

November 25, 2022

TO: Middlebury Selectboard

FROM: Bill Hart, Professor Emeritus of History, Middlebury College

RE: Rationale for Frederick Douglass Plaque on Court Square, Middlebury

 I am requesting that the Middlebury Selectboard give its assent to the Vermont Historic Preservation Office to erect a plaque at Court Square in commemoration of Frederick Douglass's visit to Middlebury in July 1843. Ideally, I would like the installation of the plaque to occur in September 2023 as part of the Clifford/Twilight Symposium, September 21 -23, 2023, at Middlebury College to commemorate the 200th anniversary of Alexander Twilight's graduation from Middlebury College in 1823.

Douglass's visit to Middlebury is significant because it was the first stop on the New England Anti-Slavery Society's "100 Conventions" tour that commenced in July 1843 and concluded in December 1843. During those six months, Douglass and other well-known abolitionists visited communities in Vermont, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Indiana, and Pennsylvania to "creat[e] antislavery sentiment." Douglass was billed as one of two keynote speakers among a roster of distinguished orators during the two-day anti-slavery meeting in Middlebury. What better spokesperson to speak on behalf of the enslaved and to insist on the end of slavery than a former slave – Frederick Douglass.

The intriguing question is: Why begin in Middlebury? There are four plausible explanations that certify the significance of this historic event:

(1) Most Americans at the time regarded Vermont, the 14th state to join the union in 1791, as the first state to begin as and remain an anti-slavery state. Its constitution outlawed *adult enslavement*, although it permitted the bondage of minors and regarded debt peonage as lawful, practices accepted as common during this era.

(2) Judge Theophilus Harrington's famous decision handed down in 1807 in the Vermont Supreme Court while in session in Middlebury. Harrington told a New York enslaver that the Court required proof "from the Almighty" that the enslaver was entitled to hold another human being in bondage. William Lloyd Garrison's anti-slavery journal, *The Liberator*, ran the story of Harrington in its January 6, 1843, issue just as the planning for the 100 Conventions tour commenced. The article reminded readers that Harrington's pronouncement was a "solemn and deliberate decision of the Supreme Court of Vermont."

(3) Abolitionists regarded Vermont Governor William Slade, native of Cornwall and an 1807 graduate of Middlebury College, as a strong, dependable anti-slavery ally. While serving in Congress in the 1830s and early 1840s, Slade took to the floor of the House of Representatives to denounce slavery. He also published many letters in newspapers and journals to explain his anti-slavery views.

(4) The Vermont Anti-Slavery Society was founded in Middlebury in May 1834. Several nearby towns had formed local anti-slavery societies a few weeks before 86 conventioners gathered in Middlebury to establish the *state* anti-slavery society.

Thus, the New England Anti-Slavery Society viewed Middlebury as a friendly town in which to launch its tour. Many of its residents as well as students at the College embraced anti-slavery views. Nevertheless, they were disappointed and perplexed by the cool – even hostile -- reception that greeted them.

Language on the plaque to commemorate the July 1843 convention in Middlebury might read as:

