“This is a cause worth dying for:” Sarah and Angelina Grimké and the development of a political identity

Erin K. Gillett
James Madison University

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“This is a Cause Worth Dying For:”
Sarah and Angelina Grimké and the Development of a Political Identity
Erin K. Gillett

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY
In
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of History

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In Loving Dedication to My Parents, Craig and Teri

Also for historian Gerda Lerner,
whose biography of Sarah and Angelina Grimké
first sparked my interest in the sisters.
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# Table of Contents

Dedication .......................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... iii
List of Figures ....................................................................................................................... v
Abstract .............................................................................................................................. vi
Introduction ........................................................................................................................ 1
Chapter 1: Toward Abolition ............................................................................................. 10
Chapter 2: Development of a Political Identity ............................................................... 51
Chapter 3: Creation of a “New Woman” ........................................................................ 94
Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 128
Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 133
List of Figures

Figure 1: Angelina and Sarah Grimké ................................................................. 104
Abstract

Growing up in a slave-holding family in South Carolina, sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimké had first hand experience of the horrors and evils of the institution of slavery. Due to a religious conversion and a strong internal moral code, both sisters chose to leave their southern home and move to Philadelphia. Once in the North, the sisters became actively engaged in the abolition movement, and served as itinerant antislavery lecturers around the New England states. As their fame grew, so did opposition against their presence in the public sphere—an arena that was traditionally male dominated. Despite harsh criticisms against their womanhood and femininity, the Grimké sisters maintained their lecture circuit and continued to speak against slaveholders and slavery.

Opposition from the public—particularly the Congregational Church and Catharine Beecher—forced the sisters to defend their womanhood and justify their actions on the public platform of antislavery. This public hostility is what caused the sisters to link antislavery rhetoric with a movement for women’s rights. As the sisters were forced to develop a justification for their antislavery careers, they started to simultaneously develop a conscious political identity based on their natural rights as American citizens and human beings. This thesis traces the development of this political identity, and the journey the Grimké sisters underwent into order to create a foundation for the next generation of women’s rights activists.
INTRODUCTION:

It was Election Day in Hyde Park, Massachusetts, and excitement was running high in the town meeting hall. Rumors had spread that a group of women were planning on exercising their self-declared right to vote in this 1870 election, and a crowd had gathered to witness this spectacle. Just a few blocks from the voting-place, a group of women had indeed gathered with the intent of voting that day, proving that they could successfully exercise their political and natural rights to participate in local and national elections. At the appointed time, the group of fifty women filed out of the Everett House parlors, and walked single file the few blocks to the voting house. Quite a crowd had already gathered at the polls, and many were concerned that this event would turn violent, with people protesting against the propriety of women engaging in a political action. Yet no one stirred as the party of women entered the voting hall; in fact, silence reigned through the hall as the women—led by the aged and venerable Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Moore Grimké—filed through the crowds, “deposited their ballots in a separate box, and at once left the room. The deed was done! The women had voted.”

The fifty ballots deposited by the women were not counted, nor did the women expect them to be; but these women considered the event a success, as they were able to embrace their political identities by participating (even indirectly) in the vote—an event which they believed to be an inherent right of all humans, women included. By depositing their ballots in a peaceful and respectful manner, these women had given practical and shocking proof of their earnestness and resolve to participate in the political

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arena, alongside and equal to men. This action was a symbol of women’s rights, as well as an encouragement to other women to take up the cause of women’s enfranchisement and thus advance the cause of all women.

This event served as the political climax of the long and fruitful careers of Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Moore Grimké—sisters who had toiled for almost fifty years for the advancement of women’s rights. Sarah and Angelina had grown up in a wealthy, slave-holding family in South Carolina, and had daily witnessed the horrors and abuses of slavery. Troubled by the moral implications of the peculiar institution, both sisters eventually fled to Philadelphia, hoping to distance themselves from the land that depended on the ownership and exploitation of fellow human beings. The sisters first entered the public scene in the latter half of the 1830s, when they were sought out by the American Anti-Slavery Society, and charged with the task of traveling around the state of New York, speaking to small groups of women on the evils of slavery and spreading the message of abolitionism. The two women experienced great success in their lecture circuit, drawing large crowds of both men and women to hear them speak on behalf of the antislavery movement.

But the act of women speaking in front of men on a politically charged topic such as antislavery raised numerous questions concerning the propriety of women speaking in public. Sarah and Angelina suddenly found their femininity and womanhood being attacked as their opponents claimed that a woman’s character depended upon her staying within the domestic sphere, using her moral and womanly influence in an indirect manner. The sisters now had to defend their right to be engaged and active in the political realm as agents for the abolitionist movement. Sarah and Angelina were forced to
develop a rhetoric that defended and justified their presence outside of the domestic sphere. It was during this time of public discourse when the Grimké sisters started to develop and nurture a political identity. As the two sisters fought on behalf of the enslaved, they also had to fight on behalf of women, who had been distanced from politics and relegated to the inferior status of housekeeper and wife.

Sarah and Angelina were instrumental in the development of a natural rights platform for women. The sisters adopted the principles of the Second Great Awakening, which was sweeping across the nation during the first half of the nineteenth century; they argued that men and women were not created differently, but that God had bestowed all humans with the same moral and intellectual rights. Both sexes had the same responsibilities when it came to civil and political service; neither gender nor race should ever dictate the status of a human. As moral beings, women had an individual responsibility to help reform the nation’s morality and rid the world of the evils of slavery, both on a domestic and political level. So as Sarah and Angelina were fighting for the rights of enslaved African-Americans, they were also fighting for the right of women to be involved in politics. Along this journey, both sisters developed a strong sense of political consciousness, which they used to justify their presence in the political realm.

Sarah and Angelina were only in the public eye for a few years, yet they did much to advance women’s rights, and they laid the foundation for future generations of women’s rights activists. Less than one decade after Sarah and Angelina had faded from the frontlines of antislavery, a group of women gathered in Seneca Falls, New York and proclaimed the rights of women through the Declaration of Sentiments. Penned by
abolitionist and women’s rights activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, this declaration espoused the same language and rhetoric the Grimké sisters had advanced in the late 1830s. Like Sarah and Angelina Grimké, the Seneca Falls Convention called upon the natural rights of humans to justify the enfranchisement of women. Not only were Sarah and Angelina Grimké developing an important sense of political identity, they were also developing a rhetoric and argument for the equality of men and women. So as the sisters faded from the public view in the early 1840s, their legacy did not fade with them; it remained in the form of the following generation of women who continued to develop the natural rights platform for the advancement of women.

Sarah and Angelina Grimké led extraordinary lives, yet the significance of their actions, speeches, and writings has not been fully explored by historians. It was not until the 1960s when many women—including Sarah and Angelina Grimké—were snatched out of historical obscurity. Before the 1960s, there was one biography of the Grimké sisters, which was written by the sister’s close friend, Catherine Birney, a fellow women’s rights activist and former student of the sisters. This biography appeared after the sisters’ death, but was started while Angelina was still alive and able to discuss her life and achievements with Birney. Thus, many passages communicate Angelina’s reminiscences of her childhood and time as a public reformer. While this is an extremely useful piece of history, it must be read carefully as many of the facts have been romanticized; Catharine Birney did not wish to paint either sister in anything but an extremely positive light. So while this biography is useful and offers Angelina’s personal
insights and reflections on her own life, it must be read with a discerning and often skeptical eye.  

The earliest scholarly works of the Grimké sisters are largely biographical; Gerda Lerner was the first historian to write on the two sisters. Lerner astutely and effectively argued that Sarah and Angelina Grimké established the first American feminist movement in the 1830s. Shortly after Lerner’s work on the Grimké sisters, historian Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin published *The Emancipation of Angelina Grimké*, focusing on the internal struggles of Angelina’s life, specifically her renunciation of slavery and her relationship with her family members, including her sister, Sarah, and husband Theodore Dwight Weld. While this is another helpful and insightful look into Angelina Grimké’s life, it does not focus on her life as an antislavery or women’s rights activist.

Soon after Lerner and Lumpkin published their works, historians started focusing less on individuals and began examining the larger women’s rights movement and the role antislavery activism played in shaping the first generation of feminists. Thus, the most recent historiographical trend has focused on how Sarah and Angelina Grimke fit into the larger movement of woman’s rights. Historians have done this by comparing the lives and careers of Sarah and Angelina Grimké with other woman’s rights advocates such as Lydia Child and Maria Weston Chapman. For the most part, scholars have stopped focusing solely on the Grimké sisters, and are now attempting to properly situate them within the abolition and woman’s rights movements. There are numerous works

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When studying individual women like Sarah and Angelina Grimké, it is important to understand the historical context of the nineteenth century, and the role women were expected to play. The conception of “true womanhood” has been the focus of many historical works, as authors have attempted to understand the societal expectations placed on nineteenth century women. Some historians have pointed to the Revolutionary Period, and claimed that in order to understand Antebellum women, one must first understand their Revolutionary foremothers. Many works have chronicled women in the Revolutionary Period, but not many have successfully connected the ideals of Republican Motherhood in the 1790s with the Cult of Domesticity in the 1830s.\footnote{Works focusing on women’s roles in the nineteenth century include: Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women’s Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); and Eleanor Flexner and Ellen Fitzpatrick, *Century of Struggle: The Woman’s Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959).


One of the most important works attempting to connect the nineteenth century ideal of domesticity with Revolutionary era ideals is Rosemarie Zagarri’s *Revolutionary...*
Backlash. Zagarri argues that by the first decade of the nineteenth century, the idea that women should indirectly influence politics from the home had become the prevailing view. By using their heightened sense of morality, women could steer the country away from moral ruin and civil war. Women would, however, as Zagarri points out, be forced to pay a heavy price for this contribution:

In order to rescue the country, women were asked to withdraw from party politics and electoral affairs. They were to renounce their partisan affiliations and relinquish their independent political identities. Instead of acting as their own political agents, they were to exercise their political role indirectly, primarily by means of influencing their husbands and children. They would, in a sense, give up some of the political possibilities that the American Revolution had created for them.

Zagarri believes that a certain number of women did obtain a political identity through their actions during the Revolutionary War, but this was lost when men forced women to start playing a new role—one of disinterested and impartial mediator. No longer did women require a sense of political identity to play their new role, and so it was discouraged.

Not only did women no longer require a political identity, they were publically attacked if they attempted to engage in political activity. In the 1800s, stepping outside of the domestic sphere or engaging in activities deemed fit only for males came to be seen as unfeminine. By the late 1820s, Zagarri claims that women had entered into a phase of political invisibility. Zagarri’s narrative ends on a somewhat bleak note; while she claims that women did engage in limited political activities through the growth of benevolent activities, charitable organizations, and social reform societies, Zagarri points out that women continually denied the political implications of their activities. Zagarri argues

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8 Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 134.
that: “Despite their protestations to the contrary, female reformers engaged in what modern observers would characterize as political behavior. In lobbying for the passage of laws, circulating petitions, and trying to influence male politicians, they used political means to obtain their ends.”

Zagarri’s well-researched narrative provides astute insight in many places; her success in tracing the expectations of women from the Revolutionary era through the 1830s has largely been unduplicated by other historians. Yet despite her contributions, Zagarri’s narrative is often incomplete and ignores large factions of politically minded women in the nineteenth century. In the above quote, Zagarri claims: “modern observers would characterize” Antebellum women’s actions as political. Many women in the 1830s, however, would also have quickly identified their actions as political and purposefully engaged in what they knew to be designated as “male-only” political activities. Furthermore, Zagarri barely glances at women who purposefully stretched the boundaries of “woman’s sphere” and challenged the prevailing view of women’s political duties. In Zagarri’s narrative, all nineteenth century women agreed with Catharine Beecher when she firmly stated: “Women [do] not belong in either party of electoral politics.” Throughout her work, Zagarri claims that once the 1820s struck, women were forced to operate within the confines of benevolent and reform societies. While this is true, there was a contingent of politically minded women—like Sarah and Angelina Grimké—who refused to be limited by the construct of the “domestic sphere.” While Zagarri wants her reader to believe that women’s political activities were limited to petitioning and indirectly influence within the home, women like the Grimkés were

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9 Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 145-146.
10 Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 144-145.
speaking in public on the politically-charged topic of antislavery and universal emancipation.

*Revolutionary Backlash* is a useful work in understanding the relationship between the ideals of Republic Motherhood and the Cult of Domesticity; yet there is room to complicate the narrative by incorporating a different perspective. Sarah and Angelina Grimké refused to live within the confines of domesticity and rejected indirect political influence. So they developed an argument to justify their presence in the political realm. They created a natural rights platform—one which Zagarri fails to mention—that created the foundation for the entire women’s rights movement of the 1830s and generations beyond. Zagarri’s monograph is just one example of how women’s political activities in the 1830s have been overlooked. There are plenty of opportunities to further the narrative of women in the nineteenth century. Tracing the development of a conscious political identity by two female activists—Sarah and Angelina Grimké—is just one of these paths that will lead to a broader understanding of nineteenth century American society.
CHAPTER 1:
Toward Abolition

With the arrival of the nineteenth century, forces were in play that would radically change the role of women in American society. Ideals of domesticity and women’s role within the domestic sphere were indoctrinated into women early in their lives; but in the 1830s, women started to actively challenge the existing model and conception of womanhood. Religious revivalism of the Second Great Awakening—sweeping the country by the early 1800s—introduced new doctrines that awakened individuals to the need of America’s moral reformation. Women adopted this dictum as uniquely their own, spurring on the creation and growth of benevolent and social reform societies throughout the nation. These women were forced to develop a rhetoric under which their actions in these reform movements were justified as an extension of the domestic sphere. Yet not all women were content with disguising their political actions.

Sarah and Angelina Grimké were two of the first women in the nineteenth century to actively and publically protest the confines of the domestic sphere. Growing up in slave-holding South Carolina, these sisters were shaped by a combination of childhood experiences, national religious movements, and a strong inner sense of right and wrong. They would grow to be the first American female abolitionists, and also become staunch advocates of the emerging women’s rights movement. In the nineteenth century, a woman’s world revolved around the home, and it was almost impossible for her to step beyond the bounds of her prescribed sphere of influence. Sarah and Angelina were raised in a culture that separated men’s and women’s duties based on a gendered social structure, and it was against this structure of “separateness” that they rebelled. Timing
was on the sisters’ side, however, as they both matured in a rapidly changing world; they were able to effectively harness the fluidity of the time and step beyond the traditional boundaries for white, genteel southern women. Their actions and choices between 1820 and 1836 created a foundation on which they helped build a new, collective female identity.

By the dawn of the nineteenth century, the ideal of woman’s domesticity had been well defined within American society. At this point in history, most Americans lived in a rural area and were dependent on agricultural production, and women played a central role in the household production of marketable goods and products. But in the early 1800s, the nation underwent a radical shift from agricultural production to industrial manufacturing; products previously produced by both men and women within the home were now being mass-produced by factories. Woman’s role in household production—particularly in the Northeast region of the United States—was undermined by this transition to factory production. The home was no longer the center of daily economic activity, and the daily work experiences of men and women became increasingly separated as men found employment within urban factories and women stayed at home to care for the house and children.¹

This phenomenon created what historians have termed “separate spheres” for men and women. Men operated within the “public sphere” of business and the market, while women operated within the “private sphere” of household duties and childrearing. These spheres dictated the daily activities and societal roles each gender would play throughout the entirety of the nineteenth century. Since women now spent less time producing goods

within the home, they had time to develop a specific set of household and domestic skills. Historians recognize that “women’s role in the household became rationalized and professionalized just as men’s work away from home had become.”² Women and the home became linked with values such as morality and spirituality, so in order for women to run and maintain a virtuous and efficient household, they had to hone and develop the proper set of domestic skills. Men’s public realm was seen as a morally corrupt and spiritually dangerous place, so women were charged with the duty of creating a haven to which men could retreat after a day of work. Women’s role in the home was seen as essential to the moral well being of the nation because they operated outside the world of politics and business.³

As the ideals of domesticity were developing within the northeastern states, the South was also solidifying the traditional role they expected women to play within the patriarchal society. From childhood, southern girls of every social status were instructed in the “ideals of perfection and submission.”⁴ Male leaders expected that all women, children, and slaves pay them deferential respect. If a woman deviated from her proper and subordinate role, she was considered unladylike and seen as a threat to the male-dominated hierarchical society. Popular literature such as The Rosebud, a children’s magazine published in Charleston, South Carolina, was filled with stories about how little southern girls should act. The fictional stories always rewarded the pious, obedient children and punished the unruly children who failed to adhere to the strict, gender-based behavioral code. Like their northern counterparts, southern women had a prescribed

²Wayne, Women’s Role, 3.
³Wayne, Women’s Role, 29-30.
“sphere” of influence in which they were expected to operate. In both the North and the South, to step beyond the bounds of this womanly sphere was to question the social and economic norms that had been established by the elite white males.⁵ According to historian Anne Firor Scott: “Churches, schools, parents, books, magazines, all promulgated the same message: be a lady and you will be loved and respected and supported. If you defy the pattern and behave in ways considered unladylike you will be unsexed, rejected, unloved, and you will probably starve.”⁶ It was within this strict societal framework that Sarah and Angelina Grimké were born and raised, and it was these gendered conventions that the sisters were going to reject. Both sisters were aware of the prevailing conceptions of a southern lady, and the subsequent restrictions on female behavior. They also understood what would happen to their reputation if they were to behave in an unladylike fashion, yet they refused to stay confined within the social barriers placed upon them.

Sarah Moore Grimké was born on 26 November 1792 to a wealthy, slave-holding, South Carolinian family. Her father, Judge John Grimké, owned a prosperous sea-island cotton plantation and had served in the South Carolina state legislature from 1782 to 1790. The Grimké name was known throughout the state, and came with a large degree of respect and prestige. Sarah’s upbringing was not different or unique from other girls who grew up in prosperous, southern homes, and she received an education similar to what other females would have received, including instruction in a woman’s proper domestic responsibilities and those activities deemed appropriate for a woman.⁷ Sarah

⁵Scott, The Southern Lady, 7, 11-12, 17-21.
⁷In South Carolina, the plantations were all fairly near the city of Charleston. Instead of having to employ private tutors or rely on rural schools, the Carolina gentry were able to send their children to Charleston,
would have been instructed in activities such as: reading, writing, sewing, drawing, piano and singing, needlework, basic arithmetic, and a little French. It was an education meant to create proper and well-mannered young ladies, who would be well suited for marriage. It was also, as historian Gerda Lerner has noted: “a curriculum offering a little of everything and not very much of anything, designed not to tax excessively the gentle female mind.” Sarah was never content with the amount of education she received; in her diary, Sarah confessed a sense of regret and disappointment regarding the scope and nature of her education. Looking back on her childhood, Sarah stated: “…the powers of my mind have never been allowed expansion; in childhood they were repressed by the false idea that a girl need not have the education I coveted.” She longed to study Latin and political law—subjects considered outside the realm of usefulness for women—and was devastated when her father refused. Biographer Catherine Birney recounts Sarah’s endless attempts to study subjects outside of her womanly sphere. When Sarah would express her desire to study “useful” subjects, the reply was always a variation of:

“You are a girl, what do you want of Latin and Greek and philosophy? You can never use them.” And when it was discovered that she was secretly studying law, and was ambitious to stand side by side with her brother at the bar, smiles and sneers rebuked her “unwomanly” aspirations. And though she argued the point with much spirit, unable to see why the mere fact of being a girl should confine her to the necessity of being a “doll, a coquette, a fashionable fool,” she failed to secure a single adherent to her strong-minded ideas.

which afforded excellent education opportunities in the early 1800s. For a more extensive discussion on Charleston culture, see: Frederick P. Bowes, *The Culture of Early Charleston* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1942).

*Bowes, The Culture of Early Charleston, 42.*

*Lerner, The Grimké Sisters, 14.*

Sarah’s hand written diary spans over 500 unnumbered pages. Although her diary was not begun until 1821, it gives many reminiscences of her youth and gives a detailed account of her religious conversion to Quakerism.

Sarah Grimké to Harriot Hunt, 31 December 1852, Weld-Grimké family papers, Box 10.

Note: The Weld-Grimké family papers will be referred to as “Weld MSS.”

*Birney, The Grimké Sisters, 18.*
Despite his refusal to let his daughter participate in certain studies, John Grimké did not fail to notice his daughter’s unique abilities. Noting her eagerness to further her realm of knowledge, John did allow Sarah to be tutored in basic math, geography, history, natural science, and botany. John also allowed Sarah use of his large personal library, and on occasion permitted Sarah to participate in the political debates he designed in order to prepare his sons for the study of law.\textsuperscript{13}

Each year, from the beginning of November to the middle of May, the Grimké family resided on their cotton plantation in rural South Carolina. On the plantation, Sarah lived in close contact with many of the family house slaves and established a close relationship with many of the enslaved women who worked for the Grimké family. Early in her childhood, Sarah became aware of the unjust nature of slavery, and was appalled by the punishments inflicted upon the slaves. In her diary, Sarah recounts several occasions when she witnessed slaves being beaten. She also recorded the deep psychological impact those experiences had on her as a young girl. Sarah would often entreat her father and brothers to suspend punishment of disobedient slaves, and when her appeals did not work, she would weep bitterly in her room for several hours. When Sarah was eleven years old, her father punished her for attempting to teach a young slave girl to read the Bible, an action that was illegal in the state of South Carolina. According to the South Carolinian slave laws, “any person who shall teach any slave to write or to employ any slave as a scribe in writing, shall forfeit 100 pounds.”\textsuperscript{14} This particular event sparked


a sense of sisterhood between Sarah and the slave girl: both girls were prohibited from studying—be it the Bible or the law—the subjects they longed to learn.\textsuperscript{15} While it was not uncommon for young white children to develop a close bond with their house servants, it was uncommon for that child to develop a bitter hatred toward the practice of owning slaves or to rebel against the society that legalized such a system. Sarah’s detailed account of her childhood reveals such a hostility toward a society that denied a white female the right to obtain the same level of education as a man, as well as a growing distaste for the socially and legally accepted institution of slavery.

Born on 20 February 1805, Angelina Grimké was the last of the fourteen Grimké children. Upon the birth of the new infant, thirteen-year-old Sarah begged her mother to allow her to become Angelina’s godmother. Her unusual request was granted, and Sarah became her younger sister’s primary caregiver. It is not hard to imagine some of Sarah’s reservations towards the institution of slavery being transmitted to the younger Angelina. It seems, however, that Angelina independently acquired an equally strong hatred of slavery. While attending school at a Charleston seminary—one run exclusively for the daughters of wealthy and important South Carolina families, and whose education focused more on behavioral training than intellectual development—Angelina fainted at the sight of a slave boy who had recently been whipped. Angelina recounted that the bloody marks on the boy’s back and legs were enough to make her shun the peculiar institution.\textsuperscript{16} Angelina never described her childhood in as much detail as her sister, but it is evident that as a young girl, she too started to develop a hatred for the whole of southern society.

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{15} Lerner, \textit{The Grimké Sisters}, 11-18.
\textsuperscript{16} Lerner, \textit{The Grimké Sisters}, 11, 27; and Scott, \textit{The Southern Lady}, 7.
In 1818, when Sarah was twenty-six years old, John Grimké became gravely ill. Sarah accompanied her father to Philadelphia for a consultation with a famed doctor, Phillip Synge Physick. During their two-month sojourn in Philadelphia, Dr. Physick arranged for Sarah and her father to lodge with a Quaker family. After a few months without improvement, it was recommended that Mr. Grimké experience a change of climate. Sarah traveled with her father to the Long Branch resort in New Jersey for John to reap the benefits of the ocean air. Not long after their arrival at the New Jersey resort, John Grimké’s health took a bad turn and he passed away. Alone, Sarah prepared John Grimké’s body for burial and made preparations for the passage home. During her shared journey back to South Carolina, Sarah was introduced to a group of Quakers, with whom she spent much of her time. She made a particularly strong connection with Israel Morris: a successful commission merchant, a member of a prosperous Philadelphia family, and a subscriber to the Quaker religion. It may have been the Quaker faith they discussed during their shared sea-voyage, because Sarah returned to South Carolina with a book written by John Woolman—a famous itinerant Quaker preacher who spoke passionately against slavery—which Israel Morris had given to her. The new friends had also agreed to continue their discussion via correspondence after their separation.

