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**“A Brave Man’s Child”:
Theodore Parker and the Memory of the American Revolution**

By

Paul E. Teed

On July 30, 1845, the Rev. Theodore Parker of West Roxbury, Massachusetts walked fifteen miles to visit his boyhood home at Lexington. Having grown up only a short distance from the place where the “shot heard round the world” was fired, Parker had been raised on stories of his grandfather’s heroism on April 19, 1775. Although Captain John Parker, commander of the Lexington minutemen on that fateful day, had died more than thirty years before his grandson’s birth, the deeds of the “old Captain” had remained a central part of Lexington’s communal past and the central events in Parker family history. By 1845, however, Theodore Parker was becoming fearful that the memories of men like his grandfather were fading from his region’s consciousness and culture. He therefore took pains to revisit the battle monument on the southwest side of the town green with Jonathan Harrington, an 87 year old relative who was the only remaining member of the “company” that had encountered the British soldiers. Writing furiously as the old farmer struggled to recall the Captains actions, Parker received a deeply satisfying account of his ancestors courage and leadership in the face of deadly force. “Some offered to run,” Harrington remembered, “But Captain P. drew his sword and said he would run through any man who offered to run away.”¹

¹ Theodore Parker, Manuscript Journal, Massachusetts Historical Society MHS], 121; See also, Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 114-117. The monument to the eight minutemen killed

Theodore Parker's 1845 pilgrimage to Lexington was a defining moment in the career of one of New England's most influential antislavery activists. Occurring as it did in the very midst of the national crisis over Texas annexation, Parker's mystical connection with the memory of his illustrious revolutionary ancestor emerged as the bedrock of his identity as an abolitionist. Over the next fifteen years, Parker's militant resistance to what he believed was an aggressive southern "slave power" intent upon colonizing the rest of the nation was built firmly upon the symbol of revolutionary manhood that his grandfather represented. Using his vast knowledge of Massachusetts revolutionary history as framework for understanding and organizing resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Parker consciously constructed other roles for himself that explicitly drew upon the experience of John Adams, John Hancock and other Bay State revolutionaries. While studies of the antislavery movement have often pointed out the ways in which radical abolitionists refashioned aspects of Revolutionary-era republicanism in their arguments for immediate emancipation, this article will show that Theodore Parker's abolitionism was distinctive in its more direct and dynamic uses of revolutionary memory in fashioning an individual activist identity. For Parker, the Revolution had bequeathed not only its libertarian political ideology, but also radical and highly confrontational models of personal conduct that were otherwise hard to come by in the "un-Revolutionary" culture of antebellum New England. While other abolitionists frequently claimed the revolutionary tradition for their cause, Parker's antislavery vision also rested upon a deep sense of filial obligation to the revolutionaries themselves.²

in the battle of Lexington was erected in 1799. See also Charles Hudson, *History of the Town of Lexington* 2 Vols. (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1913)1: 191.

² Michael Fellman's, "Theodore Parker and the Abolitionist Role in the 1850s," *Journal of American History* 61 (December 1974), 666-684 argues that Parker's primary intentions in using the revolutionary tradition was in advocating violence against the slaveholding South. Daniel McInerney, *The Fortunate Heirs of Freedom: Abolitionism and Republican Thought* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), correctly identifies the abolitionist's ideological connections to the republican past. Works dealing with the tensions in antebellum America's collective memory of the Revolution include Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); Michael Kammen, *A Season of*

Since his own activist identity was constructed upon images of a radical past, Parker's abolitionist leadership also involved a conscious attempt to radicalize New England's culture through a revision of the region's collective memory of the American Revolution. Enormously sensitive to the rituals and symbols through which imagined traditions are transmitted, Parker's public speeches during the 1850s skillfully combined rhetoric and performance in reminding his fellow New Englanders that independence and liberty had been secured by a radical people willing to defy established authority in the name of principle. He was keenly aware that as New England's revolutionary generation passed from the scene, its children and grandchildren were left to remember and interpret the struggle for independence through commemorative oratory, monument building, and the writing of history. New England's memory, and therefore its very identity, had become the product of those who commanded public spaces and the rites of commemoration which occurred there. While the Massachusetts conservative elite had long claimed special authority to interpret the meaning of the region's past in such spaces, Theodore Parker used alternate public venues to revise the meaning of revolutionary war monuments and iconography. The success of Parker's leadership points to the centrality of revolutionary memory in the public discourse of antebellum New England, and to the fiercely contested nature of that memory as abolitionists struggled with conservatives to define regional tradition and identity.³

Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination (New York: Knopf, 1978), 49-59; Lewis Perry, *Boats Against the Current: American Culture Between Revolution and Modernity, 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 47-71; and Glen Wallach, *Obedient Sons: The Discourse of Youth and Generations in American Culture, 1630-1860* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 116-150.

