The Prescott Girls – Study Guide

The Sugar Boycott

Sugar and the Abolition Movement

During the late 1700s and early 1800s, many people in Britain and the United States began to protest the use of enslaved labor on sugar plantations in the Caribbean.

Sugar was one of the most widely traded goods in the Atlantic world. Large plantations produced sugar using the labor of enslaved Africans under extremely harsh conditions.

As the abolition movement grew, some people chose to protest slavery by refusing to buy sugar that had been produced by enslaved labor. This movement became known as the sugar boycott.

Why Sugar Was Important

Sugar was a common ingredient in many households. It was used in:

- tea and coffee
- baked goods
- preserves and sweets

Because sugar was so widely used, refusing to buy it became a meaningful way for ordinary families to express their opposition to slavery. Choosing not to use sugar required giving up something familiar and widely enjoyed, making the decision both personal and visible within the home.

A Protest in the Kitchen

Unlike many political protests, the sugar boycott often took place inside the home.

Families made choices about what they would buy, cook, and serve. Some people stopped using sugar completely, while others tried to purchase sugar that had not been produced by enslaved labor.

Women often played an important role in the boycott because they usually managed household purchases and food preparation. Decisions made in kitchens and at market stalls became ways for families to express their moral beliefs in everyday life.

Quakers and the Sugar Boycott

Many early supporters of the sugar boycott were members of the Religious Society of Friends, often called Quakers.

Quakers were among the first religious groups to speak openly against slavery. As early as the late 1700s, Quaker meetings in both Britain and the United States encouraged members to avoid goods produced by enslaved labor whenever possible.

Because Quaker beliefs emphasized living according to one's conscience, many Friends believed that refusing slave-produced sugar was a way to practice their moral principles in daily life. Choosing what to buy at the market or serve at the table became a small but meaningful act of protest.

Quaker communities also helped spread these ideas. Letters, pamphlets, and traveling speakers carried news of the sugar boycott between cities such as Philadelphia and smaller towns throughout New England.

Free Labor Sugar

By the early nineteenth century, some merchants began selling "free labor sugar." This sugar was advertised as being produced without enslaved labor.

Another alternative sometimes discussed by abolitionists was East India sugar, which came from British-controlled plantations in Asia rather than from Caribbean plantations dependent on enslaved labor.

People who supported abolition often preferred to buy these products even if they cost more. Stores and newspapers sometimes encouraged customers to choose goods produced without slavery.

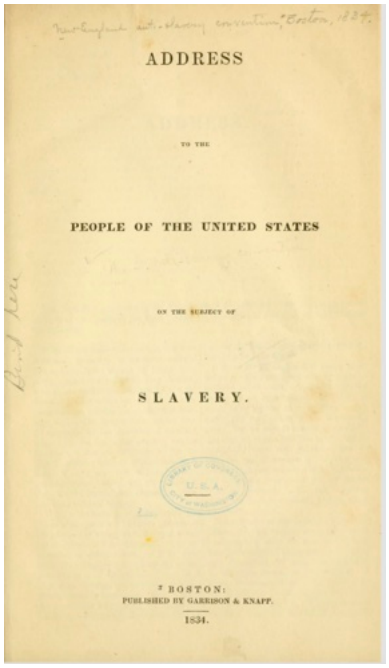
Connections to *The Prescott Girls*

During the 1830s, debates about slavery and the goods produced by enslaved labor were spreading across the northern United States.

Letters, pamphlets, church discussions, and newspaper articles helped carry these ideas between cities such as Philadelphia and towns throughout New England. In communities like those in Maine, families sometimes discussed these issues at home, at school, or in church meetings.

In *The Prescott Girls*, the decision to consider a sugar boycott grows out of this historical context. The ideas, conversations, and influences that reach the girls are grounded in documented patterns of communication and reform during this period. The specific choices the girls make, and the way those choices unfold in their daily lives, are part of the story.

What is Known from Historical Evidence


ADDRESS

TO THE

PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES

ON THE SUBJECT OF

SLAVERY.

BOSTON:
PUBLISHED BY GARRISON & KNAPP.
1834.

Historical records show that:

• sugar produced by enslaved labor was widely used in Britain and the United States
• abolitionists organized boycotts of slave-produced sugar
• Quaker communities encouraged members to avoid goods tied to slavery
• “free labor sugar” and alternative sources were promoted in newspapers and shops
• letters, pamphlets, and traveling speakers helped spread these ideas

These sources help historians understand how the sugar boycott developed and how widely it was discussed.

What Has Been Imagined in the Story

The story imagines:

• how the Prescott girls first learn about the boycott
• the conversations they have with one another and with adults
• how the question of using sugar appears in their daily lives
• the personal meaning the decision holds for each of them

These elements are imagined, but they are grounded in what is known about families, communities, and communication during the period.

Why This History Matters

The sugar boycott shows how people responded to a difficult and distant problem using the choices available to them.

Families were asked to give up something familiar in order to take a stand against something they believed was wrong. These decisions were often made quietly, in kitchens and marketplaces, but they were part of a larger effort to challenge slavery.

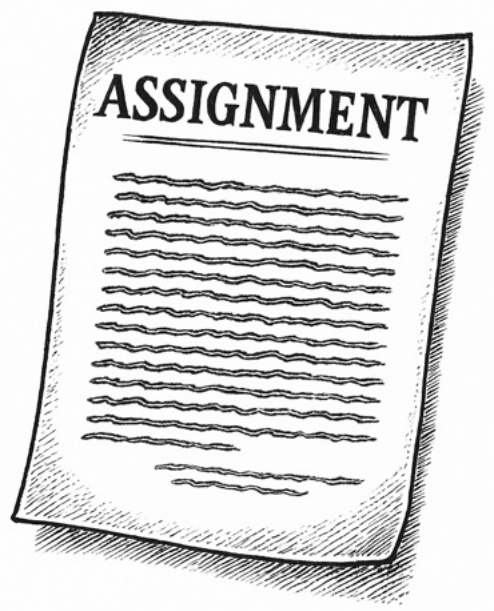
The boycott also encouraged people to think about where goods came from and how they were produced. As information spread, many began to see everyday purchases in a new way.

Studying these actions helps us understand how individuals and families expressed their beliefs and participated in larger movements for change.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think sugar became an important focus for the abolition movement?
2. Why might refusing to buy sugar have been considered a meaningful form of protest?
3. Why were women often important participants in the sugar boycott?
4. What would have to be true for someone to give up something they use every day?
5. Can a small decision at home really make a difference? Why or why not?

Activity



Imagine you lived in the 1830s and learned that some products were produced using enslaved labor.

Write a short letter to a friend explaining whether you would support the sugar boycott and why.

In your response, consider:

• what information you might have heard
• how your family or community might feel about the issue
• what choices you might make in your daily life