“Putting Politics In: Rethinking the Problem of Political Abolitionism”

Bruce Laurie
No observer of Massachusetts politics had ever seen anything quite like the legislative session of 1843. The General Court, as the house and senate were formally known, took action on civil rights that more than justified the Bay State’s reputation as the most racially liberal state in the union. Early in the session lawmakers repealed two laws, passed in 1705 and 1786, prohibiting marriage between Caucasians and peoples of color.  

Legislators also passed a personal liberty law, popularly known as the Latimer Law, which denied federal officials tracking down fugitive slaves the use of Bay State jails and other public facilities.  

Lawmakers, in addition, reintroduced a measure narrowly defeated the previous year prohibiting separate facilities on railroads by ending the recent invention of the Jim Crow “dirt car” for African American passengers. The revised bill went down in the house (having cleared the senate) but with the understanding that carriers would integrate their lines voluntarily instead of submitting to state mandate.  

The Liberty party, the nation’s first political party dedicated to emancipation, had a major role in the making of those civil rights initiatives. The party’s founders included one-time Garrisonians convinced that moral suasion had reached its limits and that electoral politics was necessary. Invoking the Liberty party in this context, or indeed any other, is likely to
raise historians’ eyebrows and for two reasons. We hardly know the Libertyites because they have long been in the shadow of Garrison and the Garrisonians, the activists who have proved far more attractive to scholars. Garrisonians, after all, founded the white abolitionist movement in the antebellum era and took a heroic stand for civil rights in a period when most Northerners preferred racial segregation and black subordination; not a few Northern states also tried to expel blacks. For their part, the Libertyites had no “Garrison,” no leader as dynamic or voluble as the Great Agitator. Small wonder that they remain largely unknown to us.

What we do know about the Libertyites, moreover, is not especially flattering. Gilbert H. Barnes, one of the first authoritative historians of abolitionism and one of the few to stress the importance of political abolitionism, wrote off the Liberty Party as a “pathetic residue” worthy of only passing notice. He preferred the political abolitionism of Whiggery. Later historians writing in this spirit alternately attributed the party’s alleged irrelevance to political inexperience or naiveté rooted in the idealistic anti-institutionalism of evangelical Protestantism. They were guilty of a debilitating moral absolutism originally described by Liberty men themselves as “Bible politics,” or “political antipolitics,” a term later adopted by modern critics of the party. Aileen Kraditor, picking up on this
characterization, asserted that the Libertyites were “conceived in frustration and self-delusion, acted out a farce, and died in betrayal.”\(^7\) Several scholars, following a more optimistic line of reasoning put forth at the turn of the 1950s by Dwight L. Dumond, find the Libertyites operating quite effectively at the state and local levels.\(^8\) No historian more fully developed this approach than Richard H. Sewell, who persuasively demonstrated that the Liberty Party deftly blended antislavery morality into political activism. “Liberty men,” in national politics he tells us, “looked upon their party as much as a vehicle for abolitionist propaganda and as an instrument of political power.” \(^9\)

The most recent work cleaves between following Sewell and Barnes. Jonathan H. Earle and Frederick J. Blue examine political abolitionists and political abolitionism from different but engaging perspectives. Earle traces the origins of political antislavery to the egalitarianism of Jacksonian radicalism and charts the work of his insurgents in third-party politics largely at the national level. Blue profiles ten antislavery activists before the Civil War. Both draw attention to more obscure antislavery advocates, as well as better-known figures, and seek to restore political antislavery to its rightful place in the narrative of antebellum
reform. They also correct the conventional wisdom that such insurgents--Free Soilers especially--were racist. It would appear that politics is back in the reassessment antislavery.\textsuperscript{10}

