Awaiting Atheism:

The Legacy of Religious Freethought and Its Final Martyr, Abner Kneeland

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Introduction and Research Objective

In 1834, four years before Abner Kneeland stood trial for blasphemy, an anonymous author asked, "Is it consistent with common sense, or the principles of our republican constitution, to repress the expressions of opinions however false or absurd those opinions may be, or to shackle the liberty of discussion, however that liberty may be perverted to the support of false doctrines?"[1] This question, itself, was revolutionary. Despite the Constitution's ban on the officialization or prohibition of any religion,[2] the legacy of the United States' founding by Puritan colonists seeped through early American institutions. The population largely consisted of church members, for whom Kneeland's speech against Christianity symbolized a direct attack on the ideals of the young nation. The author's booklet—*An Appeal to common sense and The Constitution, in behalf of the unlimited freedom or public discussion: occasioned by the late trial of Rev. Abner Kneeland, for blasphemy* (henceforth referred to in shorthand as *An Appeal*)—harshly condemns Kneeland and his cadre of "free inquirers."[3] It also speaks against the "blasphemous" and "obscene" descriptions of Jesus and God in *The Boston Investigator*,[4] the periodical edited by Kneeland that served as a lynchpin of the freethinking movement. The author eventually changes their tone toward Kneeland, turning their emotional diatribe into an objective legal analysis. They write that it is just for Kneeland to be prosecuted for violating the law with obscenity, but that his opinions on matters of faith must be protected. Kneeland was a leader of the freethinkers, who rejected Christian hegemony and embraced new religious ideologies. Some freethinkers refused the existence of God altogether, while others were deists who believed that prayer was a futile attempt to intervene in a preordained divine plan or

[1] *An Appeal to common sense and The Constitution, in behalf of the unlimited freedom or public discussion: occasioned by the late trial of Rev. Abner Kneeland, for blasphemy* (Boston, 1834), 5.
[2] U.S. Const. amend. 1.
[3] *An Appeal*, 3.
[4] *An Appeal*, 4-5.

pantheists—like Kneeland—who equated God with nature. This project will explore how Kneeland, once ordained as a Universalist minister,[5] took on a leadership role in the movement of religious freethought. It will look into periodicals such as Kneeland's *Boston Investigator* and Robert Dale Owen's *Free Enquirer*, the rise of dissenting religious factions, and the trials against Kneeland that challenged social and religious norms of the day. Together, this research will be able to examine how a small and vocal community espoused religious heterodoxy, encroaching on the legitimacy of mainstream Christian leaders and giving rise to modern-day atheism.

The objective of this project is to learn how Abner Kneeland became a leader and used his freethought philosophy to disrupt Christian standards. More generally, it seeks to know how freethought was perceived by its proponents and its opponents in the 1800s. Even as non-Christian thought has grown rapidly since Kneeland's time, many elements of American society are still in effectively controlled by its Christian majority. By utilizing primary and secondary sources to explore how atheism functions today, this project will add to existing scholarship around religious dissent and the radical movement that Kneeland spurred. The scope of this project explores the role Kneeland and his freethinking followers played in society, how Christian leadership responded, and the relationship between religious freethought and modern secularism.

Historiography

Scholarship on freethought pans its focus beyond Kneeland, himself. A self-proclaimed freethinker, Kneeland did not abandon religion and spirituality. Quite the contrary, he believed in the omnipresence of God in people, nature, and the universe. He held a "creed as spiritual and

[5] Edward Turner, "THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCHES AND SOCIETIES, AS PRESENTED TO THE REV. ABNER KNEELAND, AT HIS REINSTALLATION IN AND OVER THE FIRST UNIVERSAL SOCIETY IN CHARLES-TOWN, MASS. SEPT. 5, 1811," *Gospel Visitant* (Charlestown, MA), Dec. 1, 1811.

benevolent as that of the Transcendentalists,"[6] acknowledging that he felt his duty was to do as much good as possible on earth rather than to blindly preach gospel. The diverse community of freethinkers stirred up high emotions in the United States that sparked Kneeland's leadership, outspokenness, and eventual conviction on behalf of their movement. A recurring theme in scholarship is that secularism was frowned upon around the world, which provides context for the extreme controversy it gave rise to in the United States after colonization.[7] Most sources concur that the tension among total nonbelievers, deists, pantheists, and religious zealots created an interplay that contributed to modern-day atheism.

