



Iowa's Antislavery

Imagine that you farm in southern Iowa when, one night in 1851, you hear a tap at your door. Opening it, three weary escaped slaves stand before you. They ask for food and shelter as they tell of their flight from Missouri.

You must decide what to do. From which way had they arrived at your place, you ask, wondering if your neighbors to the west had spotted them and alerted others. One of the fugitives replies that they had crossed the creek from the south and came here because they heard you were antislavery and might help.

You realize that any aid for them is illegal, that

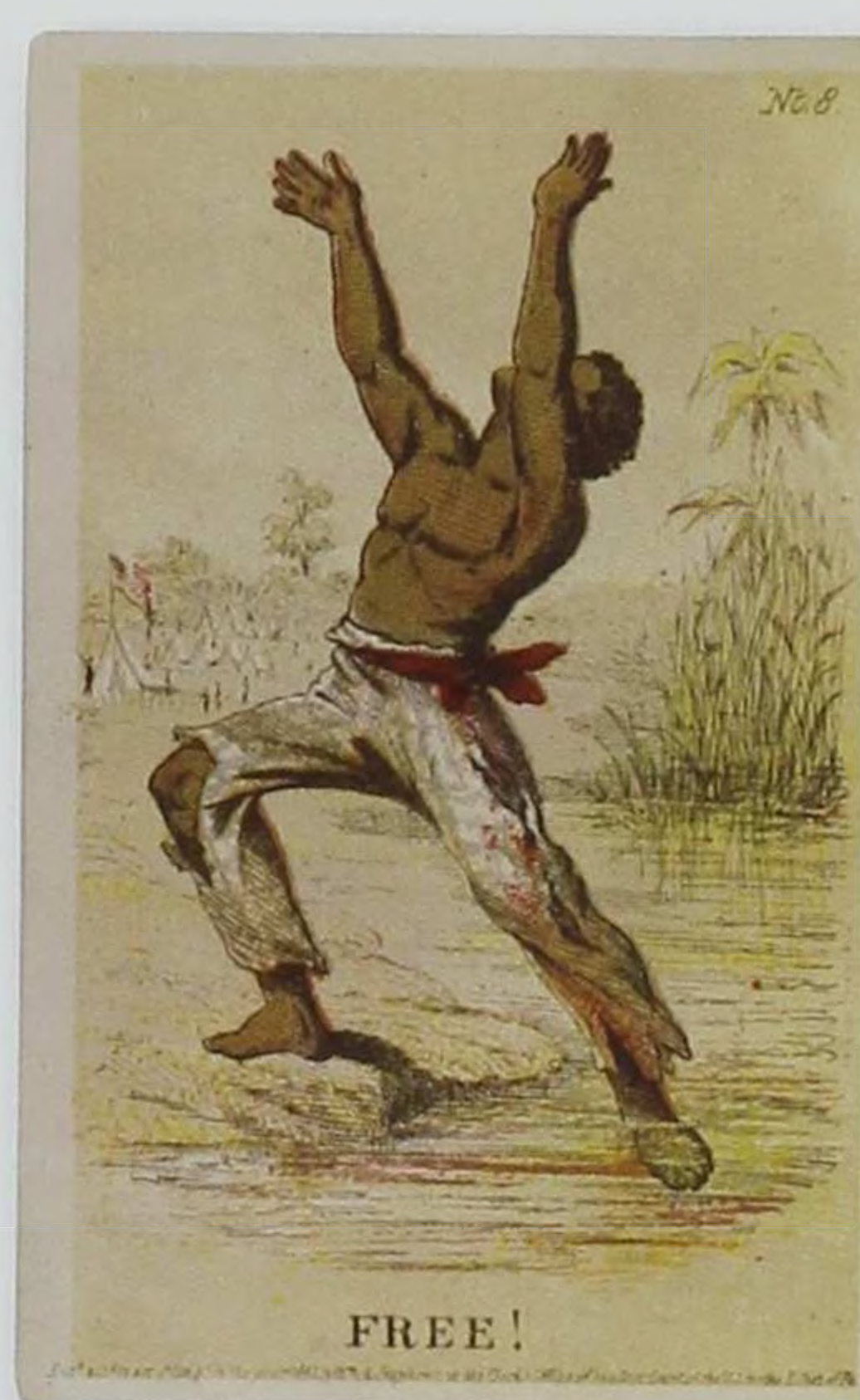
most Iowans are highly unfriendly to abolitionists, and that the Fugitive Slave Act, enacted a year ago, imposes stiff criminal penalties on those who harbor fugitives or hinder their capture. Having never before engaged in underground railroad efforts, you fear what might happen if you're caught.

