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THE CHARGE OF DESERTING THEIR SPHERE: THE BOSTON FEMALE
ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY AND WOMEN'S PLACE IN THE ABOLITIONIST
MOVEMENT

A Thesis Presented

by

MEGAN IRENE BRADY

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,
University of Massachusetts Boston,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2018

History Program

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ABSTRACT

THE CHARGE OF DESERTING THEIR SPHERE: THE BOSTON FEMALE ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY AND WOMEN'S PLACE IN THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT

December 2018

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Responding to the all-male American Anti-Slavery Society and inspired by the expansion of women's benevolent organizations, the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society (BFAS) was founded in 1833. At the outset, the members defined themselves as pious women dedicated to immediate emancipation, while making no overtures to challenging their place in society. BFAS grew quickly in influence and membership, and helped organize the first national women's anti-slavery convention in 1837. The convention brought together female abolitionists from all over the United States, some of whom espoused more radical views on women's rights. This thesis examines how interactions at

the national conventions—a network BFAS helped create—impacted BFAS’s thinking around women’s roles, both within the abolitionist movement and in society as a whole. Persuaded by the gender-rights activism of their counterparts, BFAS implemented many of their ideas and embraced the women’s rights cause, abruptly and dramatically changing their rhetoric and behavior upon their return to Boston. While most, if not all, BFAS members shifted towards explicitly supporting women’s rights, they soon disagreed over incorporating gender rights into their abolitionist work. Two factions emerged: some wanted to maintain a focus committed solely to abolitionism, and others wanted to blend women’s rights with the anti-slavery platform. Ultimately, encounters with other female abolitionist societies at the national conventions raised questions and issues to which BFAS members had incompatible responses, contributing to BFAS’s bifurcation into two separate organizations in 1840.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Reflecting on their first ten years as organized abolitionists, members of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society (BFAS) in 1842 honored their founders' instincts and commitment to the cause. They wrote, “[i]t is the order of nature, that when human beings earnestly wish the accomplishment of any particular object, they look around them for help—they unite their forces—they become associated” (italics in original).¹ For these women, some of whom had been part of BFAS since its inception, the first task toward their goal—immediate emancipation—was to seek out similarly-minded women, thus creating a supportive network with which to challenge slavery's existence and its defenders. Indeed, BFAS's activism and methods can only be understood as part of a larger community of abolitionists, both female and male, in the 1830s. This thesis examines BFAS and how its ideology around women's roles in the abolitionist movement shifted dramatically in its first decade.

In late 1833, twelve women, inspired by the growing number of women's organizations and the recently-established all-male American Anti-Slavery Society,

¹ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *Ten Years of Experience: Ninth Annual Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Boston: Oliver Johnson, 1842), 9, accessed 8 November 2017, <https://archive.org/details/annualreportofbo1842bost>.

founded BFAS. The original members came from diverse backgrounds: the Weston sisters—Maria, Anne, Caroline, and Deborah—were upper-class white women; Mary Parker and Martha Ball were middle-class white women; Susan Paul was a free black woman.² Several members came from prominent Boston families, such as Paul, whose father was a respected reverend, and Charlotte Phelps, whose husband helped found the city's male abolitionist organization.

At the outset, the members, guided by their Christian faith, dedicated themselves to immediate emancipation. BFAS grew quickly in influence and membership, helping to organize the first national women's abolitionist convention in 1837, and reaching five hundred members in 1838. However, internal disagreements over the organization's role in the larger anti-slavery movement soon erupted, and BFAS bifurcated into two smaller abolitionist societies in 1840.

My research into BFAS concentrates on the confluence of abolitionism, religious identity, and women's rights. I argue that BFAS's encounters with other female anti-slavery societies introduced new ideas about women's rights activism within the abolitionist movement and about how women's activism intersected with their religious identities. Specifically, other female anti-slavery societies, especially in Philadelphia, encouraged BFAS to advocate for greater gender equality, and to confront directly those religious leaders who hindered abolitionist activity. Encounters with these other female abolitionists, mostly at the national women's anti-slavery conventions, inspired many

² Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 43-44.

BFAS women to recognize and challenge gender limitations; however, BFAS members disagreed over incorporating women's rights activism into their religious-oriented anti-slavery work and over the appropriateness of criticizing religious authority. I conclude that BFAS split because these new philosophies around female abolitionism were incompatible, thus making further group activity impossible.

Scholars have analyzed many aspects of nineteenth-century women's organizations, and designed classification systems for women's groups which I applied to my own research. Since the turn of the nineteenth century, white middle class and upper-middle class women throughout New England had organized themselves into societies, usually centered on their domestic network and faith.³ Anne Boylan identified two functions for women's organizations in Boston in the early 1800s: benevolent and reformist.⁴ In Boylan's categorization, benevolent societies focused on providing care to marginalized groups, such as through missionary work or the establishment of orphanages; reformist societies, which first emerged in the early 1830s, directed their attention to social problems, such as prostitution, alcoholism, or eventually slavery.⁵ Occasionally, Boylan observed, reformist societies shifted toward feminist societies when they began labeling and challenging their gender limitations.⁶

³ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 8-9.

⁴ Anne M. Boylan, "Timid Girls, Venerable Widows and Dignified Matrons: Life Cycle Patterns Among Organized Women in New York and Boston, 1797-1840" in *American Quarterly* 38, no. 5 (1986): 779, doi:10.2307/2712823.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 780.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Similarly, Kathryn Kish Sklar, Jean Fagan Yellin and John Van Horne focused on organized women's perceptions of gender, and discerned three categories: "first, group activity beyond the limits of the family; next, gender-conscious group activity (that is, women acting consciously *as* women); and finally, group activity intended to advance women's rights and women's interests."⁷ For some women's organizations, their activism inspired them to shift from the second to the third category.⁸ Furthermore, some women's organizations were founded as counterparts to male organizations, including BFAS which was established in response to the all-male American Anti-Slavery Society. In those situations, the relationship between and the collaboration among the women's and men's societies varied greatly, which could inspire women's organizations to become more independent or shift away from the male organization's original goals.⁹ From these scholars' analyses, it is clear BFAS was part of a larger and dynamic tradition of organized women.

Female abolitionist societies' ideologies and diversity have long attracted historians' attention; these historians identified some of the women's methods, self-perceptions, and understandings of race and gender, which then guided my own research. Writing in 1968, Alma Lutz offered the first scholarly work on female abolitionists with *Crusade for Freedom: Women of the Antislavery Movement*. Lutz

⁷ Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 2.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Anne M. Boylan, "Women in Groups: An Analysis of Women's Benevolent Organizations in New York and Boston, 1797-1840" in *The Journal of American History* 71, no. 3 (1984): 507, doi:10.2307/1887469.

credited women's anti-slavery organizations for helping "create public sentiment" for the Reconstruction Amendments, especially through their petitions and circulars; she particularly acknowledged BFAS's success in framing slavery as an institution that violated family structures.¹⁰ Other historians examined race and racial identity within the female anti-slavery movement. Blanche Glassman Hersh asserted that white female abolitionists were inspired to join the movement because of "parallel positions" to those of the slaves: "black women were enslaved by chains and codes; all women were the slaves of creed and custom, imprisoned within the traditional concept of woman's sphere."¹¹ Shirley Yee argued that black women and white women in abolitionist societies had fundamentally different experiences, where female anti-slavery societies could reinforce racial discrimination.¹²

Scholars have been drawn particularly to BFAS for two reasons: for its early dominant role in the female abolitionist movement, and for its public feuding and ultimate split in 1840. Debra Gold Hansen offered a thorough analysis of BFAS and its members in *Strained Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society*. She argued that the religious differences among the BFAS women—mostly Unitarians and Congregationalists—fostered competing imaginations of womanhood and

¹⁰ Alma Lutz, *Crusade for Freedom: Women of the Antislavery Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), ix, 76, 292.

¹¹ Blanche Glassman Hersh, *The Slavery of Sex: Feminist-Abolitionists in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), vii.

¹² Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 6.

pastoral authority, ensuring the organization's eventual collapse.¹³ Indeed, as she observed, when BFAS splintered into two parallel abolitionist societies, Maria Weston Chapman led one faction comprised of mostly upper-class Unitarians, and Mary Parker and Martha Ball led the other of mostly middle-class Congregationalists. Her synthesis of the organization's publications and the members' public and private correspondence revealed how their backgrounds affected their factions and ideologies.

Over the last decade, the field of women's abolitionist history has shifted to explore the women's place within larger networks of advocacy; I adopted this framework with my own research into BFAS. In 2005, Beth Salerno studied how women's abolitionist societies created regional and national networks through written correspondence, national conventions, and annual fairs.¹⁴ Similarly, Alisse Portnoy examined women's organizations that petitioned against forced Indian removal in the years prior to the abolitionist societies' foundings; as such, Portnoy argued that anti-removal activism laid the foundation for anti-slavery.¹⁵ Finally, Kathryn Kish Sklar posited that Angelina Grimké's framing of slavery as a racial and gendered institution—a mindset which other female abolitionists in the United States eventually adopted—was grounded in centuries of European women's political and moral thought.¹⁶

¹³ Debra Gold Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 8-9,11.

¹⁴ Beth A. Salerno, *Sister Societies: Women's Antislavery Organizations in Antebellum America* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), 4-5.

¹⁵ Alisse Portnoy, *Their Right to Speak: Women's Activism in the Indian and Slave Debates* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1-2.

¹⁶ Kathryn Kish Sklar, "'The Throne of My Heart': Religion, Oratory, and Transatlantic Community in Angelina Grimké's Launching of Women's Rights, 1828-1838" in *Women's Rights and Transatlantic*

My research builds on Hansen’s focused study of BFAS’s factions and recent scholars’ emphasis on the networks of female abolitionism. I examined BFAS in one specific network—the annual national conventions of women’s anti-slavery societies in 1837, 1838, and 1839—to better understand how the society’s ideology around women’s participation in the abolitionist movement shifted dramatically over its six-year existence. In Chapter 2, I explore BFAS’s first few years of activism, from 1834 to 1836, when members consistently perceived themselves as pious mothers in a reformist society. Through their annual reports and circulars to women across Massachusetts, they argued that women must use their influence as moral and religious guides to teach their husbands and children about the wrongs of slavery. During this time, BFAS members emphasized their identities as mothers, whether biological or an imagined relationship with enslaved mothers, and exemplified “gender-conscious group activity” because all members were female and their cause was unrelated to women’s rights.

Chapter 3 focuses on the 1837 national convention for female abolitionist societies, a turning point for BFAS’s ideology and group cohesion. Correspondence with the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, with whom BFAS organized and hosted the convention, revealed their ongoing discussion over women’s place in the larger abolitionist movement. The convention itself typified “group activity intended to advance women’s rights” because delegates proposed greater activity in public life, whether for women to speak up more in church or to challenge clergymen who opposed abolitionism.

Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation, eds. Kathryn Kish Sklar and James Brewer Stewart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 213, 229.

I have found that BFAS adopted these strategies when they returned to Massachusetts, such as when they invited Angelina and Sarah Grimké to speak in churches across the state and when they manipulated Bible passages to challenge local Boston clergymen who opposed BFAS's cause. Lastly, in the wake of the convention, BFAS members began imagining themselves as part of a global sisterhood working collaboratively to abolish slavery. I argue that the interactions and discussions surrounding the national convention precipitated BFAS's dramatic shifts in thinking and behavior.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I investigate how factions developed in BFAS over the role of women and women's rights in the abolitionist movement. After 1837, ongoing encounters with other female anti-slavery societies continued to push BFAS in new directions, but the resultant conflicts became more apparent. At both the 1838 and 1839 national women's conventions, BFAS members softened their tone on advancing women's rights and opposing anti-abolitionist churches. By extension, BFAS's work in Boston also became contentious, as members disagreed over how to appropriate funds from their annual fundraiser. Leading up to the 1840 national women's convention, Maria Weston Chapman and Mary Parker's respective factions within BFAS separated when their conflicts over these issues became too extensive.

My research draws heavily from BFAS's annual reports, which were written and published by the members. Each annual report provided a summary of the year's events, an overview of their finances, and facsimiles of the organization's correspondence; additionally, board members edited and voted on drafts of the annual report before

publication. Because BFAS's annual reports represented the group's collective opinions, it can be difficult to determine individual members' perspectives, especially after fissions appeared in 1837. To that end, proceedings from the national conventions and BFAS members' private correspondence help illuminate factions and individuals' opinions on religion and women's rights within the female abolitionist movement.

In closely examining the interplay among BFAS, other female anti-slavery societies, and the national women's conventions, it is clear that female abolitionists held a diverse set of views. Slavery was so embedded into American institutions that, in challenging it, abolitionists necessarily challenged religious and gender hierarchies. When BFAS members confronted these systems, they responded in various, incompatible ways. Unable to agree on how to best proceed or what to prioritize in their behemoth undertaking, BFAS split into two subsidiary organizations, maintaining similar goals to those BFAS had at its founding in 1833, but preferring different methods for achieving them.

CHAPTER 2

“THE DISSEMINATION OF TRUTH”: BFAS AS A REFORMIST ORGANIZATION, 1834-1836

For the first three years of its advocacy, from 1834 through 1836, BFAS positioned itself as a reformist society, and made no explicit challenge to gendered expectations. Such was a common strategy for female anti-slavery organizations, and intentionally contrasted themselves from their male counterparts who could translate ideology into voting power.¹⁷ In BFAS’s meetings, circulars, and published reports, members portrayed themselves as pious mothers fulfilling their moral duty to educate their children and husbands, and conformed to prevalent attitudes around women’s behavior. They acknowledged their abolitionist views could be controversial, but they justified their ongoing activism as part of their Christian charge. To that end, BFAS argued they were like other all-women’s organizations in Boston that worked to improve the city and nation’s moral behavior, even if their cause—immediate emancipation—was more political in nature than other benevolent groups. Significantly, I argue, BFAS during this period had minimal interactions with other female anti-slavery societies, but

¹⁷ Beth A. Salerno, *Sister Societies: Women's Antislavery Organizations in Antebellum America* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), 5.

was more affiliated with the local all-male abolitionist organization; therefore, BFAS's rhetoric and activism reflected the founding members' original intent and goals for the organization.

