

Charles Follen, the East Village and Abolitionism

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We have recently delved into the sources upon which the history of Follen Church, as presented on the Follen web site, is based and have prepared a more detailed and more accurate history with indications of what is still unknown. Here is an overview of our findings.

East Lexington outdid Lexington center as a center of manufacturing in the early 19th century. Stephen Robbins and his son, Eli, led the development of this part of town with their fur dressing and peat harvesting businesses. After 1803 Ambrose Morell contributed to the growth with his own fur dressing manufactory.

Eli Robbins did much to improve the lot of those who worked for him. In particular, in 1833, he built the Stone Building as a place to hold public lectures at a time when the Lyceum movement was burgeoning in the country.

In 1833 the people of East Lexington began what would become repeated unsuccessful attempts to be allowed to have their own church, instead of having to travel two miles to the church in the center of town and having to pay taxes to support the center church. When these efforts failed, services began to be held in 1835 in the lecture hall at the Stone Building.

By the mid 1830s, Eli Robbins had become a confirmed abolitionist at a time when antislavery views were exceedingly unpopular in New England. The East Lexington congregation chose Charles Follen as its first minister. Follen had recently lost his position as Professor of German Literature at Harvard because of his abolitionist activities. Even among the clergy, abolitionist views were rare at the time but the people of East Lexington, under Eli Robbins' leadership, apparently, were comfortable with the radical views of their new pastor, whose views were not shared by members of the church in Lexington center.

By tradition, the Stone Building was said to have been built as a locus for free speech including abolitionism. However, it was not until the late 1840s that antislavery speeches occurred in the building. By that time a number of people in East Lexington were actively supporting abolition principally under the leadership of Eli's daughter, Julia Robbins.

Charles Follen preached for only six months in 1835 before leaving to take a better paying position as a tutor to a family of boys. After that Ralph Waldo Emerson was engaged to preach, or find others to preach if he couldn't. Emerson preached sixty times to the East Lexington congregation until he gave up preaching altogether in February 1838.

It was not until 1845, when the Town's ministerial fund was opened to all religious organizations, that the people of East Lexington were relieved of supporting the First Parish. However, previously in 1839 they had persuaded Charles Follen to return to East Lexington as their minister. The people set to work to raise money to build a new church. Fund raising included holding the first East Village Fair, a tradition that continues to this day. Charles Follen, who had studied architecture in Germany, designed the building we still use. The unique octagonal church design was intended to bring the congregation and minister closer together and to symbolize the inclusive mission of the congregation. As Charles Follen prayed at the groundbreaking in 1839:

[May] this church never be desecrated by intolerance, or bigotry, or party spirit; more especially its doors might never be closed against any one, who would plead in it the cause of oppressed humanity; within its walls all unjust and cruel distinctions might cease, and there all men might meet as brethren.

Tragically, Follen was not able to attend the dedication in January 1840 because he died the day before on a fire on the steamship Lexington on its way from New York to Boston.

Our research is ongoing as we attempt to understand the views, the roles, and the actions of our forebears as they faced controversial issues involving race, gender, politics, the law, and moral obligations. Among remaining questions are:

- When and why did Eli Robbins and his daughters become abolitionists?
- What more can we learn about the roles of Charles Follen and Ralph Waldo Emerson as preachers in East Lexington between 1835 and 1838?
- Why was it the late 1840s before antislavery speeches came to the Stone Building?
- Did Dr. Follen give antislavery sermons in East Lexington?
- Who else in East Lexington shared his views on abolition in the 1830s and 1840s?
- Is sympathy to abolition implied by East Lexington's choice of Follen?
- Did Lexington native Theodore Parker play a role in abolition politics in East Lexington?

To help answer these questions we have delved into some original and historical sources. They include biographies of Follen by Eliza Cabot Follen¹ and George Spindler,² mentions of Follen by abolitionist Samuel May,³ Richard Kollen's history of Lexington,⁴ and a history of

¹ Eliza Cabot Follen, *Life of Charles Follen* (Cambridge: Metcalf, Keith & Nichols, 1842). (<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100114574>)

² George W. Spindler, *the Life of Karl Follen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917). (<https://archive.org/stream/lifekarlfollena00spingoog#page/n202/mode/2up>)

³ Samuel J. May, *Some Recollections of our Antislavery Conflict* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1869). (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moa/abt7666.0001.001/267?page=root;rgn=full+text;size=100;view=image>)

Follen Church by Follen Minister Douglas Brayton.⁵ The story that has emerged from these and other sources is more complicated than we imagined but we think it is worth telling.

Background: Antislavery in Massachusetts and the US

Rev. John Hancock, Captain William Reed, Benjamin Muzzey, Francis Bowman, Esq., Lt. Robert Harrington, Matthew Bridge, William Munroe, Deacon Samuel Stone, Daniel Tidd, Deacon Joseph Estabrook, Ebenezer Fisk, Samuel Lock. Lexingtonians will recognize these as names of town schools and streets, but according to Lexington historian Richard Kollen,⁶ they are also names of Lexington slaveholders. Kollen reports that as of 1754 there were 24 slaves living in Lexington. This little slice into Lexington history is a piece of the frame for the Follen story.

According to the Massachusetts Historical Society on July 8, 1783, "slavery was effectively abolished in Massachusetts, with the ruling by the Massachusetts Supreme Court in the Commonwealth v. Jennison case. A slave named Quock Walker sued his owner for his freedom. The court ruled that he was free and the Commonwealth brought suit for wrongful imprisonment of Walker by Jennison. The court used the Massachusetts Declaration of Rights in the Massachusetts Constitution, which states "all men are born free and equal," as the basis for saying that slavery was abolished under the Massachusetts Constitution.

