

*Benjamin Lundy,  
Abolitionist*

Fred Landon

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# Benjamin Lundy, Abolitionist

By FRED LANDON

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Here was a man, without education, without wealth who had undertaken, single-handed and without the shadow of a doubt of his ultimate success, to abolish American slavery.

Macy, *The Anti-Slavery Crusade*.

The student of American history, whose field of investigation lies within the twenties and thirties of the last century, finds the name of Benjamin Lundy appearing in many records. At a time when the older America seemed to be breaking up and when all its people seemed to be on the move, he was as restless as any. In 1830 he could say that he had travelled more than 5,000 miles on foot and more than 20,000 miles in other ways, that he had visited 19 states, and had made two voyages to Hayti. Within the next five years he added to this record three journeys to Texas and the southwest, and a journey through the western part of Upper Canada. His purpose never varied. While others might seek wealth or adventure, he was seeking a solution for the national problems involved in slavery, and he was particularly seeking the means by which the lot of the negro race in America might be improved.

As a pioneer in the abolitionist movement, as the most active propagandist of anti-slavery ideas during the twenties, and as the agent through whom William Lloyd Garrison was first enlisted in the cause, it is strange that he has had so little recognition given to his efforts. A patchwork sort of biography issued eighty years ago, casual references in larger histories, and two or three brief magazine articles alone record Lundy's activities. He was, of course, overshadowed in his own day by Garrison, and he never sought public notice of any kind. The difficulties of a biographer are increased by the fact that most of his papers and journals perished when Pennsylvania Hall was destroyed by a Philadelphia mob in May, 1838, and by the fact that of his paper *The Genius of Universal Emancipation* there is probably no complete file in any library.

The *Genius* is the most fruitful source for details of the more active period of his life. There is much of a personal character in its pages. Lundy was a keen observer, and while his paper is not to be compared with Garrison's *Liberator* either for forcefulness or for scope, it does provide us with a chronicle of the anti-slavery movement in one of its most obscure periods. It is Lundy's distinction that he links the older humanitarian movement with the aggressive propaganda of the Garrisonians, and his really important work was thus done by 1830. He had had a part in the controversy over the admission of Missouri into the union, and following that issue, in itself a point of departure in the slavery struggle, he spent the remainder of his life in seeking some solution for what he believed was a national ill. He never wearied, though it cost him home and family and comfort and means. Long after he was gone, the poet Whittier could say of him that "it was his lot to struggle, for years almost alone, a solitary voice crying in the wilderness; poor, unaided, yet never despairing, traversing the island of Hayti, wasting with disease in New Orleans, hunted by Texas banditti, wandering on foot among the mountains of East Tennessee and along the Ozark Hills, beaten down and trampled on by Baltimore slave dealers; yet, amidst all, faithful to his one great purpose, the emancipation of the slaves and the protection of the free people of colour."

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The main facts of Lundy's earlier life may be briefly set forth. He was born of Quaker parentage in New Jersey in 1789, and as a youth went to Wheeling, Virginia, where he learned the trade of saddlemaker. At Wheeling he witnessed some of the unpleasant aspects of the inter-state slave trade, for the place was on one of the main roads of travel. "I heard the wail of the captive", he says, "I felt his pang of distress, and the iron entered my soul". When he removed to the free state of Ohio, he carried his anti-slavery sentiments with him, and as early as 1815 organized at St. Clairsville an anti-slavery association which was called the "Union Humanitarian Society". It began with half a dozen members, but grew to several hundred within a few months, and included in its membership some of the leading people of the district.

The success of this local organization suggested the possibility of greater influence by the union and concerted effort of the anti-slavery forces. Accordingly, in 1816, we find Lundy urging the formation of new societies, the adoption by them of a common name and a common constitution, regular correspondence among the various groups, and the holding of annual conventions representative of the individual societies. All this was set forth

in a circular which he issued, and which must be regarded as an important step in the anti-slavery movement. In this circular Lundy says that, having carefully considered the issue and his personal relation to it, he has taken it up, fully determined never to lay it down while he can breathe or until the end is accomplished.

His high resolve he soon put into action by undertaking to associate himself with Charles Osborne in the publication of *The Philanthropist* at Mt. Pleasant, Ohio. This paper was distinctly anti-slavery in sentiment. The decision meant that he would have to abandon his hitherto prosperous business, but he did not hesitate. He immediately loaded his stock on a flat boat, and started for St. Louis. The journey should not have been prolonged, but when he arrived there in 1819 he found himself in that first national controversy over the spread of slavery and with abundant opportunities to engage in it. The result was that he remained for nearly two years in St. Louis, lost several thousand dollars on the sale of his stock, and practically broke his engagement with Osborne. He blames the business conditions for his losses, but we may suspect that he was more interested in the political controversy raging in the proposed state than in finding customers. His name appears in the St. Louis press of the time in connection with reports of anti-slavery work.

