

The Anti-Slavery Movement In America

Posted on September 5, 2019

The struggle over slavery was one of the defining moral and political conflicts in nineteenth-century America. The original essay compares antislavery writers William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child with proslavery defenders George Fitzhugh and James Henry Hammond. That comparison remains valuable because it reveals two incompatible visions of freedom, labor, race, and government. The proslavery texts should not be presented as neutral explanations or as credible evidence that enslavement benefited African Americans. They were ideological defenses of a violent system based on hereditary racial bondage, forced labor, family separation, and denial of legal personhood. Garrison and Child exposed slavery as a violation of natural and Christian rights, while enslaved people and Black abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass made the movement's strongest case through testimony, organizing, resistance, and political action. (Sinha, 2016)

Slavery in the United States

Slavery in British North America and the United States developed into a racial and hereditary system in which people of African descent and their descendants were treated as property. Enslaved people produced wealth through agriculture, domestic service, skilled trades, mining, transportation, and other labor. Law restricted movement, literacy, marriage, family security, testimony, and self-defense. Although conditions varied, slavery depended on coercion and the threat or use of violence. Its economic importance to cotton and national commerce made abolition politically difficult. (Sinha, 2016)

Enslaved People as Historical Actors

The abolition of slavery cannot be explained only through White reformers. Enslaved people resisted through escape, work slowdowns, preservation of family and culture, literacy, religious organization, legal petitions, revolt, and assistance to others. Free Black communities created churches, newspapers, conventions, schools, and antislavery societies. Their testimony challenged claims that enslaved people were content or incapable of citizenship. Any account of the movement should place Black agency at its center. (Douglass, 1845; Sinha, 2016)

William Lloyd Garrison

William Lloyd Garrison became one of the most visible advocates of immediate abolition. He founded *The Liberator* in 1831 and helped establish the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. Garrison rejected gradual emancipation and colonization schemes that proposed removing free Black

Americans from the United States. He argued that enslaved people had an immediate right to freedom and that delay continued injustice. His rhetoric was deliberately uncompromising because he believed moderation protected slaveholders. (Garrison, 1833)

The Declaration of Sentiments

The American Anti-Slavery Society's 1833 Declaration of Sentiments, associated with Garrison, condemned slavery through moral and religious argument. It contrasted violent domination with "moral purity" and supported persuasion rather than armed insurrection as the society's official method. The document declared that enslaved people possessed the same human rights as others. It challenged law and custom when they contradicted justice. The movement's commitment to moral suasion reflected both ethical conviction and debate over political strategy. (Garrison, 1833)

Garrison's Strengths

Garrison helped move immediate emancipation into national debate. His newspaper circulated antislavery arguments and reported violence against abolitionists. He attacked racial prejudice in the North as well as slavery in the South. His refusal to treat freedom as a distant goal exposed the injustice of gradual solutions that centered slaveholders' convenience. Garrison also supported women's participation in the movement, though this position created conflict within abolitionist organizations. (Sinha, 2016)

Criticism of Garrison

Garrison's approach was controversial even among abolitionists. He denounced the Constitution as compromised by slavery and often rejected electoral politics, while others believed political parties and legal action were necessary. His public prominence could overshadow Black abolitionists whose experience and leadership were essential. Frederick Douglass initially worked closely with Garrison but later developed a different interpretation of the Constitution and political strategy. These disagreements show that abolitionism was a coalition rather than one unified doctrine. (Sinha, 2016)

Lydia Maria Child

Lydia Maria Child was a writer, editor, and reformer whose *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, published in 1833, presented a wide-ranging argument against slavery and racial discrimination. She examined history, law, religion, economics, education, and prejudice. Publishing the work damaged her commercial popularity but strengthened the intellectual case for immediate abolition. Child addressed northern readers who might condemn southern slavery while practicing racial exclusion themselves. (Child, 1833)

