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Abolitionism and the Struggle Against Slavery in Livingston County

by Justin Behrend

About the Author

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The Livingston County Historical Society welcomes local historians, historical societies, scholars and others interested in Livingston County history to submit original articles for the Livingston County Historical Review. This publication supports the society's mission of presenting and preserving our county's history and is distributed to hundreds of individual and corporate members as well as Livingston County schools and libraries. As we plan for future issues, LCHS invites you to submit articles of interest. Submissions can be emailed to the editor at lchistory@frontier.com or sent in hard copy to Livingston County Museum, 30 Center Street, Geneseo, NY 14454.

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The Livingston County Historical Society is an educational institution whose purpose is to present, preserve, and value the rich history of Livingston County via its collections, programming, and partnership.

Abolitionism and the Struggle Against Slavery in Livingston County

By Justin Behrend

In the back pages of an old, dusty book is a curious note. This book, which sits on a shelf in the Livingston County Historical Society Museum, is a journal of the Livingston County Anti-Slavery Society (LCASS). And within its pages are the society's meeting minutes from 1837 to 1839. Near the end of the book, a brief note states: "This book is committed to the care and keeping of the Livingston County Historical Society," and it was signed "the sons of James H. Rogers."[1] The writing is different from the script of the person who recorded the meeting minutes [Figure 1]. This suggests that "the sons of James H. Rogers" did not create this journal, and that it was donated in the late 19th century after the Historical Society was established in 1876.[2] It also suggests that James H. Rogers' sons believed that this book was of particular historical value.

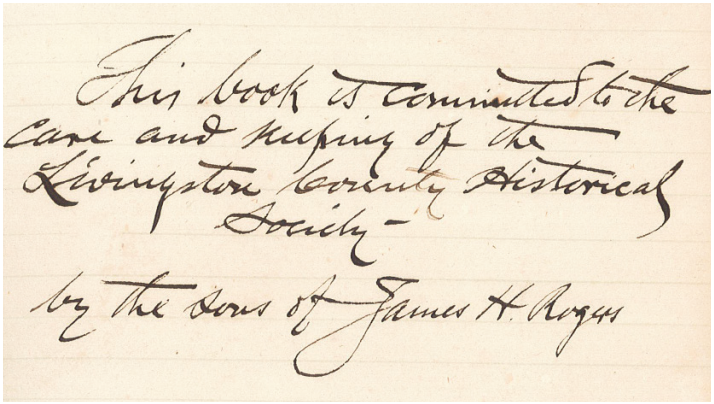

This book is committed to the care and keeping of the Livingston County Historical Society -
by the sons of James H. Rogers

Figure 1: "Livingston County Anti-Slavery Society Records" (1839), Livingston County Historical Society Museum, Geneseo, New York.

Although long forgotten today, these records open a window to a time when the people of Livingston County struggled mightily with the institution of slavery. We recognize this struggle as consequential to United States history, but the role of Livingston County residents is less clear. Slavery was illegal in New York in 1837, so why was there a need for an anti-slavery society at this time? Who were the people who joined the LCASS? Why did they do so? What did they hope to accomplish? And why was it so short-lived? More broadly, how might these local events fit within the national story of abolition and civil war?

Rogers' sons were right to preserve this book. These records reveal a fascinating history about social change, political turmoil, and fundamental rights. Contrary to popular belief, the fight against slavery was opposed locally and only gained wide support during the Civil War. The LCASS existed at a time when the values of abolition clashed with traditional values based in white supremacy and patriarchy. Those who opposed abolition did so because ending slavery involved more than just freeing Black people from slavery in the South. It also meant radically changing society. The extent to which we embrace universal freedom and equal rights today in the 21st century owes much to the abolitionist members of the Livingston County Anti-Slavery Society.

To better understand the origins of this anti-slavery society in Livingston County, we need to begin with the fact that slavery was legal when Americans began to settle this land. In each of the thirteen colonies, colonists enslaved Black people and Native Americans. The revolutionary ferment of the 1770s and 1780s, however, prompted some states to listen to pleas for abolition from Black activists and other advocates for universal liberty, and begin to restrict slavery. A few gradually abolished slavery, but not New York. When the Wadsworth brothers moved from Connecticut to the Genesee River Valley in 1790 to establish the first homestead, they forced Jenny, a Black enslaved

Figure 2: Austin Steward. https://blogs.bl.uk/americas/2014/06/anti-slavery-news-fredrick-douglasss-the-north-star.html

woman, to join them.[3] Only a few enslaved people lived in Ontario County, which encompassed modern day Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, and Steuben counties, at that time.[4] Ten years later, the federal census reported fifty-seven enslaved persons despite passage of New York's Gradual Abolition Act in 1799.[5] Although a groundbreaking law, it did not free anyone immediately nor did it prevent enslavers from bringing enslaved people into the region.[6]

As a result, slavery persisted for nearly three more decades in New York. Migrants from southern states forced enslaved people to move with them. This was how Austin Steward found his way to New York at age seven [Figure 2]. Fourteen years later, he escaped from slavery in Bath, then settled in Rochester, and later wrote an account of his life called *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman*. "Everywhere that Slavery exists," he wrote, "it is nothing but *slavery*. I found it just as hard to be beaten over the head with a piece of iron in New York as it was in Virginia."[7] Steward was not the only enslaved child brought to New York in the early 19th century. Two years after Steward's escape, R. A. Fitzhugh, an enslaver from Maryland, forced three enslaved children to move with him to Groveland. The Groveland town clerk recorded the names, ages, and sex of the children—Nancy (age six), Barbary (age six), and Nelly (age twelve)—because the Gradual Abolition Act required registration so that their future freedom date would be known [Figure 3].[8] For males, liberation would come at age twenty-eight, and for females, three years earlier, at age twenty-five. Further protests against the inadequacies and limitations of the 1799 law finally broke through in the state legislature and resulted in an emancipation law, passed in 1817, that went into effect on July 4,

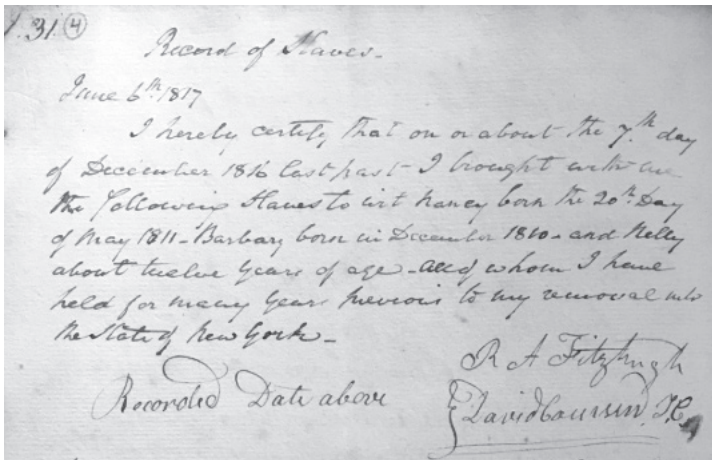

Record of Slaves.
June 6th 1817
I hereby certify that on or about the 7th day of December 1816 last past I brought with me the following Slaves to wit Nancy born the 20th day of May 1811 Barbary born in December 1810 and Nelly about twelve years of age which I have held for many years previous to my removal into the State of New York
R A Fitzhugh
Recorded Date above
David Bowman Jr. Clk

Figure 3: "Record of Slaves," June 6, 1817, Groveland Town Clerk's Book. https://www.livingstoncountyny.gov/DocumentCenter/View/11738/Record-of-Slaves-from-Groveland-Town-Clerks-Book-1818?bidId=

