

Conviction and Circumstance: The Liberty Party in Indiana

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Though American politics have long been dominated by a two party system, history contains several incidents in which a small third party was able to decide national elections. The most recent such instance was the 2000 presidential election in which Green Party Candidate Ralph Nader received 97,488 votes in the decisive state of Florida which the Republican Candidate George W. Bush won over Democrat Al Gore by a mere 537 votes. An older example of this phenomenon occurred in 1844 when the abolitionist Liberty Party took enough votes from Whig candidate Henry Clay in Michigan and New York to give Democrat James Polk the presidency. In both cases the third party hindered its intended cause, the Liberty Party helped to elect a President who dramatically expanded slave territory, and the Green Party prevented the election of Al Gore, who would later win a Nobel Prize for his environmental work. Why was there such support for third party movement that had little chance of winning elections and undermined largely sympathetic candidates?

The Indiana Liberty Party provides an excellent opportunity to study the motivations of third party voters and the circumstances that surround the creation and dissolution of third parties. The Liberty Party's single issue, opposition to slavery, lacked widespread appeal in the 1840's and within an already small movement, the Indiana Liberty Party was especially weak. Historians have traditionally considered it "not an important state for the Liberty Party" because it "exerted no

national or regional influence.”¹ Yet it is this weakness that makes Indiana a compelling place to study the Liberty Party. Though they were often accused of naiveté, abolitionists in Indiana were not unaware of the weakness of the movement within their state, and yet they continued to maintain politically and financially an organization that had no chance of obtaining their political goals. Why did they support a movement which appeared so futile at its conception?

Previous accounts of the Liberty Party in Indiana by historians Theodore Clarke Smith and Vernon Volpe have focused on the religiosity and idealism of the Liberty Party. They have explained it as a movement that primarily served the moral purity of its members rather than accomplish their political goals. Volpe and Smith rightly characterize Liberty Party supporters as deeply religious and concerned with separating themselves from the sin of slavery. However, in emphasizing the religious and moral convictions that produced the Liberty Party, they neglect the ways in which its abolitionist supporters acted in response to the political circumstances they faced. Members of the Liberty Party were not so fanatical that they never attempted to compromise and work within the two party system, nor were they so rigid that they did not respond to the changing political landscape of the 1840’s. Any account of the Liberty Party in Indiana must acknowledge not only the religious character of the abolitionist movement which produced the Liberty Party, but also the changing political realities abolitionists faced and the ways in which they responded to them.

¹ Johnson, *The Liberty Party, 1840-1848: Antislavery Third-party Politics in the United States*, 215.

Origins of Political Abolitionism

Abolitionists had traditionally seen themselves as part of a moral religious movement separate from the impious world of politics. However, during the 1830s many abolitionists recognized the failure of their current tactics and the ways in which anti-abolitionist political power was used against them. These abolitionists began to see political action as critical to their struggle against slavery and began the slow, controversial, and divisive process of politicizing the movement.² By the end of the decade abolitionists nationwide would test various political strategies and attempt to use the Federal Government to either end, or separate themselves, from the institution of slavery.

Emerging out of the revivalist fervor of the Second Great Awakening, the abolitionist movement had initially employed the tactic of “moral suasion” which attempted to convince slaveholders of their own sinfulness and relied on individual conversions. While some notable slaveholders did convert, by the 1830s it had become clear to many that slavery would never be eradicated by an ethical revolution among Southerners, and that “judged by its initial aims, moral suasion had failed utterly.”³ In addition to the disillusionment with moral suasion, the political tactics of their adversaries provided the impetus for some abolitionists to take up political action. Anti-abolitionists in the House of Representatives had enacted a gag rule to end the abolitionist petition campaign which had sent Congress 415,000 petitions denouncing slavery. The “gag rule”, passed by the House of Representatives in 1836, automatically tabled all anti-

² James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 46.

³ Stewart, *Holy Warriors*, 74.

slavery petitions before they were read and prevented them from becoming the subject of debate.⁴ Abolitionists and their northern sympathizers saw the gag rule as a violation of civil rights which could only be remedied through political action, giving it “an influential role in sectionalizing American politics and in politicizing abolitionism.”⁵

In addition to legal attacks on their civil rights, abolitionists suffered illegal attacks on their persons. Violence against abolitionists, and particularly against the abolitionist press, reached its peak in the years 1837-1838. Anti-abolitionist violence was an issue of particular concern to Indianan abolitionists. In its early days the Abolition movement in Indiana relied heavily on the Cincinnati based *Philanthropist*, which was attacked by several mobs. Furthermore, the most famous incident of anti-abolitionist violence, the murder of Elijah Lovejoy, took place in neighboring Illinois.⁶ Abolitionists needed the State to protect their right of free speech in congress, the freedom of their presses, and the safety of their persons and so began to seek political representation.

The concern of Indiana abolitionists over the violation of their civil liberties is reflected in the constitutions of many early anti-slavery societies, which decried the gag rule as a restriction of free speech. The Fayette County Anti-Slavery Society declared that “the right of petition has been virtually denied, and free discussion strangled in the General Councils of our nation.”⁷

⁴ Ibid, 84.

⁵ Stewart, *Holy Warriors*, 83.

⁶Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom: The Liberty Party in the Old Northwest*, 23.

⁷ ANTI-SLAVERY MEETING, *Philanthropist*, May 21, 1839; 3. American Periodicals.

Indiana's first anti-slavery newspaper, the *Protectionist*, condemned both mob and government suppression of free speech in its statement of purpose, which read "we must padlock the press, tie up or tongues, and seal away or lips... lest we offend the despots."⁸ While Indiana abolitionists were clearly effected by the nationwide attempts to stifle debate on the subject, they were also influenced by powerful pro-slavery legislation passed in their own or nearby states. The Indiana State Anti-Slavery Society upon its creation, resolved to "petition the next Legislature of our state to repeal our statue laws relating to Negroes and Mullatoes,"⁹ while the Fairfield Society resolved that the Black laws "ought to be regarded by every Christian and philanthropist as worthy only of entire disregard."¹⁰ Ohio's Fugitive Slave Law of 1839, which made it a crime "to entice or aid a fugitive from labor, or interfere with the process of removal" was deplored by Indiana and Ohio abolitionists and condemned by additional meetings in Fairfield and Fayette County.¹¹ The success of pro-slavery or negrophobic legislation in Indiana and Ohio added local political issues to the national demand to end the gag rule.

