



The PAS and American Abolitionism: A Century of Activism from the American Revolutionary Era to the Civil War

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The Pennsylvania Abolition Society was the world's most famous antislavery group during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Indeed, although not as memorable as many later abolitionists (from William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child to Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth), Pennsylvania reformers defined the antislavery movement for an entire generation of activists in the United States, Europe, and even the Caribbean. If you were an enlightened citizen of the Atlantic world following the American Revolution, then you probably knew about the PAS. Benjamin Franklin, a former slaveholder himself, briefly served as the organization's president. French philosophes corresponded with the organization, as did members of John Adams' presidential Cabinet. British reformers like Granville Sharp reveled in their association with the PAS. It was, Sharp told the group, an "honor" to be a corresponding member of so distinguished an organization.¹ Though no supporter of the formal abolitionist movement, America's "first man" George Washington certainly knew of the PAS's prowess, having lived for several years in the nation's temporary capital of Philadelphia during the 1790s. So concerned was the inaugural President with abolitionist agitation that Washington even shuttled a group of nine slaves back and forth between the Quaker State and his Mount Vernon home (still, two of his slaves escaped). The PAS was indeed a powerful abolitionist organization.

PAS Origins

The roots of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society date to 1775, when a group of mostly Quaker men met at a Philadelphia tavern to discuss antislavery measures. This small organization called itself "the Pennsylvania Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage," a name which signified the group's primary mission of rendering aid to free people of color who had been wrongly enslaved. The case of Dinah Nevill, an enslaved woman of Native American and African descent who claimed to be free, became the focal point of the society's earliest actions. Nevill and her three children had been sold to a Virginia master named Benjamin Bannerman when Israel Pemberton and Thomas Harrison, a Quaker merchant and tailor, respectively, intervened on their behalf. Though a legal suit in Philadelphia courts proved unsuccessful, Harrison facilitated a purchase agreement and manumission deed for Nevill and two of her children in 1779. Harrison, who had a history of supporting black freedom claims, remained one of the leading Pennsylvania abolitionists for years to come. More importantly, as both Pemberton's and Harrison's work on the Nevill case illustrates, the Pennsylvania society had now established itself as a public entity dedicated to black liberty. For the first time in the Western world, in other words, activists banded together to formally oppose bondage. Although the group would go through several

organizational changes over the next two decades, it would always celebrate the 1770s as the beginning of a great cause.²

The Pennsylvania society organized at an important moment in western reform. To begin with, Quakers had accelerated their own attacks on slaveholding. During the 1750s, Pennsylvania Quakers banned slave trading; by the 1770s, they abolished slavery itself, making masters choose between bondage and membership in the Society of Friends. Believing that slavery violated the word of God, and that all humans contained the inner light of spiritual revelation, Quakers became the face of antislavery in the 18th century Atlantic world.

Quaker abolitionism had a long and distinguished tradition. As far back as 1688, when a group of German Quakers issued the Germantown Protest against slaveholding, the Society of Friends served as abolition's vanguard in both the American colonies and Great Britain. During the 1720s and 30s, Ralph Sandiford and Benjamin Lay wrote searching critiques of American slavery while John Woolman and Anthony Benezet became familiar abolitionist faces in the years leading up to the American Revolutionary era. The PAS, whose membership by the 1780s comprised a majority of Quakers, borrowed heavily from the reform energies of the Society of Friends.

Anthony Benezet (1713 - 1784) became perhaps the leading Quaker abolitionist of his day. A highly influential educator and skilled writer, he integrated doctrines of Christian piety with elements of Enlightenment philosophy to argue against bondage. Rejecting a prosperous mercantile life, Benezet established schools in Philadelphia for both women and African-Americans during the 1750s. (Perhaps the most famous student of his night school for black pupils was former slave Absalom Jones, who helped establish the Free African Society and St. Thomas' African Church). In 1759, Benezet published his first attack on bondage, "Observations on the Enslaving, Importing and Purchasing of Negroes." Focusing mainly on the evils of the slave trade, Benezet called the traffic in human beings "inconsistent with the gospel of Christ, contrary to natural justice, the common feelings of humanity, and productive of infinite calamities to many thousand families... and consequently offensive to God..."³ Benezet's consistent prodding of religious and political figures on both sides of the Atlantic helped push antislavery into the mainstream.

