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### The Significance of Abolitionism and the Underground Railroad, in the Buffalo area, 1840-1860

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## Abstract

The movement to end slavery is commonly known as the abolitionist movement. As a city located next to the Canadian border, Buffalo was a major route on the Underground Railroad. Sadly, when researching abolitionism and the Underground Railroad, national research seems to gloss over Buffalo. If Buffalo makes an appearance in national history books on this topic it is usually only a mention of being an Underground Railroad route into Canada. If historians mention Upstate New York, they usually focus on Frederick Douglass's home of Rochester. Using the accounts of abolitionists, fugitive slaves, newspapers, community activists, and guest speakers, it becomes clear that by the 1850s Buffalo was at the forefront of a new wave of abolitionism. This new wave is distinguishable from what came before it by, advocating for, and taking radical action to end slavery. One of these actions was helping those attempting to escape slavery. This author intends to analyze both primary and secondary sources, from 1830-1859, that pertain to any abolitionist lecture, convention, debate, newspaper, or activity such as helping fugitive slaves, happening in the Buffalo area. This study will use these sources to show the development of increasing escalation in abolitionist activity and rhetoric in Buffalo, which can be traced back to the 1830s. With this new information, this study intends to inform readers about how Buffalo was more than just an Underground Railroad route. It was a leading city in this new wave of abolitionism.

State University of New York  
College at Buffalo  
Department of History

The Significance of Abolitionism and the Underground Railroad,  
in the Buffalo area, 1840-1860

A Thesis in  
History

By

Timothy J. Nixon

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

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## Introduction

When one thinks of the movement to end slavery, the city of Buffalo, New York may not come to mind. This is a mistake. Buffalo was a key city in the abolition movement for many reasons. Buffalo fostered leaders and thinkers who would speak out, and take action against agents of slavery. Buffalo attracted conventions and speakers, where leaders would speak out against slavery, and ideas would be spread. These ideas on slavery were spread, in newspapers far beyond Buffalo. Geographically, Buffalo is located close to Canada, which made Buffalo an important terminus on the Underground Railroad. This Underground Railroad route saw fugitive African Americans seeking safe harbor in Canada after the Canadians ended slavery in 1835. Still, many historians, with an eye on the national movement, seem to overlook Buffalo's importance in the movement against slavery, as anything but a terminus of the Underground Railroad. As such, more light should be shed on Buffalo, in an intellectual and political history of Buffalo's role in the movement to end slavery.

Even some of the leaders of the abolitionist movement such as George Bradburn did not believe in Buffalo's potential to listen to and support the abolitionist message. He believed that Buffalonians were too busy with their daily life to care about ending slavery. So, when Frederick Douglass and George Bradburn arrived in Buffalo, in August of 1843, Bradburn did what many contemporary historians have seemed to do he skipped over Buffalo. Frederick Douglass and other speakers, such as George Bradburn, were on a six-month tour across the eastern and midwestern United States as part of the American Anti-Slavery Society's Hundred Conventions project. Before arriving in Buffalo, they had overcome obstacles in Syracuse and received a warm welcome in Rochester. In Buffalo, Edwin A. Marsh, a local abolitionist, acquired a room

for the Buffalo convention. Douglass described it as, “an old dilapidated and deserted room, formerly used as a post office.”<sup>1</sup> It was here, on the second floor of an old, abandoned post office, that Douglass was to give his first lecture. When Bradburn and Douglass arrived for the first day of meetings they were shocked, as only a few cabmen were in attendance. Douglass describes finding seated, “a few cabmen in their coarse, every-day clothes, whips in hand, while their teams were standing on the street waiting for a job.”<sup>2</sup> These cabbies were using the deserted room as a gathering place, before going about their own day of work. This was not the crowd they had hoped for, leading them to assume that Buffalo was, “too busy to attend to such matters as we had in hand.”<sup>3</sup> Disappointed by the poor attendance of cabbies that Bradburn described as a ‘set of ragamuffins,’ he decided that Buffalo was not worth his time. He took the first steamship to Cleveland, leaving Douglass behind in Buffalo.<sup>4</sup>

Douglass’s persistence paid off. In only a few days, his meetings had increased from a few cabbies to 5,000 individuals coming to hear his views on abolitionism. Bradburn’s and Douglass’s initial pre-conceptions of Buffalo being too busy to care about abolition were proven wrong. The people came out once they heard there was someone worth listening to.<sup>5</sup>

Many professional historians hold the same assumption as Bradburn, as their writing often overlooks Buffalo. This oversight could lead scholars to mistakenly believe that Buffalo was not active in the abolitionist movement, as professionals have overlooked abolitionist actions in Buffalo while highlighting other cities such as Rochester. This is unfair, as this research will expose, by the mid-1840s, Buffalo was a hotbed of abolitionist activity, and

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<sup>1</sup> Fagant, John. "Frederick Douglass in Buffalo." Buffalo Architecture and History. Accessed October 3, 2019. <https://buffaloah.com/h/fagant/Douglass.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

influential in driving the thought process of the movement. This thought process that Buffalo helped foster formed in two separate ways. One such way was race solidarity among African Americans who would help each other out when threatened by Southern interference such as slave catchers coming to town. Another driving force of the abolitionist movement that Buffalo helped to develop was the movement, especially of White abolitionists away from just moral suasion, towards actually taking immediate actions to end slavery and help African Americans who were in danger because of continued aggression by agents of the South.

Before one looks at the actions of the 1840s one should examine the roots of this movement in the 1830s. Then one should highlight the actions Buffalonians took in the 1840s that expanded abolitionist sentiment across the city, and how these actions helped to radicalize the abolition movement, not only in Buffalo but across the nation. Lastly one should look at Buffalo in the 1850s, where there is ample evidence of a broad abolitionist sentiment and vocal abolitionist leaders engaged with matters of national significance.

First, it should be pointed out that for most purposes, abolitionist, will be the most commonly used terminology in this scholarship. It will be used to connote any action, thought, or belief in bringing about the end of slavery or helping fugitive slaves. For simplicity, anti-slavery will only be used in quotes. Far more important to this study, than the difference between anti-slavery and abolitionism, will be the evolution of abolitionists who believe in moral suasion versus taking either physical or political action. Although there are not a plethora of historical works on abolitionist activities in Western New York, there were still some very helpful sources. One such author is Stanley Harrold, in 2004 he wrote, *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism: Addresses to the Slaves*. Harrold states that previous consensus historians had believed that abolitionists, especially ones from the same area, were mostly united in their goals of abolishing

slavery. Harrold composed a revisionist history of this idea. He found a, “fermenting state of ambiguity, indecisiveness, and virtual self-contradiction regarding many-or even all-the issues that abolitionists wished to address.”<sup>6</sup> Harrold found that some of the reformers' arguments changed over time. Harrold tracks three defining speeches; Gerrit Smith's Address of the Anti-Slavery Convention of the State of New York to the Slaves in the United States of America, delivered in Peterboro, New York in January 1842; William Lloyd Garrison's Address to the Slaves of the United States, presented in Faneuil Hall, Boston, in May 1843; and Henry Highland Garnet's An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America, delivered in August 1843, in Buffalo, New York<sup>7</sup>. Harrold used these speeches to show a movement away from abolitionists being, “law-abiding, pacifistic abolitionists” toward more aggressive tactics that include breaking the law, using violence, and supporting slave insurrections.<sup>8</sup> He even pushes the idea that these speeches were steppingstones toward the Civil War. Harrold finds abolitionism had two basic forms “The conservative abolitionists, and the Garrisonian, or radicals political or Liberty.”<sup>9</sup>

Another author is Milton C. Sernett who wrote, *North Star Country: Upstate New York and the Crusade for African American Freedom*. Some of his historiographical questions include what rifts were caused in the debate about slavery and race, after “ecclesiastical abolitionists took the fight into America’s churches.”<sup>10</sup> Another question he explores is how did the presence of African Americans, in Upstate New York, define the emancipation struggle to be more powerful than the traditional movement of abolitionism, which was portrayed as the struggle of a

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Sears. "Civil War Book Review." Review of *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism: Addresses to the Slaves*. In *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism: Addresses to the Slaves*, by Stanley Harrold, 2. N.p.: University Press of Kentucky, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 1

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 2

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Milton C. Sernett. *North Star Country: Upstate New York and the Crusade for African American Freedom*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002.

minority of white men. A third question includes what moral choices did Upstate New Yorkers make when they encountered the strife of African Americans attempting to achieve liberty, did their religious persuasion affect their judgement?<sup>11</sup> My scholarship will be more focused on the moral decisions New Yorkers made, over questions of religious persuasion.

The third author is Manisha Sinha, who wrote, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*. She addresses historiographic questions of the differences between the two waves of abolitionism. The first wave is defined as the time from the American Revolution to the early 1820s. The new wave of abolition takes place from the late 1820s to the Civil War. She questions the difference between the contributions and goals of Black abolitionists and White abolitionists. She also questions how the abolition movement is linked to other movements against inequality, such as women's rights. Sinha's book, "narrates a movement history of abolition in the United States in a transnational context."<sup>12</sup> Sinha's book was the biggest inspiration for my research, where this study will try to do the same thing, which is to narrate the history of abolition in the United States, but this study will do so in the context of Western New York, especially Buffalo.

The fourth author with helpful research was John Myers, who wrote *The Major Effort of National Anti-Slavery Agents In New York*. He addresses how abolition activity, such as the formation of abolitionist societies, increased across New York, after a visit by a national lecturer. Sadly, he only focuses on a narrow time frame of 1835-1837. Myers takes a methodical approach by naming a lecturer, then documenting where they went, and lastly the outcomes of their visit.<sup>13</sup> From

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. XIX-XX

<sup>12</sup> Sinha, Manisha. *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*, 5. London, UK: Yale University Press, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Myers, John L. "The Major Effort of National Anti-Slavery Agents In New York State, 1836-1837." *New York History* 46, no. 2 (1965): 162-86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23162538>.

the story of Douglass and research, we can tell that Buffalo and Erie County did not have much experience receiving abolitionists by the mid-1830s, and as such is hardly mentioned in Myer's text. This lack of early visits by national abolitionist leaders could help explain why Buffalo has not received the national attention cities as Syracuse and Rochester do. With these cities receiving multiple lecturers, they jumpstarted their abolition movement in the 1830s. With these lecturers usually originating from the east coast, perhaps Buffalo was too far west for them to venture. This study shows that when Buffalo began to get these lectures, and later conventions, the outcome in Buffalo was greater than or equal to the other Upstate cities, as it took up the abolitionist cause.

Another author with helpful research was Gregory Lampe. He wrote *Frederick Douglass: Freedom's Voice, 1818-1845*. His book follows Frederick Douglass and the lecturers who traveled with him across the country. He starts his book by explaining the origin and power of Douglass's oratory skills, then he turns his focus on crowd turnout and responses to Douglass and his co-lecturers. Through his tales of other cities, one can see that the initial, poor response that Douglass received in Buffalo was similar to many other cities. Also, the eventual success, measured in turnout, the Buffalo conventions received was not always replicated. The prominence of Rochester at the forefront of abolitionism seems to be predicated on the fact that Douglass decided to live here, as although Lampe notes that the initial welcome Rochester provided Douglass was slightly warmer than Buffalo, the outcome one could argue was better in Buffalo. Douglass stayed in Buffalo beyond his mandated time of three days, extending his speeches to eight days. He then decided to stay even longer to attend the National Convention of the Colored Citizens, even though many of his fellow Garrisonians were against the convention even taking place, as they viewed it as advocating too much radical political

action.<sup>14</sup> As such Lampe's research can be used to reframe Buffalo as the prominent Upstate city engaged in the abolitionists' message instead of being too busy for it.

Using these historians' questions, I have formulated some questions to help to illuminate the under-researched topic of Buffalo's role in the abolition movement. How did Buffalo's development between 1820 and 1860, affect Buffalo's response to the issue of slavery? How were abolitionist activities in Buffalo comparable with trends in the national movement? What were the actions taken by certain individuals, who proclaimed to act in the interest of abolition? How was Buffalo affected by being a border city to Canada, making it one of the last stops on the American side of the Underground Railroad? What was Buffalo's role in the radicalization of abolitionist activity that Stanley describes? What events or actions helped to push Buffalo's abolitionists, or abolitionists who met in Buffalo, to advocate extreme actions. The author expects to find many instances of abolitionist activity in Buffalo. One expects to see a city responding to national events that the whole country had to deal with, such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, or new States entering the Union. Also, when referring to Buffalo, this study will include its surrounding areas which is now known as the Buffalo-Niagara metropolitan area, this includes Erie, Niagara, and Cattaraugus County. As a border city to Canada, Buffalo deserves a spotlight in history, for the countless African Americans it helped to smuggle to freedom.

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<sup>14</sup> Lampe, Gregory P. *Frederick Douglass: Freedom's Voice, 1818-1845*, 176. Michigan State University Press, 1998.

## Chapter I:

### The Beginning of Buffalo's Abolition Movement

The abolition movement in America, according to Sinha, has been marked by two waves of abolitionism. The first wave of abolitionism goes back to when the United States were still British colonies, through the revolutionary times, up to the end of the 1820s. Interestingly Sinha notes of a period called the 'neglected period of antislavery,' this period consists of the waning years of the first wave of abolition up to the second wave, this neglected period happens circa 1815-1825. As both Buffalo and Black Rock were not major cities in the first wave of abolition, it will not be the focus of this study. Instead, the focus of this study will be on Buffalo's role, in what Sinha identifies as the second wave of abolition, which would be best specified as starting circa 1825 and ending after the Civil War in 1865.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will focus on abolitionist activities in Buffalo from 1830-1839. Sadly, even though this period is firmly in what Sinha nationally finds as the second wave of abolition, it is difficult to find much abolitionist activity in Buffalo during the 1830s. Even though Sinha found that the national abolitionist movement's second wave began in 1825, Buffalo would seem to not be very active in the abolitionist movement, until the 1840s, when a plethora of abolitionist activity became apparent. Still, two residents of Buffalo, New York can give further insight into abolitionist activity and sentiment of both the White and Black citizens of Buffalo. The actions of these two individuals also helps to shed light on the main racial difference between why White and Black people took up the abolitionist cause. White northerners will primarily become involved in radical abolitionist

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<sup>1</sup> Sinha, "The Neglected Period of Antislavery." 160-191

activities in the sense that Southerners were abusing the law. This will also be present with ideas of Southern aggression against the Northern culture, such as when slave catchers bribed Northerners to do their bidding. African Americans on the other hand seem to get involved in radical abolitionist activities out of a sense of racial solidarity and the dangers agents of slavery impose upon members of their race. Two Buffalo residents who became active in the abolitionist cause and exemplify these distinctions are George W. Jonson, and William Wells Brown.

### **Historical Background impacting Buffalo in the 1830s**

Before this study starts to explore the abolitionist movement of the 1830s it would be prudent to first explore a few major historical events happening in Buffalo, and around the region that impacted the people of Buffalo. Issues such as the Second Great Awakening, and Market Revolution would change Buffalo in the 1830s and make it a place more receptive to the abolitionist movement. The Second Great Awakening was a Protestant religious revival, that rejected the Calvinist ideas of the world being out of people's control because everything is how God intended it to be. If this Calvinist ideology remained dominant then one would presume that religious people would allow slavery to continue to exist because it was god's will.

In November 1830, Charles Finney, a leading revivalist in Western New York, gave a speech to Rochester's Third Presbyterian Church, where he stated, "God had made man a moral free agent, evil was the product not of innate depravity but of choices made by selfish men and women. Sin and disorder would disappear when they choose good over evil and convinced others to do the same."<sup>2</sup> Historian Paul Johnson, author of *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*, contends that this speech was very successful, that thousands of middle-class men and women set off on an activist crusade to re-make society

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Paul E. *A Shopkeeper's Millennium : Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*, 3. 1st ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.

in gods image. Temperance of alcohol was one of the societal issues that the Second Great Awakening tried to address. Instead of going to taverns, or having dealings with prostitutes, people went to church more to hear about the evils that could be rooted out of society. They became evangelical purists. The growing number of people attending church is also significant. Paul Johnson found that from 1800 to 1835, across most of the northern United States, church membership doubled relative to the population, with most of this growth happening after 1830. Johnson also found that the church membership in Rochester doubled. Although Johnson does not provide a date for these changes, it shows that church massive growth was occurring in Western New York.<sup>3</sup> At these churches, more people than ever before would hear of the evils of slavery. Historian Gilbert Barnes found that the rejection of gradual abolition in favor of immediatism was a direct outgrowth of the Second Great Awakening.<sup>4</sup>

The Second Great Awakening would also help cement the idea of Higher Law into abolitionist messaging. Basically, abolitionists would begin to argue that there was a higher law than the constitution. That law would be gods law, which is significant because slavery was now being seen as Anti-Christian. Thus, if god's new millennium was going to begin, slavery would have to be stopped across the country as soon as possible. It would now be seen as a Christian duty to bring about the end of slavery.

