

# ‘If There Is No Struggle...’

## Teaching a people’s history of the abolition movement

By **BILL BIGELOW**

“WHO HERE WOULD HAVE BEEN AGAINST slavery if you suddenly found yourself living in those times?”

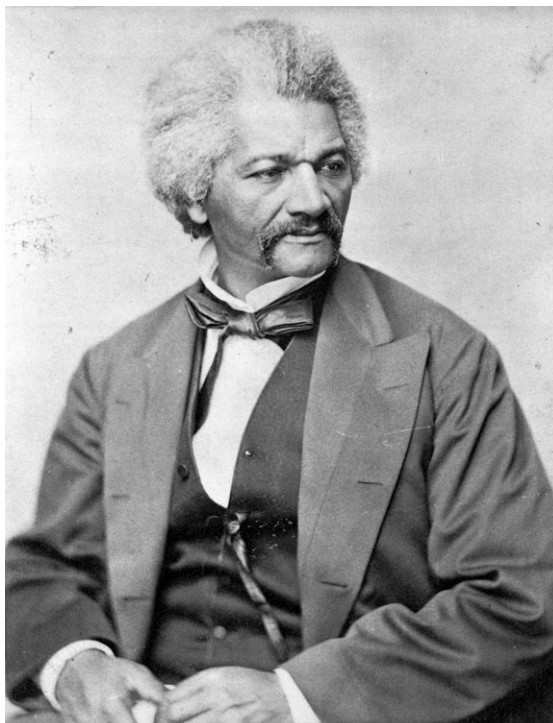
I’ve asked a version of this question to many U.S. history classes over the years. Every student raises a hand.

“So what exactly would you have done to end slavery?”

Puzzled looks are generally the response to this question. What *should* we do, what *can* we do, when we are confronted by the enormity of an injustice like slavery? It’s not an easy question for my students, and it wasn’t an easy question for the people who opposed slavery in those times. The answers were struggled over in the abolition movement, one of the most significant social movements in U.S. history, but underappreciated in today’s history curriculum.

A few summers ago, my wife, Linda, and I vacationed in upstate New York. We went to visit John Brown’s grave site at North Elba, near Lake Placid. Brown was executed Dec. 2, 1859, by the state of Virginia shortly after leading a raid on the Harpers Ferry arsenal, hoping to trigger an anti-slavery rebellion.

In a nearby town, we went to a talk, part of a lecture series on abolitionism, by scholar Eric Foner. Foner’s thesis was that the abolition movement was the foundation of virtually all social justice movements in the United States. It led to the first antiwar movement, against the U.S. invasion and occupation of Mexico (1846–48), which abolitionists saw as a landgrab to expand slavery. (Henry David Thoreau coined the term “civil disobedience” in defending his willingness to go to jail for his refusal to pay taxes to support the war.) The abolition movement seeded the movement for women’s rights in the United States: The leaders of the first gathering of women to demand rights as women, at Seneca Falls, N.Y., in 1848, were abolitionists like Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. For all its imperfections, the abolition movement was this country’s first multiracial movement. And it was the first anti-racist movement in U.S. history, demanding an end not only to slavery but also to racial segregation and discrimination in the North. As Foner writes in *The Story of American Freedom*, “The origin of an American people unbounded by race lies not with the founders,



*Frederick Douglass escaped slavery and became a prominent leader in the abolition movement.*

not with the founders,

who by and large made their peace with slavery, but with the abolitionists. . . . [A]bolitionists invented the concept of equality before the law regardless of race, one all but unknown in American jurisprudence before the Civil War.”

U.S. history textbooks and curricula tend to marginalize the abolition movement. For example, Oregon’s state social studies standards mention “abolitionists” only once in the 8th-grade benchmarks, and not at all in the high school standards. One of my favorite quotes is from Amy Goodman, host of the radio/TV program “*Democracy Now!*” Goodman says that journalism needs to go where the silences are. The same can be said of the school curriculum. And one of the greatest silences is about the fact that social movements have transformed the United States—that everything good and decent about our society is the product of people working together to make things better.

But like so much other media, textbooks prefer to regard social progress as the product of great individuals. Ask a typical group of students “Who freed the slaves?” and they’ll say Abraham Lincoln. Yet Lincoln was never an abolitionist. In fact, the Great Emancipator was not even an abolitionist when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation—a document that carefully listed the regions, county by county, where enslaved people were to remain enslaved, “as if this proclamation were not issued.” Earlier, in March 1861, during his first inaugural address, Lincoln had not been president for five minutes before he quoted one of his own pro-slavery speeches: “I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so. . . .” He then promised to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act and to support a constitutional amendment “to the effect that the federal government shall never interfere with the domestic institutions of the states, including that of persons held to service.” Lincoln left a complicated legacy—and no doubt, through the course of the Civil War he came to espouse positions held

by white and black abolitionists—but he began his presidency by promising slave owners that they could keep people enslaved forever.

