

Profiles of 24 Black abolitionists who fought against enslavement

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Image 1. The Underground Railroad monument in Detroit, Michigan. The Underground Railroad, established in the early to mid-nineteenth century, was a network of secret houses and safe routes used by enslaved African Americans to escape into free states and Canada. Photo: Wolfgang Kaehler/Getty Images.

American history textbooks give little attention to the abolition movement, which pushed tirelessly to end enslavement. This is particularly true of Black abolitionists. Yet, Black abolitionists were central to the abolition movement. They played a major role in the ending of enslavement.

Below are the biographies of two dozen important Black abolitionists. This collection is not complete. Indeed, there are many more Black abolitionists who fought against enslavement in countless ways.

William Wells Brown

William Wells Brown was born with "slave" status in 1814. Much of his childhood was spent working in St. Louis, Missouri. During one of his many attempts to escape enslavement, he and his mother were caught. She was shipped south to New Orleans and he never saw her again. Brown was finally able to escape on New Year's Day in 1834. He went to Buffalo, New York, where he

worked on steamboats and helped in the work of the Underground Railroad.

In the 1840s, Brown joined the abolitionist movement. He soon began attending conventions, working on committees and giving speeches. In 1847, he was hired by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society as a public speaker and moved to Boston. That same year he published his book "Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave." The book was widely read and greatly admired.

In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, which gave enslavers the right to seize people who had escaped enslavement and moved to free states. This put Brown in great danger. To escape recapture, he moved to England, where he spent five years.

After the Civil War, Brown continued to write. He published three volumes on Black history, a novel, travelogues, a play and a collection of abolitionist songs. In time, he came to be considered the most important Black writer in the U.S. Brown also became a doctor. He passed away in 1884.

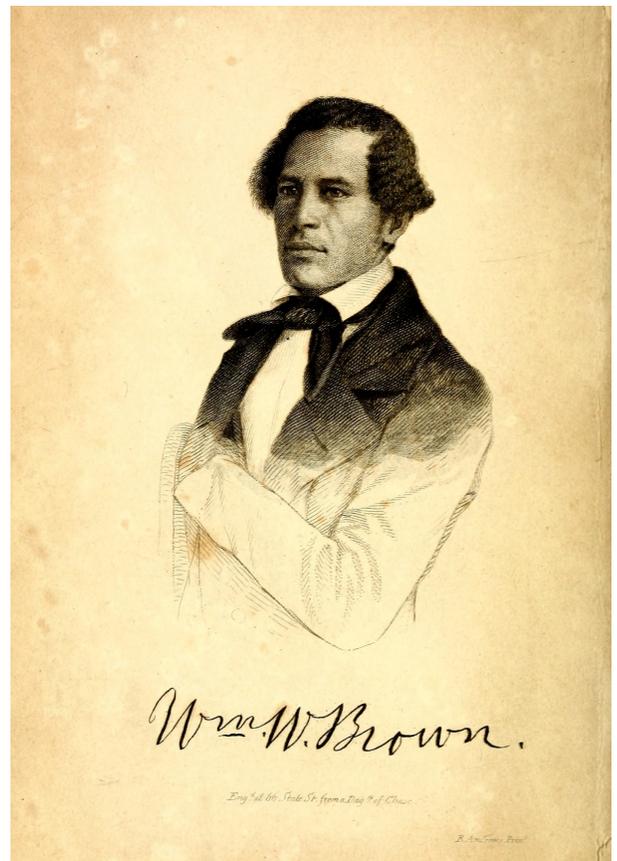
Paul Cuffee

On February 10, 1780, Paul Cuffee and several others petitioned the Massachusetts government. They asked state leaders to do one of two things: either give free Black Americans the right to vote or stop taxing them. Their petition was denied. However, it helped lead to the 1783 Massachusetts Constitution, which gave equal rights to all male citizens of the state.