Locally there were some changes occurring in Buffalo as well. One such change was the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. The Erie Canal was completed in part because of the Market Revolution. Basically, markets were expanding, farms and manufacturers were no longer just producing for local markets, but for far-flung markets across the country. Historian Charles Sellers, in his book *The Market Revolution Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*, points out New

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 4

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 5

York was one of the aggressive states in “pushing commerce into their hinterland.”<sup>5</sup> Sellers argues that New York wanted to become the foremost route for trade between the Atlantic into the interior of the West. The problem was cities like Philadelphia and Baltimore were closer to the trans-Appalachian West, with improved roads across the Appalachian Mountains to upper Ohio. Still, New York had a massive advantage because of the break in the Appalachian Mountains in Upstate, New York. Trying to be a leader in this Market Revolution, New York set out to beat competition from Philadelphia and Baltimore. This led New York to complete the Erie Canal.<sup>6</sup> The completion of the Erie Canal would significantly impact the economy of Buffalo.

With the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, Buffalo quickly became the gateway to the West, and the United States' premier Great Lakes port. Buffalo became a major transshipment center between the East and West. By 1843, Buffalo was a busy city of commerce. Buffalo was a transfer point where grain was sent to the east coast, while Irish and German immigrants transferred westward. Anthony Trollope, an English novelist, described Buffalo as having, “rivers of wheat and maize ever running.”<sup>7</sup> The massive grain elevators that still to this day dominate the waterfront, were popping up. Buffalo’s harbor was packed with ships and activity. The transfer of people, produce and materials created many jobs and a great demand for workers. Employment opportunities greatly outnumbered the available labor pool. These factors created a viable African American community because of the availability of lake and canal, dock jobs. Also, Buffalo’s proximity to the slave-free haven of Canada, made Buffalo a major site on the Underground Railroad. This growing economy and closeness to Canada, made Buffalo an

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<sup>5</sup> Sellers, Charles. *The Market Revolution Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*, 41. Oxford, U.K. Oxford University Press, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 41-42

<sup>7</sup> Fagant, "Frederick Douglass in Buffalo." 1.

attractive location for both free and fugitive African Americans. The presence of an African American community is important because many times it was Buffalo's African American community and individuals that helped support fugitive slaves, as will be shown in this study.

To communicate with business interests in the interior of the country, opened up by the Market Revolution, telegraph links had to be built. Historian Nicole Kondziela, author of "When Ink Turned into Bullets: The Effect of the Press in Buffalo, New York and the Nation along with Its Role in Igniting a Civil War" argues that the Buffalo press was a driving force in igniting the Civil War, studies how Buffalo's telegraph links spread the news to the West. Kondziela states,

As was customary at the time, many smaller newspapers would reprint articles from more prominent papers instead of taking the time to rewrite an article on the same event or topic. Consequently, whatever biases or opinions that existed within the article from the first newspaper then carried over to every other paper that decided to use the same article within their pages. For example, since Buffalo was the western most city in the north to have access to telegraph for some time during the 1840s, newspapers in Illinois were reprinting articles from the Buffalo Morning Express and the Buffalo Commercial Advertiser, among others.<sup>8</sup>

As the Buffalo *Morning Express* was a newspaper specifically founded to spread the abolitionist cause, the fact that Kondziela finds it being reprinted in western cities, shows the importance of Buffalo newspapers in the spread of abolitionist thought across the country.

### **Jonson and other White abolitionists of 1830s Buffalo**

For Buffalo to spread abolitionist thought it would need to have individuals become deeply committed to the cause. One such individual was George W. Jonson. Jonson left extensive journals on his daily activities, which Nelson Terry Hientzman painstakingly compiled to tell the story of one of Buffalo's leading, unsung, abolitionists. Hientzman points out that Jonson's journals illuminate a man who seemed to be uninterested in the abolitionist fight, until

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<sup>8</sup> Kondziela, Nicole C., "When Ink Turned into Bullets: The Effect of the Press in Buffalo, New York and the Nation along with Its Role in Igniting a Civil War" (2016), 3. History Theses. Paper 39.

circumstances put him in the middle of a mob while walking the streets of Buffalo on July 12th, 1835. In his journal, Jonson writes that when he saw the mob, he, “became a practical abolitionist for the first time, spite of me.”<sup>9</sup> This quote exposes that Jonson never planned to get involved in the abolitionist movement, if not for being placed in this situation. Hientzman claims that this mob was started because the family of a former slave had escaped, living in St. Catharines, Canada. A slave catcher by the name of Tait had discovered their location, crossed the border into Canada, and kidnapped them in the dead of night, bringing them back into the U.S., via Buffalo. Then these recaptured slaves were rescued by a group of black people, which included William Wells Brown, who lived in Buffalo. In the process of rescuing the former slaves, the group of black Buffalonians came to violently engage with Tait and his ‘Irish posse’. Later when trying to return the family of former slaves to Canada, via the Black Rock ferry, Tait and his Irish mob engaged the Black rescue party. Even though the family escaped, eight to ten of the local African Americans were arrested. Jonson would complain about the arrest stating, “The infamous agent and his bogtrotting abettors, should have been arrested instead.”<sup>10</sup> This journal helps illuminate the so-called ‘pulse’ of the city. This also shows how Jonson’s abolitionist activity was not rooted primarily in a strong belief that slavery should be nationally ended, but in how the detestable actions of agents of slavery. In Buffalo, until the end of the 1830s, there is evidence of a bunch of moral white citizens, such as this lawyer and Jonson, but no evidence of widespread white abolitionist activity. Also, it is very telling that when this escaped African American family was taken to Buffalo, they were saved by other African

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<sup>9</sup> Hientzman, Nelson Terry. *"Not a Scintilla of Abolition in Buffalo:" The Rise of a Liberty Man as Revealed in the Journals of George Washington Jonson*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 28

Americans, not well-to-do, idealistic white people, whom some conventional historians paint as central to the abolitionist movement.

The important takeaway from this mob that Jonson became entwined in, was the fate of the Black rescuers, who were now expected to defend their actions in court. According to Jonson, “the design of the mob seemed to be to mob Pepper (the lawyer) for defending the negroes, being an abolitionist also: or at least to continue their abuse of him; and for that purpose, to get past the constable, and up the narrow passage to the Justice’s office.” He continued, “...in the mob’s midst I boldly and loudly denounced the villains. The majority of the people of the city profess a horror of Abolitionism and are in favor of the rights of the poor negroes being over-ridden. Shame on such a community - a burning shame! What I preached will do good!..”<sup>11</sup> One thing to note about this is that even though Jonson derides the majority of the community for not coming out to defend the lawyer and Black rescuers from the mob, it is important to note that Hientzman denotes that the Irish mob belongs to Tait, by calling them his Irish mob. With that implication, one wonders if Tait paid them, which would mean their actions would not be representative of the whole Buffalo community. If they were Irish people from Buffalo, and not being paid, this would be more damning, but this scenario could still only be indicative of one community in Buffalo. Furthermore, the Irish of the time were stereotyped as being against abolition as they were worried about free African Americans threatening their economic status making their actions less surprising. Even if they were Irish people from Buffalo, one could find it unfair to characterize others' inaction to be the same as supporting the Irish’s actions. In contrast to Jonson, when William Wells Brown tells this story from his perspective, the goodwill of many local individuals will be exposed.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 32

Another white abolitionist known to be active during 1830s Buffalo would be Samuel H. Addington, who was just one of the abolitionists to be mobbed at the Utica anti-slavery convention in 1835. By the late 1840s he would be the Recording Secretary of the Buffalo City Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>12</sup> Jonson in the 1840s would be a committed organizer for abolitionist activities and organizations, but as Hientzman points out, “Jonson was not actively involved in any organized abolitionist movement in Buffalo during the 1830s.”<sup>13</sup> There is no evidence of Addington who was from Buffalo, and known to be an active abolitionist in the 1830s, organizing abolitionists in Buffalo.

As for Buffalo, during the 1830s, there is truly little evidence of organized abolitionist societies, organizations, or action. One such society that was mentioned is the Buffalo and Erie County Anti-Slavery society. After facing the mob, in 1835, Jonson is credited with drafting the constitution of the Buffalo and Erie County Anti-Slavery society.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, the only information on the Buffalo and Erie County Anti-Slavery society, which can be found, by the research cited in this paper, is that Jonson drafted the constitution in 1835. Also, this search has only turned up two sources mentioning Jonson’s drafting of the society’s constitution, that being Heinzman’s book, and *The Liberty Party, 1840–1848: Antislavery Third-Party Politics in the United States*, by Reinhard O. Johnson.<sup>15</sup> Since there is an apparent lack of sources corroborating the actions, members, or even the existence of this society, one could assume that this society was either not very active, or long lived. Future historians may wish to try to shed more light on the actions of the Buffalo and Erie County Anti-Slavery society. If more information can be

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 82

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 32

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 14

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, Reinhard Johnson. *The Liberty Party, 1840-1848: Antislavery Third-Party Politics in the United States*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2021.

found it would seem to be an original scholarship that would help expose the existence of organized abolitionist action in Buffalo during the 1830s. This leads to the conclusion that even though there are signs of individual white abolitionists, people whom William Wells Brown would call friends, there is no evidence of large-scale organized abolitionist activity. Large-scale organized abolitionist activity would not take place in Buffalo until the 1840s.

### **Buffalo's abolition movement of the 1830s from Brown's perspective**

One way that Buffalo was involved in the abolition movement was by helping runaway slaves find shelter in Canada. Since Buffalo is a border city to Canada, The Underground Railroad would be active in Buffalo. The problem with tracing the Underground Railroad has always been that it was a secret operation, without a defined start, although one of the earliest accounts of Buffalo's role in the Underground Railroad comes from abolitionist, orator, and historian, William Wells Brown, who lived in Buffalo circa, 1836-1845. After escaping from slavery, Brown worked on Great Lakes steamboats, which enabled him to carry other fugitives to safety in Canada.<sup>16</sup> Brown moved his family to Buffalo from Cleveland, in the summer of 1836. He picked Buffalo for many reasons, such as it was a terminus of steamboat lines making it a convenient place for steamboat workers to live. More importantly, Buffalo had three times the African American population than Cleveland, suggesting more opportunities for employment. Most relevant was Buffalo's proximity to Canada in case he needed to escape for whatever reason.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cynthia M. Van Ness "'Still they come': some eyewitness accounts of the Underground Railroad in Buffalo." *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 36, no. 1 (2012): 86+. *Gale Academic Onefile* (accessed November 14, 2019). [https://link-gale.com.proxy.buffalostate.edu/apps/doc/A280967667/AONE?u=nysl\\_we\\_bsc&sid=AONE&xid=eda90657](https://link-gale.com.proxy.buffalostate.edu/apps/doc/A280967667/AONE?u=nysl_we_bsc&sid=AONE&xid=eda90657).

<sup>17</sup> William Farrison. "William Wells Brown in Buffalo." *Journal of Negro History* 39, no. 1 (January 1, 1954). <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1290540775/>.

Although Brown would not find the need to escape, he would soon help other African Americans escape to Canada. Since Brown made his living working on steamboats, he could conveniently hide fugitive slaves from catchers, and transport them to Canada via Detroit or Buffalo. Brown in, *Narrative of William W. Brown, an American Slave: Written by Himself*, states that when his ship would arrive in Cleveland, the people who were assisting the slaves knew that he would not charge them to help the fugitive slave. He also claims that he always had at least one slave, sometimes four or five, to help escape when his ship arrived in Cleveland.<sup>18</sup> Once he helped a fugitive slave escape by painting them white, dressing the man as a woman, then guiding him to his steamer and carrying them to Buffalo, to proceed to Canada.<sup>19</sup> In the diary of Brown's daughter, Josephine Brown, she described other small ways William Wells Brown helped slaves, such as,

Buffalo being a place through which many fugitives passed while on their way to Canada. Mr. Brown spent much time in assisting those who sought his aid. His house might literally have been called the 'fugitive's house.' As Niagara Falls were only twenty miles from Buffalo, slaveholders not unfrequently passed through the latter place attended by one or more slave servants. Mr. Brown was always on the look-out for such, to inform them that they were free by the laws of New York, and to give them necessary aid. The case of every colored servant who was seen accompanying a white person was strictly inquired into, Mr. Brown's residence also became the home of Anti-Slavery agents, and lecturers on all reformatory movements.<sup>20</sup>

It is important to note that Brown is a free black person, who is actively helping enslaved black people by sheltering them, presumably feeding them, and smuggling them to safety. All these actions require money and are dangerous to Brown's life if ever a slaveholder or their agents found him. Since he allowed congregations of abolitionists into his residence, his residence could not have remained secret. This makes it surprising that in his narrative of his life, titled,

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<sup>18</sup> Brown, William Wells. *Narrative of William W. Brown, an American Slave: Written by Himself*, 70. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, 2011. Accessed December 6, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Van Ness, "'Still they come': some eyewitness accounts of the Underground Railroad in Buffalo."

*Narrative of William W. Brown, an American Slave: Written by Himself*, while living in Buffalo, besides during Tait's fugitive slave situation, he never reports getting into altercations with enemies of abolition. This indicates that the Buffalo community, at the very least, did not strongly object to Brown's actions, and could be indicative of Buffalo being supportive of the plight of fugitive slaves, and those who help them.

The story of Bacon Tait, misspelled "Tate" by Brown, is told from a very different perspective than Jonson. Unlike Jonson, Brown did not accidentally find himself becoming involved in this incident. He was one of the African Americans, in Buffalo, who set out to rescue the fugitive slaves. Brown provides a more ground-level re-telling of these events than Jonson. Apparently, Tate came North with a list of 20 fugitive slaves, and the Stanford family was one of the most valuable on his list. As the Stanford family had made their way to Canada, they were legally out of Tait's reach. So, he sent a local African American hotel worker to St. Catharines to spy on them and figure out how to best kidnap them. By using what Brown describes as a 'liberal' use of money, Tait found four, presumably local, Buffalonians to help him kidnap the Stanford family. After being alerted around three hours after the kidnapped family had crossed over to Buffalo, Brown, who was in the company of around 5 or 6 other African Americans, all rushed to a stable to rent horses. Brown states that Buffalo's African American community was, "noted for their promptness in giving aid to the fugitive slave."<sup>21</sup> This proved to be true, as when Brown reached the stable, he found many other African Americans doing the same thing. They traced the kidnapers' route two ways and split up. Brown happened to go the right way. On the road towards Hamburg, they ran across a man. He told them that the kidnapers had the family in a tavern and that he himself was looking for some neighbors to, "demand of the kidnapers the

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<sup>21</sup> Brown, 72

authority by which they were taking these people into slavery.”<sup>22</sup> When Brown’s group was spotted making their way to the tavern, the kidnapper locked the Stanford family in a room and threatened Brown’s group with guns. Brown states that the patrons of the bar seemed to rejoice in their presence, he also finds an ally in the tavern-keep who states, “Boys, get into the room in any way you can; the house is mine, and I give you liberty to break in through the door or window.”<sup>23</sup> Despite the kidnappers claiming they would shoot them, Brown’s group persisted till the kidnappers gave up, without shooting anyone, thus, ending the kidnapping attempt.

Even though the Stanford family was safe from the kidnappers, the Stanford family, and their rescuers were not out of trouble yet. Soon they would find Tait had ‘employed’ the sheriff to retake the slaves. Luckily, before the sheriff caught up with them, they were joined by a group of around 40 to 50 African Americans. In between the rescuers and a ferry to Canada from Black Rock was the Sheriff, his officers, and about sixty canal workers. The Sheriff accused them of violating the Riot Act and called upon good citizens to help him keep the peace. Brown then claims it was the sheriff’s officers who rushed them with clubs, at which a general fight broke out. During the fight the lawyer Pepper, the same one from Jonson’s story, appeared. Every time an officer would try to make an arrest, he would ask the officer if he had a warrant to take the man. As they did not, he would then inform the rescuers, “He has no right to take you; knock him down.”<sup>24</sup> The rescuers worked together to stop officers from arresting each other and fought their way to the ferry. Eventually, the rescuers fought their way to the ferry and forced the captain to bring the Stanford’s to Canada, where they rejoiced and remained free. About forty of the African American rescuers were remanded to jail and in the following trials, they were

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 73

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 75

charged from 5 to 50 dollars. Since it was Sunday, Brown claims the Sheriff charged them with “breaking the Sabbath by assembling in such large numbers to protect a brother slave and his wife and child from being dragged back into slavery.”<sup>25</sup> In summary, Brown calls this event, “the most fearful fight for human freedom that I ever witnessed.”<sup>26</sup>

Many events of this account help to further the claim that there was an active African American community in Buffalo, taking action against agents of slavery. Such as Brown calling Buffalo’s African American community prompt in aiding fugitive slaves. More evidence is provided by the many African Americans showing up and using their money to rent horses to chase down the carriage. Even more evidence is provided by the fact that Brown and his fellow African Americans were not deterred by the kidnappers' guns, they were willing to die to save the Stanford family. Then the rescuers fought a mob of both officers, and dock workers, even while knowing the result was likely arrest and fines. The Stanford family was not from Buffalo, nor known by anyone in the community, if it had not been for the Buffalo African American community’s actions, their fate would have been sealed, and they would be illegally returned to slavery. Brown provides motivation for their actions, in helping these strangers when he states, “The most of those who made up our company were persons who had made their escape from slavery, and who knew its horrors from personal experience, and who had left near and dear relatives behind them.”<sup>27</sup> Even with many of these African Americans having the same motivation, the fact that this many African American community members could gather in such large numbers. Then decided to do whatever it took to help fugitive slaves, no matter the cost. Exposes an African American community ready to engage in all aspects of abolitionist action.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid 78.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 74

This support for taking action to save slaves would be present again when Buffalo had to deal with increasing Southern intervention after the passing of the 1850 Fugitive slave law, which would make the North unsafe for all African Americans.

