

Men Were Too Fiery for Much Talk

The Grinnell Anti-Abolitionist Riot of 1860

by Thomas A. Lucas

During the 1859-60 school year the abolitionists of Grinnell, Iowa, enrolled a fugitive slave girl in the village's public school. Later that year they enrolled four adult male fugitives. The black girl was able to attend the school unharassed, but the enrollment of the black men resulted in a two-day riot which forced the closing of the school and the expulsion of the blacks. Why did school integration cause a riot in Grinnell, a town founded as an abolitionist community? And why did a riot occur after the enrollment of black men, but not after the enrollment of a black girl? The answers to these questions reveal much about racial attitudes in an Iowa village on the eve of the Civil War.

MANY ANTEBELLUM Americans firmly believed that the emancipation of blacks from slavery would lead to the merging of the races. Indeed, scholar Winthrop Jordan asserts that this belief was "nearly universal" in the United States by the end of the eighteenth century. In his study of northern anti-abolitionist violence, scholar Leonard Richards observes that "for many Northerners, the probable alternative to slavery and African colonization was *either* race war *or* miscegenation. For Northern anti-abolitionists, this alternative was as immutable as the law of gravity or the Ten Commandments: if slaves were freed, it followed that the two races must completely separate or wholly merge." Because of this belief, anti-abolitionists interpreted the abolitionists' call for emancipation and racial equality as an advocacy of miscegenation. And to anti-abolitionists, miscegenation meant the debasement of their posterity. As it happened, miscegenation declined after emancipation, and that fact perhaps makes it difficult for us today to appreciate that many antebellum Americans were unable to separate black freedom and equality from miscegenation.

It is important to recognize that the anti-abolitionists' fear of miscegenation centered on the black male. Anti-abolitionists certainly opposed unions between white men and black women, but what truly frightened them was their conviction that the free black man would assert his new status by demanding access to white women. As historian Ronald Takaki points out, "What probably worried northern whites most [about blacks] was their image of the Negro as a sexual threat to white women and white racial purity." Anti-abolitionists often portrayed the black man as a potential rapist.

Fear of miscegenation (or "amalgamation," as it was called before the Civil War) pervaded the law and politics of the antebellum North. Historian Eugene Berwanger identifies this fear as one of the factors that led the western states to pass "black laws" restricting the civil rights and immigration of free blacks. Mid-

western whites, writes Berwanger, "feared that the unlimited immigration of free Negroes would result in miscegenation. The point was too often raised to be overlooked."

During the 1850s and 1860s the Democratic party tried to profit politically from the widespread fear of miscegenation by portraying the Republicans as amalgamationists. In one Democratic parade in Indiana, for example, young women carried a banner reading, "Fathers, save us from nigger husbands." In an anti-Republican parade in New York, one float showed a black man embracing a white girl; another depicted a black man leading a white woman into the White House. The Republicans found it politically essential to declare their opposition to miscegenation. Abraham Lincoln assured a Springfield audience in 1857 that he and Stephen Douglas were in perfect accord on the issue: "Judge Douglas is especially horrified at the thought of the mixing of blood by the white and black races: agreed for once — a thousand times agreed." Republican senator James Doolittle of Wisconsin suggested that "down with amalgamation" would make a good party slogan in the 1860 campaign.

Few issues were more likely to arouse cries of amalgamation in the antebellum North than school integration. Historian Leon Litwack observes that "the possibility that Negro children would be mixed with white children in the same classrooms aroused even greater fears and prejudices than those which consigned the Negro to an inferior place in the church, the theater, and the railroad car. This, indeed, constituted virtual amalgamation." One delegate to the Iowa Constitutional Convention of 1857 insisted that school integration would result inevitably in miscegenation: "Put your white children in the country, upon an equality with the negro, in the schools or the social circle, and I undertake to say that it is the very thing to lead to amalgamation. Teach them that the colored population are just as good as they are by nature, and equal in every sense of the word, and that [i]s the inevitable consequence." When they attempted to integrate the Grinnell public school in 1860, then, the Grinnell abolitionists had chosen an issue that

was particularly likely to cause an eruption of the powerful and widespread fear of miscegenation.

