Antebellum Reform Movements

Learning Target:
I can discuss the social reform movements that developed in the United States from 1790-1860.

Critical Vocabulary:

Transcendentalism
In his 1794 book The Age of Reason, Thomas Paine advanced a religious philosophy called Deism that struck at the tenets of organized religions, particularly Calvinism as it was practiced by the Puritans. Paine claimed that churches were “set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.” These thoughts were shocking to Americans who were imbued with a strong religious tradition. At the same time, Paine’s ideas appealed to many Americans who were likewise steeped in the rationality of the Enlightenment period and who had difficulty aligning Calvinist doctrine with reason.

Calvinism held that the essential nature of infants was evil. This belief was called “infant damnation.” Calvinism also subscribed to the belief that there were only a certain few who were “elect” by God from the beginning to be saved. All others were doomed after death regardless of their beliefs or actions in life. Many people objected to the ideas of infant damnation and the powerlessness of the individual to achieve salvation.

Paine’s Deism, by contrast, claimed that human nature was essentially good and that salvation was within reach of every person through faith and good works. Deists believed in a “clockwork” universe. They felt that God had created the world and all the laws that governed it, and then He allowed events to play themselves out as they would without further divine intervention. Deists believed that the laws of the world are knowable to humanity by the application of logic and reason. This contrasted with the Calvinist idea that true knowledge is only obtained by divine revelation as expressed in the Bible. A number of the Founding Fathers, including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, became Deists.

A new Protestant sect, the Unitarians, formally expressed the philosophy of Deism. Unitarians believed in a single divine deity, the Supreme Being, as opposed to the Holy Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit worshipped by most Christians. They also believed in free will, salvation through good works, and the intrinsically moral nature of human beings, including infants and children. The Unitarian creed was rational, optimistic, and non-dogmatic. Unitarianism appealed to many intellectuals and free thinkers of the day.

Others who were unhappy with the Puritan religion chose to return to the Episcopal faith, which was associated with the Anglican Church of England. The Irish and Scots in the United States were already
largely Presbyterian. A similar religious group, the Congregationalists, often merged with the Presbyterians in small communities since they differed little in creed. In these ways the religious landscape was changing in the early 1800s, especially among the established, educated people of New England. But the pace of change across the country was soon to quicken.

The **Romantic Movement** at the turn of the nineteenth century gave expression to a growing conviction throughout Europe and America that there was more to experiencing the world than could be inferred by logic and more to living than could be satisfied by the acquisition of material things. People felt a need to balance reason and calculation with emotion and spirit. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant first framed doubts over rationality as a cure-all for human problems and needs in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1781. Sympathetic poets and authors transmuted his ideas into literary works that were meant to be as much apprehended by the soul as understood by the intellect. In England, writers such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and Tennyson, to name a few, breathed life into Romanticism through their poetry. The Romantics revered nature and felt that contemplation of natural scenes would lead to realization of fundamental truths.

In America, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau helped formalize the Romantic Movement into **Transcendentalism**, a philosophy that reads almost like a faith. The Transcendentalists infused the Romantic impulse with mysticism, a belief in the possibility of direct communion with God and knowledge of ultimate reality through spiritual insight.

For Transcendentalists, truth is beyond, or transcends, what can be discovered using evidence acquired by the senses. Like the Quakers, Transcendentalists believed that every person possesses an Inner Light that can illuminate the highest truth and put a person in touch with God. Since this sort of knowledge of truth is a personal matter, Transcendentalism was committed to development of the self and had little regard for dogma or authority.

**Ralph Waldo Emerson** took up the Transcendentalist banner after studying at Harvard to be a Unitarian minister. He left what he called the “cold and cheerless” Unitarian pulpit to travel in Europe and talk to Romantic writers and philosophers, including Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Thomas Carlyle. Returning to America, he lived in Concord, Massachusetts, near Boston, where he composed poetry and wrote essays. He supported himself through annual lecture tours and was a very popular speaker.

In 1837 at Harvard, Emerson delivered his influential “**American Scholar**” lecture that exhorted Americans in the arts to stop turning to Europe for inspiration and instruction and begin developing an American literary and artistic tradition. Emerson preached the organic, ever-changing nature of the universe, stressing self-reliance, individualism, optimism, and freedom. Though not inclined toward political activism, by the eve of the Civil War, Emerson became an ardent abolitionist.

