Main Idea
In the midst of the nation’s reform movement, a number of citizens embarked on a crusade known as abolitionism to end slavery in the United States.

Key Terms and Names
gradualism, American Colonization Society, abolition, William Lloyd Garrison, emancipation, American Antislavery Society, Frederick Douglass

Reading Strategy
Sequencing As you read about the beginning of the abolitionist movement, complete a time line similar to the one below to record early events of this movement.

Reading Objectives
• List groups involved in the early abolitionist movement.
• Analyze how Northerners and Southerners viewed abolitionism.

Section Theme
Individual Action Abolitionist reformers challenged the morality and legality of slavery in the United States.

Preview of Events
1831
William Lloyd Garrison begins publishing the Liberator

1833
Prudence Crandall arrested; American Antislavery Society founded

1834
Mob attacks William Lloyd Garrison

1836
House of Representatives adopts gag rule on abolitionist petitions

An American Story
In 1831 William Lloyd Garrison began publishing a fiery antislavery newspaper in Boston. One day in 1834, a large group gathered outside Garrison’s office to express its disapproval of his views. An onlooker, Thomas Low Nichols, described what followed:

“I was in the editorial office of Mr. Garrison when the crowd began to gather in the street below. . . . There were hundreds—then thousands. It was a mob of people dressed in black broadcloth, a mob of gentlemen—capitalists, merchants, bankers, a mob of the Stock Exchange and of the first people in Boston, which considered itself the nicest of cities, and intellectually the ‘hub of the universe’. . . . There was a great howl of rage; but, a moment after, it became a yell of triumph. Garrison had been seen to go from the building into a narrow lane behind it. Pursued, he took refuge in a carpenter’s shop, only to be dragged out and carried into the midst of the mob. . . . I saw him, his hat off, his bald head shining, his scanty locks flying, his face pale. . . .”

—quoted in Witness to America

Early Opposition to Slavery
By the 1830s, a growing number of Americans had begun to demand an immediate end to slavery in the South. Of all the reform movements that began in the early 1800s, the movement to end slavery was the most divisive. By pitting North against South, it polarized the nation and helped bring about the Civil War.
Gradualism  From the earliest days of the Republic, many Americans had opposed slavery. Many of the country’s founders knew that a nation based on the principles of liberty and equality would have difficulty remaining true to its ideals if it continued to enslave human beings. Quakers and Baptists in both the North and South had long argued that slavery was a sin. After the Revolution, Baptists in Virginia called for “every legal measure to [wipe out] this horrid evil from the land.”

Early antislavery societies generally supported an approach known as **gradualism**, or the belief that slavery had to be ended gradually. First they would stop new slaves from being brought into the country. Then they would phase out slavery in the North and the Upper South before finally ending slavery in the Lower South. Slaveholders would also be compensated for their loss. Supporters of gradualism believed it would give the South’s economy time to adjust to the loss of enslaved labor.

Colonization  The first antislavery societies also believed that ending slavery would not end racism in the United States. Many thought that the best solution was to send African Americans back to their ancestral homelands in Africa. In December 1816, antislavery reformers founded the **American Colonization Society (ACS)** to move African Americans to Africa. The society had the support of many prominent Americans, including James Madison, James Monroe, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John Marshall.

By 1821 the ACS had acquired land in West Africa. The following year, free African Americans began boarding ships chartered by the society to take them to Africa. There they established a colony that eventually became the country of Liberia. It declared its independence as a republic in 1847 and adopted a constitution designed after the U.S. Constitution. The capital, Monrovia, was named for President Monroe.

Colonization was never a realistic solution to slavery and racism, however. The cost of transporting African Americans was high, and the ACS had to depend on donations. Moving the roughly 1.5 million African Americans who lived in the United States in 1820 to Africa was nearly impossible. Furthermore, most African Americans regarded the United States as their home and were not prepared to migrate to another continent. Only an estimated 12,000 African Americans moved to Africa between 1821 and 1860.

