

Revive America's revolutionary democratic traditions

The anti-immigrant ICE raids and the 1854 “Slave Catchers Riot” in Worcester, Massachusetts

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Is the following sequence of events so difficult to imagine?

A radicalized population is enraged by years of attacks and provocations by an arrogant, quasi-aristocracy, often unopposed or even aided and abetted by local, state and federal government officials. When a straw finally breaks the camel's back, people rise up against the effort to round up “illegal” or “fugitive” human beings, the victims of official cruelty.

In late October 1854, a large crowd in Worcester, Massachusetts, the second largest city in the state and a hotbed of abolitionism, took action against the presence of federal marshal Asa O. Butman. The latter had made a name for himself as a “slave kidnapper,” especially in the notorious case of Anthony Burns, an escaped slave seized earlier that year in Boston. That arrest provoked a riot and the dispatch of federal troops to ensure Burns' return to Virginia under the hated Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. In Worcester, several months later, anti-slavery forces physically expelled Butman from the city.

The resonance of this historical episode in the present situation should be obvious. The US and global population is currently witnessing vicious raids carried out by heavily armed Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents and various other organs of state repression. These agents are the widely despised “slave catchers” of our time, directed by the would-be dictator Donald Trump.

Most concretely, the “Slave Catchers Riot” of 1854 in Worcester comes to mind because of a January 22 item in the media. According to a report, a memo “was sent by the transportation department within Worcester Public Schools directing bus drivers to refuse Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agents who may be waiting at bus stops.” (Patch.com)

The memo directed to the bus drivers reads:

A recent notification has gone out regarding ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents potentially being at bus stops. If you are aware of any agents being at a stop, DO NOT let any student off the bus and contact the transportation office immediately.

On January 21, Worcester School Superintendent Rachel Monárrez sent out a letter asserting that “We do not ask for families' immigration statuses” and “We will not coordinate with ICE.”

Worcester schools officials, of course, cannot be counted upon to stick to their guns. The governor of Massachusetts, Democrat Maura Healey, has already capitulated to Trump's vile campaign.

Nonetheless, a revival of America's revolutionary democratic traditions

among masses of people, in Massachusetts and elsewhere, is inevitable. The effort to impose authoritarian rule, in the interests of a handful of oligarchs, will encounter mass resistance, sooner rather than later.

In this context, it seems useful to recall the events of 1854 in greater detail.

The incident in Worcester took place within a broader conflict between what was known as the “Slave Power” in the South, and its Northern and federal government accomplices, and growing popular opposition to slavery and the Fugitive Slave Act in particular.

As historian James McPherson has noted,

On all issues but one, antebellum southerners stood for state's rights and a weak federal government. The exception was the fugitive slave law of 1850, which gave the national government more power than any other law yet passed by Congress. (*Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*)

The Fugitive Slave Act, part of the wretched Compromise of 1850, passed by the Senate 27-12 and the House of Representatives 109-76 and signed into law by President Millard Fillmore on September 18, 1850, as McPherson explains,

put the burden of proof on captured blacks but gave them no legal power to prove their freedom. Instead, a claimant could bring an alleged fugitive before a federal commissioner (a new office created by the law) to prove ownership by an affidavit from a slave-state court or by the testimony of white witnesses. If the commissioner decided against the claimant he would receive a fee of five dollars; if in favor, ten dollars. This provision, supposedly justified by the paper work needed to remand a fugitive to the South, became notorious among abolitionists as a bribe to commissioners. The 1850 law also required U.S. marshals and deputies to help slaveowners capture their property and fined them \$1000 if they refused. It empowered marshals to deputize citizens on the spot to aid in seizing a fugitive, and imposed stiff criminal penalties on anyone who harbored a fugitive or obstructed his capture. The expenses of capturing and returning a slave were to be borne by the federal treasury.

Black and abolitionist resistance to the infamous act led to numerous skirmishes in Boston with the administrations of Fillmore (1850 to 1853) and Franklin Pierce (1853 to 1857) over escaped slaves. These included the cases of William and Ellen Craft, successfully shielded by anti-slavery forces in 1850 and put on a ship to England; Shadrach, rescued from deputy federal marshals by a group of black men and delivered by the underground railroad to Canada in 1851; and 17-year-old Thomas Sims, who was grabbed and returned to bondage, also in 1851. Protests and mass actions in defense of arrested slaves occurred in numerous other locations, including famously in Syracuse, New York in 1851 and Milwaukee in 1854.

The largest and most violent confrontation, which clearly helped fuel the popular fury that erupted in the October 1854 Slave Catchers Riot in Worcester, took place in Boston in regard to the fate, as noted above, of escaped slave Anthony Burns. His arrest in May 1854 drove abolitionist forces in Massachusetts into action. The local anti-slavery vigilance committee sponsored a meeting at Faneuil Hall (known for its association with the American Revolution), which resolved that “resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.”

