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# A Border Community's Unfulfilled Appeals: The Rise and Fall of the 1840's Anti-Abolitionist Movement in Cincinnati

Julie Mujic  
*Sacred Heart University*

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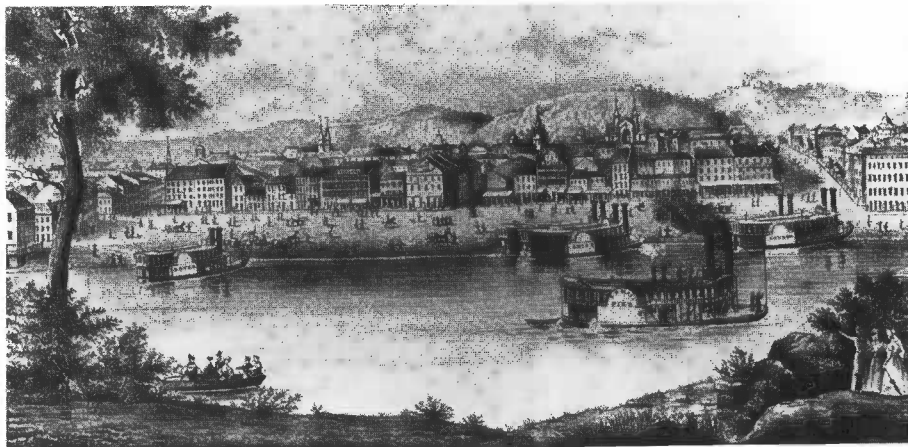
# A Border Community's Unfulfilled Appeals

*The Rise and Fall of the 1840s Anti-Abolitionist Movement in Cincinnati*

Julie A. Mujic

On Friday, September 4, 1841, the fourth day of an intense racial riot in Cincinnati, Ohio, a mob of angry young white men pursued a group of blacks into the predominantly black section of town. There, the black residents desperately tried to defend themselves, their businesses, homes, and families. According to the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, at approximately one o'clock in the afternoon, a portion of the mob "procured an iron six pounder from near the river, loaded with boiler punchings, &c. and hauled it to the ground, against the exhortations of the Mayor and others. It was posted on Broadway and pointed down Sixth street." During an attack that lasted well into the night, the mob proceeded to open fire with the cannon several times on African American homes. Two days later, the Queen City appeared calm. However, reverberations from the outburst continued in the months to come, on the streets, in meeting halls, and in the newspapers of the divided city, as anti-abolitionists blamed Underground Railroad activists for provoking the incident.<sup>1</sup>

This essay explores the nature of anti-abolition sentiment in Cincinnati, Ohio, in the early 1840s through an analysis of a short-lived anti-abolition organization and newspaper. The two institutions developed in response to



Cincinnati in 1840. CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER AT UNION TERMINAL, CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY

the race riot of 1841 and attempted to address the social and economic concerns of certain Cincinnati citizens. White and black residents struggled to cope with the challenges posed by difficult race relations. The racial discord of 1841 was but one example of similar events that had occurred in Cincinnati since its settlement. Located on the Ohio River between the North and the South and peopled by a mixture of Protestant New Englanders, southerners, and immigrant settlers, Cincinnati possessed a complex culture. Rarely did Cincinnatians agree on topics such as slavery and the Union. For example, residents witnessed deepening racial debates during negotiations at the Ohio Constitutional Convention and at many subsequent legislative sessions, during which members debated the rights of free blacks in the new state. By 1841, Cincinnati was home to an increasingly popular antislavery movement, which in turn sparked sporadic race riots and consistent resentment from the city's anti-abolitionist inhabitants.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the 1840s, Cincinnati was an important destination for both migrating settlers and immigrants. Its population increased from 24,900 in 1830 to 46,000 ten years later, making it the sixth largest city in the nation. In 1840, blacks represented slightly more than 5 percent of the total population, and three-fourths of the free blacks who settled in Ohio during the first half of the nineteenth century resided in Cincinnati. The city's geographic position on Ohio's border with the slave states created a dilemma for the many residents who derived much of their wealth from southern markets. White citizens who moved to Cincinnati with antislavery beliefs often had to choose between maintaining their ideological stance and increasing their economic livelihood. A significant influx of European immigrants enhanced the ethnic diversity of the city in the early-nineteenth century, with Germans comprising the largest incoming population. By 1840, Germans represented 28 percent of Cincinnati's population, with Irish and English immigrants constituting another 16 percent. Many of these young immigrants arrived without families and few skills germane to an urban environment. They often made their homes along the riverfront and earned a living working on the docks. The city's free black population competed for the same jobs, and friction between the groups increased.<sup>3</sup>

Many immigrants who arrived in Cincinnati in the late 1830s and early 1840s stumbled into a turbulent economy. In late 1836, land sales declined significantly and markets began to falter. The interest rate in Cincinnati rose to 24 percent and by March 1837, Cincinnati's banks faced a critical situation. The resulting Panic of 1837 led to an "unprecedented curtailment in activity and employment" in Cincinnati and much of the Midwest. The pork-packing industry, Cincinnati's fastest growing commercial endeavor, fluctuated widely during the antebellum period. In 1836, Cincinnati workers packed almost forty thousand fewer hogs than in 1835, and in 1837 during the recession the number declined yet again by twenty thousand. Property and wealth, distributed somewhat evenly during the first

decades of Cincinnati's settlement, became more disproportionate among the city's residents. Food prices increased 24.4 percent between 1830 and 1840, almost matched by inflated housing costs. The income of skilled and unskilled labor failed to keep pace with rising costs and in some cases even declined. Residents hoped that a proposed Charleston-Cincinnati railroad project would bring new economic opportunity to the area. By 1835 all of the states involved except Kentucky had approved the proposal, and Cincinnatians waited anxiously for the final plans to be accepted. The Panic of 1837 doomed the railroad to failure, however, drying up its sources of financial support. The Cincinnati markets generally recovered within a year and internal improvement projects resumed with vigor during the late 1830s. However, in March 1840, depression hit Cincinnati again, eliminating jobs on the Ohio River docks. Particularly harsh winters in 1841 and 1842 caused many of the rivers and roads to freeze, effectively depleting the main source of income for unskilled laborers. Conditions declined to the point that laborers held mass rallies to protest against the "embarrassing condition of mechanics in [the] city."<sup>4</sup>

