



Abby Kelley Foster: Anti-Slavery, Women's Rights, and Seneca Falls



Abby Kelley Foster was an influential Quaker anti-slavery reformer who provided inspiration and courage to the women who organized the Seneca Falls 1848 Woman's Rights Convention. Her activism in Seneca Falls led to the formation of the Wesleyan Methodist Congregation with their public anti-slavery stance and free speech commitment.

Anti-Slavery

Abby Kelley was born in 1811 into a large Quaker family in Pelham, Massachusetts. Her family, school, and religious community instilled in her a belief in the equality of all people. After her formal education ended, Kelley moved to the nearby village of Lynn. There she was introduced to Quakers who openly proclaimed their commitment to social justice issues. Kelley began taking an interest in temperance, anti-slavery, and pacifism. She heard William Lloyd Garrison speak about the abolition of slavery and she was hooked.

In 1837 Kelley joined the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Lynn, a chapter of Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society. Within a year, Kelley had established herself as an anti-slavery leader and agreed to serve as a delegate to the National American Anti-Slavery Society Convention in New York City.

As a follower of Garrison, Kelley agreed with his extreme radical philosophy. It included "non-resistance" which opposed all forms of governmental coercion, a refusal to serve on a jury, join the military, or vote. Garrison called for the immediate end of slavery and the extension of civil rights to women and African Americans.

By 1838 the American Anti-Slavery Society had 1350 chapters with a membership of over 250,000. The organization employed a wide and varied network of lecturers including men, women, fugitive slaves, and free blacks. Along with Abby Kelley, these included Angelina and Sarah Grimke, Frederick Douglass, Lydia Maria Child, Maria Weston Chapman, Theodore Weld, Sarah Parker Remond and her brother Charles Lenox Remond, Robert Purvis, Charlotte Forten, and Lucretia Coffin Mott.



William Lloyd Garrison

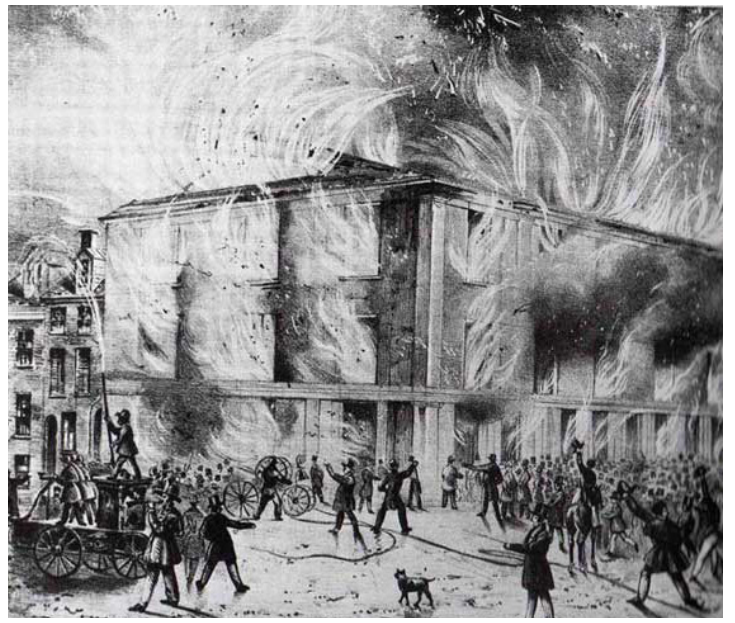


Angelina Grimke

Anti-Slavery

Abby Kelley began working very diligently for the American Anti-Slavery Society distributing petitions, fundraising, and public speaking. In 1838 she gave her first speech to a mixed gender audience, known at the time as a “promiscuous” audience. She addressed the Second Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women in Philadelphia in the newly constructed Pennsylvania Hall.

The local community was outraged that men and women were meeting together, that there were members of the African American community present with whites, and that women were at the podium. A mob formed and burned the new meeting hall to the ground. The mob stayed to throw rocks and shout obscenities as the participants fled. Frederick Douglass, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth M’Clintock were among the participants.



Pennsylvania Hall Burning, Philadelphia, 1838

Women’s Rights

By 1840 many women who worked in anti-slavery, like Kelley, were testing the boundaries of what was considered proper for a woman to do in public. Kelley continued to create controversy for speaking to male audiences and sharing speaking platforms with men who were once slaves.

In May of 1840 William Lloyd Garrison nominated Kelley to the national business committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society at their annual convention. Conservatives walked out in protest at Garrison’s bold motion. The problem of “the woman question” had caused the abolitionist community to officially split.

In June of 1840 abolitionists traveled to Great Britain to attend the World Anti-Slavery Convention. Garrison, accompanied by Charles Lenox Remond, arrived late and sat in protest with the American women delegates who had not been seated or given the opportunity to participate. Lucretia Mott, a delegate, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a spectator, were among them.



Abby Kelley married Stephen Foster in 1845

Seneca Falls

In 1843 Abby Kelley arrived in Seneca Falls for a week-long series of speeches intended to convert as many souls as she could to the anti-slavery cause. She called for the Christians in the village to take a public stand against slavery in their local churches.

Presbyterian Rhoda Bement took Kelley’s advice to heart and asked her own minister if he was an abolitionist. Outraged and flummoxed by Bement’s inquiry, the minister put her on trial and Bement was excommunicated. Bement and her protestant supporters found a welcoming worship community as Wesleyan Methodists as active abolitionists and advocates of free speech. They met in the Wesleyan Chapel.

Abby Kelley Foster was inspired to continue as a women’s rights reformer and helped plan the 1850 National Women’s Rights Convention.



Wesleyan Chapel, around 1845