

## A NEGRO BOYCOTT TO INTEGRATE BOSTON SCHOOLS

CARLETON MABEE

ONCE a year school examiners used to visit all the Boston public schools, both white and Negro, awarding honors to those who passed their examinations most acceptably. At the Negro school on Beacon Hill in 1829 the examiners awarded honors to several of the scholars, among them a slight, serious boy, William C. Nell. Afterwards, when the mayor invited all the white honors winners from the Boston schools to a dinner at Faneuil Hall but did not invite the Negro winners, Nell felt the discrimination. Believing he had a right to be at the dinner, he was enterprising enough to do something about it. He inveigled one of his friends who was to be a waiter at the dinner to let him wait on table in his place part of the time. At the dinner, one of the school examiners recognized Nell and whispered to him, "You ought to be here with the other boys." Nell wanted to reply, if you think so, why didn't you do something about it? In fact Nell said nothing, but, as he explained long afterward, the wound of this incident developed in him the determination to help integrate Boston schools.

Nell, who became a Garrisonian abolitionist by the time he was barely out of school, by the 1840's and 1850's emerged as the major leader in the campaign to integrate Boston's schools. The campaign was led by Negro Garrisonians, especially Nell and the barber John T. Hilton, the most active Boston Negro in the Massachusetts Antislavery Society. The campaign was supported by white Garrisonians such as William Lloyd Garrison and the orator Wendell Phillips. Like the similar campaigns occurring about the same time in Salem and Nantucket, Massachusetts, and Rochester, New York, the Boston campaign used the unconventional method of the boycott.<sup>1</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> C. G. Woodson, *Education of the Negro Prior to 1861* (New York, 1915), 320-325, describes the desegregation of schools in Salem, Nantucket, and particularly Boston without mentioning the boycott as a method or Nell as a leader, giving credit to whites as leaders instead. Louis Ruchames stresses the Boston

campaign resulted in Boston becoming the first major American city in the abolitionist period to integrate its schools.

Nell was born on Beacon Hill, and he continued to live there for most of his life. Not impressive as a speaker, Nell was guarded in his manner, and he became known among abolitionists as careful on details. He considered becoming a lawyer, but Phillips dissuaded him because it would require an oath to support the slavery-protecting United States Constitution, which Nell, as a Garrisonian, was reluctant to take. However, with the help of his experience in a lawyer's office, Nell became a "business agent" who conducted correspondence, prepared deeds and mortgages, and served as an accountant and collector. He also wrote on the history of Negroes in America—he has been called the first American Negro to do so seriously.<sup>2</sup> At various times over many years, Nell also worked for Garrison, assisting in the *Liberator's* printing office, running its employment bureau for Negroes, and writing on Negro activities in Boston. Briefly Nell also assisted Frederick Douglass in Rochester on the *North Star*, occasionally writing editorials during Douglass' absence. Because of his familiarity with both Boston and Rochester, Nell was able to exchange news about their simultaneous school boycotts.

Like Nell, most Boston Negroes lived on the back slope of Beacon Hill, farthest from Boston Common, where the Negro Smith School was located. Downstairs in the Smith building was one of the city's public primary schools for Negroes. Upstairs was Smith Grammar School, for Negro children from about eight to thirteen years; as the only public Negro grammar school in Boston, it was to this school that Negro children were required to come no matter where they lived in the city.

---

campaign in his "Race and Education in Mass.," *Negro Hist. Bull.*, Dec., 1949, 53 ff.; he gives due attention to Nell, but only mentions the boycott in one oblique reference. Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery* (Chicago, 1961), devotes pages 143-150 to the Boston campaign but does not mention Nell or the boycott. As far as this author knows, the story of the Boston campaign has never before been comprehensively written.

<sup>2</sup> Vernon Loggins, *The Negro Author* (Port Washington, N. Y., 1964), 177.

Because there was no Negro high school, Smith Grammar School was also expected to serve as a high school if any Negroes were insistent enough to push their education that far. It was Smith Grammar School around which the Boston desegregation campaign swirled.

Sporadic protests against Boston school segregation had been made by Negroes and whites before, but in 1844 the campaign began in earnest. It was thirteen years since Garrison had founded the *Liberator* in Boston, plenty of time for Garrisonian intransigence to have infected Boston Negroes. It was just one year since the last Massachusetts railroads had ended segregated seating, following a Garrisonian-led ride-in, boycott, and legislative campaign.

