

A Man of Faith and Mighty Action

He could feel the tension in the room. The whispered words of diplomats echoed around him, filling the silence with the soft murmur of voices. Even from where he sat in a hard wooden chair at the back of the assembly, the apprehension and uneasiness in their words were unmistakable. This debate could change America forever.

The man in the back of the room stood, striding forward across the floor. He was an older man, with a pale complexion and slightly graying hair. He had a firm jaw and strong build, traits common to many men of his age. Yet, as he moved to the front of the room, his posture and mannerisms transformed him into a powerful man with firm ambition. He had the air of a great leader, and when he turned to face that vast congregation of senators, his commanding presence instantly silenced the whispers in the room.

He stood and looked out across the great assembly of men who had gathered to hear his address to the House of Representatives. He knew many of those men would oppose him, and he met their eyes with a proud and defiant strength. He did not fear these men. He did all that was just, moral, and right, trusting the rest to God.

Owen Lovejoy had been born for this moment. All his life, everything had been leading up to this...

Though Owen Lovejoy was a man destined to do great things, his early childhood was much like any other boy's. He was born in 1811 to a well-off family in Albion, Maine (Owen Lovejoy, Spartacus). Lovejoy's father was a Congressionalist Minister and instilled in his sons a strong belief of right and wrong. From him Owen gained a powerful religious faith that remained strong throughout his entire life (Litteken 42-44). Owen's brother, Elijah, also had a profound impact on the young boy. Because Elijah was nine years older than him, Owen had a

deep admiration for his brother and tried to emulate his good example (Garrison).

When Owen was nineteen, he enrolled in Bowdoin College to study law. He worked hard and supported himself by teaching school. Owen seemed likely to pursue successful career as a lawyer, but three years into his education Owen's father died (Garrison). His death devastated Owen who returned home to his mother. She encouraged Owen and told him that he needed to have more faith.

Owen decided to follow his mother's advice. He dedicated himself completely to religion and became a minister like his father (Litteken 42-44). Owen also traveled to Missouri where his brother Elijah was publishing an anti-slavery newspaper. For a time, Owen and Elijah owned a printing press and co-edited the *Observer* (Garrison). However, the Lovejoy's abolitionist stance was unpopular and the two brothers' newspaper faced brutal opposition. Hatred and prejudice mounted against them until November 7, 1837, when an unlawful mob stormed the printing office and attempted to destroy the building and all the documents inside it. Elijah valiantly tried to defend his property and freedom, but was brutally shot and killed (Elijah P. Lovejoy).

After the murder of his brother, Owen vowed to stand against slavery and those who uphold it. At Elijah's funeral, Owen knelt in prayer and promised, "I shall never forsake the cause that has been sprinkled with my brother's blood" (Owen Lovejoy Spartacus). Owen left Missouri and settled in Princeton, Illinois where he became the minister of a fairly large congregation. From the pulpit he preached firmly against slavery and declared that human bondage was a sin against God (Owen Lovejoy Homestead).

During this time, Owen met and married a young widow named Eunice Denham. The two of them raised her three daughters as well as six children of their own (A Tour of the

Lovejoy Home). Owen was a loving father and worked hard not only to support his family, but to teach them the values he so firmly believed in. Owen instilled in his children a strong sense of freedom and liberty. They grew up well educated and were strongly opposed to slavery.

When Owen's home became a safe haven for runaway slaves traveling on the underground railroad, he and his family helped, fed, and harbored any slaves who needed his assistance. A large attic loft, with a secret door concealed behind a large dresser, was used to hide escaping slaves until nightfall (A Tour of the Lovejoy Home). The Lovejoy family gave generously of their food and money, selflessly aiding all who came to them. E. P. Lovejoy, one of Owen's sons once recalled, "At that time we had a few Negroes thay [sic] lived here-- free... One time a whole wagon-load came by day in a red painted wagon. I wondered whether I'd have anything to eat after they... stopped at my father's house (Bryant)." Despite the hardships and persecution, Owen and his family never turned anyone away from their home.

Owen Lovejoy was not secretive about his actions in the underground railroad. He declared boldly that he would shelter and protect any runaway slave who came to his house. Such daring statements eventually brought Owen to court, but he was firm in his beliefs and refused to back down (Garrison).