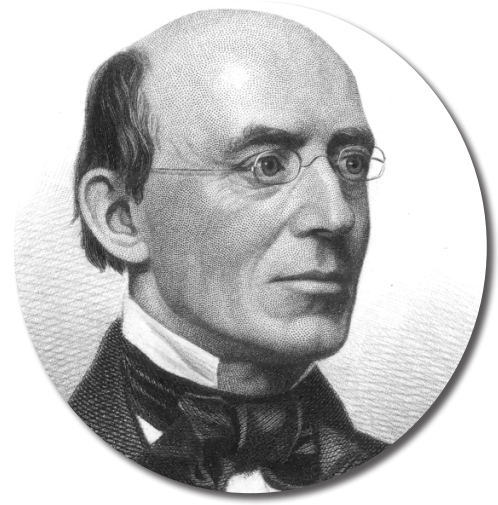


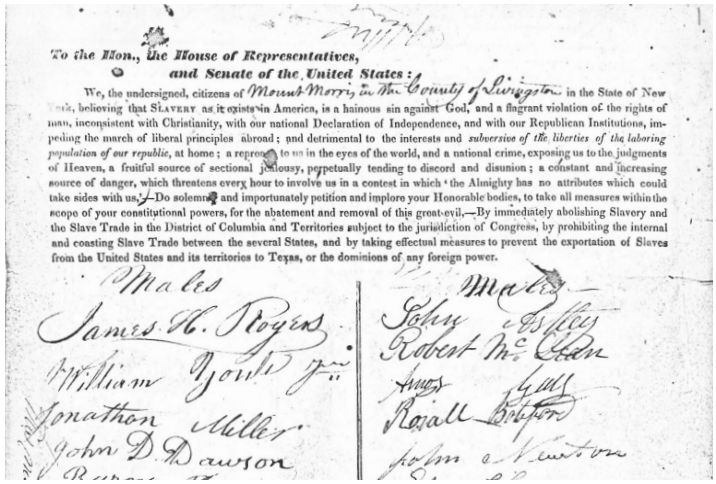
Figure 4: William Lloyd Garrison.

https://www.thoughtco.com/william-lloyd-garrison-1773553

1827. On that day, Black New Yorkers across the state celebrated the legal end of slavery.[9]

Nearly ten years later, the Livingston County Anti-Slavery Society (LCASS) held its first meeting in Geneseo. But why was there a need for an anti-slavery organization after abolition had been secured? The local people who joined were part of a small but growing abolition movement in the North that began to expand rapidly in the early 1830s. The LCASS was one of about 1,000 societies that were affiliated with the American Anti-Slavery Society.[10] Founded in 1833, this interracial organization was dedicated to the immediate abolition of slavery and strongly opposed to compensating slaveholders for freeing the enslaved. The central figure behind this society was William Lloyd Garrison [Figure 4]. Deeply influenced by Black abolitionists, Garrison took an uncompromising approach to slavery and injected new life into the movement. He believed that persuasion, or moral suasion, was the best means by which to end slavery, as opposed to political engagement or violent resistance.[11]

Local abolitionist activism can be traced back to 1835. In that year, 126 Livingston County residents petitioned Congress to abolish slavery and the slave trade in Washington, DC. They argued that slavery in the nation's capital violated natural rights as expressed in the Declaration of Independence.[12] A little over a year later, a few dozen Mount Morris residents attached their name to a similar petition. Unlike the earlier one, this petition was printed, suggesting that the American Anti-Slavery Society had better organized a national petition campaign and sent out forms to various local branches to obtain signatures.[13] Both petitions included the names of



To the Hon., the House of Representatives,
and Senate of the United States:

We, the undersigned, citizens of Mount Morris, in the County of Livingston in the State of New York, believing that SLAVERY as it exists in America, is a heinous sin against God, and a flagrant violation of the rights of man, inconsistent with Christianity, with our national Declaration of Independence, and with our Republican Institutions, impeding the march of liberal principles abroad; and detrimental to the interests and *subversive of the liberties of the laboring population of our republic*, at home; a reproach to us in the eyes of the world, and a national crime, exposing us to the judgments of Heaven, a fruitful source of sectional jealousy, perpetually tending to discord and disunion; a constant and increasing source of danger, which threatens every hour to involve us in a contest in which the Almighty has no attributes which could take sides with us,—Do solemnly and importunately petition and implore your Honorable bodies, to take all measures within the scope of your constitutional powers, for the abatement and removal of this great evil,—By immediately abolishing Slavery and the Slave Trade in the District of Columbia and Territories subject to the jurisdiction of Congress, by prohibiting the internal and coasting Slave Trade between the several States, and by taking effectual measures to prevent the exportation of Slaves from the United States and its territories to Texas, or the dominions of any foreign power.

Males

James H. Rogers
William Gould Jr.
Jonathan Miller
John D. Dawson

Males

John Wesley
Robert Mc Clain
James Gall
Royall Bolton
John Newton

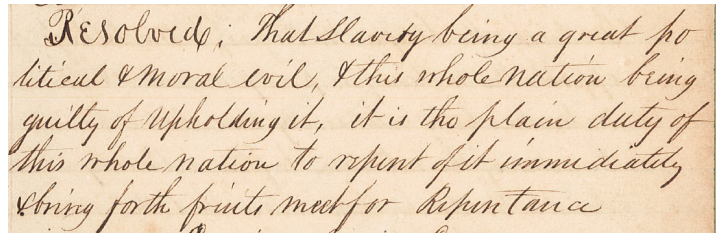
Figure 5: "Petition of Sundry Inhabitants of the County of Livingston in the State of New York, praying for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the District of Columbia," December 31, 1835. https://www.livingstoncountyny.gov/DocumentCenter/View/11593/Petition-of-Citizens-of-Mt-Morris-to-House-of-Representatives-and-Senate-against-slavery

women and men, and several names would find their way onto the membership role of the LCASS [Figure 5].

Mount Morris was the epicenter of local abolitionist activism in the 1830s, and this prompted a violent backlash. An anti-slavery society was organized there in April 1835, and at its first recorded meeting, in February 1836, several townsfolk rose in opposition, saying that they "did not want to hear" the scheduled lecture on "Slavery."[14] The lecture continued as planned, but at the March 7, 1837 meeting, a disturbance broke out. A mob attacked those gathered at the "Methodist chapel" to hear lectures against slavery from Rev. George Storrs, a traveling speaker for the American Anti-Slavery Society. The mob, led by Phinneas Canfield, a merchant and former member of St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Geneseo, set off an explosive charge in an anvil to announce their presence, then proceeded to throw snowballs, which broke fourteen glass panes. These disturbances did not stop the proceedings, so someone in the mob filled a flask with gunpowder and attempted to blow up the church. Thinking quickly, a young man "snatched away the match and this prevented a dreadful catastrophe," noted the society's minutes.[15]

Violence against abolitionists was not unusual at this time. In the mid-1830s, white mobs attacked Black and white abolitionists in several northern cities, including Boston, Cincinnati, Hartford, New York, Pittsburgh, and Utica.[16] These attacks demonstrate the unpopularity of abolitionism. Indeed, only a small minority of white northerners before 1861 ever embraced the racial egalitarianism that underlay abolitionist thinking. It was not just that abolitionists called for the immediate end of slavery, they also denounced churches and the U.S. government for tolerating and promoting slavery. Their condemnation of racist discrimination also made abolitionists unpopular.

