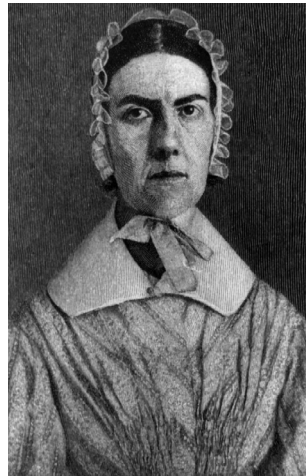


Fire at Pennsylvania Hall

The Grimke sisters, Angelina (1805–1879) and Sarah (1792–1873), grew up on a South Carolina slave plantation, moved to Philadelphia as young adults, and became prominent abolitionists. Their personal experience with slavery made them unique voices in Northern abolitionist circles. Both sisters wrote and spoke against slavery, but Angelina was known as one of the most compelling orators in the abolition movement. For many Americans, a woman speaking in public to a “promiscuous” audience—one that included men and women—broke the rules about women’s proper role. A group of ministers wrote that it violated God’s order and was “unnatural.” But the sisters, convinced they were doing God’s work, defended women’s right to speak against slavery, and continued to do so themselves.

On Monday, May 14, 1838, a four-day abolitionist convention opened in Philadelphia. It was the first event in Pennsylvania Hall, which had been built by abolitionists because their unpopular cause made it difficult to rent meeting space. That night, with abolitionists and



Angelina Emily Grimké, undated. Wood engraving. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C., 2003653379.

former slaves in attendance at her sister Anna’s home, Angelina married fellow abolitionist Theodore Weld.

Angelina was due to speak to the convention on Wednesday, May 16. By then, a noisy anti-abolitionist mob had gathered outside the building. Several times as she addressed the audience, shouts interrupted her, and rocks were hurled through the windows. This mob of Northern whites was incensed about abolition itself and because black abolitionists were present at the meeting. Insults and stones flew again



[Above] John Caspar Wild, *Destruction by Fire of Pennsylvania Hall*, 1838. Lithograph. Library Company of Philadelphia. *W94 [P9057.27].

[Left] American Anti-Slavery Society, *Am I Not a Woman & a Sister*, 1838. Copper. New-York Historical Society, 2006.21.1.

when black women and white women left the building arm in arm. On Thursday, after the mayor cancelled the convention to restore quiet, the crowd broke into the empty building and torched it. Firefighters allowed the structure to burn to the ground as they hosed down nearby buildings instead.

Angelina Grimke Weld continued to write against slavery. In 1836, when Congress resolved not to read any more antislavery

petitions, she and Sarah placed their names at the top of a petition against this decision. But after the fire at Pennsylvania Hall, Angelina Grimke Weld never spoke against slavery in public again.



Sources: Carol Berkin, “Angelina and Sarah Grimke: Abolitionist Sisters,” *History Now: The Journal of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/slavery-and-anti-slavery/essays/angelina-and-sarah-grimke-abolitionist-sisters> (accessed by M. Waters, 10-27-2016); Gerda Lerner, *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina*, rev. ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

Discussion Questions

- ★ What message did the mob send by burning down Pennsylvania Hall?
- ★ Was this protest effective? Why or why not?
- ★ How did this event affect Angelina Grimke Weld’s career?