

ABOLITIONISTS ORGANIZE: THE MAINE ANTISLAVERY SOCIETY
(Conclusion)

by Edward O. Schriver
Archivist, University of Maine

To aid and to strengthen his case against slavery and slaveholders, Thurston was able on occasion to enlist a traveling companion who was also a convinced abolitionist. On one of his trips he took Charles L. Remond, who had come to Maine on his own to strike a blow against oppression. The two men used all the energy and all the eloquence they had to shatter the resistance of Maine people to the cause of abolition. The method they employed to attempt to "abolitionize" Bethel in Oxford County serves as an example of how the message of antislavery was transmitted. (10) When they arrived in the town, the haying season was in full swing and the day itself was sunny and warm. Expecting under such circumstances as these not to attract a sizeable audience, they were surprized, and pleased, to confront a crowd "coming up pretty well towards a Sabbath Audience." Thurston spoke first. He excitedly laid before them the indictment against slavery--its sinful nature, the inhumanity of the slaveholder, and the horrors and cruelty of the whip--speaking for an hour and a half with such skill that his audience hung on his every word. After Thurston had finished his lecture, a choir of singers provided release from the tension which he had generated by singing "a select piece, well adapted to the occasion with taste and accuracy." But the emotional relief provided by the choir was only momentary; for then Remond proceeded to assail the bastions of slavery, holding the crowd transfixed by the sheer intensity of his attack. So satisfied was Thurston at the end of the day's labors that he optimistically concluded that "the principles of righteousness will gain the ascendancy over false principles of expediency."

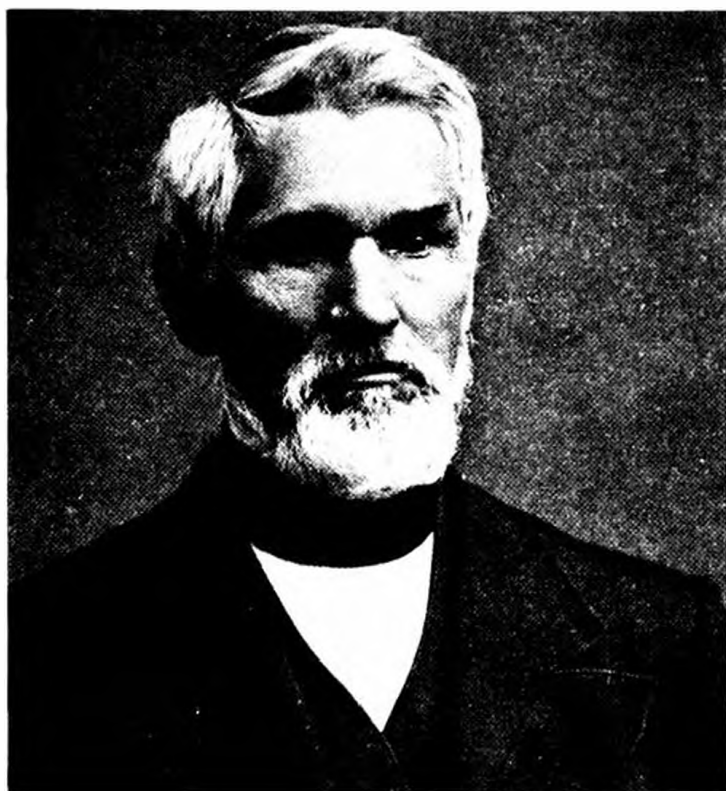
In spite of his early claims of success, Thurston's tour met with strong resistance, an opposition which was apparent in the small audiences which came to hear him speak and in his inability to attract large numbers into the societies which he helped to encourage or to form. Despite his failure to set Maine aglow with the heat of abolition, Thurston maintained his commitment to the cause of emancipation and to the truth for which it stood. On his retirement from the field as an agent of the Maine Antislavery Society, he pledged his continued belief in the goodness of the cause of antislavery:

Never was my own mind more deeply convinced of the truth, the righteousness, or the magnitude of the abolition enterprise, then at the time I decided to return to the bosom of my family, and to the duties, the responsibilities, trials, sorrows, and joys of ministering to the beloved flock, among whom half my three score years have been spent. (11)

