

The Abolition Movement in Minnesota

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PRESIDENT LINCOLN'S EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION was no bolt out of the blue. It did not stun a surprised and unwary populace, for storm warnings had long been circulated by weather prophets in political garb. For decades, the ominous cloud of abolition had hovered over the land, and each year found the storm more threatening. A gusty wind, à la William Lloyd Garrison, had helped Theodore Weld, "eloquent as an angel and powerful as thunder," and James G. Birney blow the storm clouds directly overhead.

The citizenry of the Northwest viewed the gathering storm with mixed feelings of joy and regret. A growing group hoped that the clouds would shower freedom upon those held in slavery. Another portion of the populace feared the storm would increase sectional enmity, rent asunder the Democratic party, and bring a rain of bullets and death. Some of the latter understood the working of the Southern mind, recognizing that the portentous thunderhead forced slaveholders to seek shelter in an intensified Southern nationalism as they rationalized the case for slavery. For the South viewed the gathering gloom as man-made—the work of Northern fanatics and the product of Yankee meddling and a debased witchcraft.

Minnesota, new as a state, was within the storm area. Settlers from New England, New York, and Pennsylvania carried their prejudices with them, and they or their descendants were responsible for much of the antislavery sentiment in the youngest state of the Middle West. Many of them had been exposed to the rhymes of Whittier, the repetitious ranting of Garrison, the oratorical persuasion of Wendell Phillips, the pulpit-prompted predilections of Henry Ward Beecher, the contagious evangelism of Weld, or the crusading zeal of Birney. Early Minnesotans who migrated from the East hoped the views of the immigrants from Europe would parallel theirs. But many Irish and German Catholics joined the ranks of the Democratic party, despite its proslavery proclivities, for the scarlet mark of Know-Nothingism was very evident upon the Republican party banner. Neither did the German Lutherans fall for Republican charms; they were not opposed as a group to the views of the Reverend C. F. W. Walther of St. Louis, genius of the Missouri Synod, who had

written an able theological defense of slavery. Minnesota Norwegians could be influenced either by *Nordstjernen*, an ardent pro-Democratic paper of the late 1850's, or by *Emigranten*, its competitor in the Norwegian-language field, which upheld the principles of antislavery as it beat the drum for the Republican party.¹

Even before Minnesota became a state, two abolitionists had gone west to settle and leave their marks upon its history. The earlier Enoch was a courageous clergyman, the Reverend Henry M. Nichols, who was not afraid to mix politics and religion. In a Fourth of July oration in 1854 he attacked the Kansas-Nebraska Act. "This day we have occasion to rejoice with trembling," he said sadly; "fair freedom has received a wound." In sermons and in antislavery addresses he condemned the South's efforts to build a slave state out of Kansas as well as the Fugitive Slave Law. Dejectedly he declared of the slaveholders, "If they please they may call their roll of slaves on Bunker's Hill, & we must stand by them and support them in their right" for the Fugitive Slave Law made all Northerners "turn man-hunters, & go off like hounds, baying on the track of the fugitive." While the United States Supreme Court heard the arguments presented in the Dred Scott case, Nichols gave full publicity to his views. He set himself in direct opposition to the "political desperadoes" who tried to "cram" Negro slavery into the territories. In a sermon of December 10, 1857, Nichols predicted that eventually: "The stain spots on our political purity will all be removed. The black gangrene upon our southern limbs will be entirely healed. *Slavery shall die; its death knell shall come, because, God reigns.*"²

The light generated by the second abolitionist emissary dimmed Nichols' efforts and contributions. Mrs. Jane Grey Swisshelm, nationally known as an ardent abolitionist, so dominated the publicity picture that the energetic efforts of others remain almost unnoticed. She began her newspaper career in Pittsburgh, where she contributed to an antislavery paper, the *Spirit of Liberty*. When that *Spirit* died for want of mammon, Mrs. Swisshelm founded its successor, the *Saturday Visiter*. In its cramped columns she denounced "slave-catching" as a crime and lumped the Mexican War into the same category. During a short stay in Louis-

¹ Joel S. Torstenson, "The Attitude of the Lutheran Church toward Slavery," 88 (1940). A typewritten copy of this master's thesis, prepared at the University of Minnesota, is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. The author makes it clear that synod meetings held in Wisconsin, Missouri, and Minnesota failed to take a public stand against slavery. See also Hildegard Binder Johnson, "The Election of 1860 and the Germans in Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 28:20-36 (March, 1947); and Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America: The American Transition*, 318-324 (Northfield, 1940).

² Charles W. Nichols, "Henry M. Nichols and Frontier Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 19:254, 255, 261 (September, 1938).

ville, she learned about the seamy side of slavery. She recognized slave breeding as an abhorrent practice, and she became convinced that the "ungentlemanly gentlemen" who kept slaves "lived, in whole or in part, by the sale of their own children, and the labor of the mothers extorted by the lash."³

While concerned with the sufferings of others, she did not neglect to recognize her own. She found the pathway to marital bliss strewn with thorns and thistles, rather than roses. So she became a fugitive from an unhappy marriage and went to stay with a sister in St. Cloud. She revived her interest in editing, secured control of the facilities of a St. Cloud newspaper office, and began publication of the *St. Cloud Visiter*. In an early issue she stated her creed: "The Bible, and the Constitution of the United States are antislavery; and human chattledom is unconstitutional in any association professing to receive either as fundamental law."⁴