Sarah made no indication of having been affected or influenced by the Quaker family she lodged with in Philadelphia, but for two months she had lived within a slave-free household, which must have been dramatically different from her southern plantation home. Upon her return to South Carolina, Sarah was once again affronted with the daily

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17 Sarah was the sixth child (and second daughter) to the Grimké family. Traditionally, the eldest son or daughter should have accompanied the ill Mr. Grimké to Philadelphia. After requesting to fulfill this task, however, Sarah was allowed to join her father on this journey.
horrors of slavery and accosted by a society who accepted such an institution. Looking back on this time, Sarah wrote:

From early childhood [I] long believed [the slaves’] bondage inconsistent with justice and humanity… after being for many months in Pennsylvania when I went back it seemed as if their condition was insupportable, it burst on my mind with renewed horror… [I] can compare my feeling only with a canker incessantly gnawing – deprived of ability to modify their situation, I was as one in bonds looking on their suffering I could not soothe or lessen.¹⁹

The time Sarah spent away from slave-holding South Carolina had a dramatic impact—it served to intensify her moral indignation of slavery and it introduced her to the Quaker faith.²⁰ Sarah did not recognize the uniqueness of Quakerism while she was boarding with the Philadelphia family, claiming she “saw nothing to recommend the profession as to Religion tho’ they were very kind.”²¹ It was not until she returned to the slave-holding South and had time to mourn the death of her father that she realized what sort of freedom the Quakers could offer.

During the months following her return to South Carolina, Sarah grew despondent and perhaps even mildly depressed due to her feeling of helplessness when it came to the plight and condition of the slaves. Sarah also started questioning her family’s religion, finding no satisfaction or contentment within the Episcopalian Church. She recounted: “Nothing interested me; I fulfilled my duties without any feeling of satisfaction, in gloomy silence.”²² In order to help cope with her restlessness, Sarah started to investigate the Quaker faith. She continued her correspondence with Israel Morris, and soaked up the

¹⁹Sarah Grimké, Diary of Sarah Grimke, dated 1827, Weld MSS, Box 22.
writings of Quaker preacher John Woolman.\textsuperscript{23} Like Sarah, Woolman had felt moral qualms over slavery early in his childhood. After becoming a member of the Society of Friends, Woolman became an itinerant minister and started traveling throughout the southern states, confronting slaveholders and preaching the evils of slavery. In his famous journal, he relates his experiences and impressions of the South: “When I ate, drank and lodged free-cost with people who lived in ease on the hard labour of their slaves, I felt uneasy.” Furthermore, he “saw in these southern provinces so many vices and corruptions, increased by this trade and this way of life, that it appeared to me as a dark gloominess hanging over the land.”\textsuperscript{24} It was this sort of sentiment that coincided so perfectly with Sarah’s attitudes, and persuaded her to further pursue the Quaker religion. She started attending Quaker meetings in Charleston, and felt God calling her not only to join the Society of Friends but also to leave her southern home and move to Philadelphia, where there was a strong Quaker influence.\textsuperscript{25} Sarah was slow to make her intentions known to her family; she knew that the disapproval she faced while simply attending Quaker meetings would be minimal compared to the disapproval she would face if she officially aligned herself with the radical sect. Because the Quakers believed in the principles of antislavery and egalitarianism, the religion was extremely unpopular within the southern states. Families like the Grimkés lived and operated within a society that directly violated many of the Quakers’ most strongly held doctrines, so it is

\textsuperscript{23} John Woolman lived from 1720-1772. His most famous works include his personal journal, which was published posthumously, and \textit{Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes}, which was first printed in Philadelphia in 1754. It is probable that Sarah Grimké read both of these works by Woolman.


understandable that Sarah was reluctant to inform her family of her decision. This does, however, showcase Sarah’s strength and determination—she rejected everything her family stood for, and chose to leave them behind in pursuit of an uncertain future in Pennsylvania.

What Sarah did was scandalous for a woman of her social status; she was an unmarried female who left her home to live, alone and unsupervised, in a foreign city. Most unusual of all, she turned her back on her family religion and became a Quaker. It appears, however, as though Sarah’s family was prepared for this radical step. Catherine Birney notes:

There seems to have been little or no opposition offered to a step so serious; in fact, her brothers and sisters, though much attached to her, – for her loving nature was irresistible, – evidently felt it a relief when she was gone, her strict and pious life being a constant rebuke to their world views and practices.\(^\text{26}\)

While this account may be exaggerated, there is truth in the fact that Sarah’s family was hardly surprised when she announced her decision to move to Philadelphia. For some time, Sarah had been suffering from a kind of mental and physical anxiety, and it was time that she pursued a life outside of South Carolina. On 15 May 1821, she set sail for the North. For the next seven years, Sarah lived in Philadelphia with Catherine Morris, the sister of Israel Morris. It was through the Morris’s that Sarah was introduced to the local members of the Philadelphia Quaker society. From the time of her arrival, Sarah attended local Quaker meetings, but it was a full year and a half before she made the

formal decision to join the Society. On 29 May 1823, Sarah was recognized as a member of the Fourth and Arch Street Meeting of the Society of Friends.27

When Sarah Grimké joined the Society of Friends, she joined an organization with a rich history of antislavery and gender egalitarianism. George Fox and his wife, Margaret Fell, founded the Quaker religion in the seventeenth century. Together they reinterpreted the Pauline gospels of the New Testament, specifically the doctrine of female inequality and subordination found within the books of 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. Fox and Fell believed that both men and women possessed the inward light of the Holy Spirit, which made both genders capable of divine revelation. If both sexes were capable of receiving this type of revelation from God, then they must be spiritual equals. For most sects, the fall of man—as recorded in Genesis—gave rise to the modern doctrine of woman’s subordination and inferiority to man. According to Quaker doctrine, however, the gender equality of Eden is restored after individuals experience spiritual rebirth. Paul’s doctrine of female subordination only applied to the unbelieving and unregenerate world. Those who have been born again and who possess the inward light of the Holy Spirit live in complete equality with each other.28 This view of gender equality afforded a unique degree of freedom to Quaker women, and allowed them to become itinerant ministers. These women ministers, or “Public Friends,” traveled the country in single-sex pairs, promoting the Quaker ideals, disciplines, and doctrine.

The “inward light” also made the institution of slavery morally suspect to many Quakers. Because every man and woman could potentially receive divine revelation from

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the Holy Spirit, no human should be purposefully kept ignorant of the Bible and the Truth therein. In 1775, the Baltimore Yearly Meeting of Women Friends urged its larger Society to end slaveholding within its ranks; until this point, the Society had preached the evils of slavery, but had allowed their members to own slaves. Married women could not legally own slaves, but they would nevertheless be tied to slavery until their husbands renounced the institution and freed their slaves. Thus, it was the woman’s duty to persuade and morally guide her family toward an abolitionist stance. These Baltimore women believed that a woman’s domestic authority allowed her to affect change within the home. If wives stood “firm in the belief that justice is due to all men, they could be instrumental in…convincing the unbelieving husband.” The yearly meeting of Quaker women in Baltimore continually urged women to help free the enslaved; they also attempted to provide education—both practical and moral—to the freedmen.

So while Quaker women did prescribe to some of the ideals of domesticity, they also placed a high value on equal education for boys and girls. Anthony Benezet—a famous Philadelphia Quaker and one of the first Quaker abolitionists—once said about education: “Ought not the education and training of the youth be…the chief concern of every one that really desires the welfare and enlargement of the borders of Zion?” In accordance with Benezet’s teachings, the Society of Friends offered equal access of education to their young children, regardless of gender. Female education included the traditional domestic training, but they were also instructed in the same “scholarly”

29 Crothers, *Quakers*, 173-175.
30 Crothers, *Quakers*, 175.
31 Baltimore Year Meeting Women Friends minutes, query of 1785, Haverford College Quaker Collection: quoted in Crothers, *Quakers*, 175; and Baltimore Yearly Meeting Women Friends, 15 October 1792 & 14 October 1790, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College: quoted in Crothers, *Quakers*, 175.
subjects as male students. An article in *The Friend*, a magazine circulated by the Society of Friends, claimed that there is no reason why “the education of women should differ in its essential from that of men. The education which is good for human nature is good for them.” The author also complains about the frivolous role women are expected to play within society, saying: “a large class are taught less to think than to shine.” Despite this opportunity for females to gain a more complete education, motherhood still remained the ultimate goal and expectation of Quaker women. Many of these Quaker women viewed their education as a way to ensure that they would be able to provide moral guidance to their children and husbands. It was not until the 1800s, when the Second Great Awakening and religious revivalism swept the nation that women started using their Quaker-based beliefs and education to step beyond the boundaries of their prescribed “sphere” of domestic influence.

Back in South Carolina, Angelina was going through her own period of uncertainty as she attempted to make sense of the institution of slavery and her role as a woman in southern society. Like her sister, Angelina was troubled by slavery and saw it as a moral evil. During these thoughts, she refused to become a member of her family’s Episcopal Church on the grounds that she “determined never to join any Church until [she] had real, heart-felt piety.” After exploring several churches and denominations in Charleston, Angelina finally became a member of the Presbyterian Church in 1826.

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34 Crothers, *Quakers*, 179-187.
35 During the time that Sarah was in Philadelphia and Angelina was in South Carolina, all of Sarah’s letters to Angelina were destroyed upon her own request. Thus, it is difficult to trace the religious impact Sarah had on Angelina during this span of time. This also makes it difficult to follow Sarah’s life during the first five years she lived in Philadelphia.
36 Angelina Grimké, autobiographical manuscript, dated June-July 1828, Weld MSS, Box 22.
Within two years, however, she became frustrated and disillusioned by the church’s doctrine of sectarianism, or disavowal of any Christian denomination but Presbyterianism. The congregation’s tolerance, and even defense of slavery also dismayed Angelina. She met with the elders of her congregation (who were all slaveholders), and urged them to speak out against slavery in the church. She was disappointed, although probably not terribly surprised, when the elders ignored her suggestion.\(^\text{37}\) Although there is no record of the elders’ reaction to Angelina’s request, it is significant that Angelina felt she had the right to appear before a council of elders and put forward such a radical proposal. Traditionally, women were expected to play a subservient and silent role in the Church; this action shows that even at this stage in Angelina’s life, she believed women had the ability to play a more active role within society.

In 1827, Sarah visited Charleston and found her younger sister stuck in the same spirit of despondency and frustration she herself had experienced several years prior. Sarah found, however, that Angelina was receptive and curious about the Quaker religion. Before Sarah’s visit, Angelina claimed that she had been “violently opposed to Quakers,” but was “forcibly struck with the holiness of [Sarah’s] life and the gentleness and humility of her manner,” and “very soon after she came I saw that I must become Quaker.”\(^\text{38}\) From June to November of 1828, Angelina stayed in Philadelphia with Sarah; this visit further confirmed her conviction and desire to join the Society of Friends. Unlike her sister, however, Angelina did not feel compelled to leave the South; instead, she felt called to reform South Carolinian laws. For more than a year, Angelina fought

\(^{38}\) Angelina Grimké, autobiographical manuscript, dated June-July 1828, Weld MSS, Box 22.
against the state’s institution of slavery, but she eventually became discouraged by her lack of progress. Deepening the wound, she was expelled from her Presbyterian Church in 1829 due to her radical beliefs.

Angelina believed that she should pursue the Quaker faith, yet she remained in South Carolina for the purpose of effecting reform, not least of all within her own family. Accounts taken from Angelina’s diary illuminate the struggles she had with her mother and brothers regarding the issue of slavery. In February of 1829, she recounted a painful conversation she had with Henry, her older brother. Henry’s slave boy had run away from the Grimké plantation, and it was Henry’s intention to whip the boy as punishment when he was recovered and returned to the plantation house. Angelina attempted to assuage Henry’s anger and convince him such physical punishment was not necessary. Her persuasion was to no avail:

I pled the cause of humanity. [Henry] grew very angry & said I had no business to be meddling with him, that he never did it with me…. He said I had come from the North expressly to make myself miserable & every body in the house & that I had much better go & live at the North. I told him I was not ignorant that both C[harles] & himself would be very glad if I did & that as soon as I felt released from Carolina I would go…

This revealing passage shows that Angelina had, for some time, been trying to convince her family of the evils of slavery. It also reveals that her family was aware of Angelina’s altered state of mind coming back from her visit with Sarah in the North; there was clearly an internal battle going on within Angelina. Should she stay in the South and keep trying to reform her family, or should she move north where her antislavery convictions could be put to more practical use? From this narrative, one also glimpses a certain level of gender subordination; Henry was indignant that Angelina, a woman, should be

39 Angelina Grimké, Diary of Angelina Grimké, 6 February 1829, Weld MSS, Box 22.
involving herself in the business of the plantation. Henry was not just upset over Angelina’s blatant antislavery sentiment—he was annoyed by her seeking equality with a man. This breech of decorum was seen as Angelina trying to dictate family policy as if she were a man or even superior to a man.

Angelina did eventually choose to move to Philadelphia, but not without great reservation—mainly on account of her close relationship with her mother. Angelina’s diary reveals her continuing hesitation:

Much as I have suffered here, yet I find the very idea of leaving poor Mother extremely painful. I think I can truly say it is so painful as to counter-balance the satisfaction felt at the prospect of leaving the land of Slavery… Sometimes when I think of leaving poor Mother, I feel as tho’ I cannot do it, & yet when I remember how steadily she has always refused to listen to my advice [about freeing her slaves], I cannot hope to be of any service to her…. It appears to me plain that nothing but her refusing to listen to me has caused this separation.

Angelina was, however, very much looking forward to being reunited with Sarah, and the mutual support and comfort the two sisters would afford each other. Catherine Birney suggests that while Sarah and Angelina had always shared a close friendship, it was their religious unitedness against the rest of their family that sealed the close bond between the two sisters. Although Mrs. Grimké appeared to harbor more regret over Angelina’s departure than she did Sarah’s, it seems as though she (and the rest of the Grimké family) was expecting Angelina’s decision to join Sarah in Philadelphia. In Angelina’s diary, she writes about discussing these plans with her mother: “This morning I read parts of dear sister’s letters to mother, on the subject of my going to the North. She did not oppose it, though she regretted it.”

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40 Angelina Grimké, Diary of Angelina Grimké, 11 September 1829 & 29 September 1829, Weld MSS, Box 22.
difference within the South, Angelina followed in the footsteps of her sister, and at the age of twenty-four moved to Philadelphia in October of 1829, where she was welcomed into the Society of Friends. For the next five years, both sisters lived together in Philadelphia, pursuing a sense of purpose and identity within their Quaker religion.42

From 1800 to 1860, the Second Great Awakening transformed Quaker religion and revitalized spirituality within America. The doctrine of awakened churches stressed the importance of the individual having a personal relationship with God. All people—both men and women—had to recognize their sinfulness so that they could experience a second birth, enter into a new life with Christ, and forsake the unregenerate world.43 In the North, religious revivals were very appealing to middle-class white women, especially those of Quaker background. Within the Quaker sects of New England, female converts outnumbered male converts three to two.44 As the nineteenth century unfolded, women’s heightened presence and participation in churches created a “feminization of religion” within the Northeastern states; according to historian Ann Douglas, contemporaries attributed this high level of female participation to women’s innate “Christian nature.”45 Evangelical religion promoted values that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American culture associated with women: i.e., temperance, self-control, and a high sense of morality. In 1810, New England preacher John Buckminster voiced the opinion that women were held to a higher spiritual standard, and they should use this position to influence and mold the morals and spirituality of the male gender:

42 Lerner, The Grimké Sisters, 47-60; and Weld, In Memory, 37, 47-48.
43 Mintz, Moralists and Modernizers, 26-27.
44 Mintz, Moralists and Modernizers, 27.
We look to you, ladies, to raise the standard of character in our own sex…
We look to you for the continuance of domestick purity, for the revival of
domestick religion, for the increase of our charities, and the support of
what remained of religion in our private habits and publick institutions.⁴⁶

For many Quaker women, religion and reform went hand-in-hand, and their
religious doctrine supplied the foundation needed for the justification of their
participation in reform movements. Prominent preachers such as Charles Grandison
Finney emphasized the need for individuals to choose their own salvation, and to also
convince others to make this same decision. The Christian’s job now entailed a large
degree of evangelization; this provided Quaker women with the necessary justification
for taking on a broader social role. As the ideals of domesticity called for women to bring
morality into the home, both the doctrines of Quakerism and the Second Great
Awakening called for women to bring morality to the unregenerate world. Women like
Sarah and Angelina Grimké used this new sense of purpose to expand their domestic
roles and step into the public world.⁴⁷

Especially impressive to the Grimké sisters was Finney’s doctrine of
perfectionism—the belief that Christians could lead truly sinless lives. It became the
individual’s duty to combat sin, and Finney believed the best way to do this was to link
personal piety with social action. The linkage between benevolent actions and religion
became the foundation for women’s reform societies of the mid-1800s. Steven Mintz
argues that of all the factors involved in the growth of reform movements, religion was
the most influential. Evangelical religion, as embraced by the Society of Friends,

⁴⁶John Buckminster, “A Sermon Preached before the Members of the Boston female Asylum. September
1810:” quoted in Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood, 148.
⁴⁷Wayne, Women’s Roles, 50.
promoted the work of women in benevolent societies. Many Protestant denominations used evangelical religion as a platform for reform, but no denomination more than the Quakers. Scholars have estimated that between 1800 and 1860, forty percent of all women abolitionists and fifteen percent of women’s right advocates had a background in the Society of Friends. The more women became involved in reform and benevolence movements, the more they started to challenge preexisting notions and conceptions about womanhood and the proper role for women in nineteenth century America.

Interestingly, women’s first wave of involvement in benevolent societies was not perceived as being political or outside the domestic sphere. These early groups justified their social action by claiming to use their heightened sense of morality and virtue to promote moral goodness and social order within the larger society, an action that fell within the domestic realm. Indeed, groups such as the Boston Female Asylum and The Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children (both established by 1800) justified their presence in the community by making the argument that their societies were an extension of the mother’s role in the home. They had no real interest in stepping outside of the accepted domestic sphere, but simply extended the domestic sphere to include benevolent work outside of the home. Benevolent women in no way questioned or threatened the established male domain. But as historian Anne Boylan points out, societies formed after 1830 had a much broader conception of what a female’s role should entail, and women started to challenge the traditional roles assigned to them. Boylan states:

49 Crothers, Quakers, 179.
No matter what their goals, no matter how narrow or extended their activities, [Benevolent] groups formed before 1820 (and, indeed, many founded after that date) subscribed to similar images of women and similar views about their proper role in society, images and visions differed substantially from those held by the moral reformers, abolitionists, and working women’s advocates who organized for the first time in the 1830s.\textsuperscript{51}

The important difference between the moral reform movements of the 1830s and the earlier benevolent societies is that moral reform—including abolitionism—involved women questioning basic economic and social institutions, which was alarming to the men and women who believed in the cult of domesticity.

Women who joined the later reform movements also started pursuing careers in printing, writing, and editing. This movement of women leaving their prescribed sphere of influence had a profound effect on the conceptions of womanhood in the nineteenth century. It was in this aura of reform and change where women such as Sarah and Angelina Grimké developed a uniquely female consciousness and identity, separate from the prescribed identity given to women by men. Women started to develop a consciousness of themselves, independent from the notions or concerns of men.

Sarah and Angelina Grimké joined the Quaker society due to their rejection of slavery, but these sisters were also seeking a sense of identity that could not form while living in the South. They joined the progressive Quakers in part because they were aware of the expanded role women were allowed to play within the Society. The sisters were hopeful that the Quakers would not only provide a platform on which they could voice their concerns regarding slavery, but that it would provide them with a conscious identity.

\textsuperscript{51}Boylan, “Women in Groups,” 503.
within the public realm. These expectations were not, however, to be fulfilled within the Quaker society.

Regardless of the unusual degree of gender equality that existed within the Quaker religion, women were still considered socially subordinate to men. Women could actively participate within the ranks of the Society, but Quaker men still held onto the assumption that males should have more power outside the Society. Quakers could not fully shake the traditional gendered roles American society had so firmly established. One example of this inequality: decisions or resolutions made at women’s yearly meetings had to be approved by the male Friends before any action could be made. The men, however, did not have to gain approval from their female counterparts before taking action. Hence, the men’s meeting was the authoritative body, not being accountable to the female members. Even in the eighteenth century, historians have noted that women tended to have less power than men within Quaker societies. Mary Maples Dunn concluded that the separate women’s meeting was established to give women just enough power to keep them appeased, but not enough power within the Society to be truly useful. This was not George Fox’s intention when he established the Quaker doctrine, but men had slowly manipulated the meetings in order to exclude women from important decision-making processes. Regardless of the realities concerning opportunities offered Quaker women, by the end of 1829, both Sarah and Angelina were living in Philadelphia and serving as members of the Fourth and Arch Street meeting of Quakers. The sisters were excited about the supposed opportunities available to women within the Society of Friends, and they were eager to start applying their knowledge and beliefs.

52 Crothers, *Quakers*, 176-177; and Hamm, *The Quakers*, 184-185.
Before Angelina’s arrival in Philadelphia, Sarah struggled to find acceptance within the community of Quakers. Sarah’s intense shyness and lack of confidence hampered her progress within the Society. Friends did not believe in the authenticity of structured or planned preaching; they believed in spontaneous speaking by those who had been seized by the Spirit. This type of public speaking did not play to Sarah’s strengths and discouraged her from speaking during the meetings. When she did attempt to speak, she was met with discouraging indifference from the male members of the Society. It was custom that Quaker ministers should be appointed by “recommendation,” or public nomination by another member, during monthly meetings. As a result of her halting speeches and reserved nature, Sarah was never given the recommendation she needed to become a female minister within the Society of Friends. Reflecting on her perceived failure within the Society, Sarah concluded that it was due, once again, to her lack of education as a child:

Oh, had I received the education I desired, had I been bred to the profession of the law, I might have been a useful member of Society [of Friends], and instead of myself and my property being taken care of, I might have been a protector of the helpless, a pleader for the poor and unfortunate.

As it was, Sarah considered herself an unworthy member of the Society, because she seemed unable to gain the approval of her fellow Quakers. Feeling rejected and inadequate, Sarah retreated into the background during the monthly meetings. In reality, it was becoming much less common in the 1800s to anoint women as ministers in the Quaker faith. While it was relatively common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the prevailing doctrine of separate spheres pervaded the Quaker halls, and

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55 Sarah Grimké, Diary of Sarah Grimke, Weld MSS, Box 22.
effectively discouraged male members from allowing women to become ministers.  

There was a common concern that women ministers would make the Quaker faith appear ridiculous.

Angelina arrived in Philadelphia five years after Sarah, and her presence offered Sarah the needed support and encouragement for her to become an active and confident member in the Society. But like her sister before her, Angelina did not find the Society of Friends as fulfilling as she has expected. Both were disappointed to find that the doctrine of gender equality did not seem to make the transition from word to deed. Women were not granted as large a role as men in the Society’s government and internal policymaking decisions. Equally disturbing to the Grimké sisters was the discriminatory treatment toward the African American members of the Fourth and Arch Street meetings. Although the Quakers had been promulgating against the evils of slavery since the mid-seventeenth century, the Fourth and Arch Street church required the black members to sit on “Negro benches” situated at the back of the meeting hall. This form of segregation appalled the sisters, who had moved North for the purpose of escaping such attitudes. As a form of rebellion against this discrimination, Sarah and Angelina chose to seat themselves on the “Negro benches” at monthly meetings, despite the disapproving looks that came from their fellow white members.

