The Biography of William Lloyd Garrison

William Lloyd Garrison (December 13, 1805 – May 24, 1879) was a prominent American abolitionist, journalist, and social reformer. He is best known as the editor of the radical abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, and as one of the founders of the American Anti-Slavery Society, he promoted "immediate emancipation" of slaves in the United States. Garrison was also a prominent voice for the women's suffrage movement and a notable critic of the prevailing conservative religious orthodoxy that supported slavery and opposed suffrage for women.

Early life

William Lloyd Garrison was born in December 1805, in Newburyport, Massachusetts, the son of immigrants from the province of New Brunswick, Canada. Under the Seaman's Protection Act, Abijah Garrison, a merchant sailing pilot and master, had obtained American papers and moved his family to Newburyport in 1805. With the impact of the Congressional Embargo Act of 1807 on commercial shipping, the elder Garrison became unemployed and deserted the family in 1808. Garrison's mother, Frances Maria Lloyd, was reported to have been tall, charming and of a strong religious character. At her request, Garrison was known by his middle name, Lloyd. She died in 1823, in the town of Springfield.

Young Lloyd Garrison sold homemade lemonade, candy, and delivered wood to help support the family. In 1819, at fourteen, Garrison began working as an apprentice compositor for the *Newburyport Herald.* He soon began writing articles, often under the pseudonym Aristides, taking the name of an Athenian statesman and general known as "the Just." After his apprenticeship ended, he and a young printer named Isaac Knapp bought their own newspaper, the short-lived *Free Press*. One of their regular contributors was poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier. In this early work as a small-town newspaper writer, Garrison acquired skills he would later use as a nationally known writer, speaker and newspaper publisher. In 1828, he was appointed editor of the *National Philanthropist* in Boston, Massachusetts, the first American journal to promote legally mandated temperance.

Career as a reformer

When he was 25, he joined the Abolition movement. For a brief time, he became associated with the American Colonization Society, an organization that believed free blacks should immigrate to a territory on the west coast of Africa. Although some members of the society encouraged granting freedom to slaves, the majority saw the relocation as a means to reduce the number of free blacks in the United States and thus help preserve the institution of slavery. By late 1829-1830 "Garrison rejected colonization, publicly apologized for his error, and then, as was typical of him, he censured all who were committed to it." (William E. Cain, *William Lloyd Garrison and the fight against Slavery: Selections from the Liberator*)

Genius of Universal Emancipation

Garrison began writing for/and became, co-editor with Benjamin Lundy of the Quaker *Genius of Universal Emancipation* newspaper in Baltimore, Maryland. Garrison's experience as a printer and newspaper editor allowed him to revamp the layout of the paper and freed Lundy to spend more time traveling as an anti-slavery speaker. Garrison initially shared Lundy's gradualist views, but, while working for the *Genius*, he became convinced of the need to demand immediate and complete emancipation. Lundy and Garrison continued to work together on the paper in spite of their differing views, agreeing simply to sign their editorials to indicate who had written it.

One of the regular features that Garrison introduced during his time at the *Genius* was "The Black List," a column devoted to printing short reports of "the barbarities of slavery — kidnappings, whippings, murders." One of Garrison's "Black List" columns reported that a shipper from Garrison's hometown of Newburyport, Massachusetts — one Francis Todd — was involved in the slave trade, and that he had recently had slaves shipped from Baltimore to New Orleans on his ship *Francis*. Todd filed a suit for libel against both Garrison and Lundy, filing in Maryland in order to secure the favor of pro-slavery courts. The state of Maryland also brought criminal charges against Garrison, quickly finding him guilty and ordering him to pay a fine of $50 and court costs. (Charges against Lundy were dropped on the grounds that he had been traveling and not in control of the newspaper when the story was printed.) Garrison was unable to pay the fine and was sentenced to a jail term of six months. He was released after seven weeks when the antislavery philanthropist Arthur Tappan donated the money for the fine, but Garrison had decided to leave Baltimore, and he and Lundy amicably agreed to part ways.

The Liberator

In 1831, Garrison returned to New England and founded a weekly anti-slavery newspaper of his own, *The Liberator*. In the first issue, Garrison stated:

> “I am aware that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for severity? I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or to speak, or write, with moderation. No! no! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen; – but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest – I will not equivocate – I will not excuse – I will not retreat a single inch – AND I WILL BE HEARD. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal, and to hasten the resurrection of the dead.”

