



Why, How, and When They Fought

You know we are now in a business where we are very likely to be sent home crippled.

—William Henry Ross, letter to his brother Dan,
February 6, 1862

The four Ross brothers and their two sisters grew to adulthood in upstate New York's Washington County farming on both sides of the Hudson River. The verdant green hills belied the land's limited fertility. Frequent rains and bitterly cold winters only added to the challenges of growing crops. The Rosses took advantage of dense, virgin forests to supplement their farm income, cutting cordwood along the banks of the Hudson, then floating it downstream to Albany when the ice melted. Charles Wesley and Margaret Reid Ross moved their family three times as they prospered, seeking out larger acreage and woodlots and more fertile soil. One of their main crops was potatoes. Like lumber, this crop was floated downriver, on barges, to Albany.

William Henry was the oldest of the four Ross brothers, and the first to enlist. After his second enlistment, his mother pleaded with him to apply for a hardship discharge and return home to help operate the family farm, because she and her husband were crippled with rheumatism. On May 1, 1862, he expressed his concern for them in a letter, acknowledging that the "hard labor" of farm work was damaging his mother's health and leaving his father "feeble." He added that he owed his parents "a duty" that he could "never cancel."

Despite such concerns, Will and his brother Melancton (Lank) enlisted at the outset of the war. They also were among those 136,000 battle-hardened soldiers who reenlisted in regiments organized in response to Lincoln's first two calls for three-year volunteers. Dan enlisted soon afterward, serving in the cavalry, infantry, and artillery, something extremely few soldiers did.

Their sister Anna Marie was teaching in a girls' school in Mississippi, but once the war broke out, she returned home rather than remain in a Southern state. Their other sister, Charlotte, married a farmer and moved to a neighboring county, where she would spend the rest of her life. All four brothers wanted to help preserve a livelihood for their parents, as well as a home they could return to. They contributed part of their military pay to help with the farm mortgage payments.

Despite their sons' financial help, Margaret Ross's early concerns proved true. The spring and summer of 1864 were catastrophic for the family. One son was injured, another killed, and the third captured. At home, severe weather destroyed half their crops. Even with these tragic setbacks, eighteen-year-old John enlisted in Dan's regiment to replace his imprisoned brother—with his parents' approval. Soon after the war's end, with no help at home, Charles and Margaret Ross lost their farm to foreclosure.

What could have compelled all four brothers to risk not only their own personal safety, but the well-being of their parents and sister? Why would Will, Dan, and Lank reenlist when they not only had fulfilled their military duty, but also knew far too well what dangers they would face? What reasons could have driven John, who was under no obligation, to enlist and leave his home and family to fight in the war? Given the fates of his three brothers, he knew the risks were great.

The answers lie in their family's history and deep-seated faith. Their church had provided this family, as well as many others, with a moral compass, a definition of who they were. The Ross brothers' decisions stand as mute testimony to their pro-Union and antislavery sentiments. They felt no necessity to express those feelings to their parents or siblings in writing, because they already shared one another's convictions. Even their sister Anna Marie had acted on a commitment to those ideals when she went to Mississippi to teach in the 1850s. Immediately after the Reformed Presbyterian Church organized its Board of Missions for Freedmen in 1863, in response to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, she went to Virginia to teach freedmen.

Most Northern families thought sending one son to fight the war was enough. *Everyone* in the Ross family sacrificed for the war. Between

them, the four Rosses fought in virtually every major Civil War campaign and battle in both the East and the West, from Virginia and Pennsylvania to Tennessee, Georgia, and the Carolinas—an unusual distinction in itself. The family fully committed its personal skills and wealth, arguably the strongest position they could take.

As one historian wrote, only the church and the government could “legitimately ask Northern men to selflessly risk everything in pursuit of a common good. . . . Their Union was . . . meant to be viewed by the rest of the world as God’s model for the Millennium—the thousand years of ideal society in the Book of Revelation.”

These Northerners were firmly convinced they were instruments of God, who required this great revolution in their country’s social system to rid it of slavery.

Setting Their Moral Compass

Charles and Margaret Ross’s forebears were Reformed (Covenanting) Presbyterians who had emigrated from the Scottish Highlands before the American Revolution. Their ancestors were products of the Protestant Reformation, the impact of which was greater in Scotland than any other European country. They brought with them their covenant with God, which decreed that when man’s law—including the king’s—conflicted with God’s, they would obey God’s law.

Covenanting was a basic tenet of Reformed Presbyterians’ faith. To them the Bible was the supreme law of the land. They believed in God’s direct rule on Earth, and in theocracy as a form of government. Armed resistance against sin was justified, because it was the individual’s responsibility to implement God’s law for the benefit of others. President Lincoln and other Calvinists shared this view. From the seventeenth century in their old country, “religious faiths had been battle flags, not just belief systems.”

From the 1720s thousands of Ulster Scots began arriving in the American colonies, many settling on the frontier, west of New England, including in the Hudson River Valley. They came for both economic and religious reasons. Here they lived largely beyond the reach of government and law. Their Presbyterian Church was the only institution that followed them—indeed, it sometimes colonized them on land patents. Its ministers were not only among the best-educated people on the frontier, they were both religious and community leaders. So closely did the members of the congregation identify with and look to the church

for guidance that it was often said they could not live without it. Their scriptural teachings included defining the duties of parents and children, and the importance of family worship.

