ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

William Lloyd Garrison

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In August 2005, nearly two hundred descendants of William Lloyd Garrison gathered in Boston, Massachusetts, for a three-day reunion to explore the life and legacy of the American abolitionist. This was no ordinary family reunion. The event had been timed to coincide with the bicentennial anniversary of the abolitionist's birth. And the Garrison family was joined by several distinguished scholars, including David W. Blight and Lois Brown, who made major presentations at the academic conference hosted by the family. Such an event is testimony to the impact and the continuing legacy of the radical abolitionist who was described by Blight as "a storied, troubling, challenging, profoundly important and controversial figure."[1]

William Lloyd Garrison was born December 12, 1805, in Newburyport, Massachusetts, the fourth child of Francis Maria Lloyd and Abijah Garrison. The Garrisons were recent immigrants to Newburyport from the British colony of New Brunswick, in present-day Canada. In 1808, Garrison's father, who had struggled with unemployment and alcoholism, abandoned the family. A devout Baptist, Garrison's mother seldom spoke of her absent husband and, in many ways, attempted to remove his imprint on the family. Frances Garrison moved frequently in this period in search of work as a domestic servant, leaving William to live with friends. William attended school infrequently, often working odd jobs to help his mother support the family, especially after his older brother James left the family to go to sea. William spent at least seven years living apart from his mother.

Despite this impoverished, rootless lifestyle, William Lloyd Garrison was deeply influenced by his mother's all-consuming Baptist faith. Garrison grew into adulthood in an environment of religious revivalism commonly referred to as the Second Great Awakening.[2] He was inspired by the preaching of revivalist ministers Lyman Beecher and Charles Grandison Finney who exhorted their followers to seek a more personal relationship with God. Beecher, Finney, and other evangelicals claimed sin was the result of poor choices made by men and women who possessed free will and could choose otherwise. These evangelical influences had a profound and lasting effect on Garrison. He, along with many other like-minded abolitionists, emphasized the primacy of moral suasion in the fight against slavery. Moral suasion referred to the idea that the hearts and minds of men and women must be changed first. Only after this change of heart could laws or political structures change.

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[1] David W. Blight, "William Lloyd Garrison at Two Hundred: His Radicalism and His Legacy for Our Time," in *William Lloyd Garrison at Two Hundred: History, Legacy, and Memory*, James Brewer Stewart, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 1.

[2] The Second Great Awakening emerged in the early nineteenth century, in part, as the result of sweeping social and political changes in American society. Ministers like Finney and Beecher encouraged followers to seek a more personal relationship with God. Sin was the result of selfish choices made by men and women who could choose otherwise. Social evils such as drunkenness, lewd behavior, intemperance, and poor work habits were the result of the collective sinfulness of American society.

After serving brief stints as an apprentice first to a shoemaker and then to a cabinetmaker, Garrison found his true calling when he was apprenticed to Ephraim W. Allen, owner and editor of the *Newburyport Herald* in 1818. In 1826, with funds borrowed from his former employer, Garrison acquired the *Newburyport Essex Courant*, which he renamed the *Newburyport Free Press*. That publication lasted only six months. In January 1828, Garrison accepted editorial responsibility for the Boston-based *National Philanthropist*. Three months later, Garrison met Benjamin Lundy, a Quaker and publisher of the anti-slavery newspaper, the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, while Lundy toured Boston seeking funds for his newspaper.

In Benjamin Lundy, Garrison found a genuinely radical abolitionist mentor. In the 1820s, Lundy traveled the anti-slavery lecture circuit and used his paper to denounce the evils of slaveholding. He supported gradual emancipation and limited colonization schemes in Haiti and Texas, but he did not support the American Colonization Society (ACS), which had been established in 1817 to promote the establishment of an American colony in Africa for freed slaves and free blacks. Supporters of the ACS linked the potential for slave revolt to the presence of a large free black population, claiming slaveholders would be encouraged to free their slaves if those freed slaves were sent to Africa. Colonizationists also claimed emigration to Africa would resolve racial problems and provide racial uplift. African Americans, colonizationists argued, could never attain equality in a white society. Initially, some black abolitionists supported the ACS. However, many abolitionists, regardless of race, came to believe that the ACS was anti-black rather than anti-slavery. Lundy supported colonization not because he distrusted free blacks. Rather Lundy supported colonization because he believed it would speed the abolition of slavery.

This shared interest in anti-slavery brought Garrison and Lundy together. Garrison saw in Lundy an older version of himself. Lundy and Garrison shared the craft of printing and based their activism on the twin foundations of the Bible and the Declaration of Independence. The two men also shared an interest in British abolitionists' efforts to abolish slavery, including the work of British Quaker Elizabeth Heyrick who authored *Immediate Not Gradual Abolition* in 1824. Heyrick called for grassroots participation in the abolitionist movement, urging men, women, and even children to reject the products of slave labor, particularly West Indian slave-grown sugar.