As pertaining to the average white Buffalonian, Brown's testimony of these events portrays mixed reactions. First one should look at the helpful citizens. Before starting to analyze the actions of the individuals in this story, it should be pointed out although Brown identifies many African American individuals, many times he does not identify individuals' race, based on the average demographics of Buffalo, and sometimes occupation of the individual, we will assume they are White. First, there is the man whom the rescuers find on the road, who tells them where the kidnapers are hiding. Although he flags down Brown's group and tells them where the kidnapers had taken the Stanford's, he does not join the group to assist the Stanford's. Instead, he claims to be gathering neighbors to ask about the authority on which the kidnapers took them. This could be one of two things, either this was just the man using a common phrase and he did not care if the extradition was legal. Or it could indicate that this man was more concerned with lawful practice than saving the Stanford family. Also, he never actually shows up, which could mean many things: perhaps it was hard to rouse his neighbors to save the Stanford's, or they were just too late. Then there were the people at the tavern. Brown finds they were happy to see the rescuers, and the owner encouraged them to break his property, to save the Stanford's. Pertaining to these people's position on abolition, one could assume that these people were against slavery but were not ready to take action to stop slavery. Another potential explanation for the actions of the man on the road, and the tavern owner, is rooted in regionalism. Basically, these white individuals potentially did not care about slavery existing in the South. Instead, they were angry about Southerners coming to the North and interfering with

their way of life. This makes sense as many people care more about what is affecting their own lives, than what is happening in far-off places. Regionalism will be further explored, when this issue of Southern slave catchers coming to the North becomes a major issue, after the passing of the fugitive slave law of 1850. We will never know if these citizens held abolitionist sentiment, or were just angry at the Southern interlopers. It is clear that slavery was not part of Buffalo culture and was something these individuals did not condone.

The most impressive of White locals who joined Brown's group, was the lawyer Pepper. He joined Brown's group to defend both the rights of the Stanford's and the rescuers. By being present, he helped to motivate the rescuers and kept them from being wrongly charged. Without him being present, it is likely the sheriff or officers could have made up their own version of events. By standing up to law enforcement, especially by telling Brown's group they could physically resist, he risked extrajudicial retaliation from the sheriff and his officers. Even though Brown never mentions Pepper using violence himself, Pepper encourages the rescuers to fight against their unlawful arrest. This was smart, if he used violence himself, he potentially would not be able to defend the rescuers in court. As for Pepper's motivation, it can be assumed it went beyond simple regionalism, and that Pepper not only held abolitionist sentiments but was willing to take action to further abolitionist goals. This can be assumed because Pepper joins the story after the kidnappers had retreated, during which the rescuers were facing the law, as such it was a local issue. Pepper took a stand against local Buffalonians, who would have put the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, of the Stanford family in jeopardy. One could not know what law enforcement and the courts would have done with the Stanford family if Pepper and the rescuers had not ensured they got safely to Canada. Another factor that often influences lawyers, but

probably did not influence Pepper, is greed. Most likely the individuals in Brown's group were not wealthy, and he was defending them before they reached the courtroom or negotiated a price.

There were also those who joined with Tait, attempting to stop Brown's group from rescuing the Stanford's. The first group to look at is the law. Brown uses ambiguous wording when describing their motivation stating they were 'employed' by Tait.<sup>28</sup> Does Brown simply mean that Tait went to them and asked for their help? This could mean that they were simply interested in upholding law and order, perhaps racially biased. A more likely possibility is that the word "employed" is used by Brown, to indicate that he thinks the officers were paid off by Tait, which would correspond to Tait's tactic of using money, such as when he bribed the Black hotel worker, to cross the border and spy on the Stanford's. Another reason racism most likely influenced the officers, no matter what the officer's motivation was to stop the rescuers, is that in the end, the only charge the officer could come up with was they were breaking Sabbath by assembling. Breaking the Sabbath does not seem like a reasonable explanation to beat up a group of people, or imprison them. Although it is uncertain what motivated these officers to attempt to stop the rescue of the Stanford's, one can assume they were motivated by a mixture of racism, and greed, but there is no evidence that they took these actions in support of slavery.

Both Jonson and Brown's stories speak of the mob who helped the officers, Jonson identifies them as Irish, and Brown identifies them as dock workers. By looking at both stories we can ascertain they are the same group. This mob was trying to stop the Stanford's from getting across to Canada. Later they tried to attack the lawyer for defending the African Americans. Since Irish dockworkers often saw African Americans as competition to their economic opportunities, this is a potential explanation for their racist behavior. Another

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 75

explanation for their actions could be greed; it is plausible that Tait paid them off at some point, to try to stop the rescue of the Stanford's. Beyond the incentive of trying to capture the Stanford's, Tait could have been trying to intimidate those who would oppose the capture of slaves, with the expectation that another case like this would arise again.

### **Conclusions**

It can be concluded that in Buffalo during the 1830s individual White abolitionists seem to be mostly involved in the legal and moral arguments for abolition. There is little evidence of them organizing or holding conferences. Many local whites, such as Pepper and the tavern owner, are willing to give their support to the abolitionist cause and help fugitive African Americans, but only as far as the law permits. In summation, while there are signs that local White people know the horrors of slavery, and are sympathetic to the cause, there is no evidence of them taking radical, immediate, or unlawful action to support the cause. Buffalo's Black community presents as very active, saving slaves from slave catchers. The fast way the African American community shows up, to help the Stanford family, could be indicative that this was not the first time something like this had happened, and it certainly would not be the last. This is interesting, because it shows the 1830s African American community ready to take radical action where they can prevent slavery, long before the leaders of national conferences, including the ones in Buffalo, encourage them to do so. These conferences might have been pivotal to enlisting White support for these radical actions, but it seems the Black community was already ready to take these actions. In conclusion, the African American community was leading the charge toward what will be defined as radical abolitionism and will become a mainstream position by the end of the 1840s.

## Chapter II

### Abolitionism During the 1840s: Buffalo's local Awakening

Compared to the 1830s the 1840s would be a time of great action from abolitionists in Buffalo. Both the African American and White communities of Buffalo would become extremely active and have an abolitionist zeal not seen before. Buffalo's abolitionist sentiment would awaken during the early to mid-1840s with locals embracing and spreading abolitionist thought. Evidence of this abolitionist awakening in Buffalo is shown in many ways. One such example is exposed in the litany of journals left by Jonson, exposing a growing number of meetings and discussions on the topic of abolition, across Western New York. Jonson's journals also help expose Buffalo becoming involved in the national abolitionist movement, by helping to cultivate Liberty Party action in Buffalo. Another example of an abolitionist awakening occurring in Buffalo was shown by the growing crowds and attention that former slave, Fredrick Douglass, received in Buffalo.

#### **The Liberty Party in Buffalo**

One recurring issue of consequence to the Northern abolitionist movement, was the movement from being a peaceful passive movement, towards increasing lawlessness and violence. Before the 1840s the dominant thought among abolitionists was that moral persuasion was the best way to achieve the abolition of slavery. By the 1840s, radical, action-taking, abolitionism became widely accepted by many Northerners. Howard Bell attributes this rise in radical abolitionism to the advent of the Liberty Party. The Liberty Party was founded in 1840 and would soon be led by Gerrit Smith. Stanley Harrold, author of, *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism: Addresses to the Slaves*, states that the Liberty Party was founded, "To use politics

as a means of spreading antislavery sentiment. Almost from its beginning this organization divided into two major factions: Smith's radical political abolitionists and a more moderate group centered in Cincinnati."<sup>1</sup> Smith's faction of radical political abolitionists, using both political mobilization and civil disobedience, would be centered in Upstate New York.<sup>2</sup> It was found that by 1843, many African American leaders, especially the ones located outside of the New England area, were extremely supportive of the ideals of the Liberty Party. They supported it because the political action taken by the Liberty Party was usually denied to African Americans before this point. Therefore, it is not surprising that national conventions meeting in upstate New York, including Buffalo, would be influenced by Liberty Party ideals.<sup>3</sup> The issue of moral suasion versus political action, which would sometimes include violence and civil disobedience would be a recurring issue at conventions, and among abolitionists through the 1840s. One should notice that Buffalonians, and conventions held in Buffalo, show a tendency towards political action.

Perhaps Buffalo's support in this rise in radical abolitionism, attributed to taking action, could be explained by events of the 1830s such as Brown's encounter with the slave catchers. Moral suasion would not have saved the kidnapped Stanford family. Even though the catchers had no legal standing to kidnap the family from Canada, the police still sided with the kidnapers. From this event, the African American community experienced the power of taking radical abolitionist actions. Jonson, and presumably people of like mindsets, who supported abolition but were not yet ready to get involved beyond moral suasion, experienced firsthand the

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley, Harrold. *Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism: Addresses to the Slaves*. 8. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004. Accessed October 5, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>2</sup> Howard H. Bell. "National Negro Conventions of the Middle 1840's: Moral Suasion vs. Political Action." *The Journal of Negro History* 42, no. 4 (1957): 247. doi:10.2307/2715512.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

trouble that could be caused when slave catchers and police alike took extra-legal steps to advance the encroachment of Southern slavery on Buffalo. This public escalation of anti-slavery forces in Buffalo could have led to increased support for the escalation of abolitionist actions beyond moral suasion. One way this want for action would present itself is in Buffalo's Liberty Party.

George W. Jonson, the unplanned defender of slaves in 1830s Buffalo, would return from a short hiatus from Buffalo as one of its chief abolitionists in the 1840s. Hientzman states that during the early 1840s, "the loose network of Buffalonians sympathetic to the abolitionist cause began... to reform into a functional organization of focused antislavery activity. Under GWJ's guidance, the focus centered on creating the nucleus of a local Liberty Party."<sup>4</sup> Jonson's local Buffalo Liberty Party was affiliated with Smith's faction of radical political abolitionists, centered in Upstate New York. This information helps to expose Buffalo's leading local abolitionists ideas aligned with a more radical abolitionist approach.

Jonson's journals help to illuminate both the high quantity of abolitionist meetings, occurring in Buffalo in the 1840s, and that Jonson was becoming a more active leader of the Western New York abolitionist movement, and the local Liberty Party. A brief time period contained in Jonson's journals, from August to November 1841, exposed an explosion of Liberty Party action in Western New York. His journals show the places where meetings were held, how Jonson was becoming a leader of the local Liberty Party, and lastly that the Liberty Party was taking action. One should also remember that these logged events were attended by Jonson, meaning there could have been more events happening that Jonson was unable to attend. Also, it is possible that Jonson is inflating his own self-importance. Journals show a Liberty Party

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<sup>4</sup> Hientzman, 85.

convention happening on August 25th, 1941, in Arcade, which is described by Jonson as large. On September 22, there was a Liberty Party convention held at Griffin's Mills in Aurora. On October 28th, 1941, there was a meeting of the Liberty Party at what could be assumed as a private residence of D.W. Williams, which is at Corner of Church and Franklin Street. On November 25th, Jonson mentions meeting at some place called Atkins' store, which would imply a private business. On November 29th, Jonson mentions requesting the use of churches for, "monthly concerts on behalf of the enslaved."<sup>5</sup> From the locations of these events one can infer that the Liberty Party had support in the city of Buffalo, with its meeting at D.W. Williams, and also in the surrounding rural communities such as Arcade and Aurora. Also, it can be inferred that both private businesses, private residences, and churches, were not only willing to be associated with, but to advance Liberty Party ideals. If the Liberty Party were seen to Buffalonians as radicals, it can be inferred that they would have trouble finding places to host their meetings. As businesses must worry about customer perceptions, private citizens might fear social shunning, and churches do not want parishioners switching churches. Jonson never mentions having to deal with any of these problems. Jonson's journals expose that by 1841 the Liberty Party operated across the Western New York region and was most likely accepted.

Jonson's journals also expose that he took a leadership role in the Liberty Party. At a convention on August 26th, Jonson mentions giving a speech, then later when the convention became more relaxed and they were sharing poems, Jonson mentions being deferred to and taking an active role in this exercise. On October 28th, Jonson presided over a meeting about getting out the vote. On November 29th, Jonson and a few others got together to resurrect the Old City Abolitionist Society which was formed in 1834. Although he declined the presidency,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 87-88

he accepted being the corresponding secretary.<sup>6</sup> All of these events show individuals in the Liberty Party looking to Jonson for leadership. Even though Jonson did not take the presidency of the old city Abolitionist society, it is impressive that he was offered it, which shows that his colleagues looked to him for leadership. Which he would still provide by taking the role of corresponding secretary. Overall, this fits Jonson's life choices, he seems to want to organize and help push the abolitionist cause, to inspire and recruit more followers to the movement, but not become the face of it. This reluctance to being the acknowledged leader could help explain why his role in the movement is usually not mentioned, still many times, especially when a movement is getting started, or in an awakening period, it is the organizers who shape a movement over figureheads and pronounced leaders. Jonson can be seen as a behind the scenes sort of leader, who pushed for political action.

These journals show multiple instances of action being taken in Buffalo during this brief window of time. One such action is creating a culture of abolition at the multiple conventions where lectures, poems, and speeches were given. This is important because many people seek entertainment with people of like sensibilities, since the Liberty Party was hosting these events one can assume a culture of abolition was forming in attendees. Another action taken was the nomination of candidates to advance the Liberty Party cause, such as on August 26th, Joseph Plumb of Erie County was nominated for New York State Senator of the 8th district. On September 22, the Liberty Party nominated; Asa Warren of Eden, Elihu Rice of Sardinia, and Edwin Marsh of Buffalo for the New York State Assembly. These are names of leaders who were at the forefront of politics and even if they lost, other candidates would have to contend with losing their support for this third party if they did not try to court abolitionist voters. Also,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

one can further infer that the Liberty Party had support in both rural and urban Western New York with the diversity of locations they were nominating representatives from. After nominating their candidates, the Liberty Party went to great lengths to get out the vote, with broadside addresses to voters of Erie County, meetings over the general canvas of voters, and speeches in churches.<sup>7</sup> Just like in other get-out-the-vote efforts one can assume the campaigners were not only advocating for their candidates, but trying to persuade voters that their brand of political action against slavery was needed, and awaken them to the growing voice of the radical abolitionist movement. A movement that wanted to end slavery as quickly as possible, not just try to convince Southerners to give up the practice.

Jonson also had much to do with spreading Liberty Party ideals in the local Buffalo newspapers. One such Liberty Party idea that Jonson would help spread occurred when Gerrit Smith gave his address of the Anti-Slavery Convention of the State of New York to the Slaves in the United States of America, delivered in Peterboro, New York in January 1842. Historian Stanley Harrold identifies Smith's address as one of three key addresses that helped to radicalize the abolition movement. The other two addresses are William Lloyd Garrison's Address to the Slaves of the United States, presented in Faneuil Hall, Boston, in May 1843, and Henry Highland Garnet's An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America, delivered in August 1843, in Buffalo, New York. While Smith's address did not occur in Buffalo, it was important because it was a precursor to Henry Highland Garnet's, Address to the Slaves of the United States of America, which was delivered in August 1843, in Buffalo, New York. Another reason Smith's address is relevant to the abolitionist awakening and radicalization in Western New York, is because it helps expose the escalating radicalization of Jonson and the Liberty Party of Buffalo.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Smith's address also exposes the obstacles Jonson, and the local Liberty Party had to overcome to reach its audience, to help awaken them to the struggle to end slavery. As such one must understand why this address was controversial.