You and your wife nervously feed and hide the fugitives for the night and send them on their way the next morning with directions to someone two miles distant who reputedly helps escaped slaves.

The fugitives' prospects for successful escape across Iowa would then depend on their ingenuity, on others who befriended them, and on whether eventually they found direct help from fearless individuals who stood committed to a "higher law" of duty.

Of course, much of the story of the fugitives' escape

Above: Cards depict the journeys of African Americans from slavery to freedom. Six more exist in the 1863 series, ending with a black soldier dying for the Union.



Movement

by Lowell Soike

and dangerous flight toward freedom had already taken place before they even arrived at an Iowan's doorstep. It was the fugitives who in fact devised a plan of escape and showed the courage to carry it out, adjusting things in transit and appealing to others as needed.

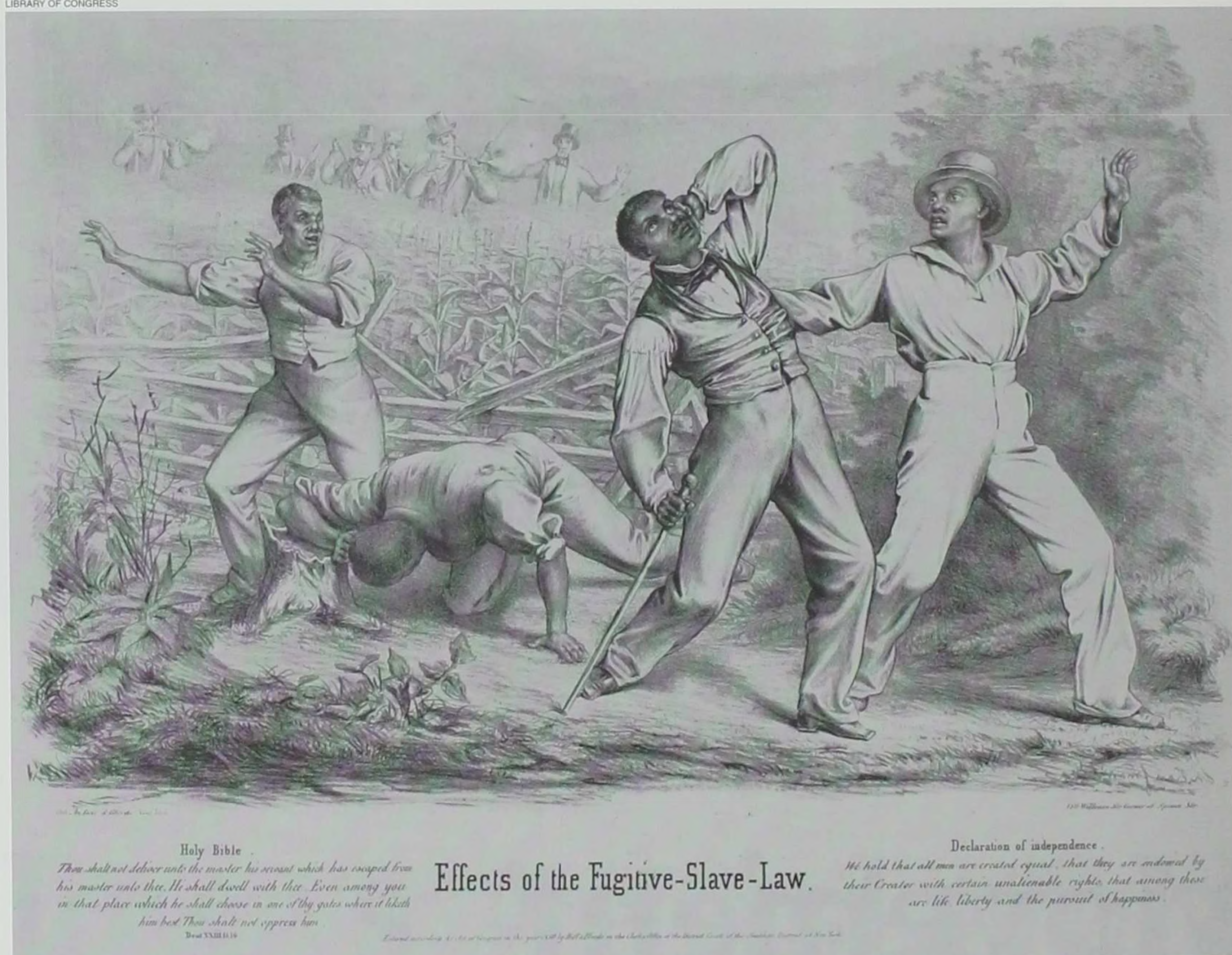
Whether running away north to freedom from a border state, which might bring the fugitive into contact with underground railroad operations, or running away to escape plantation circumstances elsewhere in the South, a slave's flight expressed a broad and constant pattern of defiance that continually bedeviled slaveholders.