³ On the role of festive culture in mediating national and regional identities, see David Waldstreicher, *In The Midst of Perpetual Fêtes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1997); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997). Recent works dealing with the relationship between memory and New England identity include John Seelye, *Memory's Nation: The Place of Plymouth Rock* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Stephen Nissenbaum, "New England as Section and Nation," in *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* eds. Edward Ayres et. al. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,

Theodore Parker's acute facility with memorial rhetoric and performance derived in part from early experience. Having grown up in Lexington, Massachusetts in the early nineteenth century, his apprenticeship in the political uses of revolutionary memory could not have been served in a more conducive location. Beginning in the mid-1790s, Lexington's community leaders had struggled mightily to win national recognition for their town as the birthplace of the American Revolution. With only a small population and limited economic prospects following independence, Lexington competed with more prosperous neighboring towns like Concord only in its claims to historical distinction. Correspondingly, in 1797, the town petitioned the Massachusetts State legislature for two hundred dollars to construct a granite monument on Lexington green to honor the eight men killed by British troops in the famous battle. While monetary support for the building of the monument was certainly an important consideration for a relatively poor community like Lexington, the state government's support of the petition also offered official recognition of the town's importance. The monument ultimately cost double the initial outlay, but the inscription on the stone obelisk completed in 1799 left no doubt as to the extraordinary significance of the battle and of the town where it had been fought. "Sacred to Liberty & the Rights of mankind!!! The Freedom & Independence of America, Sealed and defended with the blood of her sons . . . The Blood of these Martyrs, in the cause of God & their country, Was the Cement of the Union of these States . . ." For the next half century, moreover, the battle monument became the site of yearly April 19th and Fourth of July celebrations in which orators reminded the people of Lexington that "one of the most important events in the history of the world" had occurred in their town.⁴

1996), 38-61; and Blanche Linden-Ward, *Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989). On the conservative uses of history, see Harlow Sheidley, *Sectional Nationalism: Massachusetts Conservative Leaders and the Transformation of America* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 118-147; J.V. Matthews, "Whig History: The New England Whigs and a Usable Past," *New England Quarterly* 51 (June 1978), 193-208; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 89.

⁴ The inscription is reprinted in Hudson, *History of the Town of Lexington*, I: 191.

During Theodore Parker's youth in the 1820s, the celebrations at the battle monument consistently linked Parker family memory with that of the larger town and national communities. As the grandson of the legendary militia commander, Parker heard the sacrifices of his ancestor celebrated by famous men in the most eloquent terms. Fourteen years old in 1824, Parker walked with his family to the celebrations on Lexington green where none other than the Marquis de Lafayette himself linked the noble sacrifices of the Parkers to the birth of the American nation. Only a few months later at the town's Fourth of July festivities, the Rev. Caleb Stetson of Boston asserted that "the little band that stood in fearless array with the gallant Parker" had produced the spirit of liberty "in which the Declaration of Independence was written." In Theodore Parker's case, memorial orations and other official occasions of memory construction were complemented by more informal conversations with survivors of the battle. Fourteen of the original participants remained during the 1820s, and Parker spoke with them frequently at family gatherings and other social events. "Theodore and I used to go Sunday... and hear the old revolutionary soldiers tell stories about the war," one relative remembered. While the substance of these early conversations was never recorded, Parker's 1845 discussion with Jonathan Harrington suggests that the official renderings of the battle and the more spontaneous tales told in local taverns differed only in the more personal nature of the latter. Orators tended to celebrate the larger political significance of both the battle and the town, whereas veterans usually offered more earthy tales of individual courage. Having heard their own story retold over and over again by highly skilled practitioners of public oratory, the memory of the town's aged veterans was itself partly a product of post-revolutionary culture.⁵

The special fervor with which the Revolution was celebrated and remembered in Lexington during Theodore Parker's youth also reflects two other related factors. First, as historians Michael Kammen and Alfred Young have suggested, the 1820s represents a pivotal point in the larger national memory of the events surrounding independence. As the

⁵ Lafayette's visit to Lexington is described in Hudson, *History of Lexington*, 258-259; Caleb Stetson, quoted in Hudson, *History of Lexington*, 1: 261 ; "Recollections of Mr. Greene," Manuscript in Theodore Parker Papers, Library of Congress.

revolutionary generation passed from the scene, many Americans came to believe that the permanence of that generation's republican achievements rested upon the preservation and understanding of its experience by succeeding generations. The survival of the nation's republican institutions depended upon its ability to remember and emulate the republican sacrifices of the founders. One Lexington orator eloquently expressed these hopes in 1814 by predicting that "long after that [monument] shall have crumbled to dust . . . the hearts of a grateful people shall engrave the deed and transmit the glorious record to remotest ages." The frenzied pace with which monuments were constructed in New England and the nearly incessant public celebrations of the region's revolutionary past reflect an anxious quest to create a national mythology that would sustain essential republican values such as virtue and sacrifice. In his youth, therefore, Theodore Parker learned that preserving history and celebrating historical memory (particularly revolutionary memory) were deeply political acts upon which the present and future of his national community depended.⁶

A second and more immediate consideration in Lexington, however, was the serious challenge leveled against the town's historic claims by the citizens of neighboring Concord. In 1824, Concord's leading citizens published a series of pamphlets contending that the first shots of the American Revolution were actually fired at their town's North Bridge, and that "no forcible resistance" to British forces had been offered at Lexington. Outraged by these claims, Lexington's town meeting appointed a special committee to refute them. The result was extraordinary. The fourteen remaining survivors of the battle were interviewed by members of the committee, and signed affidavits testifying to the events of the day. All of them confirmed that while Captain Parker had not ordered the company to fire on the advancing British troops, shots were indeed fired by members of the retreating militia before leaving the field. A highly dramatic account of the battle that made use of these accounts was then published by Elias Phinney, the town's historian. In Phinney's account, the panicked exchanges of fire that had occurred during the chaotic retreat of the Lexington militia on

⁶ Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 41-75; Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, 108-194; Timothy Fuller, *An Oration Presented at Lexington, Massachusetts on the Fourth of July, A.D. 1814* (Boston: Rowe and Harper, 1814), 9-10.

