

“Recollections of Old Friends:” Frederick Douglass, The Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, and the Dorr Rebellion

By Caleb Horton

In the spring of 1840, working-class white men formed a suffrage organization called the Rhode Island Suffrage Association. Their preamble demanded a lift on the expensive \$134 landholding voter qualification and universal suffrage for all adult white males residing in Rhode Island. In December, the association began printing a weekly newspaper called *The New Age and Constitutional Advocate* and rallied supporters across the state.¹ On August 28, 1841, Thomas Wilson Dorr and the suffrage association held its “People’s Convention” in Providence. Convention members sought to draft a new state constitution to replace the old Landholder’s Charter, plagued with “rotten borough” representation that gave the most political power and representation to the agricultural towns in the Rhode Island state legislature. Such representation was inequitable since the urban areas, such as the City of Providence, had the largest populations in the state. Also, under the charter, no white adult male who did not own \$134 worth of land was allowed to vote, which meant, in 1840, that 60 percent of the state’s white adult male population could not vote.²

Convention members were stunned when African Americans began showing up to the convention. They immediately began denying them access to the committee proceedings. Matters came to a head-on on September 24, 1841, when Alfred Niger, a representative of the Black community from Providence, was ejected from his appointment of treasurer for the convention. Despite winning the majority nomination from the convention’s executive committee, a minority report nominated and favored a white man named Thomas Greene for treasurer. The conflicting nominations caused a firestorm. The committee proceeded to take a vote on allowing Niger to keep his office. Meeting minutes printed in *The Providence Daily Journal* reveal that a chairman by the name of Mr. Russell exclaimed: “[H]e hoped all would vote in this ballot and vote their sentiments, in order that all might know how many ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing’ [abolitionists] were among them.”³ Those in favor of electing Niger were either ignored or backed down, as no record of a vote was kept. The subject ended, and Mr. Greene won a majority ballot as treasurer.⁴ The community ran out of patience.

On October 8, 1841, Alexander Crummell, an African American Episcopal priest, approached Thomas Dorr with a petition he drafted on behalf of the grievances of the Black community. Dorr presented the petition to the convention, and many believed it to be a rouse constructed by abolitionists. Dorr assured the convention members that it was “written by Alexander Cromwell [Crummell], a respectable colored man of this city, of some education, signed by him and five others, relating to their exclusion of the rights of suffrage and the white-only clause in the People’s Constitution.”⁵ Dorr then began reading the petition to the convention

¹ Marvin E. Gettleman, *The Dorr Rebellion: A Study in American Radicalism: 1833-1849* (New York: Random House, 1973), 34-36.

² Arthur M. Mowry, “Chapter VI: The Charter Criticized,” in *The Dorr War: The Constitutional Struggle in Rhode Island* (Providence: E.L Freeman and Sons Press, 1901), 74-83.

³ “Meeting of the Suffrage Association,” *The Providence Daily Journal*, September 24, 1841.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Suffrage Convention: Friday Evening,” *The Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841.

and its committee members, addressing it “To the Free Suffrage Convention.” The document, under the title “Committee in behalf of the People of Color,” was signed by the following Black men:⁶ Thomas Howland, a grocer on 125 South Water Street; Ichabod Northrup, a laborer on Cushing Street; James Hazzard, a clothes dealer on 49 South Main and 148 North Main Street; Charles G. Brown, a confectioner located at the rear of 94 Benefit Street; and James Gumes, a laborer residing on the Pawtucket East Turnpike.⁷ A vote was then called on convention members to keep or remove the word “white” from the People’s Constitution; 18 were for removing it, and 46 were for keeping it.⁸

The community was not alone in the fight for suffrage, for they had a formidable ally in the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society. In mid-November 1841, the society agreed that they, too, would petition for Black voting at the People’s Convention.⁹ On the 11th, 12th, and 13th, they held their sixth annual meeting at Franklin Hall in Providence.

