



Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH
Library of Congress

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pan.6a08553>

Securing Liberty:

African Americans & the Abolitionist Movement

I consider the Constitution the foundation of American liberties and wrapping myself in the flag of the nation, I would plant myself upon that Constitution and using the weapons they have given me, I would appeal to the American people for the rights thus guaranteed.

~ William Howard Day, January 1851

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Slavery and the Union

In 1787 the Constitutional Convention would convene in Philadelphia to address problems in governing the United States of America, which had been operating under the Articles of Confederation since gaining independence from Great Britain. Among the most controversial issues discussed by the delegates was that of slavery. Since 1619 the importation of persons of African descent became a central part of the building of the colonies. In the century before independence the population of African descent would grow from less than twenty families to over seven hundred thousand persons of African descent in 1790.

Almost half of the delegates meeting in 1787 owned slaves and some lived in areas where approximately 1 in 3 families owned slaves. In order to maintain this fragile new union of states the delegates were forced to

make several compromises. Congress would have the power to ban the transatlantic slave trade, but not until 1808. Delegates also agreed on a compromise, which allowed three of every five persons held as slaves to be counted for the purpose of representation. From this convention the Constitution of the United States was born, which supported the right of an individual to own another as property, although its preamble established its anti-slavery goals. As the institution of slavery in the United States grew so too did the efforts of many individuals to abolish it.



National Archives and Records Administration
http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_zoom_1.html

Preparing for War

In the decades leading up to the Civil War leaders in the African American community would spring up for the cause of abolitionism. In January of 1851, young men of African descent led by Oberlin College graduates met in Ohio to decide whether they should work within the legal confines of the United States Constitution to end slavery and secure their rights as citizens. H. Ford Douglass argued against an affirmative resolution while William Howard Day argued that in league with the Constitution, they could secure their liberty. Charles Langston expressed his apprehensions, but supported Day's argument.

It was resolved they would work in league with the Constitution, and therefore, established a Legal League to abolish slavery in the United States. In May 1851, Frederick Douglass publicly parted with the opinions of William Lloyd Garrison and other radical abolitionists by declaring the Constitution anti-slavery. Aligned with the conservative abolitionists such as James G. Birney, Douglass argued the liberties of the oppressed could be secured by legal means.



Frederick Douglass
Library of Congress
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc/nnp/rnh3a18172>

We had arrived at the firm conviction that the Constitution, construed in the light of well established rules of legal interpretation, might be made consistent in its details with the noble purposes avowed in its preamble; and that hereafter we should insist upon the application of such rules to that instrument, and demand that it be wielded in behalf of emancipation.

*Frederick Douglass,
The North Star, May 15, 1851*

The divide in the North and South over the issue of slavery grew after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. This act

repealed the Missouri Compromise by allowing slavery north of latitude 36°30'. The act allowed voters in the territories of Kansas and Nebraska to decide whether or not to allow slavery within their borders. After the law was passed, pro-slavery and anti-slavery settlers rushed to settle Kansas in order to determine the outcome of the election, which resulted in a pro-slavery victory. Anti-slavery settlers called the election a fraud and held another election. Two Kansas legislatures were formed and violence soon erupted. The territory earned the nickname "Bloody Kansas" as the death toll rose.

In the midst of battles over slavery in the territories, Lincoln took center stage as a leader in the Illinois Republican Party, and would win the 1860 presidential election. By the spring of 1861 eleven of fifteen slave holding states would secede from the union, listing their fear that the new Republican administration would attempt to abolish slavery throughout the as a cause for secession.

This rebellion for slavery means something! Out of it emancipation must spring. I do not agree with those men who see no hope in this war. There is nothing in it but hope. Our cause is onward.

John S. Rock, February 1862



John S. Rock
Library of Congress
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc/ppp/cp13-10530>

From the beginning of the war African Americans worked within their established network of intelligence to furnish information to the Union for the cause of liberty. The elaborate codes, intelligence, and dedication of these individuals would culminate in the abolishment of slavery in the United States. They left behind a fount of primary sources in newspapers, speeches, letters, and other documents that tell their story.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

Abolitionist like William Howard Day argued that African Americans could achieve the abolition of slavery in league with the Constitution as well as civil rights for themselves. The Constitution of the United States never mentions the word slavery or slaves but alludes to persons held for their labor. Have students first find the places in the Constitution that would and or would not allow for slavery in the United States, and then have them write an argument for the abolition of slavery in the United States using the Constitution.

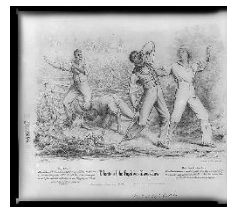
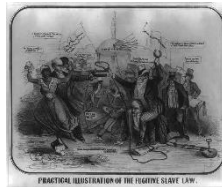
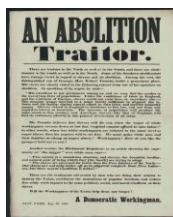
All of the handwritten and printed documents in this primary source set are accompanied by transcriptions. Hand out photocopies of one of the documents (U.S. Constitution) and allow students a few minutes to read it on their own. Then present the transcription. Direct students to paraphrase a portion of the document in their own words. Discuss the difference between reading the original handwritten document and the print transcription. Which do students prefer? Why?

After teaching about slavery in the United States, use the speeches and writings of abolitionist; William Howard Day, H.Ford Douglass, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, John S. Rock, James W.C. Pennington, and Henry Highland Garnet to compare different opinions and actions of abolitionist contrasting the arguments of these abolitionist on the following subjects:

- Morality of slavery
- Legitimacy of slavery under the U.S. constitution

What can be learned from these abolitionists? What obstacles did the abolitionist overcome? In what way do these abolitionists reflect the same ideas and opinions and in what ways do their opinions differ?