Smith's address was radical because Smith urged slaves to disregard both state and federal law, with the ultimate goal being escaping slavery. While Smith did not advocate violence, Harrold states that his address is noteworthy because "Smith did originate was the legitimization of contacting slaves."<sup>8</sup> It is also important to note who was in attendance at this speech. Harrold states that the convention attendees who voted in favor of his address were all white Liberty Party members who were, "evangelical perfectionists from central New York, who denied that slavery could enjoy the protection of church or state."<sup>9</sup> This idea of slavery not being able to be justified by neither church nor state, is an idea that Smith will elaborate on, not only to win the support of attendees, but also to attempt to win general support for the immediate ending of slavery, from the general population, who usually support the following of laws.

In his address, Smith states,

Perilous as it is, you should, nevertheless, snatch all your little opportunities to learn to read. The art of reading is an abundant recompense for the many stripes it may have cost you to acquire it. The slave, who has learned to read a map, has already conquered half the difficulty in getting to Canada; and the slave, who has learned to read the Bible, can learn the way to heaven. Have no conscience against violating the inexpressibly wicked law which forbids you to read it; - nor indeed against violating any other slaveholding law. Slaveholders are but pirates; and the laws, which piracy enacts, whether upon land or sea, are not entitled to trammel the consciences of its victims.<sup>10</sup>

This portion of the address is interesting because even though Smith proclaims to be speaking to slaves, he is using this to also engage a White audience. While the utility of reading a map is obvious, more interesting is Smith's motive in mentioning the law forbidding bible reading. This

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<sup>8</sup> Harrold, 20

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 53

<sup>10</sup> Harrold, 159

is Smith's way to expose how following the law is detrimental to the soul of a slave. It is a way for Smith to show intellectual White people that the laws slaveholders pass are unchristian. This is important because many contemporary people believed that the law of God supersedes the law of man. Therefore, if Smith succeeded in having his audience conclude a slave should be allowed to read the Bible, despite what the law says, they might also agree that slaves should disregard all laws keeping them enslaved. Also, they might conclude it was righteous for abolitionists to break the law by assisting fugitive slaves.

This idea that emerges from abolitionist messaging such as Smith's, is known as 'Higher Law.' The idea of 'Higher Law', is only possible because of the activism and ideals of the Second Great Awakening. The use of 'Higher Law' in the context of abolition can be seen as a fusion of the moral suasion abolitionists into the action taking abolitionists. Basically, since all men are equal in god's eyes, any law that offends the evangelical law, such as slavery, should be disregarded. Some, such as Smith would go beyond pushing for disregarding laws that violate 'Higher Law', and advocate for breaking and fighting against these laws. Smith's ideas relate directly back to the ideas of prominent Second Great Awakening leader Charles Finney as he wanted to quickly create god's new millennium by rooting out all societal evils that went against God's law.<sup>11</sup> This idea would obviously be effectively spread in churches, as a reason to advocate for the end of slavery and to provide assistance to fugitive slaves.

This is especially important as church attendance had greatly increased because of the Second Great Awakening's religious revival. In the future 'higher law' would eventually become a legal defense in the courtroom. Historian Stephen Lubet, the author of *Fugitive Justice: Runaways, Rescuers, and Slavery on Trial*, tracks the development of this idea of 'higher law' in

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<sup>11</sup> Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*, 3

connection to legal defenses in cases of accused fugitive slaves after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Lubet states, “William Lloyd Garrison had long condemned the Constitution, given its implicit recognition of slavery, as a covenant with death and an agreement with Hell.”<sup>12</sup> While calling the constitution itself an evil document would be a hard sell to the average white person, New York Senator William Seward stated that there were ‘higher laws’ than the constitution. This argument of the higher law of God, over man, in regards to slavery, ties into The Great Awakening. The Second Great Awakening was the revival of religious movements for change that was sweeping over what is known as the burned-over district of Upstate New York. Among other issues, It would influence religious peoples into thinking that even though slavery may be constitutionally legal, it was against God’s Higher Law. This Second Great Awakening was happening across many parts of the country, especially Upstate New York, including Buffalo. Smith’s address was revolutionary because it not only affirmed that slavery was against god, but it was imperative for Christian peoples to stop it. That a slave escaping and not being obedient to slaveholders is actually the Christian thing to do. The idea of ‘higher law’ is not only revolutionary to mobilizing agents of abolition in the 1840s but it becomes a legal defense strategy in the courtrooms of the 1850s, with lawyers trying to help clients wronged by the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. With these events in mind, it is clear that the changes made to the religious thoughts and lives of churchgoers after the Second Great Awakening helped paved the way for more individuals to be receptive to Smith’s message and the immediate abolitionist message in general.

Previously the average Buffalonian citizen's stance on extrajudicial action, to stop slavery, is best illustrated by the previously told story of the Stanford family, who was abducted

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<sup>12</sup> Lubet, Steven. *Fugitive Justice Runaways, Rescuers, and Slavery on Trial*. 8. Cambridge, MA : Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010.

from Canada and then quickly rescued by Buffalo's African American community. During that ordeal the African American community was willing to take extrajudicial steps, including brawling with police, to return the Stanford family to Canada. Despite the actions of the Irish mob and the police, whom one could suspect were paid off by the slave catcher Tait, the White citizens that William Wells Brown mentions in his story all seem to support the cause of rescuing the Stanford family. Still, they are unwilling, or unable to take actual action to save them. Jonson is an example of this because he only got involved in the aftermath of this event when a mob unexpectedly interrupted his day by harassing the White lawyer, Pepper, who defended Brown's African American rescue party's rights. Jonson's reaction to this speech will help expose a major awakening and radicalization in his thinking.

This address caused much national debate, with abolitionists and non-abolitionists alike taking issue with advocating illegal, even if peaceful, actions by slaves to take their freedom. Jonson was not conflicted, he fully supported African Americans taking action. After this address, Jonson wrote in his journal, "I am in advance of advanced abolitionists, I am not only for doing away slavery in the South but for putting arms into the hands of the negroes and forming them into companies and training them."<sup>13</sup> This quote exposes a radical even militant mindset that Jonson had now taken in support of immediate abolition by any means. Even though Smith's address would not be as radical as the other two addresses, identified by Harrold, as they called on slaves to further disobey their masters by using violence, if necessary, local abolitionist leader, Jonson, was already advocating these ideas. Even those more radical public addresses do not reach the levels of militancy Jonson held, especially in his ideas of arming and training

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<sup>13</sup> Hientzman, 87-88

slaves, which can be seen as evidence of some local Buffalo abolitionists having early support for military action to end slavery just short of 20 years before the start of the Civil War.

To prove Jonson was not the only Liberty Party member to become radicalized one can look at another one of Buffalo's less known abolitionists, Edwin A. Marsh. Marsh was a White abolitionist, who had ties to the American Anti-Slavery Society, and the Liberty Party. Jonson's journals before Smith's address mention him being nominated as an assemblyman to the Liberty Party, and also him getting out the vote. Even though these are actions that support abolitionism, they do not indicate a willingness to get actively involved in helping fugitive slaves escape slavery. In July 1842, just six months after Smith's address, Jonson's journals expose Marsh being involved in The Underground Railroad, as a Unitarian pastor brought a family of freedom-seeking, fugitive slaves, to Marsh, with Jonson's help they found the family shelter for the night, before arranging to transport them to Detroit.<sup>14</sup> Even though the mentions of Marsh in historical records are scant, the available evidence shows radicalization towards action, following Smith's address.

How the Liberty Party overcame difficulties they experienced in spreading the ideas espoused by Smith's address also illustrates the growing influence of the Liberty Party. As the Liberty Party was not a mainstream party, they had trouble financing their own paper. Jonson remarked that the Liberty party, "usually lacked exposure from the major party presses."<sup>15</sup> This became a major issue when the local Whig paper, the Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser* published an article critical of Gerrit Smith's Peterboro address, without publishing the address in its whole. Jonson wanted to start his own paper, but Hientzman states there was a "lack of enough grass roots support in Western New York to financially sustain a separate Liberty

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 125-126

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 102

paper.”<sup>16</sup> Instead of creating their own paper, other papers such as the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* offered to admit the Liberty Party’s abolitionist and temperance notices as paid advertisements.

One might falsely presume this failure to obtain their own paper is evidence of either an inactive, insignificant, or incompetent, Liberty Party in Buffalo. Besides the expenses of owning a paper, there are advantages to delivering your message on mainstream and traditionally hostile outlets. Jonson took advantage of this by denouncing the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* for not including Smith’s address, on their own paper. In response, on February 1, 1842, the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* decided to republish the editor’s explanation of Smith’s address, the Liberty men’s protests, and then they finally published the full text of Smith’s address.<sup>17</sup> This shows a major victory for the Liberty Party as they were able to make a major newspaper not only publish Smith’s address in full but also to publish the Liberty Party’s protests against their own journalism. It is not unreasonable to believe that this increased exposure to Smith’s address and Liberty Party arguments, would help to awaken abolitionist sentiments in some readers of the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, who would otherwise not have picked up and read a paper, from a press solely dedicated to abolition, as slavery is an issue that could be out of sight and mind for many Buffalonians.

To sum up the importance of Jonson, Hientzman, the historian who compiled his journals, points out that he excelled in both political action and organization. Hientzman states,

If antislavery men and women sought to ‘abolitionize’ society, then GWJ sought to ‘politicize’ abolitionists... Jonson came to believe that slavery could only be reached through the ballot-box, not the pulpit, by a party which would make the extinction of slavery its specialty. Hence GWJ was most concerned, as has been seen, about public

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 103

relations, media manipulation, and attracting the right sort of people to spearhead the local movement.<sup>18</sup>

As discussed, Jonson was a driving force in the local abolitionist movement, especially the Liberty Party. His contribution to the awakening of the abolitionist movement in Buffalo can be seen in many ways. His public relations made a vibrant culture for abolitionists where they could be entertained by poems or lectures. He wrote to established newspapers to spread the abolitionist message. Jonson even pushed local abolitionist leaders, who helped spread the abolitionist message to more people. Still, Jonson was not without flaw, he was an elitist. Jonson once shared his belief that, “no reform was ever started or sustained by the poor and oppressed whom it was to benefit. It is only the well born and well-to-do that are capable of being reformers.”<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps this snobbery, on the part of Jonson, and perhaps his fellow Liberty Party friends, helps to explain the initial low turnout for Frederick Douglass, when he arrived in Buffalo for his 100-convention tour. Beyond snobbery, one has to acknowledge that the Liberty Party and Jonson had vastly different views from the followers of Garrison, which Douglass at this time was. While the Liberty Party advocated for political action and immediate change, followers of Garrison believed in moral suasion or convincing people that slavery was evil. Since the followers of Garrison held different views a New York State Liberty Party organizer named Alvan Stewart published a letter to the *Liberty Press* in July 1843 urging both central and western New York to boycott the Hundred Convention Tour. Stating that views to not pursue political action, were prolonging slavery. As such they should not receive money nor attention.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 116

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 117

<sup>20</sup> Lampe. 175

This is evidence that instead of Buffalo being too busy to listen to Bradburn and Douglass's message, their message was not radical enough for Buffalo's established abolitionists.

### **Frederick Douglass**

Frederick Douglass is one of the most well-known abolitionists of all time. As historian Gregory Lampe correctly points out, he was successful because contemporaries, "could not reconcile his genius with the nineteenth-century stereotype that blacks were genetically and culturally inferior."<sup>21</sup> Lampe points out that because he eloquently described his first-hand experiences as a slave, listeners could not help but realize the injustices of slavery. Lampe identifies many individuals from all steps of life, from self-identified abolitionists, to first timers more deeply committing to the abolitionist cause after hearing Douglass speak. As such, having Douglass speak in Buffalo will serve as a catalyst for increasing abolitionist activity in Buffalo.

August 1843 was an active month for abolitionists in Buffalo. The biggest event would be the National Convention held at Buffalo, N.Y. in 1843. A few days before this National Convention, Frederick Douglass would visit Buffalo, as part of his 100-convention tour. The Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, which met in early 1843, developed a plan for a series of one hundred conventions to be held throughout the North. They hoped that holding meetings in many towns and cities across the Northeast and Midwest would create an abolitionist sentiment in the people.<sup>22</sup> Douglass thought that by sharing tales of his first-hand experiences as a slave he could shed light on the horrible practice to Americans. Douglass states, "Could they know slavery as I knew it, they would hasten to the work of its extinction."<sup>23</sup> However, Douglass would have to get people to listen to his story, if he wanted his story to affect anyone.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. viii

<sup>22</sup> Fagant, "Frederick Douglass in Buffalo." 1.

<sup>23</sup> Frederick Douglass. "One Hundred Conventions." In *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 159. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications inc, 2003.

When Frederick Douglass came to Buffalo in 1843, he was only in his mid-twenties, and had only escaped from slavery five years before. He made his first public speech only two years before coming to Buffalo.<sup>24</sup> George Bradburn and Frederick Douglass arrived in Buffalo early in August. Just as they had done for other stops on their tour, a local abolitionist was to find a room in Buffalo to accommodate the convention. This would be done by previously mentioned local abolitionist, Edwin A. Marsh. Marsh was only able to acquire what Douglass describes as, “an old dilapidated and deserted room, formerly used as a post office.”<sup>25</sup> Fagant’s article sheds more light on how underwhelming a location this former post office was. Not only was it located on the second floor, but it was only accessed by an outside flight of steps.<sup>26</sup> Still, even with these poor conditions, Douglass and Bradburn held hope for their convention.

That hope gave out for Bradburn when he saw the crowd assembled to hear them speak for the first time. Douglass states that they, “found seated a few cabmen in their coarse, everyday clothes, whips in hand, while their teams were standing on the street waiting for a job.”<sup>27</sup> This unpromising audience was too much for Bradburn, he remarked to Douglass that he would not speak to “such a set of ragamuffins.”<sup>28</sup> Bradburn then left Douglass, alone to speak in Buffalo. These descriptions help shine a light on the busy bustling city of Buffalo, which seems to be as Frederick Douglass described as too busy to attend to the matter of Abolition.<sup>29</sup>

Directly before coming to Buffalo, Douglass led a convention in Rochester. Douglass states that “Abolitionists of all shades of opinion were broad enough to give the Garrisonians (for such we were) a hearing.”<sup>30</sup> Douglass goes on to state that he had no trouble obtaining a church to

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<sup>24</sup> Fagant, "Frederick Douglass in Buffalo." 1.

<sup>25</sup> Douglass, "One Hundred Conventions." 162

<sup>26</sup> Fagant, "Frederick Douglass in Buffalo." 2.

<sup>27</sup> Douglass, "One Hundred Conventions." 162

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 161

hold the convention in Rochester. He even describes being entertained by two Rochester locals, Isaac, and Amy Post, whom Douglass describes as not caring about what others might think about them engaging in abolitionist activity, they believed it was their duty. Douglass also states that many fugitive slaves would find a roof with them.<sup>31</sup> This is significant because he received an immediately ideal reaction in Rochester, he was listened to and respected. This is evidence of Rochester being a city mature with abolitionist ideas.

This reaction he received in Rochester can be contrasted to the situation Douglass experienced when he first came to Buffalo. From this information, one can surmise that more citizens in Rochester were involved in the abolitionist cause, before Douglass's arrival, than in Buffalo, because Rochester provided Douglass with a better initial location and attendance. Another piece of evidence, that sheds light on Rochester already being a hotbed of abolitionist activity, before Douglass's arrival, is how Douglass articulates being impressed by the 'manly' way the local Rochester abolitionists debated with him.<sup>32</sup>

Buffalo may have taken longer to pay attention to Douglass's message, but eventually they did. Douglass claims that in only a few days, his meetings had increased from a few cabbies to 5,000 individuals coming to hear his views on abolitionism. In his autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass writes,

For nearly a week I spoke every day in this old post-office to audiences constantly increasing in numbers and respectability, till the Baptist church was thrown open to me, and when this became too small I went on Sunday into the open park and addressed an assembly of four or five thousand persons.<sup>33</sup>

Even if the number of attendees was exaggerated, the continuous upgrading in locations and numbers of attendees is impressive. Bradburn and Douglass's initial pre-conceptions of Buffalo

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 162

being too busy to care about abolition were proven wrong. They just needed someone worth listening to that could break through the busyness of their lives.<sup>34</sup>

One could argue that Douglass's convention had a larger impact in Buffalo than it did in Rochester. However, detractors could attempt to argue the opposite, using the fact that Douglass never mentions local Buffalonian abolitionists debating with him. This should be interpreted as a sign that before Douglass's arrival, the abolition movement in Buffalo had not reached maturity, it was still awakening. Even if one concedes that Buffalo took longer than Rochester to take up the abolitionist cause, one cannot deny that Douglass never mentions addressing crowds of four to five thousand people, in a large park, in Rochester. In Buffalo, the park he gave his lecture in, was Courtyard Park, which is now Lafayette Square, a Civil War monument.<sup>35</sup> Even before Douglass gave his massive address in the park, he had upgraded from the ex-post office to the Baptist church. By the end of Douglass's visit to Buffalo, he had acquired a better location and attendance than he had in Rochester.

