On the night of July 21, 1836, a crowd broke into the offices of the *St. Louis Observer*, upset the press, and threw its type into the street. This wasn’t the first time the *Observer* had been attacked for reasons historians have attributed to local reaction to the anti-slavery views of its editor, Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy. By the time of this incident, Lovejoy had already moved most of his printing operation from the slaveholding state of Missouri and across the Mississippi River to Alton, in the free state Illinois. Here, he hoped that he, his family, and his press would be safe from harm and he could circulate his opinions without worry. However, relocating the *Observer* didn’t end the ill will – or the attacks. Lovejoy’s Alton press would be destroyed three times as he stubbornly refused to stop publishing his increasingly abolitionist leaning newspaper.¹ Then, on November 7, 1837, a group of Alton men stormed a warehouse where Lovejoy and his anti-slavery associates were guarding a new press, set the building on fire, and shot and killed him two days before his thirty-fifth birthday.

With his death, Elijah Lovejoy became a martyr for abolitionism and freedom of the press -- which he remains to this day. However, I would like to argue that historians have failed to adequately consider the extent to which the enmity toward Lovejoy in St. Louis may have been as much a consequence of his views about Catholicism as it was a consequence of his views about slavery. Careful review of Lovejoy’s writings in the *Observer*, his correspondence, the correspondence of his friends, and newspaper accounts -- along with census, court, and probate records, reveal a much more complex relationship between
his antislavery and his anti-Catholic politics than has been supposed in the years before he moved to Alton.

Lovejoy began editing the Observer in 1834 after graduating from Princeton Theological Seminary, and receiving his certification as a minister. Leaders in the First Presbyterian Church in St. Louis had helped him secure a place at Princeton, a conservative Old School Presbyterian institution, and they persuaded him to return West with the guarantee of a free hand in running their new religious newspaper. Under Lovejoy’s editorship, the Observer expressed strong anti-Catholic sentiments from the start -- its front page filled with allegations about Vatican treachery, warnings of the “spread of popery,” and rants about Catholicism’s “sins recorded in scripture.” Inside, the Observer published news accounts from around the United States and the world critical of Catholicism. It carried advertisements for anti-Catholic books like the salacious gothic novel, Six Months in a Convent, and the conspiracy-laden Popery: A Fatal Enemy of Civil & Religious Liberty and Dangerous to Our Republic. No facet of the Catholic Church was safe from Lovejoy’s invective. He claimed: “the Nunnery has generally been more nor less than a seraglio for the friars of the monastery.” And he ridiculed transubstantiation as something “that no man, in his senses, ever believed fully and fairly.” On the other hand, he ran articles about slavery inside the Observer – describing that subject as “exceedingly delicate and difficult.” These articles generally favored gradual abolition and colonization, and Lovejoy would often republish items from other newspapers to which he added
comments indicating his anti-slavery sympathies.\textsuperscript{7} Certainly, his writing on slavery lacked the fiery, severe, and mean-spirited tone of his anti-Catholic work.

Nonetheless, a letter addressed to Lovejoy requesting that he “pass over in silence every thing connected with the subject of Slavery”\textsuperscript{8} ran in the \textit{Observer} on October 5, 1835 — conveniently while he was out of town attending Presbyterian synods. It was signed by nine “friends and supporters” of the \textit{Observer}—among them the men who had hired him to run it. In second letter that ran two weeks later, the proprietors reiterated their desire for Lovejoy to stop publication of anything that would “keep up the excitement on the Slavery question,” that they were “one and all opposed to the mad schemes of the Abolitionists,” and that the \textit{Observer} office had been threatened with violence if it didn’t cease its current editorial direction.\textsuperscript{9} When Lovejoy returned to St. Louis, he responded with his own letter in the \textit{Observer} addressed to “My Fellow Citizens.” Published on November 5, 1835, it denied he was an abolitionist, asserted his right to free speech, and rejected the idea that the Bible condoned slavery.\textsuperscript{10} He also identified the menace behind the efforts to silence him:

\begin{quote}
…the real origin of the cry, ‘Down with the Observer,’ is to be looked for in its opposition to Popery. The fire that is now blazing and crackling through this city, was kindled on Popish altars, and has been assiduously blown up by Jesuit breath.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