In 1844 citizens petitioned Boston authorities to end school segregation; in 1845, 1846, and 1849 they did so again.<sup>3</sup> It was Negroes who led this petition movement, though the opposition often charged that white abolitionists were behind them. In 1844, when Negroes opposed to school segregation organized, they chose the middle-aged barber Hilton as president, and two bright young men in their twenties, *Liberator* assistant Nell and law student Robert Morris, as secretaries. The group petitioned school authorities to end segregation. At the same time it also complained against the white principal of the Smith Grammar School, Abner Forbes, charging him with punishing the children cruelly and with having such a lack of confidence in their mental ability that he was not competent to teach them. After investigation, a school committee recommended that segregation be continued; and, while exonerating Forbes from the charges against him, it recommended that since the charges had impaired his usefulness at Smith School, he be transferred. For the time being, however, Forbes remained at Smith School. Disappointed, the protesting Negroes declared that Forbes was "totally unworthy of his present re-

<sup>3</sup> Boston *Atlas*, June 28, 1844; *Report to the Primary School Com. . . on the Petition of Sundry Colored Persons* (Boston, 1846), 20; *Report of a Special Com. of the Grammar Sch. Bd. . . on the Petition of Sundry Colored Persons* (Boston, 1849), 3.

sponsible station," and that segregation was contrary to "that equality . . . which is the vital principle of the school system of Massachusetts," and that for both these reasons Negro parents should "withdraw their children from the exclusive school."<sup>4</sup> They were urging a boycott.

By this time Hilton had already withdrawn his daughter from the Smith School where she had been doing poorly, and moved her into an integrated school in nearby Cambridge where she soon carried away the honors from the white children. The next year, 1845, a minority report of a committee appointed by Boston school authorities to study segregation noted a general move by Negroes to withdraw their children from the segregated schools. A clergyman had already moved to an adjacent town so that his children could attend schools with whites, while many colored kept their children out of school solely to prevent their being degraded by segregation. One woman had already kept her children out of school for two years for this reason alone.<sup>5</sup> The boycott campaign was well under way.

In 1846, when Negroes again petitioned school authorities for desegregation, for the first time the major documents in the matter were published. The Negroes' petition was forceful: "All experience teaches that where a small and despised class are . . . confined to separate schools, few or none interest themselves about the schools—neglect ensues, abuses creep in, the standard of scholarship degenerates." They felt that separate schools were "insulting."

The majority of the five-man subcommittee assigned by the Boston Primary School Committee to study the petition replied that the petition failed to represent the opinion of most Boston Negroes. They admitted that separate schools cost the city more than desegregated schools would, but predicted

<sup>4</sup> Boston *Atlas*, June 28, 1844; clipping (Boston *Courier*, 1844?) in *Boston Public School for Colored Children*, scrapbook, Boston Public Library, 1-2; clipping, Boston *Daily Advertiser* (June, 1844?), in *Boston Public School for Colored Children*, 6-8.

<sup>5</sup> Boston *Atlas*, July 25, 1844; *Liberator*, June 27, 1845, 102-103.

that if schools *were* desegregated, colored scholars, with their irregular attendance record, would hurt the whites' record, many whites "would vex and insult the colored children," and many others would be driven from the schools. They insisted that racial distinction, created by God, "is founded deep in the physical, mental, and moral natures of the two races," and legislation could not erase it. They warned that desegregation would lead to the horror of intermarriage, and advised Negroes not to lean on whites but to "cultivate a respect for themselves."<sup>6</sup>

The minority of the subcommittee was composed of two white Garrisonians. They reported that Bostonians generally considered Negroes to be an inferior race, and the usual effect of this opinion on the school authorities, teachers, and colored children is "want of heart and faith" in their work. Boston schools have not yet produced a single Negro scholar for high school, and Boston was the only place in the state where common schools were still segregated. They recommended gradual abolition of the separate schools, at first allowing Negroes to choose, as in the recent desegregation in Nantucket, between entering the white schools or staying in the separate Negro schools.<sup>7</sup>

However, the Primary School Committee followed the advice of the majority by voting to continue to require segregation. At least the votes of the various school committees were less and less strong for segregation: in 1844 the vote of the Grammar School Committee was 24 to 2; in 1845 the vote of the Primary School Committee was 55 to 12; and in 1846 it was 59 to 16.<sup>8</sup> While the protesters still had a long way to go, they were making headway with the school committees. If the protesters persist, said the *Liberator*, "they will at last prevail."

Meanwhile Secretary Horace Mann of the Massachusetts

<sup>6</sup> *Report to the Primary School Com.*

<sup>7</sup> *Report of the Minority of the Com. of the Primary Sch. Bd. on the Caste Schools* (Boston, 1846).

<sup>8</sup> *Report to the Primary School Com.*, 20, 38; *Liberator*, June 27, 1845, 102-103.

Board of Education, reformer though he was, was doing nothing about segregation in Boston schools. In fact, Mann was making the Negroes' boycott of Smith School more difficult by attempting to find a more competent master for it.

Disturbed by Mann's course, in 1846 Wendell Phillips charged Secretary Mann with "timid silence" on Boston school segregation. Mann did not reply. The next year, when Phillips repeated the charge, Mann remained silent, and Phillips said he believed he knew why. Mann was a compromiser, trying to avoid controversy over segregation to insure that he could accomplish other objectives, said Phillips; he was sacrificing despised Negroes for the sake of obtaining well-ventilated school rooms, new books, "physiological seats," and "broad playgrounds." Still Mann remained silent.

