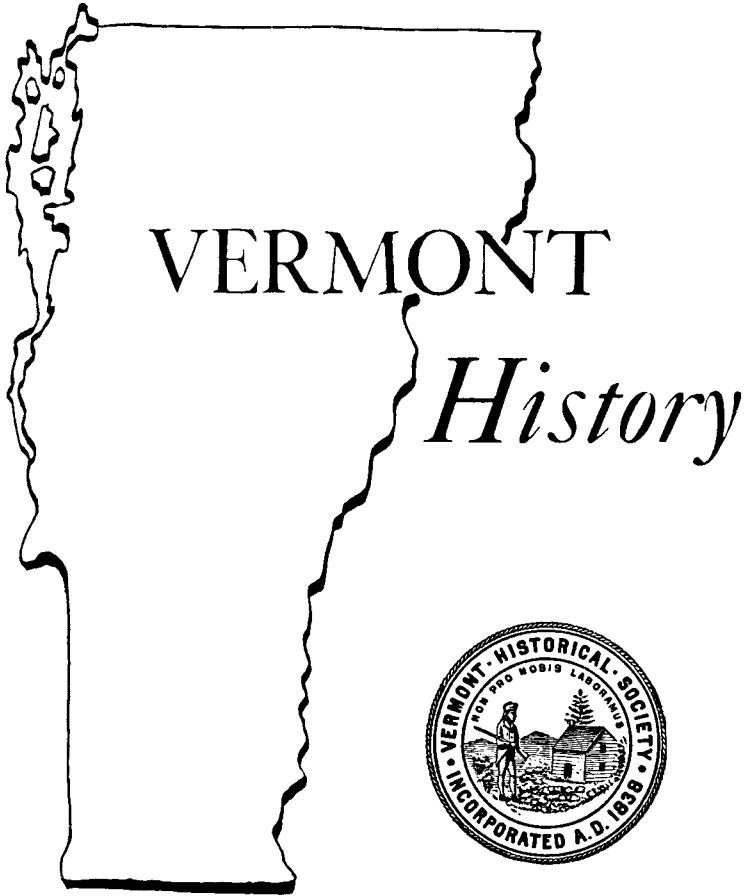


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Vermont Attitudes Toward Slavery: The Need For A Closer Look

By J. KEVIN GRAFFAGNINO

For well over a century Vermont has been proud of its reputation for having been the most outspoken antislavery state in the Union in the years preceding the Civil War. Every Vermont schoolchild hears the famous words of Vermont Supreme Court Judge Theophilus Harrington, who demanded "a bill of sale from Almighty God" from a slaveowner seeking the return of his runaway property. Most towns and cities in Vermont have old houses that local residents point to with pride as having served as way stations on the legendary Underground Railroad. Any history of Vermont would be deemed incomplete without inclusion of the response of the Georgia State Senate to Vermont's vehement opposition to the expansion of slavery into Kansas and Nebraska: "Resolved, That His Excellency, President Pierce, be requested to employ a sufficient number of able-bodied Irishmen to proceed to the State of Vermont, and to dig a ditch around the limits of the same, and to float 'the thing' into the Atlantic."¹ In short, Vermonters have long held themselves and their history to be in full accord with Walter Hill Crockett's conclusion that "For a quarter of a century preceding the Civil War, the outstanding feature of Vermont's attitude toward the great public issues of that period was a hatred of slavery, which steadily grew more intense . . . The love of liberty, characteristic of mountain peoples, found a full and free expression among the Green Mountains."²

In fact, there is much to support Vermont's proud legacy. The Vermont Constitution of 1777 was the first in America to prohibit adult slavery. Sparked by the furor over the Missouri Compromise, in 1820 the Vermont state legislature began a series of resolutions and

petitions against slavery that continued virtually unabated for the next forty years.³ In 1821, the Reverend Joseph Andrus, a native of Cornwall, Vt., was placed in charge of the American Colonization Society's first attempt to establish a settlement of freed American slaves on the west coast of Africa. William Lloyd Garrison, perhaps America's most famous antislavery voice, founded the abolitionist newspaper *Journal of the Times* in Bennington in 1828, before moving on to bigger things in Boston. Such Vermonters as Jacob Collamer, William Upham and William Slade expressed strong and consistent opposition to slavery in the Congress. On January 18, 1840, Slade delivered what is recognized as the first abolitionist address ever made in Congress, calling for an immediate end to slavery in America.⁴ The list of antislavery actions, statements and resolutions by both the State of Vermont and individual Vermonters went on and on, and it undoubtedly is true that the great majority of Vermonters supported the antislavery movement in America.

Yet not all Vermonters agreed with their antislavery neighbors. In the fall of 1835, Samuel J. May, a Unitarian minister from Connecticut, was mobbed five times on his speaking tour of the state for the Vermont Anti-Slavery Society, and his lectures in favor of immediate abolition were violently cut short in Montpelier and Rutland.⁵ In the 1830's and 1840's, "the commercial towns on the lines of trade and communication were slow to embrace organized antislavery," while "the Democratic press of the Green Mountains bitterly opposed the preaching of emancipation."⁶

