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Three-part PBS documentary shines spotlight on key abolitionists

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

"The Abolitionists"

American Experience, PBS

10 p.m./9 p.m. Central, Jan. 8, Jan. 15 and Jan. 22

Tonight, a three-part documentary premieres on PBS that tells the story of the abolitionists and the movement they created in the United States to end slavery. The series comes at the right moment by providing the historical context, biographies and background to the passage of the 13th Amendment as shown in the Steven Spielberg's film "Lincoln," now in theaters. Yet Abraham Lincoln's beliefs, efforts and ultimate success in abolishing the institution of slavery come late. The abolitionists are promoted by their deep faith to rid the United States of slavery, then it is through the Emancipation Proclamation, 150 years ago Jan. 1, and an act of law, the 13th Amendment, that Lincoln and Congress finally eradicate slavery, though its effects are with us still.

The documentary's first part details 1828 to 1838; part two covers 1838 to 1854; and part three examines 1854 to emancipation and victory.

The series, narrated by Oliver Platt, attains the usual high production quality of "American Experience" and combines dramatic recreations, brief commentaries by historians, photographs, narration drawn from letters and other original documents, and is produced in clarity of images and story-telling. The series was written, directed and produced by Rob Rapley.

The three installments focus on a few key characters we are already familiar with and their life's work to abolish slavery: the runaway slave Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks), the nonviolent William Lloyd

Garrison (Neal Huff), the insurgent activist John Brown (T. Ryder Smith), and Harriet Beecher Stowe (Kate Lyn Shiel). Then the series introduces a luminous character -- until recently not so well known -- in Angelina Grimké, here played by Jeanine Serralles. Grimké, the daughter of a prominent Charleston, S.C., judge, left the South for the North as a young woman. Unable to persuade her family to abandon slavery because it was a sin, she became an outspoken opponent of slavery and a supporter of women's rights beginning with universal education. When she married, a black minister stood alongside a white minister at the ceremony.

By 1828, the United States had 2 million slaves, and slaves made up "the single largest financial asset in the U.S. economy." All the northern states had outlawed slavery, but the invention of the cotton gin made slavery indispensable to the South and the North. No one was thinking about turning millions of dollars of slaves into millions of citizens. And then came the abolitionists.

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