Critics of the Status Quo

Such are the modernists who abuse the three learned professions. They attack the law by codification. The pulpit, by not going to church, and medicine by steam. They don’t profess any thing but the greatest philanthropy, and a desire to see the human race emancipated. They abandon themselves to prediction. They catch at every project which seems new. They are like the camelion, changing color every moment, but not like it, deriving their shade from the colors around for they are sure to oppose every thing they find established. I will not say that such men ought to be put to death, but I will say that the world would be better without them—Utilitarian Democrats, infidels, nullifiers, Steam Doctors, abolitionists and all.

*Cincinnati Chronicle and Literary Gazette* (1833)

Like most Americans of their day, the political down-to-earth citizens of Cincinnati were quite satisfied with the world as they found it. They lived in a country which seemed to them the freest and happiest in the world, and they championed its social and political institutions with a truculence and fervor that both angered and amused their European critics. The disapprobation of foreigners was ascribed to stupidity, malice, or envy. Although not entirely blind to the imperfections of their city, they never questioned the certainty of its ultimate greatness.

Such a people, working with that admirable doggedness and intelligence which almost amounted “to a species of heroism,” would not be likely to warm up to the visionary schemes of utopian social theorists. The events of the preceding decades had only confirmed their faith in material prosperity, organized religion, private property, and the home. Wrapped in his daily affairs and schooled to accept the ideas and prejudices of the majority, the
citizen was usually content to abide by that omniscient and omnipotent power, public opinion. Opinions died slowly in America. Few people in Cincinnati cared to risk their reputations in overt attacks against even the ghosts of the old ideas which had long since lost their validity for the majority. According to Tocqueville, "this empty phantom of public opinion" was "strong enough to chill innovators, and to keep them silent and at a respectful distance." The citizen's attachment to security and property, together with his reverence for prehensile ideas, made him distrust untested theories and sometimes encouraged him to repress those reforms, however necessary, which violated the sacred assumptions of the status quo.

During this period of optimism and dynamic change, when the country was expanding with such celerity and anticipation barely outstripped achievement, conservative ideas and established opinion universally prevailed. Not that minds were stagnant, but most of the restless thinkers concerned themselves with the infinite variations of the known and the accepted rather than with revolutionary principles. Their criticism of religion, philosophy, morality, and politics was of the constructive kind, its purpose to strengthen and perfect the social foundations rather than to undermine them. The dry goods merchant protesting against price fixing and recommending uniform business codes, the debtor protesting against imprisonment for debt, the editor advocating a more ethical conduct for business—such men could not be called radical reformers in the real sense of that term, because their proposals in no way interfered with the basic economic and social framework of society.

Malcontents who aimed to subvert the divine order, the agrarians, the Tom Paine men, the crazy disciples of "Owenism" and "Fanny Wrightism," found little support among the bulk of Cincinnati's population during the twenties and thirties, although one might have suspected from the dire predictions and warnings of the secular and religious press that revolution was imminent. Cincinnati conservatives, apprehensive lest an "enlightened people" turn into an unruly mob, sought to expose those hidden agencies which, under the banner of egalitarianism, would deprive the undiscerning common man of his fundamental liberties. The Jacksonian revolution, to the Whig mind, threatened the country because the "mobility," hoodwinked by a

2. Cincinnati Gazette, Dec. 8, 12, 1836.
3. Liberty Hall and Cincinnati Gazette, Sept. 8, 1821; Feb. 13, 1824.
demagogue, preferred a surface and specious equality to their constitutional rights. Jackson might satisfy their egos, but he would ultimately enslave them. This kind of hysteria had always characterized the Federalist-Whig utterances since the days when the ideas of Thomas Jefferson haunted the principled and the propertied.

As Tocqueville observed, rich Americans dressed like their inferiors, acted like their fellow citizens, participated in municipal affairs, and avoided ostentatious expenditures at the same time that they piled up fortunes, controlled banks, seized the choicest real estate, and cemented property rights into the laws of the land. The majority, absorbed in the dream of equality, emulated the successful. Only when the acquisition of wealth seemed to set up class barriers did class hatreds develop. The rich were not asked to sacrifice their money, only their pride. Most Americans regarded radical notions with repugnance because of their “love of well-being,” their distaste for any system that might call for a redistributing of their hard-earned property. “Intoxicated by the small enjoyments” and pursuing a kind of “virtuous materialism,” they saw nothing incongruous in the amassing of wealth by an Astor or a Longworth so long as it was done legally and unostentatiously. Nicholas Longworth, canny, realistic, and homely, could in no sense be called an aristocrat. In appearance he might have been a grubby and impecunious western lawyer instead of one of the richest men in the United States.

The rich and the virtuous never tried to accentuate their prosperity or stand aloof from the crowd, and only when the wrong principles seemed to jeopardize their stake in society did they harp on political obligations and the necessity of political integrity. When “King Andrew” ruled the land, they attributed business depressions to the luxurious habits of the masses and to the monster in the White House. With safe men at the helm, their apprehensions for the nation’s safety disappeared, for a government of their own choice allowed them to get what they wanted and to enjoy their possessions in peace.

The “reformers” who most vehemently questioned established principles were regarded at best as deluded visionaries and at worst as vicious criminals. Some were the cynical grumblers “liable to the chilling influences of withering misanthropy”; others were the perfectionists who cherished ideas

“incompatible with the real condition of man.” Reformers of the lunatic fringe, the “nostrum vendors,” attacked private property and attributed man’s condition to environment. They established “Time” stores, railed against marriage, encouraged divorce, and scoffed at the Bible.

Heaven save us [wrote one eloquent conservative] from such inquiries as they make, asking whether the Union is of any value, whether slaves belong to their owners, whether the Bible is a good book, whether the constitution is in existence, whether a classical education is desirable. . . . The order of things may have a thousand defects in it, but it is a pool which must be troubled by an angel and not by poor diseased wretch himself. I have no patience with that sort of impudence.

The men and women who sought to crack the cornerstones of the state: private property, the home, and the church; who imputed social evils to environment rather than to the human heart; and who supported organizations of laborers—these were the reformers, or, in the aggregate, what John P. Foote called the wicked sorcerers. These were the people who raised “the demons of lawless passion” and loosed “from the restraints of religion and the laws, all the inordinate desires and intemperate appetites of a whole people.” A small number of unimfluential but articulate “sorcerers” in Cincinnati conjured demons with the magic catchwords “Love the people” and “Liberty and Equality.” When the stand-patter quoted, “Order is Heaven’s first law; some must be better than the rest,” the radicals replied that the order of Heaven could be realized only when mankind, “untrammled by superstition, and uninfluenced by belief without knowledge,” can act rationally in conformity to nature’s laws. Stability in itself was not a virtue, declared a liberal in 1819.

All human institutions are necessarily imperfect. From various causes, great and frequent changes take place in the population, manners, commerce and revenue of a country which require correspondent alterations in its constitution and laws. A pertinacious adherence to old establishments, which have become useless or defective, is no evidence of patriotism. Yet

some minds cherish a superstitious dread of innovation, and prefer the endurance of every evil, rather than to encounter the apprehended dangers of experiments. This is always a lion in the way. This vague and indefinite dread of innovation, will, I fear, too often be found to originate in distrust of the capacity of the people for self-government.\textsuperscript{9}

The reformers and radicals who will be discussed in the following pages had no such reservations about the capacities of the people. Alarmed by the inequalities which already marred the youthful republic, they advocated revolutionary proposals which they hoped would return to the people their lost birthright. Nothing short of a complete reorientation in social and economic thinking would satisfy them. Filled with the significance of their mission, they lectured to skeptical audiences and conducted short-lived community experiments until their bored, disillusioned, or offended disciples deserted them. The programs of Robert Owen and Frances Wright horrified respectable Cincinnatians and provided Cincinnati ministers with themes for a thousand sermons. Although the ideas of these twin devils and others like them constituted a less-immediate threat to the economic interests of the employing classes than trade unions, the bland Mr. Owen and the "unsexed" Frances Wright became symbols of everything profane and disruptive in American life.