Literature exploring the role of irreligion in early America is "still in its embryonic stage," ever-expanding to contradict the popular misconception that America evolved from being a purely religious nation to a purely secular one over time.[8] Scholars prove that such progress did not occur in a linear fashion merely supplanting Puritan beliefs for non-religious, pragmatic attitudes. Rather, they claim that America's religiosity fluctuated over time. The first Puritans to arrive in the Americas "established rigidly theocratic societies."[9] However, Puritan aspirations were unsustainable, as "the American colonies grew dramatically in population, ethnic and religious diversity, economic production, and cultural sophistication."[10] By the time of the American Revolution, religious affiliations had dropped significantly,[11] presumably due to an inability to believe in a higher power as citizens witnessed the seemingly endless bloodshed and devastation around them. Still, "religion, both during the Revolution and afterward, provided

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[6] Leonard W. Levy, "Satan's Last Apostle in Massachusetts," *American Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1953): 23.
[7] David Manning, Review of *BLASPHEMY IN THE CHRISTIAN IDIOM, c. 1500 — c. 2000*, by David Nash, Michael F. Graham, Francisca Loetz, Rosemary Selle, and Javier Villa-Flores, *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 3 (2012): 888.
[8] James Rogers, "Preaching Unbelief: Freethought in Boston, 1825-1850," Master's thesis, (University of New Hampshire, 2013), 5-6.
[9] Geoffrey Stone, "The World of the Framers: A Christian Nation?," *UCLA Law Review* 56, no. 1 (2008): 3.
[10] Stone, "The World of the Framers: A Christian Nation?," 3.
[11] Stone, 4.

essential moral and political principles to the revolutionaries and forged the new American nation."[12] Many, on the other hand, believed that it was necessary for there to be an enlightenment period; "a commitment to human reason" in America and around the world.[13] Christopher Grasso surveys the emergent belief that "advancing human happiness depended not on interpreting sacred texts but on the work of physical and moral sciences."[14] In turn, deism came into its own by sustaining a belief in God without prayer or attempts for mortals to influence the divine.[15]

Reactions to the freethinkers varied drastically by the social standing of commentators. Lawyer, journalist, and politician Richard Hildreth, for example, was protected by his status as he challenged Unitarian and Transcendentalist ideals.[16] Leigh Eric Schmidt notes that less elite, small-town Americans were more likely to be "punished for a violation of public decency"[17] if they spoke their secular beliefs. Challenging this status quo, *An Appeal* argued that people should be charged only with legitimate crimes and not for ulterior motives put forth by religious devotees.[18]

The freethinking movement—"radical" as it was for its time—gained significant traction and fostered a society that accepted, and continues to accept, atheism as the norm. It foreshadowed many of today's conflicts between religious and secular communities, proving that they have been long-standing for centuries. This project fits into the existing literature by finding how the freethinking community and its leadership grew throughout time. It contributes to

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[12] Christopher Grasso, "The Religious and the Secular in the Early American Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 36, no. 2 (2016): 369.
[13] Stone, "The World of the Framers: A Christian Nation?," 25.
[14] Grasso, "The Religious and the Secular in the Early American Republic," 361.
[15] Kirsten Fischer, *American Freethinker: Elihu Palmer and the Struggle for Religious Freedom in the New Nation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Incorporated, 2020), 192.
[16] Grasso, 360.
[17] Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 174.
[18] *An Appeal*, 5.

scholarship by explaining how atheism and minority religions have been perceived in the United States, and it comes to find that Kneeland—a martyr for freethought—has become a symbol for the persistence and resistance of non-Christians in a Christian world.

The American Revolution, the Second Great Awakening, and the Freethinking Movement

The fissure between those who had reincorporated religion into their lives and those who had abandoned it after the revolution was stark. As early leaders prepared to codify America's founding documents, they were "highly critical of what they saw as Christianity's historical excesses and superstitions.[19] Some were deists, who "challenged religious beliefs they could not reconcile with reason, but . . . accepted the idea of a Supreme Being.[20] As the Second Great Awakening took shape in the early 1800s, however, many revived the fundamentalist beliefs that had been introduced by the Puritans over a century earlier.[21] Citizens who subscribed to this reemergent school of thought called leaders such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison "atheists, heretics, and infidels"[22] for entertaining the notion that Christianity need not be prescribed upon citizens. "Infidel" became a popular term of denigration for those who opposed the Christian mainstream. Though the turn of the century was formative in the creation of the United States, it was riddled with constant political, social, and religious instability.

