

Garrisonians' Domestic Abolitionism

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The phrase “domestic abolitionism” is meant to encapsulate the central place of domesticity and the home in Garrisonians' antislavery activism and discourse. Antislavery activists' homes were often deeply political spaces. As mentioned by Corey M. Brooks in his recent essay on the historiography of abolitionism, “[w]e would benefit from new attempts to digest how antislavery politics might have been negotiated at home, within a wide range of domestic spheres across the North.”¹ Homes were places where activists met after days spent at public meetings and conventions, where they stayed with other activists when they travelled, where they discussed the abolitionist cause with their family and informal circles of friends, such as the “Boston Clique,” which was formed by “elite Garrisonians” who provided William Lloyd Garrison with both moral and financial support.² It was also at home that, according to his children, Garrison corrected the proofs of the *Liberator* which he brought from the office.³ The home came to be considered as a political space by Garrison as shown by the name of the first house where he and his wife Helen Eliza Benson Garrison lived, “Freedom's Cottage.”

The trope of domesticity was often used by Garrisonians, who relied on “conventional gender roles” to attack slavery.⁴ They denounced the distortion of gender norms by the Southern slaveholding system. On the one hand, Southern enslavers were the epitome of “the perversion of masculine powers and values.”⁵ On the other hand, “[t]he degenderization process, argued Garrisonians, turned slaves into the most egregious examples of false womanhood and manhood.”⁶ According to them, enslaved people were kept from fulfilling their roles as mothers, fathers, husbands, and wives.

Consumption was considered as a possible weapon against slavery. Very early on, some activists abstained from consuming goods produced by slave labor as shown by the example of Benjamin Lay. What came to be known as the “free produce” movement in the 1820s had a complex, transatlantic trajectory. While not all abolitionist activists agreed with it, women played an important part in it, as evidenced by the creation of the Female Association for Promoting the Manufacture and Use of Free Cotton in Philadelphia in 1829.⁷

The importance of the home and of domesticity in Garrisonian activism was linked to the crucial role women played in the movement. The presence of women in antislavery activities is as old as antislavery itself. Manisha Sinha shows that Black women brought freedom suits against their masters as early as the 17th century. Between 1716 and 1783, 14 black women sued for their freedom in New England. We also find women close to the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage.⁸ Women's central presence in the second wave of abolitionism has also been very well documented. The women's antislavery associations that were created in the 1830s as auxiliaries of the American Anti-Slavery Society were involved in a great variety of actions, including petitions and the organization

¹ Corey M. Brooks, “Reconsidering Politics in the Study of American Abolitionists,” *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 8.2 (June 2018): 301. I want to thank Michaël Roy for the reference.

² Stacey M. Robertson, *Parker Pillsbury: Radical Abolitionist, Male Feminist* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 108. For a discussion of the “Boston Clique,” see Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), chapter 2.

³ Wendell Phillips Garrison and Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of His Life Told by His Children*, Volume IV, 1861-1879 (New-York: The Century Co., 1889), 330.

⁴ Kristin Hoganson, “Garrisonian Abolitionists and the Rhetoric of Gender, 1850-1860,” *American Quarterly* 45 (1993): 574.

⁵ Chris Dixon, *Perfecting the Family: Antislavery Marriages in Nineteenth-Century America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 158.

⁶ Hoganson, “Garrisonian Abolitionists and the Rhetoric of Gender, 1850-1860,” 561.

⁷ Carol Faulkner, “The Root of the Evil: Free Produce and Radical Antislavery, 1820-1860,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 27.3 (Fall, 2007): 377-405.