In one sense, the moral watchdogs of Cincinnati acted quite logically in lumping together, however indiscriminately, abolitionists, socialists, trade unionists, freethinkers, and radical Jacksonians. For all of those dissenters caught a glimpse of the reality behind the appearances and were not beguiled by the myth of economic equality. To them the principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence were not "glittering generalities" or goals impossible to approximate but a practical code for the good society. It was not by accident that James Birney, the hated abolitionist "incendiary," denounced as a relic of slavery any law that "punishes men as criminals for peaceably demanding higher wages than they have been accustomed to receive."\textsuperscript{10} Nor was it coincidental that at about the same time, Moses Dawson, the fiery Jacksonian editor, sarcastically pointed out the paradox of men being punished for what their so-called betters could do with impunity. "It is only corporations who may combine," he wrote, "and charge such prices as they may deem necessary and proper." The poor mechanic can go to bed hungry

\textsuperscript{9} LHCG, Sept. 7, 1819.
\textsuperscript{10} Philanthropist, July 1, 1836.
so long as "rich men are made richer, and poor men are only reduced to starvation." These dissidents, in short, saw more keenly than did the majority of their contemporaries the implications of an economic system which already differentiated employer from employee, class from class.

The reformers made little headway during the disorders of the twenties and thirties, but their importance does not lie in what they accomplished or the influence they had on their generation. We know that society did not follow their leadership, but this very lack of success tells us a great deal about the society which rejected them.

New Harmony, the seat of "enlightened atheism" where Robert Owen conducted his notorious and shortlived socialist experiment (1825–29), was close enough to Cincinnati to arouse considerable interest among the traders of the Queen City. Owen’s religious views, as we have already seen, had shocked orthodox churchgoers in Cincinnati, but his theories on property and the distribution of wealth struck at the very roots of a commercial civilization. New Harmony was organized expressly to do away with the class of middlemen who at this time dominated western economy: the wholesalers and the large retailers. In attacking the trading system, Owen challenged the occupations of the most powerful group of businessmen in Cincinnati.

Owen’s schemes of community living at first attracted wide and not unsympathetic interest, but his experiment quickly fell into disrepute. It had been thought that his colony might do much to lessen the privations usually experienced by first settlers, that it might even accomplish the highly desirable fusion of agriculture and manufacturing. He had come to the United States with the reputation of being a successful businessman as well as philanthropist. But men wondered even in 1825 whether New Harmony could "keep alive that spirit of liberty and self respect for one’s own opinion, that so peculiarly belongs to the American people." A reflection which appeared in *Niles’ Weekly Register* the next year was prophetic:

> We do not think that the genius and character of our people are adapted to the perfection of Mr. Owen’s plan. We are full of enterprize and fond of exertion, and each one is anxious to act for himself and acquire something that shall be his own, not liking a state of dependence on others, further than is indispensable to his own personal safety.\(^{12}\)

11. Cincinnati Advertiser and Ohio Phoenix, June 22, 1836.
With the publication in 1827 of Paul Brown’s sensational _Two Months in New Harmony_, the floodgates were loosened, and Cincinnati citizens, acutely conscious of the goings on down the river, turned their attention to “Owen” and his “new views.”

The contentions of Owen that environment determined human character, that the evils of mankind resulted from the institution of private property, and that a new propertyless community would make man virtuous never sat well with the Cincinnati orthodoxy. His disrespect for the “sacred marital relations” seemed especially offensive to the possessive and monogamous citizens, and they regarded Owen’s failure as good evidence of the speciousness of his doctrines. “Like all other efforts which strike at the foundations of settled order of society,” a Cincinnati editor declared, “his visionary schemes will soon be covered with the pall of oblivion.”

Timothy Flint, less hidebound than the majority of his fellow citizens, had little to say in favor of Owen’s system, but unlike his prejudiced colleagues, he recognized Owen as a fair and tolerant, if misguided, enthusiast. Moreover, he was astute enough to see the charm of New Harmony and its appeal for certain groups of jaded and disappointed westerners. Whom did New Harmony attract? he asked.

The indolent, the unprincipled, men of desperate fortunes, moon worshippers, romantic young men, Wolstonecraftian [sic] ladies, the more free thinking of the has beens, those who had dreamed about the early Elysiums, a great many honest aspirants after a better order of things, poor men simply desiring an education for their children, a great many people who suffered from ennui, without knowing the term, and who were weary of the dull, hum drum, and lonely way of getting along in common life, in regions where balls were rare occurrences, like “angel visits few and far between,” all such felt strong hankerings after a place, where they expected to feed full, without care or trouble, and dance one evening, and sing another in every week.

Perhaps the same urges drove yearning Cincinnatians who did not join the New Harmony venture to establish their own communistic society in Yellow Springs in the summer of 1825. Whether the founders were bored with Porkopolis or whether they wished to test “the practical effects of the New

System” in beautiful Yellow Springs is not certain. Nor is very much known about the Yellow Springs experiment, which broke up after three months. From accounts in the press, one gets the impression that Yellow Springs and Owenite protagonists quarreled over the merits of the rival systems, the latter group apparently angry at the Yellow Springs revisionists for tampering with and modifying the principles of the Master. The brevity of the experiment indicates that not enough candidates applied to work in the seven-hundred-acre community, although other obscure reasons probably help to explain its swift collapse.

After the breaking up of the Owenite experiments, what one correspondent referred to as the “ephemeral popularity of Mr. Owen and his theories” lingered only as an unpleasant memory in the minds of respectable citizens, but his dream did not die. A few years after the New Harmony fiasco one Owenite disciple tried to set up his own little utopia in the marketplace of the hog merchants. This was Josiah Warren, known as the first American philosophical anarchist and inventor of a speed printing press, a musician and reformer, and founder of a bucolic colony on Long Island called Modern Times. Warren had left Boston for Cincinnati about the year 1818, where he first made a living as a teacher of music. His first invention, a lard-burning lamp, which he patented in 1823, proved financially successful, and he seemed to be following the conventional success pattern until Robert Owen’s visit to Cincinnati in 1825. Convinced by the plausible Owen and charmed by the prospects of New Harmony, Warren sold his business. Two years later, still serene and optimistic, he returned to Cincinnati and set up his first “Equity Store” on the corner of Fifth and Elm.

Unlike Owen, Warren placed great emphasis on individuality and personal initiative, and he intended his “Equity” or “Time” stores to be individual enterprises. He had derived the idea for this kind of store from Robert Owen’s theory of “labor notes,” although Warren was the first man to put the idea into practice. Warren priced the articles in his store by the amount of time their production entailed. All goods were marked with the cost price,
plus a percentage to cover freight, shrinkage, and rent. The *Western Tiller* gives the following example of how the system worked.\(^{20}\) A mechanic, making about 12½ cents an hour, spends $1.52½ for some articles which would ordinarily cost him $2.62. The keeper of the Time Store, taking twenty minutes to sell the articles, thereby earns twenty minutes of the mechanic’s time and receives a labor note or IOU for twenty minutes. Now the buyer can either pay the cost price in cash, take away an equitable exchange of goods,\(^ {21}\) or exchange his own goods for Warren’s labor notes. To prevent a glut of unsalable commodities, Warren wisely decided to accept only those articles from his depositors which were in demand. Owen’s failure to follow Warren’s policy had helped to bring about the collapse of his London Exchange.

Not surprisingly, Warren’s scheme drew fire from businessmen who did not like to see the middleman’s profit disappear, yet for two years his Time Store (which also functioned as a bank and labor bureau) achieved considerable popularity. Moncure Daniel Conway, who later visited Warren at the Modern Times Community, records that rival storekeepers drove Warren out of Cincinnati by circulating rumors about his selling damaged stock.\(^ {22}\) His biographer, however, believes that Warren left the city to carry out his schemes in a locality not yet monopolized by land speculators. Warren had rented valuable Cincinnati property from Nicholas Longworth on a ninety-nine-year lease. Had he held on to it, he would have become immensely wealthy, but he disapproved of the landowner’s unearned increment and gave up his lease.

