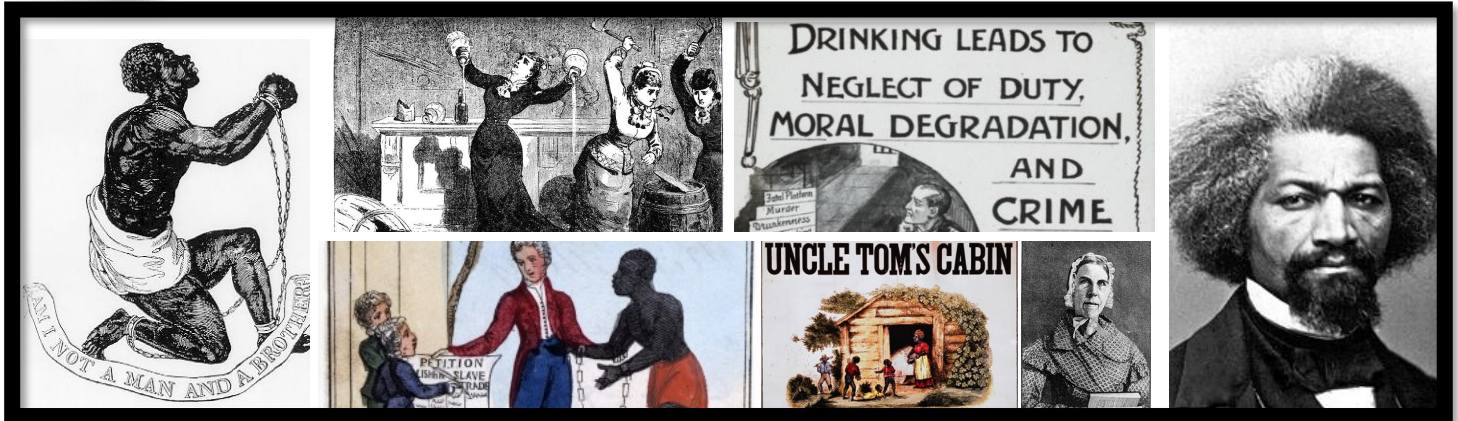




# HISTORICAL SNAPSHOT

## ABOLITION AND TEMPERANCE READING INVESTIGATION



### BACKGROUND

In the decades after the War of 1812, Americans witnessed great economic, social, and cultural change. The growth of industry in the North brought hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers into larger cities and towns like New York and Boston. Public schooling produced a highly literate population that was eager for newspapers and books. Railroads, steamships, and canals allowed people to travel more quickly, engage in business across greater distances, and settle farther to the west.

In the midst of these transformations, a variety of reform movements urged Americans to focus on their individual and national morality. The Second Great Awakening — an evangelical religious revival that swept across the nation during the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century — emphasized the ability of individuals to purify themselves and (in the words of one minister) “raise the world from its degraded condition.”

Reformers focused their attention on a great many causes, but two in particular stand out: abolition and temperance.

### ABOLITION IN THE NORTH

Slavery remained legal in much of the nation when the Constitution was written in 1787. The New England states (Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Connecticut) had abolished the institution outright during the previous decade. In 1780, Pennsylvania had instituted a plan to gradually free its bondsmen and bondswomen, and New York and New Jersey would institute similar laws by the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, Congress had passed the Northwest Ordinance, prohibiting slavery in the territories west of Pennsylvania and north of the Ohio River. Slavery was gradually becoming a Southern

institution, but most whites accepted its existence.

From the 1830s onward, however, a small number of Americans began calling for the immediate abolition of slavery. They claimed it was a brutal institution that stifled liberty and offended God. Some abolitionists, like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, had lived for many years as slaves before acquiring their freedom. Others, like Angelina and Sarah Grimké, were whites who had grown up in slaveholding families and witnessed plantation life firsthand. Most were northern men and women like William Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Weld, and Maria Chapman, who simply believed slavery was a crime against natural human rights, and they warned it would provoke divine judgment and national catastrophe.

Abolitionists founded many newspapers, including Garrison’s *The Liberator* (Boston) and *Freedom’s Journal* (New York), the first newspaper owned and published by African Americans. They gave speeches and wrote books about the horrors of slavery, including novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and they organized boycotts and petition drives to call attention to the cause. Numerous abolitionist organizations (like the American Anti-Slavery Society) drew several hundred thousand members into the cause.