Abner Kneeland lived at the critical juncture between the wake of the American Revolution and the onset of the de-secularizing Second Great Awakening. At this time, a "'wave of conservatism and religiosity' swept the nation," backtracking the irreligious developments of the previous decades.[23] Kneeland's own troubled and fluid relationship with religion reflected the

[19] Stone, "The World of the Framers: A Christian Nation?," 4.
[20] Stone, "The World of the Framers: A Christian Nation?," 6.
[21] Stone, 25.
[22] Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books - Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2004), 5.
[23] Stone, "The World of the Framers: A Christian Nation?," 25.

turbulent moment in history that he occupied. By 1801, when he was 27 years old, he began to preach at a Baptist church in Putney, Vermont. Over the fewer than three decades to follow, he would convert to Universalism and serve as a minister, relinquish his pulpit due to religious doubts, come back to the ministry, and yet again leave the fold.[24] In his 1827 resignation from the First Universalist Society, of which he was pastor, he wrote:

> Is it so, that knowledge is dangerous to Christianity; and that a man must be either ignorant, or keep back much of what he knows, or else he cannot preach so as to give satisfaction? If so; blessed be the ignorance! I say; and pity of poor christianity [sic]! I should advise no church hereafter, to engage any man to teach them who knows more than themselves!!! But it cannot be, knowledge never was, never can be unfavourable to truth. Brethren, I have beheld, and borne these things in silence, as long as I can, *and they must stop*, or *I must quit preaching*.[25]

While he left subtly the first time, his second exit was ungraceful; boisterously rousing the energies of freethinkers in New York, Philadelphia, and around the country, instilling fear in private citizens and congregations alike. Propelled by the socially radical ideas of "utopian socialist Robert [Dale] Owen,"[26] who wrote skeptically on the authenticity of the New Testament and its gospels,[27] Kneeland divorced himself from the church to create the Second Universalist Society.[28] His followers' loyalty quickly withered as Kneeland "allowed a radical feminist and abolitionist, Frances Wright, to speak from his pulpit when no one else in New York would give her a platform."[29] Quickly, Kneeland's embrace of radicalism in his life and career led to his excommunication from the Universalist church.

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[24] New England Historical Society, "Abner Kneeland, The Free-Speech Martyr Convicted of Blasphemy in 1838," New England Historical Society, 2020, https://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/abner-kneeland-the-free-speech-martyr-convicted-of-blasphemy-in-1838/.
[25] Kneeland to the Trustees of the First Universalist Society in the City of New-York, 1827, American Antiquarian Society, Catalog Record #256135.
[26] New England Historical Society, "Abner Kneeland, The Free-Speech Martyr Convicted of Blasphemy in 1838."
[27] Origen Bacheler and Robert Dale Owen, *Discussion on the Existence of God and the Authenticity of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (New York: A. J. Matsell, 1833) 246-257.
[28] New England Historical Society, "Abner Kneeland, The Free-Speech Martyr Convicted of Blasphemy in 1838."
[29] New England Historical Society, "Abner Kneeland, The Free-Speech Martyr Convicted of Blasphemy in 1838."

Without a pulpit to speak from, Kneeland turned to writing. He penned a lyric book of songs that, in contrast to other communal and national pride hymns, included no religious language—and, at times, mocked it. Titles included what he viewed as important principles that were lacking in church life: "Generosity,"[30] "Friendship,"[31] and "Self-Control,"[32] as well as more direct attacks on facets of American life that he believed were wedded with Christianity: "The reign of Superstition subdued by the light of Reason and Truth,"[33] "Persecution and Intolerance, absurd,"[34] and "The horrors of Slavery."[35] He founded *The Boston Investigator*, of which he was chief editor. His writers pushed against "what they perceived to be the theocratic encroachment on free society."[36] Kneeland also took the stand at what his opponents called "infidel orgies," where he "characterized the Holy Bible as a pack of lies and the clergy as hypocrites . . . scoffed at the sacredness of marriage, promoted sex education, rallied against the rich, and identified with farmers, workingmen, and organized labor."[37] He rattled the elites of Boston, who worried that he would inspire laborers to unionize or otherwise rebel against authority.[38] Christian publications put up defenses, purporting that the freethinkers were able to succeed not on their merits, but only by misrepresenting and perverting other ideologies.[39] It seems from accounts of these "orgies," however, that the freethinkers cared more about progressing their radical Democratic agenda than about disparaging any religious school of thought.

