

Elijah Parish Lovejoy, 1802-1837

"A Martyr on the Altar of American Liberty," As reported in the Alton Observer - November 7, 1837

Night had come to the town of Alton, Illinois and a crowd began to gather in the darkness.

Some of the men stooped to gather stones. Others fingered the triggers of the guns they carried as they made their way to a warehouse on the banks of the Mississippi River.

As they approached, they eyed the windows of the three-story building, searching for some sign of movement from inside.

Suddenly, William S. Gilman, one of the owners of the building, appeared in an upper window. "What do you want here?" he asked the crowd.

"The press!" came the shouted reply.

Inside the warehouse was Elijah Parish Lovejoy, a Presbyterian minister and editor of the Alton Observer. He and 20 of his supporters were standing guard over a newly arrived printing press from the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society.

This was the fourth press that Lovejoy had received for his paper. Three others already had been destroyed by people who opposed the antislavery views he expressed in the Observer.

But Lovejoy would not give up.

This time, in an attempt to hide the arrival of the new press, secret arrangements were made. A steamboat delivered the press at 3 o'clock in the

morning on November 7, 1837, and some of Lovejoy's friends were there to meet it.

Moving quickly, they carried the press to the third floor of Gilman's warehouse, but not before they were spotted by members of the mob.

Word of the arrival of the press spread throughout the town all that day. As nightfall approached, mob leaders were joined by men from the taverns, and now the crowd stood below, demanding this fourth press.

Gilman called out: "We have no ill feelings toward, any of you and should much regret to do any injury; but we are authorized by the Mayor to defend our property and shall do so with our lives." The mob began to throw stones, breaking out all the windows in the warehouse.

Shots were fired by members of the mob, and rifle balls whizzed through the windows of the warehouse, narrowly missing the defenders inside. Lovejoy and his men, returned the fire. Several people in the crowd were hit, and one was killed.

"Burn them out!", someone shouted.

Leaders of the mob called for a ladder, which was put up on the side of the building. A boy with a torch was sent up to set fire to the wooden roof. Lovejoy and one of his supporters, Royal Weller, volunteered to stop the boy. The two men crept outside,

hiding in the shadows of the building. Surprising the mob, they rushed to the ladder, pushed it over and quickly retreated inside.

Once again a ladder was put in place. As Lovejoy and Weller made another brave attempt to overturn the ladder, they were spotted. Lovejoy was shot five times, and Weller was also wounded. Lovejoy staggered inside the warehouse, making his way to the second floor before he finally fell.

"My God. I am shot," he cried. He died almost immediately.

By this time the warehouse roof had begun to burn. The men remaining inside knew they had no choice but to surrender the press.

The mob rushed into the vacant building.

The press Lovejoy died defending was carried to a window and thrown out onto the river bank. It was broken into pieces that were scattered in the Mississippi River.

Fearing more violence, Lovejoy's friends, did not remove his body from the building until the next morning.

Members of the crowd from the night before, feeling no shame at what they had done, laughed and jeered as the funeral wagon moved slowly down the street toward Lovejoy's home. Lovejoy was buried on November 9, 1837, his 35th birthday.

Elijah Parish Lovejoy was born in Albion, Maine, November 9, 1802. He graduated from Waterville College (now Colby College) in 1826 and came to St. Louis as a school teacher. In 1831 he joined the First Presbyterian Church, decided to become a minister, and returned to the East to study at Princeton Theological Seminary. He was licensed to preach in April, 1833, by the Second Presbytery of Philadelphia. He was ordained by the Presbytery of St. Louis in 1834 and was elected its Moderator in 1835. In St. Louis he was pastor of the Des Peres Presbyterian Church (the "Old Meeting House"). He published a religious newspaper, The St. Louis Observer, and began to advocate the abolition of slavery. Despite the bitter feeling against him, Lovejoy persisted in arguing the fights of freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and freedom from slavery. After seeing a slave, Francis J. McIntosh, burned at the stake, his editorials became so strident against slavery that he became an object of hatred by both Southerners and slave holders. His press was wrecked by a mob in July, 1836, and he moved to Alton in the free State of Illinois. In Alton, Lovejoy became the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery in 1837 and the first pastor of the present College Avenue Presbyterian Church. He actively supported the organization of the Ant-slavery Society of Illinois, which enraged the Alton citizens. He continued writing and publishing the Alton Observer even after three presses had been destroyed and thrown into the Mississippi River.