



## Introduction

*“I will be as harsh as truth, and uncompromising as justice . . . I am in earnest, I will not equivocate, I will not excuse, I will not retreat a single inch, and I will be heard.”*

—William Lloyd Garrison, 1831



**William Lloyd Garrison, 1835**  
[ENLARGE]

These unforgettable words appeared in the first issue of *The Liberator*, the nation’s most powerful abolitionist newspaper. Between 1831 and 1865, William Lloyd Garrison edited 1,820 weekly issues of *The Liberator*; his “words of thunder” played a vital role in eliminating what he called the “national sin” of slavery. But Garrison did not work alone. He was part of a larger movement of activists—men and women, black and white, young and old—who fought for decades to achieve freedom and full civil rights for people of African descent. This movement was headquartered in Boston, the center of the abolition movement in the United States and home to a politically active, free black community.

**Words of Thunder** is one component of The Abolitionist Exposition, a three-year series of exhibits and education programs that illuminate the story of black and white New Englanders who worked together to end enslavement and elevate the status of free people of color in the 19th century. The exposition is a collaborative effort between the Museum of Afro-American History and the Boston Public Library, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Launched to coincide with the 200th anniversary of Garrison’s birth (2005) and the bicentennial of the African Meeting House in Boston (2006), **Words of Thunder** brings to life the voices, values, and passions of a group of tireless crusaders. (The phrase “words of thunder” is taken from a poem about William Lloyd Garrison written by John Greenleaf Whittier. See page 21.) For more information, visit [www.wordsofthunder.org](http://www.wordsofthunder.org).

## ABOUT THE COLLABORATION

The Museum of Afro-American History (MAAH) is New England’s premiere African American history museum, with four national historic sites and two Black Heritage Trails®, in Boston and Nantucket. These sites—the African Meeting House and the Abiel Smith School in Boston, and the African Meeting House and the Florence Higginbotham House on Nantucket—bore witness to the birth of the nation’s struggle for equality and justice, and provided the gathering space for black political life and culture in Massachusetts, from the colonial period through the 19th century.

Founded in 1966, MAAH embraces a powerful mission to preserve, conserve, and interpret the contributions of people of African descent and those who have found common cause with them in the struggle for liberty, dignity, and justice for all Americans. Through preservation of historic sites, exhibitions, education programs, humanities scholarship and programming, and resource services, the Museum places the African American experience in an accurate social, cultural, and historical perspective. To learn more about MAAH, visit [www.afroammuseum.org](http://www.afroammuseum.org).



# WORDS OF THUNDER Teacher's Guide



Established in 1848, the Boston Public Library (BPL) was the first publicly supported municipal library in America, the first public library to lend a book, the first to have a branch library, and the first to have a children's room. Today, the BPL boasts 27 neighborhood branches, free Internet access, two unique restaurants, an award-winning Web site, an online store featuring reproductions of the BPL's priceless photographs and artwork, and one of the country's largest collections of antislavery manuscripts and publications. Each year, the BPL hosts nearly 5,000 programs, answers more than one million reference questions, and serves millions of people in its McKim Building in Copley Square, a National Historic Landmark Building. All of its programs and exhibits are free and open to the public. Visit [www.bpl.org](http://www.bpl.org) to learn more about the Boston Public Library.

## USING THIS GUIDE

This guide will help middle school and high school teachers introduce students to the abolition movement in Boston. To engage students, the guide contains a variety of primary source documents, images, and other artifacts for students to examine and analyze. The guide is divided into five sections: The Abolitionist Movement in Boston, Ambassadors of Abolition, William Lloyd Garrison and *The Liberator*, The Power of Music and Poetry, and The Legacy of Boston's Ambassadors of Abolition. Each section lists the names of key people and places for students to become familiar with.

Within each section, each primary source—taken mainly from the collections of the MAAH and the BPL—is accompanied by a description that provides context and background information, along with discussion questions, suggested activities, and investigations. A black-and-white “thumbnail” image of each item appears in the guide. To view a full-page reproduction of each item, click on the image. Strategies for using primary source documents appear on page 4. Resources for further exploration of the abolition movement can be found on pages 25–27.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

William Lloyd Garrison launched *The Liberator* in 1831. This milestone has traditionally been viewed as the beginning of the militant antislavery movement in Boston. But as historians James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton point out in their book, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North*, “Abolitionism in Boston dated from the late eighteenth century and was almost entirely a black endeavor during the early years. It was carried on through the black church, the Prince Hall Masons, and several other black associations.” For more background and historical context for **Words of Thunder**, you may want to read chapter 7 of *Black Bostonians* before you begin your unit.

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## A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Many of the primary source documents use language that, while common in the 1830s and 1840s, is considered offensive, inappropriate, or insensitive today. As language has evolved, even more contemporary terms have been reexamined. You'll notice, for instance, that this guide uses the term *enslaved person* instead of *slave* and *self-emancipated person* instead of *fugitive* or *runaway slave*.

You might begin discussion of **Words of Thunder** by asking students to reflect on the power of language and the ways in which language evolves over time. For example, consider the difference between a *slave* and an *enslaved person* or between a *runaway slave* and a *self-emancipated person*. You may want to point out that language often reflects society's attitudes and structures. To use the term *slave* is to identify that person only by his or her social status; to use the term *enslaved person* indicates that he or she is a human being who has been forced into slavery. As students read and analyze the historical documents in the **Words of Thunder** collection, have them watch for and note additional words and phrases that are no longer used or may be considered inappropriate.