For American abolitionists before the Civil War, it would have been unthinkable not to think about the Haitian Revolution, which resulted in the first episodes of abolition and emancipation in the New World. But in the early nineteenth century, Haiti’s antislavery legacy was encumbered with well-known liabilities. If abolitionists sensed that Haiti’s past could be useful in their own campaign against slavery in the United States, they also knew that Saint Domingue had to be handled with care. Most of their close contemporaries were terrified by what Americans often referred to as “the scenes of Santo Domingo.” Saint Domingue conjured up grisly visions of massacre and insurrection, and abolitionists had to fight an uphill battle to convince most Americans that it represented progress. Some abolitionists, especially pacifists who opposed violent resistance to slavery, had trouble convincing even themselves that Haiti had been a success. For abolitionists, the Revolution’s legacy remained especially ambivalent – not easy to think about, but not entirely “unthinkable” either. It was hard to know whether to treat it as a landmark or a landmine.¹

Given the complex disincentives for talking about Haiti’s past, it is startling that so many American abolitionists wrote positively about the history of Saint Domingue. Many reformers praised the island and its Revolution outright. In 1861, Wendell Phillips predicted optimistically that in fifty years, Toussaint L’Ouverture would be remembered by all as a hero. “When Truth gets a hearing,” he said, the “Muse of History” would list its usual heroes, Brutus, Lafayette, George Washington and John Brown, but “then,
dipping her pen in the sunlight, [would] write in the clear blue, above them all, the name of the soldier, the statesman, the martyr, TOUSSAINT L’OUVERTURE.” The “Muse of History” may have waited much longer than fifty years to dip her pen in the sunlight, but that may be a measure of how far-sighted some abolitionists were.\(^2\)

Nevertheless, the Saint Domingue praised by Phillips and others was carefully constructed. This paper will show that abolitionists revised the Haitian Revolution according to certain of their preconceptions about emancipation. First, they wrote a history of Haiti that painstakingly dissociated its bloody past from the emancipation of its slaves. Second, abolitionists’ histories of Haiti were written contemporaneously with their histories of British emancipation in 1834, the other major example of abolition in the West Indies. Abolitionists wrote about English emancipation with an adulation that approached Anglophilia. But historians usually have not placed abolitionists’ Anglophilia in relation to their views about Saint Domingue, focusing instead on how they dealt with Haiti’s violent reputation. In this paper, I will argue that Anglophilia and views about violence were mutually reinforcing for abolitionists, not mutually exclusive. Both Anglophilia and views about violence influenced the ways in which American abolitionists used the history of emancipation in general and of Haiti in particular.

For brevity’s sake, my paper focuses on Garrisonian abolitionists. Led by William Lloyd Garrison from roughly 1830 to 1865, these antislavery radicals were among the few white Americans who dared to cast “the scenes of Santo Domingo” in a positive light. But if Garrisonians praised Haiti, they were also prone to let it become eclipsed by Britain’s example. Star-struck and overawed by British abolition, Garrisonians wrote as if British abolitionists had hung the moon. They imagined the First
of August, the date of British emancipation in 1834, as a completely unprecedented and unsurpassed event in secular and sacred time.³

More than any other date, the First of August proved to Garrisonians that history was headed in the right direction. In an 1841 editorial, Lydia Maria Child wrote that “perhaps never, since the advent of Christianity, has an event occurred which so plainly expresses human progress, so distinctly prophesies the coming of a better age.”⁴ Most abolitionists echoed her judgment that the First of August was an exceptional event in secular time. In Garrison’s newspaper, The Liberator, it was variously called “an event which has no parallel in the transition of any people from bondage to liberty,” “one of the noblest events that brighten the page of History,” “a holy day in the Annals of Humanity, Justice, and Liberty,” and so on.⁵ Even moderate abolitionists favored such immoderate praise. For Ralph Waldo Emerson, the First was “an event singular in the history of civilization.” For William Ellery Channing, it stood “alone in human history.” For abolitionist John Jay, “it was reserved for England to furnish this missing chapter in the history of the world – this unlimned picture in the Gallery of Time.”⁶⁵