April 19th, 1775, were transformed into a fierce and heroic defense of liberty. For reasons that went well beyond their search for historical truth, therefore, Theodore Parker's community bequeathed an understanding of the battle of Lexington that was permeated with both political and personal significance.⁷

While Parker's boyhood experiences in Lexington clearly shaped his peculiar sensitivity to revolutionary tradition, his adult use of revolutionary memory in forging an abolitionist identity adds a striking new dimension to the vast literature on antislavery motivation. Over the last several decades, students of abolitionism have struggled to identify the social and psychological forces that compelled a small minority of antebellum Americans to join the radical crusade for the immediate abolition of slavery. While nearly all scholars acknowledge the importance of the evangelical revivals of the 1820s in generating morally committed converts anxious to eradicate both individual and collective sin, the fact that relatively few evangelicals joined the antislavery movement has necessitated a more detailed investigation of the antislavery impulse. In their attempts to pinpoint the common experiences of those revival converts who did devote their lives to the destruction of slavery, scholars have explored an array of possibilities. Historian Paul Goodman, for example, has argued that participation in the New York and Ohio manual labor movements led some evangelicals to attack an institution that undermined respect for virtuous physical toil. In the manual labor movement, Goodman locates "a distinctive strain of evangelical sensibility" that reviled slavery as "the starker example of the way market calculation demeaned humanity." While this argument makes positive contributions to the larger debate over the relationship between the antislavery movement and the rise of capitalism, Goodman acknowledges that it fails to explain the commitment of abolitionists in areas where manual labor sentiment was less developed. Other works have explained abolitionist commitment as a solution to the intense vocational and identity crises experienced by young evangelicals whose desire for lives of high moral purpose seemed incompatible with available occupational options. Examining John Greenleaf Whittier's 1833 conversion to immediatism, Charles Jarvis has suggested that the

⁷ Elias Phinney, *History of the Battle of Lexington* (Boston: Phelps and Farnham, 1825), 5-6; and David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 328-329.

Quaker poet's embrace of abolitionism resolved a deep adolescent ambivalence over the meaning and direction of his life. Jarvis writes that "Whittier's experience does not seem to be unique for a young man in early nineteenth-century New England in general, particularly those who became abolitionists..."⁸

In explaining Theodore Parker's decision to take up the cause of the slave, however, these explanations seem inadequate. A religious liberal rather than an evangelical Protestant, Parker flatly rejected the neo-Calvinist theology from which historians often trace the emergence of immediate abolition in the United States. While biographies of countless abolitionists include conversion experiences that resulted in a heightened consciousness of sin, Parker's Unitarian background instead stressed reason, moderation and gradualism in the development of individual religious sentiment. Indeed, Parker was a sharp liberal critic of evangelicalism who frequently mocked the language of sin and redemption that pervaded evangelical culture. "I think the thing which ministers mean by *ngsin-n-n-n*," he once joked to a colleague, "has no more existence than *phlogiston*, which was once adopted to explain combustion." While Whittier and other male activists gravitated to the movement as a rite of passage to manhood or as a solution to the vocational crises of their young adult years, moreover, Parker was an

⁸ Charles A. Jarvis, "Admission to Abolition: The Case of John Greenleaf Whittier," *Journal of the Early Republic* 4 (Summer 1984), 164; Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 83; and Goodman, "The Manual Labor Movement and the Origins of Abolitionism," *Journal of the Early Republic* 13 (Fall, 1993), 355-388. The larger debate over capitalism and antislavery can be found in *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). The connections between evangelical revivalism and immediate abolition are explored in many works, but some of the most influential are David Brion Davis, "The Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Antislavery Thought," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 49 (September 1962), 209-230; Gilbert Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York, 1933); James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976, 1996). On life-cycle and vocational issues in abolitionist motivation, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Conscience and Career: Young Abolitionists and Missionaries Compared," in *Yankee Saints and Southern Sinners* (Baton Rouge, 1985).

ordained Unitarian minister in his mid-thirties when he joined the crusade. During the movement's early period of growth in the 1830s and early 40s, he remained consciously aloof from abolitionism while concentrating on his theological and pastoral duties in West Roxbury. Even as late as 1842, he could not generate the same commitment for the rights of the fugitive slave George Latimer that had sustained his prolific theological writing. "Perhaps you feel a stronger interest than I do in the welfare of Latimer, and of the slaves generally," he admitted to an abolitionist friend. "I will not boast of my zeal."⁹

Yet problems of identity and vocation, when combined with Parker's powerful connection to memories of the revolutionary past, did play a role in his emergent antislavery consciousness. While initially secure as the pastor of the small but wealthy Congregational church in West Roxbury where he was ordained in 1837, Parker became a lightning rod in the bitter, protracted theological disputes that raged among the Unitarian clergy of eastern Massachusetts during the early 1840s. A disciple of German theology and biblical criticism and a devoted supporter of Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendental philosophy, Parker had emerged as the leader of a small group of liberal clergymen who overtly denied both the divinity of Christ and the authenticity of New Testament miracles. Attempting to establish his credentials as a biblical scholar in the early 1840s, he pushed his mental and physical stamina to the breaking point in publishing a staggering number of highly controversial books and sermons. By the middle of the decade, however, this scholarship had not only been condemned by the Unitarian and popular press as wrongheaded and dangerously radical, but he had also been professionally and socially isolated. Shunned at official

