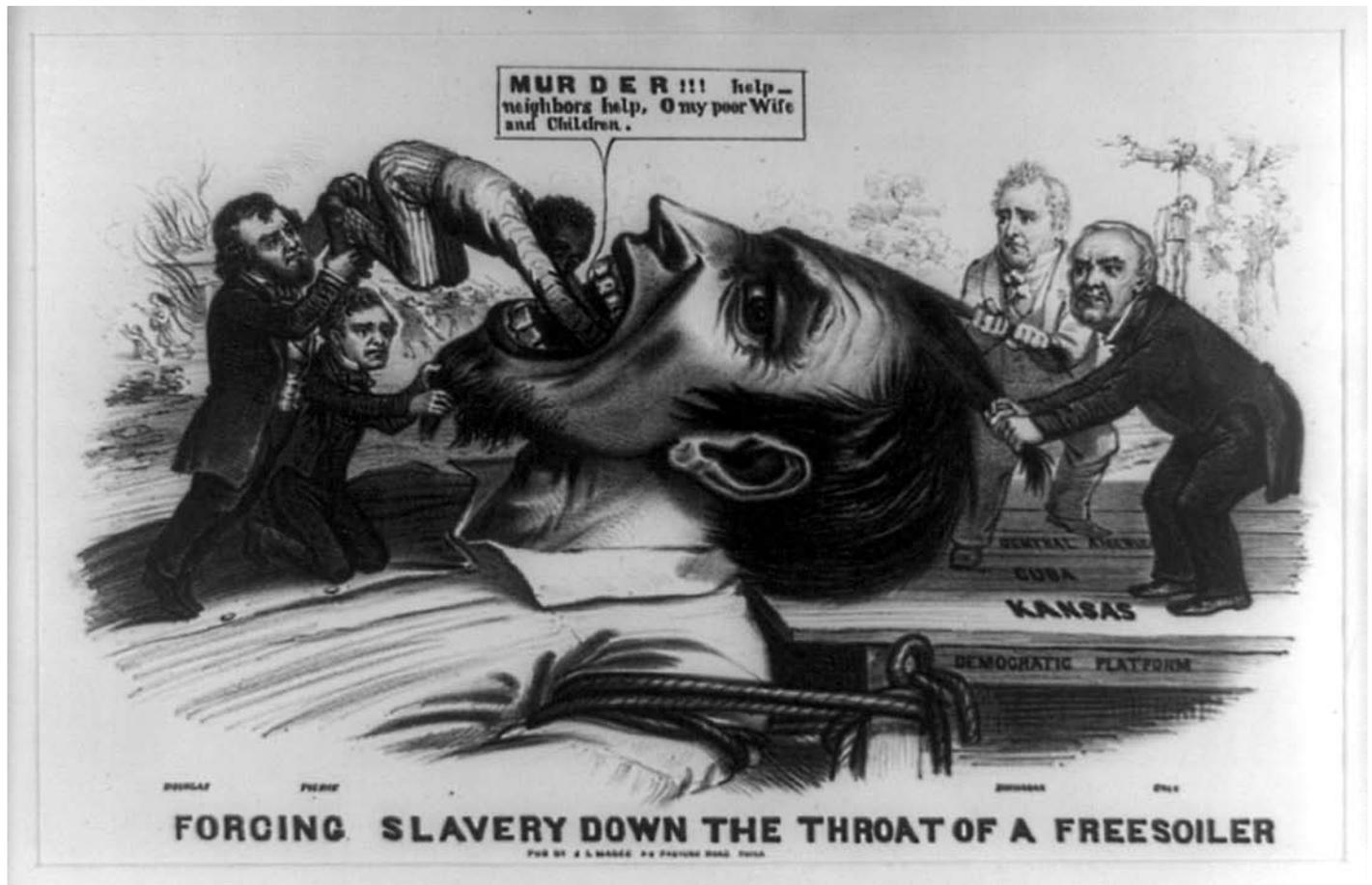


“ARE WE READY FOR THE CONFLICT?”



Cartoon, drawn by John L. Magee in 1856, courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

Black Abolitionist Response to the Kansas Crisis, 1854–1856

by Zachary J. Lechner

On the evening of May 22, 1856, Frederick Douglass delivered an address titled “Aggressions of the Slave Power” to a meeting of the Rochester (New York) Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society. He spoke just one day after the proslavery raid on the free-state stronghold of Lawrence, Kansas. For over a year a de facto civil war had raged in Kansas between antislavery and proslavery factions, as they battled over whether Kansas would enter the Union as a free or slave state. The fight was waged outside Kansas, as well. Hours before Douglass’s speech, South Carolina Representative Preston Brooks beat Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts senseless at his desk in the Senate chamber of the U.S. Capitol as retribution for Sumner’s confrontational “The Crime against Kansas” speech. Douglass’s oration in Rochester outlined the deep divisions between North and South engendered by slavery. He bemoaned what he considered the proslavery focus of President Franklin Pierce’s administration. The chief executive, he advanced, allowed “border ruffians” from Missouri to assault free-state settlers and push their proslavery agenda by voting illegally in territorial elections. The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act’s repeal of the Missouri Compromise, which had provided for clear divisions between free and slave states, was very significant. Douglass argued, “Until that act of bad faith on the part of the South, the North continued to believe in the South. They can believe in it no longer, and hence no compromise is possible.” A few moments later Douglass added, “Since compromises are out of the question, nothing remains but to fight the battle out. One or the other—Liberty or Slavery must be the Law giver in this country. Both cannot reign, and one must be put down.”¹

The vitriolic nature of Douglass’s speech is a striking example of the militancy that the Kansas crisis promoted in black abolitionists. Their increasingly violent language demonstrated their frustration with the continued presence and threatened expansion of slavery into the territories and their dissatisfaction with a political process that was slow and hostile to African American interests. These grievances helped to fuel blacks’ escalating militancy during the decade. Importantly, however, blacks’ vituperative rhetoric did not segue into murderous or destructive exhortations. Rather, as historian C. Peter Ripley has written, “Black abolitionists wavered between hope and despair during the 1850s.”² One part of this dichotomy is embodied in Douglass’s pessimism about defeating the entrenched position of the so-called “Slave Power” in the national government. Black abolitionists worried that white Northerners either did not recognize or did not care about the proslavery threat.

At other times, African American leaders were more hopeful. Many of them regarded white Northerners’ outrage over the provisions of the Kansas-Nebraska bill as profoundly significant and even encouraging.³ The bill, approved by Congress on May 26, 1854, and signed by President Pierce four days later, opened the territories of Kansas and Nebraska to popular sovereignty, whereby the citizens of the territories could decide if they wished to allow slavery within their borders. Blacks hoped that white outrage would translate into a large-scale Northern movement to destroy the Slave Power. They also anticipated that the fighting in Kansas and Sumner’s caning would further awaken Northerners to the proslavery menace. Prominent African Americans such as Douglass remained vague about how the North would counteract

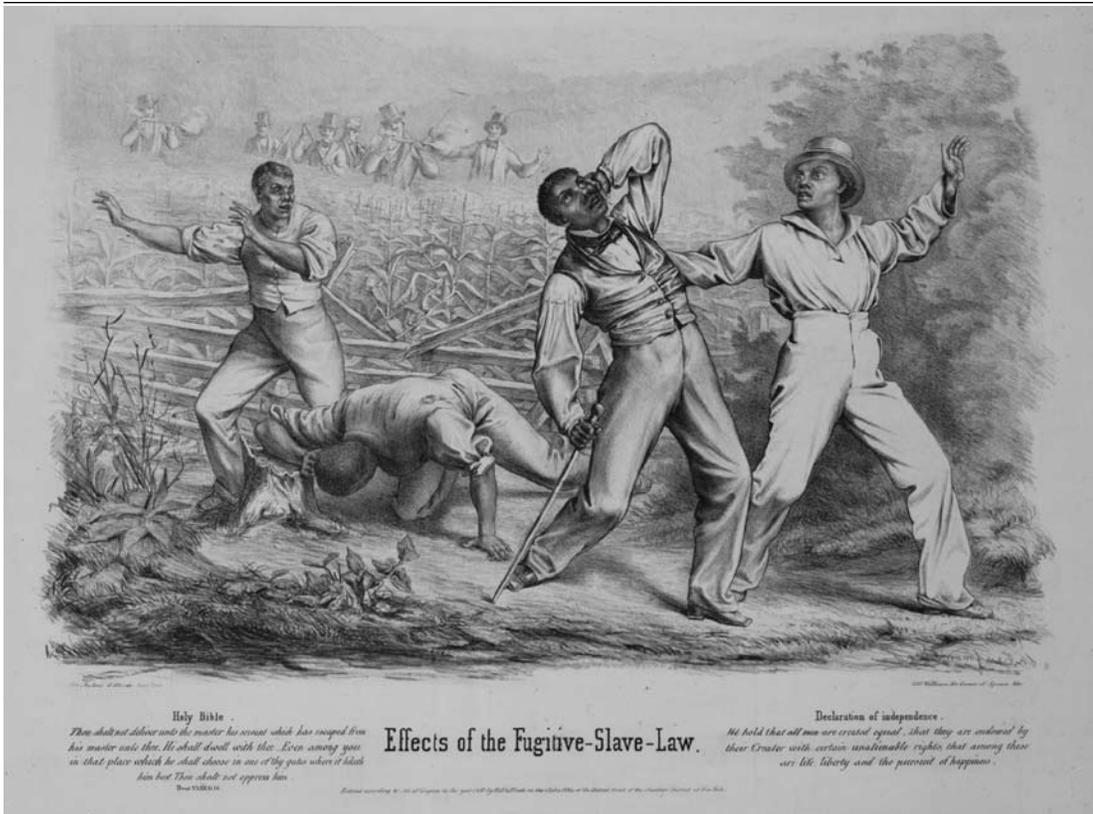
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The author would like to thank Michael A. Morrison for helping to conceptualize this project and Robert E. May, Elizabeth R. Varon, and *Kansas History*’s anonymous reviewers for their comments on the manuscript.

