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"WE ARE VERILY GUILTY CONCERNING OUR BROTHER": THE ABOLITIONIST TRANSFORMATION OF PLANTER WILLIAM HENRY BRISBANE

J. BRENT MORRIS*

A Slave holder then or Southern man who falters, who apologizes, much less who denounces Slavery & regards abolition as inevitable is in my opinion *our very worst enemy*, the man who saps our strength at the core & does more to destroy us than a brigade of abolitionists could.

—James Henry Hammond to John C. Calhoun¹

IN THE ANTEBELLUM DECADES, THE HEGEMONY OF THE slaveholding class rested upon the façade of a white population unified in support of the institution of slavery. Especially in South Carolina, proslavery leaders brooked little criticism of this social and economic bedrock of their society and moved swiftly to nip any resistance in the bud, while simultaneously extolling the virtues of their "peculiar institution" whenever possible. Northern abolitionists, for their part, specifically targeted the potentially less-resolute yeomanry of the South in an attempt to divide the white population against itself. Though the top-level convert proved exceedingly rare, both the most passionate proslavery ideologues of the South and their harshest critics in the North were well aware of how valuable such a devotee might be. Once-committed slaveholders who embraced abolitionism often became some of the most effective antislavery reformers because of their unique insight into the mind of the master class. Famous examples included the Grimké sisters of South Carolina and James G. Birney, a son of Kentucky, who understood better than most abolitionists the mental acrobatics necessary to sustain a proslavery mindset and the arguments most likely to erode its ideological foundations. Moreover, proslavery apostates represented a propaganda windfall for the forces of antislavery. Their testimony, often reprinted in abolitionist journals and recounted from antislavery rostrums,

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¹James Henry Hammond to John C. Calhoun, September 26, 1845, in *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, vol. 22, 1845–1846, ed. Clyde N. Wilson (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 172. Emphasis in original.

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closely resembled a narrative of religious conversion that was relatable to all Americans. The experience of South Carolina clergyman, editor, and planter-turned-abolitionist William Henry Brisbane is a fascinating instance of the rare and tortuous trek from proslavery ideologue to zealous abolitionist. His antislavery transformation traces the crumbling of an engrained proslavery attitude, the *de novo* development of an antislavery ideology, and the complex path to emancipation.

In the fall of 1833, William Henry Brisbane was a young man of few worries. He had just celebrated his twenty-seventh birthday, and as the son of a wealthy planter, he could look forward to many happy returns. Surveying his plantation at Lawtonville, he could smile as a small army of two dozen slaves toiled to make him even richer.² Under the care of a capable overseer, the regular use of the lash kept the workforce at an elevated level of productivity.³ His family was well connected politically, and Brisbane was one of the most celebrated stump speakers in the region.⁴ He also was a respected man of God and had recently accepted a call to pastor the Beech Branch Baptist Church. He considered himself quite liberal in admitting his own slaves (documented in church records as "property of Bro. Brisbane") as balcony-only members.⁵

There were no obstacles in Brisbane's path to advancement among the Carolina gentry. Perhaps the most significant key to his success was his firm and orthodox opinion on the absolute propriety of slavery. He had been instructed from infancy that all African Americans were his inferiors and especially designed by God to be the white man's slave.⁶ He took many of his cues on the slavery question from older brother Abbott Hall Brisbane, likewise a planter and leading apologist for the institution. William Henry's wife, Anna Lawton, was from a prominent slaveholding family, and together, they trod among the highest echelons of low-country society.

However, Brisbane could recall the precise moment when his mind was first troubled by the notion that slavery might not be the positive good he had

² E. Haviland Hillman, "The Brisbanes," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 14 (July 1913): 133.

³ Journal of William Henry Brisbane, June 13, 1835, microfilm, roll 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

⁴ James Louis Petigru to William Elliott, September 20, 1832, in James Petigru Carson, ed., *Life, Letters, and Speeches of James Louis Petigru, the Union Man of South Carolina* (Washington, D.C.: W. H. Lowdermilk and Company, 1920), 96.

⁵ Wallace Alcorn, "Dissenting Baptists: The Glory of a Hated People," *Baptist History and Heritage* 38 (Summer-Fall 2003): 50.

⁶ William Henry Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane, Lately a Slaveholder in South Carolina; Containing an Account of the Change in His Views on the Subject of Slavery* (Hartford, Conn.: S. S. Cowles, 1840), 3; *Colored American* (New York City), May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840.

come to know it as in South Carolina. On November 8, 1833, he came into possession of an abolitionist pamphlet. Immediately upon ascertaining its nature, Brisbane threw it across his study with disgust. After a few hours, he "condescend[ed] to give it a perusal," if only to satisfy his curiosity. The pamphlet, he discovered, was exceedingly critical of South Carolina politician John C. Calhoun, one of Brisbane's personal political idols. Its author analyzed many of the senator's proslavery arguments, but extended them to demonstrate their potential effects on the rights of white men. This application of Calhoun's ideas was entirely novel to Brisbane, and it so startled him that he began to think about slavery in a fresh way. "It was an entirely new thought to me," he admitted, "feeling the . . . obligation to have regard to the interests and rights of my fellow men."⁷

Brisbane's ethical concern soon gave way to his strong aversion to the prospect of diminishing his main means of support over mere "convictions of duty." On second thought, he decided to turn to the Bible for guidance on whether or not to immediately free his slaves. In recalling his hours of scriptural study years later, Brisbane acknowledged that his mind was "unconsciously warped by interest, and blinded by prejudice." Thus biased, Brisbane concluded that man did in fact have a right to hold his fellow man as property. Abraham appeared to him as the ideal paternalistic slaveholder, and the line of Ham emerged from his study as a people rightfully cursed. "In a word," he recalled, "it was easy for one who wished it so, to find in the Bible a sanction for American Slavery."⁸

Brisbane did not stop at just a word, however. He soon established his own newspaper, the *Southern Baptist and General Intelligencer*, and as editor used his position to promote his scripturally based, proslavery ideology. Besides firing off several quick Biblical justifications of slavery to other newspapers, Brisbane published the widely lauded proslavery article "Has Man a Right to Hold Property in Man?" in the *Southern Baptist*.⁹ It was a thorough survey of both Old and New Testament authority, and Brisbane's exegesis concluded "that man's mind must be awfully perverted by prejudice who does not see in the above passages a sanction for slavery."¹⁰ After this the *Southern Baptist* became Brisbane's personal anti-abolitionist soapbox. "I honestly expressed my conviction in favor of slavery," he admitted, "and

⁷ *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Southern Baptist and General Intelligencer* (Charleston, S.C.), April 17, 1835 (hereafter cited as SBGI); Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 4; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840. See also William Henry Brisbane to J. E. Snodgrass, February 20, 1844, in *Liberator* (Boston), March 8, 1844; *Concord Register* (Concord, N.H.), June 18, 1841; David B. Cheeseboro, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South, 1830-1865* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 32.

¹⁰ SBGI, April 17, 1835. Original emphasis.

zealously defended the institution whenever I had a suitable opportunity."¹¹ Time after time, he excerpted antislavery passages from northern papers and attempted to refute them point by point. After reprinting one particular passage from the *Boston Christian Watchman* that argued slavery was a sin against God and man as well as a barrier to the progress of Christianity in the United States, Brisbane demanded proof. "The ungrounded assertion that all slavery was forbidden by the spirit of Christianity," he wrote, "cannot be expected to convince us." He concluded his critique by maintaining that "until something more is brought to bear upon the Anti-Slavery side of the question, we are disposed to maintain our belief as consistent with justice and revelation."¹²

Brisbane never seriously considered anything "on the other side of the question," he said, since "I felt so satisfied that my own views were incontrovertible."¹³ He labeled those who disagreed with his support of slavery as mischievous agitators and disturbers of the peace.¹⁴ He believed that abolitionists, particularly those who dared question his editorials in print, were attempting "much evil, and no practical good" by meddling in peculiarly southern affairs.¹⁵ He also urged northerners to help reign in the reformers and "arrest these misguided fanatics and consign them and their works to the contempt and shame and obscurity which they deserve."¹⁶ Yet while he and other southerners rested content with their conclusions, abolitionists in the North used the newspaper exchange to finely tune their own biblical arguments.¹⁷ Just as Brisbane had excerpted or reprinted antislavery articles so that he could pick them apart in his own editorials, antislavery newspapers copied his so that their readers could get some idea of the degree of obstinacy they faced from the South. The editor of the *Boston Recorder* stated that Brisbane's "Has Man a Right" essay was an important and valuable document insofar as it would show abolitionist readers "some of the work which must be done in order that slavery may be abolished." The line of argument that Brisbane articulated needed to be answered "patiently, calmly, and thoroughly" so that slaveholders could be most effectively appraised. "It will doubtless be hard

¹¹ Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 4; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840. See also Brisbane to Snodgrass, February 20, 1844, in *Liberator*, March 8, 1844; *Concord Register*, June 18, 1841; Justin D. Fulton, *Memoir of Timothy Gilbert* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1866), 95.

¹² SBGI, May 8, 1835.

¹³ Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 4; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840.

¹⁴ SBGI, May 15, 1835.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, August 7, 1835. See also *ibid.*, April 17, 1835.

¹⁷ Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 4; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840.

work," the editor announced, but all abolitionists should be prepared "to add a few remarks by way of reply" when confronted with the standard proslavery dogma.¹⁸

Abolitionists did not limit themselves to editorial responses to proslavery threats like Brisbane. In the summer of 1835, besides an unprecedented lecturing campaign across the North and West, abolitionist leaders prepared a massive propaganda operation for the "benefit" of their southern brethren. The Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) mailed thousands of pamphlets in an attempt to inundate the South with abolitionist literature, which hopefully would convince many southerners of the evils of slavery and lead them to emancipate their bondsmen. However, the effect of the postal campaign was to inflame the passions of most southerners and steel their resolve to resist any and all attempts by abolitionist outsiders to extend their message below the Mason-Dixon Line.¹⁹

Brisbane noted with disgust in the *Southern Baptist* the arrival in Charleston of a shipment of abolitionist literature to be delivered to "respectable gentlemen" and the ensuing siege of the post office and burning of hundreds of the pamphlets. Though he disapproved of the mob tactics of the anti-abolitionists, he fully endorsed their motives and what he imagined would be the end result of their actions. He hoped that the Charleston episode would convince northerners "that the Southern people *will protect themselves from further aggression.*" "Instead of standing coolly [*sic*] by, and seeing these men pouring 'fire-brands, arrows, and death into our bosoms,' " Brisbane urged, "let them frown upon them and put them down; let them make it criminal in the representative states to publish a seditious or incendiary paper or pamphlet; let them come forward and aid the Southern people in passing laws, if none are already in existence, to prevent the United States' mail from becoming the vehicle of pestilence and ruin to one portion of this union."²⁰

Interestingly, Brisbane's name was among those slave masters meant to receive a portion of the mailings, and his parcel survived destruction in the Charleston blazes. In late July 1835, Brisbane received a tract containing an excerpt from Brown University president Francis Wayland's treatise *Elements*

¹⁸ *Boston Recorder*, n.d., quoted in *SBGI*, May 22, 1835.