Much of the work in the Barnes tradition centers outside of New England. An account of the Liberty party in Ohio and the Old Northwest anchors the party in evangelical pulpits, predictably arguing it was a “religious party, just as revisionist critics said” -- Puritans in the Babylon of politics.\textsuperscript{11} Another work in this spirit on upstate New York describes a more complex organization factionalized into pragmatists and idealists that embraced land reform and progressive taxation as well as antislavery and civil rights. At the same time the party’s grounding in “ecclesiastical abolitionism” blunted its capacity for compromise and deal making in the political arena.\textsuperscript{12} The work of Henry Mayer reaches the same conclusion from a different perspective, subordinating religion in favor of ideology and personality. Mayer’s Libertyites were not church men but “conservatives” blinkered by a litany of personal failings, echoing Barnes’s derisive assessment of the party as a whole. James Birney retained the “oligarchic planter’s hauteur;” Henry Stanton was suspect for his “transparent ambition and reputation for mendacity;” Amos Phelps was “hot tempered” and “preoccupied with petty grievances. . . .” As for Elizur
Wright, Jr., his “administrative talents far exceeded his literary gifts. . . .” Mayer goes on to chastise historians of political abolitionism for diverting attention from the Garrisonians after 1840, a puzzling claim given vast body of literature centered on Garrisonianism during the 1840s.13

This essay confirms two trends in the revisionist scholarship on the Liberty party and by extension abolitionism more broadly. The first is that the party was not a sideshow but a main event, however briefly, in Bay State politics. The second is that while the party tried to work with the Garrisonians, it was rebuffed and chastised on the grounds that political involvement amounted to tacit acceptance of slavery because the Constitution was a proslavery document.14 Garrison’s slogan of “No Union with Slaveholders” and program of encouraging secession erected an impregnable wall between his “old org” and the “new org.” That wall, however, did not separate Garrison from political activism. A close reading of his Liberator and more to the point his annual reports for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (MASS) shows that he followed state and national politics ever more closely as the 1840s wore on. The annual reports of the MASS grew lengthier with such additional subsections as “The Democratic Party,” “The Whig Party,” “The Third Party,” and so on.15 Garrison continued to encourage
such policies as petitioning (the movement’s most effective tactic),
questioning office-seekers, and organizing mass protests against
discrimination and Jim Crow. Make no mistake, Garrison promoted
the struggle for civil rights despite recent effort to downplay his racial
liberalism.\textsuperscript{16} The Great Agitator was undeniably paternalistic but also the
nation’s most credentialed friend of civil rights.\textsuperscript{17} His blind spot was
tactical—the means to achieve his goals. Garrisonianism never rejected
using mass action to influence politicians. What it did reject through the
1840s, apart from voting, was working with third parties, and with the
Liberty party especially. When Garrison spoke of influencing politicians, he
meant Whig politicians. He never forgave the Libertyites for bolting the
movement in 1839-40. His obsession with that “betrayal” nearly equaled his
obsession with the sins of the Colonizationists a decade before. As a result,
he often sounded petty and vindictive. He missed a chance to broaden the
base of abolitionism by working with men and women who differed with
him on tactical matters but not on the objectives of civil rights or
emancipation. He underestimated electoral politics and the Libertyites as
well, turning his back on a party that proved to be a very effective pressure
group. Liberty operatives swung political regulars to support policies some
individuals endorsed but the parties as a whole would not have supported on
their own. This forced the Libertyites to go it alone, a path they blazed with some skill and acumen and one that opened the way to the Free Soilers and the antislavery parties of the 1850s.