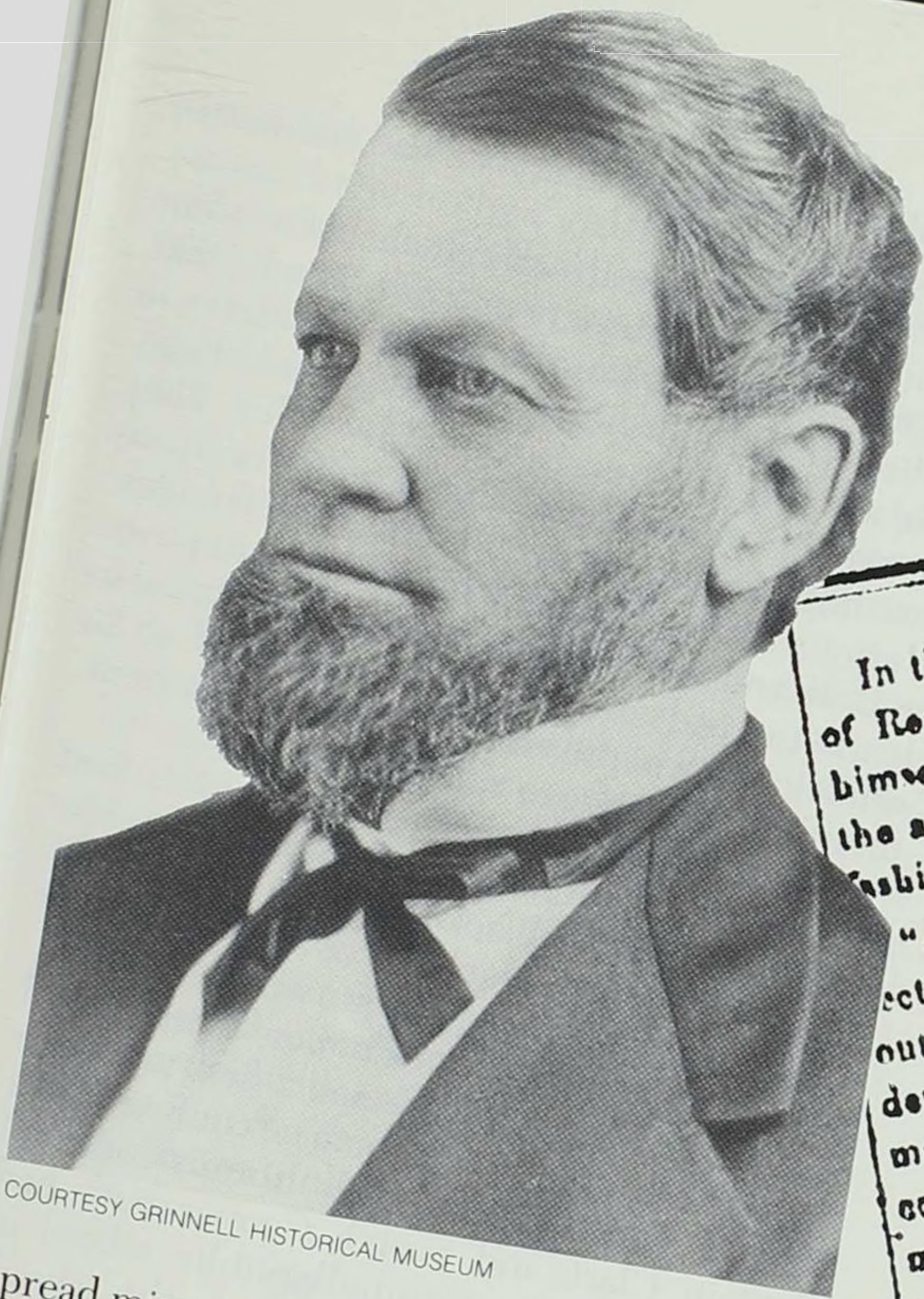
THE VILLAGE of Grinnell was founded in 1854 by Josiah Bushnell Grinnell, a Congregationalist minister and political abolitionist from Vermont. Like other New England ministers who founded towns in the Midwest, Grinnell's aim was to build a "city upon a hill": a morally righteous community bound together by common ideals. Grinnell dedicated his town to abolitionism, prohibitionism, Congregationalism, and education. Believing firmly in the advantages of a homogeneous population in the village, Grinnell expelled persons who did not share his views. Grinnell sold town lots with the proviso that they would revert to him if liquor was sold on the premises. Proceeds from the sale of the lots went into an educational fund, and the preparatory department of Iowa College (now Grinnell College) opened in Grinnell in 1859. Grinnell started a Congregational church and tried to keep other churches out of the village, believing that they would divide the community. In the early days of the village everyone was expected to attend Grinnell's church. Members were required to oppose slavery "earnestly and actively." John Brown spoke in Grinnell's church in February 1859, and Grinnell took up collections for fugitive slaves who passed through the village on the Underground Railroad.

Despite J. B. Grinnell's efforts to achieve ideological unity, dissent arose in the village. The most divisive issue proved to be racial equality. The Grinnell settlers of the 1850s came chiefly from New England, the Western Reserve, and western New York State. They brought with them the antislavery sentiment of those areas, but most did not share J. B. Grinnell's abolitionist commitment to racial equality. The results of the election of August 1857 illustrate this fact. Among the issues in the August election was a proposal to extend the suffrage to blacks in Iowa. One hundred and twenty-two men went to the polls in Grinnell Township and, as usual, voted overwhelmingly for the Republican candidates. But only 18 of

the 122 voters cast ballots on the black suffrage proposal — 8 in favor and 10 against. As one villager later put it, "While we were in fact an anti-slavery community, there were sharp differences among us as to the proper limits of agitation." Racial equality was evidently beyond these limits for the vast majority of Grinnellites in 1857. In fact there was a wide range of racial attitudes in antebellum Grinnell. At one extreme stood a group of abolitionists, who were committed to racial equality. At the other extreme stood a former sea captain named Nathaniel Winslow Clark, who viewed blacks as property and denounced the abolitionists for promoting "negro-stealing" and "negro-equality."

The Grinnell abolitionists who were most prominent in support of school integration in 1860 were J. B. Grinnell, Leonard F. Parker, Samuel F. Cooper, and Amos and Augusta Bixby. Grinnell, Parker, and Cooper were all graduates of racially integrated, abolitionist colleges. Grinnell had attended the Oneida Institute in Whitesboro, New York, in the early 1840s. Leonard Parker, Samuel F. Cooper, and their wives, Sarah and Jane, had been classmates at Oberlin in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Parker was the head teacher in the Grinnell public school in 1860 and Cooper edited the county newspaper. Amos Bixby, a lawyer and a "radical reformer," had come to Grinnell from Maine with his wife, Augusta.

