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## The Politics of Abolition in Northampton

Michael D. Blanchard

This paper describes the evolution of political abolition in Hampshire County in general, and Northampton in particular, from the anti-slavery organizations of the 1830s to the advent of the Free Soil Party in the late 1840s and early 1850s, with little attention to the Garrisonian nonresistants. Garrisonians existed in Northampton in considerable numbers, in a utopian community known as the Northampton Education and Industry Association, an entity that was separated from the mainstream of the Northampton community by location, religious belief, and ideology. Prominent abolitionists such as David Ruggles, Sojourner Truth, David Lee Child, and, for a brief time, Frederick Douglass, belonged to the utopian community, which prospered only for a short period, from 1841 to 1846.<sup>1</sup>

The focus on Northampton in particular is due to the fact that Northampton served as the nucleus of anti-slavery and later political abolition for the rest of Hampshire County. Most of the Hampshire County town committees organized by the Liberty and Free Soil parties were established and directed from Northampton. In addition, the major conventions and meetings which attracted prominent speakers were usually staged in Northampton.

According to Henry S. Gere, who served as editor of the Liberty Party newspaper and subsequently the Free Soil and Republican journals, the political abolitionists of Northampton were

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1. Alice Eaton McBee II, From Utopia to Florence, the Story of a Transcendentalist Community in Northampton, Mass. (Menasha, Wisconsin, 1947) pp. 342-343.

a noble class of men, strong in intellect and of high moral character. They did not embrace much of the wealthy class, but were made up largely of men in middle life and advanced years and moderate circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

The "high moral character" which Gere recalled was demonstrated by many of the abolitionists' involvement in a wide variety of reforms, the most paramount being the temperance movement.

The perseverance of the anti-slavery men was also a striking feature. After examination of the documents listing anti-slavery society members, newspaper articles revealing Liberty Party members, and lists of Free Soilers, it is apparent that these advocates of anti-slavery adhered to the cause through each sequential organizational structure, with little deviation. There is one exception to this generalization, however. It is apparent that several of the members of the first anti-slavery organizations declined to join the Liberty party at its outset, and chose to remain the anti-slavery advocates of the Whig Party. However, many of these individuals became politically active with the inception of the Free Soil Party.

Like most of the North in the 1830s and 1840s, Northampton, was politically dominated by the Whig Party. The Whigs had established by 1837 an approximately two to one superiority over the Democrats.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, by focusing on the evolution of political abolition, this paper delineates the struggle of third-party abolitionists against the iron grip of the Whigs in Northampton.

When the tide of abolition swept across the north in the 1830s, Northampton piously followed suit. But the community was not marked by any organized anti-slavery societies until after the initial shockwaves caused by the publication of William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper, *The Liberator*. Northampton's first anti-slavery society was founded on May 12, 1836, the year following the most turbulent episodes in Boston. The Old Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society, originally containing seventy-six members, echoed Garrison's ideas by calling for the "immediate and unconditional

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2. Henry S. Gere Reminiscences of Old Northampton (Northampton, 1902), p. 60.

3. Hampshire Gazette, November 15, 1837.

abandonment of slavery." Within one year, the society had attracted thirty-two more male members, and fifty-four female members.<sup>4</sup> On January 18, 1837, the Old Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society voted to affiliate with the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>5</sup> The Old Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society was the entity which gave birth to political abolition in Northampton. Many of its original members such as Moses Breck, Joel Hayden, and J. P. Williston, became the founding members of the local branch of the Liberty Party, and later, the primary advocates of the Free Soil Party in the Northampton area.

By 1838, the question of establishing an abolitionist political party was being discussed by the members of the Northampton abolition community. An anti-slavery convention, open to all "friends of immediate emancipation," convened in the Town Hall on October 5, 1838.<sup>6</sup> The meeting was addressed by William Goodell, of Utica, New York. Goodell, a prominent abolitionist, had produced a book-length series of articles which appeared in Garrison's *Liberator* during the summer of 1838. His discourse argued against the organization of a third party at that point in time, but he asserted that the abolitionists had the right to do so.<sup>7</sup> This represented the views of many Garrisonians, which was delineated in a letter from Francis Jackson and Amos A. Phelps to the abolitionists of Massachusetts. The letter maintained that the duties of the abolitionists were to vote only for those candidates who maintained strident anti-slavery sympathies. Jackson and Phelps stated that the abolitionists should do so individually, unbiased by party loyalties. The objective was to control the balance of power, forcing the two established parties to appease the abolitionist constituency.<sup>8</sup> The convention in Northampton

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4. Minutes of the First Meeting of the Old Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society, May 12 1836, ms. in Forbes Library, Northampton.

5. Hampshire Gazette, January 25, 1837.

6. Hampshire Gazette, October 5, 1838.

7. Aileen Kraditor, Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics 1834-1850 (New York, 1969), p. 123.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

adopted this ideology, marking a progression of the movement towards an anti-slavery political party.

