

AP United States History
Unit 4- The New Republic
Topic: An Age of Reform

Abolition and Antebellum Reform— from *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*

When the Boston abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson looked back on the years before the Civil War, he wrote, “there prevailed then a phrase, ‘the Sisterhood of Reforms.’” He had in mind “a variety of social and psychological theories of which one was expected to accept all, if any.” Of that sisterhood, anti-slavery stands out as the best-remembered and most hotly debated, even though it was not the largest in terms of membership or the most enduring. (That honor goes to the temperance movement.) Abolitionism continues to fascinate because of its place in the sectional conflict leading to the Civil War, its assault on gender and racial inequality, and its foreshadowing of the twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement.

Sometimes, however, it is useful to consider abolitionism in relation to Higginson’s Sisterhood of Reforms. The years between 1815—the year that marked the end of the War of 1812—and 1861 did indeed produce a remarkable flowering of movements dedicated to improving society, morals, and individuals. Some appear silly from a present-day perspective (would cheap postage really foster international unity and understanding?), but many contemporaries nonetheless took them seriously. And although Higginson exaggerated connections between movements, it was relatively common for people who believed in anti-slavery reform also to believe in religious reforms, women’s rights, temperance, and health reform. (The latter was based on the idea that a proper diet—a severely vegetarian one—could eliminate illness and produce moral human beings.)

Placing anti-slavery within the sisterhood helps us to see both what was and what was not distinctive about it, as well as begin to address the larger question of why certain periods in American history provide especially fertile ground for reform movements. The answer to the latter question is not always straightforward. Drunkenness did not begin around 1819, when a temperance movement began to take shape; slavery had not suddenly changed in 1831, the year a new, more radical anti-slavery movement emerged; and the oppression of women did not start around 1848, the year of the pioneering women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. For that matter, segregation and racial discrimination began well before the twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement. Making it all the more difficult to answer the question of timing is the fact that periods of intense reform activity sometimes coincide with economic crises, as was notably the case during the Great Depression of the 1930s, while at other times such as the Progressive Era (1890–1919) and the 1960s, periods of reform are also periods of general prosperity. But regardless of whether reform movements take place in good or bad economic times, the point is that reform movements usually are more than just simple, direct responses to a perceived problem.

Multiple changes converged after the War of 1812 to produce the Sisterhood of Reforms. Improvements in transportation—especially steamboats, canals, and railroads—made it easier to send lecturers and publications—including abolitionists, other reformers, and their writings—far and wide. And new printing technologies in the 1830s lowered the cost of publications, including publications from abolitionists.

At the same time, a dynamic American economy created a new class of men and women with the leisure time and financial resources to devote to reform movements. A comparison with eighteenth-century reformers is

revealing. They were fewer in number and, with some notable exceptions (mostly Quakers), tended to be part-timers like Benjamin Franklin who were either retired or had other jobs. By contrast, antebellum reformers were both more numerous and, in cases like that of the abolitionist editor William Lloyd Garrison, had no other career.

Social and economic change also provided a psychological context for reform. After 1820, the rapid growth of cities and expanding commerce and manufacturing seemed both to herald a glorious future and to open the door to temptations and vice. How to ensure that God, and not Satan and Mammon, would win?

Behind that question lay two powerful traditions that compelled reformers to contrast what America and Americans were with what they ought to be. One was the legacy of the American Revolution. Even when most critical of their government, reformers evoked it. The first women's rights convention modeled its declaration after the Declaration of Independence. Similarly, after publicly and notoriously burning a copy of the Constitution on July 4, 1854, William Lloyd Garrison asked, "What is an abolitionist but a sincere believer in the Declaration of '76?" He was repudiating a government that supported slavery, not the principles of the Revolution.

The other tradition was evangelical Protestantism. An outpouring of religious fervor in the early nineteenth century—sometimes called the Second Great Awakening—swept from west to east and fired the hearts of millions of Americans. It encouraged many to believe they had a moral imperative to do what they could to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. Although not all evangelicals were reformers, and not all reformers were evangelicals, the Awakening put the power of religion behind a belief that individual men and women could change the world, rather than passively accept as inevitable whatever fate held in store, as their ancestors often had done.

Why should they conclude that that job fell to them rather than to their leaders? The most famous foreign observer of the young republic, Alexis de Tocqueville, was struck by the peculiar propensity of Americans to form local "voluntary associations" to accomplish a wide range of goals, including reforms. In large measure, this was a reasonable approach in a nation with few effective institutional sources of moral authority, and one with relatively weak political institutions, no national church, and a culture mistrustful of governmental power. Use of voluntary associations also reflected a feeling among some—especially the most radical abolitionists—that elected officials were part of the problem, not the solution. Antebellum reformers believed in moral absolutes; politicians believe in the art of the deal, even when the result is compromise with an evil like slavery. Under the circumstances, it seemed better to go around the political system than through it (a position temperance reformers and some abolitionists began to reconsider in the 1840s).