Founding Principles

The women of BFAS lived in a time of defined gender roles. Beginning a decade earlier, a nation-wide economic transformation pulled more and more men into new industrial factories, leaving women to manage the home.¹⁸ This shift created two spheres within American society: a public sphere for men, and a private sphere for women.¹⁹ Scholars have questioned the rigidity of the sphere binary, but have agreed that there were separate character traits and appropriate behaviors based on gender.²⁰ Broadly speaking, womanhood in the nineteenth century was defined by selflessness, religiosity, and dedication to the family.²¹

BFAS members were aware of these gendered expectations when they wrote the founding constitution, consisting of a preamble and eight articles, and outlined the organization's goals and motivations. As they explained in the preamble:

Believing slavery to be a direct violation of the law of God, and productive of a vast amount of misery and crime; and convinced that its

¹⁸ Debra Gold Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 45.

¹⁹ Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 137.

²⁰ Nannerl O. Keohane, preface to *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History: Essays from the Seventh Berkshire Conference on the History of Women*, eds. Dorothy O. Helly and Susan Reverby (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), ix-x.

²¹ DuBois and Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes*, 138-139.

abolition can only be effected by an acknowledgement of the justice and necessity of immediate emancipation,—we hearby [*sic*] agree to form ourselves into a Society to aid and assist in this righteous cause as far as lies within our power.²²

Several important themes emerged in the preamble, including BFAS's core belief that anti-slavery work was a religious and moral endeavor. Its founders' piety, both in their private lives and as an organizing principle, reflected a dominant characteristic of the idealized nineteenth-century woman and Republican mother.²³ BFAS, like other women's organizations upon first adopting the abolitionist cause, initially adhered to social norms by using religious rhetoric or emotional appeals.²⁴ Furthermore, by writing that they would "assist in this righteous cause," BFAS members acknowledged their new society was part of a larger anti-slavery campaign; within this larger movement, BFAS members presented themselves as immediate abolitionists, but did not mention if or how they would work with other anti-slavery organizations.

While most of the constitution's articles described BFAS's board, quarterly meetings, and membership fees, one article concisely stated the organization's planned methods. Article Two dictated that the organization's "funds shall be appropriated to the dissemination of TRUTH on the subject of slavery, and the improvement of the moral and intellectual character of the colored population" (emphasis in original).²⁵ Both of

²² Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *Constitution of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Boston, 1834), accessed 16 July 2017, <https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.05600700/>.

²³ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" in *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 152, doi:10.2307/2711179.

²⁴ Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 6.

²⁵ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *Constitution of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society*.

these undertakings reified BFAS members' roles as educators: they personally would educate white citizens about slavery's horrors and injustices, and they would support programs that educated free and enslaved blacks. In that sense, BFAS's goals and intended activities complied with social expectations for women's behavior at the time. Additionally, by focusing on teaching others about the immorality of slavery, they followed the same structure of existing reformist societies.

The 1835 annual report explicitly reiterated BFAS's goal to inform men and women about slavery without challenging the gender or religious status quo. In the opening pages of the report, the author claimed "the wish to promulgate TRUTH" as the organization's "only motive" (emphasis in original).²⁶ Furthermore, she asserted, the society would "make no appeal to the public, as a body whose verdict they will abide; their purpose is to preserve a sketch of their times, as one from which valuable instruction may be drawn by their children."²⁷ In other words, BFAS strove to present facts about slavery and abolitionism, allowing for others to reach informed conclusions about whether or not to join the anti-slavery cause. The claim's directness also suggested that BFAS members may have been criticized for violating their place as women or for participating in public and political debates. Regardless, their terse remark made clear that BFAS did not seek to act beyond the scope of other benevolent societies.

²⁶ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society; with a concise statement of events, previous and subsequent to the Annual Meeting of 1835* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1836), 3, accessed 2 October 2017, <https://archive.org/details/ASPC0002429700>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Early Religious Rhetoric

BFAS members' identity as Christian women undergirded their beliefs and activities around abolitionism. Piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity represented the four core characteristics of the ideal nineteenth-century woman; therefore, moral, religiously-minded women who did not speak about politics would not have violated their place.²⁸ In these early years, BFAS's words and actions consistently reflected its members' piety and domesticity, implying that the society intended to work within the established gender limitations. The women's early activism hinged on persuading their husbands that slavery was anti-Christian, and on convincing other women to do the same; to that end, their rhetoric invoked motherhood and Biblical allusions. By Yellin and Van Horne's classification, BFAS at this point demonstrated "gender-conscious activity" because all members were female and their cause was unrelated to women's rights.²⁹

Throughout its early publications, BFAS framed slavery as a moral crisis that hurt all Americans, both enslaved and free. As explained in the 1835 annual report, the organization aimed to "make man just and benevolent, give principle and energy, and correct his tendency to abuse power."³⁰ Not only did this reiterate the members' founding principles, but it also defined the organization as one that would work toward abolition by persuading men to recognize slavery's immorality. Additionally, it suggested that mankind as a whole depended on women to know right from wrong in order to act

²⁸ Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," 152.

²⁹ Yellin and Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, 2.

³⁰ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1835 Annual Report*, 44.

appropriately. BFAS further defended itself on the grounds that “the social intercourse” of a local association is “fruitful of enjoyment” and if an “association is good for man, *to us* it follows also that it is good for woman” (italics in original).³¹ By comparing themselves to other associations, BFAS members indicated they acted in accordance with social norms. Although the author hinted at a male and female equivalency, she still emphasized the social aspect of the organization, as opposed to the potentially political nature of abolitionism.

Each BFAS annual report included an epigraph, which previewed the theme of the year’s events or of the report itself. Analyzing the epigraphs’ rhetoric and context can further elucidate BFAS members’ conception of themselves and their cause. The 1835 epigraph quoted François Fénelon, an eighteenth-century French archbishop, in his original French; in full, it read, “Si je vous parle fortement n’en soyez pas étonné; c’est que la liberté est libre et forte.”³² The use of French suggests the original membership was well-educated and probably predominantly upper-class. In English, the epigraph means, “If I speak to you loudly, do not be surprised; it is because freedom is free and strong,” which indicated BFAS’s unyielding commitment to exposing the hard truths about slavery. Fénelon’s original text was a letter to King Louis XIV, encouraging a more “humanitarian” and less militaristic style of rule;³³ BFAS, of course, also advocated for a humanitarian style of rule and leadership. Finally, Fénelon supported a girl’s education in

³¹ Ibid, 47.

³² Ibid, cover page.

³³ Sanford B. Kanter, “Archbishop Fénelon's Political Activity: The Focal Point of Power in Dynasticism” in *French Historical Studies* 4, no. 3 (1966): 320, doi:10.2307/285906.

“practical economics, basic religious training, and a safe dose of carefully-selected classical and modern literature” in order to prepare her for “governance of families.”³⁴ Fénelon’s philosophies of state and family governance aligned with BFAS’s, making him a logical selection for the first annual report’s epigraph.

The epigraph for the 1836 annual report, a passage from Matthew 22:20-21, echoed the themes of slaveholding as immoral and of women’s responsibilities in educating others about proper religious behavior. The epigraph read: “Let us make man in OUR image. Whose image and superscription is THIS?—‘Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; but unto God the things which are God’s.’—Jesus Christ” (emphasis in original).³⁵ The latter part of the selection, a quotation attributed to Jesus himself, distinguished between state authority and heavenly authority. In its original context, Jesus was answering questions about paying taxes. But in the context of an abolitionist annual report, it signified that the state’s position on slavery conflicts with God’s. Significantly, they added a phrase—“Let us make man in OUR image”—to the epigraph, which indicated that BFAS had the power to “make man” recognize the horrors of slavery, whether through education, persuasion, or some other means. This scriptural allusion demonstrated how BFAS invoked religious text to defend its abolitionist beliefs and efforts.

³⁴ Carolyn C. Lougee, “Noblesse, Domesticity, and Social Reform: The Education of Girls by Fénelon and Saint-Cyr” in *History of Education Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1974): 87, doi:10.2307/367607.

³⁵ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *Annual Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society; being a concise history of the Cases of the Slave Child, Med, and of the Women Demanded as Slaves of the Supreme Judicial Court of Mass. with all the other proceedings of the society* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1836), cover page, accessed 20 August 2017, <https://archive.org/details/annualreportofbo1836bost>.

Correspondence with other female anti-slavery societies at this time similarly reflected their founding ideas around gender and piety. To facilitate communication, BFAS had a corresponding secretary who was in charge of writing, receiving, and responding to letters pertaining to abolitionist activity. In 1835, Anne Weston, the first corresponding secretary, wrote a letter to the Putnam, Ohio Female Anti-Slavery Society, where she articulated some of BFAS's core beliefs. She explained that women had a unique role in the abolitionist movement: a woman's "affections [are] less liable to be chilled by familiarity with selfishness," enabling "arguments addressed particularly to the women of the South [to be met] with a readier acceptance by them than by any other class in the country."³⁶ Weston envisioned a community of women within which Northern women could reach out to Southern women and encourage them to rethink slavery. Furthermore, she recognized a spiritual distinction between men and women in explaining why females were best equipped for this task. By acknowledging these gender differences, Weston reified the notion that female anti-slavery societies' effectiveness lay in their power of moral persuasion.

In the same letter, Weston asserted the religious underpinning of abolitionism and exalted the holiness of their shared work. As she wrote:

Let no ingenious theories of political economy or suppositions of divine ordination, blind us to the truth of the sentiment, that under no possible combination of circumstances, can a human being, without exceeding criminality in the sight of God, claim another as his property.³⁷

³⁶ Anne Weston to the Putnam, Ohio Female Anti-Slavery Society, July 22, 1835, *Women & Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

In other words, Weston contended that slaveholding was an “exceeding[ly] criminal” act in God’s eyes, and therefore slavery violated Christianity. Furthermore, Weston warned the Putnam Female Anti-Slavery Society of two hegemonic ideologies that inhibited abolitionism: economic explanations for the institution’s necessity and “suppositions of divine ordination,” or misinterpretations of Christian doctrine. Such competing interpretations of Christianity set up a conflict between abolitionists and slavery defenders, which made BFAS’s use of religious rhetoric a powerful tool in persuading others to support abolitionism.

BFAS also communicated with women’s abolitionist organizations in Great Britain, who were similarly working to end slavery within the British Empire. In an 1836 letter to the Ladies’ Anti-Slavery of Edinburgh, Maria Weston Chapman, the BFAS secretary, elaborated on the organization’s motivations for joining the abolitionist movement, reiterating a woman’s duty to address moral failings, such as slavery. As she wrote:

It is not now for the *slave* alone that the friends of Emancipation in the United States are laboring. It is also for the menaced institutions of the free;—it is for Christianity and law, alike contemned [*sic*] and cast aside, as often as they command justice and forbid oppression. It is for a nation in peril—for their beloved country, humbled in the dust before the indignant gaze of Christendom, that they throw their whole spirit into the demand they made of Freedom for the human race.³⁸

Chapman, in other words, listed several reasons for supporting immediate emancipation, only one of which included the enslaved population. BFAS was also acting out of

³⁸ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1836 Annual Report*, 24.

concern for the “nation in peril,” whose institutions and righteousness were threatened by slavery. To realize America’s potential as a just nation, BFAS believed women needed to adopt the abolitionist cause; this principle situated BFAS as a reformist society and directed the organization’s early activism.

Early Gender-Conscious Activism

Women’s organizations in the early 1800s worked indirectly to influence policy at all levels of government. Anne Boylan discerned that reformist societies served also as “interest groups to pressure politicians” and “sought to mobilize women in a mass, democratic fashion.”³⁹ BFAS, as a reformist organization, conformed to this trend. Its major activities included circulating statewide anti-slavery petitions, fundraising for male abolitionist organizations through an annual fair, and bringing more women across Massachusetts into the movement. Additionally, BFAS’s activities from 1834 to 1836 largely targeted two groups: their male relatives and potential members. The members’ stated cause and their methods, therefore, adhered to gender expectations, and they did not indicate a plan to break the reformist societies mold.

In an effort to increase membership, BFAS circulated pamphlets throughout the state that advertised the abolitionist cause and encouraged women to either join BFAS or create their own local anti-slavery societies. In 1835, for example, the organization sent “two thousand pamphlets, which have plead[ed] for the slave, silently, but most

³⁹ Anne M. Boylan, “Women and Politics in the Era before Seneca Falls” in *Journal of the Early Republic* 10, no. 3 (1990): 364-365, doi:10.2307/3123393.

successfully, as the large addition to our society will testify.”⁴⁰ The next year, BFAS remedied the “silent” aspect by reproducing transcripts of BFAS members interviewing Lucille, a former house slave from Virginia, who had escaped when her owner visited Boston. Described by BFAS as a woman of “ardent piety,” BFAS shared the following conversation with women across the state:

Q: What had you then to complain of? were you ever beaten?

A: Ever beaten! (Lucille then showed the marks of the whip—and her breast had the deep scar of a wound received from the latch of a door, against which her Mistress forced her, when in anger.)...

Q: Were you happy in slavery?

A: No.⁴¹

Lucille’s story of physical and emotional suffering evoked the reader’s empathy, while also directly challenging the prevalent notion that slaves enjoyed their forced servitude. Furthermore, the question-and-answer format invited readers to participate in the conversation with Lucille and relate to her story. Even if the interview were exaggerated—or made up entirely—it does not belittle BFAS’s use of personal, highly-emotional anecdotes to appeal to readers’ consciences, inspiring more women to join BFAS’s efforts.

