

# PBS's *The Abolitionists*: Remembering the political struggle against slavery

By Tom Mackaman  
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*The Abolitionists*, which aired in three parts in January on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), is a reminder that the fight against slavery in the US was a long and bitter political struggle. The film can be viewed for free on the PBS web site.

“Abolitionist” was the name given to those who sought the total elimination of slavery from the United States in the period before the Civil War. They constituted a small and persecuted minority at first, but their principled opposition to slavery and their relentless exposure of the “Slave Power” that dominated the federal government won growing numbers of adherents as tensions between North and South mounted. The abolitionists’ own actions came to play a powerful role in the developing sectional crisis. Abolitionist books, pamphlets, public meetings, and assistance to runaway slaves brought vitriolic and violent responses from the Southern planter elite and their political allies in the North.

The victory of the North in the Civil War (1861-1865) vindicated the abolitionists. The war to preserve the Union could not be won without ending slavery. Once Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party, driven by the logic of war, moved to this position, the abolitionists’ aim was realized: Slavery, and with it the Southern plantation elite, was destroyed.

The PBS documentary *The Abolitionists* follows this process through the lives of five leading figures of the movement: Angelina Grimké, agitator and author; William Lloyd Garrison, founder and editor of the leading abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*; Frederick Douglass, the foremost free black opponent of slavery; Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom ’ s Cabin*; and John Brown, who took up arms against slavery in Kansas and later in an unsuccessful attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

Grimké (played by Jeanine Serralles) came from one of the elite Charleston, South Carolina, slaveholding families, and in this sense her embrace of abolitionism, together with her elder sister, Sarah Grimké, was an act of class betrayal. Grimké made contact with Garrison, who without permission published her letter condemning slavery in *The Liberator*. This event turned Grimké into one of the foremost abolitionists and set the stage for her anti-slavery polemic, *An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, which circulated widely in the late 1830s.

Harriet Beecher Stowe (played by Kate Lyn Sheil) was born to a different sort of elite family. Her father, Lyman Beecher, was one of the leading evangelists of the “Second Great Awakening.” Then living in Cincinnati, Stowe was deeply impacted by slavery when she crossed the Ohio River into Kentucky as a young woman, and there witnessed the separation by sale of a slave mother from her child. As

the documentary presents her evolution, the loss of a favorite child to an epidemic brings Stowe to sympathize with slave mothers. The outcome was the publication of the powerful novel (and play) *Uncle Tom ’ s Cabin*, which sold millions of copies in the 1850s, saturating the population in the North with anti-slavery ideas.

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith), a tanner and sheep trader who had lived variously in Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, and Massachusetts, was radicalized by the lynching of abolitionist publisher Elijah Lovejoy in Illinois in 1837. Brown, the documentary recounts, stood up at a prayer service where Lovejoy’s killing was being condemned and announced, “Here, before God, in the presence of these witnesses, from this time, I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery.” In the 1850s, Brown led anti-slavery militants against pro-slavery forces in “Bleeding Kansas,” and in 1859 with a small band of followers he led a raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry. His dream of triggering a slave rebellion that would sweep the South failed, but his audacious act considerably heightened the sectional crisis, which would explode into civil war after Lincoln’s victory in the 1860 election.

Brown had attempted to win to his cause Frederick Douglass, who by the 1850s had already established a national and international reputation, both for his oratory and because of his autobiographical account of slavery and his escape, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. The portrayal of Douglass by actor Richard Brooks, best known for his performance as District Attorney Paul Robinette in the television program *Law and Order*, is the strongest in the film. This must be in part attributable to the power and directness of Douglass’s writing and speaking, from which the film quotes directly.

To the extent that the documentary intertwines these historical figures together, it is through William Lloyd Garrison (played well by Neal Huff), whose founding of *The Liberator* in 1831 must be considered the beginning of the abolitionism as a coherent national movement. “There shall be no neutrals; men shall either like or dislike me,” Garrison writes in the first issue. “Let Southern oppressors tremble, let their Northern apologists tremble—let all the enemies of the persecuted blacks tremble. On the subject of slavery, I do not wish to write with moderation. I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—and I WILL BE HEARD.”

Garrison recruited both Douglass and Grimké, and his newspaper had a powerful impact on Stowe and Brown in quite different ways. Stowe’s own literary efforts were made possible by *The Liberator*, while Brown came to reject Garrison’s peaceful tactics.

The documentary’s biographical dramatizations are little more than character sketches, which is perhaps the most that can be expected

from a three-hour documentary. Much must be left out. Grimké's remarkable family, outside of her sister, is presented as an obstacle to her development. Lost is the fact that her father had been a veteran of the Revolutionary War and evidently held anti-slavery views—not uncommon among slaveholding planters of the revolutionary generation. A brother was a notable jurist and legislator who opposed his own state of South Carolina in the nullification crisis of 1832. It was a remarkably political family.

