

FORCE AND FREEDOM

BLACK ABOLITIONISTS
——— *and the* ——
POLITICS *of* VIOLENCE

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UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS

PHILADELPHIA

CHAPTER 1

Forcing Freedom

The Limits of Moral Suasion

No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance.

—Henry Highland Garnet

The success of the Haitian Revolution convinced black abolitionists that the ending of slavery would entail a revolution and that revolutions entailed violence. Thus, antebellum history is replete with examples of black Americans inspired by the newly liberated and independent Haiti. In 1800, a slave named Gabriel living in Richmond, Virginia, planned a bold conspiracy against slave owners in collaboration with both white and black Americans. His plan is often cited as an attempt to replicate the events that brought down slavery in Saint-Domingue.¹ However, Gabriel's plot was discovered and foiled, leading to mass executions. In 1811, Charles Deslondes, a former overseer and a free mulatto from Saint-Domingue, led hundreds of slaves living in the German Coast (a region located above New Orleans and on the east side of the Mississippi River) to revolt in one of the largest slave rebellions in American history. Donning their planter's military uniforms, leaders of the rebellion mounted horses and marched militia-style to convey authority. It is estimated that between two hundred and five hundred slaves were involved in the German Coast rebellion. The revolt was overthrown in its infancy and ended with its leaders and accomplices decapitated. The rebels' heads were mounted on stakes along the road leading into New Orleans as a warning to stave off potential uprisings.² In 1822, Denmark Vesey, an African American who had lived for a short time in Saint-Domingue, plotted another slave insurrection,

this time in Charleston, South Carolina. Although Vesey reportedly had promised his followers the help of Haitian soldiers once they had overthrown the city of Charleston, the alleged rebellion was thwarted before it could take place. While these rebellions failed, what remains important was the choice to use orchestrated violence to overthrow slavery. In each instance, the enslaved believed violence was the most strategic tool to combatting their oppression.³

The rebellious climate created by the American and Haitian revolutions coupled with republican ideology provided enslaved and free African Americans with a sense of optimism that was unprecedented.⁴ Black abolitionists looked to the examples of violence against the enslaved inflicted by white American forefathers and of black Haitians who used violence to liberate their nation. They saw violence as a legitimate response to the institution of slavery and as a pathway to liberation. This view runs contrary to past historiography that argues that the politicization of black abolitionists has more to do with the American Colonization Society (ACS; a group interested in sending black Americans back to African colonies established in Liberia and Sierra Leone). However, this argument is not only incomplete but continually places black leadership outside of the intellectual, ideological, and tactical debates regarding abolition and plans for their own enfranchisement.⁵ In many ways, the ACS was created in response to free black Americans, black resistance and rebellion, and the failure of abolition to spread beyond New York and Pennsylvania.⁶

Tactics regarding abolition were constantly being contested by black leaders, especially when it came to the idea of moral suasion. Persuading a slave society of the evils of bondage was one thing; not responding to that evil with violence felt counterintuitive. For black abolitionists, pacifism was too restrictive. Nonresistance would not and could not restore the humanity of black Americans alone, which alongside abolishing slavery, was the central goal of black Americans. For some, political and violent force was required. How else might white Southerners and Northerners see black people as people, if not by force? Although the American slave rebellions of the early 1800s were foiled or failed, the success of the Haitian Revolution rendered white supremacy vulnerable and thereby surmountable. Among black abolitionists, all roads pointed toward the island of Haiti and the call for America to live up to its principle of all men created equal. The success of the Haitian Revolution also proved that a black revolutionary tradition existed and was deeply rooted both inside and outside the United States.⁷

William Lloyd Garrison was the founder of the New England Anti-Slavery Society and the American Anti-Slavery Society. As a white abolitionist, Garrison's brand of nonresistance was continually challenged by incidents of white-on-black violence and in turn created disenchantment among black leaders who no longer saw Garrison's form of agitation as effective or exhaustive. What became most important for black abolitionists was the need to contest methods that proved ineffective. Accordingly, the early years of the abolitionist movement questions the utility and limits of moral suasion. The ideological weapons of black leadership during the first two decades of the movement were clearly demonstrated through historical precedent, radical rhetoric, and the burgeoning threat of violent resistance. Prior to the turbulent 1850s, the goals of black abolitionists were best illustrated and understood by examining the radical speeches and language used to express discontent and their defensive rationale and reactions to the world around them.

David Walker's Appeal to the Use of Violence

In black abolitionist thought, David Walker's *Appeal* and Henry Highland Garnet's *Address to the Slaves* serve as the bookends to a conflict and conversation long in the making and culminating with their joint publication in 1848. In 1829, two years before Garrison's *Liberator* was founded and four years before the American Anti-Slavery Society became an organization, David Walker was circulating his ideas and vision for ultimate emancipation. Born free in North Carolina, Walker lived for a time in Charleston, South Carolina. While living in Charleston, it is highly probable that he was aware of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy to overthrow slave plantations and was influenced by rebellious sentiments among black Americans. He would have also been cognizant of the events regarding Haiti and the belief that Haiti supported American slave rebellions.⁸ Walker likely also knew of Haitian president Jean-Pierre Boyer's attempts to recruit black Americans to emigrate to the island throughout the 1820s.⁹ Yet, instead of heading to Haiti, Walker took his ideas north to Boston where in 1825 he opened a used clothing store. From the rebellious climate of the slaveholding South to the organized abolitionist movements of the North, every region in which he lived influenced Walker.¹⁰ He became involved in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and spoke out against colonization. It seemed everything around him propelled him toward activism

and abolition through both a political and a spiritual lens. His interactions within Charleston's intricate network of black leaders and ministers connected to local, national, and international happenings were an example of Walker's potential to institute change. In a very short time, Walker became a prominent abolitionist who defended slave rebellions and called for black pride in his writings. In 1829, Walker published his famous *Appeal in IV Articles*. His heavily circulated and widely discussed pamphlet argued that if white Americans were to abolish slavery and change their racist views concerning black inferiority, then black and white Americans could live harmoniously.

Walker understood that violence was employed by white oppressors to maintain slavery and power. Although Walker believed in the legitimacy of political violence to combat oppression, his deepest desire was for reconciliation. The historian Alfred Hunt attests that "Walker was one of the first protesters against slavery to make the point that became the sine qua non of twentieth-century anticolonial leaders such as Franz Fanon: Taking one's own destiny into one's hands was an act of manhood that created self-respect as well as freedom."¹¹ Walker rationalized violence only as a form of self-defense, a forceful attempt to establish justice and equality.

In his short *Appeal*, Walker referred to Haiti several times; it was known that he had closely followed the events on the island. Undoubtedly, the Haitian Revolution encouraged Walker to contemplate political violence at both the local and national levels. Walker wrote to the enslaved and free black Americans alike to protect themselves from their masters with violence. Keenly aware of the injustice and hypocrisy slavery created, Walker urged: "Therefore, if there is an *attempt* made by us, kill or be killed. Now, I ask you, had you not rather be killed than to be a slave to a tyrant, who takes the life of your mother, wife, and dear little children? Look upon your mother, wife and children, and answer God Almighty; and believe this, that it is no more harm for you to kill a man, who is trying to kill you, than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty."¹² Walker posed the following question to the enslaved: "Are we MEN!!—I ask you, O my brethren! are we MEN?" This gendered appeal stands in stark contrast to the nonthreatening abolitionist slogan "Am I not a Brother?" portraying a shackled black man pleading for his liberation. Walker called for white Americans to see black humanity as a form of manliness and for the enslaved to be motivated by manliness as a justification for self-defense. He assured his readers that the Lord would provide them a leader the like of Hannibal and of Toussaint in Haiti, and advised

them to read the history of Haiti. He added that he did not need to refer to antiquity for a story of freedom; he needed only reference the "glory of the blacks and terror of tyrants" in Haiti. This precedent, he wrote, would be enough to convince the most "avaricious and stupid of wretches." Walker never minced words.¹³

The historian Peter Hinks rehabilitates Walker from scholars who portrayed Walker's calls for violence as atypical from his moral-suasionist abolitionist peers. Hinks understands Walker's *Appeal* as a platform for social uplift and as a necessary sophisticated analysis of last resorts. For Walker, when all other means had been exhausted to maintain one's family or well-being, the oppressed had an obligation to defend themselves as best they could. Walker represented the values, beliefs, and aspirations of a band of black reformers in the late 1820s who were outraged by the persistence of slavery and believed that violent resistance should not be excluded to end it.¹⁴ Empowerment and increased political awareness was the essence of the *Appeal*.

