WHITTIER'S PENNSYLVANIA
YEARS, 1837-1840

By Arthur H. Reede*

In 1884 an instructor at the Friends' School in Providence was
telling Professor J. B. Thayer of Harvard College of the way
in which his pupils reacted to the poetry of John Greenleaf Whittier.
"Tell your boys and girls," Professor Thayer broke in, "that,
however much they admire and love Whittier, they cannot know
what a fire and passion of enthusiasm he kindled in the hearts of
the little company of anti-slavery boys and girls of my time, when
they read his early poems!" 1

The intervening years have been less than kind to the memory
of Whittier. As a poet, he has been measured by more lofty
aesthetic standards, and found wanting. Like Longfellow, he has
been most remembered for his inferior work and, except for a
few hymns and ballads, is not well known to this generation. Few
remain who either admire or love Whittier, but may not this be
because they do not know his best work, or the circumstances in
which he lived and wrote?

More important, Whittier was not just a poet, whether third-
rate or better, but a man who participated intensely in the life
and thought of his age. He can never be properly judged, as poet
or man, by any simple and mechanical comparison of his writings
with predetermined aesthetic standards. Carpenter described Whit-
tier as "for the best years of his life a man of action rather than
a man of letters." 2 Hart called him "the poet of the anti-slavery
cause, as Mrs. Stowe was its novelist." 3 In general, historians tend
to devote most attention to Garrison, Phillips, and Brown, ex-
tremists in abolitionist ranks. Has Whittier ever received due

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delivered at the annual banquet of the Woman's Club of Clearfield, Pa.
1 Kennedy, William S., John G. Whittier (1892), 110.
2 Carpenter, G. R., John Greenleaf Whittier (1903), 173.
3 Hart, Albert B., Slavery and Abolition (1906), 31.
recognition of the importance of his sacrifices and services in this cause?

The principal task of the historian is so to reconstruct the environment in which men lived as to enable those now living to share in some measure the recorded experiences. From October, 1837, Whittier assisted Benjamin Lundy in editing, and from March, 1838, to February, 1840, he served as editor of the Na-
tional Enquirer (renamed Pennsylvania Freeman) and throughout this period maintained residence in Philadelphia. His experiences were important, not only in his own life but in that of the Commonwealth, as well as that of the anti-slavery movement. A reappraisal of those experiences, with the help of his writings and those of his associates, should improve our understanding both of Whittier and the history of Pennsylvania.

Whittier's motivation in coming to Philadelphia was characteristic of the man. He did not come out of any desire to live in a city, for to the end of his life he had a distinct preference for the countryside. He had some preference for Philadelphia over other cities, based on the special reverence any devout Quaker feels for the City of Brotherly Love. Thus, although he twice rejected an offer of $1,200 a year to edit a Portland (Maine) abolitionist journal, he did accept a similar call to Philadelphia, tentatively, in the fall of 1837, and completely the following spring.4

Whittier had likewise refused an offer from his friend, Abijah W. Thayer, to take an editorial job with the Philadelphia Commercial Appeal, in a letter of January 10, 1836. His reasons are stated explicitly:

I feel besides, too deep an interest in the struggle now going on between Slavery & Freedom, especially, as I have been somewhat active heretofore in the cause of Emancipation and as my apparent withdrawal from it might be construed very unfavorably to the cause as well as myself. I have I hope no fanaticism about me—cant of all kinds, religious, political, or moral, I abhor. But I regard the contest now going on as of vital interest to the welfare of mankind, not in our country alone—but in all the world. It is a struggle for the rights of men everywhere. In such a cause I must not seem to yield—especially at a time like this when its advocacy is so unpopular that its abandonment would subject me to the charge of cowardice and insincerity.5

It is clear that his acceptance of the post with the National Enquirer resulted primarily from Whittier's commitment to the anti-slavery cause. This commitment, complete as early as 1833,

5 From an original letter in the Houghton Library of Harvard University.
and persisting throughout the war for the Union, was quite as important in Whittier’s life as Milton’s decision to fight for the liberty of the English people had been in his life. Moreover, it appears to have had a similar effect on the literary output of the two poets. Particularly during his Philadelphia editorship Whittier’s commitment both reduced his poetical output and narrowed its content. A year before, when his *Poems Written During the Progress of the Abolition Question* was published, its still unidentified editor wrote: “It is to be regretted, as a loss to American literature, that one so gifted as a poet should devote so little time to poetic labours.”

Whittier’s sacrifices in the anti-slavery cause, while perhaps increasing his influence in shaping the viewpoint of his generation, may also have had the result of reducing the literary value of such poetry as he did write. He seems to have held this opinion himself, for writing in 1847 he observes that:

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The jarring words of one whose rhyme
Beat often Labor’s hurried time
Or Duty’s rugged march through storm and strife, are
here. 
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When Whittier arrived in Philadelphia in the autumn of 1837, at the invitation of Benjamin Lundy to assist him in editing what was then called the *National Enquirer* (soon to be renamed the *Pennsylvania Freeman*), he was not quite thirty years old. It is this clean-shaven young man, not the saintly, venerable, and white-bearded gentleman whose portrait hangs in many a school hall, with whom we must become acquainted. Of slightly more than average height, slender of frame, he had dark hair and piercing dark eyes. He wore sideburns and, although he wore the plain habit of an orthodox Quaker, was always neatly dressed. He had the Quaker’s dignity and quiet manner, too, but beneath this exterior there smoldered a fiery spirit and nervous energy.