Four months after the mob attack in Mount Morris, the Livingston County Anti-Slavery Society was formed at a meeting in Geneseo. It is likely that the Mount Morris hostilities prompted some of the founders to create a county-wide society and one that met in a town with less overt opposition. (One of the mob's leaders sued the editor of the abolitionist newspaper *Zion's Watchman*, La Roy Sunderland, for libel, but a Geneseo jury acquitted Sunderland in 1839.)[17] The first LCASS meeting took place on July 13, 1837, and not without opposition. The first resolution put forward was opposed by the minister of Geneseo's Episcopal church, Rev. W. P. Page. He objected that a society named "Livingston County" would give the impression that "public sentiment" in the county favored strident opposition to slavery. Several rose to defend the society and the opening resolution that read, "Resolved, That Slavery being a great political and moral evil, and this whole nation being guilty of upholding it, it is the plain duty of this whole nation to repent of it immediately and bring forth fruits meet for Repentance" [Figure 6].[18] The resolution was adopted, but Page was not quieted.



Resolved; That Slavery being a great political & moral evil, & this whole nation being guilty of upholding it, it is the plain duty of this whole nation to repent of it immediately & bring forth fruits meet for Repentance

Figure 6: First resolution adopted by the LCASS. "Livingston County Anti-Slavery Society Records" (1839), Livingston County Historical Society Museum, Geneseo, New York.

The main event of this first meeting was a lecture from Gerrit Smith. As president of the New York Anti-Slavery Society and one of the wealthiest persons in New York, Smith was famous and undoubtedly attracted attention as the featured speaker [Figure 7]. A recent convert to abolitionism, Smith would go on to become a partisan political leader as a candidate for governor and president on the Liberty Party ticket in the 1840s. In 1853, he was elected to Congress as a

Figure 7: Gerrit Smith. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:GerritSmith-1840s.jpg

member of the Free-Soil Party, an antecedent to the Republican Party. Smith also provided funding to many abolitionist causes, including setting aside land near Lake Placid in the Adirondacks for the settlement of Black families, in order to provide Black men with sufficient property to meet New York's racist voting requirements, which stipulated that "no man of colour" could vote unless he possessed property valued at $250 or more above his debts. Smith also provided funds for Frederick Douglass' newspaper, *The North Star*, and John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry.[19]

But all of this was in the future. That day in Geneseo, Smith spoke for four hours, with a break for lunch in the middle. Smith defended the abolitionist resolution and spoke on several topics: white racism against Black people, slavery's threat to "liberties and free institutions of the nation," and "the duties of people of the free States" to resist slavery "by all lawful and moral means." He also spoke on the "safety and general benefits of immediate emancipation," which is a rather peculiar phrase.[20] What does safety have to do with emancipation? Here, Smith sought to ease the fears held by many white people who worried that talk of emancipation would lead to insurrections and violence. That seemed to be the lesson of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). Black people revolted and unleashed unprecedented destruction and slaughter. These atrocities captivated and haunted the minds of many white people.[21] For African Americans, however, this history offered a different lesson. Haiti was a heroic struggle against European enslavers and their armies, and one that resulted in the immediate abolition of slavery and national independence.[22] But just six years earlier in 1831, Nat Turner's insurrection in Virginia brought to mind the worry that an explosion of violence against white people could be let loose at any moment. This is why many white people, even those who opposed slavery in principle, either favored a very gradual process toward abolition or perpetual enslavement to keep Black people carefully controlled.

Rev. Page voiced these fears at the meeting. After Smith finished his lecture, Page declared himself opposed to slavery and also to "the doctrines of abolition." He was no abolitionist. He particularly objected to the way that abolitionism "had agitated and disturbed the peace of the Churches."[23] Page had a point. Abolitionists were disruptive. They challenged the established order. As much as the question of slavery was roiling American politics in the 1830s, churches were at the forefront of the turmoil. Indeed, the debate over slavery ultimately split the major protestant denominations into northern and southern branches: the Methodists in 1844, the Baptists in 1845, and the Presbyterians in 1857.[24] But Rev. Page's objections did not split this new abolitionist society. Only four or five negative votes were cast, and the LCASS was formed.

The meeting next proceeded to adopt a constitution. It was modeled after the constitution of the parent organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society, and its eleven articles reveal the radical values of abolitionists. Article Five laid out the core objective of the society, which was "the entire abolition of Slavery in the United States" [Figure 8]. Virtually every African American

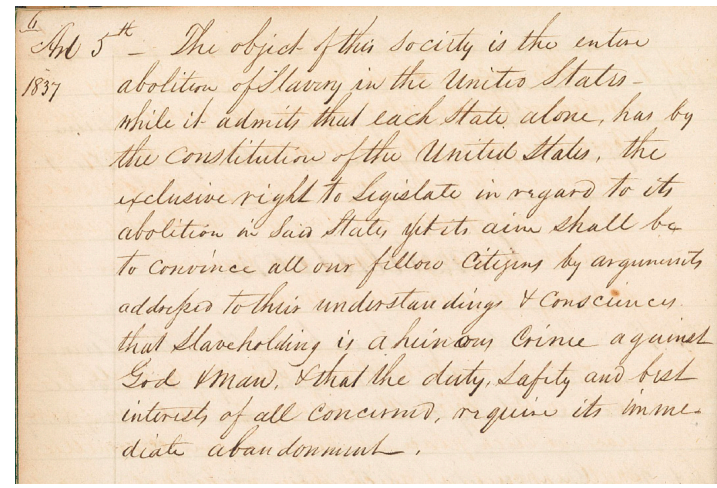

Art 5th — The object of this society is the entire
1837 abolition of Slavery in the United States —
while it admits that each State alone, has by
the Constitution of the United States, the
exclusive right to Legislate in regard to its
abolition in said State yet its aim shall be
to convince all our fellow Citizens by arguments
addressed to their understandings & Consciences
that Slaveholding is a heinous Crime against
God & Man, & that the duty, Safety and best
interests of all concerned, require its imme-
diate abandonment —

Figure 8: Article V of the LCASS Constitution. "Livingston County Anti-Slavery Society Records" (1839), Livingston County Historical Society Museum, Geneseo, New York

agreed with this goal, but only a small minority of white Americans did. Part of the reason can be found further down in the article, when it stated that it is their "aim … to convince all our fellow citizens … that Slaveholding is a heinous crime against God and man." This meant that abolitionists accused their neighbors of perpetuating a great sin even though the Bible never condemned the institution of slavery.[25]

Two other constitutional goals are worth mentioning. Article Six refers to Black people but in a condescending way. Reflecting the perspective of the white men who led the society, they sought "to elevate the character and condition of the people of color." White abolitionists often assumed that enslavement weakened the moral character of Black people, and thus, they needed instruction from white people on how to live virtuous lives. Despite this condescension, Article Six also acknowledged that Black people's oppression owed to "the prejudice of public opinion." That is, white people harmed African Americans through their white supremacist views and discriminatory actions, and it was part of the LCASS's mission to correct this bigotry.[26]

Following the adoption of the constitution, the LCASS proceeded to elect leaders and enroll members. The patronizing tone to Article Six suggests that Black people were not consulted in the drafting of the constitution. Indeed, there is no evidence that Black people were members or ever attended these meetings. This may be a result of the fact that very few Black people lived in Livingston County. According to the 1840 federal census, 203 of the 35,000 residents identified as "free colored persons," which is approximately 0.5% of the population.[27] On the other hand, abolitionist societies often had Black and white members. The Rochester Anti-Slavery Society, for example, which was established in 1833, was biracial from its inception, founded by Thomas James, an African American minister, and William C. Bloss, a white activist. Bloss's brother (Joseph) and sister-in-law (Caroline) were LCASS members.[28] Perhaps Black people were not welcomed or invited to join this society, or they might not have felt comfortable in the midst of the wealthy and privileged white members. Whatever the reason, their absence from the operations of the anti-slavery society is notable.

