

## **Frederick Douglass in Buffalo 1851**

The National Liberty Party convention met on September 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, 1851, in Buffalo at Townsend Hall. Some of the most hardened of abolitionists, such as Frederick Douglass and Gerritt Smith, attended the two day event. Douglass was afforded the opportunity to speak on both of the days.

### **Townsend Hall**

Townsend Hall was located on the southwest corner of Main and Swan streets. The Party most likely met on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, which was used for many public exhibitions. Access to this floor was by the use of three separate, yet narrow, stairways. The building was rightly considered a fire hazard and in February 1861, while President-elect Lincoln was in Buffalo, the Hall did indeed burn to the ground.

### **Background**

The National Liberty Party (aka Liberty League) was an offshoot of the original Liberty Party formed in 1839-1840. The 1844 presidential election was its high water mark, as it began to fall apart soon afterwards. Many of its members joined the more popular Free Soil Party for the 1848 elections. However, a handful of Liberty men refused to sacrifice their original principles to the politically stronger Free Soil Party. Led by Gerritt Smith, William Goodell and others, they formed a new version of the old organization. Much smaller in membership than even the original Liberty Party and even too small to be considered a third political party, this minor organization consisted of essentially Upstate New York men.

According to historian Reinhard Johnson, had they stayed in the original party, or moved to the new Free Soilers, “they would have to accept the anti-extension of slavery in place of outright, aggressive abolition efforts as the party’s main feature. And second, they would have to support a candidate without superior abolition credentials.”

### **Day One of the Convention (September 17<sup>th</sup>, 1851)**

The Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser* reported on the two day convention, although not with approval.

“We looked in upon the Liberty Party convention last evening (Wednesday). Gerritt Smith was speaking to an audience which nearly filled Townsend Hall, composed of persons of both sexes, and all shades of color.”

Smith was a wealthy abolitionist from Peterboro, N.Y., just south of Syracuse. He was known and respected for his philanthropic ways; financially supporting various anti-slavery causes including Frederick Douglass’ newspaper and later, John Brown’s ill-fated Harpers Ferry attack.

Smith also donated acres of northern upstate N.Y. land to any African-American who desired a life of agriculture.

Frederick Douglass followed Smith in speaking on that first night of the convention. Once again, it was the *Commercial Advertiser* that gave details of Douglass's talk, essentially disagreeing with all of it.

"Fred. Douglass followed Mr. Smith, giving his own version of the late affair in Lancaster County, Pa., in which the owner of a fugitive slave and his son were killed... He justified the killing of slave catchers ... and compared the murderers of the slave owner and his son to Washington and other heroes of the Revolution... During the delivery of the address of Douglass many persons left the room, evidently disgusted and shocked at the diabolical doctrines promulgated by the speaker"

There was also a group of black and white individuals who applauded Douglass's stand.

The *Commercial Advertiser* then referred to Douglass as

"the trained pet of the abolitionists, and is used by them on all occasions to preach doctrines that white men ...dare not avow."

There are three comments to be made on the above newspaper quote.

First, note the disrespect shown to Douglass – referring to him as "Fred. Douglass". Gerritt Smith, a Caucasian, was referred to as "Mr. Smith", giving him a proper level of respect. This was done purposely to denigrate the African-American Douglass. It was not the first or last time a news reporter would refer to him in that way.

Second, a few words need to be said about the "late affair in Lancaster County, Pa." Known to history as the Christiana Riot, it occurred one week prior to the convention (September 11<sup>th</sup>). It was a violent confrontation in response to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. Edward Gorsuch, a Maryland slave owner, led a gang of slave catchers to the farm house of William Parker in Christiana, Pa. to recover his escaped slaves. Parker and 20 armed African-American men refused the request. Gun shots were fired. Gorsuch, the slave owner was dead, his son seriously wounded and the rest of the gang retreated. Parker was able to move the fugitives to Rochester where Douglass hurried them on to Canada and freedom.