Throughout the 1700s, there were probably never more than 10,000 Presbyterian Covenanters in America, and their membership grew slowly thereafter. The church and the church-sponsored school, with the Bible as its textbook, were the focal points of the Scotch-Irish community. The church had a stable, organized, governing structure that took care of the poor and the sick and provided discipline necessary for survival as they struggled in poverty. In 1773, as one Covenanter noted, "This is the best poor man's country in the world." The elders and the minister acted as a court in governing "sessions," in hearing and ruling on charges, in settling disputes over debts, land matters, and domestic conflicts, as well as in formulating and teaching church doctrine and moral discipline to the congregation.

Benedict Maryniak observed in *Faith in the Fight*, "The great formative events in the rise of England and then the United States were . . . wars—bitter fratricidal wars—accompanied by Puritan and abolitionist sermons and battle hymns." King George III regarded the Revolution as a Puritan and Presbyterian vendetta against the Anglican Church and the monarchy. A number of royal governors of the colonies as well as Anglican clergy vehemently voiced the same criticism.

Since the Covenanters saw slavery as a sin in God's eyes, they believed it had to be eradicated. Some even refused to recognize the U.S. Constitution, because it condoned slavery. There was no room in their religion for the whip, slave pen, or auction block. Their concept of freedom did not include the freedom to enslave others. They had fought in the old country for liberty from the oppression of the Crown. In the new, they called for liberty for the oppressed slaves. They believed that a nation built on the concept that all men are created equal could not also be the world's largest slaveholding nation.

Church members internalized, and were powerfully guided by, this set of moral principles. By the 1760s, Washington County had become a strong center for Highland Scots and Ulster Scots (Scotch Irish), many of whom were Presbyterian Covenanters. Members of those initial congregations were largely poor and uneducated, so Covenanter discipline was important in helping them form communities and survive in the wilderness.

Three generations of Rosses and at least one person from Margaret Reid's family belonged to the Old White Presbyterian Church of Cambridge, Washington County, whose part-time pastor, a Covenanter,

became the first chaplain of Dan's regiment. Covenanters had organized this church in 1769, the second oldest covenanting church between Albany and the Canadian border. Its original congregation consisted of Scots, and its first ministers were Scots. Founded in 1785, the Reid family church to which Margaret's family initially belonged in Washington County also was a Covenanting Presbyterian Church. By the 1790s there were nine Covenanting congregations in Washington County.

Other ancestors of Margaret Reid Ross had a similar religious background. The Reids had intermarried with Dutch Calvinists named Krom, who were members of the Dutch Reformed Church, of Calvinist origin, the first of whom had arrived in 1624, escaping religious persecution.

The first recorded communion in the Rosses' church in Cambridge was held on November 9, 1794, when it had forty-three members. One member was William Ross, the grandfather of the four brothers, who joined on April 17, 1803, and was given an adult christening upon admission. Margaret Reid, the mother of the future soldiers, was admitted and baptized there on July 12, 1824. Shortly thereafter, she married Charles Wesley Ross, William Ross's son, who also was a member. William Henry Ross, the oldest of the four brothers, was baptized in the church on February 6, 1839. His sister also joined the church.

The Rosses' church was one of nine organized by Rev. Thomas Clark, MD, a Scotsman. He and congregation members who followed him from Scotland to Ireland were an ecclesiastical colony that had belonged to the Burgher Synod of Scotland. Dr. Clark, while still in Ireland, founded, in 1751, the Associate Presbytery of Down, Ireland's first Burgher presbytery. He and most of his congregations were Burghers who had seceded and would not "kiss the book," the legal form of oath-taking at that time in Ireland, nor would they take the sacrament from the King's Established (Anglican) Church. They were Covenanters who would hear no minister preach who had taken "the indulgence" after the National Covenant was signed in 1638. Ministers who took "the indulgence" surrendered the spiritual independence of the church to the tyranny of the king and his bishops.

Dr. Clark affiliated his nine churches, beginning in 1769, with the Associate Presbytery of Pennsylvania and, in 1776, with the Associate Presbytery of New York. By 1782, the Old White Church was affiliated with the Associate Reformed (Covenanting) Presbyterian Church. By 1858, it was one of seventeen churches that belonged to the United Presbyterian Synod of New York, nine of which were in Washington County. The 1850 U.S. Census recorded 35,660 church members in Washington County and eighty-one churches. Twenty-five were Presbyterian and accounted for 36 percent of total church membership in

the county that year. In 1865, the two Presbyterian churches in Salem Township where the Rosses lived had a combined membership of 380, of whom 375 usually attended.

In 1858, the United Presbyterians declared that "slaveholding . . . is a violation of the law of God . . . that the law of God . . . is supreme in its authority and obligations, and that where the commands of church or state . . . conflict with the commands of this law, we choose to obey God rather than man." This synod resulted from a merger of the Associate Presbyterian Church and the Associate Reformed (Covenanting) Church. Both branches had repeatedly witnessed against slavery, keeping alive the tradition of the Scottish Covenanters. As early as 1787, the Synod of New York indicated its willingness "to procure eventually the final abolition of slavery." In 1800, the Covenanters agreed that "no slaveholder should be allowed the communion of the church." In 1811, the synod adopted an act declaring slavery a moral evil, directing members to free their slaves, and declaring that those who refused to comply were unfit for the fellowship of the church. In 1837, the delegate of the Presbytery of Troy, New York, to which the Ross family church belonged, introduced a motion to the Presbyterian General Assembly to get petitions on slavery read, but it was defeated.