Warren’s activities in New York and his connections with Frances Wright and Robert Owen cannot be discussed here, nor is there room to describe his subsequent career in Cincinnati.\(^ {23}\) But something should be said about the series of eight articles he wrote for the *Western Tiller*: “To the Friends of the Social System. . . .” In those essays “By a Member Late of New Harmony,” Warren argued that all men are “creatures of surrounding circumstances”\(^ {24}\) and declared that only in a pleasant environment could the individual fulfill his chief desire, to be happy. If the individual controlled the causes which produced his happiness, if he moved about in perfect freedom,

\(^{20}\) *Western Tiller*, Sept. 28, 1827.
\(^{22}\) Moncure Daniel Conway, *Autobiography Memories and Experiences of Moncure Daniel Conway* (Boston, 1905), I, 266.
\(^{24}\) *WT*, June 1, 1827.
neither interfering with the pleasures of others nor suffering intrusions from the outside, then life became ordered, controversies ceased, and human misery ended. By helping others, the individual worked to his own advantage, since contending associates would be less inclined to interfere with his own interests. A world of absolute precepts and laws indicated a general sense of insecurity; cooperative living, Warren thought, might alleviate fear by developing a more intelligent and equitable social system permitting harmonious individual expression. Finally, a progressive system of education, based on Maclure’s educational theories and relating subject matter to the personal needs and desires of the students, would teach the incipient citizen that peace of mind can be obtained only by removing the sources of unpleasant sensations and aiding his fellow men.

Warren’s theorizings might have been written in Chinese for all the influence they had on the people, but in spite of his revolutionary theories this amiable man was not unpopular in Cincinnati. He played funeral marches for the Masonic corteges. He printed and distributed leaflets bearing directions for the care of cholera victims during the 1832 epidemic. Even if his ideas were subversive, he advocated a peaceful revolution and never employed the sensational tactics of the friends of Tom Paine and the adherents of Frances Wright. Warren, at least, did not shout his reprehensible heresies from the housetops.

It had reached a sorry pass for many staid citizens when the “Friends of the Rights of Man and American Independence” celebrated the “Anniversary of the birthday of that champion of Equal Rights, Thomas Paine, by a Supper and Ball.” To have Frances Wright reiterating Paine’s “infatuated conceptions” was adding a crowning touch to the infamous proceedings, for this obnoxious woman had plagued the decent people of the city since 1828, when she had preached her views on racial intermarriage to Cincinnati audiences. “Her’s is not the eloquence, nor the advice of wisdom,” reported “Oliver Oldschool” at this time, “but the siren song that lures and deceives the more it charms.” Cincinnati editors followed her lecture tour through Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York with undisguised horror and pictured her as a wild woman whose sole aim was to destroy home and religion. The sentencing of a bigamist to six years in the penitentiary immediately

25. Ibid., June 8, 22, 29, 1827; July 6, 1827.
made this "consummate villain" (with two wives in Pennsylvania and one in Cincinnati) one of Miss Wright's "accomplished disciples"; and the granting of nine divorces by the state legislature was somehow ascribed to her infamous teachings.

It was not simply the heresies preached by Frances Wright, heresies which provoked "the spirit of misrule now so alarmingly prevalent," that shocked her critics in Cincinnati, but the fact that a woman had so degraded her sex. A genteel female of the Queen City summed up the full extent of Frances Wright's wickedness in an eloquent denunciation entitled "What a Woman Has Done."

With a brain from Heaven and a heart from Hell, she has employed all the powers in her intellect, in removing the ancient land-marks of mortal and social order, and in diffusing the worst principles of the French Revolution through this land of the Puritan Fathers. [Her satanic policy] opens a flood-gate to every species of licentiousness, and by a refinement of wickedness which puts papacy to the blush, upholds the very incarnation of impurity. . . . Many a happy home has been rendered a moral desert by the trace of her foot-steps, many a parent worse than childless and many a wife more desolate than a widow. . . . I have sketched but a faint outline of what a woman has done. To fill up the picture, I must borrow a pencil dipt in the Cimmerian darkness which shrouds the horrors of the lower world.

When a man becomes an infidel, declared a female correspondent, we mourn his weaknesses of understanding or perverted intellect.

But when woman—whose breast should be the seat of every soft emotion and virtuous principle, who should be distinguished for her retiring modesty and gentleness of spirit; and most of all, for her ardent attachment to Christianity, when she so far forgets the modesty and dignity of the female character, and her proper station in society, as to publicly proclaim herself the advocate of infidelity, our compassion for her is not unmingled with disgust. There is something so revolting in the thought that woman should renounce her Maker, and set at nought his authority, that it fills every pious mind with horror. We are forced to the conclusion, that in such a heart there must not only be a fearful departure from religious principles, but an insensibility to all the soft and lovely sympathies of our nature. It must in-

29. CCLG, Jan. 24, 1829; Mar. 13, 1830.
30. CC, Jan. 13, 1838.
31. Ibid.
deed be a "moral waste," in which we fear the lovely flowers of piety and virtue may never again bloom and emit their sweet fragrance.32

Although many of her detractors fumed in the columns of the Cincinnati press, Fanny Wright did not lack forthright defenders. Their utterances, while sometimes "too coarse in style, and too gross in sentiment" to appear in print, make it clear that she enjoyed a certain popularity in the city among a select circle of freethinkers. Give us some facts, demanded a self-styled mechanic. Has it been proved that Frances Wright inspired mobs? On the contrary, free enquirers are the ones who aremobbed! The French Revolution, like our own, was a struggle for freedom. Aristocrats had themselves to blame for its excesses! What mischief has Frances Wright provoked? the mechanic asked. What homes has she destroyed?

How many "infidels" are there in our state prison? Are all the persons executed infidels or believers in Christianity? How quick would you noise it, could you find one sceptic or infidel among them? Were not the pilgrims, who fled to this country from persecution, the purest sample of Christianity? And did they not persecute, burn and hang, in their turn when they had the power? . . . What was Miller, who, a few years ago, caged up his children, for fear when they grew to maturity, they might sin and go to hell? . . . The time has now arrived, when people are no longer frightened by the words "infidel, heretic," &c. You will see these horrible beings now every where, in broad day—almost your every other door neighbor, of every station in life, among our best and intelligent citizens. You are two hundred years before the age. We are approaching more towards the age of reason. Men would be more convinced by one good reason, than a thousand dogmas.33

Freethinkers in Cincinnati were neither so common nor so respectable as the defender of Frances Wright maintained, but enough people were impressed by her eloquence, knowledge, or reputation to hear her speeches. Her discussions of the relation of American geography to American institutions and her sketches of the civil history of the United States attracted large crowds in 1836. At this time she delivered her message with the same "high souled enthusiasm and unsurpassing eloquence that characterized her former lectures." In these speeches, if we can rely upon newspaper transcrip-

32. CC, Feb. 10, 1838.
33. Ibid., Jan. 27, Feb. 3, 1838.
tions, Frances Wright turned her “gigantic mind” against Hamiltonians, the moneyed aristocrats plundering the “weak with impunity” and gorging themselves “with the life blood of the American people.” She told how voracious banking corporations were taking control of the economic and social life of the land, where “sages and heroes had labored and bled to establish equal rights.” She told how Jefferson had blocked the schemes of the American monarchists just as Jackson foiled the chartered monopolies, “and when she described the manner in which political gamblers had played with the first office in the world, as with a tennis ball, it had such an effect, I think, as will prevent the like game, from ever being played.”

But even the courageous Frances Wright, cheering for Jackson and denouncing the monopolists and aristocrats who devoured the substance of the people, shied away from the abolition question, the most explosive topic of the year. Charles Hammond said that she was too prudent to discuss it. In any event she got round the difficulty by passing off the slavery issue as “only one of the many evils, imported to us by European influence, and which the institutions and character of the people would eventually throw off.” Moreover, the free states, she told her Cincinnati audiences, should look into the status of the white worker in the northern cotton factories as well as that of the Negro laborer. With the enfranchisement of the white worker, the Negro problem would take care of itself.

Distasteful as these sentiments undoubtedly were to the businessmen of Cincinnati, they nevertheless preferred the ravings of a harum-scarum demagogue to the anti-slavery meetings of pious and fervent abolitionists. Abolitionism by 1836 had become the bête noir of the Cincinnati commercial interests and had exhausted their long-suffering patience. “Commerce,” Tocqueville had written, “is naturally averse to all violent passions; it loves to temporize, takes delight in compromise, and studiously avoids initiative. It is patient, insinuating, flexible, and never has recourse to extreme measures until obliged by the most absolute necessity.” “Absolute necessity” finally forced the hand of Cincinnati’s mercantile aristocracy against the most persistent and fanatical opponents of the established order.