The Grinnell abolitionists believed that slavery, not freedom, was the cause of miscegenation. Standing the anti-abolitionist argument on its head, they portrayed the white slaveowner, not the free black, as the sexual aggressor. J. B. Grinnell used this tactic in an 1857 attack on Benjamin M. Samuels, the Virginia-born Democrat who was running for governor of Iowa: "The Slavery Candidate for Governor from Virginia, the State whose greatest business is having and breeding, men, women and children for the market, would drive us to his support, by alarms as to amalgamation, &c., when there is none of it in the State nor any mingling of the races in prospect." Samuel F. Cooper agreed, printing in his *Montezuma Weekly Republican* a speech by Representative James Ashley of Ohio, in which Ashley asserted that slavery had "corrupted the blood . . . of millions in the South." Wide-



COURTESY GRINNELL HISTORICAL MUSEUM

Negro Equality.
In the course of a speech in the House of Representatives, Gen. Ashley, of Ohio, himself a native of Virginia, raked down the advocates of Negro Equality after this fashion:

"And now, sir, what are the practical effects of slavery, as exhibited in the working out of this much talked of and universally denounced negro equality and amalgamation of the races? Has not slavery corrupted the blood, to say nothing of the morals, of millions in the South? If it has not, whence spring the octoroons, the quadroons, and the myriads who are tinged with the blood of the dominant race, in every Southern State? Sir, it is in the land of slavery you must look for amalgamation, and that terrible, degrading negro equality, which is inseparable from such amalgamation. But for a negro equality all over the South, that must be nameless here, there would be no blue eyed, light-haired octoroons, the children and descendants of African slaves, in every Southern city, and in every neighborhood, appealing to the liberal, as we see them almost daily here in this Capitol, asking for aid to purchase their right to that which God gave, not only to them, but to all the human race, the right to themselves. Sir, that Mormon foray, about which even Southern republicans professed to be so shocked, the

spread miscegenation between white men and black women, Ashley argued, was one of the "practical effects of slavery." "Isn't that right to the point!" exclaimed editor Cooper.

Teacher Leonard Parker also accused slave-owners of sexual licentiousness. In a speech given many years after emancipation, he asserted that female slaves had been kept for sexual purposes. According to Parker, Southern owners bought male slaves for their fields and female slaves for their "harems." Amos Bixby took the same view. From 1858 to 1860, the lawyer and his wife employed a fugitive slave girl named Frances Overton in their home. Frances confided to the Bixbys that she had been sexually abused by the sons of her Missouri master. Amos Bixby believed that Frances's experience was typical: "Hers was but the unhappy lot of slave girls since the world began."

Such charges of sexual misconduct in the South were, of course, typical of abolitionists. As scholar Ronald Walters has shown, these charges were more than an attempt to deflect the anti-abolitionists' attacks. Abolitionists believed that the absolute power of the slave-

Josiah Bushnell Grinnell (upper left) denounced the argument that freed slaves and integrated schools would lead to miscegenation. Editor Samuel F. Cooper agreed, printing and attacking a congressman's anti-abolitionist speech in his *Montezuma Weekly Republican*.

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owner led to sexual licentiousness. And abolitionists, like other antebellum reformers, saw unrestrained sexuality as a threat to civilization.

THE CHAIN OF EVENTS leading to the riot over school integration began in 1858. In that year Frances Overton, a sixteen-year-old escaped slave from Missouri, arrived in Grinnell on the Underground Railroad. Amos and Augusta Bixby took Frances into their home, where she worked as a maid. Frances was illiterate when she arrived in Grinnell, but she was eager to learn. Augusta Bixby instructed her at home, and three months after her arrival Frances won a Sunday school prize for reciting the greatest number of Bible verses. This accomplishment "caused offence to some white competitors."

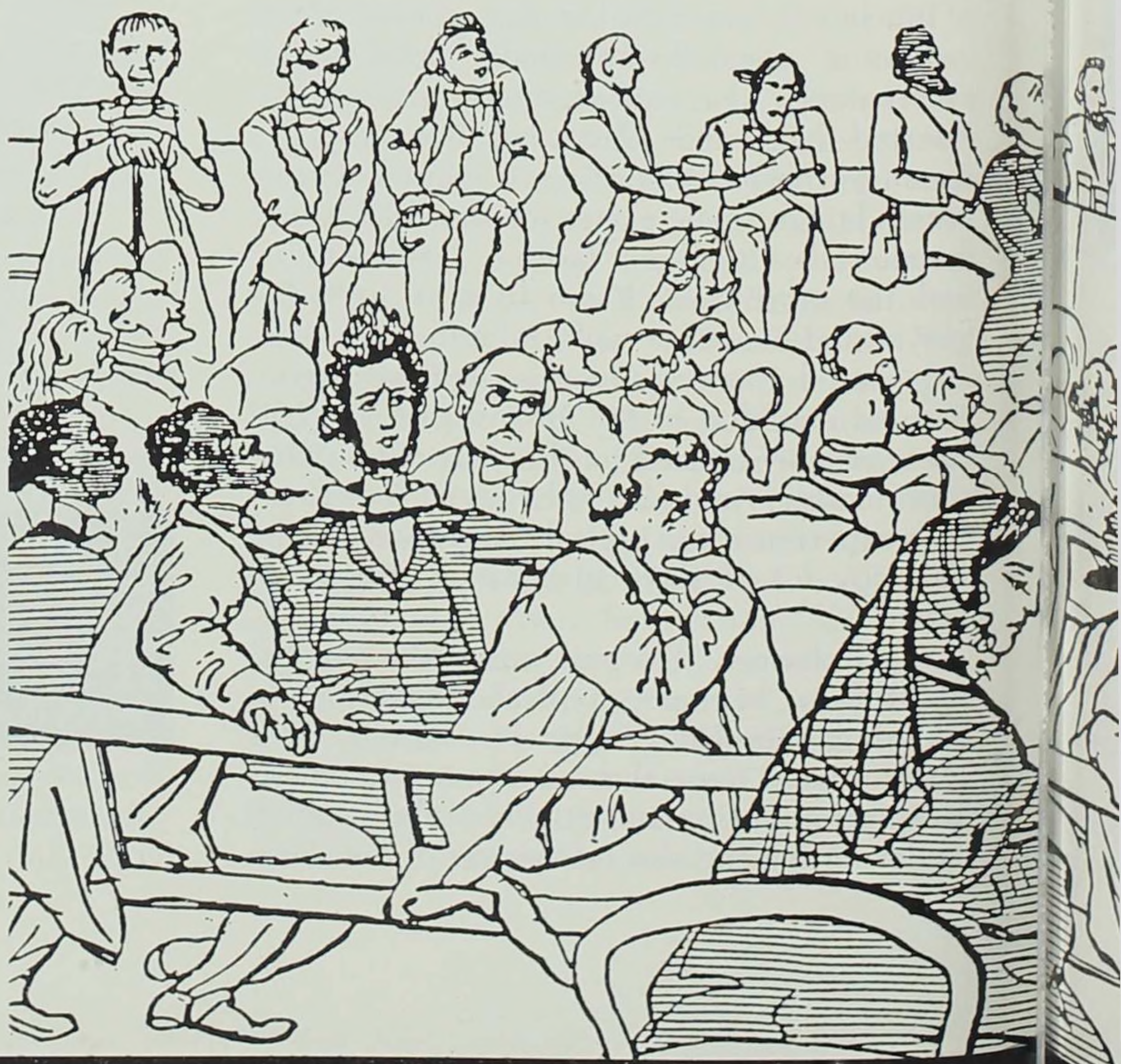
More than a year after Frances came to Grinnell, Amos Bixby decided to enroll her in the public school. He first asked J. B. Grinnell what he thought of the idea. The town founder's reply was characteristically combative: "Send her to school, and if any one dare oppose her, he can't stay in the town twenty-

