

THE ABOLITIONIST DILEMMA:

THE ANTISLAVERY MOVEMENT AND THE NORTHERN NEGRO

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CONSISTENCY demanded that abolitionists move against racial oppression in both the North and the South. Slaveholders and their spokesmen repeatedly defended the "peculiar institution" on the ground that Negroes were unfit to enjoy the rights and privileges exercised by whites, and they pointed to northern treatment of the free Negro as substantial proof of the real benevolence of slavery and the hypocrisy of anti-slavery arguments.¹ Abolitionists did not ignore the plight of northern Negroes; indeed, they contended that slaves and free Negroes shared a similar plight. After surveying the condition of Negroes in northern states and cities, they could come to no other conclusion.

Although fundamental differences existed between a condition of legal servitude and freedom, municipal, state, and federal statutes relegated northern Negroes to a position of legal inferiority, while custom and prejudice reduced them to a subservient economic and social status. Disfranchised in nearly every state, denied the right to settle in some, confined to a diminishing list of menial employments, northern Negroes found themselves systematically separated from the white community. They were either excluded altogether from railway cars, omnibuses, stage coaches, and steamboats, or assigned to special "Jim Crow" sections; they sat in secluded and remote corners of theaters; they could enter most hotels, restaurants, and resorts only as servants; and they prayed in "Negro pews" in the white churches. Moreover, they were educated in segregated schools, punished in segregated prisons, nursed in segregated hospitals, and buried in segregated cemeteries. The public burying ground or "Potter's Field" in Cincinnati sym-

¹ See, for example, *Register of Debates*, 21 Cong., 1 Sess., 47, 215; *Congressional Globe*, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 602, *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 2 Sess., 349.

bolized the tragic plight of the Negro—even in death. White bodies were laid east to west; Negroes north to south.²

As long as northern laws, institutions, and customs rendered “the freedom of the colored people but an empty name—but the debasing mockery of true freedom,” abolitionists confessed that it would be difficult indeed to condemn the practices of the South. Abolitionists, in short, must strike at the roots of slavery, show the Negro’s capacity for self-improvement, and demonstrate the sincerity of their own professed sympathy for his plight.³ Improving the condition of northern Negroes thus formed an integral part of the antislavery movement. In the first issue of *The Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison advised his “free colored brethren” that the struggle for equal rights in the North constituted “a leading object” of abolitionism.⁴ In no other way, agreed James Russell Lowell, could abolitionists more effectively serve “their holy cause.”⁵

By 1860 the antislavery societies could point to some important achievements in the North. What made them especially noteworthy was not only the existence of powerful public hostility but dissension and prejudice within the abolitionist movement itself.

I

While deploring racial prejudice and endorsing the Negro’s claim to full citizenship, many white abolitionists hesitated to carry their views to the point of social intercourse with their Negro brethren. Since racial mixing flouted the prevailing so-

² Edward S. Abdy, *Journal of a Residence and Tour in the United States of North America, from April, 1833, to October, 1834* (London, 1835), III, 7.

³ For examples of this sentiment, see the address of William Goodell before the Lewis County Anti-Slavery convention, January 10, 1837, in *Human Rights*, February, 1837; *Second Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society . . . 1835* (New York, 1835), 6, 69; *Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the New York State Anti-Slavery Society . . . 1836* (Utica, 1836), 57; address of Gerrit Smith before the second annual convention of the New York Anti-Slavery Society, in *The Friend of Man*, October 11, 1837; Sophia Davenport to Anne Warren Weston, June 30, 1838, Weston Papers, Boston Public Library.

⁴ *The Liberator*, January 1, 1831. See also issues of January 15, May 28, 1831.

⁵ James Russell Lowell, *The Anti-Slavery Papers of James Russell Lowell* (Boston and New York, 1902), I, 21-22.

cial code and might easily lead to mob action, antislavery advocates faced a real dilemma. If an abolitionist fought for equal rights, some argued, it did not necessarily follow that he must also consort with Negroes socially. Indeed, such an act might endanger the effectiveness of the antislavery cause. "May we not find it more efficient to go for their improvement in . . . civil privileges," James Birney asked, "leaving their introduction to *social* privileges out of the public discussion? Would it not be better to leave this . . . matter rather more at rest for the present time than to press it upon the whole community? May not urging it *now* be throwing too much in our way the prejudice against it, and defeat the elevation of the Col'd people to *civil* privileges?"⁶

Although several Negroes actively participated in the organization and activities of the antislavery societies, white abolitionists continued to disagree on the expediency of Negro membership. In 1835, for example, Garrison criticized William Ellery Channing, an antislavery sympathizer, for expressing the belief that "we ought never to have permitted our colored brethren to unite with us in our associations."⁷ The following year Charles Follen admitted before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society that abolitionists had been advised "not unnecessarily to shock the feelings, though they were but prejudices, of the white people, by admitting colored persons to our Anti-Slavery meetings and societies. We have been told that many who would otherwise act in union with us, were kept away by our disregard of the feelings of the community in this respect." However, Follen added, excluding Negroes would not only deprive the movement of some effective workers but it would comply with "inhuman prejudice," sanction the principle of slavery, and "give the lie to our own most solemn professions." While abolitionists should select their

⁶ James G. Birney to Theodore Weld, July 26, 1834, in Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, editors, *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld, and Sarah Grimké, 1822-1844* (New York, 1934), I, 163.