Another common mechanism for female abolitionists included petitioning lawmakers. Petitions had been a common tool for women’s benevolent and reformist societies for several decades; significantly, participants did not perceive petitions to be a political act.⁴² Indeed, women typically signed petitions as “residents,” not “citizens,” and

⁴⁰ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1836 Annual Report*, 77.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 44, 55, 58.

⁴² Salerno, *Sister Societies*, 73.

often opted to sign separate petitions from men.⁴³ BFAS coordinated petitions around immediate abolition throughout the United States and around abolition specifically in the District of Columbia, finding a strong ally in its Congressional representative, John Quincy Adams.⁴⁴ So prolific were female anti-slavery societies' petition campaigns that in 1836 the House of Representatives instituted a gag rule on all subsequent abolitionist petitions.⁴⁵ In the wake of this decision, BFAS circulated an open letter to "the Women of Massachusetts," encouraging them to "rise in the moral power of womanhood" and maintain, if not increase, their efforts of moral persuasion and petitions.⁴⁶ In the letter, BFAS specifically appealed to three aspects of their shared identity: as "immortal souls," as "women," and as "wives and mothers."⁴⁷ This three-pronged identity conformed to popular conceptions of womanhood at the time and reaffirmed their piety and domesticity.

Like other female abolitionist organizations, the annual anti-slavery fair was BFAS's main fundraising event.⁴⁸ At the fair, BFAS members sold their own needlework, with proceeds going to the all-male Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. They first planned such a "show-case" in 1835,⁴⁹ and the following year's fair raised over \$400,

⁴³ Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven, "'Let Your Names Be Enrolled': Method and Ideology in Women's Antislavery Petitioning" in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, eds. Yellin and Van Horne, 180, 194.

⁴⁴ Edward Kahn, "Desdemona and the Role of Women in the Antebellum North" in *Theatre Journal* 60, no. 2 (2008): 248, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25070199>.

⁴⁵ Yellin and Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, 14-16.

⁴⁶ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1836 Annual Report*, 30.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁴⁸ Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 5.

⁴⁹ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1835 Annual Report*, 77.

accounting for more than one-third of the year's earnings.⁵⁰ One of their most profitable items was a hand-sewn "anti slavery handkerchief, which is operating upon many a little heart, sowing the seeds of good will to the colored man in our midst, and causing the spirit to be bowed in prayer for his less favored brother."⁵¹ The handkerchief had two functions: a sale item, and a perpetual reminder to the owner of slavery's horrors. While BFAS did not record the words or images on the handkerchief, Jean Fagan Yellin noted that female abolitionists commonly sewed an emblem of a kneeling slave in chains into their needlework.⁵² Whether or not this is the symbol BFAS put on their own handkerchiefs, the purpose—to further "disseminat[e]" the abolitionist message—is identical.

The annual fairs also offered BFAS an opportunity to expand their network and attract new members, in keeping with their early goals. Lee Chambers-Schiller researched the social aspect of these anti-slavery fairs, where BFAS members encouraged buyers to sign petitions and join the abolitionist cause, in addition to shopping.⁵³ Furthermore, Maria Weston Chapman, one of the leading fair organizers, intentionally held the fair close to Christmas in order to maximize the goods' appeal to consumers.⁵⁴ In managing the fair, then, BFAS members created a space for them to interact with other women and discuss abolitionism and women's activism.

⁵⁰ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1836 Annual Report*, 85.

⁵¹ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1835 Annual Report*, 77.

⁵² Jean Fagan Yellin, *Women & Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 5-7.

⁵³ Lee Chambers-Schiller, "'A Good Work among the People': The Political Culture of the Boston Antislavery Fair" in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, eds. Yellin and Van Horne, 259.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 250.

Per the founding constitution, BFAS assembled in an annual meeting every October to review the operating budget, plan for the following year, and discuss ways to increase membership. At the 1835 annual meeting, BFAS invited two prominent male abolitionists, George Thompson and William Lloyd Garrison, to speak, when a violent mob threatened to overrun the assembly.⁵⁵ As such, at Mayor Theodore Lyman's behest, BFAS concluded the meeting out of concern for everyone's safety.⁵⁶ Reflecting on the scene, the members commented in their annual report that people, from slavery apologists to status quo defenders, and northerners and southerners alike, misunderstood their organization; BFAS, members asserted, "never propose[d] to take a step beyond making known their opinions, and the reasons of them," and any misconceptions "might be rectified" if others attended the annual meeting instead of inhibiting it.⁵⁷ With this, BFAS reaffirmed its focus on educating people on slavery's hard truths, and claimed members had no intent to move from educators to political activists.

Preserving society's gendered expectations, particularly around who can and cannot speak in a public forum, some BFAS members attended the New England Anti-Slavery Convention in May 1836, but did not participate. They recorded in the year's annual report the convention's final resolution: a pledge to persist in their "right of Free [*sic*] discussion upon the altar of southern slavery" at whatever personal, physical,

⁵⁵ John T. Cumbler, "With Other Good Souls," in *From Abolition to Rights for All: The Making of a Reform Community in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 32, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhcjr.6>.

⁵⁶ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1835 Annual Report*, 33.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 35-36.

or professional cost.⁵⁸ The BFAS members in attendance had neither speaking nor voting privileges, but supposedly “rose with their husbands and friends in unanimous support of the resolution, with the deliberate solemnity of self-dedication to the God of truth and love and freedom.”⁵⁹ The resolution’s terms were stronger than previous moments in BFAS’s early activism, suggesting that the idea to act more radically existed in some members’ minds. However, to include the phrase “rose with their husbands” also reaffirmed their deference to male family members and to the all-male wing of the abolitionist movement. Moreover, observing a regional convention would also have exposed BFAS members to the structure and logistics of a larger assembly, perhaps laying the foundation for BFAS to do something similar the following year.⁶⁰

In keeping with its emphasis on domesticity, BFAS was more likely to focus on the plight of slave women and tended to overlook slave men. This was a common tactic among female anti-slavery organizations: while simultaneously denying black women’s “claims to femininity and true womanhood which accompanied white motherhood, abolitionists asked white mothers to consider the bond that existed between mother and child when considering” slavery.⁶¹ In August 1836, BFAS manifested its concern for slave mothers and children when it funded a legal case against a slaveholding family that was visiting from the South. Upon learning that an enslaved child named Med was with

⁵⁸ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1836 Annual Report*, 11-12.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁰ Salerno, *Sister Societies*, 7.

⁶¹ Sarah Mitchell, “Mother, Murderess, or Martyr?: Press Coverage of the Margaret Garner Story” in *Seeking a Voice: Images of Race and Gender in the 19th Century Press*, eds. David B. Sachsman, S. Kittrell Rushing, and Roy Morris (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2009), 17, 24.

the family in Boston, while her biological mother was in New Orleans, the “circumstance admonished [them] to do nothing which should interfere with the paramount claims of maternal love” because they, too, “are mothers, and felt their sacredness.”⁶² Acting out of their abolitionist principles and their imagined relationship with Med’s mother, BFAS initiated a public awareness campaign about Med and hired a lawyer to sue for her freedom in the state court. Ultimately, the court ruled that Med was protected by the Massachusetts Bill of Rights and could not be enslaved. This legal victory was a huge success for BFAS, but it is also significant that BFAS framed its interest in the case in terms of family and motherhood. Perhaps BFAS used this discourse because it presented the issue of slavery in language that adhered to nineteenth-century gender norms and was a more acceptable way for BFAS to talk publicly about a pressing political issue.

Seeds of Gender-Rights Advocacy

BFAS’s official publications and correspondence with other abolitionists represented the collective views of the society, blurring individual member’s opinions on women’s roles and anti-slavery activity. It is clear that members had a diversity of perspectives and backgrounds, including some radical ideas around women’s activism. For example, Lydia Maria Child, a leading figure within BFAS, independently edited a book on abolitionism in 1834 entitled *The Oasis*, where she argued the best way to “effect emancipation” was to vote only for representatives who endorsed explicitly

⁶² Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1836 Annual Report*, 64-72.

abolitionism.⁶³ Her ideas did not appear in BFAS's writings, perhaps because they departed from the discourse of the domestic sphere in calling for women's greater influence in the public sphere, even if women themselves did not have the right to vote. Nevertheless, BFAS hinted at frustrations over their own gender limitations on a few occasions in the annual publications between 1834 and 1836; significantly, these complaints appeared in footnotes, indicating the organization's grievances were strong enough to record in the report, but were ancillary to the year's main events.

In summarizing the challenges in organizing and conducting the October 1835 annual meeting, BFAS included a lengthy footnote about how the organization's right to assemble was restricted compared to other female societies in Boston. As they explained, two other women's groups—the Fatherless and Widows' Society, and the Institution for the Blind—sembled in Faneuil Hall in 1835 with the support of local clergymen and “an approving public.”⁶⁴ Newspaper editors applauded these groups' efforts on behalf of “him that hath none to help him” and that in these situations “no one said *then*, ‘women had better stay at home’” (italics in original).⁶⁵ BFAS lamented the contrasting experiences between these two benevolent societies and their own, claiming “the public is *half* right; that under *any* name we are permitted to meet” (italics in original).⁶⁶ This side commentary makes clear that BFAS's argument was simply to have the same access

⁶³ William Wilberforce, *The Oasis*, ed. Mrs. Child (Boston: Benjamin C. Bacon, 1834), accessed 19 July 2018, 18, <https://archive.org/details/ASPC0008120600>.

⁶⁴ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1835 Annual Report*, 6.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

to public spaces for meetings and fundraisers that other women's organizations had at the time.

Accusations toward BFAS for violating gender norms continued in 1836, and the year's annual report included another footnoted tirade on the matter. As the author noted, women were the ones who most frequently labeled BFAS members and activity as "unladylike," to which BFAS responded that such a woman "is dead while she lives, or to be pitied as the victim of domestic tyranny."⁶⁷ "Domestic tyranny," by BFAS's definition, was "a process of spiritual suffocation" from infancy to adolescence to adulthood, or, more creatively, from "the display of elegant baby linen" to "the display of braiding the hair" to "drinking champagne at midnight with the most dissipated men in the community."⁶⁸ With this, BFAS asserted that expectations of domesticity hindered a woman's development and achievements, encouraging her to condemn women who acted contrary to these norms. BFAS concluded that when it "ask[s] that children may no longer be sold away from their parents, or wives from their husbands," they do so because, as an organization of women, it wanted to protect families and the domestic environment.⁶⁹ The women's anti-slavery activism and petitions only could have exacerbated competing conceptions of womanhood, but it is noteworthy that BFAS solely responded to other women's criticisms. Perhaps BFAS felt uncomfortable engaging directly with its male critics, or agreed as a group to maintain the gendered spheres.

⁶⁷ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1836 Annual Report*, 27.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

While gender rights activism might have been on some of the members' minds by late 1836, it was not in practice. They used their positions as mothers and wives to encourage other women to join the society and to sign petitions, but they made no overtures of challenging gender roles or of entering public debates. In August 1836, Maria Weston Chapman, on behalf of BFAS, wrote to the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society and proposed a national women's abolitionist organization. In her letter, Chapman argued that "a general executive committee might be formed of the officers and most deeply interested members of female antislavery societies" to petition the United States government to ban slavery.⁷⁰ Such a committee of female activists would work independently from men's organizations and reaffirm separate activities. However, this national organizing movement would dramatically shift BFAS's opinions of gender rights the following year.

⁷⁰ Maria Weston Chapman to the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, August 4, 1836, *Women & Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*.

CHAPTER 3

“BY HER VOICE, AND HER PEN, AND HER PURSE”: THE 1837 NATIONAL CONVENTION AND BFAS’S CHANGING RHETORIC AND ACTIVISM

After months of planning, the first Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women assembled in New York City in May 1837. Coordinated by BFAS and the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, the convention brought together women from all over the Northeast, allowing women to discuss their strategies and develop a network of support moving forward.⁷¹ At the convention, BFAS members encountered radically new ideas about gender and religion within the abolitionist movement and in society as a whole, ideas which differed from their founding principles and reformist society framework. When BFAS members returned home after the convention, they acted on these new ideas in several ways. First, BFAS shifted from defending separate spheres for men and women to promoting female participation in politics and speaking in public, thus moving from what Yellin and Van Horne call “gender-conscious activity” to “group activity intended to advance women’s rights and women’s interests.”⁷² Additionally, after years of

⁷¹ Ira V. Brown, “‘Am I not a woman and a sister?’: The Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, 1837-1839” in *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 50, no. 1 (1983): 17, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27772873>.

⁷² Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women’s Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 2.

focusing on slavery's affront to Christianity and their role as mothers and moral guides to expose slavery's true horrors, BFAS members adopted a more direct and confrontational approach and began targeting local clergymen for their latent defenses of slavery. Such dramatic shifts in BFAS's behavior were inspired by the interactions at the convention, but also instigated disagreements among members over time.

