

Anti-slavery movement, Britain

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Sections

[Phase 1: Expansion and Resistance \(1607-1770\)](#)

[Phase 2: The Abolition Movement \(1770-1807\)](#)

[Phase 3: The Emancipation Movement \(1807-1838\)](#)

[References and Suggested Readings](#)

The abolition of slavery in Britain and its Atlantic empire was a protracted process that took centuries to accomplish. While historians often focus on one element of the anti-slavery movement – the abolition campaigns of the late eighteenth century – anti-slavery resistance was, in fact, a much more complex phenomenon that ranged from slave resistance to evangelical pressure to mass boycotts and petitioning. The diversity of anti-slavery resistance in the early modern period necessitates that scholars understand the end of slavery in Britain as the accomplishment of many grassroots movements rather than that of a single, monolithic organization of middling reformers.

The abolition of slavery in the British Atlantic took place in three phases. The first phase, lasting roughly from the seventeenth century to the 1770s, saw the expansion of the British slave trade and the earliest, decentralized anti-slavery resistance. The second phase, from the 1770s to 1807, witnessed the rise of massive British support for the abolition of the slave trade, which many leaders believed was the first step in bringing an end to the institution of slavery. The third phase, between 1808 and 1838, brought the legal emancipation of slaves in the British Atlantic world.

Phase 1: Expansion and Resistance (1607–1770)

By the end of the sixteenth century, English traders were actively participating in the transatlantic slave trade. With the establishment of several permanent American colonies during the first decades of the seventeenth century, the institution of slavery became part and parcel to these colonies' economic success. The tobacco, sugar, and, eventually, cotton that fed a growing consumer society in Europe demanded large labor forces to plant, grow, harvest, and process them.

The introduction of a massive slave society into the English world required philosophical and legal justifications. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, plantation owners, merchants, scholars, and politicians alike cobbled together a regime built on control and exploitation that was bolstered by philosophical notions of difference and protected by a legal superstructure. The English borrowed from a set of preexisting discourses to defend their engagement with the slave trade and forced labor. These included arguments from natural philosophy, which emphasized cultural, physiological, and even moral differences, and the Christian scriptures, from which contemporaries extrapolated that black Africans were descended from Ham and thus condemned to be slaves. Clergy in the Church of England, such as the seventeenth-century missionary Morgan Godwyn, argued that the institution of slavery was not inconsistent with the doctrines of Christianity. Thus, the extension of the slave system and the articulation of a racial hierarchy became mutually enforcing processes. English common law did not initially provide strong support for the Atlantic slave system, but the legal institutionalization of slavery was forthcoming, although there was never a legal formula as comprehensive as France's Code Noir (1685). By the 1660s, colonial statute law recognized slaves as property, a status that was hereditary through matrilineal descent, and miscegenation laws, protection for masters who killed their slaves, and restrictions on equal rights under the

law, even for free blacks, soon followed.

Early resistance took many forms that stretched from Africa to the Americas to Britain and Ireland. African strategies included open military confrontation, revolts, and even reconfiguring the layout of villages and establishing sites of refuge. Likewise, slave revolts in African slaving ports were not uncommon. Records indicate that for every ten slaving voyages, there was a shipboard revolt. Most of these took place while the ship was anchored and loading its victims. In a significant number of examples, Africans in boats attacked anchored slave ships in order to free the captives. Once slaves found themselves working on the American plantations, their resistance continued. A Virginia statute from 1680 prevented slaves from carrying any weapons or leaving their master's estates, a reaction to the continued efforts of Africans to undermine the slave system. In the Caribbean, slave owners experienced regular revolts. Escape proved another mode of resistance, and no group embodied this example more than the Jamaican Maroons, who, for 140 years, resisted the imposition of British rule.