⁷ William Lloyd Garrison to Lewis Tappan, December 16, 1835, quoted in Charles H. Wesley, "The Negro's Struggle for Freedom in its Birthplace," *Journal of Negro History*, xxx, 74 (1945).

social friends according to their own principles, "how can we have the effrontery to expect the white slaveholders of the South to live on terms of civil equality with his colored slave, if we, the white abolitionists of the North, will not admit colored freemen as members of our Anti-Slavery Societies?"⁸

But such liberal sentiments did not always prevail. When abolitionist leaders met in New York on March 9, 1836, to arrange a program for the anniversary meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, Lewis Tappan proposed that a Negro minister be invited to deliver one of the addresses. However, considerable opposition thwarted such a bold plan. "This is a ticklish point," Tappan wrote that night. "I insisted upon it as we must act out our principles, but it was said the time has not come to mix with people of color in public. So to prevent disunion I submitted."⁹ A month later an even more heated discussion occurred at a meeting of the executive committee of the Society, and one member threatened to resign if "true abolitionism" required social intercourse between Negroes and whites. "I have observed," Tappan wrote after the meeting, "that when the subject of acting out our profound principles in treating men irrespective of color is discussed heat is always produced. I anticipate that the battle is to be fought here, & if ever there is a split in our ranks it will arise from collision on this point."¹⁰

The meetings of a Philadelphia antislavery society vividly demonstrated the division in abolitionist ranks on the questions of Negro membership and social intercourse. Organized in 1836, this society dedicated itself to arrest the progress of slavery and to strive for eventual abolition. One year after its formation, however, the organization found itself spending

⁸ *Fourth Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society*. . . . January 20, 1836 (Boston, 1836), 50.

⁹ MSS Diary of Lewis Tappan, February 23, 1836 to August 29, 1838, Papers of Lewis Tappan, Library of Congress; Lewis Tappan to Theodore Weld, March 15, 1836, in Barnes and Dumond, editors, *Weld-Grimké Correspondence*, I, 276-277.

¹⁰ MSS Diary of Lewis Tappan, February 23, 1836 to August 29, 1838, Papers of Lewis Tappan, Library of Congress.

five sessions to discuss the question, "Is it expedient for colored persons to join our Anti-Slavery Societies?" After hearing speakers on both sides, the members finally decided in the affirmative by a margin of two votes. Subsequent meetings discussed such questions as, "Ought Abolitionists to encourage colored persons in joining Anti-Slavery Societies?" and "Is it expedient for Abolitionists to encourage social intercourse between white and colored families?" While resolving at its 1837 quarterly meeting to remove public prejudice and encourage the intellectual, moral, and religious improvement of Negroes, the members debated and eventually tabled a resolution which declared that social intercourse with Negroes would strengthen the bitterness of public prejudice, retard the acquisition of civil and religious privileges, and fasten the chains of bondage even tighter, and which condemned "the conduct of those who feel it their duty to encourage such intercourse, as a necessary consequence of their profession of Anti-Slavery principles." Instead, the convention resolved that it was neither "our object, or duty, to encourage social intercourse between colored and white families." However, they agreed by a margin of ten votes that it would be expedient to accept Negroes as members of antislavery societies.¹¹

Such problems apparently confronted foreign as well as American antislavery societies. Edward Aaby, a staunch English abolitionist who visited the United States in the years 1833-1834, later wrote to an American friend, "We cannot, I am ashamed to say, claim exemption from the prejudice of color. . . . [Gustave?] De Beaumont, when asked why Bisette was not a member of the Committee of the French abolition society replied—'Why! he is a colored man.' Here we have a religious man and a liberal expressing sentiments opposed to every rational idea of what we owe to God and humanity. Thus it is that Benevolence is employed to foster Pride—we humiliate while we relieve. . . . It really seems as if many considered an African . . . as entitled to the same sort of sympathy and sub-

¹¹ Minutes of the Junior Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia, 1836-1846, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

scribed to the anti-slavery society as they subscribe to the society for the prevention of cruelty to animals."¹²

While abolitionists searched their conscience for a way out of these perplexing problems, Lewis Tappan engaged in a bitter controversy with the revivalist leader and antislavery sympathizer Charles G. Finney, over the wisdom of mixing Negroes and whites in public functions. When, for example, Negro and white choirs shared the same platform at the first anniversary meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in May, 1835, some abolitionist sympathizers, including Finney, apparently intimated that such intercourse had helped to provoke the July anti-Negro riots in New York City. But "the choirs sat separately in the orchestra," Tappan explained, "the whites on one side and the colored on the other!" Having "been cruelly *slandered* about attempts to mix black and white people," Tappan asserted that the seating of the two choirs was "the only attempt I ever made to mix up the two colors in any public assembly or elsewhere," and "this I did by order of a committee of which I was chairman." However, Tappan admitted that he had once dined with two Negro members of the executive committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society and occasionally with "a few colored 'gentlemen'" but this constituted "the [head] and front of my offending. . . . And yet many abolitionists have talked about efforts at amalgamation, etc."¹³

Acting as an intermediary in the Tappan-Finney dispute, Theodore Weld, the leading western abolitionist, expressed his own views on the delicate subject of social intercourse.

¹² Edward Strutt Abdy to Maria (Weston) Chapman, May 24, 1844, Weston Papers, Boston Public Library.

¹³ Lewis Tappan to Theodore Weld, March 15, 1836, in Barnes and Dumond, editors, *Weld-Grimké Correspondence*, I, 275-276. References to this dispute are also included in Weld to Tappan, November 17, 1835, March 9, April 5, October 24, 1836, *Weld-Grimké Correspondence*, I, 242-243, 270-274, 289, 345; MSS Diary of Lewis Tappan, February 23, 1836 to August 29, 1838, Papers of Lewis Tappan, Library of Congress, especially the entries for February 25 and March 19, 1836. "I am satisfied CSF [Charles S. Finney] is wrong," Tappan wrote in his diary, "and has unjust suspicions of me. Last year, in another matter, he accused me of 'pious fraud' wh I thot wholly unmerited."