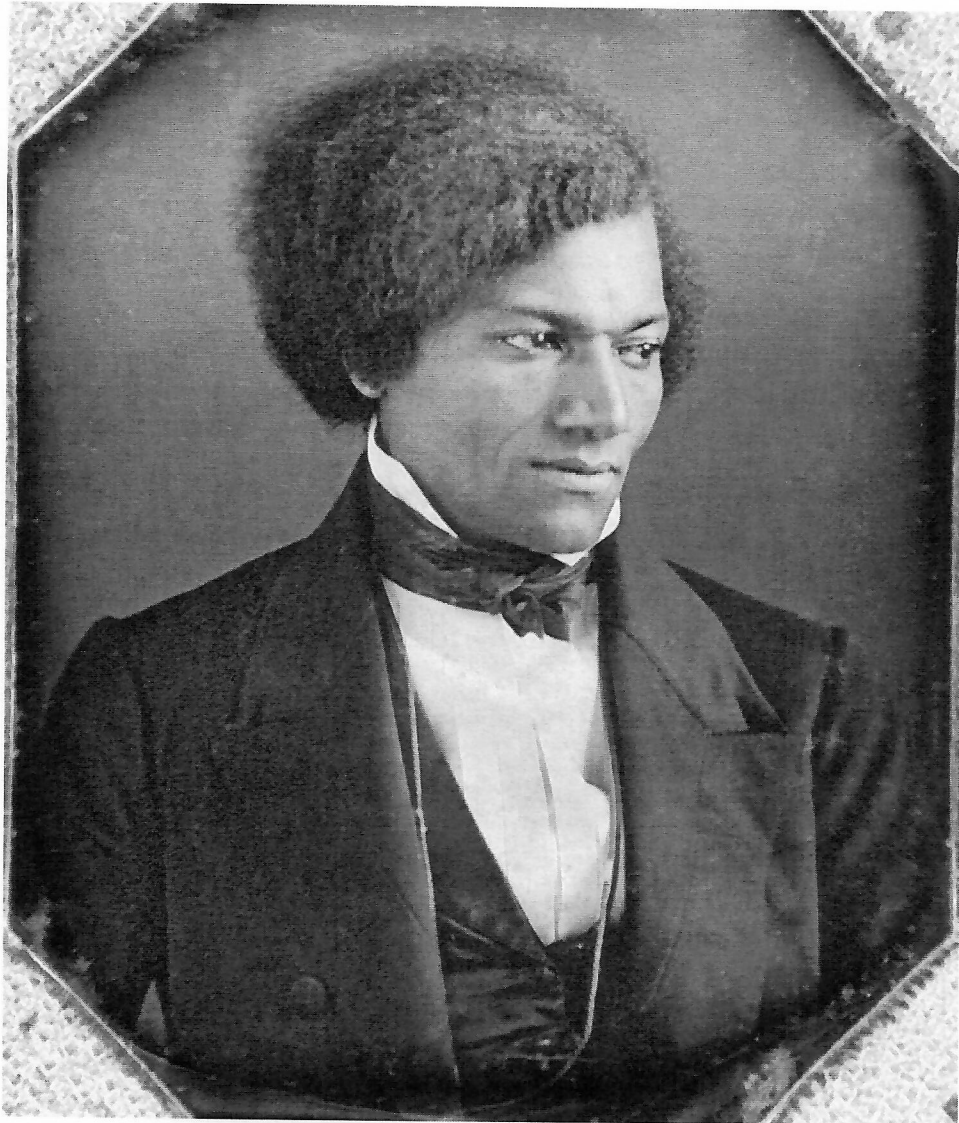
On this site in the Addison County Courthouse on July 13 and 14, 1843, Frederick Douglass and several other prominent abolitionists of the New England Anti-Slavery Society launched their six-month 100 Conventions tour for the purpose of “creating anti-slavery sentiment” in communities in Vermont, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Indiana, and Pennsylvania. They chose Middlebury as the inaugural site because Vermont Governor Slade and other Middlebury residents harbored anti-slavery sentiments. However, Douglass described his reception in Middlebury as “intensely bitter and violent.” *The Vermont Observer* reported that some boys threw gravel and eggs at some of the speakers. Nevertheless, when Douglass began to relate his personal story of enslavement, “the house was perfectly still.” Douglass credited Edward Barber, an 1829 graduate of Middlebury College, local lawyer, and founding member of the Vermont Anti-Slavery Society, with ensuring the convention’s success.

I urge the town of Middlebury and the state of Vermont to acknowledge officially this critically important moment in our history. *The Liberator*, the leading anti-slavery journal of its day, did not mention Middlebury as the inaugural site in its reporting on the 100 Conventions. However, Frederick Douglass devoted a page and a half in his memoir, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892), to his visit here. I will say more about this historic occasion in my presentation to the Selectboard, ideally on December 13, 2022.