Phillips repeated his charges in 1848,<sup>9</sup> the year Mann resigned as Secretary after twelve years of stormy but illustrious service to Massachusetts public schools, the very year in which he said, in one of his eloquent pleas for strengthening public education, that it was "the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery."<sup>10</sup>

Mann's silence on school segregation was disturbing because, though never a Garrisonian, he was mildly antislavery and anti-segregation, and from the abolitionists' point of view, he, like other silent humanitarian leaders, might have done much to desegregate schools all over the North. As early as 1833, as a member of the Massachusetts legislature, Mann had defended the right of Negroes as well as whites to attend Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe's school for the blind. In 1842 Mann had dared to appoint his friend Samuel J. May, a well-known Garrisonian, to be principal of the Lexington State Normal School. Mann had established the first state normal schools in the nation, and later had cooperated with May in opening them to a few colored students. But while Mann could be bold up to a point, he avoided offending the public on matters

<sup>9</sup> *Liberator*, Aug. 28, 1846, 137, Dec. 24, 1847, 206, Feb. 11, 1848, 22.

<sup>10</sup> (Mass.) Bd. of Educ., *Annual Report* (Boston, 1849), 59.

which he didn't consider central to his school cause; he did not wish to alienate those whose support he desperately needed to keep his public-school mission alive, as it sometimes barely managed to be. When May was planning to deliver an abolitionist speech in Boston while he was still head of the normal school, Mann wrote him worriedly: "I have further plans for obtaining more aid [for schools], but the moment it is known or supposed that the [school reform] cause is to be perverted to, or connected with, any of the exciting party questions of the day, I shall never get another cent." The generous May said later, entirely without bitterness, Mann was "at that time, so intent upon his great undertaking for the improvement of our common schools, that he thought it our duty to repress our interest in every other reform that was unpopular."<sup>11</sup>

It was only after Mann had ceased to be responsible for Massachusetts schools, and become first a Congressman and later president of Antioch College, that he allowed himself to become an outspoken opponent of slavery and segregation. So the Negro boycotters and their white Garrisonian allies continued their struggle for school desegregation without the direct help of Horace Mann and many other well-intentioned humanitarians, doubtless for similar reasons. Few whites were willing to be as uncompromising on segregation as the "fanatical" Garrisonians were.

Despite Mann's having helped to bring a competent new master to Smith Grammar School, Negro parents were making their boycott of the school increasingly effective. Average attendance dropped from more than 100 before the boycott began in 1844, to 66 in 1848, and 53 in 1849.<sup>12</sup>

The visiting examiners in the spring of 1849 reported that

<sup>11</sup> Mann to Elizabeth Peabody, Aug. 24, 1833, Mann papers, Mass. Hist. Soc.; W. Freeman Galpin, *God's Chore Boy, Samuel Joseph May* (Syracuse, 1947), unpublished Ms. at Syracuse Univ.), 151-152; *American and Foreign Antislavery Reporter*, Jan., 1845, 30; Mary P. Mann, *Life of Horace Mann* (Boston, 1865), 172; Samuel J. May, *Some Recollections* (Boston, 1869), 313.

<sup>12</sup> Boston *Atlas*, July 25, 1844; *Report of the Annual Examination of the Public Schools* (Boston, 1848), 66; (1849), 55.

the school is in a "very low condition," the best scholars are deficient in most of their studies, the tone of the school is disorderly, "and there is no one of our public institutions that more needs reform."<sup>13</sup>

Why Smith School morale was low was a question on which Boston Negroes differed. Those who wished to keep the segregated school open explained the situation by saying that only white teachers who didn't care about colored children taught at Smith School; colored children need colored teachers, the segregationists said. As a matter of fact, for several years some abolitionists had also been saying that colored teachers would stimulate colored children to do better work.

However, those who wished to close the segregated school explained its low morale differently. They said they had no complaint against the new Mann-recommended master, a white. The trouble was that the pupils felt the injustice that forced them to attend this school, and so the teachers, no matter how competent, could not teach them effectively.<sup>14</sup>

The school authorities, falling in with the wishes of their segregationist Negro allies, decided to appoint a Negro master for Smith School. The boycotting Negroes considered this was merely a sop. Insisting that the major issue was segregation, they refused to become part of the segregation system by helping to select Negro teachers. They resolved: "We will not in any way attempt to better the condition of the school by recommending any person as instructor."<sup>15</sup>

By the fall of 1849, however, a Negro had accepted an appointment as master of Smith School. He was Thomas Paul, son of an earlier pastor of the African Baptist Church on Belknap Street, on the same street as Smith School. When Garrison first published the *Liberator*, young Paul had assisted him as an apprentice; later Paul had been a student at the Garri-

<sup>13</sup> *Report of the Annual Examination of the Public Schools* (Boston, 1849), 42-43.

<sup>14</sup> *Liberator*, Oct. 5, 1849, 160, Jan. 4, 1850, 2; *Report of a Special Com.*, 4-5.

<sup>15</sup> *Report of a Special Com.*, 5; *Liberator*, Aug. 18, 1848, 130.



sonian academy at Canaan, New Hampshire, until its building had been dragged away by farmers protesting its interracial character; and still later Paul had been graduated from Dartmouth.

