



*Free Markets or Free People: Amos A.
Lawrence and the Limits of the
Abolitionist Movement*

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Introduction

Turning points make for appealing narratives. It's satisfying to be able to point to a moment and say, "There. That's when it all changed." Amos Adams Lawrence (1814-1886), Bostonian textile merchant, indulged his inner story-teller when he described such a turning point, a moment of total reinvention, in a letter to his uncle: "We went to bed one night old-fashioned, conservative, Compromise Union Whigs and waked up stark mad abolitionists."¹ Eighteen years before this transformation, Lawrence toured the Southern United States, keeping a travelogue in which he appeared a largely disinterested, often racist observer of slavery who occasionally recognized individuals as evildoers but who refused to denounce the entire system of bondage. Following his 1854 letter proclaiming an overnight change of heart, Lawrence channeled much of his energy and fortune into preventing the spread of slavery. From this narrative, Lawrence appears to have experienced a dramatic turning point. But, like much of history, his story is not so easily categorized. In reality, Lawrence's shift towards abolitionism was quite unremarkable. Like many Northern industrialists, Lawrence continued to have a multi-faceted relationship with the institution, criticizing slavery without recognizing his own dependence on it and opposing its spread on political grounds rather than championing the end to an unethical practice.

Lawrence's eventual abolitionist reputation and his earlier disinterested or racist reactions to slavery are not, then, mutually exclusive or evidence of a complete personal transformation. Rather, when coupled with a look at the society which formed him, they show a nuanced portrait of a man who was both culpable for profiting from slavery and admirable for trying to prevent its spread, a man who was both racist and a self-proclaimed abolitionist. The contradictions of Lawrence and his society are worth studying, not only as a means of understanding this time period and demographic, but as a case study which argues against painting history in broad strokes. Rather than praising people or regions as being heroic and without flaw, or condemning entire generations as evil beyond redemption, it is important to examine the nuances of a society in order to better understand its workings. Understanding such intricacies prevents us from

¹ Robert K. Sutton, "The Wealthy Activist Who Helped Turn 'Bleeding Kansas' Free," Smithsonian.com, last modified August 16, 2017, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/wealthy-activist-who-helped-turn-bleeding-kansas-free-180964494/#hva2twMOC03aLLtd.99>.

viewing current leaders or events as entirely good or evil. Lawrence, through his complicated relationship with slavery, challenges simplified narratives about Northern interactions with the institution and cautions us against viewing history in terms of good and bad, right and wrong, black and white.

Itinerant Industrialist: Amos A. Lawrence's 1836 Trip to the American South

On July 31, 1814, one of Boston's most prominent textile families gained a new member. Perhaps fittingly, Amos A. Lawrence's birth occurred just a few days after one of the deadliest battles of the War of 1812, a war that killed thousands of Americans while giving "a tremendous boost to the cotton goods business."² The mood of ambivalence governing the domestic scene into which he was born, as his nation suffered and his family prospered, mirrors the position Lawrence would come to occupy in society. Throughout his life, he often benefited from practices that inflicted misery upon different sectors of the population, most notably the institution of slavery. While Lawrence ended his life a self-proclaimed abolitionist, he spent many years profiting from slavery without truly confronting its evils. Later in life, Lawrence would put much of his time and fortune into an effort to halt the spread of slavery, yet his early interactions with the system of human bondage seemed to have little effect on Lawrence's actions. This can be seen most clearly during his 1836-1837 trip to the Southern United States. During these travels, Amos A. Lawrence's mostly apathetic views towards slavery, a system from which he was benefitting as the son of a textile manufacturer, were occasionally punctuated by conflicting feelings as he recognized evils in some slave owners yet continued to view African Americans as inferior.

Lawrence's early life was designed to prepare him for continuing his father's financial success. He attended Franklin Academy in Andover, then Harvard University. His father emphasized the importance of his studies saying, "you ought not to feel that there is less for you to do, because I have the means of giving you a start in life; on the contrary, you ought to feel

² Barry Alan Crouch, "In Search of Union: Amos A. Lawrence and the Coming of the Civil War." (PhD diss., The University of New Mexico, 1970), [Page #], <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.bu.edu/docview/302529798?pq-origsite=primo..>, 21

that your duties and responsibilities are greatly increased by this start, and to bring into use all your talents.”³ Shortly after graduating from Harvard, Lawrence began to take action regarding his career by embarking on a tour of the southern and western United States with the intention of establishing business connections. Amos A. Lawrence’s son later explained the trip: “[Lawrence] went in company with two business friends, on a journey through the West and South, to examine credits for Boston firms...and to make business acquaintances throughout the country.”⁴ This account perhaps overemphasizes Lawrence’s business intentions. One of his “business friends” was John Dexter, who was “simply traveling for pleasure,” and while the trip was certainly partly a business venture, it also arose from Lawrence’s desire to “see a part of the United States he had never seen before” and to improve his health.⁵ An examination of Lawrence’s diary from this time reveals important insight into his early interactions with and reactions to slavery. Whatever his motives, Lawrence’s “Journey of 1836,” as he titled his diary, brought him face to face with the realities of slavery, leading him to occasionally recognize evils within the system yet primarily producing little more than indifference.⁶