I have attached the following supporting documents:

- A. Photo of Frederick Douglass.
- B. Excerpt from Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written By Himself* (1892; rpt New York: Collier Books, 1962) 226-27.
- C. Article 1, “The Rights of Individuals,” *The Vermont Constitution* (1793).
- D. Samuel. E. Sewall, “Harrington’s Decision,” *The Liberator* (January 6, 1843): 13.
- E. “The ‘One Hundred Conventions’,” *The Liberator* (December 22, 1843): 13, 51.
- F. Image of first Addison County Courthouse, Middlebury, in Glenn Andres, *A Walking History of Middlebury, Vermont*, 2nd ed. (Middlebury: Henry Sheldon Museum, 2021) 21.

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Chapter 5

One Hundred Conventions

THE YEAR 1843 WAS one of remarkable antislavery activity. The New England Anti-Slavery Society, at its annual meeting held in the spring of that year, resolved, under the auspices of Mr. Garrison and his friends, to hold a series of one hundred conventions. The territory embraced in this plan for creating antislavery sentiment included New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, Ohio, Indiana, and Pennsylvania. I had the honor to be chosen one of the agents to assist in these proposed conventions, and I never entered upon any work with more heart and hope. All that the American people needed, I thought, was light. Could they know slavery as I knew it, they would hasten to the work of its extinction. The corps of speakers who were to be associated with me in carrying on these conventions was Messrs. George Bradburn, John A. Collins, James Monroe, William A. White, Charles L. Remond, and Sydney Howard Gay. They were all masters of the subject, and some of them able and eloquent orators. It was a piece of great good fortune to me, only a few years from slavery as I was, to be brought into contact with such men. It was a real campaign, and required nearly six months for its accomplishment.

Those who only know the State of Vermont as it is today can hardly understand, and must wonder that there was forty years ago need for antislavery effort within its borders. Our first convention was held in Middlebury, its chief seat of learning and the home of William Slade, who was for years the co-worker with John Quincy Adams in Congress; and yet in this town the opposition to our antislavery convention was intensely bitter and violent. The only man of note in the town whom I now remember as giving us sympathy or welcome was Mr. Edward Barber, who was a man of courage as well as ability, and did his best to make our convention a success. In advance of our arrival the college students had very

industriously and mischievously placarded the town with violent aspersions of our characters and the grossest misrepresentations of our principles, measures, and objects. I was described as an escaped convict from the state prison, and the other speakers were assailed not less slanderously. Few people attended our meeting, and apparently little was accomplished by it.

In the neighboring town of Ferrisburg the case was different and more favorable. The way had been prepared for us by such stalwart antislavery workers as Orson S. Murray, Charles C. Burleigh, Rowland T. Robinson, and others. Upon the whole, however, the several towns visited showed that Vermont was surprisingly under the influence of the slave power. Her proud boast that within her borders no slave had ever been delivered up to his master, did not hinder her hatred to anti-slavery. What was in this respect true of the Green Mountain State was most discouragingly true of New York, the state next visited. All along the Erie Canal, from Albany to Buffalo, there was evinced apathy, indifference, aversion, and sometimes a mobocratic spirit. Even Syracuse, afterward the home of the humane Samuel J. May and the scene of the "Jerry rescue," where Gerrit Smith, Beriah Greene, William Goodell, Alvin Stewart, and other able men taught their noblest lessons, would not at that time furnish us with church, market, house, or hall in which to hold our meetings. Discovering this state of things, some of our number were disposed to turn our backs upon the town and to shake its dust from our feet, but of these, I am glad to say, I was not one. I had somewhere read of a command to go into the hedges and highways and compel men to come in. Mr. Stephen Smith, under whose hospitable roof we were made at home, thought as I did. It would be easy to silence anti-slavery agitation if refusing its agents the use of halls and churches could affect that result. The house of our friend Smith stood on the southwest corner of the park, which was well covered with young trees too small to furnish shade or shelter, but better than none. Taking my stand under a small tree in the southeast corner of this 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

