



William Lloyd Garrison and *The Liberator*

BACKGROUND

Born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1805, William Lloyd Garrison grew up in poverty, with limited formal education. Before founding *The Liberator*, the nation's most influential abolitionist newspaper, in Boston in 1831, Garrison worked on several newspapers in New England and Maryland.

Believing in the immediate abolition of slavery and in civil equality for African Americans, Garrison oriented his life's work toward achieving those goals through his newspaper and his organizational activities at home and abroad. At the center of a dynamic, ambitious, and enterprising circle of abolitionist men and women, black and white, in communities throughout the North, Garrison and his colleagues were a powerful source of resistance that "shook the nation."

Names and Places To Know

- James Forten
- William Lloyd Garrison
- *The Liberator*
- New England Anti-Slavery Society
- Wendell Phillips
- Lucy Stone
- 13th Amendment
- Sojourner Truth

Antislavery Societies

In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison and 11 other white men founded the New England Anti-Slavery Society (NEASS) in the Infant School Room of the African Baptist Church when their political objectives closed other venues to them. William Cooper Nell, who became the nation's first published African American historian, was a teenager at the time and observed the meeting through a window. The next day, five black members from the Massachusetts General Colored Association signed the NEASS constitution, making it an interracial antislavery society. Susan Paul, an African American teacher and choir director, was one of only three female members of NEASS in its early years.

ARTICLE

This 1837 article from *The Liberator* reported on the growth in the number of antislavery societies in the country. The writer was decidedly optimistic, concluding that "The world has witnessed no moral change like this since the Reformation."

In Focus

1. How did the number of antislavery societies in the United States change between 1832 and 1837? To what do you attribute this remarkable growth?
2. According to *The Liberator* article, who were the most forceful opponents of antislavery societies? What segments of American society do these opponents represent?

Excerpt from *The Liberator*,
August 4, 1837

"[T]here are 1006 anti-slavery societies in USA with 100,000 members; know dates of organization for 727: 1832:2; 1833:31; 1834:84; 1835:159; 1836:255; 1837:134—up to May 1...

"The increase for the last three years, in the midst of the most formidable opposition, and the most virulent persecution, and in spite of the combined efforts of Church and State, of Presidents, Governors, Judges, Professors of Law and Theology, Doctors of Divinity, &c. &c.—has averaged about one society daily. The world has witnessed no moral change like this since the Reformation."

Article, "Anti-Slavery Societies," *The Liberator*, August 4, 1837 [ENLARGE]

3. What was the Reformation? Why does *The Liberator* writer compare the antislavery movement to the Reformation? Does that claim strike you as an exaggeration, or was it justified? Explain.

Activities and Investigations

1. Since the 1830s, have there been moral changes in America or in the world comparable to the abolition movement? Discuss in an essay, focusing on one “moral movement” and comparing its impact to that of the antislavery societies.
2. *The Liberator* article reports that antislavery societies faced “the most formidable opposition.” Locate at least two primary source documents that help explain why people were opposed to the growth of antislavery societies. Documents might include editorials, letters to the editor, broadsides, books, cartoons, or other sources. What arguments are contained in these documents? Do you find them convincing? Explain.

GARRISON'S “ADDRESS”

Garrison published this pamphlet based on lectures that he gave in Philadelphia, New York, and other urban centers in June of 1831. The pamphlet advised free people of color “how to behave to encourage emancipation.”

In Focus

1. Why does Garrison say that he “never rises to address a colored audience without being ashamed of his own color”? How do you think his black audiences would have responded to this statement? Have you ever had a similar feeling of being an outsider? Describe your experience.
2. Define “atonement.” How does Garrison pledge to atone for the sins of white people? How does he express his total commitment to the plight of African Americans?
3. Garrison says that he is willing to plead the cause of “human rights in general.” How would you define human rights? What human rights issues are in the news today?