Angelina proved to be much less reserved at the monthly meetings than Sarah. She did not hesitate to speak in front of the assembly, nor did she shy away from being outspokenly critical of what she perceived to be shortcomings of the Society. Like in her Presbyterian congregation in South Carolina, Angelina believed that women had the right

56 Crothers, *Quakers Living in the Lion’s Mouth*, 172-177 passim.  
to be actively involved within the decision-making processes within the Society, but was discouraged by the male elders. Angelina had also initially desired to become involved in social and moral reform movements outside the Quaker church, but became disillusioned when the elders of her meeting started placing restrictions on the amount of public activities in which Angelina could participate. Quakers prohibited any interaction with the world outside of the Society, meaning anyone or anything not directly related to the Society of Friends. Angelina expressed her feelings of entrapment in a letter sent to her brother in 1832:

We mingle almost entirely with a Society which appears to know but little of what is going on outside of its own immediate precinct. It is therefore a great treat when we have access to information more diffuse and which introduces our minds in some manner into the general sensation which seems to have been excited in the Religious [World].

During their first years together in Philadelphia, one of the sisters’ only non-Quaker correspondents was Thomas Grimké, their elder brother. By the early 1830s, Thomas Grimké had become a prominent member of the American Peace Society, and wrote extensively on the topics of war/peace, temperance, and education. He would often send Sarah and Angelina the manuscripts of his essays and pamphlets, asking for their suggestions and corrections. No doubt this introduced the sisters to the basic workings of politics and gave them a basic understanding of contemporary political debates. Thomas was also a source of information for the sisters; in 1832, Angelina wrote Thomas asking: “Didst thou know that great efforts are making in the House of Delegates in Virginia to abolish slavery?” In another letter, she asked: “Do you know how this subject

58 Angelina Grimké to Thomas Grimké, 3 June 1832, Weld MSS, Box 2.
of slavery] has been agitated in the Virginia legislature?"60 This shows that Angelina had a real interest in politics. She was not just concerned with antislavery within the confines of the Quaker religion, but was concerned with the larger legal and political aspects of the movement as well. This is the first sign of a burgeoning interest in politics in Angelina’s correspondence. In another letter, Angelina states: “I am no politician, but… Slavery is too great a sin for justice to always slip over, and this, this I believe is the true cause of the declining state of Carolina, this, the root of bitterness which springing up in our Republic has troubled us.”61 At this point in 1832, Angelina was interested in antislavery, but was not prepared to define her role in the movement. She had not yet considered the possibility of becoming an active part of the fight against slavery. She was, however, certain of one thing: “I do verily believe, that there are hundreds, perhaps thousands who carry the spirit of martyrs about them and are now preparing the way for the universal reign of Truth and Righteousness in the earth.”62 While Angelina did not include herself in the category of “martyr,” she is still showing true concern and interest over the issues of slavery, and perhaps hints at her growing resolution to leave the restrictive Quaker society and seek a more active role in the antislavery movement.

A short time later, Angelina once again sought out political information and advice from Thomas. In 1833, she wrote: “I ask for information. Please tell me, also, whether slavery is not an infringement of the Constitution of the United States.”63 Again this shows not just a moral interest in slavery, but a political interest as well. The letter asking about the Constitution may have come as a result of Angelina becoming familiar

60 Birney, The Grimké Sisters, 105.
61 Angelina Grimké to Thomas Smith Grimké, 3 June 1832, Weld MSS, Box 2.
62 Angelina Grimké to Thomas Smith Grimké, 3 June 1832, Weld MSS, Box 2.
with the writings and doctrines of a famous abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, who rejected the United States Constitution as a pro-slavery document. Garrison had started an anti-slavery newspaper called *The Liberator* in 1831; he rejected gradual emancipation and embraced immediatism. Garrison based his antislavery platform on the belief that African Americans—free or slave—were human beings and citizens, and deserved to be treated as such within the abolitionist movement. Historian Gerda Lerner has pointed out that the black slave was merely an abstraction to most northern abolitionists, so Garrison’s view was regarded as extremely radical.\(^{64}\) But to the Grimké sisters who had grown up surrounded by African-American slaves, the belief that they too deserved to be given natural human rights seemed extremely logical. It is unclear at what point in the 1830s the Grimké sisters started reading Garrison’s newspaper, but he consistently presented views that supported women’s action within the antislavery movement. This must have appealed to the Grimké sisters, who were living within the domineering structure of the Quaker community.

In 1832, Garrison introduced the “Ladies’ Department” in his antislavery newspaper. In the inaugural column, Garrison stated the purpose of this newest addition:

> The fact that one million of the female sex are reduced, by the slave system, to the most deplorable condition…ought to excite the sympathy and indignation of American women. We have therefore concluded, that a Ladies’ Department in the Liberator would greatly add to its interest, and give a new impetus to the cause of emancipation… In [women’s] hands is the destiny of the slaves.\(^{65}\)

The Ladies’ Department regularly published essays, poems, fictional dialogues, speeches by women, and constitutions/reports of female antislavery societies. Historian Jacqueline

\(^{64}\) Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters*, 80.

Bacon has written an article about the contradictory nature of the Ladies’ Department column. Bacon argues that the very creation of a “Ladies’ Department” implied that women’s concerns should remain separate from men’s; rather than talk about political issues, this column was dedicated for women to discuss the moral and religious implications of slavery. The women who authored articles for the column were confined to rhetoric of domesticity and traditional womanhood. Yet Bacon also argues that no matter the rhetoric, the very act of writing for the Ladies’ Department was a public behavior—one that helped extend woman’s sphere into the antislavery realm.66 Regardless of the traditional domestic language within the Ladies’ Department column, The Liberator was one of the only antislavery newspapers condoning women’s action in the early- to mid-1830s. This, along with Garrison’s view of African Americans, is undoubtedly what drew Sarah and Angelina Grimké to The Liberator, and by 1834, both sisters were avid readers.

Also by 1834, both sisters had become painfully aware of the fact that slavery was an issue seldom discussed by the Society of Friends. As a supplement to this lack of antislavery rhetoric in the meetings, Angelina started to read abolitionist newspapers such as The Emancipator and The Liberator. During the summer of the same year, Angelina was invited to stay with her friends, James and Margaret Parker, in Shrewsbury, New Jersey. This was meant to be an opportunity for Angelina to escape the disapproving looks and restrictive rules of the Philadelphia Quakers, and she looked forward to her summer retreat. During the first half of the summer, Angelina read as many Quaker works as she could, including works written by George Fox, William Penn, Isaac

Pennington, and Robert Barclay. The events that took place during the latter half of the summer, however, made relaxation impossible. In July of 1834, anti-abolitionist riots broke out in New York City and Philadelphia. In Philadelphia alone (Angelina’s adopted hometown), mobs destroyed forty-five African Americans’ home. During the melee, many abolitionists and African Americans had been wounded, and one man was killed. After this event, Angelina spent much of her time worrying about her sister and friends in Philadelphia. She abandoned Quaker texts and took up Philadelphia and New York newspapers, trying to stay current on the antislavery events happening in those cities.

The riots in July of 1834 were merely the first in a series of race-based riots that erupted in large Northeastern cities. The violence continued for more than a year, peaking in the summer of 1835. In response to this violence, William Lloyd Garrison countered with a series of powerful articles in *The Liberator*. He declared that violence toward abolitionists would only serve to strengthen their resolve of emancipating the enslaved population. On 15 August 1835, he boldly proclaimed: “we shall never desist from our practice of publishing the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, respecting [the South’s] thievous and murderous acts, while life remains, or a slave pines in bondage.”

Both the violence directed toward abolitionists and Garrison’s response to this violence deeply affected Angelina, and she felt as though she should write a letter of support to Garrison. Angelina described her reaction to Garrison’s appeal in a letter to Sarah: “I perused the Appeal. I confess I could not read it without tears, so much did its spirit

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67 William Penn (1644-1718) was a pacifist Quaker; he wrote about many issues dealing with war and peace. He was a close friend of George Fox, the founder of the Quakers. Isaac Pennington (1616-1679) wrote on the exploration of spiritual existence. Robert Barclay (1648-1690) was a Scottish Quaker, and wrote extensively on the doctrine of the Inner Light.


harmonize with my own feelings. This introduced my mind into deep sympathy with Wm. Lloyd Garrison… and I felt as if I would like to write to him.”

A few days later, Angelina did write to William Lloyd Garrison. She freely and passionately expressed her feelings concerning the evils of slavery and the noble work of the abolitionists. Angelina started her letter in deferential tones, using her womanhood and Christian nature as a shield and justification for her assertive tone. She starts:

> It seems as if I was compelled at this time to address thee, notwithstanding all of my reasonings against intruding on thy valuable time, and the uselessness of so insignificant a person as myself offering thee the sentiments of sympathy at this alarming crisis. 

This was clearly a tactical technique applied by Angelina; she knew that women did not usually write letters on the subject of slavery (or any other major public issue) and needed to disguise this breech of domesticity. In order to present herself as a respectable, yet self-possessed woman, Angelina had to emphasize her subservient position. By acknowledging that Garrison’s time is valuable, she is implying that hers is less valuable; by claiming that she is but an “insignificant person,” Garrison must presumably be the opposite. Angelina is acknowledging the society’s gendered hierarchy, and places herself into her rightful, and inferior position within that hierarchy. By disguising her purpose within this extremely humble and submissive language, she ensured that her womanhood and femininity would not be attacked. This tone dominates the first portion of Angelina’s letter to Garrison, and although this attitude of deference never completely fades, she does become more direct in the latter half of the letter. She urges Garrison and all his

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71 Angelina Grimké to Sarah Grimké, 27 September 1835, Weld MSS, Box 3.
fellow abolitionists to stand strong in the face of persecution, and to never compromise their most holy quest for emancipation:

The ground upon which you stand is holy ground; never – never surrender it. If you surrender it, the hope of the slave is extinguished, and the chains of his servitude will be strengthened a hundred fold… If we call upon the slaveholder to suffer the loss of what he calls property, then let us show him we make this demand from a deep sense of duty, by being ourselves willing to suffer the loss of character, property – yea, and life itself, in what we believe to be the cause of bleeding humanity… If persecution is the means which God has ordained for the accomplishment of this great end, EMANCIPATION; then… I feel as if I could say, LET IT COME; for it is my deep, solemn, deliberate conviction, that this is a cause worth dying for.  

Despite the earlier diffidence, there is in this section a trace of Angelina’s sense of an emerging identity—not a political identity, but a sense of self-ownership, and a principle of “unflinching firmness.” This was the first time the abolitionist cause had been so clearly and passionately defined not just by a woman but also by any abolitionist. Here, Angelina displayed an understanding of the abolitionist creed that was unmatched by most contemporary males who also professed antislavery ideals.

Upon reading Angelina’s Letter, Garrison immediately published it within The Liberator, sending a shock wave through the abolitionist movement. Such strong, politically minded words had never been published with a woman’s name attached to it. Even Garrison’s introduction, which he published along with Angelina’s letter (with the purpose of acquainting the public with Angelina Grimké), acknowledged the unusualness of this publication. He alluded to the fact that she might encounter some opposition for not only her radical views but also the fact that she felt superior enough to publicize her views. Garrison began: “We know its excellent authoress ordinarily shuns public

observation, and that nothing but a willingness to bear odium for Christ’s sake, or the hope of advancing his cause, would allow her to obtrude her thoughts upon the attention of others.”

Perhaps Garrison was in part attempting to shield Angelina from the forthcoming attacks by vouching for her reputation. Garrison assured his readers that Angelina would normally “shun public observation,” but was moved by Christ and could not help but speak. Regardless, the fact that Angelina’s name was attached to this published letter marked her entrance into the world of politics and the “public sphere.” Although it was Garrison’s choice to publish this letter with Angelina named as the authoress, it was Angelina who was attacked.

Angelina’s surprise at the letter’s appearance in print matched that of the rest of the abolitionist world. In her diary, she admitted: “I had some idea it would be published but did not feel [at] liberty to say it must not be, for I had no idea of my name being attached to it if it was.” If it was to be published, Angelina believed that it would have been marked as “anonymous,” protecting her identity as a female. It was not long before various members of the Quaker society approached Angelina, asking her to retract her radical statements. Samuel Bettle, a wealthy Quaker philanthropist and elder of the Fourth and Arch Street church, came to Angelina in order to address the letter she had sent to Garrison. Angelina reported that “[Bettle was] exceedingly tried at me having written it & also its publication. He wished me to reexamine the letter, &c, if I could, to write to [William Lloyd Garrison] disapproving the publication & altering some expressions in the letter.” Not only did Bettle disapprove of a woman publishing such a

76 Angelina Grimké, Diary of Angelina Grimke, September 1835, Weld MSS, Box 22.
77 Angelina Grimké, Diary of Angelina Grimke, September 1835, Weld MSS, Box 22.
radical document, he believed that it brought a bad name to the entire Quaker society. This highlights the true lack of gender equality within the Quaker society. The Quakers believed that Angelina’s letter would make the entire Society of Friends look ridiculous by allowing a woman to voice her political opinion in a public venue.

Despite severe disapproval from her Quaker contemporaries, Angelina refused to remove her name from the letter, nor would she allow a single word to be changed or removed. Despite the tribulations that plagued Angelina due to her assertiveness in this matter, she later admitted that it was a turning point in her life. She declared that upon the publishing of the letter, it was:

> the first long breath of liberty which my imprisoned spirit dared to respire whilst it pined in hopeless bondage, panting after freedom to think aloud. O! how I suffered for writing that letter, but IT WAS GOOD! I thank the Lord for the suffering and the unshrinking firmness which prevented my recalling one single sentence…

After living under the restrictions of the Society of Friends, this free flowing of thoughts and opinions was like a taste of true liberty. Thus, Angelina committed herself to radical abolitionism, and entered into the public realm.

The reaction following the publication of the letter proved to be the catalyst for Angelina’s break from the Quaker religion. For years, she had been the victim of disapproval and had balked at the restrictions placed on her activities. Angelina hoped to participate within the Society on an equal footing with the men, but was disappointed with the amount of liberties actually granted to women. Although based on a foundation of gender equality, the Quaker religion had been corrupted by the prevailing views of American society regarding the “separate spheres” for men and women. The reaction to

78 Angelina and Sarah Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld, 11 February 1838, Weld MSS, Box 4.
her letter caused Angelina to reflect upon her stance on the Quaker faith; her conclusion was that any religion that did not promote equality among the races and genders must be fundamentally wrong:

   the more I reflect on the exclusiveness of our Society, the more I am convinced its constitution must be radically wrong, for any thing which cuts us off from christian communion with Christians of any name, & cooperation with them in works of mercy & faith, must be of man’s invention… 79

Angelina was angered by the inconsistency of the Quaker religion. Their doctrines supported women’s equality, yet in practice women were treated as inferiors. She voiced this displeasure when she stated: “Women are regarded as equal to men on the ground of spiritual gifts, not on the broad ground of humanity. Women may preach; this is a gift; but woman must not make the discipline by which she herself is to be governed.” 80 Not only were the Quakers restricting the amount of activities Angelina could participate in, they were also refusing to address women as equals based on human rights. This was, Angelina believed, a fundamental error on the part of the Quaker doctrine. Angelina desired to be treated as an equal, and was not satisfied with how she had been treated by the Quakers.

   Sarah, too, felt impeded by the Society, and although she was not yet ready to pursue radical abolitionism, she was not happy with her current position. She espoused the exact same view as Angelina about the lack of women’s equality within the Quaker community: “no Christian denomination or Society has ever acknowledged [women’s rights] on the broad basis of humanity. I know that in some denominations, she is permitted to preach the gospel; not from a conviction of her rights, nor upon the ground

79 Angelina Grimké to Sarah Grimké, 14 August 1836, Weld MSS, Box 3.
80 Angelina Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld and John Greenleaf Whittier, 20 August 1837, Weld MSS, Box 4.
of her equality as a *human being*…” Rather than leave the Society based on philosophical differences, however, Sarah needed a concrete reason to leave the Quaker religion. Until this occurred, she remained faithfully with the Quaker fold.

As the sisters slowly turned away from the Quaker faith, they felt they could no longer accept the hospitality of Catherine Morris, who was opposed to the radical steps the Grimké sisters were taking. Also at this time, the Philadelphia Society of Friends was engaged in an internal debate that would end with the rejection of the doctrine of immediate emancipation; the official platform of the Society would remain a gradualist one. It was the combination of these events that caused the split between the Grimké sisters and Catherine Morris. In her diary, Angelina recounted a tearful conversation she had with Catherine on the subject of her involvement in the antislavery movement: “I told her, with many tears, that I felt it a *religious duty* to labor in this cause, and that I must do it even against the advise and wishes of my friends.”

Once again, Angelina went to stay with the Parkers in Shrewsbury and Sarah found lodging in the home of Peter and Abigail Barker in Burlington, New Jersey. While in Shrewsbury, Angelina received a letter from Elizur Wright, secretary of the American Anti-Slavery Society, who invited her to New York to meet with groups of women and speak about her experiences with slavery. Overwhelmed by this invitation, Angelina did not yet feel prepared for such a public task. As she contemplated Wright’s request, however, she felt moved to write an appeal to southern women on the issue of slavery. She expressed this revelation in her diary:

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82 Birney, *The Grimké Sisters*, 149.
It has all come to me; God has shown me what I can do; I can write an appeal to Southern women, one which, thus inspired, will touch their hearts, and lead them to use their influence with their husbands and brothers. I will speak to them in such tones that they must hear me, and, through me, the voice of justice and humanity.\textsuperscript{83}

Perhaps Angelina’s decision to write this appeal was simply a stalling mechanism; she knew that her views on antislavery would lead her to accept Wright’s invitation to join the American Anti-Slavery Society, but she needed time to mentally prepare herself for this future. Angelina had never spoken in public before, and she knew she would be breaking strict social conventions—yet how could she refuse Wright’s offer to make a real difference in the antislavery movement? In the time she needed to consider Wright’s offer, Angelina believed that writing an appeal for women in the South might do some good in the antislavery movement. Angelina knew that an appeal written for men would not necessarily reach the southern women; but if an appeal was written expressly for the women, then both men and women would be aware of Angelina’s appeal. So she started to compose an antislavery pamphlet with the goal of “women of the South [arising] in the strength of the Lord to plead with their Fathers, Husbands, brothers, & sons…”\textsuperscript{84}

During the summer of 1836, Angelina worked on what would become \textit{An Appeal to the Christian Women of the Southern States}. She addressed her southern acquaintances and asked them to listen for the sake of old friendship; she addressed strangers in the name of love. The core of her argument came from her belief in the innate equality of every human, and in the black man’s natural and inalienable right to freedom. In the conclusion of her Appeal, Angelina forcefully states: “Man, who was created in the image of his Maker, never can properly be termed a thing, though the laws of the Slave

\textsuperscript{83}Birney, \textit{The Grimké Sisters}, 138.
\textsuperscript{84}Angelina Grimké to Sarah Grimké, 31 July 1836, Weld MSS, Box 3.
State do call him a “chattel personal;” *Man* then, I assert, *never* was put *under the feet of man*, by the first charter of human rights which was given by God.”\(^8^5\) In this appeal, Angelina is already espousing the doctrine of natural human rights. Here, those rights only extend as far as the African American man, but it shows Angelina’s understanding of the principles of the natural rights platform. In this appeal, Angelina does not mention the rights of women, but it would not be long before Angelina included women under this platform of natural and inalienable rights of equality.

Angelina’s appeal to southern women was largely popular among the northern states, but was rejected by Angelina’s own religious group. The Quakers were again concerned with Angelina’s radical tone, and believed the entire Society of Friends would suffer ridicule due to Angelina’s bold assertions. This served as yet another source of tension between the Quakers and Angelina. Elizur Wright, however, was once again moved by Angelina’s boldness, her familiarity with the institution of slavery, and her ability to present arguments in accessible ways. He renewed his invitation for her to speak to groups of women throughout New York, and this time Angelina was not so quick to ignore his request. Throughout 1836, Angelina had attempted to become more involved in Quaker evangelism, but the male members of her Society had blocked her attempts. Angelina had written to Effingham Capron, a prominent Quaker in Massachusetts, asking him if she might be used as a traveling missionary in the New England region.\(^8^6\) Capron replied that Angelina would find most avenues closed if she pursued missionary work through the Quakers. She would have to acquire a certificate (signifying permission from her local meeting house) and she would also need a partner.


\(^{86}\) Effingham Capron (1791-1859) owned a cotton-manufacturing firm in Uxbridge, Massachusetts, and was a prominent Quaker in his community.
with whom to travel—both Capron and Angelina knew that the elders of the Fourth and Arch Street Meeting would refuse both requirements.\(^87\)

It became clear to Angelina that if she was to have an impact on the antislavery movement, it would have to be from outside the Quaker community. Angelina expresses this in a letter to Sarah just months after her appeal had been published: “I feel no opening among [Friends]… My only relief I experience is in writing letters & pieces for the Peace & Anti Slavery causes, & this makes me think my influence is to reach beyond our own limits.”\(^88\) Angelina finally felt called to forsake the Quaker doctrine and work outside of the Society. Looking back on this decision, she declared: “as the servant of Jesus Christ I have no right to bow down thus to the authority of man, and I do not expect ever again to suffer myself to be trammeled as I have been.”\(^89\) Angelina never regretted leaving the Society of Friends; she felt that she had been oppressed based on her gender, and for too many years she had complied with the perverted doctrines. She had struggled to maintain a sense of independence and purpose within the Quaker community. Thus, in order to make a difference within the antislavery movement—where she felt truly called to labor—she had to withdraw from the Quaker religion.

Sarah, however, was still hesitant; she wanted to follow her sister into the antislavery movement, but she still felt obligations toward her Quaker community. Although she referred to Philadelphia and the Society of Friends as “this city of bonds,” she needed a concrete reason for abandoning the Society.\(^90\) This reason came in August of 1836 when Sarah was attending a Quaker meeting in New Jersey. She felt moved to

\(^{87}\) Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters*, 98.

\(^{88}\) Angelina Grimké to Sarah Grimké, 19 September 1836, Weld MSS, Box 3.


\(^{90}\) Sarah Grimké, Diary of Sarah Grimké, 19 July 1836, Weld MSS, Box 22.
speak to the congregation, but shortly into her speech, she was sharply cut off by the presiding elder, Jonathan Edwards, with the suggestion that she stop speaking. Embarrassed and angry at this unsolicited rebuke, Sarah was nevertheless relieved: “The incident has proved the means of releasing me from those bonds which almost destroyed my mind.” Angelina was overjoyed at Sarah’s formal rejection of the Quakers. In an emotional letter written to Sarah, Angelina expressed her feelings of gratitude toward Sarah’s support for antislavery, including her reflection upon the unhealthy environment of the Society of Friends:

I cannot be too thankful for the change in thy feelings in regard to the Anti Slavery…. It really seems as if Friends were determined we should not be useful among them, when I can truly say I desired to be so & would have sacrificed any thing if I could… I feel completely shut up among them & as tho’ I hav nothing to do with them… I sometimes feel frightened to think of how long I was standing idle in the market place, & I cannot help attributing it, in a great measure, to the doctrine of nothingness so consistently preachd up in our society.

Now that the sisters were free from the Quakers, Angelina was determined not to “stand idle” any longer; she accepted Elizur Wright’s offer.