Before the 1770s, European resistance to slavery was limited. Both Anglicans and nonconformist sects justified slavery, and even the Religious Society of Friends, or the Quakers, were reluctant to take a firm stance against it. As early as 1671, one of the Quaker founders, George Fox, argued for the spiritual equality of all humans, but he did not reject slavery outright. Instead, he used the Christian scriptures to justify a period of temporary slavery after which slaves should be freed with some form of compensation. When four Quakers and Mennonites in Germantown, Pennsylvania signed a petition in 1688 against the "traffik of men-body," the event marked the beginning of the anti-slavery movement amongst peoples of European descent. From this community of mid-Atlantic nonconformists came more sustained and significant opposition to slavery in the mid-eighteenth century.

The most influential document of the pre-1770 abolition movement was John Woolman's *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* (1754), in which he spoke out against both the slave trade and the institution of slavery. A Quaker, his conscience led him to the conclusion that “the Colour of a Man avails nothing, in Matters of Right and Equity.” Speaking out against slavery at the annual Philadelphia Meeting of Friends in August 1758, he convinced his fellow Quakers to begin freeing their slaves. His journals record his visits to his fellow Quakers, encouraging them to end their participation in the slave system. Woolman's voice was joined by another Philadelphia Quaker, Anthony Benezet. Benezet devoted himself not only to the cause of abolition, but also to social reform. Arguing that humans were not just spiritual equals, but that they were social equals, he was an advocate for black and female education. As early as 1750, he tutored free blacks and slaves at his house. In 1770, using his own fortune and funding from the Philadelphia and London Quakers, Benezet founded a free school for Philadelphians of African descent.

Woolman and Benezet were part of an increased move toward abolitionism among the eighteenth-century devout – in part, the product of the Great Awakening. John Wesley preached openly against slavery to his fellow Methodists. Likewise, mid-century Moravian, Baptist, and Mennonite leaders spoke out against the institution. Slaves and free blacks were encouraged to join their congregations. Nevertheless, despite the radical nature of their theologies and the potential challenge that they posed to the slave system, none of these sects rejected slavery altogether. Preaching spiritual equality was not the same thing as practicing social equality. Many of their members continued to own slaves, and evangelicals typically imagined abolition in gradualist terms.

Phase 2: The Abolition Movement (1770–1807)

Anti-slavery resistance during the last decades of the eighteenth century

resulted in the abolition of the slave trade in the British Atlantic world in 1807. Most British and American abolitionists believed that their success rested in a two-phased attack on the slave system: first outlaw the slave trade, and then outlaw slavery. The reasons for the end of the slave trade were many, but one recognizable feature of the movement was an increasingly vocal public rejection of the institution. The public critique of slavery was inspired by ideas about religious and natural equality. It found its voice in the burgeoning literacy and print culture of the Anglo-American world.

In 1771–2, the cause of abolition found an unprecedented success in the English courts. A slave, James Somerset, who had come to London as chattel to a Scottish merchant, Charles Stewart, claimed freedom as a consequence of his 1771 baptism. While many colonies had passed laws prohibiting manumission upon baptism, precedent in England was unclear. Stewart had Somerset captured and prepared to send him to Jamaica, at which point Somerset's lawyer, Granville Sharp, filed a writ of habeas corpus. Thus, Somerset and his abolitionist friends orchestrated a case against Stewart's claims of ownership and the institution of slavery in England in general. William Murray, 1st Earl of Mansfield, heard the case and produced a carefully worded ruling that held that masters could not send slaves out of England. Despite its precision, much of the public interpreted the ruling as the end to the institution of slavery in England. A similar case lasted from 1772 to 1778 in the Scottish courts. Inspired by the Somerset ruling, Joseph Knight claimed his freedom from John Wedderburn.