Notably, the proprietors had not mentioned the Catholic Church, they only asked Lovejoy to stop writing about slavery. But, his reaction, as it was on many occasions, was to privilege Catholicism in assigning blame for assaults against himself and the \textit{Observer}. On one occasion, when the \textit{Missouri Argus}, a
Democratic newspaper, chided the *Observer* for mixing politics and religion, Lovejoy accused its editor of “tak[ing] the Catholics into his special keeping. Why? Simply because he wants their votes.”12 In a letter to his mother, Lovejoy recounted recent threats against him, noting that, “The Papists, the Irish, and the pro-slavery Christians finding that I am not to be driven nor frightened away, are beginning to feel and act a little more reasonably. A large majority of the Protestants in the city are decidedly with me.”13

Lovejoy’s friends appeared to share his anti-Catholic convictions. Mary Sibley, who with her husband George, ran the Linden Wood Female Academy in St. Charles, was one of them.14 In a letter to the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, she wrote of her concerns about “Romish efforts and influence,” and a desire to “rescue Protestant children from Papal schools.”15 A Congregational minister in Maine wrote to Lovejoy that, “you were undoubtedly right in your conjecture, that popery was the moving cause of all the vials of wrath that have been poured out upon you. You had assaulted ‘the scarlet courtezan,’ (sic) in a way not to be pardoned.”16 Another friend, a Presbyterian minister in Chicago, noted in his journal that, “It is deplorable that St. Louis will banish from its bounds a religious Editor. But this is one of the fruits of Slavery & Popery. Where Slavery exists piety must be banished.”17

That the *Observer* was a font of anti-Catholic cant is not particularly surprising, even though the newspaper was located in a former territory that had been under the rule of two Catholic countries (Spain and France), and was
published in a city with both the Jesuit St. Louis College, and a convent. Anti-Catholicism was experiencing one of its antebellum peaks at the time Lovejoy was editing the *Observer* in the mid-1830s -- a period Jenny Franchot wrote, when “Protestants imagined that a resurgent, disturbingly immigrant Catholicism aimed for their land, their children, their very souls.” In *A Plea for the West*, published in 1835, Lyman Beecher warned that a Catholic Church marching toward spiritual and political domination “holds now in darkness and bondage nearly half the civilized world.” Lovejoy’s tirades about the threat of Catholicism to America’s freedom, spiritual self-determination, and republican values echoed those of Beecher and other Protestant nativists. Lovejoy wrote:

> Popery and Freedom, whether civil or religious, are incompatible with each other—they cannot coexist. What we warn our countrymen to be on their guard against, is, the hordes of ignorant, uneducated, vicious foreigners who are now flocking to our shores, and who, under guidance of Jesuit Priests, are calculated, fitted and intended to *subvert our liberties*.

Lovejoy’s denunciations did not go unnoticed in the *Shepherd of the Valley*, a Catholic newspaper edited by the Bishop of the Diocese of St. Louis. While the letters and notices in the *Shepherd of the Valley* complaining about Lovejoy and the *Observer* didn’t threaten violence, they did express anger and antipathy. One letter writer observed, “You stand convicted at the bar of public opinion as a libelous reviler of a large number of your fellow-citizens . . . You know not, Sir, how much you injure your cause and character by such malevolent evaporations of ill-will.” Another claimed to have pinpointed the moment Lovejoy had adopted his anti-Catholic views: “We can all remember when Mr.
Lovejoy . . . was a political writer—when he was no abettor, at least in his public character, of Presbyterianism . . . we can moreover remember the precise period at which Mr. Lovejoy became “anxious” – the epoch of his peregrination to the east, and that of his return in the character of a minister.” Indeed, Lovejoy’s work for the *St. Louis Times*, before he left for Princeton, was not distinguished by anti-Catholic or anti-slavery sympathies. Nevertheless, Lovejoy made clear that he was not against Catholics “as individuals” for whom he had “none but the kindest feelings of good will.” No, he was against “Popery, because WE BELIEVE THE CAUSE OF HUMANITY, OF FREEDOM, OF VITAL PIETY, IN A WORD, THE CAUSE OF TRUTH, DEMANDS IT.”

