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"Full of Light and Fire": John Brown in Springfield

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“FULL OF LIGHT AND FIRE”: JOHN BROWN IN SPRINGFIELD

A Thesis Presented

by

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ABSTRACT

"FULL OF LIGHT AND FIRE": JOHN BROWN IN SPRINGFIELD

May 2020

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History remembers radical abolitionist John Brown (1800-1859) as the man who directed the slaughter of five pro-slavery settlers in Bleeding Kansas in 1856 and for his failed October 1859 raid on the federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. But before he committed these infamous and life-defining acts, John Brown lived and worked in Springfield, Massachusetts, from 1846 to 1849. Though originally drawn to Springfield to work as an agent for wool growers who were being taken advantage of by powerful New England mill owners, it was during his time in western Massachusetts that the nature of Brown's abolitionism changed. While Brown was a committed abolitionist before he moved to Springfield, a position he inherited from his father and the region of Ohio where he spent his formative years, most of his early actions on behalf of the cause took the form of small,

symbolic gestures.[1] During his residency in Springfield, Brown met with Frederick Douglass for the first time and revealed to him an early version of his plan to destroy slavery. He also penned an advice essay to the black community entitled "Sambo's Mistakes," and founded the all-black mutual defense organization called the League of Gileadites to resist attempts at enforcing the new Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Through each of these episodes, Brown demonstrated a more practical and radical orientation to the abolition of slavery than he had prior to moving to Springfield. The environment in Springfield helped inspire this shift in Brown. Springfield had a significant abolitionist community by the time of Brown's arrival, many of whose members acted as agents for or conductors on the Underground Railroad. Springfield was also home to the third-largest African American community in Massachusetts. Brown spent a considerable amount of time with members of this community, hiring them to work in his wool warehouse and praying with them in the town's only African American church. The environment and people in Springfield helped Brown become the man who would stoke the flames of sectional discord with his actions in Bleeding Kansas and his failed raid on Harpers Ferry.

[1] These include committing to adopt a slave child and found a school for black children (both of which he failed to do), allowing black congregants relegated to the back of the Ohio church where he worshipped to sit in his family's pew, and pledging his life to the destruction of slavery following the murder of Rev. Elijah Lovejoy. He also served as a conductor on the Underground Railroad line which passed through Akron and Hudson, Ohio.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Radical abolitionist John Brown (1800-1859) is quite rightly known and remembered for his actions during the final five years of his life. It was during this period that he took part in the prologue to the Civil War known as Bleeding Kansas. Brown contributed to the bloodletting in Kansas when, on May 24th-25th, 1856, he directed the slaughter of five pro-slavery settlers as retribution for pro-slavery forces sacking the anti-slavery settlement of Lawrence. Nearly three and a half years later, in mid-October 1859, Brown would cement his place in the history of American sectional discord when he attempted to raid and seize the Federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in order to inspire a general slave uprising. The raid would fail and Brown would be tried and put to death for his role in orchestrating and leading it, but it also exacerbated tensions between the North and South over the future of slavery and the Union. And though he never lived to see or participate in the Civil War, many Union soldiers carried his name into their camps and battles while singing “John

Brown's body lies a mouldering in the grave," set to the same tune as the more famous "Battle Hymn of the Republic."[2]

But how did John Brown become "Osawatomie Brown" and "the meteor of the war"?[3] The answer lies in large part in the period of his life when he lived and worked in Springfield, Massachusetts, from 1846 to 1849. Brown was already a committed abolitionist before moving to Springfield, participating in the Underground Railroad and making other, mostly symbolic, gestures on behalf of the cause. But it is evident that his time in western Massachusetts changed him. This change was undoubtedly inspired and facilitated by the environment in Springfield during his residency, including its large abolitionist community. Crucial within this community was Springfield's black community, which was one of the largest in Massachusetts during the antebellum period. Brown interacted with members of this community on a near-daily basis, working alongside them in his wool warehouse and praying with them at their Free Church. It was also during his time in Springfield that Brown met with Frederick Douglass for the first time and shared with him an early version of his plan to destroy slavery. He also penned an advice essay to the black community entitled "Sambo's Mistakes" and founded a mutual defense organization for Springfield's black community called the League of Gileadites. Through each of these acts, Brown demonstrated a more practical and radical orientation with regard to the abolition of slavery than he had prior to moving to Springfield. The environment and people in Springfield helped Brown

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[2] Jonathan Earle, *John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), 142-143.
[3] Herman Melville, "The Portent," 1859, in Louis Ruchames, ed., *A John Brown Reader*, (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1959), 285.

become the man who would stoke the flames of sectional discord with his actions in Bleeding Kansas and his failed raid on Harpers Ferry.

Much of the historiography of John Brown's life focuses on his time and activities in Kansas and the Harpers Ferry raid. By comparison, Brown's time in Springfield is treated as an afterthought by most scholars. This can be represented quantitatively through the number of pages various scholars have dedicated to discussing these topics. For instance, one of Brown's earliest biographers, Oswald Garrison Villard, spends a grand total of two pages discussing Brown's time and activities in Springfield, compared to over 115 pages on Kansas and 150 pages on the lead up to, execution, and aftermath of the Harpers Ferry raid.[4] The scholarship following Villard does not improve much on this disparity. In *To Purge This Land with Blood,* Stephen Oates spends 13 pages on Springfield, 80 pages on Kansas, and over 75 pages on Harpers Ferry.[5] More modern scholars have fallen into this same pattern, as evidenced by David Reynolds' *John Brown, Abolitionist*, which affords Brown's time in Springfield a mere 15 pages, in contrast to the 65 pages dedicated to Kansas and the 110 pages dedicated to Harpers Ferry.[6] Clearly, there is a blind spot in the historiography of Brown's life when it comes to his time in Springfield.

When scholars have chosen to discuss Springfield, they offer varying interpretations of the key incidents which defined Brown's time there: his first meeting with Frederick

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[4] Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, 1800-1859, A Biography Fifty Years Later,* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965), 49-50 (originally published in 1910).
[5] Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood, A Biography of John Brown,* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).
[6] David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

Douglass, his writing of "Sambo's Mistakes," and his founding of the League of Gileadites. Still, this historiography is severely lacking in its treatment of the abolitionist movement and community in Springfield. Most scholars have failed to adequately explore or discuss the scope of the abolitionist movement in Springfield and its importance to Brown's evolving commitment to a more radical strain of abolition. Some have neglected to even mention Springfield's abolitionist community in their writings.[7] Others discuss Brown's interactions with Springfield's black community, which played an important role in abolitionist activities in the town, but do not mention the many white abolitionists who worked alongside the black community to assist fugitive slaves.[8] And those scholars who do mention Springfield's significant abolitionist community keep their discussions to a single paragraph or sentence.[9]

This project presents the opportunity to update the existing scholarship on the abolitionist movement in Springfield. It will take previous generations of work and combine that work with primary sources to produce a new and more comprehensive understanding of the town and its relationship with abolition. Contemporary reports from the *Springfield Republican* – the largest and most important newspaper in Springfield – will provide considerable detail regarding important abolitionists and abolitionist activity in the town. Minutes from the founding meeting of the Hampden County Anti-Slavery Society will also demonstrate the fervent commitment of Springfield's residents to abolition in the 1830s. This

[7] Carton, *Patriotic Treason*; Villard, *John Brown*.
[8] Carton, *Patriotic Treason*; Earle, *John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry*; David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*.
[9] Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*; Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

thesis will demonstrate Springfield's importance in the larger story of the abolitionist movement in Massachusetts, which helped lead the nation in anti-slavery activity, abolitionist organizing, and racial progress during the antebellum period.

Chapter 2 will detail John Brown's life and his relationship to abolition prior to arriving in Springfield. It will begin with a discussion of his father, Owen, whose abolitionist convictions helped shape Brown from his childhood through his young adulthood. It will also examine Brown's early life growing up in Ohio, his time as a young adult in Pennsylvania, and his return to Ohio after falling on hard times. Throughout these three phases of his life, Brown demonstrated support for the abolition of slavery. This support manifested itself in a variety of ways, from participation in the Underground Railroad to attempting to adopt a slave child into his family to pledging his life to the destruction of slavery. While his convictions were sincere, this chapter will illustrate how Brown's commitment to abolition was relatively abstract prior to his time and experiences in Springfield.

Chapter 3 will dive deeply into Springfield's history and culture of abolition. This will include a discussion of the Hampden County Anti-Slavery Society, an organization which Springfield residents helped found and lead throughout its existence. It will also include a detailed discussion of Springfield's abolitionist community, which was led by one of the town's most important religious and civic figures, Rev. Samuel Osgood. This community attracted people from all walks of life, from ministers and doctors to hoteliers and train men. It also included many members of Springfield's black community. Led primarily by former slaves such as Rev. John Mars and Thomas Thomas, Springfield's black community was just as engaged in abolitionist activities as its white residents. The heart of

this community was the Free Church, Springfield's first black church, which was founded in 1844. Brown frequently worshipped and even occasionally preached at the Free Church, where he established and cultivated strong bonds of loyalty and friendship with its members. These bonds were also developed at Brown's wool shop, where he employed and shared his thoughts on abolition with many of the town's black men. This chapter will also detail the activities of the abolitionist community in Springfield, most importantly its deep involvement and significance in the operations of the Underground Railroad. Finally, it will illustrate that Springfield and Hampden County were also home to many who opposed the abolitionist movement. This chapter will show that Springfield was an incredibly fertile place for the seed of Brown's abolitionism to bud into something more practical, real, and radical than it had been prior to his residency.

Chapter 4 focuses on three key events during John Brown's time in Springfield that illustrate his growing militancy on the question of abolition. The first was his first meeting with Frederick Douglass in 1847 during which he divulged to Douglass his scheme to undermine the institution of slavery by deploying raiding parties from the Allegheny Mountains to slowly siphon off slaves from Southern plantations. The second key event was the publication of Brown's first-person narrative essay entitled "Sambo's Mistakes." In this essay, Brown adopted the persona of a black man who used his life as an example of how black men should *not* behave. Most important among these mistakes was Sambo's willingness to sacrifice his self-worth and dignity in order to win the approval of whites. Finally, following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, Brown helped found an all-black self-defense organization known as the League of Gileadites. Brown had worked,

worshipped, and lived alongside many of the League's original members during his time in Springfield, and he addressed them with a speech which sought to bolster their spirits and offered practical, tactical advice on how to subvert and resist the new Federal law. This chapter will demonstrate how Brown's commitment to abolition changed and hardened during the course of his residency in Springfield.

Demonstrating how Brown's time and experiences in Springfield changed him and placed him on the road to Kansas and Harpers Ferry will distinguish this project from previous scholarly work. It will also serve as an important reminder that individuals like Brown are not born ready to change history, but are made and molded by their environments and experiences into the figures historians write about long after their deaths.

CHAPTER 2

JOHN BROWN BEFORE SPRINGFIELD

Throughout the first half of his life, John Brown developed strong antislavery convictions. These convictions were inspired by a singular and profound incident of direct exposure to the cruelty of slavery as an adolescent. They were also inculcated in him by his father, Owen. From an early age, Owen Brown was a committed abolitionist, and his example was one which his son John sought to emulate. Both father and son worked as agents on the Underground Railroad while they lived in Hudson, Ohio. When Brown moved to northwestern Pennsylvania, he continued to help fugitive slaves whenever he could. He even hatched a plan to adopt a slave child and open a school for black children in and around his neighborhood. Well intentioned though these plans were, Brown failed to bring them to fruition. Upon his return to the Hudson region due to economic hardship, Brown's commitment to abolition and egalitarianism remained fully intact. He did not hesitate to call out discrimination in his church and, following the murder of antislavery editor Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois, in 1837, he made a public commitment to devote his life to

helping bring about the end of the peculiar institution. As will be seen, however, Brown's actions on behalf of abolitionism and his antislavery convictions during this period in his life were moderate compared with the more radical words and deeds of his time in Springfield.

Owen Brown and Early Life in Ohio

In order to understand John Brown's early commitment to abolition, it is important to understand one of the most important influences in his life: his father. Owen Brown was born in West Simsbury, Connecticut, in 1771. When Owen was five years old, his father left to fight the British in New York during the early days of the American Revolution. In his father's absence, life on the family farm became increasing difficult. Sensing the family's distress, a neighbor lent the Brown family a slave by the name of Sam to assist with chores and field work. Owen befriended Sam, who let the child ride on his back as he plowed the fields. Unfortunately, Sam would die from complications arising from an illness, leaving Owen devastated. To make matters worse, news of Owen's father's death from dysentery would follow just a few weeks later.[10]

With too many children, too little help, and a hard winter in 1778-1779 that wiped out most of the family's livestock, his mother sent Owen away to learn a trade. He picked up cobbling and lived with a relative, Rev. Jeremiah Hallock, for a time. Rev. Hallock proved instrumental in developing Owen's sense of morality, especially when it came to the issue of slavery. He overheard Rev. Hallock sharing his pride in Connecticut's gradual emancipation of slavery with a fellow minister from Rhode Island. Rev. Hallock also shared a copy of

[10] Carton, *Patriot Treason*, 22; Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 4; Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 23.

