“REVOLUTIONIZING THE PUBLIC SENTIMENT OF THE COUNTRY”:
THE ABOLITIONIST POSTAL CAMPAIGN OF 1835 AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF
THE AMERICAN PUBLIC SPHERE

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ABSTRACT

In the late spring of 1835, the American Anti-Slavery Society, an abolitionist organization based in New York City, decided to launch a national pamphlet campaign to raise publicity and awareness about their cause. Over the course of the summer of that year, the AASS circulated hundreds of thousands of antislavery newspapers and pamphlets via the federal postal system. What sounds like a harmless junk mail campaign to modern ears was to contemporaries shocking strategy. A massive nation-wide reaction erupted that fall, and the debates that followed about slavery and abolitionism drew unprecedented numbers of Americans into a transformative mass conversation. This thesis examines the abolitionist mail campaign of 1835 as a moment of national crisis and transformation. The crisis reflected and highlighted the ways in which American society was changing as it transitioned from the Early Republic period to the antebellum era.

Abolitionism was a new force in American society in the 1830s, out to change (or terrorize, depending on one's perspective) the nation. Religiously-motivated, reform-minded, and dedicated to the cause until their deaths, the abolitionists challenged Americans' conception of the nation, the "sin of slavery," and their role in mediating the two. The American Anti-Slavery Society in particular represented a paradigm shift within the larger antislavery movement. Their ultraist nature, commitment to the pursuit of public opinion, middle-class and business-oriented background, and national aspirations set them apart from other groups. Their decision to pursue a postal campaign demonstrated their understanding of the ways the United States was changing socially, economically, and politically in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The national reaction to the mail demonstrated the extent to which Southern slaveholders' interests dominated the country. The specific complaints they voiced against the AASS show that the abolitionists' behavior was just as important an affront to Southern values as the content of their appeals. But Southerners were not the only ones to react to the mail campaign; as Northerners expressed their opinions as well, the mail campaign became a truly national issue. At the same time as the participants in this national conversation expanded, so did the scope of their discourse. In the fall of 1835 and onward, Americans raised issues of censorship, civil liberties, social order, civic participation, privacy, and federalism and states' rights in explicit reference to slavery.

Using Jürgen Habermas's theory of public and private spheres as a frame for analysis, I look at the ways these debates changed the constitution and character of the American public sphere. The mail campaign politicized Americans, men and women, black and white, North and South. It drew new participants into the national discourse, shined a light on their positions on "the slave question," and forced them to harden and articulate their opinions in a public forum. Mass participation in these debates marked the emergence of new publics explicitly defined by slavery, which voiced a spectrum of opinions on the issue. The mail campaign also opened up new discursive spaces for slavery and became an umbrella encompassing all the big issues of antebellum society. The introduction of slavery into the public domain had irreversibly changed the country on social and political levels.
To Mom and Dad, for making this all possible

To all my teachers who have ever pushed me to be my best, but especially to Professor Saler, for opening my eyes to the wonderful world of theory and for believing that I could conquer Habermas

And to the Beatles, whose rendition of “Please Mister Postman” got me thinking about the mail in the first place
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INTRODUCTION

The editors of the Richmond Whig released an article called “ABOLITION OUTRAGE. A Strong Case for Southern Action” in early September 1835. The article opened:

It appears by a statement in the Lowell Times, that a meeting opposed to the Abolitionists was held in that town on the 22d ult., the proceedings of which were interrupted by ‘hisses, scrapings, coughings, and yells,’ producing such a ‘scene of confusion’ and ‘disorder,’ that the meeting had to adjourn without accomplishing the object for which it was convened.1

Why were the citizens of a Massachusetts industrial town meeting about slavery and abolitionism, and why were the editors of the Richmond Whig concerned about this assembly?

“Lowell is not an obscure and insignificant village, but an extensive manufacturing town,” the article continued.

Thus the startling fact appears, that the Abolitionists have made such progress, that in such a town as Lowell, they have not only a Society and a Press to aid them in their seditious and traitorous agitating measures. [...] They have acquired such an influence, made so many converts, and infused into them such a fanatical and intolerant spirit, that an Anti-Abolition meeting is not permitted to be held there! — not simply voted down, but put down in the violent, outrageous and disgraceful manner described! Nothing can be plead in justification or extenuation of such conduct. 2

The “fanatical” abolitionists were, in some unspecified way, forcing on the South “a lighted match, that would produce havoc and destruction,”3 and that destruction seems to have spread even to Massachusetts. Despite this deeply-described scene of violence and chaos, these journalists understood that abolitionism was still weak and unpopular. Nonetheless, they worried that its influence might be spreading, especially in the expanding rural towns of the North:

We are still told that they are few, and our friends many, at the North. It is doubtless so, in the large commercial cities, with which we have extensive

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
dealings, and whose principal inhabitants are intelligent and attached to us by interest. But is it so in the interior? It is to be hoped it is.\textsuperscript{4}

Rather than sit passive and let their abolitionist enemies gain influence, the Whig editors urged their Southern readers to act up and defend their interests:

But the proceedings at Lowell, and other circumstances, create a doubt of the ability of our friends there being able to restrain the Fanatics without action on the part of the South. And that action can be effectual only as a preventive—to intimidate the agitators, and urge our friends to take immediate steps to restrain them, before they attain the ascendancy, and have it in their powers to put opposition at defiance. Now is the time, therefore, for the South to act with effect.\textsuperscript{5}

And the \textit{Richmond Whig} proposed a method of retaliation that would hit the offending town where it hurt them most: “It is in the South that the manufacturers of Lowell find the chief and best markets for their goods. The Southerners have only to cease purchasing them, and Lowell will wither, or be forced to expel the Abolitionists.”\textsuperscript{6} Such large-scale collective action could bring about real, tangible changes.

The editors did not believe they were dealing with just any old quotidian antislavery challenge: “They heed not our resolutions, our appeals, and threats—they must feel our ACTION, before any check can be given to them—and if they are not immediately checked, it is to be feared that they may ere long be able to put down, as they have done in Lowell, all opposition north of the Delaware.”\textsuperscript{7} “Though God forbid it!” the editors added, in outrage.\textsuperscript{8} The article closed with a clear threat: “The Times, containing the account of the proceedings at the

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
Lowell meeting, will be forthwith handed to the Committee of Vigilance—some extracts from it follow. VIGILANCE."

What forces were at work here to provoke such violence in Massachusetts, and worry Southern Whigs in Virginia? How could civic associations, abolitionism, mob violence, town meetings, manufacturing, national trade, rural towns, sectional antagonism, critiques of behavior and rationalism, and vigilance committees all make into one, rather short, editorial in 1835? And why doesn't the word "slavery" appear even once in this editorial which is clearly in favor of the institution?

In the late spring of 1835, abolitionists, businessmen, and brothers Arthur and Lewis Tappan decided to launch a national pamphlet campaign to raise publicity and awareness about abolitionism. Their organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society, was a relatively young, naïve, and enthusiastic society committed to immediate abolition, moral suasion, and shock and awe tactics. Over the course of the summer of that year, the AASS circulated hundreds of thousands of antislavery newspapers and pamphlets via the federal postal system. No one could have predicted the massive nation-wide reaction that erupted that fall: villages, towns, and cities across the country, South and North, spoke out in response to the abolitionist mail campaign in town meetings attended by thousands of Americans. Newspaper and pamphlet publishing exploded, denouncing the abolitionists and their actions. Along the way, these national debates conducted in the press raised issues of censorship, civil liberties, social order, civic participation, and privacy, resulting in a fundamental change in the composition and character of the American public sphere. Relegated to a footnote in history or a lighthearted story illustrating antebellum sectionalism, the abolitionist mail campaign of 1835 was, in fact, an entirely new phenomenon in Jacksonian America, and the debates it raised reflected and highlighted the ways in which

9 Ibid.
American society was changing as it transitioned from the Early Republic period to the antebellum era. On a more fundamental level, these attending debates set the wheels in motion for a paradigm shift in the constitution and character of the American public sphere.

This study, thus, examines the abolitionist postal campaign of 1835 as a moment of national crisis and transformation. This event is clearly an important part of the study of abolitionism, sectionalism, and the hardening of Northern and Southern values and social identities in Jacksonian America, but it has been largely ignored by most existing scholarship. This project brings together well-established themes of American history in a new way around the postal campaign, drawing mainly on two fields: Jacksonian America and the study of slavery. In short, this project combines and develops ideas about the formation of a new national community, the role of the postal system, abolitionism, proslavery ideology, and women’s history with Jürgen Habermas’s theory of public and private spheres in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

The first section examines how abolitionism in the 1830s fit within the rising reform impulse in American society, and how the American Anti-Slavery Society was a paradigm shift within abolitionism. The Tappans capitalized on emerging trends in Jacksonian society in unexpected and highly effective ways in the mail campaign, to the surprise, intrigue, and disgust of the wider public. The second section traces public reactions to the campaign and the national dialogue surrounding it. Beginning in the South, I will look at town meetings and pick apart why the South found the campaign so offensive. Next, I will study the evolution of the nation’s reaction, and the ways new Constitutional issues were raised and incorporated into the debate. The third section presents the long-term implications of the campaign and the ways it transformed the public spheres of the North, South, and the country as a whole. Using
Habermas's theory as a framework for analysis, I will look at the changing ways Americans came to participate in their national community. Habermas's theory of the formation and character of the bourgeois public sphere provides a useful lens to understand the new voices, spaces, values, and discourses surrounding slavery in the public sphere.

It was no mere overstatement that the Richmond Whig chose to title this editorial "ABOLITION OUTRAGE," all in capitals. The mail campaign aroused passions (and even physical violence) around the country, and it rocketed slavery and abolitionism to the forefront of Americans' consciousness. Contemporaries understood the mail campaign as a game-changing phenomenon in terms of behavior, interactions, and the role slavery could and should play in American public life. This project aims to show how this oft-forgotten crisis left its mark on American political debates and the shape of the nation's public spaces.
THE ABOLITIONISTS AS INSTIGATORS

On the 4th of December, 1833, a group of radical abolitionists met in Philadelphia with the aim of, for the first time, organizing a national antislavery association. Their convention constituted the first official meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society.\(^{10}\)

At this meeting the society’s members drafted a declaration of sentiments and a constitution that reflected their motivations and goals. Led by the fiery William Lloyd Garrison, the AASS declared, “We have met together for the achievement of an enterprise, without which that of our fathers is incomplete; and which, for its magnitude, solemnity, and probable results upon the destiny of the world, as far transcends theirs, as moral truth does physical force.”\(^{11}\) More so than in the American Revolution, whose legacy the abolitionists invoked, the “destiny of the world” and the souls of all Americans were at stake in the battle against slavery. They attached a moral urgency to their work that raised it above any other struggle for liberty: “Their grievances, great as they were, were trifling in comparison with the wrongs and sufferings of those for whom we plead.”\(^{12}\)

It would be no understatement to say that the men who met in Philadelphia believed themselves to be acting out the will of God. White Americans drawn to the antislavery cause were most often deeply religious and committed evangelists. “Our trust for victory is solely in GOD. We may be personally defeated, but our principles never. TRUTH, JUSTICE, REASON, HUMANITY, must and will gloriously triumph. Already a host is coming up to the help of the

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\(^{10}\) American Anti-Slavery Society, *The declaration of sentiments and constitution of the American Anti-slavery Society: together with all those parts of the Constitution of the United States which are supposed to have any relation to slavery* (New York: The American Anti-Slavery Society, 1833), 2.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 3.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 3.
Lord against the mighty, and the prospect before us is full of encouragement.”

Linked to such a holy cause, the abolitionists’ work required a new kind of strategy: moral suasion.

Their measures were physical resistance—the marshaling in arms—the hostile array—the mortal encounter. Ours shall be such only as the opposition of moral purity to moral corruption—the destruction of error by the potency of truth—the overthrow of prejudice by the power of love—and the abolition of slavery by the spirit of repentance.

“We shall spare no exertions nor means to bring the whole nation to speedy repentance,” they promised. Part mission statement, part to-do list, and part threat to slaveholders everywhere, the AASS detailed the tactics they would employ:

- We shall organize Anti-Slavery Societies, if possible, in every city, town and village, in our land.
- We shall send forth agents to lift up the voice of remonstrance, of warning, of entreaty, and rebuke.
- We shall circulate, unsparingly and extensively, anti-slavery tracts and periodicals.
- We shall enlist the pulpit and the press in the cause of the suffering and the dumb.
- We shall aim at a purification of the churches from all participation in the guilt of slavery.
- We shall encourage the labor of freemen rather than that of slaves, by giving a preference to their productions.

The American Anti-Slavery Society met for the first time in 1833; did they know at this founding moment that their pledge to “circulate, unsparingly and extensively, anti-slavery tracts and periodicals,” wedged in the middle of a long list of actions, would rock the country two years later? Abolitionism was just one of many benevolent causes clamoring for the attention of Americans in the 1830s, but it was abolitionism that was the most controversial, public, and divisive. The members of the American Anti-Slavery Society had much in common with other radical reforming pioneers in terms of socio-economic background, religious conviction, and

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13 Ibid., 6.
14 Ibid., 3.
15 Ibid., 6.
16 Ibid., 6.
inclination for social reform, but their organization represented a fundamental paradigm shift within the antislavery movement and benevolent work at large. The AASS combined ultraism and the pursuit of popular opinion with middle class reform tendencies, financial resources, and national aspirations to create a new kind of reform institution. Their canny manipulation of contemporary Jacksonian-era social changes and material resources yielded a mail campaign that was uniquely qualified to make a scene.

*The Religious Roots of Radical Antislavery Reform*

The defining characteristic of the reformers of the Jacksonian Age was that they "[applied] religious imagination and passion to issues that most Americans considered worldly"[17]—everything from charity, drinking, and prisons to women's rights and slavery. This turn to religion was part of a wider social obsession with religion—the Second Great Awakening. "The religious revivals known collectively as the Second Great Awakening reflected a radical change in American religion," writes historian Lori D. Ginzberg.

"Characterized by dramatic individual conversions in a group setting, the revival experience transformed the lives of countless Americans—and, along the way, changed the way Americans thought of themselves, of their national mission, and of God's (and their own) role in leading the world to a golden age."[18] According to historian Robert Abzug, three conditions at the birth of America set the stage for the country's collective spiritual upheaval: the separation of Church and state and religious toleration established by the Constitution; the post-Revolution battle over the definition of "America" as a nation and an idea; and the commercial-industrial economic

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transformation of the market. These conditions led to a “free atmosphere for religious speculation” that led to a proliferation of new religious sects, beliefs, and practices.

The United States—its culture, economy, and social and geographic space—was changing at breakneck pace in the first half of the nineteenth Century, terrifying contemporaries. To many Americans, these changes and uncertainties set their moral compasses off kilter. “For a great number of middle- and upper-class Americans, the anxiety about the nation’s moral standing demanded a religious response. Torn between optimism and fear, Americans turned to religion in numbers and intensity that have not been surpassed before or since.” Religious belief shaped reformers’ understanding of the individual, society, and cosmos. As Americans re-imagined the origin and structure of their universe and America’s role in this metahistory, “social, economic, and personal issues came alive within the reform cosmology. It constituted a broad sacralization of the world, where sacred and profane were of a piece.” Spiritual questioning thus led many Americans in new directions away from institutionalized churches; messages stressing sin, salvation, moral responsibility, free will and the capacity of ordinary people led logically to radical attempts to reform society in readiness for the Millennium. American radicalism thus was inspired by and evolved in a religious context. Ultraists, as these religious radical reformers were known, “sought not merely social change but spiritual transformation, the moral regeneration of the world.”

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19 Abzug, 5.
20 Ibid., 31.
21 Ginzberg, Women in Antebellum Reform, 5.
22 Abzug, 13.
23 Ibid., 7.
The abolitionists continued in this religious vein. According to Abzug, William Lloyd Garrison’s successes stemmed from his successful re-writing of America’s reform cosmology to emphasize racial equality along with the sin of slavery. In other words, Garrison re-interpreted the United States’ history and destiny as revolving around slavery. As antislavery made more and more sense from an economic and rationalist-Enlightenment point of view, “it took religious zeal to make active antislavery sense out of this new secular environment.”

The first American radical abolitionists began to act up in the early 1830s. They were of diverse backgrounds and temperaments, but almost all of them perceived Negro slavery as the great national sin.

Abolition was an “ultraist brand of moralism” — one that phrased itself in terms of right and wrong, good and evil. But these first abolitionist groups were radical, fragmented, and marginal. Their confrontational messages were designed to make others uncomfortable. Religion was not just a motivator for early abolitionists, but a weapon wielded against slaveholders and sympathizers.

