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## The Interstate Slave Trade in Antislavery Politics

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### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Interstate Slave Trade in Antislavery Politics David L. Lightner In the 1830s American abolitionists argued that the federal government by virtue of its authority over interstate commerce possessed the power to prohibit movement of slaves across state lines. The founding convention of the American Anti-Slavery Society (AA-SS) adopted a constitution which declared that the society intended to influence Congress "to put an end to the domestic slave trade." The convention also endorsed a "Declaration of Sentiments," written primarily by William Lloyd Garrison, which asserted that Congress had both the right and the duty "to suppress the domestic slave trade between the several States." Subsequently, Henry B. Stanton, William Jay, Alvan Stewart, and many other abolitionists produced a barrage of books, articles, tracts, and speeches that agitated for such a ban. Meanwhile, antislavery societies both inundated Congress with petitions on the subject and successfully lobbied the legislatures of Vermont and Massachusetts to call

upon Congress to end the interstate slave traffic. At the close of the decade, when Stanton and Stewart, together with James G. Birney, William Goodell, Myron Holley, Joshua Leavitt, Gerrit Smith, and Elizur Wright, moved to establish an antislavery political party, all of those veteran abolitionists agreed that destruction of the interstate slave trade should be a major objective of their enterprise.<sup>1</sup> By 1840 the stage was set for a vigorous political assault upon the slave trade, and for a time such an assault occurred. But then everything changed. Instead of increasing in importance, the slave trade issue received less and less attention from antislavery politicians, as the Liberty men of 1840 and 1844 gave way first to the Free Soilers and Free 1AA-SS Constitution, Article II, Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention, Assembled at Philadelphia, December 4, 5, and 6, 1833 (New York, 1833), 6-7; "Declaration of Sentiments," *ibid.*, 15; David L. Lightner, "The Door to the Slave Bastille: The Abolitionist Assault upon the Interstate Slave Trade, 1833-1839," *Civil War History* 34 (Sept. 1988):23552. *Civil War History*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, ° 1990 by the Kent State University Press 120 erra war history Democrats of 1848 and 1852, and then to the Republicans of 1856 and 1860. How are we to explain the curious waning of this issue, one that seemed to offer the avenue for a devastating blow against slavery within the confines of the American constitutional framework? To answer that question, we first describe the role of the slave trade question in antislavery politics after 1840, then probe for reasons why that role diminished rather than expanded as time went on. Finally, we suggest that the threat to the interstate slave trade, feeble as it was by 1860, was nevertheless significant in shaping Southern reaction to the electoral triumph of Abraham Lincoln. The founding convention of the Liberty party at Albany, New York, in April 1840 did not prepare a formal platform, but the delegates agreed that their new party should include termination of the interstate slave trade as one of its objectives.<sup>2</sup> Eight weeks later a state convention of Massachusetts Liberty men authorized an address that castigated the established parties for neglecting "the great duties, which devolve on the national government," including that of abolishing "the slave trade between the states." British abolitionists viewed these developments with interest; the General Anti-Slavery Convention in London urged Americans to end their internal slave trade, and Harriet Martineau wrote hopefully, if inaccurately, that "the usual federal and democratic questions are in many cases laid aside at the present elections for the allimportant one of the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, and the prohibition of the inter-state slave-trade."<sup>3</sup> In subsequent years the banning of the interstate slave trade was called for in resolutions or addresses issuing from various Liberty groups, including the national convention at New York in May 1841, the Pennsylvania state convention at Philadelphia in February 1844, the southern and western convention at Cincinnati in June 1845, the north western convention at Chicago in June 1846, and the Massachusetts state committee in August 1846. Meanwhile, the Liberty Almanac, an annual Liberty party propaganda piece, often included material publicizing the party's intention...

## THE INTERSTATE SLAVE TRADE IN ANTISLAVERY POLITICS

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*David L. Lightner*

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<sup>1</sup> AA-SS Constitution, Article II, *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention, Assembled at Philadelphia, December 4, 5, and 6, 1833* (New York, 1833), 6-7; "Declaration of Sentiments," *ibid.*, 15; David L. Lightner, "The Dawn to the Slave Bastille: The Abolitionist Assault upon the Interstate Slave Trade, 1833-1839," *Civil War History* 34 (Sept. 1988):235-52.





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