

The Philadelphia Free Produce Attack Upon Slavery

THE issue of slavery in the United States has produced an extensive literature of such vast proportions that every aspect of it appears to have received exhaustive study. Yet "best sellers" continue to be spun out of this rich source and learned professors retain it as a favored topic of research in the more objective deliberations of history seminars. The field has been ploughed and reploughed innumerable times with sterility too often the reward of research; but occasionally there is unearthed some fragment that pushes back a little further the curtain of our ignorance of that eventful period from 1830 to 1860.

What we shall discuss here has none of the dramatic qualities characteristic of that swift succession of crises that drove ever deeper the wedge of secession. Our story has no episode comparable to Adams' stubborn fight against "gag rule"; it will not arouse the reader as do the fervid cries of a Garrison and the dangerous fanaticism of a John Brown. Utterly devoid of the pathos and romantics of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it is also happily free from the sanguinity of "Bleeding Kansas." These and the other familiar incidents have completely overshadowed, almost to the point of obscurity, a less-publicized contemporary development, which, even if finally judged to be relatively insignificant, must be considered better to view the antislavery crusade in its entirety. This is the story of a few people who cherished an illusion—the belief that it would be possible to abolish slavery by making it an economic liability.

The attempt to do away with slavery by making it financially unprofitable during the years when "cotton was king" was as empty a gesture as Canute's ambition to turn back the waves of the sea by command. Many who were exhorted to wage economic war on the

plantation system must have regarded such a struggle as ludicrous. But the beginnings of protest go back to a day when cotton was not paramount, when the evil of slavery was seen at its worst in the production of sugar cane. Convinced of the sin of keeping a fellow man in bondage, the venerable John Woolman abstained from using sugar in order to bear a consistent testimony against the method by which it was produced. For like reason, when a guest in another's home, he refused to accept the services of a household slave. His co-religionists, the Friends, whose moral tenacity has often evoked universal admiration, were not yet ready to emulate his self-sacrifice.

Early in the 1790's there were signs, however, that a boycott was being attempted on slave-grown cane sugar. In the second session of the third Congress notice was drawn to the perceptibly diminishing consumption of sugar due to "the qualmishness of some of the Quakers." In the sugar maples of the northern forests Dr. Benjamin Rush saw the means to end slavery in the sugar islands. To Thomas Jefferson he confided:

I cannot help contemplating a sugar maple tree with a species of affection and even veneration, for I have persuaded myself to behold in it the happy means of rendering the commerce and slavery of our african brethren in the sugar islands as unnecessary, as it has always been inhuman and unjust.¹

Others shared Rush's hope that the sugar maple might prove the key to emancipation. A society was organized to encourage planting; estimates of the yield of the maples in New York and Pennsylvania were made, and it was believed that 263,000 acres of trees would fill the sugar needs of the entire nation. Anticipating the effects of maple sugar culture upon the deliberations of Congress in regard to the Negroes Abbé Bonnet envisioned a not distant day when nature would compel the freeing of the enslaved. Congress will be confronted by the slaves

... and what can it reply to them, when each bearing in his hand a branch of the sugar maple, they shall come to say to it: Look, and read upon this leaf the decree of nature; we were enslaved in order to cultivate the sugar cane! What can it reply, I say, but you are free.²

Less philanthropic-minded persons had seen the possibility of

¹ Mary S. Locke, *Anti-Slavery in America, 1619-1808* (Boston, 1901), 189.

² *Ibid.*, 190.

"turning a penny" to their own account. One instance is that of the enterprising Dutch bankers of the Holland Land Company. Taking up the scheme of producing maple sugar on a large scale, they sent Gerrit Boon of Rotterdam to America in 1792. After touring the northern states in search of tracts heavily wooded with sugar maples Boon purchased thirty thousand acres north of Fort Stanwix in New York state. Yankee woodcutters were engaged to cut out all trees but the maples on the hillside chosen for the first experiment. Within eighteen months numerous difficulties arising from the lack of proper equipment, and also from Boon's refusal to accept advice from more experienced heads, contrived to prevent the enterprise from succeeding. In November, 1794, the venture was closed at an estimated loss of \$15,000. Boon had been able to produce only about \$320 worth of maple sugar.³

Other projects to produce maple sugar in quantities sufficient to supplant the use of cane sugar met with similar failure. Thus the leaf of the sugar maple vanished as a symbol of Negro freedom. Congress never entertained the leaf-bearing blacks and in a few years the sugar cane yielded its place to the cotton plant.