Child's Critique of Racial Prejudice

Child argued that the condition of Black Americans had been created by oppression rather than by inherent inferiority. She challenged restrictions on education, employment, voting, and social participation. This argument was significant because proslavery and racist writers often treated the consequences of exclusion as evidence justifying exclusion. Child reversed the logic: unequal opportunity demonstrated injustice, not incapacity. Her analysis connected abolition with broader civil rights. (Child, 1833)

Women in Abolitionism

Women organized fairs, circulated petitions, raised funds, wrote articles, sheltered fugitives, and spoke publicly. Angelina and Sarah Grimké, Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, Lucretia Mott, Harriet Tubman, and many others expanded both antislavery and women's-rights activism. Their participation challenged gender norms that restricted women from public political speech. Conflict over women's leadership divided some antislavery organizations, demonstrating that movements for justice can reproduce inequality within their own structures. (Sinha, 2016)

Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass escaped slavery and became a leading writer, speaker, editor, and political thinker. His narratives described violence, family separation, resistance, literacy, and the hypocrisy of a nation claiming liberty while holding people as property. Douglass's experience gave authority to his critique, but his significance exceeded personal testimony. He analyzed constitutional law, political strategy, citizenship, war, and Reconstruction. His development from Garrisonian moral suasion toward political antislavery illustrates strategic diversity. (Douglass, 1845)

David Walker and Black Abolitionist Militancy

David Walker's 1829 *Appeal* condemned slavery and demanded immediate justice. He rejected paternalistic claims that enslaved people should wait for liberation granted by White reformers. Black abolitionists often emphasized self-defense, political rights, and the danger of racial violence more directly than some White allies. Their work demonstrates that the movement did not begin with Garrison and was not dependent on White moral awakening. (Sinha, 2016)

Harriet Tubman and Direct Action

Harriet Tubman escaped slavery and repeatedly returned to assist others. She also supported the Union during the Civil War as a scout, nurse, and guide. Her work represents direct action rather than publication alone. The Underground Railroad was not one physical route but a network of people, safe locations, knowledge, and risk. Escape did not end the danger because the Fugitive Slave Acts allowed capture efforts in free states. (Sinha, 2016)

The Fugitive Slave Laws

Federal fugitive-slave laws required the return of people claimed as escaped slaves and imposed penalties on assistance. The 1850 law expanded federal enforcement and weakened procedural protection for accused fugitives. Free Black people also faced kidnapping. The law brought slavery's coercion into northern communities and radicalized some previously moderate opponents. Resistance included legal defense, rescue operations, vigilance committees, and personal-liberty laws. (Sinha, 2016)

George Fitzhugh

George Fitzhugh was among the most aggressive proslavery theorists. In works such as *Sociology for the South* and *Cannibals All!*, he attacked free-labor capitalism and argued that slavery provided protection to workers. His argument did not establish that enslaved people benefited. It concealed the absence of consent, legal rights, wages, family security, mobility, and power. Fitzhugh compared exploitation under capitalism with slavery in order to defend slavery rather than to secure freedom for workers. (Fitzhugh, 1857)

“Slavery Justified”

Fitzhugh's proslavery reasoning portrayed hierarchy as natural and freedom as dangerous for supposedly dependent people. This was circular: law denied education and autonomy, then proslavery writers cited the resulting vulnerability as evidence that control was necessary. He also extended paternalistic arguments beyond race, suggesting that many workers needed masters. The theory reveals how defenses of domination can rename coercion as care. Its historical value lies in showing slaveholding ideology, not in providing a legitimate social model. (Fitzhugh, 1857)

James Henry Hammond

The original essay refers to “Hammond Harper,” but the prominent proslavery politician and writer was James Henry Hammond. Hammond defended slavery through the “mudsill” theory, arguing that every society required a permanently subordinated laboring class. In his “Cotton Is King” speech, he emphasized the economic power of southern cotton. His argument treated people as economic foundations for elite prosperity. It demonstrates the connection between racial ideology and material interest. (Hammond, 1858)