1. “Aggressions of the Slave Power” in *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews: Volume 3: 1855–63*, ed. John W. Blasingame (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 126.

2. C. Peter Ripley et al., eds., *The Black Abolitionist Papers: Volume IV: The United States, 1847–1858* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 207.

3. As one of the cornerstones of the antebellum sectional crisis, the Kansas-Nebraska Act and its ensuing political fallout have been discussed in numerous works. Starting points include William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion, Volume I: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), chs. 30–31; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), ch. 5; David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), particularly chs. 7 and 9; and James C. Malin, *The Nebraska Question, 1852–1854* (Lawrence, Kans.: James C. Malin, 1953).



Historians of black abolitionism acknowledged the psychological toll that the sectional crises of the 1850s took on black leaders, in particular the enactment and enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law and the issuance of the Dred Scott decision. The gruesome results of the former are depicted in this 1850 political cartoon, courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

Studies focusing on Northern free blacks and their communities have given scant attention to the reaction of African American leaders to the Kansas issue.⁵ Although historians of the sectional crisis seem to

Slave Power incursions, but they believed that the eventual abolition of slavery hinged on an informed and engaged Northern populace. Thus, black abolitionist responses to the Kansas struggle operated on a continuum, teetering between optimism and pessimism.⁴

4. Historians have written extensively about the Kansas-Nebraska Act and Bleeding Kansas, generally focusing on the ideological reasons that drove proslavery and free-state factions to kill each other. In the mid-1950s, Alice Nichols argued for the centrality of slavery in debates over Kansas's status, and James A. Rawley, in the following decade, made the case that racism in both the proslavery and free-state factions was central. The two sides hated blacks, he contended, and free-state settlers wished to keep both free blacks and black slaves out of Kansas. By contrast, Paul Wallace Gates insisted that land concerns, not slavery or race, fed territorial strife. Gunja SenGupta took a more moderate position, stressing the importance of economic issues, along with political and moral concerns over slavery. Most recently, Nicole Etcheson has asserted that proslavery and free-state settlers battled over differing interpretations of liberty. Alice Nichols, *Bleeding Kansas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954); James A. Rawley, *Race and Politics: "Bleeding Kansas" and the Coming of the Civil War* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1969); Paul Wallace Gates, *Fifty Million Acres: Conflicts over Kansas Land Policy, 1854–1890* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1954); Gunja SenGupta, *For God and Mammon: Evangelicals and Entrepreneurs, Master and Slaves in Territorial Kansas, 1854–1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004). For a view similar to Etcheson's, see Michael A. Morrison's earlier *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 159. Gunja SenGupta provides an excellent overview of Bleeding Kansas historiography in her review essay "Bleeding Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 24 (Winter 2001–2002): 318–41.

acknowledge the ambiguities of black sentiment toward North-South tensions, they have not developed in-depth examinations of black leaders' thoughts on the divisive issues of the 1850s. The debate over Kansas has been especially overlooked. Some scholars, such as James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, mentioned the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the territorial struggle in their works, but they eschewed discussions of black responses, aside from African American support for the free-soil rhetoric of the Republican Party. Similarly, historians of black abolitionism acknowledged the psychological toll that the sectional crises of the 1850s took on black leaders, though they rarely drew ties to Kansas. Collectively these scholars demonstrated that sectionalism led to increased African American militancy and interest in emigration from the United States.⁶

5. For a consideration of black abolitionist historiography, see Manisha Sinha, "Coming of Age: The Historiography of Black Abolitionism," in *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism*, ed. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer (New York: The New Press, 2006), 23–38.

6. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 257–58, 260–63; Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (1969; repr., DeCapo, 1991), 217–22, 229–35. The Hortons and Quarles are careful to assert that most Northern free blacks continued to oppose emigration in the 1850s. See also Harry Reed, *Platform for Change: The Foundations of the Northern Free Black Community, 1775–1865*

On the issue of militancy, historians emphasized the impact of the Fugitive Slave Law and the Dred Scott case. Historian Benjamin Quarles wrote in *The Black Abolitionists*, "The militant spirit among Negroes was fanned full sail in 1857 by the Dred Scott decision." Likewise, Horton and Horton noted the promotion of black armament by the Garrisonian abolitionist Charles Lenox Remond and the justifications given by Frederick Douglass for killing slave hunters empowered by the Fugitive Slave Law.⁷ This focus on extreme militancy during the 1850s neglects black leaders' views of the Kansas struggle, which generated harsh rhetoric, but rarely calls to unprovoked violence. Black abolitionists often placed their critiques in a larger context; they combined their outrage over the Fugitive Slave Law and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, conflating the danger of slave catching with slavery's expansion.

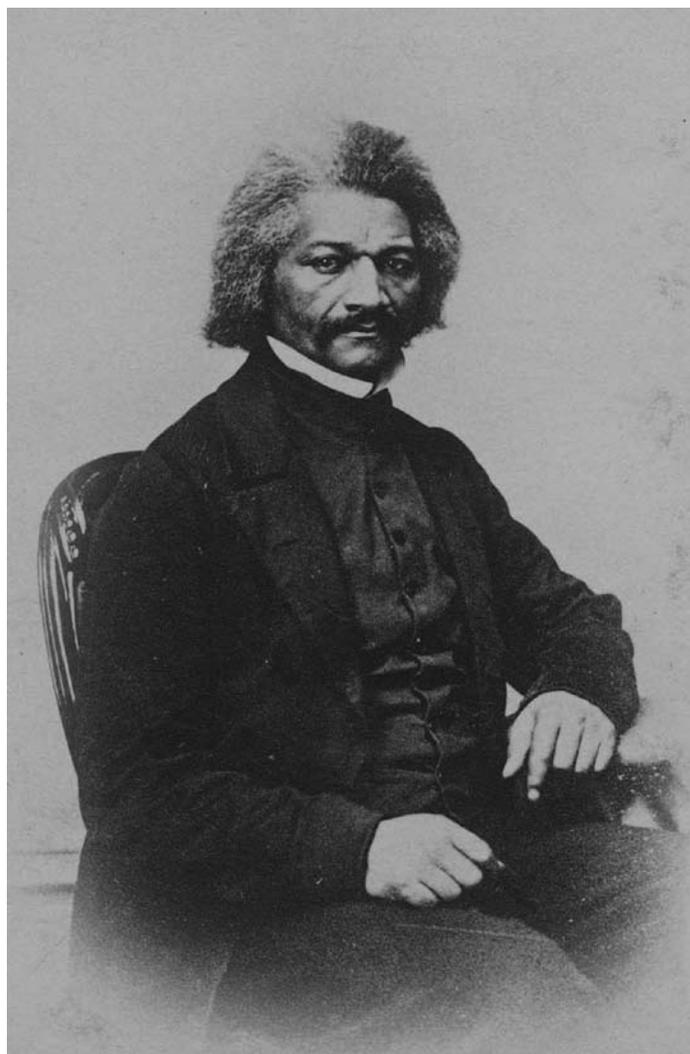
Black activists recognized the complicated environment in which they protested the proslavery position. Their role was largely reactive due to their tenuous social and racial positions. Black and white political abolitionists sought similar results, but blacks faced greater difficulties. Northern racial discrimination acted as an additional obstacle to the effort to promote the unpopular cause of immediate abolition. Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease have elucidated the divisions among African American and white abolitionists.⁸ In general, black activists focused more intently on the plight of Northern free blacks and on community building than did their white allies. The cause of political abolitionism, in contrast to Garrisonian abolitionism, sought constitutional remedies to black enslavement. Due in part to its more single-minded goals of legally outlawing slavery and restricting the influence of Southerners in Washington, this ideology guided black and white reformers along similar paths. Nevertheless, African Americans

(East Lansing: Michigan State Press, 1994), 166, 199–200; Joel Schor also notes the overall effect of the sectional crises of the 1850s in driving black militancy in *Henry Highland Garnet: A Voice of Black Radicalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977), 136–39, 144–45, 216–17; Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *They Who Would be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830–1861* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 243, 255–77; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970; repr., 1973), 274–76.

7. Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 230; Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 257. These authors and Foner also describe the formation of black militias after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law: Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 229–30; Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 263–64; Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 274–75.

8. Pease and Pease, *They Who Would be Free*, ch. 1.

recognized that impassioned responses to the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the violence in Kansas Territory could not by themselves bring abolition about. Blacks had to rely on the assistance of like-minded whites, in the Northern public and in Congress, in order to fight the slaveocracy. They framed their battle as one aimed at spreading black influence.



