

Stephen S. Harding: A Hoosier Abolitionist

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In 1808, the very year set aside two decades before by the framers of the Constitution of the United States in which to allow Congress to prohibit the foreign slave trade, there was born in Palmyra, New York, Stephen S. Harding who was to become a leader in the abolition movement. In Harding's natal year, Congress promptly forbade further importation of slaves into the United States in the hope, perhaps somewhat feeble, that by the enactment of this law slavery would cease to be a wedge splitting the nation into two hostile camps.¹

During the next two decades, as Harding was growing to maturity in southeastern Indiana, slavery, instead of subsiding, continued to spread until the domestic slave system had firmly intrenched itself in the economic life of the southern States. It was near the close of these two decades, or in the fall of 1828, that young Harding dedicated his life to the abolition of domestic slavery in the United States. Not only did he abhor slavery but believed it to be unconstitutional.

Reared in Ripley County, Indiana, a small backward community, which was inhabited largely by emigrants from slaveholding states,² Harding, as soon as he reached manhood, began a fight in this settlement, which was somewhat favorable to slavery, for abolition in the South. So successful were his efforts that later, he was twice named as candidate for lieutenant governor of Indiana on the Liberty Party ticket.³

Young Harding was one of thirteen children who accompanied their parents, David and Abigail Harding, to Indiana in 1820.⁴ Coming into an undeveloped country at the impressionable age of twelve, Stephen Harding early learned to shift for himself.⁵ He began teaching school in his community in

¹ The Constitution of the United States, article I, section 9: "The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the year one thousand eight hundred eight, but a Tax or duty may be imposed on such Importation, not exceeding ten dollars for each Person."

² Julia Henderson Levering, *Historic Indiana*, 283-284. Also Henry Wilson, *History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America*, II, 62.

³ *American Biographical History of Eminent and Self Made Men of the State of Indiana*, (4th Cong. Dist.), I, 79. See also pp. 22-24. The campaigns were 1843 and 1846.

⁴ Harding mss. at Milan, Indiana, May 10, 1875.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Ripley County at the age of sixteen, although he had then had but nine months formal school training himself.⁶ The first formal public address given by the young schoolmaster, who later was to become one of the outstanding orators in the abolition cause in Indiana, was delivered at a local Independence Day celebration in his seventeenth year. Eager to learn and advance, Harding studied law, being admitted to the bar at the age of twenty.

Harding began the practice of law at Richmond, Indiana, where he was forced to compete with such prominent attorneys as John Test, United States Senator James Noble, and Oliver H. Smith who later became a United States Senator from Indiana.⁷ His legal abilities were not recognized at this place, where he was not known, and he left within six months.⁸ His idle hours in his Richmond office, Harding said, were spent in the study of Shakespeare and the Roman and Greek classics.⁹ He became well versed in the classic literature, and this knowledge ever after influenced his style of speaking and writing.

There is no record that Harding held any decided opinion on the question of slavery until he came in actual contact with the institution in the South.¹⁰ This contact came in the fall of 1828, when but twenty years of age he made a trip to New Orleans by steamboat.¹¹ He had two purposes in making this trip. He went to assume charge of the personal property of a client in New Orleans, and also to look about with a view of establishing himself in the practice of law somewhere in the South.¹²

Abandoning his office in Richmond, Harding set out for the South, carrying with him letters of introduction from John Test, then a prominent Indiana lawyer, to Governor Miller of Arkansas, and from Oliver H. Smith to the Hon. Henry H. Gurley, then a representative in Congress from Louisiana.¹³ There were also letters of introduction from General James

⁶ Interview between Harding and Judge O. F. Roberts, Dec. 13, 1883, printed in the *Lawrenceburg Press*, Dec. 13, 1883.

⁷ William W. Woolen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana*, 178. Also Oliver H. Smith, *Early Indiana Trials and Sketches*, 11.

⁸ John B. Rebuck, "Biography of Stephen S. Harding", read before the Ripley County (Indiana) Bar Association.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Harding mss., undated.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ The originals of the letters of introduction are among Harding's papers at Milan, Indiana.

Noble addressed to Senator Cobb, of Georgia, and Ambrose Sevier, then a delegate in Congress from the territory of Arkansas, and from the Governor of Indiana to the Governor of Louisiana.¹⁴

Harding, upon arrival at New Orleans, presented himself to the Governor of Louisiana, who received him courteously and invited him to visit his plantation. Several days elapsed before Harding could turn his attention to the business of his Indiana client. Meanwhile his spare time was spent in sight-seeing, the most impressive sight, to this young man of twenty, being the slave markets of New Orleans. This was his first direct contact with slavery at its worst, and in recounting this experience later, he said:

I confess much as I had heard of the horrors of the domestic slave trade, I witnessed scenes on these various occasions that are not fit to be named amongst Christians. And yet the buyers and sellers in these human shambles could be found, some of them, oftentimes at a Christian Church! With sanctimonious faces and prayer books in hands! No wonder that on that occasion I should mentally quote the words of the author of American Independence, "I tremble for my country when I consider that God is just, and that His justice will not sleep forever."¹⁵

It is an interesting coincidence that Harding and Abraham Lincoln saw Louisiana and the slave markets of New Orleans for the first time in the same year (1828), though there is no evidence that Harding made the acquaintance of Lincoln on this trip.

Harding returned home after eight months in New Orleans, working his way back on the Mississippi River as clerk on the steamboat "Belvedere". The impressions of slavery which he acquired during his brief sojourn in the South made of him an ardent anti-slavery man, and caused him to assume a belligerent attitude toward the institution.¹⁶ The anti-slavery movement had not yet affected his home community¹⁷ which as already stated was made up largely of folk from south of the Ohio River.¹⁸

Unable to subdue the wanderlust of youth, Harding left

¹⁴ *American Biographical History of Eminent and Self Made Men of the State of Indiana* (4th Cong. Dist.), I, 77.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Rebeck, "Biography of Harding."

