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RACIAL ATTITUDES OF THE NEW YORK FREE SOILERS

ERIC FONER *

IN the United States of the mid-nineteenth century, racial prejudice was all but universal. Belief in Negro inferiority formed a central tenet of the Southern defense of slavery, and in the North too, many who were undecided on the merits of the peculiar institution, and even those who disapproved of it, believed that the Negro was by nature destined to occupy a subordinate position in society. After all, until 1780 slavery had existed throughout the country, and it was only in 1818 that provision had been made for its abolition in every Northern state. And even after slavery had been banished from the North, that section continued to subject free Negroes to legal and extra-legal discrimination in almost every phase of their lives. Though these restrictions were less severe than in the South, most of the free states denied the colored man the right of suffrage, subjected him to segregation in transportation, excluded him from all but menial employment, and barred his children from the public schools. In the decade of the 1850's, four Northern states—Indiana, Iowa, Illinois and Oregon—went so far as to pass legislation prohibiting Negroes from entering their territory. One contemporary Negro writer could well complain of the “bitterness, malignity, and cruelty of the American prejudice against colour.” The Free Soiler from Indiana, George W. Julian put it more bluntly. “The American people,” he wrote, “are emphatically a *Negro-hating* people.”¹

With anti-Negro feeling so deep-seated and widespread, it was inevitable that all political parties would have to cope with the problem of racial prejudice. From its beginning, the anti-slavery movement had included social and political equality for Northern Negroes as an essential aspect of its

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program. But even the abolitionist Liberty party found that its efforts were hampered by prejudice within its ranks. In one celebrated incident, a Michigan convention denied two Negro delegates the right to participate in the nomination of candidates, on the ground that they were not legal voters. And in 1844, the party nominated for the Vice-Presidency ex-Senator Thomas Morris, a staunch foe of Negro suffrage. Nonetheless, the party constantly avowed its commitment to "the principles of Equal Rights," and urged its supporters to combat "any inequality of rights and privileges . . . on account of color." Almost without exception, the state and national Liberty platforms included such resolutions, and throughout the North, the party was an ardent opponent of political and social discrimination against the free Negro.²

During the decade of the 1840's, great numbers of Northerners became opponents of slavery, moved either by the moral appeals of the abolitionists, fear of the Southern "Slave Power," or apprehension that the extension of slavery into the newly acquired territories would exclude free Northern settlers. But astute observers recognized that many who held these views had been prevented from embracing anti-slavery because of the Liberty party's adoption of political and social equality for Negroes as one of its major goals. In order for the political anti-slavery movement to attract a wide following it would have to adopt a platform so broad that both the prejudiced and the advocates of equal rights could support it. In other words, it had to divorce itself from the ideal of equality.

That the Free Soil party would achieve this divorce was perhaps to be expected. For although it was established in 1848 as a coalition of anti-slavery Democrats, Whigs, and Liberty party men, united by their opposition to the extension of slavery, the leading organizers of the party came from the Democracy of New York State, which had long opposed the granting of political rights to colored citizens. In New York, where Negro suffrage had been almost wholly a party issue, first the Federalists and then the Whigs had endorsed political equality, while the Democratic-Republicans and later the Jacksonian Democrats, with their close ties to the South, had taken the opposite position. Since Negroes, who until 1821 enjoyed full suffrage rights, tended to vote Federal-

ist, and since the Democratic-Republicans and the Democrats were chiefly supported by those elements of the population which feared Negro competition and wished to make the state unattractive for colored immigration, the Democrats had both political and economic reasons for wishing to restrict Negro suffrage. At the Constitutional Convention of 1821, the Democrats, even as they were striving to remove all property qualifications for white voters, succeeded in instituting a \$250 property requirement for Negroes.³

In 1846, when another Constitutional Convention was held, friends and opponents of the Negro again divided along party lines. The Whig party did not formally endorse equal suffrage, doubtless because of the prevailing prejudice, but its views were made known through unofficial sources. The leading Whig journal, Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, listed elimination of the property qualification for Negroes among its proposals for constitutional reform, and bewailed the "Colorphobia which prevails so extensively in the ranks of our modern 'Democracy.'" ⁴ The Liberty party took the same position.⁵

The Democratic press, on the other hand, staunchly opposed any reduction in the property requirement. The *Morning News*, which espoused the views of the party's loco-foco wing, from which many of the Free Soilers would come, had, in 1845, argued that the annexation of Texas would rid the nation of Negroes by providing a "safety-valve" for their migration to Latin America. Now, it bluntly asserted that the Negro race was inferior to the white, insisted that free Negroes should be allowed no political rights at all, and defended Samuel J. Tilden against the "base charge" of favoring Negro suffrage. William Cullen Bryant's *Evening Post*, soon to become the state's chief Free Soil organ, completely avoided the issue of Negro suffrage in its discussions of constitutional reform, but seemed to agree with other Democratic papers that equal suffrage would dangerously increase Whig power in the state. Though Bryant insisted that free Negroes should be considered citizens, he pointed out that New York's white voters had the right to place limits on that citizenship, if they chose. When the election of delegates to the Convention took place, the Democrats appealed so blatantly to racial prejudice that Greeley later recalled,

