

“Recollections of Old Friends:” A Historical Account of Rhode Island African American Community and Anti-Slavery Society Leaders in the Affairs of the Dorr Rebellion

By Caleb Troy Horton

Under the Rhode Island State Constitution, as written in 1840, no white adult male who did not own \$134 worth of land in the state could vote; this was 60 percent of the state’s white adult male population.¹ In the spring of 1840, working and middle-class white men formed the Rhode Island Suffrage Association to address this inequity. Their preamble demanded that lawmakers cease to make landholding a qualification for voting and that they instate universal suffrage for all adult white males living in Rhode Island. In December of that year, the Association began printing a weekly newspaper called the *New Age and Constitutional Advocate*, using it to rally supporters.² In July 1841, Thomas Wilson Dorr and the Suffrage Association convened its “People’s Convention” in Newport. Convention members sought to draft a new state constitution, called the People’s Constitution, to replace the old Landholders’ Constitution, which they described as being plagued with “rotten borough”³ representation that gave outsized political power and representation to agricultural towns. Urban areas, such as the city of Providence, had the largest populations in the state but were underrepresented in the legislature when it came to decision-making.

On August 28, 1841, when it came time to cast ballots to determine who would become a delegate to a “People’s Convention” in October, Suffrage Association members were flabbergasted by the participation of African American men and moved swiftly to deny them

¹ Arthur M. Mowry, “Chapter VI: The Charter Criticized,” in *The Dorr War: The Constitutional Struggle in Rhode Island* (Providence: E.L. Freeman and Sons Press, 1901), 74–83.

² Marvin E. Gettleman, *The Dorr Rebellion: A Study in American Radicalism: 1833–1849* (New York: Random House, 1973), 34–36.

³ An English term that refers to a borough that was able to elect a representative to Parliament through having very few voters, the choice of representative typically being in the hands of one person or family oligarchy.

voting privileges. Alfred Niger,⁴ a founding member of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, was kept from casting a ballot in Providence's Sixth Ward despite the ambivalence of the poll station warden about allowing light-skinned people of color to vote.⁵ The warden ultimately denied Niger and any man of color their right to cast ballots. The incident caused a firestorm among the Black community and its abolitionist allies.⁶

Matters came to a head on September 24 when People's Convention members rescinded Niger's nomination to the position of convention treasurer. While winning the majority of nominating votes from the convention's executive committee, a minority contingent of delegates put forward Thomas Greene for the position. The conflicting nominations caused a firestorm. The committee member who put Niger on the ballot, whether known by Niger, was an anti-Black

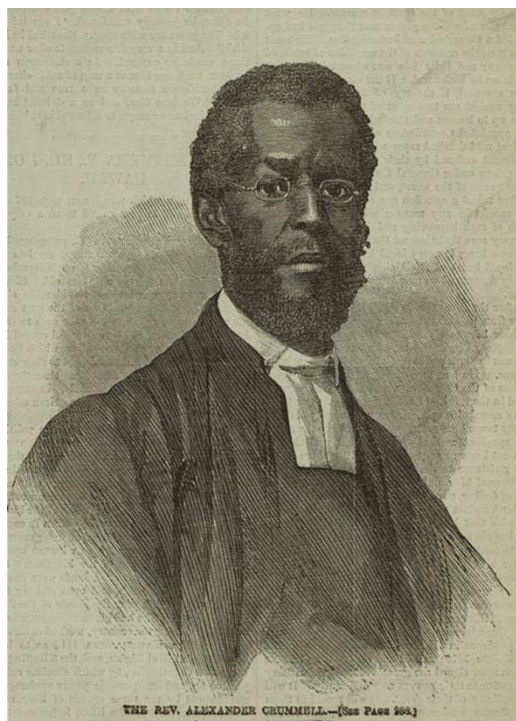
⁴ Alfred Niger was born in 1797 in the Old Saybrook area of Connecticut. He moved and worked as a barber in Providence, Rhode Island, from 1824 to his death in 1862. Niger began his career in Black civil rights during the decade of the 1830s. He was a Providence delegate to the National Colored Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1830. In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison hired Niger to be an agent for *The Liberator* for the state of Rhode Island. In Providence, Niger also served as an agent for *Freedom's Journal*. Niger joined the New England Anti-Slavery Society and served as a Providence delegate, and in 1836, Niger became a founding member of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society. Niger became involved in the Black suffrage cause beginning January 6, 1831, with Providence African American community leaders George Waterman, James E. Ellis, George C. Willis, and George McCarty. Their concern was twofold and lay in a fee per annum charged in taxes charged to African American property owners without the right to representation and the refusal of the city of Providence to build a public school for children of color; only taxes paid for white children's public education. They drafted a petition, submitted it to the Rhode Island General Assembly, and debated on the floor, but nothing came to fruition. In January 1841, Alfred Niger and George McCarty submitted a similar petition on behalf of fifteen other African American community leaders regarding the taxation issue, which met the same fate as it had in 1831 among assembly members.