¹⁷ Albert B. Hart, *Slavery and Abolition*, 194.

¹⁸ W. H. Smith, *A Political History of Slavery*, I, 12-13; Wilson, *Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America*, II, 184-185.

shortly after his return from the South for an extensive trip to the East, spending a part of the time among relatives at his former home in Palmyra, New York.¹⁹ While in Palmyra, he met Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet, in whose home he was a guest over night and heard read the first four chapters of the Book of Mormon which was at that very time in the process of being published in a Palmyra printing shop.²⁰ Smith tried to prevail upon Harding to remain in Palmyra until the Book of Mormon was completed after which Harding would be sent to London as a missionary for the newly created Mormon church. This opportunity was rejected. Just what influence this trip to the East had on Harding with respect to slavery is not known. Only this is known, that, being widely traveled for a youth of his backward Indiana community, Harding at once stood out among his neighbors as a leader.

He began in 1830 to follow closely the trend of the slavery controversy. He subscribed to a number of anti-slavery periodicals as well as other journals of his day. Almost from their first issue Harding received the *True American*, published at Lexington, Kentucky, by Cassius M. Clay, and the *Philanthropist*, published at Cincinnati, Ohio, 1836-1847, by Gamaliel Bailey, Jr. From these papers he drew while yet a young man ideas on universal liberty, gradual emancipation, and the elevation of labor morally and politically. After 1840 Harding reached out beyond his own state and neighboring states for his ideas, supporting such anti-slavery publications as the *Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison's publication, and the *National Era*, published by Dr. Gamaliel Bailey. There is every evidence that Harding, because of his impetuous nature might have been as radical as Garrison had he been reached by the Garrisonian literature soon after his return from New Orleans when he was but twenty years old. But, as the following letter from Harding to Garrison printed on the front page of the *Liberator* of April 7, 1843, will show, the attention of Harding was not attracted to Garrison's paper before March, 1843.

Dear Sir—Some person (unknown to me) has been kind enough to send to this office a copy or two of your paper. From a candid reading of the same, I am induced to send my name to you as a subscriber. You

¹⁹ Harding mss., undated.

²⁰ Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism*, p. 284; Also, Harding mss., undated.

will please forward me one copy for a year. . . . You may, if you think proper, enclose me a Prospectus for the *Liberator*. I will try and see if I can procure some subscribers from this vicinity. We, in the Far West, are beginning to feel the vast importance attached to this question of slavery, and all admit that the question, however 'exciting' and 'delicate' it may be, cannot longer be stove off. . . . The signs of the time are truly portentous as it regards this question; and that the American people should have tamely submitted to the 'overseership' which has heretofore been resorted to by the interested 'clique', in order to stifle the groans of millions in this 'land of liberty', is as astonishing to the reflecting man, as its tendency is alarming to the lover of his country. A week since, I learned the fate of the GREAT PETITION from your State, and noted especially the dignified epithets which a few slaveholding and soul-buying ruffians applied to it, and to that 'wonderful man' who had the honor of trying to present it. I have asked myself, what will the descendants of the Pilgrims say of the epithets, 'nigger', 'slaves', 'runaway slaves', 'smut machine', &c, &c. as applied to their Petition, bearing the humble requests of 52,000 of her 'free sons and daughters'. Well, we shall see what we shall see.

Harding hearkened to the published opinions of prominent men on the subject of slavery and discovered that even in the South abolition sentiment had been tolerated. Slaveholders and free farmers not infrequently admitted that slavery was an evil.²¹ In an old leather law account book, Harding pasted numerous newspaper clippings giving accounts of speeches on the slavery question made by prominent southerners of Jackson's day.²² Undoubtedly these discussions influenced Harding to throw himself into the fight against slavery and helped him to express in words some of the impressions of slavery which he had so recently formed during his brief stay in the South. Among these was a part of a speech delivered by Hon. Charles James Faulkner in the Virginia House of Delegates, January 20, 1832, on "The Policy of the State with Respect to Her Slave Population"; a fragment of a speech by Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Jefferson's grandson, who introduced the subject of Virginia's slave population to the Virginia Legislature of 1831-32;²³ editorials of John Hampden Pleasants, then the editor of the *Richmond Whig*; and many other editorial opinions from other influential papers of Virginia. From 1829 until 1832, the negro question was in the fore in

²¹ Smith, *A Political History of Slavery*, I, 3; also, A. B. Hart, *Slavery and Abolition*, 176-177.

²² This law account book is among Harding's papers in the Harding home at Milan, Indiana.

²³ Smith, *A Political History of Slavery*, I, 3.

Virginia, and the attention of anti-slavery men of the North was naturally attracted to these discussions.

Determined that slavery was wrong and should be abolished, Harding flung himself into the abolition movement with full force. His line of reasoning was simple, since to him slavery was wrong and a wrong should be righted. It might have been, and probably was, "a gloomy time for the little band of people who believed that slavery was poisonous to the south, hurtful to the north, and dangerous to the Union."²⁴

Harding was especially qualified to be a leader in the abolition movement to which he dedicated himself from 1830 forward. He was an omnivorous reader and an eloquent and utterly fearless speaker. He possessed a deep, resounding voice and convincing manner of address.²⁵ He believed firmly in the cause of abolition and fearlessly espoused this cause in southern Indiana at this early day when four-fifths of the people were in sympathy with slavery.²⁶ The greater portion of the inhabitants, having moved to southern Indiana from slaveholding states, had been reared to regard the rights of the slave owner to his slave as sacred as his rights to his horses, cattle, or any other property.²⁷

After 1833 Stephen S. Harding was called upon frequently to address public gatherings in southeastern Indiana. The earliest one of his speeches which is extant was made in 1833 when he was twenty-five years old. On this occasion, Harding addressed a Fourth of July gathering on the subject of intemperance. He could not resist the temptation to introduce into this speech the evil of slavery, and to link it with intemperance as one of the two great evils undermining the sacred principles of the people of the United States.