6 Thus, the masterpiece of each poet was produced quite late in life, *Paradise Lost* when Milton was fifty-nine, *Snow-Bound* when Whittier was fifty-eight.
7 Often attributed to Garrison, it may have been the work of the publisher, Isaac Knapp.
8 “Proem” from *Collected Works* (1888).
Whittier was always the writer, never the speaker. In a way this reflects a native shyness from which he never completely escaped, except with intimates. It is also connected with his relatively frail physique, and his consequent incapacity for sustained physical effort. Between periods of rest he showed a great capacity to produce in bursts of nervous energy. His need for such periods of rest, even within the day, helps to explain his reticence, his distaste for protracted conversation, and his habit of so stationing himself on a platform as to permit himself to withdraw briefly, when necessary.

Despite his quiet dignity and native shyness, he had a fun-loving disposition and a delightful humor. A portrait of him, painted during his Philadelphia residence by Basil Otis, hangs today in Haverford College. One day he was asked for an engraved copy of it by a group of Philadelphia ladies who wished to offer it for sale at an anti-slavery bazaar. He wrote this characteristic reply:

I have no great fancy for having my face made use of in the manner thee suggests, but if it will be of any service to the bazaar, it would perhaps be foolish to object to it. My heart has been too long devoted to the good cause in which you are laboring to withhold my head when it is needed.  

Whittier was known to his intimates by his middle name, Greenleaf, apparently because his father's name was also John. Like other members of the Society of Friends he used the intimate pronoun in the second person (thee, thy) when speaking or writing to those he knew well. He was an advocate of woman's suffrage, of temperance, and of labor reform, as well as many other causes. Yet such was his dedication to the anti-slavery cause, that he pursued it with an intense singleness of purpose.

Whittier never married, and this has led to a great deal of speculation as to the reasons. He came closest to being in love during this very period. The lady was Lucy Hooper, twenty-year-old poetess from Massachusetts, who had taken up residence in Brooklyn. She was of another faith (Episcopalian), but surely more important, his sacrifices to the anti-slavery cause and the dependence of his mother and sister posed a serious financial

⁹Pickard, op. cit., 1, 220, n. 1.
problem. Perhaps even more important was the physical condition of both: he was struggling with ill health during much of this period, while she was to die of tuberculosis in 1841. These factors seem to constitute a better explanation of his failure to marry than the more exciting speculations of Mordell.

Pollard has pointed out that Whittier's "Philadelphia story was a tale of close work." It is evident that, coming at the end of a period of eight years of almost continuous service to the anti-slavery cause, this last endeavor had placed a severe strain on his frail physique. He worked so hard and under such trying circumstances that the state of his health required occasional periods of respite from toil in Philadelphia. Eventually, his resignation from the editorship of the Pennsylvania Freeman followed medical advice that he had a "heart condition."

Whatever the merits of this diagnosis, Whittier appears to have learned from this experience that he must operate as a "free lance," avoiding an intensive routine and feeling free to rest when necessary.

The Pennsylvania to which Whittier came was quite different in many respects from the Commonwealth we now know. The Census of 1840 counted only some 1,724,000 inhabitants, as compared with our present population of nearly 11,000,000. Similarly, only one of Pennsylvania's cities then had over 30,000 inhabitants, namely, Philadelphia, then the second largest city in the United States, with 220,000 inhabitants. The first Census of Manufactures, taken ten years later, was to show Pennsylvania second in value of manufactures by a narrow margin, but third behind Massachusetts in both number of hands and wages paid.

We think of Pennsylvania as clearly a northern state, but until the admission of West Virginia as a separate state in 1863, it

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10 In an ingenuous note of August 17, 1837, he wrote her: "I really had no idea it was so late when I left your house last evening." Whittier's friend, Harriet Minnott, thought them engaged, and wrote his sister Elizabeth a congratulatory letter.

11 Mordell, Albert, Quaker Militant (1933). He considered Whittier a victim of extreme sexual repression. Having assayed the evidence, I cannot agree.

12 Pollard, John, John Greenleaf Whittier: Friend of Man (1949), 175.

13 He complained of "palpitations," but these may well have resulted from eye strain or a nervous condition. Cf. Bennett, Whitman, Whittier: Bard of Freedom (1941), 139 ff.


bordered on the great slave state of Virginia. New York, which had over 700,000 more inhabitants than Pennsylvania, had only 50,000 free Negroes, barely 2,000 more than Pennsylvania. The issue of human slavery was thus extremely "hot" in the Commonwealth. Whittier has indicated that in coming to Pennsylvania he expected to have a "front seat" in the struggle over slavery.