The First of August had an eternal as well as a temporal significance for Garrisonians; its picture hung not only in the “Gallery of Time,” but also in heaven’s hall of fame. Abolitionists mined biblical history for appropriate parallels to British abolition. Garrison declared typically that “there is no day in the history of human emancipation so precious as the first of August – the redemption of the Israelites from Egyptian servitude alone excepted.” His close friend, Rev. Samuel J. May, deemed it “an event more auspicious to the cause of the poor and oppressed ... than any other event since the advent of the Messiah.” Messianic allusions were not uncommon. Philadelphian David Paul
Brown effused that William Wilberforce, the leading parliamentary abolitionist, was guided by “the Star of Bethlehem.” Abolition in the West Indies likewise reminded Lydia Maria Child of the “chorus of angels over the moon-lit hills of Judea!” And Child’s husband, David Lee Child, used even more fervid metaphors to describe the First of August. He raved that British emancipation was like “the key-stone of a triumphal arch, such as earth-born ambition never conceived, reaching, like the patriarch’s ladder, from earth to heaven; beautiful as the rainbow, enduring as the firmament, inscribed in characters of effulgence, ‘Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good will towards men.’” Characters of effulgence indeed.

American abolitionists were dazzled by British emancipation because they thought it uniquely portended their own success. Abolitionists often emphasized the historical kinship between America and its “mother country.” They celebrated cultural and linguistic ties with England and used them rhetorically to make an American First of August seem imminent. According to its 1836 annual report, the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society gained new confidence in the cause “when we cast our eyes across the Atlantic, and see how great a work, of the same kind we have to do, has been done by the moral power of a people speaking the same language, and professing the same religion with ourselves.”

Likewise, in a speech given on the First of August at an abolitionist picnic, Ralph Waldo Emerson first argued that English abolitionism “reflects infinite honor on the people and parliament of England,” and then reflected on the “painful comparisons” he drew between England and New England. But Emerson, like the Garrisonians, believed that American civility was inexorably affected by the British, “inasmuch as England is the strongest of the family of existing nations, and as we are the
expansion of that people.” Similarly, for the radical Wendell Phillips, abolitionism in England, “the greatest and freest nation of the age,” made him optimistic about the progress of its former colonies. “The parent has rebuked the child,” he said in another First of August speech. “In the name of three million slaves among us, let us thank God that that nation was our mother country – the glass of our public opinion – the source of our literature and our religion.” From the same premises of Anglo-American kinship, Lydia Child reasoned that “between two such countries as England and America, there must, unavoidably, be a continued moral action and re-action, on all subjects involving great principles.”

Without understanding this streak of Anglophilia in the abolitionists’ view of history, their view of Haiti’s history cannot be properly understood either. Garrisonians consistently placed the combined moral strength of Anglo-America – and especially Anglo-American abolitionists – in the driver’s seat of history, gilding the First of August with glistening hyperboles. Even if Saint Domingue was the first emancipation of the New World, English abolitionists were seen as the trailblazers. As Garrisonian Charles Follen put it in 1834, “England goes before us as a torch-bearer, leading the way to the liberation of mankind.” Haitian revolutionaries fit uneasily into this story of mankind’s liberation, perhaps in part because they had taken to bearing actual torches. Whether the torch was real or figurative, though, the apotheosis of British abolition inevitably seemed to diminish the importance of Saint Domingue to abolitionists. After all, if the First of August was the greatest event in history since the Exodus – or at least the Incarnation – what place did this leave for the Haitian Revolution? If Garrisonians were positive about Haiti, it rarely reminded them of rainbows, the Messiah, or moon-lit Judean hills. In the
spotlight glare of an Anglophilic history of abolition, shimmering with secular and sacred superlatives, Haiti receded in shadow.

There were two particular shadows hanging over Haiti’s past. The first was that England and the United States could not claim responsibility for its emancipation. If anything, the revolutionaries in Saint Domingue had succeeded in spite of indifference or outright opposition from Anglo-America. The British had actively fought to defeat the revolutionaries and reverse their gains. But a second and more salient problem was that the Haitian Revolution lacked the First of August’s aura of equanimity. Garrisonians were fond of claiming that the consequences of British abolition had been “bloodless, peaceful and glorious.” As one of Lydia Child’s pamphlets exclaimed in capital letters, “THE WORST ENEMIES OF ABOLITION HAVE NOT YET BEEN ABLE TO SHOW THAT A SINGLE DROP OF BLOOD HAS BEEN SHED, OR A SINGLE PLANTATION FIRED, IN CONSEQUENCE OF EMANCIPATION, IN ALL THE BRITISH WEST INDIES!” But if the First of August seemed to prove beyond doubt, to Child and to other Garrisonians, that the “right way” was the “safe way,” it was far easier for the antebellum “enemies of abolition” to argue that this was not the case in Saint Domingue, where freedom had been seized by slaves in fire and blood, instead of being conferred on them by faraway reformers.

