

# What America's First Student-Led Rebellion Looked Like

In 1834, a 30-year-old seminary student named Theodore Dwight Weld led what is arguably the most successful student rebellion in U.S. history.

It took place near Cincinnati at Lane Theological Seminary, where Weld had enrolled the previous year after dedicating his life to a single cause: the abolition of slavery.

"Abolition immediate universal is my desire and prayer to God," he had written in [an 1833 letter](#). "I hardly know how to contain myself."

Weld led a group of students—known as the Lane Rebels—who demanded a free exchange of ideas on the issue. And their demands were met initially, writes historian Jack Kelly, in his new book [Heaven's Ditch](#):

*"In February 1834, against [its] better judgment, [Lane Seminary] allowed [its] students to hold a series of debates about two questions: Should slavery be immediately abolished? Should Christians support colonization? Weld, an experienced and persuasive talker, took the lead. ... For eighteen days, regular classes were suspended while the students and guest speakers discussed the questions."*

Then something happened. The university's board of directors, led by university president Lyman Beecher (father, ironically, of Harriet Beecher Stowe), shut down debate. In protest, about 80 percent of the students [abandoned the school](#), arguing that the pursuit of Truth should prevail, and if not "[better the mob demolish every building](#)."

Most of the students went to nearby Oberlin College, a

religious school [founded a year earlier](#) by a Presbyterian minister, but Weld was not one of them. He abandoned his studies to help found the American Anti-Slavery Society (though he did help organize Oberlin as the first college to admit African Americans and females). In 1839 Weld published [American Slavery As It Is](#), the tract that would inspire Harriet Beecher Stowe's seminal work [Uncle Tom's Cabin](#).

By the mid 1830s abolitionism was spreading across northern states like wildfire, largely because of Weld, whom historian Paul Johnson [called](#) "the most sophisticated and effective of the abolitionist campaigners."

What's most striking to me is how different the 1830s student revolt was to those we see on campuses today. Weld's revolt was more than a cause; it was a rebellion of ideas. The students simply were seeking freedom to communicate a straightforward concept—that slavery is wrong—and they used reason and history to present their case. When debate was shut down, they committed the ultimate form of protest: they left.

Compare that to today's campus protests, which more often than not involve [students trying to stop others](#) from freely exchanging ideas. When today's students do seek redress to a specific issue, spectacle, not reason, is usually the method of choice—marching with signs, [baring skin](#), [strapping on sex toys](#), etc.

Could today's students learn a few things from Weld and his fellow students?