We will not . . . give our votes for any candidate for Congress who will not go the whole length of his Constitutional powers in voting against slavery; Nor will we neglect to record our votes against slavery, whenever a candidate of good moral character and heartily in favor of immediate emancipation shall be nominated in our several districts, irrespective of the political party to which he may belong.<sup>9</sup>

The abolitionists were clearly placing their commitment to abolition above their party loyalties. The convention further asserted their political freedom, by stating that as abolitionists they "claim the right to organize an Anti-Slavery party," although they were not inclined to do so at that moment.<sup>10</sup> Obviously influenced by Goodell, this statement was Northampton's harbinger of the establishment of the Liberty Party two years later. The resolutions demonstrated a decisive ideological evolution from two years earlier, when the members of the Old Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society were discussing such fundamental issues as the expediency of immediate emancipation.<sup>11</sup> At a time when many Northerners were just coming to accept abolitionist agitation, the Northampton anti-slavery advocates seemed to have been advancing their ideological basis to the point of considering political activity.

Although the abolitionists of Northampton had considered applying their anti-slavery viewpoints to the ballot, they were reluctant to accept the formation of a third party in 1840. This sentiment, however, was derived from their belief that the introduction of a third candidate for president merely months before the election would prove to be ineffective. Moses Breck was one of the delegates sent by the executive committee of the

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9. Hampshire Gazette, October 17, 1838.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Minutes of the First Meeting of the Old Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society.*

Hampshire Abolition Society to the convention in Albany, New York, in 1840.

Born on July 4, 1793, Breck was one of the most active anti-slavery advocates in Northampton. He earned his living by carpentry, apparently employing some thirty to forty men at times. Breck belonged to the Edwards Church of Northampton, which was the congregational affiliation of many of the prominent abolitionists of Northampton. Like most of the abolitionists, Breck was enthusiastically involved in a variety of reforms. He was a "natural reformer," who attracted so much hostility through his campaign for temperance that his house was the victim of arson once, and his shop twice. His involvement with the abolition movement was pursued with unrelenting zeal. "Not many of the anti-slavery reformers paid a greater price in money, time, treasure, and fare, than Moses Breck."<sup>12</sup> During the 1830s and 1840s, Breck constantly retained one or more positions in the Old Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society, and then in the Liberty Party and later the Free Soil Party.

In a letter to the executive committee, published in the *Hampshire Gazette* on April 8, 1840, Breck reported on the course of the convention. He stated that he and the Reverend David Root, who also was from Northampton, as well as delegates from various other counties and states, argued that "The time has not come. The parties are so well organized," Breck declared, "that we shall gain nothing."<sup>13</sup> Despite much opposition, the Albany Convention nominated James G. Birney for president, and the Liberty Party was born.

In Hampshire County, the Liberty Party received miniscule support for the Presidential election of 1840, as was the case for the rest of the northeast. The result of the election simply proved what many, including Moses Breck and David Root, had asserted at the Albany convention. But the abolition candidates in the election of 1840, were destined to fail, due to the fact that the third party appeared too late in the campaign. The failure did not discourage many of Northampton's abolitionists, including Breck, from continuing in politics. The Anti-Slavery Convention of 1838 in Northampton had demonstrated the abolitionists' support of

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12. *Hampshire Gazette*, April 18, 1882.

13. *Ibid.*, April 8, 1840.

such ventures, and in 1841, the Liberty Party emerged in the town. In July of 1841, the Liberty Party of Massachusetts nominated Lucius Boltwood of Amherst to be its candidate for governor. In his letter of acceptance, Boltwood justified the turn to politics, by stating that "the intelligent citizens of Massachusetts will never contend that what is morally wrong can be politically right."<sup>14</sup>

The Whig Party newspapers of Hampshire County, primarily the *Hampshire Gazette*, immediately responded to the formation of the Liberty Party, with editorials castigating the third party, and arguing that if they were to be elected, its candidates could do no more for the cause of emancipation than any Whig. "What could [Lucius Boltwood] do in the capacity of Governor, on this subject, which John Davis could not do?" The editorial, which appeared in the *Gazette* on October 19, 1841, also stated that "This third party movement has a tendency to alienate many from the cause of emancipation."<sup>15</sup> The editorial sparked a series of rebuttals which maintained the theme that "Slavery, if ever abolished, will be so by political action," and that the Whig Party was an instrument of the "Slavepower."<sup>16</sup> The Liberty Party proponents demonstrated zealous enthusiasm for their cause, however the handful of letters printed in the *Gazette* in no way represented the voters of the Northampton area. The Liberty Party received a mere 212 votes of the 5,221 cast in Hampshire County for the election of governor in 1841.<sup>17</sup>

The true power of the Liberty Party, which lay in its capability of interfering with the traditional parties' ascendancy, would become evident in the 1842 election. The Whig candidate for Congress from Hampshire County in 1842, Osmyrn Baker, was not strongly supported, even by his own party. Evidently, he had voted against the repeal of a bankruptcy law, which many Hampshire County Whigs thought should have been repealed.<sup>18</sup>

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14. *Ibid.*, August 17, 1841.