Two additional points in a historiographical spirit inform this essay. The first is Liberty activists were not egalitarians who believed that African Americans were the social, moral, or intellectual equals of whites. I have argued elsewhere in more length and will repeat here that they were integrationists in a qualified way and paternalists above all else. They were patronizing and condescending toward blacks, just as Garrison was. Like him they promoted integrating public accommodations partly because they saw segregation as an embarrassing remnant of slavery in their own backyard, not simply the etiquette of a distant region they had come to regard with greater and greater disdain. ¹⁸ Libertyites also believed that the state constitution at least guaranteed equal rights, if not outright equality; they were convinced that the Federal Constitution could be enlisted in the struggle for emancipation and equality--and much earlier than most historians want us to believe. In 1841, four years before the more famous polemics of William Goodell and Lysander Spooner, the Boston chemist George W. F. Mellen took a similar position in An argument on the unconstitutionality of slavery, which he sent to Garrison for assessment;
Garrison pronounced it “interesting” but not interesting enough to command his endorsement. They also endorsed integration because they feared racial separatism was the crucible of black separatism and because they believed integrating blacks into white institutions and the schools especially would cleanse the objectionable features of their culture and make them more like whites in language, appearance, and aspiration. If that does not make them full-blown egalitarians, it also does not justify lumping them together with racists working for greater segregation or (neo)colonization.

The other point has to do with our persistent ignorance of abolitionists—both black and white—outside of the Garrisonian circle. Much of the literature—too much I would say—follows Garrison and as a result leads away from the activists described above because they repudiated Garrisonian nonresistance for electoral politics. Not a single modern biography of Garrison pays much attention to the laws mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The long shadow of Garrison has not only kept lesser figures in the dark; it has also made it difficult to take for scholars the Liberty party seriously. Very few recognize the racial liberalism they passed on to the Free Soil Party, their successor in the politics of civil rights and antislavery. Important though Garrison was, the movement was much bigger than he through the 1840s. In fact, Garrisonianism and
Libertyism were headed in opposite directions, with the latter eclipsing the former and arguably having a greater impact in politics.

The Libertyites’ image of bumbling amateurs traces in large part to their initial campaign in 1840. They entered the Bay State hustings with little or no organization, not much of a press, and an embarrassingly fluid ticket. Their nominee for governor stood down because he said that he didn’t believe in third party politics; then his replacement (Roger Leavitt) suddenly died, leaving the top of the ticket blank. It was filled in at the last minute by a Whig who was persuaded to run by a loose group of aspiring leaders in accord on little else. But within a few years, the new party began to resemble a serious political organization with a network of committees reaching down to the precincts, along with a major organ (Joshua Leavitt’s Emancipator) and newspapers in just about every county in the state. It also boasted an impressive cadre of leaders, including Samuel Edmund Sewall, a lawyer by profession and the party’s favorite gubernatorial nominee, as well as Henry Ingersoll Bowditch, a public health physician and party leader in Boston. Though Sewall and Bowditch enjoyed Brahmin pedigrees, such secondary leaders Elizur Wright, and Chauncey Langdon Knapp had more common origins in hardscrabble New England. Wright, the former
corresponding secretary of the American Anti-Slavery Society and apostate Garrisonian, became a party journalist working with labor advocates like Knapp to bring the organization around to labor reform, supporting the fledgling ten-hour movement in industrial towns, including Lowell, where Knapp was the party’s nominee for the General Court in the middle of the decade.  

Knapp’s foray into electoral politics indicates the importance of probing beyond the Liberty party’s formal policy of one-idea antislavery to what its operatives actually did in the districts. They ran best in the industrializing villages of the countryside, cobbling up a base of small shopkeepers and working people--plebeians in a word. 

Libertyism, it is important to add, was not confined to white men. It also had the support of women who overlooked the antifeminism of Wright and of the many conservative clergymen in Congregational churches no more eager than Wright to work with women who stepped out of their sphere. The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society in May 1840 voted overwhelmingly (142-10) to leave their Garrison affiliate and re-form as the “new org” Massachusetts Female Emancipation Society, because of dismay over their old organization’s “no-government friends.”

