

**“I think I can see the hand of God in it”:
The Failed Palmyra Revolt and the Problem of Slavery**

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“I think I can see the hand of God in it,” wrote the imprisoned abolitionist Alanson Work. “I now know how to feel for those who are separated from their families, and bought and sold like cattle—How to sympathize with the slave in all his afflictions, better than I ever did before.”¹ Born in 1790 in Connecticut to a farm man, Work learned the trades of carpentry and gun-stocking.² After his marriage in 1825 the details of his life are unclear.³ However, at some point he moved from Missouri, where he worked as a handyman at Marion College with Dr. David Nelson, to Quincy Illinois to live and work in some capacity at the Mission Institute in the same city. Details of the Mission Institute are scarce at best, but it is generally accepted that it was a short-lived venture created by Dr. David Nelson, a notorious abolitionist.⁴ Nelson himself was chased out of Missouri by an angry mob for speaking against slavery; Work followed

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George Thompson *Prison Life and Reflections; or A Narrative of the Arrest, Trial, Conviction, Imprisonment, Treatment, Observations, Reflections, and Deliverance of Work, Burr and Thompson*. New York: Negro Universities Press reprint 1969. 61

² “Death of Alanson Work: A Prominent Abolitionist’s Career,” *The New York Times*, From the Hartford Curreant July 7th. 1879, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html>

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Harriet Frazier claims that he was a faculty member at the Mission Institute of Quincy Illinois, but Thompson’s account, and Work’s obituary only mention that he was there for the purpose of educating his children.

⁴ Harriet C Frazier. *Runaway and Freed Missouri Slaves and Those Who Helped Them, 1763-1865*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2004. 131.

him.⁵ While at the Mission Institute, Work met two students, George Thompson and James Burr, who were studying for the ministry at the Institute. While little information is available about the abolitionist leanings of these three men prior to their time at the Mission Institute, their presence alone at an institution founded by an unapologetic abolitionist indicates that they already had anti-slavery sympathies.

The Mission Institute itself was across the river from Missouri. From this location they could, “as it were, hear the crack of the Overseer’s whip.”⁶ From here these three men formed and attempted to execute a poorly designed plot to help slaves from Missouri escape into Illinois and eventually Canada. The failure of this conspiracy, and the subsequent arrest of the three men, set off a fire storm in the troubled Missouri/Illinois region. This event has largely been overlooked by history, and the best account of the events comes from George Thompson’s own pen. Thompson’s *Prison Life and Reflections*, provides the only thorough narrative of their failed mission, arrest, conviction, imprisonment, and release. As a result, any analysis of the event must be based largely on Thompson’s narrative, and thus influenced by his perspective. From the perspective of George Thompson, the failed Palmyra slave revolt, led by himself, Work, and Burr, was an important chapter in shaping American abolitionism. Their poorly executed escape plot created a national stir that helped accentuate the greater divisions in the region. By driving to action both common citizens and politicians both locally and nationally, the events surrounding these men exemplified and intensified the growing division between radicals on

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David Nelson. *Dr. Nelson's Lecture on Slavery*. Miniature anti-slavery tracts, no. 12. New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839.

⁶ *Prison Life*, 17.

both sides, while at the same time having a moderating effect on many people who were turned off by the extremism.

According to Thompson's record, on July 1st 1841, James Burr and another man he calls a brother, crossed the Mississippi river into Missouri. While on this "tour of mercy" the two men made an agreement with two slaves that they would come back for them on a specific day, at a specific spot along the river. On the appointed day, the 12th of July, Work, Burr, and Thompson took a skiff across the river. Burr and Work entered the country-side in the afternoon and went out to "reconnoiter." After dark the two were met by a handful of slaves who pretended that they were interested in coming with them. After traveling with these slaves but a short distance, slaveholders rose out of the grass and, armed with rifles, took the two men captive. Thompson, who had stayed behind in the skiff, to fish and wait, was approached by several more slaves who hailed him asking him if he was "a friend." After replying that he was a friend, the slaves engaged Thompson in conversation until more slaveholders came to arrest him as well. Thompson was then "bound, and marched barefoot," while "Host after host came with all speed to meet us, and 'the earth rang out again' with their fiendish yells. It seemed as if all the infernal regions had been uncapped, and had vomited forth their legions to hail our approach, as if some long dreaded monster had been captured."⁷

