
**Reviewed by** Eric Walls (Pitt Community College)

**Published on** Jhistory (November, 2023)

**Commissioned by** Zef Segal (Department of History, Philosophy, and Jewish Studies, the Open University of Israel)

The antebellum movement for the abolition of slavery in the United States has been the subject of much scholarship over the last several decades. The significance of men like William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, with their voluminous publications as writers and editors of two of the most widely read and distributed abolitionist newspapers of the times, has been deeply explored and well documented by historians. The significance of women within the abolition movement has also been the topic of much research and writing in recent times, especially the role that the issue of women's participation played in the splintering of the abolition movement into separate factions in the 1840s and the influence that participation by women had on the rise of the women's suffrage movement and women's rights in general in the mid- to late nineteenth century. In *The Color of Abolition: How a Printer, a Prophet, and a Contessa Moved a Nation*, author Linda Hirshman reveals not only the role one woman in particular, Maria Weston Chapman, had in managing much of the day-to-day business of the Garrisonian faction of the movement but also how she personally affected and manipulated the relationships between abolition's major players and thus the direction and fate of the entire movement.

Hirshman's background is in law and philosophy, with a JD in the former and a PhD in the latter. Her legal career spanned fifteen years, including several high-profile Supreme Court cases, before shifting into academia and teaching courses in philosophy and women's studies at Brandeis University. Her previous published works explored women's and LGBT issues, including *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World* (2006), *Victory: The Triumphant Gay Revolution* (2013), and *Sisters in Law: How Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsberg Went to the Supreme Court and Changed the World* (2016). Although not a historian by training or trade per se, Hirshman displays a nuanced understanding of the historical context of the time period, and her attention to de-
tail reveals a keen scholarly eye that belies any deficiencies of education in the field of history specifically.

The Color of Abolition focuses primarily on the relationship, both personal and professional, between Garrison and Douglass from the inception of the abolition movement until the final split between the two in 1854. Although they certainly were not the only significant figures in the movement, these two men were certainly the most well-known voices for abolition in the period, and their often fraught relationship was arguably the pole around which the entire movement revolved. As Hirshman reveals, however, there was another person who played a vital role not only in the movement itself, but also in how the relationship between Garrison and Douglass evolved and ultimately splintered. That person was Maria Weston Chapman, who served as the corresponding secretary for Garrison’s American Anti-Slavery Society (AAS). In this role, Chapman had close contact with nearly every major and minor player in the movement, and her vast collection of letters and other correspondence serves as the major primary source that Hirshman uses to tell her tale. “Given her centrality,” as the Society’s corresponding secretary, “Weston Chapman’s correspondence provides stunning, unedited insight of the events throughout her years with the Garrisonian antislavery societies” (p. 153). Chapman was the first person to read all letters written to the AAS and all reports sent to the head office from the army of lecturers the organization sent into the field to drum up support for the cause. She was also usually the first to respond to those letters and reports. She was the funnel through which all communication to and from the AAS flowed, and, as Hirschman’s research shows, she was no mere conduit but rather an active participant and manipulator of events and people.

Hirshman divides her work into five parts that run chronologically: “Allies Arise,” “Abolition Takes Root,” “The Grand Alliance at Work,” “Douglass to the Political Side,” and “Douglass and Garrison Divide.” Part 1 is split into six chapters and details the early lives of Garrison, Douglass, and Chapman and how they were drawn into the abolition movement. Most of this, excepting Chapman’s story, is well-worn territory and serves to provide context and background to the rest of the book. Part 2 comprises seven chapters and relates the inception of and early days of the movement. Like part 1, most of this material has been studied and described in depth, with the notable exception of chapter 11, “Maria Weston Chapman Takes the Reins.” This chapter details how Chapman inserted herself into the movement by first becoming involved in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. From a prominent and wealthy family, Chapman quickly earned the nickname “the Contessa” for her aristocratic upbringing and bearing in a movement that typically did not attract anyone, much less a woman, of her social and economic standing. When “the beautiful, wealthy, well-connected Maria Weston Chapman” first came to the organization the other members “thought she was a spy” for some proslavery faction (p. 83). Chapman’s force of will and intrepid charisma contributed to her quick assent amongst the ranks of the organization. The chapter closes with Chapman playing a pivotal role in initiating and organizing the first all-women’s national abolitionist convention in Philadelphia in 1837.

