

Unitarian and Universalist Denominational and Individual Involvement in the Anti-Slavery Movement Prior to the U.S. Civil War

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What involvement, if any, was there in the abolitionist movement by the Universalists and the Unitarians, both as denominations and the individual members themselves?

The earliest written statement is in the *Articles of Faith and Plan of Church Government* composed and adopted by the churches believing in the Salvation of all Men (Universalist), May 25, 1790, Chapter III, Recommendations, Section 3. Of Holding Slaves:

We believe it to be inconsistent with the union of the human race in a common Saviour, and the obligations to mutual and universal love which flow from that union, to hold any part of our fellow-creatures in bondage. We therefore recommend a total refraining from the African trade, and the adoption of prudent measures for the gradual abolition of slavery of the negroes in our country, and for the instruction and education of their children in English literature, and in the principles of the Gospel.

According to a UUA Commission on Appraisal (COA) report in 1983 [1] the Universalist denomination was silent on the issue for the next fifty-one years. At an 1820 Universalist Anti-Slavery Convention Hosea Ballou refused to sign the roll “because he believed a discussion of slavery was not a proper denominational question.” [2] By 1841 the denomination began to move. A resolution passed in 1841 by the Universalists in Maine condemning slavery. In 1843 the General Convention followed suit and the next year 304 Universalist ministers out of 344 signed a *Protest Against American Slavery*. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 increasing penalties for those aiding escaped slaves, the repeal of the Missouri Compromise by the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, and the U. S. Supreme Court ruling in the Dred Scott v. Sandford case in 1857 that African Americans could never become U. S. citizens and declared the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional all contributed to fanning the abolitionist sentiments of the Universalists even higher.

Of the Unitarians the Rev. Samuel J. May of the Church of the Messiah (now named May Memorial Unitarian Universalist Society) in Syracuse, N. Y. wrote:

The Unitarians as a body dealt with the question of slavery in any but an impartial, courageous...way. Continually in their public meetings the question was staved off and driven out, because of technical, formal and verbal difficulties which were of no real importance... We had the right to expect from Unitarians a steadfast and unqualified protest against... American slavery. And considering their position as a body not entangled with any proslavery alliances, not hampered by any ecclesiastical organization, it does seem to me that they were pre-eminently guilty in reference to the enslavement of the millions in our land with its attendant wrongs, cruelties, horrors. They, of all other sects, ought to have spoken boldly. But they did not. [3]

The work of individual Unitarians was in sharp contrast with the institutional response. The COA report states that Channing, Parker, Child, Chapman and other Unitarians were hard workers in the abolitionist movement.

Morrison-Reed recounts the story of Theodore Parker late at night with both a gun and a sword nearby while he wrote sermons, so that he could protect the runaway slaves he was hiding. In fact, Earl Morse Wilbur attributes the slow growth of Unitarianism after 1840 at least in part to the fact that so many “active spirits” were promoting such reforms as antislavery. In 1845, one hundred seventy Unitarian ministers published an antislavery declaration in *The Liberator*, lamenting both the fact that the gospel could not “be fully preached in the slave-holding states” and the “long silence of Northern Christians and churches.” [4]

The number of individual Unitarians and Universalists involved in the fight for freedom of the slaves before and during the Civil War are more numerous than I am able to account for. Not only were those who were visible through their outspokenness in print, membership in various societies – including the Underground Railroad – and preaching from their pulpits. There were also probably ten more supporting all of this for every one that was prominent. Those who, through means or motivation, were reluctant or unable to be in the forefront of the fight but without whose support and efforts behind the scenes those on the front lines would not have been able to be as effective as they were.

The following people I have been able to identify as abolitionists who were involved in the struggle to some extent and continue to be models for us in the present day in the continuing efforts to make all prejudice and racism a distant memory, relegated to the trash heap of human weaknesses.