Lawrence’s personal accounts of his travels reveal his general apathy towards slavery through frequent mentions of the practice as just another part of his Southern experience. Lawrence’s diary reads far more like a travelogue, casually recording his travel experiences, than a societal analysis. Political observations are largely outnumbered by comments on his accommodations (“the boat trembles badly”) or evening activities (“great deal of drinking at the bar”).⁷ His sentences are mostly short and many are fragments simply listing the activities of the day. Scattered throughout these mundane observations are passing references to the presence of slaves in the states he is touring. For example, in Alabama he notes the “use of pepper in spirits here,” and then nonchalantly remarks on seeing “negro women belonging to plantation dressed well going in pairs to the market.”⁸ By the next sentence, he is back to his travel plans: “Start

³ Ibid., 43.

⁴ William Lawrence, *Life of Amos A. Lawrence: With Extracts From His Diary And Correspondence* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1888), 26.

⁵ Crouch, “In Search of Union,” 53.

⁶ Lawrence, Amos A. Ms. N-1559, Massachusetts Historical Society. Boston, Massachusetts.

⁷ Ibid, December 31, 1836, Jan 3, 1837.

⁸ Ibid, January, 3, 1837.

from Montgomery at nine o'clock in the evening.”⁹ In one case, he describes “meet[ing] wagons full of negro children and women” just a few sentences before complimenting a restaurant for its “French clock” and “good dinner.”¹⁰ These brief allusions to slavery are interesting for two reasons. On the one hand, their placement as just another part of his day suggests that he is not profoundly moved by the slaves that he encounters. Rather, he assigns them the same level of importance or recognition as an unusual beverage or a pleasant meal. However, the frequency with which Lawrence chooses to record observing slaves suggests that they did hold some significance in his travels. He does not comment on passing white people, yet he often relates passing a group of African Americans, even if no interaction occurs. In this way, Lawrence shows that he is at least somewhat interested in the presence of slaves and considers them important to an account of his travels.

Occasionally, Lawrence reveals that he not only recognizes slavery as noteworthy, but even shows an awareness of the evils within the system. In one of his longest anecdotes regarding slaves, Lawrence tells of an African American man named Jim who lost both of his legs. Jim explains to Lawrence that “his master did not treat him well” and “one day he whipped him so severely” that he ran away, spent a frigid night in the woods, and “was found and carried home and his legs taken off at the stumps.”¹¹ In choosing to take the time to document his interaction with this African American man, to write the man’s story rather than simply noting his appearance as a novelty, Lawrence shows that he has at least some concept of the horror and brutality demonstrated by slave owners. However, this account of exceptional cruelty might also suggest that Lawrence did not see all slave owners as worthy of blame. Lawrence establishes Jim’s story as more than just a routine anecdote by recording his name. This sets Jim apart from the many other unnamed slaves whom Lawrence references in passing, showing that he has somewhat of an emotional connection to Jim. Lawrence’s conflicting views towards slavery are once more made apparent. He pities Jim and criticizes this master who “did not treat [his slaves] well,” yet in portraying this incident as an anomaly, not a representation of most slave-owners, Lawrence

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, January 10, 1837.

¹¹ Ibid.

denies the inherent evil of slavery. Lawrence's account is that of a bad person, not an immoral institution.

Lawrence later criticizes slave-practitioners through his negative portrayal of a slave trader. "This slave dealer lived in Virginia," he writes, "where he raided negroes and bought them for the Southern market- a low trade even in the slave states."¹² Here, Lawrence not only condemns the slave trade, but tentatively begins to denounce slavery itself through the qualifier "even," which suggests that slave states have lower moral standards than non-slave states. Lawrence goes on to suggest that the man knew his actions were deplorable saying, "he was a stout man of fifty with a bold look as though he was thinking that he was despised and meant to brave it out."¹³ In this way, Lawrence shows that he has some uneasiness regarding the slave trade.

Despite Lawrence's occasional criticism of slave owners and traders, his diary reveals an overarching prejudice against people of color. In one account, Lawrence plays into the simple-minded, animalistic stereotypes of African Americans by describing an accidental encounter with a "negro making love," giving no other context as to how he came about this intimate moment.¹⁴ If Lawrence was embarrassed at having witnessed this private situation, he relieves himself from guilt by turning quickly to racial stereotypes. Rather than leaving the couple or apologizing for his intrusion, Amos judges the people involved as wrong, feels entitled to scold them, and describes them in a belittling way. When Amos and his traveling companions "tell [the man] to desist," he "grins and says 'it is getting towards sunset... I can't help it.'"¹⁵ This portrayal of an African American man who "can't help" giving into his carnal desires perpetuates the bestial stereotype leveled against black men as part of the slave-owning mentality which excused subhuman treatment of slaves.

