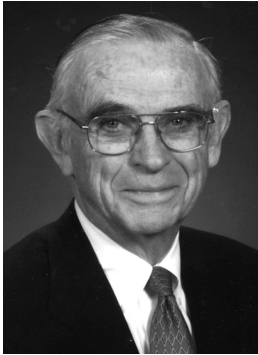


# Tracing America's Forgotten First Abolitionist

By Donald F. Nelson



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The sesquicentennial year of Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation rekindled interest in the abolitionist movement and to the several notable figures who contributed mightily to its realization; a three-part PBS television series in 2013 was built around the contributions of William Lloyd Garrison, Angelina Grimké, Frederick Douglass, John Brown, and, of course, Abraham Lincoln. But the movement did not begin suddenly with Garrison, as I learned through my

research of an 1826 letter and its original recipient, one Benjamin Lundy.

I found the letter among the letters to my maternal grandfather, Andrew Atchison, from his future wife, written during their courtship; it was clearly a cherished possession to be in such company. Dated June 5, 1826, the letter was written by a Richard Mendenhall of James Town, North Carolina, to Benjamin Lundy of Baltimore, Maryland. But who were these two men? Why was it a keepsake? And how had it come down to Atchison? Neither man was a relative of his, and it was mailed thirty years before Atchison's birth.

I started by deciphering the handwriting and making a transcription. In the first paragraph, the writer welcomed his friend Lundy home from Hayti (as the country was then spelled) and lamented some loss he had suffered in ornate, but obscure, language. Then in mid-sentence he launched into an apparently original (a Google search found no analogue) thirteen-line poem of condolence in perfect rhyming iambic pentameter. Its meaning, however, was far from obvious:

Thy hopes, thy woes, thy griefs  
and fears,  
Taken from thee how tarnished  
all appears.  
Yet wafted on the polar star  
thy guide,  
Thy cause is buoyant, tho'  
thyself had died.  
Beneath the waves had sunk  
and seen no more,  
Thy cause had lived and beamed  
along the shore.

Companion's tears thy children  
had bedewed,  
Each nugget hath with fragrant  
laurels strewed.  
Each Slavite's hand in conscious  
justice raised,  
Smiting his breast, the darling  
babes had praised.  
But other toils are still reserved  
in store,  
To rear thy babes, and what  
thee can, no more,  
And seek to find thy wife on  
no delusive shore.

While the couplet involving Slavites (slavery backers) and babes is baffling, it appears Lundy's cause has survived some unidentified tragedy. His need to raise his babes gets mention, as does a sinking, and he is advised where *not* to search for his wife. Was his wife lost in a shipwreck on Lundy's Hayti trip? The 19th century amateur poet's verse taxed my abilities at exegesis, so I decided to find out who Lundy was. A library search yielded immediate success.

Benjamin Lundy was the leading abolitionist in America between 1820 and 1830, before William Lloyd Garrison became prominent in the national debate. This immediately answered why the letter was a keepsake: my grandfather had spent the 1880s founding, teaching in, and managing the Freedmen's Academy of Kansas, established for African Americans who had fled the South in the "Exodus of 1879" after the end of Reconstruction.

Born in Greenville, Sussex County, New Jersey, in 1789, Lundy left home at twenty to apprentice with a saddler in

Wheeling, then a part of Virginia. Reared in the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) with its century-old opposition to slavery, Lundy was appalled to witness the active slave market there and resolved to “break at least one link of that ponderous chain of oppression.” After moving to nearby St. Clairsville, Ohio, marrying Esther Lewis, and establishing his own saddlery, he was ready to carry out his vow.

At the time, progress towards abolition had led to a lull in anti-slavery agitation; gradual emancipation (the mandatory freeing of children of slaves) had been enacted in six northeastern states, and Congress had ended the foreign slave trade in 1808, the earliest date a special Constitutional provision allowed. Lundy revived the languishing cause when in 1816 he formed the Union Humane Society, with aims of gradual emancipation through political means and of aid to freed slaves. Lundy’s approach to abolition, tempered by his Quaker pacifism and by the northeastern states’ success in implementing gradual emancipation by political means, was arguably proven inadequate by the horrendous civil war it finally took to eradicate slavery—which explains why his efforts are today undervalued and even overlooked, as in that recent PBS series.

Later in 1816, Lundy briefly collaborated with Charles Osborn, a Quaker minister, in publishing a new paper, the *Philanthropist*, which backed many causes, but particularly abolition. The collaboration did not work out, but Lundy founded his own newspaper in 1821. Despite its cumbersome name, *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, it became the nation’s first influential and long-lasting publication devoted entirely to abolition. Soon he moved the paper to Greeneville, Tennessee; printing the *Genius*, as it was called, in a slave state seemed appropriate to Lundy at the time. The paper developed a national circulation through subscription agents in twenty-one

states (Mendenhall’s letter suggests he was one of them). It became apparent to Lundy by 1824 that the paper could be more influential if it were published on the East Coast, so he moved it to Baltimore, where he was living at the time of Mendenhall’s letter in 1826.

