As early as 1836, Salmon P. Chase joined the battle to abolish slavery. His beliefs propelled him into national politics, although more than two decades passed before the mood of the nation was receptive to the ideals he expressed in his early years in Cincinnati.
The Politics of Abolition:
Salmon P. Chase in Cincinnati

by William E. Baringer

In November, 1860, Abraham Lincoln had just been elected President. The first winner of the new Republican party, Lincoln was so little known that the nation felt an overpowering curiosity about what sort of man he was. The New York Herald and other Democratic newspapers made a “contribution” to the public’s knowledge by printing a speech allegedly delivered by Lincoln to a Negro audience in Cincinnati in 1845. The speaker claimed that black Americans were the natural equals of whites, denounced as undemocratic the laws and customs that denied them equality, and received an engraved silver pitcher saluting his services to the race.

Among those who read this radical oration was a Democratic legislator from Mississippi, William C. Smedes of Vicksburg. In an angry letter to Henry Jarvis Raymond of New York, Republican national chairman, Smedes declared that the holder of such views should be struck dead by lightning as “a just punishment from an offended deity.” Raymond forwarded this missive to Lincoln, who repudiated the speech as “a forgery out and out.... I was never in a meeting of Negroes in my life; and never saw a pitcher presented by anybody to anybody.”

The actual speaker and recipient of the pitcher on that occasion was not Lincoln but a Cincinnati attorney named Salmon Portland Chase. Chase meant exactly what he said about black equality in 1845. Negro rights were to him a simple matter of legal justice. The effort of translating that principle into practice, however, was so strenuous and spectacular that it propelled the lawyer into public life and eventually earned even from his enemies an ungrudging respect and a national reputation.

Salmon Portland Chase was born in New Hampshire in 1808, the eighth child of Ithamar and Jannette Ralston Chase. Theirs was a branch of a large Chase clan extending throughout New England. They were what might be called upper class Americans, although some branches of the family were afflicted with decayed fortune. This was true of Salmon P. Chase’s family, especially after his father died when the boy was only eight. His mother kept the family together by hard work and thrift, aided by the generosity of relatives. Philander Chase, Salmon’s uncle, was a noted Episcopal clergyman of unlimited energy in doing good works, particularly founding schools. Young Chase attended one of these at Worthington, Ohio, and continued with higher education.
In 1823 Chase studied briefly at Cincinnati College. His early career was enhanced by the influence of his uncle, Philander Chase, Episcopal bishop of Ohio and, for a time, the president of the college.
at Cincinnati College, of which his uncle was briefly president. Though a quick learner, Salmon spent most of his time herding his uncle's cows on vacant lots in Cincinnati and was admitted to Dartmouth College as a junior only after extensive additional preparation.  

The courses Chase took at Dartmouth were hopelessly impractical. But that did not matter, for then the educational goal was the impossible ideal of "training the mind" through massive infusions of mathematics and dead languages. Salmon later complained that at college he had learned a great deal about Caesar and hardly anything about the real world. But he emerged a certified member of that elite class of liberally educated young gentlemen. These college years had greatly strained the family budget, yet the graduate had learned nothing that would help him earn a living except by teaching school. This chore, which he hated, he had already done for two brief terms during college recess in the dead of winter, near home, for very little money. Uncle Philander, about to found another school, offered Salmon a teaching job, but the young man declined.

Salmon decided instead to study law in the national capital while supporting himself by teaching. Quickly assessing the opportunities in this city where private schools had a monopoly, Chase founded and operated his own "Select Classical School" with notable success. He instructed the sons of such famous statesmen as Henry Clay and William Wirt, exercising stern discipline on the basis of his early teaching experiences. He cut a handsome figure, and after hours he enjoyed an active social life, attending parties and dances from "the President's House" on down the social scale.

Nowhere was Salmon more at his ease than at the home of William Wirt, a well-known lawyer, writer, and attorney general under Presidents James Monroe and John Quincy Adams. Wirt had begun his career in the same way as young Chase, and he became a substitute father to the ambitious young pedagogue. Chase fell in love with all of Wirt's beautiful daughters, only to see them married off to young men of superior prospects. Schoolmastering was then rated a non-profession, ranking somewhere between tradesmen and body-servants.

