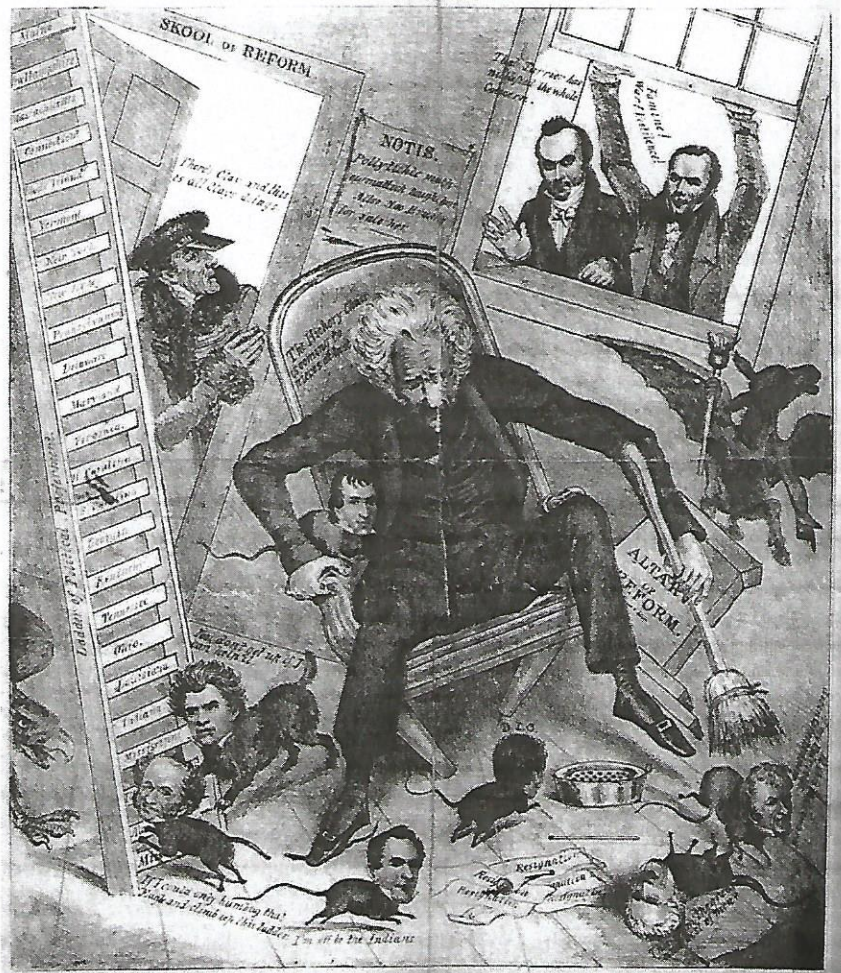


Ruinous Tendencies

THE ANTI-ABOLITION BACKLASH

“Who does not see that the American people are walking over a subterranean fire, the flames of which are fed by slavery?” These words, with their ominous ring, were written by abolitionist Lydia Maria Child as a commentary on the nullification crisis, the protracted clash between South Carolina and the federal government that lasted from 1828 until 1833. As we have seen, the ostensible cause of the crisis was Congress’s passage, in 1828, of a “tariff of abominations” on European imports. In the first act of the crisis, President Andrew Jackson had condemned South Carolina’s nullification scheme and hoped that a reduction in the tariff rate would ease tensions. But South Carolina states’ rights men were singularly unimpressed by the tariff reform of 1832 (although it reset the tariff rate at its 1824 level), and in November of that year they held a Nullification Convention that enacted a veto of the hated measure and threatened secession if the U.S. government tried to enforce the nullified law. The South Carolina legislature voted to muster an army to protect the state against federal force. In December 1832 John C. Calhoun, the mastermind of nullification, resigned the vice presidency and took up the banner of state sovereignty in the U.S. Senate. Under pressure from extremists in his own state, Calhoun had made his stance of interposition public in his July 1831 “Fort Hill Address,” and he now developed the doctrine in a



00001
The value of a unit with four cyphers going before it.
 Published by S. W. Clay & T. F. Horn of Newark and 42 N. Market St. Philad^a.

