Highlights of Abolitionism and the Underground Railroad in Marblehead

1835

October 21
British abolitionist George Thompson is scheduled to speak at the first anniversary meeting of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society.

After discovering threats of violence against him, abolitionists sneak Thompson out of Boston and into a series of safehouses, including Erastus Ware’s Farm in Marblehead, where he stayed for a week.

Ware received an anonymous letter threatening that his house “would be burned over his head” if Thompson remained there. A party of men came to the house looking for Thompson, but he hid in the woods. When Thompson lectured in Marblehead’s Methodist Church, a mob attacked the building, smashing some windows.

1837

April 2
Oliver Johnson, a Boston newspaper editor and abolitionist, delivers an address in Marblehead at the Methodist Society Meeting House.

In The Liberator, Johnson described how “a lawless rabble manifested their attachment to the ‘Union’ by attempting to break up our meeting.” Protestors outside tried to empty the building by shouting “Fire!”, but most of the audience remained.

Protestors then tossed stones through the windows, breaking a few panes of glass, in an attempt to intimidate those gathered inside. The audience remained until the meeting ended at 10pm.

1840

Betsey and Simeon Dodge begin to offer their house as a station on the Underground Railroad.

In a letter to Underground Railroad scholar Wilbur H. Siebert in 1893, Simeon noted, “Marblehead being on the sea and off the road to Canada, my home was used, for secreting fugitives who were sent to me for temporary safety, and kept until danger was over.”

1840

October 30 - December 2
In the Election of 1840, Marbleheader Samuel Goodwin and five other men vote for the Liberty Party ticket of J. Gillespie Birney and Thomas Earle. The Liberty Party was an antislavery third party that fielded candidates in presidential elections from 1840-1860.
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September 2, 1842

In his Herald of Freedom newspaper, New Hampshire abolitionist Nathaniel P. Rogers describes a trip to Marblehead: “I was astonished to hear that the people were peculiarly pro-slavery.

Garrison or Foster must go among them, and tell the bold ‘fishermen of Marblehead’ what anti-slavery means, and they will embrace it. They will be abolitionists fast enough, when they learn that anti-slavery is humanity, and not politics or sectarianism.”

November 4-5, 1844

The quarterly meeting of the Essex County Anti-Slavery Society is held in Marblehead at Lyceum Hall. Frederick Douglass and Charles Lenox Remond are among the abolitionists present.

Fifty years later, a Marbleheader remembered the scene for the local newspaper: “It was in the Lyceum Hall that I first heard ‘Fred Douglass,’ as he was familiarly called. Memory’s picture of that night time has not dimmed. I can see his tall, erect figure on the speaker’s stand, his kinky hair parted on the right, ‘stickin’ out’ on the left far beyond his forehead, his arm extended in gesticulation. As has been said, he was endowed with genius.”

In The Liberator, an anti-slavery newspaper, William Lloyd Garrison wrote that the meeting “passed off with the greatest enthusiasm and tremendous cheering, and will undoubtedly produce a lasting effect.”

August 22, 1845

Captain Jonathan Walker speaks in Marblehead.

Walker was a Cape Cod mariner who smuggled former slaves to the British West Indies. When Walker was captured, his hand was branded with the letters S.S. for “Slave Stealer.”

The Liberator requested that all Marbleheaders “use” what personal influence is necessary to draw out all sects, parties, classes, and conditions to hear the experience of a Massachusetts man of the evils of slavery.”

November 27, 1846

In a meeting of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, James Buffum of Boston claims that the Marblehead Baptist Church sells pews “on condition that they should be rented to no one but reputable white persons, thus excluding sinners and colored people.”
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January 22-23 1848

William Wells Brown, a former slave, speaks in Marblehead as an agent of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

Five years later, he would write Clotel: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States, the first published novel by an African American.

March 9 1848

William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the Liberator, speaks at Lyceum Hall.

The Marblehead Mercury reported, “the talented lecturer did ample justice to the great subject, and the audience were highly gratified. A few more such lectures would wake up our citizens to a sense of their duty with regard to the ‘great abomination.’”

