

THE SLAVE'S CAUSE

A History of Abolition

Manisha Sinha

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In a familiar pattern, Rhode Island had disfranchised black men in 1822, and two years later whites had attacked black homes in the Hard Scrabble area of Providence. In the 1830s a committee that included laborers such as George Willis and the barber Alfred Niger in Providence demanded the right to vote. By 1841 a suffrage movement geared to removing property-holding qualifications and led by Thomas Dorr, a former member of the RIASS, held out some hope to blacks. But the suffrage associations excluded African Americans and restricted their demand to democratize the vote to whites only. The people's convention rejected a petition prepared by Ichabod Northrup and Crummell, who was now a pastor of the Christ Church in Providence, to remove the word *white* from its constitution despite Dorr's support for black voting. Dorr managed to ensure jury trial for fugitive slaves and insert a mandatory provision to put the whites-only clause to a referendum. But African Americans rejected the people's constitution, and Kelley, Douglass, Foster, and Pillsbury campaigned against it. The racial animosity of Dorrites allied blacks with conservative state authorities. The Law and Order Party put black suffrage on the ballot in 1842, and it was approved by voters. The state constitution of 1843 gave black men the right to vote. After his imprisonment for leading the rebellion against state authorities, Dorr became a proslavery Democrat. Rhode Island was the only northern state to reverse black disfranchisement.

The fight for suffrage continued in Pennsylvania, where the easterners Purvis, Stephen Smith, Whipper, Shadd, McCrummell, and Bowers dominated the second state convention, which met in Harrisburg in 1848. Vashon, Peck, and Remond also attended. The convention's address to voters as "arbiters of our political destiny" again asked for the removal of the word *white* from the state constitution, invoking the names of Franklin, Rush, Benezet, and Woolman as well as the European revolutions of 1848. Its appeal to colored citizens read, "Our fathers sought personal freedom—we now contend for political freedom." Even if their object was not realized, "we will gain in the consolidation of our people on the subject of our rights." It hoped to plant the "seeds of revolution." The convention constituted itself into the "Citizens' Union of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania" in order to carry on the struggle for voting rights. In 1855 the state's disfranchised black citizens submitted a memorial to Congress detailing that seventeen years of disfranchisement had led to the burning of black churches and institutions and mob violence and calling the attempt to list all the outrages they were subject to a "Herculean task."³⁸

The revival of the national conventions also spurred the fight for black citizenship. In his speech of 1843 to the national convention in Buffalo, meeting after a hiatus of eight years, President Samuel Davis noted that while abolitionists had made "noble efforts in behalf of the poor slave . . . We, ourselves, must be willing to contend for the rich boon of freedom and equal rights." The meeting became famous for Garnet's "Address to the Slaves," but much of its business was geared to reviving a national network of independent black activism, the establishment of a black press, and the economic growth of northern black communities. Two years later the national convention in Troy, on Garnet's behest, called on folks to "*agitate! AGITATE!! AGITATE!!!*" The national convention of 1848, held in Cleveland and presided over by Douglass, took up the topics of gender and class. A Mrs. Sanford asked for the "Elective Franchise" and the right to property. She encouraged the convention to fight for "*unqualified citizenship of the United States*." The convention's address to the colored people pointed out that whereas they were held as slaves in the South, in the North they were "the slaves of the community." Debate over Delany's resolution that black people avoid servile jobs resulted in a compromise mediated by Douglass. The address urged moving out of menial positions but refuted the notion that they were a mark of degradation.³⁹

The conventions did not stem the tide of black disfranchisement but acted as sites of resistance, especially in the more racially intolerant northwest with its large southern-born populations and black laws that penalized African Americans for entering the region's states. The black laws were sporadically enforced, and the rise of abolition posed a challenge to them. Black conventions held in Indiana in 1842, 1847, and 1851 took up many issues, but the right to vote was their foremost demand. The last convention met on the eve of the passage of a law that, implementing an article in the new state constitution, prevented blacks from entering the state. The meeting's president, John G. Britton, insisted that "[as] Americans we are entitled to all the rights, privileges, and immunities of citizenship." Abolitionists protested the exclusionary law and rejected state-sponsored colonization schemes. Given the dismal conditions faced by black Indianans, colonization found favor among antislavery men like Robert Dale Owen and the Methodist minister Rev. James Mitchell, who would be recruited by the Lincoln administration as emigration commissioner to promote colonization. Illinois and Oregon too had antiblack immigration clauses in their constitutions.