four hours, any more than if he had committed a rape."

Frances had been attending school for "some time" when, in February or early March 1860, a Quaker brought four more fugitive slaves to Grinnell. All four fugitives were "finely built, big men" in their early to mid-twenties. They decided to remain in Grinnell temporarily, as two hoped to return south to free their families. Various Grinnell families boarded the fugitives and offered them work. The fugitives wanted to learn to read and asked if they could go to school. Some of the villagers encouraged them, and the blacks began to attend.

While the black girl, Frances Overton, had been able to attend school unhindered, the enrollment of four black men aroused immediate and angry resistance. The resistance was led by Captain Clark, whom we met earlier, and by Samuel "Scotch" Cooper, a grocer and farmer who became Grinnell's first mayor in 1865. (Scotch Cooper is not to be confused with Samuel F. Cooper, the abolitionist editor.) Captain Clark and Scotch Cooper both had daughters in the Grinnell public school in 1860. Clark had four daughters in the school, who ranged in age from nine to fifteen years, and Cooper had three, aged five, eight, and

A *Harper's Weekly* portrayal of abolitionists in council, May 1859 (location of council unknown). In the village of Grinnell, despite founders' efforts to create a community bound by common ideals, the issue of racial equality sharply divided the citizenry. Enrolling four fugitive male slaves in the public school was the spark that ignited the argument into riot.



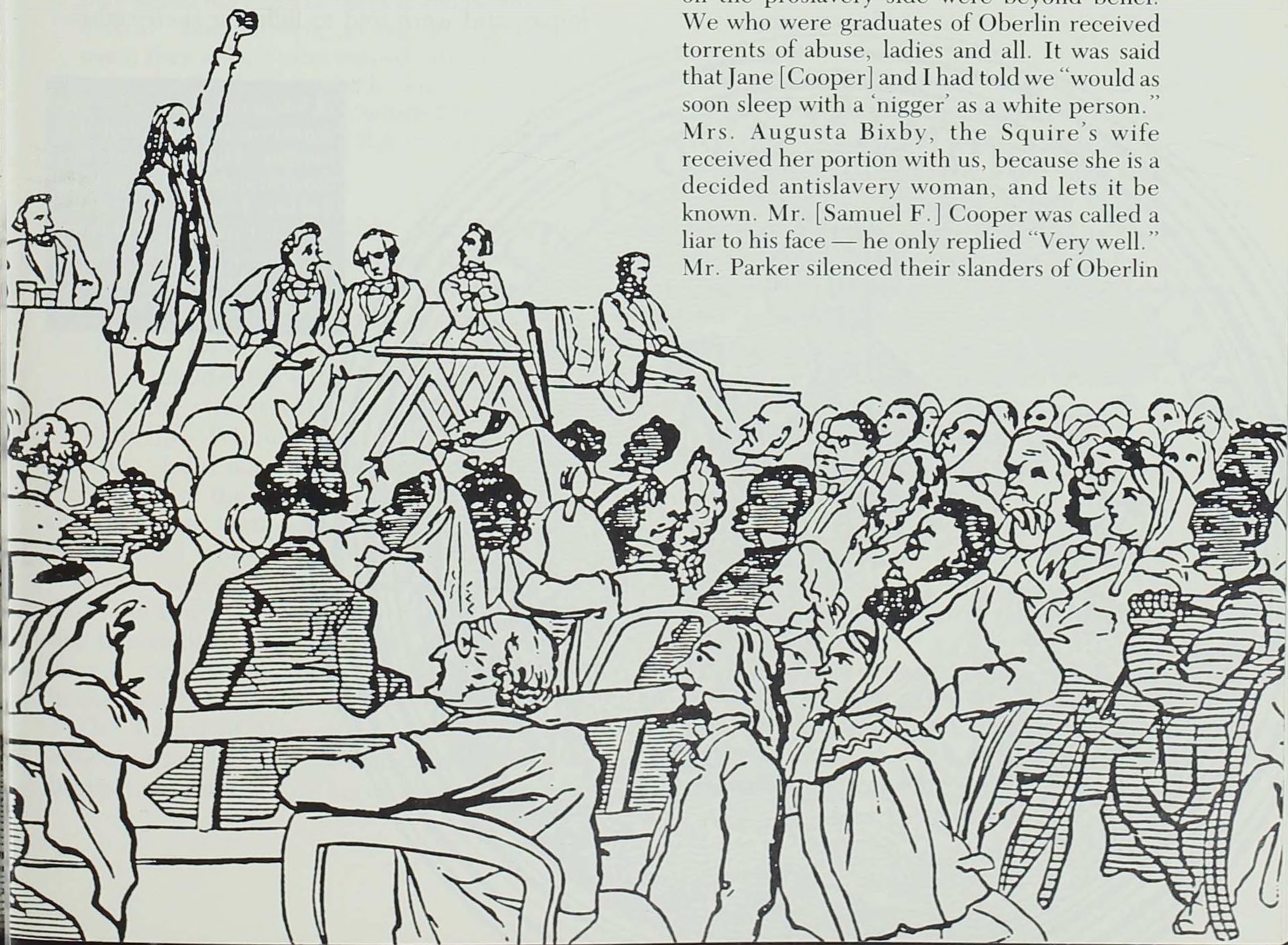
ten. Clark and Cooper saw the black men as a sexual threat to their girls. They declared, one villager recalled, that "their daughters should not sit with the niggers."

