

# A BENEVOLENT EMPIRE? RELIGION, MORAL REFORM, AND DOMESTIC POLITICS IN THE ANTEBELLUM NORTH

HISTORY 1100.3, DEC. 5, 2006

#### I. RELIGIOUS REFORM & THE DOMESTICATION OF THE NORTH

As new domesticity took hold, problem appeared: new capitalist society had not changed to suit the new middle-class family values.

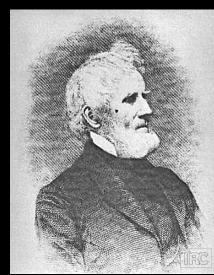
• Examples: national drinking binge, toleration of prostitution, disrespect for religion/Sabbath.

In response, emotional religious revivals swept "Greater New England," trying to restore & update Puritan faith & morality.

- Most successful revivalist was Charles Grandison Finney of NY, beginning in 1825.
  - Used commercial methods, well-funded by capitalists like the Tappan bros.: aggressive marketing, hard-sell tactics. More staid than southern revivals.
  - Very popular with middle-class women.
- Dropped harsher aspects of Puritanism like original sin & predestination, made conversion simple decision to reject sin.
  - Doctrines of "free moral agency" & perfectionism held out the possibility of a perfectly moral society brought about by changing individual hearts.
  - Sought to reshape men's behavior to the specs of wives, mothers, & future employers.
  - Male personality promoted by cult of domesticity and evangelical reformers: plain-living, self-controlling, futureoriented, self-reliant, hard-working, inner-directed (motivated by shame, not honor), law-bound (seeking impersonal & peaceful means for solving conflicts).
    - Southern men, working-class men, followed quite different model of manhood & even some northern men resisted.



**Charles Grandison Finney** 



Arthur Tappan

### I. RELIGIOUS REFORM & THE DOMESTICATION OF THE NORTH (CONT.)

- Rise of the "Benevolent Empire"
  - New evangelical religion inspired wave of well-funded movements, often female-dominated & led, to reform society according to values of Christianity, middle-class morality, & cult of domesticity.
    - Examples: Sabbatarianism, Sunday Schools, temperance, criminalization of prostitution (& other forms of disorderly conduct), missionary work, Antimasonry, "penitentiaries," and the new abolitionism (immediatism).
    - Played up threats to domesticity & relied on the allegedly non-political stance of wives, mothers, & their ministers to excuse their heavy political activity.
    - Hostile to immigrants, Catholicism, Democrats, sinning workers.
  - Methods: "moral suasion" by national organizations w/local chapters, networks of newspapers, direct mail, touring speakers, popular culture (prints/songs, sentimental novels & plays).
    - Despite its criticisms of traditional patriarchal society, "Benevolent Empire" increasingly reached for the coercive authority of government to impose values.
- The Benevolent Empire and Westward Expansion
  - Another popular cause was sending missionaries to Christianize and reform Indians, foreigners, the urban poor, western settlers, trying to get them all under middle-class moral restraints
    - Christian reform organizations (ABCFM & American Home Missionary Association) in effect mounted a campaign to culturally colonize the West, on behalf of New England.
    - Sent out ministers, started churches, schools, colleges all over West, creating a Yankee belt across northern tier from Massachusetts to NY, Ohio, & all the way over to Minnesota.
      - Also opened a competition for cultural/sectional loyalties of the West.