William Ellery Channing

Born May 25, 1810 in Boston, Massachusetts; died December, 1844 in London, England. Channing is a central figure in Unitarian ministerial history. By nature moderate and non-confronting, his thoughtfulness and eruditeness continually put him in the forefront of issues and causes when he determined he had to speak out. He finally assumed the label “Unitarian” when he delivered his sermon “Unitarian Christianity” at the Ordination of Rev. Jared Sparks in The First Independent Church of Baltimore on May 5, 1819. The predominant impetus behind his producing his work *Slavery* in 1835 is commonly identified as Maria Weston Child’s book *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* on the conditions of slavery in the U. S. That there were other forces at work in Channing’s life regarding slavery is an account given by the Unitarian minister Samuel J. May in his 1869 book, *Some Recollections of Our Anti-Slavery Conflict*, of a conversation between he and Channing:

“Dr. Channing,” I continued with increased earnestness, “it is not our fault that those who might have conducted this great reform more prudently have left it to us to manage as we may. It is not our fault that those who might have pleaded for the enslaved so much more

wisely and eloquently, both with the pen and the living voice than we can, have been silent. We are not to blame, sir, that you, who, more perhaps than any other man, might have so raised the voice of remonstrance that it should have been heard throughout the length and breadth of the land, we are not to blame, sir, that you have not so spoken. And now that inferior men have been impelled to speak and act against what you acknowledge to be an awful system of iniquity, it is not becoming in you to complain of us because we do it in an inferior style. Why, sir, have you not taken this matter in hand yourself. Why have you not spoken to the nation long ago, as you, better than any other one, could have spoken. “

At this point I bethought me to whom I was administering this rebuke, the man who stood among the highest of the great and good in our land, the man whose reputation for wisdom and sanctity had become world-wide, — the man, too, who had ever treated me with the kindness of a father, and whom, from my childhood, I had been accustomed to revere more than any one living. I was almost overwhelmed with a sense of my temerity. His countenance showed that he was much moved. I could not suppose he would receive all I had said very graciously. I awaited his reply in painful expectation. The minutes seemed very long that elapsed before the silence was broken. Then in a very subdued manner and in the kindest tones of his voice he said, “Brother May, I acknowledge the justice of your reproof. I have been silent too long.” Never shall I forget his words, look, whole appearance. I then and there saw the beauty, the magnanimity, the humility of a truly great Christian soul. He was exalted in my esteem more even than before.

The next spring, when I removed to Boston and became the General Agent of the Antislavery Society, Dr. Channing was the first of the ministers there to call upon me, and express any sympathy with me in the great work to which I had come to devote myself. And during the whole-fourteen months that I continued in that office he treated me with uniform kindness, and often made anxious inquiries about the phases of our attempted reform of the nation. Early in December, 1835, Dr. Channing’s volume on *Slavery* issued from the press. A few days after its publication, he invited Samuel E. Sewall and myself to dine with him, that he might learn how we liked his book. Both of us had been delighted with some parts of it, but neither of us was satisfied with other parts; much dissatisfied with some. He requested and insisted on the utmost freedom in our comments. He listened to our objections very patiently, and seemed disposed to give them their due weight. [5]

Channing’s volume was received as May had presaged. It was widely read and made its way into places where *The Liberator* could not. His usual eloquence resulted in many deeming him more dangerous than William Lloyd Garrison, the leader of the American Antislavery Society. It is a moderate document with much caution in it.

The word Massacre has resounded through the land, striking terror into strong as well as tender hearts, and awakening indignation against whatever may seem to threaten such a consummation. The consequence is, that not a few dread all discussion of the subject, and, if not reconciled to the continuance of slavery, at least believe that they have no duty to perform, no testimony to bear, no influence to exert, no sentiments to cherish and spread, in relation to this evil. What is still worse, opinions either favoring or extenuating it are heard with little or no disapprobation. Concessions are made to it, which would once have shocked the community; whilst to assail it is pronounced unwise and perilous. No stronger reason for a calm exposition of its true character can be given, than this very state of the public mind. A community can suffer no greater calamity than the loss of its principles. Lofty and pure sentiment is the life and hope of a people. There was never such an obligation to discuss slavery as at this moment, when recent events have done much to unsettle and obscure men's minds in regard to it. This result is to be ascribed in part to the injudicious vehemence of those who have taken into their hands the cause of the slave. Such ought to remember, that to espouse a good cause is not enough. We must maintain it in a spirit answering to its dignity. Let no man touch the great interests of humanity, who does not strive to sanctify himself for the work by cleansing his heart of all wrath and un-charitableness, who cannot hope that he is in a measure baptized into the spirit of universal love. Even sympathy with the injured and oppressed may do harm, by being partial, exclusive, and bitterly indignant. How far the declension of the spirit of freedom is to be ascribed to the cause now suggested, I do not say. The effect is plain, and whoever sees and laments the evil should strive to arrest it. [6]

Channing's moderation was made evident in a letter published April 17, 1840 in *The Liberator* from Edmund Quincy on the matter of Channing's congregation rescinding his offer of the church for a memorial service for a member of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, Dr. Charles Follen.

