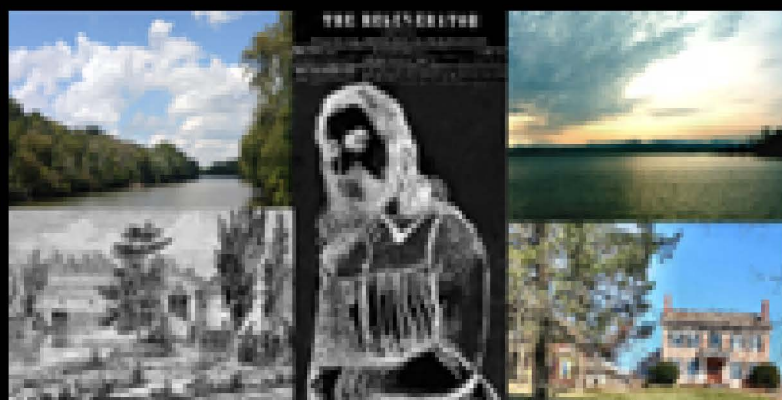


A Higher Law

The Life of Orson S. Murray



Tom Calarco



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This book is dedicated to Marcia Murray Holstrom, whose dedication to see a book about her ancestor Orson finally was realized.

Thanks are expressed to Brandon historian and history professor Kevin Thornton for help with information about Murray's life in Vermont, and to historians Karen Dinsmore and John Zimkus for help with information about Ohio.

Thanks go to my co-author of *Secret Lives of the Underground Railroad in New York City* and long-time colleague in researching the Underground Railroad, Don Papson and wife Vivian, who read through the manuscript and immensely improved its clarity.

The author made occasional revisions to quoted text—not affecting meaning or content—to facilitate clarity. Endnotes are appended after the Index and genealogical information.

Author Bio

Tom Calarco is the author / editor of eight books about the Underground Railroad (UGRR). They include *The Underground Railroad and the Adirondack Region*—for which he won the year 2008 Underground Railroad Free Press award for “Advancement of knowledge in UGRR studies—and *Secret Lives of the Underground Railroad in New York City*, which he co-authored with Don Papson, published in 2015. He has written for many publications during the last 30 years, including more than a decade as a stringer for antiques publications and as a classical music reviewer. For seven years he wrote the column, “Profiles in Perseverance,” which highlighted the achievements of lawyers who overcame great personal obstacles, for the magazine, *Diversity and the Bar*.

Publisher Tribute

After many years of genealogical research and teaching genealogy classes I realized that writing a book about one of my significant ancestors was an important part of this family history process. Tom Calarco has published multiple books about *The Underground Railroad* and my third great grandfather was a key player in that effort. Fortunately, Tom agreed to tackle the project and working with Tom has been a fascinating process ending in an incredible comprehensive story about Orson Smith Murray. Thank you, Tom, for your professionalism in this process and for using your proven writing talent to bring Orson's story to all of his descendants and to those studying how we overcame a tragic part of our history by eliminating slavery in the United States. Marcia Murray Holstrom

Preface

Orson Murray was a complicated person, a rugged, virile man whose wild appearance made some apprehensive. But there was nothing to fear from this deeply intellectual individual whose golden rule was non-violence and turning the other cheek. Though he also could be rude and arrogant, it was always in the service of what he thought was right and beneficial to others. It is hoped that this work will lead others to explore his life and perhaps create their own interpretations.

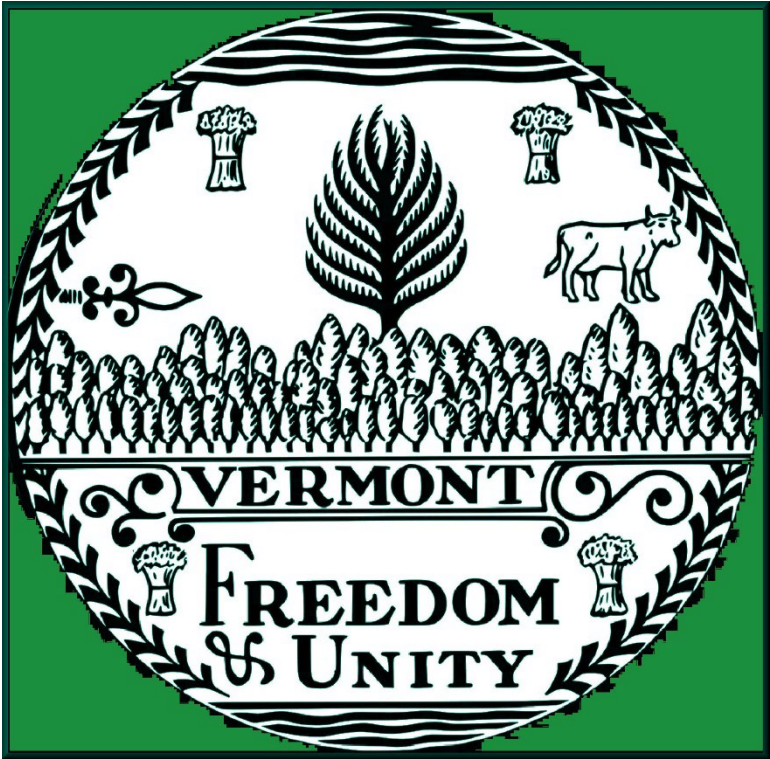
Tom Calarco, Lebanon, Ohio, June 22, 2023