¹⁹ Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 4; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840. See also Susan Wylly-Jones, "The 1835 Anti-Abolition Meetings in the South: A New Look at the Controversy over the Abolition Postal Campaign," *Civil War History* 47 (December 2001): 289–309; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Abolitionists' Postal Campaign of 1835," *Journal of Negro History* 50 (October 1965): 227–238.

²⁰ *SBGI*, August 7, 1835. Original emphasis.

of *Moral Science*.²¹ The piece, Wayland's chapter on "Personal Liberty," again shook Brisbane's conceptions of slavery to the core. Wayland's main argument was that a master had no right to control both the physical and intellectual freedom of his slave for his own benefit. Such a practice, he wrote, "renders the eternal happiness of the one party subservient to the temporal happiness of the other." "The principles of the Gospel," Wayland concluded, "are diametrically opposed to the principle of slavery," and the Gospels themselves were "equally opposed to the practice of slavery."²² Brisbane admitted that the argument was the most cogent he had read on the antislavery side of the question.²³ Indeed, he confessed in his journal that he was "very much distressed" by the revelations contained in the pamphlet.²⁴ This reaction was so alien to his deeply ingrained proslavery ethos that he could only respond with anger and rage. As he had in 1833, Brisbane instinctively endeavored to discredit the tormenting pamphlet. After rereading Wayland's chapter several more times, Brisbane "detected its errors" and torturously drafted a response.²⁵

His reply betrayed the desperation of someone whose convictions had been sorely troubled. Brisbane expended more effort criticizing the basic fact of Wayland's abolitionism than his logic. Brisbane believed that everything Wayland (as an abolitionist) touched must be carefully avoided. Though Brown University was a Baptist institution, Brisbane admonished his readers to keep their children from attending "so long as Dr. Wayland be its president, or his system of ethics be taught." Brisbane went on to say that "if Dr. Wayland had desired to close the doors of the University to *Southerners*, he could not have resorted to a more effectual expedient than that chapter of his on personal liberty." The Brown president was but one of the "fanatical Abolitionists" who hoped to "subvert the peculiar policy of the South" and needed to be silenced.²⁶

After Brisbane installed Wayland as a principle target of abuse in the *Southern Baptist*, he gradually became "easy" again regarding the slavery question.²⁷ Yet Brisbane's mind must have been troubled more than he was willing to admit. As the summer of 1835 waned, he noticed with alarm the

²¹ See William W. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 340-342.

²² Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Moral Science* (New York: Cooke and Company, 1835), quoted in *SBGI*, September 18, 1835. Original emphasis.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Brisbane Journal*, July 8, 1835.

²⁵ *Brisbane, Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 4; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840.

²⁶ *SBGI*, September 11, 1835. Original emphasis.

²⁷ *Brisbane Journal*, July 8, 1835.

surprising path down which his own proslavery arguments were forced to evolve. He was startled to recognize "anti-republican conclusions" throughout his justifications of the institution.²⁸ By late August, despite his continuing hackneyed attempts to vindicate the South from charges of criminality in owning slaves, he had noticeably ratcheted down the proslavery tone of his newspaper. "We have determined, at least for the present," he announced to his readers, "to cease on our part the discussion regarding the justice of slavery *in the abstract*." While he stood by his assertions that slavery (in some form) had been sanctioned in the Bible, he confessed that "whether the argument is applicable to *our* system of slavery or not, or whether it would prove that the origin of slavery in this country can be justified or not" was more than he was capable of arguing at that point.²⁹

Francis Wayland's words continued to haunt Brisbane. He began to feel as though he must either give up his republican principles "or admit that slavery, in its origin was unjust, and that if freedom be a good, slavery is an evil." He soon fell into the self-serving lament of many slaveholders, though, by questioning whether he could actually be held responsible for the bondage of men and women who were already slaves before they came into his possession. "The responsibility could not rest on me," he reasoned, since he "was only acting in agreement with the laws of the country. . . . Our fathers had fixed it upon us." Moreover, it was his republican principles that had been shaken, not his Bible-based defense of slavery. The Holy Book still appeared to him to clearly justify the practice, even if many of its transcendent principles seemed opposed to it, at least as it existed in America.³⁰

Brisbane finally decided that careful and intensive study of the slavery question was necessary. He was anxious to have all aspects of the subject before him, but in South Carolina, he could find little literature to satisfy his thirst for answers. He read some "thoughts" on slavery in *Rees's Cyclopaedia*, but feared the consequences of being found with any genuine abolitionist writing in his possession, especially in light of the mobocratic response of proslavery Charlestonians in July.³¹ Nonetheless, he rapaciously devoured any bits of information he could obtain on the subject. For every tract he read on human rights, he stumbled upon another that highlighted slavery as the

²⁸ Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 4; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840.

²⁹ SBGI, August 21, 1835. Original emphasis.

³⁰ Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 4; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840.

³¹ *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840. *The Cyclopaedia, or Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*, edited by Rev. Abraham Rees, was published in London between 1802 and 1820. It contained thirty-nine volumes of text.

bedrock of the southern economic and social system.³² By the end of the summer of 1835, Brisbane had incongruously concluded that slavery and republicanism were at odds, yet the institution remained justifiable "on the ground of necessity."³³ A general emancipation would cripple the southern economy, and Brisbane was convinced that it would also expose the freed slaves to unbearable adversity at the hands of their former oppressors. "The African race are here among us," he wrote in the *Southern Baptist*, "and unless we can, without injury to ourselves or them, restore them to their own country, it is absolutely necessary for our prosperity, for the safety of our citizens, and for the welfare of the blacks themselves, to retain them in bondage."³⁴

To save his own conscience, while avoiding the "ruinous" large-scale emancipation that he feared, Brisbane decided to free his own slaves.³⁵ "If necessity was the law by which [slavery] was justified," he deduced, that law would not apply to him, since he had the means to weather this loss of "property." As he arranged for their emancipation, Brisbane allowed his slaves to work his plantation, supplied them with whatever goods they needed, and agreed to distribute the proceeds of all crops evenly among them. He banished the whip from his fields, dismissed his overseer, and left his lands entirely under the control of his bondsmen.³⁶

Yet no sooner had Brisbane taken these steps than he became "the object of calumny and abuse" from his neighbors. It was even suggested to him that for his own personal safety, he take his family and flee the low country. All of this puzzled him. He did not believe that he had broken any laws by his new labor arrangements. What is more, he was emphatically no abolitionist. Admittedly, he had given up the defense of slavery in the abstract. But even as he allowed his slaves a significant degree of freedom on his plantation, he continued to vindicate the South's system of chattel slavery in the columns of his Charleston newspaper.³⁷ Indeed, Brisbane admitted that he "would rather have been called an assassin than an abolitionist."³⁸ He continued to use his editorials to urge "sensible" northerners to publicly denounce abolitionist leaders like William Lloyd Garrison, Lewis and Arthur Tappan, and George

³² Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 4; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840. See also *SBGI*, September 18, 1835.

³³ Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 4; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840. See also *SBGI*, September 18, 1835.

³⁴ *SBGI*, August 21, 1835.

³⁵ Brisbane *Journal*, July 8, July 14–17, 1835; Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 5; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840.

³⁶ *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840.

³⁷ Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 5; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840. See also *SBGI*, August–December, 1835, *passim*.

³⁸ Brisbane *Journal*, July 8, July 14–17, 1835; Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 5; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840.

Thompson. These were either "depraved men or devoid of common sense," not to mention "wicked disturbers of the public peace."³⁹ When well-known abolitionists suffered frustrating public setbacks, Brisbane rejoiced.⁴⁰ When his sister-in-law began expressing views that smacked of abolitionism, "carrying the matter too far," he was quick to rebuke her.⁴¹

Nevertheless, despite maintaining himself an apologist for slavery in the *Southern Baptist*, his subscriptions began to drop off. An effort was made by "Christian people" to ruin his journal because Brisbane "would no longer say that slavery was right in itself, and ought to be supported."⁴² Rumors swirled that Brisbane was in fact a "vile" abolitionist and that warrants had been issued from Beaufort for his arrest because of his "incendiary movements." At least three times, he was threatened with tar and feathers. When he approached the pulpit to offer his sermons each Sabbath, church members left the sanctuary. There was a stirring among his critics to bar him from preaching altogether.⁴³ Even Brisbane's slaves suffered on account of his rumored abolitionism. Many were afraid to venture off his plantation "lest they might be abused." In response, Brisbane truly proved himself no abolitionist. "I thought I had better sell them," he wrote, "than retain them in my possession." The reaction of the community suggested to Brisbane that his views on slavery may have been in error. He was finally convinced, though, that he must soon leave "the jurisdiction of Lynch Law" so that he could consider the issue even further.⁴⁴

On February 12, 1838, Brisbane and his family left South Carolina for Ohio, where he accepted a call to pastor Cincinnati's First Baptist Church.⁴⁵ Before departing, Brisbane entered into negotiations to sell his slaves. He convinced his wife that in selling his land and bondsmen, "it was decidedly to increase our annual income."⁴⁶ He also disingenuously claimed that he "could not with safety to themselves leave them without a protector." Brisbane

³⁹ *SBGI*, August 21, 1835.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, October 30, 1835.

⁴¹ Brisbane Journal, July 20, 1835.

⁴² Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 5; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840; *SBGI*, September 18 and 25, October 16, 1835.

⁴³ Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 5; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840; *North Star* (Rochester, N.Y.), October 12, 1849; *Spartan* (Spartanburg, S.C.), n.d., quoted in *Liberator*, October 19, 1849.

⁴⁴ Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 5-6; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840. See also Brisbane to Snodgrass, February 20, 1844, in *Liberator*, March 8, 1844.

⁴⁵ Brisbane Journal, January 18, February 23, 1838. He assured his new congregation that he would not use his post as an antislavery pulpit. See Alcorn, "Dissenting Baptists," 3.

