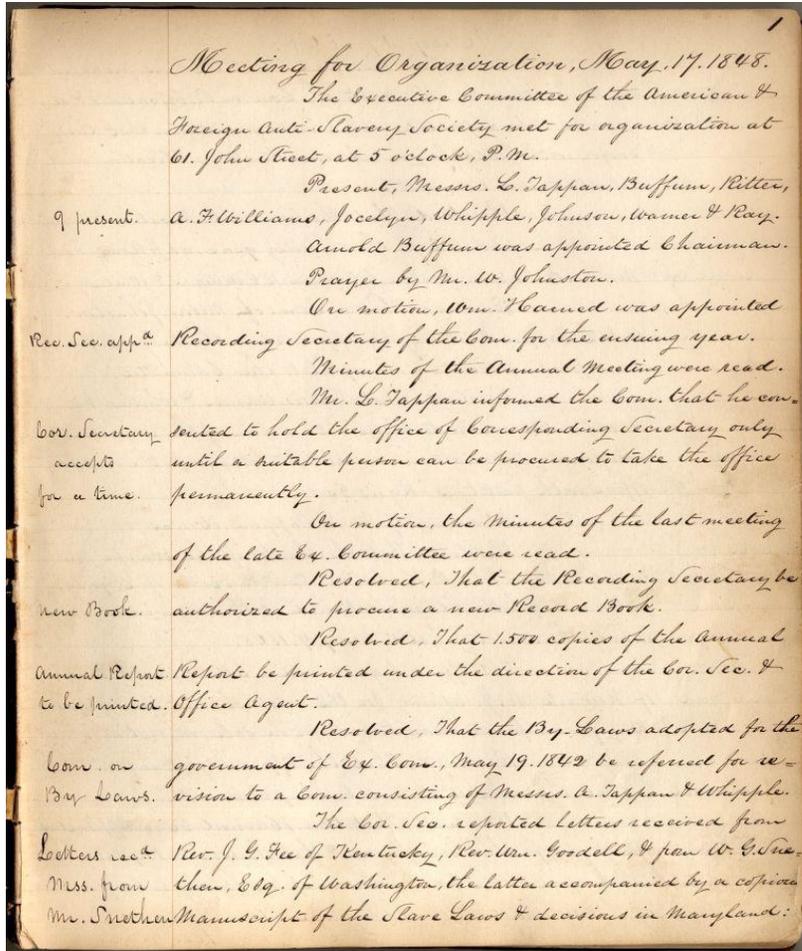


The American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society



© American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society minute book, 1848-1859, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana

The American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society was the result of a schism in the American Anti-Slavery Society (AAS) between William Lloyd Garrison and Lewis and Arthur Tappan. The Tappan brothers felt that abolitionists should create their own political party to advance their struggle by voting. They also believed that women should not be involved in politics. Garrison disagreed with both viewpoints. He believed that women played an important part in the struggle to end slavery. These issues came to a head in 1839 at the AAS Convention in New York, causing the society to split in 1840 and form the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.

In his brilliant and rich biography of William Lloyd Garrison, historian Henry Mayer characterized Lewis and Arthur Tappan's controversial split from the American Anti-Slavery Society as a "schism" in the religious sense, meaning a controversy over matters of orthodoxy and discipline (Mayer 261). It is difficult to frame the argument as a heated debate between conservatives and progressives, for, as Myer aptly illustrates, Garrison and his supporters believed that "politics had to be understood in a moral framework, and the abolition movement had to remain a religious enterprise" (Mayer 264). Arthur Tappan, however, argued that abolitionists needed to advance their struggle via the ballot box, a view that Garrison opposed (Ripley 292).

The Tappans' view that abolitionists should use the ballot to push their agenda in the political realm overlapped with their conviction that white women needed to remain in the domestic sphere and stay out of politics (the issue of black women's role in the AAS was barely addressed in 1830s and 1840s). The antislavery movement challenged this orthodoxy, however, as women used their organizing skills in the realms of reform, missionary work, and temperance to create antislavery societies of their own. Women (white and black) wrote essays, raised funds, and contributed to the protection of runaways. Garrison might believe that abolition could and should be achieved through moral suasion, but he also maintained that women's support was essential to ending slavery (Mayer 266).

These issues came to a head in 1839 when the issue of female participation moved front-and-center at the American Anti-Slavery Convention in New York. A two-day debate about whether women should be formally admitted as members ensued. The final vote supported the admission of female delegates, and Tappan and his supporters protested the result arguing that the decision was a "repugnant" one characterized by an "expression of local and sectarian feelings" (Mayer 267). Over the course of the next year, the issue of the role of women in the organization intensified as did pressure from James Birney, a former slave owner and AAS participant who, like the Tappan brothers, believed abolitionists needed to create a third party and use the ballot.

Birney and the Tappans resigned from the AAS in 1840. The final straw for them came when orator and organizer Abby Kelley was nominated to the society's business committee at the 1840 annual convention by a vote of 571 to 451 (Mayer 281). On May 13, Lewis Tappan called upon all disgruntled attendees to meet him at four in the afternoon in a local church basement to form the "American & Foreign Anti-Slavery Society" (Mayer 282).

Lewis nominated his brother Arthur to be president of the new organization, which was loosely imagined as a rival organization to the AAS that would commit itself to advancing Birney's presidency on the new Liberty Party ticket. It is important to note that not all members who left Garrison's AAS abandoned the organization simply over female participation; Liberty Party leaders Elizur Wright, Henry B.

Stanton, and Joshua Leavitt believed that political action was essential regardless of the role of women in the movement (Johnson 8-10).

The “schism” in the AAS proved to be a watershed moment in the abolitionist struggle because it placed the issues of political action and women’s participation to the forefront of a national movement. Yet as historian Reinhard Johnson has noted, many of the smaller state and local Anti-Slavery Societies opted to pursue a neutral course. Only Anti-Slavery Societies in New York and Michigan voted to split from the Garrisonians and affiliate formally with the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (Johnson 389 n.12).

Works Cited & Further Reading

Mayer, Henry. *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Johnson, Reinhard O. *The Liberty Party, 1840-1848: Antislavery Third-Party Politics in the United States*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009.