While calling down the wrath of God upon the slaveholders, the impetuous and independent editor soon brought the wrath of the leading St. Cloud Democrat upon her own head. General Sylvanus B. Lowry, an ex-Tennessean of pro-Southern views who lived in plantation style upon his estate, disapproved not only of the lady's views but also of her influence and its role in the resuscitation of the Republican party in the St. Cloud region. As a man of considerable means, dispensator of federal patronage in his district, and dictator of the Democratic party in the community, General Lowry wanted to force the *Visiter* to support his political party's program and serve its purposes. Friends rallied to the support of both Mrs. Swisshelm and Lowry. Personalities, partisanship, prejudices, and passions were injected into the dispute. On March 24, 1858, the growling general and several friends conducted a midnight raid on Mrs. Swisshelm's newspaper office. They smashed the press on which she produced the *Visiter*, and collected the type, scattering some in the street, and consigning the rest to the murky bottom of the Mississippi. In the wrecked room they left a penciled note, stating that "the citizens of St. Cloud have determined to abate the nuisance," and that efforts to "repeat the offence" would bring "a more serious penalty." Mrs. Swisshelm's Republican friends criticized the act of vandalism, sponsored a mass meeting to refurnish the office of the *Visiter*, and made political capital out of the episode. Confessions and lawsuits followed—then concessions and promises by both parties. But the tactical victory belonged to Mrs. Swisshelm, who changed the name of her paper to the *St. Cloud*

³ Jane Grey Swisshelm, *Half a Century*, 53 (Chicago, 1880).

⁴ *St. Cloud Visiter*, December 24, 1857.

Democrat, thus pigeonholing promises she or her friends had made not to re-establish the *Visiter*.⁵

The feud revealed that the abolitionist editor possessed a latent talent; she learned that she had platform appeal and a speaker's potentialities. In the years that followed she developed the lecturer's art and toured Minnesota annually, giving addresses on "Slavery as I Have Seen It in a Slave State" and similar subjects in every city and hamlet where the Republicans could hire a hall.

When the Lowry-Swisshelm controversy seemed to lose its force, the resolute and mettlesome editor launched a flank attack. The new victim of her vehemence was the Reverend Thomas Calhoun, a visiting Tennessee Presbyterian clergyman and a brother-in-law of Lowry. Mrs. Swisshelm, reluctant to conversion, questioned the persuasive preacher about his views on slavery. In conversations Calhoun stated his rational opposition to that peculiar Southern institution, yet when a Negro slave servant of his St. Cloud household gave birth to a child, he sent both the mother and her baby back to Tennessee and into slavery. Mrs. Swisshelm, convinced in her own mind of Calhoun's insincerity, waged a war of words upon him in the columns of her journal. His presence in her community gave her a chance to rekindle the fires of abolitionism. Her Republican colleagues nodded approvingly, for she won converts for their cause and weakened the foundation of Lowry's political house.⁶

In August, 1860, an incident occurred in St. Anthony which revealed that Minnesota was far from "abolitionized." The Winslow House was an aristocratic and popular rendezvous of Southern gentlemen who went North to vacation or to investigate business opportunities. Negro servants, as slaves, often were a part of their retinues. One Negro maid, vacillating in her loyalty to her master, played into the hands of a group of ardent abolitionists. They secured a writ which took her into court on the grounds that she was "restrained of her liberty." When the awe-stricken Negro lost heart, when conservatives took inventory of the effect such an incident would have upon the future of the Winslow House and St. Anthony, and when her master acquitted himself honorably in the courtroom, the local attitude toward Eliza Winston changed. On the night of the trial, unwelcome guests gathered about the chief abolitionist

⁵ Arthur J. Larsen, *Crusader and Feminist: Letters of Jane Grey Swisshelm, 1858-1865*, 16 (St. Paul, 1934). Mrs. Swisshelm felt that the *Democrat* was justified in name as an organ of the Republican party, for it was the medium by which democratic and liberal principles were promulgated.

⁶ The Swisshelm story can best be reconstructed from her autobiography, *Half a Century*; S. J. Fisher, "Reminiscences of Jane Grey Swisshelm," in the *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, 4:165-174 (July, 1921); and Larsen, *Crusader and Feminist*. The latter work contains an excellent biographical sketch of Mrs. Swisshelm and many of her letters.

complainant's house, threatening that he would be "tarred and feathered" and forced into "riding the rail." But a pistol shot and a heavy rainstorm dampened the ardor of the vigilantes. Although Eliza escaped to Canada, the incident was not closed. The Democratic press linked the "abduction" of the slave to abolition fanatics and Republican enthusiasts. The Republican press retaliated with a stream of invectives, denouncing advocates of violence and the enemies of freedom and liberty. In both branches of the state legislature, the Democrats sponsored resolutions which would permit slaveholders to bring their slave servants with them and hold them to service within Minnesota's borders for five-month periods. But the Republicans defeated the resolutions, thus demonstrating their inhospitality to slavery.⁷

The Eliza Winston incident took place on the eve of the elections of 1860, when Minnesotans were participating in their first presidential election. Although the homestead question and the railroad bond issue were the pivotal points around which the election revolved,⁸ the abolitionists waved their banner energetically. In the *St. Cloud Democrat*, Mrs. Swisshelm made an emotional plea for emancipation, and she had the support of other Republicans who were soon to be labeled "Radicals" and "Black Republicans." Orville Brown, editor of the *Faribault Central Republican*, began the campaign for radicalism which won him the sobriquet of "Awful" Brown and the title of "fire-eater." The *State Atlas* of Minneapolis and its William S. King clan prepared a tasty dish of bold Republicanism seasoned with abolitionism. Ignatius Donnelly, campaigning for the office of lieutenant governor on the Republican ticket, exhibited the greatest degree of party talent in refuting the arguments of Democratic aspirant Stephen A. Douglas. The doughty Donnelly prophesied the coming of the day when "no human being shall wear the shackles of servitude." The Democrats paid Mrs. Swisshelm a high compliment when they labeled her effigy "the mother of the Republican party" before they consigned it to the flames.⁹

⁷ *St. Cloud Democrat*, September 6, October 11, 1860; *St. Anthony Weekly Express*, August 25, September 1, 1860; *Daily Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), August 22, 23, 24, 1860; *State Atlas* (Minneapolis), August 29, 1860; *Minnesota, Senate Journal*, 1859-60, p. 599-601; *House Journal*, 1859-60, p. 649. For an objective, though brief, summary of the entire Eliza Winston episode, see William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:69 (St. Paul, 1924).