Paul's arrival at Smith School created a new crisis for the boycotters, and it was during this crisis that Nell began to emerge as their outstanding leader. For Smith School to have a well-educated Negro master, and from a family respected in the Negro community, was an even greater threat to the boycott than the arrival of Mann's protégé had been. The crisis came to a head the day school opened in September, 1849, Paul's first day as master.

Early in the morning of that day, before the school opened, supporters of the boycott—whether with the approval of such leaders as Hilton and Nell or not is not clear—went to the school with the hope of preventing pupils from entering. As a historian of Boston Negroes described it, they surrounded the school, and tried to use “every means, short of actual physical violence, to prevent the children from going in.” A school official explained what happened somewhat differently: “A collection of rude boys . . .—all of them persons of color—beset the doors in a disorderly manner, and sought to intimidate and keep from the school all who repaired to it as pupils. The prompt appearance, however, of a police officer . . . scattered the noisy group; and the school opened with comparative quiet. Still, it was found expedient to keep up a patrol about the place for a day or two more.” The first day only twenty-three children registered.<sup>16</sup>

On the evening of the same day, Nell and the boycotting Negroes met in the Belknap Street Baptist Church, near the school. Outside, doubtless in retaliation for the morning attempt to keep pupils out of the school, opponents threw stones at the church, breaking some of the windows. Inside, Nell spoke contemptuously of those who threw the stones; the stones

<sup>16</sup> John Daniels, *In Freedom's Birthplace* (Boston, 1914), 448; *Report of a Special Com.*, 70.

will be preserved, he said, "as trophies of the prowess of those who resort to such methods of appeal."<sup>17</sup>

Nell was concerned to avoid violence. Within a few days the boycotting Negroes met again, and, as Nell reported in the *Liberator*, officially promised to "maintain at all meetings, and in our daily intercourse with the entire public a consistent regard for law and order; . . . no matter what violations of either may be perpetrated during the controversy, others, and not ourselves, shall be responsible therefore."<sup>18</sup>

About the same time, the protesting Negroes also decided to continue their boycott—they claimed that they had kept the attendance at Smith School "very small" the previous year—and to make the boycott effective despite Paul's arrival, they planned to do something new—to open "temporary schools" of their own, so that the boycotting children would not be deprived of their education. To run these schools, Nell appealed for funds, and many of those who responded were Garrisonians, including both blacks and whites. By October the *Liberator* rejoiced that the boycotters had already created a temporary school and it was "well attended."<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile legal action to end segregation in Boston schools had reached the state Supreme Court. It was in the form of a suit by Negro parent Benjamin F. Roberts, a printer, asking the city of Boston for damages because his child Sarah had been excluded from the public school nearest her residence. The suit claimed that exclusion was contrary to the equal protection guarantees of the state constitution. Lawyers for Roberts were the aggressive black Robert Morris, who had already associated himself with Hilton and Nell in the cause, and the white Charles Sumner, the chairman of the state Free Soil Party's executive committee who was soon to be United States Senator from Massachusetts.

<sup>17</sup> *Boston Journal*, Sept. 18, 1849; *Boston Traveller*, Sept. 18, 1849; *Liberator*, Sept. 21, 1849, 151.

<sup>18</sup> *Liberator*, Oct. 5, 1849, 160.

<sup>19</sup> *Liberator*, Aug. 10, 1849, 127, Sept. 21, 1849, 151, Aug. 2, 1850, 123. Only one "temporary school" was created. *Liberator*, Oct. 12, 1849, 162.

Negroes thronged the courtroom to hear the illustrious Sumner give his argument. Even if separate schools were as good as other schools, Sumner argued, compulsory segregation should be condemned because it contributes to distrust. "Prejudice . . . is sure to prevail where people do not know each other," he explained. Moreover, school segregation deprives blacks "of those healthful, animating influences which would come from a participation in the studies of their white brethren. It adds to their discouragements. It widens their separation from the rest of the community and postpones that great day of reconciliation which is sure to come."<sup>20</sup> It was notable that Sumner's argument was to a considerable degree psychological and social, rather than strictly legal, much as the school desegregation decision of the United States Supreme Court was also to be in 1954.

While the boycotters were hoping for a court decision that would end segregation in all Massachusetts schools, they held "enthusiastic" protest meetings at the Belknap Street church. The Negro Garrisonian Charles Lenox Remond and the white Garrisonian Phillips spoke, giving their encouragement. The pastor of the antislavery and interracial Wesleyan Methodist church in Boston came regularly to the meetings, assuring the protesters that they had his church's full support, while others pointed out by contrast that none of the ten clergymen on the general Boston School Committee favored desegregation. Two Negro men told the meeting that to secure "equal school rights" for their children they had moved their families away from Boston, one to Cambridge and the other to Fall River.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, not all Boston Negroes joined in the school protest. There were Negro clergy, for example, who did not support the boycott. And one Negro speaker, the escaped slave Josiah Henson, now visiting from Canada, pointed out a mundane reason why it was difficult for colored businessmen to

<sup>20</sup> Sumner's argument is in *Liberator*, Dec. 28, 1849, 105, Jan. 11, 1850, 5, Feb. 1, 1850, 18.