Women abolitionists in the country, where the Liberty Party was much stronger than in the Hub City, were even more likely to pitch in. Mary White
in the Worcester County village of Boylston certainly was. She told of
enthusiasm for the “Abolitionist Ticket” in her town, explaining that her
Congregationalist preacher used his Sabbath pulpit to call for “repentance on
the importance of choosing good rulers and putting away slavery . . . .” His
evening meeting was “mainly of politics,” she said, assuming that the
morning was not, and adding in her own words, “May the Lord direct the
electing of this nation that slavery and oppression may cease.” 25

African Americans also came on board. Not long after the party
formed, it was endorsed by The Colored American, Samuel Cornish’s
sheet in New York and by at least one major African-American church
upstate in Albany. 26 Of course, many African Americans and especially
those in the Bay State were personally loyal to Garrison and at first,
fiercely supportive of his antipathy to the new party. The more intrepid
of them like Frederick Douglass and Charles Lenox Remond
bore the banner of their hero even on hostile terrain. The 1843
meeting of the National Negro Convention in Buffalo, best remembered
for the dramatic confrontation between Douglass and Henry
Highland Garnet over militancy, passed a little-recognized resolution
endorsing the Liberty party. 27 The lone dissenters were Douglass and
Remond, but they should not be mistaken for the voice of
Bay State blacks. The Boston civil rights leader Jehiel C. Beman was a Libertyite early in the decade and it is likely that the black lawyer Robert Morris was simpatico as well. Such leaders pursued what the historian Charles H. Wesley long ago described as the pragmatism of endorsing moral suasion and political action, working for the Liberty party or for friendly regulars depending on which tack was likely to be more fruitful. The New Yorkers believed that the party could help achieve their main objective of eliminating property qualifications that prevented blacks from voting. Many more were drawn in by the middle of the decade when the national organization made of point of welcoming blacks and condemning racist policies.

Their party enjoyed steady growth through the first half of the 1840s, reaching its apogee of 62,000 votes in the presidential election of 1844. This small total had a huge impact on the national race, throwing the election to the expansionist Democrat James K. Polk and setting the stage for the Mexican War. A similar scenario played out earlier in Massachusetts, where the party grew rapidly, peaking in 1846 at about 10,000 votes (just under 10% of the total). It wound up with great leverage because state elections, like the national contests, tightened as Whigs saw their commanding majority of the 1830s recede in the 1840s. Even more
important, Massachusetts was one of the few states in the union that retained the majority rule requirement in order to win elections. Candidates for state offices who did not garner a majority of the vote had to face run-offs until they did; deadlocked races were determined by the General Court. Statewide elections were so closely contested that on three occasions—1842, 1843, and 1845—the Libertyites threw the choice of governor to the legislature. That was the electoral context in which the legislature of 1843 addressed the issue of civil rights.

The Liberty Party may have run well in 1842 on its own without assistance from external events. The insurgency got an unexpected lift from the tumult over George Latimer, the Virginia slave who in fall 1842 bolted for freedom with his wife by hiding in a ship bound for Boston. Latimer tried to blend in to the Hub City’s black quarter known as “The Hill,” but was spotted in October by his former master’s agent, who had him arrested on the trumped-up charge of larceny and then alerted his owner, James Gray. When Gray appeared in court for an article of removal in accordance with the 1793 Fugitive Slave Law, Judge Joseph Story ordered Latimer detained until his owner produced evidence of title. But instead of returning to court, Gray allowed local abolitionists to buy Latimer’s freedom. Latimer was not an isolated episode. It came between two tumults
over runaway slaves in 1839 and 1845 in the countryside, which were broadly seen as companion chapters in the treachery the Slave Power. John Greenleaf Whittier, the Quaker poet from Amesbury and Liberty operative, captured the larger meaning of slavery in his 1845 essay, “The Black Man.” Whittier opened his piece with an anecdote about John Fountain, a free black jailed in Virginia on suspicion of helping slaves escape. Fountain was released from custody on condition that he leave the state but had to flee an angry mob, leaving his wife and children in bondage. He went on a speaking tour to raise funds for their freedom, taking a break from a talk in Lowell in order to thank Whittier for his help. “It is in this way,” Whittier wrote of Fountain but clearly with Latimer in mind, “that the terrible reality of slavery is brought home to the people in this section of the country. Occasionally a fugitive from oppression seeks shelter among us and reveals the horrors... of bondage... As a result, we no longer regard slavery in the abstract.”