Jonathan Edwards Jr.'s "The Injustice and Impolicy of the Slave Trade and of the Slavery of Africans" with Owen in 1791. In it, Edwards uses Matthew 7:12 (the "Golden Rule" verse) to argue that opposing slavery was the duty of every Christian. This sermon had a profound effect on Owen.[11]

One final incident would solidify Owen's commitment to opposing slavery for the duration of his life. During the Revolution, a Virginia minister travelling north left a family of slaves which he owned in Norfolk, Connecticut, for safekeeping. When he returned to Norfolk sometime between 1797 and 1798, he tried to reclaim them, but the family resisted, stating that they were now northerners and free from his clutches. The minister brought his case before a panel of local residents. He defended the practice of slavery, but the local residents were unconvinced. They criticized him and sent him back to the South without the family he had brought with him. Observing the minister's attempts to justify and rationalize slavery was enough to make Owen an outspoken opponent of slavery.[12]

Owen carried on with his life in Connecticut, which included his marriage to Ruth Mills in February 1793 and the birth of a son, John Brown, on May 9th, 1800. Sensing a lack of opportunity in southern New England, he moved his young family to Hudson, Ohio, in 1805. Owen became one of the town's most successful residents, working as a tanner, cattle breeder, and land speculator. He was also deeply involved in the town's civic life, serving as a justice of the peace, county commissioner, and founder and trustee of both Western Reserve College and Oberlin College. During the War of 1812, Owen became the chief

[11] Carton, *Patriot Treason*, 22-23; Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 5-6.
[12] Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 5-6; Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 23.

provider of beef for General William Hull's army, which was stationed in Detroit. Young John Brown often accompanied his father on the 100-mile cattle drives from Hudson to Detroit. He was even tasked with making the drive all by himself at various times during the war. It was during one of these lone cattle drives that John would have an experience which would shape his attitude toward slavery.[13]

Brown recounts this experience in an autobiographical letter written just over two years before his infamous raid on Harpers Ferry to the son of George Luther Stearns, one of his financial backers. He begins by warning its intended recipient, Henry Stearns, that his story "will be mainly a naration [sic] of follies & errors; which it is to be hoped you may avoid."[14] Alongside autobiographical facts and self-described character flaws, Brown tells of the seminal moment in his early life which "led him to declare, or Swear: Eternal war with slavery."[15] During one of his lone cattle drives during the War of 1812, young Brown was staying with a U.S. Marshal who owned a slave boy. The boy was close to Brown in age and was active, intelligent, and kind to him. Yet, while the Marshal treated the young John Brown like "a great pet," showing off his intelligence to dinner guests, "the negro boy (who was fully if not more than his equal) was badly clothed, poorly fed; & lodged in cold weather: & beaten before his eyes with Iron Shovels or any other thing that came first to hand."[16] This experience caused Brown to reflect upon the plight of slave children, and

[13] Carton, *Patriot Treason*, 23; Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 23-33; Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 23.
[14] John Brown to Henry Stearns, July 15, 1857, in Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader*, 35.
[15] Ibid, 38.
[16] Ibid, 38.

impressed upon him the evil of slavery, an evil which he would later dedicate his life to extinguishing.

Several years later, after formally joining Hudson's Congregational Church, Brown left home to train for the ministry. He spent time training with Moses Hallock (the brother of Rev. Jeremiah Hallock) in Plainfield, Massachusetts, followed by a period of study at Morris Academy in Litchfield, Connecticut, before eye inflammation and a lack of funds forced him to return to Ohio. He worked at his father's tannery for a few months before establishing his own tanning business with his adopted brother, Levi Blakeslee. During this period, in 1817, Brown received his first opportunity to put his antislavery convictions into action. A fugitive slave had arrived on his doorstep asking to be hidden from a band of whites who were pursuing him. Brown obliged, hiding the fugitive slave in his cabin. Such an act was not uncommon in the region, as Hudson itself was a popular station along the Underground Railroad. Both John and his father Owen were active workers along this line of the network.[17]

Life in Randolph Township

The beginning of the 1820s brought success for Brown. He had been running a successful tannery for several years, married Dianthe Lusk in June 1820, and had his first son, John Jr., in July 1821. He was even able to replace his family's cabin with a framed house in 1823-1824. Still, Brown was ready to move on, so he bought land and moved his family to Randolph Township in northwestern Pennsylvania in 1826.[18]

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[17] Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 37.
[18] Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 16-18.

The first half of Brown's decade-long residency in Randolph went very well. He got his tanning business up and running and helped improve and grow the town by surveying roads, importing livestock, opening a post office (where he served as postmaster until leaving Randolph), and opening a school for his own and another family's children. He even occasionally helped fugitive slaves who passed through his area of Pennsylvania, hiding them in a safe room he had built in his barn.[19]

As 1831 came and passed, however, life for Brown and his family would take a turn for the worse. His business success began to slow and even reverse, as he fell into deep debt with business partners and banks. He also experienced terrible personal set-backs. He suffered from bouts of ague throughout most of 1831-1832. His son, Frederick, died in March 1831, and his wife, Dianthe, died in August 1832. Realizing he could not raise his surviving children and run his business on his own, Brown married 16-year-old Mary Ann Day less than a year after Dianthe's death. Mary would bear John 13 additional children during the course of their marriage.[20]

The year 1831 would also become important for the nascent abolitionist movement in America. On January 1st, 1831, William Lloyd Garrison would publish the first issue of the *Liberator*. Owen Brown was an early subscriber and, according to Brown family lore, it was during one of John's several business trips to the Hudson region during the early-1830s that he first gained exposure to the newspaper in his father's home.[21] Brown allegedly enjoyed

[19] Carton, *Patriotic Treason*, 47.
[20] Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 24-26.
[21] Stephen Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 30.

the newspaper so much that he took out a subscription for himself. Yet, however much Brown may have enjoyed the writings and efforts of Garrison, the two could not have been further apart in several key ways. Whereas Brown came to his antislavery convictions in childhood, Garrison made the conversion as a young adult. Brown eventually came to believe in violence as an effective means of combatting slavery, while Garrison was a champion of non-resistance and moral suasion. Brown was a genuine egalitarian who freely and comfortably lived, worked, and worshipped alongside African Americans at several points throughout his life, while Garrison struggled at times with equality in his own sphere. Brown admired, studied, and modelled his later, more infamous actions on slave revolts like that of Nat Turner (which also took place in 1831), while Garrison was repulsed by such revolts, which caused him to double-down on his commitment to pacifism. Finally, Brown was an old-school Calvinist, while Garrison came to subscribe to the doctrine of Christian perfectionism.[22]

While Brown's financial and personal troubles in the early-1830s kept him from mounting any kind of sustained or organized effort to help fugitive slaves and free black residents, beyond assisting the occasional fugitive, things began to change by the mid-1830s. The first written account of his desire to help enslaved blacks is found in an 1834 letter to his brother, Frederick. Brown confided in Frederick that, "I have been trying to devise some means whereby I might do something in a practical way for my poor fellow-men who are in

[22] Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 30-31; Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 50-55.

bondage."[23] After deliberating with his wife and sons, he revealed that they had agreed that the best way to do this would be to adopt at least one black boy "and bring him up as we do our own."[24] Brown hoped to acquire this new son through the charity of a "Christian slaveholder" who would release a child to him.[25] But, if no such slaveholder existed or could be found, he was willing to adopt a free black boy instead. If, however, this proved impossible and they were left with no other choice, his family had "all agreed to submit to considerable privation in order to buy [a slave child]."[26]

Brown also revealed that he had been trying for years to establish a school for blacks in the region of Pennsylvania where he lived. Believing optimistically that "there would be no powerful opposition influence against such a thing," he implored Frederick to consider moving to assist him in this endeavor.[27] Brown's plan may have been inspired by Prudence Crandall, the young woman who founded a school for black girls in eastern Connecticut in April 1833. If so, then his optimism should have been tempered by the way Crandall's story unfolded. Her school was met by a racially-motivated backlash, boycotts, insults, vandalizing, and threats against her and her students. Opponents of the school even got the state legislature to pass a law against the establishment of such schools and had Crandall

[23] John Brown to Frederick Brown, November 21, 1834, in Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader*, 42.
[24] Ibid, 42.
[25] Ibid, 42.
[26] Ibid, 42.
[27] Ibid, 43.

thrown in jail for her efforts.[28] Like many of Brown's plans to assist African Americans, however well intentioned, those mentioned in his letter to Frederick came to naught.

Returning to Ohio

Brown's stance against slavery would manifest itself in other ways when economic hardship caused him to move his family to northern Ohio in the late-1830s. The move brought Brown back to the strongly abolitionist region of his early childhood years. Abolitionist zeal had begun to extend beyond the region of Brown's childhood, however. Owen Brown had helped found and served as Treasurer for the Western Reserve Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. By 1837, there were 200 anti-slavery societies and around 17,000 residents openly opposed to slavery in Ohio. Hudson remained an important station along the Underground Railroad, and abolitionists such as Owen and John were successful at ferrying fugitive slaves to freedom, despite the risk of a $1000 fine for each fugitive a person was caught helping.[29]

Still, despite the gains made, Ohio was still not a friendly place for black residents. The state's black laws relegated its black residents to second-class status. Black men could not get work unless they presented proof that they were free. Similarly, black people could not live in the state unless they provided a bond, underwritten by two securities, that they would behave themselves. Finally, despite having to pay taxes, black residents could not send their children to public schools.[30] By the mid-1830s, Ohio's abolitionists were campaigning

[28] Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 31-32.
[29] Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 60-61.
[30] Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 40.

against these discriminatory laws. On January 18th, 1837, Brown delivered a speech before a crowd of free blacks and white abolitionists in Cleveland calling for their repeal. His words inspired the audience to gather signatures and create a committee of correspondence, of which Brown was a member. Unfortunately for Brown and his fellow abolitionists, the campaign was not enough to persuade the state legislature to repeal the laws.[31]

This period also witnessed an incident which would spark the abolitionist movement and sharpen Brown's commitment to the cause. On November 7th, 1837, a pro-slavery mob from Missouri murdered anti-slavery editor Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois, burned his newspaper's offices, and threw his printing press into the Mississippi River. Two days later, a meeting was held at the Congregational Church in Hudson to discuss the news. Brown and his father were in attendance. At the end of the meeting, after several long speeches had been made, Brown rose from his seat and delivered a vow to the audience. The precise wording of this vow is a matter of dispute. According to Emily Metcalf and Lora Case, two of Brown's neighbors who were also in attendance, Brown said, "I pledge myself, with God's help, that I will devote my life to increasing hostility to slavery."[32] Years later, Brown's brother, Edward, claimed that his brother had actually said, "Here, before God, in the presence of these witnesses, from this time, I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery!"[33] While these two quotes suggest differing levels of commitment to ending slavery, they are both still noteworthy for their personal nature. In both cases, Brown was making a personal

[31] Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 41; Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 60-61.
[32] Quoted in Carton, *Patriotic Treason*, 82.
[33] Rev. Edward Brown in Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader*, 181.

commitment before his neighbors and God to help bring about the end of slavery in some way. And while Brown's pledge did not change his life overnight, he continued to help where he could by hiding and assisting fugitive slaves, helping his black neighbors, or calling out racial bigotry within the church.

In another incident, John Brown Jr. recalls his father's reaction to racial segregation in an Ohio church. In 1837, Brown and his family joined the Franklin Mills Congregational Church in Kent, Ohio. During a series of meetings in the summer of 1838 during which the Church hosted an itinerant evangelical minister, Brown noticed a number of black attendees seated separately in the back of the Church next to the stove near the door. At the opening of the next meeting, Brown addressed the congregation, arguing that "in seating the colored portion of the audience, a discrimination had been made."[34] He then invited the black attendees to switch seats with the Brown family, which they did. "This was a bomb-shell," John Brown Jr. recalls, and the next day the Church's deacons met with his father to reprimand him. The senior Brown was able to convince the deacons of the rightness of his position, however, as "they returned with new views on Christian duty," and allowed the black attendees to remain in the Brown family pew for the remainder of the meetings.[35]

While Church officials felt as though they could not confront Brown at the time, they would get their revenge upon the Brown family. A year after the revival meeting, Brown and his family had moved back to Hudson and they received a letter from the Franklin Mills Church expelling them for their prolonged absence from services. Brown and his family saw

[34] John Brown Jr. in Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader*, 182.
[35] Ibid, 182.

right through this letter, however, and were convinced that the true reason why they were being expelled was for their generous and benevolent treatment of black attendees during the revival in 1838. This letter caused several of Brown's children, including John Jr., to leave the Church and refuse to join another for the rest of their lives. While Brown's reaction to the letter is unknown, he did stop attending services with any regularity shortly after receiving it.[36]

Conclusion

By the 1840s, John Brown had clearly developed and demonstrated his commitment to his antislavery convictions. This is evident through his work helping fugitive slaves in Hudson and Randolph, his desire to adopt a black child and build a school for African American children, his public promise to dedicate his life to ending slavery, and his stand against racial segregation in church. While this behavior was undoubtedly genuine and well-intentioned, it also reflects Brown's nascent and more abstract commitment to abolition during this period in this life. His commitment would mature, deepen, and become more practical and radical shortly after his arrival to Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1846. But in order to understand why and how Brown's abolitionism changed, we must first understand Springfield's history and culture of abolition. This includes its significant abolitionist community and relatively large black population, the latter of which Brown grew very close to during his three-year residency.

[36] Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 43-44; Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 61.

CHAPTER 3

SPRINGFIELD IN CONTEXT

Throughout the antebellum period, Massachusetts helped lead the nation in anti-slavery activity, abolitionist organizing, and racial progress. While many are familiar with the important role that places like Boston and people like William Lloyd Garrison played in this struggle, other towns and figures have been overshadowed or forgotten. One Massachusetts town whose activities and people have been lost in the narrative of this period is Springfield. The economic hub of western Massachusetts, Springfield proved to be a hotbed of abolitionist activity. It played an important role in the life of the Hampden County Anti-Slavery Society, an active organization that met regularly throughout the late-1830s and early-1840s to promote the cause of abolition. It was also home to a significant and dedicated community of abolitionists, which was led by one of Springfield's most prominent residents, Rev. Samuel Osgood. Osgood and several other members of this community served as agents for and conductors on the Underground Railroad which passed through Springfield. Springfield also boasted an active black population, one of the largest in Massachusetts

during the antebellum period. This community included both free blacks and fugitive slaves, attracted to Springfield by its economic opportunities and abolitionist culture. Many of its most prominent leaders were also engaged in abolitionist activity, including the Underground Railroad, with which some of them had direct experience. At the same time, while Springfield was undoubtedly a bastion of abolition, it was also home to more conservative-minded residents who made their displeasure with abolition known in a number of ways. Springfield's contributions to the abolition movement should compel scholars to reconsider its place in the history of Massachusetts abolition. Given his three-year residency there, it is also vitally important in understanding John Brown's evolution on abolition.