By 1838, the church had split into Old School and New School factions. The New School faction then met in Auburn, New York, to organize. They were largely antislavery, and the events leading to the schism left little doubt that the Presbyterian was the first major church to split over the slavery issue. The Methodists formally split over the issue in 1844, and the Baptists in 1845. In 1840, correspondence was directed to Southern congregations asking them to agree to "moral emancipation," if they would not free their slaves. In 1850, the New School Synod declared the recently enacted Fugitive Slave Act null and void, and in 1854 called for the repeal of the Kansas-Nebraska Act because it would permit slavery in those states. In 1856, it inveighed against "American Slavery as a system which had its origin in violence, robbery, and blood . . . [and] is a sin against God." In 1858, there were four synods in the Associate Reformed Church, and the Rosses' church belonged to one of them. There were only 367 congregations with 31,284 members in the entire North. Eleven of these congregations, with 2,037 members, were in Washington County.

Among the eighteen articles in the United Presbyterian Basis of Union, one dealt with slavery, declaring it "a foul blot on this fair land [and] a violation of the law of God and contrary both to the letter and spirit of Christianity." In 1860, the *Reformed Presbyterian* expressed its

view that slavery should “be met with its own weapons. . . . [It] maintains itself by the sword. As it has chosen its mode of warfare . . . those who are not disposed to submit to its demands should meet it . . . with its own weapons.” That same year, the *Presbytery Reporter* editorialized, “Even the fierce pro-slavery fervor of the South presents no cause for discouragement. It will either drive them madly on the rocks where their slave system will be wrecked, or there will be reaction. To stem the tide of human liberty which God is driving on in the world, is as insane an undertaking as to . . . wade up the Mississippi River.”

Covenanters often took the strongest position against slavery of any church of Puritan persuasion. How could they do anything less than send their sons—including the Ross brothers—to fight for putting an end to slavery?

Rev. Henry Gordon, a part-time pastor of the family church, would help to recruit the 123rd Regiment and serve as its first chaplain. Rev. Charles H. Taylor, another pastor of the church during the Civil War, allowed the church to be used as a recruiting station and made numerous trips to hold services for the troops in army camps. Likewise, in August 1862, Rev. James G. Forsyth, pastor of another Covenanting church in Washington County, preached to the 123rd New Yorkers while in camp in Washington, DC. In late April 1863, Gordon was temporarily succeeded as chaplain by Rev. A. B. Lambert, pastor of a neighboring Reformed Presbyterian church. Beginning one week after Lincoln’s first call for volunteers, meeting after meeting was held in these two churches to gain public support for the war effort as well as to recruit volunteers for the two Washington County regiments, which three Ross brothers joined—the 93rd and the 123rd New York.

Shortly after he became chaplain of the 102nd Pennsylvania, in which capacity he served for four years, Rev. A. M. Stewart, a Covenanter, stated, “Slavery is now looked upon by all as a deadly bane on the body politic—a thing hated by God, accursed of men, and to be speedily and forever abolished.” In 1862, the General Assembly of the New School Presbyterians sent Lincoln a message, declaring, “Since the day of your inauguration, the thousands of our membership have followed you with increasing prayer, besieging the throne of Heaven in your behalf.” A year later, a committee of the Reformed Presbyterians told him, “By every consideration drawn from the Word of God [do not] be moved from the path of duty on which you have so auspiciously entered.”

It was in this abolitionist environment that the Ross brothers grew to manhood and heard the twin issues of slavery and secessionism debated in the press and in the pulpit for years prior to the war. In perhaps their

most impressionable years—the pre-Civil War decade—they heard, read, and felt the social, political, and economic issues that underlay the raging controversy. For them, their preacher was their “thought” leader.

From the 1830s, New York's abolitionist leaders were intensely active Reformed Presbyterians, Quakers, Methodists, Unitarians, Baptists, and Congregationalists. Had they not stimulated public debate on slavery, no one else would have. Dogged in their determination to abolish slavery, the Scots abolitionists helped stiffen the spines of their coreligionists in particular, and other abolitionists in general. Although there is no record that the Ross family were active or professed abolitionists—that they attended meetings, or circulated broadsides or pamphlets—they clearly were steeped in the beliefs of their church. Their actions as soldiers and the willingness of their parents to let all four brothers serve speak more loudly than any words they could have written or spoken.

Loyalty to church, family, and community was traditional among all the brothers' ancestors in New York, as it had been in Scotland and Holland. Community loyalty in the New World gradually extended to a wider patriotism, embracing all thirteen colonies that struggled to gain independence and then, as the United States, to keep it. They had tasted the fruits of self-government and never forgot its addictive flavor. A great-great-grandfather of the brothers served as a Hudson River shore guard in a New York militia regiment at the outbreak of the Revolution. Others served as sheriffs, school trustees, tax collectors, road masters, and—most importantly—as soldiers in the War of Independence and the War of 1812. Two great-great-uncles also served in the Revolution. Two of their grandfathers died in the War of 1812, and two great-uncles and another close relative served in it.

Margaret Reid Ross cherished a patchwork quilt she made from pieces of woolen uniforms worn by members of her family who had fought in colonial wars, as well as in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, to which she added scraps from her sons' Civil War uniforms. Her quiet pride in the fact that her ancestors, as well as her sons, would fight for their principles was woven into her quilt.

The Ross brothers' heritage stood firmly for both preserving the Union and removing its blemish of slavery. Apart from the armies of the Crusades, the American Civil War armies were probably the most religious that had ever fought. Northern Protestant clergy gave the war religious sanction. They were the single most important source of urgent patriotic appeals and earned more public respect than at any other time in the nation's history. It was during the Civil War that the phrase “In God We Trust” first was engraved on U.S. coins. Clearly, those soldiers who fought to end slavery acted on the deepest of religious convictions.