⁸ For detailed discussions of these issues, see Verne E. Chatelain, "The Federal Land Policy and Minnesota Politics, 1854-1860," in *Minnesota History*, 22:227-248 (September, 1941); Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:44-47; and Rasmus B. Saby, "Railroad Legislation in Minnesota, 1849-1875," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15:10-47.

⁹ Daniel S. B. Johnston, "Minnesota Journalism in the Territorial Period," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 10:303; Winfred A. Harbison, "President Lincoln and the Faribault Fire-eater," in *Minnesota History*, 20:269-286 (September, 1939); *St. Cloud Democrat*, November 1, 1860; Larsen, *Crusader and Feminist*, 22.

Editor Charles P. Adams, who had called John Brown of Harper's Ferry fame a "murderer" and "fiend incarnate," led the opposition in his *Hastings Democrat*.¹⁰ The *Pioneer and Democrat* of St. Paul flew Douglas' colors and preached moderation, while condemning fanaticism. The *Charfield Democrat* also belabored the abolition issue, for Minnesota Democracy needed a matador's cloak to attract the voters' gaze from the weak position which that party held on all basic questions.

While Republican partisans celebrated Lincoln's victory at the polls and quarreled over the plums of patronage, the ship of state floundered on the jagged rocks of secession. Skipper Buchanan, seasick and faint-hearted, tried to sail the hazardous course between the Scylla of concession and the Charybdis of coercion. Congress failed to agree upon any peaceful solution, and the national convention of states found no common ground for an amicable settlement. The abolitionists recognized that any compromise would devitalize their crusade, and the rabid Republican partisans feared that concessions to the South would wreck their party. By refusing to send delegates to the national convention, Minnesota Republicans contributed their bit to quashing the peace efforts.¹¹ Governor Alexander Ramsey had a reputation as one of the most radical of the Northern governors. A year earlier he had firmly denied the right of Southerners to extend slavery into the territories and then, when peace proposals were pending, he took the view that South Carolina had already levied war upon the United States, and that before the administration could consider compromise it must first put down the treason. On January 14, 1861, the Minnesota legislature adopted a joint resolution declaring that secession implied revolution and civil war, and pledged aid in men and money to the government, to the extent of the state's ability, for checking rebellion and treason.¹²

The abolitionists were not sure of Lincoln and they found little to cheer them in his inaugural address when he declared unequivocally: "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so."¹³

The Fort Sumter affair fired the North into action. The tidal wave of patriotism ran high in Minnesota; it obliterated party lines, stimulated volunteering, and hurled the challenge:

¹⁰ See the issue for December 10, 1859.

¹¹ Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin were the only Northern states that refused to send delegates.

¹² Minnesota, *House Journal*, 1859-60, p. 163-183; 1861-62, p. 56; *Winona Republican*, January 11, 1860.

¹³ James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 6:5 (New York, 1896).

Men of the North and West
Wake in your might!
Prepare, as the rebels have done,
For the fight;
You cannot shrink from the test—
Rise! Men of the North and West!¹⁴

War brought new hope for the abolitionists—they planned to intertwine the strands of abolition, Republican partisanship, and war into a rope that could pull slavery to its death. “Awful” Brown wasted no time in advocating an emancipation proclamation that would free the slaves in every state that persisted in rebellion. This native of New York State, who went to Minnesota to make his mark in journalism, antedated Horace Greeley in espousing emancipation by presidential proclamation. Mrs. Swisshelm viewed the national crisis as God’s curse upon a people who lacked the moral courage to do what was right—a curse upon humans who had hardened their hearts to the pleas of humanity as they violated “God’s law.” The radical and impulsive editor of the *Chatfield Republican* hoped that the war would overthrow slavery. “Now that this hideous monster of African Slavery has seen fit to inaugurate civil war, and raise the black banner of piracy and seeks to destroy in toto the government of our fathers,” he wrote, “the conviction is forcing itself upon the minds of all right thinking men, that this damnable leprosy, this plague spot of our free institutions, this breeder of treason, piracy and murder . . . had best be overthrown on this continent forever.” Continuing the theme, Brown expressed his demands in more forthright phrases: “Slavery by the position it has taken as against the Union has no wrights now on this continent that freedom is bound to respect. By its villianous treason it has forfeited all claims to Government protection, and we sincerely hope that the victory which is certain to be won by the Unionists, shall carry with it freedom to every bondsman in America.”¹⁵

Minnesota’s rabid Republican press circulated the views of the fiery Eastern abolitionists. Henry Ward Beecher, propagandist and pulpiteer, received space in the state’s papers for his radical pronouncements. Many editors first clipped, then restated editorially, the following item: “The grand result—the only solution of the question—is fast coming up—the emancipation of the slaves by the nation. . . . Let our armies, as a ‘military necessity’ and strategical act, declare ‘freedom’ to all, and in a moment we will have an army of 4,000,000 human beings on our side—allies in every house and on every plantation. The enemy is demoralized.