Initial circulation of *The Liberator* was relatively limited; there were fewer than 400 subscriptions during the paper's second year. However, the publication gained subscribers and influence over the next three decades, until, after the end of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery nation-wide by the Thirteenth Amendment, Garrison published the last issue (number 1,820) on December 29, 1865, writing in his "Valedictory" column,

> “Commencing my editorial career when only twenty years of age, I have followed it continuously till I have attained my sixtieth year—first, in connection with *The Free Press*, in Newburyport, in the spring of 1826; next, with *The National Philanthropist*, in Boston, in 1827; next, with *The Journal of the Times*, in Bennington, Vt., in 1828–9; next, with *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, in Baltimore, in 1829–30; and, finally, with the *Liberator*, in Boston, from the 1st of January, 1831, to the 1st of January, 1866;—at the start, probably the youngest member of the editorial fraternity in the land, now, perhaps, the oldest, not in years, but in continuous service,—unless Mr. Bryant, of the New York *Evening Post*, be an exception. ... The object for which the *Liberator* was commenced—the extermination of chattel slavery—having been gloriously consummated, it seems to me specially appropriate to let its existence cover the historic period of the great struggle; leaving what remains to be done to complete the work of emancipation to other instrumentalities, (of which I hope to avail myself,) under new auspices, with more abundant means, and with millions instead of hundreds for allies.”

Organizations

Dinner bill of fair for Lloyd Garrison, Franklin Club, October 14, 1878.

In 1832, Garrison founded the New-England Anti-Slavery Society. The next year, he co-founded the American Anti-Slavery Society. That same year, 1833, Garrison also visited the United Kingdom and assisted in the anti-slavery movement there. He intended that the Anti-Slavery Society should not align itself with any political party and that women should be allowed full participation in society activities. Garrison was influenced by the ideas of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone and other feminists who joined the society. These positions were seen as controversial by the majority of Society members, and there was a major rift in the Society. In 1839, two brothers, Arthur Tappan and Lewis Tappan, left and formed a rival organization, the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society which did not admit women. A segment of the Society also withdrew and aligned itself with the newly founded Liberty Party, a political organization which named James G. Birney as its Presidential candidate. By the end of 1840, Garrison announced the formation of a third new organization, the Friends of Universal Reform, with sponsors and founding members including prominent reformers Maria Chapman, Abby Kelley Foster, Oliver Johnson, and Bronson Alcott (father of Louisa May Alcott).

Meanwhile, on September 4, 1834, Garrison married Helen Eliza Benson (1811-1876), the daughter of a retired abolitionist merchant. The couple had five sons and two daughters, of whom a son and a daughter died as children.

In 1853, Garrison credited Reverend John Rankin of Ohio as a primary influence on his career, calling him his "*anti-slavery father*" and saying that Rankin's "*...book on slavery was the cause of my entering the anti-slavery conflict.*" Rankin's "Letters on Slavery" were standard reading by Abolitionists across America and the Reverand is considered the "Father of the Abolitionist Movement".

William Lloyd Garrison, engraving from 1879 newspaper

Controversy

Garrison made a name for himself as one of the most articulate, as well as most radical, opponents of slavery. His approach to emancipation stressed nonviolence and passive resistance, and he attracted a vocal following. While some other abolitionists of the time favored gradual emancipation, Garrison argued for "immediate and complete emancipation of all slaves". On July 4, he publicly burnt a copy of the Constitution condemning it as "pro-slavery".

Garrison and *The Liberator* were ardently supported by the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, which held meetings, sponsored lectures, and helped to strengthen the female anti-slavery network throughout the Northeast. Garrison was an important contributor to the suffrage movement,

Garrison's outspoken anti-slavery views repeatedly put him in danger. Besides his imprisonment in Baltimore, the government of the State of Georgia offered a reward of $5,000 for his arrest, and he received numerous and frequent death threats.

William L. Garrison publicly burned a copy of the Constitution in 1844, declaring it "a Covenant with Death, an Agreement with Hell," referring to the compromise that had written slavery into the Constitution. This further signified his opposition to slavery in the 19th Century.