⁹ Theodore Parker to Rev. James Freeman Clarke, November 9, 1859, Parker Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University; Theodore Parker to George Adams, December 5, 1842, Parker Papers, MHS. Abolitionist biographies dealing with the role of conversion include Robert H. Abzug, *Passionate Liberator: Theodore Dwight Weld and the Dilemma of Reform* (New York, 1980); and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Cleveland, 1969); and Lawrence B. Goodheart, *Abolitionist, Actuary, Atheist: Elizur Wright and the Reform Impulse* (Kent, Ohio, 1990). On the differences between Unitarians and evangelicals in the issues of conversion and character development, see Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

gatherings of the Boston area clergy and denied even the most basic professional courtesies, Parker began to despair of achieving his vocational ambitions and even thought of himself as “the most hated man in America.” Not surprisingly, his journal entries during this period indicate real emotional distress and disorientation about the direction of his life. “I am certain that my life is not worthy of true ideas,” he wrote only month after visiting the battle monument at Lexington in 1845. “I am ashamed of it - but it is so.”¹⁰

As his own dreams of theological distinction slipped away in the rancor of controversy, Parker’s attention and concern shifted more and more to the future of the nation. While the Latimer protests had failed to spark his imagination three years earlier, the sectional antislavery politics surrounding the annexation of Texas in 1845 had a much more powerful impact. Attending the annual Forefather’s Day celebrations in Plymouth on December 22, 1845, he was appalled that the day’s orators did not remind New Englanders of their historic duties to protect liberty. “I hate to judge men by one thing,” he wrote in his journal, “but in all the day there was but one allusion . . . to slavery.” Deeply fearful that “the spirit of the Pilgrims rests no longer in the sons,” Parker looked for ways to prove his loyalty to both family and sectional tradition. In opposing the despotic designs of what he now saw as an expansive “slave power,” he found emotionally satisfying opportunities for courageous action that resonated with the memories of revolutionary heroism. Just a year after his personal crisis of confidence, he joined abolitionists at Faneuil Hall, itself a monument to Boston’s revolutionary resistance, in denouncing what he believed was as pro-slavery war against Mexico. When recently enlisted volunteers inside the hall flashed their bayonets at him and shouted “Kill him! Kill him!,” Parker dramatically reminded them that “our fathers hated a standing army,” and theatrically declared his

¹⁰ Theodore Parker, “Myself and My Ideas,” Manuscript Journal Entry, Parker Papers, MHS; On Parker’s bitter relationship with the Unitarian clergy in the 1840s and 50s, see Henry Steele Commager, *Theodore Parker: Yankee Crusader* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960); and Paul E. Teed, “A Very Excellent Fanatic, A Very Good Infidel, and a First-Rate Traitor’: Theodore Parker and the Search for Perfection in Antebellum America,” Ph.D. diss. University of Connecticut, 1994.

intention to “walk home unarmed and unattended.” The “old Captain” of Lexington, it seemed, had returned.¹¹

As he emerged as a leader in the Massachusetts abolitionist movement over the next several years, Parker’s transformed identity as a brave son of the American Revolution defined his distinctive approach to the movement. Although sympathy for the slave played an important role in his antislavery rhetoric, his most powerful antislavery addresses described opposition to the “slave power” as a binding filial obligation to defend the “old Bay State” against a new kind of foreign domination. “Have we lost the breed of noble men?” Parker asked in an 1848 sermon that lamented Boston’s failure to oppose the Mexican War. Fearing that New England’s commercial ties to the South would swamp its ties to the past, Parker reminded his readers that “there was not enough money in all England to make . . . Hancock and Adams false to their sense of right.” After moving to Boston in 1846 to take over an independent congregation that included social reformers and fugitive slaves, Parker decorated his new home in the Back Bay with revolutionary war icons that symbolized his sense of loyalty to Massachusetts’ past and his willingness to act -- violently if necessary -- upon its memory. Visitors who knew of him only as a scholar were sometimes surprised by these images of martial force. A young Harvard Divinity School student who arrived on a mission for fugitive slaves in 1853 was stunned to be “received in his library, where he sat beneath his grandfather’s old musket fixed to the wall.” Parker was always willing to explain the significance of these symbols to anyone who asked -- and even those who did not. “There hangs in my study . . . the gun my grandfather fought with at the battle of Lexington...and also the musket he captured from a British soldier on that day,” he informed President Millard Fillmore in a letter protesting the Fugitive Slave Act. “If I would not peril my property, my liberty, nay my life to keep my parishioners out of slavery, then I should throw away these trophies, and should think I was the son of some coward and not a brave man’s child.”¹²

¹¹ Theodore Parker, “The Mexican War,” in *The Slave Power* ed. James K. Hosmer (Boston: American Unitarian Association, n.d.), 28.

