

Crossing Borders: From Slavery to Abolition, 1670–1865

An Exhibition Curated by Sarah Wilma Watson,
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and the Students of Her “Crossing Borders” Writing Seminar in Fall 2019



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Rebecca and Rick White Gallery
Lutnick Library
Haverford College

INTRODUCTION

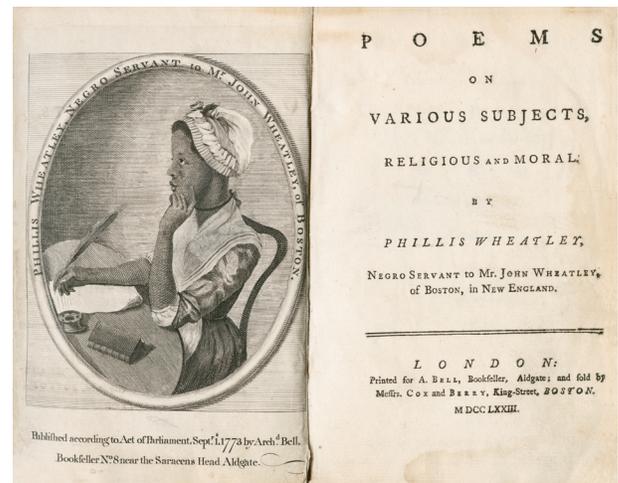
In 1773, Phillis Wheatley became the first African American woman to have her work published. Born in West Africa and enslaved at the age of seven or eight, she was purchased by the Wheatley family in Boston. There she learned to read and write, and began composing poetry (Haefeli, “Wheatley, Phillis”). At the age of nineteen, Wheatley published her first poetry collection, entitled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. In one well-known poem, Wheatley celebrates the appointment of William, Earl of Dartmouth, to the position of Secretary of State for North-America, declaring that he will “adorn” New England with “Fair Freedom” and banish “wanton Tyranny” (Wheatley 73–74). Reflecting on her commitment to freedom, Wheatley writes:

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom
 sprung,
Whence flow these wishes for the common
 good,
By feeling hearts alone best understood,
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

(Wheatley 74)

Wheatley provides a vivid description of her enslavement and communicates a powerful call to action, insisting that freedom must triumph over tyranny—the practice of slavery must be abolished.

“Crossing Borders: From Slavery to Abolition, 1670–1865,” an exhibition curated by the first-year writing seminar “Crossing Borders,” presents a history of slavery and abolition through a selection of items from Haverford College’s Quaker & Special Collections. The exhibit pursues a number of themes, investigating, for example, the roles of literature, religion, education, and activism in the abolition movement. In particular, the exhibit foregrounds the experiences, perspectives, and actions of enslaved and formerly enslaved people like Phillis Wheatley and chooses to examine rather than ignore difficult topics such as “the white savior complex” in abolition. The exhibit aims to communicate



Titlepage and frontispiece of Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773)

the complex history of slavery and abolition with care and clarity to an audience on and beyond campus.

THE SLAVE TRADE

Jack Weinstein, Ashley Chun, and Rachel Schiffer

From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, the transatlantic slave trade transported approximately 10.7 million enslaved people from Africa to colonies in the Americas (“Estimates”). Also known as the “triangular trade,” the process moved goods and people between three continents—Africa, America, and Europe. European traders brought goods like wine, guns, and ammunition to African trading posts, where they exchanged them for enslaved people. The traders then brought the enslaved individuals across the Atlantic on the infamous “Middle Passage,” where twenty percent of the Africans on board died (“Life on board slave ships”). Finally, the traders exchanged enslaved people for American goods like cotton, tobacco, and sugar, which they then brought back to Europe. Over the course of four centuries, four million enslaved people were transported to Brazil, four million to Dutch American colonies, and two million to the British Caribbean. Only 388,000 (3.6%) of enslaved people taken from Africa landed in mainland North America (“Estimates”).

While the first British slave trading voyage was led by John Hawkins in 1562, the British slave trade developed more fully in the 1640s and revolved around sugarcane. England went on to become one of the biggest slave trading nations in the world. The National

Archives estimates that the empire transported about “3.1 million Africans—of whom [only] 2.7 million arrived” (“Britain and the Slave Trade”). In the 1790s, attempts were made to put an end to the slave trade, and growing disapproval eventually resulted in the Slave Trade Act of 1807, which officially outlawed the trading of enslaved people within the British Empire (“British Transatlantic Slave Trade records”).