Out of the social season Chase spent his free time trying his hand at belles lettres, imitating William Wirt, writing a diary, and plowing through Blackstone and Chitty. He was no more successful as apprentice man of letters than as student of law. After three years of intermittent study he presented himself for admission to the bar, in those days a procedure of remarkable informality. The candidate was obliged to satisfy one lone barrister, who might quiz him for thirty minutes or less. Chase's examiner was a district judge, Justice Cranch, who after a few questions ruled that the candidate invest an additional year in study. That, objected Chase, would ruin everything; he had already made preparations to leave Washington, move west to Cincinnati, and practice law. The judge obligingly reversed his decision from flunk to pass, and Chase was
In 1830, when Chase returned from Dartmouth College and Washington, D.C., to enter law practice in Cincinnati, he found a burgeoning city whose public landing was a primary staging area for the new western frontier. His office was located nearby on Third Street.
duly enrolled as a lawyer. "I have a profession," he exulted in his diary. "Let me not dishonor it."³

Chase had given careful thought to the locale of his new career. He wavered among three cities: Baltimore; Lockport, New York, on the Erie Canal, where his younger brother Edward was practicing law; and Cincinnati. He chose the Ohio River town as the spot likely to develop most rapidly while offering the least competition for a green and indifferently trained counsellor-at-law. A United States senator from Cincinnati told him that the town already had more lawyers than it required. Chase, however, had reasoned that he could compete with the established local bar because, unlike most of its members, he had been "liberated" by a college education.

A college friend limned for him a land of "privations and hardships" arising from its frontier condition. "In this Western country," he wrote, "every man is a politician." Chase did not consider this point a credit. Jacksonian politics in Washington had repelled him, and his family, replete with politicians, had laid down an axiom: to stay out of trouble, avoid politics.⁴ Chase had developed his own formula for success: (1) store up knowledge; (2) be "a man of popular and winning address;" (3) "exhibit all you know in such a way as to make fools...stare." By so doing, he considered that the long and bumpy road to Cincinnati would be the first steps on "the steep where Fame's proud temple shines."⁵

The journey, by stagecoach and riverboat, took a fortnight, and the traveler had ample time for a hard look at himself and his prospects. His introspections ranged from soaring confidence to timorous self-doubt. Shy by nature, cautious in giving his trust, charming and witty only with people he knew well, the uncertain newcomer found Cincinnati much changed since he had last seen it six years earlier. To acclimate himself, Chase spent weeks studying Ohio law and getting acquainted with the local bar, a task made easier by letters of introduction supplied by William Wirt. Admitted to practice, Chase began a long and frustrating search for paying clients. Entirely on his own, with nobody to throw business his way, he was unable to establish a successful practice. Finally he entered into partnership with Edward King and Timothy Walker, the first of a long line of law firms which Chase shuffled to his own advantage. By 1835 he was so busy that he had to refuse new business. During his slack years, Chase spent countless hours editing and annotating a three-volume Statutes of Ohio and writing an extensive historical introduction. Published between 1833 and 1835, it established his reputation among western lawyers and eastern legal scholars, but brought him little money.

Outside of working hours the slim, handsome New Englander was a quick social success. His Uncle Philander, now the Episcopal bishop of Ohio, supplied a letter of introduction to the Nicholas Longworth mansion, and with it Chase promptly gained entry to the upper level of Cincinnati society. Four years' experience on the Washington social scene enabled Salmon to meet and
escort a long list of young ladies. His energetic social life was good for business; it made him known and supplied contacts. He was also looking for a spouse. In the tradition of eligible young gentlemen who seek affluence by taking an heiress to wife, Chase paid vigorous court to Miss Cassily Longworth, daughter of Cincinnati’s wealthiest family. The romance died, however, and finally his choice narrowed to Catherine Jane Garniss, daughter of a leading businessman. It was a genuine love match, and the pair was married March 4, 1834, with Dr. Lyman Beecher officiating. Domestic bliss ensued, matched by professional success. Before long the new husband was so busy at law that he took on a junior partner.

In November 1835, a daughter was born to the Chases, and Salmon was so elated that he took the next working day off to celebrate. Then Mrs. Chase became violently ill. But several doctors attended her and her condition appeared to improve. Chase was encouraged to go ahead with a planned business trip to Philadelphia, and for weeks he was out of touch. Then at Wheeling, on his way home, he found three letters awaiting him. The second and third told him that his beloved “Kitty” had suffered a relapse and died. On the slow voyage downstream he read the messages over and over again, alternately grieving and disbelieving. Reaching Cincinnati in the middle of the night, he found on his front door a ribbon of black crepe. Stunned, his last hope gone, the shattered husband walked the streets aimlessly most of the night before he could bring himself to enter. When he finally looked upon his beautiful bride laid out in her coffin, he fell to his knees and vainly prayed to God to restore her to him.