Walker's rationale is best explained as a reiteration of liberal-republican ideology coupled with evangelical principles. He too, had co-opted the principles of the Founding Fathers' ideology and employed it to defend his inalienable rights as a person, and in particular as a Christian. In addition, it was Southerners like Walker who brought to the North a clear notion that armed black resistance founded on the word of God and on the underground organizational structures already existing by many enslaved people was possible. In the 1820s, he represented a new generation of black political leaders who possessed a broad-based commitment to social uplift and enfranchisement. That commitment could not be separated from the desire to do away with racist institutions and perceptions built on denying access and equality for black people.¹⁵

Walker's words were circulated up and down the Eastern Seaboard and as far west as New Orleans. While it has been suggested that Walker had pamphlets sewn into the lining of the clothes he sold from his shop, he more likely utilized the intricate network of black sailors in port cities who transported goods and ideas from town to town. Free, literate, and mobile black Americans had the greatest impact in getting the word to the enslaved and other free black communities. The words were intended to be read out loud to enable literate ministers, mobile black laborers, and black seamen to disseminate the message to large groups. A Boston newspaper claimed, "Since the publication of that flagitious pamphlet . . . we have noticed a marked

difference in the deportment of our colored population. It is evident they have this pamphlet, nay, *we know* that the larger portion of them have read it, or *heard* it read, and that they glory in its principles, as if it were a star in the east, guiding them to freedom and emancipation.”¹⁶ The pamphlet acted in concert with an insurrectionist spirit that could direct black Northerners and Southerners. The white abolitionist and minister Samuel J. May exclaimed, “The excitement which had become so general and so furious against the Abolitionists throughout the slaveholding States was owing in no small measure to . . . David Walker.”¹⁷ As a result, legislatures as far away as Louisiana tightened literacy laws.

A little over a year after the publication of the pamphlet, Walker was a marked man. In the South, Walker had a hefty bounty on his head, wanted dead or alive by slaveholders. And, by June 28, 1830 the thirty-three-year-old was dead. Scholars are not clear as to what led to Walker’s death. Many suspected poisoning, due to the large rewards offered by Southern slaveholders for his murder, but the most likely conclusion was lung fever, of which his daughter had died a week prior. According to the *Boston Daily Courier*, seven people in the city had died all in the same week to lung complications.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the death of Walker did not curb the spirit for reform among abolitionists and the enslaved. In Boston, another newspaper, the *Liberator*, was finding its own voice and hoping to expand upon and beyond Walker’s ideas, primarily by using moral suasion to put nonviolence at the forefront of the abolitionist agenda.

Garrison’s *Liberator*: The Moral Argument

At the start of a new year, January 1, 1831, the white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison began publishing his own weekly abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*. Later that year, Garrison founded the New England Anti-Slavery Society. The next year, he cofounded the American Anti-Slavery Society. Born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, Garrison became involved in the abolitionist movement at twenty-five years of age. He began a short stint working with the American Colonization movement but quickly rejected the views of an organization whose sole purpose was to send black Americans “back” to Africa. He then moved to Baltimore, where he wrote for Benjamin Lundy’s publication the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* but eventually left and returned to Boston to start his own paper. Garrison kept the need for immediate abo-

lition at the forefront of his agenda, rejecting too the gradualist approach that supported emancipation somewhere in the unforeseeable future and likely culminated with indentured servitude. Running his own newspaper allowed Garrison to distribute a militant tone and to argue in favor of immediate emancipation.

In addition to being an abolitionist, Garrison was a pacifist. His tactics of moral suasion established the notion that immediate emancipation could be achieved by convincing Americans of the sinfulness of slavery. Moral suasion was intended to appeal to the conscience and compel one to repentance, particularly in the wake of the second Great Awakening. The notion of nonviolence cannot be separated from its Quaker influence on the abolitionist movement. Garrison believed in pacifism; on religious grounds he was wholly opposed to violence. The American Anti-Slavery Society officially stated in its Declaration of Sentiments that “carnal weapons for the deliverance from bondage” either by the enslaved or by one acting on behalf of the enslaved was unacceptable. Furthermore, if moral suasion was an offensive position, then nonresistance was a defensive tactic. Nonresistants were strict pacifists and staunchly religious; they renounced all resorts to violence and war. The coupling of these principles promoted by Garrison instructed members to fight moral corruption with moral truth. It was believed that together moral suasion and nonresistance could effectively abolish slavery.

Though Garrison was a pacifist, he never disparaged Walker; he catered to the attentive audiences of black Americans Walker had cultivated with his pamphlet. Courting the base of supportive readers was essential for survival, particularly the survival of a press. Garrison’s stance against colonization and his call for social reform appealed to black readers, who made up the bulk of his subscribers. In the first five months of his paper’s existence, nearly all five hundred readers of the *Liberator* were African American. By 1834, black readers made up three-fourths of the twenty-three hundred subscribers and over a dozen black agents who delivered the paper. The *Liberator* was just as much black America’s as it was Garrison’s. Even Garrison lauded that the paper “belongs especially to the people of color—it is their organ.”¹⁹

Unfortunately, as was the case for Walker, Garrison’s activism and radical sentiments often placed him in danger. Once he issued his newspaper, Georgia offered \$5,000 to anyone who would capture and carry Garrison to the state for trial. Many Southern states had passed laws preventing the circulation of “incendiary” abolitionist literature. He faced ridicule, threats, and mobs, yet he remained a staunch proponent of turning the other cheek in the

face of opposition. For Garrison, nonresistance was about condemning the use of violent force in war and even self-defense. In 1833, Garrison wrote part of the constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society, in which he included a clause that rejected any use of violence, claiming, "Ours forbids the doing of evil that good may come, and lead us to reject, and to entreat the oppressed to reject, the use of carnal weapons for deliverance from bondage; relying solely upon those which are spiritual, and mighty through God to the pulling down of strong bonds." He explained his firm belief in moral suasion by giving his own call and response, asking, "What is able to overthrow the present system of slavery?" and answering, "An enlightened, consolidated, and wisely-directed *public opinion*." He asked and answered again: "How this shall be secured? By disseminating LIGHT—by preaching the TRUTH. For this purpose we established *The Liberator*, as a medium through which LIGHT and TRUTH might obtain a wide circulation."²⁰ Some abolitionists believed that they could elevate the human race by pleading for Christian and moral duty and that their cry for justice would eventually be heard. For Garrison, the means and ends of American abolition were rooted in Christian principles.

In 1835, the American Anti-Slavery Society issued a statement promising not to give the "slightest aid to slave insurrections." The group claimed that if they could reach the enslaved, "they would advise them to be quiet and peaceful."²¹ Abolitionists supported the model of peaceful British emancipation in the West Indies, even though rebellion had been the primary catalyst for emancipation. The Baptist War was the largest and most violent slave rebellion in Jamaican history. With Jamaica as the crown jewel of the British Empire in the Caribbean, no one wanted to be Haiti.²² As much as white abolitionists attempted to avoid violence, many were beginning to see what the enslaved and black abolitionists already understood: slavery begets violence. And the American South had no desire to follow the model of the British Empire.

The historian Aileen Kraditor argues that Garrison "distinguished between principles, which must never be compromised, and policy, which to serve principle must be flexible." She adds that "the common ground of the Garrisonians was the belief that the antislavery platform must be kept broad enough to hold abolitionists of all varieties so long as they agreed that slavery was sinful and must be immediately abandoned." Kraditor contends that in the seventeen years from 1834 to 1850, the majority of the tactical problems of the abolitionist movement could be broken into ideologies that were both

supported and refuted by various leaders, particularly among black abolitionists.²³ The practice of self-defense and violence and its utility was constantly questioned. It was during these formative years that the expectations of the abolitionist movement solidified into what it would become for black and white activists.

In March of 1831, at a meeting in Philadelphia, the black abolitionist leaders Frederick A. Hinton, William Whipper, and James Cornish resolved that they were “cheerfully” in accord with the views and sentiments of Garrison. They promised to give dignified support to his paper and to “exercise every means in our power to give them [Garrison’s ideas] a more extensive circulation.” While critics charged Garrison with fanaticism, black abolitionists praised Garrison’s “efficient and unwavering advocacy of human rights.” They added, “While such fanaticism breathes the spirit of truth, honesty, and justice, may it be our lot to be cast in its precious mould.”²⁴ For the first time, the black community had an ally that was not pushing colonization or a gradual approach to emancipation. While Walker’s *Appeal* grounded black leaders’ ideological framework, Garrison was hoping to develop their practices. Abolitionists understood that the reformer’s job was to make the truth widely known and that public opinion would do the rest.²⁵ Garrison firmly believed that people could be persuaded to abolish slavery through nonresistance and moral suasion.