Throughout the speech Harding graphically portrayed the ravages accompanying intemperance. It was near the close that he introduced the subject of slavery:

This, however appalling, is but a faint picture of the ravages of intemperance; nor is it from this source alone that our country need apprehend the greatest of all evils, a national dissolution. These evils, however now they cannot be dwelt upon, consist of Slavery and its legiti-

²⁴ Hart, *Slavery and Abolition*, 166.

²⁵ Lawrenceburg (Indiana) *Press*, June 6, 1891.

²⁶ Julia Henderson Levering, *Historic Indiana*, 283-4; William M. Cockrum, *The Underground Railroad—Indiana*, 12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

mate offspring, Nullification. For, depend upon it, from the sources of the former spring all the discord and threatening of the latter. . . .²⁸

Harding, as well as other anti-slavery leaders, "discovered the usefulness of organized societies, because they encouraged each other and spread information and arguments from community to community."²⁹ In 1833 he made a trip to New York and Philadelphia, at which time he very probably attended the convention in Philadelphia which organized the Anti-Slavery Society of America. Certainly to connect himself with such a convention would have been entirely in keeping with his belief in the policy of organized effort. The following is from a speech of 1833:

Societies for the purpose of promoting these great causes of Benevolence (intemperance and slavery reform) have already been formed not only in our own country but throughout Christendom, and the great and good of both Hemispheres are concentrating their moral energies to accomplish this grand desideratum. . . .

The next earliest preserved speech was made about 1834. This confines itself entirely to the subject of slavery. In tune with the style of oratory of that day, this address is very flowery and draws a fanciful picture of the horrors of an enslaved man. According to this speech, Harding's cherished desire was to see the citizens of the United States awakened and determined to bring about the eradication of this great evil of our country. To him the fallacy of the framers of the Constitution in causing that document so to read as to seem to recognized slavery in the states where it existed³⁰ was a dark blot on our history. He remembered, however, the circumstances under which the compromises of the Constitution were made, and recalled Alexander Hamilton's question, "Is it possible to deliberate between anarchy and confusion on one side, and the chances of good on the other?", and mingled charity with his censure.

By 1842, Harding had joined the fight against the extension of slavery into the territories. The ornate style of his former speeches was now replaced by a more practical treatment of the subject of slavery. He advocated, on this occasion, free speech and open discussion of the subject of slavery. In

²⁸ Harding mss., dated June 29, 1833.

²⁹ Hart, *Slavery and Abolition*, p. 160.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

the heat of his discussion he says of the inconsistency of the fathers of our government in admitting slavery into the Constitution:

I know that this is called a delicate question and some will say 'tread lightly on the ashes of the dead', 'the good men do lives after them, the bad is interred with their bones!' But still, vice is not entitled to our veneration the more for its age, nor that which is morally wrong to our sanction because it has numbered in its advocates the names of those whose statues are in the temple of Fame, and whose names are enrolled on the records of Immortality. . . .³¹

The Hoosier abolitionist took this stand on the subject of freedom of speech almost twenty years before William Ellery Channing, the Boston and Newport minister and abolitionist declared:

The greatest truths are often the most unpopular and exasperating The progress of society depends on nothing more than on the exposure of time-sanctioned abuses, The right of free discussion is, therefore, to be guarded by the friends of mankind with peculiar jealousy.³²

Harding was not a Garrisonian abolitionist. He did not believe, as did William Lloyd Garrison in 1843, that "the compact which existed between the North and the South is a covenant with death and an agreement with Hell . . . involving both parties in atrocious criminality and should be immediately annulled."³³ Nor would he have sympathized with Garrison when, in 1854, the latter publicly burned a copy of the Constitution, crying out, "So perish all compromisers with tyranny."³⁴ The following quotation from a speech of June 20, 1842, will prove this point:

Impressed with these truths, it becomes a cardinal duty of every American citizen to preserve, as far as in him lies, the purity and integrity of our institutions. They were formed upon a basis of the best experience, and the principles which gave rise to them need not recoil from a comparison with those ever yet advanced by any set of men.

On the other hand, Harding advocated an anti-slavery interpretation of the Constitution in accord with what he be-

³¹ Harding mss., dated June 20, 1842.

³² *Tribute to the American Abolitionists for Their Vindication of Freedom of Speech* (pamphlet), Anti-Slavery Society, 1861.

³³ Wilson, *Rise and Fall of the Slave Power*, I, 569-570; Hart, *Slavery and Abolition*, 252.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 253.

lieved to have been the ultimate purpose of the framers. For he believed, and so expressed himself in his speeches, that it could not have been in the hearts of such noble patriots as were the fathers of our country to desire to perpetuate so odious a system as human slavery. In a speech made in 1849, Harding asked his audience to imagine the massive tables of Washington's monument, then in the process of erection, being inscribed with some of the axioms at the foundation of the belief of the slavery advocates:

Suppose that the committee . . . should order that the plain surface of its massive tablets should be inscribed in ineffaceable letters with some of the axioms which lie at the foundation of certain modern schools . . . Here are some of them, . . . 'Slavery is the corner stone of the American Republic', . . . 'Slavery is a divinely appointed institution' . . .

Is there an American who would not hide his face in shame? . . . Aye, Sir, he would devoutly pray . . . that God's descending thunderbolts would scatter in ruins its record of impudent lies!!! . . .

Harding advocated the crystallization of public opinion both in the North and South for the abolition of slavery:

No human structure, however grand or lofty is immutable. . . .