“we should, in all probability, have carried two-thirds of the Constitutional Convention but for the cries of ‘Nigger Party,’ ‘Amalgamation,’ and ‘Fried Wool,’ etc., which were raised against us.”⁶

For some years, the New York Democracy had been divided into two wings, differing on matters of economic policy and federal patronage. At the Convention of 1846, however, both Hunkers and Barnburners stood together to block any extension of Negro suffrage. Thirteen of the Democratic delegates later became prominent Free Soilers, yet none voted in favor of a motion granting equal suffrage to the state’s colored citizens.⁷ Indeed, a majority of these delegates, including Samuel J. Tilden, also opposed a proposal to reduce the property qualifications to \$100. And when equal suffrage was voted upon as a separate issue in November, it was defeated by a resounding margin: 223,845 to 85,306. St. Lawrence County, in 1848 termed the “banner county” of the Free Soil party, opposed equal suffrage by a two-to-one margin. Years later, Horace Greeley would tell a New York audience how he had stood at a polling place on that rainy election day, peddling ballots for equal suffrage. “I got many Whigs to take them,” he recalled, “but not one Democrat.”⁸

But the Democracy’s unity on the question of Negro rights could not offset its internal divisions on other issues. The party which had enjoyed political hegemony for so many years in the Empire State was disrupted and driven from power by the issue of the Wilmot Proviso. In September 1847, when the State Democratic Convention, controlled by the Hunker faction, tabled a resolution demanding that slavery be excluded from the territory acquired from Mexico, and then denied renomination to the Barnburner Comptroller Azariah C. Flagg, the Barnburners walked out. A month later they met at Herkimer, endorsed the Proviso, and repudiated the Hunker nominees, who were decisively defeated at the polls by the Whigs. The most prominent members of the New York Democracy—John Van Buren, Preston King, Samuel J. Tilden, C. C. Cambreleng, and Flagg—remained aloof from their party in 1848, and organized the Free Soil party.⁹

Although the question of the extension of slavery was the

immediate cause of the Barnburner revolt, the bolters did not alter their attitude towards the Negro as a result of their adherence to the Proviso. On the contrary, they made it clear that their support of the Proviso was based as much on repugnance to the prospect of a Negro population, free or slave, in the territories, as on an opposition to the spread of the institution of slavery. There was no moral opposition to the slave system; ex-Congressman Michael Hoffman, for example, a leading Barnburner until his death early in 1848, had sneered at John P. Hale's anti-slavery campaign a few years earlier as "that *Negroism* that shakes the granite hills of New Hampshire." The Barnburners were concerned for the fate of the free white laborer of the North. They had been ardent expansionists and were now determined to prevent the new territories from being swallowed up by slavery. Free white laborers would never migrate to an area of slavery, both because of their animosity to the Negro, and because they could not compete with slave labor.¹⁰

Over and over the Barnburners reiterated that their interest was not in the Negro, free or slave, but in the free white laborer. As one Barnburner Congressman put it in 1848:

I speak not of the condition of the slave. I do not pretend to know, nor is it necessary that I should express an opinion in this place, whether the effect of slavery is beneficial or injurious to him. I am looking to its effect upon the white man, the free white man of this territory.¹¹

Moreover, when they enumerated the degrading effects of slavery on the free white worker, the Barnburners invariably listed association with Negro slaves as most important. They were worried by the assertions of some Southerners, that the territories provided a "natural outlet" for some of the South's Negro population, and in order to safeguard the rights of white labor in the territories, they insisted that slavery, and therefore the Negro, be excluded. The Barnburners made no real distinction between the free Negro and the slave, and believed that white labor would be degraded by association with "the labor of the black race." For them, the terms "free labor" and "white labor" were interchangeable, as were

“black labor” and “slave labor.” Often, the seemingly unnecessary adjective “black” before the word “slave” testified to an aversion to the presence of any black men in the territories. “We deem it indispensable,” wrote Martin Van Buren (who, in 1821 had been one of the few Democrats at the Constitutional Convention to support Negro suffrage) “that black slaves shall be excluded from the territories.” On other occasions, the structure of a sentence indicated that, in Barnburner rhetoric, white and slave, and black and free, were perfect antonyms. One pamphlet, for example, spoke of a West settled “exclusively by white yeoman,” as contrasted with the vision of “the same region given up . . . to a slave population.” Thus, the Negro, free or slave, had no place in the Barnburners’ image of life in the territories. The Wilmot Proviso, as they saw it, was emphatically “the Laboring White Man’s Proviso.”¹²

The spokesman of the Barnburners in Congress reiterated this position. Senator John A. Dix, the Free Soil gubernatorial candidate in 1848, who had made frequent assertions of his belief in Negro inferiority, declared in the Senate that North America was destined to be populated by the white race. In a much publicized speech, he declared that the Negro race was doomed “by the unalterable law of its destiny,” to die out within a few generations. The extension of slavery would only diffuse the colored race, and prolong its existence. The territories, Dix continued, should be reserved for “the multiplication of the white race . . . the highest in the order of intellectual and physical endowments.” Dix’ speech was widely circulated and one Barnburner wrote him enthusiastically that it was “the great speech of the present age.” Dix also indicated that he opposed the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, even though the Free Soil platform called for emancipation there.¹³ His attitude towards the Negro and slavery was strikingly different from that of his running mate, the veteran anti-slavery Whig, Seth M. Gates, who had voted for James G. Birney, the Liberty party candidate, in 1844. Gates’ name was revered by Negroes in both Northern and border states as one who hid fugitive slaves in his upstate New York home, and helped them reach Canada.¹⁴

