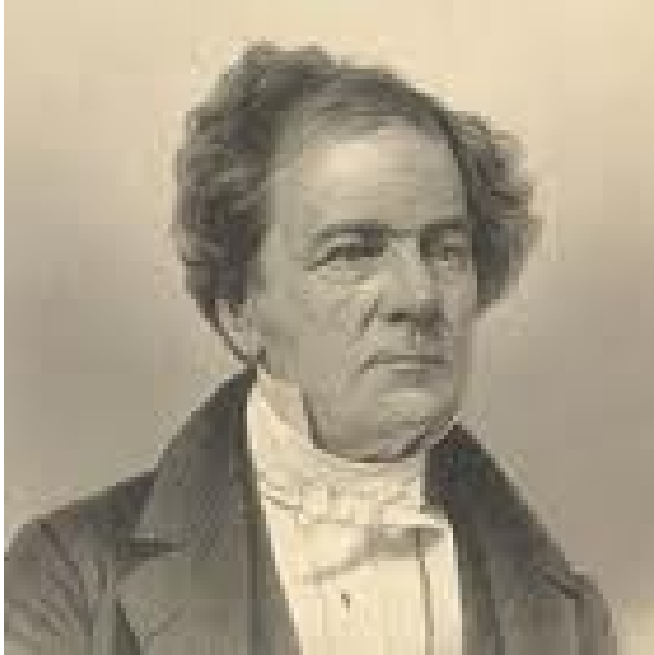


Lewis Tappan: New York's Evangelical Abolitionist

By Fergus M. Bordewich

New Yorkers of the twenty-first century generally do not think of their city as a hotbed of "born again" religion, much less of Christian evangelicals as the cutting edge of progressive politics. But in the early nineteenth century, an era when New York was commercially shackled to the economy of the cotton-growing states, it was the city's most ardent Christians, white and black, who led the struggle against the South's "peculiar institution" of chattel slavery. Foremost among them was an unassuming Pearl Street dry goods merchant named Lewis Tappan, who though now largely forgotten was in the decades before the Civil War the most pivotal figure in the national abolitionist movement. Indeed, without Tappan's efforts, and the impetus of evangelical religion, antislavery might not have developed into a serious social and political force at all.

The first organized group to oppose slavery in the United States were the Quakers, who in the 1760s began urging first their own members and then non-Quakers to free their slaves. Their efforts received a boost from the libertarian values spread by the American Revolution – most importantly, Thomas Jefferson's ringing cry in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal." Following the surging evangelical revival of the 1820s, known as the Second Great Awakening, the Quakers were joined by large numbers of northern Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Congregationalists such as Tappans. As long as slavery was regarded as part of the normal texture of American life, however regrettable, few dared to risk their safety or reputation to agitate against it. Once slavery was redefined as sin, however, action became imperative. Abolitionism called upon believers to put their professed faith to immediate effect. "Christianity is practical in its very nature and essence," Tappan's fellow New York abolitionist William Goodell declared in 1837. "Come, then, and help us to restore to these millions, whose eyes have been bored out by slavery, their sight, that they may see to read the Bible. Do you love God whom you have not seen? Then manifest that love, by restoring to your brother whom you have seen, his rightful inheritance, of which he has been so wrong and so cruelly deprived."



Born in 1788, Tappan – picture a slight man with hazel eyes, and an open, animated face crowned with wavy, flyaway hair – was the youngest in a long line of Northampton, Massachusetts merchants. His mother taught him from infancy to think of himself as "a probationer for eternity," and to follow his own conscience in a world where everything from birth and death to the abolition of slavery was ordained by God. After a sojourn in Boston, Tappan relocated to New York in 1827, where he and his brother Arthur founded what grew into an immensely profitable silk-trading and textile business – selling everything from pins and bobbins to fans and umbrellas – near the East River docks. The Tappans embraced the gamut of reformist causes, which included, along with antislavery, temperance, the reclamation of prostitutes, and missionary work among the poor. While Arthur continued to share Lewis's sentiments, personal financial reverses forced him to eventually withdraw from public life.