The Spread of Abolitionism

Covenanting Presbyterians were not the only faith community taking a strong stand against slavery in nineteenth-century America. Quakers and Mennonites in Pennsylvania had campaigned against slavery since 1688. By 1755 Quakers had banned slavery as a matter of principle. Nevertheless, during the 1830s, there were few abolitionists and most of them were scorned. Antislavery effort grew slowly but steadily through the 1840s, resulting in the emergence of new antislavery politics. By the 1850s, the simmering pot stirred by activists began to boil, and they gained both respectability and strength.

The Associate Synod, all Covenanters, was clearly at the vanguard of the abolitionist movement within the Presbyterian Church, and also led most denominations. In 1857, Albert Barnes, a leading antislavery New School Presbyterian spokesman, noted that “with the exception of the Quakers, there is no church . . . whose testimony has been more uniform . . . against slavery” than the Reformed Presbyterian.

As support for the abolition of slavery spread, it moved from churches into politics. In 1817, the state of New York had adopted an emancipation act. With the formation of the Anti-Slavery Society at a convention in Philadelphia in 1833, the movement became national. The convention was convened by William Lloyd Garrison of Massachusetts, editor of the *Liberator* and an admirer of the Covenanters. The publication’s modus operandi was “to enlist the pulpit in the cause of the slave and to [purify churches] from all participation in the guilt of slavery.” New York’s Anti-Slavery Society became one of the strongest and had a chapter in Washington County as early as 1836. The *New York Evangelist*, a Presbyterian newspaper founded in 1830, became the leading abolitionist newspaper of the period. Abolitionist sentiment also was stirred by such African American writers and orators as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman.

By 1857, the New School Presbyterians at their General Assembly condemned slavery and barred slaveholders from membership. Albert Barnes observed that “great reforms on moral subjects do not occur except under the influence of religious principle.” By then he was an ardent Republican and strongly opposed admitting Kansas as a slave state. In 1861, Barnes’s followers issued a call stating, “those . . . followers of the Prince of Peace who have no swords should sell their garments and buy them.” He and other abolitionists argued that if slavery was not a sin, the Bible was the devil’s book, not God’s.

In May 1862, the Reformed Presbyterians urged both houses of Congress to remove the “foul blot upon the national escutcheon,” arguing that

the holding of slaves was a sin against God and that its continuance would invoke divine disapproval unless immediate emancipation was secured. The day before Lincoln announced the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, a group from the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Washington urged Lincoln to free the slaves with the admonition that "God's wrath cannot be appeased." Shortly thereafter, the Scots Covenanters told the president that their church, "true to its high lineage and ancient spirit, does not hold within its pale a single secessionist," and congratulated him on the government's antislavery measures, foremost of which was the Emancipation Proclamation. Through this proclamation, in the eyes of the abolitionists, Lincoln had redirected the purpose of the war. Instead of a war merely to preserve the Union, the War Between the States became a war for freedom. The Covenanters enjoined him "not to be moved from the path of duty on which you have so auspiciously entered."

Since 1850, Lincoln and his wife had attended a Reformed Presbyterian church in Springfield, Illinois, and another in Washington while he served as president. Shortly after he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, however, Lincoln expressed concern that the majority of the public was not yet supportive. He wrote Vice President Hannibal Hamlin, "troops come forward more slowly than ever." Further, voters indicated their displeasure that fall by handing the Republicans a number of setbacks. In March 1863, Lincoln wrote to George W. Julian, "My proclamation was to stir the country; but it has done about as much harm as good." Fearing the proclamation would significantly weaken his support in the border states, he confided to another friend that "to arm the negro would put 50,000 bayonets that are for us against us."

During the decades immediately before the Civil War, the Liberty Party emerged on the national political scene. Its founders were upstate New York abolitionists, many of whom were preachers taking their first steps toward political action. In 1843, the party had resolved "that human brotherhood is a cardinal doctrine of true democracy, as well as of pure Christianity." The Bible was the party's creed. Some of its party conventions adopted resolutions based on biblical justifications for abolishing slavery.

The Liberty Party's mission was to make abolition a central issue in American politics. They ran James G. Birney as their presidential candidate on an antislavery ticket in both 1840 and 1844. A Kentuckian, Birney was nominated in Albany, New York, in 1840. His son, Maj. Gen. David B. Birney, also an abolitionist, was to become the division commander under whom Will Ross's regiment would serve. Another of Birney's sons would become a major general, recruit seven regiments of black soldiers, command a division of black troops, support equal pay for black soldiers, and systematically release slaves from Baltimore's city

jails and slave pens. Because the Liberty Party was a one-idea party, it could only attract a small percentage of the popular vote.

Allied with the Liberty Party was the antislavery wing of the Democratic Party known as “Barnburners” because they would burn the barn to get rid of the “rats.” One of the main planks in the 1848 New York Barnburner platform was restriction of slavery in the new western territories. Washington County was one of the five New York counties that in 1844 voted for Barnburner candidates by a majority of at least 60 percent. In 1848, at a convention in Buffalo, the Liberty Party merged with the Barnburners and others to form the Free Soil Party, with Martin Van Buren of New York as its nominee. Its campaign slogan was “Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor, and Free Men.” They also were against the extension of slavery in territory where it did not presently exist. In 1850, the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act infuriated abolitionists who stood firmly behind the biblical passage in Deuteronomy, “Thou shall not deliver unto his master, the servant who is escaped from his master unto thee . . . thou shall not oppress him . . . ”

This growing political momentum may have led Lincoln to state his position on slavery in 1852, namely, “opposition in principle, toleration of it in practice.” Nevertheless, as antislavery sentiment increased in the North, pro-slavery attitudes hardened in the South. Northern and Southern radicals rejected further compromise.