15. *Ibid.*, October 19, 1841.

16. *Ibid.*, October 20, 1841.

17. *Ibid.*, November 8, 1841.

18. *Ibid.*, May 23, 1843.

The animosity of so many Hampshire County Whigs towards Baker furnished an excellent opportunity for the Liberty Party to obstruct his election. The Liberty candidate, Dr. Gardiner Dorrance of Amherst, increased the party's support from that town, and consequently strengthened its position. Elections were conducted in November, February, April, and June, which all resulted in no choice. In all four elections, the Liberty Party held the balance, and if a mere two-hundred Liberty Party votes had gone to Baker, he would have won the election.<sup>19</sup> The ability of the Liberty Party to affect the outcome of the election was recognized by many of the Whig voters of Hampshire County. This was shown in their pleas to appease the third party by suggesting a compromise, nomination of a new Whig candidate who was "more in favor with the abolitionists than Mr. Baker."<sup>20</sup> It seems as though the Liberty Party of Northampton had achieved the objective of "holding the balance," set forth by Garrisonians in 1838, except that the objective was reached through the collective strength of the Liberty Party, as opposed to Garrison's tactic of writing in the name of any person.

The elections of 1842 and 1843 demonstrated one characteristic of the Liberty Party of the Northampton area, that its members were intransigently committed to the cause of abolition, in its newest embodiment, the Liberty Party. While the vote of the Whigs steadily decreased throughout the series of elections, most likely due to apathy, the Liberty Party's votes either increased or remained consistent.<sup>21</sup> In addition, members of the third party maintained a steady flow of letters to the *Gazette*, rebuking Whig arguments that attempted to persuade the Liberty men to abandon their candidate and to elect Baker. Because the Liberty Party refused to give up its candidate and support Baker, it was necessary to hold one election after another. The end result was that Hampshire County failed to elect a representative, and it was not represented in Congress during 1842-1843.

The limited success in the 1842-1843 elections caused the political abolitionists of Northampton to increase their efforts.

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19. *Ibid.*, JUNE 20, 1843.

20. *Ibid.*, May 23, 1843.

21. *Ibid.*, October 24, 1843.



Liberty Party conventions and meetings were frequently held at Oliver Warner's Coffee House in Northampton (Warner was a founding member of the Old Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society). At one such meeting on October 24, 1843, a committee was created consisting of Moses Breck, J. P. Williston, H. K. Starkweather, Isaac and Jared Clark, and William K. Wright (all of whom, except for Wright, were founding members of the Old Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society). The purpose of the committee was to increase Liberty Party support at the ballot-box. These increased efforts of the committee were complemented by a number of lectures given by prominent Liberty Party figures. The venerable Reverend John Pierpont of Boston addressed several Liberty Party meetings in the Northampton area in October of 1843.<sup>22</sup> James G. Birney, the Liberty Party candidate for president, addressed the people of Northampton at the Town Hall on November 1, 1843.<sup>23</sup> Of course, these increased efforts of the Liberty Party were being censured by the Whig *Gazette*, which reluctantly acquiesced to the requests of third party leaders to print announcements of upcoming Liberty Party activities. The *Gazette's* article on Birney's address depicted the Liberty candidate through the prism of Whig bias. The article referred to statements made by David Lee Child (the well-known Garrisonian abolitionist of Northampton, whom the *Gazette* often consulted in attacking the Liberty Party), which portrayed Birney as simply attaining wealth through his candidacy. The situation of the abolition movement in general was threatened by the recent advancements made for the annexation of Texas, and the Whigs attempted to capitalize on the crisis. Fearing a repetition of the 1842-1843 election, the article asked

How can any intelligent and honest Liberty party man — who is not a slave to the leaders of the party — put to hazard the great interests of human freedom now at stake, by neglecting to vote for the Whig ticket? If by reason of the third party, no Whig should be elected from this district and there should be no Representative, this would strengthen

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22. *Ibid.*, September 26, 1843.

23. *Ibid.*, October 24, 1843.

the Texas and the slave-holding party in Congress.<sup>24</sup>

The *Gazette's* expressed concern reflected its recognition that the Liberty Party was an important, even if minor constituency, which held the balance of power in upcoming elections.

