A New England Abolitionist Visits a St. Louis Slave Trader

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Descended from patrician New England stock, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a Unitarian minister and radical reformer, may be more popularly known today as poet Emily Dickinson's special friend and mentor, but in the late 1850s he was known for being a militant abolitionist. He advocated Northern disunion from Southern slaveholders, and he was subsequently exposed as one of the "Secret Six" who raised money for John Brown's attack on the federal armory at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in hope of igniting a race war. In 1862 Higginson served as a colonel of black troops raised from South Carolina's Sea Islands, the first authorized regiment of Freedmen of the Civil War.[1]


Negroes for Sale.

Higginson's longstanding vocal abolitionism changed into an active belligerency with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas had designed the bill to help win Southern support for a transcontinental railroad originating in Chicago. Controversially it repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which forbade the spread of slavery north of Missouri's southern border, and now gave actual settlers the right to determine whether to establish slavery in the region. The possibility of creating new slave states out of the vast unorganized land acquired through the 1803 Louisiana Purchase set off a sectional firestorm and led to the creation of the Republican Party. "Bleeding Kansas" was soon engulfed by violence as "Free-soil" and pro-slavery settlers struggled for supremacy. In support of pro-slavery forces, Missouri "Border Ruffians" crossed into Kansas to cast illegal votes and intimidate free-soil settlers. As part of the effort to arm free-soilers, Higginson traveled there in 1856, stopping briefly in St. Louis.[2]

It was his first visit to Missouri. He had been to slave states before, and he was surprised to find so few African Americans wandering in St. Louis' downtown streets. He thought this especially strange because six steamboats had caught on fire, putting on a magnificent show at the city wharf, drawing, he estimated, a thousand spectators. Yet he could not find more than ten black faces in the entire crowd. When he asked a stranger about the absence of slaves, he was told they generally they did not venture into the city's business district. This was a curious statement given the strong concentration of African Americans among the menial laborers on the wharf and on steamboats, but Higginson's impression was evidently sincere. More likely, he simply lacked knowledge of the city's demographic character. A few years later, the 1860 census would reveal that African Americans made up less than two percent of St. Louis' population, and the majority of those were not slave but free. By the time of Higginson's arrival, Missouri had the nation's smallest slave population, save Delaware. If he wanted to see the kind of slavery he expected in a Southern state, he would have to wait until he reached the state's central Missouri River corridor, or he might have seen it as well if he had ventured up the Mississippi River north of St. Louis.[3]

Whatever the case, like other New England abolitionists visiting slave states, he decided to visit one of the city's slave pens. He knew that St. Louis was no Richmond. Still, it was an important slave trade entrepot, with black captives regularly moving in and out from other geographic regions. After a search, he finally identified what he was looking for in the pages of the city's Democratic paper, the Missouri *Republican,* in which he found ads by John Mattingly and Corbin Thompson both directing him to Thompson's pen. He determined to visit it the next day.[4]

Higginson's subsequent account of his trip oozes sardonic indignation, using a clever, if rather mirthless satire, to make his antislavery points. In an age that sanctified home and family, especially sentimentalizing the bonds between mothers and children, abolitionists frequently pointed out how the slave trade violated what the larger society professed to hold dear by tearing the slave family apart. So, it is probably no accident that Higginson dwelled on the sale of sweet vulnerable little girls–pretty in pink—attempting to engage the reader's emotions, as if it might be his own daughter being sold into the hands of strangers. In some ways it was a typical set piece. By 1856 this had been a standard abolitionist polemical strategy.[5]

While Higginson is snobbish and condescending about what he saw in St. Louis, his account rings true. He notes the slaves in the pen ranged in age from about six to 40. So-called "likely" negroes, that is able-bodied slaves, typically between 15 and 35, usually sold best, certainly not seven-year-olds like "Sue." Higginson's claim that most of the slaves

Unitarian minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823–1911) was a leading figure in the abolition movement and a supporter of John Brown's raid. Early in his career, he invited William Wells Brown, a former slave who lived in St. Louis in his early life, to speak at his church, the First Religious Society of Newburyport. *(Image: Library of Congress)*