This 1831 anti-Jackson satire shows him beleaguered by infighting, as Van Buren and Calhoun compete over the ladder of “political preferment” while Webster and Clay look on. Webster remarks that Calhoun has “nullified the whole Concern,” while Clay, given to dire prophecies of disunion, mutters “Famine! War! Pestilence!” (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

host of speeches, letters, discourses, and other polemics. Interposition, he explained, provided a constitutional check on the “unrestrained will of a majority,” by which he meant a numerical majority. The states, through Calhoun’s mechanism of protest, could assert themselves as a “concurrent majority”—they could achieve consensus or compromise in consultation with each other. In other words, in Calhoun’s view, the government was not designed to confer absolute power on a ruling majority based on a simple tally of votes. Instead, the government was designed to protect all of its constitutive interests—namely, the states. By “taking the sense of the community” (a favorite phrase of Calhoun’s), the constitutional device of interposition would give “each interest or portion of the community” the right to defend itself against the others.¹

Calhoun was at great pains, in his public and private writings, to distinguish nullification from secession. Secession was a separation of one state from its partners, whereas nullification set in motion a deliberative process among the states. Nullification could be “succeeded by secession,” but that was a last resort; the purpose of nullification was to preserve the Union. The Union was the “means, if wisely used,” Calhoun again and again reminded his followers, “not only of reconciling all diversities, but also the means and the only effectual one, of securing to us justice, peace and security, at home and abroad.”²

With leading nullifiers such as Robert Barnwell Rhett, James Henry Hammond, and South Carolina governor James Hamilton Jr., rejecting such paeans to the Union in favor of militant rhetoric that promised martial resistance to federal “invasion,” Calhoun’s attempts to cast nullification as a patriotic doctrine rang false. President Jackson again took a defiant stance against his former partner — Jackson issued his own proclamation that nullified nullification, declaring it unconstitutional. Jackson believed that pro-nullification Southerners had been manipulated by designing leaders like Calhoun and Rhett. Addressing himself to South Carolinians, Jackson decried the “eloquent appeals to your passions, to your State pride, to your native courage, [and] to your sense of real injury” that “were used to prepare you for the period when the mask which concealed the hideous features of DISUNION should be taken off.” Instead of looking with “horror” on the deformity of disunion, duped nullifiers now looked on it with “complacency.” Jackson tried to restore their sense of horror, both by invoking the “bloody conflicts”

Calhoun saw nullification and secession as two different things

that disunion would bring and by restoring its true definition: "Be not deceived by names," he warned—"Disunion, by armed force, is TREASON."³

This standoff set the stage for Senator Henry Clay, of Kentucky, the "golden-tongued" orator whose role in resolving the Missouri crisis of 1820 had already earned him a national reputation as the "Great Compromiser." He shepherded through Congress a reduced Compromise Tariff and a "force bill" that authorized President Jackson to use the might of the army and navy to enforce the law should South Carolina not back down. Clay used disunion rhetorically as the calamity to be disavowed by all reasonable men. "When a civil war shall be lighted up in the bosom of our own happy land, and armies are marching, and commanders are winning their victories, and fleets are in motion on our coast," he intoned in the Senate in February 1833, arguing on behalf of the Compromise Tariff, "tell me, if you can, tell me, if any human being can tell its duration. God alone knows where such a war would end." Such apocalyptic language served "Union" politicians in the Deep South as well, as they sought to taint nullification as treason. At a January 1833 meeting in Natchez, Mississippi, for example, Robert J. Walker, running for the Senate against a nullifier opponent, echoed Daniel Webster's 1830 reply to Robert Y. Hayne: America stood on "the precipice," and what lay below were "untried horrors." Tapping deep-seated associations between disunion and foreign intervention, Walker imagined that "disunion would be the signal for WAR—a war of conquest, in which the weak would fall under the power of the strong; and upon the ruins of this now happy Union might arise the darkest despotism that ever crushed the liberties of mankind." For as America lay prostrate, "exhausted and bleeding at every pore," the "sanguinary alliance" of European despots would send their "armies to our shores." To nullifiers, Walker warned: "Let us take the first step, and all may be lost forever." The notion that disunion would be the prelude to the imposition of a foreign monarchy was echoed in newspapers across the South.⁴

In March 1833 South Carolina grudgingly acceded to compromise and rescinded its nullification ordinance. Calhoun and South Carolina accepted the Compromise Tariff, although this measure lowered the tariff only incrementally, both because the leaders of the other Southern states overwhelmingly supported accepting this concession, and because Calhoun himself believed that the path of negotiation was an honorable one. For Clay and Calhoun, civil war was the shameful alternative to compromise, and it would

neither North nor
South wanted war

result only if political leaders failed to fulfill their sacred trust of upholding the Constitution.⁵