Such leaders encouraged enslaved people to be patient. In 1835, the Massachusetts Antislavery Society affirmed that the enslaved would be redeemed “by the patient endurance in their wrongs . . . the slaves will hasten the day of their peaceful deliverance from the yoke of bondage . . . whereas by violent and bloody measures they will prolong their servitude, and expose themselves to destruction.”²⁶ Moral suasion was intended to make the slave owner fear not the enslaved, but God. Furthermore, abolitionists appealed not only to the slave owner, but to the nation, imploring its people to turn from their offensive and grievous ways. In a letter to the *Liberator*, one abolitionist wrote that a just God had declared vengeance was His and wondered how slave owners could pretend that the pain they had caused Africans would not result in divine retribution.²⁷

Certain that God would administer judgment for the sins of slavery, black abolitionists endeavored to convince the ministers and elders of churches to adopt the cause of perseverance and moral reform. They believed that if they trained undisciplined youth in moral pursuits, then they would be able to convince people everywhere that true happiness comes

through moral elevation.²⁸ Patience, long-suffering, and an appeal to the sensible and moral self lay at the foundation of these abolitionists. In many ways, emancipation was a religious experience: full confirmation of the goodness of man's potential, if he would but right his wrongs. The abolitionist newspaper the *National Enquirer* echoed such sentiments. The paper called upon its readers to "endeavor to enlist the sympathies and benevolence of the Christian, moral, and political world. Without regard to creeds, we shall only ask for the fulfillment of Christian duty, as the surest method of extending righteousness and justice." The newspaper made it clear that it intended to procure the abolition of slavery and racism. The *National Enquirer* selected valuable subjects for rallying points: education, temperance, economy, and universal liberty. The editor's hope was to have his readers, in theory and practice, become thoroughly acquainted with these subjects in preparation for future action.²⁹ These values and the accompanying moralism fed into Americans' optimistic belief in improvement and empowerment.

The reason for the embrace of Garrison's principles over Walker's forceful resistance by black leadership was simple: practicality. If a movement of black and white abolitionists was to be successful, compromise was paramount. Black leaders were willing to set aside violence for white abolitionists who were willing to set aside colonization. Moral reform appealed to black activists because it appealed to their white allies, who had only recently taken up the stance of immediacy in regard to abolishing slavery. Looking back on the movement, in 1846, black Bostonian leaders acknowledged, "We had good enough doctrine before Garrison, but we wanted a good example" to present to white audiences.³⁰ Other black leaders concluded that moral suasion promoted peace and harmony "as a measure necessary to aid in effecting the total abolition of slavery."³¹ Black abolitionists contended they would advocate for the cause of peace, "believing that whatever tends to the destruction of human life, is at variance with the precepts of the Gospel, and at enmity with the well being of individuals as well as society."³² In other words, in order to be successful, abolitionist principles had to be aligned with biblical principles because no one would question the authority of the Bible. Perhaps more than anything, black leadership was happy to have allies who supported them. If their tactics proved successful, then violence could be left out of the conversation Walker facilitated just a few years ago.

Weighing Moral Suasion and Violence as Abolitionists' Tools

As patience became part of the platform, some leaders argued that in the face of oppression, patience was not a virtue but a vice. Dr. Franklin, a patron of the *Liberator*, wrote the following in a letter to the editor in 1831: "There are ways to try men's patience; and I say that treading on the toes of human creatures with sharp instruments, and searing their bodies with hot irons, for centuries, it cannot be expected that they will exhibit the submission of Job."³³ Along similar lines, in 1831, "A colored Philadelphian" wrote to the *Liberator*: "When we take a retrospective view of things, and hear of almost every nation fighting for its liberty, is it to be expected that the African race will continue always in the degraded state they now are? No. The time is fast approaching when the words 'Fight for liberty, or die in the attempt,' will be sounded by every African ear throughout the world."³⁴ His and Franklin's observations proved correct.

On August 21, 1831, Nat Turner's rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, sent shock waves throughout the country. Turner originally planned his own rebellion to begin on July 4, an ironic selection given the national holiday. But due to illness, Turner pushed the date back. Turner was intelligent, literate, and highly religious. He spoke of visions he received and believed his actions were divine and intended by God. The day of the rebellion and on his orders, a group of fellow slaves traveled from plantation to plantation with instructions to kill all of the white people. The rebelling slaves killed slave masters and their families with hatchets, axes, knives, and other blunt objects instead of firearms so as not attract others to their attention. When Turner and his brigade of slaves finally met resistance from white militia, they had already slain sixty white men, women, and children. The rebels saw their violence as just compensation for the oppression they had endured. Their violence was more than an act of defiance; it was retribution and revolution. It took two days to stop the rebellion and, astonishingly, Turner escaped. He remained on the run for months before he was captured. He was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death by the authorities. In the aftermath of the rebellion, the local militias killed three free black people and more than a hundred enslaved persons, some by lynching. Turner's rebellion recognized and used the principles of force to achieve freedom, and black abolitionists did not fail to notice his impact on African American resistance to

slavery. The rebellion echoed the fear and brutality white planters and their families experienced during Haiti's revolution.

In response to Turner's rebellion, an unknown black man wrote a letter to the *Liberator*. He wanted to see slavery abolished without bloodshed and abhorred the thought of a Saint-Domingue-like uprising. His hope, then, was that the white people of the United States would have an epiphany, as had the Egyptians who imprisoned the Israelites, and in the face of past rebellions and rumors realize that it was in their best interest to let the slaves go free. The unidentified man sincerely hoped that the impetus of truth and moral suasion would be sufficient to assist the great work of human rights, without the use of force and with an active faith in the goodness of men's hearts.³⁵

Another article in the *Liberator*, titled "Causes of Slave Insurrections," stated that such rebellions were inevitable wherever men were held in bondage. It was basically a matter of human nature: "Negroes, like other men, have a spirit which rebels against tyranny and oppression."³⁶ Though Turner's insurrection failed, its impact was powerful. Even Garrison believed Turner's justification was no different than that of "our [fore]fathers in slaughtering the British."³⁷ If the Founding Fathers could commence a revolution against Great Britain for what appeared to the abolitionists to be superficial reasons, surely the enslaved could rise up against real oppression and the tyranny of American slavery. He claimed also that it was indeed Haiti—and not the United States—that lived up to the principles of freedom and liberty for all. While Garrison contended that the slaves had every right to revolt, however, he made it clear that he took no part in their revolts, and specifically in Turner's revolt. Despite his empathy for the enslaved, he refused to concede that political violence was the solution.³⁸ Garrison feared slave rebellions would only create more burdens for the enslaved, such as violent backlash, increased sales (spurring the breakup of families), and tighter restrictions, particularly because the revolts had a propensity to fail. It was impossible for successful rebellion in America to look like that in Haiti. Moreover, as a staunch supporter of nonviolence, he did not desire to emancipate slaves at the expense of the planters' safety. At a National Negro Convention Garrison exclaimed, "I believe you [black Americans] have stronger reasons for dreading a Southern insurrection than the whites themselves."³⁹ In other words, Garrison knew, as did all black Americans, that the repercussions of slave rebellions were harsh and extreme. Rebellions entailed risks that most African Americans were simply not willing to take, particularly those living in relative freedom.

While moral suasion was intended to persuade slaveholders of their wrongs, it often appeared that Garrison was also pleading more with black Americans to be persuaded against retaliation. In the first edition of the *Liberator*, Samuel J. May argued that Garrison had repudiated violence “as wrong in principle and disastrous in policy.” Garrison’s opinions on this point were generally embraced by his followers and explicitly declared by the American Anti-Slavery Society, which stated in 1833 that people of the South and North should be assured of the organization’s pacific principles. According to May, Garrison claimed, “We hoped to abolish the institution of slavery by convincing [*sic*] slaveholders and their abettors of the exceeding wickedness of the system.” They had sent letters and pamphlets to Southern friends, ministers, and political officials they knew. However, Garrison specifically claimed that “in no case did we send our publications to slaves.”⁴⁰ In contrast, the genius of Walker’s *Appeal* is that it spoke directly to the enslaved and white Americans simultaneously. In the spirit of preventing violence, white abolitionists were neglecting the very base upon which their campaign was built.

Like many African Americans, the abolitionist Joseph C. Holly, older brother of the emigrationist James Theodore Holly, embodied the diversity and complex nature of black abolitionism. He was born to free parents in Washington, DC, settled in Brooklyn, New York, and became a shoemaker. In many ways, Holly was the quintessential activist: he gave speeches for the American Anti-Slavery Society and lectured independently, he confronted the issue of racism with the same fervor with which he combated slavery, he endorsed black newspapers, he assisted fugitive slaves, and he helped to free black families from slavery by raising money for their purchase. Holly took a strong ideological stance toward making sure black Americans secured their own uplift, but he also encouraged the help of white allies to aid in black employment. Holly supported Garrisonian principles but also supported political abolitionists, those who sought to use the government and politics to accelerate changes for the movement. Holly did not see moral suasion and reverence for Toussaint Louverture, Nat Turner, and the defense of slave violence as mutually exclusive.⁴¹ Among black and white abolitionists, the subject of slave revolts had become a divisive topic. Most abolitionist leaders opposed advocating slave rebellions like Turner’s, but Holly could not be persuaded to abandon the pivotal events that shaped black radical thought. Many black leaders thought moral suasion and defense were not completely irreconcilable; one could value both principles as offensive and defensive tactics against proponents of slavery. Violence and self-defense

might have been options of last resort, but they were always an option. Holly was nothing if not pragmatic.

