

In her recent comprehensive study of the female antislavery movement, Julie Roy Jeffrey has shown that despite the fact that large, urban organizations claimed more members, many small women's groups exerted a significant influence.² Yet surprisingly, one of the most influential and active of all the female antislavery societies has received virtually no scholarly attention to date, nor does Jeffrey mention it. The Concord, Massachusetts, Female Anti-Slavery Society boasted the wives, sisters, mothers, friends, aunts, and neighbors of men whose public support eventually directed worldwide political and philosophical attention to the antislavery cause. Abolitionist historiography routinely invokes the names of Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Amos Bronson Alcott, and others when recounting Concord's abolitionist past; but adequate recognition of the women who urged them forward is long overdue. Two works that provide the most thorough coverage of the society—Joan Trumbull's 1942 thesis "Concord and the Negro" and Wendell Glick's 1950 dissertation "Thoreau and Radical Abolitionism: A Study of the Native Background of Thoreau's Social Philosophy"—remain unpublished.³

²Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

³In particular, the biographers of Henry D. Thoreau, Lidian (Mrs. Ralph Waldo) Emerson, and Abigail "Abby" (Mrs. Amos Bronson) Alcott mention the organization, as do a handful of works chronicling nineteenth-century Concord. See Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (1962; reprinted, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Ellen Tucker Emerson, *The Life of Lidian Jackson Emerson*, ed. Delores Bird Carpenter (Boston: Twayne, 1980; reprinted, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1992); Cynthia Barton, *Transcendental Wife: The Life of Abigail May Alcott* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, Inc., 1996); Franklin B. Sanborn, "The Women of Concord IV: Mary Merrick Brooks and the Anti-Slavery Movement" (1906), reprinted in *Transcendental Epilogue: Primary Materials for Research in Emerson, Thoreau, Literary New England, the Influence of German Theology, and Higher Biblical Criticism*, 3 vols., ed. Kenneth Walter Cameron (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1965–82), 3:44–47; Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990); Gary Collison, *Shadrach Minkins: From Fugitive Slave to Citizen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 151–58. Gougeon credits the influence on Emerson of Mary Merrick Brooks, the society's most persevering member, while Collison narrates one of the most dramatic episodes in the society's history—its members' overnight vigil with the runaway slave Minkins. The two unpublished works are Joan Trumbull's "Concord and the Negro" (B.A. thesis, Vassar College, 1946), and Wendell Glick's "Thoreau and Radical Abolitionism: A Study of the Native Background of Thoreau's Social Philosophy" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1950). See also Barbara K. Elliott and Janet W. Jones, *Concord: Its Black History* (Concord: Concord Public Schools, 1976).

In Concord, a mecca of transcendentalism, abolitionism was predominantly women's work. For decades, Concord women sponsored speakers, disseminated periodicals and other propaganda, circulated and signed petitions, raised money, traveled to national conventions, and worked to improve the lives of the few African Americans in their community. And, it was largely through these outspoken women sharing their homes that Concord's famous men came to accept leading roles in the fight against slavery. The story of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society—the events that led women to organize it, the specific tasks they accomplished, and the resources they exploited in their antislavery crusade—renders a compelling portrait of individual women whose dedication to end slavery spanned more than three decades and earned them the admiration of America's most revered abolitionists.



On 18 October 1837, sixty-one women attended the first formal meeting of the newly organized Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, one of eight antislavery groups formed in Middlesex County that year, at least three of which were female.⁴ Meeting at the home of Susan Barrett, the organizers elected Mary Wilder president and Mary Merrick Brooks secretary. Mary Wilder and her husband, the Reverend John Wilder, were among Concord's first abolitionists and, while boarding with the Thoreau family during the mid-1830s, had become friends with them. Mary Merrick Brooks, who attended national conventions and served on various committees of the

⁴Timothy Prescott, manuscript diary, 18 October 1837, °94M-97(f), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Permission to quote from this and other manuscripts in the Houghton Library is gratefully acknowledged. Gerda Lerner, *The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimké* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 185. Some scholars date the founding of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1835, based on evidence that an earlier antislavery organization—not exclusively female—may have been formed then. In addition to Prescott's diary, the following records document the society's founding in 1837: *Sixth Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society* (1838; reprinted, Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1970), p. xlii, and *Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838), p. 134. In addition, the society's 1843 annual report dates the organization's inception to 1837 (see *Liberator*, 23 June 1843).

Middlesex County Anti-Slavery Association, developed over the next twenty years into the most active and vocal of Concord's abolitionists. Other founding members included Cynthia, Sophia, and Helen Thoreau (Henry Thoreau's mother and sisters), Mrs. Joseph Ward and her daughter Prudence (abolitionists who had moved to Concord in 1833 and lived with the Thoreaus), Lidian Emerson, and Maria Prescott (wife of Concord lawyer Timothy Prescott). In 1843, the society listed the following women as officers: Mrs. D. Gerrish, president; Miss Helen _____ (possibly Helen Thoreau), vice-president; Mrs. Tewksbury, treasurer; and Mary Brooks, secretary. Eventually, the society claimed nearly one hundred members; by the busy decade of the 1850s, many daughters of the founding members had subscribed to the cause too. An 1857 list of members includes most of the charter members as well as the newly entered names of Ann Bigelow, Amanda Brown, Maria Pratt, Caroline Hoar, Mrs. Jerome Richardson, Ann Brown, Lucy Brown, Abby Alcott, Harriet Robinson, Mary Rice, Harriet Stowe, Caroline Stowe, Ann Whiting, Jane Whiting, Carrie Pratt, Martha Bartlett, and Ellen Emerson.⁵

Concord women were inspired to organize when abolitionist lecturers Angelina and Sarah Grimké spent a week in town on their whirlwind tour of New England in the fall of 1837. Just days after hearing the sisters address large crowds at Reverend Wilder's church in Concord, Prudence Ward delightedly claimed that their visit had "awakened a greater interest in the subject than any previous lecturer." Others in town agreed. In diary entries from 4 through 8 September, Timothy Prescott recorded the Grimkés' venues, who entertained them, and the number of people attending their lectures; he also related the extent to which the town's residents opened their hearts, homes, and purses to these controversial women. The Grimké sisters spent two nights with Mary Brooks and were entertained

⁵Harding, *Days of Henry Thoreau*, pp. 73-74; *Liberator*, 23 June 1843; Mrs. W. S. Robinson, "Warrington" Pen-Portraits: A Collection of Personal and Political Reminiscences from 1848 to 1876, from the Writings of William S. Robinson. With Memoir, and Extracts from Diary and Letters Never before Published (Boston: Mrs. W. S. Robinson, 1877), p. 73.

by Lidian Emerson as well. Emerson, along with her guests, was captivated by the Grimkés, and after they left Concord, she committed herself to antislavery action. "I shall not turn away my attention from the abolition cause till I have found whether there is not something for me personally to do and bear to forward it," Emerson proclaimed. At least one member of the local press agreed with her plan. The *Concord Freeman* suggested that more women should join the antislavery ranks because "The truth is, *men* have faltered and have failed in their duty touching this matter of slavery."⁶

Organized, exclusively female charity in Concord dated from at least 1814, when the Concord Female Charitable Society had been founded by almost one hundred women who sought to reduce their community's poverty and hunger. Several Charitable Society members, considering it a logical extension of their routine volunteerism, joined the antislavery society. This antebellum charity work has been described as an "ideology of benevolence," which allowed women to attack the social ills they thought were destroying the moral fiber of their homes and community. In carrying on this rich tradition, antislavery society members began to transform their heretofore domestic charity into political, public action.⁷

Female abolitionists were motivated, according to Jeffrey, by their conviction "that slavery was a sin that, as women, they had a moral and religious duty to eradicate." Radical male abolitionists urged them on. Editor Nathaniel P. Rogers refused to accept the notion that women might be stepping outside their

⁶Prudence Ward to Caroline Sewall, 25 September [1837], #1576, Ellen Sewall Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif. Permission to quote from this and other letters in this collection is gratefully acknowledged. Prescott, diary, 4-8 September 1837; Lidian Emerson to Sophia Brown, 9 September 1837, *The Selected Letters of Lidian Emerson*, ed. Delores Bird Carpenter (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987), p. 61; *Concord Freeman*, 16 September 1837. According to Blanche Glassman Hersh, the Grimkés addressed 40,500 people in more than sixty towns on their six-month New England speaking tour (see *The Slavery of Sex: Feminist-Abolitionists in America* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978], p. 18).