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Though Lundy was often required to fulfill all the roles of his paper from writer to typesetter, he was also an indefatigable lecturer, activist, and organizer for abolition, which is what took him to Hayti, a country whose independence had been won in a slave revolt in 1804. Its president, Jean Pierre Boyer, was open to resettlement of freedmen from the United States and was willing to help defray transportation costs and aid in resettlement. Lundy thought such a program offered the best long-term solution for the African Americans, a view shared by a sizeable portion of white Americans in the 1820s. (The colonization of Liberia also dates from this era.) Six thousand freedmen had been resettled in Hayti when Lundy traveled there in January 1826, accompanying a group of freedmen organized by North Carolina Quakers. Lundy’s wife Esther was pregnant when he left but had agreed to his trip, knowing how devoted Benjamin was to his cause. Negotiations for continued immigration were difficult, though, since Boyer had become dis-

satisfied with the costs and problems of the program, and Lundy’s trip extended well beyond the expected eight weeks.

The worst happened in his absence: Esther died in childbirth of twins, a boy and a girl, who both survived. Lundy arrived home to an empty house and severe criticism from the Quaker community, which nonetheless had stepped in to care for his three children and two newborns. This explains the reference to the loss of Lundy’s wife in Mendenhall’s poem, but the image of a shipwreck remains puzzling, perhaps a result of misinformation.

Turning the attention of my research to Richard Mendenhall, the author of the letter, I was again successful. He was a prominent member of the James Town Quaker community, living there from his birth in 1778 to his death in 1851. His home, built in 1811, is now on the National Register of Historic Places maintained by the Historic Jamestown Society; its being on the main road between Greensborough and High Point enabled Mendenhall to offer accommodations to needy travelers and, it was rumored, to escaped slaves on the underground railway. His formal education apparently did not go beyond the local Quaker school, but he used his father’s extensive library to further his learning. He took over his father’s tannery, married Mary Pegg in 1812, and had seven children by her. Though he remained a tanner throughout life, he taught on occasion in the Quaker school, and was for a time a state legislator. A published horticulturist, he wrote an extensive manual on tanning in late life.

Mendenhall also was a founding member of the North Carolina Manumission Society, which aimed at helping slaves to obtain their freedom. He described the deep Christian beliefs behind his commitment in a piece called “The Author’s Apology.” He was also active in the Meeting for

Sufferings, a Quaker organization that responded to the illegality of freeing slaves in North Carolina by purchasing slaves, training them in a trade, and escorting them surreptitiously to a free state such as Ohio, to Hayti, or to Liberia. Thus, it was natural that Mendenhall would be writing Lundy upon his return from Hayti; the group of freedmen that Lundy had just escorted there was from the Meeting for Sufferings.

Let us return briefly to the remainder of Mendenhall's letter. After the poem of condolence, Mendenhall delivered an ornately worded excoriation of the "late" Senator of Virginia for his pro-slavery views in his publicized correspondence with the governor of Virginia. The late Senator of Virginia must be James Barbour, who had not died but had resigned his Senate seat the year before to become the Secretary of War in the Cabinet of John Quincy Adams. The governor of Virginia at the time was John Tyler, who would later become the country's tenth president. Mendenhall also criticized the compromised position of Massachusetts's Representative Edward Everett, who in a recent speech on the House floor had cited Biblical tolerance of slavery.

Barbour, one of slavery's most formidable spokesmen of the time, had recently denounced the abolitionists, claiming that, if not curbed, their efforts could lead to the dissolution of the Union. Lundy had been happy to quote Barbour in the *Genius* a few months earlier after Barbour denounced Lundy's newspaper as the "croakings of the distempered who seek to establish a character for philanthropy at the expense of others." Clearly, pro-slavery people were becoming increasingly agitated by the activities of abolitionists like Lundy. And not surprisingly so. In 1824 the Ohio Legislature had passed a resolution requesting Congress to implement gradual emancipation and emigration of emancipated slaves at a national

level. Eight other Northern states passed similar resolutions in the following months. Clearly, Lundy's view of abolition by peaceful, political means was mainstream Northern thinking—or at least hope—at that time.

Prior to his Hayti trip, Lundy had helped organize the Maryland Anti-slavery Society in 1825 and had begun a weekly edition of the *Genius* in the same year. But then with the loss of his wife, he had five children to raise, a job a man seemed ill-prepared to carry out in those days. His father and stepmother agreed to raise the three older children, and he hired a nurse to care for the newborn twins. With these arrangements, he was able to continue publishing the *Genius* and within two years had expanded its subscription base to a thousand. When the twins reached three, his sister-in-law in Ohio agreed to take over raising them.

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Shorn of family duties, Lundy could again devote full time to his abolition efforts. In 1828 he traveled northward to give lectures, enlarge his subscription base, seek support for anti-slavery petitions, and instigate formation of anti-slavery societies. In Boston he met a young man, William Lloyd Garrison, then an editor of the *National Philanthropist*. Garrison immediately became a great admirer of Lundy and of his deep devotion to the cause of

abolition, writing a glowing piece to that effect in his own newspaper. Lundy made a second speaking tour north that same year, delivering forty-three speeches and meeting again with Garrison. These trips took a toll on the regularity of appearance of the *Genius* and then on its commercial viability. After a period of difficulties, Lundy convinced Garrison to join him in the abolitionist effort as a coeditor of the *Genius*—and launched Garrison's abolitionist career.