It's worth noting that Massachusetts was the first state to completely abolish slavery.⁷ Other states moved against slavery earlier, e.g., Vermont in its 1777 Constitution and Pennsylvania in 1780 by statute, but abolition in both applied only to children, leaving current adult slaves in bondage. This gradual abolition approach was followed by Connecticut, New Hampshire, New York and Rhode Island, leaving slaves in some of these states as late as 1847.

Charles Follen and the Antislavery Movement

Almost as soon as he arrived in this country in 1824, Charles Follen realized that slavery was a direct contradiction of the rights of universal freedom for which the American Revolution was fought. He declined to pursue a permanent position in Virginia because of slavery in the state. His views were reinforced when he gave a well-spoken black man a ride in his carriage in the rain in 1831. The man spoke movingly of slavery and the bravery

⁴ Richard Kollen, *Lexington: From Liberty's Birthplace to Progressive Suburb* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Arcadia Press, 2004).

⁵ Douglas Percy Brayton, *The History of Follen Church: Centennial History*. (Lexington: Follen Church, 1939). (http://www.calliope.org/follen/1940_History_of_Follen_Church.pdf)

⁶ Richard Kollen, 2011. "Slavery in Lexington" Unpublished paper, delivered March 17, 2011 at Grace Chapel.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolition_of_slavery_timeline#1701.E2.80.931799

of Mr. Walker, who had sent an "incendiary" pamphlet to the south. Shortly after this meeting Follen went to meet William Lloyd Garrison.⁸

Follen was an early and prominent member of the Massachusetts movement to abolish slavery in the remaining slave states, and Massachusetts was the center of the national antislavery movement in the 1830s. The movement was not without controversy. William Lloyd Garrison released the first copy of the *Liberator* on January 1, 1831 in Boston. In January 1832 a small number of Boston men formed the Society of New England. Soon antislavery societies were formed in more cities. The Middlesex County Anti-Slavery Society, in which several residents of East Lexington were active, was founded in 1834. The US movement built on the English movement, which saw the abolition of the slave trade in the Empire in 1807, the founding of the Anti-Slavery Society in 1823, and the abolition of slavery throughout the Empire in 1833. The antislavery movement was condemned in many quarters – not just in the South.

The most thorough treatment of Follen's antislavery involvement is found in Spindler.⁹ He reports that Follen had started talking antislavery in 1830. Follen based his position on Johann Fichte's doctrine of mankind's right to self-determination, and Follen called slavery an example of using society to "oppress human beings simply because mother nature had arrayed them in black and red." Follen reportedly said that slavery was still allowed "because some cents less on every pound of cotton will satisfy the sensible and practical people all over the world that slave labor is useful and slavery is right."¹⁰

By 1831 Follen was well connected with the abolitionist movement. He visited Garrison repeatedly and encouraged him in his efforts, though many Boston-area ministers did not associate with Garrison because of his radical language and stances. Follen did not speak to the Boston Anti-Slavery Society in its first year. By that time he had become a Professor of German Literature at Harvard, and he was warned by his superiors there not to participate in abolitionist efforts. They reminded him that as a foreigner he shouldn't meddle with a "question whose aim it was the subversion of an American institution."¹¹ Follen went ahead and was demoted by Harvard from Professor to instructor of German.

The spring of 1835 into 1836 was a turbulent time with antislavery meetings getting broken up by mobs in the Boston area. By this time Follen was on the board of managers of the Boston Anti-Slavery Society. (April 1835 was also when Follen was called to preach in East Lexington in the Stone Building.) In the spring of 1836 Follen joined other antislavery activists on a speaking tour. Foreigners like Follen were warned to keep out of it. He came

⁸ Eliza Cabot Follen, *Life of Charles Follen* (Cambridge: Metcalf, Keith & Nichols, 1842), 304.

⁹ George W. Spindler, *The Life of Karl Follen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917), 186-223.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

back to Boston and, according to leading abolitionist Samuel May, gave a powerful speech.¹² The first part said that free blacks should be allowed into all civil places and meetings (a position opposed by many in the North, including some in the Anti-Slavery Society). In the second part he defended foreigners' right to speak out. In the third part he defended rights of women.

Eliza Cabot Follen also discusses his speech at this time (1836) to the Boston Anti-Slavery Society. She writes that Follen first argued against those who would exclude blacks from the Society meetings. Then he argued for the foreign born to be included too. Follen had first encountered resentment against foreigners participating in the organizations in 1834 when he was chosen to write an Address to the American People, which the New England Antislavery Society had reproduced and sent to every member of Congress. One copy was returned to him with the statement written on it, "A foreigner should recollect the protections afforded him by the institutions of this country, when he undertakes to throw a firebrand amongst the people."¹³ Pro-slavery newspapers mounted vehement attacks as well.

To continue Eliza's version of the speech:

Our cause is the cause of man. Therefore from the beginning our watchword has been our country is the world. Our countrymen are all mankind. *Men and women* have the same rights. . . . Men have at all times been inclined to allow women peculiar privileges, while withholding from them essential rights. We are far from acknowledgement of the simple truth that . . . women as well as men are rational and moral beings. And it's not a surprise that the slave's cry for freedom should thrill with particular power through the heart of a woman. For it is woman, injured, insulted woman that exhibits the most baneful and hateful influences of slavery. . . .

I cannot speak of what the free woman ought and must feel for her enslaved sister, - because I am overwhelmed by the thought of what we men, we, who have mothers, and wives, and daughters, should not only feel but do, and dare, and sacrifice, to drain the marshes whose exhalations infect the moral atmosphere of society. . . .

