The Pursuit of Perfection: Social Reform in Antebellum America 1820 - 1860

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Reform and Reform Movements

• To Reform
  – To change something for the better

• Social Reform
  – The belief that people can work together to change their society for the better

• Reform Movement
  – An organized movement whose participants are committed to bringing about social reform
Religious Revival: The Engine of the Social Reform in Antebellum America
The Second Great Awakening: 1800-1850

A 50 year religious movement that focused on:

1. Reforming the Individual from worldliness to holiness

2. Reforming American society to make it more fair, equitable, and just for all
The Second Great Awakening: The Spread of Revival
Rev. Charles G. Finney

- Revivalist minister
- Christians have a duty to remake the world in God’s image
- To “correct and perfect”
  - American Institutions
  - American Social Practices
From Religious Revival to Social Reform

To Correct and Perfect American Institutions, Society, and Social Practices

Temperance

Educations

Abolitionism

Women's Rights
1826 – American Temperance Society
- Attacked “demon rum” and “devilish spirits”
  - Weakened republic
  - Prevented hard work and self-improvement
  - Led to wasted earnings and/or job loss
  - Led to domestic violence
  - Families and children were thrown into poverty
“The Drunkard’s Progress”

From the first glass to the grave, 1846
Result: Alcohol Consumption dropped by 50% between 1820 and 1850.
Educational Reform

- Transition from religious training to secular education
- Education for all (white) children: Widening of education to general population regardless of wealth
- Education in academics, citizenship, and values
- Creation of tax supported local public schools
“Father of American Education”

1. Children were clay in the hands of teachers and school officials

2. Children should be “molded” into good citizens with “American” values
   - Patriotic
   - Hard-working
   - Sober and Sensible

Horace Mann
The McGuffey Readers: America’s First Textbook

- Used religious parables to teach “American values.”
- Taught middle class morality and respect for order.
- Taught “3 Rs” – Reading… ‘Riting… ‘Rithmetic
Results of Antebellum Education Reform

• By 1860 every state offered free public education to white children
• US had one of the highest literacy rates in the world
The Women’s Rights Movement

It was we, the people; not we, the white male citizens; nor yet we, the male citizens; but we, the whole people, who formed the Union.

-Susan B. Anthony
19th-Century Gender Roles: Separate Spheres

“The Cult of Domesticity”

• A woman’s sphere was the home (it was a refuge from the cruel world outside)

• Her role was to “civilize” her husband and family
A 19th-Century Woman’s World

- Expected to remain dependent on man for entire life (father, husband, or other)
- Had the legal status of a minor
- No legal control of property or her own children
- No such thing as domestic abuse
- Could not vote
The 2nd Great Awakening inspired women to:

1. Seek equality and equal treatment for themselves
2. Become active participants in reform work of all kinds
3. Take leadership roles in social reform movements – especially temperance, education, prison, and abolition

Breaking Out of their “Sphere”
The Birth of the Women’s Rights Movement: Seneca Falls Convention, 1848
The Birth of the Women’s Rights Movement:

Seneca Falls Convention  New York 1848: the beginning of the women’s movement in the U.S.

Organized by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Their purpose was to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women. They wanted to publicize the second class status of women and begin the fight to remedy it.

Over 300 attended.

A series of declarations was passed. The issue of female suffrage met serious opposition until a speech by Frederick Douglass convinced the delegates to pass a declaration demanding it.

Only one Convention attendee, 19 year old Charlotte Woodward lived to see women win the vote in 1920.
Seneca Falls Convention, 1848: The Declaration of Sentiments

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal...

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpation on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.

Resolved, that woman is man's equal, was intended to be so by the Creator, and the highest good of the race demands that she should be recognized as such.
The Results of the Antebellum Women’s Rights Movement

- A long road with little traction
- Consciousness raising
- Movement to a Backseat to Abolition of Slavery
- Women began to assume leadership and public roles
- Laid the foundation for the Women’s Suffrage Movement after the Civil War
- Full Equality & the Vote came in 1920 with passage of 19th amendment
ABOLITION OF SLAVERY.

The GLORIOUS 1st of AUGUST, 1838,
When it is confidently expected that the last vestige of SLAVERY will be swept away in all our West India Islands.

A Public Thanksgiving Service will be held in the ENGLISH WESLEYAN CHAPEL, on WEDNESDAY Evening next, AUGUST 1st, 1838, precisely at 7 o’Clock. Addresses in both Languages will be delivered on the auspicious occasion.

The attendance of all that feel interested in the welfare of 800,000 of their fellow creatures who will shortly emerge from a state of SLAVERY into that of FREEDOM, is most earnestly requested.

Carmarthen, July 30th, 1838.

