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THE CONVERSION OF ELIJAH PARISH LOVEJOY AND ITS RESULTS

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ELIJAH PARISH LOVEJOY, "the first American martyr to the Freedom of the Press,"¹ was shot and killed on November 7, 1837. The one-hundred-and-tenth anniversary of his martyrdom provides a good occasion for examining some of the papers from his hand which have recently come to the Colby College Library.

In 1832-1833 he was a student at Princeton Theological Seminary. His decision to attend this institution to prepare himself for the Christian ministry was the result of a dramatic religious conversion which was a turning point in his life.

Lovejoy was twenty-nine years old at the time of this conversion. All his life he had been subjected to strong religious influences. His father, the Rev. Daniel Lovejoy, of Albion, Maine, was a Congregational minister; both of his parents, in fact, were devout Christians. Elijah attended Waterville (now Colby) College, at that time a strict Baptist institution, from which he graduated in 1826. While he was in college, he was, as President Jeremiah Chaplin wrote to Joseph Lovejoy (one of Elijah's brothers) in 1838, "never chargeable with making light of sacred things," and "his attendance on the services of the chapel

¹ John Quincy Adams, in the Introduction to *Memoir of the Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy*, by Joseph C. and Owen Lovejoy (New York, 1838), p. 12.

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were regular and respectful." (Quoted in Joseph C. and Owen Lovejoy, *Memoir of the Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy*, p. 298.) But he had never committed himself wholly to God or publicly professed his religious convictions prior to the great event which he described in his letter of February 22, 1832. After graduating from Waterville College, he was principal of the China (Maine) Academy for a year; then in May and June, 1827, with hardly a penny in his pockets, he travelled to Saint Louis to begin a new career in the West. (The diary which he kept during this trip has recently come into the possession of Colby College, and was published in full in the March, 1946, issue of *The Colby Alumnus*.) He taught school in Saint Louis for a few months, and then became editor of a political paper advocating the claims of Henry Clay to the presidency. He gave up this post in early 1832 when, as a result of the conversion which he described in a letter to his parents, his life was turned into different channels.

In this remarkable letter, written in Saint Louis on the hundredth anniversary of the birth of George Washington, he announced his decision to "turn my immediate attention to the work of the ministry" and dwelt in rhapsodic phrases on his "joy and peace in believing." The manuscript of this letter has been presented to Colby College, Lovejoy's *alma mater*, by Mr. Elijah Parish Lovejoy of Detroit, Michigan, namesake and grand-nephew of the martyr, and grandson of Elijah's younger brother Owen, for many years a prominent member of Congress from Illinois and one of Lincoln's closest friends. The original letter is in a fragile condition, but Mr. Lovejoy's beautiful hand is clearly legible. A transcript is published herewith, as an important religious and historic document.

My Dear & Honored Parents,

Saint Louis. Feb. 22 - 1832

After reading this letter, you will, I think, be ready to exclaim with me, "God's ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts as our thoughts." When this letter reaches you, I shall, if God spares my life and health,

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be on my way to Princeton, in New Jersey, for the purpose of entering upon my studies preparatory to the work of the ministry.

I wrote you four weeks since last Tuesday, and, as you will have learned from that letter, was then in a state of deep distress. Sorrow had taken hold upon me, and a sense of my long career in Sin and rebellion against God, lay heavy upon my soul. But it pleased God—and blessed be his holy Name—to grant me, as I humbly hope, that very night, joy and peace in believing. I was, by Divine Grace, enabled to bring all my sins and all my sorrows, and lay them at the feet of Jesus, and to receive the blessed assurance that He had accepted me, all sinful and polluted as I was.

My dear Parents, I can see you now, after having read thus far, shedding tears of joy over the return of your prodigal son; but oh! forget not to return thanks to that God of the promises, who, as I humbly hope, has at length heard your prayers in behalf of one for whom, at times, you were ready to say there remaineth no longer any hope. And surely, you may well join with me in saying that nothing but a miracle of Sovereign Mercy could have arrested and saved me from eternal perdition. How I could have so long resisted the entreaties, the prayers and the tears of my dear parents, and the influences of the Holy Spirit, is, to me, a wonder entirely incomprehensible; and still greater is my astonishment, and my admiration, that God has still borne with me, still continued unto me the influences of his Spirit, and at last brought me to submit myself to Him. I think I can now have some faint conception of boundless infinite Mercy. I look back upon my past life, and am lost in utter amazement at the perfect folly and madness of my conduct. Why, my dear Parents, it is the easiest thing in the world to become a Christian—ten thousand times easier than it is to hold out unrepenting against the motives which God presents to the mind to induce it to forsake its evil thoughts and turn unto Him. If I could forget what I have been and what I have done, I should certainly say it was impossible that any one could read of a savior, and not love him with their whole heart. The Eternal God—the Infinite Jehovah—has done all he could do—even to the sacrificing his own Son—to provide a way for man's happiness, and yet, they reject him, hate him and laugh him to scorn! How God could suffer me to live so long as I have lived, is more than I can understand. Well may He call upon the heavens to be astonished, both at His own forbearance, and the unnatural rebellion of his creatures. Do christians ever feel oppressed, as it were, with the debt of gratitude which they owe to their Redeemer. Why, it seems to me, sometimes, as if I could not bear up under the weight of my obligations to God in Christ,—as if they would press me to the very earth. And I am only relieved by the reflection that I have an eternity in which I may praise and magnify the riches of his grace.