If multiple changes came together after the War of 1812 to produce the Sisterhood of Reforms, they did not determine *how antebellum* reformers tried to change the world or what they regarded as the main thing wrong with it. Even within a movement like abolitionism, there was widespread disagreement over tactics and goals.

Running through many reforms, however, were common themes and assumptions, one of the most important of which was a passionately held belief that individuals must be able to act as free moral agents, capable of choosing right from wrong, and not restrained by the "arbitrary power" of someone else (like a slaveholder or immoral husband) or something else (like alcohol, bad diet, or mental illness). In that respect, abolitionism was the ultimate expression of the antebellum reform impulse: Slaves, for abolitionists, were the mirror image of freedom, symbols of what it was not—the most extreme example of unfreedom. This logic helps explain the close connection between abolitionists and reforms such as the women's rights movement, as well as why abolitionists felt an affinity with European revolutionaries and efforts to end serfdom in Russia. All such cases, in their view, were part of a larger international drama of the progress of freedom. With this powerful rhetorical tradition entrenched by the 1840s, it is no accident that the term "slave" persisted in reform rhetoric throughout

the nineteenth century, long after the institution itself died in 1865—drunkards as “slaves” to the bottle, women as “slaves” to men, and factory workers as “wage slaves.”

Abolitionists themselves were vague about what freedom might mean in practice after the death of slavery, and unconcerned that others might disagree with their definitions. Even so, their emphasis on individual moral agency and their use of the antithesis between slavery and freedom to define freedom’s absence and presence locates them within Higginson’s sisterhood. But in three important respects—in their views on their government, gender, and race—abolitionists parted company with other sisterhood reforms. Few reform movements prior to 1861 produced the fundamental attacks on the American political system that abolitionists mounted in denouncing its devil’s bargain with slavery. And although all major antebellum reforms depended heavily upon women, only a handful of utopian communities gave as prominent a voice to them as abolitionism in its most radical forms.

Most distinctive, however, was how abolitionists framed the relationship between anti-slavery and race, using ideas and concepts that went well beyond the movement’s assault on slavery and that eventually came home in the form of attacks on discriminatory laws and practices in the North. In addition, the abolitionist movement was unusually interracial. The fame of a few black abolitionists—notably Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman—somewhat obscures the high degree to which lesser-known African American abolitionists also supported the cause in every way possible, including with their own organizations, pens, speeches, and dollars. If racism never entirely disappeared among white abolitionists, and if relations between them and black colleagues were sometimes strained, it is nonetheless true that no other movement of the day was remotely close to abolitionism in interracial cooperation, in mobilizing black communities, and in challenging racism in both theory and practice. On those issues, abolitionism was both part of a band of sister reforms and a movement that went well beyond them.

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William Lloyd Garrison's War Against Slavery– from the *Bill of Rights Institute*

During a cold Boston night in March 1828, William Lloyd Garrison, then the twenty-three-year-old editor of the *National Philanthropist* newspaper, dined at Reverend William Collier's boardinghouse. Garrison enjoyed a good dinner with a guest, Benjamin Lundy; no alcohol was served because all had taken a temperance pledge not to drink. Lundy was also a Quaker antislavery reformer and editor of the periodical *Genius of Universal Emancipation*.

Over many hours of conversation, Garrison, a social reformer and devout evangelical Christian influenced by the Second Great Awakening, was impressed by Lundy. Garrison shared Lundy's belief in abolition, but Lundy took a more radical approach, demanding immediate abolition. During a stint as editor for a partisan Vermont newspaper called *Journal of the Times*, Garrison had promoted the gradual emancipation of every slave in the republic and the transportation of such liberated slaves and free colored peoples as are desirous of emigrating to a more genial [climate] in Africa. These ideas were part of a popular movement organized around the efforts of the American Colonization Society, started in 1817 and supported for humanitarian reasons by James Madison, John Marshall, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster. Indeed, Garrison thought upholding the doctrine of gradual emancipation and colonization based upon wisdom and humanity was the duty of every patriot and Christian, and that immediate emancipation was most assuredly out of the question.

At one point in the dinner with Garrison, Lundy declared in animated fashion, "I shall not hesitate to call things by their proper names, nor yet refrain from speaking the truth." Under Lundy's influence, Garrison changed his views about slavery and even the course of his life, becoming the nation's leading proponent of immediate and uncompromising abolitionism, or the end of slavery, a role he undertook for more than thirty years. In fact, Garrison wrote, "I feel that I owe everything instrumentally and under God, to Benjamin Lundy."

