

1 Networks

Properly speaking, the history of organised anti-slavery dates from the 1780s. Of course, there were dissenting voices before this date. In his monumental *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* (1808), Thomas Clarkson devoted ten chapters to these early pioneers, identifying scores of activists on both sides of the Atlantic, among them Anthony Benezet and John Woolman, two early Quaker propagandists, and Granville Sharp, whose involvement in the Somerset decision of 1772, which set a limit on the ability of masters to take African ‘servants’ out of Britain against their will, gained him widespread recognition, not least in the USA.¹ Though the work of these men was largely uncoordinated, common concerns did sometimes draw them together. Sharp’s growing list of American correspondents, for instance, included not only Anthony Benezet but also Benjamin Rush, a young Philadelphian doctor, who, in 1773, published anonymously *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America, upon Slave-Keeping*, a devastating critique of slavery and slaveholders, as well as white racist attitudes.² Similarly, the international Quaker network facilitated the regular exchange of ideas and information. But, important as they were, these stirrings did not as yet represent a coherent movement. That was to come in the years immediately after the American Revolution, with the appearance on both sides of the Atlantic of highly organised, energetic and broad-based abolitionist societies that together formed a vibrant and relatively well-integrated international community.³

¹ Clarkson, *History*, vol. I, pp. 1–258.

² David Freeman Hawke, *Benjamin Rush: Revolutionary Gadfly* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), pp. 104–7. For Sharp’s relationship with Benezet, see Drescher, *Abolition*, pp. 107–8.

³ There is a rich theoretical literature on networks, some of which I draw on below. See, for instance, Martin Kilduff and Wenpin Tsai, *Social Networks and Organizations* (London: Sage, 2006); Alain Degenne and Michel Forse, *Introducing Social Networks*, trans. Arthur Borges (London: Sage, 1999); Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Application* (Cambridge University

The timing of this ‘take off’ was not entirely accidental. While there were long-term factors involved, including economic development and the growth of compassionate humanitarianism, there is little doubt that the American Revolution changed the terms of the debate.⁴ The Declaration of Independence, in particular, raised pressing questions about the nature and extent of liberty, a fact not lost on some British observers, who suspected the Patriots, especially those in the slave South, of insincerity or, worse, hypocrisy. For others, however, the logic of their position was inescapable. As Benjamin Rush put it, ‘It would be useless for us to denounce the servitude to which the Parliament of Great Britain wishes to reduce us, while we continue to keep our fellow creatures in slavery just because their colour is different.’⁵ In Britain, meanwhile, the American Revolution unleashed a heated debate about political representation that was quite often framed in terms of slavery (disenfranchisement) and freedom (the vote). But of far greater moment was the fact that the conflict effectively divided British America, at the same time halving the number of slaves in the British Empire. Suddenly, the problems of slavery and the slave trade became a good deal more manageable. ‘As long as America was ours’, Thomas Clarkson conceded in 1788, ‘there was no chance that a minister would have attended to

Press, 1994). Historians have also shown a growing interest in networks, particularly trading networks within the Atlantic world. See, for instance, Douglas Hamilton, ‘Local Connections, Global Ambitions: Creating a Transoceanic Network in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic Empire’, *International Journal of Maritime History*, 23 (2) (December 2011): 1–17; Natasha Glaisyer, ‘Networking: Trade and Exchange in the Eighteenth-Century British Empire’, *Historical Journal*, 47 (2) (2004): 451–76; David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735–1785* (Cambridge University Press, 1995). For two rather different perspectives, stressing the importance of familial and political networks, respectively, see Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2008) and Zoë Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections, 1815–45: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government* (Manchester University Press, 2005). Finally, François Furstenberg has recently used the slavery tracts in George Washington’s library at Mount Vernon to explore Washington’s engagement with international debates on slavery and the slave trade. See François Furstenberg, ‘Atlantic Slavery, Atlantic Freedom: George Washington, Slavery, and Transatlantic Abolitionist Networks’, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 68 (April 2011): 247–86. My own emphasis, by contrast, is on the denser networks that involved organised anti-slavery societies on both sides of the Atlantic.

⁴ For an overview of some of these issues, see Drescher, *Abolition*, especially p. 110, n. 45; Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), pp. 3–22; Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, pp. 231–49.

⁵ Brown, *Moral Capital*, pp. 123–34; Arthur Zilvermit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 227–8; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 478 (quotation).

the groans of the sons and daughters of Africa, however he might feel for their distress.⁶ In short, after 1783, activists found themselves operating in a very different political climate, one in which formal amalgamation, in the shape of abolitionist societies, seemed not only possible but also highly desirable.

The oldest of these societies was the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, usually referred to as the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS), which was originally organised in 1775 by a group of Philadelphia Quakers.⁷ With a population of around 30,000, Philadelphia was the second-largest city in what was then still the British Empire. Commerce drove this thriving seaport. By the early 1770s it is estimated that Philadelphia had about 320 merchants, many of them Quakers, who dominated the social, economic and political life of the community. The city was also justifiably proud of its commitment to rational thought and progress; before the Revolution it not only boasted a library (the first circulating library in America) but also a college, a hospital and various other literary, philosophical and philanthropic organisations. The heart of the city, however, remained the crowded wharves jutting out into the Delaware river, where wealthy merchants mixed with shopkeepers, sailors, slaves (close to 1,500 in 1767) and artisans.⁸ It was here, in the Rising Sun Tavern overlooking the waterfront, that on 14 April Quaker activists took the first steps in the organisation of what was to become the PAS.

Forced to suspend its operations during the Revolutionary war, in 1784 the PAS was revived, largely at the instigation of Thomas Harrison, a Quaker tailor. New members were recruited, and, just as important, the organisation expanded beyond its narrow sectarian base. As Gary Nash and Jean Soderlund point out, of the thirty-seven men who joined the PAS between April 1784 and December 1785, only thirteen were Quakers. Perhaps just as significant, most of these men were artisans, shopkeepers, manufacturers and lesser merchants.⁹ By late 1786, however, Harrison and his colleagues were obviously aware that something

⁶ J. R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion Against the Slave Trade, 1787–1807* (Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 33; Andrew O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p. 245 (quotation).

⁷ The date is sometimes given as 1774, but there is nothing in the handwritten minutes to suggest that the society was active before April 1775.

⁸ See Gary B. Nash, *First City: Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), pp. 45–78.

⁹ Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath* (Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 115–16.

more was needed, particularly if they were to tackle slavery head-on 'rather than rescuing individuals one by one from its snares'.¹⁰ Mindful that a Constitutional Convention was soon to meet in Philadelphia, in April 1787 the PAS underwent further reorganisation. Significantly, among the new recruits were members of Philadelphia's elite, men of considerable wealth and influence, among them Benjamin Rush, Tench Coxe, Caspar Wistar, David Wilson and James Pemberton. Equally telling was the decision to make the veteran politician Benjamin Franklin president of the reorganised society. In other words, by 1787 the PAS had been not only reorganised but also placed on an entirely different social and political footing.¹¹

Philadelphia reformers may also have been influenced by developments in New York, where in January 1785 a group of activists organised the New York Manumission Society (NYMS). From its inception, the NYMS attracted some of the state's most prominent statesmen. Its first president, for instance, was John Jay, US Secretary of Foreign Affairs from 1784 to 1789 and, later, one of the co-authors of the *Federalist Papers*. Other members included Alexander Hamilton, formerly George Washington's aide-de-camp and a member of the Continental Congress (1782-3); Revolutionary soldier Matthew Clarkson, who went on to become a member of the New York Assembly (1789-90); and Melancton Smith, a merchant and lawyer, who was also a member of the Continental Congress (1785-8). Like the Pennsylvania society, the NYMS was a 'mixed' organisation. Richard S. Newman estimates that at least up until 1815 over 50 per cent of its members were Quakers, among them the society's long-time treasurer, John Murray, Jr., a New York merchant and later president of the city's Chamber of Commerce, and John Keese, a New York attorney.¹² The appearance of this new society, led by men of such obvious distinction, set an example for others to follow; hence the decision in April 1787 to reorganise the PAS and hence the decision to make Franklin its new president.

The initial impetus, therefore, came from America. In May 1787, however, another new society appeared, this time on the other side of the Atlantic. Here again, Quakers were an important driving force. In 1783, the London Meeting for Sufferings appointed a special committee

¹⁰ Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, p. 124.