¹² Theodore Parker, “The Mexican War,” in *The Rights of Man* ed. Franklin B. Sanborn (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1911), 42; Moncure Daniel Conway, *Autobiography, Memories and Experiences*, 2 Vols. (New York: Da

One of the most striking consequences of Parker's distinctive abolitionist identity was the opportunities it offered to transcend or mediate the ideological polarization that periodically vitiated the activities of the Massachusetts antislavery movement. In part, this was a function of his rather late arrival in the movement. Having never advocated non-resistant Christian anarchism or disunion as did many Garrisonian abolitionists, Parker was able to work comfortably with antislavery politicians like Charles Sumner and Horace Mann who adamantly rejected such views. At the same time, his radical theology and public confrontations with Boston's Brahmin elite endeared him to radical abolitionists who shared many of his religious views and personal experiences. But whatever their differences over the Constitution and the Union, both radicals and antislavery politicians claimed loyalty to the same American revolutionary tradition that motivated Parker's activism and dominated his rhetoric. Despite their firm pacifist principles, for example, the Garrisonian Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society frequently linked Bay State revolutionary memory with the contemporary struggle against human bondage. "Massachusetts was the first in the revolutionary struggle for liberty and independence," they reminded fellow citizens in 1840. "She will not, she cannot prove recreant . . . in this second great struggle to establish the rights of man." Similarly, Free Soil politicians like Charles Sumner conceived of antislavery politics as a redemptive force that would ultimately restore Massachusetts to its former glory. "The spirit of Freedom is spreading in Massachusetts now as in the days of the earlier Revolution," Sumner wrote excitedly in 1848. "It promises to sweep the whole state." Both abolitionists and antislavery politicians interpreted public opposition to slavery and the south as evidence of their regions fidelity to principles of 1776.¹³

Parker successfully drew upon this common well of memory to establish an enclave of antislavery unity during Boston's repeated crises over fugitive slave renditions in the 1850s. As the co-founder and leader

Capo Press, 1970)1: 132; Theodore Parker to Millard Fillmore, Nov. 21, 1850, Parker Collection, Harvard Andover Theological Library [H-ATL].

¹³ *Eighth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society* (Boston: Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, 1840), 40; and Charles Sumner to Salmon P. Chase, July 7, 1848, in *Selected Letters of Charles Sumner*, 2 Vols. ed. Beverly Wilson Tucker (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990) II: 237.

of the Boston Committee of Safety and Vigilance, he presided over an organization that brought radical abolitionists, antislavery politicians, as well as the city's black leaders together in mobilizing resistance to the hated Fugitive Slave Act. Parker's public speeches to the group consistently avoided troublesome ideological issues and instead centered on the familial and regional memories of revolutionary heroism that lacked divisive content. "Let us swear by the glory of our fathers that we will hate slavery," he exhorted the committee in 1852. "Come up hither and renew the annual oath, till not a kidnapper is left lurking in the land." Since the Vigilance Committee bore a striking resemblance to Boston's revolutionary Committee of Correspondence, moreover, Parker pored over published works on the city's revolutionary history for organizational models and sources of personal inspiration. Only a few hours after a dramatic confrontation with two southern agents searching for fugitive slaves William and Ellen Craft, Parker was back in his study excitedly turning the pages of John Adams's diary and reflecting on the parallels between Adams's heroic sacrifices and his own. "[H]e could not be driven from the right by violence, by intimidation, by fear of poverty and disgrace," Parker wrote with an obvious sense of personal importance and satisfaction. "I make no doubt I shall have to go to gaol this winter."¹⁴

While models and images of a glorious revolutionary past inspired the antislavery ranks to resist the Fugitive Slave Act, they also offered a convenient means of excoriating those elite Bostonians who supported the law. Indeed, Parker found the conservative social and political leaders of Boston in 1850 eerily similar to the wealthy opponents of American liberty described in Adams's diary. The loyalist merchants and "Reverend Tories" of the colonial city had present analogues in the Cotton Whigs and "south-side" clergymen who called for the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act as a patriotic duty. "How much the old times were like the present times!" he confided to his journal.

¹⁴ Theodore Parker, "The Boston Kidnapping," in *The Slave Power*, 382; and Parker, Manuscript Journal Entry, November 1, 1850, Parker Collection, Boston Public Library [BPL]; The most recent work on the Boston Vigilance Committee can be found in Gary Collison, *Shadrach Minkins: From Fugitive Slave to Citizen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); see also Collison, "The Boston Vigilance Committee: A Reconsideration," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 12 (1984), 104-116.

“Most of the men of property were on the side of tyranny.” These historical allusions were also appealing to other antislavery activists who sought to legitimate and control Boston’s resistance to the enforcement of federal law. While Daniel Webster and other conservative regional leaders condemned the actions of the Vigilance Committee as lawlessness, the groups members found justification in the historic actions of regional heroes. Deeply struck by Parker’s comparisons between the Fugitive Slave Act crisis and the Stamp Act agitation, Wendell Phillips reminded the Vigilance Committee that city’s revolutionaries had not underestimated the baleful influence of the city’s wealthy and conservative elite. Had the Boston Whigs “mistaken 1765 for 1776,” he warned, “[they] would have ended up on the scaffold instead of the Declaration of Independence.” Furthermore, in casting themselves as latter-day revolutionaries and their conservative opponents as avaricious modern Tories, activists like Parker and Phillips also limned the South as a new colonizing power whose rigid insistence on the return of fugitives recalled arrogant British demands for New England’s tame submission to unjust laws. Ultimately working its way off the pages of Parker’s journal and into the air of Boston’s public discourse, such rhetoric proved highly provocative. Attempting to rally a Faneuil Hall crowd during the Anthony Burns crisis in May 1854, Parker provoked violent action when he addressed the excited crowd as “fellow subjects of Virginia!”¹⁵

