

On October 12, 1853, former Exeter Congressman Amos Tuck organized a meeting of anti-slavery men from various political parties and united the group with a new name: the Republican Party. Exeter's claim to the founding of the Republican Party has been challenged over the years, but even if Tuck's meeting is only recognized as one of a few possible candidates, it still raises the question of just how much of Exeter was devoted to the abolitionist movement.

When the 1790 census was taken there were still two enslaved people living in Exeter. The practice fell out of favor even though the New Hampshire Constitution never actually prohibited its existence. And, although New Englanders were more than willing to buy goods and products made by slaves, they weren't comfortable keeping slaves themselves.

With that said, it's hard to tell whether New Englanders were opposed to southerners keeping slaves. Before the Civil War was fought, most Americans still thought of themselves along regional, not national, lines. If the southern states wanted slavery, so be it. It wasn't illegal according to the Constitution.

In 1834, slavery ceased to exist in Great Britain. Enslaved people were granted gradual emancipation through an apprentice system that lasted for nearly a decade, but the practice was for all intents and purposes outlawed. Emboldened by this, American abolitionists began to push for a similar ban. Unfortunately, that crusty old U.S. Constitution stood in the way. Without an amendment banning the practice, there was no way slavery would end.

That same year, the women of Exeter fired off a petition to the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives requesting that the practice of slavery be prohibited within the confines of Washington, D.C. They may not have been able to influence what happened in the individual states, but the capital city was federal land. Visiting dignitaries were often horrified to witness scenes of slave auctions on arrival to Washington. The women of Exeter – representing all social groups and all the major churches in town – used the strongest possible language: “The undersigned, women of Exeter New Hampshire believing that slavery is a sin, and therefore ‘a reproach to any people,’ especially the free, enlightened and liberal government of which your honorable body form a part; and being grieved at its existence in the capital of our beloved country, the District over which you have exclusive jurisdiction, do unite our fervent, importunate petitions with the thousands already presented that you would immediately abolish Slavery in the District of Columbia, that henceforth, whoever breathes its air or touches its soil may be free.”

They were part of a larger movement of northern abolitionists. So many petitions were delivered to Congress, that in 1836 a committee finally instituted a rule that automatically tabled discussion and consideration of any more that might arrive.

The existence of these petitions might lead one to believe that Exeter was a solidly abolitionist town. But another event, on August 11, 1836, highlights how contentious and divisive the issue really was.

The Methodist Church, then located on Portsmouth Avenue, had agreed to host a fiery abolitionist speaker named Reverend Storrs. As the meeting began, the church was surrounded by an angry mob which, according to the *Exeter News-Letter*, “interrupted the services – stones were thrown – glass and window blinds broken – the fire engine brought out and made to play upon the building – until the Lecture was given up and the audience dispersed.” Public opinion leaned toward the rioters’ side. It wasn’t so much the idea of abolition to which they objected, it was *abolitionists* that made them uncomfortable. What right did they have to agitate? One letter writer placed the blame for the event firmly on the organizers, “I think the injudicious conduct of the Abolitionists is making this great evil still greater, not only to the slave holder, but to the slaves themselves.”

The divide in Exeter was similar to the divide everywhere in the North. Mark Sammons and Valerie Cunningham summed it up convincingly in *Black Portsmouth*: “there were gender issues at play too. White males typically assumed slavery was an aspect of business, finance, trade, and the economy. As a topic for debate, men fell squarely in the male domain. Women and abolitionists viewed slavery as a moral evil, an outlook that brought the debate within what was called the women’s sphere. Among whites, women became advocates of abolition.”

The ladies’ petition failed to end slavery in Washington, D.C. In 1850, after a great deal of debate and outright fighting, President Millard Fillmore reluctantly signed a compromise bill that eliminated slave trading, but not slave ownership, in the capital. It would take a much bloodier event, the Civil War, to eliminate the practice completely.