Tensions mounted between the abolitionists and their opponents. Leonard Parker recalled that "the niggers must go," had trembled angrily on the air. "The negroes may remain," had been breathed from Puritan thought and purpose." Both sides turned out in force at the annual school meeting on the evening of Monday, March 12, 1860. Avoiding the racial issue at first, one of the anti-abolitionists moved that "foreign students" (that is, students from outside the village) no longer be admitted to the school. (The school served as the preparatory department of Iowa College and so had attracted students from other counties.) Leonard Parker sprang to his feet and argued that the effect of the motion would be to deprive the school of several hundred dollars a year in tuition paid by the foreign students. Some classes in the school contained only one

Grinnell native, and might therefore have to be cancelled. Faced with these facts, even the anti-abolitionists could not support the motion, and it was defeated.

The mover then broached the real issue. "But we didn't say exactly what we wanted," he protested, "We want to exclude the niggers." A motion was made to that effect and "the feeling on both sides was intense." The motion was defeated by five votes out of a total of about fifty. The anti-abolitionists demanded a second vote, and the motion was defeated again, this time by eight votes. The frustrated anti-abolitionists then exploded, unleashing a flood of insults at the abolitionists. Sarah Parker described the scene in a letter to her mother:

One man arose in a frenzy of passion, exclaiming, "They *shall never enter those doors* unless over my dead body." Another says — "I go with you." — and still others said the same, telling the antislavery men they must come prepared to defend them if they sent the negroes on. The proceedings of the meeting on the proslavery side were beyond belief. We who were graduates of Oberlin received torrents of abuse, ladies and all. It was said that Jane [Cooper] and I had told we "would as soon sleep with a 'nigger' as a white person." Mrs. Augusta Bixby, the Squire's wife received her portion with us, because she is a decided antislavery woman, and lets it be known. Mr. [Samuel F.] Cooper was called a liar to his face — he only replied "Very well." Mr. Parker silenced their slanders of Oberlin