The Hampden County Anti-Slavery Society

The growth and development of abolition into an organized movement during the 1830s eventually found its way to Hampden County. On March 1st, 1837, delegates from Springfield, Willimansett, Ludlow, North Wilbraham, and Brimfield, as well as individuals from other towns sympathetic to the cause of abolition, gathered in Westfield, Massachusetts, for the purpose of establishing an anti-slavery society for Hampden County. The first day of the convention was spent selecting officers, voting on meeting times, creating committees, and debating resolutions. Among those in attendance, and selected to serve on a number of committees, was Rev. Samuel Osgood, the minister of Springfield's First Church and one of the most important figures in Springfield's abolitionist community.[37]

[37] *Minutes and Journal of the Hampden County Anti-Slavery Society* (HCASS), from Springfield History Library & Archives, Lyman and Merrie Wood Museum of Springfield History, accessed October 3-5, 2019, 6. Rev. Osgood's significance to Springfield's abolitionist community and activities will be discussed later in this chapter.

Day two of the convention opened with Rev. Osgood reporting on his committee's efforts to produce a constitution for a county-wide anti-slavery society. The constitution which Osgood's committee produced was discussed and debated article by article later in the day. Article I established the association as the Hampden County Anti-Slavery Society (HCASS), which would serve as an auxiliary to the American Anti-Slavery Society. Article II articulated the Society's founding principle that slavery was a "flagrant offense against God and man; and aught [sic] to be immediately and entirely abandoned, by every slaveholder, and every government which now sanctions it by law."[38] Articles III and IV laid out the focus of the Society's work, which included disseminating its founding principle throughout the county and uniting local anti-slavery societies behind it. The remaining articles created the Society's officers and board of directors, delineated their responsibilities, and established annual meetings. Each of the articles was adopted and nearly 200 attendees, including a considerable number of women, signed their names to the constitution by the end of the convention. Following the adoption of the constitution, officers were nominated and selected, and the Hampden County Anti-Slavery Society was officially inaugurated later that evening.[39]

The remainder of the second day of the convention was spent debating and voting upon a series of resolutions. These resolution opposed the admission of Texas as a state, praised John Quincy Adams for his work in Congress, called for the formation of anti-slavery societies in every town in Hampden County, noted the particular suffering of female slaves

[38] *Minutes and Journal of the HCASS*, 16.
[39] Ibid, 7-9, 16-21.

and recommended the creation of separate female anti-slavery societies in every town, and condemned churches which condoned and defended slavery. Additional resolutions called for more anti-slavery petitions to be sent to Congress, for the Massachusetts Legislature to provide a trial by jury for anyone accused of being a runaway slave and threatened with removal from the state, and for abolitionists to work to remove any racial prejudice they harbored. The members also encouraged local anti-slavery societies and abolitionists to contribute to the American Anti-Slavery Society. All of these resolutions, and others, were adopted by the Society's members. The HCASS's members adjourned their inaugural convention in good spirits and prepared to tackle the work before them.[40]

The work of the HCASS would continue on January 16th and 17th, 1838, when members met at the First Parish in Springfield for their first annual meeting. The sizable crowd in attendance elected officers, including Rev. Samuel Osgood (serving as one of the Vice Presidents) and Dr. Jefferson Church (serving on the Board of Directors). This meeting also produced a series of resolutions that condemned slavery, expressed indignation at the recently passed Congressional Gag Rule on anti-slavery petitions, and promoted the viability and justness of immediate emancipation.[41] The meeting made an impression on the editors of

[40] Ibid, 10-15.

[41] Following the beginning of organized abolitionist activity in the early 1830s, Congress was inundated with petitions calling for the restriction or abolition of slavery in the United States. In the House of Representatives, many of these petitions were introduced by Rep. John Quincy Adams. Southern representatives sought to quell the momentum and debate generated by these petitions, which they accomplished in May 1836, when they secured the passage of a resolution which automatically tabled all anti-slavery petitions. This Gag Rule would be renewed several times in the House of Representatives until it was finally repealed in 1844, thanks in large part to the work and dedication of Rep. Adams.

the *Springfield Republican*, who noted that abolition was "fast gaining ground in Hampden County, and that nothing is wanting to bring in a vast majority of our citizens, but the dissemination of suitable information."[42]

As the abolition movement grew over the course of the 1830s, however, it would also begin to fragment. William Lloyd Garrison, one of America's foremost abolitionists, was at the center of this schism. Garrison represented a more radical wing of the movement that eschewed political activity in favor of moral suasion. His radicalism, his position on women's rights, and his belief in the primacy of morality over politics in the battle for emancipation grated on those who were more receptive to using the political process to combat slavery. The tension between these two factions came to a head during a January 1839 meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, which formally split the national organization in two. The resulting fallout led to the founding of the Massachusetts Abolition Society, which focused more exclusively on the issue of abolition and was willing to engage in politics to bring about the emancipation of America's slaves.[43]

Springfield's white abolitionists declared their position on the issue of political abolition before this schism took place. On October 9th, 1838, they held a meeting that produced a number of resolutions, many of which amounted to a qualified statement of support for political abolition. One resolution bluntly stated, "That slavery which exists by law, can be abolished only by law, - in other words by political action." Another deemed it a

[42] *Springfield Republican*, January 20, 1838.
[43] Bruce Laurie, *Beyond Garrison: Antislavery and Social Reform*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

"gross inconsistency" to merely pray for good rulers rather than elect them, and urged abolitionists to vote for candidates who would work toward abolition in Congress. The final resolution declared that the HCASS would not organize into its own anti-slavery political party, finding such a course of action "unwise." However, that same resolution also encouraged individual members to reform their respective political parties to make them more supportive of abolition. It also made clear that members of the HCASS would never vote for candidates who were not advocates of immediate emancipation. Instead, they would vote for candidates outside of their party if their party refused to nominate a candidate who supported emancipation, or (if neither party nominated pro-emancipation candidates) they would scatter their votes among candidates of good moral character.[44]

Just over a year later, the members of the HCASS would meet in Monson to adopt another flurry of resolutions. Notably, one of the resolutions took aim at a cause which some of the members of the HCASS – including Rev. Osgood – had previously supported: African colonization. The resolution condemned colonization as "a scheme of deception, originating in prejudice and interest, calculated to perpetuate slavery, incapable of benefitting Africa, impracticable, cruel, impolitic and unworthy of the patronage of the Christian public."[45] The organization also doubled-down on its commitment to political abolition, using one of its resolutions to pledge to send money to the Massachusetts Abolition Society, the politically-active rival to William Lloyd Garrison's Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. The HCASS continued to operate into the early-1840s, with Rev. Osgood continuing to serve as one of its

[44] *Springfield Republican,* October 20, 1838.
[45] *Springfield Republican,* November 2, 1839.

Vice Presidents. This period also witnessed the growth of the Underground Railroad in Springfield.

Springfield and the Underground Railroad

In addition to many of its residents taking part in the HCASS, Springfield also played a vital and active role in the Underground Railroad in Massachusetts. However, the town's commitment to assisting fugitive slaves did not begin with the creation of the HCASS. It dated back to the early 19th century. In 1808, Peter von Geyseling, a Dutchman from Schenectady, New York, came to Springfield looking for an escaped slave named Jenny whom he claimed as his property. Rather than assist the slaveholder to reclaim and return Jenny to New York, a number of residents banded together to assist her. They raised $100 to purchase her freedom and ensure that she could continue to live in Springfield, which she did. Among the 21 signatures on Jenny's bill of sale was that of a "Simon Negro." This dramatic move on the part of Springfield's residents would serve as the first of many they would take to assist fugitive slaves throughout the 19th century.[46]

Part of what made Springfield an important stop for fugitive slaves on their way to freedom was its people. The single most important figure in Springfield's abolitionist community was Rev. Samuel Osgood. Born in Fryeburg, Maine, in February 1784, Osgood graduated from Dartmouth College in 1805, after which he moved to Hanover, New Hampshire, to study law. He then moved to Dorchester, Massachusetts, where he worked as a teacher and became disenchanted with the prospect of a career in law. His mind turned to

[46] "The Early Black Experience," The Pan African Historical Museum USA, accessed May 8, 2019, http://pahmusa.mysite.com/The%20Early%20Black%20Experience.pdf, 2-3.

theology and he began to preach in Roxbury and Quincy before moving to Princeton in 1807 to study under Dr. Samuel Smith. He returned to Dorchester after his time in Princeton and continued to bounce around in search of a parish to settle in. On January 28th, 1809, Osgood found the parish and community he would make his home for the next 53 years when he was made pastor of the First Congregational Church in Springfield.

Osgood's record as minister is impressive. During his tenure, 1257 people became church members, a Sunday school was established in 1818, a new church edifice was erected in 1819, and an organ was installed in 1849. In a time when various denominations were competing for souls, including the Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Universalists, the First Church became "the largest and strongest church in the region" during Osgood's pastorate.[47]

Osgood also became a pillar of civic life in Springfield. He attended countless community events, from annual Fourth of July celebrations and agricultural fairs to more novel gatherings including a Peace Convention in 1845, a meeting to welcome anti-slavery hero Rep. Joshua Giddings to Springfield in 1848, a meeting to abolish liquor rations and flogging in the U.S. Navy in 1849, and a meeting to celebrate Hungarian revolutionary Louis Kossuth's visit to Springfield in 1852. He was also a staunch and consistent supporter of the temperance movement in Massachusetts, making the First Church available as a meeting place for temperance organizations, offering prayers and sermons at temperance gatherings, and attending state-wide temperance conventions throughout the 1840s and 1850s. He even

[47] *Springfield Republican,* December 9, 1862; *Springfield Republican*, December 13, 1862; *Springfield Union,* May 23, 1887.

served as the Chairman of the Springfield School Committee during the late-1840s and early-1850s.

In addition to his involvement in these civic activities, thousands of Springfield residents came to know Rev. Osgood as the man who baptized, married, or provided funeral rites for them or their loved ones. The *Springfield Republican* noted that, "His presence added dignity to every assembly and delight to every feast."[48] And in an article commemorating the 250th anniversary of the founding of the First Church, the *Springfield Union* commented that it was impossible "to fully portray all that Dr. Osgood was to the church, the city or the community, but no man has ever lived here who left his impress more forcibly on the life of the region."[49]

In addition to being a pillar of religious and civic life, Osgood was one of the most important figures in the abolitionist movement in Springfield. Although a subscriber to the colonization movement earlier in his life, Osgood became an officer of the Hampden County Anti-Slavery Society, which repudiated colonization in 1839. He was also a key conductor on the Underground Railroad in Springfield. He was the man to whom nearly every other conductor in Springfield would bring fugitive slaves for safekeeping or to arrange the next step on their journey to freedom. In his autobiography, William Green recounts his own journey from slavery to freedom.[50] He notes that when the party he was travelling with

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[48] *Springfield Republican*, December 9, 1862.
[49] *Springfield Union*, May 23, 1887.
[50] Green was a member of Springfield's Free Church, the first church built for and used by Springfield's black community. He later joined John Brown's League of Gileadites. Both the Free Church and League of Gileadites will be discussed later in this thesis.

arrived in Springfield, "we were directed to Dr. Osgood, who appear[ed] to be pleased to see us. We remained with him for a few days, when we got us a place and went to work."[51] James Smith also describes being brought to Osgood's home upon arriving in Springfield. Smith recalls dining and praying with Osgood and his family. He describes Osgood as "very benevolent, and his charitable deeds were many; none were turned away hungry from his door. I was much impressed with his genial spirit, consistent and zealous piety, and activity in the cause of Christ. His life was upright, pure, and good, and his Christian faith unfaltering. None in want ever appealed to him in vain."[52] Osgood helped many fugitives, including James Smith, find jobs in Springfield. He also worked to help the town's only black congregation raise money to secure a new and better building in which to hold their services.[53]

In addition to Rev. Osgood, there were a number of Springfield residents who played an active role in the housing and transportation of fugitive slaves throughout the mid-19th century. They included Dr. Jefferson Church, a well-known physician who moved to Springfield in 1827 in order to practice medicine. Dr. Church was an officer of the HCASS for a time, as well as an ally and friend of John Brown during his residency in Springfield. His house also served as a stop on the Underground Railroad. His impact upon and importance within the black community was evident during his funeral in April 1885, when

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[51] William Green, *Narrative of the Events of the Life of William Green, (Formerly a Slave) Written by Himself*, (Springfield, MA: L.M. Guernsey, 1853), 21.
[52] James L. Smith, *Autobiography of James L. Smith*, (Norwich, CT: Bulletin Company, 1881), 54.
[53] Smith, *Autobiography of James L. Smith*, 56; *Springfield Republican*, September 8, 1848.

several prominent black residents, including Thomas Thomas, John N. Howard, and Eli Baptist, served as his pallbearers. Another physician, Dr. George White, also played a role in Springfield's Underground Railroad. He served as an officer in the town's local anti-slavery society, which was founded after the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act.[54]

Members of Springfield's business community also were involved in the Underground Railroad. Rufus Elmer was a local merchant whose shoe and boot store served as a meeting place for agents and conductors. According to one of Elmer's former employees, John Brown attended several meetings at the store. Additionally, Daniel Harris, President of the Connecticut Railway, served as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, placing fugitives aboard his trains bound for Vermont. James H. Osgood, Samuel's son, recalled seeing nine fugitive slaves in his father's house one evening. He was instructed by his father to bring those nine fugitives to Daniel Harris, who then took them to Vermont via one of his Connecticut River trains.[55] Harris also helped facilitate the sectional conflict in Bleeding Kansas, using his office as a supply depot for weapons intended for anti-slavery settlers in Kansas. Another railroad man, Eliphalet Trask, also played a role in Bleeding Kansas and anti-slavery activities in Springfield. He was among the residents of Springfield who supplied John Brown with money and weapons for his infamous activities in Kansas.[56]

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[54] "Springfield's Black Community in 1850," The Pan African Historical Museum USA, accessed March 8, 2019, http://pahmusa.mysite.com/Springfields%20Black%20Community%20in%201850.pdf, 4.
[55] *Springfield Republican*, November 4, 1914.
[56] "Springfield's Black Community in 1850," 5-6.

