

# From Moral Suasion to Political Confrontation: American Abolitionists and the Problem of Resistance, 1831-1861

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In January, 1863, as warfare raged between North and South, the great abolitionist orator Wendell Phillips addressed an enormous audience of over ten thousand in Brooklyn, New York. Just days earlier, President Abraham Lincoln, in his Emancipation Proclamation, had defined the destruction of slavery as the North's new and overriding war aim. This decision, Phillips assured his listeners, marked the grand culmination "of a great fight, going on the world over, and which began ages ago...between free institutions and caste institutions, Freedom and Democracy against institutions of privilege and class."<sup>[1]</sup> A serious student of the past, Phillips's remarks acknowledged the fact that behind the Emancipation Proclamation lay a long history of opposition to slavery by not only African Americans, free and enslaved, but also by ever-increasing numbers of whites. In Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica, Brazil and Surinam, slave insurrection helped to catalyze emancipation. Abolition in the United States, by contrast, had its prelude in civil war among whites, not in black insurrection, a result impossible to imagine had not growing numbers of Anglo-Americans before 1861 chosen to resist the institution of slavery directly and to oppose what they feared was its growing dominion over the nation's government and civic life. No clearer example of this crucial development can be found than Wendell Phillips himself.

For this reason his career provides a useful starting point for considering the development of militant resistance within the abolitionist movement and its influence in pushing northerners closer first, to Civil War, and then to abolishing slavery.

This compelling Boston orator burst on to the national stage in 1837 when vociferously denouncing a mob of pro-slavery rioters in Alton, Illinois, that had murdered abolitionist editor Elijah Lovejoy. Thereafter, Phillips developed a rich abolitionist career in which he all but covered the spectrum of resistance, legal and extra-legal. On a day-to day-basis, he claimed the role of agitator by making speeches, publishing articles and petitioning legislatures, all forms of resistance protected by the Constitution's Bill of Rights. At various junctures he relied on these protections to urge defiance of proslavery law and government, to engage in peaceful civil disobedience, and even to give rhetorical encouragement of the use of violence. More specifically, he customarily defied legally-sanctioned white supremacy by seating himself in railway cars reserved for "colored only," agitated in favor of desegregating Massachusetts' public facilities, (schools in particular), and demanded that citizens organize vigilante actions in the free states to protect against the recapture of fugitive slaves.[2]

All of these actions were the logical consequences of his most fundamental conviction of all — that slavery itself was so heinous a crime in the eyes of God and so fundamental a violation of all principles of American freedom that it ought, by every measure of justice, to be destroyed in the twinkling of an eye. Like all fully-committed abolitionists, black and white, Phillips demanded "immediate abolition." By the 1840's and 1850's, he had followed this logic to

justify still more militant forms of resistance. Now he announced that moral Americans must deny the legitimacy of the nation's proslavery Constitution, welcome slave revolts in the South, openly defy federal law enforcement officers in order to prevent the recapture of fugitives, and celebrate the insurrectionist John Brown for his 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia.[3]

Most important of all, when Phillips voiced his insurgency the American public paid closest attention, and as the decades passed, increasing numbers of northerners felt compelled to agree with him. From the mid-1840's onward, Phillips achieved wide renown as an extraordinary orator who presented the most radical abolitionist opinions in a way that audiences always found compelling, even enchanting. "You heard him...an hour, two hours, three hours," listeners typically recalled, "and had no consciousness of the passage of time.... He steals upon the audience and surprises them into enthusiasm." The fullest testimony to Phillips's preeminence as "abolition's golden trumpet," however, came from slavery's defenders, who feared him as "an infernal machine set to music," an exponent of racial upheaval and political chaos so eloquent in his espousals of resistance that he simply overpowered his listeners' better judgment. "For the present generation, he is a most dangerous agitator," one such critic observed, because he possessed an unerring ability "to take premises we all grant to be true and to weave them into an enchantment of logic from which there is no escape." [4]

But explaining Phillips's remarkable impact involves more than appreciating his oratory. More important, his unusual public appeal documents a broadening agreement among white northerners about the necessity of resisting of slavery. As Phillips's reputation grew, so did both

his espousals of resistance and his audiences' receptivity to his ever more militant message. Between 1831, when white "immediate" abolitionists first began mobilizing, and 1860, after that most violent resistor of all, John Brown, had been hanged, powerful insurgent impulses increasingly permeated the abolitionist movement. Much to the advantage of Wendell Phillips as a public speaker, they also radiated ever more powerfully into the broader political culture of the North, a fact that angry slaveholders fully appreciated when voting to secede from the Federal Union. This essay, therefore, will to examine the roots of white abolitionists' postures of resistance, the evolving forms that this resistance took, and the reasons why increasing numbers of white northerners joined with abolitionists like Phillips to register defiance to the slave South.[5]

When launching their movement against slavery in the early 1830's, the first white exponents of "immediate abolitionism" presented themselves as apostles of Christian reconciliation, not as agents of insurgent resistance. Most of these early crusaders drew their inspiration from a wave of Protestant religious revivalism, the Second Great Awakening, which swept the nation in the 1820's. Led by powerful evangelical ministers such as Charles Grandison Finney and Lyman Beecher, this religious outpouring emphasized the individual's free will choice to renounce sin, strive for personal holiness, and then, once "saved", bring Gods truth to the "unredeemed" and to combat the evils that sin inevitably perpetuated-- drunkenness, impiety, sexual license, and exploitation of the defenseless. In the ears of young white abolitionists-to-be, Congregational revivalists such as Arthur and Lewis Tappan, Theodore Dwight Weld and Elizur Wright Jr., Baptists such as William Lloyd Garrison and radical Quakers such as Lucretia Mott

and John Greenleaf Whittier, these doctrines confirmed that slavery was the most God-defying of all sins and the most corrosive behavior of all to harmony among His people. [6]

In what other system did exploitation of the defenseless occur more brazenly? Where was sexual wantonness more rampant than in the debauchery by masters of their female slaves? Where was impiety more deliberately fostered than in masters' refusals to permit their slaves to read the Scriptures? Where was brutality more evident than in the master's heavy use of whips, or his willingness to dismember the slaves' ties of family? The solution to all these terrible questions was the truth of "immediate emancipation," pressed urgently upon the slumbering consciences of American citizens, slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike, by means of peaceful exhortations of Christian morality. [7]

