

Righteous Radicalism:

Oberlin Abolitionism from 1839 to 1859

Research Thesis

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by

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“Manufactory of Fanatics”

From its inception in 1833, Oberlin was a hot bed of anti slavery-activity that tried to create a utopian society in northwest Ohio based on the teachings of Christian perfectionism and moral purity. This truth brought both praise and contempt on Oberlin. In 1837, an editor for *The Ohio Statesman* referred to Oberlin College as a “manufactory of fanatics” for their anti-slavery activities.¹ Counter this with a letter written in 1834 by Oberlin co-founder John J. Shipherd who wrote of Oberlin’s particular brand of progressivism, describing it simply as, “Peculiar in that which is good.”² Indeed, there was much “fanaticism” at Oberlin and the college wore that badge with pride. To this day, historians often paint Oberlin abolitionists with a wide brush that evokes either disdain or admiration for their peculiar mission. In his 2012 book, *The Abolitionist Imagination*, historian Andrew Delbanco noted that, “The very word *Abolitionism* was usually uttered as slander meant to convey what many Americans considered its essential qualities: unreason, impatience, implacability.”³ Counter this with historian Nat Brandt’s romantic opening line in his 1990 book about Oberlin abolition titled, *The Town That Started The Civil War*. Brandt dramatically exclaimed, “This is a story about courage-about physical and about moral courage.”⁴ To be sure, with regard to Oberlin abolitionists both estimates are accurate because, throughout the 1840s and 1850s, Oberlin and the abolitionists who called it home had come to epitomize both extreme assessments. Moreover, during that particularly disheartening

¹ *Daily Statesman*, 9 September 1837, Issue 6 Column B, http://infotrac.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/itw/infomark/687/159/5417898w16/purl=rc1_NCNP_0_GT3002781433&dyn=3!xrn_1_0_GT3002781433&hst_1?sw_aep=colu44332 (accessed 15 Nov 2012)

² Nat Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 28.

³ Andrew Delbanco, *The Abolitionist Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 11.

⁴ Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War*, xiii.

span of twenty years from 1839 to 1859, which saw the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, The Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the Supreme Court Ruling on the Dred Scott case, Oberlin abolitionism transformed from being the model of Christian perfectionism and social progressivism, to hopeful political operatives active in third party politics, to desperate, gun-toting revolutionaries willing to give their lives or take others to end slavery in America. It was this moral duality and the slide from righteousness to radicalism that truly represents the abolitionism of Oberlin College.

“Peculiar in that which is good”

Shortly after the Oberlin Institute opened its doors in 1833, Oberlin began attracting professors and students who were already involved in abolitionist activity. Among those were two professors who were dismissed from the Western Reserve College in nearby Hudson, Ohio for their stance on Immediatism or the immediate abolition of slavery. Another group of abolitionist misfits, who left Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, would come to be known as the Lane Rebels. Asa Mahan, who was the college’s first President, was part of that group of “Lane Rebels” who left Lane Seminary in 1836 over the divisive issue of Colonization and the resulting suppression of free speech over the issue of slavery at Lane. Lyman Beecher, Lane’s President at the time, and its board of trustees were supporters of Colonization, a process of returning blacks to Africa upon gaining freedom, as the best way to remedy the freedman race issue in America. However, Mahan and the other Lane Rebels were supporters of Immediatism, or the immediate end of slavery, and rejected the old model of Colonization. In an attempt to quell an inevitable clash of ideological differences, President Beecher imposed a seminary-wide rule that prohibited the students and faculty from discussing the issue of slavery any further. As a result of Beecher’s

suppression of the slavery debate at Lane, some 40 people, including professors, trustees and students, left Lane *en masse* and settled in Oberlin after an invitation to join the college was extended by John J. Shipherd. In many ways, this event signaled the true beginning of Oberlin as a center of progressive anti-slavery activities.

Oberlin's distinct anti-slavery identity was further formed with the hiring of Charles Finney, another Immediatist, who was then the leader of the "Second Great Awakening," which was a protestant religious revival in the early 1800's that advocated Christian Perfectionism. Finney first became a professor of theology at Oberlin and later became President of the college. Finney was an outspoken anti-slavery activist as well as a religious reformer who preached that people should return to God and live in a Godly manner. Finney's idea of Godliness included such things as abstaining from alcohol as well as maintaining an *open* opposition to slavery. Finney also advocated social engineering and moral suasion, or the act of persuading one to act morally for their own good, as a tool to achieve his view of Christian perfectionism. Indeed, Oberlin had made a mark through social engineering with the admission of both blacks and women into the college in the mid 1830's. Oberlin holds the distinction as the first college in the United States to do both.

At Oberlin, the "Great Experiment" was working. Historian Stacey Robertson wrote in her book, *Hearts Beating for Liberty: Women Abolitionists in the Old Northwest*, "Even easterners concurred that the West (Ohio and in particular, Oberlin) had a certain energy that was lacking in the East."⁵ After a visit to Oberlin, William Garrison wrote, "The West is a mighty theatre for enterprise, our East is fossilized in contrast. We have gone to seed."⁶ Indeed, in the

⁵ Stacey Robertson, *Hearts Beating for Liberty: Women Abolitionists in the Old Northwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*

first five years of its existence, Oberlin had become the most progressive college in the United States over issues of anti-slavery, coeducation, temperance, free speech, and Christian perfectionism.

“The Appeal”

In spite of its many social advancements, by 1839, Oberlin’s finances had dried up. Due in large part to the nationwide financial crisis of 1837, Oberlin was barely surviving, and even then was only doing so mostly on the generous philanthropy of the Tappan brothers, Lewis and Arthur, who were fellow abolitionists and therefore wanted Oberlin to remain open and active. But those gifts were becoming fewer and farther in between and Oberlin was at risk of financial ruin and shutting down altogether. Charles Finney wrote about the dire state of Oberlin’s finances in his memoir, “It (the commercial crash) left us not only without the funds for the support of the faculty, but fifty thousand dollars in debt, without any prospect, that we could see, from obtaining funds from the friends of the college in this country.”⁷

Seeing the importance of Oberlin as an anti-slavery center in the west, the American Anti-Slavery Society, which was an eastern abolitionist society founded by William Lloyd Garrison and Lewis Tappan, encouraged Finney to seek donations for the college from British philanthropists who had recently been successful in abolishing slavery in the West Indies. Desperate to remain open, if only to continue the anti-slavery struggle, in May 1839, Oberlin leaders took the advice from those in the American Anti-Slavery Society and sent two trustees, William Dawes and Rev. John Keep, who previously had cast the deciding vote admitting blacks to Oberlin, on a fund-raising mission to Great Britain. Along with conducting their adventurous