This state of economic desperation, combined with the continuing changes in Cincinnati's demographics, created an unstable environment during the early 1840s. Cincinnatians coped with pressures created by the city's economic dependence on its southern neighbors and with residual social tensions from previous outbreaks of violence in the late 1820s and 1830s. In 1829, for example, residents sent petitions to the city council requesting stricter enforcement of Ohio's Black Laws. When the council members responded that they would request cooperation from the black population after thirty days notice, white Cincinnatians reacted by terrorizing black neighborhoods. After several weeks of hostile and violent attacks on African American residents, about half the black population left the city. In early 1836, James Birney, a former Alabama slaveholder turned abolitionist, arrived in the Queen City and drew national attention with his newspaper, *The Philanthropist*. The city's anti-abolitionists responded by attempting forcibly to dismantle his press and drive him from town. In August, an anti-abolitionist mob led a multi-day riot, attacking black homes and throwing Birney's press into the Ohio River. These outbursts did not deter Birney in his quest however, but instead thrust him into the mainstream of antislavery reform.<sup>5</sup> These social and economic strains had not lessened when some city residents established the Anti-Abolition Society of Cincinnati in the fall of 1841. The publication of an Ohio Supreme Court opinion that declared slaves emancipated when their owners brought them into Ohio, continuing weak enforcement of the Ohio Black Laws, and an anti-black riot in August 1841 helped provoke the organization's creation.

Debate about proper enforcement of the state's Black Laws consumed Cincinnati's newspapers in the months before the October 1841 formation of the Anti-Abolition Society. One newspaper, *The Cincinnati Daily Gazette*,

argued that law enforcement did not fully understand the Black Laws and thus failed to apply them equally. Frustrated residents demanded that free blacks fulfill the requirements of the Black Laws, including registering with the clerk and paying the five hundred dollar bond. Cincinnati's anti-



James G. Birney (1792-1857). CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER AT UNION TERMINAL, CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY

abolitionists recognized that the legislature had designed the laws to oppress the African American population, yet they increasingly saw well-dressed free blacks enjoying various forms of entertainment, receiving educations, and owning property. They blamed white abolitionists for aiding free blacks financially instead of providing assistance to their white brethren. Anti-abolitionists expressed their fears, anger, and frustration through discrimination against blacks in the job market, physical confrontations with confident African Americans in the streets, and violent mob attacks on black neighborhoods. The *Cincinnati Weekly Chronicle* concluded that the state's failure to enforce its own laws caused men to take the law into their own hands.<sup>6</sup>

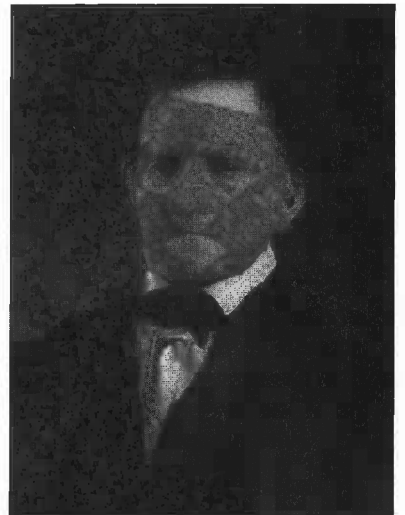
Many Cincinnati residents responded with alarm to the spring 1841 Ohio Supreme Court decision handed down in Warren County that denied slaveholders the right to bring their slaves into the state temporarily. The case in question resulted from a riot that occurred when officials tried to protect a Virginian named Bennet Rains from losing African Americans whom he claimed as his slaves. A group tried forcibly to remove the blacks from Rains's possession, insisting that the slaves were free upon entering Ohio in accordance with the Northwest Ordinance. Although the judges were supposed to decide the guilt of the rioters, they took the liberty to express their opinion about the legal status of slaves who had temporarily been brought into Ohio by their owner. The court's majority stated, "if a slave there [Virginia, in this example], he became free when brought to this State by his master, since the Constitution and the act of Congress, under which alone the state of slavery subsists in Ohio, applies to *fugitives* only." Thus, the judges argued that the Fugitive Slave Law alone enforced the institution of slavery in Ohio. In all other cases, including masters who willingly brought slaves into Ohio, the slaves automatically became free because Ohio did not recognize the existence of slavery as a social institution.<sup>7</sup>

Reaction in Cincinnati was swift, with newspapers jumping to either commend or condemn the judges. Abolitionists, elated with the outcome, attempted to lure slaves brought into the city away from their masters with

increased frequency and aggressiveness. Anti-abolitionists insisted that the Union would perish under such a policy and hastened to warn their southern friends about the new trend. Businessmen feared that southerners would turn to other Ohio River cities for commerce. Their fears seemed justified as word came from Louisiana of a threatened southern economic boycott of the city. The persistent activities of local abolitionists after the judgment created a sense of desperation among merchants who believed that abolitionism would be the downfall of Cincinnati's economy.<sup>8</sup>