Abolitionists were not shy about their evangelical convictions and religious motivation. The abolitionists saw themselves as martyrs, modern-day analogues of the Apostles. They were acting out the will of God, however unpopular their cause. “’Never were men called on to die in a holier cause,’ wrote Amos A. Phelps in 1835 as he began his first tour as an abolitionist lecturer. It was far better, he thought, to die ‘as the negro’s plighted friend’ than to ‘sit in silken security, the consentor to & abettor of the manstealer’s sin.’”

Garrison expressed a similar sentiment in a letter to his wife: “With so many high responsibilities resting upon us—exerting

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26 Abzug, 130.
29 Stewart, 46.
so much powerful an influence as we do upon this nation—and about planning and devising ways and means for the speedy redemption of a great multitude of captives—we need the wisdom that is from above." And interestingly, many described their introduction to immediate abolitionism as a conversion akin to a religious experience.

Religious themes dominated early antislavery speeches, pamphlets, and editorials. Slavery was always the "national sin," inconsistent with God's creation and Christ's doctrine of love. With emancipation would come redemption and salvation for the entire nation. In her landmark book *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, Lydia Maria Child declared, "The plain truth is, the continuation of this system is a sin, and the sin rests on us." David Walker, a free black Bostonian wrote in *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* that blacks, just like whites, are God's children and "men, notwithstanding our improminent noses and woolly heads, and believe that we feel for our fathers, mothers, wives and children, as well as the whites do for theirs." Like many others, Walker invoked the Bible in his work; he relayed the story of the Jews' slavery in Egypt as a metaphor for Africans in America, with blacks standing in for Jews, white slaveholders as the pharaohs, and God's wrath expected at any moment. Ironically, both antislavery and proslavery authors relied on the Bible as their main source in writing. If one looked at the New Testament as a whole and stressed Christ's overall message of humanity, charity, and love, the Bible seemed to vindicate antislavery arguments. Yet, if one looked at specific passages detailing the curse of Ham, prescribing the proper treatment of slaves, or relating the slaveholding habits of the prophets, the Bible seemed

31 Goodman, 37, and Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform*, 8, 64.
34 Ibid., 10-11.
to defend the institution. Operating in such a religious environment as Second Great
Awakening-era United States, Biblical evidence was the most potent and persuasive argument
one could provide.

But antislavery, and especially abolitionism, went beyond other reform movements that
prescribed specific actions. Abolitionism required a revolution not only in the ways one lived
one's life, but in one's attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. What set abolitionism apart, aside
from its immediatist demands, was its stress on racial equality and eliminating prejudice. Unlike
the American Colonization Society (an older antislavery organization), which promoted
colonization because its white members saw blacks as inherently inferior, the abolitionists
believed emancipated blacks could be, and should be, incorporated into free white society. They
attacked Southerners for supporting slavery, but spared no words for the Northerners whose
prejudice kept them from acting on behalf of suffering blacks:

Let us not flatter ourselves that we are in reality any better than our brethren of
the South. Thanks to our soil and climate, and the early exertions of the Quakers,
the form of slavery does not exist among us; but the very spirit of the hateful and
mischievous thing is here in all its strength.36

And at the center of the abolitionists' mission was the humanitarian impulse to help those who
had been freed. Walker called for enlightened blacks to help each other:

Men of colour, who are also of sense, for you particularly is my APPEAL
designed. Our most ignorant brethren are not able to penetrate its value. I call
upon you therefore to cast your eyes upon the wretchedness of your brethren, and
do your utmost to enlighten them—go to work and enlighten your brethren!—
Let the Lord see you doing what you can to rescue them and yourselves from
degradation.37

But it was not only black abolitionists who called for aid to the emancipated; white abolitionists,
especially in the Boston area, organized schools and promoted literacy and Bible societies to lift

35 Goodman, 25.
36 Child, 186.
37 Walker, 30.
up free blacks towards racial equality. Both these missions, to eradicate prejudice and promote humanitarianism, linked back to the abolitionists’ original religious vision: to treat all equally and with kindness, and to eliminate sin.

The abolitionists were not afraid to be confrontational, inflammatory, and offensive in their rhetoric—even before their actions in the mail campaign were characterized as such. Garrison’s famous first editorial for *The Liberator* embodied his passionate attitude: “I am in earnest, I will not equivocate, I will not excuse, I will not retreat a single inch, and I will be heard.” 38 Many abolitionists focused on the hypocrisies intrinsic to American slavery and spared no one in their condemnations of the system. “Slavery is so inconsistent with free institutions,” wrote Child, “and the spirit of liberty is so contagious under such institutions, that the system must either be given up, or sustained by laws outrageously severe.” 39 The abolitionists saw themselves as the ultimate patriots, ensuring the legacy of the Revolution. Garrison explained his motivations in a letter to the editor of the Newburyport *Herald*:

> My ‘stubbornness’ and ‘dogmaticalness’ consist in ardently cherishing, and fearlessly avowing, the following notions: -- That ‘all men are born equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights’—and consequently, that a slave-holder or a slave-abettor is neither a true patriot, a good citizen, nor an honest man, in all his transactions and relations, and that slavery is a reproach and a curse upon our nation. 40

Because nineteenth century Americans saw their country as the pinnacle of enlightened Christianity, American slavery was the worst system in history. Walker wrote of his hypocrisy, My beloved brethren—[…] all the inhabitants of the earth, (except however, the sons of Africa) are called men, and of course are, and ought to be free. But we, (coloured people) and our children are brutes!! and of course are, and ought to be SLAVES to the American people and their children forever!! […] we (coloured people of these United States of America) are the most wretched, degraded and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began, and that the white

39 Child, 70.
40 Garrison, 100.
Americans having reduced us to the wretched state of slavery, treat us in a condition more cruel (they being an enlightened and Christian people,) than any heathen nation did any people whom it had reduced to our condition.41

Garrison even went so far as to condemn the Constitution as “a covenant with death, and an agreement with hell”42 for allowing slavery to thrive. And in line with these other extremist words, some abolitionists condoned (and even encouraged) rebellion on the part of slaves.

Given that their words were so strong and their arguments consistent across their many publications, why did these abolitionists fail to enact any changes? Until 1835, American antislavery was fragmented and heterogeneous; pockets of activity were isolated from each other by space and ideology. Most antislavery activity was local and decentralized; even where antislavery societies did exist to bring neighbors together, they had a limited spatial range and there was little communication between groups—Boston was separate from Ohio was separate from Western New York was separate from Pennsylvania. Lack of unity prevented these groups from mobilizing. And on the whole these early protesters were too radical for contemporary society and easily marginalized. Their messages alienated the rest of America, attacking the very foundations of society. Northerners were not ready to accept responsibility for their tacit support for and gain from the South’s system, nor were they ready to own up to their prejudices and accept free blacks as their equals. Anti-antislavery sentiment often turned violent. In the first third of the nineteenth century, “rioting had become a widely accepted method of addressing society’s burgeoning religious, ethnic, political, and class tensions,”43 and mobs targeted local antislavery meetings and newspaper editors across the North. “In a few instances, mob violence

41 Walker, 9.
43 Stewart, 65.
was spontaneous, but the far more typical anti-abolitionist riot was planned in advance and led by the local elites, "historian James Brewer Stewart notes. Even before Garrison and the Tappans had to worry about kidnapping and assassination attempts threatened by Southerners for their mail campaign, they had to worry about broken windows, fires, and intimidation. Early abolitionists were idealistic but unprepared, or unwilling, to act on their goals. It was not until the formation of a national society that abolitionism approached anything resembling a coherent movement.

The American Anti-Slavery Society

That official institution came in the form of the American Anti-Slavery Society, whose inauguration by an antislavery convention in Philadelphia in December, 1833 was described earlier. Eschewing gradualist means like colonization, which they dismissed as racist and doomed to failure, the AASS was uncompromising in its demands for immediate emancipation. Not just the society's message, but its membership, was radical for the time: "Racially mixed and eager to attract the assistance of women, the American Anti-Slavery Society was controlled at its inception by talented and aggressive white men who combined religious zeal with aspirations as editors, businessmen, clerics, and philanthropists." The AASS represented a paradigm shift within abolitionism and reform work at large. It was characterized by four features that differentiated it from both earlier individual abolitionist action and other reform institutions.

The members of the AASS were unabashedly ultraist. In the words of their Declaration of sentiments, they aimed their work to bring "whole nation to speedy repentance." They saw slavery as a sin and were unwilling to compromise when it came to Americans' souls and

44 Stewart, 72.
45 Goodman, 65.
46 Stewart, 52.
salvation. Ginzberg says of evangelicalism-inspired reform, “Here was a religious impulse that demanded far more than social tinkering.” The AASS did not just want to free a few slaves; they wanted to transform the entire United States economically and spiritually.

Secondly, the AASS understood in a way that few other groups of the time did, that in order to gain supporters, they needed to court public opinion at large, not just individuals’ consciences. “Public opinion” was accepted as the first and final word on most subjects of the day in Jacksonian America. “The great power of public opinion is universally admitted,” began an editorial titled “Public Opinion” in the *Alabama Intelligencer & States Rights Expositor:*

> Public opinion has its influence here also: we admit generally received positions because they are generally received, and we would not be thought ignorant of what seems to be generally known. [...] How important it is that public opinion should be sound and healthy! If it be not so, how corrupting must its influence, how cumulative the evils of its production!49

Americans in the Jacksonian era understood public opinion as “collective wisdom,” and the AASS believed that if they could shift this popular understanding far enough, they could engender real change and achieve immediate emancipation quickly and easily. Their attempts at moral suasion were aimed not just at individuals, but the “whole nation.” They reached for converts in a new way; as they put it in the *Second annual report:*

> We want that those who see the evils of slavery, should feel on the subject; that those who feel a little should feel deeply; that those whose feelings, though deep, be divorced from action, should act. They must admit, at once, that slavery is a crime against God and man, that it is a true and absolute SIN. No man can deny this.50

The leadership of the AASS had faith that by appealing to those who could see the evils of slavery, they could convince them to feel its evil, and feel it deeply, and then act on those

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feelings. Their appeal to public opinion was more astute, emotional, and physical than other contemporary groups.

Thirdly, the AASS was also a thoroughly middle-class institution, linked more to middle-class reform than martyrdom. Ginzberg argues that in antebellum America, reform was a way to mark "membership in the Protestant middle class," and now abolitionism could count in that model. Unlike impoverished, martyr-like abolitionists like Garrison, the AASS had significant financial resources from businessmen backers like Arthur and Lewis Tappan. These men brought their business interests and middle class way of doing things to the antislavery cause. Their emphasis on fundraising, efficiency, internal organization, and a focus on "profit" increased the efficacy of their moral suasion efforts. Additionally, middle-class membership brought an element of respectability and acceptability that was missing from earlier marginal antislavery groups like the Quakers.

Finally, unlike the fragmented antislavery groups that came before, the AASS had decidedly national aspirations. Not only did they call themselves the American Anti-Slavery Society, calling out for a national membership; they also attempted to reach out to the nation as a whole. In their eyes, all Americans were responsible for slavery and had to be held accountable for its sins. The AASS operated in an increasingly interconnected world linked by the postal system, the press, and a new identity of "American." Their goals and methods reflected that national vision.

For its first few years, the AASS faced significant organizational and ideological obstacles. The society's publications were few, uncontroversial, and easily ignored; it was constantly short of money; and its leadership constantly disagreed over the direction of the

51 Ginzberg, Women in Antebellum Reform, 2.
movement—not to mention that few Americans had even heard of their society,\textsuperscript{53} and those who did strongly objected. Anti-abolitionist mob hysteria plagued the AASS from its inaugural meeting.\textsuperscript{54} Internal struggles between the AASS’s radical Boston wing, represented by Garrison, and its more moderate New York wing, under the aegis of Arthur and Lewis Tappan, almost tore the movement apart before it could get off the ground: Garrison’s sentimental idealism clashed with Lewis Tappan’s hard-headed realism.\textsuperscript{55}

By the AASS’s Second Annual Meeting in New York on May 12 1835, these problems needed to be addressed. Garrison called for action; he praised groups like the Quakers for their antislavery sentiment, but asked for their cooperation in “bold action.” The executive committee agreed that the coming summer needed to be spent on both practical and symbolic antislavery activities.\textsuperscript{56} With a businessman’s pragmatic sense and access to capital, Lewis Tappan suggested that printing pamphlets might remove the society’s obstacles: “It is obvious to remark, that a proper organization of its friends throughout the country might enable the Society to accomplish a hundred-fold more by the press.”\textsuperscript{57} A pamphlet campaign would attract attention and supporters in the Northern states, raise money for the society, and convince Southern slaveholders of their sinfulness. The minutes of the Second Annual Meeting reiterated their commitment to moral suasion while calling for more direct action. They emphasized the necessity of reforming public sentiment in regards to slavery: “The AASS aims to overthrow slavery by revolutionizing the public sentiment of the country in regard to it; or, in other words,

\textsuperscript{54} Bertram Wyatt-Brown, \textit{Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery} (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1969), 105.
\textsuperscript{55} Wyatt-Brown, \textit{Lewis Tappan...}, 110, 140.
\textsuperscript{56} American Anti-Slavery Society, \textit{Second annual report of the American Anti-slavery Society: with the speeches delivered at the anniversary meeting, held in the city of New-York on the 12th May, 1835, and the minutes of the meetings of the society for business} (New York: Printed by William S. Door, 1835), 32.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 48.
by convincing all of the sinfulness of slavery, and of the duty and safety of its immediate abolition."58 The committee expressed confidence that their publications would gain them followers, noting that immediate emancipation was gaining new supporters North and South every day because "the doctrine reaches the conscience."59

For the first time, the abolitionists were trying to reach the whole country at once. "The campaign was truly national in scope," notes historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown. "The names of over twenty thousand Southerners appeared on the mailing list. At the end of July some one hundred and seventy-five thousand copies of the four periodicals [Emancipator, Anti-Slavery Record, Slave's Friend, and Human Rights] passed through the New York Post Office."60

Financed by the Tappans and put together by Elizur Wright, the AASS's secretary, and R.G. Williams, its publishing agent, the postal campaign galvanized and rededicated members of the AASS to the cause of antislavery.

*The Mail Campaign and Social Change*

Why was a mail campaign such an attractive option to the abolitionists and why did it engender such a passionate national response? The AASS identified and capitalized on contemporary social trends in a way unprecedented in antebellum social reform.

As mentioned above, the men and women who joined the American Anti-Slavery Society were almost all evangelical Christians of the Second Great Awakening and graduates of other radical antebellum reform groups. Their earlier experiences provided a crucial training ground and institutional model for the AASS. As historian Daniel Walker Howe writes, "Americans of this generation experienced widespread direct democracy through the creation, administration, and financing of churches and other voluntary societies. [...] Women, African Americans, and

58 Ibid., 62.
59 Ibid., 65.
60 Wyatt-Brown, "The Abolitionists' Postal Campaign," 229.
newly arrived poor immigrants were all participating in religion, often in leadership roles, before they participated in politics. The churches and other voluntary associations nurtured American democracy. Abolitionists adapted the skills, tactics, and perseverance learned in the temperance, Sunday School, Bible literacy, and prison reform movements.

Culturally, the abolitionists also tapped into powerful changes emerging during Jackson's presidency with the mail campaign. American literary culture experienced a renaissance—or perhaps more aptly, a first-naissance—between 1815 and 1848, as for the first time a uniquely "American" style emerged separate from Europe. Historian David S. Reynolds notes the appearance of a popular culture separate from elite at the time. Especially important was the invention of the "penny press," which revolutionized mass reading. "Penny papers are springing up in all directions. [...] In general, they are 'very good little fellows' conducted with as much talent and more honesty and more independence than the average of the big sheets," began an editorial from the New York Journal of Commerce. Sensationalist stories ruled, grabbing the imagination of readers and feeding their taste for the dramatic. The AASS pamphlets, and their Southern responses, followed the over-the-top formula established by these newspapers.

Another important factor contributing to the possibility of the mail campaign was the rhetoric of Jacksonian Democracy. As the first president to stylize himself as for the "common man," Andrew Jackson's presidency came to be synonymous with "universal white manhood suffrage" and "mass politics." His elections in 1824 and 1828 against John Quincy Adams emphasized the importance of public opinion, partisanship on a national scale, and confrontational campaigning—all things aimed at in the AASS's pamphlet campaign. While

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61 Howe, What Hath..., 166.
64 Reynolds, 241.
Jackson's presidency also stood for the disenfranchisement of women, Indian removal, and slavery, his contemporaries saw Jackson's election as the inclusion of average America in the affairs of Washington—as the true advent of "popular rule" democracy. Jackson's presidency encouraged Americans to see themselves as part of a national community, a belief intrinsic to the AASS's mission statement.

