

A is for Abolition

Julie Holcomb

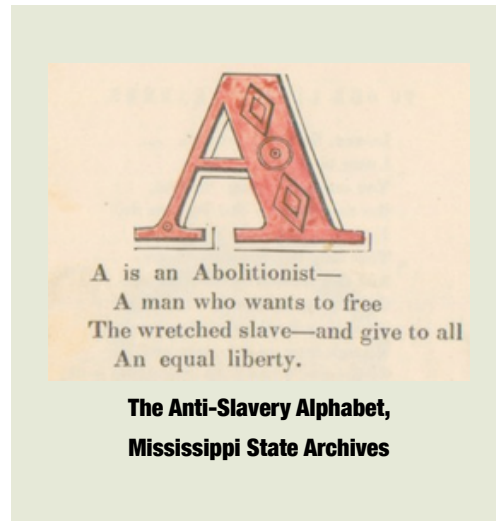
From the abolitionist to the hound who brought the fugitive slave “trembling back” on through to the zealous man, “an earnest pleader for the slave,” *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet* pulled no punches when it came to highlighting the horrors of slavery.

Written in 1846 by two sisters, Hannah and Mary Townsend, this alphabet book was one of many abolitionist stories written and published for children. Promoted and sold at events such as the annual fair of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, the book found a ready audience among the children of abolitionist families.

Early Children's Literature

To modern readers, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century children's literature can seem heavy-handed. Books such as Priscilla Wakefield's popular *Mental Improvement, or the Beauties and Wonders of Nature and Art*, for example, emphasized moral lessons, while lecturing readers about topics ranging from whaling and painting on glass to the use of slaves to produce sugar cane in the West Indies. Alphabet books, which used familiar illustrations and Bible verses to teach children their letters, followed this pattern of merging moral lessons with a story.

Novels, picture books, and illustrated magazines of this type were, however, popular with young readers and their mothers who wanted both



entertainment and instruction throughout the nineteenth century. By the 1850s, these books had become even more appealing as improvements in printing technology allowed for more complex color illustrations.

The Anti-Slavery Alphabet

Like other nineteenth-century alphabet books, *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet* taught the alphabet in standard alphabetic order, beginning with the abolitionist and ending with the zealous man.

The simple design of *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet* reflects the Quaker background of its authors. Hannah and Mary Townsend were members of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (PFASS), which Quaker

women had established in December 1833. Each December beginning in 1836, the PFASS hosted an anti-slavery fair to raise funds for the abolitionist cause. Toys and books for young abolitionists were among the most popular items sold.

The Anti-Slavery Alphabet taught young readers not only the alphabet but also the politics of slavery and abolition. “M,” for example, represents the northern merchant “Who buys what slaves produce” while “R” and “S” represent the rice and sugar, which the slave “Is toiling hard to make.” Clearly, those who were complicit in the evils of slavery were not simply those who owned slaves.

Reading this alphabet was not intended to be a passive activity. The authors also asked young abolitionists to join the cause:

Y is for Youth

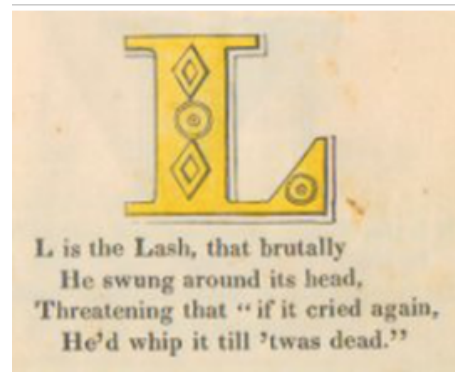
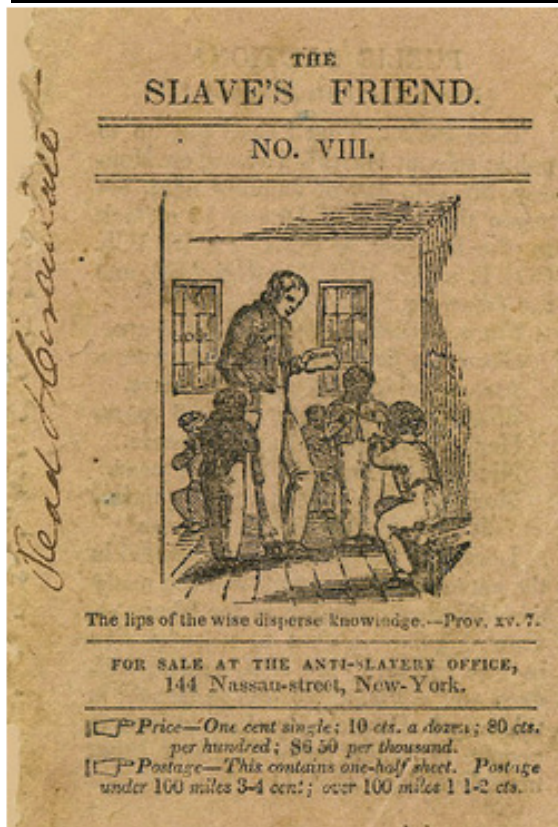
— the time for all Bravely to war with sin;

And think not it can ever be

Too early to begin.

Z is a zealous man,
sincere, Faithful, and just, and true,
An earnest pleader for the slave —
Will you not be so too?

Sold at both the 1846 and 1847 fairs, *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet* was a financial success.



The Slave's Friend, Public Domain

The Letter L from *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet*,
Mississippi State Archives

Woe to slavery...when the present race of juveniles is grown up”

Noting that “[e]very body writes now for children,” the abolitionist journal, *The Liberator* specifically urged abolitionists to write children’s stories for children, providing them with “correct information” about slavery.

In responding to this call, women authors, such as the Quaker Elizabeth Margaret Chandler, were able to participate in the public debate about slavery without violating accepted ideas about women’s domestic roles.

Two of Chandler’s most widely reprinted children’s poems — “What is a Slave, Mother?” and “Looking at the Soldiers” — featured an abolitionist mother answering her child’s questions about slavery. “What is a Slave, Mother?” was later included in *Juvenile Poems for the Use of Free American Children of Every Complexion*, edited and

published by William Lloyd Garrison in 1835.

Chandler’s poems were also reprinted in the monthly children’s magazine, *The Slave’s Friend*, which was published and edited by the American Anti-Slavery Society from 1836 to 1838. The articles in this journal, which often used dialogue to make the issues intensely personal, described the horrors of slavery in the United States and throughout the world.

The Slave’s Friend also encouraged children to form juvenile anti-slavery societies and cent-a-week societies to raise money for the abolitionist cause.

Children and Anti-Slavery Societies

In response to these calls, dozens of juvenile anti-slavery societies were established. In Providence, for example, young women in the newly formed Providence Juvenile Anti-

Slavery Society read anti-slavery literature and raised funds for the cause through donations and the sale of handmade items. This group soon opened their membership to include young black women. Their adoption of the name “sugar-plum society” probably referred to their pledge to boycott slave-grown sugar.

In 1836, young abolitionists in New York organized the Chatham Street Chapel Juvenile Anti-Slavery Society, an auxiliary to the New York City Anti-Slavery Society. That same year, young men in Philadelphia formed the Junior Anti-Slavery Society of Pennsylvania. And in 1838, African American juvenile societies were established in Troy, New York; Carlisle, Pennsylvania; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Providence, Rhode Island.

Children’s stories like *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet* taught children

about abolitionism, creating in the process a generation of morally sound citizens charged with reforming American society. Nineteenth-century views about childhood emphasized children's inherent morality. In the Victorian era, mothers were encouraged to educate children about moral issues such as slavery, teaching children to confront evil so that they might guard against it as adults. This, in turn, created a market for books and magazines for children, many written by women like Hannah and Mary Townsend who used the expanding field of children's literature to create a new generation of abolitionists.

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