Attendance and location of Douglass's meetings can also show that Buffalo was more active of a city in the Abolitionist movement than Syracuse. As when Douglass arrived in Syracuse he initially could not find a place to give a lecture. Then with the help of Stephen Smith, whom Douglass tellingly does not identify as an abolitionist, but as an eminent citizen, he gives his first lecture to only 5 people in a park in front of Smith's house, he then moved to a rundown abandoned church, and finally spoke in an old Congregational church. He spent only three days lecturing in Syracuse, and the biggest crowd described was only 500. This is in contrast to the 5,000 he described in Buffalo. As such Syracuse should be thought as the Upstate New York city that was too busy to hear Douglass, not Buffalo. The only reason Buffalo is

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<sup>34</sup> Fagant, "Frederick Douglass in Buffalo." 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

remembered as such is the interesting tale of Bradburn deciding to skip Buffalo. As Syracuse was visited before Buffalo, perhaps this bad experience influenced Bradburn's decision to leave Buffalo as he thought the convention would turn up as Syracuse did.

Beyond increasing attendance, at Douglass's lectures, one should note the length of time Douglass spent in Buffalo. For example, Douglass was scheduled to speak in Syracuse for 3 days, Utica for 3 days, Rochester for 4 days, and Buffalo for 3 days. Although they had a schedule, Douglass did not always stick to it. Utica was cut short from 3 days to only 1 day. Buffalo on the other hand was extended to 8 days. This expansion was because of the great success they were having in Buffalo.<sup>36</sup> Williams Wells Brown actually attended one of these conventions and stated they, "tore the veil of prejudice from the eyes of the whites of the city."<sup>37</sup> Wells goes on to state they opened up churches that had previously not been supportive of abolitionists. Wells also states there were thousands in attendance and the lecturers received thunderous applause.<sup>38</sup> This is evidence of the Buffalo community coming out to hear the abolitionist message at a rate greater than other cities such as Rochester. If Buffalo was not yet part of the national debate, it was about to take center stage in the abolitionist debate, when the 1843 National Convention of Colored Citizens was held in Buffalo.

### **Conclusions**

As the experiences of leaders such as Jonson and Douglass illustrate, Buffalo in the early to mid-1840s was awakening to the abolitionist message. More people were getting deeply involved in the local movement. This local awakening to the abolitionist message would put Buffalo on the map for getting involved with the national movement to end slavery. Jonson

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<sup>36</sup> Lampe. 175-181

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 181

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

exposes the growing political action of the well-off white men, who through the Liberty Party helped to spread the abolitionist message across both rural and urban parts of Western New York. While Douglass helps to illuminate how African Americans became organized and found their place in advancing the abolitionist movement, with victims of slavery engaging in political action to help those still enslaved. Douglass's lectures drew more attention to the plight of enslaved African Americans. This increased attention was a catalyst that increased the number of people supporting the abolitionist cause. Douglass encouraged local African Americans to get involved in the liberation of enslaved African Americans and perhaps made people more receptive to addressing the African American audience in general. This would be an important goal in the national convention held in Buffalo, New York, which was held days after Douglass's lectures.

## Chapter III

### Buffalo Emerges as a Leader of the National Abolitionist Movement

After Buffalo awakened itself locally to the abolitionist movement, in the early to mid-1840s, Buffalo quickly became deeply involved in the national movement for the abolition of slavery in the mid to late 1840s. Buffalo would not only get involved in national abolitionist issues, but it would also contribute. One such way was hosting national conventions on slavery, which became driving forces in shaping a policy of abolitionist political action. Another way Buffalo contributed to the national abolitionist movement was the formation of newspapers supportive of abolition. Lastly, there is evidence that Buffalo became even more involved in the Underground Railroad than ever before. Buffalo's involvement in these events of importance to the national abolitionist movement is evidence that by the mid to late 1840s Buffalo had become an important and influential city in the national abolitionist movement.

#### **Conventions**

One major convention that exemplifies the effect of the growing influence of militant abolitionism, coming into conflict with the old guard thought process of moral suasion had on abolitionist thought, is the 1843 National Convention of Colored Citizens held in Buffalo, NY.

Howard H. Bell, a historian who researched these conventions, states that it was here that,

For the first time the moral suasionists, representing the old order met in national convention with men who championed the newer confidence in political action as the means by which the salvation of all the people was to be accomplished. Though seriously outnumbered, the moral suasionists were not without modifying influence.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bell, 253.

This attempt to acknowledge both sides of the abolitionist argument can be best seen in the opening keynote address of the convention. That address was delivered by an African American abolitionist from Buffalo, named Samuel Davis.

In the inaugural address of the The National Convention of Colored Citizens of 1843, Samuel Davis, who was at the time living in Buffalo, delivered the first address. As such Samuel Davis deserves more study. He was born a slave on August 13th, 1810, in Temple Mills, Maine. Samuel was born with the name William McCarty. His father's father was a White man, who married a Black slave. This would technically make his father, mother, his brothers, and himself slaves by law. Although his White grandfather protected them from that fate, his health was failing, and William knew that after he died his future would be in question as he would be the property of his grandfather's heirs. When he turned 17, which was in 1797, he took matters in his own hands and moved to Boston. Here he changed his name to William Davis, he would then change his name to Samuel Rand, before finally settling on Samuel Davis. He attended Oberlin College in Ohio which in 1835 became the first predominantly white collegiate institution to admit male African American students. Davis's studies included primarily theology and teaching.<sup>2</sup>

After graduating from Oberlin, and a brief stay in Windsor Ontario, Samuel Davis moved to Buffalo. Davis was active in Buffalo in many ways, one such was his religious activities. He was a reverend and pastor in the Michigan Street Baptist Church of Buffalo. He would also be involved in education. In 1839, a year after Buffalo established the first taxpayer funded, free public schools, in New York, the city's African American parents petitioned for their children to

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<sup>2</sup> Richardson, William J. "The life and times of Samuel H. Davis: an anti slavery activist." *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 33, no. 1 (2009): 47+. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed March 8, 2021). [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A192404032/AONE?u=nysl\\_we\\_albionhs&sid=AONE&xid=f7c13d13](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A192404032/AONE?u=nysl_we_albionhs&sid=AONE&xid=f7c13d13).

be able to attend. Although the City Council refused integration, they did establish an African American public school. Samuel Davis would be the third teacher hired here. He was later promoted to the principal teacher at Buffalo's public African School, in 1842 until 1844. He then established his own private school for African American students from 1844 until 1845, when he returned to teach at the public schools. Davis is most known for his involvement in The National Convention of Colored Citizens of 1843. Davis was elected a delegate from Buffalo, elected Chairman Pro Tempore, and asked to give the keynote opening speech.

His address should be further analyzed, for it can shed more light on what the common abolitionist thought was in Buffalo, and throughout the North. Davis starts his address by stating the grievances African Americans have. He stated,

Gentlemen, in behalf of my fellow citizens of Buffalo, I bid you welcome, from the East and West, the North and South, to our city. Among you are the men who are lately from that part of our country where they see our brethren bound and manacled, suffering and bleeding, under the hand of the tyrant, who holds in one hand the Constitution of the United States, which guarantees freedom and equal rights to every citizen, and in the other, "the scourge dripping with gore," drawn from the veins of his fellow man...Our grievances are many and great, but it is not my intention to enumerate or to enlarge upon them. I will simply say, however, that we wish to secure for ourselves, in common with other citizens, the privilege of seeking our own happiness in any part of the country we may choose, which right is now unjustly and, we believe, unconstitutionally denied us in a part of this Union. We wish also to secure the elective franchise in those states where it is denied us, where our rights are legislated away, and our voice neither heard nor regarded. We also wish to secure, for our children especially, the benefits of education, which in several States are entirely denied us, and in others are enjoyed only in name. These, and many other things, of which we justly complain, bear most heavily upon us as a people; and it is our right and our duty to seek for redress, in that way which will be most likely to secure the desired end.<sup>3</sup>

In this section of Davis's speech, abolitionists contend that the constitution is being used as a shield to defend the practice of slavery. This shows that the abolitionists wanted to change the

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel Davis. "Address." In *Minutes of the National Convention Or Colored Citizens: Held At Buffalo on the 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th of August 1843. For The Purpose of Considering Their Moral And Political Condition As American Citizens.*, 4. New York, NY: Piercy & Reed, 1843. Accessed November 4, 2019. <http://coloredconventions.org/files/original/73369fab9bb261275b57276ccbdbded2.pdf>.

constitution to abolish slavery and secure a form of equal rights, such as enfranchisement, uniformly across the entire United States. Talking about giving African Americans enfranchisement goes beyond the scope of ending slavery, especially a moral suasion argument, it is clear evidence that Buffalo is awoken to the idea of using political action to end slavery, and even enhance the lives of African American citizens. It is not surprising that Davis would choose to speak of the disparity in education received by African Americans, as he himself was a schoolteacher for the Buffalo area, which was one of few places providing any degree of public education to African Americans. An education he most likely believed to still be inferior to white students as he created his own school in Buffalo in 1844. It is also telling of the acceptance of political action in Buffalo that he states that it is their duty to seek change in any way that will accomplish the changes he wants to see.

After many paragraphs where Davis continues to provide reasons, slavery should end and states that they should persuade and pressure the white lawmakers into changing the situation for African Americans, Davis strikes a different tone. He states,

What shall we do? Shall we petition for our rights? I do not pretend to dictate the course that should be pursued; but I have very little hope in petitioning longer... Our humblest prayers have not been permitted a hearing. We could not even state our grievances... Shall we turn to either of the great political parties of the day? What are our prospects there?... They are but the slaves of slavery, too, contending which shall be most faithful in supporting the foul system of slavery, that they may secure the vote of the slaveholder himself, and of his scores of human cattle. Shall we, then, look to the abolitionists and wait for them to give us our rights? I would not say a word that would have a tendency to discourage them in their noble efforts in behalf of the poor slave, or their exertions to advance the cause of truth and humanity. Some of them have made great sacrifices and have labored with a zeal and fidelity that justly entitle them to our confidence and gratitude. But if we sit down in idleness and sloth, waiting for them—or any other class of men—to do our own work, I fear it will never be done. If we are not willing to rise up and assert our rightful claims, and plead our own cause, we have no reason to look for success. We ourselves must be willing to contend for the rich boon of freedom and equal rights, or we shall never enjoy that boon.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Davis, 6-7.

Davis is clearly making a case that moral suasion alone has failed, thus exposing further evidence that Buffalo was in favor of the political action side of the abolitionist argument. With this quote, one can see that Davis is acknowledging the growing call in the abolitionist movement to do more than persuade. He provides evidence of moral suasion failing, while political parties continue to benefit from slavery. Since this is an address to African Americans in general, which was a remarkable advancement in its own right, Davis even states that African Americans should not wait for abolitionists to do their work for them, thus showing his growing attention to radical action. Any call for political action, for African Americans, was bound to raise some eyes of the White population. While Davis still falls short of calling for African Americans to take extreme, or violent action, he does make it clear that African Americans are going to have to take a more involved role in the abolitionist movement, if they want it to succeed. As for the general response to Davis's address in Buffalo little is known. Still, one could infer that it was not seen as inflammatory to local Buffalonians, as Davis retained his job as principal teacher at Buffalo's public school for African American children. If there was a backlash against his address his role as a public-school teacher would most likely have been terminated, and he most likely would not have been rehired as a teacher to the public school in 1845 after leaving to form his own school in 1844. Samuel Davis's speech could be seen as a lens to what the majority of the national abolitionist argument was at this time, pondering the merits of moral persuasion vs political or even militant action. It is also further evidence that Buffalo was on the radical political action side of the argument. One of the following speakers at the convention would take a more radical approach to abolition, which would continue to shape abolitionist thought going forward.

Henry Highland Garnet's address is one of the most famous addresses to come out of Buffalo's National Convention of Colored Citizens of 1843. Importantly his address is directed towards those still enslaved. Even though no slaves were in attendance, this was a radical move as most previous abolitionists, besides Gerrit Smith, thought nothing would come from talking to slaves. He started his address by stating that abolitionists have come from all over the United States to these national conventions, where they "weep over your unhappy condition."<sup>5</sup> Garnet is alluding to the fact that the previous strategies of these conventions have been composed of moral persuasion. Garnet continues that up until now these conventions have been only for freemen, but this time he was offering the slaves advice. Garnet points out that the abolitionists at their conventions have been content to complain about enslaved peoples' situation, hoping their complaints would bring about liberty. He points out that this has not worked.<sup>6</sup>

Garnet continues by degrading the religious argument for slavery. As Southerners proclaimed that the state of slavery was ordained by God, Garnet stated to the slaves that,

You are not certain of Heaven, because you suffer yourselves to remain in a state of slavery, where you cannot obey the commandments of the Sovereign of the universe. If the ignorance of slavery is a passport to heaven, then it is a blessing, and no curse, and you should rather desire its perpetuity than its abolition. God will not receive slavery, nor ignorance, nor any other state of mind, for love and obedience to him. Your condition does not absolve you from your moral obligation. The diabolical injustice by which your liberties are cloven down, neither God, nor angels, or just men, command you to suffer for a single moment. Therefore, it is your solemn and imperative duty to use every means, both moral, intellectual, and physical that promise success.<sup>7</sup>

This quote is significant because Garnet is stating that even though God requires obedience, an enslaved person should not remain obedient, as slavery itself is abhorrent to God. More evidence of the growing movement towards militant abolitionists, at the Buffalo convention, is the fact

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<sup>5</sup> Henry Highland Garnet, "An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America" (1848). *Electronic Texts in American Studies*. 2

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 5-6

that he states it is the religious duty of these slaves to not only use mental abilities, but physical abilities to end slavery. As white owners regularly used religion and even black preachers such as Nat Turner, to control their slave population, this must have been very inflammatory.

Garnet, then goes on to secular arguments for why African Americans should resist slavery. He contends that it is just as wrong for owners to continue to hold African Americans in captivity, as it was for their ancestors to go to Africa to take them. Therefore, current slaves are just as justified to respond with violence, as their ancestors in Africa were, while defending themselves from being taken captive, to the Americas.<sup>8</sup> Garnet continues to state,

Inform them that all you desire, is Freedom and that nothing else will suffice. Do this, and for ever after cease to toil for the heartless tyrants, who give you no other reward but stripes and abuse. If they then commence the work of death, they, and not you, will be responsible for the consequences. You had far better all die—die immediately, than live slaves, and entail your wretchedness upon your posterity. If you would be free in this generation, here is your only hope. However much you and all of us may desire it, there is not much hope of Redemption without the shedding of blood. If you must bleed, let it all come at once—rather, die freemen, than live to be slaves.<sup>9</sup>

This speech was an extremely provocative one, in its Garnet pushes for extreme abolitionist activity. He wants the slaves to take action, as it's better to die a freeman than live as slaves. This message seems to mean it's worth it to try to escape slavery and if one is captured, it was worth it to try to become a freeman. Frederick Douglass, still following non-violent ideals, helped to persuade the convention to reject Garnet's address.<sup>10</sup> Frederick Douglass, a strong force in the Rochester abolitionist community, lobbied for restraint from the abolitionist movement, thus this could be indicative of the Rochester abolitionist movement being a more politically conservative force in the abolitionist movement, aligned with the Garrisonian's of the East Coast.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 6

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 7-8

<sup>10</sup> Sernett, *North Star Country: Upstate New York and the Crusade for African American Freedom*, 117.

Buffalo would host another significant abolitionist conference in the second week of August 1848. Thousands of delegates from every Northern state and three from the South, would meet in Buffalo for what would be the founding convention of the Free-Soil Party. This convention would create a platform and ticket for the presidential election of 1848. They would run Martin van Buren of New York for president, and Charles Adams of Massachusetts for vice president.<sup>11</sup> In Buffalo, the Free-Soil Party, adopted a platform that, “opposed the extension of slavery, advocated homestead legislation, and called for the elimination of slavery in the District of Columbia. But it failed to call for the end of slavery in the Southern states.”<sup>12</sup> Even though the Free-Soil party would lose the election to the Whig candidate, Zachary Taylor, its existence, and formation in Buffalo, is still evidence of a city deeply involved in national abolitionist activity.

### Newspapers

Further evidence of Buffalo engaging in national events around the issue of slavery can be seen in newspapers. In Buffalo there was an editor named Almon M. Clapp, who had deep political connections. In 1846, he began the publication of a newspaper called the Buffalo *Morning Express*.<sup>13</sup> When describing his motivation to create the *Express*, Almon Clapp said,

The growing sentiment that slavery had no proper abiding place on the soil of a free nation had begun to manifest and assert itself in Western New York without a sympathizing journal to espouse its cause. It seemed that the time had come when free sentiment should have an advocate, and that feeling crystallized in The Buffalo Morning Express, a journal of modest dimensions and pretensions at its birth, and which has survived the institution of slavery, the existence of which caused its conception.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 124

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 125

<sup>13</sup> Kondziela, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Almon M. Clapp, "Interesting Reminiscences of his Early Life." Buffalo *Morning Express* (Buffalo, NY), April 10, 1899. Microfilm.

