

Module 04: How Did Abolitionism Lead to the Struggle for Women's Rights?

Evidence 2: One Woman's Anti-Slavery Activities, 1836-1839

A

Introduction

A significant number of women, like Mary Avery White of the rural community of Boylston, Massachusetts, answered the call to action published in the "Ladies Department" article. As the following document suggests, women's efforts were varied. Because of their committed and persistent work, women like Mary White quickly became the backbone of the abolitionist movement, a member of the stalwart troops that William Lloyd Garrison's son would later call the "great army of silent workers, unknown to fame, . . . without whom the generals were powerless." (1)

Mary Avery White, a typical New England woman of her time, was approximately sixty years old when she wrote the diary entries below. As the daughter of a minister, the wife of a farmer and small shopkeeper, and the mother of ten children, White devoted her life to fulfilling her many domestic duties. She was also well versed in the tenets of Christian virtue, aspects of which come through in her diary comments. White became quite active in the anti-slavery cause in the early 1830s. She had organized a local female anti-slavery society and participated in many of its efforts.

Questions to Consider

- What types of activities did Mary White engage in? How did her behavior compare with the suggested course of action for female abolitionists described in the "Ladies Department" article?
- How did White justify her involvement in a political cause? What aspects of the "True Woman" did she seem to rely on most of all?
- How did her efforts seem to challenge the concept of separate spheres?

Document

[Excerpts from Mary Avery White's diary entries, 1836-1839:]

1836

Tuesday, March 8. . . Antislavery meeting this evening. . . Monday, April 25. . . a concert of prayer for our rulers and for the emancipation of the slaves. . . Sabbath [Sunday], October 30. . . Antislavery meeting in the evening. . . Sabbath, November 27. . . Antislavery [prayer] concert this evening. . . Friday, December 23. . . Attended an Antislavery Meeting at the Vestry. Mr. Amos Dresser addressed the meeting & gave an account of his suffering for the cause of Abolition. Mr. Stanton [the husband of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, see Document 15] delivered a lecture on the subject of slavery. May the Lord God add his blessing to the efforts that are making to Abolish slavery. . . .

1837

Friday, January 13. . . Mr. Stanton delivered an antislavery lecture in the afternoon & one in the evening. . . may the Labors of this agent be blest of the Lord to bring about the emancipation of the poor negro. . . Monday, January 30. . . I attended an antislavery [prayer] concert. May the Lord grant a blessing on the efforts made to abolish Slavery. . . Sabbath, April 23. . . Antislavery lecture at the town Hall by Rev. Mr. St. Clair. . . Sabbath, May 21. . . an antislavery lecture delivered at the town Hall by Mr. St. Clair of West Boylston. May the Lord soon grant deliverance to the poor Slaves. . . . Saturday, June 10. . . we had a female antislavery society formed at the town hall. Rev. Mr. Smith closed the meeting. . . Saturday, June 24. . . Antislavery meeting of Females at the town Hall. Mr. Temple made a prayer. Revd Mr. St. Clair delivered an address, a pertinent one on the subject of Slavery. May we be animated to do what we can for the deliverance of the poor Slave. Sabbath, June 25. . . a third service Antislavery concert. . . Friday, June 30. . . Mary took a circuit round the Neighborhood with petition for the Abolition of Slavery in the district of Columbia [Washington, D.C.] & a remonstrance [protest plea] against the annexation of Texas to the United States as a Slaveholding territory. May the Lord soon grant deliverance to those who are in bonds. Saturday, July 8. . . Female Antislavery society met this afternoon. Caroline attended. Friday, July 14. . . Very pleasant and warm. Mary went & carried an antislavery petition to Miss Lucy Goodenow to circulate for subscribers. . . Wednesday, August 23. . . Antislavery society met at Mr. Strattons. . . Saturday, September 9. . . a Mr. Fairbanks from Providence [Rhode Island], an agent for the Antislavery cause, drank tea. Then a meeting at the Vestry the evening. Wednesday, September 20. . . Antislavery meeting this

afternoon. . . Tuesday, September 26. . . an antislavery lecture delivered by Mr. Philemon Rand at the town hall. . . Wednesday, September 27. . . Mr. White went with Mrs. Sanford and Miss Smith to Worcester [Massachusetts] Antislavery meeting. . . Monday, October 2. . . Attended in the evening Lectures by the Miss Grimkes on Slavery. Very interesting lectures. May the Lord direct them in all they do. . . Tuesday, October 3. . . I went to Mr. Sanfords & had the pleasure of seeing the Miss Grimkes. We had a meeting of a few females for prayer this afternoon, a meeting for inquiries & for prayer at the meeting house. . . Wednesday, October 18. . . Mary attended Antislavery meeting this afternoon. . . Wednesday, November 1. . . I attended Antislavery meeting this afternoon.