The only object of Anti-Slavery societies is to restore the slave to his natural rights. To promote this object, all human beings, white men and colored

¹² Samuel J May, *Some Recollections of our Antislavery Conflict* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1869), 255.

¹³ Excerpts from Eliza Cabot Follen, *Life of Charles Follen* (Cambridge: Metcalf, Keith & Nichols, 1842), Appendix No. IV. Speech before the Anti-Slavery Society January 20, 1836, 629.

men, citizens and foreigners, men and women, have the same moral calling, simply because, in virtue of a common rational and moral nature all human beings are in duty bound, and divinely authorized, to defend their own and each other's *natural rights*.¹⁴

Free speech was another issue that the abolitionist movement was forced to defend. In his January 1836 message, the Governor of Massachusetts urged the legislature to prohibit antislavery activities. A legislative committee was formed to study and act on the issue. The antislavery leaders petitioned to present their case to the committee, and Follen was one of nine in the group that went. Follen argued that antislavery advocates had a right to speak about slavery and that the slaveholders were arguing that people couldn't talk about slavery. He also argued that legislative censure of antislavery activists would incite mobs to attack them. For this position the committee told him to hold his tongue.¹⁵ Follen was praised for his comeback and winning style and passion. Samuel May commented on Follen's argument, "I have sometimes thought it was a turning point in our old Commonwealth."¹⁶ Some of his wife's friends thought she should feel badly about her husband being thus insulted, but Eliza Follen said, "the unruffled calmness of his soul took possession of mine, and I felt, as he did, that what had passed that day would be felt throughout the Union."¹⁷

Follen was way ahead of where most clergy would go in his antislavery stances. William Ellery Channing supported abolition but not the Anti-Slavery Society. For this, Follen rebuked him for "giving quotations that the pro-slave people could use."¹⁸ Garrison reported that Follen tried to bring Channing around: "My early faithful and clear-sighted friend, Professor Follen, tried to induce him to make my acquaintance, . . . but he never manifested any desire to do so."¹⁹ Garrison named his own son Charles Follen.

Rev. Samuel May (uncle of Louisa May Alcott) was a leading abolitionist. In 1869 he wrote a book on the antislavery conflict in which he describes his friend Follen's role in the movement. He reviews Follen's history in Germany fighting for freedom. Then in America he reports that Follen was dismayed that good people weren't fighting slavery. He quotes Follen: "Some men are so afraid of doing wrong that they never do right."²⁰

Follen's wife Eliza supported his joining the Anti-Slavery Society even though it meant rejection by some and the loss of his Harvard salary. In her biography she recounts his

¹⁴ Ibid., 629-632.

¹⁵ George W. Spindler, *The Life of Karl Follen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917), 211.

¹⁶ Samuel J May, *Some Recollections of our Antislavery Conflict* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1869), 256.

¹⁷ Eliza Cabot Follen, *Life of Charles Follen* (Cambridge: Metcalf, Keith & Nichols, 1842), 401.

¹⁸ George W. Spindler, *The Life of Karl Follen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917), 218.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Samuel J May, *Some Recollections of our Antislavery Conflict* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1869), 254.

history of involvement with the abolitionist movement and quotes many of his writings on the subject.

Follen's Writing and Antislavery

Follen became a member of the Executive Committee of the Boston Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. At the Society's first convention in May 1834 he was chosen as chair of the committee to draft the Society's statement to the people of the US. It wasn't just a philosophical piece; it got into the conflict between the idea of freedom in the Declaration of Independence versus the clause in the Constitution about returning slaves "to those to whom such service or labor may be due."²¹ Follen's statement was distributed around the country, including to Congress. The Society later distributed the statement with the Constitution because many people did not know the details of the latter.

After the 1836 run-in with the legislature and governor, Follen wrote a tract – *The Cause of Freedom in our Country* – in which he said slavery was only the worst manifestation of a battle between freedom/liberty and intolerance/oppression. The oppression of the slave spilled over to oppression of free blacks, Native Americans and women. He also wrote of elites looking for titles and wealth. He also advocated for universal suffrage and education.²²

Follen's Preaching and Antislavery:

Follen only preached specifically on antislavery once: when he became pastor of First Unitarian Church of NY (after leaving the East Village in 1836).²³ He preached that slavery went against US history and values. He encouraged parishioners to study each side of the issue and then decide and then use all lawful and moral means to follow the conclusion to stop slavery. He preached against mobs and other means. This caused an uproar, about which Follen said that they "agreed with what he said but not that he should say it." Two powerful parishioners walked out. "A few strongly approved but the majority were either angry or afraid or sorry."²⁴ At the end of his trial period as pastor he withdrew his name for the permanent position in the New York Unitarian church.

Although he only preached specifically about slavery once, he always preached about freedom and the rights of man. A friend rebuked him early on: "Your sermons are very sensible but you spoil your discourse with your views about freedom. We are all weary of hearing the same thing."²⁵ He was often rebuked by parishioners too. He would just smile and go on. He wrote to Channing: "There is now and then, apparently, an expectation of

²¹ George W. Spindler, *The Life of Karl Follen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917), 197.

²² *Ibid.*, 213-214.

²³ *Ibid.*, 216.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 217

²⁵ George W. Spindler, *The Life of Karl Follen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917), 215.

hearing rank abolition doctrine, but I avoid exciting words and let the principles make the desired impression. I have never been so strongly impressed with the intrinsic antislavery tendency of Unitarianism, as taking its stand on the absolute worth and eternal destiny of human nature."²⁶

East Village in the Early 19th Century²⁷

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, East Lexington became the locus of manufacturing, entrepreneurial spirit and prosperity that outstripped the rest of Lexington. The leading industry, fur dressing, is estimated to have employed over 300 people at its height in the 1830s,²⁸ Other businesses and supporting trades such as tanning, saw and grist mills, wheelwright and blacksmithing shops, and a shop that sold West Indian goods contributed to the economic vitality of the East Village, as it was called at the time.