Fugitives along the way often sought help from members of their own race, whom they naturally judged to have more sympathy for their plight. One Missouri slaveholder admitted as much in his adver-

tisement for the return of Lucy, a fugitive slave, in an 1846 issue of the *Keokuk Argus*. His reward notice stated: "It is believed that she will be conducted to the territory of Iowa in the direction of Keosauqua or beyond that place to a settlement of free negroes that was set free by Meirs living in Tully, Lewis Co., Missouri some years ago."

Typically fugitives took things a step at a time, having only the name of a person to inquire after, based on directions from another person met along the way. Perhaps, if lucky, they would run into someone belonging to the loosely organized underground railroad network.

When Iowa residents helped runaways from the slave state of Missouri, they knew they were taking the biggest risk of their lives. Criminal charges, threats,



Condemning the Fugitive Slave Act, this lithograph from 1850 portrays a posse of six ambushing four blacks, possibly freedmen. Quotations from the book of Deuteronomy in the Bible and from the Declaration of Independence appear below the image.

and physical harm could befall them. Adopting direct action might mean the loss of friends who, though antislavery in opinion, were unwilling to go this far. Neighbors might be either unfriendly to blacks entering their midst or wary about violating the Fugitive Slave Law, which had been the cost of gaining Southern support for the Compromise of 1850. Although free-state residents had a hard time swallowing the law, most wanted to avoid the issue.

This strong desire to accommodate and conciliate the South produced actions in Iowa that were, in effect, pro-slavery. State legislation during the 1840s and on into the mid-1850s limited or restricted black settlement in Iowa. Opinion leaders viewed assistance to runaway slaves as hostile and judged "abolitionists" to be subversive threats to a Union thought to be easily broken.

Avoiding the Issue

THE WORLD KNOWN to Iowa settlers during these years was quite unlike our own. In 1850, Iowa had been a state for just four years, and settlement was only into its second decade. Southern and eastern Iowa counties contained most of the thinly settled population, while the northeastern counties were seeing a beginning influx of arrivals from New England and mid-Atlantic states and immigrants from northern Europe. Northwestern Iowa would not be largely settled until the decades following the Civil War.

For a time, the early stream of migrants from slaveholding states into southern Iowa townships and counties gave several localities a Southern and politically

Democratic cast. Having come from a slaveholding state, however, did not necessarily mean the settler was proslavery in attitude. Most had no desire to see slavery extended and did not wish to encourage its growth elsewhere. Rather, the effects of one's slave state background showed in anti-black attitudes. This translated into antagonism toward black migration into Iowa and an attitude favoring severely limited political and civil rights for black residents.

Not surprisingly, slave catchers from Missouri could find some sympathetic help among numerous southern Iowa residents for returning fugitives to their master's home. They saw little reason to do otherwise, believing that instances of runaway slaves and slave hunting in Iowa only made visible the issues of slavery that everyone wanted to avoid.