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[30] Abner Kneeland, *National hymns, original and selected: for the use of those who are "slaves to no sect*" (Boston: The Investigator, 1832), 6.
[31] Kneeland, *National hymns*, 7.
[32] Kneeland, 19.
[33] Kneeland, 23.
[34] Kneeland, 32.
[35] Kneeland, 54.
[36] New England Historical Society, "Abner Kneeland, The Free-Speech Martyr Convicted of Blasphemy in 1838."
[37] Roderick Bradford, "The American Inquisition," *FREE INQUIRY-BUFFALO THEN AMHERST* 27, no. 1 (2007): 33.
[38] New England Historical Society, "Abner Kneeland, The Free-Speech Martyr Convicted of Blasphemy in 1838."
[39] Jno Hughes, "Controversy. No. XVII. Rule of Faith," *Catholic Herald* (Philadelphia, PA), May 30, 1833.

Kneeland's activity at these conventions in Boston was a microcosm of the larger freethinking movement, reflecting pockets of "infidels" that were proliferating around the country. Many of these freethinkers, realizing they had an uphill battle against the Christian establishment, used print media, oral sermons, and other "means of dissemination that had most effectively been used by evangelical religionists."[40] Kneeland and his colleagues used these tools to continually critique the centralized role of capitalist and religious structures in the United States. In New York, for example, Owen and Wright founded the "Hall of Science" and edited the *Free Enquirer*,[41] advocating alongside other freethinkers for radical social reforms. The infidels of Tammany Hall ensured that their venue was one of tolerance, even for religious ideas with which they vehemently disagreed. Accordingly, they held public debates between defenders of infidelity and defenders of scripture.[42] Kneeland, Owen, Wright, and their allies became heavily censured by the public as they spoke against the lack of separation between the church, the state, and society. American periodicals stoked religious devotees' beliefs that their secular countrymen were unfit for citizenship,[43] much like the pre-enlightenment Puritans correlated citizenship with faith and held the expectation that "only godly Christians" could govern.[44] Kneeland continued to rise among the ranks of freethinkers, eventually publishing the letter that brought him to trial.

Kneeland's Blasphemous Letter, its Supporters and its Opponents

[40] Rogers, "Preaching Unbelief: Freethought in Boston, 1825-1850," 8,
[41] Mark Lause, "Solidarity: Coalescing a Mass Resistance," in *Long Road to Harpers Ferry: The Rise of the First American Left* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 54.
[42] W.W. Sleigh, *The New-York Discussion, Between Dr. Sleigh, in Defence of Divine Revelation; and the Delegates of the Tammany Hall Infidels, and Others, in Defence of Infidelity. Held in 1835—1836. With Copious Explanatory Notes.*" (New York: Charles H. Jackson & Co. No. 17, Ann Street, 1836), 2.
[43] Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation*, 2.
[44] Stone, "The World of the Framers: A Christian Nation?," 3.

Kneeland spent much time exploring his own religious identity, embarking on a journey that carried him in and out of various religious communities. He declared in 1833, "I am not an Atheist, but a Pantheist; that is, instead of believing there is no God, I believe that in the abstract, all is God."[45] He echoed the sentiments of transcendental naturalists, continuing, "[t]he whole duty of man consists in living as long as he can, and in promoting as much happiness as he can while he lives."[46] Rather than believing religion itself was corrupt, Kneeland's challenge to the American mainstream stemmed from his commitment to individualism and his drive to live in a way that satisfied the body, mind, heart, and soul, rather than an amorphous divine power. Also in 1833, Kneeland sent a letter to Universalist editor Thomas Whittemore, which served as one of the counts for his blasphemy charges.[47] Additionally included in the charges were two articles reprinted from *The Free Enquirer*, one of which was written by Kneeland.[48] Whittemore's refusal to print it led Kneeland to publish it himself in *The Boston Investigator*. In the letter, Kneeland outlined his four key oppositions to Universalism, detailed below:[49]

