

The Making of the North's 'Stark Mad Abolitionists':
Anti-Slavery Conversion in the United States, 1824-1854

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In the late 1920s an economics professor at Ohio Wesleyan University stumbled upon a forgotten trunk in an attic belonging to Dr. L.D.H. Weld. The trunk contained the papers and letters of the abolitionists Theodore Dwight Weld and Angelina Grimké Weld, and opened up a rich, untapped source of material about the anti-slavery movement. The professor, Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, noticed dramatic differences between the Welds' abolitionism and that of the far more famous William Lloyd Garrison, the central figure in most accounts of American anti-slavery. Perhaps most significantly, Weld's abolitionism was inextricably linked with the concept of conversion: from his own conversion (to Christ) at the hands of the evangelical revivalist Charles Grandison Finney to his subsequent conversion of countless others to the religious crusade against slavery. Garrison and his New England supporters may have been religious men and women (ranging from John Greenleaf Whittier's Quakerism to Theodore Parker's New Agey transcendentalism), but few of them could match Weld's direct link to the Great Revival and the Second Great Awakening – to sudden, emotionally-wrenching conversion.

Barnes' book The Anti-Slavery Impulse, published in 1933, seriously challenged the prevailing interpretations of his day. Instead of putting a small group of New

England agitators front and center in the anti-slavery struggle, Barnes inserted a groundswell of evangelical westerners, “turned on” to their crusade by a tousled, wild-eyed evangelical preacher. He credits their army of Christian abolitionist soldiers – and not Garrison’s Liberator, with paving the way for the Civil War.

Thus Barnes traced the anti-slavery impulse to frontier revivalism, with all its connotations of fanatical zeal, hellfire-and-brimstone sermons, and cataclysmic front-bench conversions. This revivalism, according to Barnes, “fulfilled its purpose when moral people were persuaded to denounce the immorality” of others, namely, slaveholders. This persuasion, more often than not, came in the form of a sudden conversion:

The Lord forgive our comparative apathy in respect to [slaveholders]. Our indignation has been too faint – our denunciation too tame...No earthly language can sufficiently express the contempt and loathing with which true Christianity requires us to regard their hypocritical pretensions; their heaven-daring blasphemies!²

This response came after its author had read Weld’s screed American Slavery As It Is, a dizzying litany of horrors, tortures, beatings, rapes and other cruelties, written to provide his fellow converts with an arsenal of facts to take into battle. It became the most widely read and influential abolitionist pamphlet (100,000 copies were sold or distributed by the American Anti-Slavery Society, which commissioned the book) until Harriet Beecher Stowe published Uncle Tom’s Cabin.³

¹ The author wishes to thank the Huntington Library, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies and the University of Kansas for their support.

² Quoted in The Emancipator, June 6, 1839.

³ In Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1853), Stowe acknowledges how she was indebted to Weld’s book for many of her own ideas. According to A.G. Weld, Stowe claimed to have “kept the book in her work basket by day and slept with it under her pillow by night till its facts crystallized into Uncle Tom. See Barnes, The Anti-Slavery Impulse, p. 264n., Harriet Beecher Stowe, Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin (Boston, 1853) 13-16, 21, 40-46.

At least since the publication of The Anti-Slavery Impulse, historians have portrayed changes of opinion on the matter of slavery as “conversions.” This is partly attributable to antebellum memoirists, diarists and autobiographers, whose descriptions of such moments drip with religious imagery. Cultural anthropologists have focused on the ways religious conversion entails a transformation of the individual’s sense of reality as well as a major change in his or her self-identification within a social structure.⁴ In this paper, I will argue that the same dual transformations affected people who embraced anti-slavery in the antebellum United States. A great many Americans who changed their minds about slavery, like Weld, did so for religious reasons. But without downplaying the significance of evangelical abolitionists like Weld, Grimké, and their host of converts, it took far more than a few thousand revivalists to bring an end to American slavery. Before this could happen, the anti-slavery crusade (another image right out of the Middle Ages) needed to become a movement with true mass appeal – thousands of non-evangelicals needed to reorient themselves from either indifference to slavery (or outright pro-slavery) to a stance more closely favoring abolition.⁵

After a brief discussion of the more traditional trope of religious anti-slavery conversion, this paper will explore some of the ways Americans who did not consider themselves front-line abolitionists came to view slavery as the gravest threat facing the

⁴ Elizabeth E. Brusco, The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia (Austin, 1995); Robert W. Hefner, ed., Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation (Berkeley, 1993); David A. Snow and Richard Machalek, “The Sociology of Conversion,” Annual Review of Sociology 10 (1984), 167-90.

⁵ Slavery’s demise came as a result of a civil war brought on by a sectional political crisis between a vaguely anti-slavery northern electorate and a pro-slavery Southern one. The palpable change in mood, belief and values in the North was a result of both abolitionist agitation and significant political shifts in the major parties. For the shift among antebellum Democrats, see Jonathan Earle, “The Undaunted

republic, a threat requiring their personal action.⁶ This latter discussion will focus on two groups that historians of the anti-slavery movement normally elide: Jacksonian Democrats and “Cotton” Whigs. Unlike abolitionist diarists, these people rarely left behind memoirs about the circumstances surrounding their change of heart. But through the examination of the editorial press and private letters, we can begin to make sense of the events leading to their personal transformations. There were many different roads to each person’s moment of decision: the suppression of the right of abolitionists to assemble and speak freely provided the catalyst for some antebellum Americans to turn against slavery and slaveholders. Others were convinced that slavery’s expansion into western states and territories threatened free institutions. For a group of Boston conservatives, the use of overwhelming federal might to return a fugitive to slavery transformed them into “stark mad Abolitionists.” If we are fully to understand the events leading to the Civil War, historians must ask why and how antebellum Americans made their momentous individual decisions to oppose slavery. These intensely personal yet critical moments are crucial to explaining America’s sectional crisis.⁷

Democracy: Jacksonian Anti-Slavery and Free Soil, 1828-1848,” (unpub. Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1996).

