

Document 1: William Lloyd Garrison, July 14, 1830, to Ebenezer Dole

Introduction

William Lloyd Garrison was the leading proponent of the immediate abolition of slavery without compensation to owners. In this letter, he explains that life under slavery is far worse than the seven weeks he spent in jail for criminal libel after he accused a Baltimore merchant of involvement in the slave trade

Image

Baltimore
Baltimore, July 14, 1830.
Respected and benevolent Sir:
At the request of my counsel, and at the desire of my friend Lundy, I visited Boston and Newburyport a few weeks since, in order to get some essential evidence to be used in the civil action which is now pending against me in this city; and also to see whether any thing could be done towards removing, and permanently establishing, the weekly publication of the Genius. I left Baltimore without adequate means to carry me home, relying upon Providence to open a door of relief. On my arrival in New York, I was accidentally introduced to a gentleman named Samuel Hazzell, who generously offers me a passage to Rhode-Island, in the splendid steam-boat President, he being a stockholder therein. Thus I was most unexpectedly relieved of my embarrassment, and enabled to reach my place of destination. Mr. H. said that he has read with indignation the proceedings of the court at my late trial, and was glad to hear an opportunity of serving me. I gave him many thanks for his kindness.
I found the minds of the people strangely indifferent to the subject of Slavery. Their prejudices are invincible—stronger, if possible, than those of slaveholders. Objections were started on every hand; apologies for the abominable system constantly saluted my ears; obstacles were industriously piled up on my path. The cause of this callous state of feeling was owing to their exceeding ignorance of the horrors of Slavery. What was yet more discouraging, my best friends—without an exception—besought me to give up the enterprise, and never to return to Baltimore! It was not my duty (they argued) to spend my time, and talents, and services, where persecution, reproach and poverty were the only certain rewards. My scheme was visionary—fanatical—unattainable. Why should I make myself an exile for home and all the hardships, dangers and toils in a strange land, among enemies whose hearts were dead to every noble sentiment?—No, Sir, I repeat—All were against my return. But I desire to thank God, that he gave me strength to overcome this selfish and pernicious advice. Opposition serves only to increase my valor, and confirm my purpose.

Transcript

William Lloyd Garrison, July 14, 1830, to Ebenezer Dole (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC4516)

I have found the minds of the people strangely indifferent to the subject of slavery. Their prejudices were invincible -- stronger, if possible, than those of slaveholders. Objections were stated on every hand; apologies for the abominable system constantly saluted my ears; obstacles were industriously piled up in my path. The cause of this callous state of feeling was owing to their exceeding ignorance of the horrors of slavery. What was yet more discouraging, my best friends -- without an exception -- besought me to give up the enterprise, and never to return to Baltimore! It was not my duty (they argued) to spend my time, and talents, and services, where persecution, reproach and poverty were the only certain reward. My scheme was visionary -- fanatical -- unattainable. Why should I make myself an exile from home and all that I held dear on earth, and sojourn in a strange land, among enemies whose hearts were dead to every noble sentiment? -- &c. &c. &c. I repeat -- all were against my return. But I desire to thank God, that he gave me strength to overcome this selfish and pernicious advice. Opposition served only to increase my ardor, and confirm my purpose.

But how was I to return? I had not a dollar in my pocket, and my time was expired. No one understood my circumstances. I was too proud to beg, and ashamed to borrow. My friends were prodigal of pity, but of nothing else. In the extremity of my uneasiness, I went to the Boston Post office, and found a letter for my friend {Benjamin} Lundy, enclosing a draft for \$100, from a stranger -- yourself, as a remuneration for my poor, inefficient services in behalf of the slaves! Here Providence had again signally interfered in my behalf. After deducting the expenses of travelling, the remainder of the above named sum was applied to discharging a few of the debts incurred by the unproductiveness of the Genius.

