The Road to Freedom

Anti-slavery Activity in Greenfield, Massachusetts

By the 1830s, New Englanders prided themselves on their free labor economy. Though deeply ambivalent toward the increasingly immigrant workforce fueling the region’s rapidly expanding manufacturing sector, many nevertheless rooted their regional identity in contrasting New England’s labor system with that of the slaveholding South. The influence of free labor ideology led many New Yorkers, even those possessing little compassion for the slaves themselves, to assert the moral superiority of supposedly “pious, hardworking Yankees” over “dissipated southern aristocrats” who relied on enslaved workers to take care of them. A Greenfield resident noted in an anonymous article in the Gazette and Mercury in 1838 that “in the high hills and valleys of New England, far from the slave market and the slave ship.” But in reality, New Englanders possessed little historical connections to slavery. Enslaved Africans played an important role in building the region, and at least three resided in Greenfield prior to 1800. In the wake of a gradual emancipation process spanning the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many remained in the region as free people of color, organizing strong historical connections to slavery. Enslaved women—to demand an immediate end to slavery. Black and white activists forged ties—some times strong, sometimes uneasy—

Embracing the Cause: The Anti-slavery Movement in Massachusetts

In accordance with a public invitation to the people of Franklin County from a Committee of 12 gentlemen appointed for the purpose by the Franklin County Anti-Slavery Society, a meeting was convened in the Memorial Church in Greenfield, on Tuesday, the 5th instant. The call of the convention was read by Messrs. T. Davis and A. Howard, and the convention formed a Constitution for a Company Anti-Slavery Society. A Committee to arrange the business for the meeting was appointed, consisting of W. Ellet, C. P. Converse, and S. Adams. They were followed gentlemen, viz. Rev. Mr. Adams, Mr. Winsted, Mr. Stratton, Mr. John P. Stone, Mr. Abner B. Warner, and Mr. Amos Dunn. At the opening of the American Anti-Slavery Society, the meeting was held at the meeting. Several resolutions, temperance, were adopted, and supported by different gentlemen, and family associations. The Committee appointed for the purpose, reported a Constitution, which was then adopted, where it was printed and distributed. The Convention meeting a committee, the following Constitution and Provisions were adopted, viz.

Formation of the Franklin County Anti-Slavery Society

Greenfield Gazette, Dec. 27, 1836

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Archival Sources:
Historical Society of Greenfield Archives
Franklin County Registry of Deeds
Greenfield Assessors Records and Historic Town Inventory

Newspapers:
Gazette and Courier, Gazette and Mercury, Greenfield Gazette, Franklin Herald and Greenfield Recorder-Gazette

Books:

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Books:
to organize local anti-slavery societies across the state, transform public sentiment by appealing to the emotions as well as the intellect, and spark a grassroots revolt strong enough to topple the very foundations of the slave system. These new abolitionists sought to build a mass movement fueled by the actions of “ordinary” people, transfer Bay States’ allegiance from colonization to immediate emancipation, and decrease the influence of the Massachusetts Colonization Society.

Organized in 1837, the American Colonization Society and its state affiliates echoed Thomas Jefferson’s sentiments that blacks and whites could never live together in harmony. Colonizationists attempted to soothe southern fears of racial insurrection by insisting that emancipation and black emigration go hand in hand, going so far as to advocate the forcible removal of free people of color to Africa. While some African Americans supported black-led emigration programs to Canada, Haiti, and Africa, the majority opposed colonization as a blatantly racist attempt to deny blacks their natural rights of citizenship in the country of their birth. Contact with black anti-colonizationists radicalized many white opponents of slavery, including Massachusetts’ own William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the nation’s most famous anti-slavery paper—The Liberator—into the crusaders who led the grassroots campaigns of the 1830s. These new abolitionists drew interested crowds at their public lectures in Greenfield, but often found themselves debating local residents supportive of colonization, fearful of racial intermarriage, or disturbed by the speakers’ explicit advocacy of racial equality.

Organizing Franklin County
Massachusetts abolitionists formed the world’s first integrated anti-slavery organization—the New England Anti-Slavery Society—in 1832. Quickly renamed the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (MAS), the group embraced two central goals: ending slavery at once and “revolutionizing public opinion” in regard to black rights. Devoting the majority of its funds to disseminating publications and keeping its traveling lecturers circulating throughout the state, the MAS worked tirelessly to build the local organizations so essential to mounting a grassroots campaign. By 1837, nearly two hundred local societies dotted the landscape, including at least thirteen in Franklin County.