In addition to the failure of moral suasion and the need to preserve civil rights through political action, some historians

⁸ Arnold Buffum, "Northern Rights", *Protectionist*, January 1, 1841.

⁹ James Donell, "PROCEEDINGS OF THE INDIANA STATE ANTI-SLAVERY CONVENTION" *Philanthropist*, September 25, 1838, 2. American Periodicals.

¹⁰ Moses Wilder, "THE SPIRIT OF FREEDOM IN INDIANA", *Philanthropist*, March 12, 1839, 3. American Periodicals.

¹¹ Stephen Middleton, *The Black Laws: Race and the Legal Process in Early Ohio*. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), 174.

have argued that economic factors also influenced the turn towards political abolitionism. In 1837 the United States underwent a severe economic crisis and abolitionists were quick to blame slaveholders for this misfortune, considering it “one of the many plagues to be suffered by a corrupt society that condemned such sins as slaveholding.”¹² The American Anti-Slavery Society resolved in 1840 “That the existence of Slavery is the grand cause of the pecuniary embarrassments of the country; and no real or permanent relief is to be expected... until the total abolition of that execrable system”¹³. Joshua Leavitt’s pamphlet “Financial power of slavery” explained the country’s financial woes as a product of the poor character of slave owners. Leavitt claimed that “The free expect to pay their debts, if it takes years of toil and self-denial; the slave holder likes to pay debts if it is convenient, but to work and save to pay an old debt enters not into his thoughts.”¹⁴ If the financial practices of the South were responsible for the nation’s distress, then only control of economic policy could keep them in check, and so Leavitt called for “direct resistance to the political domination of the Slave Power.”¹⁵

One might expect that Indiana’s bankruptcy after the crisis of 1837 would make Indiana abolitionists particularly receptive to arguments which blamed slaveholders for their misfortunes, but this rhetoric was slow to appear in their

¹² Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom: The Liberty Party in the Old Northwest*, 17.

¹³ Fourth Annual Report of the Am. Anti-Slavery Soc., 52. Cited in Bretz, *The Economic Background of the Liberty Party*, 253.

¹⁴ Bretz, *The Economic Background of the Liberty Party*, 254-255.

¹⁵ Bretz, 255.

writings.¹⁶ Indiana abolitionists were more concerned that they might implicate themselves in the sin of slavery by financially supporting or benefitting from it, than they were about the role of slave power in the national economy. Many of Indiana's local Anti-Slavery Societies encouraged members to avoid goods produced by slave labor, and the state Anti-Slavery Society recommended at its formation that abolitionists "abstain as far as possible from the proceeds of unrequited labor."¹⁷ The tendency of Indiana abolitionists to emphasize personal piety over national policy was reflected in the states anti-slavery press by the failure of the *Protectionist* and the success of the *Free Labor Advocate*.

The *Free Labor Advocate* and the *Protectionist* were both Liberty Party newspapers founded in 1841 in the town of New Garden, Indiana. As its name would suggest, the *Protectionist* advocated "PROTECTION for our industry against a hopeless competition," and sought to demonstrate that "without a Protective Tariff, we of the north cannot ... have any market for our produce."¹⁸ Throughout its short run the *Protectionist* covered the financial malfeasances of the South in repaying their debts,¹⁹ the role of slavery in provoking the financial crisis,²⁰ the need for protective tariffs, and the inequity in distribution of proceeds

¹⁶ Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom: The Liberty Party in the Old Northwest*, 17.

¹⁷ James Donell, "PROCEEDINGS OF THE INDIANA STATE ANTI-SLAVERY CONVENTION", 2.

¹⁸ Arnold Buffum, "Northern Rights", *Protectionist*, January 1, 1841, 6.

¹⁹ Arnold Buffum "Great Rogues", *Protectionist*, May 1, 1841.

²⁰ Arnold Buffum, "State Debts", *Protectionist*, April 1, 1841.

from the sale of public lands.²¹ While the *Free Labor Advocate* echoed some of these national issues, it emphasized the boycott of slave made goods as a way of removing economic support for, and absolving oneself from, the sin of slavery. The emphasis on consumer boycotts over protective tariffs reflects the different economic relationships represents the differing economic relationships that the North and Midwest had with the South. Former New Yorker, Arnold Buffum, emphasized tariffs because that was the primary site of economic contention between the industrial North and the rural South. However, Indiana had no manufacturing and Midwesterners primarily saw the south as a market for their agricultural products. In part because it emphasized economic concerns that did not fit the state it was published in, the *Protectionist* ran for only a year before being canceled due to a lack of subscribers. The *Free Labor Advocate*, however, continued to print advertisements for goods produced without slave labor until the formation of the Free Soil Party in 1848.

While many disparate issues contributed to the rise of political abolitionism, Historian Julian Bretz has argued that the common factor in all of them was the threat they posed to northern whites. Bretz argues that political anti-slavery was “chiefly directed against the slave power as a political and economic force, and not against the existence of slavery in the states.”²² Bretz’s skepticism about the altruistic nature of political abolitionism was echoed by some contemporary non-political abolitionists who claimed the considerations of political

²¹ Arnold Buffum, “Tariff and Distribution”, *Protectionist*, July 1, 1841.

²² Bretz, *The Economic Background of the Liberty Party*, 264.

abolitionism “all center in the welfare of the white man.”²³ While the Liberty Party did emphasize personal piety and failed to better the lives of slaves, Bretz indulges in the tendency of 1930’s historiography to over-emphasize economic causes and ignores the battles fought against racist laws on the local level.