The Mudsill Theory

Hammond claimed that civilization required a class performing unpleasant labor and that southern slavery organized this hierarchy more securely than northern wage labor. The argument assumed that inequality must be permanent and hereditary. It ignored the possibility of labor rights, education, democracy, social mobility, and shared political power. Enslavement was not simply difficult work; it was ownership of people and their descendants. Comparing it with wage inequality cannot erase that distinction. (Hammond, 1858)

“Cotton Is King”

Cotton was central to the nineteenth-century economy, linking southern plantations with northern finance, shipping, textile manufacturing, and international trade. Hammond believed this dependence protected the South. The Civil War showed that economic power did not guarantee political victory. The slogan also obscured whose labor produced cotton. Enslaved workers created wealth while slaveholders claimed ownership of both the crop and the workers. (Hammond, 1858)

Religious Arguments

Both sides used Christianity. Proslavery ministers cited biblical passages and paternal duty, while abolitionists emphasized human equality, liberation, and the incompatibility of bondage with moral law. The disagreement demonstrates that scripture does not interpret itself outside institutions and interests. Enslaved Christians developed their own religious traditions, drawing hope from Exodus and challenging the theology imposed by masters. Religious language could support domination or resistance. (Garrison, 1833; Sinha, 2016)

Economic Arguments

Proslavery writers claimed that plantations produced prosperity and that emancipation would create disorder. Abolitionists argued that forced labor violated rights and distorted economic development. Economic analysis alone cannot decide whether slavery was ethical. Even if a system produces profit, ownership of human beings remains unjust. The wealth generated by slavery strengthened political resistance to abolition and spread responsibility beyond plantation states. (Fitzhugh, 1857; Hammond, 1858)

Scientific Racism

Nineteenth-century defenders used pseudo-scientific racial classification to naturalize hierarchy. Measurements and selective observations were interpreted through assumptions of White superiority. These claims were not neutral science; they were connected with slavery, colonialism, and exclusion. Abolitionists challenged some claims, although many White reformers still held paternalistic views. The history warns that data can be used to support injustice when categories and methods are built on prejudice. (Sinha, 2016)

Political Abolitionism

Some abolitionists formed or supported political parties, including the Liberty Party, Free Soil Party, and later the Republican Party, although these groups differed over racial equality and the objective of policy. Opposition to the expansion of slavery did not always mean support for immediate nationwide abolition or equal citizenship. Political antislavery transformed national elections and sectional conflict. It also showed the limits of moral persuasion without institutional power. (Sinha, 2016)

Violence and John Brown

John Brown believed armed action was necessary and led the 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry in an attempt to initiate resistance. The raid failed militarily, and Brown was executed, but it intensified national conflict. Abolitionists disagreed over his methods. The event challenged the expectation that slavery could be ended without confrontation while also raising questions about political violence. Enslaved people's own decisions cannot be reduced to Brown's plan. (Sinha, 2016)

The Civil War

The Civil War began after secession by slaveholding states seeking to protect slavery. Union policy initially focused on preserving the nation, but enslaved people escaping to Union lines and Black advocacy pushed emancipation forward. The Emancipation Proclamation declared freedom for enslaved people in areas under rebellion and authorized Black military service. It did not immediately free every enslaved person, but it transformed the war's meaning and strategy. (Sinha, 2016)

Black Military Service

Approximately 180,000 Black men served in the Union Army, with additional service in the Navy. They fought against slavery while facing unequal pay, discrimination, and the threat of severe punishment if captured. Their service undermined racist claims about citizenship and courage. Black families and communities also supported the war effort through labor, intelligence, nursing, and migration. Emancipation was achieved partly through their action. (Sinha, 2016)

The Thirteenth Amendment

The Thirteenth Amendment, ratified in 1865, abolished slavery and involuntary servitude except as punishment for crime. This constitutional change ended legal chattel slavery but did not create full equality. The exception clause and later systems of convict leasing, racialized criminal law, and forced labor became major issues. Abolition therefore had a legal victory and an unfinished social meaning.