In fact, by the time American colonists asserted their independence from Great Britain in 1775 (a short time *after* the Pennsylvania Society first met!), slavery was under broader attack than ever before. For millennia, bondage had been an integral part of human society. Aristotle considered enslaved people productive tools and extensions of their masters' will. While opposition to bondage also appeared sporadically, its legality and cultural sanction remained firmly entrenched in western nations through the 1700s.

By that time, however, a range of voices began questioning slavery's place in the modern world. Was slavery compatible with the rights of man? Was slavery problematic to the operations of the nation-state? Could enslaved people shed the stigma of bondage and assume a place in Western culture? From John Locke, who invested in slave trading concerns but also theorized against bondage, to Enlightenment philosophers throughout the Atlantic world, who pictured freedom as a natural right, slavery seemed increasingly out of place. In short, slavery was now a dirty word among many enlightened statesmen, religious leaders, and philosophical authorities. "I tremble for my country when I recall that God is just," Thomas Jefferson wrote *In Notes on the State of Virginia* in the 1780s.⁴ Jefferson and his fellow revolutionaries furthered secular antislavery trends by enshrining liberty in the nation's founding document, the Declaration of Independence, declaring not only that everyone was "created equal" but that oppressed people had the right to rebel so long as

they explained why. For generations of black and white abolitionists, the Declaration of Independence remained the touchstone of the antislavery movement.

But rising discomfort with slavery was not a product of philosophizing alone. The struggles of enslaved people exerted a powerful influence on white figures who pictured bondage as anathema to modernity. Slave rebellions, occurring in colonial New York, South Carolina, and Virginia, as well as in both the British and French Caribbean, terrified imperial regimes. Day-to-day resistance by enslaved people also began to concern individual masters. In colonial Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin's upstart newspaper *The Pennsylvania Gazette* generated a consistent stream of revenue by publishing runaway slave ads between the 1730s and 1780s. These advertisements depicted fugitives as crafty, multilingual and dead set on freedom—anything but contented slaves. By the 1770s, with the advent of the Pennsylvania society, fugitive slaves would pose a more serious threat to bondage in the new American nation. Prior to that time, black struggles for freedom subtly undermined slavery's stability.⁵

Nevertheless, on the eve of the American Revolution, bondage and not freedom remained the watchword of most African-Americans' lives. Indeed, in the newly independent United States, slavery was legal in every state (with the exception of Vermont). By the 1780s, Pennsylvania contained nearly 7000 enslaved people. If that paled next to Virginia's enslaved population (nearly 300,000 people), it was a difference in magnitude not kind. Masters had absolute rights in Pennsylvania no less than Virginia; slaves remained in bondage in perpetuity in the Quaker State no less than the Old Dominion.

The Pennsylvania society hoped to change all that.

PAS Development, 1780s-1830s

The War of Independence slowed the society's operations. In 1784, a year after peace with Great Britain, the Pennsylvanians regrouped. Now called "The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage," the organization explicitly dedicated itself to fighting bondage in American society. The establishment of Pennsylvania's gradual abolition act of 1780 certainly inspired the PAS. The Western world's first "post-nati" abolition statute, the Pennsylvania law declared that all children born in the state after 1780 would be liberated at the age of 28. Far from securing immediate freedom for enslaved people, the act epitomized the type of gradualism favored by early abolitionists generally and PAS members in particular. For them, moderation was golden. The interval between birth and liberation, many statesmen and reformers agreed, would allow white society to acclimate to black freedom while also allowing bondpeople a long prelude to liberty.