Here is a section of Cuffee's petition, adjusted for modern language:

Most of us spent years as slaves. During that time, we earned nothing for our labor. Some of us have only very recently become free. Yet we now are being taxed. We are being taxed both on what we earn and on whatever small property we have been able to buy, through much hard labor. These taxes are a heavy burden. They make it very difficult for us to support ourselves and our families.

William Howard Day



William Howard Day was a lawyer, newspaper editor, minister and abolitionist. In 1859, he traveled to Britain, where he gave a series of talks. Day urged the British to stop buying cotton grown by enslaved people from the U.S. The enslavers would be weakened if they no longer made as much money from the forced labor of enslaved people, Day said. They would have less need of enslaved people too, so enslavement would be easier to end. You can read a report on Day's talks in the Black Abolitionist Archive.

On July 4, 1865, Day gave a speech on the White House grounds. Thousands of people listened closely. Among them were people recently freed from enslavement, congressmen and government officials. Day had a stirring message for his listeners. He reminded them that the full promise of the Declaration of Independence would not be realized until Black folks had the same rights as white folks.

Frederick Douglass

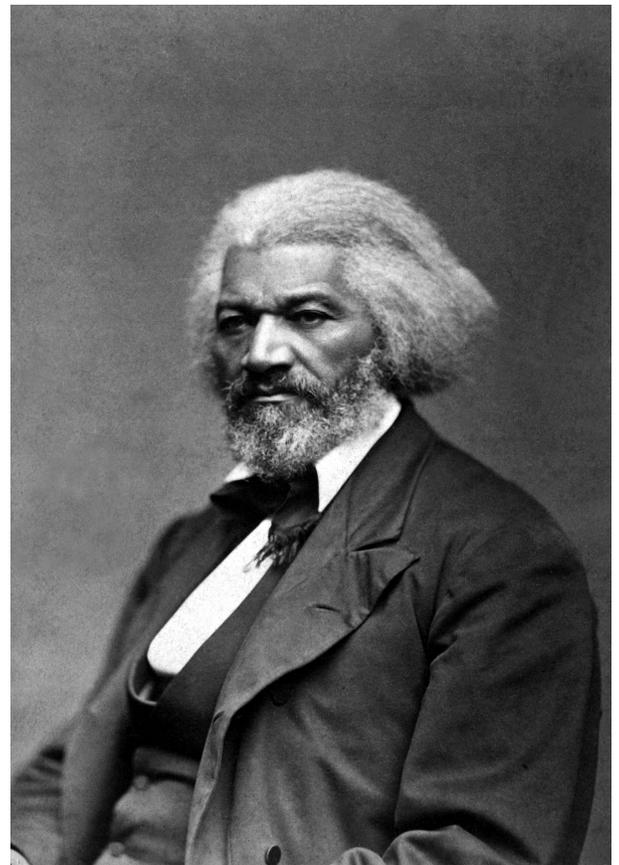
Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) was an abolitionist, a famous public speaker, a writer and a newspaperman. In 1847, Douglass founded a newspaper, The North Star.

The North Star argued against the U.S. war on Mexico. Abolitionists saw that war as an attempt by the enslaving states to extend enslavement and increase their own power. Here is part of a piece Douglas wrote for the paper:

We beg our countrymen to stop this terrible war. If we do, our country may yet be saved. Let the press, the church, and the people unite at once. Let petitions flood the halls of Congress by the million. We must demand the instant recall of our forces from Mexico.

Luís Gama

Luís Gama (1830-1882) was an abolitionist, journalist, lawyer and poet. Gama was born in Salvador, Brazil. His father was a rich Portuguese man and his mother, Luisa Mahin, was a Black woman from Ghana. Mahin played a major role in a number of uprisings by enslaved people, including the Malê Revolt.

