


## Chapter 114 -- Abolitionist Editor Elijah Lovejoy Is Murdered In Alton, Illinois Riot

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Time: 1833

### Ordained Minister Elijah Lovejoy Becomes An Abolitionist in St. Louis



Owen Lovejoy, Brother of Elijah, and Friend of Lincoln (1811-1864)

Calhoun is right in his belief that anti-slavery sentiment is growing in the North, but voicing anti-slavery rhetoric is a far cry from espousing abolition. From Boston to Cincinnati those wishing to free all slaves and welcome them into their society are met with open and often violent resistance.

This pattern is repeated in the Fall of 1837 at the southern Illinois town of Alton, across the Mississippi from St. Louis. The victim in this case is the abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy, whose death will, for different reasons, draw both Abraham Lincoln and John Brown into the slavery debate.

Elijah Lovejoy grows up in Maine, the pious son of a Congregationalist minister. He graduates first in his class from Waterville College (later Colby), then heads west to Missouri, where he hopes to serve God by using his skills as a teacher to improve society. He finds a home in St. Louis, and starts up a private high school. By 1830, however, he is ready for a new career, and becomes part-owner and editor of *The St. Louis Times*.

This lasts until 1832, when he attends a series of revivalist meetings led by the Reverend David Nelson, that prompt him toward the ministry. He heads back east to the Theological Seminary at Princeton, and is ordained as a Presbyterian minister on April 18, 1833.

Church friends support Lovejoy's move back to St. Louis, where he combines preaching in his own church with editing a religious newspaper, *The St. Louis Observer*. While his followers applaud him, others find him increasingly moralistic and outspoken. His criticism of the Roman Church become intense and unyielding, in a city that is heavily Catholic, and his vocal support for abolition is out of step in the slave state of Missouri.

Hostility toward Lovejoy erupts into violence in April 1836. A free black, one Francis McIntosh, kills a deputy sheriff and wounds another while trying to flee from a crime. He is momentarily jailed, until a mob breaks in and seizes him. Retribution is swift and savage, as McIntosh is tied to a tree and burned alive. When those involved are subsequently tried and acquitted, Lovejoy writes one editorial after another criticizing the outcome.

*We must stand by the laws and the Constitution, or all is gone.*

But legalities count little when it comes to a black man killing a white sheriff -- and, to drive home this point, another mob storms Lovejoy's office and destroys his printing press.

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Time: 1835

### **He Moves To Alton Illinois After Being Attacked By White Mobs**

He responds by moving across the river to the booming city of Alton, in the free state of Illinois. At the time he promises local leaders that he will refrain from trying to turn the town into a center for abolitionist agitation.

His actions, however, belie his words. He becomes a Garrison backer, opens a branch of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and on September 27, 1837 convenes a meeting of abolitionists in town. Then comes an editorial in his paper, *The Alton Observer*, calling for the immediate emancipation of all slaves.

Many citizens are outraged by Lovejoy's action and they respond much like the mob in St. Louis -- by swarming into his newspaper office and throwing his presses into the Mississippi River not once, but on three occasions.

When civic leaders warn him to leave the city for his own safety, he comes before them on November 3, still hoping for some kind of compromise. His speech captures both the religious fervor and personal fears so common to those who risk all for the cause of abolition.

*Mr. Chairman--it is not true, as has been charged upon me, that I hold in contempt the feelings and sentiments of this community, in reference to the question which is now agitating it. I respect and appreciate the feelings and opinions of my fellow-citizens.*

*But, sir, while I value the good opinion of my fellow-citizens, as highly as any one, I may be permitted to say, that I am governed by higher considerations than either the favour or the fear of man. I am impelled to the course I have taken, because I fear God. As I shall answer it to my God in the great day,*

*I have asked for nothing but to be protected in my rights as a citizen--rights which God has given me, and which are guaranteed me by the constitution of my country.*

*The question to be decided is, whether I shall be protected in the exercise ... of those rights; whether my property shall be protected, whether I shall be suffered to go home to my family at night without being assailed, and threatened with tar and feathers, and assassination; whether my afflicted wife, whose life has been in jeopardy, from continued alarm and excitement, shall night after night be driven from a sick bed into the garret to save her life from the brickbats and violence of the mobs; that sir, is the question."*

*I know, sir, that you can hang me up, or put me into the Mississippi, without the least difficulty. But what then? Where shall I go? I have been made to feel that if I am not safe at Alton, I shall not be safe anywhere. I recently visited St. Charles to bring home my family, and was torn from their frantic embrace by a mob. And now if I leave here and go elsewhere, violence may overtake me in my retreat, and I have no more claim upon the protection of any other community than I have upon this.*

*I have concluded, after consultation with my friends, and earnestly seeking counsel of god, to remain at Alton and here to insist on protection in the exercise of my rights. If the civil authorities refuse to protect me, I must look to God; and if I die, I have determined to make my grave in Alton.*

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Time: November 7, 1837

### **Lovejoy Is Killed In An Armed Battle At His Office**

Four days later, his fears are realized.

In a move that will dismay the passive Garrison, Lovejoy decides to arm himself against any further aggression.

He gathers some 20 supporters together at his warehouse to protect a new printing press. At nightfall on November 7 another mob attack begins. *The Alton Observer* reprises what happens next:

*As the crowd grew outside, excitement and tension mounted. Soon the pro-slavery mob began hurling rocks at the warehouse windows. The defenders retaliated by bombarding the crowd with a supply of earthenware pots found in the warehouse. Then came an exchange of gunfire. Alton's mayor tried in vain to persuade the defenders inside to abandon the press. They stood fast.*

*One of the mob climbed a ladder to try to set fire to the roof of the building. Lovejoy and one of his supporters darted into the darkness to over-turn the ladder, for they knew they would be doomed if a fire was set. But again a volunteer mounted the ladder to try to ignite the roof with a smoking pot of pitch.*

*As Lovejoy assisted in putting out the fire on the roof of the building, he received a blast from a double-barreled shotgun. Five of the bullets fatally struck Lovejoy. He died in the arms of his friend Thaddeus Hurlbut. The mob cheered and said all in the building should die. Amos Roff tried to calm the mob and was shot in the ankle.*

*Defenders of the press then laid down their weapons and were allowed to leave. The mob rushed the building, found the press, and threw it out a window to the riverbank, broke it into pieces and dumped the broken parts into the river, The body of Lovejoy was left undisturbed, remaining there until morning, guarded by friends who finally carried him home. He was buried on his 35th birthday, November 9, 1837.*

Lovejoy's death in Illinois joins the near lynching of Garrison in Boston in demonstrating the widespread resistance to abolition among whites in the North. Many may feel uncomfortable about the morality of slavery, but the prospect of having more blacks in their own towns remains terrifying.