Under Lundy's influence, Garrison became an antislavery activist. Among other activities, he collected signatures on antislavery petitions and sent them to Congress. Over the next few years, Representative (and former president) John Quincy Adams launched a moral crusade by fighting for Congress to consider thousands of petitions after southerners instituted a gag rule that prevented them from coming to the floor of the chamber.

On July 4, 1829, Garrison walked six blocks from his rooming house to Park Street Church in Boston to deliver an Independence Day oration. He used the patriotic occasion to point out that slavery conflicted with America's most cherished ideals of liberty, equality, and self-government. Free and enslaved African Americans possess the same inherent and inalienable rights as ours, he thundered from the pulpit. He called slavery a national sin and advocated the gradual emancipation of enslaved persons.

Garrison then accepted Lundy's offer to move to Baltimore and take over publication of the antislavery newspaper *Genius of Universal Emancipation*. Lundy had persuaded Garrison to alter his views and support immediate emancipation and equal rights in the United States (instead of colonization) as a moral imperative. Garrison now believed that if slavery, indeed, were sinful, it needed to be expunged instantly from the United States. Witnessing the horrors of the slave markets in Baltimore only reinforced his views.

Garrison's stance on slavery became increasingly uncompromising. When a slave trader warned him to be more moderate, Garrison responded, Delicacy is not to be counseled. Slavery is a monster, and must be treated as such. His written attacks on other slave traders in the port city as highway robbers and murderers led to an indictment for libel, for which he served a jail term from April to June 1830. He was unapologetic and said, "My pen cannot remain idle, nor my voice be suppressed, nor my heart cease to bleed, while two millions of my fellow beings wear the shackles of slavery in my own guilty country."

Garrison and Lundy had a falling out, however, after the jail sentence and its unfavorable publicity. Garrison considered his future to be in newspapers and decided to move back to Boston that autumn because he thought many of the ministers and public figures there would be more receptive to his message. He won over several supporters in a series of anti slavery speeches. Indeed, he soon received financial backing and launched a new newspaper, *The Liberator*, dedicated to abolitionist principles.

The inaugural edition of *The Liberator* was published on January 1, 1831, and plainly laid out Garrison's anti slavery views. Garrison appealed to Founding principles when he asserted that he would lift up the standard of emancipation in the eyes of the nation, within sight of Bunker Hill and in the birthplace of liberty. He then publicly apologized for his own previous unreflecting support for the popular but pernicious doctrine of gradual abolition. He stated, I seize this opportunity to make a full and unequivocal recantation and thus publicly ask pardon of my God, of my country, and of my brethren the poor slaves, for having uttered a sentiment so full of timidity, injustice, and absurdity. He had altered his views considerably and now identified with those who urged the immediate freeing of enslaved persons.

The very first issue demonstrated Garrison's uncompromising stance. "I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject I do not wish to think or speak, or write, with moderation. No! No! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm . . . but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. He demonstrated his identification with his righteous cause when he finished: "I am in earnest, I will not equivocate, I will not excuse, I will not retreat a single inch, AND I WILL BE HEARD."

Over the next few years, Garrison established himself as one of the leading abolitionists in the country. He organized the New England Anti-Slavery Society and joined the American Anti-Slavery Society created by wealthy New York abolitionists Lewis and Arthur Tappan. He remained perhaps the leading abolitionist voice in the coming decades, in which slavery became a significant national issue that divided the country and led to the Civil War.

Garrison's views became even more radical as he rejected a Union with slaveholders because of the immorality of slavery. He denounced the Union and the U.S. Constitution as a covenant with death and an agreement with Hell and believed he obeyed a higher law than the Constitution. In this way, his ideas differed from those of statesmen such as Abraham Lincoln, who wanted to preserve the Union and Constitution while eradicating the practice of slavery.

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Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Struggle for Women’s Suffrage– from the *Bill of Rights Institute*

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, a Second Great Awakening, or religious revival, swept through the United States. The evangelical fervor spawned numerous reform movements such as abolitionism, temperance, and prison reform. Reformers sought to alleviate harsh conditions, work for equality for all, eliminate vice, and create a utopian society. In general, they wanted to achieve a more just society. In the 1830s and 1840s, these reform movements created organizations that worked to advocate greater equality and improve civil society. They sent out speakers to raise awareness, spread knowledge through pamphlets and newspapers, lobbied politicians at various levels of government, and learned how to create strong organizations. Many of the reform movements were controversial because of the change they sought.