Latimer’s arrest intensified the feud between the “old org” and “new org” forces, as each side organized to reap the political whirlwind. They formed separate Latimer Committees, which ran on parallel tracks but also collided head on. The Garrisonian committee, organized shortly after Latimer’s arrest and lead by Remond, William Cooper Nell and others,
proved ineffective. Its fundraising stumbled and its effort to enlist legal support for Latimer turned into an embarrassment because Libertyite stalwart Sewall stole their thunder. Sewall brokered Latimer’s release and paid for his freedom with funds raised by his party’s Latimer Committee headed by Henry Bowditch, William F. Channing, and Frederick Cabot, with help from Rev. Nathaniel Colver. 36 The committee also scheduled public protests and doubled as the editorial board of the Latimer Journal and North Star, an ephemeral party organ.

The work of the Libertyite committee angered Garrisonians who denounced Sewall’s intervention for Latimer as “compensation” for slavery. 37 Their pique thwarted Bowditch’s best efforts to call a truce in the name of the beleaguered Latimer. The accommodating patrician included Garrisonians on the podium of a late October meeting, only to hear the gathering dissolve into disorder when Wendell Phillips rose to “CURSE. . . the Constitution.” 38 Tempers were no cooler several weeks later at another “joint meeting” in celebration of Latimer’s new-found freedom. The Garrisonians rejected a motion to put Colver on the business committee, electing Maria Chapman Weston instead. Colver stormed out; Leavitt denounced the “proscriptive spirit” borne of the “OLD GRUDGE;”
Bowditch openly despaired, then listened in amazement to gratuitous assaults on his party by Garrison loyalists Phillips and Stephen Foster. ³⁹

Garrisonians sharpened their pens as the November 1842 race drew near. Garrison, in an election-eve editorial on the gubernatorial race, poured scorn on all candidates, dismissing the Whig John Davis as a surrogate for Henry Clay and the Democrat Marcus Morton as a shill for “Martin Van Buren, or John C. Calhoun.” That left Sewall, who Garrison conceded was a “meritorious man” but also a misguided one and the dupe of “those who are waging a war of extermination against the American Anti-Slavery Society,” a fatuous charge more reflective of Garrison’s obsessions than of realities on the ground. He added that “We recommend to voting abolitionists to scatter their votes in all such cases,” aiming to hit the Libertyites where it mattered most. But only a puny one hundred and eighty of the faithful followed suit, leaving Garrison not a little humbled and without much to say except that the electorate had been “led astray.”⁴⁰

The 1842 race was a banner outing for the Liberty party, just as Garrison seems to have feared. Their statewide candidates drew an average of some 6000 votes, nearly doubling the vote (5.4 per cent) of the previous year. The tally complicated the gubernatorial race and left dozens of house
seats, sixteen senate seats, and six Congressional seats hanging for want of a majority. Runoffs in December gave the Libertyites at least six seats in the house, which yielded the balance of power because the regulars were evenly divided and each needed Libertyite help in order to fill the remaining seats in the senate, name the speaker, and elect the governor. The shadowy horse-trading that followed showed that the Libertyites were no longer a fringe, or a party of the “flank,” as their Whig detractors called them. Liberty electees went after the sixteen senate seats but soon fell back, ceding them to the Democrats and helping put a Democrat in the governor’s chair. They also wound up with the trump card for speaker. They held out through four ballots before supporting H.A. Collins, a Whig from the abolitionist wing of his party; in return the Libertyites extracted from both parties the promise of favorable action on civil rights bills that cleared the General Court the following spring.41

This is not to dismiss the work of the “old org” pressure on the General Court. Indeed, Garrison first called attention to the ancient intermarriage ban over a decade before repeal. An early Liberator editorial railed against the proscription as unjust, racist, and particularly objectionable because it traced to the old colony’s slave code.42 Such a “disgraceful badge of servitude,” as he called it, was unworthy of a Christian republic and an anathema to
Yankees. At the end of the decade his followers responded with a petition campaign that grew more robust as the 1830s turned into the 1840s. Some 9000 men and women signed petitions by 1843, about double the number of signatures in 1838 when the drive kicked off. The politicians had to take heed.