Frederick Douglass and abolitionists from across the Northeast were present, including William Lloyd Garrison, female abolitionist Abby Kelly -- and lesser-known individuals such as Stephen S. Foster¹⁰ and Parker Pillsbury,¹¹ who spoke against throngs of angry Dorrites (Dorr supporters). They were all united under a single cause: Black male suffrage.¹² On the 11th, the suffrage question came to a head when Dr. Joseph Brown, a Dorrite who had advocated Black voting at the People’s Convention, confronted the abolitionists during their meetings. Dr. Brown tried to defend the white-only clause in the constitution by supporting the idea that African Americans would gradually be included in the People’s Constitution. William Lloyd Garrison and others -- including Douglass -- denounced Dr. Brown’s claims, and the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society officially declared they would no longer support the Suffrage Association. Douglass summarized the events, exclaiming:

We cared nothing for the Dorr party on the one hand, nor the “law and order party” on the other. What we wanted, and what we labored to obtain, was a constitution free from the narrow, selfish, and senseless limitation of the word *white*.”¹³

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *The Providence Directory, 1844*, 194-199.

⁸ “Suffrage Convention: Friday Evening,” *The Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841.

⁹ “To the Free Suffrage Convention” (A petition by the Providence African American Community presented to the People’s Convention) excerpted in: Burke, Edmund. *Rhode Island--Interference of the Executive in the Affairs of June 7, 1844: Burke’s Report* (Washington: Blair & Rives, print., 1844), 112-113.

¹⁰ Stephen Symonds Foster (November 17, 1809 – September 13, 1881), abolitionist and an advocate for women’s rights, was known for his radicalism and aggressive oration skills. He spoke out against Christians who did not support the abolishment of slavery. He also formed the New Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society and was a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Foster was courting Abby Kelley during Douglass’s visit to Rhode Island and married her in 1845. For more information on the lives of Stephen Foster and Abby Kelley, please see Sterling, Dorothy. *Ahead of Her Time: Abby Kelley and the Politics of Antislavery*. New York U.A.: Norton, 1991.

¹¹ Parker Pillsbury (September 22, 1809 – July 7, 1898) was a friend of Stephen Parker and a resident of New Hampshire. A minister and abolitionist, unlike Foster, he practiced civil disobedience among angry crowds. For more information, please see: Parker Pillsbury Diaries, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

¹² Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, CT: Park Publishing Co., 1882), 273-274.

¹³ Ibid, 274.

Whenever the society held a meeting, the Dorrites would crash it. On December 13, 1841, *The Providence Daily Journal* reported that an Anti-Slavery meeting was disrupted by a “number of rowdy boys,” in which “Abby [Kelley] was full of spunk and did not care a fig for the noise, but told them to make as much disturbance as they please.”¹⁴

The disturbance most likely came from young Dorrite men or Dorrite supporters, who sent their kids to disturb the meeting’s delegations. A response in *The Providence Daily Journal* further explained the harassment of the Anti-Slavery meetings:

What kind of men were those of whom [Abby] Kell[e]y complained, in Woonsocket, Smithfield and Scituate, who became a riotous mob, so as to deprive the AntiSlavery Society of freedom of speech, when discussing one of the articles of the Suffrage Constitution? And what kind of scenes have our Town House witnessed in relation to those who took the liberty to think differently from a majority of their party on this question? “If these things be done in the green tree, what will be done in the dry!”¹⁵

Douglass remarked in a chapter titled -- “Recollections of Old Friends” -- in his memoir, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*: “Her [Abby] youth and simple Quaker beauty, combined with her wonderful earnestness, her large knowledge and great logical power, bore down all opposition in the end.” However, he continues by adding, “wherever she spoke though, she was before pelted with foul eggs, and no less foul words, from the noisy mobs which attended us,” and that she was “more than once mobbed in the old town in the city of Providence, and pelted with bad eggs.”¹⁶ Douglass admired her bravery.¹⁷ The feeling of respect was mutual among Abby Kelley, who wrote “[Frederick Douglass] stole the hearts of the Rhode Island people” to her friend Lucinda Wilmarth.¹⁸ The sentiment was probably felt more by the members of the Anti-Slavery Society than by the state's total population, but her admiration was undoubtedly genuine.

Douglass also accounts for the direct activism of society member Stephen Foster, who he describes “during his tour in Rhode Island” as being “extravagant and needlessly offensive in his manner of presenting ideas.” However, he held him in high regard in his commitment to abolitionism, remarking, “no white man ever made the black man’s cause more completely his own.”¹⁹

The debate came to a lull when the Suffrage Association began campaigning to ratify the People’s Constitution and electing Thomas Dorr for governor. On April 18, 1842, the Suffragists held an election. Governor King refused to recognize it. The legal government argued that the election was invalid since it included non-eligible votes. Dorr reassured them that legal voters took the vast majority of votes.²⁰ Governor King would have none of it; on May 4, 1842, King

¹⁴ “Anti Slavery Meeting,” *The Providence Daily Journal*, December 13, 1841.