Courting public opinion would not have been possible without what Howe calls the "communications revolution"—"the improvements in printing and paper manufacture [...] and the introduction of steamboats, canals, turnpikes, and railroads" that gave Americans "new opportunities for disseminating ideas." More than any other group, the abolitionists capitalized on these improvements to spread their message. Without steam technology—needed to power the printers producing the pamphlets and the boats carrying them south—the mail campaign could never have taken off.

When coupled with internal improvements—government-sponsored public works projects—the communications revolution had far-reaching influence over the maturing American public. Of particular note is the postal system itself. As detailed in Richard R. John's Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse, "the postal system was far more than the arena within which the action was staged. Rather, in a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle ways, it shaped the public issues that these controversies raised and the social divisions that they spawned."

The Post Office Act of 1792 established the conditions necessary for a modern postal system, and unknowingly, it laid the tracks for the abolitionists' postal campaign 40 years later.

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65 Howe, What Hath..., 4-5.
66 Ibid., 2.
67 Ibid., 7.
The Postal Act subsidized the circulation of newspapers to facilitate the spread of information; it
prevented postal employees from reading and censoring the mail; and it detailed the system's
expansion process to include new territory. Of particular note is the newspaper subsidy; the
early Congress considered access to information a prerequisite for informed citizenship, and
newspapers were the primary way of fostering the exchange of information. As such, this
packet of legislation simultaneously promoted the expansion of the press and of the geography
included in mainstream America. The expanded press—in terms of the number of titles printed
and the tonnage of paper circulated—in turn helped establish the national market and change
political thought; newspapers were the “national marketplace for ideas.” Newspapers re-
printed and featured articles from other publications, giving readers a taste of national ideas and
affairs. They facilitated the communication of ideas between the northwestern territories, small-
town New England, the shipping centers of coastal South Carolina, and the nation's capital all at
once.

Most importantly here, newspapers produced a discursively representational public
sphere, divorcing it from face-to-face interactions and giving rise to what political scientist
Benedict Anderson theorized as an “imagined community.” John writes, “Postal policy [created]
an imagined community in which the government encouraged its far-flung citizenry to
participate directly in the political process through an ongoing discussion of the leading events of
the day.” And this imagined community was not exclusive the way the physical public sphere
was. Race and gender barred huge segments of America's population from participating in the
political public sphere; but anyone could receive mail, even slaves, and thus participate in this

69 Ibid., 31.
70 Ibid., 30.
71 Ibid., 59.
72 Ibid., 112.
literary public sphere of ideas. The expansion of the postal system in the early part of the nineteenth century and the ensuing disembodied public sphere challenged the “conventional assumptions regarding the boundaries of American public life.” The AASS recognized the potential in the postal system for advertising their cause on a national level and attracting new adherents.

Taking the four characteristics of ultraism, popular opinion, middle-class identification, and national aspiration along with these uses of social change into account, the AASS seems to follow closely with Daniel Walker Howe’s depiction of Whig political culture. In The Political Culture of the American Whigs, he concludes that Whig culture outlasted and overshadowed Whig politics. While the second quarter of the nineteenth century is usually referred to as “the age of Jackson,” Howe argues that this era was more clearly marked by Whig values and visions. Values such as “productivity, equanimity, discipline, and improvement” could just as easily describe a middle-class abolitionist organization like the AASS as the Whig party. Like the amorphous Whig party, the AASS believed that material change (economic, industrial, communications) could lead to social progress. Both made moral appeals to shared values, and for both, “the object of [...] didacticism was redemption: to make people better.” In other words, the AASS was a group truly representative of its time in the content of its message, the goals it strove towards, and the means it took to achieve them.

Intent

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73 Ibid., 260.
75 Ibid., 4.
76 Ibid., 9.
77 Ibid., 32.
78 Ibid., 36.
What did the AASS intend to achieve by their postal campaign? In its own words, the AASS published to save the soul of the United States:

Nothing but a revolution in public sentiment in regard to Slavery can preserve our present excellent form of government. To say nothing of the awards of Divine Justice, it is plainly impossible for a pure republican government to subsist long upon a foundation of tyranny. Slavery is the dry rot to all the props that can sustain a good government. The natural tendency of all its influences is to pervert every good institution.\textsuperscript{79}

But it also printed to expose the truth: “Terrible systems of injustice may go forward smoothly, so long as truth can be kept under lock and key.”\textsuperscript{80} The mail campaign was meant to reach the country in a way that a radical individual, like Garrison, acting alone never could. It seems clear that they expected this mass attempt at moral suasion to work better than earlier efforts. “The abolitionists were vaguely aware that their effort might create more publicity than they could handle,”\textsuperscript{81} Bertram Wyatt-Brown notes. However, in no way could the AASS have predicted the volcanic eruption they would trigger.

\textsuperscript{79} American Anti-Slavery Society, \textit{Second annual report...}, 66.
\textsuperscript{81} Wyatt-Brown, “The Abolitionists’ Postal Campaign of 1835,” 229.
On Wednesday, July 29, 1835, the steam packet *Columbia* arrived in Charleston, South Carolina from New York City with the U.S. mail—containing, as Charleston’s postmaster Alfred Huger described it, enough of the AASS’s publications that they “literally filled our office with thousands of Pamphlets and Tracts upon the question on which this community is too Sensitive to admit of any Compromise—The Emancipation of the Southern Slave.”

News this juicy could not be kept secret for long, and word soon spread, such that “the attention of the Whole

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Town was immediately attracted to the P.O."\(^{83}\) "The most respectable men of all parties gather'd about our doors and windows, and in a little time I was formally summoned to give up the 'incendiary publications' which were known to be in my possession,"\(^{84}\) Huger wrote to Samuel L. Gouverneur, New York's postmaster, in a series of letters requesting aid in stopping the circulation of abolitionist mail. Huger, dedicated to the sanctity of the federal mail, refused to hand over the abolitionist pamphlets to angry mobs, instead separating them from the rest of the post and locking them in his office: "I had hoped that when I assumed the responsibility of Separating these productions from the rest of the Mail, (for the Security of the Mail) [...]

everything would have remained quiet and tranquil."\(^{85}\)

But that tranquility was most certainly not attained. "I regret to say that in this expectation I was dis-appointed," he wrote, "and during the Night of Wednesday the P.O. was broken open and the bag containing the Tracts carried off."\(^{86}\) We now know this kidnapping of the mail was more sinister than Huger's telling; a vigilance society known as the Lynch Men, made up of leading Charlestonians, broke into the post office between 10:00 and 11:00 by prying open a window with a crow bar. The men stole the sacks of separated abolitionist mail and left undetected.\(^{87}\)

An editorial in the *Charleston Southern Patriot* published the next day encouraged this behavior: "*Extreme cases require extreme remedies.* It will never do to allow our mails to be laden with these anarchical publications, while our citizens fold their arms and permit the poison to circulate through all the veins and arteries of the South and West."\(^{88}\) The Lynch Men took

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 194.
\(^{84}\) Ibid., 194.
\(^{85}\) Ibid., 195.
\(^{86}\) Ibid., 195.
\(^{88}\) "Charleston: Thursday afternoon," *Charleston Southern Patriot*, July 30, 1835.
such "extreme remedies" into their own hands; they publicly burned the mail that night, along with effigies of three abolitionists, on the Parade Ground at the Citadel in front of a crowd of nearly 2,000 Charlestonians. "For contemporaries familiar with the highly stylized protests that eighteenth-century Charlestonians had organized to publicize their opposition to British tyranny, the public burning was sure to bring to mind the hallowed exploits of the earlier Anglo-American mob." It is clear that Southerners immediately recognized the mail campaign as another essential struggle for their liberty, only this time against a tyrannical North rather than the British crown.

Charleston was the first city to receive the AASS mail, and they were the first to react in such a way, but they were certainly not the last. Through August, September, and October 1835, cities across the South blazed with anti-abolitionism anger. While few other instances of bonfires exist on record, Southerners expressed their outrage in other ways. Town hall meetings, newspaper editorials, and pamphlet publishing mushroomed and initiated a national dialogue about slavery, abolitionism, and what federal and state governments could do about them. This section examines the proceedings and function of these town meetings and counter-publications to find out the role of anti-abolitionism meetings in the public consciousness, and to determine exactly what the South found so offensive about the American Anti-Slavery Society's mail campaign. It then looks at Americans' reactions to the abolitionists on a national scale and the issues at stake in their debates above and beyond the immediate "slave problem" at hand. It examines the political and social dimensions of the abolitionist mail crisis on community, sectional, and national levels.

Town Meetings, Vigilance Societies, and Lynching

89 John, 258.
According to historian Susan Wyly-Jones, “In the South, [...] the postal campaign sparked an unprecedented anti-abolitionist panic whose intensity far exceeded the actual threat.” While the Charleston bonfire dominates modern consciousness about the abolitionist postal campaign and crisis, in actuality this conflagration amounted to only a small part of the South’s reaction to the mail. More important than this expression of strength and fury, the “more formal and deliberate side to Southern protest in 1835” demonstrated the extent to which Southern societies mobilized in reaction to the external abolitionist threat. Foremost among these systematic and institutionalized reactions were town hall meetings, which were publicized and summarized in the newspapers of the day. These meetings served both to bring communities together and to radicalize them against abolitionism.

In his study of public meetings in antebellum North Carolina, historian Alan D. Watson observes that “by mid-nineteenth century America had developed a long-standing tradition of participatory democracy in the form of public gatherings designed to express opinions, air grievances, and undertake desirable causes. [...] Such convocations provided a forum for the declaration and effectuation of public opinion.” By all accounts, the Southern town hall meetings in 1835 about the mail campaign fit this bill. Over one hundred and fifty anti-abolitionism meetings took place between August and December 1835 across the South in almost every slaveholding state. The attendance of these meetings reflected the dominance of white supremacist and proslavery ideology at all levels of society, not just amongst slaveholders: “Led by community elites but attended by whites of all classes, the meetings functioned as

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90 Wyly-Jones, 291.
91 Ibid., 292.
93 As Wyly-Jones’s study cautions, this number only includes those whose proceedings were published in newspapers. It is highly possible that more meetings happened and went undocumented or that such documentation has since been lost.
ritualistic displays of white unity and the communal means of enforcing race control." These meetings thus represent an important expansion in public engagement. It was not just elites who participated in the definition, establishment, and enforcement of community identity and values—through these discussions affirming slavery and denouncing abolitionism, all whites were involved and invested in Southern proslavery ideology.

Most meetings, from their minutes and summaries published in newspapers, seem to follow a set pattern. First, a meeting would be called and advertised in the local newspaper a few days ahead of time. For example, this July 31, 1835 notice in the *Charleston Courier*:

*Public Meeting*—It is suggested that the Intendant of the City should call a Meeting of the Citizens as early as possible, in order that any future proceedings, intended to prevent the further abuse of the public Mail to incendiary purposes, may have the sanction of public and responsible authority. The just excitement now prevailing on the subject should be regulated, to prevent the danger of excess.

As this advertisement indicated, meetings were called to ensure that anti-abolitionist sentiment embodied communal opinion, or "the sanction of public and responsible authority." By publicizing these meetings, it is clear that community leaders wanted *everyone* there. They could just as easily have unilaterally acted in what they saw as the community's best interest, but a show of community-wide unanimity and strength was the key in sending a message to the abolitionists. The mention of the "danger of excess" implies whole community needs to hew to collective standards of moderation and restraint.

Once a meeting came together, its first order of business was to appoint a committee whose duty it would be to draft a statement on the community's behalf. Regardless of the socio-economic makeup of the audience in attendance, the committee drafting resolutions was almost

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94 Wyly-Jones, 293.
95 "Public Meeting," *Charleston Courier*, July 31, 1835.
always made up of wealthy community leaders (and slaveholders). The *Charleston Courier* described the “high character and standing of the gentlemen who compose it [the Committee of 21]” as the reason they were trusted with representing the community’s opinions. Sometimes, as in Charleston, the committee was named at one meeting and then presented their resolutions at another. The *Charleston Mercury* reported on August 11, 1835, “The citizens of Charleston assembled yesterday, in all their strength, at the City Hall; all parties and all classes were there, and united in unanimous adoption and cordial approbation of the Report and Resolutions of the Committee of 21, appointed at the previous [August 3] adjourned meeting.” Other times, as in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, the Committee only “retired a few minutes” before reporting. This suggests that these meetings, especially those that occurred a month or later after the discovery of the abolitionist mail, were not spontaneous but rather a conscious self-fashioning to express quickly established conventional opinions.

These reports were largely similar in form and content across the South. Beginning with a preamble denouncing the abolitionists, their ideas, and their actions, the reports presented communities with a number of anti-abolitionism resolutions. Tuscaloosa’s preamble was a typical example:

> Whereas a number of organized bodies of reckless and infatuated persons of the Eastern and Middle States have raised, and are now raising, funds to strike pamphlets, papers and prints, and to pay agents and emissaries to disseminate them in the Southern States, tending to excite insurrections destructive of the good order of our society, involving consequences shocking to contemplate, in the destruction of property and life, with the accompanying brutalities which have heretofore marked such outrages; and to reason with these enemies of man, is as profitless as it is criminal in us longer to delay energetic and effectual measures, therefore, *Resolved*... 

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96 Wyly-Jones, 296.
100 Ibid.
Like preambles and resolutions around the country, Tuscaloosa labeled the abolitionists “fanatics,” “reckless,” and “infatuated.” This introduction set the tone for the following resolutions: to discuss such issues in public, especially in such a radical and inappropriate way as the abolitionists have attempted, can only invite slave insurrection, untold violence, and the disintegration of society. The safety, order, and survival of proper Southern society depended on stopping the abolitionists and denouncing before they could gain support from slaves or wayward whites.

The number and type of resolutions passed varied from city to city, but first and foremost every community defined slavery as a private and domestic issue. Charleston proclaimed, in perhaps the most reprinted and widely read set of resolutions:

1. Resolved, that we hold it to be an unquestionable truth, that the subject of Slavery as it now exists in the Slave holding states of the Union, is, in all its bearings, A DOMESTIC QUESTION, belonging exclusively to the citizens of those states—that the people of no other state have any right to interfere therewith, in any manner whatsoever—and that such interference is utterly inconsistent with the Federal compact, and cannot be submitted to.  

The citizens of other cities, such as those in Barnwell, South Carolina, were more confrontational:

1st Resolved, That any attempt to interfere with our domestic policy, whether by the Federal Government or by the constituted authorities or the people of other States, would be, and is alike unconstitutional unjust and iniquitous and we proclaim our stern and fixed determination promptly to repel such interference at any and every hazard.

"Domestic," as these resolutions use it, was an especially powerful and descriptive word. In this case, it had a double meaning. The first, from an international politics perspective: these Southern towns were describing their section as "domestic" as opposed to a "foreign" North.

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102 Edmund Bellinger, “A Speech on the Subject of Slavery Delivered 7th Sept’r 1835 at A Public Meeting of the Citizens of Barnwell District, South-Carolina” (Charlestown: Dan J. Dowling, Printer, 1835), 3.
Resolutions like these were designed to separate and polarize the sections of the country. Later, the same word would take on familial, home-like connotations as paternalism gained popularity as a method of slaveholding. This meaning separated the “conjugal family home” of the South from the state bureaucracy. Whichever way it was interpreted, calling slavery “domestic” consolidated the Southern states to stand firm against outsiders.

Other common resolutions invoked the South’s conception of the Constitution and Union as designed to protect the “peculiar institution,” called on Northern sympathies to help put down abolitionism, urged postmasters not to circulate any abolitionist mail that might find its way to their jurisdictions, and offered rewards for the capture or killing of leading abolitionists.

