



# The Liberty Women of Boston: Evangelicalism and Antislavery Politics

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IN April 1840, the women of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society (BFAS) gathered for what would be their last meeting as originally organized. Although not the first female antislavery society to be established, it had been a leader in that field for most of the 1830s. It had petitioned the state and national governments, circulated antislavery propaganda and newspapers, offered advice and encouragement to women seeking to promote antislavery in their own communities, and perhaps most notably, by sponsoring an annual fair, had raised funds sorely needed to support the unpopular cause.<sup>1</sup> Despite its many achievements, however, the society was rent by two factions vying for control. Maria Weston Chapman and her allies urged the society to affiliate with and support William Lloyd Garrison and his newspaper, the *Liberator*. The society's president, Mary Parker, and the sisters Lucy and Martha Ball, who were increasingly disenchanted with what they considered

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<sup>1</sup>For women's antislavery activism, see my *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822–1972* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Deborah Bingham Van Broeckhoven, *The Devotion of These Women: Rhode Island in the Antislavery Network* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828–1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992); Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Home, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). These studies shed little light on the women explored in this essay.

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to be Garrison's mushrooming and distracting reform agenda, balked. A series of ugly confrontations ensued, and the society was dissolved. Parker, the Balls, and their allies founded the Massachusetts Female Emancipation Society (MFES), while the Chapmanites reestablished the BFAS.

In a detailed study of the episode, *Strained Sisterhood*, Debra Gold Hansen observes that in addition to their divergent views about the future of the BFAS, the two factions were divided along the lines of class and religion. Maria Weston Chapman, her sisters Anne, Caroline, and Deborah, and their associates, among whom were members of the Southwick, Cabot, Sargent, Follen, Loring, and Shaw families, enjoyed a privileged socioeconomic status. Describing herself and her friends in 1858, Chapman declared that "one of our advantages is, that, if there be here properly any such thing as social rank & respectability . . . Boston abolitionists are that thing;—some by wealth, as America counts riches;—some by various antecedents;—some by high intellectual gifts." Unitarians, Quakers, Universalists, and Episcopalians, the women who aligned themselves with Chapman, herself a Unitarian, were wary of evangelicals, a distrust that intensified after 1837, when the General Association of the Massachusetts Congregational Churches issued a pastoral letter denouncing women's involvement in abolitionism.<sup>2</sup> The women who left the BFAS, on the other hand, were staunchly evangelical. Generally members of Congregational or Baptist churches, they accepted the leadership and advice of antislavery clergy such as Congregational minister Amos Phelps, whose wife had been the first president of the BFAS. Dismissively referred to by Anne Weston as "boarding house abolitionists," most of the women in the MFES were middle class: schoolteachers, milliners, and boardinghouse proprietors if single or, if married, wives of small business owners, artisans, and evangelical ministers.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Debra Gold Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), pp. 97–105; quotation p. 105. For information on the pastoral letter, see pp. 28, 83, 142.

<sup>3</sup>Debra Gold Hansen, "The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Limits of Gender Politics," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, p. 61. In *Strained Sisterhood*

Although the dissimilarities Hansen observes are certainly real, she goes beyond them to posit not only that those differences prompted the split in the BFAS but that they had done so *because*, prior to the break, they had been influential in shaping contradictory conceptions of female activism. Elite and liberally religious “radical” women increasingly adopted an expansive understanding of women’s role in reform, whereas middle-class and evangelical “conservative” women viewed their work as flowing from their domestic and religious responsibilities. Accepting at face value Chapman’s charge that the women of the MFES were under the clergy’s thumb, Hansen concludes that they quickly retreated from abolitionism to embrace “moral reform and missionary causes,” a contention that subsequent studies have repeated and even enlarged. All agree that the MFES disappeared by the middle of the decade; in fact, since the reorganized BFAS was small and concerned only with its yearly fund-raising fair, “by 1845 Boston’s separate female antislavery movement had all but disappeared.”<sup>4</sup>

Hansen’s thesis has remained uncontested largely because no institutional accounts or letters revealing the activities of the MFES and its main female actors have survived to dispute it. Whereas the Boston Public Library has in its collections 1,200 letters written by the Weston-Chapman sisters alone and many others by Garrisonians in Massachusetts and their friends abroad, there are no records for the MFES, and no reports

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(p. 81), Hansen reports that of those members of the BFAS whose religious affiliations she could find, 24 percent were Unitarian, 43 percent Congregational, and 30 percent Baptist.

<sup>4</sup>Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood*, pp. 21, 110, 112, and “The BFAS and the Limits of Gender Politics,” p. 59. For further studies, see Lee V. Chambers, “Maria Weston Chapman’s Widowhood,” in *Women on Their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single*, ed. Rudolph M. Bell and Virginia Yans McLaughlin (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), pp. 167–68; Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Anne M. Boylan, “Timid Girls, Venerable Widows, and Dignified Matrons: Life Cycle Patterns among Organized Women in New York and Boston, 1797–1841,” *American Quarterly* 38 (Winter 1986): 780–82, 789, 791; and Larry Ceplair, “Women Organized against Slavery, 1688–1870” (comp. 2003), unpublished manuscripts, www.larryceplair.com (© 2010), chap. 6 (unpaginated); accessed 9 August 2011.

about MFES activities in the most readily available abolitionist paper, the *Liberator*. Two major investigations of the Liberty Party in Massachusetts found little specific evidence of female participation in third-party politics.<sup>5</sup> The digital revolution, however, has given us the opportunity to test the reigning hypothesis about the MFES. By means of a careful examination of notices and articles, including annual reports, in the once hard-to-find periodical the *Emancipator* (edited by Joshua Leavitt, a Congregationalist minister), the leading Liberty Party newspaper before the *National Era* was established in 1847, as well as other sources, we can reconstruct this crucial period of female anti-slavery activism.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Institutional Politics of the Antislavery Movement*

The virulence of the dispute that preceded the disintegration of the BFAS reflects disagreements within the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, which in 1839 resulted in the organization of the Massachusetts Abolition Society (referred to pejoratively by Garrisonians as the new organization, or new org). In 1831, when Garrison had helped to found the New England Anti-Slavery Society (later renamed the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society), there had been no serious rifts among abolitionists. In 1833, at Garrison's urging, abolitionists agreed to establish the American Anti-Slavery Society to lead the movement at the national level. Both organizations advocated immediate emancipation and adopted Garrison's program of moral suasion as a means toward that goal. A period of intense organizing ensued; by 1835, over five hundred local antislavery societies and seven state antislavery societies had been established.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>See Reinhard O. Johnson, *The Liberty Party, 1840–1848: Antislavery Third-Party Politics in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), and Bruce Laurie, *Beyond Garrison: Antislavery and Social Reform* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup>*The Emancipator* is available through America's Historical Newspapers, found at <http://www.newsbank.com/readex/?content=96>, a subscriptions database that I accessed through the Goucher College library.

<sup>7</sup>Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 127–31, 170–71, 194, 209–10.

By the later 1830s, however, differences of opinion were emerging. Some abolitionists, convinced that a reliance on moral suasion alone would not end slavery, began to contemplate working through the political system. Garrison, however, believed that because politics inevitably involved compromise, it would destroy abolitionism's moral purity; and so, he flatly rejected any strategy that involved political involvement. Many also disapproved of Garrison's violent anticlerical rhetoric and the number of seemingly extraneous causes he supported, including nonresistance (pacifism) and the full participation of women in mixed antislavery organizations. When Garrison's opponents formed the Massachusetts Abolition Society, they explained that "the object of our exertions is important and onerous enough, to demand all our efforts . . . without connecting it" to other causes. The Balls, Parker, and their allies agreed with this position and had great respect for ministers like Charles Torrey and Amos Phelps, who were among the organizers of the Massachusetts Abolition Society. By contrast, the Chapmanites described the 1839 schism as an anti-Garrisonian clerical plot.<sup>8</sup>

The evangelical women were also dismayed by the high-handed tactics of Chapman and her allies. As early as 1837, Chapman, then the society's corresponding secretary, had used the society's annual report to attack certain Boston clergymen as obstacles to "the vigorous prosecution" of the women's activities. When Martha Ball and others objected that Chapman's condemnation of the ministers was unjust, she shot back, "the opinions of any society are as immaterial to me as the wind that blows." Proceeding to publish the report, she murmured meaningfully about spiritual "despots" who were, she feared, "influencing the B.F.A.S.!" When the society's officers included an insert in the report specifying their "most serious

<sup>8</sup>Quoted from Massachusetts Abolition Society, *Formation of the Massachusetts Abolition Society* (Boston, c. 1839), p. 10. For differing accounts of the split, see Mayer, *All on Fire*, chap. 13, and Hugh Davis, *Joshua Leavitt, Evangelical Abolitionist* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), chap. 8. For the notion of a clerical plot, see Maria Chapman, *Right and Wrong in Massachusetts* (Boston: Dow and Jackson, 1839).

objections” to some of its contents, Chapman resigned her post.<sup>9</sup>

During the next three years, the two factions maneuvered for control of the BFAS. When plans for petitioning were discussed, Chapman announced that the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society had the matter in hand, whereas Parker and others “warmly defend[ed] against the idea of giving up the glory of petitioning.”<sup>10</sup> Attempts to elect new officers broke down repeatedly. The Chapmanites’ tactic of shouting “I doubt that vote” after Lucy Ball, the acting recording secretary, announced each tally prompted an exasperated president Parker to exclaim, “Then you may doubt it to the day of your death!” As vice president Catherine Sullivan explained at the April 1840 meeting, the society’s usefulness had been deeply eroded by differences of opinion so powerful that “no compromise, concession, or change can be expected.” She moved that the society be “*Dissolved*,” and a majority of women stood in support.<sup>11</sup>

Two days later, Parker, the Balls, and others founded the MFES, which soon affiliated itself with the Massachusetts Abolition Society, an organization in which Timothy Gilbert, Simon Shipley, Jehiel Beman, and other MFES spouses were active. The following day, the Chapmanites, who declared the dissolution of the BFAS invalid, reorganized it and elected new officers. The MFES was, they publicly proclaimed, more “detrimental” to the cause of antislavery than the hated colonization movement; privately, their attacks were cruel and personal. Because of the high regard in which the evangelical women held the pastor, the women of the BFAS referred to the women of the MFES

<sup>9</sup>Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood*, p. 24; Hansen, “The BFAS Society and the Limits of Gender Politics,” p. 55.