After spending several months in the local prison, the three men were tried in September of the same year. The trial itself was a sham, relying largely on the evidence of slaves, whose testimony was barred from open court by state law.⁸ The prosecution found a way around this by

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Ibid. 17-23

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W. Sherman Savage, *The Contest Over Slavery Between Illinois and Missouri*, *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Jul., 1943), p 319.

having the slave's testimony be presented from their masters. The white slaveholders testified to the things that the slaves had claimed to have seen and heard. Despite the objections of the defense, the judge allowed the hearsay to be admitted into court.⁹ The jury for the case was made up of the most prestigious men available, including the father of Samuel Clemens.¹⁰ After the trial the jury brought down a sentence of guilty, and through consultation with the judge handed down a twelve year sentence to all three men. According to Thompson this produced a general excitement against them. Thompson later relates that men from Palmyra and the nearby town of Hannibal, had been so sure that the court would acquit them that they had built and readied gallows for their hanging should they be released or given an unsatisfactory sentence.¹¹ Their sentence, the second longest ever given to an abolitionist in the state of Missouri, was likely the only way to protect them from the lynch mob. All appeals to state courts, and the state governor, Thomas C. Reynolds, were denied, and they were carted off to state penitentiary.¹²

The time spent in state prison was one of both trial and blessing for the three men. Thompson's account is largely a recollection of events that took place while they were imprisoned. He recounts nearly every detail of their stay. While most of this is irrelevant to the discussion at hand, it does make for an interesting, and spiritual encouraging account. Thompson recalls both the trials they endured and the blessings afforded them by God. Their time included periods of persecution for their abolitionism, as well as their Christianity. However, Thompson is

⁹ *Frazier*, 132

¹⁰ *Savage*, 319

¹¹ *Thompson*, 90-91

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Frazier, 132

also careful to recount the many spiritual encounters they had with other prisoners, including the conversion of several. In essence Thompson's record stay in prison is more a memoir than it is a historical work, but it still contains many things helpful to the study at hand, which will become evident.

All three of the prisoners were eventually pardoned, but not before serving a healthy term each. Alanson Work was the first to be pardoned, after serving just three years, six months, and seven days. James Burr was released about a year and one half later, after badly breaking his arm in a work related accident. The last one to be released was George Thompson. Perceived as the ringleader, Thompson's release was delayed for another five months after Burr's.¹³ Thompson went on to become a missionary to Africa and later a pastor in the United States. He also wrote several books besides his chronicle of the above mentioned events. James Burr travelled the country and sold Thompson's narrative, *Prison Life and Reflections*, but his broken arm and poor health led to an early death.¹⁴ Alanson Work returned to his home state of Connecticut, per the terms of his pardon, and spent the rest of his 89 years selling *Prison Life and Reflections*, working for a gun-stocker, and serving as an agent for the American Missionary Society. He passed away on July 6th 1879, just six days before the 38th anniversary of his capture.¹⁵

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Thompson, 266-414

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"Three Abolitionist Martyrs: Letter from the Survivor," *The New York Times*, From the Cleveland Ohio Leader, July 28th 1879, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html>

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Death of Alanson Work.