Amongst his other abolitionist activities, Frederick Douglass, pictured here ca. 1870, published a series of newspapers, including Frederick Douglass's Paper out of Rochester, New York, from 1847 until 1863. This paper, which mostly found its way into the hands of antislavery whites, offers invaluable information on the opinions of black leaders regarding obstacles to abolition like the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

An examination of this battle adds a new layer to the history of African American political thought during the 1850s. The struggle evoked a less violent strain of militancy, which operated within a framework that varied between optimism and pessimism about the meaning and outcome of the crisis. This dichotomy is the primary concern of this essay. In order to access these complex attitudes, this essay's methodology centers on an examination of black abolitionist newspapers. It draws heavily from *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, published in Rochester, New York, and Mary Ann Shadd Cary's *Provincial Freeman*, founded and published by American expatriates living in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. Most copies of these newspapers probably found their way into the hands of antislavery whites. Regardless, these publications offer invaluable information on the opinions of the black leaders on which this essay focuses. "Aside from furnishing a vehicle for self-expression," Quarles stated, "these newspapers furnished an outlet for the frustrations of the Negro, and his blueprints for a new relationship between white and black Americans." African American meetings, including state conventions throughout the free states, often forwarded the minutes of their proceedings to *Frederick Douglass' Paper* and the *Provincial Freeman*. Douglass's publication, in particular, featured a centralized forum for many of the key black abolitionist voices of the day, including William J. Watkins, William Wells Brown, and William Still. These newspapers therefore served as important repositories of African American abolitionist thought.⁹

For black abolitionists the debate over slavery in Kansas was no abstraction. African Americans' anti-Nebraska sentiment, rather than being simply a rhetorical position from which to promote abolition, drew on the fear of slavery actually expanding into the territory. They agreed with white Northerners who believed that eastern Kansas's fertile soil could produce large yields and promote slavery.¹⁰

9. Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 89. The *Provincial Freeman*, co-edited by Cary and Reverend Samuel Ringgold Ward, is useful because, despite being published in Canada, recent African American migrants to Canada wrote for the paper, and it accepted contributions from blacks residing in the United States. Douglass claimed three thousand subscribers in 1855. See Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton, and Mulligan, 1855), 394; online at <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/DouMybo.html>. The *Provincial Freeman* claimed to have a larger subscription list than Douglass's publication, but even so, the Canadian paper's circulation probably remained low. Yet, it is likely that issues of black newspapers moved about in black (and white) circles, possessing a greater influence than their modest subscription tallies suggest.

10. William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852–1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 75.

William J. Wilson, the Brooklyn correspondent for *Frederick Douglass' Paper* writing under the name "Ethiop," illustrated his fellow blacks' concerns. He demonstrated the extreme anxiety that the Kansas-Nebraska Act induced in many African Americans, as they expected that slavery would flourish in Kansas and possibly even the less hospitable Nebraska territory. "Already I hear the sound of the auction hammer," Wilson wrote. "Already do I see husbands and wives, parents and children, separated, manacled and driven off to the dark and lone swamps of Nebraska. . . . Already do I see the jaws of the ferocious bloodhounds dyed in the red gore, and the poor victims' whitened bones as monumental curses resting in the mountain fastness and plains of Kansas."¹¹ William J. Watkins shared Wilson's fears. Hailing from a prominent free black family in Baltimore, Watkins served as a traveling lecturer and co-editor of *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. He chose less colorful language than Wilson in reproving the Kansas-Nebraska Act, but Watkins blasted the "short-sighted prophets" who considered the Nebraska issue an "abstraction." The extension of slavery, he asserted, had nothing to do with a new area's suitability for farming. The Slave Power would push slavery wherever it could, if permitted. Watkins stated that one had to look no further than Kansas's election of a proslavery territorial representative in late 1854 to understand the strength and potential of the proslavery influence in the newly formed area.¹²

Watkins effectively distilled black fears of slavery's stretching into Kansas while also epitomizing the hopefulness of African American abolitionists about the Kansas-Nebraska Act. He and other black leaders expressed joy at the scores of anti-Nebraska meetings held throughout the North in early 1854. In a March 3 editorial entitled "Effect of the Nebraska Bill," Watkins advanced a withering condemnation of slaveholding. More important, he exhibited confidence in the bill's ability to consolidate Northern support against the peculiar institution. Watkins ridiculed the hypocrisy of proslavery men who spoke of slavery's "humane and christianizing influence" while brutally mistreating their chattel. He believed that the introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Act would draw more attention

11. *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, June 9, 1854. Newspapers were accessed via Ripley et al., eds., *The Black Abolitionist Papers, 1830–1865* (17 vols.; New York: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1981–1983), microfilm reels 8–10; or online at <http://www.accessible.com/accessible>. For more biographical information on black abolitionists, see Ripley et al., eds., *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, vol. 4.

12. *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, December 15, 1854.



Events such as the 1855–1856 proslavery attacks on free-state settlers in Kansas—including assaults on women and children as seen in this depiction of the May 1856 sack of Lawrence from O. N. Merrill’s 1856 publication, *A True History of the Kansas Wars*—convinced African Americans that the Slave Power could not help but reveal its dubious aims.

to slavery’s atrocities. “Slaveholders and their apologists are unconsciously erecting a gallows upon which to hang themselves,” Watkins wrote. “They are doing much toward the overthrow of the foul system of slavery.” Here he alluded to the unintended consequences of the South’s thirst to expand slavery. The Slave Power’s agitation in this area would not succeed, Watkins assured his readers, because its zealousness exposed unsavory designs.¹³ Once the North fully understood the proslavery aim to spread human bondage throughout the entire United States and even south into the Caribbean, black leaders expected Northern whites to vote out Southern-sympathizing politicians.¹⁴ Watkins and others failed to indicate how they expected to deal with a united, proslavery Southern faction alienated

by Northern rhetoric that conflated popular sovereignty with slavery extension.

African American abolitionists, encouraged by the anti-Nebraska sentiment sweeping the North, often employed in their writings and speeches the image of an awakening Northern populace. This trope would emerge at various times from 1854 through 1856 as perceived Slave Power threats increased. Writing from his home in New York, the black lecturer Jermain W. Loguen reported, “this Nebraska business is the great smasher in Syracuse, as elsewhere.” Loguen served as an Underground Railroad stationmaster in Syracuse and a clergyman in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He noted how he and other black abolitionists could barely keep up with demands for anti-Nebraska speaking engagements. Like Watkins and other allies, Loguen felt that the Nebraska bill, although part of the treacherous designs of the Slave Power, boosted the antislavery movement. Illinois Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas, the legislation’s author, had unknowingly aided the cause of freedom. For Loguen the explosion of anti-Nebraska meetings pointed to a simple conclusion: “The

13. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, March 3, 1854.

14. *Ibid.* Northern political antislavery advocates shared black leaders’ fears of a Slave Power conspiracy. After the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, Northerners increasingly drew on the image of a rapacious Slave Power determined to gobble up land for its brutal institution. Eric Foner largely credited Senator Salmon P. Chase with persuading Northerners to this point of view; Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 93–96.

Nebraska bill is waking the people up in all parts of the country."¹⁵

These anti-Nebraska meetings mentioned by Watkins and Loguen were often biracial and sometimes solely run by African Americans. On March 20, 1854, black Philadelphians held an anti-colonization and anti-Nebraska meeting and passed four resolutions related to the Nebraska bill. Philadelphia blacks echoed many of their brethren in denying Congress's right to legalize slavery. Its violation of the Missouri Compromise, they emphasized, was a relatively small issue compared to the greater evil of allowing slavery to survive and potentially grow. The resolutions also thanked several senators and representatives who objected to the bill.¹⁶

Critical events, such as the 1855–1856 proslavery attacks on free-state settlers in Lawrence, Kansas, and the brutal caning of Senator Sumner in May 1856, convinced African Americans that the Slave Power could not help but reveal its dubious aims. William Still, a black community leader and conductor on the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia, sought to put the alleged atrocities in perspective. He contended that, as a whole, the Missourians who tried to make Kansas a slave state were no worse than the rest of slaveholding Southerners, yet he considered them less secretive in how they employed their tyrannical methods. They openly attacked free-state settlers and violated voting regulations. Ultimately, Still advanced, the border ruffians' actions



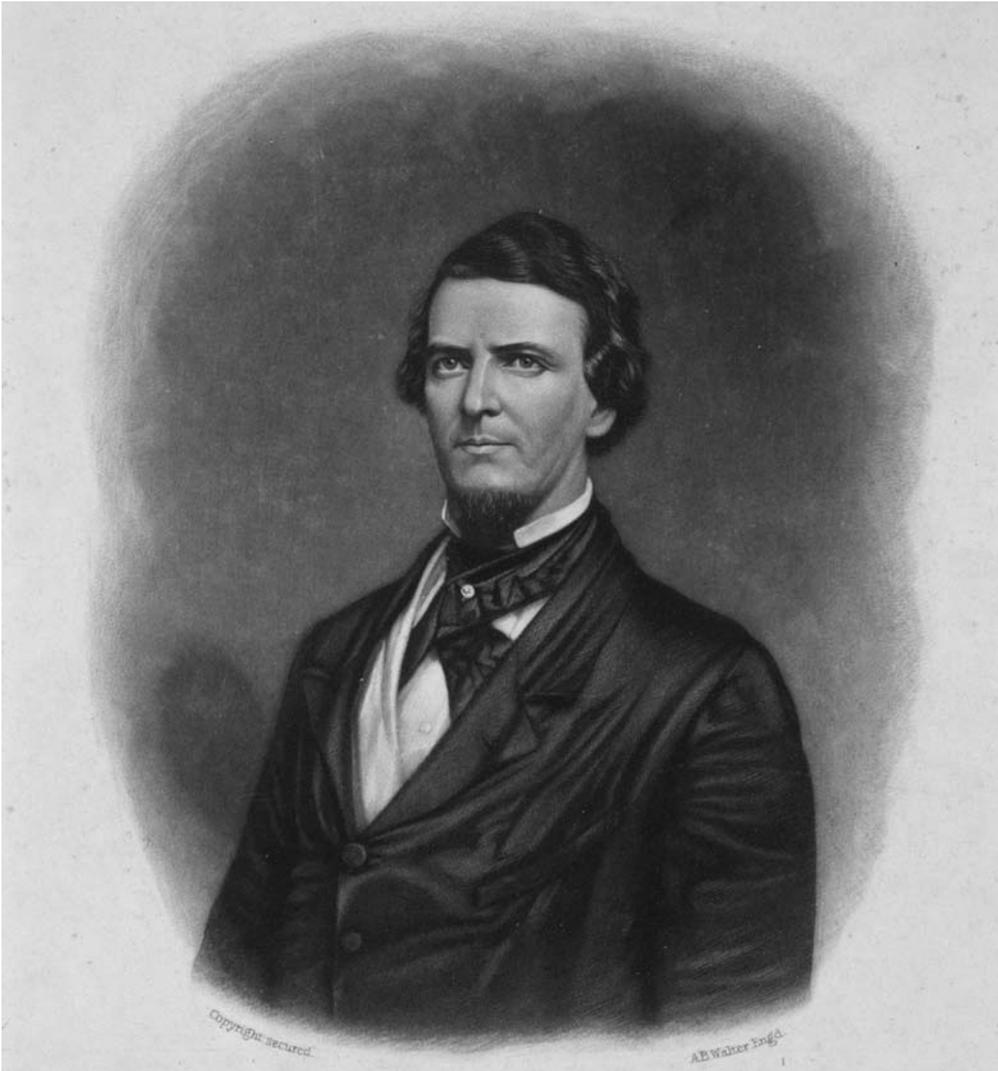
would probably benefit the side of antislavery. He declared that the Missourians' "lawless deeds will bear undying testimony against oppression the civilized world over!"¹⁷