Abolitionists in Indiana were more concerned with avoiding the products of slave labor than the macro-economic effects of slave power. Furthermore, they adopted political tactics well before *The Protectionist* tried to make economic policy a central issue for the movement. Blaming the South for the Panic of 1837 is more likely an attempt to use sectional tension and economic hardship to attract others to the abolitionist movement, than a strategy designed to protect calculated economic interest. As Bretz admits, abolitionist economics “reflects as much prejudice as scientific analysis.”²⁴

In the 1830’s abolitionists nationwide developed diverse political goals that included federal trade policy, procedural rules in the House of Representatives, and local anti-black codes. Abolitionists would attempt to accomplish these goals first by cooperating with the existing political parties and eventually by forming their own. The process would be long, controversial and difficult.

Abolitionist & Liberty Party Organization in Indiana

Indiana was slow to develop an organized abolitionist movement. The first county anti-slavery societies in Indiana were not founded until 1836, with a state society coming two years later in 1838. In its infancy, the abolitionist movement in Indiana

²³ Bretz, *The Economic Background of the Liberty Party*, 263.

²⁴ Bretz, 265.

was reliant on and heavily influenced by the anti-slavery press in Ohio. When the Logansport Anti-slavery Society was founded in July of 1836 they requested their proceedings be published in “the anti-slavery papers of the east, together with those papers in this state whose editors are willing to give us a hearing”, but the only paper they mentioned by name was the Cincinnati based *Philanthropist*.²⁵ The Indiana State Anti-Slavery Society also acknowledged their links to the movement in Ohio and resolved that “This Society approves of the spirit and manner in which the PHILANTHROPIST is conducted...we, therefore, adopt it as our OFFICIAL ORGAN, and request all abolitionists to use their exertions to extend its circulation.”²⁶ Furthermore all members pledged to “extend the circulation of the PHILANTHROPIST, and each member pledge himself to obtain at least five new subscribers to that paper.”²⁷

James G. Birney, editor of the *Philanthropist*, led a group of Ohioans who favored political abolitionism and would begin to split with the William Lloyd Garrison led American Anti-Slavery Society in 1839 over the interrelated issues of women’s rights and the political duties of abolitionists. Birney, did not want “to confuse abolitionism with [the] “extraneous” causes such as women’s right and non-resistance” that Garrison championed.²⁸ While abolitionist in Indiana and Ohio favored political abolitionism over such issues, they were not predisposed to the formation of a third party. The *Philanthropist*, declared that

²⁵ Mating Gibson, “A New Society”, *Philanthropist*, Oct 7, 1836, 2. American Periodicals.

²⁶ Donell, “PROCEEDINGS OF THE INDIANA STATE ANTI-SLAVERY CONVENTION”, 2.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸ Stewart, *Holy Warriors*, 91.

abolitionists “never will organize as a political party for the purpose of accomplishing their great desire.”²⁹ Rather than form their own organization abolitionists attempted to work within the two party system and adopted the policy of questioning existing candidates about their positions on slavery, and then voting for whomever would respond satisfactorily. Since publically professing abolitionism was political suicide in Indiana, candidates rarely ever met the abolitionist’s requirements. Nevertheless several factors kept Indiana abolitionists within a two party system.

The Liberty Party formed nationally well before abolitionists in Indiana were ready to form a third party. In 1840 a convention in Albany, New York nominated the Liberty Party candidates for President and Vice-President with no delegates from the Old Northwest in attendance. Despite the population being dominated by delegates from the north-east, James Birney of Ohio was chosen to lead the ticket. Despite the nomination of Birney the Liberty Party received little support from abolitionists in Indiana, or the Ohio based anti-slavery press on which they relied. Gamaliel Bailey, who had by then succeeded Birney as editor of the *Philanthropist*, opposed the formation of a third party based on his own religious reservations and a desire to avoid splitting the abolitionist movement further.³⁰ In Indiana, where “abolitionists were especially unprepared to handle the responsibility of forming a new third party”, the Liberty Party was slow to develop.³¹ The Indiana Anti-Slavery Society, led by Arnold Buffum, and encouraged by the Anti-Slavery Whig

²⁹ Ibid, 28.

³⁰ Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom: The Liberty Party in the Old Northwest*, 37-39.

³¹ Ibid, 40.

congressmen James Rariden, voted against the formation of a third party in July of 1840.³² Even those who supported the Liberty Party in the Old Northwest disagreed over their goals, with some aiming only to divorce the federal government from slavery and others actually seeking to abolish slavery in the South.³³

The reluctance of Indiana abolitionists to form or support a third party in 1840 was exacerbated by the popularity of Whig presidential candidate William Henry Harrison was a former Governor of the Indiana Territory and hero of the Battle of Tippecanoe. Even in the few Indiana counties that approved the formation of a third party on their own, the influence of Harrison was disruptive. When the Jefferson County Anti-Slavery Society resolved in September of 1840 to support the nomination of Birney for president, “a spirited discussion ensued... until a late hour. All the argument that could be presented in favor of Gen. Harrison were brought up and well supported.”³⁴ In the end the resolution passed eleven to nine, though Jefferson County only recorded three votes for Birney in 1840. In total, Indiana recorded thirty votes for Birney, far fewer than neighboring Ohio which gave him 1.8% of the vote.³⁵ Abolitionists in Indiana were still trying to work within the two party system, not because it was an effective way of

³² Smith, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Old Northwest*, 44.

³³ Ibid, 39.

³⁴ James Henderson, “ANTI-SLAVERY MEETING: Carmel Church Jefferson Co. Indiana”, *Philanthropist*, September 22, 1840, 3. American Periodicals.

³⁵ Dorothy Riker, and Gale Thornbrough, *Indiana Election Returns 1816–1851* (Indiana Historical Bureau, 1960) 36.

accomplishing their goals but because Harrison was enormously popular in his home state.