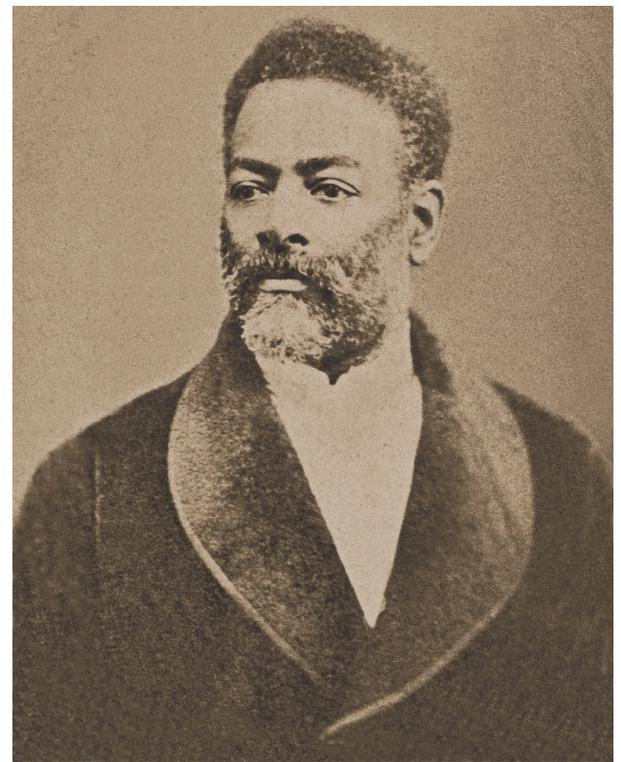
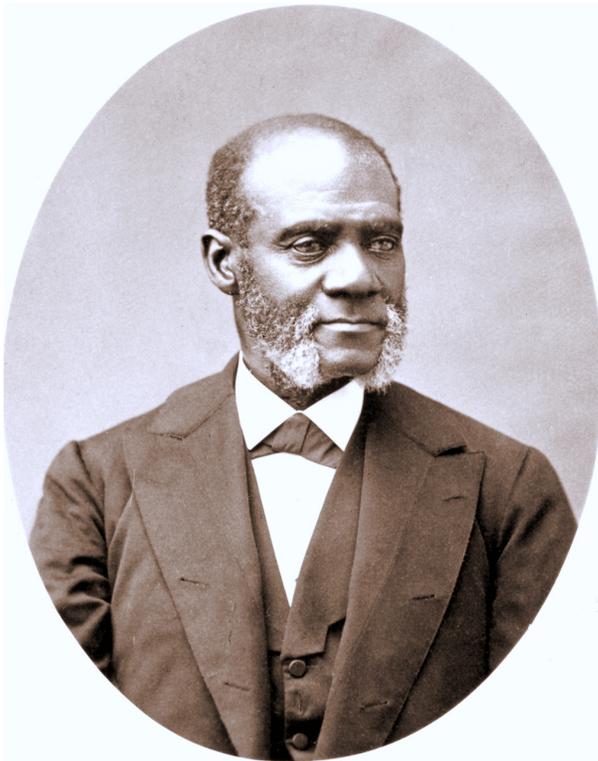


When Gama was 10, his father sold him into enslavement. In 1848, Gama escaped his enslavement. He was then able to win his legal freedom after proving to a court that he was born free.

Gama became famous in Brazil as a lawyer. He represented enslaved people in lawsuits against their enslavers. His efforts helped to free more than 1,000 enslaved people. By the end of his life, Gama was widely considered one of Brazil's most important abolitionists.

Henry Highland Garnet

Henry Highland Garnet was born with "slave" status in Maryland in 1815. When he was 9, his family won their freedom via the



Underground Railroad. Garnet entered the African Free School in New York City in 1826.

In 1834, Garnet and some of his classmates formed their own club. They called it the Garrison Literary and Benevolent Association. Because the club was named after abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, the school where the group wanted to meet insisted that the group first change their name. Keeping the name could lead to mob violence, the school said. The club decided to keep their name and instead change their meeting place. The first meeting of the group drew over 150 African Americans under age 20.