This quote helps shed light on the fact that there was a growing abolitionist sentiment in the general population of Buffalo, that enough people were involved or at least cared about this cause to make a newspaper venture into the topic a worthwhile, profitable, venture.

Also of note is that Frederick Douglass's famed Rochester based abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star*, or later *Frederick Douglass Paper's* did not begin publication until 1847, a year after the Buffalo *Morning Express*.<sup>15</sup> If one compares Frederick Douglass's life as a slave and abolitionist to Almon Clapp's, who was involved in many ventures outside of abolition, such as a previous publisher of the Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser*, a clerk for the Erie County Board of Supervisors, and loan commissioner for the U.S. Deposit Fund, it is remarkable that Clapp founded his paper not only as an abolitionist paper, but founded it first, before Douglass.<sup>16</sup> This helps to shed light on a hunger for an abolitionist paper that could be theorized to be stronger in Buffalo than it had been even in Rochester, as Douglass, a former slave and abolitionist, would be a logical choice to start an abolitionist paper.

As Buffalo was the western most city in the North to have access to the telegraph in the early 1840s it was found that newspapers out West, such as Illinois were reprinting articles from Buffalo newspapers including the Buffalo *Morning Express*. Even after 1852, when almost every major city was connected by telegraph, Buffalo was still a gateway for news to the West, being that it was only beaten by Philadelphia for most telegraph links to New York City.<sup>17</sup> This means that Buffalo's newspapers and journalists were able to influence people's opinions in cities across the country. This is especially important with articles of the Buffalo *Morning Express*, as it

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<sup>15</sup> Douglass, 187.

<sup>16</sup> Kondziela, 36-37.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 3

would be spreading the word of the radical political activist side of the abolitionist movement which was dominant in Buffalo.

### **The Underground Railroad**

Buffalo during the 1840s did more than hold conventions on the evils of slavery, and print articles, it would be a place where slaves would finally become free. For some slaves, Buffalo might have been where they achieved their freedom because of circumstance, basically, they found themselves in Buffalo and took the opportunity for freedom. As for the African Americans who purposefully came to Buffalo as their point of liberation, one must wonder why they chose Buffalo. Could they have heard of any of the rhetoric coming out of Buffalo's conventions, such as Garnet stating that nothing but freedom will suffice, that it was better to die free than live as a slave? Or these slaves may have heard of the abolitionist newspapers coming out of Buffalo, identifying the city as one likely to be sympathetic to their cause. Perhaps they knew of Buffalo's proximity to Canada. Even though it is impossible to determine what, if any, pull factor brought African Americans escaping slavery, to Buffalo, it still important to note that these pull factors were numerous.

Pull factors aside, it is known that many African Americans came to, or through Buffalo seeking freedom from slavery. Such was the case of two unnamed slaves, from Louisiana whose tale was told by Frederick Douglass's *North Star*, in an article called, "They Are a Stupid Race Made to be Slaves." This article is indicative of the historiographic effort of African American historians before the 1960s, these histories are described as attempts to show that enslavement was not African Americans' natural condition.<sup>18</sup> Considering bias, it is important to note that this article's headline exposes that Douglass's intent was to disprove the notion that African

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<sup>18</sup> Harris, Robert L., Jr. "The Changing Contours of African American History." In *A Century of American Historiography*, by James M. Banner, Jr, 52-65. Boston, MA: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2010.

Americans were stupid, docile, and made to be slaves, as such one might wonder what ‘creative licenses’ Douglass took, nevertheless it is a captivating story. Douglass states that these two slaves were skilled, intelligent, mechanics, who brought in high sums of money for their owner. The owner allowed these slaves to keep any money for work performed after they finished their daily allocated tasks. After accumulating what they thought to be a fair sum of money, they attempted to negotiate their freedom with their owner, who continuously refused to free them no matter what sum of money they would produce. Since they could not buy freedom, they would take it. Douglass then describes their journey North as perilous as if they had to face the many forces that might try to send them back such as in the southern patrols and lynchers, or northern kidnappers who as Douglass bitterly states were, ‘backed by the glorious constitution.’ What is most unique about their situation is they paid a white beggar to act as their owner and secure carriages and inns for them. When they arrived in Buffalo, they sold their horses and carriages, paid off the white beggar, and eventually crossed the border into Canada.<sup>19</sup> It is significant that they must have spent time in Buffalo, while selling the horses and carriages, instead of solely leaving that to the white beggar as payment. This could be interpreted as they felt relatively safe in Buffalo perhaps because of one of the previously mentioned pull factors.

Of course, African Americans were helped by White abolitionists along the Underground Railroad too. One such conductor on the Underground Railroad was George W. Jonson. Jonson’s journal entries involve harboring African Americans as casual with little sense of drama, simply factual. This could indicate that he did not fear reprisals for his actions. Jonson commonly used

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<sup>19</sup> Douglass, Frederick. "They Are A Stupid Race Made to be Slaves." *The North Star* (Rochester, NY), April 28, 1848. Accessed March 13, 2020. [https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.buffalostate.edu/iwsearch/we/HistArchive/?p\\_product=EANX&p\\_theme=ahnp&p\\_nbid=O5DO5BVYMTU4MDgzMzY1Ny42Mzg3NzI6MToxMzoxMzYuMTgzLjExLjQz&p\\_action=doc&s\\_lastnonissuequeryname=6&d\\_viewref=search&p\\_queryname=6&p\\_docnum=28&p\\_docref=v2:11BE9340B7A005AB@EANX-11D0A37BC061C358@2396146-11D0A37BCC8BEA00@0-11D0A37BF413F478@%22they%20Are%20a%20Stupid%20Race%20Made%20to%20be%20Slaves%22](https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.buffalostate.edu/iwsearch/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=O5DO5BVYMTU4MDgzMzY1Ny42Mzg3NzI6MToxMzoxMzYuMTgzLjExLjQz&p_action=doc&s_lastnonissuequeryname=6&d_viewref=search&p_queryname=6&p_docnum=28&p_docref=v2:11BE9340B7A005AB@EANX-11D0A37BC061C358@2396146-11D0A37BCC8BEA00@0-11D0A37BF413F478@%22they%20Are%20a%20Stupid%20Race%20Made%20to%20be%20Slaves%22).

these fugitive slaves as lectures. Jonson's journal entry on October 19th, 1842, states, "Rev. Shepperd... presented a white-black man, named Milton Clark, a fugitive slave, from Kentucky. Mr. S. asked if he could not be made useful, and we decided to set him lecturing..."<sup>20</sup> Using fugitives as lectures could paint Jonson as an exploiter, this can be countered by his journals which expose that he also harbored people he found distasteful as one of his journals from October 24th, 1842, states,

Bored and vexed by a colored rascal, who has assumed my name, and pretends to have been a slave in the Dist. Col. but whom I suspect to be a fugitive from justice; and yet he has been recommended to me by the Revs. Brown and Torrey. They lack sagacity and prudence. He rails at the former, is sordid, unprincipled, his object notoriety and money. He will give us trouble.<sup>21</sup>

This journal gives insight into just how committed Jonson was to helping African Americans escape injustice, even when he did not particularly like, or trust the individual, he still would help them.

What Jonson wrote in his journal on July 24th, 1843, helps illuminate that by this date, Jonson had much experience dealing with fugitive slave situations. The journal states,

About 11 at night a man rattled at my office door... It was Rev. G. W. Hosmer, Unitarian minister of Buffalo. Wanted my aid. Was very much agitated, he. A minister named East had commended to his care a colored fugitive slave [named Brown] wife, children. Hurried off with H. to rouse some of the colored folks here to take them. Not a Negro in the streets. Went way over to Quarles on Michigan street... got his son to go to a colored boarding house, and after much debate, induced three or four blacks to accompany me to Hosmer's... The fugitives were quartered among the colored people... I learned that Brown had escaped from prison in Philadelphia... The next day Brown went on to Detroit... Quite an amount contributed here for the fugitives... I must do Dandridge and other colored men justice to say they did their whole duty... I laugh at Hosmer's nervousness and fussing, this being about his first experience in such business, which he contrived to shirk on me and the colored folks. Why did he not take the whole family into his spacious house, temporarily at least? But H. did much and is a good man - for a priest.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Hientzman, 124

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 125-126

This quote helps to summarize the actions taken by Buffalo's abolitionists, when dealing with fugitive slaves, during the 1840s. The abolition movement consisted of African Americans, church leaders and members, and well-off White men, such as Jonson, each performing a role, and contributing what resources they had to ensure freedom for the fugitive African Americans they took under their care. It is also worth mentioning that beyond Jonson's activities, of helping fugitive slaves, and being a leader in the local Liberty Party, he also assisted African Americans who sought to own property, and attempted to correct the inequalities present in the Buffalo public school system.<sup>23</sup> Jonson used his skills as a well-connected lawyer and businessman to advance both social and civil liberties for African Americans.

The development of Buffalo into a bigger city, would also be advantageous for African Americans seeking freedom in Canada. The Suspension Bridge, which was built in 1848, was the first and only bridge across the Niagara River to Canada.<sup>24</sup> This is an important development for fugitive slaves as now they would not have to find someone to ferry them across the Niagara River to Canada. This development will be vital to a story Samuel Ringgold Ward recounts in his autobiography, titled, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro: His Anti-Slavery Labours in the United States. Canada & England*. The story states,

He arrived at the Niagara River without serious mishap, and was just about to cross, and make the "leap" of which Miss Martineau speaks. But he cautiously approached the river's brink, and looked up and down before borrowing a boat, there being no ferry very near, and he preferring to cross quietly and privately, in that manner: but down the river he saw a man fishing, whose appearance he did not particularly like. He hesitated. The man turned his face towards him. It was the face of his master! In an instant, he ran - almost flew--from the margin of the river, to gain the suspension bridge close at hand, and cross it. His master pursued... The keeper of the tollgate encouraged the Negro, who, though breathless, redoubled his energies and almost multiplied his speed at every bound, until he reached the Canadian end of the bridge-when he suddenly stopped, his haste being over, the goal having been reached, the prize won. He looked his former master, who had just "arrived in time to be too late." calmly in the eye, with a smile of

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 126

<sup>24</sup> Van Ness, "'Still they come': some eyewitness accounts of the Underground Railroad in Buffalo."

satisfaction and triumph overspreading his features. The two were equals: both were free."<sup>25</sup>

This story is important because it shows how the development of Buffalo led to new avenues of escape for fugitive African Americans, without the bridge Samuel Ward would likely have been recaptured.

Although the Underground Railroad had been operating before the 1840s as previously mentioned, new infrastructure in the form of the Suspension Bridge, made it easier to cross the border than ever before. Beyond infrastructural improvements to aid in fugitive slaves escape, Buffalo now awakened to the abolitionist message seems to have more White involvement with the Underground Railroad, as evidenced by all the people involved in helping harbor fugitive slaves. This is in contrast to the 1830s when for the most part it was only Buffalo's African American community that was taking action to help fugitive slaves. Now well-off White people such as Jonson are purposefully getting involved and organizing a network of protecting fugitive slaves.

### **Conclusions**

In general, one can define the 1840s as an awakening of the Buffalonian abolitionist movement. The involvement Jonson describes in the 1830s, and the indifference Douglass received when he first arrived in 1843, is a far cry from the bustle of activity reported by the end of the 1840s. By the end of the 1840s, Buffalo had hosted both multiple national and local conventions on the abolition of slavery. The national conventions helped shift the nationwide strategy of abolitionists away from moral suasion towards radical abolitionism. Local conventions helped organize and promote the Liberty Party which became a contender for the

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<sup>25</sup> Samuel Ringgold Ward, *Autobiography of a fugitive negro Ins anti-slavery labors in the United States. Canada & England*. London: J. Snow. 1855), 176. <http://www.docsouth.unc.edu/neh/wards/menu.html>

Presidency. Local newspapers began to take interest in the abolitionist movement, and Buffalo started its own abolitionist paper in the form of *The Buffalo Morning Express*. These papers carrying abolitionist ideas were spread across the expanding United States via the telegraph. Also, the 1840s saw churches, African Americans, and White abolitionists come together to help fugitive slaves in an organized manner, now known as the Underground Railroad. This abolitionist awakening would progress into outrage and further radicalization in the 1850s

## Chapter IV

### Buffalo's Leading Role in the Abolitionist Movement of the 1850s

As shown the 1840s were an awakening for the abolition movement in Buffalo, the movement became more organized and attracted a broader audience by spreading its ideas through conventions and lectures. The abolition movement in Buffalo in the 1850s gained momentum from national issues such as the Fugitive Slave Act and the issue of the admittance of Kansas and Nebraska to the Union as either slave or free states. These national outrages would be met by Buffalo's organized abolitionist movement, who would then use these outrages to fuel their newspapers, and lecturers with the ammunition they needed to convert more people to their way of thinking. Thus, showing a community outraged by Southern aggression on the eve of the Civil War. This community would continue to help out on the Underground Railroad, which would take on additional significance after the issuance of the Fugitive Slave Act. Analysis of the condemnations of federal policy in local newspapers and the newsletters of abolitionist organizations will help expose Buffalo as a leading example of what abolitionist policy was in the antebellum North.

#### **The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850**

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was perhaps the most aggressive action slaveholders ever took to defend slavery, before leaving the Union. The law expanded federal judicial authority and directed federal authorities to adopt a more direct role in guaranteeing the security of slavery. It exclusively empowered federal officials, with the ability to apprehend and repatriate fugitive slaves. A number of United States Commissioners, who were based in cities throughout the country, could issue warrants for the arrest of alleged fugitive slaves. Then these same

Commissioners determined the status of the apprehended African Americans, and if they were found to be slaves, rather than free persons, these Commissioners could exact a higher fee, giving incentive to finding apprehended African Americans as runaway slaves. Alleged fugitives were denied many of their rights, such as a trial by jury, the right to speak on their own behalf, and no guarantee for legal counsel. Furthermore, the act provided for a \$1,000 fine and up to six months imprisonment for citizens who aided in the concealment of fugitive slaves.<sup>1</sup> From these provisions one can conclude that this law was created only for the benefit of the slaveholder. With Commissioners receiving incentives to find captured African Americans as runaway slaves, and these African Americans unable to exercise their rights, one could theorize that this law caused disruption in northern African American communities, with many free persons wrongly brought to the South and enslaved, just by being accused. Analysis of the responses to this act will help to expose the continuing theme of racial divergence in why both White and Black abolitionists became further radicalized. For many White abolitionists, the Fugitive Slave Act was seen as further regional aggression from the South, they saw it as an encroachment of Southern values over their own. Black abolitionists would become further militant and radicalized out of necessity, as now even free African Americans were at risk of being taken from the North to the South.

On September 18, 1850, President Fillmore signed the Fugitive Slave Act, into law. The fact that this law was signed into law by President Millard Fillmore, a western New York, native, who achieved his notoriety in Buffalo, could be construed by some as evidence that Buffalo did not have abolitionist sentiments. Instead, one should look at his time in Buffalo, and his record as

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<sup>1</sup> Richardson, Jean. "Buffalo's antebellum African American community and the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850." *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 27, no. 2 (2003): 29+. Gale Academic Onefile (accessed October 5, 2019). [https://link-gale-com.proxy.buffalostate.edu/apps/doc/A128705089/AONE?u=nysl\\_we\\_bsc&sid=AONE&xid=ef391e4d](https://link-gale-com.proxy.buffalostate.edu/apps/doc/A128705089/AONE?u=nysl_we_bsc&sid=AONE&xid=ef391e4d).

a congressman. Fillmore was born in Cayuga county, New York, and moved to Buffalo in 1820, at the young age of 20 years old. In Buffalo, Fillmore studied law, taught students, and worked in the post office. From 1832 to 1834, he was a representative in the House of Representatives, opposing President Jackson. From 1836 to 1842, he served as the Whig party representative of his district. Congressmen generally earn votes and get re-elected, by representing the thoughts and interests of the people who elected them, in this case, Buffalo. As such Fillmore's congressional record reflects not only the mindset of a leader who was molded by Western New York values but the general mindset of the average Buffalonians who voted for him multiple times. Examining Fillmore's time in Congress, exposes Fillmore's anti-slavery sentiments. As a congressman, he opposed Texas being annexed as a slave territory, supported John Quincy Adams's fight against the 'gag rule' which forbid the house from considering anti-slavery petitions, advocated congress ending the interstate slave trade, and fought for the exclusion of slavery from Washington D.C. Beyond voting for these issues, in 1838, Fillmore responded to a letter from the chairman of the Anti-Slavery Society of the County of Erie, affirming he was in favor of all of their demands, but did not want them to consider this a pledge. This can be seen as politics as usual, especially for someone trying to climb the political ladder, to represent other parts of the country who may not have the same support for anti-slavery politics.<sup>2</sup>

Millard Fillmore's shift away from anti-slavery, towards the President who compromised for the union, by signing the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, can be traced to his failed first attempt to represent citizens beyond Buffalo. In 1844 Fillmore ran for the Governor of New York and lost. He attributed this loss to the votes that the Liberty Party, poached from his mainstream appeal, and then denounced them in a letter written in 1844 to Henry Clay, stating "The

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<sup>2</sup> Goldman, Mark. *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York*, 48. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983.