<sup>10</sup>Mary Parker to Anne Weston, 1 November 1839; Deborah Weston to Anne Weston, 8 March 1839; Anne Weston to Deborah Weston, 11 July 1839, Chapman-Weston Papers, Boston Public Library (BPL).

<sup>11</sup>*Liberator*, 5 and 19 July, 18 October, and 1, 15, and 22 November 1839. For a further description of the final days of the BFAS, see Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood*, pp. 24–28, 109.

as the “wicked” Amos Phelps’s “harem, the Boston ‘Spiritual Wives.’”<sup>12</sup>

### *The Character and Organization of the MFES*

Although the absence of organizational records for the MFES is a serious impediment to reconstituting its membership and activities, evidence gathered from a range of extant sources indicates that the society was far from moribund. Maria Chapman told an English friend that thirty-two women had established the MFES, an estimate that cannot be verified.<sup>13</sup> Advertisements, announcements, occasional published annual reports, and articles in the *Emancipator* (1833–50), the *Massachusetts Abolitionist* (1839–41), and the *Boston Daily Chronotype* (1846–51), the two latter edited by Elizur Wright, a staunch abolitionist and former secretary of the American Anti-Slavery Society, suggest, however, that the white, middle-class, evangelical women who had formed the backbone of the BFAS during the 1830s turned their considerable energies to the new organization after the rift. Attendance at the MFES’s quarterly meetings was not reported, but the composition of committees responsible for the important fund-raising fairs, ranging in size from sixteen to twenty-four women, often was. The 1848 committee is typical. Of its twenty-two members, the majority were married; three were wives of clergymen (at least two of whom were Congregationalists), and two were widows of ministers (one Baptist, the other Congregational). The occupations of other women’s husbands ranged from Sabbath-school book publisher, pianoforte builders, a lumber and wood merchant, a wood and coal merchant, a housebuilder, and a bank cashier. One of the married women ran a millinery business.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>“Address of the Massachusetts Female Emancipation Society to the Women of Massachusetts,” Anti-Slavery Papers, BPL; *Liberator*, 17 and 24 April 1840; Maria Chapman to Deborah Weston, 9 May 1839, Chapman-Weston Papers.

<sup>13</sup>Maria Chapman to Elizabeth Pease, 20 April 1840, Chapman-Weston Papers; Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood*, p. 66; for information on Adele Shute, see *Christian Watchman*, 21 May 1896.

<sup>14</sup>Most of the data I have been able to collect beyond what Hansen provides is from George Adams, *The Boston Directory*, 1845, 1851, available online at the Tufts

Offices rotated among a small, core group of women, who were apparently key to the organization's vitality. Influential were two sets of sisters: Abigail Shute, widow of Baptist clergyman Caleb B. Shute, and her unmarried sister Mary Ann Clough; and Lucy and Martha Ball. The Balls, who were also Baptist and occasionally taught school, were particularly forceful actors, later praised for their "faithful and unwearied services" to the MFES.<sup>15</sup> Martha Ball appears to have been the most zealous of the four. All were relatively young women, thus able to devote significant attention to their chosen cause. When the MFES separated from the BFAS, Shute was thirty years old, Clough nineteen, Lucy Ball thirty-two, and her sister Martha twenty-nine.

These women, like many abolitionists, regarded eliminating slavery as a religious duty. They held prayer meetings in one another's parlors to keep "minds informed, and . . . hearts engaged in the good cause."<sup>16</sup> With ministers' wives serving as officers—those elected in 1843 included the wives of the Wesleyan Methodist minister, Jotham Horton, of Jehiel Beman, the black pastor of the A.M.E. Zion Church, and of Baptist Nathaniel Colver, who presided at Tremont Temple—and fair managers, the MFES women clearly held the clergy in high esteem. But clergy spouses (with the exception of Shute, who was a widow) did not constitute the society's core leadership. Although Chapman and her friends charged that the women who

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Digital Library, <http://dca.lib.tufts.edu/features/bostonstreets/people/directories.html>, and his *Massachusetts Register: A State Register for the Year 1852* (Internet Archive, <http://www.archive.org/details/massachusettsreg1852bost>); Charles Stimpson Jr., *Stimpson's Boston Directory*, 1834, 1836, 1845, also available on the Tufts site; and the federal census, accessed through Ancestry.com. The fair committee for 1848 was composed of the following women: Adele Shute, Martha and Lucy Ball, Mrs. Pierce, Mrs. E. Felt, Mrs. W. Blakemore, Mrs. D. Foster, Mrs. A. D. Hatch, Mrs. T. Gilbert, Mrs. W. B. Tappan, Mrs. S. A. Wheelock, Mrs. C. T. Torrey, Mrs. S. P. Andrews, Mrs. E. Wright, Mrs. Morris, Mrs. Leavitt, Mrs. J. C. Lovejoy, Mrs. Elizabeth Whittier, Miss. L. A. Harding, Mrs. J. K. Miller, Mrs. C. C. Barry, Mrs. C. M. Greenwood.

<sup>15</sup>*Emancipator*, 11 July 1850.

<sup>16</sup>*Emancipator*, 13 May 1843. The meeting, scheduled to last an hour, was held at Judith Shipley's house, and all ladies interested in emancipation were invited. Judith's husband, Simon, was a successful baker and prominent in the Massachusetts Abolition Society.

established the MFES were in thrall to their ministers, there is no evidence that they, like many of their abolitionist female counterparts elsewhere, did not exercise independent judgment in religious matters.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the report these women wrote in 1839, when they held all the offices in the BFAS, explicitly reaffirmed their determination to continue to do abolitionist work “though ministers of Church and State” might instruct them to desist. Never should it be said, they went on, that any member of the society altered her steps “through fear, cowardice, or subjection to worldly or church usurpation.”<sup>18</sup> In a final reference to the MFES before it dissolved, the *Emancipator* published a resolution in which the members pointedly singled out for thanks only those ministers who had courageously supported emancipation and free blacks.<sup>19</sup>

A series of resolutions passed by the Third Congregational Church in Abington in 1843 sets forth the standards to which abolitionists held their clergymen. The Abington minister must believe that slavery was a sin, and he was to make no distinctions based on race within the church. The congregation firmly declared that it would not support any man for minister who gave consent, tacitly or explicitly, to the institution of slavery.<sup>20</sup> These expectations guided Boston’s abolitionist women as they chose and changed churches. The Balls moved from the Charles Street Baptist Church to the Federal Baptist Church, and then to Tremont Temple, an activist abolition church that offered open seating for blacks and whites alike at a time when most Protestant denominations relegated blacks to a particular pew or part of the church. Mary Gilbert, a stalwart member of the MFES until her death in 1843, and her husband also defected from the Charles Street Baptist Church. In the 1830s, Timothy Gilbert had caused the Rev. Daniel Sharp considerable discomfort when he invited a black man to sit in the family

<sup>17</sup>*Emancipator*, 18 May 1843, and *Liberty Standard*, 25 December 1845. The *Liberator*, 20 October 1843, gives information about Beman and his church.

<sup>18</sup>*The Sixth Annual Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Boston: Dow and Jackson, 1839), pp. 23–24.

<sup>19</sup>*Emancipator*, 26 December 1850.

<sup>20</sup>*Liberator*, 10 June 1843.

pew. In an undated letter written sometime before 1844, Sharp indicated that, following the inclusive practice of Christ and the apostles, he would not deny communion to slaveholders, a position staunch abolitionists would have found reprehensible. After the Gilberts left Sharp's church, Timothy took an instrumental role in establishing Tremont Temple.<sup>21</sup> Jotham Horton and his wife, Mary, broke with mainstream Methodism because it refused to condemn slaveholding; they joined a new antislavery sect, the Wesleyan Methodists.<sup>22</sup>

Although some female societies articulated elaborate religious rationales as the foundation for their organizations, the MFES did not, choosing instead to adopt an abbreviated version of the original BFAS constitution, which stated, simply, that slavery directly violated God's laws and had resulted in "a vast amount of misery and crime." Thus, immediate emancipation was the only option, and the women of the MFES pledged to work for it "as far as lies within our power." Their goals were twofold: the dissemination of truth, and the elevation of the character of free African Americans. With the acrimonious proceedings of the BFAS still ringing in their ears, they pointedly reinscribed language from the BFAS constitution that emphasized the importance of "freely given" opinions and of majority vote. Annual dues were set at fifty cents, but all women interested in the society's objectives were welcome to attend its quarterly meetings.<sup>23</sup>

The MFES swiftly launched an effort to expand its network beyond Boston. In the pages of the *Massachusetts Abolitionist*,

<sup>21</sup>Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood*, pp. 74, 108–9, on the Balls. For the Gilberts, see Justin D. Fulton, *Memoir of Timothy Gilbert* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1866), pp. 27, 51, 57–60, 162. Stephen Foster included Sharp's letter in *The Brotherhood of Thieves: or, A True Picture of the American Clergy* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1844), p. 52.

<sup>22</sup>The *Christian Reflector*, 13 November 1839, the *Philanthropist*, 10 November 1841, and the *Catholic Telegraph*, 10 December 1842, noted Jotham Horton's progressive disenchantment with Methodism, a sentiment his wife presumably shared. For some insight into the treatment of blacks in mainline denominations, see Gary Collison, "Anti-Slavery, Blacks, and the Boston Elite: Notes on the Reverend Charles Lowell and the West Church," *New England Quarterly* 61 (September 1988): 419–29.