Violence Rises in the Face of Moral Suasion

Nat Turner's violent slave rebellion in Southampton, Virginia, ushered in the tumultuous 1830s. The abolitionists' "peace principles" were severely tested during the great "mob years" of anti-abolitionist campaigns. During a ten-year period, cities erupted in violence across the country. The rise in crime and mob violence was brought on by a number of factors, such as the increased growth of urban cities; an insurgence of foreign immigration, which spurred bitter ethnic and religious tensions; and the burgeoning abolitionist movement, which fed racist anti-negro sentiments.⁴² For example, in 1834 in New York City, the white abolitionist Lewis Tappan fled the city with his family under threats of attack. Upon finding his home empty, rioters removed Tappan's furniture and set it on fire. For free black Americans, the violence was worse. Their homes and churches were often demolished or set on fire. The African-American Episcopal priest Peter Williams Jr.'s home was severely damaged and his place of worship, St. Philip's African Episcopal Church, was completely destroyed.⁴³ The lists go on: there were at least 115 incidents of mob attacks against free black Americans and abolitionists during the 1830s. This is an astounding shift considering there were only 21 recorded incidents in the 1820s and just 7 violent confrontations in the 1810s.

Nothing was more difficult than to adhere to nonviolence in the face of an angry mob. In all sections of the country, abolitionists found themselves subjected to bitter, and sometimes injurious, physical attack. The riots made the 1830s the most violent decade prior to the Civil War. In many cases the underlying causes for these riots were racism and the idea that abolitionists sought miscegenation, the greatest fear of anti-abolitionists. The terror evoked by the thought of mixing the races resulted in the targeting and lynching of many black men, as anti-abolitionists sought to preserve the status quo.⁴⁴ The 1830s also saw widespread mob violence against abolitionists and African Americans in the North, as social and political struggles over slavery began to dominate the nation. Despite the many attacks suffered by both African Americans and white abolitionists, a correspondent who wrote for the *Liberator* proclaimed, "Among the friends of moral reform . . . the belief is prevailing more and more that our Saviour meant to inculcate the doctrine of never

fighting in self-defense.”⁴⁵ For Garrison, pacifism was not only strategic—it was Christ-like. In nearly every case of anti-abolitionist violence, the response of the abolitionists was nonviolent.⁴⁶

However, African Americans realized that they were the most vulnerable to the brunt of proslavery violence. Pacifism may have been Christlike, but in the face of mob it was also a sure path to martyrdom. Black schools were burned down. Black businesses were destroyed. In October of 1834, anti-abolitionist rioting destroyed forty-five homes in Philadelphia’s black community. Moral suasionist ideology weakened as proslavery violence became more intense, particularly in cities hard hit by anti-abolitionist mobs, such as Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Black leaders began to place more emphasis on the values of self-defense than of morality. Protecting one’s livelihood for self-improvement trumped turning the other cheek in the face of a burning business. Other abolitionists, who could not bring themselves to persuade audiences to embrace peace, remembered Walker’s radical sentiments and sought to intimidate with the memories of rebellion.

Influenced by Walker, Maria Stewart was a schoolteacher and public speaker living in Boston. She was the first African American woman to lecture on women’s rights and served as a contributor to the *Liberator*. Stewart was also the first black woman to publicly acknowledge and echo the sentiments of Walker’s *Appeal*. She declared, “African rights and liberty is a subject that ought to fire the breast of every free man of color in these United States, and excite in his bosom a lively, deep, decided, and heart-felt interest.”⁴⁷ Stewart posed the question, “where are the names of our illustrious ones?” Stewart acknowledged that she could point to a list of white heroes, but where were the heroes in the black community? She called on black leadership to take a more aggressive stance. For Stewart, progress was not merely about recognizing black heroes but also of making sure their ideals and contributions were carried out by succeeding generations. In 1835, she issued a rallying cry to black Americans: “Far be it from me to recommend to you, either to kill, burn, or destroy. But improve yourselves, express yourselves, rise!” Stewart was instructing black people to take matters into their own hands for advancement and protection. For an African American woman to use the words “kill, burn, destroy” in a speech was quite radical, perhaps unprecedented. Stewart’s purpose was to echo Walker—“Though Walker sleeps, yet he lives and his name shall be had in ever-lasting remembrance.” She concluded that she was enlisted in holy warfare and that she intended to fight until her voice expired in death.⁴⁸ Stewart recognized the consequences of

political violence and believed many would inevitably suffer for pleading the cause of oppressed black people. Without hesitation, she boldly declared, "And I shall glory in being one of her martyrs."⁴⁹ Defense of black rights would not be left up to men alone. When it came to self-determination and enfranchisement, freedom was not gendered. Stewart saw herself as much a part of Walker's vision as any black man. When and if the enslaved and free black Americans would rise up, it would undoubtedly include both men and women.

Nevertheless, white abolitionists continued to underestimate how much of an impact black radical leadership had on black thinking. In 1835, white abolitionists held a public debate in Boston on the question "would the slaves be justified in resorting to physical violence to obtain their freedom?" The debate likely stemmed from a growing conversation about the utility of force and violence among black activists and followers. The combative atmosphere in which abolitionists often found themselves compelled them to consider violence at the very least on behalf of the enslaved; never mind that the enslaved did not need permission or affirmation from abolitionists to rebel. The *Liberator* reported on the gathering, at which Reverend Samuel May opened the debate by arguing for the negative. "According to the dictates of unenlightened and unsanctified human nature," May claimed, the enslaved would be justified in attempting violently to liberate themselves in secular terms. However, according to May, the principles of the Gospel and the precepts of Jesus Christ did not allow the enslaved to resort to violence. May continued, "The spirit of the Gospel is one of forbearance, of long suffering, of forgiveness." The rest of the meeting's attendees seemed to be of one accord. They believed slave rebellions could be justified but simultaneously saw rebellion as immoral. These were sentiments developed by men who had never been enslaved or experienced the harsh reality of such a life. The very debate stemmed from a place of privilege never afforded to black Americans. Nevertheless, the attendees were so fully in agreement it appeared that the question at hand was not a topic worth debating, until a man known as Mr. Weeks began to argue in favor of the enslaved's resorting to physical violence. While little is known of Mr. Weeks, the *Liberator* claimed that the gathering rebuked him unanimously for his suggestion.⁵⁰ If white leadership was unwilling to envision black violence, how would they respond to white abolitionists who considered taking up arms in self-defense? It was not long before they too would face with their own mortality in the face of a mob.

Fighting Words and the Murder of Elijah Lovejoy

In the summer of 1835, Southern states passed laws to keep antislavery petitions and literature out of slave territory. Additionally, the South instituted the “gag rule,” which prohibited antislavery discussions from taking place in Congress from 1835 to 1844. After Walker and Nat Turner, rhetoric likely to incite slave rebellion (and proslavery violence) was just as much a threat as a slave rebellion. And, if language was a weapon, then the white abolitionist and Presbyterian minister Elijah Lovejoy’s printing press was an arsenal. Living in Alton, Illinois, proslavery mobs destroyed four of Lovejoy’s printing presses. Lovejoy admitted in the *Liberator* that “a loaded musket is standing at my bedside, while my two brothers, in an adjoining room, have *three others*, together with *pistols, cartridges, etc.*” Lovejoy explained that he had “inexpressible reluctance” to engage in violence or resort to self-defense. Yet, after having lost several printing presses, he understood that there would be no policing protection for his property. He declared, “There is at present no safety for me, and no defense in this place either in the laws or the protecting aegis of public sentiment.”⁵¹ When an angry mob set fire to Lovejoy’s press on November 7, 1837, Lovejoy attempted to defend his property and disperse the mob by threatening to shoot, but before he could, Lovejoy was shot and killed. The proslavery mob destroyed his press one final time by breaking it into pieces and throwing it in the river.