Garnet is perhaps most famous for his radical speech of 1843, "An Address to the Slaves of the USA." In this speech, Garnet spoke directly to the country's enslaved people. He urged them to rebel against their enslavers.

Because of Garnet's outspoken views, he was a major target during the 1863 New York City draft riots. Rioters mobbed the street where Garnet lived. Fortunately, several neighbors hid Garnet and his family.

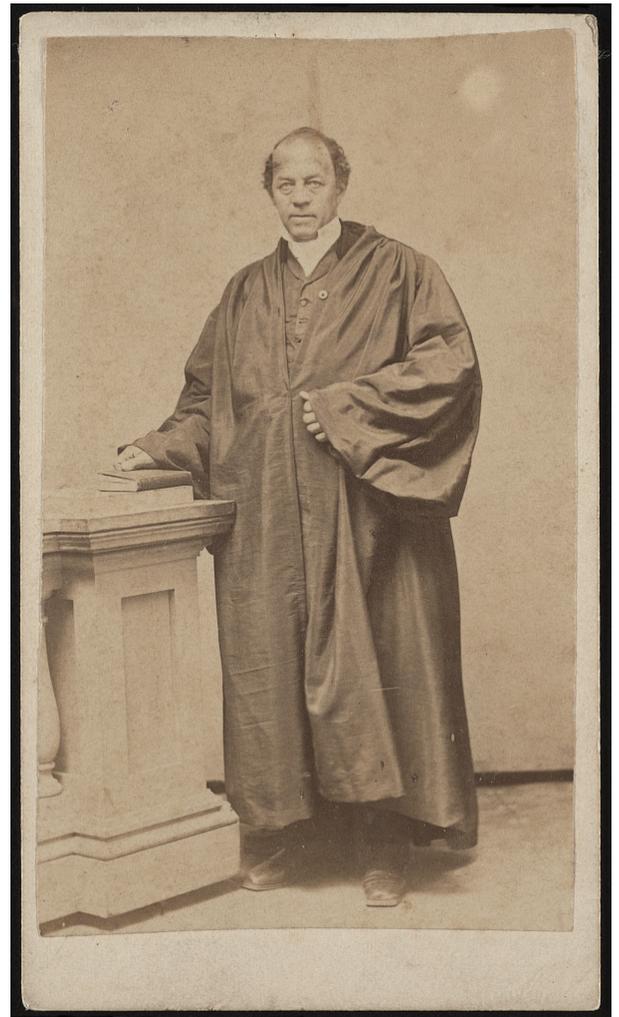
Leonard Grimes

Leonard Grimes (1815-1873) was an abolitionist and pastor. He played a big role in the Underground Railroad. Grimes was born in Virginia. After seeing the horrors of enslavement as a young man, he decided to do all he could to help people escape.

Grimes got a job hiring out horses and carriages in order to provide cover for his work on the Underground Railroad. In 1839, he was arrested for transporting a family to freedom. He was sentenced to two years of hard labor in a Richmond, Virginia prison.

After his release, Grimes and his family moved to Boston. There, he became the first pastor of Twelfth Baptist Church, known as The Fugitives Church. In Boston, Grimes continued his abolitionist work. He helped hundreds of freedom-seekers make their way to Canada.

Charlotte Forten Grimké



Abolitionist and educator Charlotte Forten Grimké was the granddaughter of Philadelphia abolitionist James Forten. She was a member of the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society. After the Civil War began, Charlotte Forten served as a teacher for a community of African Americans who had been freed in 1862. These formerly enslaved people were living on the Sea Islands off the coast

of South Carolina. Forten wrote about the experience in her article "Life on the Sea Islands." Her article was published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1864.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1825. After teaching in Pennsylvania and Ohio for two years, she traveled the U.S. speaking against enslavement. At the same time, she worked with the Underground Railroad.

Harper was also a celebrated writer. She published many collections of poetry, including "Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects" and "Sketches of Southern Life." Harper quickly became the most celebrated female African American writer in the United States. Here are a few lines from a poem she wrote about enslavement:

And mothers stood with streaming eyes

And saw their dear children sold

Unheeded rise their bitter cries,

While tyrants bartered them for gold.