"Take *more pains* to treat with attention, courtesy, and cordiality a colored person than a white," Weld advised, "from the *fact* that he *is* colored." But in mixing the two races on a social basis, abolitionists should first ask whether its effect on the general public would be "a *blessing* or a *curse* to the Colored people?" Weld felt that his own feelings toward Negroes had been sufficiently demonstrated by his actions while attending the Lane Seminary in Cincinnati. "If I attended parties," he declared, "it was *theirs—weddings—theirs—Funerals—theirs—Religious meetings—theirs—Sabbath schools—Bible classes—theirs.*" It did not necessarily follow, however, that he would walk arm-in-arm with a Negro woman at midday down the main street of Cincinnati. Such an act "would bring down a storm of venge[a]nce upon the defenceless people of Color, throw them out of employ, drive them out homeless, and surrender them up victims to popular fury"; indeed, such "an ostentatious display of superiority to prejudice and a *blistering bravado defiance*" would misconstrue the true motives and objectives of abolitionists and turn public attention from their major goal—the destruction of slavery—to a "collateral" point. While it would be sinful to manifest any unkindness toward Negroes, abolitionists must realize, Weld concluded, that "there are times when we *may refrain* from making *public visible demonstrations* of feelings about differences of color in practical exhibitions, when such demonstrations would bring down persecutions on them."¹⁴

Charges of racial mixing also deeply annoyed Arthur Tappan. Defending his conduct as late as 1863, the New York abolitionist leader and philanthropist wrote to an English friend regarding his past views and actions. While Christian conduct had bound him to treat Negroes without respect to color, Tappan explained that he had always felt that public sentiment on the subject required "great prudence" on the part of abolitionists. Although he had consistently shown his willingness "*publicly*" to associate with "a well educated and refined colored

¹⁴ Theodore Weld to Lewis Tappan, March 9, 1836, Barnes and Dumond, editors, *Weld-Grimké Correspondence*, 1, 270, 272-274.

person," he considered it best to refrain from social intercourse until "the public mind and conscience were more enlightened on the subject." It was thus a "malignant falsehood" to accuse him of "any gross assault on the fastidiousness of the age." As to charges that he or any member of his family "have ever put arms into the hands of colored men or women in New York or anywhere else, it is without the slightest foundation."¹⁵

The problems of Negro membership and social intercourse also aroused considerable discussion among the women's anti-slavery organizations. When two Quaker women formed a Female Anti-Slavery Society in Fall River, Massachusetts, and invited several interested Negroes to join, it "raised such a storm among some of the leading members that for a time, it threatened the dissolution of the Society." Although the opposition denied any objections to Negroes attending their meetings, they considered it improper to invite them to become members of the Society, "thus putting them on an equality with ourselves."¹⁶ While the Fall River group finally decided in favor of admission, "wicked prejudices about colour" prevented Negro membership in the New York women's anti-slavery society.¹⁷ Delegates to the national convention of anti-slavery women approved, although not unanimously, a resolution by Sarah M. Grimké calling upon abolitionists to associate with their oppressed brethren, to sit with them in churches, to appear with them on the streets, to grant them equal rights in steamboats and stages, and to visit them in their homes and receive them "as we do our white fellow citizens."¹⁸ Less than a

¹⁵ Arthur Tappan to A. F. Stoddard, August 27, 1863, quoted in Lewis Tappan, *The Life of Arthur Tappan* (New York, 1870), 201-202.

¹⁶ Malcolm R. Lovell, editor, *Two Quaker Sisters. From the Original Diaries* (New York, 1937), 119-120. (Elizabeth Buffum Chace and Lucy Buffum Lovell)

¹⁷ Anne Warren Weston to Deborah Weston, October 22, 1836, Weston Papers, Boston Public Library. "Every body has their own troubles and the New York brethren have theirs. Mrs. Cox is the life and soul of the New York Society and she is in a very sinful state of wicked prejudices about colour; they do not allow any coloured woman to join their society. . . . The Tappans have none of this prejudice therefore they and Mrs. Cox are hardly on speaking terms."

¹⁸ *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, . . . 1838* (Philadelphia, 1838), 8. For additional sentiments on this question, see *Proceedings of the Third Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, . . . 1839* (Philadelphia, 1839), 22, 24; *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, . . . 1837* (New York, 1837), 13, 17.

month after the convention, two Philadelphia abolitionists wrote that the recently passed resolution had "greatly alarmed" some of "our timid friends" who unsuccessfully attempted to expunge it from the published convention report. Not content with this setback, these "pseudo-abolitionists" endeavored to induce leading Philadelphia Negroes to deny publicly any desire to mix socially with whites; only such a disavowal, they warned, would avert "destruction and bloodshed."¹⁹ In Cincinnati, meanwhile, several of the women teachers at the Negro school complained to Weld that some "halfhearted" abolitionist co-workers expressed alarm "if perchance we lay our hands on a curly head, or kiss a coloured face." Since such actions seemed to "offend their nice taste," it became increasingly difficult to work with these prejudiced women in the company of Negroes. "Dear Br.[other]," they pleaded, "do pray the Lord to send us co-workers instead of anti-workers."²⁰

Regardless of public opposition and personal doubts, some abolitionists considered social intercourse with Negroes a demonstration of true devotion to the cause. While admitting that one could advocate "the civil emancipation of those whom he would still be unwilling to associate with," the American Anti-Slavery Society warned in its 1837 annual report that its members yielded too readily to prejudice. If color or public opinion alone explained an abolitionist's reluctance to associate with Negroes, then "he wrongs the cause in which he is engaged."²¹

¹⁹ James and Lucretia Mott to Anne Warren Weston, June 7, 1838, Weston Papers, Boston Public Library. "[I]t is only our half-way Abolitionists," Mrs. Mott explained, "and some timid ones like Dr. Parrish who have never joined our societies and who are now quaking with fear—These it is to be regretted are not well understood by the colored people whom they attempt to influence. They think them wholly identified with us and confiding in them as their best advisers they are in danger of being led astray." See also Lucretia Mott to Edward M. Davis, June 18, 1838, in Anna Davis Hallowell, *James and Lucretia Mott. Life and Letters* (Boston, 1884), 130.