In some cities, resolutions addressed slavery as a substantive moral issue, but more often, they kept to purely political takes on the “slave question” and left morality to the speeches made after the resolutions were (always unanimously) passed. For example, the Barnwell, South Carolina resolutions waver on histrionic and provocative, including such declarations as “That we view with abhorrence and detestation the attempt to deluge our State with Incendiary publications; and that we consider the authors of such attempts no more entitled to the protection of the Laws than the ferocious monster or venomous reptile” and “Earnestly and solemnly do we invoke the intelligent, just and patriotic citizens of those [Northern] States, by the force of public opinion and legal penalties to crush those vile and infamous wretches, whose schemes of rapine and massacre will, if unchecked, inevitably end in the destruction of American

105 “A Public Meeting,” Alabama Intelligencer & States Rights Expositor, August 29, 1835.
106 “Public Meeting in Richmond, (Virginia,) at the Capitol,” Richmond Compiler in Connecticut Courant, August 17, 1835.
107 Bellinger, v.
Liberty”\textsuperscript{108}—declarations that decry the abolitionists’ actions but deal not with slavery itself. Instead, Edmund Bellinger, Jr. (a member of Barnwell’s Committee of 21) delivered an epic defense of slavery \textit{after} the political resolutions passed, a defense that was later published as a thirty-page pamphlet. His speech touched on everything from sectionalism, colonial history, and the Caribbean to paternalism, religion, and Native Americans—themes popular in most conventional proslavery writing of the time.

As part of their resolutions, many communities created vigilance societies to put down local abolitionist action. One of Richmond, Virginia’s resolutions detailed “That a Committee of Vigilance be appointed, whose duty it shall be to use all lawful means to protect the interests of this County and City from the designs of those fanatics and abolitionists, who under the garb of humanity, hypocritically, assumed would deluge our land in blood.”\textsuperscript{109} More professionally organized was the group formed by resolution in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, which:

appointed a Committee of Vigilance, for the County of Tuscaloosa, who, or any thirteen of whom, shall have power to use all means to ferrit out, confine and bring to punishment and person or persons offending in the manner mentioned in the first resolution, by distributing inflammatory papers or pictures using language calculated to excite to insurrectionary movements, or in any other way whatever; and they shall have power to appoint two or more persons in each captain’s beat, in this county to arrest and bring to trial any person suspected of offending against the provisions of these resolutions.\textsuperscript{110}

These groups helped enforce each state’s anti-abolitionism laws; they patrolled neighborhoods,\textsuperscript{111} searched for abolitionists and offered rewards,\textsuperscript{112} interviewed suspicious

\textsuperscript{108} Bellinger, vi.
\textsuperscript{109} “Public Meeting in Richmond, (Virginia,) at the Capitol,” \textit{Richmond Compiler} in \textit{Connecticut Courant}, August 17, 1835.
\textsuperscript{110} “A Public Meeting,” \textit{Alabama Intelligencer & States Rights Expositor}, August 29, 1835.
\textsuperscript{111} “Public Meeting,” \textit{Alabama Intelligencer & States Rights Expositor}, October 3, 1835.
\textsuperscript{112} [Vigilance...], \textit{Charleston Southern Patriot}, August 15, 1835.
persons,\textsuperscript{113} and searched harbors.\textsuperscript{114} The extent of power of each town or region’s committee varied, but they were always taken seriously.

Sometimes these vigilance committees went too far. Newspaper issues over the fall of 1835 were scattered with accounts of “Judge” or “Captain” Lynch visiting communities, adding to the national panic over abolitionism. An untitled editorial from Mississippi declared, “Riots, mobs and Lynch law appear to the rage of the day. [...] Indeed, so popular has mobocracy become that all friends of good order have hardly dared to cast upon it the frown of disapprobation.”\textsuperscript{115} In Lynchburg, Virginia, one article recounted:

four white men from Ohio, bearing the names of Joe Gill, ---Drake, and ---Ross, were arrested and tried before twelve and intelligent men of our county, for endeavoring to persuade several slaves to leave their masters for some free State, with an assurance on their part that they would render them all the necessary aid for the accomplishment of such an attempt.\textsuperscript{116}

The committee sentenced two of these men to thirty-nine whip lashes a piece, and all four were banished from the town. In Kentucky, a former student from Lane Seminary\textsuperscript{117} was “seized by a mob, near his place of residence in Kentucky, and dreadfully whipped, having received thirty-nine lashes on his bare back, so heavily laid on that they nearly cost him his life.”\textsuperscript{118} At the same time, in Nashville a Bible-seller was whipped when the local vigilance society accused him of also distributing abolitionist literature.\textsuperscript{119} Fear of being accused of abolitionist action was a sure motivator for some non-slaveholders to adhere to proslavery ideology. Americans across the

\textsuperscript{113} [Committee; Vigilance; Beats; Regiments], Alabama Intelligencer & States Rights Expositor, September 19, 1835.
\textsuperscript{114} “Charleston: Monday afternoon,” Charleston Southern Patriot, August 10, 1835.
\textsuperscript{115} [Lynch; Mississippi], Macon Weekly Telegraph, August 27, 1835.
\textsuperscript{116} [Untitled], Connecticut Courant, September 29, 1835.
\textsuperscript{117} In 1834, Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio was reorganized by abolitionist Theodore Weld. Students and faculty embraced immediate abolitionism, while the city itself did not. Fearing riots, the Seminary’s trustees tried to force students to disband their recently-created antislavery society; instead, forty students rebelled, left the school, and founded Oberlin College in a nearby town. See Stewart, 59.
\textsuperscript{118} “More Summary Punishments,” Connecticut Courant, September 29, 1835.
\textsuperscript{119} Untitled, New Hampshire Sentinel, August 27, 1835.
nation were aware of the spreading chaos of anti-abolitionism sentiment and expressed dismay, disapproval, and even fear at the spread of passion and violence: “The Missouri question is revived in another shape, and in a highly excited manner. Never before was there a time in which there was so much need for moderation, and seldom when less was displayed.”

Contemporaries felt an immediate fear and urgency about this crisis. “These proceedings have bro’t about a crisis,” an article from the Charleston Southern Patriot opined, “[...] the fatal consequences of which are inseparable even from its continued prosecution, among which, not the least to be lamented, THE CERTAIN DESTRUCTION OF THE UNION.”

Many Americans predicted that the abolitionists would cause disunion and saw the country dissolving before their eyes, amidst all this violence and chaos.

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All in all, these town meetings, more so than the proslavery newspaper and pamphlet publishing occurring simultaneously, served to both bring Southern communities together and to radicalize them. Throughout the crisis engendered by the abolitionist postal campaign, Southerners emphasized unanimity and community consensus. Alfred Huger wrote to his Northern colleague, “Nullifiers and Union men, Jackson men and Clay men, Van Buren men and White men who differ on all other points agree on this.” And the Barnwell resolutions declared, “16th. Resolved, That collectively and individually we do solemnly pledge ourselves to support our common rights and common Interests, whether against Fanatics abroad, or Traitors at home.” An article anticipating the Charleston meeting stated, We hope that the above call will be answered by an assemblage of all classes and parties to the city, that the most imposing and solemn effect may be given to the proceedings. We trust, from the spirit of unanimity by which these proceedings will be pervaded, that an undivided front will be presented to the enemies of social order and domestic peace, in whatever quarter of the Union they dare raise their ill-omened voices or concoct their schemes of anarchy and sedition. The meeting achieved this hoped-for unanimity; its minutes opened with the declaration, “We have never witnessed as imposing an assemblage, combining number, property, intelligence, and respectability, on any occasion whatever, as this meeting exhibited. [...] The Preamble and Resolutions, which, after being read and put separately, were every one unanimously carried.”

122 “Postmaster Huger,” 195.
123 Bellinger, vii
124 [Union; Charleston], Charleston Southern Patriot, August 8, 1835.
Another pamphlet later declared, "On this question the whole South feels and will ACT AS ONE MAN."\textsuperscript{126}

While they brought men of varying socio-economic classes physically together, the meetings exposed and inculcated non-slaveholders with proslavery thought and brought all white men together ideologically, radicalizing them against abolitionism. As Jennifer Rose Mercieca explains, "The slaveholding elite were losing power to non-slaveholders who were ambivalent about the benefits of maintaining slavery"\textsuperscript{127} in the early 1830s. The abolitionist postal campaign presented slaveholders with an opportunity; by demonizing the abolitionist Other and emphasizing community unanimity and obligation, they could subtly intimidate and shame poorer and middle-class whites into going along with, and even promoting, their "peculiar institution." Edmund Bellinger began his speech to the Barnwell meeting by declaring,

\begin{quote}
We are all citizens of South Carolina! We are born and we live not for ourselves alone, but for our Country! And when that Country is endangered, it is the duty—the imperative duty—of each individual, however humble or obscure, to come forward in defence of her rights and interests openly without reserve, and promptly without delay! \textsuperscript{128}
\end{quote}

According to Bellinger’s appeal, all South Carolinians are South Carolinians, regardless of slaveholding status. "However humble or obscure," every South Carolinian was duty-bound to defend South Carolina—and this attack on slavery, the state’s lifeblood, was the most dire of all dangers. Hearing repeated resolutions denouncing abolitionism and the asserting the threat of vigilance committees pressured non-slaveholders to care more about defending slavery and upholding moderate and honorable standards of behavior than self-interest alone would dictate.

\textsuperscript{126} Richard Yeadon, \textit{The amenability of Northern incendiaries as well to Southern as to Northern laws; without prejudice to the right of free discussion; to which is added an inquiry into the lawfulness of slavery, under the Jewish and Christian dispensations; together with other views on the same subject, being a series of essays recently published in the Charleston Courier} (Charleston, S.C.: Printed by T.A. Hayden, 1835), 7.


\textsuperscript{128} Bellinger, 9.
At a time when the gulf between slaveholders and non-slaveholders was ever widening in the South, these meetings brought men of all socio-economic classes together and united them under one common identity as beleaguered victims of Northern attack. These appeals reinforced the growing notion that race transcended class or social standing. "Whiteness" as a marker was more important than property, slaveholding status, or religion.

Why So Offensive?

It was not just the content of the American-Anti Slavery Society’s pamphlets that enraged Southerners and offended their sensibilities; just as problematic, or even more so, were the methods they used to disseminate their literature. The abolitionists did not only break Southern laws; their campaign attacked the South’s aristocratic value system based on personal honor, prestige, and outward appearances, and violated a classical understanding of the public sphere as a place of rational-critical discussion. As such, the AASS’s mail campaign tactics were seen as inappropriate and incredibly rude. Town meeting resolutions, newspaper articles, and anti-abolitionist pamphlets emphasized privacy, manners, and social space along with the expected defenses of slavery, showing that the abolitionists’ behavior in their mail campaign was a major point of contention.

In his pamphlet Remarks upon slavery; occasioned by attempts made to circulate improper publications in the Southern States, William J. Hobby of Georgia laid a hefty charge against the abolitionists, characteristic of the issues Southerners had with the AASS’s tactics:

> It seems somewhat extraordinary, that any set of rational men, in this enlightened age, should be so regardless of the ordinary courtesies of life, as to desire to interrupt the harmony and quiet of an unoffending people, who are legally pursuing their own business, within their own limits, without disposition to interfere with the organization of society in any other section of the country.\(^{129}\)

\(^{129}\) William J. Hobby, Remarks upon slavery; occasioned by attempts made to circulate improper publications in the Southern States (Philadelphia: Printed at the Office of the Gentleman’s Vade Mecum, 1835), 3.
It is clear here that he saw the postal campaign as disrupting the "ordinary courtesies of life" and the "harmony and quiet" of the men of his section—the abolitionists must not be "rational men." While the Southerners were victims, "unoffending people," the AASS were inappropriate aggressors.

Above all, the abolitionists were guilty of forcing discussions of slavery into the public sphere where they did not belong. Southern elites had worried for generations that any discussions of slavery could bring up its deficiencies or evils and weaken its hold; better to not discuss slavery, present a united proslavery front, and maintain the status quo. The Barnwell meeting resolutions began with the assertion that "Your committee deem it alike unnecessary, undignified and improper to enter into discussion in defence of our rights and interests, as connected with the domestic policy and peculiar Institution of the South." An anonymous pamphlet entitled *The South Vindicated from the Treason and Fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionists* described how

We have fallen upon evil times. Men have been found who do not scruple to tear off the seals which our fathers set upon the question of slavery. They have broken open, with reckless hands, this magazine, filled with all that can excite and endanger; and are lighting the torch to apply to its materials of fury and desolation. The consequences are such as might have been anticipated. Distrust and fear, indignation and violence, are abroad in our land. Every fibre of our country is quivering with excitement.

Public debates about slavery threatened the very safety, security, and stability of society.

What was even more problematic in the abolitionist postal campaign was that slavery was made public by *Northerners*—outsiders, "meddlers," "interferers"—those whose lives were unconnected with slavery. As discussed earlier, almost all town meetings began by passing a resolution that established slavery as the personal, domestic concern of the South; any

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130 Bellinger, v.
131 [No author], *The South Vindicated from the Treason and Fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionists* (Philadelphia: H. Manly, 1836), xv.
abolitionist action aimed at emancipating slaves thus constituted an "interference" in the South's peculiar institution and an invasion of its privacy. In his pamphlet, Hobby wrote,

In utter disregard of the principle that the regulation of slavery belongs exclusively to those amongst whom it exists, these officious intermeddlers take upon themselves to pronounce it an evil of serious magnitude, and then assume to themselves a right to remove it, either with, or without the consent of those whose interests are to be affected by their proceedings.132

Exerting their influence where none was wanted, the abolitionists were in effect "trampling upon the rights of the Southern people"133 to regulate their own institutions. The South Vindicated agreed: "The North is not responsible, morally nor politically, for the existence of slavery in this country. It never had, has not now, and never will have, power over this subject."134 Southern values linked responsibility, duty, and power. These outsiders were spreading lies and exaggerations in order to trick supporters. As The South Vindicated argued, "The incendiaries appeal only to the passions; and endeavour, by falsehood and misrepresentation, to mislead and excite the unthinking."135 The AASS's exaggerations and hyperbolic descriptions of the evils of slavery were another way their irrational behavior went too far.

Just as problematic was the medium of the abolitionists' campaign: the U.S. Mail. One town meeting resolved

That the practice resorted to by some of the officers and members of the abolition societies, of loading the U. States mail with incendiary pamphlets, newspapers and publications on the subject of slavery, and attempting through that channel to distribute and circulate them among the blacks in the slaveholding states, is an alarming perversion and abuse of that invaluable medium of communication between the people of different sections of the country.136

132 Hobby, 3.
133 Ibid., 27.
134 South Vindicated, 211.
135 Ibid., xvii.
136 "Meeting at Portland, Maine," Niles' Weekly Register, August 29, 1835.
As *The South Vindicated* declared, "The arteries of the body politic are thus made to disseminate those poisons which are designed to destroy it"—and such behavior was a grave misuse of a federal resource designed to connect and improve the lives of all Americans. Mail was democratic, ordinary, and un-exclusive. To some Southerners, permitting abolitionist mail in the U.S. Postal System, a publicly-controlled institution, was tantamount to the government condoning antislavery. If legislating slavery was a state power, not a federal concern, the federal government had no place aiding one section while mortally offending the other. Mail was a public resource, but slavery was a private problem; the two should not be brought together.

The scale of the abolitionists' campaign was another issue for Southerners. "They pursue their object in violation of the ordinary maxims of moderation or prudence," spat Hobby. "There certainly seems very little in the conduct of the Abolition Societies at the North, to recommend to favourable regard of the inhabitants of this quarter." Abolitionists were derided as "fanatics"—so single-minded and excessive in their beliefs that no reason could reach them. The AASS aimed to "agitate" public opinion towards abolitionism, but it was this agitation that so offended Southerners, who feared "a certain fever in the public mind... an intellectual distemper..." fostered by the campaign. The intemperance of the AASS's behavior, and the excessive panic necessitated in reaction, offended the Southern values of propriety and respectability, and because of geography the abolitionists could not be brought directly to task for the chaos their campaign created. "An incendiary pamphlet performs its office of mischief as effectually when issued under the patronage of twenty, as of twenty thousand persons," declared the "Preamble and Resolutions on the subject of Incendiary Publications" issued by the South.

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137 *South Vindicated*, 174.
138 Hobby, 3.
139 Ibid., 26.
140 [North...], *Charleston Southern Patriot*, August 6, 1835.
Carolina General Assembly. "Its efficacy depends upon its circulation, not upon the weight of authority which supports it."\textsuperscript{141} This revealed Southerners' growing anxiety about authority. In the classical public sphere, one man's opinion was one man's; authority over an issue was directly proportional to the number of men expressing an opinion. But the abolitionists challenged that definition through the mail campaign. Rate of circulation, rather than size of group, was the source of their authority. "They do not need numbers, influence, or power; the press and pulpit are engines of agitation, by which, without real respectability they can effect incalculable mischief,"\textsuperscript{142} The South Vindicated explained. The use of "respectability" here suggests that Southerners saw the abolitionists' actions as cowardly, disreputable, and disgraceful, but also that they distrusted the abolitionists' new use of media. Remote agitation was dishonest in that it disguised who's opinions were expressed—circulation through the mail could easily represent the views of non-citizens—and the numerical strength of those views.