When Thurston returned to his parish, Ichabod Coddington picked up the mantle. In 1839 and 1840 Coddington and Remond, when he was in Maine, moved about the state. The two agitators condemned their opposition for the cruel prejudice directed at the Negro and the abolitionist. Remond censured with venom-tipped words those who directed their prejudices at the colored man simply because he was colored and, before the audience could recover its composure, Coddington hit them with an equally passionate denunciation of those who discriminated against the abolitionists because they wanted to do the humane thing, to free the slaves. Coddington, according to the testimony of abolitionist Samuel M. Pond of Bucksport, possessed the personal magnetism powerful enough to convert even the most stubborn doubter. But Remond and Coddington did no better than Thurston in demonstrating to the people of Maine the urgency and the righteousness of abolition.

Another fiery lecturer, the Rev. Charles T. Torrey, made the last notable attempt to penetrate the armor of those who, in one way or another, resisted the pleas and the exhortations of the antislavery agitators. He came to the state in 1841 for an "abolitionizing trip" and delivered several addresses at Wiscasset, Thomaston, Camden, Belfast, and Prospect. As had his predecessors, Torrey found it hard to lecture on abolition in Maine. At Wiscasset there were few hearers and no place to lecture; so he moved to Woolwich where he was able to get a skeleton audience to hear him. Next on his schedule were Waldoboro, East Thomaston, and Belfast. If in Waldoboro, there were too many supporters who feared "to jeopardize their whig consciences by attending a meeting," there were in East Thomaston some not so ardent supporters who preferred to hurl eggs; and in Belfast at least one opponent whose aim was accurate enough to hit Torrey square on the face. After such harrowing experiences as these, and after a relatively quiet lecture at Skowhegan, Torrey felt it best to leave Maine to its own unabolitionized devices.

The Maine abolitionists depended upon the press as well as general agents to implement their program. The Society's



Austin Willey
(1806-1896)

newspaper, *The Advocate of Freedom*, appeared for the first time on March 8, 1838, at Brunswick. (12) It was established to be "exclusively an antislavery paper; it undertook to awaken a deeper interest in the cause of our enslaved countrymen" by spreading knowledge of the character of American slavery. But, although ably edited, first by Professor William Smyth of Bowdoin College, a teacher of mathematics and a solid abolitionist; and then by Austin Willey, the paper met with no more favorable response than had the campaigns of the traveling agents.

Willey had to struggle with every means at his command to keep it going. The need for support to keep the paper alive was emphasized by the constant pleas for new readers and for financial assistance. David Thurston, who served on the Executive Committee of the State Society, made plea after plea for the paper during its short life of three years. He had a particular facility for delivering an emotional, yet appealing cry for help. "Will you do your duty?," he asked, "Are you a subscriber to the *Advocate*....Think of the bleeding slave, and then act, as you wish you had done when you meet him at the bar of God." (13) But these cries for aid were to no avail and the paper was forced to close down on June 12, 1841.

Petitioning supplemented the work done by the traveling agents and the Society's newspaper, but the results of the

petition campaign directed at the Maine Legislature were as meager as the harvest reaped by the other two methods of attacking the slave system. The issue which incited the Maine antislavery petitioners to work at a fever pitch was slavery in the District of Columbia. When the capital of a nation which was built upon the foundation of the equality of man was the scene of the sale of human flesh, they lamented, all righteous men were required to rise as one to end the oppression.

Samuel Fessenden and several hundred others begged the Maine Legislature to send instructions to the Maine delegation in Congress to work with those who would abolish slavery in Washington. Fessenden and his followers stood firm in the belief that while Congress might not have any control over slavery in the individual states, it did have not only the constitutional right, but also the constitutional duty, to end the slave system in the nation's capital. But all the efforts of the excited abolitionists did not influence the opinions of the majority of the members of the Maine Legislature. The Joint Committee appointed by that body to consider petitions on slavery rejected the appeal of the petitioners and recommended that it not be acted upon by the legislators. A minority reported that they did not agree with the majority of the legislators, but this was the only satisfaction that the Fessenden forces got out of the whole affair. In fact, the sole achievement of the petition campaign was in keeping the issue open by flooding the Legislature with petitions to force it to act.

