

February 16, 1856

Abraham Lincoln, Esq
Springfield, Illinois

My Dear Sir,

My name is Henry Wilson¹, and, as you are, no doubt, already aware, I have recently had the honor of being elected and seated as the Senator from the great State of Massachusetts. Although I have been, in days already long past, affiliated with the Whig Party, it was with great reluctance that I did support those candidates and the policies of said party. It is with the greatest concern for the wellbeing of, and Christian compassion for my fellow man that I today take my pen to paper to more fully explain to you why it is that I am no longer to be considered as associating my name with the Whigs or any other Party which does not support the idea of emancipation and the abolition of slavery, not just in Kansas and Nebraska, but for the entirety of the nation.

¹ February 16, 1812 – November 22, 1875, 18th Vice President of the United States (1873-1875)

Why, you may well ask me, does this so necessarily come to pass on this, the thirty-third anniversary of my own arrival into this world? It is well that you might ask.

It has been brought to my attention that you seem hesitant to join us in the cause to fully destroy slavery as it exists today. I tell you, sir, it is not enough to oppose only its expansion. I perceive from your own declarations at Peoria², that you understand that slavery is immoral, that it cannot be allowed to expand. I beseech you to take the next step in your arguments and call for its destruction where it exists.

I believe that this nation must commit itself in one great effort to address the incredible inhumanity that is the peculiar institution of slavery, which our brethren to the south have assured us unharmed – causing no difficulty to the slave, who sings, apparently, we are told, because he is happy with his lot in life: *“[I] have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their Contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most*

² Speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act at Peoria, Illinois, October 16, 1854, Lincoln Speeches, Letters, Miscellaneous writings, The Lincoln Douglass Debates, The Library of America, 1980 Pg 307-348

when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness.³

Nor, we are assured, is there any harm to the slave owner. Nor to our national character and our belief that all men are created equally. Nor, we are told, is there any incongruence with our Christian beliefs.

My good friend, former slave and now my fellow abolitionist, Frederick Douglass has written of his former life in the hands of slave masters such as the Auld family,⁴ late of Baltimore, Maryland. He has himself seen their own transition from kind and gentle Christian folk driven to fear and cruelty by the evils of being slave holders. It must serve to us as an arresting reminder of the evil inclination of mankind. I am reminded that even the King of Israel, once given a new heart by God himself, fell into hatred and evil and began to use his position not for the good of the people, but for their destruction.

³ The Narrative of Frederick Douglass, 1845, Pg 22, Library of Congress, (PDF)

⁴ *Ibid.*, Pg 17, 1845, Library of Congress (PDF)

Slavery, as described by Mr. Douglass, cannot be perceived as anything less than the efforts of callus men, in the name of God almighty, to destroy that which God has created. To steal the labor and the very humanity of the slave. To destroy the family and indeed, in cynical disregard of the very words on the pages of the Bible itself, they have become the millstones about the necks of the slaves, destroying the very faith of those held in bondage. Mr. Douglass himself writes, "Oh, why was I born a man of whom to make a brute?"⁵ And he cries out from the depths of his enslavement, "Is there any God?"⁶

In the year of our Lord 1838, I had the occasion to see for myself this abhorrent dehumanization of men, women and even children in the very streets of our nation's capital city. Scarce could I believe or accept the evidence of mine own eyes as men – MEN! – were sold as chattel in the most populous parts of our national city on a hill, a city dedicated to the idea that all men are created equal.

My displeasure at the odious idea of this comportment, countenanced by the most crude and uneducated of arguments burned in my soul. Mr. Douglass recounts one such argument, debauching the very words of our Lord, "*He that*

⁵ *Ibid.*, Pg 56

⁶ *Ibid.*, Pg 56

*knoweth his masters will and doth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes*⁷,” and led me to question the very idea that this curse of slavery had ever intended to have been maintained in this land of liberty by our forefathers, who although they lacked the will to put it to its necessary end, at least understood that it must end, lest it end us.

By the year 1845, when I was in the State Senate, I was busy vehemently opposed to the annexation of Texas. As a gift I had received in May of that year a copy of a new book written by Mr. Frederick Douglass called, “The Narrative of Frederick Douglass.” Mr. Douglass is an escaped slave, and, in his narrative, he has recounted his own harrowing tale of life in bondage and his escape. Having read it multiple times, it had increased my own resolve to dedicate myself to fully opposing slavery wherever we might find it and to oppose its expansion into new territories and states.