But how different has been the course pursued by the Unitarian party. How few of that numerous body, powerful from wealth and education, whether ministers or laymen, have placed themselves by the side of the suffering bondman. The freedom of discussion, which was fearlessly applied to metaphysical doctrines and theological subtleties, was found to be a dangerous weapon when it was used for the examination of an institution, the ramification of which entwined themselves around every altar of mammon worship. Commerce uplifted her voice against what seemed to threaten a possible diminution of her gains. Fashion fulminated her bull against the cause of the vulgar black man — and soon proceeded to excommunicate his advocates. Learning shook his sage head, and Wit his merry sides, at the new and

preposterous fanaticism. And what could the pulpit do for the slave, under such a pressure from without?

‘Trade, wealth and fashion asked him still to bleed,
And holy men gave Scripture for the deed.’

...Even the immemorial practice of giving information to the people of benevolent efforts from the pulpit, had been forbidden to be used in behalf of the slave, or voluntarily abandoned by the minister — and this on the part of men, who make a boast of freed discussion.
[7]



Maria Weston Chapman

Born in Weymouth, Massachusetts, on July 25, 1806; died in Weymouth, Massachusetts, on July 12, 1885. In 1830 she married Henry Grafton Chapman, a Boston merchant and member of Channing’s Federal Street church. She became involved abolitionist circles through her husband. Her status as a socialite caused initial disbelief in her sincerity. That quickly was dispelled as she set to work. In 1834, with three of her sisters and eight other women she founded the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society in the belief that slavery was “the direct violation of the laws of God, and productive of a vast amount of misery and crime, and convinced that its abolition can only be effected by an acknowledgment of the justice and necessity of immediate emancipation.” [8]

In 1835 English abolitionist George Thompson was touring New England, arousing the anger of those whose livelihood depended upon the cotton industry. Thompson was thought to be attending a meeting of BFASS at the *Liberator* office. An angry mob converged on the building. Despite the uproar, the women calmly began their meeting with scripture reading and prayer. Fearing for the women’s safety, the mayor asked them to leave the building. “If this is the last bulwark of freedom,” said Maria, “we may as well die here as anywhere.” After being escorted to safety through the crowd of hissing men, the women continued their meeting at the Chapman house nearby. A few days after the mob scene, Maria and Deborah were hissed by three men as they stood on the Chapman doorstep. It became impossible for Maria

to walk down the street alone without hearing “odious epithets” shouted after her by shop clerks.

Years later Maria wrote that “the members of Dr. Channing’s congregation were the mob.” No doubt the mob included others besides Unitarians, but influential members of Federal Street Church were unsympathetic with the Chapmans and Westons. Channing himself was only moderately supportive of the anti-slavery movement. Though he denied the right of property in slaves and had, Maria wrote, “benevolent intentions,” he showed “neither insight, courage, nor firmness.” He opposed immediate emancipation and deplored the formation of anti-slavery associations. “Above all,” she added, Channing “deprecatd the admission of the coloured race to our ranks.” Concerning her minister’s opposition to associations, Maria simply responded, “You know I never consider Dr. Channing an authority.”

By 1840 Chapmans and Westons had stopped attending Federal Street Church. Maria turned to abolitionist minister Theodore Parker, and her sisters to John Pierpont, who preached anti-slavery at Hollis Street. Maria’s spiritual life did not depend upon church attendance. “Eternity and infinity come in like a flood whenever I open the gates,” she wrote, “although God and immortality never were much to me.” [9]

Chapman became chief assistant to William Lloyd Garrison. She worked with him in running the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and editing *The Liberator*. From 1839 to 1842 Chapman edited Garrison’s New England Non-Resistance Society newsletter, the *Non-Resistant*. In 1839 she also published a pamphlet titled *Right and Wrong in Massachusetts* concerning the divisions amongst the abolitionists. She organized antislavery fairs throughout New England to raise funds and created a gift book titled, *The Liberty Bell*, to sell which contained poetry, essays, etc. about antislavery which she continued to publish until 1858. She was instrumental in promoting the antislavery work of Sarah and Angelina Grimké and others.