Lawrence's racist tendencies are most obviously articulated when describing a trip to a market in South Carolina. Lawrence writes of the African Americans there:

¹² Ibid. November 9, 1836

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. Ibid, January 10, 1837.

¹⁵ Ibid.

“Some old black women were sitting around a fire with their pipes, talking and laughing. The negroes seem very happy here...I conversed with an old negro who was brought from Africa...He says they live very well in the old negro country. They fight, but they are free. Says there are a great many in the city from Africa. I think the Africans half monkeys, he cannot speak more like a man than a monkey could if he should speak.”¹⁶

This quote is disturbing on a number of levels. The modern reader will immediately notice Lawrence’s racist comparison of African Americans to monkeys, largely due to this specific black man’s difficulty speaking English. With Lawrence’s education, which involved the study of Greek for eleven hours a day, he surely understood the difficulty in picking up a new language, especially as slaves did not have access to the best schools and private tutors a textile fortune could buy.¹⁷ Lawrence’s categorization of African Americans as not entirely human is indicative of sentiments towards black people throughout the United States’ history. The U.S. Constitution revealed the new country’s view of slaves as sub-human when it reduced them to “three-fifths” of a person for purposes of representation and direct taxes.¹⁸ Historian Edward Baptist explains that in order to maintain economic power, nineteenth century slave owners viewed their slaves as “disembodied, mechanical hands.”¹⁹ Over time, many Americans justified the oppression of black people by fabricating a bestial, sub-human reputation for African Americans, especially black men. Such an outlook led to the widespread acceptance of lynching following the freeing of slaves, as whites sought to re-establish a subhuman identity for blacks after they were no longer legally property.²⁰ In categorizing Africans as “half monkeys,” Lawrence shows how the racist sentiments of nineteenth century Americans led to the perception of African Americans as not only inferior, but as less than human.

Lawrence’s interaction with slaves at the market further reveals his racism through his disinterest in understanding the perspectives of the African Americans he interacts with.

¹⁶ Ibid., January 20, 1837

¹⁷ Crouch, “In Search of Union,” 53

¹⁸ U.S. Const. Art. 1, Sec. 2

¹⁹ Edward E. Baptist. *The Half Has Never Been Told : Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. (ACLS Humanities E-Book. New York: Basic Books, 2014), 142

²⁰ *The 13th*, directed by Ava DuVernay, Netflix, 2016.

Lawrence concludes that the black people are happy with their condition entirely through outside observations. Lawrence's language admits his lack of evidence by saying that they "seem" happy rather than stating it as a definite fact, but in defining their emotions collectively and based on appearances he dismisses the varied and complex natures of the black people to whom he is referring. His rigidity in his assumptions is made clear by the fact that he wrote this entry after speaking to an African American man who directly told Lawrence that "they live very well" in Africa because they are "free." Lawrence does not use this conversation to modify his views on the emotional well-being of slaves. Rather he chooses to record his initial impressions, suggesting that either his own inferences are more valuable than the testimony of a slave, or that African Americans are unable to recognize their own feelings.

In addition to the underlying racism revealed in the accounts of his 1836 trip, Lawrence's later abolitionist identity seems contradictory in light of the benefits he received from the institution for the majority of his life. Historian Robert K. Sutton articulates this discrepancy in a Smithsonian article in which he explains that while Lawrence was later "as he wrote, 'a stark mad abolitionist'...the fact that his business relied on the same people he was trying to free did not seem to bother him."²¹ Anti-slavery or not, many Boston merchants and industrialists were economically and personally tied to the South.²² Just ten years after graduating from Harvard, Lawrence would find himself in charge of ten corporations and a textile firm worth \$1 million in capital, a fortune only made possible through slave labor.²³ Lawrence's son suggested his father's business needs blinded him to Southern immoralities stating that "his business acquaintance with Southern cotton-growers lead [sic] him to appreciate their side of the question, and to recognize the care that many of them took in the welfare of their slaves."²⁴ This passage is immediately followed by a disclaimer that Lawrence was aware of the evils of slavery and accordingly took an "active interest" in Liberia and in slaves working to purchase their own freedom.²⁵ Lawrence's son probably mentioned his father's connection to supposedly kind slave owners to clear his

²¹ Sutton, Robert K. "The Wealthy," Smithsonian.com

²² Richard Abbott, *Cotton and Capital: Boston Businessmen and Antislavery Reform, 1854- 1868* (n.p.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 20.

²³ *Ibid.*, 24

²⁴ Lawrence, *Life of Amos*, 74

²⁵ *Ibid.*

father's name regarding his tight connection to the South. Whether Lawrence ever truly convinced himself that those he traded with were benevolent or not, the fact remains that his business was dependent on their slaves.