Until his wife’s burial the bereaved husband spent nearly every minute beside the bier. And afterwards for months he visited the cemetery every day, often weeping like a man broken beyond repair. His strong religious attachment gave him no consolation, and in church he could think only of the empty seat beside him. He blamed himself for being far away during Catherine’s crisis, and Salmon sought peace of mind by investigating and chronicling Kitty’s final illness like a lawyer preparing a case for court. Subconsciously he held his infant daughter responsible, and ignored her completely, leaving her care to his mother-in-law.6

Chase never entirely recovered from this tragedy. He was to marry twice more, both times to heiresses with whom he enjoyed a happy family life, though both died young after long, agonizing illnesses. Both gave him children, most of whom did not survive infancy. But the great love of his life was buried with Kitty in the grave he haunted all winter long.

If strength of character grows out of suffering, Chase emerged from this harrowing time a man of iron. For a long time it appeared that he would not recover. Often Chase went to his office seeking refuge in work, but he accomplished nothing. His reading narrowed to the Bible and medical textbooks; he found comfort in neither. His only pleasure was a dark, negative one, his visits
to the graveyard. Gradually Chase came back to life. By late winter he was taking an interest in his baby daughter, and a sensational murder case in which he was deeply involved restored some zest to his legal affairs.

Political developments brought on by Jackson’s lively policies interested him too, but only as a spectator. As a voter Chase described himself as an independent who leaned toward Democratic principles but usually voted Whig, a perfect formula for staying out of public office. Party politics on the frontier, where every man was a politician, were weak to the point of non-existence; a man could run for office as an individual and win. But that was rapidly changing as Jackson built a party machine and with it revolutionized American politics. Of this profound change Chase the non-politician was unaware; nor would he have cared if he had recognized it. The Jackson revolution dethroned the custom of aristocratic rule and handed over power to the common man. Chase approved of this only in theory. In practice, noblesse oblige was more to his taste. It was this attitude which was to lead him into politics by the back door.

By the time he entered his thirtieth year on January 13, 1837, Chase had moved far along the road toward financial success. From his first days in Cincinnati he had sharply observed the amount and nature of local capital investments. When he had surplus cash he bought real estate and shares of small western enterprises such as the astonishing company which supplied water, in buckets, to the inhabitants of the growing town on Lake Michigan called Chicago. Thus, as a man of substance, education, and social standing, Chase was ready for a call to public service at the very time the tradition of noblesse oblige was discarded, to be supplanted by party politics.

Chase’s economic standing was severely deflated by the Panic of 1837. Though delayed in striking the West, the business debacle hit harder there than elsewhere, for frontier development had been built mainly on credit. Many of Chase’s own investments were lost, but by that time he had a new interest: the abolition of slavery.

This was the period in which abolitionism developed into a notable reform movement. Its champions were neither numerous nor powerful, but the vigor with which southern slaveowners denounced them produced the illusion of enormous power. Cincinnati, located on the edge of the domain of slavery, was a logical spot for abolitionist activity and the city became a western focal point. But it was also a fact that the best customers of Cincinnati businessmen were in the South. A local abolitionist newspaper called the Philanthropist was the first to disturb this commercial amity. The publisher of this troublesome sheet was a newcomer, James G. Birney, a wealthy plantation owner from Alabama who had turned with vigor against slavery. On July 12, 1836, a mob raided the press office at the corner of Seventh and Main Streets.

The first raid was a warning which Birney ignored. Some of Cincinnati’s leading citizens, annoyed by what they considered a public nuisance, organized a meeting to demand that the newspaper end its agitation against slavery.
Birney was unintimidated, and on July 30 a second mob did a thorough job of wrecking his printing plant. The rioters then went after the publisher. Failing to find him, they spent the rest of the night terrorizing Cincinnati’s black section and looking for abolitionists.

One of the objects of their search was Dr. Isaac Colby, the brother-in-law and family physician of Salmon P. Chase. Chase’s sister Abigail, Dr. Colby’s wife, was badly frightened and took refuge with her brother that night. The next day Chase went into action in defense of law and order, freedom of speech and press. He canvassed the business area for supporters, organized a protest meeting, and wrote out anti-mob resolutions for adoption. But the pro-slavery group learned of Chase’s plan and took over the meeting, adopting resolutions of their own which approved the mob’s action. Flushed with victory, they again went after Birney, who was rumored to be hiding at a hotel. Chase, momentarily defeated, followed them. Learning of their objective, he raced ahead and when the mob reached the Franklin House they found Chase blocking the door. He and the rioters engaged in loud debate as tension mounted. Before anyone was hurt, the mayor emerged from the hotel and formally announced that Mr. Birney was not in. Thwarted, the noisy mob dispersed. “From this time on,” Chase recalled long afterward, “although not technically an abolitionist, I became a decided opponent of slavery and the slave power.”

