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## George Thompson and the 1851 'Anti-Abolition' Riot

Theresa A. Harrison

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In the early 1800's, America embarked on a great reform movement and people rose to this humanitarian spirit with great enthusiasm. The reform impulse touched upon every aspect of American society. With this tide of humanitarianism came a re-examination of the role of slavery in American society. The question of slavery had successfully been avoided in the years prior to 1830, but with the humanitarian impulse came a strong and growing undercurrent which would eventually lead to Civil War and emancipation. Although a great deal is known about the abolitionists, very little information is available on the relations between the factions of the movement. There were those who advocated gradual emancipation and the colonization of the Negro in Africa, while other more radical abolitionists insisted on the immediate emancipation of the slave. Emotions on both sides were strong, and on one occasion at least the interaction between the two groups resulted in violence.

George Thompson, an English philanthropist, was a well known abolitionist whom the Garrisonians (Radicals) respected and considered to be one of their leading advocates. On the other hand, he was denounced by those who were opposed to the abolition of slavery, to those who considered emancipation as a threat to the Union and to Democracy. He was also denounced by moderate abolitionists who disapproved of the radical Garrisonians.

In 1834, Thompson made his first visit to the United States, having been requested by William Lloyd Garrison to join the ranks of the American abolitionists.<sup>1</sup> A member of Parliament and one who was active in the English anti-slavery movement, Thompson's oratorical skills were valuable to the cause. Yet, when he arrived in America he met with a great deal of opposition from citizens in the Northeast, and even from his fellow abolitionists. This was primarily due to the fact that he was a foreigner; a term frequently heard through the 1830's was "Mr. Foreigner Thompson."<sup>2</sup> So strong was this feeling against Thompson that just thirty-six hours after arriving, he was asked to leave the inn where he and his family were staying.<sup>3</sup> When he spoke at abolition rallies, he was harassed and either forced to leave the premises or seek protection; on one occasion he had to receive protection from three hundred ladies at a meeting in Lynn, Massachusetts.<sup>4</sup> A great many Americans deplored the idea of a "British Emissary" interfering with their internal affairs. It is easy to understand Thompson's unpopularity. After all, he was not only an Englishman in the intensely nationalistic United States, but he joined the radical Garrisonians in denouncing the Constitution as a pro-slavery document.

As Thompson's tour continued, these feelings intensified; soon people were speaking of a "British Plot" to destroy the American way of life.<sup>5</sup> This would be accomplished by Thompson and the radical abolitionists who preached against the fundamental concepts of America, advocating disunion and immediate abolition, threatening democracy and the Constitution. Many northerners felt not only fear but contempt for this entire "scheme" and for the men promoting it.<sup>6</sup> It was asked whether the British were really humanitarian; they had abolished slavery in the West Indies in 1833 but they did little to improve conditions in Ireland. In addition, Thompson's opponents insisted that there was a "Plot" to subvert America's economic progress, which was turning the new nation into an industrial competitor of Great Britain.<sup>7</sup> Thompson was also seen as an emissary of the European despots in their attempt to demonstrate the weaknesses of democracy.<sup>8</sup> It was understandable for northerners to have feared a foreign "conspiracy against the American republic." Although this "plot" was contrived in the minds of the citizenry during a period of intense nationalism, it was not nearly as threatening as the years passed. Yet, newspapers continued to refer to this conspiracy as late as 1851; the "plot" was never quite forgotten.

When Thompson toured the country in the summer of 1835, he met with a great deal of disapproval; at times he was the target of egg throwing and severe vocal abuse.<sup>9</sup> The opposition culminated in Boston on October 21, 1835. Thompson was scheduled to make the final speech of his summer tour before the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Boston. The anti-abolitionists decided to take direct action — a handbill went out urging Bostonians to join in an attempt to "abduct Thompson and bring him to justice."<sup>10</sup> When informed of the threat, which seemed to be a serious one, Thompson decided to return to England.

Meanwhile, a mob had gathered in response to the handbill.<sup>11</sup> Not finding Thompson present, the mob satisfied itself by taking William Lloyd Garrison and dragging him through the streets with a heavy rope.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, a special effort was made to circulate the handbills to Boston's North End — at that time a predominantly Irish section.