As soon as the news of Lovejoy’s death spread, white abolitionists and Garrisonians accused Lovejoy of neglecting Christian principles. William Goodell, a white abolitionist and founder of the New York State Anti-Slavery Society, criticized Lovejoy’s actions. Goodell believed that the mob would not have killed Lovejoy if he had not taken up arms. He contended that the entire episode could have had “a more thrilling and abiding effect” if Lovejoy had not acted in self-defense—although, perhaps not for Lovejoy. These were the cowardly laments of a man who could not bring himself to confrontation, and Goodell admitted he was afraid. He recalled later that he had feared that abolitionists might be tempted to use violence to defend themselves and produce inevitable bloodshed, “in which the abolitionists would be almost certain to be overpowered.”⁵² Goodell was not alone in his rejection of Lovejoy’s actions, but it would have been better to accept violence in the form of self-defense than to accept and tout nonviolence as a shield for impotence.⁵³

As a pacifist, Garrison claimed he was “shocked” that Lovejoy, a Presbyterian

minister, had taken up arms in self-defense. Because he had resorted to such means, Garrison claimed that while Lovejoy “was certainly a martyr—strictly speaking—he was not . . . a Christian martyr.” Garrison’s biographer Henry Mayer stresses the importance for the abolitionist leader to maintain Christian ethics as the center of the movement. Just two years earlier, Garrison himself had been attacked by a mob in Boston. The anti-abolitionist mob tied a rope around Garrison’s waist and dragged him through the streets of Boston. If given the opportunity, the mob would have surely lynched him, but authorities intervened by placing Garrison in a city jail for his own safety. Garrison had wanted Lovejoy to exert the resolve he had exhibited: nonresistance to the point of death. Presenting the situation through a Garrisonian lens, Mayer asks, “What kind of abolitionist movement could exist if people lauded the printer who died with a rifle in his hands and shunned the printer who upheld the Bible as the standard of government?”⁵⁴

A year after Lovejoy’s murder in Alton, black people living in the area found themselves at the mercy of mobs, riots, and individual attacks. Fearful that the violence would continue unchecked, a group of them began to collect arms in the local hall. When members of one mob learned of the collection of arms by the black community, they plotted to attack the hall. A white abolitionist named Thomas Shipley, known for his ability to defuse an altercation, became aware of the mob’s plans. Shipley attempted to prevent open violence by meeting with the black people who were gathered in the hall. Because Shipley was known as a friend to the black population, he convinced them not to resort to violence, as doing so would only “increase their trouble.” The African Americans aborted their plans and left the hall, but probably not without resolve to take matters into their own hands if the violence persisted. Shipley reported the leaders of the white mob to the authorities and they were arrested.⁵⁵ These were the sorts of stories white abolitionists could cite as examples of the strength of nonresistance. But this story also validated the idea that these local black Americans living in Alton were not completely wedded to the notion of nonviolence. What if Shipley had not intervened? Black Americans knew what the consequences of fighting back could mean, but sometimes not responding only left more at stake. The acquiescence to back down from a fight was rarely ever countered with the arrest of white attackers. Shipley’s efforts were the exception, not the rule.

The abolition of slavery and the establishment of equality for black people was a dual calling. Black leadership could not have abolition without equality or have equality without abolition, and moral suasion could accomplish nei-

ther. The abolitionist Peter Paul Simmons highlighted this important idea in his speech before his black brethren at the African Clarkson Association. He declared, "The basis of the manumission society was to elevate Africans by morals, and this has been formed upwards of a half century, and what has been done? Our people were slaves then and are the same today." He concluded that free black Americans living in the North were no exception: "This northern freedom is nothing but a nickname for northern slavery."⁵⁶ The freedom African Americans experienced in the North was nothing like that experienced by their white counterparts. Racial discrimination prevented many black men from obtaining respectable employment and benefiting from Northern economic expansion. Due to large increases in immigration, free black Americans found themselves competing with immigrants for menial jobs that involved little or no skill. While black leadership pushed for equality alongside abolition, the socioeconomic status of many black Americans remained stagnant. Most African Americans were marginalized laborers and largely impoverished.⁵⁷ Only a small number of black men could receive an education that would allow them to become lawyers, teachers, physicians, or ministers. Most black women were only able to help sustain their families by working as domestics or housekeepers.

In addition to African Americans' dismal economic opportunities, their chances of obtaining political influence were nearly nonexistent. For example, in New York, black men needed to own \$250 worth of property to vote. In 1835, New York City had an estimated black population of 15,061, of which only 86 were eligible to vote. Twenty years later, in 1855, only 100 of the 11,640 black people living in New York City could cast ballots.⁵⁸ In 1838, fueled by fear of an increasing black population in their state, Pennsylvania's constitutional convention restricted voting rights to "white" men. In Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Oregon, there was no need to discuss the voting rights of black men—because African Americans were prohibited from entering the territory.⁵⁹ Ultimately, by excluding black people from the workforce, denying them their voting rights, and alienating free African Americans from American society, Northerners indirectly cultivated black people's forceful resistance.⁶⁰ As frustrations grew, black abolitionists began to turn against moral suasion in growing numbers. For them, abolition had to be accompanied by political and economic opportunity. Moral suasion and nonviolence offered no practical benefits. Black abolitionists were prepared to accept any force, including violence, that could provide and institute real change in their political and socioeconomic status.

Thus, black leadership understood that neither nonresistance nor moral suasion addressed black equality and the rights and privileges afforded only to white Americans. Despite Garrison's popular ideology, freedom within the American narrative was perpetually linked to the idea that violence was a virtue when resisting tyranny.⁶¹ Black leaders passed down these ideals from generation to generation and based them on the principles of freedoms taken, not given. Revolutionary liberal and republican values, combined with religious traditions, demonstrated the capacity for black abolitionists to address and combat their current circumstances within their movement.

Practical Abolitionism Allows Self-Defense and Civil Disobedience

Perhaps few knew more about what was at stake than Lewis W. Woodson, a minister in the AME church who was considered by some as the father of Black Nationalism. As Martin Delany's mentor, Woodson put forth an ideological-pragmatic-spiritual program for the collective elevation of African Americans. As a firm believer in self-determination, Woodson believed that black Americans should take primary responsibility for their own uplift, rather than relying on white Americans or seeking their counsel. He realized that even if slavery were abolished, such victories would be insufficient to alter the political position of black Americans. For his people to succeed, Woodson contended, black people needed to form a collective racial front against exploitation in general.⁶² For Woodson, separatism, a movement to form separate political, social, cultural, and spiritual institutions for black people that were perpetually dominated by whites, was a viable alternative for the black community and promoted the transformation necessary for black people's economic prosperity and freedom. He called on African Americans to collectively produce a moral revolution.⁶³ To do so, black abolitionists would not only have to persuade people of the evils of slavery but also drastically alter their myopic perceptions of black Americans. But first, black leaders needed to turn inward and empower their collective body from within. For example, it was black abolitionists who led the way in Underground Railroad and the successful escapes of fugitive slaves. During his lifetime, David Ruggles, a black antislavery activist, aided more than six hundred African Americans in attaining freedom through the Underground Railroad.⁶⁴ Ruggles was responsible for the escape of Frederick Douglass and

other prominent black leaders. His model of “practical abolitionism”, a term coined by the historian Graham Russell Gao Hodges, advocated civil disobedience and simultaneously enforced self-defense against kidnappers.⁶⁵ Ruggles’s actions set him apart from nearly all his contemporary abolitionists and foretold of the violent struggles brewing throughout the antebellum period.

Phillip A. Bell, a black journalist and founder of the *Weekly Advocate*, eloquently summarized the ideology of violence, its political language, and the model of Ruggles: “What language shall we adopt in portraying the manly conduct of such characters as reside among us? . . . We hazard nothing when we boldly assert, that there is not a crime of greater magnitude—no enormity more foul, than that of making a Slave of a Freeman among us.” For Bell, death was too soft a punishment for slaveholders and slave catchers. Bell was willing to concede a diversity of opinions within the movement, but regarding self-defense, he demanded complete unity. “Imitate the conduct of a Ruggles,” he commanded, “and be as one man in the firm and unalterable determination to maintain your just rights, and defend your property and persons against all attacks of men.”⁶⁶ Bell recognized that the abolitionist movement, despite Garrison’s beliefs, could not be separated from its political implications. Nonviolence was not only irrational in light of the African American experience, but it also ran counter to liberal republican values. Bell had a clear sense of black self-determination shaped by his activism and his experience of living in the Northeast. Bell was born to free black parents in New York City and attended the city’s Free African Schools. He joined the group that formed the New York *Weekly Advocate*, later renamed the *Colored American*, and became the paper’s first General Agent and part-time editor. He also partnered with Samuel Cornish (America’s first black editor) while at the paper in writing articles to aid the abolitionist cause.

Simmons also ran in the same circles as Bell and Ruggles and later published works in the *Colored American*. In the same speech he gave before the African Clarkson Association of New York City, he reflected sentiments similar to Bell’s and of other black activists who wanted more than moral suasion and moral elevation as a path to freedom and equality. He asked, “Why is it, that we never hear of a physical and a political elevation?” His response was straightforward, because both call for “united strength.” For Simmons, physical and political efforts were the only methods left to adopt. Inaction only led to another generation of enslaved people. “No,” declared Simmons, “We must show ACTION! ACTION! ACTION!”⁶⁷ Simmons clearly understood how abolition could not be separated from political, social, and even

economic ideals. Though measures had been taken by Congress to keep the abolition issue at bay, by the 1840s slavery had become deeply political. With Turner's rebellion, the growth of mob violence against black communities, and the murder of Lovejoy, campaigns for nonviolence were collapsing and a once-promising coalition between black and white leaders was in decline, leading to the emergence of an independent movement among marginalized and militant African Americans. Furthermore, the ideological transformations of abolitionists such as Henry Highland Garnet and Frederick Douglass led to significant turning points among black leadership. As these key leaders found empowerment in political violence in ways that nonviolence failed to provide, others sought to follow suit.