The mail campaign was seen as doubly offensive for invading Southerners' privacy and co-opting the section's prerogative towards slavery; as such, it violated the social space of the Southern public. This privacy was assaulted on two levels: on the one hand, the AASS sending unwanted mail to unsuspecting Southerners invaded the recipient's privacy; on the other, the North had no business interfering in the domestic institutions of the South. They misused federal resources for what most Americans predicted would bring the end of the Union. And their excessive behavior surpassed the boundaries of what was seen as appropriate and demanded excessive behavior in return from the South, sparking a national cycle of extreme action. These discussions about behavior, just as important as the debates about slavery itself, forced Americans to re-evaluate their conceptions of behavior in the public sphere.

\textsuperscript{141} South Carolina General Assembly, \textit{Report and Resolutions of South Carolina} (Charleston, S.C.: 1835), 27.
\textsuperscript{142} \textit{South Vindicated}, 276.
National Dialogue

Southerners, as the recipients of the American Anti-Slavery Society’s mail campaign, were not the only ones to react to its message and excesses. An outpouring of Northern sympathy materialized within days of the news of Charleston. Suddenly the whole nation was aware of the abolitionist postal campaign and involved in the discourse surrounding it. The *Niles Weekly Register*, a Baltimore newspaper, of August 29, 1835 declared that

> Immense meetings of the people have been held, or will be held in the east and north, as well as in the west and south, concerning the doings of the anti-slavery folks. [...] The effect of these things will be on the constitution of a mighty moral, as well as physical force, to act against the fanatics, and the slaves, as conservators of the public peace.  

That issue alone included minutes from meetings in Portland, Maine, Boston, and Philadelphia, while the next week’s issue declared that “During the last and present week we have cut out and laid aside more than *five hundred* articles, relating to the various *excitements* now acting on the people of the United States, public and private!”

In general, these meetings seem to follow the same pattern as those in the South: committee, preamble, resolutions, unanimous passage. The beginning of Philadelphia’s report began, “Whereas, The indiscreet and improper interference of certain individuals of the north with the domestic relations of the slaveholding states of the south… Resolved, That we respond to the call of our brethren of the south, that we are their brethren.” This summarizes the general early Northern response to the AASS mail campaign: vilification of the AASS’s behavior and tactics and affirmation of their solidarity with Southern “brethren.” A New York meeting, “the most numerous assemblage which we ever witnessed at

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143 [Untitled], *Niles Weekly Register*, August 29, 1835.
any public meeting […] to express their sentiments on the subject of slavery, and the proceedings of the abolitionists,” asserted,

While, therefore, we deplore the existence of slavery and all the evils which attend it, we dissent from the views and measures of the abolitionists and anti-slavery societies, and wholly disapprove of their extravagant proceedings and violent recriminations. […] We hold that the citizens of the north have no political right to interfere with the slavery of the southern states, nor moral right, under any circumstances, to adopt violent or aggressive measures for the purpose of abolishing it.  

This statement shows how Northerners could be antislavery and yet still anti-abolitionism; as discussed in the first section, immediate abolitionism was still too radical and marginal in 1835 to be widely accepted as part of the mainstream. Paranoid Southern newspapers, while they constantly predicted the uncontrollable spawning of abolition societies in the North and imagined that every Northerner was plotting the demise of the South, also continued to print the minutes of Northern town meetings, letters from Northerners pledging their support to the South’s cause, and editorials about the spectacular failures of the abolitionists’ meetings in Boston and Oneida, New York.

And yet for many Southerners, these pledges of support were not enough. An article called “Let the North look to it” in the Macon Weekly Telegraph affirmed, “The people & States of the North are responsible for the behaviour of the Fanatics. It is not enough to disapprove, to condemn, (as we believe the majority do,) the incendiaryism of Tappan, Garrison, Thompson, & Co- they must subdue it!” When it came to maintaining the very existence of the Union, words were not enough; they had to be accompanied by concrete, forceful actions:

If the North really feels the abhorrence for the abolitionists it pretends, let it shew its faith by its works: let it put down the incendiaries—not by mobs and acts of lawless violence, but by the strong arm of the law. Let the same laws be enacted

147 Ibid.
148 “Let the North look to it,” Macon Weekly Telegraph, September 3, 1835.
at the north against printing, circulating and distributing insurrectionary papers & pamphlets as are in force at the south; & against the assembling together of persons for unlawful purposes (as the abolitionist societies & meetings are) & the thing will stop. Postmasters who have assumed the responsibility of stopping these papers, are deserving the thanks and gratitude of their country. The Postmaster at New York has acted with a promptness and decision and patriotic feeling on the occasion, deserving all praise. The South will never forget it.149

This sentiment, calling for Northern censorship laws similar to those in the Southern states that made abolitionism illegal, echoed around the South. Town meetings, and later resolutions passed by Southern state legislatures, demanded Northern legislative action to outlaw abolitionism, allow local postmasters to censor the mail of “incendiary materials,” and forbid all public discussions of slavery. Postmaster General Amos Kendall and President Andrew Jackson approved of these requests for national censorship of the mail, but knew they could never pass such legislation. Instead, Kendall made clear to Southern postmasters that the federal government would not force the delivery of such mail.150 When Northern aid was not forthcoming to the extent they desired, some Southerners suggested economic sanctions. “It is impossible for the intercourse between New-York and the Southern and Western cities to continue in that state of freedom and security, which are essential to the uninterrupted prosecution of business, where there is blended in with every mail that arrives from the North, the innocent with the noxious newspaper,”151 affirmed an early Charleston Southern Patriot editorial. Within weeks, the newspaper was suggesting a “Commercial Confederacy” of Southern businesses cutting off trade relations with New York.152

These demands and threats upped the ante, and new issues emerged in the national discussions of the abolitionist postal campaign. By October 1835, it was clear that the morality

149 Ibid.
151 “Charleston: Friday afternoon,” Charleston Southern Patriot, July 31, 1835.
(or lack thereof) of slavery was not the only issue at stake in these debates about the AASS mail campaign. Censorship, civil liberties, the Constitution, and the balance of state and federal powers all entered this discourse in turn. As Southerners continued to make demands on the North, it became clear that what Southerners saw as concessions necessary to maintain social order in the face of anarchical abolitionism or collective reparations required to right the wrongs of the abolitionists, Northerners saw as infringements on their First Amendment rights for free speech and press (and by extension, freedom of the mail). As the slavery discourse diversified, one can clearly see a transformation in Northern opinions toward slavery, the Union, and their rights.

Southerners prioritized social order and the security enabled by tamping open-ended discussions of slavery. Any discussions of slavery that kept it in the public domain posed a challenge to this stability and would be regarded as an open threat. In his pamphlet, The amenability of Northern incendiaries as well to Southern as to Northern laws; without prejudice to the right of free discussion; to which is added an inquiry into the lawfulness of slavery, under the Jewish and Christian dispensations; together with other views on the same subject, being a series of essays recently published in the Charleston Courier, Richard Yeadon wrote, “Any attempt, therefore, on the part of the Northern people to direct public sentiment against this institution […] and shake the foundations of social order in the South, is justly to be regarded as a direct act of hostility against the South.” An editorial in the Charleston Southern Patriot asserted that the Bill of Rights never intended a complete freedom of speech; these rights always needed to be curtailed to an extent to keep society flowing:

154 Yeadon, 6.
It will be in vain to allege that this would be an interference with the liberty of opinion, or the privilege of free discussion. Are there no limits to this privilege?—no qualification to the expression of opinion? Will it be said that the liberty of the press is invaded, when the dissemination of doctrines is prohibited which loosen all the ties by which society is banded together—which break up the order and succession of property?\textsuperscript{155}

If free speech needed to be suppressed to maintain this order, so be it; without stability there would be no society in the first place.

On the other hand, Northerners were less concerned with race relations and social order, and more troubled by the prospect of losing their hard-won civil liberties. Just as the Southerners were offended by Northern fanaticism and interference in their domestic affairs, so too by October 1835 were Northerners by Southern over-reactions:

We are sorry to see the southern people running headlong into a fanaticism as hateful as that of the abolitionists. We are among the supporters of the constitutions and natural rights of the south, but when they talk of a commercial non-intercourse with New York—set seriously about the abduction of a free but foolish citizen—offer rewards amounting to $100,000 for kidnapping a blockhead [A. Tappan]—demand of the north to pass laws infringing on the liberty of the press—threaten an immediate dissolution of the union, we must tell them frankly that they are running into a similar degree of fanaticism to that which they object to in the abolitionists. Let the good sense of the north alone, and it will easily put down all this abolition business without violating law or acting like mad men.\textsuperscript{156}

But protecting free speech and press was more important than protecting privacy. These fundamental rights enshrined in the Bill of Rights were integral to American identity; they had been worth fighting for generations before, and were still worth the struggle. An anonymous poem published in the Boston Courier demonstrated one Northerner's commitment to liberty. It is clear here that Northerners were willing to separate themselves from the national community if Southern interests were to dominate and pervert it. The image of an honest, hard-working, and

\textsuperscript{155} "Charleston: Friday afternoon," Charleston Southern Patriot, July 31, 1835.
\textsuperscript{156} Untitled, New York Herald in Niles Weekly Register, October 3, 1835.
frank “Yankee farmer” standing strong against his “haughty neighbor” drew the distinction between Northern and Southern identities and priorities

Is’t not enough that this is borne?
And, asks our haughty neighbor more?
Must fetters which his slaves have worn
Clank round the Yankee farmer’s door?
Must he be told, beside his plough,
What he must speak, and when and how?

Must he be told his freedom stands
On slavery’s dark foundation strong—
On breaking hearts and fettered hands,
On robbery and crime and wrong?
That all his fathers taught in vain—
That freedom’s emblem is the chain?

Its life—its soul, from slavery drawn?
False—foul—profane! Go—teach as well
Of holy truth from falsehood born—
Of heaven refreshed by airs from hell!
Of virtue nursed by open vice—
Of demons planting paradise!

Rail on, then, ‘brethren of the south’—
Ye shall not hear the truth the less—
No seal is on the Yankee’s mouth,
No fetter on the Yankee’s press!
From our Green mountains to the sea
One voice shall thunder—WE ARE FREE!157

157 Untitled, Boston Courier in Niles Weekly Register, October 3, 1835.
IMPLICATIONS OF THE CAMPAIGN

Jürgen Habermas’s theory of public and private spheres, as elaborated in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, provides a useful lens for understanding the long-term implications of the American Anti-Slavery Society’s mail campaign. His theory explores the rise of a discursive space for political opinions that adjudicates the boundaries between private lives and the formal, public authority of government. The bourgeois public sphere, which arose in early modern Europe, is a “sphere of private people come together as a public; they [...] claim] the public sphere regulated from above against the public authority themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor.” In other words, the public sphere mediates between private individuals and state authority. It is, as historian John L. Brooke calls it, “the place where matters of shared importance unfold.”

The public sphere is a space of negotiation and interchange between private people and their public authority. It is the space in which civil society—“the corollary of a depersonalized state authority”—judges, debates, and influences political issues. This political confrontation depends on “people’s public use of their reason.” As such, activity in the public sphere depends on individuals rationally expressing their thoughts and opinions. As a whole, these private individuals come together to express “public opinion.”

160 Habermas, 19.
161 Ibid., 27.
The individuals making up civil society grant the public sphere its legitimacy. As Brooke shows by example of the early American Republic, that consent takes different forms in different republics. In the United States' public sphere, civic associations and the press express consent created by a balance between deliberation (the rational discussion necessary for Habermas's model) and cultural persuasion (language, symbols, and the threat of violence). The relationship (and tension) between rational discussion and symbolic violence became obvious in the mail campaign's aftermath. "Communication in public occurs in modes other than rational deliberation," Brooke writes. "Literary, artistic, and performative modes are cognitively emotional, symbolic, or emotional rather than rational-critical." Unlike Habermas's idealistic model entirely dependent on rational interchange, the "cultural dimensions of power" mattered in the 1835 United States. Historians need to question the "deployment of language and imagery in public forums [and the] ways they limit, constrain, or advance the circumstances and fortunes of individuals and groups in the social and political spaces in civil society." In the case of the mail campaign, the mail and the reactions to it were profoundly powerful means of cultural persuasion attempting to shift public opinion. On sectional, regional, and local levels, the course of public debate influenced the beliefs and opinions of participants and bystanders.

Public opinion is a particularly important subject of study in the United States's case, even if Habermas's model of the bourgeois public sphere refers explicitly to proto-capitalist Europe, a hundred-plus years and a continent away. Republican governments represent the interests and opinions of their citizens. When the government's authority is vested in and for the people, it must account for (and be accountable to) public opinion. Thus, the ways public

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162 Ibid., 54.
163 Brooke, 209.
164 Ibid., 225.
165 Ibid., 226.
opinion is formed and proliferated are important. Examining the ways voting, political partisanship, and infrastructural change help circulate, debate, and mature ideas reveals the ways public opinion is made and changed over time.

The mail itself plays an interesting role in the public and private spheres. Like the public sphere, which is constituted by private people acting in a public space, the mail is of both a public and private nature. In the United States, the mail is operated by the formal government and administered by public officials. But the matter of the mail is the private property of private people. Individuals use the mail to circulate their private correspondence, and it is a federal offense to steal the mail, open someone else's letters, or tamper with their mailbox. Mail thus ambivalently bridges the boundaries between public and private. In the mail campaign of 1835, a partisan group of private individuals hijacked an instrumental facet of the public sphere and made it act in a way it had not before. Their violation of the public sphere shocked Americans and changed the way the mail was perceived and used.

While Habermas writes that "The public sphere itself appears as a specific domain—the public domain versus the private;" 166 what he describes as the public sphere is more of a historical process than a thing or an event. The public sphere may be a specific discursive domain, but that does not make it static or monolithic. The moments Habermas describes in his study—classical Greece and Rome, feudal Europe, the salons of Enlightenment Paris—are snapshots in the evolution of a dynamic and fluid balance between public and private, rather than concrete "phases," per se. External factors are constantly changing—economic structures, types of government, cultural trends, salient issues—and so the public sphere constantly changes along with them. The mail campaign provides a particularly compelling example of a volatile environment that changed the public sphere. The mail campaign challenged Americans' notions

166 Habermas, 2.
of public and private, state and national, moral and political. These were by no means new ideas, but the mail campaign, with its new use of an old technology, destabilized and shook up society. When the public sphere began to reconstitute itself, the discourses, voices, and spaces composing it had changed.

One of the most significant implications of the mail campaign was the discursive fluidity it introduced to the public sphere. Americans’ opinions were constantly changing during summer and fall of 1835 and on, adapting to the shifting terrain as the crisis expanded in scope. Their arguments morphed to accommodate and respond to the new issues expressed and new voices speaking. Northern farmers who had paid slavery no attention were swept into this discourse by anti-Southern sentiments; Southerners who had passively accepted slavery as the bedrock of their society were suddenly defending slavery as a positive institution; politicians who had staunchly defended states’ rights invoked the Constitution when it suited their anti-federalist arguments. “Public opinion” was by no means unified on a national level, let alone on a sectional, regional, or local plane.

Another consequence of the mail campaign was the emergence of new voices and proliferation of new publics explicitly defined by slavery. The debates surrounding the campaign catalyzed public opinion. By spotlighting Americans’ positions regarding slavery, the crisis forced people to examine their beliefs and take a stand. It also invited the participation of new voices in these discourses—women, free African-Americans, poor whites who had no stake in the slave system. By showing off the spectrum of possible positions and the diversity of opinions, the mail campaign illustrated the ways Americans diverged on “the slave question.” Thus the mail campaign led to a broadening and deepening of public opinion.
The mail campaign also opened up more discursive spaces for slavery. The open treatment of slavery in the postal campaign changed what was possible and acceptable. As the crisis became a national issue in the fall of 1835, debates triggered the entrance of tributary subjects like censorship, civil liberties, social order, civic participation, privacy, and federalism and states’ rights into these discourses. These issues were fundamentally wrapped up in "the slave question," and slavery became an umbrella encompassing all these issues. As a political—and social, and moral—issue, slavery was all but impossible to avoid in the antebellum era.

This section first looks at the transformation of the public spheres of the North and South to tease out how each section reacted to and absorbed the campaign into its public sphere. It then looks at three levels of American social interactions (people relating to people, people relating to their government, and the government relating to slavery) to determine how the mail impacted each.