The Democratic Party was already in existence, but the Republican Party was not to be formed until 1854. Other leading parties of the period were the Whig Party and the Anti-Masonic Party, the latter having been formed in reaction to alleged excesses of secret orders. Governor Joseph Ritner, who was in office when Whittier arrived, belonged to the Anti-Masonic Party, as did young Thaddeus Stevens. Ritner was an abolitionist who had impressed Whittier by the strong line he took in his annual message in 1836. "The traffic in slaves," the Governor exclaimed, "now abhorred by all the civilized world, ought not in the slightest degree to be tolerated in Pennsylvania." Admitting the need to "respect the rights of other states," Ritner urged that Pennsylvanians should not "be driven from the spirit of independence and veneration for freedom which has ever characterized our beloved Commonwealth." He especially noted the need for protecting "the right to free discussion of any evil that may arise in the land or part of it." It was passages such as these which Whittier had in mind when, writing in 1837 shortly after his first meeting with Governor Ritner, he praised him in a poem originally entitled "Lines," but later "Ritner." He wrote in part:

O'er thy crags, Alleghany, a blast has been blown!
Down thy tide, Susquehanna, the murmur has gone!
To the land of the South, of the charter and chain,
Of Liberty sweetened with Slavery's pain;
Where the cant of Democracy dwells on the lips
Of the forgers of fetters, and wielders of whips!

The poet also referred to:

The German-born pilgrims, who first dared to brave
The scorn of the proud in the cause of the slave

and inquired whether "the sons of such men" would "rivet the

\[\text{Pennsylvania Archives, Fourth Series, VI, 290-292.}\]
chain which their fathers smote off.” The final stanza of this eulogy was Whittier’s answer to his own query:

No, never! one voice, like the sound in the cloud,
When the roar of the storm waxes loud and more loud,
Wherever the foot of the freeman hath pressed
From the Delaware’s marge to the Lake of the West,
On the South-going breezes shall deepen and grow
Till the land it sweeps over shall tremble below!
The voice of a people, uprisen, awake,
Pennsylvania’s watchword, with Freedom at stake,
Thrilling up from each valley, flung down from each height,
“Our Country and Liberty! God for the Right!”

Feelings were strong on both sides of this question, and were strong enough to cause riot and even bloodshed here in Pennsylvania. In 1838 Governor Ritner was defeated for re-election by the Democratic candidate, David Porter. The disorders which followed, often called the “Buckshot War,” indicated both the closeness and bitterness of the election contest. It is always difficult to single out “the one issue” on which a close election turns, and naturally Ritner was strongly opposed by the members of fraternal orders. It is nevertheless significant that in this same year the third of Pennsylvania’s four constitutions was ratified at the election by the narrow margin of 113,971 votes to 112,759. This constitution, containing a provision depriving the 48,000 free Negroes in the Commonwealth of their suffrage, was for this reason opposed by Ritner and his followers. As for the Governor-elect, in his inaugural address he was to denounce anti-slavery agitation and to call for “suppression of sedition.”

It was in this divided Commonwealth that Whittier took up residence in the autumn of 1837. He took a room in the house of Abijah Thayer, with whom he had earlier toiled in the abolitionist cause in New England. Later he was to room with Joseph Healy, another abolitionist, at his home at 72 North Seventh Street. Occasionally he was able to find a pleasant relief from city life at Healy’s country home, Spring Grove Farm in Bucks County, overlooking the Delaware River.

17 Whittier, Poems (1880), 52-53.
10 See infra, 400.
He had scarcely taken over the editorial desk when he became fully aware of the effects of Pennsylvania’s border position. In a letter to Joseph E. Fuller he pointed out that he had to contend not so much with pro-slavery people, as in New England, as with slavery itself. Slavery was only a few miles away, in the neighboring state of Delaware. Indeed, although few Pennsylvanians realize it, the Census of 1840 still indicated sixty-four slaves in this Commonwealth, under the law of 1780 calling for the gradual abolition of slavery in Pennsylvania!

A dramatic indication of the nearness of human slavery was the burning of Pennsylvania Hall, which contained Whittier’s office, just two months after the commencement of his editorship. This building, which had just been dedicated with benefit of one of Whittier’s occasional poems, was located on the southwest corner of Sixth and Haines streets. A mob, not content with having obtained cancellation of a meeting of abolitionists scheduled there, and unmindful of a mild remonstrance by Mayor Swift, pressed into the building and set fire to it on May 17, 1838. Later, they stood by to resist the use of fire-fighting equipment until it could be of no avail.

The burning of Pennsylvania Hall has received so much attention elsewhere that it is intended here only to report Whittier’s experiences with regard to it. His membership in the Society of Friends, an organization with a well-known distaste for violence, has perhaps led some mistakenly to assume that he lacked physical courage. Others may have assumed this from his frail physique. When he discovered the size of the enraged mob, Whittier hurried from the scene, to be sure. But if he was not rash, neither was he timorous. Going to the home of a friend, Dr. Parrish, he covered his Quaker habit with a long white overcoat and put on a wig. His identity thus concealed, he returned to the Hall, then being entered by the mob, and went to his office where he was able to carry off some of his effects.

It was like this intrepid Quaker, too, to be among those who assured that, regardless of the fire, the Pennsylvania Freeman was on sale the next morning. “In the heart of your free city,” he

\[^{20}\text{Pickard, op. cit., I, 239.}\]
\[^{21}\text{Statistical Abstract of the U. S. (1907), 32-33.}\]
\[^{22}\text{Managers of the Pennsylvania Hall Association, History of Pennsylvania Hall (1838), 150.}\]
\[^{23}\text{Pickard, op. cit., I, 234, n. 1.}\]
editorialized, "within view of the Hall of Independence, whose spire and roof reddened in the flame of the sacrifice (with shame, perhaps?) the deed has been done—and the shout which greeted the falling ruin was the shout of Slavery over the grave of Liberty."