Abolitionists sometimes used this argument to their advantage, for it vividly suggested that the “wrong way” was not the “safe way.” The longer that Americans waited to free their slaves, the more in danger they were of witnessing “the scenes of St. Domingo” played out on their shores. Better to emancipate immediately, abolitionists warned, than to let the accumulated brutalities of slavery erupt out of a volcano of
violence. But there was another side to this argument. If abolitionists argued that delaying abolition was responsible for Haiti’s violence, they also had to argue that abolition, when it did come, abruptly ended the violence. In other words, their history of Haiti had to confirm that the “right way” was always the “safe way” – that immediate abolition was always peaceful, whether in Jamaica or in “St. Domingo.” Immediate abolition had to produce immediate results.

Consequently, abolitionists emphasized the importance of 1794, the year in which a proclamation by the French National Convention officially abolished slavery in Saint Domingue. Using 1794 as a pivotal date, Garrisonians divided the Revolution into three parts. From 1791 to 1794, they said, a civil war raged between free mulattoes and white planters, whose political machinations provoked the slaves to rebel. The second phase of the Revolution began after the decree of 1794, which allegedly brought all violence on the island to a sudden stop. After this act, Garrisonians claimed, Toussaint’s government supervised a rapid return of former slaves to their plantations, where, for eight blissful years, they worked quietly, gratefully, and productively for wages. Violence broke out again only after Napoleon’s ill-fated return to Saint Domingue and General Leclerc’s betrayal of Toussaint. According to the Garrisonians, a third phase began in 1802 that ushered in a new round of bloodshed, caused not by the emancipation of the slaves but by Napoleon’s attempts to reverse the emancipation they had gained. As Angelina Grimké argued in 1836, “It was at this time that all those dreadful scenes of cruelty occurred, which we so often unjustly hear spoken of, as the effects of Abolition. They were occasioned not by Emancipation, but by the base attempt to fasten the chains of slavery on the limbs of liberated slaves.”
This tripartite timeline is not wholly inaccurate. But it overstates the effects of the 1794 emancipation decree, which, despite its importance, hardly brought a complete cessation of warfare and bloodshed in Saint Domingue. Although intense fighting involving Spain, Britain, France, and Toussaint’s armies was just beginning in 1794, an imagined intermission of peace allowed abolitionists to downplay the fierce battles for control of the island that raged throughout the 1790s, as well as internal conflicts among Toussaint, his generals, and his would-be European employers. While it is true that Napoleon’s invasion of the island only exacerbated or revived these conflicts, it is far from true that the previous eight years had been bloodless.

Still, by pivoting their histories on 1794, Garrisonians could argue that immediate abolition always resulted in perfect peace, even in particularly violent places like Saint Domingue. Abolitionist editor Elizur Wright actually claimed that after 1794, there was not “a drop of blood spilled! ... The very men who had raged like bloody-mouthed tigers before the proclamation, were after it mere lambs.” Another Garrisonian publication said that if American slavery were abolished, “every thing would go on as peaceably as in the case of the slaves in St. Domingo, who, for eight years after their liberation, continued to work with untiring industry, maintaining the utmost order, and were only roused to deeds of violence by the attempt of Napoleon to reduce them again to servitude.” From this perspective, Haiti doubly proved that immediate abolition was the “safe way,” for it not only inaugurated eight years of peace, but also ended three years of war. In the same speech that had dubbed England a “torch-bearer,” Charles Follen could argue that “the whole unprecedented history of St. Domingo [was] a most satisfactory evidence of the safety and expediency of immediate abolition, even under the
most unfavorable circumstances.” If immediate abolition worked in Haiti, of all places, surely it would work anywhere.