One of the most controversial events in pre-Civil War Boston history resulted from an Anti-Slavery Society lecture. In the fall of 1835, the society invited George Thompson, a fiery British abolitionist, to address them. When Thompson was unable to attend, Garrison agreed to take his place. An unruly mob threatened to storm the building in search of Thompson. The Mayor and police persuaded the Boston Female Anti-Slavery members to leave. The mob, however, pursued Garrison through the streets of Boston. Garrison was rescued from lynching and lodged overnight in the Leverett Street Jail before leaving the city for several weeks.

In 1849, Garrison became involved in one of Boston's most notable trials of the time. Washington Goode, a black seaman had been sentenced to death for the murder of a fellow black mariner, Thomas Harding. In *The Liberator* Garrison argued that the verdict relied on "circumstantial evidence of the flimsiest character..." and feared that the determination of the government to uphold its decision to execute Goode was based on race. As all other death sentences since 1836 in Boston had been commuted, Garrison concluded that Goode would be the last person executed in Boston for a capital offense writing, "Let it not be said that the last man Massachusetts bore to hang was a colored man!" Despite the efforts of Garrison and many other prominent figures of the time, Goode was hanged on May 25, 1849.

Garrison occasionally allowed essays in *The Liberator* from others, including 14-year-old Anna Dickinson, who in 1856 wrote an impassioned article pleading for emancipation of the slaves.

After abolition

After the abolition of slavery in the United States, Garrison continued working on other reform movements, especially temperance and women's suffrage. He ended the run of *The Liberator* at the end of 1865, and in May 1865, announced that he would resign the Presidency of the American Anti-Slavery Society and proposed a resolution to declare victory in the struggle against slavery and dissolve the Society. The resolution prompted sharp debate, however, by critics — led by his long-time ally Wendell Phillips — who argued that the mission of the AAS was not fully completed until black Southerners gained full political and civil equality. Garrison maintained that while complete civil equality was vitally important, the special task of the AAS was at an end, and that the new task would best be handled by new organizations and new leadership. With his long-time allies deeply divided, however, he was unable to muster the support he needed to carry the resolution, and the motion was defeated 118-48. Garrison went through with his resignation, declining an offer to continue as President, and Wendell Phillips assumed the Presidency of the AAS. Garrison declared that "My vocation, as an Abolitionist, thank God, has ended." Returning home to Boston, he told his wife resignedly, "So be it. I regard the whole thing as ridiculous." He withdrew completely from the AAS, which continued to operate for five more years, until the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. (According to Henry, Garrison was hurt by the rejection and remained peeved for years; "as the cycle came around, always managed to tell someone that he was *not* going to the next set of [AAS] meetings".)

After his withdrawal from AAS and the end of *The Liberator*, Garrison continued to participate in public debate and to support reform causes, devoting special attention to the causes of women's rights and of civil rights for blacks. During the 1870s, he made several speaking tours, contributed columns on Reconstruction and civil rights for the *The Independent* and the *Boston Journal*, took a position as associate editor and frequent contributor with the *Woman's Journal*, and participated in the American Woman Suffrage Association with his old allies Abby Kelley and Lucy Stone. While working with the AWSA in 1873, he finally healed his long estrangements from Frederick Douglass and Wendell Phillips, affectionately reuniting with them on the platform at an AWSA rally organized by Kelly and Stone on the one hundredth anniversary of the Boston Tea Party. When Charles Sumner died in 1874, some Republicans suggested Garrison as a possible successor to his Senate seat; Garrison declined on grounds of his moral opposition to taking government office.

Final years and death

Garrison spent more time at home with his family, writing weekly letters to his children, and caring for his increasingly ill wife, who had suffered a small stroke on December 30, 1863, and was increasingly confined to the house. Helen died on January 25, 1876, after a severe cold worsened into pneumonia. A quiet funeral was held in the Garrison home, but Garrison, overcome with grief and

confined to his bedroom with a fever and severe bronchitis, was unable to join the service downstairs. Wendell Phillips gave a eulogy and many of Garrison's old abolitionist friends joined him upstairs to offer their private condolences. Garrison recovered slowly from the loss of his wife and began to attend Spiritualist circles in the hope of communicating with Helen. Garrison made a final visit to England in 1877, where he visited George Thompson and other old friends from the British abolitionist movement.

