Local abolitionists faced rage, mob violence

Rev. Levi Spencer came to Bloomington in April 1844, and it's no exaggeration to say that his next four-and-a-half years in McLean County would prove a living hell. During his time here, local residents ostracized, scorned, mocked, vilified, threatened and physically assaulted the good reverend.

Spencer's crime? Advocating the immediate end to slavery and believing in the equality of the races. Even in much of the free North, abolitionists faced a level of vitriol and violence that still has the power to shock.

For Spencer, slavery was a "God-hating and soul-destroying system" that corrupted the nation and gave lie to its professed principles. "Liberty? Solemn mockery! Base hypocrisy!" he wrote in his diary on Independence Day, Jul. 4, 1842. "Three million of our fellow men in the most abject bondage, bought and sold like beasts in the market, right under the American flag." (Spencer's diaries are held at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield.)

Born in 1812 in New York, Spencer and his wife Minerva moved to Illinois in 1839. He left the Presbyterian Church over the slavery issue and became a Congregationalist, where his fervent abolitionism came to define his ministry. He served in Canton, Ill. before coming to Bloomington in the spring of 1844.

The family's residence was on the 200 block of East Grove Street, about where A. Gridley Antiques is today.

Spencer's diaries offer a harrowing account of the menacing mobs that abolitionists faced during his years in Bloomington. On May 30, 1846, the anti-slavery society was denied the county courthouse for a meeting space, so instead they gathered at a commercial workshop somewhere in town. There they listened to a speech by Owen Lovejoy, an abolitionist from Princeton, Ill. He was the younger brother of Elijah Lovejoy, who was killed in Alton, Ill. on Nov. 7, 1837 defending his anti-slavery press from a mob.

"Brother Lovejoy," Spencer recorded in his diary, spoke on the great moral, political and religious question of the day—"human rights and our duty to God and the slave." Near the close of the meeting an ugly crowd gathered outside began pelting the workshop and its windows with eggs. To Spencer's disgust, those that gave implicit consent to these "base and disgraceful proceedings" included "our officers of the peace (so called) and some leading members in our churches."

Spencer also preached and participated in anti-slavery meetings in Mount Hope and Pleasant Hill, two early communities in McLean County with known sympathies to abolitionism. Both small settlements were also stops on the Underground Railroad. In early October 1843, for example, Spencer was in Mount Hope doing his part to assist three fugitive slaves making their way from the "prison house of bondage" to freedom in Canada.

In June 1846, Spencer got word that a Bloomington attorney had offered a $100 reward for anyone who would tar and feather him and then ride him out of town on a rail. At this time, Spencer was despised by the local citizenry for not only his anti-slavery views, but also his vocal and steadfast opposition to the Mexican-American War. As an abolitionist, he viewed the war as little more than an illegal and immoral land grab by slave states to expand their "soul-destroying" institution.

There's more than circumstantial evidence indicating that this unnamed attorney was none other than Asahel Gridley, one of the more influential figures in the growth and development of Bloomington. Gridley, who would go on to make a fortune as a land agent for the Illinois Central Railroad, had such an impact on this area's early history that there's a statue of him on the main floor of the McLean County Museum of History.

On June 12, 1846, a raucous celebration was held in Bloomington as folks bid farewell to a company of men preparing to enlist in the 4th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment and fight in Mexico. That night, as they were about to leave for Springfield, a dozen or so 4th Regiment recruits ran amok targeting local abolitionists, including Spencer and George Dietrich.

Spencer and his family were first terrorized by egg-throwing vandals and then, after midnight, by a large number of thugs prowling about outside their home. At some point they let forth a volley of bricks through several widows causing much property damage, though thankfully there were no injuries to family members huddling in one corner of a room.

"O slavery," Spencer reflected later that day in his diary, "how alarming is thy power, how dangerous and cruel."

Coercion came not only from the rabble, but also from the more respectable corners of the community. "Threats still come to me from a leading member in the M.E. Ch. [Methodist Episcopal Church]," Spencer wrote on June 23, 1846. "He is encouraging mob violence. We know not what to expect. Every noise late at night greatly disturbs my family—Lord protect us."

On Feb. 25, 1847, Asahel Gridley made good on his own threats by assaulting the unarmed minister with a cowhide strap or whip in broad daylight on the "most public street in town." Gridley got in a good lick or two with the "cow hide" before Spencer wisely retreated.

Apart from abolitionism, what had so enraged Gridley was Spencer's visit to Gridley's wife Mary and his sister-in-law Juliet Covell. At the Gridley family home, Spencer talked with the two women "about their souls" before ending the session with prayer. Evidently, having an abolitionist preach and pray with family members was too much for the ill-mannered, hot-tempered and abusive patriarch.

For his part, Spencer reflexively turned the other cheek. "I had not for a moment a feeling of revenge or retaliation," he wrote. "I could pray for him better than anything else." Although the attack "caused much excitement in town," unsurprisingly, there appears to have been no repercussions, legal or otherwise, for Gridley.

Perhaps things cooled down a bit after that, for later that year Spencer observed an increasing tolerance for abolitionists. He happily reported "good attendance" at a Sept. 1, 1847 anti-slavery meeting. "Men are becoming more tame," he added, "so that they do not as formerly take a fit—go mad and froth and foam as much."

In November 1848, Spencer and his family settled in Peoria, and there he led a Congregational church until his passing in 1853 at the age of 41. The cause of death was said to be tuberculosis.

Back in July 1846, during his time in Bloomington, Spencer reflected on the death of a local African-American resident. "Harrison (the colored boy) has gone—yes gone beyond the reach of prejudice and hate." he wrote. "It is a consolation to know that poverty or color of the skin, nor low condition in this world will form any barrier at Heaven's Gate!"

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