¹¹ Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, p. 124. See also Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), esp. pp. 16-22.

¹² Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, p. 18. All biographical details have been extracted from the *American National Biography Online*, www.anb.org (accessed 11 March 2011).

to distribute abolitionist books and pamphlets in what may have been a calculated attempt to extend their influence beyond the narrow confines of the Society of Friends.¹³ Subsequently, this same group made contact with Thomas Clarkson, largely through the intervention of James Phillips, who had agreed to publish Clarkson's *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1786). But what held British abolitionists back, initially at least, was their lack of political influence, particularly within the British Houses of Parliament. Wilberforce's decision to take up the cause in the House of Commons, however, was the signal for the organisation of the SEAST, which was to prove the most innovative of all the early abolitionist societies. The nucleus of this society was provided by Samuel Hoare, George Harrison, William Dillwyn, John Lloyd and Joseph Woods, who had all been members of the original Quaker committee established in 1783. In all, nine of the twelve founding members were Quakers, the exceptions being Granville Sharp, Phillip Sansom and Clarkson himself. The other significant feature of the original society or, at least, its guiding London Committee, was its middle-class origins in trade and business. Two members were bankers, four were merchants or had some experience of trade, while two, John Barton and James Phillips, were small manufacturers. Unlike the PAS or the NYMS, the SEAST had few, if any, members who were serving politicians (Wilberforce, for example, did not formally become a member until April 1791), even if in Sharp it had a figure of considerable influence, not least among jurists.¹⁴

The SEAST, in turn, had a direct impact on the organisation of the Société des Amis des Noirs in February 1788.¹⁵ Based in Paris, the French society was led by Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville and Etienne Clavière, one a writer and publicist, the other a banker, who drew around them a group of lawyers, academics, legislators and doctors that included M. de Gramagnac, Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, Jérôme Pétion de Villeneuve, Honoré

¹³ See Brown, *Moral Capital*, pp. 424–5.

¹⁴ Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, pp. 41–2, 71–3. See also Judith Jennings, *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade, 1783–1807* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁵ Lawrence C. Jennings, *French Anti-Slavery: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802–1848* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 1–2; Daniel P. Resnick, 'The Société des Amis des Noirs and the Abolition of Slavery', *French Historical Studies*, 7 (4) (1972): 558–69. The manuscript minutes or 'registre' of the Société des Amis des Noirs, which can be found at the Archives Nationales in Paris, have been published, along with those of the later Société des Amis des Noirs et des Colonies, in a single volume edited by Marcel Dorigny and Bernard Gainot. See Marcel Dorigny and Bernard Gainot, *La Société des Amis des Noirs, 1788–1799: Contribution à l'histoire de l'abolition de l'esclavage* (Paris: UNESCO, 1998).

Gabriel Mirabeau and François Xavier Lanthenas, many of whom would later play a leading part in the French Revolution.¹⁶ But this was never exclusively a metropolitan group. There were corresponding members in other parts of France (Lyon, Chartres and Nantes, for example), as well as in Brussels, Dublin and London. Uniquely among these early societies, the Société des Amis des Noirs also had direct links to colonial slavery in the shape of its free coloured members. As we shall see, the presence of these men, chief among them the Saint-Dominguan planter Julien Raimond, gave the French society a very different focus and direction, particularly after 1789. What is worth stressing at this point, however, is that the Société des Amis des Noirs was the most diverse of all these early abolitionist societies, not just in regard to *gens de couleur* but also in regard to women, who could also become members and, under its constitution, attend some of its meetings, although it is clear from the official minutes that few of them ever did.¹⁷

In organisational terms, all four of these societies shared striking similarities. For the most part, the real work, meaning decision-making and the formulation of policy, was done by ‘general’ meetings that met either monthly or quarterly; this was certainly the case with the PAS, the NYMS and the Société des Amis des Noirs.¹⁸ Day-to-day business (that is, business between meetings) was invariably carried out by ‘acting’ or ‘standing’ committees, or sometimes secretaries or treasurers. The constitution of the Société des Amis des Noirs, for instance, provided not only for monthly ‘general assemblies’ but also for an elected committee (‘Le Comité’) that in practice met three or four times a

¹⁶ Dorigny and Gainot, *La Société des Amis des Noirs*, pp. 39–46. Some of these figures had already published works attacking slavery. See, for instance, Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, *Réflexions sur l’esclavage des nègres* (Neuchâtel: Chez la Société Typographique, 1781). For early slavery debates in France, see Sue Peabody, *‘There Are No Slaves in France’: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁷ *Règlement de la Société des Amis des Noirs* (Paris, 1788), p. 21. A membership list published around 1790 included the names of three women: Madame la marquise de Baussans, Madame Poivre and Madame Clavière. See Eloise Ellery, *Brissot de Warville: A Study in the History of the French Revolution* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), pp. 442–7. It would seem that women were only admitted to special half-yearly assemblies rather than to monthly assemblies, which were reserved for men. See Dorigny and Gainot, *La Société des Amis des Noirs*, pp. 125, nn. 135, 233, 236.

¹⁸ Some of these meetings were quite large. In 1796, for instance, the average attendance at the quarterly meetings of the NYMS was twenty-three and in 1802 thirty-two. Figures extracted from the Quarterly Committee Minutes, 1785–97 and 1798–1814, New York Manumission Society (hereafter NYMS Minutes), NYMS Papers, New-York Historical Society, New York.

month.¹⁹ Some of these societies also had committees of correspondence and even electing or membership committees. By contrast, the SEAST was a much leaner organisation, concentrating all of these different functions into its central London Committee, which met on a much more regular basis, usually once a week. In short, the effectiveness of these societies and, by extension, the effectiveness of the abolitionist network, often depended on the energy and commitment of relatively small numbers of people. Average weekly attendance at the meetings of the London Committee was rarely more than ten, while throughout this period (1787–95) the highest recorded attendance was only seventeen.²⁰

By February 1788, therefore, there were four major abolitionist societies, two on either side of the Atlantic. Significantly, none of these societies operated in isolation. One of the first acts of the PAS, following its reorganisation in 1787, was to write to the NYMS, as well as to leading British and European activists, among them Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp and the Abbé Raynal. Simultaneously, in July 1787, the London Committee of the SEAST instructed four of its members to prepare a letter to the societies at 'Philadelphia and New York to inform them of the measures this committee are taking for the abolition of the Slave Trade'.²¹ The French society was equally quick to make contact with British and American abolitionists. In March 1788, the Société des Amis des Noirs set up a special committee to correspond with the SEAST, while Brissot's visit to the USA later that same year would help to forge important links with both the PAS and the NYMS.²² This reaching out to each other reinforced a sense that abolitionism transcended narrow national boundaries. Inspired variously by political ideals of freedom and equality and religious notions of benevolence and brotherhood, abolitionists saw themselves as part of an Atlantic world that was at once progressive and enlightened. Greeting the Société des Amis des Noirs in February 1788, SEAST president, Granville Sharp, reminded them that he and his colleagues had not taken up the cause of

¹⁹ *Règlement de la Société des Amis des Noirs*, pp. 18–19, 21–8, 36–48. The twenty-one members of La Comité of the Société des Amis des Noirs were elected by the General Assembly at the beginning of each year and served for three years.

²⁰ Figures extracted from the minutes of the London Committee of the SEAST (hereafter SEAST Minutes), Add. MS 21254, British Library, London. These minutes are arranged in three volumes as follows: Add. MSS 21, 254 (22 May 1787–26 February 1788); Add. MSS 21, 255 (5 March 1788–7 July 1791); and Add. MSS 21, 256 (20 July 1790–1819).

²¹ SEAST Minutes, 5 July 1787.

²² Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, pp. 51–2; Dorigny and Gainot, *La Société des Amis des Noirs*, pp. 72–88 (minutes of meeting of 4 March 1788).

abolition as ‘Englishmen’ but as ‘citizens of the Universe’. ‘In truth’, he went on, ‘we consider our plan as encompassing the whole globe, and we will only consider it complete when violence against the rights of humanity ceases everywhere.’²³

This was the language of the Enlightenment, of cosmopolitanism and the rights of man. For men such as Sharp, abolition was never solely a national project; rather, it spoke to universal values as well as to sympathetic connections with all humankind.²⁴ Not by accident, the same language was invoked in the constitution of the PAS. ‘It having pleased the Creator of the World to make of one flesh all the Children of men’, the preamble began, ‘it becomes them to consult and promote each other’s happiness as Members of the same family, however diversified they may be by color, situation, religion or different states of Society.’²⁵ But this was not merely a Christian obligation; those who professed ‘to maintain for themselves the rights of human nature’ also had a duty ‘to use such means as are in their power, to extend the blessings of Freedom to every part of the human race’.²⁶ The framers were thinking here especially of those enslaved in the USA. Like their counterparts in Britain and France, however, Pennsylvania activists saw themselves as ‘citizens of the universe’. With this in mind, the PAS arranged for 1,000 copies of its constitution to be printed and distributed, not just within the USA but overseas as well. The constitution, in effect, became the society’s calling card, a written affirmation of its commitment to exporting abolition and to establishing a ‘relationship of brotherhood and mutual correspondence’ with reformers on both sides of the Atlantic.²⁷

Though not all abolitionists were radicals, the heady optimism of the late 1780s (really the period up to 1792) also encouraged them to think of abolition in global terms. This was perhaps most evident in France, where the American Revolution inspired what Durand Echeverria describes as a genuine ‘Americanism’, that is, a popular movement or sensibility that saw America as ‘the hope of the human race’.²⁸ As Brissot

²³ Quoted in Dorigny and Gainot, *La Société des Amis des Noirs*, p. 86.

²⁴ For cosmopolitanism, see Michael Scrivener, *The Cosmopolitan Ideal in the Age of Revolution and Reaction, 1776–1832* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007).

²⁵ Minutes of General Meetings, Pennsylvania Abolition Society (hereafter PAS Minutes), 23 April 1787, PAS Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, microfilm edition, Reel 1.

²⁶ PAS Minutes, 23 April 1787.

²⁷ PAS Minutes, 23 April 1787 and 5 January 1789; James Phillips to James Pemberton, 21 July 1787, Pemberton Papers, 48/110, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. See also James Pemberton to John Pemberton, 30 April 1787, Pemberton Papers, 48/31.

²⁸ Durand Echeverria, *Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815* (Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 39–78.

told members of the Société des Amis des Noirs, the Revolution had ‘impressed upon the minds of most men a respect truly religious for the cause of liberty; it [had] impressed upon them an aversion, a horror for all tyrannical proceedings, under whatever shape’. ‘Unite all the strength of men of integrity, that it may be directed to a common end’, Brissot went on, stressing the importance of international cooperation. ‘Let them make it their constant occupation, and nothing will resist efforts that are always wisely directed.’²⁹ If anything, the French Revolution furthered the development of this idealistic internationalism. Events in France seemed to many to confirm the emergence of a new democratic era. This, of course, was the wider meaning of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (26 August 1789), which significantly was framed in terms not so much of French rights but of universal human rights, and therefore applicable everywhere.³⁰ As we shall see, the legacy of the French Revolution was fraught and complicated, but, initially at least, activists greeted it with enthusiasm. There was increasing talk of pushing back the limits of monarchy, of tyranny and of oppression. Even as late as November 1794, Thomas Clarkson, who among British abolitionists was perhaps most closely identified with the French Revolution, was still confident that republicanism would effect widespread social and political change, not least in Britain itself.³¹

Responding to these trends, organised anti-slavery expanded rapidly after 1788 until by the mid 1790s it represented a complex network of groups, some more active than others. In Britain, this expansion was linked directly to the two petition campaigns that the SEAST organised against the slave trade, the first in 1788 and the second in 1792. Up and down the country, committees were set up to manage petitions (the collection of signatures and so on) and to see to it that they eventually reached the House of Commons. As a result, some of them survived only a matter of months, or as long as it took to organise petitions. Others, however, were much more substantial. The Exeter committee, for instance, met regularly between July 1788 and January 1789 and seems to have survived more or less intact until the petition campaign of

²⁹ Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, *A Discourse, Upon the Necessity of Establishing at Paris, a Society to Co-operate with Those of America and London, Towards the Abolition of the Trade and Slavery of the Negroes. Delivered the 19th of February 1788, in a Society of a Few Friends, Assembled at Paris, at the Request of the Committee of London* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Francis Bailey, 1788), pp. 146, 156–7.

³⁰ William Doyle, *The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 16.

³¹ See Diaries of Katherine Plymley, 1066/29 (1 December 1794), Shropshire Record Office, Shrewsbury.

1792. Much the same thing was true of the committees at Manchester, Newcastle, Edinburgh and Glasgow. In each case, survival depended on the energy and commitment of local committee members, men such as Thomas Walker in Manchester and William Elford in Plymouth, or else the strength of religious ties and associations. From what we know about the committee system in Britain, an important impetus came from Nonconformists and from Quakers and Unitarians, in particular. To take one example, the driving force behind the Newcastle committee came from the members of the Hanover Square Unitarian Chapel, among them William Baston, a prosperous corn merchant. In Exeter, on the other hand, it was Quakers who took the lead. At least eight members of the local committee were Friends, including Samuel Milford, co-founder of the Exeter City Bank, and Joseph Saunders, a woollen draper, while a further three were dissenting ministers.³²

There was a similar expansion in the USA. In 1788, a group of Quakers in Dover, led by veteran activist Warner Mifflin, founded the Delaware Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, for Superintending the Cultivation of Young Free Negroes, and for the Relief of Those Who May Be Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and another society began meeting in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1789.³³ Other societies quickly followed: at Providence, Rhode Island; Washington, Pennsylvania; Baltimore, Maryland; New Haven, Connecticut; and Richmond, Virginia.³⁴ Here again, the impetus came from Quakers and Evangelical Protestants. But PAS members also provided an important lead, encouraging the growth of local societies and providing them with financial support, as well as with books and pamphlets. The Pennsylvania group underwrote the activities of the Wilmington society, for instance, and in July 1792 directed its committee of correspondents to 'take measures for effecting the establishment of abolition societies in New Jersey'.³⁵ When a

³² Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, pp. 96–105.

³³ T. Stephen Whitman, *Challenging Slavery in the Chesapeake: Black and White Resistance to Human Bondage, 1775–1865* (Baltimore, Md.: Maryland Historical Society, 2007), p. 51; Monte A. Calvert, 'The Abolition Society of Delaware, 1801–1807', *Delaware History*, 10 (4) (1963): 295–320, at pp. 298–9; *Pennsylvania Mercury and Universal Advertiser*, 2 February 1788 (organisation of Wilmington society); *Pennsylvania Packet, and Daily Advertiser*, 22 August 1788 (organisation of Dover society).

³⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, 25 February 1789, 11 March 1789 and 23 December 1789, 29 September 1790 and 17 November 1790; PAS to SEAST, 24 June 1789, 28 February 1790 and 25 October 1790 Committee of Correspondence, Pennsylvania Abolition Society (hereafter PAS Correspondence), PAS Papers, microfilm edition, Reel 11. For the Rhode Island society, see also Charles Rappleye, *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade and the American Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), pp. 259–60, 268–9, 305–9.

³⁵ PAS Minutes, 2 July 1792.

New Jersey society was finally organised in 1793, PAS vice-president James Pemberton boasted that ‘the chain [was] now complete, from RI to VA inclusive’.³⁶ The PAS would go on pressing for further expansion, and, to judge from the proceedings of the American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, they clearly made an impact. At different times between 1788 and 1800, anti-slavery societies were organised at Alexandria in Virginia, and at Choptank, Easton and Chestertown on the eastern shore of Maryland. The PAS even received enquiries from a group of activists in Augusta, Georgia, although perhaps not surprisingly nothing seems to have come of the idea.³⁷

The largest of these societies had hundreds of members. When the Rhode Island society was formally incorporated in June 1790, the Act listed 190 names, including sixty-eight from Massachusetts and three from Connecticut.³⁸ If anything, the Maryland society was larger still. A report prepared in 1797 listed over 200 members, roughly 40 per cent of them from outside the state. The majority, however, came from Baltimore, led by a group of fifty-seven merchants, among them figures such as Elisha Tyson, John McKim and Richard Lawson. Perhaps just as striking were the large number of shopkeepers and small manufacturers who were members of the Maryland society. The full membership list included over twenty-five different occupational categories, ranging from merchants and gentlemen to scribes, cabinet-makers, bricklayers, carpenters and saddlers.³⁹ With a membership of this size, the society was easily as large as the PAS and the NYMS (202 members in 1797) and in many ways just as influential. Granville Sharp was an honorary member of the Maryland society, for instance, as were

³⁶ PAS Minutes, 2 July 1792 and 1 October 1792, 1 April 1793 and 2 May 1794; PAS to SEAST, 21 May 1793 (Pemberton quotation) and PAS to NYMS, 14 March 1793, PAS Correspondence, microfilm edition, Reel 11. For the activities of the New Jersey Abolition Society, see Minutes of the New Jersey Society for the Abolition of Slavery, available online at http://triptych.brynmawr.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/HC_QuakSlav&CISOPTR=12257&CISOSHOW=12143 (accessed 13 July 2011). The original minutes are deposited in Haverford College Library, Haverford, Pennsylvania.