During this time, most Americans accepted the idea that there were different spheres for men and women – men were active in public life through their jobs and politics, and women were responsible for the home. As a result of these gender roles, women suffered inequality in most social and political institutions. They could not vote or serve on juries, and married women generally could not own property. They did not have the same educational or professional opportunities as men. The antebellum reform movements gave women an opportunity to participate in politics and public life because of the inherent moral quality of social reform and because, by the 1830s, women were being seen as defenders of morality in society. When they engaged in movements for equality and justice such as abolition and prison reform, women gained practical experience in organizing a movement.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was one of the pioneers in the fight for women’s rights. Born to an affluent family in upstate New York, the “burned-over district” and center of the Second Great Awakening, she received a classical education, unusual for girls at the time. Her parents were Quakers who taught her their values of human equality and abolitionism. In the spring of 1840, the twenty-five-year-old Stanton boarded the *Montreal* to sail to London on her honeymoon with her new husband, abolitionist Henry Stanton. They were among forty people from the United States (including eight women) who were traveling across the Atlantic to attend the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. The three-week voyage was largely uneventful. Stanton and her husband took advantage of the trip to read abolitionist tracts and discuss ideas associated with anti slavery. The couple stayed at the grimy lodging house of an abolitionist in Cheapside, London. Nevertheless, they enjoyed touring around the capital and engaging other abolitionists in conversation.

On Friday, June 12, the meeting of some five hundred abolitionists convened in Freemasons’ Hall. Stanton and the other female delegates bristled when they were seated behind the bar and not on the floor of the convention as official participants. Abolitionist leader Wendell Phillips and other American men boldly protested the unequal treatment of women. Phillips stated that excluding women was akin to excluding black delegates. Another famous abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, who arrived late and refused to participate because of the seating issue, later said, “If women should be excluded from its deliberation, my interest in [the convention] would be destroyed.” Nevertheless, the English hosts were adamant that the women would not be seated, because of the customs of the country. Stanton had suffered discrimination at the hands of those at the vanguard of abolitionist reform. It was a turning point in her life.

While in London, Stanton struck up a friendship with women's rights advocate Lucretia Mott. Stanton revered the older Mott and was struck by her oratorical ability when she preached at a London Unitarian church. During a sightseeing walk, the two women agreed to hold a convention and organize a society dedicated to women's rights. After lingering in London for their honeymoon, the newlyweds sailed home in December with Elizabeth dedicated to a new cause for justice. Over the next few years, the couple had several children and moved to Boston, where Henry practiced law. Elizabeth's time was largely consumed by domestic affairs, though she was still very interested in women's rights. In 1847, she moved her family to New York after her father offered her a piece of property there, with a farmhouse in her own name. The humble town soon became the site of a historic meeting for women's rights.

On Sunday, July 9, a half-dozen Quaker women assembled in nearby Waterloo. They met at that time to include Mott, who was visiting from Philadelphia. Mott had encouraged them to also invite Stanton, who made the short ride by train and expressed her discontent at women's status. The women resolved to call a meeting to "discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women." They placed an ad in the local newspaper and in black abolitionist Frederick Douglass's *North Star* announcing the upcoming convention. The following Sunday, Stanton met with a few other women and penned a series of resolutions on her own that she intended to present, and, more importantly, a Declaration of Sentiments based on the Declaration of Independence, after reading that document aloud. On Wednesday, July 19, a blistering hot summer day, more than one hundred women assembled for the convention in Seneca Falls' Wesleyan Chapel. Forty men also appeared and were asked not to speak during the morning session. Stanton delivered an opening address in which she spoke passionately against the subordination and inequality of women. She introduced and read the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments (commonly called the "Declaration of Sentiments") for attendees' consideration before adjourning in midafternoon.

The next day was just as hot, but more than three hundred women and men squeezed into the crowded church to consider the Declaration of Sentiments and a series of resolutions. Henry Stanton had warned his wife that if she planned to bring up women's suffrage, he would stay away. "You will turn the proceedings into a farce," he told her. Because she definitely would advocate women's suffrage, he spent the day lecturing in another town. The assembly heard Stanton read the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments again and noted its familiar words, because it was modeled after the assertion of universal rights in the Declaration of Independence. Stanton's Declaration featured a significant clarification: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men *and women* are created equal." Just as the original Declaration had presented a list of grievances against George III, the Declaration of Sentiments included a list of grievances and stated that the "history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman." The list included examples of political, civil, economic, and educational inequality. Man had compelled woman to follow laws "in the formation of which she had no voice." It continued, "He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead." Moreover, "He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns." Men had allowed women "but a subordinate position" in church affairs. Most importantly, and most controversially, the declaration asserted: "It is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise" of the vote.

The Declaration and other resolutions, especially for women's suffrage, were highly contentious, even at the convention. Mott told Stanton, "Lizzie, thee will make us ridiculous." The other Quaker women, who were not interested in civil affairs, also demurred. Frederick Douglass was the only man to support the resolution and delivered a speech defending women's right to vote. He said, "In this denial of the right to participate in government, not merely the degradation of women and the perpetuation of a great injustice happens, but the maiming and repudiation of one-half of the moral and intellectual power of the government of the world." In the end, the resolution barely passed and, as predicted, it was the center of ridicule in the press. That evening, sixty-eight women and thirty-two men signed the convention's statement.