Foner’s talk about the significance of the abolition movement inspired me to rethink how I had been approaching the anti-slavery struggle in my classes. First, I realized that I needed to spend more time teaching it. I wanted to find teaching strategies that would underscore the difficult choices that confronted the abolition movement. Instead of having students simply read about the abolition movement or listen to me talk, I wanted to engage them as movement participants, so that the strategic dilemmas of ending slavery would unfold in class. In other words, I wanted a *people’s* pedagogy to match the bottom-up *people’s* history I hoped to impart to my students.

### **‘You Are a Member of the American Anti-Slavery Society’**

I created a role play in which every student in class portrayed a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS). As the AASS, the class would encounter some of the difficult strategic choices that confronted the actual organization throughout its history. I’d be present as teacher to observe and take notes, but I would play no role in their deliberations. My hope was that students would taste a bit of the uncertainty but also the exhilaration that actual anti-slavery organizers experienced as they sought to abolish the greatest injustice of their time.

A little context: When I first taught this to my 10th-grade U.S. history classes, I was at Franklin High School in southeast Portland. My classes at Franklin were largely white and working class, with relatively small numbers of African American, Asian American, and Latino students. According to state standards, slavery and the antislavery movement were supposed to be taught in the 8th grade, not high school—a mandate I consistently ignored. The idea that students should finish their study of U.S. slavery in the 8th grade seemed absurd. With no exit tests or curriculum cops around, it was an easy

order to disobey. Prior to this role play, my students engaged in a simulation on the dynamics of the African slave trade; watched a slide lecture on the slave trade and U.S. slavery; examined laws pertaining to slavery; and read, wrote about, and discussed Chapter 9 from Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, “Slavery Without Submission,” up to the point where Zinn discusses the abolition movement.

## Autobiography of an Abolitionist

I began this lesson by telling the class that we were going to do a role play on the movement to end slavery in the United States, and that each of them would become a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society, the most significant abolition organization in the country. I distributed a role sheet and we read it aloud. The role begins:

*You are a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society, an organization founded in 1833 to end slavery in the United States. Your members include both blacks and whites. To you, slavery is the central evil in American life. Of all the injustices, this one—that allows human beings to own other human beings and to treat them purely as property—is far and away the worst.*

The role sheet goes on to describe aspects of slavery and some of the first actions against slavery, and concludes by reminding the students-as-abolitionists that “it’s one thing to oppose slavery and quite another thing to know what to do about it. There is sharp debate among abolitionists—people who want to end slavery. How can we end this enormous evil? That is the question we face.” [All the teaching materials for this role play can be found at [www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org).]

To encourage students to connect more personally to their role as abolitionists, I asked them to write their autobiography, to imagine the experiences that led them to dedicate their

lives to the fight against slavery. I emphasized to them what a remarkable thing it was for someone to become an abolitionist—slavery was the dominant institution in the United States. It had existed here for more than 200 years, was protected by the Constitution and U.S. Supreme Court rulings, and was the single most profitable “industry” in the country. By the birth of the abolition movement, most U.S. presidents had owned slaves. I asked: “What motivates you to work against your government and for equality? How did you come to think that you could make a difference in the world?”

I told students that they were free to choose their gender, age, race, social class, and region of the country. To help them find a route into their autobiographies, I offered a number of general scenarios that summarized the histories of actual abolitionists—both black and white—but I also told students that these needn’t limit them. For example:

- Your father was a slave owner. You witnessed firsthand the conditions of enslaved African Americans.
- You escaped from slavery. You know from your own experience the horrors of being enslaved. Every day of your life you can’t stand the fact that people just like you are still being whipped, still being sold apart from their families, still being abused—just because of the color of their skin.

I hoped that the autobiography writing assignment would help students imagine lives of commitment, to consider experiences that might lead one to dedicate one’s life to something beyond simply making a living, enjoying one’s family, and having a good time. But I’m aware that an assignment like this also invites stereotype—that despite previous lessons, students wouldn’t have enough background to plausibly describe someone’s transformation into an abolitionist. That didn’t bother me. Reading students’ writing alerted me to areas I

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*The abolition movement was the foundation of virtually all social justice movements in the United States.*

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needed to teach in greater depth, and the objective was less exact historical accuracy than it was for students to spend time “inside” an individual committed to racial justice and to radically changing the society. I wanted them to try on the personas of individuals who had created lives of activism and defiance.