When he finally returned to Ohio, he decided to establish a newspaper of his own. So in January, 1821, there appeared the first number of *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, at the beginning published at Mt. Pleasant, Ohio, but after a few issues removed to Greenville, Tennessee, where it continued to be published until Lundy's removal to Baltimore in the summer of 1824. Thereafter, it was published successively at Baltimore, at Washington and at Philadelphia, and in the last year of his life at Hennepin, Illinois. It was frequently irregular in its issues, and at one particular period, 1830-31, Lundy has recorded that as he had to travel considerably to obtain subscribers, he took a part of the type, etc., along with him, and had the printing done in different places though the nominal place of publication continued to be Washington. It is little to be wondered at, under such circumstances, if existing files of the paper are so incomplete.

Between 1824 and 1835 Lundy was interested chiefly in the idea of colonizing as a solution for the slavery problem. He believed that either the negroes, bond and free, should be removed from the country to foreign shores ready to receive them, or else the federal Government should set aside portions of the western domain where they could be assisted in working out their own destiny. The search for a hospitable foreign shore

took Lundy twice to Hayti, three times to Mexican territory, and once to the British province of Upper Canada. He gave hearty support to schemes for colonization in the west, and in 1825 commended the Nashoba scheme of Frances Wright, though at a later date he displayed less enthusiasm for that lady's rather startling views on marriage and some kindred subjects. In general, he was friendly to the American Colonization Society and mentioned its work frequently in his paper, though he was not blind to the limitations of its activities and the forces which were behind it. He was ever receptive to new ideas, and changed his own plans often. Towards the end of his life he may have lost some of his faith in colonizing as a solution for slavery. He probably realized that the great national problem would have to be settled in some other way, and that its future developments would be in the west. We find him in Illinois, in the last year of his life, taking the place of the fallen Owen Lovejoy and providing the anti-slavery forces in the western state with a newspaper for the expression of their opinions. During 1838-39 he issued a dozen numbers, the old name once again at the top of the page, and the same spirit informing its contents. The issue of February 26, 1839, has a report of the convention of the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society, at which resolutions were passed adopting the *Genius* as the official organ of the society and promising it support. The name of Benjamin Lundy is attached to a proposal to hold a convention at Lowell on March 12 with the aim of forming a county society for La Salle as an auxiliary of the state society.

But Lundy's career was about to end. In the issue of July 19, 1839, we find him apologizing for having missed an issue; a small wheat harvest, he explains, had required his care. If, he added humorously, some country editors would farm a little, they might write more independently. A week later he again apologized for the small amount of editorial matter, and explained that he had suffered from a light fever. Then, on August 23, the announcement appeared of his death which had taken place on the 22nd. The last issue of the paper is dated September 13, 1839.

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It is not the purpose of this article to analyze fully the place of Lundy in the anti-slavery movement, nor to follow in detail the activities of his life. It will be sufficient if some acquaintance is made with the man himself, who in his day seems to have strangely interested all who came in contact with him. Through the pages of his biography and the columns of his paper we can see the motley procession of those with whom he had dealings on land or at sea. Black and white, rich and poor, sailor, merchant, slave-dealer, pioneer

farmers and Mexican peasants, the governors of provinces, blasphemous ruffians and gentle pious folk of his own belief, all came in contact with him, and he seemed able to get on with every tune. In out of the way places he is given a hearty welcome when his identity is discovered. Negroes seek him out by night and press rifts of money upon him. Slave-holders discuss their peculiar institution with him aboard ship, and there is no bitterness on either side. At times on his journeys, when money is at an end, he goes back to his old trade of saddle-making and leather work, and restores his affairs just as did the Apostle Paul when he made tents on his journeys about the Mediterranean.

There are occasional glimpses in his record of the family and of the home which he saw so seldom. He was on his first journey to Hayti when his wife died. News reached him of her death the day before he was to sail from Port-au-Prince. The mother had died after giving birth to twin babies, and there were other small children in the home. When his ship arrived off the port of Baltimore it was held up by the quarantine regulations, but the captain took the bereaved man ashore in the night that he might seek out his children.

“We rowed a small boat several miles to the shore”, says Lundy’s narrative. “I hastened to my dwelling, but found it deserted. All was lone and dreary within its walls. I roused some of my neighbours, but they could tell me nothing about my children. I returned with the captain before daylight to the vessel, and the next day obtained legal permission to land. On further enquiry, I found that my little ones were scattered among my friends. But home with all its pleasures was gone. I collected my children together, placed them with friends in whom I could confide, and renewed my vow to devote my energies to the cause of the slave.” Only at intervals did he see much of his children until the last year of his life when they were all in Illinois. The separation cost him many a pang, and he had them much at heart. There is a beautiful letter written to his daughter and son in 1836, preserved for us in the biography. It is full of affection and wise counsel.