And they did. Despite a feverish reaction by racist journalists and cartoonists from both parties in the cities, lawmakers debated repeal each year after 1838. Whig and Democrat unimpressed with the justice of the matter reflected a range of positions. Some felt it was not the business of government to dictate who could marry whom; others believed it was a non-issue since there was no chance that a Caucasian would even consider the possibility of wedding a person of color. All of that aside, the fact remains that Garrisonian agitation aroused the public and the politicians.

The same could be said of the movement to integrate public carriers. The advent of commuter rail lines in the 1830s brought the “dirt car,” the overland equivalent of separate outdoor facilities for African Americans on water carriers. Garrison found such policies as objectionable as the interracial marriage ban. In the late 1830s he faithfully reported racist policies of private carriers; in the early 1840s he publicized indignities suffered by black passengers, including Douglass and David Ruggles. His
followers in Lynn gathered often in early fall 1841, once to condemn the eviction of John A. Collins and Douglass for openly defying separate seating on the Eastern Railway. Another rally called for a fresh petition imploring lawmakers to “defend the colored people who may see fit to take their seats in the long cars, in the enjoyment of their rights” by taking legislative action—a position endorsed by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.

Thus, Garrison yielded to no one when it came to airing the injuries and injustice of racial segregation. When he proclaimed “I will be heard,” he meant it. When he said “No Union with Slaveholders,” he not only meant condemning the Constitution; he also meant no union with third parties because their very involvement in electoral politics made them complicit with slavery, a kind of guilt by association. Such a position effectively severed his faction of the movement from an important avenue of the struggle for emancipation and civil rights. Though not out of the game altogether, Garrison wound up on the sidelines at a critical moment in the remaking of the antislavery movement and in the hewing of the alternative path of electoral politics in order to break down the barriers of social (if not economic) segregation.

It goes without saying that “old” and “new org” abolitionists reacted differently to the session of 1843. In his annual report to the MASS Garrison
intoned that his organization would stick to its policy of pressuring the regulars because it was palpably successful. This “two party” policy, he said, worked because it “shows that we obtained every thing for which we have asked (with the exception of the railway bill) by votes of members of both parties, without the expense of time and money involved in the inception and conducting of a third.” He conceded that a “short-sighted politician for the Third Party” could take some credit for “a portion of these success.” Then he abruptly and characteristically changed course, arguing that “while we would not deny that the existence of that party may have had an apparent effect . . . still, knowing as we do the origin, character and malign influences of that movement towards our enterprise, we cannot admit that its interference [emphasis added] was of any genuine benefit. . . .” He ended with the blunt assertion that “we should have gained more than we have achieved through the two other parties, had it not been for the interposition of the Third Party . . . .” 47

Liberty men demurred, no one more prominently than Joshua Leavitt, who was the source of a good deal of Garrison’s bitterness over the split because he had refused to give up control of the Emancipator. Leavitt told his readers that the action of the lawmakers on the Latimer Bill had been “prompt, firm, thorough, and unanimous.” Taking a broader view of the
session, he wrote that it was “an edifying and encouraging sight” to see the various bills pass “without debate--as a matter of course, precisely like the pay roll or an order notice in regard to the change in town lines . . . . The Latimer Committee got all they asked.” The movement got even more, for the General Court had repealed the “anti-Christian” marriage ban and warned the railways to “behave better” or face “no mercy next year.”

Such measures unquestionably enjoyed momentum fueled by “old org” agitation. Indeed, as we have seen, two of them--the marriage ban and railway bill--had come before lawmakers the previous year and earlier still in the case of the former. The fact is, however, they failed until the Liberty men weighed in. It was they who brokered the deal that put across the two major civil rights bills of the session and extracted the understanding with the railroads that produced the objective of the third.