This assignment produced some of the best writing of the year. I’m tempted to include lots of examples, but I’ll stick to two different approaches. This first is from Nicole McDonald, a kind, quiet, and bookish student who fired to life when we talked about women’s issues in class. Nicole’s character is a young white woman raised in the North:

*I was brought up in a staunch Christian home by my father and elder brothers, my mother having passed away giving birth to my brother a year younger than me. Living without a woman, none of us were quite sure how a girl was supposed to act. I’m sure I had the queerest upbringing in all of New England. I didn’t start wearing skirts until I was 10 because my father did not want to spend the money on an entire wardrobe just for myself when my brothers’ hand-me-downs were as good as anything. I worked with the boys in the barn and in the fields. I had to, they needed my help. I was always big for my age, and never had a problem with physical labor.*

*But none of this tells how I entered the anti-slavery movement. All I can say is that I know what it feels like. No, I have never been whipped. I have never been forced to*

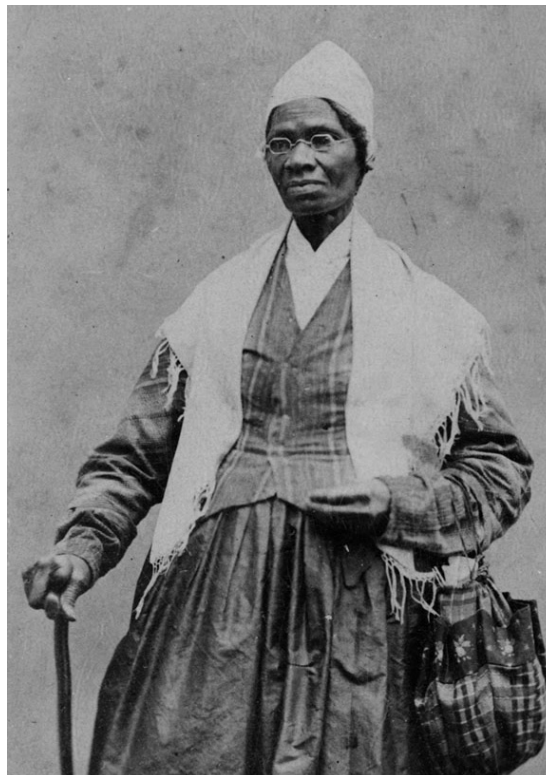
*pick cotton in the fields, torn from my family and all that I know. But as I entered society, I realized, really, I do not have much freedom either. I cannot get a job besides being a teacher, and even then only if I do not date or am not married. My shackles are invisible. I am given the illusion of freedom, but not the reality. In reality, I am as much a slave as anybody. My situation is immovable except into marriage. And then I will be like a servant.*

Mariya Koroteyev, a big-hearted, religious, Russian immigrant, took her autobiographical story in a different direction. She imagined herself enslaved as “Maggie”:

*I leaned against the tree with closed eyes. I took a moment to catch my breath. “You!” I heard the watcher yell. “Get moving. Don’t waste precious time.” So once more I took my heavy basket and began to pick. Row by row, basket by basket, under the burning sun, I picked cotton and so did the other slaves. When the day came to an end and the sun, understanding our pain, hid behind the mountain, I heard the whistle ordering us to go back to our cabins, for the day’s work was over.*

Mariya’s character, Maggie, learns that a friend has been killed for stealing food. Distraught, she decides to run away and is joined by two other friends:

*As we crossed the border of Canada, I was filled with joy. “Larrie!” I shouted. “We*



*Sojourner Truth was an abolitionist and a women’s rights activist.*

are free!” “Free, free,” my words echoed through the cave where we stopped to make our new home. Then it was quiet. We each thought of the horrible place we had escaped, and Matt was first to reply: “We are,” he said. “But I think about the millions of others.” And so did I. I thought of the four girls in my cabin, and the hundreds of slaves who were beaten in the fields, and my eyes filled with tears. “I wish I could help,” I whispered. “I wish I could.”

Ultimately, Maggie begins attending anti-slavery meetings, joins the abolition movement, and volunteers her house as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

Other abolitionists who students created included a dockworker who encounters slave auctions where he sees “how carelessly families are torn apart”; an enslaved woman who cannot bring herself to raise her daughter to be a slave, and remembers her own mother’s stories of Africa retold through the years; a white worker disgusted by parasitic slave owners—“Where I come from, no matter who you are, you take care of and clean up after yourself”; and a young white woman from a tight-knit, devoutly Christian family, frustrated by her parents’ inability to “take their devotion one step further” to become abolitionists: “I have no patience for anyone who is too self-absorbed to care about the suffering of others simply because of their skin color.”

Our class formed a circle and we read aloud and appreciated these one by one, creating an aural tapestry of abolitionist resistance. It was worth spending a substantial amount of class time listening to these stories, both because a read-around in which students express such humanity is a great community builder, but also because a successful abolition role play would depend on students steeped in their collective anti-racist imagination.