Dismayed as they must have been by the failure of the maple sugar scheme the zealous abolitionists of the later 1790's labored the more diligently to spread the conviction that slavery could not be opposed on humanitarian and religious grounds and at the same time supported economically. The flow of profits that kept the abhorred institution alive had to be shut off, the consumption of goods made by slaves had to cease. At the convention of abolitionist societies that met in Philadelphia in 1796 this ideal found sufficient acceptance to occasion a general appeal. Members and sympathizers were called upon to give

. . . decided preference to such commodities as are of the culture or manufacture of freemen, to those which are cultivated or manufactured by slaves, as a means by which every individual may discountenance oppression, and bear a testimony against a practice which is still suffered to remain the disgrace of our land.⁴

The annoying inconveniences and expense inhibiting a scrupulous

³ Paul D. Evans, *The Holland Land Company* (Buffalo, 1924), 14-18, 63-66.

⁴ Edward Needles, *An Historical Memoir of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery; The Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for Improving the Condition of the African Race* (Philadelphia, 1848), 43, 44.

obedience to this supplication are obvious. Numerous essential goods and many habitual luxuries were produced only by slave labor; reluctance to forego these was considerable. Few women were willing to sacrifice comfort and style in dress, while not many men would abjure the old habits of smoking, snuff-pinching, and the use of sugar at the behest of impractical visionaries. Northern traders and processors of southern raw materials naturally opposed such a program of abstinence. It must be remembered too that a widespread sentiment against slavery did not yet prevail in the northern states. Pennsylvania's gradual emancipation law had not long been on the statute books (1780); slave trading flourished until 1808 and aroused little public indignation when carried on surreptitiously thereafter. Philadelphia was still to witness demonstrations against its anti-slavery champions, riots and the burning of meeting places.

This early injunction of the abolitionists was but a gesture, a feeble cry of opposition amidst the virile forces that were planting deeper the institution of slavery in the expanding nation. In a short time the wording of the first free produce appeal was modified to permit a more flexible adherence. Preference for the products of free labor should be exercised ". . . in cases where it is practicable," an escape clause allowing the compromise of principle and practice without too serious soul-searching. One might note the analogy between the support accorded the free produce ideal and adherence to the cause of prohibition in a later day.

In the literature of abolitionism there are few references to free produce during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. A pamphlet by Elias Hicks, *Observations on the Slavery of the Africans and their Descendants* appeared in 1811 attacking the use of slave-made goods and reiterating the appeal to abstain. But in these years the energies of abolitionists were given mainly to improving the lot of free Negroes and preventing their re-enslavement. Others saw solution of the slave problem in the colonization movement.

Hitched to a bale of cotton the South's star had been rocketing ever higher. Less tenacious spirits than the Philadelphia abolitionists might have succumbed to its ascending power and free produce would have suffered oblivion. The ideal was somnolent but not dead. In 1825 there is a token of its rejuvenation in a letter received by Roberts Vaux from England's indefatigable warrior against slavery,

Thomas Clarkson. Clarkson mentions plans afoot in England to organize a company to produce by free labor, manufacture and undersell commodities now produced entirely by slave labor. This Free Labour Company was to be capitalized at the tremendous sum of four million pounds.⁵

Early in January, 1827, there was organized in Philadelphia the first American society dedicated to the task of converting the ideal of free produce into a frontal attack on the slave system. Meeting on January 8, it enrolled sixty-five charter members, among whom were the following:

William Rawle, president
Thomas Shipley
Isaac Barton
James Mott
William Wharton

Isaac T. Hopper
Abraham L. Pennock
Edwin P. Atlee
Joseph Parrish

A constitution was framed and published in April in conjunction with a circular descriptive of the Society's intent. Moral protest was now to be transmuted into planned action. Means would be found to enable the free labor producers to compete equally with producers using slaves. The Society also hoped to

satisfy the Slave-Holder that the net income from his estate would be increased by converting his Slaves into free hired laborers, and an important advance will be made in the great work of emancipation.

For the present the Society aimed to act as a clearing house, gathering and disseminating information about the persons and places producing free labor cotton, rice, sugar, molasses, tobacco, and similar products, and advising on the best markets where these could be sold. A committee of correspondence charged with this function circulated the following questionnaire:

1. Are there any persons, and what number, within your knowledge in the United States, engaged in the production, by the labor of Freemen, of either Cotton, Sugar, Rice or Tobacco? If there are, please state their address, and the probable quantity and kind they may have to dispose of, and what will be the probable annual disposable sum.