In 1846, Niger served as a Providence delegate to the American Anti-Slavery Society. One of Niger's sons, Alexander Petion Niger, had a career in printing and became the first Black member of a typographical union in Providence when he was one of its founding members in 1857. For more biographical information and Niger's involvement in the Rhode Island black community and Dorr Rebellion. See CJ Martin, "The 'Mustard Seed': Providence's Alfred Niger, Antebellum Black Voting Rights Activist." Small State Big History. Accessed May 2, 2024. <https://smallstatebighistory.com/the-mustard-seed-providences-alfred-niger-antebellum-black-voting-rights-activist/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

suffragist attempting to root out abolitionist sympathizers.⁷ Meeting minutes printed in the *Providence Daily Journal* revealed a chairman named Mr. Russell, who exclaimed: “[H]e hoped all would vote in this ballot and vote their sentiments, in order that all might know how many ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing [abolitionists] were among them.’”⁸ The whole affair was a ruse contrived to reveal and preclude from conference participation those who favored Black suffrage. Those in favor of electing Niger were ignored or backed down, as no record of their vote exists. The



Alexander Crummell, circa 1866 (Providence City Archives)

subject ended, and Mr. Greene won a majority ballot as treasurer.⁹ The community ran out of patience.

On October 8, 1841, Alexander Crummell,¹⁰ an African American Episcopal priest, approached Thomas Dorr—a Rhode Island General Assembly representative, who joined the Suffrage Association and later led their movement—with a petition he drafted on behalf of the

⁷ Stanley J. Lemons and Michael McKenna, “Re-enfranchisement of Rhode Island Negroes,” *Rhode Island History* 30 (Winter 1971): 8.

⁸ “Meeting of the Suffrage Association,” *Providence Daily Journal*, September 27, 1841.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Alexander Crummell (March 3, 1819 – September 10, 1898), an avid abolitionist and proponent of Black nationalism, served the African American Community in Providence, RI, as an Episcopal minister of Christ Church and professor of theology. Crummell helped draft the petition for the “colored community” in Providence to the People’s Convention in October 1842. He claimed that he secured the community’s “political rights in Rhode Island,” stating: “[T]he leading colored men communicated their interests to my hand and judgment; and laid upon me the burden of drafting the documents and addresses and of taking the steps which secured in the end their political rights.” Quoted in Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 35.

grievances of the Black community. At the convention, where many believed it to be a ruse constructed by abolitionists, Dorr presented the petition. Dorr assured the convention members that it was “written by Alexander Cromwell [Crummell], a respectable colored man of this city, of some education, signed by him and five others, relating to their exclusion from the rights of suffrage” and the white-only clause in the People’s Constitution.¹¹ Dorr then began reading the petition to the convention and its committee members, addressing it to the Free Suffrage Convention. The document, under the title “Committee in behalf of the People of Color,” was signed by the following Black leaders:¹² Ichabod Northrup, a laborer living on Cushing Street; Samuel Rodman, a laborer living on Union Street; James Hazard, a clothes dealer on 49 South Main and 148 North Main Street; George J. Smith, a coachman living on Power Street; and Ransom Parker living on Congdon Street.¹³ Convention members then voted on whether to keep or remove the word white-only from the People's Constitution; eighteen voted to remove it, and forty-six voted to keep it.¹⁴

¹¹ “Suffrage Convention, Friday Evening,” *Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841.