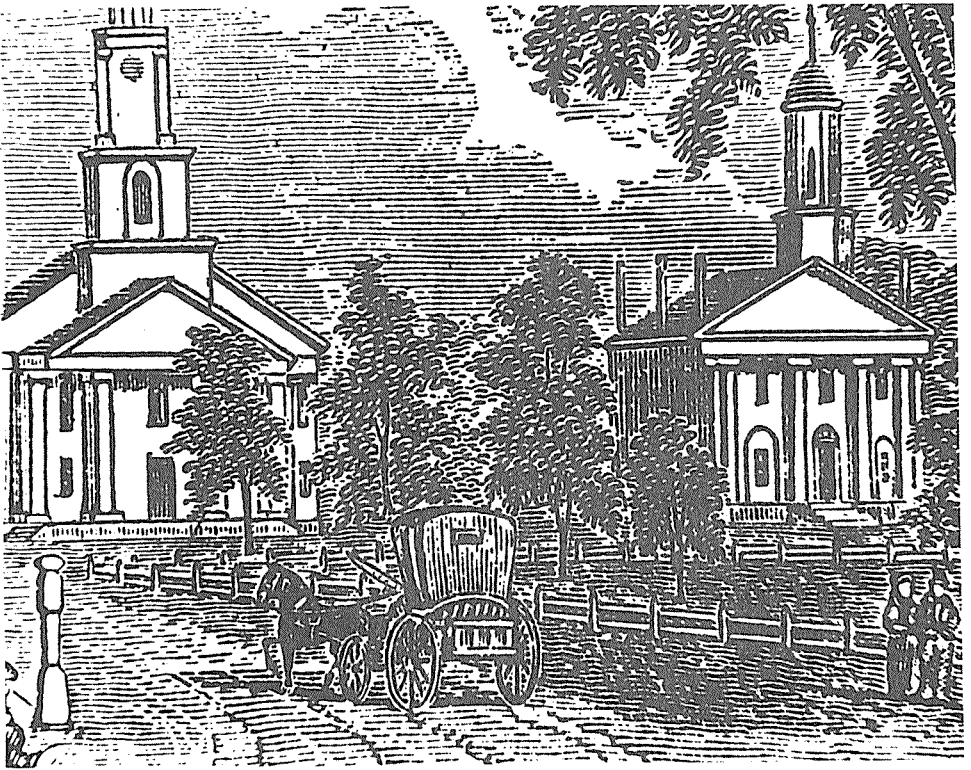
On October 29, 1850, Thompson returned to the United States. By that time, the intense nationalism had subsided, especially in the North, in the aftermath of the Mexican War. The abolition movement had grown over the years, and it was strengthened by the excitement generated by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. The hostility which was demonstrated in his earlier trip was not present this time; Thompson was received with a great deal of enthusiasm.<sup>13</sup> He promptly began an intensive campaign for the anti-slavery cause, visiting Maine, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania and various cities and towns in Massachusetts. It was evident that the hostile feelings of the 1830's had virtually disappeared.

There was, however, one exception. In Springfield, Massachusetts, Thompson encountered extreme opposition. Indeed, he was immediately advised to leave for fear of bodily harm.<sup>14</sup> The *Springfield Daily Republican* printed notices of Thompson's scheduled speeches on the seventeenth and eighteenth of February. A typical notice read: "George Thompson, the English Member of Parliament and radical will speak on slavery, at Hampden Hall on Monday and Tuesday evenings, at 7:00."<sup>15</sup>

On Sunday, February 16, the day before his arrival, George Thompson and "John Bull" were hung in effigy in Court Square until noon of that day, when Sheriff Rice cut them down.<sup>16</sup> During the night, handbills were posted throughout the town; they called on the citizenry, and especially the Irish to "drive this miscreant from our soil... and give this British Emissary a reception that will teach a new lesson to English Statesmen."<sup>17</sup> That same night, "death - warrants" were posted on the tree which had been used for the symbolic hanging of Thompson and "Bull." The warrants described "the character of Thompson and Bull," along with a "history of their crimes."<sup>18</sup> Thompson had not yet arrived in town and trouble was in the air. A special meeting of the selectmen was called for Saturday evening to make plans to protect Thompson and his supporters and to maintain law and order in the town.