As I lay in my couch one night, in jail, I was led to contrast my situation with that of the poor slave. Ah! Dear sir, how wide the difference! In one particular only, (I said,) our conditions are similar. He is confined to the narrow limits of a plantation -- I to the narrow limits of a prison-yard. Farther all parallels fail. My food is far better and more abundant, as I get a pound of bread and a pound of meat, with a plentiful supply of pure water, per diem. I can lie down or rise up, sit or walk, sing or declaim, read or write, as fancy, pleasure or profit dictates. Moreover, I am daily cheered with the presence and conversation of friends;-- I am constantly supplied with fresh periodicals from every section of the country, and, consequently, am advertised of every new and interesting occurrence. Occasionally, a letter greets me from a distant place, filled with consolatory expressions, tender remembrances, or fine compliments. If it rain, my room is a shelter; if the sun flame too intensely, I can choose a shady retreat; if I am sick, medical aid is at hand. Besides, I have been charged with a specific offence -- have had the privilege of a trial by jury, and the aid of eminent counsel -- and am here ostensibly to satisfy the demands of justice. A few months, at the longest, will release me from my captivity.

Now, how is it with the slave? He gets a peck of corn (occasionally a little more) each week, but rarely meat or fish. He must anticipate the sun in rising, or be whipped severely for his somnolency. Rain or shine, he must toil early and late for the benefit of another. If he be weary, he cannot rest -- for the lash of the driver is flourished over his drooping head, or applied to his naked frame; if sick, he is suspected

of laziness, and treated accordingly. For the most trifling or innocent offence, he is felled to the earth, or scourged on his back till it streams with blood. He has a wife and children, he sees them as cruelly treated as himself. He may be torn from them, or they from him, at any moment, never again to meet on earth. Friends do not visit and console him: he has no friends. He knows not what is going on behind his own narrow boundaries. He can neither read nor write. The letters of the alphabet are caballistical to his eyes. A thick darkness broods over his soul. Even the "glorious gospel of the blessed God," which brings life and immortality to perishing man, is as a sealed book to his understanding. Nor has his wretched condition been imposed upon him for any criminal offence. He has not been tried by the laws of his country. No one has stepped forth to vindicate his rights. He is made an abject slave, simply because God has given him a skin not colored like his master's; and Death, the great Liberator, alone can break his fetters!

Document 2: John Quincy Adams to the Inhabitants of the 12th Congressional District of Massachusetts

Introduction

After the House of Representatives adopted the notorious "gag rule" in 1836, tabling all anti-slavery petitions without discussion, former President John Quincy Adams, now a Congressman, argued that the rule violated the constitutional right to petition government for redress of grievances.

Image

To the Inhabitants of the 12th Congressional District of Massachusetts,
House of Representatives of the United States
Washington 3^d March 1837

Fellow Citizens.

The proceedings of the House of Representatives on the presentation of abolition and anti Slavery Petitions on the 23^d of January were so incorrectly reported in the National Intelligencer of the 25th that I addressed a letter to the Editors of that Paper, pointing out some of its errors and omissions, which was published in their paper of the 30th

On that day I presented twenty one Petitions all of which were laid on the table without being read, though in every instance I moved for the reading, which the Speaker refused to permit from his decision I took in every case an Appeal, and the Appeal was in every case laid on the Table, by a vote of the House, at the motion of a member from New Hampshire, Mr Cushman. This Gentleman had been reported in the Globe, as having voted against receiving the abolition Petitions addressed to the Editors of that Paper a letter correcting that error, and stating that he had voted for receiving them, and then for laying them on the Table, where they might be taken up and acted upon, whenever the House should think fit. Thus you will observe the line of separation between the Northern Anti abolitionists and the Southern Slave holders in the House. The practical result to the Petitioner was the same. His right of Petition was in both cases suppressed. The freedom of speech in the House was equally denied to the Member presenting the Petition to support by argument, its prayer. But the Slave holder denied the right of Congress to receive the Petition. His Northern Auxiliary receives the Petition, and lays it on the table, to be taken up when time shall serve. But in the meantime, it is to be reported in the Globe, that the Slave holder would bring Congress of the House. The Northernman holds it in reserve. This distinction may hereafter prove to be a difference in its present issue is the same.

I considered as I stated in my address of the 21st of January, the system of action of the House upon the abolition Petitions as settled for the remainder of the Session. But between that and the next day for receiving Petitions, namely the 6th of February

Transcript

John Quincy Adams to the Inhabitants of the 12th Congressional District of Massachusetts, March 3, 1837. GLC 639.05

To the Inhabitants of the 12th Congressional District of Massachusetts,

House of Representatives of the United States

Washington 3d March 1837

Fellow Citizens

The proceedings of the House of Representatives on the presentation of abolition and anti-slavery petitions on the 23d of January were so incorrectly reported in the National Intelligencer of the 25th that I addressed a letter to the editor of that paper, pointing out some of its errors and omissions, which was published in their paper of the 30th.