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Chapter 1

Beginnings



Looking across Lake Champlain from Vermont at McNeil's Ferry

There must've been a comet hailing the birth of Orson Smith Murray on the night of September 23, 1806 in Orwell, Vermont. His father, Jonathan Murray, had recently moved there from Guilford, Connecticut with two uncles. His mother, Roselinda Bascom, had come during childhood with her family from Newport, New Hampshire. Her grandson Charles described her as “a woman of high intelligence, [who] possessed unusual powers of memory.”¹

Orwell was a farming village near Lake Champlain, a little south across the lake from Fort Ticonderoga, a picturesque place surrounded by small furry green mountains; “where earth and air and water give unmeasured recompense; where one feels not the feather-

weight of care, but luxuriates in the calm, rich gladness that stirs the boughs of the goodly trees, [that] sings in the low murmurs of the lake waves,” as one contemporary described it.²

His parents were devout, orthodox New England Baptists. Of Scottish descent, Orson had extended family on both sides. His uncle, Eber, was the pioneer resident of Orwell when he came to the Vermont wilderness in 1783 and along with Ephraim and William Fisher founded the First Baptist Church in 1787.³ Other Murrays followed him. By 1810, there were 16 Murray families in Vermont with nearly 100 total members.⁴

They were pioneers, young families with children. It was a time of great activity, of clearing land, erecting grist mills, sawmills, tanneries, of building roads, and having eleven children— Orson, the oldest. Nearly 70 percent of Vermont was under 26 in 1810, and more than 60 percent of those under 10.⁵

Mining ore, and products made from it, was a major industry.⁶ The first blast furnace was constructed in Orwell in 1787 and twenty years later an “inexhaustible” source of iron ore was discovered in nearby Brandon.⁷ Prior to the Civil War, there were an estimated 288 blast furnaces, forges, foundries, and kilns, making charcoal, iron, and other metal tools and products like tea kettles, pots, frying pans, bread pans, griddles, and stoves, the majority of them in the south-central region of Vermont where Murray grew up.⁸

Orwell was a prosperous location for farming. It was said at that time there were no poor people living there.⁹ Its main crops were wheat, corn, potatoes, maple syrup, and wool.¹⁰ As a youth, Orson was noted for his ability with an ax in chopping down trees. His son Charles wrote of him that “in later life he found pleasure, relief from mental fatigue, and recreation in swinging his axe. He was a rare artist in use of the axe.”¹¹

Descriptions of him said he was lean and muscular,¹² probably owing to years of physical labor up through his twenties working in the fields. While farm chores were likely a constant in his youth, he

showed a great aptitude for “book learning.” Silas Wright, the future governor of New York, then a young teacher living nearby, tutored him when he was seven and encouraged him.¹³

Perhaps it was the combination of his inborn intellectual energy and the spiritual Awakening¹ of his age, which gave birth to the reformer in him. Religious revivals were common in Vermont at this time and would be throughout his years living there. One accounting of revivals in the state from the years of 1815-1818 enumerated 45.¹⁴

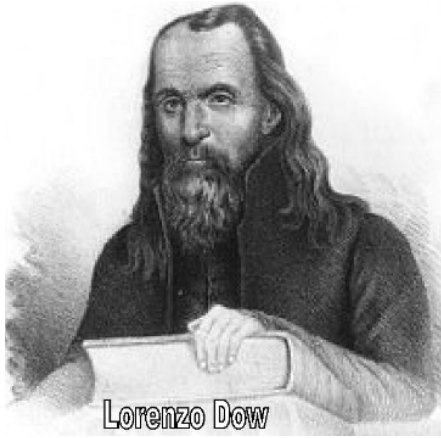


Romanticized view of 19th century revival

We can only surmise how the fervor influenced him or such noted spiritual leaders like Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism, born the year before Murray in Vermont, and William Miller who lived along the Vermont border and predicted the Second Coming of Christ would occur in 1843.

The Awakening was a passionate entreaty to make everything right with God, promising salvation to all who followed the son of God, Jesus Christ. As one of the great evangelists of the era, Charles Finney, proclaimed:

¹ There were two Great Awakenings of religious fervor in the U.S. The first led by Massachusetts preacher Jonathan Edwards occurred from 1730-1770; the second which was characterized by the camp meetings occurred from 1800-1830. Its leader was Lorenzo Dow.