<sup>23</sup>Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood*, p. 13; MFES, *Third Annual Report of the MFES* (Boston: James Loring, 1843), p. 15. See, e.g., *Emancipator*, 7 March 1844, for an open invitation to MFES meetings.

it invited all existing “societies who are favorable to our objects” to correspond and cooperate with it and to affiliate themselves either with the MFES or with the Massachusetts Abolition Society. In 1841, Anne Weston reported to her sister that Martha Ball had been lecturing widely toward that end. That year, Ball attended a meeting of the Cambridgeport Female Anti-Slavery Society and attempted to persuade its members to use their treasury to support MFES goals. She was also present at the formation of the Wrentham Female Emancipation Society, which affiliated with the MFES. Whether true or not, a correspondent of Deborah Weston’s shared a rumor that Ball was planning to travel to New Bedford with the intent of organizing the town’s African American women.<sup>24</sup>

In reaching out, MFES women employed conventional gender and religious terminology. When soliciting help for their 1840 fair from women throughout the commonwealth, a committee of five fashioned themselves the representatives of the slaves, appealing “in the name of Jesus” to the hearts and emotions of their “dear Sisters,” who as wives, mothers, and daughters presumably harbored a natural sympathy for the slave. The words were carefully chosen to resonate with female evangelical abolitionists, and they implied shared domestic and familial values. But despite their rhetoric, at least three of the five committee members deviated from the usual pattern of middle-class domesticity in their own lives: they were not wives or mothers but single women who had worked outside the home for pay; one woman was an African American.<sup>25</sup>

The rift between Boston’s two female antislavery societies spread through the region’s communities. Women in Dedham established a female antislavery society in 1839, and when, before the split, Chapman held a fair in opposition to that regularly mounted by the BFAS, they had contributed to it. At the Dedham society’s annual meeting a year later, not enough

<sup>24</sup>*Massachusetts Abolitionist*, 30 April, 4 June, and 12 November 1840; Anne Weston to Lucia Weston, begun 21 September 1841; M. T. C to Deborah Weston, 26 July 1840, Chapman-Weston Papers.

<sup>25</sup>*Massachusetts Abolitionist*, 18 June 1840; see also Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood*, p. 113.

members were present to elect officers. When the society reconvened shortly thereafter, a majority decided to align with the Massachusetts Abolition Society and to become an auxiliary of the MFES. In protest, a number of women removed their names from the roster. The following day, accusing their former friends of supporting “a pro-Slavery Christianity,” they established the Dedham Female Anti-Slavery Society and pledged to support the reconstituted BFAS.<sup>26</sup>

Although Chapman and her supporters liked to refer to the “drooping spirit of new organization,” events in Dedham demonstrate that the MFES was sufficiently strong to pose a viable threat to the BFAS. In Concord, Maria Thoreau was disturbed that the president of her female antislavery society remained loyal to Garrison, who maintained that the Sabbath was no more nor less sacred than any other day of the week. “I can no longer follow such a leader [the society’s president],” Thoreau declared, adding that “a number have followed our example, we shall pay our money over to the female Emancipation Society in Boston.” Newly formed societies, some female and others, like the Danvers Anti-Slavery Society and the Easton Anti-Slavery Society, with both male and female members, also chose to align themselves with either the MFES or the Massachusetts Abolition Society.<sup>27</sup>

Since the correspondence between local organizations and the MFES is not extant, it is not possible to reconstruct the particulars of the affiliations. But Garrisonian women, whose correspondence was preserved, offer tantalizing hints about what was happening on the local level. Jerusha Bird informed Maria Chapman in 1840 that Taunton’s female antislavery society was defunct; no more than two or three women would

<sup>26</sup>The *Liberator*, 2 August and 2 November 1839, details early support for the BFAS, and on 17 July 1840, it describes the inability to elect officers. Writing to Maria Chapman on 17 June 1840, Edmund Quincy speculated that the majority of the Dedham Female Anti-Slavery Society would embrace the Massachusetts Abolition Society, Chapman-Weston Papers.

<sup>27</sup>Chapman quoted in *Liberator*, 4 December 1840. Sandra Harbert Petruionis, *To Set This World Right: The Antislavery Movement in Thoreau’s Concord* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), chap. 1, details the split in Concord; quotation p. 27. For Danvers and Easton, see *Liberator*, 13 March 1840 and 20 December 1839.

help her make items for the Boston fair. Evidently women in the community were being influenced by the MFES, for, Bird went on, “I understand that Miss Ball’s letters have been circulating privately.”<sup>28</sup> In 1842, Leominster resident Frances Drake lamented that very few women in her town were Garrisonians. When a majority of the members of the female antislavery society changed the constitution to affiliate with the Massachusetts Abolition Society, Drake resigned, even though she believed that the other women were “very active and engaged in their way.” She persevered in her efforts to enlist women to help her prepare items for the Chapman-Weston fair, but only five could be persuaded. The following year, she reported that “the sectarians”—who were not true abolitionists because they devoted much of their energy to the Canada Mission for fugitives, a cause the MFES supported—had been advising women to return their sewing to Drake unfinished. Despite the poor response to Drake’s appeals on behalf of the BFAS, Leominster had no shortage of women sympathetic to abolitionist causes. When she circulated a petition in 1845 against the war in Texas, three hundred individuals, all female, signed it.<sup>29</sup>

Although we lack systematic information, anecdotal evidence suggests that the organizing activities of the MFES and the Massachusetts Abolition Society undermined Garrisonian strength outside of Boston. At its annual meeting in 1842, the BFAS board registered its concern. Chapman had received letters bemoaning apathy. Hannah Wilbur of Dover noted that “out of an association of one hundred and fifty females, not more than six or seven remain true to the old organised anti slavery principles.” The BFAS prepared a resolution urging “all Female Anti-Slavery Societies to continue faithful, zealous and organized” and warned that “any advice to the contrary [w]as a device of the enemy, who would rejoice in their dismemberment.” The resolution had little impact. At the end of the year, Garrison lamented the weakness of his own network,

<sup>28</sup>Jerusha Bird to Maria Chapman, 1 November 1840, Chapman-Weston Papers.

<sup>29</sup>Frances Drake to Maria Chapman, 18 December 1841, 11 June, 6 August, and 31 October 1843, and 1 December 1845, Chapman-Weston Papers.

which had once provided monetary support for both state and national societies; now he could rely on but a few individuals to accomplish the task—those benefactors *and*, of course, the Chapman-sponsored fairs. Indeed, Garrison confessed, “our glorious cause, in this section of the country, is now signally dependant [*sic*] on . . . [the fairs’] success for the means whereby to carry on its operations.”<sup>30</sup>

The MFES and local female societies similarly supported the Massachusetts Abolition Society, which Garrisonians accused of being hostile to women. The women of the MFES, however, apparently thought that the woman question was extraneous to the abolition of slavery. Nor were they bothered that women could not hold office or transact business in the Massachusetts Abolition Society. In fact, the society’s constitution did not specifically bar females from membership, and some MFES women may have joined it, for sources reveal that women did hold life memberships in and attended the organization’s public sessions.<sup>31</sup>

### *The Work of the MFES*

Aware that the Massachusetts Abolition Society was struggling to support the *Massachusetts Abolitionist* as well as lecturers, members of the MFES pitched in to help the organization with its finances. At the Massachusetts Abolition Society’s annual meeting in 1843, a few “sympathetic” MFES women courageously agreed to raise \$430 toward paying down the \$9,000 debt burdening the Massachusetts Abolition Society.

<sup>30</sup>Hannah Wilbur to Maria Weston, 21 December 1841, Chapman-Weston Papers. For the BFAS resolution, see *Liberator*, 22 April 1842. In 1844, Lewis Tappan wrote to John Beaumont that “the Garrisonian party is less numerous than it has been & is, I think, dwindling every day. It is so connected with other subjects that it has not the confidence of the moral and religious part of the community which abhors slavery” (quoted in Annie Heloise Abel and Frank J. Klingberg, *A Side Light on Anglo-American Relations, 1839–1858* [Lancaster: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1927], p. 174). For Garrison on fairs, see *Liberator*, 7 October 1842.

<sup>31</sup>*Formation of the Massachusetts Abolition Society*, pp. 2–5, 9, 10–12. The constitution stated that any non-slaveowner who agreed with the principles of the organization could join, with a ten-dollar contribution securing a lifetime membership. See also *Massachusetts Abolitionist*, 8 March 1840, and *Liberator*, 4 June 1841.

The MFES board took responsibility for the pledge and informed the membership that it intended to finance the commitment with proceeds from the upcoming fair. The fair met that goal, and the following year the board determined to raise even more money (\$500) for the Massachusetts Abolition Society, which represented, they believed, the captives' best hope for emancipation. A few years later, the MFES was drawing on fair profits to help Rev. Tyler Thatcher of North Wrentham settle his outstanding \$400 pledge to the Massachusetts Abolition Society. Various MFES members contributed more modestly and personally to the effort to keep their affiliate solvent by hosting sewing circles at their homes.<sup>32</sup>

Although the connections between the MFES and the Massachusetts Abolition Society suggest substantial cooperation, the women charted their own course. The MFES constitution stated that one of the society's primary goals was to disseminate the truth about slavery, and its members—realizing how rarely residents of “New England's peaceful cities and villages” were confronted by or even reflected upon “the afflictions” of the peculiar institution—took that task seriously. In an address to “the public” in 1841, the board invited women outside the city to work with them each month to distribute tracts that would present “such *facts* . . . as we hope will induce you to heartily cooperate with us, in the emancipation of the oppressed and down-trodden slave.” The following year, at a special meeting, convinced that “these messages of truth” were the most effective way to advance the cause, the membership voted to raise \$100 to publish four-to-eight-page tracts. Nancy King and Lucy Ball constituted a special committee to oversee the project. With reminders to all that the printer must be paid, they solicited donations, promised everyone who helped that they would receive tracts to distribute, and priced the publications at \$4 per 1,000. The endeavor energized men as well as women. One abolitionist from Northampton asked