There is a tendency today to dismiss abolitionists as extremists, while stressing the kindliness of the average slaveholder. There were extremists among abolitionists, no doubt, but the movement cannot be fairly judged by reference to the ideas of Garrison alone, nor to the actions of John Brown alone. As for slaveholders, however gently they may have treated their slaves, their treatment of abolitionists was not gentle. Indeed, reports appearing in many Southern newspapers strongly suggest that slaveholders were connected with the riot and arson at Pennsylvania Hall.

The alert Whittier discovered the connection between Philadelphia mercantile interests and Southern slaveholders, and expressed his righteous indignation in a fiery editorial. But he did not stop with expostulation. An example of his ability in supplying abolitionists with a rallying point was his poem, "The Relic," contributed to the Freeman in 1839. He had received a "cane wrought from a fragment of the wood-work of Pennsylvania Hall which the fire had spared." During his life he was to be given many canes, some far more valuable, but Pickard reports that "this plain stick was the only one he ever carried." For more than fifty years he used it, and it is still beside the desk in the "garden room" of his home in Amesbury, Massachusetts. Fired by the thought that had led to the fashioning of the cane, Whittier wrote of it, in part:

(12)

But from that ruin, as of old,
    The fire-scorched stones themselves are crying,
    And from their ashes white and cold
    Its timbers are replying!
    A voice which slavery cannot kill
    Speaks from the crumbling arches still!

24 The Pennsylvania Freeman, May 18, 1838.
26 "Base and Contemptible Servility" in The Pennsylvania Freeman, August 2, 1838.
27 See his introduction to "The Relic" in his Collected Works (1888), 283.
28 Pickard, S. T., Whittier-Land (1904), 64.
And even this relic from thy shrine,
O holy Freedom! hath to me
A potent power, a voice and sign
To testify of thee;
And grasping it, methinks I feel
A deeper faith, a stronger zeal.

And not unlike that mystic rod
Of old stretched o'er the Egyptian wave
Which opened in the strength of God
A pathway for the slave,
It yet may point the bondsman's way
And turn the spoiler from his prey.20

Nor did Whittier neglect to exert effective political pressure, whether at Philadelphia or Harrisburg. To his everlasting credit Governor Ritner apologized for the destruction of the Hall, and offered a reward for information leading to the apprehension of those responsible for it. Mayor Swift, who is believed to have sympathized with the rioters, was shamed by the Governor's action into offering a similar reward, carefully limited to the persons who actually set the fire. At the very least, the Mayor did not act with sufficient energy, before or after the fire. He was replaced by the City Council in October, perhaps partly because of this incident.20

Whittier did not confine himself to writing editorials while in Philadelphia. He continued to serve the anti-slavery movement by attending meetings: national, state, and local. He was active in seeking to win converts who would help carry on the work of the movement. He participated directly in the flight of runaway slaves over the "underground railroad" to freedom. His attendance at meetings outside the state, combined with periods of rest and recuperation reduced substantially Whittier's actual residence in Pennsylvania. Of the twenty-eight months during which he maintained residence in the Commonwealth, Whittier spent only about fifteen months in actual residence. But whether he was in Saratoga for a national conference or at his home in Amesbury

20 Pollard, op. cit., 166.
for his health, he continued to send letters, editorials, and poems to the *Freeman*.

In July, 1839, concerned over the slow development of the movement in Pennsylvania, the Anti-Slavery Society asked Whittier and H. B. Stanton to seek seventy converts who might be hired as speakers. Appointing his cousin, Moses Cartland, acting editor of the *Freeman*, Whittier set out with Stanton on a tour of central Pennsylvania towns. They appeared at meetings in which the orator Stanton took a leading part, and visited homes of sympathizers where Whittier’s quieter organizing skill helped. Since the railroad only went as far as Columbia, they took the stage for Harrisburg instead. Three years later, Dickens was to describe the “Harrisburg Mail” as “shaking its sides like a corpulent giant, a kind of barge on wheels.” With characteristic Yankee humor, Whittier reported a breakfast-stop of the stage where they had “. . . an execrable cup of tea, which would have poisoned a Chinese mandarin; ham, tough and solid as sheet iron, which had probably been smoked and salted annually for the last twenty years; and some hot cakes saturated with bad butter, greasy and heavy, and anti-Grahamish.”

They got to Harrisburg “about three o’clock, and stopped at the splendid Hotel Wilson, on Market Street.” The next day (July 8) Stanton spoke twice to Harrisburg groups, after which they rode out to Carlisle, nineteen miles to the west, to the home of a local abolitionist, Reverend J. Miller McKim. The letter from which the foregoing quotations were taken was written in the McKim parlor. In it Whittier refers to the beauty of the Cumberland Valley, just then lit up by flashes of lightning along the mountains to the west. A highlight of the tour was a visit to the home of “sturdy farmer Ritner,” about nine miles west of Carlisle, near Mountrock. Whittier described the visit: “The old man was out on his farm, and his wife and daughters welcomed us with great hospitality. The governor soon came in in his working dress. We stayed about one hour and a half, and then rode back to Carlisle.”

Although in retirement from his post as governor, Ritner had not forgotten the poetic tribute Whittier had paid him in 1837.

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23 Ibid., 253.
The travelers knew well the importance of enlisting converts among the Pennsylvania Germans, and it was only natural to ask Ritner's help in reaching his people. In a letter to the Freeman, Whittier observed, "This section of the state has been much neglected. It needs the services of two or three able and active agents."

