19th Century Reforms: Crash Course US History #15

Crash Course: U.S. History
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Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course U.S. History, and today, we finally get to talk about sex. Also, some other things. Today, we're going to discuss religious and moral reform movements in nineteenth century America, but I promise there WILL BE SOME SEX.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Is it gonna be about real sex or is it gonna be about people who are obsessed with not having sex?

You got me there, Me from the Past, but how and whether we skoodilypoop ends up saying a lot about America, and also about people in general.

So one response to the massive changes brought about by the shift to an industrialized market economy was to create Utopian communities where people could separate themselves from the worst aspects of this "Brave New World." The most famous at the time, and arguably still were the Shakers, who were famous for their excellent furniture, so you can't say that they really fully withdrew from the market system. Still, Shaker communities did separate themselves from the competition that characterized free markets, especially in terms of the competition for mates. They were celibate, and therefore only able to increase their numbers by recruitment, which was made a little bit difficult by celibacy. But, they did do a lot of dancing to sublimate their libidinous urges. They embraced equality of the sexes, and at their peak, they had more than 6,000 members. Today, they are still one of the most successful Utopian communities to have emerged in the nineteenth century. They have three members.

Much more successful in the long run were the Latter Day Saints, also called Mormons, although at the time their ideas were so far out of the mainstream that they were persecuted and chased from New York all the way to Utah. In addition to the Bible, the LDS church holds the book of Mormon as a holy scripture, which tells of the resurrected Jesus's visits to the Americas. And while it was subject to widespread persecution and even some massacres, the LDS church continued to grow, and in fact continues to today.

So while some of these communities were based in religion, others were more worldly attempts to create new models of society, like Brook Farm. Founded in 1841 by a group of Transcendentalists (is a dependent clause that always ends in failure), Brook Farm tried to show that manual labor and intellectual engagement could be successfully mixed. This community drew upon the French Socialist Charles Fourier, who, as you may recall from Crash Course World History, believed--no joke--that Socialism would eventually turn the seas in to lemonade. And much like Fourier's planned communities, Brook Farm did not work out, largely because--and I can say this with some authority--writers do not enjoy farming.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, complained about having to shovel horse manure, but if he'd only kept shoveling horse manure, he might not have shoveled the Blithedale Romances onto an unsuspecting reading public. I'm sorry, Nathaniel Hawthorne, I do like the Scarlet Letter, but I feel like the only reason you're read is because you're, like, the only author in pre-Civil War America. So, either we have to pretend that America began with Huck Finn's journey on the Mississippi, or else we're stuck with you. It was just like you, Thomas Paine, Mary Rowlandson, a bunch of printed sermons, and James Fenimore Cooper.

Anyway, the most Utopian of the Utopian communities were set up at Utopia, Ohio and Modern Times, New York, by Josiah Warren. Everything here was supposed to be totally unregulated and voluntary, including marriage, which, as you can imagine, worked out brilliantly. But, without any laws to regulate behavior, Warren's communities were individualism on steroids, so they collapsed spectacularly and quickly. But these Utopian communities were relatively rare. Many more nineteenth century Americans participated in efforts to reform society, rather than just withdraw from it.

And behind most of those reform movements was religion, particularly a religious revival called the Second Great Awakening. This series of revival meetings reached their height in the 1820s and 1830s with Charles Grandison Finney's giant camp meetings in New York. And, in a way, the Second Great Awakening made America a religious nation. The number of Christian ministers in the United States went from 2,000 in the 1770s to 40,000 by 1845. And western New York was the center of this revivalism. That's where Joseph Smith had his revelations. It's also where John Humphrey Noyes founded his Oneida Community in which post-menopausal women introduced teenage boys to sex and which eventually ceased being a religious community and devolved into--wait for it--one of the world's largest silverware companies. That's right, every time you take a bite of food with Oneida cutlery, you're celebrating free love and May-December relationships. Well, more like February-December relationships.

[Libertage: "America: Turning Free Love into Fancy Forks"]

So yes, religious fervor burned so hot in upstate New York that it became known as the Burned-Over District. And New York remains the heartland of conservative Christianity to this day. Or not.

The Awakening stressed individual choice in salvation and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and it was deeply influenced by the Market Revolution. So, like, while many preachers criticize the selfish individualism inherent in free market competition, there was sort of a market for new religions and preachers who would travel the country, drumming up business. Awakening ministers also preached the values of sobriety, industry, and self-discipline, which had become the essence of both the market economy and the impulse for reform. There are three points I want to make about the religious nature of all these nineteenth-century reform movements:

First, it was overwhelmingly Protestant. Like, all these new religions were Protestant denominations, which meant that they wouldn't have a lot of appeal to immigrants from Ireland and Germany, who started to pour into the United States in the middle of the 19th century, because a) those people were mostly Catholic and b) reasons we'll get to momentarily.