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*Students created an aural tapestry of abolitionist resistance.*

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## Strategic Dilemmas of the Abolition Movement

The day following the conclusion of our read-around, I distributed a handout with five strategic dilemmas that faced the AASS at different points from its founding in 1833 until 1858:

- Should the AASS support “colonization” schemes to send people freed from slavery to Africa?
- Should the AASS spend time and money opposing racial discrimination in the North as well as attempting to end slavery in the South?
- Should the AASS support efforts to gain greater equality for women?
- Should the AASS support armed attempts to resist enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act?
- Should the AASS support John Brown either with guns or money?

These were actual historical dilemmas, although I took some liberty in suggesting that they were each debated in an assembly of AASS members. Here’s an example from the handout:

**Situation:** *It’s 1848. Many of the people in the abolition movement are white women. As they worked against slavery, many women began to feel that they, too, were heavily discriminated against. Even in some anti-slavery gatherings, women are not allowed to speak or to be leaders. In almost every state, married women cannot own property. Women’s husbands even own the wages that women earn. In almost every state, the father can legally make a will appointing a guardian for his children in the event of his death. Should the husband die, a mother can have her children taken away from her. In most states, it is legal for a man to beat his wife. New York courts have ruled*

*that, in order to keep his wife from nagging, a man can beat her with a horsewhip every few weeks! Women are not allowed to vote in any state.*

*A number of prominent women—many of them, perhaps most, active in the abolition movement—have organized a women’s rights convention for Seneca Falls, N.Y., in July of this year. Some of the organizers would like the American Anti-Slavery Society to endorse this gathering. This will be the first time that women in the United States have organized a meeting to discuss the condition of women.*

**Question: Should the American Anti-Slavery Society publicly endorse this gathering?**

**Arguments:** *Those in favor argue that the abolition movement should stand against all oppression, including the oppression of women. They argue that women abolitionists would be more effective if they were allowed to speak publicly. Some supporters also believe that the women’s rights movement would bring in many people who have not been active in abolitionist work, and that this could ultimately strengthen the movement against slavery. And besides, they argue, we’re trying to build a society based on equality and freedom from all oppression.*

*Others argue that this is nonsense, that this threatens to divide anti-slavery forces. They argue that without question, the greatest evil of our time is the enslavement of black human beings by white human beings, and that as bad off as some white women have it, this discrimination cannot be compared to slavery. Opponents argue that associating the American Anti-Slavery Society with women’s rights will confuse and divide our supporters—and will weaken the anti-slavery movement.*

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*It is one thing to oppose slavery and quite another to know what to do about it.*

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We went over one of the questions as an example. I told students: “These were real issues that anti-slavery activists faced. I want you to think about each of these questions as if you’re a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society.” I told them they’d be discussing and making decisions about these questions in a large AASS meeting, but first I wanted them to discuss the dilemmas in small groups. I divided them into groups and urged them to stay in the “roles” that they’d created through their autobiographies, and asked them to try to reach agreement about the best course of action for their organization. These are tough questions, and my hunch was that their whole-class discussion would be richer and more democratic if students had thought about the issues beforehand in small groups.

As the students talked about the thorny questions that the abolition movement faced, some continued to represent the individual they’d created in their autobiography, and some abandoned their character in favor of trying to figure out what they personally thought was the best course of action. Either was fine with me; the autobiographies had served their purpose by getting students into an abolitionist mindset.

I gave the small groups a class period (about 50 minutes) to talk through the issues and to write down preliminary thoughts on what they felt was the best course of action for each strategic choice. As I circulated through the classroom, I noticed that there was no unanimity in students’ opinions on these questions. I told them that it was fine if they couldn’t agree because we’d be talking about these issues as a whole class the following day, but that I wanted them to make their best attempt to reach consensus.

## **Students Run Their Own Abolitionist Meeting**

The next day, we arranged our desks in a circle. This was the first “whole-group” role play that

my U.S. history students had encountered. I explained: “The real abolitionists didn’t have a teacher there to guide their discussion. They were on their own. That’s how it’s going to be in here, too. I’ll sit at my desk and take notes on your discussion, but how you run your discussion and the decisions you make about each question will be up to you. The only requirements are that you do your best to take this seriously, and that you *discuss* the questions and don’t simply bring them to a vote.” I shared that, in watching students do whole-group role plays over the years, the best route is to raise hands and have each speaker call on the next speaker. “Be sure to decide on a process to carry on your conversation before you begin, or people will just start calling things out, and it can get chaotic.”

One of my two classes doing this activity decided to choose a trusted student to chair the proceedings; the other class followed my suggestion and called on each other. Neither was problem free, but by and large both worked fine. In whole-group role plays, there is almost always a rough period that tries my patience, but the students’ struggle to do this *together* without an adult leader is itself a key piece of the lesson.