This attitude predominated during the pre-1855 years, although events sometimes frustrated those wishing to keep the issue silent. A fugitive slave court case in 1839 was one such instance. It arose out of the 1838 capture of a slave named Ralph. A Missouri slaveholder had allowed Ralph to gradually purchase his freedom by going to work in the lead mines of Dubuque. But Ralph failed to make the payments and was taken by two slave catchers for return to the slave holder. A man who witnessed Ralph being handcuffed and loaded in a wagon obtained a writ of habeas corpus from a judge, which forced a hearing to be held. Ultimately, the Iowa Supreme Court decided that once Ralph had been permitted by his owner to reside on Iowa soil in order to become free, he could not again be reduced to slavery for failing to make his payments.

Twenty years later an opposite decision would be rendered by the United States Supreme Court in the Dred Scott case.

As to numbers of slaves who escaped northward, the United States Census reported that between 1850 and 1860 about 500 slaves escaped from the border slaveholding states into the free states. Of the border states, the greatest reported increase in escapes occurred from Missouri. This made Iowa and Illinois significant receiving states for fugitive slaves.

Among the enslaved who ran away rather than endure the circumstances of their bondage, most were caught. But these acts of defiance also unnerved the slaveholder. A constant fear of losing runaways bred an exaggerated defensiveness and resentment toward all who stood opposed to their peculiar institution. Their exasperation helped bring about the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. It required the United States government to aid in returning escaped slaves and punish those who hindered it. The law made visible the

slaveholder's sense of weakness as well as deepening the divide between North and South, thus helping set the stage for the Civil War.

Interfering Abolitionists

IOWA PASSED THROUGH TWO ERAS of antislavery feeling and underground railroad activity. A general public attitude, noted above, of anti-abolitionism and noninterference with slavery, disturbed occasionally by scattered incidents and court cases, marked the first. The second period showed growing resistance to slavery's demands while the term "abolitionist" began to lose its stigma, all of which was underscored by the increasingly open support shown in Iowa for John Brown and others working on behalf of the free-state movement in Kansas.

During the first period, lasting until about 1854, tensions over antislavery revealed themselves in southeastern and south-central Iowa when fugitive slaves escaped from north-central and northeastern Missouri. Public opinion in these years—being indifferent to slavery and accommodating to the South—disparaged abolitionists and decried antislavery agitation as hostile and inflammatory. True enough, Iowans agreed, slavery was an abomination, but it was somewhere else and should be left alone to avoid inflaming passions.

Consequently, antislavery advocates had only a minor voice in public affairs and kept a low profile locally. Those who spoke out openly for emancipation were rejected or worse. When, for instance, a lecturer from the Massachusetts Antislavery Society visited the Iowa towns of Clinton and Camanche for a series of talks, he found the scheduled church closed to his lecture. At another stopping place "threats of personal violence were freely made," leaving the lecturer "glad to escape with a whole skin and unbroken bones."

To be openly an abolitionist in Iowa during the 1840s and early 1850s meant living a public life where one was shunned and ostracized. We should leave in silence the emotional issue of slavery, went the prevailing opinion, for to do otherwise by tolerating abolitionist talk would only tear away at the scab covering the Union's fragile peace. As one Clinton County abolitionist later put it, "The boasted free press of the North avoided the antislavery question and the underground railroad as unclean things, and branded their advocates and adherents as wild fanatics and dangerous agitators."

Abolitionism brought dread to North and South alike, moreover, because it implied black equality. Leaders of opinion readily connected abolitionists to public fears of free black migration into Iowa. Building on this fear, they further charged that abolitionists interfered with and harassed people of Southern states in their lawful pursuits. And they justified the "peculiar institution" as "a blessing to the bondsman" because it provided paternalistic care.

Only a Temporary Refuge

EVEN ANTISLAVERY ADVOCATES did not see Iowa as a permanent place of refuge for slaves to come and live. Rather, they saw themselves as providing a temporary refuge to the fleeing slave, not a place for them to be welcomed as full residents. Feelings were mixed even in the staunchly antislavery Congregationalist town of Tabor in Fremont County. When the pastor tried to place in school the children of a recently settled free black family, some would have none of it and burned down the school.

