The Civil War is remembered by Americans as the bloodiest and most violent war ever to take place on American soil. It was a war between the North and South over the morality and allowance of slavery in the United States, and over 600,000 Americans died to determine that slavery was unethical and that African Americans should be freed from bondage. The abolitionist movement that sought freedom for African Americans went through many different phases, which reflected the various groups of people within it, such as radicals, moderates and graduals. The abolitionist movement was the principal cause of secession and therefore the Civil War in 1861 through the changes that occurred within the movement to increase Southern fear and hostility towards the North. Early black abolitionists, leaders such as William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass and resistance to laws that promoted slavery prompted these shifts from gradualism to immediatism to outright violence.

The abolitionist movement that began a few centuries prior to 1800, led primarily by the Quakers, was key in developing the stage for the abolitionism that became the central cause of the Civil War. Africans were first brought to the North American region during the 17th century when Great Britain was attempting to populate the area with colonists.  Twenty black men and women were brought into Jamestown as servants in 1619 on a Dutch ship, but it was not until the 1650’s – 1670’s that masters in Virginia and Maryland thought that Africans should be forced to serve for life.  From this decision white masters concluded that slave statuses would pass form mother to child, that all blacks were slaves unless they could prove otherwise, and that slaves were not entitled to any rights such as the right to vote, own property, or even testify against whites (Harrold 15).  While there may have been some at this time who felt that the institution of slavery was immoral, it was not until the second half of the 18th century that religious, economic and ideological changes initiated a genuine abolitionist movement among black and white Americans.

Accordingly, abolitionism originated in the North where slaves were generally treated with less cruelty than those of the South and where some states began to abolish human bondage at the end of the 18th century.  Early black slave revolts beginning as early as 1676 helped launch the outset of the abolitionist movement.  It was during this year that 80 black men fought with Nathaniel Bacon to overthrow the authority of slaveholding gentry in Virginia. Another resistance movement occurred in 1712, when 35 slaves in New York rose against their master and killed nine men. Quakers also constituted an important segment of the antislavery movement and remained predominant in the movement through the 1820’s.  From the late 1600’s to the mid 1700’s they persuaded others of their religion to realize the sinfulness of slavery and eradicate its existence. Two Quakers who had the most significant impact in convincing many others of their religion to give up all connections with slavery between the 1740’s and 1760’s were John Woolman and Anthony Benezet. In a speech he made in 1754, Woolman alluded to the matter of religion and morality in relation to slavery, declaring that “God’s love is universal” (Woolman 22) and that “”Negroes are our fellow creatures” (Woolman 23).

Early evangelicalism also occurred during the late 1700’s in which rationalism and commercialism worked together to establish a world that sought natural rights for all humans, making slavery seem quite out of place. This allowed some African Americans to see the American Revolution as their opportunity to assert their own rights against white colonists the same way in which the colonists were asserting their rights against Great Britain. During this time the American population was about 4 million people, 700,000 of which were slaves (Harrold 15). Eighty years later, however, the American population had grown to over 30 million people with almost 4 million slaves, whom were mostly located in the South. Consequently, the abolitionist movement was prompted to move into a stage of gradualism to help the millions enslaved.

It was necessary for the abolitionist philosophy of gradualism to pave the way for immediatism before leaders such as William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips could introduce it in the early 1830’s. Prior to the 1820’s, it was believed among antislavery whites that emancipation must be associated with the expatriation of free African Americans. Some black leaders also felt this way because they were unable to pinpoint any means of attaining freedom and rights for African Americans in the United States. As blacks were all too aware, Southerners feared a growing class of free African Americans due to the belief that it would increase the amount of slave revolts taking place (Harrold 24). Around the 1790’s Benjamin Rush, John Jay and Alexander Hamilton organized an antislavery society due to their belief that the institution contradicted American Republican values and their own fear of divine power). The societies they established were small and conservative and therefore unable to last for an extended period of time, but what did last was their legacy of cooperation against the institution of slavery (Harrold 20). African Americans and whites both had similar goals and cooperated during the revolutionary era, but they were never in the same organizations presumably due to the fact that white gradualists at the time did not promote equal rights or racial justice of blacks.