Like many other statesmen and reformers, white abolitionists were obsessed with notions of order and virtue during the Revolutionary era. Some PAS members even worried that former slaves would create chaos without masters looking over their shoulders. Ben Franklin, who owned at least five slaves during his life (he liberated none of them, choosing to let death relieve him of mastery) and converted to abolitionism only in the 1780s, slaves were like "machines." Black freedom, he argued, must therefore be treated with care and caution. Serving as PAS president between 1787 and 1790, the erstwhile Franklin constantly emphasized black uplift as a key part of white abolitionism. For this reason alone, gradual abolition was the gold standard of antislavery efforts in Franklin's day.

Despite its slow operation (and the fact that recalcitrant masters would sometimes sell slaves before their freedom date arrived), Pennsylvania's gradual abolition law was a milestone. Passage of the act reflected the influence of Quaker abolitionism in Pennsylvania. It also reflected the impact of the radical press which had operated with particular force in Pennsylvania during the American Revolution. Thomas Paine, the British expatriate pamphleteer best known for his anti-monarchical, pro-revolutionary treatise "Common Sense," helped author the abolition act, which had probably emanated from a radical politician named George Bryan. Both men saw state-sponsored abolitionism as a natural outgrowth of the revolution's broader struggle against oppression. Knowing that many Americans distinguished between white oppression and black oppression, Bryan, Paine and other Pennsylvania legislators created a preamble that stressed the abolition act's natural rights foundation. "It is not for us to inquire why, in the creation of mankind, the inhabitants of the several parts of the earth were distinguished by a difference in feature or complexion," it stated. Rather, revolutionary governments must show respect for the principles which produced American independence and pass liberty on to enslaved people. "We conceive that it is our duty," the abolition act declared, "and we rejoice that it is in our power, to extend a portion of that freedom to others, which hath been extended to us."⁶ The polity of Pennsylvania could and would exert its power over bondage.

In this manner, Pennsylvania formed a northern border against slavery by the close of the 18th century—a Mason-Dixon line between bondage and freedom. Enslaved people beyond Pennsylvania's borders quickly recognized this fact. While Pennsylvania slaves made sure that masters recognized their claim to eventual freedom, fugitives from beyond the state attempted to reach Pennsylvania's borderline in hopes of achieving liberty. The Pennsylvania borderland thus served as the equivalent of Spanish Florida during the colonial period: it offered slaves a geographical boundary line of freedom, if only they could make it there. Freedom suits multiplied during the 1780s and 1790s, as an increasing number of blacks risked their lives on perhaps the earliest version of the underground railroad. And often waiting on the other side of the Pennsylvania borderland was a group of PAS officials eager to render aid.

To propel abolitionism nationally and better serve the burgeoning free black community in Pennsylvania, the abolition society expanded and reorganized in 1787. "It having pleased the creator of the world, to make of one flesh, all the children of men," the society's new constitution offered, "it becomes them to consult and promote each other's happiness, as members of the same family, however diversified they may be, by color, situation, religion, or different states of society." With a constitution and an increasingly distinguished membership (including not just Benjamin Franklin but Declaration of Independence signer Benjamin Rush), the PAS's newest incarnation had a respectability that resembled a bank or other key civic association. According to its constitution, the group had a president, vice president, secretaries, a treasurer, and counselors. An electing committee nominated and accepted new members; an acting committee deployed the society's resources on issues ranging from lobbying state and federal governments in support of gradual abolition laws to adjudicating fugitive slave and kidnapping cases in state and federal courts. The PAS added to its luster by gaining official incorporation from the state of Pennsylvania in 1789. Unlike subsequent radical abolitionists, early reformers wanted the antislavery movement to have state sanction. Although this might compromise abolitionist principles—some reformers hesitated to challenge unjust laws that might undercut the PAS's respectability—official incorporation allowed the group to secure financial bequests for long-term investment.