Similarly in Grinnell, when in March 1860 members of the strongly antislavery Congregationalist town tried to enroll four fugitive slaves in school, opponents provoked a riot that effectively denied the youths entry. Given these attitudes in largely antislavery places, it was hardly surprising to see that during this era Iowa passed laws and proposed measures to discourage black migration into Iowa, limit blacks' rights in the state, and pursue policies to conciliate the South.

This prevailing attitude of "non-involvement" ultimately collapsed into a new mood of "resentment" after 1854. Mainly responsible was passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. It not only brought the slavery issue back to center stage; it also forced Iowans to see that slavery might expand northward. Now thrown on the defensive were those in the dominant Democratic Party who were used to holding together its Northern and Southern wings by arguing to avoid sectional conflict and leave slavery and the South alone.

In Iowa, the politically astute antislavery radical Whig James Grimes eagerly capitalized on the opportunity to marshal a successful coalition based on the antislavery issue. True, Iowa Democrats suffered as well by party infighting, lack of purpose, and failure to win national party support for federal railroad grants and internal improvements. But it was the Kansas-Nebraska Act and "bleeding Kansas," with a little help

from the Dred Scott decision, that drove the Democrats from power as a new era of rising antislavery militancy now convinced Iowans that there was no appeasing the South.

Iowa residents had originally pressed their Democratic congressmen to work for organizing the Nebraska Territory in order to obtain westward railroad growth, settlement, and economic development. When Iowa Senator Augustus C. Dodge introduced such a bill, Southern leaders in Congress feared that accepting it would effectively surround the state of Missouri with free territory. Stephen Douglas, Democratic congressman from Illinois who chaired the Committee on Territories, knew that he would need to gain several Southern votes to pass the bill. Though knowing that certain of his changes would "raise a hell of a storm" among Northerners, Douglas revised the bill to divide the Nebraska Territory into two territories and leave the slavery issue to be decided by "the people residing therein." Dividing one territory into two left the impression that one would be slave and the other free, while leaving the slavery question to those who settled the territories would allow slavery to expand north of the 36°30' line and effectively end the Missouri Compromise.

To Iowans, this opened the fearsome prospect that slavery might not only expand but could fix itself on Iowa's western border. Once that happened, James Grimes shrewdly argued, "bounded on two sides by slave states, we shall be intersected with underground railroads, and continually distracted by slave-hunts."

After bitter debate, Congress passed the bill. Both of Iowa's Democratic senators, who were locked into their state development schemes and railroad mania, voted for it. The unrelenting pounding by antislavery leaders that followed spelled the beginning of the end for Democratic rule in Iowa. The coalition that helped James Grimes become governor in 1854 developed by 1856 into the Republican Party, which won all contested state offices, gained both House seats in Congress, and gave Frémont a solid margin over Buchanan in the presidential contest.

Joyous Shouts

THE PUBLIC MOOD SHIFTED, turning more militant and antagonistic towards those who formerly held sway in both apologizing for slavery and demonizing its detractors. In the process, underground railroad

operators increasingly found less to fear from enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act. When in June 1855 two slave catchers near Burlington stopped the wagon of avowed abolitionist Dr. Edwin James and his black passenger named Dick, the difficulty of enforcing the stringent Fugitive Slave Law in Iowa became clear.

Alleging that the black man was Dick Rutherford who had escaped from service to Thomas Rutherford, of Clark County, Missouri, the two slave hunters asked for an arrest warrant from the commissioner in Burlington who had been appointed by the federal circuit court to dispose of fugitive slave cases. Meanwhile the gathering commotion around the wagon outside the commissioner's office drew his eye. As he gazed out his window at the throng's reactions, he later recalled, "Every man in the crowd who was himself a native of the slave-region, or the son of such a native—and there were many such in Burlington—seemed to be very zealous in his manifestations of sympathy with the slave claimants. . . . Most of them were of the class in the South that never owned a slave, and who had migrated . . . because they had become certain that if they remained in their original locality they would never be able to own one. They came here to better their condition. But unfortunately they brought with them all their local prejudices and habits, and especially their imbibed hatred of the negro. . . . Such a pretense [to personal liberty] on the part of the black bondsman was outrageous insolence, requiring at the hands of all white Southerners not merely admonition but prompt and decisive punishment. It disputed the white man's supremacy, and as to the non-slaveholder, deprived him of the coveted privilege of looking down upon a class inferior to his own.