⁶ Historians have traditionally separated those proposing the immediate cessation of slavery as “abolitionists” and those favoring slavery’s eventual overthrow (or its geographical containment en route to its extinction) as “anti-slavery.”

⁷ Due to limitations of space, this paper will not explore the anti-slavery conversions of slaves and free blacks, which I envision as a separate essay in conjunction with this research project. Since, of course, every slave opposed his or her thralldom and virtually every free African American opposed slavery, this separate essay will focus on the moment slaves came to understand their own plight as part of a larger struggle for freedom. In this case I am thinking particularly of Frederick Douglass’ recollection in his Narrative of the moment he dedicated himself to escaping slavery. He reached this resolution after helping two Irishmen unload a scow of stone on the Baltimore wharf. When one of them asked if he was a slave for life, Douglass answered in the affirmative. The Irishman “said to the other that it was a pity so fine a fellow as myself should be a slave for life...They both advised me to run away to the north; that I should find friends there, and that I should be free...I remembered their advice and from that time I resolved to run

Like many evangelical abolitionists, Weld's own conversion came in two parts: a first conversion to revivalist Christianity, and a separate, second decision to fight against slavery and for the rights of black people. When he first heard of the tactics of Charles Grandison Finney and the other revivalists in 1826, Weld was outraged. In the heady early days of the revival, the Finneyites and their converts lustily attacked establishment preachers and traditional practitioners, labeling those who opposed them the Devil's helpers. Weld, a student at Hamilton College, fumed that "my father was a real minister of the Gospel, grave and courteous, and an honor to the profession. [Finney] is not a minister, and I will never acknowledge him as such."⁸ Weld's rage continued after he heard Finney preach, and the next day he ranted at the preacher for an hour in a local store. Feeling guilty for this public display, Weld decided to apologize and paid Finney a call. The two men ended up clutching on the parlor floor, "sobbing and praying, sobbing and praying." That night, Weld paced in his room until daybreak, when he recalled being crushed to the floor by an invisible force. A disembodied voice called upon him to repent; the following evening he rose in meeting to confess his sins and pledge himself to Finney's revivalist crusade.⁹

Even though Weld claimed to have become a "radical abolitionist" the moment he witnessed slavery as a teenager, his change of heart over slavery occurred over a period of years, not minutes. Very few people became instant abolitionists, their remembrances in memoirs aside; like most opponents of slavery, Weld began his anti-slavery career as a

away." Quoted in Benjamin Quarles, ed., Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (Cambridge, 1971), p. 69.

⁸ Quoted in Robert H. Abzug, Passionate Liberator: Theodore Dwight Weld and the Dilemma of Reform (New York, 1980), p. 47.

⁹ Abzug, p. 49.

supporter of the American Colonization Society.¹⁰ And, like many Colonizationists, Weld feared that, if freed on American soil, blacks would use their freedom for revenge. But certain other beliefs and personality traits made Weld question the entire philosophy of Colonization and its innate assumptions of black inferiority. From the revival, for example, Weld had embraced a religious philosophy based in opposition to hierarchical structures and deference. He also developed an egalitarian belief in the power of manual labor, which predisposed him to reject inherent inequality among classes. And he had, over the course of his life, developed friendships with individual African Americans. Finally, according to his most recent biographer, Weld's own conversion at the hands of Finney had given him a powerful sense that he had left behind a life of spiritual slavery for one bathed in the benevolent light of Truth.¹¹

But these beliefs weren't enough to push Weld out of the Colonization camp and into a life of abolitionism. Various external events, including Nat Turner's bloody revolt and the Nullification crisis (also intimately bound up with slavery) seemed to threaten the very existence of American society. Slavery, despite the effort of the politicians, had seeped into every quarter of American public life in 1831-2.¹²

In the fall of 1832, Weld arrived in the college town of Hudson, Ohio to speak on his preferred topics of temperance and manual labor. He left a full-fledged abolitionist. We do not know exactly what transpired on the campus of Western Reserve College. However, he wrote to the Garrisonian Elizur Wright as soon as he left that he had

¹⁰ Colonizationists, whose number at one time included such diametric opposites as Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, James Birney and William Lloyd Garrison, hoped to solve race problems by colonizing free blacks in Africa.

¹¹ Abzug, p. 84-5.

