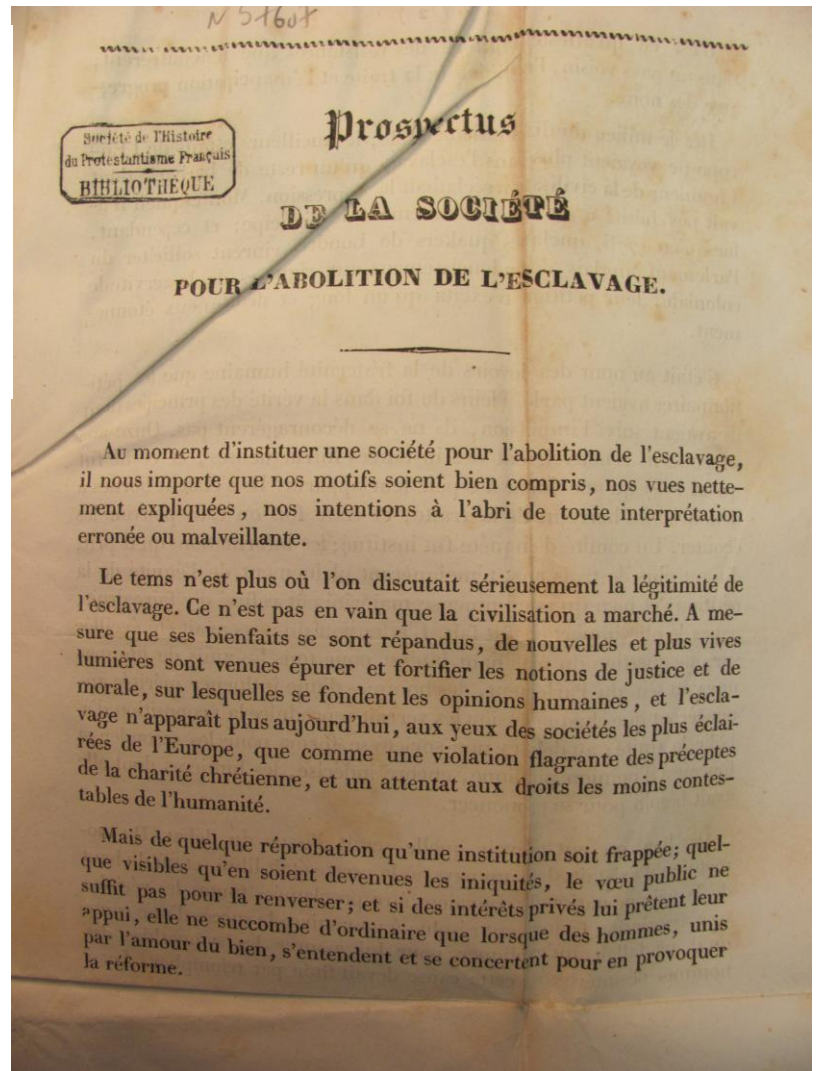


***Prospectus de la Société pour
l'abolition de l'esclavage***

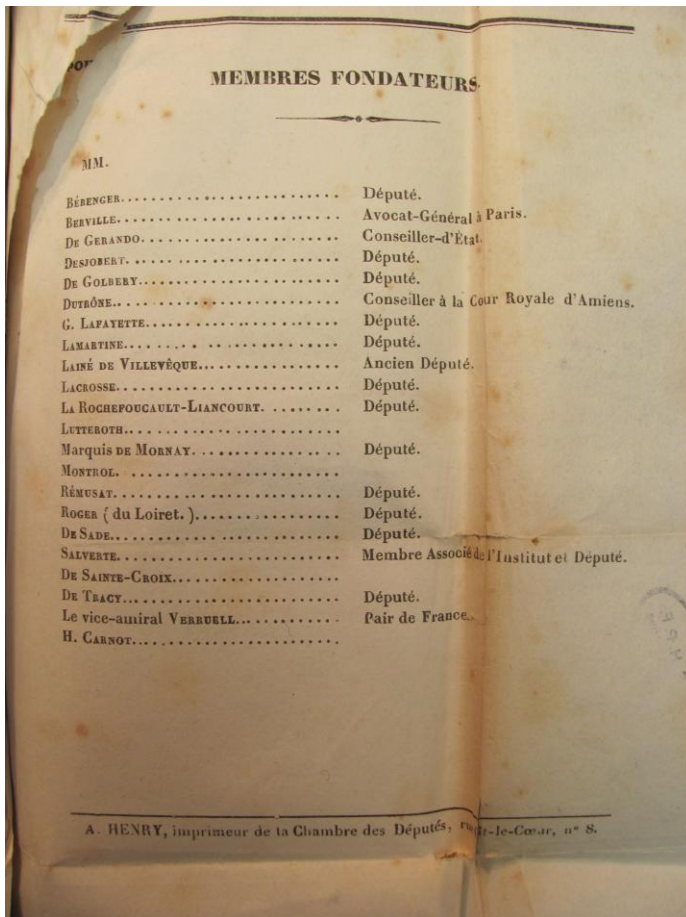
**[Prospectus of the French Society
for the Abolition of Slavery]**

Paris: printed by A. Henry, 1834



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In August 1834, two major developments in European anti-slavery political culture occurred: the bill abolishing slavery in the British colonies came into force, and the Société pour l'Abolition de l'Esclavage held its first meeting in Paris. Motivated by the victory of the British abolitionists, the Société declared in its founding document, drawn up in December 1834, that: "from the perspective of the most enlightened societies in Europe, slavery can only be seen today as a flagrant violation of the principles of Christian charity and an attack on the most basic, uncontested rights of humanity" (1). The founding principles of the society were made clear in its prospectus. If Europe was united in condemning slavery in the name of Christianity, civilisation and enlightenment, then slavery should not be present in any territory under French control. Public opinion was not powerful enough on its own to force change, according to the prospectus: a degree of political organisation was therefore necessary.



Membership of the French Société pour l'abolition de l'esclavage was concentrated within the political elite. As the list on the left indicates, the majority of the founding members of the society were either current or former Deputies in the French Parliament. The president, the Duc de Broglie, was a former foreign secretary, and leading figure in post-1830 French politics. The two vice presidents, Passy and Odillon-Barrot were also important liberal politicians in France at the time. Although the Society was mainly comprised of liberal politicians, the Prospectus called for participation from across the political spectrum, in an attempt to broaden its appeal, and cast abolition as a moral, rather than political issue. One of the two founding secretaries, François Isambert, also became the French correspondent of the anti-slavery movement in Britain.