Planning the 1837 National Convention

Founded six weeks after BFAS, the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society had a more radical conception of gender roles and female abolitionist activity, appearing more comfortable with women's rights activity from the beginning. In 1833, one of its leading members, Lucretia Mott, spoke unofficially at the first meeting of the national American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia, indicating she supported a woman's right to speak in a public forum in front of a mixed-gender audience.⁷³ Their founding constitution called for women to boycott any slave-made products, and they bought multiple copies of *Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, written by Lydia Maria Child, one of the most radical members of BFAS.⁷⁴ This connection implied that the Boston and Philadelphia societies knew of each other from early on, although they had different founding principles and ideologies. Angelina and Sarah Grimké joined the Philadelphia society in 1835 as honorary members, where they were

⁷³ Ira V. Brown, "Cradle of Feminism: The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, 1833-1840" in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 102, no. 2 (1978): 144, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20091253>.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 146, 149.

supported in their speaking and writing endeavors around slavery, racism, and women's rights.⁷⁵

When Mary Grew, the Philadelphia corresponding secretary, responded to Maria Weston Chapman about a national women's convention, it became clear that such an assembly would include a variety of views and would elicit thoughtful debates around their disagreements. As Grew explained to Chapman, "some of our members would much prefer a recognition of female members and delegates in the American Society. As that seems to be at present unattainable, they willingly accede to your proposal" of maintaining separate organizations.⁷⁶ The Philadelphia organization preferred to work alongside and in conjunction with the all-male organizations, even pursuing membership on the board, and felt confident in transcending into the public sphere; however, after voicing their views, they recognized that a public, mixed-gender approach was not an option at the moment. Grew also applauded BFAS's Massachusetts-wide petition to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, but added that theirs "made a larger demand on Congress, by asking for the abolition of slavery in the Territories of the U.S., and of the slave trade between the states."⁷⁷ While a minor distinction—and easily explained by the two organizations' lack of communication prior to planning the convention—their disagreements hinted at the potential idea exchanges at the convention itself.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 150.

⁷⁶ Mary Grew to the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, September 9, 1836, *Women & Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

In her follow-up letter to the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, Chapman appeared less decisive about the potential executive committee of women organizers. As she wrote, BFAS wanted to “ascertain the minds of our members respecting the plan and details of the proposed gathering of Ladies in N. York in May next” before continuing to design an executive committee.⁷⁸ Furthermore, Chapman claimed BFAS now favored a public vote at the convention on whether or not to institute an all-female executive committee, a marked shift after Mary Grew’s response.⁷⁹ As Chapman explained it, female abolitionists had two choices: remain an independent social movement and “avoid the charge of deserting our sphere (if it were worthwhile to do so),” or merge with the men’s national anti-slavery societies.⁸⁰ Chapman acknowledged how women’s actions were limited by the existing gender spheres, and insinuated that it could be “worthwhile” to ignore these spheres, even if they were berated as a result. In discussing social norms and women’s behavior regarding the national abolitionist movement, it appears BFAS members were starting to confront their own limitation.

Network of Sisters at the 1837 National Convention

At the first national women’s anti-slavery convention, urban female abolitionist societies had the largest presence; of the seventy-one women in attendance, eighteen were from the host city, fifteen were from the Philadelphia organization, and eight were

⁷⁸ Maria Weston Chapman to the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, January 12, 1837, *Women & Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

from BFAS. BFAS representatives were Lydia Maria Child, Anne Weston, Mary Parker, Henrietta Sargent, Julia Williams, Eliza Merriam, Catharine Sullivan, and Lydia Fuller.⁸¹ Other Massachusetts towns, including Lynn, Fall River, Andover, Roxbury, Dorchester, and Salem, also sent delegates.⁸² On the first day, the organizing committee appointed delegates to leadership roles, with Parker as the convention's president, Child as one of six vice-presidents, and Weston as one of four secretaries.⁸³ Through these appointments, BFAS held several powerful positions at the convention and would have interacted frequently with other women on the board, especially Lucretia Mott from Philadelphia, and Angelina and Sarah Grimké.

The minutes from the national convention defined the attendees' core objective: "to interest women in the subject of anti-slavery, and establish[] a system of operations throughout every town" in order to "do all that she can by her voice, and her pen, and her purse, and the influence of her example, to overthrow the horrible system of American slavery."⁸⁴ In other words, the convention organizers believed individual female abolitionist societies could sustain a decentralized movement to turn public opinion against slavery. To that end, the resolutions and debates focused on affirming slavery as unjust and un-Christian. Some resolutions, especially those proposed by Angelina and Sarah Grimké and representatives from Philadelphia and upstate New York, included

⁸¹ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, held in the City of New-York, May 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th, 1837* (New York: William S. Dorr, 1837; reprint, New York: The Cornell University Library Digital Collections, 2018), 4.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 3, 9.

expanding women's behavior into the public sphere and targeting specifically the northern clergymen who opposed female abolitionist activity. Such resolutions typically inspired debate among the delegates, suggesting that they were new ideas to many in attendance, not just BFAS.

Religious discourse pervaded the national convention, demonstrating that the individual female abolitionist societies and the convention as a whole were grounded in their Christian identity. Each session began and concluded with a delegate reading Scripture and offering prayers, with two delegates—Child and Mary Cox of Pennsylvania—expressing appreciation that “sectarian feeling had been swept away by the strong current of abolition philanthropy.”⁸⁵ The women, in other words, found enough common ground in their religious opposition to slavery that they could look beyond their various Protestant affiliations. Additionally, in a letter to the assembled delegates, the Newcastle on Tyne Ladies’ Emancipation Society acknowledged their shared cause with their “sister country, claiming the same ancestry, speaking the same language, and professing the same Christianity with ourselves!”⁸⁶ Christian identity and values undergirded female abolitionist activity in both the United States and abroad, and allowed members to connect with each others. In this sense, the religious rhetoric at the national convention affirmed BFAS’s religious language from the previous years and their religious motivations for originally joining the abolitionist movement.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 7, 18.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 23.

Over the course of the four-day convention, delegates proposed over thirty resolutions, representing a wide array of ideologies around female activism. Lydia Maria Child's resolution to petition state legislatures to protect fugitive slaves was accepted.⁸⁷ Petition, of course, was a common mechanism for women to voice their opinions, and Child might have believed that focusing on state governments was more effective in the wake of the 1836 gag rule. Lucretia Mott advanced the line from the Philadelphia society's constitution to boycott all slave-made goods, which would have inflicted financial harm on Northern manufacturers who relied on slave-made raw materials.⁸⁸ Delegates did not adopt Mott's resolution, although they did recognize that "*interest, political, commercial, and domestic*" inhibited the abolitionist cause (italics in original).⁸⁹ Boston manufacturing was heavily dependent on slave cotton, so perhaps BFAS opposed a boycott because of its potential negative impact on the state's economy.⁹⁰

One proposed resolution around activism was particularly radical, strongly promoting women's interests and rights. Sarah Grimké, probably in reference to Congress's gag rule on female anti-slavery petitions, proposed to the convention:

That the right of petition is natural and inalienable, derived immediately from God, and guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States, and that we regard every effort in Congress to abridge this sacred right,

⁸⁷ Ibid, 8.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 13.

⁸⁹ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *Annual Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, with a sketch of the Obstacles thrown in the way of Emancipation by certain Clerical Abolitionists and Advocates for the subjection of Woman, in 1837* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1837), 33, accessed 20 August 2017, <https://archive.org/details/annualreportbos01socigoog>.

⁹⁰ Lawrence Lader, *The Bold Brahmins: New England's War Against Slavery, 1831-1863* (New York: Dutton, 1961), 15.

whether it be exercised by man or woman, the bond or the free, as a high-handed usurpation of power.⁹¹

Sarah Grimké argued that women had Constitutional rights, invoking language from the Declaration to emphasize that they cannot lawfully be deprived of their right to petition. Furthermore, Sarah Grimké claimed gender, race, or condition of servitude cannot determine one's rights and privileges. The convention minutes do not specify whether or not this resolution was adopted; the only listed supporters of the resolution are Angelina Grimké and Lucretia Mott.⁹² Nevertheless, BFAS picked up on her main idea; as BFAS summarized in its 1837 annual report, the delegates "felt that the right of petition is God-given, inalienable, therefore ought to be exercised to the utmost for the slave."⁹³ While BFAS members were already committed to petitioning both the state and national legislatures, they adopted Sarah Grimké's stronger rhetoric to justify their behavior.

Other resolutions grappled with gender, women's choices, and women's place in society as a whole. Two unanimous resolutions—including one authored by Sarah Grimké—affirmed a mother's responsibility in abolition, whether to educate her children morally or to empathize with enslaved mothers.⁹⁴ In conforming to gendered expectations of the 1830s, these resolutions easily passed. At Sarah Grimké's behest, another adopted resolution condemned Northern women who married into Southern slave-holding

⁹¹ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Proceedings of the 1837 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women*, 8.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1837 Annual Report*, 33.

⁹⁴ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Proceedings of the 1837 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women*, 11-12.

families, claiming it “desecrate[d] the marriage relation.”⁹⁵ But it was Angelina Grimké’s resolution on women’s rights that was by far the most radical; she argued, “the time has come for woman to move in that sphere which Providence has assigned her, and no longer remain satisfied in the circumscribed limits with which corrupt custom and a perverted application of Scripture have encircled her.”⁹⁶ She overtly rejected remaining within the women’s sphere and even blamed false interpretations of Christian doctrine for perpetuating the separate spheres. Ultimately, her resolution was adopted, but a dozen delegates stated on the record their opposition to this resolution.⁹⁷ In BFAS’s own account of this resolution, it reproduced Angelina Grimké’s exact words, without crediting her, suggesting the organization was intrigued by and responsive to her ideas.⁹⁸

Building off Angelina Grimké’s accusation against false church doctrine, two additional resolutions defined anti-abolitionist clergymen as one of the greatest obstacles to the anti-slavery effort. Martha Storrs from Utica, New York, invoked a passage from Judges 5:23 when she proposed “that it is the duty of women to send up memorials to the different ecclesiastical bodies to which they belong” to oppose actively slavery “lest the curse of the Almighty God fall upon their churches for refusing, as Meroz did, to come up ‘to the help of the Lord against the mighty.’”⁹⁹ In the Bible passage, when the Canaanites attacked the Israelites, the city of Meroz refused to help, choosing to remain

⁹⁵ Ibid, 8.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 9.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1837 Annual Report*, 33-34.

⁹⁹ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Proceedings of the 1837 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women*, 13.

neutral in the conflict; when the Israelites triumphed, God cursed the city for its apathy.¹⁰⁰ Storrs's message, then, was that clergymen who avoided or repressed the abolitionist question were guilty of apathy and risked themselves and their congregation in God's eyes. Neither the convention minutes nor BFAS's summary of the convention noted whether or not Storrs's proposal passed. The following day, though, Lydia Maria Child proposed a similar resolution, but softer in tone: she called upon "the wives and daughters of clergymen" to persuade their husbands and fathers to condemn slavery while noting the "death-like apathy of some northern churches."¹⁰¹ Perhaps Child intended her resolution to be a compromise between Storrs's and others' opinions.

Reflecting on the convention, the official BFAS publication espoused the convention's long-term effects on women. The author articulated that "the best hopes of the sexes are in each other," which was why all BFAS representatives ultimately opposed "the formation of a national anti-slavery society of women."¹⁰² In other words, between first discussing such a convention with the Philadelphia women in August 1836 and the convention itself in May 1837, BFAS members completely reversed their policy on maintaining separate societies, a dramatic shift in a short amount of time. Furthermore, BFAS predicted that once slavery was abolished and "long after the practice of separate meetings of men and women for the discussion of great principles shall have disappeared,

¹⁰⁰ Richard Levin, "Silence Is Consent, or Curse Ye Meroz!" in *College English* 59, no. 2 (1997): 184, doi:10.2307/378547.

¹⁰¹ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Proceedings of the 1837 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women*, 17.

¹⁰² Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1837 Annual Report*, 40.

[the first national women's convention] will be recognized as among the first of the grand series of movements which are to make this enslaved earth again a paradise."¹⁰³ Maintaining their Christian overtones and commitment to remaking earth as an Edenic paradise, BFAS hinted that its future endeavors could include combatting gender segregation and women's exclusion from politics.

Embrace of Women's Rights

In the wake of the national convention, BFAS maintained some of its previous strategies and activities while incorporating some new ideas around gender and pro-slavery churches. Over the course of 1837, BFAS members incorporated a new tactic—to focus their energies on anti-abolitionist, but not necessarily pro-slavery, clergymen—and adjusted their stance on women's participation in the larger movement and in society as a whole. Of the plethora of women's benevolent and reformist organizations in the 1830s, very few transformed into feminist or women's rights organizations, indicating that gender rights activity was not a natural progression from women's associations.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, external influences—especially the other women's anti-slavery societies at the national convention—best explain BFAS's embrace of women's rights in 1837.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 41.

¹⁰⁴ Anne M. Boylan, "Women in Groups: An Analysis of Women's Benevolent Organizations in New York and Boston, 1797-1840" in *The Journal of American History* 71, no. 3 (1984): 515, doi:10.2307/1887469.

From the outset of the 1837 annual report, it was apparent that BFAS's tone and perspectives on abolitionist activity and women's role in the movement had changed dramatically. Indeed, the full title of the annual report bluntly stated, "Annual Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, with a sketch of the Obstacles thrown in the way of Emancipation by certain Clerical Abolitionists and Advocates for the subjection of Woman in 1837."¹⁰⁵ The report also included two epigraphs, each of which was markedly different in tone and meaning from previous epigraphs' emphasis on women as moral guides and educators acting within their gendered sphere. The epigraphs—one from a 1625 essay by Francis Bacon, and one from a 1678 allegorical novel by John Bunyan—reoriented BFAS as an anti-slavery society whose platform included greater rights for women and whose main obstacle was local religious leaders.

For its first epigraph of the 1837 annual report, BFAS selected a sentence from Francis Bacon, a seventeenth-century scholar of rationalism, nature, and philosophy. The full quotation, from his essay "Of Regiment of Health," read, "It is a secret both in nature and state, that it is safer to change many things than one."¹⁰⁶ On the surface, the epigraph hinted at BFAS's decision to address multiple social ills at once, instead of focusing solely on abolitionism; no doubt, women's rights and women's interests were one of the "many things" that fell under this new charge. Bacon's own notions about nature and the study of nature are relevant to fully understand the epigraph's significance. His approach to hermeneutics inspired his approach to examining nature, and religion was tied up in his

¹⁰⁵ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1837 Annual Report*, cover page.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

definition of “nature.”¹⁰⁷ Perhaps BFAS copied Bacon’s syncretic understandings of nature and religion, and therefore imagined blending religion and state, or the two parallel spheres women and men inhabited.

