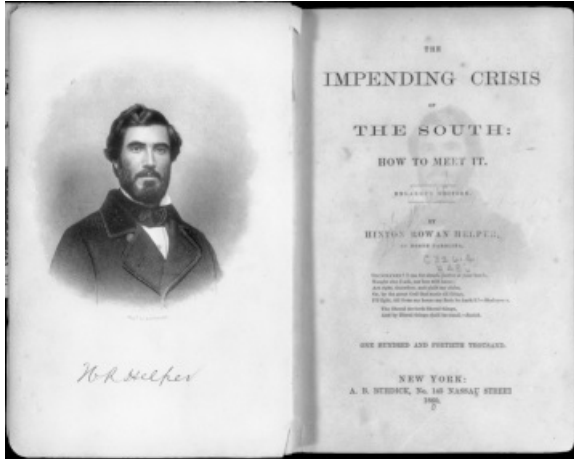


State v. Worth ^[1]

State v. Worth

by Alexander R. Stoesen, 2006

See also: [Daniel Worth](#) ^[2] (*Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*), *Impending Crisis of the South* ^[3]; *Walker's Appeal* ^[4].



Title page and frontispiece portrait of Hinton Rowan Helper in the 1860 edition of *The Impending Crisis of the South*. North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library.

Daniel Worth, a Wesleyan Methodist ^[5] minister, came to North Carolina in 1857 as an agent of the American Missionary Society ^[6]. By 1859, 130 new members had joined the churches he served in [Guilford](#) ^[7] and [Randolph](#) ^[8] Counties. His popularity enabled him to denounce the use of [liquor](#) ^[9], [tobacco](#) ^[10], and "other fripperies," but his ultimate motive was to attack [slavery](#) ^[11] and to disseminate [abolitionist](#) ^[12] literature. He insisted that religion and antislavery sentiments should be synonymous. In 1859 Worth began to distribute *The Impending Crisis of the South* ^[3], a vigorous antislavery book written by Hinton Rowan Helper. Worth's action might have been ignored earlier, but John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in the same year had raised fear, anxiety, and passions to a fever pitch throughout the South.

Helper's book was considered an "incendiary publication" under the North Carolina code, which had been [amended in 1830](#) ^[13] in response to [David Walker](#) ^[14]'s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* ^[15] calling for a black rebellion to crush slavery. In late 1859 Worth sold and delivered a copy of *Impending Crisis* to George W. Bowman, a white resident of [Guilford County](#) ^[7]. Subsequently indicted for distributing an incendiary publication that urged slaves to insurrection—a capital offense—he was arrested, refused counsel, and heard 15 witnesses describe his activities. He was bound over for the spring term of Guilford Superior Court on a \$5,000 bond, which was then doubled to ensure "good behavior."

Before being tried in [Greensboro](#) ^[16], Worth was tried in [Randolph County](#) ^[8] and found guilty of the same charge. He was sentenced to a year in jail, but the requirement that he be flogged was dropped. On 27 Apr. 1860 a second trial was held in Greensboro, where this time he was represented by counsel. Attorneys for the defense argued that the 1830 statute did not contain the word "book," but rather used the words "pamphlet or paper" and thus did not refer to *Impending Crisis*. Moreover, the sale to Bowman was a personal matter that did not constitute "distribution." Finally, since Bowman was white and had not given the book to slaves or free blacks, nor read it aloud in their presence, he had not violated the law.

The state contended that Helper's book was an incendiary publication covered by the law given the statute's use of the word "paper." The state also demonstrated that Worth had distributed copies of the book to persons other than Bowman and argued that it was unnecessary to prove that slaves or free blacks had been his target because of the book's "wicked intent" to "excite slaves to insurrection." Worth was convicted, and an appeal to the [North Carolina Supreme Court](#) ^[17] failed.

Authorities set Worth's bond at the purposely low figure of \$3,000 in the hope that he would leave the state before sentencing and thus avoid becoming a martyr for the abolitionist cause. This is exactly what happened: Worth jumped bail and was spirited through Virginia to the North. Although he continued to work as an abolitionist, his commitment was always overshadowed by the fact that he had been unwilling to accept a very public imprisonment that might have greatly aided the antislavery movement.

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Title page and frontispiece portrait of Hinton Rowan Helper in the 1860 edition of *The Impending Crisis of the South*. North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library.

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