¹⁴ *Daily Pioneer and Democrat*, May 5, 1861.

¹⁵ Harbison, in *Minnesota History*, 20:276; *St. Cloud Democrat*, June 20, 1861; *Chatfield Republican*, May 28, 1861.

Panic sweeps through the Southern land. Here is a foe more dreadful than Northern armies."¹⁶

The Democrats heard with alarm the rising abolition chorus, and they hoped that the songsters of emancipation would not charm the entire membership of the Republican party. The discordant notes of the conservative Republicans were pleasing to the ears of the dissident Democrats. Irish and German communities spoke of the conflict as "a war for the nigger." Walther of the Missouri Synod, whose influence in Minnesota was considerable, conveyed to his fellow Germans his views on national affairs; he believed the Lincoln administration was a "fanatical abolitionist" regime that was trying to accomplish by force of arms what it had been unable to do by peaceful persuasion. The conservative papers, exemplified by the *Pioneer and Democrat*, warned the administration that they opposed abolition and that their support of the war was conditional. Its editor declared that "While pledged to support the administration in all constitutional measures for the energetic prosecution of the war, we do not propose to defend its unconstitutional acts."¹⁷

The approach of the fall elections of 1861 brought about the resurrection of party lines and the reassessment of party issues. The Democratic press railed against Simon Cameron's "shoddy plundering," challenged the Republican high tariff policy, and complained that the Republicans preached a bipartisan policy while monopolizing patronage and pelf. To hide party disunity, the Democrats pulled the ghoulish ghost of abolition across the political stage to scare the marginal voters into their party's camp.

The Democratic call to the party's convention implored Minnesotans to shake the "black dust of pol[iti]tution from your garments," for "Black Republicanism has been weighed" and found wanting. The party's state convention, which met in St. Paul on September 12, 1861, adopted a platform which deplored the agitation for abolition and renewed faith in the Crittenden-Johnson Congressional resolution, which declared that the object of the war was not to destroy slavery, but to preserve the Union.¹⁸

Radical Republicans kept the abolition pot boiling. S. C. Pomeroy of Kansas introduced a bill calling for the immediate abolition of slavery by

¹⁶ Quoted in the *Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, July 12, 1861. The St. Paul editor did not agree with Beecher, but he quoted the New Yorker to illustrate fanaticism for purposes of refutation.

¹⁷ Torstenson, "Attitude of the Lutheran Church," 89; *Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, July 19, 1861; Laura Howe Carpenter, *Reminiscences of Pioneer Life*, 18. The latter is an undated, privately printed pamphlet describing conditions in frontier rural Hennepin County. The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy.

¹⁸ *Chatfield Democrat*, August 24, 1861; Richardson, *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 6:430.

presidential proclamation. Democratic leaders ranted and raved. Editor John S. McKenny of the *Chatfield Democrat* endorsed the position of a La Crosse editor who declared: "We are for the Union, no matter who is President so long as the rights guaranteed all by the Constitution are kept sacred, but if the law to abolish slavery passes, we shall go South to fight." This whining of the so-named "abolition hounds" unnerved numerous Democrats. One asked dejectedly: "In the name of God how much longer is this hellish negro agitation to be kept up? . . . The wave of abolitionism is fast followed by blood and yet men stand up and offer bills to add fuel to the flame."¹⁹

Another portion of emotionalism was added to the political pottage on August 30, 1861, when General John C. Frémont, commanding the Department of the West from his St. Louis headquarters, published an extraordinary proclamation instituting martial law throughout the state of Missouri and proclaiming that the property of all rebels would be confiscated and their slaves "declared free men."²⁰ President Lincoln, trying to keep the border states in the Union and soliciting the support of Northern conservatives, soon reversed Frémont's order and later removed him from command. But the entire episode roiled both the radical Republicans and the Democratic chieftains; the former condemned Lincoln while the Democrats vented their rage upon Frémont.

Editor H. W. Holley of the *Chatfield Republican* took a hand in chastising the president; Holley had envisioned the "institution of human slavery" going down before "the just indignation of freeman." Brown of the *Faribault Central Republican* treated his president less respectfully. He accused Lincoln of "an act of cowardly imbecility and treachery to his former teachings." The revocation was "an act of dastardly imbecility which stands without its parallel in the an[n]als of Presidents." The *Winona Republican* complimented Frémont for depriving the rebels of their "sinews" of war. Mrs. Swishelm bitterly denounced Lincoln for repudiating Frémont's proclamation, accusing him of "treachery." A Congregational conference in Anoka passed a resolution heartily approving Frémont's actions and prayed that "all the legitimate powers of the government" would be "exerted not to protect but destroy slavery."²¹

Although the abolition radical corps in the Republican ranks beat the drum of freedom lustily, it could not induce the party to nail an abolition

¹⁹ *Chatfield Democrat*, August 3, 17, 1861. The editor quoted the *La Crosse Democrat*, which printed editorials full of vindictiveness. They were frequently clipped and featured by Democratic editors in Minnesota.

²⁰ Frank Moore, ed., *The Rebellion Record*, 3:10 (New York, 1894-1922).