2. Is it probable that any person or persons would in the United States, engage in raising the above mentioned articles in the manner designated, from an assurance that in this City, and elsewhere, many persons would give to

⁵ Thomas Clarkson to Roberts Vaux, May 30, 1825, Roberts Vaux Papers in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

articles thus grown a decided preference to those of similar kind and quality resulting from slave labor?

3. What number of individuals are there in your township or neighborhood that would be willing to purchase the above named articles at a small advance above the market price?

4. What proportion of people would in your opinion, purchase those articles in preference to those raised by Slaves, at the same prices, within your neighborhood?⁶

It would be interesting and valuable to our purpose to know how widely the poll circulated and to learn the nature and extent of the replies. Evidence of the success of the Society's efforts is similarly denied us. Students of Philadelphia history will recognize immediately, however, that its membership included men of initiative and stature—persons who held fast to the ideal and laid the groundwork for the more aggressively active associations that appeared within the next two decades.

In the depression year of 1838 the American Free Produce Association was founded. Its very name suggests that the movement was passing from a purely local into a wider field. Organized to furnish commodities made only by free labor, thereby enabling opponents of slavery to advance their purpose, it constituted a modest assault on southern economy. The creation of this Society, it should be noted, coincided with signs of an increasingly aggressive and militant opposition to slavery. In this period the Pennsylvania Antislavery Society and the Philadelphia Female Antislavery Society came into existence. Symptomatic of the same impulse, the Free Produce Association assigned to itself the more difficult, mundane task of diverting the stream of profits sustaining slavery, while its affiliates crusaded on that elevated moral level that has seldom failed to gain popular acclaim.

Inasmuch as the goods placed on the market by the Association were chiefly textiles and foodstuffs the patronage of the members of the Female Antislavery Society was an early objective. Collaboration between the two groups is evidenced in their joint annual reports, and in the incorporation into Article Twelve of the Female Society's constitution the counterpart of the now familiar exhortation:

. . . to plead the cause of our brethren in bonds . . . it is especially recommended that the members of this Society should entirely abstain from purchasing the products of slave labor . . .

⁶ *Constitution of the Free Produce Society of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1827).

Reminded periodically of this duty the more zealous ladies made their purchases from the Association. Annually during the week before Christmas, the Society held a bazaar for four or five days in the Assembly Rooms or in Sansom Hall. The bazaar became an elaborate event with proceeds netting between \$1,000 and \$1,700. To aid the Free Produce Association the Female Society early adopted the practice of giving it a sizable donation. It is not likely that only free labor goods were offered for sale at the bazaar, but aware of the spirit of the leaders of the Society it can be safely assumed they were displayed and their purchase encouraged.

The fifth annual report of the Free Produce Association (1842-43) optimistically notes that its work is progressing nicely, but the absence of a proselytizing zeal is sadly deplored. A firm belief that slavery is sinful must precede acceptance of the principle that it is also wicked to partake of its fruits. The most arduous task of the Association is to persuade a large number of really zealous opponents of slavery that their purchase of slave products is supporting the very system they wish destroyed. Difficult as it had been to overcome such indifference the demand for free produce goods has doubled in the past year; more goods of better quality and at lower prices are now available to meet this favorable turn.

The scant margin of capital, the Association informed its friends, did not allow it to sell goods on credit or consignment. In lieu, a plan similar to mail-order-house methods of a later day was suggested. Buyers in a community should pool their orders, and with the requisite money forward them to the Association's agent, who would fill them with alacrity.

Though the report gives no detailed account of operations nor indicates clearly the extent of the market, some general comments provide clues to the scope of the Association's activities. Happily the enterprise appeared to be arousing considerable interest in many parts of the country: it was publicly discussed; conventions had been assembled and additional free produce units created; and more distant parts of the country daily requested supplies. Too expansively optimistic as it was, the report does signify that the idea of free produce was gaining needed publicity, more people were becoming conscious of it as an economic weapon the abolitionist might wield.

The remainder of the report, aside from an inventory of manu-

facture, is a lengthy admonition directed to those abolitionists who "... forget that the testimony of a consistent life is far more valuable to any cause . . ." than gifts of money, time, and labor. The cornerstone of the whole fabric of slavery is supported by their consumption of its bloodstained yield! Are not abolitionists, convinced of the evil of slavery, more guilty than those blind to its sinfulness? Thus were backsliders rebuked, but the report tempered its final words with a challenging exhortation to couple their self-denying testimony with vocal protest against slavery.

