



Madison County (NY) Historical Society



FUGITIVE SLAVE LAW CONVENTION
Cazenovia, New York
21-22 August 1850



Top: Gerrit Smith (man with raised arm); Mary and Emily Edmonson (to Smith's left and right), former slaves who became active in the abolition movement

Bottom: Theodosia Gilbert (at table), Frederick Douglass, Theodore Weld (in front of Douglass; creator of the daguerreotype)¹

LETTER TO THE AMERICAN SLAVES

FROM THOSE WHO HAVE FLED
FROM AMERICAN SLAVERY

Fugitive Slave Law Convention
Cazenovia, New York, August 1850

[Excerpts]

In the summer of 1850, as Congress was debating a new and harsher fugitive slave law, abolitionists gathered in the upstate New York town of Cazenovia to take action against the bill. Attendance was so high — over two thousand people including about fifty fugitive slaves — that the main session was held in an apple orchard (captured in the daguerreotype at left). The convention adopted this “Letter to the American Slaves” (probably written by Frederick Douglass), which was read aloud in Congress. On September 18, 1850, a month after the convention, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act.

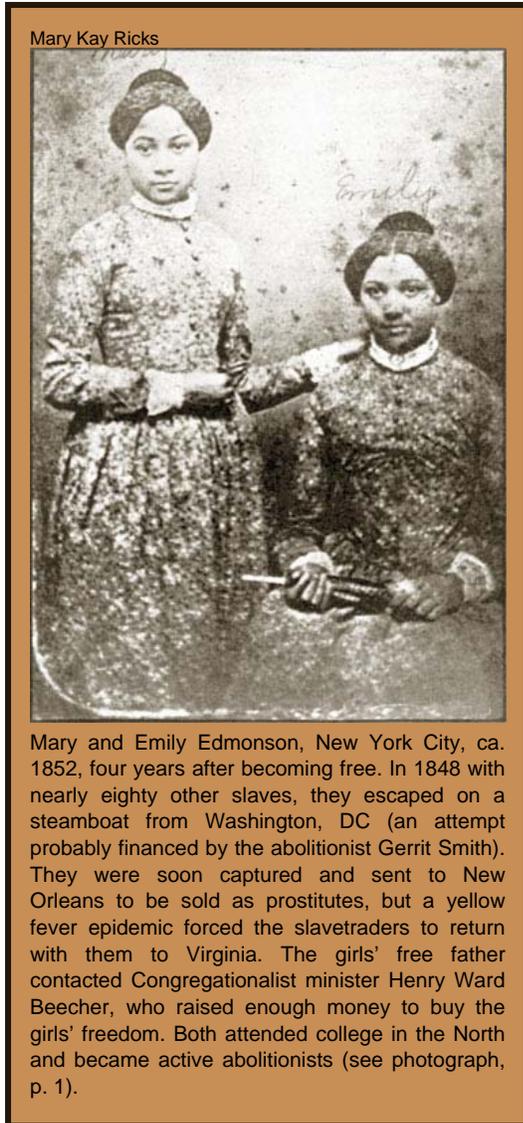
Afflicted and beloved Brothers: — The meeting which sends you this letter, is a meeting of runaway slaves. We thought it well that they who had once suffered as you still suffer, that they who had once drank of that bitterest of all bitter cups which you are still compelled to drink of, should come together for the purpose of making a communication to you.

The chief object of this meeting is to tell you what circumstances we find ourselves in — that so you may be able to judge for yourselves whether the prize we have obtained is worth the peril of the attempt to obtain it.

The heartless pirates who compelled us to call them “master” sought to persuade us, as such pirates seek to persuade you, that the condition of those who escape from their clutches is thereby made worse instead of better. We confess that we had our fears that this might be so. Indeed, so great was our ignorance that we could not be sure that the Abolitionists were not the fiends which our masters represented them to be. When they told us that the

National Humanities Center, 2007: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Published in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 29 September 1850; by Helen Boardman in *Common Ground 7* (Spring 1947); in Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1951), pp. 299-305. Copyright © 1969 by Herbert Aptheker. Permission pending. Images added and some punctuation modernized by NHC. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Photograph identification by Daniel H. Weiskotten, Chesterfield Historical Society, at www.rootsweb.com/~nyccazen/Shorts/1850Convention.html.