⁸ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

of antislavery fairs that aimed at raising money for the movement. Although important from the early 1830s on, the role of women in the abolitionist movement was at first limited by conventions and the reluctance to challenge gender roles among male and female activists. Women's early abolitionist role was rooted in the belief in "female influence," a notion based on qualities presumably specific to women that defined their role and was shared by male and female abolitionists in the 1830s. Pieces published in the *Liberator* in the first half of the 1830s encouraged women to join the abolitionist cause in the name of their reputed natural inclination for empathy and the widely perceived natural bond uniting free and slave women—including mothers—, best represented by the image of the female supplicant used to introduce the "Ladies Department" in the publication. Female abolitionists themselves disagreed over the significance of their activism and its influence on traditional gender norms.⁹ They were also divided over the question of gender-segregated associations at the end of the 1830s, when the issue of their integration into the same organizations as men was raised. Lydia Maria Child famously compared female abolitionist organizations to "half a pair of scissors." Other activists, such as Lucretia Mott, saw women-only associations as places of empowerment.¹⁰

In this paper, I would like to suggest a slightly different take on the question of women's participation in Garrisonian abolitionism through the notion of domestic abolitionism. While many important books have been written about the women abolitionists who pushed the boundaries of women's traditional roles by fighting against slavery publicly and visibly at a time when women were confined by dominant ideals, I would like to focus on the women who, though central to the fight, did not assume a public role, working behind the scenes, within the constraints of what could be interpreted at first sight as traditional marriages. My perspective is not to add to the "behind every great man there stands a woman" narrative, but rather to show a slightly different view on the domestic sphere as deeply political, thus questioning the traditional separation of spheres, which was not a reality in people's lives in the 19th century, and certainly not among Garrisonian abolitionists.¹¹

In order to deal with Garrisonian domestic abolitionism, I will focus mostly on the Garrisons, although many other abolitionist marriages present a similar profile. Leigh Fought thus describes Frederick Douglass's escape with the help of his first wife, Anna Murray, as "a joint venture undertaken to create a life in which they could have a chance to thrive and protect the integrity of their family to the fullest extent of their abilities."¹² Both Helen Benson Garrison and Anna Murray Douglass were clearly different from the women their husbands came to be acquainted with in their work as reformers and invited into their families.¹³ On his first wedding anniversary, Garrison might have written his brother-in-law that he did not "marry [his wife], expecting that she would assume a prominent station in the anti-slavery cause, but for domestic quietude and happiness," adding that he was "completely absorbed" in the antislavery fight, and "that it was undoubtedly wise in [him] to select as a partner one who, while her benevolent feelings were in unison with [his], was less immediately and entirely connected with it."¹⁴ His sons might have described their mother as a "conventional housewife" in the biography of their father.¹⁵ The fact remains that Helen Benson Garrison, as well as Anna Murray and other women, were central to the

⁹ On female abolitionists' different perceptions of their role in the movement, see: Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horn, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Carol Faulkner, *Lucretia Mott's Heresy: Abolition and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 81, 82.

¹¹ On the role of the home among Garrisonians, see Hélène Quanquin, "'The World to Each Other': The Joint Politics of Isolation and Reform among Garrisonian Abolitionists," in *Cultures of Solitude: Loneliness-Limitation-Liberation*, ed. Ina Bergmann and Stefan Hippler (Frankfurt Am Main: Peter Lang, 2017), 146-148.

¹² Leigh Fought, *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 50.

¹³ R.J. Young, *Antebellum Black Activists: Race, Gender, and Self* (NY: Garland Publishing, 1996), 126.

¹⁴ William Lloyd Garrison to George W. Benson, September 4, 1835, Garrison Family Papers, Houghton Library. Quoted in Walter McIntosh Merrill, "A Passionate Attachment: William Lloyd Garrison's Courtship of Helen Eliza Benson," *The New England Quarterly* 29.2 (June 1956): 200.

¹⁵ Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879*, 4: 329.

antislavery fight, making of the domestic space the center of abolitionist agitation. In February 1861, when Garrison wrote his wife for her fiftieth birthday, he paid tribute to her domestic qualities: "As a wife, for a period of more than twenty-six years," he wrote, "you have left nothing undone [...] to render home the all-powerful magnet of attraction, and the focal point of domestic enjoyment."¹⁶ Fifteen years later, in a eulogy of Helen Eliza Garrison, abolitionist Wendell Phillips used the same image to describe Helen Benson Garrison's role: "We miss the magnet that kept this home together. We miss the tie that bound so lovingly into one life so many lives. That is broken."¹⁷ When Anna Murray died in 1882, Douglass wrote in a letter, "Mother was the post in the center of my house and held us together."¹⁸