After the Civil War, Harper supported the fight for African American civil rights. She was also a strong supporter of women's rights.

Lewis Hayden

Lewis Hayden was born with "slave" status in 1811 in Lexington, Kentucky. His first wife and son were sold by U.S. Senator Henry Clay. He never saw them again.

Hayden married Harriet Bell in 1840. The couple escaped on the Underground Railroad in 1844. They fled to Canada before they made their way to Boston.

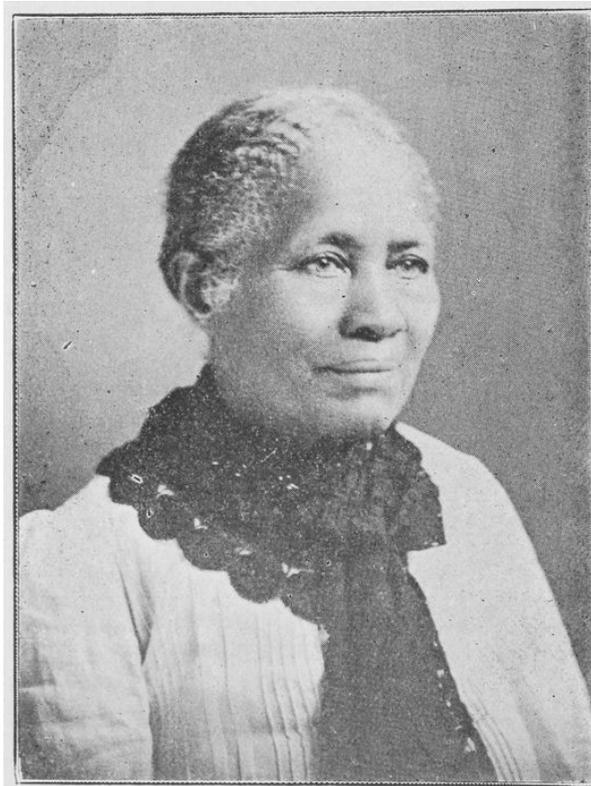
In Massachusetts, Hayden and his family ran a clothing store. The store hosted abolitionist meetings. It also provided a hiding place for people escaping from enslavement.

During the Civil War, Hayden helped sign up Black soldiers. He later served a term in the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

Hayden passed away in 1889.

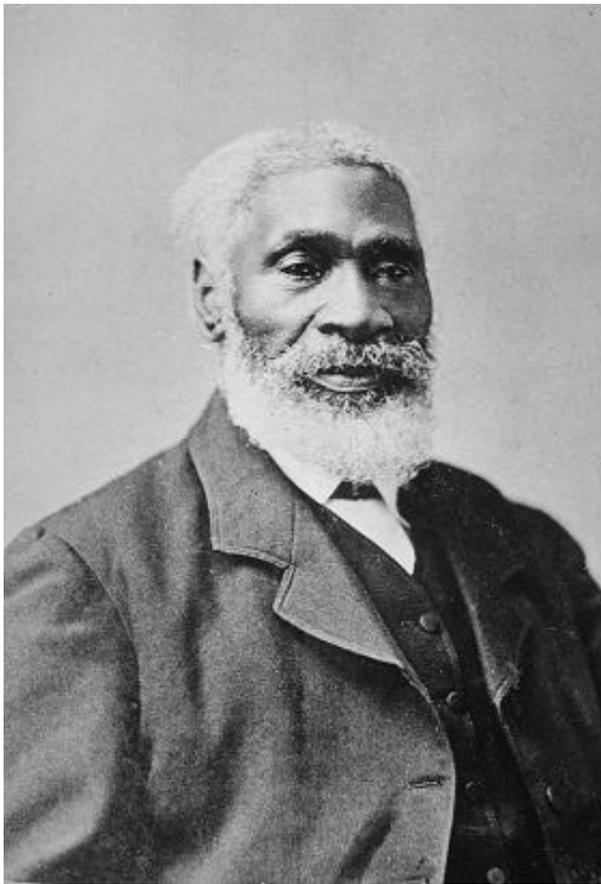
Josiah Henson

Josiah Henson was born with "slave" status in 1789 in Maryland. He later fled to Canada with his family. In Canada, he founded the Dawn Institute, which taught trades to people who had escaped enslavement.