Activities and Investigations

1. Garrison was a powerful orator. To get a deeper sense of his style as a speaker and writer, read his 1831 “Address” aloud. What techniques does Garrison use to engage his audience? Is his style conversational? Formal? Colloquial? Point to specific lines to support your answer.
2. Visit the Web site of a human rights organization such as Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org) or Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org), and identify one human rights issue of particular concern to you. According to the Web site, what is the scope of this problem? How can this situation be improved or resolved? What connections do you see between this issue and the movement to abolish slavery?

Opening Statement of William Lloyd Garrison's June 1831 Address

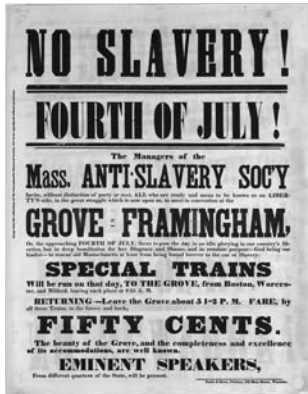
I never rise to address a colored audience, without being ashamed of my own color; ashamed of being identified with a race of men who have done you so much injustice, and who yet retain so large a portion of your brethren in servile chains. To make atonement, in part, for this conduct, I have solemnly dedicated my health, and strength, and life, to your service. I love to plan to work for your social, intellectual, political and spiritual advancement. My happiness is augmented with yours: in your sufferings I participate.

Henceforth I am ready on all days, . . . to plead the cause of my colored countrymen in particular, or of human rights in general. . . .

Countrymen and Friends! I wish to gladden your hearts, and to invigorate your hopes. Be assured, your cause is going onward—right onward.

William Lloyd Garrison

“Address Delivered before the Free People of Color,” 1831
[ENLARGE]



No Slavery! Fourth of July! poster, 1854 [ENLARGE]

“NO SLAVERY!” POSTER

This poster was created to advertise a rally held in Framingham, Massachusetts, on July 4, 1854. It was on this occasion that Garrison burned copies of the Constitution and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, documents he regarded as proslavery manifestos. Garrison set these documents on fire before a large audience that had heard the stirring words of abolitionists Sojourner Truth, Lucy Stone, and Wendell Phillips that same afternoon. As the Fugitive Slave Act document became engulfed in flames, Garrison said, “And let all people say ‘Amen.’”

In Focus

1. Who was invited to this rally? How did organizers attempt to persuade people to attend the event?
2. Why do you think this rally was scheduled for July 4? According to the creators of the poster, why was “deep humiliation” more appropriate than “glorying in our country’s liberties” on July 4, 1854?
3. What impact do you imagine Garrison had on spectators when he burned the Constitution and Fugitive Slave Act? Why do you think he chose to burn these two documents? In your view, was Garrison being patriotic or disloyal to America through these actions?

Activities and Investigations

1. Garrison was committed to pacifism: he believed that dramatic social change could come about through the use of nonviolence. Imagine that instead of burning a copy of the Fugitive Slave Act, Garrison had decided to physically harm a “slave catcher” on the 4th of July. In your opinion, how would the use of violence have affected Garrison’s stature as a leader? Do you agree with Garrison that nonviolence can be a more effective weapon than guns and bullets? Explain.
2. Think of a controversy that has occurred recently at your school, in your town, or at the national or international level. What would William Lloyd Garrison say about this issue? Draft the text of a speech that Garrison could deliver on this topic.
3. Garrison argued that the U.S. Constitution was a proslavery document. Working with a partner and a copy of the Constitution, evaluate this claim.

The Liberator

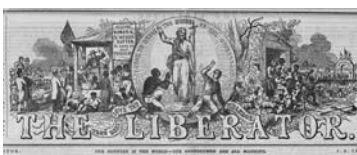
The Liberator was the most powerful abolitionist newspaper in Boston—and the nation. Published weekly for more than three decades, from 1831 to 1865, *The Liberator* provided vital news about abolition, slavery, political developments, international events, and regional matters. It established a reputation for reporting different sides of a story, so Northerners often had access to the arguments made by Southerners, Europeans, Africans, and members of the West Indian community.

