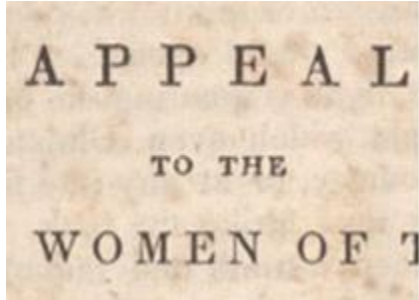


Angelina and Sarah Grimke: Abolitionist Sisters

by Carol Berkin



Angelina Grimke and her sister Sarah Grimke were legends in their own lifetimes. Together these South Carolina sisters made history: daring to speak before “promiscuous” or mixed crowds of men and women, publishing some of the most powerful anti-slavery tracts of the antebellum era, and stretching the boundaries of women’s public role as the first women to testify before a state legislature on the question of African American rights. Their crusade, which was not only to free the enslaved but to end racial discrimination throughout the United States,

made them more radical than many of the reformers who advocated an end to slavery but who could not envision true social and political equality for the freedmen and women. And the Grimke sisters were among the first abolitionists to recognize the importance of women’s rights and to speak and write about the cause of female equality.

What made Angelina and her sister Sarah unique within abolitionist circles was neither their oratorical and literary talents nor their energetic commitment to the causes of racial and gender equality. What made them exceptional was their first-hand experience with the institution of slavery and with its daily horrors and injustices. Abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of the *Liberator*, and Theodore Weld, who Angelina married in 1838, could give stirring speeches about the need to abolish slavery, but they could not testify to its impact on African Americans or on their masters from personal knowledge.

Angelina Grimke was born in 1805, the youngest of fourteen children born to John Grimke and Mary Smith Grimke. As the daughter of one of Charleston’s leading judges, she could look forward to a life of luxury and ease, her comfort assured by the presence of slaves trained to respond to her wishes. As an eligible young woman, she could have enjoyed the lively social life of Charleston’s planter society with its balls and dinner parties that would have led eventually to a good marriage and an elegant home of her own. But Angelina Grimke chose a different path: Like her older sister, Sarah, she left the South and devoted her life to racial and gender equality. In the early nineteenth century, the causes that the Grimke sisters espoused placed them among the most radical Americans of their day.

HIDE FULL ESSAY

Angelina’s self-imposed exile from her family and her hometown was not the result of a personally unhappy childhood. Although her own mother was somewhat distant, her older sister Sarah doted on her and, as the youngest member of the family, she was often the center of attention. But in the world around her, Angelina witnessed suffering that disturbed her: a young slave boy who walked with difficulty due to the whip-mark scars on his back and legs; family slaves who were mistreated and abused; and screams of pain from the nearby workhouse, where slaves were dragged on a treadmill, suspended by their arms.

It was not in Angelina’s character to remain silent about these injustices. Under the guidance of a tiny local congregation of Quakers, she renounced materialism and its comforts and began a regime of austerity and moral and religious introspection. But Angelina was not content to pursue her own salvation quietly. Having reformed herself, she set out to reform her family, eager to change the views of her mother, sisters, and brothers, and anxious to enlighten them as she believed herself to be enlightened. Compelled to speak out, she antagonized her family by criticizing their love of finery, their idleness, and above all, their acceptance of slavery. Perhaps to her surprise, she could not win over her mother or her siblings. “I am much tried at times at the manner in which I am obliged to live here,” she wrote in her journal. By 1829, she had resolved to live there no longer.

In November of 1829, Angelina moved to Philadelphia, where Sarah had already settled. While most Philadelphians did not share Angelina’s abolitionist sentiment, she did find a small circle of anti-slavery advocates. Still, she was uncertain what she could do for the cause of abolition. She began attending anti-slavery meetings, encouraged by some male abolitionists’ call to women to become activists in the movement. In 1835, she was disturbed by violent riots and demonstrations against abolitionists and African Americans in New York and Philadelphia, and by the burning of anti-slavery pamphlets in her own hometown of Charleston. When William Lloyd Garrison published an appeal to citizens of Boston to repudiate all mob violence, Angelina felt compelled to send the noted abolitionist a personal letter of support. “The ground upon which you stand is holy ground,” she told him, “never-never surrender it . . . if you surrender it, the hope of the slave is extinguished.” Agitation for the end to slavery must continue, Angelina declared, even if abolitionists are persecuted and attacked because, as she put it, “This is a cause worth dying for.”

Garrison published Angelina’s letter, never thinking to ask permission to share her private thoughts with his readers. Her friends among the Quakers in Philadelphia were shocked and Angelina was embarrassed, but her career as a public figure began on the day that issue of the *Liberator* came out, a career both meteoric and pioneering. Angelina and Sarah became the first women to serve as agents for the American Anti-Slavery Society. In January and February of 1837, the sisters toured New York State, filling churches with the sympathetic, the curious, and the hostile. Angelina proved to be a dynamic and persuasive orator and was quickly acknowledged as the most powerful female public speaker for the cause of abolition—unequaled by many of the male orators who traveled the reform lecture circuit.

From New York, the Grimkes went on to New Jersey. Back again in New York, this time in Poughkeepsie, the sisters spoke for the first time to a mixed-gender audience. Although skeptics had warned that two women speaking in public on political issues would damage the already controversial anti-slavery movement, the Grimkes’ first tour was widely regarded as successful. By May, the sisters were prominent figures at the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, held in New York City in 1837. Two weeks after the convention ended, they were off to Boston to begin an exhausting speaking tour of New England. There, on June 21, 1837, the sisters again addressed a mixed audience of women and men, this one far larger than the audience in Poughkeepsie. From that evening on, there were no gender restrictions for their talks.