MRS. FRANCES E. W. HARPER,

Henson
also
became a



Methodist preacher. He traveled throughout the U.S. and Great Britain lecturing against enslavement. Over the years, Henson helped over 200 people escape to Canada via the Underground Railroad.

The book "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was partly based on Henson's life.

Paul Jennings

Paul Jennings (1799-1874) was enslaved by President James Madison. Jennings won his freedom in 1845. He then published a book about his years with the president, "A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison."

Jennings also helped plan the largest-ever attempted escape by enslaved African Americans. Unfortunately, the escape failed, as everyone was quickly caught. This attempted escape is known as the Pearl incident.

John Mercer Langston

John Mercer Langston was an abolitionist, politician and lawyer. Below is a section of a speech he delivered in August of 1858:

"Slavery is no good for anyone. It does not just rob the Black man of his freedom. It also strikes down the freedom of the white man. If one part of the population is in chains, the other part is, too. The chains that bind the white man may be invisible for a time. Yet they are iron-linked and strong."

Robert Morris

Robert Morris (1823-1882) was one of the first African American lawyers in the U.S. In 1851, he was one of the



abolitionists who helped Shadrach Minkins escape from a courthouse. Minkins had been seized under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Morris was tried and found not guilty for his role in the Minkins escape.

Morris was also one of the lawyers for Benjamin Roberts. In 1848, Roberts filed the nation's first-ever school integration suit. His daughter Sarah had been barred from a white school in Boston.

William Cooper Nell

William Cooper Nell was an abolitionist, journalist, author and civil servant. Nell was born in 1816. He was one of the first people to record African American history. He was also an activist in the fight for school desegregation in Boston.

Solomon Northup

Solomon Northup was born free in upstate New York in 1808, but was later enslaved. He spent 12 years on plantations in Louisiana before he was able to regain his freedom. The story of his enslavement was told in his book "12 Years a Slave." The book was twice made into a film.



Northup wrote his book to show the terrible brutality of enslavement. After regaining his freedom, he spoke out against enslavement across the U.S.

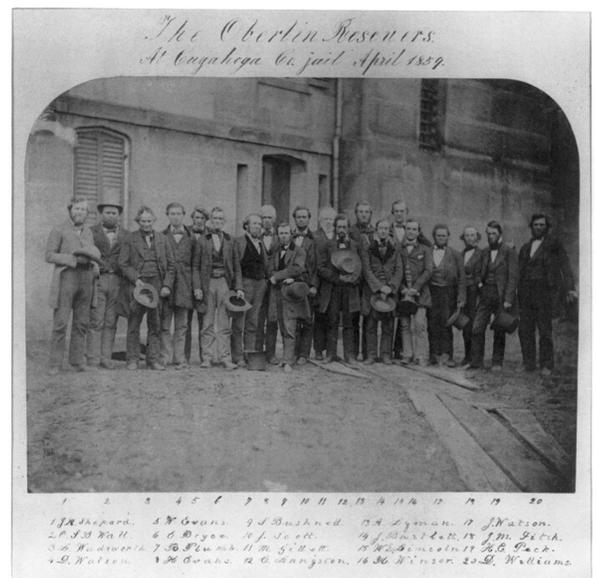


Wellington Rescuers

On September 13, 1858, a group of people from Oberlin, Ohio stopped Kentucky catchers from kidnapping John Price, who had once been enslaved. These Oberlinians were both Black and white. They pursued the kidnappers to nearby Wellington. There they managed to free Price.