Abolitionists, although particularly unpopular in the Queen City during the thirties, received little sympathy in any other section of the country. Public

34. *CAOP*, May 14, 21, June 4, 1836.
opinion stigmatized them as a band of misguided bigots whose activities, if not checked, would destroy the tottering edifice of the Union. Churches and schools easily defended the American way from either the Jesuitical assaults of the papists or the absurdities of Robert Owen and Fanny Wright; few socialists got any further than explaining their highly theoretical doctrines to mildly curious but inactive audiences. The abolitionists, zealots of another stamp, directly threatened private property and were not amenable to public opinion. Moral considerations, primarily, motivated the abolitionists. They denounced slavery not because it was inefficient or unfair or undemocratic, but because it was sinful. Their moral law convicted the slaveholders or anyone dealing with them. Finally, the abolitionists supported their demands for freedom of speech and freedom of the press with copious quotations from the Bible and the Declaration of Independence. And they could not be discouraged.

Heckling, stoning, tarring and feathering, and lynching occurred throughout the Union during the middle thirties. New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Charleston, Richmond, towns and cities in every section, were swept by plagues of riots and mobbings in defiance, or with the connivance, of the local authorities. Garrison raced through the Boston streets with a gang of businessmen at his heels; George Thompson, the English alien, was howled down and threatened. Such incidents reflected the temper of the times. Thousands of resolutions coming from innumerable committees denounced the incendiary publications of the abolitionists. Some resolutions advocated freedom of opinion and condemned violence while at the same time assuring southern leaders of the fullest cooperation and exoriating foreign abolitionists. The South cried out for penal laws to keep the anti-slavery terrorists under control and threatened sharp economic reprisals if their northern business friends failed to silence them. Religious conventions deprecated attempts to disturb the Bible-ordained relationship of master and slave.38 A bitter congressional debate arose over the question of the government’s right to exclude “seditious” papers from the mails. In short, this was a period of name-calling, fierce recrimination, and violence, a time when the economic, political, social, and religious issues were inextricably fused, and real motives lay hidden behind reams of verbiage.

Southern goodwill, as we have seen, meant a great deal to Cincinnati businessmen. They were anxious to continue and extend commercial relations with the slave-owning planters, and they were not content with the

38. See debate on “Modern Abolitionism” in the General Conference of the Methodist Church, Held in Cincinnati, May, 1836 (Cincinnati, 1836), 11, 81.
mere surface signs of prosperity. True, Cincinnati commercial houses shipped out increasing amounts of flour, pork, whiskey, and corn to the southern markets. Cincinnati artisans, as skillful as any in the country, were producing hardware, farm equipment, furniture, steam engines, castings, and a variety of odds and ends (valued at $4 million annually) for consumers in the Mississippi Valley. But more thoughtful citizens already realized that the advantages Cincinnati derived from her location, backcountry, and proximity to raw materials would not permanently enrich her. Rival cities reaching out for new markets cut into the Queen City’s profits; and as channels opened up eastward, western merchants who formerly purchased their stock in Cincinnati found it easier to do business more directly with the East. Cincinnati’s natural advantage had to be supplemented. The remedy, so many believed, was a vast transportation system linking her with hitherto untapped sections in the South and West, bolstering the uncertain and irregular river and canal traffic with a chain of railroads. Chief link in the new chain would be the Charleston-Cincinnati railroad, a project which, together with the White Water Canal and the Little Miami Railroad, would ensure Cincinnati’s position as “Queen of the Magnificent West,” her dominions extending “without fear of a rival from the cliffs of the Allegheny to the waters of the Missouri.”

Cincinnati’s social and cultural ties with the South, already described, as well as her interest in southern markets, help to explain the anti-abolitionist attitude of at least a part of the people. Her heterogeneous population included a large southern representation. Although no slaves could be owned north of the Ohio, Cincinnati, a border city, revealed certain southern affinities. Indecorous prints and engravings hanging in the Ohio barbershops and coffeehouses, designed “to gratify the perverted taste of the Kentuckians and Virginians,” only illustrated, according to one observer, the force of southern influence. Some of the people, said another, regarded particular occupations as servile and demeaning, as in the South. Shoeblacking or, in some cases, family manufacture and domestic service were not honorable callings; even paupers in the Cincinnati poorhouse could not be prevailed upon to carry water for their own use. Some Negroes probably received worse treatment in Cincinnati than they experienced south of the river.

Merchants, lawyers, and other businessmen of eastern origin, as well as most of the working population, gave no more comfort to the abolitionists than did the southern sympathizers. These men had no love for slavery and privately admitted their displeasure at the brutal injustices inflicted upon the free blacks. But they, too, were supplying Mississippi plantations with Miami Valley produce and selling refining machinery to the Louisiana sugar growers. They profited when the planters and their families spent a few summer months in Cincinnati and purchased all manner of goods in the city shops. Such reasons, as well as distaste for abolitionist fanaticism, induced businessmen who disliked slavery in the abstract to join with the pro-slavery faction in their fight against abolitionism and salve their consciences by boasting of Ohio's free institutions and supporting gradualist schemes such as the Colonization Society. But the Negro's ultimate deliverance, they believed, lay in the hands of a wise Providence. It did no good to stir up bad feeling between mutually dependent states.

The rising specter of state and sectional jealousy in the thirties alarmed Cincinnati's commercial class. Fearful of disunion, they saw the slavery issue as an international plot fomented by European governments to destroy the nation, a plot furthered by the insidious wiles of "abolitionists" and "mobocrats" who preached "the Spirit of domestic insubordination." Others attributed the unrest of the country to

an inherent weakness of the ruling power, to control and regulate the subject or component parts—No government depending on or springing from popular election, can be strong and energetic in times of domestic disquiet—It may show a good front against a common enemy, because the defense unites all—but equally weak against the domestic enemy, as is the numerical strength of the division—and I believe that our government is about being put to a test of its strength—or its power to act upon insurrectionary movements—Tant pis, tant mieux.—Here all is quiet at present, though no one can tell at what moment a flame may burst forth.  

With the welfare of the country and the city at stake, the harmful activities of the anti-slavery enthusiasts could not continue unchecked. All regretted the evils of slavery, but if the Cincinnati-Charleston railroad was to be negotiated

42. When Chancellor Harper's defense of slavery appeared in The Southern Literary Messenger, the Cincinnati Chronicle was particularly incensed against his remarks about free northern labor and repudiated all of his pro-slavery arguments. CC, Oct. 13, 1838.

successfully, southern legislators had to be appeased. Negotiations between West and South required delicate handling; anti-slavery agitation in Cincinnati might prove embarrassing to the commercial emissaries of the Queen City.

No dissenting minority threatened the material well-being of Cincinnati as seriously as the abolitionists. The city had never before faced a problem of this kind; never before had moral and economic issues been so hopelessly entangled. No other radical group had carried on such outrageous activities for such idealistic reasons. Is it any wonder, then, that the leaders of Cincinnati were demoralized?

As early as 1835 the *Daily Cincinnati Republican and Commercial Register*, disturbed by the increase of the abolitionist press in the Miami section, published the first of a series of editorials which were to culminate a year later in violent diatribes and stormings. Shocked at the sight of a well-known Cincinnati printing house spreading anti-slavery pamphlets and irked by the abolitionist sentiments of several respectable citizens, the paper issued the following prophetic warning:

We do not mention this by way of bravado; our object is to appraise those who have so indiscreetly given their countenance and influence to the course of abolition in this city, of the true estate of public sentiment, and to warn them of the consequences which must result from a perseverance in their measures. We do not believe it would be safe for them, or advantageous to the peace of the community, to agitate the public mind upon the subject. We do, therefore, hope that we shall hear no more of the Cincinnati Anti-Slavery Society. The southern feeling is too strong in this city; the interests of her merchants, her capitalists, and her tradesmen, are too deeply interwoven with the Southern country; commercial and social intercourse between her citizens and the citizens of the South-Western states are too intimate to admit the successful operations of a Society tending to separate the ties which connect the city with those States, and withdraw from her their confidence and trade.44

That Cincinnati merchants and capitalists knew their interests and guarded them vigilantly had been convincingly demonstrated in 1834, when the trustees of Lane Seminary quashed a small but voluble anti-slavery so-

44. *COCR*, Jan. 18, 1835.
ciety at that institution. Incorporated in 1829 as a preparatory school, college, and theological school, Lane had, by 1834, dropped the first of the three departments in order to concentrate on turning out Presbyterian ministers who could control the godless West and combat the Catholic church. A distinguished faculty, made possible by the generous contributions of eastern capitalists, attracted an idealistic and talented group of students. Most of them hailed from the “burnt over” districts of western New York, but southern states furnished their quota, and President Lyman Beecher, fresh from his triumphs over the hydra of infidelity in Boston, surveyed his promising class with pride. Soon he would discover that the “Lane radicals,” under the leadership of Theodore Weld, regarded the iniquities of slavery more pressing than missionary movements, temperance reforms, or anti-Catholic agitation.

