

The Antislavery Crusade: The Question of Slavery within a Presbyterian Church in the
1830s-1840s

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The Window

On January 2nd, 1841, a newspaper article titled “The Crusade of 1840” was published in the *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics*, defending a previous slaveholding minister by the name of Edwin Holt from the Abolitionist Society while also condemning slavery. The article starts off with the story of Peter the Hermit and his tour of Europe where he recruits friends to help rescue the Holy Land from infidels and to fight a crusade to honor the institutions of Christendom.¹ The author then states that such a crusade in the “enlightened age” that they lived in would be “ridiculous to the extreme” since modern hermits, also known as abolitionists, would be starting a crusade against the “peace and good order of society”.² The author asserts that it is the rightful duty of the Freeman to destroy the system of slavery rather than a abolitionist or colonizationist.³ The author also agrees with the Abolitionists in the sense that slavery is “an evil which is a disgrace to our Nation” and yet defends a pastor for owning a slave. Right off the bat, the beginning of this article is painting abolitionists in a light that makes them seem obnoxious, unnecessary, and aggressive, yet is found in agreeance with the hatred of slavery but is also found to defend a pastor by the name of Edwin Holt. This short beginning of the article speaks volumes for understanding abolitionism not as a quick sweep across New England but perhaps slow steps that may have contained conflicting views influenced by their reputation and religious beliefs.

An excerpt is included from the N.H. Abolitionist Society that targeted Edwin Holt and the North Church in Portsmouth, this details two men by the names of Pilsbury and Fosier that

¹ "The Crusade of 1840." *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire) LII, no. 1, January 2, 1841: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.libraries.uc.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A10C617B76CD6DDD8%40EANX-10C877929898D830%402393473-10C877938EC2D2E8%403-10C877972345D4B8>.

² “The Crusade of 1840.”

³ “The Crusade of 1840.”

visited the church to try and convince the church members that their pastor Edwin Holt was an evil to their community and to their religion. They then complained about the reactions of the clergymen and the church members who were found to be offended by these two men that were perceived as being slanderous to Holt followed by kicking these men out of the church.⁴ These men compared Holt's offence to "be worse than killing the body" in an attempt to produce a shock factor that brings these members to their senses if they are antislavery and supporting a previous slaveholding minister.⁵ The response of kicking out these men from the church angered them and towards the end of their report they questioned their religiosity and if it had any respect for the liberty of speech.⁶ This characterizes the typical assumption of the fiery passion that many abolitionists fought with against proslavery and antislavery. This aggressive and direct approach was intended to reach the core values that these church members held close, and in a religious context these core values hold significant weight in these people's lives, to question it would force them to reevaluate everything. Religious institutions typically follow some type of moral code, especially in Christianity where it is strict, so to question the morals of an important sector in people's lives is calculated and purposeful since it is a known vulnerable state. Along with this understanding that it is a calculated choice grouped with the fact that it is targeting a religious institution that has a perception of being holy and pure, the author of the newspaper article sees this in a different manner.

The author does point out that "an advocate for Slavery can scarcely be found among us", implying that these agents that travel across the state are not doing a great job of emancipating the slaves in the United States, but the true goal is to "prostrate all moral institutions which will

⁴ "The Crusade of 1840."

⁵ "The Crusade of 1840."

⁶ "The Crusade of 1840."

not adopt their sentiments, and stigmatizing citizens whose moral characters are without reproach, as worse than murderers”, revealing a great opposition to the methods of the abolitionist.⁷ An explanation for Holt’s actions is made after the abolitionist excerpt, describing the situation that Holt was in with the slave that he owned. The author even goes as far as saying that the abolitionists Pilsbury and Fosier did not seem to be “acquainted with the facts” as the meeting that they held, further emphasizing the reckless and unnecessary aggression that these men targeted at the North Church and its members.⁸ The story is then told in a “pure” light as the author states that Holt needed help with his family and was not able to obtain a “free domestic” so he had then purchased a female slave for \$300 to employ.⁹ They claim that the female slave worked with equitable wages that could pay for her emancipation once she raised the amount of \$300, and when Holt was leaving Georgia and heading to New Hampshire, he offered her freedom if she went along with him and his family but it said that she declined because she wanted to stay near her family.¹⁰ Holt then sold her to a close friend and made a pact with this person that once she raised \$100 that she would be freed if she desired it, then affirming that purchasing a slave “with a view to give her freedom” was a moral act rather than an immoral one.¹¹ The conclusion of the article ends with the author agreeing that they oppose the oppressive laws of Georgia just as “any one in New England” but then claiming that there wasn’t much else that Holt could have done in that situation, further humanizing him and his actions.¹²

There is interesting language in this newspaper article that scratches the surface of understanding the impact of abolitionism in New England and the obstructions that faced it,

⁷ “The Crusade of 1840.”