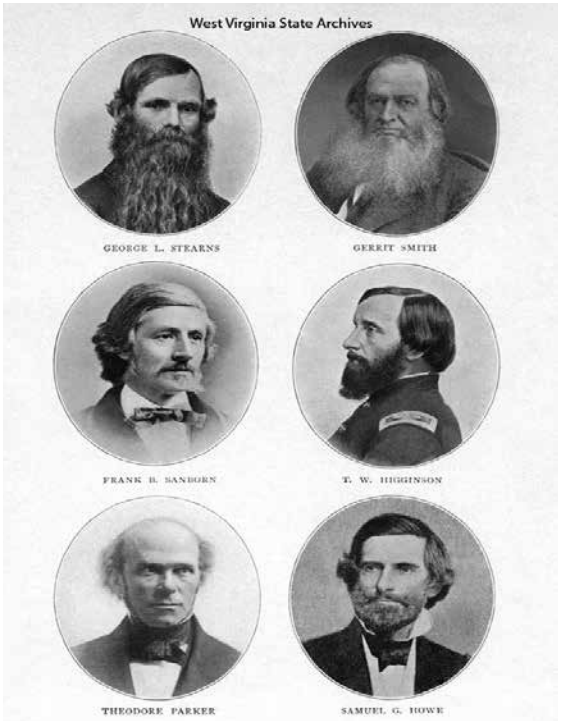
being sold at the pen were 14 years or younger is an undoubted exaggeration. In his account Thompson seems like an actual person—and not wholly unlikeable, even if engaged in a detestable business. Thompson seems more an amoral businessman than an ogre, at least until he thinks one of his "stock" might be thwarting her own sale, something that routinely angered slave traders. But Thompson has no refinement: neither the real nor fake Virginia gentility that led those easterners to refer to their slaves as "servants," or their "people." Thompson simply calls African Americans "Negroes" and "Niggers," and he makes the shocking offer to strip the little girls so a buyer can see that they are sound, though this was a common offer by traders, even genteel Virginians.[6]

Higginson himself uses stereotypes, referring to "Sambos" and "Dinahs," and scorns rich Southern whites, giving them names like Bulford Dashaway, Esq., and Miss Caroline Pettitoes. These wealthy Southerners, he suggests, enjoy their transitory luxuries and Northern vacations based on the misery they create by selling an expendable slave to finance their trips. The one St. Louis buyer that appears in Higginson's article is described as a kind gentleman—"the very kindest man who ever chewed tobacco in the streets of Missouri"—but Higginson shows that even a kind gentlemen cannot help but harm those being sold.

At the end of his visit Higginson asks Thompson if he would not like to try to keep slave families together. While slave traders like Thompson did, of course, heartlessly tear relations apart normally, that work was accomplished by the slaveowners who rarely sold their captives as intact families. Thompson rather matter-of-factly responds that if he spent a lot time brooding about breaking up families, he would need to get a new line of work.

Higginson wrote the following narrative as one of a series of articles on the Kansas issue for Horace Greely's *New York Tribune.* It is drawn here from a 1914 book of Higginson's personal and public writings compiled by his daughter, Mary, entitled *Thomas Wentworth Higginson: The Story of His Life.*[7]

The Secret Committee of Six, pictured here, were influential abolitionists who secretly supported John Brown in his planned attack of a federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), in December 1859. Higginson was one of the six, along with Samuel Gridley Howe, Theodore Parker, Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, Gerrit Smith, and George Luther Stearns. *(Image: Institute for Advanced Technology in Humanities, West Virginia State Archives)*



As this engraving suggests, St. Louis was a bustling city in the mid-1850s, when Higginson visited. *(Image: Missouri History Museum)*

I took an early opportunity to call on Mr. Corbin Thompson. I found him in the doorway of a little wooden office, like a livery-stable office in one of our cities; he being a large, lounging, good-natured looking man, not unlike a reputable stable-keeper in appearance and manner. Inside his stable, alas! I saw his dusky "stock," and he readily acceded to my desire to take a nearer look at them.

Behind the little office there was a little dark room, behind that a little kitchen, opening into a dirty little yard. This yard was surrounded by high brick walls, varied by other walls made of old iron plates, reaching twenty feet high. These various places were all swarming with Negroes, dirty and clean, from six years old to forty—perhaps two dozen in all, the majority being children under fourteen.

"Fat and sleek as Harry [Henry] Clay's," said my conductor, patting one on the head patriarchally.

Most of them had small paper fans, which they used violently. This little article of comfort looked very odd, amid such squalid raggedness as most of them showed. One was cooking, two or three washing, and two playing euchre with a filthy pack of cards. The sun shone down intensely hot (it was noon) in the little brick yard, and they sat, lounged, or lay about, only the children seeming lively.

