



“This Most Atrocious Crusade Against Personal Freedom” Anti-abolitionist Violence in Boston on the Eve of War

PATRICK T.J. BROWNE

DESPITE the rain and thunder during the afternoon of October 21, 1855, friends of antislavery in Boston gathered in great numbers to commemorate the so-called “Garrison mob of 1835.” The attendees filled the meeting hall where, twenty years earlier, the infamous riot had begun. They reflected on the terrifying episode during which about five thousand rioters broke up a small meeting of the Boston Female Antislavery Society and then turned their anger toward William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of the antislavery newspaper *The Liberator*. Garrison escaped the violence only when the mayor of Boston and constables tore him from the mob’s grasp and jailed him for disturbing of the peace.¹

During the commemoration Garrison spoke first. He called the anniversary a milestone, marking “the progress of the Anti-Slavery movement.”² Other speakers offered similar reflections

I would like to thank Sarah Phillips, Nina Silber, Jon Roberts, and Cari Babitzke for their valuable insight and suggestions on early drafts of this paper as well as the anonymous reviewer and editors at the *New England Quarterly*.

¹Anti-abolitionist newspapers estimated the mob’s size at two to three thousand according to the *Boston Commercial Gazette*, October 22, 1835; Garrison, four to five thousand, (William Lloyd Garrison, *Selections from the Writings and Speeches of William Lloyd Garrison* [Boston: R.F. Wallcut, 1852], 374 [hereafter Garrison, *Selections*]). James L. Homer estimated six to ten thousand (quoted in Wendell Phillips Garrison and Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805–1879: the story of his life told by his children* [Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1889], 2:11).

²*The Boston Mob of “Gentlemen of Property and Standing”: Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Meeting Held in Stacy Hall, Boston, on the Twentieth Anniversary of the Mob of October 21, 1835* (Boston: R.F. Wallcut, 1855), 4.

The New England Quarterly, vol. XCIV, no. 1 (March 2021). © 2021 by The New England Quarterly. All rights reserved. https://doi.org/10.1162/teq_a_00878.

on the growth of the antislavery movement. The last of the speakers, Rev. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, took the platform as the afternoon light was fading and began by politely, yet firmly, disagreeing with Garrison. An abolitionist of a younger generation, Higginson employed different tactics, embracing militant abolitionism. The previous year he had led an unsuccessful armed attempt to free the fugitive slave Anthony Burns from the Boston Court House during which a US Marshall was fatally stabbed. Higginson took issue with Garrison's claim that the antislavery movement had accomplished much:

Are things so changed, after all? Is the Massachusetts of 1855 so transformed from the Massachusetts of 1835? Is State Street so utterly changed now from what it was when it poured forth its base-hearted myriads then? . . . I say to you, younger men and women who are here, that if you come here to exult, to tremble with excitement . . . at the thrilling story of the past, and not to consecrate yourselves to continue the work in the future, you have hurt your own souls by coming here, and you had better have stayed at home.³

Higginson reminded his audience that the "base-hearted myriads" of State Street—the wealthy merchants, manufacturers and financiers of Boston—still opposed abolition as bitterly as they had in 1835. Such prominent men, according to accounts by both sides, made up the bulk of the Garrison mob in 1835. The *Boston Commercial Gazette* coined the now well-known phrase characterizing the mob as "a meeting of gentlemen of property and standing."⁴ Higginson's listeners, at least by his estimation, seemed content to exult in the story of the Garrison mob of 1835, forgetting the forces still arrayed against them and the difficult work yet to be done in combatting slavery.

In a similar manner the dramatic story of the Garrison mob has all but monopolized the attention of historians examining anti-abolitionism in Boston. This tendency to focus on that

³*The Boston Mob*, 53–54.

⁴*Boston Commercial Gazette* quoted in *Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society with a concise statement of events previous and subsequent to the annual meeting of 1835* (Boston: The Society, 1836), 56.

single event, and the circumstances leading up to it, has distorted our understanding of the broader trends of organized opposition to abolitionists in Boston in several ways. First, the history of anti-abolitionism in Boston did not end with the Garrison mob. As Higginson pointed out, vitriolic opposition to the movement was as strong in the 1850s as it had been twenty years earlier. Anti-abolitionism in Boston not only persisted but surged, reaching its most ferocious height on the eve of the Civil War as the secession crisis careened out of control. Second, a focus on the 1830s and the Garrison mob places undue emphasis on a lone white male abolitionist leader when, in fact, many others—both black and white—were targeted by anti-abolitionist violence. It is essential to recognize the terrible violence directed toward the African American population of Boston during the Secession Winter of 1860–1861. These incidents included the Tremont Temple riot, during which a mob broke up an antislavery meeting and then rampaged through Boston's black neighborhood on the north side of Beacon Hill that in turn inaugurated a series of violent mob actions targeting antislavery meetings and threatened the lives of many abolitionists. Finally, the focus placed on the 1830s backlash and the Garrison mob elides the degree to which anti-abolitionism in Boston came to be an organized and cohesive effort. Though violent action continued to be a key tactic wielded by anti-abolitionists in the months leading up to the war, they increasingly mirrored their abolitionist counterparts, passing resolutions, forming a secret organization, and implementing a political agenda in the state legislature. Anti-abolitionism in Boston went far beyond the angry, irrational outburst of 1835.

This paper focuses on the Secession Winter rather than 1830s as the apex of anti-abolitionism in Boston. The fact that violent opposition to abolition only increased on the eve of Civil War—particularly in Boston, a supposed bulwark of abolitionism—challenges the pervasive notion of growing tolerance of antislavery in the North. The rise and fall of 1830s anti-abolitionist violence have been interpreted as being linked to a concurrent rise and fall in the number of antislavery

societies established in communities across the North.⁵ This interpretation assumes a growing degree of tolerance on the part of anti-abolitionists as antislavery societies became accepted institutions.⁶ In fact, anti-abolitionists did not simply grow more tolerant. Rather, they continued their efforts to suppress or even destroy the antislavery movement, and Boston experienced its worst outbreak of anti-abolitionist rioting fully twenty-five years after the Garrison mob.

This study also seeks to expand the study of anti-abolitionism beyond mob violence. The emphasis that historians have placed on the dramatic incidents in the streets ignores the degree to which this struggle took place in the political arena through legislative action and hearings in the chambers of the State House.⁷ Both anti-abolitionists and abolitionists launched legislative efforts to thwart their opponents. Abolitionists were not merely passive victims of beatings and threats. They employed political counter-tactics to actively combat their

⁵Leonard L. Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing: Anti-abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁶In addition to Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing*, seminal works on anti-abolitionist violence include Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790–1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Lorman Ratner, *Powder Keg: Northern Opposition to the Antislavery Movement, 1831–1840* (New York: Basic Books, 1968); Linda K. Kerber, “Abolitionists and Amalgamators: The New York City Race Riots of 1834,” *New York History* 48 (1967): 28–39; and Michael S. Hindus, “A City of Mobocrats and Tyrants: Mob Violence in Boston, 1747–1863,” *Issues in Criminology* 6.2 (Summer 1971): 55–83. Later studies specifically focusing on anti-abolitionism are rare. See Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987). More recent historians tend to deal with incidents of violent opposition within the context of larger studies of the antislavery movement, antebellum politics, or mob violence. For example, see David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion!: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789–1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Kyle G. Volk, *Moral Minorities and the Making of American Democracy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁷James Brewer Stewart, “Reconsidering the Abolitionists in an Age of Fundamentalist Politics,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26 (2006): 1–4; Corey M. Brooks “Reconsidering Politics in the Study of American Abolitionists,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8 (2018): 291–317. Both urge historians to take more seriously the political impact of the abolitionist movement. This paper argues that political strategies employed by Boston abolitionists to thwart violence against them demonstrates how antislavery activism and political action were connected even for Garrisonians.

oppressors. The political maneuverings on Beacon Hill and the violent outbursts on the streets represented two concurrent phases of the struggle over slavery that influenced and fueled one another. Examining the legislative action, and the public response to it, illuminates the manner in which abolitionists managed to shift the conflict in their favor, redefining the fight in the public eye to a struggle over freedom of speech. On one side, anti-abolitionist legislative efforts included an attempt to gag abolitionists and, later, to roll back their advances in guaranteeing the legal rights of fugitive slaves. The 1836 Committee on Slavery sought to criminalize abolitionist activities. The 1860–1861 Committee on Personal Liberty sought to repeal the Personal Liberty Law, an 1855 measure passed in defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act which guaranteed due process in Massachusetts for black men and women arrested as fugitive slaves. On the other side, abolitionist efforts to pass legislation in an attempt to hinder their anti-abolitionist opponents included the 1861 Massachusetts Metropolitan Police Bill which would have established a police force under the direct control of the abolitionist governor, John Andrew. During the Secession Winter anti-abolitionist mobs repeatedly broke up antislavery meetings with the support of the Boston police. If the bill had passed, the governor would have been able to provide police protection to abolitionists and defend them from such mobs.