The second epigraph insinuated that some religious institutions and local leaders misrepresented proper Christian behavior, forcing BFAS to sever its affiliation with these groups. Its tone and implied message reiterated Martha Storrs’s resolution at the national convention to challenge directly Christian organizations who manipulated Biblical passages to defend slavery. *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, an allegorical novel published by John Bunyan in the late seventeenth century, traced the protagonist, aptly named Christian, on his earthly journey toward eternal salvation; along the way, Christian faced many temptations, including a character named By-Ends who posed as a good Christian but sought to live easily and without struggle or sacrifice.¹⁰⁸ Seeking to reiterate these themes, the second epigraph read:

By-Ends: You must not impose, nor lord it over my faith; leave me to my liberty and let me go with you.

Christian: Not a step further, unless you will DO in what I propound, as we.¹⁰⁹

This excerpt connoted a cognitive dissonance between a Christian’s words and actions. Whereas By-Ends wanted to live as he chose without adhering to another’s doctrine, Christian refused By-Ends’s company on the pilgrimage because By-Ends’s behavior was

¹⁰⁷ Richard Serjeantson, “Francis Bacon and the ‘Interpretation of Nature’ in the Late Renaissance” in *Isis* 105, no. 4 (2014): 681-682, doi:10.1086/679419.

¹⁰⁸ A. L. Morton, “Pilgrim’s Progress” in *History Workshop*, no. 5 (1978): 3-8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288157>.

¹⁰⁹ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1837 Annual Report*, cover page.

immoral. This excerpt previewed the open conflict between BFAS and local clergymen over proper Christian conduct, but also revealed how BFAS felt comfortable labeling those who prioritized constancy over justice as un-Christian.

Within the annual report's body, BFAS summarized several important events following the national convention. The first was the organization's unequivocal support for the Grimké sisters' speaking tour across Massachusetts. Originally, the Grimkés intended to speak only to female benevolent societies and anti-slavery societies, but their lectures enticed male audience members, too.¹¹⁰ As such, they inadvertently spoke to mixed-gender audiences, violating previous norms around women speaking in public fora. To rally support for Angelina and Sarah Grimké, Mary Parker circulated a letter to "female anti-slavery societies throughout New England."¹¹¹ Her rhetoric, Biblical and historical allusions, and intention further demonstrated how much BFAS's activism and goals had shifted in the previous year. First and foremost, Parker's targeted audience extended much further than BFAS's previous circulars, suggesting that the network of female abolitionist organizations was similarly expanding.

In her letter, Parker specifically endorsed the Grimkés' perspective on women's rights, thus expanding BFAS's activism to include "advanc[ing] women interests."¹¹² She espoused:

the elevated and christian [*sic*] point of view, from which [the Grimkés] behold the condition of woman, her duties and her consequent rights. It is of paramount importance, that both men and women should understand

¹¹⁰ Brown, "Am I not a woman and a sister?," 9.

¹¹¹ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1837 Annual Report*, 42.

¹¹² Yellin and Van Horne, *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, 2

their true position and mighty responsibilities to this and to coming generations. In all spiritual things, their functions are identical;—both are created to be parents and educators;—both for all the duties growing out of that spiritual equality here, and for communion with their Maker during their immortal life hereafter;—neither for helplessness or dependence.¹¹³

Here, Parker’s conception of women’s behavior and status shifted dramatically from BFAS’s writings in prior years. She argued that men and women have the same “function” and men are also “parents and educators,” two responsibilities typically associated with women. As such, Parker appeared to reject the maxim that each gender has its own set of responsibilities in its respective sphere, an axiom that BFAS itself had most recently affirmed in its 1836 annual report. Finally, she claimed here that neither gender is “dependen[t]” on the other, pushing back against women’s assigned trait as submissive.¹¹⁴

Significantly, Parker borrowed some of these phrases from one of the national convention’s publications, highlighting the convention’s influence on BFAS’s rhetoric and thinking. One of the committees at the national convention was charged with writing an “Appeal to the Women of the nominally Free States”; committee members included Angelina Grimké, six women from the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, and Lydia Maria Child as the sole BFAS representative once Anne Weston dropped out for unknown reasons.¹¹⁵ Given Child’s personal radical thoughts on gender spheres and the

¹¹³ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1837 Annual Report*, 42-43.

¹¹⁴ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” in *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 152. doi:10.2307/2711179.

¹¹⁵ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Proceedings of the 1837 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women*, 7, 10, 11.

Philadelphia women's early embrace of gender equality, it suggests that this committee was more willing to adopt a women's rights stance. In the committee's final publication, formally written by Angelina Grimké, the women argued that, "[a]ll moral beings have essentially the same rights and the same duties, whether they be male or female."¹¹⁶ By adopting the same rhetoric, Parker internalized the message and, through her position as BFAS president, spread it to women across the region through her letter and her support for the Grimkés' lecture series.

In the same circular to promote the Grimkés, Parker also invoked historical and Biblical allusions; in doing so, she advanced both BFAS's interests and women's interests as a whole, further revealing the organization's shift in thinking around gender and gendered spheres. In one instance, Parker argued that the Grimkés will "exalt the national character of our women—so inferior to that of the Maternal Ancestry, who, in 1620, 'shot from their spheres' in England."¹¹⁷ In other words, she commended the Pilgrim women who had similarly transgressed male and female spheres two centuries prior, and established a model for women in the nineteenth century. Parker additionally quoted a verse from Philippians in order to persuade women to join her cause. She wrote, "we earnestly entreat you, in the words of Paul—'Help *these* Women, who have labored thus in the gospel'" (italics in original).¹¹⁸ Her use of religious rhetoric was consistent with BFAS's language from previous years; however, the context of this verse—Paul

¹¹⁶ *An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States, Issued by an Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women* (New York: 1837), 19-20, as quoted in Brown, "Am I not a woman and a sister?," 8.

¹¹⁷ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1837 Annual Report*, 43.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

advising two women who are in a disagreement to find common ground by following Jesus's example—denoted some sort of conflict involving female abolitionists and an outside group, with Parker and BFAS reiterating their long-held belief that abolitionism was a righteous endeavor. To that end, it appears that Parker appropriated the Bible verse to defend aggressively the Grimké's ideas.

Beyond Parker's letter, BFAS demonstrated an interest to transcend women's sphere in other instances in 1837, solidifying a shift in thinking around women's place that began with the planning of the national convention. As one member articulated in the annual report, "[i]t is not necessary for us, at this late day, to declare our theory with regard to the sphere of woman. It is sufficiently evident in our practice," before adding, "[t]he customary Bible argument for the subjection of women is even more easily confuted than the Bible argument for slavery."¹¹⁹ Of course BFAS, and the other female abolitionist societies they communicated with before, during, and after the national convention, consistently "confuted" the Christian defense of slavery and asserted that to be Christian is to oppose slavery. By extension, then, BFAS claimed explicitly for the first time that the Christian defense of female inferiority or submissiveness was equally unfounded. In the course of one year, BFAS went from considering "desert[ing] our sphere" to wholeheartedly rejecting the concept of separate spheres.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 74-75.

¹²⁰ Maria Weston Chapman to the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, January 12, 1837, *Women & Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*.

Upon incorporating women's interests into its abolitionist platform, BFAS faced harsh criticism from local religious leaders. In one protracted saga, clergymen from Protestant denominations across Massachusetts circulated a letter condemning BFAS's behavior and activism for three main reasons. First, the clergymen, led by Reverend Nehemiah Adams of a Congregationalist parish in Boston, argued that this "perplexed and agitating subject" and debate "should not be FORCED upon any church" (emphasis in original). Curiously, Adams and the other clergymen avoided the word "slavery," as if the term itself would legitimize BFAS's cause. Second, they complained that the expanding "personal religion" that BFAS had used to justify their actions, detracted from the "respect and deference to the *Pastoral Office*, which is enjoyed in Scripture" (italics in original). Third and final, the clergymen worried that these debates "seem to threaten the FEMALE CHARACTER with wide-spread and permanent injury" (emphasis in original).¹²¹ The clergymen's charges demonstrated that BFAS's activism in 1837 included more forceful anti-slavery advocacy within and against churches, thus threatening who can claim to better interpret Christian behavior and destabilizing prescribed notions of femininity. In short, these accusations intimated BFAS's new direction of abolitionist activity.

In keeping with Martha Storrs's resolution from the national convention, BFAS responded directly to its vocal opponents on multiple fronts, emphasizing the clergymen's false interpretations of Christianity. First, the women elected to republish the

¹²¹ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1837 Annual Report*, 45-48.

letters, editorials, and sermons which ridiculed them. Indeed, nearly one-third of the annual report—over twenty-five continuous pages—was devoted to these texts. This enabled BFAS to refute publicly each of the claims. BFAS stingingly recorded in the annual report that “whoever comes to us with such a message on his lips, is liken our idea to a nuncio of his holiness, than an Ambassador of Christ.”¹²² Essentially, BFAS avoided race rhetoric, just as Adams did, and returned to religious rhetoric to refute the clergymen’s attacks. BFAS’s response, however, emphasized the conflicting versions of Christianity between the organization and the clergymen, who they labelled as “nuncios,” or papal ambassadors, implying that the clergymen were heretical. Perhaps, then, BFAS’s intent was to highlight this estrangement, while asserting that BFAS was the true representative of Christ’s message on slavery.

BFAS furthered its counterattack when it ascribed the clergymen to a larger tradition of injustice in Massachusetts religious history. BFAS concluded the 1837 annual report with a poem, originally published in William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator*, where the anonymous poet summarized the Salem Witch Trials, before adding:

Not to reproach New England’s dead,
This record from the past I summon,
Of manhood to the scaffold lead,
And suffering and heroic woman.
No—for *yourselves* alone, I turn,
The pages of intolerance over,
That, in their spirit, dark and stern,
Ye haply may your own discover!¹²³

¹²² Ibid, 50.

¹²³ Ibid, 118.

In selecting this poem, BFAS asserted that Nehemiah Adams and the other clergymen were “intolerant,” incited violence, and caused “heroic women” to suffer, perhaps imagining themselves as victims in the same mold as women in Salem in the 1690s. Nevertheless, BFAS’s accusatory tone and directness deviated sharply from its more inclusive, general statements regarding abolitionism and religion from previous years.

The burgeoning conflict with established churches across Massachusetts in 1837 inspired some abolitionists to consider setting up a free church in Boston, a proposal BFAS strongly opposed. A free church, as defined by Deacon John Gulliver, a leading figure in the all-male Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, forbade slave owners and slave traders “from the communion table and the pulpit.”¹²⁴ The abolitionist movement instigated free churches elsewhere, both in the United States and Great Britain, most commonly among the Presbyterian denomination.¹²⁵ Upon learning of this proposal, BFAS commented that “many of our society perceived that [Deacon Gulliver’s] object now was, if indeed it had ever been any other, to make abolition subservient to the church.”¹²⁶ It appears BFAS wanted to advocate within the existing religious institutions and to persuade the local religious leaders to support abolitionism. BFAS members might have become more comfortable in confronting the gender hierarchy following the

¹²⁴ Ibid, 11.

¹²⁵ Larry G. Willey, “John Rankin, Antislavery Prophet, and the Free Presbyterian Church” in *American Presbyterians* 72, no. 3 (1994): 157-171, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23333630>; George Shepperson, “The Free Church and American Slavery” in *The Scottish Historical Review* 30, no. 110 (1951): 126-143, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25526104>.

¹²⁶ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1837 Annual Report*, 21.

national convention and in talking directly to religious men in power, but they did not seek to subvert the religious order.

Seeds of Internal Conflict

BFAS's dramatic shifts in the wake of the 1837 national convention—from “gender-conscious group activity” to “group activity intended to advance women’s rights and women’s interests,” and from broad claims about slavery’s anti-Christian nature to targeted discourse against anti-abolitionist clergymen—were not universally accepted by members. BFAS members might have opposed these shifts for a variety of reasons: too much change in too little time, loss of focus on the original cause, or fears about losing credibility as abolitionists if they also advocated too strongly for women’s interests. While BFAS annual reports did not specify individual members’ opinions, private correspondence revealed why some women disagreed with the organization’s new direction.

Parker’s nascent affiliation with Sarah and Angelina Grimké, especially her invitation to have them speak throughout Massachusetts for both abolitionism and women’s rights, instigated negative reactions. Juliana Tappan, a member of the New York City Female Anti-Slavery Society, had attended the 1837 national convention and volunteered to serve on a correspondence committee to preserve communication among female abolitionist societies before the next year’s convention; other committee members included Mary Grew of Philadelphia and three BFAS members, Maria Weston Chapman,

Henrietta Sargent, and Catharine Sullivan.¹²⁷ In July 1837—two months after the national convention and six weeks after Mary Parker’s letter of support for the Grimké sisters—Juliana Tappan wrote a private letter to Anne Weston and expressed her dismay at women and men collaborating on abolitionism. Anne Weston was not on the assigned correspondence committee, which indicated that Tappan’s letter was more personal than official anti-slavery business. Tappan wrote:

Is it not difficult to draw the boundary line? On the one hand, we are in danger of servile submission to the opinions of the other sex, & on the other hand, in perhaps equal danger of losing that modesty, & instinctive delicacy of feeling, which our Creator has given as a safeguard.¹²⁸

Tappan favored separate spheres for each gender, although recognized that that system could cause women to become subservient. Nevertheless, Tappan identified spiritual distinctions between the genders, namely womankind’s “modesty” and “delicacy,” and did not condone collaboration among male and female abolitionists. Therefore, she preferred BFAS’s gender-conscious activity from the previous few years over the new women’s rights activity that Parker and others adopted.