In the antislavery upper northwest, black abolitionists and their political allies managed to initiate state referendums on black suffrage. Detroit's activist black community called for a state convention in 1843, identifying African Americans "as an oppressed people wishing to be free" who will gain their liberties only

by their "own exertions in their own cause." Despite repeated disturbances over the issue of rightful delegates, the Michigan convention was one of the most successful. Its resolutions made the gaining of the right to vote its primary aim, protesting that blacks were "passive instruments of the law." On the initiative of the fugitive slave Henry Bibb it passed resolutions demanding the immediate abolition of slavery and praising abolitionists, starting with Wilberforce, Clarkson, and Lovejoy and adding local abolitionists. Its address to the citizens of Michigan referred to the ancient history of Africa to refute the charges of inherent racial inferiority deployed as an excuse to deny equal political rights. A new state constitution in 1850 extended voting to immigrants and Indians, but black suffrage went down to defeat by a vote of 32,000 to 12,000. In neighboring Wisconsin, which entered the Union in 1848, a black suffrage proposal was rejected despite winning a majority because most voters abstained. In 1857 black suffrage was defeated in Iowa.⁴⁰

The states in the northwest modeled their "black laws" after Ohio's. In the 1830s the legislature turned down abolitionist petitions against the black laws and in 1839 denied African Americans the right to petition against them. Black abolitionists such as Peter Clark and William O'Hara had long agitated for civil rights. In 1834 the light-skinned Williams family from Xenia sued to gain admittance to the public schools, and black Ohioans held "education conventions." Ohio held the greatest number of state conventions. The address of the Columbus convention held in 1843 to the citizens of Ohio, written by George Boyer Vashon and others, insisted, "WE ARE AMERICANS" and condemned the "pseudo-philanthropy" of colonizationists. The broad-based nature of the conventions was evident in its call for farmers to leave their land, mechanics to put down their tools, laborers to abandon their work, and domestic servants to "leave their lords." It invited white abolitionists to attend "without the privilege of voting" or without compromising its character as sites of independent black activism. It targeted the removal of legal disabilities, which barred blacks from giving testimony. They were "oppressed, disfranchised and otherwise degraded on account of complexion by certain infamous and most tyrannical laws."⁴¹

The Ohio convention of 1849 made the repeal of the state's black laws its primary concern. The political emergence of the Free Soil Party and Salmon P. Chase, who was elected to the Senate, made it an auspicious time for repeal. The delegates invited "ladies to share in the doings of the Convention" after they had protested their exclusion. The Oberlin-educated black abolitionists William Howard Day, born in New York, and Charles and John Mercer Langston dominated the proceedings. The Langston brothers, sons of a Virginian planter and his enslaved common-law wife, migrated to Chillicothe, Ohio, home to

the pioneering Colored Antislavery Society, founded in 1834. The convention's address demanded the desegregation of the state's schools and ended with the slogan, "Repeal, Repeal, Repeal" the black laws. Black protest and electoral victory of a Free Soil Democratic coalition orchestrated by Chase resulted in the overthrow of the black laws. The convention in 1850 capitalized on this success. It formed the Ohio Colored American League, demanded the right of suffrage, and asked that all discriminatory laws be done away with. It also recommended that Day be appointed superintendent of the colored schools. The next year the convention appointed a commission to the governor and sent an address to the Ohio Constitutional Convention demanding suffrage. Day and James Watson spoke before the legislature on black suffrage. The constitutional convention, however, voted it down by 75 to 15. Undeterred, the Ohio conventions in the 1850s made suffrage their central demand.⁴²