The climax of the Liberty Party in Hampshire County and in the rest of the nation as well, came with the election of 1844. By 1844, the Liberty Party of Hampshire County had become a well-organized political entity, with a network of town committees and links across the county, directed from Northampton. The Whigs focused their campaign efforts on eroding the legitimacy of the Liberty Party, and they even attempted to manipulate religion in their favor:

There are but two parties, so far as the national government is concerned . . . every vote given for a third party candidate, if given understandingly, must be regarded by Him, who searches the heart, as given for Polk.<sup>25</sup>

In the national election of 1844, the Liberty Party exceeded its votes in any prior election. But the repercussions of the increased Liberty Party vote proved to be one of the most ironic catastrophes in the history of political abolition. James G. Birney, the Liberty Party candidate for president, received enough support to undermine the Whig candidate, Henry Clay, allowing an expansionist slaveholder, James K. Polk, to be elected as president.<sup>26</sup> The *Hampshire Gazette* criticized the Liberty Party, placing the blame for the election of Polk and the annexation of Texas solely on their actions. "Had the cause been all, and the party a secondary matter, Texas would be where she was . . . and the bounds of slavery would be where they have been." The *Hampshire Gazette* made it extremely clear as to who was responsible. "The Liberty Party willed it. They held the balance

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24. *Ibid.*, November 7, 1843.

25. *Ibid.*, November 5, 1843.

26. Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery* (New York, 1960), p. 176.

of power and could have turned the scale against Mr. Polk," according to the newspaper.<sup>27</sup>

The political catastrophe of 1844, and the ensuing criticism, fired the passions of Liberty men, encouraging them to labor indignantly in the attempt to prevent a recurrence of such disasters. One exemplary tactic of these increased efforts was the appearance of several Liberty Party newspapers.<sup>28</sup> Until 1845, the Liberty Party's only voice in Hampshire County had been in the columns of the Whig *Hampshire Gazette*, which was becoming increasingly hostile to the third party, printing only announcements of meetings and negative commentaries. On March 5, 1845, Northampton witnessed the publication of its first abolitionist newspaper, the voice of the Liberty Party, the *Hampshire Herald*.

The *Hampshire Herald* was established by John P. Williston and Joel Hayden, both of whom were founding members of the Old Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society, as well as prominent figures in the local abolitionist community. Williston had been born in Easthampton, the son of Reverend Payson Williston. John P. was a prominent businessman, who in 1835 began manufacturing Payson's Indelible Ink, his own invention. By 1846, he was part-owner of the Greenville Manufacturing Company, and he served as director of the Northampton Bank and the Holyoke Water Power Company. Williston was a deacon at the "Old Church" in Northampton, where many of the abolitionists worshipped.<sup>29</sup> John P. Williston was elected manager of the Old Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society, at its first meeting. For more than two decades, Williston would serve the cause of abolition through the Liberty and Free Soil parties, consistently holding one or more offices in those organizations. Williston also ran for political office several times, although never achieving success. His dedication to abolition in general, and political abolition in particular, was representative of most of the members of the Old Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society.

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27. *Hampshire Gazette*, March 18, 1845.

28. Mary-Elizabeth Murdock, *Index of the Hampshire Herald, 1845-1848* (Northampton, 1987).

29. *Representative Families of Northampton*, (Northampton, 1917), pp. 81-85.

Joel Hayden was born on April 7, 1793. In 1822, with a mere \$1,500 in capital, Hayden endeavored to manufacture power looms for weaving broadcloth, in what was to become Haydenville. Eventually Hayden came to manufacture buttons, and in 1834 he merged business with Samuel Williston of Easthampton (J. P. Williston's brother). Williston and Hayden employed some two hundred workers, most of whom were women. Hayden was also involved in the manufacture of plumbers' materials, and he ran a cotton-mill. The town of Haydenville emerged directly as a result of his efforts. He was remembered as extremely benevolent toward his workers, in contrast to many other factory owners of the first half of the nineteenth century. As a reformer, Hayden was deeply involved in the temperance movement, as well as in anti-slavery. As a political abolitionist, he was a founding member of the Old Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society, and several times he ran for Congress on the Liberty Party slate.<sup>30</sup>

The editor of the *Hampshire Herald*, Abijah W. Thayer, was a far more elusive character, and very little is known about his life. But from his editorials, from the attacks they provoked, and from the memories of his apprentice, Henry S. Gere, it can be assumed that Thayer was a provocative figure driven by the cause of the Liberty Party. According to Gere, Thayer "was a natural controversialist, and nothing suited him better than to antagonize someone in print. He was a dangerous antagonist."<sup>31</sup>

The *Herald*, although designated as a Liberty Party newspaper, appealed to the reformist atmosphere of Northampton, by including articles pertaining to a wide range of reforms, encompassing temperance, education, and women's issues. Thayer, editor of the *Hampshire Herald*, enhanced the diversity of the paper by maintaining a policy of opening up the columns of the *Herald* to viewpoints opposed to abolition as well as to anti-Liberty Party commentaries. By maintaining this standard, the *Herald* became a forum of debate among Northampton's moderates and radicals, abolitionists and anti-abolitionists, Whigs and Liberty men. This was a somewhat unique aspect of the *Herald*, when compared to abolitionist newspapers nationally. Although the

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30. *Hampshire Gazette*, November 11, 1873.