³⁷ *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Fourth Convention of Delegates from the Abolition Societies Established in Different Parts of the United States, Assembled at Philadelphia, on the Third Day of May, One Thousand Seven Hundred and Ninety-Seven, and Continued, by Adjournments, Until the Ninth Day of the Same Month, Inclusive* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Zachariah Poulson, Junior, 1797), pp. 3–4.

³⁸ *Providence Gazette and Country Journal*, 14 August 1790.

³⁹ Maryland Society to the American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, probably May 1797, PAS Papers, microfilm edition, Reel 28, Correspondence relating to the American Convention. The Treasurer of the Maryland Society, David Brown, was a potter, and among the members of the electing committee were two cabinet-makers, a silversmith, a painter and a printer.

prominent American activists such as Uriah Tracy (Connecticut) and Warner Mifflin (Delaware). In all, the society had some seventy-five honorary members, a further indication of the scale of its ambitions, as well as its importance in connecting different groups of actors, thereby strengthening the abolitionist network.

Other societies were much smaller and probably only survived through the efforts of a few dedicated activists. Size, however, was no indicator of energy or resolve. One of the most remarkable of these early American societies was that organised in Washington, Pennsylvania, in February 1789.⁴⁰ Located some 300 miles west of Philadelphia and close to the Virginia border, Washington was at the crossroads of the internal slave trade. As James Pemberton explained, 'it has been a practice of the cattle drovers of late years to pass through [Washington] and adjacent counties from the frontiers of the Southern states to the back parts of this [and] New Jersey, and there exchange the flesh of beasts for that of mankind'.⁴¹ Finally losing patience, a group of local activists led by Thomas Scott, Absalom Baird and David Redick 'determined to speak out', and over the course of the next five years they waged a protracted battle against local slave traffickers. The Pennsylvania society, in turn, lent them support and even brought their activities to the attention of British and French abolitionists, thereby linking them to the wider international movement.⁴² Such gestures created enduring friendships and alliances. When the first American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery met in 1794, Absalom Baird was one of those who made the trip to Philadelphia, obviously determined to take his place among the delegates at this critical moment in the movement's history.⁴³

Equally remarkable, particularly given its geographical location, was the society formed in Richmond, Virginia. A key figure here was Robert Pleasants, a Quaker slaveholder and proprietor of a tobacco-exporting company, who in 1782 freed all his slaves and thereafter devoted his time and energy to persuading others, mainly Quakers, to follow his example.⁴⁴ Virginia was hostile territory for abolitionists, but, by the

⁴⁰ *Pennsylvania Mercury and Universal Advertiser*, 7 March 1789; *Pennsylvania Packet, and Daily Advertiser*, 29 April 1789.

⁴¹ James Pemberton to William Dillwyn, 25 February (possibly 25 April) 1789, Pemberton Papers, 51/182.

⁴² See William Dillwyn to James Pemberton, 9 July 1789, Pemberton Papers, 52/129.

⁴³ *Minutes of the Proceedings of a Convention of Delegates from the Abolition Societies Established in Different Parts of the United States, Assembled at Philadelphia, on the First Day of January, One Thousand Seven Hundred and Ninety Four, and Continued, by Adjournments, Until the Seventh Day of the Same Month, Inclusive* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Zachariah Poulson, Junior, 1794), p. 6.

⁴⁴ For Pleasants, see http://trilogy.brynmawr.edu/speccoll/quakersandslavery/commentary/people/pleasants_map.php (accessed 20 May 2011).

late 1780s, Pleasants thought he detected a shift in local opinion. 'It really appears admirable to me', he wrote in 1788, 'that the minds of men should be so changed in the compass of a few years in a matter so generally prevalent', adding that

although the bulk of the people can't yet give up their views of ease and consequence in the estimation of the world, so far as to emancipate their slaves, there are very few now that undertake to justify the keeping them in that state, on any other principle than mere convenience, or policy as they term it.⁴⁵

Pleasants was equally encouraged by the course of events in Europe, particularly the French Revolution. Writing to a friend in September 1789, he predicted that the abolition of the slave trade by the British Parliament, which he thought imminent, would be 'a prelude to Emancipations in the West Indies and indeed the world over; for it seems as if the spirit of liberty in France was not to be restrained by all the efforts of those in power'.⁴⁶ Significantly, Pleasants' prophetic imagery was rooted very firmly in his religious faith and in his reading of Scripture. If the prevalence of anti-slavery feeling demonstrated anything, he believed, it was that the time was fast approaching when 'righteousness shall cover the Earth, as the Waters cover the Seas'.⁴⁷

By the summer of 1790, activists in Virginia were clearly convinced that the time was right to organise a statewide abolitionist society. Here, again, Pleasants played a significant part, becoming the society's first president, although initially, at least, the real impetus came from local Methodists; Pleasants, in fact, confessed to being 'a little mortified to find so much slackness among us [Quakers], when others especially Methodists seem so much more zealous in promoting it'.⁴⁸ From these small beginnings, the Virginia society expanded until by 1792 it had more than 100 members, most of them from the counties in and around Richmond (New Kent, Charles City, Prince George and Chesterfield).⁴⁹ Thanks largely to Pleasants, the Virginia

⁴⁵ Robert Pleasants to John Townsend, 25 January 1788, Robert Pleasants Letterbook, 1754–97, available online at http://triptych.brynmawr.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/HC_QuakSlav&CISOPTR=11435&REC=10 (accessed 10 February 2011). The original letterbook can be found at Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania.

⁴⁶ Robert Pleasants to Jacob Scott, 18 September 1789, Robert Pleasants Letterbook, 1754–97.

⁴⁷ Robert Pleasants to Jacob Scott, 9 March 1790, Robert Pleasants Letterbook, 1754–97. See also Robert Pleasants to Charles Carter, 17 August 1790, and Robert Pleasants to James Madison, 6 June 1791.

⁴⁸ Robert Pleasants to Samuel Bailey, 23 July 1790, Robert Pleasants Letterbook, 1754–97; *Pennsylvania Mercury and Universal Advertiser*, 17 July 1790.

⁴⁹ Robert Pleasants to Dr George Cheeseman, 6 July 1792, Robert Pleasants Letterbook, 1754–97. By 1797 the Virginia society was reported to have 147 members. For details,

society became an important regional hub, forging close links with the PAS as well as with activists in the Carolinas. Like so many Quakers, Pleasants was extremely well connected, both inside and outside the state. Perhaps just as important, his list of correspondents included members of the Virginia establishment, among them Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry.⁵⁰ An intense and seemingly tireless figure, Pleasants helped to give the Virginia society focus and direction; indeed, it was by no means accidental that his death in 1801 coincided with the demise of the organisation, although, as we shall see, there were other factors involved, too.

Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that abolitionists had everything their own way. In Providence, for instance, slave merchants waged a protracted war against the members of the Rhode Island society, questioning their motives as well as their sincerity.⁵¹ Slaveholders proved equally obdurate. Activists in New Jersey reported that opposition to abolition in the eastern part of the state was 'formidable', and there were similar reports from Maryland, where in 1791 the House of Delegates came within two votes of declaring the state abolition society 'subversive to the rights of our citizens'.⁵² Sometimes the levels of resistance were such that organisation proved impossible. David Rice tried repeatedly to organise an abolition society in Kentucky but found it difficult to 'get any number of weighty influential characters to engage in [the] business'.⁵³ Even many churchmen, he discovered, opposed abolition. 'The rich hold the slaves, and the rich make the laws' was Rice's frank assessment of the situation.⁵⁴ While Rice remained hopeful that an abolitionist society would eventually be organised in Kentucky, he

see Joseph Anthony to the American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, probably May 1797, PAS Papers, microfilm edition, Reel 28.