Stephen Robbins (1758-1847) and his son, Eli (1786-1856), were the men chiefly responsible for the growth of East Lexington. They, along with Ambrose Morell, another successful fur dresser, had national and international business contacts that apparently gave them more cosmopolitan views than were held in other parts of town where farming was the chief occupation. As far back as the birth of his daughter in 1794, Stephen Robbins demonstrated his sympathy for liberty by naming her Caira after the popular French song of the revolutionary period, *Ca Ira*, translated as "It will be fine." The song became the unofficial anthem of the French revolutionaries. These views, as we will see, led the Robbinses to associate with leading thinkers of the day such as Emerson, Theodore Parker, and Charles Follen, and to bring these people to speak to their neighbors in the village.

The economic and architectural vigor of East Lexington in the 1830s is evident today in the thirty-three buildings built in that decade that survive along Massachusetts Avenue. Grecian motifs, drawn from Asher Benjamin's architectural books, grace nine of these buildings, most notably the Stone Building. That, in itself, bespeaks the progressive spirit of the village. Architecture, in what is known today as the Greek Revival style, was burgeoning in the period. Americans were looking for a style that would express a distinctly American cultural identity. Americans saw a kinship between their own democratic system and that of ancient Greece.

²⁶ Ibid., 216.

²⁷ This section quotes part of Anne Grady, "Historical Analysis and Architectural History, Historic Structure Report: the Stone Building," Menders, Torrey & Spencer. September 2009: 1-25.

²⁸ George O. Smith, "Reminiscences of the Fur Industry," *Proceedings of the Lexington Historical Society* Vol. II (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Historical Society, 1900), 175. The number 300 includes men, women and girls, who worked in the shops, and "many girls in well-to-do families, who found good revenue for 'pin money' in sewing furs and making capes and muffs in their homes."

Eli Robbins, in particular, used his wealth for the public good. As Bradford Smith said, he “put his heart into all new enterprises for the benefit of the [village].”²⁹ Emerson called him “A man of genuine public spirit and profuse liberality.”³⁰ The most notable of Eli Robbins’s improvements was his construction of the Stone Building in 1833. Anne Grady cites evidence that Eli Robbins built the Stone Building as a Lyceum, a national movement in the 1830s that “was based on the simple idea, that of the coming together of ordinary people – merchants, lawyers, ministers, mechanics, farmers, neighbors all – for the high-minded purpose of learning from one another and from experts about the latest discoveries regarding the physical, social and moral world.”³¹ The building was designed to include a lyceum lecture hall on the second floor, while the first floor was built as a residence.

The East Village and Antislavery

Eli Robbins’s Abolitionist Views:

We know that Eli Robbins and his family became abolitionists, but we don't yet know how or when. Was it through the liberal outlook inherited from his father or absorbed from business or other contacts? Or was it through his association with Charles Follen? Did Follen discuss abolition with Eli Robbins when he first met Robbins about 1833? Follen was already sympathetic to the antislavery movement, if not yet active. Robbins told Dr. Follen that the people of East Lexington desired to have religious services in their village. A newspaper article in 1891 states that “this interested the learned German. . . . Mrs. Robbins offered to fit up a large room in her house as a place of meeting, and here religious services began, under the ministrations of Dr. Follen.”³² It is hard to believe that Follen wouldn't have made his abolitionist views known to Robbins.

The Robbins women are known to have shared Eli’s progressive spirit. In addition to his wife's offer of the use of her home for services led by Dr. Follen, references in the diaries of Eli Robbins' daughters, Ellen (b. 1817) and Julia (b. 1819), mention people coming the Robbins house to discuss abolition.³³

²⁹ Bradford Smith, “History of the Stone Building,” *Proceedings of the Lexington Historical Society* vol. II (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Historical Society, 1900), 145.

³⁰ Emerson added, “yet out of his mouth runs ever this puddle of vitriol of spite ‘at the other village.’” William H. Gilman, Alfred R. Ferguson, Merrell R. Davis, Merton M. Sealts, Jr., and Harrison Hayford, eds., *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 35.

³¹ Robert A. Gross, “From Moral Reform to Popular Amusement: The Strange Career of the Nineteenth Century Lyceum,” lecture to the NEH Landmarks Workshop, Millbury, Mass, May 27, 2007, p. 2. As quoted in Anne Grady, “Historical Analysis, Stone Building Historic Structure Report,” 2009.

³² *Lexington Minuteman*, October 16, 1891, quoting an article that appeared in the *Transcript*.

³³ For Example, entries in Ellen Stone's diary for June 1838 include:

“Mr. Lothrop, Mr. Dodge and Miss ___ here and spent the afternoon, took tea and talked upon Abolition.” And “Mr. Dwight talked upon Abolition all the evening.” Robbins-Stone Papers, Box 7 #48. Lexington Historical Society Archives.

There are references to Eli Robbins having built the Stone Building as a place for free speech on such topics as abolition and temperance. For example, George O. Smith in "Reminiscences of the Fur Industry," a paper delivered in 1896, quotes one of Robbins' daughters as telling him that "when the building was being erected, the antislavery and temperance agitations were beginning, and it was found difficult to procure suitable places for discussion of these topics. The school committee had refused the use of the school-house, and the church was closed to petitioners."³⁴ It should be noted, however, that there was a general prohibition against religion or politics, such as abolition, as subjects for lyceum lectures. Speakers at the Stone Building, including abolitionists Theodore Parker, Wendell Phillips, and Charles Sumner, gave lyceum lectures, but on other topics. The first lecture on abolition at the Stone Building did not occur until 1847 when Parker Pillsbury spoke on the subject.