Abolitionists and foreign Catholics have defeated us in this state. I will not trust myself to speak of the vile hypocrisy of the leading Abolitionists now. Doubtless many acted honestly but ignorantly in what they did.”<sup>3</sup> This letter not only shows Fillmore's disappointment of losing the election to the Democrat Silas Wright Jr., but his dismay over the fact that because the Liberty Party ran their own candidate, instead of supporting him, New York would be controlled by the Democrat party, which would be worse for the abolitionist cause than Whigs. This forming divide between himself and abolitionists can be shown again in a letter to John Gayle, where he replies to being called an abolitionist by saying that even though slavery is evil, the constitution leaves the matter to the states, not the national government, that it is the constitutional right of states who call slavery a blessing to continue slavery and states that find it as evil can abolish it.<sup>4</sup> As an abolitionist, Millard Fillmore never made it past moral suasion. He was then spurned by the radicalizing abolitionists of the time who demanded more action and voted for their own candidate. These events help illuminate why, when he reached the White House, he places his anti-slavery sentiment below preserving the union.

As Vice President, who presides over the Senate, Millard Fillmore originally sided against the compromise bill. Soon after Fillmore became President following Taylor's death in July of 1850, he received multiple letters supporting the compromise over inaction. One of the last letters Fillmore received was from Samuel Addington, a Buffalonian abolitionist, who tried to persuade Fillmore against signing the bill. Sadly, Fillmore signed the bill, and his national image will forever be tainted by signing the Fugitive Slave Law, but by doing so he saved the union for about another 10 years. His actions and ideology is much the same as Lincoln. In response to the Black Lives Matter movement, in 2020, many statues of Fillmore, names of

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<sup>3</sup> “Millard Fillmore Papers”, Book II, F. Severance (editor), Publications of the Buffalo Historical Society, XI.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 267-268

campus buildings, such as the one at the University of Buffalo, where Fillmore was a founder of the university, are being removed, as he is now being seen as racist, or at the very least his connection to the Fugitive Slave Law is seen as offensive. To these charges one could state that this bill should not be the defining factor in Fillmore's life. Fillmore has a record of being against slavery as a personal conviction and a congressman. At the very least one should understand that Fillmore's signing of the Fugitive Slave Law was not due, or influenced by, his experiences in Buffalo. Furthermore, most Buffalonians did not support the Fugitive Slave Law. Illuminating the problems, and immortality, associated with the Fugitive Slave Law, was something the contemporary papers of Buffalo excelled at.

One Buffalo paper best illustrates how devious this new law was, and the chances for personal profit, if only one went along with the corruption of law and order and left behind their morality. The Buffalo *Daily Republic*, on October 9th, 1850, less than a month after the signing of the Fugitive Slave Act, released an article titled "Practice under the Fugitive Slave Law." In this article the paper creates a conversation between two different persons, Person A, and Person B. Person B is probably a Southern bounty hunter, who is trying to convince Person A, a Buffalonian, to help him identify African Americans, fugitive or otherwise, to be brought back to the South. Important pieces of the conversation goes as follows, after person Person A states that his conscience makes him decline Person B's offer, Person B responds with,

B: Conscience be hanged! If you wish to see the result of listening to the Whining's of conscience, go to the poor houses... You say you live in Buffalo. All that I require of you is to spy out all the runaway slaves you can, and send me a description of their persons with their ages as nearly as you can guess. And when you run out of these, free blacks will do just as well. As fast as you can send me these descriptions, I will procure affidavits of ownership and escape, and powers of attorney. These powers of attorney will authorize the holder to reclaim the slave described, and to return him to the owner, or sell him in any slave market. As the owners will be generally fictitious, we shall, in most cases, take the latter alternative.

A: But how do you propose to get these affidavits and powers of attorney? Do you intend to forge them?

B: By no means. I can procure thousands of them in any of the slave states... and if they are not true affidavits, it will not be our fault, you know. I will buy the affidavits and the powers of attorney, and have them certified as the law directs. If the persons of whom I purchase them choose to stretch their conscience, why let them do so- we take them in good faith, and nobody can hurt us for it.

A: But there is an affidavit to be made before the commissioner or the judge who issues the precept; and the person who makes this affidavit must swear he knows the negro in custody to be the identical one described in your papers. You could not of course expect me to do this.

B: Certainly not. I shall, in all cases, send persons to make these affidavits... The owners of runaway slaves will not leave their homes and their business, to go long journeys into free states, to swear to the identity of negroes; nor will they send members of their own families for that purpose. Making affidavits, in the slave states, is a mere business transaction, which anyone will do.

A: Well, suppose that we should run out of legitimate game and commence on the free negroes, would your agent swear to their identity?

B: Certainly, he would, and swear truly too; for the person he would swear to, would be the identical one which you had previously described.<sup>5</sup>

This whole conversation exposes the contempt the author of this article has for the Fugitive Slave Law. Person A makes it quite clear that this law is not at all about capturing runaway slaves and returning them to their rightful owners. This is a whole new industry to them, a way to make a profit by taking African Americans from free states and selling them into slavery in the South. It highlights the fact that since travel is neither cheap, easy, or fast, in the 1850s, the Southern slave owners would never come North, and that by giving a mere description of an African American, one could set in motion the enslavement of either a former slave or born free African American. They would enter new slave markets, regardless of their former status, making their accuser rich. The *Republic* characterizes Person B as extremely confident in the ease of this operation. The *Republic* does this to highlight how absurd the law is, and how easy it is to abuse.

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<sup>5</sup> Buffalo *Daily Republic* (Buffalo, NY). "Practice under the Fugitive Slave Law." October 9, 1850. Accessed September 20, 2019. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/254823008/?image=254823008&words=>.

As the conversation went on, Person B further explained how it did not matter if the African Americans were a freeman, and how much of an insult to the North this law was. Person B explains that there was no difference as to how a rightfully free African Americans could defend themselves, as they had no right to defend themselves, as they have no writ of habeas corpus, and others could not testify to the captured African Americans' place of birth. Then later when Person A brings up the possibility of other free men intervening to stop the African American from being fraudulently seized, Person B responds by reminding Person A of all the fines and imprisonment facing anyone doing so. In the end, the *Republic* has Person A agree to join Person B, in hunting African Americans as he could not find any possible repercussions to his involvement, besides his conscience, plus he would become very wealthy.<sup>6</sup>

An obvious message the Buffalo *Daily Republic* attempted to convey was the new danger facing both free African Americans and White abolitionists who continued to help African Americans, beyond the obvious, it seems the *Republic* was also trying to warn of a perceived cultural assault by the South, on Northern values. In fact, the author has Person B call it a humiliation when he states, “If a southern president had favored a law as humiliating to the south as this is to the north, he would have been lynched on his first return to his native state. But your northern politicians think more of offices and executive patronage than you do of honor.”<sup>7</sup> The article clearly tries to create regional tension by having Person B gloat about how this was a humiliation of Northern values, and stating that if a Southern politician did the same they would have been lynched, which implies that the author thinks that people from the South see Northern politicians as weak. Then he even has Person B insult the honor of people from the North. When this happens the author does not have Person A object, which signifies that the author feels this is

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

a humiliation and wants the audience to feel that too. The author has Person B tell Person A to put his conscientious objections aside early in the conversation, which the author had Person A make to show he was raised with Northern ideals. After this, instead of questioning the morality of the situation the author purposefully has this average White guy from the North, only questioning the practicality of the situation. Once all his legal and financial questions on how slave catching in the North could be done, he has Person A agree to join Person B in the slave catching business. The article emphasized how an average Northerner who originally had not supported slavery could be convinced, based upon monetary advantage, to become an agent of slave catchers. This was most likely done by the author to exacerbate the idea of Southern ideology corrupting Northern sensibilities. The author purposefully has Person A be slowly corrupted by Person B, until he too takes up the slave catcher's cause. As established earlier in the story of the Stanford families' escape to Canada, slave catchers were seen by many as Southern interlopers who were not welcome in Buffalo, now the *Republic* is trying to say that they are trying to convert average White Buffalonians into slave catchers as well. As such this article would seem to serve as a rallying call for action towards national abolition exposing the South as an aggressor on Northern culture. Painting the South as not content to just have slavery be protected in their states, but forcibly enforced upon the Northern states by not only enterprising Southern slave catchers, but new financially motivated recruits from the North. The issue of the spread of slavery would also be present when new States joined the union.

The Buffalo *Daily Republic* in their very next article after, "Practice under the Fugitive Slave Law" provided a response to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, by pushing for political action, as it publicly vilified the Northern politicians who voted for this law. In the article titled, "The Fugitive Slave Bill" the *Republic* writes this introduction, "The deep feeling of indignation

which a knowledge of the wicked provisions of the fugitive slave bill has caused at the North, makes it desirable that the vote upon it in the Senate and House of Representatives should be placed on record.”<sup>8</sup> The *Republic*, goes on to list all the congressmen who voted for the Fugitive Slave Law, and singles out the congressmen from the North and identifies their constituency.<sup>9</sup> It would be logical to assume that The *Republic* took this action so that these congressmen can be voted out of office. This assumption also is supported by the line from their previous edition when they had Person B allude that Northern politicians cared more about their career than doing what was right. This shows a Buffalo paper taking national action to attempt to create national political change by informing citizens across the country of which Northern representatives voted for this bill, that they have previously identified as an aggressive encroachment of Southern values and embarrassment to Northern values. This message would likely be read across the country because of the previously mentioned importance of Buffalo in connecting the telegraph network. Articles like these two, which came out of Buffalo, likely influenced countless literate White people across the country to take radical abolitionist political action.

Political action such as voting was not a luxury afforded to African Americans in the 1850s, unlike the average white citizen who could chose to do nothing, every African American living in the United States was in jeopardy. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, Canada was one of the logical safe havens for African Americans in the 1850s. As such one would expect a mass exodus of the African American population from a border city such as Buffalo. Surprisingly, Buffalo's census data confirms that many African Americans decided not to leave Buffalo even after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. The 1850 census is the first census one

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<sup>8</sup> *Buffalo Daily Republic* (Buffalo, NY). "The Fugitive Slave Bill." October 9, 1850. Accessed September 20, 2019. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/254823008/?image=254823008&words=>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

can find online with data on how many African Americans were living in Erie County. In the city of Buffalo there were 41,586 people classified as White, and only 675 people classified as ‘free colored.’<sup>10</sup> In light of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law and the extremely dangerous situation it created for all African Americans, regardless of their freedom status, one would expect the population of African Americans in Buffalo to decrease, as they would look to find refuge in Canada. Surprisingly, the African American population in Buffalo would grow to 878 people in 1860.<sup>11</sup> Historian Jean Richardson, contends that census figures for the African American population may have been distorted lower, “due to absences from the city for seasonal work on the canals and lakes and reluctance to give information to white census takers.”<sup>12</sup> Beyond Richardson’s reasons believing the number of African Americans living in Buffalo might have been higher one must consider whether an African American might hide from census takers out of fear of being kidnapped as a repercussion of the Fugitive Slave Law. Meaning Buffalo probably had more African Americans than reported. This population change can be contrasted to the African American population of Columbia, Pennsylvania, which dropped from 943 to 487 after the passing of the bill.<sup>13</sup> Even in Monroe County which encompasses Rochester, a city many consider a hub of abolitionist activity, the census shows the African American population dropped from 699 in 1850 to 567 in 1860. Although one cannot ascertain if the African American population in Buffalo grew from natural birth or other African Americans relocating to Buffalo, it can be theorized that Buffalo was an attractive place for African Americans to live even after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act. This could be explained by

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<sup>10</sup> State of New York: Table NO.2 - Population by Subdivisions of Counties." In *Census of Population and Housing*. N.p.: U.S. Census Bureau, 1850.

<sup>11</sup> State of New York: Table NO.3 - Population of Cities, Towns." In *Census of Population and Housing*. N.p.: U.S. Census Bureau, 1860.

<sup>12</sup> Richardson, Jean. "Buffalo's antebellum African American community and the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850."

<sup>13</sup>Fred Landon. "The Negro Migration to Canada after the Passing of the Fugitive Slave Act." *The Journal of Negro History* 5, no. 1 (1920): 25. doi:10.2307/2713499.

the geographical advantage of being a border city to Canada, or a sense of an active community of abolitionists willing to help out African Americans who ran into trouble.

Fred Landon, in his article, “The Negro Migration to Canada after the Passing of the Fugitive Slave Act” finds that despite the law, severe repercussions for abolitionists, and the increased activities of slavecatchers, the Underground Railroad was never more successful as it had become after the passing of the Fugitive Slave law. He finds that at least 3,000 fugitives were able to make it into Canada within 3 months of the bill being signed. Landon mentions that 87 fugitives escaped through Buffalo within a year of the bills passing.<sup>14</sup> Landon finds that in Buffalo, at one Baptist church alone, more than 130 members fled across the border.<sup>15</sup> This is comparable to Rochester as Landon finds, only 2 of the 114 members of Rochester’s African American Baptist church, did not flee for Canada. Landon illuminates an important distinction in Buffalo, that some African American Methodists decided to stay and make a stand.<sup>16</sup> Thus one could speculate that these black Methodists had faith in the people of Buffalo to protect them from this unjust law.

Contrary to Landon, Historian Jean Richardson, contends that the national number of African Americans emigrating to Canada was exaggerated by abolitionists, as propaganda against the Fugitive Slave Law. Regarding Buffalo, Richardson contends that the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law did not lead to large-scale emigration to Canada, from Buffalo’s African American community. Richardson states, “Buffalo's Pre-Fugitive Slave Law African American community was active in opposing slavery and calling for local integration and civil rights. After passage of the bill, the community publicly demonstrated against the law and took actions to

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 28

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 25

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 25-26

save arrested fugitives.”<sup>17</sup> He contends that this is why many African Americans decided to stay, as they had a community willing to defend them. As evidence to his claim, Richardson provides a letter by George Weir, Jr., who was an influential businessman in Buffalo’s African American community. When the *New York Evening Post* wrote a report that stated 130 African Americans from Buffalo’s Baptist church had fled, the same number historian Landon claims in his article, Weir contended that the *Post* was misinformed and refutes the *Post's* claims by publishing a letter to the *North Star*, Weir states,

From whatever source this information emanated, allow me to inform you that it is incorrect, and instead of the large number spoken of, not three have left from either church, and I know that not three have left from the whole city; therefore, the report is entirely incorrect and without the least shadow of foundation. The Buffalonians are made up of different stuff. We are not so easily frightened as to leave our homes in consequence of any such machinations of the Devil... We have long since considered the matter and have come to the conclusion that we have a right to live here, and also that we have a right to use the same means to maintain our right that our revolutionary fathers taught us on a "certain occasion." No attempts have been made here as yet to arrest anyone. Our city has enjoyed a quietude and repose which is devoutly hoped may continue. But when it shall be broken, Buffalo will be heard from.<sup>18</sup>

Weir is a great contemporary source, illuminating a confident African American community in Buffalo, claiming that Buffalonians were different from the rest of the country. Although it should be noted that Weir was a businessman, meaning one might theorize that he would have an interest in making it appear that emigration from Buffalo was not a problem, so he didn’t lose business. One should believe Weir since Landon and the census data both also show that Buffalo’s African American population was not experiencing mass emigration and was actually growing. As a primary source Weir’s account of African American resilience is a boost for the argument that the number of emigrants from Buffalo was much lower than other parts of the

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<sup>17</sup> Jean Richardson. "Buffalo's antebellum African American community and the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850."

<sup>18</sup> Weir, George. "Letter from George Weir." *North Star* (Rochester, NY), March 20, 1851. Accessed April 24, 2020. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84026365/1851-03-20/ed-1/?sp=3&r=0.189,1.13,0.291,0.144,0>.

country. Despite the disagreement over the actual number of African Americans who fled, both historians contend that Buffalo did not experience the same level of emigration as other parts of the country. Sadly, his claim, issued in March 1851, that no Buffalonian had been arrested under the Fugitive Slave Law would only be correct until August 1851. Thankfully, his claim that Buffalo would be heard from would be accurate.