Abolitionist Lydia Maria Child took a very different view, both of nullification and of political compromise, in her 1833 book *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*. A literary trailblazer among women, Child transgressed the boundaries of her white New England Protestant milieu. She began her career writing novels and domestic advice books, only to be drawn into the antislavery campaign when she met William Lloyd Garrison in the late 1820s. The most analytically rigorous abolitionist text of its era, Child's *Appeal* argued that the "subterranean fire" that threatened America was the rising "sectional dislike" between the North and the South, and that the fire was stoked, not calmed, by political negotiations such as the Clay-Calhoun agreement of 1833. For the "system of compromises" did a grave injustice to a "third party, which is never heard or noticed, except for purposes of oppression"—the slaves themselves. By sacrificing their interests in the name of compromise, the U.S. government emboldened the "slaveholding power" to make further demands and threats, lulled the North into a deeper daze of complicity and submission, and hastened the fearful day when an unrepentant nation would face divine retribution. For Child, only an immediate renunciation of slavery could restore the honor of the United States and forestall civil strife and bloodshed; political compromise, by contrast, was both shameful and dangerous—it represented damnation, not salvation.⁶

Child =
end slavery
now

The connection between South Carolina's taking offense at the tariff and its defense of slavery was plain for Child, and for any discerning observer, to see. Fear of slave rebellion was but one of the many bonds that held together South Carolina whites and made them the most cohesive ruling class in the region. Unlike in other Southern states, where plantation districts often clashed politically with areas where both slaves and plantations were scarce, in South Carolina "cotton mania" united the lowcountry and the upcountry. As William W. Freehling has put it, "no other southern elite faced so weak a pressure to compromise with nonslaveholding egalitarians."⁷

Both lowcountry and upcountry were firmly in the sway of "aristocrats" for South Carolina restricted membership in the legislature to men who could meet the most stringent property qualifications of any state in the nation. Those legislators, in turn, were given more authority than were assemblymen in any other state—they elected the governor, the judges, and the presidential

electors for South Carolina. In other words, "no yeoman farmer ever cast a vote" for a presidential candidate; that prerogative was reserved for the wealthy. The South Carolina elite maintained its hegemony through careful and canny manipulation of political rituals and symbols. The nullifiers had won popular approbation by co-opting gatherings such as Fourth of July barbecues and militia musters and using them to preach a gendered message of racial unity. They stressed that the wealthy planter and the common farmer shared the special rights and responsibilities of "martial manhood." In the words of Stephanie McCurry, "As masters of dependents, even if only, or perhaps especially, of wives and children, every freeman was bound to defend his household, his property" against threats to his independence.⁸

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power
so they
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nullification
as threat

South Carolina's ruling race was profoundly insecure about its waning national power. Falling cotton prices and westward migration threatened the state's economic well-being, and national political trends were alarming—white South Carolinians viewed the popular American Colonization Society as a threat to slavery, quailed at the news of Nat Turner's Rebellion, and condemned Virginia's recent deliberations over gradual emancipation as a terrible apostasy. Lydia Maria Child recognized the insidious dynamic that was at work: leaders such as Governor Hamilton and Senator Calhoun cast the very occurrence of the "remarkable debate in the Virginia legislature" as an "offence" chargeable to the "opinions and policy of the north." Nullifiers practiced the art of "Yankee baiting" and declared that any Southerner who opposed nullification was under the sway of Northern capitalists. South Carolina's leaders saw nullification as a way to consolidate their own power and to stem the antislavery tide.⁹

If South Carolina's assertion of states' rights was a veiled bid to protect slavery, why didn't Andrew Jackson and the other Southern states support it? One argument is that Jackson simply did not regard the tariff as a great economic burden to the South or as a threat to slavery; another, that he wanted to see that his Democratic Party retain strength in the West and North and not become an exclusively sectional party. Yet another is that because of his military background, Jackson would not tolerate insubordination in the ranks. A related explanation is that Jackson, who had risen from humble beginnings to achieve planter status, represented a different kind of Southern political culture than did Calhoun and his ilk. Jackson exemplified Herrenvolk democracy, the creed that black slavery made possible a rough equality

among all white men, whereas Calhoun stood for "Old World republicanism," which reserved power for the elite.¹⁰