In 1856 Owen Lovejoy was elected to the United States House of Representatives. It was there that he delivered some of his most stirring speeches against slavery. Owen became identified with the Radical Republican group, a collection of Senators and Representatives who believed that the slaves should not only be free, but were entitled to the same rights as every other citizen in the United States. Owen firmly believed in equality for people of all races; however, unlike most Radical Republicans, Owen was good friends with President Abraham Lincoln (Owen Lovejoy, Spartacus). Many members of congress rebuked Lincoln for his mild

stance on slavery, but Lovejoy did not (Radical Republicans). Even though he disagreed with the President's stand on slavery, Lovejoy tried not to criticize him. Instead Owen said of Lincoln: "If he does not drive as fast as I would, he is on the right road, and it is only a question of time" (Owen Lovejoy, Spartacus).

Lovejoy stood silently in front of the Congress, his dark eyes slowly studying the men before him. Some were gentlemen, born to affluent families. Others were merchants with well established businesses. There were men who were farmers, men who were lawyers, men who were ministers and preachers. Representatives of every state had gathered here, from the wintry tip of Maine to the southern edges of Georgia. Some member of Congress had traveled all the way from the new state of California to attend this meeting (50states). Mingling together and chatting animatedly, both slave holders and the abolitionists greeted each other sociably. Here, in this room, they seemed united together for a common cause, and yet they were divided by an unbridgeable chasm.

Owen Lovejoy stood, looking out at those whom he called his countrymen, his brothers. He could not understand how any American, any man dedicated to a country built upon principals of liberty and justice, could stand behind slavery and support its cause. The subjection of human will and spirit was wrong. It was against the designs and commandments of God. This Owen Lovejoy knew. No man on earth could convince him otherwise. And one day, he knew that all men everywhere would acknowledge this truth, denouncing the evils of slavery and instituting a fair and just law that would not only conform to the value of the American constitution but also to the will of his God.

Unfortunately, Lovejoy would never live to see the establishment of the Thirteenth Amendment. He would die two weeks before it was introduced to Congress (Garrison). Owen

Lovejoy had no way of knowing the great and wonderful changes that were about to take place, yet he had faith. He believed that one day all of America would be united, regardless of race or descent. However, he had no way of foreseeing what a truly great work he had begun. Lovejoy influenced many people throughout his lifetime, including Abraham Lincoln who later stated, “It can truly be said of him that... he bravely endured... the unpopularity... his principles imposed.” “He was my most generous friend. Let him have the marble monument along with the... more enduring one in the hearts of those who love liberty” (Garrison). Owen Lovejoy would be remembered long after his death as a man who never wavered in what he believed and fought tirelessly for the freedom of all.

Of course, as Owen Lovejoy stood to address the Thirty-Sixth Congress, he knew none of this (Owen Lovejoy 2002). He had only his faith in the unchainable human spirit and the firm conviction that justice would prevail. His heart was pounding as Owen placed his slightly trembling hands atop the podium. In his mind he said a silent prayer, asking the Lord to strengthen him and bless the words he was about to speak. He prayed that his message would reach deep into the conscience and touch the heart of each listener. Owen Lovejoy had a fervent desire to change his country, to elevate America and lead her to a wondrous future, but he knew that he needed divine help.

His swift yet heartfelt prayer finished, Owen looked up and faced the vast assembly of men. He was ready now. Ready to say what must be said. Owen Lovejoy stood to his full height, the determination to overcome slavery filling his entire body and driving away any doubts or fear. Owen Lovejoy opened his mouth and the words he spoke were so stirring and inspired that they placed America on an unalterable course for a wonderful future.

These words would influence politicians and judges, presidents and lawyers. These

words would awaken the cause of freedom and liberty in the heart of every man. These words would echo through the halls of history to the present day where they would strengthen the conviction of a nation founded in liberty and equality. These words would change America forever.

Owen Lovejoy declared "No human being, black or white, bond or free,... ever came to my door and asked for food and shelter... who did not receive it. This I have done. This I mean to do as long as God lets me live... Let it echo through all the arches of heaven, and reverberate and bellow along all the deep gorges of hell,... Owen Lovejoy lives at Princeton Illinois, three-quarters of a mile east of the village, and he aids every fugitive that comes to his door and asks it. Thou invisible demon of Slavery, does thou think to cross my humble threshold, and forbid me to give bread to the hungry and shelter to the houseless? I BID YOU DEFIANCE IN THE NAME OF MY GOD!" (Owen Lovejoy 2002).

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