

## Chapter 8

## Witnessing History . . .



**Haitian independence** movement leader Touissant Louverture fought successfully against the French and British and provided inspiration for leaders of slave uprisings in America.

Beloved brethren—here let me tell you, and believe it, that the Lord our God, as true as he sits on his throne in heaven, and as true as our Savior died to redeem the world, will give you a Hannibal [an ancient Carthaginian general], and when the Lord shall have raised him up, and given him to you for your possession, O my suffering brethren! . . . Read the history particularly of Hayti, and see how they were butchered by the whites, and do you take warning. The person whom God Shall give you, give him your support and let him go his length, and behold in him the salvation of your God. God will indeed, deliver you through him from your deplorable and wretched condition under the Christians of America.

—David Walker’s *Appeal*



Why was Louverture an inspiration to advocates of slave revolts in America?

### Chapter Preview

**B**lack abolitionist David Walker wrote these words in Boston in 1829. They suggest both the sense early-nineteenth-century Americans had of the nearness of God and the anguish a free black man felt about his brothers and sisters in bondage.

In his harsh language and demands for action, Walker was a precursor of the militant black and white abolitionists of the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s. He bluntly portrayed the oppression suffered by African Americans. He urged black men to redeem themselves by defending their loved ones from abuse. If that led to violence and death, he asked, “Had you not rather be killed than be a slave to a tyrant, who takes the life of your mother, wife and dear little children?” Through his provocative language and his efforts to have his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* distributed in the South, Walker became a prophet of violent revolution against slaveholders.

Walker’s *Appeal* was not just a reaction to slavery; it was also a response to a conservative brand of antislavery reform. This chapter explores the emergence, during the years between Gabriel’s conspiracy in 1800 and the organization of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, of a radical antislavery movement in the United States. We first discuss the turmoil of the period, the Second Great Awakening, the related social reform efforts, the two strains within the abolition movement, and the black response to African colonization. We then describe how Walker, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, other black leaders, and white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison radicalized the abolition movement during the late 1820s and early 1830s. Chapter 9 traces the development of abolitionism from 1833 into the 1850s.

## Section

# 1

## A Country in Turmoil

When David Walker wrote his *Appeal*, the United States was in economic, political, and social turmoil. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 led to a vast westward expansion of cotton cultivation. Where cotton went, so did slavery. By the late 1820s, southern slaveholders and their slaves had pushed into what was then the Mexican province of Texas.

The states of the Old Northwest were passing from frontier conditions to commercial farming. By 1825 the Erie Canal, between the Great Lakes and the Hudson River, had linked this region economically to the Northeast. Later, railroads carried the Old Northwest's agricultural products to East-Coast cities. An enormous amount of grain and meat also flowed down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers encouraging the growth of such cities as Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, St. Louis, Memphis, and New Orleans.

In the North, the transportation and market revolutions changed how people lived and worked. As steamboats became common and as networks of macadam turnpikes (paved with crushed stone and tar), canals, and railroads spread, travel time diminished. As Americans began to move from one region to another, families became more scattered, and ties to local communities became less permanent. For African Americans, subject to the domestic slave trade, mobility came with a high price.

### Political Paranoia

The Jacksonian Era began with charges leveled by Andrew Jackson's supporters that John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay had conspired to cheat Jackson out of the presidency in 1824. Jackson had won a plurality of the popular vote but failed to get a majority in the electoral college. These charges and the belief that Congress chose Adams to be president. Adams and his political allies represented the interests of rich businessmen and intellectuals, rather than those of the common people, led to the organization of the Democratic Party to contest the national election of 1828. The Democrats claimed to stand for the natural rights and economic well-being of American workers and farmers against what they

### GUIDE TO READING

- ▶ What impact did the Second Great Awakening have on black leaders?
- ▶ How did the Democratic Party support the interests of the South's slaveholding elite?
- ▶ What was the Benevolent Empire and what causes did it champion?

### KEY TERMS

- ▶ money power, p. 256
- ▶ slave power, p. 256
- ▶ Trail of Tears, p. 256
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- ▶ expansionism, p. 256
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This drawing appeared in Henry Highland Garnet's 1848 edition of David Walker's *Appeal . . . to the Colored Citizens of the World*. It portrays a black Moses receiving divine laws guaranteeing liberty and justice.

called the **money power**, a conspiratorial alliance of bankers and businessmen.

Yet, from its start, the Democratic Party also represented the interests of the South's slaveholding elite. Democratic politicians from both the North and South favored a states' rights doctrine that protected slavery from interference by the national government. They sought through legislation, judicial decisions, and diplomacy to make the right to hold human property inviolate. They became the most ardent supporters of expanding slavery into new regions, leading their opponents to claim they were part of a **slave power** conspiracy. Most Democratic politicians also openly advocated white supremacy. Although their rhetoric demanded equal rights for all and special privileges for none, they were really concerned only with the rights of white men.