All three of these legislative efforts elaborated on in this study as key examples of the political struggle between abolitionists and anti-abolitionists failed to pass. It was therefore not the implementation of the proposed legislation which had such powerful impact on this struggle but rather the process involving public committee hearings. Abolitionists—including Wendell Phillips and Samuel May—were particularly adept at dominating the hearings through lengthy statements in which they garnered public sympathy by drawing a compelling connection between the legislative and mob efforts to silence their speech. In the case of the Metropolitan Police Bill, abolitionists utilized hearings to interrogate and humiliate anti-abolitionist mob leaders and exposed the existence of an anti-abolitionist

organization in Boston. Anti-abolitionism did not fade away as a result of increasing tolerance but rather was actively shut down by abolitionists who learned through political experience how to influence policy and public opinion through new tactics.

Earlier examinations of anti-abolitionism have identified several explanations for their heated reactions to antislavery. Historians most commonly cite economic interests on the part of influential “gentlemen of property and standing.” Massachusetts merchants, manufacturers, brokers, and owners of shipping fleets built their fortunes on the cotton trade and maintained strong ties with Southern cotton merchants. For most of Boston’s elites, antislavery threatened economic ruin, tampering with otherwise harmonious dealings with Southern planters.⁸ Anti-abolitionists also sought to suppress agitation that might lead to dangerous disunionist rhetoric. So-called “friends of the Union” of all classes feared that the South, outraged by these malicious Northern “fanatics” and the prospect of slave insurrection, would almost certainly break away from the Union. Anti-abolitionist Bostonians therefore desired to send a clear message to their Southern brethren: this small minority of radicals did not speak for the Bay State.⁹

In explaining the anti-abolitionist phenomenon, other historians point to factors intrinsic to northern society. Persistent racism in the North motivated anti-abolitionists more than any other societal factor. Whites feared that emancipation would cause a complete upheaval, resulting in social mixing among

⁸On economic interests of northern merchants and anti-abolitionism, see Thomas H. O’Connor, *Lords of the Loom: The Cotton Whigs and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Scribner, 1968), 46, and Theodore M. Hammett, “Two Mobs of Jacksonian Boston: Ideology and Interest,” *Journal of American History* 62 (1976): 845–68. The economic argument is also incorporated by James Brewer Stewart, “Boston, Abolition, and the Atlantic World, 1820–1861,” in Donald M. Jacobs, ed., *Courage and Conscience: Black & White Abolitionists in Boston* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 105; and Jack Tager, *Boston Riots: Three Centuries of Social Violence* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 89.

⁹More recently, Elizabeth Varon has offered a more complex examination of the many charged meanings of disunion to the American public in *Disunion!*. Most relevant here, she argues northern anti-abolitionists associated abolitionism with treason “and willfully exaggerated the potency of Southern threats” of disunion and abolitionist’s exacerbation of the alleged crisis (9, 105).

the races and ultimately amalgamation.¹⁰ Most leading anti-abolitionist politicians avoided using the rhetoric of racism and fear outright finding it more effective to speak patriotically of Union and the Constitution. Semantics aside, racism existed as a driving force behind the movement in Boston, as evidenced by the violence targeting African-Americans during the Tremont Temple riot of 1860. “Gentlemen of property and standing” suppressed abolitionism because of fears of losing social control not just over African-Americans but over lower-class whites and white women. The Boston elite and those aspiring to elite status abhorred any hostile challenge to the social deference they felt they deserved.¹¹

Some historians have complicated the binary of abolitionists and anti-abolitionists and instead explore a spectrum of antislavery and proslavery in the North. Such studies tend to downplay the extremism of both sides and emphasize the role of moderates. An examination of the moderates enhances our overall understanding of the complexities of Northern politics of the Antebellum Era regarding slavery; however, a tendency to temper the radicalism of both sides of this question, minimizing the danger involved in Northern mobbing or portraying abolitionists as passive targets, is problematic.¹² A study of anti-abolitionist riots in Boston during the Secession Winter demonstrates that the threat was acute and genuine for both sides. The Tremont Temple riot—during which anti-abolitionists broke up a John Brown memorial meeting and then attacked persons and property in Boston’s black

¹⁰Lorman Ratner, *Powder Keg: Northern Opposition to the Antislavery Movement, 1831–1840* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 5; see also Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery*; Kyle G. Volk, *Moral Minorities and the Making of American Democracy*, 103–7.

¹¹Richards, *Gentlemen of Property*, 61–62. Stewart, “Boston, Abolition, and the Atlantic World, 1820–1861,” 107.

¹²Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 45–46, emphasizes gray areas in abolitionist politics, particularly an ambivalence regarding African-American civil rights, and also argues anti-abolitionists were pro-Union and not proslavery. David Grimsted, *American Mobbing: Towards the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 28, downplays the danger involved in “mild mobbing” carried out by Northern anti-abolitionists; Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 81, argues that Northern anti-abolitionist mobbing followed a mostly harmless “ritual” pattern typically seen in theater disturbances.

neighborhood—was not a ritual exercise in moderation. Militant abolitionist organizers of the meeting demonstrated support for slave insurrection, deliberately tying their activism to sectional conflict.¹³

Anti-abolitionists comprised a diverse and fluid population made up of individuals from different classes, political parties and ethnic backgrounds with a variety of views on the institution of slavery. What united them, and in many cases radicalized them, was the belief that abolitionists—and their apparent support for slave insurrection, disunion and racial equality—posed a national threat and had to be silenced. Anti-abolitionism in Boston transitioned from a loose coalition of convenience in 1830s, one that could only be called a movement in the most general sense, to something more structured. An anti-abolitionist of the 1830s likely did not shape his identity around that concept. However, during the Secession Winter, anti-abolitionists showed distinct indications of organization. In short, anti-abolitionists began, in some ways, to resemble the societies of their rivals.¹⁴

In the wake of Nat Turner's failed slave insurrection in 1831, Southerners demanded the arrest of William Lloyd Garrison, who had begun publishing the *Liberator* just months before Turner's violent uprising. Boston anti-abolitionists, eager to "vindicate the fame of our city" and denounce the fanatics inciting civil and servile war, organized a mass anti-abolitionist meeting that took place in Boston's Faneuil Hall on August

¹³Recent scholars have emphasized the radicalism of abolitionists and demonstrated their active support for slave insurrection. Stanley Harrold, *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism: Addresses to the Slaves* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), and *The Abolitionists and the South, 1831–1861* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999). Also see Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

¹⁴In this paper "anti-abolitionist" is used to identify individuals who took action, whether through the press, the pulpit, politics, or violence, to silence or eradicate abolitionist activism. Tise traces links Federalist leaders of the early nineteenth century to Northern anti-abolitionists and the term "proslavery," he suggests, should be applied to Northern opponents of abolitionism. Tise, *Proslavery*, 203.

21, 1835.¹⁵ The meeting voted for resolutions condemning attempts “to coerce any of the United States” to abolish slavery and declare their disgust for any measure than might incite slave revolt. The following day, musing on the possible outcome of the meeting, the editor of the *Boston Recorder* described abolitionists as dangerous agitators and predicted that they would likely “go on more furiously than ever, till they provoke the people to crush them, by law or against law.”¹⁶ In fact anti-abolitionists would attempt both.