The first boat carrying enslaved Africans to what is now the United States arrived in the Virginia colony in 1619, shortly after Jamestown was established (“A History of Slavery in the United States”). After the American Revolution, the maintenance of slavery was written into the United States Constitution through the Fugitive Slave Clause, the three-fifths compromise, and a clause stipulating that the government could not end slavery for at least twenty years (“The Annenberg Guide to the United States Constitution”). In 1808, Congress banned the import of foreign enslaved people, while specifying that enslaved people could still be

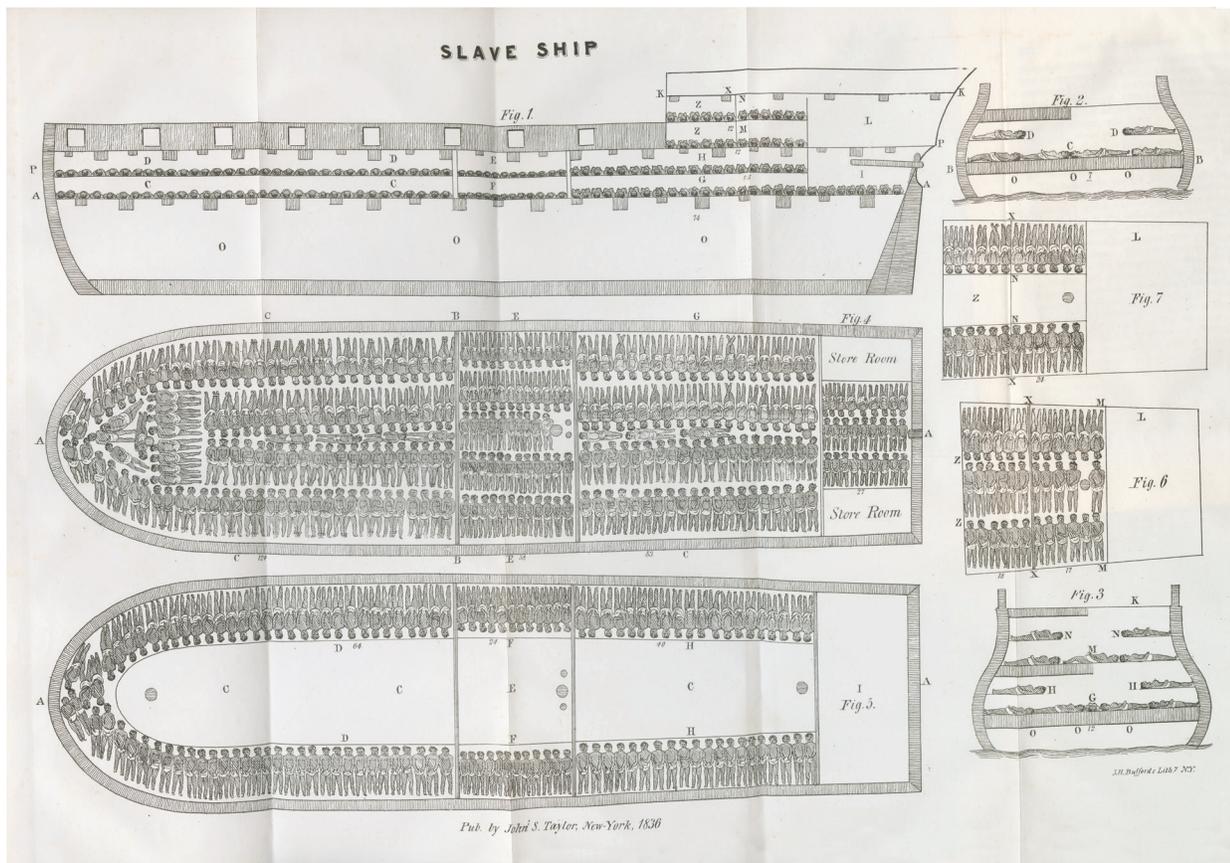
bought and sold within the United States. However, the last ship carrying enslaved Africans to the United States arrived in Alabama in 1859, fifty-one years after the import of enslaved people had been prohibited (“A History of Slavery in the United States”).

ABOLITION

Ashley Chun and Rachel Schiffer

“Abolition” can refer to either the ending of slavery or the ending of the slave trade. In both cases, abolition was not a single historical moment but long and varied processes that occurred at different times in various parts of the world.

The trading of enslaved people was officially outlawed within the British Empire in 1807 (Gilmore). Similarly, the United States Congress banned the importation of foreign enslaved people in 1808 (“A History of Slavery in the United States”). In 1833, Britain passed the Abolition of Slavery Act, outlawing the practice of slavery itself (Gilmore). The abolition of slavery in the United States



A fold-out diagram of a slaving ship found in Thomas Clarkson’s *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition* (1836). A version of the much older ‘Brookes diagram’ from 1787.

began as early as 1777 but was not outlawed on a national level until 1865. In 1777, Vermont became the first territory to ban slavery in its constitution and in 1781, two enslaved individuals, one a woman, successfully sued for their freedom in Massachusetts, setting a precedent and effectively ending slavery there. By 1787, slavery was largely illegal or being phased out in the Northern states. President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and slavery was deemed unconstitutional with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 (“A History of Slavery in the United States”).