This was clear in their outlook toward American Indians, women, and African Americans. Democratic politicians were in the forefront of those who demanded the removal of Indians to the area west of the Mississippi River, which culminated in the Cherokee **Trail of Tears** in 1838. Generally, Democrats were also traditionalists concerning the role of women in society. They supported patriarchy and a subservient role for women in both the family and the church. Finally, almost all Democratic leaders in both the North and the South believed God and nature had designed African Americans to be slaves. Yet, during the 1820s and early 1830s, only a few radicals like Walker saw the hypocrisy of the Democrats' outlook and contended that real democracy would embrace all men, regardless of race. Reformers did not even begin to propose equal rights for women until the late 1830s.

By the mid-1830s, those Americans who favored a more enlightened social policy than the Democrats offered turned—often reluctantly—to the Whig Party, which opposed Jackson and the Democrats. The Whigs also attracted those who had supported the Anti-Masonic Party during the early 1830s. This small party epitomized political paranoia by contending that the Freemasons were a vast conspiracy to subvert republican government. From the late 1820s onward, politicians such as Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, William H. Seward, and John Quincy Adams, who identified with the Whig Party, placed much more emphasis on Christian morality and an active national government than the Democrats did. They regarded themselves as **conservatives**, did not seek to end slavery in the southern states, and included many wealthy slaveholders within their ranks. But in the North, the party's moral orientation and its opposition to territorial expansion by the United States made it attractive to slavery's opponents.

The Whig Party also served as the channel through which evangelical Christianity influenced politics. In the North, Whig politicians appealed to evangelical voters. Distrustful of slaveholders and **expansionism**, some northern Whig politicians and journalists defended the human rights of African Americans and American



**The Trail of Tears**, painted in 1942 by Robert Lindneux, dramatizes the westward journey of Cherokees from their homeland in Georgia to what is now Oklahoma. The Democratic party, which championed the rights of white men, was chiefly responsible for the forced westward relocation of the Cherokees and other southeastern Indian peoples.

Indians. They criticized the inhumanity of slaveholders and tried to limit the federal government's support for the peculiar institution. When and where they could, black men voted for Whig candidates.

## The Second Great Awakening

Evangelicals were motivated to carry their Christian morality into politics by a new era of **revivalism** in America. Like David Walker, they saw the hand of God everywhere. Religion, of course, had always been important in America. During the 1730s and 1740s, the widespread religious revival known as the Great Awakening had used emotional preaching and hymn singing to bring men and women to embrace God and reform their lives. African Americans helped shape this emphasis on emotion. American churches had first made a concerted effort to convert black people at that time. Then a new wave of emotional revivalism began at the end of the eighteenth century. Known as the **Second Great Awakening**, it lasted into the 1830s. The new evangelicalism led ordinary black and white Americans to try to take control of religion from the established clergy and to impose moral order on an increasingly turbulent American society.

The Second Great Awakening influenced Richard Allen and Absalom Jones's efforts to establish separate black churches in Philadelphia during

the 1790s. It helped shape the character of other black churches that emerged during the 1800s and 1810s. These black churches became an essential part of the antislavery movement. However, the Second Great Awakening did not reach its peak until the 1820s. With particular force in the North and Northwest, Charles G. Finney, a white Presbyterian, and other revivalists helped democratize religion in America. At camp meetings that lasted for days, Finney and other revivalists preached that all men and women—not just a few—could become faithful Christians and save their souls. Just as Jacksonian democracy revolutionized politics in America, the Second Great Awakening revolutionized the nation's spiritual life and led many Americans to join reform movements.



### Reading Check

What impact did the Second Great Awakening have on black leaders?

## The Benevolent Empire

Evangelicals—both black and white—emphasized **practical Christianity**. Those who were saved, they maintained, would not be content with their own salvation. Instead, they would help save others. Black evangelicals, in particular, called for “a *liberating* faith” that would advance material and spiritual well-being. An emphasis on action led to what became known during the 1810s and 1820s as the **Benevolent Empire**, a network of church-related voluntary organizations designed to fight sin and save souls. The Benevolent Empire launched what is now known as antebellum or **Jacksonian reform**.

This social movement flourished from the 1810s through the 1850s. It consisted of voluntary associations dedicated to a host of causes: public education, self-improvement, limiting or abolishing alcohol consumption (the temperance movement), prison reform, and aid to the mentally and physically handicapped. Members of the movement were also involved in distributing Bibles and religious tracts, funding missionary activities, discouraging prostitution, seeking health through diet and fads, improving conditions for seamen, and—by the 1840s—seeking rights for women. The self-improvement, temperance, and missionary associations that free black people—and sometimes slaves—formed in conjunction with their churches in urban areas were part of this movement.

The most important of these societies, however, were those dedicated to the problem of African-American bondage in the United States. At first called societies for promoting the abolition of slavery, they later became known as antislavery societies. Whatever they called themselves, their members were **abolitionists**, people who favored doing away with or abolishing slavery in their respective states and throughout the country. To understand American abolitionism in the 1820s, we must return to the first abolitionist organizations that arose during the revolutionary era.