East Lexington's efforts to become a separate congregation

In March of 1833, the people of the East Village submitted the first of what would become over a dozen requests to be allowed to have a church of their own instead of having to travel two miles to the church in the of town and having to pay taxes to support the center church. They argued that since residents of the East Village contributed one fourth of the taxes collected by the Town, their request for a church nearer to their section of town should be granted.³⁵ It was not, however, until 1845 when an act of the legislature required that the Town's ministerial fund be divided between the First Parish, the Baptist Church, and the church in East Lexington, that the East Village church was officially incorporated under the name of the Second Congregational Society.

Religious services begin in East Lexington

Charles Follen was called to preach in the spring of 1835, though, as stated, he may have preached earlier in the Robbins' home. He preached his first sermon in the Stone Building on April 5. He agreed to supply other preachers when he was unavailable. His salary was paid for by repeated subscriptions, records of which that are preserved in the Follen Church records.

Eliza Follen described his pleasure at assuming this role:

Dr. Follen was pleased at finding among the people that fresh and hearty interest in religion, which a society newly formed, and formed in spite of obstacles, usually manifests. They too were pleased with his preaching and put their pulpit under his charge, urging him to preach, himself, as often as

³⁴ George O. Smith, "Reminiscences of the Fur Industry," *Proceedings of the Lexington Historical Society* Vol. II, (Lexington: Lexington Historical Society, 1900), 177-178,

³⁵ Richard Kollen, *Lexington From Liberty's Birthplace to Progressive Suburb* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Arcadia Press, 2004), 59.

possible, and, when he could not, to send some one whom he should approve. This he readily agreed to; and it was from that time a favorite wish with him that this little society should form a church upon a new and better foundation than any that yet existed, one more truly deserving of the name of Christian church.³⁶

As it turned out, Follen only preached for six months before assuming the job of tutor to a family of boys. By then he had given up his position teaching German at Harvard and needed more income than the people of East Lexington could provide. In November of 1835 Ralph Waldo Emerson, was hired to supply the pulpit. He preached sixty times before he asked to be relieved of his duties in February 1838. Others, who preached during that time, included John Sullivan Dwight, Theodore Parker and John Pierpont. According to Brayton, Emerson enjoyed the free-speech East Village pulpit. He'd left Boston because he didn't have it in pulpits there. Transcripts of some of the sermons that Emerson gave are available.³⁷

Emerson, in his correspondence with Scottish philosopher, Thomas Carlisle, said that the East Villagers were "simple men who I sustain no other relation than that of a preacher." The East Lexington congregation was the last to which Emerson preached. In 1838, he wrote to Carlisle to say that he "felt freer on the lecture platform than in the pulpit."³⁸

In 1839, Charles Follen was rehired as minister for \$600 a year. A subscription raised \$3,386 to build a new church. After the building was completed pews sold for \$70 each. The original name of the church was the Christian Society of East Lexington.

A year before Follen agreed to return to East Lexington as their minister, he laid out his idea for a free Christian church. Ironically, the free church that Follen proposed bears greater resemblance to the Follen Church of today than it did, apparently, to Unitarian churches of the 1840s. What he chose to specify in the following description seems to highlight what was different from sectarian church practices of the day.

Eliza Follen described his vision:

He wished to see a church established upon what he considered the true Christian principles, where the preacher did not address men as proprietors of pews, but as the possessors of immortal souls; he wished to minister to a church, the doors of which should be open to all those whose creed was universal love and toleration . . . His great object was to produce a more truly social worship; he wished that the congregation should take an active part in the services, particularly

³⁶Eliza Cabot Follen, *Life of Charles Follen* (Cambridge: Metcalf, Keith & Nichols, 1842), 235.

³⁷ Albert J. von Frank, ed. *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol 5. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989).

³⁸ Richard Kollen, *Lexington From Liberty's Birthplace to Progressive Suburb* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Arcadia Press, 2004), 58.

the devotional parts He wished to see a closer union between members of the same church, to bring the minister more among the people. He wished to do away with the high pulpit, to have the building so constructed, as that whoever desired to speak, could easily find a place to stand where the whole audience could hear him. He wished to imitate the Society of Friends in put women on an equal footing men, and that each should be encouraged to speak according to his or her gift, without any distinction. He wished the music to be a truly devotional act, performed by the whole society, excepting those individuals, who had no musical powers. Painting, sculpture and architecture should be employed as helps and expressions of devotional feeling. He thought a learned minister . . . important because all had not the time and opportunity to examine difficult questions for themselves. . . . He thought it would be better that all expenses of the society should be paid by voluntary subscription.³⁹

Eliza Follen said that Follen's desire for such a church "amounted to a passion."⁴⁰ George Simonds, a young man who lived in the Robbins household, wrote that Dr. Follen held "frequent public meetings to discuss what constituted a Free Christian Church during his stay with us. . . . He conversed . . . privately upon the Freedom of his church, [with] clergymen as well as others in this city."⁴¹

Follen designed the Follen Church to express the concepts he described. Originally there was no raised stage and before 1865 no chancel, so the pulpit designed by Follen would have stood directly in front of the pews on the same level, bringing the minister into "closer union" with the congregation. It is hard not to see the tall gothic-arched windows as expressions of "devotional feeling."