<sup>32</sup>*Liberator*, 4 December 1840; *Emancipator*, 12 January, 31 August, and 21 December 1843, 3 February and 17 July 1844, 4 June 1845, and 23 February 1848; *The Missionary Herald* (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1848), p. 329. For sewing circles, see the *Emancipator*, 16 November 1843 and 13 November 1844.

for a “dollar’s worth of Tracts” so that he and his son might try to melt “the frigid hearts of this pro-slavery latitude.” Although the women humbly referred to their efforts as “feeble,” they estimated in their 1843 report that they and their network of supporters had distributed 32,000 pages of antislavery propaganda. They speculated that without their publications, James Birney, the former slave owner and now leader of the new Liberty Party, might still be holding men and women in bondage.<sup>33</sup>

The women pursued other means to publicize their anti-slavery agenda. During its short life, they tried to boost the circulation and operating funds of the *Massachusetts Abolitionist* by offering a free paper to any woman or female society that prepaid four subscriptions. They bought multiple copies of the *Emancipator* (50 in 1842), and in 1843 it was their largest expenditure (\$140) after their donation to the Massachusetts Abolition Society. When the *National Era* began publishing in Washington, D.C., the MFES took five copies of that paper in addition to the fifty copies of the *Emancipator* it was already receiving. The strategy was designed not simply to support the antislavery press but, by distributing the papers, to disseminate interest in the cause in towns that had previously evinced little, an effort that produced a few new subscriptions as well as cooperation with the MFES. The leadership also urged members and friends to take their own paper “and visit from house to house,” spreading antislavery doctrine and soliciting donations of money and items for the annual fair. In a further commitment to antislavery publishing, the MFES announced that it would raise money for a reporter in Washington.<sup>34</sup>

The MFES’s second stated goal was to improve the moral and intellectual character of “the colored population,” a commitment that produced a variety of initiatives, many of which

<sup>33</sup>*Christian Reflector*, 26 October 1842; Massachusetts Female Emancipation Society, *To the Public* (n.p., 1841), p. 1; *Emancipator*, 10 November 1842 and 15 and 29 June 1843; MFES, *Third Annual Report*, p. 4; *Emancipator*, 17 July 1844.

<sup>34</sup>MFES, *Third Annual Report*, pp. 4, 13; *Massachusetts Abolitionist*, 23 July 1840; *Emancipator*, 25 August 1842, 31 August 1843, and 24 February and 30 June 1847; Davis, *Joshua Leavitt*, p. 239.

Garrisonians would have disdained because they did little to eliminate slavery and perhaps little to assist free blacks. Yet the projects corresponded to the sorts of activities black women sponsored in their own communities. Some were modest, evidently one-time obligations, like those noted in the 1848 treasurer's report: \$5 to educate John Wesley, a native of Africa; \$5 to help Rhoda Cook rebuild her house, which had burned; and \$20 to help Samuel Barr buy his mother out of slavery. Others, like the financial contributions to the Canada Mission to further its work with fugitives and the purchase of Bibles to distribute to slaves, were more substantial. MFES interest in the Bible enterprise doubtlessly stemmed from an 1847 antislavery conference of religious abolitionists held in Boston. Three of the men (Timothy Gilbert, Joseph Lovejoy, and William Blackmore) on the committee that issued a letter to "The Christian Public" proclaiming the initiative's importance were married to MFES women. As themselves members of evangelical churches, however, many MFES women would have quickly agreed that supplying scriptures to three million slaves who had been denied them was a goal Christian abolitionists could hardly dispute. In 1848, the MFES allocated \$100 for the Bible project.<sup>35</sup>

MFES women also assisted fugitive slaves arriving in Boston. In *Unknown Tongues*, Gayle Tate argues that black women believed a "direct action strategy" of supporting vigilance committees and participating in the Underground Railroad and slave rescues was the surest way to strike a "direct blow at the

<sup>35</sup>*Emancipator*, 10 December 1841, and, noting the commitment to blacks, 21 June 1848. In 1843, BFAS women described Hiram Wilson's work with Canadian fugitives as "the evil contrivance of a pro-slavery soul" and argued that "freedom for the slave . . . can never come out of it" (*Liberator*, 12 January 1843). *Christian Reflector*, 4 February 1847, gives the letter emerging from the Bible conference. The *Liberator* denounced the Bible project as a "wicked scheme" that would cause slaves to be punished for reading (26 March 1847). Gayle T. Tate, *Unknown Tongues: Black Women's Political Activism in the Antebellum Era, 1830-1860* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2003), pp. 150-54, describes the kinds of activities embraced by black women and, to some extent, by the women of the MFES. Most treatments of the split between abolitionists suggest that blacks initially sided with Garrisonians, but the MFES seemed sensitive to the black community, and given the lack of membership evidence, it is possible that there were black members beyond the clergy wives and the single woman, Julia Williams, who eventually married a clergyman.

institution of slavery.”<sup>36</sup> MFES members would have agreed, and they were convinced that fugitives selected Boston as a destination because the society had succeeded in sensitizing Massachusetts residents to their needs. Some MFES members’ husbands, including Nathaniel Colver, Charles Torrey, Dexter King, and Timothy Gilbert, shared their wives’ commitment.<sup>37</sup> Although there is little evidence of collective action on the part of the MFES to help fugitives, there is some indication of individual efforts. Mary, the first Mrs. Gilbert, and her successor, Alice, housed fugitives in their home. One acquaintance remembered that Mary’s “hand bound up the wounds of many a scarred slave, and supplied the wants of many a half-famished fugitive” before her death in 1843. He recalled there being as many as six escaped slaves in her house at one time. In 1850, a slave hunter, speaking of Gilbert’s actions on behalf of the fugitives, indirectly acknowledged the domestic role his wife performed. “We are full satisfied,” he wrote, “or at least I am—that the boy is yet in Boston and in the house of this man Gilbert. . . . He’s quite wealthy . . . [and] will pay fugitive slaves more for work than any other persons, and give them the privileges of his private residence, Table, &c.”<sup>38</sup>

With the exception of prayer meetings, MFES activities cost money. Dues provided some income, as did life memberships. The treasurer’s report for 1843 listed \$57 derived from these sources; expenses for that year amounted to approximately \$1,130. Fund-raising was obviously a necessity, and the report shows that Lucy and Martha Ball, Abigail Shute, Nancy King, and Mary Dexter were all engaged in soliciting funds, as were women in some affiliated societies. But the bulk of the

<sup>36</sup>Tate, *Unknown Tongues*, p. 189. Tate repeats the standard story that the MFES soon lost steam.

<sup>37</sup>*Emancipator*, 12 January 1843, 17 July 1844, and 6 May 1846; *Liberator*, 11 June and 2 July 1841. The *Liberator* of 4 June 1841 listed the members of the Boston Vigilance Committee, including Charles Torrey and Dexter King, whose wives were MFES members. *Daily Chronotype*, 29 August 1846, notes the presence of a slave catcher in Boston.

<sup>38</sup>Fulton, *Memoir of Timothy Gilbert*, pp. 49–50, 47; Deborah Weston to Caroline Weston, started 21 October 1850, Chapman-Weston Papers.

income for that year came from the proceeds of the ladies' fair.<sup>39</sup>

Fairs were a favored fund-raising strategy among female groups. Temperance supporters, religious societies, and a host of other organizations in addition to antislavery organizations resorted to this means to generate cash. The Boston fair had been quite profitable before the BFAS began to fracture, and its value was clear to both groups. When Chapman launched a rogue fair even before the split, it was more than twice as profitable as the official event, which, given the experience and social contacts she and her cohort enjoyed, is far from surprising. Deborah Weston, Maria Chapman's sister, was evidently pleased to report (whether accurately or not), that the other fair was "very shabby, & some one of us . . . who went in said there was no one there hardly the first evening." To her delight, "all the fashionables" had attended the Chapman fair and "bought extensively."<sup>40</sup>

### *MFES Antislavery Fairs*

In her detailed scholarly study of the BFAS, Hansen concludes that the MFES fairs were of a "modest, religious nature," in keeping with the women's religious and class affinities and, further, that the members of the MFES "did not believe in inducing wealthy Bostonians to purchase luxuries and ornaments in the guise of aiding the abolition cause." To be sure, the MFES fairs were never as profitable nor as stylish as those of their rival, known first as the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Fair and then as the National Anti-Slavery Bazaar. The MFES could not gather a fair committee filled with elite women, as Maria Chapman and her friends were able to do, and in 1845 and 1846 the organization did not mount a sale at all. (The

<sup>39</sup>MFES, *Third Annual Report*, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup>For treatments of antislavery fairs and their importance, see my *Great Silent Army*, pp. 108–26; Lee Chambers-Schiller, "'A Good Work among the People': The Political Culture of the Boston Antislavery Fair," in *Abolitionist Sisterhood*, pp. 249–74; Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood*, pp. 130–31 (quotation); and Deborah Weston to Caroline Weston, 2 January 1840, Chapman-Weston Papers.

fair planned for 1847 actually took place in 1848.) But their fairs were neither shabby nor particularly modest. Although, in keeping with their sales strategy, the women did feature useful items, they also displayed a number of unusual, ornamental goods, many of them donated by women in the British Isles. Their desire to generate a profit for the cause clearly outweighed any evangelical distrust of materialism. That the Chapman group felt threatened by the activities of their former colleagues is evident in their pointed attempts to differentiate their bazaars from MFES sales, as in an 1844 advertisement in the *Daily Atlas*. In an earlier piece, the *Liberator* complained of the “very deceptive and unjustifiable” manner in which the MFES promoted its fair (“we know several individuals, friend to the old org, were deceived”) and lamented that its proceeds would “succor the evil but drooping spirit of new org.”<sup>41</sup>

Not surprisingly, the competing fairs shared common features. Both organizations depended on a network of support from local groups to produce many of the articles to be sold and to supply the greenery to decorate the halls and the foodstuffs for lavish refreshments. In 1842, women from forty-three towns donated items to the Chapman group’s Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Fair, while women (and some men) from forty-two towns worked for the MFES fair. In nine communities, some women cooperated with the BFAS, while others labored for the MFES. Assistance for the MFES was concentrated in the eastern half of the state, with several towns—including Concord, Reading, Ashburnham, Sandwich, Medfield, and Freetown—offering steady backing (see table 1).<sup>42</sup>

Women mobilized support through the abolitionist press: Leavitt’s *Emancipator* was the MFES’s conduit, while the

<sup>41</sup>Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood*, pp. 132–33, 130; *Liberator*, 9 December 1842; *Daily Atlas*, 20 December 1844; *Liberator*, 4 December 1840. For a discussion of fairs and evangelical values, see my “Women Abolitionists and the Dissenting Tradition,” in Elizabeth J. Clapp and Julie Roy Jeffrey, eds., *Women, Dissent, and Anti-Slavery in Britain and America, 1790–1865* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2011), pp. 151–53.