Jackson's antinullifier stance, in other words, reflected the political culture of his home state of Tennessee. In contrast to South Carolina, Tennessee was characterized by three "grand divisions": mountainous eastern Tennessee, where slaves were scarce, was a realm of small-scale subsistence farming; western Tennessee was the state's cotton-producing "black belt"; and middle Tennessee had a hybrid economy. Tennessee farmers, most of whom practiced "semi-subsistence, safety-first" farming, did not perceive the tariff as a major threat to the state's economy. Moreover, Tennessee politicians favored egalitarian appeals to voters that promised to defend them against "the perceived assaults of demagogic politicians" like Calhoun. According to Jonathan M. Atkins, "Tennessee's solid support for Jackson during the Nullification Crisis proved most immediately influential in isolating South Carolina and compelling that state to accept compromise."¹¹

Even in those states, such as Georgia, where there was substantial opposition to the tariff, Jackson's popularity held, in part because Democrats there found ways to defend states' rights even as they rejected the "Tariff of Abominations" and nullification alike. In Georgia, two Democratic factions squared off against each other during the nullification crisis. One, led by John Clark, claimed to stand, along with Jackson, for the "true" states' rights principle—that "the state and federal governments had separate and distinct powers and were sovereign within their respective spheres." This faction accused the other, led by George Troup and a handful of vocal nullifiers, of supporting an extreme, bastardized version of states' rights—one that "tolerated state defiance of federal laws" and would thus lead to disunion. The Clarkites, behind their rhetoric of states' rights Unionism, vanquished the Troupites in state elections. In the presidential election of 1832, both factions reunited in support of Jackson and in bitter opposition to the National Republican challenger, Henry Clay. Although a number of prominent Democrats in Georgia and elsewhere in the South openly disapproved of Jackson's choice of New Yorker Martin Van Buren as his vice president and heir apparent, the Southern electorate accepted Jackson's assurances that Van Buren could be trusted to advance the region's interests.¹²

As Michael Les Benedict has explained, the nullification crisis dramatized the conflict of *three* basic doctrines of constitutional interpretation. Those

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who had¹ championed the tariff in the first place—National Republicans like Webster and Clay—interpreted the Constitution broadly and believed that it “delegated implied powers to the national government”; Article I, section 8, of the Constitution, which specified that Congress could “make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper” for executing its powers, undergirded this notion of “implied powers.”² Nullifiers, by contrast, insisted on the separate sovereignty of each state, believing that “the only cement that bound them together was the mutual regard, respect, and affection of their peoples.”³ States’ rights Democrats represented a middle ground between these two positions: they believed in a government of “delegated” powers rather than broad “implied” powers, but they “recoiled from the idea that the states should have the final say about the constitutionality of federal and state laws.” They preferred, writes Benedict, to treat the “national and state governments as equally sovereign.”¹³

Jackson successfully walked a fine line during the nullification crisis: his antinullification rhetoric was so unabashedly nationalistic that it pleased the likes of Webster, but his war against the “Monster Bank” rhetoric persuaded Southern voters that the president remained committed to states’ rights. In July 1832, at the very moment the tariff was being adjusted downward, Jackson vetoed legislation that would have rechartered the Second Bank of the United States. A core component of Clay’s “American System” for economic modernization, the bank held government deposits and regulated the money supply and credit system to provide capital for commercial development. Jacksonian Democrats, in what Michael F. Holt has called a “masterpiece of political propaganda aimed directly at voters,” portrayed the bank as “an engine of aristocratic privilege that favored the rich at the expense of the poor”; such rhetoric implied that the bank’s branch directors, including Daniel Webster, were profiting personally from the institution. While the average American did not understand the intricacies of national finance, Jacksonian antibank propaganda resonated in the South among voters who were eager to guard the legacy of Jeffersonian agrarianism against Clay and the “moneyed interest.” The veto thus refurbished Jackson’s credentials as a “strict constructionist” who would protect the states and people from federal “consolidation.” And it set the stage for his overwhelming defeat of Clay in the 1832 presidential election.¹⁴