Another Transcendentalist, **Henry David Thoreau**, wrote essays that have had a profound effect on modern thought. His philosophy of individualism and conscious nonconformism is expressed in his book *Walden: Or Life in the Woods* (1854) where he describes living a full emotional and intellectual life for two years while residing in a tiny cabin he made himself and existing in every other way at a barely subsistence level. His other work of note is the essay “**On the Duty of Civil Disobedience.**” Thoreau was against Texas joining the Union because it would be a slave state. He felt that the United States had involved itself in the Mexican War on behalf of Texas and, therefore, he refused to pay a tax that he felt would support the war effort. For this he was briefly jailed. Thoreau’s tactic of passive resistance was later emulated by Mahatma Gandhi in India in his resistance to British rule and by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his non-violent approach to gaining civil rights.
Romanticism encouraged writing literature of remarkable emotional effects. In the early nineteenth century, Washington Irving (Legend of Sleepy Hollow), James Fenimore Cooper (Last of the Mohicans), and Edgar Allen Poe (The Pit and the Pendulum) made their marks as gifted authors. In the early 1850s, however, in addition to Thoreau’s Walden, American writers produced a dazzling set of classic works inaugurating a golden age in American literature. In this time frame, Nathaniel Hawthorne published The Scarlet Letter and The House of the Seven Gables, Herman Melville produced Moby-Dick, and Walt Whitman composed Leaves of Grass. These were a new breed of distinctly American authors, writing on American subjects and from a uniquely American perspective steeped in native Transcendentalism. Until this time American literature was considered second rate if it was considered at all. In the wake of these contributions, Europe began to look to America for thought and inspiration of true quality.

The Second Great Awakening
At the turn of the nineteenth century, America was still a devotedly church-going nation. Most Americans felt a traditional religious faith to be the foundation of moral character, and many worried that over time the religious imperative would wane into token gestures and empty social structures. These concerns increased with news of the cruelties and excesses of the French Revolution done in the name of reason.

In 1795, Timothy Dwight became president of Yale College, described as a “hotbed of infidelity.” Determined to counter the secular trend in American thinking, Dwight sponsored a series of religious revivals that fired the collective soul of the Yale student body and spread across New England, igniting a religious movement called the Second Great Awakening. The sermons preached from the pulpits of this great revival did not attempt like the old-time Puritans to pressure a captive congregation with dire predictions of a vengeful God’s omniscient power and arbitrary judgments. Rather, they spoke of a benevolent Father whose most passionate desire was the salvation of every one of His children down to the most lost sinner.

At a religious assembly, a person could be saved by faith alone during a conversion experience. Unusual behaviors such as “speaking in tongues” or convulsive fits of religious ecstasy sometimes accompanied these experiences. The only absolute requisite to salvation, however, was an acceptance of Christ’s sacrifice as atonement for one’s sins. All people were free to accept this gift or not. But the fires of everlasting hell, described in lush and vivid imagery, awaited those who turned their backs.

The Second Great Awakening soon spread to the frontier. Beginning in the South and moving northward along the frontier to the Old Northwest, a new institution, the camp meeting, ignited a spiritual fervor that converted thousands and altered the religious landscape of America forever. Many traditional churches were swept away in this new awakening. Others reformed to counter the firestorm of the evangelical preacher.

Camp meetings were generally held in the fall after harvest but before the rigors of winter. For the participants who often traveled considerable distances, religious revivals probably combined the attractions of a retreat, a camp-out, and a much-earned vacation. As many as 25,000 people gathered at revival meetings to hear the gospel preached by charismatic orators who “rode the circuit” from camp to camp.
Evangelists were aware that their power to make converts rested substantially in their influence with women. The new gospels emphasized the importance of the role of women in bringing their families to Christian life. They placed an equal value on the spiritual worth of men and women, in contrast to earlier religions that tended to minimize women’s importance in the spiritual as well as secular spheres. This gender egalitarianism in religious matters marked a break with the past and offered women the opportunity to acquire standing in the community without treading on the secular prerogatives of their husbands. Once this door was opened to them, women continued to play a crucial role in religious life and went on to become pioneers and crusaders in nineteenth century social reform.

Many prominent preachers frequented the pulpits of the burned-over-district. Among them, William Miller gained a following of around 100,000 with a Biblical interpretation of the Second Coming of Christ on October 22, 1844. Failure of the prophecy to materialize did not wholly quench the Millerite movement, which became known as Seventh Day Adventist.