Black abolitionists' beliefs in an "awakening" North rested not only on the proliferation of Northern anti-Ne-

15. *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, April 14, 1854.

16. *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, March 30, 1854.

17. *Provincial Freeman*, May 19, 1855.



Two days before the infamous 1856 proslavery attack on free-state settlers in Lawrence, Kansas, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner (opposite), gave a speech titled "The Crime Against Kansas" on the floor of the U.S. Senate. He accused the authors of the Kansas-Nebraska bill—Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois and Andrew Butler of South Carolina—of any number of crimes. The former was, he said, a "noisome, squat, and nameless animal"; the latter had "a mistress who, though ugly to others, is always lovely to him . . . the harlot, Slavery." Two days later, Representatives Preston Brooks (left) and Laurence M. Keitt of South Carolina, along with Henry A. Edmundson of Virginia, approached Sumner as he sat at his desk in the nearly empty Senate chamber. Brooks excoriated Sumner for libeling his home state and Butler, whom he claimed as a relative. Brooks proceeded to beat Sumner over the head with his cane, and when the injured senator stumbled out from under the desk where he had taken refuge Brooks beat him until the cane broke and Sumner was unconscious. Those senators who tried to help Sumner were held at bay by an armed Keitt. Sumner spent three years in recovery, during which time Massachusetts voters again elected him to the Senate. His empty seat served for them as an abolitionist symbol. Image of Brooks courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

braska meetings and sentiments. The election of Northern anti-Nebraska politicians was also critical. Fourteen Northern Democratic senators voted for the Kansas-Nebraska Act and ensured its passage in the upper chamber in early 1854. William J. Watkins spoke for other African American leaders when he denounced these men as "traitors" and fantasized about banishing them from the country.¹⁸ As a result, Watkins and his black colleagues must have felt especially encouraged by the strong showing of Northern anti-Nebraska

18. When the House of Representatives passed the Nebraska bill in May, forty-four Northern Democrats voted for the legislation, forty-three opposed it, and five abstained. See Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party*, 78; *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, March 10, 1854.

candidates in November 1854. The Northern public took out its anti-Nebraska ire against the entire "Democracy." The Northern Democratic Party hemorrhaged a remarkable sixty-six congressional seats. Applauding the rebuke of so-called "doughfaces," a term usually reserved for pro-Southern Democrats, Watkins wrote, "The People have administered a withering rebuke to those of their representatives, or the most of them, who basely deserted Freedom in the hour of her extremity."¹⁹

The doughface dilemma illustrates how the Kansas crisis brought out black feelings of both hope and despair.

19. *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, December 1, 1854.

Arguably, black abolitionists focused their greatest displays of hatred on doughfaces and their role in the Kansas crisis. For African Americans, any Northern congressional support of the Kansas-Nebraska bill was unforgivable. Blacks could expect Southern congressmen to vote for dissolving the Missouri Compromise and for the possible spread of slavery into new territories. Doughfaces, on the other hand, undermined the united Northern front crucial for defeating the forces of slavery. In the month following the passage of the Nebraska bill, Watkins implored Northern voters to depose doughfaces, who “should be politically decapitated.”²⁰ The defeat of pro-Nebraska congressmen did not end the doughface threat. Black leaders thought that the United States government continued to acquiesce to slaveholders’ whims in Kansas. After all, Frederick Douglass argued, the government did not put up adequate resistance to the ballot box-stuffing operations of the border ruffians. Douglass spoke before the Colored Men’s State Convention of New York in September 1855. There he drew on the image of a famous battle during the Crimean War. Douglass asserted, “The walls at Sebastopol are of granite. The walls of Kansas are of *dough!*”²¹ Over two years after the Kansas-Nebraska Act went into effect, Chicago black leader H. Ford Douglas claimed that “dough-faces [were] innumerable in the North.” He decried their support for the Southern idea that slaveholders had the right to take their slaves into any United States territory.²² In spite of this exasperation, black abolitionists recognized that poll results showed the weakness of the doughface position in the North. They cheered the defeat of Nebraska supporters for reelection and optimistically noted the legislation’s potential for girding Northern antislavery feeling. They also

20. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, June 23, 1854. In the December 1, 1854, issue, Watkins celebrated the “political decapitat[ion]” of pro-Nebraska politicians in the midterm elections.

21. Speech of Frederick Douglass at Colored Men’s State Convention of New York, Troy, September 4, 1855, in *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840–1865, Volume I: New York, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio*, ed. Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), 96.

22. Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker, eds., *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840–1865, Volume II: New Jersey, Connecticut, Maryland, Illinois, Massachusetts, California, New England, Kansas, Louisiana, Virginia, Missouri, South Carolina* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 78. H. Ford Douglas delivered his speech on November 15, 1856, at the State Convention of Colored Citizens of the State of Illinois, Alton. Soon, Douglas would become even more closely identified with Kansas; see Roger D. Cunningham, “Douglas’s Battery at Fort Leavenworth: The Issue of Black Officers During the Civil War,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 23 (Winter 2000): 200–217. Although contemporary references to Douglas often spell his name “Douglass,” the author chose to use the spelling preferred by Ripley in the bound version of *The Black Abolitionist Papers*.

believed that the North continued to demonstrate weakness against the aggressive Slave Power.

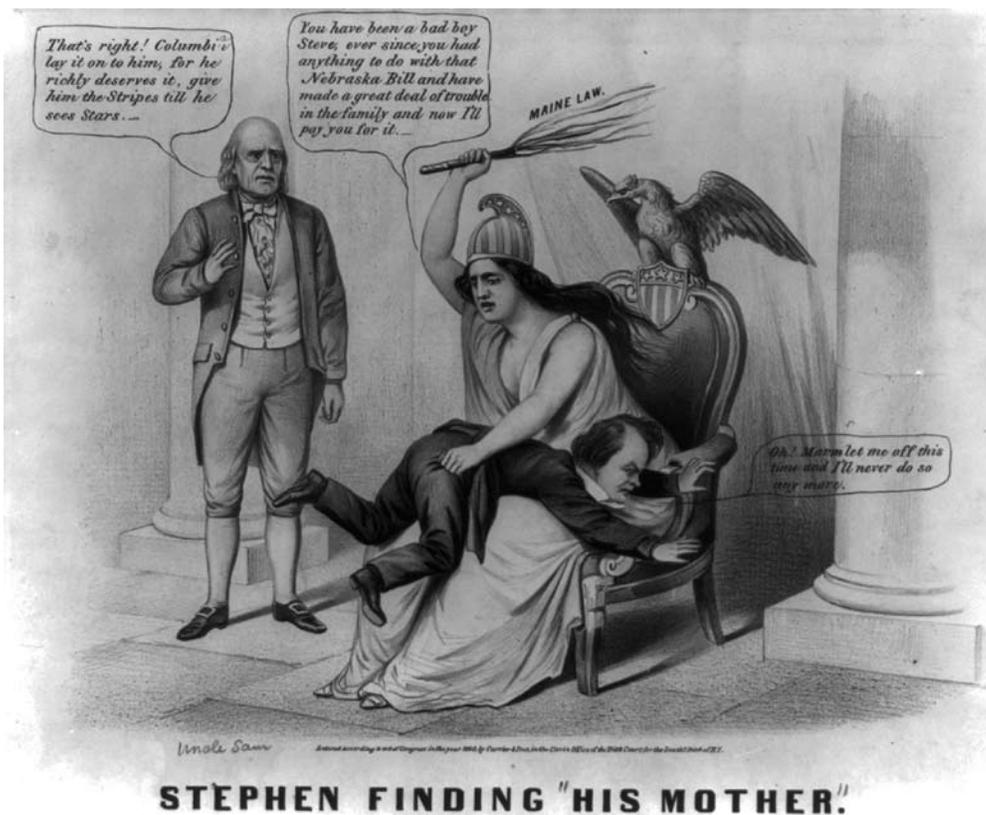
The successes of anti-Nebraska politicians fueled the hopes of African Americans anxious to see Pierce unseated in the 1856 presidential election. Many black abolitionists, like their white counterparts, rebuked Pierce for signing the Kansas-Nebraska bill and for his criticism of free-state forces. In March 1855 Reverend John W. Lewis, a New Hampshire Baptist minister and antislavery lecturer, took comfort in his state’s election of an anti-Nebraska governor and anti-Nebraska state legislators. Because the president hailed from New Hampshire, Lewis understandably viewed the election tallies as a Northern strike against the Kansas-Nebraska Act and against Pierce for his allegedly proslavery sympathies.²³ The Boston correspondent for *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, Dr. John Stewart Rock, also bashed Pierce while playing up the significance of the recent New Hampshire elections. “The people are both tired and disgusted with [the Pierce administration],” he advanced. Rock further excoriated the president for assisting the proslavery agenda. This correspondent referred implicitly not only to Pierce’s support for the Nebraska bill but also to his refusal to take punitive action against proslavery Missourians who voted illegally on Kansas territorial measures. For Rock and other black leaders the successes of anti-Nebraska candidates at the polls showed that Pierce’s collaboration with the Southern aristocracy had backfired; Northern opinion had turned against the president.²⁴

