

CHAPTER SIX

## THE SPRINGFIELD LYCEUM

The struggle over the Gag Rule at its beginning resonated in Vandalia as distant rumbling over the horizon. Here people were scrambling for the move to Springfield. But even in Illinois the near-universal opinion of the tempest in Washington was incontestably on the side of the Southerners. Southern legislatures had passed resolutions condemning the “dark, deep and malignant design of the abolitionists” (Alabama), their “prostitution of the freedom of the press” (Kentucky), their incitement of “insurrection and revolt” (Virginia), and “plotting” against “the harmony and safety of the Union” (Mississippi)—all sent to Northern states appealing for solidarity. Connecticut’s legislature proclaimed “sympathy” for the “slaveholding states,” censured abolitionists as “dangerous,” and reproved the suggestion of emancipation in the District of Columbia as “unjust and impolitic.” New York’s legislature endorsed the message of Governor William L. Marcy, a Jacksonian Democrat,



Elijah Parish Lovejoy

expressing “unanimity” of disapproval of “the whole system” of the abolitionists and “affection for their brethren of the south.”

The Illinois General Assembly voted, January 20, 1837, on a resolution that reproached the abolitionists, who “have aroused the turbulent passions of the monster mob, whose actings are marked by every deed of atrocity,” and promised “our brethren of the South” that to suppress insurrection the people of Illinois “would fly to their assistance.” The statement concluded: “That we highly disapprove of the formation of abolition societies, and of the doctrines promulgated by them. That the right of property in slaves, is sacred to the slave-holding States by the Federal Constitution, and that they cannot be deprived of that right without their consent. That the General Government cannot abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, against the consent of the citizens of said District without a manifest breach of good faith.” Seventy-one members voted in favor, only six against. Voting for the resolution was politically safe and sound, an easy symbolic gesture.

Only one protest was lodged, on March 3, by two members, both from Sangamon County, Dan Stone, already appointed a circuit court judge and politically secure, and Abraham Lincoln. “They believe,” they wrote, “that the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy; but that the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends rather to increase than to abate its evils.” Their protest made two more points: “They believe that the Congress of the United States has no power, under the Constitution, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the different states. They believe that the Congress of the United States has the power, under the Constitution to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia; but that that power ought not to be exercised unless at the request of the people of said District.”

Lincoln and Stone waited to register their dissent five days after the passage of the Springfield bill, though their votes against the main resolution were taken before the all-important measure for removal of the capital. Lincoln’s protest might in retrospect have appeared cautious, narrow, and hedged, but it was the only one, marking the furthest edge of dissent while still remaining within the strict boundaries of viable politics in Illinois. “It is not surprising, I think, that Lincoln should have viewed this New England importation with mingled suspicion and alarm,” Herndon observed about his early attitude toward abolitionism. “Abstractly, and from the standpoint

of conscience, he abhorred he was by slave-holding in their line of thought, imate properly the rightec Abolitionist.” And yet Liicism of abolitionists or ir Quincy Adams stood at tl

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of conscience, he abhorred slavery. But born in Kentucky, and surrounded as  
he was by slave-holding influences, absorbing their prejudices and following  
in their line of thought, it is not strange, I repeat, that he should fail to esti-  
mate properly the righteous indignation and unrestrained zeal of a Yankee  
Abolitionist." And yet Lincoln's position was little different, even in his crit-  
icism of abolitionists or in seeing slavery as a state matter, from where John  
Quincy Adams stood at that moment.

~~The day after Lincoln's protest, which went unnoticed beyond tiny Van-  
dania, Martin Van Buren was sworn in as president. In his Inaugural Address,  
he warned "the least deviation from this spirit of forbearance" toward slavery  
"is injurious to every interest." He affirmed he would be "the inflexible and  
uncompromising opponent of every attempt on the part of Congress to abol-  
ish slavery in the District of Columbia against the wishes of the slaveholding  
states, and also with a determination equally decided to resist the slightest  
interference with it in the states where it exists." He denounced "the agitation  
of this subject" for "terrifying instances of local violence." And he appealed to  
the people "to resist and control every effort, foreign or domestic, which aims  
or would lead to overthrow our institutions."~~

Five weeks after Van Buren's inauguration the speculative bubble inflated  
by highly leveraged private debt began to burst. By April, 250 New York  
mercantile houses failed, and on May 10 the New York banks refused to ac-  
cept paper money, in effect declaring it worthless; all debts were immediately  
called, triggering bankruptcies and cascading collapse. The Panic of 1837 set  
off an economic depression that lasted about six years. Lacking any under-  
standing of business cycles and the governmental capacity for stimulating  
the economy to achieve recovery, Van Buren attributed the crisis to unmanly  
weakness, "a sickly appetite for effeminate indulgence," announced the gov-  
ernment had no responsibility to "relieve embarrassments," and prescribed  
"strict economy and frugality." He acquired the nickname "Martin Van  
Ruin." The Whigs blamed the catastrophe on a chain reaction stemming  
from Jackson's policies, his war on the Second Bank of the United States,  
removing its ability to manage national credit, in turn inciting inflationary  
speculation, stoked by his substitute "pet banks," which issued unsupported  
banknotes and multiplied unsecured loans, prompting his Specie Circular,  
which imposed hard currency payments for soaring federal land transac-  
tions, which prompted deflationary contraction. The Democrats, for their