



“Abolition” Text from *Freedom: A History of US*, Webisode 5  
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/historyofus/web05/segment3.html>

1. Abolition! Back in 1765 Americans had shouted the word. Before the Revolution it was the hated British stamp tax the colonists wanted to **abolish**. Then the word began to be used with a new meaning. It was the slave trade some wanted to abolish, and then slavery itself. In 1775 Benjamin Franklin helped found the American Abolition Society. The Constitution said the slave trade could be officially ended in 1808. When Thomas Jefferson becomes president, he reminds everyone of that, and a law is passed ending the slave trade. Now, no additional people can be enslaved—at least not legally. An elated Jefferson said this: “I congratulate you, fellow citizens, on the approach of the period at which you may **interpose** your authority **constitutionally** to withdraw the citizens of the United States from all further participation in those violations of human rights which have been so long continued on the unoffending inhabitants of Africa.”
2. But ending the international slave trade doesn't put an end to slavery itself, which continues to grow by **natural increase**. And within the South a major internal slave trade develops. Many thinking people—both Northerners and Southerners—believe slavery is morally wrong. Yet few are willing to do anything about it. Slavery is a profitable way of life. Those who do speak out—the abolitionists—aren't very popular. Many people argue that if slavery is abolished it will wreck the Southern economy. James Henry Hammond was one of them. He said, “Do you imagine you could prevail on us to give up a thousand million dollars in the value of our slaves, and a thousand million more in the value of our lands?”
3. The Southern leaders don't seem to understand. Immigrants and ideas and inventions are beginning to change the North. The South will be left out of much of that excitement. The Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville visits the United States and observes a free state and a slave state. He writes about what he sees: “On the north bank of the Ohio, everything is activity, industry; labor is honored; there are no slaves. Pass to the south bank and the scene changes so suddenly that you think yourself on the other side of the world; the **enterprising** spirit is gone.”

**Definitions:**

Abolish: to officially end a law or system

Interpose: to put yourself between two things

Constitutionally: in agreement with the Constitution

Natural increase: when a population grows because more people are born

Enterprising: able to think of and carry out new ideas



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4. And yet still, because of the huge importance of cotton, the South remains the wealthiest part of the nation. Both North and South are jealous of political power. Each wants to dominate the government in Washington. But as long as Congress is evenly divided between slave states and free states, there is some stability. Then, in 1820, Missouri asks to enter the Union as a slave state. Northerners are alarmed. If Missouri becomes a state, the North will be outvoted in Congress. What can be done? Finally, a solution is found. Maine is carved from Massachusetts and made into a state, a free state. That keeps the balance of free and slave states. At the same time, the territories north of Missouri's southern border are to remain free. That action is called the Missouri Compromise. It keeps North and South talking to each other, but just barely. In 1845 slaveowner James Hammond writes this to an abolitionist. He says: “I **repudiate**, as ridiculously absurd, that much lauded dogma of Mr. Jefferson that ‘all men are born equal.’ No society has ever yet existed without a natural variety of classes. Slavery is truly the cornerstone and foundation of every well-designed and durable republican **edifice**.”
5. Meanwhile, Mr. Hammond and his planter friends are falling out of step with the European world. There, in the first half of the nineteenth century, most nations outlaw slavery. The Europeans begin to criticize the United States for allowing it. There are also white Northerners who are increasingly speaking out against slavery. By 1840 there are said to be about 2,000 abolitionist societies in the North. While some talk of gradually freeing the slaves and even paying the owners the cash value of their slaves, most abolitionists don't think anyone should be paid for owning anyone else. They want to end slavery—bam—just like that—and too bad for the slave owners. William Lloyd Garrison, a white man from Massachusetts, is the founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society and the publisher of the leading abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*. He says, “I do not wish to think, or speak, or write with **moderation**. No! Tell a man whose house is on fire, to give a moderate alarm, but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest—I will not retreat a single inch—and I WILL BE HEARD.”

**Definitions:**

Repudiate: deny, reject

Edifice: building

Moderation: within reasonable limits, not calling for extreme action

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