Just as he appeared to distinguish between Catholics as individuals and the Catholic Church, so too did Lovejoy seem to make a distinction between slaveholders and the institution of slavery. For one thing, he chose to marry into a family with pro-slavery sympathies. His wife’s uncle, Seth Millington, owned slaves during the time Lovejoy knew him, and his mother-in-law signed a bond to buy two young women in 1839. George and Mary Sibley owned slaves -- as did two men who assisted him on his escape from a mob in St. Charles on the night of October 1, 1837 (about one month before he was killed in Alton). The men -- lawyer William Campbell, and his brother-in-law, Thomas P. Copes -- were also members of the First Presbyterian Church in St. Charles where Lovejoy often preached. In fact, Lovejoy described Campbell, who intervened to protect him, as “a southerner, and a slaveholder; but he is a MAN.”
Slaveholders were also among the members of the First Presbyterian Church in St. Louis to which Lovejoy belonged. Daniel D. Page, who served as St. Louis’ mayor from 1829 to 1832, was accused of chasing one of his slaves around a yard with a whip, and tying up another and beating her almost to death. Of the nine men who requested Lovejoy stop writing about slavery, at least six owned slaves. Another, Presbyterian minister Rev. William S. Potts, didn’t own slaves, but he was probably closer to Lovejoy than any of the other men. Lovejoy credited Potts with his evangelical resurrection, for inspiring his decision to quit his job at the St. Louis Times, and for encouraging his studies at Princeton. Although not an official organ of the Presbyterian Church, it is not unreasonable to believe the Observer’s backers assumed that under Lovejoy’s guidance it would resemble conservative, anti-abolitionist Presbyterian publications like the Biblical Repertory published at Princeton, the Philadelphia Presbyterian, and the Pittsburgh Christian Herald. They probably did not envision it would approximate the pro-abolitionist New York Evangelist, whose work Lovejoy frequently reprinted in the pages of their newspaper.

The Observer’s backers eventually had enough of Lovejoy ignoring their pleas to stop writing about slavery. In late 1835 or early 1836, he took over the newspaper’s management and could thus print whatever he wanted. Then, on April 28, 1836, came the murder in St. Louis of Francis McIntosh, a free mulatto steamboat worker, who had become involved in an altercation with law enforcement. While being escorted to prison, McIntosh killed one sheriff’s deputy,
tried to escape, was caught, and jailed. A mob then forcibly removed McIntosh from prison, tied him to a tree, and burned him alive. In his instructions to the grand jury investigating McIntosh’s murder, presiding Judge Luke Lawless recommended that it not indict the mob participants. Lawless suggested that if the lynching was “the act . . . of many . . . then, I say, act not at all in the matter—the case then transcends your jurisdiction—it is beyond the reach of human law.” Lawless went on to condemn the Observer for its “religious fanaticism,” and warned that as long as it was published, “It seems to me impossible . . . there can be any safety in a slave-holding state.” Proof of the danger of publications like the Observer, Lawless said, was its “abolitionist influence upon the passions and intellect of the wretched McIntosh” – even though there is no evidence that McIntosh read or knew of the newspaper.