Violent measures came first. On October 21, 1835, a large group of Boston businessmen, incensed by news that the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society planned to host a lecture by the reviled British abolitionist George Thompson, published a handbill calling for “friends of the Union” to resort to force.¹⁷ Thompson’s friends advised him to leave Boston, and Garrison gave the lecture instead, becoming the scapegoat of a mob numbering approximately 5,000 that gathered outside the small meeting hall.¹⁸ The crowd apprehended him, tore off most of his clothes and tied a rope around his waist. Many of them shouted for a lynching.¹⁹ Mayor Lyman and his constables intervened, taking Garrison into custody and eventually delivered him to the Leverett Street Jail, where he was held for his own protection.²⁰

While the extraordinary events of October 21, 1835 invite attention, it is important to understand the manner in which the abolitionists and their rivals moved their conflict to the state house after tumult of the Garrison mob. The legislative

¹⁵*Liberator*, reprinted from the *Boston Atlas*, August 15, 1835, 2. Hammett, “Two Mobs of Jacksonian Boston,” 863.

¹⁶*Boston Recorder*, August 28, 1835, 3.

¹⁷James Homer to George C. Rand, August 9, 1852 in Garrison and Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison*, 10.

¹⁸*The Boston Mob*, 24.

¹⁹Attorney Ellis Ames’s described the attempt to lynch Garrison in *The Garrison Mob in Boston, October 21, 1835* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1881), 341; as does abolitionist Charles Burleigh in the *Liberator*, October 24, 1835, 3. Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery*. (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998), 200–5.

²⁰Garrison, *Selections*, 386.

aspects of the struggle potentially held greater consequences for the antislavery movement than the violent treatment of a single individual. Political anti-abolitionism in Massachusetts first took the form of a Committee on Slavery, established by conservatives in the Massachusetts legislature in 1836 to explore criminalizing antislavery speech and meetings—or, at the very least, censuring antislavery and providing a rationale for future mob action. The formation of this committee, and the widespread support for anti-abolitionism even in a city known as a bastion of antislavery sentiments, is indicative of the national scope of the 1830s backlash against antislavery. As conservatives in Congress called for the infamous Gag Rule, Southern legislatures denounced citizens who interfered with slavery, demanding the suppression of antislavery societies and calling for Northern states to outlaw antislavery meetings and publications.²¹ Alabama’s resolution read, in part, “we call upon our sister states and respectfully request them to enact such PENAL LAWS, as will finally *put an end* to the malignant deeds of the abolitionists.”²²

In 1836, newly elected Massachusetts Governor Edward Everett responded directly to such demands during his inaugural address on behalf of Massachusetts anti-abolitionists. Antislavery language, he asserted, threatened to “excite an insurrection among the slaves” and should be prosecuted. He called all patriotic citizens to abstain from such discussion which, he feared, “will prove ‘the rock on which the Union will split.’”²³ To placate Southern legislatures, Everett called for the establishment of a joint Massachusetts Committee on Slavery. By placing the matter before the General Court, Everett tasked them to accomplish what the mobs thus far failed to do and

²¹Walter M. Merrill and Louis Ruchames, eds., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 6:223. Governor Edward Everett received letters from the legislatures of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama. *Liberator*; April 9, 1836, 1.

²²*Liberator*; April 16, 1836.

²³Edward Everett, “Address of the Governor, January 15, 1836,” *Resolves of the General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts passed at the several sessions commencing January, 1835, and ending April, 1838* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1838), 297–98.

what anti-abolitionists nationwide demanded—to silence abolitionists through legislation. The appointed chairman, George Lunt, vigorously opposed antislavery. As editor of the *Boston Courier*, he lambasted abolitionists' efforts to "corrupt human society" by bringing "ferocious" freed slaves into contact with white women.²⁴

Abolitionists seized this opportunity to publicize the attempt to curtail their constitutional rights by sending a committee of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society to state their case through lengthy addresses during two public hearings. These hearings repeatedly devolved into heated arguments as a flustered George Lunt struggled to maintain his authority and frequently gaveled the abolitionists into silence. Abolitionist Samuel May made an eloquent case arguing that the committee's efforts proved that free speech was not safe in Massachusetts. Ellis Gray Loring pressed what he perceived to be the true matter at hand: if the General Court issued even a censure against abolitionism, let alone penal laws, it would provide fodder for the mobs.²⁵ Abolitionist Charles Follen put the matter bluntly, stating that in the event of a censure "mobocrats" would "undertake to execute the informal sentence of the General Court."²⁶

Lunt was particularly incensed by abolitionist rhetoric seeking to draw a connection between his committee and any future mob action. His refusal to allow any mention of mob violence drew further protests from the abolitionists, and he grew so irate he declared the committee had heard enough and ended the second hearing without an adjournment. His behavior only provided further evidence for the abolitionists' depiction of the proceedings as a tyrannical attempt to prohibit free

²⁴George Lunt, *Radicalism in Religion, Philosophy and Social Life: Four Papers from the Boston Courier for 1858* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1858), 73–74.

²⁵Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, *An account of the interviews which took place on the fourth and eighth of March between a committee of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, and the committee of the Legislature* (Boston: Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, 1836), 7.

²⁶*An account of the interviews*, 9.

speech and incite mob violence.²⁷ Samuel May recalled that newspapers across the Commonwealth condemned the committee.²⁸ Even the conservative *Gloucester Democrat* shouted, “George Lunt against the County—Slavery or Liberty—Gag-laws or Free Discussion!—That is the question. Who opens his mouth for the gag? Who gives his lips to the padlock?”²⁹

National crises, primarily the John Brown Raid of October 1859 and the South Carolina Secession Convention of December 1860, drove Boston anti-abolitionists into a panic. On December 3, 1859, the day after Brown’s execution, a group of successful Boston businessmen formed a committee to organize a “Union Meeting” for the purpose of condemning the abolitionist observances recently held in Boston to honor him. They asked Edward Everett to deliver the keynote address. Everett noted in his diary, “Though long since retired from the political scene the crisis is one of so much alarm and as I think real danger that I cannot refuse.”³⁰ During the meeting that took place just days later, however, it was not the elder statesman Everett who electrified the crowd but rather former Massachusetts Governor Caleb Cushing. Railing with the tone of an evangelical preacher, Cushing compared Boston abolitionists to “devils in hell” and condemned them for initiating a war against Southerners.³¹ Calling upon God for protection against the “demoniac passions” of abolitionists, Cushing appealed to the cheering crowd: “Rise, I say, in the majesty of your might, people of Massachusetts . . . and redeem the honor and the fame of the good old Commonwealth.” Cushing’s directive had

²⁷*An account of the interviews*, 18–19, 25. Lunt’s final report to the Massachusetts legislature, which ardently defended the institution of slavery and called for the censuring of abolitionists, was tabled. Massachusetts General Court, Joint Special Committee on Slavery, *Report and Resolves on the Subject of Slavery* (Boston: Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1836), 12, 20.

²⁸Samuel J. May, *Some Recollections of Our Antislavery Conflict* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1869), 202.

²⁹*Gloucester Democrat*, November 18, 1836.

³⁰Edward Everett Diaries, December 3, 1859, Ms. N-1201, Edward Everett Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

³¹*Boston Courier Report of the Union Meeting in Faneuil Hall*, Thursday, December 8th, 1859 (Boston: Clark, Fellows & Co., Office of the Boston Courier, 1859), 17.

a double meaning—take action on the streets and take action at the polls.³²

Just as the election of Abraham Lincoln in November 1860 prompted South Carolinians to initiate the secession process, conservatives in Massachusetts viewed the election of radical Republican Governor John A. Andrew with similar distress. Andrew's election on November 6, 1860 sent a clear signal to Massachusetts conservatives: efforts to mollify the South and silence abolitionists would henceforth encounter increasing resistance. Andrew, a Boston lawyer, had participated in the Boston Vigilance Committee that supported the Underground Railroad. Political conservatives became angry when in November 1859 he presided over a meeting to raise funds for Brown's wife. Despite this ire, Republicans nominated Andrew for governor amidst a wave of enthusiasm and a desire to sweep away the conservative "hunkerism" that had long dominated the corner office of the Massachusetts State House. An antislavery journalist called Andrew's nomination a glorious victory over "old Boston conservatism, and everything bad."³³

Anti-abolitionists viewed Andrew's election differently. Massachusetts conservatives, mainly through the momentum provided by the 1859 "Union Meeting," formed a branch of the new Constitutional Union party, opposed the Lincoln/Hamlin ticket, and nominated industrialist Amos Lawrence to run against Andrew.³⁴ Richard S. Fay, a lawyer and gentleman farmer from Lynn, played a major role in organizing anti-abolitionist violence. As a young man, Fay had attended the 1835 anti-abolitionist meeting that had fueled the Garrison mob. Presiding over the ratification meeting of the Massachusetts Constitutional Unionists in Boston on September 26, 1860, he noted that the nominations of Lincoln and

³²*Courier Report of the Union Meeting*, 17.

