

Frederick Douglass in Buffalo

By John Fagant

“Pleased with our success in Rochester, we ... made our way to Buffalo, then a rising city of steamboats, bustle, and business.”

It was August of 1843 and Frederick Douglass arrived in Buffalo for the first time, but not for the last, to give a series of lectures on the evils of slavery. This was the beginning of a dramatic month in which the national abolitionist movement finally arrived in the city. Douglass and his weeklong lecture series was followed in mid month by the National Convention of Colored Citizens, an extraordinary gathering of many of the leading African-Americans in the north and west. The Convention was planned, organized and run by the free black citizens as a way to keep in touch with each other on the events of the day, how it affected them and what they could do about it. The Buffalo convention was highlighted by the most important speech of Henry Highland Garnet's career, one which many consider to be a turning point in the American abolitionist movement. Finally, the end of the month had Buffalo involved in a political convention for the Liberty Party, the first such party to advocate the abolition of slavery in the United States. The Party placed forth nominations for the 1844 Presidential campaign.

Douglass in Buffalo

By 1843, Frederick Douglass, now in his mid twenties, was only five years removed from slavery. It had been a little over two years since he had made his first public speech; one in which he described himself as terrified and shaking throughout and remembering nothing else of it. Since then, however, he had become passionately involved in the abolitionist movement, with William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of *The Liberator*, serving as his mentor. Garrison was not shy about his hatred of slavery. He was a journalist and agitator who took a position, despised compromise and attacked his opponents mercilessly. Garrison espoused immediate emancipation, education and equality for the African-American, advocate for women's rights and was committed to a biracial society. He believed the U. S. Constitution to be a pro-slavery document and thus politics and compromise were useless for emancipation. “Moral suasion “or converting the public to a hatred of slavery was the only way in which it could be eradicated and racism destroyed. And in 1843, this was the thought process of Frederick Douglass as well.

The Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society met early in 1843 and came up with a plan for a series of one hundred conventions to be carried on throughout the North. Holding meetings in the many towns and cities across the Northeast and Midwest would hopefully create an abolitionist sentiment in the people. Douglass was chosen to be one of the agents and he “never entered upon any work with more heart and hope.” Thinking as only an idealist can, he was certain that “all that the people needed... was light.” If they knew slavery as he did, “they would hasten to the work of its extinction.” With this hope and with this desire, Douglass and the other speakers took to the road to tell America all about the evils of slavery.

Their first stop was in the state of Vermont, where they expected a friendly welcome. Instead, “the opposition to our anti-slavery convention was intensely bitter and violent.”

Vermont was an anti-slavery state. It also was anti-abolitionist. Douglass wrote that “Vermont was surprisingly under the influence of the Slave Power.”