Tensions escalated as the fallout from the spring court decision continued into the summer of 1841. Several events heightened Cincinnati's already palpable uneasiness. The downturn in the economy left many Cincinnatians unemployed, especially along the riverfront that normally provided numerous jobs for unskilled blacks and whites. As idle time increased, complaints of insolent African American behavior grew in number. Accounts of slave revolt conspiracies in the South drifted up the Mississippi River and intensified negative perceptions of local blacks. In June, the case of a prominent Cincinnati resident charged with harboring a fugitive slave in his home riveted the city. The events surrounding the case further fueled hostility toward free blacks and abolitionists for their alleged role in the Underground Railroad. During another confrontation in August, two German men were stabbed, one fatally, by a group of African American men trying to enter the Germans' blueberry patch. Racial confrontations over the issues of job competition, sectional pressures, and black behavior promoted combative attitudes in the city and culminated in an August riot.<sup>9</sup>

An altercation between Irish and African American residents provoked the riot, which spanned six days in late August and early September 1841. Newspaper accounts estimated that the anti-black mob was comprised of about fifteen hundred people, but less than twenty-five were wounded in the riots. The mob of white Cincinnatians assaulted blacks in the streets, wreaked havoc on their businesses, and opened fire on their homes. City officials and citizens met at the court house on Saturday morning, the fifth day of the riot, in an attempt to calm the residents and encourage peace. The resulting resolutions, which blamed abolitionists for the uprising and vowed to enforce the Black Laws, foreshadowed the foundation of the Anti-Abolition Society. By Sunday morning, the streets were quiet, but newspapers continued the debates and accusations in the following weeks. A public meeting on September 23, 1841, formalized the intentions of the Anti-Abolition Society of Cincinnati, and on October 4, the group adopted a preamble and constitution.<sup>10</sup>



Jacob Burnet, 1847. CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER  
AT UNION TERMINAL, CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
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A comparison between Cincinnati's anti-abolition movement of the 1840s and prior efforts in the 1830s reveals change within continuity. The 1840s movement adopted economic arguments similar to those made in the 1830s, and they continued to defend Cincinnati's reputation in the South. However, in the 1830s the perceived threat of abolitionism to the city's southern commercial ties inspired men of a different social status to support the movement than those who led the effort in the 1840s. In the 1830s, anti-abolitionists represented gentlemen of the highest classes and respected professions in the city. The 1840s movement, in contrast, filled its ranks with unskilled immigrants and white mechanics. For instance, Lewis Humiston, a carpenter, served as the society's first President. Judge Jacob Burnet, who led the initial attacks in the press against *Philanthropist* editor Birney in 1836, also participated in the 1841 riot. He and a few other "gentlemen" supported the first wave of anti-abolitionist responses to the 1841 riot, but they did not remain active in the society following the first post-riot meeting in September 1841.<sup>11</sup>

The 1830s anti-abolitionist meetings drew large crowds from throughout Cincinnati's seven wards, while the Anti-Abolition Society of 1841 featured a smaller group of mainly third ward mechanics and laborers. The third ward was located along the Ohio River on the east side of town, centered on Front and High streets. Men between the ages of twenty and thirty years old comprised 45 percent of the third ward's population, a figure that was 28 percent higher than the next closest age range of thirty to forty. Ward three also contained the highest number of twenty to thirty year-old white males by well over seven hundred. The disproportionate number of young, white males in the third ward sought support within their new community by invoking racial justifications for their attacks on black competitors on the river docks.<sup>12</sup>

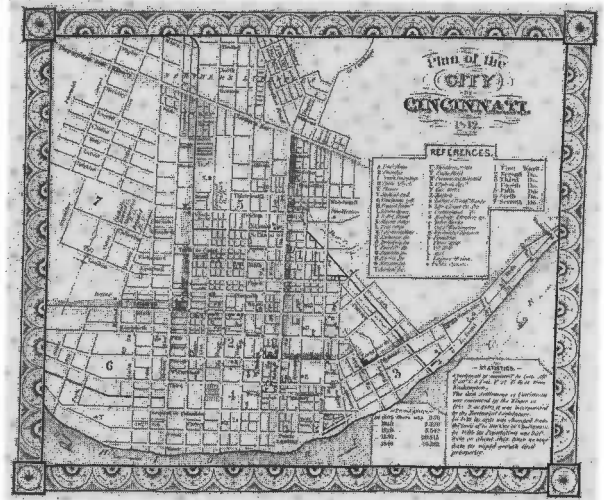
Anti-abolitionists of the 1830s focused on colonization as the solution to an increasing black population and attacked the patriotism and constitutionality of abolitionist proposals. In the 1840s, anti-abolitionists utilized racist, anti-black, proslavery, and pro-southern rhetoric, and offered contemporary proslavery ideological arguments to explain why Ohio should more stringently enforce the Black Laws. They cited biblical justifications for slavery contending that blacks were better off as slaves, and argued that the institution was a necessary yoke placed on the American people by prior generations. Although these claims mirrored those of the 1830s, the earlier proslavery advocates justified slavery mainly on an economic basis, while the anti-abolitionists of the 1840s focused on racial justifications of the South's peculiar institution. As a result, Cincinnati businessmen who previously joined anti-abolitionist efforts failed to support the 1840s movement, with its emphasis on racial confrontation and job competition between the unskilled laborers. Anti-abolitionists in 1841 also targeted participants in

the Underground Railroad more than did their counterparts of the previous decade, blaming increases in the city's black population on the efforts of antislavery activists. Because the city's abolitionist movement in the 1840s was considerably less unified, anti-abolitionists focused more fully on Underground Railroad supporters. Therefore, the Underground Railroad represented the most visible enemy available to anti-abolitionists in 1841.<sup>13</sup>

The Anti-Abolition Society of Cincinnati was a formal, structured expression of the racial hostility of white, working-class Cincinnatians. The organization held weekly meetings in a third ward engine house throughout late 1841 and into early 1842. Within three months of the society's establishment, one of its members, Lucius Greely Curtiss, used his third ward publishing house to issue a weekly newspaper entitled *The Cincinnati Post & Anti-Abolitionist (CP&AA)*. Curtiss, originally from Maryland, was thirty years old at the time of his first foray into the newspaper industry. His publication made its debut on Saturday, January 8, 1842, and ran under its initial title through Saturday, July 30, 1842. It ceased to exist in September 1842, after publishing five more issues under the name *The Cincinnati Post*.<sup>14</sup>

