Introduction:  
“Our Rights as Moral Beings”

In the summer of 1837, two sisters from South Carolina, Angelina and Sarah Grimké, age 32 and 45 respectively, began a speaking tour of New England that permanently altered American perceptions of the rights of women. What began as a tour to promote the abolition of slavery ended by introducing the new concept of women’s rights into American public life. Between May and September the Grimkés ignited a debate about the equality of the sexes that first enveloped the abolitionist movement and then extended into the lives of women who were active in other reforms, precipitating large changes in consciousness in a relatively short period of time.

Although the Grimké sisters retired from public life in 1839, their ideas took root in the fertile soil of a rapidly changing society. In 1848 a Women’s Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York, marked the emergence of women’s rights as an autonomous social movement. A cascade of women’s rights conventions in the 1850s carried the movement into towns and villages throughout the Northeast and Midwest. After the Civil War the movement consolidated around women’s right to vote,

1 Although the term “woman’s rights” was used more frequently in the nineteenth century than “women’s rights,” I use the term “women’s rights” because it has become the preferred term in the twentieth century.

K. K. Sklar, Women’s Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement, 1830–1870 © Bedford/St. Martin’s 2000
forming two organizations in 1869 — the National Woman Suffrage Association in New York and the American Woman Suffrage Association in Boston. For the next fifty years, until the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granted votes to women in 1920, the woman suffrage movement forged channels through which women contributed enormous vitality and energy to American civil society.

The emergence of an autonomous women’s rights movement from the struggle against slavery was not inevitable. Although women were also active in British antislavery circles, for example, their activism did not generate an equivalent women’s rights movement in England. In the United States a movement arose out of the confluence of many causes, some rooted in the particulars of American slavery, American religious culture, and American political culture, some arising from other changes already under way in the personal lives of American women between 1830 and 1870. The movement began, however, with the unique position the Grimké sisters, exiles from South Carolina, held within the campaign to end slavery.

**PRELUDE: BREAKING AWAY FROM SLAVE SOCIETY**

Angelina and Sarah Grimké occupied a special position in the antislavery movement between 1835 and 1839 because they were the daughters of an elite southern slaveholding family who left the South and became lecturers for the American Anti-Slavery Society. Their compelling descriptions of the horrors of slavery attracted audiences that otherwise might have remained indifferent to the topic, given the wide extent to which livelihoods in the North were intertwined with the economic success of slavery in the South. For example, the politically powerful class of northern merchants profited substantially by selling southern cotton to English manufacturers. And even New England textile workers depended on southern cotton for their earnings.²

Before 1830 the Grimké sisters seemed an unlikely pair to launch a revolution. Born to a prominent slave-owning family of Huguenot (French Protestant) descent in Charleston, South Carolina, Sarah was the sixth and Angelina the last of fourteen children. Their father was