Douglass, Frederick

Life and Times of
Frederick Douglass

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF

HIS EARLY LIFE AS A SLAVE, HIS ESCAPE
FROM BONDAGE, AND HIS COMPLETE HISTORY

With a New Introduction by Rayford W. Logan

Reprinted from the revised edition of 1892



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CHAPTER I.
A DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF THE
INHABITANTS
OF THE STATE OF VERMONT

Article 1. [All persons born free; their natural rights; slavery prohibited]

That all persons are born equally free and independent, and have certain natural, inherent, and unalienable rights, amongst which are the enjoying and defending life and liberty, acquiring, possessing and protecting property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety; therefore no person born in this country, or brought from over sea, ought to be holden by law, to serve any person as a servant, slave or apprentice, after arriving to the age of twenty-one years, unless bound by the person's own consent, after arriving to such age, or bound by law for the payment of debts, damages, fines, costs, or the like.

SELECTIONS.

D

From the Liberty Bell.
Harrington's Decision.
 BY SAMUEL E. SEWALL.

The opinion of Judge HARRINGTON, in the case of a person claimed as a fugitive slave, is probably familiar to most abolitionists. I have lately inquired the particulars of this transaction, of the Hon. RASTUS WOOSTER, of Middlebury, Vermont. He replies thus:

The transaction to which you allude is somewhat ancient one. The case occurred before my eye. But I have the history of it from the lips of an eye-witness, who was present at the time; the name HORATIO SEYMOUR, formerly a Senator from Vermont, State in Congress. There was a person of color in Middlebury, who was claimed as a slave by his master, from the State of New-York. He was brought before two justices of the peace, and they ordered to surrender him. LOYAL CASE, Esq. counsel for the slave, brought him up, on a *habeas corpus*, before the Supreme Court, then in session, for his liberation. The master brought forward documentary evidence to show his title to the slave. Judge HARRINGTON, who was then on the bench, gave the opinion of the Court. He said that the evidence of the title was good, as far as it went, the chain had some of its links broken. The evidence did not go far enough. If the master could show a bill of sale, or grant, from the Almighty, in his title to him would be complete: otherwise it would not. And as he had not shown such evidence, the Court refused to surrender him, and discharged him. This is the opinion of the Court, as delivered by Judge HARRINGTON, as well as can be collected after such a lapse of time. The transaction took place about the year 1807. Judge HARRINGTON is now dead. He possessed a powerful mind, not fond of technicalities: had a strong sense of justice, and was a great friend to liberty.

Several circumstances in this case merit attention:—

1. The decision was made only about seventeen years after the Constitution of the United States was put into operation.

2. It was the solemn and deliberate decision of the Supreme Court of Vermont; not the opinion of Judge Harrington alone. As such, it becomes of great weight as a legal authority, and should be regarded whenever a person, claimed as a fugitive slave, is brought before any Court.

3. The decision was placed on a true and immovable foundation—the supremacy of God's law over human constitutions and laws. On no other foundation can we resist effectually the claims of our northern neighbors. The history of the formation of the Constitution, and a continued practice under it for more than half a century, can, in a legal point of view, leave no question as to the construction of this obnoxious clause.

But, when we assert that the clause itself is null and void, as a violation of the higher law printed by the finger of God on the heart of man,—that our own consciences repeal and annul it,—we assume an impregnable position, which seems the more secure the more we examine it—which is supported by the wise and good of all ages—the sages and martyrs of antiquity, and the moralists and jurists of modern times.

All writers on moral and international law declare, that a promise to commit a crime, even if sanctioned by the most solemn oath, is not binding; that the sin is not in breaking, but in keeping such a promise.