**Reading Check**  **Identifying** What two religious groups were among the first to oppose slavery?

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**Abolitionist Songs**  Abolitionists used songs to stir up enthusiasm for their cause. To make songs easier to learn, they often wrote new words for old tunes. Here is a stanza William Lloyd Garrison wrote to the tune of “Auld Lang Syne”:

I am an abolitionist!  
I glory in the name;  
Though now by Slavery’s minions hiss’d,  
And covered o’er with shame;  
It is a spell of light and power—  
The watchword of the free:—  
Who spurns it in this trial-hour,  
A craven soul is he!

**The New Abolitionists**  Gradualism and colonization remained the main goals of antislavery groups until the 1830s, when a new idea, **abolition**, began to gain ground. Abolitionists argued that enslaved African Americans should be freed immediately, without gradual measures or compensation to former slaveholders.

**TURNING POINT**

**Garrison Stirs a New Movement**  Abolitionism began to gain support in the 1830s for several reasons. As with other reform movements of the era, it drew its strength from the Second Great Awakening, with its focus on sin and repentance. In the eyes of abolitionists, slavery was an enormous evil of which the country needed to repent.

The first well-known advocate of abolition was a free African American from North Carolina named **David Walker**, who published *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*. In this pamphlet, Walker advocated violence and rebellion as the only way to end slavery. Although Walker’s ideas were influential, the rapid development of a large national abolitionist movement in the 1830s was largely due to the efforts of **William Lloyd Garrison**.

In 1829 Garrison became assistant to Benjamin Lundy, the Quaker publisher of the Baltimore antislavery newspaper, *Genius of Universal Emancipation*. Garrison admired Lundy but grew impatient with his gradualist approach. In 1831 Garrison left his mentor and, with fellow abolitionist Isaac Knapp, founded Boston’s antislavery newspaper, the *Liberator*. 
The paper’s style was anything but moderate, as Garrison wrote caustic attacks on slavery and called for an immediate end to it. To those who objected to his fiery language, he responded that the time for moderation was over:

“I am aware that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for severity? I will be as harsh as truth and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject I do not wish to think, or speak, or write with moderation. No! No! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the raver; tell the mother to gradually [remove] her babe from the fire into which it has fallen—but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest; I will not equivocate; I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD.”

—from the Liberator

With his balding head, his steel-rimmed glasses, and his plain black suits, Garrison was as mild-looking as his words were strong. Inside this soft-spoken man, however, an intense passion burned. In his mind, the situation was very clear: Slavery was immoral and slaveholders were evil. The only option was immediate and complete emancipation, or the freeing of all enslaved people.

Garrison soon attracted enough followers in the North to enable him to found the New England Antislavery Society in 1832 and the American Antislavery Society in 1833. Membership in both organizations grew quickly. By the mid-1830s, there were hundreds of society chapters, and in 1838, there were more than 1,350 chapters with over 250,000 members.

Other Abolitionists at Work As the anti-slavery movement gained momentum, new leaders emerged from Garrison’s shadow and carried on the effort. Theodore Weld, a disciple of the evangelist Charles Grandison Finney, was one of the most effective leaders, recruiting and training many abolitionists for the American Antislavery Society. Arthur and Lewis Tappan, two devout and wealthy brothers from New York City, also emerged as leaders.

The orator Wendell Phillips, the poet John Greenleaf Whittier, and many others became active in the cause as well. Many women also gave their efforts to the abolitionist movement. Prudence Crandall worked as a teacher and abolitionist in Connecticut, and Lucretia Mott often spoke out in favor of abolitionism. Some Southern women also joined the crusade. Among the earliest were Sarah and Angelina Grimké, South Carolina sisters who moved north to work openly against slavery.