⁷Ruth R. Wheeler, *Concord: Climate for Freedom* (Concord: Concord Antiquarian Society, 1967), p. 164; Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 1.

proper sphere by tackling the politically volatile issue of slavery; he claimed instead that their gender *obliged* them to join the fray. In December 1837, Rogers challenged his female audience:

Women must encounter all this. It becomes woman to do it. It is her sphere. Slavery must be abolished at all sacrifices. You must see that it is done. You are as responsible for its being done, as men are. You are more responsible—for you have more moral influence. Be not too careful about keeping within any fashionable sphere. Do your duty. That is your sphere.⁵

“Moral commitments demanded public expressions,” Jeffrey argues, as the preamble to the Canton, Ohio, women’s antislavery society made clear. “We consider that we are *not moving out of our proper sphere* as females when we assume a *public stand* in favor of our *oppressed sisters*,” the document stated. Not all male abolitionists agreed. Conservative clergymen, especially, opposed women’s entry into the arena of public activism. The Reverend Albert A. Folsom warned his congregation in Hingham, Massachusetts, that a woman’s involvement in abolition

poisons the soul, embitters the affections, and exasperates the feelings. She, who is naturally amiable and modest, by having her mind filled with the peculiar spirit which characterises the most clamorous among the Abolitionists, is imperceptibly transformed into a bigoted, rash, and morose being. Nor is this all. Self-sufficiency, arrogance, and masculine boldness follow naturally in the train.⁹

Most antislavery women, however, including the members of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, ignored these dire warnings; some, like Helen Thoreau, left the church altogether over the issue of slavery.

Like other activist women throughout the country, women in Concord reveled in this sanctioned opportunity to formulate a

⁵Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army*, p. 4; Nathaniel P. Rogers, *An Address Delivered before the Concord [N.H.] Female Anti-Slavery Society at Its Annual Meeting 25 Dec. 1837* (Concord, N.H.: William White, 1838), p. 18.

⁹Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army*, p. 7, and Canton preamble quoted on p. 57; Folsom in *Liberator*, 22 September 1837.

political identity. Especially in the early years, most women's antislavery societies had more work to do than resources on which to draw. In the year the Concord Society was founded, approximately 70 percent of the Massachusetts signatures on a petition to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia were female. Concord was, in the 1830s, still essentially a provincial town with largely anti-abolitionist, if not pro-slavery, views, and Garrison and his band of rabble-rousers enjoyed little support.¹⁰ In an 1838 letter to her vacationing mother, Prudence Ward lamented the town's lack of sympathy for the cause she held dear: "One almost dispairs [*sic*] for the slave—when the community is so dead."¹¹ But despite their critics, Concord women took to their work with a fervor. Members met in each others' homes, where they sewed, strategized, and kept each other apprised of abolitionist news from surrounding towns. The society characterized its birth a few years after its founding as "an event noticed but little by the inhabitants of the town, or noticed but to be ridiculed; nevertheless, an event which is destined to have an immense bearing on the temporal and eternal interests of its founders, and to do not a little towards swelling that great tide of humanity, which is finally to turn our world of sin and misery into a world of purity, holiness, and happiness."¹² From its inception, then, the society deemed its mission to be one of social, political, and even global reform.

The society's fragmentary records, located at the Concord Free Public Library, document a few of its activities. An un-

¹⁰Goodman, *Of One Blood*, pp. 226, 229. Robert A. Gross, in discussing Thoreau's assessment of Concord in *Walden*, calls its culture "parochial and thin"—see "The Most Estimable Place in All the World": A Debate on Progress in Nineteenth-Century Concord," *Studies in the American Renaissance 1978* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1980), p. 9. For a contrasting view, see Len Gougeon's "Historical Background" to *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, ed. Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. xxv-xxvi. In 1845, the issue of abolition caused an uproar when the curators of Concord's Lyceum, led by John Keyes, objected to inviting the fiery Wendell Phillips to lecture again in town. Keyes and others resigned their positions, to be replaced by new curators Henry Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Samuel Barrett, who promptly invited Phillips (see Harding, *Days of Thoreau*, p. 176).

¹¹Prudence Ward to Mrs. Prudence Ward, 13 April 1838, Abernethy Library of Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vt. Permission to quote from this letter is gratefully acknowledged.

¹²*Liberator*, 23 June 1843.

dated meeting announcement implores local women, "For the Slave's sake, and for your own, please come." A note publicizes ticket sales for a "tea & dancing party" to be held on 12 December 1853; another describes an upcoming antislavery fair that "will commence on Wednesday August 3rd at Shepherds Hall." In addition to appealing to the conscience of their community, society members promoted the merchandise: "a great variety of clothing for children, Frocks, Caps, Aprons, Shoes &c, &c, also a large collection of very beautiful bags from cork & worsted work of all descriptions. Bronzes from Rome, Books, Engravings, Card Cases & medals." The 3 August fair was also advertised in the *Liberator* of 22 July 1842:

The Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society will hold a FAIR, in Concord, (Mass.) on the 3d of August. A great variety of useful and ornamental articles, many of them from friends in Europe, will render the Fair attractive to all. Every description of children's clothing, worsted work, bags, caps, toys, paintings, engravings, books, &c., will be sold nearly or quite at cost. The refreshment table will be well supplied with ice creams, and other delicacies. There will be music in the Hall, at intervals, during the day and evening. . . . Will not the friends of the slave in Lexington, Littleton, Sudbury, Carlisle, Westford, and all the neighboring towns make an effort to attend, and induce others to come?

For this fair and undoubtedly for other events, the society charged a sixpence admission fee because Mary Merrick Brooks insisted on wresting money from those who came merely to look.¹³

As their charity generated revenues for the abolitionist cause, women transformed the ordinary, domestic tasks of sewing and baking into "the radical and public work of antislavery fairs," which were widely advertised events. These very public forums,

¹³Records of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, Special Collections, Concord Free Public Library, Concord, Mass. I would like to thank Leslie Wilson and the Special Collections Department for permission to quote from these and other manuscripts. Lee Chambers-Schiller, "'A Good Work among the People': The Political Culture of the Boston Antislavery Fair," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 255; *Liberator*, 22 July 1842.

however, also helped fuel the perception that abolition was a legitimate concern of women. Adding support to Deborah Van Broekhoven's contention, Carolyn Karcher notes that "antislavery fairs offered women who felt uneasy about overstepping the bounds of their 'sphere' a traditional mode of contributing to the cause and displaying their creativity." The private writings of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society members corroborate the two scholars' conclusions. In their correspondence—alongside a running dialogue about neighbors, politics, and personal matters—Prudence Ward, her niece Ellen Sewall, and Maria Thoreau routinely chatted about shopping at, sewing for, and staffing the tables of upcoming antislavery bazaars.¹⁴

Treasurers' reports of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society record the extent to which the activism of the Concord Society translated into hundreds of dollars for the cause. From its initial donation of \$21.33 in 1838 through subsequent annual contributions and convention pledges, Concord led all other local women's societies in charitable donations for many years of its existence.¹⁵ Moreover, each year Concord women supplied handcrafted goods and helped to staff the annual Boston antislavery bazaar, which after its debut in 1834 became the country's largest abolitionist fundraiser. The capital that the women raised was used to print flyers, run the antislavery press, hold conventions, and compensate traveling antislavery agents. Added to these ongoing expenses, cash was needed in later years to defray the costs associated with hiding, feeding, and sending runaway slaves toward freedom. Viewed from a pecuniary perspective, Garrison's reliance on and praise for women's antislavery groups is easily understood; they paid at least half his bills in any given year.

