

# Antebellum Reform Stations

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## **Reform for Treatment of People with Mental Illnesses: Dorothea Dix**

**One of the most famous reformers from the 1800s is Dorothea Dix, a woman who worked for the improved treatment of people with mental illnesses. When she visited various “prisons for the insane,” she was appalled by the conditions. Read some of her observations below in an excerpt of one of her letters from 1843.**

“...I refer to Idiots and Insane persons, dwelling in circumstances not only adverse to their own physical and moral improvement, but productive of extreme disadvantages to all other persons brought into association with them.

[In Lincoln] A woman in a cage.

[In Medford] One idiotic subject chained, and one in a close stall for 17 years.

[In Granville] One closely confined, now losing the use of his limbs from want of exercise...

...Men of Massachusetts, I beg, I implore, I demand, pity and protection, for these of my suffering, outraged sex!....

Raise up the fallen; succor the desolate; restore the outcast; defend the helpless; and for your eternal and great reward, receive the benediction . . .  
‘Well done, good and faithful servants, become rulers over many things!’”



## Reform for Women's Rights: Seneca Falls Convention

While many associate the women's rights movements with the 1910s-1920s, one wave of feminism began in the early-1800s. Male and female reformers advocated for more equal treatment of women, both in the domestic (home) and political sphere. Perhaps the most famous event from this time period was the meeting of reformers at Seneca Falls, NY in 1848. Reformers wrote a famous document titled the "Declaration of Sentiments" where they advocated for better treatment of women in America. Read an excerpt below:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed..."

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman...the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world...

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise...

He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns...

He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration...

He has endeavored, in every way that he could to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life..."



Three of the most well-known reformers at Seneca Falls were Frederick Douglass (left), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (bottom left), and Lucretia Mott (bottom right).

*Images from Britannica*



## Reform for Women's Rights: Sojourner Truth

"Born into slavery in 1797, Isabella Baumfree, who later changed her name to Sojourner Truth, would become one of the most powerful advocates for human rights in the nineteenth century" (National Park Service). Truth escaped slavery, became a preacher, changed her name, and became involved in the women's rights and abolitionist movements. She continued to advocate for the rights of African Americans and women throughout her life.

In 1851, she delivered one of the most recognizable abolitionist and feminist speeches in American history, titled "Ain't I a Woman?". Read an excerpt of her speech below.

*"I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?..."*

*"Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him."*

*"If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back , and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them."*

Source: National Park Service



# Utopian Reform Movement: The Shakers and Mother Ann Lee

During the antebellum, many people wanted to create new communities with a better way of living. These communities are called **utopias**.

One utopian community was the Shaker community, which was based on religious beliefs of the founder, **Mother Ann Lee**.

According to PBS, “They called themselves the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, but because of their ecstatic dancing the world called them the **Shakers**.”

They believed that “God existed in all people.” Their most radical belief was their full commitment to equality. In the early 1800s, they practiced full social, economic, sexual, and spiritual equality for all members. They were pacifists (believed war and violence cannot be justified).

According to the National Park Service, “they practiced communal living, where all property was shared.” They were dedicated to work. They farmed, made goods, and provided for their own needs.

During their most prosperous time, the Shakers had 19 communities with around 6,000 members. However, they did not believe in procreation. This meant that members would not biologically produce offspring as new members to the community. So, all new members had to be adopted or recruited.

Source: National Park Service



*Drawing of Shaker community dancing*



*Picture of a room from a Shaker house in New Hampshire*



*Group of Shakers*

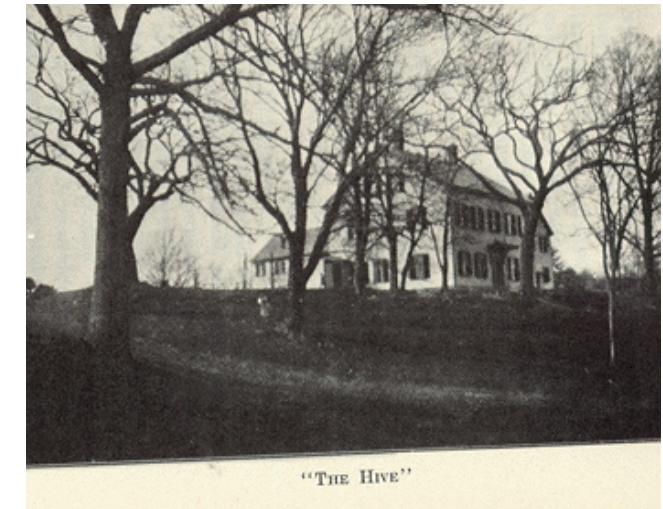
*Photograph of Shakers, from 1880*

# **Utopian Communities: Brook Farm**

**In 1840, George Ripley started the Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education.**

According to Gilder Lehrman Institute, “Through this utopian experiment in communal living [Ripley] tried to break down the barriers between intellectuals and laborers and divided the community’s profits according to socialist principles.