⁸ “The Crusade of 1840.”

⁹ “The Crusade of 1840.”

¹⁰ “The Crusade of 1840.”

¹¹ “The Crusade of 1840.”

¹² “The Crusade of 1840.”

especially in a religious manner. To humanize Holt and use language that is persuasive in calming the hearts of those who valued their religious moral code reveals just how delicate this seemingly holy and mighty institution was. Even the action of publishing a newspaper article defending a previous slaveholding minister speaks as an obstruction against abolitionism and revealing that in this case study in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, that these obstructions reveal key turning points in the steps that people were taking towards abolitionism and that they were hesitant rather than completely willing. This is just one perspective in the story of Edwin Holt and the North Church, and it shows steps towards abolitionism rather than wildfire.

As the story develops, drama ensues in the church and members of the church begin being excommunicated. Some of these excommunicated members begin writing letters to the church, claiming that Holt was proslavery and that they were being excommunicated because of their antislavery views. This is another example of obstructions against not just abolitionism, but antislavery views as well, which reveals this slow development that New England faced in cases like these rather than a simple story of acceptance. These obstructions speak to an understanding that reputation and authority was more important to Edwin Holt and clergymen, and the best method of preserving that reputation and holiness is through polite silence.

The Foundation

To better understand the method of polite silence and why it was the route that Edwin Holt chose, it is important to understand where his reputation and authority came from and what it meant to him. Edwin Holt was three years old when his family moved from Connecticut to

New York city where he grew up in his early life.¹³ He graduated from Columbia college in October of 1818, at the age of thirteen.¹⁴ His original route that he pursued was medical school and studied medicine and was a favorite pupil of his instructor.¹⁵ He nearly completed his medical schooling when he was convicted of sin in May of 1822, and “obtained a hope in the Savior” that inspired him to pursue theology.¹⁶ He joined Dr. Gardiner Spring’s church in April of 1823 and began his studies of theology at the Auburn theological seminary in February, 1824, after receiving advice from his pastor and by his own convictions of duty.¹⁷ Holt began his pastoral work after he was licensed to preach in 1826, from working under Gardiner Spring, he became a Presbyterian pastor and found himself preaching in different Presbyterian churches in the North and the South.¹⁸

Old School Presbyterianism

In 1837, Presbyterians split into the “old school” and “new school” factions.¹⁹ The push for this split was due to several issues including whether humans had any ability to embrace Christ on their own (old schoolers said no, new schoolers said yes) but it also had to do with slavery.²⁰ The Old School party of the Presbyterian church declared the Western Reserve region of Presbyterians were to be declared “no longer a part” of the denomination which included presbyteries and synods in the upper Midwest and New York.²¹ The New School was scheming to prevent the ratification of the decision but the Old School Presbyterians found out and the

¹³ Durrie, Daniel S. “Rev Edwin Holt”, *A Genealogical History of the Holt Family in the United States*, (J. Munsell, Albany, 1864), 280. *Hathitrust*. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uva.x000486310>.

¹⁴ Durrie, “Rev Edwin Holt”, 280.

¹⁵ Durrie, “Rev Edwin Holt”, 280.

¹⁶ Durrie, “Rev Edwin Holt”, 280.

¹⁷ Durrie, “Rev Edwin Holt”, 280.

¹⁸ Durrie, “Rev Edwin Holt”, 280.

¹⁹ Wacker, Grant. *Religion in Nineteenth Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 102.

²⁰ Wacker, *Religion in Nineteenth Century America*, 102.

²¹ Hart, D.G., Muether, John. “Turning Points in American Presbyterian History Part 6: Old School Presbyterianism, 1838”, *The Orthodox Presbyterian*, https://www.opc.org/nh.html?article_id=21.

moderator refused to recognize them when they showed up to the gathering.²² This is an early sign of using the tactic of silencing and ignoring radical changes in order to remain a powerful and influential religious sect.