The struggle for the franchise also dominated the New Jersey and Connecticut black conventions of 1849. The New Jersey convention at Trenton, which was addressed by Van Rensselaer and led by the physician John Swett Rock, who became a prominent abolitionist in Massachusetts, launched a petition campaign for black suffrage. It also recommended obtaining signatures of white citizens and issued an address to them appealing for their support to make the state "the first consistent reformer of human rights in the Western World." The Connecticut convention's call noted, "We are dead to citizenship—struck down by an unrighteous State Constitution, and our life spark quenched by a cruel and unreasonable prejudice." Amos G. Beman led the convention, which was attended by his father, Jehiel Beman, and Bibb. Despite the presence of black women, the demand for black citizenship remained male centered, especially when citing black military service in the revolution and the War of 1812 as a reason for enfranchisement. The address to the colored men of Connecticut held that disfranchisement assailed their "manhood and Citizenship." The appeal to the voters of the state, written by Amos Beman and others, listed southern proslavery actions as akin to opposition to black citizenship, rebuked racism as an unchristian "corrupt public sentiment," and listed black achievements as arguments for free suffrage. In the 1850s the state convention movement spread to Illinois, California, Kansas, and even Maryland. Nearly all focused on demanding the right to vote, civil rights, and equality before the law.⁴³

Black abolitionists also made the desegregation of public facilities integral to abolition. The question of segregation became entangled with factionalism when Charles Reason, responding to Van Rensselaer's criticism of the city's black abolitionists affiliated with the AFASS, accused Van Rensselaer of not serving him and Crummell in his restaurant. Van Rensselaer replied that as a

matter of principle he served blacks in his establishment, even though that had cost him business among whites. In 1839 Crummell publicized Bishop Onderdonk's efforts to exclude him from the Episcopal General Theological Seminary. Earlier, Isaiah De Grasse had been admitted and then was forced to leave the seminary. A few years later Onderdonk's brother obstructed Crummell's attempt to found an Episcopal church in Philadelphia, demanding that neither Crummell nor his church be seated at his convention. In his introductory remarks to the history of the Episcopal church, Jay used the Crummell case to indict it for racism, as did his son John Jay II in his pamphlet *Caste and Slavery in the American Church* (1843), based on material Crummell forwarded to him. Smith sent Crummell twenty dollars, the latter writing that the "kindnesses of friends" had helped soften the blow. Black abolitionists led by George T. Downing, John J. Zuille, Wilson, and Bell held a meeting protesting Crummell's treatment. Onderdonk also refused to ordain Charles Reason. The Onderdonk brothers soon fell from grace, accused of womanizing and alcoholism.

The *Liberator* and CA regularly reported the experiences of blacks encountering Jim Crow. Cornish protested the exclusion of his children from the public school system in New Jersey, and Van Rensselaer for being thrown off a steamboat. Ruggles recounted being defrauded by a Rhode Island steamboat and "lynched" in the Stonington railroad. In 1841 Downing was unsuccessful in his suit against the Harlem Railroad Track Company for a "barbarous outrage upon him." Black abolitionists circulated a petition for the removal of the company as a nuisance to black citizens. It also denied black women access to the ladies' cars, repudiating their claims to respectability. In 1854 the eviction of Elizabeth Jennings, a schoolteacher and the daughter of Thomas Jennings, and her female companion from a streetcar by an Irish conductor instigated community protest and a successful lawsuit argued by the future Republican president Chester Arthur. Jennings, McCune Smith, and Pennington founded a Legal Rights Association to contest segregation in the streetcars. The next year Pennington was evicted from a streetcar but lost his suit. The association prosecuted a number of cases of discrimination, and it developed a female branch. Pennington and Garnet reported that they had successfully desegregated certain streetcar lines in the city. When Day and his wife were denied cabin accommodations on a steamboat, he pursued his case against the owner all the way to the Michigan Supreme Court only to lose. In 1864 Ellen Anderson, thrown out of a whites-only car in New York by the conductor and a policeman, sued the police commission. She won her case and effectively desegregated public transit when the city police stopped enforcing segregation. The battle against streetcar segre-

gation was not won completely. Well after the war Sojourner Truth asserted that she had been sent so often to the smoking car that she smoked in self-defense, swallowing "her own smoke [rather] than another's."⁴⁴

Desegregation was most successful in Massachusetts, where "the story of civil rights [was] born in the age of abolitionism." Garrison had called for the repeal of the law against interracial marriage. Female antislavery societies in the state led by Kelley conducted annual petition campaigns against the law since 1839. With positive committee reports in successive years, the legislature came close to passing the repeal in 1842. The next year Nell submitted a black petition against the discriminatory law. In March, despite the strong opposition of some members, the legislature passed a law proposed by the abolitionist George Bradburn of Nantucket that repealed the marriage prohibition. The Liberty Party played a crucial role in negotiating the final passage of the repeal. Garrison hailed it as "a signal victory over prejudice and the spirit of caste."