Voting during the new republic had been limited to those with economic independence, because of the republican ideal that only they could be disinterested in exercising the right of suffrage. In New Jersey, the 1776 state constitution allowed all women to vote. Then, in the 1790s, the state's constitution was revised to allow only single women who owned property to vote. This remained in effect until 1807, when suffrage was rescinded due to partisanship disputes. During the 1800s, new ideals of democratic citizenship and suffrage were formed. Stanton led the fight for women's suffrage on the grounds that the individual right to vote was at the core of citizenship and political participation in the republic. She stated that women's suffrage was the "stronghold of the fortress" of women's equality. The long struggle for women's suffrage thus began with the unflagging fortitude of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her dedication to the cause of justice for women.

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The Struggle for Public Schools– *from UH Digital History*

Of all the ideas advanced by antebellum reformers, none was more original than the principle that all American children should be educated to their full capacity at public expense. Reformers viewed education as the key to individual opportunity and the creation of an enlightened and responsible citizenry. Reformers also believed that public schooling could be an effective weapon in the fight against juvenile crime and an essential ingredient in the assimilation of immigrants.

From the early days of settlement, Americans attached special importance to education. During the 17th century, the New England Puritans required every town to establish a public school supported by fees from all but the very poorest families (a requirement later repealed).

In the late 18th century, Thomas Jefferson popularized the idea that a democratic republic required an enlightened and educated citizenry. Early 19th century educational reformers extended these ideas and struggled to make universal public education a reality. As a result of their efforts, the northern states were among the first jurisdictions in the world to establish tax-supported, tuition-free public schools. At the beginning of the 19th century, the United States had the world's highest literacy rate—approximately 75 percent. Apprenticeship was a major form of education, supplemented by church schools, charity schools for the poor, and private academies for the affluent. Many youngsters learned to read in informal dame schools, in which a woman would take girls and boys into her own home. Formal schooling was largely limited to those who could afford to pay. Many schools admitted pupils regardless of age, mixing young children with young adults in their twenties. A single classroom could contain as many as 80 pupils.

The campaign for public schools began in earnest in the 1820s, when religiously motivated reformers advocated public education as an answer to poverty, crime, and deepening social divisions. At first, many reformers championed Sunday schools as a way “to reclaim the vicious, to instruct the ignorant, to secure the observance of the Sabbath...and to raise the standard of morals among the lower classes of society.” But soon, reformers began to call for public schools.

Demands for schools, however, were not confined to those worried by rapid immigration and urban growth. There was also widespread demand for schooling from urban workers. Many skilled laborers called for schools that would mix wealthy children with those of the working class. Workers supported schools even though they depended on the wages of their children. In many working-class families, children under the age of 15 earned as much as 20 percent of the family's income.

Horace Mann (1796–1859) of Massachusetts, the nation's leading educational reformer, led the fight for government support for public schools. As a state legislator, in 1837 Mann took the lead in establishing a state board of education and his efforts resulted in a doubling of state expenditures on education. He also won state support for teacher training, an improved curriculum in schools, the grading of pupils by age and ability, and a lengthened school year. He was also partially successful in curtailing the use of corporal punishment. In 1852, three years after Mann left office to take a seat in the U.S. Congress, Massachusetts adopted the first compulsory school attendance law in American history.

Educational opportunities, however, were not available to all. Most northern cities specifically excluded African Americans from the public schools. It was not until 1855 that Massachusetts became the first state to admit students to public schools without regard to “race, color, or religious opinions.”

Women and religious minorities also experienced discrimination. For women, education beyond the level of handicrafts and basic reading and writing was largely confined to separate female academies and seminaries for the affluent. Emma Hart Willard opened one of the first academies offering an advanced education to women in Philadelphia in 1814. Many public school teachers showed an anti-Catholic bias by using texts that portrayed the Catholic Church as a threat to republican values and reading passages from a Protestant version of the Bible. Beginning in New York City in 1840, Catholics decided to establish their own system of schools in which children would receive a religious education as well as training in the arts and sciences.

In higher education a few institutions opened their doors to African Americans and women. In 1833 Oberlin College, where Charles G. Finney taught, became the nation’s first co-educational college. Four years later, Mary Lyon established the first women’s college, Mount Holyoke, to train teachers and missionaries. A number of western state universities also admitted women. In addition, three colleges for African Americans were founded before the Civil War, and a few other colleges, including Oberlin, Harvard, Bowdoin, and Dartmouth, admitted small numbers of black students.

The reform impulse brought other changes in higher education. At the beginning of the 19th century, most colleges offered their students, who usually enrolled between the ages of 12 and 15, only a narrow training in the classics designed to prepare them for the ministry. During the 1820s and 1830s, in an effort to adjust to the “spirits and wants of the age,” colleges broadened their curricula to include the study of history, literature, geography, modern languages, and the sciences. The entrance age was also raised and the requirements demanded of students were broadened.