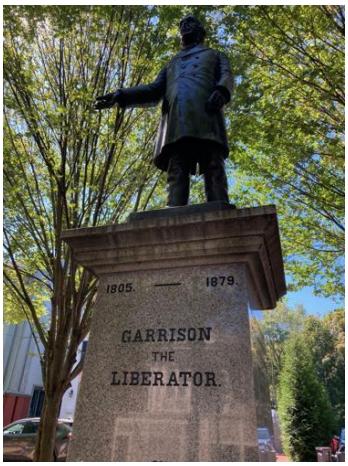
Grave of William Lloyd Garrison

Garrison, ailing from kidney disease, continued to weaken during April 1879, and went to live with his daughter Fanny's family in New York City. In late May his condition worsened, and his five surviving children rushed to join him. Fanny asked if he would enjoy singing some hymns, and although Garrison was unable to sing, his children sang his favorite hymns for him while he beat time with his hands and feet. On Saturday morning, Garrison lost consciousness and died just before midnight on May 24, 1879. Garrison was buried in the Forest Hills Cemetery in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts on May 28, 1879, after a public memorial service with eulogies by Theodore Dwight Weld and Wendell Phillips. Eight abolitionist friends, both white and black, served as his pallbearers. Flags were flown at half-staff across Boston. Frederick Douglass, then employed as a United States Marshal, spoke in memory of Garrison at a memorial service in a church in Washington, D.C., saying "It was the glory of this man that he could stand alone with the truth, and calmly await the result".

Garrison's son, also named William Lloyd Garrison (1838-1909), was a prominent advocate of the single tax, free trade, woman's suffrage, and of the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act. A second son, Wendell Phillips Garrison (1840-1907), was literary editor of the *New York Nation* from 1865 to 1906. Two other sons (George Thompson Garrison and Francis Jackson Garrison, his biographer) and a daughter (Helen Frances Garrison, who married Henry Villard) survived him.

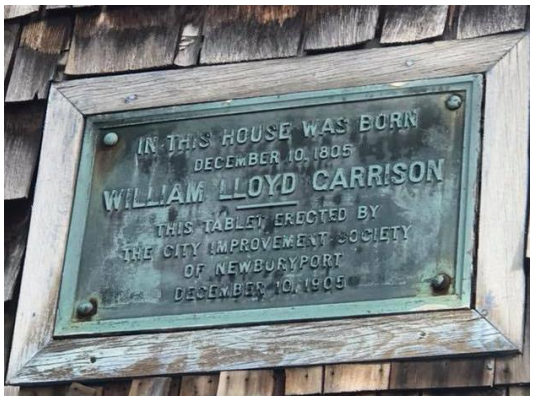
Honoring Garrison's 200th birthday, in December 2005 his descendants gathered in Boston for the first family reunion in about a century. They discussed the legacy and impact of their most notable family member, Garrison.

His Impact on Newburyport



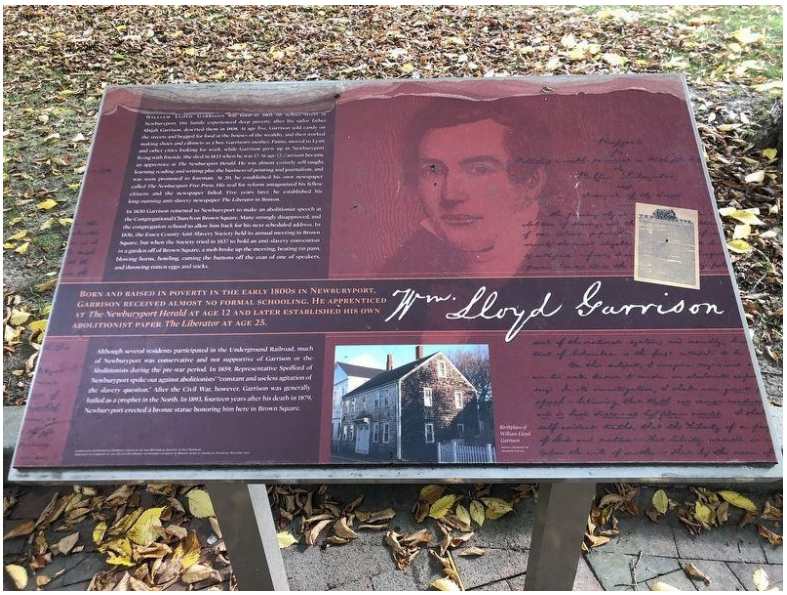
Today, Newburyport is extremely proud of their native son. His statue is located in Brown Park facing toward City Hall, with his quotations etched in stone. Interpretive panels surround him hailing his achievements. It was his apprenticeship at the *Newburyport Herald*, and his other newspaper, *The Free Press*, that would shape his powerful prose in the future. His birthplace on School Street directly behind the Old South Presbyterian Church is still made a pilgrimage site for aspiring journalists with award plaques attached to the side of the building. As part of Atwood Park, a special landscaping, Garrisons Garden, houses yet another interpretative plaque on his legacy.

