Handout 1B

The Growing Role of Women in America

In 1828, America was still a young country. The creation of a new constitution, foreign invasion, and westward expansion were just some of the many challenges the infant nation navigated through in just over 50 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. And for a nation that prided itself on a vision of equality unlike any other seen throughout the world, there were even more challenges to overcome. Just one of these was the expansion of democracy, a growing theme that helped to elect Andrew Jackson, the so-called champion of the common man, to the presidency in 1828.

One may ask what exactly the expansion of democracy is. To answer this question, some context is needed. Think back to the United States Constitution. Is there any guarantee of a citizen's ability to vote? Surprisingly, the answer is no. Instead, throughout the United States, land ownership was often a requirement for citizens to vote. Not only did someone have to own land, but they also needed to be a male and white. So again, the same nation that claimed to value equality did not have equal standards among its populace. This inequality was gradually starting to change around Jackson's election, and by 1830, ten states provided for universal white male suffrage, compared to just three states in 1800 (New Hampshire, Vermont, and Kentucky).[1] Thus, more voices began to be heard on election days over the years.

Coupled with the lack of equal access to the polls was the lack of equality in many other spheres. Two of the greatest challenges to this were the "peculiar institution" of slavery and the lack of women's rights, specifically the denial of women's suffrage. Proponents of both abolition and women's suffrage often asked how a nation that declared its independence with the famous quote that "all men are created equal" could deny the fundamental rights of freedom and equal application of the laws.

Given the lack of true equality, reformers had to seek other modes of civic participation in the absence of the right to vote. Throughout the antebellum period, many women came to find their voice through one of nearly a dozen different social reform

[1] Steven Mintz. "Winning the Vote: A History of Voting Rights." The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, n.d. Web. 29 Dec. 2016.

movements. Public education, mental health, temperance, and treatment of prisoners, in addition to abolition and women's suffrage, were just some of the many movements that drew individuals from all parts of American society to their cause. Even though they could not vote for a certain candidate, women could contribute to the causes they felt passionately about by attending rallies, publishing written works, boycotting goods, or purchasing others that guaranteed some profits to go towards supporting a cause.

As it had been during the Revolutionary period, Massachusetts proved that it would not stand for the status quo, thus becoming one of the centers of these reform movements. Massachusetts women were especially prominent. Women like Maria Weston Chapman found allies in nationally renowned male abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass. Chapman and many others found ways to appeal to even the more traditional women throughout the Commonwealth by calling upon their motherly virtues or religious convictions as a reason to support the abolitionist cause. These female reformers proved that women would not be content to watch injustices plague their societies and would refuse to let the denial of the ballot keep their voices from being heard.

Anti-slavery societies were common throughout the Commonwealth, but one of the more notable ones was the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS), founded in 1833. Although the group was dissolved in 1840, well before the outbreak of the Civil War, it revealed the potential for women to get involved in politics and social reform in some way. The group had various strategies to garner support for their cause, including suing people who brought slaves to Boston, sponsoring fundraisers, organizing a petition campaign across multiple states, and organizing national conventions.[2] Membership was quite diverse, racially, religiously, and socioeconomically. It was first founded by a group of black and white women from both Baptist and Congregationalist churches, and as such was an integrated association from the very start and would come to criticize similar groups in other areas that were not integrated. Later, membership expanded to include White Quakers & Unitarians from the upper-class, White Congregationalists and Baptists from the middle class, and African-American Baptists and Methodists from a more elite background.

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[2] Debra Gold Hansen. "The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Limits of Gender Politics" in *Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994. 45-46.

Sadly, it was this diversity that actually led to the demise of the group, since it was hard to choose one method or group of people to appeal to due to the wealth of different perspectives and opinions of the group's members.[3]

Still, the group's contributions to both the abolition movement and the increasing role of women in the public sphere cannot be overlooked. BFASS never shied away from controversy, supporting the controversial Grimké sisters[4] and initiating lawsuits as a means to bring about awareness to their causes. In 1836, one such lawsuit made it to the Massachusetts Supreme Court. In the lawsuit, the question of a young enslaved girl's freedom was at stake. The girl had been brought to Boston by her Southern owners, who were visiting the North on vacation. The court ultimately ruled that the girl was free because slavery was unconstitutional in the North. Two of the lawyers in the case were married to Louisa Loring and Louisa Sewell, members of BFASS. The court victory was a major success not just for Boston and its reputation of supporting abolition, but for women in court systems as well. [5]

The group began to divide between those who favored a religious approach to abolition and those who feared a religious focus would turn some away from the cause. Pressure from others worsened this divide, like when some male abolitionists in Boston raised the concern that having men and women work together at a time when their public spheres were very much divided would distract abolitionists from their original goal of abolition.[6] The religious divide ultimately drove away the support of African-American women, most of whom were elites of African-American society in Boston.[7] Ultimately, the faction led by Maria Weston Chapman felt that there was too much tension with male abolitionists, especially due to conflict between ministers and laymen over what the proper role of the clergy was in the abolition movement. In contrast, Chapman's opponents felt

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[3] Debra Gold Hansen. "The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Limits of Gender Politics" in *Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994. 46-47.
[4] ibid. 52-53
[5] ibid. 50-51.
[6] ibid. 54.
[7] ibid. 57-58.

that she and her followers had grown distracted from original cause and focused too much on women's rights.[8]

The group continued to split on socioeconomic lines. Some of the events that BFASS planned were class-based. For example, the anti-slavery bazaars that raised money for the cause appealed to those with more expendable income and could have been seen as materialistic to Congregationalist and Baptist members.[9] Political protests were seen as something upper-class women took part in, while middle class women were drawn to projects connected to their individual churches that related to women and children specifically.[10]

While the group dissolved in 1840 due to its inability to overcome all of these tensions, it left an indelible mark on the cause and on the role of women in society:

> Historians have credited BFASS's activities and the controversies they engendered with creating the political climate that fostered the nineteenth-century women's rights movement. A permanent women's united front, however, in which gender concerns overrode the economic, religious, and racial differences of its participants, remained elusive. After several intensely productive years, BFASS disintegrated, and its members rejoined their male counterparts in organizational structures more compatible with their respective sociopolitical orientations. In the final analysis, the personal predispositions of BFASS members arising from class, religious, and racial backgrounds proved far more powerful than the bonds of womanhood.[11]

Future movements stood to learn much from the successes and failures of BFASS. If nothing else, the group at least brought about an increased awareness to the cause of abolition, which in the days leading up to a growing resistance to the gradual abolition of slavery would be vital in uniting more Americans in that cause.

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[8] Debra Gold Hansen. "The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Limits of Gender Politics" in *Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994. 60.

[9] ibid. 61-62.

[10] ibid. 63; 65.

[11] ibid. 65.

Answer the following in complete sentences:

1) Why was an expansion of democracy necessary in the 1820s?

2) In what type of reform movements did women begin to get involved?

3) What was BFASS? What did they do? Why were they significant?

4) What was the connection between the abolition movement and the women's rights movement?