

Story of mutual support

Owen Lovejoy and Hampshire Colony Church

It was from the pulpit of the Hampshire Colony Congregational Church that Rev. Owen Lovejoy began his fight against slavery. It was a fight that was to lead to his indictment by the Grand Jury for harboring two black women; to his election to the State Legislature; and to five years of national recognition in the U.S. House of Representatives.

His coming to Princeton, as he said in a letter to the Church, was "Providential." Lovejoy was born June 6, 1811 on a farm in Kennebeck County, Maine. His father, Daniel Lovejoy, was a Congregational preacher, as well as a farmer.

With instruction from his parents only, Lovejoy prepared himself to teach school. He earned enough money by that endeavor to finance a couple years at Bowdoin College.

In 1836 he migrated to Alton, Illinois, to be with his older brother, Elijah Parish, and under him prepared for the ministry. The two brothers had been together less than a year when the storm of pro-slavery broke out over Elijah's head.

The elder Lovejoy had opposed the pro-slavery movement and published his views in his anti-slavery newspaper. An outrageous mob of pro-slavery rioters murdered him in 1837 and disposed of his printing press in the bottom of the Mississippi.

Over his brother's lifeless form, Owen Lovejoy vowed to carry on his brother's fight for human liberty. The first seventeen years of his fight

were spent at the Hampshire Colony Congregational Church in Princeton.

The following legend of his providential coming to the Church and to the community was quoted in *The Lovejoy Shrine* written by George Owen Smith in 1949. The speaker of this passage was said to be Harvey P. Leeper, a close friend of Lovejoy's:

..Shortly after his brother's funeral, he himself made application to the Episcopal bishop, under whom he had studied for an assignment to a parish. The bishop was willing to grant the request, but only upon the condition that there should be no strong talk against slavery from his pulpit. To this proposition Lovejoy replied that he would not have his right of free speech restricted even by the Church, that all the bishops in the world could not keep him from expressing himself against the enslavement of his fellowmen, and that if he had to lock up his lips to get an Episcopal Church he would not have one. Naturally enough his next step was to offer his service to some Congregational Church, the denomination of his father's faith. Having heard that vacancies existed in churches of this denomination at Rock Island and Princeton, he mounted a horse and started northward. After several days of tedious travel he came to a fork in the road, one way leading to Rock Island, the other to Princeton. To which

place should he go? He knew very little about either town or its church. It was at this point that destiny was allowed to play its part. Dropping the bridle reins, he said "giddap" and allowed the horse to choose a road.

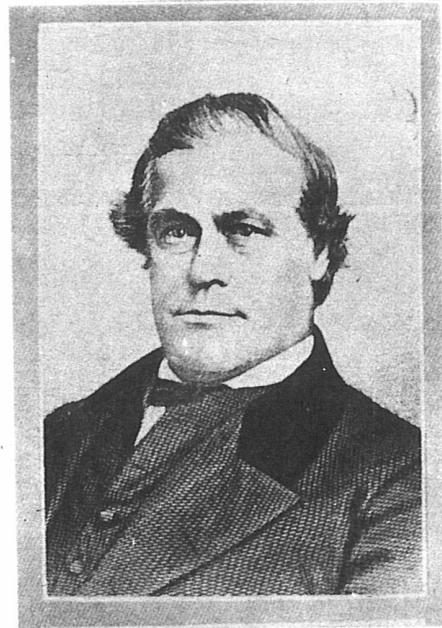
The truth is that Owen Lovejoy's arrival to Princeton was not entirely controlled by fate, as this legendary account would indicate.

He was called by the Hampshire Colonists to preach, however, Lovejoy himself remarked in a letter that his coming here was "providential." Perhaps it is from his use of such a word that the legend evolved. At any rate, he arrived here in the fall of 1838.

Rev. Lucian Farnham, the first pastor of Hampshire Colony Congregational Church, had developed throat trouble the previous summer. He asked to be released for a season and Rev. Owen Lovejoy was called to supply his pulpit for six months.

At the end of the six months, Rev. Farnham was still too ill to take up his role as pastor and was dismissed at his own request. Lovejoy was at once asked to become pastor of the church and in August, 1839 he accepted the call.

At that time the 10-year-old community had a population of 200 settlers, most of which were from New England. Even before the arrival of Lovejoy, the founders of the Hampshire - Colony Congregational Church, who had come to this part of the country with the intention of implanting moralistic



OWEN LOVEJOY

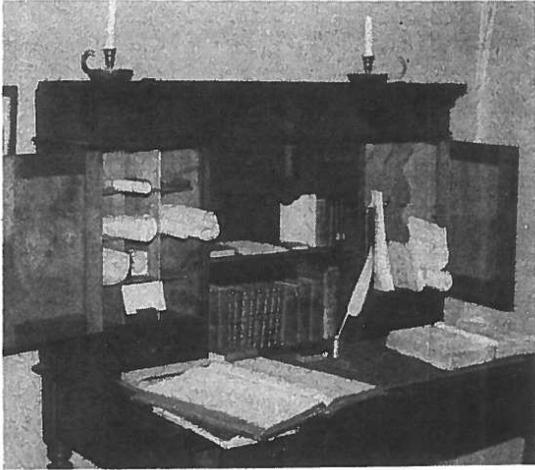
strongholds, were anti-slavery in sentiment.