The LCASS was predominantly an organization of white men who tended to be economically prosperous and engaged in politics and social reform. All of the leaders and seventy-five percent of the 114 members

Figure 9: Reuben Sleeper. James H. Smith,* History of Livingston County, New York *(Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., 1881), 322.

were white men. The president was Reuben Sleeper, a Mount Morris merchant and member of that town's anti-slavery society [Figure 9]. The father of six children, married, and thirty-nine years old in 1837, Sleeper served for four nonconsecutive terms as president of the village of Mount Morris, was one of the first directors of the Genesee River Bank, and was active in the Livingston County Temperance Society and the Mount Morris Bible Society.[29]

Sleeper's brother-in-law, Allen Ayrault, was also a member. Born in 1793, Ayrault moved to Livingston County at age twenty-one and became one of the wealthiest and most influential men in the county [Figure 10]. He got his start working at a merchant store connected to the Wadsworth family and opened his

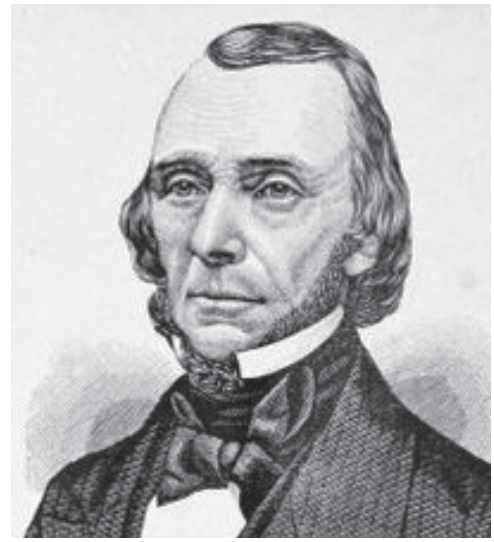


Figure 10: Allen Ayrault. https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/88524364/allen-ayrault.

own store in Mount Morris. He later became president of the Livingston County Bank, a position he held until 1855 when it closed. Ayrault held many political offices, including Geneseo village trustee (1832), town supervisor (1842 and 1847), delegate to the state constitutional convention (1846), and state senator (1848). He was married to Bethiah (Lyman) Ayrault, also a LCASS member.[30]

James H. Rogers, whose sons donated the journal to the Historical Society, was a vice president. Before joining the LCASS, he was the president of the Mount Morris Anti-Slavery Society. In 1837, he was a 33-year-old merchant living in Mount Morris with his wife and three children. (Three more children were born in subsequent years.) Between 1831 and 1842, he partnered with William H. Stanley, the secretary of LCASS, in running a merchant store. Additionally, Rogers was the Mount Morris clerk in the later 1830s, one of the trustees of the village in 1836, elected to the Executive Committee of the Temperance Society of Livingston County, and an elder at the Second Presbyterian Church of Mount Morris.[31]

One other leader worth mentioning is George Hastings. Born in 1807 in Clinton, New York, Hastings was an attorney from Mount Morris, married to Mary Hopkins Seymour Hastings (also a LCASS member). He held various public offices, including Mount Morris town clerk (1832-3), Mount Morris village clerk (1835-6), Livingston County district attorney from 1839 to 1847, member of Congress (1853-55), and county judge (1855 to 1863) [Figure 11]. He was a Democrat

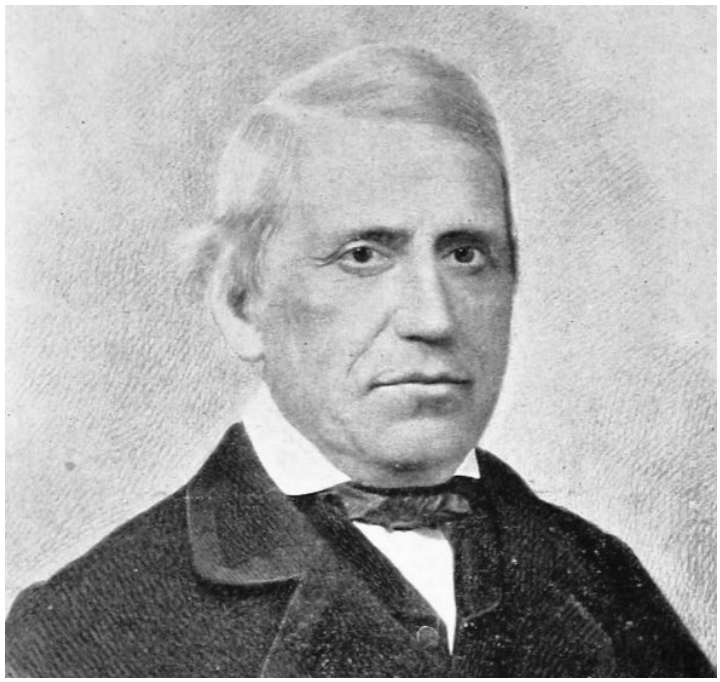


Figure 11: George Hastings. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Hastings_%28American_politician%29#/media/File:George_Hastings_(Mount_Morris).jpg

in a county that became increasingly Re-publican in the late 1850s. Hastings was also a member of the Presbyterian Church and president of the Mount Morris Cemetery Association (1863-66).[32]

A sampling of the male members reveals a few patterns. The leaders came from the county's political and economic elite. They were active in their churches and other reform movements. In addition, the membership roll reveals how several families were interwoven within the abolitionist network. The Stanley family is a good example. Mary W. Stanley was twenty-five years old when she joined along with her husband Frederick, whose brother William H. Stanley was the recording and corresponding secretary. Their father, Luman, born in Connecticut in 1779, was also a member along with five other Stanleys.

What is also interesting about the extended Stanley family were the women. Four young Stanley women (Mary, age 25, Mercy, age 30, Harriet, age 23, and Emily, age 18) were listed in order on the membership roll.[33] This suggests that they attended the meeting together and were friendly. The Stanley men, by contrast, were scattered throughout the list. The women's relative youth and grouping give us some clues as to why they might have joined the abolitionist cause. Perhaps they were drawn to a public society with male and female members, which was highly unusual in 1837. Public associations and reform groups tended to be gender exclusive, such as the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, a biracial organization, that met in New York City two months before the LCASS's first meeting.[34]

The fact that twenty-five percent of the LCASS members were women highlights the inclusiveness and radicalness of the society [Figure 12]. According to prevailing cultural norms, a woman's realm was the domestic sphere, and only men were supposed to publicly engage in political issues, such as antislavery. But many abolitionist women (and a few men) rejected the premise that women should stay out of politics. If the "whole nation" was complicit in the "great political and moral evil" of slavery, as the inaugural resolution of the LCASS claimed, then women were not exempt. It is also likely that the women drew inspiration from egalitarian Christian teachings that were popular during the Second Great Awakening. They empathized