The anti-Pierce sentiments of black abolitionists often ran contrary to their hopes for a unified North. Black leaders targeted Pierce with great intensity while also exhibiting enmity for other individuals who were identified with fomenting the Kansas crisis. Not surprisingly, the Kansas-Nebraska bill’s author, Stephen Douglas, came under fire. Anti-Douglas speeches and writings from prominent blacks echoed the attacks on Pierce by portraying the Illinois senator as having sold out the North to the Slave Power. At a spring 1854 meeting of Garrisonian abolitionists, Philadelphia’s Robert Purvis, a co-founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society, called Senator Douglas “a man who would offer up to the bloody Moloch of Slavery, the unpolluted and virgin soil of a territory larger than the original thirteen States.”²⁵ Joseph C. Holly of Rochester,

23. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, April 27, 1855.

24. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, April 6, 1855.

25. *The Liberator*, May 19, 1854.



Not surprisingly Stephen Douglas, after helping to draft the Kansas-Nebraska bill, came under the fire of black abolitionists. Northerners opposed to the Illinois senator's support of Southern interests lobbed similar criticisms. Such censure is seen in this 1860 cartoon, which depicts Douglas being paddled by "Mother" Columbia (with a "Maine Law" switch, a possible reference to one of the many laws enacted in Northern states to oppose the Fugitive Slave Law). Uncle Sam lends support, stating "give him the Stripes till he sees Stars." Cartoon courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

New York, exhibited his anti-Douglas fervor in verse. The black community leader and poet believed that Douglas's supposed desire to increase his fame by aligning himself with the proslavery faction would ultimately fail. Addressing Douglas in a tortured rhyme scheme, Holly wrote, "Not by such means is Southern favor bought, / You've rolled and wallowed in the dirt for naught; / Henceforth, saving your bad notoriety, / You'r doomed to moulder in obscurity."²⁶ William J. Watkins similarly offered harsh rhetoric against Douglas, but he claimed, maintaining the theme of Northern awakening, that Douglas's villainy would

26. *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, July 14, 1854. For more examples of black anti-Douglas sentiment, see *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, March 3, 1854; June 23, 1854; and October 5, 1855; and *Provincial Freeman*, April 12, 1856.

eventually rouse the North from its Slave Power-induced sleep. More broadly, black abolitionists condemned Pierce and Douglas's affiliation with the Democratic Party, which they considered the political mouthpiece of the pro-slavery agenda. African Americans reprimanded the Democracy even as they toasted its "waning influence."²⁷ Delegates to an 1856 black convention in Ohio spoke for other members of their race when they labeled the party as "the black-hearted apostle of American Slavery" that "has pledged itself to do the menial offices of slavery," promoting slavery expansion and the Fugitive Slave Law, resisting antislavery entreaties, and making a mockery of the country's "great principles of justice."²⁸

It should come as no surprise that most black political abolitionists lent their support to the Democrats' new opponent, the Republican Party. Formed from a tenuous coalition of Northern Whigs, former Free Soil Party members, and anti-Nebraska Democrats, the Republicans strongly opposed the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and the further extension of

slavery into the territories. Black abolitionists, however, were guarded in their support of Republicanism. The views of the Republican Party certainly trumped what

27. *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, April 28, 1854; Foner and Walker, eds., *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions*, 1:308.

28. Foner and Walker, eds., *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions*, 1:307. Ohio delegates to the 1856 convention specifically condemned Douglas, Pierce, border ruffian leader David Rice Atchison, and John H. Stringfellow, a prominent member of the proslavery faction in Kansas. All of these men, as well as Lewis Cass, the 1848 Democratic presidential nominee and supposed originator of the popular sovereignty doctrine, attracted censure in other black writings and speeches. For a discussion of Cass's connection to popular sovereignty, see Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, 57-59. For more on Stringfellow, his brother Benjamin, and their Atchison newspaper, see Bill Cecil-Fronson, "'Death to all Yankees and Traitors in Kansas': The Squatter Sovereign and the Defense of Slavery in Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 16 (Spring 1993): 22-33.



The Radical Abolitionist Party, a biracial group that called for the end of slavery throughout the Union, ran New York Senator Gerrit Smith for president in 1856. Most African American abolitionists recognized that the party had little chance for success, though they certainly felt a need to oppose the Democratic candidate, James Buchanan and his running mate, John C. Breckenridge, as this election-year cartoon suggests. Here the "Democratic Platform" is viciously pro-slavery. In the foreground "Squatter Sovereignty [is] Demonstrated," as Brooks beats Sumner and two slaves are chained to the flagpole, asking "Is this Democracy?," while their master promises to subdue them. In the background Lawrence, Kansas, burns (left) as ships fire on Cuba (right), demonstrating Democratic ambitions to extend slave territory. Cartoon courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

African Americans considered the Democrats' proslavery stance, but the Republican platform did not address slavery as an evil institution. In 1855 Jermain W. Loguen noted the new party's pledge not to tamper with slavery where it already existed. Still, Loguen respected the organization for its stance, even if it was not ideal. "If the Republicans can get a good meal at the public gramary [*sic*] this fall," he contended, "it will, perhaps, strengthen up their back bones a little, so that they will 'come up' nearer the broad, true ground of Radical Abolitionists."²⁹ The Republicans dashed Loguen's hopes when they failed to move toward abolitionism despite their success in the Northern states.

The Radical Abolitionist Party referred to by Loguen never held much favor among blacks. This biracial organization had enjoyed minimal success in the previous decade as the Liberty Party. The Radical Abolitionists, who called for the end of slavery throughout the Union, ran New York Senator Gerrit Smith for president in 1856. Most African American abolitionists recognized that the party had little chance for success. Smith himself contributed funds to the campaign of the 1856 Republican presidential candidate John C. Frémont. Blacks recognized that Northern voters felt more comfortable with the Republicans' less severe position on slavery. Recognizing that Republicans had better chances for victory, Frederick Douglass changed his support in 1856 from Smith to Frémont and showed high hopes for the Republican Party despite its limited goals. He believed that the Republicans would, among other things, stand up against the Slave Power, rid the government of proslavery influences, "give ascendancy to Northern civilization over the bludgeon and bloodhound civilization of the South, and [put] the mark of national condemnation on Slavery."³⁰

Far from Frederick Douglass's strong enthusiasm and Loguen's guarded optimism lay the radical slant of H. Ford Douglas. He disagreed vehemently with Frederick Douglass's advocacy of the Republican Party and deplored African Americans who touted Republicanism, because he believed this position led them away from committed abolitionism. "Men who had gloried in the name of abolition all their lives were swallowed up in the Republican maelstrom," H. Ford Douglas stated in a speech shortly after

the 1856 elections.³¹ In reality H. Ford Douglas paralleled Frederick Douglass's analysis of Republican ideology. The Republican Party's emphasis on protecting white free labor formed a central part of its appeal in the 1850s. Historian Michael F. Holt posited that this appeal "had less to do with what ultimately happened to the West than with the immediate threat of the so-called Slave Power to the rights and liberties of northerners, most of whom had no intention of decamping to Kansas or Nebraska."³² Regardless, Loguen's comments best represented the opinion of black leaders on the question of proper party affiliation. Most blacks considered the Republican Party their best hope for challenging proslavery incursions in Kansas, bringing the territory in as a free state, and stemming the overall spread of slavery. In their analysis, neither the Democrats, nor the nativist American (or Know-Nothing) Party, could be trusted, so black abolitionists tentatively embraced the Republican Party.³³ They viewed it as malleable and dedicated themselves to holding the party accountable for its antislavery pronouncements. Leading African Americans' feelings about the Republicans were indicative of their general response to the Kansas crisis. Optimism coexisted with a fear that neither Northerners nor Republicans would resist the constant agitation of proslavery adherents.

Not all blacks were convinced that the events in Kansas had made Northerners conscious of the Slave Power's deceptions. African Americans responding to the Kansas controversy often tempered their hope that the North would "awaken" with the concern that this event still had not taken place. Douglass observed on May 25, 1855, that although newspaper reports had made Northerners well aware of the proslavery crimes in Kansas he doubted the North's commitment to an immediate response. He described people on the streets who heard the news of Kansas outrages on the telegraph wires and then proceeded on their way in a state of

31. Foner and Walker, eds., *Black State Conventions*, 2:78. For another example of black abolitionists' tepid support for the Republican Party, see the minutes of the August 26, 1856, meeting of Boston's African American citizens in *The Liberator*, September 5, 1856, and Henry Highland Garnet's speech printed in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, October 3, 1856.

32. Michael F. Holt, "Making and Mobilizing the Republican Party, 1854-1860," in *The Birth of The Grand Old Party: The Republicans' First Generation*, ed. Robert F. Engs and Randall M. Miller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 42-43.

33. For black opposition to the Know-Nothing movement, see *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, July 6, 1854 and January 4, 1855. Blacks generally believed that nativism threatened their rights as well as those of immigrants. William Still credited the resistance of Northern Know-Nothings to a hands-off approach to slavery expansion and their demands to restore the Missouri Compromise. See *Provincial Freeman*, June 23, 1855.