Chase closed the episode, his first active venture in public life, by writing a ringing editorial for the local papers:

Sooner than see Any Press, however obnoxious, destroyed, and put to silence by unlawful force, I would make almost any sacrifice. Much as I have deprecated the course of the Abolitionists, I regard all the consequences of their publications, as evils comparatively light, when contrasted with the evils produced by the prevalence of the mob spirit. Freedom of the Press and Constitutional Liberty, must live or perish together.

Birney, having shown courage, sincerity, and the presence of active support, won the right to publish his paper. But that did not mean that the sectional peace-at-any-price party had forgiven him. Fate put into their hands a club with which to belabor him, in the form of Matilda, a fugitive slave. Matilda, a light mulatto, had escaped in May 1836 from her master, Larkin Lawrence, who was also her father, while the river steamer on which Lawrence was moving from Maryland to Missouri was tied up at Cincinnati. The local underground hid her until her owner-father left, then passed her on to James Birney, who employed her as a household servant. Lawrence, meantime, hired a private detective, who tracked the girl down and arrested her in March 1837. Matilda’s friends quickly went to the law office of Chase & Eells, outlined the case, and asked the senior partner if he could get Matilda released from jail.

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Chase took the case. He argued that the prisoner was not a fugitive at all but a free woman, having been voluntarily brought to the free state of Ohio by her owner. Thus she could not legally be forced to return to a slave state. Asking for a writ of habeas corpus, Chase made his argument and lost. His client was ordered back to slavery. But the anti-slavery press printed his strong plea and gave it wide circulation.\(^9\)

That did not end the Matilda case. Under Ohio law, harboring a fugitive slave was a crime. Birney’s enemies lost no time in so charging him, and Chase was back in court with a new client. He defended Birney with the same argument: Matilda was not a slave, so the accused could not have been harboring a fugitive. The court, “supported by the prejudices of nearly the entire community,” found for the plaintiffs, and Birney was fined fifty dollars. Chase appealed to the Ohio Supreme Court and made his argument a third time. The indictment contained a serious technical flaw in that it failed to allege that Birney had knowingly assisted an escaped slave. Chase ignored this, hoping for a verdict affirming that residence in the free state of Ohio rendered slavery a constitutional impossibility, a decision which would set a legal precedent. He won the case, and the lower court’s verdict was reversed, but the high court avoided the larger issue and found for Birney on the technicality. However, the court had Chase’s argument printed, and thus it was widely read by lawyers.\(^10\)

In this manner Chase began his public career. It was an unusual start. His introduction was not the common one of winning a modest office leading to higher rank, but a controversial principle and a law case. Of no great importance in itself, the Matilda case was the first of a long list of battles between Chase and the vested interests of slavery. These jousts at law did not arise with regularity. Unlike officeholders, whose service is continuous, Chase was an occasional public man, and his public reputation grew slowly. Thirteen years passed between his first plunge, unwittingly, into the waters of politics, and his first election to high public office.

In Cincinnati, Chase became at once a hero to the black population. The tale of his defense of Matilda was told and retold, and Negroes, who had few rights under Ohio law, sought him when they needed legal assistance. He drew up and executed deeds for many black purchasers of real estate and performed countless other services for nominal fees or none.\(^11\) It was this dedication which earned him the engraved silver pitcher in 1845, a gift he prized for the rest of his life. When, after leaving Cincinnati, he sought national office as a Republican, he took delight in serving political visitors ice water out of this pitcher, a practice which often made politicians think twice about supporting him.

In the presidential year of 1840 Chase was in the unusual position of having two of his friends and neighbors running for President. James Birney, who had little chance of winning, had been nominated by the Liberty party, which had been formed by the abolitionists. William Henry Harrison had been nominated
The anti-slavery sentiments of the Philanthropist, published by James G. Birney (left), so angered the populace that a mob destroyed his press in July 1836. Birney ignored handbills which threatened further violence, and was raided by another mob several weeks later. This violence against the freedom of the press was the decisive event which led Salmon P. Chase to join the abolitionist movement. The newspaper remained in circulation under a variety of names until 1848. Abolitionist Birney was twice the Liberty party candidate for President.

ABOLITIONISTS BEWARE.

The citizens of Cincinnati, embracing every class, interested in the prosperity of the City, satisfied that the business of the place is receiving... stab from the wicked and misguided operations of the abolitionists, are resolved to arrest their course. The destruction of their Press on the night of the 12th Instant, may be taken as a warning. As there are some worthy citizens engaged in the unholy cause of annoying our southern neighbors, they are appealed to, to pause before they bring things to a crisis. If an attempt is made to re-establish their press, it will be viewed as an act of defiance to an already outraged community, and on their heads be the result—which will follow.