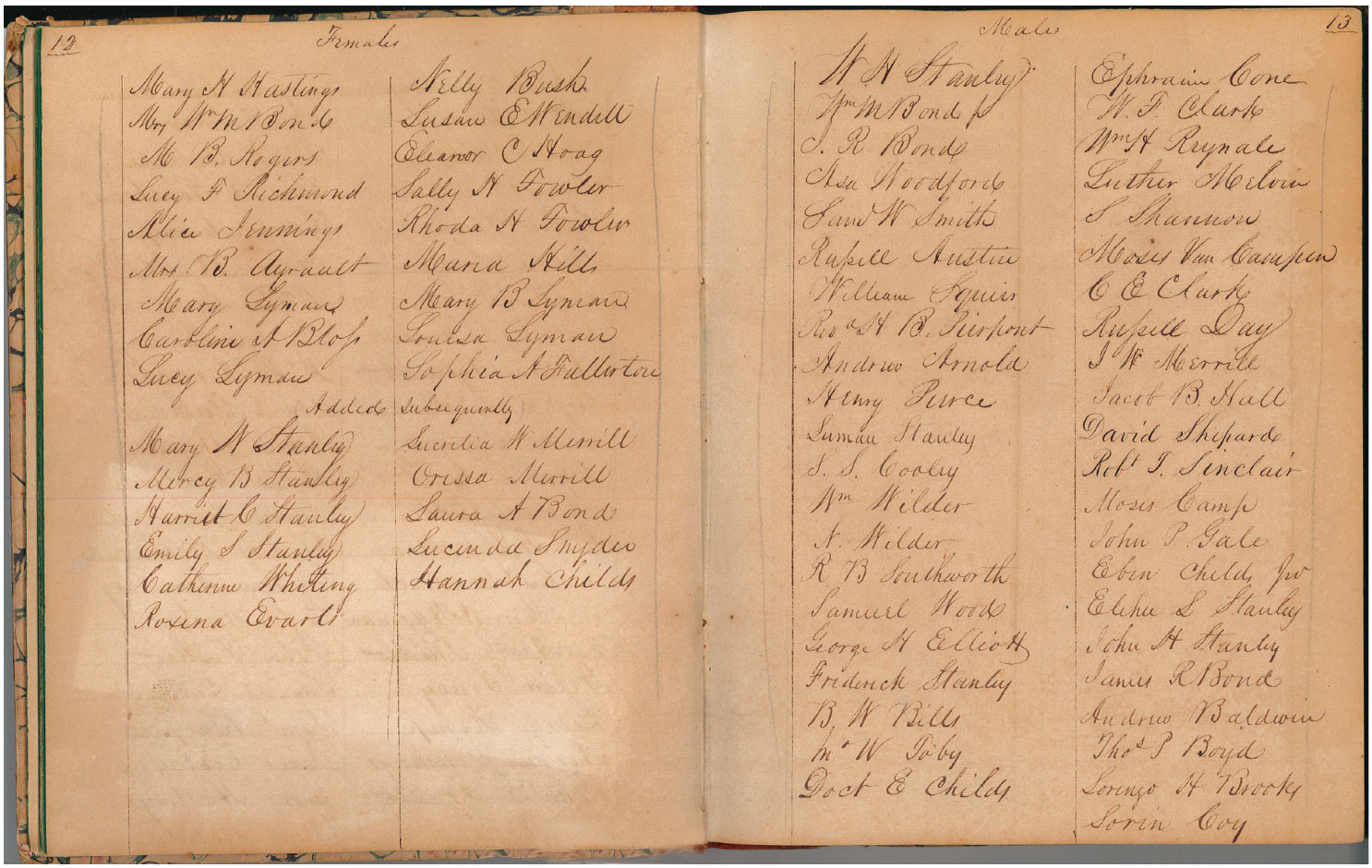


Figure 12: Women members of the LCASS. "Livingston County Anti-Slavery Society Records" (1839), Livingston County Historical Society Museum, Geneseo, New York.

with the plight of the enslaved because they could understand, perhaps better than white men, what it was like to be treated as an inferior person. The incorporation of women into the proceedings also helps to explain the wide-spread opposition to abolitionism. By challenging the morality of slavery, abolitionists questioned hierarchies of race, class, and gender. Put another way, they sought to upend racist, patriarchal, and elite assumptions about how society should be organized.[35]

How these women participated in the LCASS is something of a mystery. The membership roll was divided by gender, which suggests that the women were treated differently. The journal also does not record any women speaking or participating in debates. But on the other hand, there was not a rule that restricted women's participation. Indeed, members could vote, and the votes were not recorded by gender. This means that women likely voted on political resolutions and the society's constitution, and this political participation took place ten years before the Seneca Falls Convention demanded a woman's right to vote. If the LCASS women were similar to women in other abolitionist associations, they were extensively involved. Historian Manisha Sinha asserts that "women were abolition's most effective foot soldiers."[36]

With the adoption of the constitution and the enrolling of members, the society was established and met every few months to discuss issues of national importance.[37] The meeting minutes do not record any discussion about local concerns, such as fundraising efforts or assistance to fugitive slaves. Livingston County was not, in fact, an ideal destina-tion for those escaping slavery, especially in the 1830s. But the LCASS did meet to select delegates to attend antislavery conventions, listen to invited speakers, and to discuss pressing national issues, such as the Gag Rule, slavery in federal territories, and the murder of Elijah P. Lovejoy.

The LCASS hosted W. L. Chaplin at the December 30, 1837 meeting to discuss the suppression of antislavery petitions in Congress. A prominent abolitionist based in Utica, Chaplin was a general agent of the New York Anti-Slavery Society and editor of two anti-slavery newspapers: the *American*

Citizen and the *Albany Patriot*. Along with Gerrit Smith, he would go on to form the Liberty Party in 1840 and was later imprisoned in 1850 for his role in a failed escape of seventy-seven enslaved people in Washington, D.C., known as the "Pearl" incident.[38] At the meeting, Chaplin specifically called attention to the renewal of the Gag Rule in the US House of Representatives nine days earlier. Sponsored by a Virginia Democrat, this rule prevented "all petitions, memorials, and papers, touching the abolition of slavery" from being "debated, printed, read, or referred" to any committee in the House. From 1836 to 1844, this rule prohibited congressmen from discussing antislavery peti-tions similar to the ones that Mount Morris residents sent to Congress in 1835 and 1837. The LCASS, in response, unanimously adopted a series of resolutions that denounced the Gag Rule as "rude and unconstitutional." They further blasted the "un northern and un American representatives" who "are ready to sacrifice the entire nation on the alter *[sic]* of slavery."[39]

LCASS members were similarly outraged by the extension of slavery into new territories. They rejected the proposed annexation of Texas as a slave state, calling it "unsound in policy" because it would lead to "a speedy disolution [*sic*]" of the Union.[40] In addition, they demanded "immediate abolition" in Washington, DC and in Florida.[41] This resolution was composed during the Second Seminole War, a long conflict (1835-1842) in which the Seminole people resisted removal to west of the Mississippi River. Among the Seminole were thousands of Black Seminoles (most of whom had escaped from slavery), and the US army hoped to destroy their communities and return them to slavery. Because Florida was a federal territory at the time and under the sole jurisdiction of Congress, abolitionists insisted that lawmakers had the power to strike down slavery in Florida. An earlier resolution adopted at that same December meeting denounced the American system of human bondage as "disgraceful to this nation[,] revolting to humanity, repugnant to common sense and common justice, [and] contrary to the plain and positive injunctions of the Gospel." [42]