Mary Kay Ricks

Mary and Emily Edmonson, New York City, ca. 1852, four years after becoming free. In 1848 with nearly eighty other slaves, they escaped on a steamboat from Washington, DC (an attempt probably financed by the abolitionist Gerrit Smith). They were soon captured and sent to New Orleans to be sold as prostitutes, but a yellow fever epidemic forced the slavetraders to return with them to Virginia. The girls' free father contacted Congregationalist minister Henry Ward Beecher, who raised enough money to buy the girls' freedom. Both attended college in the North and became active abolitionists (see photograph, p. 1).

Abolitionists could they lay hands upon us, would buy and sell us, we could not certainly know that they spoke falsely; and when they told us that Abolitionists are in the habit of skinning the black man for leather and regaling their cannibalism on his flesh, even such enormities seem to us to be possible. But owing to the happy change in our circumstances, we are not as ignorant and credulous now as we once were; and if we did not know it before, we know it now, that slaveholders are as great liars as they are great tyrants. . . .

Including our children, we number in Canada, at least, twenty thousand. The total of our population in the free States far exceeds this. Nevertheless, we are poor, we can do little more to promote your deliverance than pray for it to the God of the oppressed. We will do what we can to supply you with pocket compasses. In dark nights, when his good guiding star is hidden from the flying slave, a pocket compass greatly facilitates his exodus. Besides, that we are too poor to furnish you with deadly weapons, candor requires the admission, that some of us would not furnish them, if we could; for some of us have become non-resistants and have discarded the use of these weapons: and would say to you: "love your enemies; do good to them, which hate you; bless them that curse you; and pray for them, which despitefully use you." Such of us would be glad to be able to say that all the colored men of the North are non-resistants. But, in point of fact, it is only a handful of them who are. When the insurrection of the Southern slaves shall take place, as take place it will unless speedily prevented by voluntary emancipation, the great mass of the colored men of the North, however much to the grief of any of us, will be found by your side, with deep-stored and long-accumulated revenge in their hearts, and with death-dealing weapons in their hands. . . This

truth you are entitled to know, however the knowledge of it may affect you, and however you may act in view of it.

We have said, that some of us are non-resistants. But while such would dissuade you from all violence toward the slaveholder, let it not be supposed that they regard it as guiltier than those strifes which even good men are wont to justify. If the American revolutionists had excuse for shedding but one drop of blood, then have the American slaves excuse for making blood to flow "even unto the horsebridles."¹ . . .

We do not forget the industrious efforts which are now making to get new facilities at the hands of Congress for re-enslaving those who have escaped from slavery.² But we can assure you that, as to the State of New York and the New England States, such efforts must prove fruitless. Against all such devilism — against all kidnapers — the colored people of these States will "stand for their life"; and, what is more, the white people of these States will not stand against them. A regenerated public sentiment has forever removed these States beyond the limits of the slaveholders' hunting ground. Defeat — disgrace — and it may be death — will be their only reward for pursuing their prey into this *abolitionized* portion of our country. . . .

¹ Revelation 14:20: "and the winepress was trodden without the city, and blood came out of the winepress, even unto the horse bridles, by the space of a thousand and six hundred furlongs." [King James Bible]

² At the time of the convention Congress was debating the fugitive slave bill, which was passed and became law the next month (September 18).

There are three points in your conduct when you shall have become inhabitants of the North on which we cannot refrain from admonishing you.

1st. If you will join a sectarian church, let it not be one which approves of the Negro-pew, and which refuses to treat slaveholding as a high crime against God and man. It were better that you sacrifice your lives than that by going into the Negro pew, you invade your self-respect — debase your souls — play the traitor to your race — and crucify afresh Him who died for the one brotherhood of man.

