The Abolitionist Movement

**Historical overview:** Many individuals, both white and black, slaves and free persons took a strong moral stand against slavery. As abolitionists, they circulated petitions, wrote letters and poems, and published articles in the leading anti-slavery periodicals such as the Liberator. Others however took a different approach to the abolition of slavery that was not as peaceful or non-threatening to life. Each of these methods alludes to the changing tide in America’s feelings towards enslavement and free labor.

**Directions:** Please read through the following biographies and determine the following items for each abolitionist. Then complete the reflection questions.

* ***Items to look for:***
  + Their race
  + Their class
  + Their methods as an abolitionist
  + Their expectations/goals as an abolitionist
  + Any restrictions they faced

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| **Name** | **Race/Gender** | **Social Class** | **Methods** | **Problems That Arise** | **End Result** |
| **Harriet Tubman** |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Prudence Crandall** |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Henry Brown** |  |  |  |  |  |
| **John Brown** |  |  |  |  |  |

**Reflection Questions:**

* What was the goal of the abolitionist movement?
* What methods did the women use to protest the institution of slavery? Why do you think they chose those methods?
* What differences existed between the methods used by black women and white women? Why do you think these differences occurred?
* What differences existed between the methods used by black men and white men? Why do you think these differences occurred?
* What differences existed between the methods used by people of different social classes during this time period? Why did these differences exist?
* Evaluate: Which method is most effective in changing American attitudes towards blacks? Explain.

Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman is perhaps the most well-known of all the Underground Railroad's "conductors." During a ten-year span she made 19 trips into the South and escorted over 300 slaves to freedom. And, as she once proudly pointed out to Frederick Douglass, in all of her journeys she "never lost a single passenger."  
  
Tubman was born a slave in Maryland's Dorchester County around 1820. At age five or six, she began to work as a house servant. Seven years later she was sent to work in the fields. While she was still in her early teens, she suffered an injury that would follow her for the rest of her life. Always ready to stand up for someone else, Tubman blocked a doorway to protect another field hand from an angry overseer. The overseer picked up and threw a two-pound weight at the field hand. It fell short, striking Tubman on the head. She never fully recovered from the blow, which subjected her to spells in which she would fall into a deep sleep.   
Around 1844 she married a free black named John Tubman and took his last name. (She was born Araminta Ross; she later changed her first name to Harriet, after her mother.) In 1849, in fear that she, along with the other slaves on the plantation, was to be sold, Tubman resolved to run away. She set out one night on foot. With some assistance from a friendly white woman, Tubman was on her way. She followed the North Star by night, making her way to Pennsylvania and soon after to Philadelphia, where she found work and saved her money. The following year she returned to Maryland and escorted her sister and her sister's two children to freedom. She made the dangerous trip back to the South soon after to rescue her brother and two other men. On her third return, she went after her husband, only to find he had taken another wife. Undeterred, she found other slaves seeking freedom and escorted them to the North.   
  
Tubman returned to the South again and again. She devised clever techniques that helped make her "forays" successful, including using the master's horse and buggy for the first leg of the journey; leaving on a Saturday night, since runaway notices couldn't be placed in newspapers until Monday morning; turning about and heading south if she encountered possible slave hunters; and carrying a drug to use on a baby if its crying might put the fugitives in danger. Tubman even carried a gun which she used to threaten the fugitives if they became too tired or decided to turn back, telling them, "You'll be free or die."   
  
By 1856, Tubman's capture would have brought a $40,000 reward from the South. On one occasion, she overheard some men reading her wanted poster, which stated that she was illiterate. She promptly pulled out a book and feigned reading it. The ploy was enough to fool the men.  
  
Tubman had made the perilous trip to slave country 19 times by 1860, including one especially challenging journey in which she rescued her 70-year-old parents. Of the famed heroine, who became known as "Moses," Frederick Douglass said, "Excepting John Brown -- of sacred memory -- I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than [Harriet Tubman]."  
And John Brown, who conferred with "General Tubman" about his plans to raid Harpers Ferry, once said that she was "one of the bravest persons on this continent."  
  
Becoming friends with the leading abolitionists of the day, Tubman took part in antislavery meetings. On the way to such a meeting in Boston in 1860, in an incident in Troy, New York, she helped a fugitive slave who had been captured. During the Civil War Harriet Tubman worked for the Union as a cook, a nurse, and even a spy. After the war she settled in Auburn, New York, where she would spend the rest of her long life. She died in 1913.

Prudence Crandall

Prudence Crandall was a remarkable woman who opened one of the first schools for African American girls, despite the ridicule and harassment she faced because of her actions.