¹⁴Deborah Van Broekhoven, "Better than a Clay Club: The Organization of Anti-Slavery Fairs," *Slavery and Abolition* 19 (April 1998): 38; Carolyn L. Karcher, *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 219; Ellen Sewall to Prudence Ward, n.d. [January 1841], and Maria Thoreau to Prudence Ward, 17 December 1849, both in Ellen Sewall Papers.

¹⁵*Sixth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society*, p. xxxiii; Glick, "Thoreau and Radical Abolitionism," pp. 196–97.

In 1838, the New England abolitionist movement ruptured over Garrison's radicalism. Not only was he advocating that abolitionists withhold their vote in state and national elections on the grounds that voting countenanced the pro-slavery U.S. Constitution and government, but he championed the admission of female delegates to the annual antislavery conventions. Primarily, it was the conservative clergy and their supporters who split from Garrison, men solidly against allowing women to attend antislavery conventions as voting delegates. These abolitionists—Amos Phelps, Henry Stanton, and Lewis Tappan, among others—formed a new organization, the Massachusetts Abolition Society (and they would eventually found the Liberty Party); hence, they were referred to as “new orgs.,” while Garrison and his associates were dubbed the “old orgs.”¹⁶

Long allied with Garrison, the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society naturally became embroiled in the conflict; for a time, the rancor apparently enveloped the Concord Society as well. In December 1841, while the conflict was still brewing, Boston Society member Anne Warren Weston visited Mary Brooks in Concord. While there, Weston met “Mrs & Miss Hoar & the Misses Thoreau.” Weston pronounced “the first women very weak abolitionists of the old school, the second new orgs.” “In the most innocent manner,” Weston then “gave some dabs at New. Org. which greatly pleased Mrs. B.” In time, Brooks apparently prevailed, for the 1843 annual report of the society boldly proclaims its allegiance to Garrison: “we have breasted the storm, and the waves of new organization . . . have beat against us in vain.” This report credits the society's founding members for their “clear-sightedness . . . integrity . . . courage” in remaining loyal to “the old platform, when the armies all

¹⁶For an excellent discussion of this “schism,” see Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 261–84, and Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *Bound with Them in Chains: A Biographical History of the Antislavery Movement* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972), pp. 40–47. Ironically, one of the “new orgs.,” Henry Stanton, was the husband of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, whose views on women's enfranchisement, both within and outside of the antislavery movement, would soon be well known.

around them were so panic-stricken, and the deserters so numerous."¹⁷

On 1 August 1844, the Concord society strengthened its public role as well as its ties to Garrison's statewide organization by sponsoring the first of what became an annual celebration in many New England cities marking the anniversary of West Indian emancipation. Each week for a month before the event, the *Liberator* advertised the day's activities and lineup of speakers: Frederick Douglass, Samuel J. May, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Two years later, Henry Thoreau hosted the gathering, an occasion he likely refers to when he writes in *Walden*, "It is surprising how many great men and women a small house will contain. I have had twenty-five or thirty souls, with their bodies, at once under my roof." In addition to Emerson, the 1846 event included abolitionist speakers George W. Stacy, William Henry Channing, Reverend Caleb Stetson, and former fugitive slave Lewis Hayden. Media coverage hailed the festivities as "the best celebration ever had anywhere."¹⁸

After the Fugitive Slave Law was enacted in 1850, abolitionist activity heightened in Concord. Boston abolitionists reenergized the city's Vigilance Committee, a grassroots organization formed to aid runaway slaves coming into and leaving the community; Concord women mobilized to offer support. The Brooks, Thoreau, and Bigelow homes, among others, provided refuge to slaves leaving Boston, usually through the aid of the Vigilance Committee. Few records exist to document these clandestine encounters, but various sources attest that, in addition to fugitive slave Shadrach Minkins, Concord women hid a number of other slaves in their town. In *The Underground Railroad in Massachusetts*, nineteenth-century historian Wilbur Siebert reported that a fugitive slave was taken to the Brooks home by William Bowditch and other members of the Boston

¹⁷Thomas Blanding, "Beans, Baked and Half-Baked (14)," *Concord Saunterer* 17 (December 1984): 48; *Liberator*, 23 June 1843.

¹⁸Harding, *Days of Thoreau*, p. 195; *Liberator*, 5, 12, 19, and 26 July 1844; Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 140; *Liberator*, 31 July and 7 August 1846; *Concord Freeman*, 7 August 1846.

Vigilance Committee; abolitionist Captain Austin Bears recalled that in October 1854 he had transported a slave he had rescued from a ship in Boston Harbor to the Concord home of Ephraim Allen; and society member Ann Bigelow, interviewed in 1892 about her antislavery activism, claimed that fugitive slaves were hidden in Concord “nearly every week” during the turbulent decade of the 1850s. While Bigelow’s claim is likely exaggerated, there is no reason to doubt her statement that runaway slaves in Concord were usually taken in by her family, or by Cynthia Thoreau or Mary Rice.¹⁹



Collectively, the women of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society made a tremendous impact in their community. Individually, the contributions of Cynthia, Helen, and Sophia Thoreau; Abby Alcott; Lidian Emerson; and Mary Merrick Brooks exemplify the premise that antislavery work provided a chance for women “to create a moral identity that was both rooted in and separate from [their] familial identity.”²⁰ In order to motivate—in some cases, goad—the men in their homes to adopt an antislavery stance, these women cleverly put to use a variety of methods. As a result, the influence they brought to bear on some of America’s most noted antislavery speakers and writers had a pronounced and far-reaching impact. When Emerson denounced slavery in no uncertain terms in 1844, and when Henry Thoreau spoke to a rally in the company of Garrison, Phillips, and others in 1854, the abolitionist cause gained momentum and increased its stature not only in New England but throughout the world.

¹⁹Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad in Massachusetts* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1936), p. 23; Austin Bears, *Reminiscences of Fugitive Slave Law Days in Boston* (Boston: Warren Richardson, 1880), pp. 38–39; Edward W. Emerson, “Notes on the Underground Railway in Concord and the Concord Station,” typescript, Allen French Papers, Special Collections, Concord Free Public Library, Concord, Mass.

²⁰Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army*, p. 36.

Thanks directly to eight women, six of whom lived in his home, Henry Thoreau had long been exposed to the most radical antislavery positions during his formative, young-adult years. His mother, Cynthia Dunbar Thoreau; his sisters Helen and Sophia; his aunts Maria and Jane Thoreau and Louisa Dunbar; and Prudence Ward and her mother, Mrs. Joseph (also Prudence) Ward, had all participated in the founding of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society just a few months after he graduated from Harvard and returned home. The Wards' presence in their home undoubtedly reinforced the Thoreaus' reformist sympathies; indeed, it has been argued that "abolitionist sentiment . . . must have overshadowed all other activities in [the Thoreau] household." Writing in 1950, Wendell Glick expressed surprise that up to that time scholars had paid little attention to the society's influence on the development of Thoreau's antislavery philosophy.²¹ Thoreau maintained that reform was an individual enterprise, but under the influence of the Wards and the women of his family—and as a result of his admiration for abolitionist Wendell Phillips and antislavery editor Nathaniel Rogers, and his anger over the Fugitive Slave Law—he increasingly responded to Garrisonian abolitionism. His early support for antislavery in the mid-1840s eventually transformed into complete identification by the 1850s, and his published words evolved from the caution in "Resistance to Civil Government," to the contemplation of violence in "Slavery in Massachusetts," to the full-blown praise of revolution in "A Plea for Captain John Brown."