Charles Lenox Remond

Charles Lenox Remond (1810-1873) joined the abolitionist movement while in his early twenties. In 1832, he worked as an agent for William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*. He then became a lecturer for the American Anti-Slavery Society. Remond was the only African American delegate to the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. In the United Kingdom, he quickly became known as a gifted and moving speaker.



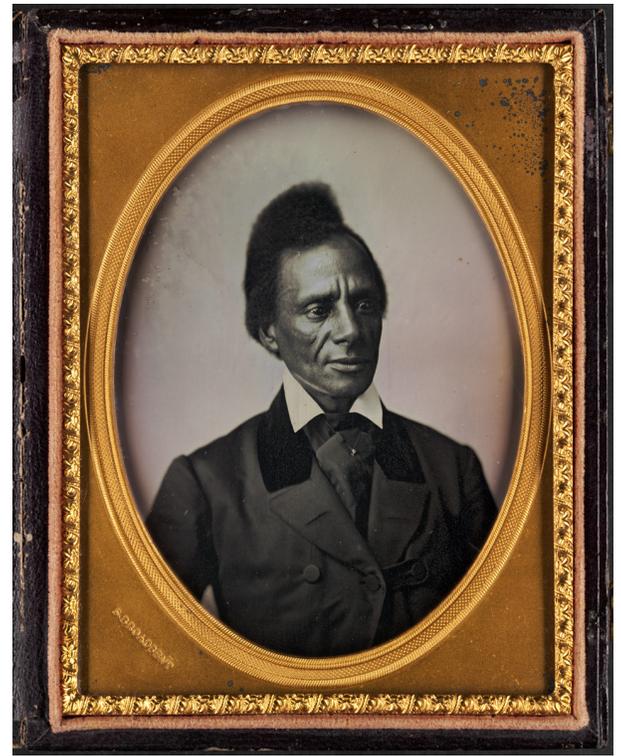
Upon his return to the U.S., Remond continued to fight against enslavement. He also labored to improve the lives of free Black Americans in the north. For example, he lobbied the Massachusetts House of Representatives to end segregation on trains.

Sarah Parker Remond

Sarah Parker Remond (1826-1894) was born into a family of abolitionists who were also active in the Underground Railroad. She was the sister of Charles Lenox Remond, who is discussed above. Remond gave her first abolitionist speech at the age of 16. This was a radical action at the time not

just because she was young and Black, but also because she was a woman.

Remond was a member of several anti-



enslavement organizations, including the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society. When she was 27, she refused to accept segregated seating at an event at Boston's Howard Athenaeum. As she was being forced to leave, Remond was pushed down a flight of stairs by a police officer. She then took the city of Boston to court. Remond was awarded a settlement of \$500, which was a lot of money for the time. The case drew national attention.

Remond later traveled across the country as an abolitionist lecturer. She eventually moved to Italy and became a doctor.

David Ruggles

David Ruggles (1810-1849) was an abolitionist, editor, and writer. He was an organizer of the New York Committee of Vigilance. He was also a famous conductor of the Underground Railroad. Ruggles was well known for his great bravery in the battle against kidnapers and people trading enslaved people.