The number of colleges also increased. Most of the new colleges, particularly in the South and West, were church-affiliated, but several states established public universities. Before the Civil War, 16 states provided some financial support to higher education, and by the 1850s, New York City offered tuition-free education from elementary school to college.

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Criminal and Asylum Reform– from UH Digital History

The nation's first reformers tried to improve the nation's moral and spiritual values by distributing Bibles and religious tracts, promoting observance of the Sabbath, and curbing drinking. Beginning in the 1820s a new phase of reform--social reform--spread across the country, directed at crime, illiteracy, poverty, and disease. Reformers sought to solve these social problems by creating new institutions to deal with them--including prisons, public schools, and asylums for the deaf, the blind, and the mentally ill.

The Problem of Crime in a Free Society

Before the American Revolution, punishment for crimes generally involved some form of corporal punishment, ranging from the death penalty for serious crimes to public whipping, confinement in stocks, and branding for lesser offenses. Jails were used as temporary confinement for criminal defendants awaiting trial or punishment. Conditions in these early jails were abominable. Cramped cells held large groups of offenders of both sexes and all ages; debtors were confined with hardened criminals. Prisoners customarily had to pay the expenses of food and lodging.

During the pre-Civil War decade, reformers began to view crime as a social problem--a product of environment and parental neglect--rather than the result of original sin or innate human depravity. Reformers believed it was the duty of a humane society to remove the underlying causes of crime, to sympathize and show patience toward criminals and to try to reform them, instead of whipping or confining them in stocks.

Revulsion over the spectacle of public punishment led to the rapid construction of penal institutions in which the 'disease' of crime could be quarantined and inmates could be gradually rehabilitated in a carefully controlled environment. Two rival prison systems competed for public support. After constructing Auburn Prison, New York State authorities adopted a system in which inmates worked in large workshops during the day and slept in separate cells at night. Convicts had to march in lockstep and refrain from speaking or even looking at each other. In Pennsylvania's Eastern State Penitentiary, constructed in 1829, authorities placed even greater stress on the physical isolation of prisoners. Every prison cell had its own exercise yard, work space, and toilet facilities. Under the Pennsylvania plan, prisoners lived and worked in complete isolation from each other. Called 'penitentiaries' or 'reformatories,' these new prisons reflected the belief that hard physical labor and solitary confinement might encourage introspection and instill habits of discipline that would rehabilitate criminals.

The legal principle that a criminal act should be legally punished only if the offender was fully capable of distinguishing between right and wrong opened the way to one of the most controversial aspects of American jurisprudence--the insanity defense. The question arose dramatically in 1835 when a deranged Englishman named Richard Lawrence walked up to President Andrew Jackson and fired 2 pistols at him from a distance of 6 feet. Incredibly, both guns misfired, and Jackson was unhurt. Lawrence believed that Jackson's attack on the Second Bank of the United States had prevented him from obtaining money that would have enabled him to claim the English throne. The court, ruling that Lawrence was clearly suffering from a mental delusion, found him insane and not subject to criminal prosecution; instead, he was confined to an asylum for treatment of his mental condition.

Another major effort in social reform was the drive to outlaw capital punishment. Before the 1830s, most states reduced the number of crimes punishable by death and began to perform executions out of public view, lest the public be stimulated to acts of violence by the spectacle of hangings. In 1847 Michigan became the first modern jurisdiction to outlaw the death penalty; Rhode Island and Wisconsin soon followed.

Imprisonment for debt also came under attack. As late as 1816, an average of 600 residents of New York City were in prison at any one time for failure to pay debts. More than half owed less than \$50. New York's debtor prisons provided no food, furniture, or fuel for their inmates, who would have starved without the assistance of relatives or the charity of humane societies. In a Vermont case, state courts imprisoned a man for a debt of just 54 cents, and in Boston a woman was taken from her three children as a result of a \$3 debt.

Increasingly, reformers regarded imprisonment for debt as irrational, since imprisoned debtors were unable to work and pay off their debts. Piecemeal reform led to the abolition of debtor prisons, as states eliminated the practice of jailing people for trifling debts, and then forbade the jailing of women and veterans.

Assisting the Disabled

A number of reformers devoted their attention to the problems of the mentally ill, the deaf, and the blind. In 1841, Dorothea Dix (1802–1887), a 39-year-old former schoolteacher, volunteered to give religious instruction to women incarcerated in the East Cambridge, Massachusetts, House of Correction. Inside the House of Correction, she was horrified to find mentally ill inmates dressed in rags and confined to a single dreary, unheated room. Shocked by what she saw, she embarked on a lifelong crusade to reform the treatment of the mentally ill.