It may be useful to ask whether these narratives of the Haitian Revolution, so carefully crafted, appealed not only to Garrisonians’ nonviolence, but also to their Anglophilia. In the first place, British abolitionists, the Garrisonians’ heroes, endorsed the same Haitian chronology; here, as in much else, transatlantic abolitionists were reading from the same page. And one reason both groups liked the eight-year period of peace was that it left most of the blood on the hands of Napoleon, England’s perennial nemesis in the early nineteenth century. By the 1830s, nothing could have been more Anglophilic than to demonize the First Consul, which both American and British abolitionists did to great effect. Even more importantly, though, the eight years of peace in Saint Domingue were imagined to be much like the British West Indies after 1834. The abolitionists’ portrayal of Haiti’s freed slaves, transmogrified from raging tigers into industrious lambs, mirrored their roseate images of freed slaves in Jamaica, Barbados, and Antigua. Catharine Hall has recently argued that British abolitionists and missionaries in Jamaica “dreamed” of a “new society ... which celebrated free labour,” a dream in which black men would become “responsible, industrious, independent [and] Christian.” American abolitionists fully shared this vision of post-emancipation Jamaica. And by emphasizing the eight years of peace in Haiti, they could argue that the history of Saint Domingue, far from being a Southern planter’s nightmare, in fact confirmed the basic truth of the abolitionist’s dream.

In conclusion, the abolitionists recreated Saint Domingue in the image of Jamaica, instead of the other way around, a choice that was unsurprising given their superlative
love of the First of August and their personal admiration for British abolitionists. By sticking to their tripartite timeline, abolitionists could suggest that emancipation in Haiti was as peaceful as it had been recently in Jamaica, Barbados and Antigua. Charles Follen ably summarized the Garrisonian view that, “The history of the past, as well as the experience of our days, does not record one instance in which the immediate abolition of slavery has stirred up the freed man to violence, outrage and war.” Because they thought Saint Domingue was no exception to this rule, abolitionists could shape Haiti’s past to complement their views of British emancipation. French abolition in 1794 became a kind of First of August that immediately transformed slaves into peaceful and productive wage laborers. Once the violence in Saint Domingue was bracketed off and blamed either on delayed emancipation or retroactive enslavement, Haiti could be offered as further evidence that the Anglo-American model of abolition was the most effective.

Of course, this was not the only model for abolition. There were other ways to think about Haiti’s past, and in future work I intend to consider some important alternatives. African-American narratives of the Haitian Revolution, for example, need to be compared and contrasted with the narratives I have discussed here. On the one hand, many black abolitionists shared the Anglophilia of white Garrisonians, and many shared their aversion to Haiti’s violence. But at the same time, many black abolitionists were not as apologetic about the violence that did occur in Saint Domingue, and many also became wary of the strident Anglophilia expressed by their white colleagues. Perhaps some sensed that making the First of August a sacred event and praising England to high heaven could all too easily make the Anglo-Saxons a chosen race and England a heaven on earth. James McCune Smith, an African-American abolitionist who praised
British abolition, came to oppose the annual celebration of the First of August for its disproportionate emphasis on the achievements of white reformers. Frederick Douglass spoke of Smith’s objections in one of his own First of August speeches, pointing out that some white abolitionists “talk of the proud Anglo-Saxon blood, as flippantly as those who profess to believe in the natural inferiority of races.” To correct this prejudice, Douglass argued that slaves themselves had struck the first and most important blows against their chains in the British West Indies, and it was their effort that African Americans commemorated on the First of August.24

McCune Smith also counteracted the potentially racist edge of Anglophilia by giving Saint Domingue precedence in the history of emancipation. In an 1838 speech, he reminded members of the American Anti-Slavery Society that emancipation in Haiti had come long before British abolition. “France, indeed, set the first, most glorious and most instructive example,” he said, and by becoming the first European nation to recognize Haiti’s independence, France, not England, was “the first to grant immediate and entire emancipation, and the first to acknowledge the right and capacity of freemen to rank among the nations of the earth.” Such statements directly confronted the claim that the First of August was the greatest episode of emancipation since the crossing of the Red Sea, a strained historical gesture that looked back thousands of years and skipped over the more “instructive example” of France in 1794.25

These different ways of using Haiti’s past only point to more questions that need to be asked by historians of abolitionism. For they reveal that the usability and the “thinkability” of the Haitian Revolution had to do with more than merely its violence. I have argued here that for American abolitionists, the history of Haiti intersected not only
with debates about violence, but also with discourses about Anglophilia, about race, about the results of emancipation, and about history itself. We are just beginning to understand how these intersections worked, and what their implications were for the development of American anti-slavery.

Notes


3 On the philosophical and rhetorical importance of British emancipation to both English and American abolitionists, see David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984). Davis masterfully draws attention to their association of abolition with “secular” and “sacred” progress.

4 *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 29, 1841.