Even Preston King, the Congressman from St. Lawrence

county, who represented the most radical wing of the Barnburners, and who had been denied the Free Soil nomination for governor because of his extreme anti-slavery views, insisted that white labor must not be excluded from the territories, nor subjected to association with “the black labor of slaves.” The Northwest Ordinance, he declared, had saved the Northwest from “the evils of slavery and a black population,” and any man who opposed a similar proscription for the newly acquired territories, he termed “false and recreant to his race.” This did not, of course alter his hatred of slavery, but surely President Polk’s Secretary of War, William L. Marcy, was right when he wrote of John Van Buren and King that, though they would “break up the union” over the Wilmot Proviso, “yet neither . . . care for negroes.”¹⁵

These prejudices were shared by the man whose name had become a symbol of resistance to the extension of slavery, David Wilmot, the Democrat who became leader of the Free Soil party of Pennsylvania. Wilmot, like the Barnburners, did not regard slavery as a moral issue. Although he viewed the institution as a political, economic, and social evil, he was particularly outraged by its degradation of the white race. The Proviso, he explained in Congress, was not motivated by any “squeamish sensitiveness upon the subject of slavery, [or] morbid sympathy for the slave,” and he objected strenuously when, as he put it, an attempt was made “to bring odium upon this movement, as one designed especially for the benefit of the black race.” Instead, he insisted, “I plead the cause and rights of the free white man.” The question was simple—should the territories be reserved for the white laborer, “or shall [they] be given up to the African and his descendants?” Wilmot’s answer was emphatic—white labor must not be degraded by association with “the servile labor of the black.” Besides, he declared, “the negro race already occupy enough of this fair continent.” Speaking at the Herkimer Convention, the Pennsylvanian accepted the phrase “White Man’s Proviso” as an accurate description of the measure which bore his name.¹⁶

Indeed, when Wilmot, a life-long opponent of abolitionism, cautiously held out the hope that in the remote future, the South might voluntarily emancipate its slaves, he stressed that coupled with this should be the “great work . . . [of] the

separation of the two races." In addition, Wilmot consistently opposed the granting of political rights to Northern Negroes. When a Southern Congressman charged that he favored political and social equality between the races, the Pennsylvanian cried out indignantly, "my vote shows no such thing." And when Joshua Giddings proposed that *all* the residents of the District of Columbia vote in a referendum to determine the fate of slavery in the nation's capital, Wilmot was incensed. He found it "highly objectionable," he wrote, "to admit the blacks, bond and free, to vote upon the question."¹⁷

This blatant prejudice did not go unnoticed in Wilmot's own state. A month after the election of 1848, the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, the Keystone State's abolitionist journal, lashed out at Wilmot after a speech in which he repeated his contrast between "black labor" and "free labor" as if, wrote the *Freeman*, "it were the negro and not slavery which degraded labor." The anti-slavery organ continued:

A man of Mr. Wilmot's intelligence and observation ought to know that it matters very little for the honor of labor what is the color of the laborers. Enslaved, his labor is degraded, free, it becomes honorable. Let slavery be abolished and the colored people of the North no longer be identified with an *enslaved* race, and this truth will be seen.

Wilmot's attitude, the *Freeman* conjectured, "seemed the result of an old and unconscious prejudice in his mind."¹⁸

II

It is not surprising that Negroes and many white anti-slavery men were aware of, and distressed by, these expressions of race bias, even during the organizational period of the Free Soil party. Many looked forward to the party's first national assembly, the Buffalo Convention of August, 1848, to determine how widespread prejudice would be in the new party. The fact that Negroes were in attendance at Buffalo, and addressed the Convention, led some to hope that the party would not be marred by anti-Negro feeling. One abolitionist wrote enthusiastically to the Liberty party leader Gerrit Smith, that "men of all political and religious com-

plexions and of all *colors* were called to the platform to address the Convention.”¹⁹ Yet the harmony which seemed to prevail at Buffalo was, at best, delusive. Abolitionists did not know that it was only after a bitter argument among the Barnburners, and at the insistence of Martin Van Buren, that they had been invited to the gathering at all. Nor were they cognizant of the behind the scenes maneuvering which had been necessary to secure the nomination of the ex-President.²⁰

And even in the atmosphere of enthusiasm which animated the delegates, racial prejudice did not subside. Francis W. Bird of Massachusetts was presiding officer of one of the sessions. Years later he told how Barnburner delegates surrounded him, urging him not to give the floor to the Negro abolitionist Frederick Douglass. “They didn’t want a ‘nigger’ to talk to them,” he recalled. “I told them,” Bird continued, “we came there for free soil, free speech and free men; and I gave a hint to Mr. Douglass that if he would claim the floor when the gentlemen who was then speaking gave it up, he should certainly have it.”²¹ It is true that Douglass was warmly applauded, and that when he indicated that he did not intend to speak, the delegates seemed disappointed. Yet the Negroes who did speak did not receive a completely cordial reception. One Ohio delegate, for example, complained that he resented “taking his cue from a ‘nigger.’”²²