Douglass was involved in this national story just a few days before he attended the Buffalo convention. Naturally, it was fresh in his mind as he spoke about it on Day 1. Historian David W. Blight wrote that "it was as if (Douglass) had found the African American equivalent of the Battle of Lexington and Concord in the American Revolution... Douglass mocked the pro-slavery public that seemed shocked that 'hunted men should fight the biped bloodhounds' and kill them in self-defense."

Third, Frederick Douglass was no one's "Pet". He was a fiercely independent thinking man. The abolitionists rarely, if ever, presented a united front, and were often at odds with each other. They argued over whether the Constitution was Pro-slavery or Anti-slavery. They argued over the use of political activity or moral suasion; changing of people's hearts or the use of violence. In the early 1840's, Douglass had been with the Garrisonian pro-slavery Constitution "moral suasion" New Englanders. By 1851, he had a falling out with this group and was in the camp of the political abolitionists who also believed in the use of violence in the name of self-defense and freedom.

### **Day Two of the Convention (September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1851)**

The *Commercial Advertiser* reported on the second day of the convention.

"In the evening the Convention was addressed by Mr. Anderson, from Jamaica, W.I. (West Indies), who gave an account of how the blacks of his country succeeded in taking care of themselves. Mr. Scoble, from England, then spoke and was followed by Fred Douglass, who abused everybody as usual, but his particular friends."

The paper mixed up the order of the speakers. Douglass spoke after Anderson and before Scoble.

W. W. Anderson of Jamaica spoke highly of conditions in that country and was making an effort to recruit free blacks to the island.

John Scoble, from England, was the Secretary for the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. He "defended the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies from criticism that it had resulted in the degradation of the free black population. He described a visit to the West Indies since emancipation, and told how, in general, the conditions of the black population had improved."

Douglass spoke on colonization and his views against it. The American Colonization Society had been founded in 1816 on the idea of sending free American blacks back to Africa. The Society was soon condemned by many African-Americans and white abolitionists as nothing more than a white supremacist based organization intent on removing a People born and living in the United States. Douglass had been speaking against it since the beginning of his public career (early 1840's). As David Blight, the historian, remarks, "He had no patience with the idea that people such as himself, born on American soil... ought to voluntarily take his family on a ship bound for Africa, a Caribbean island, or any other foreign place."

What follows below is a Frederick Douglass speech given in Buffalo on September 18, 1851.

## September 18, 1851 Speech by Frederick Douglass in Buffalo

**THE FREE NEGRO'S PLACE IS IN AMERICA,**  
Speech delivered at National Convention of Liberty Party, Buffalo, New York, September 18, 1851

... It is my purpose to occupy but a few moments of the meeting on this subject, as I know you are anxious to hear our other friend (Mr. Scoble) from England. In listening to the remarks of our friend from Jamaica, I was struck with the similarity of the reasons given by him for the emigration of colored persons from his country, to those which are given, but with very different motives, by the agents of the American Colonization Society—a society which ever has and, I hope, ever will receive the utter detestation of every colored man in the land. I know that our friend (Mr. A.) will find it difficult to appreciate the reasons which induce the free colored people of these states to insist upon remaining here. He sees us, a suffering people, hemmed in on every side by the malignant and bitter prejudice which excludes us from nearly every profitable employment in this country, and which, as he has well said, has had several of the states to legislate for our expulsion. In the extremity of our need, he comes to us in the spirit of benevolence, I believe, and holds out to us the prospect of a better country, the prospect of a home, where none shall molest or make us afraid. And he will think it strange that we do not accept of his benevolent proffer, and welcome him in his mission of mercy and good will towards us. And yet we must say that such a welcome cannot be given by the colored people of this country without stabbing their own cause to the vitals, without conceding a point which every black man should feel that he must die for rather than yield, and that is, that the prejudice and the mal-administration toward us in this country are invincible to truth, invincible to combined and virtuous effort for their overthrow. We must make no such concession. Sir, the slaveholders have long been anxious to get rid of the free colored persons of this country. They know that where we are left free, blacks though we are, thick skulled as they call us, we shall become intelligent, and, moreover, that as we become intelligent, in just that proportion shall we become an annoyance to them in their slaveholding. They are anxious therefore to get us out of the country.—They know that a hundred thousand intelligent, upright, industrious and persevering black men in the northern states must command respect and sympathy, must encircle themselves with the regard of a large class of the virtue-loving, industry-loving people of the North, and that whatever sympathy, whatever respect they are able to command must have a reflex influence upon slavery. And, therefore, they say "*out with them*," let us get rid of them! For my part, I am not disposed to leave, and, I think, our friend must have been struck with the singular kind of applause at certain sayings of his, during the address—an applause that seemed to come from the galleries, from the door, and from that part of the house that

