



# The Pennsylvania Abolition Society: Restoring a Group to Glory

By Richard S. Newman

It is the nature of great events to obscure the great events that came before them,” the noted 19th-century historian Francis Parkman once wrote. There is no need to tell that to the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS). Once the leading abolitionist organization in the world, the PAS was eclipsed by a more radical (and media-conscious) brand of abolitionism in the years leading to the Civil War. Everyone knows *those* abolitionists: William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Lydia Maria Child. Just a couple of generations ago scholars thought these ultraradical reformers even caused the Civil War! And what of the PAS? It rates barely a mention even in textbooks dedicated to the struggle against slavery.

Top of Page: Old Rising Sun Tavern, birthplace of the PAS. Watercolor by David Kennedy.

Background: Excerpt from draft of an antislavery memorial to Congress from the PAS, Feb. 3, 1790, signed by PAS president Benjamin Franklin. PAS Papers.

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**1775** The Society for the Relief of Free Negroes unlawfully held in Bondage (Pennsylvania Abolition Society) founded. Meetings suspended in November.  
**1780** PA legislature enacts law for the gradual abolition of slavery.

This omission is truly unfortunate. For the PAS was not only the first abolition society anywhere in the western world, it has remained active ever since its organization in 1775. Now that is dedication to the cause of racial justice. But longevity is only one reason to look again at the PAS, for the group not only helped secure and protect abolitionist laws in Pennsylvania during America's revolutionary years but its members consistently attacked slavery in an age when many American statesmen hoped to avoid the sensitive and divisive issue. Silence on slavery is golden, George Washington observed when Pennsylvania abolitionists issued the first antislavery petitions to Congress in 1790. America is better than that, the PAS constantly replied. In the words of famed black minister Richard Allen, the PAS was "the friend of those who hath no helper."

Roughly a decade after it first gathered in 1775 at the Rising Sun Tavern, the PAS made Philadelphia the worldwide capital of the burgeoning abolitionist movement. The PAS's first incarnation comprised a small group of men who wanted to expand Quaker attacks on slavery. Quaker-style abolitionism (not to mention the consciousness-raising tactics of an Anthony Benezet or John Woolman) offered a model for all Americans. After a lull during the Revolution (and Benezet's death), the PAS was revived.

In the magical year of 1787, just as American leaders gathered in the City of Brotherly Love to form a more perfect union, the PAS reorganized itself to give new energy to American abolitionism. As liberty loving Americans and Christians, the group's constitution told the world, the PAS's members would "use such means as are in their power to extend the blessings of freedom to every part of the human race." Antislavery talk was nice—but abolitionist action all the better. Over the next several decades, nearly

Benjamin Franklin. Society Portrait Collection.

2,000 members would officially join the PAS, and many more reformers would express sympathy with its motives. While men of standing joined the group—from America's leading doctor (Benjamin Rush) to its leading jurist (William Rawle)—so too did tailors, middling merchants, and candlemakers.

No one offers a better glimpse into the hopes of PAS activists than Poor Richard himself. A former northern slaveholder, Ben Franklin became PAS president in 1787 and helped it gain official incorporation by the state in 1789—giving abolitionism the standing of, say, a bank. As Temple University scholar David Waldstreicher has brilliantly



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shown, Franklin accommodated to slavery for most of his life. Yet Franklin also came to see abolitionism as part of a momentous change sweeping through western society. Slavery, Franklin knew by the 1780s, was a dirty word. His voluminous papers tell the tale of his transformation. For much of his life, "abolition" had nothing whatsoever to do with racial slavery. Franklin initially used the word when referring to things like colonial fears that England would abolish trial by jury. After Franklin joined the PAS, however, he used "abolition" only in reference to battling bondage. And he excitedly wrote to friends around the world about the wonders of the PAS.

After Franklin's death in 1790, the group continued to raise abolitionist consciousness. The PAS wrote to and dealt with reformers in Britain, France, and Jamaica, as well as American governors, congressmen, and jurists. It forwarded copies of the group's constitution, abolitionist laws and legal opinions, and antislavery essays to virtually anyone who could help the cause. British reformer Granville Sharp wrote that he felt a "deep sense . . . of obligation to the PAS for the honour . . . they confer upon me by enrolling my name in the number of their corresponding members." As its contact list illustrated, the PAS was particularly keen on gaining the support of governing elites.

Inside the Quaker state, the PAS remained vigilant against attempts to

rescind Pennsylvania's gradual abolition law—the first of its kind in the western world. Passed in 1780, the law promised slavery's gradual demise in Pennsylvania: all slaves born after that date would be free at age 28. While it is easy to harrumph now at this half-way measure, it was a model for black as well as white activists in its time. Indeed, no sooner had the law taken shape than fugitive slaves and kidnapped free African Americans would try to make it to "free" Pennsylvania. Here was the true beginning of American sectionalism. And the PAS was in the middle of it all.