¹² See William W. Freehling, Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836 (New York, 1965).

experienced a fundamental transformation: “[S]ince I saw you my soul has been in travail over [abolitionism]. I hardly know how to contain myself...Abolition *immediate universal* is my desire and prayer to God.”¹³ In the same letter he also mentioned having “many pitched battles this side of the mountains – two with agents of the Colonization society.” That same month the New York abolitionist Arthur Tappan mentioned Weld’s Western Reserve conversion to abolitionism in a letter to Garrison.¹⁴

By early 1833 Weld had abandoned the “vain plea of expediency or necessity” and successfully combined anti-slavery feeling with his egalitarian Finneyite revivalism:

[N]o condition of birth, no shade of color, no mere misfortune of circumstances, can annul that birth-right of charter, which God has bequeathed to every being upon whom he has stamped his own image, by making him *a free moral agent*, and that he who robs his fellow man of this tramples upon rights, subverts justice...and sacrilegiously assumes the prerogative of God.¹⁵

Less than two years later, in February 1834, Weld helped orchestrate anti-slavery conversions on a mass scale on the campus of Lane Theological Seminary. Regular campus life shut down for eighteen days as students and invited guests debated the merits of immediate abolition versus colonization. In actuality, the meetings were not debates at all: the entire occasion was designed as a way to discredit Colonization and convert the seminarians *en masse* to a full-fledged abhorrence of slavery. Weld arrayed arguments and witnesses the way a big-league manager makes a starting line up: “Those of us who sympathized together...selected each his man to instruct, convince, and enlist in the cause...before ever we came to the public debate, [we] knew pretty well where we stood.” With just two questions up for discussion (“ought the people of the Slaveholding

¹³ Weld to Elizur Wright, Jan 10, 1833, Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, eds., Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld and Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Grimké (New York, 1934), I., 99.

¹⁴ Abzug, p. 318n.

States to abolish Slavery immediately?” and “are the doctrines...of the American Colonization Society...worthy of the patronage of the Christian public?”), what Weld achieved at Lane could more accurately be described as a 19th century Be-in for anti-slavery conversion.¹⁶

The Lane method seemed to work especially well on Southern-born seminarians. Many, like James Thome (not the Cleveland Indians’ hard-hitting first baseman) disliked slavery and had joined the Colonization Society. But the debates, which centered on the way slavery cruelly denied African Americans God-given rights as human beings, sent Thome spiraling into a conversion experience. Colonization, he reported had only “lessened [my] conviction of the evil of slavery, and...[deepened my] prejudice against the colored race.” Now he realized that “[the sin of slavery] wrote ‘thou art the man,’ upon the forehead of every oppressor,” a mark that left a sinner pledged to do God’s work to abolish the institution.¹⁷

Angelina Grimké’s path to anti-slavery conversion was more complex. Grimké, the youngest of fourteen children, was born into slave-pampered Charleston society in 1805. But her childhood hardly befit the life of leisure and gaiety one expects of a family like the Grimkés. As a child she resisted confirmation in the Episcopal Church, and experienced a religious conversion to Presbyterianism in 1826.¹⁸ Under the guidance of her sister Sarah, who was 13 years her senior (and who she called “mother”), Angelina renounced her Presbyterianism and her conversion and became a Quaker. She followed her sister to Philadelphia in 1828, where she was pressed by Sarah’s friends to defend her

¹⁵ Weld to Garrison, Jan. 2, 1833, in Weld-Grimké Letters, I, p. 98.

¹⁶ Abzug, p. 90-91. See also [Henry B. Stanton], Debate at the Lane Seminary, Cincinnati (Boston, 1834).

¹⁷ Quoted in Stanton, p. 3.

¹⁸ Katherine DuPre Lumpkin, The Emancipation of Angelina Grimké (Chapel Hill, 1974), p. 24.

family's ownership of slaves. She reacted defensively, vowing "never to own [a slave]." Angelina returned to Charleston after five months, with a growing feeling of the sinfulness of slavery.¹⁹

Grimké began groping her way towards abolitionism during 1833-4, particularly stirred by Nat Turner's rebellion. The case of Prudence Crandall – a Connecticut schoolteacher and a Quaker – was also significant to Grimké's emerging position on anti-slavery. When a black farmer's daughter was admitted to Crandall's school, the town's white parents protested bitterly, and most removed their children. Crandall then opened the boarding school to blacks, and 16 girls arrived from across New England. The white community responded by poisoning the school's well, scattering trash in the schoolyard, filing nuisance lawsuits and, finally, torching the building. When the fire was extinguished, a mob arrived and smashed windows and doors while the terrified students cowered inside. The episode illustrated for Grimké that women and Quakers were not exempt from anti-abolitionist violence.

Grimké's full conversion to anti-slavery finally occurred in the 1835, although she had been reading abolitionist papers for almost two years. Her biographer noted a strange yet significant reply to a letter Grimké wrote in the spring of 1835, from a Quaker in Charleston (Grimké's original letter is lost). The correspondent, fulfilling a request from Grimké, had investigated a room where slaves were punished. He wrote, "Thou wished to be informed for what faults they may be punished by whipping, and whether they are naked when whipped. The offense is anything whatever that the master or owner may choose to have them punished for, whether imaginary or real...the power of the owner [is] entirely absolute." She never mentioned the letter in her writings, but the next

¹⁹ Ibid., 34-9.

entry in her journal, dated May 12, 1835, read, “I have become deeply interested in the subject of Abolition.” Later that spring, against her sister’s wishes, she joined with the non-Friends and Hicksite Quakers who made up the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society.²⁰ The abolitionist movement had gained one of its most powerful lecturers and advocates. “If persecution is the means which God has ordained for the accomplishment of this great end, EMANCIPATION,” Grimké wrote to William Lloyd Garrison that summer, “I felt as if I could say, LET IT COME; for it is my deep, solemn, deliberate conviction, that this is a cause worth dying for.”²¹