Perhaps the greatest evangelist was the former lawyer Charles Grandison Finney, who conducted an intense, sustained revival in the burned-over-district from 1826 to 1831. Beginning in Utica, he made his way in stages to Rochester and New York City. Church membership grew by tens of thousands wherever he held revivals. A spellbinding orator, Finney preached a theology in pointed contrast to Puritan Calvinism. Salvation could be had by anyone through faith and good works, which he felt flowed from one another. People were the captains of their own fate, and since Judgment Day could come at any time, his hearers should take immediate action to ensure the redemption of themselves and their loved ones.

Finney was a master of showmanship and participatory psychology. His revival agenda included hymn singing and solicitation of personal testimonials from the congregation. He placed an “anxious bench” in the front of the assembly for those teetering on the brink of commitment to Christ. The moment of holy redemption for a bench-sitter became a dramatic event. Finney encouraged women to pray aloud and denounced alcohol and slavery from the pulpit. He felt that mass, public conversions were more effective than the old-style, solitary communion because they emphasized the fraternal nature of church membership. Finney later became president of Oberlin College in Ohio, the first U.S. college to admit women and blacks and a hotbed of abolitionism and evangelical zeal.

The crusading spirit of religious evangelism carried over into secular life and expressed itself in a number of reform movements. Temperance, suffrage, prison reform, and abolition all received an infusion of energy from evangelical vigor. In addition, the
traveling preacher expanded the horizons of imagination beyond the local sphere and even beyond the borders of the nation. Supporting a mission in a foreign country or among Native Americans in the West became a binding cause for many churches. Reports from missionaries in such exotic places as Africa, India, or Hawaii were awaited with breathless expectation. As an enticement to listen to their religious message, missionaries often provided medical, technical, and educational benefits to the people in the locale of their mission. In these ways, the Second Great Awakening contributed to changing not just the nation, but the world.

Revivalism did not affect the wealthier, better-educated parts of society that gravitated to Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Unitarian churches as much as it did rural and frontier communities that tended to be Baptist or Methodist. The Baptist faith proved ideal for conditions on the frontier. Baptists believed in a literal reading of the Bible that required no authoritarian interpretation. They also subscribed to the concept of the possibility of any person obtaining salvation through his or her own free will. Above all, however, they believed that a church was its own highest authority and thus avoided the difficulties and delays of petitions to and approvals from a distant hierarchical organization.

A group of Baptists could form their own church on the spot and choose a preacher from among themselves. The Baptists were egalitarian in their creed, believing that all people were equal before God regardless of their economic, social, or educational standing. The simplest farmer in Kentucky was on par in native dignity with every other person in the Republic. These beliefs and the Baptists’ uncomplicated organization were highly appealing to small communities of self-sufficient, independent-minded people.

The Methodists, however, were most successful at reaping the benefits of religious revivalism of the early 1800s by establishing a system of itinerant preachers on horseback, or circuit riders. Francis Asbury began the practice when the frontier was scarcely west of the Appalachian Mountains. Hardy and fearless, Asbury rode the rugged backwoods trails and preached thousands of sermons to farmers, pioneers, and backwoodsmen and their families.

Peter Cartwright, the most famous of the Methodist frontier preachers, delivered his highly charged sermons for 50 years in the frontier region bordering the Ohio River. Uneducated himself, he along with other Methodist evangelists considered education a hindrance to converting souls since conversion is not a matter of the mind but of the spirit. Energy, sincerity, and a powerful message of faith and redemption were the necessary requisites for a Methodist circuit rider. Their approach seems justified since by 1850 the Methodist Church had more members than any other Protestant sect in the country.

Churches came to reflect deep divisions that paralleled sectional interests in the country far beyond issues of religious doctrine or socio-economic stratification. By 1845, both the Baptist and Methodist Churches split over slavery. Presbyterians suffered a similar schism in 1857. The Northern churches of these denominations believed in abolishing slavery while Southern congregations felt their economic well-being was bound to a slaveholding system. The conflict over human bondage thus broke first in the communities of religion, which served as heralds to the South’s secession from the Union and, ultimately, to the American Civil War.

Utopian Movements
A number of cooperative communities were launched in the 1800s as experiments in alternative social organizations and Christian living according to scriptural interpretations. This was not a new phenomenon in the New World. The Jamestown colonists, the Puritans, the Quakers, and others had all made the difficult and dangerous voyage across the sea in order to live by their own beliefs.