There yet remained in 1845 a small part of the Whig Party to which I could, in good conscience⁸ join my efforts. Alas, that small part was not successful in bringing about the necessary and desired effects on the policy of our national

⁷ Ibid., Pg 50

⁸ The so-named “Conscience Whigs,” who by the late 1840s had formed a small Whig faction which fervently, but unsuccessfully, supported anti-slavery positions and ideas.

government, and to refuse to extend the vile and cruel institution of one man owning another man. I perceive, as you also appear to have done, that this nascent Party of republican men may yet offer a pathway to victory over slavery for our nation.

In the midst of those long and difficult efforts on the part of myself and many, many others, including the esteemed Governor of the State of Ohio, it was with great joy that in the late fall after his book had been published in 1845, I had the opportunity to meet in person with Mr. Frederick Douglass, now of Rochester, New York, at an anti-slavery meeting which I had the honor to attend in a small town in upstate New York. Mr. Douglass, this former slave who had escaped to his freedom recounts in his book a life of the most horrid abuse and cruel treatment by men who claimed that they have some God given right to own other men for the sole purpose of stealing the labor of those who are thus “owned” – in the most distorted use of that word - for their own gain and purpose.

Because he has lived the life of a slave, he can better express to you, through the medium of his writings, and, indeed, his personal recollections told before the most astonished crowds, the most passionate and spirited defense of the need to henceforth and forever destroy the institution of slavery that one such as myself,

who has not lived that life nor having experienced those sad and frightening trials, only holding to a passionate belief in its diabolic vileness, am utterly able to recount them to you.

I have included in this correspondence a personal copy of his book, from the shelves of my own library. It is called, as I mentioned above, “The Narrative of Frederick Douglass,” and I petition you with all haste, making a presumption on my part that, based upon your positions, you have not already done so, to read and reflect upon his words.

I believe that you, like myself, will find further compelling argument and support for the necessity of the legislation which I shall shortly be proposing before the United States Senate⁹, for the restriction and the ultimate destruction of the peculiar institution of slavery on our shores.

⁹ Wilson made numerous speeches in the US Senate, beginning with his first speech in 1856, calling for the repeal of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. It was not until June 28, 1864, that he was able to see the Act finally repealed. In the meanwhile, he proposed several laws to enhance the freedom of African Americans in Washington, D.C. He was responsible for the law which abolished slavery in the Capitol (1862), a law which authorized Lincoln to enlist African American soldiers (1862) and to pay them equally with white troops (1864). Moreover, he was responsible for a law which funded the education of African American children in Washington, D.C. (1863), as well as an 1864 law which specifically allowed former slaves from Confederate States to enlist in the US Army. While his own bill, guaranteeing the Civil Rights of African Americans, introduced two days after the ratification of the 13th amendment failed to pass, it was essentially the same legislation that would pass as the Civil Rights Act of 1866. During his term as Vice President, he would cast a single tie breaking vote, in favor of the Civil Rights Act of 1875.

It is my dearest hope that we can discuss this book and my legislative proposals at the Bloomington Convention in your State this coming May. I shall make every effort to attend, as I believe that God Himself has raised up this great republican effort to destroy, as He did when the trumpet called at Jericho, the very walls of slavery and thus bring them tumbling to the ground.

I have spent my days seeing the need, and going to wherever I have been sent, to oppose this curse of slavery. As He did with Jonah, God has in these days sent us a prophet of His word - this man Frederick Douglass - and we must heed his admonition. As the city of Nineveh did so long ago, this nation must repent and make atonement for its sins.

Moreover, we must endeavor and dedicate ourselves to the unfinished work before us, which so many others have committed themselves to doing, and it is our calling to resolve that their efforts be not in vain.

We must have a new delivery of freedom, for the slave and indeed for the slave owner, who has been poisoned by this venom injected by that snake who has lied from the beginning. For our nation, we must have this new birth so that we can fulfill our purpose and our calling as beacons of liberty and justice for all.

With the help of our God, like Frederick Douglass, we “cannot fail¹⁰” in our efforts.

And those held in the depravations of slavery which Mr. Douglass so vividly describes for us to read for ourselves, can be made henceforth and forever free.

I remain, sir, your humble and obedient servant,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Henry Wilson". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name and address.

Henry Wilson
Washington, D.C.

¹⁰ The Narrative Frederick Douglass, 1845 Chapter X, Pg 56, Library of Congress (PDF)