Thereafter the Liberty Party sometimes gained voices disillusioned with their former parties. George Bradburn was an antislavery Whig from Nantucket at that time who had been a leading advocate for repealing the intermarriage ban and integrating railway cars. In 1844, he left the Whigs, possibly over its tepid position on civil rights, its unpopularity in his new North-Shore district, or both. Whatever the case, Bradburn was a Libertyite,
a political fact that bothered Garrison because abolitionist regulars like him justified Garrison’s two-party strategy. The editor belittled Bradburn’s departure in a letter to Henry Wright just before the 1844 election. “Poor man!” he exclaimed, “there is more of the Politician than of the Christian in his composition. . . .” But Bradburn’s departure clearly weighed on Garrison, for he mentioned it two months later in a letter to Elizabeth Pease, and again several months later in another note to Richard Webb, adding “These are trying times certainly.”

If Bradburn’s addition did not help the party much in the State House, it was partly because Libertyism stalled not long after he went over. Its vote fluctuated within a narrow range between 1844 and 1845 before reaching its plateau in 1846 and then sliding back. Party operatives carried on through the second half of the 1840s at the local level in the villages and industrial towns. As the work of Henry Bowditch in Boston indicates, they also built on the foundation laid elsewhere earlier in the decade, a surprising finding indeed in light of the party’s weakness in the Commonwealth’s leading city. The public-health physician had helped coordinate the statewide petition in support of the Latimer Bill. At the start of the 1843 session Bowditch and his friends ceremoniously rolled into the State House a great coil of paper two feet wide and nearly a half mile in length pasted
with 230 petitions demanding approval of the bill. So much for the Libertyites’ political ineptitude.  

By 1845 Bowditch was a fearless ally of African Americans in Boston who were about to renew a drive to close the city’s black-only schools and open mainstream classrooms to their children. This is no place to review that struggle in its entirety. It is enough to say that the agitation, which had died down in the late 1830s, picked up in 1840 when William Cooper Nell started a movement to dismiss the white head Abiel Smith School accused of abusing the students. It drew inspiration from the concurrent civil rights campaigns over intermarriage and integration and from efforts to close Jim Crow schools in Salem and Lowell. Nell’s group got nowhere petitioning school authorities to sack the offensive headmaster and then close his hated school. A meeting of African American parents angered by the inaction called for a boycott of the “caste schools” and then linked up with local Libertyites. They had every reason to do so. In 1845, roughly coincident with the beginning of the boycott, Bowditch’s party called on the legislature to prohibit taxation for support of separate schools and to admit black students to mainstream classrooms. Bowditch, now a member of the Boston School Committee, proved to be a
rare voice of enlightenment on the racist body. In 1846 the committee made short work of another petition on the grounds that segregation enjoyed no less of a sanction than the “All Powerful Creator.” Bowditch replied in a minority report, co-authored by fellow abolitionist Edmund Jackson, that claimed separate education based on race violated equal rights guaranteed to all Bay Staters under their constitution and constituted a dangerous example that could be used to exclude anyone for any reason. Separate schools not only reflected white chauvinism and inferior education; they also abetted racism by condemning black youths to illiteracy, ignorance, and poverty, which in turn made them easy targets “for the most inveterate hater of . . . [the black] race.” The report recommended the bold step of phasing out the Smith School and allowing black children to disperse among schools of their choice, an early version of school choice voted down by the school authorities. 56

This initial assault on the ramparts of school segregation in Boston and in the towns failed to achieve immediate results. But it did help solidify a bi-racial coalition in Boston and elsewhere that would strengthen in time, culminating in the 1855 law integrating public education in the Bay State. 57 The important point to bear in mind is that while Garrisonians were involved in this initiative from the beginning, the Libertyites joined in at
mid-passage and along the way drew more and more African Americans into political participation including use of the ballot box. That coalition proved stronger still in the Free Soil party, the political force that replaced the Libertyites and one that continues to be misunderstood as single-mindedly racist. But that’s a story for a different time.