The group's abolitionist strategy rested on twin pillars: petitioning and legal work. For decades, the

1784 PAS reactivated.

1787 Richard Allen and Absalom Jones found the Free African Society.

group's pestering petitions asked state and national governments to protect free African Americans, curtail the domestic trade, ban overseas slave trading, and strike at slavery in the District of Columbia. "[We] have observed with great Satisfaction," the group's first federal petition told Congress, "that many important & salutary Powers are vested in you for 'promoting the Welfare & securing the blessings of liberty to the People of the United States.'" Why not make that statement ring true "without distinction of Color"? The federal government, in short, should be in the business of promoting abolitionism.

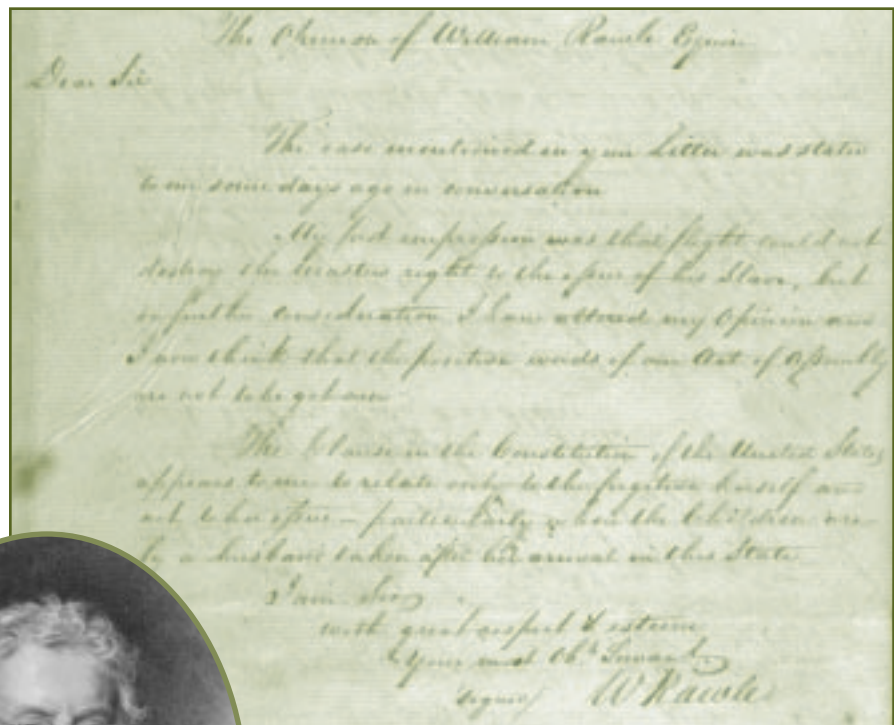
That notion was none too popular, even in the 1790s. The PAS memorial was essentially shelved, but not before Georgians and South Carolinians excoriated Pennsylvania abolitionists. Years later, on the eve of secession, one Georgia disunionist would recall that abolitionist agitation of the federal government dated to that first Congress with those pesky Pennsylvania activists.

Legal work remains one of the most undervalued facets of the PAS's activities. From the 1780s onward, Pennsylvania abolitionists ran the most important legal-aid system for endangered African Americans anywhere. True, Pennsylvania reformers believed that slave property had constitutional standing in southern states; one could not simply free all slaves. But PAS lawyers also believed that abolitionists could manipulate bondage via the law. If a Maryland master gave his or her slave permission to visit family in "free" Pennsylvania, and that enslaved person refused to return to bondage, the PAS took up the case—often

with great success. If a slave fled to Pennsylvania and had children there, the PAS challenged the master's right to the kids—again, with much success. Such legal battles did not stop slavery from growing, but they sure upset many southern slaveholders.

The PAS had a complex relationship with Pennsylvania's free black community. On the one hand,

The early 19th century proved to be an era of transformation both for the PAS and American abolitionism. By the 1820s, the institution of slavery had grown impressively in the South and Southwest, offsetting the passage of gradual abolition laws in every northern state. And slavery—from its role in cotton and sugar cultivation to the traffic in enslaved



Above: *Opinion of William Rawle in the case of the slave Kitty, 1815. Kitty escaped from slavery in Virginia in about 1808 and had three children born in Pennsylvania. Rawle wrote in favor of the freedom of her children. PAS Papers.*



Left: William Rawle. Lithograph from a portrait painted by order of the Bar of Philadelphia. Society Portrait Collection.

it rendered important aid by finding apprenticeships for former slaves, opening schools, and even offering business loans to Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. On the other hand, the PAS remained a segregated organization until the 1830s. It never dawned on the group to ask black leaders to become fellow activists. For all of the group's incredibly innovative abolitionist activity, it would not innovate interracial activism.

people themselves—formed a critical part of a growing American economy. What would Pennsylvania abolitionists do now? Tactical debates broke out within the group. But the PAS eventually stayed its course. Gradual abolitionism and a lawyerly chipping away at slavery's margins were its past, present, and future.