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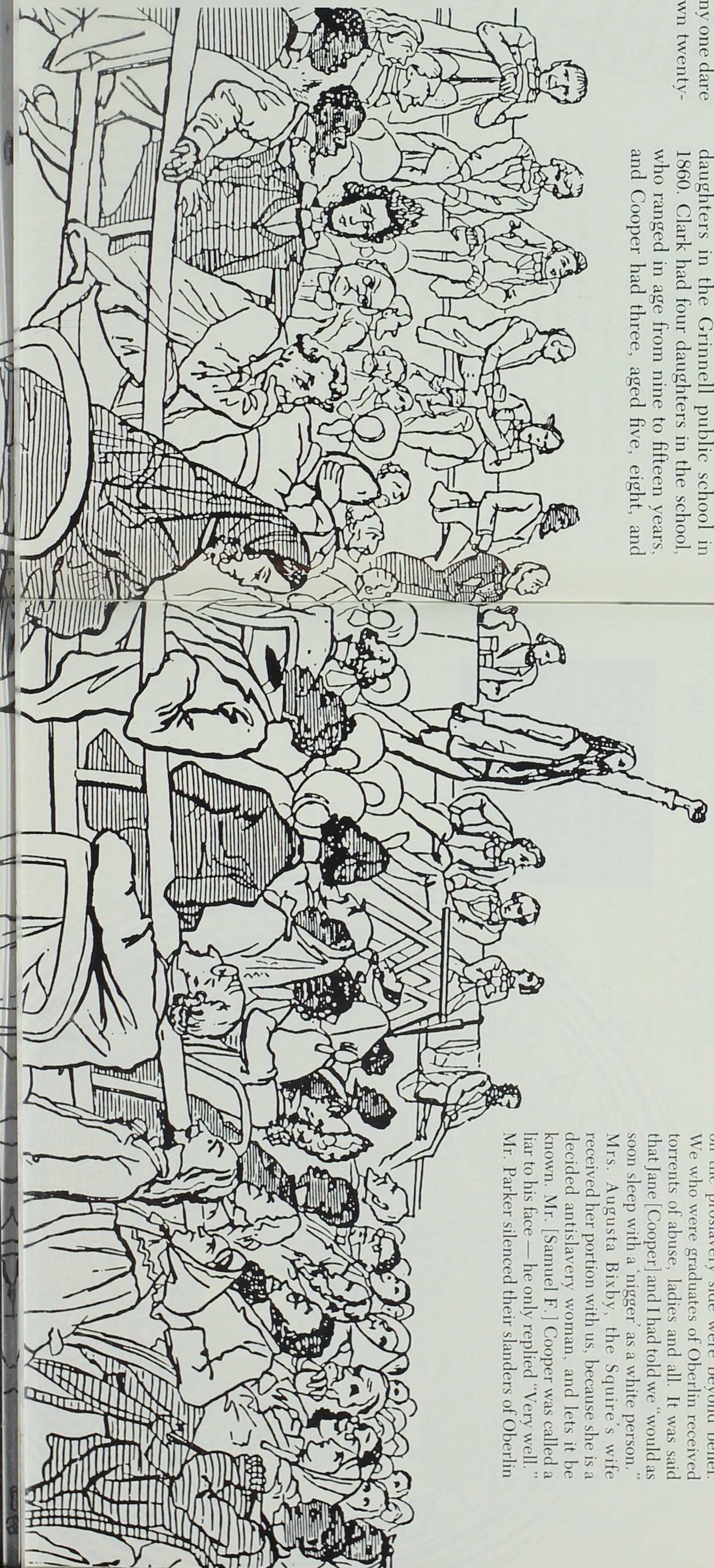
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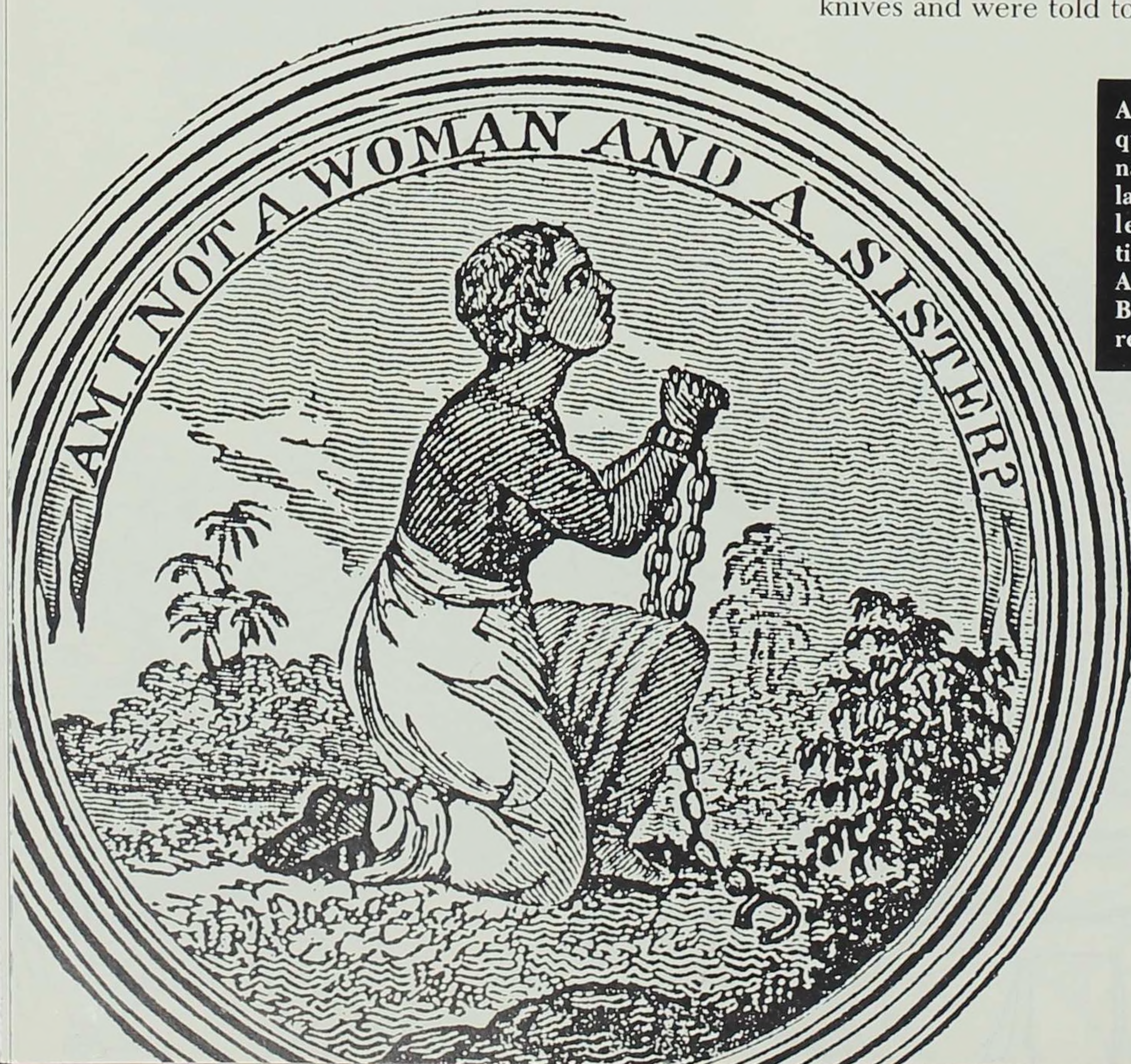
by giving them the facts. It was feared the meeting would not end without fighting — but it did.