Their work in Carlisle done, they went on to Chambersburg, western terminus of the Cumberland Valley Railroad, which was to be the farthest west Whittier ever got during his life. From there they took a stage to Gettysburg where, at the Lutheran Theological Seminary, they appear to have obtained the largest number of young converts. This is not surprising for the founder and professor of theology at the Seminary, Dr. S. S. Schmucker, has been described by the historian of the Seminary as having "moderate abolition sentiments." As noted below, Gettysburg

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36 Loc. cit., where in a humorous vein, Whittier writes of the need for converting the "Schloshenburger, the Quackenbosches, the Kakerspergers and the Slambangers." He goes on: "We must get the Germans with us, by some means or other."

35 The Pennsylvania Freeman, July 11, 1839. See also the July 25th issue, an editorial: "The Cause."

was a station on the “underground railroad,” and Dr. Schmucker’s barn on the Seminary campus sheltered runaway slaves temporarily on several occasions. From Seminary Ridge, Whittier’s party could look westward to the road they had just taken, or southward to hills that would become famous twenty-four years later. Then, during the same month, General Lee would follow the same road to the same ridge on an opposite yet related mission.

Negroes in the border states of the South dreaded nothing so much as being “sold down the river,” that is, into service in the Deep South. When this happened or was threatened, many of them adopted the slogan “Follow the North Star,” traveling north by night and hiding by day. The striking success of many fugitives prompted a Southerner to complain that there “must be a railroad.” To this plaint may be attributed the descriptive phrase everyone knows. The “railroad” was not a single “line,” but a network of routes built around “trunk lines,” most of the routes leading ultimately to freedom in Canada. The activities of the dedicated persons who acted as “agents,” “conductors,” or “stationmasters” on these lines were of equivocal legality. They were helping to cause a loss of what was considered “property” in the South, but which would normally have had no status as property in the North.

Four such trunk lines entered Pennsylvania, those in the east passing through Baltimore and Gettysburg, those in the west through Bedford and Uniontown. The importance of Pennsylvania to operations of the “underground railroad” was only natural, for its southern border extended for some 300 miles, adjacent to Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. Philadelphia was a main “station” on the easternmost trunk line and, once having reached there via Baltimore or Wilmington, the fugitives proceeded to such stations as Norristown, Hazleton, and Binghamton.37

The risks of participation in the “underground railroad” Whittier well knew. No real proof was required of a slaveholder or his agent that an apprehended Negro belonged to him. On the other hand, if caught or even apparently caught, in an attempt to help a slave to freedom, one must face years of imprisonment. In a letter from Edwin Coates, we have a vivid description of one

37 For a general description of the “underground railroad,” see Hart’s Slavery and Abolition (1906), 226 ff. There is a map of the trunk lines and routes.
"underground railroad" incident in which Whittier was involved. Upon application of an escaped slave named Douglass, the committee sent a female agent to Baltimore to make contact with his wife and children. Shortly after the fleeing party reached Philadelphia, Coates was visited by a "consequential-looking individual" who showed him an advertisement describing each of the runaways.

Coates was naturally alarmed and conferred with Whittier for an hour without reaching any conclusion as to what they should do. "I know," Coates wrote, "I kept looking at the penitentiary with one eye and on the God of the oppressed with the other." Eventually, good news came back from a secure place on the "underground railroad" and although it was midnight, Coates set out for Whittier's home. He called out: "Whittier! Whittier! The Douglass family is safe!" Strange as it may seem to any Quaker, Whittier's reply was a fervent shout of "Glory! Hallelujah!"\(^5\)

What can account for the willingness of a devout and non-violent Quaker to get involved in such an equivocal legal position? Was he not aware of the legal claim of the slaveholder to his slaves? Did he not realize the financial costs to the owner that resulted from each running-away, even when unsuccessful? Could he not appreciate that the "underground railroad" was a threat to the plantation system, which otherwise might be expected to prosper?

Whittier was later to write that the constitution should be interpreted "in the light shed upon it by the Declaration of Independence, the Ordinance of 1787, and the words of the Preamble affixed to the instrument itself, wherein its framers defined its objects to be the promotion of 'domestic tranquillity and the securing of the blessings of Liberty to themselves and their posterity.'\(^6\)" He believed that the founding fathers themselves had intended slavery to be gradually ended under the constitution. He was aware of the costs caused by runaways, but he had long felt that the plantation system would not have prospered in any case. In this respect subsequent researches have borne him out.\(^6\)

His biographer Kennedy has pointed out that, Quaker though

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\(^6\) Whittier, "The Lesson of the Day" in the *Essex Transcript*, Nov. 17, 1859.

he was, "there is a touch of the fighting parson or Friar Tuck in him." Nathaniel Hawthorne referred to Whittier as "a fiery Quaker youth to whom the Muse has perversely assigned a battle-trumpet." Whittier himself, noting this curious dualism and denying any preoccupation with martial spirit for its own sake, wrote:

It is only when a great thought incarnates itself in action, desperately striving to find utterance even in the sabre-clash and gun-fire, or when Truth and Freedom, in their mistaken zeal and mistrustful of their own powers, put on battle-harness, that I can feel any sympathy with merely physical daring.