From her vantage point in 1833, Lydia Maria Child took no comfort in

Jackson's seeming defiance of South Carolina. She contrasted his proclamation against nullification with his subsequent "Message" to the nation in which he "maintained that the wealthy land holders, that is, the planters, are the *best* part of the population," conceded that high tariffs had been a burden to the South, recommended a "gradual withdrawing of protection from manufactures," and discouraged future appropriations for "internal improvements" that would modernize the economic infrastructure. This, for Child, was the real Jackson—a man committed to extending slavery and serving the interests of elite slaveholders. The ultimate proof of Jackson's commitment to slavery was his handling of an issue that had long been a passionate interest of Child's, namely the "Indian question." To her horror, Jackson had repudiated efforts to assimilate Native Americans in the Southeast and had instead endorsed their "removal" from their homelands to reservations in the West. Even as he had rejected South Carolina's invocation of state sovereignty, the president, in 1832, asserted the right of the state of Georgia to expel Cherokees forcibly from lands guaranteed them both by federal treaties and by the Supreme Court of the United States. In 1838, when Jackson's policy achieved its tragic culmination, thousands would die on the "trail of tears" to make way for white landowners to cultivate cotton.¹⁵

For Child, then, and for her fellow immediatists, the years 1831 to 1833 witnessed what Garrison called a "double rebellion" in the South—the uprising of slaves (Turner's band) against their masters and a "rebellion against the Government" by Southern whites, nullifiers and advocates of Indian removal alike. This "double rebellion" intensified the abolitionists' sense of urgency, and at the close of 1833 Garrison and his allies came together in Philadelphia to make their dream of a national immediatist campaign a reality. In its "Declaration of Sentiments," the fledgling American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) straddled the line between moral absolutism and political pragmatism. The Garrison-penned "Declaration" gave voice to a kind of antislavery nullification doctrine: that "all those laws which are now in force, admitting the right of slavery, are . . . before God utterly null and void; being an audacious usurpation of the Divine prerogative." But it juxtaposed such unforgiving language with a pledge that abolitionists rejected the use of force and would instead rely on moral suasion to change the minds and hearts of the people. Moreover, the AASS declaration paid deference to the dominant interpretation of the Constitution—that Congress had "no right to interfere with any of the

doesn't believe Jackson

Garrisonians believed in non-violence

slave States"—and announced that immediatists would only press Congress to act where it did have jurisdiction. Abolitionists would petition for an end to "the domestic slave trade between the several States" and for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia and in other territories under Congress's control.¹⁶

used speeches to change 1st Northerners minds

BUILDING A COALITION *than the Union*

With their mandate thus laid out, abolitionists embarked on a period of intensive organizing. Agents such as Theodore Weld, Arthur and Lewis Tappan, and Gerrit Smith were dispatched to work the lecture circuit in the North; local societies proliferated; and an antislavery petition campaign took shape. As they took the stage, local societies, no less than the movement's national leaders, mixed caustic rebukes to slaveholders with appeals to empathy and Christian fellowship. The secretary of the New Haven Anti-Slavery Society, an immediatist organization founded in 1833, defined his group's purpose in this way: "We regard the system of Slavery as founded in wickedness, and tears, and blood, and as sustained by avarice and crime. We believe it ought immediately to be overthrown." He vowed that his society would form an "unbroken phalanx—unintimidated by calumny or threats" or by "the chimerical fears, & woful [*sic*] predictions of the results of emancipation." But he also promised, on a gentler note, that New Haven activists would promote justice and truth "in the spirit of Christ, and in love."¹⁷

Abolitionists dramatized the possibility of a new kind of Christian fellowship that crossed boundaries of gender, race, and region. Northern women, white and black, were core constituents of the movement, founding racially integrated organizations in Boston and Philadelphia that would serve as models for immediatist societies elsewhere in the North. These societies, in turn, furnished fund-raisers and orators for the movement, such as the indefatigable Abby Kelley, of Massachusetts, who eventually joined the "hardy group of lecturing agents [carrying] their message to the new towns along the Erie Canal, to the rich farm counties of Pennsylvania, and over the Alleghenies to Ohio and Michigan." Female abolitionists drew out the radical implications of the dominant doctrine of woman's place—the ideal of "separate spheres." Because of their natural piety and moral purity, so that doctrine held, women belonged in the domestic sphere of home and family; the hurly-

burly public world of politics and business was the domain of men. With the approbation of men, antebellum women, particularly in the urban North, had extended their sphere by engaging in charitable work, justifying it as a special moral duty. Abolitionist women insisted that because slavery was primarily a moral problem, women had a paramount duty to oppose it, even if that meant crossing the boundary into the "male" sphere of politics.¹⁸