The proprietors of two of Springfield's more prominent hotels were also engaged in the activities of the Underground Railroad. Jeremey and Phoebe Warriner, owners of the United States Hotel, were among the most committed abolitionists in Springfield. The couple, who married in 1810, began running the hotel together in 1812, and they quickly gained a reputation for "first-class hotel-keeping" in the Connecticut River Valley.[57] Throughout the mid-19th century, their hotel was a busy nexus for harboring and moving fugitive slaves. The hotel's black employees and servants provided ample cover for fugitives, who were hidden by the cook under the kitchen stairs and in a large bin in the granary before being moved on their way to freedom.[58]

Ethan and Marvin Chapin were brothers who owned the Massasoit House, another Springfield hotel which played a role in the Underground Railroad. The brothers, who had purchased their first hotel in 1836, opened the Massasoit House in June 1843. Ethan managed the day-to-day operations of the hotel, while Marvin attended to office work and business. They were rivals of the Warriner's for a time, but their decision to locate their hotel right next to the railhead in the downtown area caused the Massasoit House to surpass Warriner's Tavern as the hotel of choice in Springfield. The hotel's reputation for excellent service also attracted a long list of famous guests, including President Franklin Pierce, Congressman (and future President) Andrew Johnson, future General Ulysses Grant, Hungarian revolutionary Louis Kossuth, and Senators Jefferson Davis, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and Thomas Hart

[57] *Springfield Republican,* March 26, 1859.
[58] Wilbur H. Siebert, "The Underground Railroad in Massachusetts," *The New England Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (Sept. 1936): 465-466.

Benton. The Massasoit House also welcomed less high-profile guests in the form of fugitive slaves. The hotel harbored, fed, and cared for numerous fugitives until they had to move on. John Brown was also a frequent guest at the hotel during his various trips to Springfield during the 1850s.[59]

Springfield's economic development – of which its railroad men and hotel proprietors were beneficiaries – was another key factor in its growth as a hub of abolition in western Massachusetts. Springfield experienced a variety of developments which boosted its economic standing, beginning with the founding of the United States Armory in 1794. The Armory attracted a number of migrants to the town, including artisans, skilled workers, and merchants. Economic growth continued at such a pace that, by 1830, the town had become the industrial center of western Massachusetts, boasting seventy-three machine shops, six cotton factories, four printing shops, and three paper mills. Springfield also benefitted from its status as the transportation hub of western Massachusetts. The Western Railroad connected Springfield to Boston by way of Worcester in 1839 as well as Albany in 1841, while the Hartford, Springfield, and Connecticut River Railroad connected the town to Hartford and New York City in 1844.[60]

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[59] "Springfield's Black Community in 1850," 9; *Springfield Republican* March 2, 1889; *Springfield Republican*, June 27, 1899.

[60] Imani Kazini, "Black Springfield: A Historical Study," *Contributions in Black Studies* 1, no. 2 (1977), accessed February 18, 2019, https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1000&context=cibs, 4; Richard D. Brown and Jack Trager, *Massachusetts: A Concise History*, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 212.

A retrospective series in the *Springfield Republican* provides a wealth of detail concerning how the Underground Railroad operated in the Connecticut River Valley. According to this series, the Underground Railroad split into two northern routes from New Haven, one of which passed through Springfield. Both routes, however, were monitored by pro-slavery residents in Connecticut who were not afraid to hunt down fugitives themselves. Still, brave conductors such as Rev. Zolva Whitmore and Levi Yale helped shepherd fugitives north from New Haven to North Guilford, Meriden, Hartford, and eventually Springfield. Once in Springfield, fugitives received the assistance of people like Rev. Osgood, Rufus Elmer, Thomas Thomas, and Rev. Jonathan D. Bridge.[61]

Springfield's involvement in harboring and moving fugitive slaves eventually attracted the attention of officers charged with enforcing the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. While some of these officers enforced the law, others found ways to shirk their duties and help conductors and fugitives. Marshal Isaac O. Barnes of Boston was one such officer. When Marshal Barnes heard that a fugitive was in or passing through Springfield, he would go there ostensibly to apprehend them. Once he arrived, however, he would meet with conductors he knew to ask them about the fugitive in question. Barnes would phrase his questions in such a way as to describe the fugitive in detail, giving the conductors he met with the information they needed to identify who was at greatest risk of capture and whom to prioritize moving before he returned to Springfield.[62]

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[61] *Springfield Republican*, March 25, 1900.
[62] Ibid.

Another law enforcement official who used his position to help fugitive slaves and those who abetted their escape was the "titanic" Titus Chapin. Chapin was a constable in Hampden County who lived in Springfield and neighboring Chicopee during the 1840s and 1850s. A man "whose will power was equal to his large size, whose sense of justice made him an intense hater of slavery," Chapin would both receive and transport fugitives from his farmhouse. He was also one of the agents that Marshal Barnes would call upon to warn which fugitives he was in town to apprehend so that they could be spirited away before he returned.[63]

Springfield's African American Community and Abolitionist Activity

Beyond its significant community of white abolitionists, Springfield also boasted a sizable black community, which contributed to the town's abolitionist activities. The history of Springfield's black community dates back to the town's founding in 1636, with the presence of slaves owned by men like John Pynchon, son of town founder William Pynchon. The town experienced economic growth during the mid-17th century which, coupled with its abundant amount of land, attracted numerous settlers. Among these settlers was Peter Swinck, the first free black resident in western Massachusetts. Swinck did well in Springfield, occupying a pew next to his fellow (white) congregants in the First Church and, by 1685, owning over 50 acres of land. But land ownership was not limited to free black residents like Swinck. Slaves were allowed to own land as well. For instance, John Pynchon's slave Roco owned 60 acres while in bondage. There was, evidently, no uniform

[63] Ibid.

status or standard of living for Springfield's black residents. Slaves, black indentured servants, and free black people all lived side-by-side in the area. Still, while free black residents like Swinck did well for themselves, slavery would continue to expand. By the mid-18th century, there were 40-50 slaves in what would become Hampden County, many owned by Springfield's most prominent men.[64]

Following the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts in the late-1700s, Hampden County's black population began to experience piecemeal, incremental advances in their economic and social status. During the first decade of independence, over half of the members of the recently emancipated population of the county still lived with and worked for their former owners. By the turn of the 19th century, however, things began to change. The number of black residents economically and residentially dependent upon white families dropped to under 30% by 1820. Blacks who worked as farm laborers and yeoman farmers during the first few decades of the 19th century consolidated their resources and forged community bonds through marriage, creating enclaves throughout the county and increasing their collective independence.[65]

By the mid-19th century, the time when John Brown was a resident, Springfield was home to over 250 black residents, most of whom lived in the segregated neighborhoods of "Hayti" and "Jamaica," though some lived closer to white residents in the downtown area

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[64] Kazini, "Black Springfield: A Historical Study," 1-2; Joseph Carvalho III, "Uncovering the Stories of Black Families in Springfield and Hampden County, Massachusetts: 1650 – 1865," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 40, no. 1/2 (Summer 2012), accessed February 22, 2019, http://pahmusa.mysite.com/Black%20Families.pdf, 61-65.

[65] Carvalho III, "Uncovering the Stories of Black Families in Springfield and Hampden County, Massachusetts: 1650 – 1865," 71-74.

where the job prospects were more promising.[66] By this time, Springfield's black community was being led by migrants and fugitives from the mid-Atlantic and the Upper South, especially Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. The skills that some migrants brought with them as barbers, cooks, carpenters, and teamsters made them very valuable in Springfield and the surrounding Connecticut River Valley. The growth of Springfield offered opportunities for unskilled laborers as well. These opportunities for employment, plus the town's location as a central transportation hub, made Springfield a very desirable place for blacks to settle and live in.[67]

The heart of Springfield's black community was the Free Church, also known as the Sanford Street Church or the Zion Methodist Church. The Free Church was founded in 1844 by the anti-slavery Methodists of the Pynchon Street Society.[68] It is unclear where exactly the

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[66] This figure made Springfield third in Massachusetts in terms of the number of black residents, free and fugitive. New Bedford was second and Boston was first. The figures in New Bedford vary substantially. Wilbert Siebert claims that the town was home to 600-700 black residents in 1851, while a document prepared by the National Parks Service claims that the town had 1714 black residents in 1855. It is possible that New Bedford's black population exploded as a result of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, but there might be more to explain the wide discrepancy in these figures. Despite this discrepancy, it appears that New Bedford was safely ahead of Springfield in terms of the size of its black population. The National Park Service report which placed New Bedford's black population at 1714 in 1855 also placed Boston's at 2248. National Park Service, "The Underground Railroad in Massachusetts: Statement of Historic Context," accessed February 22, 2019, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/ugrr/discover_history/upload/massugrr.pdf; Siebert, "The Underground Railroad in Massachusetts."

[67] "Springfield's Black Community in 1850," 1; Carvalho III, "Uncovering the Stories of Black Families in Springfield and Hampden County, Massachusetts: 1650 – 1865," 74-76.

[68] Mary C. McLean, "Giant Step into Freedom," in *The History of St. John's Congregational Church, Springfield, Massachusetts, 1844-1962*, (Springfield, MA: History Committee of St. John's Congregational Church, 1962), 16; "Springfield's Black Community in 1850," 1-2. This was also the year that the debate over slavery in the American Methodist Church would

black community of Springfield worshipped prior to the founding of the Free Church. A public letter in the *Springfield Republican* imploring its readers to help this congregation find a new home merely notes that they had previously worshipped in a rented hall "in several respects unsuitable and inconvenient."[69] What is known, however, is that after its founding, the black community worshipped primarily – if not exclusively – at the Free Church.

The church played a vital role in the evolution of black life in Springfield, serving as the center of religious, cultural, and political life for the community. Abolitionist activity took many forms in the church and was present from its founding. For instance, while little else is known about him, the church's first minister, Rev. Leonard Collins, played "a significant role in the underground movement" in Springfield, helping men like Rev. Samuel Osgood, Dr. Jefferson Church, and Rufus Elmer find housing for fugitive slaves.[70] Additionally, anti-slavery and abolitionist rallies took place at the church, which featured speeches delivered by figures such as Sojourner Truth and John Brown.[71] And Brown wasn't just an occasional guest speaker at the church. He frequently attended worship there, forging bonds of loyalty, affection, and support with the members of its congregation. At least nine members of the church would later join Brown's League of Gileadites, a mutual defense

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come to a head. During the 1844 General Conference, Rev. Orange Scott of Springfield introduced a resolution which called for Bishop James Andrew of Georgia – who had been bequeathed a slave who would not leave him for freedom in Liberia – to desist from his activities as a Bishop until the matter was resolved. The debate over and passage of this resolution during the 1844 conference ultimately led to a formal separation of the Methodist Church into northern and southern branches.

[69] *Springfield Republican*, September 8, 1848.

[70] McClean, "Giant Leap into Freedom," 16, 18.

[71] Kazini, "Black Springfield: A Historical Study," 9.

organization founded for Springfield's black community in the wake of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850.[72]

Springfield's African American community also boasted a number of prominent and important leaders, almost all of whom were connected to the Free Church. Among the most important during the mid-19th century was Rev. John Mars, the second minister of the Free Church. Mars was born to slave parents in Norwalk, Connecticut, around the beginning of the 19th century. Shortly after his birth, Mars' parents were able to obtain their own and his freedom. At age 20, he converted to and became a licensed minister in the Methodist Church. He preached for several years in New York before moving to Salem, Massachusetts, in 1840. He remained in Salem for a few years before conducting missionary work among black communities in Canada. In 1850, he moved to Springfield, where he became the First Church's second minister.[73] That same year, upon the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, Rev. Mars – inverting the famous line from the Book of Isaiah – implored his flock to "beat their plowshares into swords" in order to defend themselves and their families.[74] Mars would leave Springfield and the Free Church in 1851, only to return for a second stint as minister from 1859-1860.

Rev. Mars was incredibly active during the Civil War. He protested the exclusion of black soldiers from the battlefield and wrote a letter which appeared in the *Springfield*

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[72] Those members were Thomas Thomas, Eli Baptist, John N. Howard, William Green, Eliza Green, Ann Johnson, Cyrus Johnson, Joseph Adams, and William H. Montague.
[73] McClean, "Giant Leap into Freedom," 24.
[74] Carvalho III, "Uncovering the Stories of Black Families in Springfield and Hampden County, Massachusetts: 1650 – 1865," 82.