Calling this strategy "moral suasion", these neophyte abolitionists believed that theirs was a message of healing and reconciliation to be delivered by Christian peacemakers, not by divisive insurgents. Their goal was not simply to resist slavery, but actually to obliterate it, rapidly and forever. Their method was to touch the (presumably) guilty and therefore receptive consciences of slaveholders with appeals for "immediate emancipation", inspire masters voluntarily to release their slaves and thereby lead the nation into a redemptive new era of Christian reconciliation and moral harmony. Guided by such visions they quite naturally insisted that "immediate emancipation" would do away with racial conflict by ending the bitter enmity between masters and slaves and relieve dangerous political tensions already inflaming North against South. "Our object is to save life, not destroy it" William Lloyd Garrison stressed in

1831. “Make the slave free and every inducement to revolt is taken away, every possibility ended for servile as well as civil war.” Moreover, they felt certain that the practice of “immediatism” would enrich daily living for everyone by expanding adherence to time-honored values to which morally upright citizens already held fast. As Garrison sharply questioned “are we then fanatics because we cry ‘Do not rob! Do not murder!’?” And finally, immediate abolitionists saw themselves as harmonizers, not insurgents, because the vast majority of them forswore violent resistance. The American Anti-Slavery Society’s founding Declaration, published in 1833 made this requirement clear when its signers pledged to reject “the use of all carnal weapons” and to adhere to Christian principles that forbade “the doing of evil that good may come.” “Immediatists,” in short, saw themselves not as resisting slavery by responding to it reactively, but instead as uprooting it by spiritually revolutionizing the corrupted values of its practitioners and supporters.[8]

By adopting Christian pacifism and regarding themselves as revolutionary peacemakers, these earliest white immediatists woefully underestimated the power of the forces opposing them. Well before they launched their crusade, slavery had secured formidable dominance in the nation’s economy and political culture. To challenge so deeply entrenched and powerful an institution eventually meant adopting postures of intransigence for which these abolitionists were, initially, wholly unprepared . A review of slavery’s actual position within the nation’s political economy and culture suggests why this was so.

From the 1830's until the onset of Civil War, enslaved humans constituted the nation's second largest form of capital investment, exceeded only by investment in land itself. After 1810, when Eli Whitney's gin had opened vast new opportunities for planters to adapt slave labor to an important new commodity, cotton had quickly replaced rice and tobacco as the South's most lucrative product. Slavery's geographical center shifted rapidly southwestward from Virginia and Maryland into the newly admitted states of Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Missouri and Arkansas. Multiplying slave populations mirrored this expanding geography. In 1790, the nation's enslaved had numbered 600,000. By 1830, they counted for close to 2,000,000 and were concentrated increasingly in these newly-developing western lands. To hasten this process, masters developed a far-flung interstate slave trade by uprooting enslaved families in the upper south and selling their scattered members to eager buyers on the "cotton frontier." Meantime, in New England, wealthy industrial entrepreneurs with names such as Lowell, Appleton and Lawrence linked southwestern cotton and slavery to their own region's emerging leadership in the industrial revolution. Throughout the 1830's, they established water powered textile mills across New England that transformed raw cotton into fabric that clothed ever-increasing millions of Americans, thereby uniting North with South in ever-tightening bonds of commerce, investment and credit.[9]

In politics as in the economy, slaveholding interests predominated as the nation expanded its boundaries and consolidated its systems of government. Back in 1787, the framers of the United States Constitution had provided slavery with legal legitimacy and significant political advantage that became increasingly obvious during the antebellum years. Article Four confirmed

masters' rights to recover runaways, and the Tenth Amendment forbade the Federal Government to interfere with slavery on the state level. The former provision insured the legal sanctity of slaves as property and the latter gave slaveholders ample constitutional support for adding new slave states to the Federal Union. Most crucially, the Constitution guaranteed slaveholders political power that far exceeded their actual numbers when providing, in Article One, that in addition to the free population, three fifths of the slave population also be counted for purposes of taxation and representation in the House of Representatives. This imposing advantage for southern planters took on still greater importance in the 1830's when politicians assembled a national two party system based on universal white manhood suffrage.[10]

The men who perfected this expansive new approach to politics competed as Whigs and Democrats. Influential among them were representatives of the same elite groups that underwrote slavery's southwestern expansion and fostered the economic transformation so closely related to slavery,-- northern industrialization. Rousing unprecedented numbers of voters by organizing speakers, parades and rallies, barbecues and partisan newspapers, their two parties offered contrasting approaches to fiscal policy, banking, tariffs, the opening of western lands and support for roads and canals. Concerning slavery, however, their differences were superficial. Led by slaveholding war hero, Andrew Jackson, and organized by talented party operatives in both sections, Democrats across the nation stood fore-square behind the institution. Whigs both North and South sometimes phrased their support in more measured accents when embracing the leadership of Kentucky planter/ politician, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster, New England's powerful spokesman for industrialization. In either case, strategies for victory` required parties



to mobilize a white majority of voters that encompassed both regions. This, in turn, led politicians to suppress sectionally divisive disagreements over slavery and to appeal forcefully to powerful new ideologies of white supremacy that circulated freely in both North and South. As the 1830's opened and abolitionists launched their crusade, it was deepening racial prejudice even more than slavery's entrenched positions in politics and the economy that secured it as the nation's most formidable institution.[11]

In the South, of course, it had long been established that heavily enforced white supremacy constituted the cornerstone of a free, "white" society. By contrast, the racial tensions that developed in the 1820's in the North were of a much newer sort. As urban life in the North rapidly grew more complicated during this decade, feelings of white supremacy and conflict between people of differing colors grew increasingly chronic as well. In Northern cities, industrialization fostered a rapid transition from artisan work to wage labor, which, in turn, attracted waves of immigrants from all over the British Isles, particularly from Ireland. When encountering the traumas of adjustment to unfamiliar circumstances these newly arrived workers saw in the "blackness" of their African American neighbors unwelcome competition in a tightening labor market and, even more important, a mirror of their diminishing ability to shape their own futures as "independent" men. Irish Catholics in particular feared personal "enslavement" to the Protestant "bosses" who paid their wages. Acting on these anxieties, they claimed to be "white" just like all other presumably "free" citizens, and then asserted this "whiteness" through acts of aggression against free blacks. On the opposite end of the social spectrum, elite white ministers, lawyers and businessmen noted these growing frictions and

increasingly convinced themselves that free African Americans constituted an ever more turbulent, dangerous people. Such blacks should be encouraged to ‘return’ to Africa under the auspices of the American Colonization Society, a “benevolent” movement favored by prominent northerners.