Immediatists such as Sarah Mapps Douglass, a free black Philadelphia Quaker, believed that the abolition cause was inextricably linked to the promotion of civil rights in the North—that blacks and whites must work together to fight racism everywhere they found it. She practiced what she preached. A teacher by profession, Douglass established a "female coloured school" in Philadelphia and enlisted the help of white abolitionists like Lucretia Mott to sustain it. Douglass also urged upon Northern free blacks an empathetic identification with Southern slaves by emphasizing, in her speeches and writings, the threat that slavery posed to the homes of free Northern women. Whereas the female petitioners of Augusta County, Virginia, had in 1832 evoked an image of homes menaced by slave rebellion, Douglass conjured up that same year an image of homes threatened by slave catchers. Speaking in Philadelphia, and thinking no doubt of the many ominous signs of slaveholder militance, Douglass confessed that while she had once imagined that slavery was a distant prospect, she now "beheld the oppressor lurking on the border of my own peaceful home!" She saw "his iron hand stretched forth" to seize her "as his prey." Garrison featured this speech in the *Liberator* and told Douglass that her eloquence had put a "new weapon" into his hands with which to fight slavery and prejudice.¹⁹

African American reformers again and again urged Northerners to identify with Southern slaves. For example, Elizabeth Wicks of the African Female Benevolent Society of Troy, New York, in an 1834 address to her fellow female activists, said: "Let our minds travel south and sympathize with the present state of the two millions of our brethren who are yet in bondage." Such appeals, which echoed the sentiments of James Forten and the preceding generation of black leaders, can and should be read as a commentary on the discourse of disunion. For even as the rift widened between white Northern critics and white Southern defenders of slavery, African Americans asserted that the interests and destinies of Northern blacks were inextricable from those of Southern ones. Disunion connoted for free blacks both the cutting

off of slaves from their Northern allies and the disjuncture between America's transcendent ideals and its shameful realities. The promise of the Union, African American leaders stressed, would only be fulfilled if the Southern states followed the example of the Northern ones, by instituting emancipation. As free black activists commemorating emancipation in New York put it: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are born free and equal, has been resounded from one end of the Union to the other by white Americans—May they speedily learn to practice what they so loudly proclaim."²⁰

Antislavery white Southerners, although a statistically insignificant part of the immediatist coalition, loomed large as symbols for the movement. Three Southerners in particular—Angelina and Sarah Grimké of South Carolina and James Birney of Kentucky—represented the hope that slaveholders could be persuaded to repent and join the immediatist crusade. The Grimké sisters' religious convictions compelled them to forsake the elite slaveholding milieu in which they were raised. Their brother Thomas, it will be recalled, was a dominant voice against nullification; he had embraced colonization as the cure for sectional tensions. But the sisters instead followed the path blazed by Forten, Walker, Douglass, and Garrison. They settled in Philadelphia, where they joined another set of formidable siblings, Sara, Harriet, and Margaretta Forten (and Sarah Mapps Douglass and Lucretia Mott), in working for the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. The Grimkés' status as Southern insiders made them valuable assets on the lecture circuit, where they could offer firsthand testimony about the cruelties of slavery. Moreover, "their own daily contact with blacks under the racist regime of slavery" attuned them to the prevalence of Northern racism, even within the antislavery ranks. As Carolyn Williams has noted: "Unlike many white abolitionists, the Grimké sisters regarded blacks as people rather than as abstract symbols of oppression and degradation." James Birney, for his part, had also willingly forsaken slavery and settled in the North, operating an abolitionist newspaper in Ohio and traveling the North as a lecturer before becoming executive secretary of the AASS. The editor of a paper in Essex County, Massachusetts, after reprinting a Birney speech of 1836, commented that anyone who was generally skeptical about abolitionism should take special note of Birney, "REMEMBERING THAT IT IS A RECENT SLAVEHOLDER WHO SPEAKS!"²¹