Use the primary source analysis tools and guides, from the Library of Congress, to analyze the nine newspaper prints in this primary source set.



What do these prints depict? What can we learn from these prints about the abolitionist movement in the United States? Compare these prints to modern day political prints in the newspapers, how do the issues from this period compare with issues today? What else would you like to know?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Black Abolitionist Archive: University of Detroit Mercy

http://research.udmercy.edu/find/special_collections/digital/baa/

The Black Abolitionist Digital Archive is a collection of over 800 speeches by antebellum blacks and approximately 1,000 editorials from the period.

The Library of Congress

From the Frederick Douglass papers to Slave Codes the Library of Congress has hundreds of documents related to laws governing slaves to manuscripts written by abolitionist.

Frederick Douglass Papers: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/doughtml/doughome.html>

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/sthtml/sthome.html>

PRIMARY SOURCES



The United States Constitution
National Archives and Records Administration

http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_zoom_1.html



William Howard Day, January 15, 1851

Responding to another speaker, defending the Constitution as an important document intended to establish a just nation, even though unjust laws were being made in its name. Black Abolitionist Archives

http://research.udmercy.edu/find/special_collections/digital/baa/item.php?record_id=347&collectionCode=baa



H. Ford Douglass, January 15, 1851

Speech given in response to a resolution offered at the convention. The speaker denounced the Fugitive Slave Law and expressed his belief that the “Constitution of the United States is a pro-slavery document. Black Abolitionist Archives



http://research.udmercy.edu/find/special_collections/digital/baa/item.php?record_id=1802&collectionCode=baa

Mary Ann Shadd Cary, April 8, 1857

Shadd condemns the Dred Scott decision and urges African American leaders to immigrate to Canada. Black Abolitionist Archives

http://research.udmercy.edu/find/special_collections/digital/baa/item.php?record_id=811&collectionCode=baa



John S. Rock, 1862

Emphasized the fight for freedom during the civil War would be won through the work of the abolitionists. Black Abolitionist Archives

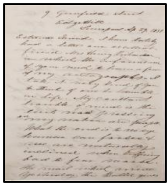
http://research.udmercy.edu/find/special_collections/digital/baa/item.php?record_id=1133&collectionCode=baa



John S. Rock, January 23, 1862

Speech regarding the influence the question of abolition has on decisions being made within the government during the Civil War. Black Abolitionist Archives

http://research.udmercy.edu/find/special_collections/digital/baa/item.php?record_id=1190&collectionCode=baa



James W.C. Pennington The Whole land is full of blood, April 29,1851

Letter written by Pennington referring to the case of Thomas Sims an escaped slave returned to slavery. Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

<http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/slavery-and-anti-slavery/resources/%E2%80%9Cwhole-land-full-blood%E2%80%9D-1851>



Henry Highland Garnet, November 6, 1850

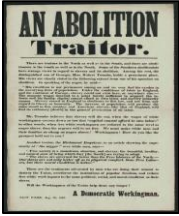
Speech denouncing the Fugitive Slave Bill. Garnet encourages his audience to buy “free labor” goods instead of those produced by slave labor. Black Abolitionist Archive

http://research.udmercy.edu/find/special_collections/digital/baa/item.php?record_id=2251&collectionCode=baa



Henry Dacre, Henry Robinson, Abolition frowned down, 1839, Library of Congress. A satire on enforcement of the "gag-rule" in the House of Representatives, prohibiting discussion of the question of slavery. Growing antislavery sentiment in the North coincided with increased resentment by southern congressmen of such discussion as meddlesome and insulting to their constituencies.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a12359/?co=app>



A Democratic Workingman, An Abolition traitor, there are traitors in the North as well as in the South, August 29, 1863, Broadside, Library of Congress

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?ammem/scsmbib:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(scsm000287\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?ammem/scsmbib:@field(DOCID+@lit(scsm000287)))



Practical Illustration of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1851

A satire on the antagonism between Northern abolitionists on the one hand, and Secretary of State Daniel Webster and other supporters of enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661534/>



Theodor Kaufmann, Effects of the Fugitive Slave-Law, 1850

An impassioned condemnation of the Fugitive Slave Act passed by Congress in September 1850, which increased federal and free-state responsibility for the recovery of fugitive slaves. Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a05114/?co=app>

Fugitive Slave Law, 1850

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/odyssey/archive/03/0305001r.jpg>



Am I not a man and a brother? 1837

The large, bold woodcut image of a supplicant male slave in chains appears on the 1837 broadside publication of John Greenleaf Whittier's antislavery poem, "Our Countrymen in Chains." Library of Congress

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a44497>



Uncle Abe's Valentine sent by Columbia; an envelope full of broken chains. Feb, 1865
Clipping from newspaper Frank Leslie's Illustrated after election campaign of 1864,
Library of Congress

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/lprbscsm.scsm0381>



The Blessings of Liberty or how to "hook" a "gentleman of color" 1851

A diverse group of abolitionist try to drag an unwilling black man toward the left with a large gaff hook. Library of Congress

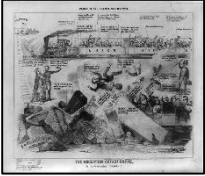
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a51002>



Ho! For the Kansas plains, 1856

An illustrated sheet music cover for an antislavery song, dedicated to abolitionist spokesman Henry Ward Beecher. The illustration features a roundel illustration of the burning of the Free State Hotel in Lawrence, Kansas, by a proslavery mob in May 1856. Library of Congress

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b38196>



The abolition catastrophe Or the November Smash-up, 1864

Lincoln's support of abolition is portrayed here as a liability in his race to the White House against Democratic candidate George B. McClellan. Library of Congress

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a12905>