Free blacks, for their part, refused to abandon their hard-fought struggles, dating from the American Revolution, to claim full citizenship and build “respectable” communities around their churches, schools and voluntary associations. In their view, invitations to resettle in Africa were gross insults and ominous signs that whites were planning their forced deportation. Threats by these white elitists as well as by white rabble required sternest responses.[12]

These volatile racial tensions turned the 1820's into a decade of white racial tyranny. Lower class whites felt a mounting impunity to harass abuse, vandalize and even murder. Typical were the Philadelphia rioters in 1824 who hurled garbage and paving stones when driving away their dark complected fellow citizens from the Fourth of July ceremonies in which everyone had, until then, participated amicably. Particularly horrifying was the Cincinnati “race riot” of 1829. Armed mobs returned for three successive nights to terrorize black neighborhoods, leaving homes and churches in rubble, several dead, and more than 600 in stupefied exile, some permanently to Lower Canada. While less disastrous incidents disrupted other major cities such as New York, Boston and Hartford, racial bigotry overtook state legislatures in the North as politicians methodically stripped free African Americans of their citizenship. Legislators in Ohio, Indiana and Illinois opened the franchise to all white males while simultaneously enacting

“black codes” that all but eliminated the political rights of free African Americans. Pennsylvania, New York State and Connecticut likewise approved universal white manhood suffrage while requiring blacks to “qualify” as voters by satisfying all-but-impossible property requirements. Newspapers, bar rooms and theaters suddenly teemed with viciously racist cartoons and satires. White Americans in the North no less than in the South had now made color the primary criterion for living unchallenged or in oppression on “free” American soil.[13]

With the nations most powerful institutions so tightly aligned in support of slavery and white supremacy, it is clear that young white abolitionists were profoundly self-deceived when characterizing their work as “the destruction of error by the potency of truth---the overthrow of prejudice by the power of love---the abolition of slavery by the spirit of repentance.” When so contending, they were deeply sincere and grievously wrong. To crusade for slavery’s rapid obliteration was, in truth, to stimulate not “the power of love” and “repentance,” but instead the opposition of an overwhelming number of powerful enemies -- the entire political system-- the nation’s most potent economic interests-- the society’s most influential elites-- and a popular political culture in the North more deeply suffused with racial bigotry than at any previous time in the nations history. Three headline events that opened the 1830's ominously suggested what the future actually held for these young idealists. [14]

The first, the Nullification Crisis in South Carolina (1828-1832), revealed just how enraged by “immediate abolitionism” slaveholders were likely to become. Well before the start of the abolitionists’ crusade, extremist planters in this state were already mobilizing armies and

threatening secession in order to protect slavery from “meddling outsiders” and the power of the Federal Government. The second, involving militant pamphleteer, David Walker, highlighted just how desperate race relations across the nation had actually become. Walker published his Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, in Boston in 1829 and 1830, and immediately it became a landmark expression of African American political ideology. With angry accents and uncompromising ideas Walker excoriated whites for their bigotry and free African Americans for their apathy, calling, in extreme circumstances, for slaves to rise in violence. As Walker made all too clear, white oppression was driving black leaders in the free states to desperation even as angry planters closed ranks around their “peculiar institution.” Then in late 1831, in Southampton County Virginia, insurrectionist Nat Turner, led a bloody uprising that accounted for the lives of fifty five whites and a far greater number of black. Yet when responding to all this turmoil, newly- committed immediatist Samuel E. Sewell saw only portents of redemption, offering the prediction in that “the whole system of slavery will fall to pieces with a rapidity that will astonish”. Garrison even went so far as to prognosticate that “the day is not far off when black skin will be not simply endurable, but even popular!”[15] To these “Bible believing” abolitionists, sectional crisis and racial upheaval did not portend disaster, but instead gave reassurance that a God who hated slavery was making His anger manifest.

For all its obviousness, this enormous naiveté was actually one of the abolitionists’ greatest initial strengths. Their fervent belief that God would make all things right as slavery rapidly was swept aside motivated them as nothing else could have to shoulder otherwise unthinkable tasks and endure otherwise unimaginable risks. Thus, for a full six years, from 1831

through 1837, abolitionists made themselves into whirlwinds of agitation. Fully intent on uprooting, not simply resisting, the institution of slavery, they energetically canvassed the free states, creating hundred of anti-slavery societies, dozens of newspapers, blizzards of pamphlets and broadsides, and innumerable local controversies over the “sin of slavery.” Working closely with long- established groups of free African American activists in the Northern cities, they also struck directly at what they termed “color phobia” by founding schools, churches and voluntary associations in which people of all ancestries and both genders associated freely. In the same spirit abolitionists met as “promiscuous assemblies” (as detractors called them) with men mixing publicly with women and light skinned people with dark. By 1835, abolitionists had exploited the United States Postal service to flood slaveholders’ mailboxes with warnings of impending damnation and pleas to repent and emancipate. The next year they launched a “Great Petition Campaign,” sending to the U.S. House of Representatives a tidal wave of citizen requests that Congress legislate against the interests of slavery.[16]

Judged by the urgency of the issues they raised and the controversies they provoked, the abolitionists’ initial impact vastly exceeded their modest numbers. (Never were fully-engaged immediatists any more than a minuscule portion of the North’s population). Judged by their self-professed goals and expectations, however, these first campaigns led them straight to a disaster that changed their movement forever. Elected officials from President Andrew Jackson on down, civic leaders of every variety, ministers from nearly all denominations and masses of ordinary people in both North and South responded to “immediatism” with a harrowing barrage of repression. In response, white abolitionists had no choice but to redirect their movement from

a crusade for rapid emancipation into a long-term resistance struggle against the intractable tyranny of slavery and white supremacy.