On February 17, the *Daily Republican* made its first statement on Thompson's engagement. An editorial indicated that Thompson, William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips would be the main speakers at the meeting. The editor, Samuel Bowles, declared that the speakers would be "denouncing the American Constitution, libelling the Christian Church, and abusing the greatest and best men, living and dead, that have ever impressed their names upon our country's history."<sup>19</sup> The editorial went on to explain that opposition to this

meeting was based more on “sorrow rather than bitterness.” Bowles predicted that it would be “a scene of pitiful fanaticism, blind perversion of truth, and such handling of sacred things as shall wound the moral sense like the naked blow of blasphemy.”<sup>20</sup> Bowles concluded by telling the citizens to ignore these men, rather than to attend the meeting.



“Court Square in the 1840’s.  
Illustration from the Springfield City Library”

A second article, also in the *Monday Republican*, was entitled “Excitement in Springfield.” This noted the possibility of a “serious disturbance” if Thompson and his associates held their meeting as scheduled. Again, Bowles warned against violence, which “would be subversive of those principals of law and order” and because a disturbance would be “a gross violation of the free speech of which we boast as one of the greatest liberties guaranteed by our

Constitution.”<sup>21</sup> Finally, he declared that if a disturbance should occur, it would disgrace the citizens and the town. The article also referred to the meeting which had been called by the Selectmen for Saturday evening.<sup>22</sup> At that meeting it was decided to have a delegation inform Thompson as to the general feeling of the people and to warn him of the probable results if he insisted on speaking. The article concluded by expressing fear that personal injury might result and indicating that adequate protection would be necessary against “the threatened mob.” As a result twenty-one extra constables were ordered in as a precautionary measure.<sup>23</sup>

When Thompson arrived on Monday evening, February 17, he was greeted by the committee which told him of the dangerous situation. He listened calmly, expressing surprise, in view of his previously peaceful engagements during that year. When he said that he had no intention of leaving, the selectmen passed a resolution declaring that they, as representatives of the town of Springfield, “are not responsible for any injuries or damage that may take place.”<sup>24</sup> The proprietor of Hampden Hall refused to let Thompson speak there; by this time it was obvious that there would be “some kind” of trouble.

Thompson tried to rent Washington Hall, but he was unsuccessful. The evening speech was then canceled. Later that night, a mob of about 200 men and boys gathered outside his hotel and created a disturbance, complete with fire crackers, tar barrels, bonfires, drums, fifes and bells.<sup>25</sup> In addition eggs, stones, mud and “missiles” were thrown towards his window.<sup>26</sup> It was reported that one stone which went through the window was wrapped with the handbill that was circulated prior to Thompson’s arrival. The disturbance continued until a very late hour when most of the citizens finally went home.<sup>27</sup>

The next morning, Thompson acquired a meeting place, Dwight Hall. He was now accompanied by Wendell Phillips, Judge Morris of Springfield, Edmund Quincy and Doctor Hudson. The meeting began at approximately eleven in the morning, with the sheriff present; it continued until one without disturbance. Wendell Phillips, the first speaker, made clear his “right to hear whoever he chose,” a direct reference to the cancellation of the Monday evening meeting. He emphasized the importance of the freedom of speech which had been violated by the “mob spirit” of Springfield. Thompson spoke next and began by reviewing the incidents that had taken place, expressing himself both eloquently and sarcastically. He bitterly denounced the attack on his character, and he accused the committee that first confronted him of trying to deny him the right to speak.<sup>28</sup> He condemned the printing of the handbill and he criticized the nature and character of both the citizens and the city of Springfield. Thompson then claimed that the mob was fabricated, “as much as the coat on my back, and some of you know the tailors and the material it was made of, tar and rum.”<sup>29</sup> The reports show that the audience seemed to approve of what Thompson said, indicating that most local citizens followed Bowles’ advice and ignored the meeting.