Every kind of expostulation and remonstrance has been resorted to in vain—longer patience would be criminal. The plan is matured to eradicate an evil which every citizen feels is undermining his business and property.
by the Whigs and was likely to be elected. The old general had no public record and his party adopted no platform. During the campaign the Philanthropist vigorously attacked Harrison for being a defender of slavery. Harrison, who lived a few miles downriver at North Bend, encountered Chase on a Cincinnati street and asked him to tell Birney that he was mistaken. Chase did so and Birney’s attacks ceased.

After Harrison’s victory, Chase’s hope was to move the next President in an anti-slavery direction. This was a practical consideration, for the Whigs basically were the party of business and commerce, although they kept this as quiet as possible during the campaign. Such men were not slave owners, and Whig leaders like Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and William H. Seward, governor of New York, were anti-slavery. In this milieu, Chase now found himself regarded as a man of power whose influence was eagerly courted. He did advise Harrison on several appointments. However, as he desired no job for himself, overall policy was more important to him, and Chase advised the President-elect to omit slavery entirely from his inaugural address. But he was out-weighed by Webster, his legal idol for fifteen years, who wrote the speech in which Harrison told the nation that his slavery policy would be to promote harmony and avoid provocation. This was hardly what Chase had in mind, but as it happened, within a month Harrison had died and John Tyler of Virginia was President.12

To have a President die in office was a new experience for Americans. It was especially shattering to Ohioans, who saw their first President inaugurated and buried in the short space of five weeks. Chase, mulling over the effects of this on the politics of slavery and freedom, reached conclusions which shaped his career. Tyler, he feared, might make the Whigs the party of slavery and thus nudge the Democrats into a more neutral posture. Future Democratic Presidents might handle slavery by neutralizing the position of the national government, leaving bondage an option under state law only. Then, he reasoned, the ultimate triumph of freedom would be certain. Chase’s anti-slavery position in 1841 was modest, legal, constitutional. While some of his fellow reformers demanded abolition whatever the consequences, reform within the law was Chase’s objective. He did not expect federal power ever to be used against slavery; the Constitution did not permit this.13

How then could such a goal be realized? By entering the Democratic party and shaping it? Chase thought better results could be achieved by a subtler method. The Democrats, out of power, would invite support of all dissatisfied voters. If the North’s anti-slavery voters could be organized into a strong independent party, Democrats would court their support by adopting some anti-slavery objectives. Should the two major parties not move as Chase anticipated, the third party would remain independent.

Such a party already existed in the Liberty party which had nominated
Birney in the 1840 campaign. Since, like Chase, a majority of the voters had supported Harrison, the Liberty ticket had attracted fewer than a thousand votes in Ohio. Chase determined to work to strengthen the Liberty party. So late in 1841, he plunged into politics and became, for the first time, an active politician.

Ohio would elect a governor in 1842, and the Liberty party entered the contest by holding a state convention at Columbus in December 1841. Chase was one of the organizers. The Ohio Liberty men were delighted and they immediately gave him a place of importance. He was assigned to write resolutions and a major address, which would explain the reasons for supporting a third party. Liberty men, Chase said, had left their old parties reluctantly. They had hoped that those powerful organizations would reverse "the ascendancy of slaveholding influence, in all the departments of our national government.... All such expectation, however, after having been repeatedly disappointed and repeatedly resumed, is now finally relinquished."

The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, he argued, were anti-slavery instruments. Now, he declared,

*Slavery has overleaped its prescribed limits and usurped the control of the national Government.... The honor, the welfare, the safety of our country imperiously require the absolute and unqualified divorce of the government from slavery.... We would, therefore, withdraw the support of national legislation from the system of slavery. We would enforce the just and constitutional rule that slavery is the creature of local law, and cannot be extended.*

Chase's party platform added specifics: abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, free speech and press, trial by jury and right of petition made secure against interference by the slave power, and equal education for white and black races.

Chase returned to Cincinnati well satisfied with his first convention. He had sold his fellow liberals on a reform program that could halt slavery without producing any shocks to the American system. Its conservatism, in theory, would attract a host of voters. Chase labored hard to inspire the voters, working behind the scenes as well as on the stump. The state elections produced five thousand votes for Liberty candidates. Though this was an impressive gain over the 1840 total, it was exceeded twenty times over by each of the national parties.

Still, it was a start, and Chase told himself that he must simply work harder. Years later he recollected,

*Having resolved on my political course, I devoted all the time and means I could command to the work of spreading the principles and building up the organization of the party of constitutional freedom then inaugurated.*
Sometimes, indeed, all I could do seemed insignificant, while the labors I had to perform and the demands upon my very limited resources by necessary contributions taxed severely all my ability.... It seems to me now, on looking back, that I could not help working if I would; and that I was just as really called in the course of Providence to my labors for human freedom, as ever any other laborer in the great field of the world was called to his appointed work.  