Although it is widely accepted that slavery was not considered a major topic of this split between the two factions, it is worth mentioning that it was a fear that rested in the shadows of conservative minds during a time that saw rapid economic and social change.²³ James Moorhead argued that this fear that lurked in the shadows on the conservative minds of Old School leaders connected the disorders in the Presbyterian Church with “the wide spread and ever restless spirit of radicalism, manifest in both church and state...” highlighting the anxieties that Old School Presbyterians were facing which then played a role in the disruption of the denomination.²⁴ This anxiety stems from the threat of authority and legitimacy of the sect and of the leaders within the faith. Dramatic changes in society pushes religious sects into their own dramatic changes which can cause members to lose faith and leave the practice, ultimately losing power and control within their communities. The best method of dealing with these dramatic changes, specifically abolitionism, is to ignore and silence it as to not provide it with any legitimacy and opportunities to make it into the Old Presbyterian school. Dealing with the question of slavery was daunting for people all across New England, and especially so for those in powerful religious positions that guided the morality of others. Historian Joanne Pope Melish argues that whiteness was the core of “New England nationalism” and sought to rid the lands of African Americans through many different means, like colonization.²⁵ These perceptions of whiteness play into

²² Hart, Muether, “Turning Points in American Presbyterian History Part 6: Old School Presbyterianism, 1838”.

²³ Hoyt, William. “Gardiner Spring and the Presbyterian Old and New Schools”. Presbyterian Heritage Center, 2011. <https://www.phcmontreat.org/PDF/Gardiner-Spring-Article-by-Hoyt-August-2011.pdf>

²⁴ James H. Moorhead, “The ‘Restless Spirit of Radicalism’: Old School Fears and the Schism of 1837,” *The Journal of Presbyterian History* 78 (Spring 2000): 28b-31b.

²⁵ Melish, Joanne Pope, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1998).

understanding the political and social climate that this sect could have been in agreeance with. Although it is important to note that the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church declared slavery as a “gross violation of human nature” although it did receive mixed enforcement.²⁶ The Old School Presbyterians embraced tradition which would include the traditional white colonial America that shaped its beginning. The color white is also perceived as “pure” and “holy” which was associated with the perception of white people, so this concept could be perpetuated by different religious institutions.

Gardiner Spring

Edwin Holt learned his pastoral ways through Gardiner Spring, as he served as his mentor. Spring provides an important glimpse into understanding Holt and his actions with the North Church. Spring chose to become a part of the Old School and would become heavily involved with it.²⁷ He aligned himself with Hopkinsianism which “included the agreement of essential doctrines of the Westminster Confession of Faith, including its stress upon the depravity of humans and their utter inability to turn to God apart from God’s sovereign grace.”²⁸ Spring also became heavily involved in Christian missionary work and served in the American Home Missionary Society and then later the Presbyterian Board of Domestic Missions.²⁹ Spring being a part of the Old School and actively serving this sect of Presbyterianism shows the influences that he had on Holt. The fear of the radical changes that threatened the wellbeing of this religious ecosystem was passed on from Spring to Holt, along with the passion for Christian missionary work, and the tactic of silencing and ignoring radical beliefs and changes, which for Holt included abolitionist and antislavery beliefs.

²⁶ Wacker, Grant. *Religion in Nineteenth Century America*. (Oxford University Press, 2000), 96.

²⁷ Hoyt, William. “Gardiner Spring and the Presbyterian Old and New Schools”.

²⁸ Hoyt, William. “Gardiner Spring and the Presbyterian Old and New Schools”.

²⁹ Hoyt, William. “Gardiner Spring and the Presbyterian Old and New Schools”.

Southern Influence

Edwin Holt first began his pastoral work at a Presbyterian church in Westfield, New Jersey in 1827 but then in 1830 he was dissolved from the church and went to become a pastor in Hopewell, Georgia and during that same year he began preaching at White Bluff, near Savannah, and also in the First Presbyterian church in that city for the preceding year.³⁰ Holt had received a call from a Presbyterian church in Macon, Georgia the following winter in which he had accepted.³¹ He served as the pastor for the church in Macon for four years, a city that had slavery entrenched in their social and economic order during that time.³²

