If the period between 1815 and 1848 can be considered an age of great confidence and optimism for a “spirit of improvement,” it can also be cast as an age of tremendous anxiety and uncertainty over the future. Indeed, such confidence and anxiety can go hand in hand, each flowing from the exact same set of circumstances. The opportunity for growth and expansion that motivated the speculator, farmer, immigrant, and banker also motivated the reformer, revivalist, advocate, and educator. Indeed, in this highly fluid environment, a certain calculus emerged with respect to the nature of American society and the role of virtue, one that was rooted in the same formula present at the creation of the republic: Collective virtue, the virtue of the nation, stemmed from individual virtue, the virtue of the citizen. A citizenry that was corrupted by the vices of greed, power, and lust would, it was believed, inflict those same vices upon the nation. More often than not, reform movements of various stripes presented an alternative narrative on the power of commercialization, one that challenged the fundamental assumptions guiding American politics.

Generally speaking, reform and religious revival movements possessed certain key characteristics. Among these were the following:

* A reform or revival movement identified a concrete social or political ill or shortcoming, and developed a rhetoric and culture designed to countervail its negative effects.
* Middle-class white citizens, disproportionately from the American Northeast and Old Northwest Territories, comprised most of those engaged in reform and revivalism.
* Reformers, particularly leaders, often engaged in multiple reform movements simultaneously.
* Reform and revivalism were arenas of greater gender equality compared with traditional politics, with women often assuming leadership roles.
* Reform movements could, and often were, at odds with themselves, beset by internal divisions.
* More often than not, reformers and revivalists identified with the Whig Party.
* Reformers often presented Americans with an alternative notion of individual progress and “improvement” than that promoted by the dominant, commercial culture of the day.

An examination into one of the era’s most prominent and powerful reform movement illustrates many of these points.

**Antislavery**

However much the Missouri Compromise may have been designed to alleviate national tension on the issue of slavery and its extension, the reality was that as time passed, a budding antislavery impulse grew in the period to become one of the most important and impactful reform movements in American history. At least some of the timing of the movement’s ascendance is owed to its predecessor in Great Britain. Beginning in the 1790s, the British religious leader William Wilberforce began to agitate for an end to slavery in the British Empire. In the early decades of the 19th century, Wilberforce attempted to convince British leaders, especially those in the House of Commons, that the country needed to end slavery as a kind of national atonement for centuries of wrongdoing—that the country’s moral and economic future depended on it. Abolishing slavery meant affirming a commitment to liberty, after having fought a war with the Americans that called it into question. Abolition, Wilberforce and others argued, would reaffirm Britain’s commitment to liberty. In essence, abolition was a patriotic act that would redeem the nation.

His agitation gradually paid off. In1833, 1.5 million British citizens petitioned for, and got, an Emancipation Act from Parliament, granting gradual emancipation to all slaves in the West Indies. The British example set the way for American antislavery forces in the early 19th century. More importantly, the American antislavery movement embraced as its own the rhetoric of the British movement, namely that ending slavery was a patriotic act capable of redeeming the nation and ensuring the blessings of liberty. Antislavery was an equal opportunity movement for its followers; it crossed gender, race, class, age, and occupation. Yet there was division within the movement as to what, exactly, antislavery could or should look like in the United States.

Some favored **gradual emancipation**, taking their cues from the model of the British in the West Indies. The idea was to free newly born slaves after a certain age, and free adult slaves after a set number of years, using a kind of indentured servitude as a transition out of slavery. This argument was favored by those who feared a shock of thousands of slaves being freed for which neither the slaves nor free whites were prepared. In this way, the time of “indentured servitude” could be used to educate blacks and prepare them, society, and the economy for their freedom. Indeed, the economy here is important—many would presumably have stayed somewhere in the South, where their roots were—as such, the Southern economy would have to be prepared for the transition from slave to wage labor.

Some advocated **colonization** (an act that Daniel Feller in *The Jacksonian Promise* calls assisted deportation). Those who wanted to expunge slavery but who feared a substantial, permanent free black citizenry in the United States devised the idea of removing slaves to Africa. Supporters for this plan were found among established whites of the old South as well as some Northern whites. Advocates established the American Colonization Society in Washington in 1816, and it was far from a fringe movement. Its first president was Supreme Court Justice Bushrod Washington, George Washington’s nephew. Officers and supporters were a who’s who of Washington politics—Chief Justice John Marshall, Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, Francis Scott Key, Richard Rush, and Daniel Webster. Clay1 believed slavery kept Kentucky and other slaveholding states “in the rear of our neighbors . . . in the state of agriculture, the progress of manufactures, the advance of improvement, and the general prosperity of society.” Emancipation without colonization, according to Clay, “would be followed by instantaneous collisions between the two races, which would break out into a civil war that would end in the extermination or subjugation of the one race or the other.”

Colonization never gained the support of most Northerners, and whites in the plantation South sternly opposed the idea of giving up their slaves. It was easy for older families of the old South to support colonization, but for these individuals, slavery was more vibrant and more important to their survival. The Colonization Society was only able to purchase the freedom of a few hundred slaves in order to send them to Liberia. Conditions in Liberia made colonization more difficult also; American blacks spoke English and formed a distinct ruling class in Liberia, and class tensions defined Liberia from the beginning, spawning bloody civil wars.