⁴⁶ Brisbane Journal, January 18, 1838.

sold all but his three favorite slaves to his brother-in-law (and one-time overseer) Edward Peeples on credit.⁴⁷ The three remaining slaves accompanied the family to Cincinnati. "We are now quite free of the care of negroes," Brisbane jotted in his journal as he left South Carolina.⁴⁸

Brisbane continued in his severe dislike of abolitionists, mostly for what he perceived as their irresponsible and reckless style of agitation. Though he subscribed to James G. Birney's *Philanthropist* in Cincinnati, Brisbane "almost felt like polluting my fingers whenever I touched it." A quick perusal of Theodore Dwight Weld's *The Bible against Slavery* enraged him.⁴⁹ Though he proposed a resolution before the Ohio Baptist State Convention in June 1839 in favor of "free expression of opinion on moral and religious subjects" (a move that again brought upon him the charge of abolitionism from many of his Baptist colleagues), prominent antislavery advocates in Cincinnati pointed out that Brisbane was "not yet an Abolitionist."⁵⁰

In a parallel to the situation that brought his first pangs of antislavery doubt, it was Brisbane's attempt to craft a response to Weld's argument in *American Slavery as It Is* that effected a lasting abolitionist transformation. Brisbane began to read the book and managed six pages of objections to Weld's introduction by the light of his fireplace. Yet as he perused the body of Weld's text, including hundreds of pages of accounts of the worst horrors of slavery, Brisbane could not bring himself to write another word in its defense. "I found myself already convinced that he had the truth on his side," Brisbane declared, and though he "could cavil, [he] could no longer say that the Bible sanctioned slavery." Brisbane tossed his earlier objections into the flames.⁵¹ He realized that to right these horrible wrongs, he must not only endorse, but also actively join in the militant tactics of the abolitionists.

Though the three slaves he had taken to Ohio were worth several thousand dollars, Brisbane immediately freed them. He rejoiced that in the process, he too had been "emancipated from that inglorious prejudice which enslaved me to error and to wrong."⁵² To make further amends, he returned south in October 1839 and attempted to repurchase the rest of the slaves that

⁴⁷ Ibid.; Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 6; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840.

⁴⁸ Brisbane Journal, January 18, 1838.

⁴⁹ Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 6; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840. See also *Liberator*, April 3, 1840.

⁵⁰ *Philanthropist* (New Richmond, Ohio), July 2, November 19, 1839.

⁵¹ Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 6; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840. See also *Liberator*, April 3, 1840; *Oberlin Evangelist* (Oberlin, Ohio), January 5, 1848.

⁵² *Philanthropist*, December 9, 1840.

he had previously sold.⁵³ Though he offered ten thousand dollars (over a quarter-million in 2009 dollars), his bid was rejected as too low.⁵⁴ Refusing to abandon his former slaves, Brisbane then gave over a huge portion of his estate to a trustee so that if any ever came up for sale, they could be immediately redeemed.⁵⁵ "I will endure poverty, yea, die in a hospital," he affirmed when he signed over his wealth, "before I will any longer allow myself to be an instrument of aiding and abetting a system of wrong against my fellow man, and of sin against my God."⁵⁶

Brisbane returned to Ohio in late 1839 as a fully converted abolitionist. His first journal entry of 1840 avowed, "My mind is now fully made up, not only that slavery is wrong to man, both the slave & his master, & a sin against God having no justification in his word, but that to the principles of the abolitionists as set forth in their constitution can we alone look with any hope of success to put down the horrible system of human robbery and oppression."⁵⁷ Three days later, he revised his offer to repurchase his slaves. In a letter to Edward Peeples, Brisbane reiterated his belief that slavery was sinful and that he would not rest until his erstwhile bondsmen were free. If Peeples refused to sell, he warned, "the account stands between you and God.... Remember that these are immortal souls which you are to meet at the bar of God." He offered to transport the freed people to Ohio, "where they can have opportunity to rise in character as well as worldly prosperity." Fittingly, Brisbane sent along an antislavery tract with his letter.⁵⁸

His public "coming-out" was in a speech before the Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society of Cincinnati in early February 1840. For the first time, he fully recounted his transformation from passionate defender of slavery to zealous

⁵³ Brisbane Journal, October 24, 1839.

⁵⁴ Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 6; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840. See www.measuringworth.com/index.html for relative value (accessed May 17, 2010).

⁵⁵ Brisbane Journal, October 24, 1839; *Philanthropist*, December 9, 1840; *Cincinnati Weekly Herald and Philanthropist*, September 4, 1844; *National Era* (Washington, D.C.), n.d., quoted in *Christian Reflector* (Worcester, Mass.), November 18, 1847. See also Brisbane to Snodgrass, February 20, 1844, in *Liberator*, March 8, 1844. If Peeples still refused to sell Brisbane the slaves at the end of ten years, the agent was authorized to sell all that Brisbane had given him in trust and use the proceeds to purchase as many Carolina slaves as possible and settle them in the North.

⁵⁶ *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840. See also *Philanthropist*, December 9, 1840.

⁵⁷ Brisbane Journal, January 4, 1840.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*; William Henry Brisbane to Edward H. Peeples, January 4, 1840, in Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 6–7; *Philanthropist*, April 7, 1840; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840; *Philanthropist*, March 9, 1842. See also J. E. Snodgrass to William Henry Brisbane, February 19, 1844, in *Liberator*, March 8, 1844.

abolitionist. Besides the brief autobiographical account, his speech was a thorough exegesis and refutation of the proslavery argument that had for so long gripped his convictions, as well as an invitation to others to follow his example. This was the first of a barrage of antislavery addresses before northern abolitionist meetings and a subject, along with "the salvation of the soul," upon which he "could speak with most anxious interest."⁵⁹

Over the next month, Brisbane's Cincinnati speech was reprinted in over a dozen antislavery newspapers nationwide, and thousands of copies were printed for gratuitous circulation.⁶⁰ From Boston, Garrison called Brisbane's transformation a "REMARKABLE CONVERSION!" The Cincinnati speech, in Garrison's opinion, demonstrated "noble resolve! Spoken in the true martyr-spirit, like a man, a brother, and a Christian!"⁶¹ Brisbane quickly became a darling of the abolitionist community in the North, representing as he did so well their hopes and dreams for the conversion of each and every slaveholder and proslavery ideologue. He appreciated the weighty task before him and why he had to undertake it. "I feel it a duty to myself as well as to society," he declared, "to make known in a public manner, that I most heartily repent of all part that I have heretofore voluntarily taken in supporting this unholy system of wrong and oppression."⁶²

Even as he kept up the brisk pace of an abolitionist speaker whose lectures were in great demand, Brisbane continued negotiations to reacquire his former slaves in South Carolina. In each of his speeches, the most difficult part for Brisbane was the account of his life since his letter to Edward Peeples in January 1840. His story of the recent slaveholder converting to radical abolitionism seemed to be a triumphant progression. Yet his ongoing difficulties in redeeming his fellow men, enslaved by his own hand, severely complicated the narrative. Months of haggling amounted to little, as Peeples and his agents held out for a purchase price well above market value.⁶³

Finally, by April 1840, the parties had come to terms, and Brisbane's costly tender was accepted. For reasons which remain unclear, one particular slave (a man whom Brisbane personally favored) could not be located at the time of the sale. Though he "always felt troubled, afterward, about that man,"

⁵⁹ William Henry Brisbane to Samuel D. Hastings, April 28, 1840, in *Liberator*, June 12, 1840. See also *Philanthropist*, April 28, 1840.

⁶⁰ *Philanthropist*, May 12, 1840.

⁶¹ *Liberator*, April 3, 1840. Original emphasis.

⁶² Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 4; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840.

⁶³ See Coy K. Johnston, *Two Centuries of Lawtonville Baptists, 1775-1975* (Estill, S.C.: Historical Committee, Lawtonville Baptist Church, 1975), 65.

Brisbane began the process of settling the rest of the slaves on free soil.⁶⁴ On August 21, 1841, Brisbane prepared a deed of emancipation in anticipation of his upcoming homecoming to South Carolina.⁶⁵ His good antislavery friend Salmon P. Chase helped him draft the document and then endorsed it as a witness.⁶⁶

After several more unexpected delays, Brisbane returned to his native state to accompany the slaves to their new home.⁶⁷ When goodbyes were said and everyone's possessions packed, Brisbane and the twenty-eight men, women, and children departed for Green Township, Ohio. There, Brisbane contracted to rent several houses for the group until he could make arrangements to bring them closer to Cincinnati.⁶⁸ Though their residence was widely known to be only temporary, within days of reaching Green Township, the new arrivals were attacked at night in their houses. A white mob bent on intimidation surrounded the dwellings and broke every window. Besides this, several armed men in the mob randomly discharged their firearms into the houses, endangering the lives of everyone inside. A Cincinnati newspaper called the attack "utterly unprovoked, and . . . simple devilishness." Still, local officials reacted not by seeking out the assailants, but by vowing to enforce one of Ohio's notorious "Black Laws" that required a five-hundred-dollar security bond for each free African American resident. Brisbane immediately came to the group's aid and helped them relocate to Cincinnati, where the Black Laws were not so rigidly enforced.⁶⁹

When Brisbane (and his former slaves) arrived in Ohio, the West was rapidly becoming a nerve center of the American abolitionist movement. With the founding in 1833 of Oberlin College on strong abolitionist principles in the

⁶⁴ William Henry Brisbane to Edward H. Peeples, January 4, 1840, in Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 6–7; *Philanthropist*, April 7, 1840; *Colored American*, May 2, 1840; *Boston Recorder*, April 3, 1840; *Philanthropist*, March 9, 1842. See also Snodgrass to Brisbane, February 19, 1844, in *Liberator*, March 8, 1844; *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, ed. Brenda Stevenson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 469–470; Brisbane Journal, December 19, 1841.

⁶⁵ Brisbane Journal, August 21, 1841.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, August 25, 1841.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, December 19, 1841; *Cincinnati Weekly Herald and Philanthropist*, September 4, 1844.