The East Lexington congregation apparently accepted the idea of a free church. George Simonds wrote in his journal, "It is said that the Follen Church was built with the understanding that . . . it would be Antisectarian."⁴² In fact, on March 15, 1840 the male members of the church, according to Simonds, "almost, but not quite voted themselves a Unitarian Society," which did not necessarily mean that the men wanted it to be known as a church favoring abolition.⁴³ The transformation of the church seems to have been the preference of the male members. Simonds said, "Some of the ladies were opposed to this . . . alleging that the Society had by so doing departed from the broad principle of a free

³⁹, Eliza Cabot Follen, *Life of Charles Follen* (Cambridge: Metcalf, Keith & Nichols, 1842). 497-498.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 498.

⁴¹ George W. Simonds, letter to William Clapp, Clerk and member of the Parish Committee, March 15, 1840.

⁴² George W. Simonds, Journal, March 31, 1840.

⁴³ Ibid.

Christian church. Some of them on this side dwelling under the same roof as myself [Robbins women] were and are very zealous in conversation on the subject."⁴⁴

The vote by the male members was bitterly denounced in a letter written by an unidentified female member of the church (possibly Ellen Robbins) to the leaders of the church. The author of the letter, who appeared to be responding to an assertion made in a newspaper article, said that the women of East Lexington felt that their hard work to make the building of the church a reality was subsequently ignored, that the women's wishes were overridden, that the church had become a place where abolition and temperance were not addressed or even spoken of, and that Unitarianism now held sway.

An assertion in an article in your paper has suggested the following facts should be published in justice. Two women established a Sabbath school--the first permanent effort made for religious instruction in East Lexington. It was the women. When a sufficient interest was produced to [pay] for preaching and Unitarians of Cambridge refused to come to them, who placed their position before Dr. Follen and induced him to come [?] It was a woman. When it became necessary to build a church, whose arguments brought Dr. Follen back after a short absence? It was a woman. Was it not a woman who solicited the largest donations from people of different faiths, as well as very many small, which they ___ not have built their little church, setting aside 11 hundred dollars that was procured by tea parties and hard work at a fair, which was not all taken to carpet the aisles [?] Finally, was it not a woman who consented to give up all party and sectarian ties to establish a truly free Christian church [?] It would seem so, for as soon as the Lords of East Lexington—priests of Unitarianism—step forward and take the control, which they get by taking all they then have given in the shape of pews. Then and not till then the free Christian church is forgotten and sectarian Unitarianism prevails. Anti-slavery and temperance are actually pushed out, not even a notice can be read. An attempt is made to establish a creed but in spite of the custom of the society, . . which does not count [women's votes], her voice is raised against it. An effort is made to purge the Library [;] it is a woman who comes forward to oppose it—"my mother's gold ring" for example, I suppose, [was] considered a useless school book [and] was thrust outside, [though books like this were] selected by Dr. Follen, R.W. Emerson and other liberal minds. Of course [as the Library] contained books that did not suit sectarians, [they] . . . would be considered useless schoolbooks.⁴⁵

It was recently suggested that the refrain, "It was a woman" resonates with the refrain in

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Transcription of a letter found in the early records of the Follen Church, possibly written by Ellen Robbins, to an unidentified newspaper. Lexington Historical Society Archives.

Sojourner Truth's later poem, "Ain't I a Woman."⁴⁶

Follen's Death and Memorial Service

In late 1839 Eliza and Charles were in New York City, where he was lecturing. According to Eliza, Follen tried to delay his return to Lexington to attend the dedication of the new church building in January 1840. She was ill, and he asked the congregation to push back the date of the service. They said no and he got on the Steamship Lexington as scheduled. It caught fire in Long Island Sound killing Follen and all but four others on board.

According to several sources, the Anti-Slavery Society wanted to hold a large public memorial service for Follen in January with Rev. Samuel May preaching. But all the churches in the Boston area (including the Christian Society of East Lexington) refused. According to Follen, people feared that May would "broach the subject" of abolition. May was denied pulpits in all Boston churches. He lamented their refusal of the service but said it was "the temper of the times." Channing wanted to use his church but his trustees blocked him.

At the East Village church, all but one of the male members (S. L. Lothrop), voted to deny May permission to speak at the church.⁴⁷ George Simonds and the women of the Robbins family were vehemently opposed to the decision. Simonds wrote in his journal:

The church would never have stood where it does [regarding slavery] if Dr. Follen had been with us. To him they owed nearly all for their success & he was an abolitionist too. I felt irritated and still do. I also feel disposed to absent myself from that church 'till it has more Abolitionist spirit.⁴⁸

A memorial service for Follen was not held until April 27, 1840 when the Marlborough Chapel opened its doors to 2,000 mourners.

How widespread was support for abolition in East Lexington?

Addressing this question is one of the objectives of this paper. The answer is not entirely forthcoming, given the limited historical documentation available to us. Resources we have used include:

--Mary Keenan's biography of Julia Robbins, *In Haste, Julia* and resources that Keenan has shared with us. Known antislavery supporters included Mulliken family and others mentioned in correspondence with Julia Robbins about abolitionist efforts in the 1840s.

⁴⁶ Mary Haskell, personal communication to Anne Grady

⁴⁷ George Simonds Journal, March 31, 1840.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

--Journal of George Washington Simonds. George Simonds was a nephew of Mrs. Robbins who was living with the Robbins family during the time when he wrote a year-long journal in 1840. Although only 20 years of age, he was a committed abolitionist. He frequently mentions reading abolitionist newspapers before handing them on to others, like John Gammell. Simonds's journal and a letter he wrote to the clerk of the Follen Church are the chief sources of information about the votes of the men in the congregation for the church become Unitarian instead of nonsectarian, and to prevent Rev. Samuel May from delivering a eulogy for Charles Follen at the church. After the votes, Simonds never again referred to the church as the Follen Church (a name used informally even then), but called it the proslavery octagon church.