³³William S. Robinson quoted in Dale Baum, *The Civil War Party System: The Case of Massachusetts, 1848–1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 49.

³⁴Bruce C. Levine, *Half Slave and Half Free: The Roots of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 217.

Andrew filled him with “deep misgivings” on the future of the Union.³⁵

The crisis prompted drastic action. Anti-abolitionists found their opportunity in the announcement in November 1860 of a meeting to take place on the first anniversary of the death of John Brown. The meeting served a dual purpose as organizers invited speakers to discuss “How can American slavery be abolished?” and to memorialize Brown. Tying those two goals together represented a tipping point for opponents of abolitionism. The speakers included prominent black abolitionists—Frederick Douglass and Rev. J. Sella Martin of Boston’s African Meeting House—as well as devoted Brown supporter Franklin Sanborn. The primary organizer, James Redpath, was a Scottish immigrant who had met Brown in Kansas in 1856 and worked to support his plans for a slave insurrection. Redpath’s reputation was well-known in Boston, and a writer for the *Boston Pilot* declared his radicalism “obnoxious . . . to peace-loving people.” Further, the journalist asserted, “the community, is now suffering under great pecuniary distress, aggravated by grave political trouble.” Under such circumstances, he insisted, a meeting honoring Brown could only result in violence.³⁶ Groups of both abolitionists and anti-abolitionists met privately before the event to plan for the worst in the event violence erupted. According to a writer for the *Boston Traveler*, a “great many” abolitionists armed themselves, citing an unnamed black man allegedly displaying a large protrusion from his inside coat pocket. While this may have been an attempt to discredit abolitionists, it indicated that individuals such as Redpath had, intentionally or not, brought some of the warfare of Kansas back to Boston with them.³⁷

The crowd that filled the lecture hall of Tremont Temple on December 3 was not what the organizers had envisioned.

³⁵*Boston Courier*, September 27, 1860, 1.

³⁶*Boston Pilot*, reprinted in the *Liberator*, December 7, 1860, 1. Stephen Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829–1889* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 268.

³⁷*Boston Traveler*, December 4, 1860, 2.

Abolitionists made up only a small minority. A rowdy throng filled the rest of the hall and gallery, shouting, hissing, and stamping their feet as Redpath attempted to call the meeting to order. As Rev. Martin and Redpath called for quiet, the crowd answered with shouts of “Put him out! All up! We will not let you talk here!”³⁸ Redpath lost his temper and rushed from the platform followed by several abolitionists. They attempted to remove forcibly some of the loudest protestors from the hall but failed. The chaos continued as the abolitionist Franklin Sanborn endeavored in vain to proceed with his remarks.³⁹ Rev. Martin temporarily restored some order when he announced that the police had arrived. The officers stood along the sides of the hall but made no effort to remove or quiet the disruptive crowd. The relative order did not last long. The anti-abolitionist mob made its designs known when a voice from the crowd nominated Richard Fay as chairman of the meeting. The rowdy majority immediately voted in favor of him, and he took the platform surrounded by supporters. The anti-abolitionists thus had seized control of a meeting to honor John Brown and proceeded to use it for their own purposes. At Fay’s request, the police finally intervened, under orders from Mayor Frederick Lincoln, repeatedly ejecting abolitionists from the hall and permitting Fay to control the meeting.⁴⁰

When the police restored order, Fay proposed several resolutions, prepared in advance and amounting to an anti-abolitionist platform. In many ways these resolutions paralleled the Ordinances of Secession which would soon be passed by Southern states and place Boston opponents of antislavery firmly within a national movement. The first condemned Brown’s “piratical and bloody attempts to create an insurrection” and asserted that no citizen of Massachusetts should hold communion with any man who sympathized with him. Another

³⁸*Liberator*, December 7, 1860, 3.

³⁹*Liberator*, December 7, 1860, 3.

⁴⁰*Liberator*, December 7, 1860, 3 and December 14, 1860, 4; Wendell Phillips, “Mobs and Education,” *Speeches, Lectures and Letters* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1894), 1:334.

resolution called upon all citizens to express their esteem for the Union in the “interests of commerce, manufactures, and agriculture of the world.” The final and most significant resolution stated “[t]hat the people of this city have submitted too long in allowing irresponsible persons and political demagogues . . . to hold public meetings to disturb the public peace and misrepresent us abroad, they have become a nuisance which, in self-defense, we are determined shall be henceforth abated.” The rowdy crowd quickly passed the resolutions.⁴¹

When Frederick Douglass rose and attempted to speak, disturbances broke out throughout the hall. Fay agreed to allow Douglass to address the crowd. Douglass began speaking over a tremendous uproar, “This is one of the most impudent, barefaced, outrageous acts on free speech . . . that I have ever witnessed in Boston or elsewhere. I have served, . . . the same master that you are serving. You are serving the slaveholders!”⁴² Eventually, a “collision” occurred between Douglass and one of the anti-abolitionists on the platform. The meeting then devolved into utter violence. Rioters dragged Douglass from the platform by his hair, but according to witnesses, he fought back like “a trained pugilist.”⁴³ The chief of police announced that he had received orders from the mayor to clear the hall, and as the police carried out this order, an abolitionist angrily cried out, “This is a disgrace to Boston for the Chief of Police to clear the hall instead of protecting the people in their rights!”⁴⁴

That afternoon, word spread that the abolitionists intended to resume their meeting in the African Meeting House on Joy Street. Anti-abolitionists quickly printed up a handbill calling

⁴¹*Liberator*, December 7, 1860, 3.

⁴²*Liberator*, December 7, 1860, 3.

⁴³James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), 125. James H. Cook traces Douglass's growing non-violence during his career but points to the Tremont Temple riot as an important exception. “Fighting with Breath Not Blows: Frederick Douglass and Antislavery Violence,” ed. John R. McKivigan and Stanley Harold, *Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 148.

⁴⁴*Liberator*, December 7, 1860, 3.

for Bostonians to put down the supporters of Brown.⁴⁵ A crowd of thousands consequently gathered outside the African Meeting House that evening. This time, however, a large force of policemen protected the building and prevented the mob from breaking up the meeting. Mayor Lincoln's reasons for denying police protection to the Tremont Temple meeting yet marshalling law enforcement to allow the African Meeting House meeting to proceed are unclear. It seems likely that he was aware of the increased potential for violence in reaction to a meeting attended by large numbers of black abolitionists. The trustees of the African Meeting House also saw the danger and initially refused to open the doors to the abolitionists until Rev. J. Sella Martin threatened to resign if they didn't allow the meeting to proceed. The trustees agreed to accept the risk to their church and their community rather than surrender the right to free speech to a mob. Nonetheless, many members of the congregation armed themselves.⁴⁶

The meeting at the African Meeting House took on an angry tone, passing resolutions condemning the disruption of the Tremont Temple exercises and blaming Mayor Lincoln for his negligence, calling him, "the real ringleader of the mob." Here, John Brown Jr. spoke, telling Boston abolitionists that he had come "prepared to repel mob violence by force" and urged them to do the same.⁴⁷ The African Meeting House meeting took a far more militant tone than that at Tremont Temple earlier the same day. For the African American community, the stakes were higher, and the threat was greater than for white abolitionists. John Brown Jr. seemed to understand this and was prepared to fight alongside the black abolitionists in the African Meeting House. The trustees of the meeting house clearly recognized the increased danger as well. Subsequent events would indeed bear this out. When the meeting broke up, the police

⁴⁵*Liberator*, December 7, 1860, 3.

⁴⁶Roy E. Finkenbine, "Boston's Black Churches: Institutional Centers of the Antislavery Movement," *Courage and Conscience: Black & White Abolitionists in Boston*, ed. Donald M. Jacobs (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 177, 180.