Secondly, many of these reformers believed in Perfectionism: the idea that individuals in society were capable of unlimited improvement.

And third, many of the reform movements were based, ultimate, on a different view of freedom than we might be used to. And this is really important to understand. For 19th century reformers, freedom was the opposite of being able to do whatever you wanted, which they associated with the word "license." They believed that true freedom was like an internal phenomenon that came from self-discipline and the practice of self-control. Essentially, instead of being free to drink booze, you would be free from the temptation to drink booze. According to Philip Schaff, a minister who came to Pennsylvania in the 1840s, "true national freedom in the American view [is] anything but an absence of restraint ... [it] rests upon a moral groundwork, upon the virtue of self possession and self control in individual citizens." Members of the fastest-growing Protestant denominations (like Methodists and Baptists) were taught that it wasn't enough to avoid sin themselves. They also needed to perfect their communities, and that leads us to America's great national nightmare: Temperance.

Now, you're not going to see me advocate for the prohibition of

alcohol, but to be fair, Americans in the first half of the 19th century were uncommonly drunk. In fact, in 1830, per capita liquor consumption was seven gallons per year, more than double what it is now. And that doesn't even count wine, beer, hard cider, Zima, pruno... By the way, some people like to have home breweries or whatever, but at our office, Stan's been making pruno under the couch.

The growing feeling among reformers that we should limit--or even ban--alcohol appealed to those Protestant ideas of restraint and perfecting the social order. And that's also precisely why it was so controversial, especially among Catholic immigrants, who a) came largely from Germany and Ireland, two nations not known for their opposition to strong drink, and b) we're Catholic, and the Catholic Church's morality didn't view alcohol or dancing as inherently sinful the way that so many Protestant denominations did.

And then, we have the widespread construction of asylums and other homes for outcasts. Anyone who's ever done a bit of urban exploring knows that these places were built by the hundreds in the 19th century: jails, poorhouses, asylums for the mentally ill. And while they might not seem like places of freedom, to reformers, they were. Remember, freedom was all about not having the choice to sin so you could be free of sin. Bear in mind, of course, that the crusading reformers that built these places usually chose not to live in them.

And speaking of places you're forced to go regardless of whether you want to, the mid-19th century saw the growth of compulsory state-funded education in the United States. These new schools were called "common schools," and education reformers like Horace Mann hoped that they would give poor students the moral character and body of knowledge to compete with upper-class kids. And that worked out great, just look where we are on the equality of opportunity index. Now, this may seem like an obvious win for all involved, but many parents opposed common schools because they didn't want their kids getting moral instruction from the government. That said, by 1860, all northern states had established public schools, but they were far less common in the South, where the planter class was afraid of education falling into the wrong hands, like, for instance, those of poor whites, and especially slaves, which brings us to abolition. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

[Thought Bubble]

Abolitionism was the biggest reform movement in the first half of the 19th century, probably because--sorry, alcohol and fast dancing--slavery was the worst. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the only challengers to slavery were slaves themselves, free blacks, and Quakers. But in the early 19th century, colonizationists began to gain ground. Their idea was to ship all former slaves back to Africa, and the American Colonization Society became popular and wealthy enough to establish Liberia as an independent homeland for former slaves. While the idea was impractical and racist, it appealed to politicians like Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay, and some black people--who figured that America's racism would never allow them to be treated as equals--did choose to emigrate to Liberia, but most free blacks opposed the idea. In fact, in 1817, 3,000 of them assembled in Philadelphia and declared that black people were entitled to the same freedom as whites. By 1830, advocates for the end of slavery became more and more radical, like William Lloyd Garrison, whose magazine The Liberator was first published in 1831. Known for being "as harsh as truth and as uncompromising as justice," Garrison once burned the Constitution, declaring it was a pact with the devil. Radical abolitionism became a movement largely because it used the same mix of pamphleteering and charismatic speechifying that people saw in the preachers of the Second Great Awakening, which, in turn, brought religion and abolition together in the North, preaching a simple message: Slavery was a sin.

By 1843, 100,000 northerners were aligned with the American Anti-Slavery Society. What made the radical abolitionists so radical was their inclusive vision of freedom. It wasn't just about ending slavery, but about equality. The extension of full citizens' rights to all people, regardless of race. By the way, it was abolitionists who re-Christened the old state house bell in Philadelphia, the Liberty Bell. Why's all this awesome stuff happen in Philadelphia?