By then, one churchman had concluded that trying to abolish slavery through the church was “like trying to pry up a stump with a bamboo crowbar.” William Lloyd Garrison attacked the Constitution, describing it as “a covenant with death and an agreement with hell” and publicly burned a copy of it. More and more, abolitionists and slaveholders agreed that conflict was the only solution. The armed conflict in “Bloody Kansas” between free state and slave state settlers (“Border Ruffians”) confirmed the belief that violence was inevitable.

Passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, sponsored by Sen. Stephen A. Douglas, was undoubtedly the most significant event in Lincoln’s conversion to national antislavery activity and his resultant emergence as a national figure. It fired a political controversy that created unprecedented bitterness and led to vitriolic personal abuse, prompting some historians to argue that the Civil War started in Kansas. In 1854, the Republican Party was born, largely spawned by Northern indignation, if not fury, over passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. That year, the founding convention for the party in New York was held in Saratoga Springs, across the Hudson River from Washington County. By 1855, Abraham Lincoln had shifted his position on slavery, writing, “Experience has demonstrated, I think, that there is no peaceful extinction of slavery in prospect for us.” That year he also wrote his friend Joshua Speed reminding him of a

river trip they took together in 1841 when “ten or a dozen slaves [were] shackled together with irons” aboard the steamboat. “That sight was a continued torment to me [to this day].” In 1856, what remained of the short-lived Free Soil Party joined the newly formed Republican Party, which also included antislavery Whigs (Lincoln’s party) and Democrats. In 1857, the Dred Scott decision handed down by the Supreme Court angered Lincoln, who called it, “a burlesque upon judicial decisions” and a “slander and profanation on the Founding fathers.”

Lincoln threw himself wholeheartedly behind the party, as did many abolitionists. They ran John C. Fremont as their presidential candidate. On July 28, speaking on behalf of Fremont, Lincoln said, “We [the Republicans] would not strive to dissolve the Union; and if any attempt is made it must be by you. . . . We don’t want to dissolve it, and if you attempt it, we won’t let you.” The campaign became a moral crusade against slavery and secession. Many Reformed Presbyterians joined, including Charles Ross. In the March 1858 local elections, entire slates of local Republican officials were elected in township after township in Washington County, and the Rosses became lifelong Republicans. Nationally, the Republican Party lost, but garnered 42 percent of the vote.

In 1858, Lincoln began his campaign against Stephen A. Douglas for the U.S. Senate seat from Illinois. In his opening speech on June 16, he summarized the depth of the controversy, saying, “I do not expect the Union to be dissolved . . . but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other.” In his last debate he pleaded “let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it . . .” Lincoln lost to Douglas, but by that year, the Republican Party had gained majority support in Washington County.

In 1859, John Brown led a bloody, armed, and futile attempt to seize Harper’s Ferry and start a slave rebellion. At least one newspaper in Washington County, the *People’s Journal*, was sympathetic to him. By then, the Fugitive Slave Act had led to violence over returning runaway slaves to their masters. Many factors added fuel to the fire through the 1850s: the Kansas-Nebraska Act, expansion of the Underground Railroad, publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s immensely popular *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (four hundred thousand copies were sold within a few years of its publication in 1851), the Dred Scott decision, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, John Brown’s call at a Syracuse convention for arms to fight Kansas slaveholders, and the savage physical attack by Congressman Preston Brook of South Carolina on Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts on the Senate floor. The last straw was Lincoln’s Cooper Union Speech in New York, which led to his nomination and election in 1860. He finished that

speech by saying, "Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it."

Meanwhile, the Reid family's former church in Argyle, Washington County, New York, where Margaret's family initially settled, operated a station for runaway slaves along the "North Star Route" to Canada. Another station on this route, known as the Wheelhouse, was located near Cambridge (the site of the Ross family church) on the Turnpike Road to Vermont. Another three homes in Cambridge are thought to have been stations. Others in Washington County were located in a number of villages along the Battenkill, a major Underground Railroad route known as the Quaker Road that led from its mouth on the Hudson River eastward into Vermont. The Ross farm was on the Battenkill, and runaway slaves could have traversed it with or without the assistance of the family. Many other Covenanter settlements in the county were also on the Underground Railroad.

In 1854, Frederick Douglass gave seven lectures in Washington County. In 1858, the American Anti-Slavery Society held a meeting in Washington County at which Susan B. Anthony, a Quaker and New York agent for the society, spoke. Like the Rosses, as a child she had lived in that county along the Battenkill. During the 1850s she frequently lectured in company with a fugitive slave. A resolution was passed at that Washington County meeting condemning "all popular religions" except the "Old School" Covenanters as "eminently guilty of the sin of oppression." On another occasion, she observed, "[W]hile the cruel slave-driver lacerates the black man's . . . body, we, of the North, flay the spirit. . . . Let the North . . . prove to the South that she fully recognizes the humanity of the black man."

Gerrit Smith of New York, one of the wealthiest abolitionists of his day, gave farms to twenty-two black families in Washington County. Three were in Greenwich, two in Cambridge, and one each in Argyle, Salem, and Shushan. He also gave many more farms to black families elsewhere in New York.