When it was established in 1787, the Constitution was a setback for gradualism as a result of the important protections it provided for slavery such as the Fugitive Slave Law and the allowance of the external slave trade to continue for twenty more years. Such provisions were included in the Constitution due to the reluctance of the South to establish a large class of free blacks and the requirement of slave labor that was necessary for the prosperity of their economy. To fight against this hit to gradualism Paul Cuffe, the leading proponent of the American Colonization Society (ACS), worked to create a colony near Liberia. Colonization and gradualism were closely related to each other in that neither fought for the equal rights of African Americans. The goals for the ACS were the gradual abolition of African Americans in order to reduce southern fear of free blacks and the employment of blacks as Christian missionaries in Africa (Harrold 26). After Cuffe’s death in 1817, however, blacks began to become suspicious of the true work of the ACS. They began to fear that the ACS was actually trying to strengthen slavery in the United States through the gradual removal of all free blacks. Naturally, the ACS rapidly lost popularity and made way for a more radical group of abolitionists.

Established in 1833 by immediatists in Philadelphia, the American Anti Slavery Society (AASS) opened the door for immediatists in the abolitionist movement who, through various actions, became central to causing the Civil War. The AASS consisted of Protestants from New York, Quakers from Philadelphia and free Americans with African ancestors. Its main idea was to prove that the abolitionist movement was morally good while simultaneously proving that the institution of slavery was morally wrong. They adopted a Declaration of Sentiments, which was written by William Lloyd Garrison, in 1833. They modeled their Declaration off the Declaration of Independence, stating their principles, measures and grievances before going on to state their demands. In the document they portrayed whites as the villains and blacks as the innocent victims, maintaining simply that “for the crime of having a dark complexion, [slaves] suffer” (Garrison 53). The AASS demanded immediate and uncompensated emancipation, and asserted that absolutely no one had the right to enslave another man, acknowledge him as a piece of property, or deny him of natural rights such as knowledge and social and moral improvement. They argued that it was the responsibility of people in free states to do all that they could to achieve emancipation, and contended that blacks, when freed, should enjoy the same privileges as whites (Garrison 54). The AASS also fought for secession, declaring that the North’s “relation to slavery is criminal and full of danger: it must be broken up” (Garrison 55). Unlike some other abolitionists, Garrison believed the theory that if the South were to separate from the North, the South would not be able to endure on its own due to a lack of industrialization, so they would be forced to submit to the North’s terms of abolition and rejoin the Union. James Russell Lowell supported this idea in his speech *The Moral Movement Against Slavery*. Lowell explained that “those who urge [disunion] do so from an intense appreciation of the horrors of slavery” (Lowell 264), meaning that the sole reason abolitionists would ever call for disunion would be if they strongly believed that it would help to emancipate the slaves. He clarified that it was these moral abolitionists, who would go to great lengths for immediate emancipation, which kept the movement alive and allowed the North to push the South into abolishing slavery.

The immediatist group that developed within the abolitionist movement around the late 1820’s increased antagonisms between the North and South to cause secession and the Civil War in 1861. Immediatists were people who, on the basis of moral principle, wanted immediate emancipation of the slaves and equal rights for African Americans without outside colonization, unlike the ACS. According to them, they were “moral heroes who brought about the termination of human bondage in the United States” (Harrold 5), and their goal was not to just free the slaves, but to obtain a racially inclusive U.S. society. Hence, it was during this time that many black abolitionists arose to impact popular white opinion in the South and to heighten the fear of slave revolts due to immediatism in the North.

In 1822, Denmark Vesey, a free black man, led a conspiracy for a slave revolt in Charleston, South Carolina. The plan for the revolt was unfortunately found out, and Vesey was arrested and executed for simply intending to rebel. More restrictions were set on free blacks and bondage was strengthened in the South due to their fear of the violence of immediatism that came from the North (Ptasz 16). Southerners had also viewed the threat of rebellion as an attack on their way of life, given that they thrived off a slave-labor economy (Harrold 27). This budding hostility towards the North grew even more when David Walker wrote his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* in 1829. In this work, he urged blacks to rise and redeem slaves against the wrongdoings of white southerners, calling them “an unjust, jealous, unmerciful, avaricious and blood-thirsty set of beings” (Walker 135). Walker’s ability to circulate his work to slaves and other free blacks demonstrated that an alliance between northern abolitionists and southern slaves was possible, so to prevent such a situation from occurring southerners attempted to suppress Walker’s work by enacting harsher laws and penalties to prohibit slaves from learning how to read (Lowance 132). Unfortunately for southerner’s, this effort was unsuccessful in lessening the impact of Walker’s writing and caused their fear of the North to escalate. Slave preacher Nat Turner, who believed that God had chosen him to free the slaves through violence, led a slave rebellion in 1831 in northern Virginia and killed 57 white men, women and children. Southerner’s responded by killing dozens of allegedly rebellious slaves out of a need for revenge, and attacks by lower class whites on African Americans continued for months after Turner’s rebellion (Varon 76). They did this out of fear from the implied warning from the North that without immediate emancipation other slaves would violently challenge slaveholders as Turner did. It was African Americans like Vesey, Walker and Turner who encouraged northern abolitionists to act more aggressively towards slavery in the South in order to obtain emancipation and equal rights.