Encouraged rather than dejected by their showing, the Liberty men immediately began planning for 1844. A national convention was arranged for August 1843 in Buffalo, New York. Every state but one was represented by the one thousand who attended this gathering. Chase was chief author of the party platform. He offered his Ohio resolutions, and they were adopted with one addition. For the first time he was a national political figure.

Chase's personal choice as Liberty presidential nominee for 1844 was John Quincy Adams. The old man had recently become an anti-slavery hero by defeating Texas annexation in the House of Representatives. At Buffalo, Chase argued that a presidential nomination be postponed for a year. It was the ideal time for striking a bargain with the big parties. They were evenly matched and both were sorely troubled by the slavery issue. Their great challenge was to find candidates and platforms able to command votes in both free and slave states. Chase hoped that the Liberty party might hold the balance of power and use it to force concessions out of the others. But the convention would not wait; it rejected Chase's plan and renominated Birney.

Back home, Chase undertook the difficult task of starting a party newspaper for Ohio. Putting up his own property as security, he raised nearly $20,000 and wrote a portion of the first issue which was published at Columbus in April 1844.

By this time the presidential race of 1844 was underway. The most hotly contested issue was Texas annexation, and, as Chase expected, both major parties evaded it in their platforms. But fence-sitting proved impossible with their presidential nominees. Pro-Texas James K. Polk of Tennessee was nominated by the Democrats. The Whigs chose their veteran leader, Henry Clay, who was anti-Texas. Chase made an extensive speaking tour for Birney in Central Ohio during the summer, while the Whigs worried about losing southern votes over Texas. When Clay retreated on the Texas issue thousands of voters shifted to the Liberty party.

The results of the election were unusual. In Ohio the Liberty vote doubled, but Clay carried the state. Birney's total vote nationally was nine times that of 1840. In New York, he polled 16,000 votes, gaining enough Whig support to shift New York's electors and give the presidency to Polk. Thus the immediate effect of Liberty gains was to give southern Democrats greater power. The increased Liberty total was delusive: most of it was protest voting, which would
be lost in the next election unless the reformers could take effective steps to hold the mavericks.

In another convention organized by Chase the following spring, he attempted to do just this by broadening the party base. He issued a call for all who opposed "the criminal usurpations of the slave-power" to convene a "Southern and Western Liberty Convention" at Cincinnati in June 1845. Two thousand representatives came from ten states and two territories. Chase managed the convention and wrote for adoption an "Address to the People." It was printed as a pamphlet and one hundred thousand copies were distributed.16

Chase spent much of the summer of 1845 on the road, from Cincinnati to Cleveland, organizing the party for local elections. A year later he was engaged in another vain effort to elect a Liberty candidate for governor. In two years, the party gained three thousand votes.

All of this political action did not divert Chase from his role as a vigorous opponent of slavery at the bar. A new legal cause celebre, the Vanzandt case, had arisen in 1842 and continued until 1847. Nine slaves who belonged to Wharton Jones of Kentucky fled one April night in 1842, crossed the Ohio, and made contact with the underground railroad through an old farmer named John Vanzandt. In his covered wagon, Vanzandt was taking the escapees to the next "station" when he was stopped by a gang of ruffians at a rural tavern. A bloody fight ensued. The survivors were taken back to slavery by their abductors, who collected a reward, then were charged with kidnapping and acquitted. Wharton Jones filed suit in federal court charging Vanzandt with harboring escaped slaves, a crime under a 1793 act of Congress.

Chase was chief attorney for the defense, and in a jury trial he moved for acquittal on the technical ground established in the Matilda-Birney case. This was a different court, federal rather than state, and the judge ruled against him. The case went to a jury which found Vanzandt guilty, and the court awarded $1200 in damages to the plaintiff. Chase moved for a new trial and an arrest of judgment. The judge granted the latter so that the issue could be decided by the Supreme Court. Years passed before its turn came, and Chase prepared a constitutional argument holding the 1793 law null and void. The same high court had just decided, in another case, that the law was constitutional. This conflict, and its slavery aspect, made the case famous. William H. Seward of New York joined Chase in the defense, but the Supreme Court decided against them without even giving Chase the chance to deliver his elaborate argument. Defeated again, Chase took comfort in criticizing the court's decision as "amazingly weak at all points," and was mollified by the fact that Vanzandt had died before the plaintiff could collect, leaving an estate too small to pay the judgment. Chase also had his lengthy argument printed as a pamphlet. His own office mailed 405 copies to a select list headed by John C. Calhoun of Washington, D.C.—an unlikely reader—and one for every other member of Congress.17