While revolutionary memory cut through some of the issues that divided the white antislavery community in Massachusetts, Parker consistently used it as a signifier in interpreting black resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act as well. For instance, when Robert Morris, Louis Hayden and other black abolitionists in the city succeeded in the dramatic rescue of Shadrach Minkins from Boston’s Federal Court, Parker applauded it as “the most noble deed done in Boston since the destruction of the tea in 1773.” Working closely with the black community for several years, moreover, Parker had met the children and grandchildren of black revolutionary war veterans and was sensitive to

¹⁵ Wendell Phillips, “Sims Anniversary,” in *Speeches, Lectures and Letters* 2 vols. (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1892) I: 80. Parker’s famous speech on the night of the Boston Court House attack can be found in Theodore Parker, *The Trial of Theodore Parker For the Misdemeanor of a Speech in Faneuil Hall Against Kidnapping* (Boston: Allen and Farnham, 1855), 199-203.

the ways in which their place in Massachusetts revolutionary memory had been marginalized. He remembered engravings of the Battle of Bunker Hill in his youth that had shown the black soldier Peter Salem in the act of shooting Major Pitcairn, but noted with disgust that current reproductions on banknotes put “a white man . . . in his place.” Complaining that recent oratory on the battle made “no mention of Peter,” Parker sent George Bancroft a long letter detailing the heroism of African-Americans at Bunker Hill and recommending the pioneering work of the black historian William Nell. Parker saw attempts to erase the memory of black participation in the revolution as a threat to New Englanders, both black and white, who based their challenge to illegitimate authority on the radical traditions of their ancestors. “The American Republic is the child of ‘Rebellion; the national lullaby was ‘Treason,’ he insisted to abolitionist Samuel J. May. “Is America not proud of her rejection of the Stamp Act, and her treatment of the Stamp Commissioners?”¹⁶

Parker’s fear that the radicalism of the American Revolution was being systematically erased from New England’s public memory was well founded. Since the 1820s, Massachusetts orators like Rufus Choate and Edward Everett had made use of commemorative occasions to shape a conservative public understanding of their region’s revolutionary past. At Fourth of July and Forefather’s Day celebrations, such men had consciously downplayed the role of popular resistance in the events leading to Independence and insisted that the people had acted in orderly deference to New England’s “natural leaders.” In the words of historian Harlow Sheidley, they described “a conservative Revolution, undertaken to preserve law and order and not in defiance of established authority or existing social relationships.” This interpretation of the past, of course, was loaded with contemporary political meaning. In his 1835 oration

¹⁶ Parker, Manuscript Journal Entry, February 16, 1851, BPL; Theodore Parker to George Bancroft, March 16, 1858, Parker Papers, MHS; Theodore Parker to Samuel Joseph May, [n.d], [n.p.] in John Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker* 2 Vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1864) II: 117; See also, William Nell, *Colored Patriots of the Revolution* (Boston, 1854). Parker’s racial thought and its relationship to the American revolutionary tradition are discussed briefly in Fellman, “Theodore Parker and the Abolitionist Role in the 1850s,” and Paul E. Teed, “Racial Nationalism and Its Challengers: Theodore Parker, John Rock and the Antislavery Movement,” *Civil War History* 41 (June 1995), 142-160.

commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the battle of Lexington, Edward Everett only briefly mentioned the role of Captain John Parker and instead dwelt upon the role of Boston leaders like Paul Revere and John Hancock. He also used the occasion to warn those whose overzealous sympathy for the slave threatened the stability of a Union created in part through the blood of Bay State martyrs. “Should the time come when the [Star Spangled Banner] be rent in twain, may Massachusetts be the last by whom that cause is deserted.” Using history as an ally in preserving traditional authority and political deference, Everett and other educated spokesmen for the Massachusetts elite vehemently denied any legitimate connection between their “orderly” Revolution and radical social movements like abolitionism. Parker and other activists who sought to mobilize resistance to Federal law in the fugitive slave crises faced a conservative historical tradition that equated revolutionary memory with national authority.¹⁷

Having established an activist identity based upon memory of the Revolution, moreover, Parker was perhaps more sensitive than other abolitionists to the power that conservatives like Edward Everett wielded over New England’s revolutionary symbols. Consequently, his antislavery rhetoric during the 1850s is also distinctive in its explicit references to Boston’s commemorative traditions and its provocative use of monuments and historic landmarks. In ways that both mimicked and inverted conservative memorial performances, Parker’s speeches against the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act warned Boston audiences that subservience to the South would literally profane the sacred relics and memories of revolutionary heroism that surrounded them. At stake, he argued, was New England’s fidelity to those who had struggled to make liberty possible and therefore its historic regional identity. “This is holy ground we stand upon,” he declared in 1852, “where New England men . . . first offered the conscious sacrament of their blood.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Sheidley, *Sectional Nationalism*, 129, 141-147; Edward Everett, *An Address Delivered At Lexington* (Charlestown, MA: Weldon, 1835), 21; See also, Sarah Purcell, “Sealed With Blood: National Identity and Public Memory of the Revolutionary War, 1775-1825,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Brown University, 1997), 284-309.

¹⁸ Theodore Parker, “The Boston Kidnapping,” in *The Slave Power*, 32.