The trustees of Lane were even more disturbed by the anti-slavery proclivities of the students than was the equivocating but well-meaning president. These prominent and conservative Cincinnatians, for the most part lawyers, merchants, bankers, manufacturers, and ministers, expected future clergymen to devote their extra time to Sabbath school or missionary or temperance work. Associations for these purposes should be encouraged, they maintained, but questions “too absorbing for health, and most favorable persecution of study, and bearing upon a divided and excited community, and touching subjects of great national difficulty, and high political interest, and conducted in a manner to offend, needlessly, public sentiment”46 were beyond the pale of religion. When Lane students fraternized with Negroes and attacked the characters of Cincinnati’s southern customers, it was time to put a stop to such nonsense; the trustees ordered the anti-slavery society dissolved and forbade further discussion of this inflamable issue.

Before the Lane radicals departed for the more liberal environment of Oberlin College, they eloquently justified their stand. Theodore Weld, the spokesman of the group, had already answered successfully the animadversions of one sneering critic, the pundit James Hall, editor of the Western Monthly Magazine.47 Now, singled out by the trustees as a monomaniac agitator trying to capture the Seminary for the abolitionists, Weld ably defended

45. See A Statement of the Reasons Which Induced the Students of Lane Seminary to Dissolve Their Connection With That Institution (Cincinnati, 1834); D. L. Dumond, ed., Letters of James G. Birney (New York, 1938), I, 146.
46. Fifth Annual Report of the Trustees . . . Lane Seminary (Cincinnati, 1834), 29.
47. Cf VII (1834): 86. Hall’s attack appeared in the July 5, 1834, issue of his magazine.
his own views and those of his student friends. What could be fitter employ-
ment for the clergyman, he asked, than analyzing the evils of his age, “espe-
cially when all these heave up their mountain masses full upon his own
vision, and at his own door—and still more especially, when these accumu-
lated wrongs and woes have been for ages unheeded?”

All the giant sins which have ever made havoc in society have been toler-
ated and sanctioned by public sentiment. He that moves with the tide of
this public sentiment, is a part of it, augments it, and cannot absolve him-
self from the responsibility of its effects. If it be wrong, it is not enough
that he silently withdraw his original contributions, leaving the remainder
to sweep on unresisted. It is not enough that he neither votes for the iniqu-
ity himself, nor solicits the votes of others. If he would be guiltless of
blood, he must do his utmost to unite against it the suffrages of the world.
A moral agent cannot determine duty by proxy. He must investigate for
himself.48

But the city fathers disdained such fine-spun casuistry. While they did
their best “to render more firm and indissoluble the bonds of Union,” the
“visionary enthusiasts” strained “every nerve to sever the golden chain”49
which linked the plantations of the South with Porkopolis. Consequently, in
January 1836, when James G. Birney, a recent convert to the abolitionist
cause, established his anti-slavery paper in New Richmond, a short distance
from Cincinnati, and began cannonading Kentucky slaveholders across the
river with abolitionist propaganda, Cincinnati’s businessmen were in no
mood for reflective discussion. Late in the same month, the richest and most
respectable citizens called an anti-abolition meeting attended by over five
hundred people. Birney went to the meeting, heard the names of the mem-
bers of the anti-slavery society read before the audience, and listened to an
insulting account of his entertaining “the biggest and most blackest of nigg-
gers.”50 When he attempted to explain his cause to the assembled company,
they refused to listen. This anti-abolition meeting was tantamount to a polite
warning; Birney was invited to stay out of Cincinnati.

During February no explosions occurred. Birney continued to take pot-
shots at his tormentors, taunting the editors of the *Daily Cincinnati Republi-

50. *Philanthropist,* Jan. 8, 29, 1836. Weld had assured Birney that he need not fear mobs in
can and Commercial Register for their frenzied, ineffective name-calling. Liberty is a good cause, he argued, oppression a bad one. Unfamiliar with the meaning of the Constitution or the nature of slavery, the anti-abolitionists, he observed, resort at first to preambles and resolutions. When this fails, they grow excited and talk about stirring up mobs in order to keep his paper, the Philanthropist, from Cincinnati homes, workshops, and counting rooms. The anti-abolitionists, Birney paradoxically contended, struggled against great odds.

You have ARISTOCRACY—we, the PEOPLE:—you have indolence—we, ACTIVITY: you have WEALTH—we, PRINCIPLE;—you have PASSION—we CONSTANCY; you have the spirit of OPPRESSION—we, of LIBERTY; you have VIOLENCE and CURSES—we, PATIENCE and PRAYERS;—you have the DISPLEASURE of God—we, his BLESSING. Which side do you think will triumph?51

The city fathers apparently ignored Birney’s jibes until the latter decided to publish his paper in the camp of the enemy; the Philanthropist moved to Cincinnati in April. Rioters during that month burned down a Negro tenement (“notorious as a place of resort for rogues, thieves, and prostitutes—black and white,” the Republican explained) before a “large concourse of our citizens,” who made no effort to extinguish the flames.52 The April 1836 riot anticipated events to come; the next four months were perhaps as exciting and dramatic as any period in Cincinnati’s history.

Before describing the events that culminated in the anti-abolitionist riot, something more needs to be said about the position of the Negro in Cincinnati, for his presence in the Queen City unquestionably aggravated the abolitionist controversy and determined the attitudes of many white citizens toward the whole slavery question.

Since the passing of the “Black Code” of 1804, sponsored by the southern men of the Ohio River counties who wished to discourage Negro settlement in Ohio, free blacks had suffered miserably in Cincinnati. The original “Black Code” legislation and the even more repressive acts which followed three years later disqualified the testimony of any black in a court of law. If he wished to reside in the state he had first to obtain the signatures of two white

51. Ibid., Feb. 12, 1836.
52. CRCR, Apr. 13, 1836.
men on a five-hundred-dollar bond. While this act had no bearing upon the Negroes already living in Ohio and was never strictly enforced, it indicated plainly enough that free blacks would not be welcomed in the river counties. The rigid enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act and the imposition of heavy fines upon anyone who abetted runaway Negroes showed, too, that Ohio businessmen, while strong in their determination to exclude slavery from the state, nevertheless wished to keep in the good graces of their southern neighbors.53

The passage of the “Black Code” could not be attributed merely to the southern sympathizers residing in Ohio. Many citizens from the middle states, who opposed slavery because it seemed to jeopardize the status of free labor, had no great dislike for the institution in the South. They simply did not relish the prospect of competing against cheap black labor in the free states.54 For example, Jacob Burnet, a New Jersey man, found nothing reprehensible in the “Black Codes” since he regarded free Negroes, for the most part, as undesirable and incapable of supporting themselves.55 Even New Englanders in Washington and Hamilton counties, at first hostile to anti-Negro legislation for ideological reasons, soon gave up their prejudices and voted pretty consistently with the southern group. Contact with the free blacks convinced them that the wholesale dumping of manumitted or escaped slaves into Ohio would constitute a serious menace to the state.56

In spite of the disabilities against them,57 however, the number of Negroes gradually increased in Cincinnati, and the hostility towards them, always latent, intensified. E. P. Fordham found about two hundred of these “dissipated, vile, insolent beings”58 living in Cincinnati during his visit in 1818, and in the next year, a citizen asked for relief

from the hordes of idle runaway blacks of both sexes, who are sauntering about the streets at all hours of the day, and who have no other visible

55. NWR XXXVIII (1830): 145.
means of subsistence than what they get by nightly plunder and the pilferings of a few, who, by hiring out have access to their employer's closets and cellars.

