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Providence Society for Abolishing the Slave Trade Minute book

1789-1827

1 vol. (0.2 linear feet)

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Founded in 1789, the Providence Society for Abolishing the Slave Trade was an early antislavery organization forged in the unique political and social climate of post-Revolutionary Rhode Island. An interdenominational organization with a membership comprised largely of Quakers, the Society served as a self-appointed watchdog for violations of the act abolishing the slave trade and they provided funds to prosecute violators and to support African Americans fighting for their rights in state courts. The Society lay essentially dormant from 1793 to 1824, when it was revived as an all-purpose antislavery organization, and it appears to have ceased operations in 1827.

The minute book of the Providence Society for Abolishing the Slave Trade are an essentially complete record of the organization's formal meetings. The volume begins by laying out the organization's constitution and includes listings of officers and members and summary records of their activities.

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Background on Providence Society for Abolishing the Slave Trade

Founded in 1789, the Providence Society for Abolishing the Slave Trade was an early antislavery organization forged in the unique political and social climate of post-Revolutionary Rhode Island. Although slavery had been endemic to Rhode Island for nearly a century and the slave trade was an integral part of its mercantile economy, years of agitation by antislavery advocates induced the state's General Assembly to pass an act in October 1787 that not only banned the slave trade in the state, but made it illegal for Rhode Islanders to engage in the trade anywhere. In the following year, the Quaker philanthropist and merchant Moses Brown and his colleague Samuel Hopkins, a Congregationalist minister, convinced the legislatures in both Massachusetts and Connecticut to enact almost identical laws, theoretically signaling an end to the trade in all of New England.

Moral and religious opposition to slavery had been building in Rhode Island since at the least the 1760s, feeding off the movements in the mid-Atlantic colonies and England. In Providence, a handful of prominent individuals had taken the essential step of liberating those they held captive, including James Manning, pastor of the First Baptist Church, who freed one enslaved person in 1770, and Brown, who freed ten three years later. Like their counterparts in Philadelphia and London, the New England Yearly Meeting of Friends became an important voice in opposing slavery despite the resistance of slave holders within its ranks, moving gradually from cautioning Friends on slavery to banning trafficking in slaves before finally prohibiting slave ownership altogether in 1773. Facing even stiffer resistance from slave holders and merchants invested in the trade, the legislature in Rhode Island also moved gradually toward opposing the institution. Ten years after banning the importation of slaves in 1774, the General Assembly passed a statute mandating the gradual emancipation of those held in bondage, followed by the Act of 1787.

Although antislavery would seem to have won the day in the state, the critical factor would prove to be enforcement, and it soon became clear that enforcement would not readily be forthcoming. The Providence Society was formed in response. Using moral suasion when possible and legal intervention when necessary, they served as a self-appointed watchdog for illegality and a source of funds to prosecute violators. In practice, their aims were broader, as expressed in their full, formal title: the Providence Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, for the Relief of Persons Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for Improving the condition of the African Race. Although Quakers formed the bulk of the membership, the Society was fully interdenominational, drawing in key activists such as Brown and Manning, former congressman and jurist David Howell (who was selected as the Society's President), the New Bedford whaling magnate William Rotch, among about 180 members. At their first meeting, the Society adopted a clear and radical statement on their commitment to the principal of human equality and the necessity of enacting social justice:

"It having pleased the Creator of mankind to make of one blood all nations of men, and having by the diffusion of his Light Manifested that however diversified by Colour, Situation, religion, or different states of Society, it becomes them to consult and promote each other's happiness, as member of one great Family. It is therefore the duty of those who profess to maintain their own rights, and especially those who acknowledge the obligations of Christianity, to extend by the use of such means as are or may by in their power, the blessings of Freedom to the whole human Race; and in a more particular manner to such of their fellow creatures as by the Laws & Constitution of the United States are Entitled to their freedom And who by fraud and Violence Are or may be detained in bondage. And as by the African Slave-Trade a system of Slavery replete with human misery is erected and carried on, it is incumbent on them to endeavor the suppression of that unrighteous commerce; to excite a due observance of such good and wholesome Laws, as are or may be enacted for the Abolition of Slavery, and for the support of the rights of those who are entitled to freedom by the Laws of the country in which they live; And to afford such relief as we may be enabled to those unhappy fellow Citizens, who like the sons of Africa, falling into the hands of unmerciful men may be carried into Slavery at Algiers or Elsewhere.

From the outset, the Providence Society was met with stiff resistance from those still invested in the slave trade, and its members soon became the targets of public allegations that they were little more than self-interested radicals opposed to free trade, common sense, and social order. Nevertheless, the Society played a valued role in supporting individuals of African descent in defending their rights in court, especially those who disputed their status as slaves. More importantly, in March 1791, they won a two hundred pound judgment against Newport, Rhode Island, merchant Caleb Gardner, for carrying out a slaving voyage in his brigantine *Hope*.

Such successes were few for the Society and had only limited impact in curtailing the state's participation in the slave trade. By 1793, the focus of activity shifted from the state level to the federal, where the Slave Trade Act of 1794 became the first in a series of acts that finally shut down the legal slave trade. The first person prosecuted under the Act of 1794 was a Rhode Islander -- Moses Brown's older brother John -- who was found guilty and forced to forfeit his ship, the *Hope*.

The Providence Society lay dormant from February 1793 until November 1821, when it was revived by the aging David Howell. With direct American involvement in the slave trade having ebbed, the Society changed name to the Providence Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, signaling its intention to oppose slavery itself. Although Howell died in 1824, the Society continued to meet until 1827.

Scope of collection

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Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Part of the New England Yearly Meeting of Friends Records, Apr. 2016.

Although the Abolition Society minute book came to SCUA as part of the New England Yearly Meeting of Friends Records, the organization was never an official part of the Meeting. It is likely that the volume came into the Yearly Meeting Records in association of the papers of Moses Brown.

Related Material

Other material on the Providence Society for Abolishing the Slave Trade can be found in the **papers of Moses Brown (MS 930)**, which is similarly part of the New England Yearly Meeting of Friends Records. The Brown Papers include a copy of the **printed constitution for the Society**, a copy of the printed **Act of incorporation**, and correspondence with many members, most notably George Benson, William Rotch, and Samuel Elliot.

Processing Information

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Subjects

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Contributors

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