



PROJECT MUSE®

Earnest and Solemn Protest: Quaker Anti-Slavery Petitions to
Congress, 1831-1865

Judith Z. Thorne

Quaker History, Volume 88, Number 2, Fall 1999, pp. 47-50 (Article)



Published by Friends Historical Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/qkh.1999.0020>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/393230/summary>

Earnest and Solemn Protest: Quaker Anti-Slavery Petitions to Congress, 1831–1865

Judith Z. Thorne*

Rarely would one go to the National Archives to document the activities of a religious group. The records of the Senate and House of Representatives at the National Archives, in particular the petitions submitted to the Congress, however, represent a rich source of documentation of Quaker involvement in the anti-slavery movement of the early and mid-19th century.

These records are available for research in the Center for Legislative Archives at the downtown Washington facility of the National Archives. Finding aids include the House and Senate guides, available on the National Archives' Legislative home page (<http://www.nara.gov/nara/legislative>). They begin with a helpful "An Introduction to Research in the Records of Congress," containing a section on research strategies.

While Quaker petitions are found in the records of the earliest Congresses, their style, substance, and frequency is enlarged, expanded, and changed in the period beginning after the Nat Turner rebellion and moving on into the period of Texas independence and the Mexican War and the later Compromise of 1850. While anti-slavery petitions end with the emancipation of the enslaved, petitions do continue, though in a somewhat diminished fashion, urging the extension of the full rights of citizenship to the emancipated.

Petitions from Quakers include those from the various yearly or monthly meetings, as well as those submitted by Quakers as individuals or on behalf of the various anti-slavery societies. The specific issues raised by the petitioners include slavery in the District of Columbia, the internal slave trade, the Mexican War and the annexation of Texas, slavery in the territories, and fugitive slave laws. Because of the multitude of issues involved, the sometimes overlapping jurisdictions of the various Congressional committees, and the many Congresses that may over time reflect upon an issue, petitions are widely dispersed throughout the records of both houses of Congress.

Petitions from the yearly meetings or anti-slavery societies are generally signed by the clerks or by the officials. Those from yearly and monthly meetings constitute the vast bulk of the petitions in these two categories. They encompass a wide geographic area, one of the more notable, from New

*Judith Z. Thorne initially came to the National Archives over two decades ago to participate in a new program declassifying classified federal documents. For the last decade, she has been a reference archivist, primarily working with new researchers.

York City, being a 1836 memorial from the Yearly Meeting of Friends forwarded by Isaac Hopper [SEN 24A-G3].

Those signed by individual Quakers (including birthright Quakers raised and schooled in the Quaker tradition, but who may have broken away in adulthood from the Society of Friends) usually contain the names of many, sometimes hundreds of people. A notable example is an 1835 memorial from the citizens of Haverhill, Massachusetts, including John G. Whittier [HR 24A-H1.3]. Related is an 1840 petition from Philadelphia objecting to the use of bloodhounds against the Seminole Indians in the Territory of Florida, this petition containing the names of John G. Whittier, James Mott, Thomas Cavender, Edward M. Davis, Edward Hopper, and 47 others [SEN 26A-H3].

Available Congressional indexes allow one with relatively little difficulty to locate particular petitions from yearly and monthly meetings and anti-slavery societies. Petitions signed by Quakers as individuals, indexed, for example, "citizens of Philadelphia" or, even more broadly, "citizens of Pennsylvania" and sometimes accompanied by the name of but one of the signers, however, may require lengthy searches through a vast bulk of petitions and signatures to find particular names. In some ways though, the more secular petitions signed by individual Quakers can present possible areas for new research, especially since they are generally not duplicated or referred to in the archives of the various meetings or anti-slavery societies.

Still, to find Abby K. Foster's name among the inhabitants of Worcester, Massachusetts, along with that of her brother Albert Kelley and her longtime friend Sarah H. Earle, on an 1856 petition praying for a dissolution of the Union in consequence of the "conflicting views in relation to Freedom and Slavery" [HR 34A-G9.9], is not a predictable occurrence. More challenging, however, is connecting this petition with related petitions from the citizens and inhabitants of Providence, Rhode Island, including another 1856 petition on the issue of dissolution signed by Elizabeth B. Chace and Joanna K. and Diana Ballou [HR 34A-H1.3].

The interrelationships, both family and community, become even more interesting when one examines two other Rhode Island petitions, one (1840) signed by Wm. M. Chace [HR 26A-H1.4], urging abolition of the slave trade ("We go for Disunion or Liberty."). The other, an 1865 petition urging the adoption of a constitutional amendment prohibiting slavery, includes the signatures of members of the Earle and Chace families, among these Elizabeth B. Chace, and also Amos and Joanna K. Ballou, sister of Abby Kelley [HR 38A-G10.1].