Like other activists, Parker called for resistance to Federal authority in the name of the “Higher Law,” but his appeal to Bostonians also rested upon an imaginative link between historic principle and specific physical spaces on the urban landscape. “Suppose the weary fugitive takes refuge in Faneuil Hall,” Parker asked his audience to imagine in 1850, “and here, in the Cradle of Liberty, . . . under the watchful eye of Samuel Adams, the bloodhounds seize their prey.” Since Faneuil Hall was the preferred public venue in which both abolitionists and conservatives vied for the allegiance of Boston’s citizens, Parker sought to recapture the symbolic meaning of both the building and the portraits of revolutionary leaders that hung on its walls. Describing the 1850 Faneuil Hall meeting where Daniel Webster was applauded for supporting the Fugitive Slave Act, Parker dramatically charged those present with a treasonous disregard for revolutionary ancestors whose portraits adorned the very walls of the building. Boston had declared its support for tyranny “in front of the pictures of Samuel Adams, and John Hancock, under the eyes of George Washington, -- in the hall that once rocked to the patriotism of James Otis.” While the people of revolutionary Boston had once expressed their righteous indignation at the Stamp Act at Faneuil Hall, “hunkers” and “political doctors” now debased that memory in service to an aggressive Slave Power.¹⁹

Faneuil Hall, however, was far from the only revolutionary space in Parker’s repertoire. Since the victims of the Fugitive Slave Act were African-Americans, he also found the site of Crispus Attucks’ death in the Boston Massacre a powerful symbol of black resistance and sacrifice. Always aware of his location on the city’s historical map, Parker had noted that fugitive slaves Thomas Sims and Anthony Burns had been forced to walk over the spot where Attucks had fallen as they made their way to the ships that would carry them back to slavery. The state legislature had already rejected petitions from the black community to

¹⁹ Theodore Parker, “Reply to Webster,” in *The Rights of Man*, 238; and Parker, “The Boston Kidnapping,” 344. On the campaign for a Crispus Attucks monument, see Dale H. Freeman, “The Crispus Attucks Monument Dedication,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 26 (1997), 125-138. For the larger significance of Boston’s landscape in the abolitionist imagination, see James Brewer Stewart, “Boston Abolition and the Atlantic World, 1820-1860” in *Courage and Conscience: Black and White Abolitionists in Boston* ed. Donald M. Jacobs (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

honor Attucks with a physical monument, but Parker used an 1852 speech on the anniversary of Sims's rendition to forge a powerful imaginary link between these two black martyrs to liberty. "They took [Sims] over the spot where, eighty-one years before, the ground had drunk the African blood of Crispus Attucks, shed by white men on the fifth of March," he remembered; "brother's blood which did not cry in vain." Conservative guardians of Boston's past could prevent the erection of a monument to Crispus Attucks, but they could not stop Parker from linking the iconography of the Revolution with recent material artifacts from the Fugitive Slave crises. Holding up the tattered jacket worn by Sims on the day of his capture, he dramatically pointed to its torn sleeves as evidence of Sims' physical struggle for liberty. Like the "powder horns, shoe buckles, a firelock, and other things from April 1775," he insisted, Sims' coat represented "a trophy from April 19th 1851."²⁰

In using Faneuil Hall and the Boston Massacre as symbols of spontaneous popular outrage at the tyranny of an illegitimate government, Parker offered a serious challenge to conservative visions of an orderly and deferential revolution. At the same time, he equated popular opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act with New England's overall loyalty to a more radical understanding of the revolutionary tradition. At a time when Massachusetts was divided on the question of fugitive slaves, Parker used his highly visible pulpit at the Boston Music Hall and his appearances at Faneuil Hall to cast opponents of the law as true sectional patriots.

If conservatives called for popular obedience to national authority in memory of the revolutionary generation's commitment to republican institutions, Parker called for crowd action in memory of the region's unwillingness to submit to British injustice. The multitudes that denounced fugitive slave commissioner E.G. Loring in 1854, he insisted, were the "true sons" of the men who "on the 17th of December, 1765,

²⁰ Parker, "The Boston Kidnapping," 357-358; See also, Theodore Parker, "The New Crime Against Humanity," in *The Rights of Man*, 266; This was not the first time that Parker had used the coat of a fugitive slave as a dramatic prop in comparing black resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act with the American Revolution. Julia Ward Howe remembered Parker presenting the torn coat of Shadrach Minkins in exactly the same fashion. See Julia Ward Howe, *Reminiscences, 1819-1899* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1899), 165.

induced [Stamp] Commissioner Oliver to swear solemnly . . .that he would not collect another stamp.” In an electrifying speech that led his Faneuil Hall audience to attack the Boston Court House in a failed attempt to rescue Anthony Burns, Parker implied that the very survival of New England’s identity depended upon the memory of radical action. “Once this was Boston; now it is a suburb of Alexandria,” he charged. “Once, you and I had brave fathers . . . you know what they did with the tea.”²¹

While the effectiveness of rhetorical style is always difficult to prove, there is evidence that Parker was successful in using revolutionary memory to frame and motivate the popular resistance movement in Boston. Black abolitionist Charlotte Forten, who often attended Parker’s sermons at the Music Hall, found his language very useful in expressing her disgust at the rendition of Anthony Burns. “This [happened] on the very soil where the Revolution of 1776 began,” she lamented, “in sight of the battle-field, w[h]ere thousands of brave men fought and died opposing British tyranny...” The symbolic contrast that Parker had drawn between Boston’s heroic landmarks and its current subservience to the slave power also appealed to Martha Russel, a Connecticut-based writer and antislavery activist who happened to be in Boston during the Burns affair. After watching the procession in which U. S. marines and the Boston police escorted the convicted fugitive to his ship, she concluded that the historic landscape had been desecrated. “I had only to look around me from the spot where I stood to read the eloquent history of Massachusetts,” she told her sister. “On the east rose the majestic spire of the Bunker Hill Monument,...and scarcely at a distance of an arrows flight the cupola of Faneuil Hall...In the face of all this the deed was done.” Both Forten and Russel shared Parker’s view that resistance to law and established authority, not obedience to it, truly honored the memory of Massachusetts’ past.²²

²¹ Parker, “The New Crime,” 287; and Parker, *Trial of Theodore Parker*, 200-201.