The Liberty Party was not firmly established in Indiana until 1841 and the buildup to the election of 1842. The Indiana Anti-Slavery Society finally endorsed the formation of a third party in February of 1841, reversing the decision it had made to oppose the formation of such a party as recently as July of the previous year.³⁶ Theodore Clarke Smith makes the curious claim that “the true explanation of this change is that abolitionists who favored acting with the old parties no longer attended abolitionist conventions.”³⁷ Smith makes no attempt to explain why partisan abolitionists abruptly ceased attending conventions between July of 1840 and February of 1841. The prominence of the national movement, the death of William Henry Harrison, and mounting frustration with the inability to find anti-slavery candidates within either of the major parties are all more fitting explanations. Still, the transition to a third party was slow. County anti-slavery societies still made resolutions referring only to the duty of abolitionists to fill the halls of legislation with Anti-Slavery politicians without making reference to the Liberty Party even after the State Society had endorsed it.³⁸ Endorsing the Liberty Party was a controversial decision for county anti-slavery societies, and the decision to do so was often accompanied by

³⁶ Reinhard O. Johnson, *The Liberty Party, 1840-1848: Antislavery Third-party Politics in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009) 211.

³⁷ Smith, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Old Northwest*, 52.

³⁸ Samuel N. Ustbank, “Nery County Convention” *Protectionist*, April 1, 1841.

“considerable discussion”, which was duly noted when the resolution was published.³⁹

The Liberty Party initially lacked a state wide organization in Indiana and relied largely on County conventions to nominate candidates for local and congressional offices, a task they often struggled with.⁴⁰ In 1841 the Liberty Party nominated Rariden, a former Whig, for Congress, only for him to withdraw at the last minute in order to avoid splitting the vote.⁴¹ The *Protectionist* hastily nominated Daniel Worth, but he was also running for state legislature.⁴² The result was confusion, Rariden still received fourteen votes to Worth’s 102.⁴³ The Liberty Party first organized state wide and attempted a gubernatorial campaign in 1843, nominating Deming and Stephen Harding for Governor and Lieutenant Governor. While Deming and Harding received only 1.4% of the vote statewide, what support they did receive was heavily concentrated in Wayne, Randolph, and Henry counties which accounted for 47% of the Liberty vote.⁴⁴ The town of New Garden, in Wayne County, was a bastion of Liberty Party support which gave the plurality of its votes to Liberty Party Candidates as early as 1841.

³⁹ Jehu Priatt, “Political”, *Protectionist*, June 16 1841, 189.

⁴⁰ Johnson, *The Liberty Party, 1840-1848: Antislavery Third-party Politics in the United States*, 211.

⁴¹ Rariden had lost a campaign for Representative in 1837 because he split the vote with John Finely.

⁴² Arnold Buffum, “Congressional Election” *Protectionist* June 16, 1841, 176.

⁴³ Indiana Election Returns, 105.

⁴⁴ Smith *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Old Northwest*, 58

The Liberty Party made substantial gains in Indiana heading into the 1844 Election. Though its proportion of the total vote was relatively stagnant, moving from 1.4% of the vote of the 1843 campaign to 1.5%, the increased overall turnout for the election meant that the total number of Liberty Party voters grew substantially.⁴⁵ Again, the vote was concentrated largely in a few eastern counties. Only twelve of Indiana's ninety counties recorded more than fifty Liberty Votes, but these twelve accounted for 70% of the vote within the state.⁴⁶ In New Garden, home of the *Free Labor Advocate*, the Liberty Party presidential ticket received 80% of the total vote.⁴⁷

The increased turnout for the Liberty Party was a result of increasing organization and the acceptance of third party politics by existing abolitionists. In addition, the visit of Henry Clay to Richmond in 1842⁴⁸ had radicalized some local abolitionists, increasing support for third party politics. Though the Liberty Party grew substantially during the 1844 campaign, its growth slowed shortly after, and it began to stagnate. In the 1846 gubernatorial campaign, the Liberty Party received a larger portion of the vote (1.8%) but it added only around 200 votes, a growth of less than 10% and a far cry from the 25% increase in total votes between 1843 and 1844.⁴⁹ New Garden was still majority Liberty Party, but the major parties gained ground and the Liberty Party's percent of the vote declined to 67.9% in

⁴⁵ Johnson, *The Liberty Party, 1840-1848: Antislavery Third-party Politics in the United States*, 212.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 212.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 212.

⁴⁸ The lasting implications of this visit on anti-slavery politics in Indiana will be explored later in this paper

⁴⁹ Smith *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Old Northwest*, 325.

1845.⁵⁰ After 1846, abolitionists in Indiana began recognizing the decline of their party and began to move back towards working with the existing two party system.

While the Liberty Party in Indiana achieved its greatest successes in 1844 and was powerful at the local level in one or two counties, it was never particularly large or successful. It failed to achieve the abolition of the state's discriminatory black laws and Democrats remained in control of State politics until 1860.⁵¹ In every major election, Indiana still had the fewest total Liberty Party votes of any of the Northwestern states, save sparsely populated Iowa and Wisconsin.⁵² Though it received relatively few votes, what votes it did receive were heavily concentrated in a few counties and townships. What explains the relative weakness of the Liberty Party within the state and the concentration of Liberty Party voters in a few small areas?

Weakness of the Liberty Party in Indiana

The Liberty Party was unsuccessful in Indiana for two main reasons. First, Indiana's population immigrated largely from the South and brought with them favorable attitudes towards that region's "peculiar institution". However, Indiana still had a sizeable population of Quakers that could have formed a substantial anti-slavery movement if not for a schism which drove the majority of Quakers away from Abolitionism. The Liberty Party in Indiana was weak both because there were few

⁵⁰ Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom: The Liberty Party in the Old Northwest*, 64.

⁵¹ Johnson, *The Liberty Party, 1840-1848: Antislavery Third-party Politics in the United States*, 215.

⁵² Smith, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Old Northwest*, 325.

people predisposed to support abolition, and because it lost the support of those few.