Heyrick promoted the Quaker tactic of boycotting slave labor; yet, she added a new twist, linking the rejection of the products of slave labor to the immediate abolition of slavery.[3]

Like Heyrick, Garrison and Lundy both embraced immediatism. Lundy believed slaves had an inherent right to their freedom and that all efforts must be made to bring about the abolition of slavery. It was for this reason that Lundy supported colonization. Slavery must end by whatever means necessary. However, Lundy's approach epitomized his Quaker faith. For Lundy, the abolition of slavery would be the result of a gradual process of conversion, making individuals aware of their Christian duty to end slavery. Garrison, on the other hand, sought a more dramatic end to slavery, one that came as the result of a climactic, transformative conversion to the immediate abolition of slavery. As Garrison biographer Henry Mayer notes, "Lundy looked to charitable acts [while] Garrison sought crisis and transfiguration."[4] Thus Lundy labored with the sinner, urging him to see the evil of slavery. Garrison, in contrast, condemned slavery and slaveholders as a threat to the social and economic order.

In 1829, Lundy hired Garrison to assume editorial duties for the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*. That year would bring other important changes for Garrison. In a series of speeches and editorials, Garrison began to denounce gradualism. Garrison was invited to address the afternoon church service at the Park Street Church in Boston, Massachusetts on July 4, 1829. Although the American Colonization Society planned to hold its own service at the Methodists' Bromfield Street chapel, the society also expected to take up a collection for the cause at Park Street. Garrison's speech, however, was not what the group expected. Instead, in his speech, Garrison rewrote the Declaration of Independence to include African Americans. Garrison's speech signaled his growing disillusionment with the ACS.

Garrison's activism brought him to the attention of African American community leaders including the militant black pamphleteer David Walker. In September 1829 Walker, a former slave from North Carolina, published *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. In his *Appeal* Walker denounced colonization and called for racial unity and, if necessary, armed resistance to slavery. Walker's appeal acted as a catalyst for both supporters and opponents of slavery including Garrison and Lundy. Walker's *Appeal* worried Lundy who believed the pamphlet too inflammatory to notice in the pages of the *Genius*. Garrison, however, believed the *Appeal* to be one "of the most remarkable productions of the age."[5] Despite his praise for Walker's *Appeal*, Garrison withheld comment on the tract until January 1830, after a vigorous campaign to suppress the *Appeal* had begun. In February, Garrison and Lundy were indicted by a Baltimore grand jury for libel. Garrison was fined one hundred dollars. Unable to pay the fine,

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[3] Elizabeth Heyrick, Immediate, not Gradual Abolition; or an Inquiry into the Shortest, Safest, and Most Effectual Means of Getting Rid of West Indian Slavery (London: Hatchard &Son, 1824).

[4] Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998), 125.

[5] As quoted in Mayer, *All on Fire*, 83.

Garrison was jailed for fifty days before he was bailed out by New York abolitionists Lewis and Arthur Tappan. For the young abolitionist, imprisonment became a badge of honor, a symbol of his martyrdom for the cause of freedom. Garrison and Lundy soon parted ways, however, as Garrison fully embraced radical immediatism.[6]

In 1831, Garrison published the first issue of his anti-slavery newspaper, *The Liberator*. "I *will* be harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject I do not wish to think, or speak, or write with moderation," Garrison insisted in his debut issue. "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 promised. The establishment of *The Liberator* is often cited as the beginning of a new, radical abolitionist movement. Yet, it must be remembered that Elizabeth Heyrick's *Immediate Not Gradual Abolition* pre-dated Garrison's *Liberator* by seven years. Garrison was deeply influenced by Heyrick as well as the early anti-slavery activism of the Quakers (including Benjamin Lundy) and black resistance to slavery and the American Colonization Society, particularly Walker's *Appeal*. Those influences along with the religious revivals of the 1820s led Garrison to the belief that the sin of slavery must be abolished without delay and without compromise. Garrison denounced slavery as a sin against God and all slaveholders as sinners. Moreover, Garrison condemned the American Colonization Society, arguing that the racist spirit of the ACS assumed that whites and blacks could not live together.[7]

Garrison may not have been the first to demand the immediate abolition of slavery, but he became the spiritual and intellectual force of radical abolitionism in America, particularly in the 1830s and 1840s. He was, as David W. Blight argues, "the genuine article – a radical perfectionist who demanded vast social changes that Americans were almost wholly unprepared and unwilling to accept. He threw thunderbolts at anyone and everyone he deemed responsible for slavery." Garrison embraced his role as radical outsider, seeking a thoroughgoing reform of American society that would replace human government with a "government of God."[8]