²² Charlotte Forten, *The Journals of Charlotte L. Forten* 2 vols. ed. Ray Allen Billington (New York: Dryden, 1953)1: 37; Martha Russel, “An Old Letter,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, January 10, 1900. For these examples I am indebted to Albert J. Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson’s Boston* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). Von Frank argues for the importance of Emerson’s philosophy in the Burns crisis, but much

While Parker's construction of a more radical vision of New England's revolutionary memory worked most effectively in the Fugitive Slave Act crises, it also became a determining factor in his later support for John Brown's violent, antislavery revolution. As he had connected resistant fugitives and antislavery crowds with New England's revolutionary spaces and monuments, his imagined "Captain Brown" was "one of the noblest New England patriots" whose heroism recalled "the times of the Stamp Act"-- and he might easily have said Lexington. Vainly battling tuberculosis in Italy at the time of Brown's capture and execution, he wrote a public letter to his Boston congregation that reminded his flock that violent sacrifice for liberty was not fanaticism but a regional tradition. "Why [else] do we honor the Heroes of the Revolution and build them monuments all over our blessed New England?" he asked rhetorically. The Bunker Hill Monument, a structure erected and interpreted by the region's conservative elite, now stood in Parker's public imagination as a "great sermon in stone" to the revolutionary spirit that Brown encapsulated. "Its lesson will not be in vain," he predicted.²³

In proposing to ignite a slave insurrection in the South, moreover, Brown's plan had also promised to resurrect the black revolutionary tradition that Parker had helped to preserve from cultural extinction. Indeed, Parker's initial agreement to raise money for Brown's plan in 1858 occurred only a day after he delivered a powerful speech on Crispus Attucks at a celebration of the Boston Massacre sponsored by the city's black abolitionists. Sharing the Faneuil Hall platform with black activists William Nell and John Rock, Parker had predicted that "slavery will not be exterminated at one blow, and...black men will do

of his evidence points to the role of revolutionary memory in motivating resistance.

²³ Theodore Parker to Dr. Flint, December 31, 1859, in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, 11, 398; Theodore Parker to Francis Jackson, November 24, 1859, in Theodore Parker, *An Anthology* ed. Henry Steele Commager (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), 268. Parker's role in the "Secret Six" conspiracy has been well-documented and analyzed from numerous angles. See for example, Jeffery Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators: John Brown, the Secret Six, and a Theory of Slave Violence* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); and Stephen Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

their part.” While ultimately disappointed in the failure of Brown’s scheme, Parker again used the past as a guide to predict a glorious future for a biracial antislavery revolution. Just ahead, he predicted, was a second Battle of Saratoga which would lift the sagging fortunes of the friends of liberty and guide them to ultimate victory. “The victory over Gen. Burgoyne more than made up for all the losses in many a previous defeat,” he reminded his listeners. “It was the beginning of the end.”²⁴

Revolutionary memory was the central means by which Theodore Parker connected his activist identity to the larger regional community of which he was a part. Believing that the burning embers of revolutionary New England smoldered just beneath the placid surface of its daily life, he used the physical artifacts that memorialized the landscape as allies in his quest to build the fires of resistance. In a process that required the re-imagining of these markers and the public dissemination of their new meanings, moreover, he sought to mobilize and lead a radicalized New England that initially existed at the level of his own imagination. Nevertheless, as the region faced repeated crises in the 1850s that necessitated the re-evaluation of its regional character, its culture may have become more open to the reconstructions of memory that an activist like Theodore Parker offered. After all, as an “imagined community” the identity of a region like New England was inevitably the product of ongoing cultural negotiations in which memory played a central role.²⁵

Before his death in 1860, Parker made one final attempt to secure his own connection to New England’s revolutionary past, present and future. Bequeathing his grandfather’s muskets to the State of Massachusetts, he hoped that the sacred icons which had for years graced the walls of his own study would now hang for generations in the state house to remind the state’s leaders of their duties. As Gov. John A. Andrew prepared to mobilize Massachusetts soldiers for a war that would eventually realize Parker’s hopes for a second American

²⁴ Parker’s speech at the Boston Massacre Celebration can be found in the *Liberator*, March 12, 1858; Parker to Francis Jackson, November 24, 1859, in *Anthology*, 262-263. Parker’s letter to Jackson on the Harpers Ferry Raid also makes reference to the Haitian revolution as a source of black militancy.

²⁵ The concept of imagined communities come from Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983). Although Anderson deals primarily with nationalism, regional identities can be analyzed in the same way.

Revolution, he presided over a small ceremony in which Parker's Lexington trophies were presented to the state legislature. Julia Ward Howe, a longtime admirer and friend of Theodore Parker, was in the State House gallery that day and briefly recorded the scene. "The governor pressed the gun to his lips before handing it over to the official guardian of such treasures," she remembered. Even in his "parting gift," Parker hoped to remind his fellow New Englanders that, like them, he was a brave man's child.²⁶

²⁶ Julia Ward Howe, *Reminiscences*, 263.