The Virginia-born Methodist preacher Moncure Conway experienced his own shattering conversion to anti-slavery and Methodism much later, in 1850. Conway, whose family owned slaves, eventually became a radical abolitionist and, in the 1860s, received the scorn of anti-slavery unionists when he advocated a politically independent Confederacy. Monc, as he was called, only achieved his “real” conversion when he intellectually tried (and failed) to reconcile slavery, racism and science. In early December 1850 he began work on “The Diversity of [the] Origins of Races – Slavery,” an elaborate essay in which he advanced the theory of polygenesis. Not the most eloquent example of the scientific racism of the mid-19th century, Conway claimed that “this supreme [Caucasian] race has the same right over the lower species of his genus than he has over quadrupeds.”²²

²⁰ Ibid., 75-7.

²¹ Grimké to Garrison, Aug. 30, 1835, quoted in Lumpkin, p. 78.

²² Quoted in Peter F. Walker, Moral Choices: Memory, Desire and Imagination in Nineteenth Century American Abolition (Baton Rouge, 1978), p. 58.

But as Conway completed his essay, he began to feel ill. He also remembered watching the slaves “moving about the house, cheerfully yielding me unrequited services [never dreaming] of the ease with which I was able to consign [them] to degradation.” That night, amid violent fevers, Christ appeared to Conway in his sleep. Drawing near, Christ told him “What thou doest to the least of these my brothers, thou art doing to me.” Conway immediately understood the bankruptcy of his racial thinking, and his intellectual pride was shattered. Then the vision of Christ receded and Conway heard the voice of God, who “set a mark” on him and commissioned the young preacher “to devote my life to the elevation and welfare of my fellow-beings, white and black.” After years of battling with his family and himself, he had, at that moment, found his vocation and his mission. It was, as Peter Walker points out, a classic conversion experience: the wretched sinner was brought low before God and exposed as a fraud, shattering his pride in this case his “scientific” intellect. Even though he was already a preacher and had attended divinity school, Conway did not find his true vocation until his anti-slavery conversion.²³

The stories of Weld, Grimké and Conway, though vastly different, provide examples of religious or evangelical conversions to anti-slavery thought. But just as important were the more secular and political anti-slavery conversions that swept the antebellum United States in the four decades before the Civil War. One did not need to be an evangelical Christian – or even a churchgoer – to experience a profound, transformative, and action-inspiring change of heart about slavery.

²³ Quotations from Walker, pp. 61-2.

The Scots-born feminist Frances Wright was the most notorious *anti-evangelical* in the United States in the 1820s. The daughter of a freethinking merchant, Wright's first "conversion" was to the socialist principles of Robert Owen. Scandalizing conservatives, Wright lectured publicly on topics such as political economy, education, and American inequality. But it took a harrowing miscarriage of justice to convince her to act on her anti-slavery feelings. In doing so, Wright became the first woman in America to act publicly to oppose slavery. Once she had committed herself, Wright commenced a truly radical experiment in anti-slavery race relations by using her money and powers of persuasion to build an Owenite community for ex-slaves in Nashoba, Tennessee.

Wright's first encounters with slavery occurred during a first visit to the United States in 1818-20. "The sight of slavery is revolting everywhere," she wrote, "but to inhale the impure breath of its pestilence in the free winds of America is odious beyond all that the imagination can conceive."²⁴ Her Southern hosts pointed to the poor conditions experienced by free blacks in Virginia and Maryland, and tried to use their squalor to convince Wright that to free the slaves would be to do them an injustice. But Wright rejected this argument, believing instead that discrimination and lack of education led to the plight of free blacks in the South. Upon her return to the United States in 1824, Wright determined to see slavery "in its worst form" and write an article on it for the Westminster review. When she arrived in New Orleans, she found the slavery there much more harsh, and reacted with disgust. "Truly this is the Babilon of Revelations, where reigneth the great Western slavery mud and mosquitoes," she wrote. "[E]very man's hand is against the hapless slave and every law of man's creation."²⁵

²⁴ Quoted in Celia Morris Eckhardt, Fanny Wright: Rebel in America (Cambridge, 1984), p. 40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

It was during the next six weeks that Wright made the decisions that led her to oppose slavery in public. First, she visited two utopian communities: Owen's New Harmony in Indiana and Albion in Illinois. She was convinced that Owen's experiment in communal living (then just getting off the ground) would usher in a new state of society that would erase all causes for conflict between individuals. With the utopian socialism of New Harmony fresh in her mind, Wright encountered darker stories from the English radicals at Albion. A guide told her how pro-slavery settlers and officials in Illinois had repeatedly terrorized and attacked the free blacks settled among them and the whites who supported their right to live there. Wright became intent on developing a plan that would, if possible, put an end to slavery and at the same time avoid racial war.