During this time, abolitionist appeals to Christian principles that supported emancipation were openly discussed in the North which caused the slave-holding South to create detailed scriptural arguments to defend slavery as a divinely sanctioned institution.³³ Defenses in slavery was not a new concept but using Scripture to defend slavery became incredibly influential for the nation in the South when the views of Abolition became more present.³⁴ Many Abolitionists at the time would use scripture to defend their own views on slavery but they soon found out that the slavery defenders had many more texts that they could quote to undermine the abolitionist examples.³⁵ The defenders of slavery could easily show that Moses, Abraham, Apostle Paul, and Jesus himself would either take the existence of slavery for granted or they made no obvious moves to eliminate it, becoming an important driving point.³⁶ Moderate Bible-believers found themselves in a dilemma as they supported the abolitionists in attacking slavery but still held

³⁰ Durrie, "Rev Edwin Holt", 280.

³¹ Durrie, "Rev Edwin Holt", 280.

³² Bellamy, Donnie D. "Macon, Georgia, 1823-1860: A Study in Urban Slavery." *Phylon* (1960-) 45, no. 4 (1984): 298-310. Accessed April 18, 2021. doi:10.2307/274910.

³³ Noll, Mark A. *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, (Princeton University Press, 2010), 32.

³⁴ Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 32-33.

³⁵ Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 33.

³⁶ Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 33.

their reliance on the Bible very close to their hearts.³⁷ This antislavery zeal was intimidating to many moderates as it threatened Scripture by pushing it towards having dangerously loose distortions of it.³⁸ The question of slavery was just as much of a theological debate as much as it was a political debate.³⁹ It was through these debates that pushed many churches in America, including Presbyterians, to split. Southern ministers wrote sermons, published essays, gave speeches, and prepared scientific articles to defend slavery as a “positive good” for the slaves, the masters, non-slaveholding whites, and the entire society in general.⁴⁰ Other works that were coming out during this time in the 1830’s would casually transpose the terms “Africans” and “slaves” as being simply equivalent to each other due to the prevailing black-only slavery that was being sanctioned by Scripture.⁴¹

Southern ministers perceived the attack on slavery as a motivation by unorthodox religion and therefore they became infidels.⁴² This view that abolitionists were infidels was a common view of the North as a whole and they questioned the religious validity of the people who resided there that held abolitionist views.⁴³ This debate over slavery and Scripture caused a parallel debate on true religion and false religion, and a biblically revealed religion versus a man-made religion.⁴⁴ Many southern clergymen believed that the North became a lawless land due to abolitionism acting as a mob which made it inferior and debased.⁴⁵ They became passionate in defending slavery and began associating slavery as a sanctioned part of Christianity that withheld

³⁷ Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 33-34.

³⁸ Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 34.

³⁹ Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 34.

⁴⁰ Finkelman, Paul. *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South*, (Bedford BKS, St. Martin’s, 2019), 29.

⁴¹ Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 41.

⁴² Chesebrough, David B. *Clergy Dissent in the Old South: 1830-1865*, (Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 12.

⁴³ Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South: 1830-1865*, 12.

⁴⁴ Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South: 1830-1865*, 12.

⁴⁵ Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South: 1830-1865*, 13.

Scripture and law. To these southern clergymen being in support of slavery coincided with the faithfulness towards God and Christianity.

The southern clergy were not always so heavily involved in political and civil matters prior to the 1930's, in fact they generally attempted to avoid these matters.⁴⁶ The clergy mostly felt inclined to speak up on matters that dealt with morality and even kept quiet during the ground-breaking and passionate political matter of the South Carolina nullification issue of the late 1920's and early 1930's.⁴⁷ Slavery was a different issue that was provoked by abolitionists who used religion to denounce it as immoral and inhumane.⁴⁸ The southern clergy felt that they were called upon to defend not only slavery but also the Bible, God, and divinely ordered way of life.⁴⁹ They drew from the foundations of America and the vision that Americans idealized for their nation, but also the concept of America being a religious and holy nation that would serve as a beacon of light that would lead the world to God.⁵⁰ They felt that the Northerners were desecrating the nation and giving up the role of being God's chosen people which would put the future of the nation in ruin.⁵¹ The topic of slavery was an issue that was cataclysmic in the eyes of the southern clergymen and it extended into their reputation of being holy. Abolitionism became classified as being motivated by a "perverted Northern religion" that was detrimental to the religious ecosystem of America.⁵²

Edwin Holt was a pastor that was surrounded by these southern ideals for nearly seven years of his career. Coming from a conservative background with Gardiner Spring can possibly

⁴⁶ Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South: 1830-1865*, 14.