Around the Thoreaus' dinner table could regularly be found such antislavery lecturers as Garrison, Henry Wright, Loring Moody, Parker Pillsbury, and even John Brown. Thoreau's sisters Sophia and Helen both belonged to the Middlesex County Anti-Slavery Association, serving as officers and members of the executive committee at various times in the 1840s and 1850s. Along with their mother Cynthia, they attended the New England Anti-Slavery Convention in Boston in May 1844,

²¹Sanborn, "The Women of Concord—IV," p. 45; Harding, *Days of Thoreau*, pp. 73–74; Glick, "Thoreau and Radical Abolitionism," pp. 7, 195.

where they voted to approve a resolution calling for signers to "agitate for a dissolution of the Union," a radical position, as Glick points out, that Henry Thoreau would not publicly assume for several years. At other conventions, the Thoreau women contributed money and signed petitions registering their displeasure with the Mexican War and the annexation of Texas, stances that aligned them with the nation's most militant abolitionists. In antislavery publications, the women's names appeared in print alongside the men's on the rosters of voting delegates.²² These national conventions not only allowed the Thoreaus to nurture relationships with abolitionists they already knew, such as Garrison and Phillips, but brought them into contact with important members of the Boston Vigilance Committee, such as Henry and William Bowditch, Robert Wallcut, and Samuel May, Jr., the men who would appeal to Concord's citizens when free blacks or runaway slaves needed help.

Helen Thoreau, especially, cultivated relationships with prominent abolitionists. She met Frederick Douglass at an antislavery meeting in June 1844, perhaps at that time securing his commitment to speak at the society's upcoming August gala. In an undated letter presumed to have been addressed to Helen Thoreau, Douglass described his current lecture tour, relating the opposition he had encountered in nearby towns. He sent his regards to Concord friends—Mrs. Brooks, Mrs. Bigelow, and Helen's family. Similarly, Helen's relationship with Garrison was close enough that upon her death in 1849, he eulogized her at length in the *Liberator*: "Our friend, Miss Thoreau was

²²*Liberator*, 14 June 1844; Glick, "Thoreau and Radical Abolitionism," p. 200. The Middlesex County Anti-Slavery Association boasted many Concord members, including Dr. Josiah Bartlett, Colonel William Whiting (who served as its president in 1850), and Mary Merrick Brooks, who sat on the executive committee in 1848 and 1849 and served as secretary for a number of years in the early 1850s. The national debate over whether it was proper for women to *join* an antislavery society was apparently not an issue for the Middlesex County group, yet during its meeting of 26 July 1839, the members argued vehemently over whether or not female members might *vote* on resolutions. During a break in the quite contentious meeting, the members most opposed to women's voting, led by Reverend J. W. Cross of Boxboro, left to form their own society (Records of the Middlesex County Anti-Slavery Association, Special Collections, Concord Free Public Library).

an abolitionist," he proclaimed. "She had the patience to investigate truth, the candor to acknowledge it when sufficient evidence was presented to her mind, and the moral courage to act in conformity with her convictions, however unpopular these convictions might be to the community around her." Invoking his own political hobbyhorse, Garrison drew attention to Helen's contempt for the church's silence on slavery. "She repudiated such a church. . . . Again and again has she called upon the writer of this notice, when returning from church, and said, with strong emotion, it is all darkness and gloom." Garrison closed with a sense of shared loss. "The abolitionists of Concord will mourn deeply her loss; for, few and feeble as they are, they can ill afford to lose one so intelligent and so true."²³ Although critical of Concord's anti-abolitionist contingent, Garrison's public tribute reflected the extent of his respect for Helen, and by appearing in the widely circulated *Liberator*, it also continued to position the society at the vanguard of Concord's agitation.



A friend of the Thoreaus and a member of the Philadelphia, Boston, and Concord Female Anti-Slavery Societies, Abby Alcott was an antislavery pioneer. She and her husband Bronson had supported Garrison from the outset of his abolitionist crusade. During the early, often violent years of the movement, Abby joined Bronson on some risky escapades, including visiting Garrison in a Boston jail in 1835 after a raucous mob had led him through the streets by a rope and nearly killed him. Abby's brother Samuel Joseph May, a committed abolitionist as well, had joined Garrison's organization at its inception. In the mid-1830s, he and poet John Greenleaf Whittier had confronted violent mobs when they spoke in Haverhill, Massachu-

²³Frederick Douglass to Helen [Thoreau], n.d., Special Collections, Concord Free Public Library (I would like to thank Robert A. Gross for first bringing this letter to my attention); *Liberator*, 22 June 1849.

setts, and Concord, New Hampshire.²⁴ May had championed schoolteacher Prudence Crandall when she opened a school for black girls in Canterbury, Connecticut, in 1833; and in 1851, he had masterminded the rescue of fugitive slave Jerry McHenry from a Syracuse, New York, jail.²⁵ Moreover, Abby's cousins Samuel May, Jr., and Samuel E. Sewall were agents of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. Through the years, Bronson Alcott also maintained a steadfast profile in the abolitionist movement. In the 1850s, he belonged to the Boston Vigilance Committee; and in June 1854, he helped T. W. Higginson plan the failed attempt to rescue fugitive slave Anthony Burns, the last runaway to be returned to slavery by the state of Massachusetts in compliance with the Fugitive Slave Law.

The Alcotts lived in Concord between 1840 and 1843, 1844 and 1848, and from 1857 until their deaths. During her Concord residence, Abby participated in the society's activities and occasionally hosted meetings, at least one of which, in November 1860, drew guests from Boston. In her journal, Abby describes one such gathering at her home: the "Antislavery Society met here—42 present; My brother held a discussion on Non-resistance—Mr. Emerson—Sanborn—Miss Peabody—and Mr. Alcott The widows of John and Watson Brown were

²⁴Frederick Dahlstrand, *Amos Bronson Alcott: An Intellectual Biography* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), p. 151. Although Gerda Lerner has written that May and Whittier were stoned in Concord, Massachusetts, in May 1834 (see *The Grinné Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Woman's Rights and Abolition* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], p. 92), I can find no record of their having experienced such treatment there. The incident seems to have occurred in Concord, New Hampshire, probably in the fall of 1835, during the 1834-35 period in which May and Whittier were subjected to anti-abolition violence throughout New England. See May's *Some Recollections of our Antislavery Conflict* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, & Co., 1869; reprinted, Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968), pp. 140-57; *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, 1822-1835*, ed. Walter M. Merrill, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 1:525-26; Roland H. Woodwell, *John Greenleaf Whittier: A Biography* (Haverhill, Mass.: Trustees of the John Greenleaf Whittier Homestead, 1985), p. 75; *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier, 1828-1845*, ed. John B. Pickard, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975), 1:171-72; and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *John Greenleaf Whittier* (1902; reprinted, New York: MacMillan Company, 1926), pp. 58-61.

²⁵Donald Yacovone, *Samuel Joseph May and the Dilemmas of the Liberal Persuasion, 1797-1871* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 43-55, 143-54; Mayer, *All on Fire*, pp. 146-48; Pease and Pease, *Bound with Them in Chains*, pp. 276-307.

here—with Watson's infant—10 months old—” John Brown's widow and daughters had come to Concord early in 1860 following Brown's execution, and they remained in town so that the girls could attend Franklin B. Sanborn's school. Initially, they were the Emersons' houseguests; then they boarded with the Alcotts for several months. Abby sympathized with the daughters' ordeal, which she described to her brother along with her thoughts about the nation's civil unrest:

The oldest has been dreadfully tried in her nervous system—She tries to study but her heart and thoughts are not in her books—She has had a terrible “lesson for the day” its consequences may be most sad to *her* as well as fatal to her father—She lived 4 months at Harper's Ferry—Are we not beginning to reap in the Storm what was there Sown in the whirlwind—I dread a war—but is not a Peace based on such false compromises and compacts much more disastrous to the real prospects of the Country generally—and Freedom in particular—I think so.