<sup>42</sup>*Emancipator*, 20 January 1842 and 9 February 1843; *Liberator*, 13 January 1843.

TABLE 1  
TOWNS CONTRIBUTING TO MFES FAIRS

2 Fairs		3 Fairs		4 Fairs
Andover	Lowell*	Ashburnham	Medfield	Concord
Danvers*	Marlborough	Beverly	Monson	Freetown
Hanover	Medford	Cambridgeport*	Newton	Reading
Holliston	New Bedford	Charlestown	Roxbury	
Hopkinton	Oxford	Dartmouth	Salem*	
Kingston	Shrewsbury	Dedham	Sandwich	
Lancaster	West Boylston	Falmouth	Stoneham	
		Framingham	Weymouth	
		Grafton*	Woburn	

SOURCE: Reports published in the *Emancipator* on fairs held in 1841, 1842, 1843, and 1848 (data missing on 1844 fair).

\*Town also had a separate fundraiser for the MFES or the Massachusetts Abolition Society.

*Liberator* carried announcements and articles on behalf of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Fair. Not surprisingly, Garrison's paper refused to publicize the MFES's activities, explaining that "it appeared . . . upon mature reflection, that . . . it were unreasonable to expect Mr. Garrison to assist Miss Ball to raise money to give to Mr. Leavitt." Circulars soliciting assistance were also sent to individuals and societies.<sup>43</sup>

Recruitment was a challenge for both organizations. The MFES attempted to make a personal connection—"Let each reader of this notice remember that the Committee address him or her particularly"—and those who were sympathetic were then urged to act as agents for the committee—"Visit from house to house, solicit donations in money, or articles." Ball longed for the day when no woman would be happy until her town was "fairly and honorably" represented at the fair. Announcements emphasized the need for generosity and itemized especially desirable articles, even down to scraps of material that could be made up into attractive items. Personal letters supplemented the messages conveyed in the newspapers, as the ample correspondence of Maria Chapman and her

<sup>43</sup>*Liberator*, 11 September 1846; see *Emancipator*, 24 February 1848, for circulars.

sisters in the archives of the Boston Public Library demonstrates. No evidence of such personal communication has survived for the MFES, but the fair was such a major cooperative effort that it must have involved some letter writing. Indeed, fair committees assured ladies in need of advice that "it would give us pleasure to answer any inquiries or make suggestions."<sup>44</sup>

Ensuring that women living in small towns and villages remained connected to the fairs, or even to the antislavery cause in general, required constant attention. Early fair announcements reminded women of the "holy principles" involved, explained how the proceeds of the fair would be used, and compared the United States' woeful inaction on the matter of slavery with the uplifting progress made in other parts of the world. Sometimes solicitors crafted elaborate appeals to female sympathies. "No less than *two* hundred helpless infants are daily seized by the rapacious slaveholder," the MFES committee reminded potential workers in 1842, babies who are "bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh." An urgency of tone occasionally seemed to signal a level of desperation. "Who will help us?" asked one notice, suggesting that goods were not being received in the necessary quantities. "*All must help*"; even children could save pennies to send to the fair.<sup>45</sup>

For the elegant and unusual goods that would attract fair visitors perhaps more interested in buying than in supporting abolitionism, both groups depended on contributions from abroad. Dissension in American ranks disrupted that essential flow of goods. Elizabeth Pease, one of the leading female

<sup>44</sup>*Emancipator*, 16 November 1843, 2 October 1844, and 20 October 1842; *Liberator*, 22 July 1842, 13 January 1843, and 11 September 1846; *Emancipator*, 29 October 1842 and 9 February 1843. The MFES asked for bits of silk, lace, or muslin, while the BFAS requested silk or other "desirable" materials in pieces as small as two square inches. See *Emancipator*, 19 October 1843, and *Liberator*, 15 September 1843. In the *Liberator*, 22 July 1842, the BFAS implored women not to plead fatigue when asked for assistance. Although preparing for the fair was no longer a novelty, "we find this instrumentality so successful, we dare not relinquish it, merely because it is not amusing to us."

<sup>45</sup>*Emancipator*, 10 December 1841, 25 August and 20 October 1842, and 16 November 1843.

English abolitionists in the 1830s, wrote Maria Chapman that she regretted “that there should be at this critical & important juncture . . . anything like a division in the ranks of the abolitionists.” She hoped that the differences could be resolved, but when they were not, she, like other British abolitionists and their organizations, felt compelled to choose. Pease persisted in backing Garrison even though Martha Ball had solicited her allegiance by explaining that since “our *no-government* friends” were “resolved to carry their *peculiar views* along with them IN THE ANTI-SLAVERY CAR . . . it was found impracticable to continue united with them.” The British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Association, Britain’s national organization, did however turn away from Garrison to support his opponents, and many of its female auxiliaries were favorably disposed toward the new organization.<sup>46</sup>

Ball, who often held the post of foreign corresponding secretary, was particularly careful to nurture relations with British female antislavery societies, ties that were desirable not simply for fair goods but for their legitimization of the MFES and the Massachusetts Abolition Society. “Letters and documents . . . received from distinguished friends in Europe” were shared at MFES meetings, and Ball informed societies like the Ladies Negro’s Friend Society of Birmingham about the progress of antislavery in the United States. When Amos Phelps traveled to Great Britain, Lucy Ball asked him to urge the ladies with whom he met to patronize the MFES. Other Massachusetts Abolition Society representatives, including James Birney, Henry Stanton, and Charles Stuart, encouraged British and Scottish women to affiliate with the MFES. In the pages of the *Emancipator*, Martha Ball publicly thanked British women for their valued contributions. Her efforts reaped rewards. Antislavery societies and individuals in England, Scotland, and Ireland sent boxes laden with such items as embroidery, rug

<sup>46</sup>*Liberator*, 6 May and 30 October 1840; Clare Taylor, *British and American Abolitionists: An Episode in Transatlantic Understanding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1974), p. 84; Christine Bolt, *The Anti-Slavery Movement and Reconstruction: A Study in Anglo-American Co-operation, 1833–77* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 3–5.

work, pictures, sea flowers, fire screens, and at least one “splendid” quilt.<sup>47</sup>

MFES fairs, often held around Christmas, as were its rival's, were not as dazzling as those mounted by the BFAS. In 1842, Chapman and her group held their fair at the Melodeon, its exterior brilliantly illuminated in the evening. The event featured the “beautiful and magnificent spectacle” of the first Christmas tree ever publicly displayed in Boston. A multitude of goods from Paris included gas-filled balloons described as “safe for drawing room use.” A profusion of books, paintings—including “an original Vandyke” (which failed to sell)—and statues of “principally classical subjects” were just a few of the costly and enticing items on offer. The goods reflected the cultural values and living arrangements of the organizers and their preferred customers. A friend of Maria Chapman's recalled how well she understood the “art” of attracting buyers, “having the most elegant little circulars printed for private circulation among the aristocratic families of Boston.”<sup>48</sup>

The MFES fair developed its own character, based not only on the class, preferences, and values of the organizers but on their understanding of their audience's tastes. Although they appealed to the interests of the sophisticated visitor who craved European and American fancy goods, they also catered to the simpler tastes and smaller purses of country and small-town men and women and members of Boston's middle class. Goods advertised included shoes, straw bonnets, mittens, skeins of wool, brooms, apples, turkeys, cranberries, butter, and cheese. “Nothing goes better in a Fair, than the substantial which are sent by farmers and their daughters, and by the mechanics and manufacturers,” proclaimed an announcement for the 1843 fair; “Give us an abundance of the useful.” Martha Ball encouraged

<sup>47</sup>*Massachusetts Abolitionist*, 1 October 1840; Celia King, ed., *Ladies Negro's Friend Society, 1849–1889*, microfilm copy, Milton Eisenhower Library, Johns Hopkins University; Minute book, Annual Meeting, 27 April 1843; MFES, *Third Annual Report*, p. 10; *Emancipator*, 30 November 1843, 25 January 1844, and 24 February 1847; John Collins to Maria Chapman, 3 December 1840, Chapman-Weston Papers.