²⁰ Phebe Mathews, Emeline Bishop, Susan Lowe and Lucy Wright to Theodore Weld, March? 1835, in Barnes and Dumond, editors, *Weld-Grimké Correspondence*, I, 217.

²¹ *Fourth Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society, . . . 1837* (New York, 1837), 107. For similar abolitionist criticism, see *Proceedings of a Meeting to Form the Broadway Tabernacle Anti-Slavery Society* (New York, 1838), 28, and *The [9th] Annual Report of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, . . . 1849* (New York, 1849), 68.

When abolitionists did mix with Negroes, it became almost fashionable to tell others about this novel experience, treating it as a personal triumph over the amassed forces of prejudice and evil. Weld, for example, related at great length his daily intercourse with Negroes in Cincinnati. When Negro ministers and friends mixed with whites at the Weld-Grimké wedding, the new bride explained, "They were our invited guests, and we thus had an opportunity to bear our testimony against the horrible prejudice which prevails against colored persons."²² Both Negroes and whites attended the funeral of James Forten, a prominent Philadelphia Negro leader, and one white participant proudly described it as "a real amalgamation funeral."²³

But such intercourse was, after all, novel and often dangerous in the ante-bellum United States. In facing this annoying problem, many abolitionists did, indeed, appear hesitant, careful, apprehensive—but always curious. "I hear that Mrs. [Lydia] Child has had a party lately," a Massachusetts woman abolitionist wrote, "and invited colored persons, do write me about it."²⁴

II

The aversion to social relations with Negroes might be ascribed in part to the fact that most whites, whether abolitionists or not, acknowledged the existence of vast differences—physical and mental—between the two races. Some abolitionists, for example, failed to question the validity of commonly accepted stereotypes of the Negro character; they contended instead that these peculiar racial qualities constituted no just grounds for denying Negroes freedom or equal political rights. On the other hand, abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison argued that the Negro could unfortunately do nothing

²² Sarah Grimké to Elizabeth Pease, May 20?, 1838, Barnes and Dumond, editors, *Weld-Grimké Correspondence*, II, 679.

²³ Lucretia Mott to Richard and Hannah Webb, February 25, 1842, in Hallowell, *James and Lucretia Mott*, 232.

²⁴ Sophia Davenport to Caroline Weston, June 5, 1836, Weston Papers, Boston Public Library.

about the color of his skin and this alone perpetuated prejudice. "The black color of the body, the woolly hair, the thick lips, and other peculiarities of the African," Garrison's *Liberator* remarked, "forms so striking a contrast to the Caucasian race, that they may be distinguished at a glance. . . . They are branded by the hand of nature with a perpetual mark of disgrace."²⁵

Nevertheless, abolitionist literature contributed its share to the popular conception of the Negro, frequently referring to his meek, servile, comical, minstrel-like qualities. For example, William Ellery Channing, writing in an antislavery tract, described the Negro as "among the mildest, gentlest of men"; his nature is "affectionate, easily touched" and therefore more open to religious impression "than the white man's; the European races manifest "more courage, enterprise, invention" but the Negro "carries within him, much more than we, the germs of a meek, long-suffering, loving virtue"; if civilized, the African would undoubtedly show less energy, courage, and intellectual originality than the Caucasian but would surpass him in "amiableness, tranquillity, gentleness and content"; he may never equal the white man "in outward condition" but he would probably be "a much happier race."²⁶ The Ohio Anti-Slavery Society found that Negroes "endure with more patience the scorn and wrong under which they are pressed down—are more grateful for the favors which they receive—more tractable than persons of like information and intelligence among the whites."²⁷ Abolitionist author Charles Stuart reported that Negroes were guilty of fewer "atrocious crimes" because they were "less ferocious, less proud, and passionate and revengeful, than others."²⁸ Accepting this composite pic-

²⁵ *Liberator*, January 22, 1831.

²⁶ William Ellery Channing, "The African Character," John A. Collins, editor, *The Anti-Slavery Picknick: A Collection of Speeches, Poems, Dialogues and Songs; intended for use in Schools and Anti-Slavery Meetings* (Boston, 1842), 56-58. See also Edward Abdy's interview with Channing in Abdy, *Journal of a Residence and Tour*, III, 217-237.

²⁷ Ohio Anti-Slavery Society, *Condition of the People of Color in the State of Ohio* (Boston, 1839), 4.

²⁸ Charles Stuart, "On the Colored People of the United States," *The Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine*, II, 16 (October, 1836).

ture of the Negro character, abolitionists might well argue that social intercourse with the blacks not only seemed impolitic but unnatural.

Negro efforts to break away from this stereotype did not always win acclaim within the abolitionist movement. Frederick Douglass, for example, proved to be a formidable antislavery orator. But some abolitionists became concerned over Douglass' rapid intellectual development; perhaps people would no longer believe that he had ever been a slave. "The public have itching ears to hear a colored man speak," antislavery agent John A. Collins pointed out to Garrison, "and particularly a *slave*. Multitudes will flock to hear one of this class speak. . . . It would be a good policy to employ a number of colored agents, if suitable ones can be found." By 1841, however, Douglass' suitability seemed to be in question. "People won't believe you ever was a slave, Frederick, if you keep on this way," one abolitionist told Douglass. Collins added, "Better have a little of the plantation speech than not; it is not best that you seem too learned."²⁹

In battling prejudice while at the same time accepting certain popular notions about the Negro, abolitionists frequently exhibited a curious racial attitude. They might, for example, refer to their African brethren—innocently or otherwise—as "niggers" or emphasize some alleged physical or mental characteristic. At times they seemed to sense this dual attitude. When a prominent Massachusetts woman abolitionist described a recent antislavery fund-raising fair in New Bedford, she wrote to her sister, "All the fashionables of the town were there and all the 'niggers' (dont let this letter get into the Mass ab.[olitionist])."³⁰ Usually, however, abolitionists appeared unaware that they might be using offensive language in describing Negroes. Arnold Buffum, a New England antislav-

²⁹ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, Conn., 1884), 269-270.