⁵⁰ Robert Pleasants to Patrick Henry, 1 September 1790 and 21 July 1792; and Robert Pleasants to Thomas Jefferson, 1 June 1796 and 8 February 1797, Robert Pleasants Letterbook, 1754–97. For Pleasants' contacts with activists in the Carolinas, see Robert Pleasants to Exum Newby, 30 July 1795.

⁵¹ *Providence Gazette and Country Journal*, 14 (28) February 1789; Moses Brown to James Pemberton, 8 March 1789, Pemberton Papers, 52/4; Rappleye, *Sons of Providence*, pp. 260–7.

⁵² *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of Delegates from the Abolition Societies Established in Different Parts of the United States, Assembled at Philadelphia, on the Third Day of June, One Thousand Eight Hundred and One and Continued, by Adjournments, Until the Sixth Day of the Same Month, Inclusive* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Zachariah Poulson, Junior, 1801), p. 11; Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 81.

⁵³ David Rice to William Rodgers, 4 November 1794, PAS correspondence, Reel 11.

⁵⁴ Rice to Rodgers, 4 November 1794.

was equally convinced that to be successful he would need the support of others. 'If such a Society shall be formed', he conceded, 'I shall esteem it an honour and a great advantage to be favoured with a correspondence with other societies, who have in the main the same object in view.'⁵⁵

By the mid 1790s, therefore, the transatlantic abolitionist network had grown to some sixteen societies (more if we include the provincial British committees) that spanned the Atlantic world, from Paris to Washington, Pennsylvania; from London to Richmond, Virginia. The backbone of the network, however, remained the old historic centres. In the USA, many of the newer societies, especially those in Washington, Richmond and Providence, clearly looked to the Pennsylvania society for support and encouragement. The PAS, in turn, provided these groups with an important link with the outside world. Very few American societies had direct contact with European abolitionists; instead, ideas and information tended to be channelled through Philadelphia or, occasionally, New York. In short, the effectiveness of the abolitionist network depended less on integration across the full network than on intensive integration through network cliques.⁵⁶ At an international level, for instance, there were particularly strong links between London, Paris and Philadelphia. By contrast, the links between New York, London and Paris – and between New York and some of the other American societies – were comparatively weak.⁵⁷ An important factor here was the transatlantic Quaker community. As we shall see, there were close personal and business ties between Quakers in London and Philadelphia, and the same thing was true at the domestic level, where again Quaker networks helped to foster close cooperation between activists in Philadelphia, Richmond and Providence.

Ultimately, however, the effectiveness of the transatlantic abolitionist network depended on individual resolve and endeavour. Particularly important here were a number of key actors, men who occupied a central position within their own specific groups or societies but who also acted as critical links between other groups within the network.⁵⁸ An important example was set by figures such as Granville Sharp, president

⁵⁵ Rice to Rodgers, 4 November 1794. A society was eventually organised in Kentucky in 1808. See Carter Tanant to John Thomas, 27 May 1809, PAS Correspondence, microfilm edition, Reel 11.

⁵⁶ Kilduff and Tsai, *Social Networks and Organizations*, pp. 45–7.

⁵⁷ It is revealing, for instance, that when the NYMS first broached the subject of what would become the American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery in March 1793, they directed letters meant for the societies at Dover, Baltimore and Richmond through the Pennsylvania society. See PAS to NYMS, no date given but definitely 1793, PAS Correspondence, microfilm edition, Reel 11.

⁵⁸ Kilduff and Tsai, *Social Networks and Organizations*, pp. 29–30, 132–4.

of the SEAST, whose list of correspondents included James Pemberton, Benjamin Rush, the marquis de Lafayette and François Lanthenas. As his papers reveal, Sharp was a compulsive letter-writer and one who was not afraid to use his influence to chide and encourage fellow activists, even at the risk of causing them offence.⁵⁹ But, more than that, he lent the international abolitionist movement a certain kind of celebrity status, dragging others along with him. To an extent, the same thing was true of Benjamin Rush, another figure whose writings and research, principally in medicine and science, had earned him an international reputation. Rush made no secret of his abolitionist sympathies. As vice-president and later president of the PAS, he corresponded with activists on both sides of the Atlantic, helping in the process to locate abolitionism within a wider Enlightenment culture that shone 'just as brightly on the far side of the Atlantic as on the banks of the Seine and the Thames'.⁶⁰

Not as well known perhaps but no less important were figures such as James Phillips. A Cornishman by birth, Phillips moved to London during the 1760s. He next appears in 1775 when he bought a printing business from Mary Hine, another Quaker, in George Yard, Lombard Street.⁶¹ At first, Phillips seems to have concentrated on religious works. But from 1783, the same year that the London Meeting for Sufferings appointed a special committee to distribute abolitionist books and pamphlets, he began to publish an increasing amount of literature devoted to slavery and the slave trade. Phillips announced himself with two important works: Anthony Benezet's *The Case of the Oppressed Africans* (1783) and David Cooper's *Serious Address to the Rulers of America, on the Inconsistency of their Conduct respecting Slavery* (1783). The following year he reprinted Benezet's *Caution to Great Britain and Her Colonies* and published two works by James Ramsay, including his influential *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Colonies*. In 1785 and 1786 he published two more books by Ramsay, but, of greater significance, certainly in terms of the history of the early abolitionist movement, was his decision to publish Clarkson's prize-winning *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1786). In other words, by the time the SEAST was organised in May 1787, Phillips had

⁵⁹ Granville Sharp, for instance, was highly critical of the newly adopted US Constitution, particularly those clauses relating to slavery and the slave trade, which he thought were 'so clearly null and void by their iniquity that it should be even a crime to regard them as law'. See Granville Sharp to Benjamin Franklin, 10 January 1788, Pemberton Papers, 49/56.

⁶⁰ Echeverria, *Mirage in the West*, p. 26.

⁶¹ Biographical files, Friends House Library, London.

already earned himself a reputation as a leading publisher of specialist (abolitionist) literature.⁶²

For obvious reasons, Phillips' business expanded rapidly after 1787. As the SEAST's official printer, he was responsible for all of its reports and circular letters, as well as for most of the books and pamphlets the London Committee approved at its various meetings. But this was not all. When the committee sat down in July 1787 to draw up a list of contacts through which it could distribute its publications, Phillips provided over half of the 132 names. His contacts in thirty-four English counties included George Croker Fox, Josiah Wedgwood and the Manchester radical Thomas Walker.⁶³ Phillips also had a large number of American correspondents, among them James Pemberton. Phillips was certainly doing business with Pemberton by 1783, probably before, and, through him, was in touch with a number of Philadelphia booksellers, including Joseph Cruikshank. Furthermore, Phillips had close kinship ties with the Griffiths and Fisher families, who, like the Pembertons, were influential in Quaker circles in Philadelphia, and he seems to have kept up a regular correspondence with both James Pemberton and Miers Fisher.⁶⁴ It was undoubtedly for this reason that in July 1787 he was made an honorary member of the PAS, along with Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson. Energetic, resourceful and well connected, James Phillips occupied a central position in the transatlantic abolitionist network that emerged in the late 1780s, both in terms of 'degree' (that is, having many ties to other actors) and 'betweenness' (that is, connecting different groups of actors).⁶⁵

If anything, James Pemberton (see Fig. 1.1) was more energetic still. Some years older than Phillips, Pemberton was a member of an important Philadelphia Quaker dynasty. His father and grandfather were both merchants, and he and his brothers John and Israel were also involved in the shipping trade. It was in pursuit of these interests that in 1748 he visited Britain, where he established many of the contacts that would

⁶² All of these details about Phillips' publishing business are extracted from the online version of the *English Short-Title Catalogue*, <http://est.bl.uk> (accessed 9 May 2011).

⁶³ SEAST Minutes, 17 July 1787.