P.S.—A Collection will be made to defray the local expenses of the Carmarthen Anti-Slavery Society, and to aid the General Committee in London, in their important and unwearied labours, to secure to the Negro the possession of ACTUAL, as well as NOMINAL Freedom.
• The most complex and passionate reform movement in Antebellum America

• The issue of slavery in America will spawn debate, violence, and eventually split the nation in two
Varieties of abolitionism
- Sympathy for Slaves – Sympathy for Whites
- Freed slaves should citizens – Freed slaves should be sent back to Africa
- Nonviolent – Violent
- Religious – Rational
- Black - White
- Men - Women
Back to Africa with the American Colonization Society

- One of the oldest abolition groups. Made up of evangelicals and Quakers
- Goal: To Repatriate of Free Blacks to Africa
- 1820’s the ACS bought land in Africa and established a country called Liberia
- Governed by ACS officials until 1841
- By 1867 over 13,000 free blacks were transported from America to Liberia
- Was an American protectorate until 1980
Abolition at Home: The American Anti-Slavery Society

• Founded in 1833
• Argued for the total Abolition of Slavery and the Emancipation of Slaves
• Took a rational / legal approach to convince northern whites to pressure the US government to end slavery
• Large membership of sympathetic northern white citizens, including reform communities
William Lloyd Garrison (1801-1879)

- Slavery was a moral evil
- It undermined the republic
- Constitutionality of slavery was blight on America
- Immediate Emancipation
- Started newspaper, *The Liberator*
Reform Tactic: Abolitionist Alphabet

A is an Abolitionist—
A man who wants to free
The wretched slave—and give to all
An equal liberty.

B is a Brother with a skin
Of somewhat darker hue,
But in our Heavenly Father’s sight,
He is as dear as you.

C is the Cotton-field, to which
This injured brother’s driven,
When, as the white man’s slave, he toils
From early morn till even.

D is the Driver, cold and stern,
Who follows, whip in hand,
To punish those who dare to rest,
Or disobey command.
Pro-Slavery
Propaganda

Slavery is said to be an evil; that it impoverishes the people and destroys their morals. If it be an evil, it is one to us alone, and we are contented with it—why should others interfere? But it is no evil. On the contrary, I believe it to be the greatest of all the great blessings which a kind Providence has bestowed upon our glorious region. For without it, our fertile soil and our fructifying climate would have been given to us in vain. As it is, the history of the short period during which we have enjoyed it has rendered our southern country proverbial for its wealth, its genius, its manners.

Pro-Slavery Images

Southern Pro-slavery Editorial
Resistance to Abolition

Outrage

Fellow Citizens,

AN ABOLITIONIST,

of the most revolting character is among you, exciting the feelings of the North against the South. A seditious lecture is to be delivered

THIS EVENING,

at 7 o'clock, at the Presbyterian Church in Cannon-street.

You are requested to attend and unite in putting down and silencing by peaceful means this tool of evil and fanaticism. Let the rights of the States guaranteed by the Constitution be protected.

Feb. 27, 1837. The Union forever!

Property Destruction and Murder

Pro-Slavery Events
Resistance to Abolition

Smashing the printing press of an Abolitionist paper
The Black Abolition Movement

Two Goals:

1. Provide 1st hand accounts and narratives of former slaves to expose whites to the horrors of slavery And to strengthen sympathetic white’s resolve to abolish the practice → Evoke Emotion

2. To help slaves escape to freedom
Frederick Douglass
1818-1895

- Ex-Slave
- Escaped to Freedom
- Most prominent and influential Black Abolitionist
- Writer / Orator

1845 → *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*

1847 → “The North Star” newspaper
Sojourner Truth
(1787-1883)

- Ex-Slave
- Women’s rights Advocate and Abolitionist
- Travelled America giving lectures and Truth telling

1850 → The Narrative of Sojourner Truth
Harriet Tubman (1820-1913)

- Helped over 300 slaves to freedom
- Called “Moses” for her efforts to lead slaves north to “the promised lands” of northern states and Canada
- $40,000 bounty on her head
The Underground Railroad
“Conductor” → leader of the escape

“Passengers” → escaping slaves

“Tracks” → routes

“Trains” → farm wagons transporting the escaping slaves

“Depots” → safe houses to rest/sleep
Impact of Reform in Antebellum America

Antebellum Reform movements laid the groundwork for future change efforts in America.

Made Reform a distinctively America pastime – We are a nation always looking to “perfect” itself and its institutions.

Highlighted an important truth about the process of bringing about change is society: Moral Suasion vs. Political Action.

It expanded the growing rift between the American North and the American South. and escalated sectionalist feelings in America.

The North became more dynamic, reform-minded, and comfortable with change.

The South became more conservative and ultra determined to protect its traditional institutions from change.