The press coverage of the Knight and Somerset cases generated momentum for abolition during the 1770s. Abolitionists in Britain joined their American counterparts in their calls to end slavery, even as the colonies went to war against the British government. In 1773, slaves in Massachusetts unsuccessfully petitioned the state legislature to end slavery. The following year, the colonial assemblies began a long and

uneven process of withdrawal from the slave trade. At their annual meeting in 1776, Pennsylvania Quakers banned members who owned slaves. But, in the North American context, it was the British government that did the most to manumit slaves between 1775 and 1783. In 1775, the Governor of Virginia, John Murray, 4th Earl of Dunmore, declared that slaves who fought for the British against the American revolutionaries would become free. While self-serving reasons motivated the British, thousands of African Americans fought against the odds by escaping plantations and joining the British. While many of them found themselves recaptured at the end of the war, more than 14,000 former slaves eventually found their freedom.

In Britain, abolitionists continued their campaigns. Former slaves, such as Olaudah Equiano and Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, added their voices to activists such as Ignatius Sancho and Ukawsaw Gronniosaw. Appealing to Christian morality and philosophical arguments about human equality, their pamphlets, newspaper articles, and books used autobiography to expose slavery's evils. Their descriptions were confirmed in the courts, most horrifically in a King's Bench case of 1783 – the Zong massacre. Typical of the period, the Zong was making an overcrowded and sickly slave voyage in autumn 1781. With its high mortality rates, the ship's captain, Luke Collingwood, decided to cut his losses and throw 133 ill slaves overboard. Considered as chattel under the law, the Liverpoolian owners would have lost money if the slaves died of disease. However, Collingwood claimed that water reserves were low. By throwing these slaves overboard to save the other slaves from dehydration, the owners could claim them as lost property to the underwriters. The case that entered Lord Mansfield's court in 1783, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, was a suit by the ship owners to collect the insurance. When Olaudah Equiano, a former slave and abolitionist, heard about this case, he worked with Granville Sharp to publicize the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade.

In the 1780s, a formal coalition developed to pressure parliament to end

slavery. As in the Americas, Dissenters were at the forefront. At the London yearly Meeting in 1783, 273 Quakers petitioned parliament to end the slave trade. They also set up the Committee on the Slave Trade, which became the first abolitionist organization in Britain. Following their mandate, two members on the Committee, William Dillwyn and John Lloyd, published *The Case of Our Fellow-Creatures, the Oppressed Africans* in December 1783, a denunciation of slavery that had print runs of 2,000 and 10,000 within the year. Granville Sharp, who had worked closely with Anthony Benezet as early as 1772, developed the links between the Anglican community, the British and American Quakers, and the British evangelical community – most notably, the emergent Clapham Sect. Their association culminated in the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787, the group that has often been widely interpreted as the single voice of abolition.

The success of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade relied upon the politicization of the British masses, coupled with parliamentary pressure. A growing reading public and new forums for the discussion of the abolitionist cause played a major role in their achievement. Likewise, a modern mass marketing campaign accompanied the cause. The icon of a suppliant slave in chains and the accompanying motto, “Am I not a Man and a Brother?,” found itself repeated on everything from medallions created by Josiah Wedgwood's Staffordshire factory to anti-slavery tokens to folk art. The motto appealed to Enlightenment notions of human equality and Christian ideas of brotherhood. The image of the slave as suppliant confirmed paternalistic middling attitudes toward people of African descent and their duty to raise people up from their oppression. Furthermore, the tireless campaigning of people such as Hannah More and Thomas Clarkson made the colonial humanitarian crisis palpable to provincial English publics.

Using the technique of petitioning to pressure members of parliament (MPs), hundreds of thousands of Britons added their voice to the abolitionist cause. This provided MPs, such as William Wilberforce, with

the leverage that they needed to legislate against the slave trade. As early as 1787, over 10,000 enfranchised men from Manchester signed an anti-slavery petition. Organizing themselves through a nationwide epistolary network, within a year petitioners numbered nearly 100,000. In 1792, these numbers approached 400,000. It was not just the wealthy who added their names to these petitions. For example, in 1789, 769 Sheffield metalworkers signed an anti-slavery petition, knowing that to do so undermined their livelihoods. In their petition, they recognized that slavers traded Sheffield cutlery for slaves in Africa. By the 1790s, some provincial anti-slavery organizations took the lead in organizing a boycott of West Indian sugar.