Institutionally secure and rising in the minds of trans-Atlantic reformers, the PAS grew steadily during the early Republic. Over several decades of operation, it boasted perhaps as many as 2000 members, with a couple hundred activists comprising the PAS's core

membership in any short-term period. If this was a small number compared to later abolitionist crusades, it was an important step on the road to making abolitionism a professional cause.

During its heyday (1780s-1820s), the PAS focused on three main objectives: first, agitating against slavery in the political realm; second, aiding kidnapped free blacks and, where possible, fugitive slaves in courts of law; and third, establishing education for, and financial support to, free communities of color.

The group's abolitionist strategy rested on the twin pillars of petitioning and legal work. For decades, the group's pestering petitions asked state and national governments to protect free blacks, 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 in 1790, "that many important and salutary powers are vested in you for 'promoting the welfare' and '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 for threatening the stability of the Union.⁷

Though the group retreated from such bold abolitionist pronouncements, it continued to lobby political bodies for and against various measures. PAS pleas prompted the federal government to adopt the first strictures on the overseas slave trade (a 1794 law prohibiting Americans from slave trading, under foreign flags) while at the state level they secured laws prohibiting the kidnapping of free blacks (1788). In 1813, the group helped persuade state legislators to reject a proposed law requiring black citizens traveling through Pennsylvania to register with officials if they stayed longer than six months. As black activist and celebrated preacher Richard Allen put it, Pennsylvania abolitionists were "friends of him who hath no helper."

Legal work remains one of the most undervalued facets of the PAS. From the 1780s onward, Pennsylvania abolitionists ran the most important legal aid system for endangered blacks anywhere in the Western world. The names Thomas Shipley, Thomas Harrison, Isaac Hopper, and David Paul Brown became well-known to black and white abolitionists along the eastern seaboard. (Perhaps the distinguishing feature of the PAS' legal aid system was that nonlawyers as well as those trained at the bar aided endangered African Americans in court. Harrison, Hopper, and Shipley were all nonlawyers who consulted with the likes of David Paul Brown, William Rawle, and other formally trained PAS lawyers). Their tireless and consistent legal work, in the words of black activist Robert Purvis, stirred the emotions of reformers everywhere and gave hope to "those oppressed, degraded and humbled into dust."⁸ 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 the spread of slavery, but they sure upset many southern slaveholders.

As early as 1787, George Washington worried about Pennsylvania abolitionists' legal aid to Southern blacks. In April of that year, he complained to Philadelphian Robert Morris of "a vexatious lawsuit" initiated by members of the PAS for the freedom of a Virginia slave who

had traveled to Pennsylvania with his master. Although the Pennsylvania Supreme Court eventually sided with the master, the enslaved person (named Frank) later escaped. Over the next several decades, Maryland masters saw so many slaves flee to Pennsylvania that they complained to their state legislature, which in turn pressed Quaker State politicians to crack down on the problem. One Maryland master became so frustrated with runaways that he wrote directly to a state screen court justice in Pennsylvania for redress of his grievances. Action such as this did not stop PAS lawyers from successfully aiding fugitive slaves. In the 1815 case "Kitty v. Chittier," for example, the society protected the children of a Southern fugitive known as Kitty from reenslavement. In the 1825 case of "Brickell v. Green," PAS lawyers secured the freedom of a Maryland slave who visited family in Pennsylvania and never left.

If petitioning and legal work made the society famous both regionally and nationally, then its educational endeavors solidified the group's standing in Philadelphia proper. Indeed, after reorganizing in 1787, the PAS made education a key part of its mission. In 1789, the group posted broadsides throughout Philadelphia (particularly in areas south of the city center that contained sizable numbers of free blacks) announcing that "improving the condition of the African race" would occupy a considerable portion of abolitionists' time and resources. Education proved to be essential to early abolitionists' notions of black improvement. During the 1790s and early 1800s, a committee of education—which was superseded by the PAS's Board of Education in 1813—studied and supported the growing free black community's educational needs in and around Philadelphia. In 1795, for example, the group supported a school run by a free black woman named Eleanor Harris. The PAS also provided financial support to Absalom Jones' school for African-American youth as well as one established by the black Baker Cyrus Bustill north of the city. In addition to supporting formal educational endeavors, Pennsylvania reformers emphasized the importance of learning trades—a traditional pathway to financial security—particularly for former slaves and younger members of the free black community. The "Committee of Inspection," "Committee of Guardians," and "Committee of Employ" all researched and monitored black apprenticeship opportunities, including the possibility of attaining literacy skills while learning a trade.