⁶⁴ James Pemberton to John Pemberton, 1 January 1783, Pemberton Papers, 38/7/1; James Pemberton's Account with James Phillips, 1783, Pemberton Papers, 48/48; James Phillips to James Pemberton, 28 February 1788, Pemberton Papers, 49/125; James Phillips to Miers Fisher, 23 July 1791, 7 July 1792 and 7 February 1793, Fisher Family Papers, Box 11, Folders 4, 5 and 6, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; James Phillips to Samuel Griffiths, 30 May 1796 and 8 August 1796, Dreer Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁶⁵ PAS Minutes, 2 July 1787; Kilduff and Tsai, *Social Networks and Organisations*, pp. 132–3.

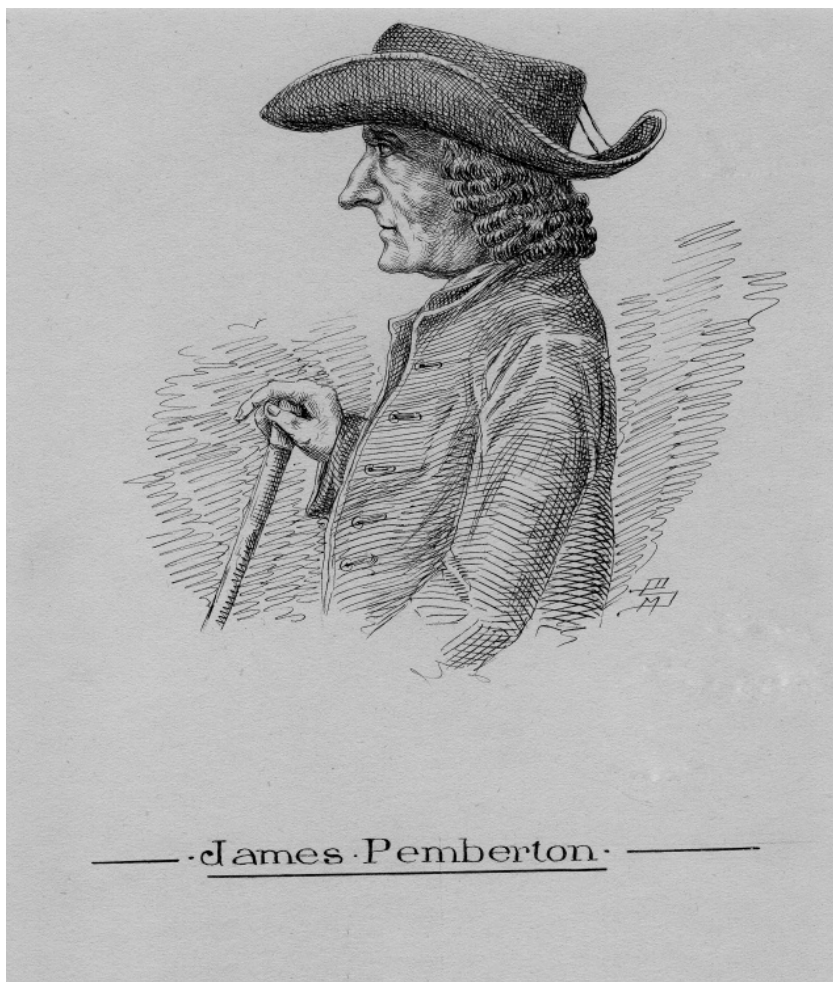


Figure 1.1 David McNeely Stauffer, *James Pemberton*, c. 1893, based on an original portrait by John F. Watson. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, David McNeely Stauffer Collection on Westcott's *History of Philadelphia*.

survive the American Revolution. As befitted a man of his wealth and station, Pemberton played an important role within the Society of Friends. He was a leading member of the Philadelphia Meeting for Sufferings from its organisation in 1756 until 1808, and, together with his brother Israel, was one of the trustees of the Friendly Association for

Regaining and Preserving Peace with the Indians by Pacific Measures. He also took an active interest in the political life of the colony, serving two terms as a member of the Pennsylvania Assembly, first in 1756 and then again in 1765–9. Pemberton, therefore, was part of the Philadelphia elite. He and his family lived at 'Evergreen', a country house near 23rd and South Streets, to the west of the city, and by 1800 he was listed in the City Directory as a 'gentleman'.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, Pemberton was no stranger to hardship or misfortune. Like many Quakers, he supported the Patriot cause during the American Revolution but stopped short of bearing arms against the British. Naturally, this stance (there were even rumours that some Philadelphia Quakers had colluded with the enemy) aroused suspicion, so much so that in September 1777 he and nineteen other men, mostly Quakers, were charged by the US Congress with 'evinced a disposition inimical to the cause of America' and detained in the Masons' Lodge.⁶⁷ Led out of Philadelphia under armed guard, Pemberton and his fellow prisoners, who included his two brothers, John and Israel Pemberton, as well as his brother-in-law Samuel Pleasants, older brother of Robert Pleasants, were subsequently escorted to Winchester, Virginia, where they endured an exile of eight months. As Pemberton's journal makes clear, throughout this difficult period he and his friends tried to go on much as before, meeting and praying together, while all the time protesting their innocence. But there is little doubt that the experience was traumatic or that it engendered a lingering sense of injustice. At no time either before or during their exile were the prisoners allowed to answer the charges made against them, and even after their release in April 1778 they were politely warned against pursuing the matter any further, for fear of causing more distress and aggravation.⁶⁸

Following his return to Philadelphia, Pemberton gave up all active interest in politics, devoting himself instead to his various reform interests, which included health (he was a member of the first board of managers of the Pennsylvania Hospital) and education. Following its reorganisation in 1787, he was also invited to become a member of the PAS, assuming the role of vice-president and, after 1790, president. Grateful for this opportunity to take a lead once again in public affairs,

⁶⁶ *American National Biography Online*, www.anb.org (accessed 9 May 2011); *Friends' Miscellany*, 7 (2) (1835): 49–95; Pemberton Papers, Miscellaneous Items, Box 3; *Philadelphia City Directory*, 1800.

⁶⁷ Thomas Gilpin, *Exiles in Virginia with Observations on the Conduct of the Society of Friends During the Revolutionary War, Comprising the Official Papers of the Government Relating to That Period, 1777–1778* (Philadelphia, Pa: Published for the Subscribers, 1848), p. 71.

⁶⁸ See Gilpin, *Exiles in Virginia*.

Pemberton threw himself into the work of the new society, going out of his way to create close working relationships with abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic. Letters and letter-writing were vital to this process. Pemberton not only put groups into contact with each other, as he did in February 1789 when he encouraged the society newly established in Providence, Rhode Island, to open a correspondence with the SEAST, but he also circulated news and information, as well as books and artefacts, through these different channels.⁶⁹ However, Pemberton was more than a go-between. Steeled by his experiences in Virginia, he brought to the early abolitionist movement great patience, as well as great fortitude; indeed, it became Pemberton's peculiar role to rouse others, including British abolitionists, when their energies flagged or, more often, when they became dispirited or disillusioned.

Another key actor in the international abolitionist network was Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville (see Fig. 1.2). Unlike Phillips and Pemberton, however, Brissot's activism was shaped not so much by his religious beliefs (Brissot was nominally a deist) but by Enlightenment thinkers, men such as Rousseau, Voltaire and Diderot; indeed, if there is a consistent theme in his rich and varied life it is his commitment to the Enlightenment principles of liberty, equality and sovereignty of the people. Seemingly destined for a legal career, Brissot became better known as a writer. During the 1780s he wrote a number of books on ethics and philosophy and, for a time, worked on the *Mercure de France* and the *Courier de l'Europe*. These activities were part of a more ambitious project, however, namely to promulgate ideas of political and legal reform. From an early stage, Brissot encouraged close collaboration between European intellectuals (at one point, he even proposed setting up a *lycée*, really a kind of 'philosophic club', with its own journal, based in London) and later, with Etienne Clavière, founded a Franco-American society, which was designed to promote commercial relations between the two nations. Like many young Frenchmen of his generation, Brissot was clearly inspired by the American Revolution, both as an idea and as an event. America, with its free institutions, became his ideal republic and, just as important, a model for others, including France, to follow.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ James Pemberton to William Dillwyn, 25 February (or possibly 25 April) 1789, Pemberton Papers, 51/182; James Pemberton to Edward Miller, 18 June 1789, Pemberton Papers, 52/98; John Murray to James Pemberton, 29 June 1789, Pemberton Papers, 52/112.