Lovejoy responded to Lawless’ remarks in the July 21, 1836 Observer in his usual vigorous style. He did not, however, mention McIntosh’s race or slavery. Instead, he took aim at Lawless himself, who was Irish and Catholic, and thus, in Lovejoy’s eyes, incapable of understanding America or American jurisprudence. Lovejoy wrote: “Judge Lawless is a Papist; and in his Charge we see the cloven foot of Jesuitism, peeping out from under the veil of almost every paragraph of the Charge.” The attack on the Observer’s office came on the night of the article’s publication. Although fifteen to twenty men were estimated to have taken part in the affair, only three were indicted. George Corwin, Joseph Hughes, and James Robinson. Only Corwin’s case went to trial. On
October 4, 1836, a jury found him guilty, fined him $10, sentenced him to ten minutes in jail, and ordered him to pay court costs. Joseph Hughes’ case was dismissed on November 28, 1836. And on July 11, 1837, almost one year after the attack, the prosecutor decided to drop his case against James Robinson. Judge Lawless oversaw all three cases and the lenient to non-existent punishment that was meted out. That the judge who had been the target of Lovejoy’s attacks was also on the bench when the men accused of destroying his press were in court does not necessarily mean he orchestrated the decisions as he had in the McIntosh grand jury incident. The court files for the Observer case no longer exist. But Lovejoy had no doubt why his St. Louis press had been destroyed: “I dared to comment upon the charge of Judge Lawless.” Others shared his suspicions. The Missouri Republican, which was no friend of Lovejoy’s, decried the violence and blamed the attack on reaction to Lovejoy’s comments about Lawless as well. It supported his “constitutional right . . . to review Judge LAWLESS’ charge to the Grand Jury, and to declare his own sentiments.”

That Lovejoy was not alone in identifying a cause other than pro-slavery or anti-abolitionist factions for the destruction of his press does suggest that his persistence in linking and often privileging Catholicism in assigning blame may not be so far-fetched. While his spiritual and nativistic beliefs about the Catholic Church were not unusual among his friends, or in the sphere of American popular
opinion, it was his very public maligning of it that made him a detested figure in the St. Louis Catholic community. At the same time, he published an anti-slavery newspaper while maintaining close ties with slaveholders. And, while his position on slavery would undergo a transformation from gradual emancipation to immediate abolition, his views about the Catholic Church as “venal, ignorant and debauched” did not appear to change at all.48

But Lovejoy’s intense anti-Catholicism should not be explained away, as historians like John Gills tried to do when he described it as “belonging to his youthful period and should be read as a reflection of controversies going on about him.”49 I would suggest that we can’t understand Elijah Lovejoy, the destruction of his press in St. Louis, and events leading up to his death, without exploring the relationship between his antislavery and anti-Catholic politics. We can’t also lay a blanket of blame on pro-slavery mobs, as historians have done, when we know the Catholic community in St. Louis was hostile to Lovejoy, Lovejoy himself recognized its antagonism, and evidence in the Lawless incident suggests that this may have been a contributing factor in the attack. Certainly knowing the religious affiliations of the three men indicted in the attack might help shed light on this matter, as would knowing that of others in Lovejoy’s circle.50 David Knott, for example, who was among the mob who attacked Lovejoy in St. Charles in October 1837, was not a slaveholder, but he was Catholic.51 Could Knott’s faith have been a motivation for his actions as much or more so than any of his beliefs about slavery?
It is questions like these that need to be asked. Lovejoy’s defense of abolition and freedom of the press are significant, but I believe they do not represent the entire story. I would argue that his life and death are invested with historical significance beyond abolitionism and freedom of the press. Let us not pull back from considering the mutually reinforcing dynamics of Catholicism and slavery in his writing, nor ignore how these may have shaped community opinion about him. Such considerations, I believe, will help rescue Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy from his martyrdom and contribute to a more clear understanding of his work as an anti-slavery newspaper editor, deeper insights into the abolitionist movement, and a better grasp of the historical landscape of St. Louis in the 1830s.


3 *St. Louis Observer*, September 3, 1835.