The ninety-two member Franklin County Anti-Slavery Society (FCAS) formed in December 1836 to tie together the efforts of the town organizations. Its inaugural convention, held at the Methodist Episcopal Church in Greenfield, wrote a constitution, appointed a business committee and elected officers. Attendees chose, among others, Asa Howland of Conway as President, Theophilus Packard of Shelburne as Secretary, and George T. Davis of Greenfield as Treasurer. Other Greenfield representatives to the convention included Unitarian minister John Parkman, lawyer George Grennell, and merchants Hart Leavitt and Sylvester Maxwell.

Noting that “slaveholding is sin, and ought at all times to be regarded and treated as such,” the FCAS’s constitution pledged the organization to “labor for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia and the territories,” “promote the moral and intellectual improvement of the colored population at home,” and “remove public prejudice.” Several Franklin County men, including Greenfield lawyer George T. Davis and Rev. John Parkman, won appointment as Vice-Presidents of the state society in 1838 and 1839.

Members reconvened at the Methodist Church for the society’s first annual meeting from January 16–17, 1838. The Board of Directors drew up a series of anti-slavery petitions to Congress to be distributed to town societies for signing and submission. These regular
ed several African Americans: Vincy, the nursemaid; Jim, a manservant; and Eliza, the cook. Their legal status is uncertain. Given the era, they could have been enslaved, free, or in transition. In 1850, when Eliza Stiles died in 1795, Emelia Leavitt brought two of his aged servants—Newport and Nabby—to Greenfield. Stiles bought Newport in 1756 from a slave trader in his congregation who recently returned from a voyage to Guinea, naming the young boy for his new hometown. His discomfort with slavery rising in tandem with his willingness to accept blacks as equal members of his church, Stiles freed Newport in 1778 upon accepting the presidency of Yale. Four years later, the bleak economic prospects facing free blacks in Rhode Island drove the couple to New Haven, where Newport approached Stiles for a job. In accordance with common practice, Stiles agreed upon the condition that the couple indenture their two year old son Jacob to him until the age of twenty-four. Newport and Nabby did not linger long in Greenfield. Missing their old home, they soon returned to New Haven, revealing the strong communal ties that bound eighteenth-century blacks as well as whites.

Both Roger Leavitt and his oldest son Joshua helped to found the American & Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, and the Yale-educated Josh threw himself into the anti-slavery cause on a national scale, serving as publisher of the American Anti-Slavery Society's official newspaper, the Emancipator, and later the New York Independent. Ohio State University historian Wilbur Siebert listed Joshua's brother Hart, a Charlemont resident, as one of Franklin County's Underground Railroad operators, "a sturdy abolitionist who did all he could to help slaves gain their freedom."

George Grennell

Lawyer George Grennell, another founding member of the FCAS, ranked among the county's most prominent men. Elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1828, he served for eleven years, vocally encouraging his reluctant colleagues to extend diplomatic recognition to Haiti, the western hemisphere's first independent black republic and a lightning rod for Americans' racial fears. The first President of the Troy & Greenfield Railroad Company and the holder of many local and county offices, Grennell, according to the Greenfield Gazette Centennial Edition, "early took a positive stand in favor of human freedom and equal rights." Along with D.W. Alvord and Hugh Thompson, Grennell served as a Greenfield delegate to an 1854 mass meeting in Worcester that adopted a resolution condemning the Kansas-Nebraska Act (which overruled the historic Missouri Compromise to open the two territories to slavery). Two years later, he organized a public meeting to protest South Carolina congressman Preston Brooks' caning of Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner, an outspoken abolitionist, on the floor of the U.S. Senate. A cape style home now standing at 53 High Street served as the Grennell homestead at 500 Main Street until 1846, at which time the family constructed a larger and more stylish house on the property and moved the cape to its present-day location. Though later owners have altered both homes, the two Grennell residences continue to provide a link to an earlier era.

| Image courtesy Historical Society of Greenfield |
| Leavitt-Hovey House, 1900 |

petitions, predominately signed and circulated by women, constituted a central element of the abolitionists' strategy through the 1850s, and Franklin County women actively participated. Roger Leavitt, a prosperous Charlemont farmer and head of a family whose anti-slavery work would eventually expand far beyond Franklin County, took over as President. Thirteen members re-elected George Members in their annual report that "the conviction is becoming stronger in Franklin County that slavery concerns all men and that they have an important part to act in its removal from the United States."

