

# Wilberforce's Influence on the Efforts of U.S. Abolition of Slavery

Wilberforce's influence had long been felt in America. Benjamin Franklin, no less, in the months before he died in 1790, learned of the efforts underway in Britain to seek the abolition of the British slave trade. Wilberforce, whom Franklin had met cordially in 1783, had given his first great speech against the slave trade on 12 May 1789. Franklin learned of Wilberforce's effort, and those of other like-minded British reformers. He rejoiced at the prospect of an end to the slave trade.

President George Washington sent John Jay to England in 1794 to build better relations with England. Wilberforce noted briefly in his diary his meeting with Jay with whom he carried on a subsequent correspondence. Jay had actually been engaged in abolition in the U.S. in 1777 as a member of the constitutional gathering in the state of New York. Both Wilberforce and Jay were soul mates in their opposition to slavery. Five years after meeting Wilberforce and while serving in his last public post as the Governor of New York, Jay signed legislation to emancipate slaves in the state.

In the same year that British finally abolished the slave trade, 1807, America had also voted to do so--on 2 March 1807, some 23 days before the Royal Assent making legislation official in England. That both watershed events had taken place at nearly the same time was due in no small measure to Wilberforce's example and influence with many prominent Americans, including James Madison and President Thomas Jefferson with whom Wilberforce corresponded..

Writing to Jay in August of 1809 Wilberforce sought Jay's prestige and influence to lobby for an Anglo-American convention on anti-slave trade laws. Wilberforce informed Jay of a new society that has been formed "for the purpose of promoting civilization and improvement in Africa." The pressing concern of the society was the inability for effective enforcement of the anti-slave trade laws. Wilberforce appealed for Jay's support in influencing the United States' full cooperation in enforcing its own law.

Fast forward to 1833. When news reached America's shores that the British government had at last voted to emancipate the nearly 800,000 slaves in bondage throughout its empire (news Wilberforce had received just three days before his death) the leaders of the American Anti-Slavery Society took this as their cue to formally launch their efforts to secure emancipation in America. William Lloyd Garrison and the other leaders of the AAS believed that the momentum established by Wilberforce and his colleagues in Britain were a harbinger of better days for America. In this respect, reformers in Britain and America were again acting in concert.

The following lines by Isaac Watts were applied to William Wilberforce by William Lloyd Garrison following Garrison's visit with Wilberforce on 19 June 1833.

*Were I so tall to reach the pole,  
Or grasp the ocean with my span,  
I must be measured by my soul;  
The mind's the standard of the man.*

Garrison's admiration for Wilberforce bordered on hero worship, but their visit yielded much more than a treasured interview. At Garrison's behest, Wilberforce drew upon his influence and wide contacts among British reformers to denounce the racist aims of the American Colonization Society, which sought forcibly to repatriate slaves to Africa. Along with the many fellow reformers whose help he had enlisted, Wilberforce signed his name to the document denouncing the ACS.

It was the last great act Wilberforce performed in service to the sons and daughters of Africa--and the last great act of collaboration Wilberforce undertook with an American colleague.

When news of Wilberforce's death on July 29, 1833, the reaction was immediate in New York. The officers of Free People of Color met at the colored Presbyterian Church in New York to draft resolutions expressing regret felt by the people of color for the death of Wilberforce and to recommend "the most extensive manifestations of feeling be recommended to the people of color throughout the United States, particularly in this State." The lament of the great African American Benjamin Hughes who preached in praise of Wilberforce on behalf of grateful American slaves still yearning to breath free at the time of Wilberforce's death

There is a charm that attracts the admiration of men to their destroyers; a propensity to applaud those very acts that bring misery on the human race; and on the other hand to pass by unheeded, the placid and even tenor of the real benefactors of their species.

The list of important Americans who were influenced by Wilberforce or who had significant dealings with him reads like a who's who of the early American republic. The list includes Presidents John Quincy Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe and Abraham Lincoln. It includes many prominent African-Americans, among them William Wells Brown, Paul Cuffe, Frederick Douglass and Benjamin Hughes. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lydia Maria Child and Mary A. Collier were among the women reformers and writers shaped by his legacy. Other noted Americans influenced by Wilberforce include Whittier, Emerson, Thoreau, Lewis Tappan, Henry Ingersoll Bowditch, William Buell Sprague, William Cabell Rives, George Ticknor, Charles Sumner, Jedidiah Morse, Samuel F.B. Morse and Lyman Beecher. There are many other names that could be listed. Suffice it to day, Wilberforce's influence and legacy were deeply felt in America. It was as Lincoln said of him in 1858: every schoolchild knew of Wilberforce.