⁷ Garth M. Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis, eds., *Memoirs of Charles G. Finney* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1989), 387.

financial enterprise, the two men were also to attend the World Anti-Slavery Conference in London the following year. The Oberlin men brought with them an appeal of support for Oberlin College to be given to the British anti-slavery philanthropists that was signed by 37 of America's most prominent abolitionists including Henry B. Stanton, James Birney, Lewis and Arthur Tappan and William Garrison. Written by abolitionist Theodore D. Weld, the appeal would highlight Oberlin's dedication as an anti-slavery college as well its desperate financial predicament. The written appeal ended with these words:

“It is under these circumstances, that the friends of the Oberlin Institute apply to the philanthropists and Christians of Great Britain. So long as they were able to sustain its operations themselves, they willingly did so, but the failure of their means now obliges them to make an appeal to their British brethren, which for the honour of the country and the good of an oppressed and suffering race, we trust will be liberally responded to. The Institute is already in debt, and the sum owing bears a high rate of interest. The Professors and their families have long been reduced to the greatest straits, and must soon, though in deep bitterness of heart, relinquish their stations, unless God in his providence raises them help.”⁸

So effective was the Oberlin appeal and the persuasive efforts of Keep and Dawes that in eighteen months of collecting funds the men from Oberlin gathered over \$30,000 which was enough to sustain Oberlin's operating costs for at least four more years. One of the largest benefactors to the Oberlin cause was writer and social critic, Harriet Martineau. According to

⁸ Theodore D. Weld, “An Appeal on Behalf of the Oberlin Institute In Aid of the Abolition of Slavery, In the United States of America, Oberlin University, http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/Weld%20Abolition%20Appeal/weld_appeal.htm (accessed 15 Nov 2012).

historian Marlene D. Merrill, Martineau launched her own personal campaign to save Oberlin. Particularly impressed with Oberlin's admission of blacks and women to the college, Martineau wrote of "The Oberlin", as she affectionately called it, in a twenty eight page appeal of her own in the second edition of her book, *The Martyr Age of the United States*, in her own attempt to obtain funds for the progressive American college. Her efforts proved fruitful for the Oberlin men. On Dec. 17th 1839, "Martineau wrote that she received a letter from John Keep which described the 'burst of tearful joy at the Oberlin, when they received the first installment (600 pounds) of our contributions.'" ⁹ The trip was a huge success for Oberlin College. So much so, that a few months after the two Oberlin men left Britain to return to Ohio, another agent for The American Anti-Slavery Society went on a similar fund-raising mission but soon found that Dawes and Keep, "...had reaped the field and scarcely left a solitary ear for anyone else."¹⁰ And thus began a special kinship between Oberlin and the anti-slavery agents in England that contributed to Oberlin's overly optimistic hope for American emancipation.

Not surprisingly, just when the Oberlin abolitionists were once again growing hopeful in regards to their anti-slavery pursuits, there were critics and detractors. In an article in the Ohio Statesman titled, *The Whigs Asking Aid From The British*, the editor announced with disgust that Oberlin officials "have sent an agent to Europe to carry on electioneering schemes against the Democrats, for Oberlin is a political hot bed of niggers and abolition Whigs."¹¹ Indeed, the Oberlin was operating outside of the sphere of proper society in regard to women, blacks and

⁹ Marlene D. Merrill, "Radical Women and the Survival of Early Oberlin," *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, Spring 1983, 7.

¹⁰ Ibid, 4.

¹¹ "The Whigs Asking Aid from the British," *The Ohio Statesman*, 13 Nov 1839, Issue 20 Column D, http://infotrac.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/itw/infomark/48/466/5414623w16/purl=rc1_NCNP_0_GT3010791396&dyn=4!xrn_15_0_GT3010791396&hst_1?sw_aep=colu44332 (accessed 15 Nov 2012).

slavery and now they indeed had the support of British philanthropists and anti-slavery activists to assist them in their fight. Well-known British abolitionist George Thompson explained the British interest in Oberlin when he wrote in 1839, "...the maintenance of Oberlin is inseparably connected with the progress and triumphs of abolitionist principles in America."¹² By 1839 the dual existence of Oberlin abolitionism as both a radical affront to the Slavocracy and an inspiration to abolitionists was firmly established.

The British Inspiration

The success of this trip and the impact that British emancipation in 1838 had on Oberlin would mark a kind of pinnacle of hope that the Oberlin abolitionists would rally around in the coming years. In spite of the outside criticisms and financial setbacks, the Oberlin Abolitionists were discovering a new *modus operandi* for abolition through the British anti-slavery veterans. They had seen results first hand how slavery came to an end in Great Britain by legislative means and were infused with a new sense of hope that the same could be done in America. Anti-slavery activists in Oberlin embraced their new kinship with the British and sought to emulate them with a new model of anti-slavery activity that combined moral suasion with an anti-slavery legislative front.

Perhaps in an attempt to keep the successes of the British anti-slavery men on the minds of Oberlin abolitionists, throughout the 1840s the Oberlin anti-slavery activists often referenced and celebrated the efforts of their British abolitionist brethren. In the Oberlin anti-slavery newspaper, *The Oberlin Evangelist*, William Wilberforce was often written of as a source of continued inspiration for the abolitionist cause. In a January 17th 1844 edition of *The Oberlin*

¹² Merrill, "Radical Women and the Survival of Early Oberlin," 4.

Evangelist, contributor J.A.T. went as far as to write, “One of the most extraordinary men of any age was William Wilberforce.”¹³ “Every anti-slavery man,” the writer continued, “...ought to be intimate with the man whom God called to be the first great leader of the abolition enterprise, and through whose instrumentality the African Slave Trade, and subsequently slavery in the West Indies were abolished.”¹⁴ Certainly, anti-slavery activists in Oberlin felt that if they could raise themselves to the high standards set by men like Wilberforce, they bettered their chances of achieving emancipation in the United States, and they also felt they were up to the task.

Oberlin also embraced their British anti-slavery kinship by honoring the anniversary of British Emancipation. Oberlin historian Robert Fletcher wrote in *A History of Oberlin College*, “Not July 4 but August 1 was the gala day for Oberlin Abolitionists. No year was allowed to pass without some recognition of the anniversary of the emancipation of the slaves in the British West Indies.”¹⁵ In August of 1842, Oberlin marked the end of slavery in the West Indies and the completion of gradual British emancipation in 1838 by having a great “First of August” celebration. The town celebrated with a day of prayers, public meetings, music and speeches by professors, students and former slaves. That evening, two hundred and fifty persons sat down to a free dinner. Of those two hundred and fifty, some eighty were colored and of those, half had felt the “galling chain of slavery.”¹⁶ In a celebratory article about the First of August celebration, a writer for the *Oberlin Evangelist* stated, “The Anniversary of the emancipation of 800,000

¹³ J.A.T., “Wilberforce,” *The Oberlin Evangelist*, 17 Jan 1844, 8, <http://cdm15963.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/evangelist/id/1559/rec/2> (accessed 15 Nov 2012).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Robert S. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College From its Foundation Through the Civil War* (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1943), 250.