In 1812, Pennsylvania abolitionists furthered their organizational commitment to black learning by building one of the most important free black school buildings in the early Republic: Clarkson Hall. With enough space for multiple classrooms, the hall proved so commodious that the PAS met there as well. Located on Cherry Street (near present-day Sixth and Seventh streets), the hall was "the pride and joy of the society," in the words of historian Margret Hope Bacon. Named after celebrated British reformer and opponent of the slave trade Thomas Clarkson, the school divided pupils into a boys' floor and a girls' floor. The school's first class of students assembled in 1813 with 94 boys and roughly 50 girls. Although similar to an elementary school, students paid modest tuition fees in exchange for the opportunity to study literacy, penmanship, and other subjects. By the 1820s, the group began operating public elementary schools for black youth at other locations.

Perhaps better than anything else, the group's long-standing commitment to education illustrates its complex relationship with Pennsylvania's free black community. On the one hand, the PAS rendered important aid by funding and establishing schools dedicated to improving black educational opportunities; on the other hand, the group did not publicly support integrated school systems in the Philadelphia area until much later, nor did it emphasize advanced schools until the 1830s (the Pennsylvania society established a high school for boys in 1831, though it closed soon after due to low enrollments). Indeed, while subsequent groups of abolitionists would make integrated schools in northern locales a key part of their agenda—going so far as to litigate the matter successfully in Boston just before

the Civil War—the PAS somewhat limited its educational outreach by providing same-race schooling. To be sure, black churches and autonomous educational institutions—at Bethel Church, for example, or the African Presbyterian Church—attempted to fill the void. Nevertheless, the PAS did not innovate integrated school systems as a keystone of the abolitionist agenda during the early national period.

The PAS's racial ideology affected its educational outlook. Though sure that slavery was wrong and that "God hath made of one blood all man," the Pennsylvania society remained a segregated organization until the 1840s. Not one black activist of the post-revolutionary era was invited to become a member of the august PAS—not Richard Allen, not Absalom Jones, not James Forten. It never dawned on the group to ask black leaders to become fellow activists. Abolitionism, most PAS members agreed, required gentlemanly lobbying of political officials and artful litigation in courts of law, both of which required men of public standing to lead the antislavery movement.

Similarly, the PAS argued that education was central to the project of black uplift. Before African-Americans could become full members of civil society, they needed to attain the basic tenets of education: literacy, numeracy and so forth. In this manner, education would allow free blacks to shed the vestiges of bondage. If one reads PAS and other early abolitionist broadsides to the black community, it is clear that they viewed African-Americans as not only oppressed, but in many ways degraded by the experience of slavery. According to PAS doctrine, white abolitionists needed to be paternalistic. Thus, while the group defended black achievement in public, it also lectured African-Americans about piety, thriftiness, diligence and educational uplift. To be sure, many early black leaders—including both Richard Allen and Absalom Jones—echoed these sentiments. Nevertheless, such lectures from above (and particularly from white abolitionists) grated on members of the free black community by the early 1800s, some of whom replied that white racism framed black opportunity far more than uplift ideology (the notion that one could build him or herself up from the bootstraps in American culture by working hard and remaining both pious and humble).