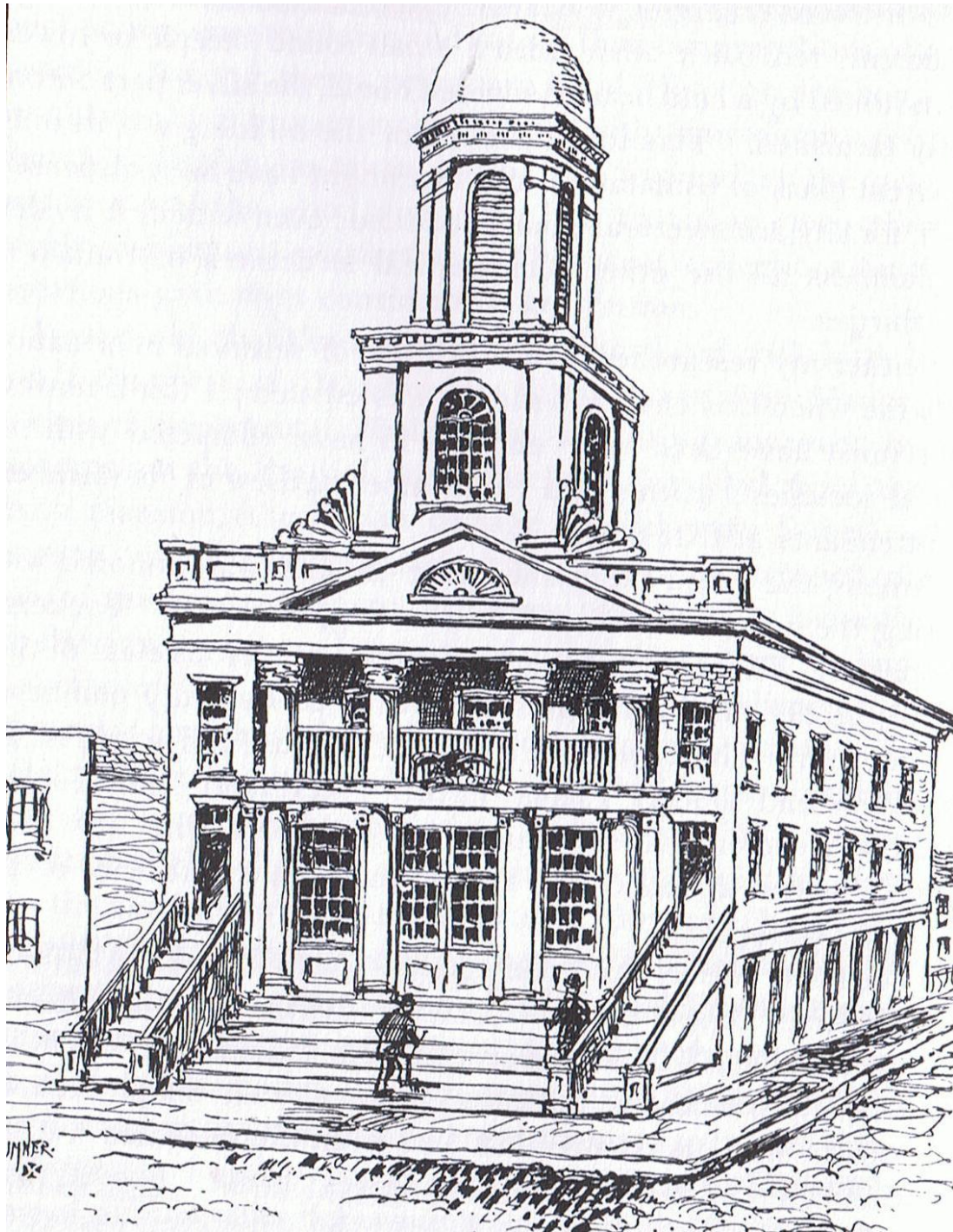
Moving into New York State, they found apathy and indifference, along with an occasional angry mob. In Syracuse, later a bastion of abolitionism, the agents against slavery were rejected in their effort to obtain a “church, market, house or hall in which to hold the meetings.” It was here that Douglass learned a valuable lesson in determination and resolve. Having been rejected for any indoor location, he took it outside to the local park.

“I began to speak in the morning to an audience of five persons, and before the close of my afternoon meeting I had before me not less than five hundred.” In the evening, several members of a local church, impressed by his performance, offered their church to him and the Garrisonians for the remaining three days of meetings.

Having overcome the obstacles in Syracuse and receiving a warm welcome in Rochester, the group was slowly gaining confidence and assurance that these One Hundred conventions would be successful. The next stop was Buffalo.