Much this essay said applies to Massachusetts, the place I know best. How typical was the Bay State?—a fair question but one we cannot answer with much confidence at this time simply because we do not know. We do not know because we have not done the spade work. Past work on New York and Ohio, the two other strongholds of Libertyism, is dated or generally suffers from the traditional tendency of looking at the party exclusively from an evangelical lens or assessing it by Garrisonian standards. Such a standard stacks the case against Libertyism by showing (erroneously, I would argue) that it was not as correct as the “old org” because it didn’t come out for emancipation until 1844 and 1845. Put another way, it was largely a matter of not measuring up to Garrisonianism..

All that aside, what we need is work on how antislavery parties functioned at the state and local levels; we need to look at what they did as well as what they said. We ought not expect to learn from such work that
Ohioans had second thoughts and decided to integrate their schools or that New Yorkers regretted the opportunity at their constitutional convention in 1846 to broaden the black franchise. The political rules and valence of political actors in such places differed from Massachusetts; it would be foolish to expect the same or a similar result. We might find that the unmistakable tendency of deepening racism in the two decades before the Civil War did not go unchallenged. We might find resistance because we have seen enough of it in this essay, and in the revisionist work of Jonathan H. Earle and Frederick J. Blue, to believe that the struggle for racial equality at that time was more impressive than the conventional wisdom would have us believe. 59

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Notes


6 Kraut, Crusaders and Compromisers, p. 13 ff.


15 See MASS, Annual Reports, (1840-1850), passim.


18 Laurie, Beyond Garrison, esp. pp. 87-105.


25 Quoted in Mary Fuhrer, “‘We all have something to do in the cause of freeing the slave:’ The Abolition Work of Mary White” (paper presented at the Dublin Seminar, Deerfield, Ma., June 15-17, 2001), p. 13.


30 Wesley, “Participation of Negroes in Anti-Slavery Political Parties,” 176-78.

31 Ibid., p. 173. Also Quarles, Black Abolitionists, pp. 183-88.


33 Laurie, Beyond Garrison, pp. 76-80.

34 Ibid., pp. 76-77.


36 Patrick Crim, “‘The Ballot Boxes Are Our Arms!’ The Latimer Slave Case and the Liberty Party in Massachusetts” (seminar paper, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 1999), and Laurie, Beyond Garrison, pp. 78-80.


38 (Boston) Liberator, Nov. 25, 1842. Hereafter Lib.

39 Ibid., Nov. 11, 1842.

40 Ibid., Jan. 17, 1843.

41 (Boston) Emancipator, Jan. 12, 19, and 26, 1843 and (Boston) Daily Advertiser,

42 Lib., May 7, 1831. Also see Ruchames, “Race, Marriage, and Abolition in Massachusetts,” and Dubow, “‘Not a Virtuous Woman.’”

43 Eman., Dec. 1-8 and 29, 1842, and Jan. 12, 19, and 26, 1843. Also Darling, Political Change in Massachusetts, pp. 248-49.

44 For a summary of the debate in the press see Laurie, Beyond Garrison, pp. 110-12. Also see Ruchames, “Race, Marriage and Abolition in Massachusetts,” and Dubow, “‘Not a Virtuous Woman.’”


46 Lib., October 15, 1841. Also ibid., Aug. 20, and Oct. 1-8 and 29, and Nov. 5, 1841.


49 Dubow, “‘Not a Virtuous Woman,’” and Ruchames, “Jim Crow Railroads in Massachusetts.”


52 This aspect of party activity is least well known. The work of Mark Voss-Hubbard, “Slavery, Capitalism, and the Middling Sorts,” suggests that the party was deeply
engaged in local politics. I am assuming that it was at least one of the groups at work for
the racial integration of town schools.

53 Boston Courier, Feb. 7, 1843.


57 Laurie, Beyond Garrison, pp. 279-83.