³⁰ Deborah Weston to Mary Weston, January 5, 1840, Weston Papers, Boston Public Library. The "Mass Ab" refers to a weekly abolitionist newspaper edited by Elizur Wright, Jr., which generally disagreed with the Garrisonian position, especially concerning political action. Deborah Weston was a Garrisonian.

ery leader, thus informed Garrison about his activities in behalf of a school "where honors may be dispensed to woolly heads."³¹ Abolitionist James W. Alvord, after visiting a school in Clifton, Connecticut, wrote to Weld that one Negro girl sat with the white students. "Cant tell how it will go," he remarked. "Should not be surprized if some of the white parents should smell her very bad, tho I could not perceive the girls on either side were at all aware of her niggerly odour." At the same time, however, Alvord asked Weld what more he could do for "the salvation" of the Negro. "To this object," he declared, "I *would dedicate my life.*"³²

III

While Negroes demonstrated their appreciation of the efforts and accomplishments of the antislavery societies, they did not hesitate to condemn prejudice within the abolitionist movement. "Even our professed friends have not yet rid themselves of it," a Negro teacher lamented; "to some of them it clings like a dark mantle obscuring their many virtues and choking up the avenues to higher and nobler sentiments." As an example, she cited the comment of "one of the best and least prejudiced men" in the antislavery cause: "Ah said he, 'I can recall the time when in walking with a colored brother, the darker the night, the better Abolitionist was I.' " While this person no longer expressed such feelings, she feared that similar sentiments "oftentimes" manifested themselves among the white friends of the Negro. However, she added, "when we recollect what great sacrifices to public sentiment they are called upon to make, we cannot wholly blame them. Many, very many anxious to take up the cross, but how few are strong enough to bear it."³³

³¹ Arnold Buffum to William Lloyd Garrison, October 23, 1832, in Francis and Wendell P. Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879* (Boston, 1894), I, 327.

³² James W. Alvord to Theodore Weld, August 29, 1838, Barnes and Dumond, editors, *Weld-Grimké Correspondence*, II, 697.

³³ Sarah Forten to Angelina Grimké, April 15, 1837, Barnes and Dumond, editors, *Weld-Grimké Correspondence*, I, 380.

Several Negro leaders complained that white abolitionists devoted so much time to fiery condemnations of southern slavery that they tended to overlook the plight of northern Negroes. One Negro newspaper charged in 1839 that making "abolition in the North" an objective of secondary importance clearly constituted "a primordial defect" in the antislavery movement.³⁴ Even when white abolitionists turned their attention to the condition of northern Negroes, it appeared to some that they stressed only political rights and education. Was it not "strange," a Negro leader asked, that the Constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society failed to mention social equality as an objective?³⁵

But while some Negro leaders criticized the apathy of white abolitionists, others contended that Negroes had placed too much reliance on the efforts of outside forces, thus actually hampering the struggle for equal rights. The antislavery societies, Martin R. Delany charged, have always "presumed to *think* for, dictate to, and *know* better what suited colored people, than they know for themselves." While he applauded the constructive work of these societies, he felt that Negroes placed too much faith in the "miracle" of abolition and demonstrated too little confidence in their own efforts. After the appearance of some white abolitionists at the 1831 national Negro convention to propose a manual labor college, it seemed to Delany that Negroes suddenly ceased their independent activities, "and with their hands thrust deep in their breeches-pockets, and their mouths gaping open, stood gazing with astonishment, wonder, and surprise, at the stupendous moral colossal statues of our Anti-Slavery friends and brethren, who in the heat and

³⁴ *Colored American*, May 18, 1839. "They [the American Anti-Slavery Society] make secondary and collateral what ought to have been the primary object of all their efforts. . . . At this moment more is known among abolitionists of slavery in the Carolinas, than of the deep and damning thralldom which grinds to the dust, the colored inhabitants of New York. And more efforts are made by them to rend the physical chains of Southern slaves, than to burst the soul-crushing bondage of the Northern states."

³⁵ James McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith, March 1, 1855, quoted in Howard Holman Bell, *A Survey of the Negro Convention Movement, 1830-1861* (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1953), 41.

zeal of honest hearts, . . . promised a great deal more than they have ever been able half to fulfill, in thrice the period in which they expected it." Awaiting a practical application of abolitionist dogma, Negroes had been disappointed. Instead, "we find ourselves occupying the very same position in relation to our Anti-Slavery friends, as we do in relation to the pro-slavery part of the community—a mere secondary, underling position, in all our relations to them, and any thing more than this, is not a matter of course . . . but . . . by mere sufferance."³⁶

In assessing the weaknesses of the antislavery movement, Negro critics referred particularly to the economic depression of their people and the failure of abolitionists to offer Negroes decent jobs in their business establishments or even in the anti-slavery offices.³⁷ After all, abolitionist speeches and editorials could not correct the prevailing prejudices of white society—this required a demonstration of Negro economic improvement. "Our white friends are deceived," a Negro newspaper charged, "when they imagine they are free from prejudice against color, and yet are content with a lower standard of attainments for colored youth, and inferior exhibitions of talent on the part of colored men."³⁸ Abolitionists possessed the means to assist Negro laborers, these critics maintained, and yet few of them showed any willingness to train or hire Negroes. This prompted one Negro delegate to a convention of the

³⁶ Martin R. Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1852), 10, 24-25, 27.

