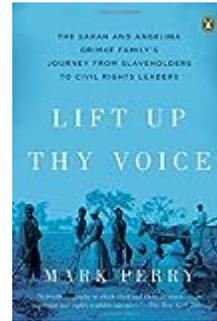




Mark Perry. *Lift up Thy Voice: The Grimke Family's Journey from Slaveholders to Civil Rights Leaders.* New York: Viking, 2001. xxii + 406 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-14-200103-5.



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The Emergence of Civil Rights Leaders from the Deep South

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Interracial families have long fascinated historians and novelists alike. For this reason, it is somewhat surprising that no one has explored the family history of the Grimkes, perhaps the most well-known interracial family in nineteenth century America. As Mark Perry explains in *Lift up Thy Voice: The Grimke Family's Journey from Slaveholders to Civil Rights Leaders*, the family was among the elite of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century South Carolina, but its most famous members rejected slavery. Sarah and Angelina Grimke, daughters of a Revolutionary war veteran and judge, became well-known abolitionists and feminists during the 1830s. After the Civil War, Sarah and Angelina prepared Archibald and Francis Grimke, the sons of their brother Henry and his slave Nancy Weston, to assume leadership in the civil rights movement. Perry uses this family biography as a lens into this movement during the nineteenth century.

Perry describes the emergence of abolitionists in the most unlikely of settings, Charleston. Sarah, born in 1792 as the second of fourteen children of John and Mary

Grimke, never embraced the role of slave mistress. Beginning at the age of eleven, she defied her father's expressed wishes and taught slaves how to read in a Sunday school. Two years later, Angelina was born. Sarah played such an important role in raising her that Angelina called her "mother." By 1817 Sarah began to take the steps that eventually led her to break with her family in Charleston. She left her family's faith, Episcopal Church, and embraced, for a time, Presbyterianism. Sarah then moved to New Jersey and began looking for her place within the anti-slavery movement. By 1821, she had accepted the abolitionist views of the Quaker Church and moved to Philadelphia. Thereafter, she encountered a chilly reception during visits to her family, but maintained contact with Angelina. At the age of twenty-three, in 1828, Angelina delighted Sarah by converting to Quakerism and moving to Philadelphia.

Through their church, Sarah and Angelina quickly connected with anti-slavery reformers in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Both women developed oratorical skills during their participation in church meetings, where members discussed the merits of gradual eman-

ipation and colonization. When William Lloyd Garrison pressed for immediate emancipation with the publication of *The Liberator* in 1833, the Grimke sisters quickly joined the American Anti-Slavery Society. They soon began working closely with Theodore Dwight Weld, who espoused political organization as the means of defeating slavery.

In addition to delivering public speeches condemning slavery, the sisters developed a distinctive critique of slavery. Perry maintains that, unlike most of the anti-slavery reformers, Angelina and Sarah Grimke identified racial or color prejudice as the real evil of slavery (p. 83). In 1836, the sisters published two tracts calling for immediate abolition and equality for black people: *An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* by Angelina and *An Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States* by Sarah. Both tracts aroused widespread indignation in the South. In 1838, the sisters extended their argument, advocating political equality for women in *Letters to Catherine Beecher*, written by Angelina, and *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* by Sarah. After her marriage to Weld, Angelina retreated into private life; although, she and Sarah did establish a school in Philadelphia.

From the moment of their first meeting, Sarah, Angelina and Theodore embraced their nephews Francis and Archibald Grimke as the standardbearers of their work into the next century. A newspaper item that identified Francis and Archibald as black students at Lincoln University in Philadelphia immediately aroused Sarah's suspicions that these men were indeed the sons of her brother Henry. With the guidance of their newfound family, Francis and Archibald experimented with several different programs. By the end of the 1880s, Francis completed courses in theological studies at Princeton and became a Presbyterian minister at the Fifteenth Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. Archibald studied law at Harvard, remaining in Boston as he developed his law practice. Their aunts did not live long enough, however, to witness their nephews' success. Sarah had died in 1874, Angelina in 1879. (Theodore Weld died in 1895).

Francis and Archibald Grimke became prominent advocates of civil rights for African Americans and emerged as early critics of Booker T. Washington. As proponents of political action, they spoke out against the Washington's accommodationist views. Francis delivered a series of eight sermons at the Fifteenth Presbyterian Church which catapulted him into the national leadership of the civil rights movement. Despite their strident criticism of Washington, the brothers developed an appreciation for

the complexity of Washington's views and maintained a cordial relationship.