⁴⁷ Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South: 1830-1865*, 14.

⁴⁸ Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South: 1830-1865*, 14.

⁴⁹ Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South: 1830-1865*, 15.

⁵⁰ Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South: 1830-1865*, 15.

⁵¹ Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South: 1830-1865*, 15.

⁵² Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South: 1830-1865*, 9.

allude to his willingness to preach in the southern and proslavery state of Georgia. This conservatism can also explain his willingness to then preach in the northern and antislavery state of New Hampshire as well, but with strings attached. He went from preaching in a state that valued slavery as an integral part of society to preaching in a state where antislavery was the most commonly held view along with abolitionism, this may be from a lack of passion for the topic of slavery or purposely used polite silence to diffuse any abolitionist or antislavery activity in the church. To be silent on a topic such as this was still a role that was played during this period of heated debates, and Holt was using it as a way to deal with the problem in a more discrete manner, which is a typical method used by Old School Presbyterians during that time.

Colonization

After being a pastor in Georgia for four years, Holt was dealing with issues related to his health and therefore he had to reluctantly be dismissed from the church on November 21st, 1834.⁵³ In the following winter, Holt was appointed as the secretary of the Southern Board of Foreign Missions which “was ever very near his heart”.⁵⁴ This passion for foreign missionary work could explain his choice to join the American Colonization Society. The Christian ideal of helping other countries and people convert to Christianity and to adopt western thinking and culture definitely correlates with the colonization ideal of freed people residing in their own sovereign and free nation. The exact date of when he joined this society is unknown, but he was published as a member in 1849 in the African Repository and Colonial Journal by the American

⁵³ Durrie, “Rev Edwin Holt”, 280.

⁵⁴ Durrie, “Rev Edwin Holt”, 280.

Colonization Society.⁵⁵ It also stated that he was residing in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, so he could have joined during his time in Portsmouth.⁵⁶

The American Colonization Society worked with the concept of populating Africa, specifically Liberia, with free colored people that were previously slaves in America to give them their own lives outside of America. Colonization was a concept that received support across party and sectional lines.⁵⁷ In this journal they write “it is desirable and necessary to both races that our free colored people should be removed without delay from the state”, the implication is that it is a humane and well received idea between both races that solves the question of emancipation.⁵⁸ This view of colonization goes hand in hand with the concept that New England placed whiteness as a core part of its nationalism. It was a more conservative solution when it came to the emancipation of slaves as it supported the “out of sight, out of mind” while also achieving the pure white society that was so valued. The journal then states “Liberia, in Africa, is their proper home, and it is for their interest to emigrate to that land of liberty and law” supporting the idea of a sovereign nation for freed people to enjoy for themselves and out of the way of America.⁵⁹ The American Colonization Society supported colonialism and saw economic benefits from sending freed people to Africa as well, as America could trade valuable goods with Liberia and have strong connections with the people that would reside there.⁶⁰ This conservative view of dealing with emancipation lines up with Holt and him being more conservative, but it could have also been a decision that he made in order to look

⁵⁵ *African Repository and Colonial Journal*, American Colonization Society, Vol. 25, (Washington: C. Alexander, Printer, 1849), 89.

⁵⁶ *African Repository and Colonial Journal*, American Colonization Society, Vol. 25, 89.

⁵⁷ Sinha, Manisha. *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*, (Yale University Press, 2017), 163.

⁵⁸ *African Repository and Colonial Journal*, American Colonization Society, Vol. 25, 82.

⁵⁹ *African Repository and Colonial Journal*, American Colonization Society, Vol. 25, 82.

⁶⁰ *African Repository and Colonial Journal*, American Colonization Society, Vol. 25, 81.

better to the North Church and the members that had troubles with him regarding views of slavery.

Impact

Edwin Holt had many different influences that shaped him into the person that he was. These different influences like Gardiner Spring and Old School Presbyterianism taught him how to use polite silence as a tool in his own church, and to be discrete about his actions. Being a pastor in a proslavery city in Georgia and allowing Southern influence to strengthen his conservatism and even owning a female slave is critical in understanding his views of slavery and the lack of addressing them with members in the North Church. Surrounded by southern clergymen that praised slavery as part of Scripture and part of the orderly and lawful society of America is very heavy pressure to resist. For a Christian that depends on faithfulness, holiness, and morality, to be an antislavery pastor in such a city while also owning a slave doesn't add up correctly. Edwin Holt serves as an example to the idea that New England did not spread abolitionism like wildfire and resist conservative and proslavery views, but rather that there was a struggle to get through several steps with obstructions like polite silence that stood in the way.