<sup>21</sup> *Liberator*, Dec. 14, 1849, 200, Nov. 9, 1849, 180.

join the protest: "few colored men, in their business associations, have independence sufficient to practice" fidelity to principle, Henson said. However, Nell wrote in the *Liberator* that the protest meetings and the sacrifices blacks were making in the boycott indicated that never before had the blacks of Boston been "so united and persevering in a progressive movement."

In April, 1850, the state Supreme Court announced its decision in the Roberts case: each local school system could decide for itself whether it wished to have segregation.<sup>22</sup>

Disappointed, Nell and the "Friends of Equal School Rights," as the desegregationist Negroes called themselves, reconsidered their position. So far they had done well in involving considerable numbers of their own community in their cause; they had won the support of a growing minority in the school committees, the aid of eminent legal counsel, and of many white Garrisonian leaders. Their boycott had been impressive: the average attendance at Smith School had dropped from a normal number of over 100 before the boycott began in 1844, to 53 in 1849; and after Master Paul arrived, instead of rising, the attendance had dropped even lower by the spring of 1850, to 25.<sup>23</sup> They had met the crisis of Master Paul's arrival by bringing the boycott to its most effective point so far. But all this protest had not yet accumulated enough power in legal argument, or in appeal to conscience, or in nuisance, or in popular outcry to induce the school committees or the state Supreme Court to decide against segregation.

The protesters didn't abandon their boycott—they continued it, but less intensely than in the year of Paul's arrival. They stopped the extra drain on their time and funds from maintaining their own "temporary school," and instead encouraged the boycotting parents to send their children to existing pri-

<sup>22</sup> *Liberator*, Feb. 8, 1850, 25, Nov. 9, 1849, 180, April 26, 1850, 67, May 3, 1850, 69. The court's opinion provided the first constitutional justification for racial segregation in public schools in American jurisprudence, according to Leonard Levy and Harlan Phillips, "The Roberts Case," *Am. Hist. Rev.* (April, 1951), 517.

<sup>23</sup> *Report of the Annual Examination of the Public Schools* (Boston, 1850), 46.

vate schools.<sup>24</sup> In addition, they looked for new forms of protest to reach wider circles of people in more effective ways.

During the early 1850's, according to Nell, the protesters developed another form of school boycott, a Negro taxpayer's boycott of Boston. In the *Liberator* in 1852, Nell wrote: "Boston is fast losing many of her intelligent, worthy, aspiring citizens, who are becoming taxpayers in adjoining localities, for the sole advantage of equal school rights." Similarly, in the *Liberator* in 1854, Nell wrote: many colored have "within the past few years, removed from Boston to Cambridge, Charlestown, Roxbury, Salem, New Bedford, and elsewhere, where equal school privileges prevail, rather than submit to the fiat of colorphobia which school committees in the Athens of America yet ingloriously thrust upon colored taxpayers." In his 1855 history book, *Colored Patriots*, Nell repeated the theme, explaining that the colored people who had moved out of Boston included "many of the largest taxpayers," and that in moving they "withdrew their investments from Boston real estate."<sup>25</sup>

There was in fact a general trend of Negroes to the Boston suburbs in the period 1850-1855, part of a long-term trend of both colored and white to the suburbs. Among colored desegregation leaders who by the early 1850's had moved to the suburbs were hairdresser Hilton, who had moved to Brighton, lawyer Morris who had moved to Chelsea, and clothier Henry Weeden, who had moved to Cambridge. It is possible that Negroes' desire to avoid paying taxes to support Boston's segregated schools, whether they had children of school age or not, was at least a factor in the Negro trend to the suburbs.<sup>26</sup>

In addition, almost at once after the disappointing state Su-

<sup>24</sup> *Liberator*, Dec. 10, 1852, 199.

<sup>25</sup> *Liberator*, Dec. 10, 1852, 199, April 7, 1854, 55; Nell, *Colored Patriots* (Boston, 1855), 113.

<sup>26</sup> Of eight Negroes who are readily discernible as active in the school desegregation cause and whose residence address is available in city directories or elsewhere, three as above moved out to the suburbs, and five remained living in Boston (Jonas W. Clark, clothier, Lewis Hayden, clothier, Henry L. W. Thacker, waiter, Benj. Weeden, waiter, and Nell). Nell, who had no children, said his window looked out on Smith School. *Liberator*, Dec. 28, 1855, 206.

preme Court decision in the Roberts case, the equal school righters tried for the first time to persuade the state legislature to prohibit school segregation.

Negroes considered that they were leading this legislative drive. They wished to make it clear that they wanted desegregation themselves, and were not being pushed into wanting it by white abolitionists, as opponents often charged. Negroes announced that the school protest movement had begun with them, not with whites, and that even now "on this subject, we are unadvised."