--Participation of East Lexington residents in the Middlesex County Anti-Slavery Society of which Charles Follen was one of the founders. Ambrose Wellington and Cyrus Pierce were officers in the Middlesex County Anti-Slavery Society and George Simonds attended a meeting of the Society in Westford.

--Indications of the liberal outlook of East Lexingtonians in general, which might imply support of abolition. In addition to the influence of what Emerson called Eli Robbins' "profuse liberality," Emerson and Rev. Samuel May supported the idea that the founders of the Follen Church were liberal. May identified the founders as the "highly liberal Christians at East Lexington."⁴⁹ Emerson stated that he was surprised that the church had become Unitarian as he thought that the church was dedicated to freedom and liberty.⁵⁰

--Petitions to the Massachusetts Legislature

The most interesting sources of information about the views of the people of East Lexington are the petitions to the General Court that they signed between 1843 and 1860. Petitions were, then as now, a means of conveying requests for action by both state legislatures and the US Congress. They were also reluctantly accepted in the mid-nineteenth century as a suitable activity for women, who, of course could not express their opinions at the ballot box. It is worth noting, in addition, the close association between the abolition movement and the Women's Rights movement. Many leaders, such as Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who fought women's right to vote in the nineteenth century, began as advocates for abolition.

We have reviewed manuscript versions of eleven petitions from Lexington to the General Court of the Commonwealth that are preserved in the State Archives.⁵¹ Most of the

⁴⁹ Samuel J. May, *Some Recollections of our Antislavery Conflict* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1869), 257.

⁵⁰ George Simonds Journal, April 23, 1840.

⁵¹ Harvard University - Collection Development Department, Widener Library, HCL / Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions; Massachusetts Archives. Boston, Mass.

signatures are those of East Lexington people. Five of the petitions addressed liberal causes that are, in some cases, still current:

- Reform and support of discharged convicts (1845, 48 signatures)
- Abolition of capital punishment (1849, 146 signatures)
- Abolition of capital punishment (1850, 84 signatures)
- Allow women the right to vote and hold public office (1850, 25 signatures)
- Prohibition of school discrimination (1855, 85 signatures)

Six of the petitions were related to the treatment of fugitive slaves and associated topics.

- Against aiding and abetting slavery in any form
Petition of Nathaniel Mulliken (Latimer Petition, (1843, 56 signatures)
- Request for noncompliance with Fugitive Slave laws
Petition of George W: Simonds (1851, 118 signatures)
- Request for noncompliance with Fugitive Slave laws
Petition of Eli Robbins (1851, 71 signatures)
- For Removal of Edward Greeley Loring, Judge of Probate, who caused an inhabitant of the Commonwealth to be sent into Slavery
Petition of Andrew C. Davidson (1855, 69 signatures)
- Against rendition of fugitive slaves
Petition of Peter Wellington (1859, 9 signatures)
- Against slave hunting.
Petition of Peter Wellington (1860, 28 signatures)

We compared the names of signers of these petitions with the names of members of the Follen Church. The findings, however, can only be approximate. We have just the names of the original male members of the church. Except in the case of two women who owned pews, women were not listed as members. We do not as yet have records of the members of the church up until 1860. Also, although many of the names of signers are shown on the 1853 map of East Lexington as property owners, we have not identified the percentage of signers who were not residents of this area of Lexington.

In total, 199 people signed these petitions regarding the treatment of slaves; some of them signed 2, 3, or 4 petitions. Ninety-four signers were men and 105 were women and "others;"⁵² Of the 94 male signers, only 17 were among the 82 known members of the

⁵² Many of the names of petition authors and signers are East Lexington names. The signees are divided into two columns for "Voters, Gentlemen" and "Nonvoters, Ladies and others." See illustration following this text.

Follen Church. Of the 105 female signers, as best can be determined, 34 were related to male members of the Follen Church.⁵³

Thus, only 20 % of the original 82 male members of the church signed these petitions. The proportion appears to be substantially higher among women at 40%. The reason for the relatively low numbers of petition signers related to the Follen Church is unknown and somewhat surprising. A deeper look at the demographics and wealth of the male members of the Follen Church might be instructive. We do know that one of the leaders of the Church, Ambrose Morell was a Whig and his opposition to allowing Rev. May to eulogize Charles Follen at the church in East Lexington because, as he said, all the Boston churches also refused to do so, may be an indication of his broader influence.⁵⁴

--The role of Unitarian churches in abolition.

The switch from the idea of a "Free" Christian church to a Unitarian church, decried by the women of the Follen Church, and its implications for non-support of abolition reflects a broader context of Unitarianism at the time. A number of Unitarians may have opposed abolition because they profited from slave-produced products of the South like cotton. According to a Unitarian Universalist Association educational resource, Unitarian churches were about equally divided among those that supported abolition, those that only gave tacit support, and those opposed to abolition.⁵⁵ Rev. Samuel J. May presented a more critical picture of the response of Unitarian churches to abolition.⁵⁶

Merge of the Unitarian and Universalist churches in East Lexington

For reasons that are not yet explained the Universalists built a church, between April 10 and October 1, 1840, just across the street from the Follen Church.⁵⁷ Some of the members of the Universalist Church were also members of the Follen Church. There must be a story behind this separation, but as yet no documents have surfaced to explain it.