The most unusual means employed to spread the antislavery argument was the children's lecture. What more appropriate place to begin was there, the abolitionists reasoned, than with children who had yet to be stained with the guilt of slavery? David Thurston was the most agile of the members of the Maine Antislavery Society in presenting the antislavery case to children. One of his most convincing performances was before the Juvenile Antislavery Society of Winthrop. (14) First he prepared the minds of the children to hate slavery by describing in the most vivid terms the sinful nature and the horrors of slaveholding. Once the minds of his hearers were sufficiently primed with antislavery opinions, he confronted them with the decisive objection to the bondage system. "Holding a human being, a man, or woman, or child, as property, as something to be sold and bought as though it were a beast," was, Thurston charged, the horrible offense of the slaveholder. (15) To complete his brief against the institution of slavery, he asked his little listeners if there

were any other reasons why slaveholding was a dreadful sin. Their reply indicated the success of his attempt to indoctrinate them: "Yes," they chimed as one, "God says 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself'." The lecture session was concluded by several suggestions, at the prodding of the lecturer, offered by the children indicating what children could do to help free the slave. Children could help, they all agreed, by giving their money, by offering their constant prayers, and by continuously practicing self-denial for the sake of the slave.

The final means employed by the Maine Antislavery Society to promote and to disseminate its message was the annual meeting. The principal instrument used to express the consensus of the annual meeting was the resolution. The conviction most often expressed in the form of a resolve was the one which described the sinful and criminal nature of slavery. Year after year the halls where the Society met rang with firm, and often angry, denunciations of the slave system. The Maine trustees used the resolution to condemn slavery in the District of Columbia, to express opposition to the annexation of Texas, to denounce the churches for their lack of initiative in the cause of the oppressed, to demand the right to speak freely against social evils, to praise emancipation in the West Indies, and to register their disgust for those who opposed antislavery.

The Maine Antislavery Society held its first annual gathering in October, 1835, at Brunswick and continued to meet yearly until January, 1845. By that date the Maine abolitionists were promoting two other antislavery endeavors besides. the antislavery society itself--the Liberty Party and the Religious Antislavery Conventions. Thinking it best to consolidate their efforts, the abolitionists abandoned the Maine Antislavery Society to concentrate on political and religious opposition to slavery. All that was left of the Society after 1845 were the local associations and the independent action of its former members.

-----NOTES-----

(10) [Brunswick] *The Advocate of Freedom*, August 16, 1838.

(11) *The Advocate of Freedom*, August 16, 1838.

(12) From March 8, 1838, to April 25, 1839, the paper was published at Brunswick; from April 25, 1839, to April 18, 1840, at Augusta; and from April 18, 1840, to June 12, 1841,

at Hallowell.

(13) [Augusta] *The Advocate of Freedom*, May 9, 1839.

(14) [Brunswick] *The Advocate of Freedom*, April 11, 1838.

(15) *The Advocate of Freedom*, April 11, 1838.

WRITINGS IN MAINE HISTORY

Books

Banks, Ronald F., editor. *A History of Maine; A collection of Readings on the History of Maine 1600-1970*. Dubuque, Iowa, Kendall/Hunt, 1969.

For years teachers of Maine history have complained at the lack of printed material for classroom use in the teaching of Maine on any level. In fact the cries have been so loud and so prolonged it is hard to understand why something before this could not have been done about it. And something was but nothing as ambitious as the present volumes of "readings" compiled by the industrious Ronald F. Banks when he was teaching a course in Maine history at the University of Maine in Orono.

Way back in the early 1930's, to aid her students in their study of Maine at the same University, Miss Ava Chadbourne published at her own expense another short collection of "readings", chiefly by the earlier writers in the colonial period. The volume was thin and anemic with nothing much to nourish it. At that time little of significance had been written in any category of Maine history after statehood. How true this was is proven now by the datelines found in the essays which are included in the present volume. Of the 46 essays presented, only ten were published before 1935, and only one of these, Henry S. Burrage's account of the Northeastern boundary dispute, is concerned with the period of statehood. As further proof of the value of recent investigations in Maine history is the fact that of the essays included by editor Banks which have to do with the period before statehood, over half were written after 1935.

One might ask - why this sudden spurt in creative scholarship in the field of Maine history? A number of things contributed to it. Not the least of these was the revival of interest in Maine history found at the University in Orono