Nevertheless they knew that they needed white help. In 1850, on behalf of the black school protesters, Nell asked the New England Antislavery Convention for its aid in the political campaign, and the convention promised it. To avoid too much identification with whites, the blacks arranged to petition the legislature separately, as blacks, leaving the whites to petition separately as well. With the *Liberator's* support, Benjamin Roberts, the black parent who had brought the case of his daughter's exclusion from a Boston school to the courts, undertook to tour Massachusetts to secure signatures.<sup>27</sup>

However, the year 1850 was not a fortunate time for a campaign for a desegregation bill. In that year Congress passed a new, harsh fugitive slave law which led many Massachusetts blacks to become chiefly concerned with protecting themselves from being seized and sent back into slavery in the South, while many Massachusetts whites were preoccupied with how to punish the renegade Daniel Webster and other Whigs for their share in enacting the harsh law. Abolitionists gave little attention to the petition for a school desegregation bill, and in May, 1851, the legislature rejected it.<sup>28</sup>

But the cruel attempts to enforce the new Fugitive Slave Law led to a gradual rise in antislavery feeling in Massachusetts, and beginning in 1853 another colored parent's com-

<sup>27</sup> *Liberator*, April 4, 1851, 55, June 7, 1850, 91, June 14, 1850, 95, June 21, 1850, 99.

<sup>28</sup> Jonas W. Clark et al., "Equal Schools for All without Regard to Color or Race," printed letter, May 21, 1851, Boston Public Library.

plaint sharpened the school segregation issue. Boston school officials had excluded from the white schools a child, Edward Pindall, who, though he appeared to be white, was of mixed white, Indian, and Negro ancestry. City officials had ordered him to attend Smith School, but his father refused to allow him to do so, and formally complained to the city. By 1854 a city committee, including the mayor and five common councilors, after studying the complaint, reported that in the rest of Massachusetts schools racial integration was working harmoniously, and that racial exclusion in Boston "is doing more injury" to our boasted common schools "than any other influence"; for the first time an official Boston committee had recommended segregation be dropped. The Boston common council at first endorsed this committee's recommendation, but later withdrew its endorsement by a vote of 21 to 14.

Even this later withdrawal vote represented a much more favorable proportion of votes for desegregation than the comparable committee votes we have noted earlier for 1844, 1845, and 1846. Nell was pleased. Boston officials were more inclined to desegregation than ever before, he said. He urged Negro parents to renew their petitioning to Boston school authorities to admit their children to the white schools.

Pindall's father, still dissatisfied, carried his complaint to the courts by suing the city. Robert Morris, the same Negro lawyer who had participated in the Roberts case, represented Pindall, but in the fall of 1854 Pindall lost his case. The disappointing Pindall decision provided the occasion for Nell to call for a new campaign of petitions to the legislature, which, fortunately, following a popular reaction against the Whig Party for its complicity in the Fugitive Slave Law, had just come under the control of the new, mildly antislavery Know-Nothing Party. The *Liberator* published a suggested form of petition several times, and Nell urged that the petitions be circulated, signed, and returned to him at the *Liberator* office.

For this final victorious round of petitions in 1854-1855, Nell was responsible for obtaining 311 names in Boston, and Lewis Hayden, the fugitive slave who ran a fashionable cloth-

ing store in Boston, obtained 87 more. In addition, friends in Nantucket and Salem, having had "successful struggles" in desegregating their schools, as Nell said, assisted the Boston boycotters by circulating petitions, the wife of Charles Lenox Remond being one of those who secured signatures in Salem. In several towns white antislavery friends were also active.

This time, while the total number of petitioners was only about 1,500, a law prohibiting all distinctions of color and religion in admitting children to Massachusetts public schools easily passed the Know-Nothing-controlled House. It passed its third reading with a shout, not more than half a dozen voices being heard in opposition. The Know-Nothing Senate quickly concurred, and the Know-Nothing governor signed the bill on April 28, 1855.<sup>29</sup>

Why Nell and his friends were more successful in persuading the legislature to accept desegregation in 1855 than they had been earlier in persuading the legislature, or the courts, or the school authorities, can at least be suggested.

First, the desegregation campaign had been persistent. It had lasted eleven years. One key part of it had been the continuous leadership by the same dedicated men, especially Hilton and Nell. Another pivotal part had been the Smith School boycott, which, though it diminished in its intensity—attendance steadily rising from the low of 25 in 1850 to 37 in 1851, 44 in 1852, 51 in 1853, and 54 in 1854<sup>30</sup>—nevertheless survived; even in 1854, the boycott kept attendance to almost half what it had been before the boycott started. By requiring personal sacrifices of participants as it often did, over a long period of time, the boycott inevitably helped to make clear to concerned observers the depth of Negro feeling on segregation, and to unite those who participated into a loyal group.

Second, the campaign was comprehensive. It drew blacks into three forms of boycott: refusing to send children to segregated schools, refusing to recommend teachers for appoint-

<sup>29</sup> *Liberator*, Feb. 9, 1855, 22, Dec. 28, 1855, 206, April 6, 1855, 54.

<sup>30</sup> *Report of the Annual Examination of the Public Schools* (Boston, 1851), 18, (1852), 39, (1853), 44, (1854), 41.



ment to such schools, and moving out of Boston to avoid paying taxes for such schools. It drew blacks and whites into two court suits and seven petition sallies. It brought them into meetings for information, encouragement, policy decisions, and entertainment; it encouraged their participation in money-raising, negotiations, hearings, publicity, and lobbying.