After Wright left Albion she heard about a poor black boy who had been kidnapped in Indiana by men hoping to sell him into slavery. She hired two men to help her rescue the child. When they caught up with the outlaws two days later, the kidnappers drew knives. Wright recalled the boy clinging to her skirts in terror. Just before events turned violent, another group of men arrived to aid the rescuers. Then Wright made a costly mistake: she took the boy to a local magistrate, who turned him over to the sheriff for the night. The next morning the boy was gone. The sheriff played dumb.²⁶ Wright blamed herself for renouncing responsibility for the child and she resolved to confront the slave system herself, using what she had seen and learned at New Harmony. She bought ten slaves – six men and four women – and 320 acres near Memphis, Tennessee, which seemed to her at the time to be the most liberal of the slave states. There she hoped, with the help of the newly freed blacks and a communitarian spirit, to prove that slavery was unprofitable and that emancipation need not be followed

by racial war. And even with the abject failure of the experiment at Nashoba, Wright's conversions to Owenism and anti-slavery activism suggested a path for others to follow.²⁷

While different in circumstance, William Leggett's conversion to abolitionism (and martyrdom at the hands of his party) blazed a trail for future anti-slavery Democrats. Leggett rose to prominence among New York City's political writers in part by his withering attacks on organized abolitionism – a position *de rigueur* for Jacksonian Democrats in the 1830s. “We have...witnessed the rapid increase of abolition fanaticism with the deepest regret, not unmingled with alarm,” Leggett wrote in a typical editorial in August 1835. “If aught had been in our power to arrest that frantic sect, we should not have stood an inactive spectator to its progress.” But members of his own political party drew the radically egalitarian editor, incrementally, into the anti-slavery camp by their escalating suppression of abolitionism. While still decrying the abolitionists’ “fanaticism,” Leggett eventually became dismayed by the Democrats’ anti-abolitionist tactics: barring anti-slavery materials from the mails, tabling anti-slavery resolutions in Congress, and inciting (as well as participating in) anti-abolitionist riots. Destroying freedom of speech, he argued, was perhaps the worst way to correct the abolitionists’ “error of opinion.”²⁸

In the year after anti-abolitionist mobs burned and looted anti-slavery meetings, black homes and churches in the July Days riots of 1834, Leggett experienced a conversion to abolitionism on a scale unmatched among Jacksonian Democrats. First, Jackson's postmaster general Amos Kendall announced that local postmasters were

²⁶ Ibid., 100.

²⁷ Ibid., 109; 136-7; 164-7. Nashoba failed as a result of financial and labor troubles and a public firestorm over Wright's published ideas about sex and racial mixing.

²⁸ New York Evening Post, August 22, September 3, 1835.

welcome to halt abolitionist mail, a move Leggett called “truckling to the domineering pretensions of slaveholders.” For his outspokenness, Tammany Hall Democrats suspended all patronage advertising in Leggett’s Evening Post. That same week, word reached New York that New Orleans slaveholders had posted a \$20,000 reward for the successful delivery of the abolitionist Arthur Tappan to the city’s levee. If accomplished, Leggett predicted the kidnapping (and the torture and/or murder that would inevitably follow) would “make abolitionists out of our whole two millions of inhabitants.”²⁹ Leggett’s tone towards abolitionist “lunatics” and “fanatics” had undergone a subtle yet significant change.

It took a particularly violent anti-abolitionist mob in Haverhill, Massachusetts to finally force Leggett’s personal conversion. In a scene that bore resemblance to the previous summer’s riots in New York, a large mob attacked an abolitionist meeting with a loaded cannon and other explosives. This time, Leggett warned that further bloodshed in the battle against slavery threatened to “engender a brood of serpents which shall entwine themselves around the monster slavery, and crush it in their sinewy folds.” By the end of the editorial, Leggett decided he would join the serpents. The “monster slavery” became, for the first time in Leggett’s writings, the most serious threat facing the nation’s Democratic institutions. The next evening, Leggett shocked Jacksonian New York by announcing that he had read and almost wholly endorsed the program of the American Anti-slavery Society.³⁰

²⁹ New York Evening Post, August 26, 1835.

³⁰ New York Evening Post, September 3, 4, 1835. I am indebted to Sean Wilentz’s presentation, “Jacksonian Abolitionism: The Conversion of William Leggett,” delivered at the Commonwealth Fund Conference, London, February 1994.

Leggett paid a huge political price for his conversion: he was read out of the Democratic Party (excommunication apparently deemed the proper punishment for a heretic) and denied a congressional nomination over his anti-slavery views in 1838. Yet he continued to insist that his conversion represented the fulfillment of his Democratic principles. “I am an abolitionist,” he admitted in an 1838 letter meant to settle the question once and for all. “I would not have this fact disguised or mystified...Abolition is, in my sense, a necessary and glorious part of democracy.” In editorials for the Evening Post and his independent journal Plaindealer (where he called for black suffrage in addition to emancipation), Leggett pioneered a distinctive Jacksonian abolitionism that, in the 1840s and 50s, would help to split the party and pave the way for the political showdown over slavery. And his conversion and martyrdom at the hands of pro-slavery Democrats helped pave the way for future Jacksonian dissidents to follow.³¹

The anti-slavery conversion of one of Leggett’s Democratic disciples was closely linked with the development of a radical new type of free verse expression. Walter Whitman was the editor of the Democratic Brooklyn Eagle during the Mexican War, which added to the U.S. territory that became the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. Whether this territory would remain free (as it had been under Mexican law) or be opened up to slavery almost tore the Union apart between 1846 and 1850, and forced many Northerners (including Whitman) into the anti-slavery camp.³² In an editorial written at the end of 1846, Whitman urged his fellow Democrats to “set down your feet!” on the question of slavery

