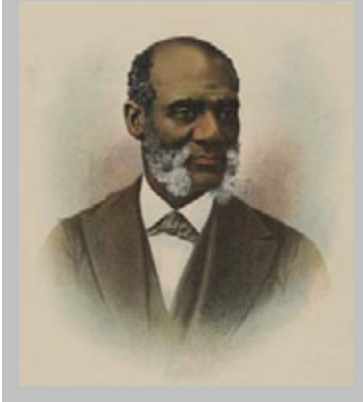




Free Blacks Address the Enslaved: Resist, Run Away, . . . Revolt?

Many free blacks in the North, especially former slaves, became anti-slavery activists — abolition speakers and editorialists, Negro Convention leaders, Underground Railroad “conductors,” fugitive aid committee members, and church spokesmen for the enslaved. Most encouraged slaves to resist by running away, many urged group resistance by the enslaved, and a few advocated the use of violence. Presented here are excerpts from four documents in which free blacks urge organized group resistance from strikes to violent uprising. What arguments are presented for and against group resistance? for and against the use of violence?

“Call to Rebellion” Address, 1843



Rev. Henry Highland Garnet, Address to the National Convention of Negro Men, Albany, New York, August 1843 [EXCERPTS]

Garnet’s address initiated a lengthy debate with Frederick Douglass, who opposed Garnet’s proposal. The convention decided, by one vote, not to adopt Garnet’s address as its official position (“sentiments of the convention”).

Brethren, the time has come when you must act for yourselves. It is an old and true saying that “if hereditary bondmen would be free, they must themselves strike the blow.” You can plead your own cause, and do the work of emancipation better than any others. . . Think how many tears you have poured out upon the soil which you have cultivated with unrequited toil and enriched with your blood; and then go to your lordly enslavers and tell them plainly, that you *are determined to be free*. Appeal to their sense of justice, and tell them that they have no more right to oppress you, than you have to enslave them. Entreat them to remove the grievous burdens which they have imposed upon you, and to remunerate you for your labor. Promise them renewed diligence in the cultivation of the soil, if they will render to you an equivalent for your services. Point them to the increase of happiness and prosperity in the British West Indies since the Act of Emancipation. Tell them in language which they cannot misunderstand of the exceeding sinfulness of slavery and of a future judgment, and of the righteous retributions of an indignant God. Inform them that all you desire is FREEDOM, and that nothing else will suffice. Do this, and forever after cease to toil for the heartless tyrants who give you no other reward but stripes and abuse. If they then commence the work of death, they, and not you, will be responsible for the consequences. You had better all die — *die immediately*, than live slaves and entail your wretchedness upon your posterity. If you would be free in this generation, here is your only hope. However much you and all of us may desire it, there is not much hope of redemption without the shedding of blood. If you must bleed, let it all come at once — rather *die freemen, than live to be slaves*. . . .

. . . You act as though you were made for the special use of these devils. You act as though your daughters were born to pamper the lusts of your masters and overseers. And worse than all, you tamely submit while your lords tear your wives from your embraces and defile them before your eyes. In the name of God, we ask, are you men? Where is the blood of your fathers? Has it all run out of your veins? Awake, awake; millions of voices are calling you! Your dead fathers speak to you from their graves. Heaven, as with a voice of thunder, calls on you to arise from the dust.

Let your motto be resistance! *resistance!* RESISTANCE! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance. What kind of resistance you had better make, you must decide by the circumstances that surround you, and according to the suggestion of expediency. Brethren, adieu! Trust in the living God. Labor for the peace of the human race, and remember that you are FOUR MILLIONS.

“Slaves of the South, Now Is Your Time!” 1849



Willis Hodges, *The Ram's Horn*, [New York], n.d., as reprinted in *The Liberator*, 3 August 1849 [EXCERPTS]

In 1849 the Louisiana legislature passed a resolution in support of the short-lived Hungarian uprising against the Austrian empire. Partly commenting on the irony of a slaveholding state encouraging an oppressed minority, Willis Hodges, a free black newspaperman, published this editorial calling for the enslaved to “strike at once.”

Slaves of the South, Now Is Your Time!

Strike for your freedom *now*, at the suggestion of your enslavers. Governor Johnson, one of the largest slaveholders in Louisiana, encourages you to strike at once. You may be sure of his sympathy for your success in a physical struggle for liberty. What have you to gain by procrastination in a manly struggle for liberty? You have nothing to lose, but every thing to gain. God is with you for liberty. Good men will sympathize for your success, and even slaveholders are ready . . . to cheer you on in the holy cause of freedom. Men will respect you in proportion to the physical efforts you put forth in resisting tyranny and slavery.

We do not tell you to murder the slaveholders; but we do advise you to refuse longer to work without pay. Make up your minds to die, rather than bequeath a state of slavery to your posterity.

Remember that thousands of your friends in the free States, both colored and white, are anxiously waiting for you to make a demonstration of your desire for freedom. The first thing for you to do is to make up your minds deliberately, that you will work no longer, for any living man, without wages. Let this determination be general, and well understood. In the second place, select out your bravest men to go and tell the slaveholders your determination, and make up your minds, as *Christians*, to die rather than submit. By such a course, you will throw the responsibility on them of a resort to physical violence. And in case of struggle, you will stand justified before the world in your noble struggle for freedom, and will transmit your example to generations yet unborn.