Lorenzo Dow

Now the great business of the Church is to reform the world, to put away every kind of sin. The Church of Christ was . . . designed . . . to lift up her voice and put forth her energies against iniquity in high and low places—to reform individuals, communities.

and governments, and never rest until . . . until every form of iniquity be driven from the earth¹⁵

Hundreds of circuit riders often on horseback scoured the nation's virgin countryside bringing the gospel to the formerly lost souls, and numerous religious tracts and periodicals soon were bringing God's word into the farthest reaches of the frontier, promising salvation to those who renounced sin and did good deeds. It proclaimed that they needed to get ready for the imminent Millennium, the second coming of Christ and that all would be judged, the wicked facing eternal damnation. This revival experience touched almost every rural hamlet springing up in America, and by the 1830's, almost every American village had a Sunday school and a chapter of a religious society. It created a great network of Christianity, whose goal was the annihilation of sin.¹⁶ It spawned a moral revolution that would leave its mark for more than a century, inspiring the great reform movements of temperance, abolition, and women's rights and reformers.

Perhaps the greatest of all circuit riders, who made annual lecture tours in Vermont during Orson's formative period, was the legendary Lorenzo Dow.

"In his lifetime [Dow] traveled not less than two hundred thousand miles, preaching to more people than any other man . . .

He went from New England to the extremities of the Union in the West repeatedly. Several times . . . to Canada, once to the West Indies . . . three times to England, everywhere drawing great crowds about him. Friend of the oppressed, he knew no path but that of duty Conversant with the Scriptures, intolerant of wrong, witty and brilliant, he assembled his hearers by the thousands.”¹⁷

They often referred to him as Crazy Dow, but he was just all afire with awakening, at least that’s how some described him, this man with shoulder-length hair and a flowing beard. What else would possess someone to travel constantly and spread the word about repentance in order to save souls? It wasn’t money or pleasure that he sought, but probably it was fame, notoriety, the attention, like celebrities of our time.¹⁸

He was an inveterate promoter, continually advertising his sermons, pamphlets, and books in the newspapers of the day. “His dress is mean, his voice harsh, gesticulation and delivery ungraceful to the extreme,” one contemporary description said, “and his whole appearance and manners calculated to excite the curiosity and wonder of his believers.”¹⁹

Many stories were told about him. One often told was about the man who came before his lecture and asked if he could help in finding the man who stole his ax. Dow assured him he would and told the man to come that evening. Dow brought a large stone and put it on his pulpit. He said he had heard that someone had stolen one of their neighbor’s axes. He told the audience that he knew who it was and that the man had better duck because – he paused and picked up the stone – because I’m going to hit him in the head with this stone. Dow made a motion as though to throw it and the man who stole the ax ducked.²⁰

He was kind to his friends but harsh to those who opposed him much like the man Murray would become.

On May 13, 1820, a chunk of earth the size of five football fields near the Murray farm broke off and sunk into Lake Champlain.²¹ Perhaps locals might've attributed some spiritual significance to it. Perhaps it influenced Orson who shortly after was baptized into the Freewill Baptist Church and developed aspirations for the ministry, and took up his first cause, Temperance, at the age of 17.²²

Murray would remain temperate throughout his life not only in drink but in diet and while not a teetotaling vegetarian, close to it, subscribing to the diet principles of Sylvester Graham that “bad eating is as great an evil as bad drinking.”²³

He married his first wife, Catherine Higgins in 1827, putting his vocation on hold. During these years, he also attended Shoreham Academy and Castleton Seminary. Formal schooling had not been provided to him as a boy.²⁴ He and Catherine also welcomed two boys into their household: Carlos in 1828 and Marsena in 1829.

Licensed as a Baptist minister about 1830 (listed as living in Shoreham during the 1830 census), he only occasionally tended to his ministerial duties and instead expressed his views through contributions to the various periodicals of the time, his first published article in 1831 discussing Temperance.²⁵

rooms, and these places that were once devoted to intemperance and revelry are now devoted to prayer and praise. There is nothing like extravagant excitement, but an almost universal solemnity on the minds of all the people. One of the principal booksellers informed me that he had sold more Bibles in one month, since Mr. Miller came here, than he had in any four months previous.³³⁷

Miller's years of reaching out to the public with lectures and publications was coming to fruition. Despite being often ridiculed, other preachers became attracted to his ideas and wondered if Christ might be coming. If so, people needed to prepare for the day of judgment when the world would be consumed in fire, their fears allayed by the belief that those who were righteous would soon know eternal happiness.

Many of these converts to Millerism were abolitionists and temperance advocates like Himes. Their preaching acted like a synergistic effect that mushroomed the movement. They included Joseph Bates, a Congregational minister and abolitionist, who shifted his focus to Millerism and in 1842, took a hazardous journey to Maryland to preach the Second Coming; Rev. Charles Fitch, another abolitionist and pastor of the First Free Congregational Church in Boston, who began corresponding with Miller in 1838; Josiah Litch, a Boston minister, who began preaching about Miller's theory after hearing him lecture in Lowell; Congregational minister, Henry Jones, a Temperance agent interested in biblical prophecy; and the charismatic preacher, Elder Jacob Knapp.