

## Meetings for Learning – Resources – History and Testimonies

**Sarah Grimké (1792-1873)**

**Angelina Grimké-(Weld) (1805-1879)**



### **Sarah's early life**

Sarah and Angelina Grimké were daughters of a slaveholding Judge in Charlestown, South Carolina. Sarah was a teenager when Angelina was born, and she was very aware of the cruelty of slavery. At the age of 5, when she first saw a slave whipped, she tried to run away to a place where there was no slavery and her outrage lasted throughout her life,

Her brother Thomas urged her not to marry because of the 'moral degradation' involved for wives of slaveholders. Sarah wrote that the white woman is often 'compelled to witness in her own domestic circle, those disgusting and heart-sickening jealousies and strifes which disgraced and distracted the family of Abraham'.<sup>1</sup> She was referring to the slaveholder's relations with his female slaves, and the resulting hatred and distress often felt by the slaveholder's wife.

When she was twenty-four she had a conversion experience at the Presbyterian

Church. The clergyman, Rev. Kollock preached about sin, hell-fire and damnation, and as a result, Sarah gave up the 'sinful' things in life, such as dancing, attending balls and parties, and reading novels. She undertook charitable work and religious duties instead, and when her father became ill, she decided it was her duty to nurse him. He was sent to a doctor in Philadelphia, and she went there with him in April 1819. They stayed with Quakers, and in June they went to Long Beach resort in New Jersey, where the Judge died and was buried. Sarah stayed in Philadelphia for some months before returning home. On the return voyage to Charleston, she met and talked extensively with Israel Morris, a Quaker. They agreed to continue their discussions by correspondence, and he gave her a copy of John Woolman's *Journal*.

### **Returning home**

Sarah had been away from the south for several months, and slavery was more difficult for her to bear when she returned. She read Woolman's *Journal*, and wrote to Israel Morris to find out more about Quakers. She also asked her brother Thomas to get her some more Quaker books. Woolman's solution to slavery was clear: Stop the buying and selling and the holding of slaves. His book had a profound effect on Sarah. She began attending Quaker meeting in Charleston, and felt called to go north. She went with her widowed sister and niece to Philadelphia, and she stayed with the Morris family. She attended Arch Street Quaker Meeting (where Lucretia Mott also worshipped), and she became a member in 1823. Her younger sister Angelina was involved in the Presbyterian church in Charleston, where she organized some female interfaith prayer meetings. She spoke against slavery to people in the church. In 1829 the Presbyterians expelled her, and she also moved north, and became a member of the Arch Street Quaker Meeting in Philadelphia in 1831.

### **Working for the anti-slavery cause**

William Lloyd Garrison, who was based in Boston, edited and published an abolitionist newspaper entitled *The Liberator*. He was one of the founders of the

American Anti-Slavery Society and became its leader in 1833. He was also appointed an agent of the society to travel and give lectures against slavery. The number of American Anti-Slavery Society agents increased to around 70 in the mid to late 1830's. Angelina wrote to *The Liberator* in 1835, and was invited by Garrison to attend an agent's convention. Theodore Weld trained abolition agents to speak against slavery, and he tutored the Grimké's in public speaking. Angelina and Sarah then did a series of parlour talks for women. Many wanted to hear them, so they got a room in a Baptist Church. There was some public consternation at women lecturing in a Church, but Weld urged them to continue, and they became skilled at what they did. They began to write, and in one pamphlet, Sarah challenged the Southern Clergy to show moral leadership. They read widely to equip themselves to present legal, political, economic and biblical arguments against slavery, and Weld continued to guide them. They attended the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women in New York in 1837, where they said that race prejudice needed to be tackled in the North as well as in the South.

### **Their pioneering work**

The American Anti-Slavery Society, agreed to send the Grimké's on a speaking tour to Boston. They were the first women abolition agents in the country, and as white southern women actively working for abolition they were also pioneers. They addressed large mixed audiences, and during the speaking tour, they wrote a series of 'letters' which were published in *The Liberator*. Angelina wrote 'Letters to Catherine Beecher,' mainly about abolition. Sarah wrote 'Letters on the Equality of the Sexes,' which dealt with equality for women, and their right to speak and be active in the cause of abolition, on which they were often challenged. At the end of July 1837, a pastoral letter was issued by the Congregational Churches in Massachusetts, and read from the pulpits, against Garrison and the Grimké's, which stated that woman's appropriate place was specified in the Bible. Sarah's next letter to *The Liberator* addressed the Biblical argument against women's rights: 'The Lord Jesus defines the duties of his followers in the Sermon on the Mount. He lays down the principles by

which they should be governed, without any reference to sex or condition. Men and women were created equal; they are both moral and accountable beings, and whatever is right for man to do is right for woman.’ Referring to the translation of the Greek word for ‘deaconess’ as ‘servant’ in particular versions of the Bible, she said that when women are allowed to study Greek and Hebrew, ‘we shall produce some various readings of the Bible, a little different from those we have now’.<sup>ii</sup>