The statement of manufactures for the year 1842-43 gives some idea of the quantity and variety of textiles the Association furnished to its customers. Securing cotton grown and picked only by free labor, the Association, not having its own factory, had arranged with private millowners to make muslin sheeting, printed cloth, flannel, drilling, gingham, table diaper and printed calico. Nearly forty thousand yards of these had been made, and 3,900 pounds of cotton yarn spun. Purchases of raw cotton for the year totalled 30,496 pounds. Unfortunately a deficit of \$321.50 had been suffered, a regrettable fact necessitating further loans of money to the Association. Prospective lenders were reminded of the valuable service they could render and were assured their loans were secure.

Despite the persistently cheerful tenor of the report, the lingering impression is that of an uphill struggle waged against bogging inertia and indifference. Lacking necessary financial support the Association was trying to furnish free-made goods—of comparatively inferior quality and style, yet at slightly higher prices—to a reluctant trade painfully kept aware of its obligation to boycott slave goods and thus uphold moral principle. Extremely pertinent to our study would be reliable evidence to show whether the leaders of the free produce movement actually believed they could wage an effective economic war against the slave system, or whether the venture was launched primarily as a protest and regarded as of little material consequence, except as evidence of consistency of principle. Reports of the effectiveness of the boycott on slave-grown sugar instituted by English abolitionists in 1791 undoubtedly led some to believe the former was possible. After Wilberforce's abolition bill had been defeated in Parliament over three hundred thousand British subjects had abstained from using West Indian sugar. West In-

dian planters became alarmed at this; and consistent pressure finally led to the ending of the slave trade in the islands. The Americans believed they could wield the same weapon with success equal to that of their more experienced English cousins and coadjutors.

The American Free Produce Association passed from view in 1845 but in that same year appeared in its stead a new and more vigorous organization, the Philadelphia Free Produce Association of Friends. Within recent years the free produce ideal had gained considerable headway among members of the Society of Friends, and during the spring and summer months of 1845 they had begun to organize. A constitution limiting membership to Friends had been drawn up; requests were made for loans; and a board of managers was named. George W. Taylor was chosen secretary, Samuel Alsop, treasurer, succeeded in the following year by Marmaduke C. Cope, and the following were constituted the managers:

Samuel Allinson, Jr.
Edward Garrett
Israel H. Johnson
Enoch Lewis

Abraham L. Pennock
Elihu Pickering
Samuel Rhoads
Thomas Wister, Jr.⁷

Fortunately for the researcher, Taylor methodically made copies of his personal correspondence. As the most active member of the Association from 1847 to its collapse on the eve of the Civil War, the two volumes of his correspondence in the Haverford College Manuscript Collection are the richest source from which the story of the later, more ambitious phase of the free produce movement is derived.

Basing its *raison d'être* upon the assertion “. . . slavery owes its vitality to the demand for the products of slave labour” the Association prefaced its work by communicating with the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society and with Thomas Clarkson, then in his eighty-fifth year. From these hardy veterans in the war on slavery the managers sought counsel and information as to how they could more effectively “assail it through the medium of the market. There,” they remarked, “appears to be the vulnerable point.”

Not deluded into believing their boycott would visibly affect

⁷ *Minutes of the Board of Managers of the Free Produce Association of Friends of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting* (Friends Historical Society, Philadelphia).

slavery in a short space of time, a minute of the Friends expressed this note of quiet optimism:

In looking towards the future operations of our Association we readily perceive that the enterprise is not to be accomplished in a day or a year, . . . yet what has already transpired is sufficient to afford no trivial encouragement.

Even persons not ardently opposing slavery would prefer to buy free-made goods if given the opportunity, believed the managers. The initial step in supplying this anticipated market was made in December, 1845. Letters from merchants in Tennessee reported that about one-fifth of all cotton brought into the northern Mississippi market was free grown and of good quality. Acting on this the Association, with the cooperation of Indiana Friends, purchased sixty-three bales of guaranteed free labor cotton. Some difficulty was met in getting this first lot of cotton cleaned because all available gins were owned by slaveholders who were using them to capacity. The resourceful agents of the Association, however, hired slaves, paying them wages, to work cleaning the cotton during the Christmas holiday season when they had free time.

Precautions shortly adopted by the Association to insure that no slave had had any part in the production of the cotton deserve special comment. Agents acting for the Association were instructed to secure the following general information:

1. What plantations in this neighborhood are worked by free labour exclusively?
2. Could an increased quantity of cotton, if contracted for, be raised by free labour?
3. Where is the cotton ginned?
4. Why is not slave labour employed?
5. Can free labourers be hired?