In her journal, Abby mused further about the enduring significance of Brown's raid: “John Brown's martyrdom has perhaps been the event of /59. . . . The hour and the man both came at last to reveal to the south their sins—and to the Slaves their Savior—He came to them with a Sword, but he has slain thousands by his *Word*.”²⁶

From late December 1846 through mid-January 1847, and perhaps for a week in early February 1847, the Alcotts harbored at least one, and possibly two, fugitive slaves in their Concord home of Hillside. In an undated journal entry for December 1846, Abby records: “This month has been full of interest—Preparations for the ‘Christmas tree’ . . . —The arrival of a Slave named for the present John—an intimate in my family untill some place where work can be provided—An amiable intelligent man Just 7 weeks from the ‘House of Bondage.’” The very next entry is dated 31 December; on this day, Abby writes that she “rose early to give John his breakfast that he might go

²⁶Abigail May Alcott, manuscript journal, 31 December 1859 and 24 November 1860, bMS Am 1130.1 (2); Abigail May Alcott to Samuel J. May, 14 April 1861, bMS Am 1817 (44), both at Houghton Library.

to his work by early dawn I was repaid for my effort by meeting God—the interview was short—but *real*—.” Slightly over a month later, Bronson Alcott begins his February 1847 journal with a lengthy entry on “Slavery,” which includes his reactions to abolitionists Parker Pillsbury and Stephen Foster, whom he had recently heard speak in Boston. On 2 February, Bronson writes, “there arrives from the Maryland plantations a fugitive to sit at my table and fireside.” A week later, the entry for 9 February discloses that “our friend the fugitive, who has shared now a week’s hospitality with us, sawing and piling my wood, feels this new taste of freedom yet unsafe here in New England, and so has left us for Canada.” Bronson describes this fugitive as “scarce thirty years of age, athletic, dextrous, sagacious, and self-relying”; he regards his family’s hospitality to the slave as “an impressive lesson to my children, bringing before them the wrongs of the black man.”²⁷ It is important to note that none of Bronson’s several journal entries for January 1847 mentions this or another slave.

Although critics have heretofore assumed that the slave Abby describes in her late December journal is the same man to whom Bronson refers in February, a letter Abby wrote to her brother Samuel J. May seems to contradict this conclusion. On 13 January 1847, three weeks before Bronson records a slave’s arrival at their house in his journal, Abby informs May that a fugitive slave, presumably the “John” she described in her 31 December journal entry, has been sent on his way. “We have had an interesting fugitive here for 2 weeks—right from Maryland—He was anxious to get to Canada and we have forwarded him the best way we could—His sufferings have been great—his nature sickly—unparalleled [*sic*]—.”²⁸ In addition to the

²⁷ Abigail May Alcott, manuscript journal, undated entry for December 1846, and 31 December 1846, bMS Am 1130.1 (2); Amos Bronson Alcott, manuscript journal, undated entry for February 1847, bMS Am 1342, both at Houghton Library; *The Journals of Bronson Alcott*, ed. Odell Shepard, 2 vols. (1938; Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1966), 1:188, 190. For critics who have referred to the fugitive slave hidden with the Alcotts, see Cynthia Barton, *Transcendental Wife: The Life of Abigail May Alcott* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, Inc., 1996), p. 130; Dahlstrand, *Amos Bronson Alcott*, p. 210; and Trumbull, “Concord and the Negro,” pp. 49–50.

²⁸ Abigail Alcott to Samuel J. May, 13 January 1847, bMS Am 1130.9 (25), Houghton Library.

fact that the health of the slave(s) is differently described by Abby and Bronson and the dates of their entries do not coincide, further evidence suggests that Bronson could have brought home a slave following his visit to Boston, where he not only met Pillsbury and Foster but dined at the home of Vigilance Committee treasurer Francis Jackson and spent the night with William Lloyd Garrison. Thus, during his stay in Boston, recorded in a journal entry for February, Bronson kept company with four abolitionist leaders, any one of whom could have asked him to conceal a second slave in Concord, particularly if he knew that the Alcotts had just weeks earlier successfully hidden and then dispatched a fugitive slave to Canada. The records of the Vigilance Committee lend credence to the possibility. Of the ten runaway slaves documented in the committee's records from November 1846 through February 1847, at least four had arrived in Boston after escaping from Maryland. None of these slaves was taken to the Alcotts', but their arrival in Boston during these months and the fact that they were assisted by the Vigilance Committee, members of which Bronson had just been visiting, establish the circumstances that could have led to the Alcotts being asked to hide more than one slave from Maryland that winter at their Concord home: one from late December 1846 until mid-January 1847, as Abby's journal and correspondence record, and another in early February 1847, as Bronson describes.²⁹



Down the road from the Alcotts lived the man to whom the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society directed its most determined attention. Although Ralph Waldo Emerson would come to denounce slavery quite strongly, he did not do so soon enough to satisfy the crusading women in his extended family and community. Len Gougeon has aptly characterized the years from 1837 through 1844 as Emerson's "silent years," a time

²⁹Irving H. Bartlett, "Abolitionists, Fugitives, and Imposters in Boston, 1846-1847," *New England Quarterly* 55 (March 1982): 99-101.

when he struggled to revise his basic belief in the inferiority of the African race. Four women share primary credit for fostering a domestic atmosphere of reform that ultimately helped drive Emerson to the antislavery cause: his aunt Mary Moody Emerson, his wife Lidian Emerson, his devoted friend Elizabeth Hoar, and his neighbor Mary Merrick Brooks. Perhaps more than any of Concord's famous sons, Waldo Emerson has been aligned with the abolitionist cause that these women kept constantly before him in the 1830s and 1840s. When the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society first organized, Lidian cautiously predicted that Waldo "would not be lukewarm" to its cause. But others in town expressed hope that he would prove an outright ally. Prudence Ward, for one, was gratified that "whether Mr. E. approves of societies—especially whether he will join one is uncertain—but I am rejoiced that he is coming out in this public manner on the subject of Abolitionism."³⁰

Although not a permanent Concord resident, Waldo Emerson's Aunt Mary Moody Emerson urged her nephew to take a stronger antislavery stand. Biographer Phyllis Cole believes that Mary Emerson "was a deep, long-term source of [Emerson's] idealist principles" and argues that her views strengthened the antislavery resolve of Lidian Emerson. Mary Emerson thus "mediated between" husband and wife. Lidian Emerson, who took a leading role in local reform efforts, hosted antislavery meetings and entertained visiting abolitionists, but unlike the Thoreaus and Mary Brooks, she apparently did not attend national conventions. Her most vital contribution to antislavery, however, lay in providing a direct link to her spouse. Although, as Robert Richardson, Jr., states, Lidian always remained "ahead of her husband on the subject of abolition" and was dissatisfied with his guarded attitude, by eventually persuading him to lend his support to the cause, Lidian Emerson succeeded in spreading the message of Concord's antislavery society far and wide.³¹

Occasionally, in the 1830s and 1840s, Emerson did speak out

³⁰Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero*, p. 41; Prudence Ward to Caroline Sewall, 25 September [1837], Ellen Sewall Papers.

³¹Phyllis Cole, "Pain and Protest in the Emerson Family," *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform*, ed. T. Gregory Garvey (Athens: University of

against the "peculiar institution," but he did not respond to the condition of the individual slave. In fact, Emerson's private writings of the period display little sympathetic understanding of the chattel's plight, an attitude that no doubt gave rise to T. W. Higginson's judgment years later that Emerson possessed an "instinctive colorphobia." Both his aunt and his wife, on the other hand, were intense in their opposition toward slavery, an emotionalism that annoyed Emerson, who considered such "temperamental excess" uniquely female. Indeed, their passion produced a reaction precisely the opposite from what they intended; objecting to the depth of Lidian's sympathy, Waldo complained in his journal that his wife "grieves aloud about the wretched negro in the horrors of the middle passage." Others, however, considered Lidian's depth of commitment a principled stand. As Wendell Phillips acknowledged in 1867, she attended antislavery meetings even "when her husband objected to her coming." Waldo simply did not comprehend nor value that the women could transform their feelings into effective political action. Yet this is exactly what they did. The society's formation and its increasing activism through the years resulted in a number of successful political actions, including the organization and sponsorship of rallies at which Waldo himself agreed to be the keynote speaker. In addition, despite his disdain for Lidian's emotional reaction to slavery, Waldo didn't object to borrowing these same sentiments for use in his own writings and lectures.³²

Georgia Press, 2000), pp. 68, 75; Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 270.

³²Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Anti-Slavery Days," *Outlook*, 3 September 1898, p. 57; Phyllis Cole, "'Men and Women Conversing': The Emersons in 1837," *Emersonian Circles: Essays in Honor of Joel Myerson*, ed. Wesley T. Mott and Robert E. Burkholder (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1997), p. 155, and "Pain and Protest," pp. 69, 72-73; *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* [JMN], vol. 5, ed. Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 382; Edith E. W. Gregg, ed., *The Letters of Ellen Tucker Emerson*, 2 vols. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1982), 1:426. While there is no record that Waldo addressed a preliminary meeting of the society, he did offer his first anti-slavery remarks in Concord in November 1837, two months after its formation.