5 *The Liberator*, August 1, 1856; July 17, 1857; August 8, 1856. See also *The Liberator*, August 6, 1841 (only “the overthrow of Pharaoh and his hosts in the Red Sea” could compare with August First); July 31, 1846 (“the most illustrious of holidays! The most glorious of anniversaries!”); July 30, 1847 (“the great event of the nineteenth century”); Garrison to Samuel May, Jr., August 1, 1856, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, ed. Walter M. Merrill and Louis Ruchames (5 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 4:399, hereafter *Letters* (“history records no event so marvellous and soul-thrilling ... All praise and honor to British philanthropy”); Garrison to Theobald Mathew, July 26, 1849, *Letters*, 3:641 (“the most thrilling event of the nineteenth century”), Garrison to Charles Sumner, July 16, 1860, *Letters*, 4:675 (“this grand event ... without a parallel in history”). See also Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, 116-129, 139-153.

6 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “An Address ... on ... the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies,” in *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*, ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven, 1995), 7; William Ellery Channing, *Dr. Channing’s Last Address*,
Delivered at Lenox, on the First of August, 1842 (Boston, 1842), 3; John Jay, The Progress and Results of Emancipation in the English West Indies (New York, 1842), 10.


8 Fourth Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (Boston, 1836), 40.


10 National Anti-Slavery Standard, July 29, 1841.

11 Charles Follen, Address to the People of the United States on the Subject of Slavery (Boston, 1834), 16.

12 See Roger N. Buckley, Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795-1815 (New Haven, 1979). Abolitionists knew of Britain’s campaigns in Saint Domingue and were duly embarrassed. One Garrisonian pamphlet admitted that the English “came not to assist [blacks] in maintaining their rights, but to drive out the French, to claim the colony, and to endeavor, ... to re-establish and perpetuate the system [of slavery] which was at this moment abolished.” See [American Anti-Slavery Society,] St. Domingo: Compiled, chiefly, from recent publications (New York, [1839?]), 4.

13 Garrison to Harrison Gray Otis, Sept. 5, 1835, Letters, 1:503; Lydia Maria Child, The Evils of Slavery, and the Cure of Slavery, the First Proved by the Opinions of Southerners Themselves, the Last Shown by Historical Evidence (Newburyport, 1839), 15; Lydia Maria Child, The Right Way the Safe Way, Proved by Emancipation in the British West Indies, and Elsewhere (New York, 1860).

14 This abolitionist theme receives a fuller treatment in Alfred N. Hunt, Haiti’s Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean (Baton Rouge, 1988), 147-156. For an example of the argument given by a non-Garrisonian abolitionist at the outset of the Civil War, see George S. Boutwell, Emancipation: its Justice, Expediency and Necessity, as the Means of Securing a Speedy and Permanent Peace; an address delivered by Hon. George S. Boutwell ... Dec. 16, 1861 (Boston, [1861?]), 11.

15 Abolitionist writers sometimes used 1793, the year in which Sonthonax, the French commissioner in Saint Domingue, issued a provisional emancipation decree. The local declaration was not ratified by the National Convention until the next year.

16 A.E. Grimke, “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South,” The Anti-Slavery Examiner, 1 (September 1836), 35. Abolitionists sometimes used 1801, instead of 1802,
to mark the opening of the third phase. But interestingly, those who used 1801 as the starting date of Napoleon’s campaign usually chose 1793 as the starting point of emancipation, keeping the period of peace eight years long and revealing how malleable the actual facts were in the hands of antislavery writers.


19 First Annual Report ... of the New-England Anti-Slavery Society (Boston, 1833), 20.

20 Follen, Address, 8.

21 English activist George Thompson, for example, agreed that “the revolution in St. Domingo originated ... previous to any act of emancipation. ... [The] slaves after their emancipation remained peaceful, contented, industrious, and happy, until Buonaparte made the attempt to restore slavery in the island.” [George Thompson,] Letters and Addresses by George Thompson (Boston, 1837), 83. See also Temperley, British Anti-Slavery, 76-77; Charles Stewart [Stuart], The West India Question: Immediate emancipation would be safe for the masters ... (1832; Newburyport, 1835), 13-14.

22 Robin Blackburn has noted that “following Napoleon’s attempt to restore slavery abolitionism [in England] was to become quite compatible with patriot hostility to the French.” See Robin Blackburn, The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848 (London, 1988), 303.


25 Smith’s comment on France’s example came in a speech delivered to the American Anti-Slavery Society in the year that full emancipation was granted to slaves in the British West Indies, so he was challenging the preeminence of English emancipation just as it was reaching its peak. See Fifth Annual Report ... of the American Anti-Slavery Society (New York, 1838), 25.