⁷⁰ See Ellery, *Brissot de Warville*, pp. 4–40; Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, *New Travels in the United States of America, 1788*, ed. Durand Echeverria (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1964), pp. xi–xvi.

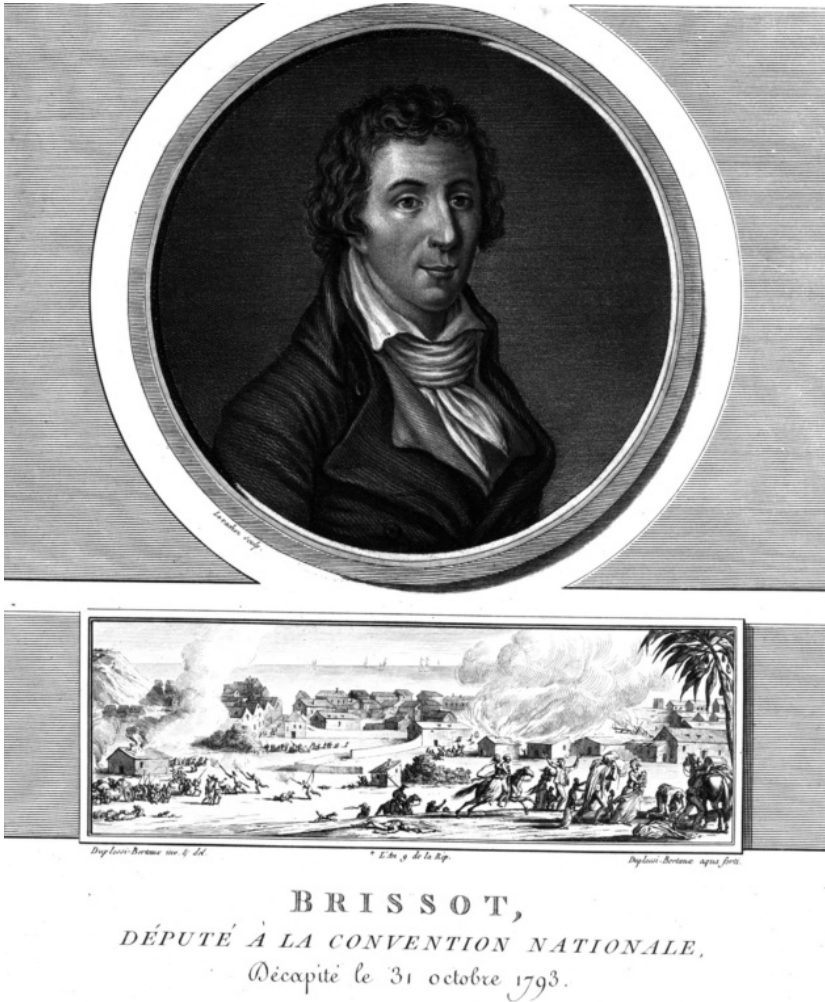


Figure 1.2 Charles François Gabriel Levachez, *Jacques-Pierre Brissot*, c. 1805. Author's own collection.

Brissot's abolitionism was all of a piece with his progressive thinking. Inspired by the example of British abolitionists, some of whom he already knew, in August 1787 he contacted the London Committee of the SEAST with an offer to act as their agent, along with his close friend Clavière. As Clarkson later explained: 'He purposed to translate and circulate through France, such publications as they might send him

from time to time, and to appoint bankers in Paris, who might receive subscriptions and remit them to London for the good of their common cause.⁷¹ Brissot also raised the possibility of setting up a similar society in France, but only if ‘his own countrymen should be found to take an interest in this great cause’.⁷² The London Committee was clearly intrigued by this approach, so much so that on 27 August it called a special meeting to discuss Brissot’s offer. The outcome was a polite rebuff. Not surprisingly, the committee declined the offer of ‘pecuniary aid’ (perhaps because they feared an adverse reaction from their British supporters), but, while doing so, they encouraged Brissot to do everything in his power to set up a French society and to join them in making common cause against the slave trade. In a gesture of solidarity, they also made Brissot and Clavière honorary members of the SEAST. If Brissot was disappointed, he did not show it. On the contrary, the London Committee’s carefully worded response seems to have been just the stimulus he was looking for, so much so that it was pasted into the minutes of the first formal meeting of the Société des Amis des Noirs, thereby becoming an essential part of its history as well as its memory.⁷³

As luck would have it, the following year Brissot visited the USA. Although this was meant to be a business trip and designed primarily to obtain information for Clavière, who was about to speculate on the American domestic debt, it was no accident that Brissot carried with him letters of introduction from both the Société des Amis des Noirs and the SEAST, or that he used this opportunity to make contact with American abolitionists. Brissot seems to have presented his credentials to the NYMS in August 1788 and to the PAS in September. Both groups welcomed these overtures and, with them, the prospect of opening a correspondence with French abolitionists. Both groups also set up temporary committees to help him with his ‘enquiries’ while he was in America.⁷⁴ Brissot established especially close ties with the members of the PAS, who, at a meeting in October, made him one of their honorary members. He spent a lot of time with James Pemberton, on one occasion accompanying him to the funeral of Thomas Howell, one of the elders of the Society of Friends, and formed particularly close ties with Miers Fisher and his family. As his account of his visit to the USA

⁷¹ Clarkson, *History*, vol. I, p. 446.

⁷² Clarkson, *History*, vol. I, p. 447; Ellery, *Brissot de Warville*, p. 183.

⁷³ Clarkson, *History*, vol. I, p. 447; SEAST Minutes, 27 August 1787; Dorigny and Gainot, *La Société des Amis des Noirs*, p. 63.

⁷⁴ Brissot, *New Travels*, pp. xix–xx; NYMS Minutes, 21 August 1788; PAS Minutes, 3 September 1788 (for letters of introduction) and 19 January 1789.

makes clear, Brissot warmed to the Quakers, in whom he discovered what he regarded as simple republican virtues.⁷⁵ Here, it seemed, was the potential for meaningful international cooperation; in fact, it is possible that Brissot found in transatlantic abolitionism a substitute for the kind of collaboration he had envisaged in the *lycée*.

Brissot finally left the USA on 3 December 1788. By this stage he was keen to get back to France, where a meeting of the Estates-General had been called for early the following year, but it is also clear that he was under increasing surveillance. Edmund Prior in New York reported that 'the French Minister here watched all his movements & conducts in such a manner as rendered his stay unpleasant'.⁷⁶ Significantly, Brissot returned to Paris via London, where he attended a meeting of the London Committee on 20 January 1789. These visits gave him a unique vantage point. He was, if you will, the public face of transatlantic abolitionism, as well as being a key figure in the emerging alliance between French and American activists.⁷⁷ Over the course of the next five years, until his death in 1793, Brissot would keep up a regular correspondence with American abolitionists, among them Pemberton and Fisher. On another front, he also corresponded with James Phillips and Thomas Clarkson; indeed, the number of his contacts underscored his centrality to the emerging abolitionist network. Brissot's contribution was important in another way, too. A prolific author, between 1788 and 1790 he produced a range of abolitionist texts that enjoyed a wide circulation not only in Europe but also in the USA. As we shall see, Brissot was one of the few French (abolitionist) authors who penetrated America during the 1780s, a feat that in a European context, at least, was equalled only by his friend Thomas Clarkson.

All of these figures stand out because in each case they linked together three different parts of the abolitionist network: Britain, France and the USA. Others, however, were part of much smaller cliques or subsets, sometimes involving only two different parts of the network. A case in point is the Quaker William Dillwyn (Fig. 1.3). An American by birth, Dillwyn was educated at the public school in Philadelphia, where he fell under the influence of Anthony Benezet. The experience changed his

⁷⁵ Brissot, *New Travels*, pp. 168–72, 240, n. 18, 298–335. James Phillips later told James Pemberton that Brissot 'seemed quite delighted with the reception he met with in America particularly amongst friends [Quakers] & mentioned thy name in such terms as bespoke his gratitude for thy favourable attention'. See James Phillips to James Pemberton, 10 March 1789, Pemberton Papers, 52/6.

⁷⁶ Ellery, *Brissot de Warville*, p. 85; Edmund Prior to James Pemberton, 29 January 1789, Pemberton Papers, 51/137.

⁷⁷ SEAST Minutes, 20 January 1789. See also William Dillwyn to James Pemberton, 3 March 1789, Pemberton Papers, 51/190.