The context of Illinois was critical to the defining of this event, and had the events just recounted not taken place in the Illinois/Missouri boarder area, it is likely that this event either never would happened or would have been utterly unimportant. Besides having been home to the Mission Institute, Quincy, Illinois is located at the westernmost edge of the state. It sits right on the edge of the mighty Mississippi, and consequently on the very boarder with Missouri. The young state was settled by a largely Northern population, and therefore possessed of a corresponding attitude toward slavery.¹⁶ The state herself was formed out of the larger Northwest Territory, and was thus subject to the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which states, in part, that “there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory, otherwise than in the punishment of crimes whereof the party shall have been duly convicted: *Provided, always,* That any person escaping into the same, from whom labor or service is lawfully claimed in any one of the original States, such fugitive may be lawfully reclaimed and conveyed to the person claiming his or her labor or service as aforesaid.”¹⁷ Despite these laws slavery still found its way into Illinois. A large influx of Southerners brought with them both slaves and slave laws. This led to a kind of double-mindedness within the state. Pro-slavery and anti-slavery groups battled for supremacy in the state. However, it generally maintained a more Free State status, and abolitionists found a better home there than in Missouri.¹⁸

Quincy, Illinois was, however, an abolitionist stronghold. According to a number of accounts this small city served as the first hub for the western Illinois line of the Underground

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Savage, 311

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The Northwest Ordinance of 1787. Article VI

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Savage, 312-313

Railroad. Quincy, in the 1840's was a thriving but still small commercial center. Recent scholarship has handed down the belief that abolitionism came into its own in Quincy with the arrival of Dr. Nelson.¹⁹ Nelson, a converted slave-holder, had made a reputation for himself as an outspoken abolitionist. While serving at Marion College across the river from Quincy in Marion County Missouri, Nelson got into trouble a number of times for his abolitionist position. On one occasion he invited two free black students to come and study at the school. This created an uproar in which the students were beaten, threatened and forced to leave the area. Not long after Nelson was chased out of Missouri by an angry mob that was ready to lynch him on the spot.²⁰ With his arrival in Quincy came a growing abolitionist movement in the city.

The Mission Institute became a manual labor school for the purpose of training men for Christians missions work. However, it was no less a school dedicated to abolitionism. Under unclear circumstances Nelson became highly involved in the Underground Railroad, but unlike most agents he believed in a direct action policy. In other words Nelson preferred direct intervention to entice slaves away from their masters, as opposed to passively assisting those who came looking for it. Nelson put together both a faculty and a band of fellow Underground agents that shared his views. Quincy maintained a deep roster of abolitionists. John K. Van Dorn was a Congregationalist who became known as the "most notable abolitionist" in the region. Dr. Richard Eells sacrificed both wealth and health in his service on the Railroad, and the Mission Institute was unofficially named for him. He was a long standing member of the Illinois Anti-

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Joseph C Dickman *The Underground Railroad in Illinois: A Study in Practical Abolitionism.*, The Ohio State University, 197, 6

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David Nelson. *Dr. Nelson's Lecture on Slavery.* Miniature anti-slavery tracts, no. 12. New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839.

slavery society, and was eventually elected president of the society. Nelson's most important associate was a Congregationalist minister named Moses Hunter. Hunter, already in Illinois, made a trip to see Nelson and his Institute, and immediately returned home to gather a large group of both men and women. Together they established the "Mission Institute No.2." He and Nelson formed the backbone of the Institute, and their deaths marked the nearing death of the Institute.²¹

Given the hotly abolitionist rhetoric of the Institute's most important members it is little wonder that the interventionist ideology of Nelson and his followers would spill over in the students. It soon became an unwritten policy of students to go out on the Mississippi on a skiff, and give a signal. This signal, if reciprocated from the shore would be met with an immediate response from the students in the skiff. Of the experience one student wrote, "We were to help such as needed help, to a station 16 mi. east of Quincy." However, all attempts before Work's were unsuccessful.²² While Quincy served as a training ground for Work, Burr, and Thompson, Marion County Missouri served as a hot house for their opponents.

The state of Missouri was born out of a compromise between pro and anti-slavery forces. The debate over the admittance of a western slave state became a defining moment for both the United States and the slavery debate in general. The turmoil of identity that ruled the state at its creation would continue to be a thorn in the side of all.²³ In 1819 the state of Missouri was

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Dickman, 40-43

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Ibid, 6-7

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Herbert, Aptheker. *Abolitionism: A Revolutionary Movement*. Social movements past and present. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989. 8-11

seeking admission into the Union, and the issue of slavery quickly became the defining factor. At the time the Union was split evenly between free and slave states, so the entrance of Missouri would create a shift in power. Pro-slavery advocates were pushing to have Missouri admitted as a slave state, and anti-slavery forces were trying to oppose them, both internally and externally. Eventually the problem was solved, temporarily with the Missouri Compromise of 1820. The compromise involved adding Main (previously of Massachusetts) as a free state. While the state was officially licensed as a slave state, the bitter infighting that had accompanied its admission left a lasting mark on the state. For years Missouri battle through a crisis of identity, and these frustrations led to an outpouring of hate toward all things anti-slavery.

