

How Did Abolitionist Women and Their Slaveholding Relatives Negotiate Their Conflict over the Issue of Slavery?

Introduction



Martha Coffin Pelham Wright, ca. 1870

From Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol 1 (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1881), opp. p. 641.

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As the Civil War approached, many American families were split over the highly emotional subject of slavery. The differences in opinion were particularly extreme when relatives in the North were abolitionists and those in the South were slaveholders. This project focuses on abolitionists Martha Coffin Pelham Wright (1806-1875) and her daughter Marianna Pelham Mott (1825-1872), and their relationships with their slaveholding Pelham relatives. The project includes correspondence of Martha and Marianna with Martha's brother-in-law William Pelham and three of her nephews (Charles, John, and William).

Martha Wright was the youngest sister of famed Quaker preacher and reformer Lucretia Mott.[1] Like her sister, Martha was active in both the abolition and early woman's rights movements.[2] It was during a visit of Lucretia to Martha's home in Auburn, New York, in July 1848 that the two sisters joined with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and two other women to issue the call for the world's first Women's Rights Convention in nearby Seneca Falls.[3] Martha's first husband, Peter Pelham of Kentucky, had died soon after the birth of their only child, Marianna.[4] Martha later married David Wright, with whom she had six more children. Marianna Pelham, who like her mother became an ardent abolitionist and yet corresponded with her slaveholding Pelham relatives, married her first cousin Thomas Mott, son of Lucretia Mott.

Martha and David Wright lived most of their adult lives in Auburn, New York. Martha first became directly exposed to the abolitionist movement during an 1833 visit to Lucretia Mott's home in Philadelphia. There she met William Lloyd Garrison and, along with Lucretia, attended several sessions of the founding meeting of his American Anti-Slavery Society, an experience she described in a letter to her husband (see [Document 1](#)).[5] Until this time, Martha had been undecided about the relative merits of abolition and colonization, the movement that proposed gradual elimination of slavery by purchasing slaves and returning them to Africa. Her exposure to Garrison and his followers, including black abolitionists born in America who had no interest in going to Africa, convinced her that abolition was the proper course.

As was true for many abolitionists, the participation of Martha and David Wright in the movement involved the use of their home as a temporary haven for fugitive slaves, i.e., as a station on the Underground Railroad. Martha's 1843 letter to Lucretia Mott is a rare contemporary account of the overnight stay of a fugitive slave (see [Document 2](#)). Martha's participation in the Underground Railroad brought her into contact with Harriet Tubman and a group of slaves Tubman had led north to freedom (see [Document 5](#)).[6] Martha's abolitionist activities also included service on committees of the American Anti-Slavery Society and attendance at various antislavery events in New York and Philadelphia. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act as part of the Compromise of 1850 increased the intensity of both abolitionist and anti-abolitionist feelings, and led to numerous controversies in the North over the capture and/or rescue of fugitive slaves. While in Philadelphia in 1859, Martha attended a trial of a fugitive slave who was released on a minor technicality, probably because of the presence in the courtroom of many supportive abolitionists (see [Document 3](#)). She then attended a subsequent meeting of abolitionists called to oppose the return of any fugitives (see [Document 4](#)). In January 1861, on the brink of war, Martha presided over abolitionist conventions in Auburn and Albany that anti-abolitionist mobs attempted to disrupt. The latter convention was kept in order by the presence of the Mayor and a squad of police (see [Document 6](#)).

Despite her abolitionist convictions and activism, Martha Wright maintained contact with the relatives of her first husband, Peter Pelham, all of whom remained unabashed defenders of slavery before the Civil War. After Peter's death in 1826, Martha corresponded for several years with his brother Atkinson, whom she had known in Philadelphia before she met Peter. However, Atkinson ceased to write, and Martha's contact with the Pelham family lapsed until 1838, when she received a letter from William, another brother. William, then serving as Surveyor General of Arkansas, had reasons to make occasional visits to the Northeast, and sought contact with his sister-in-law Martha and niece Marianna. Martha and Marianna both responded favorably, and in 1841 William visited Martha in Auburn and took Marianna, then 15, on a lengthy trip to Kentucky and Arkansas to meet her Pelham relatives. The early correspondence between Martha and William made no mention of slavery, but in an 1841 letter to Lucretia, Martha wrote, "And my dear sister, he has only eight slaves, 4 grown and 4 children which he means to free at his death. He was amused to find M.A. [Marianna] and the other children such strong abolitionists and talked very fully on the subject."^[7] Nevertheless, Martha and Marianna were both very pleased to get to know William Pelham, and when Martha gave birth to a son one year later, Marianna convinced her mother to name him William Pelham Wright. At this time, for all involved, the pleasure of forming new and close family connections outweighed any discomfort over the issue of slavery.