A month later, BFAS meetings became increasingly heated, including over issues Tappan mentioned. In August 1837, Anne Weston circulated a letter to all of BFAS, commenting on these divisions. In her letter, Weston identified two types of women’s organizations: one that “acknowledges its own dependence & subordination,” and the other that “acknowledge[s] & fulfill[s] the duties of their various domestic obligation,

¹²⁷ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Proceedings of the 1837 Anti-Slavery Convention*, 16.

¹²⁸ Juliana Tappan to Anne Weston, July 21, 1837, Boston Public Library, quoted in Yellin and Van Horne, *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, 9-10.

[but] are not at all prepared merely in virtue of being women to declare themselves either subordinate to or dependent.”¹²⁹ Without identifying individuals by name, Weston appeared to delineate the two factions emerging within BFAS: those who recognized gendered limitations, but maintained focus on abolitionism, and those who blended anti-slavery and women’s rights activism. Clearly, women’s activism in American society in general and in the anti-slavery movement in particular was becoming a polemical issue for the organization.

Outside of this private correspondence, there was one recorded instance of internal dissent in BFAS’s official publications in 1837. At the annual meeting in October, several anonymous members proposed “expung[ing]” “the part relative to the organization of the Free Church” from the annual report before publication,¹³⁰ perhaps because these unnamed women so strongly opposed even the notion of an independent religious institution. After the debate, which was not summarized in the meeting minutes, the annual report was “read and discussed and again accepted, *but not unanimously*” (italics in original).¹³¹ Immediately following was a note from five members, including organization president Mary Parker, that read, “While we give our cordial approbation to many of the sentiments of this Report—the love of freedom and justice constrain us to state that some portions of it we cherish the most serious objections.”¹³² At the literal

¹²⁹ Anne Weston to the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, August 21, 1837, *Boston Public Library Special Collections*.

¹³⁰ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1837 Annual Report*, 3.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

level, this side note reified disagreements within BFAS over the new direction of their activism. Structurally, though, this style of dissent—emphasizing that a proposal had not passed unanimously and listing a few dissenters by name in an addendum—had never appeared before in a BFAS publication; it had, however, been used multiple times in the proceedings of the 1837 national convention around contested resolutions. This suggests that even members who disapproved of the national convention’s influence on the organization’s behavior or rhetoric, were still influenced by its syntax.

CHAPTER 4

“SOME OF THE MEMBERS BEING DISSATISFIED”: IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICT, 1838-1839

BFAS's embrace of the Grimké sisters following the 1837 national convention contributed to internal disagreements over leadership and course of action, ultimately destabilizing BFAS in the lead up to the 1838 convention. Maria Weston Chapman, the corresponding secretary for the previous few years, had played a key part in publishing BFAS's evolving ideology over the previous year, both in the 1837 annual report and in circulating Parker's letter endorsing the Grimkés' speaking tour. Indeed, Chapman was a well-known and well-connected figure in Massachusetts society, a status she achieved in part through her "incredibly prolific letter writing."¹³³ In a draft letter to Parker in November 1837, Chapman requested a new position in BFAS, specifically one where she would "be able to give unanimous satisfaction in discharging its duties."¹³⁴ While Chapman offered no further explanation to indicate why she wanted a new role, it can be assumed that either other members or she herself were not "unanimous[ly] satisf[ied]" with her current work as corresponding secretary. Regardless of who was unsatisfied with

¹³³ Beth A. Salerno, *Sister Societies: Women's Antislavery Organizations in Antebellum America* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), 132.

¹³⁴ Maria Weston Chapman to Mary Parker [draft], November 17, 1837, *Boston Public Library Special Collections*.

Chapman's performance, it is clear that BFAS was experiencing tensions over leadership by the outset of 1838.

Mary Parker's close friendship with the Grimké sisters, which had begun at the 1837 national convention, also became increasingly divisive for BFAS members. Indeed, Sarah Grimké had addressed her 1837 treatise *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* to Mary Parker.¹³⁵ In March 1838, two months before she and Parker would attend the second national convention, Anne Weston sent a letter to her sister Deborah, describing a recent BFAS meeting, where Parker had once again invited the Grimkés to speak. When Parker introduced Sarah Grimké, "she requested...there might be no demonstration of praise or censure,"¹³⁶ implying Sarah's presence sparked both extremes. Clearly, Parker's ongoing affiliation with the Grimkés caused strife within BFAS, most likely because the Grimkés' ideology around women's rights and women's role in the abolitionist movement were more radical than what some BFAS members had expected when they first joined the organization.

Violence at the 1838 National Convention

At the 1838 national convention in Philadelphia, urban female anti-slavery societies once again comprised a majority of the representatives. Of the over two hundred

¹³⁵ Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, ed. Elizabeth Ann Bartlett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

¹³⁶ Anne Weston to Deborah Weston, March 23, 1838, *Boston Public Library Special Collections*.

delegates, most were from Philadelphia, New York City, or Boston.¹³⁷ Specifically, BFAS sent fourteen representatives: Mary Parker, Anne Weston, Catharine Sullivan, and Lydia Fuller returned for their second national convention, and Maria Weston Chapman, Susan Paul, Abigail Ordway, Thankful Southwick, and Martha Ball were among the ten new attendees. Lydia Maria Child did not attend the convention.¹³⁸ Parker remained as president, with Chapman, Sullivan, Paul, Lucretia Mott of Philadelphia, and both Grimké sisters sharing the role of vice-president; in other words, BFAS and its Philadelphia counterparts maintained their leadership and dominance at the convention. BFAS's 1838 annual report did not address the convention's affairs, instead directing interested readers to "the minutes that have been published" by the convention itself.¹³⁹ As such, most of the information concerning voting, resolutions, and debates comes from the convention's official proceedings.

Several proposed resolutions and discussions at the convention centered around the relationships between churches and slavery, and how female abolitionists should best proceed. Mary Grew, the Philadelphia corresponding secretary who had coordinated the previous national convention with Chapman, claimed "it is our duty to keep ourselves separate from those churches which receive to their pulpits and their communion tables,

¹³⁷ Ira V. Brown, "'Am I not a woman and a sister?': The Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, 1837-1839" in *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 50, no. 1 (1983): 10, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27772873>.

¹³⁸ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, held in Philadelphia, May 15th, 16th, 17th and 18th, 1838* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838), 12, accessed 28 June 2018, <https://www.loc.gov/item/33001926/>.

¹³⁹ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *Fifth Annual Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), 11, accessed 20 August 2017, <https://archive.org/details/annualreportofbo1838bost>.

those who buy, or sell, or hold as property, the image of the living God,” essentially endorsing free churches.¹⁴⁰ The resolution ultimately passed, but several delegates from New York, including Juliana Tappan who had written privately to Anne Weston the year prior about BFAS’s radical behavior, openly dissented, on the grounds that “there is still moral power sufficient in the church, if rightly applied, to purify it.”¹⁴¹ Both Maria Weston Chapman and Anne Weston supported Grew’s resolution, but there is no record of other BFAS representatives’ votes.¹⁴² This debate demonstrated how the Philadelphia women’s more radical thinking was embraced by some members of BFAS at the national convention, even if the organization had rejected a free church proposal in Boston the previous year.

Three BFAS members proposed resolutions at the national convention which emphasized women’s roles as moral educators in the abolitionist movement, returning to their discourse from the organization’s first few years. Abigail Ordway offered that “every mother is bound by imperative obligations, to instruct her children in the principles abolition,” and Catharine Sullivan framed “the Anti-Slavery cause to be identical with those on which the whole gospel rests” because the “salvation of the slave” is intertwined with the “salvation of the master.”¹⁴³ Such resolutions reinforced female anti-slavery activity as reformist activity, making no mention of challenging women’s

¹⁴⁰ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Proceedings of the 1838 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women*, 4.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 6, 9.

ascribed place as BFAS had done the year before. Perhaps BFAS members like Ordway and Sullivan opposed the society's changing rhetoric and activism, and used the national convention to express their perspective of proper female abolitionist behavior. Thankful Southwick, another BFAS delegate, authored a resolution for women "to make the *most vigorous efforts* to procure for the use of their families the products of *free labor*" (italics in original).¹⁴⁴ Therefore, while she encouraged women to change their consumption patterns to further the abolitionist effort, it was still within their homes and the private sphere. BFAS members' voting records and proposed resolutions revealed their differing opinions around women's activism in the anti-slavery movement.

Four female anti-slavery societies—three from Massachusetts and one from Rhode Island—did not send delegates to the national convention; instead, they wrote letters of support, which were then read aloud to the assembled representatives in Philadelphia. These four corresponding societies, as they were called, each emphasized women's rights to participate fully in the public sphere on the abolitionist issue. The Providence Female Anti-Slavery Society penned "the iron shackle that drags heavily along the plains of the south, and the golden fetter hugged by so many of our sex, are alike to be broken;"¹⁴⁵ the Fitchburg Society claimed abolitionism is a cause worthy of challenging the "appropriate sphere of labor;"¹⁴⁶ BFAS's neighbor, the Cambridgeport Society, argued that slavery was not "a political affair" and therefore women must

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 7.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 15.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 18.

“infuse her spirit into the laws of country.”¹⁴⁷ Not only did these letters illuminate how women anti-slavery advocates were shifting toward a gender right’s platform, but these organizations were all close in proximity to BFAS. BFAS’s local network of female abolitionists would have encouraged and been encouraged by BFAS’s ideological shifts since 1836.

For BFAS, though, the convention’s defining moment happened outside of the assembly. On the second and third days, a mob gathered outside of the assembly, infuriated by the convention’s interracial and coeducational anti-slavery activism; ultimately the mob burned down one of convention’s meetinghouses overnight.¹⁴⁸ The convention’s secretaries glossed over the mob’s actions in the meeting minutes; they referred only to a change in location for the closing session.¹⁴⁹ BFAS delegates, however, reacted much more strongly and affectively to the mob, devoting several pages in their annual report to the mob’s actions, the panic it inspired, and the women’s resilience through prayer. Martha Ball later wrote how delegates, in the face of the mob, reflected whether they were “prepared to die for the bleeding slave,—for the cause of [their] master.”¹⁵⁰ Ball also described the meetinghouse’s ruins in a creative edit of Isaiah 64:11 about the destruction of Solomon’s Temple: “Our holy and beautiful house, where we praised Thee, is burned up with *fire*, and our pleasant things are laid waste” (italics in

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 17.

¹⁴⁸ Carolyn Williams, “The Female Antislavery Movement: Fighting against Racial Prejudice and Promoting Women’s Rights in Antebellum America” in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, eds. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, 170.

¹⁴⁹ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Proceedings of the 1838 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women*, 7.

¹⁵⁰ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1838 Annual Report*, 13-14.

original).¹⁵¹ Ball's accounts reiterated BFAS's religiosity and emphasized the danger involved in female abolitionist activity. Of course, BFAS faced a violent mob fewer than three years earlier, at their 1835 annual meeting; the mob at the national convention must have triggered these memories and added to their trauma. Chapman, for example, fainted when she heard about the assembled mob.¹⁵² Beyond their discussions and interactions at the 1838 national convention, BFAS also came away with heightened awareness about the potential hazards of their activism.

Return to Founding Principles

In the wake of the 1838 national convention and its violence, BFAS offered a more reserved tone on women's rights and at times explicitly reaffirmed its identity as a reformist society. The organization continued to chastise clergymen who preached against the abolitionist message, although the women now emphasized their desire to persuade the clergymen to change their perspectives. Finally, BFAS highlighted multiple times in the 1838 annual report the power of women's petitions, especially in conjunction with other female anti-slavery societies' petitions; yet again, this is an overt return to the society's activism before 1837, further suggesting the growing opposition to the organization's radical shift from gender-conscious to gender-rights activity over the previous year. Overall, BFAS in 1838 demonstrated a less radical approach to women's abolitionist activity and, at times, adopted more conservative language than ever before.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 11, 16.

¹⁵² Brown, "'Am I not a woman and a sister?,'" 13.

As with previous years, the epigraphs on the annual report reflected the tone and tenor of BFAS's year. The 1838 annual report's epigraphs were two psalms, each emphasizing God's support for the enslaved and His power to release them from bondage. By quoting Psalms in these epigraphs, it seems BFAS was less political than the previous year, and more focused on connecting abolitionism to a higher cause. The first epigraph, from Psalm 68:6, read, "God setteth the solitary in families; he bringeth out those that are BOUND WITH CHAINS," and the second, from Psalm 125:1, said, "They that trust in the Lord shall be as mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth forever" (emphasis in original).¹⁵³ The psalms implied that those who supported God's causes on earth would earn salvation and immortality in heaven, perhaps in reference to the violent mobs they faced at the national convention that year. With these epigraphs, BFAS reasserted its religious endeavor, but made no mention of either politics or women's rights, as it had the previous year.

For the third consecutive year, BFAS hosted an anti-slavery fair in 1838; its appropriation of revenue evidenced the growing conflict among the organization over women's role in the larger abolitionist movement. As BFAS's fair continued to expand over the previous few years, so, too, did its attendees; men and women alike attended, interacted, and shopped at the fair, making it a public coeducational forum.¹⁵⁴ In 1838,

¹⁵³ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1838 Annual Report*, cover page.

¹⁵⁴ Lee Chambers-Schiller, "'A Good Work among the People': The Political Culture of the Boston Antislavery Fair" in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, eds. Yellin and Van Horne, 264.