The platform adopted at Buffalo, written by Salmon P. Chase, the Liberty party leader from Ohio, and the Barnburner Benjamin F. Butler, met with the almost unanimous approval of the Liberty men present.²³ In order to secure the nomination of Van Buren, the Barnburners had had to accept a more radical program than they themselves would have written. Thus, the Buffalo platform not only opposed the extension of slavery, but also advocated homestead legislation, and called upon the federal government to disassociate itself from the institution of slavery. Though it acknowledged that slavery in the states was outside the province of federal power, it did call for abolition in the District of Columbia. “The Liberty platform,” exclaimed the Chicago *Western Citizen*, “has been adopted by the Free Soil party and its nominee,” and almost without exception, the Liberty press of the country flocked to the new standard.

Joshua Leavitt, Liberty party leader from Massachusetts, in a widely publicized remark, asserted at Buffalo, "the Liberty party is not dead, but translated," and he later wrote an open letter to the supporters of the Liberty party, urging them to vote for Van Buren. The Liberty presidential candidate, John P. Hale, quickly withdrew his candidacy, and one of his abolitionist constituents wrote him that he could "stand very comfortably" on the Buffalo platform.²⁴

But one basic plank of the Liberty platform had been sacrificed. Leavitt could ask rhetorically, "what have we lost? Not one of our principles, not one of our aims, not one of our men," but many Liberty men and many Negroes remembered that James G. Birney had written that "the grant of the Elective Franchise to the colored people" was a primary goal of his party.²⁵ The "translation" of the Liberty party had only been achieved at the expense of the ideal of equality.

To many Negro leaders, and to the radical wing of the Liberty party, led by Gerrit Smith, this change could not go unnoticed. When a small Negro newspaper, the *Ram's Horn* of New York City, endorsed Van Buren, Smith wrote a sharp letter of protest. He had thought, he wrote, that it would be unnecessary to explain to colored men why they should not support the Free Soilers. It was obvious that Van Buren was making no efforts either to deliver the Negro race from slavery, or to combat racial prejudice. The Free Soil candidate, Smith insisted, differed in no essential respect from the vast majority of his fellow Americans in his "views and treatment of the colored race." In view of these facts, Smith contended, colored citizens could not expect any better treatment from a Free Soil government than a Democratic or Whig administration. Negroes, he concluded, should not vote for Free Soilers, who "acquiesce, and even take part, in the proscription and crushing of your race," but should give their suffrage to Smith himself. Smith was running as a Liberty party candidate, and espoused equal rights for all men.²⁶

Samuel R. Ward, a Negro abolitionist who had been present at Buffalo, offered the same advice to the Negro community. The absence of a plank advocating equal rights in the Buffalo platform might seem an oversight, he wrote,

but actually, "it has the appearance of studied and deliberate design." Ward pointed out that the Barnburners had always opposed Negro suffrage, and argued that the equal rights plank had been intentionally left out of the platform, in order not to conflict with the "words, deeds and character of the leading men of the Free Soil party in this state." The Free Soilers of New York, wrote Ward, were "as ready to rob black men of their rights now as ever they were . . . Mr. Dix and Mr. Butler we know to be approvers and fosterers of the bitterest prejudices against us."²⁷

Not all Negro leaders, however, agreed with Ward. Frederick Douglass, for example, though he himself was a non-voting, or Garrisonian abolitionist in 1848, urged those friends of the slave who did vote to support Van Buren. Many Free Soilers, he insisted, had changed their attitude towards the Negro, and the party as a whole should be judged by its deeds, not its words. Besides, few abolitionists had completely freed themselves from prejudice, and bias in the Free Soil party might be combatted by Negroes working within the new organization. Douglass realized that men like Gerrit Smith, who had close personal relationships with free Negroes, were much more likely to be egalitarian in their views than men like the upstate New York Barnburners, who rarely saw a Negro. Another Negro, in a letter to Douglass' newspaper, the *North Star*, though admitting that it was "well known" that nine-tenths of the Barnburners had opposed equal suffrage, and would in all probability do so again, argued that the absence of an equal rights plank in the Buffalo platform should not prevent Negroes in other states from supporting the party. This, he continued, was a local, not a national issue, and would therefore be out of place in a national platform. New York Negroes, however, were advised to think twice before supporting Dix and the other Barnburners, who had openly proclaimed the white race's superiority.²⁸

Apparently, most of the free Negroes of the North adopted this line of thinking, for outside New York, where Free Soil leaders were mostly former Liberty men or Whigs, more favorable to Negro rights than the New York Free Soilers, colored citizens overwhelmingly supported the new party. In the Empire State, however, many remembered that the

Liberty party, as late as 1847, had included the "local issue" of equal rights in its national resolutions, and followed the advice of Ward: vote "for Smith and Equal Rights."²⁹