According to Phyllis Cole, in his "Divinity School Address," Emerson incorporated the phrase that it "is wicked to go to church on Sundays," a remark Lidian had made regarding the decision by several Massachusetts churches to close their pulpits to the Grimké and other antislavery speakers (see Cole, "Pain and Protest," p. 73).

Several society members enjoyed a close relationship with Emerson. Emerson's friend Elizabeth Hoar was one such individual, and despite the fact that her name does not appear on the partial lists of the society, it is likely that she did belong. The daughter of Judge Samuel Hoar, Elizabeth had been engaged to Waldo's brother Charles, who died in 1836. A declared abolitionist, Charles Emerson had given a speech in 1835 that urged acceptance of Garrison's radical position.³³ After Charles's death and throughout her life, Hoar enjoyed a close relationship with the Emersons, and Waldo considered her one of his closest confidantes. Thus, when Southern slavery touched the lives of the Hoars, Emerson took notice.

In November 1844, Elizabeth Hoar and her father traveled to Charleston, South Carolina, at the request of Massachusetts Governor George Briggs, who asked the judge to protest the Southern state's new policy of imprisoning free blacks who entered Charleston harbor aboard Northern vessels. Instituted to stem the increasing frequency with which Southern slaves were escaping via northbound ships, the law was objectionable to the commonwealth because among those incarcerated were free African-American citizens of Massachusetts. The Hoars were rebuffed in their attempt to meet with South Carolina Governor James Hammond, and they nearly fell prey to a violent mob, indignant over what it viewed as Yankee interference in Southern affairs. Ultimately, Governor Hammond refused to meet with the Hoars and demanded that they leave the state on the grounds that he could not guarantee their safety. An outraged Judge Hoar vividly related his ordeal at a Concord town meeting, and once Waldo Emerson heard about this treatment of his friends, he lodged his own angry protests in his journal and in a letter to the *New-York Daily Tribune*.³⁴

The woman in Concord who likely carried more weight with

³³The full text of Charles Chauncy Emerson's "Lecture on Slavery" can be found in *ESQ* 16 (3d quarter 1959): 12-21.

³⁴E. R. Hoar, "Samuel Hoar," in *Memoirs of Members of the Social Circle in Concord*, 3d ser.: 1840 to 1895 (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1907), pp. 38-44; Elliott and Jones, *Concord: Its Black History*, pp. 88-92; Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero*, pp. 92-93, and

Emerson than any other, however, was his outspoken neighbor Mary Merrick Brooks—the undisputed leader of Concord’s antislavery effort. Brooks, whose husband Nathan was a prominent lawyer, cast a wide reform net, including temperance and capital punishment, but slavery claimed her most devoted attention. Based on her quite accurate belief that his support would lend critical weight to the cause, Brooks pursued Emerson with a vengeance.

Invited by Brooks, and no doubt persuaded by Lidian and other society members, Emerson agreed to speak during the society’s festivities celebrating West Indian emancipation in August 1844. The speech, entitled “An Address . . . on . . . the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies,” his first truly unequivocal statement against slavery, marks what has been characterized as Emerson’s shift from “philosophical antislavery to active abolitionism.” After reviewing the turmoil that finally led Great Britain to end slavery in the West Indies, Emerson proclaimed that the “conscience of the country” had finally been aroused in America: slavery will inevitably be abolished. The stark and incontrovertible realities of American slavery that Concord’s women had forced Emerson to confront undoubtedly played a role in causing him to question the efficacy of a transcendentalist philosophy that failed to put actions behind words. In “Self-Reliance” (1840) Emerson had counseled readers to ignore society’s many claims on the individual, and he spoke dismissively of “the thousand-fold Relief Societies.” But a decade later, when he addressed Concord’s citizens regarding the newly enacted Fugitive Slave Law, he advised that speaking out against slavery was each individual’s “paramount duty.” Finally, Emerson became the ally for whom the society’s members had long wished, and after the 1844 speech, his commitment to antislavery strengthened year by year. In November 1845, he refused to address the New Bedford Lyceum after its

“Historical Introduction” to *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*, p. xxxi. For Emerson’s private comments on this incident, see *JMN*, vol. 9, ed. Ralph H. Rusk and Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 161–62.

members voted to exclude blacks, information that came to him via Mary Brooks; by November 1852, he was contributing to the coffers of the Boston Vigilance Committee; in July 1854, he and Lidian joined a public protest in Concord over the rendition of fugitive slave Anthony Burns; and in 1856, he donated fifty dollars to Concord's Kansas relief effort.³⁵

Brooks's influence extended beyond Emerson and Concord. Nearly every published account of the town's abolitionist activities cites her as the society's prime mover; no abolitionist's visit could be considered complete without taking "tea at Mrs. Brooks's." After her stay in Concord, Anne Warren Weston called Brooks "perfectly fearless—what the transcendentalists might hail as 'the truest of women.'" Daniel Ricketson, a New Bedford abolitionist and friend of the Thoreaus, similarly praised her as "a true and stirring abolitionist" with "downright principles on the subject of slavery." After her appointment as the society's first secretary, Brooks and her stepdaughter Caroline represented Concord as delegates to the second, highly contentious Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, held in Philadelphia in May 1838.³⁶ Immediately thereafter, Brooks became the critical link between Concord and the busy Boston abolitionist network, particularly as she fortified her connection to Maria Weston Chapman, with whom Brooks

³⁵Gougeon, "Historical Introduction" to *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, p. xxx; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "An Address . . . on . . . the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies," in Gougeon and Myerson, *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, pp. 32–33; RWE, "Self Reliance," *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2, ed. Joseph Slater, Alfred R. Ferguson, and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 29, 31; RWE, "'Address to the Citizens of Concord' on the Fugitive Slave Law, 3 May 1851," *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, p. 53; Len Gougeon, "Emerson and the New Bedford Affair," *Studies in the American Renaissance 1981* (Boston: Twayne, 1981), pp. 259–60; Francis Jackson, "Treasurer's Accounts: The Boston Vigilance Committee," facsimile, Boston Public Library (Boston: Bostonian Society, n.d.), p. 69; Richardson, *Mind on Fire*, pp. 495–96; "Subscription List for Relief of Free State Citizens of Kansas," Franklin Benjamin Sanborn Papers, Concord Free Public Library.

³⁶*Daniel Ricketson and His Friends: Letters, Poems, Sketches, etc.*, ed. Anna Ricketson and Walton Ricketson (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1902), pp. 286, 288, 320; Blanding, "Beans, Baked and Half-Baked (14)," p. 48; *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women Held in Philadelphia May 15th, 16th, 17th and 18th, 1838* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838), p. 12.

maintained a vigorous correspondence spanning more than twenty years.

Brooks could be a tyrant. In large urban areas, where male abolitionists organized vigilance committees and the depredations of Southern slavery were denounced daily in the press and from the podium, the topic was widely debated. In small towns like Concord, on the other hand, activists depended on visiting abolitionist agents to rouse townsfolk who were, by and large, content to ignore the geographically remote subject of slavery. Brooks relentlessly sought to bring the most popular antislavery speakers to Concord and showed precious little concern for the frenetic schedules of those she repeatedly invited. In February 1844, for example, Brooks urged William Lloyd Garrison to consider the value of speaking in Concord once again:

Will it be in your power to come to Concord and talk to us on Slavery in general, and the Nebraska Bill in particular, next week on Thursday evening. There is to be something done about the Nebraska abomination in the Town Meeting on the 6th of March next. Our Society think it will be a good time to have a lecture—we have not much to offer you pecuniarily but we know you are always abounding in this work of the Lord and so we feel confident that if it possible you will come and strike a blow for freedom among us—Will you please send an answer as soon as convenient—³⁷

In light of his demanding schedule, this invitation for a specific evening, with no alternative dates suggested, reveals that Brooks failed to appreciate the many claims on Garrison's attention. Yet this insistent personality doubtless enabled her to succeed where others, more circumspect and polite, would likely have failed. Garrison appeared in Concord on numerous occasions, and his presence lent a stature to the society and its efforts that it would not have enjoyed otherwise.