Prudence Crandall was born in Hopkinton, Rhode Island on September 3, 1803 to a Quaker family. She attended the New England Friends’ Boarding School in Providence, where she was able to study subjects such as arithmetic, Latin and the sciences. Although most women during the early 1800’s did not receive much education, Quakers (or Friends) believed that women should be educated.

In October of 1831, Crandall opened a private girl’s academy in Canterbury, Connecticut. In 1833, Crandall decided to admit an African American student named Sarah Harris, who wanted more education in order to become a teacher for African American children. The white students’ parents were outraged and demanded that Sarah Harris be expelled. Crandall, however, opposed slavery and believed in educating African Americans. She refused to expel the young student and decided instead to open a new school for African American girls.

Prudence Crandall’s new school met with much hostility. The four most prominent men in the town of Canterbury arranged a meeting in which they told Crandall that they were intent on destroying her school. The men objected to educating African Americans in their hometown and felt it might lead them to believe they were equal and to interracial marriages. Women in the 1800s were raised to obey men’s wishes, but Crandall did not back down.

Crandall enlisted the help of William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the *Liberator*, the nation’s major antislavery newspaper. Garrison supported her and directed her to several families interested in sending their girls to Crandall’s boarding school. Although African Americans, these families not only were emancipated, but also affluent enough to pay the tuition. In addition, Garrison placed advertisements for Crandall’s school in his newspaper.

The first week in April, 1833, Crandall began admitting students. She taught the girls advanced grammar, math and science so that they would one day be able to teach other African Americans. Inside the school, the girls enjoyed the peaceful activities of lectures and study but when they ventured outside they were met with threats and violence. The townspeople jeered rude comments at the girls and threw stones, eggs, and manure at them. Most of the shopkeepers refused to sell Crandall the goods she needed to run the school; she was forced to have her supplies shipped in. The Congregational church refused to allow her students to attend services, while other townspeople contaminated the water in her well.

Despite the hardships she faced, Crandall had many admirers and became known throughout the country and the world for her courage. Crandall received letters and gifts from American abolitionists and even from supporters as far away as Scotland, praising her brave actions.

Within months, the town of Canterbury led the legislature in passing the “Black Law,” which made it illegal to open a school or academy that taught African American students from a state other than Connecticut. Crandall was arrested and jailed for providing education to African Americans under this law. The first trial ended in a hung jury – with all jurors, of course, being male – but was convicted in the second trial. A higher court reversed the decision, but on a technicality, not on principle, and angry townspeople continued to harass Crandall and her students. They threw stones, eggs, and mud at the schoolhouse and attempted to light it on fire. On the night of September 9, 1834, the townspeople made one last attempt to drive the schoolhouse to close by breaking most of the windows and smashing furniture in an angry mob attack. Although she had won her legal battle, Crandall feared for her students’ safety and decided to close the school.

Henry Brown

Henry Brown was born in either 1815 or 1816 at the Hermitage, a plantation about ten miles from Yanceyville in Louisa County. Unlike many slaves who knew neither their parents nor their siblings, Brown spent his formative years with his parents (whose names are unknown) and his four sisters and three brothers. They all were slaves belonging to John Barret, a former mayor of Richmond. After Barret's death on June 9, 1830, Brown was separated from his family and sent to Richmond to work in the tobacco factory of Barret's son William Barret, whose property he became. Brown's brothers and sisters were sent to various plantations, except for Martha, who, according to Brown, was kept by William Barret as his "keep Miss," or mistress.

In Richmond about 1836 Brown married Nancy, a slave owned by a different master, and together they had three children. The family joined the First African Baptist Church, where Henry Brown sang in the church's choir. He had become a skilled tobacco worker and earned enough money through overwork to set up his family in a rented house. Then, in August 1848, Nancy Brown's master sold her and their three children to another master in North Carolina. At the time, she was pregnant with a fourth child.

After mourning his loss for several months, Brown resolved to escape from slavery and conceived an unusual method. Through James Caesar Anthony Smith, a free black and fellow member of the church choir, he contacted Samuel Alexander Smith, a white shoemaker and sometime gambler, who agreed for a price to help Brown escape. (Ironically, Samuel Smith himself owned slaves.) The three men rejected several possible means before Brown had the inspiration to be shipped in a box by rail to Philadelphia. Samuel Smith accordingly contacted James Miller McKim, a Philadelphia leader of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society who was involved in Underground Railroad activities.