²¹ *Chatfield Democrat*, August 17, September 28, October 26, 1861; *Faribault Central Republican*, September 25, 1861; *Winona Republican*, September 16, 1861.

plank into its platform. One delegate wanted to insert such a plank as a concession to the antislavery faction; slavery was the cause of the war, he said, and the object of the war ought to be the abolition of slavery. But the conservatives felt that such a knotty plank might not carry the public, so they took no official stand on abolition or emancipation. They made a concession, however, when they adopted a resolution endorsing confiscation of Negro slaves, for, they said, it would bring to human beings "free enjoyment of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."²²

Minnesota's chief officials were not unanimous in their views. Senator Morton S. Wilkinson put himself nearest the left flank by endorsing Frémont's action and regretting that of Lincoln in countermanding the proclamation. Congressman William Windom of the first district straddled the fence by approving both Frémont's proclamation and Lincoln's nullification. Congressman Cyrus Aldrich also defined his position ambiguously, much to the consternation of the opinionated Mrs. Swisshelm. Although in his first message to the state legislature, Governor Ramsey went on record as saying "we can never assent . . . to any interference with slavery in the States," the politically conscious governor later retreated from his position and stood by, waiting for Republican party sentiment to crystallize before he jumped overboard into the abolition pool.²³

Ironically, the president's chief defenders were Democrats, members of the "opposition party." Minnesota's senior senator, Henry M. Rice, defended Lincoln and announced his disapproval of Frémont's proclamation resolutely: "To a civil war, prosecuted for the abolition of slavery, I am opposed, now and forever," he wrote.²⁴ This view harmonized with that of most Democrats, evinced by the fact that the *Minnesota Volksblatt* of St. Paul, the *St. Cloud Union*, the *Chatfield Democrat*, the *Winona Daily State*, the *Pioneer and Democrat* of St. Paul, and the *Hastings Democrat*, among others, rallied to the support of Lincoln in his feud with Frémont.

Democratic defeats in the Minnesota fall elections of 1861 spurred the abolitionists to grow more insistent in their demands. According to the *Chatfield Democrat*, after studying his political barometer, Governor Ramsey decided "it would be a good dodge to emancipate the negroes," and reported his conversion to the state legislature in his message of January 9, 1862. A host of radical Republican editors restated their views

²² The Republican program is viewed critically in the *Chatfield Democrat*. See especially the issue of September 14, 1861.

²³ *Faribault Central Republican*, October 30, 1861; *St. Cloud Democrat*, October 31, 1861; *House Journal*, 1859-60, p. 163-183.

²⁴ Letter to a Wabasha County committee, October 4, 1861, quoted in *Chatfield Democrat*, October 19, 1861.

and sought to force the issue. Mrs. Swisshelm again demanded emancipation, wrapping her plea in Biblical trimmings: "Remember those dusky browed people of the Lord who out of their ignorance and bonds are crying to him for deliverance. Do not forsake them now and range yourself on the side of the oppressor, but go forward and work, no matter *who* turns back or falters." This feverish feminist not only endorsed freeing all the blacks, but favored arming them and encouraging them to fight in a "holy war."²⁵

The speeches and views of renowned Eastern abolitionists — the harsh indictments of Garrison, the passionate pleas of Beecher, and the persistent pretensions of Greeley — were widely circulated in both Republican and Democratic papers of Minnesota. The Republicans hoped thus to gain new converts; the Democratic editors used them as examples of bad taste and American fanaticism. One dissenting Democratic editor wrote:

Almighty "nigger" rules the fated day,
And o'er our hopes and fears holds perfect sway.²⁶

Despite the pleas of the conservatives of the North, the wheels of emancipation moved forward. On August 6, 1861, Congress passed a confiscation act which provided that owners who employed slaves in hostile military service forfeited claims to their labor. The second confiscation act, passed the following year, went a step further; it provided that the slaves of all persons supporting the "rebellion" should be "forever free of their servitude, and not again held as slaves." A Congressional act of March 13, 1862, prohibited the use of the military power for the return of fugitive slaves who had found their way within the Union lines. On April 16, 1862, Congress abolished slavery in the District of Columbia, with compensation to the owners. The abolitionists accepted these measures, which they regarded merely as crumbs from their table, and clamored for more.

The Democrats meanwhile viewed with alarm the trends and omens. The editor of the *Chatfield Democrat* claimed that the bill to abolish slavery in the Capital City district was "ill-timed" and "injudicious," that the measure was a steppingstone in the abolitionist program, that the law was promoted by a group of fanatics, and that the president had betrayed the wishes of the majority of Americans. Impulsively, the editor suggested that General McClellan detach a force from his army and dispatch it to Washington to "dissolve that corrupt and dangerous body of fanatics," as he called Congress. Democrats sincerely believed that the

²⁵ *Chatfield Democrat*, January 25, 1862; *St. Cloud Democrat*, January 16, 1862.

²⁶ *Chatfield Democrat*, January 11, 1862.

radical Republicans were deliberately turning a war to save the Union into one to free the slaves. So they denounced abolition as a heresy which produced hatred, strife, and bloodshed. They deplored the surrender of the Republican party to the abolition coterie. They ridiculed abolitionism in prose; they satirized it in verses like "The Abolition Wagon."²⁷ One stanza reads:

Come all treacherous Abolitionists, and join in hostile band,
Your going to invade the Southern men and drive them from their land;
Disunion is your motto, and satan is your guide,
So jump into the wagon, and all take a ride.

Wait for the wagon,
The Abolition wagon;
The nigger's in the wagon,
And you'll all take a ride.

President Lincoln put a drag on the wheels of emancipation when he revoked the radical proclamation of General David Hunter. This garrulous commander had decreed freedom for all "persons in . . . Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina—heretofore held as slaves."²⁸ Lincoln revoked Hunter's proclamation and braved the wrath of the abolitionists, who had begun to hope the president would come over to their side.