**North**

"We have proofs which ought to satisfy us, that the Abolition Societies are but lean and despised minorities of the Northern people. They may preach their philanthropy till Doom's-day—the great body of the people will heed them not, because they have other fish to fry—other uses for their money, and know our condition and their own interests better. But just go to legislating upon the subject—get the Legislatures in full blast upon the details of the proposed terms, and the principles they involve—then will come the danger! Then will arguments be put into the mouths of the fanatics, more potent than their philanthropy. They will make more converts in one day, by preaching up the right of discussion, the freedom of speech, and the freedom of the press, than they could make in a century by talking about the hardships of our slaves."\(^{167}\)

A January 5, 1836 editorial in the Richmond Enquirer called "Hands Exposed, Foul Play Detected" chastised Southerners for their over-the-top responses to the American Anti-Slavery Society's mail campaign. The article's author understood in a way few other Southerners did the long-term impact their collective action could, and did, have on Northerners' consciousness.

While abolitionism was still far from a mainstream ideology, the AASS's publicity campaign

\(^{167}\) "Hands Exposed, Foul Play Detected," Richmond Enquirer, January, 6, 1836.
and Southerner’s demands for Northern reaction turned many Northerners against their
“brethren” and slowly but surely towards acceptance of antislavery ideas. James Brewer Stewart
writes, “Discouraging as it was, repression nonetheless did make some genuine converts. More
important, it was helping to create a broad constituency of antislavery sympathizers who blamed
violence-prone ‘southern influence’ in the North for jeopardizing civil liberties.”

These “partially committed sympathizers […] became centers for abolitionism and breeding grounds
for sectional impulses in American politics” through the 1840s and provide one of the clearest
eamples of the discursive fluidity introduced by the mail campaign. “Immediatism became
most difficult to distinguish from broader anti-Southern opinions once ordinary citizens began
articulating these intertwining beliefs.” In other words, the reactions to the mail campaign
ushered in a new phase in American abolitionism that was at once more ambiguous in doctrine,
more overtly sectional in nature, and more inclusive in membership.

Anti-abolitionism remained strong through fall and winter 1835-1836, but as the Boston
Courier poem mentioned earlier showed, these sentiments were increasingly joined with
sectional, anti-Southern attitudes. After a mob of local residents drove the New York State Anti-
Slavery Society’s annual meeting out of Utica in October 1835, Gerrit Smith, a local unaffiliated
man, invited them to reconvene at his home in nearby Peterboro. At the convention, he gave a
speech which explained his change of heart with respect to abolitionism. His logic reflected that
of many new converts in late 1835 and early 1836; as the Richmond Enquirer guessed, his “right

168 Stewart, 74.
169 Ibid., 75.
170 Ibid., 78.
171 Gerrit Smith, “Speech in the Meeting of the New-York Anti-Slavery Society, Held in Peterboro, October 22,
1835” in A House Divided: The Antebellum Slavery Debates in America, 1776-1865, ed. Mason Lowance
of discussion” was what he held most dear. In conscious imitation of the town hall meetings establishing slavery as a domestic concern of the South, Smith opened his address with:

Resolved, That the right of free discussion, given to us by God, and asserted and guarded by the laws of our country, is a right so vital to man’s freedom, and dignity, and usefulness, that we can never be guilty of its surrender, without consenting to exchange that freedom for slavery, and that dignity and usefulness for debasement and worthlessness.¹⁷²

According to Smith, the right to free discussion was what separated a freeman from a slave.

Like the Boston Courier poem which queried, “Must fetters which his slaves have worn/Clank round the Yankee farmer’s door?” Smith compared Northerners controlled by Southern demands to slaves. Rather than stand for this intimidation and tyranny, he encouraged his audience to “never be guilty of its surrender” and fight for their rights as free, white Americans. He asserted that he wanted to live under a democracy, “not that it clothes me with rights, which [other forms of government] withhold from me; but, that it makes fewer encroachments than they do, on the rights, which God gave me—on the divinely appointed scope of man’s agency.”¹⁷³ But Southerners were threatening the very openness and integrity of American democracy, and Smith would not stand for it: “We are threatened with legislative restraint on this right. Let us tell our legislators in advance, that this is a right, restraints on which, we will not, cannot, bear.”¹⁷⁴ It was the protection of his own rights, not the fight for blacks’, which first drew Smith to abolitionism; but the abolitionists’ steadfastness in the face of opposition inspired him:

At such a time as this, when you are nobly jeopardizing, for truth’s sake, and humanity’s sake, property and reputation and life, I feel it to be not only my duty, but my privilege and pleasure, to identify myself with you […].—Passing events… admonish me of the necessity there is, that the friends of human rights should act in concert: and, with all my objections to your society, it is not only

¹⁷² Ibid., 431. ¹⁷³ Ibid., 431. ¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 431.
possible but probable, that I shall soon find myself obliged to become a member of it. 175

Smith presaged a new generation of American abolitionists: those whose membership was inspired not by evangelical Christianity (like the earlier Garrisons and Tappans), but by secular, liberal political ideals. The issues raised by the debates surrounding the AASS postal campaign—freedom of speech, civil liberties, social order, the proper role of federal and state governments with respect to slavery—motivated a new kind of political abolitionism, which attracted new groups into the movement and gave them new tools for action. And even for those Northerners who stayed away from the antislavery movement, sectionalism made abolitionism’s presence in the public sphere more tolerable and acceptable.

Gerrit Smith was not alone as a convert to abolitionism: the number of auxiliary and state abolitionist societies skyrocketed between May 1835 and May 1836. Before the AASS mail campaign, there were 200 registered antislavery societies in the United States; only a year later, there were 527. 15,000 new subscriptions to the AASS’s publications were processed in that time, which R.G. Williams, the AASS’s publishing agent called “a rate of growth [...] unparalleled in the history of American reform.” 176 Geographically, abolitionism shifted west from the liberal urban centers of Boston and New York to more rural areas. “Northern Ohio’s Western Reserve, Indiana’s northernmost counties, parts of eastern Michigan, upstate New York, portions of western Vermont, and western Massachusetts became rural hotbeds of anti-Southern politics and centers of abolitionist recruitment,” 177 attracting small, independent farmers and entrepreneurs in these quickly-developing regions.

175 Ibid., 431.
177 Stewart, 78.
As the profile of the average abolitionist changed, so did their tactics. Although their overall strategy was still “moral suasion,” these new, more politically-motivated members adopted more direct political engagement than public speaking, publishing in newspapers, and pamphleteering to shift public opinion. Petitioning the state and federal governments emerged as the abolitionists’ most powerful and public tool. This offered them a direct discursive path to the government, allowing their challenges to be heard openly—at least in theory. Petitioning had already been an important part of the antislavery arsenal for a century. Individuals’ petitions constituted an important part of eighteenth-century emancipation movements in the North, and the American Anti-Slavery Society's *Declaration of Sentiments* affirmed their right to petition legislators—but 1835 marked the first time American abolitionists aggressively employed petitions on a national scale.\(^{178}\)

Historian Susan Zaeske points out that “from the colonial to the Jacksonian period petitioning was transformed from a tool for airing individual grievances to an instrument for collective political action.”\(^{179}\) Abolitionists hoping to shape public opinion by placing slavery on the national legislative agenda circulated a new kind of petition in the 1830s—petitions that were increasingly active rather than deferential, and signed by thousands rather than a single individual. While newspaper stories and editorials brought the national debates about slavery into the homes of the rural North, petitions facilitated local discourse about slavery more directly. Abolitionist volunteers brought their petitions door-to-door, engaging neighbors in personal debates. “Whether people signed or not,” Paul Goodman writes, “canvassing was a way to bring the slavery question to the doorstep of that great mass that preferred to evade the

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\(^{178}\)Ibid., 81.

issue.”\textsuperscript{180} And abolitionists continued to use the mail to link their neighborhoods with others, feeding a growing network and national community of abolitionists. As James Brewer Stewart puts it, “The importance of local initiative, community involvement, and the individual act of affixing one’s signature to an anti-slavery protest is impossible to over stressing. By making this gesture, unprecedented numbers of people found a safe yet politically effective way to express their sympathy for abolitionism and their hostility towards the South.”\textsuperscript{181} Petitioning’s ability to spark personal discussions about a national issue expanded small town America’s active participation in the national community. These activities transitioned slavery into the North’s public sphere; for years, slavery was the subject of “rational-critical discussion.” This discourse between friends and neighbors, strangers and sympathizers convinced many Northerners that slavery was a “matter of shared importance” and the rightful subject of their collective concern.

As Stewart suggests, petitioning was a “safe” (less public) way for new converts to participate in abolitionism without putting their reputations, safety, and even lives on the line as Garrison and the Tappans had done in the mail campaign. As such, petitioning invited the participation of those traditionally excluded from the public sphere—women. While technically not the citizenry by a legal definition, women were citizens of the public sphere when they took part in the debates about slavery. Zaeske writes, “Enabling them to participate in national public dialogue over the controversial issue of slavery absent the right of suffrage, petitioning provided a conduit for them to assert a modified form of citizenship.”\textsuperscript{182} Women had long held an ambiguous role within American antislavery; while their moral assistance had been solicited for decades, they had been relegated to the role of silent moral guides, and explicitly discouraged from direct political action like petitioning. Rather, they were encouraged to exert their moral

\textsuperscript{180} Goodman, 230.
\textsuperscript{181} Stewart, 82.
\textsuperscript{182} Zaeske, 2.
superiority over brothers and fathers and convince them to act,\(^{183}\) and focus their energies on boycotting slave-made goods, fund raising for the men’s antislavery societies, and educating free blacks.\(^{184}\) In such activities, they were not full participants in the public sphere of slavery.

Abolitionist leadership held an ambivalent attitude towards the expanding role of women in the movement until 1835, when the mail campaign re-energized and expanded the movement. Suddenly, abolitionists began actively recruiting women, equally with men, to their cause. One editorial declared, “Every man and woman in the northern states, who does not petition Congress to do something, and who does not pray for the extermination of slavery in the District of Columbia, is guilty of the sin of perpetuating slavery.”\(^{185}\) Later that fall, Garrison’s *Liberator* called on women to help in the petitioning campaign: “Let not our female friends forget that on them we rely for powerful and efficient aid in this work.”\(^{186}\) Petitioning was the most potent, and controversial, of women’s abolitionist activities. They were the motor behind the mass movement: “The recruitment of women into societies also gave the movement a valuable new resource for gathering signatures, since many women, especially single women, had more time than men to canvass systematically.”\(^{187}\) Through their canvassing, women took an active role in the discussions and print that shaped the public sphere. With this direct participation, they used their reason publicly, against the power of the public authority’s definition of “citizen,” and inserted themselves into the public sphere.

Antislavery could be construed as—indeed, began as—a religious, not political, movement, one in which women’s activity was wholly appropriate given contemporary ideas about femininity, domesticity, and benevolence: “It enabled women to fulfill what was supposed

\(^{183}\) Ibid., 39, and Goodman 218.
\(^{184}\) Zaeske, 42.
\(^{185}\) [Untitled], *New England Spectator* in *Emancipator*, March 10, 1835.
\(^{186}\) [Untitled], *Liberator*, October 31, 1835.
\(^{187}\) Goodman, 209.
to be their natural, moral impulse to labor on behalf of the most needful, to defend domesticity
and the family, and to rescue their Southern white sisters from betrayal and dishonor.\textsuperscript{188}

"Abolitionists insisted that American women simply had no moral choice but to enlist in the
antislavery crusade. [...] Their special role as exemplars of piety, compassion, and benevolence
inevitably enlarged their sphere and sometimes required that they enter the public arena to
protect other women, the family, and the home from lust and avarice."\textsuperscript{189} As Lori D. Ginzberg
notes, this was true for women participating in all types of benevolent work: "Whatever the
contradictions in an ideology that declare women's duty to exercise public authority in the
interest of private virtue, the belief in women's greater morality and in their duty to promote in
inspired female action."\textsuperscript{190} Women's early abolitionist petitions phrased their demands in terms
of this religious and moral duty which required political elaboration. In this way, Northern
women made their first mass foray into the public sphere in a seemingly-respectable and
acceptable way.

Women were especially effective at encouraging each other to join the abolitionist cause.

In her \textit{Appeal to the Christian Women of the South}, Angelina Grimke exhorted her "sisters" to
take political action:

\begin{quote}
If you could obtain but six signatures to such a petition in only one state, I would
say, send up that petition, and be not in the least discouraged by the scoffs and
jeers of the heartless. [...] It will be a great thing if the subject can be introduced
into your legislatures in any way, even by women, and they will be the most likely
to introduce it there in the best possible manner, as a matter of morals and
religion, not of expediency or politics.\textsuperscript{191}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{188} Goodman, 219.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 221-222.
\textsuperscript{190} Ginzberg, \textit{Women in Antebellum Reform}, 10.
\textsuperscript{191} Angelina Grimke, "An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South," in \textit{Against Slavery: An Abolitionist Reader},
Despite this opposition, women continued to turn to abolitionism in droves and became some of the movement’s most active participants. In 1834, the number of female antislavery societies across the United States numbered 9; a year later, the number jumped to 23, and by 1837, 30.\(^{197}\) Of the abolitionist petitions sent and signed in 1837, women’s signatures accounted for 59% of the national total, and as many as 70% in Massachusetts, 74% in Maine, and 100% in Rhode Island.\(^{198}\) Through these societies, women developed the “self-confidence, political consciousness, and administrative skill that could inspire more extensive activism,”\(^{199}\) paving the way toward proto-feminism and the women’s rights movement.

With the increased numbers of abolitionist societies operating over wide geographical space and exploding with members, petitioning truly became a mass movement.\(^{200}\) Over 30,000 petitions flooded Congress in late 1835 and early 1836, many signed by thousands of women, provoking controversy and leading to the passage of the gag rule in June 1836, which rather than stifling antislavery discussion only gave it renewed life and inspired more and more Northerners to tolerate, and even join, the abolitionists.

Thus the abolitionists changed the makeup and tenor of the Northern public spheres. Their activities fostered the emergence of new publics—anti-Southerners, women, those concerned with rights talk—explicitly conceived around slavery, and expanded membership in the public sphere at large. Additionally, those who had believed, in the summer of 1835, that slavery was the domestic concern of the South, came to take it on as their own “matter of shared importance” in the fall and winter. Rational discussions, both face-to-face and in print, extended

\(^{197}\) Ibid., 207.
\(^{198}\) Ibid., 229.
\(^{199}\) Stewart, 82.
\(^{200}\) Goodman, 228.
what was a legitimate public matter. And the introduction of “irrational” and “emotional”
women into the public sphere changed the qualifications of those discourses.

South

Governor George McDuffie of South Carolina gave his annual address to the state
legislature in early December 1835, reflecting on the tumultuous year his state had just survived.
Still fresh on everyone’s mind was the abolitionist mail campaign, which dominated his
message. “Since your last adjournment, the public mind thro’-out the slave-holding States, has
been intensely, indignantly and justly excited, by the wanton, officious and incendiary
proceedings of certain societies and persons in some of the non-slave-holding States,” he began.

These wicked monsters and deluded fanatics, overlooking the numerous objects in
their own vicinity who have a moral, if not a legal claim upon their charitable
regard, run abroad in the expansion of their hypocritical benevolence, muffled up
in the saintly mantle of Christian meekness, to fulfill the fiendlike errand of
mingling the blood of the master and the slave, to whose fate they are equally
indifferent, with the smouldering ruins of our peaceful dwellings. 201

McDuffie then launched into a passionate denunciation of the abolitionists and defense of
slavery; excerpts from his speech filled an entire broadside when reprinted in newspapers across
the country. Already a known entity from his high-profile role in the Nullification Crisis three
years earlier, many across the country paid careful attention to his words.