Angelina and Sarah (who had hesitantly decided to accompany her sister) went to New York for a brief time in order to speak with Elizur Wright and to meet the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) committee members. Upon their return to Philadelphia, Angelina was convinced that she had been called to become a member of the antislavery movement, and to help the slaves in any manner possible. Sarah was still unsure, but was persuaded after receiving a letter from Mrs. Grimke stating that although she was against antislavery, her “maternal instincts were aroused at the prospect of Angelina’s going on

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91Sarah Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld, 10 March 1837, Weld MSS, Box 3.
92Angelina Grimké to Sarah Grimké, 31 July 1836, Weld MSS, Box 3.
93Sarah and Angelina consistently abbreviated the American Anti-Slavery Society as AASS; this is the abbreviation that will be used throughout the remainder of this thesis.
such a mission alone, and she entreated me to accompany her. It was like a voice from the Lord, and I instantly resolved to do so.”94 Both sisters understood that their allegiance to the AASS would likely lead to disownment by the Society of Friends and while they were saddened by this prospect, it was something they were willing to risk. The sisters informed Elizur Wright of their intention to come to New York and work for the AASS. With that, the Grimké sisters became the first female abolitionists in the United States, and—although it was not initially recognized as such—became involved in real political activity.

Only six years after Angelina’s arrival in Philadelphia, both sisters had renounced the Quaker faith and broken away from their local Society. Sarah and Angelina were hopeful that they would find fulfillment in the antislavery movement—the kind of fulfillment that had been lacking in the Society of Friends. Even in these early stages of their public careers, it is possible to see the growing sense of identity among these two women. Both sisters had the strength to renounce slavery and their home in South Carolina; the act of moving to Philadelphia was not an easy decision for either sister, but both felt called to renounce the institution of slavery. In the 1820s, this meant simply fleeing their slave-holding home, but by 1836, both Sarah and Angelina were prepared to take the next step and join the American Anti-Slavery Society as itinerant lecturers. This lecture circuit would only serve to strengthen the sisters’ political motivations and sense of purpose in the political realm. Just a few months into their new public careers, however, Sarah and Angelina became involved in a national debate regarding woman’s

rights and the role of women in the political realm, forcing them to develop both a political identity and an argument for the advancement of women based on natural rights.
CHAPTER 2:
Development of a Political identity

Over the course of 1837, Sarah and Angelina Grimké developed a conscious political identity. This year was, however, full of obstacles and opposition to their public careers as antislavery lecturers. As Sarah and Angelina received training in antislavery rhetoric, they simultaneously became aware of the parallels between slavery and white women’s bondage under white men. The sisters were also continually forced to justify their presence on the public platform, a place where women were not traditionally allowed or accepted. The combined effect of becoming aware of women’s social and political fetters, and the necessity of justifying their public position prompted the sisters to make the leap from antislavery to woman’s rights, culminating in a full and stable political identity. While developing a political consciousness, Sarah and Angelina also developed the doctrine of moral and intellectual equality between men and women. Based on both Biblical and political principles, the sisters used this argument to develop their identities as political individuals. The beginning of the sisters’ journey toward political enlightenment started with a formal invitation to join the American Anti-Slavery Society as the first female itinerant antislavery lecturers.

The American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) was founded in 1833 under the leadership of William Lloyd Garrison and Arthur Tappan. The Society’s original plan included the creation of a female antislavery auxiliary group. In this all-female society, members would speak to groups of women in private homes. Based on their first-hand knowledge and experiences with slavery, the Society solicited Sarah and Angelina Grimké with the opportunity to speak on behalf of the AASS. Upon their acceptance, the
AASS invited the sisters to attend the Agents’ Convention in November of 1836 in order to prepare them for their future antislavery duties. This convention was an orientation and training course for newly admitted members of the AASS, who were to travel throughout the Northeastern states, carrying the message of antislavery. Famous abolitionist Theodore Weld led the daily meetings and lectures; his assignment was to train the new recruits and prepare them to effectively challenge pro-slavery arguments and anti-abolitionist opposition.¹ The group met on a daily basis from the 8th to the 27th of November 1836. They practiced the art of public lecturing and debating, and learned how to counteract every known pro-slavery argument.² At the convention, the Grimké sisters met William Lloyd Garrison and Theodore Weld for the first time—two men who would have a profound influence on the sisters’ lives and ideologies concerning both antislavery and women’s rights.

Sarah and Angelina Grimké were the only females present at the Agents’ Convention; the mere presence of two females at an antislavery training convention was highly unusual. The Convention was held in order to prepare for effective public speaking against slavery and slaveholders—an activity that was not traditionally assigned to women. This group of abolitionist men, however, not only invited the sisters to attend but also encouraged their active participation during the daily meetings and lectures. During the convention, William Lloyd Garrison wrote to his wife, explaining the peculiar nature of having women participate in a traditionally all-male arena:

Our convention has unanimously invited the Grimkés, Angelina and Sarah (who punctually attend our meetings,) to speak whenever they think

¹Theodore Weld (1803-1895) became active in the antislavery movement in the early 1830s; he quickly gained the respect and friendship of important abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Lewis Tappan. He remained an important antislavery figure throughout his life.
proper, and to state such facts representing slavery as they may choose. Sarah has just said, that, although brought up in the midst of slavery, and having conversed with hundreds of well-treated slaves, she has never found one who did not long to be free. Garrison’s letter reveals several interesting points about the sisters’ attendance and participation at the Convention. Garrison claims that the entire convention of men—equaling over forty individuals—unanimously accepted and welcomed the presence of two females within their ranks. Some historians have speculated that the men may have passed an official resolution to make known their support of this precedent-breaking move. Not only were these sisters welcomed into the convention, they were encouraged to speak as often as they deemed necessary and proper. In normal circumstances, women present during such a convention would be expected to sit at the back of the meeting room in silence, allowed to listen to the proceedings, but not to participate. This excerpt from Garrison’s letter, however, shows that Sarah had actively participated, sharing experiences and views concerning her time in South Carolina and her perceptions of the treatment of slaves and the institution of slavery. The decision to accept a woman’s testimony within this Convention was truly an unprecedented action on the part of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

Upon the conclusion of the Agents’ Convention, Sarah and Angelina started speaking to small groups of New York women in private parlors in December of 1836. During their first lectures, topics of discussion were limited primarily to the sisters’ personal experiences of slavery and common Biblical arguments against the peculiar

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institution. These private talks became immensely popular with middle-class women and soon private parlors could not accommodate the amount of women wanting to attend the Grimkès’ lectures. A local minister, Jonathan Dunbar, offered the large session room of his Baptist church to the sisters, so that they could have a larger meeting space. The word quickly spread throughout the city that Sarah and Angelina Grimké—the abolitionist sisters from South Carolina—were planning on giving their first public lecture. At this point, Sarah and Angelina Grimké were both hesitant and somewhat fearful of their popularity. They were unsure of their speaking abilities, and were in fact concerned with the propriety of speaking in such a public venue. Angelina voiced her concern in a letter to her friend, Jane Smith:

…we felt almost in despair about this meeting, for we know that some persons here were exceedingly afraid that if we addressed our sisters, it would be called quaker preaching & that the prejudice here against women speaking in public life was so great that if such a view was taken, our precious cause would be injured.⁶

Both sisters were concerned that their Quaker background would skew the public’s opinion of their lectures. Instead of attributing their speaking to the sisters’ belief in the antislavery cause, some might dismiss the sisters as females taking advantage of the Quaker doctrine, disregarding their message as Quaker fanaticism. Equally disturbing to Angelina was the possibility that the public’s prejudice against females speaking in public would turn the audience away from the antislavery cause altogether.⁷

Sarah and Angelina were not the only two struggling with this dilemma. Even from within abolitionist ranks, there were conflicting ideas regarding their new public personas. Gerrit Smith, a fellow abolitionist, advised the sisters not to speak at Dunbar’s

⁶Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 17 December 1836, Weld MSS, Box 3.
Baptist church, but rather to continue speaking exclusively in private parlors. Smith feared that such a public display would be deemed by the public as a “Fanny Wright affair.” Early in the decade, a female activist named Francis Wright had burst onto the public scene and championed women’s rights: including birth control and sexual freedom for women. The general public quickly dismissed Wright as a radical and masculine fanatic—not a woman to be taken seriously. Gerrit Smith did not want the public to take a similar view of the Grimké sisters, and have their testimony be dismissed as fanaticism.

Theodore Weld, however, held a different view; he encouraged the sisters to hold the public, antislavery meeting for women. Recalling Weld’s encouragement and support, Angelina wrote: “T[heodore] D[wight] Weld came up like a brother to sympathize with us & encourage our hearts in the Lord…His visit was realy [sic] a strength to us, & I felt no fear about the consequences, went to the meeting at 3 O clock & found about 300 persons.” Upon the urging of Weld, the sisters decided to hold the public meeting. The Grimkés arrived at the Baptist Church on 16 December and found around three hundred women anxiously waiting to hear the sisters speak. The proceedings began with opening remarks and prayer by two men associated with the church—Reverend Henry G. Ludlow and Minister Jonathan Dunbar. After these introductory comments, Ludlow and Dunbar left the meeting hall, making the audience exclusively female. In a letter written after the meeting, Angelina recalled an event that took place during her lecture. A man had entered the hall, sat in the back, and started listening to Angelina’s speech. But Reverend Ludlow escorted him out of the room due to the impropriety of a male listening to a public lecture.

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8 Gerrit Smith (1797-1874) supported immediate abolitionism. He presided over the New York Anti-Slavery Society from 1836-1839 and also published the antislavery newspaper, Friend of Man.
9 Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 17 December 1836, Weld MSS, Box 3.
10 Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 17 December 1836, Weld MSS, Box 3.
given by a female. This incident was reported to Weld after the session, and Angelina recorded his reaction:

…the warm-hearted Abolitionist had found *his* way into the back pack of the meeting & that [Henry Ludlow] had escorted him out. Weld’s countenance was instantly lighted up, & he exclaimed how extremely ridiculous to think of a man’s being shouldered out of a meeting for fear that he should hear a woman speak.¹¹

But not every male abolitionist was as enthusiastic or supportive as Theodore Weld. In the same letter, Angelina admits that many of the male members of the ASS thought it best to suspend the sisters’ public lectures, as it might negatively influence the public’s view of the Anti-Slavery Society.¹²

The females in attendance during Sarah and Angelina’s lecture, however, considered the meeting a smashing success, and they demanded that a similar meeting take place the next week. Public demand was so high that the Grimké sisters started speaking every Friday from three to five o’clock in the evening. The sisters discussed laws of slave states, read testimony and letters from southerners attesting to the evils of slavery, shared their own experiences of slavery, discussed Biblical arguments against the institution, and handed out antislavery pamphlets.¹³ At this point in the sisters’ careers, they were still speaking to exclusively female audiences, so although they were speaking about political matters, there was not a large amount of public opposition. Sarah and Angelina were still operating within the appropriate realm of domesticity by speaking only to females about antislavery—a subject that was linked to social order and the public virtue of the nation. But in this environment, the sisters were rapidly developing a belief

¹¹ Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 17 December 1836, Weld MSS, Box 3.
¹² Ceplair, *The Public Years*, 85-86.
¹³ Ceplair, *The Public Years*, 85-86.
that they had moral and political responsibilities to uphold. It was not until the sisters started speaking to “promiscuous audiences” that males got involved and started voicing concerns regarding the propriety of women engaging in public speaking. But during the first months of lecturing, Sarah and Angelina spoke to groups of women and faced minimal opposition from males. This provided the sisters with an opportunity to hone their public speaking skills and develop the rhetoric they would later use to justify their position as antislavery lecturers.

Historian Susan Zaeske has written a short, yet revealing article on the history and meaning of the term “promiscuous audience,” and how the phrase was used against women like Sarah and Angelina Grimké who dared to give public lectures on a politically charged subject. Zaeske reports that prior to the nineteenth century, the phrase “promiscuous audience” was seldom used and never with strong gendered connotations. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the Latin root of the word “promiscuous” means simply “to mix.” Historically, this word was used to convey the concept of “members or elements of different kinds grouped or massed together without order,” or that which was “without discrimination or method; done or applied without respect for kind, number, order…” On occasion, “promiscuous” could also be applied to a person belonging to one sex, but portraying the attributes or characteristics of the other sex. Thus, when “promiscuous audience” was used in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, it never referred to the presence—or absence—of women in a group setting.¹⁴

There was, however, a shift in attitude during the beginning of the nineteenth century. Men started using the term “promiscuous” to mean an assembly of mixed

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genders, usually surrounded with negative connotations of women participants. For example, former President Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to Samuel Kercheval in 1816 expressing his view on women’s participation in business or public meetings. In this letter he uses the word “promiscuously” in order to show why women should not be involved in political affairs. He wrote:

> Were our state a pure democracy, in which all its inhabitants should meet together to transact all their business, here would yet be excluded from their deliberation, 1. Infants, until arrived at years of deliberation. 2. Women, who, to prevent depravation of morals and ambiguity of issue could not mix promiscuously in the public meetings of men. 3. Slaves, for whome the unfortunate state of things with us takes away the right of will and property. Those then who have no will could be permitted to exercise none in the popular assembly; and of course, could delegate none to an agent in a representative assembly.¹⁵

According to Jefferson, women could not participate in politics or public meetings because it would cause the breakdown of their higher moral standards, and it would create “ambiguity” in policy and decision-making. More at the heart of the matter, Jefferson voiced the common belief that women were incapable of making rational decisions based on logic and reason. It was thought that women appealed to their passions, letting emotions cloud their judgment—a characteristic that could not be tolerated in politics and national business matters. Compared to helpless infants and uneducated slaves, women were incapable of making important decisions or forming rational opinions.¹⁶ Zaeske expresses it well when she states: “The implications for women speakers were clear: women had nothing to say and no right to say it. If women did speak, they would cloud the issues by inspiring immoral conduct.”¹⁷

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In 1827, just a few years before Sarah and Angelina became public figures, an association of ministers from New York issued the *Pastoral Letter of the Ministers of the Oneida Association*. In this treatise, the association declared that females should be allowed to speak only to groups comprised exclusively of fellow-females, and that “…in promiscuous meetings, we do not think God has made it [woman’s] duty to lead, but to be in silence.”

Calling on the doctrine of separate spheres for men and women, the Pastoral Letter warned women about the moral consequences of stepping outside of their God-given, appropriate sphere of influence. It would be this line of attack that would plague Sarah and Angelina Grimké starting in the year 1837, when they dared to break convention and speak to a promiscuous audience. At the height of the sisters’ public speaking career, two Boston newspapers printed articles that conveyed the popular opinion of the Grimké sisters and the work they were attempting to accomplish. The *Boston Reformer* commented that if men would perform their duties, women like Sarah and Angelina Grimké would not have to step outside their proper sphere to plead for the slave. Likewise, the *Boston Morning Post* stated: “Angelina can reel off an antislavery speech of two and a half hours in length in excellent offhand style as easily as if she were engaged at the spinning wheel, where she should have been occupied.” The Pastoral Letter and these newspapers questioned the propriety of women being involved in the public sphere. This was a common thread of opposition coming from the general public in 1837 and 1838.

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18 *Pastoral Letter of the Ministers of the Oneida Association, to the Churches Under Their Care, on the Subject of Revivals of Religion* (Utica: Ariel Works, 1827).
20 *Boston Morning Post*: quoted in *The Philanthropist*, 3 April 1838.
Men were at times reprimanded for becoming participants in these mixed assemblies, but the main charges were leveled at the women. Although men often spoke at the same assemblies, they were never attacked for speaking to a mixed audience. In May of 1838, the *Journal of Commerce* attacked the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women for speaking to promiscuous assemblies. In the article, it said: “Three women, besides Wm. Lloyd Garrison, held Fourth to a *very* promiscuous assembly of 3000 persons” and doubted “whether such conduct is becoming the modesty which ought to belong to the female sex.” While commenting on the inappropriate behavior of the women speakers, the news article never once called into question Garrison’s reputation or decency, even though he spoke to the same audience. In 1837, Garrison posed what he meant as a rhetorical question within *The Liberator*; he asked: “We allow our women liberty of the press – why should we deny them liberty of speech?” But society had an answer to Garrison’s question: audiences comprised of only females could exert no real power, for women could not vote or be involved in decision-making processes. When men were present, however, women speakers were placed in a position of social and political power—they were given the opportunity to assert direct influence over those who held political power. Once a man started listening to a lecture given by a woman, he could possibly be influenced on political matters. Theodore Weld aptly explained the population’s general suspicion of women’s capabilities when he stated:

> The feelings of opposition to female praying, speaking, etc., which *men* generally have is from a stereotyped notion of persuasion that they are not competent for it. It arises from habitually regarding them as *inferior* beings. I know that the majority of men regard women as *silly*. The

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proposition that woman can reason and analyze closely is to them an absurdity. By the time Sarah and Angelina Grimké stepped onto the platform as antislavery lecturers, the nineteenth century definition of “promiscuous assemblies” was entrenched within the public’s mind. The sisters attempted to break the stereotype that women speakers were “silly” or “inferior,” yet it was a ferocious and prolonged struggle, one that continued well after the sisters’ retreat from public life.

The Grimké sisters spent the first few months of 1837 speaking in front of female audiences. Despite their growing confidence, the sisters still voiced reservations as to the nature of their new lives. “How little!” Angelina wrote, “how very little I supposed, when I used to say, ‘I wish I was a man, that I might go out and lecture,’ that I would ever do such a thing. The idea never crossed my mind that as a woman such work could possibly be assigned me.” Traditional conceptions of womanhood had been deeply engrained in both sisters while growing up in South Carolina; and while they had already broken many social conventions, they were still hesitant in pursuing a so-called male profession.

Angelina continued, saying: “I often feel as if the only earthly blessing I hav to ask for is to be made the unworthy instrument of arousing the slumbering energy & dormant sympathy of my northern sisters on this deeply painful & interesting subject.” Here again, Angelina reveals her hesitation. The only task that she considers herself able to fulfill is to speak in front of women and attempt to open their eyes and hearts to the moral evils of slavery. While Angelina may have felt that slavery was more than just a moral

24 Theodore Dwight Weld to Angelina Grimké, 26 August 1837, Weld MSS, Box 4.
25 Angelina and Sarah Grimké to Jane Smith, 20 January 1837, Weld MSS, Box 3.
26 Angelina and Sarah Grimké to Jane Smith, 20 January 1837, Weld MSS, Box 3.
issue, she did not yet feel able to publicly address the intellectual or political nature of the issue.

But this was certainly a time of flux and inconsistency in Angelina’s life, for not two weeks later, she was enthusiastically remarking on her ability to speak in front of a man and discuss political topics. After a meeting held in February of 1837, Angelina animatedly wrote:

[It] was the largest we hav had, about 400, I should think….We had one male auditor, who refused to go out when [Henry Ludlow] told him it was exclusively for ladies, & so there he sat & somehow I did not feel his presence at all embarrassing & went on just as tho’ he was not there…. I finished off with some remarks on the popular objection Slavery is a political subject, therefore women should not intermeddle. I admitted it was, but endeavored to show that women were citizens & had dutys to perform to their country as well as men… I tryd to enlighten our sisters a little in their rights & dutys…

For the first time, Angelina approached the topic of slavery as a political issue; she argued that women had just as much of a civic responsibility to procure the end of slavery as men. Despite the political nature of slavery, Angelina believed that women should still have an active role in the antislavery movement. It is here that one can start to detect a growing sense of political consciousness in Angelina’s writings. It may have been coincidence that prompted Angelina to directly address politics during her first lecture where a male was in attendance, but more likely she realized she had the unique opportunity to sway the opinion of an enfranchised citizen—one who could actively work within the government to affect change. The time had come when talking about the political aspects of antislavery could have a direct influence on her audience.

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27 Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 4 February 1837, Weld MSS, Box 3.
The doctrine of female inferiority and the Pastoral Letter of 1827 discouraging woman’s public speaking served to create an incredibly hostile environment for women like Sarah and Angelina Grimké, who broke social conventions by speaking in front of men. Even bold and assertive Angelina expressed hesitancy and consternation toward the future opposition she knew would accompany her speaking to promiscuous audiences. Initially, the charge that women speakers were morally unscrupulous deterred Angelina; she was nervous that her reputation as a lady would be called into question. In a letter to abolitionist Amos Phelps, Angelina recounted her decision to speak in front of mixed assemblies: “nothing but the repeated solicitations of our Anti Slavery brethren could have induced me to consent to speak to any but women, for tho’ my principles were all in favor of doing so, yet, as I never have done it, I felt a timidity about it.” Due in large part to the support and encouragement of abolitionists such as Theodore Weld, William Lloyd Garrison, and Elizur Wright, Angelina was soon able to conquer her timidity and confidently speak on antislavery issues to large audiences comprised of both males and females.

A turning point for Sarah and Angelina Grimké’s public speaking careers came in April of 1837. For the first time, the sisters spoke in front of a “promiscuous audience.” This was an unprecedented event and served to spark a national controversy revolving around the proper role of women. On 2 April 1837, Angelina reported: “…brother [Gerrit] Smith & ourselves had a meeting with the colord people in the evening. About 300 attended…& for the first time in my life I spoke in a promiscuous assembly, but I

28 Angeline Grimké to Amos Phelps, 17 August 1837, Weld MSS, Box 4.
found that the men were no more to me then, than the women." Although Angelina seemed at ease while speaking to both men and women, the public viewed the situation quite differently. The sisters faced attacks from various fronts for speaking to a promiscuous audience, calling into question the sisters’ very womanhood and femininity for daring to step so far outside the bounds of traditional domestic activities.

In the midst of the controversy surrounding “promiscuous audiences,” Sarah and Angelina Grimké met the opposition by continuing to speak unabashedly in front of mixed assemblies. Rather than shy away from attacks on their femininity, these allegations only strengthened Sarah and Angelina’s resolve that the condition of womanhood needed to be redefined. “The investigation of the rights of the slave,” Angelina claimed, “had led me to a better understanding of my own.” Not only did this make Angelina aware of her rights but it also alerted her as to how her rights were being undermined by the traditional conceptions of womanhood and the perverted doctrine of gendered spheres. As Sarah and Angelina studied the antislavery arguments in preparation for their abolition lecture tour, they realized that most of the arguments they used on behalf of the oppressed slave could be applied to their own position as oppressed females. Like the slave, women had no legal rights, and they were socially reliant on white men. Women had no representation in the government, yet still had to abide by laws passed by an all-male government. Sarah and Angelina’s investigation into the plight of the slaves and the studying of antislavery arguments led them to believe that they could not fully help the slave until they had gained their proper legal and political rights. Under these assumptions, the Grimkés claimed that women should fight against

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29 Angelina and Sarah Grimké to Sarah Douglass, 3 April 1837, Weld MSS, Box 3.
their bondage, and demand the right to fully and equally participate in politics. This philosophy was about to be put to the test; over the next few months, Sarah and Angelina participated in several conventions and rallies comprised of male and female abolitionists. They needed to prove that gender played no role in one’s capability of engaging in a political career.

One of the most significant antislavery conventions took place in May of 1837; female delegates from northern states gathered in New York for the first annual Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women. This convention had been called in response to Congress passing the “gag rule” in May of 1836. It was stated in this legislation that: “all petitions relating… to the subject of slavery or the abolition of slavery, shall, without being either printed or referred, laid upon the table and… no further action whatever shall be had thereon.” Understandably, women reformers were concerned about this bill—petitions were the only form of political voice given to women in the nineteenth century, and now this right had been stripped from them. It was the Convention’s goal to respond to and take action against the Congressional gag rule.

