

Chapter 15: Abolition

1. Division

Slavery

At one time, all the American colonies allowed slavery. In 1776, the colonies went to war to gain their independence from Britain. In the Declaration of Independence the colonists wrote that “all men are created equal” and that people have rights that included “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Many Americans realized they could not say people deserved freedom while also practicing **slavery**—humans owning other humans.

In the 1770s, many northern colonies and later states began to end the practice of slavery. While some southern states discussed **emancipation**, setting people free from slavery, it seldom happened. Eventually, the states divided into the free North and the slave South.

2. Abolitionists

Abolition

People who wanted to end slavery became known as **abolitionists**. Men and women, white and black joined the abolitionists. These people generally lived in the North. They gave speeches against slavery, published newspapers calling for emancipation of all slaves, and helped enslaved people who escaped to the North.

William Lloyd Garrison

William Lloyd Garrison was born in Massachusetts in 1805. At an early age he began writing and editing newspapers. Garrison wanted to make the world a

better place and got involved in the abolitionist movement. In 1831, he started his own anti-slavery newspaper called *The Liberator*. It became the leading abolitionist newspaper in America and called for an immediate end to slavery. Garrison also started several anti-slavery groups including the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833.

Garrison believed slavery was wrong. He once burned the United States Constitution because he believed it gave power to slaveholders to control the federal government. While giving a speech in Boston, Garrison was nearly killed by a mob that opposed abolitionists. Nonetheless, Garrison continued to lead people in the abolitionist movement until slavery ended in 1865.

Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass became the most famous African American in the 1800s. Born into slavery in Maryland around 1818, Douglass spent his youth moving from one slaveholder to another. The wife of one slaveholder thought Douglass was very bright so she taught him the basics of reading and writing before she was told to stop as it was illegal to teach enslaved people. Yet, Douglass continued to learn in secret.

In 1838, Douglass managed to escape to the free North. He arrived in New York City and soon started speaking about his experiences as a slave to abolitionist societies. Douglass was a great speaker and also a great writer. He wrote about his life as a slave in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* published in 1845 which sold thousands of copies. His book educated many people on the evils of slavery.

With his growing fame, Douglass became a leader in the abolitionist movement. In 1847, Douglass began publishing his own anti-slavery newspaper *The North Star*. Douglass kept abolitionists informed about slavery issues and attacked racism. When the Civil War began in 1861, Douglass met with President Abraham Lincoln and supported the war effort. For the rest of his life Douglass fought for civil rights.

3. Underground Railroad

Escaping Slavery

The **Underground Railroad** was a loose network of people who helped slaves escape from the South to the Northern free states or beyond to British Canada. In no way was the Underground Railroad a real railroad. Abolitionists used railroad vocabulary to describe things. Places to get shelter and food became known as stations. People who led slaves to the North were called conductors. Estimates vary widely as to how many people the Underground Railroad assisted, but historians put the number in the tens of thousands.

It is believed that the Underground Railroad got its beginnings in the late 1700s. Many Quakers opposed slavery and several members of this Protestant Christian religion actively helped enslaved people escape to the North. An escaped slave was called a **fugitive**. By the 1830s, abolitionists in the North, mostly free African Americans or former slaves, made journeys into the South to help fugitives. In many cases, slaves escaped on their own and only got help once they got near the borders of the northern states.

Once fugitives made it to the North, vigilance committees would help them settle. These groups offered a place to stay, food, and clothing. Frequently, abolitionists would help fugitives find employment and teach them. However, fugitives had to always be on guard for the South constantly sent slave catchers into the North to capture fugitives. This is why many fugitives kept traveling until they reached Canada which had started to outlaw slavery beginning in 1793.

Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman was an African American born into slavery in Maryland around 1822. Tubman had a defiant attitude that often got her into trouble. On one occasion, a white man hit her on the head and knocked her out. This caused her to suffer a lifetime of seizures. In 1849, Tubman escaped to the free state of Pennsylvania. She worked various jobs and used the money to help other fugitives.

Despite having no education, Tubman was resourceful. Working with people in the Underground Railroad, she spent a decade making several trips into the South to lead, in total, over 200 fugitives to the North including members of her own family. Abolitionists started calling her “Moses” because she was leading her people to the promised land.

The Underground Railroad and Harriet Tubman gave hope to enslaved people in the South that they may one day become free. The Underground Railroad also caused the South to spend lots of money and resources to try to stop enslaved people from escaping. Eventually, the conflict over slavery led to The Civil War and slavery’s end.