In Philadelphia at that time the poet could not miss the contrast between statements of liberty and the power of the advocates of slavery, and this it was that made him an "embattled Quaker." When a Negro suspect was handcuffed in the immediate vicinity of Independence Hall and sent South, with scarcely a semblance of trial, he burst into militant song. Called "Republican Man-Robbery," the poem was one of six anti-slavery poems contributed to the *Freeman* during his editorship, but it was omitted from his *Collected Works* and is scarcely known today. About the same time he paid his respects to what he termed "a desecration of the Hall of Independence," in an editorial in the *Pennsylvania Freeman*:

It may not be generally known to our readers that the building in which our National Independence was first proclaimed is not unfrequently devoted to the vile purpose of trying colored Americans, charged in the quaint language of a New York mechanic, with having been "born contrary to the Declaration of '76," and that from its doors many a poor wretch has been borne away into helpless bondage. Our indefatigable friend, Samuel Webb, of Philadelphia, lately presented a petition to the city council, praying that the building wherein, in the year 1776, was proclaimed to an admiring world the sublime truth that all men are created equal, may no longer

43 Kennedy, *op. cit.*, 138.
44 *Pennsylvania Freeman*, August 29, 1839.
be prostituted to the purpose of sending men, women and children, unconvicted of crime, into hopeless, helpless bondage, a purpose inconsistent with the uses to which that building should be applied, which was selected by the founders of the Republic in which to “proclaim Liberty throughout the land, and to all inhabitants thereof.” The memorial was presented to the council, and it was respectfully received and referred to the committee on city property. What action has been taken on it we have not learned. The first trial of a man charged with being a chattel, at which we were ever present, was held not long ago in that very hall.45

Much has been made of Whittier’s poem praising Governor Ritner for enjoining his fellow-Pennsylvanians to continue to support liberty and equality of all men, and to resist human slavery in the District of Columbia, and its extension to the territories.46 It is natural, today, to remember Ritner’s stand which is in the tradition which survived, while forgetting the stand of his successor, Governor David Porter on this same issue. But Whittier was as unsparing in criticism of Porter as he had been unstinting in praise of Ritner.

What provoked Whittier’s philippic was what he deemed a shift on the slavery question by Porter, when he became governor. As a state senator, Porter had voted to memorialize Congress to end human slavery in the District of Columbia.47 But in January, 1839, he used the occasion of his inaugural to denounce abolitionists for opposing the manner in which the new state constitution “disposed of” the Negro issue:

To agitate the question anew when it was thus satisfactorily settled, is not only unwise and impolitic, but is a virtual breach of good faith to our brethren of the South; an unwarrantable interference with their domestic relations and institutions; and is calculated to do positive injury to the African race there held in servitude, for whom in her policy, and within her own borders, Pennsylvania has always shown a becoming sympathy. I can never, in the official station which I occupy, consent to countenance a course which may jeopardize the peace and harmony of the union, without answering

46 Pennsylvania Archives, Fourth Series, VI, 290-292.
47 Kennedy, op. cit., 124.
any good purpose in the end. It shall meet with no en-
couragement at my hands.\textsuperscript{18}

That the new Governor would not “countenance” abolitionist
actions which might “jeopardize the peace and harmony of the
union” was interpreted as threatening them with action under a
sedition statute. This view was bolstered a few days later when
Porter promised energetic action to quell riotous outbreaks and
illegal conduct, in the course of a message principally devoted to
state finances. It is possible that Porter was preoccupied, not so
much with abolitionists, as with rioters of the Anti-Masonic
Party who for a time had threatened to hold up his inauguration.
Yet, in view of the broad base of the Anti-Masonic outbreaks
which were in no way related to the anti-slavery cause, it would
seem that the Governor could have dealt effectively with this
question without appearing to threaten non-violent abolitionists.

The \textit{Pennsylvania Freeman} of February 28, 1839, contained
Whittier’s poetical rebuke, in some ways similar to his “Ichab-

dod” with which in 1850 he was to rebuke a greater man, Daniel
Webster, for what he deemed an about-face on this same issue.
Critical portions of the 1839 rebuke, which is less well written
and perhaps for this reason is omitted from the poet’s \textit{Collected
Works}, follow:

\begin{quote}
Go, eat thy words. Shall Henry Clay
   Turn round,—a moral Harlequin?
And arch Van Buren wipe away
   The stains of his Missouri sin?
And shall that one unlucky vote
   Stick burr-like in thy honest throat? ...

Go hunt sedition. Search for that
   In every pedler’s cart of rags;
Pry into every Quaker’s hat
   And Dr. Fussell’s saddle bags,
Lest treason wrap, with all its ills
   Around his powders and his pills... .

Ho! send ye down a corporal’s guard
   With flow of flag and beat of drum,—
Storm Lindley Coates’ poultry-yard,
   Beleaguer Thomas Whitson’s home!
Beat up the Quaker quarters,—show
Your valor to an unarmed foe! ...
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Journal of the House of Representatives (Pa.)} (1838-1839), I, 94.
HOW WHITTIER'S ANTI-SLAVERY POEMS WERE SOMETIMES CIRCULATED

Photographed from a part of a leaflet sold at three cents a copy by the American Anti-Slavery Society.
We cannot falter! Did we so,
The stones beneath would murmur out,
And all the winds that round us blow
Would whisper of our shame about.
No, let the tempest rock the land,
Our faith shall live, our truth shall stand.\textsuperscript{49}

You will have observed the irony which Whittier used, but you can scarcely miss the occasional lapse in rhythm, nor the excessively hortatory tone. Clearly, the young poet had yet to learn his art and in any case was primarily concerned with propaganda. As such it seems to have been effective among his following, and perhaps beyond that circle. For while the Governor certainly gave the abolitionists no “encouragement,” he did not take stringent action to carry out his declared intention of not “countenancing” their agitation.