Similarly, Frederick Douglass was a former slave and adamant abolitionist who, in the 1850’s, felt that the issue of slavery was unjustly being hidden behind the shadow of the possibility of the breakup of the Union. In 1852 Douglass asserted, “Union and disunion are but words – the *thing* is slavery” (Varon 16). He wanted to convince northerners that the use of disunionism to gain political power should not hide the issue that disunion was really about slavery. A supporter of Douglass was Uriah Boston, a black abolitionist from New York. In the fall of 1855 he wrote to Douglass to promote disunion by explaining the likely results of it. He revealed that the South would be more hurt by disunion than the North because it would put an end to the fugitive slave law, increase slave revolts and weaken their slave power. Boston rationalized that if the North would ask for disunion then the South would realize what such an action would do to their ability to flourish, therefore making them more willing to give up slavery.

Although both black abolitionists shared the same goal of ending slavery, Douglass disagreed with Boston’s support of ‘Garrisonian disunionism.’ Douglass believed that if slave states were separated from free states, then slaveholders would be free to continue their torture and oppression of blacks. He felt this way because he favored the radical reading of the Constitution, meaning that he believed Congress had the power to abolish slavery but simply chose to keep their non-extension policy to focus on preserving the Union (Varon 278). However, Douglass did share with some members of Congress an opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which would allow popular sovereignty in those areas and completely disregard the Missouri Compromise. When the abolitionist movement finally pushed the South to secede and the war to begin in 1861, Douglass wrote in his newspaper, “Our national sin has found us out… No distant monarch, offended at our freedom and prosperity, has plotted our destruction; no envious tyrant has prepared for our necks his oppressive yoke. Slavery has done it all” (Varon 342). Despite the fact that according to Douglass slavery had caused the nation’s destruction, the statement was only partially true because the national sin of slavery would have never been ‘found out’ if abolitionists had not worked to bring the moral argument against it to the forefront of nation’s problems. Through simply being an abolitionist, Douglass proved that it was the antislavery movement that caused the Civil War because it would not have happened if the abolitionists had not worked to fight the moral argument against the southern institution.

A friend of Douglass’ was Wendell Phillips, a white abolitionist who had a large influence in increasing antislavery sentiment during the immediatist stage of the abolitionist movement. Throughout the 1830’s, the government generally tried to ignore the presence of the abolitionist movement because they feared the problems it could cause in the Union. Phillips attempted to force the government to acknowledge the movement by criticizing statesmen for being unable to recognize the importance of the issue of slavery in the United States. He accused them of choosing to focus on other matters such as tariffs and internal improvements, which were insignificant compared to slavery (Hawkins 74). Phillips extended this theory by arguing that abolitionists had better statesmanship than the statesmen themselves:

Now, when we come to talk of statesmanship, of sagacity in choosing time and measures, of endeavor, by proper means, to right the public mind, of keen insight into the present and potent sway over the future, it seems to me that the Abolitionists, who have taken – whether for good or for ill, whether to their discredit or to their praise – this country by the four corners, and shaken it until you can hear nothing but slavery, whether you travel in railroad or steamboat, whether you enter the hall of legislation or read the columns of a newspaper… (Phillips 74)

He explained that it was the hard work of the abolitionists who made slavery one of the most pressing issues in the United States, and denounced the statesmen by implying that it was their job to confront the problem of slavery, but because they refused to the abolitionists did it for them. Phillips also argued for immediatism by declaring that unprejudiced people should know that slavery, being so evil, could only be helped through the most radical treatment (Hawkins 75). This encouraged the start of a more radical abolitionism to spread throughout the North, which was predominantly led by William Lloyd Garrison.