2d. Join no political party which refuses to commit itself fully, openly, and heartily, in its newspapers, meetings, and nominations, to the doctrine that slavery is the grossest of all absurdities, as well as the guiltiest of all abominations, and that there can no more be a law for the enslavement of man, made in the image of God than for the enslavement of God himself. Vote for no man for civil office who makes your complexion a bar to political, ecclesiastical, or social equality. Better die than insult yourself, and insult every person of African blood, and insult your Maker, by contributing to elevate to civil rule the man who refuses to eat with you, to sit by your side in the House of Worship, or to let his children sit in the school by the side of your children.

3d. Send not your children to the school which the malignant and murderous prejudice of white people has gotten up exclusively for colored people. Valuable as learning is, it is too costly, if it is acquired at the expense of such self-degradation. . . .

And now brethren, we close this letter with assuring you that we do not, cannot forget you. You are ever in our minds, our hearts, our prayers. Perhaps you are fearing that the free colored people of the United States will suffer themselves to be carried away from you by the American Colonization Society. Fear it not. In vain is it, that this greatest and most malignant enemy of the African race is now busy devising new plans and in seeking the aid of Government to perpetuate your enslavement. It wants us away from your side, that you may be kept in ignorance. But we will remain by your side to enlighten you. . . The land of our enslaved brethren is our land, and death alone shall part us.

We cannot forget you, brethren, for we know your sufferings, and we know your sufferings because we

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CAUTION!!

COLORED PEOPLE
OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,

You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the
Watchmen and Police Officers
of Boston,

For since the recent **ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN,** they are empowered to act as
KIDNAPPERS
AND
Slave Catchers,

And they have already been actually employed in **KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES.** Therefore, if you value your **LIBERTY,** and the *Welfare of the Fugitives* among you, *Shun* them in every possible manner, as so many **HOUNDS** on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.

Keep a Sharp Look Out for
KIDNAPPERS, and have
TOP EYE open.

APRIL 24, 1851.