Before we began, I emphasized that, even though we may now think the end of slavery was inevitable, there was no way abolitionists could have known with certainty that it would end. In fact, territories open to slavery had spread, and slavery became more legally entrenched between the founding of the AASS in 1833 and 1858 (the year the AASS debated my students’ final question). I urged them to approach each question

thoughtfully and seriously. In real life, these decisions had life-and-death consequences.

Each class began a bit haltingly. But the first question, about whether the AASS would support sending people who had been freed from slavery to Africa, was the easiest, both for students and for the real AASS. As the African American abolitionist Maria W. Stewart said, before she would go to a strange land, “the bayonet shall pierce me through.” (Stewart was the first U.S.-born woman to speak in public and leave written texts of speeches.)

I was delighted by the seriousness and passion that students brought to these discussions. Frankly, these went on much longer than I’d planned, but I’d promised students that as long as they were engaged in discussing the issues, I wouldn’t interrupt or hurry them. I sat at my desk and took careful notes on their arguments.

Here is a sampling of one class’s discussion about whether they should consider armed resistance to oppose enforcement of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act:

**Austin:** There are so many other ways to make our point other than with violence.

**Luke:** Austin said that there are so many nonviolent things to do. Name one.

**Tim:** Think of when you walk by a house and there is a little yapping dog tied on a leash. You walk by day after day. You don’t pay any attention to the dog. You know that it can’t hurt you. That’s who we are. The abolitionists are that yapping dog, and we’re not making any difference at all. We have to unleash the dog and it has to bite the slave owners on the butt.

**ANTI-SLAVERY MEETINGS!**

A Quarterly Meeting of the Worcester County South Division Anti-Slavery Society, to be attended by

**STEPHEN S. & A. K. FOSTER,  
CHARLES LENOX REMOND,  
AND  
SAMUEL MAY, Jr.**

Will be held as follows: In the  
**METHODIST CHURCH, at Millville,  
Saturday Evening, July 1st,  
AT 7 1/2 O'CLOCK.**

**AT BLACKSTONE TOWN HALL  
SUNDAY, July 2d A. M. and P. M.**  
Commencing at 10 o'clock.

And again in the **METHODIST CHURCH at MILLVILLE, Sunday Evening at 5 o'clock.** The public are invited to attend.

**Tiffany:** Well, if we're that dog, and that dog does bite, then we're going to get put to sleep. The whole government and army is going to come down on us and we'll be destroyed.

**Eron:** People keep saying that we need to find other ways besides violence. Fine. What other ways? The bounty hunters are rounding up blacks. What if the bounty hunters started rounding up white people in the North? Would we still urge nonviolence then? Would we just sit back and say let's stay nonviolent and continue to publish our pamphlets and speak in churches as they are destroying our lives?

**Alex:** I like the yapping dog analogy. We need to go after them. We can't just look at the legalities. They'll just change the law anytime they feel like it.

**Tiffany:** People are saying that the law is unimportant. It's not unimportant. If it were unimportant, then why are we trying to pass a law outlawing slavery? It's not like

the choice is to be violent or to do nothing. We could develop a strategy to help freed blacks. We could establish communities of armed blacks for self-defense. We don't have to *attack* people but we can help people defend themselves.

**Eron:** If we are going to abide by this fugitive slave law, we can't win. We have to fight this law.

**Ilantha:** I thought Tiffany's solution was good. We organize communities of people who can stay together to defend themselves.

**Nick:** I like that too. We train people in self-defense. To defy the bounty hunters.

**Eron:** We have to force the judges and courts to see our point. The only way we have to do that is to revolt.

**Jaimie:** Yeah. Violence *will* get their attention. But once they're attacked, the government will try to do away with us.

**Tim:** People are saying that violence is doomed to fail. What about the American Revolution? What about the Boston Tea Party? We could be the hicks and farmers of the American Revolution. The ones who threw out the British. Just because we're outgunned doesn't mean that we're doomed to lose.

**Eron:** I don't think that Tiffany's idea of self-defense solves anything. We're throwing them to the dogs. "Let them defend *themselves*. We don't want to get involved." But we have numbers. We have to get out people to defend *them*.

The students voted 15 to 11, with several abstentions, to reaffirm their commitment not to attack bounty hunters first, but decided to help communities of freed African Americans arm themselves for self-defense. My students' discussion mirrored the frustration and disagreement within the abolition movement about what to do in the face of the increasingly aggressive measures by pro-slavery forces. Eron was becoming the John Brown of the class, even if he wrongly assumed that the "we" of



Alec Icky Dunn

John Brown. The artist writes: "I set the portrait of him, based on his time in Kansas, when he was carrying on a running battle with pro-slavery forces there. The house on fire is America, built on the foundation of slavery."



the abolition movement was all white. Others refused to waver from a strict adherence to nonviolence.