Republican calling for black participation in the war effort. In 1863, after sufficient funds had been raised by his supporters in Springfield and Worcester, he was sent to New Bern, North Carolina, to assist General Edward Wild to form colored regiments. Shortly after his arrival, he became chaplain of the 1st North Carolina Colored Regiment, making him (alongside Rev. Samuel Harrison, also of Springfield) one of the first black commissioned officers in the history of the United States military.[75]

Another important leader in Springfield's black community was Thomas Thomas. The *Springfield Republican* described Thomas as, "a noble specimen of the negro race: gentle, courtly, and with an integrity and genuineness of the character which made him prized, whether as a servant or host."[76] Born a slave in Oxford, Maryland, in 1817, Thomas worked as a waiter on steamships on the Chesapeake Bay as a child. At 17, he convinced his master to allow him to purchase his freedom for the price of $400. After purchasing his freedom in 1836, Thomas worked in New Orleans and on the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers before settling in Springfield in the 1840s, where he joined his mother and sister, who had settled there some time earlier. He worked at the Hampden House Hotel, another of the town's hotels believed to have served as a stop on the Underground Railroad. In 1847, he began working for John Brown's wool agency. He quickly became one of Brown's most

[75] Carvalho III, "Uncovering the Stories of Black Families in Springfield and Hampden County, Massachusetts: 1650 – 1865," 83-84; Kazini, "Black Springfield: A Historical Study," 7; McClean, "Giant Leap into Freedom," 25; *Springfield Republican,* September 19, 1884.
[76] *Springfield Republican,* March 10, 1894.

trusted allies. Brown shared his early plans for destroying slavery with Thomas, who joined with him and helped him found the League of Gileadites in January 1851.[77]

Eli Baptist was another of Springfield's more prominent black leaders. Born free in Pennsylvania in 1820, Baptist migrated to Springfield, where he worked selling soap and candles. Like Thomas, he also came to know John Brown and joined the League of Gileadites. He was also one of the leading members of the Free Church.[78]

Finally, one of Springfield's most financially successful African American residents during the 19th century was Primus Parsons Mason. Born free in Monson, Massachusetts, in 1817, Mason moved to Suffield, Connecticut, following the deaths of his parents in 1824. He then went to work for a farmer named Ferry whose son regularly whipped him, causing him to flee to Springfield in 1837. He lived in Springfield's Hayti neighborhood, one of the town's two primarily black enclaves. He worked several odd jobs, including as a horse undertaker, receiving and burying horse carcasses in the sand banks of Hayti. He was "shrewd, saving and industrious," selling the hides and hooves of horses whose owners didn't provide money for their funerals. He also collected old shoes, bones, and other trash which he repurposed or sold for money. News of the California Gold Rush took Mason to the West Coast in 1849, but he returned penniless. Though he lost much of his savings, he did not lose his industriousness or business savvy. He rebuilt and grew his wealth through the purchase of real estate. By the time of his death in 1892, he owned 16 houses, plus additional building lots. Like many other residents of Springfield, Mason was an active abolitionist. He

[77] *Springfield Republican*, March 10, 1894.
[78] "Springfield's Black Community in 1850," 10-11.

was "one of the useful underground railway agents," who would share the news of incoming fugitives with Rev. Osgood whenever he received notice from allies in Hartford. Upon his death, he left most of his estate (estimated to be between $30,000 and $60,000) for the founding of a home for elderly men, regardless of race.[79]

Springfield's Conservative and Anti-Abolitionist Faction

While it is clear that Springfield was home to a significant abolitionist community which engaged in a host of anti-slavery activities, there is evidence that there were some residents of Springfield and Hampden County who opposed the movement and those involved in it. This conservative, anti-abolitionist faction expressed its opposition in a number of ways. For instance, on the night of November 30th, 1844, the residents of Springfield were woken from their slumber by the sound of fire bells summoning firefighters to a property owned by D.W. Willard, Esq. According to the *Springfield Republican*, this fire was "believed to be kindled by an incendiary." After a fire company managed to quench the blaze, another alarm bell sounded, which proved to be a false alarm, but it kept residents on edge. An hour later, a third alarm bell alerted fire companies to a fire at the unfinished home of Jeremey Warriner, the proprietor of the United States Hotel, one of Springfield's most popular hotels and a hiding place for fugitive slaves along the Underground Railroad. As with the fire at Williard's building, the *Republican* concluded that, "This was unquestionably the work of an incendiary, as, when the fire was first discovered by the neighbors, the house

[79] *Springfield Republican*, January 13, 1892.

was on fire throughout, and there was no chance to save it." As Jeremey Warriner's home was beyond help, firefighters focused on and managed to save a nearby home.[80]

The town took this incident very seriously. The Springfield Selectmen acted quickly, appointing six watchmen to work alongside other officials to monitor for additional threats. The Selectmen also offered a $200 reward for information leading to the identification, capture, or conviction of those responsible. The reward notice promulgated the theory of malicious intent by claiming that the fires were "undoubtedly caused by an INCENDIARY." On top of the Selectmen's reward, Jeremey Warriner posted his own advertisement, promising an additional $500 for information leading to the capture and conviction "of the incendiary who set fire to my house." It is unclear, however, if these hefty rewards ever yielded information or produced any arrests, as the *Republican* went silent on the matter after these advertisements were posted.[81]

Six years after the alleged arson of Jeremey Warriner's house, the passage of the new Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 would provide Springfield and Hampden County's anti-abolitionists with another opportunity to demonstrate their antagonism toward the movement. The catalyst for this demonstration was the presence of British Member of Parliament and abolitionist lecturer George Thompson. Thompson was no stranger to the United States, having visited once before in the mid-1830s. Invited to speak in America by his good friend William Lloyd Garrison, Thompson's first visit would prove to be a turbulent affair. From the beginning, he was hounded and harried by protestors and mobs in the North. An angry

[80] *Springfield Republican,* December 2, 1844.
[81] *Springfield Republican,* December 3, 1844.

crowd in Lowell threw brickbats at the building where he was speaking, barely missing his head. In Concord, New Hampshire, the house where he was staying was attacked and a man mistaken for Thompson was pelted with rotten eggs. Thompson's visit even almost cost Garrison his life. On October 21st, 1835, a Boston mob nearly lynched him after they heard Thompson was going to speak at a meeting of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, but he failed to appear.[82]

Despite his experience in the 1830s, Thompson decided to return to America following the passage of the new Fugitive Slave Act. A notice in the *Springfield Republican* of February 14th, 1851, announced that Thompson had been invited to give three lectures at Hampden Hall in Springfield "at the request of a large number of citizens." This visit would end up inspiring a similarly violent response to the one the British abolitionist experienced fifteen years prior.[83]

News of Thompson's upcoming visit to Springfield engendered a variety of responses. The editors of the *Springfield Republican* excoriated Thompson as a man who had nothing to teach New England about slavery, arguing that he should focus his energies on reforms needed in his home country of England.[84] Concerned residents of Springfield met at the town's Union House on February 15th to discuss the matter. During the meeting, they appointed a delegation to greet Thompson when he arrived in town and warn him of the

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[82] W. Caleb McDaniel, *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists & Transatlantic Reform*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 50-54.
[83] *Springfield Republican*, February 14, 1851.
[84] *Springfield Republican*, November 30, 1850.

probability of danger and violence. Events later that evening confirmed these residents' fears. Around 1 a.m. on the morning of February 16th, a crowd gathered around a large tree on Court Street to hang Thompson and John Bull in effigy. They also posted death warrants for Thompson and Bull on the tree's trunk for good measure.[85]

On top of this violent demonstration, an inflammatory handbill was circulated in and around Springfield. Written by "Lexington," the handbill asked its readers if they would let "an English Serf" and "a *British Spy*" come amongst them to foment civil war and threaten their government and way of life. Arguing that the despots of Europe wanted nothing more than to snuff out the example of self-government represented by America, it asked, "Is it rational, is it reasonable, is it even plausible, that George Thompson […] can be aught but a *paid Emissary and Spy of England*?" Finally, the handbill called upon the "sons of down-trodden and crushed Ireland" to "drive this miscreant from our soil, for your brothers' blood cries against him for vengeance! Men of Hampden, turn out to a man, and teach Britain that the worst use to which she can put one of her *Slave Drivers*, is to send him here to scheme and plot. Rally, every man, and give this British Emissary a reception that will teach a new lesson to English Statesmen."[86] The call had been given, and now the only question was whether anybody would answer it.

When Thompson arrived in Springfield on February 17th, he was greeted by the warning committee appointed at the Union House meeting. The committee informed Thompson of the excited state of the people and alerted him to the strong possibility of

[85] *Springfield Republican*, February 17, 1851.
[86] *Springfield Republican*, February 17, 1851.

violence if he proceeded with his lectures. Later that afternoon, Dr. Jefferson Church, Rufus Elmer, and prosperous housebuilder Amaziah Mayo met with the town Selectmen, urging them to provide additional resources to protect Thompson. The Selectmen appointed 21 additional constables, including Church, Elmer, and Mayo, to keep the peace. Seeking to protect themselves from any liability, the Selectmen also informed the owner of Hampden Hall that if his building sustained any damage as a result of Thompson's lectures, the town would not pay to fix it. This news caused the owner of the Hall to close its doors to Thompson, who was unable to deliver his first scheduled lecture as a result.[87]

This did not stop a large crowd from gathering at Hampden Hall that night to make their displeasure with the English abolitionist known. Between one to two hundred men and boys from Springfield and surrounding towns gathered at the Hall, "determined not to be cheated out of having 'a time.'" The mob used fire crackers, fifes, bells, and their own hoots and hollers to keep the scene around Hampden Hall quite lively throughout the night. They even started a large bonfire and danced around it. "Rowdyism was in the highest degree rampant," the *Republican* lamented, "and if there was not a riot, a row and a rumpus all together, we never had a realizing idea of that threefold designation of disorder."[88]

Despite this demonstration of opposition, Thompson and company were determined to find a place to speak. Unfortunately for them, the anti-slavery meeting they were supposed to attend the morning after the ruckus at Hampden Hall was cancelled because the proprietor of Washington Hall had closed off the building to them. They migrated to Dwight's Hall,

[87] *Springfield Republican,* February 18, 1851.
[88] *Springfield Republican,* February 18, 1851.

where they held a relatively quiet meeting. Some of Springfield's most influential and active abolitionists, including Eliphalet Trask, Rev. John Mars, and Rev. Samuel Osgood, were in attendance. Thompson was introduced by noted orator and radical abolitionist Wendell Phillips who, together with Garrison and Edmund Quincy (editor of several abolitionist publications), had arrived in Springfield the previous evening before the riot had begun.[89]

Thompson used his first address to go on the attack. He criticized the mob for rising up against him before hearing what he had to say, accused the *Springfield Republican* of printing and helping disseminate the "Lexington" handbill, and condemned the warning committee that had greeted him upon his arrival. Thompson delivered another address to a larger crowd at the Free Church later that day. In it, he issued a pointed attack on Samuel Bowles, the editor of the *Republican*, calling him "a moral assassin, inhaling the very spirit of malignity," a "venal scribbler," a "bread and butter patriot," and a "crocodile" responsible for printing "fish-woman billingsgate."[90]

No additional meetings were called that day, but the anti-Thompson mob would still reprise its performance from the previous night. This mob was larger than its predecessor and engaged in more of the loud, rambunctious activity of the previous night. Its members also threw stones into Thompson's hotel room, one of which almost struck Rev. Osgood. After the mob dispersed, Thompson received a pleasanter farewell in the form of a group of black residents who gathered outside his hotel to play music and sing for him. Perhaps this showing

[89] *Springfield Republican,* February 19, 1851.
[90] *Springfield Republican,* February 19, 1851.

of respect and appreciation helped salvage Thompson's experience of Springfield, which he left for New York the next morning.[91]

Conclusion

Springfield's experience throughout the antebellum period is a valuable reminder that there is always more to the history of a social movement than the people and places that occupy the majority of the established historical narrative. While cities such as Boston and figures such as Garrison and Wendell Phillips were undoubtedly important, places like Springfield and people like Rev. Samuel Osgood, Rev. John Mars, and Thomas Thomas were equally if not more important to the activities in their respective communities. Springfield was indeed a bustling center of abolition, filled with many brave people who were willing to risk their livelihoods and freedom to help fugitive slaves secure freedom for themselves. The spirit of abolition was also undoubtedly fueled by the town's large and active black community, many of whose members had slipped the shackles of bondage and were happy to help others do the same. It is little wonder, then, that Springfield served as such an important and transformative place in the history of one its most famous residents, John Brown. Indeed, Brown's experience in Springfield, his interactions with its people and his involvement in its abolitionist activities, would help bolster his commitment to the slave and help turn him into the man capable of organizing the murder of pro-slavery settlers in Kansas and the raid on the Federal armory at Harpers Ferry.

[91] *Springfield Republican*, February 19, 1851.

CHAPTER 4

JOHN BROWN IN SPRINGFIELD

Up to the mid-1840s, Brown's commitment to abolition was sincere and his actions mainstream, relative to the rest of the abolitionist movement. He believed that slavery was evil and worked when and where he could to assist fugitive slaves to escape to freedom. And while he hatched plans to take his commitment to abolition and egalitarianism further, in the form of adopting a slave child and establishing a school for black students, these plans ultimately went nowhere. Upon his arrival in Springfield, however, the nature of Brown's commitment to abolition began to change. In his first meeting with Frederick Douglass in 1847, Brown declared that slaveholders had given up their very right to live, after which he revealed his plan to destroy the institution of slavery through guerilla tactics. In "Sambo's Mistakes," an advice essay published in a black abolitionist newspaper in which he adopted the persona of a black man, Brown encouraged African Americans to abandon material distractions and petty grievances and to defend their self-worth and dignity in order to take their place as equal citizens in the United States. Finally, following the passage of the new

Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, he founded a mutual self-defense organization called the League of Gileadites. During the inaugural meeting of the League, Brown exhorted its members (all of whom came from Springfield's African American community) to defend their dignity and freedom at all costs and provided specific tactical advice on how to resist Federal law and those who would seek to enforce it. These words and deeds signified that Brown's beliefs regarding abolition had become more radical, a development which was influenced by the environment in Springfield during his residency.