The most potent antislavery testimony of all came from fugitive slaves—

themselves, and their stories were featured in the speeches and publications of white immediatists like Lydia Maria Child. In the 1830s abolitionism tapped the power of published slave narratives. Works such as Charles Ball's *Slavery in the United States* and Moses Roper's *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper*, both published in 1837, provide searing indictments of the barbarity of slavery as well as trenchant analyses of the social dynamics of Southern society. Ball's narrative graphically depicts the tortures he suffered as a slave in Maryland and South Carolina. On one occasion he endured a whipping of ninety-six lashes, after which scalding pepper was poured directly onto the gashed, quivering flesh on his back. By the end of this ordeal, Ball's face was badly bruised as well, for "in the madness of my agony, I had not been able to refrain from beating my head violently against the [whipping] post." Ball positions himself, however, not just as a victim of slavery but as an authority on Southern society who has the duty to enlighten Northerners about it. No one who had not lived in the South "can fully understand the bonds that hold society together there, or appreciate the rules which prescribe the boundaries of the pretensions of the several orders of men who compose the body politic." Based on those rules, "every man who is able to procure a subsistence, without labor, regards himself a gentleman." But if the dream of rising into the ranks of gentlemen intoxicated nonslaveholders, it did not follow that the elite felt a genuine solidarity with and respect for striving nonelite whites. In fact, according to Ball, the planter class looked with disdain on common whites and did their best to keep them in ignorance. After escaping to the North, Ball realized that one of the most fundamental differences between the sections was that whites "are not nearly so well informed in the southern states, as they are in those lying farther north."²²

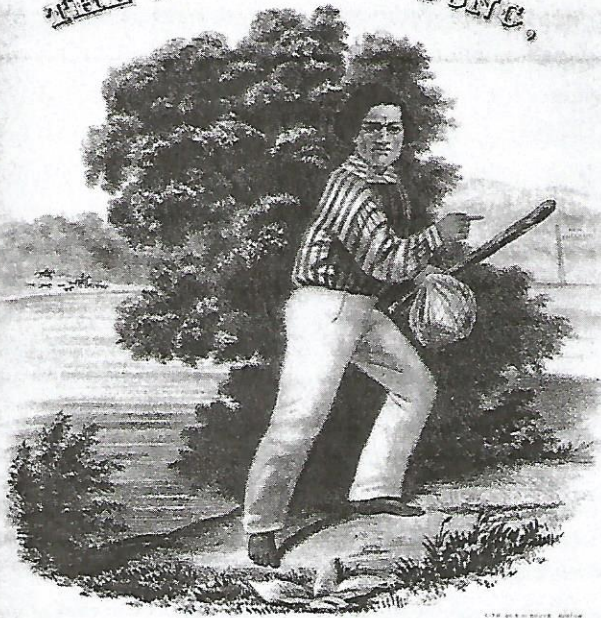
Moses Roper's narrative, too, sought to lay bare the internal workings of Southern society. Describing how he accompanied his master to a political event in South Carolina, he notes that it was "at the time of the agitation of the Union and Nullifying party, which was expected to end in a general war. The Nullifying party had a grand dinner on the occasion, after which they gave their slaves all the refuse, for the purpose of bribing them to fight on the side of their party." The scene that ensued—drunken masters watching as slaves scrambled to get "bare bones and crumbs"—was in Roper's eyes both patently absurd and tragically telling. Roper juxtaposed it with a report that a few

days later “a public auction was held for the sale of slaves, cattle, sugar, iron &c.” by the leading men in his town. The first incident, no less than the second, Roper conveys, was intended to humiliate and dehumanize the slaves; masters demanded their loyalty but gave no loyalty in return. Roper, whose narrative was favorably reviewed in Garrison’s *Liberator*, proved to be a popular speaker on the antislavery lecture circuit in the United States and Britain. Former slaves, then, used their writings and speeches to chart the gap between the rhetoric of slaveholder paternalism—with its claim that a system of mutual duties and obligations bound master and servant—and the realities of slave suffering.²³

With the rise of Frederick Douglass (who no bore no relation to Sarah Mapps Douglass) to prominence as an orator in 1839–40, abolitionism found its greatest standard-bearer. Born in 1818 on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, Douglass was scarred, literally and figuratively, by a childhood spent in the grip of slavery. As a boy, he had fifteen of his kinfolk sold away from him to owners in the Deep South; he witnessed brutal punishments, such as the whipping of his elderly aunt with a “blood-clotted cowskin”; he experienced the daily trials of hunger, overwork, and exposure to the elements. A ray of light broke into this world of deprivation and brutality when a “kind and tender hearted” woman named Sophia Auld, the wife of his master Hugh Auld, taught him the rudiments of literacy. Enraged that his wife would put such a dangerous weapon into Douglass’s hands, Auld forbade her to continue the lessons; soon Sophia’s tenderheartedness dissipated, and she came to wear the cold countenance of the slaveholder. This experience—the corruption of Sophia Auld—persuaded Douglass that “slaveholding is learned behavior” and that it could be “unlearned” too.²⁴