African American Abolitionists Not surprisingly, free African Americans took a prominent role in the abolitionist movement. African Americans in the North, who numbered over 190,000 by 1850, endured much prejudice, but they cherished their freedom nonetheless. When Garrison launched his newspaper, African Americans rushed to his support, not only buying the paper but also helping to sell it. Many began writing and speaking out against slavery and taking part in protests and demonstrations.

One of the most prominent African American figures in the movement was Frederick Douglass, who had escaped from slavery in Maryland. Douglass was a brilliant thinker and an electrifying speaker. “I appear before the immense assembly this evening as a thief and a robber,” he told one Massachusetts
“I stole this head, these limbs, this body from my master, and ran off with them.” Douglass published his own antislavery newspaper, the *North Star*, and wrote an autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, which quickly sold 4,500 copies after its publication in 1845.

Another important African American abolitionist was *Sojourner Truth*. She gained freedom in 1827 when New York freed all remaining enslaved people in the state. In the 1840s her antislavery speeches—eloquent, joyous, and deeply religious—drew huge crowds. Though lacking a formal education, Truth enthralled listeners with her folksy wit, engaging stories, contagious singing, and strong message.

**Reading Check**

**Summarizing** How did William Lloyd Garrison work to end slavery?

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**The Response to Abolitionism**

Abolitionism was a powerful force, and it provoked a powerful public response. In the North, citizens looked upon the abolitionist movement with views ranging from support to indifference to opposition. In the South, many residents feared that their entire way of life was under attack. They rushed to defend the institution of slavery, which they saw as the key to the region’s economy.

**Reaction in the North**

While many Northerners disapproved of slavery, some opposed extreme abolitionism even more. They viewed the movement as a dangerous threat to the existing social system. Some whites, including many prominent businesspeople, warned it would produce a destructive war between the North and the South. Others feared it might lead to a great influx of freed African Americans to the North, overwhelming the labor and housing markets. Many in the North also had no desire to see the South’s economy crumble. If that happened, they might lose the huge sums of money Southern planters owed to Northern banks, as well as the Southern cotton that fed Northern textile mills.

Given such attitudes, the attack on Garrison in Boston was not surprising. In fact, it was one of many such assaults. In 1837 in Illinois, for example,
abolitionist publisher Reverend Elijah P. Lovejoy was killed trying to protect his printing press from a mob. Yet Northerners also resented Southern slave-catchers, who kidnapped African American runaways in the North and hauled them back to the South. In response, several states in the North passed personal liberty laws restricting slave recapture.

**Reaction in the South** To most Southerners, slavery was a “peculiar institution,” one that was distinctive and vital to the Southern way of life. While the North was building cities and factories, the South remained mostly agricultural, becoming increasingly tied to cotton and the enslaved people who planted and picked it. Southerners responded to the growing attacks against slavery by strongly defending the institution. South Carolina’s governor called it a “national benefit,” while Thomas Dew, a leading Southern academic, claimed that most slaves had no desire for freedom, because they enjoyed a close and beneficial relationship with their slaveholders. “We have no hesitation in affirming,” he declared, “that throughout the whole slaveholding country, the slaves of good [slaveholders] are his warmest, most constant, and most devoted friends.”

Less than eight months after Garrison printed his first shocking words in the *Liberator* in 1831, Nat Turner, an enslaved preacher, led an uprising that killed over 50 Virginians. Many Southerners believed that papers like the *Liberator* sparked this rebellion. Although Garrison’s paper did not even circulate in the South, furious Southerners demanded the suppression of abolitionist material as a condition for remaining in the Union. Southern postal workers refused to deliver abolitionist newspapers. In 1836, under Southern pressure the House of Representatives passed a gag rule providing that all abolitionist petitions be shelved without debate.

For all the uproar it caused, the abolitionist movement remained relatively small. Very few people before the Civil War ever accepted the idea that slavery must be immediately eliminated. The crusade that William Lloyd Garrison had started, however, and that thousands of men and women struggled to keep alive, became a constant and powerful reminder of how much slavery was dividing the nation.