The Anti-Slavery movement within Indiana is atypical among anti-slavery movements in the Old-Northwest due to its small size and its position in the mid-eastern rather than northern part of the state. As sectional tension between the Northeast and the South increased, the Northwest, with its rapidly growing population, was positioned to “decide the political balance of the country.” The Old Northwest was populated by settlers from both the Eastern and Southern United states who were often at odds politically, and so the sectional battle between North and South played out within the Old Northwest. In this battle “the institution of slavery and the right of free blacks often became merely another point of contention between rival cultural and religious groups.”⁵³ Supporters of abolitionism were usually migrants from the north-east who settled primarily in the northern portion of the Old-Northwest States. Indiana saw very limited settlement by Northerners who stayed away “due to swamps, bad reputation and land speculators.”⁵⁴ What little support there was for abolitionism in Indiana came primarily from Quakers, many of whom had migrated out of the South and settled in eastern Indiana, primarily in Wayne, Henry, and Randolph Counties.⁵⁵

Indiana Quakers took progressive stances on racial equality but were divided over anti-slavery organization. The Indiana Yearly Meeting had condemned the negrophobic colonization schemes of some anti-slavery groups which they

⁵³ Ibid, 4.

⁵⁴ Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom: The Liberty Party in the Old Northwest*, 4.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 12.

termed “the unrighteous work of expatriation”, and issued condemnation of the states racist anti-black laws in 1831.⁵⁶ However, this anti-slavery sentiment did not translate into the creation of anti-slavery organizations. While Ohio had 120 anti-slavery societies with ten thousand members between them by 1836,⁵⁷ Indiana had only eight anti-slavery societies reporting to the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1838.⁵⁸ While some Quaker meetings took anti-slavery stances, the Indiana Yearly Meeting issued statements against the formation of independent anti-slavery societies and “cautioned against joining “with others not of our society” lest the standing of Friends as a “peculiar people” separate from “the world” be compromised.”⁵⁹ Quaker anxieties about forming separate anti-slavery societies were not eased by the fact that Arnold Buffum, who was tasked with establishing these societies in Indiana, had been disowned by eastern Quakers “and had come west pursued by letters and traveling Quaker Ministers warning against him as an infidel and deceiver.”⁶⁰

Quaker opposition to political anti-slavery intensified in 1840 when the leaders of the Indiana Yearly Meeting “issued a statement condemning membership in antislavery societies, and a year later it advised that local meetinghouses be closed to

⁵⁶ Thomas D. Hamm et al., "Moral Choices: Two Indiana Quaker Communities and the Abolitionist Movement." *Indiana Magazine of History* 87 (1991), 119.

⁵⁷ Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom: The Liberty Party in the Old Northwest*, 12.

⁵⁸ Smith, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Old Northwest*, 14.

⁵⁹ Hamm et al., "Moral Choices," 119.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 120.

antislavery gatherings.”⁶¹ This move was met not with outrage by the *Protectionist*, but with a subdued letter that expressed appreciation for the long history of Quaker anti-slavery and dismay at the closing of the meetinghouses which it claimed were vital instruments for the spread of abolitionism.⁶² Local abolitionists understood the importance of the Yearly Meeting to their cause and seemed to prefer not to push the issue at the time, but this would not last. Increasing tensions between abolitionist and non-abolitionist Friends would ignite over the visit of Henry Clay to Richmond, causing the Indiana Separation of 1842.

On October 1, 1842 soon to be Whig presidential candidate Henry Clay visited Richmond to the great delight of Whig supporters and many prominent Quakers. His visit coincided with the Society of Friends of Indiana Yearly Meeting and Clay was invited to attend by Elijah Coffin, the clerk of the Yearly Meeting. During his visit local abolitionist Hiram Mendenhall delivered a petition with some two thousand signature requesting Henry Clay to manumit his slaves. Clay delivered a stinging rebuttal that was applauded by the gathered crowd and Elijah Coffin informed Clay that the Yearly Meeting did not support the petition.⁶³ Shortly afterwards the Yearly Meeting removed its abolitionist members and declared that no abolitionists could hold leadership positions. Abolitionist friends therefore were separated from the Yearly Meeting and formed their own Indiana Yearly Meeting of Anti-Slavery Friend⁶⁴ This

⁶¹ Ibid, 121.

⁶² Arnold Buffum “Friend” *Protectionist* October 7, 1841.

⁶³ Ryan Jordan, *The Indiana Separation of 1842 and the Limits of Quaker Anti-Slavery*, 1.

⁶⁴ Hamm et al., "Moral Choices," 120.

division alienated a large portion of the demographic that was most likely to support anti-slavery within Indiana and contributed to the weakness of the Liberty Party.

It is difficult to explain why some Quakers took up political abolitionism while others condemned membership in anti-slavery societies. Thomas Drake argues in *Quakers and Slavery in America* that the importance of trade with the South was responsible for the unwillingness of Indiana Quakers to take strong anti-slavery positions.⁶⁵ This explanation was also advanced by contemporary Quakers, who saw the avarice of wealthy Quakers as the explanation for their support of slavery. The *Free Labor Advocate* published a lengthy dialogue between a Quaker merchant and a southern slave-owner in which the slave-owner exposes the hypocrisy of the merchant in selling slave made goods, and the inconsistency of buying slave goods with the Quaker practice of avoiding the purchase of other goods obtained through force, such as prizes from profiteers. Finally, the two discuss the enormous profit margins available on slave made goods, estimating it at 25% and calculating the Quakers profit from cotton alone to be some \$12,500 annually. The dialogue clearly implies that “body” Friends (those who stayed part of the yearly meeting after it expelled the abolitionists in 1842) are hypocrites who undermine the anti-slavery cause due to their lust for profits and their desire to “procure the conveniences, comforts, and necessities of life.”⁶⁶ That Elijah Coffin, clerk of the Yearly Meeting during the separation, was

⁶⁵ Hamm et al., "Moral Choices," 121.

⁶⁶“Dialogue”, *Free Labor Advocate*, August 24, 1844.

himself a storeowner and a banker, would have made it obvious to local Quakers who the attack was targeting.⁶⁷

Though Drake and contemporary Quakers emphasized the role of wealth in determining an individual's positions on abolitionism, a quantitative case study of Indiana Quaker communities at Spiceland and Duck Creek during the 1842 separation brings this theory into question. In this study, Hamm et al concluded that "the decision to become an abolitionist was not a function of wealth or property—economically, Anti-Slavery Friends were a cross section of their communities."⁶⁸ The study similarly discards length of residence in the community and kinship ties as determinative factors, believing that only age and a commitment to the strict observance of Quaker Discipline had significant. Because adherence to discipline was primarily a personal choice and no other sociological characteristics correlate strongly with Anti-Slavery positions, Hamm et al conclude that "decisions about separation are explicable only by individual conscience."⁶⁹

Yet if there is no factor other than individual conscience to explain whether Indiana Quakers chose to support abolitionism, what explains the tendency of Liberty Party voters in Quaker dominated Eastern Indiana to be strongly concentrated in small townships? Within Wayne County "the relatively small townships of New Garden, Perry and Greene accounted for over 70 percent of Wayne's Liberty vote."⁷⁰ This

⁶⁷ Elijah Coffin, *The Life of Elijah Coffin; with a Reminiscence*, (Cincinnati: E. Morgan & Sons, 1863), 22.