I talked a little with them, and they answered, some quietly, some with that mixture of obsequiousness and impudence so common among slaves. Mr. Thompson answered all questions very readily. The 'Negroes' or "Niggers," he said (seldom employing the Virginia phrases 'servants' or "people"), came mostly from Missouri or Virginia, and were with him but a little while. "Buy when I can and sell when I can, that's my way; and never ask no questions, only in the way of trade. At this season, get a good many from travellers."

On inquiry, he explained this mystery by adding that it was not uncommon for families visiting Northern watering-places to bring with them a likely boy or girl, and sell them to pay the expenses of the jaunt! This is a feature of the patriarchal institution which I think has escaped Mrs. [Harriet Beecher] Stowe.[8] Hereafter I shall never see a Southern heiress at Newport without fancying I read on her ball-dress the names of the "likely boy or girl" who was sold for it. "As for yonder Sambo and Dinah" (I meditated), "no doubt, young Bulford Dashaway, Esq., is at this moment driving them out to Saratoga Lake, as a pair of blood-horses. Or Miss Caroline Pettitoes, of Fifth Avenue, how odd it would be if, as you sit superb by his side, those four-legged cattle suddenly resumed the squalid two-legged condition in which I now behold them, in Thompson's Negro-yard, No. 67, Locust Street."[9]

I strolled back into the front office and sat down to see if anything turned up. The thing that turned up was a rather handsome, suburban-looking two-horse carriage, out of which stepped lazily a small, spare, gentlemanly man, evidently a favored patron of my host. After a moment's private talk Thompson went out, while the gentleman said abruptly to me, "Well, it is all bad enough, housekeeping, marketing, and all, but I'm—if servants ain't the worst of all." We then talked a little, and I found him the pleasantest type of a Southerner—courteous, kind, simple, a little imperious—finally, a man of property, member of the city Government, and living a little out of town.

Thompson came in and shook his head. "Can't let Negroes to anybody, Mr.——.Glad to sell, anyhow."

"Got a good article of a small girl?" said the gentleman suddenly.

"Martha!" shouted the slave-dealer, and presently three good articles, aged eleven, nine, and seven, came trotting in. I had not seen them before. Nice little pink frocks, not very dirty—barefooted, of course, but apparently well taken care of, and evidently sisters. With some manoeuvring, they were arranged in a line before my new acquaintance, the purchaser.

He fixed his eyes on Sue, a black marble statue, aged seven. Nothing could have been kinder than Mr.——'s manner in addressing the little thing. "Will you like to come and live with me, and have some little girls to play with?"

(It is a little patriarchal, I said. That kind voice would win any child.)

I looked to see the merry African smile on the child's face. But no smile came. There was a moment's pause.

"Speak up, child," said the merchant roughly. But she did n't speak up, nor look up, either. Down went the black marble face, drooping down, down, till the chin rested on the breast of the little pink frock. Down, down came one big tear, and then another over the black marble cheeks; and then the poor little wretch turned away to the wall, and burst into as hearty an agony of tears as your little idol Susy, or yours (my good New-England mother), might give way to, at such an offer from the very kindest man who ever chewed tobacco in the streets of Missouri!

Human nature is a rather unconquerable thing, after all, is n't it?

My kind purchaser looked annoyed, and turned away. The slave-trader gave an ominous look to the poor child, such as I had not seen on his face before. "Beg pardon, sir" (said he gruffly); "they only came from Virginia yesterday, and have n't learnt how to treat gentlemen yet" (with an emphasis).

Poor little Sue!

The purchaser next turned to Martha, the elder sister, a bright Topsy-looking thing.

"What's that on her cheek," he asked, pointing to a sort of scar or streak of paleness. Martha grinned.

"Somebody's whacked her chops, most likely," said the slave-trader, coolly (in whose face I saw nothing good-natured after that). Nothing more was said about it.

The gentleman drew the child to him, felt the muscles of her arm, and questioned her a little. Her price was 700 dollars, and little Sue's 450 dollars.

"Well, Martha," said he at last, "would n't you like to go with me and have a pleasant home?"

Strange to say, the African smile left Martha's merry face, too. "Please, sir," said she, "I wish I could stay with my mother."

"Confound the girls," said the good-natured purchaser, turning to me in despair; "they must be sold to somebody, you know. Of course, I can't buy the whole of them, and the mother, too." Of course not; and there was the whole story in a nutshell.