Perkins & Brown Wool Agency

Though it would play a huge role in the story of his time there, the abolition of slavery was not the reason John Brown decided to move to Springfield. Instead, it was a different kind of economic injustice which brought him to the hub of western Massachusetts. The economic hardship which caused Brown and his family to move back to Hudson only got worse during the early-1840s, and in 1842 he was forced to declare bankruptcy. Yet, it was during this time that Brown also found a new calling in breeding sheep and grading wool. By 1845, he was one of the nation's most successful sheep breeders and foremost authorities on cleaning and grading sheep wool.[92] His skills and success caught the attention of Simon Perkins, the owner of one of Ohio's largest flocks of sheep. On January 9th, 1844, the two men signed a contract to merge their flocks and share the profits and losses it would yield each year. Perkins would "furnish all the food and shelter" for the flock, while Brown would "furnish throughout the year all the care and attention of every description which the

[92] Carton, *Patriotic Treason*, 99.

good of the flock may require," including washing and shearing the sheep as well as packing and shipping the wool.[93]

Brown's responsibilities required him to travel around the country. He used his travels to shepherd both sheep to pasture and slaves to freedom, continuing the work he had engaged in while living in Hudson and Randolph. During his travels, he also became aware of the plight of wool growers in states such as Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Virginia who were being taken advantage of by mill owners in New England. The distance between the small wool growers in these states reduced their bargaining power and left them at the mercy of traveling mill agents. These agents would swindle growers by dishonestly grading their wool in order to buy medium- and high-grade product at low-grade prices.[94]

As with slavery, once Brown was convinced that an injustice was being perpetrated, he resolved to do something about it. He believed the solution was to be found in collective bargaining, in establishing a type of producers' cooperative where the wool growers could work together to strengthen their position when negotiating with manufacturers.[95] Brown agreed to move to Springfield to act as the manager and agent for wool growers in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, as well as New York and Vermont. He would receive their wool, grade it properly, and sell it to manufacturers for what he considered a fair price. Agreeing to work on a commission of 2 cents per pound of wool sorted and sold, Brown's motive in this

[93] Agreement – John Brown & Simon Perkins, January 9, 1844, in Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader,* 51.
[94] Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood,* 52-53.
[95] Carton, *Patriotic Treason,* 101-102; Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist,* 83.

endeavor was not to make money, "but to correct a great wrong."[96] And thus, in June 1846, with Perkins providing the financial capital, Brown moved to Springfield. Brown's two eldest sons, John Jr. and Jason, would join their father that summer, while his wife and most of the rest of his children wouldn't make the move to Springfield until July 1847.[97]

Unfortunately for Brown and the wool growers he represented, this venture proved to be a commercial failure. Several factors caused the collapse of the Perkins & Brown Company. The Walker Tariff of 1846, which reduced duties on imported wool, increased competition from foreign growers. Brown was aware of the potential impact the new tariff rates could have on his business, telling Perkins a mere month after arriving in Springfield, "We sold for 69 cents all round, & are to get 70 cents if the new Tarriff [sic] bill does not pass. This is as well as we could do while the bill is pending, & makes the whole business drag," adding bitterly that, "The prospects of good & brisk sales is very different from what it was before the Dough faces passed [the tariff] through the house."[98] At the same time that Brown was trying to navigate the impact of new tariff rates, the Mexican-American War, which had begun just two months before Brown arrived in Springfield, caused the wool market to fluctuate wildly.[99]

Brown's stubbornness and lack of business acumen also played a role in the fate of the wool agency. Brown himself admitted the difficulty of his work shortly after arriving in Springfield, telling Perkins, "We have received so much wool that our freight bills have

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[96] Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 81.
[97] Ibid, 54-56.
[98] John Brown to Simon Perkins, July 23, 1846, in Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader*, 54-55.
[99] Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 55-56.

given us a good deal of anxiety, & trouble," though a recent sale had alleviated these early troubles.[100] One scholar has argued that if Brown had been a different man, then he would have fared much better in Springfield, "But compromising or moderating an action that he believed to be justified had never been John Brown's strong suit."[101] Likewise, another blames Brown's "stubborn, dictatorial spirit," coupled with "a deep bitterness against what he regarded as exploitative capitalism," for his failure.[102]

As the Perkins & Brown Company inched closer and closer to financial ruin, Brown found solace and a much needed distraction in the abolitionist movement. As detailed in Chapter 3, the environment in Springfield during Brown's residency was very well-suited to reigniting and deepening his commitment to abolitionism. It featured an abolitionist culture which dated back to the early-19th century and had only grown in scope and activity since then. It was also home to a large community of abolitionists, many of whom participated directly or assisted in the Underground Railroad which operated throughout the Connecticut River Valley. Springfield was also home to a relatively large and politically active black community, many of whose members Brown became very familiar with during his residency.

Despite his previous involvement in Hudson and elsewhere, Brown never participated directly in the organized Underground Railroad in Springfield, opting instead to pursue more solitary efforts at assisting runaway slaves. This included planning a showcase and contest for American wool products. Brown shared his plan in a letter to anti-slavery Congressman

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[100] Ibid, 54.
[101] Carton, *Patriotic Treason,* 103.
[102] Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist,* 82.

Joshua Giddings of Ohio, whom he greatly admired. Brown revealed that he had over $1000 and other prizes at his disposal for the contest and, in an effort to hide his involvement and perhaps to draw more attention to the contest, he asked if Rep. Giddings would be willing to be the person to award the prizes in order to "secure favor" to the cause of abolition.[103] Brown never explicitly stated how this contest would benefit the cause, saying only "that some of the strong interests of the country are to be both *flattered, & benefited*" by the prizes.[104] Brown was explicit, however, in his desire to keep his plan "a most *profound secret*," asking Rep. Giddings to refrain from putting any identifying information on a reply letter.[105] Despite offering to visit Rep. Giddings in Washington, D.C. to discuss the matter in person, there is no evidence that Brown pursued this scheme any further.

Brown also began reading radical abolitionist publications and interacting with Springfield's abolitionist community, including its large black population. While Brown had known and befriended African Americans in the past, he "came to know blacks in a more personal way and in a more sustaining relationship only after he had come to Springfield," establishing friendships, hiring black people like Thomas Thomas to work in his wool warehouse, and attending services and occasionally preaching in the Free Church at the invitation of Rev. John Mars.[106] These relationships and interactions, and the bonds of loyalty

[103] John Brown to Congressman Joshua Giddings, June 22, 1848, in Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader*, 65.
[104] Ibid, 66.
[105] Ibid, 66.
[106] Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom*, 19; Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 58; Carton, *Patriotic Treason*, 134.

and affection they created, deepened Brown's commitment to the black community and the destruction of slavery.

Brown and Douglass

One member of the black community with whom Brown first established an important friendship during his time in Springfield was Frederick Douglass. Douglass details his first meeting with Brown in his autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Douglass' interest in Brown began after he heard African American ministers Rev. Henry Highland Garnet and Rev. Jermain Loguen speak of the man. In November 1847, during a stop in Springfield as part of a larger lecture tour, Douglass was invited to have dinner with Brown at his house. Douglass toured Brown's wool warehouse before visiting his home, which gave him "the impression that the owner must be a man of considerable wealth."[107] Upon reaching the Brown household, however, Douglass found himself "a little disappointed," observing that it "was neither commodious nor elegant, nor its situation desirable," adding that "its furniture would have satisfied a Spartan."[108]

During a hearty dinner of beef soup, cabbage, and potatoes, Douglass was impressed with the egalitarian nature of the Brown family's domestic economy:

> There was no hired help visible. The mother, daughters, and sons did the serving, and did it well. They were evidently used to it, and had not thought of any impropriety or degradation in being their own servants. It is said that a house in some measure reflects the character of its occupants; this one

[107] Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History*, (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 271. (Originally published in 1881, revised in 1895.)
[108] Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 271.

> certainly did. In it there were no disguises, no illusions, no make-believes. Everything implied stern truth, solid purpose, and rigid economy.[109]

He was equally impressed with the head of this industrious, egalitarian clan. Douglass recalled that his host "presented a figure straight and symmetrical as a mountain pine. His bearing was singularly impressive."[110] He was a man with "a strong, square mouth, supported by a broad and prominent chin," whose bluish-gray eyes "were full of light and fire" when they engaged in conversation.[111]

After dinner, Brown broached the subject he had wished to discuss with Douglass. Brown prefaced his remarks with a denunciation of slavery and slaveholders "in look and language fierce and bitter."[112] He argued boldly that slaveholders had given up their right to live and that neither appealing to their conscience nor taking political action would bring about the abolition of slavery. Instead, he had devised a plan that would better accomplish this end.

Brown had been waiting for black allies like Douglass to whom he could reveal and with whom he could discuss his plan. Brown informed Douglass, "that for many years he had been standing by the great sea of American bondsmen, and anxiously watching for some true men to rise about its dark level, possessing the energy of head and heart to demand freedom

[109] Ibid, 271-272.
[110] Ibid, 272.
[111] Ibid, 272.
[112] Ibid, 273.

for their whole people, […] He now saw such men rising in all direction."[113] Brown counted Douglass among these men, and felt comfortable sharing his plan with him.

Brown's plan did not involve a general slave uprising or the mass slaughter of slaveholders. He thought such measures would defeat the purpose of his plan, though he wasn't opposed to using violence if necessary. Instead, Brown laid out a map of the Allegheny Mountains, which he contended had been placed in their exact location by God "for the emancipation of the Negro race."[114] He had devised a plan which he believed would destroy the value of slave property by reducing that property's security. Beginning with a team of about twenty-five men, Brown would start by sending the most persuasive among them to nearby slave fields, where they would convince small groups of slaves to join them back in the mountains. Once his force reached about one hundred properly trained and drilled men, they could start to siphon off larger numbers of slaves, keeping the "strong and brave" and escorting "the weak and timid" north through the Underground Railroad.[115]

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[113] Frederick Douglass, "Editorial Correspondence," *North Star* (Rochester, NY), Feb. 11, 1848, in 19th Century U.S. Newspapers, http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.bpl.org/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DateAscend&tabID=T003&prodId=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchId=R1&searchType=PublicationSearchForm&currentPosition=12&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918480211%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C28%29%22North+Star+%28Rochester%2C+NY%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&userGroupName=mlin_b_bpublic&inPS=true&contentSet=LTO&&docId=&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3013079281&contentSet=UDVIN&callistoContentSet=UDVIN&docPage=article&hilite=y.
[114] Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 273-274.
[115] Ibid, 274.

While Douglass conceded that the plan "had much to commend it," he was not fully convinced of its efficacy and raised several objections.[116] How would Brown feed and supply his force? "Slavery was a state of war," Brown replied, and they would take what they needed from the enemy.[117] But what if Brown's actions caused slaveholders to sell their slaves further south? Brown insisted that this was the whole point and would actually mark a great victory. Driving slavery from a single county would weaken it throughout a state, allowing his forces to expand and reach further south. But what if slaveholders and their allies employed bloodhounds to track him and his team? In his response, Brown displayed an optimism rooted not in personal experience but in his deep and intensive study of rebellious slaves in the Caribbean and South America who resisted capture by waging guerilla warfare from and establishing self-sustaining communities in woodland areas.[118] He asserted that, given the natural fortifications the Allegheny Mountains provided, his forces should be able to turn back any incursion from slaveholding forces. After being turned back once, slaveholders would be hesitant to try again. But what if these forces surrounded Brown and his team, cutting them off from their supplies? Again, Brown displayed a naïve sense of certainty, dismissing Douglass' reasonable and realistic concerns by suggesting that they would be able to find a way out. And even if they could not, Brown conceded that the worst that could happen would be his death, adding that, "he had no better use for his life than to

[116] Ibid, 273.
[117] Ibid, 274.
[118] For a longer treatment of Brown's studies and the examples which may have inspired his plan, see Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 106-110.

lay it down in the cause of the slave."[119] Finally, when Douglass suggested that slaveholders might still be convinced to change their ways, the fire in Brown's eyes must have blazed when he argued, "[T]hat could never be, he knew their proud hearts and that they would never be induced to give up their slaves, until they felt a big stick about their heads."[120]

While he may have harbored doubts concerning the viability of this plan, Douglass admitted that he found Brown's convictions "to be real as iron or granite."[121] These convictions left a mark on Douglass. Following his night with Brown, Douglass revealed that he "became all the same less hopeful of [slavery's] peaceful abolition. My utterances became more and more tinged by the color of this man's strong impression."[122] He would also share his estimation of Brown with the readers of his newspaper, the *North Star*. Douglass informed his readers that, "though a white gentleman, [Brown] is in sympathy a black man, and is as deeply interested in our cause, as though his own soul had been pierced with the iron of slavery," adding that he "is one of the most earnest and interesting men that I have met in a long time."[123]

The militancy of Brown's plan, as well as his assertion that, "No people […] could have self-respect, or be respected, who would not fight for their freedom," must have struck a chord with Douglass, given his own history.[124] At one point during Douglass' time in

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[119] Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 275.
[120] Ibid, 275.
[121] Ibid, 275.
[122] Ibid, 275.
[123] Frederick Douglass, "Editorial Correspondence," *North Star* (Rochester, NY), Feb. 11, 1848.
[124] Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 273.

bondage, his master, Thomas Auld, had grown tired of his insubordination and had lent him to Mr. Edward Covey "to be broken."[125] Covey was a tenant farmer who "had acquired a high reputation for breaking young slaves," such as Douglass.[126]

Covey set out to break Douglass "in body, soul, and spirit."[127] The first six months under Covey would be among the hardest of Douglass' life, a time when he would "drink the bitterest dregs of slavery."[128] But it was during the latter half of Douglass' one-year lease to the slave-breaker that he would reclaim his manhood and dignity, if not his freedom. On a hot Friday afternoon in August 1833, Douglass and two fellow slaves were fanning wheat. The heat became overbearing for Douglass, who eventually passed out. Covey came over to investigate and, upon learning the facts, proceeded to kick and beat Douglass with a hickory slat for his exhaustion. Douglass resolved to seek help, walking seven miles over five hours to seek protection from his master. Instead of protection, however, he was given a dose of salt, allowed to stay the night, and sent back to Covey the next morning.

Upon returning to Covey's farm, Douglass would reach the climax of his journey back to self-respect. While Douglass was in the horse stables, he was confronted by Covey, who attempted to tie him up. During the ensuing struggle, Douglass "resolved to fight" and seized Covey by the throat.[129] Douglass' act of aggressive and active resistance took Covey by surprise, so he called upon an ally for help. Douglass managed to incapacitate Covey's

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[125] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2000), 62. (Originally published in 1845.)
[126] Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 62.
[127] Ibid, 68.
[128] Ibid, 68.
[129] Ibid, 73.

ally, further weakening Covey's resolve. Still, the slave and the slave-breaker remained at each other's throats for two hours before the latter finally yielded, "getting entirely the worst end of the bargain," according to the victor.[130]

Covey didn't lay a finger on Douglass for the remaining six months of his lease. More importantly, Douglass explained that his battle with Covey "was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free."[131] From that point forward, Douglass "did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me."[132] Such words, had Brown ever read them, must surely have filled his heart with optimism and joy.