⁶⁸ *Philanthropist*, n.d., quoted in *Liberator*, April 19, 1844.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* See also *Baltimore Saturday Visitor*, n.d., quoted in *Liberator*, March 8, 1844. Brisbane helped organize the Cincinnati Anti-Slavery Society, a biracial organization. He also was a familiar face in Cincinnati's African American community, often preaching at black churches, participating in the ordinations of black ministers, organizing and working in schools for African American children, and aiding self-emancipating slaves in their journeys to freedom. See Brisbane Journal, December 29, 1844, November 2, 1845; William Henry Brisbane to "W," September 18, 1840, in *Philanthropist*, March 29, 1843.

northern part of the state, a burgeoning antislavery movement around Cincinnati in the south, and the abolitionist barnstorming of Oberlin students and other agents of the AASS in the mid 1830s, Ohio emerged as the fastest-growing abolitionist stronghold in the nation. Importantly, reformers in Ohio were relatively successful in avoiding the ideological quarrels that divided their eastern colleagues. Though there were local organizations nominally affiliated with the "Old Organization" Garrisonians, the "New Organization" Tappanites, and the Liberty Party, western abolitionists were far more likely to develop a composite antislavery ideology by choosing the means and tactics most likely to effect change.⁷⁰

Brisbane fit into this ideological mix without difficulty. He had become an abolitionist because he believed slavery to be a heinous sin that should immediately be abolished. Accordingly, he was willing to consider any tactic that might contribute to that end. He cared little for the ideological differences in the East. He urged all reformers "to pursue a course as much in harmony as possible with all engaged in advocating the rights of the slave." Brisbane himself stated that he had "been willing to do what I could in the cause of human rights, either with old or new organizations." In fact, he doubted the wisdom of even having large national organizations and believed that "there was a better and more efficient mode of action, than through regularly constituted societies."⁷¹ This did not mean, of course, that Brisbane thought all antislavery tactics offered equal chances of success. When pressed to take sides, Brisbane most often agreed with the methods of the "New Org" American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (AFASS). Still, he objected to the rash 1840 walkout and separation of the AFASS from the AASS, arguing that "it would have been better, in my opinion, to have held on." He personally had no problem with the controversial move that precipitated the schism—the Garrisonians' appointment of a woman to the Business Committee of the AASS—but simply noticed a higher degree of compatibility between himself and the New Org.⁷²

From the organization of the national Liberty Party in 1840, Brisbane was one of the most active political abolitionists in the West.⁷³ Following that year's presidential contest, Brisbane was named to the Liberty Party's Ohio central committee and electioneered on behalf of party candidates in the state elections of 1842 and 1843.⁷⁴ In 1844 Brisbane was nominated for Congress

⁷⁰ See J. Brent Morris, "'Be Not Conformed to This World': Oberlin and the Fight to End Slavery, 1833–1863" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 2010), esp. chap. 6.

⁷¹ William Henry Brisbane to William Lloyd Garrison, n.d., in *Liberator*, March 1, 1844.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Philanthropist*, March 9, May 25, June 1, August 13, September 24, 1842, September 6, 27, October 11, 1843; William Henry Brisbane to Gamaliel Bailey, n.d.,

to represent the Hamilton County district.⁷⁵ Though he lost the election, his cache among Ohio Liberty Party men remained undiminished. The year 1845 found Brisbane again headlining Liberty Party lecture tours along with Salmon P. Chase, Gamaliel Bailey, and two-time Liberty presidential candidate James G. Birney.⁷⁶

In 1846 the Brisbanes moved briefly to Philadelphia to pursue new business opportunities, but a great percentage of William Henry's time continued to be occupied with abolitionist work. While resident in Philadelphia, Brisbane served on the Executive Committee of the Pennsylvania Liberty Party and edited the official newspaper of the Liberty Party of Eastern Pennsylvania, the *American Citizen*.⁷⁷ Besides his writing duties as newspaper editor, Brisbane also busied himself in more substantial antislavery literary projects. In his mind, he had still not sufficiently made amends for his proslavery past, and he pledged to do as much and more as an abolitionist writer than he had once done as a proslavery editor. In late 1846, he published (anonymously) *The Fanatic; or, the Perils of Peter Pliant, the Poor Pedagogue*.⁷⁸ This appears to be the earliest extant full-length antislavery novel in America, yet its explicit content more resembled Theodore Weld's bracing *Slavery as It Is* than delicate Victorian sentimental fiction. From the premise that slavery was a "damning leprosy" that ruined the lives of both masters and slaves, Brisbane described a world of incest, insanity, rape, adultery, murder, suicide, and sadism. Only those slaveowning characters who repented of their sins and freed their bondsmen were spared the worst curses brought on by the institution. Likely because of its graphic (though often historically accurate)

in *Philanthropist*, March 30, 1842; Brisbane Journal, December 23, 1844; Eugene Holloway Roseboom and Francis Phelps Weisenberger, eds., *A History of Ohio*, 2nd ed. (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society, 1967), 415.

⁷⁵ Brisbane Journal, August 20, 30, 1844; *Cincinnati Weekly Herald and Philanthropist*, September 4, 1844.

⁷⁶ Brisbane Journal, March 10, June 10, 1845.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, August 18, November 24, 1846. For more on the *American Citizen*, see Michael D. Pierson, *Free Hearts and Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 31; Pennsylvania Newspaper Project, vol. 1, no. 1 (1992), 43.

⁷⁸ Anonymous, *The Fanatic; or, the Perils of Peter Pliant, the Poor Pedagogue* (Philadelphia: Office of the American Citizen, 1846). Historian Donald Edward Liedel credits Brisbane with the authorship of this work based on the recognizable arguments it contains as well as handwritten annotations found on the copy of *The Fanatic* in the Library of Congress. If this is true, then Brisbane also was the author of *Winona; or, The Brown Maid of the South*, published some time between 1843 and 1846. The title page of *The Fanatic* credits its author with having penned *Winona*, but no copies of this work are known to exist. See Donald Edward Liedel, "The Anti-Slavery Novel, 1836-1861" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1961), 47 (n. 70), 50.

scenes, *The Fanatic* was not commercially successful and only merited a single press run.⁷⁹

Brisbane wrote a second antislavery novel while in Philadelphia, *Amanda: A Tale for the Times*, which played on the sensational trope of the white slave. It told the story of a northern white woman who was kidnapped, hurried south, and forced into slavery.⁸⁰ Though she was eventually rescued from certain concubinage, Brisbane used the Amanda character to expose the market in light-skinned "fancy maids" among lust-driven southern slaveholders.⁸¹ This anticipated the theme of kidnapped and enslaved white children that would become common in antislavery literature in the 1850s.⁸²

His most famous and well-received literary work was *Slaveholding Examined in the Light of the Holy Bible*.⁸³ In this lengthy composition, Brisbane's journey from proslavery ideologue to antislavery activist came full circle. It was more than just a point-by-point refutation of his earlier proslavery interpretation of the Bible, though Brisbane was sure to thoroughly discuss each and every thrust of his former arguments.⁸⁴ As a friend pointed out, Brisbane discussed "every passage in the Bible, that has heretofore been adduced in support of slavery." *Slaveholding Examined* also was a "rigorous" analysis of the Scriptures in several languages and translations and showed, according to at least one reader, "to a demonstration . . . that the Bible not only withholds its sanction from [slavery], but imposes upon it the most fearful condemnation."⁸⁵

This work became one of the most successful antislavery books published in the antebellum period, going through several editions and reprints and gathering the unconditional praise of some of America's most respected abolitionists. Gamaliel Bailey, now editing the antislavery *National Era* in Washington, D.C., declared that "so much truth in briefspace, we have seldom read. Without doubt we think it the best argument on the Bible question we have ever read."⁸⁶ Theodore Dwight Weld, whose own literary efforts in the

⁷⁹ See Liedel, "The Anti-Slavery Novel," 46–50.

⁸⁰ *Amanda* was first published serially in Gamaliel Bailey's *National Era*, March 23, 1848–April 6, 1848. It was reissued separately later that year and reprinted again in 1849. See William Henry Brisbane, *Amanda: A Tale for the Times* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Thompson, 1848); *Brisbane Journal*, January 6–7, 1848.

⁸¹ Brisbane, *Amanda*, 38–39, 44.

⁸² See Stephen Talty, *Mulatto America: At the Crossroads of Black and White Culture: A Social History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 3–26.

⁸³ See William Henry Brisbane, *Slaveholding Examined in the Light of the Holy Bible* (Philadelphia: American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1847).

⁸⁴ For examples of his former proslavery Biblical arguments, see *SBGJ*, May 8, 15, July 10, August 21, September 18, 25, October 23, 1835, January 29, 1836.

⁸⁵ Letter of Rev. Samuel Aaron, August 8, 1847, in Brisbane, *Slaveholding Examined*, ii.

⁸⁶ *National Era*, n.d., quoted in *Christian Reflector*, November 18, 1847.

1830s were largely responsible for Brisbane's conversion to abolitionism, lauded *Slaveholding Examined* as "admirable." The work's "clearness, compact logic, freedom from ambitious pretense of scholarship—its easy, natural flow of common sense . . . entitle it to a wide dissemination, and will secure for its words of truth and soberness large audience and earnest pondering."⁸⁷ Lewis Tappan, the man responsible for financing its publication, called *Slaveholding Examined* "an excellent performance" that would "do much good."⁸⁸ Philadelphian William Elder noted that Brisbane "has lived through every stage of his argument, and in a very successful piece of authorship, has produced a book, which is well-calculated to spread its truths and circulate itself wherever it is most needed."⁸⁹ The zealous abolitionists of Oberlin, Ohio, hailed Brisbane's book as "beyond all praise."⁹⁰

In spite of his accomplishments in the North, the recreancy of Brisbane's native state was never far from his mind. For the sake of the nearly four hundred thousand men and women enslaved in South Carolina as well as his genuine concern for his beloved place of birth, Brisbane felt confident that he had "good reason for desiring to see South Carolina delivered from the despotism which is now grinding her to powder."⁹¹ Since his removal from the Palmetto State in 1838, Brisbane had carried on a steady correspondence with family members, acquaintances, and even outspoken proslavery ideologues back home.⁹² Though he dealt gently with these relations on the touchy issue of slavery, he maintained one constant goal: the conversion of his correspondents to abolitionism and the immediate release of all of their slaves from bondage. Most often, the Carolinians' stubbornness was unyielding, but in several instances, he appears to have been successful. In the autumn of 1847,

⁸⁷ Theodore Dwight Weld to William Henry Brisbane, August 18, 1847, in Brisbane, *Slaveholding Examined*, iii; Brisbane Journal, August 10–12, 1847. Original emphasis.

⁸⁸ Lewis Tappan to William Henry Brisbane, n.d., in Brisbane, *Slaveholding Examined*, v; Brisbane Journal, August 10–12, 1847.

⁸⁹ William Elder to Brisbane, September 23, 1847, in Brisbane, *Slaveholding Examined*, ii. Original emphasis.