When negotiating a purchase the agent must ask these questions of the cotton grower:

1. What quantity of cotton is raised on this plantation?
2. Is it cultivated by free labour entirely, in all the various stages of its growth.
3. Is it ginned and otherwise prepared for market entirely by free labour?
4. Is the bagging and rope of free labour materials?
5. Is it baled and transported for shipment by free labour?

If doubtful of the planter's veracity the agent should investigate

further. As an additional safeguard each invoice of purchase had to be sworn to before a magistrate attesting that the cotton had been grown entirely by free labor and that the planter neither owned slaves nor contracted for slave labor.

The difficulty the Association had experienced in having the first cotton shipment cleaned led it to make loans to free cotton growers to enable them to erect their own gins. It was hoped such aid would stimulate increased production. The number of loans was not large, however, for shortly it became evident that an ample supply could be assured without assistance of this kind. The model of a small, inexpensive machine known as the "Cottage Gin" was sent to the Association by English Friends early in 1849. Successfully used in the East Indies by small cotton producers, its introduction into the southern states would lessen dependence upon the large planters who owned virtually all the gins. Arrangements were made to have a number of these machines built and sent into the South. Encouragement to free cotton culture appeared in another guise when George Taylor, with Elihu Burritt, the peregrinating "Learned Blacksmith" of Connecticut, and Benjamin Latham, proposed a competitive scheme. Premiums were to be given planters in the several areas who grew the largest crop of free cotton above a specified minimum. Lest this antagonize the slaveowners Taylor cautioned that the initial premiums be small—let the scheme appear too picayune to oppose. Further mention of the plan is lacking beyond comment that a prospectus of it had been forwarded to several southern newspapers for publication.

In addition to cotton the Free Produce Association sought sugar, molasses, rice and coffee. Sugar was obtained from the island of St. Croix, Mexico and Louisiana; molasses was imported from St. Lucia; coffee from Java and Haiti; and rice from both the Carolina coast and the Far East. Whether these goods were purchased direct or through a jobber the same sworn guarantee that no slave labor had been used in their production was required.

There is no evidence that slaveowners in the South became the least disturbed by the activities of the Association's agents in their midst. Recounting his trip through Arkansas and Texas during the winter 1847-48, the agent Nathan Thomas stated that, on the contrary, slaveholders had been most willing to aid him in his inquiries.

In the years of intense sectional hostility that marked the 1850's one would expect to find resentment against those aiming to cripple the South economically, but such was not the case. Two reasons for this indifference come to mind: the assault of free produce was too trifling and inconsequential to merit anxiety, or, here, as in other numerous instances, the Friends were displaying their peculiarly distinctive talent for maintaining amicable relations with their opponents. In addition, one must not lose sight of the antislavery sentiment in certain areas of the South itself, notably in the new South of the Mississippi and Gulf regions.

To gain a better idea of the scope and effectiveness of the Association's work the report of goods manufactured for the year ending February 1, 1848 is listed:

Heavy shirtings and sheetings	16,734 yds.
Fine shirtings and sheetings	23,103 "
Fine cambric muslins	2,509 "
Print cloths	12,383 "
Prints for dress calicoes	5,449 "
Prints for furniture calicoes	915 "
Dyed for linings	645 "
Dyed for umbrellas	518 "
Paper muslins	2,604 "
Ginghams	4,369 "
Apron and furniture checks	634 "
Tickings	2,236 "
Drilling	585 "
Canton flannel	511 "
Table diaper	234 "
Satinets	755 "
Pantaloon stuffs	1,804 "
Oil cloth	210 "
Yarn for knitting and weaving hose	368 lbs.
Hosiery	32 doz.
Umbrellas	247

Though conceived as a non-profit organization the Association had cleared \$1,100 by February 1, 1848.

Lacking its own retail outlets during the first few years, the Association marketed its wares through private stores on a commission basis. This arrangement had many objectionable features, foremost of which was the sale of slave and free-made goods over the same counter. The free labor goods thus lost their peculiar identity, ne-

gating the aim of the sponsors—to make the general public increasingly aware of the free produce ideal. To remedy this the managers of the Association prevailed upon Taylor, in 1848, to assume management of a store devoted exclusively to free produce commodities. It was thought that an establishment bearing the name and advertising under a free produce banner line would attract much-needed publicity. The managers were to continue the purchase and processing of the raw materials while Taylor handled wholesale and retail sales on which he was to receive a commission. After operating several years in this manner the Association, judging a unified management would be more efficient, turned over its entire stock, valued at \$6,000, to Taylor in the form of a loan without interest. In 1852 the tasks of securing raw materials, supervising their manufacture, and enlarging the free produce market fell to Taylor. The Association agreed to contribute toward the expenses of the store and the maintenance of a traveling agent. Henceforth the headquarters of the movement for the Philadelphia area became the free produce store on the northwest corner of Fifth and Cherry Streets; and upon Taylor rested the sole responsibility of keeping the market stocked with a plentiful and varied supply of free labor goods.