The Conflict

Edwin Holt was installed as the pastor for the North Church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on October 2, 1836.⁶¹ He took his conservatism and southern influence with him to this new church and found himself in an area that was more populated with the infidels that southern clergymen believed to plague religion and America- antislavery and abolitionists. Holt decided that the best way to deal with the people with these beliefs were to be silenced and

⁶¹ Durrie, "Rev Edwin Holt", 280.

excommunicated, showing that there was no room for antislavery or abolitionism in the North Church so long as Edwin Holt was the pastor there.

A year into preaching at the North Church, Holt wrote to a fellow clergyman by the name of Daniel Knight and requested that he cease preaching due to being diagnosed with “anxiety of the mind” by his doctor in August of 1837.⁶² This anxiety stemmed from a throat condition that he had that affected his preaching and quality of life.⁶³ Although Edwin Holt did return as the pastor for the church in December of 1837.⁶⁴ It is through this throat condition and anxiety that will be one of the reasons for his dismissal from the North Church later in 1842, although that will not be the only one.

Excommunications

The excommunications from the church began occurring in 1840, four years after Holt became the pastor of the church. There were six men that were ultimately excommunicated for holding antislavery or abolitionist views. Several of these men including George Booth, James Nowell, and Frederick W. Rogers all wrote lengthy letters to speak out against these actions by Edwin Holt. These men addressed the other clergymen of the church to examine these excommunications but also to condemn them for the lack of action against slavery. These letters also detail the actions and words of Edwin Holt to prove that he was against antislavery and abolitionism. It is through these letters that reveal Holt’s views of slavery and its place in the church while also using silencing tactics to keep members quiet.

⁶² Holt, Edwin. *Edwin Holt to Daniel Knight, August 11th, 1837*. Letter. From the Portsmouth Atheneum, *Folder 18 1836-1839 Correspondence*, (Accessed April 19, 2021).

⁶³ Holt, Edwin. *Edwin Holt to Daniel Knight, August 11th, 1837*.

⁶⁴ Mutter, Jacob. *Resolution to reappoint Edwin Holt as pastor, December 13th, 1837*. Letter. From the Portsmouth Atheneum, *Folder 24 1837-1842 Other Materials*, (Accessed April 19, 2021).

James Nowell

On December 7th of 1841, James Nowell wrote to the North Church, urging the church to take a stand against slavery and requesting that his membership be restored so that he may be transferred to the Free Church in Portsmouth.⁶⁵ Nowell also puts blame on the church for allowing Holt to create “resolutions” that purposely silenced antislavery members of the church stating

“...the church did wrong in sustaining the pastor by pulsing resolutions which, as it appeared to me, were shutting the cause of the slave out of the church and which, the pastor has since saw he considered to be shutting the discussion of the subject out of the church.”⁶⁶

Nowell blamed the church for supporting Holt’s actions and speaks about the silence that was purposely put in place to keep these antislavery and abolitionist members from tainting the holiness of the church. Nowell also writes to the church in hopes that they realize the situation at hand and further explains that the church should take a stand against slavery and reject this silencing pastor who is actively erasing their cause within the church.⁶⁷ Nowell states in the letter that the northern churches hold “immense responsibility” with regard to the slave system, that it is a holy duty for these churches to actively speak out against it.⁶⁸

Nowell requests within the same letter that he has his membership restored by the church so that he may become a member of the Free Church. Holt may have gotten rid of the infidel within the North Church, but he did not stop Nowell from finding a free church in Portsmouth that would accept his views and speak against slavery. Holt used the tactic of polite silence

⁶⁵ Nowell, James. *James Nowell to the North Church, December 7th, 1841*. Letter. From the Portsmouth Atheneum, Folder 21, 1841 July-Dec Correspondence, (Accessed April 19, 2021).

⁶⁶ Nowell, James. *James Nowell to the North Church, December 7th, 1841*.

⁶⁷ Nowell, James. *James Nowell to the North Church, December 7th, 1841*.

⁶⁸ Nowell, James. *James Nowell to the North Church, December 7th, 1841*.

against Nowell so that the antislavery view would not permeate the church, following his Old School influence. Nowell did not give up on his antislavery passion even when he was shut down by Holt but saw the obstruction as an opportunity to find strength in numbers elsewhere.