⁹⁰ Oberlin Evangelist, January 5, 1848.

⁹¹ North Star, October 12, 1849; University of Virginia Historical Census Browser, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/newlong2.php> (accessed February 24, 2010). See also Philanthropist, February 18, 1840.

⁹² See William Henry Brisbane to "W.," September 18, 1840, in Philanthropist, March 29, 1843; "W.B." to "Henry," August 7, 1840, September 6, 1842, in Philanthropist, March 15, 1843; Philanthropist, August 2, 1843; William Henry Brisbane to Edward H. Peeples, January 4, 1840, in Brisbane, *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*, 6–7; Philanthropist, April 7, 1840; Colored American, May 2, 1840; Boston Recorder, April 3, 1840; Philanthropist, March 9, 1842. See also Snodgrass to Brisbane, February 19, 1844, in Liberator, March 8, 1844.

for example, he rejoiced that a relative had concluded "American slavery to be sinful" and "made up his mind to abandon slavery & emancipate the slaves over whom he has ownership."⁹³

Encouraged by this success and driven by lingering homesickness, Brisbane and his family made their first return visit to South Carolina in January 1849. Back once again in old Beaufort District, he was warmly greeted by well wishers, and the Brisbanes received "their hospitalities and affectionate attentions" graciously. Yet while they felt safe among family and friends, others in the community were busy plotting Brisbane's lynching.⁹⁴ Meetings were called by men described by Brisbane as "Enemies of liberty." The declared object of the assemblages was "to devise some plan by which to rid ourselves of so unprivileged a personage." They decried the fact that "he has had the audacity to show himself in one of our pulpits . . . then insult[ed] us with the prayer that universal liberty might soon prevail." The ad-hoc convention regarded Brisbane as "an enemy to his country, a traitor to the South, and particularly dangerous to this section, where he has the sympathy of the slaves, having liberated a part of his own here." For these unforgivable sins, it was determined that Brisbane "should not be permitted to rest among us."⁹⁵

A committee was appointed to call upon Brisbane and warn him to leave the state within forty-eight hours "or abide the consequences from a hitherto patient, but now indignant community." If he refused to depart, the committee promised to "'deal with the felon exciter of insurrection."⁹⁶ An even more agitated and "riotously disposed" portion of the gathering did not wish to allow the interloper the luxury of two days' notice and made plans to attack Brisbane that night. Luckily, the Brisbanes were informed of the plot in time to flee into a nearby swamp and then to a railway station, where they hastened north. Only through the delays of a few of Brisbane's friends, who had

⁹³ Brisbane Journal, October 4, 1847.

⁹⁴ *North Star*, October 5, 12, 1849; *Charleston Mercury* (Charleston, S.C.), August 29, 1849, quoted in *National Era*, October 4, 1849; *Spartanburg Spartan*, n.d., quoted in *Liberator*, October 19, 1849; *Christian Citizen* (Boston), n.d., quoted in *Liberator*, September 28, 1849. See also Brisbane Journal, February 8-9, 1848; Georgia Lawton-Moran, "Reminiscence of Trying Times," in Annie Elizabeth Miller, comp., *Our Family Circle* (Macon, Ga.: J. W. Burke Company, 1931), 359.

⁹⁵ *North Star*, October 5, 1849; *Charleston Mercury*, August 29, 1849, quoted in *National Era*, October 4, 1849; Charles Elliott, *The Sinfulness of American Slavery*, ed. B. F. Tefft (Cincinnati: L. Swarnstedt and J. H. Power, 1851), 1: 353-354.

⁹⁶ Elliott, *The Sinfulness of American Slavery*, 1: 353-354; *Spartanburg Spartan*, n.d., quoted in *Liberator*, October 19, 1849.

infiltrated the meeting, did the family have time to escape the wrath of the mob.⁹⁷

These events left Brisbane with no shortage of consternation. He had openly declared himself against the notion of "servile insurrection." While among southerners, he had always "borne the character . . . of being an honest and an honorable man." Moreover, the church in their neighborhood, of which Brisbane had once been pastor, had confidence in the integrity of his Christian character (notwithstanding his well-known opinions on slavery) and invited him to preach there only a few days earlier. If they could trust him, thought Brisbane, then "others might." He concluded that critics had set upon him "for no other reason than that I had opinions adverse to slavery, and had emancipated my slaves."⁹⁸

The exaggerated response to the presence in their midst of an abolitionist highlights the surprisingly tenuous support for the institution of slavery in late 1840s South Carolina. Despite most outward appearances, South Carolinians were widely divided on the slavery issue. One essayist writing in 1847 described the idea of southern unanimity on the slavery question as "a mere farce," insisting that "seven eighths or eight ninths of the white male Southern adults are not slaveholders, but, on the contrary, in respect to vital interests, are great sufferers of the institution."⁹⁹ From his early years among slaveholders, Brisbane was aware that "in South Carolina there is, in very many minds, a private sentiment of repugnance to Slavery." Even among the most wealthy slaveholders, "it is not uncommon in the family circle to express the wish that slavery could be got rid of."¹⁰⁰ Only a sense of racial solidarity and social aspirations kept most southerners supportive of the institution.¹⁰¹

Elites took extraordinary measures to make sure the non-slaveholding majority stayed in lock-step on the slavery issue.¹⁰² The most promising means

⁹⁷ Spartanburg *Spartan*, n.d., quoted in *Liberator*, October 19, 1849; *Christian Citizen*, n.d., quoted in *Liberator*, September 28, 1849. See also Brisbane Journal, February 8-9, 1848; Lawton-Moran, "Reminiscence of Trying Times," 359.

⁹⁸ *North Star*, October 12, 1849.

⁹⁹ John Gorham Palfrey, *Five Years' Progress of the Slave Power* (Boston: Benjamin B. Mussey and Company, 1852), 61.

¹⁰⁰ A True Carolinian [William Henry Brisbane], *To the Voters of South Carolina* (Cincinnati: n.p., 1849), 1 (copy available in Samuel J. May Antislavery Collection, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y.).

¹⁰¹ See Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

¹⁰² See Blake McNulty, "Uncertain Masters: The South Carolina Elite and Slavery in the Secession Crisis of 1850," in *Looking South: Chapters in the Story of an American Region*, ed. Winfred B. Moore Jr. and Joseph F. Tripp (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 82.

towards this end was the attempt to smother all expression that could be construed as opposing the peculiar institution. The 1835 Charleston mob was just one extreme example of this tactic. The *Charleston Courier*, mindful of the excitement caused by the discovery of abolitionist literature there earlier that summer, declared that "the gallows and stake" awaited anybody who in the interest of abolition "discharge[d] their missiles of mischief in the security of distance."¹⁰³ Calhounite journalist Duff Green wrote in the *Southern Review*, "It is only by alarming the consciences of the weak and feeble, and diffusing among our people a morbid sensibility of Slavery that the Abolitionists can accomplish their object."¹⁰⁴

In the late 1830s, the editors of the *Columbia Telescope* demanded that "the question of slavery is not and shall not be open for discussion." They continued, "The very moment any private individual attempts to lecture us upon its evils and immorality, and the necessity of putting means into operation to secure us from them, in the same moment, his tongue shall be cut out and cast upon the dunghill."¹⁰⁵ Brisbane himself (as the editor of his Charleston newspaper in 1835) expressed the necessity for slaveholders to keep discussion over the propriety of the institution far removed from popular discourse. "Cease then," he demanded of antislavery subversives, "cease discussion, for it is awfully hazardous, and leave us to our bibles and to our God."¹⁰⁶

The hazard of which Brisbane wrote was that non-slaveholders would realize slavery's deleterious effects upon their lives and, most importantly, their numerical power to act against it. The editor of the *Columbia South-Carolinian* complained of "a certain class of our native born—who . . . are perfect drones in society, continually carping about slave competition, and their inability to acquire respectable position." These yeomen were supposedly "pests to society . . . ever ready to form combinations against the interest of the slave holder."¹⁰⁷ A correspondent of James Henry Hammond reckoned

¹⁰³ *Charleston Courier* (Charleston, S.C.), August 11, 1835, quoted in *Niles' Weekly Register*, August 22, 1835.

¹⁰⁴ *Southern Review*, quoted in Julius Rubens Ames, "Liberty" (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1837), 52.

¹⁰⁵ *Columbia Telescope* (Columbia, S.C.), quoted in James G. Birney, *The American Churches: The Bulwarks of American Slavery* (London: British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1840), 8. See also Palfrey, *Five Years' Progress*, 63; Edwin Wiley and Irving E. Rines, eds., *Lectures on the Growth and Development of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: American Educational Alliance, 1915), 7: 442.

¹⁰⁶ SBG, September 18, 1835.

¹⁰⁷ *South-Carolinian* (Columbia), quoted in Frederick Law Olmstead, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States in the Years 1853-1854* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1904), 2: 149-150.

that these non-slaveholding whites were "the only party from which danger to our institutions is to be apprehended among us." The writer feared that if given enough encouragement, this demographic "would soon raise here the cry against the Negro, and be hot Abolitionists. And every one . . . would have a vote."¹⁰⁸

After the intimidating attack on himself and his family by Carolina ruffians, Brisbane pronounced that "if the demagogues of the despotic party can, by bravado, and rising, as they term it, 'superior to law,' prevent an open discussion, they must expect the friends of truth and justice to resort to more private means of access to the hearts of the people."¹⁰⁹ Because of his intimate insight into the mind of the master class, Brisbane was keenly aware of its most vulnerable spots and greatest insecurities. Back in the relative safety of the North, Brisbane went on the offensive, writing a series of pamphlets directed at his most likely allies in his home state, the white yeomanry.¹¹⁰ "To the Voters of South Carolina," "An Address to the Citizens of South Carolina," and a third pamphlet that has not survived were all penned anonymously or under the pseudonyms "True Carolinian" or "Brutus" in early 1849. These were mailed south along with an unsigned letter from the author and often under the frank of one of his friends in Congress such as Salmon P. Chase or Joshua Giddings.¹¹¹ All of these pieces were intended to strike directly at the sensitive class interests of the non-slaveholding white citizens of the state, precisely the same appeal that Hinton Rowan Helper would make in his more famous book *The Impending Crisis of the South* in 1857.¹¹²

By the spring of 1849, many South Carolinians had either received one of Brisbane's unsigned pamphlets or heard news of someone who had. The up-country districts where slaveholding was smallest were specially targeted for blanketing by the tracts. The *Charleston Mercury* printed a letter from a correspondent in Pendleton infuriated with the circulation of the anonymous essays. The writer declared that "it need scarcely be remarked, that the war which the fanatics of the North are so perseveringly waging against the peace and security of the South, cannot be much longer carried on by one party." "An offensive attitude," he concluded, "will be impossible to restrain the people

¹⁰⁸ Tom Downey, *Planting a Capitalist South: Masters, Merchants, and Manufacturers in the Southern Interior, 1790–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 141.