Helen Benson was born in an abolitionist family. She was the daughter of George Benson, a prominent Providence abolitionist, and Garrison found in her family great support for his activities.¹⁹ They met in April 1833, when Garrison visited Providence right before embarking on his first trip to England, and started a correspondence in January 1834. He was immediately "favourably and deeply impressed by [her] sweet countenance and pleasant conversation" and he claimed that she was "in [his] thoughts" when he was in England.²⁰ Later on, he recalled that when he met Helen Eliza Benson "it was something very like [love at first sight]," a feeling similar to the one described by his fiancée.²¹ After they were engaged, Garrison praised the "fine and perfect affinity" existing between their two "souls." "I am no longer William Lloyd Garrison," he wrote her, "but Helen Eliza Benson."²²

Right from the start of their relationship, Helen adhered to the idea that her role as a wife would be to help her husband fulfill his mission. When in January 1834, William Lloyd asked her to organize a women's abolitionist society in Providence,²³ she answered with great diffidence: "You say that you look to me for the formation of an antislavery society; but you are not aware how extremely limited my influence is, and inefficient my efforts would be in such a cause," she wrote him. She was however ready to dedicate her life to that end, promising him that it would "be [her] highest aim to seek [his] welfare and approbation." She was aware of "the weight and responsibility" that came with her being the spouse of a prominent abolitionist leader and assured him that he should "[n]ever feel the least anxiety for [her]."²⁴ They married on September 4, 1834 in a ceremony where no alcohol and no cake were served.²⁵ After becoming engaged to Helen Benson, Garrison expressed his conviction that "a wedded life, if there be a union of hearts as well as of hands, is usually preferable to a single one."²⁶

¹⁶ *Helen Eliza Garrison. A Memorial* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1876), 30.

¹⁷ *Helen Eliza Garrison. A Memorial*, 42.

¹⁸ Frederick Douglass to Doctress S.M. Loguen, August 12, 1882, quoted in Philip S. Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass on Women's Rights*, Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, n°25 (Westport, Con.: Greenwood Press, 1976).

¹⁹ Merrill, "A Passionate Attachment: William Lloyd Garrison's Courtship of Helen Eliza Benson," 185.

²⁰ William Lloyd Garrison to Helen Eliza Benson, March 26, 1834, Garrison Family Papers, Houghton Library.

²¹ William Lloyd Garrison, "In Memoriam," in *Helen Eliza Garrison. A Memorial* (Cambridge, Riverside Press, 1876), 18. Helen Benson remembered being "riveted to the spot" when she first met Garrison. Helen Eliza Benson Garrison to William Lloyd Garrison, April 3, 1834, Garrison Family Papers, Houghton Library.

²² William Lloyd Garrison to Helen Eliza Benson, April 24, 1834, Garrison Family Papers, Houghton Library.

²³ William Lloyd Garrison to Helen Benson Garrison, January 18, 1834, Garrison Family Papers, Houghton Library. The society was later formed in April 1835 on the occasion of British abolitionist George Thompson's visit to Providence. See George Thompson to "My dear Sir," New York, New York, April 1835, in George Thompson, *Letters and Addresses by George Thompson during his mission in the United States, from Oct. 1st, 1834, to Nov. 27, 1835* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1837), 60.

²⁴ Helen Eliza Benson Garrison to William Lloyd Garrison, April 14, 1834, Garrison Family Papers, Houghton Library.

²⁵ Helen Eliza Benson to William Lloyd Garrison, June 23, 1834, Garrison Family Papers, Houghton Library.

²⁶ William Lloyd Garrison to Helen Eliza Benson, April 5, 1834, Garrison Family Papers, Houghton Library.

