

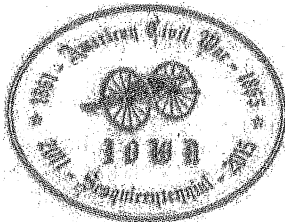
Two of Grinnell's founders linked to Underground Railroad

• The Rev. Homer Hamlin and Josiah Bushnell Grinnell helped fugitive slaves on their journey north

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Two of Grinnell's founders participated in the Underground Railroad; two apparently did not. They "represented four different groups of anti-slavery men," according to historian Leonard F. Parker.

The founders were the Rev. Homer Hamlin, the Rev. Josiah Bushnell Grinnell, Dr. Thomas Holyoke,



and Henry M. Hamilton. They all joined Grinnell Congregational Church, a body which loved to emphasize the words of Jesus, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." Accordingly, church by-laws required members to oppose slavery.

Homer Hamlin was "a somewhat radical abolitionist," wrote Parker. Physically ailing, Hamlin believed the "prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

Hamlin opened his home to a male fugitive slave — one of four whose presence in school sparked Grinnell's first riot in March 1860. But Hamlin wasn't a "Garrisian."

Radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison wanted slavery to end immediately, and he went further: He discarded any "portion

of Scripture" that allowed slavery.

Many Northern Christians were troubled by those Old Testament passages, according to historian Mark Noll. But Hamlin wasn't willing to jettison the Bible.

Fellow minister J.B. Grinnell "was less radical and more inclined to political action" than Hamlin, said Parker. J.B. was outgoing, highly verbal, and good at "accomplishing what he undertook." His "funny sayings" kept some early settlers "laughing most of the night."

J.B. regularly preached at Grinnell Congregational Church for two years — and afterwards occasionally.

In February 1859, J.B. invited some of abolitionist John Brown's party (which included 12 fugitive slaves) to stay in his home. Brown spoke for two evenings inside Grinnell Congregational Church. The second evening, J.B. thanked God for protecting Brown's party.

J.B. became a whipping boy for the Underground Railroad in Grinnell. Critics called him "John Brown Grinnell" and assailed him on editorial pages. In spite of the insults, J.B. continued to "entertain" fugitive slaves in his house. He also asked Grinnell residents to contribute money to help fugitives who came to town.

One hundred fifty years ago, on July 14, 1860, J.B. sent five fugitive slaves along the Underground Railroad to Brooklyn.

Further down the spectrum, Dr. Thomas Holyoke was a moderate anti-slavery man. "Cool in manner but

warm in feeling," Holyoke was a man of few words.

He was "more conservative and disposed to be on guard against radicalism in church or state," according to Parker.

Holyoke later supported Dr. Samuel D. Cochran, a minister with strong abolitionist credentials who served Grinnell Congregational Church, starting in 1863.

The last founder, Henry M. Hamilton, was "little inclined to be aggressive" or to give "special thought or effort" to abolitionism. "Reticent and thoughtful," Hamilton seemingly did

nothing to help or hinder fugitive slaves.

The final journey of the Grinnell station of the Underground Railroad, prior to the Civil War, occurred on August 15, 1860. Three wagons, carrying 15 fugitive slaves (and guarded by 10 whites) left Grinnell, headed for Iowa City.

From 1854 (Grinnell's founding) to 1860, at least 37 fugitive slaves had passed through town. These cases are documented, mainly through correspondence and letters to editors in 1859 and 1860. Less-well-documented cases could push the number even higher.



Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress

JOSIAH BUSHNELL GRINNELL