On that day I presented twenty-one petitions, all of which were laid on the table without being read, though in every instance I moved for the reading, which the speaker refused to permit; from his decision I took in every case an appeal, and the appeal was in every case laid on the table, by a vote of the House, at the motion of a member from New Hampshire, Mr. Cushman. This gentleman [struck: had] [inserted: having] been reported in the Globe as having voted against receiving the abolition petitions, addressed to the editors of that paper a letter correcting that error and stating that he had voted for receiving them and then for laying them on the table, where they might be taken as and acted upon whenever the House should think fit. Here you will observe was the line of separation between the Northern Anti-abolitionists and the Southern Slave-holders in the House. The practical result to the petition was the same. His right of petition was in both cases suppressed. The freedom of speech in the House was equally denied to the member presenting the petitions to support, by argument, its prayer. But the slave holder denied the right of Congress to receive the petition. This Northern auxiliary receives the petition, and lays it on the table, to be taken up when times shall serve; but in the meantime refuses to hear it read. The slave holder would strip Congress of the power. The Northerner holds it in reserve. This distinction may hereafter prove to be a difference. Its present issue is the same.

I considered as I stated in my address of the 31st of January, the system of action of the House upon the abolition petitions as settled for the remainder of the session. But between that and the next day for receiving petitions, Monday the 4th of February, I received thirty petitions, among which were two, which came to me by the mail postmarked Fredericksburg, Virginia. One of them signed by nine names of women in various hand-writing some of them good, none of illiterate appearance. It prayed not for the abolition of slavery, but that Congress would put a stop to the slave trade in the District of Columbia. It was accompanied by a letter signed by one of the names subscribed to the petition requesting me to present it. The other purported to be from twenty-two slaves, subscribed so as to have every appearance of being genuine; the first name being in a hand writing not absolutely bad, and subscribed also alone to a letter requesting me to present the petition. I believed the petition signed by female

names to be genuine and did not believe them to be names of free Negroes or mulattoes, but had I known them to be such that would not have deterred me from presenting it. The object of it being not only proper in its all, but laudable and eminently fit for subscription by virtuous women of any colour [sic] or complexion. I had suspicions that the other, purporting to be from slaves, came really from the hand of a master, who had prevailed upon his slaves to sign it, that they might have the appearance of imploring the members from the North to cease offering petitions for their emancipation which could have no other tendency than to aggravate the burden of their servitude and of being so impatient under the operation of the petitions in their favour [sic], as to pray that the Northern members who should persist in presenting them should be expelled. Intimations of the same desire had already been manifested in quarters very remote from servitude, and not even professors of servility. They had been seen in a newspaper of this city professedly devoted to the pure coinage of democracy from the mint of Van Buren and Rives, against the counterfeit currency of Benton and Amos Kendall. The Albany Argus itself, a paper known to be under the same influences, had commented that the Massachusetts Madman should be permitted week after week, to do what? To persist in presenting abolition petitions! This was the head and front of my offending, and for this alone, the petition from Slaves, for my expulsion from the House, was but the echo of the distinct and explicit call from the Albany Argus and the Van Buren and Rives Washingtonian.

But the petition, avowedly coming from slaves, though praying for my expulsion from the House if I should persevere in presenting abolition petitions opened to my examination and enquiry a new question, or at least a question which had never occurred to me before, and which I never should have thought of starting upon speculation namely, whether the right to petition Congress could in any case be exercised by slaves? And after giving to the subject all the reflection of which I was capable, I came to the conclusion that however doubtful it might be whether slaves could petition Congress for anything incompatible with their condition as slaves, and with their subjection to servitude, yet that for all other wants, distresses and grievances incident to their nature as men and to their relations as members, degraded members as they may be of this community, they do enjoy the right of petition and that if they enjoyed the right in any case whatever, there could be none in which they were more certainly entitled to it, than that of deprecating the attempts of deluded friends to release them from bondage; a case in which they alone could in the nature of things speak for themselves, and their masters could possibly speak for them. The next question which I considered was whether this paper was embraced by the resolution of the 18th of January and of that, no man understanding the English language could entertain a moment's doubt.