Before the Convention, Angelina had an on-going conversation with Theodore Weld concerning what should and should not be discussed during the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women. One month before the Convention, the Grimké sisters were preparing for the discussions and debates that were sure to arise over women’s roles both in petitioning and in the larger antislavery movement, and Angelina was securing Weld’s advice on how to proceed during the Convention. It was Weld’s belief that they should not focus on the political nature of slavery, but instead firmly establish woman’s

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32 Ceplair, *The Public Years*, 85-86.
moral duties within the antislavery movement. Angelina explained Weld’s views in a letter to Jane Smith:

His objection to it was, that a sufficient *moral foundation* had not yet been laid in the public’s mind upon which to erect a political structure, & that therefore all the energy of our first Convention ought to be directed toward laying the foundation, by working only on the moral & religious feelings.\(^{33}\)

Both Sarah and Angelina Grimké held Theodore Weld in high regard and valued his opinion, and for the majority of the proceedings, Weld’s piece of advice was generally followed. There is a clear dedication to woman’s moral responsibilities rather than her political responsibilities. Only one of the multiple motions put forward to the Convention questioned woman’s traditional role as domestic guardian, and this was met with opposition from several women attendees.

Throughout the 1837 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, Sarah and Angelina both played prominent roles. In fact, Sarah was elected as one of six vice presidents and Angelina was elected as one of four secretaries. At the beginning of the Convention, Sarah goes on record outlining the overarching goal of the convention. “The object of the convention,” Sarah stated, “was to interest women in the subject of anti-slavery and establish a system of operations throughout every town and village in the free states, that would exert a powerful influence in the abolition of American slavery.”\(^{34}\)

During the Convention, Sarah was assigned to a committee with the task of preparing an “Address to Free Colored Americans.” In this brief address, the committee highlighted their belief that regardless of the abolitionists’ work, it was up to the black population to prove their worth as equal members of society. Although this address is aptly written and

\(^{33}\) Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 17 April 1837, Weld MSS, Box 3.

\(^{34}\) *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: Dorr, 1837): 3-4.
encourages freedmen to take action for their own equality, there is no political language utilized in this address. According to the address, the black population was to use heightened “moral attributes” to convince the white population that they were worthy of equality. Thus, blacks were to display sobriety, decorum, and neat appearance—characteristics that were traditionally more feminine in nature than masculine, thus more domestic than political.35 This address was meant to reform morals rather than politics. This address speaks to the Grimkés’ self-defined political identities at this moment in 1837; the sisters still believed that although women had a right to engage in political activities, they could still exert a positive influence over the nation by using their heightened sense of morality and religiosity.

Angelina, too, was nominated to serve on two separate committees; one of these was charged with preparing “An Appeal to Women of the Nominally Free States,” and the other to compose a letter to former President John Quincy Adams. Adams was serving as a Congressional Representative from Massachusetts; he had espoused a personal opposition to slavery, but did not publicly or politically challenge the institution until 1835. When the “gag rule” was passed the following year, he became one of the most outspoken critics of the legislation and advocated for its repeal. The letter composed by the antislavery convention was one of encouragement and entreated Adams to use his considerable influence to get the gag rule revoked.36

The “Appeal to Women of the Nominally Free States” was written with the purpose of debunking a popular argument as to why females should not be involved in abolition. Opponents claimed that because slavery is a political subject, women have no

35 Address to the Free Colored People of the United States (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Gunn, 1837): passim.
36 Ceplair, The Public Years, 86-87.
right to meddle with the issues surrounding the institution, and furthermore have no right to send petitions to Congress dealing with the issue of slavery. The Appeal also refutes the argument that females need to “maintain the dignity and delicacy of female propriety,” which is lost when females step outside their bounds and become involved in men’s business. Angelina’s committee responded to this by arguing:

We grant that [antislavery] is a political, as well as a moral subject: does this exonerate women from their duties as subjects of the government, as members of the great human family? Have women never wisely and laudably exercised political responsibilities?37

The women at the Convention took a unique position in their argument while advocating for women’s participation in the antislavery movement; they simultaneously embodied a moral stance and a political stance. First, they developed a moral argument. Black women slaves were being abused and exploited in the South—“torn from their husbands, and forcibly plundered of their virtue and their offspring.” Angelina and her companions are appealing to women’s higher sense of morality and religiosity by highlighting the sundering of domestic ideals. The family and morality were woman’s domain and that domain was being badly damaged by slavery—families were being torn apart and women were being sexually brutalized. The Convention of women argued that this departure from domestic ideals justified their public action. As women, they had a moral and civic duty to put a stop to these domestic outrages.38 This argument embodied morality at its core, and did not have any particular political undertones. It was simply a woman’s duty to help protect the domestic sphere against the moral corruptions of men. A few sentences later, however, the Anti-Slavery Convention presented a political—albeit

38 An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States, 5-14, passim.
simple and underdeveloped—argument for their participation in the antislavery and petitioning campaigns. The women argued: “these outrages of blood and nameless horrors are practiced in violation of the principles of our national Bill of Rights and the Preamble of our Constitution.” Significantly, this argument is not promoting women’s natural or inalienable rights, but the slaves’ natural rights to freedom. The women championed political rights for black men, but never for themselves. Concluding the address, they say: “The denial of our duty to act, is a bold denial of our right to act; and if we have no right to act, then may we well be termed “the white slaves of the North” – for, like our brethren in bonds, we must seal our lips in silence and despair.”

Here the committee adopts Angelina’s view that white women can be compared to slaves, because of their lack of legal standing. In this context, however, their “right to act” stems from the moral outrage over the corruptions of slavery, not out of a political concern for emancipation. Women also had the responsibility of protecting the female slaves’ domestic affairs, and the responsibility of protecting the male slaves’ political and natural rights to freedom and equality.

While these women were not necessarily promoting political rights for themselves, they are nevertheless starting to develop a rhetoric in which they could espouse political ideas and arguments. By referencing the Bill of Rights and the Constitution, these women were clearly developing a political argument. They were also undoubtedly referring to the natural and inalienable rights that are promised to every human being in the Declaration of Independence. One can see Sarah and Angelina slowly developing a foundation of political rhetoric that negates issues of sex or gender, making

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every human equal in the eyes of God; and if equal in the eyes of God, then humans should be equal in the eyes of the law. Although not fully matured at this point, Sarah and Angelina would continue to nurture this doctrine into a political argument for women’s rights.

Along with their involvement in preparing various treatises, Sarah and Angelina Grimké also submitted several motions to the convention. Angelina put forward a motion dealing with the issue of women’s right to petition Congress for the abolition of slavery. She moved that:

the right of petition is natural and inalienable, derived immediately from God, and guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States… whether it be exercised by a man or woman, the bond or the free… it is the duty of every woman in the United States, whether northerner or southerner, annually to petition Congress… for the immediate abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia…

The women present at the Convention unanimously adopted this motion. The right of petition, however, was a complex issue. While these women were using a political rhetoric to justify their right to send antislavery petitions to Congress, they also argued that it was a woman’s moral and domestic right to petition. Harkening back to their Republican Mothers, who actively engaged in petitioning in the 1790s, the Grimké sisters and the women at the Convention claimed that petitioning was simply an extension of the domestic sphere because it dealt so closely with public virtue and the promotion of morality. According to historian Susan Zaeske, the language employed in petitions during the early 1830s was developed to intentionally disguise the political nature of signing and circulating petitions. In the petitions, women would describe their actions as motivated not by political means, but by a sense of Christian duty and out of concern for the

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morality of the nation. Because slavery was a moral threat to the domestic sphere, it was natural that women should participate in circulating these petitions; it was nothing but an extension of women’s domestic duties.\footnote{Susan Zaeske, \textit{Signature of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, & Women’s Political Identity} (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003): 48-61.} For many women—Sarah and Angelina Grimké included—the act of signing a petition was a political act, but many women firmly believed petitions had nothing to do with politics. So while this motion appears to be openly political, many contemporary men and women would have understood the language to be promoting domestic values rather than political gain.

Sarah then put forward a motion supporting the open discussion of slavery among women in preparation for their duties in the antislavery movement. The motion stated that as moral and responsible beings, “the women of America are solemnly called upon by the spirit of the age and the signs of the times, fully to discuss the subject of slavery that they may be prepared to meet the approaching exigency, and be qualified to act as women, and as Christians on this all-important subject.”\footnote{Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, 8-9.} Like the previous motions, this justified women’s participation in the antislavery movement based on their womanhood, not on their rights as political individuals. By using this language, the Grimké sisters were still using their special position as women—the guardians of public morality and virtue—to account for their activities of discussing slavery, engaging in petition campaigns, and speaking to public audiences on antislavery topics. To Sarah, this language might have implied that as humans, women—like men—have an intellectual duty to fulfill by discussing the antislavery conflict. To the other women, however, it was most likely regarded as an affirmation of women’s domestic duty to rid the nation of slavery.

Finally, Angelina put forward one last motion to the assembly of women. This
That as certain rights and duties are common to all moral beings, 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 has encircled her... it is the duty of woman... to plead the cause of the oppressed in our land, and 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.\textsuperscript{43}

Angelina was attempting to push the limits of woman’s public duties far outside of the domestic realm—too far for the liking of the more conservative women. The language Angelina used in this particular motion is interesting and worthy of investigation.

Angelina’s motion was sustained, but two women—Mary Grew and Abigail Cox, both respected antislavery advocates—proposed amendments to Angelina’s motion.

According to the minutes of the Convention, this sparked an “animated and interesting debate respecting the rights and duties of women.” Unfortunately, the minutes do not record what was discussed or said during these debates, it is merely indicated that another vote was taken and Angelina’s motion was adopted without the Grew/Cox amendments.

But it was not adopted unanimously; a post-script in the minutes indicates that twelve women (out of seventy-one delegates) wished to go on record as rejecting parts of Angelina’s motion.\textsuperscript{44}

It is not explicitly stated what portions of the motion were met with disapproval, but based on the previous language utilized by the Convention, the strong political undertones would have been alarming for many women. Angelina clearly states that the

\textsuperscript{43}Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, 9.

\textsuperscript{44}Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, 9.
sphere Providence assigned to women was not the same sphere that male-dominated society had assigned her. She blames male corruption, dissolute social customs, and a perverted interpretation of Scripture for woman’s inferior and wrongful political and public position. Women, then, should occupy her God-given sphere rather than the sphere relegated to her by man. In her proper sphere, woman has the responsibility to actively work toward the abolition of slavery through the means of speaking, writing, monetary donations, and using her influence in the community. Angelina does not directly advocate woman’s right to address promiscuous assemblies in this motion, but if her own previous actions count for anything, she is justifying her lectures by redefining the traditional gendered spheres, and encouraging other women to do the same. Angelina did not believe that men and women were created inherently different; thus gender should be of no regard when considering the moral and intellectual responsibilities that God has bestowed upon humans. Because Angelina was a human being, she believed she had the duty to become actively and politically engaged in issues that affect the nation—the nation of which she was a legal and natural citizen. As citizens of the United States of America, women did not just have the right, they had the duty of fighting on behalf of the oppressed and subjugated people of America, be those people slaves or women, black or white. By using this language, Angelina was resolutely justifying women’s actions in the political sphere based on the philosophies of natural rights and citizenship—philosophies which would later become the very foundation of her own political identity.

It is this implication that undoubtedly met with opposition from several women at the 1837 Convention. Until Angelina’s motion, the Convention had been working within the sphere of domesticity, and using feminine rhetoric to justify their domestic actions of
promoting social order and morality. Angelina’s motion, however, did away with the conventional conceptions of gendered spheres, claiming they were a male-created contrivance to keep women in an inferior and wrongful state. Furthermore, Angelina claimed it was a woman’s civic duty to speak against slavery, and not just by using her influence within the family-like traditional domesticity prompted, but within the public community, speaking in front of both men and women. This extended woman’s sphere too far for several women, although after the “animated and interesting debate,” it was eventually adopted.⁴⁵ According to historian Carolyn Williams, Angelina’s radical proposal was the first assertion of equality between the sexes, and by the end of the Convention, many women who had simply come to support antislavery had begun to develop an awareness of their own oppression as women.⁴⁶ This was also a significant step for Sarah and Angelina Grimké, who would now have to defend the position they so adamantly stated at the Convention. The two sisters now had to develop a rhetoric that supported their claims that women were created equal to men, and endowed with the same moral and intellectual responsibilities toward the nation.

Angelina’s “Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States” and Sarah’s “Appeal to the Free Colored Americans,” made the sisters widely known throughout New England; and requests started arriving for the sisters to speak at various female antislavery societies. Upon contemplating their options, the sisters decided to first visit Boston. Compared to New York, the sisters found Boston women to be more open to reform and actively interested in the question of women’s rights. According to historian

Kathryn Kish Sklar, the number of women’s reform societies in the city of Boston had dramatically increased from the 1810s to the 1830s. She estimates that between one-third and one-half of all adult women were members of at least one reform society.\(^{47}\) Angelina noted this difference in a letter to Jane Smith: “In New York we were allowed to sit down & do nothing. Here, invitations to labor pour in from all sides…”\(^{48}\)

In this more open environment, Sarah and Angelina were able to make significant headway on the issue of women’s rights; they were also able to start utilizing the political arguments they had been developing in New York. In late May, both sisters spoke at a Moral Reform Meeting and for the first time espoused their beliefs concerning women’s rights to a promiscuous audience. Angelina’s reflection upon her speech is especially insightful; she reported:

> this [antislavery] reform was to begin in ourselves…If we regarded each other as moral & intellectual beings merely, how pure & elevated & dignified would be our feelings toward, & intercourse with [men]…. My heart is pained, my womanhood is insulted, my moral being is outraged continually, & I told them so. After we had finished, many women came up & expressed their pleasure & satisfaction at this part particularly of our remarks. They were their own feelings, but had never heard them expressed before.\(^{49}\)

Here, Angelina starts to utilize rhetoric concerning women’s roles as “moral beings.” The sisters will utilize this phrase throughout the rest of their antislavery careers, using it as justification for women’s equal participation in the movement and their ability to publicly speak to promiscuous audiences. This argument would also serve as the foundation of a larger feminist movement in the late 1840s.

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\(^{48}\) Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 29 May 1837, Weld MSS, Box 4.

\(^{49}\) Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 29 May 1837, Weld MSS, Box 4.
Perhaps the most important argument the sisters developed regarding the equality of women in the public sphere was the notion that all humans—both male and female—were moral beings. Angelina believed that “when human beings are regarded as moral beings, sex, instead of being enthroned upon the summit, administering upon rights and responsibilities, sinks into insignificance and nothingness.” The Grimkés argued that every human being was equally and individually responsible to God. Based on this doctrine, the sisters rejected any government that enforced racial or sexual inequalities, which “obstructed the essential relationships between the oppressed and the God to whom they were individually responsible.” Divine authority should always take precedence over human government, and according to Sarah and Angelina, the American laws were in direct conflict with God’s laws.

Lucretia Mott, a famous female abolitionist, expanded the doctrine started by the Grimké sisters in the 1830s. Mott gave numerous lectures on women’s true moral role within the nation. In 1849, she gave a speech presenting the Biblical foundation of the doctrine for moral equality. According to Mott, moral equality came from the “Priesthood of all Believers,” a Protestant doctrine teaching that all believers who were members of the Church (and able to read the Bible) were capable of interpreting, ministering, and preaching. A single, unisex standard based on Biblical truths and natural rights could be applied to both males and females. Mott continued, saying that the Bible had been misinterpreted for centuries, and woman had been relegated to a sphere God never intended for her. She concludes: “We would admit all the difference, that our great and beneficent Creator has made, in the relation of man and woman, nor would we seek to

50 Grimké, Letters to Catherine, 115.
disturb this relation; but we deny that the present position of woman is her true sphere of usefulness.”

This 1849 speech reflects the perfected doctrine that Sarah and Angelina had been developing in the 1830s. Even after the Grimkés’ exit from public life in the late 1830s, their doctrine of moral equality continued on and was adopted and extensively utilized by later women’s rights activists.

In June of 1837, the sisters began an antislavery lecture tour of New England. They traveled from town to town, often speaking four to five times a week in public venues. During the first leg of their lecture circuit, they generally received warm welcomes from the towns and positive responses from the people who heard them lecture. They also started drawing more attention from males, who began attending their lectures in greater numbers. On 21 June 1837, Sarah and Angelina spoke in front of their first large mixed audience. There were over one thousand people present, yet Angelina revealed that there was “great openness to hear & ease in speaking.”

The sisters were becoming ever more comfortable with their public personas and gaining confidence in their ability to speak competently in front of large assemblies. Yet the growing number of male attendees caused a disturbance in the New England states. The sisters’ letters start to reflect the growing hostility toward female speakers; in one town they were promised the use of a Church, but Angelina reported: “the minister… said if we went into his pulpit he never would again.” In other towns, ministers often preached follow-up sermons, teaching that such female lecturing violated Biblical principles. Yet the sisters’ effectiveness could not be denied; one minister admitted: “whenever these ladies spoke in

52 Lucretia Mott, “Discourse on Women,” (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, 1850). This was a speech delivered by Mott at the Assembly buildings on 17 December 1849; it was later published in 1850.
53 Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, June 1837, Weld MSS, Box 4.
54 Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 6 October 1837, Weld MSS, Box 4.
public, it caused people to lose their prejudices against female speaking.”  

The amount of critiques and feedback—both positive and negative—served not only to spread the sisters’ fame, but it also sparked a national debate concerning women’s rights, specifically the role of women as public speakers and antislavery activists.

The next month, the sisters were preparing to lecture at Amesbury, Massachusetts, when they were handed a note saying that two southern gentlemen wished to say a few words to the assembly concerning their personal views on slavery. Upon receiving permission to speak, the two gentlemen stood up and addressed the audience. According to Angelina, they were “inconsistent & constantly betrayed that they had had a pretty close affinity to Slavery.”  

Sarah and Angelina responded to the gentlemen’s’ remarks, and then continued with their scheduled lecture. The southern men, however, requested that Sarah and Angelina join them in a “free discussion” of slavery; the sisters consented and the debate was set for 19 July 1837 in Amesbury. Over one thousand people attended this “spectacle” where two women equally engaged two men in an open debate on the issue of slavery and abolition. The southern gentlemen based their argument on personal experiences of the South and slavery, contending that slaves enjoyed better physical conditions than the factory workers in the North. Angelina described her opponents as “infidels… trying to throw reproach upon Almighty God by trying to prove that He sanctioned Slavery.” Such a debate was completely unprecedented and defied almost every traditional conception of womanhood in the nineteenth century. Not only

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55 Angeline Grimké to Elizabeth Pease, 18 December 1837, Weld MSS, Box 4.
56 Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 16 July 1837, Weld MSS, Box 4.
57 Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 16 July 1837, Weld MSS, Box 4.
59 Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 25 July 1837, Weld MSS, Box 4.
were Sarah and Angelina speaking in front of a large promiscuous audience, they were engaging in a highly politicized debate against two gentlemen. The event so scandalized one local newspaper, it reported that the events of the debate were “too indelicate” for publication.\(^6\)

Sarah and Angelina’s ever-increasing fame provoked negative responses from two different groups—those that opposed immediate abolition and those that objected to women speaking in public. Angelina commented on the public opinion when she reported: “our womanhood, it is as great offense to some as our Abolitionism… The whole land seems roused to discussion on the province of woman, & I am glad of it.”\(^6\)

The sisters had been relentlessly overstepping traditional domestic bounds, and such blatant violation of female propriety caused widespread opposition. In August of 1837, the sisters faced fierce attacks from two separate opponents: Catharine Beecher and the Congregational ministers of Massachusetts.\(^6\)

This was not the first time Catharine Beecher had attacked a fellow-female for stepping outside of Beecher’s perceived boundaries. In 1836, Beecher attacked Frances “Fanny” Wright, a social activist who criticized religion, advocated whites and blacks living together, and supported “free thinking” (which was linked to “free love” in the

\(^6\) Campbell, \textit{Man Cannot Speak For Her}, 24.
\(^6\) Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 25 July 1837, Weld MSS, Box 4.
\(^6\) Catharine Beecher (1800-1878) became famous as an advocate for female education. She also published many household manuals, instructing women on how to “professionalize” the management of the home. She was arguably the most well known female advocate of separate and gendered spheres of influence. Congregational Churches are a family of the Protestant denominations. The Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony were the first to establish the Congregational Church in the United States, thus the state of Massachusetts has remained a stronghold for this sect.
Condemning these beliefs as anti-feminine, Beecher criticized Wright in
harsh and critical language:

> Who can look without disgust and abhorrence upon such an one as Fanny Wright, with her great masculine person, her loud voice, her untasteful attire, going about unprotected, and feeling no need of protection, mingling with men in stormy debate, and standing up with barefaced impudence, to lecture to a public assembly…There she stands with brazen front and brawny arms, attacking the safeguards of all that is venerable and sacred in religion, all that is safe and wise in law, all that is pure and lovely in domestic virtue.”

Clearly, Beecher took offense at any perceived threat to the sanctity of the domestic sphere or the tarnishing of females’ reputation as docile and virtuous creatures. Any deviation from the domestic sphere, and women’s very femininity was liable to be attacked. Fanny Wright’s womanhood was questioned when she engaged in the male activity of public speaking. So in 1837 when Sarah and Angelina Grimké appeared on the public platform, Beecher started on a similar crusade to publicly reprimand the errant sisters.

Catharine Beecher published a treatise addressed to Angelina, entitled *An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism, with Reference to the Duty of American Females*. Beecher strongly opposed immediate abolitionism, believing that it caused more problems than it solved. While she was morally opposed to the institution of slavery, she did not believe “immediatism” was the answer to society’s wrongs. The last third of her treatise addressed the issue of women’s rights and why women were not suited to be participants in the antislavery movement. According to Beecher, true womanhood is:

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63 Frances “Fanny” Wright (1795-1852) was a Scottish-born freethinker and social reformer. She became one of the first and most radical feminists in the United States. While she was influential, she was largely dismissed as fanatical after she espoused the doctrine of sexual freedom for women.

entirely opposed to the plan of arraying females in any Abolition movement; because it enlists them in an effort to coerce the South... it leads them into the arena of political collision, not as peaceful mediators to hush the opposing elements, but as combatants to cheer up and carry forward the measures of strife.\textsuperscript{65}

If a woman wished to plead on behalf of the slave, she was to “try and induce the men in her domestic sphere” to become active in the abolition movement—women should never become directly involved in such a politically charged matter. Beecher’s views on the proper role of women contradicted the Grimkés’ view of women in almost every way possible. Beecher subscribed to the traditional belief that women should spark change through their womanly influence in the home; the political realm was full of corruption and coercion, traits not suited for women’s dispositions. Thus, Beecher accused the sisters of perverting the role God had assigned women and endangering the domestic sphere by introducing it to political corruption and vice.\textsuperscript{66}

Angelina decided that a public response was needed in order to address the ideas presented in Beecher’s treatise. But as soon as she started her response, the General Association of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts appointed Reverend Nehemiah Adams to publish a Pastoral Letter attacking immediate abolitionists, paying special attention to women abolitionists. While no names were mentioned in this Pastoral Letter, it was clear that it was written with Sarah and Angelina Grimké in mind. The letter was read from Congregational pulpits all over the state of Massachusetts in early July and printed in the \textit{New England Spectator} on 12 July 1837.\textsuperscript{67}


\textsuperscript{66}Beecher, \textit{An Essay on Slavery}, 103; and Cepair, \textit{The Public Years}, 138-139.

\textsuperscript{67}\textit{New England Spectator}, 12 July 1837. The pastoral letter was also published in \textit{The Liberator} on 11 August 1837.
The Pastoral Letter laid out the Congregational Church’s stance on the role of women, which placed women within a subordinate position. Based on the New Testament, the association of ministers claimed that while women do possess a great deal of power through their morality and virtuous characters, their influence should always be private and unobtrusive. “The power of women,” the Pastor Letter stated, “is in her dependence, flowing from the consciousness of that weakness which God has given her for her protection and which keeps her in those departments of life that form the character of individuals and of the nation.” 68 Women did have a certain degree of power, but it should remain hidden from the world, to be used in the privacy and sanctity of the home. The ministers then addressed the role of women as public speakers, and outlined why this was an inappropriate activity for women:

when she assumes the place and tone of a man as a public reformer, our care and protection of her seem unnecessary, we put ourselves in self defense against her, she yields the power which God has given her for protection, and her character becomes unnatural. 69

According to the Congregationalists, women who spoke in public—especially those who spoke to promiscuous assemblies—forgot their God-given position, and made themselves immodest. This view clearly adheres to the traditional belief that women lecturers took on male characteristics, which perverted their female character and made them “unnatural” creatures. Women should not emit public influence over men, because it might cloud men’s judgment over political matters.