Reformers in the aftermath of the Second Great Awakening sought to get away from authoritarian power structures but still provide for all members of the group. Brook Farm, New Harmony, the Shaker and Amana communities, and Oneida Colony were typical trials of utopian communes. Generally socialistic, these communities failed to thrive in America’s capitalistic culture once the vision and dedication of the original founders was gone. Their histories as alternative patterns of living are valuable, however, for their insight into human relationships and social structures.

New Harmony, founded in 1825 in Indiana by wealthy Scottish textile manufacturer Robert Owen, ironically perished early from lack of harmony among its participants. The Amana communities in New York and Iowa were also short-lived, fading away by the end of the 1850s.

Brook Farm in Massachusetts, noted as a transcendent literary and intellectual haven, suffered from indebtedness, in part from a disastrous fire and in part from lack of incentive for the members to be productive, since the fruits of the labor of all were shared equally by all, regardless of contribution. Lasting only five years, the experiment in “plain living and high thinking” was forever memorialized as the basis for Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel The Blithedale Romance.

The Shaker communities, founded by an Englishwoman, Ann Lee, who came to America in 1774, practiced strict sexual abstinence since they believed the Christian millennium was imminent and therefore saw no reason to perpetuate the human race. Ann Lee died in 1804, but the sect continued to prosper on the strength of its fervent and joyful religious life. The Shakers admired simplicity and
made an art of designing buildings and furniture of distinctive, harmonious beauty. By the 1830s, there were 20 Shaker communities, and by 1840 the Shakers had a membership of some six thousand. Shaker communities existed for another 100 years, though dwindling slowly. Their rule of celibacy and communal holding of property discouraged new converts. Because of their high ideals and lack of controversial practices, the Shaker communities lived in harmony with their neighbors.

By contrast, the Oneida Colony practiced free love, birth control, and eugenic selection of parents. These life-style anomalies proved unpalatable to most Americans and caused ongoing problems with the surrounding community. Founded in 1847 in Vermont by John Humphrey Noyes, the colony soon had to relocate to more-tolerant New York. Noyes's doctrine of “Bible Communism” insisted selfishness was the root of unhappiness. Owning property and maintaining exclusive relationships encouraged selfishness and destructive covetousness of what others have. Therefore, the keys to happiness were communal ownership of property and what Noyes termed “complex marriage” where every woman was married to every man in the group.

The Oneidans shared work equally and supported their enterprise by manufacturing such things as steel traps, silk thread, and silverplate tableware. Yielding to external pressure, the Oneida colony gave up complex marriage in 1879, and communal ownership of property soon followed. The group eventually transformed itself into a joint-stock company manufacturing stainless steel knives and tableware. Thus Noyes’s communistic utopia ended as a capitalist corporation.

In New York in the 1820s, Joseph Smith was visited with a vision and claimed to have received golden plates that detailed a new religion he called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormonism. In 1831 Smith founded a small community in Ohio. The Mormon faith was cooperative in nature, which rankled the individualistic temper of the times. But the colony was efficient and successful, which attracted converts. Strife with the local inhabitants caused the colony to relocate to Missouri and then to Illinois, where in 1839 they founded the town of Nauvoo. Five years later, Nauvoo was the largest town in the state. Rumors of polygamy and other social irregularities incensed the moral rectitude of neighboring non-Mormons. Smith and his brother Hyrum were arrested, and while in jail they were attacked by a mob and killed.

Leadership of the Mormons was taken up by Brigham Young who led the sect to the site of what is now Salt Lake City. The Mormons were highly successful in Utah, but so staunchly independent that they raised the ire of the United States government, which sent troops against them in 1857. The issue of polygamy delayed statehood for Utah until 1896. Though no longer communal in nature, Mormonism remains a dynamic influence in the state of Utah, and the Mormon faith is recognized as a major religion in the United States.

Subordination of the individual to the group seems to be the one common thread among the utopian experimental communities. Beyond that, their doctrines, practices, and fates make each group uniquely individual. They reflected the idealistic, reform-minded spirt of their age, and remain as monuments to human courage to live differently on the basis of principle and religious conviction.

Reform might be labeled the touchstone of the nineteenth century. The movements begun then often did not bear fruit until the twentieth century, and some are still in the process of becoming fully realized. Reforms such as prison reform, corporate reform, sanitation, and child labor were mostly accomplished through court cases. Women’s rights, the universal right to vote, and temperance from alcohol relied on grass-roots movements, consciousness raising in the form of parades, petitions, and lectures, and ultimately, legislation. But the test of the nation came over reform from the practice of slavery, which sparked a terrible war. The first reforms of the era were of religion and philosophy. When the hearts and minds of the people changed, social and political reform became an unstoppable force.
Humanitarian Reforms
The Age of Reform—the decades prior to the Civil War—was a period of tremendous economic and political change. Many Americans believed that traditional values were undercut by the emerging industrial and market economy and they supported humanitarian and social reforms in an effort to create a new moral order. Some reformers, including those who embraced transcendentalism, promoted the divinity of the individual and sought to perfect human society. A number of experimental communal "utopias" were formed to further this effort.