"And then the sympathy of the northern people in the crowd was scarcely less pronounced. They were probably very few, if any openly acknowledged 'abolitionists' among them. But the system to the respectable people of the North seemed inhuman, and was also obnoxious because of its political influence. The sight of a victim of the system, seized by a couple of voluntary bloodhounds while seeking to escape from bondage, stirred the blood of those who thought that liberty was rightly purchased at any price. These men had no desire to interfere with the system where it existed. They were not responsible for it, and could do nothing under the Constitution to destroy it. But when it obtruded itself upon them and proposed to exert its power in their own streets, they were roused to action, and resolved that the authority should be exerted under the strictest construction of the law."

The commissioner, upon learning that the two

slave pursuers lacked the official transcript of escape and service due under seal of a Missouri court of record, held the case over for a hearing to confirm the facts of Dick's alleged identity. When at the hearing the slaveholder's son failed to identify the detained black man as his father's slave, the judge dismissed the matter and the man was released to the "joyous shout" of onlookers. From there "more than a thousand exulting people escorted Dick to the ferry-boat. Dr. James, Dick and plenty of guards" then accompanied him across the river, and "this time Dick was started by rail towards Chicago without detention." The trend of public temper indeed was changing.

Abolitionist demands to end slavery were hardly opinions shared by most living before the Civil War, however. The most committed among abolitionists were found mainly among two branches of religious adherents: Quakers and Congregationalists. Although members of both faiths disagreed among themselves over whether they should actively seek out or encourage slaves to escape, both shared disrespect for laws that supported the right of one person to hold another in bondage. For as they saw it, all persons were equal in the sight of God, and both believed that a higher law of conscience applied. Where a fugitive slave found a community of Quakers or Congregationalists, the chances improved for receiving direct and unconditional aid. Antislavery views were also strong among Wesleyan Methodists, Baptists, plus other evangelical Protestant groups, and individuals among them did participate in the underground railroad activities. Generally, however, they were less directly involved in active underground railway operations.

But no matter what one's religious convictions, the underground railroad was not for the ordinary anti-slavery advocate. ♦

Lowell Soike is a long-time historian with the historic preservation office of the State Historical Society of Iowa. In recent years he has directed a federal grant-assisted project on antislavery and underground railroad activity in Iowa.