Elijah P. Lovejoy also condemned American slavery, and he was murdered for these views in western Illinois. Lovejoy was a Presbyterian minister and abolitionist newspaper editor. On November 7, 1837, a pro-slavery mob in Alton, Illinois gunned down Lovejoy as he sought to protect his printing press [Figure 13].[43] It was only eight months earlier when a mob attempted to blow up a Mount Morris anti-slavery meeting, an event that several current LCASS members had witnessed. Lovejoy's murder was a reminder, as they acknowledged in a resolution, that "the friends of human rights should be prepared to make any sacrifice for the promotion of their cause." They were plain about the risks. Up-holding "the great principles of abolitionism which bind us to our fellow men and the throne of God" might well jeopardize one's "reputation[,] property[,] and even life," but these were the consequences. Ridding the country of slavery, they recognized, could not be peaceful and would be terribly difficult.[44]

The meetings continued into 1838, discussing topics such as teaching Christianity to the enslaved, encouraging the widespread distribution of antislavery literature to libraries, and calling for subscriptions to antislavery newspapers. But the tone of these discussions took a more political turn. One resolution called attention to the power of "our Elective franchise." This was a break from one of the core principles of Garrisonian abolitionism. Garrison avoided the realm of partisan politics because, he believed, it was too corrupting and not an effective arena to change people's minds. Instead, this LCASS resolution asserted that "the

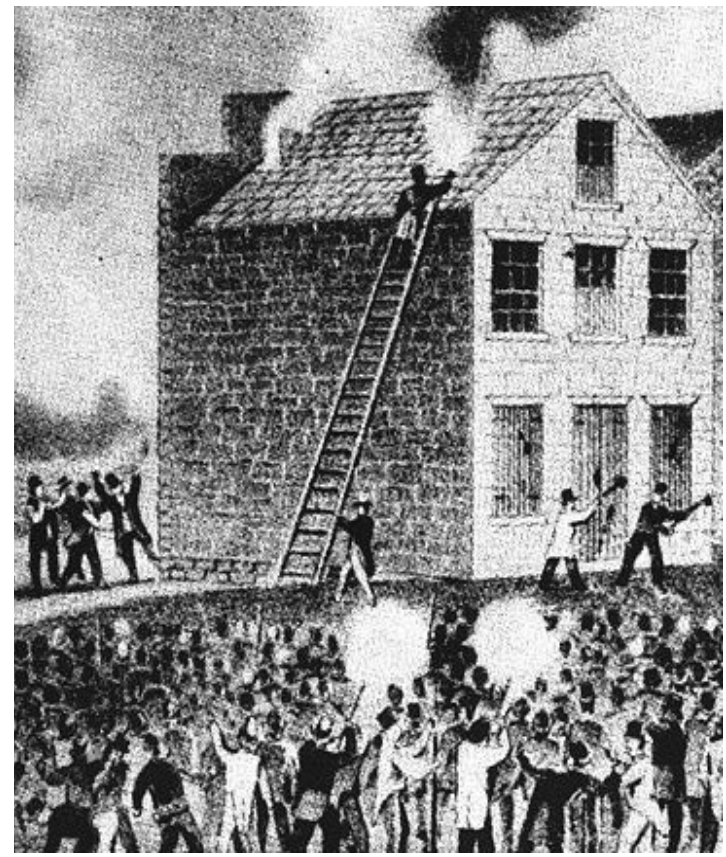


Figure 13: Anti-Abolitionist mob attacking the building where Elijah P. Lovejoy's newspaper was printed. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alton_Observer#/media/File:Lovejoyat1837AltonIllinoisRiot.JPG

time has come to let all men know, that we will not, on any consideration give our votes for any man, to be next President or Vice President, of these United States, who is a Slave holder, or an apologist for Slavery" [Figure 14].[45]

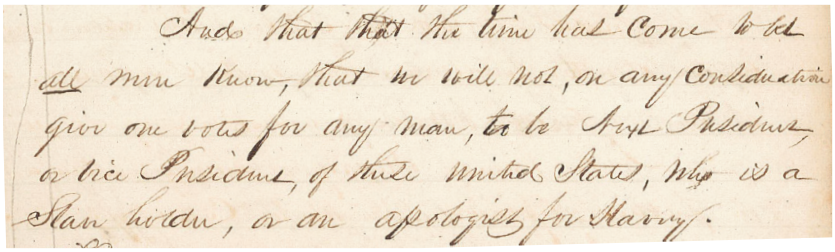

And that that the time had come to let all men know, that we will not, on any Consideration give our votes for any man, to be next President or Vice President of these United States, who is a Slave holder, or an apologist for Slavery.

Figure 14: "Livingston County Anti-Slavery Society Records" (1839), Livingston County Historical Society Museum, Geneseo, New York.

This statement hinted at the potential political power of abolitionists in northern elections, and it also signaled that abolitionists would need to form their own political par-ties. At the time, both major parties, the Democrats and the Whigs, protected slavery. Of the candidates in the 1840 presidential election, only President Martin Van Buren, a New York Democrat, did not own slaves. Nevertheless, he sought to re-enslave the African rebels who revolted on the Spanish schooner *La Amistad* in 1839. Van Buren's vice president, Richard Mentor Johnson, was a Kentucky enslaver. William Henry Harrison, the Whig candidate, won the election, but both he and his vice president, John Tyler, were enslavers and publicly defended the right of states to maintain slavery. In other words, the LCASS resolution announced that male members should not cast a ballot for either a Democrat or a Whig in the 1840 national election. What they could do, instead, was cast a ballot for the newly created Liberty Party, a new abolitionist party organized nearby in Warsaw.[46]

The shift toward political abolitionism likely spelled the demise of the LCASS. We cannot know for certain what caused the society to stop meeting after February 6, 1839. Indeed, the report from this last meeting was quite optimistic about the future: "The meeting was unanimously attended considering the Extreme coldness of the weather.… The best spirit prevailed throughout and we think we are quite within the limits of truth when we say it was the most spirited county meeting on this subject we have ever attended in this county."[47] Soon after, however, the parent organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society, split over the issue of electoral politics and the role of women. Several prominent members created a rival organization, called the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, so that women and African Americans could hold leadership positions.[48] Factional divisions, of course, are not uncommon in reform groups and activist organizations. Although there is no evidence of factional discord in Livingston County, the fracture of the national movement probably contributed to its end.

Although the organization operated for a little less than two years, the Livingston County Anti-Slavery Society was part of a tumultuous moment in American history. The meeting records reveal a substantial transformation in which a growing number of Americans, although never close to a majority before 1860, began to embrace the principles of abolition, universal freedom, and equal rights. When Livingston County was first settled by white Americans, there were few who embraced these values. African Americans, because of their experiences living in a system of race-based slavery, were the ones most likely to embrace abolitionism. It took time and a lot of hard work to convince more and more white people that these principles could align with one's faith and sense of a proper social order.