1. *Universalists believe in a god which I do not; but believe that their god, with all his moral attributes (aside from nature itself) is nothing more than a chimera of their own imagination.*[50] This initial opposition laid the foundation for Kneeland's trials. The *Investigator* also came under fire during Kneeland's trials for an article in the same issue referring to God as "the poor old gentleman" and derisively equating God to General Andrew Jackson, a move seen as blasphemous as it stripped honor from the divine.[51] By calling God a "chimera" of Universalists' imaginations, Kneeland immediately made

[45] New England Historical Society, "Abner Kneeland, The Free-Speech Martyr Convicted of Blasphemy in 1838."
[46] New England Historical Society, "Abner Kneeland, The Free-Speech Martyr Convicted of Blasphemy in 1838."
[47] Bradford, "The American Inquisition," 32-33.
[48] Henry Steele Commager, "The Blasphemy of Abner Kneeland," *The New England Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1935): 31.
[49] Abner Kneeland, "To the Editor of The Trumpet," *The Boston Investigator* (Boston, MA), Dec. 20, 1833.
[50] Kneeland, "To the Editor of The Trumpet."
[51] Levy, "Satan's Last Apostle in Massachusetts," 19.

himself a pariah amongst the religious majority of Americans. At the same time, he signaled with this language that he was willing to serve as a role model in the freethinking community, even at the risk of being ostracized, excommunicated, and—as he would come to know—jailed.

2. *Universalists believe in Christ, which I do not; but believe that the whole story concerning him is as much a fable and a fiction, as that of the god Prometheus, the tragedy of whose death is said to have been acted on the stage in the theatre at Athens, 500 years before the christian [sic] era.*[52] This second statement denied the existence of Jesus Christ in its entirety and compared Christian religion to that of the ancient Greeks. In drawing this parallel, Kneeland tried to further delegitimize and discredit the originality of Universalist beliefs. This specification is "described in the indictment, not only as *blasphemous*, but as *obscene*" for depicting Christ in a dishonorable manner and—corroborant with another article in the same issue of the *Investigator*—as a eunuch.[53] At Kneeland's first trial, Judge Thacher asked before jury:

> If Mr. Kneeland had meant to say that Jesus Christ was a mere man like ourselves and that Joseph was his father, could he not have found language to express the sentiment with decency without a disgusting reference to those parts of the human frame which even savages cover with the veil of modesty, and of which among the civilized is always deemed indecent to speak[?][54]

3. *Universalists believe in miracles, which I do not; but believe that every pretension to them can either be accounted for on natural principles or else is to be attributed to mere trick and imposture.*[55] In the foreword to his letter, Kneeland wrote that he was still a Universalist with regard to his support for "universal philanthropy, universal

[52] Kneeland, "To the Editor of The Trumpet."
[53] *An Appeal*, 4-5.
[54] Commager, "The Blasphemy of Abner Kneeland," 35.
[55] Kneeland, "To the Editor of The Trumpet."

benevolence, and universal charity." While he held these particular morals, he made his rejection of broader Universalist beliefs clear in this paragraph. He denied the basis of much of Christian thought—the existence of miracles in any given time period.

4. *Universalists believe in the resurrection of the dead, in immortality and eternal life, which I do not; but believe that all life is mortal, that death is an eternal extinction of life to the individual who possesses it, and that no individual life is, ever was, or ever will be eternal.*[56] This final opposition—the last in Kneeland's "heretical" list—begs Americans to consider the question asked in *An Appeal*: does it uphold American values to suppress the voices of freethinking infidels like Kneeland? By stating his unwavering viewpoint that life is mortal, Kneeland shoots down the Christian belief in an eternal God, a messiah who will be resurrected, and the afterlife. This solidified, to many, that Kneeland was not simply a "a mere harbinger of free thought."[57] Rather, he was an infidel who would come to be *persona non grata* in American society.