In Minnesota Mrs. Swisshelm deserted the Lincoln bandwagon, although earlier she had lauded the presidential endorsement of the act abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia. She then was generous in her praise of Lincoln, and she saw him as God's instrument on earth. In her *St. Cloud Democrat* she described the act as a triumph of God, Truth, and Justice. In bold-faced type she told her story: "SLAVERY IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA IS ABOLISHED THE PRESIDENT HAS SIGNED THE BILL, AND TO-DAY NOT A CHAIN IS CLANKED IN THE SHADOW OF OUR NATIONAL CAPITAL!!" But the president's revocation of the Hunter proclamation alienated the crusader; she turned like a mad dog upon her one-time apostle. She gave proof that there is no fury like that of "a woman scorned" as her erstwhile praise became poison. She branded Lincoln's "interference" as "folly," as the act of a pusillanimous and "vacillating weakling."²⁹

To add to the verbal rebuff, Mrs. Swisshelm adopted other idols. Frémont won her praise and applause. Ben Butler, too, she placed upon a pedestal, envisioning him as the Galahad of the abolition movement. While commanding at Fortress Monroe in Virginia, he had confiscated as "contraband" slaves coming into his lines. Later, while commanding

²⁷ *Chatfield Democrat*, April 19, May 24, 1862.

²⁸ Richardson, *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 6:91.

²⁹ *St. Cloud Democrat*, April 24, May 29, 1862.

Federal forces in New Orleans, he again pleased the radicals by his acts and his bold talk. Mrs. Swisshelm believed he possessed both the passion and the courage which Lincoln lacked. Butler's conversion to the abolition cause drew praise in the following rhyme:

Abou Ben Butler (may his tribe increase!)
Awoke one night down by the old Balize,
And saw, outside the comfort of his room,
Making it warmer for the gathering gloom,
A black man shivering in the Winter's cold: —
Exceeding courage made Ben. Butler bold,
And to the presence in the dark he said —
"What wantest thou?" — The figure raised its head,
And with a look made of all sad accord,
Answered — "The men who'll serve the purpose of the Lord."
"And am I one?" said Butler. "Nay, not so,"
Replied the black man. Butler spoke more low
But cheerly still; and said, "*As I am Ben,*
You'll not have cause to tell me that again!"

The figure bowed, and vanished. The next night
It came once more, environed strong in light,
And showed the names whom love of Freedom blessed,
And, lo! Ben. Butler's name led all the rest!³⁰

Other Minnesotans viewed Lincoln's revocation of Hunter's order with alarm. Editor Brown condemned Lincoln's timidity in an editorial entitled "Humiliation Intensified. The President Again on His Knees to the Slave Power." The Reverend J. E. Burbank, editor of the *Preston Republican*, ranted irreligiously. The *St. Paul Press*, organ of Governor Ramsey and radical Republicanism, voiced its approbation of Lincoln's proslave policy. Captain Thomas Foster, an antislavery soldier, announced his intention of returning to Minnesota from the battlefield, establishing a paper there, and conducting "a life-long war . . . against slavery and also against its *advocates* or *apologists* in Minnesota." If the Republican party in Minnesota would not advocate abolition, he would help drive that party to the wall.³¹

Democratic party leaders again found themselves in a dilemma. Their opposition to abolition forced them to defend the administration. They vented their rage upon General Hunter and the movement he represented. They tabbed him a "crazy fanatical General" and called him "a most consummate jackass." The vitriolic McKenny, editor of the *Chatfield Democrat*, alleged: "He has out Heroded Herod in his effort to

³⁰ Quoted from the *Boston Transcript*, in the *St. Cloud Democrat*, March 5, 1863.

³¹ *Faribault Central Republican*, May 28, 1862; Foster to Donnelly, June 30, 1862, Donnelly Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

create a name.”³² The editor’s colleagues joined in the refrain — music to Lincoln’s ear and clamant clatter to the advocates of emancipation.

But the faith of Democratic partisans in the president was short-lived. Lincoln soon took a couple of rapid steps in the direction of emancipation. The pressure of the radical war governors made it a measure of political expediency, for these state executives threatened to relegate Lincoln to the political ash heap and substitute in his stead Salmon P. Chase or Frémont. Furthermore, the pressure of the abolition wing of the Republican party was incessant and puissant. The growth of foreign anti-slavery sentiment aided the cause of the North and made abolitionism respectable. The increasing radicalism of the war mind, exposed to waves of emotion, also helped push the president from the position of caution and conservatism. The stubborn and able resistance of the Southern rebels drove the North to desperation and turned attention to slavery as the cornerstone of Southern economy: “Have we not been playing at war long enough? Why not strike at the root?” asked one Northerner. “Thousands are of the opinion that we must *strike slavery*, or acknowledge the independence of the south. . . . While slavery is allowed to remain, the ‘backbone’ of the rebellion will *not* be broken. I have been a ‘Conservative’ long enough — ‘Conservatism’ will not do. We must adopt ultra measures or *we* are whipped.” War psychosis, thriving upon emotionalism, prepared Northerners for eventual emancipation. The rational man recognized the course of events when he wrote: “One thing is certain — the longer the war continues, providing foreign nations do not interfere, the more certain it is to kill slavery.”³³

Lincoln’s reply to Greeley’s “Prayer of Twenty Millions” indicated a crack in the president’s armor of conservatism.³⁴ This rejoinder of August 22, 1862, justified the war as one essentially for the preservation of the Union, but it prepared the populace for coming events in these masterly words: “My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy Slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that. What I do about Slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save this Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts

³² *Chatfield Democrat*, May 24, 1862.