31. Gere, *Reminiscences of Old Northampton*, p. 18.

*Herald* never acquired a large number of subscribers, it served as the voice of Northampton's dissenters and it maintained its role as public agitator, while launching itself into the center of controversy.

By printing the attacks of those who were opposed to the abolition movement in general and the Liberty Party in particular, the *Herald* contributes to current research of the Northampton abolition movement what the other papers of the 1840s do not; that is, a perception of how the abolitionists, and Liberty Party men in particular were viewed by the Northampton community. Abolition, unlike other reforms of the era, struck at an institution which was intertwined with nearly every facet of the Union's structure.<sup>32</sup> The political abolitionists were viewed as eroding the basic framework of the country, through their advocacy of the Liberty Party, which in itself not only attacked slavery but also the established political structure. The *Herald*, time and time again, was compelled to defend itself against accusations of the local newspapers representing the two established parties, the Whigs and Democrats, while maintaining its strident rhetoric:

The slanderous charge which is brought against us by the Whig and Democrat papers of hostility to the Union and the Constitution, we indignantly repel. We hold . . . that either the Constitution must destroy slavery, or slavery will destroy the Constitution.<sup>33</sup>

The charge of "hostility to the Union and the Constitution" seems to have permeated the Whig and Democrat assault on the Liberty Party. This perception was accompanied by a number of stereotypes of the Liberty Party members. While Northampton did not experience any anti-abolition riots, there were incidents which reflected the views of the community toward the abolitionists. On April 14, 1846, for example, a case was brought before Judge Wells of Northampton, that concerned the disruption of an

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32. Kraditor, Means and Ends in American Abolitionism, p. 20.

33. Hampshire Herald, September 14, 1845.

abolition lecture a few weeks earlier, in nearby Southampton.<sup>34</sup> Apparently a number of youths of that town had attended the lecture with the intent of sabotaging it. They allegedly accomplished this by cracking peanuts, whistling, fidgeting noisily, and firing a pistol outside the door. The comments made by the defense attorney, Mr. Forbes, embodied many of the views held by the community towards the abolitionists. Forbes

accused them of great deficiency of patriotism and that abolitionists in general were a very excitable class of people . . . sensitive to public opinion, and ready to construe the least impropriety into a wanton outrage. Mr. Forbes admitted that the majority of abolitionists were men of kind and benevolent disposition, but their leaders were notoriously corrupt — consisting of editors and others who strove to prevent the amalgamation with the other parties.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, the primary issue, which presented the Liberty Party as anathema to the abolitionists, was the third party's intransigence against "amalgamation" with the others. The Liberty Party seemed to be very radical to the members of the Northampton community, and it was often looked upon as disunionist, because the Liberty Party was willing to see the disintegration of transectional institutions in the name of abolition, such as the traditional parties, and the church. As a result, at a meeting of the members of the party, it was

Resolved, That slavery being a political evil requires a political remedy — that this remedy is obviously . . . the divorce of the General Government from the Slave Power . . . hence the necessity of the Liberty party . . . which seeks by

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34. Ibid., April 28, 1846.

35. Ibid.

legal and Constitutional means, the attainment of these ends.<sup>36</sup>

The resolution demonstrated the gradual radicalization of Northampton's political abolitionists, who declared that the Liberty Party was to become a wedge which was to be driven between the "slavepower" and the government. This progression may have been the product of the Liberty Party on the national scale, as much as a reaction to the actions of the Polk administration, such as the annexation of Texas in 1845 and the Mexican War of 1846. The Mexican War provided the Liberty Party with ammunition for attacking the Whig Party. The Whig Governor, Briggs, was the target of castigation by Northampton's Liberty men, primarily through the columns of the *Herald*. The *Herald* questioned if the Governor was "bound by the Constitution to aid the President in raising volunteers for a war of invasion," which was viewed by the abolitionists in general as a "purpose morally wrong."<sup>37</sup> The Governor's actions further demonstrated to Liberty Party supporters that the Whig Party was subservient to the "slavepower." In addition, the muster for the Mexican War proved the statement incorrect that "a Liberty party Governor could do no more for the cause of abolition than a Whig."

The Liberty men of Northampton attempted to capitalize on such events as the Mexican War, to gain support from the ranks of "conscience Whigs" and Democrats. On August 1, 1846, an "anti-slavery" meeting was held in nearby Southampton, hosted by various Liberty Party leaders, including Moses Breck, J. P. Williston, and A. W. Thayer. The Mexican War was among the topics discussed, and the members resolved that it was an event that caused "the people to mourn while the wicked bear rule." Their protest crystallized in the form of support for the Liberty Party. Those who were present resolved: "we will unyieldingly adhere to and give the Liberty Party our undivided suffrage."<sup>38</sup>

Local events were also exploited by the Liberty Party, in the hope of swelling its ranks. In August of 1845, a gentleman from

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36. *Ibid.*, October 28, 1845.