The eternal Pyramids themselves . . . will not remain long unimpaired without the continued skill and care of the architect . . . Institutions and governments of every description, however well founded they may be, are in the most imminent danger of being corrupted if not entirely overthrown the moment that the great end of their formation is lost sight of. In the history of a people or nation there is much to be learned; we are led to avoid their errors and to improve upon their wisdom.⁸⁵

He believed in the principle of meeting a political evil by political action. He left the Whig party in 1840, since he did not care to identify himself with a political group which did not carry a plank in its platform against the further extension of slavery into the territories, and a gentle but firm determination so to alter the Constitution of the United States as to abolish slavery in the United States forever. This is to be seen from a letter written to Harding by a friend, Aaron Richardson of Rochester, Minnesota, in 1870, in which Richardson recalls when he and Harding were

⁸⁵ Harding mss., dated June 20, 1842.

pioneers in battling for the great principles contained in the Declaration of Independence. Little did I think in 1841, when twelve men in Milan, Ind. absolved themselves from the old political parties to contend for right,—wrote on our tickets in blazing capitals 'Human Rights',—and put them in the ballot box,—little did I think then that seed sown in such weakness would soon be raised in great power.³⁶

A campaign leaflet of 1856 to which Harding subscribed carried the following, a platform declaring that it should be the purpose

to guard and protect the respective rights of native and naturalized citizens; to aid in preserving the Territories of the Union for the homes of Freemen, and the institutions of Freedom; to maintain and uphold the rights of the North, without infringement upon those of the South; to sustain the sentiment affirmed in the Declaration of Independence, and by the Fathers of the Republic, that Freedom is, and of right should be, the policy of the Nation, the end and aim of our National organization,
.³⁷

Although 1856, the date of this leaflet, is sixteen years removed from 1840, the last time Harding voted with the Whig party, yet in this declaration we see a crystallization of Harding's ideas as expressed in his speeches from 1840 to 1850.

The ambiguities in the Constitution regarding slavery, Harding thought to be only a temporary toleration by the framers as an expedient to bind together the thirteen colonies during the formative period of the Union, with the expectation that in time the institution of slavery would run its course in the United States and be automatically abandoned as an economically unsound institution. Harding always spoke at length in driving home to his hearers the argument that slave labor was uneconomical, as well as degrading to slave and master alike. As Harding's speech made in 1849 shows, he followed the moderate abolitionists like Salmon P. Chase, William Jay, Joshua R. Giddings and James G. Birney, as against extremists like William Lloyd Garrison.

Over a period of fifteen years, from 1833 until 1849, Harding developed into an able anti-slavery leader, lining up with representative men of the middle and western states, hoping to lead his section of Indiana to victory over slavery. As a reward for this growth and leadership, Harding became a leader in state politics on the tickets of the Liberty and Free-

³⁶ This letter is among the Harding mss. at Milan, Indiana.

³⁷ This leaflet is among the Harding papers at Milan, Indiana.

Soil parties and arose to further prominence in the Republican victory of 1860.

In June, 1844, Harding delivered an anti-slavery speech at the courthouse in Versailles, Indiana. At that date there were not "twelve men in Ripley County who were avowedly in sympathy with his views", according to Major Oscar Cravens of Lawrenceburg in his address at that city on the occasion of memorial services for Harding.⁸⁸

Proud, ambitious, a highly sensitive being, Harding knew to the fullest extent the unpopularity of the cause he espoused. The space about the courthouse, where he was to speak, was filled with auditors. Some were armed. There was a determination that Harding should not speak. Upon the courthouse was painted on black muslin, "Treason, treason, the Union dissolved this day by the abolitionists." Personal friends tried to dissuade Harding from speaking. According to his own report, one friend said:

You know that I am your friend. I would not see you insulted and abused for all that I am worth. It won't do for you to attempt to make a speech here today. The people, without distinction of party, have determined that you shall not make an abolition speech no matter what happens. The Whigs and Democrats held a meeting last night in the Court House and have agreed in their determination that you should not speak here today. I beg of you to go away immediately and have no trouble

Harding described his feelings and decision:

As I listened to this my very brain was on fire. I replied, "Mr. S. . . . will you take my horse or will you compel me to hitch him to the fence? I will not go back. By the eternal I will make a speech in this town today or I will be carried out of it *feet foremost*. Yes, sir, I will do it if every shingle", pointing to the roof of the courthouse, "turns into a grinning devil!!!"

Turning to my friends who had now disposed of their horses, I said, "Gentlemen, follow me." By this time the doors and upper windows were filled with women and children. To the credit of some of these ladies they were actually wiping their eyes There were men on the streets that looked at me and my friends with a brutal stare. . . .

Harding did speak, unperturbed by the threats of being mobbed. He delivered a fiery abolition speech and predicted

⁸⁸ Lawrenceburg (Indiana) *Press*, June 6, 1891.

that in twenty years slavery would be wiped out of existence in the United States. He declaimed to the Versailles audience upon the right of free speech, the right of the press, and the rights of the people of God's creation without distinction of color.³⁹

This speech at Versailles made converts of some of the strongest and most able men in southern Indiana, who remained loyal to the cause of anti-slavery until slavery was abolished. At the time of this address in 1844, Harding was undoubtedly one of the best informed men of Indiana upon the slavery question, having followed closely the sentiments of the abolition and pro-slavery leaders since 1830. In facing an Indiana audience in 1844, Harding had to bear in mind that his fellow citizens of Indiana had but a superficial knowledge of the slavery question. To them it was an institution necessary and natural. Any attempt to overthrow it was considered by them radical and even treasonable. They believed it to bear the sanction of the American constitution. As a result of this feeling, founded on sentiment rather than on logic, Harding by many of his public utterances, brought down on his own head the ire of the people. He had high hopes that once the people of Indiana were informed on the slavery question, they would rally to the cause of anti-slavery, the torch of which he held aloft among his benighted neighbors.