After a two-year secret investigation of every jail and almshouse in Massachusetts, Dix issued a report to the state legislature. The mentally ill, she found, were mixed indiscriminately with paupers and hardened criminals. Many were confined "in cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods and lashed into obedience." Dix then carried her campaign for state-supported asylums nationwide, persuading more than a dozen state legislatures to improve institutional care for the insane.

Through the efforts of reformers such as Thomas Gallaudet and Samuel Gridley Howe, institutions to care for the deaf and blind began to appear. In 1817, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet (1787–1851) established the nation's first school in Hartford, Connecticut, to teach deaf-mutes to read and write, read lips, and communicate through hand signals.

Samuel Gridley Howe (1801–1876), the husband of Julia Ward Howe, composer of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," accomplished for the blind what Gallaudet achieved for the deaf. He founded the country's first school for the blind in Boston and produced printed materials with raised type.

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Temperance and Moral Reform– from UH Digital History

The most extensive moral reform campaign was that against drinking, which was an integral part of American life. Many people believed that downing a glass of whiskey before breakfast was conducive to good health. Instead of taking coffee breaks, people took a dram of liquor at 11 and again at 4 o'clock as well as drinks after meals "to aid digestion" and a nightcap before going to sleep. Campaigning politicians offered voters generous amounts of liquor during campaigns and as rewards for "right voting" on election day. On the frontier, one evangelist noted, "a house could not be raised, a field of wheat cut down, nor could there be a log rolling, a husking, a quilting, a wedding, or a funeral without the aid of alcohol." Easily affordable to even the poorest Americans—a gallon of whiskey cost 25 cents in the 1820s—consumption had risen markedly since the beginning of the century. The supply of alcohol increased as farmers distilled growing amounts of corn into cheap whiskey, which could be transported more easily than bulk corn. By 1820 the typical adult American consumed more than 7 gallons of absolute alcohol a year (compared to 2.6 gallons today). Reformers identified liquor as the cause of a wide range of social, family, and personal problems. Many middle-class women blamed alcohol for the abuse of wives and children and the squandering of family resources. Many businesspeople identified drinking with crime, poverty, and inefficient and unproductive employees.

The stage was set for the appearance of an organized movement against liquor. In 1826 the nation's first formal national temperance organization--the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance--was born. Led by socially prominent clergy and laypeople, the new organization called for total abstinence from distilled liquor. Within 3 years, 222 state and local anti liquor groups were laboring to spread this message. By 1835 an estimated 2 million Americans had taken the "pledge" to abstain from hard liquor. Temperance reform drew support from many southerners and westerners who were otherwise indifferent or hostile to reform. Their efforts helped reduce annual per capita consumption of alcohol from 7 gallons in 1830 to 3 gallons a decade later, forcing 4,000 distilleries to close.

The sudden arrival of hundreds of thousands of immigrants from "heavy drinking" cultures heightened the concerns of temperance reformers. Between 1830 and 1860, nearly 2 million Irish arrived in the United States along with an additional 893,000 Germans. In Ireland, land was in such short supply that many young men were unable to support a family by farming. The only solution was to delay marriage and socialize with other young men in "bachelor groups," a ritual that often involved drinking. These immigrants probably drank no more than most native-born Americans before the 1830s, but increasingly heavy drinking was regarded as a problem demanding government action.

Two new approaches to the temperance movement arose during the 1840s. The first was the Washingtonian movement in which reformed alcoholics sought to reform other drinkers. As many as 600,000 drinkers took the Washingtonian pledge of total abstinence. The second approach was a campaign to restrict the manufacture and sale of alcohol, culminating in adoption of the nation's first statewide prohibition law in Maine in 1851, which led to prohibition laws often being referred to as "Maine laws." Convinced that moral suasion was ineffective, a minister argued strongly in behalf of prohibition laws: "You might almost as well persuade the chained maniac to leave off howling, as to persuade him to leave off drinking."

Utopian Movements— from the University of North Texas

In the same spirit as the other reform movements, more than 100,000 American men, women, and children between 1820 and 1860 searched for alternative lifestyles. They wanted to find a utopia, or an ideal society. Disenchanted with the world around them, utopian seekers hoped to create their perfect society by building experimental communities. Most of the communes had short lifespans, and the utopians performed their experiments in isolation from the rest of society, yet they all expressed the deep desire of perfectionism.

Amana Society—founded by German emigrant Christian Metz. Eight hundred followers, collectively known as the Community of the True Light, moved from Germany to Buffalo, New York. Believing that Metz was a prophet, the group relocated to Iowa and founded the Amana Society in 1859, building seven villages over 25,000 acres. Families lived in individual houses but shared communal kitchens and dining halls. Amana existed until the 1930s when the villages officially abandoned communal property ownership, divided the land and holdings, and adopted capitalistic values and institutions.