¹⁶ “First of August – Colored People,” *The Oberlin Evangelist*, 17 August 1842, 6, <http://cdm15963.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/evangelist/id/1221/rec/1> (accessed 15 Nov 2012).

persons held in slavery in the British West Indies, must be a more interesting time to the friends of human rights, than the anniversary of American Independence, so long as the principles of that independence are so utterly disregarded by our slave-holding and proslavery citizens.”¹⁷ The First of August Celebration became an annual event in Oberlin to remind anti-slavery activists what they were fighting for, which was the complete emancipation of all enslaved peoples.

Third Party Politics

Because the British abolitionists were held in such high esteem for their effective anti-slavery efforts, and the Dawes-Keep fund-raising trip to England had proven so successful, the Oberlin was indeed riding a high of hopefulness on the issue of abolition. As a result, Oberlin activists were very interested in imitating the triumphant British model of anti-slavery in Ohio to end slavery through legislative means. In an attempt to achieve that end, one of the first steps was to join allegiances, in 1840, with the newly formed national anti-slavery political party, the Liberty Party. The anti-slavery activists surmised that by nominating candidates who were already sympathetic to the anti-slavery mission, they could expedite the process of abolition by supplanting politicians indifferent to the abolitionist’s cause with their own. With the formation of the Liberty Party, the Oberlin abolitionists firmly planted their hopes to a legislative end to slavery in the United States.

Although ambitiously optimistic, it is safe to say that few abolitionists truly expected James Birney, the first Liberty Party presidential candidate in 1840 and who also ran in 1844 to

¹⁷ “First of August – Colored People,” *The Oberlin Evangelist*, 17 August 1842, 6, <http://cdm15963.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/evangelist/id/1221/rec/1> (accessed 15 Nov 2012).

win either election. However, there was hope amongst Oberlin abolitionists that Birney may make a good showing. Oberlin trustee and abolitionist John Keep wrote about this growing sense of optimism to his wife while he was in London, England attending the International Anti Slavery Conference in 1840. Historian Joseph Brent Morris quoted Keep in his dissertation, *Be Not Conformed to This World*. The Democrats and Whigs would hurt one another, wrote Keep, by “each charging the other as a crime, that it is friendly to abolition!” and therefore, “allowing Birney to collect many votes.”¹⁸

However, other more pragmatic supporters felt the Liberty Party’s real possibility was to start a national movement in which otherwise apathetic whites, including some moderate slave owners who struggled with the morality of slavery, would grow more sympathetic to the plight of the black man through a kind of legislative enlightenment where the public view of abolition would eventually be less radicalized in the North and viewed as less of a threat in the South. In the book *A Side-Light on Anglo-American Relations 1839-1858*, compiled by Annie H. Abel and Frank J. Klingberg, Lewis Tappan, a successful businessman from Massachusetts and supporter of many abolitionist causes, including lending financial support to Oberlin College, described to a friend the goal of the Liberty Party. “If the people of the free states could be brought to a clear perception of their own connection (to slavery, they) would act as Liberty men against slavery consistently, unitedly and efficiently,” and therefore the overthrow of slavery “would be near.”¹⁹

Perhaps Theodore Clark Smith described the Liberty Party mindset best when he wrote in his essay titled *Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Northwest*, “The best way to affect public

¹⁸ Joseph Brent Morris, “‘Be Not Conformed to This World’: Oberlin and the Fight to End Slavery, 1833-1863” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2010), 243.

¹⁹ Annie H. Abel and Frank J. Klingberg, eds., *A Side-Light on Anglo-American Relations 1839-1858: Furnished by the Correspondence of Lewis Tappan and Others with the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society* (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1927), 119.

opinion, in their opinion, was to get some public representative.”²⁰ Regardless of the perceived outcomes of the upcoming election, the Oberlin abolitionists viewed the Liberty Party as a wonderful and potentially lasting opportunity. After the trip to England and the financial and inspirational benefits that followed, Oberlin was experiencing a new beginning and the election of 1840 marked an apex of hope for the dawn of emancipation in America.

However, when Election Day came in 1840, the Liberty Party candidate, James Birney received a meager 902 votes in Ohio, and not surprisingly most of those came from the northeast counties, which included Oberlin. Nonetheless, rather than be dissuaded, the editors of the anti-slavery newspaper, *The Oberlin Evangelist* instead declared a moral victory. “Where is the man of this ‘glorious minority’ who regrets his vote? We have found none.”²¹ To the Ohio abolitionists, and particularly those in the northeast corner of the state, the foundation of anti-slavery political action had been established in America and they held the belief that third party participation in national elections would prove an effective and necessary way to “reconcile moral suasion with political action.”²² Undeterred by the vote total, the Liberty men that Tappan wrote of prepared for another presidential election in 1844.

In the election of 1844, the Liberty Party succeeded in gaining a higher vote total than the previous election but that triumph would be quickly overshadowed by the unfavorable outcome of the election itself for the anti-slavery cause. For Abolitionists, there were not many positive choices among the presidential candidates leading up to 1844. During the campaign season, James K. Polk, the Democrats nominee, had already declared support for the annexation of

²⁰ Theodore Clark Smith, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Northwest* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1896), 220.

²¹ Morris, “Be Not Conformed to This World’: Oberlin and the Fight to End Slavery, 1833-1863,” 247.

²² *Ibid.*, 248.