Whittier’s singleness of purpose and his refusal to be diverted to related or semi-related purposes caused an exchange between him and the extremist Garrison in 1839. Their basic difference was in the field of methods. An intensely practical man, Whittier was for building a political organization that would end slavery as rapidly as it could be ended, but through constitutional means.\textsuperscript{50} Garrison, unlike Whittier, chafed under the restraints imposed by the constitution, which he once referred to as “a covenant with death and an agreement with hell.” He felt that he could not conscientiously vote under it or in any manner recognize its authority. This was Garrison’s doctrine of non-political action.

An old proverb has it that “extremes meet.” Just as Southerners were willing to risk secession for the protection of slavery, so Garrison was willing to risk secession for the preservation of the anti-slavery movement in the North. This was Garrison’s doctrine of disunion. Those who chose to work under the constitution and within the Union, through political action, were described with contempt as “political Abolitionists” and later as “New Organizationists.” It was during Whittier’s editorship of the

\textsuperscript{49}Dr. Bartholomew Fussell was a Chester County physician. Lindley Coates was among the signers of the 1833 Declaration of Sentiments, basic document of the anti-slavery movement. So was Thomas Whitson, Hick-site Quaker and Lancaster County farmer.

\textsuperscript{50}Whittier helped establish three anti-slavery parties: Liberty (1840); Free Soil (1848); and Republican (1854).
Pennsylvania Freeman that the differences with Garrison reached their high point. Ill at his home in Amesbury during the winter of 1838-39, Whittier had admonished the Freeman readers in editorials and letters to submerge personal and partisan differences:

Are we not all brethren, Abolitionists all? . . . Like the fabled stone of Scio, which Pliny speaks of that floated on the waters when whole, but sunk like lead beneath them when broken asunder, our strength and safety lies in our union and brotherhood of spirit.51

In the Washington's Birthday number of the Liberator, Garrison attacked Whittier for arguing "somewhat in the Henry Clay style, as when Missouri was admitted into the Union as a slave state, for the sake of peace."52 Whittier replied in a conciliatory letter that he was not disposed to "quarrel with the friend of twelve years' standing." Garrison published the reply but not without a characteristic outburst against "political Abolitionists." Expressing sympathy for "our dear friend in his illness," he explained the invidious comparison with Clay, while still maintaining that Whittier was "for obtaining peace at the expense of consistency, if not of principle."53

Whittier did not view the slavery question in the light of an intercollegiate debate. His presence in Massachusetts was for recuperation only, and he looked forward to resumption of the "border war with slavery" in Pennsylvania. Back at his desk in Philadelphia, he stated his position in a firm but conciliatory manner. The statement, entitled "The Editor at His Post," said in part:

We entered into the association (American Anti-Slavery Society) and gave our name to the Constitution with no ulterior object of reform in church or in state, or in the general condition of the social fabric. We looked only to THE ABOLITION OF AMERICAN SLAVERY. We simply pledged our moral power as a man, and our political power as a citizen, for the overthrow of the abomination. . . . Is the present harmony of feeling among the Abolitionists of Pennsylvania to give place to personalities, invective, jealousy and evil surmisings? Will our McKims and Burleighs, our Coateses

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51 Pennsylvania Freeman, February 14, 1839.
52 Liberator, February 22, 1839.
53 Liberator, February 28, 1839.
and Motts, turn away from the victims of the southern prison-house to discuss the relative merits of William L.L. Garrison, Henry B. Stanton, or Amos A. Phelps? We will not believe it.

The regimen of editorship was a severe trial for Whittier's frail physique. He often found his office desk too rigidly confining, city streets too enervating. Sometimes he would go out into the nearby countryside, or even into the city's park. At other times he would return to his Amesbury farmstead, from which he would send fighting letters and editorials. It was the strain of toil and the distaste for urban life, not the atmosphere of Philadelphia, against which his system rebelled. Quaker-like, he had nothing but veneration for the City of Brotherly Love. During his editorship he happened upon a tailor from whom throughout his remaining years he continued to purchase the plain, black broadcloth coat that orthodox Quakers wore in that period.

In one of his letters he mentions a walk near the Fairmount Water Works. He praises alike the "beautiful spot," the fountains "made to gush up from the rocks of the cliffs which overhang the Schuylkill," and the fine "view of the river winding down to the city." In another he confides to Caleb Cushing:

I like the Quaker purity of this city, and its Quaker hospitality, but I would rather live as an obscure New England farmer. I would rather see the sunset light streaming through the valley of the Merrimac than to look out for many months upon brick walls and Sam Weller's "werry beautiful landscape of chimney pots."

Yet apart from the natural attachment to his boyhood home, Whittier appears not to have had any preference for the New England countryside over that of Pennsylvania. He is reported to have been charmed with the landscape viewed from Seminary Ridge at Gettysburg. He wrote to Daniel Neall's daughter about the beauty of the Cumberland Valley near Carlisle. He was partial

24 Pennsylvania Freeman, April 11, 1839.
26 Pickard, Life and Letters, I, 240.
27 Ibid., 250.
28 Ibid., 251.
to Spring Grove Farm, Healy's estate overlooking the Delaware. In his later life he was to write:

I think the old Quaker settlements of Chester, Bucks, Delaware and Lancaster counties forty years ago were nearer the perfection of human society than anything I have since seen or heard of before.  