George Booth

Later in the month on December 27th, 1841, George Booth wrote a twenty-nine-page letter addressed to the North Church that accuses Holt as being pro-slavery and how he had purposely made it difficult for those in the church that were anti-slavery.⁶⁹ Booth begins his letter condemning slavery and how he could no longer be silent on the matter with the church and with Holt.⁷⁰ Booth puts most of the blame on the actions of Holt stating

“...and praying for the Abolition of this system so heinously sinful in the sight of a holy God, and odious to the benevolent Heart was from Mr. Holt soon after he commenced his labours with this church”.⁷¹

Booth then goes on to describe Holt and his actions as being calculated and “seeking occasion to hone a difficulty” with him, and that these are actions that someone with a “benevolent heart” who supports proslavery would do.⁷² Booth then goes on to describe the different actions of Holt and his tactic of polite silence. Booth met with Holt to discuss the possibility of Holt reading an antislavery notice to the other members of the church, when Holt stood up during the meeting and said that he was in hopes that he would never have to read any threats as such and that he had a list of sixty members that requested for him not to read that

⁶⁹ Booth, George. *George Booth to the North Church, December 28th, 1841*. Letter. From the Portsmouth Atheneum, Folder 21, 1841 July-Dec Correspondence, (Accessed April 19, 2021).

⁷⁰ Booth, George. *George Booth to the North Church, December 28th, 1841*.

⁷¹ Booth, George. *George Booth to the North Church, December 28th, 1841*.

⁷² Booth, George. *George Booth to the North Church, December 28th, 1841*.

notice.⁷³ This notion that an antislavery notice served as a “threat” in the eyes of Holt reveals the southern influence that he embraced as part of his religious moral code. Giving the power of just reading an antislavery notice to the church would breach the security of the church and threaten its holiness. For a southern influenced pastor like Holt, giving any sort of power to these views was detrimental to the wellbeing of the church and therefore the tactic of silencing members was the safest route to protect it.

Booth then goes on to describe an event where he was accused of winking and smiling at another church member during a service where Holt was preaching against the Abolitionists.⁷⁴ For Booth to mention that Holt had preached against abolitionism and then being punished for petty facial expressions shows the true nature of Holt and his views of slavery. Actively preaching against abolitionism within the church and receiving support from other church members (excluding those that were excommunicated) tells of a different story that the “pure white” North wasn’t necessarily purely white but rather a grayscale of mixed views and emotions during this time. Holt being bothered by these actions of Booth and for being abolitionist highlights the purposeful obstruction that he had set in place to resist and protect what he felt was the divine way of American life.

Frederick W. Rodgers

Frederick W. Rodgers has perhaps the most direct examples in his letter that allude to the possible proslavery views that Holt had held close to his divinity. Rodgers was also excommunicated from the church for holding antislavery views.⁷⁵ Rodgers was requested to state

⁷³ Booth, George. *George Booth to the North Church, December 28th, 1841.*

⁷⁴ Booth, George. *George Booth to the North Church, December 28th, 1841.*

⁷⁵ Rodgers, Frederick W. *Frederick W. Rodgers to the North Church, February 11th, 1842.* Letter. From the Portsmouth Atheneum, *Folder 23, 1842 Correspondence*, (Accessed April 19, 2021).

the reasons as to why he did not support the church and Edwin Holt, to which he gave five significant reasons. This resulted in him being told to resign by Holt, which he did.⁷⁶

The first reason that Rodgers gave was that Holt had said that he “prayed against a part of the members of this church, as much as a slave ever prayed against his oppressors”, a low blow that shows the negative attitude that Holt had against antislavery and abolitionist members.⁷⁷ The next reason was that Holt stated that if “he would be placed in the circumstances again, as he was at the south, he should again hold a slave” a direct connection to being proslavery while also holding such an act in front of the faces of members who were so passionately against it, including Rodgers.⁷⁸ Holt had also cast out members and treated them like “heathen men and publicans”, which included people like Nowell and Booth, which greatly upset Rodgers.⁷⁹ Rodgers refers to the antislavery meetings and how Holt refused to allow them to occur at the church, purposely preventing the discussion of antislavery.⁸⁰ Lastly, Rodgers states that Holt called some of the members who were abolitionists “a factious cabal, a misguided few” and also said that he would fight them “as long as he had a drop of blood in his veins”, Holt was willing to go through a religious mental war with these members and was incredibly passionate about it.⁸¹ These are actions that were purposeful and vindictive, showing the means that Holt was willing to do in order to silence these members for good and protect the southern ideals of slavery.