Texas, which had gained independence in 1836 from Mexico. The abolitionists knew that the annexation of Texas would be detrimental to their cause in that Texas would enter the United States as a slave state and therefore would tip the balance of free and slave states, making passage of any federal anti-slavery legislation that much more difficult. Alternately, the Whig Party, who abolitionists had traditionally threw their support behind, put up candidate Henry Clay who was opposed to the annexation of Texas but his opposition was based more on the fear that it would lead to war with Mexico rather than concern for the spread of slavery. Furthermore, Clay was even more undesirable to Ohio abolitionists in that he was himself a slave owner. The Liberty Party voters were torn between the realization that votes for Liberty candidate James Birney would in fact help the annexationist democrats. But how could the men of the Liberty Party, in good conscience, vote for a slave owner? Opinions of Clay, among those Ohio Liberty men leaning Whig, were further muddied in the summer of 1844 when Clay made a puzzlingly dubious statement regarding Texas when he addressed a group of Alabamians by stating, he “would be glad to see it, (Texas annexed) without dishonor...and upon just and fair terms.”²³ Oberlin College President, Asa Mahan, severely criticized Clay for his statements by labeling him “a most bloody duelist, and a man who sustains the vilest character.”²⁴ Indeed, the conflicting statements by Clay seemed to settle any issue of support for the Liberty Party among most of the Ohio abolitionists. Once again, the Liberty supporters in Oberlin threw support behind their own candidate, James Birney, but more than just a good showing for the party was at stake in 1844. There was a real possibility that the results of the 1844 presidential election could decide whether slavery was to spread in the United States.

²³ Morris, “Be Not Conformed to This World,” 308.

²⁴ Ibid., 307.

Concern for Polk winning the Election of 1844 among Ohio's abolitionists was soon confirmed when Polk beat Clay by a slim electoral margin. To make matters worse, in the state of New York, Polk's margin of victory was a mere 5,000 votes. Liberty Party candidate James Birney received some 15,000 votes in New York, far exceeding Polk's margin of victory, and as a result, may have ensured victory for the pro-annexation democrat by handing Polk New York.

Among some anti-slavery Ohioans, blame for the Whig's loss was quickly placed at the feet of the abolition party and some even questioned the Liberty voter's motives. Author Vernon L. Volpe, in his book *Forlorn Hope of Freedom*, cited the *The Ohio State Journal* as claiming "Liberty Party leaders would next be seen 'hanging about the Executive offices in Washington, receiving their pay.'" ²⁵ Moreover, Horace Greely's *New York Tribune* denounced the election when he said, "It is hard that the ultra slavery candidate should be elected by abolitionists." ²⁶ Unlike after the election of 1840, no one among the anti-slavery activists in Oberlin could so easily claim a moral victory after the election of 1844 and so began the long descent from hope and optimism to despair and desperation for the Oberlin abolitionists.

To make matters worse, abolitionist anxiety over the Annexation of Texas proved to be well founded when in 1845, less than a year after Polk's victorious election and even before he was sworn in to office, the United States did indeed annex the Republic of Texas. This in turn led to the Mexican-American War in 1846 which then-President Polk was highly criticized by both Whig and anti-slavery factions for executing an unjust war. Nonetheless, the war ensued, slavery spread, and the Liberty Party proved to be one of the casualties.

²⁵ Vernon L. Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom: The Liberty Party in the Old Northwest* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1990), 95.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

The Liberty Party had already been fracturing after the election of 1844 with some Liberty men claiming that the third party was simply “a temporary way station to building a more permanent and broader-based anti slavery party,” where other more pious advocates thought the party would “go on promoting righteous, moral and religious action.”²⁷ Others, like Ohioan Salmon P. Chase, abandoned the Liberty Party and lent support to Martin Van Buren’s Barnburner Party, which would soon evolve in to the Free Soil Party. No matter the affiliation with new parties, the Liberty had by 1848, ceased to exist and the Ohio abolitionists had little to show for their efforts thus far in national third party politics.

To be fair, there were some victories for the third parties in Ohio politics and most of those came for the Free Soil Party. In the election of 1848, five Free Soil candidates were elected to the Ohio legislature. At this time, the state legislature was more or less equally divided between the two major parties, the Democrats and the Whigs. And although the number of Free Soil legislators was small, they were often the deciding vote on legislative matters and so they commanded more power than their small minority would have suggested.

One such legislative victory for the Ohio Free Soil Party was the overturning of Ohio’s black laws in 1849. In 1807 Ohio had enacted “black laws” to restrict blacks rights and deter black settlement in Ohio. Provisions of these laws required blacks to prove they were not slaves when questioned as well as to provide two people who would corroborate their claim to freedom. Additionally, Ohio black laws restricted gun ownership by blacks, forbid them from marrying whites and the laws also limited employment opportunities for black Americans. These laws remained in place for forty-two years until the late 1840’s when the newly empowered Free Soil politicians gained enough support from Ohio democrats to have the laws repealed. What the

²⁷ Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom: The Liberty Party in the Old Northwest*, 109.

Liberty Party was unable to achieve on a national level, the Ohio Free Soilers did see some legislative victories come to fruition on the state level in Ohio.

Another triumph for the Free Soil Party was the successful United States Senate election in 1848 of Ohioan Salmon P. Chase, one of the originators of both the Liberty and Free Soil Parties. Chase, a long time advocate for abolition, became a vocal opponent against the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 as well as the Kansas-Nebraska Bill of 1854, which Chase warned in a speech to Congress that the bill would cause the territories to become "...a dreary region of despotism, inhabited by masters and slaves" that would undermine the Missouri Compromise and therefore open new territories to slavery.²⁸ Despite the passage of both pieces of legislation, Chase was able to take his anti-slavery platform to the national level, and as a result, he garnered the support of many northern whites to oppose the aggressive slave powers of the south. Instead of an appeal for whites to oppose slavery simply on moral grounds, Chase made the compelling argument that the southern slave owners were infringing upon the rights of state sovereignty in the north. He surmised that slave owners, who were the minority, imposed their views on the nation through the Compromise of 1850 and later, the Dred Scott decision. This argument was included in Chase's address to Congress titled, *Appeal of the Independent Democrats in the Congress to the People of the United States*, and it was this sentiment that gained the support of white Ohioans at the onset of the Civil War. Arguably, the election of Chase to the United States Senate was an impressive and effective "high water mark" for the Ohio anti-slavery third parties in national politics.

²⁸ Albert Bushnell Hart and William Edward Dodd, *American Statesmen: Salmon P. Chase* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899) 139.

The Dark Ages

A major blow to anti-slavery came two years after Chase's senate victory with the aforementioned Compromise of 1850, which included a provision referred to as the Fugitive Slave Act. This controversial law made state governments and federal marshals obligatory to the capture and return of fugitive slaves, even in northern free states. Furthermore, blacks in the North could be arrested merely on the *suspicion* of being a runaway slave. Moreover, blacks could be questioned and detained based on nothing more than an accuser's claim to ownership. This led to many blacks being conscripted into slavery because they had no rights in court and were unable to defend themselves against their accusers. Additionally, anyone found guilty of aiding a runaway slave or anyone deemed as such faced six months imprisonment and a \$1,000 fine. This law effectively made all northerners complicit to the act of slave catching and made all blacks, free or not, at risk of being forced by law into slavery.