³⁷ See, for example, Delany, *The Condition* . . . , 26-28. "It is true," Delany remarked, "that the 'Liberator' office, in Boston has got . . . a colored youth, at the cases—the 'Standard,' in New York, a young colored man, and the 'Freeman,' in Philadelphia, . . . another, in the publication office, as 'packing clerk'; yet these are but three out of the hosts that fill these offices in their various departments, all occupying places that could have been, and as we once thought, would have been, easily enough, occupied by colored men. Indeed, we can have no other idea about anti-slavery in this country, than that the legitimate persons to fill any and every position about an anti-slavery establishment are colored persons." In addition to this criticism, a delegate to a meeting of the National Council of the Colored People in 1855 charged that "[t]hose who professed to be the strongest abolitionists have refused to render colored people anything but sympathy. . . . [T]hey might employ a colored boy as a porter or packer, but would as soon put a hod-carrier to the clerk's desk as a colored boy, ever so well educated though he be." *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, May 18, 1855.

³⁸ *Colored American*, November 4, 1837, July 28, 1838.

American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society to charge that attempts to induce members of the executive committee to admit Negroes into their commercial houses or into the anti-slavery offices had met with no success. Replying to a specific charge that he used Negroes only in menial employment, delegate Arthur Tappan, owner of a large New York City department store, claimed that he had recently hired a Negro porter but that this person had left his job before being qualified for a clerical position. In any case, Tappan declared, he would not ask "an Irishman sawing wood in the street, and covered with sweat" to dine with his family; neither would he ask a Negro in a similar condition. He only required that his associates be gentlemen, irrespective of color. While regretting that erroneous stories had been circulated among Negroes concerning his conduct, he was still pleased that delegates had alluded to them for this should "put all abolitionists on their guard, and induce them to act out, at all times, the principles they professed."³⁹

IV

In view of the prevailing economic outlook among abolitionists, Negro expectations of substantial economic progress under the impetus of the antislavery movement were unwarranted. Abolitionists gave no indication of encouraging Negro workers to combine among themselves or with white workers for economic gains. Inasmuch as Garrison and other reformers had expressed no sympathy with the efforts of white workers to organize into trade unions, this attitude is not surprising.

However, abolitionists did consider the economic plight of the northern Negro. In their appeals to the Negro community, antislavery leaders stressed the importance of economic advancement and independence. Accumulate money, Garrison told a Negro audience in 1831, for "money begets influence, and influence respectability."⁴⁰ This became standard abolitionist advice throughout the ante-bellum period. "A colored

³⁹ *The [12th] Annual Report of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, . . . 1852* (New York, 1852), 29-30.

⁴⁰ William Lloyd Garrison, *An Address Delivered before the Free People of Color, in Philadelphia, New York, and other Cities, during the month of June, 1831* (Boston, 1831), 10.

man who makes a thousand dollars," a Unitarian clergyman and abolitionist declared in 1859, "does more to put down prejudice, than if he made a thousand moderately good speeches against prejudice, or wrote a thousand pretty fair articles against it. No race in this country will be despised which makes money. If we had in Boston or New York ten orang-outangs worth a million dollars each, they would visit in the best society, we should leave our cards at their doors, and give them snug little dinner-parties."⁴¹

Antislavery organizations encouraged a program of economic uplift. They cheered Negro efforts to shift from menial to agricultural and mechanical employments and called upon sympathetic merchants and master mechanics to hire Negro apprentices.⁴² In Pennsylvania, abolitionists established a register of Negro mechanics available for work, and in New England they moved to establish a manual labor college to train Negro youths.⁴³ Gerrit Smith, an antislavery leader and philanthropist, decided to promote the Negro drive for economic independence by distributing approximately 140,000 acres of his land in northern New York (much of which was poor and unfit for cultivation) to 3,000 Negroes.⁴⁴

⁴¹ James Freeman Clarke, "Condition of the Free Colored People of the United States," *The Christian Examiner*, LXVI, 5th Series, IV, 263-264 (1859).

⁴² *The Fifth Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society*, . . . 1838 (New York, 1838), 127; *Proceedings of the Third Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women*, 8; Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society, *Address to the People of Color, in the City of New York* (New York, 1834), 5; Theodore Weld to Lewis Tappan, February 22, 1836, Barnes and Dumond, editors, *Weld-Grimké Correspondence*, I, 264-265.

⁴³ Minutes of the Committee for Improvement of the Colored People, Pennsylvania Abolition Society, 1837-1853, Historical Society of Pennsylvania [24-25]; *Liberator*, September 29, 1832.

⁴⁴ Several factors, however, resulted in the failure of this project. In addition to the poor quality of the land, the cost of moving, settling, seeding, and waiting for the first crops compelled many Negroes to abandon their grants. In 1848, two years after the inauguration of the plan, less than thirty Negro families had settled on the new lands. See *An Address to the Three Thousand Colored Citizens of New-York, who are the owners of one hundred and twenty thousand acres of land, in the State of New York, given to them by Gerrit Smith, Esq. of Peterboro, September 1, 1846* (New York, 1846); *North Star*, January 7, February 18, 1848, January 5, March 2, June 1, 1849; Ralph V. Harlow, *Gerrit Smith* (New York, 1939), 244-245, 250-252.