When the French Revolution began in 1789, radical-minded British abolitionists such as Clarkson saw an opportunity to join their cause with that of the Société des Amis des Noirs in France. Unexpectedly, however, the course of the French Revolution undermined the cause of abolition in Britain. When the French Revolution entered its radical phase in 1793–4, British conservatives saw all reform movements as a potential threat to the British state, a perspective that was as much a reaction to Jacobinism as it was to the Saint-Domingue slave revolt of 1791. When the slaves of Saint-Domingue, driven by their desire for freedom and inspired by revolutionary rhetoric, revolted against French plantation owners, British anti-abolitionists argued that the abolition movement was to blame. This perspective gained more credibility with revolutions in Dominica and Jamaica the same year. The slaving lobby proved tenacious in the 1790s. Panicked by the abolition movement, plantation owners increased the numbers of slaves that they imported from 5,662 per year in 1784–7 to 25,960 in 1793 (Geggus 1981: 222). In turn, sugar and coffee plantations saw their profits increase as Saint-Domingue's imports fell during its civil war. Thus, even though William Wilber-force nearly succeeded with an abolition bill in 1796, it was not until 1807 that the abolitionists successfully passed a slave trade bill.

Phase 3: The Emancipation Movement (1807–1838)

After the abolition of the slave trade, abolitionists initially turned their attention to enforcing the end of the slave trade. The most ardent exponent of enforcement was the African Institution, which included many prominent abolitionists such as Clarkson and Wilberforce. While British ships could not participate in the slave trade, the African Institution recognized that this did not mean the slave trade had ended. They pressured the government to pass legislation to require Caribbean colonies to compile slave registers. By 1817, these registers allowed the government to monitor slave smuggling. Abolitionists saw the registers as a way to trace plantation mortality rates, numbers with which they could press for humanitarian reform.

In the Caribbean, plantation owners continued to protest reforms, and a succession of conservative governments generally responded with a gradualist approach toward legislation. Slaves, however, were unwilling to suffer the abuses of the slave system, and they continued their anti-slavery resistance. In 1816, a revolution in Barbados, often called Bussa's Rebellion, marked a new moment in British slavery. The slaves, inspired by Haitian independence and abolitionist sentiment, planned a complete overthrow of the Barbadian government. Their leaders, Bussa, Washington Franklin, Nanny Grigg, and others, led a rebellion for three days. While unsuccessful in their ultimate aims, their revolt led to reforms, including extended rights in the 1825 Consolidated Slave Law.

With pressure for and against slavery, the British government responded with an approach known as “amelioration.” Amelioration would institute gradual reforms, in particular the Christian education of slaves. Groups such as the London Missionary Society sent evangelicals to proselytize Christian non-resistance. Once they saw the horrors of plantation slavery, some missionaries became vocal abolitionists. This was the situation in the Demerara, Guyana revolt of 1823. Jack Gladstone, a slave, led approximately 13,000 slaves against plantation owners. Following the

advice of the Christian missionary John Smith, the slaves generally revoked violence. When plantation owners violently suppressed the revolt, John Smith was arrested and eventually died from pneumonia in prison. He became a symbol for abolitionists and slaves alike, “the Demerara Martyr.”

The cases of Barbados and Demerara infused new life into the abolition movement, which in 1823 formed the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Dominions, also known as the Anti-Slavery Society. Like its predecessor, the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the Anti-Slavery Society became the national voice of a network of regional organizations. While women had been integral to the pre-1807 abolitionist movement – numbering up to a quarter of subscribers in abolitionist societies – women featured even more prominently in the Anti-Slavery Society and its affiliates. Over 70 women's organizations joined the cause, including the Birmingham Ladies' Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves, later the Female Society of Birmingham. These groups were essential to the success of the petitioning campaigns of the 1820s and 1830s, which gathered over 1.5 million signatures.