"Nonsense, gals," said Thompson; " your mother'll be up here, maybe, some day." (Pleasant prospect, in the lottery of life, for three 'articles' under twelve years.)

On inquiry it appeared that the mother was in Virginia, and might or might not be sent to St. Louis for sale. The intention was, however, to sell the children in a day or two, together or separately, or else to send them south with Mr. Mattingly.

To avert this, I hoped earnestly that my good-natured friend would buy one or more of the poor things. "For," said he to me, "I mean to bring her up well. She'll be a pet for the children—black or white it will make no difference—and while I live I shan't sell her—that is while it is possible to help it." (A formidable reservation, considering the condition of most Southern estates.)

The little pink frocks were ordered to stand off, and a bargain was finally struck for Martha, quite to Mr. Thompson's chagrin, who evidently hoped to sell Sue, and would, no doubt, have done so, but for her ignorance "how to treat gentlemen."

"Girl is sound, I suppose?" carelessly inquired the purchaser.

"Wind and limb," responded the trader. "But strip her naked and examine every inch of her, if you wish," he quickly added; "I never have any disguises with my customers."

So ended the bargain, and I presently took my leave. I had one last glance at little Sue. It is not long since I set foot on the floating wreck of an unknown vessel at sea, and then left it drifting away in the darkness alone. But it was sadder to me to think of that little wreck of babyhood drifting off alone into the ocean of Southern crime and despair.

St. Louis must unquestionably be a very religious place, however, for in returning to my hotel I passed a church with inscriptions in four different languages. There was Jehovah in Hebrew, "Deo Uno et Trino," "In honorem S. Ludovici." Finally in English and [189] French, "My house shall be called the house of prayer," with the rest of the sentence, in both cases, omitted. Singular accident, is n't it?

I forgot to mention that I asked Mr. Thompson, out of the dozen children in his "yard," how many had their parents or mothers with them. "Not one," he answered, as if rather surprised at the question;

"I take 'em as they come, in lots. Hardly ever have a family."

"I suppose you would rather keep a family together?" I put in, suggestively.

"Yes," he answered carelessly. "Can't think much about that, though. Have to shut up shop pretty quick, if I did. Have to take 'em as they come."

This was evident enough, and I only insert it in the faint hope of enlightening the minds of those verdant innocents who still believe that the separation of families is a rare occurrence, when every New Orleans newspaper contains a dozen advertisements of "Assorted lots of young Negroes."

ENDNOTES

1 For greater biographical information on Higginson, see Tilden G. Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm: A Life of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968) and Jeffery Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators: John Brown, the Secret Six, and a Theory of Slave Violence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), especially pp. 21–22, 69–72. Both Edelstein and Rossbach skate over Higginson's short stay in St. Louis.

2 Higginson's daughter, Mary, reprinted the article in a chronological compilation of her father's personal and public writings as a documentary biography. I have taken the account from that volume as more accessible to the general reader. Mary Thacter Higginson, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson: The Story of His Life* (Boston, MA, 1914), 182–89, https://archive.org/stream/thomaswentworth00higgrich#page/213/mode/2up

3 Thomas C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 8: Harrison Anthony Trexler, *Slavery in Missouri, 1804–1865* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1914), 226; Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict In Missouri During the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3-11; Douglas R. Hurt, *Agriculture and Slavery in Missouri's Little Dixie* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 215–244.

4 John Mattingly, a notable itinerant slave trader, worked in both Missouri and Kentucky, usually setting up his "headquarters" in hotels. In the late 1850s, he formed an association with Corbin Thompson and, as implied below, took their slaves for sale down the Mississippi River.

5 Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 188–91.

6 Walter Johnson. *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 144–49.

7 I have not changed outdated spelling in the original since it is not confusing, eschewing the use of "*sic*" as overly intrusive.

8 Published in 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly,* received immediate acclaim across the North and in Great Britain. Higginson was numbered among its most ardent admirers. See Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm,* 141–42,

9 Higginson wrote this article principally for the New York readers of Horace Greely's *Tribune.* but in targeting New Yorkers with his heavy-handed satire he had a real point to make. Historian Eric Foner cites an estimate that at least 100,000 southerners visited New York each summer to conduct business and to escape the South's summer heat, often bringing their enslaved domestic servants with them. New Yorkers vigorously competed for this southern trade. See *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 45–46.