By 1850, the New York Democracy had been reunited, and many of the Free Soil leaders, including C. C. Cambreleng, John Van Buren and Samuel J. Tilden, remained with their party through the Civil War. Even those who, like King, were destined to join the Republican party within a few years, accepted the Compromise of 1850 and expressed the hope that agitation of the slavery question was at an end.³⁰ Many of the Barnburners had joined the Free Soil party with the primary purpose of restoring the balance of power between the sections in the Democratic party by demonstrating that General Cass could not be elected without the votes of Northern Democrats, and some desired to defeat Cass solely to "revenge" the denial of the Democratic nomination to Van Buren four years earlier. With Cass defeated, they were ready to regard the Hunkers, as John Van Buren said, "enemies in war—in peace, friends."³¹ Those New York Negroes who had supported the ex-president in 1848 resumed their attitude of hostility to the Democratic party. Just before the election of 1849, a meeting of colored citizens in New York City announced its determination to work for the defeat of the "union" Democratic ticket. Commenting on this, the *National Era*, the only national journal of the Free Soil party, indicated that it was "not much surprised at the conduct of the colored people." "We trust," the *Era* continued, "that the reunited Democracy of New York henceforth will show that it no longer measures out justice according to complexion."³²

The New York *Evening Post*, however, rejected this advice. In the campaign of 1848, Bryant's journal, like the rest of the Barnburner organs, had opposed the introduction of "negro labor" into the territories. After the election, the *Post* continued to object to the introduction of slavery into the territories, either "under the form of well subdued slaves, or hoardes of free negroes," and it protested vigorously when a Southern paper proposed that some of the "dense free black population" of the South be sent to New Mexico and California. Bryant did favor the repeal of some discriminatory laws in the North, but he argued that the free

states were an "uncongenial clime" for Negroes, and hoped that the races might be permanently separated. Though the *Post* opposed compulsory colonization, it termed the Colonization Society and the Anti-Slavery Society organizations which both were "contemplating, in different ways, the good of the African race," and said it hoped that both would achieve their objectives.³³

In addition, the *Post*, which, even after the reunion of the New York Democracy, continued to consider itself a "free soil" journal, bluntly asserted that the white race was superior to the Negro. In urging colored citizens to emigrate to some tropical region, it argued that "unequal laws and inveterate social prejudices" made the elevation of the free Negro impossible in this country. Yet it was sure to suggest that the inveterate prejudices were not entirely unfounded. The Negro was, to be sure, unequal to the white man, for in his new home he would have to "take those primary lessons in civilization which his race has never yet mastered." The two races, associate editor John Bigelow (one of the few Barnburners to support equal suffrage in 1846) wrote, could not prosper together, for "the superior intelligence and advantages of the whites" would prevent the Negroes from acquiring self-reliance and independence. Finally, in 1853, the *Post* published a series of articles which perhaps best characterized its position on race and slavery. The series, a "scientific" study of the Negro race, concluded that although the Negro was by nature indolent, mentally inferior, and "hardly capable of elevating himself to the height of civilization," he was a man, and slavery was "an abuse of superior mental endowment." In this manner, the *Post* was able to combine an unrelenting racial prejudice with an anti-slavery position.³⁴

III

In assessing the racial attitudes of the Free Soil party of New York, it must be remembered that the Barnburners were less prejudiced in their outlook than their Hunker opponents. Thus, although the New York counties which Van Buren carried in 1848 had, two years earlier, opposed equal suffrage by 16,668 - 10,166, this ratio (1.6 to 1) was

much smaller than the state-wide margin of 2.7 to 1. On the other hand, the counties carried by Cass voted against removing the property qualification for colored citizens by 8,597 to 2,540, or 3.6 to 1, far greater than the overall margin. After all, the Barnburners, despite their reservations, were able to participate in the Buffalo Convention alongside Negro delegates, while the prospect of an integrated convention filled the Hunkers with horror. As a Boston Free Soil newspaper put it, "there is no hatred so infernal as the hatred of a Northern Hunker towards the blacks."³⁵

Moreover, the rather blatant prejudice of the Free Soilers of Democratic extraction was by no means representative of the views of the entire party. Indeed, the *National Era*, in June 1848, sharply criticized the Barnburners' prejudice. "Studiously placing their opposition to the extension of slavery on the ground of abhorrence of 'black slaves,' rather than the despotism that imbrutes them"; it charged, many Barnburners were "apparently fearful of having their Anti-Slavery position attributed to generous convictions of the brotherhood of the Human Race." "We distrust these men," the *Era* added. And in Pennsylvania, the leading Free Soil newspapers, the *Philadelphia Republic*, openly differed with the views of David Wilmot by denouncing racial prejudice and calling the restriction of suffrage to white citizens a disgrace to the state.³⁶

It is thus an oversimplification to equate Free Soil with an aversion to the presence of Negroes in the territories, as some historians have done.³⁷ The Free Soil party, or, as it was later called, the Free Democracy, was a political party with no truly national organization, only one national newspaper (the *National Era*), and with only a handful of recognized spokesmen in Washington. Most of its work was done by the various state parties, some of which died out soon after the election of 1848, some of which survived until 1854, and all of which were completely autonomous. In most of the state outside New York, the Free Soilers came from a tradition of support for Negro rights, and the party, though by no means free from prejudice, sincerely strove to combat discrimination.³⁸