More importantly, the plan which Brown shared with men like Douglass signified a shift in his orientation toward abolition. This plan revealed that Brown believed that radical measures would be needed to extinguish slavery from America, and that he was capable of leading and executing such measures. But he couldn't do this by himself. He would need a team of individuals like Douglass to join him in order to bring his plan to fruition. Brown sought to inspire more members of the African American community to rise up, seize their dignity, and join him in his quest to end slavery with the publication of "Sambo's Mistakes."

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[130] Ibid, 74.
[131] Ibid, 74.
[132] Ibid, 75.

"Sambo's Mistakes"

Beyond his plans to destroy slavery by eroding the security of slave property, Brown found other, more creative means through which to express his growing militancy and radical orientation toward abolition during his time in Springfield. This took the form of "Sambo's Mistakes," an essay written by Brown and published in *The Ram's Horn*, a short-lived New York abolitionist newspaper edited by African Americans, including his friend Thomas Van Rensselaer.[133] Just as Benjamin Franklin adopted the persona of Silence Dogood, a middle-aged widow, in order to critique politics, culture, and religion in colonial Boston, so Brown adopted the persona of "Sambo," a black man, in order to offer his observations of and advice to the black community. In the essay, Sambo uses his life experiences to teach the rest of the black community important lessons. He details nine distinct errors, in the form of specific behaviors or character flaws, over three brief chapters. He ends his discussion of each of the nine distinct errors with some variation of the refrain "but I can see where I missed it," indicating that he was aware of the error as well as what he could do to correct it. Brown used this rhetorical device to suggest to the black readers to whom he was offering his advice that these mistakes were not fatal and were capable of correction.

The nine distinct errors which Sambo discusses are material, intellectual, social, and political in nature. He makes two references to frivolous spending habits, admitting that he would waste money on things like tobacco, canes, watches, rings, parties, amusements, and candy, all in an attempt to "distinguish myself from the vulgar as some of the better class of

[133] Carton, *Patriotic Treason*, 102.

whites do."[134] Sambo also laments having spent his time reading "silly novels & other miserable trash such as most of the newspapers of the day" and joining secret societies like "the Free Masons[,] Odd Fellows [and] Sons of Temperance," instead of reading more intellectually and spiritually rewarding literature and seeking the company of "intelligent[,] wise & good men."[135]

Nearly half of Sambo's mistakes involve the obstinacy he displayed in his interactions with fellow blacks and white anti-slavery allies. Sambo warns that, during various meetings with other colored people, he had been "so eager to display [his] sprout talents & so tenacious of some trifling theory" that he would grind meetings to a halt, thereby preventing anything from getting done.[136] Sambo admits he would never yield, not even on minor differences. He would also waste time and energy fighting with anti-slavery allies over religious tenets. Consequently, when he took action on behalf of his race, he often did so alone, "accomplishing nothing worth living for."[137] Finally, Sambo reveals his propensity for administering purity tests to potential allies. If an otherwise well-qualified, intelligent, and well-intentioned person failed to meet his stringent standards in the least respect, "I would reject him entirely, injure his influence, oppose his measures, & even glory in his defeats while his intentions were good, & his plans well laid."[138]

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[134] John Brown, "Sambo's Mistakes," in Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader,* 61-63.
[135] Ibid, 61-62.
[136] Ibid, 62.
[137] Ibid, 62.
[138] Ibid, 62-63.

The most important of Sambo's mistakes, the one which most clearly points to Brown's point and purpose in penning this essay, involved his relationship to white people and his sense of self-worth. Sambo expected "to secure the favor of whites by tamely submitting to every species of indignity[,] contempt & wrong instead of nobly resisting their brutal aggressions from principle & taking my place as a man & assuming the responsibilities of a man[,] a citizen, a husband, a father, a brother, a neighbor, a friend as God requires of everyone (if his neighbor will allow him to do it)."[139] Repeating the self-aware refrain of the piece, Sambo sees how fruitless the path of passive submission is and has been; that this behavior had netted him no more than what "Southern Slaveocrats render to the Dough faced States of the North [who] think themselves highly honored if they may be allowed to lick up the spittle of a Southerner."[140] With this passage, Brown was calling upon black men to stand up for themselves, reclaim their dignity, and thereby seize their rightful place as men and citizens of the United States. It was a moral call to arms, one intended to inspire more black men to emulate the likes of Frederick Douglass and Thomas Thomas, the type of men whom Brown would need to bring his plan for destroying slavery to fruition.

More than one scholar has noted that many of the mistakes that Sambo describes – specifically those concerning his hardheadedness in his dealings with fellow abolitionists, including picking unnecessary fights over religious doctrine – reflected Brown's own personal and professional shortcomings.[141] One particularly critical analysis describes

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[139] Ibid, 63.
[140] Ibid, 63-64.
[141] Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 59; Earle, *John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry*, 9.

Brown's tone as a "condescending brand of paternalism" which would manifest itself again when speaking of the black community in North Elba, New York.[142]

Others scholars have noted that "Sambo's Mistakes" offers contemporary readers insights into Brown's evolving position on nonviolent protest, influenced as it was by his interactions with the militant black preachers Jermain Loguen and Henry Highland Garnet. While it is difficult to gauge precisely their influence on Brown, one historian has suggested that his call for resistance "sounds almost exactly like something Garnet would say."[143]

Given the deep and pervasive racism of the period, David Reynolds argues that Brown's contention that African Americans were "not moronic brutes but rather [were] intelligent beings full capable of improving themselves," and that they were "not hopelessly mired in ignorance and immorality but [were] as perfectible as whites," was powerful and revolutionary.[144] Ultimately, Reynolds takes the essay as evidence that Brown, more than any other member of his race at the time, sympathized with and understood black culture.[145] Such a perspective is supported by others who have likened "Sambo's Mistakes" to "an in-house memorandum, an unburdening of confidences within the family circle."[146]

While many historians have focused on what "Sambo's Mistakes" teaches us about Brown, at least one historian has used it to examine what it can teach us about the black

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[142] Ibid, 11.
[143] Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 61.
[144] Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 119.
[145] Ibid, 120.
[146] Quarles, *Allies for Freedom*, 21.

community. Evan Carton argues that Springfield's black community trusted Brown because of:

> The utter lack of discomfort he displayed as a minority of one in black environments, the way he simply assumed an equal footing in his personal interactions with blacks, a footing grounded nowhere but in his assumption of it. Neither condescending nor excessively solicitous, Brown's manner in his exchanges with blacks […] was the manner of a man who took it as a given that he and his interlocutors were both creations of a God who was no respecter of persons.[147]

Brown's seemingly natural comfort living, working, and worshipping with and among black communities in Springfield and North Elba explains why African Americans "accepted him as one of their own" and why the editors of *The Ram's Horn* felt comfortable publishing an essay, written by a white man, which was both critical of and instructional to the black community.[148]

While these scholars are correct that the message of "Sambo's Mistakes" was revolutionary and that it teaches us much about Brown's evolving attitude toward violence and the black community's unqualified acceptance of Brown, they appear to miss the underlying frustration evident in the essay. Quarles comes close when he likens the essay to an "unburdening of confidences," but this can be taken a step further. Brown understood that he needed allies in the black community willing to join him in risking their lives to bring about the end of slavery. Yet, the purpose of "Sambo's Mistakes" suggests that he wasn't satisfied with the number of allies available to him or the action taken up to that point. He

[147] Carton, *Patriotic Treason,* 104.
[148] Ibid, 114.

clearly believed in the dignity and equality of African Americans, and "Sambo's Mistakes" was a public-facing effort to get more members of that community to believe it for themselves and to inspire them to act. Only then, when enough African Americans joined the ranks of Frederick Douglass and Thomas Thomas, would Brown have the allies he needed to bring his plans to fruition. Until that time, however, Brown would have a different opportunity to organize African Americans into a force willing to defend their dignity and their freedom in the form of the League of Gileadites.

The League of Gileadites

The last significant event linking Brown's growing militancy and faith in the black community to his time in Springfield was his founding of the League of Gileadites in 1851. The League itself was inspired by the passage of the package of legislation which came to be known as the Compromise of 1850. Among the provisions enacted into law was a new, stronger Fugitive Slave Law. The new Fugitive Slave Law allowed for the appointment of federal fugitive slave commissioners in the North whose job it was to receive claims for runaway slaves. Commissioners could issue arrest warrants for those accused of being fugitives and determine if those arrested were in fact runaways. Accused fugitives could not present a defense, and there were no judges or juries to counter or stay a commissioner's decision. Commissioners also received $10 for each individual they returned to slavery and only $5 for each they found to be legally entitled to their freedom. Finally, the new law

imposed steep fines and imprisonment on anyone assisting escaped slaves or obstructing the capture of an alleged runaway.[149]

The new Fugitive Slave Law would make many white Northerners confront slavery in person for the first time. Southern slave catchers would be in their towns and local sheriffs would be forced to assist in searching for suspected runaways. Powerful slave commissioners, motivated in part by the financial incentive in the new law to return (rather than exonerate) accused fugitives, would make a mockery of due process. White Northerners would have to witness their black friends and neighbors being sent back to the South in chains. And those who would dare to help them evade the slave-catchers risked being branded as criminals and incurring harsh penalties.[150]

Given the large and politically active black community in Springfield, plus their numerous white friends and allies, it was inevitable that the town would produce an organized response to the new law and the activities of slave-catchers. A meeting of Springfield's black community took place at the Free Church on September 17th, 1850. This meeting adopted several resolutions which demonstrated the black community's capacity and readiness to organize and defend itself at all costs. One resolution declared that they would welcome any fugitive slave and felt justified in "using every means which the God of Love has placed in our power to sustain our Liberty." Those in attendance also resolved to form "a vigilant Association, to look out for the panting Fugitive, and also for the Oppressor, when he shall make his approach," adding ominously that, if a "Task Master presume to enter our

[149] Ibid, 131.
[150] Ibid, 131.

dwellings, and attempt to reclaim any of our brethren whom he may call his slaves, we feel prepared to resist his pretensions."[151] Springfield's black community, many of whose members were former slaves themselves, were clearly committed to preserving their freedom and would not return to the South without a fight.

Another meeting similar in spirit to the Free Church gathering was held on October 1st at a packed Town Hall. This meeting "took a very decided stand against the execution of the law, and pledged itself to defend the fugitives from it." Among those who addressed the crowd were Rev. Osgood, Dr. Church, and Rufus Elmer. Nine resolutions were adopted, all condemning the new law in one way or another. One resolution declared all escaped slaves living in Springfield to be free and independent, while in another those in attendance pledged "to stand by each other in determined resistance to this law, and to fugitives from the South to protect them from their pursuers, and we will if necessary, suffer the consequences." To help enforce these resolutions, the meeting created a fifteen-person Vigilance Committee and a five-person Finance Committee. They also agreed to ring alarm bells whenever an attempt on a fugitive living in Springfield was being made.[152] It appeared as though Springfield's white abolitionists were equally as committed as their black compatriots to ensuring that no fugitives living in Springfield would be returned to their former masters under the new Fugitive Slave Act.

The initial energy and passion that had fueled the September 17th and October 1st meetings would evaporate as time went on. In another meeting held in Hampden Hall on

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[151] *Springfield Republican,* September 21, 1850.
[152] *Springfield Republican,* October 2, 1850.

October 7th, the tone and message was far less radical than it had been a week prior. One of the speakers at the meeting captured this more moderate tone when he condemned the new law but rejected the idea of forcible resistance. At a fourth meeting held on October 15th, the crowd was thinner than it had been during the previous three events. Rev. Osgood, Rufus Elmer, and others once again addressed the crowd, and their speeches echoed the moderate tone of the October 7th meeting. Most notably, the Chairman of the meeting suggested that the resolutions of the previous meetings be reconsidered, given how the speakers and crowds at the meetings had clearly soured on the notion of forcible, organized resistance.[153]

Brown was in Springfield when the new Fugitive Slave Law went into effect. He informed his wife that, in the wake of the news of a black man named Long being sent South from New York under the new law, "I have improved my leisure hours quite busily with the colored people here."[154] He described the anxious state of his black friends, telling his wife that, "some of them are so alarmed that they cannot sleep on account of either themselves or their wives and children," and empathically asking his family to "imagine themselves in the same dreadful condition."[155] In response to this threat to his friends and fellow Americans, Brown believed he had "been enabled to do something to revive their broken spirits."[156] To that end, on January 15th, 1851, with the help of many of the black men and women whom he had come to know and grown to care about during his time in Springfield, Brown founded the League of Gileadites.

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[153] *Springfield Republican*, October 8, 1850; *Springfield Republican*, October 15, 1850.
[154] John Brown to Mary Brown, January 17, 1851, in Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader*, 75.
[155] Ibid, 75.
[156] Ibid, 75.