While Phillips did have a significantly large impact on the abolitionist movement, it was actually Garrison who was arguably the greatest white abolitionist to ever live. Born in 1805 in Newburyport, Massachusetts, Garrison was an apprentice to a printer in his adolescence, which helped him establish his career as a journalist later in his life when he began his newspaper *The Liberator*. Garrison had a vision of equality within a biracial American community, asserting that slaves were entitled by their birthright in America to enjoy the same freedoms as all whites did (Harrold 31). As a radical, Garrison went further and expressed that whites should empathize with slaves and appreciate the anger of African Americans against white oppressors. He warned southerners that if they did not immediately emancipate the slaves, they would rise up and “violently seize their freedom” (Harrold 31). Garrison also called on whites to regard slaves as their brothers and sisters, becoming the first known abolitionist to link immediatism with the demand for black equality (Harrold 32). With the support the wealthy black abolitionist James Forten from Philadelphia, Garrison began publishing *The Liberator* in 1831. In his writings he encourage immediatism and violence in his readers, 60% of whom were black (Harrold 32), and strongly refused gradual emancipation. The spread of *The Liberator* throughout the north increased northern hostility towards the proslavery south when Garrison wrote in one of his publishing’s, “I will not equivocate – I will not excuse – I will not retreat a single inch – AND I WILL BE HEARD” (Harrold 32). In 1831 Garrison also wrote *Truisms*, which was a list of ironic statements to attempt to reveal the ignorance of proslavery southerners. He wrote, “In Africa, a man who buys or sells another, is a monster of hell. In America, he is an heir of heaven” (Garrison 106). This emphasized the moral corruption of the institution of slavery, and caused ethical antislavery sentiment to rise in the abolitionist North.

Beginning around the same time as Garrison’s rise to fame and a bit earlier, as early as 1820, events stemming from the northern abolitionist movement occurred to initiate increased hostility and fear from the South to provoke secession. In the Missouri Compromise of 1820, abolitionists in the North viewed Congress’s compromise to not allow slavery above the 36° 30° line as meaningless compensation for their refusal to admit Missouri as a free state (Ptasz 50). Abolitionists felt this way because the idea that a state so far north could contain slavery instilled the fear in northerners that southerners were attempting to spread their institution throughout the United States (Ptasz 106). Resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law that was established in the Constitution but was not heavily enforced until 1850 when it pushed the conflict between escaping slaves and their masters northward into the border states, producing instances of violent struggle among northern whites and blacks (Harrold 80).

In the *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* case of 1842, Edward Prigg took the fugitive Margaret Moran back into slavery without the proper certificate that was necessary for such an action. Justice Joseph Story ruled in favor of the slaveholders, supporting the Constitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Law. Northern saw this ruling as an injustice to their abolitionist movement, so as a response in 1843 northern state legislatures attempted to nullify the law within their boundaries by enacting “personal liberty” laws (Harrold 79). First executed by Massachusetts (Varon 159), these laws were designed to protect free blacks from being stolen back into slavery by prohibiting state officials from helping recapture slaves. The laws went directly against the orders of the Fugitive Slave Law. This caused southern slaveholders to believe that their interests were no longer secure within the Union in knowing that they could not trust northerners to uphold their wishes. They became hostile towards the refusal of Massachusetts to remove the personal liberty law and were angered that people aiding slaves were generally found innocent of the crime by northern courts (Varon 237).

As part of the Compromise of 1850, a stronger Fugitive Slave Law was enacted that affirmed northerner’s beliefs that they had a moral duty to use physical force against such an evil institution as slavery. The rules of the new law declared that it was a federal crime to aid any escaping slaves, required federal marshals to recapture escaped slaves, and restricted the allowance of jury trials for alleged fugitives. This strict law advanced the growing schism between the North and the South, for abolitionists viewed it as southerners pushing to expand the institution of slavery. As a direct response to the passage of the stronger Fugitive Slave Law, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote a book that soon encouraged resistance against not only the law itself but also the whole of slavery.

Published in 1852 by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* played a largely significant role in widening the schism between the North and South due to its portrayal of southern slaveholders as merciless and torturous when it comes to the treatment of African Americans. The book was read by thousands in the North and sold over 4.5 million copies in 16 languages (Lowance 291). To promote the moral argument against slavery to increase antislavery sentiment in the North, Stowe highlighted the idea that the selling of slaves separated black families all throughout the South. She critiqued southern family culture through dramatically displaying the worst parts of slavery, providing examples such as a baby being taken from the arms of its mother to be sold to another slaveholder (Lowance 292). The image presented by such a description both heighted emotional antislavery sentiment in the North and increased hostility in the South.