Rodgers expected that he was going to have to defend his reasons and show proof by providing witnesses that these things were said by Holt, but he never had to do so because he

⁷⁶ Rodgers, Frederick W. *Frederick W. Rodgers to the North Church, February 11th, 1842.*

⁷⁷ Rodgers, Frederick W. *Frederick W. Rodgers to the North Church, February 11th, 1842.*

⁷⁸ Rodgers, Frederick W. *Frederick W. Rodgers to the North Church, February 11th, 1842.*

⁷⁹ Rodgers, Frederick W. *Frederick W. Rodgers to the North Church, February 11th, 1842.*

⁸⁰ Rodgers, Frederick W. *Frederick W. Rodgers to the North Church, February 11th, 1842.*

⁸¹ Rodgers, Frederick W. *Frederick W. Rodgers to the North Church, February 11th, 1842.*

was swiftly excommunicated, and no further questions were asked.⁸² Holt was quick to silence these members after making the purposely vicious remarks in order to remain in a place of power against them and then not deal with any of the possible repercussions. Rodgers provides this key information into the fears that Holt held regarding antislavery and abolitionist views, and the desperate and vicious remarks that revealed this fear.

Holt's Resignation

On the 14th of February of 1842, only four days after the letter from Frederick W. Rodgers was written, the committee accepted the resignation of Edwin Holt.⁸³ The correspondence states that Holt had received a call to become the new pastor at the West Presbyterian Church in New York city.⁸⁴ The resignation correspondence does not speak of any negative views regarding Holt or that he is residing because of the previous members of the church but the timing and the drama of the church certainly provided that extra push that ultimately caused Holt to resign.⁸⁵ It is interesting that he chose another northern church to preach at since he dealt with the drama and conflict of the North Church. Hearing the volatile emotions that he had towards abolitionism and antislavery, it would only make sense that he would go back to comfort and preach in the south again, or maybe it was in his evangelical personality to try and continue to further spread his polite silence and aide the southern clergymen in their religious battle by fighting in the frontlines. Edwin Holt would go on to preach in the states of New York, New Hampshire, and Iowa with his last sermon occurring in

⁸² Rodgers, Frederick W. *Frederick W. Rodgers to the North Church, February 11th, 1842.*

⁸³ *Resolution to Accept the Resignation of Rev. Holt, February 14th, 1842.* Letter. From the Portsmouth Athenium, Folder 24, 1837-1842 Other Materials, (Accessed April 19, 2021).

⁸⁴ *Resolution to Accept the Resignation of Rev. Holt, February 14th, 1842.*

⁸⁵ *Resolution to Accept the Resignation of Rev. Holt, February 14th, 1842.*

June of 1854 and then less than a month later on July 2nd, he passed away due to complications with his throat.

The Outcome

Edwin Holt was a reverend that was influenced by the south and by Old School Presbyterianism, but he is also an important example of an obstruction that used polite silence in order to keep the church “pure” and to rid the land of the abolitionist infidels. This obstruction influenced the many members of the North Church, those accepting of it and those who held antislavery and abolitionist views that were resilient against it. Holt felt passionate about his reputation and authority as a minister, and the duty to keep America as an “old” and “true” religious landscape rather than a “radical” and “new age” one was important to him. Hearing the actions of Holt through Nowell, Booth, and Rodgers also speaks to the deafening silence that Holt placed among this story, since he nor any of the other clergymen wrote about the manner. Holt was calculated, vindictive, and discrete as he had learned from his Old School roots.

This is also a story that goes against the normal understanding for the religious climate surrounding slavery at the time in New England. Why would clergymen, in a heavy antislavery and abolitionist state, hire a previous slaveholding minister that closely followed southern ideals of slavery to become a religious leader at their church? It shows that antislavery and abolitionism was not a wildfire that swept across New England and quickly accepted into the religious institutions, but rather a slow burn that dealt with many steps towards these views and the purposely placed obstructions that were in the way of it. Holt signifies that these obstructions did not solely reside in the south, but rather they could find themselves in the belly of the northern beast, fighting firsthand against this new and radical vision of religion in America.