Under Taylor's direction the economic crusade accelerated its tempo. Appeals were now addressed to all opponents of slavery as well as to Friends. Local newspapers and several in neighboring states carried free produce advertisements; pamphlets were circulated; the antislavery press, particularly the *Non-Slaveholder* and the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* publicized free produce in article and editorial. Taylor cooperated for several years in publishing and distributing *The Friend*, the organ of the Society of Friends. The Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society repeatedly adopted the following resolutions during the 1850's:

Resolved, That we recommend to all enemies of Slavery to abstain, as far as practicable, from the consumption of the productions of slave labor, as an endeavor after personal purity, and a testimony against the robbery of the slave by the slave-holder.

Resolved, That the efforts made by the Free Produce Association for developing the resources which exist on this Continent and elsewhere for the supply of free goods, and to meet the increasing demand for them, have our thankful acknowledgments with our earnest wishes for their continuance.⁸

⁸ Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, Thirteenth Annual Report, October 15, 1850.

At the Society's annual meeting of 1851 Taylor heard Lucretia Mott reaffirm its adherence to the sentiment "No Union with Slaveholders." Abolitionists, having refused religious and political connections with slaveholders, must now take the third step and sever all commercial relations ". . . thus treating them as we would treat all other flagrant criminals."⁹

Members of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, whose support of the earlier free produce ventures has been noted, were also officers and active members of the Pennsylvania Society. Lucretia Mott, Sarah Pugh, Sarah McKim, Mary Grew, Margaret Burleigh, Abby Kimber and Maria Davis zealously championed the war on slavery. The efforts of these and a host of unnamed women suggest that the antislavery crusade as a phase of feminism has not been adequately studied. Token of the fervid emotionalism in which the women labored is their abolition song:

I am an Abolitionist!
I glory in the name;
Though now by slavery's minions hissed,
And covered o'er with shame.
It is a spell of light and power,
The watchword of the free;
Who spurns it in the trial hour
A craven soul is he.

Certain well-known public figures became attached to free produce in these years. In Elihu Burritt, advocate of international peace and world brotherhood, the movement had an able collaborator, as Taylor's frequent letters bear evidence. Shortly after the appearance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Taylor began a correspondence with Professor Calvin E. Stowe, husband of the newly famous author. Associated with free produce the name of Stowe would be of considerable publicity value. Taylor outlined the history of the movement for Stowe and sent a batch of samples of free produce goods to be distributed among a convention of ministers meeting in Washington, D. C. Initiative, vigor, and persistence yielded their fruit, and within two years Taylor was able to enlarge the store, lease a near-by warehouse, and visualize the acquisition of a much-needed factory.

While all these factors were enlarging the market, keeping it replenished and satisfied was a task too often hampered by irksome

⁹ *Ibid.*, Fourteenth Annual Report, October 7, 1851.

incidents. The unique nature of the business made it imperative that there be no cause for complaint. Unfortunately, specifications as to quality, color, and pattern of textiles were frequently disregarded by the mills weaving the free labor cotton into finished goods. A letter from Taylor to an English firm in Manchester, Josias F. Brown & Co., reports:

My customers are exceedingly particular. Some, I fear, would be willing to find an excuse in defective quality or style or what not, to reconcile their consciences to taking choice out of the general market irrespective of the origin of the material. Conviction must be well settled before ladies can be cramped to our meager supply amidst so great a profusion to please their taste.¹⁰

Frequently Taylor had to protest against the gaily colored, large-patterned materials shipped to him for sale to his conservative trade whose tastes ran to small, neat patterns in quiet grays, slates and browns. The manufacturers' penchant for fancy boxes and gaudy wrappings did not impress his customers and Taylor rightly felt that costs would be reduced by omitting them. Other problems were occasioned by the failure of seasonal goods to arrive on time. Aside from the fact that it was bad business in general, in the case of the Free Produce Society it furnished lukewarm abolitionists with a plausible excuse not to limit themselves to free produce goods. When a shipment of sugar did not arrive on schedule Taylor ruefully commented that many of his customers

. . . have gone back to walk no more with us. . . . It would have been better for me to have lost in the River 200 Dols. than to have had this occur.¹¹

A succession of similar incidents finally induced the managers of the Association to undertake their own manufacturing. Accordingly a textile mill was leased in 1854. This was the Rosenvich Mill owned by Henry Webster, whom the Association engaged to stay on as manager. Situated on Doe Run, a small stream near Cochraneville in the vicinity of West Chester, the mill was some six miles distant from the nearest shipping point on the Colombia Railroad. For use of the mill and the machinery it contained the Association agreed to pay Webster an annual rental of \$1,180. To finance this and the

¹⁰ Taylor to Josias F. Brown and Co., August 10, 1852. Copy Press Letters of George W. Taylor, in Haverford College Manuscript Collection. Hereafter cited as Taylor Letters.