Missouri's circuit court system sentenced a minimum of 42 abolitionists, and contributed to the freeing of none. The states laws were anything but kind to those seeking to aid slaves. Given that abolitionists came to Missouri from 14 different states and 4 different countries, this caused no small level of friction. Laws were written especially against slave enticement, and the act was not smiled upon. Harriet Fraizier's recent work, *Runaway and Freed Missouri Slaves*, dedicates an entire chapter to those who suffered imprisonment and other forms of persecution for the crime of slave stealing. As she says these accounts "document the community's intense anger toward anyone accused of slave stealing. This rage bent the law...helped to convict at least one innocent free black...and was also an influence in sending two women to prison, one of whom was almost certainly visibly pregnant..."²⁴ Missouri, especially Marion county, was a truly important area for the cause of pro-slavery, and its close physical connection to Quincy caused serious abrasion.

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As we have already seen Dr. Nelson's students, and later himself, were driven out of the county for abolitionist sentiments. Dr. Eells, and many others also paid the price in Marion County, and all were from Quincy. These two relatively small locations mark a much more serious distinction between ideologies. Given the intense sentiments and loyalties of these neighboring areas, it is no real surprise that the events of July-September of 1841 would cause a great deal of tension on both sides. However, what is unexpected is the extent to which this event helped to define the movements with which it interacted.

When word of their arrest reached the ears of their fellow abolitionist laborers, the reaction was immediate and serious. Thompson's account is full of letters, and visits from friends in the area. In fact, Thompson's writing so abounds with them that it is almost redundant to try to mention them. Many included sympathy, calls for immediate release and the like. The full extent of these contacts from ordinary people cannot be fully grasped. On the one hand they served to uplift the spirits of the three. On the other hand, according to Thompson, the work and petitions of others also served to keep the three men in prison longer, but we will not deal with that here.

The story soon became publically known, and the response from abolitionists nationwide was overwhelming. While the exact process by which the story became national news is unknown, the response from outside of the states of Illinois and Missouri leave little doubt that the story was disseminated by some high profile publications. The response was so severe that the pardon file for the three is more than six times the length of a typical abolitionist pardon file for the period.²⁵ Letters and petitions from all over the United States came flooding into the offices of the various governors of Missouri. While the exact numbers of responses are unknown, the evidence does seem to suggest the number is potentially quite staggering. Thompson recounts

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that the final governor under which they were imprisoned received so many petitions from Free states that the postage cost to the governor's office was over three hundred dollars.²⁶ This is a hefty sum considering that the postage price during the Civil War was just 3 cents per half ounce.²⁷ Also, the character of these petitions and letters says something about the seriousness with which these men's case was taken.

The origins of the correspondence were quite diverse, but not altogether dissimilar. Notable examples include two petitions originating from Indiana. The first petition came from a group of over 100 female citizens. These women casted their arguments in language from the Declaration of Independence. The other came from a mixed gender petition of well over 200 hundred names. In it they ask for the prompt release of the three prisoners, and also make it known that they believe that "slavery is a violation of every principle of right, that God never made one man to be the slave of another."²⁸ The majority, it seems, did not hold back on their views. Rather than offering a pardon or excuse for the behavior of these men, they owned and embraced their confrontational approach. Citizens from New York's Thirty-First Congressional District also petitioned on similar grounds of immorality. Such was the claim of the Unitarian pastor William Ware in his letter to Missouri's Senator Thomas Hart Benton. Such was the character of the more uncompromising abolitionists.²⁹ Many moderate abolitionists also