Oberlin's anti-slavery activists were in an absolute panic over what course of action to take next. The first instinct of the Oberlin abolitionists was to take measures by discussing and adopting resolutions in the Oberlin Anti-Slavery Society. In October of 1850, the *The Oberlin Evangelist* published an agreed upon list of public action and open dissent to be taken. Among other points of contention with the Fugitive Slave Act, the abolitionists of Oberlin declared, "We regard the late fugitive act, as belonging to a dark age and tyrannical government," and they agreed, "That the provisions of this bill are in plain a flagrant violation of the Constitution of the United States."²⁹ Additionally, the people of the Oberlin Anti-Slavery Society called for the "holding of mass meetings throughout the North to express and embody the feelings of the

²⁹ "The Fugitive Slave Bill," *The Oberlin Evangelist*, 23 Oct 1850, 6.
<http://cdm15963.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/evangelist/id/3149/rec/3> (accessed 15 Nov 2012).

people” as well as more incendiary rhetoric like, “We see in this act, fresh and convincing proof that the Constitution of the United States must either be given to the Slaveholders, or rescued from slavery.”³⁰ However, it is unlikely that the slave powers in the south or the legislators in Washington paid any mind to the emotional proclamations emanating from the sleepy town of Oberlin, Ohio. Suddenly, the hope and confidence of the Oberlin abolitionists gave way to alarm and dismay after the calamity that was the Fugitive Slave Law.

By November of the same year, some in Oberlin began to consider the use of force and violence, not “mass meetings” to combat the Fugitive Slave Law. One such example of a kind of call to arms, an article was written in the *Oberlin Evangelist* that was titled, “Shall our Colored Brethren Resist an Attempted Arrest by Force of Arms?” In that particularly urgent and lurid piece of writing, the *Oberlin Evangelist* editor stated, “If anything can rouse the torpid conscience of the North, it will be our streets stained with human blood, shed by the slave-catchers.”³¹ Indeed, tensions were rising among the Oberlin abolitionists as a result of the Fugitive Slave Law and the only consensus on how to effectively combat the controversial piece of legislation was outright defiance.

In 1854, less than four years after the Fugitive Slave Law, yet another legislative blow to the anti-slavery movement came with the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This Federal piece of legislation created the territories of Kansas and Nebraska but it was the notion of “Popular Sovereignty” that was included in the law that caught the eye of abolitionists in Ohio and elsewhere. Popular

³⁰ “The Fugitive Slave Bill,” *The Oberlin Evangelist*, 23 Oct 1850, 6.
<http://cdm15963.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/evangelist/id/3149/rec/3> (accessed 15 Nov 2012).

³¹ “Shall Our Colored Brethren Resist an Attempted Arrest by Force of Arms?” *The Oberlin Evangelist*, 06 Nov 1850, 7.
<http://cdm15963.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/evangelist/id/3158rec/27>

Sovereignty was a threat to abolitionism in that it opened those new territories to the possibility of the spread of slavery in that settlers to the territories would determine through a popular vote whether the territory was to be a free or slave enclave. This provision of the Kansas-Nebraska Act effectively undermined the previously enacted Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had been designed to keep a balance of free and slave states as to not give one entity power over another in regard to legislative actions. As a result of the Popular Sovereignty clause in the Kansas-Nebraska Act, there was mass immigration to the territories by both pro-slavery and anti-slavery activists alike.

Soon after, violence inevitably broke out between the opposing sides and the Kansas Territory became a kind of proxy war over the issue of slavery, which left some fifty-six men dead. Among those immigrating for the anti-slavery side were Free Soil Party activists, a number of Oberlin abolitionists, as well as Ohio native John Brown. “On October 23, 1854, the first company of forty three immigrants set out from Oberlin...All told the association sent out at least seven groups of emigrants of between twenty and more than a hundred people each during the Kansas crisis from 1854-1860.”³² While in Kansas, the aforementioned Oberlin men had made a name for themselves by agitating the pro-slavery factions, or “border ruffians” to the point that many Oberlinites were listed on the ruffian’s “hanging list” and were frequently singled out to be imprisoned by the pro-slavery forces.³³

However, of all the Ohioans in Kansas, none would make a bigger or more violent impact than John Brown. In 1856 alone, abolitionist John Brown fought at The Battle of Black Jack, the Battle of Osawatomie and killed five pro-slavery men at Pottawatomie. It was evident that

³² Morris, “‘Be Not Conformed to This World’: Oberlin and the Fight to End Slavery, 1833-1863,” 369.

³³ Ibid., 375.

Brown had completely given up on a peaceful or legislative solution to slavery and his actions were a precursor to the affront to Federal authority and ensuing violence that would come. Among Brown's "militia" in Kansas was Oberlin student and abolitionist, Ansel Lyman, who had served as a lieutenant for Brown during the Kansas wars.³⁴ It was evident that Ohioans, including some Oberlinians would now play a key role in the violent method of *direct action* taken against the slavery powers. Along with the human victims of the "Bloody Kansas" rebellion, another victim in 1854 was the Free Soil Party itself, which by the end of the year had dissolved and largely been absorbed, along with many former Whig Party affiliates, by the newly formed Republican Party.

The further slide away from any hope of a legislative resolution to slavery, as well as a kind of parting affront to anti-slavery third parties, came in 1857 with the Dred Scott decision. The Supreme Court had ruled in the case of *Dred Scott v. Sandford* against Scott by declaring that no persons of African descent could be citizens of the United States, and so Dred Scott, a slave trying to sue for his freedom was unable to do so in Federal court on the grounds that he was not in fact a United States citizen. Additionally, the court ruled that slave owners were now able to take their slaves into free states as well as the territories on the basis that slaves were their owner's personal property. The Supreme Court's decision, for all intents and purposes, made the territories and free states like Ohio open to slavery, if even in passing.

Not surprisingly, the Oberlin abolitionists were outraged but again had little course of action to take other than expressing their disdain in anti-slavery pamphlets and newspapers. Shortly after the Supreme Court's decision, an editor for the *Oberlin Evangelist* wrote in March of 1857, "We look upon this action of the Supreme Court with no other feelings than those of

³⁴ Morris, "Be Not Conformed to This World': Oberlin and the Fight to End Slavery, 1833-1863," 425.

irrepressible sorrow and indignation.”³⁵ By June of the same year, the *Oberlin Evangelist* began to use more revolutionary rhetoric when addressing the Dred Scott decision. The decision, wrote the editor, “Has excited our indignation and alarm, and calls for the strongest expression of our abhorrence of it as an act of tyranny, a betrayal of Constitutional freedom by its chiefest and sworn guardians.”³⁶ For the abolitionists of Oberlin, this declaration of “tyranny” and “betrayal” were akin to a pronouncement of disassociation with the Federal government altogether. By 1858, those very citizens of Oberlin who so enthusiastically supported the abolitionist third parties would act on a new model of anti-slavery action where violent, open defiance to Federal authority and direct, not political, action was to be taken.