37. *Ibid.*, June 30, 1846.

38. *Ibid.*, August 4, 1846.

Savannah, Georgia, identified as W. B. Hodgson, arrived in Springfield with his wife and his servant. While staying at the hotel, inquiries had been made to the servant, Catherine Linda, as to whether she wanted freedom. Dr. Erasmus Hudson, a prominent anti-slavery lecturer of Springfield, was informed of the situation. Upon discovering that such inquiries had been made into the desires of his slave, Hodgson fled to Northampton, well aware of the Massachusetts state law which stipulated that upon entering Massachusetts, slaves become free. Dr. Hudson pursued the southerners to Northampton, where he attained a writ of habeas corpus and proceeded to bring Hodgson and his servant before Judge Dewey of that town. At the hearing, Catherine Linda was denied the right to speak with the judge in the absence of her master. Under the power of Hodgson, Catherine Linda stated that she did not want to be free. The *Hampshire Herald* reasoned that slaveowners brought to the north only those slaves whose behavior was insured by relatives "held hostage" back home.<sup>39</sup>

The course of events then took an ironic turn. W. B. Hodgson informed Judge Dewey that his slave, Catherine Linda, felt that "'violence and outrage' had been committed upon her personal liberty which was 'unlawfully deprived' by Dr. Hudson." The Judge agreed to hear the case, and Dr. Hudson was arrested and held on \$5,000 bail, to "answer to the said chattel personal in damages laid at \$1000." Hudson was bailed out the following morning, by J. P. Williston.<sup>40</sup>

This "test case," as it was called, provided yet another weapon for the Liberty Party with which to attack the traditional parties, by appealing to the interests of white Northerners. The Liberty men viewed *Linda vs. Hudson* as a metaphor for the national sectional struggle which, as demonstrated by the annexation of Texas and the war with Mexico, the South was winning. As stated in the *Herald*, the case proved

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39. *Ibid.*, August 12, 1845.

40. *Ibid.*



that while slavery was tolerated, it would never cease its encroachments, until it had brought into subjection the white men of the North.<sup>41</sup>

The case itself resulted in a mere thirty-three dollar award to Linda. But it served the purpose of forcing the citizens of the Northampton area to realize the effect that the "slavepower" may have on them. It is nearly impossible to discern whether or not the individuals of Northampton passed through an ideological transformation as a result of the developments of the mid-1840s (the annexation of Texas, the war with Mexico, and locally, *Linda vs. Hudson*). But it is safe to assume that these events played a role in galvanizing the abolitionist position, as well as in radicalizing many who already had a zealous commitment to the cause of emancipation. It is also likely that these events caused many people to begin to re-evaluate their party affiliations.

The ranks of the Liberty Party had swelled by 1846 and 1847, possibly as a result of the growing fear of Southern encroachment, as well as increased organizing efforts by party members. In the election of 1846 for Governor, the Liberty Party vote increased by eighty-two in Hampshire County. Northampton, as usual, reasserted itself as the spearhead of the Hampshire County Liberty Party, by increasing its Liberty vote by twenty-six, although the *Herald* claimed another twenty-four adherents who were prevented from voting by "sickness and other causes."<sup>42</sup>

The advances made by the Liberty Party, in contrast to the praise which its leaders heaped upon it, were minor. The third party had not yet been able to muster enough support to win an election. By 1847, the Liberty Party, though slightly larger in number and more strident in rhetoric, was still merely the balance of power in close elections. This exceptionally slow increase in support can be attributed to the party's stubborn adherence to "one-ideaism," the party platform which consisted only of the abolition of slavery. Although some of the party's most prominent leaders (James G. Birney among them) had begun advocating a broader platform by 1845, the party in general had yet to adopt

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41. *Ibid.*, September 16, 1845.

42. *Ibid.*, November 17, 1846.

these objectives.<sup>43</sup> The Hampshire Liberty Convention of October 1847 resolved that

The only sound and consistent policy for the Liberty Party to pursue is to nominate their own candidates . . . and secure their election . . . while its "one great idea" is adhered to.<sup>44</sup>

The limitations of a political party representing only one issue are painfully obvious. The failure of the Liberty Party of Hampshire County to win a single election in its eight years of existence is proof of that limitation. It is apparent, however, that the Liberty Party played a crucial role in the evolution of political abolition in Northampton. First and foremost, it served as the prime agitator of the abolition movement in Hampshire County, constantly forcing the issue of slavery into the public view. Secondly, its struggle at the ballot box and its unmitigated attacks on the dominant Whig Party aided in causing many "conscience Whigs" to re-evaluate their party's affiliation, and its possible subservience to the "slavepower." Third, the Liberty Party served as a base from which an effective abolition-minded party could easily be launched. The Liberty Party's eight years of existence in Hampshire County produced a number of public figures who became well-known and occasionally respected, if not supported, by many sympathetic members of the Whig and Democrat parties. When the Liberty Party developed into the Free Soil Party, the new political abolitionists entered a ready-made political entity.