At that meeting, as historian Brenda Wineapple notes in *White Heat*, abolitionist leader Theodore Parker’s voice “rang out in the packed and steamy hall. ‘I love peace. But there is a means, and there is an end; Liberty is the end, and sometimes peace is not the means towards it.’”

McPherson recounts that suiting action to words,

a biracial group of abolitionists led by thirty-year-old Unitarian clergyman Thomas Wentworth Higginson tried to rescue Burns in an attack on the courthouse with axes, revolvers, and a battering ram. Higginson and a black man broke through the door but were clubbed back outside by deputy marshals as a shot rang out and one of the deputies fell dead.

(Henry David Thoreau subsequently praised Higginson as “the only Harvard Phi Beta Kappa, Unitarian minister, and master of seven languages who has led a storming party against a federal bastion with a battering ram in his hands,” while Ralph Waldo Emerson noted in his journal, in response to Higginson’s attempt, “Liberty is aggressive.”)

McPherson continues,

Appealed to for help, President Pierce ordered several companies of marines, cavalry, and artillery to Boston, where they joined state militia and local police to keep the peace while a federal commissioner determined Burns’s fate. “Incur any expense,” Pierce wired the district attorney in Boston, “to insure the execution of the law.” ... On June 2 the troops marched Burns to the wharf through streets lined with sullen Yankees standing in front of buildings draped in black with the American flag hanging upside down and church bells tolling a dirge to liberty in the cradle of the American Revolution. At the cost of \$100,000 (equal to perhaps two million 1987 dollars) the Pierce administration had upheld the majesty of the law.

Another historian remarks that

All over the state [of Massachusetts] church bells tolled, and effigies of President Pierce and the U.S. Commissioner were burned on village greens. In the city [Boston] fifty thousand

spectators hissed and shouted, “Shame!” ... “Twas the saddest week I ever passed,” [abolitionist] Wendell Phillips said. “I could not think then of the general cause, so sad [were] the pleading eyes of the victim. (*Ahead of Her Time—Abby Kelley and the Politics of Antislavery*, Dorothy Sterling)

In her *White Heat*, an account of the relationship between Higginson and poet Emily Dickinson, who were correspondents and literary companions, Wineapple writes that the former returned to Worcester, where he lived,

consoling himself that the rescue’s failure would provoke outrage among waffling antislavery people. And it did. “We went to bed one night old fashioned, conservative, Compromise Union Whig,” said the textile manufacturer Amos Adams Lawrence, “& waked up stark mad Abolitionists.” The struggle against slavery was now an armed insurrection. “Massachusetts antislavery differs much from New York or Pennsylvania antislavery,” one citizen would note in dismay; “it is fanaticism & radicalism.” But Higginson was pleased. “That attack was a great thing for freedom, & will echo all over the country,” he told his mother.

The episode four months or so later in Worcester was not only shaped by the immediate events in Boston, as galvanizing and infuriating as those were.

The history and character of the smaller city had something to do with the intensity of the October 1854 events.

Worcester had a young and restive labor force created through the development—in the second quarter of the 19th century, in particular—of cotton, woolen and paper mills, boot and shoe factories, machine shops, foundries and coach-making operations. Between 1790 and 1860, the city’s population had climbed from 2,100 to 25,000, a 12-fold increase. The 1840s witnessed a considerable economic spurt, as well as local workers’ involvement in the 10-hour movement. The first trade union, the Moulders’ Union (skilled workers responsible for creating molds used in metal casting in foundries) appeared the following decade. “Thousands of people streamed in from the countryside to take advantage of new opportunities. Factories and tenements sprouted up as if overnight.” (Museum of Worcester) The mills and factories also attracted immigrants from overseas and Canada, primarily Irish, Scottish, French-Canadian, German and Swedish before the Civil War.

However, as historian Jessie M. Rodrique observes,

Worcester was known for more than its manufacturing. The city’s growth promoted a rich cultural life, and it had the economic means to build the halls, hotels, and various institutions necessary to host speakers and events. ... Worcester County, in fact, was the only Free Soil county in Massachusetts and one of only three Free Soil counties in the entire Northeast. In 1854, the Republican Party of Massachusetts was formed here. These parties’ political opposition to the extension of slavery, combined with the radical agitation of the abolitionists, led one observer to remark that Worcester was known as one of the most anti-slavery communities in America.

Higginson’s presence in Worcester and his role in both the Burns riot in June 1854 and the ensuing events in October were not accidental. He became pastor of Worcester’s “fervently anti-slavery” Free Church in

1852, both attracted to the city's abolitionist feelings and, in turn, deepening them. He would later be one of the Secret Six who financed John Brown's 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia).