This leadership role within the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and the attention brought to women’s involvement in the abolitionist movement by the 1837 convention quickly garnered Chapman an introduction to Garrison, who by the early 1840s had also fostered a close working relationship with Douglass. Part 3, “The Grand Alliance at Work,” details the trio’s partnership and their efforts to forward the abolitionist cause in the 1840s, for better or worse. This section is the longest and most dense of the five as Hirschman explores the role all three played in the movement’s successes and failures, both professional and personal, during those crucial years. Even
without a specific background in the field of history, Hirschman displays a trained historian's keen eye for context as she weaves the personal stories of Chapman, Garrison, and Douglass into the grander narrative of the movement as a whole and its place within the social and political paradigm of the era. As with the previous sections much of this context is familiar territory, mulled over and discussed by countless historians. It is here, however, that Hirschman's use of Chapman's heretofore little-studied correspondence sheds new light on the behind-the-scenes machinations of the Garrison-led AAS and the role Chapman played in the breakdown of the relationship between Garrison and Douglass and Douglass's ultimate split with the organization.

The pivotal role that Chapman played in the way events unfolded within the AAS is clearly illustrated first in chapter 17, “The Cracks Widen.” As is the case within any organization, members often disagree about mission, vision, and purpose—sometimes subtly, sometimes wildly—and strong personalities with contrasting or competing ideas about those concepts clash and sow discord among the ranks. In 1843, strong disagreements between Garrison and his fellow Society lecturer, John Collins, led to some scathing exchanges with corresponding secretary Chapman. Douglass took great umbrage at the tone and tenor of Chapman's letter to him regarding the incident between the two men. Although Chapman's original letter does not survive, Douglass's response indicates she threatened to dock his pay over the incident, despite witness reports casting the blame for the dispute on Collins, and attempted to “school Douglass in his duty of loyalty” to the Society (p. 156). The threat to his livelihood was bad enough, but the apparent scolding by Chapman over his loyalty was, to Douglass, “a strange and distressing revelation” as he wrote nearly forty years later in his final memoir (p. 158). From this moment forward, Douglass's ties to Garrison and his society began to slowly weaken and fray as Douglass grew to feel increasingly insulted and unappreciated.

Chapman's influence on the course of events is further revealed in chapter 19, “Frederick Douglass, International Superstar and Publisher.” This chapter details Douglass's stint on the lecture circuit in Britain. As Hirschman's research shows, Chapman's correspondence between herself and Douglass, as well as between herself and others regarding Douglass's British tour, reveals Chapman's apparent mistrust of Douglass and his motives and her efforts to control and manage him and his work at every turn. This lack of trust, coupled with Chapman's continuous snipes and insults behind his back in letters to his colleagues (some of which Douglass learned of), played a significant role in driving Douglass away from Garrison and the AAS. Douglass was further tempted away by his reception by British audiences and the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, which seemed to provide him with the support that he felt was lacking from his American colleagues. The only thing that seemed to save the AAS from losing Douglass at that point was Garrison's own trip to Britain, which temporarily mended their partnership.

The rift soon widened once again, however. Douglass had long nurtured ideas of becoming a publisher and editor of a newspaper himself. The AAS, and particularly Chapman, did not support any such notion as it was another sign that Douglass was beyond Chapman's control. Upon his return to the United States Douglass began actively pursuing his dream, much to Chapman's and the AAS's chagrin. Partnering with friends outside of the AAS, both new and old, Douglass managed to raise enough money to launch his paper, the North Star, which first appeared in December of 1847. Almost immediately, due in no small part to Chapman’s machinations, Douglass was cut off from all AAS funding. Chapman's ire and vitriol toward Douglass once again spilled from her pen, this time in a letter to a Mary Howitt that made its
way through the abolitionist grapevine to Douglass in a letter to him from Julia Griffiths, a mutual friend of Howitt and Douglass, who happened to be with Howitt when she received Chapman’s letter. Chapman’s own sister Anne reported in a letter to their other sister Caroline how “sad and offended” Douglass was when he picked up Griffiths’s letter from the AAS offices in Boston (p. 206). Although Douglass would technically remain a part of the AAS for another year, he made his last appearance on behalf of the organization in May of 1849.