⁴⁷*Liberator*, December 7, 1860, 3.

presence departed, yet the anti-abolitionist crowd of thousands remained. The most tragic phase of the Tremont Temple riot and the most violent episode of anti-abolitionist and anti-black violence in Boston's pre-Civil War history then began.

The frustrated crowd lashed out at Boston's black population, doing more violence to them than had ever been done to white abolitionists in Boston. Although impossible to quantify, the violence committed upon Boston's black citizens was the most significant episode of the day's events. Scholarly discourse on anti-abolitionism in Boston, which has focused primarily on the Garrison mob, has failed to recognize this. Two key sources—accounts in *The Liberator* and a speech by Wendell Phillips—likely tended to inflate the level of the rioting. Still as Phillips recalled, the mob lashed out at “our hated and friendless colored people, pursued any one of them . . . [and] cruelly beat, almost to death, several, and ill-treated many of them.”⁴⁸

The *Liberator* named five black men seriously injured by the crowd and indicated there were numerous others. Rioters abused African-Americans in the streets of North Beacon Hill using clubs and stones, broke into black homes, and destroyed property. The rioters boarded trolley cars running along Cambridge Street at the foot of North Beacon Hill, dragged black passengers out and assaulted them.⁴⁹ A black man walking on Cambridge Street was knocked down by a “well dressed gentleman” and beaten so badly by a group of white men that he lost his sight. A rioter hit a black boy in the leg with an axe, causing a serious wound. Phillips observed bitterly that, despite the fact that the Boston police force was placed on alert and patrolled the streets in large numbers, it did nothing to stop the violence. The only person arrested, he said, was a black boy who had defended himself.⁵⁰

Boston had never seen this scale of mob violence targeting African-Americans, and it is telling that anti-abolitionist

⁴⁸Phillips, *Mobs and Education*, 332.

⁴⁹*Liberator*, December 7, 1860, 3, and *Massachusetts Spy*, December 12, 1860, 1.

⁵⁰*Boston Traveler*, December 4, 1860, 2. Phillips, *Mobs and Education*, 335.

violence so quickly turned against black Bostonians.⁵¹ The riot speaks to the racism inherent in anti-abolitionism and the extent to which hundreds, if not thousands, of white Bostonians blamed African-Americans for the impending civil war. The unprecedented wave of anti-abolitionist mob activity that followed reveals much about the growing, desperate determination of Boston anti-abolitionists to use violence to stop an increasingly radical antislavery movement and to punish Boston's black community for their apparent embrace of militant abolitionism.

Three days after the Tremont Temple riot, as South Carolinians took steps to organize a secession convention, a group of influential Massachusetts anti-abolitionists met at the home of Edward Everett to discuss the legislative means for rolling back antislavery activism and offering conciliatory measures to the South. Former Governor John H. Clifford attended the meeting and recorded in his diary that the primary goal, "in view of restoring harmony to this now distracted country," was the repeal of the 1855 Personal Liberty Law.⁵² The legislative effort, which stretched into March 1861, concurrent with the anti-abolitionist mobs, illustrates the multi-faceted nature of the struggle between anti-abolitionists and antislavery activists.

The Massachusetts Legislature of 1855 had passed the Personal Liberty Law in the wake of the rendition of fugitive slave Anthony Burns. The furor over the capture of Burns and other fugitives and the outrage at the show of force by the state militia and federal troops marching through Boston to return Burns to slavery prompted an alliance between moderates of the anti-immigrant Know-Nothing Party and the antislavery politicians of the Free Soil Party.⁵³ This was the coalition in the Massachusetts legislature that passed the Personal Liberty Law in defiance of the Fugitive Slave Law.⁵⁴ The state law guaranteed

⁵¹Jack Tager, *Boston Riots: Three Centuries of Social Violence* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 87–88.

⁵²John H. Clifford, Diary, December 6, 1860, Ms. N-2158, John H. Clifford Papers, MHS.

⁵³Baum, *Civil War Party System*, 32–33.

⁵⁴Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s–1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Baum, *Civil War Party System*, 32–34.

the right to a trial by jury and the writ of habeas corpus to accused fugitives, and it included other measures that increased the cost and procedural difficulty of prosecuting a fugitive slave case. Several other states joined Massachusetts in passing similar personal liberty laws which Southerners protested loudly. A journalist for the *Richmond Whig* called the acts unconstitutional and a disgrace.⁵⁵ The *Texas State Gazette* stated simply that “this is nullification with a vengeance.”⁵⁶ To Massachusetts conservatives, the Personal Liberty Law represented an unlawful sanctioning of radical antislavery efforts.

The group that met in December 1860 to organize the dismantling of the personal liberty law soon grew to include thirty-five prominent men who put their signatures to a public appeal to the citizens of Massachusetts. In this appeal, they warned citizens of the imminent destruction of the Union, declared the personal liberty law “a violation of our great national compact,” and demanded that legislators immediately repeal it.⁵⁷ Among their number were four former governors, a former chief justice of the Supreme Judicial Court, former US and state legislators, and a former president of Harvard College. In short, the group consisted of highly respected jurists and gentlemen of property and standing.

The Northern personal liberty laws featured prominently in South Carolina’s *Declaration of the Immediate Causes of Secession*. Increasing hostility in the Northern states, according to South Carolinians, “has led to a disregard of their obligations” as they “enacted laws which either nullify the Acts of Congress or render useless any attempt to execute them.”⁵⁸ In the wake of secession, citizens of Massachusetts sent hundreds of petitions to the legislature calling for the repeal of

⁵⁵*Richmond Whig*, November 23, 1860, 1. Even the *Springfield Republican* in Massachusetts urged the repeal of the “sentimental legislation.” *Springfield Republican*, reprinted in *Liberator*, November 30, 1860.

⁵⁶*Texas State Gazette*, June 2, 1855.

⁵⁷“To the Citizens of Massachusetts,” reprinted in the *Liberator*, December 28, 1860.

⁵⁸South Carolina and J. Watson Webb, *Declaration of the immediate causes which induce and justify the secession of South Carolina from the federal union, and the ordinance of secession* (Charleston, SC: Evans & Cogswell, [1861]), 7–8.

the personal liberty law.⁵⁹ The newly elected Governor John A. Andrew defended the law during his inaugural address on January 5, 1861; he stated that it enabled free men and women wrongly seized to defend themselves. Since the law had been passed, he pointed out, not a single fugitive slave had been taken from Massachusetts.⁶⁰ Governor Andrew thus set the political tone as the General Court referred the matter to a joint legislative Committee on the Personal Liberty Law. Republican Senator Eben F. Stone of Newburyport, an abolitionist, chaired the committee.⁶¹

To make the case against repeal, the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society sent several representatives who addressed the committee during hearings on January 25 and 29, 1861. Rev. J. Sella Martin, pastor of the Joy Street Church, said he stood before the committee as a fugitive slave, having escaped from bondage in Alabama. All he asked, he said, was the right to a trial “in case the sanctity of the chamber of his wife was invaded,” and he was arrested to be dragged back into slavery. As a minister of the Gospel, he asked that the law remain in force in the name of humanity. If it should be repealed, he said, “the people” would “band together to resist them and rescue fugitives.”⁶² He later asserted during a meeting at the African Meeting House that black Bostonians would defend their rights and “drive back the driver.” The “colored men” of the Commonwealth, Martin insisted, were Christians and “peaceable citizens,” but “if we must go, we will leave our blood behind.”⁶³

When Phillips addressed the Personal Liberty Law Committee on January 29, he was sharp tongued as always. Laying blame for the repeal movement upon the anti-abolitionist mayor of Boston, Joseph Wightman, and the city aldermen,

⁵⁹Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom*, 271.

⁶⁰Henry Greenleaf Pearson, *The Life of John A. Andrew, Governor of Massachusetts, 1861–1865* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1904), 1:91.

⁶¹“Report of the Committee on the Personal Liberty Law,” reprinted in the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, February 20, 1861, 2.

⁶²*Boston Traveler*, January 25, 1861, 2; and *Boston Evening Transcript*, January 25, 1861, 2.

⁶³*Liberator*, February 22, 1861, 31.