That transition occurred in 1848, as a result of the Whig and Democratic nominations for president. "Barnburner" Democrats walked out of the convention, in anger over the nomination of Lewis Cass, who advocated popular sovereignty (leaving the choice of whether a new territory would be open to slavery up to the settlers) in reference to the expansion of slavery. The "conscience Whigs" suffered a greater disappointment, with the nomination of General Zachary Taylor, who refrained from stating his position on the subject of slavery. The editor of the *Hampshire Herald* was at the depot in Northampton to witness the announcement of

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43. Kraditor, Means and Ends in American Abolitionism, p. 153.

44. Hampshire Herald, October 12, 1847.

Taylor's nomination, and he noted that very few of the Whigs present were pleased by the news. The *Herald* labeled the nomination "the Bitter Pill," and stated that "If you choose Taylor, you choose slavery and war. . . . May you answer as your own conscience and not as your party feelings shall dictate."<sup>45</sup>

While the Free Soil Party was emerging, the *Hampshire Herald* was fading away. "Its publication has involved considerable loss to its proprietors."<sup>46</sup> On August 15, 1848, editor Henry S. Gere, who had taken the position upon Thayer's resignation in 1847, was forced to announce that "the *Hampshire Herald* is no more."<sup>47</sup> The *Herald* merged with the *Northampton Courier*, to become the voice of the Free Soil Party in Northampton. It is interesting that the career of Gere paralleled the political abolition movement. Born in nearby Williamsburg in 1828, Gere came to Northampton in 1845 and he became the apprentice printer of the *Hampshire Herald*. A. W. Thayer left his position as editor to fill the same position in Worcester in 1847, and Gere, at the age of nineteen, became the editor of the *Hampshire Herald*. Gere continued his career by working for the *Northampton Courier*, after the two papers merged, and he managed to become the owner in 1849. The *Northampton Courier* and the *Hampshire Gazette* merged in 1858, and soon after that Gere became the editor, advocating the principles of the Republican Party.<sup>48</sup> The *Hampshire Gazette* and the *Springfield Republican*, edited by Samuel Bowles, became the outspoken journals of the Republican Party in western Massachusetts.<sup>49</sup>

The emergence of the Free Soil Party was a pivotal event in the political history of Northampton. It marked the end of the Whigs' exclusive control over town politics. The first Free Soil meeting in Northampton took place in late September of 1848,

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45. *Ibid.*, June 13, 1848.

46. *Ibid.*, August 11, 1848. It may be noted that at that time the *Herald* had 950 subscribers.

47. *Ibid.*, August 15, 1848.

48. Gere, *Reminiscences of Old Northampton*, p. 22.

49. For a complete biography of Bowles, see Stephen G. Weisner, *Embattled Editor: The Life of Samuel Bowles* (Lanham, Maryland, 1986).

where the new party enlisted support from ex-Whigs and Democrats, among them such notable past critics of the Liberty Party as David Lee Child, as well as the prominent Liberty men of the area. The attendance was estimated at one-thousand, which equalled or surpassed any prior Liberty Party gathering. That same night the fading Liberty Party met to discuss the new coalition. The convention was urged by the speakers (and later by the *Hampshire Herald*) to unite with the Free Soil Party, in the selection and support of a candidate. The *Hampshire Herald* stated the importance for Liberty men to participate in the nominations, to assure that their candidate would be acceptable to the third party's principles.<sup>50</sup>

The Free Soil Party received instant support in Hampshire County, support that extended far beyond that given to the Liberty Party. For seven years, the Liberty Party vote in Hampshire County fluctuated between approximately 550 and 650. In 1848, Martin Van Buren, the Free Soil Party presidential candidate, received 1,779 votes.<sup>51</sup> The Liberty men had stated from the outset that victory would be achieved when the factional forces pitted against slavery united and acted together. Their prophesy proved to be true. Northampton once again proved to be the spearhead of political abolition in Hampshire County, by electing Erastus Hopkins, a Whig defector and a Free Soil convert, as Northampton's representative to Congress.<sup>52</sup> This victory was not achieved without staunch opposition. Even though Hopkins was four years incumbent to the position, he only won by six votes. Residents of the town of Northampton now looked to the election of 1849, to see whether Hopkins would be re-elected, which would signify a firm base of Free Soil power, or if the Whigs would re-assert their domination over Northampton politics.