¹⁵ “Be Not Alarmed,” *The Providence Daily Journal*, December 29, 1841.

¹⁶ Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 274.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 572- 573.

¹⁸ Lucinda Wilmarth to Abby Kelley, 11 July 1842, Mss. F, Box 1, Folder 11, Abigail Kelley Foster Papers, 1836-1891, American Antiquarian Society (AAS), Worcester, MA.

¹⁹ Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 274.

²⁰ Mowry, *The Dorr War*, 136-138.

signed into power an “Act in Relation to Offenses against the Sovereign Power of the State,” which declared that it was an act of treason against the State of Rhode Island for anyone to accept the nomination for office or serve in office under any government but the existing government. The Dorrites referred to this proclamation as the “Algerine Law.”²¹ The Suffrage Association’s cause came to a crossroads; if the Suffrage Party could not take power legally, they would take it by force.

The African American community would not support the insurrection. After all the injustices the community had endured thus far, they decided to fight for Governor King and his Whig and conservative Democrat-affiliated party of “Law and Order.” Creating an insurrection, the Dorrites made two unsuccessful attempts to take over the state government -- one on May 19, 1842, at the Cranston Street Arsenal in Providence, Rhode Island, and another on June 27, 1842, at Acote’s Hill in Chepachet, Rhode Island. By the end of the summer of 1842, state militia of both white and Black men gathered under the banner of Law and Order to end the rebellion. Thomas Dorr and his supporters were defeated, broken, and arrested.²² In the aftermath of the uprising, the legal government of Rhode Island realized that they needed to compromise to end hostilities. In November 1842, the Law and Order Party drafted a Law & Order Constitution -- which extended universal suffrage to all native adult males -- to replace the old state charter (picking up where they had left off previously in March 1842 with the Freeman’s Constitution). The question of Black male suffrage was considered, mainly since African Americans supported the Law and Order Party during the outbreak of the rebellion and were voted on by qualified voters across the state, supporting Black male voting privileges.²³

Ultimately, the African American community, particularly in Providence, took the agency to achieve suffrage for free-born Black men. Mainly by their willingness to support the side of “Law and Order.” Douglass had prior engagements and speaking tours during much of 1842. Still, his work with the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society and the community during the People’s Convention did much to encourage the African American community, specifically in Providence, to achieve suffrage. As Douglass exclaims,

I think that our labours in Rhode Island during this Dorr excitement did more to abolitionise the state than any previous, or subsequent work. It was the “tide taken at the flood.” One effect of these labours was to induce the old “Law and Order” Party, when it set about making its new constitution, to avoid the narrow folly of the Dorrites, and make a constitution which should not abridge any man’s rights on account of race or colour. Such a new constitution was finally adopted.²⁴

The community was neither solely for Dorr nor Law and Order, but a “constitution free from the narrow, selfish, and senseless limitation of the word white,” according to Douglass. He even explains that Dorr was “a well-meaning man” with “progressive views” but “shared the fate of all compromisers and trimmers, for he was disastrously defeated.”²⁵ Part of his defeat was failing

²¹ Ibid., 136-138.

²² William G. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1986), 134-135.

²³ For a more thorough synopsis on the Dorr Rebellion, please refer to: Patrick T. Conley, *The Dorr Rebellion: Rhode Island’s Crisis in Constitutional Government* (Providence: Rhode Island Bicentennial Foundation, 1973).

²⁴ Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 274-275.

²⁵ Ibid., 272.

to muster his party's support for Black suffrage and falling on the right side of history. The Law and Order Party provided those aims, mainly because they recognized the African American community's commitment during the rebellion by joining the ranks of the state militia, city watch, and fire departments – particularly in Providence. *The New York Courier and Enquirer* reported:

The colored people of Rhode Island deserve the good opinion and kind feelings of every citizen of the State, for their conduct during the recent troublous times in Providence. They promptly volunteered their services for any duty in which they might be useful in maintaining law and order.²⁶

Through these aims, the African American community, with the help and advocacy of the Anti-Slavery Society, achieved Black male suffrage amid Rhode Island's chartist revolution through their participation and agency.

²⁶Excerpted in: *The Providence Daily Journal*, July 12, 1842.

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