Other reformers were driven by more traditional religious impulses, such as the Protestant revivalism known as the Second Great Awakening. Charles Grandison Finney, the greatest of the revival preachers, denounced both alcohol and slavery. The Shaker, Amana, and Mormon communities were among those that blended religion and secular institutions to further human perfectibility. Many middle-class women took the opportunity to broaden their experiences beyond the domestic sphere by participating in various reform movements. A defining characteristic of this era was that women played public, leading roles in many of the crusades to reform American society.

The emphasis on human perfectibility led some reformers to provide care for the physically and mentally afflicted. Thomas H. Gallaudet, a graduate of Yale who studied the education of deaf-mutes in Paris, opened the first American school for the deaf at Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817. His son, Edward, founded the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, which is now known as Gallaudet University. Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe did similar work with the sightless in Boston. He founded in 1832 the Perkins Institution and the Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind. Howe received international acclaim by teaching a blind, deaf, and mute, twelve-year-old girl to communicate through sign language.

As part of the humanitarian reforms sweeping America, asylums were also funded for social deviants and the mentally ill. Criminals of all kinds—including debtors—and the indigent insane were confined together indiscriminately in crowded, filthy prisons during the early decades of the nineteenth century. In Pennsylvania and New York, the idea that criminals should be reformed led to experiments in solitary confinement. Strict rules of silence were imposed, in an attempt to provide prisoners with the opportunity to contemplate their mistakes and become penitent. Therefore, prisons literally became "penitentiaries," or "reformatories." In 1821, Kentucky became the first state to abolish imprisonment for debt. As working-class men won the right to vote, debtors' prisons eventually disappeared from the American scene.

Dorothea Dix abandoned a successful teaching career in 1841 to begin a life-long crusade to improve conditions for the mentally impaired. After touring asylums and poorhouses in Massachusetts, she reported to the legislature that the indigent insane were treated as violent criminals: "Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience." Dix traveled extensively and ultimately persuaded 20 state legislatures and the federal government to establish mental health asylums, including St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C. At her urging, Congress passed a bill granting public lands to the states to fund hospitals for the mentally and physically impaired. President Franklin Pierce, however, did not want the federal government involved in charity work and vetoed it. Despite that singular setback, Dorothea Dix clearly influenced governmental policy during the Age of Reform.

Social Reforms
Educational reform was another effort Americans pursued to perfect society during this period. In the early nineteenth century, Americans had the highest literacy rate in the western world, and yet there was no statewide system of free elementary schools anywhere in the United States. Reformers were influenced by Thomas Jefferson's vision of an educated electorate, and the desire to inculcate students—including increasing numbers of non-English and non-Protestant immigrants—with traditional American values. Public education, they argued, would foster equal opportunity and social stability.

The leading figure in the public school movement was Horace Mann. He served as the secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education from its creation in 1837 until 1848, when he was elected to the Congress. Mann was the driving force behind better school buildings, expanded curricula, and improved teacher training and higher salaries. Boston set the pace with free public high schools in the 1820s, for both boys and girls. By the Civil War, most northern states had tax-supported public schools at the elementary and high school levels. Public education lagged, however, in the western frontier regions and throughout most of the South.

Women played an increasing role in public education during the reform era. Catharine Beecher, a sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe, encouraged women to enter the teaching profession because their "natural" role suited them to the care and nurturing of children. Thus, Beecher combined the "cult of domesticity" with educational reform. By 1850, most elementary school teachers were women, although some were hired because they could be paid considerably less than men. At the secondary level, Emma Willard in 1821 established the Troy Female Seminary in New York. Oberlin College in Ohio became the first institution of
higher learning to admit African Americans and female students—four women enrolled in 1837. That same year, Mary Lyon founded Mount Holyoke Seminary, which later became the first women's college. During the Age of Reform, educational opportunities for women expanded, although most were not encouraged to pursue higher education.