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In a short overview of abolitionism in Europe, the prospectus of the Société pour l'abolition de l'esclavage credits the British Quakers and French enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu as the first major voices to be raised against slavery, "in the name of the duty of human brotherhood" (2). The French Society took particular inspiration from the momentum generated between 1787 and 1791 in Britain against the slave trade. Important lessons were learnt from this defining period of European abolitionist political culture, such as the need for a free press in order to disseminate information widely, and the need for a political association in order to direct public opinion. With these conditions in place, the prospectus suggests, their cause would necessarily end in triumph. Other nations, particularly Denmark and the United States, were also praised for their role in ending the transatlantic slave trade. The prospectus questions why, for almost twenty years, France had remained "simply a spectator of the efforts made in England for emancipation" (4), and why no preparations had been made in the French colonies for a gradual emancipation of the slaves on the plantations. This inertia is attributed partially to traumatic memories of Saint-Domingue as well as wounded national pride, but the main cause of the lack of engagement in France with the politics of anti-slavery after 1815, according to the prospectus, is the lack of a national society to lead the way and influence public opinion. The founding of the Société pour l'abolition de l'esclavage hoped to change this situation, in order to follow the "great example" set by England (5). The prospectus argues that abolishing slavery was not only a humanitarian act – it was also a necessity. The proximity of the British Caribbean plantations would cause increased unrest and violence among French slaves, and therefore force reform of colonial legislation.