⁶⁸ Hamm et al., "Two Quaker Communities," 154.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 154.

⁷⁰ Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom: The Liberty Party in the Old Northwest*, 63.

phenomenon was not limited to Indiana, small townships produced the majority of Liberty votes in some areas in Ohio and Michigan.⁷¹ If the decision to support political abolitionism was a private moral choice then why did so many people in these towns make the same choice? Vernon Volpe offers a community based explanation, concluding that “in the Northwest the Liberty Party commitment reflected group loyalty, not simply many acts of individuals.”⁷² Volpe rejects attempts to explain Liberty Party voting as a product of individual interests. The support of entire communities for the Liberty Party meant, as the study of Duckland and Spiceland shows, that its appeal was felt by those of disparate class and social status, not just one group within the community. While individual moral choices may not have been influenced by the ownership of wealth, the public choices of other individuals in a community (and voting was public at this time), strongly influenced individual conscience.

Rather than attempting to characterize the individuals who voted for the Liberty Party we should attempt to characterize the communities in which these individuals were concentrated. New Garden, Perry, and Greene were all smaller, rural communities while Richmond, the county seat and commercial center was important enough to host a presidential candidate. Richmond Quakers would have sacrificed their city’s prestige had they joined with the radical Liberty Party, and as a county seat they had more commercial connections with the South. Peripheral rural communities had less to lose by taking radical anti-slavery position, and could use Liberty voting as a

⁷¹ Ibid, 65.

⁷² Vernon L. Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom: The Liberty Party in the Old Northwest, 1838-1848*. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1990), 64.

way to make moral critiques of the more prosperous commercial centers.

Though the Liberty Party was a fringe movement everywhere in the United States, its weakness within Indiana is particularly striking. The majority of the population was sympathetic to slavery and only a tenth of the usually staunch anti-slavery Quakers were willing to participate in political abolitionism.⁷³ Though the Liberty Party was a political party that was formed with discrete political goals the weakness of the anti-slavery movement in Indiana combined with the hostility towards abolitionism exhibited by candidates for each of the major parties meant it had no real political power outside of a few county elections. Though it could not influence state politics the Liberty Party still served a prominent role in the lives of its members by allowing them to participate in the political system while still avoiding the taint of slavery.

Freedom from Other Men's Sins

Liberty Men were aware of the weakness of their party and its inability to wield real political power in Indiana. When a wildly optimistic set of calculations emerged projecting exponential Liberty Party growth and its eventual victory, the *Philanthropist* and the *Free Labor Advocate* printed an article refuting these numbers and reminding Liberty men “they must calculate on a hard and protracted battle.”⁷⁴ Despite its political futility, the Liberty Party endured because it accomplished the moral goals of its members by allowing them to participate in the political system without being implicated in the sin of slavery.

⁷³ Hamm et al., “Two Quaker Communities,” 120.

⁷⁴ “Wrong Calculation”, *Free Labor Advocate*, February 23, 1844.

The Liberty Party's goal in preserving the moral purity of its members was central in its rhetoric. The first issue of the *Free Labor Advocate* summarizes its raison d'être thusly;

Believing that this is a subject which should engage the serious attention of all those who desire to escape the guilt of partaking of other men's sins. We propose to establish a periodical, to be entitled the "FREE LABOR ADVOCATE"⁷⁵

Curiously this organ of the Liberty Party does not mention the abolition of slavery in its statement of purpose. Though Henry H. Way, the *Advocate's* editor at the time, is sure to emphasize the papers role in providing moral purity, he alludes only to the "establishment of a correct public sentiment leading to righteous public action" when discussing slavery.⁷⁶ This is in keeping with the positions adopted by the Indiana Liberty party, which denied that the abolition of slavery could be accomplished politically since it was not within the power of congress.

This interpretation of the constitution was an issue of contention for Indiana abolitionists. At the 1838 convention the Indiana Anti-Slavery Society had accepted every declaration of the American Anti-Slavery Society except the one which "concede[d] that congress, under the present national compact, has no right to interfere with any of the slave states, in relation with this momentous subject" which was stricken out. While the Indiana Anti-Slavery Society claimed that congress could abolish slavery in the states, or at least refused to admit that it could not, the Indiana Liberty Party surrendered that power. The Indiana

⁷⁵ Henry H Way, *Free Labor Prospectus*, February 8, 1841.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

State Liberty Convention of 1844⁷⁷ and a Wayne County Liberty Convention in 1843⁷⁸ both included resolutions which denied that congress had any power to abolish slavery in the states. The Liberty Party therefore limited itself to the separation of the federal government from the sin of slavery through the abolition of slavery in the territories, and the prevention of the slave trade in federally owned waters. Both goals were designed to remove northerners from the guilt of slavery, rather than abolish slavery itself.

Voting for the Liberty Party was, therefore, about absolving oneself from sin, rather than accomplishing discrete political goals. When the Liberty Party undermined Whig success in Indiana's fifth district they did not lament the victory of a pro-slavery Democrat, but rather celebrated the unwillingness of abolitionists to be complicit in slavery. The *Protectionist* proclaimed "we regard this however as an encouraging indication, under the circumstances, that abolitionists are no longer solicitous, so to cast their vote for the "least of two evils."⁷⁹ When forced by the National Liberty Party to engage in political pragmatism, the leaders of the Indiana Liberty Party did so with a reluctance approaching on disdain. Benjamin Stanton, when publishing his support for John P. Hale as the party's nominee in 1847, added that he did so "not with any overwhelming desire that he should be nominated" and that there were "many other men whom we could support with equal cheerfulness." Stanton makes it clear that he would much prefer

⁷⁷ "Indiana State Liberty Convention", *Philanthropist*, June 26, 1844, 02. American Periodicals.