As noted above, the author of *An Appeal* makes their disagreement with Kneeland abundantly clear. They gravely clarify that Kneeland's blasphemous and obscene statements stretch beyond harmless expressions of personal ideology. Nonetheless, the author still uses a legal framework to defend Kneeland against unjust charges. They say that Kneeland must be convicted for his obscene constructions of God, Jesus, and other important tenets of Christian doctrine, but that a conviction for blasphemy would be an unjust item "tacked to the indictment."[58] They feel that legal repercussions should stem from Kneeland's attacks on Christianity, but not the defense of his own religious beliefs. "God protect us," the author writes, "from the enormity of prosecution *nominally* for one offence, and convictions *really* of another;

[56] Kneeland, "To the Editor of The Trumpet."
[57] Levy, "Satan's Last Apostle in Massachusetts," 16.
[58] *An Appeal*, 5.

from indicting a man for being a horse-thief, and convicting him of atheism!"[59] They reflect on the reigns of previous theocracies by Constantine and Theodosious, saying that the world was once a safer place for religious dissenters to live in. Solidifying their support for religious toleration, they paint the former ruler in a better light for his ability to maintain peace and for allowing the church to subject its members to its discipline, but forbidding it to "lay her bloody hands on those who refused her fellowship altogether."[60] The author defends Kneeland with the second article to the Bill of Rights which protects all people on the basis of "religious profession or sentiments" and further has "no confines to protection of Christian religion."[61] Furthermore, they write that it is not within the jurisdiction of elected legislators to enforce matters of religion on citizens.[62] In the century prior, it was far more common that blasphemy prosecutions "had more to do with religious and political dissent than with heresy."[63] The author of *An Appeal* proves that by the time of Kneeland's trials, Americans were more discerning of the elements of Kneeland's letter that they saw as fair for prosecution.

Despite their enmity for Kneeland, the author of *An Appeal* recognizes that "the free spirit of the age has succeeded, by the lucky aid of most unexpected allies,"[64] and that it would be counterproductive to the success of the United States to micromanage its citizens' religious beliefs. Though Kneeland was not the first of the freethinkers, he galvanized their movement, mobilizing a community of passionate secularists to write for his paper and break into mainstream American culture. One of the final issues of *The Boston Investigator* ran editorials by Lemuel Washburn, who satirized the Christian conception of God by writing that "There is

[59] *An Appeal*, 5.
[60] *An Appeal*, 5-6.
[61] *An Appeal*, 12-13.
[62] *An Appeal*, 14.
[63] Bradford, "The American Inquisition," 32.
[64] *An Appeal*, 14.

not a funnier character in literature than the God, or the Lord God, of the Old Testament."[65] Washburn similarly wrote under a headline named "Christian Falsehoods" that "to run to earth every falsehood of the Bible would require more than a long life-time. The writers of the Christian scriptures were not particular about telling the truth, or about quoting accurately from other authors."[66] Kneeland, Washburn, and other contributors to *The Boston Investigator* fought against Christian dominance until the newspaper's final days. They eternalized secular philosophies and ensured that future generations would know their work. They also inspired other publications to advocate for radical progress in society. An issue of *The Iconoclast* quotes: "'Infidel' has come to mean one whose religious opinions differ from the one who uses the term, and is oftentimes an unintentional compliment of a high order."[67] This language likens the word to a pejorative reclaimed by those it targets, taking radical and oppressed identities in stride.

Kneeland on Trial

Abner Kneeland stood trial four times in *Commonwealth v. Kneeland*[68] from 1834 to 1838 before offering a final appeal to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. During this time, he earned accolades from "intellectuals and reformers"[69] as well as the working class of Boston. As both an orator and the editor of a newspaper, he ensured there were few barriers between his word and the ordinary citizen.[70] Unlike philosophers' creeds of the past that had been read exclusively by the learned elite, Kneeland's writings were highly accessible to commoners. At his first trial, state counsel Mr. S.D. Parker acknowledged this, accusing:

[65] L.K. Washburn, "A Comic Deity," *The Boston Investigator* (Boston, MA), May 7, 1904.
[66] L.K. Washburn, "Christian Falsehoods," *The Boston Investigator* (Boston, MA), May 7, 1904.
[67] Tilton's Golden Age, Untitled definition of "Infidel," *The Iconoclast* (Washington, D.C.), April, 1871.
[68] Bradford, "The American Inquisition," 32.
[69] Bradford, "The American Inquisition," 34.
[70] Bradford, 33.