“It is wonderful,” Angelina wrote, “how the way has been opened for us to address mixed audiences.” But opposition to women in the public sphere had not vanished. Repeatedly, Angelina found herself forced to defend a woman’s right to speak on a political issue. Each time she countered criticism by pointing out that women were citizens and had civic duties as serious as men’s. Turning, as she often did, to the Bible, she cited the active role of women in civic and religious affairs in the text. However, many New Englanders were not convinced. On July 17, in Amesbury, Massachusetts, two young men challenged Angelina to a debate over slavery and over

women’s right to a public voice. It was the first public debate of this type between a man and a woman. An eyewitness described Angelina as “calm, modest, and dignified in her manner” and declared that she had “with the utmost ease brushed away the cobwebs, which her puny antagonist had thrown her way.”

Angelina and Sarah not only spoke but wrote about slavery and about the rights—and responsibilities—of women. Even before Angelina received the invitation to become an anti-slavery agent, she had written an *Appeal to the Christian Women of the Southern States*, calling on her old friends and acquaintances in South Carolina to become active participants in the movement to end slavery. “I know you do not make the laws,” she wrote, “but I also know that you are the wives and mothers, the sisters and daughters of those who do.” She advised them to read on the subject, to pray over it, to speak on it, and finally to act on it. It was advice that echoed her own odyssey to abolition. When copies of the *Appeal* reached Charleston, the local police warned Mary Smith Grimke that her daughter would be imprisoned if she ever set foot in the city of her birth again. Angelina addressed her next major publication to the women and men of the North, especially those like the educator Catherine Beecher who advocated colonization as the solution to the racial problems of the country. In *Letters to Catherine Beecher*, Angelina rejected what she called the exile of African Americans and accused those who embraced colonization of racism. Black Americans were entitled to “every privilege, social, civil and religious” that white Americans enjoyed. With passion Angelina declared that she was “trying to talk down, and write down, and live down” the prejudice that stood in the way of true equality. It was this frontal attack on racial prejudice that marked Angelina Grimke as far more radical than most of the nation’s abolitionists. Although Sarah was a poor public speaker—unlike Angelina, who mesmerized audiences—she was Angelina’s equal when it came to the written word. In July 1837, the first of Sarah’s remarkable “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes” appeared in the *New England Spectator*, with its simple but powerful demand: “All I ask our brethren is, that they will take their feet from off our necks, and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God designed us to occupy.” In combination with the sisters’ abolitionist activity, this feminist tract galvanized the opposition. Before the month was over, the Congregational General Association had approved and issued a “Pastoral Letter” that denounced women who transgressed the boundaries of their “proper sphere.” Despite the letter, New England crowds flocked to hear the Grimkes throughout August, September, and October, and the sisters kept up a grueling pace, sometimes speaking at six meetings a week.

By the end of the fall, Angelina was gravely ill, weakened by emotional as well as physical fatigue. But on February 21, 1838, she had recovered enough to make history once again, becoming the first woman to speak before a legislative body in the United States. “I stand before you,” she told the members of a committee of the Massachusetts legislature as well as a crowd of enemies and supporters in the galleries, “on behalf of the 20,000 women of Massachusetts whose names are enrolled on petitions [which] relate to the great and solemn subject of slavery.” And, as she had so many times before, Angelina pleaded the cause of the African American, describing the cruelty she had seen with her own eyes in her native South and the racial prejudice she saw around her in the North.

Throughout the months of her work with the anti-slavery society Angelina had come to know the idiosyncratic and dynamic Theodore Weld, the abolitionist leader known as “the most mobbed man in America.” On Monday, May 14, 1838, Weld and Grimke married. These two activists saw their union as a coming together “not merely nor mainly nor at all comparatively TO ENJOY, but together to do and dare, together to toil and testify and suffer.” Two days after their wedding, Angelina and Theodore attended the anti-slavery convention in Philadelphia. Feelings ran high in the city as rumors spread of whites and blacks parading arm in arm down city streets, and by the first evening

of the event, a hostile crowd had gathered outside the convention hall. Sounds of objects being thrown against the walls reverberated inside. But Angelina Grimke rose to speak out against slavery. “I have seen it! I have seen it!” she told her audience. “I know it has horrors that can never be described.” Stones hit the windows, but Angelina continued. For an hour more, she held the audience’s rapt attention for the last public speech she would give. The next morning, an angry mob again surrounded the hall, and that evening, set fire to the building, ransacked the anti-slavery offices inside, and destroyed all records and books that were found.

Angelina Grimke’s career as an anti-slavery speaker ended that night in Philadelphia. But she and Theodore continued to write, producing *American Slavery As It Is* in 1839, a documentary account of the evils of the Southern labor system. Over the next few decades, the Grimke sisters and Weld would earn a modest living as teachers, often in schools that Weld established. All three kept abreast of political developments and attended anti-slavery meetings. When the Civil War came, Angelina strongly supported the Union effort. She had hoped for a peaceful means of freeing the enslaved but had come to accept the reality that force was needed.

Sarah Grimke died at the age of 81 in December of 1873. Angelina, who had been paralyzed for several years because of strokes, died on October 26, 1879. Theodore Weld survived until 1895. All three had lived to see the end of slavery and the rise of a women’s rights movement. In 1863, Angelina had written: “I want to be identified with the negro; until he gets his rights, we shall never have ours.” Over her lifetime her work had been guided by a vision that both racial and gender equality would one day be realities. Those of us who study the abolition of slavery and the winning of the suffrage for women recognize her role in achieving both.

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