does not wish to be mixed up with the platform. Straws show which way the wind blows. I fancied, too, that when our friend was portraying the blessings that would result from our removal from this land to Jamaica, that delightful visions were floating before the minds of those gentlemen in the distance. Now, sir, I want to say on behalf of any Negroes I have the honor to represent, that we *have been* with, and still *are* with you, and mean to be with you *to the end*. It may seem ungrateful, but there are some of us who are resolved that you shall not get rid of your colored relations.—Why should we not stay with you? Have we not a right here? I know the cry is raised that we are out of our native land, that this land is the land of the white man; that Africa is the home of the Negro, and not America.

But how stands the matter? I believe that simultaneously with the landing of the Pilgrims, there landed slaves on the shores of this continent, and that for two hundred and thirty years and more we have had a foothold on this continent. We have grown up with you; we have watered your soil with our tears; nourished it with our blood, tilled it with our hard hands. Why should we not stay here? We came when it was a wilderness, and were the pioneers of civilization on this continent. We leveled your forests; *our hands* removed the stumps from your fields, and raised the first crops and brought the first produce to your tables. We have been with you, are still with you, have been with you in adversity, and by the help of God will be with you in prosperity.

There was a time when certain learned men of this country undertook to argue us out of existence. Professor *Grant* of New York reckoned us of a race belonging to a by-gone age, which, in the progress of the human family, would become perfectly extinct. Yet we do not die. It does seem that there is a Providence in this matter.—Chain us, lash us, hunt us with bloodhounds, surround us with utter insecurity, render our lives never so hard to be borne, and yet we do live on—smile under it all and are able to smile. Amid all our afflictions there is an invincible determination to stay right here, because a large portion of the American people desire to get rid of us. In proportion to the strength of their desire to have us go, in just that proportion is the strength of our determination to stay, and in staying we ask nothing but justice. We have fought for this country, and we only ask to be treated as well as those who fought against it. We are American citizens, and we only ask to be treated as well as you treat aliens. And you will treat us so yet. Most men assume that we cannot make progress here.

It is untrue, sir. That we can make progress in the future is proved by the progress we have already made. Our condition is rapidly improving. Sir, but a few years ago, if I attempted to ride on the railroad cars in New England, and presumed to take my seat in the cars with white persons, I was dragged out like a beast. I have often been beaten until my hands were blue with the blows in order to make me disengage those hands from the bench on which I was seated.—On every railroad in New England this was the case. How is it now? Why, a Negro may ride just where he pleases and there is not the slightest objection raised, and I have very frequently rode over those same roads since, and never received the slightest indignity on account of my complexion. Indeed the white people are becoming more and more disposed to associate with the blacks. I am constantly annoyed by these pressing attentions. I used to enjoy the privilege

of an entire seat, and riding a great deal at night, it was quite an advantage to me, but sometime ago, riding up from Geneva, I had curled myself up, and by the time I had got into a good snooze, along came a man and lifted up my blanket. I looked up and said, "pray do not disturb me, I am a black man." "I don't care who the devil you are, only give me a seat," was the reply. I told you the white people about here are beginning "to don't care who the devil you are." If you can put a dollar in their way, or a seat under them, they don't care "who the devil you are." But I will not detain you longer. I know you are anxious to hear our friend from England.

## Sources

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