He addressed the inaugural meeting of the League with a speech entitled "Words of Advice." He began by reiterating his faith in the principle which he had articulated to Frederick Douglass and alluded to in "Sambo's Mistakes": the universal appreciation for and value of self-worth and self-defense. "Nothing so charms the American people as personal bravery," Brown declared, citing the example of Jose Cinques of the *Amistad* to prove his point.[157] Going further, Brown reassured his fellow League members that no northern jury would ever convict a man "for defending his rights to the last extremity," contending that the black community would multiply the number of its white allies ten-fold "were they but half as earnest to secure their dearest rights as they are to ape the follies and extravagances of their white neighbors," a flaw Brown had identified in "Sambo's Mistakes."[158]

Brown was not afraid to employ tough love during his address. He attempted to shame his audience into action by reminding them of three white men who had made tremendous sacrifices for the cause of black freedom. The first man he mentioned was Elijah Lovejoy, whose murder at the hands of a pro-slavery mob in 1837 had inspired Brown himself to pledge his life to the destruction of slavery. The second was Reverend Charles Torrey, who was arrested and sentenced to six years in a Baltimore prison for his work on the Underground Railroad. Rev. Torrey died of tuberculosis two years into his sentence at the age of 33. Finally, there was the man with "the Branded Hand," Jonathan Walker, who was tried for and convicted of attempting to help seven slaves escape to the Bahamas. Walker was sentenced to seven years in jail and a public pelting with rotten eggs, fined nearly $5000, and

[157] John Brown, "Words of Advice," in Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader,* 76.
[158] Ibid, 76.

had the letters "S.S." (for "Slave Stealer") branded on his palm, hence the appellation Brown gave him.[159] In referencing these three examples, Brown was not trying to shame his audience simply for shame's sake. He was earnestly trying to inspire them by reminding them that they could indeed count on their white allies and increase their number through their own efforts. Here Brown once again displayed his faith in the black community.

After upbraiding his audience for their lack of action, Brown pivoted to providing tactical advice on how to prevent a black resident of Springfield from being taken under the Fugitive Slave Act. He began with the basics: gather quickly, outnumber your enemy, make sure all present are armed, and keep your plans secret. Those who betrayed the Gileadites were to be put to death, but only after being proven guilty. Citing the Book of Judges and Deuteronomy, Brown told his audience that cowards should be exposed and made to retreat before any action is taken. Once ready to attack, Brown exhorted his nascent militia not to hesitate, to engage all at once with everything they had to make quick work of their enemy. And if the enemy mounted a counterattack, Brown again reminded them that "you may safely calculate on a division of whites" to assist, which may also result in "an honorable parley."[160] Though Brown's assumption may sound naïve, given Springfield's reputation as an abolitionist hotbed, he was more than likely correct that at least some whites would come to the aid of their black neighbors.

Seeking to stiffen their spines, Brown told his audience to "let it be understood that you are not to be driven to desperation without making it an awful dear job to others as well

[159] Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 98-100.
[160] John Brown, "Words of Advice," 76-77.

as to you."[161] And just in case Springfield's white residents were not as noble or brave as he assumed, Brown instructed his audience to go into the homes of their most influential white allies following a rescue. This, he informed them, would make those white residents guilty by association, giving them no choice but to assist and "make common cause with you."[162]

Brown provided specific tactical instructions as well. If a black prisoner was taken, and the Gileadites could not come up with a distraction, Brown advised that they burn gunpowder in paper packages to form a diversion. He also suggested the use of a lasso on slavecatchers. Brown closed his "Words of Advice" by reiterating three key principles: always have your weapons nearby, "tell no tales out of school," and always have a plan.[163]

Following his "Words of Advice," League members signed an official "Agreement." In this compact, the signatories pledged, "As citizens of the United States of America […] we will ever be true to the flag of our beloved country, always acting under it."[164] Reflecting Brown's egalitarian spirit, the pledge invited "every colored person whose heart is engaged in the performance of our business, whether male or female, old or young" to join the League, reserving scout duty to those too old, too young, or too sick to fight.[165] Finally, in a gesture of meritocracy, the League reserved the right to appoint officers only after "some trial of courage and talent" revealed those who were worthy of leading the group.[166] All told,

[161] Ibid, 77.
[162] Ibid, 77.
[163] Ibid, 77.
[164] Ibid, 78.
[165] Ibid, 78.
[166] Ibid, 78.

44 black men and women (including 27 who signed their names, plus another 17 who remained anonymous) joined the League of Gileadites.

The most thorough examination of the founding members of the League comes from Cliff McCarthy, the archivist at the Lyman & Merrie Wood Museum of Springfield History. According to McCarthy's research, all of the 27 signatories to the League were African American, most being transplants from the South. Of the 14 individual names for whom he could find probable birthplaces, ten were from Virginia, Maryland, Washington D.C., or Alabama. Additionally, the occupations of the signatories varied: six worked in hospitality, five engaged in a trade, five were laborers, and one was a farmer. Finally, at least four of the signatories were women.[167]

Details of the lives of some of the members of the League make it clear why they chose to join Brown's militant band. For example, William Green was a former slave who escaped with a friend around 1840 and received help during his journey from Philadelphia to New York to Hartford before ultimately landing in Springfield. Then there was John N. Howard, who grew up on a plantation outside Baltimore. Like Frederick Douglass, Howard learned from one or more members of his master's family how to read, write, and even do some arithmetic. He gained the trust of his master and was allowed to travel alone to the city, where he first learned of places where blacks were free and slavery was illegal. Based on the little information he gathered in the city, he took off with the woman he loved. Howard

[167] Cliff McCarthy, "John Brown in Springfield & the League of Gileadites" (presentation, American International College, Springfield, MA, February 9, 2011), email message to the author, March 21, 2018.

related an incident during their journey which would have made Brown proud. After being stopped by a white man, Howard explains:

> He asked me if I had my master's pass. I told him of course. He asked me to show it. I refused. He insisted. I drew a small pistol and told him that was my pass. He raised a rifle at me. I leaned against the muzzle of the rifle and told him I would die there with him or go on free. I felt the rifle tremble against my breast; it dropped at my feet and the man stepped aside. His life was worth something to him, while mine was worth nothing. I would rather have died than gone back.[168]

Like Green, Howard eventually landed in Springfield, where he became a prominent member of the black community, working various jobs, serving as the sexton of the Free Church, and owning $600 in real estate by 1850. Other members of the League included Beverly C. Dowling, who ran a saloon and worked as a barber in Springfield, and Robert Wright (born Moses Bartlett Sohn), who purchased the free papers of a black man named Robert Wright to secure his freedom.[169]

Though his name does not appear on extant copies of League documents, the most important member of the League of Gileadites was Thomas Thomas. Thomas was born a slave in Maryland in 1817 and worked on steamboats as a waiter when he was a boy. He eventually saved enough money to buy his freedom, after which he became an entrepreneur, buying goods like vegetables and dairy products cheap before flipping them for a profit in New Orleans and other cities along the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers. After being arrested and expelled from Louisiana, he settled in Springfield, where his mother and sister lived. He

[168] Quoted in McCarthy, "John Brown in Springfield & the League of Gileadites."
[169] McCarthy, "John Brown in Springfield & the League of Gileadites."

worked at the Hampden House and Union House hotels, and it was during his time at the latter that he first met John Brown, who hired him to work in his wool warehouse.[170] Brown trusted Thomas, so much so that he had him arrive early for his first day of work, not to get a head start on sorting or cleaning wool, but so that Brown could reveal to Thomas his plan for ending slavery, the same plan he would later articulate to Frederick Douglass. Thomas wasn't alone in earning Brown's confidence, as the offices of Perkins & Brown were often humming with the animated conversations of black men discussing the evils of slavery and racial prejudice in the North.[171] Thomas became both a confidant of and friend to Brown. Brown would later try to persuade him to join him in Kansas, but Thomas declined due to a previous commitment in California.

While the courage of its members is indisputable, the legacy of the League of Gileadites is mixed. Some historians have argued that it was never meant to last, that it was an "ephemeral" symbol created by Brown to give Springfield's understandably terrified black community a shot of confidence.[172] Despite Brown's revolutionary and militant rhetoric, the League ultimately took little action because it was never really put to the test in Springfield.[173] Others have argued that the League actually did serve the mission articulated in Brown's rousing call to arms. Echoing his generous interpretation of "Sambo's Mistakes," Carton argues that the League of Gileadites "proved to be a formidable and enduring force,"

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[170] Ibid.
[171] Carton, *Patriotic Treason*, 104.
[172] Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 124.
[173] Earle, *John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry*, 12.

noting that, "No slave was ever taken from Springfield."[174] He also shares an anecdote from 1854, based on a single report, concerning a party of slave catchers who arrived in Springfield seeking to return some of its residents to the South. City officials kindly warned these men "that they would surely be killed if they tried to apprehend the negroes on their list, and the men took the evening train back to New York."[175] Whether or not the League played any role in this threat is unclear. Another historian has noted that, while it is unclear whether or not the League played a role in the Underground Railroad in Springfield, activity along the route picked up after the formation of the group.[176] And at least one historian has noted that, regardless of the efficacy or functionality of the League, its creation represented another step for Brown on his road to Harpers Ferry. Observing that the League and Brown's address to the League represented, "a practical application of 'Sambo's Mistakes,'" Stephen Oates credits Brown for "trying to put into action a fighting doctrine that other militants only talked about."[177]

Conclusion

Although John Brown was not yet the man capable of directing the slaughter of pro-slavery settlers in Kansas or leading a raid on the Federal armory in Harpers Ferry in order to inspire a general slave insurrection, his time in Springfield put him on the road to that destination. This is evidenced by how his words and deeds during his residency in

[174] Carton, *Patriotic Treason*, 135.
[175] Ibid, 135.
[176] Horatio T. Strother, *The Underground Railroad in Connecticut*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1962), 173.
[177] Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood,* 75.

Springfield differed from those before he moved there. It was in Springfield that he first shared with black men such as Frederick Douglass and Thomas Thomas his plan for subverting the institution of slavery by launching raiding parties on slave plantations. It was during his residency in Springfield that he penned an advice article wherein he adopted the persona of a black man in order to encourage other black men to correct counterproductive behavior and reclaim their dignity and worth as American citizens. And it was in Springfield that he helped organize his friends in the town's black community into a mutual defense league, offering practical and tactical advice on how to resist Federal law.

This was clearly not the same man who first arrived in Springfield in 1846; a man whose convictions, while deeply-held and sincere, manifested themselves in more or less mainstream and ordinary ways for the abolitionist movement. This was a man whose perspective and convictions had become far more radical than those of virtually all of his white, and even some black, contemporaries and peers. His years interacting with the large and active abolitionist community of Springfield and the close bond he developed with its black community (many of whose members were formers slaves who may very well have shared the horrors of slavery with Brown) had radicalized him, as evidenced by his thinking, writing, and activism during his residency. Without this time in Springfield, Brown may never have adopted the violent approach to abolition which motivated the infamous acts which defined the last decade of his life, fanned the flames of sectional tension, and shaped the course of American history.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

After he founded the League of Gileadites in 1851, Springfield would see little more of Brown before his death in 1859. It is clear, however, that Brown did not forget his friends and allies in Springfield. In 1856, during his time in Kansas, Brown wrote a letter to Timothy Walker Carter, a local weapons designer and manufacturer from Chicopee, Massachusetts.[178] In his letter, Brown expressed his desire to order more weapons from Carter to help in the fighting in Kansas, but admitted that he was unable to pay for or safely transport them to his location. Given this situation, Brown wrote that he would take an opportunity to "make a <u>further & more earnest</u> appeal to the lovers of freedom in New England for the means of procuring arms & ammunition" to keep Kansas free. (This appeal would include a stop in Springfield with his friend Frederick Douglass later in 1856.) Confident in his reputation in

[178] Chicopee had been part of Springfield when Brown first arrived in 1846, but it separated and became its own town in 1848.

the city, Brown closed his letter by assuring Carter that "I am well known to many in Springfield," in case Carter felt the need to confirm his character and trustworthiness.[179]

It is also clear that many in Springfield did not forget John Brown, even long after his death. St. John's Congregational Church, formerly the Free Church which renamed itself in honor of Brown, celebrated what would have been his 107th and 110th birthdays.[180] These celebrations were "a voluntary recognition of the old hero by the colored people of a place and generation far removed from the scene and time of his sacrifice in their behalf."[181] Such commemorations speak to the potency of Brown's connection with Springfield's black community. It was so great that 50 years after his death, members of that community who had never met him would choose to honor and celebrate his birthday.

Relative to his more memorable and consequential actions in Kansas and Harpers Ferry, Brown's time in Springfield often gets lost in the narrative of his life. This is unfortunate, as watching a flower first bud can be just as beautiful as watching it bloom. Brown became a different man because of his time in Springfield. Prior to his residency, he was a sincerely committed abolitionist whose actions were inspired by the example of his father as well as his own personal experience. Yet, these actions were largely symbolic and fell well within the mainstream of the abolitionist movement. During and after his residency, however, his words and deeds reflected a more radical orientation toward abolition, one

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[179] John Brown to T.W. Carter, January 20, 1856, from Springfield History Library & Archives, Lyman and Merrie Wood Museum of Springfield History, accessed October 3-5, 2019.
[180] *Springfield Republican*, May 9, 1907; *Springfield Republican*, May 10, 1910.
[181] *Springfield Republican*, May 9, 1907.

which accepted violence as a legitimate and necessary means to bring about the end of slavery in America. This new orientation manifested itself in the plan he revealed to individuals likes Frederick Douglass and Thomas Thomas, his message to the black community in "Sambo's Mistakes," and the advice he gave to the League of Gileadites. It would continue to evolve and harden over the early-1850s and reach its apogee in Kansas and at Harpers Ferry.

But the road to Kansas and Harpers Ferry began in Springfield, a place whose contributions to the abolitionist movement deserve much more attention from scholars. The environment in Springfield was critical to Brown's development, specifically, his interactions and relationships with individuals like Douglass, Thomas, and others in the black community. Their company, conversation, and friendship offered him the opportunity to share and develop his views and plans with the people he was trying to help. The examples of men like Douglass, Thomas, John N. Howard, and Rev. Henry Highland Garnet, as well as earlier figures like David Walker and Nat Turner, inspired Brown to encourage more African Americans to rise up and seize, by force if necessary, their rightful place as citizens of the United States, something he was supremely confident that they could do. His sincere and intense faith in the black community was light years ahead of his contemporaries. To some, Brown's willingness to sacrifice his life for the sake of a race he didn't belong to made him insane. Upon examining his experiences in Hudson, Randolph Township, North Elba, and especially Springfield, however, it was perfectly reasonable, perhaps even inevitable. And to Brown's own way of thinking, it simply made him an American.

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