

“WHAT STRANGE TIMES”

An anti-slavery newspaper survives mob violence | By Pat Williamsen



“ON TUESDAY LAST A BAND OF FIFTEEN OR TWENTY DEPREDATORS...scaled the premises of Mr. Pugh, the Printer of this journal, at midnight,” reported the *Philanthropist* on July 15, 1836. The vandals’ intent was to stop publication of the

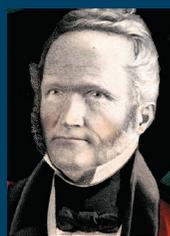
anti-slavery newspaper. They stripped the press into manageable pieces, “carrying away the smaller parts of it.” Grabbing up copies of the paper, the invaders rendered it unreadable “with the contents of a keg of ink found in the office.”

Published by the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society and edited by James G. Birney, “The Press that was assailed, was used for printing the *Philanthropist*, a journal established with the view of proving, by facts and arguments, not only the practicality of abolishing slavery, but the pressing necessity of doing so, if we wish to preserve our own liberties.”

Within hours of the midnight raid, the next edition of the *Philanthropist* was in production on a borrowed press. Days later, placards were pasted up nearby warning “Abolitionists Beware. . . . If an attempt is made to re-establish the Press, it will be viewed as an act of defiance to an already outraged community and on their heads be the results that will follow.”

Cincinnati businessmen were angered by the contents of the *Philanthropist*—news and views about the evils of slavery, commentary on stories picked up from southern journals, and religious exhortations to assist fugitives. The paper was bad for business, sure to offend Southern merchants who bought Northern goods. The *Cincinnati Republican* warned its readers to “eschew the society of James G. Birney. Avoid him as you would a viper.” Support came from editors and journalists across the country who penned editorials expressing outrage at the “Cincinnati mob” who attacked the First Amendment and a free press.

Growing up, Birney was surrounded by slaves—on his family’s Kentucky plantation, and at the homes of



James G. Birney

neighbors. Through marriage in 1816, Birney acquired slaves of his own. He dabbled in Alabama and Kentucky politics, but his political ambitions sputtered out when he called for an end to slavery. He manumitted his slaves in 1834 and moved across the Ohio River to publish the *Philanthropist*, first in New Richmond in January 1836 and then in Cincinnati.

The print shop was invaded again. “On Saturday night, July 30th, very soon after dark, a concourse of citizens assembled at the corner of Main and Seventh Streets,” reported the *Cincinnati Gazette*. This time, the vandals were more thorough. They “broke open the printing-office of the ‘Philanthropist’ . . . scattered the type into the streets. . . . the press was then dragged down the Main Street, broken up, and thrown into the river.” Disappointed that Birney was not present to be abused, the vandals proceeded to burn the homes of free Blacks. The police did nothing to stop the riot, nor did Mayor Samuel Davies “who had been a silent spectator of the Destruction of the printing office.” Eventually he tried to quell the mob, telling the crowd, “we have done enough for one night.” The riots continued for three days.

“What strange times are we fallen on to be sure!” lamented Birney in a letter to a friend. “That, in the State of Ohio, a man who has been brought up in the midst of slavery and professes to know its evils, should be threatened with degrading inflictions, cruel whippings and death, for speaking and writing about them.” He added, “The break up circulated our publication through the city better than we could have done so.”

The mob’s success at destroying the *Philanthropist* was temporary. The Ohio Anti-Slavery Society set about raising funds to replace the press and type, and the newspaper began circulating again within weeks. “The abolitionists then not only appear in the character of champions of the colored race,” wrote William Ellery Channing, “They are sufferers for the liberty of thought, speech and the press.” ♥