#### II. THE FAILED DOMESTICATION OF JACKSONIAN POLITICS



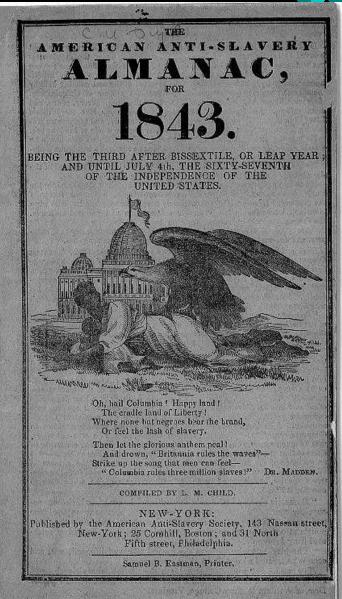
- Elected by W & S voters, new & immigrant voters, Democrat Andrew Jackson was criticized as a would-be king & the "Great Father" for his treatment of Indians, among other issues.
  - Whigs became new opposition party over these issues & the impact of the new capitalist economy: "aristocracy" & the Bank War.
    - Note connections among capitalism, middle-class religious values, & reform movements.
  - **Equally important was Jackson's confrontation with politicized women inspired by domesticity** 
    - Peggy Eaton affair: Jackson reshuffled his administration & picked a new Vice President (Van Buren over Calhoun) after Cabinet wives refused to accept a moral questionable women in their social circles.
    - Catherine Beecher herself helped lead a female reform campaign against Jackson's Indian Removal Act.
    - Reformers helped Cherokees win 2 Supreme Court cases against removal.
  - Opposition to Indian removal & patriarchal authority quieted when Jackson defended the Union in the Nullification Crisis (1832-33)

Old Federalist North's devotion to order & union proved stronger than their sympathy for Indians

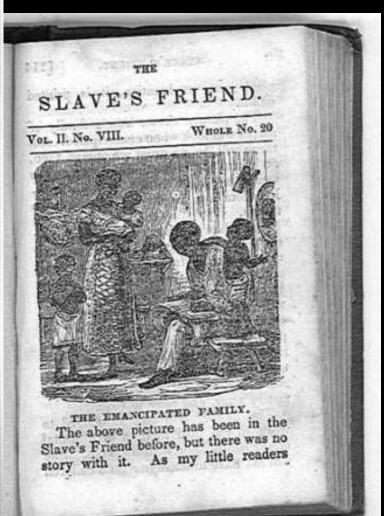
Women involved in reform movements (& often snubbed by men) become the first feminists: Elizabeth Cady Stanton & the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848.







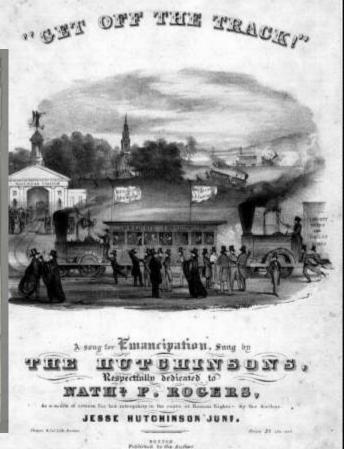
#### PULAR CULTURE



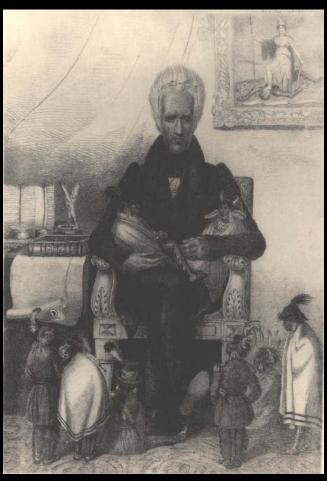
## THE HUTCHINSON FAMILY SINGERS: GREATEST ABOLITIONIST HITS

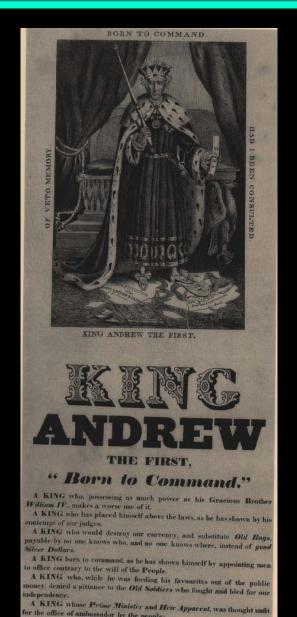






#### ANDREW JACKSON AS THE GREAT (EVIL) **FATHER**





for the office of ambassador by the people:

Shall he reign over us, Or shall the PEOPLE RULE?