Although Douglass distanced himself from the AAS after 1849, ideologically he remained mostly within the Garrisonian anti-political camp. Garrison viewed slavery as a moral issue, not a political one that could be legislated away. Thus, there was no point in pursuing that route or even voting, for that matter. Until people’s hearts changed, law could do little to stop slavery, according to this view. Parts 4 and 5, “Douglass to the Political Side” and “Douglass and Garrison Split,” narrates the turbulent 1850s and Douglass’s ideological shift into politics. Unfortunately, Chapman exits the narrative fairly early in part 4 as she moved to France in 1848, leaving her position as corresponding secretary for the AAS. Although she remained active in international antislavery efforts from her new home in Paris, her influence on the AAS and events in the United States as the “manager, moral arbiter, and enforcer of Garrisonian orthodoxy” after 1848 was next to none (p. 181). As a result of the exit of this main protagonist (or antagonist, depending on the point of view), the final two sections of Hirshman’s work are short and, although still academically sound, bereft of the depth and insight displayed by her use of Chapman’s correspondence, particularly in part 3. In this sense, the work is a bit anticlimactic from a strictly narrative point of view. As in parts 1 and 2, Hirshman deftly navigates the complicated politics, both personal and national, of the period but mostly covers well-worn territory and does not provide any startling new insights. Sadly, Hirshman ends the book with a whimper, not a bang.

Despite this bit of faltering at the end, *The Color of Abolition* is certainly a welcome, and much-needed, addition to the historical literature. Hirshman fully reveals the highly influential role that Maria Weston Chapman played within the inner workings of the AAS, as well as the part she played in the personal relationships between its leaders and members. The fact she was a woman, that most of her influence was felt behind the scenes and not splashed across newspapers around the country, and that she was overshadowed by much more publicly dynamic male colleagues like Garrison and Douglass has heretofore shielded Chapman from a direct historical gaze and masked her place among those colleagues. Hirshman has certainly done much to try to rectify that imbalance, and *The Color of Abolition* should stand as one of the linchpins undergirding future scholarship on the AAS in particular and the antebellum abolitionist movement in general.

That said, many of the personal characteristics of Chapman that Hirshman reveals do not always cast Chapman in the best light. Chapman was certainly smart, brave, strong-willed, dedicated, and a highly effective organizer and manager, but she was also catty, selfish, elitist, vindictive, petty, and racist. Despite her genuine support for abolition and even integration of the enslaved into American society, like many of her abolitionist colleagues (and most of the rest of the American population of the time) she seems to have “never accepted the full humanity of Frederick Douglass” because he was black (p. 259). She tried to manipulate everyone around her to her will and was not above insults, revenge, and subterfuge when she did not get her way. Chapman does seem to display some of the worst stereotypes of women’s behavior and attitudes, the exact sort of perceptions that women have battled for generations and in many ways still battle today. In that sense, it is hard to see Chapman as some benevol-
ent abolitionist heroine figure, which many may be tempted to do given these new revelations as to her place of prominence within the movement. Instead, she comes across as a complex, multifaceted human being with her own faults and strengths, triumphs and tragedies. This may or may not be Hirschman’s intent, but it is an important perspective. Too often historical figures from historically marginalized groups like women are painted one-dimensionally, with flaws often left out or glossed over to assuage anxieties over the appearance of sexism or racism. This does a disservice to historical accuracy and masks the deep, intertwining complexities of human motivation and action across time. To see historical figures as fully fleshed-out human beings, warts and all, is the only way to genuinely learn from history and apply it to the present and the future.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58774

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.