Sarah was very outspoken about the particular situation of women slaves, for whom she felt the ‘deepest shame and sorrow.’ ‘The virtue of female slaves is wholly at the mercy of irresponsible tyrants, and women are bought and sold in our slave markets to gratify the brutal lust of those who bear the name of Christians. In our slave states, if amid all her degradation and ignorance, a woman desires to preserve her virtue unsullied, she is either bribed or whipped into compliance, or if she dares resist her seducer, her life by the laws of some states may be, and has actually been sacrificed to the fury of his disappointed passion. Where such laws do exist, the power which is necessarily vested in the master over his property leaves the defenceless slave entirely at his mercy, and the sufferings of some females on this account, both physical and mental are intense. But even if any laws existed ... they would be null and void, because the evidence of a coloured person is not admitted against a white in any of our courts of justice in the slave states. In Christian America, the slave has no refuge from unbridled cruelty and lust.’<sup>iii</sup>

They were asked by the Anti Slavery Society to limit their public talks to the subject of slavery, but Sarah was allowed to continue with her series of articles on women’s rights. Angelina, in her articles, wrote against the colonization argument, (that of sending slaves back to Africa) and she attacked race prejudice. She opposed gradualism and called instead for immediate emancipation. She looked for civil rights for slaves: freedom, payment of wages, rights to marriage and guardianship of children, education and the protection of fair laws.

## **Women's participation in the anti-slavery movement**

Angelina and Sarah were seen as leaders amongst the women abolitionists, and they addressed the Massachusetts State Legislature on behalf of the anti-slavery petitions which were collected and presented by women abolitionists. In the late 1830's, the issue of women's participation troubled some members of the anti-slavery movement. Garrison supported women's membership, because he saw that women such as Lucretia Mott, the Grimkes, Sarah Pugh and Abbey Kelley were very effective workers against slavery. There was a rift in 1839 between Garrison and those who opposed women's membership, thereby excluding women's issues from abolition. Arthur Tappan, who had been a major benefactor, the poet John Greenleaf Whittier, and Henry Stanton were among those who left to form a new organization which would exclude women from membership. The new organization was called the National Anti-Slavery Society and Henry Stanton became the leader.

## **Marriage and disownment**

Theodore Weld, who trained and educated the Grimkés to be effective public speakers, fell in love with Angelina, and they were married in 1838. Sarah went to live with them. Angelina was disowned for marrying a non Quaker, and Sarah was disowned for attending their wedding. When the rift happened in the Anti Slavery Society, Sarah and Angelina supported Garrison, but Angelina's new husband Theodore Weld supported Stanton, so Weld and the Grimké sisters withdrew from both organizations at that time. Instead they found a useful project to work on at home. Theodore Weld bought more than 20,000 discarded newspapers of the New York Commercial Reading Rooms from 1837-1839. It included daily newspapers from the South. Sarah and Angelina read the papers and cut out everything related to slavery. There were court reports, 'wanted' advertisements for escaped slaves, and news reports. They compiled all the documents, and published it, entitled, *Slavery As It Is* in 1839. It was an extremely powerful pamphlet, documenting the horrors of slavery, and it sold in huge numbers. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is partly based on it.

The Grimké-Welds tried farming and afterwards ran a couple of schools. Sarah compiled a systematic survey of laws relating to women in the different States. They continued to be active for human rights throughout their lives, but remained in the background of the reform organizations. Sarah died in 1873, Angelina died in 1879, and Theodore Weld died in 1895.

### **Questions for small group discussion, or journaling:**

- Reading John Woolman's *Journal* led to a transformation in the life of Sarah Grimke. She moved to Philadelphia, joined the Quakers, and with her sister Angelina, worked for the abolition of slavery. Has reading any particular book had a profound effect on you? How and why did it affect you?
- The Biblical arguments against women's equality are still used occasionally to justify discrimination. ('Woman was created second, sinned first, and she should stay silent in church'). What do you say in relation to these arguments? Are they relevant?
- In their 30's and 40's the Grimkés took on public speaking, researching, writing and presenting the case for abolition, to challenging audiences. Would you have done what they did from 1835-1839? Where did their courage come from?

### **Further reading:**

Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and Other Essays*, [1838, Isaac Knapp, Boston], ed. Elizabeth Ann Bartlett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

Gerda Lerner, *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Womens rights and Abolition* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967)

Sue Monk Kidd, *The Invention of Wings*, (a novel based on the Grimkés) (London: Viking 2014)

*Compiled by Julianna Minihan during an Eva Koch Scholarship, 2015, at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham, ([www.woodbrooke.org.uk](http://www.woodbrooke.org.uk))*

<sup>i</sup>Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and Other Essays*, p. 61

<sup>ii</sup> Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, p. 38

<sup>iii</sup> Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, p. 59-60