Violence Becomes a Necessary Means for Black Abolitionists

Henry Highland Garnet was among those who led the charge against moral suasion and toward political action and self-defense. Many know Garnet for his famous "Address to the Slaves" speech given in 1843. However, Garnet's conversion from moral suasion to revolutionary violence arose from earlier experiences. He was born into slavery in New Market, Maryland, in 1815. When he was almost ten years old, he and his parents escaped. When a slave agent attempted to seize his family in New York City, Garnet's father got away by jumping off a roof, and Garnet armed himself with a knife for constant protection.⁶⁸ Nearly ten years later, when slavery ended in New York, black families were eager to have their children educated so they could escape menial labor. Thus, a young Garnet, along with Thomas Sydney and Alexander Crummell (later an abolitionist and minister), were sent from New York to attend the Noyes Academy, an experimental interracial school in Canaan, New Hampshire. The Noyes Academy was established in 1835, and George Kimball, a white abolitionist who helped to build the Congregational Church, was one of its principal founders. Kimball intended the school to be a place for children of all races to attend. The first class was composed of twenty-eight white students and fourteen black students.

However, on August 10, 1835, opponents of interracial education attacked the school. For two days, over three hundred residents wrapped chains around the schoolhouse with the declared intent to "drag the nigger school off its foundation and through town."⁶⁹ White men from the surrounding

communities used more than ninety oxen to drag the school into the river and eventually set the building's remnants on fire. But destroying the school alone did not seem sufficient. The mob began to fire shots at the students' boardinghouse. It was during this attack that Garnet picked up a shotgun and began to fire back to defend the remaining students and get them to safety. At the time, the black population of New Hampshire was about 607 out of an estimated population of 269,000.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the fear of miscegenation was fixed in the mind of the mob. John Harris, a witness and Noyes trustee, described the assault as "a monument of violence."⁷¹

Nineteen years old during the Canaan attack, Garnet found the experience to be transformative. The event led him to believe that violence, particularly self-defense, was necessary. Accordingly, when Garnet, at twenty-seven years old, delivered his "Address to the Slaves" at the National Negro Convention in Albany, he spoke from personal experience. The historian Steven H. Shiffrin claims that historians have erroneously portrayed Garnet as having entertained a lifelong commitment to revolutionary violence. Evidence for Shiffrin's position can be seen in a speech Garnet gave to the Massachusetts Liberty Party State Convention in January of 1842, declaring, "I cannot harbor the thought for a moment that . . . [the slaves'] deliverance will be brought about by violence. No; our country will not be so deaf to the cries of the oppressed; so regardless of the commands of God. . . . No, the time for a last stern struggle has not yet come."⁷² An article in the *National Reformer*, a newspaper founded by William Whipper (the wealthiest African American of his day and an advocate of nonviolence and racial integration), claimed that Garnet was aware of the importance of nonviolence. Garnet, Whipper asserted, would prefer to see slavery abolished peacefully; however, he had no confidence that the abolitionists would succeed by advocating for their cause on moral grounds.⁷³ Yet, Shiffrin makes it clear that, while no conclusive evidence can pinpoint what changed Garnet's stance, he believes that Garnet's fugitive slave status and the Supreme Court decision of *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* in 1842, a decision that made it easier for slaveholders to recover runaway slaves, were determining factors in changing Garnet's mind.

In a response to the Prigg decision, Garnet delivered his most famous speech at the National Negro Convention in Buffalo, New York in 1843. His fiery speech not only shocked the delegates in attendance but also marked a turning point in how the abolition of slavery should be approached. Garnet lectured, "Fellow men! Patient sufferers! behold your dearest rights crushed to the earth! See your sons murdered, and your wives, mothers, and sisters

doomed to prostitution. In the name of the merciful God, and by all that life is worth, let it no longer be a debatable question whether it is better to choose *Liberty or death*." He followed these remarks by reminding his audience of the heroes they had in Denmark Vesey, Toussaint Louverture, Nat Turner, Joseph Cinque, and Madison Washington, all of whom had fought for black people's freedom through rebellion. Garnet referred to these men as "Patriots" and "Noble men." Assuming that the consequences for ending slavery would have to be violent and charged, he insisted that those who listened would be better off dead than living as slaves; he asserted that a violent course was their only hope, as slavery could not be eradicated without bloodshed.⁷⁴ No doubt at the top of his lungs, Garnet voiced the same fiery word three times: "Resistance! Resistance! Resistance!" "No oppressed people," Garnet claimed, "have ever secured their liberty without resistance." In his speech he affirmed, "that the time had come to resort to this course"; that other means had failed, and would fail; that abolitionists, who were very benevolent men, had done about all that they could do; that non-resistance was ridiculous, and not to be thought of, even for the present, by the slaves.⁷⁵

For Garnet, moral suasion and the legal system equivocally failed black Americans. *Prigg vs. Pennsylvania* was a sign that the system was indeed created for the protection of white men only. If the right to freedom could be overturned in Pennsylvania—home of the Quakers and "Brotherly Love"—where else could one be safe? Furthermore, Garnet refused to be condemned by Garrison. "If it has come to this," Garnet replied, "that I must think and act as you do, because you are an abolitionist, or be exterminated by your thunder, then I do not hesitate to say that your abolitionism is abject slavery."⁷⁶ Garnet was over having white men dictate his and other African Americans' responses. White leadership could not be trusted to take the movement far enough and fast enough for Garnet. Nevertheless, because Garnet's speech was so radical, fellow black leaders voted on whether it should be published. Frederick Douglass, along with Charles Remond, an early black orator and activist for the movement born free in Massachusetts, represented those who strongly opposed its being published. Douglass contended that although it was acceptable to forward slaves' rights to achieve freedom by force, it was not acceptable for Garnet to claim that force was the only means by which slavery could be eradicated. He continued to argue that the *only* realistic hope for freedom lay in taking the high road rather than using violence.⁷⁷

Interestingly, Garnet's resolution to call for slaves to rebel lost by one vote: nineteen to eighteen delegates. But the close count revealed dissention among

the delegates and the weakening of the moral suasion position. The vote was also symbolic of a change of heart within the abolitionist movement. If black abolitionists could come within just one vote of publishing a speech that endorsed slave rebellions, how much closer were they to abandoning moral suasion? Garnet's speech was also effective because it was based on the premise that slavery was so evil it was necessary to resist it on religious grounds, meaning a religious obligation prevented the notion from being dismissed. Shiffrin writes: "To disagree with Garnet's conclusion, an audience which had met to decry slavery would have to say that slavery was not *that* evil. In short, a group of people who prided themselves on being militant activists against slavery would for the first time have to view themselves as moderates."⁷⁸ No steadfast abolitionist was willing view himself or herself as conservative in the campaign to abolish slavery.

For six years, from 1843 to 1849, debates between black leadership remained intense. Many saw the Mexican American War (1846–1848) as an attempt to expand slavery and its territory. Thus, an environment of war and violent means never waned. Douglass and Garnet had become rivals over who controlled the dominant voice among black leadership. In an article in the *North Star*, Garnet challenged Douglass openly, exclaiming, "You publish that I have no faith in the use of moral means for the extinction of American slavery. I believe with all my heart in such means—and I believe that political power ought to be used for that end and that when rightly used, it is strictly moral." He added, "I also believe that the slave has a moral right to use his physical power to obtain his liberty—my motto is, give me liberty or give me death. Dare you, Frederick Douglass, say otherwise! Speak plainly—I am 'calling you out.'"⁷⁹ Garnet wanted to make it clear that Douglass could not deny the righteousness of self-defense or the republican ideology of the forefathers. Garnet acknowledged that he and Douglass were both born into slavery and suffered greatly from it. He felt Douglass was being at the very least disingenuous to suggest moral suasion as a strategy and was baffled that any former slave would tell people to "bow down to the unreasonable and unnatural dogmas of non-resistance." Then Garnet shared his harshest feelings about the matter: "Whoever the colored fugitive may be that advocates such trash, he is either a coward, a hypocrite, a fool, or a knave." He claimed that someone like Douglass could not be trusted because he was more invested in his own celebrity. "Whenever pressed by the hunger of fame," Garnet quipped, "He would sell a thousand birth-rights for a mess of pottage." It is important to note that while Garnet had trouble getting his

