

WILLIAM SHREVE BAILEY KENTUCKY ABOLITIONIST

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William Shreve Bailey, a poor mechanic of Newport, Kentucky, published the only antislavery (indeed the only Republican) newspaper printed in Kentucky in the 1850's. Calling himself a "cotton machinist & steam engine builder," Bailey, as an abolitionist, was particularly obnoxious to some Southern "gentlemen," who disdained manual labor and manual laborers.

Bailey and his wife and daughters are an example of an entire family enlisted in the antislavery work. When he had difficulty with his employees he let them go and trained the women in his family, to aid him in the work of publishing. At one time he observed that he had ten children that could set type. "I know of no other family that ever took such an untiring stand upon its own soil," he said.¹

Moving to Newport in 1839 Bailey established a machine shop in that Northern Kentucky town. A "Mr. Ryan" published *The Newport News* and Bailey began to write abolition articles for his newspaper. Bailey's contributions brought criticism to the paper, and the editor insisted that Bailey buy him out. The mechanic purchased the press for six hundred and fifty dollars and set it up in the upper story of a store he had in the meantime established. From there, in March, 1850, he began a decade long attack upon the institution of slavery.

Bailey's newspaper in the 1850's was really several newspapers in succession. While he was publishing the daily *Newport News* he began publication of the *Kentucky Weekly News*. Later the *Newport News* was renamed the *Newport & Covington Daily News*. Eventually the daily paper had to be discontinued, and for the latter part of the decade the *Kentucky Weekly News* was given the more appropriate title, *The Free South*.²

From the mastheads Bailey proclaimed that his papers stood for "Liberty and Equality" and "The Rights & Interests of the people—True Democracy—The Freedom of Kentucky & the Downfall of Slavery." In the columns of his newspapers Bailey appealed to his fellow Kentuckians to abolish slavery. Like Cassius Clay, who published the anti-slavery organ called *The True American* in Lexington in 1845, Bailey opposed the institution of slavery on economic grounds. Unlike Clay

the editor-mechanic made it clear that he was for "Immediate, not Gradual, Abolition." He hoped, as did Clay, for the abolition of slavery in the state by the Kentucky legislature. He was aware that if such were to occur the law-making body would have to be reconstituted along less pro-slavery lines.

Appealing to the non-slaveholding "laboring masses" of the state, Bailey observed that the legislators of Kentucky cared nothing for them:

They are all either slaveholders or those who are known to favor the institution of slavery, and those whose interest it is to encourage slavery and accumulate slaves can have no sympathy for the masses whose wages they reduce by forcing them to compete with the unpaid labor of black men and women.

Bailey blamed the slaveholders for keeping the laborers in ignorance of their true interests:

It is for the want of a better education among the laboring masses that this state of things exist, and for the same reason the "Kentucky Weekly News" is hated; and for a like cause the Savior was crucified upon Mount Calvary.³

One of Bailey's chief difficulties was a shortage of funds to carry on his work. Seeking aid he wrote, in 1852, to the American Missionary Association. That body was the most important antislavery organization in the West in the decade of the 1850's. It carried on extensive work in Kentucky and was responsible for the support of John G. Fee and the other founders of Berea College. In consequence of Bailey's appeal to the Association, Fee was sent to visit the Newport publisher. He was not impressed with the machinist and reported critically that he "will not do. He has neither intelligence nor correct principles for the work—no correct motives of reform." In short, Bailey's abolitionism was not of the religious sort which attracted Fee and the Bereans.⁴

In a few months after the unfavorable estimate of Bailey was passed on to American Missionary Association headquarters the Newport publisher offered to let Fee edit the newspaper. Bailey suggested that Fee's editorship would enable the machinist to travel in the South in the antislavery work. Fee wrote to the American Missionary Association again, early in 1853, stating that he did not want to be associated with Bailey. Enlarging upon his earlier estimate of the man the young missionary declared:

The editor has no adequate ability—not much means—is a sort of skeptic—but has taken the ground of free discussion on all things—is anti-slavery—favoring infidelity his columns are much occupied with

infidel communications. He pleads in a letter to me the oppressions, hypocrisy and other sins of professing Christians as his excuse. Now he is not the kind of a man I want to do business with.⁵

Not only did Fee disapprove Bailey as a co-worker; he was equally opposed to going into the business of editing in the first place. He believed that his calling was to the preaching ministry. Fee suggested William Goodell, a Northern antislavery minister and writer, as possible editor of the Newport paper. Also, he noted that the American and Foreign Antislavery Society might be interested in the work of publishing in Kentucky, as it had already begun the *National Era*, a newspaper in Washington under the editorship of Gamaliel Bailey.