As an indication of Lawrence's ability to ignore his business' dependence on slavery, Lawrence's diary reveals small ways in which he dissociated slavery's products with slave labor during his 1836-1837 trip. For example, he says in South Carolina there are "no handsome houses except one or two plantations," thereby glorifying the products of slavery without acknowledging the process that allowed these houses to be so much grander than their neighbors.²⁶ In Alabama, he describes seeing "cotton piled everywhere waiting for a rise in price," and in this way connects the products of slavery with commerce without a thought as to how this commodity came to be.²⁷ In personifying cotton, Lawrence gives this product of slave labor its own agency, while neglecting to note the people who harvested it.

Burns, Benefaction, and Bleeding Kansas: Lawrence as a Self-Proclaimed Abolitionist

During his 1836 trip to the Southern United States, Lawrence was able to ignore the institution of slavery or consider it a novelty worth recording in a travel diary without additional contemplation. Later in life, however, Lawrence's relationship with slavery was at the forefront of his mind. Whig views pertaining to slavery shifted and divided in the 1850's as Congress debated the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The act had the potential to undo the Missouri Compromise by allowing new territories to vote on the issue of slavery rather than forcing them to adhere to the dividing line between slave and free imposed in 1820. Lawrence feared the shift in political power that new slave states would bring. Historian Albert J. Von Frank describes Lawrence, the "prince of Boston's Cotton Whigs," as "shaken by the Nebraska Bill out of his long policy of appeasing the slave power."²⁸ In an 1855 letter to General D. R. Atchison, a pro-slavery supporter

²⁶ Lawrence, January 17, 1837.

²⁷ Ibid, January 3, 1837.

²⁸ Albert Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998)

of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Lawrence writes, “the repeal of the law which secured this territory against the introduction of slavery, is considered by most men in the free states to have been a breach of the national faith.”²⁹ Here Lawrence reveals his deep dissatisfaction with the act, as well as his belief in the uniformity of this opinion by claiming to speak for “most men.”

The Kansas-Nebraska Act deeply angered Lawrence to the point of a personal transformation regarding his actions towards slavery. When reflecting on this change, Lawrence declared that the arrest of Anthony Burns was its catalyst. “We went to bed one night old-fashioned, conservative, Compromise Union Whigs,” Lawrence wrote to his uncle regarding Burns’ arrest, “and waked up stark mad Abolitionists.”³⁰ Burns was an escaped slave who had fled Virginia and gotten a job at a Boston clothing store. On May 24, 1854, he was found and arrested. While Lawrence had upheld the fugitive slave law in the past, even volunteering to help Marshal Devens arrest Thomas Sims in 1851, by 1854 Lawrence was no longer willing to appease the slave powers.³¹ The passing of the Kansas Nebraska Act during this interim had intensified Lawrence’s anger towards slaveholders. And he was not alone in being outraged at Burns’ capture. The city of Boston flew into righteous indignation. Seven thousand citizens attempted to break him out of jail.³² Abolitionist William Bowditch published a pamphlet detailing the injustice of Burns’ trial.³³ Theologian James Freeman Clarke delivered a sermon at William’s Hall saying the city was shouldering a “weight of sorrow which death cannot cause.”³⁴ And the heir to the fortune of one of Boston’s most philanthropic families had just discovered his newest cause.

Philanthropy was among the Lawrence family’s defining characteristics. Lawrence’s father had retired at forty-five to pursue charitable work, and his uncle was distinguished as the sponsor of the single largest donation ever made to a college when he gave \$50,000 to Harvard College

²⁹ Lawrence, Amos A to David R Atchison. "Correspondence Between Gen D.R. Atchison and Amos A. Lawrence." *Liberator* (1831-1865)26, no. 27 (1856):01

³⁰ Sutton, Robert K. "The Wealthy," *Smithsonian.com*

³¹ Von Frank, *The Trials*, 53

³² *Ibid.*

³³ William Bowditch, *The Rendition of Anthony Burns* (Boston, MA: Robert F. Wallcut, 1854)

³⁴ James Freeman. Clarke. *Rendition of Anthony Burns: Its Causes and Consequences: A Discourse on Christian Politics, Delivered in Williams Hall, Boston, on Whitsunday, June 4, 1854* . Boston, MA: Crosby, Nichols, & Co

in 1847.³⁵ Amos A. Lawrence himself supported a number of charitable causes, from Massachusetts General Hospital to an Episcopal City Mission Chapel.³⁶ Before his self-proclaimed transformation to abolition, he supported the colonization of Liberia by free African Americans.³⁷ Indeed, Lawrence's son, William, deemed philanthropy so central to his father's character that he included "charities" as a heading in the table of contents of his father's biography.³⁸ While it is reasonable to assume that William would have wished to portray his father positively, he supports his claims by referencing multiple concrete causes supported by Lawrence. Other accounts of Lawrence's life similarly emphasize his generosity. Professors Barbara M. Tucker and Kenneth H. Tucker Jr. use the subtitle "Manufacturing and the Moral Life of the Industrial Elite" for their section on the Lawrence family in their 2008 book *Industrializing Antebellum America*, where they say, "Amos Adams Lawrence grew up in a culture of philanthropy."³⁹ Prolific biographer William M. Thayer wrote a handbook for success in business and life using Amos Lawrence as a model: *Poor Boy and Merchant Prince or Elements of Success Drawn from the Life and Character of the Late Amos Lawrence*. Written five years after his death, this book exemplifies the high standard to which Amos Lawrence was viewed by his society. It was up to Amos A. Lawrence to carry on his father's philanthropic legacy.

