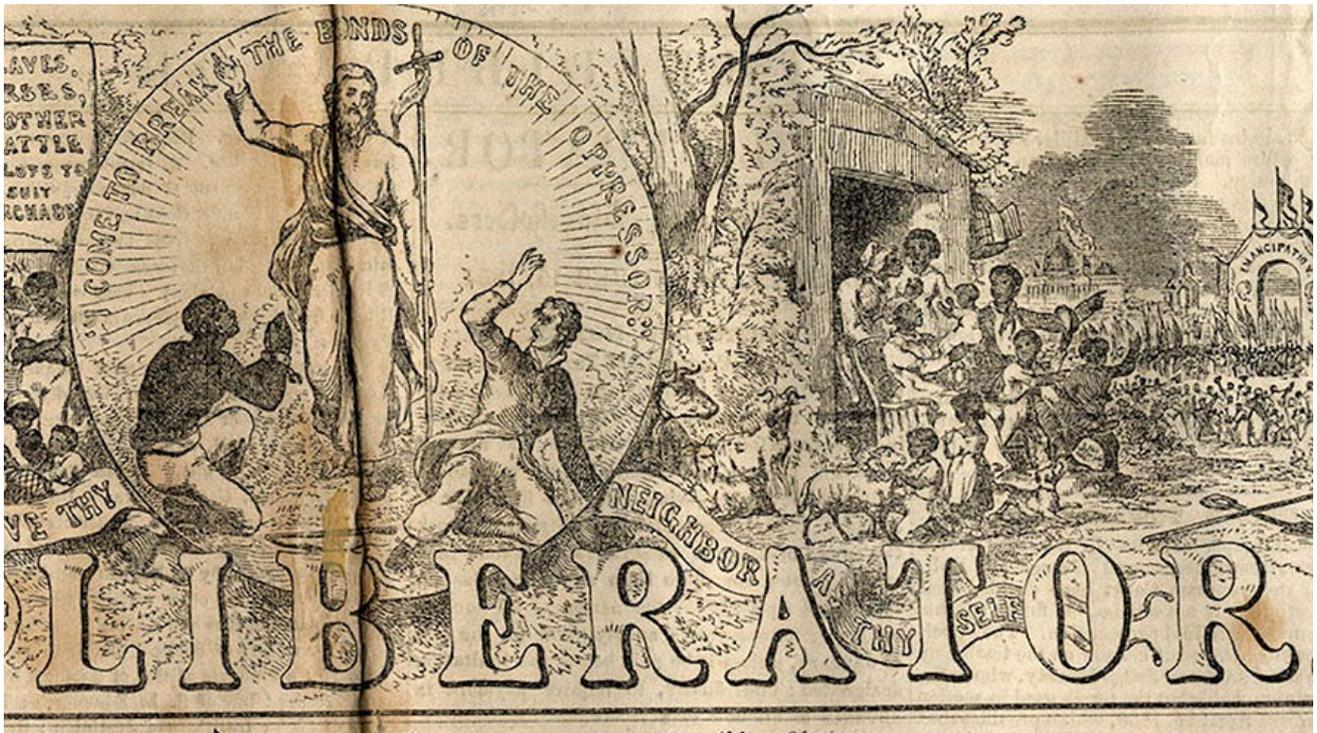


Expansion & Reform: Black Women and the Abolition of Slavery

By Margaret Washington, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.16.16

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TOP: Image of the front page of The Liberator (December 15, 1854). Courtesy of Wikimedia. BOTTOM: Abolitionist Sojourner Truth pictured in 1870. Randall Studios, Courtesy of Wikipedia.

During the time leading up to the Civil War, black women all over the North worked to end slavery. People who wanted an end to slavery were known as abolitionists. In many different ways, these women in the North helped bring an end to slavery in the South. Anti-slavery Northern black women knew what it was like to be mistreated. Like the slaves, they, too, were victims of racism. Some had been born as slaves in the North. Others had family members who were still slaves. Many interacted everyday with people who had escaped slavery and feared being returned to the South.

Some of the most famous anti-slavery women were Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. But there were others who came before them. In Northern communities, many black women performed their own quiet activism. They fought against slavery through their church work and charity groups. These women found time for political activism in between managing homes, raising children and working.



Centers of female anti-slavery activity

In the late 1820s, churches in New York City, Philadelphia and Boston were centers of female anti-slavery activity. Black women organized markets to sell goods that weren't made by slaves. They also raised money for Freedom's Journal, the nation's first black newspaper. In 1831, they helped launch an anti-slavery newspaper called The Liberator.

During the 1830s, black women engaged heavily in activism. To help runaway slaves, many turned their homes into "free homes." These "free homes" were part of the Underground Railroad, a network of safe places where slaves could hide. The Underground Railroad helped many slaves escape to the North.

By 1832, black women had formed the first female anti-slavery group in Salem, Massachusetts. They also helped lead anti-slavery groups in other cities.

Black men did not want black women in the spotlight

Black men in these anti-slavery groups wanted black women to work behind the scenes. But many refused to do so. In 1831, black women in Boston organized the African American Female Intelligence Society. One woman in the group was Maria Stewart, the first woman to speak publicly against slavery. Stewart said that she was called by God to fight for freedom and the rights of black women. However, Boston's black male community censored Stewart for her speeches and forced her into silence. She never again spoke publicly, but she remained active in women's groups.

The anti-slavery movement became more welcoming toward women in the 1840s. The American Anti-Slavery Society was founded by famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Known as the Garrisonians, this group invited women to serve as leaders and speakers. Most black women continued their quiet anti-slavery work, but some were outspoken. The most famous was Sojourner Truth. She was born into slavery and became free as an adult. By the time she joined the Garrisonians in 1844, she was already known as a preacher. In 1845, she gave her first address at the American Anti-Slavery Society's annual meeting.

Harriet Tubman

In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act. This law said that all Americans had to help return runaway slaves to their masters. That same year, former slave Harriet Tubman began defying the Fugitive Slave Law. She led enslaved men, women and children out of the South along the Underground Railroad. She helped them through the Northern states and on to Canada.

Before and after freedom

In the years leading up to the Civil War, black woman abolitionists became even more active. Harriet Tubman offered to help the Union Army of the North. Sojourner Truth gave speeches throughout the Midwest, where she faced angry mobs. Black women organized protest campaigns. They sent food and clothing to Union soldiers. On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves. Black women immediately began working on the next stage of their mission. Their new task would be to uplift their race as a free people.

Margaret Washington is a professor of history at Cornell University. Her books include "Sojourner Truth's America" which was published in 2009.