But a competitor soon emerged with a new answer to America's racial ills: colonization. The colonization idea had been around since the 1770s, attracting attention

1787 PAS reorganizes and revises its constitution.  
1789 PAS incorporated.

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from black as well as white reformers. In 1816, the American Colonization Society (ACS) gave formal shape to the idea of exporting freed slaves to Africa. Luminaries lined up behind the ACS: James Madison, Henry Clay, future Harvard president Edward Everett. In Pennsylvania, the colonization movement spawned over 80 auxiliary societies by 1830. The flagship group, the Pennsylvania Colonization Society, formed in 1826, firmly believed that colonization made abolition more palatable to southern slaveholders. It attracted northern supporters, too, who viewed free black people as anathema to a white republic. For the first time since the early days of the Revolution, then, white Americans, North and South, united behind a single "antislavery" movement, albeit one that pictured African Americans—and not bondage—as America's enduring problem.

To most African Americans, of course, colonization seemed like expulsion. And while some black leaders flirted with the ACS, most firmly opposed it. And what of the PAS? It did not take a strong public stand against colonization until the late 1820s. In other words, in a period in which both slavery and antiblack feeling were growing, the PAS cooled its exertions.

At the same time, African Americans amplified their protest activity, drawing both on traditional forms of black activism (pamphleteering, sermons, public meetings) and new ones (forming black newspapers and a black convention movement) to rally

anticolonization forces. Boston's David Walker offered the keynote to black anticolonization protest when in 1829 he asked Americans to read their own Declaration of Independence and reject the ACS. A more trenchant critique of colonization came from Richard Allen, who called America "our Mother Country."

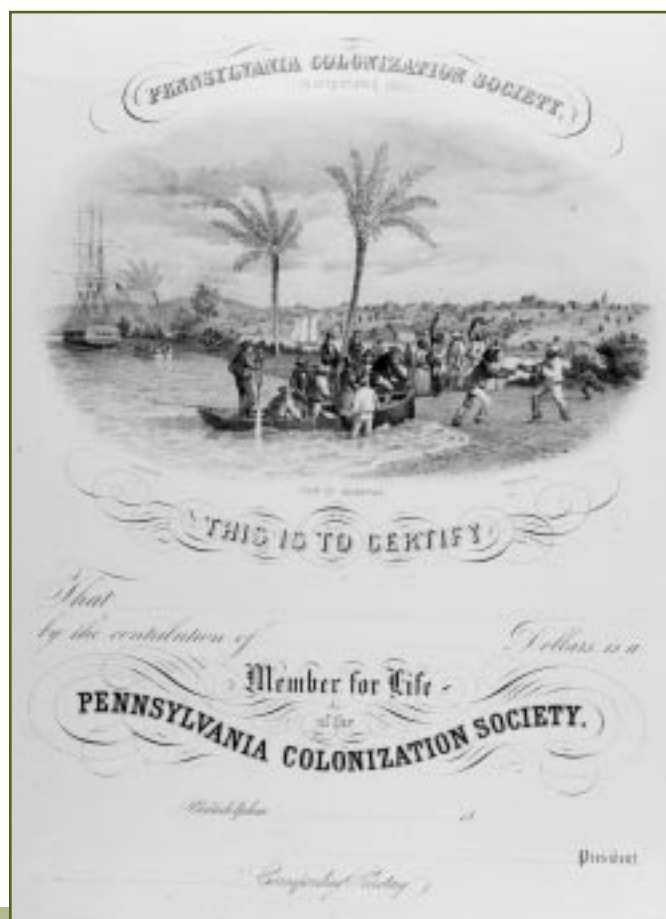
Clearly, by the 1820s abolitionism was in a period of flux. A new generation of reformers would soon realize, in fact, that the movement needed to change with the times. Abolitionists needed to radicalize the antislavery struggle and merge the formal abolitionist movement with segregated black abolitionist allies. And this is exactly what happened in the three decades leading to the Civil War—abolitionism became an integrated mass movement.