Sometime during the years 1830–31, while a slave in Baltimore, Douglass first heard of the abolitionist movement. As he recalls in his narrative, *abolition* “was always used in such connections as to make it an interesting word to me.” If a slave “did any thing very wrong in the mind of a slaveholder, it was spoken of as the fruit of *abolition*.” From then on, Douglass “always drew near when that word was spoken.” The realization that “up there in the free North there was an ‘argument’ about slavery” strengthened his determination to escape. Years of planning and hoping came to fruition when, in 1838, Douglass managed to flee Baltimore disguised as a free black sailor. He made his way to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he shortly gained prominence

THE FUGITIVE'S SONG.



WORDS
 composed and especially dedicated to the use of competent orators in
FREDERICK DOUGLASS
 A Graduate from the
"PECULIAR INSTITUTION"
 for his fearless advocacy, equal ability and wonderful success in behalf of
HIS BROTHERS IN BONDS.
 and in the FUGITIVEES FROM SLAVERY IN THE
FREE STATES & CANADAS.
 BY THE AUTHOR
JESSE HUTCHINSON JUNE

BOSTON. Published by HENRY PRENTISS, 33 CORNHILL.

As a preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. On March 12, 1839, Douglass inaugurated his long career as an orator when he spoke out against colonization at a church meeting. Two months later, he addressed an integrated audience at an antislavery meeting attended by none other than William Lloyd Garrison; thus was born one of the most important partnerships in American political history. Hearing Douglass recount his story of a life in slavery, Garrison declared that "Patrick Henry, of revolutionary fame, never made a speech more eloquent in the cause of liberty" than the fugitive slave. Thousands of antislavery auditors who subsequently listened to Douglass's speeches on behalf of the AASS would draw the same conclusion.²⁵

As this sheet music in honor of Frederick Douglass testifies, by the mid-1840s he had become an abolitionist icon—the most influential "graduate from the peculiar institution," according to the subtitle of the "Fugitive's Song." (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

As a result of the tireless work of antislavery agents, membership in abolition societies reached 200,000 by 1840. Although this figure was but a small fraction of the 17 million inhabitants of the United States and abolitionists were still far afield of the mainstream, they had succeeded, during the period 1833 to 1840, in dramatically altering the course of American politics. According to David Grimsted, as white majorities in the North and South confronted the abolitionist campaign, two distinct "sectional systems of, and attitudes toward, social violence" took shape that would "mark and deepen all future North-South confrontations."²⁶

THE SECTIONAL CRISIS OF 1835

Sectional tensions reached such a fever pitch in 1835 that commentators in the North and South declared that the Missouri controversy had been revived and had taken on a much more fearful aspect. That year saw forty-six proslavery riots and fifteen race riots. What precipitated these mob actions was the confluence of a series of slave insurrection scares in the South and the onset of a massive public relations campaign by the Northern abolitionist movement. In 1835 the AASS published over a million pieces of antislavery literature for distribution in the South as well as the North. Targeting slaveholders, abolitionists hoped that this information could effect the gentle moral suasion that would bring repentance. Insisting that slaves—not slaveholders—were the intended audience for AASS propaganda, supporters of slavery chose to cast the mail campaign as the "smoking gun" that linked abolitionism to the threat of slave insurrection. In the words of Postmaster General Amos Kendall, abolitionist literature was "calculated to operate on the passions of the colored men, and produce discontent, assassination, and servile war."²⁷

Initially, Northern elites sought to reassure Southern ones of their opposition to abolitionism by chastising antislavery agitators in the press and by holding large, peaceful, pro-Southern meetings in Northern towns and cities. Anti-abolitionist rhetoric focused on the charge that abolition radicalism poisoned the relations between the sections and thus threatened the Union. Such accusations sent a chill through the antislavery ranks, as moderates no less than radicals felt themselves under attack. As Edwin Atlee of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society lamented, the patriots and philanthropists who dared