

"A Covenant with Death and an Agreement with Hell"

[The scene is] a Fourth of July rally sponsored by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1854, a few months after the Anthony Burns/fugitive slave affair. Noted abolitionists including William Lloyd Garrison, Sojourner Truth, and Henry David Thoreau addressed the crowd. In a dramatic climax, Garrison burned copies of the Fugitive Slave Law and the United States Constitution.

A sweltering day in July

"And let all the people say, Amen!" exclaimed William Lloyd Garrison. The hundreds of abolitionists assembled at Harmony Grove, a splendid picnicking area in Framingham, about sixteen miles outside of Boston, roared back "Amen!" again and again. More than the extreme heat of July, as one unsympathetic Boston newspaper shrugged, had excited the passion of the crowd. For the Commonwealth's abolitionist community, July 4, 1854, would be a day to recognize the nation's greatest sin and to mourn the death of freedom.

Kindling for the fire

At the end of May, after furious national debate, Congress turned the Kansas-Nebraska act into law, thus permitting western settlers to legally establish slavery in the territories. The legislation, in effect, repealed the Compromise of 1820 and opened the continent, perhaps even the North, to slavery. Northerners who previously had rejected the abolitionists' dire warnings began to see the expansive and explosive power of slave owners and their allies in the North. With the nation burning red hot over enforcement of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, the Kansas-Nebraska Law created a raging blast furnace of hate and fear. Free Soil and Liberty party members, political abolitionists of varying stripes, and "Conscience" Whigs forged a coalition, soon labeled the Republican party, that dedicated itself to halting the spread of slavery.

The same month, state and federal authorities in Boston, Massachusetts, seized Anthony Burns, accusing him of escaping his enslavement. After an interracial

abolitionist rescue effort failed to free Burns, authorities surrounded the courthouse holding him with an iron chain and rings of police, cavalry, and several artillery companies. Judge Edward G. Loring ordered Burns to return to his enslaver in Virginia. Hundreds of U.S. military bayonets, at a cost of \$100,000, insured Burns' safe conduct through the streets of Boston to the city wharf and then to re-enslavement. Loring's disgraceful order, according to Garrison, had converted a man into a thing, the Declaration of Independence into a lie, "the Golden Rule [into] an absurdity, and Jesus of Nazareth [into] an imposter."

At the rally in Framingham, a spark ignites

To mark the dark days of 1854, the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society called for a rally on July 4 amid the bucolic oaks of Framingham's Grove. The Society conducted July 4 ceremonies at the same spot at Harmony Grove between 1846 and 1865, but this one would be particularly memorable. Organizers had formed a small amphitheater before a stage decorated with two white flags bearing the names of Kansas and Nebraska and banners proclaiming "Virginia" and "Redeem Massachusetts." Above, hung an inverted U.S. flag draped with black crepe. Just before the speakers took to the platform, the irrepressible William C. Nell hurriedly placed a portrait of Garrison between the two state's banners, symbolically breaking the chains binding Massachusetts to Virginia.

The rally began with a prayer and a hymn. Then Garrison launched into one of the most controversial performances of his career. "To-day, we are called to celebrate the seventy-eighth anniversary of American Independence. In what spirit?" he asked, "with what purpose? to what end?" The Declaration of Independence had declared "that all men are created equal ... It is not a declaration of equality of property, bodily strength or beauty, intellectually or moral development, industrial or inventive powers, but equality of RIGHTS--not of one race, but of all races."

Since the early 1830s, Garrisonian antislavery advocates had adopted the message of Black abolitionists in denouncing the sin of slavery and of racial prejudice. In words familiar to his audience, Garrison repeated the decades-old warnings that freedom did not exist in the South; who there, he declared, could "avow his belief in the inalienable rights of man, irrespective of complexional caste?" The church in the South, a frequent target of abolitionists, lay outside of Christendom, and was nothing but a "cage of unclean birds, and the synagogue of Satan." Garrison

ventured into new territory with his warning that slavery had strengthened--not weakened--since he had begun his antislavery career. Slavery and its minions jeopardized freedom everywhere and its advocates, he warned, intended to tighten their grasp over the Caribbean, expand into Central and South America, and even extend the cursed institution into the Pacific. Freedom was disappearing. What could there be to celebrate on July 4? he asked.

Garrison then produced a copy of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law and put a match to it. Amid cries of "Amen" the hated document burned to a cinder. Then he produced copies of Judge Edward G. Loring's decision to send [accused fugitive slave] Anthony Burns back to slavery and Judge Benjamin R. Curtis's comments to the U.S. grand jury considering charges of constructive treason against those who had participated in the failed attempt to free Burns. As Martin Luther had burned copies of canon law and the papal bull excommunicating him from the Catholic Church for heresy, Garrison consigned each to the flames. Holding up a copy of the U.S. Constitution, he branded it as "the source and parent of all the other atrocities--'a covenant with death, and an agreement with hell.'" As the nation's founding document burned to ashes, he cried out: "So perish all compromises with tyranny!"

The public reacts

Most of the audience roared its approval but some hissed and groused. Later, many of the state's daily newspapers condemned Garrison's actions. Charles Remond, the great African American abolitionist from Salem, immediately leapt from his seat to defend his good friend. Garrison had acted, Remond announced to the multitudes, in the name of three million enslaved people. Moncure Daniel Conway, a student at the Harvard Divinity School, mounted the stage and confessed that he was from Virginia and knew his fellow Southerners well. On the subject of slavery, their minds were "diseased," perfectly "insane." He was astonished to have been born in a place where "white men owned slaves" and now, because of what had happened to Anthony Burns, he lived in a place where "white men were slaves."

After the rally broke for a long and well-deserved lunch, Sojourner Truth addressed the throng, warning that God "would yet execute his judgments upon the white people for their oppression and cruelty." Wendell Phillips, Lucy Stone, John Pierpont, Stephen S. Foster, and others added their voices to Garrison's. At about

3:30 p.m., Henry David Thoreau mounted the speaker's platform.

With *Walden* fresh in the bookstores and the Burns affair eating at his conscience, Thoreau uttered his disgust for those in Massachusetts who willingly aided slavery. In an address that would later be published as "Slavery in Massachusetts," Thoreau advised the gathering that the "Law will never make men free; it is men who have got to make the law free."

At the close of the meeting, Garrison resumed his place beneath the banners and flags. When he had begun agitating against the institution of slavery more than twenty years earlier, nearly everyone believed that the institution of slavery would not survive a close scrutiny of the nation's founding documents. Abolitionists assumed that the Founding Fathers had intended to put slavery on the road to extinction. Even the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society had appended copies of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence to their pamphlets, believing that if anyone actually read those sacred words slavery would have to end. But when James Madison's notes from the Constitutional Convention were published in the early 1840s, the truth proved shocking. Many abolitionists who had believed in an antislavery interpretation of the Constitution discovered that the Fathers had traded union and white liberty for black slavery. No longer could Garrison and his allies believe in the Union, much less see the Constitution as inherently antislavery. It was, they sadly discovered, a wicked document, the true underpinning for the institution of slavery. "The only remedy in our case," Garrison exclaimed at the close of the July 4 ceremonies, "is A DISSOLUTION OF THE UNION."

<https://www.masshist.org/object-of-the-month/objects/a-covenant-with-death-and-an-agreement-with-hell-2005-07-01>