Third, the party which had swept into overwhelming control of the legislature in the fall of 1854, the nominally anti-immigration Know-Nothing Party, was, in Massachusetts at least, anti-aristocratic and antislavery. The *Liberator* praised the new legislature for being composed to an unusual degree of the common people—mechanics, farmers, and laborers; it was honest and progressive, the *Liberator* said; and by enacting a state personal liberty law to counteract the federal fugitive slave law, it had put resistance to the slave power first.<sup>31</sup> United States Senator Charles Sumner, and most other former Free Soil Party supporters—including many Boston Negroes such as Nell<sup>32</sup>—now cooperated with the Know-Nothing Party, though Sumner himself, like the Garrisonians, was uncomfortable with its nativist features. Because Sumner was now a Senator and friendly to the Know-Nothings, Nell believed that Sumner's earlier argument for desegregation before the state Supreme Court in the Roberts case now had a "potent" effect on the legislature.<sup>33</sup>

Fourth, if the Know-Nothings were likely to tolerate any minority group, they were more likely to tolerate the small,

<sup>31</sup> *Liberator*, June 1, 1855, 86. On the Know-Nothings and the Mass. abolitionists, see Geo. H. Haynes, "A Know-Nothing Legislature," *Am. Hist. Asso., Annual Report*, 1896, 1, 180-181; *Liberator*, Nov. 17, 1854, 182, May 4, 1855, 70, May 25, 1855, 82; *Am. Antislavery Soc., Annual Report* (New York, 1855), 67-70. This latter *Annual Report*, which gives only a few sentences to the Boston school victory (p. 75), attributes it to the political upheaval that brought the Know-Nothings to power and to a "gradual change" of public feeling.

<sup>32</sup> In 1852 both Nell and school desegregationist Wm. J. Watkins supported the Free Soil Party. *Liberator*, Dec. 10, 1852, 199. At that time, when Mann was Free Soil candidate for governor, he wrote privately that "the colored people of Boston are, at present, very well disposed toward me and our cause; but it would be in the power of the *Liberator* to turn all their saccharine into acetous." Mary P. Mann, *Life of Horace Mann*, 386.

<sup>33</sup> *Liberator*, Dec. 28, 1855, 206.

Protestant Negro minority, whose numbers were not noticeably growing in relation to native whites, rather than the rapidly growing Catholic Irish, who by this time formed the majority of Boston's population. For the mildly anti-immigration Know-Nothings, their natural enemies were the unwashed, Catholic, proslavery Irish, who in turn were the natural enemies of the Negroes who competed with them for menial jobs. A Catholic weekly, the *Boston Pilot*, said that the Know-Nothings "in their ignorance" probably intended the desegregation law "as an insult" to the large number of Catholics in the public schools.<sup>34</sup> In the debate in the legislature before the desegregation bill passed, a Boston Representative who supported the bill hinted how anti-Irish prejudice affected the issue for him when he said that Negroes living on the outskirts of Boston were forced to go a long distance to Smith School, passing other schools on the way, while white children, including the "dirtiest Irish," were allowed to step from their houses into the nearest school.

Fifth, in 1855 Massachusetts abolitionists were stronger than ever. They had just been bolstered by the popular reaction against the federal government's arrogant display of military power in Boston to insure the return to slavery of the pathetic fugitive slave, Anthony Burns.

After the school desegregation law was passed, Nell helped to prepare for the day in September, 1855, when all Boston schools would open to Negroes. Boston officials had arranged that the Negro schools would be kept open for Negroes if they wished to attend them, as Nantucket officials had also arranged at first when all its schools were opened to Negroes. But Nell and his friends wanted all the Boston Negro schools closed. They made strenuous efforts to strengthen their boycott against Smith Grammar School—in fact by June they had succeeded in reducing its attendance from 54 in the previous spring to 28; they hoped that by school opening day in September so few children would be attending any of the Negro schools that the officials would feel obliged to close them all permanently.

<sup>34</sup> *Boston Pilot*, Oct. 6, 1855.

As opening day approached, Nell hoped to arrange for the smooth entry of the Negro children into formerly all-white schools. With Negro mothers, Nell visited teachers and school committeemen. School authorities, Nell said, cooperated excellently in preparing for the transition. In a meeting with Negro parents, Nell urged them to have their children arrive on time at the new schools, be well dressed, and ready to work hard.