⁷⁸ "Liberty Meeting in Indiana", *Philanthropist*, July 19 1843.

⁷⁹ Arnold Buffum, "Congressional Election", *Protectionist* June 16, 1841.

Elihu Burritt, an anti-slavery activist, for the nominee but that “*he is too great and noble a man for the office of President [sic] of the United States. It would be requiring him to descend from his present position to accept of that station.*”⁸⁰ Chase was nominated because he was a member of the U.S. Senate, and therefore a practiced politician with a national stage on which to present the party’s views. To many, a prominent anti-slavery senator would be the ideal choice to lead the Liberty Party. That this nomination was so deeply disliked by Stanton, who favored Burritt, points to the emphasis on religious purification over political pragmatism present in the Liberty Party.

In addition to purifying its members of the national sin of slavery, the Liberty Party and the Anti-Slavery movement in general was also intertwined with various reform movements and an effort to promote public morals and respectability. Henry H. Way pledged that the *Free Labor Advocate* “will tend to elevate and improve the tone of public morals, and increase the aspirations after holiness without which no man can see the Lord.”⁸¹ True to his word, the *Free Labor Advocate* published moral instruction for children, religious themed poetry and warnings against dueling. Stanton’s favorite targets for condemnation were the behavior of Southerners and Henry Clay. He was able to skewer both when he published an anecdote about two Southern girls dueling each other in New Orleans and blamed Clay for encouraging this behavior.⁸² The *Protectionist* for its part, focused far less on the issue of dueling, though it advocated general non-violence, but

⁸⁰ Benjamin Stanton “Mr. Hale’s Nomination”, *Free Labor Advocate*, June 24, 1847.

⁸¹ Henry H. Way, “Free Labor Prospectus”, *Protectionist*, February 8, 1841.

⁸² “Liberty in Vermont”, *Free Labor Advocate*, August 28, 1844.

rather on support for teetotalers and their abstention from alcohol.

The Liberty Party was a political organization with no hope of accomplishing its political objectives. Its main appeal lay not in the promise of political change, but in providing Indiana abolitionists with a way to purify themselves from the sin of slavery. Some historians have seized on this aspect of the Liberty Party, calling it the “school of narrowness” and arguing that the emphasis on political purity precluded political pragmatism and cooperation with other parties. But Liberty Party members eventually did compromise, and when circumstances changed abandoned their “narrow” morally pre-occupied party in support of the more pragmatic and politically oriented Free-Soil Party.

Compromise and Free Soil Fusion

In 1848 the Liberty Party would disband and its abolitionist membership would become part of the Free Soil Party which tolerated slavery in the South but advocated federal prohibitions against the extension of Slavery into newly acquired territories. This dramatic transformation surprised historian Theodore Clarke Smith, who called it a “wonder” that “so few of the faithful refused” to join the Free Soil party.⁸³ Yet if one examines the behavior of the Liberty Party rank-and-file in Indiana from 1836-1838 one finds a remarkable willingness to compromise. The Mexican-American War, the annexation of Texas, and the prospect of the extension of slavery made Liberty Men willing to compromise and gave them common cause with non-abolitionist Northerners in the form of the Wilmot Proviso.

⁸³ Smith, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Old Northwest*, 145.

Elected in part due to the Liberty Party splitting the Whig vote in New York, President Polk had raised the prospect of expanding slave territory through the conquest of parts of Mexico and the annexation of Texas. In response David Wilmot, a northern Democrat, introduced a rider on a bill appropriating funding for the Mexican-American War. Though this failed, the Wilmot Proviso was taken up by a variety of Northerners who feared the extension of Slavery into new territory would produce a power imbalance between the North and the South. Liberty men became fearful that slavery would be extended and were willing to compromise and give up abolition in favor of non-extension. The Mexican American War moderated Indiana abolitionists so that they were willing to be politically pragmatic, but also gave them an issue around which a larger coalition could be formed.

Indiana Liberty Men did not immediately seek to form a new political organization, but rather returned to their earlier tactic of questioning existing candidates and withdrawing if they were willing to support non-extension. In Indiana's fifth district the Liberty Party sent a letter to both the Whig and Democratic candidate, asking if they would vote to allow a new slave state (i.e. annex Texas), oppose all territorial acquisition unless it is the purchase of free territory (approve the Wilmot Proviso), vote for immediate peace with Mexico, and refuse to vote for a slaveholder for President. The Democratic candidate, Judge Wick only claimed to technically be in agreement with the second by claiming that territory acquired from Mexico was not conquest but rather "an atonement for debts justly due."⁸⁴ The Whig candidate, Mr. McCarty, agreed on the Wilmot Proviso and peace

⁸⁴ Wick, William. "Judge Wick's Letter" *Indiana State Sentinel*, July 15, 1847.

with Mexico, but disagreed over the annexation of Texas and voting for a slave holding president.⁸⁵ Despite McCarty only agreeing to half of their proposals, the Liberty Party candidate, Mr DePuy, bowed out because:

"Those who desired that the abolitionists should support Mr. McCarty, in order to have the district represented by a Wilmot Proviso Man would vote for him if I should continue to be a candidate ... Those who are not willing to vote for Mr. McCarty can still vote for some well-known abolitionist and I shall be saved the extreme mortification of being the nominee of a party, a large portion of whose votes will be given to another man."⁸⁶

This was not the only instance of Liberty Party members abandoning abolition and their party for non-extension and political viability. In July of 1847, Liberty Party Candidate T.R. Stanford withdrew his candidacy in favor of allowing Whig Candidate C.B. Smith to run instead because Smith would "oppose the annexation of any territory to the United States, without a provision prohibiting *Slavery* therein."⁸⁷ On the 29th of June in 1847 another Liberty Convention decided that, rather than nominate an independent candidate, they would question the Whig and Democratic candidates and if these candidates

⁸⁵ "Mr. McCarty's Letter to the Abolition Committee" *Indiana State Sentinel*, June 30, 1847.