1838

Tuesday, February 6. . . Antislavery agent called here this afternoon. . . Monday, February 12. . . Mr. Allens Daughters called & left Antislavery reports by Mr. Allen. . . Wednesday, April 25. . . I attended a meeting of the Antislavery society at Mr. Sanfords. . . Wednesday, August 1. . . Mary attended the antislavery meeting. . . Friday, August 3. . . Mary went with Charles to hear an Antislavery Lecture at West Boylston by Mr. Stanton. . . Wednesday, August 29. . . At night I attended Antislavery meeting. . . Tuesday, October 2. . . a Mr. Root delivered an Antislavery address at the Vestry this evening. . . Wednesday, October 10. . . Mr. Cottons Daughters and Miss Olive How met here this afternoon to work for the antislavery society. . . Tuesday, October 16. . . called at Mr. Tiltons, Mrs. Norcross Sawyers, Mrs. Richs, and Mrs. White's [her sister-in-law]. Got some signatures for the Antislavery petitions. . . Wednesday, December 26. . . I received a letter from the Honorable Levi Lincoln [Representative to the U.S. House of Representatives and former Governor of Massachusetts]. It informed us of the neglect that our petition was treated with in Congress.

1839

Monday, February 11. . . an animated Lecture on Slavery by the Rev. Mr. Martyn in the meeting house. . . Friday, February 15. . . Mr. Martyn went to West Boylston to deliver an Antislavery Lecture. . . Saturday, May 18. . . Mary attended the Antislavery Meeting at the hall. . . Saturday, June 1. . . Sophia Cotton spent the afternoon here at work for the antislavery society. . . Saturday, June 15. . . Mary attended the antislavery meeting. Miss Sarah Smith attended. . . Wednesday, July 17. . . The girls attended Antislavery meeting. . . Wednesday, July 31. . . I attended Antislavery sewing circle. . .

Sabbath, September 1. . . I went to meeting. Mr. Grant, formerly a Missionary among the Foolahs in South Africa [preached] monthly [prayer] concert. At night Mr. Grant gave us an interesting account of the Foolahs. . . Thursday, October 3. . . Caroline went on foot with Sophia Cotton to West Boylston to attend an antislavery meeting. William went with the chaise [a type of horse-drawn carriage] at night expecting to hear Mr. Lloyd Garrison Lecture. . . Friday, October 4. . . Mr. Foster and Mr. Pettibone called here this forenoon & Mr. Pettibone Lectured at the hall in the evening. . . I attended the lecture in the evening. Caroline & myself assisted in getting the bed quilt at the Hall for the Antislavery cause. . . Wednesday, October 16. . . I attended antislavery meeting at the Hall. Voted to send the avails of our labor for the Society to the Anti [slavery] Fair [See Document 2]. Mr. Torrey delivered a lecture for the Slave at the meeting house in the evening. . . Thursday, October 17. . . Davis came here at night. Mr. Torrey Lecturing before the ladies this afternoon. Another lecture this evening. . . Saturday, October 26. . . Mrs. Cotton called here & got some worsted [wool] socks for the antislavery cause. . . Monday, October 28. . . Caroline attended Antislavery meeting at the Vestry. . . Tuesday, November 5. . . I called at Mr. Duntons to get Mrs. Duntons to sign our petition to send to congress & to our general court [Massachusetts State Legislature]. . . Tuesday, November 12. . . Mr. Ball called her in the evening & Mr. Sanford & his wife spent the evening here & discussed the merits of Mr. Garrison's [antislavery] paper [referring to *The Liberator*]. . . Monday, November 25. . . Caroline & Lucy attended the antislavery [prayer] Concert. Mr. Sanford Smith there & made an address. May the Lord soon prepare the way for their deliverance. . . Tuesday, November 26. . . Francis went to Mr. Flagg to carry Antislavery petitions to be sent to Worcester [Massachusetts] for Mr. [Levi] Lincoln to carry to Congress. . . .

(1) William Lloyd Garrison, Jr., quoted in Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1998), 1. ([back](#))

Source:

Diary of Mary White, Boylston, MA, 1836-1844, vol. 1 (Old Sturbridge Village Research Library; selected entries edited by Old Sturbridge Village).