In 1836 she published a collection of *Songs of the Free* and *Hymns of Christian Freedom*. In May 1838, the only time she spoke in public, she addressed the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women in Philadelphia to introduce Angelina Grimke in defiance of a threatening mob. (The mob returned the next day and burned down the hall.).

The presence of women in the public eye was not approved of by a majority of the populace at this time, including ministers. It was just as bad, and perhaps worse, in England. In July of 1840 Lucretia Mott traveled to England to attend a World Antislavery Conference and report back the following to Maria:

Our friends too can tell you so much better than I can narrate here, the story of our coming across the Atlantic to attend a 'World's Convention'--simple souls! and on our arrival the grave information awaited us, that it was no more than a Conference of the British & Foreign A. S. Society, to be composed of such members as their 'Com. of Arrangement' should choose to select--that the name "The Worlds Convention" was merely a "poetical license"-- (alias--a rhetorical flourish)--and that the 'Com.' in their wisdom had seen meet to ordain and enact, that women should not compose part of their august body. That they further 'as wise men should, had a resolution prepared for this said 'Conference' as one of its first measures,-- 'That all the arrangements of said committee be sanctioned & approved by the Conference.-- Of course we would not "thrust ourselves forward" into such a meeting, but having come so far to see what could be done for the Slave, & being [thus?] prevented doing anything ourselves, we were willing to be mere lookers on & listeners from without, as, by so doing we should be the means of many more women having an invitation to sit as spectators--which we found was accounted a very high privilege, in this land--by their women, who had hitherto, most submissively gone forth into all the streets, lanes, high-ways & bye paths to get Signers to petitions, & had been lauded--long & loud, for this drudgery, but who had not been permitted,--even to sit with their brethren, nor indeed much by themselves in public meetings--having transacted their business, as we were informed, by Committees. [10]

In 1845 a sea captain named Jonathan Walker was arrested for transporting fugitive slaves. Maria was one of those who defended his actions:

There are also those who, while they condemn slavery, at the same time assert that its extinction may be best promoted by studied silence, and by a quiet waiting for the gradual operations of a moral and religious system which declares that it is not in its nature sinful, and justifies it from the Scriptures; and of a political and governmental system which is a solemn guaranty in its favor.

It was a deep observation of facts that led Montesquieu to say, "A republic may lose its liberties in a day, and not find it out for a century." The day that sunk ours, was that of the adoption of the Federal Constitution — the day when we perpetrated, as a nation, an eternal wrong for the sake of guilty prosperity and peace.

Maria Weston Chapman

Boston, August, 1845. [11]

The sentence carried out was the branding of the letters "S. S." on his right hand to stand for "slave stealer." The abolitionists revised its meaning to be "slave saviour."

With the emancipation of the African Americans in 1863 she turned to educating the former slaves. In 1877 she published an edition of the autobiography of the English writer Harriet Martineau, at her request, to which she appended a lengthy memoir.



Lydia Maria Child

Lydia Maria Francis was born in Medford, Massachusetts on 11th February, 1802; died on 20th October, 1880, in Wayland, Massachusetts. She became a noted author and published popular historical novels such as *Hobomok* (1824) and *The Rebels* (1825). In 1826 Childs established a periodical for children called *Juvenile Miscellany*. In 1828 Lydia married David Child, a lawyer and journalist who had no business sense. Her book, *The Frugal Housewife* (1829), was especially popular with the American public. She turned her attention to slavery and in 1833 published *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*. After that the sales of her other books plummeted. Lydia also became “drawn to the preaching of William Ellery Channing, though she despaired over his reluctance to embrace abolitionism wholeheartedly. She found Unitarianism ‘a mere half-way house, where spiritual travelers find themselves well accommodated for the night, but where they grow weary of spending the day.’” [12] In 1839 She became involved with the Anti-Slavery society after hearing William Lloyd Garrison.

When John Brown was incarcerated for his raid at Harper’s Ferry Child wrote to Brown, praising his courage and offering to come and nurse his wounds. She sent a copy of her letter to Governor Henry Wise of Virginia, who responded condemning Brown’s action. When the correspondence was published in the New York Tribune, Maria received a flood of congratulations from the North and condemnation from the South.