### **Liberating Fugitive Slaves in Buffalo**

The first vignette of Buffalo abolitionists taking action, is the first legal case involving an African American being claimed by a slave catcher, in Buffalo, under the Fugitive Slave Law. This was the case of Daniel Davis, who was arrested in August of 1851. The accounts from various sources differ in what happened to Davis, what Landon writes, seems to be the least biased. Davis was a cook on the steamer *Buckeye*, while the vessel was docked in Buffalo, Landon describes the following actions occurring. Davis was called up from below, and the moment his head popped up above deck, a slave catcher named Benjamin Rust hit him hard in the head. Rust had a warrant from the United States Commissioner for his arrest. Davis fell into the hold, landing on top of a stove, which badly burned him. He was immediately brought to court. Newspapers state that at the trial he was still bleeding. In the rushed trial, Rust won. Rust would later lose when local abolitionists took legal action on a writ of habeas corpus. Davis was brought before Judge Conkling and was released. Once released, Davis was swiftly taken to Canada by Buffalo abolitionists. Rust was later even charged with a 50\$ fine for the assault of Davis.<sup>19</sup> Davis's tale shows the willingness of Buffalo abolitionists to use the court process to fight the Fugitive Slave Law. It also illuminates the efficiency in the capabilities of the Underground Railroad in Buffalo, as they were able to get Davis to Canada, so swiftly at the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 32-33

conclusion of his trial before more action could be taken against him. If Buffalo did not have such an organized, swift acting, abolition movement, it is likely that Rust would have immediately taken Davis back to the South to be enslaved. Davis's tale ignited the press of Buffalo and Rochester alike. With Frederick Douglass's paper having this to say,

This fugitive slave case has done more to awaken disgust and abhorrence in this region towards slavery, slaveholders, slave-hungers, and the Fugitive Slave Bill, than any other case of the sort that has ever occurred. The murderous assault made upon Daniel, at the time of his arrest, has much to do with the sympathy aroused in his behalf, and the indignation and loathing with which his inhuman pursuers are regarded.<sup>20</sup>

This quote from the Frederick Douglass paper, helps to illuminate the fact that abolitionists in Rochester cared about what was happening in Buffalo. This event helped to further enflame public disgust towards slavery, not only in Buffalo and Rochester, but around the region.

Landon provides another vignette of abolitionist activity. He describes a 14 year old girl, who came to Buffalo to be a maid for her owner's daughter. Landon makes no mention of this girl seeking freedom, when abolitionists found her she was, "spirited off...transferred to a steamer flying the British flag, and landed in Canada."<sup>21</sup> When the master came up to Buffalo with his lawyers trying to retrieve his slave under the Fugitive Slave Law, his demands were refused as the girl in question was in Canada, so he could not hold anyone accountable for his estimated 1,000 dollar loss. This is an example of Buffalo abolitionists taking radical, law-breaking action without even being asked to do so, exemplifying an active and motivated city.

Overall, the Underground Railroad was very effective in Buffalo, one of Buffalo's most celebrated 'stations' in this operation is the 511 Michigan Ave, Baptist Church. This was the site of the signing of New York's Freedom Trail Act, which looked to highlight places involved in

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<sup>20</sup> Frederick Douglass. "The Man Daniel and his Captors." *Frederick Douglass Paper* (Rochester, NY), September 4, 1851.

<sup>21</sup> Landon. 32

the Underground Railroad. At this Baptist church some of Buffalo's wealthy and prominent families would hide slaves in the church before they could be taken across the river into Canada. The usual route taken would be to the Black Rock harbor then across to Fort Erie. Also, it is important to note that after the construction of the Suspension Bridge in 1848, which was expanded in 1855, to make a top level for locomotives, while the bottom level would continue carrying both pedestrians and horse and carriages, Buffalo was the only point where one could cross into Canada without the use of boat for hundreds of miles. Although no official record exists, as the Underground Railroad was a secret operation, some estimates claim that at least 30,000 slaves found their freedom through the Western New York portion of the Underground Railroad.<sup>22</sup>

#### **The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854**

One national issue that Buffalo newspapers took notice of was when new states would try to join the union. One of the most controversial states, for the nation and the Buffalo newspapers, was Kansas. The source of contention was the Kansas-Nebraska Act that proposed that Kansas would be admitted as a state, and it was the people of Kansas who would decide, through a vote, whether it would enter as a slave or free state. This was contentious because Kansas was located above the 36° 30' line of the Missouri Compromise. This would allow extension of slavery into the North. The potential extension angered abolitionists and Northerners in general. This is important because those who were fine with slavery being contained, instead of abolished, were now faced with the fact that slavery was expanding into the North.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> "WNY: End of the Line On Freedom's Road" *Buffalo Evening News*, November, 9, 1963, microfilm.

<sup>23</sup> Kondziela, 44

Buffalo newspapers spent a great deal of time contesting this subject throughout the majority of the 1850s. Nicole Kondziela finds that the public opinion of the majority of both the city's newspapers and populace towards Kansas was that it should become a free state. Even so Kondziela finds, "differences in opinion among the local Buffalo newspapers which led to grand public spectacles that played out within their pages."<sup>24</sup> Even though the Kansas-Nebraska Act was not signed into law until May 30 1854, Kondziela finds that, "From the fifteenth of that month to the thirty-first, there were approximately seventy-five articles concerning the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the four Buffalo dailies that are being examined alone."<sup>25</sup> Kondziela obtains this number without including the numerous editorials on slavery in other capacities, such as the Fugitive Slave Law, or Kansas coverage in other, smaller, Buffalo papers.<sup>26</sup>

The Kansas-Nebraska act was so detested by a majority of Buffalonians that both liberal, and Southern Democrat, supporting newspapers would denounce it. With Buffalo's most liberal newspaper, The Buffalo *Morning Express*, calling the acts pending ratification, "the Nebraska fraud."<sup>27</sup> While the Buffalo *Daily Republic*, a paper that was generally viewed as having a Democratic Party bias, went against the Democrats and opposed the Act. On multiple occasions, the editorial pages of the *Republic* were similar to the content on the liberal Buffalo *Morning Express*.<sup>28</sup> The May 16th edition of the *Republic* stated,

We have protested from the outset against this measure, and have deemed it our duty to point out its impolitic and dishonorable characteristics. If its passage bequeaths to the country a legacy of sectional strife and domestic warfare; if it arrays one portion of the people against the other and compels the north to boldly assume the attitude of uncompromising hostility to the admission of another slave state into the Union, these consequences will be attributable to the authors of the violation of a solemn compact and not to those who have protested against it. Upon the former will rest the fearful

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 45

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 46

responsibility of reviving an agitation which threatens the country with the most direful results.<sup>29</sup>

With this quote, one can see that the *Republic* was firmly against the Kansas-Nebraska act. This is significant because if both liberal and Democrat supporting papers are both against the act, it helps illuminate a probable majority feeling in Buffalo of disdain for the act. This disdain can be explained by Eric Foner in *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*. Foner finds that Northerners wanted the newly formed states, from the territories, to remain as free from slavery as possible, since they thought that either they or their children, may one day go to these newly formed states, where they would have to compete with slave labor. These Northerners thought it was unfair to make them compete against slave labor, both from an economic and a racial standpoint.<sup>30</sup> Thus making some Northerners opposition to slavery not based in morality, but selfish self-interest.

This growing disdain for the South, which has been festering throughout the years, and mentioned many times, was exacerbated as the South continued to try every tactic to achieve their goal of Kansas becoming a slave state. Kondziela finds that abolitionist papers, such as the *Express*, contributed to a growing Northern clamoring for Southern separation, because of their constant hostility, chastisement, and ridicule, towards the South.<sup>31</sup> This was exemplified in an *Express* article where they state,

The 'South' was the spoiled peevish, bawling child, that was always threatening to throw itself out of the window and dash its little brains out if it could not have everything it cried for... But let this tawney [sic] half-savage urchin beware of a further repetition of its tantrums. The next time the North holds it out of the window in that way, the North will be in good earnest, and will certainly throw the good-for-nothing creature into outer darkness into the pit it has so long been digging. Fools! Quit your sham alarms and outcries of 'Wolf! Wolf!' You have cried that, just once two [sic] often. The wolf is

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<sup>29</sup> "The Struggle in the House of Representatives," Buffalo *Daily Republic*, May 16, 1854, microfilm, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Foner. *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War: With a New Introductory Essay*. OUP USA, 1995.

<sup>31</sup> Kondziela, 50.

coming at last 'and no mistake', and all your arms can bring you no deliverer, while you are torn in pieces and your flock is scattered.<sup>32</sup>

This article of *The Express*, published in 1854, helps to expose the thought process of abolitionists in Buffalo. It illuminates a people, who are tired of the South controlling the political narrative of abolition, by threatening to leave the Union. It even advocates letting them leave the union, as they have threatened so many times, as they are not worth dealing with, illuminating the disdain Northerners now had for the South.

This disdain was only exacerbated once the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed through both houses of Congress by May 1854. The *Buffalo Morning Express* was outraged, and it began to make wild predictions on what the future held. The editors portrayed the issue of slavery as moving like a spreading empire. "Slavery might as well come into New York as go into Nebraska," wrote the editors, as if it brought with it a legion of warriors. "If it can go there [Nebraska] by bribery and fraud, it can attempt with equal propriety to come here by force." Slave interests in Congress had convinced the U.S. government to open Nebraska to slavery. Next, the Buffalo paper speculated, slave interests would require New York and other free territories to accept slavery "by force. In 1854, the paper was stoking the flames of civil war. "The fight between slavery and freedom is now to be open, and 'to the bitter end,'" the paper portended, "The gauntlet has been cast at our feet." The Buffalo press purported to stand on the side of freedom wielding a gauntlet against an 'empire of slavery' authorized by the U.S. government. Only self-defense, the paper suggested, would stop the encroachment of slavery in free and new territories."<sup>33</sup> This paper helps shine light on the increasing power, radical abolitionism, had gained in Buffalo. With the editors making it clear that this continued

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<sup>32</sup> "Sectional Malignity," *Buffalo Morning Express*, May 17, 1854, microfilm, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Kondziela, 52.

aggression from the South could not continue, no matter the consequences including violence. This portrayal of the South as an expanding ominous empire helps illuminate how fierce the regional rivalry between the South and North had become, with newspapers openly showing their disdain for the South. These papers are more evidence that for White abolitionists, radical abolitionism grew in lockstep with regional rivalry.

As the Kansas territory's status as a free or slave state was to be decided by popular sovereignty, The Buffalo *Morning Express*, Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser*, Buffalo *Daily Republic*, among others, placed ads to encourage freedom-loving Buffalonians to move to Kansas to defeat slavery before it began.<sup>34</sup> With both Southerners and Northerners emigrating to Kansas, troubles were bound to flare up, such as when a mob from the southern state of Missouri sacked the town of Lawrence, Kansas. In a flair of 'yellow journalism,' the Buffalo *Daily Republic* put out a story titled, "GREYTOWN OUTDONE!! Destruction of the Printing Press and the Hotel, and Probably the Whole Town of Lawrence in Ashes – Women and Children Fleeing in Every Direction."<sup>35</sup> The story states,

People of Buffalo: –The city of Lawrence is partially if not totally destroyed! The blood of her murdered citizens cries to Heaven for vengeance. Armies of the ruffians of slavery...are hunting down with remorseless cruelty, the freemen of Kansas. Their cry is 'we will exterminate and drive out every d – d abolitionist!' meaning thereby every freeman of the North. Their victims are our countrymen, our fellow-citizens, our friends. Their only crime is that they love liberty rather than slavery...Have you no public voice of burning indignation, detestation, and scorn to utter? Have you no hand to stretch out to aid and succor the champions of liberty on the plains of Kansas, struck down by the strong arm of tyranny, and no words of cheering and hope to whisper in their ears?<sup>36</sup>

This quote helps to illuminate the scope of escalation, and exaggeration the Buffalo newspapers were willing to construe in the name of abolition. Papers engaged in what would later be coined

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 62

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 69

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 69-70

'yellow journalism' to sell copies, so it could be assumed that many Buffalonians wanted to read of the evils of the slaveholders and held the goal of abolition dear to them. This escalation of the Buffalo paper's abolitionist ideologies gave Buffalo a national platform that encouraged local activists to infuse the movement with increasingly radical ideas. These Buffalo newspapers, being shaped by the abolitionist wants of Buffalo newspaper readers, were being transmitted out West, informing and influencing their readers as well. This transmitting West of Buffalo's ideas likely influenced many other parts of the country of the regional aggression of the South which would help grow the national abolitionist movement like it did in Buffalo, rallying the population to be willing to take on the South when the time came, and the Civil War began.

## Conclusion

Buffalo was not only a bustling and growing city in population from the 1840s and 1850s, but it was also a maturing hub of abolitionist thought, comparable to Rochester and other more well-known cities. Although it is shown that the White population may have taken longer to become organized and deliberately abolitionists, than the Black community, as shown in the case of the Stanford family. Even in the 1830s Buffalo had an active community of African Americans, such as William Wells Brown, who were willing to risk their lives to save African Americans, who were threatened by slave catchers. Still, even in the case of the Stanford many white individuals such as the tavern owner, did not accept Southern slave catchers interfering in Northern affairs and helped. Thus, showing regional tension was evident and a primary cause of White action even in the 1830s. This greater regional tension will grow in lock step with greater White action in the fight against slavery, and the agents of slavery.

Although White action will grow in lock step with regional aggression, the organizing efforts of Jonson and his Liberty Party, Douglass, and the nation conventions hosted in Buffalo, will be catalysts in mobilizing the White population and then news media to get involved with the national abolitionist movement. This is evident because from 1840 onwards, there is evidence of organized political action being taken to fight slavery. Evidence of this is provided through Jonson's mobilizing and organizing of the local Liberty Party. The trend of abolitionists taking immediate action to end slavery and help the enslaved, was developed at the same time and influenced by various events happening in Buffalo, such as the 1843 National Convention of Colored Citizens. This convention helped change the dialogue on abolitionism in many ways such as stating that immediate and unlawful activity should be taken by both slaves and allies of abolition to end slavery. Evidence of this change is exemplified in Jonson, who back in the 1830s

only accidentally found himself involved in an argument against slavery, now he was an agent of the Underground Railroad. Overall, by the 1840s there is evidence of both White and Black citizens of Buffalo becoming involved with what was called radical abolition where they are taking physical action against slavery and its agents.

By the 1850s Buffalo was a city deeply involved with the abolitionist cause. Its newspapers would write about national events concerning slavery, such as The Fugitive Slave Law, and Kansas's admittance to the Union. The person A and B conversation in the October 9th, 1850, edition of the Buffalo *Daily Republic* (Buffalo, NY). "Practice under the Fugitive Slave Law" was a great example of how the Buffalo press attempted to inform and persuade the general population about how horrible the Fugitive Slave Law was. The *Republic's* next issue provided the name of every northern member of congress who voted for the Fugitive Slave Law. This is a great example of how the Buffalo press tried to influence abolitionist outcomes in elections across the country. During the Kansas - Nebraska Act the Buffalo press exaggerated the evils of forces of slavery against abolitionists to yellow journalism standards. The goal of these articles was to enrage abolitionist-minded Northerners to move to these new territories to stop the spread of slavery by both democratic as well as violent means. As such, Buffalo's press was continuing the trend of using regional tension to bring more Northerners across the country into the abolitionist cause. Thus, proving Buffalo was an influential city to the national abolitionist movement.

Individuals in Buffalo also stepped forward to help fugitive slaves, despite fear of harsh reprisals because of the Fugitive Slave Law. One example is the story of Daniel Davis, who was the first person arrested under the Fugitive Slave Law, in Buffalo, in August of 1851. Even though Davis was taken to court he did not get the fast trial that Rust, the slave catcher wanted.

The abolitionists were able to win in court and then quickly get Davis to Canada. Some estimates claim that at least 30,000 former slaves, such as Davis, found their freedom through the Western New York portion of the Underground Railroad.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, one can see that Buffalo was a key city in the abolition movement. Buffalo fostered leaders and newspapers who would speak out, and sometimes take action against agents of slavery. Buffalo attracted conventions and speakers, where leaders would speak out against slavery, and ideas that affected the national abolitionist movement would be spread. These ideas on slavery were spread, in multiple newspapers far beyond Buffalo. Buffalo with its suspension bridge into Canada, and a strong network of abolitionists was a prime location for crossing the border while on the Underground Railroad. One of the trailblazing historians to write about Buffalo's role in the abolitionist movement leading up to the civil war was Nicole Kondziela. While her thesis, "When Ink Turned into Bullets: The Effect of the Press in Buffalo, New York, and the Nation along with Its Role in Igniting a Civil War" was very helpful in identifying Buffalo newspaper articles that supported abolition, I was not convinced that the Buffalo press was actually a driving cause of the Civil War. Still, her thesis could be worked into this paper's main point, which I believe has been proven, that Buffalo was an influential and active city in the abolitionist movement.

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<sup>1</sup> "WNY: End of the Line On Freedom's Road" *Buffalo Evening News*, November, 9, 1963, microfilm.

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