Buffalo – via the Erie Canal – had become the gateway to the West. By 1843, Buffalo was a vibrant, active, aggressive city of commerce. The transfer of produce, people and materials created many jobs and a great demand for workers. The city was a busy portal where grain was transferred to the east coast; Irish and German immigrants westward. Buffalo still had elements of its frontier settlement character – its ruthlessness and rugged individuality. But it also was transitioning to a more civilized and cultural city. Anthony Trollope’s description was in the early stages of fulfillment as he witnessed “the rivers of wheat and maize ever running,” as the massive grain elevators that later dominated the waterfront, were just now beginning to make their appearance. It was a city on the cusp of greatness; where the harbor was crowded with ships and activity, where employment opportunities greatly outnumbered the available labor pool, where commerce was the defining element of everyday life. This was the Buffalo that Frederick Douglass arrived at in August of 1843.

George Bradburn and Frederick Douglass arrived in Buffalo early in the month. Edwin A. Marsh, a local abolitionist, had worked hard to acquire a room for their meetings. Douglass described it as “an old dilapidated and deserted room, formerly used as a post office.” This “old dilapidated” room was originally part of a Baptist Church located on the northeast corner of Washington and Seneca. The Post Office had purchased it in 1837 and used it for four years prior to moving to another location. The Post Office was located on the second floor, which was accessed by an outside flight of steps from Washington Street. It was in a room on this second floor, now abandoned for some two years, that Douglass was to give his first lecture in the city.



With much hope and anticipation, both men arrived for the first day of meetings but what they saw ripped apart any optimism either may have had. They “found 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.” The cabbies were using this deserted room as a gathering place for them before they set forth on their own day of work.

The two men looked upon this audience with incredulousness. Buffalo was, indeed, “too busy to attend to such matters as we had in hand.” The scene was too much for Bradburn. He looked at the “set of ragamuffins” and immediately decided that this was not worth his time.

He walked out and grabbed the first steamship to Cleveland, the next stop on the tour, leaving Douglass to “do Buffalo alone.”

Douglass’s memory was a bit off, however. Although Bradburn gave up on Buffalo, Douglass was not alone. Charles Lenox Remond had arrived in the city and would lecture alongside him throughout the week. Remond, just a few years older than Douglass and with a few years more experience, was an African-American born in Salem, Massachusetts. In 1838, he was chosen as a lecturer and agent for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and quickly gained a reputation as an outstanding lecturer and public speaker.

George W. Jonson, a Buffalo lawyer and abolitionist, heard Douglass speak and recorded his impressions in his journal:

August 10: Evening at the old post office and heard Fred Douglass and Remond lecture to a large gathering.

The next day Jonson spoke to Mayor Masten and several of the city’s aldermen, requesting permission for Douglass and Remond to use the Park (Courtyard Park, now Lafayette Square) for their Sunday lecture. Permission was granted.

Among the 4,000 to 5,000 present in the Park that Sunday evening were two visiting slaveholders from the South.

August 12: at evening heard Douglass and Remond speak from a stand in the Park... a fair audience in point of numbers. I confess Remond’s style of speaking is more to my taste than Douglass’s but, it should seem, I am singular in this, as I heard two slaveholders stopping at the American Hotel express their admiration for Douglass, but not of Remond, saying “the fellow is eloquent.” They quietly listened to both.

Douglass’s persistence to continue had paid off. In just a few days, his meetings had increased from just a few cabbies to 5,000 individuals hearing his message of abolitionism.

Maybe Douglass was wrong. Apparently Buffalo was not too busy to attend to new business. The city just needed someone worth listening to.

References:

Samuel Manning Welsh, *Home History, Recollections of Buffalo during the decade from 1830 to 1840, or fifty years since*; p.61 “the Park in front of the Buffalo library”

George Washington Jonson (GWJ) Journal: Tuesday August 15, 1843: “the Park and the Courthouse”

GWJ Journal: Tuesday August 29, 1843: “The Tent is here and up in the Park”

Old Baptist Church at Seneca and Washington used as Post office from 1837-1841

First floor: public use with four stores

Second floor: Post office – entered by long flight of stairs

Third floor: offices

Buffalostampclub.org

Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies*, (1994 TheLibrary of America p. 671-674)

History of the Buffalo Post office