It was then not out of character for Lawrence to respond to his indignation at the Burns trial by seeking a charity to support his vision. Lawrence began by offering to pay for Burns' defense. Richard Henry Dana Jr., Burns' lawyer, understood the reason for Lawrence's dramatically changed political views: "Men who would not speak to me in 1850 and 1851, and who enrolled themselves as special police-men in the Sims affair, stop me in the street to talk treason. This is all owing to the Nebraska bill."⁴⁰ Dana realized that Lawrence was moved not by

³⁵ Sutton, Robert K. "The Wealthy," *Smithsonian.com*

³⁶ Lawrence, *Life of Amos*, 53-54

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, viii.

³⁹ Barbara Tucker and Kenneth Tucker, *Industrializing Antebellum America: The Rise of Manufacturing Entrepreneurs in the Early Republic* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 168.

⁴⁰ Crouch, "In Search of Union," 53

* Lawrence and Thayer differed in exactly what they perceived this task to be. While Lawrence saw it as a purely philanthropic endeavor, Thayer saw pecuniary potential in buying up and developing land with the intent of increasing property value (Abbott 29). Lawrence's arguments that Bostonian businessmen would respond more favorably to charitable projects than to land speculation eventually triumphed and the New England Emigrant Aid Company was marketed as a charitable institution (Abbott 30).

the sadness of Burns' case, but by his anger at the South because of the political implications of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Lawrence's legal aid was to no avail, however, and Burns was returned to slavery.

Lawrence then directed his philanthropic intentions towards an effort being organized by Eli Thayer. Just days after Anthony Burns' arrest, President Franklin Pierce signed Kansas and Nebraska into the Union, allowing each to determine its own stance on slavery. Thayer responded to this news with a plan to facilitate Kansas' entrance as a free state by encouraging the emigration of anti-slavery settlers. Lawrence soon whole-heartedly adopted this task.* He became the treasurer of the New England Emigrant Aid Company, and when the funds he oversaw ran short he made up the difference from his own wealth. In a letter to his uncle, Lawrence admitted, "I send to Kansas every hundred dollars that I can get and which is not previously engaged; for that seems to be an immediate necessity and will not bear delay."⁴¹ Lawrence's dedication to the New England Emigrant Aid Company is more than just fiscally evident. In an 1855 letter to David Rice Atchison, Lawrence vehemently defends his work in Kansas. He criticizes interference from pro-slavery advocates who crossed the border to participate in elections outside of their own state, or who turned to violence over the question of Kansas' entrance. He asks Atchison to "restrain [his] people from doing great injustice to actual settlers" calling such actions "so great an evil."⁴² Whether Lawrence's settlers, fully funded and sent with political intentions, can truly be considered "actual settlers" may raise some debate, but Lawrence insists that his only goal was to "let the fight be a fair one."⁴³ Like his anger at the Kansas Nebraska Act's upset of Northern power, Lawrence was once more moved to action not by the immorality of slavery, but by the ostensibly menacing politics of slaveholders.

Lawrence's commitment to the New England Emigrant Aid Company is further demonstrated by his reluctance to receive public credit for his efforts. He objected to Thayer's report that the settlers hoped to name their new town after him responding in a letter, "my motives have thus far been pure and unselfish; and I wish them not only to be but to appear, so; this would

⁴¹ Lawrence, *Life of Amos*, 98

⁴² Lawrence, *Amos A to David R Atchison*.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

not be the case, should it be made public that the settlement had been named for me.”⁴⁴ This statement may have been intended to garner praise for his modesty, or it could be a genuine attempt to prevent the settlement from seeming like a publicity stunt. Either way, the fact remains that Lawrence hoped to sacrifice recognition for what he perceived to be the good of the cause. In the end, Lawrence, Kansas was named after its primary financial benefactor and Kansas eventually entered the Union as a free state in 1861. Lawrence’s work to prevent the spread of slavery had, by this time, become one of his most fervent and costly endeavors.