BFAS raised over one-thousand dollars, the most profitable fair by far.¹⁵⁵ BFAS attributed their fair's success to "sister Societies in New England" and our "respected sisters in Europe" who had helped make items to sell; BFAS's growing network, dating back to the previous year's national convention, made their anti-slavery work more effectual.¹⁵⁶ As with previous years, they had pledged one-thousand dollars to the all-male abolitionist organization, which they paid in two installments.¹⁵⁷

Two additional payments appeared in their 1838 financial records for the first time: one-hundred dollars towards William Lloyd Garrison's salary at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, and a one-hundred dollar donation to the Samaritan Asylum "for indigent colored children," an orphanage and women's group home that was funded entirely by charitable giving.¹⁵⁸ These two benefactors represent completely different aspects of the abolitionist movement—one was an affirmation of Garrisonian ideology, and the other harkened back to BFAS's earlier activity as a reformist society. That the amounts were equal suggested they balanced out, or were a compromise between two BFAS factions. Furthermore, Mary Parker was a member of the Samaritan Asylum, so she would likely have advocated for directing funds to this other benevolent society.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *Seventh Annual Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Boston: W. S. Dorr, 1840), 25, accessed 20 August 2017, <https://archive.org/details/annualreportofbo1840bost>.

¹⁵⁶ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1838 Annual Report*, 22.

¹⁵⁷ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1838 Annual Report*, 27; Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1839 Annual Report*, 25.

¹⁵⁸ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1838 Annual Report*, 6; Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1839 Annual Report*, 25.

¹⁵⁹ Debra Gold Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 108.

BFAS's justification for donating to the Samaritan Asylum further demonstrated some members' retrenchment as a reformist society, and their language intimated a racial hierarchy. As the annual report recorded, "the Constitution of our Society provides, that the funds of the Society shall be appropriated, not only to the dissemination of *truth* on the subject of slavery, but also for the improvement of the moral and intellectual character of the colored population" (italics in original).¹⁶⁰ This marked the first time that BFAS funded a specific social program or cited its Constitution to explain its decision; perhaps the members who advocated for this donation felt the organization had betrayed its founding principles or drifted too much from its original charge. Furthermore, BFAS emphasized this donation's long-term benefits, both for the recipients and the community as a whole:

Need it be added, this institution is one of the most economical ways of doing good. It is a preventive of crime. By taking these children from the abodes of sin, and bringing them under the healthful influence of virtue and religion, they are snatched from those paths which lead them to the chambers of death, fitted for usefulness here, and for eternal blessedness in a world of glory.¹⁶¹

BFAS's attitude—that society's most vulnerable members required outside assistance and guidance to avoid falling into immoral lifestyles—was emblematic of women's benevolent societies at the time.¹⁶² Their rhetoric also implied a power difference, where BFAS's charity provided a "healthful influence" to overcome the black orphans' natural and assigned state. Because this discourse did not appear in previous annual reports, it

¹⁶⁰ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1838 Annual Report*, 5-6.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶² Anne M. Boylan, "Women in Groups: An Analysis of Women's Benevolent Organizations in New York and Boston, 1797-1840" in *The Journal of American History* 71, no. 3 (1984): 501, doi:10.2307/1887469.

suggested some BFAS members were pushing to have their opinions included for the first time, perhaps in response to the organization's new direction over the previous year.

BFAS maintained its petition campaigns in 1838, and used its annual report to argue that petitions were women's most effective means of creating social change. In December 1837, Representative John Patton of Virginia had proposed a stricter gag rule in Congress against anti-slavery petitions; when his bill passed, it became easier for pro-slavery representatives to renew the gag rules in subsequent years.¹⁶³ Responding directly to him, BFAS's major petitions in 1838 were directed to Patton, "praying for the rescinding of the vote" and criticizing his "lamentable" character.¹⁶⁴ While petitioning was always one of BFAS's tools, they turned to their "British sisters" as role models for petitions' potency.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, slavery in the British-controlled Caribbean was abolished in August 1838, an act which BFAS credited to the millions of British women who had signed petitions. Following that contemporary example, BFAS wished "every American slave [to] find a representative in the person of a petitioner."¹⁶⁶ Therefore, while BFAS had been celebrating petitions since its founding, its awareness of other female anti-slavery societies' successes allowed BFAS to feel more confident in this method.

As they had done since the 1837 national convention, BFAS members continued to criticize priests who opposed the abolitionist effort, but now with a concise metric and

¹⁶³ Scott R. Meinke, "'lavery, Partisanship, and Procedure in the U. S. House: The Gag Rule, 1836-1845" in *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2007): 42, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40263409>.

¹⁶⁴ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1838 Annual Report*, 9-10.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

a more measured tone. BFAS's agreed upon standard for a clergyman was based on Luke 4:18: he should preach "the gospel to the poor, of healing the broken-hearted, of proclaiming deliverance to the captive, and recovery of sight to the blind, of setting at liberty those that are bruised," and he should enable his congregants to do the same.¹⁶⁷ Abolitionism, of course, was directly related to both "proclaiming deliverance" and "setting [people] at liberty," indicating BFAS still believed priests had a Christian duty to oppose slavery. Whereas the previous year, BFAS responded forcefully to such priests, they now advocated for a more introspective approach, reflecting on "means within their reach" to make such priests "see their guilt."¹⁶⁸ This restrained, almost prayerful, strategy similarly connoted a compromise among BFAS women: its softer criticism of clergymen could appease those who felt uncomfortable with their harsh language of the previous year.

Notably absent from the 1838 annual report was any overt mention of BFAS challenging dominant ideas about women's social roles; indeed, the only two references to gender rights activity were quotations from people outside of BFAS. The first was a reminder of the Grimké sisters' speaking tour the year before, which had inspired BFAS to endorse unanimously their views "in reference to the sphere and duties of women."¹⁶⁹ BFAS's undivided support for the Grimkés predated 1838; perhaps the author included this piece of BFAS history out of nostalgia as much as ideology.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 25.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 26.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 9.

The second reference to gender rights activity came from a BFAS-sponsored speech, given by Alvan Stewart and Henry Brewster Stanton at Marlboro Chapel shortly after the 1838 national convention. Stewart shared a hometown with Martha Storrs, the delegate at the 1837 national convention who had first proposed boycotting anti-abolitionist churches, and Stanton would eventually marry the leading women's rights advocate Elizabeth Cady; therefore, inviting these men to speak suggests an openness to women's rights ideology. In the men's speech, excerpts of which BFAS reproduced in their annual report, they argued women's relentless anti-slavery activism was the best hope for ending slavery, claiming "[o]ur statesmen will soon say they can hold out no longer in their oppression, when all the maids and matrons of the land have arisen for freedom and the right."¹⁷⁰ Explicitly, Stewart and Stanton affirmed women's political influence on abolitionism, but they also implied women's ability to "arise" for ending their own "oppression."

Open disagreements within BFAS began in early 1839, as members were preparing to attend the third national convention. At an unplanned board meeting in March, Mary Parker and Martha Ball rushed a vote to endorse the Lynn and Dorchester female anti-slavery societies' petitions condemning racially-prejudiced state laws.¹⁷¹ By doing so, Parker and Ball further expanded BFAS's platform and activism, and demonstrated how women's abolitionist organizations' interactions influenced each other. Anne Weston subsequently demanded in a private letter that Parker and Ball

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 21.

¹⁷¹ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1839 Annual Report*, 7.

publish the voting record for all BFAS members to see.¹⁷² Weston did not specify whether her anger was at Parker's unilateral decision-making or at her endorsement of a new cause; regardless, conflicts over the society's leadership and activity widened on the eve of the third national convention.

Recommitting to Abolition at the 1839 National Convention

With one hundred delegates in attendance, the 1839 national convention was held over three days in May in Philadelphia. This year, BFAS sent three representatives, their smallest contingency by far: Martha Ball, Mary Ann Johnson, and Julia Williams; Ball served as a secretary, and Johnson as a vice-president.¹⁷³ Maria Weston Chapman, Anne Weston, and Lydia Maria Child all chose to not attend; Child later explained their decision was due in part to a belief that male and female abolitionists needed to work more collaboratively.¹⁷⁴ The Philadelphia women maintained their dominance at national conventions: they sent twenty-three delegates, and had members at all ranks of the executive board, including the new president, Sarah Lewis.¹⁷⁵

Memories of the violent mob from the previous year lingered at the convention, although the representatives emphasized their dedication to abolitionism at all costs. The

¹⁷² Anne Weston to Mary Parker, 1839, *Digital Commonwealth*.

¹⁷³ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Proceedings of the Third Anti-slavery Convention of American Women, held in Philadelphia, May 1st, 2d, and 3d, 1839* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Thompson, 1839), 13, accessed 28 June 2018, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t42r3zd06>.

¹⁷⁴ Brown, "Am I not a woman and a sister?," 15.

¹⁷⁵ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Proceedings of the 1839 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women*, 13.

mayor of Philadelphia wrote to Lucretia Mott, one of the convention's vice-presidents, discouraging attendees from walking and associating with black people so as to avoid any "recurrence of last year's outrages."¹⁷⁶ Upon hearing of this request, the delegates responded that "it was a principle with us, which we could not yield, to make no distinction on account of color."¹⁷⁷ The three BFAS representatives supported Mott's response, thus expanding BFAS's platform to include opposing racism. Although BFAS members and actions over the previous five years suggested they supported racial equality in addition to immediate abolitionism—indeed, BFAS was one of the few racially-integrated female anti-slavery societies—they had never articulated it so explicitly.¹⁷⁸ The national convention elicited BFAS to solidify a stronger stance on combating racism and to expand their founding principles.

Several resolutions highlighted the diversity of thought within the female abolitionist movement, indicating that BFAS's tensions were not unique. On the first day of the convention, Hannah Stickney, from the Newburyport, Massachusetts Female Anti-Slavery Society, proposed that all anti-slavery activists be "welcome" to the convention and the cause, "regardless of their opinions on other subjects."¹⁷⁹ In other words, abolitionism could encompass other causes or represent a diverse set of ideals. The delegates unanimously accepted her proposal, perhaps because they were all aware of competing ideologies among the attendees, within their own anti-slavery societies, or

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 6.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 4.

within the abolitionist movement as a whole. Moreover, Stickney, as a Newburyport native, must have been familiar with BFAS, its annual anti-slavery fairs, and perhaps even its internal disagreements. Stickney might have been responding to their ideological differences by reminding the delegates of their shared belief in abolitionism.

Another resolution offered a compromise on the women's stance toward anti-abolitionist priests, such as the Massachusetts clergymen who had harshly criticized BFAS in 1837. Martha Stickney, also from Newburyport, Massachusetts, expressed her "deep[] regret" over "the inconsistency of those professed ministers of the gospel" who espoused Christian teaching while actively suppressing the women's attempts to carry out the teachings.¹⁸⁰ Stickney's tone and rhetoric were notably softer and more measured than religion-oriented proposals in previous years; indeed, it was effectively a written condemnation, but offered no suggestions for how female abolitionists should proceed. The convention adopted this proposal, perhaps seeing it as a balance between those who supported a free church and those who felt uncomfortable criticizing religious authority.

Martha Ball proposed two resolutions, each of which inspired intense debates among attendees before being adopted; her proposals illuminate not only her own ideas, but also offer a window into the conflict within BFAS. Ball called for greater direct action, even at risk of physical harm. Specifically, she encouraged a boycott of all slave-made products so as to not "be guilty of participation in the sin which we condemn," and that female abolitionists "should be made partakers in the sufferings" of

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 10.

slaves.¹⁸¹ Several delegates dissented from her proposals, citing the extreme sacrifice they could require.¹⁸² In each instance, her proposal ultimately passed, but only after multiple delegates from the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, including Lucretia Mott and Sarah Lewis, added that Ball's proposals should be construed as goals more than expectations.¹⁸³ If other national delegates only supported mitigated versions of her proposals, Ball's ideas around direct anti-slavery actions must be considered extreme by most other abolitionists. Presumably, Ball's thinking predated the 1839 national convention, which means she must have shared her beliefs with BFAS members; perhaps some BFAS members were similarly shocked by or unsure of some of Ball's proposals.

As with previous national conventions, the delegates wrote and published circulars to be distributed to all female anti-slavery societies; the 1839 circulars highlighted women's power to petition, and the need to combat prejudice. Three petitions in particular were encouraged: guaranteeing runaway slaves a trial by jury, abolishing slavery in Washington, D.C., and abolishing the interstate slave trade.¹⁸⁴ They framed these anti-slavery petitions as "our only means of direct political action," but argued that their inability to vote was beneficial because "we shall not be suspected of party motives."¹⁸⁵ In other words, the delegates embraced their apolitical identity as women, a

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 7, 10-11.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 25.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 26.

slight conservative shift for the convention that had advocated gender equality in prior years.

The second circular formalized a proposal by Sarah Grew of Philadelphia, and criticized society's implicit anti-black bias, claiming:

To a certain point, many of you encourage the colored man's efforts for improvement; you benevolently rejoice in witnessing his advancement in all of those branches of education necessary to the mechanic or tradesman; but if he press still farther,—if he should aspire to indulge a refined taste to satisfy the cravings of a cultivated mind by mingling with congenial society, you frown him back with scorn and contempt.¹⁸⁶

With this, the delegates expanded their immediate abolitionist platform to include broader social and cultural change. Reformist societies and education programs, while well-intended, did not necessarily believe freed blacks deserved equal dignity and opportunity.¹⁸⁷ The circular not only reiterated Hannah Stickney's resolution around the multiple related causes to abolitionism, but also represented how the delegates' thinking had evolved over the previous year.

At the close of the convention, the delegates created a committee of nine women who would organize the following year's convention, which was to be held in Boston and hosted by BFAS. Lucretia Mott, Sarah Pugh, and Mary Grew represented Philadelphia on the planning committee, and Mary Parker, Martha Ball, and Maria Weston Chapman represented Boston.¹⁸⁸ Chapman, as mentioned previously, did not attend the 1839

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 22.

¹⁸⁷ Anne M. Boylan, "Women in Groups: An Analysis of Women's Benevolent Organizations in New York and Boston, 1797-1840" in *The Journal of American History* 71, no. 3 (1984): 501, doi:10.2307/1887469.