By the 1830s, new ideas radically transformed the abolitionist landscape. Interracial antislavery groups that debuted in New England spread west. Drawing from a rising evangelical movement that sought to eradicate sin from American society, these so-called "modern" abolitionists embraced the doctrine of

*Membership certificate for the Pennsylvania Colonization Society.*

immediate abolition and full equality for African Americans. Gradualism now became suspect. "Has abolition gone defunct in Pennsylvania," some old-time activists wondered? Ironically the headquarters of immediatism would be formed in the PAS's backyard. In 1833, "Garrisonian" reformers met in the home of black activist James McCrummill to inaugurate the American Anti-Slavery Society.

Still, the PAS was in no way inactive before the Civil War. Some of its members joined in the new abolitionist crusade (the first immediatist antislavery society appeared in Philadelphia in 1834, attracting key PAS members). Others worked with fugitive slaves, became further involved in black education efforts, and remained dedicated to a more moderate brand of abolitionism. PAS member Passmore Williamson, for example, also joined the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society and helped fugitives



1793 Congress enacts first fugitive slave law.

1794 African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas founded, with Absalom Jones as minister.

On December 9, 1833, a small group of Philadelphia women, black and white, gathered to form the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Some of them had been present as spectators a few days earlier when William Lloyd Garrison organized the American Anti-Slavery Society, but as women were not invited to join. Nor were they welcome in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, which remained all white until 1842 and all male until the early 20th century. The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, however, became a powerful agent of the antislavery movement, and continued until 1870. It has often been referred to as the cradle of women's rights.



Lucretia Mott. Society Portrait Collection.

The women of the new society soon discovered that they were hampered in their antislavery work by restrictions on woman's role in society. In response, such members as Lucretia Mott and Sarah and Angelina Grimké began advocating for increased rights for women. Through their insistence, the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society accepted women members in 1837 and the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1839, though the election of Abby Kelley of Lynn, Massachusetts, to a committee in 1840 led to a split in the organization.

In that same year, a World Anti-Slavery Convention convened in London. The British antislavery movement had not experienced much pressure to include women. Thus, when women delegates of the Pennsylvania and the Massachusetts antislavery societies arrived, they were refused seats. Lucretia Mott protested this exclusion so vigorously that she won the allegiance of the young bride of delegate Henry Stanton. Eight years later, in July 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Mott joined together and called the world's first woman's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York.

Through much of the 19th century, the women of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society had few dealings with the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Nevertheless, when the society held its 100th anniversary celebration on April 14, 1875, the PAS

invited three women to participate in the ceremonies. Abby Kelley Foster, the fiery abolitionist whose election to a committee had raised the issue of woman's rights in the American Anti-Slavery Society, said she was unable to speak (she was suffering from a throat ailment) but congratulated the PAS on its "grand work in lifting up the oppressed and down trodden." Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, the black poet, gave a powerful speech demanding action against the White League and the Ku Klux Klanners of the South.

The sensation of the gathering was, however, a speech by Lucretia Mott, now 83 years old. Henry Wilson, vice president of the United States, introduced Mott with the words, "I propose now to present to you one of the most venerable and noble of American women, whose voice for forty years has been heard and tenderly touched many noble hearts. Age has dimmed her eye and weakened her voice, but her heart, like the heart of a wise man and wise woman, is yet young."

After a storm of applause Lucretia Mott stepped forward and recited in a firm, clear voice a poem by William Wordsworth:

*I've heard of hearts unkind, kind words  
With coldness still returning  
Alas, the gratitude of men  
Hath oftener left me mourning.*

Lucretia Mott then went on to say that she had come to the meeting without the slightest intention of saying a word to a society in which women were not expected to take part. However, the fact that there was now a union between the PAS and American Anti-Slavery Society made it possible for her to speak, despite a severe cold. She would just say a few words to remind her listeners that much remained to be done for the education of black people and to stop the outrages being perpetrated against them in the South. It was the moral influence of the antislavery cause that had won them emancipation, and that influence must be brought to bear once more in reconstruction. She sat down to a storm of applause. ❖

find freedom in the decade before the Civil War. In a celebrated case from 1855, he and black activist William Still helped an enslaved woman from North Carolina (named Jane Johnson) flee her master, a well-known congressman traveling

through Philadelphia. Williamson eventually was sent to prison for several months, where he and antislavery luminaries turned his cell into an abolitionist media center. Even Frederick Douglass paid his respects with a visit.

Looking back now, we might call the PAS the NAACP of its day. Or we might simply refer to it as the world's first abolition society. Whatever the label, we should never forget the PAS's long and important history of abolitionist activism. ❖

1794 Richard Allen founds Bethel A.M.E. Church.  
1816 American Colonization Society founded.