The Temperance Movement, the greatest of the evangelically inspired reforms, also attracted those who believed in human perfectibility. During the early 1800s, Americans consumed two to three times the amount of alcohol per capita than today. Alcohol abuse was rampant among men and women from every walk of life. Drunkenness, the reformers claimed, lay at the root of nearly every social problem—including crime, poverty, labor absenteeism, and domestic violence. Advocates of temperance had been active since the publication of Dr. Benjamin Rush's An Inquiry into the Effects of Spirituous Liquors upon the Human Mind and Body in 1784, but the campaign against alcohol during the reform era was imbued with an unprecedented moralistic fervor. This was, in large measure, because women dominated the rank-and-file membership roles of many local temperance societies. The Temperance Movement attracted the largest numbers of female reformers, and served to introduce them to other crusades—especially women's rights and abolitionism.

In 1826, the assault upon "demon rum" became a national movement with a confederation of local societies called the American Temperance Union. Within a decade, the A.T.U. boasted a membership of 1.5 million, and an additional five hundred thousand Americans had taken the "cold water pledge" and vowed to forsake all alcohol. In 1840, a group of reformed alcoholics led by John B. Gough, known as the "poet of the d.t.'s," organized the Washington Temperance Society and began touring the country, giving impassioned speeches to audiences of "drowned drunkards." Temperance songs, such as "Dear Father, Drink No More," and melodramatic fiction also were employed in the fight against liquor. The Glass, for instance, told the story of a young boy who was locked in a closet by his drunken mother and forced to gnaw off one of his arms to prevent starvation. The most popular temperance novel was Timothy Shay Arthur's Ten Nights in a Bar-Room, and What I Saw There, a tragic tale of a family destroyed by drink. Only copies of Uncle Tom's Cabin sold in greater numbers during the 1850s.

Maine became the first state to prohibit the sale of alcohol, in 1851. The leader of the prohibition campaign was Neal Dow, a Quaker businessman who served as the mayor of Portland. A dozen other states passed similar "Maine laws," although in most cases they were not rigorously enforced or were soon repealed. This shift in objectives from temperance to prohibition was generally led by well-to-do reformers and industrialists. Employers were particularly interested in imposing discipline among their laborers, many of them Irish or German immigrants who resented legislative attempts to curb their social drinking. The phenomenal success of the temperance movement in reducing alcohol consumption during this period was due not to legal coercion, but moral suasion and self-improvement.

The Women's Rights Movement

The spirit of reform was prevalent in the field of women's rights. Many women played a central role in a wide range of antebellum moral crusades—especially in support of temperance and the abolition of slavery—and their experiences in a male-dominated culture led to the first American feminist movement. This era witnessed the beginning of the quest for equality between the sexes, but the chief strides were made decades later.
Following the Revolutionary War, women were encouraged to become models of "Republican Motherhood," in an effort to nurture and shape succeeding generations of American citizens. The emerging market economy during the early nineteenth century widened the gulf between the workplace and the home, and had a tremendous impact on the social roles of middle-class men and women. The result was an increasing emphasis on the "separate spheres" concept. That is, men were the "bread-winners" and political leaders; women were expected to be the guardians of morality and benevolence. The family home was now a refuge from the harsh realities of the office or factory, and the special province of the wife and mother.

Some women enthusiastically embraced the "cult of domesticity," reveling in their increased influence and leadership within the home. Catharine Beecher, for example, in 1841 wrote Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies, a best-selling guidebook for wives and mothers in which she instructed them on their myriad household duties. Sarah J. Hale, editor of the popular Godey's Lady's Book, explained that her magazine scrupulously avoided political topics because "other subjects are more important for our sex and more proper for our sphere." Working-class women did not have the opportunity to stay home and cultivate the "domestic virtues," but for many middle-class women their growing independence within the family justified a life revolving around their husband and children.

Some women naturally found the domestic sphere to be confining. Americans were also marrying later and bearing fewer children. This meant that many women had the inclination and the time to participate in the women's rights movement. During the Age of Reform, women faced legal discrimination in virtually every aspect of their lives. They were prohibited from voting or holding public office, and forfeited their property rights when they married. A wife could not sign a contract, draft a will, or sue in court, without her husband's permission. Most professions were closed to women, with the notable exceptions of teaching and writing, and females had less access to higher education. The legal status of women was essentially that of a white child or black slave. Margaret Fuller, a prominent transcendentalist and the editor of The Dial, wrote in Woman in the Nineteenth Century: "Many women are considering within themselves what they need and what they have not."