Fee's only reasons for giving serious consideration to William Bailey's offer in the first place, he declared, were:

1. That infidelity might be shut out, or whipped off from that field and
2. That the paper might be made a propagandist of antislavery sentiments in Kentucky.

It would be something to control the only antislavery organ in the state. Its only service at the moment, Fee observed, was as a medium for the publications by the "friends of freedom." It had accustomed its patrons to hearing antislavery propaganda and in consequence they would be ready for the advocacy of "true abolitionism—mild but firm."

Although the circulation of the *Newport News* was increasing, Fee feared that it would be crushed by debt if something could not be done to aid Bailey financially. Cassius Clay had offered to pay Fee's salary and all expenses if he would go to Newport (or Covington—nearby) and edit a paper.⁶

Somehow Bailey managed to keep his newspaper going in spite of his monetary difficulties. Although Fee did not go to Newport, he was thenceforth conscious of Bailey's work, and some of the Bereans wrote articles to his newspaper.⁷ Later in the decade *The Free South* came to be noticed by different Northern church groups. Bailey reported that as a consequence of that notice, clergymen from New York had sent to him fifty dollars for use on his newspaper.

Cassius Clay had been the bearer of the funds from the Northern divines and Bailey took the opportunity to write a eulogy of Clay and publish it in the paper. He observed of Clay's reception in the North (the date was March 4, 1859) that freemen of the North had welcomed two Southerners in history: one of those was George Washington, the other was Cassius Marcellus Clay.⁸

In December, 1859, as a consequence of the terrorism pervading the South after John Brown's raid, the Bereans (Fee included) had been

driven from Kentucky. After the Berea exiles had left the state, Bailey wrote to the American Missionary Association asking the exiles to join him. Fee informed the Association that he had no intention of going to Newport to live. He charged that Bailey desired their presence because he thought it would "give him money." Bailey's character was under suspicion at that time; someone had reported to Fee that the editor was the father of some illegitimate children and, although Bailey denied it, Fee's puritan conscience rebelled at the suggestion of immorality.⁹

Had Fee and Clay developed closer ties with the antislavery organ at Newport the abolition movement in the state would have possessed greater cohesion. Remaining separate from other antislavery workers in Kentucky, Bailey, aside from his eulogy above mentioned, gave practically no attention in his newspaper to Clay and to the Bereans. The space in his columns was consumed in editorializing upon current political developments, for the most part on the national scene.

For example, Bailey was a Republican, and in 1856 he spent a good portion of his time defending the party. It was charged in the course of the Presidential campaign of that year that Fremont, the Republican nominee, was sympathetic with the Catholics in the country. He had been married by a priest. The "Native American" or "Know Nothing" party of that day particularly made capital of the pro-Catholic charge. Bailey noted that Millard Fillmore, Native American candidate, had sent his daughter to a Catholic school, and that James Buchanan, Democratic candidate, was a celibate. He concluded that the three candidates were therefore equally Catholic.¹⁰

In an effort to make Republicanism more popular in Kentucky, Bailey tried to show that Henry Clay would have been a member of the Republican Party had he been alive in 1856. He quoted from Clay: "Sir, I have said that I never could vote for it, and I repeat that I never can and never will vote for it; and no earthly power shall ever make me vote to plant Slavery where Slavery does not exist." Although employed in a partisan sense, Bailey was correct in noting Henry Clay's basic objection to slavery.¹¹

The *Kentucky Weekly News* was considered sufficiently important to claim the attention of rival newspapers in the various political campaigns. *The Frankfort Commonwealth* and the *Louisville Journal*, former Whig sheets which were then backing the Native American Party, charged in 1855 and 1856 that Bailey's paper was supporting the Democratic ticket in local and state elections. The use of the newspaper to reflect discredit upon the opposition party is suggestive of the position antislavery forces held in Kentucky.¹²

Two years later, in 1858, Bailey was concerned with attacking the Buchanan administration which the 1856 election ushered into office. He noted the civil strife then raging in the Kansas Territory and blamed the administration with attempting to force slavery upon the region.¹³

Every development on the national scene claimed Bailey's attention. Because he tended to follow the Republican line most of the time, and because his comments were more scholarly than one would expect from a mechanic, it is to be assumed that the larger Republican newspapers were the sources of much of his editorial writing as well as the news he published.