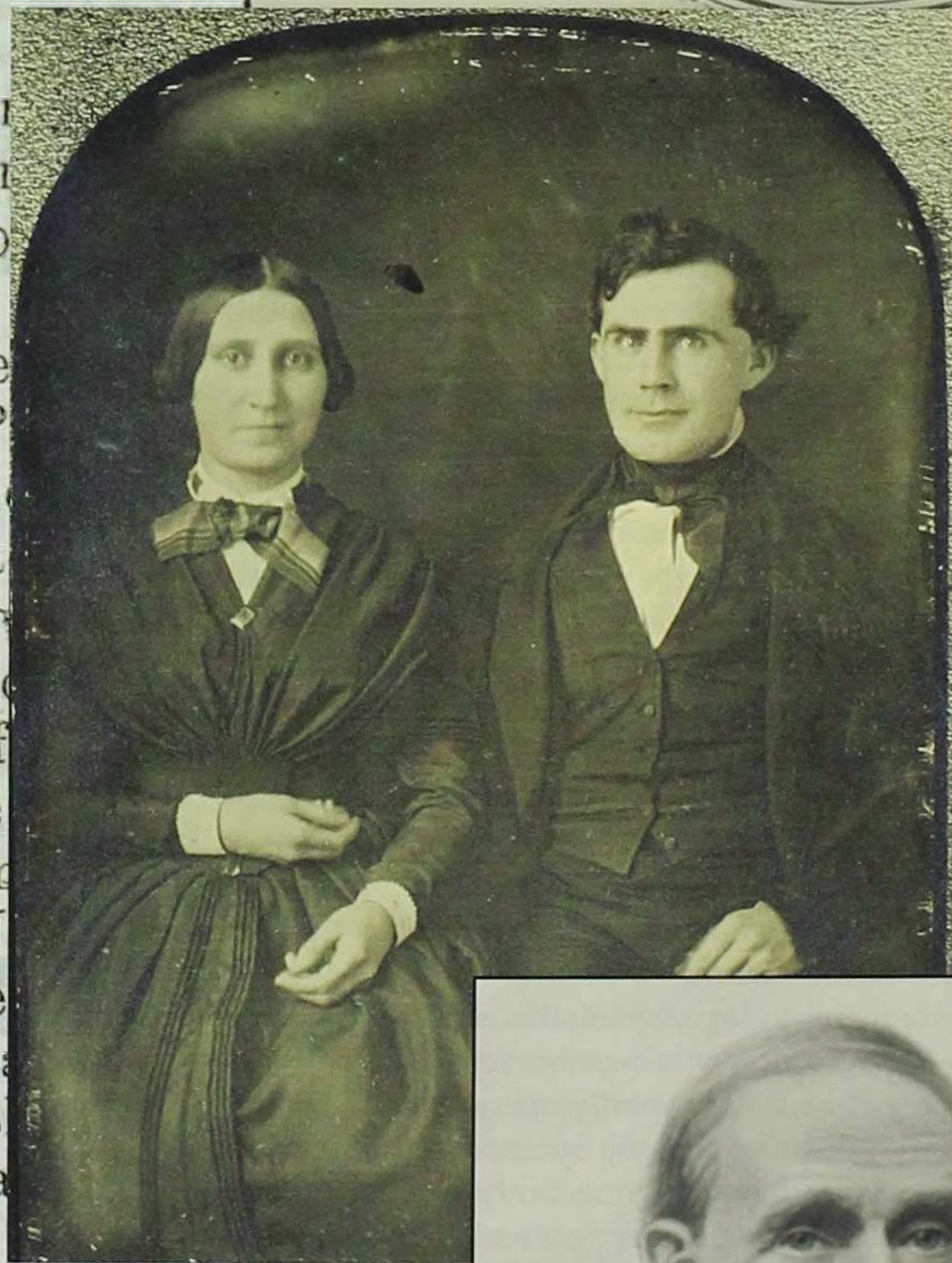
A substantial collection of materials has been compiled for public use; two National Historic Landmark nominations are in progress; and digitizing of some 4,000 Iowa newspaper articles on the slavery issue and some archaeological work at sites have been completed. Historic markers have been placed on a John Brown Freedom Trail relating to his 1859 journey across Iowa with twelve liberated slaves.

Soike is currently writing a book on antislavery and underground railroad activity in Iowa.

cultivated by slaves. There are planters in South Carolina who are owners of more than a thousand slaves. Children are raised in Virginia, and without so much as the expenditure of a dime for a primer, are sold for two, three, four, five and six hundred dollars. The last census reported one hundred and forty-six thousand, five hundred and fourteen such children in Virginia, under ten years of age, more than half of them girls. The yearly crop of human beings raised by the State of Virginia is valued at ten million