COMBATting SLAVERY: THE ROLE OF PEOPLE OF COLOR

Jiawen Wang

People of color fought against slavery as soon as the transatlantic slave trade began. Their fight continued in the Americas, where they used various methods of resistance to undermine slavery and further the abolitionist movement (Diouf). Some enslaved people led rebellions that inspired resistance among the enslaved

and increased public awareness of the harsh conditions of slavery. After gaining freedom many African Americans used their new status to work alongside white abolitionists. Although they faced many challenges, including racial bias and lack of access to education, they found ways to make their voices heard. One of the most renowned African American abolitionists, Frederick Douglass, taught himself how to read and write in secret while enslaved and later became the author of many anti-slavery articles and his own biography. Sojourner Truth moved her audiences with charismatic speeches despite racial and gender discrimination (Weeks).

African American abolitionists thus turned their experiences and disadvantages into assets and became key contributors in the efforts of emancipation. Their past experiences allowed them to work closely with the enslaved and their powerful voices proved the potential of African Americans and countered pro-slavery myths (Weeks). As the movement progressed, African American abolitionists demanded not only an end to slavery but racial equality and justice (“Abolition, Anti-Slavery Movements, and the Rise of the Sectional Controversy”).

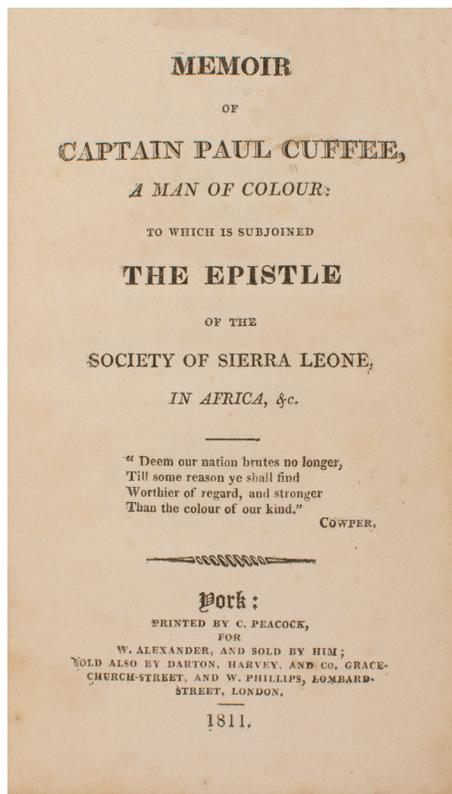
LITERATURE AND ABOLITION

Kayla Robinson

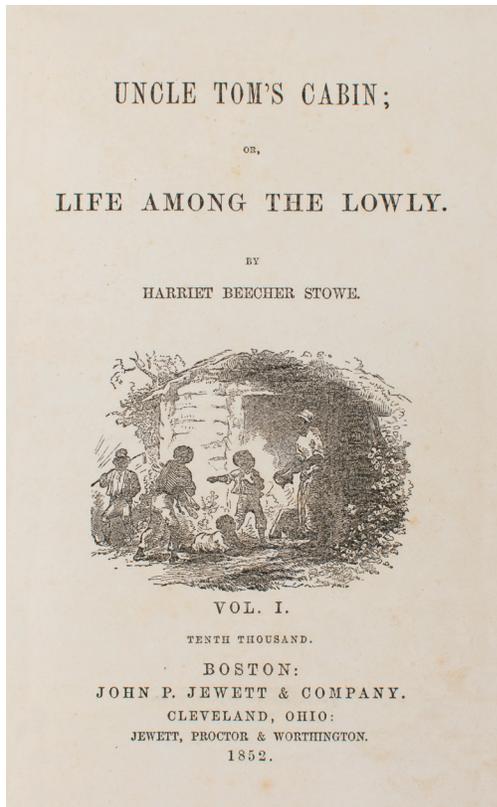
During the abolitionist movement, literature was a common vehicle for stirring up debate and social change. As Ezra Tawil notes, abolitionist literature depicted the deplorable experiences of enslaved people in order to “engage the sympathies and move the minds of a readership who could have no experiential reference point for such a condition” (Tawil 2–3).

Published in 1688, Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* has been hailed as the first literary abolitionist text (Ferguson 339). However, critics also argue that Behn’s work is not an abolitionist text due to its recurring themes of racism and anti-abolition (Rosenthal 152–3). Similarly, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) was seen as a moral battle cry in the quest to abolish slavery by some contemporary readers but received denunciation comparable to Behn’s because of the subtly racist and patronizing depictions of black characters (Lowance, Westbrook, and De Prosop 8).