³³ E. A. Stevens to Donnelly, September 1, 1862; W. C. Dodge to Donnelly, May 27, 1862, Donnelly Papers.

³⁴ In an open letter under this title printed in his *New York Tribune*, Greeley demanded that Lincoln definitely commit himself to emancipation.

the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors, and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.”³⁵

A month later, after General Lee's invasion of the North had been foiled at Antietam, the president issued the preliminary proclamation of emancipation. It promised that on January 1, 1863, slaves in the rebellious states should be “thenceforward and forever free,” and he promised that the military and naval authority would “recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons.”

Democratic papers, which had defended General McClellan against the attack of the radicals and had praised the president for his disposition of Hunter's proclamation, wailed disconsolately. They deplored Lincoln's total surrender to the “abolition wing”; the motive, they charged, was political. “We look upon the whole thing,” wrote one Democratic editor, “as a piece of fanatical folly that will do more harm than good.”³⁶ The Democratic state central committee published an address airing its views on the state of the Union, lamenting that fanatics had a hand in shaping policy and in turning the war into an abolition crusade. Democratic leaders hoped that the administration's surrender to the pressure of the abolitionists would arouse the mass of marginal voters and that the electorate would repudiate Lincoln's emancipation measures at the fall elections. The abolition press now befriended the president, praising him for bringing the promise of freedom to the slave. Mrs. Swisshelm expressed her sentiments simply: “Thank God that the word of Freedom for the slave and salvation for our country, has come at last.”³⁷

By this time, most of Minnesota's prominent politicians had boarded the abolition wagon, for they watched the political barometer with care and saw a minority movement becoming a majority one. Congressman Windom joined the movement when its adherents made up in noise what they lacked in numbers; thus his political opponents labeled him “an Abolitionist of the most objectionable stripe.” Senator Wilkinson likewise bowed early to radical pressure. Governor Ramsey also climbed aboard. Although he failed to attend a governors' conference at Altoona, he nevertheless signed the “Address” drafted there. This document thanked Lincoln for the preliminary proclamation. Democratic Senator Rice also approved the president's proclamation, much to the consternation of his party's leaders back in Minnesota.³⁸

³⁵ John G. Nicolay and John Hay, ed., *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 2:227 (New York, 1894).

³⁶ *Chatfield Democrat*, September 27, 1862.

³⁷ *St. Cloud Democrat*, October 2, 1862.

³⁸ *Chatfield Democrat*, October 4, 1862; William B. Hesseltine, *Lincoln and the War Governors*, 261 (New York, 1948); Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:341.

Lincoln kept his word, and on January 1, 1863, issued the definite proclamation, by which in regions "in rebellion" (with some exceptions) all slaves were declared free. Upon this act, justified as a "military necessity," Lincoln invoked "the considerate judgment of mankind and the gracious favor of Almighty God."³⁹

At long last the cloud of abolition, which had threatened for decades, showered the promise of freedom upon the slaves! That freedom, pronounced by the printed word, would become a reality with the end of the war.

The North on the whole was ready to accept emancipation. A Minnesota farmer wrote his approval for posterity: "This is the great day of America—the great Epochal day that is to mark the end of our American system of African slavery. . . . A hap[p]y day for all time to come will this be if the United States government is to be the instrument in the hands and under the guidance of Divine Providence for the liberation of this downtrod[d]en african race who have been held in bondage in the Southern States ever since the formation of our confederacy and long before. African Slavery is in my estimation a relic of barbarism which ought to have been abolished long ago."⁴⁰ Editor Brown heaved a sigh of relief when, belatedly, Lincoln issued a proclamation of emancipation. Mrs. Swisshelm nodded approvingly, but feared that Democratic party victories in the elections could yet reverse the abolitionists' fondest dreams. The *St. Paul Press*, voice of radical Republicanism, pronounced its sanction: "We have no adequate words to express the emotions of gladness with which we greet the President's great proclamation. Nor is it necessary. Every loyal heart will throb with delight in view of an act of military justice which at once consummates the Declaration of Independence, and inaugurates a new era in the history of mankind—the emancipation of three millions of slaves and the paralysis of the rebellion, by one sublime act which deprives it of the resources from which it draws its strength." Even the *Pioneer and Democrat*, the recipient of federal patronage through the efforts and ambitions of Congressman Aldrich, approved the president's measure.⁴¹

Democratic party leaders followed the familiar pattern of opposing the president's course. The chieftains and the journals of Minnesota Democracy, still smarting from their defeat in the elections of the previous fall, registered their protests. The German-language *Minnesota Volksblatt*,

³⁹ United States, *Statutes at Large*, 12:1268.

⁴⁰ From Mitchell Y. Jackson's diary, in Rodney C. Loehr, ed., *Minnesota Farmers' Diaries*, 214 (St. Paul, 1939).

⁴¹ *St. Cloud Democrat*, February 26, 1863; *Daily Press*, January 3, 1863; *Pioneer and Democrat*, January 9, 1863.

the dissenting *St. Cloud Union*, and the fault-finding *Chatfield Democrat* claimed that the Republicans were adding insult to injury. Editor McKenny, bold Democratic party charioteer, mourned: "The abolition element that owns him [*Lincoln*] and controls him have triumphed in this their diabolical effort" and, draining the cup of bitterness, he branded emancipation as "the most foolish joke ever got off by the six foot four Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States."⁴²

As conscription, increased living costs, and numerous Union defeats brought the war closer to the hearth and the pocketbook, dissension spread on the home front. Diehard Democrats were reluctant to accept emancipation as an objective of the war—they had opposed it and did not want to die for it. It almost seemed that they gloried in Confederate victories as they mocked the president in the following lines:

You want to free the darkeys, Abe,
At least, I so construe it;
The difficulty seems to be
To find out how to do it.
The way, dear Abe, is mighty dark,
And bothersome to see;
I fear you'll have to give it up,
And let the darkey be.