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This first clerical attack was soon followed by four other similar protests from the Congregationalist clergy, all addressing the impropriety of women speaking in public.\textsuperscript{70} Together, these public attacks against the Grimké sisters and other women abolitionists proved to be a powerful deterrent for women’s rights. Sarah and Angelina knew they must respond quickly in order to counteract the positions presented by both Catharine Beecher and the Congregational ministers. As Angelina had already committed herself to writing a response to Catharine Beecher, it fell to Sarah to pen a response to the Pastoral Letter of the Congregational ministers. Sarah wrote a series of letters, appearing in the \textit{New England Spectator} from 19 July to 6 December of 1837.\textsuperscript{71} In total, Sarah wrote fifteen letters concerning the equality of women; the third letter was written specifically to respond to the Pastoral Letter issued in June of 1837.

When Sarah first started writing, she felt that she was hindered by her lack of formal education and training on how to compose a formal argument in writing. She was not as unprepared, however, as she believed. While living in Philadelphia, Sarah had read the works of John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, and other founding fathers, all of which gave her an understanding of the American political system and the principles of man’s natural rights. These readings would also have given Sarah knowledge of Enlightenment principles upon which much of the ideology of the American Revolution had been based.

\textsuperscript{70}The four other clerical protests included: “Appeal of Clerical Abolitionists on Antislavery Measures,” signed by five orthodox Congregationalist ministers. “Appeal of Abolitionists, of the Theological Seminary, Andover, Mass.,” signed by thirty-nine seminary students. And two follow-up letters to the “Appeal of Clerical Abolitionists,” signed by two famous preachers. All four of these protests were published in the \textit{New England Spectator} and \textit{The Liberator} in August and September of 1837.

\textsuperscript{71}Only one issue of the \textit{New England Spectator} printed from July 19 to December 6 survives. The entire series of letters was reprinted in \textit{The Liberator} from January-February, 1838 and all of these issues survived. Sarah’s letters were also compiled into a book: Sarah Grimké, \textit{Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and the condition of women: addressed to Mary S. Parker, president of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society} (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838). It was this book that was referenced for research for this paper.
Earlier correspondence with Thomas Grimké also helped prepare her to write on the lack of woman’s political rights. Finally, as a former Quaker, Sarah would have been familiar with the doctrines of the Second Great Awakening, particularly the idea that individuals have the right to interpret Scripture for themselves, without the overbearing guidance of the Church or clergymen. All of these tenets came together while Sarah was composing her letters defending women’s natural right to political action. One can trace the influences of Quaker and Enlightenment principles throughout Sarah’s series of letters.72

It was Sarah’s goal to ascertain and explain “[woman’s] duties and her privileges as a responsible and immortal being.”73 Both the Congregational ministers and Sarah Grimké claimed that New Testament doctrine was on their side in this debate, so Sarah outlined her own interpretation of the Gospels and fit women into this interpretation. Sarah examined Christ’s Sermon on the Mount and concluded that Christ gave the same directions to women as He did to men, never referring to the gender distinctions “now so strenuously insisted upon between masculine and feminine virtues.”74 She concluded that this disparity was a result of anti-Christian teachings, because according to the Bible: “Men and women were CREATED EQUAL; they are both moral and accountable beings, and whatever is right for man to do, is right for woman.”75 Woman, Sarah argues, has for too long been satisfied with the privileges man has chosen to grant her rather than fulfilling her true role.

While attempting to redefine the role of woman—which the Pastoral Letter had strictly defined earlier that summer—Sarah takes a position just short of political

74 Grimké, Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, 16.
75 Grimké, Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, 16.
activism. She effectively argues that man and woman were created equal, and there is no difference between a man’s sphere of influence and a woman’s sphere of influence. She also further develops the moral equality argument, claiming that both men and women are moral creatures, meaning they are held to the same standards—both in public and in private. Hence, the traditional distinctions made between the genders are not Biblically based, but were created by man to keep woman in a subordinate position. There are clear political undertones in this letter: if man and woman have no separate spheres of influence, then woman should be welcomed into the political realm. Sarah does not, however, directly state this argument. Instead, she focused on the Biblical definition of equality, and left her readers to infer the secular implications of her argument. At the same time Sarah was composing this letter, Angelina was in the process of responding to Catharine Beecher. Angelina used many of the same Biblical interpretations to champion women’s rights, but unlike Sarah, Angelina directly tied her argument to the political realm, using clear political rhetoric and spouting some of her most radical ideas.

Angelina responded to Catharine Beecher’s essay through a series of thirteen letters, published on a weekly basis in The Liberator between 23 June and 3 November of 1837. Angelina systematically refuted Beecher’s claims on both immediate abolitionism and the question of women’s rights. The last three letters address the issue of woman’s place in society and her proper role in the antislavery movement. These letters show Angelina compiling different ideas and rhetoric that she had been generating for over a year, using bold political terminology to voice her beliefs on the role of women.

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76 Angelina’s thirteen letters were also published in the Emancipator between July-November of 1837, and in Friend of Man between July-December of 1837. Theodore Weld later assisted Angelina in compiling these letters into book form, which was published in 1838. It is this published book that will be cited throughout this thesis.
The core of Catharine Beecher’s argument revolved around what she considered to be the “God-given roles” of each sex—the different and appropriate spheres in which women and men should separately act. In her essay, Beecher stated that: “Heaven has appointed to one sex the superior, and to the other the subordinate station, and this without any reference to the character or conduct of either… it was designed that the mode of gaining influence and exercising power should be altogether different and peculiar.”77 Women should use their moral influence within the appropriate sphere, the home. Entering into the political world of men would only serve to corrupt and ruin woman’s sensitive and morally superior disposition. In order to stay pure and virtuous, women needed to stay within the home and indirectly influence their husbands and children through her gentle correction. Because of women’s different sphere of influence, Beecher was opposed to women involving themselves in petitioning campaigns, as they may:

    tend to bring females, as petitioners as partisans, into every political measure that may tend to injure and oppress their sex…. In this country, petitions to Congress, in reference to official duties of legislators, seem, IN ALL CASES, to fall entirely without the sphere of female duty. Men are the proper persons to make appeals to the rulers whom they appoint.78

To this, Angelina responded by outlining what she believed to be women’s basic political rights. Women were citizens of the United States of America; they should therefore be granted access to the rights defined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights. The Constitution’s first amendment guaranteed that: “Congress shall make no law…prohibiting the free exercise…to petition the Government for a redress of

77 Beecher, An Essay on Slavery, 100.
grievances." As women’s only guaranteed political right, Angelina argues that the right to petition must not be taken away from women. She stated:

The right of petition is the only political right that women have: why not let them exercise it whenever they are aggrieved? Our fathers waged a bloody conflict with England, because they were taxed without being represented. This is just what unmarried women of property now are. They were not willing to be governed by laws which they have no voice in making; but this is the way in which women are governed in this Republic…. The fact that women are denied the right of voting for members of Congress, is but a poor reason why they should also be deprived of the right of petition. If their numbers are counted to swell the number of Representatives in our State and National Legislatures, the very least that can be done is to give them the right of petition in all cases whatsoever; and without any abridgement. If not, they are mere slaves, known only through their masters.

Again, Angelina compares white women to slaves; if women have no means of making their political desires known, then they are no more than slaves to their husbands, fathers, and brothers. Since petitioning was the only means of political redress for women, Angelina defended it ardently throughout her entire public career. Furthermore, Angelina compares white women to the Revolutionary Fathers, who rebelled against having no representation in the English Parliament, yet were still held accountable to the English laws placed upon the colonies. If the American colonists had a right to speak against the King and Parliament, then women certainly have a right to speak against the men who now govern the American political system. Although Angelina is only defending women’s right to petition Congress, she is also setting up a political argument—one which will be important to her argument in her next letter to Catharine Beecher. The last sentence of the above quote is reminiscent of the wording used in “An Appeal of Women of the Nominally Free States,” released by the 1837 Anti-Slavery Convention of

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79 First Amendment to the United States of America Bill of Rights.
80 Grimké, Letters to Catherine, 112-113.
American Women. The appeal stated: “if we have no right to act, then may we well be termed ‘the white slaves of the North.’” In both cases, Angelina argues that if women are not given a political voice, or a way to communicate their concerns and wishes, then they are no more than slaves, whose voice and will be masked by their male counterparts.

Angelina continued to develop her theory of moral and intellectual equality in her twelfth letter addressed to Catharine Beecher. She argued that human beings, whether they are male or female, must comply with the same moral and spiritual code that is expressed in the Holy Bible. Going further, Angelina declared:

Human beings have rights, because they are moral beings; the rights of all men grow out of their nature; and as all men have the same moral nature, they have essentially the same rights…. Now if rights are founded in the nature of our moral being, then the mere circumstances of sex does not give to man higher rights and responsibilities, than to woman.

It is significant that Angelina is at the same time both affirming and refuting the traditional argument that women have a higher sense of morality, which suits them for the role of domestic guardian. Rather than deny that women have a high sense of morality, she argues that men should have an equal sense to that of women. Men and women share the same spiritual nature, which makes them equal—regardless of sex—in the eyes of God, so men should be able to live up to the standards of woman’s morality. Again (and not coincidentally), this passage is also extremely reminiscent of the ideals espoused by America’s founding fathers in the Declaration of Independence. Just as the American colonists had the right to act against the tyranny of the English crown, so too did American women have the right to act against the tyranny of a male-centered government. By utilizing and expanding the well-known argument for natural rights and

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81 An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States, 13-14.
82 Grimké, Letters to Catherine, 114.
reshaping it to include women, Angelina was sure to remind her readers of the previous generation’s fight for freedom and equality.

This natural rights platform is the fundamental tenet on which Angelina justifies women’s action as political individuals. Because of this inherent equality, Angelina believed that:

whatever it is morally right for man to do, it is morally right for woman to do. Our duties originate, not from difference of sex, but from the diversity of our relations in life… Now, I believe it is woman’s right to have a voice in all the laws and regulations by which she is to be governed, whether in Church or State; and that the present arrangements of society, on these points, are a violation of human rights, a rank usurpation of power, a violent seizure and confiscation of what is sacredly and inalienably hers.83

Here, Angelina finally commits herself to a wholly political argument. Women have a right to be politically active, because they share the same moral and intellectual disposition as every male. Like white males, women have the natural and inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—and the political rights and benefits that go along with that sacred promise of the Declaration of Independence. From this point on, Angelina wields a clear political voice, and identifies herself as an individual with a civic duty to involve herself in political issues such as antislavery. After this declaration, it is rare to see Angelina defining herself as a woman; more often she defines to herself as an “American” or as a “Christian,” which has radically different implications than that of “woman.”

The end of the 1837 summer brought a slight relief to the hectic writing and lecturing schedules the sisters had pursued. Sarah finished her series of letters dealing with the equality of the sexes, and Angelina concluded her lettered response to Catharine

83 Grimké, Letters to Catherine, 115, 118-119.
Beecher. While this certainly did not bring an end to the national discourse, the sisters were able to focus more intently on their lecture tour. From August to November, the sisters continued their circuit, speaking to large audiences of men and women throughout the state of Massachusetts. Based on the sisters’ correspondence, it is clear that the issue of women’s rights was still creating national discord, and one can see the utilization of Sarah and Angelina’s newly formed political identities in the language and rhetoric used in their myriad of personal letters written during these few months.

The sisters acknowledged the Pastoral Letter as the spark that propelled them into the public arena. Until the letter was issued in June of 1837, the sisters had not publicly written or spoken on the topic of women’s rights. After the Congregationalists’ attack, however, the sisters found it was necessary to defend their right to speak. “Before a word was written on the subject of women’s rights,” Sarah explained, “the Pastoral letter had been issued & that in every place that we lectured the subject of our speaking in public was up for discussion.”84 The sisters understood that the doctrine of moral and intellectual equality was the linchpin in their argument for women’s rights. They also knew that this philosophy had to be strengthened if they were going to convert the nation. Angelina admitted this in a letter to Jane Smith, saying:

> It must be discussed whether women are moral & responsible beings, and whether there is such a thing as *male and female virtue & male & female duties*, &c. My opinion is that there *are none* & that this false idea has driven the plowshare of ruin over the whole field of morality… I am persuaded that woman is not to be as she has been, a mere second-hand agent in the regeneration of a fallen world, but the acknowledged equal & co-worker with man in this glorious work.85

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84 Angelina and Sarah Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld, 20 September 1837, Weld MSS, Box 4.  
85 Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 10 August 1837, Weld MSS, Box 4.
It was this doctrinal refinement that kept Sarah and Angelina busy during the last months of 1837. They had to sharpen their own arguments and rhetoric concerning women’s rights before they could hope to make a difference in the political realm.

In October, Sarah and Angelina displayed a new found political consciousness when they wrote to the Queen of England. Young Victoria had just taken the throne in June of 1837; barely four months into her rule, she received a letter from Sarah and Angelina Grimké asking her to repeal the apprenticeship system in the West Indies. While slavery had been abolished in Britain in 1833, many black children in the Caribbean region still faced slave-like conditions in a mandatory apprenticeship system.86

In the letter penned by the Grimkés, the sisters never once appealed to Queen Victoria’s womanhood, her heightened sense of morality, or her domestic tendencies. Instead, they presented their request by claiming a much more political identity: “As Americans, as Christians, we feel deeply interested in this cause.”87 This phrase alone shows tremendous political growth on the part of Sarah and Angelina Grimké. Consider Angelina’s first letter to William Lloyd Garrison, written in 1835—Angelina felt compelled to justify her foray into the public eye, and used her womanhood as a shield against attacks. Furthermore, in the letter to Garrison, Angelina merely outlined the abolitionist creed and encouraged those who were engaged in the fight against slavery; she was not necessarily trying to shape Garrison’s actions. When writing to Queen Victoria, however, Angelina and Sarah attempted to directly influence the actions of the Queen, a direct position that was not traditionally taken by women. Sarah and Angelina

86 Salerno, *Sister Societies*, 78.
87 Sarah and Angelina Grimké to Queen Victoria, 26 October 1837, Anti-Slavery Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts Archive, Boston Public Library.
were not only outlining the morals wrongs of the apprenticeship system but also persuading the Queen to take action against the corrupt and cruel system.

As a woman, Angelina had felt compelled to write a letter concerning abolitionism. In this letter to Queen Victoria, however, the sisters identified themselves not as women, but as Americans and Christians. As moral beings, they had an interest in abolishing the apprenticeship system—as political beings, they felt they had a right to compose a letter to Victoria. By identifying themselves as Americans, the sisters assumed all the political rights and privileges that went along with being an American citizen, including the right to be actively involved in national politics. By identifying themselves as Christians, they laid claim to an inherent moral nature that all human beings share. This single letter highlights the immense progress the sisters had made—no longer hiding behind their womanhood, or feeling the need to justify their actions as domestically based—they now considered themselves to be full political individuals.

From this point on in their careers, Sarah and Angelina did not feel compelled to justify their public presence. As moral and political beings, it was their natural right to speak before audiences on political issues, and they intended to exercise that right with no regard to their critics. If they possessed equal political rights, why should they have to explain themselves every time they chose to speak? Men did not have to justify their manhood in order to speak, thus women should not have to justify their womanhood.

Sarah and Angelina continued their Massachusetts lecture tour until 3 November 1837. At that point they had continuously traveled for twenty-three weeks, had spoken at over eighty-eight meetings, in sixty-seven towns, to over 44,000 people.88 Sarah and

Angelina’s non-stop pace had taken its toll on their health and had left them physically exhausted. Upon the insistence of several abolitionist friends, the sisters agreed to stop lecturing during the winter months to regain their health and energy. It took almost the entire winter for the sisters to fully recover their vitality, but come the spring of 1838, they were ready to once again reenter the public arena as public speakers and political activists.
CHAPTER 3:
The Creation of a “New Woman”

In October of 1837, Sarah and Angelina demonstrated that they had developed a conscious political identity. No longer were the sisters using their womanhood or “heightened sense of morality” to justify their presence on the public platform. Never again did the sisters feel the need to account for their womanhood, because in their view, gender had absolutely no bearing on the moral and intellectual duties of mankind. American society, however, was not as progressed in its thinking as the Grimkés were, so the sisters continued to face opposition from various opponents. Although the sisters’ formal lecture tour of New England concluded at the end of 1837, they were involved in several highly publicized and politicized events throughout the year of 1838. Angelina spent most of her time preparing for what would be two of the most important events of her life: her speech in front of the General Committee of the Massachusetts Legislature, and her upcoming wedding to fellow abolitionist, Theodore Dwight Weld. Shortly after her wedding, Angelina gave her second major speech of the year (and the last public speech of her life) at the 1838 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women. While Sarah was actively involved in these events, she started to take a behind-the-scenes approach to her work. She did not speak in public as often as Angelina, but rather chose to spend her time writing. As Angelina was fighting against slavery with her speeches, Sarah was fighting against gender inequality with her pen. Each woman was employing the use of her political identity in separate, yet equally effective ways.

After writing the highly politicized letter to Queen Victoria in October of 1837, the sisters continued their New England speaking tour for only a short time more.
Throughout the months of September and October, Sarah suffered from bronchitis and was unable to speak in front of large crowds. Angelina, then, had to speak at every public lecture for several consecutive weeks. During the first week of November, Angelina lectured six times in six different locations, the last taking place in Hingham, Massachusetts. Angelina arrived at the Hingham meeting hall quite worn out; she contemplated canceling the lecture on the grounds of her illness and fatigue, but the public’s enthusiasm was so great that Angelina could not refuse to speak on the subject of antislavery. After one hour, and only half way through her speech, Angelina was forced to sit down. Fatigue overcame her, and she could not continue the lecture. This was the beginning of a serious illness that lasted the remainder of the year. Historian Gerda Lerner has concluded that Angelina had contracted a case of typhoid fever, and hovered between life and death for several weeks. Angelina’s lungs were so affected that for a time it was impossible for her to sit up in bed. While Angelina struggled for her very life, Sarah was slowly recovering from her bronchitis. Even if Sarah had been healthy during this time, it is highly unlikely that she would have continued the lecture tour while her sister was in such a dangerous state. It was Angelina’s illness, then, that effectively ended the sisters’ New England lecture tour.1

For the remainder of 1837, the sisters rested and recovered in the home of Samuel and Eliza Philbrick in Brookline, Massachusetts. Although the doctor forbade mental or physical activity for both sisters, neither sat idle for long. Soon after their arrival in Brookline, Sarah started writing letters to her antislavery contacts, and read all the latest literature on antislavery. When Angelina was able to sit up for extended periods of time,

she joined her sister in these endeavors. In a letter to Theodore Weld, Sarah reports that while it was impossible for the sisters to continue speaking in public, they did not intend to waste an entire winter due to illness and confinement. She said: “Now altho’ we do not contemplate public speaking this winter we do not wish or expect to be idle; we feel very ignorant still on the great subjects which are agitating the public mind.”

So throughout the months of November, December, and most of January, the sisters read as many works on the subject of antislavery as possible, working on strengthening their argument against slavery; they also strengthened their arguments concerning women’s rights and the appropriateness of women appearing in public while speaking on politicized topics.

In January of 1838, the Executive Committee of the Massachusetts Legislature started addressing the many antislavery petitions that had been presented to the Legislature throughout the previous year. Despite the “gag rule” that had been passed two years previously, a General Committee of the Massachusetts Legislature had decided to allow a select number of men to present arguments concerning why the Legislature should act upon these petitions. This was seen as an extraordinary opportunity by the abolitionists, and one not to be squandered. One of the most effective to present the abolitionist cause to the Massachusetts Legislature was Henry Stanton, who then privately proposed to Angelina that she should also address the Committee and present the petitions signed primarily or exclusively by women. While visiting the Grimké sisters in Brookline, Stanton explained that it would be highly appropriate for a woman to present the petitions before the Legislature, because the “names of thousands of women

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3 Sarah and Angelina Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld, 30 November 1837, Weld MSS, Box 4.
were before the Com[mittee] as signers of petitions.”

For several years now, Angelina had been an advocate for women engaging in antislavery petition campaigns as a means of asserting political power and agency. In Stanton’s opinion, Angelina was the clear choice for who should present the petitions to the Committee. But speaking before an all-male assembly of politicians was something that not even Angelina Grimké was accustomed to; never before had a woman been allowed to speak in front of the Massachusetts Legislature. Angelina’s hesitation to undertake such a task is, therefore, understandable. In a series of letters, Angelina relates her mixed feelings regarding this request; in the end, Angelina concluded that speaking before the Legislature was her duty as a concerned citizen and as an abolitionist. Angelina understood that speaking before the Legislature of Massachusetts would help advance the cause of the slave and the woman of the United States. To Jane Smith, Angelina admitted that she first took Stanton’s proposal as nothing more than a joke:

Brother Stanton was here on [Saturday], & half in jest & half in earnest asked us whether I would speak before the Committee. I laughed at the proposal, for I had no idea such a thing could be required of me. He, however, maintained it seriously before he went away & remarked that as the names of some thousands of women were before the Comm, as signers of petitions, he tho’ it would be a good thing if I felt as tho’ I could do it.5

But upon considering Stanton’s proposal, Angelina admitted that speaking before the Committee of the Massachusetts Legislature was an opportunity she could not possibly reject. In a letter to Weld, Angelina reported that although it took a while for her to take Stanton’s proposal seriously, she finally “felt to my own great surprise that I must do it.”6

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4 Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 7 February 1838, Weld MSS, Box 4.
5 Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 7 February 1838, Weld MSS, Box 4.
6 Angelina Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld, 11 February 1838, Weld MSS, Box 4.
Although Henry Stanton was supportive of Angelina’s decision to speak in front of the Committee, not all male abolitionists were enthusiastic. Many men believed that Angelina’s presence before the Committee would do more harm to the antislavery cause than it would to help, by causing potential supporters to turn away from antislavery due to its involvement with women’s rights. Due to this mixed reaction, Sarah and Angelina decided that if they were to speak to the Legislative Committee, they would do so independently from the American Anti-Slavery Society, thus attempting to keep the “woman question” separate from the abolitionist movement. In order to detach themselves from the AASS, the sisters wrote to the Chairman of the Committee, asking him for an audience in which the sisters would be allowed to present petitions signed by the women of Massachusetts. The sisters briefly summarized the essence of this letter to Jane Smith:

We wrote to the Chairman of the Com of the Leg – ourselves requesting a hearing before them as citizens of the U S, as Southerners, as repentant Slaveholders, as moral beings and on our own responsibility. They granted the request but we have been confidentially told that some of the Com. were very unwilling to do so.7

It was determined that the sisters should appear before the Legislature on 21 February 1838 at three o’clock in the afternoon. The Committee granted the Grimkés two full days to present the petitions, and each sister planned to speak one day. Both Sarah and Angelina understood the importance of this occasion—they were going to be the first women to ever appear before the Committee. Not only would Sarah and Angelina be advancing the cause of the slaves (whose freedom was demanded in the many petitions they would be introducing to the Committee), but the women’s rights movement was also

7 Sarah and Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 22 February 1838, Weld MSS, Box 4.
going to be advanced. By agreeing to grant an audience to the sisters, the Massachusetts Legislature indirectly legitimized the women’s rights movement. This would not be like the sisters’ previous lectures; it was not going to be aimed primarily at women. This meeting was meant specifically for a male audience—males who had political power. It was this very action that advocates of the Pastoral Letter so greatly feared—placing women in a position where they could directly influence the political decisions of males. The sisters understood that they had been given a chance to prove that women could participate in politics without corrupting or distracting the male contingent. This was Sarah and Angelina’s chance to convince the American population that women had the ability, intelligence, and moral capacity to engage in political activities.