Some female abolitionists turned their attention also to the women's crusade. Sarah and Angelina Grimké, daughters of a southern slaveholder, railed against "domestic slavery" as well as black bondage, and defiantly declared, "Whatever is right for man to do is right for woman." Angelina married the western abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld, in 1838, but chose to retain her maiden name. Sojourner Truth, a former slave, divided her time between addressing abolitionist audiences and women's rights groups.

Most famously, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were two female delegates to the World Anti-Slavery Convention held at London in 1840. When they were denied full participation because of their gender, they returned to America determined to campaign for equal rights. They organized the first women's rights convention held at Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848. The three hundred delegates adopted a "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions," drafted primarily by Stanton, that was patterned on the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal." The document listed the "repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman," and called for a redress of grievances.

Among the resolutions adopted by the convention, only one was not ratified unanimously—the demand that women be granted the right to vote. One hundred delegates, including thirty-four men (among them Frederick Douglass) signed the declaration, although some later requested the removal of their names due to the public outcry and scorn heaped upon the "amazons" of Seneca Falls. Thus was launched the modern women's rights movement in America.
The first truly national women's rights convention was held in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1840. **Susan B. Anthony**, an unmarried Quaker who had been active in the temperance movement, shortly thereafter assumed the leadership role in the drive for legal equality and the right to vote. Progress was limited in these years, however. More than a dozen states, led by Mississippi in 1839, granted some property rights to married women. Additionally, some extraordinary women hurdled the barriers to career advancement.

**Elizabeth Blackwell**, in 1849, became the first female to graduate from a medical college. Her sister-in-law, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, was the first ordained female minister in the United States. Progress was also made in the field of higher education for women. Lucy Stone, yet another of Elizabeth Blackwell's sisters-in-law and a graduate of Oberlin College, married Henry Blackwell in 1855. She popularized the feminist practice of retaining her maiden name after marriage; those who did so were called "Lucy Stoners." A final feminist symbol, named for Amelia Bloomer, was a style of dress that combined a short skirt over full-length pantaloes. "Bloomers," introduced by the well-known actress Frances Kemble, were a practical outfit that afforded women freedom of movement without a loss of modesty. Typically, however, bloomers were ridiculed as too radical and unfeminine. Although some progress was made during these years, the entire women's rights crusade took a back seat to other reform movements—most especially to abolitionism.

**The Abolitionist Movement**

The crusade against slavery was the most significant of the reform era movements. Slavery existed in all of the original 13 American colonies, but by the middle of the eighteenth century some Americans began to speak out against human bondage. The Society of Friends—the Quakers—became the first group to take a public stand in support of the abolition of slavery. The devotion of the Quakers was paralleled, in varying degrees, by other religions. As the Revolutionary War approached, the moral arguments against slavery were bolstered by secular concepts drawn from the Enlightenment, including individual freedom and political equality.

Spurred on by the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution, opposition to slavery grew throughout the United States. Northern states, in part due to economic conditions, inaugurated gradual emancipation programs. Since the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 prohibited slavery in that region, by the first decade of the nineteenth century all the states that would be free by the time of the Civil War were on the road to manumission. Additionally, Congress prohibited foreign slave trade in 1808.

Slavery may appear to have been dying out in the United States, but the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 made it economically viable in the southern states. Furthermore, slavery was more than just a labor system—it was an institution to control the black race in America. Racism alone prevented the abolition of slavery during the Age of Reform. Southerners defended slavery as a "necessary evil," and argued that they could not free millions of slaves without destroying their economy and their society. Many Northerners had economic ties to the "peculiar institution," and still others worried about their own futures if they were suddenly competing in the marketplace with millions of free African Americans. Most northern states restricted the political rights and civil liberties of their black citizens. Lydia Maria Child, an active reformer in many fields, captured this Northern spirit when she wrote, "Our prejudice against colored people is even more inveterate than it is at the South."

The abolition movement grew slowly during the first decades of the nineteenth century. In late December 1816, a prominent group of men, dominated by Southerners, gathered in Washington and founded the **American Colonization Society**. Judge Bushrod Washington, nephew of the first president, presided. Henry Clay, a Kentucky slaveholder and national political figure, praised the aim of the society to "rid our country of a useless and pernicious, if not dangerous, portion of its population"—free blacks.