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

[End of Thought Bubble]

So, needless to say, not all Americans were quite so thrilled about abolitionism, which is why slavery remained unabolished. Often, resistance to abolitionism was violent. Like, in 1838, a mob in Philadelphia burned down Pennsylvania Hall because people were using it to hold abolitionist meetings. And you were doing so well, Philadelphia!

A year later, a mob in Alton, Illinois murdered anti-slavery editor Elijah P. Lovejoy when he was defending his printing press. This was the fifth time, by the way, that a mob had destroyed one of his newspapers. Even Congress got in on the let's-suppress-free-speech-in-the-press-act by adopting the "gag rule" in 1836. The gag rule prohibited members of Congress from even reading aloud or discussing calls for the emancipation of slaves. Seriously. And you thought the filibuster was dysfunctional!

The best-known abolitionist was Frederick Douglas, a former slave whose life story is well-known because he wrote the brilliant "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave." But he wasn't the only former slave to write about the evils of slavery. Josiah Henderson's [sic] autobiography was probably the basis for the most famous anti-slavery novel ever: Uncle Tom's Cabin. Uncle Tom's Cabin sold more than a million copies between 1851 and 1854 and, despite the unreadable, heavy-handed prose drenched in sentimentality, the book is a great reminder that bad novels can also change the world, which is why it was so widely banned in the South.

But while based on a black man's story, Uncle Tom's Cabin was written by a white woman, which shows us that black abolitionists were battling not only slavery, but near ubiquitous racism. Like, Pat Boone re-recording Little Richard to make it safe for the white kids at the sock hop. They had to fight the pseudo-science arguing that black people were physically inferior to white people, or just born to servitude. And they had encountered the common conception--still common, I'm afraid--that there was no such thing as "African civilization."

Oh, it's time for the Mystery Document?

[Mystery Document]

The rules here are simple. If I guess the author of the Mystery Document, I do not get shocked. Let's see what we got today.

"Beloved brethren - here let me tell you, and believe it, that the Lord our God, as true as he sits on his throne in heaven, and as true as our savior died to redeem the world, will give you a Hannibal, and when the Lord shall have raised him up, and given him to you for your possession, O my suffering brethren! Remember the divisions and consequent sufferings of Carthage and of Haiti ... But what need have I to refer to antiquity, when Haiti, the glory of the blacks and terror of tyrants, is enough to convince the most avaricious and stupid of wretches?"

Alright, Stan, this is gonna take some serious critical thinking skills, so let's break this down. So, the author's clearly African American, and admirer of the Haitian Revolution, which means this was written after 1800. Plus, he references Hannibal, who Crash Course World History fans will remember almost conquered the Romans using freaking elephants. And Hannibal was from Carthage, which I don't need to tell you is in Africa. He also warns that Haiti is the terror of tyrants, referencing the widespread massacring of white people after the Revolution. Ok, that's what we know. And now we shall make our guess. Henry Highland Garnet? I HATE MYSELF!

It's David Walker? I'm not gonna lie to you, Stan, I don't even know who that is, so I probably deserve this. AAAH!

That's how you learn, fellow students. It's not about positive reinforcement, it's about shocking yourself when you screw up. I got a 3 on the AP American History Test, so I should know.

[End of Mystery Document]

So black abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, and apparently David Walker, were the most eloquent spokesmen for the idea of equal citizenship in the United States for black and white people.

In his 1852 Independence Day address--by the way, international viewers, our Independence Day is July 4th, so he gave the speech on July 4th--Frederick Douglass said, "Would you argue with me that man is entitled to liberty? That he is the rightful owner of his own body? You have already declared it. Must I argue the wrongfulness of slavery? There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven that does not know that slavery is wrong for him."

And, in the end, the sophistication and elegance in the black abolitionists' arguments became one of the strongest arguments for abolition. If black people were better off enslaved and inherently inferior, how could anyone account for a man like Frederick Douglass? Abolitionism, at least until after the Civil War, pushed all other reform movements to the edges.

But I just want to note here at the end that it's no coincidence that so many abolitionists' voices like Harriet Beecher Stowe, for instance, were female. And their work toward a more just social order for others transformed the way that American women imagined themselves as well, which is what we'll be discussing next week. I'll see you then. Thanks for watching.

=====Credits=====

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko. Our associate producer is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself. And our graphics team is Thought Cafe.

If you have questions about today's video, you can ask them in comments where they'll be answered by our team of historians. You can also suggest captions for the Libertage.

Thanks for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my home town, don't forget to be awesome.