In 1860, other leading radical abolitionists including Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, Horace Greeley, and Wendell Phillips spoke in the county. In April 1860, the Methodist Conference, to which Washington County churches belonged, adopted a resolution that read, "We are more than ever convinced of the great evil of slavery, and shall not cease to seek its extirpation by all wise and prudent means." The Congregational Church in Greenwich, founded on antislavery principles in 1837 by about a dozen Reformed Presbyterians, was the most active in the county in assisting runaway slaves. That church was only a few miles from where the Reid family first settled in 1765 on the Argyle Patent. Its founders agreed,

"It is our duty . . . to labor and pray for the speedy and entire abolition of slavery in the nation and throughout the world." Baptist and Quaker churches in Greenwich also took strong antislavery positions.

In June 1860, James B. McKean, the congressman representing Washington and Saratoga counties, said during a hearing on the state of the union, "Slavery and the Union cannot both exist; the one must destroy the other." He also noted that Southerners believed "the structure of white society must have a black foundation." Earlier in his career McKean had taught at the Jonesville Academy where Will, Dan, and Lank, as well as their sister Anna Marie, had gone to secondary school.

On both the political and religious fronts, New York had clearly emerged as a center of the politically active national abolitionist movement. Washington County was at the vortex of the movement in the Hudson River Valley. Lincoln's basic campaign argument was having its effect. Republicans, he argued, believed slavery was a moral, political, and social wrong, and the institution was an "unqualified evil to the negro, to the white man, to the soil, and to the State."

In 1860, enthusiastic "Wide Awake" Republican political clubs were organized in at least fourteen villages throughout Washington County. Members of the marching clubs wore black oilcloth caps and capes to identify themselves. Lincoln, leading the Republican ticket, had a total majority of 2,696 votes and carried every town in the county. He also swept into office Edwin Morgan, a Republican, as governor and carried the state's constitutional amendment for Negro suffrage by more than 1,000 votes in Washington County, even though it was defeated statewide. Governor Morgan won in Washington County by 6,108 votes to 3,504. Nationally, opposition to slavery had been the most important issue.

Southerners viewed Lincoln's election, only six years after the Republican Party was formed, as a Northern victory led by "Black Republican" fanatics who would use federal power to victimize them by denying their right to own slaves and to take them where they pleased. Lincoln's party did not carry a single Southern state. A point of no return had been reached.

Shushan, the village closest to where the Rosses lived, had the largest membership of all Wide Awake clubs. Members organized a rally of 800 people near the Ross farm for the "Rail Splitter," as Lincoln was known. The nearby Salem Club turned out 5,000 at its major rally. The windows were removed in the jam-packed Cambridge schoolhouse so the crowd outside could hear the speaker, District Attorney Archibald McDougall. Another rally in Hartford attracted 215 Wide Awakes, who heard James Rogers give an "excellent speech." Up to 1,000 uniformed Wide Awakes could be turned out almost anywhere. A number would be among the

first to enlist. Rogers would become the lieutenant colonel of Dan and John's regiment, the 123rd New York, and later its colonel.

Four years later, after the sacrifice of inestimable blood and treasure, Washington County voted more than 63 percent for Lincoln, while statewide he received only 50.5 percent. Five Washington County newspapers were either strong supporters of abolition before the war or adopted that position during it. Only one opposed Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation.

The *Whitehall Chronicle* described slavery as a "noxious weed." The *People's Journal* noted that justice commanded "we lift the iron heel of oppression and prejudice from off the oppressed and restore them to their long lost right of citizenship."

The *Washington County Post* editorialized on November 15, 1861, "We earnestly hope that the first hand . . . lifted in Congress against the administration . . . for party purposes—be it emancipation, secession, or peace . . . may be palsied in its place." On March 28, 1862, the *Post* wrote, "Our confidence in the final and complete triumph of our government . . . over the curse of all curses—slavery . . . is in the God of our Armies . . . who will take care [of] wiping out the slave power in this our beloved land."

On July 11, 1862, the *Troy Daily Times*, published in an adjacent county but read in Washington County, stated that slaves should be armed so that "the Union cause may be strengthened . . . and in God's own time—perhaps sooner than most of us can now see—slavery itself may be abolished as the penalty of the madness of traitors."¹

Acting on Their Faith

Shortly before the Civil War, Melancton (Lank) and William Henry moved from New York to join some of their Reid and Ross relatives, who, earlier, had moved to a farm near Somonauk, Illinois. A number of other Washington County families had moved there during the 1840s and 1850s, forming a Reformed (Covenanting) Church in 1842. The grandfather of one of its preachers had founded the Reid family church in Washington County in 1785.

The Somonauk church also operated an Underground Railroad station along the "Liberty Line" to help slaves reach Canada. Its preacher was a "conductor." A number of other Underground Railroad stations were established in nearby villages in Kendall, DeKalb, and adjacent Kane County, where there also was an Anti-Slavery Society beginning in the mid-1840s.

Will became a schoolteacher in Little Rock, Kendall County, six miles east of Somonauk, while Lank worked as a farmhand in Kane County, a few miles away.

When war broke out, the Regular Army numbered a mere 16,000 men in eighteen regiments. From the outset, Americans had disliked professional soldiers who killed for money. By the end of the war, only 67,000 had enlisted as Regulars, but there were never more than 26,000 at any point during the war. Early volunteers with a strong commitment to preserve the Union and/or abolish slavery became the backbone of the Union army.

Regular Army regiments were used intact, never to train volunteers or serve as a cadre in their regiments. Fewer than 90,000 men were drafted, and another 118,000 were hired to serve as substitutes for the conscripts. The overwhelming bulk of men in the Northern army—more than two million had served by war's end—enlisted as volunteers in 2,047 state regiments. Only 8 percent enlisted, like three of the Ross brothers, for a second hitch of three years as Veteran Volunteers.