Black abolitionists spearheaded the campaign to desegregate public transportation and schools in Massachusetts. In 1840 the *Liberator* reported on the mistreatment of Thomas Jinnings by the Eastern Railroad Company and of Ruggles in the Nantucket steamboat and at the railroad depot in New Bedford. Ruggles, who was evicted from his seat, lost his glasses and his bag and tore his clothing in the scuffle, unsuccessfully sued the railroad company for damages. The next year the AASS agents Douglass and Collins were assaulted while attempting to travel together on the notorious Eastern Railroad. Collins sustained a bad cut on his lip from blows to his head and face, and Douglass tore up a good number of seats resisting removal. They were targeted precisely because they were "damned abolitionists" and traveled in interracial groups. In protest, Garrison and Phillips chose to travel in the dirty Jim Crow cars with black abolitionists like Nell. Shadrach Howard and Jeremiah Sanderson had to face charges in court for their confrontation with the conductor of the New Bedford Railroad. Mary Newhall Green of the Lynn ASS was assaulted by a conductor for traveling in a whites-only car, an attack that injured her, the baby in her arms, and her husband. White bystanders who came to the aid of African Americans were also mistreated, one Daniel Mann, represented by Sewell, losing his suit for assault. Garrison published a travel directory for black readers with information on the policies of local railroads and steamboats and a lengthy essay against racism by the Haitian writer S. Linstat.

Abolitionists began a petition campaign against Jim Crow railroads after failing to obtain redress in the courts. The petitions and mass meetings condemning the Eastern Railroad created a wave of public sympathy, as editorials in newspapers across the state sided with them. Garrison was hard on the Quaker

superintendent of the Eastern Railroad, saying, "Quaker garb ill becomes him," as he was "lost to shame" and gloried in his brutality. But the Quaker abolitionist Nathaniel Barney, a stockholder in the New Bedford line, donated all his dividends to the abolitionist fight against segregation. Most Massachusetts railroads voluntarily desegregated their cars because of abolitionists' protests. A hearing over Jim Crow transportation in the legislature in 1842, in which Phillips, Loring, and Remond testified, revealed that only the Eastern and New Bedford-Taunton railroads persisted in their policy of segregation. The committee reported that Jim Crow violated the rights of black citizens and counseled a law prohibiting it. The law failed to pass the legislature, but Gov. Marcus Morton assured abolitionists that African Americans would receive redress. The Eastern Railroad desegregated on the prompting of its stockholders. As Garrison put it, "The corporation has proved, beyond dispute or cavil, that neither convenience, accommodation nor improvement is the ruling principle with them, but monopoly and profit."⁴⁵

Remond was prominent in the fight against segregated transportation. During his first lecture tour in Maine, he had faced "mobocrats, eggs and brickbats" and even debated the Democratic representative Hannibal Hamlin, Lincoln's future vice president. An effective agent, he had organized antislavery societies in Maine, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island and became a member of the AASS business committee. Known for his polished speeches, Remond acquired considerable fame as a delegate to the Antislavery Convention in London. On his return, he was ejected from the Eastern Railroad along with several whites who were eager to hear about his tour. At a large meeting in Faneuil Hall, Remond pointed out that while he had been treated as an honored guest in England and Ireland, he could not safely travel in his own country. Similarly, Nancy Prince, who had been received in the Russian court, wrote to Garrison that she was thrown off a steamboat for which she had purchased a ticket and dislocated her shoulder. Remond reasoned that "complexion can in no sense be construed a crime, much less be rightfully made the criterion of rights," thereby linking desegregation with the quest for equal citizenship. Maria Chapman observed that in a few words black abolitionists could convey an argument against racial prejudice that might take a white man all day.