Context Clues: Amos A. Lawrence as a reflection of his society

The travel diary of a privileged twenty-two year old remains relevant because Amos A. Lawrence’s views reflected those of the society around him. Lawrence’s ambivalent reaction to slavery is indicative of how the Bostonian elite felt and acted towards slaves before, during, and after the Civil War. While the North is often hailed as the nation’s champion of racial justice, Northern views towards people of color were far from uniformly positive. Throughout the nation’s early history, and until abolition took effect, many Northerners profited greatly from slave labor. In the colonial era, slave-holding regions in the Southern colonies and British West Indies served as markets for Northern goods. Later, slave-picked cotton drove America’s industrial revolution. Many Northerners who did object to slavery used political and fiscal arguments rather than moral ones. In this way they failed to acknowledge the suffering of individual slaves and continued to center the dialogue around the best interests of whites. Those Northerners who may have privately acknowledged slavery’s wrongs were often silenced by their economic dependence on the South. Even after the war, Northern reactions to people of color were conflicted. Despite having just poured themselves into the fight against slavery, many Northerners romanticized the antebellum South. Much as Lawrence had done before the war, post-Civil War Northern travelers commented on field workers as an idyllic part of the Southern landscape, without recognizing past and current oppression.⁴⁵ Lawrence’s diary, in all its

⁴⁴ Lawrence, *Life of Amos*, 84

⁴⁵ Nina Silber. *The Romance of Reunion : Northerners and the South, 1865-1900*. (Civil War America (Series)). (Chapel Hill, NC:

confusion and contradictions, mirrors his society's similarly inconsistent views of and actions towards slavery.

Northern states are often perceived as, at best, critics of slavery and, at worst, bystanders. Neither portrayal is fair. In truth, the North actively profited from and allowed for the continuation of slavery. The link between northern states and slavery is as old as the states themselves. New England's early colonial economy owed much of its development to the plantations of the British West Indies. New England colonies sent more than 112 million feet of pine board to the West Indies between 1768 and 1772.⁴⁶ They also supplied food, livestock, and lighting materials.⁴⁷ Northern institutions, including Lawrence's alma mater, Harvard College, profited from and even owned slaves.⁴⁸ Northerners built the ships which carried cotton from plantations to markets.⁴⁹ Northern banks lent Southerners money to buy slaves, and Northern companies insured these slaves once purchased.⁵⁰

For Lawrence, however, it was the cotton industry that most powerfully united the North and South.[†] In a single decade, between 1830 and 1840, more than 100 million pounds of southern, slave produced, cotton was consumed by Northern mills.⁵¹ Amos A. Lawrence himself estimated that by 1850, New England mills consumed 150 million pounds of cotton a year.⁵² These staggering numbers reveal the tremendous extent to which the North and South were commercially dependent on each other. Cotton not only transformed the South's economy, it changed the whole nation. Historian Edward E. Baptist explains how cotton's effects on the United States, and the world, are almost impossible to exaggerate when he writes, "Cotton was

University of North Carolina Press, 1993)

⁴⁶ Eric Kimball. "What Have We to Do with Slavery? New Englanders and the Slave Economies of West Indies." (Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development, 2016: 181-94.), 187.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 187.

⁴⁸ Craig Steven Wilder. *Ebony & Ivy : Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*. (First U.S. ed. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013)

⁴⁹ Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jenifer Frank, *Complicity : How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), 14.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 13.

[†] The North and South were so closely united through the cotton industry that Northern textile mills even produced the coarse "Negro cloth" used to clothe slaves, which was then sold back to the South to be worn by those workers who had made its production possible (Farrow et al. 26).

⁵¹ Ibid., 6.

⁵² Ibid., 26

the most important raw material of the industrial revolution that created our modern world economy.”⁵³ The Northern economy was built on slave labor, and therefore it cannot be extricated from the system of slavery. Amos A. Lawrence, as a leader and beneficiary of the textile industry, was part of this system before he began to publicly comment on slavery.

Lawrence’s transformation from author of a sometimes racist travelogue to active supporter for quarantining the institution of slavery may not reveal as large a personal transformation as one would expect. Rather, it was common for Northern industrialists to argue against the spread of slavery without delving too deeply into the institution’s morality or their own culpability in the matter. Many of those who did criticize the evils of slavery took a broad societal view rather than a look at the horrors slavery inflicted on an individual.⁵⁴ This is not to say that there were no Bostonians who supported total abolition or who opposed slavery on moral grounds. William Lloyd Garrison, Arthur Tappan, Frederick Douglass, and many others used ethics to justify complete emancipation. However Amos A. Lawrence’s industrialist peers often opposed slavery more out of a commitment to free labor and a hope to improve their economy and society than a concern for the lives and welfare of those enslaved.⁵⁵ During the Civil War, many of Boston’s antislavery advocates continued to take a practical rather than moral angle, arguing that freed blacks would be better workers and greater consumers of Northern products than slaves.⁵⁶ In his 1991 book *Cotton and Capital*, historian Richard Abbott argues that this tactic allowed abolitionists to be seen as practical and not overly idealistic. Abbott proposes that their argument that freed slaves would work harder without coercion and take advantage of opportunities such as education shows confidence in the potential of black Americans.⁵⁷ That being said, defenses of abolition from Boston’s elite do not necessarily exonerate these Northerners from accusations of racism. It is true that Bostonian abolitionists supported education for all races, arguing that educated people are better workers and consumers, but such an argument makes sense in the context of Boston’s longstanding commitment to education. In 1830, for example, few states had

⁵³ Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, 113

⁵⁴ Abbott, *Cotton and Capital*, 5

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6-7

public schools yet 75% of New England was literate.⁵⁸ Clearly, education was seen as, if not an inalienable right, then at least of the utmost importance. Abolitionist arguments supporting black education say as much about Boston's belief in the importance of educated citizens as they do about attitudes towards freed blacks. Similarly, while some arguments extolled the potential of the black work ethic, this kind of rhetoric continued to ignore the inherent evil of the institution by suggesting that it was worse in relation to other possibilities rather than declaring it entirely corrupt.