Students took most of two class periods to discuss the issues. In each class, I began the second day by reading to them my verbatim notes from the previous day. I was impressed by students' intensity and thoughtfulness, and wanted them to appreciate each other as intellectuals. They were rapt as they listened to me read the back-and-forth of their arguments. This reading helped students re-enter their roles, and reminded them where they left off. We also talked about their decision-making process and analyzed when they made progress and when they tended to spin their wheels.

In our class discussion following the role play, I asked students to predict how they thought the abolition movement had resolved these questions. Not surprisingly, their curiosity to know what "really happened" was much greater because they had tried to figure out the same questions themselves. I wanted them to recognize the growing militancy of the abolition movement. I also hoped the lesson would teach students that the abolition movement, by and large, *did* see racism as the enemy, and not only slavery. In his first speech as an abolitionist, Frederick Douglass argued

that "Prejudice against color is stronger North than South; it hangs around my neck like a heavy weight. It presses me out from my fellow men. . . . I have met it every step the three years I have been out of slavery."

There were important facts that I wanted students to know and historical figures I wanted to introduce. But my main teaching aim was to show students that the movement for racial justice wasn't simply a matter of one thing happening after another—it wasn't the smooth unfolding of History leading to Freedom. I wanted students to see that history is a series of choice-points and there is nothing inevitable about the direction of society, that where things move depends on how we analyze the world and how we *act* on that analysis. People like them—not only famous leaders—make history.

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# Member, American Anti-Slavery Society

YOU ARE A MEMBER of the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), an organization founded in 1833 to end slavery in the United States. Your members include both blacks and whites. To you, slavery is the central evil in American life. Of all the injustices, this one—that allows human beings to own other human beings and to treat them purely as property—is far and away the worst.

David Walker, the son of an enslaved father and a free mother, wrote a pamphlet in 1829, “Walker’s Appeal,” denouncing slavery. You were especially influenced by this pamphlet. Walker condemned the idea that somehow whites were inherently superior and had the right to control blacks: “God has been pleased to give us two eyes, two hands, two feet, and some sense in our heads as well as they. They have no more right to hold us in slavery than we have to hold them.” Walker insisted that slavery could not last forever: “Our sufferings will come to an end, in spite of all the Americans this side of eternity.” But the year after these words were published, Walker was found dead in Boston. Some think he was poisoned, as slave owners had put a bounty on his head.

In 1831, there was an incident that shocked the nation and forced everyone to think about slavery. Nat Turner was an enslaved man who was a preacher. He led an uprising against whites

in Southampton County, Virginia. About 70 enslaved people went from plantation to plantation killing whites—men, women, and children. In the end, about 60 whites and more than 100 blacks were killed. For slave owners, the lesson was that they needed to crack down, and pass more laws restricting the freedom of slaves. For people like you, Turner’s revolt was just another piece of evidence that slavery is an evil that must be abolished.

But you know that slavery won’t disappear on its own. Slavery is a huge industry in America—indirectly in the North as well as directly in the South. Obviously, the people who benefit the most are the slave owners, who get free labor to pick their cotton and do countless other tasks on their plantations. But there are others who benefit: textile manufacturers in the North who get cheap cotton, bankers, railroad companies, insurance people, owners of the ships that bring goods to and from the South. There is more money invested in slavery in the United States than in any other industry.

However, it’s one thing to oppose slavery and quite another thing to know what to do about it. There is sharp debate among abolitionists—people who want to end slavery. How can we end this enormous evil? That is the question we face.

# Autobiography of an Abolitionist

HOW DID YOU BECOME an abolitionist? Write an autobiography describing the experiences that led you to dedicate your life to the fight against slavery. You can choose your gender, your age, your race, your social class, the region where you live. Give yourself a name and a history. Be imaginative and very detailed in your descriptions. Give yourself a history. Tell the story of the events that made you who you are: an anti-slavery activist.

Here are some possible general scenarios, but feel free to invent your own:

- Your father was a slave owner. You witnessed firsthand the conditions of enslaved African Americans.
- You are an escaped slave. You know from your own experience the horrors of slavery. Every day of your life you can't stand the fact that people just like you are still in slavery, still being whipped, still being sold away from their families, still being abused—just because of the color of their skin.
- You are a free black living in the North. Although you personally have never been

enslaved, you are mistreated in the North because of your race. This has sensitized you to the conditions of black people everywhere, especially those living in the South.

- Your parents were strong Christians. You absorbed their religious commitments, but were frustrated by the fact that they didn't act on their religious values when it came to the most important moral concern of our age: slavery.
- You worked on the docks in New Orleans, and witnessed slave ships coming into port. You watched slave auctions, saw families sold apart. Slowly you began to change.
- You are a white woman. You can relate to the conditions of slaves in America, because as a woman, even a white woman, you sometimes feel yourself to be a kind of slave: you can't own property, you can't vote, you can't speak in public, you are not allowed to attend any college in America. According to one court of law, you may be legally whipped by your husband to stop you from "nagging."