³¹ See, for example, Plaindealer, Feb. 25, March 4, July 29, 1837; Leggett to (Theodore Sedgwick Jr.?), Oct. 24, 1838, printed in Sedgwick, ed., The Political Writings of William Leggett (2 vols., 1840), II., 335-6. See also Earle, op. cit., pp. 48-69.

expansion. “If there are any States to be formed out of territory lately annexed, or to be annexed, by any means to the United States,” Whitman said, “let the Democratic members of Congress plant themselves quietly, without bluster, but fixedly and without compromise, on the requirement that *Slavery be prohibited in them forever*.” Whitman’s refusal to compromise on the issue of slavery extension (he still referred to organized abolitionists as “fanatics”) led to conflict with the Eagle’s owner, who supported the Polk administration’s pro-slavery and expansionist policies.³³

The slavery issue also infused Whitman’s early attempts at poetry. The first time he broke into lines reminiscent of the free verse of Leaves of Grass (in an unpublished notebook dated 1847, the year he lost his job at the Eagle), Whitman attempted to create a single, unified American persona that reconciled the roles of slave and slaveholder:

I am the poet of slaves, and of the masters of slaves
I am the poet of the body
And I am

After this line Whitman breaks off, attempt to reconcile the slavery issue in verse sputtering out.³⁴ Later attempts to encompass both sides into one unified self similarly fail. When Whitman finally did confront the slavery issue in poems like “Song for Certain Congressmen,” “A Boston Ballad,” and “Resurgemus,” (and also, more famously, in “Song of Myself”) the “poet of the master of slaves” is clearly absent from the inclusive and democratic narrative voice. The “poet of slaves” is not:

I am the hounded slave...I wince at the bite of the dogs...
[The riders] beat me violently over the head with their whip-stocks.

³² It should be noted, however, that unlike Leggett, Whitman never considered himself an abolitionist. He opposed slavery in the South as well as the West, but detested the abolitionists’ piety and tactics.

³³ Brooklyn Daily Eagle, Dec. 21, 1846. On Whitman’s conflict with Isaac Van Anden, the owner of the Eagle, see Betsy Erkkila, Whitman, the Political Poet (New York, 1989), 51-58.

³⁴ Edward F. Grier, ed., Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts, II, (New York, 1984), p. 69.

When the fugitive slave arrives at the narrator's house in section 10 of "Song of Myself," he is fed, clothed, nursed back to health and given a "room that entered from my own." In addition, the converted poet suggests that he will defend the runaway's flight to freedom with a "firelock leaned in the corner."³⁵

Whitman's poem "A Boston Ballad" was written in response to the arrest, trial, and rendition of the fugitive slave Anthony Burns in the late spring of 1854. In the poem "Yankee phantoms" become witnesses to Burns' return to slavery, an ironic juxtaposition of the Revolutionary past with the tainted politics of the present. The poem's setting in the cradle of American liberty also suggests the centrality of Burns affair in sparking an immense "revival" of secular anti-slavery (and anti-Southern) conversion among Boston's conservative elite.

Despite its reputation as the capital of organized anti-slavery, most Bostonians were not abolitionists, and still fewer regarded African Americans as their equals. And although the city was a major battleground for the new Fugitive Slave Law after it was passed in 1850, no fugitive had seen the inside of a courtroom since Thomas Sims was returned to slavery in April, 1851. Indeed, to many residents, it seemed like the law might never again be tested in Boston. Still, the city continued to be a magnet for escaped slaves, who often found a haven in the city's growing free black population and work on its wharves and street trades.

Southerners seethed when they imagined armies of northerners aiding runaways, to a degree far out of proportion with the existence of such help. During the 1850s, only about a thousand slaves escaped per year, roughly one quarter of one percent of the more

³⁵ Leaves of Grass (reprint of 1855 ed.), p. 39.

than three million slaves in the country. Still, Southerners viewed the Fugitive Slave Law, and its enforcement, as a matter of honor – the only part of the Compromise of 1850 created expressly to protect Southern “rights.” Therefore Southerners watched each fugitive slave case carefully for evidence that the North was acting in good faith.³⁶

The events of 1854 began with a significant coincidence of timing: at eight o’clock on May 24, 1854, dough-faced Democrats fired a cannon on Boston Common to salute the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, passed that day in Congress. The message of the celebration was clear: that expansionist and pro-slavery elements of the Democratic Party were firmly in control of national policy. As a result much of the West – classified as free for thirty years by the Missouri Compromise – would, pending the President’s signature, be opened up to slavery. At precisely the same time cannon fire rocked the Common, a U.S. marshal apprehended runaway Anthony Burns on Brattle Street as he returned home from work.³⁷

³⁶ The Fugitive Slave Law was a stunning example of federal power. It strengthened the safeguards in the U.S. Constitution by creating federal commissioners who issued warrants for arrests of fugitives and before whom a slaveholder brought captured fugitives to prove ownership. The “proof” required for rendition was testimony from a single white witness or an affidavit from a slave-state court. The federal treasury paid all costs of enforcement. Any citizen who refused to assist a federal marshal in apprehending a fugitive could be fined up to \$1,000, and anyone who harbored or aided a fugitive was subject to jail time. The fugitive, of course, had no right to testify on his or her own behalf. See Stanley W. Campbell, The Slave Catchers (Chapel Hill, NC, 1970); Paul Finkelman, An Imperfect Union: Slavery, Federalism, and Comity (New York, 1980).

