

THE ANNALS OF AMERICA

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Steps Toward Equalitarianism



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1831

89.

WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON: For Immediate Abolition

Sometime during the year 1829, William Lloyd Garrison changed his mind about Negro slavery. He had always advocated its abolition, but he had been a gradualist, holding that a slow, steady movement in the direction of freedom would be better for whites and Negroes alike. But now he rejected this position, which he came to condemn; for "has not the experience of two centuries," he could say with his new understanding, "shown that gradualism in theory is prattling in practice?" The change of heart would not be important if it had not, for all practical purposes, launched the movement known as militant Abolitionism. Probably the most influential organ of this movement was the Liberator, the Boston weekly that Garrison edited from its first issue, in January 1831, to its last, in December 1865 — the month that saw the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment outlawing slavery. Portions of the famous salutory of the Liberator's first issue are reprinted below.

Source: *Liberator*, January 1, 1831.

IN THE MONTH OF AUGUST I issued proposals for publishing the *Liberator* in Washington City; but the enterprise, though hailed in different sections of the country, was paused by public indifference. Since that time, the removal of the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* to the seat of government has rendered less imperious the establishment of a similar periodical in that quarter.

During my recent tour for the purpose of exciting the minds of the people by a series of discourses on the subject of slavery, every place that I visited gave fresh evidence of

the fact that a greater revolution in public sentiment was to be effected in the free states — and particularly in New England — than at the South. I found contempt more bitter, opposition more active, detraction more relentless, prejudice more stubborn, and apathy more frozen than among slaveowners themselves. Of course, there were individual exceptions to the contrary. This state of things afflicted but did not dishearten me. I determined, at every hazard, to lift up the standard of emancipation in the eyes of the nation, *within sight of Bun-*

ker Hill and in the birthplace of liberty. That standard is now unfurled; and long may it float, unhurt by the spoiliations of time or the missiles of a desperate foe — yea, till every chain be broken and every bondman set free! Let Southern oppressors tremble; let their secret abettors tremble; let their Northern apologists tremble; let all the enemies of the persecuted blacks tremble.

I deem the publication of my original prospectus unnecessary, as it has obtained a wide circulation. The principles therein inculcated will be steadily pursued in this paper, excepting that I shall not array myself as the political partisan of any man. In defending the great cause of human rights, I wish to derive the assistance of all religions and of all parties.

Assenting to the "self-evident truth" maintained in the American Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," I shall strenuously contend for the immediate enfranchisement of our slave population. In Park Street Church, on the Fourth of July, 1829, in an address on slavery, I unreflectingly assented to the popular but pernicious doctrine of *gradual* abolition. I seize this opportunity to make a full and unequivocal recantation, and thus publicly to ask pardon of my God, of my country, and of my brethren, the poor slaves, for having uttered a sentiment so full of timidity, injustice, and absurdity. A similar recantation from my

pen was published in the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* at Baltimore, in September 1829. My conscience is now satisfied.

I am aware that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for severity? I *will be* as harsh as truth and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject I do not wish to think, or speak, or write with moderation. No! No! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen — but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest; I will not equivocate; I will not excuse; I will not retreat a single inch — AND I WILL BE HEARD. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal and to hasten the resurrection of the dead.

It is pretended that I am retarding the cause of emancipation by the coarseness of my invective and the precipitancy of my measures. *The charge is not true.* On this question my influence, humble as it is, is felt at this moment to a considerable extent, and shall be felt in coming years — not perniciously but beneficially: not as a curse but as a blessing — and posterity will bear testimony that I was right. I desire to thank God that He enables me to disregard "the fear of man which bringeth a snare," and to speak His truth in its simplicity and power.

Our Federal Union! It must and shall be preserved!

ANDREW JACKSON, toast, Jefferson Birthday banquet, 1830. John C. Calhoun rose after this toast and, his hand shaking so that the wine ran down the side of his glass, proposed: "The Union, next to *our liberty*, most dear! May we all remember that it can only be preserved by respecting the rights of the States and by distributing equally the benefits and burdens of the Union." Jackson's is the one that was remembered.