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Chase became famous for his legal defense of abolitionists and fugitive slaves. When he was thwarted in an attempt to deliver an argument in defense of John Vanzandt, whose home near Glendale (below) was a station on the underground railroad, Chase had his remarks printed as a pamphlet at his own expense. Vanzandt later served as Harriet Beecher Stowe's model for the character John Van Trompe in Uncle Tom’s Cabin.
Between the start and finish of the Vanzandt case, Chase fought for another publicized fugitive, Sam Watson. In January 1845, like Matilda, Watson jumped ship at Cincinnati. But he was soon apprehended and jailed. As a slave, Watson was not entitled to a court trial, and possessed no civil rights whatever. A habeas corpus writ brought him into court, where Chase gave his stock plea, supported by new arguments, on the “unconstitutional” fugitive slave laws. His effort was in vain, and Watson was returned to servitude.

The defender of these fugitives from legal tyranny became known throughout the land as “attorney general for runaway Negroes.” Chase often facetiously complained of the burdens of this fictitious office, and its lack of salary and perquisites. But he bore them, working at his desk more often than in court. Let some legal problem arise relating to slave property, or the rights of blacks, and someone would get hold of Chase to deal with it. “Although a stranger to you,” a typical letter would begin, “I take the liberty of addressing you . . . .”

Modern political science research has established and documented that American voters are not ideological. To stir the populace and change voting habits requires clearly defined issues such as economic hardship, corruption, or immorality. Events during the Polk administration revealed a fourth revolutionary political force: usurpation. Chase and his liberal colleagues had failed to move the electorate by argument and appeals to morality. But the Mexican War lent a dash of success to their decade of frustration. The United States, having defeated Mexico, possessed the power to annex all of it as well as the little republics of Central America, thus opening up a whole new empire to slavery. This prospect frightened the North and jarred the next presidential election out of its normal course.

Preparing for it, Liberty party leaders assembled at Buffalo in October 1847. Chase advised them, for the same reason as in 1843, to postpone naming a ticket. But the convention nominated Senator John P. Hale of New Hampshire, a “saved” Democrat, and offered Chase the honor of running for Vice President. He declined, and returned to Cincinnati ready to desert the Liberty party if a more effective instrument could be found. Such a prospect developed when the liberal Van Buren faction of New York Democrats bolted the party over the slavery extension issue and formed the Free Soil party in June 1848. At the same time a Chase-planned and managed “People’s Convention” was meeting in Columbus, composed of anti-slavery Whigs and Democrats as well as Liberty men. Chase’s Ohio convention proposed that the liberals join forces in a reform national convention, nominate Van Buren for President, and create the most formidable third party the country had ever seen. The coalition was forged at another Buffalo convention in August, at which Chase presided. He also wrote the resolutions, and secured the withdrawal of the Liberty candidates. Western delegates wished to make Chase Van Buren’s running mate, but again he declined.
Adjourning in a blaze of enthusiasm, the Free Soil politicians went home determined to canvass hard and give American politics a lesson in the political strength of anti-slavery. The Free Soil revolt split the Democrats badly, as theirs was the party extending slavery, and divided the Whigs only slightly. No one campaigned harder than Chase, who worked to convince Whigs of central and southern Ohio that the Whig nominee, General Zachary Taylor, a slaveholder, was not worthy of their votes.

The results were revolutionary. Taylor won the presidency, and the Democrats sustained heavy losses. Nine Free Soilers were elected to the House of Representatives in Washington. Van Buren polled more than a quarter of a million votes, 35,000 of them in Ohio, a trebling of the Liberty score of 1844. As for the Senate in Washington, legislatures rather than voters elected its members, and Free Soil victories in state legislatures held out the prospect that Free Soilers might win there too.

In Ohio, two Free Soil candidates won seats in the legislature, and in 1849 they and their colleagues would choose a United States senator. Chase's supporters at once suggested that he become a candidate. The trend of political direction was clear, and Chase, the reform politician who had never run for any office, decided to ride the wave if he could. Pulling wires in earnest, Chase went to Columbus a week after election day and was seldom seen in Cincinnati for the next three months. He was not even at home for Christmas.19

The two Free Soil legislators held the balance of power in the Ohio legislature, whose remaining members were evenly split between the two old parties, Democrats and Whigs. The Free Soilers joined with the Democrats in defeating a Whig charge of election fraud, in return for which the Democrats agreed to repeal the "Black Code" laws regulating "free persons of color" in Ohio. Thus proving the sincerity of their anti-slavery posture, the Democrats joined with the two Free Soil legislators in late February 1849 to elect Chase senator from Ohio.20