Another complaining correspondent, writing in 1826, praised the southern Quakers for freeing their slaves but made it perfectly clear that he did not want these "creatures" in Cincinnati. The prevailing attitude in the city by the 1830s might be summed up in the following view:

While the people of Ohio lament the evils of slavery, and deplore that necessity which compels them to refuse the rights of citizenship to those claiming to be free—and while they sympathize deeply with their white brethren of the South, there is still no obligation, either moral or political, that requires them to receive the disaffected, dishonest, and miserably indigent free blacks, whom, in annual augmenting numbers, the neighboring states are throwing upon them. Self-preservation is a first duty. We say, let the black population of the United States be confined to its present limits. Let its advantages and its evils go hand in hand. When the whites of the South shall deem its evils greater than its advantages—when they shall seek to abolish slavery and to remove the blacks from their limits, they will find the non-slaveholding states disposed to unite with them in any feasible scheme for relieving them from the mighty curse with which they are now weighted down.

Necessity justified the inhumane banishment from Ohio of some eleven hundred Negroes in 1833 who could not meet the requirements of the "Black Code." The plan of the American Colonization Society, although slow and gradual, seemed to be the only solution to the slavery question.

This organization, which formed a kind of liberal bloc between pro-slavery extremists and the abolitionists, allowed the cautious and benevolent citizen to ease his conscience without endangering his reputation. Editors, ministers, and businessmen of varying political faiths could meet on common

59. LHCG, Sept. 3, 1819; June 30, 1826.
60. CCLG, Dec. 24, 1831. This feeling did not apply, however, to the family servants hired out to Cincinnatians by their owners across the river. Apparently the servant shortage made this class of Negro desirable. Cyrus P. Bradley, "Journal of Cyrus P. Bradley," OAHQ XV (1906): 222.
ground and agree that slavery per se was a national evil,\textsuperscript{62} that it ought not to be extended, and that all Negroes should be shipped to Liberia, Haiti, or even beyond the Rocky Mountains.\textsuperscript{63} The moderates repudiated the half-baked notions of the abolitionists, whose proposals, if carried out, would release an uneducated horde, a vast peasant army, to prey upon or perpetually menace the safety of the state.\textsuperscript{64} Slavery, declared the colonizationists, might be an evil (the abolitionists called it a sin), but slaves nevertheless were private property and the slaveholders enjoyed constitutional privileges. The best way to remove this "fungus upon the tree of liberty," "this black fetid stream," was to deport the Negro, not to emancipate him.\textsuperscript{65}

But not everyone in Cincinnati believed in the efficacy of the colonization scheme. A small number of ardent spirits, shocked by the treatment of the free blacks in Cincinnati—the lynchings, the beatings, and the kidnappings—became abolitionists and risked their reputations and security for their beliefs. Fraternizing and working with the Negroes,\textsuperscript{66} these men and women vainly tried to alleviate the plight of blacks in the Queen City. According to E. S. Abdy, the free Negro labored under disadvantages unknown either to the slave or the white worker. If any robbery or act of violence occurred, the law supplied the wrongdoer with a perfect scapegoat. Since Negroes could not testify in court, they could neither defend themselves nor accuse their oppressors. They might be robbed and murdered with impunity since they had no other recourse except flight. If by any chance a Negro did accumulate property, as some succeeded in doing, the city taxed him for the support of schools from which he was disbarred. Discrimination pursued the Negro even to the graveyard, for in Cincinnati's "Potter's Field" he was buried in a different position (north to south) from the pauper white. "I saw the unchristian distinction amid all that is calculated to humble the pride of man," wrote

\textsuperscript{62} A classic statement of this view is contained in Joshua Wilson's letter to Bellamy Storer, Cincinnati, Jan. 21, 1836, Wilson MSS, VI, Library of the University of Chicago, 780–82. Wilson admitted that his Virginia and Kentucky backgrounds had at first blinded him to the iniquities of slavery but that he now considered slavery "sinful" and "impolitic" and contrary to reason, the will of God, and the Declaration of Independence. But it was a "national" evil, he insisted; no one section could be blamed. He recommended that slavery be abolished by constitutional amendment and that the slaveholders be fully reimbursed. No friend of the abolitionists, Wilson nevertheless argued for freedom of speech, press, and petition. This letter reveals Wilson's great integrity and humanity.

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{LHCG}, Apr. 22, 1825; Sherwood, "Movement in Ohio to Deport the Negro," 56–59.

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{CCLG}, Dec. 13, 1834.

\textsuperscript{65} \textit{LHCG}, June 25, 1827.

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Philanthropist}, Feb. 12, 1836.
Abdy, "and I wished that the shame of Cincinnati might be known in every village in Europe." 67

On the eve of the riot the Cincinnati Anti-Slavery Society numbered ninety-eight members. The purpose of the Society was nothing less than to destroy the institution of involuntary servitude in America and persuade the most influential people in Cincinnati to break off commercial relations with southern planters or anyone else connected with slavery. They found themselves opposed by a majority who were against slavery in principle but had no intentions either of severing profitable ties with their southern neighbors or of making life more pleasant for the free blacks living in their city. 68

Undismayed by threats and warnings, the abolitionists continued their campaign in the late spring of 1836. In the month of June, while improvident Cincinnatians lost their money at the racetrack in Newport, the editors of the Philanthropist, James Birney and Gamaliel Bailey, freely aired their anti-slavery sentiments in the columns of their newspaper. Since January of that year, they claimed, the circulation of the Philanthropist had risen from one thousand to seventeen hundred. It looked for a while as if they would be permitted to print accounts of southern atrocities without being molested, but this illusion was quickly dispelled.

One night during the second week of July a band of forty men broke into the office of Achilles Pugh, where the Philanthropist was printed, and smashed his press. The city watch observed the affair but made no effort to arrest the vandals. A few days later placards bearing the following message appeared on the street corners:

Abolitionist Beware
The Citizens of Cincinnati, embracing every class interested in the prosperity of the City, satisfied that the business of the place is receiving a vital stab from the wicked and misguided operations of the abolitionists, are resolved to arrest their course. The destruction of their Press on the night of the 12th instant, may be taken as a warning. As there are some worthy citizens engaged in the unholy cause of annoying our southern neighbors, they are appealed to, to pause before they bring things to a crisis. If an attempt is made to re-establish their press, it will be viewed as an act of

68. Ibid., II, 415.
defiance to an already outraged community, and on their own heads be the
results which follow.

Every kind of expostulation and remonstrance has been resorted to in
vain—longer patience would be criminal. The plan is matured to eradicate
an evil which every citizen feels is undermining his business and property.

Pugh and several members of the Anti-Slavery Society decided to ignore this
forthright, if unsolicited, piece of advice, and paid a call on Mayor Davies.
The mayor, more in sympathy with the wreckers than with the injured party,
requested that order be maintained and publicly admonished the abolition-
ists to “abstain from further persecution of such measures as may have a ten-
dency to inflame the public mind, and lead to acts of violence and disorder.”

On June 21 two communications by anonymous writers appeared in the
conservative press. The first, aimed at the anti-slavery executive committee,
was particularly illuminating:

Publish no more cards or addresses about midnight invasions. Eschew the
society of James G. Birney. Avoid him as you would a viper. Mind your own
affairs. Consult your own interests and the interests of the community
from which you are deriving a support, and from whom some of you have
acquired fortunes. If any of you are foreigners we would advise you, most
especially to be silent on the subject of slavery. A large majority of our
citizens have taken the foolish notion into their heads that they understand
their own institutions and their own interest quite as well as certain foreign
dictators.

The second communication cited the example of the Tory-hanging patriots
of old who revered the laws which worked for the public good but “were not
such worshippers of the idol, of their own or other men’s creation as not to
know that when through their [the law’s] means they were threatened with
destruction, they set them aside.” In this time of crisis, the communication
went on to say, when the city was “tottering upon the verge of dissolution,
through the machinations of a few individuals among us,” the hirelings of
European autocrats, “the enemies of America,” should not be allowed to re-
main in the city.