Slavery, in 1844, was still firmly upheld by both major political parties, Democrats and Whigs. On the evening before Harding delivered his speech at Versailles both the major parties held meetings and resolved that Harding should not be permitted to address an audience in Ripley County on the subject of slavery. The signs on the political horizon were threatening. Slavery seemed to dominate all departments of the Federal Government.⁴⁰ Freedom of the press and freedom of speech were but a mockery. Harding yielded to no party at the expense of his code of ethics. He once advised:

Do not seek to conciliate individuals or parties at the expense of your manhood and settled convictions of justice and right. Do not dread the frowns of a sect, not yield to the proscriptions of a party. . . .⁴¹

³⁹ Jacob P. Dunn, *Indiana and Indianans*, I, 512-13, gives a stirring account of this incident; Rebuck, "Biography of Harding; *American Biographical History of Eminent and Self Made Men of the State of Indiana* (4th Cong. Dist.), I, 79-83.

⁴⁰ Smith, *A Political History of Slavery*, I, 33.

⁴¹ Harding mss., dated 1849.

The story is told that in 1844 Harding addressed a meeting at North Manchester, Indiana. The lights suddenly were extinguished. In the face of insult and threat Harding was expected by his enemies to quit his speech and go home. On the contrary he delivered a powerful address in the dark and won his audience completely by his unflinching courage.⁴²

According to Harding's own account, given in an interview with Judge O. F. Roberts of Aurora, Indiana, in December, 1883,⁴³ about three o'clock one morning in the summer of 1844, shortly after his speech at Versailles, Indiana, a loud knock was heard at his door. Responding to the knock, he found a young man at the door. Harding describes the incident as follows:

He bowed and handed me a letter. It was from some Quakers at Knightstown, Indiana, who begged me to meet a Methodist preacher in debate at that place, who proposed to maintain not only the divine origin of slavery, but that it was sanctioned by the Bible as clearly as the relation of husband and wife, parent and child. I did not hesitate a moment, but I at once set off for Knightstown on horseback. I rode all day and until three o'clock next morning. I stopped with a Quaker near Knightstown. The debate was in the Quaker meeting house near the town. It lasted two days. When I went to the church I was introduced to the Rev. Mr. Kavanaugh,—He was a natural orator, and I was so informed before I met him. At first I wished I had not gone there, but the more I thought about it, the more my courage rose, and at last I felt eager for the fray to begin. The Quakers there told me, 'he is worthy of thy steel', and I found him so Kavanaugh was full of brilliant, dashing rhetoric. I closed the discussion. I charged upon him with this quotation, looking him squarely in the face,

Just Allah, what must be thy look,
When such a wretch before thee stands,
Turning the pages of thy sacred book,
With most defiled and blood-stained hands,
And drawing from the text divine,
A charter for his blood and crime.

The vast audience then arose with one universal shout, throwing of hats, and dispersed.⁴⁴

Fortunately for Harding's fate, he was speaking among Friends. He explained in later years that

⁴² Captain John C. Sims of Lawrenceburg, Indiana, who was present at this meeting left a verbal account of Harding's conduct.

⁴³ Lawrenceburg (Indiana) Press, December 18, 1883.

⁴⁴ Dunn, *Indiana and Indianans*, I, 512-13, gives an account of this debate in which he says Kavanaugh "was no match for Harding"

in 1844, the Freewill Baptists, Radical Methodists, and Quakers were all bold, outspoken, anti-slavery men, but all the other churches were pro-slavery, and they would no more admit me to their churches than they would if I had been advocating horse-stealing and the shoving of the queer. Those were the days that tried men's souls.⁴⁵

Harding chose to throw away his vote rather than to align himself with a pro-slavery candidate for president on either the Democrat or Whig ticket, after he became an enemy of slavery. So few were the souls in Indiana daring to expound publicly in 1840 their anti-slavery opinions that no Liberty party could be organized in the state. Ohio, Illinois and Michigan, however, to the north and adjoining Indiana on either side, had active Liberty or abolition party organizations by 1840.⁴⁶ In the *Philanthropist*, the virile anti-slavery paper of Cincinnati, published by G. Bailey, Jr., appeared the names of the nominees for governor on the Liberty ticket in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania. In this same issue an appeal was made by the editor that "our friends in the different counties will transmit us immediately accurate returns of the number of Liberty votes given."⁴⁷ This particular issue carried an abridged account of an address by Joshua R. Giddings, for twenty years (1838-1848) a member of the national House from Ohio, and a prominent opponent of slavery. This article appealed to Harding, as indicated by his pen markings. Addressing his constituents of the sixteenth Congressional District of Ohio, Giddings called to their attention the denial by Congress of the right to present "abolition petitions". Because of Harding's contact with these Ohio anti-slavery leaders and anti-slavery publications, he was made all the more firm in his belief that slavery was a political evil which must be met by political action.

The Liberty Party vote in the state of Indiana in 1842 totaled only 900; in 1843, the year Stephen S. Harding's name first appeared on the ticket of this party in Indiana as candidate for lieutenant governor, the vote increased to 2,050. Since the Liberty party organization in Indiana was but a year old, certainly Harding must have been a leader in its

⁴⁵ Lawrenceburg Press, December 13, 1833.

⁴⁶ Indiana Daily Sentinel, Dec. 19, 1843.

⁴⁷ Philanthropist, Oct. 20, 1841.

formation since he was selected as a candidate on the state ticket.

In the *Indiana Freeman*, an anti-slavery paper published by Henry W. De Puy, at Indianapolis, an account is given of a Liberty Party convention held at Indianapolis on November 14, 1844.⁴⁸ The platform of the Liberty party, as drawn up at this convention and published in this issue of the *Freeman*, is found among the Harding papers.