As the Anti-Abolition Society's records exist only in the *CP&AA*, exploration of the society's creation, existence, and demise intertwines with analysis of the newspaper. However, the two entities asserted their independence throughout their existence. Placement of the Anti-Abolition Society's preamble and constitution on the fifth page of the *CP&AA*'s inaugural issue, instead of the first page, illustrated the separation. Not until February 26, 1842, did the society formally endorse the newspaper, specifically described as independently published by Curtiss, in its meeting resolutions. Nevertheless, the close-knit relationship between the two entities was apparent in their stated goals.<sup>15</sup>

The preamble to the society's constitution asserted that Cincinnati housed an increasingly large population of vagrant free blacks. The members denounced abolitionists and their alleged role in aiding fugitives and free blacks in Cincinnati. They argued that abolitionists provided African Americans with food and clothes while some white laborers could barely



This 1842 Cincinnati map shows the location of the Third Ward, home of many members of the Anti-Abolition Society of 1841.

CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER AT UNION TERMINAL, CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY



feed their families. The preamble also contained economic justifications of the society's existence, emphasizing that Cincinnatians should support the laws of the slave states because southerners imported so many products of the city's industries. The nine-article constitution which followed the preamble dealt mainly with details of meetings and dues. Only Article 8, which expressed the group's dedication to the enforcement of the Black Laws, pertained to the society's goals. Every member was to collect the names of all African Americans residing in their ward and report to officials the names of those not in compliance with the Black Laws.<sup>16</sup>

*The Cincinnati Post & Anti-Abolitionist* assisted the society by publishing its meeting minutes, its preamble and constitution, and meeting announcements, but the newspaper took the society's goals a few steps further. The first issue of the *CP&AA* opened with three letters to the editor from a "Citizen of Kentucky." The columnist warned of the prospect of civil war and dissolution of the Union if abolitionists did not stop insisting on black equal rights. He argued that it was "the nature of the black to be savage and haughty," and that continued abolitionist involvement in the Underground

Railroad threatened the Union. The close association of the newspaper with Kentucky, so blatant in the first issue, made the editor's support of pro-slavery ideals obvious. In his editorial, Curtiss implored southerners and Cincinnatians for their support, arguing that the *CP&AA* was "entitled" to southern patronage. He did not seem as confident of support from Cincinnatians, proclaiming: "He that is not for us



*Cincinnati Post and Anti-Abolitionist*, January 22, 1842. CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER AT UNION TERMINAL, CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY

is against us!" He asked Cincinnati's citizens to decide within two days of receiving their first issue whether they would support the newspaper. The confident tone of his address to southerners differed greatly from the distant, business-like approach he took with his fellow Ohioans. Curtiss's tactics unintentionally acknowledged that abolitionists represented a significant enough portion of Cincinnati's society to limit the amount of support on which he could depend in the Queen City.<sup>17</sup>

Curtiss made the newspaper's goals clear. He sought to expose all abolitionists in Cincinnati who participated in the Underground Railroad by publishing their names in a weekly list. The overt purpose of the list was to help southerners know whose businesses to boycott. The lists also had a darker intention, as the caveat written below the names revealed: "our

friends in the South will know what use to make of it!" The main thrust of the newspaper seemed to be destroying the Underground Railroad by financially ruining or physically threatening those who participated in it. Curtiss's method of attacking Underground Railroad activists mimicked the tactics employed by 1836 anti-abolitionists to target all abolitionists. During the crisis in 1836, *The Cincinnati Republican* editorialized, "We would put them [abolitionists] under the ban of public sentiment. We would publish them to the world. We would say to our southern brethren . . . if you visit our city do not trade with that man. This is the only true method of reaching these incendiaries. Refuse to trade with them." The editor in 1836 believed that all abolitionists deserved this treatment, while in 1842 Curtiss specifically aimed his wrath at supporters of the Underground Railroad, those who were "stealing negroes and harboring them in this city." Still, the anti-abolitionists in 1842 did not protest directly against the moral or legal actions of the Underground Railroad, but focused instead on the increase in Cincinnati's free black population, which, they believed, was the result of such activism.<sup>18</sup>

Cincinnati's anti-abolitionists in 1841 and 1842 felt threatened by the Underground Railroad because they saw a direct link between its actions and their economic prosperity. In the preamble of the Anti-Abolition Society constitution, the members lamented, "we find our market for our manufactures diminished, and our best customers driven away, by the intolerant and meddling spirit of the Abolitionists, who, by decoying the slave from his master, and harboring the fugitive, make enemies of those who should be our friends." In their eyes the Underground Railroad was a "system of organized depredation, [carried] on, by means of societies and agents, who are continually employed in harboring, secreting, and removing slaves, and who thus, while professing to be actuated by human motives, are in fact kidnappers and negro stealers." The members of the Anti-Abolition Society clearly believed that they must confront such coordinated arrangements with an equally structured approach.<sup>19</sup>

Curtiss also refused to publish articles by abolitionists in his newspaper. He considered such individuals not respectable enough to warrant consideration. His columns depicted abolitionists as un-Christian hypocrites and instigators of mobs. The *CP&AA* also dedicated itself to the stricter enforcement of the Black Laws, intending to drive free blacks from Cincinnati. Initial issues of the paper justified the opinions of anti-abolitionists concerning the rightful social status of blacks (in slavery), their frustration with perceived British interference in American society, and their opposition to the participation of free blacks in the Cincinnati job market. Within the first month of publication, the editor claimed that discussions presented in the newspaper had prompted over three hundred Cincinnati abolitionists to join the anti-abolitionist ranks.<sup>20</sup>