While many of Boston's businessmen did think that slavery was evil, they restrained from saying so due to their economic ties to the South. As previously mentioned, Boston had long profited from slavery. Economic and personal ties to the South prevented many from seeking abolition for fear that the agitation of it would disrupt the economy.⁵⁹ During the debate over the annexation of Texas, those who did address the moral issue of slavery began to challenge the Bostonian elite's claim to moral superiority. In 1836, as Lawrence traveled through the Southern United States, conservative Boston Whigs protested Texas' annexation using political and fiscal arguments. More slave states would shift the Congressional power balance, they explained, and the South could block legislation which would benefit the North, such as protective tariffs.⁶⁰ Lawrence himself opposed annexation for this very reason.⁶¹ In contrast, anti-slavery Whigs protested the moral repercussions of allowing slavery to expand. While both strands of Whigs sought the same result, they worried about the opposite side's tactics. Amos A. Lawrence's uncle, Abbott Lawrence, worked on preventing anti-Texas advocates from alienating the South.⁶² Meanwhile anti-slavery Whigs criticized the more conservative Whigs' appeasement of the South. Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner warned against the union of the "Lords of the Lash and the Lords of the Loom."⁶³ Such animosity amongst largely like-minded parties eventually resulted in labels for the two trains of thought: "Cotton Whigs" put economic interests before condemnation of slavery while "Conscience Whigs" were outspoken against slavery and largely

⁵⁸ Ibid., 16

⁵⁹ Ibid., 20

⁶⁰ Ibid., 20

⁶¹ Ibid., 25

⁶² Ibid., 20

⁶³ Ibid., 22

unconnected to the textile industry.⁶⁴ Lawrence's 1836 observations mark him as a Cotton Whig: he was able to politically protest the spread of slavery without having an emotional reaction to encountering the practice during his travels. In this way, his later actions to prevent Kansas' entrance as a slaveholding state is not incompatible with his earlier apathy towards the experiences of slaves since his decisions were designed to protect his wealth and political standing.

The Thirteenth Amendment (1865) declared slavery illegal. It did not, unfortunately, end the debate as to what role black Americans would be granted in society. After the Civil War, many who had fought or supported the fight to free the slaves congratulated themselves on a job well done. But much like the arguments constructed earlier by Cotton Whigs, the plight of individual African Americans remained unanswered. Such a viewpoint is demonstrated in the travel journals of Northerners who visited the South following the Civil War. Historian Nina Silber examines northern perspectives of African Americans post-Civil War in her 1993 book *The Romance of Reunion*. Here, Silber shows how many Northerners originally blamed wealthy slaveholders for the war without indicting the impoverished whites who had fought on their behalf.⁶⁵ This perspective mirrors Lawrence's tendencies to blame individual slave holders for cruelty without condemning the entire system or all those who supported it, including his own comfort with racist narratives in the past. Later, many Northerners accepted a narrative which idealized the Southern aristocracy as a leisurely class who had ruled over their slaves benevolently.⁶⁶ Like these later Northern visitors, Lawrence praised plantations and their owners for their elegance and refinement without crediting slaves and their labor. The arguments in favor of black entrance into society by post-war Northerners were muted by those who saw African Americans as "foreigners" who were best kept under the supervision of their former owners.⁶⁷ Viewing slaves as foreigners perpetuates the "otherness" narrative demonstrated in 1837 by Lawrence's comment that a slave's English sounded like a monkey. In both cases, slaves are

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 21

⁶⁵ Silber, *The Romance*, 17

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 6

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

perceived as less American based on a situation over which they have no control. Post-Civil War travelers further repeated Lawrence's pre-war views towards African Americans by treating these people as part of the scenery. In fact, "vestiges of the slave system" were on many northern travelers' itineraries.⁶⁸ Elite Northerners[‡] wanted to see remnants of the system the country had just fought to end. In a manner similar to Lawrence's, these encounters were often at a distance. Also like Lawrence, post-Civil War travelers did not shy away from reinforcing black stereotypes through unflattering portrayals, often of workers they considered lazy.⁶⁹ Such portrayals speak to the fact that African Americans continued to be treated with prejudice and detachment, even after being freed. In this way, Lawrence's transformation is revealed to be less drastic than one might assume. It is very possible that Lawrence would have reacted to black workers in a post-Civil War trip in much the same way he did in 1836, despite his endeavors to prevent the spread of slavery. His racism was not necessarily tempered by his opposition to slavery.