Phillips stated “I do not think their voices ought to be very potent in changing laws until they learn to obey them.”⁶⁴ Phillips argued the constitutionality of the personal liberty law and also urged that the committee, as self-respecting men, to preserve it on the grounds of principle. Rather than repeal the law, he insisted the committee instead carefully consider, “what we submit to, and how far we get down on our knees before the Slave Power.”⁶⁵

The abolitionists failed to convince Senator Stone. Much to the disappointment of his antislavery friends, Stone presented a committee report to the senate that, while it did not recommend repeal, nonetheless proposed curtailing several measures of the Personal Liberty Law.⁶⁶ By the time the resolutions passed on March 25, 1861, the stand-off playing out in Charleston harbor between Federal and Confederate forces completely overshadowed the issue. If the alterations represented a victory for enemies of abolition, it was a hollow one. Still, the effort to repeal the Personal Liberty Law revealed the determination of Massachusetts anti-abolitionists to appease Southerners and combat antislavery not just through mob action but also by legislative means.

As the legislative effort moved forward on Beacon Hill, the mob action continued during the Secession Winter. Anti-abolitionists increasingly singled out Phillips, assaulting him during two riots in December 1860 and January 1861. Having surpassed Garrison as the most charismatic spokesman for the antislavery movement, Phillips’s piercing criticism of his enemies made him a target. Well aware of this, Phillips skillfully manipulated the mob, inflaming their hatred through his criticism of the anti-abolitionist leaders of the Constitutional Union Party. Phillips and other abolitionists understood that anti-abolitionist violence had the unintended consequence of

⁶⁴Wendell Phillips, and J. M. W. Yerrington, *Argument of Wendell Phillips, Esq., against the repeal of the personal liberty law before the committee of the legislature, Tuesday, January 29, 1861* (Boston: R.F. Wallcut, 1861), 7.

⁶⁵Phillips, “Argument of Wendell Phillips,” 6.

⁶⁶Essex Bar Association, *Memorials of the Essex Bar Association* (Salem, MA: Newcomb & Gauss, 1900), 170.

promoting the antislavery cause. More important, abolitionists understood that if free speech was to be upheld in Boston, their greatest ally would be an indignant press and a public outraged by anti-abolitionist efforts to suppress basic constitutional freedoms. His speeches undermined the respectability of the Constitutional Union party in Massachusetts, and his public exploitation of the mobs that assaulted him represented an effective counter-attack against anti-abolitionists—but with much personal risk.

Beginning in 1860, Phillips gave monthly lectures to members of the 28th Congregational Society which included many of Boston's most prominent abolitionists. He spoke to the society at the Music Hall on December 16, 1860, two weeks after the Tremont Temple riot. Despite the tension in antislavery circles, Phillips welcomed mob action as evidenced by the subject and tone of his address in his speech "Mobs and Education." His personal attacks from the podium in the Music Hall, excoriating the Tremont Temple rioters and Mayor Lincoln, were a deliberate provocation. Phillips invited violence to manipulate public opinion; he did not merely endure it as a passive martyr.

Phillips's audience consisted mostly of members of the congregation, but a number of anti-abolitionists attended to hear his message and made themselves known by hisses. From beginning to end, the address consisted of one long harangue against the perpetrators of the Tremont Temple riot and the city government. The mob had but one purpose, Phillips asserted: to strike "a blow at free speech, a right which no sane man in our age and land denies." The leaders of the mob, he claimed, consisted of younger members of old mercantile families, "playing at stock-jobbing to lose in State Street what their fathers made by smuggling in India . . . Snobbish sons of fathers lately rich, anxious to show themselves rotten before they are ripe." Driving home that sore point, questioning the manhood of wealthy anti-abolitionists, Phillips called them "[w]eak sons of moderate fathers, dandied into effeminacy, of course wholly unfit for business" and lashed out at Fay, the boss of the riot, calling him, ". . . a third-rate lawyer broken down to a cotton-clerk, borrowing consequence from married wealth."

He reserved his most acute expressions of disdain for Mayor Lincoln, calling him a tool of the bankers of State Street and holding him alone responsible for the mob's success.⁶⁷

His audience listened, many of them shocked and fearful for Phillips's safety. The abolitionist Charles W. Slack wrote, "As he poured out his blistering anathemas, I sat trembling lest I should hear the snap of a pistol."⁶⁸ At the close of the meeting, friends and police escorted Phillips out a back door of the Music Hall where they encountered a large crowd surrounding the building. The crowd rushed Phillips, but his supporters pushed them back and escorted him safely to his home.⁶⁹

It would have been simple enough for Phillips to avoid direct personal insults. He nonetheless understood the ramifications and proceeded deliberately. The tactic succeeded in goading anti-abolitionists to violence while simultaneously shaming prominent members of the mobs by name. Although none were quite as brazen as Phillips, other Boston abolitionists employed the tactic. Journalist William S. Robinson, better known by his penname "Warrington," published a column, reprinted in the *Liberator* and other papers, chastising the Tremont Temple rioters and naming every one he recognized—amounting to more than thirty.⁷⁰ The abolitionists knew their enemies and were determined to combat them in the public arena by taking away their anonymity.

As effective as Phillips's agitation was, his friends clearly worried that he went too far. Letters by Garrison and others expressed fears that this alarming shift in tactics brought unprecedented danger. A few days after Phillips's speech, Maria Chapman Weston accompanied him to New Bedford where he delivered another lecture. She noted that a group of men with "pockets full of pistols," escorted Phillips wherever he went and mounted guard outside the house where he, Chapman,

⁶⁷Phillips, "Mobs and Education," 1:325, 334.

⁶⁸Slack quoted in W. Carlos Martyn, *Wendell Phillips: The Agitator* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1890), 304.

⁶⁹*Berkshire Eagle*, December 20, 1860, 3.

⁷⁰*Liberator*, December 14, 1860, 4.

and others stayed as guests.⁷¹ Garrison wrote a friend of their shared fears regarding “a plot in embryo for murderous assault upon our dear and noble friend . . . that his precious life is in very great danger.”⁷²

Perhaps more significant, Garrison recognized that, for better or for worse, the entire Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society had become part of Phillips’s strategy, and abolitionists would have to expose themselves to almost certain violence to promote the causes of abolition and free speech. On the impending January 1861 meeting of the society, Garrison wrote, “we are quite sure of a mobocratic outbreak at our annual meeting on Thursday and Friday next.” Indeed, he anticipated “blood should be shed on the occasion, for there will be a resolute body of men present, determined to maintain the liberty of speech.” As Phillips and others deliberately incited “special vengeance,” as Garrison called it, all abolitionists were at risk.⁷³

Nonetheless, the success of the tactic became increasingly apparent immediately after Phillips’s “Mobs and Education” lecture. As he intended, the press played a vital role in cementing that success as journalists, whether they agreed with abolition or not, criticized the violent suppression of free speech and in doing so robbed the anti-abolitionists of their momentum. A Massachusetts writer observed that the Tremont Temple meeting, “might not have attracted much attention if [rioters] had been wise enough to let it alone,” and that anti-abolitionist “violence has done far more to help rather than hinder” the antislavery cause. “Freedom of speech cannot be stifled in Massachusetts,” he concluded.⁷⁴ A journalist for the *Christian Inquirer* lamented, “The late outrages in Boston . . . raise the question, Are the people in these cities free? or are they at the mercy of Judge Lynch, in the form of an irresponsible mob . . . Let these gentlemen of Boston know that their

⁷¹Maria Weston Chapman to “Dear folks,” December 19, 1860, Antislavery Collection, Boston Public Library, Boston, MA.

⁷²William Lloyd Garrison to Oliver Johnson, January 19, 1861, Antislavery Collection.

⁷³Garrison to Johnson, January 19, 1861.