Black abolitionists tested the boundaries of segregation by initiating boycotts and lawsuits. In 1845 the New Bedford Lyceum's refusal to admit Nathaniel Borden and David W. Ruggles (not to be confused with David Ruggles of New York) resulted in an abolitionist boycott during which popular lecturers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Sumner, and Theodore Parker canceled their engagements. The issue of segregation in theaters emerged in 1853, when Nell,

Sarah Parker Remond, and Caroline Remond, sisters of Remond, challenged segregated seating at the Howard Athenaeum in Boston. Sarah, who was pushed down the stairs and hurt herself, was awarded five hundred dollars as compensation after bringing a criminal complaint against the guard who assaulted her. Three years later Julian McCrea and John Stephenson sued the same theater for refusing to seat them but lost their suit. Not until 1865 did Massachusetts outlaw segregation in all public spaces.⁴⁶

Black abolitionists led by old stalwarts such as John Hilton and by the young Nell and Robert Morris became involved in a protracted struggle to desegregate Boston's public school system. Nell, who led a decade-long fight for "equal school rights," was Garrison's printing apprentice, running an employment registry for blacks in the *Liberator* and becoming a writer of some repute. As a student, Nell was recognized for scholarly distinction but, unlike white students, was denied the Franklin medal and given a voucher for purchasing Franklin's biography. Excluded from the ceremony, he attended as a waiter. Nell developed a lifelong commitment to ending educational discrimination. He initiated numerous petition drives for the desegregation of Boston's school system, one of the last holdouts in the state. Blacks had successfully desegregated public schools in Nantucket, Lowell, and Salem. The petitions asked for the dismantling of the all-black Smith school, where deplorable conditions and an abusive white schoolteacher had resulted in a boycott by a majority of parents. The school committee denied their requests despite the dissent of the abolitionist member Henry I. Bowditch. By bringing in the Dartmouth-educated Thomas Paul Jr. as head of the Smith school, the committee bolstered a small faction led by his cousin Thomas Paul Smith that defended the school as a community institution.

In 1849 Roberts sued the committee on behalf of his daughter Sarah Roberts, who, rather than attend the school, which was near her home, was forced to walk a mile to an all-black school. Morris, who had learned law under Loring and became the first black lawyer to be admitted to the Massachusetts bar, argued the Roberts case. His cocounsel was the antislavery politician Charles Sumner. In his brief, used a hundred years later by plaintiff's counsel in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which mandated school desegregation, Sumner contended that "*all men without distinction of race or color are equal before the law*," that separate was inherently unequal, and that segregation harmed black as well as white children. Chief Justice of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts Lemuel Shaw upheld segregation and thereby established the only legal precedent for *Plessey v. Ferguson*, in which the U.S. Supreme Court declared racial segregation constitutional in 1896. Despite this setback, Nell did

not give up. A resurgent boycott of the Smith school, in which activists surrounded the school and even beat up Thomas Paul Smith, led to its collapse. Nell noted the cooperation of black mothers, who made the action successful. In 1853 Morris sued the city schools again on behalf of Edward Pindall. The fight against Jim Crow schools resulted in the passage of a law by the Know-Nothing legislature and governor in 1855 that desegregated the states' schools. The nativist party contained enough free soilers such as Henry Wilson and the state legislator Charles Slack to ensure this abolitionist triumph. Armed with a stack of petitions, Nell had enlisted Slack for his cause. Slack presented a report for desegregation, liberally borrowing Sumner's words, which led to the passage of the law. The black community duly honored Nell at a meeting addressed by Garrison, Hilton, Phillips, Remond, and Slack after this long, hard-fought victory. While Phillips jokingly noted that he was tired of Nell's petitions, Garrison remarked that desegregation had been achieved mainly because of his "indefatigable efforts."⁴⁷

The state's success with school desegregation was not replicated elsewhere. A similar movement in Rhode Island begun by Downing, the son of Thomas Downing and a wealthy caterer who moved to the state in 1846, failed. Educated at Hamilton College, New York, Downing was unable to enroll his children in the public schools. In 1857 he coauthored a petition with Northrup, *Will the General Assembly Put Down Caste Schools?* They compiled evidence from Boston, New Bedford, Nantucket, and Cambridge to tout the benefits of integration. The assembly failed to pass a desegregation bill the next year. In 1859 black abolitionists issued a statement for integration, *To the Friends of Equal Rights in Rhode Island*, but the Providence school committee refused to desegregate the schools. The assembly considered desegregation again that year, but a counterpetition from forty-five black men against disbanding the all-black schools doomed it. Garrison noted that the entire press was arrayed against Downing's persistent efforts. The battle for school integration was won only after the war, in 1866. If the antebellum North birthed Jim Crow, it also gave rise to the abolitionist struggle for black citizenship and desegregation, a forgotten nineteenth-century antecedent to the long civil rights movement.⁴⁸