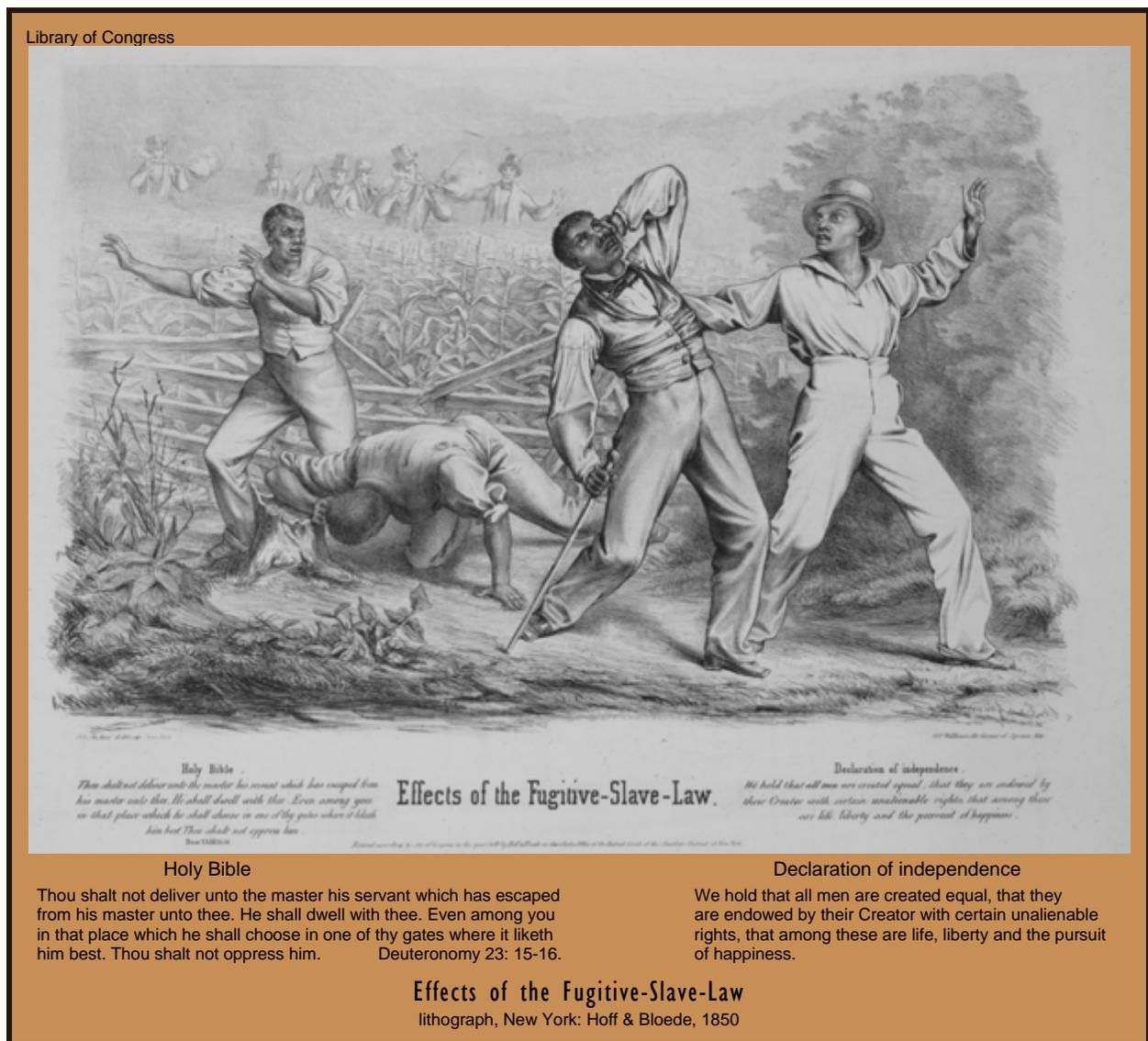
Boston, 1851

know from experience what it is to be an American slave. So galling was our bondage that to escape from it we suffered the loss of all things, and braved every peril and endured every hardship. Some of us left parents, some wives, some children. Some of us were wounded with guns and dogs, as we fled. Some of us, to make good our escape, suffered ourselves to be nailed up in boxes, and to pass for merchandise. Some of us secreted ourselves in the suffocating holds of ships. Nothing was so dreadful to us as slavery; and hence it is almost literally true that we dreaded nothing which could befall us in our attempt to get clear of it. Our condition could be made no worse, for we were already in the lowest depths of earthly woe. Even should we be overtaken, and subjected to slavery, this would be but to return to our old sufferings and sorrows; and should death itself prove to be the price of our endeavor after freedom, what would that be but a welcome release to men, who had all their lifetime been killed every day and “killed all the day long.”

We have referred to our perils and hardships in escaping from slavery. We are happy to be able to say, that every year is multiplying the facilities for leaving the Southern prison house. The Liberty Party, the Vigilance Committee of New York,

individuals, and companies of individuals in various parts of the country, are doing all they can, and it is much, to afford you a safe and a cheap passage from slavery to liberty. They do this, however, not only at great expense of property, but at great peril of liberty and life. Thousands of you have heard, ere this, that within the last fortnight, the precious name of William L. Chaplin³ has been added to the list of those who, in helping you gain your liberty, have lost their own. Here is a man, whose wisdom, cultivation, moral worth, bring him into the highest and best class of men: — and yet, he became a willing martyr for the poor, despised, forgotten slave’s sake. Your remembrance of one such fact is enough to shed light and hope upon your darkest and most desponding moments.

Brethren, our last word to you is to bid you be of good cheer and not to despair of your deliverance. Do not abandon yourselves, as have many thousands of American slaves, to the crime of suicide. Live! Live to escape from slavery! Live to serve God! Live till He shall Himself call you into eternity! Be prayerful — be brave — be hopeful. “Lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh.”



³ This convention raised a defense fund for Chaplin, an Abolitionist confined in a Washington jail for assisting a slave to flee. [Aptheker footnote]