⁵³ Female signers of the petitions were identified as related to male members of the Follen Church through their listings in Charles Hudson, *History of Lexington*, Vol. 2 (Genealogy) and from previous research by an unidentified author located in the Follen Church Records at the Harvard Divinity School.

⁵⁴ According to the Encyclopedia Britannica the "Whig Party was formally organized in 1834, bringing together a loose coalition of groups united in their opposition to what party members viewed as the executive tyranny of "King Andrew" Jackson. They borrowed the name Whig from the British party opposed to royal prerogatives."

⁵⁵ <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/river/workshop12/178742.shtml>

⁵⁶ "The Unitarians as a body dealt with the question of slavery in any but an impartial, courageous, and Christian way. Continually in their public meetings the question was staved off and driven out, because of technical, formal, verbal difficulties, which were of no real importance, and ought not to have caused a moment's hesitation. Avowing among their distinctive doctrines, "The *fatherly character* of God as reflected in his Son Jesus Christ," and "*The brotherhood of man with man everywhere*," we had a right to expect from Unitarians a steadfast and unqualified protest against so unjust, tyrannical, and cruel a system as that of American slavery. And considering their position as a body, not entangled with any proslavery alliances, not hampered by any ecclesiastical organization, it does seem to me that they were *pre-eminently guilty* in reference to the enslavement of the millions in our land with its attendant wrongs, cruelties, horrors." Samuel J. May, *Some Recollections of our Antislavery Conflict* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1869), 337.

⁵⁷ George Simonds Journal, April 10 and Oct. 1, 1840.

In 1850, however, the Second Congregational Society and the Universalist Societies of East Lexington formed a “federation.” In 1865 the two bodies merged under the name “Church of Our Redeemer.” The Universalists sold their land and building and put the proceeds toward renovating the Follen building to accommodate them. The church was not named Follen Church officially until 1891 as a condition of taking \$3,000 from Eleanor Beals to establish the Beals Repair Fund, which remained an independently managed Church endowment until it was given to the Church Trustees to manage a few years ago.⁵⁸

Thoughts

What should we make of all this? Several things strike us.

Charles Follen was active and prominent in the Boston Anti-Slavery Society. He was a lead organizer, speaker, writer, and advocate. He joined early and he was outspoken about the rights of slaves and free blacks (and women, native Americans, and immigrants). He kept active even when Harvard threatened and then hit him with a serious demotion. He associated with radicals in the movement, but he advocated working within the law based on arguments from German self-determination philosophy and the US Constitution. He was clearly a formidable man driven by a strong moral compass.

But apparently it wasn't Follen's practice to specifically preach about antislavery, nor was it the practice in other Boston pulpits. Partly this may have been from fear of violence from opponents, but it also seems that Unitarians, Bostonians and even possibly the East Villagers were not all the radical thinkers or activists regarding slavery that we like to portray, not through their churches anyway. The Villagers undoubtedly knew of Follen's Anti-Slavery Society leadership, but apparently they also knew that he would not be talking antislavery in church, and most were likely all right with that.

It is difficult for us, to whom the issue seems so black and white, to understand how the Follen members of the 1840s could hold ambiguous views regarding abolition. Perhaps it was a controversy not unlike the one that certain Unitarian churches today face about hanging a Black Lives Matter sign or becoming sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants (an issue now and in the 1980s), or hosting draft counseling (a controversy in the 1960s).

We can, however, hold onto the fact that the leading women of the congregation, the Robbins ladies, who were furious at the antislavery positions of the male members, and who by their actions made the church possible in the first place, and their father Eli, who gave the land on which the church was built, were avowed abolitionists. Perhaps they, along with Charles Follen, should be considered the true founders of the Follen Church.

⁵⁸ Douglas Percy Brayton, *The History of Follen Church*, 1939.

Going forward, the support of 30% of Follen members (averaging women and men), who signed abolition petitions in the 1840s and 1850s, was likely not insignificant in the context of the time and might even have constituted a hotbed of antislavery sentiment.

We welcome corrections, comments, suggestions, additions, and references to other sources.

The authors of this report wish to thank Mary E. Keenan for her contributions to our research.

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1851 page

CIRCULAR.

To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts:

We, the undersigned, Inhabitants of *Lexington, Mass.*
respectfully ask your Honorable Bodies to protest against the law passed at the last Session
of Congress, in relation to the *Surrender of Fugitive Slaves*, in the name of the Commonwealth,
and to instruct the Senators and request the Representatives of the State to make every effort for
its *immediate repeal*.

LEGAL VOTERS.

OTHER PERSONS.

Geo W Simonds
Amos Adams
Joseph Garrison
Wm Henry Smith
C. E. Williams
Eben Gammell
Levi Hill
John Estabrook
Nathl. Seaman
Patrick Mitchelle
Silas Cutler
James C. Lummis
J. J. Gould
C. Cutler
Billings Smith
Lucas Capell
Joseph A. Coolidge
John Quinsy Adams
Alvyn Goddard
Benjamin Hadley
S. M. Smith
Sam Cary

22 45
27

Mannah S. Robbins
E. H. Robbins
Irene Harrington
Maim Robbins
Eliza Page
C. Goodnow
J. L. Smith
M. R. Knight
L. Winslow
Mannah Smith
Mannah Brenew
Mannah Penney
M. E. Penney
G. D. Nash
Mary A. Capell
M. E. Capell
M. A. Garrison
J. J. Hancock
Moriah A. Smith
Sarah C. Smith
Francis A. Conroy
E. R. Locke
Emilia R. Gould
Susan A. Locke
M. H. Roper
Mannah M. Robbins
A. H. Adams