
THE BIRNEY ANTI-SLAVERY COLLECTION
OF
THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Milton S. Eisenhower Library
Special Collections Division

Baltimore, Maryland

1985

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INTRODUCTION

Few abolitionists were as valuable to their movement as James G. Birney. Though he was born into a wealthy Kentucky slaveholding family in 1792, a religious conversion sparked his desire "to devote his life to the cause of truth in some moral or religious enterprise".¹ Gradually convinced of the sinfulness of slaveholding, Birney abandoned a successful law practice to become an agent for abolitionism. As a southern aristocrat, he jeopardized his community standing while rising through the anti-slavery ranks. Despite angry anti-abolitionist mobs at his door, Birney persisted and was rewarded with the anti-slavery Liberty Party's unanimous presidential nominations in 1840 and 1844.

As an abolitionist writer and publisher, James Birney recognized that books, pamphlets and newspapers were the lifeblood of anti-slavery agitation. They had been essential to his own conversion to emancipationism. During the winter of 1833-34, for example, at a crucial moment in his career, as Birney later wrote, "I read almost every work [on slavery] I could lay my hands on".²

Thirty-three years after James G. Birney's death in 1857, his son William presented his father's collection of over one thousand books and pamphlets on slavery to The Johns Hopkins University. It contained materials collected by James Birney in the course of his anti-slavery labors, and items gathered

by the younger Birney while preparing a biography of his father. Over the years, the Birney Collection has been augmented and now includes both anti-slavery and pro-slavery; African colonization; politics and campaign biographies; printed speeches (including German language editions for distribution in the upper midwest); anti-slavery almanacs; and black education.

At the time of his gift, William Birney regretted his inability to arrange the collection better. "I had intended to classify and rebind... I must leave this work to the Johns Hopkins University."³ In 1983, a grant from the U.S. Department of Education enabled the Eisenhower Library to fulfill the donor's intentions. Bound volumes of pamphlets were disbound, and individual items restored and placed in protective cases. The entire collection has been catalogued and entered on the Research Libraries Group's RLIN data base, where it is now nationally accessible.

This list of items in the Birney Collection is intended to serve as a guide for researchers interested in using the collection. It is subdivided chronologically for ease of use and to reflect more clearly the diversity of topics represented. This listing should not, however, be considered complete; it is hoped that future donations and acquisitions will continue to supplement the original Birney gift.

The Birney Collection's pamphlets, books, and clippings are available for use in the Special Collections Division of the Milton S. Eisenhower Library. Inquiries about use of the

collection or about its contents and scope are welcome and should be addressed to: Special Collections, Milton S. Eisenhower Library, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland 21218.

¹Dwight L. Dumond, ed., Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857 (New York, 1938), p. 242n.

²William Birney, James G. Birney and His Times (New York, 1890), p. 427.

³Manuscript letter, William Birney to Prof. Herbert Baxter Adams, Jan. 12, 1891. Adams Collection, Special Collections Division, Eisenhower Library.