³⁷ Boston Post, May 25, 1854. Several incidents regarding fugitives and the law appeared to build up to the showdown over Anthony Burns. Three occurred during a six-month period in 1851, in the immediate wake of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. In February a group of black men burst into a Boston courtroom and spirited a fugitive named Shadrach Minkins out of the country to freedom. In April President Fillmore sent more than 500 armed men to return the fugitive Thomas Sims to slavery. And in September a Maryland slaveholder and a posse of federal marshals ran into a barrage of bullets trying to retrieve a runaway in Christiana, Pennsylvania. The government failed to convict anyone in Quaker Christiana, even after the slaveholder died and 36 people were charged with treason. Such rescues, escapes and violence kept the entire nation tense during the short life of the Compromise. See Gary Collison, Shadrach Minkins: From Fugitive Slave to Citizen (Cambridge, MA 1997); Jonathan Katz, Resistance at Christiana (New York, 1974); Thomas Slaughter, Bloody Dawn: The Christiana Riot and Racial Violence in the North (New York, 1991).

Boston was, of course, the home of Garrison's *Liberator* and the New England Anti-Slavery Society, but large segments of the population were hostile to organized abolitionism and depended on Southern cotton (and slave labor) for their livelihoods. Included among these were many of the Irish immigrants who worked in the city's mills and the men who employed them. Derided as "cotton" Whigs by bolting members of their own party, men like Amos Lawrence and Nathan Appleton were publicly lambasted (in the Whig press, no less) for "truckling to expediency in everything, for the sake of...slaveholding gold" and "thinking more of sheep and cotton than of Man."³⁸

"Cotton" Whigs represented the new capitalist order and bent over backward to conciliate their economic and political partners in the South. Manufacturers depended on Southern cotton for their factories, and merchants were deeply interested in the lucrative coastal trade. Many of the new industrialists had close personal friendships with leading planters as well: their sons studied together at Harvard, they visited each others' homes, and they praised them as gentlemen in their literary journals. Politically they were among the most conservative people in the United States, far more interested in national economic development, commercial expansion and the rights of property than in the rights of slaves. As William Lawrence wrote of his father Amos A. Lawrence,

[First and foremost] he was a Whig, bound in honor to preserve the original compact of the Union by which slavery was recognized [and] his business acquaintance with Southern cotton-growers lead (sic) him to appreciate their side of the question."³⁹

Lawrence reached the pinnacle of Boston Society by inheriting his father's share of A. & A. Lawrence, one of the oldest and most successful of the giant textile firms. He

³⁸ Quoted in David Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York, 1960), p. 142.

³⁹ William Lawrence, *Life of Amos A. Lawrence* (Boston, 1899), p. 73-4. See also Kinley Brauer, *Cotton vs. Conscience: Massachusetts Whig Politics and Southwestern Expansion* (Lexington, KY, 1967).

enhanced his already formidable position by marrying Sarah Elizabeth Appleton, daughter of another Old Money textile baron William Appleton, in 1842. A Hapsburg could not have made a better match.

Amos A. Lawrence never claimed to be pro-slavery: like most members of his class and men of his position, he claimed to oppose the institution even while providing the largest single market for slave products. A firm believer in the Colonization movement, he donated money for the relocation of free blacks to West Africa, all the while expressing deep derision for both “the small fraction of ‘higher law’ abolitionists [and] their fellow nullifiers...the slaveholders.”⁴⁰ In 1851, when Boston’s leading citizens feared mob violence when Thomas Sims was returned to slavery, Lawrence offered his services (and his pocketbook) to United States Marshal Devens.

According to Lawrence, he felt the same way until Burns was apprehended three years later. But this time, instead of offering to help the federal marshals, Lawrence wrote to Boston’s mayor that he would “prefer to see the court house razed rather than that the fugitive now confined there [Anthony Burns] should be returned to slavery.”⁴¹ What had happened to change Lawrence’s (and many other conservative Bostonians’) mind during the fateful last week of May 1854? It was a potent combination. First, Burns’ rendition came on the heels of the passage of the Nebraska Act, legislation that smacked of a broken contract between Northern and Southern interests that had served for more than 30 years. Second, the presence of slave catchers on the streets of Boston dismayed even those who didn’t consider slavery a sin or even a major problem facing the nation. Third, the pageant which accompanied Burns’ return to slavery – the massive

⁴⁰ Lawrence, p. 73.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 75-6.

military escort, the special federal cutter waiting in the harbor, the streets draped in upside-down flags and black streamers – deeply affected many Bostonians. The spectacle, more than any other white Bostonians could recall, dramatized the horrors of slavery and working with slaveholders. Even if they had not seen Burns cleaning windows at the Mattapan Iron Works or passed him in the street, he was anything but an abstract issue debated in incendiary journals. He was free man being forced back into slavery. Some abolitionists welcomed incidents like the Burns affair for its power to change people’s hearts. Albert G. Browne said of Burns’ rendition that “it has brought many a mind to our side, which nothing else could have done.”⁴²