29. *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, November 9, 1855.

30. "Fremont and Dayton" in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Volume II: Pre-Civil War Decade, 1850-1860*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1950), 401.

indifference. "The sluggish north is still asleep, or at most, is but half awake, and is not ready for sacrificing anything for the cause of law or liberty in Kansas," Douglass concluded.³⁴ More realistic than pessimistic, Douglass's assessment left room for the eventual coalescence of Northern resistance against the proslavery influence.

Hope for a revitalized North also underwrote black reactions to Senator Sumner's caning. Like the vast majority of their white counterparts, prominent African Americans lent support for the stricken Massachusetts senator and denigrated his assailant. They felt a special affinity for Sumner, Gerrit Smith, Salmon Chase, and other antislavery or abolitionist senators who sympathized with the plight of free and enslaved blacks.³⁵ A group of African Americans from Cape Island, in the North, praised Sumner's dedication to aiding "our Down Trodden Breatheren [sic]" and wished the senator a quick recovery so that he could continue his work for the black race. Although concerned for the senator's health, black leaders were cognizant of how Sumner's misfortune might work to their advantage. The *Provincial Freeman* blamed the assault, in part, on the conciliatory attitudes of the Northern press and politicians toward the "slaveocrats." One week after the attack, the paper stated that this latest Southern attempt to stifle free speech would prompt "a most powerful rebuke" from Northerners.³⁶ Similarly, Garrisonian Robert Purvis utilized Sumner's beating. After all, "Any thing, any thing, in God's name, that will tend to establish a backbone for the North, in asserting and maintaining its rights, and without regard to peril or to consequences" should be appreciated.³⁷ Despite their outrage, black abolitionists expected a proslavery assault in the halls of government to jumpstart or accelerate a Northern backlash against slavery. Overall, they anticipated that the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Bleeding Kansas, and "Bleeding Sumner" would individually or collectively rouse white Northerners to active support of the antislavery cause.

Frederick Douglass, however, proved that black optimism over the Kansas question could veer toward overconfidence. In September 1854 he pushed Northerners to

accept the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, but not the development of Kansas as a slave state. Douglass explained, "[the Nebraska] Bill leaves Liberty and Slavery on terms of equality." The main emphasis should be placed on restricting slavery in Kansas, a task Douglass wished to accomplish through free black migration. He proposed that one thousand Northern black families move to Kansas. Slaveholders would recoil at the mere presence of a large free black population, he declared, "as if it were infested by famine, pestilence, and earthquakes."³⁸ Surprisingly, Douglass hoped that black settlers would be able to vote despite the fact that very few Northern blacks possessed that right and the Kansas-Nebraska Act alluded to exclusively white suffrage. Douglass stressed the legislation's failure to specifically exclude blacks from the voting rolls. Ceding that black suffrage could experience resistance, he fell back on the idea that free black settlement would discourage slaveholders from migrating to Kansas. Douglass appeared to recognize the long odds of his poorly formulated plan. Yet he believed that "to omit any effort or neglect any plan to secure a victory for freedom" might negatively impact the larger battle against slavery.³⁹ Douglass's idea received some support. The Chicago black abolitionist, Henry O. Wagoner, was "favorably impressed." He told Douglass that slaveholders would indeed want nothing to do with Kansas once they discovered it inhabited by free blacks. Wagoner expected the Northern states to embrace the scheme, but there is no evidence to suggest that significant numbers of Northern blacks followed Douglass's enthusiastic advice.⁴⁰

Benjamin Quarles contended that Douglass "had [not] sufficiently weighed the antipathy in Kansas to people of color."⁴¹ By 1855 African Americans had come to the conclusion that the opposing forces in Kansas had little concern for the black race. Proslavery forces obviously promoted black exploitation, they believed, but freestaters posed an even more insidious obstacle. Freestaters disliked slavery; still, many wished to exclude blacks from Kansas and to keep it free for white men only. Historian Richard H. Sewell correctly noted the larger Free Soil and Republican movements' commitment to political abolitionism. They saw the containment of slavery as a tool for strangling the

34. *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, May 25, 1855.

35. See, for example, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, March 16, 1855; April 6, 1855; and June 29, 1855; and Stephen A. Myers to Gerrit Smith, March 22, 1856, in *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, ed. Ripley et al., 4:328.

36. Stephen Smith, Peter Christian, Nathan W. Depee, and George W. Gaines to Charles Sumner, July 24, 1856, in *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, ed. Ripley et al., microfilm reel 10; *Provincial Freeman*, June 7, 1856; and May 31, 1856.

37. *The Liberator*, June 13, 1856.

38. "Our Plan for Making Kansas a Free State" in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Foner, 2:313, 312.

39. *Ibid.*, 313–14, 315.

40. *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, September 29, 1854.

41. Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 31.

institution. Race, other scholars have recognized, remained a sensitive issue for antislavery politicians. Eric Foner maintained that many Republicans avoided controversial stances like black equality because they feared rejection at the polls by a racist Northern citizenry.⁴² There is no doubt, as Frederick Blue argued, that “most [freesoilers] . . . were eager to keep free blacks out of the territories,” even if “their influence did tend to temper the worst aspects of the racism of the other Republican factions.” Within Kansas the anti-black thread in free-soil/free-state ideology showed itself in December 1855 when the freestaters ratified a constitution excluding all blacks from the territory.⁴³ The optimism felt by black leaders in response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, fighting in Kansas, and the outraged reaction to the beating of Senator Sumner turned to despair once they realized how weak freestaters were on the issue of slavery and recognition of their own political impotence set in.

A free black named Samuel Golden offered in the *Christian Recorder* a somewhat more optimistic position on black political leverage. He bemoaned the failure of blacks to petition state legislatures, as he believed this to be an avenue for increasing the rights of African Americans. According to Golden, the passage of legislation like the Nebraska Act might result in “a few public meetings . . . but there generally the matter ends, until something detrimental comes to our notice.” Blacks needed to take concrete action to achieve political improvement.⁴⁴ Philadelphia’s Johnson Woodlin ridiculed Golden’s position as out of touch. In a letter to the *Christian Recorder*, he wrote that in the many states where blacks could not vote legislatures had no interest or obligation to grant them their rights. Simply put, Northern African Americans stood outside “the pale of politics.” They wielded no political autonomy, Woodlin claimed, and “the powers that be” would make sure that they never could. Most prominent blacks clearly believed that their protests against the Nebraska bill were worthwhile, but they recognized that their forceful words needed wide-scale white support. Both black Garrisonians, who rejected antislavery agitation via political means, and black political abolitionists knew this. Abner

H. Francis, a Portland, Oregon, political abolitionist and merchant, went so far as to place black hopes for political change in the hands of sympathetic antislavery whites.⁴⁵

The failure of freesoilers to fight for black rights concerned African American leaders even more than their own political ineffectiveness. By 1855 black abolitionists began to show their understanding of and their disappointment with the free-soil stance. The *Provincial Freeman* observed that Northern whites portrayed the repeal of the Missouri Compromise as an assault on white liberty. “The rights of white men had been invaded; a solemn compact entered into with white Americans had been broken,” one editorial read. The paper pointed to Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune*, as proof of the dubiousness of anti-Nebraska sentiment. Greeley had stated a desire to export blacks out of the United States. Prominent African Americans noted the rise of this new breed of antislavery men, those who found slavery distasteful or a threat to free labor, “but who also didn’t want the niggers about them.”⁴⁶ Black newspaper editor Mary Ann Shadd Cary considered this type of antislavery sentiment a critical development. The small group of abolitionists who fought for slaves based on genuine concern was declining, she stated. In their place, rose legions of “abolitionists” who neglected the enslaved individual in favor of protecting their personal liberty. Cary lamented the lack of “[c]ompassion for the slave in his chains.” Black abolitionists asserted that struggles for white liberty in Kansas downplayed the exertions of slaves and free blacks, both of whom had few rights to defend.⁴⁷

The belief held by Northern whites that the extension of slavery was detrimental to white independence and rights affected blacks in differing ways. By enlightening fellow Northerners, freesoilers helped to gather the support necessary for restricting slavery. Unfortunately for African Americans, the free-soil position often exhibited as much hatred for blacks as it did for black slavery. Once they understood this stance, blacks found little to support in Frederick Douglass’s migration plan. But despite their cynicism, blacks believed that keeping slavery out of Kansas served their cause better than the alternative. They contended,

42. Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), viii; Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 262–63.

43. Frederick J. Blue, *The Free Soilers: Third Party Politics, 1848–1854* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 286; Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas*, 75.

44. *Christian Recorder*, September 16, 1854.