But abolitionist efforts consisted largely of advice and encouragement and failed to achieve any measurable economic advance. This partly stemmed from the abolitionists' adherence to orthodox middle-class economics. Garrison, for example, believed that an employer's sense of profit would override his racial prejudices. "Place two mechanics by the side of each other—one colored, and the other white," and "he who works the cheapest and best, will get the most custom. In making a bargain, the color of a man will never be consulted."⁴⁵ In a similar vein, an antislavery New England journal declared that Negro merchants would attract customers when they sold goods cheaper than their white neighbors, and Negro mechanics would be more frequently employed when they showed a willingness to work for lower wages than whites. The voice of interest, the journal concluded, speaks "louder and more to purpose than reason or philanthropy."⁴⁶

In 1851 three prominent antislavery sympathizers—Cassius M. Clay, Horace Mann, and Benjamin Wade—communicated their recommendations to a convention of Ohio Negroes. Clay advised the delegates to sacrifice social equality, which he considered impossible to attain even in the free states, and immediate political rights in order to concentrate on the accumulation of wealth. "The blacks should 'get money,'" he declared. "Let them go into the trades—become farmers—manufacturers—where capital and employment are wanting—let them combine, and thus diminish the expense of living, and increase their productive power." According to Mann, however, Negroes could advance economically only by forming separate communities apart from the whites where they could "rise from domestic labor and mere chance-service, from being ditchers and delvers, into farmers, mechanics, artizans, shopkeepers, printers, editors or professional men." Separation would afford all Negroes an equal opportunity to compete for the highest political and economic offices. Wade arrived at al-

⁴⁵ Garrison, *Address Delivered before the Free People of Color*, 10.

⁴⁶ *New England Magazine*, January, 1832, quoted in *Liberator*, January 21, 1832.

most an identical conclusion; he advised Negroes to withdraw from all menial employments, form separate communities, cultivate the soil, enter the mechanical arts, and thereby attain economic independence. "While scattered about among the white people," this objective could not be realized. Independence, however, would compel whites to grant them respect and recognition, thus forever destroying the doctrine of racial superiority. "The colored skin is nothing," Wade concluded: "When was it ever known that virtue, industry and intelligence were not respected?"⁴⁷

However, abolitionist moral encouragement did not break down the economic barriers confronting northern Negroes. As a result, the Negro entered the Civil War period as an unorganized and unskilled worker competing with newly arrived immigrants for the menial employments.

V

Economic orthodoxy and the aversion of some abolitionists to intimate social relations with Negroes did not prevent the antislavery movement from registering some important victories in the realm of equal rights. Perhaps the most spectacular of these was the successful integration of Negro and white students in the public schools of Boston.

Education constituted the foremost aspiration of the northern Negro. But the possibility of Negroes mixing with white children in the same classroom aroused even greater fears and prejudices than those that consigned them to an inferior place in the church, theater, and railroad car. This, indeed, was virtual amalgamation. Although Negroes sometimes gained admittance to white schools, most northern states either excluded them altogether from the public schools or established separate schools for them.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *Proceedings of the Convention of the Colored Freemen of Ohio, . . . Cincinnati, . . . 1852* (Cincinnati, 1852), 15-25. For the reaction of the Negro community to these recommendations, see *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, October 22, 1852, and *Liberator*, November 26, 1852.

⁴⁸ The means by which Negroes were excluded from white schools varied only slightly from state to state. In New England, local school committees usually

Excluded from white schools, Negroes endeavored to establish their own educational institutions and enlisted the support of abolitionists. The education of the emancipated slave had formed a major goal of the early abolition societies, particularly in New York and Pennsylvania.⁴⁹ After 1831 the revived abolitionist movement sought to assist Negro education. The constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society urged the encouragement of the "intellectual, moral, and religious improvement" of Negroes, and Garrison praised Negro efforts to improve his condition through education.⁵⁰ Convinced "that faith without *works* is death," Cincinnati abolitionists provided instruction for the Negro community. Other antislavery societies moved to duplicate the achievements of the Cincinnati group.⁵¹

However, even exclusively Negro schools frequently en-

assigned Negro children to separate institutions, regardless of the district in which they resided. Pennsylvania and Ohio, although extending their public school privileges to all children, required district school directors to establish separate facilities for Negro students whenever twenty or more could be accommodated. The New York legislature authorized any school district, upon the approval of a town's school commissioners, to provide for segregation. The newer states also consented to separate instruction. In the absence of legal restrictions, custom and popular prejudices prevented Negroes from entering white schools. For a general survey of state policies regarding Negro education, see U. S. Commissioner of Education, *Special Report of the Commissioner of Education on the Condition and Improvement of Public Schools in the District of Columbia, Submitted to the Senate June, 1868, and to the House, with additions, June 13, 1870* (Washington, 1871), Part II: Legal Status of the Colored Population in Respect to Schools and Education in the Different States, 301-400; and Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861* (New York, 1915), 307-335.

⁴⁹ Minutes of the Committee for Improving the Condition of Free Blacks, Pennsylvania Abolition Society, 1790-1803, Historical Society of Pennsylvania [1-2, 113, 219-220]; Edward Needles, *An Historical Memoir of the Pennsylvania Society, for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for Improving the Condition of the African Race* (Philadelphia, 1848), 40, 43, 68, 69-70, 104-105; Charles C. Andrews, *The History of the New-York African Free-Schools, from their establishment in 1787, to the present time* (New York, 1830).

⁵⁰ *The Declaration of Sentiments and Constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York, 1835), 8; *First Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the New-England Anti-Slavery Society, presented January 9, 1833* (Boston, 1833), 7.

⁵¹ Barnes and Dumond, editors, *Weld-Grimké Correspondence*, I, 132-135, 178-180, 211-218; Abdy, *Journal of a Residence and Tour*, II, 388-389.

countered strong opposition from the white community. The identification of abolitionism with the cause of Negro education provided whites with a convenient excuse for resisting such institutions. In New Haven, Connecticut, for example, Garrisonian abolitionists failed to establish a Negro manual labor college in the face of strenuous local opposition. Such an institution, city officials declared, would propagate antislavery sentiments, prove incompatible with the existence and prosperity of Yale and other notable schools, and be "destructive to the best interests of this city." Attempts to establish a Negro girls school in Canterbury, Connecticut, and to enroll Negro students in a Canaan, New Hampshire academy met even more violent resistance, and failed.

