

American Abolitionism: Its Direct Political Impact from Colonial Times into Reconstruction

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Review

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The historiography pertaining to chattel slavery in the United States, and the price that was ultimately paid to finally remove its blight, has firmly established that unfortunate institution as the most pernicious challenge confronting the nation during the nineteenth-century. Slaveholder and *Declaration of Independence* author Thomas Jefferson, with his usual gift for ironic contradiction, was accurate when, in the aftermath of the slavery controversy that erupted over Missouri's 1819 petition to join the Union, lamented "we have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go."¹ The dangerous dilemma articulated by Jefferson's metaphor is underscored in the book *American Abolitionism: Its Direct Political Impact from Colonial Times into Reconstruction* by historian Stanley Harrold.

Harrold's robust examination of the multi-century struggle to end slavery makes it eminently clear that there was never a time when that vile practice was not threatening to explode into a general disaster. Early on, influences of the Western European Enlightenment, with its emphases upon reasoning and literacy "encouraged criticism of the Atlantic slave trade's brutality . . . violence, degradation, and ignorance" (15). The religious fervor of the First Great Awakening, lasting from the 1730s to the 1770s, complicated matters due to evangelicals' belief that the Almighty "valued all people regardless of their wealth, education, or race" (16). By quickly establishing the context of those competing ideological forces, *American Abolitionism* skillfully presents the general

¹ See the following: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/letter-to-john-holmes/>. Accessed on October 20, 2019. The website (TeachingAmericanHistory.org) is a product of the Teaching American History Project at the Ashbrook Center (located at Ashland University in Ashland, Ohio).

societal situation that grew more complex as slavery entrenched itself in colonial America. Matters of the mind and heart were forced to make room for the realities of politics and economics that proved quite malleable in adapting to the needs and dictates of slavery.

The author shines an unrelenting light upon the all too often frustrating attempts by northern abolitionists to get rid of slavery in their midst. The North gets no gentle treatment relative to the assessment of slavery's value in the region. For, just as the South would later (and deservedly) be pilloried for its love affair with human bondage, northerners proved that they could be just as ruthless and driven by avarice when it came to securing the advantages of owning human beings. A powerful tool that further anchored slavery in colonial America was the evolution and spread of a racial ideology that supplanted class as the main wedge of social division. Abolitionists used the vehicle of petition to express their dissatisfaction with slavery while also attempting to move church and political leaders to enact reforms. The eventual disappearance of slavery in the North resulted from hard-fought battles to engage politicians but those same battles, and their growing difficulty, proved that slavery would not be easily destroyed.

Harrold's examination of the strategies abolitionists employed to achieve their aims is especially fascinating. Not all abolitionists were in agreement about the methodology for getting rid of slavery. Non-abolitionists occasionally lent their voices and resources to the cause while there also existed self-described abolitionists who, in addition to ending slavery, were in favor of sending blacks to Africa. The conflicting interests within and without the American Colonization Society, founded in 1817, exemplified the disparate nature of abolitionist efforts. For example, politician and Governor of Illinois, Edward Coles, worked with abolitionists to prevent slavery's spread into his state but "as would always be the case with politicians" he "accepted abolitionist help on his terms" (44). Coles also supported the American Colonization Society's stance on rejecting rapid emancipation for blacks in the South while advocating sending free African Americans to Africa. Such was the perverse impact of slavery upon society that some antislavery advocates also sincerely believed that blacks several generations removed from Africa were best helped by deportation to that continent.

Harrold is not bashful about citing other historians for comparative analyses of their perspectives. Notwithstanding the occasional rough transitions when shifting from the central narrative to discuss their work, those variable viewpoints reinforce the intractable reality of the Gordian knot that was American chattel slavery. As the narrative moves from one decade to the next, the author's masterful articulation of how abolitionists aligned themselves with politicians, political parties, and religious organizations also reveals the growing danger that had always lurked within slavery. The controversy that was occasioned by Missouri's 1819 petition to join the Union as a slave state gifted abolitionists with practical wisdom for waging political fights against such occurrences although slavery nevertheless spread further west. Abolitionist demands for reform in the 1830s and into the 1840s mounted at a time when "the great majority of Americans did not perceive slavery and black rights as major issues facing the nation." (70) By highlighting that point, Harrold exposes the grim truth that, while there were certainly abolitionists who were motivated by a sincere belief in racial equality, there were plenty of others for whom such notions were unrealistic and unfathomable.

Harrold's study makes it plain that, for all the valiant efforts of the abolitionists, slavery in America was going nowhere fast. Incidents like Nat Turner's 1831 uprising gave abolitionists further reason to press their demands, citing the inherent dangers of keeping people in bondage. Conversely, such violence served to reinforce the viewpoints of proslavery forces who insisted that bondage (or deportation) was the only sure way to maintain order and safety in the United States. If anything, in the period from 1852 – 1860, the dysfunctional rot that slavery had imposed upon America's socioeconomic system and political process made it apparent that a crisis was building that would not easily pass.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, and especially given the January 31, 1865 passage of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, abolitionist concerns shifted to ensuring rights for the freedmen. The April 14, 1865 assassination of Abraham Lincoln left the abolitionists no choice but to deal with the new president, Andrew Johnson. While he did not immediately oppose rights for blacks, Johnson made his position clear in February 1866, during a White House visit by a thirteen-member black delegation whose leaders included Frederick Douglass. Johnson asserted that blacks "were lucky

simply to be free,” expressing more concern with the “overlooked . . . rights and interests of non-slaveholding white southerners.” (174) Accenting his disdain for recognizing black civil rights, Johnson said that colonization to Africa was still the best option for blacks seeking acceptance and then harangued Mr. Douglass in “explicitly racist terms” (174).

The progress and hope of Reconstruction (1865 – 1877) vanished as fast they had been achieved and, as the twentieth-century dawned, African Americans found themselves battling a new slavery called Jim Crow. Still, the abolitionists of the nineteenth-century had compiled an impressive record for creative tenacity, propelled by a vision of what the United States could and should be. Stanley Harrold’s *American Abolitionism: Its Direct Political Impact from Colonial Times into Reconstruction* reaffirms the courage of their struggle against slavery’s tyranny with the grim reminder that the tyranny had found a welcome home inside America’s democratic republic.

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