¹⁰⁹ *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 5, 1849.

¹¹⁰ *Brisbane Journal*, December 2, 1848, January 5–6, 1849.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, February 23, 1849.

¹¹² In fact, Helper actually quoted Brisbane in his works in the late 1850s. See Hinton Rowan Helper, *Compendium of the Impending Crisis of the South* (New York: A. B. Burdick, 1859), 133; Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (New York: A. B. Burdick, 1857), 263–264. See also McNulty, "Uncertain Masters," 81.

very shortly from assuming."¹¹³ The editor of the *Columbia Telegraph* warned that "this is one branch only of a wide spread web of machinations directed against our peace and property by domestic renegades and foreign fanatics. A thousand evidences are around us, denoting the presence in our midst of secret spies and emissaries."¹¹⁴ Others were even convinced that the culprit was living among them. After one post office near Spartanburg received fifty copies of one of the pamphlets, the Spartanburg *Spartan* warned of "an incendiary attack in our very midst... an effort to raise an Abolition party in South Carolina." The editor supposed that the author was "a viper that has nestled in the bosom of this state."¹¹⁵

Even though, as abolitionist Frederick Douglass pointed out, Brisbane's pamphlets were "simply an exposure of the working of the constitution of South Carolina, and the unequal representation among the white population," they had successfully thrown South Carolina masters into a paranoid, panicked state. "These violent measures resorted to by the slavemongers," Douglass wrote, "may be regarded as evidence that they see their weakness and the untenableness of their position." He asserted that the "man who has truth on his side never attempts to smother discussion." Despite all attempts to the contrary, Douglass predicted that "into the murky regions of South Carolina, the light of truth will ere long penetrate."¹¹⁶

As anxiety built, white men throughout the state organized local groups to denounce the "mischievous interference with our domestic slavery and the rights of slaveholders." A Columbia meeting proposed to form a central state committee of vigilance and safety to combine defensive vigilantism with their own propaganda campaign. As historian Stephen A. West points out, these planter-politicians saw the workings of such committees both as a means to disseminate proslavery ideology and an apparatus to enforce public conformity.¹¹⁷ When the fear spread to the up country in August 1849, post offices suspected of housing abolitionist mailings were raided and the offending parcels burned.¹¹⁸ A few months later, a York District committee of safety accused a white man of making "sundry abolitionist statements" and ordered him to leave the area. When he returned some weeks later, he was summarily

¹¹³ *Charleston Mercury*, quoted in *North Star*, October 12, 1849.

¹¹⁴ *Telegraph* (Columbia, S.C.), August 21, 1849.

¹¹⁵ Spartanburg *Spartan*, April 24, 1849. Original emphasis.

¹¹⁶ *North Star*, October 12, 1849.

¹¹⁷ Stephen A. West, "Minute Men, Yeomen, and the Mobilization for Secession in the South Carolina Upcountry," *Journal of Southern History* 71 (February 2005): 83.

¹¹⁸ *Laurensville Herald* (Laurensville, S.C.), August 24, 1849, quoted in Howell Meadoes Henry, *The Police Control of the Slave in South Carolina* (Emory, Va.: H. M. Henry, 1914), 157-158.

tarred and feathered.¹¹⁹ Meanwhile, Brisbane and his abolitionist supporters continued to send out his tracts, and they dispatched an agent, John Barrett, on a mission to South Carolina to gather more names and addresses for future mailings.¹²⁰ However, Barrett's stay in the state was even rockier than Brisbane's had been. It seemed that everywhere Barrett traveled, he was identified as an abolitionist. When his presence was detected in Columbia, authorities issued a warrant for his arrest. After fleeing incarceration at the capital, he was detained on the same charges in Winnsboro. Though he was eventually released for lack of evidence, Barrett was finally jailed in Spartanburg when officials discovered some of the "Brutus" pamphlets and antislavery letters from a mysterious "B. H. W." among his possessions.¹²¹ When Brisbane heard of the arrest of his friend, he was exceedingly concerned for Barrett's safety.¹²² The mob violence, near-lynching of suspected abolitionists, and heightened state of agitation following the pamphlet campaign did not bode well for Barrett. Brisbane worriedly exclaimed, "But what a wretched state of things in Carolina! May God Almighty break the chains of oppression."¹²³

His own role in Barrett's misfortune also weighed heavily upon Brisbane's mind. At the time of the arrest, the identity of "Brutus" and "True Carolinian" remained a mystery to all but a small circle of Brisbane's associates. As Barrett served a lengthy sentence in a Carolina "dungeon," even the identity of his correspondent "B. H. W." was unknown.¹²⁴ The *Spartan* stingingly criticized the fact that the proximate cause of the excitement remained in the shadows. Whoever was the true thorn in their side, "he is too cowardly to take the responsibility of a Christian gentleman, and avow his own acts, although such avowal might relieve his friends from the difficulties and dangers he has drawn them into." "In secrecy and darkness," the editor wrote, "he throws out, skunk-like, his baleful effluvia."¹²⁵ But by mid summer, the South Carolina investigators had pieced together enough evidence to confi-

¹¹⁹ West, "Minute Men, Yeomen, and the Mobilization for Secession," 84.

¹²⁰ See Brisbane Journal, February 6, 23, 28, April 11, 12, July, passim, 1849; *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society* (Boston: n.p., 1851), 68.

¹²¹ Brisbane Journal, June 21, 1849; Spartanburg *Spartan*, n.d., quoted in *Liberator*, October 19, 1849; *The Crisis*, n.d., quoted in *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 5, 1849.

¹²² Brisbane Journal, July 2, 1849.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, June 23, 1849. Even after being granted freedom on bail, Barrett had grown so ill in "his dungeon" that he soon died while continuing his antislavery crusade in Indiana.

¹²⁴ *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society*, 68; *Columbia Telegraph*, n.d., in *The Friend* (Philadelphia), December 15, 1849; Palfrey, *Five Years' Progress*, 63.

¹²⁵ *Spartanburg Spartan*, n.d., quoted in *Liberator*, October 19, 1849.

dently identify the troublesome essayist as one of their own—William Henry Brisbane.¹²⁶ After his cover had been blown, Brisbane noted in his journal, "*I see the Carolina papers are spewing out their venom upon my humble self.*"¹²⁷ His supporters in the North agreed that the unmistakable "wrath of the Spartanburgers has been kindled against Mr. Brisbane."¹²⁸

Though another homecoming was out of the question for the "True Carolinian," Brisbane felt the benefit for abolitionism was worth the sacrifice of personal exile. Brisbane's tract campaign, one historian asserts, combined with the passage of the Compromise of 1850, so jarred the confidence of many South Carolina masters in the support of the yeomanry that they seriously considered secession in 1850–1851.¹²⁹ While some mulled secession, Brisbane used the Fugitive Slave Act as another opportunity to attack slavery and the Slave Power in print. It was, Brisbane asserted in *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, an act of "horrible wickedness."¹³⁰ He also was prepared to counter the fugitive act with more than words. His most direct approach to confounding the spirit of the law was by aiding self-emancipating men and women to freedom along the Underground Railroad. From the time of his abolitionist conversion a decade earlier, Brisbane and his family had been active abettors of runaway slaves seeking freedom. From providing letters of introduction and directions to "conductors" farther down the line to his own attempts to "entice" slaves away from their masters in the South, examples abound of Brisbane's active involvement in the pre-1850 "underground."¹³¹ In blatant defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act, Brisbane continued his efforts after 1850. Brisbane's home was always available to shelter those fleeing bondage, and he did all in his power to frustrate "slave stealers" seeking to reclaim their property under the provisions of the act.¹³² He spread his table before his guests, bound their wounds, and bid them on their way with the "blessings of his heart."¹³³ He regularly collaborated with Quaker Levi Coffin, the famous "president of the Underground Railroad," in several instances of aiding former slaves.¹³⁴ Sometimes, when Coffin himself was not able to assist "fugitives," he directed

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Brisbane Journal, September 4, 1849.

¹²⁸ *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 5, 1849.

¹²⁹ McNulty, "Uncertain Masters," 88.

¹³⁰ *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (Rochester, N.Y.), October 2, 1851.

¹³¹ Spartanburg *Spartan*, n.d., quoted in *Liberator*, October 19, 1849; Brisbane Journal, August 18, 1844.

¹³² Brisbane Journal, July 4, 1853; *Thirteenth Annual Report of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, Presented at New York, May 11, 1853* (New York: Lewis J. Bates, 1853), 197–207.

¹³³ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, October 2, 1851.

¹³⁴ See Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the Reputed President of the Underground Railroad* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and Company, 1880), passim.

them to Brisbane, who brought them back to his house for protection from lurking slavecatchers.¹³⁵

Brisbane played an important role in the first case to be tried under the Fugitive Slave Act in Cincinnati in August 1853. Washington McQuerry, who had lived in Cincinnati since escaping bondage in 1849, was betrayed as a "fugitive" and arrested under the provisions of the act.¹³⁶ Abolitionists in town raised the alarm, and McQuerry's friend Brisbane was not long in coming to his aid.¹³⁷ Former Liberty Party presidential candidate James G. Birney volunteered to argue McQuerry's case, and he appealed to Brisbane to deliver an opening statement on the unconstitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Act.¹³⁸ Though observers declared his address "the ablest argument they had heard on the subject," Brisbane feared that his efforts were "all in vain." He lamented, "I presume the judge was fixed before he heard & is not to be changed. *Poor fugitive!* I fear tomorrow he will be over the River."¹³⁹ Indeed, McQuerry's appeal for freedom was denied, and he was remanded into the hands of his former owner. When the Cincinnati abolitionists could not raise enough money to purchase his freedom, McQuerry "disappeared from history into the darkness of Southern slavery." ¹⁴⁰

Each slave sent back to the South under the Fugitive Slave Act represented a tremendous victory for the Slave Power. Still, even as the proslavery element of the country demonstrated its might in the early 1850s, Brisbane continued to urge resistance. Writing with the Board of Managers of the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society of Cincinnati in 1853, he lamented that the slaveholders and their allies had become the ruling power in the nation. "This Slave Power," he pointed out, "controls the two great political parties, makes Presidents, governs official appointments, directs legislation, and, what is worse than all, corrupts the sources of religion and morals, making our Christianity a pretense and our Republicanism a sham." Though the proslavery element desired "above all things to be let alone, quietly to perpetrate its abominations," Brisbane challenged abolitionists to sustain the tenor of their objections against slavery's supporters and continue their campaign for emancipation.¹⁴¹

¹³⁵ Brisbane Journal, September 25, 1850.