In vain, abolitionists appealed to the fair-mindedness of the city. Their
plea was answered by the calling of a public meeting at the Market House to

69. Narrative of the Late Riotous Proceedings Against the Liberty of the Press, in Cincinnati, With
Remarks and Historical Notices, Relating to Emancipation . . . (Cincinnati, 1836), 14–15.
70. Ibid., 19, 20.
decide whether the citizens would "permit the publication or distribution of Abolition papers in this city." Such a gathering, it was stated, would "test the will of the people," since there seemed to be a "settled determination" to crush the abolitionists by force if admonitions proved insufficient. Land owners, merchants, and lawyers comprised the committee of forty-two who had been designated to draw up resolutions for the meeting, but the mercantile interests predominated.\textsuperscript{71}

The Market House meeting of July 23, prelude to the coming violence, went off with great éclat as far as the merchants were concerned. A large and respectable audience heard resolutions condemning slavery in principle but not as an evil to be remedied by the present generation. The resolutions committee made a bow in the direction of free speech but warned the abolitionists not to preach sectional hatred. Promising to use all lawful means to suppress the abolitionist press, they ended on this contradictory note.

That we entertain the most profound respect for the memories of the venerable patriots of more than "sixty years since," who in the harbor of Boston, \textit{without} the sanction of law—but in the plenitude of the justness of their cause, took the responsibility of \textit{reshipping} the tea cargo—and for which illegal act they were entitled to, and did receive, the warmest thanks and gratitude of every lover of good order and well-wisher of his country: and that we, in imitation of the noble and fearless example set us by these true-hearted Americans, declare that whenever we shall find an existing evil, wicked and mischievous in its conception, warring against the best interests and happiness of our common country, by its effects aiming at the destruction and disunion of our happy government, and only prompted and sustained by those untiring engines of human ambition, hope of gain, and love of notoriety—but shielded from legal abatement, according to the usual practice of our laws, so as to leave us but one channel through which we can rid our fair land from its withering influence, that in seizing that one tangible point our exertions shall be firm, united and decided.\textsuperscript{72}

Although the commercial press seemed to find nothing paradoxical about this historical perversion, the sentiments of the Market House meeting enraged the Presbyterian \textit{Cincinnati Journal and Western Luminary}. The resolutions plainly implied, declared a writer, that while law may be an excellent thing, mobs are also proper on certain occasions. "This is not the spirit of

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{CG}, July 20, 21, 1836.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{CAOP}, July 27, 1836.
liberty," the Journal concluded, "but of wanton reckless tyranny [sic]. We are incited to rise above the laws that we may exercise an irresponsible power—that we may crush a man who exercises an acknowledged constitutional right." Although objections of this kind had little effect on a group of men who by this time were growing tired of argument, the anti-abolitionists decided to give Birney and his friends another chance to capitulate.

One of the happy actions resulting from the Market House meeting was the appointment of a committee of twelve, the economic and cultural leaders of the community, to wait upon the leading abolitionists. The committee visited the abolitionists leaders on the evening of July 28 and confessed to them that an ever-growing mob of indignant citizens could not be restrained unless Birney ceased publishing his paper. Judge Burnet, speaking for the delegation, warned the abolitionists that small armies of indignant men were converging on the city from Columbia, Covington, and Newport to suppress the paper. Local gangs of workmen from the iron foundries and boat yards, he added, were also gathering. The Reverend Oliver Spencer, a Methodist minister and extensive landowner, proclaimed his own antipathy to slavery and taunted the abolitionists "for not going south and dying in glorious martyrdom." As a final gesture the Market House committee appealed to the common sense of the abolitionists. Did not Cincinnati's prosperity—high wages, the housing shortage, high rents—result from southern orders? In reply to the question whether southern orders were being withheld, Mr. Buchanan, a wealthy commission merchant, mentioned some letters he had received from several southern firms demanding the suppression of anti-slavery agitation in Cincinnati on pain of losing their business.

Birney and his friends professed to be much interested in the sentiments of the other side. They were all the more convinced of the necessity of holding a meeting in some church to debate the pros and cons. But the Market House committee demurred on the grounds that any abolitionist speaker would certainly be killed, such was the temper of the populace. If the paper were not immediately discontinued, a mob of at least four thousand to five thousand (joined by two-thirds of the city's property-holders) would be unleashed. The abolitionists refused to be intimidated. Resting their defense

74. *CAOP*, July 27, 1836. Among the members of the committee were J. Burnet, Lawrence, Buchanan, Longworth, Spencer, Loring, D. T. Disney, Bakewell, Foote, Greene, Burke, Neville, Walker.
75. *Narrative of Late Riotous Proceedings*, 30 ff.
on the freedom of the press, they argued that since the *Philanthropist* represented twelve thousand Ohio citizens and since it was none of the merchants' business anyway, their paper should go on. They placed their faith in the large number of citizens who believed in a free press and had “enough of correct and sober feeling to uphold the laws.”

Their confidence was unwarranted; the next evening, July 30, the long-threatened riot occurred. At six o'clock a meeting took place at the Exchange; the owner of a large paper mill presided, and a well-dressed crowd resolved to destroy the abolition press and run Birney out of town. Some hours after a meeting for the benefit of the Texas revolutionaries, which followed the Exchange gathering, the rioters went about their work in a leisurely way, sacking the printing office of Achilles Pugh, searching rather aimlessly for prominent abolitionists, and burning a couple of Negro shanties.

The rioters, described later by the *Republican* as “the most systematic, orderly and well behaved mob, we have ever witnessed,” could have been easily dispersed had Mayor Davies requested aid, but the mayor, watching the entire proceedings with undisguised approval, seemed more concerned about the comfort of the mob. “It is now late at night,” he was quoted as saying, “and time we were all in bed—by continuing longer you will disturb the citizens, or deprive them of their rest, besides robbing yourselves of rest. No doubt it is your intention,” he went on, “to punish the guilty and leave the innocent. But if you continue longer, you are in danger of punishing the innocent with the guilty, which I am convinced no one in Cincinnati would wish to. We have done enough for one night.” Cheers interrupted the mayor's friendly discourse, and then he continued, “The abolitionists themselves, must be convinced by this time, what public sentiment is, and that it will not do any longer to disregard, or set it at naught.” The crowd again cheered. Taking the mayor's advice, the rioters went home and caught up on their sleep.

The next two nights saw Cincinnati disturbed and excited. A newly formed mob searched for Birney and made several abortive attempts to destroy Negro houses, but volunteer organizations protecting the city during the third night kept the rioters under control. By this time, the carnival of mischief had already gone too far for certain law-abiding conservatives who

76. Ibid., 38.
77. Ibid., 39.
78. Ibid., 40. See also *CG*, Aug. 2, 1836.
now began to fear for their own property. Charles Hammond continued to criticize the abolitionists for deliberately setting the town on its ears and asserting "abstract rights against the interests, the feelings, and the present judgments" of the majority of the community, but he made it quite plain that the riot "was not the contrivance of that class of men with whom mobs are usually associated." The abolitionists, he admitted, were in the minority and as such "the enlightened very few, ought to have deferred to the wishes of the very many, even if that many were in the dark upon the subject," but this was no reason why a "speck of mischief" should be removed by "mobocratic violence."79

Following up Hammond's lead, a group of moderates calling themselves "The friends of order, of law, and the Constitution," and disclaiming any connection with the Anti-Slavery Society, planned an open meeting to condemn mob violence and the infringement of civil liberties. Editors, book-sellers, lawyers, teachers, merchants, tradesmen, and artisans making up this group affirmed in their resolutions the sanctity of those "blood-bought rights, which our fathers bequeathed to us," rights which could not be disregarded "for the purpose of securing southern trade." When the moderates came to the court house, however, they discovered the instigators of the riots were now investigating the riots. Hammond, Salmon P. Chase, Thomas Shreve, and other prominent moderates who had called the meeting to condemn lawlessness withheld their resolutions and heard the conspirators blame the abolitionists for the recent disturbances and praise the conduct of the public and the mayor. The meeting ended with the passing of a motion approving the Colonization Society as the only practical way to end "the evils of slavery."80

The incident was apparently closed. A few prominent men, landowners and merchants for the most part, had succeeded in destroying a newspaper. They had planned their campaign astutely, using the names of influential people without permission, arranging their meetings for the convenience of the foundry and shipyard workers, and publishing the findings of their Birney committee on Saturday—almost forcing a Saturday night riot. They had accomplished their objectives with parliamentary decorum, even electing a committee to ascertain the residences of the people to be tarred and feathered. But public sentiment was rapidly crystallizing against the rioters. Cincinnati awoke from her three-day debauch with a hangover.