With a coeditor in the office, Lundy was able to devote himself equally to speaking and writing. Garrison, writing under his own name and coming to believe that Lundy's gradualist approach to ending slavery would not succeed, became a more radical voice, pushing for immediate emancipation. One of Garrison's editorials, written during one of Lundy's speaking trips, attacked a slave-ship captain and resulted in Garrison being charged and convicted of libel. Unable to pay the \$50 fine, he was jailed until a benefactor stepped forward to pay it; then, a civil damage award of \$1,000 against him forced him simply to flee Baltimore. Thus his collaboration with Lundy ended, and Garrison returned to Boston, where he would begin publishing his own abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*, a year later in 1831.

In the long run, the conversion of Garrison to a prominent role in the abolitionist movement was perhaps Lundy's greatest contribution. Upon Lundy's death years later, Garrison paid tribute to him in a most generous spirit: "It is to Benjamin Lundy that I owe all that I am as the friend of the slave."

Mexico's complete elimination of slavery by 1829 led Lundy into a several year effort to establish freedmen's colonies in the Texas part of Mexico. Texas's successful revolt against Mexico in 1836, however, ended those long efforts. During this period, Lundy's

travels led him to hire a succession of assistants to keep the *Genius* in print, its publication becoming more irregular as its office was moved from Baltimore to Washington and then to Philadelphia. It then became defunct for a period of time. In its place Lundy began publishing the weekly *National Enquirer and Constitutional Advocate of Universal Liberty* for two years. When it too fell into financial trouble, it was taken over by the Young Men's Anti-slavery Society of Philadelphia, with John Greenleaf Whittier as editor.

Weakened by his hectic life and illnesses contracted during his Mexican trips, Lundy needed a slower pace of life. He also wished to bring his family back together. He began plans to remove to Illinois, where his two older married daughters then lived and were caring for his three younger children. But at just this time, May 14, 1838, Pennsylvania Hall was dedicated in Philadelphia to host meetings on politically liberal topics of the time, particularly abolition. Lundy, then in the process of moving, was invited to store his personal belongings and all of the files of his decades of abolitionist efforts in one of the offices in the three-story building so that he could attend the opening sessions of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women. On the convention's second day, pamphlets appeared around Philadelphia calling on its citizens to rally for property rights, a standard pro-slavery argument. A mob gathered on the third day and became unruly, smashing windows. When the mob became more threatening on the fourth day, the mayor of Philadelphia halted the meeting and locked the doors but provided no protection for the building. Unopposed, the mob burned Pennsylvania Hall and its contents. Lundy lost all of his worldly possessions.

Lundy moved to Putnam County, Illinois, and built a small house and printing shop, where he was joined by

his twins, Esther and Benjamin, then twelve years old, and began publishing the *Genius* once again. To make ends meet, he began farming also. Overtaxed, he became seriously ill and died on August 22, 1839, just fifty years of age.

When the mob became more threatening on the fourth day, the mayor of Philadelphia halted the meeting and locked the doors but provided no protection for the building.

That brings us to the last of my questions: How did this letter come into my grandfather's possession? Amazingly, a record of just that occurrence appears in an anonymous article in the second and last edition of an amateur newspaper, *Sweet Chariot*, published by an African-American teenaged boy in the small Kansas town of Dunlap, dated the last day of 1887. The article, entitled "The First Abolitionist," was a tribute to Benjamin Lundy, and from multiple evidences in the article and in the newspaper the author was my grandfather, Andrew Atchison. Incidental to the biographical sketch of Lundy, he mentions that "in our prettiest little city, Ottawa, Franklin County [Kansas], there lives a worthy daughter and grandson of Benjamin Lundy." Later in the article, he writes that the daughter has given him a letter written to Lundy at the time of his Hayti trip. Apparently someone during the Pennsylvania Hall fire had managed to save a few of Lundy's papers, which had

been kept by Lundy's oldest and then only surviving child, Susan.

My grandfather taught school for four years in Ottawa, Kansas, around 1880. In tracing Lundy's family, I learned that sometime after the death of her husband in 1863, Lundy's daughter Susan Wierman went to live with the family of her youngest son, Isaac, appearing in the 1880 Federal Census residing with them in Buffalo, Barton County, Kansas, to the west of Ottawa. The record of the birth of Isaac's son Harry in 1884 gives Ottawa, Kansas, as the birthplace, confirming that the family had moved there by the time of the *Sweet Chariot* article. Thus, the acquaintance of Andrew and Susan and her gift of such a souvenir to him convince me of the route this letter followed.

Let me end with a quotation from my grandfather's article in *Sweet Chariot* that I concur with: "But the man and the journal that rekindled the spirit of the patriots and heroes of the Revolution that set the Declaration of Independence in a new light before the careless eyes of a new generation, and that called down again from the throne of God the spirit of universal liberty, moral devotion, and humanity to man were Benjamin Lundy and the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*."

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