The day before the schools were to open, Nell saw a Negro boy walking by Smith School. Raising his hands, the boy exclaimed to his friends: "Good-bye forever, colored school! Tomorrow we are like other Boston boys!"<sup>35</sup>

On the first days of school, residents on Beacon Hill and elsewhere were at their windows watching the Negro children walk through strange streets, on their way to strange schools. At one school, reported the *Boston Transcript*, one or two white boys made sport of the new black pupils until the principal quietly asked, "Is that your politeness to strangers?" There was no serious trouble in any part of the city.<sup>36</sup> Soon the Negro desegregation leaders were satisfied that white children were accepting Negro children, and Boston school officials agreed. But the *South Boston Gazette* was contemptuous: some Boston schools now look like puddings with here and there a dark huckleberry in them, it said; and the Catholic *Boston Pilot* was doubtful that integration would succeed in the long run: mixing the children will test the capacity of the colored to learn in comparison with the whites, it reported, and the colored pupils may want to return to their separate schools.<sup>37</sup>

Of more immediate concern to Nell was how many children were still attending Negro schools. On the first day not one pupil attended Smith Grammar School; on the second day two

<sup>35</sup> *Liberator*, Aug. 17, 1855, 131, Aug. 31, 1855, 138, Dec. 28, 1855, 207.

<sup>36</sup> *Boston Transcript* in *Boston Pilot*, Oct. 6, 1855; clipping, marked Boston Mail, Sept. 5, 1855, in *Boston Public School for Colored Children*, 26.

<sup>37</sup> Geo. T. Downing et al., *Will the General Assembly Put Down Caste Schools?* (Providence, 1857), 9-11; *South Boston Gazette* in *Boston Pilot*, Sept. 15, 1855; *Boston Pilot*, Oct. 6, 1855.

appeared, and only slightly larger numbers attended the Negro primary schools. The boycott had reached its most effective point ever, and the boycotters were delighted. Within a few days the Boston School Committee, believing that the small attendance made keeping the Negro schools open inefficient, had decided to close them all, and use the space for new integrated schools.<sup>38</sup> The boycott had proved decisive in the last stage of the desegregation campaign.

In December, 1855, desegregationists held a victory celebration in honor of Nell. Hilton presided. Garrison said that Nell had been "indefatigable." Phillips said, if Nell "had not been the nucleus, there would have been no cause." Children presented Nell with flowers; an adult presented him a watch.

Nell reviewed the long campaign. When some of us became lukewarm and we were "betrayed by traitors within and beset by foes without," he said, the women kept "the flame alive." He insisted on covering "with the charity of our silence, the names of all who have opposed us." Since the opening of all schools to colored pupils, Nell said, despite predictions no star had shot madly from its sphere, and Faneuil Hall was still standing firm. Neither Nell nor any other speaker at the celebration gloried in the coercion they had helped to wield during the campaign.<sup>39</sup>

In the years that followed, the number of Negroes attending Boston schools went up markedly, suggesting the continued practicability of integration; and elsewhere in the nation abolitionists took note of the Boston victory. In Rhode Island, abolitionists who were petitioning to open all that state's schools to Negroes, quoted extensively from Nell and Boston school officials on the harmony in their interracial schools. The Colored National Convention, meeting in Philadelphia, rejoiced over the Boston victory; with a number of experienced school boycotters being present, including Nell from Boston, Frederick Douglass from Rochester, and Robert Purvis from Byberry, Pennsylvania, the convention resolved that schools,

<sup>38</sup> *Boston Bee*, Sept. 5, 1855; clipping, marked *Boston Mail*, Sept. 5, 1855, in *Boston Public School for Colored Children*, 26; *Liberator*, Sept. 14, 1855, 147.

<sup>39</sup> *Liberator*, Dec. 28, 1855, 206-207.

"when open to every class," are "the greatest leveller of all species of prejudice." In New York City, Negro pastor Charles B. Ray, speaking as president of the New York Society for the Promotion of Education Among Colored Children, said that, with the example of Boston before them, "there is no sound reason why colored children shall be excluded from any of the common schools supported by taxes levied alike on whites and blacks."<sup>40</sup> But, while a few small cities desegregated their schools during the abolitionist period, Boston was the first and only major city in the nation to do so.

The school integration campaign in Boston—and also, as far as the limited evidence available indicates, the similar campaigns in Nantucket, Salem, and Rochester—were essentially Garrisonian. The school boycott method was a Garrisonian contribution to nonviolent direct-action methods, and particularly a Negro Garrisonian contribution. As historians have little noticed, while Quaker and Tappanite<sup>41</sup> abolitionists contributed to improving Negro educational opportunity by other methods—the Quakers particularly through their creation of separate private schools for Negroes, and the Tappanites particularly through their creation of interracial private schools—the Garrisonians contributed particularly through their desegregation of public schools by means of the boycott.

Abolitionists, confident that their victories in the desegregation of schools were final, did not realize the capacity of Americans for transforming victories into defeats. In the twentieth century, when Negroes migrated in large numbers from the South into Northern cities, Northerners used widespread housing segregation to turn the abolitionists' school desegregation victories—and similar victories that followed the Civil War—into defeats. The abolitionists' hard-won school struggles had to be fought all over again. Sometimes Americans learn little from their own history.

<sup>40</sup> Downing et al., *Will the General Assembly Put Down Caste Schools?* 9-12; Colored National Convention, *Proceedings* (Salem, N. J., 1856), 28-29; *Anglo-African Magazine*, July, 1859, 223.

<sup>41</sup> Pertaining to abolitionists associated with Lewis Tappan, New York City merchant.