<sup>48</sup>*Liberator*, 15 December 1843; Chambers-Schiller, “A Good Work among the People,” p. 249; Sarah H. Southwick, *Reminiscences of Early Anti-Slavery Days* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1893), p. 36.

fair visitors to “buy your supplies” and necessities “cheap for cash, and the money goes to the anti-slavery cause.” Although special cakes picturing slave auctions or scenes of slaves escaping from their masters were always solicited and admired, that year the fair also featured a charity table with inexpensive clothing appropriate for distribution to the poor.<sup>49</sup>

Even though the organizers of the MFES fair knew that they could not equal the elegance of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Fair, they nonetheless sought to bring to their event refinement, style, and an air of abundance. Despite a comment in 1844 that, because they held the “strictest principles of rectitude,” the MFES women disdained exorbitant prices and banned games of chance and lotteries from their fairs, there were few signs of evangelical restraint. Holding their 1841 fair at Tremont Chapel, “a new, beautiful, and commodious place,” the ladies assured potential fairgoers that the sale would “exceed” any other (including, presumably, that held by their rivals). They promised “the most superb assortment of foreign articles that has ever been offered for sale” as well as contributions from towns in Massachusetts and cities such as Hartford, Philadelphia, and New York. Also available was clothing for all ages, fans, paintings, beautiful cut glass, and cabinet furniture, including bureaus, looking glasses, and picture frames. Choice wares from abroad included painted satin bridal bags from Leeds, a “superb assortment” of antislavery china with mottoes, a miniature West Indies sugar plantation, a figurine of a gypsy party “in fine style,” necklaces (one from Venice and others in jet, pearls, and garnet), “books in abundance,” and paintings (appropriate for the middle-class parlor). In her report on the fair, Martha Ball noted that the array of articles had been costly and lovely and the setting “tasteful,” with flowers, greenery, and banners representing the towns adorning the hall; fairgoers, she was pleased to record, had purchased with “avidity.”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup>*Emancipator*, 17 November and 1 and 15 December 1842, 23 November 1843, and 27 November 1844. In 1842, the BFAS fair also had a charity table (*Liberator*, 16 December 1842 and 24 November 1848).

<sup>50</sup>*Emancipator*, 10 December 1841, 20 January 1842, and 9 February 1843.

Three years later, a visitor to the “splendid” saloon at the Tremont Temple remarked that “Nothing could surpass the brilliancy of its appearance when lighted with gas for the evening sales, decorated with evergreens and filled with rich collections of goods from all quarters of the globe.” In some years, as was the case in 1843, the fair’s final evening was a social occasion that featured music, speeches, and gastronomic delicacies. The Tea Party that year, the first held for the benefit of the slave in the city, attracted eight hundred people. The *Emancipator* observed “many aristocratic heads and shrewd politicians among the [select] company.” The financial return was unexpectedly large, with the fair realizing \$1,350.<sup>51</sup>

Mounting the MFES fair could be a challenge for women who, for the most part, did not have significant personal resources at their disposal. In 1842, both groups advertised their upcoming fairs in the *Daily Atlas*. The lengthy notice for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Fair enumerated many of the luxury goods Chapman and her associates had procured for sale; the MFES announcement merely referred to the “elegant assortment” of articles that would be available, “one of the richest and choicest ever presented to the public.” The costs of a robust advertisement may well have discouraged the MFES from detailing their wares. The following year, less than a month before the fair’s opening, Ball and others were asking for chairs, tables, and other furniture needed for the hall. The expenses associated with the fair that year consumed 20 percent of the society’s annual income of \$1,131, which included the fair’s profits (\$821.88). That same year, the BFAS reported its income, excluding fair profits, as \$2,493.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup>*Emancipator*, 18 January and 3 February 1844. The *Baptist Advocate* decried such tea parties because they encouraged families to abandon “domestic comfort for public dissipation. The occasion furnishes all the opportunities for *dress* and *show* and *joviality* which are the chief inducements for attending worldly parties” (reprinted in *True Wesleyan*, 16 March 1844). The rival fair also had a tea party the same year (see *Liberator*, 15 December 1843, and my “Women Abolitionists and the Dissenting Tradition,” pp. 151–53).

<sup>52</sup>*Daily Atlas*, 23 December 1842; *Emancipator*, 16 November 1843; MFES, *Third Annual Report*, p. 13, *Liberator*, 20 October 1843.

Even though the Boston fairs were a crucial source of income for both female antislavery societies, each appreciated that their efforts did not exhaust opportunities for generating financial support for the cause. Both the BFAS and the MFES encouraged local communities to hold their own fairs. The *Massachusetts Abolitionist* assured women living outside of Boston that “Miss Ball, and other agents of the society, would aid them to the extent of their power.” In at least one case, the MFES held a joint fair with the ladies of Lowell. Although satellite fairs affected the bottom lines of the MFES and the BFAS, both organizations understood that local fairs were an important means of enlisting women in the antislavery cause.<sup>53</sup>

### *MFES Political Activism*

On 20 December 1844, the *Daily Atlas* honored a request from Chapman et al. that it inform readers that the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Fair, which was about to open, had “no connection with the one in alliance with ‘Liberty Party’ and ‘New Organization [Massachusetts Abolition Society],’ which is to be held elsewhere.” The BFAS was committed to remaining staunchly apolitical, whereas the MFES, as its opponents recognized and deplored, had thrown itself into “building up an abolition political party.”<sup>54</sup>

Petitioning was the earliest form of political activism in which abolitionist women engaged, and it remained an important outlet during the course of the antebellum period. As members and officers of the BFAS, the future leaders of the MFES led a petitioning effort in 1839 to overturn Massachusetts laws that discriminated on the basis of color; the initiative met with limited success in 1843 when the law forbidding interracial marriage was overturned. In 1840 members of the new organization, including Parker and Martha Ball, encouraged New England women to secure signatures against slave trading between states

<sup>53</sup>*Liberator*, 22 July 1842; *Emancipator*, 29 September 1842 and 17 April 1844; *Massachusetts Abolitionist*, 17 December 1840 and 4 and 11 February 1841.

<sup>54</sup>*Daily Atlas*, 20 December 1844; *Liberator*, 9 December 1842.

as well as to abolish slavery in Washington and the territories. The appeal they circulated addressed recipients as “sisters,” but religious and gendered references underwrote a vigorous political message. Women might still “blush for the honor” of their country and petitions might be likened to prayers, but women must respond, must act as citizens. Women were, after all, counted for the purposes of assigning representation in Congress; thus, every woman had a responsibility to her country. “So long as slavery is tolerated in our land and so long as the third Article of the amendment of the Constitution of our beloved country reads, ‘Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech or of the press’” so long should women continue to petition “the servants of our country—till they comply with the demands of the people.” The fact that women did not share the vote should not discourage them from petitioning Congress and their state legislatures, MFES women maintained, for if women had no political obligations, then they had had no duty toward their children, their husbands, their neighbors, “in fine, none to the world.”<sup>55</sup>

In 1842 and early 1843, the MFES participated in the extensive petition drive following the arrest of fugitive slave George Latimer in Boston. One petition, with over six thousand signatures and half a mile in length, asked Congress to separate the people of Massachusetts from all association with slavery. Another, which contained more than seven thousand names, demanded that the state legislature forbid officeholders from helping to arrest fugitives or detaining them in jail or any other public building. Having witnessed Latimer’s release, Martha Ball felt called upon to share the experience. “As we grasped the hand of poor Latimer on Thursday night last, who five minutes before had been immured in the jail of Leverett St., we could not but exclaim, O, that all the women of Massachusetts were here to witness what we now do. There he stood *free*, delivered from the power of his oppressor, his whole soul beaming

<sup>55</sup>*Massachusetts Abolitionist*, 16 July 1840. The women moved easily among various rationales for their activism. In their 1843 (third) annual report (p. 3), they referenced the Declaration of Independence.

forth from his countenance as he heard the congratulations of the few who now gazed upon him with eyes filled with tears of unutterable joy.”<sup>56</sup>

A circular issued by one of the Anti-Slavery Conventions of American Women that met on three occasions in the late 1830s had asserted that petitioning was women’s “only means of direct political action” since it was not their duty “to fill the offices of government or to assist in the election of those who shall fill them.” The women of the MFES disagreed. Even before the breakup of the BFAS, President Mary Parker advertised in the *Massachusetts Abolitionist* a public meeting at which James Birney and others deeply involved in assessing the viability of an abolitionist political party would speak. Parker’s choice of venue was not casual. Two months before the forum was scheduled to take place, the paper’s editor, Elizur Wright, had announced his support for just such a political party. “Without a third party,” he declared, “we have no doubt the new organization would continue to live as the old one does, passing resolutions but making no converts and acting with no efficiency on politics.” Birney had been nominated to be that third party’s presidential candidate the previous month, but he refused the honor; the following year, 1840, he accepted it. The *Liberator* criticized Parker’s notice of the forum (and, by implication, the speakers and their likely subject). Parker, the paper claimed, had inserted the notice “apparently on behalf of no one but herself.” It would soon become evident that Parker’s action represented not simply her own views but those of other evangelical women as well.<sup>57</sup>

Parker and her MFES sisters were in advance of many of their male abolitionist colleagues. At its inception, the Massachusetts Abolition Society had formally endorsed political

<sup>56</sup>*Liberator*, 2 August 1839; *Emancipator*, 9 March 1843 and 24 November 1842. See also Louis Ruchames, “Race, Marriage and Abolition in Massachusetts,” *Journal of Negro History* 40 (July 1955): 269; MFES, *Third Annual Report*, p. 10; Laurie, *Beyond Garrison*, pp. 116–17.

<sup>57</sup>“Circular of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women,” 1842, Chapman-Weston Papers; *Liberator*, 20 December 1839; Lawrence B. Goodheart, *Abolitionist, Actuary, Atheist: Elizur Wright and the Reform Impulse* (Kent: Kent University Press, 1990), pp. 110–12.

action short of third partyism. Many members were reluctant to abandon the Whig Party; others were doubtful that an antislavery party could retain the moral purity that defined the movement. Wright's editorial advocacy of political action lost the paper so many subscribers that he was eventually fired. The executive committee of the new national organization, the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, established when the Garrisonians captured control of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1840, would not embrace the Liberty Party until 1843.<sup>58</sup>

Personal ties between some members of the MFES and men who were open to the idea of an abolitionist political party are one likely reason for the women's interest in political action. Several husbands, including Timothy Gilbert, Dexter King, Charles Barry, and Stephen Pearl Andrews, ran for office as Liberty or Free Soil candidates. But the MFES's core leadership was composed of single women, independent ones at that, and it is doubtful that they were slavishly following their male relatives into Liberty Party politics. Mary Ann Clough and Adele Shute's father was zealous for the Whigs, and as late as 1843 he was addressing the Great Whig Convention in Andover. His political predilections did not determine his daughters'.<sup>59</sup>

A letter published in the *Daily Chronotype* and signed, simply, "Elizabeth" provides a few clues about the thinking that lay behind female support for the third party. There is no reason to suppose that Elizabeth was a member of the MFES, although a Mrs. Elizabeth Whittier was active in the society at the time the letter was published. Still, Elizabeth's argument that women exerted a powerful moral influence, which they should use to bring about political change, was a sentiment

<sup>58</sup>Thomas G. Mitchell, *Antislavery Politics and Civil War America* (Westport: Praeger Publications, 2007), p. 7; *Formation of the Massachusetts Abolition Society*, pp. 5, 11. Reinhard O. Johnson, in "The Liberty Party in Massachusetts, 1840-1848: Antislavery Third-Party Politics in the Bay State," *Civil War History* 28 (September 1982): 238-41, details the halting, somewhat disorganized beginnings of the Liberty Party. See also Davis, *Joshua Leavitt*, pp. 151, 182.