Soon after Bailey began publishing in 1850, he found himself attacked by powerful forces in his community. Pro-slavery individuals boycotted Cincinnati advertisers in Bailey's newspapers. That development was one of the principal causes of his shortage of money to run his press.¹⁴

In October, 1851, about a year after the *Kentucky Weekly News* had been launched, a mob burned the store where Bailey was publishing. The presses were destroyed in the blaze along with much of the family's clothing. Bailey's wife and daughters had moved many of their personal effects to the store because their work obligated them to spend much time there. His friends in Newport and surrounding areas raised five hundred and seventeen dollars to enable Bailey to get started again, and within six weeks he overcame the competition of a pro-slavery newspaper which had sprung up to fill the void left by his burning.¹⁵

The name of the publisher of the pro-slavery newspaper in Newport was Samuel Pike of Maysville, Kentucky. He moved across the Licking River to Covington and established a newspaper, which also failed. Aside from his unsuccessful attempts to oppose Bailey on home ground, two other pro-slavery newspapers failed in Newport and five in Covington.¹⁶ It would appear that in spite of his antislavery views Bailey was able to sell his paper to the local people.

Bailey's hardships and persecutions continued throughout the decade. His house and lot were sold to pay his debts, and the family moved upstairs over the printing shop. A sheriff of an adjacent county collected three hundred dollars from Bailey in court as a result of a libel suit. The editor claimed that he told the truth about the man. In 1855 the son-in-law of a wealthy man in Newport, whom Bailey had criticized in his paper, tried to cane the editor. Bailey beat him up and had to fight a lawsuit as a consequence. Later he was forced to pay a fine for letting colored people have a party in his house.

Bailey claimed that all of his losses through the year 1858 totaled twenty thousand dollars (surely a generous estimate). In addition to

that spent in the service of abolition, he said that his family had been hurt seriously by the opprobrium of the community. Still the publisher-editor took heart and, changing the name of his newspaper to *The Free South*, continued to attack the institution of slavery. The next year, 1859, held the climactic instance of violence that Bailey experienced.¹⁷

The same incident that provoked the exile of Fee's colony from Berea caused a group of local Newport citizenry to decide that *The Free South* was a dangerous and seditious nuisance, and to proceed to destroy it. John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, occurred on October 16, 1859. On the evening of October 28 a mob entered the offices of *The Free South* and, over the protests of Bailey and one of his daughters, took two of the presses into the street, throwing the type into the gutter. The next night the mob returned and stole several items from his house, among them his pocketbook. They warned him immediately afterward to leave the state.

The Newport publisher was not easily intimidated. In the Cincinnati courts Bailey sued those responsible for wrecking his office for fifteen thousand dollars. Re-establishing his presses, he wrote to the American Missionary Association asking for help to purchase type for *The Free South*. He stated that he had armed his office (reminiscent of Cassius Clay's action in arming the *True American*) and defied the mob to attack him again. "*Arms are more respected here than law,*" Bailey asserted.¹⁸

The action of Bailey in bringing suit against the mob in the Cincinnati courts caused several members to repeat their warning to him to leave the state. His action had made it impossible for the mobsters to cross the river into Ohio. Bailey had promised that he would "only go *dead*, and that *some* of them at least must die with me in that struggle." He was determined to run his newspaper "in spite of tyrants," and he pleadingly wrote "I hope to *not* be forgotten by *free men* who are not in danger of life, and who can sleep without molestation from howling desperadoes."

Bailey was not forgotten by Northern abolitionists. When he was imprisoned in Newport after the reappearance of *The Free South*, one number of which was called incendiary, his Northern sympathizers bailed him out. Funds were collected that he might go to England to lecture and collect money from British sympathizers of the antislavery cause. Upon returning his trial was not held because the Civil War had come to his state. Bailey was permitted to continue his paper during and after the fratricidal conflict. Wartime issues applauded the Lincoln government's various antislavery actions.¹⁹

William Shreve Bailey began the publication in 1850 of his anti-slavery newspaper in Newport with the aim in mind of publicizing the economic attack upon thralldom. He did not undertake the task simply as a means of livelihood, because he had been content to contribute articles to an already established paper so long as the editor would accept them. Beside, an abolition newspaper was not designed to be a money-making scheme in the Kentucky of the 1850's.

Bailey appealed to his own class—the laboring masses of his state—and he attempted to interpret current events by showing them where their interests lay. He published a complete newspaper, covering all local, national, and international matters. When the Republican Party was formed he became active in its behalf. During the latter years of the 1850's, his was Kentucky's only Republican newspaper.