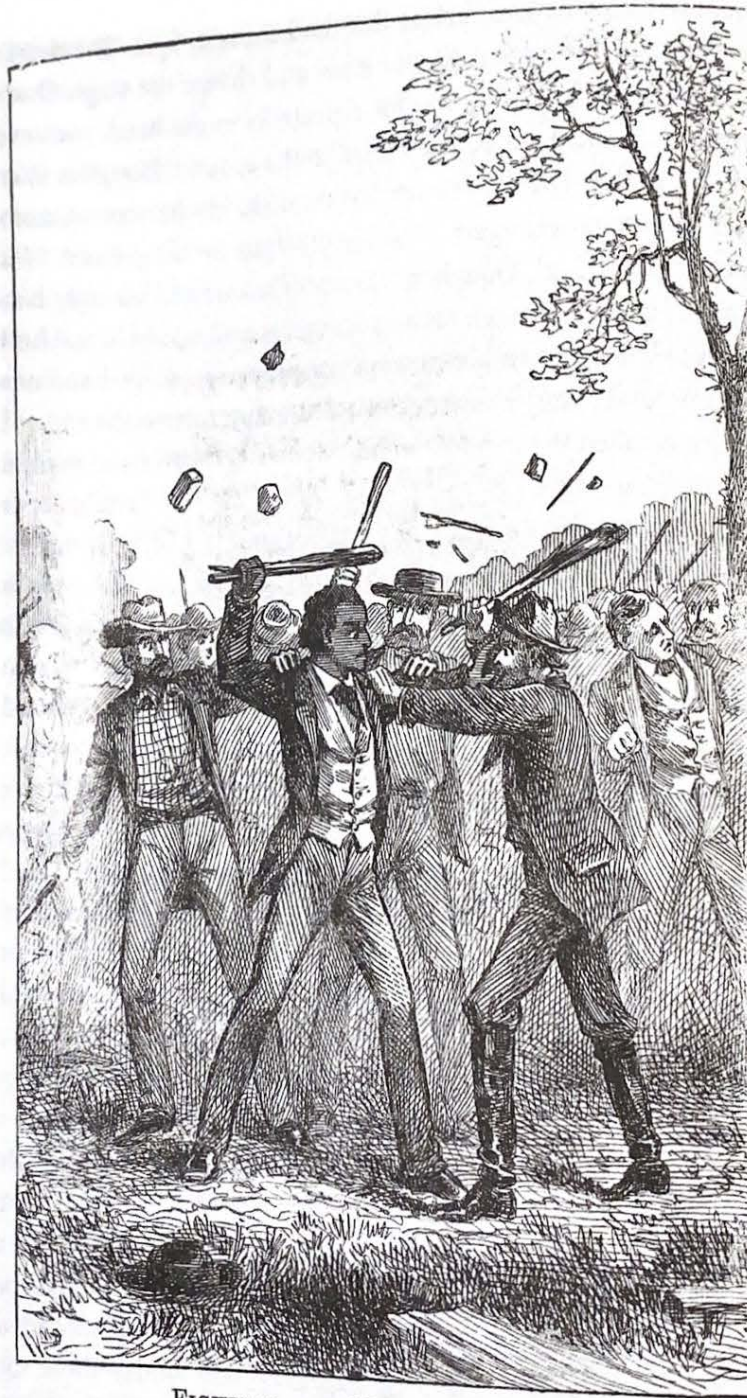
speech published, Douglass's first narrative was quite a success. Published in 1845, the first printing sold over 5,000 copies within four months. Subsequently, six more editions were published between 1845 and 1849. Garnet believed that Douglass was compromising not just his beliefs, but black abolitionists' principles for fame. He claimed his values shifted like the "colors of the chameleon", and were as "changeable as the weathercock."⁸⁰ Garnet spared Douglass nothing in this critique. What Garnet could dismiss in Garrison as a white man, he abhorred in Douglass.

Black abolitionists such as Woodson and Garnet considered black liberation to be intrinsically connected to political and spiritual redemption. Garnet's "Address to the Slaves" acknowledged that if the enslaved were to free themselves, violence would have to be an integral part of their liberation struggle. The black liberation ideology of these abolitionists also maintained that the enslaved's efforts would be blessed by God.⁸¹ This does not mean that black abolitionists condoned all-out violence, but self-defense was up for debate in a way that it had not been since the tragedy of Elijah Lovejoy's death. Black Americans did not have the luxury of being able to separate moral and political aspects of the struggle against slavery that Garrison did. Many of them were simply doing what they could to move the cause forward, even as they struggled to survive. While not every black leader had reached the conclusions of Walker, Woodson, and Garnet, others such as Douglass could not be convinced until they faced their own transformative experiences.

Early in the movement, Douglass firmly agreed with Garrison. He refused to condone slave rebellions and worked hard to convince his fellow black abolitionists to refrain from encouraging actions that he believed would be catastrophic.⁸² The scholar Leslie Friedman Goldman argues that "Douglass really believed that persuasion and moral example—moral suasion, as he called it—would be more effective in saving the slaves than would wild resorts to bloodshed." Goldman adds that early in his career, Douglass "actually believed that the slaveholders would be shamed by a transformed public opinion into giving up their own slaves."⁸³ During the first five years Douglass worked for Garrison, he expressed the certainty that the American people needed only to be *enlightened* about the horrible oppression of slavery. Douglass pushed for patience.

Nonetheless, in 1843, the same year that Douglass opposed Garnet's address, he, too, found himself on the side of violence. Douglass was giving a lecture with several abolitionists friends when a mob began to disrupt the event. Nearly sixty well-armed men began to threaten the speakers and or-

dered them to be silent; it was clear they had come to fight. The rioters then began to tear down the speaker's platform and charge the stage. One of the presenters, William A. White, was hit repeatedly in the head, and several of his teeth were knocked out before he fell to the ground. Douglass attempted to fight his way through the crowds with a stick, but he was overcome and pummeled over and over again as he lay prostrate on the ground. When the attackers finally rode off, Douglass was unconscious and his right hand was broken. Neal Hardy, a Quaker, revived Douglass and nursed him at his home. Because Douglass's broken bones were not properly set, his hand never recovered its natural strength and dexterity.⁸⁴ In 1893, toward the end of Douglass's life, he recalled the incident in an unpublished letter and explained, "I was Non-Resistant til I got to fighting with a mob at Pendleton, Ind: in 1843. . . . I fell never to rise again, and yet I cannot feel I did wrong."⁸⁵ Those who have studied Douglass—and his evolving views on violence—believe that while he supported self-defense, he remained opposed to violence as a weapon of reform.⁸⁶ For those who are familiar with Douglass's narrative, his hallmark "fight with Mr. Covey" was a turning point. Douglass refused to be broken or whipped by Covey, and a two-hour blow-for-blow fight ensued in which Covey finally conceded. As a result, Douglass was never whipped again. Because he wrote about his experience with such "glowing terms," he became a prime example of a man who would not shun self-defense.⁸⁷ Few black abolitionists practiced the notion of nonresistance and moral suasion when facing a mob attack or a personal assault. Black abolitionists utilized both accommodation and resistance as collective strategies for survival. And while it was much easier to be nonviolent in word than in deed, black abolitionists could make clear distinctions between occasions that were appropriate for violent resistance and those that were not. For instance, in the report of the Committee on Abolition of the National Negro Convention in October 1847, Douglass offered what he believed to be a rational view concerning violence, "The slave is in the minority, a small minority, the oppressors are an overwhelming majority." He contended that the enslaved people had no rights, whereas white Americans possessed every legal and deadly advantage to keep them oppressed.⁸⁸ Douglass explained that under these circumstances, black leadership had the responsibility to develop the best means of abolishing slavery. He urged the committee to see the rationale for employing violent resistance because the committee believed that resorting to bloodshed would be "the perfection of folly, suicidal in the extreme, and abominably wicked."⁸⁹ Leaders of the abolitionist movement equated violence with



FIGHTING THE MOB IN INDIANA.

Figure 2. "Fighting the Mob in Indiana." Courtesy of the Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

sin. Furthermore, the repercussions of slave rebellions almost always proved deadly for both the guilty and the innocent. But an anti-abolitionist mob was not a slave rebellion, and Douglass understood this firsthand.