The Liberty Party in Indiana, although polling a small vote in 1843 and 1844, was slowly gaining ground and prestige in the state at the expense, apparently, of the Whig party. The *Indiana State Journal* expressed the following opinions before the nomination of Taylor in 1848:

If the Whigs get the states of New York and Indiana in addition to the vote of 1844 they can win. These are the nearest Whig states. There were cast in Indiana in 1844, 138,000 votes. Polk's majority was 2,100. With a proper candidate we can overcome that

A large number of our voters are Abolitionists, conscientiously opposed to voting for a slave holder They hold the balance of power in Indiana. They are Whig and will not support the Whig ticket unless free from that objection.⁴⁹

In the state election of 1846, Harding was again the Liberty Party nominee for lieutenant governor, with Stephen C. Stevens as the nominee for governor. Stevens also was a southern Indiana man. He had served in both houses of the Legislature and on the supreme court of Indiana. In 1826 and 1828 he was elected as senator from Switzerland and Ripley counties, the latter being Harding's home. Judge Stevens was appointed to the Supreme Court bench in 1831, the year after Harding, at the age of twenty-three, began the practice of law at Versailles, Indiana. Judge Stevens was also a fearless anti-slavery man. Opposition to slavery was with him, as with Harding, a principle, for which he was willing to sacrifice all.⁵⁰

Of the political fight in the state election of 1846 the *Indiana Daily Sentinel* recorded: The abolition vote at the recent election, as reported from 48 counties, is about 1,900. In the

⁴⁸ *Indiana Freeman*, November 16, 1844.

⁴⁹ *Indiana State Journal*, April 26, 1848.

⁵⁰ Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana*, 354.

whole State it will perhaps reach 2,500,—leaving a democratic majority over whiggery and niggery of about 1,500.⁵¹

In the presidential campaign of 1848, the Free Soil vote in Indiana jumped to 8,109, the Liberty Party men being absorbed by the larger anti-slavery party. Martin Van Buren was the Free Soil candidate and enjoyed the Free Soil support in Indiana. The race between the two major parties was very close, the third party holding the balance of power in the state.

The Free-Soil party of Indiana was formed at a mass meeting in Indianapolis on July 26, 1848. The assembly was composed of members of the Liberty Party with a considerable number of Democrats and Whigs who would not tolerate slavery-extension. Although unable to be present at this meeting because he was attending the Free-Soil national convention at Buffalo, New York, Harding sent a letter of congratulations, as did also Judge Stevens who had been Harding's colleague on the Liberty Party ticket in the state election of 1846.

The following item from the Cincinnati *Weekly Herald*, published at Cincinnati, Ohio, and edited by J. V. Smith is interesting:

In relation to the interesting narrative you gave in this morning's paper, let me relate further of what happened at Buffalo and along our route.

On our return from Urbana, we found that a notice had been circulated that a voice from Buffalo would be heard that evening from some of the delegates passing through. Although word had been passed around for the people to have a glorious staying away, when the hour came the Court House was crowded. The only speaker with us was S. S. Harding, of Indiana, and it seemed rather blue to satisfy such an assembly with such a subject, but at it he went, blundering along for some ten or fifteen minutes, when warming with the subject he laid off his coat and gave it to Taylorism for three hours in one of the most effective and powerful speeches. The audience, made up almost wholly of Taylor men, annoyed him at first by their rude interruptions, but they became more and more attentive, remaining until 11 o'clock, and greeting the speech and the platform with a round of applause.⁵²

The *Indiana State Journal* in commenting on the second Free-Soil convention held in Indianapolis in 1848, which Harding attended, remarked:

⁵¹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, Sept. 15, 1846.

⁵² *Weekly Herald*, Aug. 28, 1848.

We attended the Convention and heard some of the speeches made. On Tuesday night, Mr. Harding, one of the leading Abolitionists in the State, entertained his audience with a speech of considerable length. In the course of his remarks, for the purpose of making Van Buren palatable to the Abolitionists, he took the ground that all his former opposition to him and all his political iniquity should be buried with the past—and that all should now rally around him, because he was now right. He acknowledged that it was with some difficulty he got his own consent to go for him—but he finally concluded to do it.⁵³

In the presidential campaign of 1852, Harding voted for the Free Soil candidates for President and Vice-President. Indiana had become a more important factor in the General Free Soil movement by 1852. George W. Julian who had been elected to the national House by Free Soilers and Democrats in 1849 and who later became a Republican leader in Indiana was selected as the running mate of John Parker Hale in the presidential campaign of 1852.

Harding was one of the eleven presidential electors on the Free-Soil ticket in 1852 representing the fourth congressional district. Stephen C. Stevens and James H. Cravens were the two electors at large from the state.⁵⁴

The Central Committee of the Free-Soil party advertized its state convention in the following notice:

The friends of Freedom and of Free-Soil, including all those opposed to the "Fugitive Slave Law", will hold a State Convention at Indianapolis, on the third Monday in May—for the purpose of deliberating upon the interests of the cause of Liberty and of our State and Nation.

Each township is requested to send one delegate to the Convention.

This convention was made up of members of the old Liberty Party, "with a few Whigs and Democrats still clinging on to their skirts, who aided in organizing the Free-Soil party in 1848." They were determined to continue as a political organization separate from both of the major political parties. A full state ticket was nominated, with the exception of judges. George W. Julian, A. L. Robinson and Stephen S. Harding addressed this convention.⁵⁵

Democrats and Whigs declared in their national platforms of 1852 that the question of slavery had been settled. Each party resolved that further agitation of the slavery question

⁵³ *Indiana State Journal* (tri-weekly), August 30, 1848.

⁵⁴ *Indiana State Journal*, September 23, 1852.