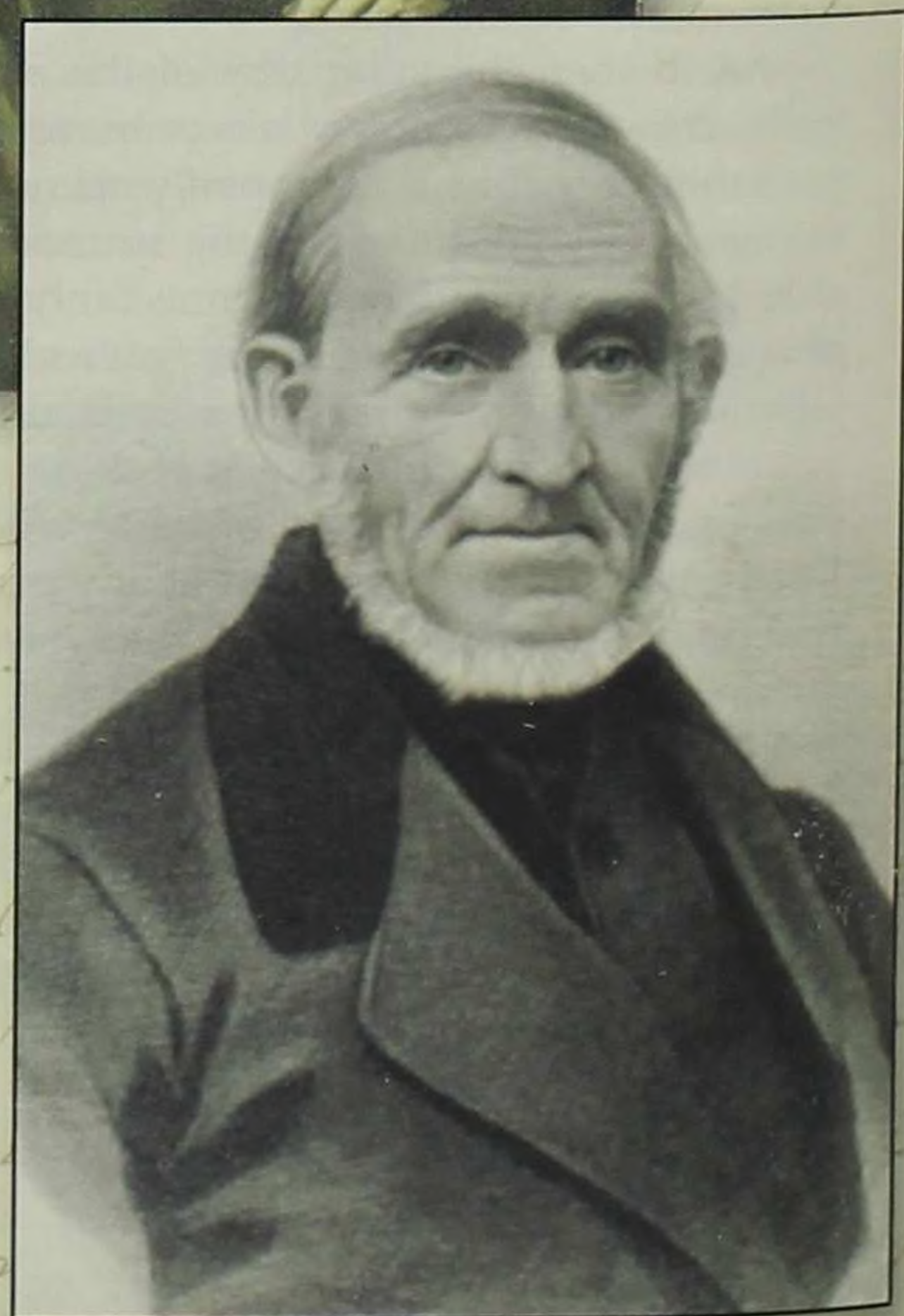


Here is the horrible explanation of this horrible anarchy. It is a question of dollars and cents, in one word, of property of productive, valuable property. This bulwark, churches, ecclesiastical bodies, benevolent societies, the President of the United States, the Supreme Court, and every politician and penny-a-liner, in the interest of the slave power, have taken shelter, as if by the throne of God, under the alleged rights of property,—of the right of property,—are held to be more counterpoise for the rights of man than the eternal laws of God. "No right of property," says a Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, "is placed by the Constitution upon a higher ground, nor shielded by a guaranty."⁵



We are thus brought to notice those recent events which have made these things realities to us, and which have startled the nation and the world, and in view of which it becomes us to inquire for our own lessons of duty.

First, Was the Fugitive Slave law, in 1850, the enactment of which with all its inhumanity and wickedness, and the enforcement of it in a number of cases, encouraged the slave power to further ag-



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