In the slave states, mobs urged on by elected officials invaded post offices and burned abolitionist mailings while state legislatures voted cash bounties for the capture of leading abolitionists. White southerners suspected of “abolitionist sympathies” faced harassment, indictment and sometimes the whip or the tar-bucket as public criticism of slavery all but ended throughout the lower south. Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., Whigs and Democrats joined in 1836 to pass a “gag rule” that prohibited all discussion of abolitionists’ petitions to the House of Representatives, a truly unprecedented restriction of citizens’ freedom of political expression. In elections across the nation these same two parties competed for votes by stressing antiabolitionism and white supremacy as central to their beliefs. This sudden emergence of intensely competitive two- party politics based on mass participation and universal white manhood suffrage was thus inextricably tied to campaigns to suppress the abolitionist movement and visit still further woe on people of dark complexion. [17]

While politicians legislated against “immediatism” and campaigned for white men’s votes, mayhem erupted in cities and towns throughout the free states. Utica, Boston, Philadelphia, Rochester, Pittsburgh and Syracuse witnessed unruly gangs that disrupted abolitionists’ meetings and threatened black citizens with rocks, garbage, fists and firebrands. Similar conflicts erupted in dozens of small towns and crossroads villages as well. When immediatist Prudence Crandall tried to establish an academy for young women of color in one

such hamlet, Canterbury, Connecticut, in 1831 and 1832, her neighbors tried to burn her schoolhouse and ultimately succeeded in driving her from the state. Soon thereafter, the state legislature made schools such as Crandall's illegal and passed laws restricting abolitionists' rights to move freely within the state. In Dover, New Hampshire, the local residents used a brace of oxen to destroy a building that abolitionists had purchased to house a school open to black students as well as to whites, while in 1831, in New Haven, Connecticut, simply the proposal by abolitionists to develop a manual labor school for young black men, provoked stern condemnation from Yale University's administrators, an attack on a home owned by Arthur Tappan and a two days of racial warfare in the city's black neighborhoods. On and on the mayhem went. For abolitionists whatever their color, disillusionment compounded as the damage mounted.[18]

In Hartford, in 1836, for example, the Reverend Hosea Easton surveyed the smoking rubble of what had been the First Congregational Church, his African American congregation's treasured symbol of spirituality and community achievement. In this instance, white marauders did not even bother to use "abolitionism" as their pretext when deploying arson against free people of color. In New York City in 1834 and (again) in Cincinnati in 1836, sheriffs and constabularies looked on unconcerned as buildings in black neighborhoods burned, pillagers looted and people of color either hid or fled. Unlike the riots of the 1820's, however, these marauders sought out white abolitionists as well as blacks. In New York City the targets were Arthur and Lewis Tappan, millionaire merchants and militant white immediatists who underwrote a broad medley of abolitionist projects and associations. In Cincinnati, the victim

was James G. Birney, editor of the immediatist newspaper, The Philanthropist. Mobs there repeatedly sacked his office and hurled his printing press into the Ohio River. A practitioner of “non-resistance,” Birney himself escaped unharmed though his offices did not, and neither, predictably, did the dwellings and businesses of Cincinnati’s African Americans. [19]

Another embattled abolitionist, however, editor Elijah Lovejoy scorned “non-resistance” as mobs in Alton, Illinois repeatedly destroyed his presses and threatened his life in 1837. Fronting on the Mississippi river and located in the southernmost part of the state, Alton (like Cincinnati) teemed with men who supported slavery fervently, who deeply despised abolitionists, and who were eager to do Elijah Lovejoy harm. Seizing his rifle, Lovejoy descended from his second story office toward his tormentors as they attempted to flush him with arson. As he descended, they cut him down with a fusillade of gunfire. Thus did white abolitionism enroll its first “martyr.” Thus too did this unprecedented movement for racial equality begin a momentous transition from a hopeful religious crusade to eradicate slavery to dogged struggle to resist this formidable institution, protected as it so heavily was by religious denominations, the state, the courts, the two political parties, the bigoted opinions of most white Americans and now by vigilante violence. In the wake of Lovejoy’s murder Garrison captured perfectly the shocked realization sweeping through the movement that abolitionists must now rethink and revise their fundamental premises:

When we first unfurled the banner of the Liberator... we did not anticipate that, in order to protect southern slavery, the free states would voluntarily trample under foot all law and order, and government, or brand the advocates of universal liberty as incendiaries and outlaws.... It did not occur to us that almost every religious sect, and every political party would side with the oppressor.[20]



Historians have provided clear accounts of the deep divisions that finally shattered the white abolitionist movement once its leaders began acting on this realization. By 1840, three quarreling factions had emerged. One, led by Garrison, argued that the nation's values had now been revealed to be so utterly corrupted that abolitionists must flee from pro-slavery churches, spurn the pro-slavery political process and oppose the pro-slavery federal union with demands for northern secession. Religious perfectionism and espousals of female equality also seasoned this iconoclastic ideology, (referred to as "Garrisonianism" by supporters and detractors alike), and sustained the American Anti-Slavery Society throughout the antebellum decades. A second group, headed by James G. Birney and others, insisted that abolitionists must shift their fight to the political arena, where voters should be exhorted to "vote as they prayed and pray as they voted" for immediate emancipation. This was possible, as they now argued, because the United States Constitution derived its organic authority from the Declaration of Independence's assertion that "all men" were "created equal" and thus actually supported a legislative end to slavery. Their Liberty Party first campaigned for the Presidency in 1840, garnering no more than 7,500 votes, but continued, undaunted to field immediatist candidates up to and including the 1860 election of Abraham Lincoln. And finally, a third group, led by Lewis Tappan, founded the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in the hope of sustaining the original version of "moral suasion". To them, Garrisonians were heretical iconoclasts who had deflected the crusade for slave emancipation into a morass of perfectionist, anticlerical heresy while the Liberty Party's initiatives pandered dangerously to pro-slavery voters.[21]