Clearly, the PAS was an American success story by the time it celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1825 (a date preceding the American Revolution's Golden Anniversary). With Pennsylvania abolitionists leading the antislavery movement in the political arena as well as in courts of law, many PASers felt that they were on the right side of history. Moderate abolitionism, they believed, would slowly but surely undercut slavery's standing in the glorious American Republic, and the future would one day see liberty, not bondage, as African-Americans' birthright.

Little did the PAS know that it would soon be eclipsed as the leading force in American abolitionism.

The Transformation of American Abolitionism: The PAS in the Age of Immediatism, 1830s-1860s

The mid-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 northern states. Moreover, slave-derived goods—from cotton and sugar to enslaved people themselves—formed a critical part of a growing national economy. What would Pennsylvania abolitionists do now? Though tactical debates broke out within the group, the PAS stayed its course.

Gradual abolitionism and a lawyerly chipping away at slavery's margins were its past, present, and future.

A competitor soon emerged with new answers to America's racial ills: colonization. The colonization idea had been around since the 1770s, attracting attention from black as well as white reformers. In 1816, the American Colonization Society (ACS) provided formal shape to the notion of exporting freed slaves to Africa. Luminaries lined up behind the ACS: James Madison, Henry Clay, and 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 blacks as anathema to a white republic. For the first time since the early days of the Revolution, then, white Americans in both the North and South united behind a single "antislavery" movement, albeit one that depicted African-Americans—and not bondage—as America's enduring racial 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 where both slavery and anti-black 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, and public meetings) and on new ones (forming black newspapers and a black convention movement) to rally anti-colonization forces. Boston's David Walker offered the keynote to black anti-colonization protest when in 1829 he asked Americans to re-read their own Declaration of Independence and thus reject the ACS. A more trenchant critique of colonization came from Philadelphia's most significant black abolitionist, the Reverend Richard Allen, who decried the colonizationist menace and 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 had 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 preceding the Civil War—abolitionism became an integrated, mass movement.⁹

By the 1830's, the abolitionist landscape had been completely transformed. Interracial anti-slavery groups which debuted in New England spread to the west. Drawing inspiration from a rising evangelical movement which sought to eradicate sin from American society, these so-called "modern" abolitionists embraced the doctrine of immediate abolition and full equality for African Americans. Gradualism, the PAS's mantra, now became suspect. Many younger abolitionists sided with immediatist reformers like William Lloyd Garrison, the Boston printer whose periodical *The Liberator* became the new standard of the antislavery movement after its debut in Boston on January 1st, 1831.

The ripple effects reached all the way to the Quaker State. "Has abolition gone defunct in Pennsylvania?," some old-time activists wondered, as "immediatist" antislavery societies proliferated in New England, New York, and the upper Midwest. Ironically the headquarters of immediatism would be in the PAS's backyard. In 1833, "Garrisonian" reformers met in the home of black activist Robert Purvis to inaugurate the American Antislavery Society (AAS). In that same year, a group of black and white women formed the Philadelphia Female Antislavery Society, one of the most important auxiliaries to the AAS. One year later, black and white activists formed the Philadelphia Antislavery Society, while in 1836 the Pennsylvania Antislavery Society took shape. The PAS was no longer the nation's—or

even Pennsylvania's!—leading abolitionist organization.¹⁰

Why did the PAS fall from prominence during the 1830s? Clearly, Garrisonian abolitionists took more militant stands, which appealed to a rising generation of reformers tired of seeing slavery—and slaveholder's power—grow in the American Republic. Befitting a romantic age swirling with evangelical fervor, post-1830 immediatists declared holy war on bondage, prosecuting the cause with a public zeal that actually scared many PAS members (distinguished Pennsylvania jurist and PAS president William Rawle was no fan of the upstart movement and thought that Garrisonian radicalism was a mere fad).