Sarah and Angelina had already demonstrated a solid political identity in their letter to Queen Victoria, asking for the cessation of the apprenticeship system. Now, they were given the opportunity to demonstrate this newfound identity on a public platform, with the whole of American society watching. Undoubtedly, the sisters understood that if they failed in this first and unprecedented endeavor, women might not get a second chance to prove their political capabilities. In the sisters’ minds, the future of the women’s rights movement hung in the balance, wholly dependent on their success and actions during the lecture in front of the Massachusetts Legislature. Both sisters acknowledged this tremendous pressure; Angelina told Jane Smith: “this is the most important step I have ever been called to take – important to woman, to the slave, to my country & the world.”\(^8\) Similarly, Sarah revealed that she felt called to speak before the Legislature, it being her moral duty: “… my moral being, the eternal spirit in me arises in

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\(^8\) Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 7 February 1838, Weld MSS, Box 4.
rebellion against the doctrine that God created one half of the human race inferior to and
to be subjection to the other half.”

This was Sarah’s chance to practically prove what she
had written in her many letters—that women’s rightful place was not in subjection to
man, but in equality with him. Although their speeches before the Committee would be
focused on antislavery petitions and not women’s rights, they realized that their very
presence in the male-filled hall would do more to advance the cause of women than
anything they had yet done.

When the twenty-first of February arrived, Sarah was again ill with a persistent
cough (a remnant of the severe bronchitis she suffered from in the last months of 1837),
and found that she could not appear before the Legislature. Angelina took Sarah’s place
and planned to speak for two days. When she arrived at the hall, she learned that people
had started gathering several hours before the scheduled starting time; the hall was so
crowded that people were standing shoulder to shoulder in the balcony and more had
been turned away all together. Angelina admitted after the fact that the site of such a
crowd made her nervous, writing: “it had been determined to appropriate the whole of the
floor to men only except two or three of my friends… At last we reached the Hall &
found it full of men. I had never had such an audience to address before.”

Despite her
nerves, Angelina spoke confidently and with great detail; at the end of the second day,
Angelina had not yet concluded all she had prepared, and the Committee granted her
another audience on a third day. Unfortunately, there are no surviving manuscripts or
transcripts of Angelina’s speeches during the first two days of the meeting. The Liberator
published a small portion of her speech from the third day, and although incomplete, it

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9 Sarah Grimké to Gerrit Smith, 16 February 1838, Weld MSS, Box 4.
10 Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 5 March 1838, Weld MSS, Box 5.
provides an opportunity to study the political tone and rhetoric Angelina used while speaking in front of the Massachusetts Legislature.\textsuperscript{11}

Those opposed to women lecturers claimed that women inherently used their sexuality to persuade men in political matters. Rather than appeal to reason and intellect, it was thought that women would appeal to men’s passions, distract men from the important issues, and thus corrupt civic virtue. It was Angelina’s goal to dispel these traditional conceptions of women who spoke to promiscuous audiences. The Committee of the Massachusetts Legislature believed that Angelina’s primary goal was to present antislavery petitions signed by over twenty thousand Massachusetts women, and also to defend women’s right to circulate petitions. While this was certainly on Angelina’s agenda, it was not her sole—or even primary—purpose. Angelina’s actual goal was to justify women’s right of petition by defending the propriety of women speaking on a political topic before a mixed audience.\textsuperscript{12} The fact that the Committee invited Angelina back for a third day shows that the members of the Committee were not displeased with Angelina’s variety of subjects; they were in fact intrigued and wished for her to complete the course of lectures she had prepared.

Angelina’s speech during the third day dealt primarily with the topic of petitions, and the right of women to engage in antislavery petitioning activities. But before defending women petitioners, Angelina felt it was necessary to establish her own right to speak before the Committee. Afraid that her critics would accuse her of using her womanhood and sexuality to persuade the Committee, she defended her right not as a woman—but as a citizen—to speak publicly on a political issue. In order to establish this

\textsuperscript{11}Angelina Grimké, “Speech to the Legislative Committee of the Massachusetts Legislature,” \textit{The Liberator}, 2 March 1838.

\textsuperscript{12}Zaeske, “The Promiscuous Audience,” 192-203 passim.
right, Angelina portrayed herself as an exact opposite of the Biblical character of Esther, Queen of Persia. The Jewish queen petitioned her husband, King Ahasuerus, to save the Jewish people who were facing imminent destruction. Like Esther, Angelina believed herself to be on a noble quest to save an entire race of people. But Angelina presented her argument in a much different way than Esther, and clearly highlighted this difference for the members of the Committee. Angelina described the nature of Esther’s appeal in vivid and shocking language, hoping to create a stark contrast between Esther’s sensual method of appeal and Angelina’s intellectually and politically based appeals. The Queen of Persia, Angelina asserted, was:

trained in the secret abominations of an oriental harem, and had studied too deeply the character of Ahasuerus not to know that the sympathies of his heart could not be reached, except through the medium of his sensual appetites…. She felt that if her mission of mercy was to be successful, his animal propensities must be still more powerfully wrought upon.

Here, Angelina presents Esther as the embodiment of what nineteenth century men feared from women who spoke in public. Esther embodied the idea that men would be distracted by a woman’s use of her sexuality. She did not appeal to Ahasuerus’ sense of moral duty to the Jewish people, nor did she try to awaken his intellectual or political nature. Instead, Esther served the King a “luxurious feast” and a “banquet of wine,” and made her final appeal only after the King was “gorged with gluttony and intoxication,” all the while herself being “arrayed in royal apparel.” Angelina declared that Esther used her sexuality to persuade the King of Persia: “It was thus, through personal charms and sensual

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13 Today, King Ahasuerus is better known as King Xerxes. But as Angelina studied the King James Bible, she used the traditional name of Ahasuerus.

14 Grimké, “Speech to the Legislative Committee,” The Liberator, 2 March 1838.
gratification, and individual influence, that the Queen of Persia obtained the precious boon she craved, – her own life, and the life of her beloved people.”

And so Esther was portrayed as Angelina’s very opposite. The two women were on the same type of mission, but used very different means with which to achieve their goals. Angelina purposefully made Esther represent every traditional argument of why women should not speak in front of promiscuous audiences. Angelina then assured her audience that this was not the form of persuasion she would be utilizing. Angelina used Esther’s story to convince the audience that times have changed, and women no longer needed to appeal to men’s sensual appetites to effect change in the political realm. After presenting the approaches of Esther, Angelina describes the methods she will use in persuading the Committee of the Massachusetts Legislature:

I thank God that we live in an age of the world too enlightened and too moral to admit of the adoption of the same means to obtain as holy an end. I feel that it would be an insult to this Committee, were I to attempt to win their favor by arraying my person in gold, and silver, and costly apparel, or by inviting them to partake of the luxurious feast, or the banquet of wine. I understand the spirit of the age too well to believe that you could be moved by such sensual means…”

Angelina’s appearance and the Committee’s solemn setting served to prove these words. The simple Quaker-style dress of Angelina served as an explicit contrast to Esther’s “royal apparel,” and the meeting hall of the Massachusetts Legislature an equally strong contrast to the imagined ornate richness of the oriental palace of Persian royalty. The images Angelina placed in the mind of the Committee no doubt helped convince the men that Angelina was the very opposite of Esther. Where the Persian queen had used sensuality and excess, Angelina used intellect and simplicity. In fact, Angelina rejected

15 Grimké, “Speech to the Legislative Committee,” The Liberator, 2 March 1838.
16 Grimké, “Speech to the Legislative Committee,” The Liberator, 2 March 1838.
the idea that her physical person would be of any consequence, saying: “if you are reached at all, it will not be by me, but by the truths I shall endeavor to present to your understandings… [you] cannot be reached but through the loftier sentiments of the intellectual and moral feelings.”  

Angelina refused to use her sexuality to effect change, but declared that if the Committee was persuaded, it would be due to her words and intellect.

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**Figure 1:** Angelina and Sarah Grimke
Even after leaving the Quaker religion, both Angelina (left) and Sarah (right) continued to dress in the traditional and modest Quaker style of black or grey cloth, with a bonnet covering their hair. This is the type of clothing Angelina would have worn to speak in front of the Massachusetts Legislature, making a vivid impression on the men by comparing her modest style of dress to that of sensual and oriental Esther. Image taken from: www.britannica.com

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To be taken seriously as a political agent, Angelina knew that sexual differences needed to be left out of public discourses. Angelina needed to present herself as a woman who could espouse intellectual and moral truths without being tainted by her sexuality. Thus having established the nature of her appearance, Angelina gets to the core of her speech—women’s right to engage in political petitions.\(^{18}\) It is in this section where one can see a sense of political identity, which Angelina had just recently discovered in herself. Angelina uses her American citizenship and political identity to justify her presence before the Committee and to establish a woman’s right to engage in political matters within the public sphere.

And so Angelina continues her speech, declaring: “I stand before you as a citizen, on behalf of the 20,000 women of Massachusetts, whose names are enrolled on petitions which have been submitted to the Legislature.” As Angelina had argued on previous occasions, women have a right to citizenship, and thus have a right to be involved in politics. She rejected gender as a basis for exclusion from the public and political realm, specifically from the antislavery movement. In the past, women had justified their presence in the antislavery movement using the moral and religious depravity of the institution of slavery. Slavery encroached on the moral realm of the domestic sphere, and women had the obligation to protect American virtues and morals. But Angelina rejected this mode of argument; in her speech, Angelina declared that women should never be content with the role given to them by men, where they are confined to the role of sensual and individual influence. Instead:

she should be something more – she should be a citizen…. I hold, Mr. Chairman, that American women have to do with this subject, not only

because it is moral and religious, but because it is political, inasmuch as we are citizens of this republic, and as such, our honor, happiness, and well being, are bound up in its politics, government and laws.  

As citizens, women have a vested interest in the political decisions and laws of the United States, and as citizens they have a right to be involved in the governmental decision making process. The incomplete transcript of Angelina’s speech ends with Angelina forcefully proclaiming: “I stand before you as a southerner… I stand before you as a repentant slaveholder. I stand before you as a moral being, endowed with precious and inalienable rights, which are correlative with solemn duties and high responsibilities…” Notice that Angelina does not claim to stand before the Committee as a woman, but rather as a southerner, a repentant slaveholder, and as a moral being. It is not her sexuality that deserves attention, but her first-hand testimony of the evils of slavery and her citizenship, which qualifies her to occupy the public platform. Angelina wanted the Committee to have a clear understanding that she was not addressing them from a woman’s perspective, but from the perspective of an American citizen. With sexuality now out of the equation, Angelina hoped that the Committee would pay attention to her as an intellectual being, rather than a sensual woman. At the same time, Angelina attempted to prove that women could speak in front of men without using sexuality as a persuasive means. She also asserted her political identity by forcing the male members of the Legislature to take her seriously as a political agent. By claiming her right as an American citizen, Angelina demonstrated a conscious political awareness and a confidence in that identity.

19 Grimké, “Speech to the Legislative Committee,” The Liberator, 2 March 1838.
20 Grimké, “Speech to the Legislative Committee,” The Liberator, 2 March 1838.
After her second day of speaking before the Committee, Angelina revealed that much of the audience had simply come in order to see the novelty of a woman speaking before a Committee of the Massachusetts Legislature. Yet Angelina was hopeful her speech persuaded some of these auditors that women speakers were not a cause for ridicule or scorn, but rather displayed the immense capabilities and intellectual powers of women. In a letter to Sarah Douglass, Angelina confided:

> No doubt great numbers who have attended them come out of mere curiosity; some to make fun of such a strange anomaly as a Woman’s addressing a Committee of Legislature; they came despising me and my cause from the bottom of their hearts. But I trust the Lord will overrule all things to his own glory, the manumission of the slave and the elevation of woman, for such proceedings cannot but have an important bearing on the Woman Question as it is called.\(^\text{21}\)

Angelina again confirmed the great importance of this event for both slaves and women. No one who heard Angelina’s speech could claim she tried to use her female sexuality to influence political decisions, or tried to assert personal power over the male members of the Committee. The American public had just been given an example of a female utilizing her political identity to effect change on a political level.

Shortly before Angelina Grimké’s decision to speak before the Legislative Committee, Theodore Weld proposed marriage to her. Having harbored romantic feelings toward Weld for many months, Angelina was both surprised and pleased when this proposal came via letter.\(^\text{22}\) This union would serve as a great transformation in both the sisters’ lives. If moving to Philadelphia and joining the antislavery movement was a momentous step for the Grimké sisters, this up-coming marriage was going to be an equally important step. Both Angelina Grimké and Theodore Weld knew that women’s

\(^{21}\) Angelina Grimké to Sarah Douglass, 25 February 1838, Weld MSS, Box 4.
\(^{22}\) Angelina Grimke to Theodore Dwight Weld, 11 February 1838, Weld MSS, Box 4.
rights critics would be closely monitoring the Weld-Grimké marriage, and hoping for it to fail. Failure would confirm the popular opinion that political activity ruined a woman for future domestic duties, and spoiled a woman’s chance at ever enjoying a happy and healthy marriage after her public career.

Angelina Grimké became a nationally known figure after her speech to the Massachusetts Legislature, and so thousands of people were aware of her imminent marriage to another abolitionist. Angelina admitted that she was worried about the transition she would be forced to make; for almost ten years she had been living independently, benefitting from neither the monetary or physical protection of a man. But now, she was going to give up her influential career as an antislavery and women’s rights activist in order to shift into a life of a married woman. Angelina understood that this might mean her career on the frontlines of antislavery was over; and while she never considered abstaining from antislavery activism entirely, she accepted that a new generation of women may have to take her place at the forefront of the movement. Angelina displayed this sentiment to Jane Smith less than two months before her wedding; she said that she and Theodore: “hope to spend our time in mutual improvement & in writing for the A[nti] S[lavery] cause, & as ways open we can occasionally go out & lecture – but we are fully convinced that we never ought to labor so unremittingly in this way as we have done.”

Perhaps it was Angelina’s brush with death that convinced her that non-stop traveling and lecturing was no longer an option for her and Sarah. Once she had a husband and family to consider, she would not be able to travel as often or push herself to her emotional and physical limits. Furthermore,

23 Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 27 March 1838, Weld MSS, Box 5.
Angelina was aware that the American public was going to be closely watching her union with Theodore Weld, and she refused to be a failure on the domestic front.

Anne Weston, a female abolitionist and friend of the Grimkés, considered Angelina’s engagement to be a “complete triumph over the pastoral brethren who threatened such women with the entire withdrawal of man’s protection.”

Many women’s rights activists took a similar stance to Weston, believing this engagement would nullify the arguments made by critics such as Catharine Beecher and those who wrote the Pastoral Letter. Others, however, knew that marriage alone would not silence the opposition. In a letter to Angelina, Theodore Weld laid out the problem in very clear terms; he explained, “Your being so generally known as a public lecturer to promiscuous assemblies, and especially as having addressed the legislature, all eyes are upon you and almost all mouths filled with cavil. Nine tenths of the community verily believe that you are utterly spoiled for domestic life.” Indeed, many people believed that a woman who had lived so long in the limelight of publicity could never make a decent wife, or understand how the domestic sphere operates. An acquaintance of Theodore Weld said that “he did not believe it possible for a woman of [Angelina’s] sentiments and practice as to the sphere of woman to be anything but ‘an obtrusive noisy clamor’ in the domestic circle;” furthermore, “it was nature’s penalty for the violation of one of her purest laws, thus holding [Angelina] up as a beacon to warn from such unnatural violations of constitutional instincts all other females.”

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24 Angelina Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld, 7 April 1838, Weld MSS, Box 5.
25 Theodore Dwight Weld to Angelina Grimké, 15 April 1838, Weld MSS, Box 5.
26 Theodore Dwight Weld to Angelina Grimké, 15 April 1838, Weld MSS, Box 5.
statements, he readily admitted that the first months of their marriage were going to be a
time of experimentation and trial. At the end of the letter, Weld concludes:

I will only add that you are the FIRST woman everywhere known to be on
this ground, to whom in the Providence of God the practical test of
married life will be applied (if we are spared). Thousands and thousands
will watch for your halting and with a Satanic eagerness forestall if
possible the result of the experiment (!) by ill omen[ed] croakings and
prophesies of failure and downfall.27

In his usual blunt style, Weld laid bare the stakes of this marriage. Angelina was the first
woman to enter marriage after a controversy-filled career as a public lecturer, so no one
knew what to expect from this union. Critics of women’s rights were hoping that this
marriage would be a failure, proving that once a woman had despoiled her feminine
character by becoming involved in politics and public business, she was no longer
suitable for marriage and domestic life, thus effectively discouraging women from
becoming involved in the antislavery movement and the broader political sphere.

Angelina, too, understood her unique position. On several occasions, Angelina
was told that because she had wasted her youth being involved in a political discourse,
she had ruined her chances at becoming a suitable companion for a man. One woman
went so far as to say: “I have believed you had thrown yourself entirely beyond the
ordinary lot of woman, and no man would wish to have such a wife.”28 Certainly these
attacks on her femininity must have caused some degree of alarm and concern, but
Angelina was adamant to prove these sentiments wrong. Still, in the privacy of the letters
sent to her fiancé, she confided some of her concerns and thoughts on their upcoming
marriage. In a revealing portion of a letter, Angelina admitted that Weld was the only

27 Theodore Dwight Weld to Angelina Grimké, 15 April 1838, Weld MSS, Box 5.
28 Angelina Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld, 18 April 1838, Weld MSS, Box 5.
man in America willing to marry her, based on her past and her radical beliefs as to the rights of women. She wrote:

> May the Lord Jesus help me for thy sake, and for woman’s sake to prove that well regulated minds can with equal ease occupy high and low stations and find true happiness in both. Yes thou art trying a dangerous experiment, one which I do believe no other man would try because I tho’t no other understands my principles or myself.²⁹

Yet despite this sense of unease, Angelina was hopeful that this “dangerous experiment” would prove successful and that the pair of abolitionists would find true happiness while fulfilling the role of an Adam-and-Eve-like couple. “I feel with thee dearest,” Angelina wrote, “that on many accounts I do stand in a very peculiar situation, and will be watched with intense anxiety by multitudes… I do believe [God] is about to afford us a glorious opportunity of carrying out into real every day life some of the most important principles of human existence.”³⁰

The stakes of this marriage were high, but neither Angelina nor Theodore Weld had ever shrunk away from a challenge. The couple was eager to prove to the world that women could be involved in a public career and still be fit for marriage after she felt called to leave the public arena. In many ways, this was Angelina’s most important work yet; if young women felt that they were giving up marriage and a family upon joining an antislavery society or becoming involved in local politics, the women’s rights movement would stagnate and fail. Angelina needed to prove that women could do both: a woman could have a family and be involved in political activism. And so the couple was married on 14 May 1838, signaling a new phase in the lives of the inseparable trio of abolitionists.

²⁹ Angelina Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld, 18 April 1838, Weld MSS, Box 5.
³⁰ Angelina Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld, 18 April 1838, Weld MSS, Box 5.
The day after the Weld-Grimké wedding, the second-annual Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women convened in the newly built Pennsylvania Hall in Philadelphia. Both Sarah and Angelina felt called to attend this Convention before starting their new domestic lives with Weld. This was an important antislavery convention because, for the first time, men and women were going to be actively and equally involved. According to the sisters, this was going to be the first convention where men and women “acted together as moral beings.”

Men conventionally withdrew from women’s meetings after the opening remarks and prayers, but this was not the case at the 1838 Convention—men were invited to stay for the entire proceedings. This sort of unprecedented meeting was not without controversy, however. During the entirety of the Anti-Slavery Convention, anti-abolitionist mobs surrounded Pennsylvania Hall, making it difficult to enter/exit the building or to conduct business. One reason the mob was protesting was due to the fact that men and women (both black and white) were meeting together and participating on equal grounds. It was not a secret that many women were scheduled to speak before promiscuous audiences, and this greatly angered the townspeople and bolstered the energy of the mob. But violence from the anti-abolitionist mob was not the only form of controversy this Anti-slavery Convention had to endure.

Pennsylvania Hall’s treasurer, Samuel Webb, wrote a history of the hall and recorded the minutes of the meetings that took place in the hall’s short-lived history. In his published history, Webb reported: “we have ascertained that many of the members of that Convention disapproved of the public addresses of women to promiscuous

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32 Pennsylvania Hall was dedicated on 14 May 1838, and destroyed by anti-abolitionist mobs just three days later on the night of 17 May 1838.
assemblies…” Some abolitionists at the Convention feared the effect women speakers would have on the Convention and the mob outside; they believed it would be safer to hold a traditional Convention, where men lectured and women took an inactive and passive role. These abolitionists were in the minority, however, and the Convention proceeded as planned with female speakers, despite the threats from the mobs outside the Hall.

The Grimké sisters arrived on the second day of the Convention; both were elected as Vice Presidents of the Convention, and both played an active role throughout the course of the meetings. On the evening of 16 May 1838, Angelina Grimké Weld gave what would be her last lecture for twenty-five years, effectively concluding her public career as an antislavery activist. For over an hour Angelina spoke to the crowded hall, ignoring the threatening yells of the restless mob. Like her speech before the Massachusetts Legislature, Angelina never mentioned the cause of women’s rights or alluded to her own womanhood, but spoke confidently on the evils of slavery and what actions the abolitionists needed to take in order to obtain emancipation for slaves. Yet once again, Angelina’s mere presence and the rhetoric used in her speech betrayed a singularly strong political identity. In the midst of the noise and violence, Angelina spoke forcefully on the nature of slavery. Watching Angelina’s countenance during her hour long speech, William Lloyd Garrison said: “as the tumult from without increased, and the brickbats fell thick and fast, (no one, however, being injured), her eloquence kindled, her eyes flashed, and her cheeks glowed.”

Angelina’s last public speech offered yet more

33History of Pennsylvania Hall, which was Destroyed by a Mob on the 17th of May, 1838 (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838): 117.
proof that women could make an intelligent and practical impact on a political subject. Although the language she used during her last public speech did not directly champion the cause of woman, Angelina’s presence and utilization of her political identity served as a reminder to the crowd that women did deserve a place in politics.

In her opening remarks, Angelina rejected the activities of both the anti-abolitionist mob and the Church, claiming that neither of these groups could be counted on to effect change for the slave. The type of men who formed the mob outside were wealthy citizens who had a large vested interest in the economy of slavery.\textsuperscript{35} The emancipation of slaves would result in a loss of money for many businessmen in the North, and Angelina attacked them for caring more about money than about human lives. Likewise, the Church had already taken its stance on woman lecturers when it published the Pastoral Letter in 1837; Angelina claimed that the Church’s desire to please the world rather than God made them deaf on the subject of slavery. Angelina then turned to those present at the Convention, supplicating them to work toward the goal of emancipation.

She said:

\begin{quote}
Each one present has a work to do, be his or her situation what it may, however limited their means, or insignificant their supposed influence. The great men of this country will not do this work; the church will never do it…. They have become worldly-wise, and therefore God, in his wisdom, employs them not to carry on his plans of reformation and salvation. He hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the weak to overcome the mighty.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Here, Angelina is claiming “foolish” and “weak” women have an influential role to play in the abolition of slavery. Since much of the wealthiest class of men and the Church


\textsuperscript{36}\textit{History of Pennsylvania Hall}, 123.
could not be counted on, women must take a stand in order to effect change in American society. It is time, Angelina declared, for woman to start fulfilling her role as political activist. With this language, Angelina again justified her role as public speaker, rejecting the traditional stigmas of women lecturers, and claiming the Scriptures as her basis for political and social equality.

