

# The First American Railroad

By PAUL PEACH

One evening, a dozen years before the Civil War, the city of Washington was on fire with enthusiasm for freedom. The French monarchy had been overthrown, and a long overdue republic established in its place. There were torchlight processions and speeches, and a Mississippi senator proclaimed the imminence of an age of "universal emancipation" in which all nations should recognize as clearly as (for example) the United States "the great principles of popular sovereignty, equality and brotherhood. . ."

The same mob which had shouted for French democracy was on hand a few days later, when a procession of captured fugitive slaves was whipped through the streets of the city. They shouted again—jeers and insults at the Negroes. Liberty? Yes, of course; they'd die for it; but slavery was God's holy institution. Nobody was going to insult God in Washington and get away with it.

In 1835 an Abolitionist writer was escorted through the streets—of Atlanta? no, of Boston—at the end of a rope. The police rescued him from the mob and clapped him in jail. He left an inscription on the wall of his cell: "William Lloyd Garrison was put into this cell on Monday afternoon, October 21, 1835, to save him from the violence of a respectable and influential mob, who sought to destroy him for preaching the abominable and dangerous doctrine that all men are created equal, and that all oppression is odious in the sight of God."

In New York a mob gutted a church and broke up an anti-slavery meeting. In New Hampshire a school was destroyed for admitting Negro students. In Illinois the printer Lovejoy had three presses dumped into the Mississippi River, and was murdered while he attempted to defend a fourth.

Henrietta Buckmaster has written a book which should be studied by all thoughtful Americans. "Let

My People Go" (Harper and Brothers, \$3.50) deals primarily with the growth of the Underground Railroad, the group of Quakers and others who defied the law in order to snatch Negroes from slavery and send them to free Canada. In addition, however, it throws much light upon two questions of the greatest present interest. The first has to do with the influence of economic institutions upon law and morals; the second with the efficacy of political means in attempts at economic reform.

The figure of Garrison dominates the work. Garrison was editor of "The Liberator" and earned the hatred, not merely of the South, but of northern "reform" groups as well. Two words lay deep in the cesspool of Garrison's uttermost contempt: "politics" and "compromise." He lived to see the reenslavement of the Negro, with a new dress hiding the old reality. It is doubtful that, for all his volcanic zeal, he ever understood the true nature of slavery.

The Negroes knew more about fundamental economics than did their friends. After the war they

clamored for land, feeling that "landed security was the only guarantee of freedom. . ." When southern landlords refused, the freedmen began to flock to the new lands of Kansas and Nebraska—a tactic which soon frightened their former masters and induced them to offer terms. The offer was unnecessary; the new lands were soon taken up, and the emigrations ceased. Southern economy was once more on a stable foundation.

Garrison was right; no political means could bring freedom to the Negro. Our problem is to bring freedom to the white man; shall we succeed? The failure of emancipation was due to the superficiality of its economic analysis: slavery in name was not distinguished from slavery in fact. Reformers today fall into the same error; they denounce what they call "capitalist exploitation" and propose political remedies, without asking how it happens that one group should have the power to exploit another. Can we ever escape the curse of the obvious? We shall have to, if we are to achieve more in the way of success than did the Abolitionists.