In 1857 she put together a compilation of letters from the Anti-Slavery Society, which contains one of Child’s most memorable lines. Responding to a letter from the wife of Virginia Senator James M. Mason which defended slavery by pointing to the kindness of Southern ladies in helping slave women give birth, Child replied, “... here in the North, after we have helped the mothers, we do not sell the babies.” [13]

In 1860 Lydia published *The right way the safe way, proved by emancipation in the British West Indies, and elsewhere*. It is an in-depth analysis of the economic and social impacts of the emancipation of the slaves in Barbados. The plantations went from money losers to money makers, edge of bankruptcy to profitability. The overhead required to ensure accountability and order for the absentee landlords and providing everything for the slaves plummeted. The former slaves made more money and were better workers because their livelihood depended on it. There were interviews with numerous plantation owners, their (some former) employees, and former slaves. This was to factually demonstrate that total emancipation worked, and worked exceptionally well! And her conclusions?

Free labor has so obviously the advantage, in all respects, over slave labor, that posterity will marvel to find in the history of the nineteenth century any record of a system so barbarous, so clumsy, and so wasteful. Let us make a very brief comparison. The slave is bought, sometimes at a very high price; in free labor there is no such investment of capital. The slave does not care how slowly or carelessly he works; it is the freeman's interest to do his work well and quickly. The slave is indifferent how many tools he spoils; the freeman has a motive to be careful. The slave's clothing is indeed very cheap, but it is provided by his master, and it is of no consequence to him how fast it is destroyed; the hired laborer pays more for his garments, but he has a motive for making them last six times as long. The slave contrives to spend as much time as he can in the hospital; the free laborer has no time to spare to be sick. Hopeless poverty and a sense of being unjustly dealt by, impels the slave to steal from his master, and he has no social standing to lose by indulging the impulse; with the freeman pride of character is a powerful inducement to be honest. A salary must be paid to an overseer to compel the slave to work; the freeman is impelled by a desire to increase his property, and add to the comforts of himself and family. We should question the sanity of a man who took the main-spring out of his watch, and hired a boy to turn the hands round. Yet he who takes from laborers the natural and healthy stimulus of wages, and attempts to supply its place by the driver's whip, pursues a course quite as irrational. [14]

In 1861 she helped Harriet Jacobs publish her book, *Life of a Slave Girl*. Two things for which she is best remembered are her *An Appeal for the Indians* and the short poem "A Boy's Thanksgiving," which begins "Over the river and through the woods..."



Ralph Waldo Emerson

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, 25 May 1803; died in Concord, Massachusetts, 27 April 1882. In 1829 he became minister of the First Church (Unitarian) of Boston. He also married Ellen Tucker that same year. Although his reason for his leaving the ministry in 1832 was because he did not want to administer communion, there are also suspicions that the death of his wife earlier also played a factor in his decision.

Emerson stayed on the sidelines of the antislavery movement until the significance of the issues in the 1840s and 1850s could not be ignored. While in ministry he made available his church to abolition speakers. Emerson supported Harriet Martineau in her vocal condemnation of slavery in 1835 and befriended her when it made her unpopular. He campaigned for John G. Palfrey, nominated as free soil candidate for governor of Massachusetts, by making speeches on his behalf.

He scorned the Abolitionists for the bitterness of their agitation. Yet he spoke out strongly in defense of Elijah Lovejoy, lynched for his anti-slavery publications, and later defended the abolitionist radical John Brown. He delivered his first public antislavery address in 1844, a commemoration of the British emancipation of the slaves in the West Indies. When the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1850, he referred to it as “this filthy enactment” and wrote in his journal, “I will not obey it, by God!” Speaking before the citizens of Concord, he said, “This is a law which every one of you will break on the earliest occasion; a law which no man can obey or abet without loss of his self-respect and forfeiture of the name of gentleman.” “Do the duty of the hour,” he wrote. “Just now the supreme public duty of all thinking men is to assert freedom. Go where it is threatened and say, ‘I am for it and do not wish to live in the world a moment longer than it exists.’” [15]

Not only did he become an outspoken critic of slavery and the retrogressive laws that were being enacted, he was also influential in making the case for the emancipation of the slaves after the Civil War had begun.