I think it needless to argue the question whether it would be wrong. I assume that man can have no property in man. A slave, then, who escapes from his master, only frees himself from unjust restraint, and vindicates his natural right to liberty. To give up a man to his master, is to commit the same crime as originally to reduce him to slavery—a crime, compared with which, common theft and robbery, and all other mere invasions on property, are petty trespasses.

To surrender a fugitive slave, then, being so atrocious a crime, is its character changed by its being sanctioned by the Constitution? Had the Constitution required, in express terms, every man who should kill four children, to drown the fifth, as soon as he was born, to prevent over-population, and enforced the obligation by denouncing capital punishment on every man who neglected to perform the required act; a man, having human feeling, would not say that such a provision could impose no obligation—that the man who should drown his child would be, in the eyes of Heaven, a murderer—and that the Judge, who sentenced a father to death for neglecting to perform such an act, and the sheriff who executed the sentence, would in vain attempt to shelter themselves under the plea that they were obeying the Constitution?

While public sentiment is not so far advanced as to see that what the Constitution requires is sin, a public functionary may be in danger of losing his office, by acting in opposition to the popular

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The 'One Hundred Conventions.'

The great, extensive, all-embracing scheme, projected at the last annual meeting of the New-England Anti-Slavery Convention, the execution of which is entrusted to the care of the Managers of the State S. Society, of holding not less than One Hundred Conventions in the western States, has been conducted in the most prompt, faithful and efficient manner. Eight able and eloquent lecturers have been appointed in the field for the last six months, who have performed more labor than was apportioned to them; and whose success in operating on the public sentiment has been of signal service to the anti-slavery cause. It is impossible, at this time, to calculate the amount of good that has been done by their powerful efforts; but that they have planted the seeds of a rich harvest yet to be gathered in, is as certain as the connection between cause and effect. They have been exposed to many perils, especially to mobocratic violence in Indiana, but they have happily all returned safely home. Long will the names of Remond, Douglass, Bradburn, White, Munroe, and their associates, be gratefully remembered by the friends of liberty and equal rights in the far West. These faithful advocates terminated their official labors at the recent meeting of the American A. S. Society, in Philadelphia.

It will be seen, by the following list of donations received by the Treasurer in aid of these Conventions, that while a considerable amount has been contributed, there is still a deficiency of money to pay those who have toiled so unremittingly for the last months. Those who have not yet redeemed their pledges will see the necessity of promptly doing so; and those who have not yet contributed any thing to that great movement, yet rejoice in what has been accomplished, will surely respond to the appeal of Mr. Jackson for additional sums to make up the present deficit.

TREASURER'S REPORT.

At the last New-England Anti-Slavery Convention, held in Boston in May, 1843, the following resolutions were adopted:

Resolved, That this Convention is rejoiced to learn, that a series of Anti-Slavery Conventions are to be held in Maine, New-York, Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania and other States, and feels confident that the abolitionists of the different States will take prompt and vigorous efforts to secure large meetings.

Resolved, That in view of the necessity of funds to carry out this plan, which promises such benefit to our cause, we will each of us devote at least one day to solicit subscriptions in our various States to aid these Conventions.

Resolved, That Francis Jackson be appointed Treasurer of this Convention to receive such sums as may be contributed, or pledged for the purposes recited in the foregoing resolutions, and that he be authorized to apply them to their appropriate object, under the direction of the Board of Managers of the American A. S. Society.

The following sums of money have been received for the purposes of the foregoing resolutions, partly in pledges made at the Convention, and partly in donations received since.