Brooks corresponded frequently with Boston abolitionist Wendell Phillips, and her letters to him exemplify her epistolary boldness and savvy. In March 1844, she apologized that "as

³⁷Mary Merrick Brooks to William Lloyd Garrison, 20 February 1854, Boston Public Library/Rare Books Department, Boston, Mass. Permission to quote from this and other letters is by courtesy of the Trustees and is gratefully acknowledged.

I am secretary of our Society I must obey orders even if I do trouble you all the time." Her casual assumption that her administrative role was sufficient excuse for importuning Phillips illustrates the premise that antislavery women regarded their work as a moral imperative, one that loosened society's usual constraints upon them. A few years later, Brooks took Phillips to task for an apparent scheduling error: "Mrs. Green saw Miss Thoreau in Boston last week, and she told her that you supposed our Convention and tea-party was to be deferred a week longer. You may well suppose the trouble the information caused me, because, moreover, she said you were engaged on this Thursday. Now as to having a tea party without you it is impossible, so I trust the information is entirely without foundation." In another letter to Phillips, Brooks makes a melodramatic appeal. "I have been hoping this morning that you are today in a most benevolent self sacrificing frame of mind, willing to lay your whole self on the AntiSlavery Altar if you are not woe is me for I shall most justly lay myself open to your righteous indignation for which I am about to request you to repeat your lecture which you delivered here in December." Never one to put off until tomorrow a favor she could press today, Brooks concluded, "If you cannot come at the time specified can you come the week after. I feel that I must have you sometime." For his part, Phillips was faithful to his verbal contracts with Brooks. In July 1846, he explained to Samuel J. May that he couldn't speak in Syracuse on a given date because "I am bound to Concord (Mass.) already, so you must excuse me."³⁸

Whether or not Phillips and Garrison privately resented Brooks for her unflagging claims on their time, they consistently paid tribute to her efforts and to those of other women like her. When he reported the society's August 1844 celebra-

³⁸Mary Merrick Brooks to Wendell Phillips, 17 March 1844, 31 March 1851, and 21 February [1845], manuscript bMS 1130.14 (2), Houghton Library; Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army*, p. 4; Wendell Phillips to Samuel J. May, 6 July 1846, May Anti-Slavery Collection, 1749-1933, #4601, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, N.Y. (permission to quote from this letter is gratefully acknowledged).

tion in the *Liberator* (9 August 1844), Garrison singled out Brooks, the event's principal organizer:

There are some great and good spirits within [Concord's] limits, whose fidelity to principle and devotion to the cause of bleeding humanity are worthy of universal fame. Among these it is not invidious to mention the honored name of a BROOKS—a lady who, for a number of years, has given herself to the work of emancipation with an unreservedness of spirit, a steadfastness of purpose, and a serenity and nobleness of soul, unsurpassed by any whose deeds are recorded on the scroll of Christian philanthropy.

In a letter to Brooks's friend Leominster activist Frances H. Drake, Phillips was explicit about what Brooks and other female abolitionists had achieved in Concord:

I have watched with deep interest the gradual, silent, but steady, growth of reform in towns where a few women, all alone, have given their hearts to it, and though, I believe, I am not wanting in faith or hope yet I have wondered to see how the ablest and and [sic] influential men are brought at last within the circle of this holy influence. There is Concord now, where Ralph W. Emerson lives, a man famous both sides of the ocean, and wielding by his pen a wide influence. I believe we owe all his interest in our cause to Mrs. Brooks and her half dozen friends. They have worked long, but lawyers, ministers, and all have been obliged sooner or later to bend to their influence.³⁹

Upon Brooks's death in 1868, Phillips publicly declared his admiration for the tireless activist in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*:

She was one, and a chief one, of half a dozen royal-minded women who represented the antislavery movement of the place. The famous men who lived there turned then only a tolerant eye on the cause, standing themselves at a civil distance. In kindly deference to wife or friend, they showed their faces, now and then, at antislavery meetings. Still it is but justice to say that it was the "continual coming" of those untiring women that "won or wearied" the noted names of Concord into sympathy with this great uprising for justice. We call others self-

³⁹Wendell Phillips to Frances H. Drake, 11 October 1849, typescript, Boston Public Library/Rare Books Department.

sacrificing and devoted; but she and her associates *lived* for their reform ideas.⁴⁰



Among the untiring women to whom Phillips alluded was Mary Rice. Single and unrelated to Concord's famous citizens, she does not figure in the biographies of Alcott, Thoreau, and Emerson, yet published anecdotes confirm her commitment to the town's abolition effort.⁴¹ Legend has it that Rice hid runaway slaves at her home on what is now Bedford Street in Concord, and Mary Hosmer Brown records that the "little spinster planted lilies on the grave of John Jack," a slave who had died in 1773. In 1883, former Concord resident David Tenney recalled that Rice—an "intensely Garrisonian" abolitionist who "believed that the Good Lord Stamped *all* men (except the 'slave driver,') in a heavenly mould!"—"did abominate Southern Slavery." With the Civil War underway in 1862, Rice and Mary Peabody Mann pressed President Lincoln to add emancipation to the Union cause, and they collected the signatures of three hundred fifty Concord schoolchildren on a petition requesting that Lincoln "free all slave children." In response, Lincoln passed the buck. He suggested that Rice tell the children that although the president did not "have the power to grant all they ask," they should "remember that God" could do so.⁴²

Concord's young women toiled in the antislavery trenches alongside their elders, and their engagement with abolition—a generation after the society's formation—exemplified how successfully their mothers had fulfilled Nathaniel Rogers's edict that "women must . . . instill anti-slavery truth into the young mind." Two especially outspoken women were Louisa and

⁴⁰Phillips, quoted by Robinson, in "Warrington" *Pen-Portraits*, p. 74.

⁴¹An exception is in Richardson's *Mind on Fire*, p. 495, where Rice is mentioned as one of the Concord residents who assisted fugitive slaves.

⁴²Mary Hosmer Brown, *Memories of Concord* (Boston: Four Seas Company, 1926), p. 26; Steven R. Shelburne, "David E. Tenney's Reminiscences of Concord during the Early 1840s," *Thoreau Research Newsletter* 2 (October 1991), p. 2; Elliott and Jones, *Concord: Its Black History*, p. 84.

Anna Whiting, the daughters of Concord residents Hannah and Colonel William Whiting. Anna attended the New England Anti-Slavery Convention in May 1846 with a contingent of townswomen; in Concord, she and Louisa escorted Harriet Tubman when the famous fugitive slave spoke there in 1859.⁴³ Taking up their pens, they also wrote letters that were published in the *Herald of Freedom* and the *Liberator*.