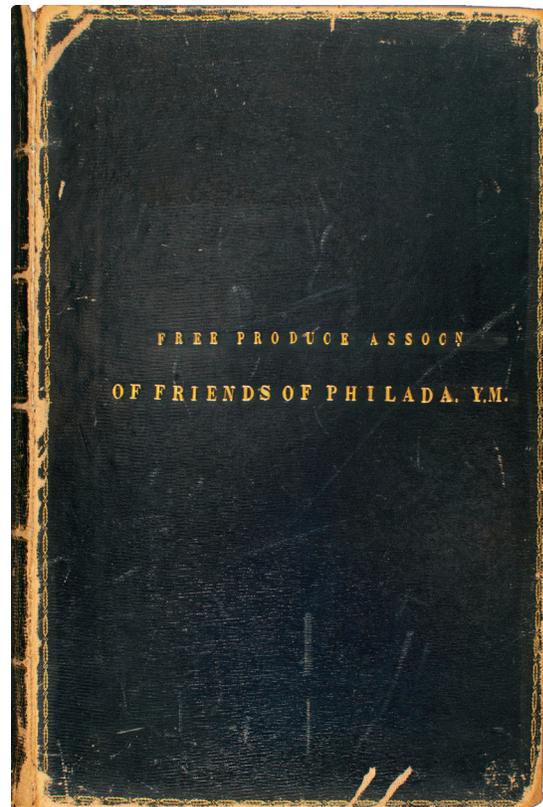
Although *Oroonoko* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were published almost two hundred years apart, both were strong vehicles of public persuasion for abolishing slavery, intentional or not, because they communicated to their audiences the atrocities faced by enslaved people.



Memoir of Captain Paul Cuffee, A Man Of Colour.
Paul Cuffee (1759–1817) was a Quaker merchant who enabled formerly enslaved people to resettle in Sierra Leone.



Titlepage of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Published in 1852 in Boston, Massachusetts



Free Produce Association of Friends of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting *Minutes* (1845–1852)

ABOLITION AND ACTIVISM

Ashley Scheffler

Opposition to slavery in the United States took many forms, including abolition societies. The first of these was the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, founded by Quakers in 1775 (King and Haveman 494). These early abolitionists sought a gradual approach to ending slavery, supporting laws which freed enslaved people after a certain age in certain northern states. Initially excluded from white societies, African Americans created their own organizations which helped fugitives from slavery and spread their unique message through protests, speeches, and writings (“Abolition” 39–40).

The founding of the American Antislavery Society (AASS) in 1832 marked a change in the movement. This group had both African American and white members and demanded immediate abolition. Their campaigns focused less on prominent legal cases and more on shifting the tide of public opinion by appealing to Americans everywhere (King and Haveman 495). One popular form of protest was the boycott of slave labor

products. Many leaders of this free-produce movement were Quakers who supported this moral and personal form of activism. Free produce also appealed to women, who through boycotting were able to show their support for the movement from within the domestic sphere. It was also popular among African Americans struggling to define their place in the economy (Holcomb 4–6).

WOMEN AND ABOLITION

Ashley Scheffler

Women played a complex and important role in the antislavery movement. Women argued that, especially in light of the sexual abuse of enslaved women, their participation in the movement was a Christian duty and one fitting to a sex which many at the time defined by virtue and sensibility (Bogin and Yellin 5). They built on a long tradition of women’s benevolent societies—charity groups which addressed social and, occasionally, political issues (Robertson 3). While women’s involvement in abolition was initially restricted to the domestic sphere, over time, female activists became bolder and more controversial. Leaders like Maria W.

The organizers organized a Sewing Society, for the purpose of relieving the sufferings of that class of our countrymen, who have fled from the oppression which they endured under the unjust laws of our country, and found a refuge in Canada. The officers are to consist of President, a Vice President, a Secretary and a Treasurer, and a business committee of three or more to prepare articles for sewing. Any person on the payment of 25 cts. may become a member. The support prepared for the Society should not exceed in parity, bread and butter or less than one pound of cake and preserves.

The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Sewing Society Records (1852–1854)

Stewart, Lydia Maria Child, the Grimké sisters, and Lucretia Mott faced harsh censure for making “promiscuous” public speeches (Bogin and Yellin 3; Robertson 3). They formed their own antislavery societies which admitted women of all races and worked to raise money, publish abolitionist texts, and impact policy through petition-writing campaigns (Bogin and Yellin 2).