Besides the FCAS, other groups in the county also spoke out against southern slaveholding. The Franklin County Association of Congregational Ministers condemned the practice in 1838, petitioned the U.S. House of Representatives in opposition to the annexation of Texas, and distributed a declaration of conviction against slavery to every minister in the county for declaration and publication. That same year, Deerfield residents adopted anti-slavery resolutions in Town Meeting calling upon Congress to abolish slavery and the slave trade and ensure northern free blacks' safety in the face of kidnapping and extradition attempts. The Greenfield newspapers devoted substantial space to slavery-related topics. From February to April 1838, the Gazette and Mercury published an engaging debate over the constitutionality of restricting slavery and the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of the anti-slavery movement. Employing pen names, several local residents launched into a vitriolic exchange filled with hyperbole, strong convictions, and a significant diversity of opinion. Around the same time, regular columns from an ardent abolitionist writer calling himself FREEDOM augmented the debate by insisting that the fundamental issues at stake were not political, but rather moral in nature.

Despite the organizational successes of the 1830s, the decade brought schism to the anti-slavery movement, which fractured over differing opinions regarding the appropriate relationship between anti-slavery and the other reform movements of the day. Radical reformers such as Garrison blended their anti-slavery principles with progressive (and generally unpopular) positions on women's rights, organized religious debate over the constitutionality of restricting slavery and the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of the anti-slavery movement. Employing pen names, several local residents launched into a vitriolic exchange filled with hyperbole, strong convictions, and a significant diversity of opinion. Around the same time, regular columns from an ardent abolitionist writer calling himself FREEDOM augmented the debate by insisting that the fundamental issues at stake were not political, but rather moral in nature.

When the conservatives failed to sway the majority of the MAS membership to their point of view at the 1839 annual convention, they organized a rival organization known as the Massachusetts Abolition Society. Supported by a new newspaper, the Massachusetts Abolitionist, the "new organization," as it was perpetually known, enrolled only men and required all members to participate in direct political activity. Adherents joined conserva-

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At their October 1839 annual meeting, FCAS officers withdrew the society's membership in the MAS. Passing a resolution asserting that "he who, having the right, neglects, when an opportunity offers, to throw his vote in favor of the slave, fails in one of the most important and effectual means to accomplish emancipation," they renamed themselves the Franklin County Abolition Society and approved affiliation with the new organization. Not all members, however, applauded their leaders' course of action, and some continued to champion Garrisonian principles. The Massachusetts Abolition Society soon proved unpopular with the majority of state activists, who considered it a secessionist group determined to silence women and personally discredit Garrison. As the organization founded, the Franklin County Abolition Society slowly disbanded.

Members, however, pursued new outlets for expressing their anti-slavery sentiments. Many with an electoral bent redoubled their efforts on part of Whig, Free Soil, and Liberty Party politicians. Charles Ingersoll, originally a publisher of the Gazette and Courier, left the paper when his partner Ansel Phelps refused to break with the Whig Party in wake of its 1848 nomination of the slaveholder Zachary Taylor for President. A convert to Free Soilism (which opposed the extension of slavery into the nation's western territories), Ingersoll set up a rival press, publishing The American Republic from 1848 to 1854. Despite Ingersoll's best efforts, Free Soil nominees ultimately captured only a small minority of town residents' votes in the election of 1852. Most of Greenfield's anti-slavery men clung resolutely to their Whig heritage. The new party did, however, attract greater support in Montague, Whately and Deerfield. Other residents lent assistance to fugitives fleeing from bondage up the Connecticut River Valley or coming west from the seaport cities. Though western New England did not constitute one of the most heavily traveled escape routes, its anti-slavery reputation and relative proximity to the Canadian border did draw some freedom seekers.