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Thompson, 410

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United States Postal Service, Rates for Domestic Letters: 1863-2009

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Frazier, 133

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Ibid, 133-134

petitioned for the release of these men, but they were not, as Thompson would say, those whose purpose was “calculated to exasperate the minds of slaveholders.”³⁰

Also, a secondary consequence of the Quincy convicts situation makes itself present. That is, a largely unsubstantiated claim from Thompson that their situation led to an increase in run away slave activity. On a number of occasions Thompson mentions that his information is largely coming from outside sources, or some unrecorded conversation with a guard or other inmate. While it is next to impossible to establish these claims, one particular instance he mentions does stand out from the others. On one occasion the men received a visit from Mrs. Work, her children, and a couple friends. Among these friends is a woman that Thompson refers to merely as M. C. (the woman who will later become his wife.). It is during one of their conversations that M.C. makes the statement that she is glad that they are in prison, because “there are so many slaves getting away, in consequence.”³¹ Again the validity of this statement is beyond the ability of this researcher to establish, but the fact that it comes from an outside source, one which likely knew quite a bit about the Underground activities, tends to add some credibility to the idea that slaves, and their liberators, were inspired by the example of the Mission conspirators.

Besides this possible outcome, one important factor should be noted. As Thompson himself points out, the more militant abolitionists, those who assaulted the state lawmakers and officials with uncompromising levels of abolitionist rhetoric, succeed in alienating themselves all the further from their pro-slavery countrymen. Thompson accounts on several occasions that it

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Thompson, 410

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Thompson, 271

was angry letter and petitions that helped keep the three men in prison for as long as they were.³² Further account of conversations with officials indicate that Missouri politicians were more angered than moved by the radical calls for the men's release. Later groups of Abolitionists would continue to fight for slave's freedom, and inspired by the story of Work, Burr, and Thompson, many slaves continued to cross.³³ If the abolitionists could be considered radical in some of their responses, it is the pro-slavery force that truly deserves the title.

As we have already addressed, the area of Marion county Missouri was a breeding ground for radical slave owners and advocates. From the writing of Thompson we know that the immediate reaction from slavery advocates was less than calm. Considering a lynch mob was prepared to string the men up right in front of the courthouse, and the laws of the land prohibiting this very activity, it is not surprising that these men were dealt with harshly. Further, their very conviction stands as evidence to the radical pro-slavery mindset. Since their conviction required the use of hearsay evidence from third-party witnesses speaking on behalf of people who were not legally allowed to testify, we can be sure that getting a conviction was more important to them than upholding the law of the land. However the changes wrought from this event ran deeper than merely surface level hostilities.

As W. Sherman Savage points out so effectively in his brief essay, *The Contest over Slavery between Illinois and Missouri*, the tensions raised around the failed slave revolt in Palmyra would lead to a change in attitude of pro-slavery advocates in Missouri. As He shows later crimes, of a similar nature, were perpetuated back and forth, but the original event led to a dynamic change in the way that many slave owners saw abolitionists. "Missouri thus not only

³² Thompson, 409-410

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Savage, 324

protected slavery but welcomed the opportunity,” writes Savage, “to retaliate for what had happened in Missouri...”³⁴ Further reaction involved citizen militia’s, whose goal was to protect the property (slaves) of owners in the area. A deep seeded hatred of abolitionists continued to grow in the hearts of many, and occasionally shot out in acts of violence. In 1844 Dr. Nelson, ever the abolitionist apostle, was chased out of Marion County under the threat of violence for the second time. Just a year before anti-abolitionist radicals crossed the Mississippi and put the Mission Institute chapel to the torch.³⁵

The identifiable result on these two extremes can be seen in the deepening divide that was created out of the ashes of the failed Palmyra slave revolt. The actions of Work, Burr, and Thompson served to accentuate the fundamental ideological differences which existed between slave owners and abolitionists, while at the same time making what had previously been fear, a reality. This one event serves as a kind of marker for the tipping point in Missouri/ Illinois relations, and gives us a point of reference for understanding the continued effort of both abolitionists and slave owners. Yet, for all the significance the failed revolt had for radicals it served as a truly defining moment for those who did not affiliate with either group of radicals.