But the main organizational impulse in 1848 had come

from the Barnburners of New York, and it was inevitable that the Buffalo Free Soil platform would reflect their views. And so for the first time, an anti-slavery political party disregarded the issue of equal rights for free Negroes in its national platform. "The old negro-hating colonizationist of '33 would almost have accepted the present Free Soil platform," complained the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, and it was right.³⁹ The party's platform was so broad that it could gain the support of those who opposed slavery in order to prevent Negroes from fleeing North and those who desired to keep the territories free from the presence of the Negro slave, as well as the veteran anti-slavery men with their moral abhorrence of the institution, and Northerners worried by the great influence of the "Slave Power" in the federal government. The Free Soil party numbered in its ranks the most vulgar racists and the most determined supporters of Negro rights, as well as all shades of opinion between these extremes. It was the only anti-slavery position that could accomplish this because the question of Negro rights, potentially such a divisive issue, was simply avoided in its national platform.

In this sense, the Free Soil party marked a vital turning point in the development of the anti-slavery crusade. It represented anti-slavery in its least radical form, and its platform gained a popularity which no other could have achieved. Southerners realized that the very fact that the sage old politician from Kinderhook had agreed to run as the party's standard-bearer was proof of its wide support. "Such a man," Calhoun recognized, "would never have consented to be placed in that position unless he was convinced that the North had determined to rally on this great question. . . ." Indeed, some observers believed that Van Buren would have carried the North, had not the free state Whigs and Democrats claimed free soil as their own cause. By the end of 1849, every Northern legislature except Iowa's had endorsed the Proviso, and some had even called for abolition in the nation's capital. The effect was summed up by New York's William H. Seward; "Anti-slavery is at length a respectable element in politics."⁴⁰

Even in 1852, when the Barnburners were no longer in the Free Soil party, the ex-Whigs and Liberty men realized that

it would be politically inadvisable to call for political and social equality for free Negroes in their national platform.⁴¹ Samuel R. Ward may have been right when he suggested in 1848 that this plank was omitted at Buffalo so as not to offend the Barnburners. But the bulk of the Liberty party, and the Free Soilers of Whig background had reacted enthusiastically to the Buffalo platform, even without an equal rights plank, and Free Soil leaders after 1848 realized that to reintroduce a call for equality for the free Negro would cost the party far more support than it would gain. In their short association with the anti-slavery movement the Barnburners thus changed that movement's course decisively. Once the commitment to equal rights had been deleted from the platform of political anti-slavery, it would never again be reinserted.

¹ William Chambers, *Things As They Are In America*, (London, 1854), p. 354; Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery, The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860*, (Chicago, 1961), especially chapters 1, 3-5; Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union*, (New York, 1949), I, pp. 518-20; John C. Hurd, *The Law of Freedom and Bondage in the United States*, Boston, 1862), II, pp. 131, 136, 177, 216-7; William G. Allen, *The American Prejudice Against Colour*, (London, 1853), p. 1; Julian to Convention of Colored Citizens of Illinois, September 17, 1853, Julian Papers, Indiana State Library (italics in original).

² Charles H. Wesley, "The Participation of Negroes in Anti-Slavery Political Parties," *Journal of Negro History*, XXIX, 1, (January, 1944), p. 48; *North Star*, September 1, 1848; Kirk H. Porter and Donald B. Johnson, eds., *National Party Platforms*, (Urbana, Illinois, 1956), pp. 4-9; Norman D. Harris, *History of Negro Servitude in Illinois*, (Chicago, 1906), p. 148; Hartford *Charter Oak*, October 7, 28, 1847; Howard H. Bell, *A Survey of the Negro Convention Movement, 1830-1861*, (unpublished dissertation, Northwestern University, 1953), pp. 75, 82-4.

³ Dixon Ryan Fox, *The Decline of Aristocracy in the Politics of New York*, (New York, 1919), p. 269n.; Dixon Ryan Fox, "The Negro Vote in Old New York," *Political Science Quarterly*, XXXII, 2, (June, 1917), pp. 252-75.

⁴ Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, (Princeton, 1961), p. 320n.; *New York Tribune*, October 4, 1845, February 12, 1846.

⁵ John R. Hendricks, *The Liberty Party in New York State, 1838-1848*, (unpublished dissertation, Fordham, 1959), pp. 152-57; Works Projects Administration, ed., *Calendar of the Gerrit Smith Papers in the Syracuse University Library*, (Albany, 1941), I, 239, 244, 260.

⁶ William Trimble, "The Social Philosophy of the Loco-Foco Democracy," *American Journal of Sociology*, XXVI, 6, (May, 1921), p. 713; Frederick Merk, "A Safety Valve Thesis and Texan Annexation," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIX, 3, (December, 1962), pp. 428-36; *New York Morning News*, March 13, 28, April 29, 1846; Robert Gumerove, *The 'New York Morning News,' Organ of the Radical 'Barnburning' Democracy, 1844-1846*, (unpublished Master's essay, Columbia University, 1953), pp. 82-91; Parke Godwin, *Biography of William Cullen Bryant*, (New York, 1883), I, pp. 345-6; Litwack, *North of Slavery*, p. 89; *New York Tribune*, January 12, 1852.