Wm. Seth Sprague, Duxbury,	\$25 00
William Ashby, Newburyport,	5 00
William Sears,	5 00
Wm. Curtis, Hanover,	5 00
Wm. Hill,	2 00
Samuel Webster, Haverhill,	1 00
Wm. Cushing,	1 00
Wm. R. Morse, Walpole, & Co, John Noyes, Jr., Dedham,	1 00
Wm. Rolfe, Weymouth,	10 00
Wm. Friend, Hanover,	1 00
Wm. Bert Gardner, I, Elijah Habart, Jr., Abington,	2 00
Wm. Eliza Bacon, Philadelphia,	12 00
Wm. Medial Sanger,	2 00
Wm. M. Fisk, West Brookfield,	1 00
Wm. Marietta Sargent, Boston,	5 00
Wm. Marine Sargent, "	5 00
Wm. Ed Hinckley, Barnstable,	10 00
Wm. Ashby, Salem,	3 00
Wm. Rogers, Boston,	1 00
Wm. Jenson, I, J. W. Ford, I,	2 00
Wm. Friend, Cambridgeport,	10 00
Wm. Money from individuals at N. E. Convention.	14 02

ry G. Chapman, "	5 00
r. Cornelius Bramhall, "	5 00
ria G. Jarvis, Concord,	3 00
ndell Phillips, Boston,	100 00
ncis Jackson, "	100 00
eph B. Congdon, New Bedford,	10 00
Sisson, "	1 00
lections at New Bedford meeting,	27 54
riend " by C. M. Burleigh,	10 00
ra Lee Follen, West Roxbury,	5 00
n Bunker, Fair Haven, by John Bailey,	5 00
eph Winslow, Foxboro,	7 00
y Gates, Townsend,	3 00
uel Richmond, North Middleboro,	2 00
hsheba Richmond, "	2 00
ince R. Shaw, "	2 00
riend, by Maria W. Chapman,	7 00
ia Eveleth and other friends, Princeton,	12 00
liam F. Stone, Groton,	2 00
atio G. Wood, Middleboro,	2 00
r. John Parkman, Dover, N. H.	50 00
iel Otis and others, in South Scituate,	22 56
omas Sturge, England,	400 44
igail Bates, Wareham,	2 00
vanus Bourne, "	1 00
Packard and J. S. Stafford, of Cummington,	
I each,	2 00
nbridgeport A. S. Society, by Wm. Farwell,	
Treasurer,	33 00
leon Warren, East Randolph,	6 20
st-Brookfield A. S. Society, by Edward F.	
Stowell,	25 00
n. Stowe, (or Stone,) of Gardiner,	2 00
riend in W. Roxbury, by Theodore Parker,	1 00
old S. Congdon, New Bedford,	2 00
ands in Walpole, by Daniel Turner,	6 00
phen Barker, Methuen, by Wendell Phillips,	5 00
leon Soule 4, and — Soule, 2, Duxbury,	6 00
vell A. S. Society, by H. Foster,	10 00
n Levi, Lowell,	50 00
W. Stearns and his mother, Springfield,	1 50
ser Trumbull, Upton, 8 25 and — 25,	8 50
urplus of contributions at N. E. Convention	
to pay expenses,	17 01
Allen, Millbury,	3 00
icord A. S. Fair, by Helen L. Thoreau	20 00
r. B. D. Peck, Grafton, village of Sanders-	
ville,	3 00
te H. Brown,	5 00
ti-slavery friends in Hubbardstown, by Wm.	
Jackson,	14 03
a Weston, Boston, by Dr. H. I. Bowditch,	6 00
n L. Emmons, Boston,	5 00
nuel Downer, Jr.	2 00
ner Sanger, Danvers,	5 00
rvey E. Weston, Boston,	5 00
Smith, Lynn,	5 00
poor Abolitionist, Northboro,	1 00
lia L. Walker and other friends, Leominster,	10 00
hel Williams, by John Bailey, N. Bedford,	1 50
nuel Morton, Plymouth,	1 00
B. Baynes, Boston,	1 00
ses Sawin and others in Southboro,	7 00
v. Joseph H. Allen, Jamaica Plain, Roxbury,	5 00

\$1232 29

FRANCIS JACKSON, Treasurer.

I take this opportunity of reminding the few who have not yet paid their pledges, and also those who design to aid us in this work, that the series of conventions is closed, and what they intended should be done immediately, in order that we may discharge at once the debts incurred by this mission. The receipts have fallen considerably short of expenses.

F. J.

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