⁷⁴“Free Speech ‘Summarily Abated,’” *Massachusetts Spy*, December 5, 1860, 2.

outrageous and cowardly assault upon the freedom of speech . . . has stamped the fair fame of their city with a brand of disgrace.”⁷⁵ The *Christian Watchman* admonished Phillips for his vitriolic language, particularly on the Sabbath but nonetheless asserted that “any attempt at coercing him, and others like him, into silence . . . ought to fail.”⁷⁶ And an editorialist in far-away Burlington, Iowa perhaps best reflected the effectiveness of Phillips’s tactic, writing, “We, of course, have no sympathy with Mr. Phillips and hold his doctrines in the deepest abhorrence, but we do have a sympathy with freedom of speech, and fear much for the liberties of our country if it is stifled in the free city of Boston.”⁷⁷

Thus, the abolitionists purposely turned the press against anti-abolitionism rather than merely waiting for public opinion to shift. Phillips would later say to friends around him as rioters shouted him down during a speech in January 1861 that it mattered little if he could not be heard. Pointing to a nearby group of reporters he said, “While I speak to these pencils, I speak to a million men. We have the press of the country in our hands . . . Whether they like us or not, they know our speeches sell their papers!”⁷⁸

Garrison was not alone in predicting violence at the January 24, 1861 annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. The superintendent of Tremont Temple, Joseph Hayes, and the general agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, Ezra Heywood, met with the new Boston mayor, Joseph Wightman, a week before the meeting. Wightman utterly refused to offer police protection to the abolitionists. Democrats had secured Wightman’s election in cooperation with a voting bloc of Irish immigrants largely as part of an anti-abolitionist agenda. According to the *Boston Post*, Wightman’s election would ensure that Boston would no longer be “the

⁷⁵“Free Speech, Free Press, Free Pulpit,” reprinted from the *Christian Inquirer* in *Liberator*, January 4, 1861, 1.

⁷⁶“Sunday Mob,” *Christian Watchman*, December 20, 1860, 2.

⁷⁷*Burlington* [Iowa] *Weekly Hawkeye*, December 22, 1860, 2.

⁷⁸*Liberator*, February 1, 1861, 1.

headquarters of Negro meetings, a Negro militia, and the advocates of John Brown's raid."⁷⁹ Wightman not only refused police protection, he promised the abolitionist organizers that if a disturbance erupted, he would arrest them as "aggressors upon the public peace." In the *Liberator*, Garrison lambasted Wightman, insisting that he was "virtually placing himself at the head of the mob."⁸⁰

Despite the risk, abolitionists held the annual meeting as planned. Indeed, as Garrison had stated, most if not all expected to strike a blow for free speech by confronting violence—though not all relished that opportunity. "I would rather have given fifty dollars than attend the meeting," Lydia Maria Child wrote, "but conscience told me it was a duty." She feared for Phillips most of all. Child recalled that the morning session began smoothly enough, but it was not long before "all hell broke loose" as hundreds of "noisy and vulgar" men began to pack the hall. Phillips took the stage and the hostile crowd erupted. At one point, the rioters rushed the stage. Phillips's body-guards formed a wall and held them back.⁸¹

When the turbulent morning session ended, the hall cleared, and both sides, anticipating still greater trouble during the afternoon session, sought reinforcements. Phillips, Rev. Martin, and other abolitionists marched up to the State House to meet with Governor Andrew. They asked him to call out the state militia to put down the rioters. Rev. Martin was particularly strident in stating that the lives and property of black Bostonians were in the "greatest danger."⁸² The *New York Daily Herald* unsympathetically claimed that Martin made this request because he had received personal threats.⁸³ While it is probable that Martin was indeed threatened, his request likely stemmed more from fears of a repeat of the widespread

⁷⁹Thomas H. O'Connor, *Civil War Boston, Home Front and Battlefield* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997), 41.

⁸⁰*Liberator*, January 25, 1861, 3.

⁸¹Child quoted in Martyn, *Phillips: The Agitator*, 308.

⁸²*American Traveller*, February 2, 1861, 4.

⁸³*New York Daily Herald*, January 26, 1861, 3.

destruction in Boston's black neighborhood in the wake of December's Tremont Temple riot. The governor replied that if he had any authority to put down the present mobs, he would "exercise it at once."⁸⁴ However, the militia could only be deployed if the mayor so requested. Andrew could only call upon units to assemble at their armories and wait for an order that might never come.

The anti-abolitionists had more success in rallying support. When the afternoon meeting convened, their numbers had greatly swelled. The crowd filled Tremont Street outside the building. "The confusion and uproar were indescribable," according to *The Liberator*. The police turned out but stood passively along the periphery of the lecture hall as speakers attempted to give addresses that went unheard. Finally, Mayor Wightman appeared. Rather than order the arrest of the rioters, he shut down the meeting, ordering the hall cleared and locked. The rioters cheered for Mayor Wightman as abolitionists were forcibly removed by the police. The abrupt conclusion of the meeting did not end the riot outside as the crowd cornered, beat and kicked an abolitionist, John C. Cluer, on the street and threatened to break into Phillips's house.⁸⁵

The riots of the Secession Winter made it clear to the abolitionists that Boston mayors by restraining police from arresting rioters and deploying them to break up antislavery meetings repeatedly sided with anti-abolitionists. Governor Andrew, though sympathetic to the abolitionists' cause, could do nothing to protect them. To ensure their safety and the protection of their rights, abolitionists attempted to take the Boston police department out of the mayor's hands by establishing a Metropolitan Police Force overseen by the state government. The process both spurred and was spurred by mob action unfolding in the streets.⁸⁶

⁸⁴William S. Robinson and Harriet Jane Hanson Robinson, "Warrington" *Portraits, A Collection of Personal and Political Reminiscences from 1848 to 1876* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1877), 336.

⁸⁵*Liberator*, February 1, 1861, 2.

⁸⁶Editorial appeals for a Metropolitan Police Force from the *Worcester Daily Spy* and the *Sandwich Advocate* reprinted in the *Liberator*, December 21, 1860, 1.

At the end of January 1861, as anti-abolitionist riots escalated, Senator Nathaniel H. Whiting, a Republican and an abolitionist, filed an order in the Massachusetts Senate recommending the formation of a committee to investigate the establishment of a Metropolitan Police Force. The order proposed the alteration of the city charter of Boston so that the police would no longer be appointed by and answer to the mayor but rather to state authorities—ultimately the governor. Whiting cited the December 1860 Tremont Temple riot as the primary reason for the proposed change, alleging that the mob had been deliberately assisted by city authorities and that the mayor might break up a meeting of the legislature itself if he deemed it a public nuisance.⁸⁷ Increasingly certain that the city government conspired against them, abolitionists again took the contest to the state legislature.

In addition to the ultimate goal of securing the protection of their rights and safety, the Metropolitan Police Bill served two additional tactical purposes for the abolitionists. First, as a part of the committee proceedings, hearings took place where antislavery legislators interrogated anti-abolitionist leaders to investigate the Tremont Temple riot. The process became an unconventional tribunal and an instrument of abolitionist retribution for the riot. Second, the publicity surrounding the committee hearings further broadcast the suppression and intimidation to which abolitionists had been subjected, thereby generating further indignation towards anti-abolitionists.

The interviews of the Metropolitan Police Committee took place during the month of February 1861. The transcripts reveal an aggressive attempt by Whiting to expose and humiliate publicly anti-abolitionist leaders and to root out evidence of a formal organization of anti-abolitionists in Boston. The committee questioned numerous individuals, successfully pressing them to admit involvement in the riots. Several witnesses also reluctantly admitted knowledge of an anti-abolitionist organization, the symbol of which was a bundle of sticks. Though witnesses denied it, Whiting suggested through questioning that

⁸⁷*Liberator*, January 25, 1861, 3.

the secret organization had planned the riots, paid individuals to participate, and possibly had ties to city government.⁸⁸ Not only did Whiting take anti-abolitionists to task, he sent a message to any would-be mob participant, particularly the gentlemen of property and standing: anonymity was no longer possible.

Interviews of two of the Tremont Temple mob leaders serve to illustrate the nature of Whiting's inquiries. Jonas H. French, a wealthy merchant from Gloucester, had been at the side of Richard Fay during the anti-abolitionist take-over of the Tremont Temple meeting. Before being sworn in, French stated that he did not recognize the authority of the committee to summon and question him but he would nonetheless cooperate. Other witnesses voiced similar protests, indicating that the committee was not a court and had no right to question them. Repeatedly asked about his role in disrupting the Tremont Temple meeting, French refused to answer "on the ground that it is none of your business." French was asked if he had participated in plans to disrupt Phillips's Music Hall lectures. He denied that he had. The committee concluded by asking him if he participated in an "organization called together by a notice representing a bundle of sticks." French replied he had. "I was told," he said, "that it meant thirty-three states bound together in Union before they were torn apart by abolitionists." Despite the meaning of their symbol, he claimed the organization "has no relation to antislavery meetings or discussion," although he admitted that antislavery "may have been spoken of" during their meetings.⁸⁹

The symbol of the thirty-three sticks bound together was a reference not only to the old fable by Aesop teaching strength in unity but also to the *fasces* used in ancient Rome—a bundle of wooden rods, often including an axe, utilized as a symbol of power and justice. The Boston anti-abolitionists were not the only opponents of antislavery to invoke this symbol. On January 23, 1861, the "working-men of New York" held an

⁸⁸*Boston Herald*, February 20, 1861, 4.