Immediately following the April 13, 1861, surrender of Fort Sumter to Confederate forces, President Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to serve for three months.² Many Northerners viewed the attack on Fort Sumter as an attempt to destroy the first and only popular government ever created, a sentiment Will, Lank, and Dan may well have shared. Responding to a church elder's call for recruits, Will enlisted in the Somonauk company, one of the first organized in Illinois, on April 19, 1861. Charles Culver, a fellow Washington County transplant, also volunteered, as did other members of their church. The quota for Illinois was six regiments.

The Covenanting Somonauk Church was affiliated with a synod that had adopted a resolution in 1861 disavowing "all sympathy with traitors, styling themselves 'The Confederate States' [and pledging] that we will, as true patriots, defend this, our common country, against these and all like enemies." Somonauk Township would provide 311 men to the Union army, including 76 who enlisted with Will. In many Scots Reformed Presbyterian churches, all able-bodied men enlisted, forming companies of their own.

By midsummer, with the war escalating, initial enlistments like Will's expired. He was discharged from the 10th Ill. in late July 1861, after his regiment was disbanded. The men had been offered the opportunity to reenlist, but not enough of them chose to do so. Will returned to the family farm in time to assist his father and brothers Dan and John with late summer and fall chores.

Such short terms of service would not help win the war. So with congressional approval, Lincoln issued calls on July 23 and July 25 for

500,000 three-year men in 460 regiments. The Ross brothers were aware that the army's ranks had to be replenished quickly by three-year men. The devastating First Battle of Bull Run (Manassas) that ended on July 21 in a shameful, pell-mell, moblike retreat, led to a stark realization in the North: the magnitude and duration of the war would be greater than anticipated.

On July 29, the first organizational meeting of the 36th Ill. was held. Lank enlisted August 10, the third Ross brother in age, but first to sign up for a three-year stint. On August 20, 1861, he was mustered into Company E, the Somonauk company. The regiment was assigned by the state legislature to the First Brigade of Illinois Volunteers.

The family of Lank's company commander, Lt. Lindsay H. Carr, were members of the Covenanting Somonauk Church. During the war, over half of the 36th would be killed, die of disease, or be wounded—more casualties than in any other Illinois regiment but one. Pvt. E. A. Crawford, assigned to Company C in the 36th Ill., wrote to his sister on December 7, 1861, that most of the men in his company were members of the United Presbyterian Church and were Covenanters.

Pvt. Walter V. Reeder of Company E, Lank's company, wrote home on July 29, 1862, that he witnessed slavery for the first time in Kentucky. "Several slaves . . . threshing wheat . . . I went down to the barn to see them work . . . three women, three men and a little boy . . . as I watched the poor things working away," he wrote. "I thought . . . I . . . would be willing to blot out this relict of barbarism, and if need be, to lay down my life for this end." He did at the Battle of Missionary Ridge after having been wounded at both Perryville and Stones River.

He was as strong a Union man as he was antislavery. He wrote, "Nothing short of the Union and the whole Union will we be satisfied with, though it may be cast in many trials and hardships and maybe our lives." In still another letter he wrote, "Badly as I want to go home I will fight them [Rebels] seven years, and, if need be sacrifice my life . . . the Union, one, and undivided, must, and shall be preserved."

Reeder did indeed sacrifice his life. He was wounded and captured at Stones River, returned to duty only to be wounded again at Missionary Ridge, and died shortly thereafter in the Chattanooga Military Hospital.

Included in Lincoln's two calls for three-year men was a quota of twenty-five regiments from New York. Washington County citizens would not accept the disgraceful Bull Run rout of their troops. Their commitment to putting down the rebellion led to the successful recruitment of three-year men in two new regiments, the 93rd N.Y. Volunteers and the 7th N.Y. (Black Horse) Cavalry. The War Department allowed prominent citizens to recruit these regiments independently, at their

personal expense, under the supervision of, and in conformity with, the governors of their respective states. Almost 90,000 New Yorkers responded to Lincoln's July calls.

On September 11, 1861, after the harvest on the Ross farm, Dan enlisted for three years in the 7th N.Y. Black Horse Cavalry, the second brother to sign on for extended duty. He had graduated in June from a two-year course at the Jonesville Academy and intended to teach school like his brother Will and sister Anna Marie. Both had attended the academy earlier to become teachers. Lank also attended in 1860.

In a December 30, 1861, letter, Will advised Dan about what he should study if he wanted to teach "out West" and earn good pay, \$25 to \$30 a month plus board. "The best place for a young man of ambition and principles . . . is in a new village" like those in southern Illinois, he urged. Will earned \$22 monthly, plus board and the use of a good horse, while teaching "twenty-two scholars" and having "a pleasant time." Summers, he worked on the farm where he lived, and finished husking corn before school started.

A fair number of easterners with secondary-school educations were moving to Illinois to meet the growing demand for qualified teachers after the state passed the Common School Law. By 1859, when Will moved to Illinois, private academies were being replaced by public schools so "the poor man's children [could] enter the school room on an exact equality . . . with the rich man's child."

A career in the classroom would have to wait, for both brothers. Dan and the fifty-four-man Salem company were not mustered in until November 6. When they left Salem to join the regiment in Troy, New York, local residents presented each member with a Bible and a blanket. Hundreds of friends and relatives gathered to bid them good-bye. The same day that Dan reported for duty with the Black Horse Cavalry, Will reenlisted, this time for three years in the 93rd N.Y. Infantry. Three brothers had now enlisted for three years.