The LCASS certainly contributed to the growing embrace of abolitionist principles in Livingston County and the region. The Liberty Party showed that abolitionism could alter elections when a few thousand of its voters tipped the 1844 presidential election to James K. Polk.[49] Increasing numbers of northern voters looked for anti-slavery and free labor candidates, a trend that resulted in the 1854 establishment of the Republican Party, which became the first major party to embrace antislavery principles. The Republican Party was not an abolition political party, even though many abolitionists voted for Republican candidates. Unlike abolitionists, Republicans favored a gradual, not immediate, abolition, and they did not embrace racial equality or women's suffrage before the Civil War.[50] In the 1856 election, 50% of Livingston County voters supported John C. Frémont, the Republican candidate. Four years later, Abraham Lincoln received 59% of the county's vote.[51]

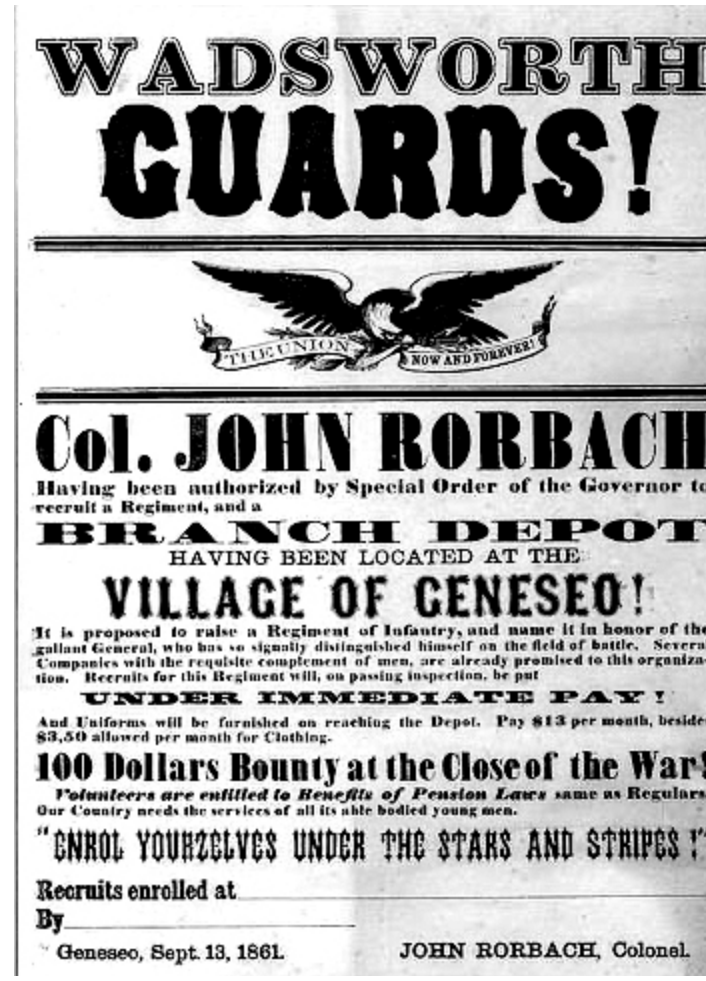
Republicans held firm in their opposition to the spread of slavery into the western territories, much like the LCASS members who opposed the extension of slavery into Texas and Florida. This opposition prompted several southern states to secede and initiate a war. One of the Livingston County residents who watched these events unfold with keen interest was James S. Wadsworth [Figure 15]. He inherited extensive landholdings from his father, who was one of the first American settlers in the Genesee Valley, and he

Figure 15: General James S. Wadsworth. https://www.loc.gov/item/2018666507

interacted with several LCASS members. According to Wayne Mahood's biography, Wadsworth began to publicly oppose the extension of slavery in the late 1840s. By the late 1850s, he had joined the Republican Party, but his commitment to the cause was minimal. The war, however, radicalized him, as it did many other northerners. "At the outbreak of this rebellion," he recalled in September 1862, "I was barely a Republican, that is, only opposed to the extension of slavery. I have slowly come to the conclusion that the time has arrived to strike it down for ever."[52]

Wadsworth was a prominent antislavery political figure in New York. Talk of him running for governor dated back to 1852, but he finally did run for office ten years later. Wadsworth joined the US military soon after the war broke out and continued in active duty as a brigadier general during the 1862 gubernatorial campaign. Wadsworth strongly supported Lincoln's Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation and made it a central part of his political campaign. Although he narrowly lost the governorship, Livingston County and most of upstate New York voted strongly for Wadsworth and immediate emancipation.[53]

The tens of thousands who voted against slavery and for emancipation joined the hundreds of thousands who volunteered to fight for their country and put down the re-bellion of slaveholders. When the call went out in September 1861 to form the "Wadsworth Guards," Livingston County men would have known that this regiment (the New York 104th) was intent on fighting against the slave power because of its connection to James S. Wadsworth [Figure 16]. The regiment was initially attached to his command in Washington, DC, but they subsequently saw action in many of the most important battles in the Eastern Theater. County men joined other New York regiments, all participating in the quest to vanquish the Confederate rebellion and abolish slavery. One local historian recalled in 1881 that it was a war between those who championed "liberalism and progress" and those who "sought to build a slaveholding and slave-perpetuating aristocracy."[54]



WADSWORTH
GUARDS!

THE UNION NOW AND FOREVER!

Col. JOHN RORBACH

Having been authorized by Special Order of the Governor to recruit a Regiment, and a

BRANCH DEPOT

HAVING BEEN LOCATED AT THE

VILLAGE OF GENESEO!

It is proposed to raise a Regiment of Infantry, and name it in honor of the gallant General, who has so signally distinguished himself on the field of battle. Several Companies with the requisite complement of men, are already promised to this organization. Recruits for this Regiment will, on passing inspection, be put

UNDER IMMEDIATE PAY!

And Uniforms will be furnished on reaching the Depot. Pay $13 per month, besides $3,50 allowed per month for Clothing.

100 Dollars Bounty at the Close of the War!

Volunteers are entitled to Benefits of Pension Laws same as Regulars.

Our Country needs the services of all its able bodied young men.

"ENROL YOURSELVES UNDER THE STARS AND STRIPES!"

Recruits enrolled at _____

By _____

Geneseo, Sept. 13, 1861. JOHN RORBACH, Colonel.

Figure 16: Recruitment poster for the Wadsworth Guards. Livingston County Historical Society Museum, Geneseo, New York.

Broad, local support for a war against slavery was one of the most important legacies of the Livingston County Anti-Slavery Society [Figure 17]. Although relatively short-lived, this abolitionist society had an important role in the national struggle against human bondage. The LCASS arose because many county residents tolerated slavery or did not see it as a moral or political injustice. While slavery had been outlawed in New York for ten years when the first LCASS meeting was held, the racist and patriarchal values that sustained enslavement remained widely popular. The 114 LCASS members were a distinct minority that favored the immediate abolition of slavery, along with related reforms, such as women's empowerment and opposition to white supremacy. As a result, they faced hostile and violent opposition from their neighbors. But the abolitionist seeds planted in the late 1830s bloomed into a robust antislavery politics twenty years later that crushed the slaveholding power, inaugurated "a new birth of freedom," as Lincoln so memorably said in his Gettysburg Address, and set the country on a path, bumpy at times, toward equal rights and social justice.

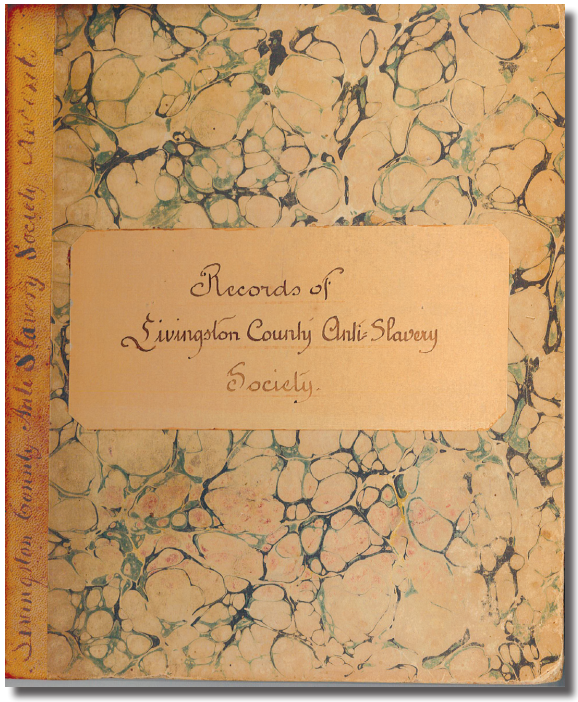


Figure 17: "Livingston County Anti-Slavery Society Records" (1839), Livingston County Historical Society Museum, Geneseo, New York.