⁵⁵ *New Albany Daily Ledger*, May 20, 1852.

was unwise and unpatriotic. There was sufficient political undertow, however, to pull down and engulf the nicely stated declarations of the Whig and Democratic parties. The next eight years were to see the slavery issue to the fore in politics with the decline of the Whig Party and the birth of the Republican Party.

Only a remnant of the Whig Party remained in existence after the campaign of 1854, in Indiana. There was a general breaking up of party lines throughout the North as politicians themselves began to recognize that the next national campaign must be made practically upon the slavery issue.⁵⁶ Throughout the free States an effort was being made to form a new political party from the Free-Soilers, Anti-Nebraska Whigs and Democrats, "Native Americans", foreigners, with other recruits from any political sect opposed to slavery that could be united in a common cause.

It was during the presidential canvass of 1852 that Stephen S. Harding met in joint debate the Hon. Jesse D. Bright, then a United States senator from Indiana, at a political mass meeting in Manchester.⁵⁷ Although Harding and Bright were of opposite political faith, they had always been friends. Senator Bright, in the course of his speech at Manchester, looking at Harding, said to the crowd:

There is my old friend Harding, as clever a gentleman as I ever met. I never see him without thinking what a pity it is that such a man should be foolish enough to spend his time, or sacrifice such prospects as he might have if he would quit paddling his little boat in the dirty goose-pond of abolitionism.

This ill-timed jest, though typical of Bright, brought a rebuke from Harding who retorted: "The world moves; politics is a revolving wheel; and he who is on top today will find himself at the bottom tomorrow."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Russell M. Seeds, *History of the Republican Party in Indiana*, 17.

⁵⁷ Bright owned a farm in Kentucky, well stocked with negroes, and was, therefore, identified with the South by interest as well as feeling. Although he was a Senator from Indiana, a free state, he was the owner of slaves, with his largest material interests in Kentucky (Woollen, p. 228. He became president pro-tem of the United States Senate in 1855 (*Tribune Almanac*, 1855, 16), and was the center of strife in connection with the alleged illegal election of United States senators in Indiana in 1858 (*Tribune Almanac*, 1860, 35-37). For twenty years prior to 1860, Bright was the leading man in Indiana politics, and the autocrat of the Democratic party in the state (Woollen, 223).

⁵⁸ *American Biographical History of Eminent and Self Made Men of the State of Indiana* (4th Cong. Dist.), I, 78-79. This retort of Harding is interesting because of the fact that on the 31st of March, 1862, Harding was appointed by President Lincoln governor of Utah territory, and the same Senate which confirmed the appointment charged Senator Bright with disloyalty and expelled him from the Senate. The 2nd session of the 37th Congress convened on December 2, 1861, and adjourned on July 17, 1862. Bright

After the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, the Democratic party in Indiana was put on the defensive, and a new People's party arose in the state. Harding aligned himself with this new party which became the Republican Party of Indiana and became prominent in the campaigns of 1854, 1856 and 1860.

Moved by two great moral forces—opposition to the further extension of slavery and the demand for a temperance law—the opponents of the Democratic party in Indiana assembled at Indianapolis in convention and formed the new People's Party of Indiana on July 13, 1854. So great were the numbers that came to this meeting that the leaders had to hold a meeting on the night of July 12 in order to perfect an organization which could handle the crowd which had assembled. It was estimated that between 8,000 and 10,000 people, of all political affiliations, coming into Indianapolis in various kinds of conveyances from every direction, gathered for the mass meeting of July 13. The preliminary meeting on July 12 was addressed by Stephen S. Harding, Schuyler Colfax, Henry S. Lane, Joseph W. Wright, and Reuben A. Riley, all men of high repute in their respective political circles.⁵⁹

Open denunciation of slavery won for the new party a tremendous following in the state. The temperance movement, which was sweeping the state, added impetus to the new organization. Not only Democrats and Whigs, but even the People's Party leaders themselves were astounded to discover the decisive victory of this newest party organization. The state ticket was carried by a plurality of 13,000 and six of the eleven Congressional districts were carried.⁶⁰

The campaign and election of 1856 proved a most stirring contest in Indiana. The People's Party had advanced to a new position on the slavery question; in 1854 it demanded the restoration of the Missouri Compromise line; by 1856 its cry was "*No More Slave States*."⁶¹

From 1854 to 1856 the People's party men in Indiana at times called themselves Republicans, which was correct enough, but this name, *Republican*, was not given to the party as

was expelled on February 5, 1862, and Harding was appointed governor of Utah territory on March 31, 1862.

⁵⁹ Seeds, *History of the Republican Party in Indiana*, 21; Charles Zimmerman, "The Origin and Rise of the Republican Party in Indiana from 1854 to 1860," *Indiana Magazine of History* (Sept. 1917), XIII, 234.

⁶⁰ Seeds, *Republican Party in Indiana*, 23.

⁶¹ W. H. Smith, *The History of the State of Indiana*, II, 927-928.

a whole in the state until the congressional and state campaign of 1858. However, Indiana sent a full delegation to the Republican national convention at Philadelphia on June 17, 1856, at which convention John C. Frémont of California and William L. Dayton of New Jersey were nominated for president and vice-president, respectively.

As the October election in Indiana drew near, the People's Party (Republican) leaders in the state were confident of success, but the returns showed a Democratic victory. When the November election came on for presidential electors, Indiana went Democratic by about 20,000. The Republicans, however, did carry five of the eleven Congressional districts, all in the northern part of the state. This seemed to draw a line in Indiana, making northern Indiana more anti-slavery than southern Indiana.

Harding saw in the birth of the new party a great possibility of stamping out slavery. He had been prominently identified with the anti-slavery parties since 1840, when he had left the Whig party. He had been a candidate for state offices on the Liberty Party ticket. He was devoted to the cause of the destruction of the institution of slavery and was aware that he could not promote this cause by further adherence to the old anti-slavery political organization. The platform opposing the extension of slavery lured Harding into the Republican ranks, and made of him an active promoter of the Republican cause in Indiana. From first to last, Harding changed his party allegiance only when he saw a better chance to strike at slavery.

