


**READING**

## A MARTYR IN ALTON: ELIJAH P. LOVEJOY

### CHAPTER 10

**O**n the night of November 7, 1837, in Alton, Illinois, Elijah Parish Lovejoy was killed defending his printing press from a mob. He was one of the important American martyrs in both the anti-slavery movement and the struggle for freedom of the press.

#### Lovejoy the Idealist

Lovejoy was born in Albion, Maine, November 9, 1802. He came from a strict, puritanical background. Lovejoy was a serious minded young man, concerned with religious matters and moral behavior. After graduating from Maine's Waterville College, he taught school briefly, and then made an unsuccessful attempt to find work in Boston and New York. Thereupon, he decided to move west, with a little borrowed money and no transportation but his own feet. In the autumn of 1827, Lovejoy began his long walk, and was literally exhausted when he arrived in Hillsboro, Illinois, late that year.

Finding no suitable work there, either, the young man journeyed on to St. Louis, Missouri, where he succeeded in establishing a private high school. Later, he bought a part interest in the *St. Louis Times* newspaper and became its editor. A deep personal religious experience led Lovejoy to return to the east to study at Princeton Theological Seminary, after which he was licensed as a minister in the Presbyterian Church.

All of this set the stage for Lovejoy's return to St. Louis as the editor of a new Presbyterian newspaper, the *St. Louis Observer*. The *Observer* sold its first copy in the fall of 1833. Four years later, Lovejoy would be dead.

#### Puritan Attitudes and a Stand Against Slavery

Readers of the *Observer* were few, and the paper was not a financial success at first. Lovejoy crusaded vigorously in the newspaper in opposition to tobacco, liquor, Catholicism and working on Sunday. Slowly, the number of readers began to grow.

In time, Lovejoy turned to the more significant and explosive topic of slavery. At first, Lovejoy's stand against slavery was moderate. But in the slave state of Missouri even his moderate views on

slavery did not endear him to the majority of its citizens. Threats and opposition to his paper grew. Rumors spread through town about a possible slave rebellion. Lovejoy considered quitting his editorship because he feared for his family's safety. The owners of the paper suggested that it might be moved to the free state of Illinois. Lovejoy agreed and decided on the city of Alton, across the river, then the largest and most progressive city in Illinois.

Before he moved the *Observer*, an incident occurred that may have strengthened Lovejoy's anti-slavery stand. A free black man, resisting arrest in St. Louis, had pulled a knife and killed one of his captors. A mob broke into the jail, seized him and burned him to death.

The judge in the trial of the leaders of the mob who killed the prisoner blamed Lovejoy for the mob violence. Lovejoy, enraged at the judge's statement, lashed back in an editorial. The night Lovejoy's reply was made, a group of men broke into his office and damaged his printing press.

#### The Move to Alton

Meanwhile, Lovejoy made his move to Alton. When his press arrived a few days later, ruffians from St. Louis smashed it and threw it into the river. Alton citizens, embarrassed by the incident, held a meeting to welcome Lovejoy to town, to raise money for a new press, and to assure him that people of Alton would never act as the people of St. Louis had. Lovejoy for his part gave the impression that he would soften his anti-slavery writings, but true to his stand on freedom of the press, he said, ". . . as long as I am an American citizen, and as long as American blood runs in these veins, I shall hold myself at liberty to speak, to write, and to publish whatever I please on any subject. . . ." His audience applauded, but approval would not last long as Lovejoy continued to attack slavery.

Being a free state did not mean that all Illinois citizens opposed slavery. Many of them had come from the South where slavery was practiced. In 1837 the Illinois General Assembly passed a resolution criticizing abolitionist doctrines and anti-slavery societies. Only six legislators, including Abraham Lincoln, voted against the resolution.

Alton depended on the South for much of its trade, and anti-slavery agitation was seen as bad for business. Lovejoy was in danger of losing his public support when he opposed slavery in Alton.

### **Lovejoy the Abolitionist**

Soon after Lovejoy's arrival, Alton's economy was hit by the Panic of 1837. Land values sagged, trade dropped off and business in general was poor. Lovejoy took another unpopular stand when he considered bankers and real estate speculators sinful and wrote that depression might be good for the people. Alton did not agree with that! In fact, some whispered that Lovejoy, as an abolitionist, might be responsible for Alton's troubles. Perhaps southern businessmen were boycotting Alton. Furthermore, Lovejoy called for a state anti-slavery convention in the face of the legislature's opposition to such action.

Gradually, Lovejoy became too much for Alton. The city grew more tense despite a meeting held to cool tempers. In August 1837, a gang again smashed Lovejoy's press. He ordered another one, which was destroyed soon after it ar-

rived. Still another press was ordered, and Lovejoy determined to defend this one with force if necessary.

### **An Untimely Death**

The press arrived by boat in the early morning darkness of November 7. That night an unruly mob gathered at the warehouse where Lovejoy and a few friends were guarding the press. The defenders killed one of the mob in its first attack. The next strategy by the attackers was to set fire to the building. The first attempt failed, and during the second attempt, Lovejoy stepped into sight. A volley of shots rang out, and Lovejoy fell dying. He was two days short of being thirty-five years old.

Lovejoy's death shocked the nation and helped convince abolitionists that slavery was an issue which would not be solved by speaking and writing. From 1837 onward, the movement to end slavery became more forceful, and the pro-slavery forces became more determined to stand their ground. The ultimate result was the horror of the Civil War.