Yet when Angelina addressed the crowd, she did not identify herself as a woman, but as a southerner. She said: “As a Southerner I feel that it is my duty to stand up here to-night and bear testimony against slavery;” she then continues to describe some of her experiences of slavery while growing up in South Carolina.37 But the evils of slavery were not, Angelina argued, just confined to the South; if the North had not been directly supporting the institution of slavery through economic means, slavery would surely have ceased decades ago. Angelina fled South Carolina to get away from slavery, but she was no more content in Philadelphia. There was no such thing as a “slave state;” instead, there was just one “slave-nation,” because all sections of the United States had vested interests in the institution. No further evidence for this claim was needed than the anti-abolitionist mob that was continually beating against the walls of the meeting hall. Thus, Angelina declared:

I will lift up my voice like a trumpet, and show this people their transgression, their sins of omission toward the slave, and what they can do towards affecting Southern mind, and overthrowing Southern oppression… Every man and woman present may do something by showing that we fear not a mob, and, in the midst of threatenings and revilings, by opening our mouths for the dumb and pleading the cause of those who are ready to perish.38

37 History of Pennsylvania Hall, 123-124.
38 History of Pennsylvania Hall, 125.
Finally, Angelina specifically addresses the women of the Convention, highlighting their duties and influence in the antislavery cause. She concluded her speech by saying:

Women of Philadelphia! allow me as a Southern woman, with much attachment to the land of my birth, to entreat you to come up to this work. Especially let me urge you to petition. *Men* may settle this and other questions at the ballot-box, but you have no such right; it is only through petitions that you can reach the Legislature. It is therefore peculiarly *your* duty to petition.\(^{39}\)

Having found her own political identity, Angelina wishes that other women might become politically active and thus find their own sense of political identity. Petitioning was one of the first political activities in which Sarah and Angelina participated, and now they were encouraging other women to become involved. Angelina acknowledged that women did not have the direct ability to pass laws through the Legislature, but this should not stop women from being involved in politics. Petitions, Angelina claims in her speech, continue to have a great impact on both the North and South. Gaining awareness of the slaves’ plight is one of the most important steps in the process of abolition, and this was exactly the purpose of antislavery petitions. Although men may try to discourage women from petitioning, Angelina asserts: “We have these rights, however, from our God.” As moral beings, women have the right and ability to be involved in politics. Currently, petitions were the only form of political action women could legally take, so Angelina tells them to utilize that form of power to its fullest extent, while continually working to expand the boundaries of woman’s sphere of influence.

It would be difficult to imagine a speech farther removed from the image of an unassertive and domestic woman. Angelina broke that stereotype as she shouted over the

\(^{39}\) *History of Pennsylvania Hall*, 126.
tumult of the mob: “Do you ask, ‘what has the North to do with slavery?’ Hear it – hear it. Those voices without tell us that the spirit of slavery is here.”\textsuperscript{40} Angelina used the anti-abolitionist mob as a contrast to her own self. Historian Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has argued that throughout this speech, Angelina assumed a prophetic role through her language and allusions. Angelina found a voice parallel to that of the Biblical prophet Isaiah when she quoted the passage: “I will lift up my voice like a trumpet, and show this people their transgression.”\textsuperscript{41} As Isaiah was condemning the sin of the Israelites, so Angelina was condemning the sins of the southern slaveholders and the northerners who supported slavery through economic, social, and political means. Angelina also utilized this powerful language to assert her own political rights. Natural rights are not, she declared, a privilege and do not need to be requested; they should only be exercised and acted upon. Thus, other women should use their own political power and engage in petition drives to end the institution of slavery—it was their natural right to do so.

Thus concluded Angelina’s last public speech as an antislavery lecturer. Directly after Angelina’s speech, Abby Kelley stood up and spoke for a few minutes.\textsuperscript{42} Kelley had never lectured before, and had never stood before a promiscuous audience; this was the beginning of what would become a most effective speaking career for the young woman. In just a few years, Abby Kelley would be considered one of the leading female antislavery lecturers. This was just one example of how a younger generation of women was becoming more active as Sarah and Angelina Grimké became less active. The public

\textsuperscript{40} History of Pennsylvania Hall, 123.
\textsuperscript{41} Campbell, Man Cannot Speak For Her, 30-34.
\textsuperscript{42} Abby Kelley Foster (1811-1887) was a leading antislavery voice in the late 1830s, and became a women’s rights activist in the 1840s. She remained involved in social activism until well into the 1870s. Like the Grimké sisters, she was a member of the Society of Friends, but resigned her membership in 1841. She was a close friend and disciple of William Lloyd Garrison.
continued to watch the sisters closely, monitoring their perceived “success” at domestic living, yet neither of the sisters ever regained the national fame they had held in 1837 and 1838. The experiment of proving that women lecturers were still fit for marriage and family life demanded most of the sisters’ time. Consequently, as the Welds and Sarah Grimké made a new life in Fort Lee, women like Abby Kelley became the forerunners of the women’s rights movement in the 1840s, building upon the foundation that had been laid by Sarah and Angelina Grimké in the 1830s.

After the 1838 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, the newly married Welds (along with Sarah) moved to Fort Lee, New Jersey in order to start their new life. Sarah was forty-six years old and Angelina was thirty-three; the sisters had spent less than three years in the public spotlight, but they felt as though the time had come to further the cause of the slave and of women through a different mode of influence. Growing up in a privileged and wealthy family, neither woman had kept house before, and neither had ever been required to learn the basic skills of cooking or domestic service. This was going to be a learning process for all three of the activists-turned-domestics. But the trio felt it was their duty to show that Angelina and Sarah had not been “ruined as domestic characters;” by maintaining a proper and wholesome household, they would advance the cause of woman just as much as if they had been lecturing to a crowd of ten-thousand people. 43 They had to prove to the younger generation of women that they could be involved in antislavery activism, and still be able to marry and have a family when they felt that their time in the public sphere was played out. Or further, that a woman could maintain a household and family, while at the same time working for the

43 Angelina Grimké Weld to Lydia Maria Child, 10 August 1838, Weld MSS, Box 5.
emancipation of the slave or advancing the cause of women’s rights. Because the sisters were the first women to make a career of public speaking and activism, they were also the first women to transition from a public career to a domestic career—and the public was curious to see if this transition would go smoothly, or if it would be an utter failure. Angelina truly believed that she was advancing the rights of women by marrying Weld and becoming acquainted with the domestic scene; yet she herself was not sure that this experiment was going to be a success, it was going to be a learning process for all three involved. In a letter to Weld shortly before their wedding, Angelina said: “I believe thou wilt find me most happy in our little Cottage & in the kitchen of that cottage when duty calls me there; still as I have never been tried, I will not speak positively.”

Just a few short months after the Weld’s marriage, Angelina started receiving letters asking when she planned to return to the public platform as a lecturer. Angelina admitted that her new lifestyle might appear as a defeated retreat into the domestic sphere, but she viewed the situation very differently. In Angelina’s mind, nothing could advance women’s rights farther than proving that women who chose to pursue public careers could still adeptly run an efficient and virtuous household. Lecturing had not ruined Angelina’s feminine character, nor had it affected her ability to become a loving and happy wife. She explains this in a letter to Anne Warren Weston, a fellow female abolitionist:

I think our enemies [would] rejoice, could they only look in upon us from day to day & see us toiling in domestic life, instead of lecturing to promiscuous audiences. Now I verily believe that we are thus doing as much for the cause of woman as we did by public speaking. For it is absolutely necessary that we should show that we are not ruined as

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44 Angelina Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld, 29 April 1838, Weld MSS, Box 5.
domestic characters… & are as anxious to make good bread as we ever were to deliver a good lecture…

It was important for the Grimké sisters to assure women that whatever path they chose in life—be it one of public speaking, or one of domestic housekeeping—they had certain rights that ensured and protected their natural, God-given rights. If a woman chose to pursue a public career, and then decided she wanted to settle down in marriage, her womanhood should not be attacked. Both Sarah and Angelina felt that they had fulfilled their duty in the public sphere; they had proven that women could possess and utilize a political identity in a meaningful and effective way. Now they wished to prove that a woman with a political consciousness could still be happy and useful in the domestic realm. It was a woman’s prerogative to choose her path in life, and men should not try to contain her to one specific arena. Angelina was correct when she wrote: “No one, then, but Sister & myself can do our work & demonstrate this for the benefit of our sex at large;” Sarah and Angelina were the first women to attempt to fill a domestic role after an active public career.  

Despite their new purpose for the advancement of women’s rights, the sisters did not fully separate themselves from the political realm. During the winter/spring of 1839, the sisters led a petition drive for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, which they planned on sending to Congress after collecting the appropriate number of signatures. According to their letters and diaries, the sisters walked many miles on a daily basis in order to obtain these signatures. Not only did they go door-to-door in the city of

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45 Angelina Grimké Weld to Anne Warren Weston, 17 July 1838, Anti-Slavery Collection, Rare Manuscripts and Archives, Boston Public Library.
46 Angelina Grimké Weld to Anne Warren Weston, 14 October 1838, Anti-Slavery Collection, Rare Manuscripts and Archives, Boston Public Library.
Fort Lee, they also scoured the countryside, asking every man and woman over the age of sixteen to sign their petition. At this point in their lives, neither Sarah nor Angelina believed that this respite from public speaking was permanent. Both sisters hoped that after a few years of keeping house and showing the public that they could effectively manage their household, they would go back to participating in antislavery conventions and giving occasional lectures.

For now, however, the trio was enjoying their time of solitude. Many requests came into the Weld-Grimké household, asking one or both of the sisters to speak to female antislavery societies. Angelina refused because she felt as though her current contribution to the movement was to maintain her “domestic sphere” and prove her effectiveness in this area. Sarah was repeatedly asked to return to New England and continue with the lecture tour she had been forced to give up in the winter of 1837. Many reformers excused Angelina’s absence due to her recent marriage, but the same reformers did not as readily excuse Sarah’s absence, since she had no direct domestic duties to which she must attend. Indeed, not everyone accepted the sisters’ “abandonment” of the antislavery cause; in a blunt letter to the sisters, an abolitionist in New England asked: “When shall we hear thee and Sarah again orally plead the cause of the oppressed; ought such talents to be [w]rapped in a Napkin or such lights hid under a bushel?” Sarah admitted that she had expected to return to New England after a short rest in Fort Lee, but having spent some time in retirement, she was hesitant to return. She said: “when I left N[ew] E[ngland] I really desired that the Lord might send me back; but I have not been able to see that he wills me to be any where at present but at Fort Lee. His loving

48 Charles Hadwen to Angelina Grimké Weld, 1 January 1839, Weld MSS, Box 6.
kindness has provided me a sweet harbor of rest, after years of tossing and buffeting…”

But even at this point, Sarah fully believed that this time of rest was temporary, and she would eventually be called back into public service.⁵⁰

Several events in the years 1839 and 1840 served to change the sisters’ expectations of their futures. On 14 December 1839, Angelina gave birth to her first child. Shortly after the delivery, Angelina started suffering from chronic pain and fatigue. Modern historians have concluded that Angelina was most likely suffering from a prolapsed uterus (to which there was no cure in the 1800s), and which caused her intermittent, yet intense pain throughout the rest of her life.⁵¹ While this condition made future childbearing all the more painful and dangerous, Angelina managed to have two more children (and perhaps one miscarriage). The combined effects of the complicated deliveries, chronic pain, and raising three children took a large toll on Angelina’s health and vitality. According to Catherine Birney, Angelina was subject to frequent weakness and intense pain throughout the remainder of her life.⁵² This combination of maintaining a house, raising three children, and chronic sickness served to frustrate any hope of Angelina ever returning to the public life as an antislavery activist.

In 1840, the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) underwent a massive political upheaval, resulting in the creation of two splinter groups. The remaining members of the AASS endorsed women’s equal participation within the society, but rejected any type of political action. They believed that a change in the government had to come by persuading politicians of the moral and religious implications of slavery. The

⁴⁹Sarah Grimké to Henry C. Wright, 19 November 1838, Weld MSS, Box 5.
splinter group of the AASS formed the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, whose members endorsed all forms of political action, yet excluded women from equal or political participation within the society. This schism in the nation’s largest antislavery society caused a philosophical problem for the Weld-Grimké household. Theodore Weld and the two sisters firmly believed in both political action and women’s right to participate equally within the antislavery movement. As neither of the societies embraced both of these beliefs, the members of the Weld-Grimké household could not endorse either of these antislavery societies. Rather than join a society where their views might be unwelcome, they decided to withdraw from the AASS and focus on their household and petition campaigns. Gerda Lerner astutely argues that the trio’s non-participation was an active political decision to refrain from public activity during this time of turmoil in the antislavery ranks. They believed that this political split hurt the whole abolitionist cause and that the slave was the true victim of this political disagreement. So rather than support one of the fractured groups, the trio believed it best to temporarily stay out of politics and remain in Fort Lee.53

So for both domestic and political reasons, Sarah and Angelina retreated from their goal of returning to their public careers. While neither woman was unhappy with their new way of life, they both expressed moderate regret at their inability to make more of an impact in the political push toward emancipation. Both sisters continued to write letters to local and state antislavery conventions, voicing their opinions on the state of women and sharing testimony on the evils of slavery. They also were actively engaged in correspondence with female abolitionists and women’s rights supporters who had started

to fill the gap left by the absence of Angelina Weld and Sarah Grimké. Abby Kelley, the woman destined to become one the most effective speakers on the subject of women’s rights, visited the Weld-Grimkés in order to gain their opinion on a variety of matters, and also maintained a prolific correspondence chain with the sisters. The sisters also stayed in constant communication with abolitionists Lydia Maria Child and Elizabeth Pease (among others), who regularly asked the sisters for advice and reported various bits of news to them in turn.\footnote{Lerner, \textit{The Grimké Sisters}, 194-195.}

While the sisters’ domestic duties and health concerns took up much of their time, they had not forgotten or abandoned their sense of political duty to the oppressed slaves and women. They continued to offer “behind-the-scenes” support and advice for those women who had now stepped into the public spotlight. The sisters also continued to write a number of letters and pamphlets for publication within antislavery newspapers. One notable publication was “A Declaration of War on Slavery,” written by Angelina in 1862. During that same year, both Sarah and Angelina circulated a petition calling for the full abolition of slavery, which was halted when the Emancipation Proclamation was put into effect on 1 January 1863.\footnote{Birney, \textit{The Grimké Sisters}, 285.} The sisters had not abandoned their political duties, but like any mother, had to divide their time between the children and household duties, while spending precious leftover time staying current on the political and moral issues surrounding the antislavery and women’s rights movements.

Despite Sarah and Angelina’s withdrawal from the political sphere, Theodore Weld was still able to maintain an active career in politics. During the months of January

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\footnote{For examples of letters between Sarah and Angelina and women such as Abby Kelley and Lydia Child, see: Lydia Maria Child and D. L. Child to Angelina and Theodore Weld, 26 December 1838, Weld MSS, Box 5; and Abby Kelley to Angelina Grimké Weld, 14 January 1839, Weld MSS, Box 6.}
and February in 1842, Weld lived in Washington D.C., a move which congressmen with abolitionist leanings requested so that they could consult his antislavery expertise. So while Weld maintained that he would support Angelina if she decided to return to her lecturing career, it would have been nearly impossible to take care of the children and the house if both parents were actively involved in the public realm, and Theodore did not seem anxious to give up his career in order that Angelina might pursue hers. Thus Angelina faced the impasse that centuries of women had faced before her—finding the time and energy to be involved in public activities while still finding the time and energy to maintain the house and the children. Early in the marriage, Angelina was confident that both could be managed without too much difficulty, but several years later (with three children in tow and a chronic illness), she was not as sure.

This speaks to the practical limits faced by the women’s rights movement of the nineteenth century. Sarah and Angelina Grimké ignited the movement with their antislavery lecture tour, found a political voice during their public careers, and encouraged other women to find their own political identity. But they were ultimately unable to make the advance to full political equality between the sexes. This is not to undermine the great advances made by the Grimké sisters; Sarah and Angelina created a rhetoric that was to give women the necessary justification and means of entering the public realm. This same rhetoric was used less than a decade later at the famous Seneca Falls Convention and in the Declaration of Sentiments, written and signed by the leading women’s rights activists of the 1840s. Sarah and Angelina Grimké’s failure to achieve full political equality, even within their own household, simply speaks to the time in

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56 Sarah Grimké to Elizabeth Pease, 11 February 1842, Weld MSS, Box 7.
which they lived—they were the first women to advocate political equality, and they made huge advances for that cause, even if their lofty goals did not get realized in their own lifetimes.

The sisters did not appear in the public realm much after the conclusion of the Civil War. Both women felt their part in the fight for antislavery and women’s rights had been played out. It was now time for other women to take up the torch and continue the advancement of women. The sisters’ slow slide into obscurity should not distract from the massive strides the sisters took during their few years of public activism. The years 1837 and 1838 had seen great accomplishments for women. Both sisters had used their political identities to fight for the cause of the slave and the woman. Even after they left the public realm, the sisters worked every day to prove to the nation that politically minded women could still be effective and adept housekeepers, wives, and mothers. Until the day of their death, the sisters were living proof that women did not have to remain relegated to the domestic sphere, but could take their place among the politicians with confidence and pride.

After a lifetime of accomplishments, Sarah died on 23 December 1873, just three years after she and Angelina had led the group of women in voting at Hyde Park. Angelina suffered from a series of strokes throughout 1874, leaving parts of her body paralyzed. She remained bed-ridden for the remaining majority of her life, dying on 26 October 1879. Both Sarah and Angelina’s funerals were well attended by leading abolitionists and women’s rights activists, all paying their respects to the momentous work this pair of sisters achieved in their lives. Lucy Stone gave a truly striking testimony
and eulogy at Angelina’s funeral, highlighting Angelina’s unique and critical contributions to the advancement of woman:

The women of to-day owe more than they will ever know to the high courage, the rare insight, the fidelity to principle of this woman, by whose suffering easy paths have been made for them. Her example was a bugle-call to all other women. Who can tell how many have been quickened in a great life purpose by the heroism and self-forgetting devotion of her whose voice we shall never hear again, but who ‘being dead, yet speaketh.’

While these words were meant to summarize Angelina Grimké Weld’s life, they were equally fitting for her sister, Sarah Moore Grimké. Together, these sisters created a moral, religious, and political foundation on which to fight for the emancipation of slaves and for the advancement of women’s rights. Throughout the course of their public speaking careers, the sisters developed a strong, conscious political identity, and then worked to use this identity for the good of the oppressed slave and woman.

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CONCLUSION:

As the Grimké sisters retreated from the frontlines of the antislavery movement, their contributions and philosophies continued to shape the women’s rights movement for the next several decades. The 1840 schism in the American Anti-Slavery Society over political issues and the role of women’s rights ultimately weakened the national influence of the abolition movement in the United States. There was also a broad movement away from the argument of “moral suasion” toward fighting against slavery on a political and legal basis. Because of this trend, women tended to retreat from the antislavery movement as their contributions were often unwelcome and continued to cause a great deal of controversy over the propriety of woman’s role in a political matter. Therefore, the Grimké sisters’ contributions to the antislavery movement were unfortunately overlooked in the area of political involvement, and males failed to give the sisters the credit due to them for the steps they had taken toward abolishing slavery on a moral and religious basis.

One of the most important contributions Sarah and Angelina Grimké made in the fight for women’s equality was the development of a philosophy of moral and intellectual equality between men and women fused with political implications. Borrowing doctrines espoused during the Second Great Awakening, the Grimké sisters believed that humans were equally and individually responsible to God. Rather than differing standards based on gender, the Bible claimed one single, unisex standard regardless of sex. Adding to this moral and religious basis of equality, the Grimké sisters claimed that the principles of natural rights—as proclaimed by the founding fathers in the Declaration of Independence—should apply equally to both male and female. God had endowed human beings with
natural and inalienable rights, and men had no legal sanction to infringe limitations on women’s natural rights. When applied, these rights implied that (white) women were full citizens of the United States, and thus entitled to every right guaranteed to citizens under the Constitution.

Sarah and Angelina Grimké were among the first American women to make these claims of equal citizenship. Despite their radical nature, these ideas served to ignite a legitimate feminist movement in the late 1830s, fueled by the Grimké’s public and political personas. Upon their retreat from their public careers, however, this movement was carried on by another generation of women’s rights activists—women who had been influenced and molded by the philosophies and ideas put forward by Sarah and Angelina Grimké. Less than a decade after the Grimké’s rise in the antislavery movement and subsequent retreat into the domestic realm, a group of women’s rights activists—including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony—gathered in Seneca Falls, New York and penned one of the most important documents in the history of women’s rights: the Declaration of Sentiments. In this famous document, not only was Stanton (the primary author) borrowing from the Declaration of Independence, she was also borrowing philosophies and language used by Sarah and Angelina Grimké not ten years previous.

The preamble of the ladies’ declaration of rights states: “[Man] has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for [woman] a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God…. we insist that [women] have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as
citizens of the United States.”¹ This statement is particularly reminiscent of Sarah and Angelina’s philosophy that man has unjustly relegated woman to an inferior social and political sphere, under the pretense of protecting their delicate and feminine characters.

Later in the declaration, Stanton asserts:

Resolved, That woman has too long rested satisfied in the circumscribed limits which corrupt customs and a perverted application of Scriptures have marked out for her, and that it is time she should move in the enlarged sphere which her great Creator has assigned her…. 

Resolved, therefore, That, being invested by the Creator with the same capabilities, and the same consciousness of responsibility for their exercise, it is demonstrably the right and duty of woman, equally with man, to promote every righteous cause by every righteous means…²

It was Sarah and Angelina Grimké who first publically declared that man had utilized a corrupt interpretation of Scripture in order to keep woman in her “appropriate” sphere of influence. But because of the inalienable rights granted onto woman by her Creator, she had a right to participate as a full citizen of the United States, and be involved in political processes previously closed to the female gender. When held next to God’s ordinances, man’s law holds no weight, and may be discarded by women in order to fulfill the duties and responsibilities placed upon her by God. The women present at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 were well versed in the moral and political philosophies previously proclaimed by Sarah and Angelina Grimké, and utilized the language and arguments that the sisters had developed throughout the late 1830s. It was this influence that created Sarah and Angelina’s longest-reaching legacy—building the foundation of an organized and legitimate women’s rights movement in the nineteenth century.

¹Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, New York, 1848.
²Stanton, Declaration of Sentiments.
Throughout their years as antislavery lecturers, Sarah and Angelina developed a strong and conscious political identity. As they advanced the message of slave emancipation, the sisters came to realize that women, too, needed to be emancipated. Like the enslaved black population, Sarah and Angelina believed that white women were likewise treated as slaves, living under the oppression of their husbands or fathers. Like the slaves, women had no political or legal status in American society, and were not welcome within the public sphere of politics and business. When the sisters started to be attacked for their public speaking careers, they were forced to develop a rhetoric that defended their womanhood and their right to be involved in political affairs. As they defended their right to be speaking in front of “promiscuous assemblies” on antislavery issues, the sisters quickly developed a political identity—one that allowed the women to confidently stand upon the public platform of antislavery and women’s rights.

This thesis has attempted to address an aspect of the social and moral reform movement of the 1830s. Previous historians have often ignored the political natures of the women who worked in the public sphere during this important decade. Sarah and Angelina Grimké were the first American women to become agents for the antislavery movement; this unprecedented action led to the development a conscious political identity. The lives of Sarah and Angelina Grimké actively refute the claims of historians like Rosemarie Zagarri, who claim that there was no real political activity among women in the 1830s outside of benevolent societies and moral reform organizations. Like many historians of this time period, Zagarri believes that women’s activities fell almost exclusively within the accepted realms of domestic and moral reform. Although women’s presence in the political realm was extremely controversial and highly contested, Sarah
and Angelina Grimké prove that women could—and did—engage in political activities despite the prevailing conceptions of how women should act in the nineteenth century.
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