Louisa had lived for a time in the South. When she returned to Massachusetts, she prepared an antislavery pamphlet entitled "Influence of Slavery upon the White Population," published anonymously in 1855 with the attribution "By a Former Resident of Slave States." In the same way that Lydia Maria Child and Frederick Douglass had called attention to the effect slavery wrought on well-intentioned whites, Whiting contends that "a true understanding of the nature and influences of American slavery forces the conviction that this system renders the master no less a 'victim' than the slave." Claiming that she "would gladly draw back" from a subject she finds both "painful and delicate," Whiting confronts the frequency with which sexual crimes were perpetrated against slave women. It is a "well-known fact that purity among southern men is almost an unknown virtue," she charges, evident in the "thousands of proofs" of mulatto slaves living on nearly every slaveholder's estate. Whiting then quotes a Virginia woman at length:

"The white mothers and daughters of the south have suffered under it [the burden of this custom] for years, have seen their dearest affections trampled upon, their hopes of domestic happiness destroyed, and their future lives imbittered [*sic*], even to agony, by those who should be all in all to them as husbands, sons, and brothers. I cannot use too strong language in reference to this subject, for I know that it will meet a heartfelt response from every southern woman. I would deal delicately with them if I could; but they know the fact, and their

⁴³Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Young Reporter of Concord: A Checklist of F. B. Sanborn's Letters to Benjamin Smith Lyman, 1853-1867, with Extracts Emphasizing Life and Literary Events in the World of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott* (Hartford, Conn.: Transcendental Books, 1978), p. 17.

hearts bleed under the knowledge, however they may attempt to conceal their discoveries."⁴⁴

Louisa next vented her hostility to pro-slavery Southerners in a letter to the *Liberator*, published on 20 June 1856. Following closely on the heels of Senator Preston Brooks's violent assault upon Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, an episode that stunned and outraged Sumner's constituents, Whiting's communication recounted her earlier chance encounter with Senator Brooks in South Carolina. According to Whiting, when Brooks learned that she hailed from Concord, he proudly informed her of his role in the summary dispatch of Judge and Elizabeth Hoar in 1844. While serving as an aide to the South Carolina governor, Brooks informed Whiting, he had been careful to ensure the Hoars' safety, but his orders were to get them out of the state at all costs—without giving them the opportunity to state their case. "*Right or no right*, Mr. Hoar must be silenced," Brooks had proclaimed to Whiting. An incensed Whiting now lashed out at Senator Brooks in print: "the man who now, for the second time, bears the words of insult, and strikes the cowardly blow at Massachusetts! *This* is the sense of *justice* and *honor* which has felt outraged by those glorious words of imperishable Truth, which are now printed in Blood!" Whiting availed herself of the opportunity in this letter to skewer the press, the politicians, and the clergy as well: "The cringing obsequiousness of even the most liberal divines . . . is painful to behold. . . . When Doctors of Divinity nurse monstrous crimes under its ample cloak, it is no longer charity, but a pharisaical pretence."⁴⁵

Anna Whiting's antislavery fervor rivaled her younger sister's. Most likely, she led the 1849 drive that secured four hundred Concord signatures on an anti-capital punishment petition occasioned by the case of Washington Goode, a black seaman sentenced to die for the Boston murder of another black man. And

⁴⁴[Louisa Jane Whiting], *Influence of Slavery upon the White Population* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Association, 1855), pp. 1, 6, 8.

⁴⁵*Liberator*, 20 June 1856.

when Concord's selectmen refused to ring the bells to announce the society's antislavery celebration in 1844, a task Henry Thoreau enthusiastically performed, Whiting declared:

If I had been there, woman as I am, I would have tried to ring it, and do not doubt I should have succeeded. I should see my way clear to do so on this ground, if no other. No one asks leave to ring the bell for fires. Antislavery meetings have been distinguished for their "incendiary" character from the beginning. We should ring out the summons to church and state, to come and put out this fire which is doubly dangerous because it burns in the hearts of the people, and invariably makes its way through their pockets.

Whiting is almost certainly the "A. M. W." who wrote an account of this bell-ringing incident that appeared in the *Herald of Freedom* (27 September 1844).⁴⁶

Over a decade later, Whiting put her courage to the test. When authorities tried to arrest her abolitionist neighbor Franklin Sanborn for his role in the John Brown conspiracy, various neighbors, including Whiting, rushed to his aid. Ellen Emerson boasts that "Miss Anne Whiting got into the carriage and held the door and put herself in the way, and fought with a cane, and so prevented them from getting Mr Sanborn in, and gave the people time to collect. . . . The men hurt her and scratched her and tore her dress trying to get her out, but she stayed in and hindered them a long time." Townsend Scudder adds a further detail to the scenario: "Anne Whiting began to belabor the horses with a broom so that their plunging would hinder the abductors."⁴⁷

⁴⁶Barry Kritzer, "A Pre-Civil War Struggle against Capital Punishment: Charles Spear, Concord, and the Case of Washington Goode," *Concord Saunterer* 2 (Fall 1994): 111; Franklin B. Sanborn, *Table Talk: A Transcendentalist's Opinions on American Life, Literature, Art and People from the Mid-Nineteenth Century through the First Decade of the Twentieth* (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1981), p. 225; Harding, *Days of Thoreau*, p. 175; Wendell Glick, "Thoreau and the 'Herald of Freedom,'" *New England Quarterly* 22 (1949): 193-204.

⁴⁷*Letters of Ellen Tucker Emerson*, 1:213; Townsend Scudder, *Concord: American Town* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1947), p. 224.

Other young women in Concord took up their mothers' cause. Ellen Emerson, the older of Lidian and Ralph Waldo's two daughters, exulted in her town's antislavery activism. Born in 1839, the teenaged Emerson proudly witnessed Concord's increasing involvement in the agitation preceding the Civil War. When her townsfolk collected money for Kansas relief in 1856, she wrote effusively:

Great is little Concord! Oh the finest town imaginable. When in May it gave 1360 dollars to Kansas [*sic*] everybody said (out of Concord and in too) how much, how good. This autumn Miss Whiting going round to the people about her got 80 dollars, which was beyond her hopes. Then came home from Nebraska Mr Sanborn and told the people one night in the town-hall what he had seen and knew, and what was needed and people cast about in their minds and in three days Miss Whiting's fund rose to 150, all of which goes for clothing.

Emerson describes the society's "sewing times," and she stakes out her position on pre-war politics: "what pleases me most is to hear from any quarter that the North will be bold and leave the South. Twice lately very knowing people have said so and I always feel at once as if a civil war was a thing to be welcomed."⁴⁸

In her zeal, Ellen Emerson was matched by her neighbor and friend Louisa May Alcott, who in the aftermath of John Brown's execution related that "We are boiling over with excitement for many of our people (Anti Slavery I mean) are concerned in it. We have a daily stampede for papers, & a nightly indignation meeting over the wickedness of the country, & the cowardice of the human race. I'm afraid mother will die of spontaneous combustion if things are not set right soon." In January 1858, Alcott organized a day of dramatic performances in Concord as a fundraiser for the society. As she grew older, she regularly attended antislavery society meetings in Concord and Boston; her poem describing Concord's memorial ceremony for Brown was published in the *Liberator* on 20 January 1860.⁴⁹

⁴⁸*Letters of Ellen Tucker Emerson*, 1:118-19.

⁴⁹*The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine B. Stern (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1987), p. 49; *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy (1989; reprinted, Athens: University of



The Civil War did not bring an end to the society's efforts. During the war, antislavery women throughout New England built on three decades of dedicated effort; the Concord women were no exception. Having established a precedent for interweaving charity and politics, society members joined their northern countrywomen in shifting from antislavery to war-related tasks. Then, after emancipation, they went door-to-door for freedmen's relief. In 1863, Abby Alcott assisted Harriet Tubman in collecting clothing for poor blacks; in 1868, Mary Brooks and Lidian Emerson served as Concord's collections representatives to the American Anti-Slavery Society; and in 1873, as she had done forty years earlier on behalf of the Cherokees, Lidian expressed concern for the treatment of American Indians, this time the Modocs.⁵⁰

The devotion of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society members to improve their world—one citizen at a time—never abated. Although they had limited access to public resources compared to the illustrious male residents of Concord, in their drive to end slavery, they pursued all the channels that were open to them. As a result, the boundaries separating public from private political action were steadily worn down. The names of Lidian Emerson, Abby Alcott, Mary Merrick Brooks, and Sophia, Helen, and Cynthia Thoreau are routinely cited in discussions of the lives and literary achievements of their male relatives and friends. But the engaging account of these women and their accomplishments stands on its own. In the early decades of radical abolitionism, when too many of their townsmen maintained an intellectual distance from the plight of the enslaved, Concord's reform-minded women galvanized their community and obliged its most famous sons to accept the responsibility of their reputations.

Georgia Press, 1997), pp. 119, 138, 164; Abigail Alcott, manuscript journal, 28 January 1858, bMS Am 1130.14 (2), Houghton Library.

⁵⁰Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army*, p. 212; Dahlstrand, *Amos Bronson Alcott*, p. 263; *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 21 December 1867; *Letters of Lidian Emerson*, pp. 308–9.

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