¹² “To the Free Suffrage Convention,” excerpted in Edmund Burke, *Rhode Island—Interference of the Executive in the Affairs of June 7, 1844: Burke's Report* (Washington: Blair & Rives, print., 1844), 111–113, Special Collections & Archives, Robert L. Carothers Library and Learning Commons, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI.

¹³ The signers continued to fight for civil rights after the Dorr Rebellion: Ichabod Northrup argued for school integration in 1859 before the Providence City Council and School Committee; Samuel Rodman owned \$400 worth of property by 1860 and became a doctor in the community; James Hazard, described as the “richest colored man in the city” (by the Dorr Rebellion, he owned \$2,700 worth of real estate) joined the ranks of the state militia to thwart the Dorr Rebellion; George J. Smith was a founding member off the organization committee of the African Union Meeting House, the first school, church, and organizational center of the Providence Black community in 1821 and continued thereafter; and Ransom Parker, who by 1859, owned \$1,800 worth of real estate and fought for the desegregation of Rhode Island schools in 1859 by signing the petition “To the Friends of Equal Rights in Rhode Island” presented to the Rhode Island General Assembly. See *Providence Directory, 1841* (Providence: H.H. Brown, 1841), 184–186; Robert J. Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees: Providence's Black Community in the Antebellum Era* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 100, 128–129, 76, 58, 99; Lemons, Stanley J., and McKenna, “Re-enfranchisement of Rhode Island Negroes,” 6.

¹⁴ “Suffrage Convention, Friday Evening,” *Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841; *New Age and Constitutional Advocate*, October 22, 1841; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, October 21, 1841.

The petitioners presented by Dorr were not alone in the fight for suffrage; they had a formidable ally in the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society. On November 11–13, 1841, during its sixth annual meeting at Franklin Hall¹⁵ in Providence, the Society agreed to petition for the right of African American men to vote at the People’s Convention.¹⁶

Frederick Douglass and abolitionists from across the Northeast were present at this gathering. Representatives from the American Anti-Slavery Society¹⁷ convened: William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Lenox Remond,¹⁸ female abolitionist Abby Kelley—and lesser-known individuals such as Stephen S. Foster,¹⁹ James Monroe,²⁰ and Parker Pillsbury,²¹ who spoke against throngs of angry anti-Black Suffragists. Attendees at the anti-slavery meeting, many of

¹⁵ Franklin Hall was in the Market House Building in Market Square, South Main Street, Providence, RI. See Welcome Arnold Greene, *The Providence Plantations for 250 Years* (Providence: Reid, 1886), 87.

¹⁶ Burke, *Burke's Report*, 114.

¹⁷ The American Anti-Slavery Society (1833–1870) was an abolitionist society founded by William Lloyd Garrison and Arthur Tappan.

¹⁸ Born in Salem, Massachusetts, Charles Lenox Remond (1810–1873) was an abolitionist and an educator. Remond worked for William Lloyd Garrison’s newspaper, *The Liberator*. Remond was a renowned orator for his anti-slavery speeches and toured the Northeastern United States, England, and Europe. Remond enlisted Black soldiers for the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry and other African American regiments during the Civil War. He advocated for Black civil rights during Reconstruction until he died in 1873. See Les Wallace, “Charles Lenox Remond: The Lost Prince of Abolitionism,” *Negro History Bulletin* 40, no. 3 (1977): 696–701, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44176724>.

¹⁹ Stephen Symonds Foster (November 17, 1809–September 13, 1881), abolitionist and an advocate for women’s rights, was known for his radicalism and aggressive oration skills. He spoke out against Christians who did not support the abolishment of slavery. He also formed the New Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society and was a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Foster was courting Abby Kelley during Douglass’s visit to Rhode Island and married her in 1845. For more information on the lives of Stephen Foster and Abby Kelley, see Dorothy Sterling, *Ahead of Her Time: Abby Kelley and the Politics of Antislavery* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1991).

²⁰ James Monroe, an abolitionist referenced in Douglass’s memoir, accompanied him during speaking tours in New England and Rhode Island during the Dorr Rebellion. See Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, CT: Park Publishing Co., 1882), 273.