¹³⁶ For more details of the McQuerry case, see *Liberator*, August 26, 1853; *New York Daily Times*, August 22, 1853; *Monthly Law Reporter*, May 1853, 294-295; Coffin, *Reminiscences*, 546; *Freeman's Manual*, September 1, 1853, 102-105; Charles Theodore Greve, *Centennial History of Cincinnati and Representative Citizens* (Chicago: Biographical Publishing Company, 1904), 1: 759-760;

¹³⁷ Greve, *Centennial History*, 760; Coffin, *Reminiscences*, 546.

¹³⁸ Greve, *Centennial History*, 760.

¹³⁹ Brisbane Journal, August 16, 1853. Original emphasis.

¹⁴⁰ Greve, *Centennial History of Cincinnati*, 760.

¹⁴¹ *National Era*, February 17, 1853.

Though the Brisbanes moved to the Wisconsin frontier in late 1853 in search of greater economic prosperity, William Henry wasted little time re-embedding himself into the local antislavery scene. His became a familiar face at Wisconsin abolitionist meetings, and he quickly made many important friends among antislavery politicians in the state.¹⁴² Brisbane was soon counted among the most zealous Wisconsin abolitionists, and his connections in the legislature often sought his advice on slavery-related questions, even arranging an official invitation for Brisbane to give an antislavery address before both chambers.¹⁴³ Some of Brisbane's close political friends in Wisconsin also were among the first to shepherd the rising political unrest into a coalition party opposed to the extension of slavery. A February meeting in Ripon was the first in the nation to designate themselves "Republicans," and afterward, the organization of like-minded men into a single anti-Nebraska, anti-Fugitive Slave Act, anti-administration party commenced across the rest of the state.¹⁴⁴ Brisbane wished the Republican platform was more aggressive in its opposition to slavery, but he rejoiced in its potential as an anti-slavery vehicle.¹⁴⁵ Though not demanding immediate emancipation or equal rights for all Americans, the Republican Party did call for a confinement of slavery to its present boundaries, admission of no more slave states, exclusion of the institution from all territories under federal control (including the Kansas and Nebraska Territories), and repeal of the Fugitive Slave Act. In the run up to the national elections of 1856, the first where the Republican Party fielded a presidential candidate, Brisbane stumped across the Northwest, organizing Republican and Frémont clubs.¹⁴⁶ In the final days before the election, Brisbane and his wife paid a visit to the Ohio abolitionist stronghold of Oberlin. There, they attended a rally for John C. Frémont, and William Henry gave a speech that was "received with the greatest applause."¹⁴⁷

Though he was disappointed with the ultimate results of the 1856 election, Brisbane rejoiced that his home district in Wisconsin favored Frémont by a margin of two to one.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, across Wisconsin Republicans had

¹⁴² Brisbane Journal, December 16, 19, 1853, January 2, 10, 11, 1854.

¹⁴³ Ibid., February 15, 1854.

¹⁴⁴ Michael J. McManus, *Political Abolitionism in Wisconsin, 1840-1861* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1998), 90-92.

¹⁴⁵ Victor B. Howard, *The Evangelical War against Slavery and Caste: The Life and Times of John G. Fee* (Selinsgrove, Penn.: Susquehanna University Press, 1996), 142.

¹⁴⁶ Brisbane Journal, July 4, 15, 27, August 23, 27, 1856. See also William A. Ellis, comp., *Norwich University: Her History, Her Graduates, Her Roll of Honor* (Concord, N.H.: Rumford Press, 1898), 71.

¹⁴⁷ Brisbane Journal, October 7-15, 1856.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., November 4, 1856.

shown well enough at the polls to become the majority party in the legislature. As a reward for his tireless efforts on behalf of the party, every Republican in the state senate voted to appoint Brisbane as chief clerk of that body.¹⁴⁹ The *Wisconsin State Journal* lauded the choice and praised him as "well known throughout the United States as an anti-slavery man & as an able writer and eloquent speaker."¹⁵⁰

As soon as the dust from the 1856 election settled, Brisbane and the rest of the Republicans set their sights on the race for the White House in 1860. With their first presidential candidate having garnered a third of the popular vote and an even greater percentage of the electoral tally, hopes were high for ultimate victory four years later. Brisbane was among the more radical members of the party, and he continued to push for Republicans to go beyond a platform of simple non-extension and embrace a true antislavery stand. He was troubled by the willingness of many party leaders to hedge their antislavery principles to gain votes, and he constantly urged them to strike a more humane balance between expediency and moral principles.¹⁵¹ Even so, Brisbane and others like him were confident that the Republican Party represented the best alternative among the political parties in the fight against slavery.¹⁵² When the 1860 Republican National Convention in Chicago nominated Abraham Lincoln for the presidency, Brisbane chaired the Arena, Wisconsin, "ratification meeting" that officially kicked off the campaign.¹⁵³ That autumn, Brisbane participated in the busy Northwest election season. Despite a serious and protracted illness brought on by exhaustion from campaigning, Brisbane dragged himself from bed to vote "the full Republican ticket" on November 6.¹⁵⁴

Lincoln had not been Brisbane's first choice for president. That distinction belonged to his good friend Salmon P. Chase. The former, he believed, was too moderate, was too willing to compromise on the slavery question, and did not fully appreciate the role of the institution in the "national evils" that threatened to follow his election.¹⁵⁵ Lincoln's inaugural address also left much to be desired in Brisbane's estimation. He had predicted as much, writing in his journal that "it is firmly up to what I might have expected from

¹⁴⁹ *Liberator*, May 1, 1857; *Brisbane Journal*, January 15, 1857; *Journal of the Senate of Wisconsin, Annual Session, A.D. 1857* (Madison, Wisc.: State Printer, 1857), 5; Charles R. Tuttle, *An Illustrated History of the State of Wisconsin* (Madison, Wisc.: B. B. Russell, 1875), 332; Ellis, *Norwich University*, 71.

¹⁵⁰ *Brisbane Journal*, January 15, 1857.

¹⁵¹ See *ibid.*, October 31, 1857.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, June 14, 1860.

¹⁵⁴ *Brisbane Journal*, September 12, November 6, 1860.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, March 3, 1861.

one in his position & with his antecedents." Nonetheless, Brisbane declared that he admired Lincoln's patriotism and resolve in the face of adversity.¹⁵⁶

When the Civil War erupted the next month, Lincoln's resolve and that of every other American was tested. When the president issued a call for volunteers, Brisbane's sons William and Benjamin were among the first rush of enlistees to offer their services for the Union war effort.¹⁵⁷ Raised in an abolitionist household, these young men were in the minority at the war's beginning who saw the conflict as one between freedom and slavery. In his blessing of his sons' decisions, Brisbane reminded them of this fact and "enjoined them never to dishonor the badge they wore." They must be brave and always fight for what was right, even though they may be called upon to fight against their own kindred from the South.¹⁵⁸ When Brisbane's abolitionist friend Republican Congressman Cadwallader C. Washburn asked if he would be willing to serve as chaplain of his sons' regiment, he was faced with a dilemma. Though he was personally opposed to war and well into his fifties, Brisbane believed that this fight could settle the slavery question once and for all. Moreover, as chaplain the elder Brisbane would be alongside his sons to look after both their temporal and spiritual well-being. After several days of prayerful consideration, he accepted the commission and began preparations for the upcoming removal to the South.¹⁵⁹ The Brisbane men were going to war.

Before he resigned his pastorate in Arena to accept the chaplaincy of the Second Wisconsin Cavalry, Brisbane preached a heartfelt war sermon that was later reprinted in antislavery newspapers across the North. In "Why the Judgment of God Is upon the Nation," Brisbane declared that God was harshly judging the United States because its citizens had refused to "remember those in bonds as bound with them."¹⁶⁰ Abolitionists had shown the way, but most Americans refused to follow. Even Republicans were far too timid in making emancipation a priority of the war. There would be no salvation until the nation repented of "the wrongs done to its sable countrymen" and became willing "to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke."¹⁶¹ Brisbane held out hope, however. "I believe my countrymen will repent," he preached, and the

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., March 5, 1861.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., April 19, 1861.

¹⁵⁸ Brisbane Journal, April 20, 1861; *Madison Daily Journal* (Madison, Wisc.), April 21, 1861, quoted in Brisbane Journal, April 21, 1861.

¹⁵⁹ Brisbane Journal, October 26-30, 1861; William DeLoss Love, *Wisconsin in the War of the Rebellion* (Chicago: Church and Goodman, 1866), 568. See also Ellis, *Norwich University*, 71.

¹⁶⁰ *Liberator*, October 25, 1861. See also William J. Park, *Madison, Dane County, and Surrounding Towns, Being a History and Guide* (Madison, Wisc.: William J. Park and Company, 1877), 107.

¹⁶¹ *Liberator*, October 25, 1861.

northern states will yet learn that to secure the Union, "SLAVERY MUST AND SHALL BE ABOLISHED." He predicted that eventually everyone, "whether white or black, and the masters themselves, will all thank God that the North was true to freedom."¹⁶²

Before the Second Wisconsin was even officially mustered into service, the Union had already achieved a significant military victory in South Carolina, when it attacked and occupied the region around Port Royal Sound, Brisbane's former homeplace. After the fall of Fort Walker on Hilton Head Island and Fort Beauregard at Bay Point in November 1861, planters from Beaufort and the sea islands fled to the mainland with the retreating Confederate soldiers. In their hasty withdrawal, the grandees were forced to leave behind the majority of their personal property, including nearly eight thousand slaves and a full harvest of cotton in the fields.¹⁶³

The power vacuum created by the rapid departure of the Confederates from Port Royal attracted the attention of abolitionists, who hoped to establish schools and churches for sea island freedmen, as well as national administrators, who were interested in the profits to be made from the valuable cotton crops. The "Port Royal Experiment" would be one of the first transitions in the Civil War from slavery to freedom. As philanthropists and capitalists converged on the Carolina coast, both groups were well aware that the eyes of the nation were upon their attempt to create a social and economic order that could demonstrate the fitness of freed slaves for citizenship after war's end if the Union was victorious and emancipated the millions of southern bondsmen.¹⁶⁴

The question of property ownership was central to the Port Royal Experiment's desire to break up slavery along with the southern oligarchy. The First and Second Confiscation Acts of August 1861 and July 1862 authorized the federal government to seize the property of disloyal southerners while also freeing their slaves. Lincoln, fearing the alienation of the border states, pressured Congress into limiting the loss of property to the lifetimes of the offenders. However, the Direct Tax Law of 1862 offered a more permanent method of confiscation. If an absentee landowner could not pay his back taxes, the land would be sold at auction. When Salmon P. Chase, who had been appointed secretary of the treasury under Lincoln, discovered that his friend William Henry Brisbane's poor health had forced him to resign his post with the Second Wisconsin in June, he immediately arranged for him to be ap-

¹⁶² Ibid. Original emphasis.

