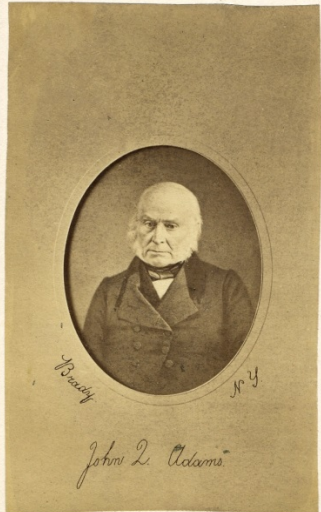


## Chapter 104 -- The House Passes A “Gag Order” to Silence Anti-Slavery Petitions

 <p>A sepia-toned oval portrait of John Quincy Adams, an elderly man with white hair, wearing a dark suit and a white cravat. The portrait is mounted on a larger rectangular card. Below the oval, the name 'John Q. Adams' is written in cursive. To the left of the oval, the word 'Brassby' is written, and to the right, 'N.Y.' is written.</p>	<p><b>Dates:</b> 1836</p>	<p><b>Sections:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• JQ Adams Protests Southerners Move To “Gag” House Debate On Slavery Issues</li> </ul>
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Time: May 1836

### JQ Adams Protests Southerners Move To “Gag” House Debate On Slavery Issues



John Quincy Adams (1767-1748)

The founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833 provides an organized forum for white abolitionists to have their voices heard across the North and the South.

Within the group, however, differences exist on which tactics are most likely to topple slavery. The New York faction – the Tappan brothers, Theodore Weld and now James Birney – believe that success lies in forming a political movement capable of electing advocates in Washington. The Boston faction – followers of Garrison – tend to distrust all politicians, and feel that direct calls to the public through publications and speaking tours are more likely to succeed.

Soon the efforts along both fronts begin to materialize – in the shape of “Citizen’s Petitions,” drawn up at local rallies and sent to the federal House of Representatives.

Once received, the time honored “rules of the House” require that all such public expressions be read into the record and then directed to appropriate committees for further consideration.

Historically, petitions related to abolition have trickled into the House one at a time, typically from Quakers. But with the advent of the Anti-Slavery Society chapters, the trickle turns into a flood.

And the response among Southern congressmen is one of outrage.

One man becomes the champion of reading these petitions out loud to his colleagues. He is ex-President John Quincy Adams, who joins the House in 1831 – and becomes the lone outright abolitionist in the House at the time.

Soon he is reading these abolitionist petitions in batches of ten or more – with Southerners bristling at every word.

Finally, on December 18, 1835, this procedure is challenged on the floor.

The impetus is a petition generated by a local abolitionist society calling on Congress to repeal slavery in the District of Columbia, a “territory” not a sovereign state, where the federal government has unilateral control over legal statutes

As one more appeal from Massachusetts is about to be read on December 18, James Hammond of South Carolina rises to object.

Why, he asks, should the House waste its time on these petitions, since the Constitution specifically guarantees the continuation of slavery? Instead of officially receiving these petitions, shouldn't the rules be changes to ignore them entirely?

Hammond's challenge sets off a fiery debate with Adams. It concludes with a decision to hand the controversy over to the rules committee headed by Henry L Pinckney, another South Carolina man, who supported Calhoun in his Nullification challenge.

On May 18, 1836 the Pinckney Committee Resolution is presented:

*Whereas it is extremely important and desirable that the agitation on this subject should be finally arrested for the purpose of restoring tranquility to the public mind...resolved that all petitions, memorials, propositions or papers relating in any way... to the subject of slavery or the abolition of slavery, shall, without being printed or referred, be laid on the table and that no further action shall be had thereon.*

Adams is outraged by the proposal:

*I hold the resolution to be a violation of the Constitution of the US, the rules of this House and the rights of my constituents.*

But the proposal passes by a comfortable margin of 117 yea to 68 nay.

Those in opposition henceforth refer to this as the “Gag Rule” – and its actual effect will prove to be very different from the intent of its backers.

Instead of ceasing to send in petitions, Rule #21 only serves to spur the abolitionists on – and, when received, Adams and others will continue to attempt to bring them up, despite the ban.

Also, as time passes, Northerners begin to regard the Gag Rule as another example of the South trying to unilaterally impose its will on Washington politics.