²¹ Parker Pillsbury (September 22, 1809–July 7, 1898) was a friend of Stephen Parker and a resident of New Hampshire. A minister and abolitionist, unlike Foster, he practiced civil disobedience among angry crowds. See Parker Pillsbury Diaries, 1864–1896, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.

them African American, raised over \$1,000 in donations to fund a statewide speaking tour to encourage Rhode Island voters to reject the proposed amendment in the People's Constitution that would eliminate the right to vote for Black men.²² According to an excerpt printed in *The Suffrage Examiner*, a reporter described the meeting in a grandiose manner:

Never before did this State witness such a gathering of free, independent, and self sacrificing spirits. The farmer and the mechanic, the merchant and the broker, the manufacturer and the operative, the clerk and the teacher, the lawyer and the printer, the priest and the politician, the old and the young, the rich and the poor, male and female, white and colored, bond and freed, of all sects and all parties: all these came up from the extreme parts of the State, and co-operated 'in glorious unity' for the advancement of our noble enterprise.²³

They were all united under a single cause: Black male suffrage.²⁴

On the twelfth,²⁵ the suffrage question came to a head when Dr. Joseph Brown, a Suffrage Associate who had advocated Black voting at the People's Convention, confronted the abolitionists during their meetings. Dr. Brown tried to defend the white-only clause in the constitution by supporting the idea that African Americans would receive gradual acceptance into the People's Constitution. William Lloyd Garrison and others—including Douglass—denounced Dr. Brown's claims, and the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society officially declared they would no longer support the Suffrage Association. Douglass summarized the events, exclaiming: "What we wanted, and what we labored to obtain, was a constitution free from the narrow, selfish, and senseless limitation of the word *white*."²⁶

²² Martin, "The 'Mustard Seed': Providence's Alfred Niger, Antebellum Black Voting Rights Activist."

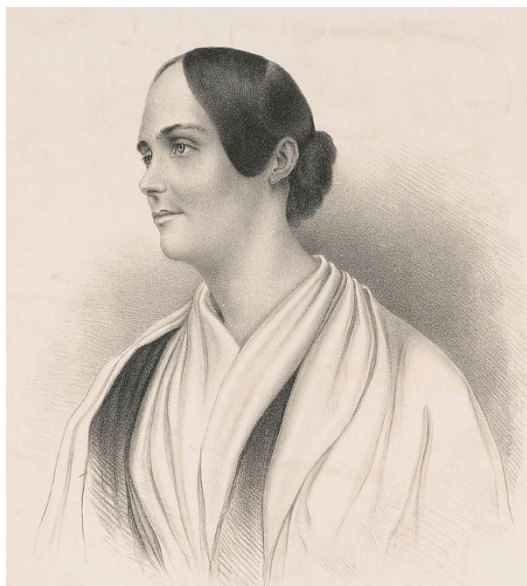
²³ Quoted from *The Suffrage Examiner* and excerpted in: Burke, *Burke's Report*, 114; "Annual Meeting," *The Suffrage Examiner*," December 1841, Brown University, Sidney S. Rider Collection on Rhode Island History, John Hay Library, Providence, RI.

²⁴ Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 273–274.

²⁵ Burke, *Burke's Report*, 115

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 274.

After this rupture, whenever the Society held a meeting, the Suffrage Association supporters would crash it. On December 13, 1841, the *Providence Daily Journal* reported a disruption at an anti-slavery meeting at the Town House²⁷ in Providence by a “number of rowdy boys,” in which “Abby [Kelley] was full of spunk and did not care a fig for the noise, but told them to make as much disturbance as they please.”²⁸



Abby Kelley, circa 1846 (Library of Congress)

The disturbance most likely came from anti-Black inclusive Suffrage Association supporters who sent younger affiliates to disturb the meeting’s deliberations. A response in the *Providence Daily Journal* further explained harassment at the Anti-Slavery meetings:

What kind of men where those of whom Abby Kell[e]y complained, in Woonsocket, Smithfield and Scituate, who became a riotous mob, so as to deprive the Anti Slavery Society of freedom of speech, when discussing one of the articles of the Suffrage Constitution? And what kind of scenes have our Town House witnessed in relation to those who took the liberty to think differently from a majority of their party on this question? “If these things be done in the green tree, what will be done in the dry!”²⁹

In a chapter titled “Recollections of Old Friends” from his memoir, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass remarked of Abby Kelley: “Her youth and simple Quaker beauty,

²⁷ Built-in 1723 as a Congregational church, in 1794, the town of Providence bought the building to host town council meetings and public functions. The old Town House became the central station for the Providence Police Department in 1851. The city demolished the building in 1860. The Providence County Courthouse now occupies its site at 250 Benefit Street. See Patrick T. Conley and Paul Campbell, *Providence: A Pictorial History* (Norfolk: Donning Company/Publishers, 1982), 21.