For all the differences in his ancestral background, Whittier was drawn to the people of Pennsylvania, too. Nor was this attraction confined to the Society of Friends. Not only did he realize the importance of winning support from Pennsylvania Germans, but he praised them in a letter written as early as August 16, 1838:

We are slow-moulded, heavy-stermed, Dutch-built, out hereaway; but when once started on the right track, there is no backing out with us. The abolitionists of Pennsylvania are of the right material; many of them don't believe in the devil, and those who do aren't afraid of him. I admire and honor their stern moral courage, in manfully maintaining their ground against a fiendish and bitter opposition.

Whittier brought to his work not only energy and ability, courage and patience, but also warm understanding and humor. Most portraits of Whittier emphasize his sterner aspect, but underneath this gravity there was a genuine and delightful humor. He did not hesitate to poke fun even at a Quaker meeting. When his cousin complained about the "gruntings" of some Quakers, and suggested they be discouraged, Whittier replied: "Oh no, Joseph, don't thee do that—take away the grunt, and nothing is left."

In May, 1838, he visited Healy's country home, Spring Grove Farm, with his cousin, Joseph Cortlands. With this same quiet humor he wrote while there:

I cannot forbear to mention one fact which has come under my notice, as showing that prejudice against color is not confined to human bipeds. A hen at this place has

50 Currier, op. cit., 70.
60 Pickard, loc. cit.
91 Pickard, Whittier-Land, 82.
disowned two of a fine brood of chickens who happen to
be black! Let this be communicated to Elliot Cresson.\textsuperscript{62}

Whittier's volume of literary output was definitely down during this period. He contributed six poems to the \textit{Pennsylvania Freeman}, while its editor, and two others to other journals. Except for two hymns, all of these poems were concerned with the anti-slavery cause. He later expressed reservations with regard to their literary merits:

Of their defects from an artistic point of view it is not necessary to speak. They were the earnest and often vehement expression of the writer's thought and feeling at critical periods in the great conflict between Freedom and Slavery. They were written with no expectation that they would survive the occasions which called them forth; they were protests, alarm-signals, trumpet-calls to action, words wrung from the writer's heart, forged at white-heat, and of course lacking the finish and careful word-selection which reflection and patient brooding over them might have given. Such as they are, they belong to the history of the anti-slavery movement and may serve as way-marks of its progress.\textsuperscript{63}

Whether Whittier would have written better, had his energies not been so channeled, is a question that cannot be categorically answered. What is certain is that, while many men were accepting human slavery, and most of those who disapproved it were temporizing, Whittier furnished effective and courageous, yet prudent and pacific leadership in the struggle to abolish slavery. He was to feel that his Pennsylvania years were perhaps his most productive period of service to this movement. Read even today, his poems and letters and editorials need no apology. They remain the most distinguished literary monument to the work of the anti-slavery societies.

Conscious at the time of the weight of Whittier's name and the value of his services, the Eastern District Executive Committee of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society memorialized him and his services when, for reasons of health, he found it necessary to

\textsuperscript{62} Pickard, \textit{Life and Letters}, I, 226.

resign the editorship of the *Freeman*. On March 17, 1840, they resolved:

That in the discharge of his duties as editor of the *Freeman*, and in all his labors among us in the cause of emancipation, as well as in the private walks of social life our friend has acquitted himself in such a manner & manifested such a spirit as to enhance our admiration of his talents, strengthen our confidence in his discretion, to renew our regard for his singleness of heart & purity of purpose, and to bind us to him by ties of the strongest friendship.\(^44\)

Whittier must often have wondered about the bearing of his contributions to the cause of freedom. In *The Tent on the Beach*, he gave poetic expression to this wonderment, in the description that follows:

\begin{quote}
And one there was, a dreamer born,
   Who, with a mission to fulfil,
Had left the Muses' haunts to turn
   The crank of an opinion-mill,
Making his rustic reed of song
A weapon in the war with wrong,
Yoking his fancy to the breaking-plough
That beam-deep turned the soil for truth
to spring and grow.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Too quiet seemed the man to ride
   The winged Hippogriff Reform;
Was his a voice from side to side
   To pierce the tumult of the storm?
A silent, shy, peace-loving man,
He seemed no fiery partisan
To hold his way against the public frown,
The ban of Church and State, the fierce
mob's hounding down.\(^45\)
\end{quote}

Not only were his services genuine, they were widely appreciated abroad as well as at home. In St. Margaret's Church in London a memorial window was installed in 1887, honoring the memory of the poet Milton. Archdeacon Farrar might have asked

\(^{44}\) Currier, *op. cit.*, 71-72.  
\(^{45}\) *Collected Works* (1888), 243.
a dozen English poets to compose the quatrain for this window, but instead he asked Whittier, the "perfect tribute" to a living poet also renowned in the cause of freedom. Pennsylvanians, mindful of the services of this poet from another state, may read into the words of Whittier's quatrain a special significance:

The new world honors him whose lofty plea
For England's freedom made her own more sure,
Whose song, immortal as its theme, shall be
Their common freehold while both worlds endure.