79. CG, Aug. 2, 1836.
80. Ibid., Aug. 3, 1836.
The first signs of revulsion appeared when Judge Jacob Burnet expressed his “detestation” and “dread” of mobs. Burnet maintained he headed the committee sent to Birney only in the interests of peace. Hammond dismissed this belated confession as nonsense. Timothy Walker, who played an important part in the Market House meeting, also repudiated the rioters. “Who can feel safe,” he wrote to the Cincinnati Gazette, if the people “may suspend or subvert laws” whenever they “think proper?” Then he added (perhaps in reference to the latest disturbance), “To day the emergency may be pressing, and the motive good; tomorrow the contrary.” 81

Hammond made short work of Walker, too, but he had quickly seen the “property” implications as most likely to convince Cincinnati’s businessmen of their reprehensible and unpotic behavior. For the next few weeks his paper hammered home this lesson: “In no case should mobs be parleyed with. Never should men of influence and wealth, with a vain view of controlling them, humble themselves to become the leaders of their tools.” Hammond derisively posed an imaginary situation where a group of citizens destroyed the city’s waterworks (owned by a group affiliated with the rioters)—first by resolutions, then by warning and intimidations, and finally by violence. “My ‘position,’ as an editor,” he sermonized, “does not allow me to wink at the mobisms of the city, because those concerned are principal citizens, and my personal friends.” Hammond knew he was alienating many of his readers and former supporters, but, he declared, if their good opinion could not “be preserved, without the Gazette lending its aid to mob law direct, or to a course of measures that can have no other result, a separation must take place.” 82

Hammond’s paper, it is worth noting, was the only one among the four big commercial dailies which had tried to deal equitably with the explosive abolitionist problem. The Republican, a Van Buren paper, had revealed its pro-slavery position from the outset. The Whig was equally vehement against the abolitionists, and the Post, another Whig paper, was cautiously hostile. Although the Gazette pussyfooted at first, as it had done on the temperance question, it slowly swerved to the unpopular side. As much as he disliked abolitionists, Hammond could not remain silent while democratic principles were being flouted. Recognizing the inflammable nature of the situation, he had quietly tried to show the merchants the dangers of their course. He had warned them that if Cincinnati acquired a reputation for “mobocracy” it

81. Ibid., Aug. 15, 1836.
82. Ibid., Aug. 2, 5, 12, 1836.
would do the town more harm than the temporary alienation of the South. "Is the freedom of speech and of press," he asked "to be weighted in balance, against pecuniary interest?" Following the Market House meeting, he quoted without comment a biblical passage referring to secret hypocrites who worshipped God and Mammon; four days before the riot, he printed the Ohio Bill of Rights. 83

These broad hints, as we have seen, had no effect except to draw opprobrium upon Hammond himself and to label him as an abolitionist sympathizer. He knew that the commercial papers were considered to be the exclusive organs of the business class. "The avowed object of the movers, in the recent violence," he explained, "was to put down that, which was supposed injuriously to affect the business of this city. It was a business measure, standing distinct from the great principles of political freedom and individual security. It had nothing to do with law, or morals or religion. Hence the business press only was affected by it." 84 The Gazette alone, of all the commercial papers, had the courage to align itself with the religious and labor press which on this issue enjoyed the luxury of free opinion.

Hammond referred particularly to the Presbyterian and Baptist journals and the Workingman's Friend. These papers had lashed the attempts to stir up mob violence, and the first two, while rather wishy-washy about extreme abolitionism, had always been decidedly anti-slavery. After the riot, the Journal, even at the risk of offending rich Presbyterian parishioners, savagely criticized the mob; like the Gazette, it also pointed out the danger of all mobs to the status quo:

There is a mob tonight to tear down an abolition press; "Glad of it," say many respectable men, this abolition is a bad thing—ought to be stopped. But at the heels of this follow a Jackson mob and a Harrison mob, a mob of workmen for wages, a mob on railroad companies, and a mob on water companies;—one man's house is torn down for one thing, and another's factory burnt for another, till all begin to doubt whether abolitionism or any other ism is not better than mobism—and all this comes of every man patronizing in the beginning, the particular mob that happens to suit his own taste. 85

83. Ibid., July 23, 26, 1836.
84. Ibid., Aug. 5, 1836.
85. CJWL IX (1836): 118. This passage had been attributed to Harriet Beecher Stowe by her biographer. See Forrest Wilson, Crusader in Crinoline (Philadelphia, 1941), 184–85.
Brainerd, editor of the *Journal*, went on to attack the "appeasement" policy of the merchants as futile as well as degrading. "We barter the prerogatives of mind, the right of speech, the liberty of the press," for mercenary reasons, he wrote, but judging from the response of the southern press, these tactics fooled no one. Louisville papers, he proved, attributed the mob to selfish business interests rather than to any real sympathy for slavery, and he predicted, as Hammond had, that Cincinnati would be universally condemned.⁸⁶ The *Journal* supplemented its attack with a series of articles on the history of the freedom of the press and a long essay on Roger Williams.

The appeal to pocketbooks made more headway than the appeal to consciences, and the *Philanthropist* was allowed to continue for five years without further molestation. "Money, or the want of it dont give people time to be angry with us," wrote Bailey in 1837. The principal leaders of the mob were indicted, and after several years of quibbling the case had reached a point where the defenders appealed a fifty-dollar judgment. By this time, Cincinnatians had forgotten about the riot and were concentrating on more important affairs.

In summing up the implications of the 1836 riot, Harriet Martineau wrote of the Cincinnati businessmen:

The day will come when their eyes will be cleansed from the gold-dust which blinds them. Meanwhile, as long as they continue active against the most precious rights of the community; as long as they may be fairly considered more guilty in this tremendous question of Human Wrongs than even the slave-holders of the south—more guilty than any class whatever, except the clergy—let them not boast of their liberality and their benevolence. Generosity loses half its grace when it does not co-exist with justice. Those can ill be esteemed benefactors to the community in one direction, who are unfaithful to their citizenship in another. Till such can be aroused from delusion, and can see their conduct as others see it, the esteem of the world must rest on those of their class who, to the graces of enterprise, liberality, and taste, add the higher merit of intrepid, self-sacrificing fidelity to the cause of Human Rights.⁸⁷

This is a noble statement and one which the citizens of Cincinnati might well have pondered. Harriet Martineau was no Mrs. Trollope looking for some-

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thing to criticize. No other contemporary foreign observer except Tocqueville analyzed and interpreted American institutions with more understanding. She admired the western people and had spoken of Cincinnati in flattering terms. Her charges against the commercial elite in Cincinnati cannot, therefore, be dismissed as ill-tempered reflections of a captious Englishwoman.88

Nevertheless, to explain the abolitionist riot simply in moral terms—to say, in short, that it was prompted merely by human greed and fear—is to oversimplify a very complicated incident. The respectable men who engineered the riot were, for the most part, good citizens, personally generous, and not necessarily motivated by their own self-interest. They constituted a group, which, as we have seen, directed or influenced every institution in the city, economic, political, or social. Cincinnati under their leadership had grown rich and famous. Then, for the first time, they had to deal with a radical minority which was not amenable to public opinion and which did not respond to peaceful coercion. The fact that the abolitionists divided the public conscience also made them more difficult to handle than dissenting groups whose entire philosophy conflicted with the mores of the community. The abolitionists were Christians. They quoted the Bible, not Tom Paine. They threatened private property, but it was property of the most debased kind, Negro slaves.

The businessmen of Cincinnati faced the same dilemma with which men before and since their time had been confronted. If they gave in to the abolitionists and permitted them to continue the anti-slavery crusade, they would jeopardize (so many of them sincerely believed) the prosperity of the community. By resorting to extra-legal methods, they would undermine the foundation of the law. That they chose the latter alternative is significant if only as an illustration of the power of property in this commercial city. Perhaps it is equally significant that a number of high-minded individuals refused to sacrifice their political ideals to vulgar expediency and that even many who temporized subsequently regretted or denied their participation in this disreputable affair.

88. Martineau was well liked in Cincinnati after her visit in 1835. See a tribute paid to her in _MC IV_ (1835): 283.