Anti-abolitionists attempted to sustain the heightened racial tensions of the previous summer. The early issues of the *CP&AA* contained many racial arguments in support of slavery. A January 1842 petition to the Ohio legislature insisted that the white and black races should not intermingle because the physical and intellectual differences between them were too great. Later in the same issue, the abolition of slavery was described as a potential curse upon the nation, because “a slave is in a sphere as high as he can fill in this country happily.” In February, a columnist argued that abolitionists who taught that there were no differences between blacks and whites lied and defied God. The author insisted that American safety depended on keeping blacks in slavery or sending them to Liberia, because “between the white and black man, there exists an inextinguishable difference . . . and [they] should be kept different and distinct.” The newspaper attacks focused on the key issues raised by abolitionists, equal rights and increased social status for blacks.<sup>21</sup>

*The Cincinnati Post & Anti-Abolitionist* contained significantly fewer advertisements than mainstream Cincinnati newspapers. Typically, the four-page layout of most antebellum Cincinnati newspapers included actual news and information on about a page and a half, with the majority of the space devoted to advertisements. The *CP&AA*, however, generally included five or fewer advertisements in any issue. One January issue, for example, included advertisements for a hotel owned by an anti-abolitionist, a law firm, the news office that published the *CP&AA*, a runaway slave notice with reward, and advertisements for merchants selling a wide range of goods. Curtiss’s prospectus for the *CP&AA* specifically mentioned the lack of advertisements as an advantage of the paper, suggesting that the small number of advertisements was intentional and not due to a lack of advertiser interest. Curtiss apparently believed that the newspaper did not need advertisers’ money in order to survive, or he might not have wanted to risk publishing advertisements by someone later linked to abolitionism. He may have anticipated attracting enough readers, especially in the South, that subscriptions alone would support his press, or he may have believed that the gentlemen who led the 1830s movement would jump at the chance to back his publication financially. Either way, it seems unlikely that an organization of fledgling, unskilled mechanics could have financed a newspaper alone.<sup>22</sup>

Initially, funding prospects must have seemed good because early issues of the paper claimed that it “number[ed] a larger list of paying subscribers than any paper in the West!” By March 5, 1842, the *CP&AA* boasted that the president of the United States, six members of Congress, forty members of state legislatures, and one hundred generals, colonels, majors, and other army officers subscribed to the paper. The *CP&AA* listed six agents, two in Louisiana, one in Kentucky, two in Missouri, and one in Mississippi, who

worked to gain subscribers. The focus on slaveholding states reveals that Curtiss considered the southern audience the most open to his paper's ideas. Just two months later, however, he begged southern patrons to send their payments, chastising the four hundred who had subscribed but neglected to pay. The continued pleas for financial support suggested that Curtiss's southern focus did not translate into monetary stability. Curtiss advertised a new format for the *CP&AA* in June and threatened to stop delivery to delinquent subscribers.<sup>23</sup>

Cincinnati's anti-abolitionists persistently tried to get the Black Laws enforced and new restrictions placed on free blacks, while attempting to minimize the influence of abolitionists in government. Three hundred bills posted around the city advertised the Anti-Abolition Society's meetings and the group's stated goals. Announcements in the *CP&AA* boasted large attendance at meetings. The society used its momentum to pressure Ohio's lawmakers, circulating a petition addressed to the state legislature to prevent black emigration into Ohio, and imploring the city council to pass a law prohibiting blacks from owning property. Anti-abolitionists saw the creation of the Liberty Party in 1840 as another arm of abolitionism that had to be defeated. At a meeting on March 22, 1842, the Anti-Abolition Society combined criticism of those who assisted fugitive slaves with scorn of the abolitionists' entry into the political arena. "This Liberty party or abolition party," society minutes recorded, "should be held to be THIEVES in the fullest sense of the word, as long as they uphold the plundering of our Southern brethren when they come into Ohio." The society railed that the Liberty Party endorsed abolition as its main tenet, despite the party's denial of the charge.<sup>24</sup>

Curtiss criticized the Liberty Party in a restatement of his newspaper's position in the fifth issue. The newspaper's supporters, he asserted, agreed that slavery must be saved at all costs, even through war if necessary, because emancipation would destroy the country and ruin the slaves. Curtiss failed to understand how men in the North could feel sympathy for blacks, who were not only a "degraded" race in America, but also "in [their] original elements." The *CP&AA* also made a special effort to denounce the activities of the Liberty Party and condemn Cincinnati newspapers favorable to the party. In its quest for social equality, Curtiss argued, the Liberty Party would dismantle the Union. His mix of racial and political rhetoric illustrated anti-abolitionists' growing concern about the perceived radicalization and strength of the abolitionists.<sup>25</sup>

In March 1842, the society challenged the Liberty Party to a debate of principles. For at least two consecutive Saturday nights, members of the Anti-Abolition Society, local Liberty Party men, and other citizens gathered to hear debates between attorney Jacob W. Piatt of the Anti-Abolition Society, and William Birney and Thomas Morris of the Liberty Party.