In November 1859, he said before the Parker fraternity that John Brown, were he to be hanged, would “ shake the gallows glorious, like the cross.” A few days afterward he spoke at a John Brown meeting at Tremont temple, with Wendell Phillips, and took part in another at Concord, and in still a third at Salem, Massachusetts. In January, 1861, also, he addressed the Antislavery society at Boston, in the face of disturbance by a mob. Though he was not a chief agitator of the cause, these efforts, so alien to his retired habits as a student, poet, and meditative writer, made him a marked advocate of freedom. [16]



Octavius Brooks Frothingham

Born November 28, 1822, Boston, Massachusetts; died: November 27, 1895, Boston, Massachusetts. He was a Unitarian minister and served from 1847 to 1859 in three different pastorates. He preached an antislavery sermon in 1854 denouncing the Unitarian complicity in slavery. He wrote a lengthy antislavery tract against the Colonization Society, the purpose of which was to transport freed slaves back to Africa:

Our objections to it are, therefore, briefly these: While we believe its pretexts to be delusive, we are convinced that its real effects are of the most dangerous nature. It takes its root from a cruel prejudice and alienation in the whites of America against the colored people, slave or free. This being its source, the effects are what might be expected; that it fosters and increases the spirit of caste, already so unhappily predominant; that it widens the breach between the two races; exposes the colored people to great practical persecution, in order to force them to emigrate; and, finally, is calculated to swallow up and divert that feeling which America, as a Christian and a free country, cannot but entertain, that slavery is alike incompatible with the law of God and with the well being of man, whether the enslaved or the enslaver. [17]



Thomas Wentworth Higginson

Born December 23, 1823, Cambridge, Massachusetts; died May 9, 1911, Cambridge, Massachusetts. While he was minister at Newburyport his outspoken abolitionism did not agree with many in the congregation and he determined that he needed to resign his pastorate. It did not end his antislavery work. When the fugitive slave Anthony Burns was at the Boston Court House to be returned to the South, Higginson led an unsuccessful raid to free him and was wounded in the attempt. He also became involved in the Free Soil fight in Kansas and supported John Brown. During the Civil War he became the commander of the first regiment of freed slaves. In a battle in South Carolina in 1863 he was wounded and discharged in 1864.

In 1888 he published a volume titled, *Black Rebellion*, which contained five stories of slave revolts: "The Maroons of Jamaica;" "The Maroons of Surinam;" "Gabriel's Revolt in Charleston, S. C.;" "The Story of Denmark Vesey;" and "Nat Turner's Revolt."



Harriet Martineau

British Unitarian born June 12, 1802 in Norwich, England; died 1876 in Ambleside, England. The *Hour and the Man* (1840) based on the life of the slave leader and liberator of Haiti, Toussaint L'Ouverture. Harriet was also a Unitarian apologist and when she traveled to the U. S. she was warmly received by American Unitarians, including William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and Charles and Eliza Follen. She also became friends with Maria Weston Chapman.

In 1835, while attending an anti-slavery meeting in Boston as an observer, Martineau was invited to make a statement in favor of abolition. Although she had been opposed to slavery prior to her visit to America, she hesitated to comply because, as she later wrote, "I foresaw that almost every house in Boston, except those of the abolitionists, would be shut against me; that my relation to the country would be completely changed, as I should suddenly be transformed from being a guest and an observer to being considered a missionary or a spy."

But she felt she had to speak the truth. In her statement Martineau denounced slavery as "inconsistent with the law of God." After the meeting, as she had predicted, her entry into American society was sharply circumscribed. The Follens, abolitionists themselves, accompanied her on her tour of the western states. [18]

In her book, *Society in America*, Martineau's impressions were mixed. Although she was generally impressed by American democracy she was disappointed in the free enterprise system's tendency to allow some, pursuing "a sordid love of gain," to trample the rights of others. Her solution to the

continuance of democracy was the abolition of private property. She also felt that, given America's expressed values, women's position in society was not what it should be. Her appraisal was that the condition of American women differed from that of slaves only in that they were treated with more indulgence. "Is it to be understood that the principles of the Declaration of Independence bear no relation to half of the human race? If so, what is the ground of the limitation?"