Many female abolitionists went on to fight for women’s rights and equality more broadly, leading to the Seneca Falls Convention for women’s rights in 1848 and the birth of the women’s rights movement in America. This legacy is complicated, however, by splits in the women’s and African American rights movements, and the push by many women’s suffrage supporters for the rights of white women only.

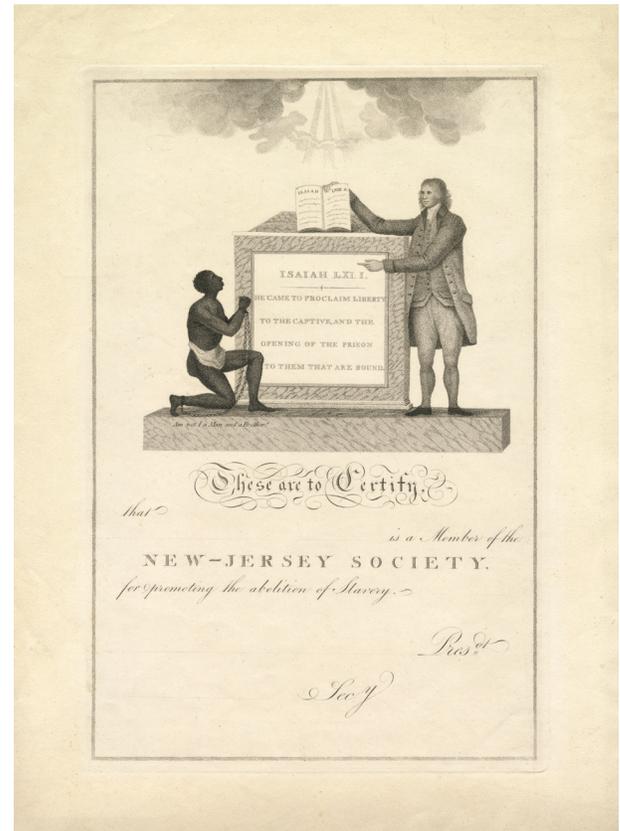
ABOLITION AND CHRISTIANITY

William Moore

Christian theology could act as a cogent and potent moral critique of slavery. The primary theological objection raised by the abolitionist movement rested on the idea in Genesis 1.27 that “God created mankind in His own image.” This troubled Christian abolitionists because by treating slaves as lesser than others, as the poet William Cowper put it, “the natural bond / of brotherhood is sever’d,” weakening not just respect for human dignity but also adherence to the divine plan

(Coffey 2–3). In this same vein, one of the most prominent abolitionist motifs—shown on the membership certificate of an abolitionist society in this exhibit—was an illustration of an enslaved person kneeling to pray and saying, “am I not a man and a brother?”

Different Christian denominations had varying degrees of concern for slavery. Many churches, especially in the American South, sought to use scripture to justify slavery, citing Biblical lines such as “you may buy slaves” and stories such as the Curse of Ham (Leviticus 25.44). On the other hand, abolitionism spread across many Evangelical denominations around the time of the American independence movement, where, according to John Coffey, they “pioneered many of the tactics of modern pressure groups” to conduct passive resistance: organizing into anti-slavery societies, condemning the practice in sermons, staging boycotts, and holding public marches (Coffey 2).

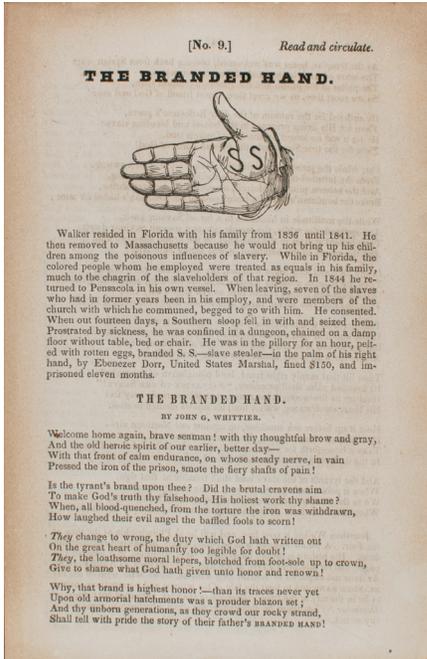


Membership Certificate for the New-Jersey Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery (1793–1817)

ABOLITION AND THE WHITE SAVIOR COMPLEX

Celine Demir

Rhetoric among white abolitionists often focused on the heroism of white anti-slavery activists rather than