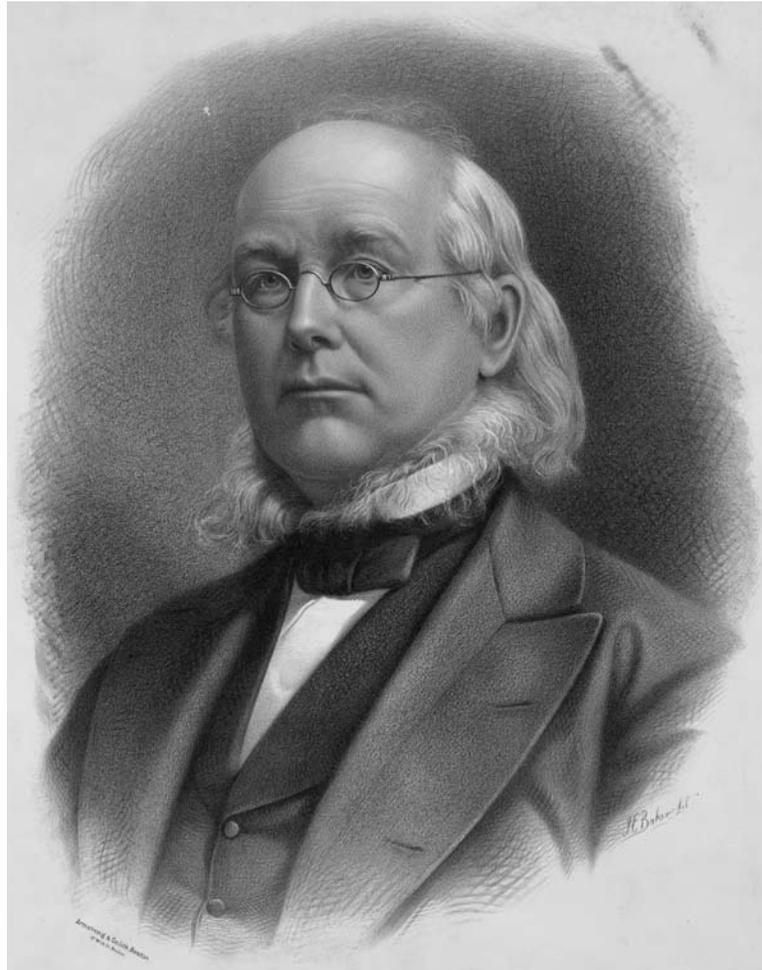
45. *Christian Recorder*, October 18, 1854; *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, September 22, 1854. Assuming a less pessimistic point of view, Henry Highland Garnet acknowledged the limitations on black citizenship, but urged enfranchised Northern blacks to exercise their right to vote. See *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, October 3, 1856.

46. *Provincial Freeman*, April 21, 1855; *Provincial Freeman*, January 20, 1855.

47. *Provincial Freeman*, December 6, 1856.

in Quarles's words, "that to save it for partial freedom was an important first step" in the battle to end slavery.⁴⁸ The spread of the institution had to be stopped before it could be destroyed.

Although black leaders were concerned about the lukewarm positions held by Northern whites on the slavery issue during the Kansas crisis, they also feared apathy within black ranks. Watkins's lectures in the North drew large crowds of both blacks and whites during the Nebraska bill controversy. He frequently recalled speaking to hostile white audiences, but more disturbingly, in some locales he encountered indifferent African Americans. Their "cold and dead" reactions contrasted sharply with the general Northern fervor engendered by the bill.⁴⁹ An editorial published in the *Provincial Freeman* recorded a similar anxiety. Curiously, it criticized black leaders who, it claimed, had made "no attempts to excite sympathy" to the danger posed by the Nebraska bill. The newspaper's criticism is indicative of its frustration with free blacks who remained in the United States instead of emigrating to Canada, a country that boasted more equitable citizenship for blacks.⁵⁰



The failure of freesoilers to fight for black rights concerned African American leaders even more than their own political ineffectiveness. Certain whites, for example Horace Greeley, the editor of the New York Tribune pictured here, held anti-Nebraska sentiments, though they also desired to export blacks out of the United States. Prominent African Americans noted the rise of this new breed of anti-slavery men, those who found slavery distasteful or a threat to free labor, "but who also [didn't] want the niggers about them." Portrait courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

The *Freeman* sounded a more enthusiastic note in July 1856. It reported on energized African Americans who were deciding in huge numbers to flee to Canada. The major issues at stake, the newspaper remarked, were the Fugitive Slave Law and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Certainly, numerous fugitive slaves and free blacks went to Canada to avoid slave catchers empowered under the Fugitive Slave Law. It is difficult to determine how many left the United States as a result of the Kansas controversy. The larger point is that whether or not free blacks showed apathy toward the implications of the Nebraska bill initially, their leaders viewed them as more animated after two years.

Even more importantly, prominent African Americans realized that although blacks might respond negatively to anti-black legislation, they hardly could be called a united people. They were divided on key issues, including whether to emigrate or remain in the country, how skin

shades should be used to determine status in their communities, and whether to support Garrisonian or political abolitionist views. Blacks' resistance to the Kansas-Nebraska

Law would convince American blacks to abandon their homeland. In the *Freeman's* July 26, 1856, issue, Isaac D. Shadd, brother of Mary Ann Shadd Cary, argued that the Kansas crisis had left free blacks with little choice but to move to Canada: "The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law . . . and . . . the Nebraska Bill, have so completely destroyed the hopes of the colored people that emigration seems inevitable."

48. Quarles, *Allies for Freedom*, 31.

49. Quoted in Ripley et al., eds., *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, 4:220.

50. *Provincial Freeman*, April 15, 1854. The newspaper's editors hoped that the Kansas crisis coupled with the oppressive Fugitive Slave

Act or proslavery atrocities in Kansas did not translate into a concerted attempt to exploit these events for their political or social advantage. James McCune Smith, a New York City physician and author, as well as a close friend of Douglass, attributed the dilemma to a lack of true leaders in the black community. Smith acknowledged that black speakers and delegates to state conventions sought to help their race, but “they have never had the masses to support them . . . [in] their well meant efforts.” Simply no black person held the confidence and support of the whole of African American society. Even as leading blacks increasingly noted their people’s alertness to the danger of the Kansas issue, they agonized over how to harness this energy in the face of seemingly intractable divisions among the black masses.⁵¹

In addition to concerns over free-soil bigotry, the Kansas dilemma sparked other major fears in the minds of African American abolitionists: proslavery incursions and the idea that slavery itself would continue unabated. Blacks, like many antislavery or free-soil whites, considered the Slave Power a monolith that sought to plant the peculiar institution wherever possible, as evidenced by Watkins’s rhetoric and Wilson’s “Ethiop” writings. Other black abolitionists addressed this issue as well. Orator and writer William Wells Brown had recently returned to the United States after spending several years abroad. The Boston resident outlined in an October 1854 speech the major changes that had occurred since his departure. For one, he said, slavery appeared on the verge of expanding everywhere in the United States. He addressed how Congress had allowed the institution to gain footing in new territories. “Yes, slavery has received a license to run wild on the virgin soil of Nebraska and Kansas,” Brown noted. He also anticipated that slaveholders would make inroads into the Caribbean, and that Cuba, and possibly Haiti and St. Domingo, would fall to slavery. Brown had cause for concern. Congressional debates over acquiring Cuba betrayed Southerners’ interest in making the country an outlet for further slavery extension. Moreover, John A. Quitman, a Mexican War general and former governor of Mississippi, drew considerable support in the South for a filibustering expedition to Cuba. As historian Robert E. May asserted, “Southerners flocked

51. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, September 21, 1855. During the previous year, Smith explained that free blacks lacked unity because “we are not equally oppressed” throughout the Northern states. See James McCune Smith to Frederick Douglass, May 4, 1854, in *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, ed. Ripley et al., 4:220–23; *Provincial Freeman*, July 26, 1856.

to [Quitman’s] standard trusting that the movement would enhance the strength of the slave states.”⁵²

Watkins surely agreed with the picture of slaveholders’ aggressions painted by Brown. In his judgment, the South demanded the ability to establish slavery anywhere in the country. “The passage of the infamous Nebraska bill,” Watkins insisted, “is but one of a series of measures to be enacted for the aggrandizement of the Slave Power.” The expectation of continued proslavery agitation continued through 1856. After the nation heard of the bloody clashes between border ruffians and jayhawkers ad nauseam, William Still could not be sure how the struggle between proslavery and antislavery factions would progress in that year. He was convinced that proslavery men would strike new, hard blows against “the cause of freedom.”⁵³ Still’s analysis proved prophetic for abolitionists who, three months later, felt both energized and dismayed by the proslavery attack on Lawrence, Kansas, and Sumner’s caning.

The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska bill and the bloodshed in Kansas clearly filled blacks with a wide range of emotions. The expression of militant attitudes marked one of their most important responses to the crisis. Frequently they insisted that the Kansas situation and the Fugitive Slave Law should be understood together as two major components of the Slave Power’s thrust for national domination. Garrisonian abolitionists had already spent years arguing for “No Union with Slaveholders” and promoting the dissolution of the Union as a way to rid the free states of slaveholders’ influence. The atrocities in Kansas fueled still more resistance from black Garrisonians toward staying politically united with proslavery adherents. Paraphrasing a speech by Charles Lenox Remond, the *Liberator* read, “[Remond] could hardly take up a newspaper [in which] he did not see some great outrage committed upon Northern rights.” Remond stressed that the North, if it truly believed in freedom, could not remain affiliated with the South.⁵⁴

Even some political abolitionists like Uriah Boston, a barber from Poughkeepsie, New York, could now coldly parse the benefits of the end of the Union. The entrance of Kansas into the Union as a slave state would necessitate this act, Boston stated. Far from being a dire situation, dis-

52. *The Liberator*, October 20, 1854; Robert E. May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854–1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 51, 56–58.

53. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, August 10, 1855; *Provincial Freeman*, February 9, 1856.

54. *The Liberator*, August 10, 1855.

union would debase the Slave Power and free the North of the financial burden of “promoting slave interests.” The South would be wracked by a rise in runaway slaves and slave rebellions, Boston concluded, leading to the eventual end of slavery.⁵⁵ Most black abolitionists thought it would be easier to abolish slavery within the Union, though even amongst this group the events in Kansas caused some disunion sentiment to kindle.