But issues relating to race and racial integration also hit the PAS with particular force. While Garrisonian abolitionists proclaimed fealty to the notion of an integrated antislavery movement—an idea which some black abolitionists complained had little counterpart in reality—the Pennsylvania Abolition Society did not even admit its first African-American member until 1842, when the light-skinned Robert Purvis joined the organization. Even this action paled in comparison to new-style abolitionists, for while the PAS did not offer Purvis a leadership role, the Garrisonian Pennsylvania Antislavery Society elected him president in 1845 (a post he won in four successive years). With Purvis at the helm, the Pennsylvania Antislavery Society hired two rising stars in the abolitionist universe: the former Maryland slave and celebrated orator Frederick Douglass as a traveling lecturer and a free black New Jersey man named William Still as an office clerk (Still went on to become, along with Purvis, one of the most famous Underground Railroad operatives in American society). The PAS, on the other hand, did not invite Douglass and Still to become members until the Civil War era.

In other words, while immediatist reformers embraced black activists as “co-adjutors” of the antislavery movement, many PAS members believed that they needed to speak and act on oppressed blacks' behalf. Furthermore, they feared that immediatist demands and integrated abolitionist societies (derisively labeled “amalgamationist” by anti-abolitionists) would themselves prompt violent northern opposition and perhaps even southern disunion. For the PAS, union and moderation stood alongside antislavery commitments. Consequently, immediatist abolitionists identified PAS as a conservative, “half-way” antislavery organization.

Nevertheless, the PAS was in no way inactive in the decades prior to the American Civil War. The group remained dedicated to aiding kidnapped free blacks and fugitive slaves. In perhaps the most famous antebellum example, the PAS joined with members of the more radical Pennsylvania Antislavery Society and the Vigilance Committee to secure the liberty of a North Carolina slave named Jane Johnson. Traveling with her master (a well-known congressman) through Philadelphia in 1855, Johnson informed local blacks at a hotel that she wanted freedom for herself and her two children. William Still, who worked at the Pennsylvania Antislavery Society offices at Fifth and Arch streets, notified Passmore Williamson, a PAS member and fellow advocate of aiding fugitive slaves. In a thrilling series of incidents both in the city and at the Delaware River, these men helped Johnson escape and elude recapture. Williamson alone served jail time for his role in the affair, and became somewhat of a celebrity. Frederick Douglass and several other high profile abolitionists visited his prison cell as a means of generating publicity about the perils of slave catchers in northern society.

Other examples abound. In 1837, as historian and archivist Christopher Densmore writes, PAS lawyer David Paul Brown helped a Maryland slave named Basil Dorsey achieve freedom by asking whether or not slavery was actually legal in the state of Maryland. When the opposing counsel could not think fast enough on his feet, or provide certified documents

proving slavery's legality, Dorsey was liberated. Brown, a longtime PAS lawyer who had also joined the Pennsylvania Antislavery Society during the 1830s, did so much for free black kidnapping victims and fugitive slaves that Afro-Philadelphians gave him an engraved silver pitcher of gratitude in 1838.¹¹

The PAS also continued to provide educational support to the black community. In both the 1830s and the 1860s, PAS members helped run evening schools. Indeed, between 1859 and 1869 black men and women could attend the Clarkson Evening Association, which provided not only educational lessons in various subjects but a lecture series as well. At the beginning of the Civil War, the group also helped fund the Clarkson Educational Association, which served as a day school for black children of both sexes. Such endeavors led to PAS-sponsored educational missions and schools in the Reconstruction South. In fact, the Laing School, which had the longtime support of the PAS in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, would one day educate Septima Clark, perhaps the leading female Civil Rights activist of the 1950s.¹²

The PAS sponsored other initiatives designed to support free black communities in the north. The early 19th century witnessed intense debate in many northern locales about the fruits of America's first emancipation experiment. After Pennsylvania passed its gradual abolition law in 1780, every northern state followed suit with some form of formal abolitionist action. Massachusetts' Supreme Court declared slavery unconstitutional in 1783, while Connecticut (1784), Rhode Island (1785), New York (1799), and New Jersey (1804) passed gradual abolition statutes of their own. Nevertheless, white citizens throughout the free North worried about black liberty, sometimes going so far as to denigrate northern emancipation itself. Colonization was to be one measure of rising anti-black sentiment: during the 1820s and 1830s, the American Colonization Society was perhaps more popular in the North than the South, largely for its promise to export liberated blacks overseas. Race riots were another barometer, with white-on-black violence occurring in urban centers like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Finally most northern states rescinded black voting rights during the antebellum era. Pennsylvania disfranchised its nearly 40,000 black citizens in 1838; voting rights did not return to Quaker State blacks until after the Civil War!