At Brook Farm members rotated through different forms of work, the most educated having their turn at farming, husbandry, and crafts, and common laborers given the opportunity to engage in art, music, drama, and other activities to which they had been little exposed.”



**When describing Brook Farm, Ripley said this:**

“If wisely executed, it will be a light over this country and this age. If not the sunrise, it will be the morning star....

I believe in the divinity of labor...

I wish to see a society of educated friends, working, thinking, and living together, with no strife, except that of each to contribute the most to the benefit of all.”

## Transcendentalism

The Transcendentalist movement began with religious young people who emphasized moral teachings. The Transcendentalist movement eventually centered on the belief that every person could connect with the spiritual and natural world. Transcendentalists emphasized self-reliance, simplicity, and equality. In the 1800s, transcendentalists rejected the nation's growing riches and expansion.

Henry David Thoreau, a famous transcendentalist, wrote *Walden, Or Life In the Woods* after living in solitude in nature for two years. Read an excerpt below.

"Still we live meanly, like ants...

Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!

I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail....Simplify, simplify.

The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it, as for them, is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. It lives too fast.

Men think that it is essential that the *Nation* have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether *they* do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain....

If we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us."

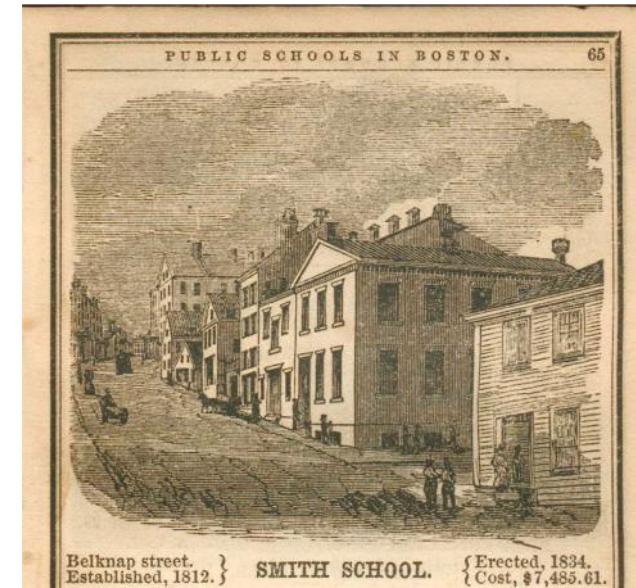
Source: National Park Service

# Public School Reform

Horace Mann was an instrumental leader in the public school reform movement (called the “common school” at the time). He believed education was “the best means of achieving the moral and socioeconomic uplift of all Americans.”

Like many reformers of the Antebellum, Horace Mann was motivated by his religious beliefs. He thought improving public education could teach children moral habits and lessen class conflicts.

Mann believed that American democracy required an educated and literate society. He thought “common schools” for children could create societal and national unity. Read his words from 1848 below.



“Under the Providence of God, our means of education are the grand machinery by which the ‘raw material’ of human nature can be worked up into inventors and discoverers, into skilled artisans and scientific farmers, into scholars and jurists, into the founders of benevolent institutions, and the great expounders of ethical and theological science. By means of early education, these embryos of talent may be quickened, which will solve the difficult problems of political and economical law....”

## **Abolitionist Movement: Ending Slavery in the U.S.**

“Black and white abolitionists in the first half of the nineteenth century waged a biracial assault against slavery...As the nineteenth century progressed, many abolitionists united to form numerous antislavery societies.

These groups sent petitions with thousands of signatures to Congress, held abolition meetings and conferences, boycotted products made with slave labor, printed mountains of literature, and gave innumerable speeches for their cause. Individual abolitionists sometimes advocated violent means for bringing slavery to an end.” -*Library of Congress*

**Read a selection of the “Declaration of Sentiments of the American Anti-Slavery Convention” below (1852).**

“No man has a right to enslave or imbrute his brother – to hold or acknowledge him, for one moment, as a piece of merchandise...or to brutalize his mind, by denying him the means of intellectual, social and moral improvement.

The right to enjoy liberty is inalienable. To invade it is to usurp the prerogative of Jehovah. Every man has a right to his own body – to the products of his own labor – to the protection of law – and to the common advantages of society...

...Every American citizen, who detains a human being in involuntary bondage as his property, is, according to Scripture, a man-stealer.

The slaves ought instantly to be set free, and brought under the protection of law...

We shall organize Anti-Slavery Societies, if possible, in every city, town and village in our land...

We shall circulate, unsparingly and extensively, anti-slavery tracts and periodicals...

We shall encourage the labor of freemen rather than that of slaves, by giving a preference to their productions...

Our trust for victory is solely in God. We may be personally defeated, but our principles never. Truth, Justice, Reason, Humanity, must and will gloriously triumph.”