During the first recruiting rallies in Washington County, when Dan enlisted, there was no mention of slavery. Rather, the focus was on preserving the Union. Rev. Henry Gordon, in his first recruiting speech to a packed audience at the Old White Presbyterian Church, told the crowd, "A great principle is at stake. Our free popular government is jeopardized." The silence on the subject of slavery was deafening—on Lincoln's part as well as that of the Ross family preacher and the committee that recruited Lank's regiment in Illinois.

Reflecting his combination of morality and expediency, Lincoln's sole rallying cry at war's beginning, as well as that of others, was saving the Union. This goal had overwhelming support in the North. In late April 1861, only a few weeks after Fort Sumter, Lincoln told John Hay, one

of his assistants, "I consider the first necessity that is upon us is proving that popular government is not an absurdity. . . . If we fail, it will go far to prove the incapability of the people to govern themselves." Clearly it had the broadest, most urgent appeal.

For Dan, his preacher's appeal to help preserve the government was sufficient reason to postpone launching his teaching career and enlist. For others who had only political reasons, fighting for the Union was sufficient to justify enlisting. For those with deep moral/religious convictions, fighting to end slavery was another spoken or unspoken reason. In any event, relatively few Union volunteers mentioned slavery when they first enlisted.

Lincoln did not want to fight a long war. To avoid doing so, he had to keep the North united behind the war—Democrats and Republicans, radicals and conservatives. His war powers as commander in chief to put down an insurrection, the aim of which was to sever the Union, could not be constitutionally challenged. To save the Union, he also had to keep the border states neutral, if not supportive. Moreover, he wanted to maximize the possibility of a fraternal reunion at war's end.

The slavery issue, therefore, had to be tackled later, when he could justify emancipation as a military necessity. Even Lincoln's enemies recognized his concern about the border states. They ridiculed him by sneering that he "would like to have God on his side, but he must have Kentucky." He had participated in political events long enough to wait for the tide of events to move public opinion in support of his position, thereby gaining the consent of the governed.

Half of Will's regiment was recruited in Washington County, and the rest from neighboring counties. Will was off recruiting when he wrote to Dan on November 5, 1861, that Col. John S. Crocker had assured him of a commission as an officer if his recruiting efforts were successful. He also wrote that a patriotic Presbyterian preacher friend, Rev. Joseph Hulburt, "pledged himself unasked to help" and would be his "right hand companion and friend as well as adviser." Will was confident, assuring Dan his "prospects for an office [were] good." Until he was reimbursed for his expenses, he had to borrow money from his father. He wrote, "Father backs me up with true love not expecting to gain . . . I asked him to back me at the bank for sixty days which he has done readily." Apparently, though, he was not successful as a recruiter, particularly after Hulburt withdrew his help because of his mother's "poor health." In spite of that disappointment, Will enlisted as a private.

For two years prior to the war Col. Crocker served as an acting brigadier general in the First Brigade of the New York State Militia, and was active in recruiting for both the 93rd and, later, the 123rd. He was an abolitionist, whose grandfather had fought in the Revolution.

Crocker had been Will's father's attorney for ten years and later served as Lank's attorney in applying for his pension. He named the Ninety-third "Morgan's Rifles," after his close personal friend Gov. Edwin Morgan of New York, and raised it without offering bounties.

Crocker, age forty-one, mustered in the full regiment by November 15. The ladies of Washington County presented the regiment with a battle flag they had designed. Will's family church in Cambridge gave his company a prayerful, rousing, patriotic send-off the night before the men left by train. Crocker also helped to raise a company for the 22nd N.Y. He had spent \$20,000 of his own money recruiting these regiments, for which he was never reimbursed. However, he had reimbursed Will for out-of-pocket expenses incurred in helping to recruit for the 93rd.

Crocker's cousin was editor and publisher of the *Washington County Post*, which came to support emancipation. Previously it had merely opposed the extension of slavery into Kansas and Nebraska and considered the matter a sectional, not a national, problem. Crocker had another relative, Rev. James N. Crocker, a Reformed Presbyterian who preached at the Charlton Freehold Reformed Presbyterian Church and was the principal founder of the academy there, a secondary school.

Meanwhile, Dan's regiment, commanded by Col. A. J. Morrison, arrived in Washington, DC, without mounts or arms. It was one of twenty-five Empire State regiments recruited in response to Lincoln's July calls. New York's quota was twenty-five thousand in twenty-five regiments. By the time Dan's regiment arrived November 25, there already were well over sixty regiments from various states guarding Washington. They were stationed at Camp Stoneman and assigned to help guard the capital. By March 1862, the War Department and General George McClellan determined that there were too few horses and too many cavalry regiments in Washington and discharged a number of them, including Dan's on March 31. His regiment was never mounted, even though its rank and file were described as intelligent sons of farmers and accomplished horsemen.

He returned home in April 1862 to work on the farm for his father, helping put in spring crops as well as harvest them. From correspondence between the two brothers that summer, it is clear that Dan was anxious to get back into the army. He wrote Will that he was plowing a field of corn stubble and felt a lack of something "prominent" to do. He also asked Will if he could assist in obtaining a position for him in his brother's regiment. On July 8, Will replied that it was "doubtful," adding, "[I] cannot give you any encouragement to leave . . . when father has so much business on hand. I am sure you can make yourself very useful" to him.

Lengthening casualty and sick lists made it clear that war was neither glamorous nor glorious. Four costly battles in the spring and summer of 1862—Shiloh, Seven Pines, Seven Days, and 2nd Bull Run—had