After Thompson had concluded, Judge Morris expressed his regret at what had happened; he was followed by Edmund Quincy, who accused the Committee and the Selectmen of having instigated the mob. Quincy's speech was met with frequent interruptions. The last member to be introduced was Doctor Hudson, who presented a set of resolutions declaring their right to hear whomever they chose and their right to invite whomever they wanted to their town.<sup>30</sup> Other resolutions were passed censuring the mob and expressing gratitude to the proprietor of the Hall. With this accomplished, the meeting was adjourned until two-thirty in the afternoon.<sup>31</sup>

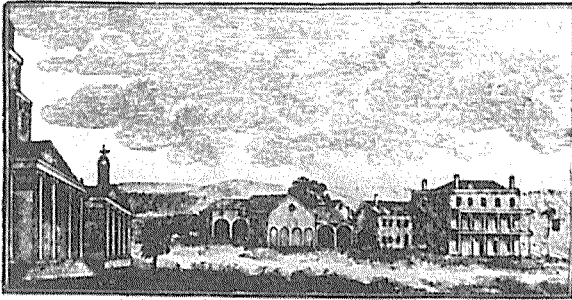
In the afternoon, they reconvened at the African Church on Sandford Street; Thompson, Phillips and Quincy all spoke. Phillips advocated disunion if it meant immediate emancipation; Quincy stated that no fugitive slave had been sent back from New England, not because of the Constitution and its principles but due to those patriots who "tramped it under the foot." Thompson directed most of his remarks to the *Republican* and its editor, Samuel Bowles. Thompson reasserted his claim that the newspaper "incited this riot," and he referred to Bowles as a "venal scribbler, a bread and butter patriot, a crocodile luminary of the *Republican*."<sup>32</sup>

This was the general feeling of the meeting on the afternoon of the eighteenth. The mob, the *Republican*, the Selectmen and the committee were condemned by the speakers, and very little reference was made to the problem of slavery. The meeting continued until after dark, closing with the adoption of a series of resolutions.<sup>33</sup>

At the end of Tuesday afternoon's meeting, Thompson and his supporters concluded their engagements in Springfield. The *Daily Republican* insinuated that even if plans had been made for evening meetings the citizens, who were more outraged and indignant than the day before, would have prevented any attempt at a peaceful assembly. Bowles stated that the abusive and defamatory remarks made by Thompson and his associates were too damaging and erroneous to be left "unvindicated."<sup>34</sup>

Almost as if in response to the comments by the *Republican*, a large number of people gathered outside Thompson's hotel, the Hampden House. They repeated Monday nights activity, but with more intensity and vigor. Music, bonfires, fire crackers, cheers and screechings were reported to have been part of the "row" that took place.<sup>35</sup> At eight o'clock Thompson was burnt in effigy, to the cheers of the crowd. Once again, "missiles" were thrown by the crowd.<sup>36</sup> Eventually the mob dispersed and Thompson was left alone until around midnight when a group of Negroes, attempting to indicate their support for the Englishman, "serenaded" him with instruments and song, outside his window. The "mobocratic" spirit of Tuesday evening was more intense than that of Monday, due to the fact that the citizens were angered not only by what the Garrisonians symbolized, but by their arrogant and outspoken condemnation of the Selectmen, the Committee, Bowles and the citizens of Springfield.

## HAMPDEN COFFEE HOUSE,



NORTH SIDE OF COURT SQUARE,

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THE subscriber has furnished the new and elegant brick house, erected the last season on the corner of COURT SQUARE, for the reception of company. It is deemed by competent judges to be the most commodious building of the kind in the state, west of Boston, and its situation is peculiarly pleasant and attractive.—Travellers and parties of business or pleasure, will find every accommodation usual in such establishments, and can at all times have access to a room regularly provided with the leading newspapers and journals in the United States.

The CHOICEST LIQUORS will at all times be kept; and during the summer months a

### SODA FOUNTAIN

will be attached to the establishment.