Erastus Hopkins was the son of Reverend Samuel Hopkins, and he was born in nearby Hadley, on April 7, 1810. The family had moved to Boston in 1814, where Erastus attended the Boston Latin School, along with such would be notables as Charles Sumner. The Hopkins family moved to Northampton in 1824.

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50. The Hampshire Herald, August 1, 1848.

51. Northampton Courier, November 7, 1848.

52. Ibid., November 13, 1849.

Erastus got his higher education at Andover Academy and Dartmouth College, and he undertook theological studies at Andover and Princeton. In 1835, he went to South Carolina, where he was ordained at Beech Island and continued there as pastor until 1837. Due to illness he moved to Troy, New York, where he was installed as pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church. While at Troy, he published his work, *Heaven the Model of a Christian Family*. After touring Europe in 1841, he returned to Northampton, where Hopkins quickly assumed a position of leadership, becoming the president of the newly-founded railroad which extended through the Connecticut River Valley to Springfield.<sup>53</sup>

From 1842 to 1848, Hopkins was a leader of the "conscience Whigs" of Northampton. According to the *Hampshire Gazette*:

He was at that time one of the most popular and rising men in the Whig Party, with the promise of a brilliant and successful career before him, such as few young men had ever had.<sup>54</sup>

Hopkins was clearly the hero of the Free Soil Party in Northampton. He had been the Whig representative of Northampton since 1844, and regardless of his change in party affiliation, he maintained the position until 1856. The *Hampshire Gazette* applauded Hopkins as an orator who was "unequaled in Western Massachusetts."<sup>55</sup>

The advent of the Free Soil Party created excitement which according to the *Hampshire Gazette* was "nowhere in the country more intense than in Northampton."<sup>56</sup> The true test for the third party came in 1849. The Northampton congressional election was recognized as a litmus test of the endurance of the third party. The campaign aroused excitement and enthusiasm unparalleled in

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53. *Hampshire Gazette*, January 30, 1872.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*

Northampton's political history.<sup>57</sup> The Whig Party resorted to negative campaign tactics, verbally assaulting Erastus Hopkins, who had defected from the Whig ranks to lead the Free Soil Party in the area. He was the object of "bitter invective and vile personal abuse" by the leading Whigs of Northampton.<sup>58</sup> In spite of the personal attacks on him and his character, Hopkins won the election by thirty-seven votes, an increase of thirty over the previous year. "The reign of Taylorism in Northampton" (the dominance of the Whig Party, the party of Zachary Taylor), was "forever 'fixed.'"<sup>59</sup> According to Gere's *Northampton Courier*, the Whig Party resorted to the lowest of tricks in an attempt to win the election:

To show the desperation of the Taylor men, we will state that they visited the jail, and bailed out two inmates of that mansion, and brought them to the polls. One of them desired to vote the Free soil ticket, and would have done so, had not the votes been forcibly taken away from him, and himself taken away. He afterwards returned with both hands in his pockets until he reached the polls . . . and voted as his masters desired. A specimen of Taylor freedom.<sup>60</sup>

Northampton was the only town in Hampshire County, except for Williamsburg, to elect Free Soil members to Congress.<sup>61</sup> The ascendancy of Erastus Hopkins did in fact prove to be an enduring obstacle to the routed Whig Party. The Free Soilers dominated the local elections. For instance, in March of 1850, the Free Soil candidates were elected to every town office but one.<sup>62</sup>

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57. Ibid.

58. Northampton Courier, November 13, 1849.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid., November 11, 1851.

Hopkins became a venerated figure, honored for victory in subsequent elections by parades of admirers led by the Northampton Brass Band. "Never before was there so much rejoicing over a political victory in Northampton."<sup>63</sup>

Although the Free Soil Party triumphed in Northampton's local elections, it did not experience the same degree of success statewide. And even in Northampton, domination of state elections for Governor and the United States Senate oscillated between the Free Soil and Whig parties. One fact remains clear, however; in the town of Northampton, the reign of the Whigs, which had lasted over two decades, had come to an end. During the 1850s, in the aftermath of the Congressional debate over the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, the Republican Party was organized by former Whigs who were opposed to the expansion of slavery into any of the territories. Soon, the Republican Party would dominate politics in Northampton and in most of the towns of Massachusetts.

Surprisingly, very little attention has been given by local historians to the abolitionists of Northampton. What mentions do occur usually refer to the activities of the local underground railroad (of which there is little credible documentation), and the Northampton Education and Industry Association. Although the activities of Northampton's political abolitionists may not have been as glamorous as those of the conductors of the secret escape passages of slavery, they were as instrumental in bringing about change, and of no less importance. The power of the political abolitionists was evident in the Free Soil Party's victory over the Whigs. The political success of the Free Soil Party, even for a short period of time, demonstrated the dedication of the abolitionists of the various northern cities and towns.

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63. *Ibid.*, March 19, 1850.