By the end of the 1840s, abolition was still not imminent, and Douglass realized he would have to take a different approach. His breaking point, the point at which he moved beyond self-defense to political violence, may have come in 1847 after he met John Brown in Springfield, Massachusetts. Douglass recalled that he had become less hopeful about the peaceful abolition of slavery and more impressed by Brown's convictions. During an antislavery convention in Salem, Ohio, Douglass was sharply rebuked by Sojourner Truth when he insinuated that slavery could be destroyed only by bloodshed. "Frederick, is God dead?" Truth asked. "No," he answered, and "because God is not dead slavery can only end in blood." Douglass acknowledged that Truth was of the Garrison school of nonresistance, but it was not long before she too "became an advocate of the sword," when the war for the maintenance of the Union was declared.⁹⁰

Douglass's frustration in the movement was beginning to make its way into his speeches. And though they would not come to fruition until much later, he along with John Brown began to spread the intellectual seeds of violent dissent. That same year, Douglass stepped into his own even more by establishing his own antislavery newspaper, the *North Star*, with its motto: "Right is of no Sex—Truth is of no Color—God is the Father of us all, and we are all brethren." When Douglass established the *North Star*, it symbolized a step toward self-determination, black separatism, and a stepping out beyond the prominent tutelage of Garrison. Samuel R. Ward, the black abolitionist minister and editor of the *Farmer and Northern Star* and Boston's *Impartial Citizen*, claimed that perhaps Douglass's and Garrison's public disputes revealed Garrison's own "hostility toward black manliness and independence," a charge Garrison strongly denied.⁹¹

Garrison stated in his own paper that "a good deal of anxiety is felt and expressed by many of his [Douglass'] old and most reliable friends, in view of this change in his sentiments; and he appears to be keenly sensitive to any criticism from that quarter—construing that criticism, as he appears to do, into an impeachment of his motives." Garrison did not approve of Douglass's relationship with Gerrit Smith and the Liberty Party or his interpretation of the US Constitution. Douglass had become political and Garrison believed it was impossible to reconcile government, politics, and slavery. After quibbling about the fact that Douglass had changed the name of his paper from

the *North Star* to his own name (the *Frederick Douglass Paper*), an act he saw as egotistical, Garrison lamented that ultimately he and his friends were sorry to see Douglass leave for what he saw as faulty politics. "It is not a question of purity of motives, but of soundness and vitality of position; and we see no cause why the discussion should not be conducted, on both sides, in an amicable and magnanimous spirit." Garrison also dismissed the claim that Douglass left because all of the white editors on staff were financially compensated and Douglass was not. But Garrison retorted that this notion was simply "an unkind fling."⁹² Nevertheless, the loss of Douglass was a major setback for the Garrison camp and all who continued to tout moral suasion. For white abolitionists, Douglass was their greatest public relations tool, their representation for recruitment to the movement.

By 1849, Douglass had changed his ideological stance even more. He declared, "Slaveholders have no rights more than any other thief or pirate. They have forfeited even the right to live, and if the slave should put every one of them to the sword tomorrow, who dare pronounce the penalty disproportioned to the crime?"⁹³ Filled with righteous indignation, Douglass became frustrated and impatient. He recognized that more than twenty years into the movement, American abolitionists had accomplished little. Douglass was always strategic. It is likely he understood that justifying slave revolts or slave violence was a way of threatening slave revolts without blatantly encouraging them. Furthermore, black abolitionists had become frustrated with the movement's ineffectiveness and dominant white leadership. As the true subjects and founders of abolitionism, black leaders wanted control and agency in the movement that belonged to them. Douglass and Garnet understood violence as a rational response to oppression, a belief that echoed sentiments proudly hailed during the Revolutionary era. No one could deny the parallel between the principles of black abolitionists and those of the Founding Fathers, nor could anyone ignore the outcome of the American Revolution or the Haitian Revolution: an oppressed colony that had engaged in a violent war had won its independence and freedom. Even Garrison had to acknowledge that the patriots achieved American independence—not with moral suasion or electoral politics, but with violence.

Lines Drawn in the Quest for Equality

In August of 1845, J. W. C. Pennington, a former slave and a Presbyterian minister, preached his farewell sermon at the Fifth Congregational Church in Hartford, Connecticut. Pennington declared that the nation was still taking shape. He stated, "I am still a young man. . . . And the last half of the present century will be our great moral battle day. I go to prepare for that."⁹⁴ Although it was perhaps not his intention, Pennington and almost all Americans would surely face a "moral battle" in the last half of the nineteenth century. If one thing was clear, it was that the campaign for moral suasion was significantly weakened. No one knew what the future of America held for black Americans, but few were willing to wait and see. Black abolitionists, like Pennington, set out in search of more forceful tactics.

In some ways, time was the decider. Time proved how much had changed and how much had not. It was two decades into the movement and the abolitionists were no closer to abolishing slavery than the day they started. If anything, the institution of slavery was stronger. And the more people held onto slavery, the more black leaders let go of their beliefs in the utility of nonresistance. In 1847, the *Liberator* regretfully reported a speech by Charles L. Remond, a former proponent of nonresistance, in which he urged the enslaved to "RISE AT ONCE, en masse, and THROW OFF THEIR FETTERS."⁹⁵ That same year, the Troy National Convention proposed the motion: "This Convention recommends to our people the propriety of instructing their sons in the art of war."⁹⁶ Although the motion failed, incidents like Garnet's speech marked a shift in the abolitionist ideology. The fact that the resolution for "instructing sons in the art of war" could be entertained was one more crack in the foundation of nonviolence. As early as 1841, the Maine and New Hampshire abolitionist conventions had refused to denounce violence in support of freeing the slaves. Eight years later, both New England states were even more fervent in their approval of support for the enslaved, even at the cost of physical violence and bloodshed. At the Ohio state convention in 1849, members recommended ordering five hundred copies of two of the most notorious writings of the antebellum period for purchase and distribution: David Walker's *Appeal* and Garnet's "Address to the Slaves." The two writings were printed together in one volume in 1848.⁹⁷ By promoting "two of the most radical calls to violence," black abolitionists were taking bold steps and distancing themselves from moral

suation.⁹⁸ Walker and Garnet's were not merely exceptional texts, they typified or put into words the central development of the period.

Resistance among black abolitionists began to affect their white counterparts as well. By the late 1840s, one by one, white abolitionists had begun to question the efficacy of moral suasion. By 1845, Gerrit Smith, a radical white abolitionist and philanthropist from New York, had grown to doubt that slavery would "die a peaceful death."⁹⁹ Similarly, Theodore Parker, a white minister, declared around the same time, "War is an utter violation of Christianity. If war be right, then Christianity is wrong, false, a lie. Every man who understands Christianity knows that war is wrong."¹⁰⁰ But in a letter to his fellow minister Francis Cobb, Parker wrote: "I think we should agree about war. I hate it, I deplore it, yet see its necessity. All the great charters of humanity have been writ in blood, and must continue to be so for some centuries."¹⁰¹ Leaders of the movement were beginning to understand that violence was not merely insidious or even vengeful but potentially a political tool that could be used to achieve a greater good.

Historically, perhaps the question of the 1830s and '40s should have been: Why nonviolence? Why moral suasion? Moral suasion was useful, but as slave owners won more and more legal and political gains, moral suasion proved ineffective as a tool largely because it did not address equality. Overall, the limitations of nonviolence were fourfold: first, nonresistance demonstrated that white elites were out of touch with the concerns of the black community. Continued discrimination, disenfranchisement, kidnappings, unemployment, growing segregation, and increased violence plagued black communities. Often black success courted violence. Real change that would result in a new social structure required more than verbal persuasion or moral elevation by African Americans. For black Americans to obtain the right to vote, own land, or maintain a living wage, they needed political and economic intervention. Second, moral suasion failed because it required the unstated assumption that black people were equal. Despite black success in the pulpit and the press, black Americans could not convince their counterparts to abandon racial prejudices. Peter Paul Simmons argued that the only thing moral reform had achieved was in creating "a conspicuous scarecrow designed expressly . . . to hinder our people from acting collectively for themselves."¹⁰² In other words, moral suasion was nothing more than an emotional decoy that could never sufficiently frighten or endanger slaveholders and the institution of slavery. Even William Whipper, a proud advocate for moral suasion, lamented that it was "not for lack of elevation, but com-

plexion that deprived the man of color equal treatment."¹⁰³ Third, given the longevity and prosperity of slavery, abolitionists were not speaking to a waning slave economy built on tobacco at the end of the eighteenth century. Cotton was king and its economic stronghold dictated not only the life expectancy of the enslaved (life expectancy rates among the enslaved rose and fell with the price of cotton) but also the political power of slaveholders to secure its dominance. Economically, nonviolence could do nothing to curb the world's insatiable demand for cotton. As the enslaved population grew, the only threat planters feared was rebellion. Fourth, and finally, the principles and rhetoric of republican ideology, which included calls to take up arms against tyranny, were powerful. Because of Haiti, Garrison could never fully capture the hearts and minds of black Americans. Because of Haiti, David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet had voices that could not be silenced. Undoubtedly the desire for freedom among the enslaved existed before 1791. However, when the sons and daughters of Haiti struck for freedom, as Douglass notes in his speech on Haiti at the World's Fair in 1893, "they struck for the freedom of every black man in the world."¹⁰⁴ The possibilities of violent rebellion cannot be underestimated; it was a common wind blowing and circulating all throughout the black Atlantic.

Freedoms given would always play second fiddle to freedoms won. Waiting for slavery to simply end of its own accord or out of the benevolence of planters proved fruitless. In order for the movement to progress, it could not remain static; it had to evolve. If black abolitionists were going to produce real change, they had embrace political protest and collective political violence.¹⁰⁵ Essentially, they had to force freedom.