⁸⁶ *Indiana State Sentinel*, July 15, 1847.

⁸⁷ T.R. Stanford, "Communication", *Free Labor Advocate*, July 1, 1847.

answered satisfactorily on the issue of non-extension, the Liberty Convention would throw their support behind them.⁸⁸

This shift towards accepting non-extension over abolition was greeted with outrage by Benjamin Stanton, editor of the *Free Labor Advocate*, who called it “a great blunder.” Stanton accused the Liberty Men in Indianapolis who supported McCarty of having “given up the idea of maintaining their distinctive Principles.”⁸⁹ Some Liberty Men in Indianapolis seemed to agree with Stanton, and so Stanford’s replacement as Liberty Party Candidate, Levi Bowman, still received 163 votes. While there was willingness to compromise and an attempt to find common ground in non-extension in 1847, some still clung to the abolition oriented Liberty Party.

National events would change this by creating the possibility of a broader third party based on the principle of non-extension. In New York the Democrats split over factional grievances and Democratic candidate Lewis Cass’s stance on the Wilmot Proviso. This withdrawal was mirrored by portions of the Democratic Party in the Northwestern states.⁹⁰ The Whig nomination of General Taylor and his unwillingness to take a stance in favor of the Wilmot Proviso produced similar outrage among anti-slavery Whigs. A national Free Soil Convention was called in Buffalo to form a new party based on the non-extension of slavery. The convention was dominated by former Democrats who made a deal with prominent Liberty men. The Convention would nominate Van Buren, a Democrat, in exchange for a platform which made it the Federal government’s duty to abolish

⁸⁸ Benjamin Stanton, “Congressional, *Free Labor Advocate*, July 7th 1847.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*

⁹⁰ Smith, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Old Northwest*, 124.

slavery where it was able, meaning the territories and the District of Colombia.⁹¹

Indiana Liberty party leaders S.C. Stevens and S. Harding made the decision to endorse a merger with the Free Soil Party, and the Indiana Free Soil Party met in Indianapolis in August to nominate a state ticket.⁹² Benjamin Stanton, who previously had condemned compromise and the adoption of non-extension, converted to the Free Soil Party after the Buffalo convention. Historian Vernon Volpe has explained Stanton's conversion through his correspondence with Free Soil leader Salmon P. Chase and emphasized Stanton's role in bringing the Liberty Party in Indiana into the Free Soil movement. However, Stanton's stature in the movement had declined by 1847-8. He had been struggling to publish the *Free Labor Advocate* due both to personal illness and a dwindling number of subscribers.⁹³ His abrupt conversion from condemning non-extension to an embrace of the Free Soil party following the Buffalo Convention can be explained by both the personal diplomacy of Salmon P. Chase, and his own exhaustion and poor health. A sick and aged Stanton likely found it easier to accept the transition to Free Soil rather than persist in the dwindling Liberty Party.

Liberty Men largely supported the Free Soil Party in the 1848 elections. However, state elections in Indiana occurred in August, only a few months after the Liberty and Free Soil parties had fused, so there was not time to have conventions and nominate candidates in every county. In the confusion the Free Soil label was claimed by Whig and Democratic candidates who

⁹¹ Ibid, 140.

⁹² Ibid, 140.

⁹³ Benjamin Stanton, "My Health and Prospects", *Free Labor Advocate*, April 21, 1848.

advocated non-extension.⁹⁴ George Evans, a democrat, was elected to the State Senate in traditionally Whig Union County by becoming a Free Soil supporter. In the same county the Whig representative for the Indiana general assembly, Dr. G.C. Starbuck, also declared his support for the Liberty Party and won. In the Quaker dominated Fourth District, the Free Soil Party was able to elect George W. Julian to Congress as part of a contentious campaign which Julian described by saying the “worst passions of humanity were set on fire among the Whigs.”⁹⁵ While Van Buren received only 5% of the vote in Indiana and failed to carry a single state nationally, the Free Soil movement won more local elections than the Liberty Party ever did.⁹⁶

After the 1848 election, the Free Soil Party declined, and by 1850 had suffered major losses due to the willingness of Indiana Whigs and Democrats to take up non-extension without joining a third party.⁹⁷ That year the only Free Soil Candidate elected was Isaac Kinley from Henry County, and few remained in the movement besides die-hard liberty followers.⁹⁸ The Compromise of 1850 briefly revived the Free Soil Party in Indiana for the 1851 Campaign. In 1854 Indiana joined the Anti-Nebraska movement that would become the Republican Party, but Free Soil men played a distinctly minor role in comparison with Whigs in both the formation of the Anti-Nebraska

⁹⁴ Smith, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Old Northwest*, 157.

⁹⁵ Julian, *Political Recollections*, 66.

⁹⁶ Johnson, *The Liberty Party, 1840-1848: Antislavery Third-party Politics in the United States*, 214.

⁹⁷ Johnson, 215.

⁹⁸ Smith, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Old Northwest*, 193.

movement and the governing of the control of the Republican Party parties.

Conclusion

The Liberty Party in Indiana must be understood as a product of both the religious ideals of its members and the political circumstances in which it was formed. Its members were deeply concerned with their own personal piety, but they also had clear political goals that the demographic composition of their state made unachievable. The overwhelming focus of the Liberty Party in Indiana on liberating its members from other men's sins should be understood as a response to, as well as a cause of, the Party's political ineffectiveness. The Liberty Party's decision to fuse with the Free Soil movement is not as "miraculous" or unprecedented as has previously been suggested once the overwhelming religiosity of the Liberty Party is explained as a product of political circumstance. After the Mexican American War created the possibility of a broader coalition, Liberty Party members actively worked to build alliances with Whig and Democratic supporters of the Wilmot Proviso in places where the Liberty Party was weak (Indianapolis) and where it was relatively strong (Union County). Far from being uncompromising religious zealots, Liberty Men in Indiana took the opportunity to join a more politically powerful organization even when it compromised their moral stand against slavery.

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