# Role Play: Ending Slavery

## American Anti-Slavery Society Choices—1833

**1. SITUATION:** Earlier this century an organization formed called the American Colonization Society. The aim of this group is to free slaves and to pay for them to be relocated in Africa. Recently, people favoring colonization approached your organization. They have asked you to contribute funds to support buying some people out of slavery and sending them to Africa. They also would like to use your organization's name in their publicity.

**QUESTION:** Will the American Anti-Slavery Society contribute funds for colonization and allow its name to be used in this effort?

**ARGUMENTS:** Some people believe that because slavery will not end on its own, we'll need to end slavery one person at a time, by buying their freedom. True, this won't end slavery as an institution, but it will end slavery permanently for those people who are freed and allowed to return to Africa. They also argue that because of all the racism in the North and the South, it will be important that freed black slaves have their own homeland in Africa. American prejudice is so deep that it will never be possible for blacks to live freely in the United States. Others disagree. They argue that "colonization" is ridiculous and a waste of time—that your organization needs to end slavery forever, not buy just a few people's freedom. Besides, if this plan "worked" and began to buy substantial numbers of people their freedom, the price of enslaved people would simply increase. Finally, they argue that most enslaved Americans were born here, not in Africa, and that people who are enslaved deserve their freedom here in the land that they worked so hard to build. And if there is discrimination here, then we must work to change it.

## American Anti-Slavery Society Choices—1833

**2. SITUATION:** In addition to the horrors of slavery in the South, racial discrimination in the North is also a huge problem. There is segregation in the North, especially in schools. There are laws in the North against intermarriage. There are even some Northern churches that oppose slavery but don't allow blacks as members. Blacks are discriminated against throughout the North. Not a single state in the country treats people equally regardless of one's race.

Recently, some members have proposed that to protest racism in the North, the AASS leaders should not accept speaking engagements in churches that refuse to allow blacks to be members.

**QUESTION:** a) Should the American Anti-Slavery Society spend time and money opposing racial discrimination in the North as well as slavery in the South? b) Specifically, should the AASS prohibit its leaders from speaking in churches that refuse to allow blacks to be members?

**ARGUMENTS:** People in favor of the AASS working to oppose racism in the North argue that our aim should be to fight racial prejudice wherever it occurs—that our deepest aim is not just to end slavery, but to end mistreatment based on race as well. They also argue that the more freedom our black members have, the more effectively they'll be able to oppose slavery. If we refuse to speak in churches that don't allow blacks to become members, it would send a powerful symbolic message that we stand against all racial prejudice. Others say: Yes, prejudice in the North is a problem. But it is a separate issue and could divide the anti-slavery movement. They argue that there are people in the North who oppose slavery but don't yet believe in equality for blacks, and that we need to keep the movement as broad as possible. People will change slowly, and we must allow that slow change to occur. They believe that if we refuse to speak in churches that discriminate against blacks, we are doing cutting ourselves off from people we need to reach with our anti-slavery message. One fight at a time, these people urge—first we get rid of slavery, then we deal with racial discrimination in the North.

## American Anti-Slavery Society Choices—1848

**3. SITUATION:** Many of the people in the abolition movement are white women. As they work against slavery, they've come to realize how much they are discriminated against. Even in some anti-slavery gatherings, women are not allowed to speak or to be leaders. In almost every state, married women cannot own property. Husbands even control the wages earned by women outside the home. In almost every state, the father can legally make a will appointing a guardian for his children in the event of his death. Should the husband die, a mother can have her children taken away from her. In most states, it is legal for a man to beat his wife. New York courts have ruled that, in order to keep his wife from nagging, a man can beat her with a horsewhip every few weeks! Women are not allowed to vote in any state.

A number of prominent women—many of them active in the abolition movement—have organized a women's rights convention for Seneca Falls, New York in July of this year. This will be the first time that women in the United States have organized a meeting to discuss the condition of women. Some of the organizers would like the American Anti-Slavery Society to endorse this gathering.

**QUESTION:** Should the American Anti-Slavery Society publicly endorse this gathering?

**ARGUMENTS:** Those in favor argue that the abolition movement should stand against all oppression, including the oppression of women. They argue that women abolitionists would be more effective if they were allowed to speak publicly. Some supporters also believe that the women's rights movement would bring in many people who have not been active in abolitionist work, and that this could ultimately strengthen the movement against slavery. And besides, they argue, we're trying to build a society based on equality and free from all oppression. Others argue that this is nonsense, that this threatens to divide anti-slavery forces. They argue that without question, the greatest evil of our time is the enslavement of black human beings by white human beings, and that as bad off as some white women have it, this discrimination cannot be compared with slavery. Opponents argue that associating the American Anti-Slavery Society with women's rights will confuse and divide our supporters—and will weaken the anti-slavery movement.