September 18 1850

Congress passes The Fugitive Slave Act, part of the Compromise of 1850. The act authorized Southern slave hunters to deputize Northern citizens to assist in capturing runaway slaves. If citizens refused, they could be fined one thousand dollars.

Under the law, African Americans were denied a trial by jury and could not testify on their own behalf before judges. Judges received ten dollars if they ruled in favor of slavecatchers, but only five dollars if they ruled for the accused.

The Fugitive Slave Act spurred Northerners into action, resulting in increased activity on the Underground Railroad.

1850

William and Ellen Craft, former slaves from Mason, Georgia who escaped to Boston, are transported to Marblehead via the Underground Railroad after two slave catchers attempt to recapture them.

The Crafts stayed in the home of Simeon and Betsey Dodge, at what is now 256 Washington Street. Simeon Dodge estimates that the Crafts stayed in his home for “approximately one week.”

To protect freedom seekers, Simeon Dodge created a secret trap door in the floor in case the house was raided. When the local Underground Railroad cell was ready to move the Crafts, Dodge conveyed them in a covered wagon to John A. Innis of Salem.

The Boston Anti-Man-Hunting League forms, after escaped slave Anthony Burns is forcibly returned to the South. Marblehead establishes its own affiliate league shortly after.

Dr. Samuel Young was President of the Marblehead Branch, and Simeon Dodge was the Secretary. Other members included Benjamin G. Hathaway, Samuel Goodwin, A.C. Orne, Hooper R. Goodwin, and John Goodwin. According to Samuel Goodwin, their Society had a cipher they used to carry out secret communications with Boston.

The purpose of the Anti-Man-Hunting Leagues was to attack and subdue slave hunters who had traveled North to reclaim escaped slaves.

However, the Leagues had few opportunities to operate. As Nathaniel Bowditch, leader of the Boston League, explained, “Burns’s rendition produced so much excitement that no Southerner or slave driver wished to come to Boston, for fear of something worse, perhaps, happening to him.”

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s antislavery novel, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, is published by John P. Jewett and Company in Boston. It had previously appeared as a serialized novel in The National Era newspaper. It sold 500,000 copies in its first three months, and remains one of 19th Century America’s most culturally significant novels.

A series of petitions are presented to the U.S. House of Representatives, calling for the repeal of the Fugitive Slave Act. Marblehead contributes one petition, organized by Rev. G. Thurston and signed by 308 Marbleheaders.

Samuel Hooper, a U.S. Congressman from Marblehead, votes to approve the 13th Amendment, which outlawed slavery nationwide.

The amendment would take effect on December 6.
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### October 30-31, 1875

Henry "Box" Brown, a former slave who gained nationwide fame for his daring escape from the South inside a shipping crate, delivers a lecture and performs a magic show at Lyceum Hall.

The Marblehead Messenger reported, "He delivered a lecture on his experience while in slavery, and his wife, who is a white lady, recited an essay on the subject. The entertainment given on Wednesday evening was very interesting, Mr. Brown proving himself quite an expert in sleight of hand tricks."

### September 7, 1881

Anthony & Ellis'Ideal Uncle Tom's Cabin Company opened the performance season at Abbot Hall.

The Marblehead Messenger reported, "This company has performed the famous drama to over a million people, and in all our large cities last season people were turned away from the doors. This season the enterprising managers offer fresh attractions, making the presentation more magnificent than ever."

However, the play's characters included many racial caricatures, like Topsy, who in this poster declares "Golly I's so wicked."

### January 29, 1894

In a letter to Wilbur H. Siebert, an Underground Railroad historian, Simeon Dodge humbly judges his work to be "of very little consequence...when I think of the work of Harriet Tubman, Lewis Hayden, and others in the business, I feel ashamed that I have done so little."

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Read the full timeline as our Black, Indigenous, and People of Color Page [here](https://marbleheadmuseum.org/bipoc)