¹⁶³ See Akiko Ociai, "The Port Royal Experiment Revisited: Northern Visions of Reconstruction and the Land Question," *New England Quarterly* 74 (March 2001): 94.

¹⁶⁴ Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1964), 3-31 and passim; Ociai, "The Port Royal Experiment Revisited," 95.

pointed one of three direct tax commissioners for South Carolina.¹⁶⁵ As commissioner, Brisbane was in charge of assessing parcels of land in the Union-occupied areas of the low country so that the federal government could collect overdue land taxes or sell the parcels at auction.¹⁶⁶ Potential purchasers included the very men and women who had once worked the fields as slaves.¹⁶⁷

It should be noted that Brisbane had been an important, though indirect, part of the Port Royal Experiment from its inception. As occupying northern troops attempted to convince skeptical African Americans of their good intentions, Brisbane's name was often used as a common point of reference. Local blacks remembered William Henry Brisbane with reverence for his mass emancipation in the 1840s, and Union leaders rightly assumed that the association of their enterprise with this homegrown deliverer would pay dividends.¹⁶⁸

Brisbane admitted that after his last visit to South Carolina, he had become "in some sort a stranger, not in the affections of his heart, but by the irresistible power of conscience." Although slavery's supporters had driven him "from the home of my fathers, and the loved associates of my early life," he could not "be made to forget the soil of my birth, and the dearest interests of Carolina." He pledged that "whilst life and reason last, I shall exert what little strength I have, to promote the physical, the intellectual, the moral, and the spiritual interests of the human family, whether in or out of Carolina."¹⁶⁹ Thus, the self-described "True Carolinian" jumped at the opportunity to be a part of what he could only have seen as a happy homecoming opportunity and chance to live out his pledges to finally redeem his home state. "To the white population," write Lawrence S. Rowland, Alexander Moore, and George C. Rogers Jr., he returned as "the most hated man in the Beaufort District."¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, he took the abuse in stride. "If in speaking or writing for the oppressed ... I offend the oppressor," he declared, "it is not because I desire to give offense to any one, but because I must open my mouth for the dumb, and my spirit will

¹⁶⁵ Ellis, *Norwich University*, 71.

¹⁶⁶ *Journal of the Executive Proceedings of the Senate of the United States of America, from December 2, 1861, to July 17, 1862, Inclusive* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1887), 12: 405, 417, 433.

¹⁶⁷ See Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 199–216.

¹⁶⁸ Edward L. Pierce to Salmon P. Chase, February 3, 1862, in Ira Berlin et al., eds., *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South, Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867*, ser. 1, vol. 3 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 132; *Friends' Intelligencer*, March 1, 1862, 807.

¹⁶⁹ Oberlin Evangelist, December 5, 1849.

¹⁷⁰ Lawrence S. Rowland, Alexander Moore, and George C. Rogers Jr., *The History of Beaufort County, South Carolina: Volume 1, 1514–1861* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 417.

not bow down when poor humanity is crushed beneath the iron heel of the despot."¹⁷¹

By January 1, 1863, Brisbane and the other commissioners had completed their valuations of abandoned plantations and other low-country lands.¹⁷² That particular morning, which dawned bright and clear on the sea islands, marked the public reading of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.¹⁷³ The African American population from Hilton Head Island and its environs assembled for the event at the headquarters of the First South Carolina Colored Volunteers "with all the zeal and animation which bright promises of freedom could inspire." Hilton Head "contrabands" began congregating early in the morning, and they were joined midday by the first of several steamers that brought more African Americans from neighboring ports.¹⁷⁴ Since it was low tide, the steamers could not land, and Union soldiers took "small boats—flats—and whatever could be made to float" to bring the people to shore.¹⁷⁵ It was, as one observer noted, "a demonstration of a purely African character," with as many as four thousand men and women, young and old, present "to participate in the celebration of their emancipation."¹⁷⁶

When the band of the Eighth Maine Regiment struck up a tune, the entire throng filed in behind them as they marched to a grove of stately live oaks. On this spot, where once had lived one of the wealthiest planters of the Beaufort District, a simple wooden stand had been erected. Upon it sat three men: General Rufus Saxton, military governor of the Department of the South; abolitionist Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson; and a third described by a correspondent from the *New York Herald* as "one of the Tax Commissioners for this State."¹⁷⁷ The journalist did not know the name of that commissioner, William Henry Brisbane, but he was well aware of his story. "This gentlemen," he wrote, "was twenty-seven years ago a resident of Beaufort, but, having tired of Southern life, sold his slaves and removed to the Far West. There, he became

¹⁷¹ Oberlin Evangelist, December 5, 1849.

¹⁷² See Berlin et al., *Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, 101–102.

¹⁷³ Luther G. Bingham, *The Young Quartermaster: The Life and Death of Lieut. L. M. Bingham of the First South Carolina Volunteers* (New York: Board of Publication of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, 1863), 180.

¹⁷⁴ *New York Herald*, January 7, 1863; *Christian Recorder* (Philadelphia), January 17, 1863; Frank Moore, ed., *The Rebellion Record: A Diary of American Events*, vol. 6 (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1863), 80; James Lynch, *A Few Things about the Educational Work among the Freedmen of South Carolina and Georgia* (Baltimore: William K. Boyle, 1865), 37.

¹⁷⁵ Bingham, *Young Quartermaster*, 180–181.

¹⁷⁶ *New York Herald*, January 7, 1863; *Christian Recorder*, January 17, 1863; Moore, *Rebellion Record*, 80.

¹⁷⁷ *New York Herald*, January 7, 1863; *Christian Recorder*, January 17, 1863.

so thorough and complete an abolitionist as to return to his former home with the purpose of repurchasing his servants and setting them free."¹⁷⁸

On this day, Brisbane had been chosen to read the Emancipation Proclamation to the gathered masses of his native district. Higginson described the choice as "infinitely appropriate, a South Carolinian addressing South Carolinians—he was reared on this very soil, and emancipated his own slaves here, years ago."¹⁷⁹ As Brisbane rose and read the first lines of the eagerly awaited announcement, he was surprised to notice a familiar face in the audience. It was the single slave he had been unable to repurchase in 1840, now grown much older. Though Brisbane had failed to help him to his deserved freedom over a quarter-century earlier, on that day, he was finally able to proclaim liberty to that man and thousands more.¹⁸⁰

As Brisbane finished and was seated, a young soldier enthusiastically called for three cheers, and then the gathering joined in singing the song "Ode for Emancipation Day," penned especially for the occasion.¹⁸¹ There, standing on ground forever stained with the blood, sweat, and tears of generations of slaves, a former planter and his former bondman joined together in a song of freedom:

We hail this dawn of future days;
And Godright arm that still upstays
The cheering superpetual rays,
Now makes us free.
We thank the Lord, we thank the North,
Whose breath hath sent the tidings forth;
Today and people glorious birth—
Today we are free!¹⁸²

"So," a spectator noted, "emancipation has been inaugurated in the Palmetto State."¹⁸³

The dawn of freedom represented by the terms of the Emancipation Proclamation would not end Brisbane's fight for full emancipation and equal rights for all Americans. He had grown up enamored of the South's most obdurate antislavery ideology, and after his long, complicated struggle to overcome it and develop in its place a set of thorough abolitionist values,

¹⁷⁸ *New York Herald*, January 7, 1863.

¹⁷⁹ *The Complete Civil War Journal and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, ed. Christopher Looby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 76.

¹⁸⁰ *New York Herald*, January 7, 1863; Stevenson, *Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, 469–470; *Christian Recorder*, January 17, 1863. See also Rufus Saxton to M. C. Meigs, October 2, 1863, in Ira Berlin et al., *Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*, 272.

¹⁸¹ Bingham, *Young Quartermaster*, 181–182.

¹⁸² *New York Herald*, January 7, 1863; *Christian Recorder*, January 17, 1863.

¹⁸³ *Christian Recorder*, January 17, 1863.

Brisbane realized that much remained to be accomplished before the goals of all true abolitionists were achieved. He continued to seek justice for freedmen as tax commissioner in South Carolina through 1870, and upon returning to Wisconsin, he remained publicly committed to protecting the gains made during Reconstruction. As he had in the antebellum decades, Brisbane urged all reformers to avoid sectarianism and unite together for change. To that end, he played a prominent part in welcoming all former abolitionists, regardless of ideological persuasion, to a widely publicized reunion in Chicago in 1874.¹⁸⁴ Two years after that, he reprised his role as delegate to the Republican National Convention. At the 1876 convention, as he had been in 1872, Brisbane was a voice of radicalism in a rising sea of party moderates shrinking away from their Reconstruction obligations.¹⁸⁵ Until his death four years later, he continued to be counted "as among the ablest advocates of right and safest counselors." Yet more than anything else, it was his famous abolitionist transformation that most admirers remembered. In Brisbane's obituary, his hometown *Arena Star* imagined that from the descendants of his former slaves in the South, to his abolitionist associates in the North, and all those in between who had benefited from his influence, "the death of this man of God will fill with sorrow many hearts in almost every state of the Union."¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, ed. James Grant Wilson and John Fiske (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1886), s.v. "Brisbane, William H." See Larry Gara, "A Glorious Time: The 1874 Abolitionist Reunion in Chicago," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 65 (Autumn 1972): 280–292.

¹⁸⁵ Ellis, *Norwich University*, 71; *Official Proceedings of the National Republican Conventions of 1868, 1872, 1876, and 1880* (Minneapolis: Charles W. Johnson Publisher, 1903), 204, 353.

¹⁸⁶ *Arena Star*, n.d., quoted in Ellis, *Norwich University*, 71–72.