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And now, my dear and honored parents, how shall I express my sense of the gratitude I owe to you—how shall I ask pardon for all the undutiful conduct, of which I have been guilty towards you? I want words to do either; but I can pray to God to forgive me, and to reward you, and this I do daily. O, how much do I owe you, for your kindness to me in everything, but chiefly for the religious instruction you bestowed upon me from my earliest youth; for your affectionate warnings and continued entreaties that I would attend to the welfare of my own soul; and for your prayers, without ceasing, to God that he would have mercy upon me, while I had no mercy on myself. For all these, may Heaven return upon your own heads, a seven-fold blessing.

I made a public profession of religion, and joined the church in this city, on the Sabbath before the last, the 12th of the present month. With me joined also thirty five others, by profession, and four by letter. There are, probably, as many more prepared to join as soon as the next communion shall arrive. You will see by these facts that an unusual attention to religion exists in this place. God is doing wonders here. The revival still continues, and day after tomorrow, will commence a four day meeting. How long this state of things will continue is known only to God; but we know that he can work, and none can hinder Him.

After much prayer, and consultation with my pastor, the Rev. William L. Potts, and other christian friends, I have felt it my duty to turn my immediate attention to the work of the ministry, and shall on the first of the week start for Princeton, with a view of entering upon the necessary studies. If God shall spare my hitherto unprofitable life, I hope to spend the remainder of it in some measure, to his glory. Time now with me is precious, and every day seems an age, till I can be at work in the vineyard of the Lord. O my dear Parents, are not the ways of Providence inscrutable. How long and how often did you pray that your first-born son might succeed his father in preaching the gospel, and after you had doubtless given over all such hopes, then the Lord displays his power in calling in the wanderer.

I hope to see you in the course of the summer face to face; for if practicable, and within the reach of my means I shall take time enough in a vacation to make a visit to my dear loved home. O how I long to embrace my Parents and brothers and sisters, and tell them what God has done for me. But I feel that I ought to say, and I trust he will enable them to say, "His will be done." Surely after all his goodness unto us, we should no longer indulge in one murmuring thought. Brother Owen² and Brother John; You are now the only members of the family

² Owen Lovejoy later became well-known as a leader of the anti-slavery movement. On the night of his brother's martyrdom he dedi-

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who have not professed to hope in Christ—to have made your peace with God. O let me entreat you, beseech you, not to put it off a moment longer. Tempt not God, as I have done. Think of poor brother Daniel, and make your peace with a Savior before you sleep, after reading this.

Your dutiful and grateful son
ELIJAH P. LOVEJOY

Lovejoy spent about a year at Princeton Theological Seminary. In April, 1833, he was granted a license to preach by the Second Presbytery of Philadelphia. He preached for a few months at Newport, Rhode Island, and in the Spring Street Church in New York City; but in the late fall of 1833 he accepted an invitation from friends in Saint Louis to return to that city and edit a weekly religious paper, which was to be an organ for Presbyterians in Missouri and Illinois. In the first number of the *St. Louis Observer*, which appeared on November 22, 1833, Lovejoy declared that the new journal would be dedicated to "divine truth in all its severity as well as loveliness," and to all who could "unite in glorying in the cross of Christ."

The four remaining years of Lovejoy's life were brilliant and stormy. He was outspoken in his denunciations of evils in Church and State, as he saw them. His editorials in the *Observer* on the subject of slavery aroused bitter opposition among influential members of the slave-owning community. When some of his best friends, including two elders of the Second Presbyterian Church, urged him for

cated himself to this cause, and as a minister of the Congregational Church in Princeton, Illinois, for seventeen years, and as a member of Congress from Illinois from 1856 to 1864, he spoke often and fearlessly against slavery. "In Congress Lovejoy assailed slavery and the South with a violence equaled only by Thaddeus Stevens and Sumner." (*Dictionary of American Biography*, xi, 436.) He was an ardent supporter of Abraham Lincoln, and upon his death in 1864 Lincoln wrote of him: "My personal acquaintance with him . . . has been one of increasing respect and esteem, ending, with his life, in no less than affection on my part. . . . To the day of his death, it would scarcely wrong any other to say he was my most generous friend." (J. G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: Complete Works*, II, 527.)

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his own safety to exclude all discussions of slavery from his paper, he replied: "I have sworn eternal opposition to slavery, and by the blessing of God I will never go back." He never did go back, although his path led to a martyr's grave.

In June-July, 1836, the *Observer* was transferred to Alton, Illinois, some twenty-five miles from Saint Louis. Any hopes that the free people of Illinois would give him a better reception than the slave-owners of Missouri were quickly dispelled when his printing press was seized and thrown into the river as soon as it arrived in Alton. A second press was destroyed on August 21, 1837, and a third on September 21 of the same year. On the night of November 7, 1837, while defending his fourth press against a mob, Lovejoy was shot and killed.

In his last recorded address, on November 3, 1837, he had said: "If the civil authorities refuse to protect me, I must look to God." His frequent sermons, his active membership in Synod and Presbytery, the strong religious emphasis which he gave to his articles in the *Observer* and which he invariably reflected in letters to his friends, and the almost fanatical religious devotion which seemed to motivate his utterances and actions after 1832, all were convincing proof that his conversion in early 1832, which came to him as a miracle from on high, and his dedication to God's work, strengthened and tempered by his year of study at Princeton, were decisive factors in his life, and gave him faith and courage during the remaining years of great influence and activity which, through the valley of martyrdom, won for him an imperishable place in the pages of American history.