⁷ C. C. Cambreleng, John Hunter, Thomas Sears, Gouverneur Kemble, Samuel J. Tilden, Arphaxed Loomis, Michael Hoffman, Azel Danforth, William Taylor, Cyrus Kingsley, John A. Kennedy, and James Powers.

⁸ S. Croswell and R. Sutton, eds., *Debates and Proceedings in the New*

York State Convention for the Revision of the Constitution, (Albany, 1846), pp. 788-91, cf. pp. 783-5; *Tribune Almanac for the Years 1838 to 1868*, (New York, 1868), I, 1847, p. 43; Boston (semi-weekly) *Republican*, November 16, 1848; *Mr. Greeley's Record on the Questions of Amnesty and Reconstruction*, (New York, 1872), p. 21.

⁹ Herbert D. A. Donovan, *The Barnburners*, (New York, 1925), pp. 92-4; Walter L. Ferree, *New York Democracy; Division and Reunion, 1847-1852*, (unpublished dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1953), p. 99.

¹⁰ Michael Hoffman to Azariah C. Flagg, March 25, 1845, Flagg Papers, New York Public Library (italics in original); *Proceedings of the Herkimer Mass Convention*, (Albany, 1847), pp. 4-8; O. C. Gardiner, *The Great Issue*, (New York, 1848), p. 119.

¹¹ George Rathbun, at Utica Convention. *Proceedings of the Utica Convention*, (Albany, 1848), p. 25. Cf. *The Free Soil Question and Its Importance to the Voters of the Free States*, (New York, 1848), pp. 2-7.

¹² J. Franklin Jameson, ed., "Correspondence of John C. Calhoun," *Annual Report of American Historical Association*, 1899, II, p. 1155; *Free Soil Question*, p. 7; John Bigelow, ed., *Writing and Speeches of Samuel J. Tilden*, (New York, 1885), II, p. 545; *National Era*, September 28, 1848; *Boston Republican*, August 23, 1848; Gardiner, *Great Issue*, p. 135; *Herkimer Convention*, p. 28.

¹³ Morgan Dix, *Memoirs of John Adams Dix*, (New York, 1883), II, pp. 114-17; *Congressional Globe*, 30 Congress, 1 Session, Appendix, pp. 866ff.; Simeon B. Jewett to Dix, July 8, 1848, Dix to Thomas Hart Benton, September 9, 1848, Dix Papers, Columbia University Library.

¹⁴ Works Projects Administration, eds., *Calendar of the Joshua Reed Giddings Manuscripts in the Library of the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society*, (Columbus, 1939), p. 222; *National Era*, July 13, 1848; Letter of Lewis H. Bishop (of Warsaw Historical Society, Warsaw, New York) to author, March 13, 1963; Carter G. Woodson, ed., *The Mind of the Negro As Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis 1800-1860*, (Washington, 1926), p. 352.

¹⁵ Ernest P. Mueller, *Preston King: A Political Biography*, (unpublished dissertation, Columbia University, 1957), pp. 335-6, 353; *Congressional Globe*, 29 Congress, 2 Session, pp. 114-5; King to Dix, November 13, 1847, Dix Papers, Columbia University Library; Thomas M. Marshall, ed., "Diary and Memoranda of William L. Marcy, 1849-1851," *American Historical Review*, XXIV, 3, (April, 1919), p. 451.

¹⁶ Charles B. Going, *David Wilmot: Free Soiler*, (New York, 1924), pp. 174-5n.; Margaret Koshinski, *David Wilmot and Free Soil* (unpublished Master's essay, Columbia University, 1949), p. 25; *Congressional Globe*, 29 Congress, 2 Session, Appendix, p. 317, 30 Congress, 1 Session, Appendix, pp. 1076-79; *Herkimer Convention*, p. 14.

¹⁷ *Congressional Globe*, 31 Congress, 1 Session, Appendix, p. 943, 30 Congress, 2 Session, p. 406; Going, *Wilmot*, p. 338.

¹⁸ *Pennsylvania Freeman*, December 7, 1848 (italics in original). In the same editorial, the *Freeman* addressed an eloquent appeal to the entire Free Soil party:

The colored people . . . are calling for their rights, and contending with long-seated prejudices. We have a right to expect Free Soil men to encourage and assist them; if they will not do this, we ask them in the name of humanity, that they will not feed the popular prejudices against this outcast class.

¹⁹ Ralph V. Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, (New York, 1939), p. 186 (italics in original).

²⁰ Van Buren had settled the dispute with the telling remark, "Is not the vote of Geritt [*sic.*] Smith just as weighty as that of [the Barnburner] Judge Martin Grover?" Lucius E. Chittenden, *Personal Reminiscences, 1840-1890*, (New York, 1893), pp. 15-6; Oliver Dyer, *Great Senators of the United States* (New York, 1889), pp. 95-6.

²¹ *Reunion of the Free Soilers of 1848, at Downer Landing, Higham, Massachusetts*, (Boston, 1877), p. 43. Douglass confirmed the incident. *Fredrick Douglass' Paper*, August 20, 1852.

²² Oliver Dyer, *Phonographic Report of the Proceedings of the National Free Soil Convention*, (New York, 1848), pp. 4, 21; Edwin H. Price, "The Election of 1848 in Ohio," *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, XXXVI, (1927), p. 249.