Similarly, the documentary stresses Stowe's loss of a favorite child as the primary impetus in her move toward outspoken abolitionism. This may have been a tipping point for Stowe, but it was very common for nineteenth century mothers to lose children—few were the families in which such an event did not occur. Clearly much more went into Stowe's determined stance. It is notable that her brother, Henry Ward Beecher, was also an outspoken abolitionist. Though not an abolitionist, her father, Lyman Beecher, held anti-slavery views, and when students at the Cincinnati college where he was president, Lane Theological Seminary, condemned slavery, the college was attacked by pro-slavery mobs in 1834.

The documentary does little to analyze the intellectual and political currents that fed into the abolitionist movement, and so the emphasis falls on the abolitionists' indubitable moral courage. We see the religiosity of several of the characters—least in Douglass and most in Grimké. But that this is a particular kind of religiosity in a particular place and time, and a religiosity moreover oriented to the question of slavery, is a historical question that is present but underdeveloped. After all, as Lincoln wryly noted in his Second Inaugural, both sides in the Civil War “read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.”

The documentary stresses Garrison's attack on the Constitution as the bulwark of slavery in the US. Unfortunately, this is implicitly equated with an attack on the American Revolution. “[T]he Republic itself had been corrupted at birth, its original sin implanted in a founding document written largely by slaveholders,” the narration goes.

As historian Alexander Tsesis has recently shown, the abolitionists' attack on the Constitution and its guarantees of slavery was coupled with their celebration of the Declaration of Independence as the real creation of the republic—it is not by accident that the founding document of the anti-slavery movement drew in its title inspiration from the Declaration of Independence, taking for itself the name Declaration of Sentiments. The documentary makes no mention of the Declaration of Independence.

The historians interviewed do not add as much depth as one might have hoped. One partial exception is David Blight who early in the documentary helps viewers comprehend the power of the slave system: “Slaves were the single largest financial asset in the entire American economy, worth more than all manufacturing, all railroad, steamship lines, and other transportation systems, put together.” Later, Blight notes the importance of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) in deepening the sectional crisis: “The Mexican War unshucked slavery. It just took it out of its shell. All those efforts to contain this issue couldn't work anymore.”

Identity politics rears its empty head in commentary from literature professor Lois Brown, who obfuscates a rift that developed between Douglass and Garrison. “On the one level, you hate to reduce it to race. On the other, it's a reality,” she intones. “No matter how many stories Garrison hears, no matter how many coffles he sees, no matter how many mothers he can imagine and conjure up, Douglass has had

that experience. Garrison is a white man in a white man's America.”

This commentary implies that the dispute was over Garrison's allegedly conservative tactics, a conservatism that arose from Garrison's skin color, as Brown would have it. In large measure, instead, the rupture emerged over Garrison's rejection of the US Constitution, which Douglass continued to believe could be invoked in the fight against slavery—on this issue, it was Douglass who held the more conservative stance. In any case, Garrison had a great many black followers, and Douglass a great many white followers. Neither viewed their separation through the racial prism that Brown implants.

These criticisms aside, *The Abolitionists* makes accessible the story of the struggle against slavery in America and deserves a broad audience.

The documentary captures the powerful moment that came near the end of the Civil War when Lincoln invited Garrison to visit Charleston, the cradle of secession, recently captured by the Union army. The two men have become allies. “Either he's become a Garrisonian abolitionist,” Garrison said of Lincoln, “or I have become a Lincoln emancipationist, for we blend together, like kindred drops, into one.”

“For his part,” the narration notes, “a few days earlier Lincoln had told an admirer that he had been ‘only an instrument’ in the anti-slavery struggle. As he put it, ‘the logic and moral power of Garrison and the anti-slavery people’ had done it all.”

In Charleston, Garrison was greeted by thousands of freed slaves. “For almost four decades, Garrison had dedicated his life to this moment. He had created a movement, had led it through every adversity without wavering. *The Liberator* had become not only the most influential voice of abolition, but the symbol of its tenacity. One thousand eight hundred and three issues, every one set by hand, most by Garrison's own. And this, Garrison felt, was a fitting occasion to print the last.”

The documentary concludes with Douglass's eulogy of Garrison in 1879: “Now, the brightest and steadiest of all the shining hosts of our moral sky has silently and peacefully descended below the distant horizon. He moved not with the tide, but against it. He rose not by the power of the Church or the State, but in bold, inflexible and defiant opposition to the mighty power of both. It was the glory of this man that he could stand alone with the truth, and calmly await the result. Now that this man has filled up the measure of his years, now that the leaf has fallen to the ground as all leaves must fall, let us guard his memory, let us try to imitate his virtues, and endeavor as he did to leave the world freer, nobler, and better than we found it.”

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