We appeal to you, then, as men, as philanthropists, and as Christians, to act promptly in this glorious cause, while the world is anxiously looking on to see the glorious result, of Liberty and Equality, triumph over Slavery and oppression; and may God prosper the right.

Letter to the American Slaves, 1850



Fugitive Slave Act 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. The convention adopted this “Letter to the American Slaves” (probably written by Frederick Douglass), which was read aloud in Congress. One month after the convention, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act.

Affected and beloved Brothers: — The meeting which sends you this letter is a meeting of runaway slaves. . . .

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. . . .

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.

It is not to be disguised that a colored man is as much disposed as a white man to resist, even unto death, those who oppress him. The colored American, for the sake of relieving his colored brethren, would no more hesitate to shoot an American slaveholder than would a white American, for the sake of delivering his white brother, hesitate to shoot an Algerine slaveholder.¹ The State motto of Virginia, “Death to Tyrants,” is as well the black man’s as the white man’s motto. We tell you these things not to encourage or justify your resort to physical force, but simply that you may know, be it to your joy or sorrow to know it, what your Northern colored brethren are, in these important respects. 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.”²

Numerous as are the escapes from slavery, they would be far more so, were you not embarrassed by your misinterpretations of the rights of property. You hesitate to take even the dullest of your masters’ horses — whereas it is your duty to take the fleetest. Your consciences suggest doubts, whether in [when] quitting your bondage, you are at liberty to put in your packs what you need of food and clothing. But were you better informed, you would not scruple to break your masters’ locks and take all their money. You are taught to respect the rights of property. But no such rights belong to the slaveholder. His right to property is but the robber-right. In every slaveholding community, the rights of property all center in them, whose coerced and unrequited toil has created the wealth in which their oppressors riot. Moreover, if your oppressors have rights of property, you, at least, are exempt from all obligation to respect them. For you are prisoners of war, in an enemy’s country — of a war, too, that us unrivalled for its injustice, cruelty, meanness: — and therefore by all the rules of war, you have the fullest liberty to plunder, burn, and kill, as you may have occasion to do to promote your escape.

We regret to be obliged to say to you, that it is not every one of the Free States, which offers you an asylum. Even within the last year, fugitive slaves have been arrested in some of the Free States, and replunged into slavery. But, make your way to New York or New England, and you will be safe. . . .

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.”

¹ Referring to north African Muslim slaveholders who captured thousands of European and American slaves, often crewmen from sailing ships.

² 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]

Debate, State Convention of Massachusetts Negroes, 1858



Charles L. Remond

Convention Proceedings, published in *The Liberator*, 13 August 1858 [EXCERPT]

Mr. Remond moved that a committee of five be appointed to prepare an address suggesting to the slaves at the South to create an insurrection. He said he knew his resolution was in one sense revolutionary and in another treasonable, but so he meant it. He doubted whether it would be carried. But he didn't want to see people shake their heads, as he did see them on the platform, and turn pale, but to rise and talk. He wanted to see the half-way fellows take themselves away and leave the field to men who would encourage their brethren at the South to rise with bowie-knife and revolver and musket.

Father [Josiah] Henson doubted whether the time had come for the people of Massachusetts to take any such step. As for turning pale, he never turned pale in his life. [Father Henson is a very black man.]³ He didn't want to fight any more than he believed Remond did. He believed that if the shooting time came, Remond would be found out of the question. As he didn't want to see three or four thousand men hung before their time, he should oppose any such action, head, neck and shoulders. If such a proposition were carried out, everything would be lost. Remond might talk and then run away, but what would become of the poor fellows that must stand? And then the resolution was ridiculous for another reason. How could documents be circulated among the Negroes of the South? Catch the masters permitting that, and you catch a weasel asleep. However, they had nothing to fight with at the South — no weapons, no education. "When I fight," said Father Henson, "I want to whip somebody."

Mr. Troy, of Windsor, Canada, wanted to see the slaves free, for he had relatives who were the property of Senator Hunter of Virginia; but he knew no such step as was now proposed could help them at all. He hoped the Convention would vote the thing down.

Captain Henry Johnson concurred with the last two speakers. It was easy to talk but another thing to act. He was opposed to insurrection. In his opinion, those who were the loudest in their professions [statements of support] were the first to run. The passage of the resolution would do no good. It would injure the cause. If we were equal in numbers, then there might be some reason in the proposition. If an insurrection occurred, he wouldn't fight.

Mr. Remond expressed himself as quite indifferent whether his motion was carried or not. He was in collusion with no one, and he cared nothing if no one supported him. It had been intimated that he would skulk in the time of danger. The men who said so judged of him by themselves. Some had said the address could not be circulated at the South; in that case, its adoption could certainly do no harm. Others had said many lives would be lost if an insurrection should come about. He had counted the cost. If he had one hundred relations [relatives] at the South, he would rather see them die today than to live in bondage. He would rather stand over their graves than feel that any pale-faced scoundrel might violate his mother or his sister at pleasure. He only regretted that he had not a spear with which he could transfix all the slaveholders at once. To the devil with the slaveholders! Give him liberty, or give him death. The insurrection could be accomplished as quick as thought, and the glorious result would be instantaneously attained.

A vote was taken, and the motion was lost. This was by far the most spirited discussion of the Convention.

³ The bracketed sentence appears in the original report. [Aptheker footnote]