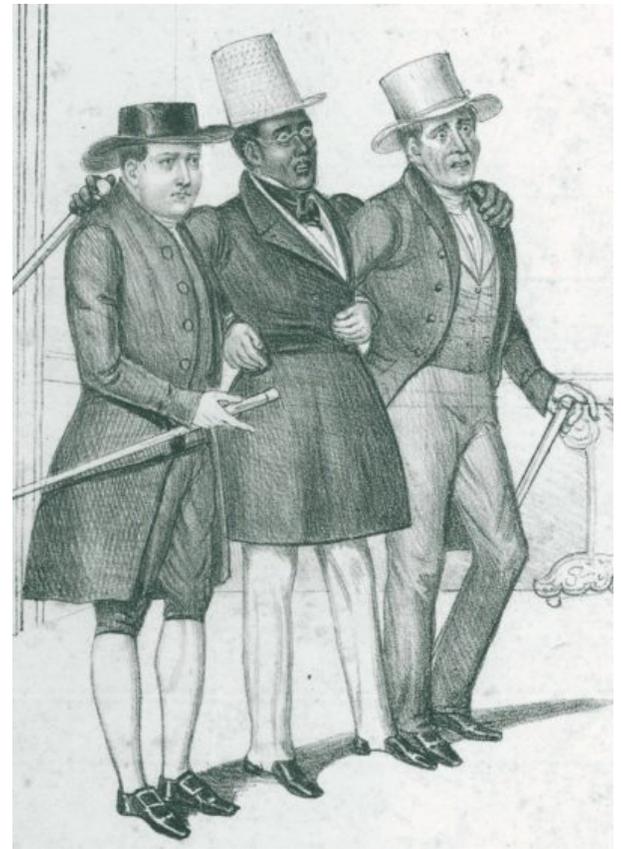
Ruggles was the nation's first Black bookseller. He also operated the country's first Black lending library. His magazine, the *Mirror of Liberty*, was the first magazine published by an African American.

Ruggles' store was burned down three times by anti-abolitionists. Ruggles himself was badly beaten in jail twice. Once, he was nearly kidnapped and sold into enslavement.

Mary Ann Shadd Cary

Mary Ann Shadd was born in Wilmington, Delaware in 1823. Her parents were abolitionists and their home was a station on the Underground Railroad.

At the time, Black children in Delaware were not allowed to attend school, so the family moved to



Pennsylvania. There Mary Ann studied at a Quaker school. She later became a teacher and taught for 12 years. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the Shadds moved to Canada. Even though they were free Black Americans, they were still in danger of being kidnapped and forced into enslavement.

Mary Ann Shadd wrote and published a pamphlet encouraging other Black people to settle in Canada. She also founded Canada's first anti-enslavement newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman*.

In 1856, Shadd married Thomas Cary, after which she became known as Mary Ann Shadd Cary. She eventually returned to the U.S. There she became active in the Women's Suffrage Movement, which was fighting to win women the vote. In 1883, she became one of the country's first female African American lawyers.

William Still

William Still was born free in 1821. He was known as the "Father of the Underground Railroad." Still helped more than 800 people escape enslavement and continue on the road to freedom.

Still worked with an Underground Railroad network that stretched across New Jersey, New York, New England and Canada. In 1872, he published an account of his work. His book is titled "The Underground Railroad Records."

James McCune Smith

The African Free School was a school for African American children. It opened in New York City in 1788. In 1835, it became an official part of the New York City public school system. By then, it had educated thousands of people. Doctor and abolitionist James McCune Smith was one of the school's best-known students.

Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman was one of the most famous



abolitionists and Underground Railroad operators. She was born with "slave" status in the early 1820s in Dorchester County, Maryland.

In 1849, Tubman fled Maryland for the north. She would later return south on countless trips to bring people to freedom on the Underground Railroad.

Tubman is less known for the important role she played during the Civil War. Tubman led the Union army in the Raid at Combahee Ferry. The raid freed more than 700 people from enslavement. This was the only Civil War military operation led by a woman and it was very successful.

Later in her life, Tubman also took part in the Women's Suffrage Movement.

David Walker

In September 1829, David Walker published his "Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World." The "Appeal" was a call to action against the brutality of enslavement.

At the time, the "Appeal" was the most widely read anti-enslavement document in the United States. With the help of sailors, church leaders, and many others, Walker was able to smuggle copies to plantations in the South. As a result, Walker's "Appeal" was banned in the South and laws were passed that made it illegal for Black Americans to learn how to read. A bounty was put on Walker's head.

In addition to writing the "Appeal," Walker was a leading abolitionist and noted public speaker in Boston. He wrote for the first African American newspaper, "Freedom's Journal." Three editions

of Walker's "Appeal" were published before his death in 1830.

