

At a Crossroads in History: Abby Kelley in Millbury, MA
by Karen Board Moran

All of Millbury wondered, “Would Abby speak in Millbury before a promiscuous audience (a mixed audience of men and women)?” Their own outspoken Abby Kelley was organizing the August 1841 quarterly meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (MASS). Two years earlier (June 25, 1839) the Second Congregational Church had avidly and frequently discussed “the propriety of women’s speaking in meeting” until it was “voted that the whole subject be indefinitely postponed.” Now, Abby had just returned from a three-week lecture tour in New Hampshire and the term “Abby Kelleyite” had been coined to identify women who stepped out of their place assigned by 19th century society.

Abby’s family had only lived in town for six years, since her father Wing Kelley bought a 100-acre farm from Aaron Trask, just north of today’s intersection of Howe Avenue and Millbury Avenue on March 17, 1835. With Millbury’s increasing industrial growth, the First Congregational Church moved from the Old Common to Bramanville that same year, but seven years earlier forty members including Asa Waters II and Aaron Trask had built the Second Congregational Church on Main Street, today’s Federated Church of Methodists and Congregationalists. Millbury had been a “thinking” town since 1820 when the Lyceum was formed and heard many prominent speakers on a variety of topics. The anti-slavery society was formed in town by many of those members including Samuel Waters and Deacon Tyrus the month the Kelleys moved to town. Had they been moved by William Lloyd Garrison as Abby had back in 1831?

Wing Kelley passed away just nine months later on December 17 and was buried 14 miles away in the Uxbridge Friends Cemetery, leaving his 22-year-old son Albert and widow Diana to run the farm with his two unmarried daughters- Abby, almost 25, and 16-year-old Lucy just finishing boarding school. Based on the comments in the *Town History*, Abby probably was teaching in District 6 later called Park School in the relatively new Park Hill district or in the Union District on School Street. It is also possible that she may have been needed in one of the other four districts in Millbury. The family owned a chaise and horse, but she could have easily walked 1 to 5 miles to the above mentioned schools or taken short cuts across fields. Another reformer, Clara Barton taught in West Millbury School that used to stand where Union Chapel stands today.

Following her father’s death, Abby took a teaching position at a Quaker school in Lynn, MA and became active in the Lynn Female Anti-Slavery Society. Committed to antislavery, peace and woman’s equality, she soon found herself unable to sit silently as dictated by 19th century social mores. Abby was inspired and encouraged by two grim-faced women—Angelina and Sarah Grimké—found in most history texts today. Besides being proper Victorians sitting unsmilingly for a photo shoot, they had a serious concern and commitment to end slavery in the nation, including the slaves owned by their family in South Carolina.

During their 1837 lecture tour in New England, they claimed the right to speak in public against slavery. When Abby met the Grimké sisters in Worcester at the October 1837 MASS quarterly meeting, she invited them to back to her home in Millbury. After

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Angelina addressed the Massachusetts legislature on February 21, 1838, Abby decided to resign her teaching position to become a lecture agent for the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) and Angelina Grimké Weld became her mentor as evidenced in her letter of February 1838 found at <http://www.wwhp.org/Resources/Slavery/grimkesisters.html>.

Like the Grimkés, Abby identified with her sisters in bondage, “When I come to sit down in the cool of the day, alone with none but God to hold communion with, and in the exercise of love to him, become myself the slave—when at such a moment I feel the fetters wearing away the flesh and grating on my bare ankle bone, when I feel the naked cords of my neck shrinking away from the rough edge of the iron collar, when my flesh quivers beneath the lash, till, in anguish, I feel portions of it cut from my back; or when I see my aged and feeble mother driven away and scourged, and then the brutish and drunken overseer lay his ferocious grasp upon the person of my sister and drag her to his den of pollutions—ah! When I see the fires of liberty going out in her bosom and the light of intellect gradually giving place to the blank of idiocy, and she becoming a mere plantation brute...[When] I witness all the unutterable abominations that spring from slavery, myself reduced to slavery by, if you please, a sanctified Doctor of Divinity, who not satisfied with picking my pockets of all my hard-earned wealth, not content with small villainy, goes on to pick away from me, one after another, bone by bone, and then filches my flesh away, and robs me of my heart’s blood and lays his iron grasp on my immortal soul...” Abby’s use of imagery captured her audience’s imagination and drew large crowds in a time of no microphone or accompanying multi media presentation.

Would you have attended the meeting in 1841? Many were present because of their commitment to make the world a better place; however, as the neighborhood entertainment event of the month many attended out of curiosity to see women speaking in public or to see important people involved in this reform movement.

Abby found housing and arranged to meet the expected 200 out-of-town guests at the Boston & Worcester Railroad depot off Grafton Road. Henrietta Sargent may have stayed with the Kelleys while Anne and Caroline Weston and Edmund Quincy were quartered with Asa Waters at his mansion. Quincy, “a leader of the Non-Resistance Society, noted in his diary that the family received them kindly ‘though they were plainly not of A[nti] S[lavery] Faith.’”

Millbury was an abolitionist town and the gathering must have been in high spirits—although not the alcoholic kind, since most reformers were supporters of temperance. Some visitors may have stayed at the Millbury Temperance House that was located across from today’s Millbury Savings and Post Office.

Abby and several white men spoke, but total silence fell over the audience in Millbury’s Academy Hall, standing from 1832-1851 on the site of today’s McGrath Education Center on Elm Street, as a tall black man rose and began to speak. Only the week before he had hesitatingly spoken for the first time before an abolitionist gathering in Nantucket. With growing enthusiasm and eloquence Frederick Douglass told the

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audience of his life as a fugitive slave. Scarcely three years since his escape from bondage, he was briefly able to forget that his skin was dark and his "hair crisp" before the friendly Millbury audience and feel relatively safe for the moment in the free state of Massachusetts. Reports of his speech appeared in Garrison's *Liberator* on August 27 and September 10, 1841.

On the second day the delegates walked a mile to the Kelley farm for a midday dinner. That evening Abby and her sister Lucy welcomed them to an antislavery bazaar to raise funds for the cause and "an elegant sufficiency" of food followed by speeches and song at Academy Hall. The meals would have followed the tenets of Sylvester Graham (of Graham cracker fame) since most reformers believed in not only improving American society, but their own health as well by forgoing coffee and tea, eating less meat and spicy foods, and eating more fresh vegetables and unrefined flour.

Upon the death of Abby's mother, Diana, in February 1842 the family sold off the estate leaving the citizens of Millbury to continue the fight in their local society and produce goods to sell at antislavery bazaars. That June Abby's sister, Lucy, married Samuel W. West of E. Hampton, CT. Their brother Albert had moved to Northbridge earlier, after marrying Deborah Inman.

Abby continued to lecture as an agent for the AASS. She settled in Worcester in 1847 after marrying Stephen S. Foster who was also present at the meeting in Millbury and argued with Asa Waters III about "killing the Seminole Indians with Water's made guns." Waters wanted to work within the law to end slavery while the radical Fosters wanted to use any non-resistant means to change the whole nature of society.

Does your family connect to our nation's past? Millbury was often at a crossroads in America's story, but many women's voices have been forgotten. To learn more about Abby's adventures visit the Worcester Women's History Project website at www.wwhp.org or read Dorothy Sterling's *Ahead of Her Time: Abby Kelley and the Politics of Antislavery* (1991). Grace LaFlash, Millbury Assessors' Office, Millbury Town Library, and Worcester County Grantee and Grantor Index were also instrumental in investigating this brief moment in Millbury's past.

1480 words