<sup>59</sup>*Daily Chronotype*, 8 November 1847; *Boston Mirror*, 17 August 1833; *Boston Cultivator*, 11 November 1843.

that would have resonated with evangelical women. "I have but little knowledge of politics, and it may be foolish to advert to the subject," Elizabeth wrote. But "it seems to me that if slavery is sustained by law, it must be put down by law. I can see no other mode of *direct* action . . . [except] through the ballot box. If we cannot vote, we can influence those who do vote; and I think we can make them feel that there is nothing more ridiculous than the idea that slavery is going to be put down by the election of slaveholders and proslavery men to office."<sup>60</sup>

The MFES's first political actions reveal the pertinence of Elizabeth's reasoning. When Birney ran as the Liberty Party's presidential nominee in 1840, most antislavery societies stood on the sidelines, either because they were wary of trespassing on voting abolitionists' loyalty to established parties or because they had succumbed to Garrison's suspicion of political participation. The MFES offered a traditional, what was seen by some as merely ceremonial, gesture: they presented a banner to highlight the importance of voting for the Liberty Party, which they would award to the community in district 10 that registered the highest percentage of Liberty votes for George Washington Jonson, the party's Massachusetts gubernatorial candidate. Dubbing the MFES women the Liberty Party Ladies of Boston, the *Massachusetts Abolitionist* declared the painted, white satin banner the equal of the costly (\$102) flag of the previous year's Whig procession in which 50,000 people marched. On one side of the banner was the goddess of Liberty, with a pennant floating above her head announcing "*I go make Freemen of Slaves!*"; on the reverse was the Cedar of Liberty, the Liberty Party's emblem.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup>*Daily Chronotype*, 13 December 1848.

<sup>61</sup>Johnson, "The Liberty Party," p. 241; Davis, *Joshua Leavitt*, pp. 167, 175–76; *Massachusetts Abolitionist*, 24 December 1840; Ronald and Mary Saracino Zboray, "Whig Women, Politics, and Culture in the Campaign of 1840: Three Perspectives from Massachusetts," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (Summer 1997): 301. Alice Taylor, in "From Petitions to Partyism: Antislavery and the Domestication of Maine Politics in the 1840s and 1850s," *New England Quarterly* 77 (March 2004): 76, notes that the shift to a political agenda on the part of Maine women was symbolized by their use of banners. The banner was described in *The Star of Emancipation* (Boston:

Just over one thousand votes were cast for the new party, and the town of Berkley captured the banner, which was proudly displayed at the 1841 fair and at the 1843 Massachusetts Liberty Party meeting of Bristol County. Calling the banner “trumpery,” a product of “the patriotic (!) ladies of Boston,” the *Liberator* scoffed that “the clerical politicians of the new org deem all this to be the ‘appropriate sphere’ of women!”<sup>62</sup> In their fair report, Martha Ball and Nancy King took a different view; to them, the banner and their work were not mere window dressing but a means of bringing about the end of slavery through “the *suffrages of the people*.” Two years later, joined by women from Cambridge, the Boston women prepared another electioneering banner, this one marrying the patriotic motif of stars and stripes to the names of the Liberty Party candidates. The *Liberty Standard*, a paper published in Hallowell, Maine, that kept close watch on events in Massachusetts, regarded the activism of the MFES women as both admirable and radical. “There is an unreasonable fastidiousness and fearfulness among antislavery women on this subject,” the paper commented. “In the revolution, wives and sisters bound armor upon their husbands and brothers. . . . Shall not ‘cheers’ be heard for such efforts?”<sup>63</sup>

By 1842 the MFES antislavery fair was recognized as a fair for the Liberty Party. Even recruiting struck the Liberty theme. “We hope the manufacturing towns will not fail to forward specimens of the handy work of those who *vote* for Liberty,” one fair announcement declared. Those who wished to see Birney elected should understand that “a favorable opportunity is now presented for them to forward this good object.” The pithy antislavery messages that once adorned certain fair goods were

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J. Putnam, 1841), p. 97. Martha Ball wrote a hymn to be sung on the occasion of the banner’s presentation.

<sup>62</sup>See Johnson, *The Liberty Party*, pp. 92–100 and *passim* for details on the Liberty Party’s progress in Massachusetts. *Emancipator*, 10 December 1841 and 16 November 1843; *Liberator*, 4 June 1841.

<sup>63</sup>Mitchell, *Antislavery Politics*, pp. 9, 12; Johnson, *The Liberty Party*, pp. 352–53; *Massachusetts Abolitionist*, 24 December 1840; *Emancipator*, 10 July 1844; *Liberty Standard*, 18 January 1843.

now repurposed toward the ends of the party. Fans, napkins, and soap kept the Liberty Party and its principles fresh in the minds of fairgoers once they carried these ordinary, inexpensive items home. “Would you be a slave?” asked one slogan. “No. Well, then, join the Liberty party, and thus demonstrate that you love liberty for others as yourself.” Another dictum implicitly posed the crass and amoral politicians who pursued office simply for personal gain against Birney, “calm and fearless . . . Our Country’s hope . . . an Honest Man!” Some goods took a more satiric approach, like the portly dolls labeled Cotton Whig Wives, whose swollen cotton bodies were meant to suggest that the Whigs turned a blind eye to the sin of slavery because of their involvement with southern cotton. At the 1844 fair, the women’s evening tea party was decorated not only with garlands, flowers, and festoons of evergreens but with a portrait of Birney, a sculpture of Myron Holley, one of the original organizers of the party, and numerous banners bearing inscriptions such as “*The One Idea*—PROTECTION TO MAN.”<sup>64</sup>

In addition to the fairs, MFES women sponsored a series of less elaborate and shorter events to raise money for and draw attention to the Liberty Party. Liberty Festivals and Liberty Levees, sometimes held in conjunction with statewide party meetings, offered entertainment, including music, speeches, and refreshments, but unlike the fairs, they sold no goods. Two favorable notices convey the character of the events. One predicted that the Grand Annual Liberty Festival of 1847 would bring together “the real, practical, operative anti-slavery agitators.” The other, perhaps contrasting it to the Chapman-Weston Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Fair, observed that the event was “no strait-laced coterie, but a gathering of large and open hearts of all names and conditions, who live for the bettering of humanity from the lowest to the highest.” Some of the

<sup>64</sup>*Emancipator*, 15 December 1842, 13 November, 25 January, and 1 February 1844, 31 May 1848, and 1 January 1845. Mark Voss-Hubbard, in “Slavery, Capitalism, and the Middling Sorts: The Rank and File of Political Abolitionism,” *American Nineteenth-Century History* 4 (Summer 2003): 56, quotes a Liberty Party denunciation of “unprincipled and dishonest politicians . . . who are mainly [in it] for the carcasses of office.”

occasions were spectacularly successful. The Ladies Tea Party of February 1848 was “a complete jam,” with an estimated four to five hundred persons turned away owing to a lack of space.<sup>65</sup>

After mounting its fair in 1844, the MFES concentrated its efforts on festivals and other soirees, but in early 1847, it determined to hold a Liberty Fair the following December (it was eventually held in the winter of 1848). In a public appeal to the “Friends of Freedom,” the society explained that it intended to use the proceeds from sales for lecturers, tracts, and the elevation of African Americans. The organization’s support for lecturers, it announced, would “be guided somewhat by the judgment of the Executive of the Liberty Party”; it hoped to send speakers to those parts of the state that had yet to be adequately canvassed.<sup>66</sup>

In the fall of 1847, the MFES hired Henry Bibb. Bibb, a fugitive slave, was an effective orator with a compelling narrative and a flair for engaging audiences. In Lynn, he began his presentation, according to one account, by “singing melodiously, which quiets even the boys, and softens the passions and enlists the affections of all.” For three nights in Salem, he held the assembly in rapt attention as he described his sufferings and the hazards of his escapes and intoned plaintive airs about the pleasures of liberty. “Many are the eyes that have wept, and the hearts that have felt, under his pathetic appeals to our sympathy and compassion,” reported the *Daily Chronotype*.<sup>67</sup>

As an agent for the MFES, Bibb attracted large crowds to his lectures, collected cash and pledges for the fair, secured subscriptions for the *Emancipator*, and drummed up enthusiasm for the Liberty Party. One article noted that following his appearance, a number of newly persuaded individuals vouched their “influence and their all to the Liberty cause.” The

<sup>65</sup>*Emancipator*, 4 November 1846 and 2 February 1848; *Daily Chronotype*, 16 and 17 December 1847.

<sup>66</sup>*Emancipator*, 24 February 1847.

<sup>67</sup>*Emancipator*, 17 November 1847; for descriptions of Bibb’s performances, see *Daily Chronotype*, 1 January 1847 and 29 December 1846.