The Local Scene

Dexter and Eunice Marsh

In 1953, a woman named Sophia Woodman sent the Historical Society of Greenfield her recollections of a story told by a child as her by surrogate "aunt" Arabella Marsh. Born in Greenfield in 1835, Arabella Marsh grew up on Clay Hill (on the site of present-day #39 Bank Row). Her father Dexter, a laborer who discovered fossilized dinosaur tracks while laying a sidewalk and eventually attained local renown for his extensive fossil collection, was the son of Joshua Marsh, a Montague man once described by a contemporary as an "abolitionist to the core." According to Woodman, a very young Arabella Marsh came home one day to find the yard full of black children, with whom she played delightedly until nightfall. Unable to locate them the following morning to find the yard full of black children, with whom she played

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The Leavitt Family

The prominent Leavitt family of Charlemont, Heath, and Greenfield spearheaded the crusade for evangelical social reform in western Massachusetts. Charlemont farmer Roger Leavitt served as President of the Franklin County Anti-Slavery Society, and in 1840, received the state Liberty Party Convention nomination for Lieutenant Governor. His wife Chloe Maxwell Leavitt actively collected signatures for petitions demanding the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. Two of Roger's brothers settled in Greenfield: Jonathan, who rose to public esteem as a judge, and Hart, a merchant who served as a founding member of the county anti-slavery society. Hart Leavitt's store—site of the town's first newspaper and post office—stood next to Jonathan's law office on Main Street.

John Putnam

John Putnam's considerable musical talent and good humor have left a long-lasting impression on the region. Contemporaries often noted that "his infectious laughter, once heard, was long remembered." According to family stories passed down through descendants, Putnam and his wife Julia, both born into freedom in Massachusetts, actively assisted fugitives traveling through Franklin County. Black barbers such as Putnam—who tended to possess the contacts and resources necessary to help freedom seekers on to their next destination—played an important role in the Underground Railroad. Putnam's shops above J.H. Hollister's jewelry store (located on the site of present-day 308 Main Street) and at the American House may have served as information centers for those aiding fugitives. Putnam came to Greenfield no later than 1845 and resided originally on Mill Street. The earliest specific documentation placing his family at 175 Wells Street is an 1871 map recording their presence on the lot next to the railroad tracks, although they did not actually purchase it until 1880. J.H. Hollister, the jeweler who worked in such close proximity to Putnam, took over ownership of a tract of land including 175 Wells in 1866, opening up the possibility that the family rented the lot prior to 1871, or perhaps even before the Civil War. Putnam descendants have long recounted stories of an underground tunnel leading from the house's basement toward the railroad tracks. A 1970s demolition at 175 Wells uncovered a subterranean tunnel closely matching the oral tradition. Lacking any documented family presence on the property prior to 1871, however, it is also possible that later generations, familiar with John and Julia's work with fugitives, may have invested the tunnel with Underground Railroad significance. It did not necessarily possess, unintentionally confusing activities taking place at the Mill Street house or the barbershop with those particular to the Wells Street property.

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George T. Davis

One of the founding members of the Franklin County Anti-Slavery Society, George T. Davis served as the organization’s first Treasurer, and later as a Vice President. A prominent lawyer who also served as a state representative, state senator, and U.S. Representative, Davis embraced political action as the most promising avenue for anti-slavery activity and supported the transfer of affiliation to the Massachusetts Abolition Society. As a member of the Business Committee, he helped guide the organization’s first year as the Franklin County Abolition Society. The prosperous Davis owned multiple properties in town, including a house on the site of the current-day Greenfield Cooperative Bank and a larger one on eastern Main Street, immediately west of the present-day YMCA building.

Charles Devens, Jr.

Admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1840, Charles Devens practiced law in Franklin County (Greenfield and Northfield) from 1841-1849 as a member of the firm Davis (Wendell), Devens, and Davis (George). He owned a home at 70 Devens Street (still standing). A devoted Whig, Devens served a term as a state senator (1848-49) before being appointed a U.S. Marshal for the District of Massachusetts in 1849. He held the office until 1854. Charged with enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Devens bore responsibility under the law for capturing and imprisoning individuals suspected of fugitive slave status, including Shadrach, whose 1851 rescue from a Boston courtroom stunned the nation, and Thomas Sims. When federal Commissioner George Curtis ruled in April 1852 that Sims must be returned to his owner, the task of carrying out the order fell to Devens. Though sources suggest he found Curtis’ ruling abhorrent, the marshal complied. In the wake of Sims’ return to Georgia, well-known abolitionist Lydia Maria Child organized a campaign to raise funds to purchase his freedom. According to the Greenfield Gazette Centennial Edition, Devens offered to defray the entire expense himself, but Sims’ owner refused to sell. In the aftermath of the Sims affair, Robert Wright, a fugitive slave employed as a cook at Greenfield’s American House Hotel (located on the site of the current-day Wilson’s Department Store), disappeared into hiding in fear of arrest. At Devens’ suggestion, a group of Greenfield anti-slavery activists contacted Wright’s owner to request permission to purchase his freedom. When he agreed, Devens contributed a substantial sum of money to the effort. Not long after, Greenfield judge Charles Allen triumphantly delivered Wright’s manumission papers. One of the first officers of the Massachusetts state militia to volunteer for military service in the wake of Fort Sumter, Devens eventually rose to the rank of brevet major general. After the Civil War, he assumed a seat on the Massachusetts Supreme Court and served as U.S. Attorney General under President Rutherford B. Hayes. During his four years in Washington, D.C., Devens secured a government job for Thomas Sims, who finally escaped to permanent freedom during the war years.