### ANTI-ABOLITIONISM AND THE SOUTH

During these years, the South experienced change as well. New technologies increased cotton production, expanding and intensifying slavery in states like Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. American cotton made large plantation owners wealthy, as their crop fueled the textile industries in Britain, France, and New England. At the same time, the economic power of cotton meant that other industries did not emerge in the American South. Its population grew less rapidly (and was less

diverse) than in the North, and it did not have the transportation networks, educational and cultural institutions, or population centers that increasingly defined the rest of the nation. Southern whites, however, generally celebrated their “civilization,” contrasting its order and traditions with the turbulence of the industrial North.

Southern whites demanded that slaveholders’ rights Southern leaders become increasingly worried that abolitionists might one day succeed in destroying slavery. They were outraged that many northern whites helped slaves escape to Canada (where slavery was illegal), and they were horrified that some northern states refused to assist in the capture and return of fugitives. They feared slave revolts and warned of a “race war” if slavery ended. Abolitionists seemed to be dangerous radicals with violent intentions — not God-fearing humanitarians who embraced liberty. Southern anti-abolitionists argued that slavery was a positive, wholesome institution that benefitted masters and the enslaved alike (an opinion that slaves themselves rarely shared).

To thwart the influence of abolitionism, Southern states prohibited the circulation of anti-slavery literature and (in South Carolina) passed laws that prevented free black sailors from entering port cities like Charleston. Eventually, fear of abolition led directly to the secession movement that sparked the American Civil War.

## **TEMPERANCE**

Opponents of slavery were not the only ones who tried to convince fellow citizens to improve their moral condition. Early Americans drank large amounts of rum, beer, hard cider, and whiskey from the early years of colonization onward. The reasons for this were numerous. Most water sources were unhealthy, while alcohol was easy to produce and store, and it provided a valuable source of income (and calories) in rural, farming communities. Moreover, most Americans originated from cultures where drinking was an important part of everyday life.

But alcohol also fueled a variety of social problems, including domestic violence, disease, and crime, especially in the cities. During the early 19th century, temperance reformers in the United States and elsewhere encouraged individuals to choose a life free of alcohol (“teetotalism”) or a life marked by very limited consumption of alcohol. Reformers established temperance halls, coffee houses, and other “dry” venues for public events to push their cause.

Like abolitionists, temperance reformers were highly organized. Organizations like the Salvation Army, the Independent Order of Rechabites, and the Band of Hope—all of which had their origins in Great Britain—

promoted abstinence and education on the dangers of alcohol. Other groups like the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance (commonly known as the American Temperance Society), the Sons of Temperance, and the American Temperance Union appeared in the 1820s. Working class temperance groups such as the Washingtonians recruited hundreds of thousands of followers who took vows of sobriety and encouraged fellow workers to follow their example. Later on, Frances Willard founded the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, which eventually became the most important organization in the movement.

In the years prior to the Civil War, advocates of temperance came increasingly to rely on legal remedies to the alcohol problem. Temperance supporters increasingly pushed for state laws that controlled alcohol, including so-called “Maine Laws” that almost completely barred the sale of alcohol. These were modeled after an 1851 statute pushed by Maine’s leading temperance reformer, Neal Dow. Dow became the voice for the emerging prohibition movement, which continued to push for the complete ban on the manufacture and sale of alcohol. In 1919, these efforts culminated with the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, enacting prohibition on a national scale until it was repealed in 1933.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Although the temperance and abolition movements might not seem to share much in common, they resembled each other in several important ways. Abolitionists sought to liberate African Americans from the violence of slavery, while temperance reformers turned their attention to alcohol, seeking to liberate their fellow citizens from the perils of “Demon Rum.” Both movements eventually led to significant changes to the United States Constitution and to the nation as a whole. Both movements also featured strong women. Abolitionists like the Grimké sisters or Harriet Beecher Stowe joined temperance reformers like Frances Willard in calling for moral changes in American life. These efforts also helped fuel the rise of a movement demanding greater political and economic rights for women. A month later, Lincoln ordered unarmed supply ships to bring aid to **Fort Sumter**. South Carolina responded by bombarding the fort and forcing its surrender on April 14, 1861. Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to put down the rebellion. Four more states — Tennessee, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Virginia — quickly joined the Confederacy, and the nation was soon at war that would either preserve or sever the union (and perhaps resolve the issue of slavery) forever.