In a world of patriarchal hierarchies, the cause of emancipation became implicated in the burgeoning women's rights movement. Against the stance of the Anti-Slavery Society, Elizabeth Heyrick, who formed the Female Society of Birmingham with Susannah Watts in 1823, argued for the immediate emancipation of slaves in her 1824 pamphlet, *Immediate, not Gradual Abolition*. She called for voters to elect MPs who supported immediate emancipation. And she was at the center of a new wave of sugar boycotts. In response, William Wilberforce, the aging leader of the gradualist Anti-Slavery Society, spoke out against Heyrick and the role of women in politics. He even sought to undermine their influence. In 1830, the Female Society of Birmingham, a major contributor to the Anti-Slavery Society, used its financial muscle to force the national

organization to call for immediate emancipation. If the Anti-Slavery Society insisted on a gradualist approach, then the Female Society of Birmingham would withdraw its support. Its influence was bolstered by its prominence among other women's groups which controlled roughly 20 percent of all contributions. Thus, in 1830, the national campaign became one of immediate abolition.

As the immediatist movement grew, the final and most significant slave revolt in the British colonies took place in 1831–2 in Jamaica. Sometimes known as the Baptist War, as planters laid blame on evangelical missionaries, Samuel Sharpe led 60,000 slaves to take their freedom. Orders were to harm no whites, perhaps indicating the leadership's awareness of anti-slavery momentum in Britain. Instead, the revolutionaries focused their attacks on property, causing perhaps £1 million in damage. Only 14 planters died, but 540 slaves died or were executed. The consequence of the revolt showed many in Britain the futility of perpetuating the institution of slavery.

The 1832 Reform Act, coupled with popular abolitionist momentum, proved the decisive factor in legally ending the institution of slavery in Britain and its American colonies. Nevertheless, the Slavery Abolition Act that passed through parliament in 1833 was hardly radical. Overall, the government paid slave owners nearly £20 million for their losses, which were determined by a Slave Compensation Commission. The Act mandated immediate emancipation of slaves under 6 years of age after August 1, 1834. Slaves over 6 years of age were forced to serve an apprenticeship of between four and six years. When abolitionists, including Joseph Sturge and the Central Negro Emancipation Committee, led the campaign against apprenticeship, the colonies passed legislation ending the institution of slavery in the British Americas in 1838.

Nevertheless, slavery still existed in the British empire and around the world. From 1839, the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society became a

new voice for international slavery issues. Holding the first World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840, the group invited some of the most prominent abolitionists from around the world. British leaders, such as Clarkson, Thomas Buxton, and Sturge, organized with American leaders, such as Louis Levesque and S. L'Instant de Pradine. Noticeably, however, the male leaders prohibited female involvement. Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, visiting from the United States, found that they could not even sit at the convention. Prominent British abolitionists Anne Knight and Elizabeth Pease petitioned to the committee, but to no avail. Inspired by their dismissal from the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Commission, these women went on to organize various women's rights organizations and, most prominently, the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. Thus, the cause of abolition also catalyzed the women's rights movement in Britain and the United States.

SEE ALSO: Benezet, Anthony (1713-1784); Bussa (d. 1816) and the Barbados Slave Insurrection; Clarkson, Thomas (1760-1846); Demerara Slave Rebellion, 1823; Equiano, Olaudah (1745-1797); Haiti, Saint-Domingue Revolution, 1789-1804, Aftermath; Queen Nanny and Maroon Resistance; Seneca Falls Convention; Sharp, Granville (1735-1813); Stanton, Elizabeth Cady (1815-1902); Wilberforce, William (1759-1833); World Anti-Slavery Convention, London

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