Worcester was also home to Abby Kelley Foster, a Quaker and an indefatigable opponent of slavery. A pacifist she may have been but not a passive one. "Ours is a revolution, not a reform. We contemplate the entire destruction of the present National government and Union," she declared in an 1857 speech. Kelley Foster was a firm believer in the equality of all human beings, regardless of color or gender. Her biographer suggests she "probably logged more miles in farm wagons, stagecoaches, and trains, spent more hours on the platform than any other antislavery speaker [including in the company of Frederick Douglass]," all over the North, from Massachusetts to Michigan.

Abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison called Kelley Foster the "most persevering, most self-sacrificing, most energetic, most meritorious" of human beings and "the moral Joan of Arc of the world." Although a "non-resistant," she could hardly contain her admiration for John Brown and his 1859 effort to provoke a slave revolt. "John Brown conscientiously believed in the rightfulness of using the sword," she explained. "All we can say to people is 'Oppose slavery with all your soul and strength and use such means as you can conscientiously and effectively adopt.'"

Higginson, Kelley Foster and their co-thinkers, in turn, were part of a broad political cultural movement that reached its height in the pre-revolutionary decade of the 1850s, a movement whose artistic philosophical expressions literary critic F.O. Matthiessen collectively termed the "American Renaissance":

The half-decade of 1850-55 saw the appearance of [Ralph Waldo Emerson's] *Representative Men* (1850), [Nathaniel Hawthorne's] *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), [Hawthorne's] *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), [Herman Melville's] *Moby-Dick* (1851), [Melville's] *Pierre* (1852), [Henry David Thoreau's] *Walden* (1854), and [Walt Whitman's] *Leaves of Grass* (1855). You might search all the rest of American literature without being able to collect a group of books equal to these in imaginative vitality. (*American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*)

Matthiessen might also have mentioned the immensely popular, if not so aesthetically exalted, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe, as well as the almost entirely unknown work of the gifted Emily Dickinson, later on Higginson's friend, who worked away in obscurity during the 1850s and, in fact, only published 10 poems during her lifetime.

An event that deeply appalled and angered all the anti-slavery forces in 1854 was the passage by Congress of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, drafted by Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas. As the WSWS explained, that act

repealed the 1820 Missouri Compromise, which had prohibited the admission of slave states above the 36° 30' latitude line. The Act admitted the territories of Kansas and Nebraska, and it allowed residents to vote on whether to establish slavery under the doctrine of "popular sovereignty." This decision produced what came to be known as "Bleeding Kansas," a civil war before the Civil War, in which pro-slavery elements sought to terrorize the anti-slavery majority in Kansas Territory, but faced ferocious resistance from

abolitionist militants, including John Brown.

Abolitionists in Massachusetts, observes Wineapple, responded to the pro-slavery violence in Kansas:

In Worcester, for instance, Higginson's friend Eli Thayer (a man of more brag than action, Higginson later noted) might have established the New England Emigrant Aid Company to supply Kansas-bound homesteaders with food and clothes, advertising the territory as a good place to live, but Theodore Parker shipped them rifles and six-shooters in boxes labeled "Bibles."

These various factors and currents taken together explain how it was, that when US Marshal Butman arrived in Worcester on October 28, 1854, the stage was set for a violent confrontation. The official in question was apparently hunting for an escaped slave, William Jenkins, now working as a barber in the central Massachusetts city. But the predator rapidly became the prey.

The news account published October 31 in the *Worcester Daily Spy* (named after a Revolutionary War-era publication dedicated to vigilance in regard to the British) provides the liveliest summary of the facts. We will rely on its presumably eye-witness reporting.

"Great Excitement in Worcester! A Kidnapper Almost Kidnapped!! THE UNION ENDANGERED," read the headline of the article.

"On Saturday evening [October 28]," the piece began, "the notorious kidnapper, Asa O. Butman, of Boston, who has covered his name with infamy by taking the lead in the kidnapping of [escaped slaves] Shadrach, Simms, and Burns, upon the free soil of Massachusetts, came to this city and took lodgings at the American [Temperance] House."

The *Spy's* reporter explained that the local anti-slavery Vigilance Committee was made aware the following day "of the presence of the kidnapper" by a member of Boston's Vigilance Committee.

Handbills were at once issued to warn the colored population of their danger, and the plans and purposes of the scoundrel were the chief topic of conversation through the city. It was ascertained that he [Butman] had been in consultation with one of the city police, and that communications were being kept up by telegraph with other places. He had also taken council with two or three lawyers of the same stripe with himself, who had insulted the community by parading the streets with him arm in arm.

The vigilance committee forces posted sentinels around Butman's hotel,

but no disturbance was made, with perhaps, the exception of an occasional ringing of the house bell, which brought the landlord to the door, long enough to hold a parley with the outsiders, or to interchange civilities. Towards morning, during one of these interviews between the landlord and the populace, Butman, who had not dared to retire to rest, began to get a little excited, and drew a pistol from his pocket, threatening death and destruction to his opponents.