¹¹ Taylor to R. L. Murray, Oct. 29, 1852, Taylor Letters.

purchase of additional machinery a special factory fund under the trusteeship of Samuel Rhoads and Richard Richardson was established. Then began a vigorous campaign to raise the necessary funds.

Taylor was enthusiastic at seeing one of his cherished plans nearing fulfillment. His letters reveal a confidence that the onward march of free produce would be accelerated mightily with the Association operating its own mill. During the spring and summer months of 1854 he assiduously solicited aid from many sources by letter and in person. To Burritt, in England at the moment, Taylor turned for assistance. Would Burritt use his influence to secure contributions from English sympathizers? Professor Stowe received a similar appeal and responded with a subscription of \$500. From New York Robert L. Murray, manager of the New York free produce society, reported that a number of well-to-do New Yorkers had shown a willingness to help underwrite the project. Taylor estimated that \$15,000 was needed. Apparently the goal was not reached for Taylor had to subscribe \$2,000 from his personal fortune. The financial arrangements finally adopted made the subscribers the owners of the machinery. This was to be rented to Taylor at a figure which it was hoped would allow payment of 6% on subscriptions over and above expenses and insurance. Thus equipped with a new weapon the free producers prepared to make their attack more potent.

Anticipating that the winter and spring trade (1854-55) could be supplied adequately from the output of the mill, Taylor did not order from the usual supply houses. He had hoped the mill would be in production by October of 1854, but the failure of the new machinery to arrive on time and a series of initial breakdowns delayed operations until the new year. No exertion of the imagination is needed to picture Taylor's predicament in this dilemma. Coupled with an inauspicious beginning was a sharply felt lack of ready funds. A letter from Taylor to a correspondent in Mount Pleasant, Ohio, indicates the scarceness of working capital:

If my customers could advance me, say half of the value of the goods they will want next spring, I will pay them interest & it wd. [would] be quite a help to me.¹²

The free produce movement never enjoyed the financial backing

¹² Taylor to E. Ratcliffe, December 2, 1854, Taylor Letters.

needed to make it the impressive, widespread assault on slavery its founders had dreamed. As we have seen its limited capital was furnished by a small group of ardent abolitionists, chiefly Friends. Credit difficulties there were in abundance; dunning letters were numerous. Taylor was obliged to extend credit to a large portion of his retail trade, and payment, though assured, was often very slow. This further reduced the too-meager assets. Operating the factory imposed an additional burden, and made it necessary to increase the volume of sales commensurately. Fortunately, at this time the Kansas-Nebraska crisis excited wide public interest in the issue of slavery, and Taylor was able to note that wholesale shipments had jumped until the market encompassed "customers . . . in all the Northern States from Maine to Iowa & several Southern."

The years from 1855 to 1857 were banner years. Relentlessly the crises of the fifties were conditioning the mind of America to believe that the slavery issue would have to be fought out to an inexorable conclusion—compromise would no longer suffice. Such an atmosphere, conducive to various assaults on slavery, invigorated the free produce movement immensely. It gained more publicity, adherents increased in number, and the apostolic zeal of its leaders caused its agencies to multiply. These happy developments Taylor hailed as a sign of Divine approval. Buchanan's election momentarily clouded his jubilation, but a letter to Elihu Burritt calls for a rallying of forces to retaliate by a mightier effort than ever:

The presidential election over and the Slavery propagandist in power is there anything to be done. Will not the wheels of our unpretending movement still be allowed to move quickly onward. Is there not the greater need too that our effort should be greater to convince the friends of freedom of the importance of consistency. . . . Dost thou feel like gathering the opinions of Gerrit Smith, Calvin E. Stowe, Amos Walker, John G. Whittier and kindred spirits as to the propriety and feasibility of a great free labor effort.¹³

This letter contained a proposal from Taylor that a *Free Labor Journal* be published with Burritt assuming the editorship.