After their initial arrest and trial Work, Burr and Thompson spent a great deal of time getting to know the people around them and through various connections were able to make friends. Through their exemplary conduct and Christian charity they succeeded in winning over a great number of sympathizers to their cause. Not so much sympathizers on the issue of abolitionism, but on the issue of their status.³⁶ This alone stands as a testament to the ability of

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Savage, 323

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Savage, 324-325

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many people to come to a more levelheaded decision regarding issues so long debated. Many took sympathy on them, but demanded that they give up their principles in order to receive some better treatment. In the end Thompson was to finally see release because he recanted of his behavior, though as his journal points out, he was truthful in only the most literal sense.³⁷In short, their condition and the circumstances surrounding it brought out a number of more moderate, compromising voices.

A group of abolitionist sympathizers in Illinois were roused to action after hearing of the work of the three men. This group, called the Anti-Slavery Concert, set about immediately to pass two resolutions. The first of these declared that three men had been tried and convicted for being abolitionists, rather than law breakers, and the second declared that the committee would more fully examine the situation and publish a report on it. Yet, in an effort to distance themselves from radical abolitionists, this Concert declared that the three men “erred in judgment,” and went “beyond the bounds of prudence.” Further they declared that the actions of Work and his companions did not represent a helpful or appropriate way to effect the emancipation of all slaves.³⁸ Two other groups made similar arguments. One group of citizens was careful to “disclaim” all affiliations with abolitionists, but still requested the release of the three men. Still another group argued that the release of these men would produce a “strong tendency to allay abolition movements in this vicinity and elsewhere.”³⁹ A growing number of

William Goodell. *Slavery and Anti-Slavery; A History of the Great Struggle in Both Hemispheres; with a View of the Slavery Question in the United States*. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968. 441.

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Thompson, 211-213; 407-409

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Dickman, 7-8

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Frazier, 133

people were realizing the potential dangers of radical behavior, and the growing trend toward a nation of two minds.

Other groups, including one from Missouri, sought to alleviate tension by releasing Work, the oldest member and a family man. They tried to make the claim that he was simply dragged into it, and was not really the kind of monster that attention should be focused on.⁴⁰ Similarly, when it came to pardon of Burr, and then Thompson, the two men were asked to admit that their work was “wild, imprudent, and fanatical;” all terms synonymous with extremism. When they were eventually pardoned by Governor John C. Edwards, Thompson recounts an exchange that gives us a glimpse into what might have been going on in the mind of the governor at the time. After vowing to deter others from his course, and admitting that he had changed many of his prejudices, Thompson recounts the following event.

“That evening,” writes Thompson, “the Governor came to me, and clasped me as would a father his long lost son. He talked very kindly. Said he, ‘I have no doubt that all the States will by and by see it to be for their interest to do away with slavery—for a free man will work faster, strike truer, bring it down harder, and work with more spirit and zeal, than a slave who gets nothing for his toil. One man in the East will do as much as ten of our men (slaves) here.’⁴¹

These free labor sentiments, assuming their truth, express a growing discontentment with current order. Further, it points to the growing movement of Free Labor in the Western States. In this instance the governor is seeking a peaceful and calm resolution, while others sought only for resolution.

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Ibid

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Thompson, 413

The events that began on July 12th 1841 may not have been planned or executed well, but one wonders if any amount of planning could have produced an event that was as meaningful. The work of these three men provided a physical manifestation of all the fears, doubts, and uncertainties that were creeping into the minds of Americans, especially those in the west who were trying to understand their own identity in age of growing tension. Some met this division with radical abolitionism, others with radical slavery ideology, and still others met it with a desperate sense of moderation. From a hind-sight perspective we know the end-game, but when Work, Burr, and Thompson set out on a skiff on a warm Midwestern summer night, they were likely not considering that their actions would have ramifications that would help to define two movements, and give new life to a third.

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