Anxieties about miscegenation had surfaced again. In their crude attack on Sarah Parker and Jane Cooper (Samuel F. Cooper's wife), the anti-abolitionists revealed their refusal (or inability) to distinguish between black equality and miscegenation. In their view, anyone who favored school integration must also favor miscegenation.

After the stormy meeting, some of the villagers armed themselves with pistols, knives, and clubs. Leonard Parker expected violence. He later wrote that "there were determined men on both sides, men, too, who had been not unfamiliar with scenes of violence, men whose muscles and weapons were as plucky as their words." Early the next morning Parker went to the schoolhouse carrying a stout oak club selected from his woodpile. Between eight and nine A.M., a mob, led by Captain Clark and

Scotch Cooper, arrived at the school. The blacks had not yet come, and Parker himself confronted Clark and Cooper when they entered the building. The two announced that they had "come to put those niggers out of school." Parker replied that he would defend all of the students against attack. Clark and Cooper demanded, "Do you mean you will fight for the niggers?" Parker answered, "I mean what I say. I shall defend every student who has a right to be here against every assailant." Clark and Cooper then withdrew to intercept the blacks before they reached the school. A crowd of armed and excited citizens gathered. A young witness later remembered that "those in favor of the negroes attending school were in the majority but a large and determined party made up the other side."

Meanwhile Amos Bixby's brother, Amasa G. "California" Bixby, armed the blacks and sharpened a knife for his own use. One villager remembered seeing the blacks in front of a store near the school: "These negroes were lined up and were armed with revolvers and knives and were told to fight for their rights."



A chained slave asks the question that divided the nation. This emblem (enlarged) appeared on an 1841 letter from Congregationalist minister Ephraim Adams, part of the Iowa Band, who preached social reform.

The blacks then started across the churchyard adjoining the school "with loaded revolvers in their pockets." There they were met by the crowd. One of the blacks climbed onto a pile of lumber and told the crowd that he and the other fugitives were ready to die right there if they could not be free. According to Leonard Parker, "the danger of bloodshed was extreme."

Bloodshed was averted, however, when the blacks were persuaded to withdraw by their friends in the crowd. Sarah Parker described the scene in a letter to her mother:

As the blacks approached, the leaders of the mob went to the schoolhouse steps with clubs, and it is supposed, concealed weapons. By much persuasion, the negroes were prevented from attempting to meet them, but it was their preference to fight their way through. They would probably have killed the leaders. Then the mob called on the officers to disarm [the blacks], but they would not, for [the blacks'] lives had been threatened and they would not deprive them of the means of defense. Riot ran wild in our streets until noon, then a short calm ensued. Meetings for counsel were held on both sides — secret meetings by the mob, in which Mr. Parker and the negroes were the objects on which to vent their wrath.

The next day, Wednesday, March 14, the anti-abolitionists again took to the streets. Sarah Parker wrote to her mother that "Wednesday forenoon was as exciting as the day before. Desperate deeds were meditated — men maddened with hate and rage ran through the streets with insulting words ever on their lips. When I bade my husband good morning, I did not know but he would be the first victim of the fury. . . . But we all live — though knives were whetted for hand to hand encounters, guns loaded and pistols made ready." A week later, on March 22, she wrote that "the town is not settled yet." She feared that the conflict would split the Congregational church, since several of its members had been in the mob.

The Board of Directors of the Grinnell School District closed the school when the riot broke out, ending the term about ten days

early. The four elected members of the school board met on Saturday, March 17, and instituted a set of rules that were obviously intended to make it more difficult for fugitive slaves to enroll in the future. Under the new rules, students over the age of twenty-one and students from outside the township were to apply for admission to the secretary of the board. They were also required to pay half of their tuition in advance. Fugitive slaves, of course, were unlikely to arrive in Grinnell with tuition money in their pockets. And even if the abolitionists were willing to pay the tuition, the new rules still prevented fugitives from enrolling without the board's consent.

THE ANTI-ABOLITIONISTS had triumphed. When the public school reopened in April, the four black men were still in the Grinnell area, but there was no attempt to enroll them. Instead, Sarah Bixby, Amos Bixby's aunt, opened a separate school for blacks in her home. The expelled blacks attended, as did other fugitive slaves.

But Captain Clark had not finished with the blacks or their abolitionist friends. Signing himself the "Opposition" and "Justitia," he wrote a series of letters to the *Iowa State Journal*, a Democratic newspaper in Des Moines. In these letters Clark revealed all that he knew of the Grinnell abolitionists' participation in the Underground Railroad. In one letter Clark told the *Journal's* readers that at least thirty-seven fugitive slaves had passed through the village during the two years ending in September 1860. According to Amos Bixby, Clark had met with a slave catcher at a stage coach station south of Grinnell and supposedly had written to Frances Overton's master in Missouri. Fearing that Clark's campaign against the fugitives would draw slave catchers to Grinnell, the abolitionists sent Frances and the four male fugitives out of the village for their own safety.