More commonly, it was African Americans’ forceful language that betrayed their increasing militancy from 1854 to 1856. Blacks began to speak more apocalyptically of a hardened division between the forces of slavery and freedom. William J. Wilson wrote a dispatch in June 1854 rebuking the intransigence of the forces of slavery and calling blacks to arms. “Let the tocsin be sounded, and to arms every man whose skin is not whitened with the curse of God; and let our motto be, ‘hands off, or death.’”⁵⁶ Watkins selected similarly ominous language. In an 1855 editorial, titled “Are We Ready for the Conflict?,” he compared the abolitionist to a lone traveler for whom “a sword or a musket would be preferred” in a dark wilderness. He did not explicitly advocate violence, although his message was unmistakable: abolitionists must respond in kind to proslavery aggression. Furthermore, they should “maintain a consistent warfare with the Slave Power.” This position seemed particularly relevant in the succeeding months when reports of attacks on free-state settlers flooded newspapers across the country.⁵⁷

Watkins’s militancy reflected the temperament of Douglass, who, after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, began using more divisive rhetoric. According to Douglass, the repeal of the Missouri Compromise placed the forces of slavery and freedom in a state of near conflict. “In the name of God, let the battle come,” Douglass boldly asserted on the day the Nebraska bill became law. He found subsequent attempts to compromise with slaveholders useless. Historian John Stauffer suggested that Douglass’s relationship with John Brown led Douglass to accept violent alternatives to peaceful abolitionism. It must be pointed out, however, that Douglass tempered his flirtation with violence with a continued dedication to using peaceful means to effect change, even if they seemed un-

likely to succeed. Despite his ambivalence toward violence, there is no doubt that the Kansas issue drove Douglass—and other blacks—to extreme rhetorical positions.⁵⁸

Just as significantly, some Northern black churches assumed more militant, but decidedly nonviolent, positions during the Kansas crisis. By 1835, black churches no longer served as the centerpiece of political action in black communities. Secular organizations began assuming some of their roles; nevertheless, ministers remained important leaders among African Americans and continued to address political questions. The Reverend John W. Lewis, an antislavery orator, told Frederick Douglass of his hope for an invigorated church-based response to the Fugitive Slave Law and the Kansas-Nebraska Act.⁵⁹ Like their white abolitionist counterparts, many black preachers met this call and during the Kansas controversy reinforced their opposition to slavery and its extension. At a Providence, Rhode Island, conference in January 1854, the African Methodist Episcopal Churches’ New England ministers spoke defiantly against the Fugitive Slave Law, the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and the introduction of the Nebraska bill. The Committee on Slavery resolved that “in these wicked and cruel acts are burning coals of fire, which will burn to the lowest hell. Over them all hovers the dark angel of night, covering them with the dark mantle of wickedness.”⁶⁰ The Kansas issue marked a continuation of black churches’ increasing outspokenness against slavery during the 1850s. Numerous congregations ignored the Fugitive Slave Law and helped to conceal fugitive slaves or smuggle them toward freedom. In 1854 black churches combined this resistance with their hatred of the Kansas-Nebraska

58. “The End of All Compromises with Slavery—Now and Forever” in Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 2:283, quoted in John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 180. See also William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 189–90, for a characterization of Douglass as generally committed to nonviolence. See also, “Peaceful Annihilation of Slavery is Hopeless” in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Foner, 2:406. In this piece, Douglass accepted slave violence as legitimate, but insisted, “we feel bound to use all our powers of persuasion and argument” to end slavery.

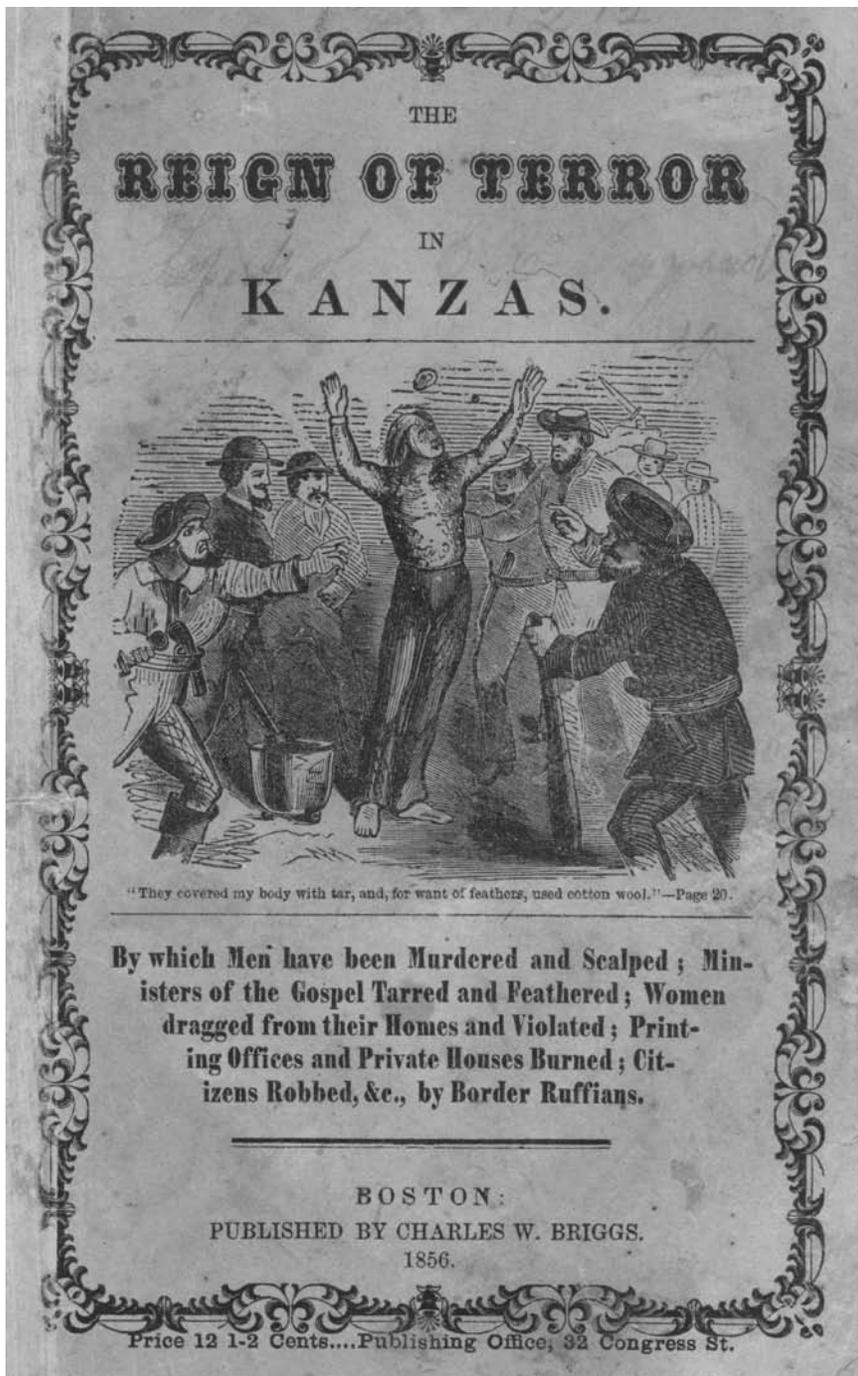
59. Reed, *Platform for Change*, 47, 49; *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, January 12, 1855.

60. Daniel A. Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, ed. C. S. Smith (Nashville: Publishing House of the AME Sunday-School Union, 1891), 308; online at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/payne/payne.html>. For more on the AME’s opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, see the *Christian Recorder*, July 18, 1854. This issue includes the report of the “Committee on the Nebraska and Kansas Bill,” dated May 23, 1854.

55. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, August 31, 1855. See *ibid.* for Frederick Douglass’s negative critique of Boston’s argument.

56. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, June 9, 1854.

57. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, February 9, 1855. For more of Watkins’s militancy, see *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, March 2, 1855.



The official title of this 1856 publication out of Boston describes atrocities in Kansas that black abolitionists hoped would provoke the rest of the country to action against slavery: The Reign of Terror in Kansas: as encouraged by President Pierce, and carried out by the southern slave power: by which men have been murdered and scalped! Women dragged from their homes and violated! Printing offices and private houses burned! Ministers of the gospel tarred and feathered! Citizens robbed and driven from their homes! and other enormities inflicted on free settlers by border ruffians as related by eye witnesses of the events. Book cover courtesy of the University Archives, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas, Lawrence.

Act. Although they resisted overtures toward violence, they spoke in increasingly vehement and political tones.⁶¹

The rising militancy of leading African Americans operated within a mindset that alternated between hope and despair between 1854 and 1856. Blacks remained optimistic that the Kansas crisis would gird Northern support for antislavery. They commented enthusiastically on the proliferation of anti-Nebraska meetings. Surely, they believed, these gatherings testified to a growing Northern awareness of the Slave Power's bottomless desire for slavery expansion. Black leaders also relished the victories of anti-Nebraska candidates after the adoption of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The new Republican Party, which dedicated itself to admitting no further slave states, lacked abolitionist fervor, but African Americans considered its platform a step in the right direction. A strain of pessimism operated simultaneously in the minds of black abolitionists. How could they truly effect political change, many of them wondered, if so many free blacks lacked basic civil rights? Moreover, African Americans came to believe—correctly as it turned out—that most Northerners who adopted the free-soil position rejected any concessions toward black equality. African Americans were excited that Northern whites personalized the struggle against the Slave Power. They simply wished it did not have to come at the expense of committed abolitionism. With the future of the Union and race relations so uncertain, blacks could at least take some comfort in having a powerful, yet tentative, ally in the Northern people. Just how far this friend would walk with them on the road to abolition remained to be seen. Black abolitionists hoped that the Kansas controversy would force the North into action, although they bemoaned the limited results, such as the cessation of slavery expansion, that Northerners seemed content in achieving.

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61. Ripley et al., eds., *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, 4:195.