

TUESDAY: COMMONLIT: THE REVOLUTIONARY RISE OF ABOLITIONISTS: Read the provided text and answer questions 1-7 that follow.

The Revolutionary Rise of Abolitionists

By USHistory.org
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The American Revolutionary War marked the moment that the thirteen colonies declared independence from Great Britain and formed the United States of America. However, this was not the only struggle taking place. Within the newly founded nation, disagreement had broken out on the ethics of keeping slaves. Abolitionists' fight to end slavery would eventually reach its height with the Civil War, dividing the nation by its opinions on slavery. As you read, take note of how the armed conflicts depicted in the text influence the public's opinion on slavery.

When the Revolutionary War for American Independence from England broke out, the ideals of the new republic clashed with one of its foundational institutions: slavery. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness simply did not seem consistent with the practice of **chattel slavery**¹. How could a group of people feel so passionate about these **unalienable rights**², yet maintain the brutal practice of human bondage? Somehow slavery would manage to survive the revolutionary era, but great changes were brought to this peculiar institution nevertheless.

The world's first antislavery society was founded in 1775 by **Quakers**³ in Philadelphia, the year the Revolution began. By 1788, at least thirteen of these clubs were known to exist in the American colonies. Some Northern states banned slavery outright, and some provided for the gradual end of slavery. At any rate, the climate of the Revolution made the institution unacceptable in the minds of many Northerners, who did not rely on forced labor as part of the economic system. Northerners did not, however, go as far as to grant equal rights to freed blacks. Nonetheless, this ignited the philosophical debate that would be waged throughout the next century.

Many slaves achieved their freedom during the Revolution without formal **emancipation**⁴. The British army, eager to destroy the colonial economy, freed many slaves as they moved through the American South. Many slaves in the North were granted their freedom if they agreed to fight for the American cause. Although a clear majority of African Americans remained in bondage, the growth of free black communities in America was greatly fostered by the War for American Independence. Revolutionary **sentiments**⁵ led to the banning of the importation of slaves in 1807.

Slavery did not end overnight in America. Before any meaningful reform could happen, people needed to recognize that the economic benefit was vastly overshadowed by the overwhelming **repugnance**⁶, immorality, and inhumanity of slavery.

As the cotton industry grew and slavery became more and more **entrenched**⁷ across the American South, opposition to it also grew.

The first widely accepted solution to the slavery question in the 1820s was colonization. In effect, supporters of colonization wanted to **transplant**⁸ the slave population back to Africa. Their philosophy was simple: slaves were brought to America involuntarily. Why not give them a chance to enjoy life as though such a forced migration had never taken place? Funds were raised to transport freed African Americans across the Atlantic in the opposite direction. The nation of **Liberia**⁹ was created as a **haven**¹⁰ for former American slaves. But most African-Americans opposed this practice. The vast majority had never set foot on African soil. Many African-Americans rightly believed that they had helped build this country and deserved to live as free citizens of America. By the end of the decade, a full-blown Abolitionist **movement**¹¹ was born.

These new Abolitionists were different from their forebears. They were more radical than members of the early antislavery societies. Past Abolitionists had called for a gradual end to slavery. They supported compensation to owners of slaves for their loss of property. They raised money for the purchase of slaves to grant freedom to selected individuals.

The new Abolitionists thought differently. They saw slavery as a **blight**¹² on America that must be brought to an end immediately and without compensation to owners. They sent petitions to Congress and the states, campaigned for office, and flooded the South with **inflammatory**¹³ literature.

Needless to say, they raised eyebrows throughout the North and the South. Soon, the battle lines were drawn. President Andrew Jackson banned the post office from delivering Abolitionist literature in the south. A "gag rule" was passed on the floor of the House of Representatives forbidding the discussion of bills that restricted slavery. Abolitionists were physically attacked because of their outspoken antislavery views. While northern churches rallied to the Abolitionist cause, the churches of the South used the Bible to defend slavery.

Abolitionists were always a minority, even on the eve of the Civil War. Their **dogged**¹⁴ determination to end human bondage was a struggle that **persisted**¹⁵ for decades. While mostly peaceful at first, abolitionists and their opponents began to trade violence as each side became more and more firmly rooted in its beliefs. Another seed of sectional conflict had been deeply planted in America's **psyche**¹⁶.

1. "Chattel slavery" is when an enslaved person is owned forever and whose direct descendants are automatically enslaved.
2. Unalienable Rights- rights that cannot be taken away or denied
3. A "Quaker" is a member of the Religious Society of Friends, a Christian movement devoted to peaceful principles.
4. **Emancipation (noun):** the fact or process of being set free from legal, social, or political restrictions
5. **Sentiment (noun):** a view or attitude toward a situation or event; an opinion
6. **Repugnance (noun):** intense disgust
7. **Entrench (adjective):** firmly established and difficult or unlikely to change
8. **Transplant (verb):** move or transfer something to another place or situation
9. **Liberia-** a country on the West African coast
10. **Haven (noun):** a place of safety
11. **Abolitionist Movement-** a movement to end slavery
12. A "blight" refers to a disease or flaw.
13. **Inflammatory (adjective):** tending to arouse anger, hostility, passion
14. **Dogged (adjective):** determined to do something, even if it is very difficult
15. **Persist (verb):** to continue to occur or exist beyond the usual, expected, or normal time
16. **Psyche-** the human soul, mind, or spirit

1. What is Abolitionism? When did Abolitionism reach its height?
2. Why is the concept of slavery inconsistent with the American ideals of "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?"
3. Who founded the world's first anti-slavery society?
4. How does the American Revolution relate to the outlawing of slavery (specifically in the North)?
5. How did some slaves earn their freedom during the American Revolution?
6. Why were some people in America in the early 1800s opposed to Abolitionism?
7. What are the economic advantages and disadvantages of slavery according to the text?