²⁸ “Anti Slavery Meeting,” *Providence Daily Journal*, December 13, 1841.

²⁹ “Be Not Alarmed,” *Providence Daily Journal*, December 29, 1841.

combined with her wonderful earnestness, her large knowledge and great logical power, bore down all opposition in the end.” He continues, “wherever she spoke though, she was before pelted with foul eggs, and no less foul words, from the noisy mobs which attended us,” and that she was “more than once mobbed in the old town in the city of Providence, and pelted with bad eggs.”³⁰ Douglass admired her bravery.³¹ The feeling of respect was mutual for Abby Kelley, who wrote in a missive to her friend Lucinda Wilmarth that Douglass “stole the hearts of the Rhode Island people.”³² The sentiment was probably felt more by the members of the Anti-Slavery Society than by the state’s general populous, but Kelley’s admiration was sincere.

Douglass also commented on society member Stephen Foster, whom he describes as “extravagant and needlessly offensive in his manner of presenting ideas.” Despite this critique of Foster’s style, Douglass held him in high regard for his commitment to abolitionism, remarking, “No white man ever made the black man’s cause more completely his own”³³ in his advocacy during the suffrage affair.

The debate over whether to include African American men in its campaign faded from view when the Suffrage Association began campaigning to ratify the People’s Constitution and elect Thomas Dorr as governor. On April 18, 1842, the Suffragists held an election that Rhode Island Governor Samuel Ward King refused to recognize. The legal government argued that the election was invalid since it included non-eligible voters. Dorr reassured them that legal voters

³⁰ Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 274.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 572–573.

³² Lucinda Wilmarth to Abby Kelley, July 11, 1842, Mss. F, Box 1, Folder 11, Abigail Kelley Foster Papers, 1836–1891, American Antiquarian Society (AAS), Worcester, MA.

³³ Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 274.

cast the vast majority of votes.³⁴ Governor King would have none of it; on May 4, 1842, King signed into power an “Act in Relation to Offenses against the Sovereign Power of the State,” which declared that it was an act of treason against the State of Rhode Island for anyone to accept the nomination for office or serve in office under any power but that of the existing government. Dorr supporters (known as Dorrites) referred to this proclamation as the “Algerine Law.”³⁵ The Suffrage Association’s cause came to a crossroads; if the Dorrites could not take power legally, they would take it by force.

And yet, the African American community would not support the group’s insurrection. After all the injustices it had endured thus far, African Americans decided to cast their lot with Governor King and his Whig and conservative Democrat-affiliated party of “Law and Order.” The Dorrites made two unsuccessful attempts to take over the state government—one on May 17, 1842, at the Cranston Street Arsenal in Providence and another on June 28, 1842, at Acote’s Hill in Chepachet, Rhode Island. By the end of the summer of 1842, state militia of both white and Black men gathered under the banner of the Law and Order Party to end the rebellion. Governor King’s forces broke Dorr and his supporters, arresting many, but they could not defeat the movement’s ideas.³⁶ In the aftermath of the Dorr uprising, the legal government of Rhode Island realized it needed to compromise to put an end to ongoing hostilities. In November 1842, the Law and Order Party drafted a new constitution—which extended universal suffrage to all

³⁴ Mowry, *The Dorr War*, 136–138.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 136–138; “Algerine Law” refers to the tyrannical rulers called Deys in Algiers, Africa, and the oppressive laws they enacted upon their people and their support of piracy on the Barbary Coast of Africa. See Erik J. Chaput, *The People’s Martyr: Thomas Wilson Dorr and His 1842 Rhode Island Rebellion* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013), 85–86.