But after getting these two questions to the satisfaction of my own mind, there remained another. With what temper they would be received in an house; the large majority of which consisted of slaveholders, and of their political Northern associates, whose mouthpieces had already put forth their feelers to familiarize the freemen of the North with the fight of a representative expelled from his seat for the single offence of persisting to present abolition petitions. I foresaw that this very conception of a petition from slaves, would dismount all the slave-holding philosophy of the House, and expected it would produce an explosion, which would spend itself in wind. Without therefore presenting, or offering to present the petition, I stated to the Speaker that I had such a paper in my possession, to which I had

been requested to present, and enquired whether it came within the Resolution of the 18th of January. Now the Speaker had decided that under that order, no such paper should be read. Yet his first impulse was to get possession of the paper, but I declined presenting it till it should be decided whether it was embraced by the Resolution of the 18th of January or not. The Speaker, conscious as he was that it came so clearly within the letter of that resolution that it was impossible for him to decide that it did not, yet horrified at the idea of receiving and laying on the table a petition from slaves, said that in a case so novel and extraordinary he felt himself incompetent to decide and might take the advice and direction of the House. One of the gross absurdities of that resolution as administered by the Speaker was that every paper relating to slavery or the abolition of slavery should, without being read, be laid on the table. I had repeatedly remonstrated, both against the resolution and against his construct of it, in vain. And one of my purposes in putting this question to him was to expose that absurdity in its uncoverable nakedness. The resolution of the 18th of January, presupposed by its own terms that every paper, relating to slavery or the abolition of slavery, should be received without examination or enquiry whence it came, or what were its contents. There was neither exception nor qualification in the resolution and the Speaker had decided that no such papers should be read. If I had stated that I had a petition from sundry persons in Fredericksburg, relating to slavery, without saying that the petitioners were by their own avowal slaves, the paper must have gone upon the table, but the discovery would soon have been made that it came from slaves and there the tempest of indignation would have burst upon me with tenfold fury and I should have been charged with having fraudulently introduced a petition from slaves without letting the House know the condition of the petitioners.

To avoid the possibility of such a charge, I put the question to the Speaker, giving him notice that the petition purported to come from slaves and that I had suspicions that it came from another, and a very different source. The Speaker after failing in the attempt to obtain possession of the paper, referred my question to the House for decision and there ensued a scene of which I propose to give you an account, in a subsequent address, intreating [sic] you only to remember, if what I have said, or may say to you hereafter on this subject should tax your patience, that the stake in question is your right of petition, your freedom of thought and of action, and the freedom of speech in Congress of you representative.

John Quincy Adams

Document 3: Advertising broadside for J.W. Barber, "A History of the Amistad Captives," featuring woodcut, "The Death of Capt. Ferrer," 1840. GLC 4295


Introduction

In 1839, fifty-two African captives staged a successful rebellion on the Spanish schooner "L'Amistad". Their seizure by a U.S. revenue cutter touched off a legal battle that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled that the captives had exercised their right to self defense and should be immediately freed.

Image

Please preserve this, until called for.

A HISTORY OF THE AMISTAD CAPTIVES:
Being a circumstantial account of the capture of the Spanish Schooner Amistad, by the Africans on board; their Voyage and Capture near Long Island, New York; with Biographical Sketches of each of the surviving Africans. Also, an account of the Trials had on their case, before the District and Circuit Courts of the United States, for the District of Connecticut, &c. Compiled from authentic sources, by J. W. Barber.
Illustrated by an accurate profile sketch of each of the Africans, with other engravings. Price, 25 cts.



Death of Capt. Ferrer, the Captain of the Amistad, July, 1839.
Don Jose Ruiz and Don Pedro Montez, of the Island of Cuba, having purchased fifty-three slaves at Havana, recently imported from Africa, put them on board the Amistad, Capt. Ferrer, in order to transport them to Principe, another port on the Island of Cuba. After being out from Havana about four days, the African captives on board, in order to obtain their freedom, and return to Africa, armed themselves with cane knives, and rose upon the Captain and crew of the vessel. Capt. Ferrer and the cook of the vessel were killed; two of the crew escaped; Ruiz and Montez were made prisoners.