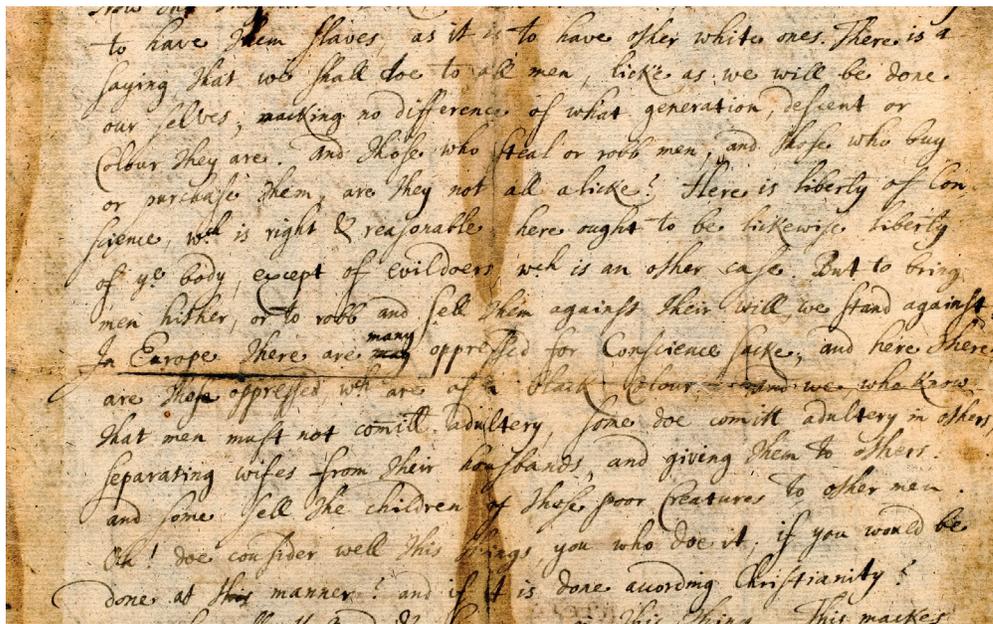
“The Branded Hand” Anti Slavery Pamphlet (August, 1845) praises a white man, Jonathon Walker, who was branded “S S” for “Slave Stealer” when trying to free enslaved persons but offers no information about the fates of the enslaved individuals.

enslaved people and their struggles. This focus on the salvific role of the white person in abolition is sometimes termed the “white savior complex” and was shaped by Christian language and imagery (Albrecht). It appeared in many different centuries and contexts; for example, see *The Branded Hand* anti-slavery pamphlet and the New Jersey Abolition Society membership certificate featured in this exhibit. It is important to understand that many white abolitionists were blatantly racist and that white abolitionist rhetoric often demeaned African Americans; the goal of ending the system of slavery was not equivalent to seeking equality among different races (Sinanan & Harde).

QUAKER INVOLVEMENT IN ABOLITION

Aidan Chapin

The Quakers, a Christian group also known as the Religious Society of Friends, took an early stand against slavery. Beginning in Barbados in the 1600s, the Quaker abolitionist movement spread to South America, the Caribbean, North America, and the United Kingdom, leading to debate, discussion, and direct action from Quakers around the world. Opposing slavery on religious and moral grounds, Quakers saw the practice as abhorrently violent (Quakers are pacifists) and a violation of the way of life set out for them in the Bible. Often quoted in Quaker abolitionist history are Biblical passages such as “do unto others as you would have



Germantown Protest Against Slavery (1688)

them do unto you” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” Quakers were at the forefront of the abolitionist movement in the United States. As early as 1688, a petition by four Quakers in Germantown, Pennsylvania objected to the practice of slavery, citing biblical arguments and providing an outline for basic humane treatment. The four signers presented the document to Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, which declined to act or make a statement; it would be another eighty-eight years before Quakers officially denounced slavery. Pennsylvania was among the first states to ban slavery due in large part to its Quaker population (DeBlasio & Haefeli).

ABOLITION AND EDUCATION

Dylan Soemitro

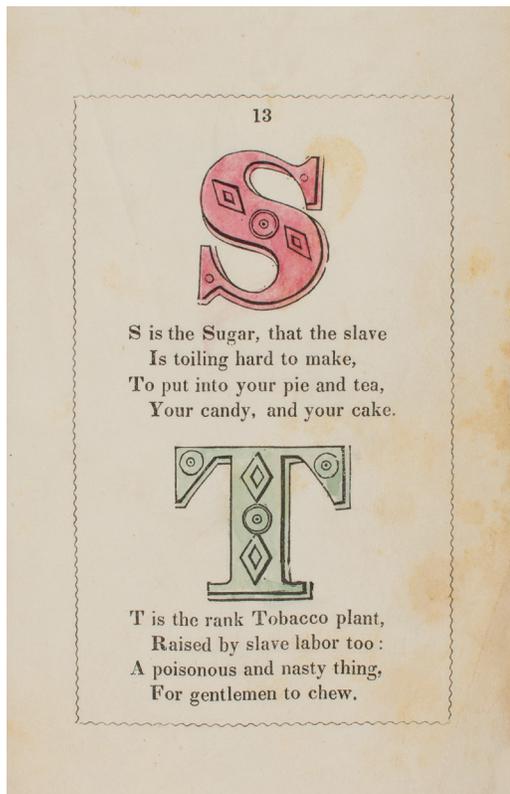
The attempt to educate people of all ages about slavery and the abolitionist movement took various forms. Abolitionists created societies that used tactics of moral persuasion and lectures to spread their message and inform and influence their audiences about the injustice of slavery. In particular, abolitionists used the press to circulate their arguments (Jackson and Reagan). William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* came out