Some favored **immediate abolition.** Immediate abolition was founded upon the belief that slavery had to end immediately so as to remove the stain on the nation and allow the economy the soonest possible opportunity to recover from the ill effects of human bondage. This movement was characterized by religious zeal, millennial thought, and dire predictions over the future of the country and its moral standing if it continued to allow slavery to exist.

Beginning in the late 1820s and into the 1830s, the loudest voices on the subject belong to immediate abolitionists. Their rise coincided with increasing tension over the issue of slavery, as events pushed the issue to the fore of American politics.

* In June of 1822, Denmark Vesey led a slave uprising in Charleston, South Carolina, that was thwarted before it got underway.
* In 1829, the House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning slavery in Washington City.
* In 1831, John Quincy Adams, the former president and newly elected congressman from Massachusetts, presented petitions to Congress for the abolition of slavery in Washington. The petition was voted down, but the fact of its consideration heralded a renewed prominence for the issue.
* In August of 1831, Nat Turner led a rebellion of slaves in Southampton County, Virginia. The rebellion’s early success struck fear in the hearts of whites in the slaveholding South; it was finally put down after 55 whites were killed.

Turner had taught himself to read and write in hopes of being freed, a hope that was dashed by his master. Eventually he became a slave preacher, and he claimed to have had a vision in which the spirit told him “Christ had laid down the yolk he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last, and the last should be first.”2Turner’s revolt inspired retaliation from whites, who took slave lives at random for days afterward. One company of cavalry killed 40 blacks in two days, putting the heads of 15 of them on poles to act as a deterrent to those who had similar ideas as Turner. Turner himself was captured and hanged, an act that he likened to Christ’s crucifixion. With racial tension growing, the Virginia legislature voted against the gradual emancipation of slaves. From this point on, white control over black slaves and the slave system in the South began to tighten.

The cascade of slavery-related events caused immediate abolitionists to agitate loudly. Several middle class whites whose names were synonymous with reform in the period rose to prominence in the antislavery movement, among them Arthur and Lewis Tappan, Theodore Dwight Weld, and Angelina and Sarah Grimke, sisters who had left their father’s South Carolina plantation to move to Philadelphia and become Quaker reformers. Yet the most vocal leader of the movement was William Lloyd Garrison. A native of Newburyport, Massachusetts, Garrison had been deserted by an alcoholic father and raised by a poor but pious mother. His upbringing inclined him toward moral perfection and social recognition. He worked for a time as a printer in Boston, where he became the co-editor of the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, a Baltimore antislavery newspaper, in 1829.

Garrison began in the movement as a colonizationist, but moved toward immediate abolition by 1830. Daniel Feller summarized Garrison’s mindset succinctly: “If slavery was a sin, then slaveholders were sinners, and those who tolerated and condoned their sin shared in its guilt. Halfway measures and expedient compromises—anything short of wholesale renunciation of evil—could never bring redemption, either national or individual. The mission of the emancipationist, like that of the revivalist, was to demand complete, wholehearted, and immediate separation from sin.”3

After being jailed (and bailed out by Arthur Tappan) for libel in 1829 (on the charge that he accused a Newburyport merchant of being a slave trader), Garrison launched, in 1831, the newspaper that would be the voice of the antislavery movement for decades to come: *The Liberator*. Two years later, Weld, Garrison, and the Tappans founded the American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia. Soon after, Lucretia Mott founded the Female Anti-Slavery Society. These societies, along with the *Liberator*, had a singular purpose in mind: to bring about the immediate end of slavery in America. Abolitionists employed a three-pronged attack on slavery:

* appealing to public opinion, and fostering intense condemnation of slavery in the North through revivals, rallies, manifestos, and the like
* encouraging slaves to flee from slavery and assisting those who did; fostering the “underground railroad” with a network of whites and free blacks who would assist slaves on their journey to freedom. By the 1840s, about 1,000 (including the likes of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman) a year were freed this way
* seeking support among state legislatures and national political leaders to legislate against slavery

By 1837, there were over 600 abolitionist societies in Massachusetts, New York, and Ohio. Membership ran well over 150,000, and included prominent cultural figures such John Greenleaf Whittier, Wendell Phillips, and James Russell Lowell.

Not all in the North agreed with immediate abolitionists, however. Indeed, most were more moderate, vexed over slavery as a moral evil, but fearful of upsetting the stability of American society with immediate emancipation. Moreover, not all Northern antislavery forces were abolitionists, and some still held racist views. Some were indeed quite hostile to abolitionists. In 1835, Garrison was dragged through the streets of Boston by an anti-abolitionist mob. Such violence was not relegated to the seat of antislavery activity. One of the most important moments of violence came in Alton, Illinois, on November 7, 1837. There, Elijah Lovejoy, an abolitionist editor and printer, was murdered, his press burned, by an anti-abolitionist mob. Lovejoy’s murder underscored the stakes in the slavery debate in America, stakes that would only increase as the nation lurched toward mid-century.

1 Henry Clay, “An Address delivered to the Colonization Society of Kentucky, at Frankfurt, December 17, 1829,”*in Inquiry into the Causes which have Retarded the Accumulation of Population in the Southern States.* (Washington, D.C.: W. Blanchard, Printer, 1846),77.

2Nat Turner,*Confessions of Nat Turner*(1831): excerpt by Steven Mintz, accessible at http://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/111turn.html

3*The Jacksonian Promise: America, 1815-1840*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 110