Billy Elliot

Merchant and insurance salesman William “Billy” Elliot played a leading role in the organized anti-slavery movement. Deeply committed to political action on behalf of the slave, he served as Secretary and Treasurer of the Franklin County Abolition Society and joined the Free Soil Party in 1848. A 1934 “Old Timer Remarks” column in the Greenfield Recorder, a repository of local lore, termed Elliot’s home at 473 Main Street (still standing) a frequent “place of refuge for slaves fleeing from southern captivity,” a stop-over point for those on the road to Canada. Elliot maintained various places of business throughout his career; sites that may have played a role in his underground activities. He worked for years at Lyman Kendall’s store on the corner of Main and Federal Street and later operated his own business at current-day 310 Main Street. After retiring from mercantile life, he became an agent for the Conway Company and maintained an insurance office in the P.T. Sprague building, which stood on the site of current-day 320 Main Street.

Samuel Wells Home

Francis M. Thompson’s 1904 History of Greenfield mentions an old-fashioned, square house on the western part of Main Street, near Coombs Avenue (now demolished), surrounded by rumors of underground activity. Thompson notes that some pre-Civil War residents, (potentially the Samuel Wells family, but also possibly a later owner) “were at one time involved in some trouble for harboring slaves.” When historian Wilbur Siebert began his investigation into Underground Railroad activity in Massachusetts in the 1930s, Isadore Taylor of Charlemont wrote him that “it was said many years ago that the Samuel Wells farm was a station from which slaves were sent to Brattleboro, Vermont.” Both Taylor and Greenfield librarian May Ashley, however, proved unable to locate any documentary evidence or oral verification for this claim, even from descendants of the Wells family.

Dr. Charles L. and Emeline Fisk

In 1895, Greenfield resident J. Johnson wrote Ohio State University professor Wilbur Siebert, the first historian of the Underground Railroad, that Dr. Charles L. Fisk and his wife Emeline sheltered fugitives in their Main Street home (which stood on the lot between current-day Miles Street and Fiske Avenue), a claim that Siebert later repeated in his 1936 book, The Underground Railroad in Massachusetts. Fisk’s son Charles, Jr., also in a letter to Siebert, lauded his father as “a great and early pioneer in the anti-slavery cause,” but offered no further details about underground activity. In his History of Greenfield, Francis Thompson called the Fisk home a frequent refuge “of the fugitive slave in his search for freedom.” An abolitionist of the Garrisonian model, Fisk may have maintained a personal friendship with the fiery editor.

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1. Coldbrook Springs Baptist Church, 463 Main Street. Currently houses the Zion Korean Church. Image courtesy Greenfield Assessors

2. Billy Elliot House, 473 Main Street. Private Residence. Image courtesy Greenfield Assessors

3. Eunice Marsh House, 63 Davis Street. Eunice Marsh relocated to this property after Dexter’s death in 1853. Private Residence. Image courtesy Greenfield Assessors


5. George Grennell House, post-1846 500 Main Street. Private Residence. Photo by Susan Allen Photography

6. Leavitt House 402 Main Street, Public Library. Image courtesy Greenfield Assessors

7. Charles Devens House 70 Devens Street, Private Residence. Image courtesy Greenfield Assessors

8. Dexter and Eunice Marsh House site 39 Bank Row

9. Samuel Wells Family Farmhouse site 1 Main Street

10. Charles and Emeline Fisk House site Main Street and Fiske Avenue

11. George T. Davis House site, pre-1852, 63 Federal Street

12. George T. Davis House site, post-1852, 451 Main Street

13. John and Julia Putnam House site 175 Wells Street

14. John Putnam Barbershop site 308 Main Street

15. Methodist Episcopal Church site 425 Main Street

16. Washington Hall site 253 Main Street

Road to Freedom Sites

Greenfield Town Center
2001 Street Guide, Department of Public Works