“Constant State of Rebellion”

Oberlin historian, Robert Fletcher wrote, “From the passage of the Federal Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, Oberlin was in a practical state of rebellion against the National government.”³⁷ And by the late 1850’s, some Oberlin abolitionists had all but given up on participation with third parties and instead shifted their efforts toward a campaign of open defiance against the Fugitive Slave Bill and any other law that supported slavery. Most Oberlinites were in agreement that the only law worth obeying was God’s “Higher Law” and they struck out across the country to enforce it.³⁸

³⁵ “The Dred Scott Case,” *The Oberlin Evangelist*, 18 March 1857, 7.
<http://cdm15963.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/evangelist/id/4669/rec/1> (accessed 15 Nov 2012).

³⁶ “Ohio State Conference,” *The Oberlin Evangelist*, 24 June 1857, 6.
<http://cdm15963.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/evangelist/id/4732/rec/13> (accessed 15 Nov 2012).

³⁷ Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College*, 399.

³⁸ Morris, “Be Not Conformed to This World’: Oberlin and the Fight to End Slavery, 1833-1863,” 394.

It was well known that Oberlin and its surrounding communities were active participants in the Underground Railroad. To be sure, there were numerous routes across all of Ohio but perhaps none were so brazenly open as the town of Oberlin. So well known was Oberlin's reputation as a safe haven for escaping slaves that slave catchers would often lurk about in hope of a significant payday.³⁹ Additionally, there was a widespread assumption that an "Underground Railroad station could be located wherever an Oberlin graduate settled."⁴⁰ In spite of the obvious risks after the passage Fugitive Slave Bill of 1850, the town of Oberlin ramped up its participation in the Underground Railroad.

For some Oberlin abolitionists, it was not enough to simply harbor escaped slaves once they reached Oberlin. Instead, some Oberlinites ventured into southern states to "entice" enslaved men and women to leave their masters to seek freedom in the north.⁴¹ Two former Oberlin students, Calvin Fairbank and Delia Webster alone were said to be responsible for helping to liberate some forty-four slaves "from hell."⁴² Had the Oberlin graduates been caught in the south enticing slaves, they most certainly would have been lynched on sight. However, Oberlin founder John J. Shepherd summed up his town's tactics against slavery as "by all means" and the Oberlinites were certainly willing to take the risk.⁴³

Of course, after 1850, reaching the "North" was not enough to ensure freedom for the fugitive slaves seeking it. It was now necessary for former slaves to reach Canada to gain freedom. Along Ohio's northern border is Lake Erie, and north of that is Canada. As well, Ohio is bordered by slave state Kentucky to the south. And so, due in part to the abolitionists operating

³⁹ Morris, "Be Not Conformed to This World," 415.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 403.

⁴¹ Ibid., 395.

⁴² Ibid., 396.

⁴³ Ibid., 404.

in the state and its obvious geographical benefits to funneling human contraband north, Ohio became an even more important state for Underground Railroad operations in the 1850's. Conveniently, Oberlin is located only thirteen miles from Lake Erie and the shipping ports of Lorain, Ohio, which regularly sent cargo to Canada. As a result, a network formed between Oberlin and ports and depots in Canada. Once there, goods and supplies which were intended to ease entry into freedom for former slaves were overseen by Oberlin alumni Hiram Wilson.⁴⁴ These Oberlin "agitators" risked, quite literally, everything for the abolitionists cause. And by venturing out beyond the safety of Oberlin, Ohio, they made getting caught and imprisoned that much more a possibility. However, one must be willing to assume great risk to break Federal law while operating in a "constant state of rebellion" against the Government.⁴⁵ The abolitionism of Oberlin had morphed from combating slavery with moral suasion, based on the principles of Christian Perfectionism, to open opposition to federal law with potentially violent undertones. The charge of Oberlin as a "Manufactory of fanatics" was certainly coming to pass.⁴⁶

"The Town That Started The Civil War"

Perhaps the single most important show of open defiance against the Fugitive Slave Law came in 1858 when a mob of anti-slavery Oberlinites rescued, by force, a runaway slave named John Price from a Federal Marshal in nearby Wellington, Ohio. The "rescue" inspired

⁴⁴ Morris, "Be Not Conformed to This World': Oberlin and the Fight to End Slavery, 1833-1863," 407.

⁴⁵ Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College*, 399.

⁴⁶ *Daily Statesman*, 9 September 1837, Issue 6 Column B, http://infotrac.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/itw/infomark/687/159/5417898w16/purl=rc1_NCNP_0_GT3002781433&dyn=3!xrn_1_0_GT3002781433&hst_1?sw_aep=colu44332 (accessed 15 Nov 2012)

abolitionists across the country as well as infuriated pro-slavery factions in the south. The events also led to legal battles over the authority of slave catchers in regard to the Fugitive Slave Law. The “Oberlin-Wellington Rescue” as it became known, gained widespread national attention and is considered to be a pivotal episode in the events leading up to the Civil War. Where Oberlin’s anti-slavery efforts were largely disregarded by the Federal powers during the third party years, they were unable to be ignored any longer after the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue. The radicalism in Oberlin was gaining national attention as well as momentum.

On the morning of September 13, 1858, slave catcher Anderson Jennings, from Kentucky, arrived in Oberlin, Ohio in search of a runaway slave named Henry. Although no sign of Henry was to be found, Jennings did recognize a runaway slave named John Price who had fled Anderson’s neighbor some month’s prior. Anderson went to a local Democrat to recruit help in capturing Price and paid the son of a local farmer to entice Price into a carriage on the promise of a job. The boy obliged and lured Price in a carriage under false pretenses. Once outside the town, Anderson’s men took over the carriage and Price was captured. The group of slave catchers, a Deputy U.S. Marshall, and Price all headed south toward the town of Wellington in the hope of catching a train to Columbus where the fugitive Price could be processed. However, en route to Wellington, the wagon that held Price passed two Oberlin students, one of whom was Ansel Lyman, who had fought alongside John Brown in Kansas. As the wagon passed the two students, Price yelled for help. Lyman, after hearing Price’s cries rushed back to Oberlin to get help from the townspeople. The people of Oberlin quickly organized and a mob of dozens of Oberlinites rushed toward Wellington, some five miles south. The impromptu band of rescuers consisted of a diversity of Oberlinites: blacks, whites, preachers, professors, students, businessmen, farmers, a

painter and a harness maker all joined in the throng to save a stranger from being returned to slavery.