William Birney, the son of former *Philanthropist* editor James Birney, worked as a lawyer in Cincinnati. Later a Union major general in the Civil War, William embraced the abolitionist cause espoused by his father. Morris, a long-time Ohio state congressman, had returned to Ohio from Washington in 1838 when the state's Democratic legislators voted to oust him from his Senate seat because of his increasingly abolitionist views. At the time of the debates, Morris was the vice presidential candidate on the Liberty ticket. During his portion of the debate, Piatt argued that the constitution protected personal property and focused clearly on the abolitionists who were involved in the Underground Railroad. "The Kentuckians have as good a right to rob us of a drove of horses while we are passing through their limits," he insisted, "as we have to steal their slaves when they land upon our shores!" On the Saturday following the first debate, the *CP&AA* published a scathing review of Birney's remarks, arguing that the Liberty Party sought only to get northern men elected to political office. The society minutes portrayed Birney as inwardly ashamed of his party's lies and immoral actions. Society members extended courtesy and respect to abolitionist leaders during the debates, but mocked and severely criticized their opponents during meeting minutes in order to portray them as fools and criminals.<sup>26</sup>

The Cincinnati abolitionist newspaper, *The Philanthropist*, spoke well of the anti-abolitionists, portraying the debate as quiet and fairly run by the society. Editor Gamaliel Bailey, successor to founder James Birney who left Cincinnati to pursue a national abolitionist agenda with the Liberty Party, ran out of money in the early 1840s and suspended publication of the newspaper early in the summer of 1841. However, the riot of that summer generated support for abolitionism among some Cincinnatians and led to a sharp increase in subscriptions. Following the boost, Bailey and Thomas Morris sought to attract more supporters to the abolitionist cause. After facing strong opposition from workers who perceived African Americans as economic competitors, Bailey and Morris adjusted their message and linked slaveholders to the exploitative factory system. Abolitionists targeted workers by adopting a pro-labor rhetoric that argued that slavery hindered workers from achieving their rightful wages and rights. Although German and Irish immigrants often expressed racist attitudes toward African Americans in their midst, they had also consciously moved to areas without slavery when they immigrated to America. Abolitionists such as Bailey and Morris tapped into the idea that slavery diminished economic opportunities for these hardworking ethnic groups.<sup>27</sup>

Confronted by this unanticipated public reaction to anti-abolitionism, dissent appeared in the Anti-Abolition Society. Lewis Humiston resigned his presidency in January 1842, followed by the Secretary, E.G. Maguire, in March. Louis Shally, a carpenter and city councilman from the sixth ward, replaced Humiston as the society's leader. Even the appointment

of so prominent a member of Cincinnati's laboring class, however, was not enough to save the society from decline. *The Cincinnati Post & Anti-Abolitionist* stopped printing the society's preamble and constitution in February. Society meeting minutes still appeared in March issues, but so did notes announcing the location and time that adjourned meetings would resume. The society's inability to hold meetings at their regularly scheduled date and time probably reflected a lack of quorum. By early spring 1842, the anti-abolitionist movement had clearly begun to falter.<sup>28</sup>

April issues of the *CP&AA* are unavailable, but the May 7 issue contained this notice: "The Anti-Abolition Society of this city, it is expected, will be formed anew in a few weeks, with an efficient organization in all its departments." Below the notice, an editorial defended critics of the society's president, Louis Shally, who was accused of treason to the cause. According to Curtiss, Shally agreed to a proposal in which two noted abolitionists presided over a debate hosted by the society and Shally was listed only as vice president. Critics argued that the abolitionists had effectively wrested control of an Anti-Abolition Society event away from Shally. Fallout from the episode was immense, and the entire society collapsed in its wake. Curtiss, although evidently disgusted with the situation, seemed relatively confident that the society would reconvene, most likely without Shally. However, the pages of the *CP&AA* never mentioned the formation of a new anti-abolitionist organization. Curtiss persistently directed his anti-abolitionist rhetoric at Cincinnati's mechanics despite this setback. As spring turned into summer, though, the *CP&AA* continued to lose momentum and its pages conveyed the desperate pleas of an unread editor.<sup>29</sup>

Lacking organized support from the Anti-Abolitionist Society, Curtiss implemented the new arrangement for the newspaper, replacing the original format in early August 1842. In its original prospectus Curtiss had described the *CP&AA*'s format as:

Strenuously opposed to Abolitionists, exposing and holding up to view their diabolical Plans—giving every information of their movements—publishing the names of the most prominent among them, and diligently and fearlessly opposing them in all their villainies [sic]—furnishing a vast store of valuable information to all, but especially the Southerner.

The new format, announced just six months later, did not mention abolitionists or southerners. In fact, the only content listed in the updated prospectus included "news, original matter on various subjects, original and selected poetry, good humor, love, honor." Whether Curtiss initiated these changes in response to the cessation of the society or if a lack of subscribers forced him to explore another format in hope of gaining patrons is unclear. Either way, his verbal assault on Cincinnati abolitionists proved neither welcome

nor lucrative enough to warrant continued publication of the paper in its original form. Curtiss's personal dedication to the issue may have given way to his economic interests.<sup>30</sup>

The *CP&AA* did not quietly withdraw in the face of failure. Throughout June and July 1842, most of the articles and editorials in the reformatted *Post* were devoted to topics other than abolitionism. Nevertheless, when Curtiss raised the issue his tone remained vehemently anti-abolitionist and racist. On June 18, for example, one column argued that abolitionist newspapers were filled with lies and could not be believed. A July 16 article claimed that African Americans in the North were "retrograding to barbarism," and Curtiss remarked in an editorial column, "The time has come when no man professing that creed [authorizing male blacks to vote] can flourish in the Queen city."<sup>31</sup>

Despite apparent obstacles, the *Post* continued to pursue its course. The mid-July issue included the highest number of advertisements (nine) and a list of seven agents for the newspaper, all still in southern states. Curtiss may have seen an initial positive response to his changes to the paper. Encouraged, he included the caption "strenuously opposed to abolitionism" below the title on the first day of the newspaper's new format. The title changed to *Cincinnati Post* and the rest of the caption reflected the updated prospectus, but Curtiss managed to keep that one short phrase at the front of his list of goals. The newspaper first published in its new format on Saturday, August 6, 1842. Featuring a fictional tale on the front page, the issue contained only three brief articles about abolitionists. Curtiss attached a plea to the South for money so that he could publish pamphlets and books needed for "the spread of correct principles." He renewed his appeal for monetary contributions on August 13, insisting that if truth were to spread anti-abolitionist tracts had to be published. However, the editorial sections, once filled with attacks on Cincinnati's abolitionists, discussed only small news pieces or debated topics such as the impropriety of trials held without proper evidence.<sup>32</sup>

The new arrangement lasted five weeks. Only careful readers found the notice on the sixth page (of eight) in the September 3, 1842, issue announcing the cessation of the newspaper. Reverting to the newspaper's original name, Curtiss announced that the "Cincinnati Post & Anti-Abolitionist will be suspended from this number to December next. In the mean time, we shall do our best to get up a subscription, that will enable us to bring out our paper in a style suitable to the object intended at its commencement." Doubtless, subscription rates had fallen to an unbearable low. Ironically, the same issue still included the prospectus with pricing for upcoming issues. Either Curtiss wanted to remind readers of the amount they still owed him or he hoped that enough additional funds would arrive from those shocked to read of the paper's demise to continue publication.