Life as the spouse of the leader of the abolitionist movement was clearly not an easy task. The attacks that targeted him and the danger he faced had a clear influence on his wife and his family. During the 1835 mob that took place in Boston, she was pregnant with their first child and was impressed with the violence that had been aimed at her husband. She also had to deal with his numerous absences. On June 14, 1840, a few hours before he landed in England to participate in the First World's Antislavery Convention in London, he thus wrote her that, "Sometimes you have hinted that I was too ready to go away from home." Even if he chose to interpret this remark, not "as a reproach," but as a sign of her "affection" for him, this shows the tensions that existed in the Garrisons' marriage, at least in its early years.²⁷

Financial difficulties were also a constant worry in the Garrison family and it was Helen Benson Garrison who bore the brunt of her husband's low income and the lifestyle associated with his leadership of the abolitionist movement. After his death, his daughter recalled his somewhat careless attitude on money issues. "My father's optimistic nature and keen sense of humor", she wrote, "could always be relied upon and in times of financial stress he would put his arm around my anxious mother, and walk up and down the room with her, saying: 'My dear, the Lord will provide.'"²⁸

The domestic sphere had deep significance for Garrison. Despite his frequent absences, his "home character" was often extolled by his contemporaries and his relatives.²⁹ His sons reminded him as "a handy man about the house," as he "hung the window-shades and the pictures."³⁰ The stories they tell, however, show that Garrison's presence was sometimes overwhelming. When, "like the conventional housewife," his wife "sometimes wished the shades drawn, to shield her carpets from the sun," he demanded "abundance of light." If they note that she "accepted without a murmur of dissent, and in all cheerfulness, the obligation to receive the bidden and unbidden guest, of all colors and conditions," the words they used show that she probably was not given a choice.³¹ Helen Benson and William Lloyd Garrison both used the term "hotel" to describe their home, an allusion to the stream of guests that they entertained as well as its nature as the meeting point between the public and the private.³²

Despite what looks like a traditional marriage based on a separation of spheres, the experience of domesticity was crucial to Garrison, as it was for other male and female Garrisonian abolitionists. In her study of the Weston sisters, Lee V. Chambers notes that the role of the household "in shaping women's political work" has been minimized by historians because of its strict definition as a "private" sphere.³³ "Those who talk so idly about us," Sarah M. Grimké wrote to Abby Kelley in June 1838, "are afraid I suspect that the woman question will gain ground too rapidly, if it is discovered that the same woman, who can hold an audience in profound attention as an A.S. lecturer can retire from the sound of public applause & quietly & unobtrusively perform the duties of a housekeeper & a wife."³⁴ Grimké thus pointed to the interdependence of the two spheres as well as the fact that abolitionist activism did not run counter to domesticity but rather went hand in hand with it. At a time when women's domesticity was celebrated as the dominant model, men's participation in the household was also becoming the norm of middle-class masculinity, showing "that the boundary between public and private was not strictly equivalent to the

²⁷ William Lloyd Garrison to Helen Benson Garrison, June 14, 1840, in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*. Volume 2: *A House Dividing Against Itself*, ed. Louis Ruchames (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 642.

²⁸ Fanny Garrison Villard, *William Lloyd Garrison on Non-Resistance, Together with a Personal Sketch by his Daughter Fanny Garrison Villard and a Tribute by Leo Tolstoi* (New York: The Nation Press Printing, 1924), 8.

²⁹ Theodore D. Weld to "my dear Mr Garrison," June 21, 1879, Garrison Family Papers, Houghton Library (emphasis in the original).

³⁰ Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879*, 4:310.

³¹ Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879*, 4:329.

³² Helen Benson Garrison to William Lloyd Garrison, Jr., January 21, 1858, Garrison Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection; Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879*, 4:328.

³³ Lee V. Chambers, *The Weston Sisters: An American Abolitionist Family* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 15.

³⁴ Sarah M. Grimké to Abby Kelley, June 15, 1838, Abby Kelley Foster Papers, American Antiquarian Society.

gender line.”³⁵ In November 1838, Samuel J. May extolled men’s domestic role in strikingly modern terms: “I hold that husbands and fathers are as much bound by their domestic ties as wives and mothers are and may not with greater propriety neglect their households for any more public cares,” he claimed.³⁶ This means that, for at least some abolitionist activists, their engagement was inextricably bound to their experiences of domesticity, and that for them abolitionism was indeed “domestic abolitionism.”

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³⁵ Shawn Johansen, *Family Men: Middle-Class Fatherhood in Early Industrializing America* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 19.

³⁶ Samuel Joseph May to Maria Weston Chapman, November 24, 1838, Boston Public Library.