In 1832 Garrison helped found the New England Anti-Slavery Society. A year later, he played a prominent role in founding the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS). The society adopted a constitution and a Declaration of Sentiments written by Garrison and a committee of other delegates. The Declaration emphasized the moral commitment of abolitionists, dedicating the AASS to "the destruction of error by the potency of truth – the overthrow of prejudice by the power of love – and the abolition of slavery by the spirit of repentance." Adoption of the Declaration affirmed supporters' break with colonization and other gradualist measures and reinforced their commitment to immediatism and racial equality. Both the NEASS and the AASS counted black abolitionists and women among its membership, signaling the growing radicalism of the movement.[9]

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[6] David Walker, *Walker's Appeal, In Four Articles; Together With A Preamble, To The Coloured Citizens Of The World, But In Particular, And Very Expressly, To Those Of The United States Of America, Written In Boston, State Of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829* (Boston: David Walker, 1829).

[7] William Lloyd Garrison, "To the Public," *The Liberator*, January 1, 1831.

[8] Blight, "William Lloyd Garrison at Two Hundred," 9.

In September 1834, Garrison married Helen Eliza Benson, the daughter of a retired abolitionist merchant. The Garrisons had five sons and two daughters: William Lloyd, Jr.; Wendell Phillips; George Thompson; Frances Jackson; Charles Follen; Helen Frances; and Elizabeth Pease.

As his involvement in the anti-slavery movement grew, Garrison developed close ties with the abolitionist movement in England, supporting visits by British abolitionists like George Thompson to the United States and in turn visiting abolitionists in England. In the midst of the postal campaign of 1835, Garrison was mistaken for Thompson, attacked, and dragged through the streets of Boston to be lynched. Garrison was saved only through the quick action of the city mayor and police who fought off the mob. In the South, Garrison was burned in effigy. In Atlanta, a reward was posted at the state capital, offering a bounty for Garrison's head.

In 1836, Garrison hired Angelina and Sarah Grimké as lecturers for the American Anti-Slavery Society. The Grimké sisters were powerful spokespersons for the anti-slavery cause. Members of a well-known South Carolina family and former slaveholders, the Grimké sisters' lectures had an authenticity that made the pair favored speakers on the anti-slavery lecture circuit. Within a short time the women attracted large, mixed-gender audiences which brought the infamous rebuke from the Congregational clergy of Massachusetts who declared that when women assumed the public role of men they risked shame and dishonor. The sisters believed they were answering God's call to speak out against slavery and refused to stop lecturing. The clerical denunciations brought the question of women's activism into sharper relief as other women joined the Grimké sisters in stepping beyond the boundaries of conventional female behavior in anti-slavery societies.

Garrison shared much in common with the reformers of his time. Slavery was but one battle (albeit the most significant) against the social inequities and moral depravity that reformers saw everywhere in the antebellum period. Like other reformers, Garrison was involved in many movements to remake American society. For example, the Grimkés rejected ministerial authority, questioned the literal truth of the Bible, criticized the coercive power of the state, and demanded equality for women. Garrison endorsed these ideas and expanded upon them to include a sweeping denial of governmental authority, a religious belief in human perfectibility, and nonresistance. Garrison also supported women's rights and equal rights for African Americans.

Garrison's broad interests in reform and his sharp, uncompromising style led to disagreements with other abolitionists in the American Anti-Slavery Society. In 1840, tensions in the AASS and in the American movement reached a flashpoint. Garrison's primary opponents, Lewis and Arthur Tappan, broke away from the organization and founded the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. Garrison was left with full control of the AASS, which left the American anti-slavery movement deeply divided between supporters of Garrison and the Tappans.

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[9] American Anti-Slavery Society, *Declaration of Sentiments of the American Anti-Slavery Society Adopted at the Foundation of Said Society in Philadelphia on the 4th Day of December, 1833* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1833).

Under the leadership of Garrison, the American Anti-Slavery Society maintained a broader reform platform including women's rights. The AASS recruited all abolitionists to the cause regardless of their religious, social, and political views. Membership in the AASS required only a desire to abolish slavery, thus the society attracted not only anti-slavery activists, but women's rights and peace activists among others. The conservative AFASS, under the leadership of Lewis Tappan, argued that other reform movements threatened the anti-slavery cause. Tappan and other members of the AFASS believed the anti-slavery cause must remain orthodox and compatible with traditional views on issues like the proper role of women. To embrace causes likes women's rights was to risk alienating the general northern public. The AFASS also emphasized political action and formed the first anti-slavery party, the Liberty Party.