Lundy’s connection with Garrison is one of the phases of his career most frequently referred to. It was in November, 1828, that after a short acquaintance he invited Garrison to assist him in the publication of the *Genius*. The invitation was declined at the time, but in the following year Garrison agreed to associate himself in the work. The partnership was brief, for the men were too unlike in temper to work on one common task. Garrison’s articles were vitriolic in comparison with the more reasoned and quiet articles by Lundy. Libel suits began to loom on the horizon, and even

the device of having each partner sign his own articles did not solve the difficulty; so they parted company. Long years after, when the anti-slavery forces had seen their work accomplished, Garrison took occasion to pay his tribute to Lundy as “one whose memory ought to be preserved to the latest generation as the distinguished pioneer in this great struggle.” To the assembled delegates at the 1863 meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, Garrison told how Lundy had given the impulse that brought him so completely and conspicuously into the struggle, and that had made him its chief figure. His concluding remarks in this connection will bear repeating: “If I have in any way, however humble”, he said, “done anything towards calling attention to the question of slavery, or bringing about the glorious prospect of a complete jubilee in our country at no distant day, I feel that I owe everything in this matter, instrumentally, and under God, to Benjamin Lundy”.

Nor was Garrison the only man of influence and importance to be touched by him. His relations with John Quincy Adams began as early as 1831, and were more or less intimate about 1836 when Lundy was proposing to revive the *Genius* which was temporarily in eclipse. He solicited the support of the ex-president; but “I thought best not to give him any expectation of it”, is the comment in the latter’s diary. A little later, however, an entry reads, “I wrote a letter to Benjamin Lundy for publication”, and there is also the following delightful entry in the diary in the summer of 1836:

Benjamin Lundy came at six, and I walked with him to the house of his friend, James Mott, No. 136 North Ninth Street, where there was a large tea and evening party of men and women—all of the Society of Friends. I had free conversation with them till between ten and eleven o’clock upon slavery, the abolition of slavery and other topics, of all which the only exceptionable part was the undue proportion of talking assumed by me, and the indiscretion and vanity in which I indulged myself. . . . Benj. Lundy and another friend came home with me to Mr. Biddle’s, and Lundy came in and conversed with me nearly another hour.

Lundy and Adams found common cause in the Texas question which was agitating the country. Lundy’s pamphlet, issued in 1836, was a condemnation of what seemed to him a vile plot on the part of the slavery states to bring Texas into the union. He could see in it only a means of increasing the area devoted to slavery, and he undoubtedly furnished Adams

with much of the material the latter used in his speeches in Congress. Wendell Phillips said:

Any one who will examine John Quincy Adams's speech on Texas in 1838 will see that he was only seconding the full and able exposure of the Texas plot prepared by Benjamin Lundy, to one of whose pamphlets Dr. Channing in his *Letter to Henry Clay* has expressed his obligation. Everyone acquainted with those years will allow that the North owes its earliest knowledge and first awakening on that subject to Mr. Lundy, who made long journeys and devoted years to the investigation. His labours have this attestation, that they quickened the zeal and strengthened the hands of such men as Adams and Channing. I have been told that Mr. Lundy prepared a brief for Mr. Adams, and furnished him with the materials for his "Speech on Texas".

Lundy's later journeys to Texas and the southwest are told in considerable detail in the biography, the accounts being evidently drawn from his own diaries or letters. The first journey to the southwest (made in 1830-31) and the journey to Upper Canada are described briefly in the biography, but are more fully narrated in the *Genius*. Of these two latter journeys he says: "I also during these years visited both Canada and Texas. I wished to see the condition of the coloured people in Canada, and to establish a settlement of that class of population in Texas with a view to the cultivation of sugar, cotton and rice by free labour. This tour was commenced in the winter of 1830-31. I travelled mostly on foot in Canada in the coldest of the winter, and in Louisiana and Texas in the hottest of the summer, going in disguise in the southern country as my life would otherwise have been endangered. My labours for 18 months of the time were truly arduous, but I considered that the sufferings of the slave were greater than my own. I remembered him in the bonds of toil as bound to him."