Reconstruction and Its Limits

The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments addressed citizenship, equal protection, and voting rights. Black communities built schools, churches, businesses, and political institutions. White supremacist violence and political retreat undermined Reconstruction. Jim Crow segregation, disfranchisement, racial terror, and economic exploitation followed. It is inaccurate to say slavery itself continued unchanged into the twentieth century, but structures and ideologies developed under slavery continued to shape American life.

Segregation and Education

The original essay connects Lydia Maria Child's critique with later school and employment discrimination. Child could not have written directly about twentieth-century Jim Crow outcomes as later history, but her analysis of racial exclusion anticipated enduring problems. Segregated schools received unequal resources, and employment discrimination restricted opportunity. These conditions

were not evidence of Black inferiority; they were effects of law, violence, and policy. (Child, 1833)

Comparing the Antislavery Writers

Garrison and Child shared a commitment to immediate abolition and moral argument. Garrison used confrontational journalism and organizational leadership. Child combined historical research, economic reasoning, and criticism of northern prejudice. Both made important contributions, but Black abolitionists supplied indispensable leadership and experience. Their work is best understood within a wider movement rather than as isolated heroic authors. (Child, 1833; Garrison, 1833; Sinha, 2016)

Comparing the Proslavery Writers

Fitzhugh and Hammond defended hierarchy through different emphases. Fitzhugh attacked liberal individualism and portrayed mastery as protection. Hammond argued that every society needed a subordinate laboring class and emphasized cotton's economic leverage. Both denied the agency of enslaved people and converted slaveholders' power into supposed benevolence. Their texts reveal how economic interest, racism, and political theory reinforced one another. (Fitzhugh, 1857; Hammond, 1858)

Why Reading Proslavery Texts Matters

Studying these texts does not mean treating both sides as morally equivalent. It helps readers recognize the rhetorical methods used to defend injustice: describing domination as care, calling hierarchy natural, blaming victims for conditions created by oppression, and predicting catastrophe if privilege ends. Similar methods can appear in later debates. Critical reading identifies claims, interests, omissions, and the voices excluded from the text.

The Meaning of the Anti-Slavery Movement

The movement expanded the meaning of American liberty by insisting that rights could not coexist with ownership of human beings. It also exposed contradictions within churches, parties, courts, markets, and the Constitution. Abolitionists did not agree on race, gender, violence, or political strategy, and the movement did not eliminate racism after slavery. Its history shows that moral change requires testimony, organization, resistance, law, political power, and sustained action after formal reform. (Sinha, 2016)

Conclusion

William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child condemned slavery as a violation of human equality and challenged northern as well as southern racism. George Fitzhugh and James Henry Hammond defended slavery through paternalism, hierarchy, and economic interest, but their arguments depended on erasing coercion and enslaved people's voices. Black abolitionists, fugitives, communities, writers, and soldiers were central to destroying slavery. The Civil War and Thirteenth Amendment ended legal chattel slavery, while Reconstruction and later civil-rights struggles confronted its legacy. Reading these arguments critically reveals both the power of [antislavery activism](#) and the sophisticated ideology used to protect an unjust system. (Child, 1833; Douglass, 1845; Fitzhugh, 1857; Garrison, 1833; Hammond, 1858; Sinha, 2016)

Works Cited

Child, Lydia Maria. *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*. Allen and Ticknor, 1833.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. 1845.

Fitzhugh, George. *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves Without Masters*. 1857.

Garrison, William Lloyd. "Declaration of Sentiments of the American Anti-Slavery Society." 1833.

Hammond, James Henry. "Cotton Is King." 1858.

Sinha, Manisha. *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*. Yale University Press, 2016.