Yet for all their conflicting approaches, all three factions still felt they relied, just as abolitionists always had, on moral appeals against slavery to “the nation’s conscience.” All, in other words, saw themselves as remaining wedded to “moral suasion.” Certainly none felt suddenly compelled to advocate broadly-conceived programs of overt resistance, let alone resort to violence. Nevertheless, by the later 1830’s, everything had changed, which is precisely what the murder of Elijah Lovejoy symbolized. A seven year reign of terror now forced these white immediatists to begin exploring, not new approaches for rapidly abolishing slavery, but instead how to grapple successfully with this intransigent institution and its equally intransigent alter ego, white supremacy. In short, they started to fashion the tools of resistance. When Wendell Phillip responded to Lovejoy’s death by dramatically embracing the abolitionist cause in 1837, his reasons for so doing illustrate how this process began.[22]

What disturbed Phillips most about Lovejoy’s murder was not the sin of slavery (heinous though he thought it was), but instead the institution’s seemingly unstoppable capacity to corrupt every aspect of American life, even to the point of destroying not only those it kept in chains, but also those who opposed it in the North. The mob that murdered Lovejoy, Phillips insisted, was driven by a soulless, unchecked power in human relations, founded in tyranny, that spread increasing destruction all over America—the institution of slavery. Here, he believed, was “an abnormal element” in American political culture that “no one had counted in. No check and no balance had been provided” in the nations laws or government to stem its corrupting influences. Phillips, as he explained, suddenly became “conscious that I was in the presence of a power whose motto was victory or death.” All that stood between slavery’s unchallenged

predominance and the last glimmerings of American liberty according to Phillips were the abolitionists themselves, few, despised and powerless though they were.

When Phillips henceforth devoted his life to turning public opinion against slavery with compelling speeches his participation injected a sharp new tone of resistance to abolitionism. He foreswore pacifism, celebrated the nation's revolutionary traditions of patriotic blood sacrifice, and sought effective political tactics for resisting the "unchecked" onslaught of slavery in the free states. Though a staunch Garrisonian when it came to northern disunion and women's rights, Phillips's militance spoke to a rapidly growing fear among abolitionists and northerners more generally that slavery's pernicious influences (race riot, "gag rules" and legislated repression) would surely overwhelm the free states as it had the South unless a new generation of abolitionist patriots rallied to resist it. The contrast between this desperate viewpoint and Garrison's ebullient prediction, six years earlier, that "black skin will soon be not simply endurable, but even popular" measures well how far abolitionists had journeyed from their original hopes of glorious victory.[23]

Yet even as this momentous transition proceeded, African American activists involved in the abolitionist movement also reordered their assumptions and changed direction in a manner that pushed their white associates still further along the pathways of resistance. A review of the evolving roles of northern black abolitionists in the early white-dominated immediatist movement will make clear how this process unfolded.

From the beginning, black activists such as James Forten, Hosea Easton and William Watkins had gravely doubted the white “immediatists’” assumptions that southern planters would embrace “moral suasion,” or that northern whites would soon cast off their “color phobia”. Their long and bitter trials with racial tyranny hardly fostered such optimism. Nevertheless, several reasons compelled them to respond with great enthusiasm to the initial white crusade for “moral suasion.” One such incentive involved the white abolitionists’ implacable hostility to the American Colonization Society.[24]

No proposition more openly scorned free African Americans’ claims to citizenship than the idea that they be “returned” to their “homeland” across the ocean, which is exactly what the American Colonization Society proposed. Like so many of the North’s black activists, these leaders regarded their ongoing struggles as being rooted in the irrevocable achievement of citizenship that had been attained for all people of color by “colored patriots” who had rallied to the cause during the American Revolution. Wedded to this conviction they hailed the white immediatists’ full-throated condemnations of the American Colonization Society and joined them to amplify it as fully as they could. Overburdened by racial bigotry, these Northern black activists also felt understandably heartened by the sudden appearance of whites who took their views seriously when inviting them to abolitionist meetings and publishing their thoughts in the abolitionist press. Black and white abolitionists discovered, furthermore, that they shared many of the same moral values, those stressing piety, thrift, sobriety self-control and self-improvement. Black leaders had long been accustomed to advocating these qualities when exhorting their communities to sustain programs of self-help in order to “uplift” themselves to ever higher levels of “respectability”. That meant building and strengthening churches and schools as well as

sponsoring adult education groups, fraternal organizations and temperance societies. “Uplift” constituted an ideology well suited not only for fortifying communities of color in northern cities, but also for inviting close collaboration between black community leaders and white immediatists to foster African American “respectability” as a demonstration of racial equality.[25]

Never before in the nation’s history had people of color and Euro-Americans worked together so closely for racially egalitarian goals of “uplift” and “respectability”. Together they moved decisively during the early 1830's in cities throughout the free states to establish academies, colleges and libraries, to foster temperance societies and underwrite cultural enrichments such as debating societies, literary clubs and “juvenile associations.” One monument to this brief crescendo of interracial creativity endures to this day, Oberlin College, founded in 1835 as the nation’s first institution of higher learning open to students of both genders and of all complexions. But Oberlin, unfortunately, is all that endures. On every other front, these unprecedented efforts to face down “color phobia” with racial “uplift” backfired completely by giving the mightiest impetus of all to fears of racial “amalgamation” and the most compelling of motives for applying mob rule and legislated repression.[26]

Thus while white immediatists were responding to racial tyranny by moving beyond “moral suasion,” their African American colleagues felt driven to recognize “uplift’s” costly limitations and to design militant new approaches of their own. Both groups, in other words, drastically revised their initial strategies and tactics. Most white immediatists turned from

converting the planter class to efforts to resist and unmask slavery's northern sources of power, as Wendell Phillips did. Northern black activists, for their part, continued to seek the "uplifting" of their communities but only as part of militant new campaigns to face down bigots, demand the rights of citizenship and assist individual slaves in escaping their masters. On every front, and among those of every complexion, abolitionists displayed an ever more militant spirit of resistance from the 1840's onward.