White abolitionists joined Negroes in assailing school segregation, and soon questioned their own efforts to establish exclusively Negro institutions. When some white colleges indicated a willingness to admit Negroes, an abolitionist leader asked Garrison in 1834 if it would not be preferable to patronize those institutions rather than build new ones since "the object we aim at, the destruction of caste, will be the sooner gained."⁵² Two years later an abolitionist convention confirmed this opinion by resolving henceforth to oppose separate schools.⁵³

Boston was the major focal point of the Negro-abolitionist attack on segregated schools. In Massachusetts, Negroes achieved virtual political and legal equality by 1845, and their children were admitted to public schools, without discrimination, in Salem, New Bedford, Nantucket, Worcester, and Lowell. Only Boston maintained a policy of separation, and it was there that Negroes launched the most concerted and suc-

⁵² Elizur Wright, Jr., to William Lloyd Garrison, June 30, 1834, Garrison Papers, Boston Public Library, and Wright Papers, Library of Congress. A New Bedford, Massachusetts abolitionist wrote in 1837 that "it is hardly desirable that there should be an exclusively coloured school established, for the public schools are all open, and black children admitted on terms of the most perfect equality." Deborah Weston to Maria (Weston) Chapman, April, 1837, Weston Papers, Boston Public Library.

⁵³ *Liberator*, November 19, 1836.

cessful attack on "caste" schools in the North. White abolitionists, convinced that local segregation practices were incompatible with their antislavery efforts, joined the campaign. "It is useless for us to prate of the conduct of South Carolina," a segregation foe declared in 1845, "so long as we maintain—*illegally* maintain—a practice here which at least incidentally sanctions it."⁵⁴ The following year the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society resolved that "the friends of the cause" residing in those communities which provided separate educational facilities should immediately inform Negroes of their legal rights, and "afford them all possible aid in securing the full and equal enjoyment of the public schools."⁵⁵

While Garrison's *Liberator* assailed the Boston school committee, local Negroes met regularly to prepare new appeals and methods of attack.⁵⁶ Rejected by the school committee and the courts, they turned to legislative action and secured in 1855 the enactment of a bill to prohibit distinctions based on race, color, or religious opinions in determining the qualification of students to be admitted into any of the public schools.⁵⁷ Negroes and white abolitionists celebrated their triumph for equal rights in a mass meeting.⁵⁸ The foes of integration appeared disappointed and fearful. "Now the blood of the Winthrops, the Otises, the Lymans, the Endicotts, and the Eliots,

⁵⁴ *Liberator*, June 27, 1845.

⁵⁵ *Fourteenth Annual Report presented to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, by its Board of Managers, January 28, 1846* (Boston, 1846), 91-92.

⁵⁶ *Liberator*, August 21, 1846, August 10, September 7, November 9, December 14, 1849, February 8, 1850.

⁵⁷ *House Report*, Massachusetts House of Representatives, No. 167 (March 17, 1855).

⁵⁸ *Triumph of Equal School Rights in Boston. Proceedings of the Presentation Meeting held in Boston, December 17, 1855; including addresses by John T. Hilton, Wm. C. Nell, Charles W. Slack, Wendell Phillips, Wm. Lloyd Garrison, Charles Lenox Remond* (Boston, 1856). "The best thing learned by these struggles," Wendell Phillips declared, "is, how to prepare for another. . . . He should never think Mass. a State fit to live in, until he saw one man, at least, as black as the ace of spades, a graduate of Harvard College. (Cheers) . . . When they had high schools and colleges to which all classes and colors were admitted on equal terms, then he should think Mass. was indeed the noblest representative of the principles that planted her."

is in a fair way to be amalgamated with the Sambos, the Catos, and the Pompeys," one newspaper declared. "The North is to be Africanized. Amalgamation has commenced. New England heads the column. God save the Commonwealth of Massachusetts!"⁵⁹

The Boston victory encouraged Negroes and abolitionists in other states to increase their agitation, but they had less success. Some small and scattered communities consented to admit both races to the same schoolhouse, but the larger cities such as Philadelphia, New York, Cincinnati, Providence, and New Haven, held firmly to a segregated school system and hoped to stem increasing agitation by promises to correct existing abuses and provide separate but equal facilities for Negro and white children.

In addition to their efforts on behalf of the economic and educational advancement of the northern Negro, abolitionists supported Negro attempts to secure equal political and legal rights with whites and to break down the segregation barrier in public places. The Garrisonian abolitionists, for example, achieved phenomenal success in Massachusetts as they combined with Negroes to secure the repeal of the ban on interracial marriages, the abandonment of "Jim Crow" seating in railroad cars, and the organization of integrated lyceums, as well as the integration of Boston's public schools.

By 1860 the antislavery societies could point to some noteworthy achievements. In assessing the weaknesses and inconsistencies of the abolitionist movement, historians must not overlook these important contributions to the cause of human freedom in the North. Abolitionists did indeed suffer from factionalism, extreme partisanship, narrow class attitudes, prejudice, and even hypocrisy, but they shared these weaknesses with nearly every organized movement and political party in ante-bellum America. The fact that abolitionists did not allow

⁵⁹ New York *Herald*, quoted in *Liberator*, May 4, 1855. Subsequent testimony of Boston school officers and teachers praised the results of integration. Although a few white parents withdrew their children and some Negroes suffered insults, integrated schools resulted in neither racial violence nor amalgamation.

these weaknesses to interfere materially with their struggle for civil rights is a tribute to their sincerity. Forced at times to endure mob violence, severe public censure, frustration and defeat, these dedicated agitators displayed an ability to apply theoretical arguments about equal rights to concrete situations. Although frequently hesitant and uncertain in their own social relations with Negroes, abolitionists nevertheless attempted to demonstrate to a hostile public that environmental factors, rather than any peculiar racial traits, largely accounted for the degradation of the northern Negro.