The PAS's major response to anti-black fear mongering was to issue reports denying that emancipation had failed, particularly in Pennsylvania. In 1838 and 1847, the group published two major studies of Philadelphia's free black community. In both cases, the PAS tried to show that Afro-Philadelphians were a law-abiding, industrious, increasingly literate, and reform-minded group. By emphasizing community stability amidst increasing racism, Pennsylvania abolitionists hoped to neutralize claims that free blacks drained society's resources and threatened white liberty. Indeed, the PAS asserted that free blacks were often more industrious, pious, and law-abiding than many white citizens!

If, then, the PAS was far from the nation's leading abolitionist organization by the Civil War era, it remained a firm part of the abolitionist landscape. Some of its members joined in the new abolitionist crusade. Others worked with fugitive slaves, became further involved in black education efforts, or remained dedicated to a more moderate brand of abolitionism.

PAS Legacies

So what did the PAS achieve? To begin with, the group never ceased operations, and it continues to support black educational endeavors into the 21st century. At the close of the Civil War, perceptive reformers realized that the PAS had been the seed of American

abolitionism itself, no matter how far it had diverged from the group's modest beginnings. In this sense, one 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' long and important history of abolitionist activism. Perhaps a Georgia secessionist put it best in 1860, when he declared that the sectional confrontation, which had resulted in Abraham Lincoln's election to the presidency and threatened civil war, dated to an abolitionist petition from 1790. That a slaveholding politician on the eve of sectional war would make such a pronouncement speaks volumes about the PAS's importance in both American reform and American culture.

Notes

¹ Sharp quoted in Newman, "The Pennsylvania Abolition Society: Restoring a Group to Glory," *Pennsylvania Legacies*, Volume 5, Number Two (November 2005): 7.

² Gary Nash and Jean Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation and its Aftermath in Pennsylvania* (New York, 1991), 80.

³ See Anthony Benezet, "Observations on the Enslaving, Importing and Purchasing of Negroes" (Philadelphia, 1759), reprinted with a fine introduction by Thomas Wolf, in *Early American Abolitionists*, James G. Basker, General Editor, (New York, 2005), 1-30, quote at 14.

⁴ Thomas Jefferson's "Notes on the State of Virginia" (1781-1782) is usefully digitized at the University of Virginia Library's Electronic Text Center: <http://etext.virginia.edu>.

⁵ On Franklin, see especially David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery and the American Revolution* (New York, 2004).

⁶ "An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery," passed in March 1780 in the state of Pennsylvania, reprinted with an expert introduction by Sam Rosenfeld of Columbia University, in Basker, ed., *Early American Abolitionists*, 89.

⁷ See Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill, 2002), especially Chap. 1.

⁸ Margaret Hope Bacon, *But One Race: The Life of Robert Purvis* (Albany, NY, 2007), 54-55.

⁹ On black activism and community life in Philadelphia and beyond during the early republic, see the following works: Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African-Americans in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, 2006) and *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, MA, 1988); John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican, The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753-1833* (New York, 2002); Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Richard Allen, the AME Church and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York, 2008); and Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten* (New York, 2002).

¹⁰ On PAS debates with Garrisonians, see Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, Chap. 5-7.

¹¹ Christopher Densmore, "Seeking Freedom in Courts," *Pennsylvania Legacies* Volume 5, Number Two (November 2005): 16-19.

¹² Bacon, *But One Race*, 23-25. See also. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, especially chap. 3.