Samuel Joseph May

Born Boston, Massachusetts; September 12, 1797; died: Syracuse, New York; July 1, 1871. He came to Syracuse in 1845 as pastor of the (Unitarian) Church of the Messiah (now named May Memorial Unitarian Universalist Society). May was active in the underground railroad in Boston and Syracuse and worked with various anti-slavery societies. In Syracuse he was involved in many of the areas most important anti-slavery events, including the 1851 *Rescue of Jerry*, a victim of the Fugitive Slave Act:

Around noon on October 1, federal marshals from Rochester, Auburn, Syracuse, and Canandaigua, accompanied by the local police, arrested a man who called himself Jerry. also known as William Henry. Jerry was working as a barrel maker, and was arrested at his workplace. He was originally told the charge was theft until after he was in manacles. On being informed that he was being arrested under the Fugitive Slave Law, he put up substantial resistance, but was subdued.

Word of the arrest quickly reached the Convention, then in session at a nearby church. There are reports that the wife of Commissioner Sabine, who would hear the case, had already leaked plans of the arrest. By pre-arranged signal, church bells began ringing, and a crowd gathered at Sabine's office, where Jerry had been taken for arraignment. An immediate effort to free the prisoner was unsuccessful, and though he escaped to the street in irons, he was rapidly recaptured. The arraignment was put off until evening and relocated to a larger room. A large crowd gathered in the street, this time equipped for a more serious rescue attempt.

With a battering ram the door was broken in and despite pistol shots out the window by one of the deputy marshals, it became clear that the crowd was too large and determined to be resisted. The prisoner was surrendered, and one deputy marshal broke his arm jumping from a window to escape the crowd. The injured prisoner was hidden in the city for several days

in the home of a local butcher know for his anti-abolitionist sentiments, and later taken in a wagon to Oswego, where he crossed Lake Ontario into Canada. [19]

May also published a book in 1869 titled, *Some Recollections of Our Anti-Slavery Conflict*. In it he relates a conversation with W. E. Channing (see Channing above) concerning his silence on the slavery issue with the result that Channing published his volume *Slavery* in 1835.



Theodore Parker

Theodore Parker

Born August 24, 1810 in Lexington, Massachusetts; died May 10, 1860 in Florence, Italy. His first sermon against slavery was delivered in 1841 to the West Roxbury, Massachusetts congregation. He was also involved in a demonstration against the return of slave Anthony Burns and supported John Brown's raid. Parker was on the Underground Railroad Operators list. [20] Both Channings, Daniel Child (Maria Weston Child's husband), Garrison, William Lloyd, Thomas Starr King, Edmund Quincy, et al. were listed as members of the Vigilance Committee of Boston, Massachusetts, organized October 14, 1850. [21] He was, quite likely, the most active and powerful Unitarians involved in the abolitionist movement.

By speeches, sermons, letters, tracts, and lectures he scattered abroad republican ideas. As a critic of pro-slavery champions, as a shielder of fugitives, as an encourager of fainting hearts, he was felt as a warrior. His labors were incessant and prodigious. He was preacher, pastor, visitor among the poor, the downtrodden, and the guilty; writer, platform speaker, lyceum lecturer, and always an omnivorous reader. His lecturing engagements numbered sometimes seventy or eighty in a season. [22]

In his *Letter to a Southern Slaveholder* Parker wrote: "I think they are doing a great wrong to themselves, to their slaves, and to mankind. I think slave holding is a wrong in itself, and therefore, a sin; but I cannot say that this or that particular slave-holder is a sinner because he holds slaves. I know what sin is-God only knows who is a sinner." [23]

In his May 26, 1858 speech, “The Relation of Slavery to a Republican Form of Government,” delivered at the New England Anti-Slavery Convention, his colorful language and rapier-sharp wit are demonstrated early on:

