

Free labor child's dress, c. 1840s.

Maker unknown; cotton.

Philadelphia History Museum at the Atwater Kent, Friends Historical Association Collection.



Abolitionists known as abstentionists supported the free produce movement, a form of consumer boycott, as an attempt to merge their political and moral ideals and spending. At the height of the free produce movement in the 1830s, there were an estimated 26 societies in different parts of the country. For women, both black and white, abstention from slave-grown produce was one of the most popular forms of anti-slavery activism because they could use their influence in the home to make a political statement.

Philadelphia became a center for this movement with groups, stores, and periodic fairs that specialized in promoting and distributing non-slave products. Most of the country's 53 free labor stores were in Philadelphia, including the longest operating store, owned and run by Lydia White for sixteen years. The Philadelphia Female

Association for Promoting the Manufacture and Use of Free Cotton, an all-white female group, organized in 1829 to strike out against slavery by not purchasing its products. The Colored Female Produce Society followed suit 1831. In 1838, a Required (non-slave) Labor Convention met in Philadelphia and established the American Free Produce Association, which became the main buyer for these products. Prominent abolitionist Lucretia Mott becomes the group's treasurer, and five women served on the executive committee.

The American Free Produce Association took the lead in finding free labor products by using its members' familial and friendship networks to identify non-slave owning farmers in the South, mainly in North Carolina. These producers created bolts of cotton for the association to sell to free labor stores in the northern states. Finding sources for non-slave produced sugar proved challenging, but they did locate sources in Puerto Rico, the British West Indies, Mexico, Java, and Manila. The high demand for sugar meant there was never enough free labor sugar, forcing customers to switch to maple sugar or sugar made from potatoes or corn. These substitutes for cane sugar were unpopular, however.

Families who purchased free labor products typically paid higher prices and received goods of lesser quality than that of the slave-produced counterpart. Participating in this boycott had a direct impact on a family's quality of life and budget. Many free labor advocates found this type of non-violent resistance challenging and looked to their comrades for words of encouragement and support to keep up their resolve. Conventions such as the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women held in Philadelphia in 1839 issued inspiring statements urging supporters to continue their commitment to free labor products:

“Resolved, That this Convention recommend to abolitionists to abstain from the use of such products, that we may not be guilty of participation in the sin which we condemn....we may add that of a pure example.”

Description found on the Philadelphia History Museum's website under the "Quest for Freedom" page. http://www.philadelphiahistory.org/quest_for_freedom