A new generation of talented African American activists that rose to leadership in the 1840's did much to move abolitionism in these new directions. As often as not, these forceful black abolitionists now set agendas for their white associates and had no time for their paternalistic impulses. This was dramatic reversal from the early years of "moral suasion" and African American "uplift" when whites made most of the basic decisions and expressed, unchallenged, their sense of cultural superiority. Some, like James McCune Smith, Martin Delany and James W.C. Pennington had northern roots and abolitionist educations while others, notably Frederick Douglass, Samuel Ringgold Ward, Sojourner Truth and Henry Highland Garnet were survivors of slavery. Whatever their backgrounds, they seldom flinched when confronted by northern bigotry and they quickly began involving whites like Wendell Phillips in protracted struggles to resist segregation. [27]

It was black David Ruggles, for example, who first refused in 1841 to sit in the "colored-only" sections of steam-boats and railway cars operating in Massachusetts. After being physically ejected from several of these conveyances, he filed a series of anti-discrimination

lawsuits and invited Garrison, Phillips and other leading white abolitionists to join him in campaigns of civil disobedience. On a warm August day that same year, Phillips thus found himself on the open air “Negro deck” of a steamer bound to New Bedford, Massachusetts, defying segregation by mingling with forty black and white abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass prominent among them. Soon thereafter individual acts of civil disobedience and concerted efforts by integrated groups against segregated transportation systems spread throughout New England, and quickly expanded to address the issue of segregation in the public schools.[28]

In the early 1840's black abolitionists began rallying their communities to boycott segregated schools and, again, found useful allies in white abolitionists. In Massachusetts towns such as Salem, Lynn, New Bedford and Nantucket such boycotts proved successful as did another led by Frederick Douglass in Rochester New York. The most significant struggle, however, took place in Boston, led by previously obscure local blacks and supported by some of the north's most prominent whites. Black abolitionists William C. Nell and John T. Hilton began an antisegregation petition campaign in 1846 to the Boston School Committee, and when their petitions were rejected they launched boycotts and rallied parents in mass demonstrations to prevent students from registering for segregated classes. When Secretary of the Massachusetts School Board, Horace Mann tried to broker a compromise, Wendell Phillips intervened with bitterly sarcastic speeches and editorials. Meanwhile black and white activists merged assets and expertise to force desegregation by bringing expensive lawsuits. In 1849, African American attorney Robert Morris and white, Harvard-educated Charles Sumner brought a suit against the

Boston School Committee on behalf of Benjamin Roberts, whose five year old daughter walked each day past five “all-white” elementary schools before arriving at the grossly inferior “colored school” to which she had been assigned. Although their lawsuits failed, continuing agitation led by Phillips, Garrison and energized black communities led by Roberts and Nell finally resulted in victory, when, in 1855, the Massachusetts Legislature voted to outlaw segregation in public schools across the state.[29]

When abolitionists turned their efforts to northern politics, however, the results were much less satisfying. During the early and mid 1840's for example, black abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet led a sustained campaign to force the repeal of New York State's two hundred dollar property qualification required of all black males who would exercise the franchise. In this case the white abolitionists who came forward to assist him were not Garrisonians, but leaders of the emancipationist Liberty Party such as Henry Brewster Stanton, Joshua Leavitt and Alvin Stewart-just one of many instance when white Liberty Party members supported black activists' efforts to resist and repeal discriminatory laws. Their efforts resulted in a state-wide referendum to repeal the restriction, which whites then rejected in 1846 by a nearly 2-1 margin, a fair measure of the power racial tyranny in one significant free state. In Pennsylvania, white opinion stymied a similar effort before it ever reached the voters.[30]

As abolitionists of all backgrounds knew well, none of these struggles did anything obvious to force emancipation in the South. On a deeper level, however, their challenges to their region's boundaries of inequality magnified as nothing else could a growing conflict of



fundamental values between the “free” north and the ‘slave” south. Below the Mason-Dixon line, granted, slavery continued to flourish and expand in the absence of organized opposition of any sort. But above it, especially in New England, in upstate New York and in northern Ohio, militant blacks were struggling to liberate themselves from humiliating denials of their citizenship and were joining whites pledged to “immediate abolition” in sustained campaigns to make the law serve racial justice. And most significantly, as in Massachusetts, sometimes they succeeded. To be sure, as the abolitionists’ defeat in New York State made clear, the free states remained mired in white supremacy at practically every level. This was particularly so in cities, in deeply conservative Connecticut, in “downstate” New York, and in the central and southern regions of states such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana and Illinois. Yet even in these locales, attorneys such as Ohio’s Salmon Chase occasionally put their legal expertise at the disposal of African Americans ensnared in a highly prejudicial legal system. Southern Congressmen and Senators, in turn, marked these multiplying signs of racial insurgency within the free states and found them increasingly disturbing. In this manner, the abolitionists’ turn from reform to resistance increasingly distressed the white south and its supporters during the 1840's and 1850's.[31]

Short of black insurrection, nothing undermined political harmony between north and south more deeply than did abolitionists who aided escaping slaves. In the larger history of slave escapes, to be sure, African Americans involved in the “Underground Railroad” usually relied on one another and distrusted whites’ involvement. Starting in the 1840's, however, white abolitionists in ever-increasing numbers grew eager to encourage slaves to escape and to protect

them once in residence in the North. By the mid-1840's "slave-stealing" ranked high on slaveholders' lists of complaints and the impact of abolitionist resistance on southern concerns was becoming increasingly easy to measure.

A few venturesome souls actually moved south, assisted escapees, and were heavily punished for their trouble-- Charles T. Torrey, for one. Torrey, from Massachusetts, stood high in the abolitionist Liberty Party before moving to Baltimore in 1844 to engineer slave escapes. Caught, convicted and sentenced in 1845, he died an abolitionist "martyr" in the Maryland penitentiary the following year. In 1836, "Garrisonian" sea captain Jonathan Walker shipped out of New Bedford, Massachusetts for Pensacola Florida where he assisted fugitives until arrested in 1844, branded with the letters SS (for slave-stealer) and imprisoned for a year. The punishment for the Reverend Calvin Fairbank was far harsher in 1844, fifteen years hard labor for abetting numerous slave escape in and around Lexington, Kentucky. William Chaplin, another prominent immediatist, proved the most ambitious "slave-stealer" of all when he visited Washington DC in 1848, hired two seafaring adventurers and their transport ship and laid plans to ferry seventy-seven fugitives to the free states. Since the plot was betrayed just as the ship left port, a pursuing steamer captured it. The angry masters (some influential members of Congress) sold most of the escapees and made sure that the adventurers received harsh sentences. Drayton and Sayres both languished in prison for several years while Chaplin, who evaded prosecution, was later convicted for abetting fugitive slaves in Maryland.[32]