⁸⁹*Boston Herald*, February 26, 1861, 4.

“Anti-Coercion Mass Meeting” condemning abolitionists and “Black Republicans.” They declared Southern slaveholders “the natural ally of Northern laborers” because of their resistance to Northern oligarchs. The meeting passed a series of resolutions supporting secession as a means of taking back the powers “delegated” to the federal government. The first speaker made the same analogy that the Union, as originally conceived by the founders was “like the bundle of sticks which cannot be broken in their solid unity” but that this had been undone by the “Black Republicans.”⁹⁰

The most important of the Metropolitan Police Committee’s quasi-depositions took place on February 19, 1861 with the questioning of Fay, the leader of the Tremont Temple mob. His appearance before the committee drew many spectators. Asked why he had gone to the Tremont Temple meeting, Fay responded that he went in order “to make an expression of public sentiment which would fairly represent Boston.” He claimed flippantly that the abolitionists had cordially elected him chairman of the meeting and that he could not have been more surprised. The committee repeatedly asked for names of individuals who had participated in breaking up the meeting. When pressed, Fay offered three names already known to the committee and said he could not remember any others. During their questioning, the committee implied that Fay and other anti-abolitionists had paid individuals to break up antislavery meetings or donated money to support a secret anti-abolitionist organization. Fay denied this. When shown a meeting notice with an image of a bundle of thirty-seven sticks, Fay replied that he knew the organization and belonged to it. He asserted it had nothing to do with putting down antislavery meetings and said that he hoped the committee members would join. Whiting told him, “I am afraid that is hoping against hope.”⁹¹

⁹⁰*New York Herald*, January 15, 1861, reprinted in the *Memphis Daily Appeal*, January 23, 1861, 2.

⁹¹*Boston Herald*, February 19, 1861, 4.

While those who openly admitted membership in this secret association referred to it as a Unionist organization, abolitionists believed this to be disingenuous and felt that the society played a major role in organizing the Secession Winter riots. Even attorney Henry F. Durant, who represented the city of Boston during the proceedings and defended the reputations of the anti-abolitionist witnesses, compared the activities of the organization to abolitionist associations aimed at “violating laws relative to the rendition of slaves.” He suggested that, though both organizations engaged in activities “inimical to the laws,” the abolitionist vigilance organizations were more “dangerous to the public peace.”⁹² His comments added weight to the abolitionists’ claims that the main purpose of the so-called Unionist society was to organize the anti-abolitionist opposition. The comparison also speaks to the growing organizational similarities between the two rival groups.

In the end, the Metropolitan Police Committee, exercising unusual authority and advancing an abolitionist counterattack, placed the leaders of the Tremont Temple riot on display and insinuated a wide range of immoral, inappropriate, and even illegal behavior on the part of the anti-abolitionists. Newspapers editors reacted sympathetically to abolitionists, even if begrudgingly.⁹³ An unnamed correspondent to the *Liberator* made a striking observation of the effect the committee’s proceedings had on the mobs. A crowd of anti-abolitionists attended Phillips’s February Music Hall lecture. They stood in the street and sat quietly in the galleries, restrained, she said, “in view of the inquiries now before the Legislature.”⁹⁴ There were no further violent outbursts later that Secession Winter.

The Metropolitan Police bill failed as the majority of committee members overruled the abolitionist chairman, Senator Whiting. In the majority report the legislators condemned city authorities for failing to protect lawful meetings and for

⁹²*Boston Herald*, February 20, 1861, 4.

⁹³The editor of the *Salem Register* observed with regret that “obnoxious” abolitionists were now viewed in a sympathetic light. *Salem Register*, January 28, 1861, 2.

⁹⁴*Liberator*, February 22, 1861, 2.

judging which doctrines should or should not be heard in Boston. This did not however, in the committee's view, merit the establishment of a state police force.⁹⁵ Regardless, the abolitionists had succeeded in implementing a successful tactic that exposed anti-abolitionists, enacted a form of justice in the wake of the secession winter riots, and put a stop to the violence.

In the midst of the Secession Winter, a columnist for the *Massachusetts Spy* commented on the mob spirit in Boston and the bleak prospects for free speech:

What does the South demand? . . . Nearly twenty-five years ago, there was a formal demand to have antislavery publications and speakers suppressed in the north; and that demand is pressed still with unabated emphasis . . . this most atrocious crusade against personal freedom . . . It forbids us to be men. We must sink to the condition of the most servile and crawling meanness, or be treated as outlaws.⁹⁶

Focused on the "Slave Power" in the South, the writer ignored the power of anti-abolitionists closer to home who had their own interests, not necessarily controlled by, but in harmony with those of the South. However, his observation that anti-abolitionism, after twenty-five years, was "pressed still with unabated emphasis" is starkly evidenced by tumultuous events of the secession winter. Historians of anti-abolitionism have focused on the initial outbreak of anti-abolitionist violence of the 1830s and argued that mob violence faded away after 1837 as the establishment of antislavery societies levelled off, suggesting a degree of acceptance on the part of the anti-abolitionists once antislavery societies became more permanent fixtures.⁹⁷

An exploration of the more aggressive phase of Boston anti-abolitionism in the months leading up to the Civil War challenges such notions. Anti-abolitionist animosity did not abate in Boston after the 1830s. The history of the struggle between anti-abolitionists and abolitionists in Boston illuminates a series

⁹⁵*Liberator*, April 5, 1861, 3.

⁹⁶*Massachusetts Spy*, January 10, 1861, 2.

⁹⁷Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing*, 159–60.

of tactical maneuvers that played out not only in the streets but in the press and, most important, in the chambers of the State House. The politics of the conflict and the legislative efforts generated both by anti-abolitionists and abolitionists in reaction to and in concert with mob action represented an essential and decisive part of the struggle. Prior studies focusing on one-sided anti-abolitionist aggression of the 1830s fail to take into account the political complexities of the conflict and the agency of abolitionist activists in developing tactics to end the mobbing successfully.⁹⁸

Interpretations focusing solely on the Garrison mob typically portray the abolitionists as persevering but passive. In fact, the abolitionists actively put down the threat of mobs through a successful publicity campaign based on the rights of free speech and, still more effectively, by turning legislative committee hearings to their advantage. While anti-abolitionists successfully shored up control of the city government, aiming to stomp out antislavery activism through local politics and institutions, abolitionists were more successful on the state level. Abolitionists such as Wendell Phillips provoked violence to draw attention to their cause and struck back with a legislative effort to establish a Metropolitan Police Force controlled by an abolitionist governor to protect their meetings, using the legislative process to interrogate and embarrass publicly anti-abolitionist leaders. Shamed in the press and before legislators on Beacon Hill for violating the right of free speech, anti-abolitionists abandoned mob violence. The tactics abolitionists employed were more extensive than previously interpreted as were the tactics they used to fight back. Ultimately, anti-abolitionist attacks, whether physical or political, were turned back upon them, provoked and used by abolitionists in their successful efforts to end a crusade against personal freedom.

⁹⁸As Stanley Harrold pointed out in *The Abolitionists and the South, 1831–1861* (particularly 65–66), abolitionists were more radical than commonly depicted and, through their efforts to help fugitive slaves and promote insurrection in the South, engaged directly in sectional conflict.

Patrick T.J. Browne *is a PhD candidate in History at Boston University. He is the former Executive Director of Pilgrim Hall Museum in Plymouth and the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society. His dissertation focuses on the efforts of the US Sanitary Commission and other organizations to provide aid to Civil War veterans and their families during and in the immediate aftermath of the war.*