New Harmony—Welsh industrialist Robert Owen established a commune at New Harmony, Indiana in the mid-1820s based on the principles of the Enlightenment. He believed that poverty could be ended in society by collecting the unemployed into self-contained and self-supporting villages. The villagers of New Harmony found it difficult to reconcile Owens's theories with reality and the commune failed. New Harmony is remembered for its advanced social ideas, including an eight hour work-day, cultural activities for workers, and equal educational opportunities for boys and girls. The community also openly criticized organized religion and favored women's equal rights and birth control, ideas far ahead of their time.

Brook Farm—Transcendentalist writer George Ripley founded Brook Farm Commune in 1841 near Boston, Massachusetts. His goal was to "prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons whose relations with each other would permit a more wholesome and simple life than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions." Member of the farm worked to make the group self-sufficient, though few individuals lived on site in the communes early years. In 1844 Brook Farm adopted a constitution based on the socialist ideas of Charles Fourier, who argued that people were capable of living in perfect harmony under the right conditions. These conditions included communal life and a republican style government. Once Brook Farm demanded that its residents share equally their earnings, the commune disintegrated. The farm is remembered largely for the famous writers who resided there for brief periods, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Oneida Community— Founded by John Humphrey Noyes in 1848. Noyes said he found true religion at one of Charles G. Finney's revivals. Noyes believed that with conversion came perfection and a complete release from sin. He claimed that Christ had already returned to earth and that Jesus had commanded his followers to escape sin through faith in God, communal living and group marriage. The community founded Oneida in New York and numbered more than 200 by 1851. They practiced a "free love" theology in a doctrine of complex marriage, which meant that every man in the community was married to every woman and every woman to every man. The group struggled until the inventor of a new steel trap joined them. Soon Oneida traps were the best in the country, and the community began selling other manufactured items, including silver spoons. Before long the spoons became so popular that they added knives and forks. In 1879 local law officials attempted to arrest Noyes for adultery and his practice of group marriage, and he fled to Canada to avoid prosecution. The community ended universal marriage and converted to a joint stock company.

Shakers—Founded by Ann Lee Stanley in 1774, Mother Ann claimed that God was genderless and that she was the female incarnation of the Trinity as Jesus had been the male. She believed in celibacy, which would prepare her followers for the perfection that was promised them in heaven. By 1830 eighteen separate Shaker communities flourished in eight states with all property held in common. At their peak, the Shakers numbered more than six thousand. They created communal farms, manufactured and sold furniture and handicrafts, and

were leaders in the garden seed and medicinal herb businesses. But celibacy spelled their end. Attempting to replenish their numbers, the Shakers adopted homeless children, raising them in the religion, but few converted.

Mormons—The Mormons proved the most successful of the utopian communities of the 1800s. Founded by Joseph Smith, who claimed to have made a great discovery in 1827 of a set of golden plates, which Smith translated into the *Book of Mormon*. The book resembled the Old Testament of the Bible and purported to be an ancient document, but it captured many contemporary themes. In 1830 Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, announced his revelation, and led his congregation into Ohio. The community prospered but local Protestants despised them, especially after 1840 when Smith began practicing polygamy. The Mormons moved twice more before Smith was attacked and killed. Smith's successor, Brigham Young, led the Mormons to their own Zion in Utah in 1846, founding Salt Lake City. Within a few years, the settlers had created an elaborate irrigation system and were prospering.

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Discussion Questions

- * What were the conditions which produced this age of reform?
- * Why do you think that the reform movements of this period occurred mostly in Northern states and not in those of the South?

Abolitionism

- * What was William Lloyd Garrison's original belief about how to bring about an end to the institution of slavery?
- * What changed his mind and made him one of the major figures in the abolitionist movement?
- * What was the primary vehicle for his movement? (How did he make his views known to other people?)

Women's Rights

- * How were most women regarded in American society at this time, and why were they often in the vanguard of reform movements during the period?
- * What led Elizabeth Cady Stanton into the women's rights movement?
- * Though the step towards women's suffrage was a radical one, how was the early movement, including the Declaration of Sentiments received?

Public Education

- * Prior to the establishment of state-supported public schools, how were people educated in American society?
- * Who led the process for the creation of public school systems and what were the reasons for supporting their creation?
- * What changes occurred in higher education during this period?

Criminal Justice and Asylum Reform

- * What major shift occurred in how reformers viewed the source of crime in the early 19th century?
- * How did prisons change during the period— both their focus and who would be sent to them?
- * How did reformers make significant changes for the treatment of the mentally ill and those with disabilities during the period?

Temperance and Utopianism

- * Why had alcoholism become such a major American moral issue by the 1830s?
- * What were the two chief approaches for dealing with the issue of alcoholism?
- * What were the origins for the creation of utopian social experiments and communities and— which of them experienced a degree of success?