“Slave-stealers” operating in the free states feared no such punishments (though escapees certainly did). On the contrary, during the 1840's, abolitionists discovered to their surprise that northerners who were in no sense “immediatists” nonetheless began voicing support for protecting fugitives as a way to express their own growing worries over the political impact of slavery in the nation’s affairs. What prompted these feelings were the same general concerns that had so troubled Wendell Phillips about the murder of Elijah Lovejoy-- the slaveholders’ seemingly unstoppable determination to undermine the freedom of Americans everywhere, not simply rule over those they enslaved. Increasing numbers now joined with the abolitionists not to endorse “immediate emancipation,” but instead to express their worry over the “gag rule,” the assaults on freedom of speech and assembly, the mobs that disrupted orderly communities, the ransacking of Federal Post Offices and the terrorizing of innocent African Americans. Compounding these concerns after 1845 was the prospect of adding still more slave states to the union, the result of annexing the Republic of Texas and opening a war of conquest against Mexico. When immediatist James G. Birney warned that “whilst our aristocracy would preserve the domestic peace of the South, they seem totally to disregard the domestic peace of the North” and that “ the liberties of those yet free are in imminent peril,” he also addressed directly the growing fears of what northerners now had begun to term the “the slave power.” Responding to this growing political concern, northern state legislatures began enacting “personal liberty laws” that relieved judges and law enforcement officials from the obligation to enforce the 1793 Fugitive Slave Law within their particular state’s borders. “States’ rights” constitutional arguments now were beginning to furnish a means for politicians to oppose the

influence of slavery in the free states, as well as a way for slaveholders to protect the institution in the South. [33]

When Boston authorities seized fugitive George Latimer in 1842, Wendell Phillips's angry response captured perfectly why state legislatures felt compelled to enact such laws. His remarks also suggests why the abolitionists' spirit of resistance was now beginning to stimulate such strong sectional feelings in northern political culture and why his own appeal to Yankee audiences was growing so rapidly. The answer, in both cases, involved revulsion against the "slave power's" invasive attempts to make northern freemen serve the commands of southern planters.

Who was really responsible for Latimer's plight, Phillips queried his audience? Not his jailors, the sheriff or even the slave catcher. "No!", Phillips exclaimed, "they are but your tools. You are the guilty ones.... It is you that bolt and bar the door to that poor man's dungeon." Demanding the passage of a personal liberty law, Phillips insisted that the State of Massachusetts "cannot allow her soil to be polluted with the footprints of slavery without trampling on her Bill of Rights and subjecting herself to infamy.... She is solemnly bound to give protection who all who may escape the prison of bondage, and flee to her for safety." Clearly, Phillips spoke the feelings of most Massachusetts voters. The following year, the legislature did as he demanded by prohibiting Massachusetts justices from acting under the 1793 Fugitive Slave Law and barring state officials from arresting presumed escapees. By the mid-1840's several other state legislatures had done likewise. Black activists in major cities who had long before established

vigilance committees of their own to protect runaways now found their work shielded from interference on the state level . For their part, worried planters now felt quite certain the law of the land in the free states legitimized “slave-stealing.” Meeting this threat, they decided, required stringent new measures on the part of the Federal Government. These they secured as part of the legislative compromise of 1850, designed by Congress to resolve all outstanding sectional disagreements, those raised over slavery’s expansion into territories conquered during the Mexican War as well as those raised by fugitive slaves and abolitionists.[34]

Proslavery politicians obtained what they wanted when Congress enacted an extraordinarily harsh new Fugitive Slave Law as part of the compromise measures. It authorized federal commissioners, not state judges, to process escapees, and obliged every citizen to assist in their capture. Those who protected fugitives risked severe penalties and the fugitives themselves were stripped of the right to trial by jury and the opportunity to testify. Free blacks found themselves in jeopardy of summarily being claimed as escapees, seized and shipped south without so much as a hearing. Though conflict over slavery’s future in western territories, not over fugitive slaves, ultimately propelled the sectional collisions that led to civil war, this repressive new law inspired abolitionists to acts of militant resistance that undermined inter-sectional good will. As conflict over reserving the west for “free soil” or opening it to slavery split Whigs and Democrats irrevocably along north/south lines following the Kansas Nebraska Act (1854), the Kansas border wars (1855-1857) and the Dred Scott Decision ( 1857), abolitionists hungered for confrontation with “slave-catchers’ and open defiance of the Federal Government. To the heightened dismay of the planters who had demanded this Fugitive Law,

“slave-stealing”, for abolitionists, now constituted their high moral injunction . To a growing majority of “free soil” minded northerners who were certainly not abolitionists but who supported the new Republican Party, resistance also seemed imperative if hope remained for arresting the spread of the “slave power.” After almost three decades of constant agitation, abolitionists were finally being heard, and in a restricted sense, believed, by powerful blocs of Republican party voters who certainly opposed the desires of the slave south, but who also promised to leave southern slavery alone and held no necessary brief for racial equality.[35]

As blacks and whites united in defying the Fugitive Law, resistance sometimes turned violent, as in Christiana Pennsylvania where in 1851 an abolitionist shot a slaveholder, or in Boston, in 1854 when an attempt to free a fugitive by storming the court house and overpowering his guards led to a fatality. And even when physical violence did not result, oratorical militants such as Wendell Phillips (now the best paid, most highly sought after public speaker in north) increasingly urged their audiences to physically obstruct Federal “slave-catchers” if more peaceable methods failed. On several occasions, well-organized groups of abolitionists overwhelmed the Marshals and spirited fugitives to safety. On others, they stored weapons, planned harassing maneuvers and massed as intimidating mobs. In any case, most agreed with Phillips when he declared that any black American “should feel justified in using the law of God and man in shooting [any] officer” attempting to enforce the Law.[36]

For African American activists, these appeals to arms and defiance of “slave-catchers” represented nothing new, but instead built on militant traditions that traced back at least to David