This all matters when studying Amos A. Lawrence because he is not only a reflection of his society, he is its product. His seemingly dramatic transformation from an alternately apathetic and critical observer of slavery to a proponent of its containment makes sense within the context of his society. In short, Boston's elite had far from clear cut views on slavery. They recognized its evils, but did not necessarily feel for individual slaves. This is reflected in how Lawrence abhors slave trade as "low" yet remarks on the lack of intelligence of individual slaves. His later efforts to prevent the spread of slavery may have had very little to do with his encounters with actual slaves. While the Anthony Burns trial spurred his self-declared transformation, it was the Kansas-Nebraska Act which was truly behind this decision to take action. Just like the others in his city, Lawrence placed practical concerns (the repeal of the Missouri Compromise) over emotional ones. And, like other elite Bostonians, Lawrence recognized evils in the system even as he continued to act within its confines: he was able to feel pity for Burns even though just years earlier, under laws he respected, he was willing to aid in a fugitive slave's capture. Lawrence's

⁶⁸ Ibid.,76

[‡] Silber notes that her use of the word "Northerners" refers mostly to those in the upper and middle classes, with some conclusions being most accurate as applied to upper-class men, as this demographic "set the dominant tone on the reunion question" (Silber 11). Amos A. Lawrence was a member of this group, thus not only making these reactions relevant to the study of him, but also showing how Lawrence's perspective would have been important in his lifetime, not only in hindsight.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 81

transformation also seems less remarkable given that those who had fought or supported the fight to free the slaves continued to see African Americans as inferior. Northern travelers toured the South after the Civil War and described African American laborers as part of the scenery, just like Lawrence did in 1836. Three decades and 750,000 lives later, the country was forever transformed yet, in some ways, tragically unchanged.

Conclusion

Later in life Lawrence would actively work to prevent the spread of slavery, yet during his 1836 trip to the American South, Lawrence's diary reveals general indifference towards slavery, interspersed with anecdotes that reveal some recognition of cruel slave practitioners and other stories that point to his own racism. For the most part, Lawrence records his interactions with slavery much as he recounts other common occurrences. In a few cases, he shows some distaste for aspects of slavery, such as when he describes a particularly brutal slave master or a distasteful slave trader. In other instances, however, Lawrence reveals his own racism in his depictions of slaves as bestial and slow-minded. Lawrence's relationship to slavery was complicated by the benefits his family derived from the institution. Lawrence's fortune came from textiles, and he therefore made a living because of the cotton produced by southern, slaveholding states. Lawrence's diary shows how he separated slavery in his mind from its products by describing culpable individual behavior without indicting the institution itself. Amos A. Lawrence later accrued an abolitionist reputation.

This change was most strongly initiated by his political discontent at the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the ways in which it threatened to shift power away from the North. Lawrence responded through his funding of the New England Emigrant Aid Company, which turned his anger into action as he worked to facilitate Kansas' entrance into the Union as a free state. He put his whole self into this endeavor, declaring himself an abolitionist and writing sternly to those who opposed him. Yet Lawrence's so-called transformation was far from drastic. His desire to halt the spread of slavery stemmed from political concerns rather than ethical ones, and he failed to recognize

his own financial gain from slavery. Other elite Bostonians and Post-Civil War Northern visitors to the South prove that Lawrence did not need to lose all racism to support abolition. But his fervor shows that he most certainly discarded his apathy.

History, especially at the primary and secondary school level, is often painted in broad strokes. It is, of course, easier to absorb information presented in a simple form, and in many cases getting the gist of a topic is enough. But a further examination of most things, history included, shows that little is clear cut. The past did not always have obvious heroes and villains. Our nation has not always righted its wrongs. The winners of battles, both literal and philosophical, did not always speak for the majority. Thinking that the past can be viewed in such simple terms is dangerous for our future. Leaders will be viewed heroically, their flaws ignored, or hated for misguided actions without hope of redemption. If you were to read selected passages of Amos A. Lawrence's diary, you would view him, unequivocally, as a racist. And he was. If you were to read his son's account of his life, or stumble upon the papers of the New England Emigrant Aid Company, you would think him a great philanthropist and a champion of free-soil. He was that too. Lawrence was at times racist, at times apathetic, and at times a self-proclaimed abolitionist. He grew up in a state founded on Puritan concepts of morality and made rich on the products of slave labor. Amos A. Lawrence's account of his 1836 trip to the American South reflects his society through his differing reactions to slavery. When viewed within the context of his later abolitionist identity, Lawrence's journal does not show a great personal transformation but rather the contradictions that existed within many Northerners of this time. The implications of Lawrence's views and actions continue to be relevant when attempting to broadly categorize current or historical figures. Historians, and readers of history, must remember that real people, like Lawrence, seldom fit into broad generalizations. And if the paradoxes and complications that characterize human behavior mean that history is difficult to fit into tight narrative structures, then perhaps turning points are not so appealing after all.

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