

## The Come-Outers

By Christine Comiskey

The New England Anti-Slavery Society was founded in 1832 by William Lloyd Garrison. During their annual convention in 1837, members adopted a new resolution: *“To leave unresponsive churches and come out from among them and separate.”* Proposed by Garrison, it reflected the general belief among Society members that Christian churches were not doing enough in the fight to end slavery. Those who chose to leave their churches became known as “Come-outers.”

The members of the First Congregational Church made their views on slavery clear in 1840 when they passed a resolution stating: *“Resolved: That we, as a branch of Christ’s church, feel ourselves called upon to bear our united and solemn testimony against this sin in all its forms, feeling that in the neglect of this duty, we at the last day shall incur the displeasure of Him who has said ‘Inasmuch as ye did it not to the least of these my brethren, ye did it not to me.’ And that it is a Christian duty which we owe to the oppressor, thus faithfully to reprove him for his reasons doing sin. Resolved: That in view of the light that is thus upon the path of the Christian at the present day, it is a sin for us as a church and we will not hold fellowship or communion with anyone who claims the right to, or holds, his fellow beings as property. Resolved: That we feel it to be a sin, and a reproach to the cause of Christ for anyone bearing a name to continue at or apologize for the sin of American Slavery.”* This was a bold stand for a church to take in those days, but it apparently wasn’t considered responsive enough for the Come-outers.

The Essex County Anti-Slavery Society held its annual conventions in Georgetown in 1841, 1845, and 1851. Among the speakers at these conventions were well-known names in the abolitionist movement, including William Lloyd Garrison, Stephen Foster, Thomas Beach, George Thompson, Parker Pillsbury and former slave Frederick Douglass.

The anti-slavery movement began to surge in Georgetown after abolitionist Stephen Foster was arrested and jailed in Danvers. He wrote to Georgetown’s Theodore Elliott, who, along with fellow townie Moses Wright, bailed him out and brought him to Georgetown. The following is from the newspaper The Georgetown Advocate:

*“Mr. Elliott and Wright gave the required bond and took Mr. Foster in their old two-wheeled chaise and started for Georgetown, but before they reached the town, the news of Mr. Foster’s arrest and release had spread about the town, so that when the royal party arrived at the residence of Mr. Elliott, a large crowd of people had gathered about the public square. As soon as the party had partaken of refreshments, a platform was erected made of boxes and boards. Upon this improvised platform, Mr. Foster took his position and after offering a short but impressive prayer he commenced an address that continued for two hours and more. In this address, Mr. Foster surpassed all his former efforts; he not only drew his inspiration from the barbarism of slavery but from bonds and imprisonment inflicted upon his own person. From that day on, converts were multiplied daily in the vicinity of Georgetown.”*

On a Sunday morning in 1842, as the congregation sat listening to the elderly Reverend Braman deliver his sermon, the door suddenly burst open and a group of angry Come-outers came marching in, disrupting the service and shouting insults at the minister and congregation.

Along with disrupting church services, the Come-outers would also taunt and insult the church-goers on their way to and from church. Annoyed at the disruptions, the congregation passed the following resolution in February of 1842: *“To have the door of the meeting house*

*bolted and barred against all desperados and men going from pillar to post trying to demolish all order and society, pretending to be anti-slavery men and accusing ministers and churches of being thieves, robbers, pirates and adulterers.”*

In December of 1842, several church members who had become Come-outers were called by the Vigilance Committee to appear before the church to answer to charges of absenting themselves from Communion and public worship. They put on quite a show. Joseph L. Noyes stated that he did not believe in the church organization or in the authority and sanctity of the Christian Sabbath. Isaac Newton Merrill said that he did not regard it as a Christian Church, but a company of thieves and robbers. Moses Wright believed that the prevailing influence of the church was the devil. They, along with Mr. Wright's Come-outer wife and mother-in-law, were excommunicated.

The Come-outers continued to be a problem for several more years. In April of 1844, the Church adopted another resolution: *“Whereas we believe there has been for years some in our religious society who at heart have been most malignant enemies of Devine Truth, and believing that the providence of God has placed them of late where their true position may be seen by every man in that they manifest their readiness to defend the open Infidel and laugh and jeer when the church and ministry are assailed, and whereas a move has been made to rescind a vote by which this church has been closed against that class of men whose business it is to assail and condemn the church and ministry and every true supporter of religious principles. Therefore, Resolved: That we will not rescind said vote but endeavor to do all in our power for the sustaining of the principles of said vote and to counteract that most deadly influence abroad in this community against Christianity.”*

In 1847, at a celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his ordination, Reverend Isaac Braman described that troubled time in this way: *“A certain class of lecturers, mock-philanthropists, under the guise of friendship for the slaves, and pleading their cause, have done immense mischief in this place, causing unpleasant feelings in the church and society, which, it is feared, has not wholly subsided, and divisions which are not, perhaps wholly healed. Some were deceived and led away by them – others were soon convinced that, however great their love for the slave, their hatred of the church, of the ministry and of all our religious institutions was much greater. The more prominent among them have since become avowed infidels, renouncing not only the church and the ministry, but the Holy Sabbath, the bible, civil government, and everything that the true Christian and the patriot hold most dear.”*

But even “avowed infidels” can have a change of heart. In 1858, Isaac Newton Merrill, who had called the church “a company of thieves and robbers,” wrote the following letter:

*“Since the hand of God has been laid heavily on me and I seem drawing near my departure, I have been led to reflect upon my past life, especially since my connection with the Church was dissolved.”*

*“Altho’ my convictions of the sinfulness of slavery remain substantially the same, yet I have been led to see that I have said and done many things in a wrong spirit, and that thus I have sinned against Christ and against my brethren. And frankly confessing the same to Him and to you, I desire to be forgiven and to ask the prayers of Christ’s people that my darkness may be removed and the joy of God shed abroad in my soul.”*

He was forgiven and his church membership restored. He died two years later at the age of 57.