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End Notes

[1] "Records of Livingston County Anti Slavery Society" (1839), Livingston County Historical Society Museum, Geneseo, New York. In this text, the words "anti" and "slavery" are never linked with a hyphen, so I have kept this spelling when quoting from the text. However, I use a hyphen when referring to the Livingston County Anti-Slavery Society because they were an offshoot of the American Anti-Slavery Society, which always used a hyphen in its title.

[2] James H. Smith, *History of Livingston County*, New York (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., 1881), 120.

[3] Wayne Mahood, General Wadsworth: *The Life and Times of Brevet Major General James S. Wadsworth* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003), 11.

[4] *Bureau of the Census, Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States taken in the Year 1790: New York* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1908), 138. The census recorded nine enslaved individuals in Ontario County.

[5] Census Office, *Return of the whole number of persons within the several districts of the United States, according to "An act providing for the second census or enumeration of the inhabitants of the United States," passed February the twenty eighth, one thousand eight hundred* (1801; reprint, New York: Norman Ross, 1990), 28-29.

[6] "An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery," New York State Archives, accessed September 11, 2024, https://digitalcollections.archives.nysed.gov/index.php/Detail/objects/10815. For more on the persistence of slavery despite gradual abolition laws, see Cory James Young, "For Life or Otherwise: Abolition and Slavery in South Central Pennsylvania, 1780-1847" (PhD dissertation, Georgetown University, 2021).

[7] Italics in original. Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman* (Rochester, William Ailing, 1857), 107.

[8] Record of Slaves, June 6, 1817, *Groveland Town Clerk's Book*, 1797-1833, Livingston County Historian's Office, Mount Morris, New York, accessed September 11, 2024, https://www.livingstoncountyny.gov/DocumentCenter/View/11738/Record-of-Slaves-from-Groveland-Town-Clerks-Book-1818. Fitzhugh attested that he brought the children to New York on December 7, 1816.

[9] David N. Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 215-18.

[10] Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 252.

[11] Sinha, 214-23.

[12] "Petition of Sundry Inhabitants of the County of Livingston in the State of New York, praying for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the District of Columbia," December 31, 1835, Livingston County Historian's Office, Mount Morris, New York, accessed September 11, 2024, https://www.livingstoncountyny.gov/DocumentCenter/View/11594/Petition-of-Sundry-Inhabitants-of-the-County-of-Livingston-against-slavery-and-slave-trade-in-District-of-Columbia-1835?bidId=.

[13] "Inhabitants of Mount Morris in the County of Livingston, NY, Slavery in the Dist. Of Columbia," January 30, 1837, Livingston County Historian's Office, Mount Morris, New York, accessed September 11, 2024, https://www.livingstoncountyny.gov/DocumentCenter/View/11593/Petition-of-Citizens-of-Mt-Morris-to-House-of-Representatives-and-Senate-against-slavery.

[14] "Records of the Mount Morris Anti-Slavery Society," Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York, 5.

[15] "Records of the Mount Morris Anti-Slavery Society," 9-10. See also George Storrs, "Facts to be Remembered," *The Zion's Watchman*, April 4, 1837; "Mob at Mount Morris," *The American Citizen* (Utica), March 15, 1837.

[16] Sinha, 236-9.

[17] La Roy Sunderland, "Letter from the Editor," *Zion's Watchman*, February 23, 1839; "Libel Suit," *Zion's Watchman*, March 2, 1839.

[18] "Records of Livingston County Anti Slavery Society," 1. This unusual phrase, "bring forth fruits meet for Repentance," is a near word-for-word reference to Matthew 3:8 in the King James Bible.

[19] New York Constitution of 1821, art. 2, sec. 1.

[20] "Records of Livingston County Anti Slavery Society," 2-3.

[21] On the Haitian Revolution, see Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[22] See, for example, David Walker, *Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (Boston: David Walker, 1830).

[23] "Records of Livingston County Anti Slavery Society," 4.

[24] Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 27-8.

[25] "Records of Livingston County Anti Slavery Society," 6.

[26] "Records of Livingston County Anti Slavery Society," 6.

[27] This is my own count based on the population schedules from Livingston County. The census published a lower figure of 147 for the number of "free colored persons." However, the 1840 census is notorious for inaccurate tallies. Nevertheless, the overall point remains, that less than one percent of the county population was Black. *Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States, as Obtained at the Department of State, from the Returns of the Sixth Census* (Washington, DC: Thomas Allen, 1841), 17. On the inaccuracies of the 1840 census, see Paul Schor, *Counting Americans: How the United States Census Classified the Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 30-37.

[28] Thomas James, *The Life of Rev. Thomas James*, By Himself (Rochester: Post Express Printing Company, 1886), 7.

[29] Smith, 322-3; *Livingston Republican*, January 18, 1832, March 6, 1838, March 1, 1842.

[31] Smith, 395; *Dansville Advertiser*, March 24, 1862. The Ayrault residence on Main Street in Geneseo later became the Big Tree Inn. https://geneseoapog.org/featured-projects/2016/6/5/big-tree-inn

[31] Smith, 291-2, 294, 309.

[32] Smith, 132, 134, 291, 313.

[33] "Records of Livingston County Anti Slavery Society," 12.

[34] *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, Held in the City of New-York, May 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th, 1837* (New York: William S. Dorr, 1837).

[35] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Sinha, 266-98.

[36] Sinha, 266.

[37] After the first meeting, they met on September 13,

1837 in Geneseo, on December 30, 1837 in Geneseo, on February 13, 1838 in Mount Morris, on September 1, 1838 in Geneseo, and on February 6, 1839 in York Centre.

[38] Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad, America's First Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2005), 299-304.

[39] "Records of Livingston County Anti Slavery Society," 22.

[40] "Records of Livingston County Anti Slavery Society," 23. Anglo-American settlers declared independence from Mexico and formed the Republic of Texas in March 1836. Most white Texans wanted to be immediately annexed by the United States, but abolitionists opposed annexation because it would extend and expand slavery. Prior to the war for Texas independence, Anglo-Texans defied Mexico's abolition law and instead created a safe haven for enslavers. Eight years later, in 1845, President James K. Polk signed legislation to annex Texas as the 28th state in the Union.

[41] "Records of Livingston County Anti Slavery Society," 24.

[42] "Records of Livingston County Anti Slavery Society," 20.

[43] Sinha, 237-8.

[44] "Records of Livingston County Anti Slavery Society," 25.

[45] "Records of Livingston County Anti Slavery Society," 37.

[46] Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 570-88; Sinha, 262-5.

[47] "Records of Livingston County Anti Slavery Society," 39.

[48] Sinha, 263.

[49] Howe, 688.

[50] Sinha, 497-8, 582-4.

[52] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1856_United_States_presidential_election_in_New_York; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1860_United_States_presidential_election_in_New_York.

[52] Quoted in Mahood, xii.

[53] Mahood, 69, 107-8, 115.

[54]Smith, 134.

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