And in another verse, the Democratic critics became even more caustic and calumnious:

You're out of luck entirely, Abe,
The engine's off the track;
The biler's bust, and there you are;
A sprawling on your back!
The exciseman is at the door,
Contractors cry for pelf,
You're blind and stupid; deaf and lame;
Not very well yourself.⁴³

Democratic election victories in many states both of the Northeast and the Middle West had threatened the security of Republican rule. The aroused Democrats, still censuring emancipation as a policy, bitter at the radicals for their shabby treatment of McClellan, and cognizant of expanding war weariness, rallied their forces and prepared for the October and November elections of 1863. The rising tide of discontent and the regency of the Democratic party worried Mrs. Swisshelm. She interpreted these protests as treason and she dreamed of a diabolical Democratic conspiracy: "The Democratic programme now, is to get possession of the Government; get a decision of the Supreme Court declaring the

⁴² *Chatfield Democrat*, January 10, 1863.

⁴³ *Chatfield Democrat*, May 30, 1863.

Confiscation Act, the Proclamation and all similar measures unconstitutional; offer the South their own terms to come into the Union, and as it is probable she will refuse association with New England, New England can be left out. Slavery is to be made National, and Freedom to be driven from the continent. The Freedmen are to be re-enslaved and the white laborers to be brought to the level of the poor whites of the South—to be without schools or the right of private ballot. The masses are in short to surrender all other rights for the right to whip a nigger—if he can get one.”⁴⁴ One election, Mrs. Swisshelm held, could undo the effort of three decades of abolition.

Victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg rekindled the war spirit of the men of the North. As the administration subdued its military foes in the battle of bullets, so it turned back the charge of its political foes in the battle of the ballots in late 1863. Together, these administration successes assured the attainment of the abolition program. Democratic divines found themselves stymied, and turned to the preaching of a gospel of peace and compromise when the fortunes of war favored the South in 1864. These political preachers made peace and abolition the two dominant issues in the presidential campaign of 1864. The editor of the *Chatfield Democrat* stated the case for the Copperheads: “Every false and delusive effort has been made to poison the minds of the people against peace, because such a result would be sudden death to the abolition-Republican party. . . . But thank God the blood-hounds of Abolitionism are rapidly approaching the end of their diabolical career. The people who can no longer realize a virtue in forbearance, are rising in their overpowering strength and demanding in thundering tones that shake the sinks of corruption in Washington to their foundations, peace we want, and peace we will have. Everywhere the cry is peace, peace, PEACE! and as the people will it, so it will be.”⁴⁵

The *Pioneer and Democrat*, despoiled of its federal patronage, was free to return to criticizing the Lincoln program and policy. It tossed down the gauntlet with a vengeance, charging that “You have slaughtered our soldiers by tens of thousands in your insane attempt to carry out the infamous abolition and confiscation programme of ABRAHAM LINCOLN and the radicals.”⁴⁶

In a sense, the national elections of 1864 were a referendum on the question of abolition and emancipation. When the Democratic bid for political power was a failure both in Minnesota and in the nation, Lincoln’s emancipation policy was assured. For the president’s re-election in

⁴⁴ *St. Cloud Democrat*, February 26, 1863.

⁴⁵ *Chatfield Democrat*, August 20, 1864.

⁴⁶ *Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, October 7, 1864.

November, 1864, constituted an endorsement of emancipation, and it ended the last threat to the deliverance of the slaves. Even the adamant Democrats recognized that the issue was political deadwood—and deadwood weakens party platforms. In acquiescing, the editor of the leading St. Paul Democratic paper wrote: "An overwhelming popular majority has decided in favor of the continuance of Mr. Lincoln's term of office, and a prosecution of the war for the complete abolishment of the slave system. So far then as the determination of the North is concerned, slavery is a doomed institution."⁴⁷

Emancipation as a policy was forged in the crucible of war. It was the product of war psychosis. In 1860 only the "abolition fanatics" favored the manumission of the slaves. Four years later the populace accepted emancipation and looked askance at the minority group which registered its feeble protest. The dream of the minority had become the policy of the majority.

President Lincoln enunciated the Emancipation Proclamation because he was a political realist. He probably did not realize that posterity would cherish the document and glorify its doctrine. Those who crusaded for abolition did not lay down the torch when emancipation became a *fait accompli*. They wanted a Constitutional amendment which would give legality and force to Lincoln's proclamation. They had demanded a Congressional act that would enable the Negroes to fight in the ranks as recruits. They prayed for the final defeat of the rebellious Southern states. Some even dared dream that the ex-slaves would cast ballots in future elections, for they believed that, politically, "all men are created equal." Before the wheel of war and reconstruction had completed its full turn all these hopes were realized.

⁴⁷ *Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, November 25, 1864.



Readers of Walter O'Meara's "Adventure in Local History," which appeared in this magazine for March, 1950, will look forward with keen interest to the same author's novel, *The Grand Portage*, which has been announced for publication late in March by the Bobbs-Merrill Company. Mr. O'Meara's hero is none other than the same Daniel Harmon whose background and family history were the lures for the adventure described in *Minnesota History*. That the setting of the novel will attract the attention of Minnesotans is clearly indicated by the title.



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