By the 1850s, however, tensions between North and South had become more difficult for the family to ignore. Martha Wright and Lucretia Mott traveled to Ohio in 1853 to attend a Woman's Rights Convention, and on their return visited the Pelham family homestead in Maysville, Kentucky, still the residence of several of Peter Pelham's siblings. Lucretia, by then a renowned antislavery speaker, spoke to a large audience in Maysville on the subject, which made John Pelham, their host and himself a slaveholder, rather nervous (see [Document 7](#)). John was nevertheless very welcoming to his guests, and when Marianna praised him for his hospitality in a letter to William, William expressed the worry that his niece now loved her Uncle John more than she loved him because John had "expressed an interest in the Anti Slavery lectures" (see [Document 8](#)). In 1854, William visited Marianna in Philadelphia and was greeted warmly by Lucretia and James Mott. He was pleased at how "delicately they treated me, never in a single instance mentioning the subject of slavery except when brought up by myself" (see [Document 9](#)). In a subsequent letter to Marianna recounting some of the history of the Pelham family, William made a special point of noting that one branch of the family "became embued with a spirit of emancipation, and liberated all of their slaves" (see [Document 10](#)). William's correspondence with Marianna remained loving before the onset of the Civil War, but the topic of slavery now appeared in every letter.

In 1859, the nation was on the brink of war. William was again in Philadelphia, as was Martha, and she reported they had "some talks on Slavery," which he bore well, "not being one of the fierce & excitable kind." Yet she sensed

that the topic was beginning to strain their relationship (see [Document 12](#)). William had just been re-appointed as Surveyor General of New Mexico by President Buchanan, but was sure he would lose his position if the Republicans were elected in 1860. Lincoln's election triggered secession, and with the onset of the Civil War, William was thrown into prison in Santa Fé for refusing to take an oath of loyalty to the Union. His next letter to Martha and Marianna, written from military prison, was very different in tone from his previous letters. He now had indeed become "fierce and excitable," and angrily blamed the abolitionists for the war and for his personal predicament (see [Document 18](#)). Of all the Pelhams, William had formed the closest ties to Martha and Marianna, but this angry letter was his last to his abolitionist sister-in-law and niece.

The difficulty facing extended families divided over the issue of slavery was also evident in Martha's correspondence with other members of the Pelham family. In the 1850s, she began to correspond with her nephew Charles Pelham of Alabama, the oldest son of Atkinson Pelham.^[8] From the beginning, young Charles expressed his pro-slavery opinions to Martha in a very combative fashion. In 1856, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, an abolitionist, had been severely beaten on the Senate floor by a Southern Congressman, Preston Brooks, enraged by Sumner's speech delivered in a debate over slavery. Charles wrote to Martha expressing his approval of this action; she responded critically, urging him to review his opinions, and "come to a less prejudiced judgment" (see [Document 11](#)). Their correspondence became even more heated in December 1860, when Charles declared his enthusiasm for secession, and threateningly declared to his aunt, "if I ever go North now, it will not be on an errand of love" (see [Document 13](#)). Charles asked her forgiveness for any of his letters that had offended her, but she responded that he had the same right of freedom of expression that she had--and then proceeded to express her contrary opinions in the strongest terms (see [Document 14](#)). Martha's deeply-held belief in the rights of freedom of opinion and expression, both for others and for herself, perhaps allowed her to maintain extended contact with her slaveholding relatives, despite her ardent abolitionism. But her tolerance was severely tested by Charles's final prewar letter, which pointedly reported the hanging of an abolitionist (see [Document 15](#)).

Martha's daughter Marianna also maintained contact with other Pelham relatives, despite their differences over slavery. One of her cousins, Charles's brother John Pelham, had been studying at West Point since 1856, and was scheduled to receive his degree in June 1861. However, his home state of Alabama seceded in January 1861, and by March he had been appointed a lieutenant in the Confederate Army. As it began to look more and more likely that he would be leaving West Point soon, he wrote Marianna to inquire about the possibility of visiting her in Philadelphia on his way south (see [Document 16](#) and [Document 17](#)). Marianna responded warmly, with the information that her mother would also be in Philadelphia in the coming weeks. Soon after the firing on Fort Sumter, John resigned from West Point and traveled south to Alabama, with a

brief stop in Philadelphia on his way to visit with Marianna and Martha. As a Confederate artillery officer, John's skill and courage caused General Robert E. Lee in late 1862 to praise him as "gallant Pelham," but John, only 24, was killed in battle the following spring. John Pelham remains today a revered hero of the South.[9] Despite John's devotion to the Confederate cause and despite Marianna and Martha's antislavery convictions, relations between them remained remarkably warm.