Lundy's journey to Upper Canada is of special interest because there he found a group of negroes who were working at the building up of a colony on very much the same lines as he had himself advocated. The Wilberforce settlement, located about twenty miles north of the present city of London, Ontario, had been founded about 1829 or 1830 by a small group from Ohio. When Lundy visited the place, the moving spirit was Austin Steward whose narrative, written some years later, gives an excellent account of the experiment. There were high hopes in 1832 that Wilberforce would become an important negro colony, because the Government of Upper Canada had

displayed a most friendly spirit, and the British laws made no discrimination in the matter of colour. These hopes were never realized. The agents who were sent out to raise funds were incompetent or dishonest, dissensions came in the colony itself, and in the end even Austin Steward had to confess that the outlook was hopeless. Some years later the experiment of negro colonies was again tried in the southwestern part of the province, in the district near the Detroit River, with much better success, the Elgin Association settlement remaining to this day as a distinctly negro group.

Lundy was much like Pepys in his intellectual curiosity. Wherever he goes, we find him seeking out the curious in life and delighting in talk with people of other types. At Monclova he goes to see a bull fight, and gives a graphic picture of this sport. At the same place he went to see the gambling houses. "A great throng was present", he says, "but it was exceedingly quiet—far more so, I think, than it would be in one of our cities if so much liquor was displayed. Five or six armed men of the city guard were there, but I judged that their presence was not necessary as there were no signs of quarreling". On another evening he attended a ball. "Nearly all the foreigners in the place were present. The waltz, seemed to be the favourite dance. Some of the company were not entirely white. Among them were a portion of very polite people. Some young men who were very good dancers came in their working dresses. It looked strange to see a person with the complexion of an Indian, wearing a hat but no coat or vest, and dancing with a beautiful white young lady who was dressed in the richest silk".

He delighted also in the beauty of nature, and there is many a reference to his pleasure in some of the scenes he encountered. From Monclova he writes: "The beautiful sunsets which we have here at present are unparalleled by anything ever seen in the higher latitudes. If the air is pure, a vast arch of fiery light of the deepest vermilion colour rises far above the horizon. Such a flood of effulgence proceeds from the arch this evening that shadows are distinctly marked on the opposite houses". There are many quaint references to his frequent lack of ready money on his journeys, and his methods of remedying this condition. Where possible he would get some saddlery to repair; but when this failed, he was ever resourceful. At Bexar he made and repaired suspenders, and was kept busy for several days at this. When the citizens of Bexar were brought to complete efficiency of suspenders, he notes in his diary: "I have now started a new line of business, viz., the making of shot bags from panther and deer skins. Anything for an honest living, and to keep my spirits from sinking while I am pent up here".

On his travels he was quite content with whatever shelter and accommodation might be available. "When night came on", he says on one occasion, "I lay down on the grass by the roadside, my knapsack serving for a pillow and my small thin cloak for sheet and counterpane, while my hat, my staff and my pistol smartly charged lay at arm's length from my person". On a miserable Mississippi river boat found several cases of cholera, and himself four of the sick. He had frequent experiences with this disease on his many journeys, and says of it: "This cholera is an extraordinary disorder. It attacks with the ferocity of a tiger, keeps its hold like a bull-dog, and as soon as it is conquered returns to the fray". At Bexar he obtained quite a reputation as a doctor, and treated those down with cholera with a remedy which he carried and to which he makes reference in his diary.

In personal appearance Lundy is described as having been slightly under middle height, slender in form, his complexion fair and his hair rather sandy. His disposition was always cheerful. His half-sister said of him: "He had the peculiar happy manner of making them (his children) greatly rejoice to see him, even to the shedding of tears, and yet to become willing for him to leave them again. Thus a strong deep attachment grew up in their minds for him, though he was seldom with them". She says also of him: "Though he left us while I was yet young, my recollections of him were always so gentle and tender that I could not bear to hear a word said in disapprobation of him. This attachment was strengthened by years and a repeated correspondence after I arrived at womanhood. He was of gentle and mild manners, yet quickly perceptible of the views and intentions of others, and always prepared to meet them in the way he thought best suited to them; of a studious habit, he seldom sat without a book in his hand, and always embraced every opportunity for improvement".

This is the wistful sort of figure that comes to us from the twenties and thirties of the last century. It is not hard to picture the Quaker-garbed figure, the hesitancy due to imperfect hearing, the gentle unassuming manner of the man. Yet beneath the gentleness was an iron resolution and a stem sense of duty. Critically examined, Lundy's plans seem visionary in character, and his efforts on behalf of colonization, to which he gave his best years, came to nought. But he inspired others by his writings, and by his personal contact with them he kept the question of slavery to the front at a time when there were few ready to do it. If he is overshadowed by Garrison and by others who were prominent in later days, they owe much to him. The name of

Benjamin Lundy will not be forgotten while men continue to esteem courage and resolution and the spirit of self-sacrifice for others.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[End of Benjamin Lundy, Abolitionist by Fred Landon]