on a weekly basis, and pamphlets and leaflets containing anti-slavery poems, slogans, essays, sermons, and songs circulated widely (Carey and Plank 520). Abolitionists also published children’s books with images and text that showed the harsh reality of slavery. Some abolitionists specifically devoted their time to the education of enslaved and formerly enslaved people. This was sometimes, however, used as a way for white abolitionists to demonstrate their own generosity and underline what they saw as their superiority over African Americans.

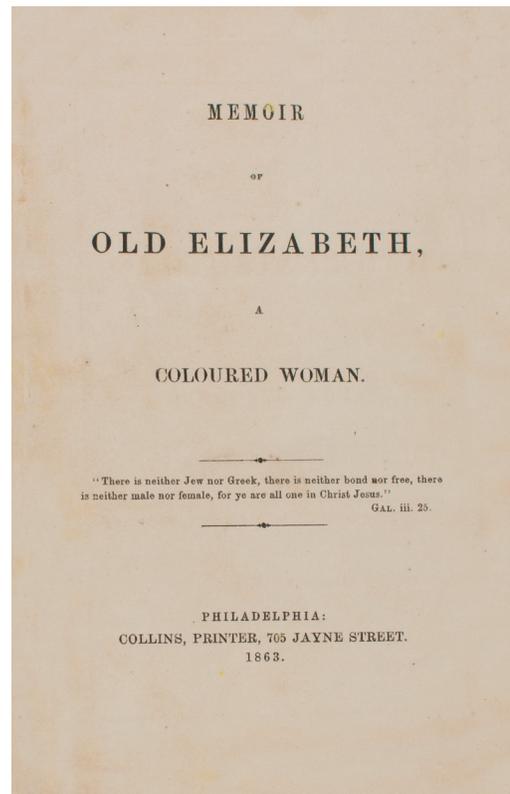
RECOVERING VOICES OF PEOPLE OF COLOR

Natasha Bansal

The vast majority of historical sources regarding slavery and abolition in existence today are written by white people. When the abolition movement gained traction at the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was a call for testimonies from people who had experienced the horrors of slavery firsthand (Andrews). It was difficult to access the voices of currently and formerly enslaved people because the law prevented enslaved people from receiving an education (“The Slave Experience”). Despite these challenges, some enslaved people, such as Phillis Wheatley



The Anti-Slavery Alphabet (1846)



Memoir of Old Elizabeth, A Coloured Woman (1863)

and Frederick Douglass, learned how to read and write, and other enslaved people found alternative strategies to document their lives under the slave system (“Frederick Douglass”). An example of this is found in the exhibit: Elizabeth, although unable to write, utilized her agency to dictate her story to a literate person. This person adhered to her words as closely as they could, to maintain the story’s integrity (*Old Elizabeth* 1). Like Elizabeth’s memoir, Phillis Wheatley’s collection of poems was framed by white editors. With these limitations in mind, memoirs and written works allow us to understand the historical voices of people of color because they are the closest firsthand accounts we have of the lives that they lived under slavery.

CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF ARCHIVES

Grayson Toole

In creating an exhibit on slavery and abolition, we were mindful of our responsibilities as disseminators of information and as interpreters of these works. Since structures of power have shaped the visibility and availability of historical voices, we have worked to combat the inequality of expression throughout our process. Although the historical voices preserved are often of those in power due to popular dissemination, education, monetary means, etc., we endeavored to create an exhibit inclusive of many narratives and perspectives while remaining reflective of the time. We were conscious of the language of privilege and prejudices often reflected in the voices preserved (Smallwood 125). By providing labels on the voices and actions of people of color, and the white savior complex, we challenged the assumptions of white benevolence and lack of racism within the abolitionist movement.