The onset of the Civil War, however, strained both Marianna and Martha's tolerance of the pro-slavery views of their Pelham relatives. During the war, Martha served as an officer in the Women's National Loyal League, and helped to collect signatures on antislavery petitions.[10] Her son William Pelham Wright served as Lieutenant in a Union artillery battery, and was seriously wounded at the Battle of Gettysburg.[11] Her emotions against the South became so strong that she wrote her son in early 1865 that "I for one wd. rather the War wd. last till the South is depopulated." [12]

Marianna's feelings toward the South appeared more mixed. When a cousin Marianna had never met wrote her from a Union prison asking for help in obtaining his release, Marianna referred to "the cruel suffering of our men confined in the South" and stated that she no longer had any friends in Southern prisons, "those so unfortunate having died there." However, despite the fact that she had never met William, the family connection overcame her resentful feelings, and Marianna reported to William that her husband had contacted the Secretary of War to seek a parole for him (see [Document 19](#) and [Documents 20A-D](#)).

After the war, Martha continued to be active in the American Anti-Slavery Society until it disbanded. By 1869, her anger towards the South had cooled sufficiently that she wrote to her nephew Charles Pelham, with whom she had exchanged several heated letters just before the war. Charles was also ready to resume friendly relations, and responded with a letter full of family news (see [Document 21](#)). Charles later served in the U.S. Congress as a Republican Representative from Alabama.[13] With the issue of slavery settled, family ties were reestablished, and Martha continued to correspond with Charles Pelham until her death in 1875.

By the 1870s, Martha's participation in the abolition movement had become only a memory, but she remained active in the women's movement and concerned about its future (see [Document 6](#)). She had returned to the women's rights movement after the Civil War, but it split in 1869 over the issue of the Fifteenth Amendment, which granted suffrage to African-American men. One group, led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, opposed the amendment without an accompanying amendment for woman suffrage, while another group, led by Lucy Stone, supported the amendment, arguing that woman suffrage could wait. Already committed to Stanton since the Seneca Falls

convention in 1848, Martha opposed the creation of Stone's organization and thought it unnecessary (see [Document 22](#)). Ironically, it was the final stage of the abolition movement, seeking to grant the vote to freed black men, that led to the unfortunate split in the other social movement to which Martha was deeply committed, the woman's rights movement.^[14]

For abolitionists like Martha Wright, the issue of slavery was a clear-cut "conflict between wrong and injustice on the one hand, and the eternal and unchanging principle of right, on the other" ([Document 14](#)). To Martha, it was clear that she was in the right and slaveholders were in the wrong. That conviction gave her the courage to participate in potentially risky abolitionist activities, including illegally harboring fugitive slaves and attending or presiding over meetings attacked by anti-abolitionist mobs. Many Southerners were equally convinced that they were in the right, as is clear from letters like those of William and Charles Pelham at the onset of war. Yet Martha, Marianna, and the Pelhams also set great value on family relationships, and their differences over slavery did not significantly damage their ties to one another until the nation went to war. Even then, Martha and Marianna were pleased to host John Pelham even as he headed south to Alabama to take up arms against the Union, and somewhat more reluctantly to assist John's brother William in obtaining parole from a Union prison. After emotions stirred by the war subsided, some family relationships could be restored, some could not. Although Martha was able to reestablish contact with her nephew Charles Pelham, she could not do so with her brother-in-law William, who was too embittered not only by his wartime imprisonment in Santa Fé but also by the battlefield death of his only son.

Martha's activism did not end with the close of the Civil War. Encouraged by the achievement of abolition, she continued to agitate for social change in the woman's rights movement, a cause in which she also had deep conviction. That area of reform, however, was much slower to achieve success. Woman suffrage was not achieved in the United States until 45 years after Martha's death, and even in the early years of the twenty-first century, full gender equality of the kind envisioned by Martha Wright and her colleagues has not yet been achieved.



