

Excerpt from: Jamie H. Eves, “Orrin and Jerusha Robinson and the Methodist Melee on Main Street”

<https://millmuseum.org/orrin-and-jerusha-robinson/>

There were some residents of antebellum Connecticut who openly challenged slavery —some because they feared competition from slave labor if it ever came north, some out of principle, and some because they empathized with the people who had been forced into bondage. Who was who is hard to tell. But among those in Willimantic who took a stand against slavery were the city’s Methodists, who had only recently organized a congregation and, in 1836, built a new church on Main Street. According to Baldwin, in the spring of 1837, the Methodists invited “an abolition lecturer by the name of Phelps” to come speak at the new church. Not everyone in town was happy about it. Allen Lincoln identified the speaker as Aaron Phelps. He may have meant [Amos Phelps](#) (1805-47), a Farmington, Connecticut native and graduate of Yale Divinity School. According to Lincoln, it was Willimantic’s Methodist minister, Rev. Moses White, who had invited Phelps to speak to his Willimantic congregation on three different days.

The situation soon became violent. On the first day that Phelps spoke, all was quiet, but on the second, an angry mob gathered outside the Methodist Church in noisy protest, and threw stones through the glass windows. On the third day, an even larger mob assembled in advance at the nearby Congregational Church and then marched en masse to the Methodist Church, bent on violence. No sooner had Phelps commenced speaking, then the mob — Baldwin called them “young hotheads, encouraged no doubt by older ones who should have known better” — entered the church and attempted to shut things down. The mob’s leader, Charles Schofield, Lincoln wrote, strode to the front of the Church, demanded that Phelps cease speaking, and threatened violence if he didn’t. But to Schofield’s surprise, the Methodists fought back. According to Baldwin, a “rough and tumblescimmage” broke out between the two sides that soon spilled out onto Main Street... In all the confusion, “Aunt ‘Rushy Robinson” (Orrin’s wife Jerusha) tossed her cloak over [Phelps] and quietly led him to safety in their home.

Lincoln provided more details about what happened, but not all of them were accurate, so we should take them with a bit of skepticism. According to Lincoln, “young Orrin Robinson, tall and strong,” stepped out of the congregation, grabbed Schofield by the arm, and marched him out of the Church. Robinson, however, was 46 at the time, hardly young — not as young as the “young hotheads,” anyway — and may not have been especially tall or strong, either. Baldwin wrote that it was the congregation as a whole that resisted.

Someone notified the Deputy Sheriff, who Baldwin said was James Webb and Lincoln said was Edward Clark, who hurriedly arrived with at least one constable – and likely more – to break up the fight. After restoring order, the Deputy chewed out the combatants and – probably to ensure that the two sides didn’t start fighting again after he left – arrested and fined 15 or 20 of the leaders on both sides.

All but one of those arrested sheepishly paid their fines and went home. However, standing on principle, Robinson, in Baldwin’s words a “strong abolitionist,” refused, announcing that he would go to jail instead. Try to picture the scene, the angry, middle-aged miller, incredulous that the authorities would

arrest and fine him because he had defended his and Phelps's right to free speech, free religion, and free assembly under the Constitution.

So Robinson and "Constable Hosmer" – who Lincoln said was William Hosmer, but also might have been Stephen Hosmer, a prosperous farmer with extensive fields at the base of Hosmer Mountain, on the edge of the city, or Stephen's son, John, a respected Main Street merchant – set off on foot, according to Lincoln, for Brooklyn, CT, the Windham County seat and site of the county jail (the same jail, it turns out, that four years earlier had held another Connecticut hero, [Prudence Crandall](#)). Apparently, Hosmer was reluctant to drag the stubborn old Methodist to jail – Willimantic was still a small community, barely more than a village, and the two families, Robinsons and Hosmers, would have known each other. So, as Baldwin wrote, "making an excuse that he had forgotten his papers, ... [Hosmer] left Robinson in the road, supposing that would end it." But Robinson had his gumption up, and still on foot he continued on towards Brooklyn on his own. Lincoln said he did so "cheerfully." Perhaps "resolutely" would be a better adverb. Hosmer returned to Willimantic, picked up any paperwork that he may have left behind, and headed back towards Brooklyn, probably on horseback. He overtook Robinson, still on his way to the county seat, accompanied him the rest of the way to Brooklyn, and "committed him to jail." Try to picture Robinson, perhaps sputtering and angry, perhaps "cheerful" as Lincoln said, taking himself to jail, now fighting not just a proslavery mob, but his own government. But still not backing down.

Thus Orrin Robinson of Willimantic, Connecticut, dedicated abolitionist, middle-aged miller, and devout Methodist, refused to pay a fine for the "crime" of defending an abolitionist speaker's right to speak – and his own and his fellow abolitionists' right to assemble and practice their religion and their politics the way they saw fit – against an angry proslavery mob. He also refused to take advantage of Hosmer's implied offer to let him go home and forget the whole thing. Instead, he voluntarily went to jail, committing an act of antislavery civil disobedience more than a decade before Henry David Thoreau's more celebrated night in Concord jail for the similar offense of refusing to pay his poll tax because it supported a war – the Mexican-American War of the 1840s – that Thoreau believed was fought to acquire new land for slavery. Robinson did it first.