That reckless act led to Butman's arrest on a charge of carrying a concealed weapon and his being taken into custody.

In the morning [Monday, October 30], the intelligence of the arrest spread through the city, and hundreds left their usual avocations to catch a glimpse of a man so noted in the annals of inhumanity and crime. At the usual hour of the opening of the court Butman was brought in. ... After a brief hearing ... by request of prisoner's counsel, the case was continued for two weeks. ... The crowd had all this time been increasing. The court room was thronged with people, and there was quite a collection outside. Inflammatory language was freely used, and shouts of derision and loud outcries, such as "bring out the kidnapper," "kill the scoundrel," &c., were not unfrequent.

Mr. Butman implored assistance from City Marshal Baker, and that gentleman, out of pity for his forlorn condition, tendered him his private room as a place of refuge, in the northeast corner of the building. Considerable indignation was expressed by the crowd, against Marshal Baker, and that officer came out upon the steps to expostulate against the disturbance, but apparently without effect. Shortly after, Mr. Baker stepped out of doors on some business, leaving several policemen on duty in the entry, but he had no sooner done so, than his office door was opened by the foremost of a gang of six or seven colored men, all of whom rushed in, and one of them dealt Butman a blow upon his knowledge box, that felled him to the ground. Marshal Baker at this moment re-entered his room, and seized the assailant of Mr. Butman, and made him a prisoner.

Butman and the colored man, were then locked up in the Marshal's Office, together, and one or two citizens were placed on guard, inside, while the Marshal again came out to allay the excitement, and look after the crowd. While busily engaged in the performance of his duty, as a preserver of the public peace, a shout was heard upon the outside, and it was soon discovered that the colored assailant of Butman, had escaped by the window, having jumped a distance of some ten or twelve feet, to the sidewalk.

Eventually, it was decided to conduct Butman to the train station. However, many in the accompanying crowd of some 600 people continued to attempt to attack and strike the object of hatred. Local abolitionists, including Stephen S. Foster (husband of Abbey Kelley Foster) and Higginson, not wanting to see Butman murdered on the spot, provided an escort.

All along on the route, repealed efforts were made by the colored men, and others, to take Butman out of the hands of his escort, but they made a desperate defence, and assisted by a few of the Worcester Policemen and other citizens, they were enabled by dint of great exertions, to keep the crowd partially at bay. Occasionally, however, an egg would break about the face and head of the fugitive, and just at the corner of Trumbull and Front Sts., a powerful negro succeeded in planting a tremendous blow behind Butman's left ear, which made him stagger like a drunken man. ...

The excitement was all this time increasing, and by the time the crowd had reached the depot of the Western R. R. [Railroad], more than a thousand persons were assembled. It was then ascertained, that the cars had gone, and here was an unexpected dilemma. Various propositions were made for the disposal of the kidnapper. Some said, "kill him," and put him out of his misery, while others counselled a ride on a rail, or on a special engine out of the city.

Butman was "stored" meanwhile in the depot privy, still in danger of losing his life, while a horse-drawn vehicle was hired. Finally, Foster

came forth and stated to the multitude, that Mr. Butman had solemnly promised that he would leave, and never come to Worcester again, if he could be left alone now. He [Foster] said that such a promise was a victory won for freedom, and he hoped no one would mar the triumph by any further acts of violence.

This "seemed partially to appease the excited multitude," but even after this, as soon as the back door was opened, by means of which Butman's protectors hoped to convey him to a wagon,

another rush was made by a band of infuriated negroes, upon Mr. Butman, and he received another severe blow upon his head, and one or two kicks behind; but he was finally got into the wagon. The horse proved to be a skittish one, and would not start; and as delays were getting to be dangerous, a hack was procured by order of the Marshal, and into it, the poor, abject, debased, degraded, and trembling white fugitive was hustled, and Rev. Mr. Higginson took a seat by his side.

"We trust," concluded the newspaper report, "that Butman will keep his word '*never to return to Worcester again.*' If he has no regard for his word, as some say, we hope bodily fear will prompt him to keep his distance."

This was the last attempt to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act in the state of Massachusetts. The Second American Revolution, the Civil War, broke out six and a half years later. Some 13,000 soldiers from Massachusetts died in the bloody conflict, 8 percent of those who enlisted, including many members of the all-black 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, and thousands more were wounded.

"Remember that to us," Higginson once wrote a friend less exercised by slavery than he, "Anti-Slavery is a matter of deadly earnest, which costs us our reputations today, and may cost our lives tomorrow." These traditions and sentiments will be revived in our time under different conditions and with different aims, but with the same depth of hatred of injustice and willingness to make sacrifices.

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[An entertaining discussion by park service rangers at the Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park provides an excellent overview of the episode.]



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