> There have been other infidels . . . but the works of these persons were read only by men of literary habits—necessarily a few. But here is a journal, a newspaper, cheap, and sent into a thousand families. Where one man would be injured by Hume, Gibbon, or Volney, a thousand may be injured by this newspaper, so widely circulated, so easily read, so coarsely expressed, so industriously spread abroad.[71]

A hostile trial ensued between the parties as they quarreled over the grammar, mechanics, and true intent of Kneeland's letter.[72] Kneeland said of his opponents, "Birds do not generally flutter much until they are hit," acknowledging that his radical sentiments were not new, but that they now engendered enough public support to discomfit the elite, Christian, conservative status quo and force the United States to acknowledge its irreligious citizens.[73]

Three subsequent trials took place at the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court before Kneeland, who elected to plead his own case in the latter two, was convicted for blasphemy. Kneeland presented "an able and persuasive argument, more elaborate" than that of his previous counsel, Mr. Dunlap, "and more candid."[74] He laid his passions for freethought on the table and relied on the jury to return an apt verdict. The drawn-out legal process that manifested to protect the chiefly Christian state culminated in a brief, sixty-day sentence for Kneeland, whose iconoclastic attitudes only further fomented in the walls of the Suffolk County jail.[75] After his sentence, Kneeland entrusted ownership and editorial power of *The Boston Investigator* to fellow radicals J.P. Mendum and Horace Seaver.[76] Kneeland and the "Society of Free Enquirers" hoped that the American West, unaffected by Kneeland's trial or by rigid Christian standards, would be more welcoming to their radicalism than Boston was. They established Salubria, a riverside

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[71] Commager, "The Blasphemy of Abner Kneeland," 32-33.
[72] Commager, "The Blasphemy of Abner Kneeland," 34.
[73] Bradford, "The American Inquisition," 33.
[74] Commager, "The Blasphemy of Abner Kneeland," 36.
[75] Paul Finkelman, "Blasphemy and Free Thought in Jacksonian America: The Case of Abner Kneeland," in *Profane: Sacrilegious Expression in a Multicultural Age*, ed. Christopher S. Grenda (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 119.
[76] Bradford, "The American Inquisition," 34.

utopian community in Iowa "dedicated to rationalism and the worship of nature."[77] Kneeland was successful in causing a fervent uproar that outlasted his tenure at *The Boston Investigator*, his confinement, and his life. As a trailblazer of the freethinking movement, he gained power as an ideological secularist and earned exceptional spiritual ethos as an ordained minister-turned-freethinker.

Implications and Legacy

Kneeland's freethinking spirit allowed him to keep an aggressive front against the repressive dogma of a *de facto* Christian nation. The freethinking population that followed him was far from niche. Many historians "[fail] to recognize the parallel developments [to the religious community] made by the irreligious community during this period," as skeptical, secular members of society marketed themselves, expanded their cohorts, and became a force to be reckoned with.[78] Kneeland and his followers aided the rise of free, anti-Christian thought around the United States, cultivating the foundation for the atheist community that exists today. This trend continues, as a majority of Americans still identify with a Christian denomination[79] while religious non-identifiers also grow in numbers.[80]

Through his bold speech and writings, Abner Kneeland mobilized a community that dared to establish and embrace new norms for religious, social, and political thought. His conviction for blasphemy not only weakened the very legal precedent that it was meant to protect, but strengthened the freethinking movement's objection to a Christian society.

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[77] Commager, "The Blasphemy of Abner Kneeland," 41.
[78] Rogers, "Preaching Unbelief: Freethought in Boston, 1825-1850," 4-5.
[79] Statista, "What is your religious preference: Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, another religion, or no religion?," Statista, 2021, https://www.statista.com/statistics/245478/self-described-religious-identification-of-americans/.
[80] Pew Research Group, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," Pew Research Group, 2019, https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/.

Kneeland's final trial exemplifies this, because "While the venerable and famous Chief Justice Shaw had the temporal power to jail Kneeland, the case did more damage to him than to Kneeland."[81] This proves that, while Christian leaders may have dominated the American government, their potential to reign dwindled in the post-Puritan period. The freethinking movement that Kneeland catalyzed, and every obstacle that attempted to suppress it—from public controversy to his years on trial and his time in jail—rang in a new America that diluted Christian conventions and became a safe harbor for religious freethought.

[81] Finkelman, "Blasphemy and Free Thought in Jacksonian America: The Case of Abner Kneeland," 119.

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