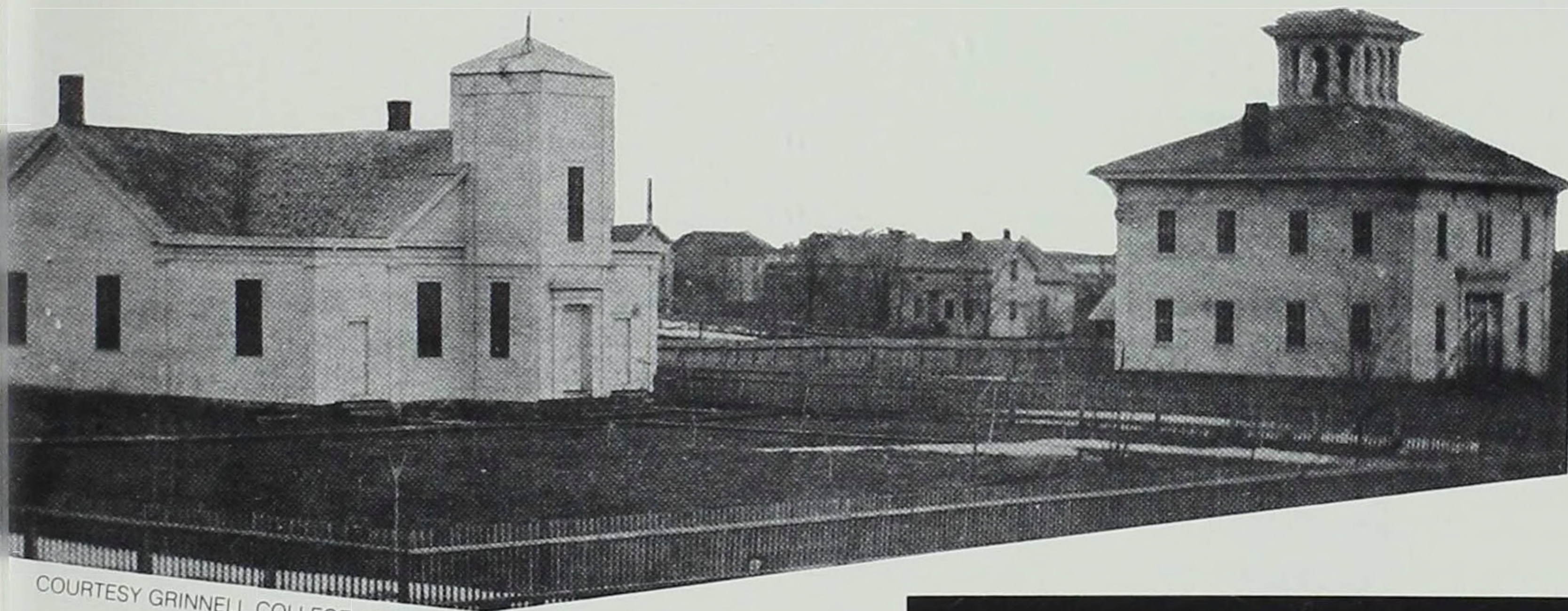
The controversy over school integration continued to have repercussions in the Grinnell area during the Civil War. On January 17, 1863, shortly after the Emancipation Proclamation, a group of Democrats from northern

Leonard F. and Sarah Parker. Leonard was the teacher at the public school where the blacks were enrolled. Sarah recorded the tense events following the explosive March 12 school meeting in letters to her mother (shown in background).

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 the proslavery side were beyond belief. We, who
 received torrents of abuse, rods and all.

Poweshiek County (which includes Grinnell) met to declare their determination to keep blacks out of that part of the county. Among the resolutions adopted by the meeting was one that addressed the school integration issue: "Resolved, That, on account of the respect and affection we have for our wives, sisters, and daughters, we will resist all schemes, let them come from what source they may, to fill our schools and domestic circles with the African race." Evidently they also interpreted integration of schools as a threat to white females.

Like many Americans of their day, anti-abolitionists in Grinnell had equated freedom for black people with miscegenation. As Leonard Parker, the Bixbys, Samuel F. Cooper, and J. B. Grinnell discovered, this fear of miscegenation was a major obstacle to black equality in Iowa and in the North in 1860. □



COURTESY GRINNELL COLLEGE ARCHIVES

In the churchyard of the Old Congregational Church the crowd confronted the black students on March 13. The public school is on the right.

NOTE ON SOURCES

The author thanks Christopher McKee, Randolph Roth, and Wade Thompson for comments on earlier drafts. Primary sources in the Grinnell College Archives include manuscripts by Leonard F. Parker, Jesse Macy, and David S. Morrison, and letters from Amos Bixby to Parker. Special Collections at SHSI (Iowa City) hold the Leonard F. Parker Papers (including Sarah Parker's letters to her mother) and an undated manuscript, "Colonel Samuel Freeman Cooper." Montezuma and Des Moines newspapers, largely from 1856 through 1863, provided much material. Major sources on Grinnell in the 1850s and 1860s include Josiah Bus[h]nell Grinnell, *Men and Events of Forty Years: Autobiographical Reminiscences of an Active Career from 1850 to 1890* (Boston, 1891); *Proceedings of the Old Settlers' Association of Grinnell, Iowa: Annual Meetings, 1896-1901*; Leonard F. Parker, *History of Poweshiek County, Iowa* (Chicago, 1911); and Joanna Harris Haines, "Seventy Years in Iowa," *Annals of Iowa*, 27 (Oct. 1945). Other sources include Henry M. Hamilton, *A Historical Sketch: A Chapter in the Early History of Grinnell by One of its Founders* (Grinnell, 1892); Grinnell school board records from 1860; Henry M. Gleason, *Reminiscences of Henry M. Gleason*. . . (Berkeley, 1961); Richard Lingeman, *Small Town America: A Narrative History, 1620-the Present* (New York, 1980); Page Smith, *As a City Upon a Hill: The Town in American History* (New York, 1966); and the secondary sources listed in "For Further Reading." Origins of Grinnell settlers were gleaned from the 1860 federal census, proceedings of the Old Settlers' Association, and the *Grinnell Herald*. The title of this article, "Men were too fiery for much talk," is taken from a Parker manuscript. An annotated version of this article is on file in Special Collections, SHSI (Iowa City).

FOR FURTHER READING

For a broader understanding of the issues of abolition, slavery, and miscegenation in American history, consult this reading list.

Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana, 1967).

Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York, 1970).

Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968).

Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago, 1961).

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