

Emancipation in the North

Background Information

Freedom & Emancipation

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Objections to slavery existed in the early colonial period. But opposition to slavery did not develop into an organized effort until the age of the Revolutionary War. As colonists demanded the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, they were forced to question and come to terms with the hypocrisy of slaveholding in their emergent free nation. Slaves also recognized the paradox of living in a country busy promoting fundamental rights while simultaneously holding blacks in bondage. Many of them used this moment of uncertainty to secure freedom. When the British forces called upon slaves to join their ranks and promised them freedom in return, black men enlisted. When the Colonial army made the same offer, black men joined their lines as well. Others, men and women, petitioned the courts for freedom, making their arguments on the same philosophical grounds that the patriots used to validate the war.

The Declaration of Independence not only declared the colonies free of Britain, but it also helped to inspire Vermont to abolish slavery in its 1777 state constitution. By 1804, all Northern states had voted to abolish the institution of slavery within their borders. In most of these states, however, abolition was not immediate. Instead, gradual emancipation laws set deadlines by which all slaves would be freed, releasing individuals as they reached a certain age or the end of a certain work period. This situation left some African Americans lingering in bonded servitude. Pennsylvania passed its Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in 1780. Yet, as late as 1850, the federal census recorded that there were still hundreds of young blacks in Pennsylvania, who would remain enslaved until their 28th birthdays.

As they were emancipated in the first half of the nineteenth century, African Americans in the Northern states began to shape their lives as free people. They changed the names that had been given to them as slaves, they sought out educational opportunities, they founded institutions to provide for their spiritual and physical needs, and they formed communities that provided social support as well as the opportunity for cultural growth. Moreover, many of these African Americans joined or established societies dedicated to freeing those blacks that remained enslaved in other parts of the country. Although the abolitionists, both black and white, were not directly responsible for ending the U.S. system of slavery, their support of the Underground Railroad helped thousands to escape to freedom and their vociferousness helped to define Northern attitudes toward slavery.

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