Every year, on the Sunday nearest to his birthday (December 13th), a special guest is invited to comment on William Lloyd Garrison and to advocate for championing rights for oppressed minority groups and is held in the Old South Presbyterian Church which is directly in front of his homestead. William Lloyd Garrison lecture is organized by the independent volunteer Friends of William Lloyd Garrison.



But in the history of Newburyport, it was not always so. Abolitionists were shunned by the merchants of the city. The fear was that being identified as a center of anti-slavery, the South, the city's main source of molasses (for rum) and cotton (For the textile mills) would dry up or be attacked with punishing price increases. When rallies were held, often, angry mobs would form to discourage their meetings.

When William Lloyd Garrison accused Captain Francis Todd of Newburyport of hauling slaves on his ship, *Francis*, The mariner brought a lawsuit in pro-slavery Maryland. He vehemently denied hauling slaves. His efforts were supported by other merchants in Newburyport. The Captain won the lawsuit and Garrison was thrown into jail to serve for six months. It was only much later that it was discovered that Francis Todd had indeed been hauling slaves, though he claimed it was only one time. Regardless, as the nation's mood swung; Captain Todd was thrown out of the Newburyport Marine Society in disgrace.



Works online

- Address to the Colonization Society, a Fourth of July oration delivered in 1829 at the Park Street Church in Boston. This was Garrison's first major public statement against slavery.
- An Address Delivered in Marlboro Chapel, a Fourth of July oration delivered in 1838, discussing Garrison's views of slave rebellion and the prospects for violence. From the Antislavery Literature Project.
- To the Public, Garrison's introductory column for *The Liberator* (January 1, 1831).
- Truisms, from *The Liberator* (January 8, 1831).
- The Insurrection, Garrison's reaction to news of Nat Turner's rebellion, in *The Liberator* (September 3, 1831).
- On the Constitution and the Union, from *The Liberator* (December 29, 1832).
- Declaration of Sentiments, adopted by the Boston Peace Convention (September 18, 1838), reprinted in *The Liberator* (September 28, 1838).
- Abolition at the Ballot Box, from *The Liberator* (June 28, 1839).
- The American Union, from *The Liberator* (January 10, 1845).
- The Tragedy at Harper's Ferry, Garrison's first public commentary on John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, from *The Liberator* (October 28, 1859).
- John Brown and the Principle of Nonresistance, a speech given for a meeting in the Tremont Temple, Boston, on December 2, 1859, the day that John Brown was hanged. Reprinted in *The Liberator* (December 16, 1859).
- The War—Its Cause and Cure, from *The Liberator* (May 3, 1861).
- Valedictory: The Final Number of *The Liberator*, closing column for *The Liberator* (December 29, 1865).
- No Union With Slaveholders
- William Lloyd Garrison works Cornell University Library Samuel J. May Anti-Slavery Collection
- William Lloyd Garrison works reprinted by Cornell University Digital Library Collections.
- The Liberator Files, Horace Seldon's collection and summary of research of William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* original copies at the Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

- Reading Garrison's Letters, Horace Seldon's insight into the thought, work and full life of Garrison, based on "Letters of William Lloyd Garrison" edited by Walter M. Merrill and Louis Ruchames, from the Belknap Press of Harvard University.

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Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice

William Lloyd Garrison at Find a Grave

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