Two notices for Curtiss's publishing house represented all the advertisements in the final issue.<sup>33</sup>

Curtiss himself quickly bounced back from *The Cincinnati Post & Anti-Abolitionist's* failure. Within eighteen months, he began publishing a new periodical, *The Daily Commercial*, which he issued until his death in 1851. In the new endeavor, touted later as "one of the most important and popular newspapers in the Cincinnati area during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries," Curtiss made a notable contribution to the field of journalism. The Citizens' Memorial Association of Cincinnati hung his portrait in the city's Music Hall as part of a commemoration of Cincinnati's distinguished citizens in 1881. Curtiss's successes at the end of his career effectively erased any link between his reputation and Cincinnati's turbulent years of anti-abolitionism.<sup>34</sup>

Reemerging in the wake of the 1841 anti-black riots, Cincinnati's organized anti-abolition movement ceased within a year. The formal society existed only seven months, while the newspaper serving as its supporter and voice to the public survived for eight months. These two entities provided vivid examples of the powerful anti-black feelings prevalent in antebellum Cincinnati. The existence of the society and the *CP&AA* also highlights the struggle of a city caught between two rival geographic sections prior to the Civil War. Even a formal organization of anti-abolitionists, with a print medium poised to distribute their propaganda, failed to rally Cincinnati around their message.

Previously unexamined by historians, *The Cincinnati Post & Anti-Abolitionist* illustrates the attempt by some Cincinnati residents in 1841 to generate support for a formal anti-abolitionist association. The distraught segment of Cincinnati's population that participated in the 1841 riot and then mobilized into an identifiable interest group vocalized their concerns in a way that both mimicked prior anti-abolitionist efforts in the city and represented a distinct venture. Anti-abolitionists in 1841 perceived the Underground Railroad as a tangible threat to their economic success and racial superiority. In order to address both issues, the society and the newspaper labeled those who perpetuated an "organized system of robbery" as menaces, "governed not by reason, but by prejudice and passion." Although they failed to sustain a viable organization, their existence and determination to make their voices heard help demonstrate how sectional tensions shaped Cincinnati's antebellum history. Lucius Greely Curtiss, the once beleaguered editor of the *Cincinnati Post & Anti-Abolitionist*, did not live to see the commencement of

**THE CINCINNATI POST,  
AND ANTI-ABOLITIONIST,**  
IS PUBLISHED EVERY SATURDAY AT  
Curtiss' News Office, Sycamore st., near Lower Market, at \$2.00 a year, in advance, \$2.50 at the end of six months, \$3.00 at the end of the year. Subscribers from a distance always in advance.  
L. GREELEY CURTISS,  
Editor and Publisher.  
Letters must be franked or post paid.

Publisher statement, *Cincinnati Post and Anti Abolitionist*, January 22, 1842. CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER AT UNION TERMINAL, CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY



hostilities between the sections, but he predicted the war in his initial issue of the *CP&AA* in January 1842. "No one can be insensible of the imminent danger to which the Union is exposed," Curtiss wrote. "The breach between the North and South is daily widening—and unless something is done, and that shortly, the integrity of this ever glorious Union will be shaken to its centre, and civil war, with all its horrors, follow in its train!"<sup>35</sup>