That some leading Vermonters continued to take a dim view of the antislavery movements even during the Civil War was made clear by John Henry Hopkins (1792-1868), the Protestant Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Vermont from 1832 to 1868. Hopkins severely condemned the antislavery movements in Vermont in a number of his prewar writings: denying that slavery was a sin; denouncing the abolitionists; listing the many Biblical instances of and sanctions for slavery; and declaring slavery as practiced in the American South a commendable, humane institution.⁷ Hopkins continued to defend slavery even after the Emancipation Proclamation, publishing in 1864 *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery, from the Days of the Patriarch Abraham, to the Nineteenth Century*, a 376-page attempt to explain that slavery was indeed sanctioned by history and by the Word of God.⁸ While Hopkins was attacked in print all over Vermont and the rest of America for his proslavery opinions, he continued to head the Protestant Episcopal Church in Vermont, apparently without opposition, until his death. On the other hand, when the Reverend Joshua Young, of the Congregational Unitarian Church in Burlington, attended the funeral of the famed abolitionist John Brown in North Elba, New York in 1859 and, as the only clergyman present, delivered the funeral oration, he was denounced

in the Burlington *Times* and supposedly forced to resign by the social pressure put on him by many of his leading parishioners.⁹

In the presidential election of 1860, when Abraham Lincoln swept Vermont with 75.8 percent of the vote, Stephen Douglas and his "popular sovereignty" stand received 19.4 percent, and John Breckinridge and John Bell, both of whom owned slaves and were avowed proslavery, received 4.2 percent and .48 percent, respectively.¹⁰ Nearly one-quarter (10,732) of the votes cast in Vermont for President in 1860 went to candidates who were either openly proslavery or unopposed to the expansion of slavery. Despite a sizeable and vocal majority, Vermonters were not as united on the question of "the peculiar institution" as tradition commonly assumes.

The following excerpt from a letter written in 1837 expresses a view of slavery seldom attributed to Vermonters. The author of the letter, Charles B. Fletcher (1818-1852), was the only son of Isaac Fletcher of Lyndon, who held a number of important political offices in Vermont: Representative from Lyndon, 1819-20, 1822 and 1824; delegate from Lyndon at the Vermont Constitutional Convention of 1822; State's Attorney for Caledonia County, 1820-28; Speaker of the House in the Vermont Legislature, 1824; and Congressman, 1837-41. Hemenway's *Gazetteer* calls Charles B. Fletcher, "A young man of brilliant intellect, who was necessarily with his father most of his congressional course, and became well posted in matters of state."¹¹ The letter, addressed to Henry Stevens, Sr. of Barnet, the founder of the Vermont Historical Society, was written while Fletcher and his father traveled in the south for the latter's health.

Charleston, So[uth] Car[olina], Apl. 2d, 1837

H. Stevens, Esq.

Dr. Sir:

I thought perhaps you would like well enough to know in what part of Uncle Sam's vineyard we were toiling & also what were the prospects for a crop. Well here we are among the most *chivalrous* of the *chivalrous south* and I like these people real well. It is a different race from any close fisted catch penny yankees altogether. Open hearted, liberal fine fellows go off on a tangent quicker than lightning & scour a dirk on your ribs before you think of it but on the whole good fellows, and then the niggers why they are much better off than the abolitionists are generally willing to allow. I have not seen any of them skinned alive, roasted and devoured since I have been here. They are well fed, well clothed, well housed and not one half of the work is exacted from them that is exacted by our farmers from his men. If they are sick medical attention is called and every attention is shewed them, they *love* their masters and every thing that belongs to their masters. They take as much pride in having every thing about the house & buildings look neat & nice as their masters do — In short I say it without exaggeration if you were to go throughout the Southern States and say to the negroes 'you are free providing you will go to the north and live' they would kill you themselves. The niggers look upon the abolitionists as agents & clerks of Satan and think Arthur Tappan¹² the very devil himself. They are the happiest race of mortals I ever saw. Any person who abuses his slaves here is looked upon in the same light as a man who abuses his family among us . . .

Yours/signed/C.B. Fletcher¹³

While young Fletcher's sentiments may only represent those of a small minority of Vermonters, that minority has been almost wholly overlooked by historians of Vermont. Such letters, Bishop Hopkins' proslavery polemics, the votes Vermonters cast in 1860 for candidates that tolerated slavery, and assorted other evidence all point to the existence of some significant diversity among Vermonters on the right or wrong of slavery. That only a few "low fellows" in Vermont differed with the antislavery majority, as one historian has implied,¹⁴ is not the case. The fact that a segment of Vermont's population in the first half of the nineteenth century at least tolerated, if not supported slavery, needs further examination. We may not like what we find, but in order to understand more completely and more accurately the history of Vermont, we need to take a closer look.

NOTES

¹Walter H. Crockett, *Vermont. The Green Mountain State* (New York, 1921-23), III, 144.

²*Ibid.*, III, 290.

³Vermont, *Records of the Governor and Council of the State of Vermont* (Montpelier, 1873-80), VI, 539-43.

⁴David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850* (New York, 1966), p. 175.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 149-50.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁷John Henry Hopkins, *Slavery: Its Religious Sanction, its Political Dangers, and the Best Mode of Doing it Away* (Buffalo, 1851); and J.H. Hopkins, *The American Citizen: His Rights and Duties, According to the Spirit of the Constitution of the United States* (New York, 1857).

⁸*A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery, from the Days of the Patriarch Abraham, to the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1864), p. 376.

⁹Wilburt H. Siebert, *Vermont's Anti-Slavery and Underground Railroad Record* (Columbus, 1937), p. 45.

¹⁰Crockett, *Vermont*, III, 491.

¹¹Abby Maria Hemenway (ed), *The Vermont Historical Gazetteer* (Burlington, Vt., 1867-91), I, 352.

¹²Along with his brothers Lewis and Benjamin, Arthur Tappan (1786-1865) was a leading advocate of abolitionism in America. He founded the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in 1840.

¹³Stevens, MSS, Fletcher to Henry Stevens, Sr., April 2, 1837, Wilbur Collection, Bailey Library, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont. Box 3, folder 15.

¹⁴Siebert, *Anti-Slavery*, p. 23.