On the fourth of March 1849 a new President, Zachary Taylor, was inaugurated, and the Senate assembled in a short session to act on his appointments. Chase had hurried home to Cincinnati, packed and departed for the capital without delay. On the same date in 1830 he had boarded the western stage in Washington, Cincinnati-bound, dreaming of a future that would find him climbing "the steep where Fame's proud temple shines." In nineteen years he had accomplished the ascent and entered the Senate to become the colleague of Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun and others. Besides fame and position, he had won considerable wealth and some power. To be sure, he held little of the latter, for a new senator with a shaky political base was far outweighed by those veterans of the Senate who had a solid grip on power in their own states. Already Whigs at home were denouncing him for defeating them, describing his election in terms of corruption, bargain and fraud. None of this troubled him. Chase had become a candidate not out of personal ambition but
The Free Soil ticket of Martin Van Buren and Charles F. Adams, in a campaign shaped by Chase and espousing the slogan "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor, and Free Men," was a powerful third-party force in the election of 1848. With the formation of the Republican party in 1854 and its absorption of the Free Soil organization. Salmon P. Chase found an even more powerful milieu for pressing the abolitionist cause.
in order to serve the cause. Until the battle over slavery was done, he would be one of its leaders, gaining power or losing it as the fortunes of political conflict dictated.

Pursuing his goal, Chase would be seen less and less in Cincinnati, the city that had unwittingly made him a public man. As United States senator from 1849 to 1855, he was in Washington much of the time, and his historic role as a founder of the Republican party, heir of the Free Soil party, in 1854, was played out mainly on Capitol Hill. As Ohio governor from 1856 to 1860, he was a resident of Columbus. Elected to the Senate once more to a term which began March 4, 1861, he served only hours before becoming Secretary of the Treasury in Lincoln's cabinet. Washington was his home for the remainder of his eventful career, which culminated in his appointment as Chief Justice of the United States in December 1864. Cincinnati saw him in person only as an infrequent visitor. But he was in the thoughts of that city's residents more often than when they formerly had seen him striding along to his office on Third Street near Main, for the newspapers were full of his activities. He was a leading presidential contender in every election from 1856 until he died in 1873. And, at the height of his fame, he was also in the people's pockets, for throughout most of the Civil War every one-dollar greenback in the land carried a statesmanlike portrait of Salmon P. Chase grown bald, portly, and world-renowned for his contributions to national finance, political organization, and human rights.

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(4) J. Kimball to Chase, July 31, 1826; Chase to Mrs. William Wirt, Jan. 28, 1830, Chase Papers.
(5) Diary, March 1, 1830, Chase Papers; Chase to J. Dennison, Nov. 14, 1828, and Nov. 7, 1831, Chase-Dennison Letters, Library of Congress.
(7) Autobiographical letter, July 10, 1853, Chase Papers.
(8) Cincinnati Daily Gazette, July 20, 23, 25, Aug. 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 15, 16, 1836. The original letter, dated August 3, 1836, by Chase to the Daily Gazette is in Chase Papers.


(10) Ibid.

(11) S. Holmes to Chase, Oct. 30, 1838; deed for H. Harrison, Nov. 27, 1838; indenture of colored boy to Chase, Feb. 5, 1841; Chase Papers.

(12) E. Smith to Chase, Nov. 20, 1840; G. S. Hubbard to Chase, Dec. 8, 1840; C. M. Emerson to Chase, Jan. 28, 1841; Diary, Feb 13, 1841; Chase Papers.

(13) Schuckers, op. cit., 45-46; Albert Bushnell Hart, Salmon Portland Chase (Boston, 1899), 55-59.

(14) Schuckers, op. cit., 46-51; Warden, op. cit., 295-296; Hart, op. cit., 58, 87-92; Francis Phelps Weisenburger, The Passing of the Frontier, 1825-1850 (Columbus, 1941), 434-435; J. Duffey to Chase, Jan. 29, 1842 and July 29, 1842; J. G. Birney to Chase, Feb. 2, 1842; E. Glover to Chase, July 29, 1842; J. A. Shedd to Chase, Sept. 9, 1842; Chase to L. Tappan, May 26, 1842, Chase Papers.

(15) Chase to L. Tappan, Sept. 24, 1842, and Sept. 12, 1843; J. L. Whipple to Chase, Oct. 7, 1843; E. Wright, Jr. to Chase, Feb. 3, 1844; B. B. Taylor to Chase, April 18, 1844, Chase Papers.

(16) Broadside, April 19, 1845, Chase Papers; Schuckers, op. cit., 70-74.