The Republican national platform of 1856 opposed those "twin relics of barbarism,—polygamy and slavery", and declared it to be the constitutional right and imperative duty of Congress to prohibit these in the territories. On the subject of polygamy, Harding was now rabid. He and Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet, had been boys together in New York state. Harding believed Mormonism to be a hoax and welcomed the chance to vote against polygamy in the election of 1856.

In a speech made in the campaign of 1856, Harding divided the Democratic party into three classes: office holders and office hunters and their dependents; the descendants of the so-called, "F.F's" (first families) of Virginia and other slave-

holding states; and a last group of honest men, not yet aroused against slavery. In regard to the last two classes Harding remarked:

To convince this [second] class of Democrats that there was anything wrong in the relation of master and slave, or that the institution ought not to extend into the territories would be quite as hopeless a task as to convince a freezing man under a clear and frosty sky there is warmth in moonshine. I shall not waste my time in attempting to convince this class of disinterested patriots But there is a third class still belonging to the so called Democratic party that I would calmly and kindly address. This class is made up of honest and patriotic men who have not examined the great issues which divide the Republican and democratic parties as closely as their paramount importance demands,—men who have been lulled into security by the sacred name of democracy, and led on by political adventurers, and aspirants for the high places in the Republic, until they have long since departed from every true principle until they have been made the unconscious yet willing instruments, through the administration of Franklin Pierce,—of wrong and outrage upon unoffending brethren in Kansas. . . .⁶²

Defeat in the state and national elections of 1856 did not discourage the members of the People's Party (new Republican party). In 1857 and 1858 they strengthened their party organization and succeeded in the state election of 1858 in winning seven of the eleven Congressional districts in Indiana.⁶³

From 1856 to 1860 the feeling of opposition to the extension of slavery remained strong, not only in Indiana but throughout the North. One evidence of this growth was the Republican state nominating convention held at Indianapolis on February 22, 1860, which was the largest assemblage of its kind ever held in the capital. So great was the crowd that it was decided to move to the state house yard. The state ticket was selected and delegates were chosen for the national Republican convention at Chicago. A State Central Committee of sixteen members was chosen, on which Harding was given a place.

Because of the importance of carrying Indiana for the Republican party, a memorial was directed by the Republican

⁶² An old law account book of Harding was filled with clippings on the campaign of 1856. In this booklet Harding draws a comparison between the Democratic party of 1832 and that of 1856, arguing that the Democratic party had become a purely slave party as opposed to the party of 1832 many leaders of which at that time spoke publicly of the evils of slavery.

⁶³ Seeds, *Republican Party in Indiana*, 416.

State Central Committee to the National Republican Committee urging that the national convention be held in Indianapolis. It was argued that Indiana should have the convention since the state was more doubtful than any other likely to be carried by the Republicans. The National Committee, however, failed to see the importance of holding the convention in Indiana, naming Chicago as the place, and June 13 as the time. The date was afterwards changed to May 16.

Indiana played no small part in the nomination of Lincoln at Chicago in 1860, and Republicans of the Hoosier state went into the canvass with an organization much more complete than before and carried Indiana for Lincoln.⁶⁴ Pennsylvania, Illinois, Indiana and New Jersey were looked upon as the states in which the greatest efforts would have to be made in order to insure the election of a Republican president. The election for state officers in Indiana occurred in October, prior to that for president in November. Lincoln recognized the importance of Indiana, for he said that, "We might succeed in general results without Indiana, but with it failure is scarcely possible."⁶⁵

The story of the defeat of William H. Seward in the Republican national convention in 1860 is too well known to require repetition. The Indiana Republican delegates to the Chicago convention feared that Indiana could not be carried for Seward and, having no candidate of their own, concluded that the best way to defeat Seward was to support Lincoln.⁶⁶ When it became known that not only the Indiana delegates but the Pennsylvania delegates would stand solidly for Lincoln, the Illinois delegation, a part of which held out for Seward, was persuaded to back Lincoln. He was nominated on the third ballot.⁶⁷ Lincoln's nomination by the Republican party in 1860 came as a surprise to the general public, since in the Republican ranks were such well known men as Seward, of New York, Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania, and Salmon P. Chase of Ohio, while Lincoln was not well known.

The October election in Indiana resulted in a Republican victory of 10,000 majority, with seven Republican Congress-

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 410.

⁶⁵ John J. Nicolay and John Hay, *Works of Abraham Lincoln*, VI, 48.

⁶⁶ Zimmerman, "Republican Party in Indiana", *Indiana Magazine of History* (Sept. 1917), XIII, 392.

⁶⁷ Smith, *The History of the State of Indiana*, I, 304.

men elected out of the possible eleven. This victory was followed by a Republican success over all the North in November. Indiana gave Lincoln 139,033 votes; Stephen A. Douglas, the candidate of the northern Democrats, 115,509 votes; John C. Breckinridge, the candidate of the southern Democrats, 12,295 votes; and John Bell, the candidate of the Constitutional Union party, 5,306 votes.

The day for a grand rally for Lincoln and the Republican cause was set for August 29. The Republican State Central Committee was in such demand that an earlier date could not be arranged. On that day a crowd estimated at 50,000 gathered in Indianapolis for the great occasion. Republican success was Harding's success, for his hope of over thirty years standing was on the eve of being realized. He first saw slavery in New Orleans in 1828 and returned to his home an enemy of the institution. When the opportunity arose, he carried his work out of his community into state politics, becoming active as a leader in the Free-Soil movement which was followed in the organization of the Republican party in 1854-1856. His party successful, Harding accepted two posts under President Lincoln, first as Governor of Utah territory and then as Chief Justice of the territorial court of Colorado.