McDuffie called it the “imperious duty” 202 of the Southern States to demand punishment
from the North against the abolitionists; otherwise, fanatics would continue to be able to “carry
on schemes of incendiary hostility against the institutions, the safety and the existence of the
State.” 203 Preservation of the state and its peculiar institution were his highest priorities, and
should be of the entire region:

201 George McDuffie, [No Headline], Connecticut Courant, December 7, 1835.
202 Ibid.
203 Ibid.
In performing this high duty to which we are constrained by the great law of self preservation, let us approach our co-States with all the fraternal mildness which becomes us as members of the same family of confederated republics, and at the same time with that firmness and decision which become a sovereign state, while maintaining her dearest interests and most sacred rights.\(^{204}\)

State sovereignty over slavery was not McDuffie’s only concern here; also at stake were God’s designs for the institution. “For the institution of domestic slavery we hold ourselves responsible only to God, and it is utterly incompatible with the dignity and the status of the State, to permit any foreign authority to question our right to maintain it,”\(^{205}\) he declared. And he had no doubts that God intended slavery for the black man:

No human institution, in my opinion, is more manifestly consistent with the will of God, than domestic slavery, and no one of his ordinances is written in more legible characters than that which consigns the African race to this condition, as more conducive to their own happiness, than any other of which they are susceptible. Whether we consult the sacred Scriptures or the lights of nature and reason, we shall find these truths as abundantly apparent as if written with a sun beam in the heavens.\(^{206}\)

McDuffie ran through a litany of defenses of slavery that would be familiar to accustomed readers, focusing on the Biblical passages, physiological evidence, and historical cases traditionally invoked. Emancipation would be a “positive curse, depriving [the slaves] of a guardianship essential to their happiness,”\(^{207}\) he declared. “Amalgamation is abhorrent to every sentiment of nature,”\(^{208}\) so free blacks could never be part of American society; but would they be better off sent to Africa, where they could never achieve the “social and political happiness”\(^{209}\) of an advanced and modern society? “The advantages of domestic slavery of the most favorable condition of political slavery, does not admit of a question,”\(^{210}\) he rejoined.

\(^{204}\) Ibid.
\(^{205}\) Ibid.
\(^{206}\) Ibid.
\(^{207}\) Ibid.
\(^{208}\) Ibid.
\(^{209}\) Ibid.
\(^{210}\) Ibid.
Employing the paternalist arguments that would soon dominate proslavery writings for the next generations, he pointed out that

The government of our slaves is strictly patriarchal and produces those mutual feelings of mutual kindness on the part of the master, and fidelity and attachment on the part of the slave, which can only result from a constant interchange of good offices, and which can only exist in a system of domestic or patriarchal slavery.  

Slaves in the United States were "cheerful, contented, and happy, much beyond the general condition of the human race," and enjoyed a better quality of life than European peasants or Northern laborers. And presaging the shift in tone of the Southern discourse on slavery, McDuffie concluded,

Domestic slavery, therefore, instead of being a political evil, is the cornerstone of our republican edifice. No patriot who justly estimates our privileges, will tolerate the idea of emancipation, at any period however remote, or on any conditions of pecuniary advantage, however favorable. I would as soon think of opening a negotiation for selling the liberty of the State at once, as for making any stipulations for the ultimate emancipation of our slaves.

McDuffie's message touched on many of the themes that would come to dominate Southern discourse for the next three decades; just as the postal campaign raised themes that transformed Northern consciousness and made abolitionism more acceptable to society at large, the mail had a profound impact on Southern sectional identity, proslavery rhetoric, and the ideology shaping its public sphere.

As discussed earlier, the South's initial reaction to the mail was to band together and emphasize sectional unity and solidarity around shared interests—the maintenance of slavery. McDuffie counseled the South Carolina legislation to "approach our co-States," echoing the call made months earlier when the city of Charleston resolved to host a convention of Southern States to facilitate cooperation in protecting slavery:

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211 Ibid.
212 Ibid.
213 Ibid.

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7. Resolved, that for the purpose of making an earnest appeal to the people of the non-slave-holding-states as may convince them of the true state of public feeling amongst us, it would in the opinion of this meeting be desirable to bring about a cordial cooperation among all the States having a common interest with us either through a CONVENTION or in any other way, best calculated to embody public sentiment, so that THE TRUTH MAY BE MADE KNOWN, that however we may differ among ourselves on other points, we are on this subject UNITED AS ONE MAN IN THE FIXED AND UNALTERABLE DETERMINATION TO MAINTAIN OUR RIGHTS, AND DEFEND OUR PROPERTY AGAINST ALL ATTACKS,--BE THE CONSEQUENCES WHAT THEY MAY.\footnote{214}{"Charleston: Monday afternoon," Charleston Southern Patriot, August 10, 1835.}

The South saw the mail as “attacks”—they saw themselves as victims of Northern aggression, the ones wronged. Slavery was the defining characteristic of their victimhood and thus their community. It was the connecting thread between all white Southerners, transcending and minimizing all other differences; no matter that Southerners “may differ among ourselves on other points”—agreement on slavery was the only thing that counted. Slavery and its associated way of life became the bedrock of Southern identity. Philosopher Michel Foucault wrote in \textit{The History of Sexuality, Volume 1} of “a transposition into different forms of the methods employed by the nobility for marking and maintaining its caste distinction.”\footnote{215}{Michel Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, an Introduction}, trans. Robert Hurley. (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 124.} His work explored the ways elites have defined and set themselves apart, and while he studied the nobility and bourgeoisie of Europe, the same idea can be applied to Southern slaveholders. If feudal nobles defined themselves by their blood and genealogy, and the rising bourgeoisie defined themselves by their sex and sexuality, Southerners defined themselves now by their slavery.

The speeches and writings coming out of the South over the next generation exhibited new characteristics in line with this change: slavery was, as Drew Gilpin Faust puts it,

“associated [...] with the fundamental values of their civilization.”\footnote{216}{Drew Gilpin Faust, \textit{The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 10.} Larry E. Tise defines
proslavery ideology as "a mode of thinking, a concatenation of ideas, and a system of symbols that expressed the social, cultural, and moral values of a large portion of the population of America in the first half of the nineteenth century." Proslavery rhetoric became increasingly comprehensive, complex, and sophisticated in reaction to the mail campaign: "The attack from the North made southern mobilization an immediate necessity, and latent proslavery feeling was quickly translated into action." Faust identifies a set of rules and common characteristics in the post-1835 period that established a "proslavery mainstream" based around the Bible, natural science, history, and "moral science." At the same time that these arguments defended slavery, they also expressed Southerners' views on subjects as varied as religion, government, and science. Adherence to this mainstream was crucial. "The defenses of slavery of this period were, in addition, remarkably consistent with one another. [...] The high level of conformity within proslavery thought was not accidental. Consistency was seen as the mark of strength and the emblem of truth."

Most of these views elaborated upon earlier proslavery writing. But the mail campaign did introduce some new ideas into this "proslavery mainstream," most notably paternalism. Lacy K. Ford's *Deliver us From Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* describes the South's shifting, nuanced, and diverse attitudes towards slavery from the nation's founding until the 1840s. Paternalism, which began as a small moral project to "domesticate" slavery in the early nineteenth century, was a powerful answer to the humanitarian critiques of the abolitionists, but seen by many slaveholders as dangerous for the amount of leeway it supposedly granted slaves. But the attacks on Southern character implicit in the literature of the abolitionist

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218 Faust, 10.
219 Ibid., 11-12.
220 Ibid., 10.
mail campaign forced hardliners to look to new ideological weapons. Ford asserts, "The longer-term impact of the abolitionist petition and mail campaigns, however, with their promise of an unending moral war on slavery, moved the South [...] toward an ideological reconfiguration of slavery that embraced paternalism and placed it at the center of the South’s efforts to explain and defend slavery."²²¹ He explains the theory of paternalism as follows:

Advocates of paternalism linked the plantation (and even the large farm) to an extended family, in which masters governed their slaves with firmness and benevolence, much as they claimed to manage their wives and children. But with the authority of a family patriarch also came responsibility. Paternalistic masters were expected to attend to their slaves’ spiritual welfare as well as their physical needs, most often by devotedly inculcating Christian doctrine and morality, or at least the masters’ version of them, among the enslaved.²²²

This explains why Governor McDuffie insisted that slavery created “feelings of mutual kindness,” William J. Hobby wrote about the “warm and sincere attachment”²²³ between masters and slaves in Remarks upon slavery, and The South Vindicated declared that “We believe it is generally admitted that the slave is nowhere better treated than in the slave-holding states of the union.”²²⁴ Paternalism brought slavery into the conjugal family, and at the same time brought family dynamics into the purview of slavery. This shift extended slavery’s implications to virtually every aspect of Southerners’ day to day lives. As such, slavery became the leading element of cultural persuasion shaping the Southern public sphere. Every discussion that took place in the public sphere, or action, or publication, needed the authentication of the prevailing proslavery rhetoric to be legitimate.

Hand-in-hand with this shift in seeing and speaking about slavery in the abstract came a change in the value judgments Southerners assigned to slavery. When the “slave question” was a

²²¹ Ford, 506.
²²² Ibid., 8.
²²³ Hobby, 17.
²²⁴ South Vindicated, 73.
political issue, Southerners could write slavery off as a “necessary evil,” a social dynamic inherited from the British that was regrettable but too hard to eliminate. Now that the abolitionists had publicly transformed it into a moral and religious issue, such a passive attitude could not hold up under such scrutiny. Just as the mail campaign forced individuals to define their views on “the slave question,” so too for sections. Along with the ideological transformation of slavery under paternalism, Southerners could (and needed to) defend slavery as a “positive good” that elevated Southern society, politics, and economy. Southerners increasingly associated slavery with the romanticism of home and their customs of life, and less with political questions. It is ironic that as Northerners began to associate slavery with rights and politics, Southerners linked it with a sentimentalist emotive language about home. These two languages of politics and domesticity seemed to belong to two different spheres, and thus to preclude any possibility of communication.

As proslavery rhetoric became more and more inclusive of the “Southern way of life,” it became further intertwined with Southern identity. The values espoused by the defenses of slavery came to stand for the values of the section as a whole. Proslavery was no longer an elite literary or political concern; it was a way for the entire white community, slaveholders and not, to come together and define itself and its values. The abolitionist attack had accused all Southerners of supporting slavery; the town hall meetings in response drew non-slaveholders into participating in the public discourse. This reconstituted an imagined community of white Southerners centered on slavery, which would mature into a separatist Southern nationalism in a few decades. As Benedict Anderson conceives of nations in his landmark study of the rise of nationalism, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, they are “imagined” because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their

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225 Tise, 101.
members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their
communion” and “communities” because “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation
that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived of as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”
Moreover, racism plays an important role in Anderson’s patriotism; it provides a “solidarity
among whites” that links them, “whatever their internal rivalries and conflicts.”
Proslavery rhetoric fits this model of an early nationalism; Southerners imagined themselves collectively
victimized. Proslavery brought all whites together, regardless of slaveholding status, in an
“equal” horizontal relationship; and the racism inherent in this white supremacy provided the
glue holding this community together. The mail campaign set in motion the ideological
beginnings of a separatist Southern nationalism that would grow and mature, and fully realize
itself 25 years later as the Confederacy.

Southerners had tried to take slavery off the table in the summer of 1835, branding it a
private concern, not a “matter of shared importance.” At the very least, slavery was outside the
scope of the North’s jurisdiction; at most, it did not belong to any public’s domain. But this re-
setting of the boundaries between public and private was unsuccessful. Not only did slavery
remain in the purview of the South’s public sphere, it became the public matter; every aspect of
Southerners’ lives was wrapped up in slavery, implicitly or explicitly. The South’s particular
proslavery mainstream set the boundaries of its public sphere and constituted the most powerful
form of “cultural persuasion” coercing actions in the public sphere.

People Relating to People

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227 Ibid., 7.
228 Ibid., 153.
On October 10, 1835, in the heat of the backlash to the mail campaign, the *Niles' Weekly Register* declared that "The whole American people are bound together by common interests and obligations." The mail campaign had infused Americans with a shared sense of identity and purpose. Men and women across the country were obsessed with the abolitionist crisis, having the same conversations, reading the same articles, and thinking about the same issues from Florida to Maine. Editors of newspapers across the country believed that all Americans wanted, and would be willing to work for, the same thing: the preservation of the Union. An editor of the *New York Commercial Advisor* declared,

I accord with you precisely in sentiment respecting the alarming state of our political affairs. I tremble for our country. God forbid that I should ever see the time when our union, our dear-bought liberties, should be prostrated in the dust, our republican compact severed as a rope of sand; the blessed inheritance of our puritan fathers, and the glorious achievements of our sages and patriots wrested from posterity by the consummate folly and madness of the present time.

"The South will feel more strongly knit together to her brethren of the North—the Union will be strengthened, for all future years, more than ever," wrote the *Richmond Enquirer*. If Northerners were willing to take concrete action to arrest abolitionism, the article continued, "We shall indeed be Americans in heart and in sentiment." This statement is telling—despite the crisis engendered by the mail campaign, Americans (and Southerners, at that), were confident that there was still a "we" of shared goals and values to strive for.

And yet at the same time, the reaction to the mail campaign crystallized and intensified nascent sectional identities, as discussed earlier. The open talk about slavery associated with the mail campaign shined a light on Americans' positions regarding slavery and crystallized and polarized their views. Northerners increasingly saw themselves, as the *Boston Courier* poem put

229 "To the friends of immediate emancipation in the state of New York," *Niles' Weekly Register*, October 10, 1835.
230 [Untitled], *New York Commercial Advisor in Niles' Weekly Register*, October 10, 1835.
it, "Yankee farmers"—honest, hardworking, and dedicated to freedom. At the same time, Southerners saw them as "members of the same family of confederated republics" as Governor McDuffie put it, as the undeserving accused united in their victimhood. The Yankees' "haughty neighbor" was to Southerners a strong, united, and noble brotherhood "UNITED AS ONE MAN IN THE FIXED AND UNALTERABLE DETERMINATION TO MAINTAIN OUR RIGHTS, AND DEFEND OUR PROPERTY AGAINST ALL ATTACKS," according to Charleston's public meeting. These self-images of sectional identity were increasingly at irreconcilable odds. In short, the mail campaign changed the way people saw themselves in relation to a national public, and subtly furthered changes in their expectations for future interactions.

But in a more fundamental way, the abolitionists' campaign transformed the entire social space in which people interacted with each other. The abolitionists' general antislavery project toyed with the boundaries of public and private on a general scale, raising the stakes of the fight over slavery. According to Abolition's Public Sphere, Robert Fanuzzi's study of abolitionism and the Habermasian public sphere, the antebellum abolitionists had three main goals grounding their antislavery campaign, with all three aimed at restructuring America's public sphere, the "material and discursive space of free discussion."

First, they wanted to cultivate "new spaces and forms of literate discussion" and expand the public sphere by reaching out to a reading public more inclusive than Jacksonian America's definition of citizenship. They called this effort to engage all Americans in the antislavery movement, regardless of race, gender, or class, to "abolitionize," indicating that this expansion of the public sphere was at the heart of their

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232 Untitled, Boston Courier in Niles Weekly Register, October 3, 1835.
233 George McDuffie.
235 Robert Fanuzzi, Abolition's Public Sphere (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), XII.
236 Ibid., XIII.
crusade. Second, they attempted to “create a deliberately anachronistic public sphere” through their publishing and speaking activities, producing a sustained analogy between the antebellum abolitionist movement and the American Revolution. Through “historical associations” like invoking the space of Faneuil Hall, the personages of the Founding Fathers, and the petitioning action inherent in the Declaration of Independence, they “sustained the promise of former revolutions.” Just as Charlestonians evoked eighteenth-century anti-British protests in their burning of the mail, the abolitionists’ actions were self-consciously historical and value-laden. Both groups tried to “circulate the memory of the nation’s founding struggle” for their own purposes. Third and lastly, through the philosophy and practice of nonresistance, they tried to find a place for abolitionism in the “public sphere in the political realm” separate from both the public authority of the state and the prerogatives of citizenship.

The case of the American Anti-Slavery Society’s mail campaign proves that the abolitionists were, at least to some extent, successful in their goal of transforming the public sphere. The mail campaign presented the potential for a wide-open public sphere, which raised practical issues of structure, content, and behavior of the Habermasian public sphere of free and critical discourse. These concerns changed the way Americans expected to relate to one another in the public domain.

In the first place, the mail campaign changed the definition of who constituted the “public sphere.” In its attempt to “abolitionize,” the AASS’s mail campaign purposely invited women and free blacks into the public sphere. Granted the ability to read antislavery literature, look at

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237 Ibid., XV.
238 Ibid., XXXVI.
239 Ibid., 3.
240 See Habermas, 30 for his diagram of the schema of social realms in the bourgeois era.
241 Fanuzzi, 8.
its pictures, hear speeches, and attend rallies, these non-citizens were able to participate in the rational and critical discourse surrounding slavery absent the right to vote. The abolitionists' conception of the public sphere was wider than Jacksonian America's. To the abolitionists, free discussion and criticism of the state were the essence of civic participation; to the nation at large, the public sphere applied only to those who could participate in the political process by voting or running for office. The abolitionists pushed along the changes that made it possible for the Angelina Grimkes and the Frederick Douglasses of the antebellum era to have the influence they did.