Their community, so recently founded, maintained well organized churches, as well as a school. Already a civil-minded community at the age of 10, Princeton was the perfect foundation for Lovejoy's oratorical devotions and for the human freedom movement to take hold.

In short, although Owen (CONTINUED ON PAGE 11)

Lovejoy's celebratedness may have put Princeton on the map; the relationship between the preacher and his church were one of mutual support. Without the freedom of speech which the Hampshire Colony Congregational church afforded him, his abolitionist's vigor may have been somewhat stifled.

Lovejoy and his Church fought for a cause



In the den of the Lovejoy home stands the desk which belonged to him as minister of the Hampshire Colony Church and as Congressman

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9)

This is not to say that the church and its community were of one mind. The majority, if not in total agreement, were at least open to Lovejoy's views. Among Lovejoy's congregational and fellow community members, however, there existed strong differences of opinion on the slavery issue.

Those who heard Lovejoy did not at all adopt his views from the start, but this fact did not trouble the stalwart leader. On one occasion in his early ministry, while preaching a strong anti-slavery sermon, several congregationalists left the church building to display their indignation.

As the group walked out the door Lovejoy paused and called after them, "I shall preach this doctrine 'till you like it, and then I shall preach it because you will like it." Reports say that the pastor did just that. It should be noted that Lovejoy remained pastor for 17 years, because the Church supported him in his approach.

Within years of his outspoken sermons, the powerful personality of the man led more and more persons to come out boldly against slavery. Princeton eventually became known locally and nationally as a safe harbor for runaway slaves. Lovejoy's own home came to be one of the most active stations on the underground railroad.

The home that became known as the union station of the underground railroad was, however, a harbor for runaway slaves before Lovejoy became the master of it. Upon coming to Princeton, Lovejoy boarded with the Butler Denham family, knowing that their sentiments were anti-slavery in tone.

After Denham's death, Lovejoy married his widow, Eunice. She too was involved with moving slaves to freedom.

of the United States. From this spot came the fiery abolitionist speeches for which the man was famous.

with whom he came in contact.

Although Illinois law made it a misdemeanor for any person to harbor a slave owing service or labor to any person, Lovejoy persisted in aiding any fugitive who crossed his path. Many others in his community did the same. In fact, Princeton, in the early 1840's, was becoming the "nigger stealing" center of the State.

Eventually, a grand jury indictment against Lovejoy was obtained in May, 1843, by W. H. Purple, a state's attorney from Peoria. There were two counts in the indictment; one charging Lovejoy with "harboring, feeding, clothing one said Agnes, a slave," the other for similarly helping another runaway known as Nancy.

If it hadn't been for an accidental disclosure from a witness who was being cross-examined for the prosecution, Lovejoy most likely would have been convicted. The witness, however, commented that the owner of Nancy was taking her from Kentucky to Missouri

through Illinois.

Lovejoy pounced on the slip-up, arguing that as long as the owner had voluntarily brought his slave into free territory, she then and there became free. The law he cited for this point was the revised statutes of Illinois (1826-1827) Sec. 148.

The indictment of Lovejoy in 1843, may have been one of his best advantages to becoming a Congressman from the 3rd District of Illinois in 1856. In 1854 he had been elected to the state legislature.

While in the House he was accused of being a "perjured nigger thief" among other choice epithets. In a speech before Congress in 1859 he proclaimed:

"Anvone who chooses may transform himself into a bloodhound, sniff, and scent, and howl along the path of the fugitive. . . . Sir, I never will do this. I never will degrade my manhood, and stifle the sympathies of human nature. . . ."

The year before he died, Lovejoy witnessed Abraham Lincoln's signature on the Emancipation Proclamation, the final end to which he had dedicated his entire life. Lovejoy himself had introduced the bill in Congress, leading it to this presidential action.

Owen Lovejoy died on March 25, 1864, in Brooklyn, New York. He was buried April 1 in the Oakland Cemetery, in Princeton. In an obituary address by Mr. Ordell, of New York, comments made about

Owen Lovejoy point out the characteristics of his personality that were common to the congregation with whom he made his start:

" . . . Owen Lovejoy was an honest man. In any age of the world this were high praise; but in these degenerate times, when peculation and fraud abound, when the whole nation seems demoralized, such a reputation is of priceless worth."