The split in the American abolitionist movement impacted the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in June 1840 just weeks after the split in the American movement. As early as 1839, members of the newly formed British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society discussed the possibility of hosting a World Anti-Slavery Convention for the purpose of strengthening the international movement against slavery. The BFASS, particularly British abolitionist Joseph Sturge, organized the world gathering of abolitionists. The British abolitionists provided tickets to the gathering, noting that only recognized members of anti-slavery organizations would be admitted. When rumors reached London that some American organizations might send female delegates, Sturge and the members of the BFASS reiterated that only male delegates would be admitted. In spite of the warning, Garrison and the members of the AASS selected a pro-woman's rights delegation including Lucretia Mott, Wendell Phillips, and Garrison. When Garrison arrived on the fifth day of the Convention, he found that the British abolitionists had refused to recognize the female delegates. In protest Garrison sat in the balcony with the ladies rather than enter the convention and be seated with the other delegates. When a second convention was held in 1843, Garrison and his supporters were not invited.

After the events of 1840, Garrison continued to advocate moral suasion as the primary weapon against slavery. In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, requiring all citizens to help catch runaway slaves under penalty of a fine or imprisonment. Accused African Americans were denied both a jury trial and the right to testify in their own behalf. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 forcefully injected the reality of slavery into the daily lives of northerners, black and white. Garrison interpreted the passage of the law as evidence of a strengthening slave-power conspiracy. In May 1854, two events deepened Garrison's conviction that pro-slavery influences dominated American society and politics.

First, in Washington, D.C., Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, an event that triggered a wave of violence on the Western frontier. The Kansas-Nebraska Act repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had limited slavery in the territories to the region south of latitude 36°30', and left the question of slavery to the settlers of the individual territories. As a result, the Kansas territory became "Bleeding Kansas," a battleground between pro- and anti-slavery settlers including the abolitionist John Brown who along with his sons gained national notoriety for their role in the murder of five pro-slavery farmers in Pottawatomie, Kansas in 1855. Second, almost simultaneously with passage of the Kansas bill, federal authorities in Boston arrested fugitive slave Anthony Burns under the authority of the Fugitive Slave Law. After a week of legal maneuvering, Burns was marched through the streets of Boston to be shipped back to slavery in Virginia. For many Bostonians, abolitionist and non-abolitionist alike, Burns' arrest and return to slavery was a visible reminder of slavery's influence on American politics. On July 4, 1854, Garrison staged a public burning of the Fugitive Slave Law and the United States Constitution, calling the latter document "a Covenant with Death, an Agreement with Hell." [10]

In 1861, when the Civil War broke out, Garrison criticized President Abraham Lincoln as soft on slavery. Still, Garrison did support the Union war effort. In 1863, he rejoiced when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which Garrison believed transformed the war for the Union into a war to free the slaves. With the successful passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, Garrison believed his work was finished. On April 14, 1865, Garrison joined a group of dignitaries, including President Lincoln, in a flag-raising ceremony at Fort Sumter, South Carolina. The following month Garrison left the American Anti-Slavery Society, relinquishing leadership of the organization to Wendell Phillips who continued the organization until 1870. In December 1865, Garrison ceased publication of the *Liberator*. After the war, Garrison supported the Radical Republicans' plans for Reconstruction.

William Lloyd Garrison died at his daughter's home on May 24, 1879 after a lengthy period of poor health. On May 28, the day of Garrison's funeral, flags flew at half-staff throughout Boston and the state of Massachusetts. More than fifteen hundred people packed the funeral service including two generations of abolitionists, black and white. Memorial observances for Garrison were held in many cities over the following weeks including an interracial service in Atlanta, Georgia, in the shadow of the capitol building, perhaps the most fitting tribute to this "profoundly important, and controversial figure."[11] Garrison is buried alongside his wife Helen in the Forest Hills Cemetery, Boston, Massachusetts.

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[10] *Boston Daily Atlas*, July 6, 1854

[11] Blight, "William Lloyd Garrison at Two Hundred," 1.

William Lloyd Garrison

Born	December 12, 1805 Newburyport, Massachusetts
Died	May 24, 1879 New York City, New York
Buried	Forest Hills Cemetery, Boston, Massachusetts
Father	Abijah Garrison
Mother	Frances Maria Lloyd
Career Milestones	1829, Editor, *Genius of Universal Emancipation* | 1831, Editor, *The Liberator* | 1832, One of the founders, New England Anti-Slavery Society | 1833, One of the founders, American Anti-Slavery Society | 1854 public burning of a copy of the Fugitive Slave Law and the United States Constitution | 1865 after passage of the 13th Amendment ceased publication of *The Liberator*.

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