Several years later, the first African Americans arrived in what became the **Republic of Liberia**. Its capital, Monrovia, was named for the slaveholding president who supported the goals of the American Colonization Society. Colonization, however, had no real chance of success. Only a tiny fraction of the African American population removed to Liberia, due to the costs involved and the opposition of free blacks who rightly viewed America as their homeland. Most white abolitionists, too, soon turned to other methods to combat slavery. Nonetheless, during the 1850s Martin Delany, a free black doctor and journalist, preached economic self-sufficiency and the creation of separate African American communities in Africa, Canada, or Latin America. As late as the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln seriously considered establishing black colonies in Latin America and the Caribbean.

A new intensity and enthusiasm galvanized the abolition movement during the reform era. African Americans were active in the crusade from the start. The first African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, was founded in New York in 1827, and within a few years there were more than 50 antislavery societies in black communities. David Walker, a free black who moved from North Carolina to Boston, was one of the Journal's agents. He published in 1829 a radical pamphlet, *Walker's Appeal . . . to the Colored Citizens of the World*, that scornfully rejected colonization, and warned whites of the destruction they faced, "If we have to obtain our freedom by fighting."
Garrison demanded immediate, uncompensated emancipation, and equal rights for black Americans. He lambasted the Constitution for permitting slavery to exist, refused to engage in political action to attain his goals, and called upon northern states to secede from the Union if slavery was not abolished by the "wicked" Southerners. Garrison led the way in founding the New England Anti-Slavery Society in 1832, and served as the first president of the American Anti-Slavery Society the following year. The chief financial backing for the national society came from two wealthy New York merchants, Arthur and Lewis Tappan. Within a decade, there were about 2,000 affiliates of the American Anti-Slavery Society, enrolling 200,000 members.

Women played a major role in the abolitionist movement. Lucretia Mott founded the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, and the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women was a network of local organizations. African Americans, including Sojourner Truth and Maria Stewart, addressed "promiscuous" audiences of men and women in New England. Abby Kelley, a Quaker, and Angelina and Sarah Grimké, who converted to Quakerism before leaving their southern home, were among the more celebrated female platform speakers. Angelina and Sarah contributed much of the primary research from southern newspapers and firsthand testimonials to Theodore Dwight Weld’s graphic exposé of the "peculiar institution," American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses. Weld, who was married to Angelina, was a revivalist preacher trained by Charles Grandison Finney and a leading western abolitionist.

Many escaped slaves made particularly effective speakers. Henry Bibb and William Wells Brown, both escapees from Kentucky, were prominent African American abolitionist orators. Frederick Douglass was the greatest African American abolitionist and a mesmerizing speaker. His autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, traced the remarkable life of a young slave who taught himself to read and write before escaping from Maryland in 1838. Douglass founded the North Star, an abolitionist newspaper, in Rochester, New York, and continued the crusade for racial equality.

Despite their growing numbers, antislavery crusaders were never more than a small minority of Northerners. They were also the subjects of physical threats. Garrison, for example, was paraded around Boston in 1835, with a rope hanging from his neck, by what was described as a "well-dressed" mob. Two years later, the movement had its first martyr. In Alton, Illinois, across the Mississippi River from slave-holding Missouri, Elijah P. Lovejoy was murdered while defending his abolitionist newspaper office. Cassius Marcellus Clay faced the same threat in Lexington, Kentucky, and mounted two small brass cannons to guard the doors of the True American. Violence was averted, however, when Clay’s press was dismantled and shipped out of the state.
To further the cause of freedom for the slaves and freedom of the press, thousands of petitions were sent to Congress urging the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. In 1836, however, the House passed a "gag rule," that automatically tabled antislavery petitions without debate. Many Northerners, who previously gave little thought to abolition, now viewed their own civil liberties as being in jeopardy. John Quincy Adams, then a representative from Massachusetts, led the fight against the gag rule until its repeal in 1844.

The petition drive was one form of political action employed by abolitionists. Some leaders of the movement, most notably William Lloyd Garrison, continued to rely solely on moral suasion. Increasingly frustrated by their lack of progress, however, Douglass, Weld, and the Tappan brothers were among those abolitionists calling for a political war against slavery. In 1840, they organized the Liberty Party, and nominated for president James G. Birney, a former Kentucky slaveholder. Birney received only 7,000 popular votes in the ensuing election. Four years later, again with Birney heading the ticket, the Liberty Party increased its vote count to 62,000. The abolitionists probably cost the Whigs the electoral vote of New York, thereby ensuring the election of Democrat James Knox Polk. In 1848, the Free Soil Party played a significant role in the election, and foreshadowed the founding of the Republican Party in the 1850s. Ultimately, the abolitionist crusade proved to be the most powerful of all the reform era movements, forever changing the history of the United States.