Other geographic areas, certainly the South, are not as well represented as New England. Examining petitions emanating from North Carolina, we

see the memorialists, the Manumission Society of North Carolina with Aaron Coffin as Chairman, assembled in late 1829 at Deep River Meeting House in Guilford County. (This, HR 21A-G5.1], is the last evidence of this group I have been able to find among the anti-slavery petitions.) The petitioners, noting the “pernicious effects of involuntary slavery in a free government, . . . wish you to consider the propriety of doing away, & suppressing Slavery altogether, in the said district of Columbia. . . .”

Similar sentiments are reflected in two petitions, signed by Nathan Mendenhall as clerk, in early 1838 from the Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends in the State of North Carolina. One additionally supports the American Colonization Society [HR 25A-H1.8], an increasingly conservative view, but one still having some acceptance among Progressives in the South. The other presents respectful opposition to the admission of Texas to the Union as a slave state [HR 25A-H1.1], a view shared with the radical abolitionists.

These 1838 petitions are the latest anti-slavery petitions from the South that I have been able to locate. In late 1847, however, the Yearly Meeting of Friends, New Garden, in Guilford County, with Aaron Stalker as clerk, does speak out on a related subject. “. . . having finished the business pertaining to our own religious society, we have felt our minds deeply and sorrowfully affected in consideration of the awful and calamitous consequences occurring from the present war against Mexico. . . .” [HR 30A-G6.2]

As Quakers moved north from the Upper South and westward, increased numbers of anti-slavery petitions are found in Ohio, Indiana, and other Midwestern states. The Indiana Yearly Meeting of Anti-Slavery Friends, assembled in Newport, Wayne County in 1844, with Walter and Rebecca Edgerton as clerks, and again in 1851 [HR 28A-G5.1 and HR 32A-G10.6] address the various manifestations of slavery including a more repressive fugitive slave law (“fleeing from the land of cruel bondage for protection, they command us to shut up the bowels of mercy and compassion, to close our doors against them, and leave them exposed to cold, hunger, and the pitiless blast”).

The name of North Carolinian Levi Coffin, best known for his activities in the underground railroad, is found in 1850 on petitions in Cincinnati with other citizens of Hamilton County [SEN 31A-J7].

Petitions from the border states are only marginally more common than those of the southern states. A modest 1848 petition, however, from the citizens of Baltimore, includes the names of John and Edward Needles [HR 30-G5.1].

Predictably, within the world of anti-slavery societies and anti-slavery

generally, Quaker leadership is found predominately in the Philadelphia area. Petitioning groups represented include the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society [SEN 24A-H2], the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society [HR 38A-G10.1], the American Free Produce Association [HR 27A-H1], the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society [various], and the Pennsylvania Society for promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the relief of Free Negroes unlawfully held in bondage, and for improving the conditions of the African Race [SEN 27A-H1 and HR 29A-H1.1].

While by the time of Texas statehood the anti-slavery bandwagon becomes crowded with passengers, on the older issue of Arkansas statehood, petitioners are relatively few, but include Lucretia Mott as clerk of the Women's Meeting of the Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends in Philadelphia [SEN 24A-H2], and among the citizens of Philadelphia [HR 24A-H1.2] Morris L. Hallowell, the Quaker merchant whose sons went on to lead the Massachusetts 54th and 55th regiments in the Civil War.

In the numerous petitions signed by members of the Mott family, especially James, one sees an interesting interplay of meeting, anti-slavery society, family, friends, and allies. An 1846 petition from the women of Pennsylvania contains both the names of Lucretia Mott and her daughter Anna M. Hopper [SEN 29A-H3]. Of perhaps even greater interest is the 1854 petition including the names of James Mott and E.M. Davis, as well as J.M. McKim, C.M. Burleigh, and black abolitionists Robert Purvis, Charles L. Reason, and James Crummill [SEN 33A-J4].

The most consistent voice, however, may well be that of Sarah Pugh of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. On almost every subject related to slavery, on small, plain informal-sized paper, written in a clear hand, with little embellishment in style or tone, is a petition signed by Sarah Pugh, usually as president of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Sometimes a second signature, that of the secretary, sometimes Anna M. Hopper, sometimes Mary Grew, accompanies that of Sarah Pugh. [HR 27A-H1.1 and H1.7, SEN 27A-H7 and 33A-J5, and others].

Quakers in counties adjacent and near to Philadelphia, including Delaware, Chester, Bucks, Montgomery, and Lancaster, are well represented in petitions to Congress. These include an 1854 memorial from the Kennett Monthly Meeting of the religious society of Progressive Friends in Chester County regarding slavery in the territory of Nebraska. "We have spoken strongly—We mean to be respectful; but truth and justice demands that so gross and infamous an outrage be resisted by every righteous instrumentality." [SEN 33A-J5]