Newport, the scene of Bailey's activities, was just across the Ohio River from Cincinnati and one might reasonably suspect was in the least violently pro-slavery section of Kentucky. Nonetheless, it was located on slave soil as the continual opposition to it made manifest. The burning of the newspaper in 1851 and the destruction of the type eight years later marked the extreme attacks made upon the editor. But in between those dates, and even after the 1859 attack, Bailey was consistently victimized because of his antislavery preachments. The boycott of his advertisers was one example of attempts made to quiet him.

Bailey's determination not to be run out of the state after John Brown's Raid stands in marked contrast to the acquiescence in exile of the Bereans. The latter group met more determined and better-organized opposition than did Bailey, it is true; but that should not detract from the credit due the editor-mechanic for standing firmly by his constitutional rights.

The newspapers Bailey published are important in any treatment of antislavery in Kentucky, not only because they were the sole abolition organ in the decade of the 1850's but also because of their contribution to free discussion of slavery.

William Shreve Bailey, like all men, sought recognition by his fellows. One hundred years after his labors he still deserves to be remembered by "free men" as one of the few Southerners who carried the torch in a crusade they deemed just. Later generations share his contribution to a happier social order.

FOOTNOTES

¹ William S. Bailey, *Office of the Daily and Weekly News*, Newport, 1858, subtitled "A Short Sketch of our Troubles in the Anti-Slavery Cause."

² Bailey, "Sketch." Eliza Wigham, *The Anti-Slavery Cause in America and its Martyrs* (London, 1863), pp. 46-47.

³ *Newport & Covington Daily News*, August 5, 1856. *Kentucky Weekly News*, January 8, 22, 1858.

⁴ Fisk University, American Missionary Association Papers. Fee to the American Missionary Association, Cabin Creek, Kentucky, October 22, 1852. Fee was sponsored by the American Missionary Association during his pastorates in Lewis and Bracken counties as well as during his later and more important work at and from Berea.

⁵ American Missionary Association Papers, Fee to George Whipple [secretary of the Association], Cabin Creek, February 15, 1853.

⁶ American Missionary Association Papers, Fee to Whipple, Cabin Creek, February 15, July 15, 1853.

⁷ *The Free South*, December 31, 1858, contains a letter from Robert Jones and one from Peter H. West, colporteurs of the American Missionary Association. Bailey's irreligious point of view may have caused him to cringe at West's letter because the theme of it was to equate the "cause of Christ" and the antislavery movement.

⁸ *The Free South*, March 4, 1859. For some undetermined reason (probably just senility) Clay declared later in his life that Bailey hated him. Clay, *The Life of Cassius Marcellus Clay* (Cincinnati, 1886), Vol. I, p. 187. (Volume II was never published.)

⁹ American Missionary Association Papers, William Bailey to Simeon S. Jocelyn [a later secretary of the Association], Newport, February 16, 1860. Fee to Jocelyn, Cincinnati, February 21, 1860.

¹⁰ *Newport & Covington Daily News*, August 5, 1856.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Bailey was the only Kentucky representative to attend the planning convention for the Republican National Convention of 1856. Consequently, he was elected to be one of the honorary vice-presidents of the convention and was placed on the Address and Resolutions Committee. Like Republicans of a later century those of 1856 welcomed anyone, no matter how undistinguished in his native state, who would come up from the South to give that section representation at their national gatherings. *Official Proceedings of the Republican Convention* (1856), pp. 3-4. Bailey undoubtedly recommended Fee as National Committeeman from Kentucky since Fee's name was placed on the list after the February meeting in Pittsburgh.

¹² *The Frankfort Commonwealth*, July 13, 1855. *The Louisville Journal*, September 10, 1855; March 4, 1856.

¹³ *Kentucky Weekly News*, January 8, 15, 1858.

¹⁴ Bailey, "Sketch."

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Wigham, *Anti-Slavery*, pp. 46-47.

¹⁶ Bailey, "Sketch." *loc. cit.*

¹⁷ Bailey, "Sketch." Wigham, *Anti-Slavery*, pp. 49-50.

¹⁸ *The Louisville Journal*, October 31, 1859; January 27, 1860. Wigham, *Anti-Slavery*, pp. 49-50. American Missionary Association Papers, William Bailey to Simeon S. Jocelyn, Newport, February 16, 1860. Bailey asked that correspondence addressed to him be sent to Covington as the postmaster at Newport was one of the mob that attacked him. The Covington Postmaster he declared was a "gentleman."

¹⁹ American Missionary Association Papers, Bailey to Jocelyn, Newport, February 16, 1860. *The Louisville Journal*, March 9, 26, 1860. Wigham, *Anti-Slavery*, p. 50. The little volume by Eliza Wigham undoubtedly included a chapter on Bailey because of that tour he made of England. *The Free South*, November 2, 1864; February 1, 1865.