²³ The Western Liberty leaders had for some time been striving to broaden their party's platform, to attract anti-slavery men from the Whig and Democratic parties. Joseph G. Raybeck, "The Liberty Party Leaders of Ohio: Exponents of Anti-Slavery Coalition," *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, LVII, 2, (April, 1947), pp. 165-78.

²⁴ Porter and Johnson, eds., *Party Platforms*, pp. 13-14; Harris, *Negro Servitude*, p. 167; Lawrence Lader, *The Bold Brahmans*, (New York, 1961), p. 135; Boston *Republican*, August 17, 1848; John Brown to Hale, August 24, 1848, John P. Hale Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society.

²⁵ Dwight Dumond, ed., *Letters of James G. Birney, 1831-1857*, (New York, 1938), II, p. 623.

²⁶ Thomas Van Rensselaer to Martin Van Buren, October 16, 1848, in Samuel J. Tilden Papers, New York Public Library; *Pennsylvania Freeman*, October 26, 1848.

²⁷ *North Star*, September 1, 1848. Butler had been Van Buren's Attorney-General. For his views on Negro suffrage, see Butler, "Outline of the Constitutional History of New York," *Collections of the New York Historical Society*, II, Second Series, 1848, p. 62n.

²⁸ *North Star*, September 1, 22, 1848.

²⁹ Bell, *Negro Convention Movement*, p. 106; *North Star*, November 24, 1848, January 12, 1849; (Montpelier, Vt.) *Green Mountain Freeman*, November 11, 1847.

³⁰ Ulrich B. Phillips, ed., "The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander Stephens, and Howell Cobb," *Annual Report of American Historical Association*, 1911, I, p. 270.

³¹ Henry B. Stanton, *Random Recollections*, (New York, 1887), pp. 162, 165. That many of the leading Barnburners were motivated in large part by the desire to defeat Cass is beyond question. See Chittenden, *Reminiscences*, pp. 12-14; "Letter of William Allen Butler to George Bancroft," *Proceedings of Massachusetts Historical Society*, LX, 4, (January, 1927), pp. 118-20; Azariah Flagg to Marcus Morton, June 19, 1848, Gideon Welles to Flagg, February 9, 1848, Flagg Papers, Columbia University Library; John L. O'Sullivan, *Nelson Jarvis Waterbury*, (New York, 1880), pp. 11-12. For a different view, see Joseph G. Raybeck, ed., "Martin Van Buren's Desire for Revenge in the Campaign of 1848," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XL, 4, (March, 1954), pp. 707-16.

³² *National Era*, November 15, 1849.

³³ New York *Evening Post*, June 12, July 17, 19, November 24, 1848, October 18, 1850, May 23, July 30, 1851.

³⁴ New York *Evening Post*, September 8, 1851; Margaret Clapp, *Forgotten First Citizen: John Bigelow*, (Boston, 1947), p. 54; John Bigelow, *Jamaica in 1850*, (New York, 1851), p. 160; Hermann Burmeister, *The Black Man*, (New York, 1853), pp. 3, 5, 13-5 (reprint from New York *Evening Post*).

³⁵ *Tribune Almanac*, I, 1847, p. 44, 1849, p. 49; Edward M. Shepard, *Martin Van Buren*, (Boston, 1888), p. 427; Boston *Commonwealth*, July 27, 1852.

³⁶ *National Era*, June 15, 1848; Philadelphia *Republic*, December 22, 1848; *North Star*, December 8, 1848. And contrast the Barnburners' opposition to the presence of the free Negro in the territories with the *National Era's* position: "We are not opposed to the extension of either class of your [the South's] population, provided it be free, but to the existence of slavery and the migration of slaves." *National Era*, May 3, 1849 (italics in original).

³⁷ Edward Channing, *A History of the United States*, (New York, 1926),

VI, p. 4; Wilfred E. Binkley, *American Political Parties*, (New York, 1954), p. 186.

³⁸ In virtually every Northern state, Negro suffrage was viewed more favorably by the Whigs, and of course the Liberty men, than the Democrats. In states like Ohio and Massachusetts, where the Free Soilers were largely former Whigs and Liberty men, the party fought to extend the social and political rights of free Negroes. Even in these states, however, the party was plagued by the problem of racial prejudice. Emil Olbrich, "The Development of Sentiment on Negro Suffrage to 1860," *Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin*, III, 1, (1912); *National Era*, March 18, 1852.

³⁹ *Pennsylvania Freeman*, February 1, 1849.

⁴⁰ Charles M. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, (New York, 1951), p. 369; Chauncey S. Boucher and Robert P. Brooks, eds., "Correspondence Addressed to John C. Calhoun, 1837-1849," *Annual Report of American Historical Association*, 1929, p. 389; Jameson, ed., "Correspondence of Calhoun," p. 1183; Phillips, ed., "Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb," p. 114; Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union*, I, p. 255; Frederick W. Seward, *Seward at Washington*, (New York, 1891), I, p. 71.

⁴¹ Porter and Johnson, eds., *Party Platforms*, pp. 18-20; New York *Tribune*, August 13, 1852; *National Era*, August 12, 1852.