The spectacle of Burns’ march from the courthouse to Boston Harbor performed a function opposite to that of the early republic’s traditional parades, pageants and celebrations. Instead of illustrating political strategy and national unity, Burns’ parade drove the citizenry of Boston (and the nation’s sections) further apart. Businesses along the planned route were closed and entire buildings were draped in black, mocking the red, white, and blue bunting that accompanied a patriotic parade. Men stood at the corner of State and Washington streets bearing a coffin inscribed “LIBERTY” on their shoulders. And the thousands of spectators lining the route, many dressed in black, held their heads in shame, hurling invectives like “coward,” “kidnapper,” and “man-stealer” at the Marines and volunteers.⁴³ The Marine band that marched directly behind Burns mocked the cat-callers by striking up “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny.” The estimated bill for the soldiers, the revenue cutter and other costs related to the Burns affair was \$100,000,

⁴² Albert G. Browne to Thomas W. Higginson, June 16, 1854, quoted in Pease and Pease, p. 51.

⁴³ Liberator, June 9, 1854. On parades in the early republic see David Waldstreicher, In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes (Chapel Hill, 1997).

making him (in the words of Thomas W. Higginson) the “most expensive slave in the history of mankind.”⁴⁴

The entire week’s events – from the boisterous celebrations on the Common to Burns’ gloomy rendition parade – dramatically altered the mood in Boston. Something about the display, coming as it did on the heels of the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, seemed to strike those who once considered slaveholders their “partners” as a busted deal. Edward Everett, who had just returned to Boston after resigning his Senate seat, was a conservative who had always viewed the Missouri Compromise a contract. Now that slavery was to be allowed to seep above 36°30’ if “popular sovereignty” allowed it, that contract was void. “However much the anti-slavery agitation...is to be deprecated,” Everett said after the affair,

It is no longer possible to resist it. A change has taken place in this community within three weeks such as the 30 preceding years had not produced. While the minds of conservative men were embittered by the passage of the Nebraska bill, the occurrence of a successful demand for the Surrender of a fugitive Slave was the last drop, which made the cup run over.⁴⁵

The reporter for The Liberator was particularly taken aback by the crowd’s reaction to the rendition, especially among the city’s conservatives:

It was everywhere apparent that an entire revolution in public sentiment had taken place since the rendition of Thomas Sims; and that the most conservative men in the city at that time, appeared yesterday to be foremost in denunciation of the inhuman fugitive slave law.⁴⁶

Amos Lawrence, who as one of those conservatives defended the South in the face of the outraged abolitionist minority for years, captured this sentiment perfectly. At

⁴⁴ Higginson to George Luther Stearns, April 7, 1854 quoted in Edward J. Renehan, Jr., The Secret Six (New York, 1995), p. 70.

⁴⁵ Everett to Joseph S. Cottman, June 15, 1854, quoted in Pease, p. 51.

⁴⁶ Liberator, June 9, 1854.

the end of the momentous week, Lawrence wrote, “I put my face in my hands and wept. I could do nothing less...We went to bed one night old fashioned, conservative, Compromise Union Whigs & waked up stark mad Abolitionists.”⁴⁷

When William Leggett shocked his fellow Democrats by exclaiming, “I am an abolitionist,” it was really more of a coming-out than an evangelical-style conversion. As we have seen, it took a potent combination of anti-abolitionist and anti-black riots, the blatant denial of abolitionists’ first amendment rights, and Leggett’s radical egalitarian beliefs to transform his stance on slavery in 1834-5. Over time, these experiences, coincidences and personality traits (in Leggett’s case his unwavering belief in the rightness of radical Democratic policies) resulted in a dramatic conversion. And, like most converts, Leggett believed his change of heart represented a fulfillment of his principles, not a departure from them. Does it make sense to call the experiences of Wright, Leggett, and Lawrence “conversions”? Is it just another example of unimaginative historians wheeling out a convenient trope to explain something complex? In the cases of these antebellum Americans, the term conversion does seem appropriate and descriptive, if in a slightly modified form. Like religious conversions, anti-slavery conversions were transformative experiences that entailed a deep change in values. And although the details varied widely from person to person, Wright, Weld, and Lawrence each felt elation at having been “brought over” to a stance they regarded as true and right, from one they regarded as false. Interestingly, anti-slavery conversion seemed to spark action – either in the wider anti-slavery movement (like Grimké and Weld); individual

⁴⁷ Amos A. Lawrence to Giles Richards, June 1, 1854, quoted in Jane J. & William H. Pease, eds., The Fugitive Slave Law and Anthony Burns: A Problem in Law Enforcement (Philadelphia, 1975), p. 43.

experimentation (like Wright); participation in anti-slavery politics (like Lawrence, whose name adorns my Kansas hometown); or in new forms of art (like Whitman).

More than any other mass-movement in the antebellum United States, the crusade against slavery assumed the attributes of a religion, complete with martyrs, saints, dogma, *weltanschauung*, creation myths and heretics. And as the national debate over slavery and its expansion spread into nearly every corner of the nation's public life, it became harder and harder for certain types of Americans to ignore. Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, with his trove of correspondence from Grimké and Weld, understood this: with each conversion, compromise over the slavery issue became harder to reach, and the pro-slavery position became more hardened and defensive. Public events like the Burns rendition and private ones like failure to free a kidnapped black child continued to pile on Americans' backs, straw by straw. By the 1850s, significant numbers of backs had begun to break.