The Grimkes assumed leading roles in the Niagara Movement, even though they frequently conflicted with W.E.B. DuBois. With the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois emerged as the leading figure in the civil rights movement, the chief critic of Washington, and a proponent of the cultural distinctiveness of African Americans. Philosophically, the Grimkes had much in common with DuBois, but the Grimkes thought his adversarial style and personal attacks upon Washington divided the movement, which required unity to achieve its goals. Moreover, they believed that his anthropological views could be used to support separatist movements such as black nationalism. For his part, DuBois also distrusted the Grimkes and their ties to the "old school" abolitionists.

Perry believes that the Grimkes' most significant contribution to the civil rights movement was Archibald's publication of "The Heart of the Race Problem," published in August 1906. This essay reveals Grimke's feelings towards his own mixed racial ancestry. Grimke maintained that the propensity of white men to rape or sexually coerce women of African descent was central to understanding the race problem. He recounted practices of masters who took slave mistresses. Grimke also addressed the double standard of whites who accused black men of sexual advances towards white women. Within the essay, he also examined what Perry calls "colorphobia," an unreasoning hatred towards anyone with black skin (pp. 325-327).

Here Perry reveals a shallow understanding of the attitudes of black activists towards interracial relationships. Perry makes no mention of the anti-lynching movement, even though Archibald Grimke's views mirrored those voiced by Ida Wells Barnett and others who argued that white fears of interracial sexual relationships—particularly between black men and white women—led to lynchings throughout the South. Furthermore, Perry asserts that Grimke had no evidence to insinuate that Henry Grimke coerced his mother into a relationship. Admittedly, it is impossible to know what transpired long ago in intimate relationships. However, slaves frequently sublimated their own feelings and satisfied their masters and the white community to ameliorate work and living conditions or to simply avoid the lash. Regardless of how much Nancy Weston and Henry Grimke cared for each other, the master/slave relationship predicated the terms of their relationship. Archibald

Grimke was in a better position than Perry to attest to his mother's feelings.

Perry also does not fully appreciate the anomalous position of mulattoes within the African American community and the broader society. Historians Ira Berlin, James Horton, Joel Williamson and Carl Degler have amply demonstrated that mulattoes had distinct privileges that darker-skinned blacks did not share.[1] The extent of such privileges varied. During the antebellum period, mulattoes in Charleston and other cities of the Lower South developed profitable patronage relationships with their white families and maintained institutions generally closed to darker-skinned blacks. In Washington and other cities of the Upper South, where liaisons between white indentured servants and slaves were common, mulattoes often did not have wealthy white patrons and shared their institutions with darker-skinned blacks. Emancipation ended the special privileges enjoyed by mulattoes of the Lower South and, as such, their position in the community paralleled the mulattoes of the Upper South. During their lifetime, Francis and Archibald Grimke saw "the one drop rule" emerge as the determinant of "blackness." Whites no longer accorded mulattoes special rights or privileges based merely upon their parentage or skin color. Instead, they were as subject to segregation as anyone.

If Perry had given more than passing discussion to the communities inhabited by his subjects, he might have been able to discern that the significance of skin color and "colorphobia" varied according to time and place. Perry did not consult the works of Willard B. Gatewood, Jacqueline Moore, and William S. McFeeley which examine the attitudes of elite blacks towards interracial relationships and the standing of mulattoes in post-emancipation Washington.[2] All of these authors explore Francis Grimke's role in the black elite community. His relationship to members of this community reveal much about his own attitudes toward skin color, segregation and more. McFeeley's biography, *Frederick Douglass* would have been especially instructive, as his understanding of the black community in Washington informs his interpretation of Douglass' thought.

Perry captures the importance of the Grimke family as leaders of the abolitionist and early twentieth-century civil rights movement, but he fails to explore the Grimke family as an interracial family. Throughout the book, he explains these movements in contemporary terms.

Yet, the earlier reformers perceived interracial relationships and their progeny very differently than did the civil rights activists of the 1960s. In this way, *Lift up Thy Voice* represents a missed opportunity. The story of the Grimkes could have served as a prism into the complex and troubled history of interracial relationships and their progeny in nineteenth-century society.

Notes

[1]. Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon, 1974); James O. Horton, "Shades of Color: The Mulatto in Three Antebellum Communities" in *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), pp. 122-145; Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); and, Carl N. Degler, *Neither Black Nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1971).

[2]. Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Jacqueline M. Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1999); and William S. McFeeley, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991).

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