To discover all the free produce units with which the Philadelphia Association had dealings is difficult. Charting them on a map, we could with certainty insert pins at New York City; Mount Pleasant and Cincinnati, Ohio; New Bedford and Salem in Massachusetts; Greensboro, Newport and Knightstown in Indiana. Our main source,

¹³ Taylor to Elihu Burritt, November 14, 1856, Taylor Letters.

Taylor's copy press letters, shows that he corresponded with numerous other agencies, but unfortunately he habitually omitted addresses from his copies. Occasionally the context indicates the recipient's address, but in the main this omission prevents any safe generalization bearing upon the extent and aggregate potential threat of the movement against the slave system. The fact that leadership rested largely with members of the Society of Friends tempts one to hazard a guess that free produce flourished wherever there was an established meeting. This theory is of doubtful validity, however, for even in Philadelphia many Friends, though sincere abolitionists, did not give the movement their support. There is some evidence to suggest that other religious groups and lay organizations also participated in the boycott.

Imposing as was the rising tide of antislavery sentiment it did not prevent the almost total collapse of the free produce movement when the depression of 1857 struck. The Society's slender resources soon disappeared. A chain of mishaps set in that finally crippled the enterprise. The mill, which had turned out \$9,481.43 worth of textiles the previous year, was first to suffer. In September the workers were notified they would have to wait payment of their wages or take them in the form of goods. These they could exchange at the free produce store for groceries and other essentials. Taylor and Webster had tried diligently to convert some assets into cash to pay the workers but resort to barter was finally necessary. Suspension of specie payment by the Philadelphia banks, beginning September 25, caused added hardship. Orders fell off so drastically that a few weeks later all but a maintenance crew were discharged from the mill. Inability to secure funds, unfavorable cotton prices, and the almost total extinction of the market made it no longer practicable to continue the free produce campaign. Webster was advised to shut down the mill in October, but he succeeded in keeping it operating until early in 1858. Taylor's letters of these troubled days are full of anxious expectancy of the return of "good times." Burdensome though the expense of an idle mill was, it was far more disheartening when considered as a gaunt and empty symbol of the defeat of an heroic attempt to put an end to slavery.

Improved conditions permitted brief periodic operations of the mill during 1858 and 1859. Taylor's letters note that weavers were

hired and cotton was being purchased. However, his correspondence in the months just prior to the outbreak of war is completely barren of references to the mill, store, or to the movement in general. In 1864 the factory equipment was offered at public sale. This marks the demise of the free produce movement.

In the tumultuous current of the pre-war generation the free produce idea was a gentle, placid eddy of which relatively few people were aware. As an ideal, and later in practice, it seems to have been nurtured particularly by members of the Society of Friends; as an instrument for exerting pressure it was in accord with their philosophy. The participation of other groups in the free produce effort should not be overlooked, however.

Free produce never aroused a surge of emotional enthusiasm. Perhaps that is why it failed. There was nothing sensational or dramatic about the movement. Devoid of panoply, it attracted no gifted orators able to recruit a popular following with stirring phrases. Commonplace, it required self-denial and logic, and popular causes flourish best with a minimum of these. Economic boycott entailed privations that few people were willing to endure. Many may have admired the principle, but there is a strong probability that they believed it a fantastic, insignificant gesture, a battle waged against impossible odds by forces that would fruitlessly spend their feeble energies and then die. Slavery would have to be fought with far more potent weapons, and these lay ready at hand. Before such a situation could arise, however, I believe the moderates in the free produce movement hoped to prove convincingly to the slaveowners that their interests and their profits, if not their social structure, would persist even with the adoption of a system of free labor. If the small non-slaveowning planters and free produce associations could make a profit from the money crops of the South, why could not the large planter do the same with hired labor? The economics of the differing situations may not have been carefully thought out by the abolitionists but inspired humanitarians pay scant attention to the importunity of the dollar. It would, consequently, not be correct to view the free produce movement only as an economic sword slashing the chains of the slave; it must also be considered as a persuasive demonstration designed to prove to the slaveowner that he could emancipate his chattels with safety and profit. But in the drama of

mid-century where crisis followed crisis in swift succession, each temporarily stayed by compromise, pacific measures yielded to aggressive militancy as North and South were impelled ever nearer to war.

Possibly the most revealing commentary upon the free produce movement comes from the object of its attack, the southern slaveowners. It is true that this is not so much comment as lack of comment, but with southern slaveholders in a defensive frame of mind in the decade of the fifties and keenly sensitive to the varied attacks upon them their indifference to the free produce movement can have but one meaning. Evidently the slaveowners never had reason to become alarmed by the threat of free produce.

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