## American Anti-Slavery Society Choices—1850

**4. SITUATION:** In 1850, the U.S. Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act and President Millard Fillmore signed it into law. The law made it much easier for slave owners to recapture slaves who had escaped into free Northern states. In fact, it made it easier for slave owners to capture free blacks and to claim that they are escaped slaves. The law denies a jury trial to anyone accused of escaping. The law requires the national government to prosecute any Northern whites who help slaves escape to freedom, or who harbor them. This is going to lead to a bunch of bounty hunters running around the North, looking for escaped slaves. And it will make all free blacks in the North more insecure. In short, this is a terrible new law that puts the U.S. government even more clearly on the side of the slave owners. There is now no doubt: The slave owners are determined to keep slavery forever, and to strengthen it.

In response, many people active in the American Anti-Slavery Society believe that we must also step up our efforts. Some of our members want to organize armed groups to protect escaped slaves and to prevent slave catchers and government officials from re-enslaving people. One strategy would be to organize—and to arm—large groups of people to resist the bounty hunters, and to attack the courts and jails where fugitive slaves are being held.

**QUESTION:** Should we support armed attempts to stop the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act? If not, how should we respond to this new law?

**ARGUMENTS:** Those in favor of using force to stop this new law from being enacted insist that we have no choice; we can't allow the slave owners to come into our communities and harm free people. Non-violence won't work, they argue, because the law and the government is on the side of the slaveowners, and their side is more than willing to use violence. It's suicidal to urge nonviolence when the people against us are armed to the teeth. This law is a potential disaster for the anti-slavery cause, and we need to become even more militant. These people also argue that even if we fail to stop escaped slaves from being captured, our resistance will inspire others, and our resistance may also discourage the enforcement of the law. Those who oppose this strategy argue that whatever we do, we must not use violence. We can continue our educational work—writing, speaking out, and building opposition to slavery. True, slavery has not ended, but there are more people than ever before who agree that slavery is evil. We risk turning these people against our cause if we use violence. We need to do what we do best: educate against slavery. These people argue that if we were to use violence, this would actually play into the hands of the government and slave owners. If the game is violence, the government is sure to win.

## American Anti-Slavery Society Choices—1858

**5. SITUATION:** Last year, in 1857, the Supreme Court ruled in the Dred Scott case that the Western territories of the United States may not prohibit slavery. Chief Justice Roger Taney wrote for the majority of the court that no black person in the United States had “any rights which the white man is bound to respect.” To many people in the abolition movement, this means that slavery cannot be ended with laws or through nonviolence. There are more slaves in the United States than ever before—more than 4 million of them. And slavery is the country’s biggest business—yes, business—with slaves valued at more than \$4 billion. Slaves in the United States are worth more than all the banks, railroads, and factories put together. To think that slavery can be argued away seems more and more ridiculous.

There is one man in particular who argues for action, not talk. His name is John Brown. He led the fight to have Kansas admitted to the United States as a free state rather than a slave state—and he killed pro-slavery people in the process. Brown is now raising money—as much as \$25,000—to “continue my efforts in the cause of freedom.” You know that Brown intends to physically confront the forces of slavery, although you’re not sure exactly how. Privately, Brown has been asking AASS members to donate guns if they have them. You know that Brown has approached anti-slavery blacksmiths, asking them to make pikes—ferocious-looking double-edged blades attached to long poles. He also is raising money to hire a military instructor.

**QUESTION:** Should you and other members of the American Anti-Slavery Society support John Brown with either money or guns? If not, what’s your alternative?

**ARGUMENTS:** People who support Brown argue that despite all the nonviolent work for almost 30 years, slavery is more entrenched than ever. They argue that the traditional tactics of the AASS have failed—that pamphlets, newspapers, speaking, and organizing meetings may have increased the number of Northerners opposed to slavery, but so what? You can win public opinion, but not end slavery. These people argue that slavery must be ended with force, and that Brown has the credentials from his time in Kansas to do the job. Well-targeted raids into the South could encourage slaves to abandon the plantations and run away, or even spark slave rebellions. These people argue that we can’t turn our backs on one of the bravest and most determined anti-slavery activists in the United States. Those opposed to Brown argue that it is foolish to think that a few armed opponents of slavery—even a small army—could go up against the U.S. Army and hope to succeed. What would this accomplish? It would be crushed by the military, and if the government discovered any links between Brown and the AASS, then it could lead to your organization being attacked by the government or even outlawed. No, they argue, we may not be sure what will end slavery, but we know that this won’t end slavery. Brown may be committed and brave, but that doesn’t make him right.