However, before the hasty departure for Wellington, some men struggled with the gravity of the situation. Author Nate Brandt wrote of a young Englishman, William Lincoln, and his internal struggle over whether to join the rabble of anti-slavery men. “Kneeling by his bed,” wrote Brandt, “Lincoln asked for God’s guidance. What should he do? After all he was a pacifist, a “non-resistant,” as he put it. The answer came quickly: “If it were your own brother, what would you do? The Answer: Rescue him or die in the attempt.”⁴⁷ The Oberlin rescuers were well aware of the seriousness of what they were about to do: break Federal law to rescue a fugitive slave, and most probably use violence to do so.

Once the rescuers reached Wellington, they began to yell for the Kentucky “man-stealers.” Surprised by the arrival of the angry mob, captor Anderson Jennings hurried Price up into the attic of the town hotel, while a couple of deputies guarded the door. Soon after, the mob gathered outside the hotel demanding Price’s release. ““*Bring him out! ‘Bring out the man!’*” shouted the crowd.⁴⁸ The situation was growing increasingly volatile.

Sensing the rising tensions, Oberlinite Charles Langston tried to quell the disturbance by seeking legal action to end the standoff. Langston went to the town constable and asked for the slave catchers to be arrested for kidnapping as well tried to secure a *habeas corpus*, which would require due process of the law for Price. When those efforts failed, Langston then went to meet with the captors themselves to negotiate the peaceful release of Price. However, Langston’s

⁴⁷ Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War*, 81.

⁴⁸ Morris, “Be Not Conformed to This World,” 427.

efforts proved futile when the Kentuckians refused to give up Price. Rather forebodingly, Langston then told the captors, “We will have him anyhow.”⁴⁹

Shortly after this exchange, groups of students began an assault on the hotel. One group, which included John Copeland, Englishman William Lincoln and Bloody Kansas veteran, Ansel Lyman fought past the guards to reach Price’s room.⁵⁰ A second group, which included Charles Langston, reached the room at the same time and as they yelled for Price through a stove hole in the wall with threats to begin shooting. As slave-catcher Anderson peered out through the hole, he was abruptly pistol-whipped, which caused him to fall back and allowed the rescuers to enter the room and seize Price. The men then hurriedly ran Price down the steps and out to the crowd to be transported back north to Oberlin. Once they reached Oberlin, Price was hidden in the home of President James Fairchild until he could be safely smuggled to Canada.

Prominent Oberlin African-American John Mercer Langston, brother of Charles, had been returning to Oberlin after a legal engagement in an adjoining county and arrived to find no one about. It was if the whole town left “en masse,” wrote Langston.⁵¹ After learning what had transpired in his absence, he soon realized the seriousness of the situation. “Hundreds of his fellow townspeople had been involved in an open and successful subversion of federal authority and the Fugitive Slave Law. Moreover, his own kinsman and other African Americans had played major roles in striking this solid blow for freedom.”⁵² The town of Oberlin had utilized a new tactic in their anti-slavery fight; violent, open resistance to Federal law.

All told, some thirty-seven rescuers were later arrested for their participation in the uprising in Wellington and all chose to forego bail as a show of solidarity for those already

⁴⁹ Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War*, 98.

⁵⁰ Morris, “Be Not Conformed to This World,” 428.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 431.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 432.

sentenced. In time, the Kentucky “man-stealers” were indeed arrested on kidnapping charges. However, in return for their charges being dropped, they did the same for the Oberlin rescuers and on July 7th, 1859, the rescuers returned to Oberlin and received a hero’s welcome.

The aftermath of the rescue would have an immediate impact on the anti-slavery community across the nation. The tale of the rescue was used as propaganda for the abolitionists and soon the newly formed Republican Party would come to embrace the radicalism that the rescue came to embody. Indeed, after the rescue, the Republicans declared outright emancipation as a party platform. Despite the best efforts of the Federal government and the slave powers that controlled it, abolitionists were making anti-slavery a national issue that could no longer be ignored.

Oberlin’s abolitionists who participated in the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue, particularly the African Americans, had “thrown down the gauntlet against the slave power,” and soon pledged “to secure, by political and moral means, the immediate and unconditional abolition of American slavery,” and were willing to do so by force if necessary.⁵³ Infused by the thrill of the rescue and the unwavering affront to the Fugitive Slave Law that Oberlin embraced, John Langston concluded that the events of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue announced that the “demise of slavery was at hand.”⁵⁴ To be sure, Langston, as it turned out, was accurate in his assessment about the “demise of slavery” but the events that led to emancipation in 1863 were certainly unforeseen by the men of Oberlin.

⁵³ Morris, “Be Not Conformed to This World,” 434.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 451.

The Raid on Harpers Ferry

In 1859, two Oberlinites joined a band of revolutionaries led by John Brown, with the intent on raiding a Federal arsenal in Virginia, starting a rebellion by arming a slave liberation army that would progress through the South, gaining strength in numbers from freed slaves until all were free. This was the new plan to end slavery once and for all in the United States. For the Oberlin men, this event marked a clear escalation in violent and revolutionary abolitionism tactics. To be sure, Oberlin had, in the past, defied Federal law by assisting runaway slaves, and then in Kansas, Oberlin men had participated in the violence and murder along side Brown to keep the territory from becoming a slave state. Then in the case of the Oberlin-Wellington rescue, the Oberlin men broke Federal law by freeing a captive fugitive slave with violence and menacing. However, all of these examples of defiance by Oberlin men had been the result of them coming to the aid of Abolition. In other words, the Oberlin had acted in defense of the movement or of individual men. But in the case of the raid on the arsenal at Harpers Ferry Virginia, they were no longer willing to sit by until the next calamity called for their action. The Oberlin now boldly chose to take the offensive with the use of outright insurgency against the slave powers of the South and the United States government.