Accordingly, proslavery southerners saw Stowe as an example of radicalism and felt that she was trying to cause a war through what they viewed as a flawed depiction of their culture. Southerners now felt the need to prove to northerners that both their moral and political superiority was above what was written in Stowe’s book. This contributed to a sort of cultural nationalism in the South, or a belief that Southern culture was unique and should therefore gain independence from the North (Varon 247). Aiding to increase of this southern nationalism was Mary Eastman, who wrote her own book in response to Stowe’s called “Aunt Phillis’s Cabin.” This proslavery book highlighted the necessity of a paternalistic treatment of African American slaves, implying that they could only be useful and content under the control of a white man (Lowance 293). This literary conflict between the North and South boosted disunionist feelings in both areas, eventually causing the South to secede in order to escape the constant attacks on their cultural values of ruralism and a slave-labor economy (Harrold 6). Secession of the South led directly to the Civil War in 1861, and in meeting Stowe in 1862 even Abraham Lincoln supposedly said, “So this is the little lady who started this great war” (Lowance 192).

The Dred Scott decision in 1857 further increased northern resentment of the South and also escalated antislavery sentiment across the North. Scott, a black man, had sued for his freedom in 1847 only to have his case go all the way to the Supreme Court ten years later. Court Justice Roger B. Taney’s decision that all African Americans could never become citizens of the United States enraged northern abolitionists and became the base for the northern claim that the South was attempting to expand the institution of slavery (Ptasz 119). This increased the separation between the North and the South because the ruling allowed slaveholders in the South to accuse northerners of pushing for disunion, and Republicans now wanted to strengthen the boundary between the North and South to better ensure future political power over the Union. Recognizing what slavery was doing to the Union, in 1857 at an AASS meeting Frederick Douglass explained that slave power was poisoning and corrupting the institutions of the United States (Varon 303). This declaration left the South with two options: to be forced to abolish slavery by the North and remain a part of the Union, or to secede and become their own Confederacy in order to keep their precious institution.

Meanwhile, the abolitionist movement became very violent a few years prior to the Civil War, which accounts for its centrality in causing the war through increasing hostilities between the North and South. John Brown’s raid of Harper’s Ferry in 1859 was a huge influence to radical abolitionists in the North, for they saw him as a martyr for the cause of the suffering slaves in the United States (Ripley 207). Blacks believed that he was fighting for their freedom in the name of God, and were compelled to continue his violent fight for racial justice in the nation after his death. Despite some viewing Brown’s acts as too violent and bad publicity for the abolitionist movement, it caused many to assume that the only way to abolish slavery was through violent actions (Hawkins 123). Brown’s burning hatred of slavery drove the abolitionist movement to a whole new level, which escalated southerner’s fears and hostilities towards the increasingly radical and violent North. For the few Southerner’s that still trusted the North, their faith was shattered with Brown’s raid (Varon 329). Some communities armed their men for defense in case of another attack, and sent warnings to the North against further provocations (Varon 330). The struggle established by abolitionists between the North and the South in these border- states led to southern secession in 1860 and the start of the Civil War in 1861.

The shifts in the abolitionist movement caused by black abolitionists, leaders such as Douglass, Phillips, and Garrison, and resistance to laws that promoted slavery increased the southern fear and hostility towards the North that caused the Civil War. Organizations such as the American Antislavery Society and events such as the publishing of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the decision of the Dred Scott case, the Missouri Compromise, the passage of a stronger Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 and the violence of Brown’s raid all played a significant role in boosting the southern fear and aggression towards the increasingly violent abolitionist North. Because Abraham Lincoln issued an Emancipation Proclamation in 1865, he is generally known as the great emancipator of slaves. This title is falsely given, however, because it was actually the abolitionists that caused the war that allowed Lincoln to emancipate the slaves. Lincoln himself, while he did find slavery morally wrong, was not an abolitionist given that he cared more about preserving the Union than the freedom and equality of African Americans in the United States. Although African Americans did not gain true equality until the Civil Rights movement in the 1950’s and 1960’s, the abolitionist movement was successful in setting the stage for African Americans to fight for their own freedom and equality. While abolitionists were unable to see their movement truly succeed in their own, the movement left behind a legacy that proved true the opportunity of obtaining freedom and equality through the power of morality.

Word Count: 4587