4 *St. Louis Observer*, October 1, 1835.


7 In April 1835, Lovejoy wrote “We only propose, that measures shall now be taken for the ABOLITION OF SLAVERY, at such distant period of time as may be tough expedient, and eventually for ridding the country altogether of a coloured (sic) population.” See, *St. Louis Observer*, April 16, 1835. (emphasis in original) Lovejoy responded to an article in the Macon, Georgia, *Messenger* by noting, “Either we ourselves must become slaves, or we must cease to call the prohibition of slavery, ‘objectionable.’” See, *St. Louis Observer*, September 24, 1835.

8 “To the Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy, Editor of the Observer,” *St. Louis Observer*, October 5, 1835. Lovejoy was absent from St. Louis for a number of weeks in October 1835 attending Presbyterian synod meetings in Union and Marion, Mo. See,

9 “To the Public,” *St. Louis Observer*, October 22, 1835. Another item apologized for having to include articles about slavery in that edition, explaining that Lovejoy had already prepared them before he left St. Louis for a trip and it would have been a “great inconvenience” to omit them. See, *St. Louis Observer*, October 8, 1835.

10 *St. Louis Observer*, November 5, 1835.

11 Ibid.

12 *St. Louis Observer*, August 27, 1835.


14 Letter from Archibald Gamble to Mary E. Sibley, February 28, 1844, Lindenwood Collection, Missouri History Museum Archives, St. Louis. Linden Wood Female Academy is now Lindenwood University.

15 Sarah Tuttle was a member of the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society. See, letter from Sarah Tuttle to Mary E. Sibley, June 25, 1847, Lindenwood Collection, Missouri History Museum Archives, St. Louis.

16 Eliphalet Gillet to Elijah Lovejoy, January 27, 1836, box 2, folder, 7, Elijah P. Lovejoy Papers, The Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas. For more about Gillet, see, Joseph Williamson, *A Bibliography of the State of Maine from the Earliest Period to 1891*, vol. 1 (Portland, ME: The Thurston Print, 1896), 482.


18 Frederick Hodes has noted that anti-Catholic sentiment in St. Louis differed little from that exhibited in the rest of the country at that time. See, Frederick A. Hodes, *Rising on the River: St. Louis 1822 to 1850, Explosive Growth from Town to City* (Tooele, Utah: Patrice Press, 2009), 244.


21 *St. Louis Observer*, August 27, 1835.

22 Rosati was not a Jesuit, but a member of the Vincentian order.

23 *Shepherd of the Valley*, February 28, 1834.

24 *Shepherd of the Valley*, February 14, 1834. (emphasis in original)

25 For example, the *St. Louis Times* ran slave sale advertisements when Lovejoy was one of its publishers, which suggests he had at least an ambivalent attitude toward slavery at the time. The probate files of James Lakenen contain a affidavit signed by Lovejoy confirming that an ad for the sale of nine slaves ran four times in December 1831. See, James Lakenen Probate Records, case no. 00693, St. Louis County, Missouri State Archives, St. Louis.
Seth Millington owned seven slaves at the time of his death in 1834. See, Seth Millington Probate Records, box 100, folder 2358, Saint Charles County Historical Society, St. Charles, Mo. The Millington family operated a castor oil factory, as well as a number of other successful business ventures in St. Charles. Seth and his brother, Jeremiah Millington, purportedly supplied the Lewis and Clark expedition with medicinal castor oil in 1804. See, Charles G. Clarke, *The Men of the Lewis and Clark Expedition: A Biographical Roster of the Fifty-One Members and a Composite Diary of Their Activities from All Known Sources* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 33.

Sally French failed to pay a $884 bond for the slaves and the estate’s administrator, Jeremiah Millington, filed suit against her for non-payment. St. Charles Circuit Court Case Files – Civil, box 16, folder 68, Saint Charles County Historical Society, St. Charles, Mo.