In terms of the structure of the public sphere, the mail campaign also called into question the boundary between the "sphere of public authority" and the "private realm"—between the bureaucracy of the state and the lives, thoughts, and opinions of private individuals. Immediately at issue, with Americans' indignation over the medium of the postal campaign, was the problem of private people manipulating public resources. The AASS had dragged the state into the "public sphere world of letters." Not only had the abolitionists intentionally invited non-citizens into the public sphere of discussion—they now also invited state power into these discussions, which according to Habermas's account, had originated in the need of private people to criticize the state. For many Americans, the mail campaign was problematic for confounding the public authority's resources with private issues. The Charleston Southern Patriot even called this "a monstrous abuse of the privilege of the public mail." It generated anxiety around the nation and raised a host of issues: Could what was public be legitimately used

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242 Ibid., XII.
243 Habermas, 30.
244 Ibid., 30.
for private concerns? Did consideration by the public authority, intentional or not, make an issue
publicly relevant?

On the flip side, at what point did the public authority have the power to control the private lives of its subjects? Disregarding the debates over whether slavery belonged in the private realm or was a legitimate issue for the public sphere in the political realm or the world of letters, to what extent could the state coerce the goings on of the private realms of civil society and the conjugal family? In this specific case, could the state censor the public sphere in the world of letters, and if so, when, how, and why?

The mail campaign also raised the issue of who—in the abstract—had a private realm to be respected. Southern responses to the campaign painted the South as a glorified conjugal family with its own internal space out of the reach of the public authority. As paternalism made slavery “domestic” and brought it into the purview of the individual slaveholder’s family, the Southern response to the mail made slavery “domestic” and brought it into the purview of the South’s domain. The possibility arose that an entire social group, and not just the bourgeois conjugal family, could have an intellectual internal space unmolested by public authority. Southerners lobbied to brand the South as a section (a fundamentally political identification turning social/cultural) such a group.

At the same time as the mail campaign changed the structure of America’s public sphere, it changed the content of the public sphere of letters. In other words, as elaborated earlier, the mail campaign dubbed slavery a “common concern,” an acceptable topic of discussion, at least in the Northern states. While there was no agreed position for “the slave question” in the public/private binary, slavery was now, as Garrison wrote to a friend in January of 1836,
"emphatically a NATIONAL object, around which are clustering momentous consequences." 

While reluctant and paranoid Southerners placed slavery in the private sphere of domesticity, abolitionists and sectionalist-minded Northerners positioned it in the public sphere where it could be examined, debated, and criticized or defended in a rational manner.

Finally, behavior in the public sphere was at stake in the mail campaign. Habermas’s model of the public sphere in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* relies on individual, rational action, and the abolitionists violated these conditions on both counts. Abolitionism depended keenly on feeling—as the AASS declared in their *Second annual report*, they believed that those who could feel the horrors of slavery would act on it, and so they appealed directly to readers’ emotions. And their petitioning campaign (spearheaded most often by “irrational” women) was a fundamentally collective activity. Additionally, as Habermas suggests in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, there is a subtle if fundamental difference between oral and written discourse. When the conversations of salons and coffee houses moved from physical space to the printed periodical, the critical elements of immediacy and continuity were lost. In the same way, as the public sphere of discussion (especially about so contentious a topic as slavery) moved from a face-to-face discussion to a printed pamphlet or newspaper in Jacksonian America, new standards of manners and accountability needed adoption to preserve polite conversation. The need for politeness was never more apparent than when the American Anti-Slavery Society had to be held accountable for its remote attack.

People Relating to Government

Habermas theorizes that the interface between public authority and the private realm is “critical”—he writes that “that zone of continuous administrative contact became ‘critical’ also

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247 Habermas, 42.
in the sense that it provoked the critical judgment of a public making use of its reason.\textsuperscript{248} In this way, that the mail campaign fundamentally changed the ways Americans could and wanted to relate to their state and federal governments is significant. The mail campaign encouraged the proliferation of new publics related in various ways to slavery; this can be alternately understood as the creation of civic consciousnesses explicitly related to slavery. Petitioning was adopted as the abolitionists’ favorite and primary means of influencing national policymaking. The petition was written for an audience, and it was understood that this audience was required to respond in some way to the petition.\textsuperscript{249} Since petitions originated as descriptions of personal grievances and pleas, these petitions initiated a personal relationship between the petitioner and his or her representative government. What was new in the aftermath of the mail campaign was the scale of petitions. As these appeals increasingly came from groups, not single individuals, they heralded the beginning of well-organized interest groups. People could interact with their government not just by voting, but by defining themselves and acting on a single issue. And they could interact on a more personal and direct manner than simply casting a vote. In short, the mail campaign ushered in an era of broader and deeper political engagement on the behalf of more and more Americans.

The mail campaign also fostered an awareness of the government’s role in everyman America’s everyday life. Richard John argues that the central government had a powerful part in regulating daily routine, and in no way was that power more apparent than in its postal policy; the postal system was its most visible arm in the way it brought news to isolated towns, connected disparate regions of the country, shaped public opinion, and structured a town’s

\textsuperscript{248} Habermas 24.
\textsuperscript{249} Zaeske, 12.
geography and temporal rhythm. But it was not until the crisis of the mail campaign that Americans were truly aware of the extent of changes U.S. postal policy had wrought on their lives. Suddenly, Americans were aware that the government had enabled the abolitionists; through the bureaucracy of the mail, the government allowed for such cultural chaos. At the same time, discussions about censorship reawakened Americans to the power the government could have over their thoughts, words, and deeds. More or less, the mail campaign sparked a more pervasive political awareness.

Government Relating to Slavery

Another reading of the mail campaign’s political significance is that it represented a fundamental challenge to federalism. From the federal government to the state governments to the national public sphere, no one could agree on the proper balance of powers and relationship regarding slavery; nor had they been in 1787, at the writing of the Constitution. The reaction to the mail campaign illustrated the country’s diverging expectations of what the federal government could, and should, do about slavery. While everyone from Arthur Tappan to Andrew Jackson denied Congress the power to directly abolish slavery in states where it already existed, opinion was split as to what smaller actions the federal government could take. States rights champions, like John C. Calhoun, placed the locus of power with the individual states, while supporters of a strong central government, gave power to a dominant executive. These groups disagreed as to who could make what kinds of laws. The mail crisis was at its heart an expression of the public sphere’s challenge to the public authority’s policies, attitudes, and powers.

250 John, 19.
251 Ibid., 60.
Regardless of what the people wanted their government to do, the government’s relationship with slavery changed subtly as it negotiated a balance between ignoring the institution and actively working to support or attack it. The mail campaign presented the government, at the federal and state levels, a challenge they had to address. In his “Message of the President of the United States, to the two Houses of Congress, at the commencement of the first session of the Twenty-fourth Congress,” Andrew Jackson dedicated some time to discussing the abolitionist mail. “Important principles are involved in this question [of how to deal with incendiary mail],” he declared. “It merits the grave consideration of all departments of the Government.” While his message affirmed the rights of states to do what they want and need to protect the institution of slavery within their borders, he denied individuals the unadulterated right of free speech: “[…] Few will maintain that they have a right, unless it is obtained by a compact or treaty, to carry on such discussions within those communities either orally or by the distribution of printed papers, particularly if it be in violation of their peculiar laws, and at the hazard of their peace and existence.” “It has never been alleged that these laws are incompatible with the constitution and law of the United States,” he said, of such censorship. He pledged the support of the federal government and its power to support states and protect them from domestic disturbance. As such, “it may safely be assumed that the United States have no right, through their officers or departments, knowingly to be instrumental in producing, within the several States, the very mischief which the constitution commands them to repress.” Since the federal government could not let itself be complicit in promoting domestic violence, it could

252 Andrew Jackson, Message from the President of the United States, to the two Houses of Congress, at the commencement of the first session of the Twenty-fourth Congress. December 8, 1835. Read, and committed to a Committee of the Whole House on the State of the Union, 24th Cong., 1st session, December 8, 1835, 397.
253 Ibid., 397.
254 Ibid., 398.
255 Ibid., 398.
not “afford the agency of their mails and post offices […] in the circulation of papers calculated to produce domestic violence.” He ended his discussion of the mail by suggesting that Congress consider passing laws to prohibit the abolitionists’ use of the public mails.

Two months later, John C. Calhoun shot back at Jackson in his “Report from the Select Committee on the Circulation of Incendiary Publications.” “The committee fully concur with the President as to the character and tendency of the papers which have been attempted to be circulated in the South, through the mail, and participate with him in the indignant regret which he expresses at conduct so destructive of the peace and harmony of the country,” his report opened. But it quickly changed tone; in response to Jackson’s suggestion about laws governing the use of the mail, “After the most careful and deliberate investigation, [the committee] have been constrained to adopt the conclusion that Congress has not the power to pass such a law.” Calhoun believed that this was censorship in violation of the first amendment, and that rather than aiding states in preserving their slavery, grudging states these powers would “would deprive the slaveholding States of any portion of the protection promised by the federal government.

The mail campaign brought the federal government no closer to a consensus on its powers regarding slavery than it had been in 1787. And as always, the government’s knee-jerk response was to find a quick, temporary solution before debate could get out of hand—in other words, to ignore the problem. Of the 428 pages of Jackson’s message to Congress, the word “abolition” never occurs, and “slavery” appears only once.

256 Ibid., 398.
257 John Calhoun, In Senate of the United States. February 4, 1836. Read, ordered to be printed, and that 5,000 additional copies be furnished for the use of the Senate. Mr. Calhoun made the following report, with Senate Bill No. 122. The select committee to whom was referred that portion of the President’s message which relates to the attempts to circulate, through the mail, inflammatory appeals, to excite the slaves to insurrection, submit the following report…, 24th Cong, 1st session, February 4, 1836, title pg.
258 Ibid., title pg.
259 Ibid., title pg.
The quintessential example of the repression of the discourse on slavery is the gag rule, adopted by both the House and Senate in May 1836 and continually renewed until the Civil War. Arguably a direct response to the mail campaign and the abolitionists' petition campaign, both houses of Congress "Resolved, That all petitions, memorials, resolutions, propositions, or papers, relating in any way or to any extent whatever to the subject of slavery, or the abolition of slavery, shall, without being either printed or referred, be laid upon the table, and that no further action whatever shall be had thereon." Yet as I argued earlier, the gag rule did nothing to stem the flow of abolitionist petitions to Congress, and did even less to suppress the national discourse surrounding slavery. In fact, the gag rule encouraged the creation of further publics as it enraged those whose rights it abridged. The tabled petitions "provided ammunition for [Americans] who sought to protect the right of petition as well as those who sympathized with the objects of the prayers." Slavery, and all the issues it encompassed, was on the national agenda and could no longer be ignored.

260 U.S. Congress House of Representatives, Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States: Being the first session of the Twenty-fourth Congress, begun and held at the City of Washington, December 7, 1835, and in the sixtieth year of the independence of the said United States, 24th Cong., 1st session, December 7, 1835, 822.
CONCLUSION

"Slavery and democracy, especially the democracy founded, as ours is, upon the rights of man, would seem to be incompatible with each other. And yet at this time the democracy of our country is supported chiefly, if not entirely, by slavery. There is a small, shallow, and enthusiastic party preaching the abolition of slavery upon the principles of extreme democracy; but the democratic spirit and the popular feeling is everywhere against them. There have been riots at Washington not much inferior in atrocity to those in Baltimore. A slave of Mrs. Thornton's made an attempt to murder her and her mother with an axe in the night. He was prevented from accomplishing his purpose by his own mother; and, in revenge for this, mobs of white people at Washington have destroyed sundry negro houses, school-houses, and a church. In the State of Mississippi they have hanged up several persons for circulating abolition pamphlets. In Charleston, South Carolina, the principal men of the State, with the late Governor, Hayne, at their head, seize upon the mails, with the co-operation of the Postmaster himself, and purify it of the abolition pamphlets; and the Postmaster-General, Amos Kendall, neither approves nor disapproves of this proceeding. At Washington, a man named Crandall has been imprisoned for circulating incendiary pamphlets, and in Halifax County, Virginia, a man named David F. Robertson, a Scotch teacher, was in danger of his life, because another man named Robertson was suspected of having dropped in a steamboat the first number of a newspaper printed at New York with the title of Human Rights. In Boston there is a call for a town-meeting, signed by more than five hundred names, with H.G. Otis and P.C. Brooks at their head. This meeting is to be held next Friday, and is to pass resolutions against the abolitionists to soothe and conciliate the temper of the Southern slave-holders. All this is democracy and the rights of man."

So John Quincy Adams, ex-President of the United States and current Representative for the state of Massachusetts, wrote in his diary on August 18, 1835. Even at this early stage of the mail crisis, Adams showed a keen awareness of the rights-driven dimension of the slavery issue. His diary entry demonstrated a nuanced understanding of democracy—that all these actions occurring around the country represented "the rights of man," whether or not he agreed with them—and the key role "public feeling" played in dictating individual action.

By December, Adams's habitual fears of a Southern-power conspiracy intensified. Southern senators were attempting the elimination of all antislavery petitions, which worried him. "The voice of Freedom has not yet been heard," he wrote to his son Charles in Boston, "and I am earnestly urged to speak in her name. She will be trampled under foot if I do not; and

I shall be trampled under foot if I do... What can I do?" Like average Americans around the
country, Adams was catalyzed by the crisis and forced to harden and articulate his views about
slavery and abolitionism; for this statesman, the fallout of the mail campaign was that he,
somewhat unwillingly at first, took on the role of the political voice of the abolitionists in
Washington. The most vocal opponent of Pinckney’s gag rule for its violation of Americans’
basic civil rights, Adams faithfully (and stubbornly) submitted every antislavery petition that
came his way, even those written by citizens of states other than Massachusetts. He continually
frustrated his colleagues by manipulating procedural parliamentary rules to read every petition he
received.264 “If southern members [of Congress] thought the business of the House could
proceed in peace without the threat of disruption from Adams and his abolition petitions, they
were wrong,” writes David C. Frederick. “Adams employed his right to free expression to
protect the rights of complainants to bring petitions.”265 His dedication to what he called the
“four freedoms” was absolute: freedom of speech, freedom of petition, freedom of debate in
Congress, and freedom of the press.266

Adams kept abreast of the “changes of public opinion upon this subject,”267 as he wrote
in his diary, and kept his congressional actions on pace with the (albeit slow and gradually
changing) opinions of his constituents.268 Adams was the abolitionists’ “most trusted”
congressman.269 He would twice defy Congress’s attempts to censure him for violating the gag

263 Adams to Charles Francis Adams, in Samuel Flagg Bemis, John Quincy Adams and the Union (New York:
264 Frederick, 133.
265 Frederick, 134.
267 Adams, 265.
268 Bernis, 350.
269 Miller, 303.
rule, and later serve as the senior defense attorney in the *Amistad* trials in 1840. His newfound popularity can be understood as one of the tributary issues introduced by the mail campaign. Adams’s congressional activities, much like the issues of civil rights, citizenship, and the future of the Union for which he acted, fell under slavery’s umbrella.

The abolitionist mail campaign of 1835 provides us with a convenient microcosm of the social and political environment of the antebellum era. In the year spanning May 1835 through May 1836, Americans raised the issues that would shape the country as it hurtled towards its ultimate national crisis, the Civil War: slavery, women’s rights, free speech, religion, state’s rights. Reflecting on a conversation with a friend on the possibility of gradual emancipation, John Quincy Adams wrote in his diary,

> I believed the slave-holders would never consent to it. My own opinion is, that the planters of the South will separate from the Union, in terror of the emancipation of their slaves, and that then the slaves will emancipate themselves by a servile war. This consummation may yet be remote, and must be preceded by the sacrifice of the public lands to the Western States, to be effected by the cooperation of the South to the purchase that of the West in perpetuating the servitude of their negroes. This coalition accomplished the election of Andrew Jackson as President of the United States, and is now in full vigor to secure the election of his successor. This is the under-current, with the tide of democracy at the surface.

Americans recognized that the introduction of slavery into the public domain had irreversibly changed the country. While it would be a generation before Adams’s prediction would come (at least partially) to fruition, the wheels were in motion by 1835. The mail campaign of 1835 and the ensuing debates galvanized the United States and initiated a structural transformation of its public sphere. What resulted was a civil society more explicitly sectional and populated by

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270 Frederick, 134 and 138.
271 Davis, 21.
272 Adams, 259.
diverse Northern and Southern publics defining themselves around slavery. The lines had not yet hardened to the point of secession, but the damage done was irrevocable.
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