Prior to 1859, John Brown, famed abolitionist and Kansas free-soil freedom fighter, had a long history with Oberlin going back to the days when his father, Owen Brown, was a trustee at the institution who, incidentally, had voted for the inclusion of African Americans at the college in the early 1830's. Additionally, Owen was a founding member of the Western Reserve Anti-Slavery Society, which was centered in northern Ohio and included the town of Oberlin. In the book, *John Brown Still Lives*, by historian R. Blakeslee Gilpin, he wrote, it was there in Northern

Ohio that Brown was “exposed to the radical fringe of American anti-slavery.”⁵⁵ And so, Brown’s Ohio abolitionist pedigree contributed to his involvement in anti-slavery activities from an early age.⁵⁶ And it was in 1837, in a church in nearby Hudson, Ohio, that John Brown, after learning of the lynching of fellow abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy, had publicly dedicated his life to the cause of anti-slavery. “Here before God,” declared Brown, “in the presence of these witnesses, from this time, I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery!”⁵⁷

But it was Brown’s now infamous attempt to incite a slave rebellion by orchestrating a raid on a federal arsenal in Virginia, in October 1859, with the intent on striking out into the southern slave plantations, all the while freeing slaves and inflicting deadly revenge on the masters, that would make him a martyr for the abolitionist cause. And for Oberlinites Lewis Sheridan Leary and John A. Copeland, their participation in the uprising meant making the ultimate sacrifice in the fight to bring about the end of slavery. Often viewed by historians as a kind of grim foreshadowing of the Civil War that would commence some nineteen months later, the raid on Harpers Ferry showed that Brown and the Oberlin men had already come to the realization that emancipation could only come by the spilling of blood.

Brown had successfully recruited Oberlinites John Anthony Copeland and Lewis Sheridan Leary for his daring plan while in Cleveland, Ohio for the trial of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescuers. John Anthony Copeland had taken part in the rescue, which according to *Oberlin History* author Geoffrey Blodgett, “...made a strong impression on Brown.”⁵⁸ However, not all those who were aware of Brown’s plot were willing to partake, and some thought it an act

⁵⁵ R. Blakeslee Gilpin, *John Brown Still Lives! America’s Long Reckoning with Violence, Equality, & Change* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 11.

⁵⁶ Morris, “Be Not Conformed to This World,” 455.

⁵⁷ Gilpin, *John Brown Still Lives*, 11.

⁵⁸ Geoffrey Blodgett, *Oberlin History: Essays and Impressions* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2006), 53.

of sheer folly. Frederick Douglass, fellow abolitionist and long time friend of Brown was certainly sympathetic to the cause, but thought the John Brown plot was a “suicide mission” and refused to join.⁵⁹ “I wanted to get at John Brown,” recalled Douglass, “to prevent him from going to Harpers Ferry. Some of us who knew what he was about to do, not only felt sure that his attempt would fail, but we feared greatly that it would do serious harm to the whole anti-slavery movement.”⁶⁰ Moreover, Douglass felt that the doomed mission would “rivet the fetters more firmly than ever on the limbs of the enslaved.”⁶¹ The Ohio men, on the other hand, felt that emancipation without bloodshed was becoming increasingly unlikely and Brown’s raid provided an opportunity to put their beliefs in action.

Undeterred by Douglass’ appeal, Oberlinites Leary and Copeland joined fellow Ohioan John Brown in the hills above Harpers Ferry on October 15, 1859. Brown, perhaps in a moment of realization of the near impossible task that lay ahead, told his band of revolutionaries, “We have here only one life to live, and once to die; and if we lose our lives it will perhaps do more for the cause than our lives would be worth in any other way.”⁶² The following day, Brown and seventeen of his followers, each armed with two pistols and a shotgun descended on Harpers Ferry to take the Federal armory.

Within thirty-six hours, the insurgency was easily put down, a dismal failure for the abolitionists. Instead of igniting a slave insurrection, the raiders found themselves surrounded by several thousand armed militia and marines commanded by none other than future Confederate General, Robert E. Lee.⁶³ During the melee, Lewis Sheridan Leary was shot as he tried to escape

⁵⁹ Blodgett, *Oberlin History: Essays and Impressions*, 37.

⁶⁰ Gilpin, *John Brown Still Lives*, 937.

⁶¹ Delbanco, *The Abolitionist Imagination*, 7.

⁶² Blodgett, *Oberlin History: Essays and Impressions*, 53.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

across the Shenandoah River and died the next day. John Anthony Copeland and John Brown were captured, imprisoned and tried in Virginia court for murder, treason and conspiracy to incite a slave rebellion.⁶⁴ The men were found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. Still certain that his radical, murderous plot and subsequent martyrdom was a necessary act for emancipation, Brown, while walking to the gallows on December 2nd 1859, handed a guard a note which read, "I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with blood. I had as I now think vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done."⁶⁵ The American Civil War began some sixteen months after Brown's sentence was served, and rather prophetically, Brown's last words were proven correct.

Conclusion

In 1865, the town of Oberlin Ohio erected a monument in honor of the men who lost their lives at during the Raid on Harpers Ferry. It reads, "These colored citizens of Oberlin, the heroic associates of the immortal John Brown, gave their lives for the slave. And thus slavery is finally dead."⁶⁶ This one event in American history, the Raid on Harpers Ferry, perfectly personifies the contradictory nature of Oberlin abolitionism where men were willing to take up arms and murder innocents to honor "God's higher law." And so, were the Oberlin abolitionists men of God on a noble mission or murderous zealots, traitors, and desperate misguided radicals? Should the events of Harpers Ferry earn the Oberlin men praise or contempt? With the "benefit of

⁶⁴ Blodgett, *Oberlin History: Essays and Impressions*, 53.

⁶⁵ Evan Carton, *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 340.

⁶⁶ "Harper's Ferry Memorial," Oberlin University, <http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/CivilWarTour/Stop4.html> (accessed 15 Nov 2012).

historical hindsight” it is easier to say that the Oberlin abolitionists were men of honor who were on the “right side of history” and were ultimately successful in their efforts to free the slaves as a result of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. More specifically, it is often said that the actions of the Oberlin radicals helped to push the southern states to war, which then led to emancipation. Indeed, Oberlin historian Nat Brandt titled his book about Oberlin abolition, “The Town That Started The Civil War” based on this very premise.⁶⁷ And perhaps there is much truth to that, but the fact is that in December of 1859, after twenty some years of exhaustive efforts by the Oberlin abolitionists, twenty years of political and legislative disappointments at the hands of the federal government, and twenty years of the anti-slavery radicals defying Federal law, the United States was no closer to emancipation than they were in 1839. As well, the southern Slavocracy had become so entrenched in the Federal Government that in many ways emancipation was even less of a possibility. Furthermore, the consequences of the Civil War, namely emancipation, were largely unforeseen and unintended by the abolitionists.⁶⁸ And perhaps that is where Oberlin’s anti-slavery legacy will remain, an historical enigma full of dual personas and conflicting legacies. The Oberlin abolitionists were at the same time martyrs *and* madmen, Christian perfectionists *and* religious zealots, freedom fighters *and* violent revolutionaries, successful abolitionists and failed monomaniacs who all the while embodied both righteousness *and* radicalism.

⁶⁷ Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War*.

⁶⁸ Delbanco, *The Abolitionist Imagination*, 7.

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