### HORSES AND CARRIAGES

will be furnished at the shortest notice.—The subscriber will be assiduous and devoted in his attention to all who may honor him with their company.

ERASTUS CHAPIN.

Springfield, June, 1822.

Tannatt & Co. Printers, Springfield.



On Wednesday morning, February 19, Thompson left Springfield for speaking engagements in New York State. At the depot, a mob bid farewell by showering his cabin with rotten eggs accompanied by derisive shouts. Thus ended his visit to Springfield.

There are many questions pertaining to the cause of the "riot." Thompson insisted that the mob was "fabricated" by certain well-known, influential men in Springfield, specifically the Selectmen and Samuel Bowles, the editor of the *Republican*. Since the only problem developed in Springfield, while the rest of his tour was successful, it seems apparent that the opposition did not develop spontaneously, without instigation. Thompson claimed that the handbill was printed on the *Republican's* presses and that the articles on his engagements were written with the intention of encouraging disruption of the meetings.

Thompson's argument obviously has some validity. The articles in the *Republican* portrayed Thompson as libeling the Church, abusing the Constitution, and advocating disunion and anarchy. The handbill stated that he was an "English Serf, paid Emissary, radical abolitionist and British Spy," and the handbill was reprinted in the *Republican*. In addition, editorials called on the citizens to take action against Thompson.

The *Daily Republican* insisted that Thompson was a foreigner who called himself an abolitionist and a humanitarian. This is reminiscent of the riots of the 1830's, which emphasized the "British Plot."

Rather interestingly, emancipation of the slaves was almost irrelevant in the case of Thompson's visit to Springfield. Although Thompson was an abolitionist, little was said concerning the plight of the Negro. The issue became a conflict between Thompson's radical abolitionism and Bowles' moderate ideology. Bowles was a supporter of the colonization movement, and it seems apparent that it was a moderate abolitionist who incited the riot against the radical.

When Thompson concluded his stay in Springfield, the general feeling was that of relief — finally the city was rid of this "menace." The *Republican* expressed its opinions in an article on February 20: "Thus has ended the disreputable and deplorable proceedings connected with this affair. For Mr. Thompson and his associates, we have no sympathy; we can have none."<sup>37</sup>

NOTES

- 1 Leonard L. Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing* (New York, 1970), p. 63.  
John L. Thomas, *The Liberator - William Lloyd Garrison* (Boston 1963), p. 193-94.
- 2 Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing*, pp. 63-65.  
*Springfield Daily Republican*, February 17, 1851, p.2, col. 2., February 18, 1851, p.2, col. 3-4.  
Thomas, *The Liberator*, pp. 200-01.
- 3 Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing*, p. 63.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 62-71.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 62 and 65.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 67 and 70.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64; Oliver Johnson, *W. L. Garrison and His Times*, (Miami, Florida, 18881), p. 135.
- 10 Thomas, *The Liberator*, p. 201; Johnson, *W. L. Garrison and His Times*, p. 136.
- 11 Thomas, *The Liberator*, pp. 197-98.
- 12 Aaron M. Powell, *Personal Reminiscences* (New Jersey, 1899), pp. 36-37.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 18-20; *Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society*, 19th Annual Report, January 22, 1851, pp. 63-67.
- 14 *Republican*, February 18, 1851, p. 2, cols. 3-4.
- 15 *Ibid.*, February 10-14, 1851, p. 2.
- 16 *Ibid.*, February 17, 1851 p.2, col. 2; *Westfield News Letter*, February 19, 1851, p. 3; *Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society* 20th Annual Report, pp. 40-43.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Republican*, February 17, 1851, p. 2, col. 2 and 5.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Republican*, February 18, 1851, p. 2, cols. 3 and 4.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 *Ibid.*; *Westfield News Letter*, February 19, 1851; *Pittsfield Sun*, February 20, 1851.
- 27 *Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society*, 20th Annual Report, January 28, 1852, p. 42.
- 28 *Republican*, February 19, 1851, p. 2, col. 3.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 *Ibid.*; *Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society*, 20th Annual Report, January 28, 1852, p. 42.
- 37 *Republican*, February 20, 1851.