1840 United States Census, Saint Charles County, St. Charles, Mo.; p. 47, roll 230. Not only did Copes assist Lovejoy in spite of their opposing views about slavery, but also despite a suit Copes had brought against Lovejoy’s father-in-law, Thomas French, in 1822 for not handing over funds Copes had been awarded in a court case overseen by French, who was a justice of the peace. St. Charles Circuit Court Civil Files, July 1822, box 31, folder 43, Saint Charles Historical Society, St. Charles, Mo.


Potts had studied at Princeton Theological Seminary, and sending Lovejoy to what Randall Herbert Balmer and John R. Fitzmier called the “the most prominent Presbyterian institution in the nation,” suggests Lovejoy’s associates had great confidence in his promise as a minister and defender of Old School Presbyterianism that was conservative in liturgical and racial matters. See, Randall Herbert Balmer and John R. Fitzmier, *The Presbyterians* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 52. For Lovejoy on Potts see, Lovejoy and Lovejoy, *Memoir*, 43.


Lovejoy had legal control of the newspaper, its office, and resources, but he was prepared to walk away from the enterprise because he “felt it my duty not to keep them contrary to their [the owners’] wishes.” The newspaper’s backers handed
the property over to a Mr. Moore, who held the mortgage on the Observer, and requested that he sell the entire property at auction, which he refused to do. Instead, Moore handed possession of the Observer to Lovejoy with the proviso that he immediately relocate it to Alton. However, Moore changed his mind, and asked Lovejoy to continue to publish the Observer in St. Louis. See, letter from Elijah Lovejoy to My Dear Brother, January 1836, in Lovejoy and Lovejoy, Memoir, 160-165.

37 Missouri Republican, May 26, 1836.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 St. Louis Observer, July 21, 1836.
41 Missouri Republican, July 23, 1836.
42 Hughes was also spelled “Hews.” See, St. Louis Circuit Court Criminal Record Book 1, vol. 1, March 28, 1831-July 14, 1838. Missouri State Archives, St. Louis, 344.
43 St. Louis Circuit Court Criminal Record Book 1, 353.
44 Ibid., 365, 411.
46 Missouri Republican, July 23, 1836.
47 Ibid. (emphasis in original)
48 St. Louis Observer, March 27 1834.
50 George Corwin is identified in an 1836-37 St. Louis business directory as an upholsterer. See Charles Keemle, The St. Louis Directory for the Years 1836-7 Containing the Names of the Inhabitants, Their Occupations, and the Numbers of Their Places of Business and Dwellings (St. Louis: Charles Keemle, 1836), 4. In 1837, Corwin was also charged in circuit court with “retailing spirituous liquors without a license” and operating a grocery store without a license. See St. Louis Circuit Court Criminal Record Book 1, 406, 390, Missouri State Archives, St. Louis. Corwin would join a Whig vigilance committee in St. Louis in 1838. See, J. Thomas Scharf, History of Saint Louis City and County: From the Earliest Periods to the Present Day: Including Biographical Sketches of Representative Men. 2 vols. Philadelphia: L. H. Everts, 1883), 665. James Robinson is described as being an upholsterer in 1839, and as a founding member of a Merchants Exchange in the city. See Richard Edwards and M. Hopewell, Edwards’s Great West and Her Commercial Metropolis, Embracing a General View of the West, and a Complete History of St. Louis, from the Landing of Ligueste, in 1764, to the Present Time; with Portraits and Biographies of Some of the Old Settlers, and Many of the Most Prominent Business Men (St. Louis: Edward’s Monthly, 1860), 365. The Joseph Hughes who is included in the indictment has not yet been identified in the historical record.

51 David Knott’s probate records do not mention slaves, but they do include bills for his daughters’ tuition at the Convent of the Sacred Heart. See, David Knott Probate Record file no. 2515, Missouri State Archives, St. Louis. Further strengthening the claim that Knott was Catholic is that his father-in-law, Louis