¹⁸⁸ Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, *Proceedings of the 1839 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women*, 12.

convention because she no longer believed female and male abolitionists should work separately. Her inclusion on the planning committee suggests that either Ball was unaware of how dissatisfied Chapman was, or Chapman had agreed to play a large role in organizing the 1840 national convention on the condition they work alongside their male counterparts. Regardless, by offering to host and coordinate the next convention, BFAS forced itself to confront and clarify some of the disagreements from the previous two years, including women's place in the abolitionist movement, whether to embrace fully a women's rights platform, and how their religious identity and abolitionist activity intersected.

Irreconcilable Differences

After the 1839 national convention, a plethora of divergent ideas appeared in BFAS's writings and activism. At times, members invoked broad, universalizing statements, as if grasping for a common thread; in other instances, members directly contradicted each other or the organization's traditions. This convoluted and inconsistent behavior highlighted BFAS's shift from its cohesive and direct tone of the previous years. To that end, as the various factions justified their competing ideas, they invoked other anti-slavery societies with whom they agreed; by doing so, BFAS further demonstrated how interactions with other abolitionist groups fueled these disagreements.

Setting the tone for their annual report, the 1839 epigraph reflected BFAS's disparate directions and multiplicity of ideas. In full, Psalm 9:9 read, "The Lord will also

be a refuge for the oppressed.”¹⁸⁹ BFAS drew from its traditional religious discourse to argue for God’s support in their endeavors; previous Biblical epigraphs, of course, had alluded explicitly to incarceration, deliverance, false Christianity, and women’s power to shape men. By contrast, this epigraph was straightforward and simple, and could have referred to any form of oppression, whether racial or gender. Perhaps this represented the diversity of causes intertwined with abolitionism as Hannah Stickney had described at the national convention. Or, to reaffirm their founding religious principles through a single-dimensional psalm was a compromise among BFAS’s factions.

The 1839 national convention inspired a peak in women’s anti-slavery petitioning, especially at the local and state levels, and BFAS is no exception.¹⁹⁰ Mary Parker and Martha Ball published their own circular to “Women of New England.” In a similar format and style as Parker’s 1837 letter in support of the Grimkés, Parker and Ball communicated the importance of women’s petitions and reproduced several themes from the previous national convention’s circular. They argued women’s petitions had proven successful because the signers “cannot be suspected of personal political aims, nor of being swayed by the churlish spirit and tyrannous machinery of party hostilities.”¹⁹¹ Like Sarah Lewis and the other executive committee members at the national convention, they perceived women’s apolitical position as a benefit. To them, American women had a unique charge and role in ending slavery.

¹⁸⁹ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1839 Annual Report*, cover page.

¹⁹⁰ Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven, “‘Let Your Names Be Enrolled’: Method and Ideology in Women’s Antislavery Petitioning” in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, eds. Yellin and Van Horne, 180, 194.

¹⁹¹ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1839 Annual Report*, 14.

Perhaps in acknowledgement of the growing factionalism, the annual report included a summary of BFAS's history and achievements, and emphasized the group's religious identity. Reflecting on BFAS's founding in 1833, the author celebrated the "band of twelve individuals" who first adopted the abolitionist mantle, connecting the original members with the disciples.¹⁹² Concern for enslaved mothers and children motivated BFAS's actions, as members empathized with "the thousands of daughters at the South to whom the name of mother is linked with no sweet remembrance of infant years."¹⁹³ Lastly, and most significantly, the author concluded by invoking Luke 4:18, the same verse BFAS had used the previous year to justify criticisms of anti-abolitionist clergymen. This time, the author asserted the "multitudes" who had joined their "cause of equal rights" and the "churches in their separate and united capacities [who] are protesting against this great iniquity" evidenced how BFAS had "proclaim[ed] liberty to the captive."¹⁹⁴ In a stark reversal from the previous two years, BFAS no longer criticized clergymen in their official publication; instead, it glorified how it had collaborated with established churches to further the abolitionist cause.

Compounding BFAS's internal debates was a larger tension within the abolitionist movement as a whole. Since 1837, American Anti-Slavery Society founders disagreed over tactics, especially as William Lloyd Garrison routinely and expressly criticized

¹⁹² Ibid, 18.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 21-22.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 23.

religious institutions for defending slavery.¹⁹⁵ Garrison, who was based in Boston and had contacted BFAS shortly after its founding,¹⁹⁶ had strong opinions on a plethora of other issues, including women's rights and political parties.¹⁹⁷ Conversely, leading evangelical figures in the American Anti-Slavery Society, such as Lewis Tappan, Amos Phelps, and Theodore Weld, believed Christian morality undergirded abolitionism and, while recognizing gender injustices, prioritized the anti-slavery cause.¹⁹⁸ Significantly, all three of these men were related to prominent female abolitionists: Lewis Tappan's daughter was Juliana Tappan; Amos Phelps's wife was Charlotte Phelps, a founding member of BFAS; and Theodore Weld's wife was Angelina Grimké.¹⁹⁹ Therefore, not only were BFAS's tensions part of a broader discussion, but they had personal connections to male leaders on both sides of the debate.

BFAS could not agree which faction of the male abolitionist organization to support, which induced a pivotal and irreversible disagreement. In planning the 1839 anti-slavery fair, the BFAS board, under Mary Parker, voted to donate one-thousand dollars of revenue to the American Anti-Slavery Society, as BFAS had done in the past, and two-hundred dollars to local benevolent organizations; however, shortly thereafter,

¹⁹⁵ Donald M. Jacobs, "William Lloyd Garrison's Liberator and Boston's Blacks, 1830-1865" in *The New England Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1971): 263, doi:10.2307/364529.

¹⁹⁶ Mary Grew to William Lloyd Garrison, April 11, 1834, *Women & Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*.

¹⁹⁷ Henry Mayer, "William Lloyd Garrison: The Undisputed Master of the Cause of Negro Liberation" in *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 23 (1999): 106, doi:10.2307/2999331.

¹⁹⁸ Lawrence J. Friedman, "Confidence and Pertinacity in Evangelical Abolitionism: Lewis Tappan's Circle" in *American Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1979): 91, 99, doi:10.2307/2712488.

¹⁹⁹ Amy Swerdlow, "Abolition's Conservative Sisters: The Ladies' New York City Anti-Slavery Societies, 1834-1840" in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, eds. Yellin and Van Horne, 41; Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1838 Annual Report*, 3.

“[s]ome of the members being dissatisfied with the appropriation to the American Society, a Fair was immediately advertised to be held in October, for raising funds for the Massachusetts Society.”²⁰⁰ In other words, BFAS members simultaneously organized two separate fairs, each benefitting a different all-male abolitionist organization. Parker defended her decision by citing the American Anti-Slavery Society’s expanding network and its ongoing collaboration with Theodore Weld.²⁰¹ Perhaps Parker’s actions were, at least in part, motivated by her personal relationship with the Grimké sisters. Ultimately, some BFAS members adamantly opposed Parker’s decision, preferring to support the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society under the leadership of William Lloyd Garrison.

From late 1837 through 1839, BFAS members discussed and disagreed over the organization’s partnerships, activism, and ideology. The annual national women’s conventions provided a space for BFAS members to learn how other female abolitionist societies grappled with women’s rights, religious leaders and institutions who opposed their work, public sphere participation, and potential collaborations with male abolitionists. Additionally, BFAS members’ proposals and voting at the national conventions revealed individuals’ opinions on how female abolitionists should proceed in the cause, offering insight into the disagreements within BFAS that were not recorded in the organization’s annual reports. Through their interactions with other anti-slavery societies, BFAS experienced similar tensions as other organizations in the movement, further indicating how BFAS was influenced by its connections and networks.

²⁰⁰ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1839 Annual Report*, 12.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, 28.

Ultimately, the chasm became too vast: one organization could not simultaneously criticize anti-abolitionist clergymen as part of a wholehearted commitment to abolitionism on the one hand, and affirm religiosity while promoting women's rights on the other.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

By 1840, the tensions in BFAS over leadership, ideology, and direction reached an apex. Maria Weston Chapman complained in a letter to Sarah Pugh, a member of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, about the extreme factionalism within the organization.²⁰² Pugh and Chapman, of course, both served on the planning committee for the 1840 national convention to be held in Boston. A few months later, Chapman berated some unnamed BFAS members for their “falsehood & deception” and declared the organization’s Board of Directors defunct.²⁰³ In 1840, the organization officially split: Parker and Ball broke away with one faction to form the Massachusetts Female Emancipation Society, and the Weston sisters assumed control of BFAS.²⁰⁴

The 1840 BFAS annual report, therefore, summarized the organization’s ideology and activities as directed by the Weston sisters. For the epigraph, the Westons selected a line from William Wordsworth’s 1802 sonnet, “Near Dover”: “By the soul only, the

²⁰² Maria Weston Chapman to Sarah Pugh, January 14, 1840, *Boston Public Library Special Collections*.

²⁰³ Maria Weston Chapman to unknown, 1840, *Boston Public Library Special Collections*.

²⁰⁴ Julie Roy Jeffrey, “The Liberty Women of Boston: Evangelicalism and Antislavery Politics” in *The New England Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (March 2012), 39, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23251364>.

nations shall be great and free!”²⁰⁵ This poem was part of an anthology where Wordsworth described England’s polarization following the French Revolution and his desire to “unify England in worthy purpose for God and Country (‘Nation’) under the banners of righteousness.”²⁰⁶ BFAS, of course, sought to bridge the pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces in the United States, framing their abolitionist activity as “righteous” and a “worthy purpose.” A modern literary scholar noted that this line from “Near Dover” encapsulated Wordsworth’s philosophy on fighting for liberty, namely of working passionately within the confines of established norms and institutions, as opposed to subverting national laws.²⁰⁷ To that end, the Weston sisters articulated BFAS’s mission after the split from Parker and Ball: an anti-slavery society that, in association with the American Anti-Slavery Society, focused relentlessly on immediate emancipation.

The 1840 national women’s anti-slavery convention never materialized, due in large part to the schisms within the abolitionist movement. Indeed, the American Anti-Slavery Society, like BFAS, bifurcated in 1840; once Lewis Tappan and his followers broke away to form the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, the remaining American Anti-Slavery Society invited BFAS and other female anti-slavery

²⁰⁵ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *Seventh Annual Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Boston: W. S. Dorr, 1840), cover page, accessed 20 August 2017, <https://archive.org/details/annualreportofbo1840bost>.

²⁰⁶ Stephen C. Behrendt, "Placing the Places in Wordsworth's 1802 Sonnets" in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 35, no. 4 (1995): 644, doi:10.2307/450758.

²⁰⁷ Charles Harold Herford, “Herford on Wordsworth” in *British Studies on Wordsworth*, ed. Mohit Kumar Ray (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2003), 151.

societies to join its ranks.²⁰⁸ Instead of an all women's convention, three BFAS members traveled with American Anti-Slavery Society members to the world anti-slavery convention in London in 1840, but were denied the right to participate at the assembly because of their gender.²⁰⁹ Instead of reacting, BFAS acknowledged "the woman's rights question" was "vast and important," but argued "there [was] not legitimate scope for it in societies whose point of union is, the rights of the southern slave."²¹⁰ In other words, BFAS under the Weston sisters did not discount gender consciousness or organized activity on behalf of women's rights, but it separated abolitionism and women's rights, prioritizing the former.

In the first six years of its existence, BFAS experienced a series of changes which challenged its founding creed, ultimately bifurcating the organization. Upon founding, BFAS was like other female reformist societies in Boston: it identified a social problem—slavery—and used its power of petition and moral suasion to encourage lawmakers and enfranchised male relatives to support abolitionism. Members' religious convictions directed their participation, and they did not seek to challenge the gendered spheres of nineteenth-century America. In 1837, BFAS collaborated with the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society to create the first national women's abolitionist convention; discussions with other female abolitionists at the convention introduced BFAS to new ideas about gender and religion within the anti-slavery movement. Inspired

²⁰⁸ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *1840 Annual Report*, 15.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, i.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

by the convention, BFAS shifted toward a women's rights organization which challenged gendered spheres, and adopted targeted, critical rhetoric toward anti-abolitionist clergymen. These marked transformations, however, frustrated some members who felt the society had betrayed its founding mission. For the following two years, disagreements over the direction, scope, and leadership of the organization persisted, playing out subtly in its annual reports or representation at subsequent national conventions. Ultimately, in 1840, as other abolitionist organizations endured similar debates around gender and religiosity, BFAS split.

Historians over the last decade have examined American female abolitionists in the context of global networks and the societies' shared sense of sisterhood. I have focused on a single smaller network—BFAS's connections to other female anti-slavery organizations through the national conventions—and argued how these conventions allowed for member organizations to share their perspectives on women's place and women's rights, ultimately impelling BFAS to bifurcate over these questions. Future researchers could examine how the conventions influenced other member organizations, such as the more conservative New York Female Anti-Slavery Society, or some of the smaller groups outside the major Northeast cities. Such studies would illuminate how other organizations broached the question of women's place in the abolitionist movement and whether BFAS's experience was unique or part of larger patterns.

BFAS's complex ideological history reveals how its network was collaborative and dynamic. Working toward systemic change, in conjunction with other female

abolitionist societies, bred divisions and disagreements over how to proceed and what to prioritize. Mary Parker fully embraced the Grimké sisters' ideas around women's rights, but felt less comfortable challenging religious leaders; Martha Ball wanted more direct action against slavery's defenders; and Maria Weston Chapman supported working alongside male abolitionists, but did not want to become an explicitly women's rights group. BFAS is not the only organization that struggled to preserve unity in the face of a diversifying and expanding movement. Indeed, the modern Women's March movement has a singular goal—to strengthen women's political power—but grapples with a diverse array of related issues, such as leadership tensions, the inclusion of anti-abortion groups, and determining which pressing political problems to address. BFAS's experience teaches social justice advocates that group cohesion requires shared objectives, methodology, and ideology.

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