- 1 *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, Sept. 6, 1841.
- 2 John D. Barnhardt, "The Southern Influence in the Formation of Ohio," *Journal of Southern History* 3 (Feb. 1937), 28-42; Michael F. Rothgery, "The Economics of Repression: The Economic Status of the Negro in Cincinnati 1800-1850," *Otterbein Miscellany* 7 (May 1971), 2; Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, eds., "The Black Laws of Ohio," in *The Black Worker: A Documentary History from Colonial Times to the Present, vol. 1: The Black Worker to 1869* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 152-54.
- 3 *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, Sept. 21, 1841; Alexander Richter, "Slavery, Abolitionism, and Race in Cincinnati's Antebellum German-Language Press and Emil Klauprecht's German-American Novel" (M.A. thesis, University of Hamburg, Germany, 1994), 12; Charles Cist, *Cincinnati in 1841: Its Early Annals and Future Prospects* (Cincinnati, 1841), 34-38, 39; *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, Sept. 21, 1841; William Cheek and Aimee Lee Cheek, "John Mercer Langston and the Cincinnati Riot of 1841" in *Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820-1970*, Henry Louis Taylor, Jr., ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 33; J. Reuben Sheeler, "The Struggle of the Negro in Ohio for Freedom," *The Journal of Negro History* 31 (Apr. 1946), 211. Black males constituted 2 percent of the population and black females numbered slightly higher than their male counterparts. Ohio had the fourth largest free black population of non-slaveholding states in the 1840 census, behind only New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Including the slaveholding states, Ohio ranked eighth.
- 4 Thomas S. Berry, *Western Prices Before 1851: A Study of the Cincinnati Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943), 441, 450, 455; Steven J. Ross, *Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788-1890* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 48, 16, 43; *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, Apr. 27, 1840; William A. Mabry, "Ante-Bellum Cincinnati and its Southern Trade," in *American Studies in Honor of William Kenneth Boyd*, David Kelly Jackson, ed. (1940; New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1968), 72.
- 5 Leonard L. Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 34-35; Nikki M. Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati's Black Community, 1802-1868* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 64-65, 109-12; Ohio Anti-Slavery Society, *Narrative of the Late Riotous Proceedings Against the Liberty of the Press, in Cincinnati, with Remarks and Historical Notices, Relating to Emancipation: Addressed to the People of Ohio* (Cincinnati, 1836), 22; Fred Gosman, "Opposition to Abolition in Cincinnati, 1835-1840" (M.A. thesis, Kent State University, 1972), 41; Melvin G. Holli and Peter d'Alroy Jones, eds., *Biographical Dictionary of American Mayors, 1820-1980* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 436. Significant social unrest may also have influenced Cincinnati's growth. Population increases that easily topped 150 percent in the decades before the 1830s dropped to 87 percent between 1830 and 1840. Turmoil in Cincinnati deterred immigrants and other Americans from settling in the Queen City as they had in decades past and would continue to do so in the years before the Civil War. The percentage increases in population as compared to the previous decade are as follows: 1820, 279.6 percent; 1830, 157.5 percent; 1840, 86.6 percent; 1850, 149.1 percent. There was a distinct fall in the rate of population increase between 1830 and 1840.
- 6 Sheeler, "Struggle of the Negro," 211; *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, Sept. 9, 1841; Carter G. Woodson, "The Negroes of Cincinnati Prior to the Civil War," *Journal of Negro History* 1 (Jan. 1916), 77; *Cincinnati Weekly Chronicle*, Sept. 11, 1841.
- 7 *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, June 1, 1841; Stanley H. Zankel, "Anti-Negro Sentiment in Cincinnati, 1829-1841" (M.A. thesis, Ohio State University, 1971), 61.
- 8 Zankel, "Anti-Negro Sentiment," 62; *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, Aug. 11, 1841; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Aug. 6, 1841.
- 9 *Cincinnati Weekly Chronicle*, Sept. 11, 1841; *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, Sept. 14, 1841; *The Philanthropist* (Cincinnati), Oct. 6, 1841; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Sept. 9, 1841.
- 10 *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Sept. 9, 4, 25, 1841; *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, Sept. 6, 9, 1841; *The Philanthropist* (Cincinnati), Oct. 20, 1841; *Cincinnati Post & Anti-Abolitionist*, Jan. 8, 1842 (hereafter *CP&AA*); Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 119-24.
- 11 Bernard E. McClellan, "Cincinnati's Response to Abolitionism, 1835-1845" (M.A. thesis, University

- of Cincinnati, 1963), 100; William T. Rehtin, "Anti-Negro, Anti-Abolition, and Fugitive Slave Mobs in Cincinnati between 1829-1843" (M.A. thesis, University of Kentucky, 1966), 59-60; Charles Cist, *Cincinnati Directory for the year 1842* (Cincinnati, 1842), 382; Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing*, 173.
- 12 Rehtin, "Anti-Negro, Anti-Abolition," 59-60; Cist, *Cincinnati in 1841*, 32.
- 13 Rehtin, "Anti-Negro, Anti-Abolition," 96.
- 14 Cist, *Cincinnati Directory . . . 1842*, 166.
- 15 *CP&AA*, Jan. 8, Feb. 26, 1842.
- 16 *Ibid.*, Jan. 8, 1842.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Ohio Anti-Slavery Society, *Narrative of the Late Riotous Proceedings*, 23; *CP&AA*, Mar. 26, Jan. 8, 1842.
- 19 *CP&AA*, Jan. 22, 1842.
- 20 *CP&AA*, Feb. 12, 1842; Curtiss provided no evidence for his assertion.
- 21 *CP&AA*, Jan. 22, Feb. 26, 1842.
- 22 *Ibid.*, Jan. 29, Mar. 26, 1842.
- 23 *Ibid.*, Mar. 26, 5, May 7, 1842.
- 24 The handbills contained anti-black, pro-Southern rhetoric: "The days of *humbug black sympathy* are numbered in Cincinnati. . . [People] begin to see that negroes are in their proper places when working for good masters, well fed and clothed, and which is certainly the fact"; *CP&AA*, Jan. 22, Mar. 26, 1842.
- 25 *Ibid.*, Feb. 12, 1842.
- 26 *Ibid.*, Mar. 26, 12, 1842; Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 46.
- 27 Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery*, 152-53, 145; *The Philanthropist* (Cincinnati), Mar. 16, 1842; Joel Goldfarb, "The Life of Gamaliel Bailey Prior to the Founding of the National Era: The Orientation of a Practical Abolitionist" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1958), 230.
- 28 *CP&AA*, Jan. 8, Mar. 5, 1842; David Henry Shaffer, *The Cincinnati, Covington, Newport, and Fulton Directory, for 1840* (Cincinnati, 1839).
- 29 *CP&AA*, May 7, 1842.
- 30 *Ibid.*, Mar. 26, June 11, 1842.
- 31 *Ibid.*, June 18, July 16, 1842.
- 32 *Ibid.*, July 16, Aug. 6, 13, 1842.
- 33 *Ibid.*, Sept. 3, 1842.
- 34 Charles T. Greve, *Centennial History of Cincinnati and Representative Citizens* (Chicago: Biographical Publishing Co., 1904), 1036; Jeffrey Herbert, *Index of Death Notices in the Cincinnati Commercial, 1858-1899* (Cincinnati: Heritage Books, 1996), v; Citizens' Memorial Association of Cincinnati, *In Memoriam: Cincinnati, 1881; Containing Proceedings of the Memorial Association, Eulogies at Music Hall, and Biographical Sketches of Many Distinguished Citizens of Cincinnati*, vol. 1 (Cincinnati: A. E. Jones, 1881).
- 35 *CP&AA*, Feb. 5, Jan. 8, 1842.