*Liberator* printed a hostile account, entitled “Political Cunning,” of a meeting sponsored by Bibb and Hiram Cummings, a Liberty Party organizer. Acknowledging the large audience and Bibb’s success in gaining its sympathy with his life narrative, the paper accused him of concealing that “the funds raised would go to support a political campaign.” Claiming that Bibb had only once mentioned political action, the paper asserted that he had indicated that “the fund shall be used for publishing books, & c., and also for supporting lecturers. I am sent here by the females; they employ me to go about the country, telling my story, to raise funds to carry on the cause by moral means—the ladies don’t vote—they go for moral suasion.” Whatever Bibb actually said, the ladies definitely went in for more than moral suasion.<sup>68</sup>

“We are aware it is said woman can do nothing in the political field,” MFES members noted, but they patently rejected that view. In addition to the lecture program, by 1847 they were circulating multiple copies of the *Emancipator* in locales where there was not much interest in the Liberty Party and encouraging women sympathetic to it to subscribe to political papers and to share them with potential voters. They believed that this strategy had worked well. “Within the last year *not a few votes* have been gained for the ‘Honest Man,’” they proudly announced. As evidence of what women might accomplish, they cited the example of a young lady who gave her copy of the *Emancipator* to two non-abolitionist gentlemen. By furnishing the men with political information, she had been instrumental in securing their votes for the Liberty Party. Other such instances, the MFES insisted, could be found.<sup>69</sup>

MFES fair notices, reports, and resolutions all expressed public solidarity with their brothers who were battling to free

<sup>68</sup>*Emancipator*, 12 January 1848. The MFES treasurer’s report, dated 21 July and printed in the *Emancipator*, 22 December 1848, noted that the MFES paid Bibb almost \$295 in that fiscal year. *Liberator*, 12 February 1848.

<sup>69</sup>*Emancipator*, 1 February 1844 and 30 June 1847. As the *Pennsylvania Freeman* pointed out on 26 August 1849, men tended to confine their political advocacy to election seasons; thus, the year-round commitment of the women was extremely important.

the slave. At its quarterly meeting in July 1842, the MFES recorded its “unmingled satisfaction” with the recent political convention held in Boston and urged those laboring in the movement to hold firm. The basic tenet that all men were created equal was not just a political principle, the women believed, but a sacred one. As they straightforwardly explained, “We believe that LEGALIZED SLAVERY MUST FALL”; all Americans, they insisted, were morally obligated to work toward that goal “by any means sanctioned by the word and spirit of God.” The women also weighed in on an idea that attracted party leaders like Wright, Henry B. Stanton, and John G. Whittier, who considered the Liberty Party a means of pressuring one of the two major parties to embrace antislavery. The two major parties would never change sufficiently to gain the abolitionists’ trust, the MFES women pessimistically predicted; only if the parties abandoned the principles that might make right and that color constituted value would Liberty Party members “shake hands with either.”<sup>70</sup>

By 1847, political abolitionists were reexamining the wisdom of supporting a party based solely on the elimination of slavery. That year, the notice for the MFES’s annual meeting urged all ladies to attend and to “encourage each other at this trying time.” Whether they were referring to the uncertainty surrounding Liberty Party prospects is unknown, but it is likely. The local, Suffolk chapter of the Liberty Party, whose meetings were open to women as well as men, was actively assessing the political environment. Several meetings analyzed the character of the Democratic and Whig Parties (“Is the Whig Party more Pro-Southern than the Democratic party?”) and the candidacy of Zachary Taylor. In May, the discussion focused on the question of whether the Liberty Party would be stronger or weaker if it moved beyond its commitment to one idea: emancipation of the slaves.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>70</sup>*Emancipator*, 20 January 1842, 28 October 1846, and 25 August and 15 December 1842; MFES, *Third Annual Report*, p. 11; Johnson, “The Liberty Party,” pp. 248–49.

<sup>71</sup>*Emancipator*, 21 April 1847; and *Daily Chronotype*, 6, 13, 20, and 27 April and 18 May 1847.

Boston hosted a number of events that testified to the growing interest within Liberty Party circles of becoming a party of “Free Soil, Free Labor, [and] Free Speech.” John Hale, the former Democrat and likely contender to become the Free Soil presidential candidate, made several trips to confer with party leaders and to speak to enthusiastic crowds of men and women. At the great Free Soil meeting in July, the audience was apparently more radical than the speakers. The September Free Soil convention in Boston was, according to the *Liberator*, probably the largest political convention the state had ever seen.<sup>72</sup>

MFES women were caught up in the enthusiasm. The husband (Joshua Leavitt) of one member attended the convention in Buffalo, New York, that drafted the new party’s platform and nominated not Hale but the Democrat Martin Van Buren to be its presidential candidate. By the time of the annual festival in 1848, the MFES was supporting the Free Soil Party, apparently not deterred, as were some former Liberty Party supporters, by the presence of Van Buren on the ballot. “Let all who love the slave and are interested in the principles of the Free Soil movement” attend the fair, urged the *Daily Chronotype*, as the MFES assured readers that “no effort will be spared on the part of the society to secure the services of the choicest talent which the cause affords.” Among the speakers were Charles Sumner and Free Soil leader Amasa Walker.<sup>73</sup>

The Free Soil Party continued the Liberty Party practice of encouraging female support at speeches and rallies. At one meeting in Boston, seats were set aside for ladies and the men who accompanied them. When Hale spoke in Walpole, women constituted almost half the audience. On that occasion, Hale spoke of suffrage. Women “should have the right to vote, and the day is coming when they will have and will exercise it to good purposes. They count more than their number now, in

<sup>72</sup>*Daily Chronotype*, 19, 8, and 21 July, 17 and 24 August, 19 and 20 September, 4 October, and 28 December 1848; *Liberator*, 15 September 1848.

<sup>73</sup>*Daily Chronotype*, 28 December 1848; Mitchell, *Antislavery Politics*, p. 35; Johnson, “The Liberty Party,” pp. 260–64.

favor of the right and the true.”<sup>74</sup> Since they could not vote, however, women’s contribution to the successes the Liberty and Free Soil Parties enjoyed in Massachusetts is impossible to determine. The publicity, propaganda, and funds the MFES generated certainly helped influence potential voters, and their fairs, teas, and other social events created an air of excitement and expectation that provides the necessary fuel to power any cause or movement. When the Free Soil central committee decided not to hold a state convention in Boston during the winter, a decision that meant there would be no Free Soil Festival either, the *Daily Chronotype* issued a disapproving report.<sup>75</sup>

### *A New Narrative*

At the June 1850 MFES annual meeting, after the annual reports were presented, Mary Ann Clough rose to offer a motion that the society resolve itself into the Massachusetts Female Emancipation Committee. Accepted after a “free and interesting” discussion, the resolution may have signified little change beyond that of a name, at least in the short term. At that same meeting, the women agreed to raise \$100 for the distribution of the *Emancipator*. In November, at a specially called meeting, the group passed a series of resolutions, which Martha Ball sent to the *Emancipator* for publication, that testified to its ongoing interest in antislavery. The women condemned the Fugitive Slave Law and urged all men within their circle to vote only for legislators committed to repealing it.<sup>76</sup>

At the end of 1850, the *Emancipator* ceased publication, and its demise cuts our line of communication with the MFES and its successor. But whether or not the organization lived on, we know that Mary Ann Clough, Abigail Shute, Lucy and Martha Ball, and others would never have abandoned their God-given

<sup>74</sup>*Daily Chronotype*, 16 September and 11 October 1848.

<sup>75</sup>Mitchell, *Antislavery Politics*, pp. 28, 50; *Daily Chronotype*, 5 March 1849. In 1844, Massachusetts’ tally for the Liberty Party was the second highest in the country (10,814), a number that essentially translated in full to the Free Soil Party in 1848.

<sup>76</sup>*Emancipator*, 11 July and 26 December 1850, that being its final number.

mission to free the slave. Alice Gilbert, for one, surely stood at her husband Timothy's side when he publicly offered his house to "any poor, panting fugitive" and warned the slave catcher that he carried his pursuit to the Gilberts' doorstep "at his peril."<sup>77</sup>

In 1837 Catharine Beecher had debated Angelina Grimké about women's participation in abolitionism. "A woman may seek the aid of co-operation and combination among her own sex, to assist her in her appropriate offices of piety, charity, maternal and domestic duty," Beecher acknowledged, but "whatever, in any measure, throws a woman into the attitude of a combatant, either for herself or others—whatever binds her in a party conflict—whatever obliges her in any way to exert coercive influences, throws her out of her appropriate sphere."<sup>78</sup> Like Beecher, the women of the MFES were evangelical, but they did not agree with Beecher's narrow view of woman's sphere. Their unrelenting, committed activism should force us to reexamine the very meaning of radicalism and conservatism in New England's nineteenth-century antislavery movement, as well as their relation to evangelicalism and political involvement.

Although MFES women did not publicly embrace woman's rights nor agree with the Garrisonians that women should serve as officers in antislavery organizations, they did not hold a limited view of women's role in antislavery, nor did they mindlessly accept clerical direction, as Chapman and others suggested. These were women who, on the one hand, knew how to ask other women for assistance, prayers, and sympathy in alleviating the sufferings of slaves who were, the women devoutly believed, "bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh." On the other hand, they understood and deployed the values of the market to mount successful, even flashy, public events, and they spent time and money proselytizing antislavery politics. They did not shrink from politicized abolition but embraced the new

<sup>77</sup>*Liberator*, 11 October 1850, reports on Gilbert's letter.

<sup>78</sup>Beecher, quoted in Ceplair, "Women Organized against Slavery," unpaginated, chap. 6.

opportunities it presented, thereby helping to “broaden the foundation of antislavery” and prepare “the ground for its political successors.” They were not conservative but quite radical indeed in their understanding of how women might help transform politics and realize antislavery goals. Rather than being guided by a rigid faith, they showed remarkable flexibility as they moved from a female antislavery society of the 1830s that was focused on moral suasion to one embracing both moral suasion and political activity.<sup>79</sup> This small band of strong-minded, evangelically motivated, and independently organized women would have been honored to claim and proud to proclaim the title bestowed upon them: The Liberty Women of Boston.

<sup>79</sup>*Emancipator*, 25 August 1842; quotation from Laurie, *Beyond Garrison*, p. 48.

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