The Liberator also included reports about literary clubs, community meetings, concerts, school exhibitions, and announcements of births, marriages, and deaths in the free black community. It remains the best source of information about the daily lives of African Americans in Boston and New England before the Civil War.

Garrison’s *Liberator* contributed both to the abolition of slavery and to the social advancement of the free black community.

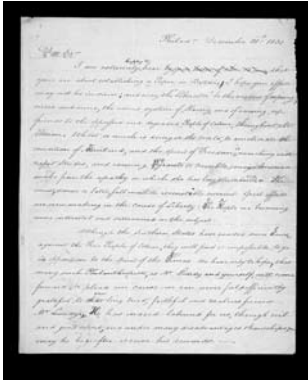


Masthead, *The Liberator*, 1838 [ENLARGE]



Masthead, *The Liberator*, 1850 [ENLARGE]

WORDS OF THUNDER Teacher's Guide



Record of payment from James Forten to William Lloyd Garrison [ENLARGE]

JAMES FORTEN

Garrison knew that the success of his radical newspaper depended upon support from Boston's black community as well as from progressive whites. Though Garrison obtained short-term credit to prepare the first issue of *The Liberator*, he had no money to pay his bills. Just in time, Garrison received a check for \$54 for 27 subscriptions from James Forten, an African American businessman from Philadelphia. Forten, a fourth-generation Philadelphian, had served in the Continental Navy and was a member of one of the wealthiest African American families in the nation. Other members of Boston's African American community also raised funds to help Garrison.

In Focus

1. In his note to Garrison, what goals does Forten spell out for *The Liberator*? Which of these came to pass during the newspaper's existence?
2. Why was it significant that *The Liberator* received financial support from members of the African American community? What did this support indicate about perceptions of Garrison?
3. In the first issue of *The Liberator*—and in many subsequent issues—Garrison made it clear that he believed in the *immediate* abolition of slavery, not in a long-term phasing out. Why do you think he took this position? What pros and cons do you see in a more moderate and gradual approach than that of Garrison?

Activities and Investigations

1. How do you think Garrison responded to Forten's letter? Draft the text of a reply. Be sure to include a section that addresses Garrison's goals for his new publication.
2. When it came to stating his position on slavery, Garrison was steadfast, declaring that "I will not retreat a single inch." Can you think of another historical or contemporary figure who has refused to compromise or equivocate? In your view, did this person make the right choice? In a brief essay, take a stand on the question of when (if ever) one should compromise, offering examples to support your thesis.

THE LIBERATOR MASTHEAD

In Focus

1. Compare *The Liberator's* old masthead to its new one (see page 19). Who donated the new design? Why?
2. Read the description of the new masthead out loud. Then describe the new image and explain what each element stands for.
3. How is religion invoked on the masthead, with references to both the Old and New Testaments? Why do you think the newspaper's editors made these choices? To whom were they trying to appeal? Might they have offended or alienated anyone?

Activities and Investigations

1. Design your own masthead and logo for *The Liberator*. Or imagine your own publication in support of a cause you believe in and design a logo and masthead for it. Provide a detailed explanation for the symbolism.
2. Study the masthead of a contemporary newspaper or magazine. What symbolism do you see? What is the impact of the typeface that is used? What audience are the editors trying to reach? Is the masthead effective? Why or why not?

THE NEW HEAD TO THE LIBERATOR

The engraving at the head of this week's paper, which each reader will have noticed before seeing these lines, has been made from the design of HAMMATT BILLINGS, Esq., who has very liberally given this labor (Estimated to be worth twenty dollars) for love of the cause. The idea represented is the same as in the former head, the contrast of slavery with freedom, with the addition of a central medallion representing Jesus, the Liberator, around whose head is this inscription, "I come to break the bonds of the oppressor." At his right hand a slave kneels, extending his manacled hands for protection. On the left, a slaveholder, whose whip has fallen to the ground, shrinks from his rebuke. Beneath the medallion is a scroll bearing these words, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

Article, "The New Head to The Liberator," *The Liberator*, May 31, 1850 [ENLARGE]