Figure 1.3 C. R. Leslie, *William Dillwyn*, 1815. Courtesy of the Library of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain.

life. In 1772, he visited South Carolina, seemingly at Benezet's suggestion, and the following year produced, with Richard Smith and Daniel Wells, *Brief Considerations on Slavery and the Expediency of Its Abolition*. Around 1777, Dillwyn moved to Britain, where he remarried and put down roots in Walthamstow, Essex. Here he continued to involve

himself in abolitionist activity. In 1783, he became a member of the London Meeting for Sufferings on the Slave Trade, and the same year he co-wrote *The Case of Our Fellow-Citizens, the Oppressed Africans*, one of the earliest abolitionist tracts published in Britain. Four years later, he joined Thomas Clarkson, John Lloyd, James Phillips and others in the organisation of the SEAST, and he would remain a member of the society's London Committee until 1807.⁷⁸

As these few details suggest, Dillwyn was an important link between British and American abolitionists, at both a personal and an intellectual level; Clarkson went so far as to suggest that he was the 'great medium' whereby the various classes of 'forerunners and coadjutors up to 1787' were brought together and unified.⁷⁹ But Dillwyn's influence did not end there. Though he never returned to the USA, he retained strong links with Philadelphia Quakers, chief among them his brother, George, and his cousin, James Pemberton. Dillwyn and Pemberton were especially close. As we shall see, the two men corresponded regularly, at least once a month, and came to rely on each other for ideas and information. Dillwyn also took a keen interest in the welfare of James's brother, John Pemberton, who was in Europe during the greater part of the 1780s and 1790s, and accompanied him on his visit to the Netherlands and Germany in 1795.⁸⁰ As even a cursory glance at Pemberton's papers suggests, the Dillwyn–Pemberton nexus was one of the most important strands or 'spurs' of the abolitionist network, not least because of the levels of trust that existed between the various parties, John Pemberton included. Theirs was a special relationship that in drawing activists in London and Philadelphia closer together underscored the importance of transatlantic abolitionism during the 1780s.

By contrast, Thomas Clarkson's interests and sympathies turned eastward. Obsessive and indefatigable, Clarkson (Fig. 1.4) not only popularised abolition through his various books and pamphlets, but also, as the SEAST's travelling agent, provided a vital link between London and the provinces. In 1787 he visited the major slave ports. This was followed in 1788 by a tour of the south coast of England; in 1790 by a tour of Scotland and the north of England; and in 1791 by a tour of Shropshire and the north of England. Clarkson, as a result, built up a huge network of local and regional correspondents, many of whom he was in contact with on a regular basis, particularly during the petition campaigns of 1788 and 1792.⁸¹ He also established important links

⁷⁸ Biographical files, Friends House Library, London.

⁷⁹ Clarkson, *History*, vol. I, p. 202.

⁸⁰ Biographical files, Friends House Library, London.

⁸¹ Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, pp. 74–7.



Figure 1.4 Carl Frederick von Breda, *Thomas Clarkson*, 1789.
Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

with French abolitionists. In July 1789 he visited Paris at the London Committee's request and quickly immersed himself in the activities of the Société des Amis des Noirs. He was a regular presence at meetings (twelve, in all, between 21 August 1789 and 29 January 1790) and, armed with a French translation of his *Essay on the Impolicy of the Slave Trade* and copies of the plan and sections of the slave ship *Brookes*, even lobbied members of the French Constituent Assembly to take up the question of the slave trade.⁸² During this visit Clarkson also befriended figures such as Brissot and Honoré Gabriel Mirabeau, many of whom would become his lifelong friends; indeed, Clarkson's correspondence with Mirabeau testifies to the enduring friendships that existed between British and French activists.⁸³

Clarkson also had an impact in the USA. He was certainly held in high esteem by American abolitionists, and, as we shall see, his books and pamphlets enjoyed a wide readership.⁸⁴ Yet, strangely, he seems to have made little effort to cultivate American abolitionists. Pemberton's papers, for instance, contain only a few letters from Clarkson, and most of these date from after 1807. One reason for this was that Clarkson was something of an outsider. Unlike Brissot, he was not personally known to American abolitionists and neither did he have many American contacts. (Dillwyn, on the other hand, was deeply embedded in the transatlantic Quaker community and could count men such as Pemberton among his close personal acquaintances.) And yet there were undoubtedly other factors at work here, too. Clarkson considered himself a 'Democrat', and, if anything, his visit to Paris in 1789 reinforced his identification with the French Revolution. Many of the members of the Société des Amis des Noirs, including Brissot, Mirabeau and Condorcet, were themselves deeply involved in the revolutionary movement in France, and, much to the dismay of some of his colleagues, Clarkson was quick to lend them his support.⁸⁵ By contrast, if his surviving correspondence is anything to go by, Clarkson showed little interest in America or in the potential of American abolitionism. Put a different way, his perspective was European rather than transatlantic, and it was this outlook, as much as kinship, religion or, indeed, familiarity, that helped to shape his allegiances.

⁸² Clarkson, *History*, vol. I, pp. 122–66; Dorigny and Gainot, *La Société des Amis des Noirs*, pp. 239–70; Ellen Gibson Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson: A Biography* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 53–9.

⁸³ For Clarkson's correspondence with Mirabeau, see Thomas Clarkson Papers, CN36–40, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

⁸⁴ See Chapter 2.

⁸⁵ Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, pp. 80–1.

Wilberforce, for his part, stood both inside and outside these networks. As the chief parliamentary supporter of abolition, Wilberforce was widely applauded, not least in the USA where groups such as the NYMS made him one of their honorary members.⁸⁶ But Wilberforce did not cultivate American contacts – partly because he was not actively involved in the opinion-building activities of the SEAST and partly because, like Clarkson, he attached more significance to France, although his interests here were strategic rather than ideological. (Wilberforce had no time for the political ideals of French revolutionaries.) If anything, Wilberforce preferred to work through his own networks, which revolved around fellow Evangelicals (Hannah More, Henry Thornton, Bishop Beilby Porteous) whose aim was nothing less than a total revolution in British manners.⁸⁷ Wilberforce's relationship with the SEAST was, as a result, complex. While Wilberforce clearly looked to the London Committee for support, he did not formally become a member of the society until April 1791, on the eve of the second petition campaign. Theirs was in many ways a marriage of convenience, shaped as much by political necessity as it was by close personal, religious or kinship ties. Indeed, if William Allen is to be believed, Wilberforce had serious doubts about the religious convictions of Quakers, even if 'continued association seemed in a degree to soften down those prejudices'.⁸⁸

The 1780s, therefore, witnessed the emergence of an abolitionist network that spanned the Atlantic world, connecting places as far afield as London, Paris, New York, Baltimore, Richmond and Philadelphia. Wherever they were, activists seem to have reached out to each other. They were frequently members of societies in a number of different countries (this was particularly true of Sharp, Clarkson and Brissot); they corresponded with each other on a regular basis; and they freely exchanged ideas and strategies. Put a different way, this was a genuinely transatlantic community, a network of like-minded reformers that was cosmopolitan in both its outlook and composition. As we have seen, the nature and extent of these relationships – some of them quite complex, others relatively simple – depended on a variety of factors: kinship ties, business and religious contacts, personal recommendations and

⁸⁶ PAS Minutes, 29 December 1794.

⁸⁷ For Wilberforce and Evangelicals, see Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge University Press, 1961); R. J. Hind, 'Wilberforce and Perceptions of the British People', *Historical Research*, 60 (143) (1987): 321–35; G. F. A. Best, 'The Evangelicals and the Established Church in the Early Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Theological Studies*, new series, 10 (April 1959): 68–78.

⁸⁸ (Anon.), *Life of William Allen, with Selections from His Correspondence* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Henry Longstreth, 1847), vol. I, pp. 133–4.

face-to-face meetings and visits. There was no simple formula and no guarantee of success; indeed, some parts of the international abolitionist network clearly worked better than others. A lot, however, depended on the willingness of those involved to make these relationships work. This is why figures such as Granville Sharp, Benjamin Rush, James Phillips, Brissot, James Pemberton, William Dillwyn and Thomas Clarkson were so important. Through their patience and perseverance, these men not only sustained the early abolitionist movement but they also ensured that it remained a potent international force.