

Abolition

The American South's euphemism for slavery—"our peculiar institution"—made it sound like a fringe phenomenon. The reality? Slavery had been sanctioned by the US Constitution, and by 1860, it was the bedrock of the American economy.

So how did slavery get abolished?

The first abolitionists were formerly enslaved people who had escaped or purchased their freedom. As early as the late 1600s, they submitted petitions to state legislators, published narratives of their lives in bondage, and established churches, schools, and mutual aid societies. Quakers are also known for early resistance efforts. In addition, the 1700s saw several uprisings among enslaved people, most notably the famous Saint Domingue revolt.

These resistance efforts coalesced with the American Revolution's espoused ideals of liberty and justice—and 1804, all northern states had outlawed slavery.

But in the South, the institution was growing stronger. The 1794 invention of the cotton gin radically transformed cotton production, creating a huge demand for so-called "white gold." And for enslavers, the growing free Black population in the North was a threat.

To counter this threat, some slaveholders joined the American Colonization Society, founded in 1816 in order to force free Black people to relocate to a West African colony. Not all ACS members supported slavery, but those who rejected it also rejected the idea of a multiracial America. Most Black people, however, favored not colonization, but abolition—immediate emancipation, the outlawing of slavery, and the establishment of equal rights.

Abolitionism emerged as a more organized movement around the 1830s. In 1833, disparate anti-slavery groups in the North came together to form the American Anti-Slavery Society. Its charter was written by William Lloyd Garrison, a White journalist who, with financial support from Black abolitionists, had recently

started an anti-slavery newspaper called The Liberator. The Society sought to change minds through nonviolent means, including lectures, petitions, demonstrations, and postal campaigns.

At the same time, efforts to help enslaved people escape to freedom became more organized. The term “Underground Railroad” became well-known by the 1840s.

Abolitionism was transformed by the arrival of Frederick Douglass, who escaped slavery in 1838. A brilliant orator, Douglass became the country’s most famous abolitionist. His 1845 autobiography was a bestseller, and his newspaper, The North Star, was a leading anti-slavery publication.

As it grew, the abolitionist movement became increasingly diverse. It was notable for its inclusion of women, though there was disagreement about their roles. There was also disagreement about the use of physical force and the soundness of the US Constitution (Douglass supported the Constitution, while Garrison once burned a copy). The result was a multi-factioned effort with a singular goal.

Unsurprisingly, slavery supporters across the country responded with violence and suppression. Congress even passed a gag rule, prohibiting legislative discussion of anti-slavery petitions.

The 1850s brought further polarization. The Fugitive Slave Act required free states to “return” those who escaped. The Kansas Nebraska Act repealed the Missouri Compromise, which had abolished slavery north of the 36 degrees 30 minutes latitude line. And in 1859, John Brown raided Harper’s Ferry in Virginia, hoping to start a “slave revolt.” By the 1860 presidential election, the country was a tinderbox.

When Abraham Lincoln won the election, the tinderbox exploded. Southern states seceded; Civil War began. Lincoln, though against slavery, wasn’t an abolitionist at first. He prioritized reunification of the country, not emancipation.

What’s notable about Lincoln, however, is the eventual transformation in his worldview. Two major forces contributed. First, the war casualties were enormous, and Lincoln began to view the end of slavery as the only justification for this. Second, abolitionists united to broaden Lincoln’s perspective. Frederick Douglass in particular urged him to free enslaved people so they could fight for the Union.

On New Year's Day, 1863, Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, granting immediate freedom to enslaved persons in the Confederacy. 1865 brought Union victory and the passage of the 13th Amendment, which finally outlawed slavery.

Abolition efforts, focusing now on equal rights for Black Americans, continued through Reconstruction. Some mark Reconstruction's end as the end of abolitionism. A countering view, however, is that abolition can't and won't end until all the eradication of all remnants of slavery.