Walker's Appeal. Leaders such as Frederick Douglass, Samuel Ringgold Ward and Henry Highland Garnet were hardly innovators when declaring in the 1850's that the killing of tyrants was obedience to God. Neither were the black insurgents in Detroit who drove away Federal Marshals with volleys of paving stones. For white abolitionists, by contrast, the journey away from "moral suasion" was full of ambivalence. From one perspective "moral suasion" had yielded so little that more extreme measures seemed perfectly justifiable. More than two decades of peacefully preaching against the sin of slavery had yielded not emancipation but several new slave states and an increase of over half a million held in bondage, trends that seemingly secured a death-grip by the "slave-power" on American life. As for the new Republican party, its opposition to slavery appeared to many abolitionists, as Garrison put it "mean, partial, dwarfed and twisted," blighted by white supremacy and an easy acceptance of slavery's continuance in the south. Surely, none of this was progress.[37]

Yet from a second perspective, the white abolitionists' commitment to pacifism upheld their movement's high religious vision at a time when 'free soilers' and proslavery settlers slaughtered each other in Kansas and Senator Charles Sumner recuperated from a vicious beating by an enraged South Carolina Congressman. Then too, "non-resistance" had always registered the white immediatists' sincere abhorrence of black insurrection. To jettison that conviction now was, perhaps, to embrace the prospect of servile revolt. That, however, is precisely what many white abolitionists began to do, a few quite consciously but most through a hesitant process of rationalization that left them without defenses when they found themselves in the overpowering presence of formidable John Brown.

“Old Brown” was a truly complex and dangerous man, endowed with a personality of immense authority. His magnetism, his skill at manipulating others and his prophetic vision of Godly retribution helped him to draw frustrated immediatists to support his cause of capturing the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, arming the slaves and inciting insurrection. He made a familiar figure of himself at abolitionist meetings during the 1850's where he came to know many leading immediatist. All were well aware that Brown possessed a killer's instinct. It had been widely documented that he had butchered six unarmed settlers during the Kansas wars in 1857 and that leading abolitionists, Phillips among them, had given him money to purchase rifles and pikes. Now as Brown laid plans for fomenting slave insurrection, immediatists again gave him cash and asked few questions. Some black activists such as Harriet Tubman and Jermain Lougen generally knew that Brown plotted insurrection, but not where, when or how. (Wendell Phillips suspected Brown's intentions, but claimed no direct knowledge of them). And then there were the most violence-prone abolitionists of all, those who knew all that Brown would tell them in exchange for directly financing his attack -- Liberty Party leaders Gerrit Smith and Frederick Douglass and four strong Bostonian allies of Phillips's in the struggle against the Fugitive Slave Law-- Thomas Wentworth Higginson, George Luther Sterns, Franklin L. Sanborn and Samuel Gridley Howe. Brown satisfied these men's romantic desires to engage in conspiracy and their yearnings for a dramatic example of direct action that would shatter slavery. After many weeks of preparation he and his band of eighteen descended on Harpers Ferry, seized the arsenal, and were quickly routed by troops commanded by Colonel Robert E. Lee. As abolitionists everywhere rushed to embrace his insurrectionary deeds Brown was arraigned, tried, sentenced and hanged by Virginia authorities in December 1859. His raid can perhaps be



best understood less as Brown's supreme act of will and more as the predictable result of the abolitionists frustrating struggles in the unremitting cause of resistance, their ambivalent feelings about the Republican party, and their mounting desires for a morally definitive confrontation with slavery.[38]

In the aftermath, many abolitionists rushed to embrace Brown's insurrectionary deed though some, like Garrison attempted to separate their belief in the slaves' inherent right to rebel from Brown's act of terrorism. As usual, Phillips captured feelings of the insurrectionist's admirers unusually well when proclaiming to an enormous audience in Boston's Faneuil Hall that Brown had "twice as much right to hang Governor Wise [of Virginia] as Governor Wise has to hang him." Brown's deeds, Phillips emphasized, did not aim at creating social chaos. Instead, Brown had sought to destroy a turbulent, anarchic society that had tormented the nation for nearly a century. The South itself was in "chronic insurrection," not John Brown, according to Phillips, peopled by a "barbarous horde who gag each other, imprison women for teaching children to read, abolish marriage, condemn half their women to prostitution and devote themselves to the breeding of people for sale." Brown at Harpers Ferry stood, by contrast "as a representative of law, of government, of right, of justice, of religion." Brown, in short, embodied moral order to Phillips, not insurrection, a rationalization that permitted him and many other abolitionists to celebrate the bloody deeds of the most dangerous resister of all.[39]

With Lincoln's election as President in 1860, the full political significance of the abolitionists long pilgrimage from "moral suasion" to resistance and (finally) to insurrection at last became

clear. Long observation of the abolitionists behavior over almost three decades had utterly convinced the slaveholders that exactly the opposite of what Phillips believed was the truth. The North, not the South had collapsed into anarchy. Race mixers, law breakers, and armed insurrectionists had now overrun the (supposedly) free states. What once had been a civil society now wallowed in moral chaos? Despite all their reassurances about never meddling with slavery where it presently existed, Abraham Lincoln and the party he led were actually “black Republicans,” no different in the final analysis than Frederick Douglass or Wendell Phillips. Fully alienated, the planters elected secession and commenced with civil war. In this respect the abolitionists influenced the course of the nation’s history to an extent greatly disproportionate to their meager numbers. In the process, their work had also done much to prepare a white majority in the free states for its ultimate wartime reckoning with southern slavery. [40]

Subsequent events would drive white Americans to recreate new forms of racial tyranny that continue into our time. Nevertheless the history of resistance on the part of the abolitionists makes clear that at least some Americans before the Civil War entertained far more democratic visions of the nation’s future. While the abolitionists continued their work throughout the Civil War and well into Reconstruction, their antebellum struggles had already secured their ultimate legacy. From 1831 to 1860, they had engaged the nation and one another honestly, exploring their movement’s internal tensions and identifying its most fundamental obligations while making searching critiques of society’s deep injustices. It is this compelling example of civic engagement that gives the history of the abolitionists’ struggles significance for their own age, and for ours.