Another aspect of being respectful and responsible is to use language to uphold the individuality and inherent human dignity of people. We chose to use terms like “enslaved person,” “captive,” or “enslaver” to separate the individual from their state of oppression (Archives 9). We stressed the enslaved person’s name, if available, over their social categorizations, restrictions, or enslaver (Archives 4, 9). For instance, by introducing Phillis Wheatley by her own name and her skill as a writer before her enslaver or being African American, we honor her as a person. Overall, we wanted to emphasize the humanity of individuals before their identities, and not to glorify oppressors or the role of white people in abolition.

These same privileges and power-dynamics are in place today. By remembering the pain of the past present within

slavery and racism, we never forget how dehumanization, oppression, and xenophobia are irrevocably damaging and lead to atrocities. By establishing the part people of color had in their own emancipation, we recognize through abolition that all the progress gained over the decades for people of color is not due to white benevolence. By acknowledging the struggle within our documents, we recognize the transgenerational trauma and inter-generational opportunity disadvantages still present today.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

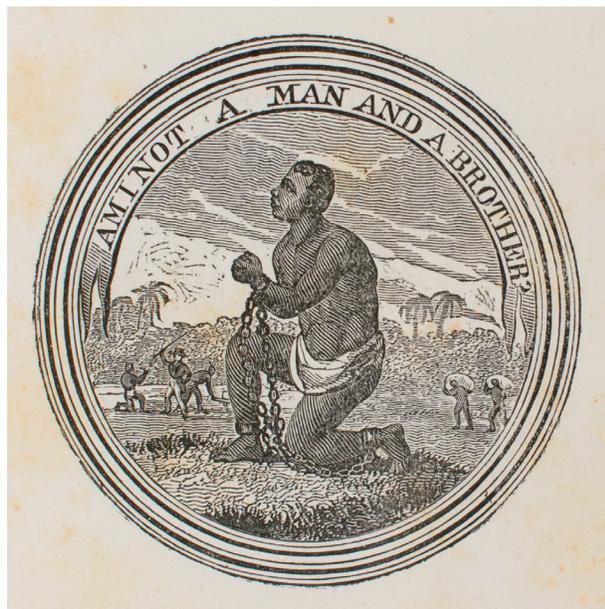
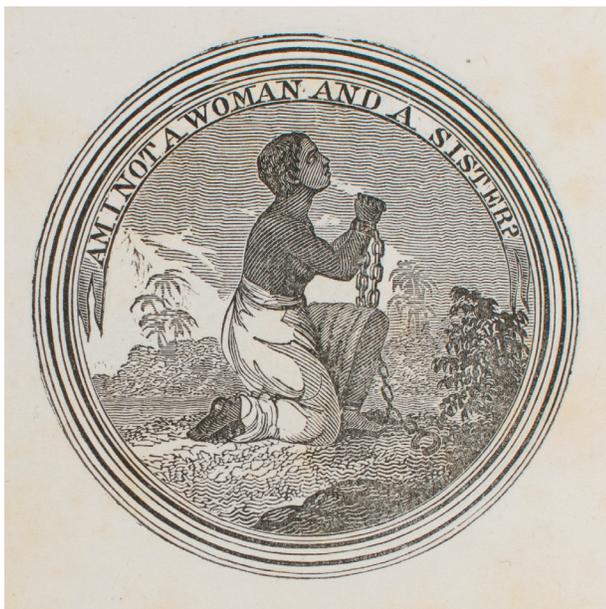
This exhibition was truly a collaborative endeavor and could not have been accomplished without the enthusiasm and teamwork of the students of the Fall 2019 “Crossing Borders” Writing Seminar: Natasha Bansal, Aidan Chapin, Ashley Chun, Celine Demir, William Moore, Kayla Robinson, Ashley Scheffler, Rachel Schiffer, Dylan Soemitro, Grayson Toole, Jiawen Wang, and Jack Weinstein. First and foremost, we would like to thank Sarah Horowitz, Head of Quaker & Special Collections at Haverford, for providing invaluable support, resources, and guidance throughout the exhibition process. We would also like to thank Terry Snyder, Librarian of the College, Semyon Khokhlov, Research & Instruction Librarian, and Bruce Bumbarger, Library Conservator for supporting the project.

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Illustrations from *Poems, Written During the Progress of the Abolition Question...* (1837) by John G. Whittier

doe to all men, like as we will be done.
no difference of what generation, descent or
those who steal or rob men, and those who buy
they not all alike? Here is liberty of con-
scionable, here ought to be likewise liberty
evildoers, which is an other case. But to bring
and sell them against their will, we stand against
many oppressed for Conscience sake, and here they
are of a black colour, ~~and we, who know~~
omit adultery, some doe commit adultery in
their husbands, and giving them to others.
children of these poor creatures to other men
if you would be

FRONT COVER

Frontispiece portrait of Phillis Wheatley from her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773)

REAR COVER

Detail from the text of *The Germantown Protest Against Slavery* (1688)

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