On March 23, 1849, the Smiths sealed Brown into a wooden box three feet long, two and one-half feet deep, and two feet wide, and conveyed the package as "dry goods" from Richmond to Philadelphia. On the steamboat transfer up the Potomac River to Washington from the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad's terminus at Aquia Creek, Brown was turned head down in the box for several hours and nearly died. At other transfers the box was roughly handled, but he endured silently. He later wrote that he "was resolved to conquer or die," even as "I felt my eyes swelling as if they would burst from their sockets; and the veins on my temples were dreadfully distended with pressure of blood upon my head." Even as he thought he might die, Brown heard a man telling another that he had been standing too long and needed a place to sit; "so perceiving my box, standing on end, he threw it down and then two sat upon it. I was thus relieved from a state of agony which may be more easily imagined than described."

After the parcel finally arrived in Philadelphia early on March 24, McKim took delivery at the office of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, where the box was opened with great trepidation. After twenty-six hours' confinement, Brown emerged, alive and free. "I had risen as it were from the dead," Brown wrote.

Samuel Smith attempted another shipment of slaves from Richmond to Philadelphia on May 8, 1849, but was discovered and arrested. That November he was sentenced to six and one-half years in the state penitentiary. James C. A. Smith had aided Smith in the attempt but avoided arrest until September 25, 1849. A divided panel of magistrates enabled him to escape conviction. James C. A. Smith had joined Brown in Boston by December.

John Brown

John Brown was born into a deeply religious family in Torrington, Connecticut, in 1800. Led by a father who was vehemently opposed to slavery, the family moved to northern Ohio when John was five, to a district that would become known for its antislavery views.  
  
During his first fifty years, Brown moved about the country, settling in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New York, and taking along his ever-growing family. (He would father twenty children.) Working at various times as a farmer, wool merchant, tanner, and land speculator, he never was finacially successful -- he even filed for bankruptcy when in his forties. His lack of funds, however, did not keep him from supporting causes he believed in. He helped finance the publication of David Walker's Appeal and Henry Highland's "Call to Rebellion" speech. He gave land to fugitive slaves. He and his wife agreed to raise a black youth as one of their own. He also participated in the Underground Railroad and, in 1851, helped establish the League of Gileadites, an organization that worked to protect escaped slaves from slave catchers.   
  
In 1847 Frederick Douglass met Brown for the first time in Springfield, Massachusetts. Of the meeting Douglass stated that, "though a white gentleman, [Brown] is in sympathy a black man, and as deeply interested in our cause, as though his own soul had been pierced with the iron of slavery." It was at this meeting that Brown first outlined his plan to Douglass to lead a war to free slaves.  
  
Brown moved to the black community of North Elba, New York, in 1849. The community had been established thanks to the philanthropy of Gerrit Smith, who donated tracts of at least 50 acres to black families willing to clear and farm the land. Brown, knowing that many of the families were finding life in this isolated area difficult, offered to establish his own farm there as well, in order to lead the blacks by his example and to act as a "kind father to them."   
  
Despite his contributions to the antislavery cause, Brown did not emerge as a figure of major significance until 1855 after he followed five of his sons to the Kansas territory. There, he became the leader of antislavery guerillas and fought a proslavery attack against the antislavery town of Lawrence. The following year, in retribution for another attack, Brown went to a proslavery town and brutally killed five of its settlers. Brown and his sons would continue to fight in the territory and in Missouri for the rest of the year.  
  
Brown returned to the east and began to think more seriously about his plan for a war in Virginia against slavery. He sought money to fund an "army" he would lead. On October 16, 1859, he set his plan to action when he and 21 other men -- 5 blacks and 16 whites -- raided the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry.

John Brown was a man of action -- a man who would not be deterred from his mission of abolishing slavery. On October 16, 1859, he led 21 men on a raid of the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. His plan to arm slaves with the weapons he and his men seized from the arsenal was thwarted, however, by local farmers, militiamen, and Marines led by Robert E. Lee. Within 36 hours of the attack, most of Brown's men had been killed or captured.  
  
Brown was wounded and quickly captured, and moved to Charlestown, Virginia, where he was tried and convicted of treason, Before hearing his sentence, Brown was allowed make an address to the court.   
  
. . . I believe to have interfered as I have done, . . . in behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right. Now, if it be deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children, and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I submit: so let it be done."

Although initially shocked by Brown's exploits, many Northerners began to speak favorably of the militant abolitionist. "He did not recognize unjust human laws, but resisted them as he was bid. . . .," said Henry David Thoreau in an address to the citizens of Concord, Massachusetts. "No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature. . . ." John Brown was hanged on December 2, 1859.