The American Church is the staunchest supporter of American slavery. To the American Politician, slavery is a “Republican Institution;” to the American Priest, it is doubly religious—both a “Jewish” and a “Christian” Dispensation. The Revival of the Ecclesiastical Religion and of the African slave trade go on at the same time; they take sweet counsel together, and walk to the house of their God in company. Years ago, the greatest professional Rhetorician of America, “the Monarch of the Platform,” “Orator, Patriot, Sage, Cicero of America, Laudator of Washington, Apostle of Charity, High Priest of the Union, and Friend of Mankind,” whom “totally mendacious Greece,” if she might equal, yet could ne’er surpass in that sophistic art, justified slavery out of the New Testament, and declared his readiness to buckle on his knapsack, shoulder his musket, and march South, to defend the masters who make merchandise of men, against their insurgent chattels. I know not whether Mr. Everett said that under the influence of “an anodyne” or a stimulant; but neither the public and immediate reply of Southern Congressmen, nor the private rebuke of more distant Jefferson — then so near the grave — has yet led this “Patriot, Statesman, Philanthropist,” to renounce that statement in his maiden speech! [24]



Henry David Thoreau

Thoreau attacks slavery and government in his *Resistance to Civil Government, or Civil Disobedience* in 1849 when he refused to pay taxes because of the Mexican War and slavery:

[7] How does it become a man to behave toward the American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave’s government also. [25]

Thoreau delivered an address at the Anti-Slavery Celebration, at Framingham, July 4, 1854 entitled, *Slavery in Massachusetts*. The setting is the Boston Court House and the slave Anthony Burns. Thoreau called the citizens of Massachusetts slaves to the law, the newspapers, and the Southern slaveholder. The thrust of his message is that law is not equivalent to morality and that the decision to return the slave, although it will conformed to the law it did not conform to morality: “Will mankind never learn that policy is not morality — that it never secures any moral right, but considers merely what is expedient?” [26]

Slavery and servility have produced no sweet-scented flower annually, to charm the senses of men, for they have no real life: they are merely a decaying and a death, offensive to all healthy nostrils. We do not complain that they live, but that they do not get buried. Let the living bury them: even they are good for manure. [27]

In his “A Plea for Capt. Brown,” given October 30, 1859, Thoreau speaks of John Brown as a hero. Thoreau continues to pound at the irrational intransigence of the government while applauding Brown’s convictions and stand against slavery. “It was his peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder, in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him.” [28] Thoreau saw John Brown’s death as a victory, rather than a defeat.

They talk as if a man’s death were a failure, and his continued life, be it of whatever character, were a success. When I reflect to what a cause this man devoted himself, and how religiously, and then reflect to what cause his judges and all who condemn him so angrily and fluently devote themselves, I see that they are as far apart as the heavens and earth are asunder. [29]

In Closing

The time that I have been able to spend on the ministerial aspects of the UUA and its member congregations I have become aware of some of the strengths and weaknesses of the structure and philosophical underpinnings.

What I have felt in the three congregations that I have been a member of in the last 15 years is a denominational unawareness. I do not know if this was an issue in the 19th century. I do see it as one in the 21st. So far the only place that I been able to determine where the responsibility lies is with the ministers. The minister is the one who provides the input with the most weight into the internal administrative structure of a congregation and the one who spends the most time assessing

what the pulpit will provide each Sunday. I get so little of what we are about as a denomination and the part the congregation that I belong to plays in the big picture that I quite often feel that I know more about the Roman Catholic, Baptist, or Four Square Churches than I do about the UUA. As I write this I just thought of a committee I have never heard of in a UU congregation before – a Denominational (“Associational” if you must, although it doesn’t have quite the same feeling to it.) Affairs Committee (or some such interlinking organization)! Perhaps the expectation is, if there is any, that the Social Responsibility Committee or Social Action Committee will handle it. I have not seen that, other than when a particular UUA issue or goal coincides with the interests of the congregational committee. Perhaps I have an idea that will fly here (this is the broad “here,” not the positional one.). Another hindrance to a unified denominational position may have been the same sense of “congregational rights” that was fueling the “states rights” issues of that time. It seems that there was enough independence to go all around.

One of the benefits of the congregational individuality is the potential for members to create within the congregation the particular type of organization that best fits their needs rather than trying to accommodate to an existing structure in the denomination/association. Although the task is made more difficult at the higher levels it can be done with good ideas, good communications, and ingenuity.

Which leaves one with a question of these “UUs” of the 19th century – would they have shone as brightly in any other denomination? Many of them were only part-time members of one or the other denomination. They were powerhouses, both in energy and independence and they were highly literate individuals. Perhaps, rather than lament our poor showing as denominations, we should be lauding the denominational structures and processes that attract independent thinkers and such outstanding social activists.

What if...?

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