³⁶ William G. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1986), 134–135.

native-born adult males—to replace the old Landholders' Constitution. The question of Black male suffrage came into consideration as African Americans supported the Law and Order Party during the outbreak of the rebellion. The Law and Order party presented a referendum to remove or keep the white-only clause from the new constitution to qualified voters across Rhode Island—including eligible men of color who were allowed to cast their ballot. The majority of votes favored removing the white-only clause from the new constitution. In May 1843, the Rhode Island General Assembly enacted the new constitution, commonly referred to as the Law and Order Constitution, which remained a doctrine of Rhode Island government well into the late twentieth century. Black men became enfranchised.³⁷

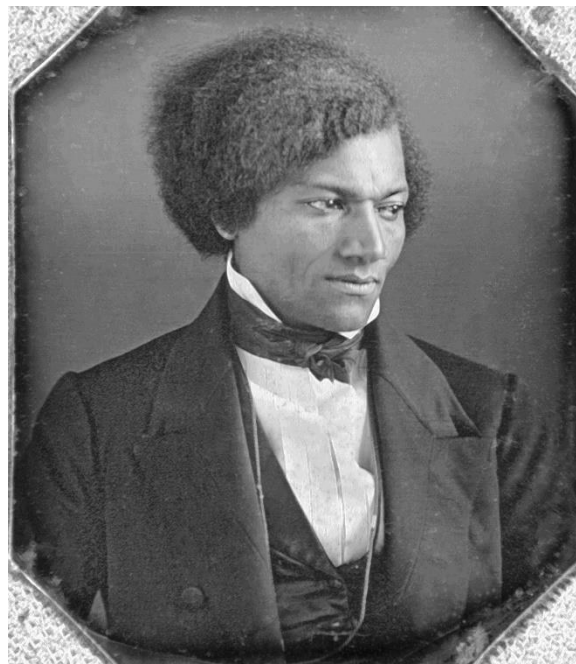
Ultimately, trailblazers from the African American community, with assistance from the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, particularly in Providence, were instrumental in winning suffrage for Black men, mainly because of their willingness to support the Law and Order Party. Douglass and his colleagues worked with the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society and the community during the People's Convention and did much to encourage local voting activists to achieve Black male enfranchisement. Douglass said of his experience in the state:

I think that our labours in Rhode Island during this Dorr excitement did more to abolitionise the state than any previous, or subsequent work. It was the “tide taken at the flood.” One effect of these labours was to induce the old “Law and Order” Party, when it set about making its new constitution, to avoid the narrow folly of the Dorrites, and make a constitution which should not abridge any man's rights on account of race or colour. Such a new constitution was finally adopted.³⁸

³⁷ At least 700 eligible men of color could vote in Rhode Island during the November 1842 constitutional referendum. This aggregate helped tip the ballot for Black male enfranchisement in the Law and Order Constitution. See Gettleman, *Dorr Rebellion*, 145, 148.

³⁸ Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 274–275.

According to Douglass, African Americans in Rhode Island were not for Dorr nor Law and Order, but for a "constitution free from the narrow, selfish, and senseless limitation of the word white." He says that Dorr was "a well-meaning man" with "progressive views" but "shared the fate of all compromisers and trimmers, for he was disastrously defeated."³⁹ Dorr's defeat was partly tied to his failure to muster his party's support for Black suffrage. The Law and Order Party took on



Frederick Douglass, circa 1848 (Albert Cook Myers Collection, Chester County Historical Society)

this charge mainly because it recognized the collective power of the African American community when its members joined the ranks of the state militia, city watch, and fire companies, particularly in Providence, during the Dorr rebellion. The *New York Courier and Enquirer* reported that:

The colored people of Rhode Island deserve the good opinion and kind feelings of every citizen of the State, for their conduct during the recent troublous times in Providence. They promptly volunteered their services for any duty in which they might be useful in maintaining law and order.⁴⁰

Through these aims, African American community leaders, with the help and advocacy of Anti-Slavery Society members, achieved Black male suffrage amid Rhode Island's chartist revolution through their participation and agency.

³⁹ Ibid., 272.

⁴⁰ Excerpted in the *Providence Daily Journal*, July 12, 1842.

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