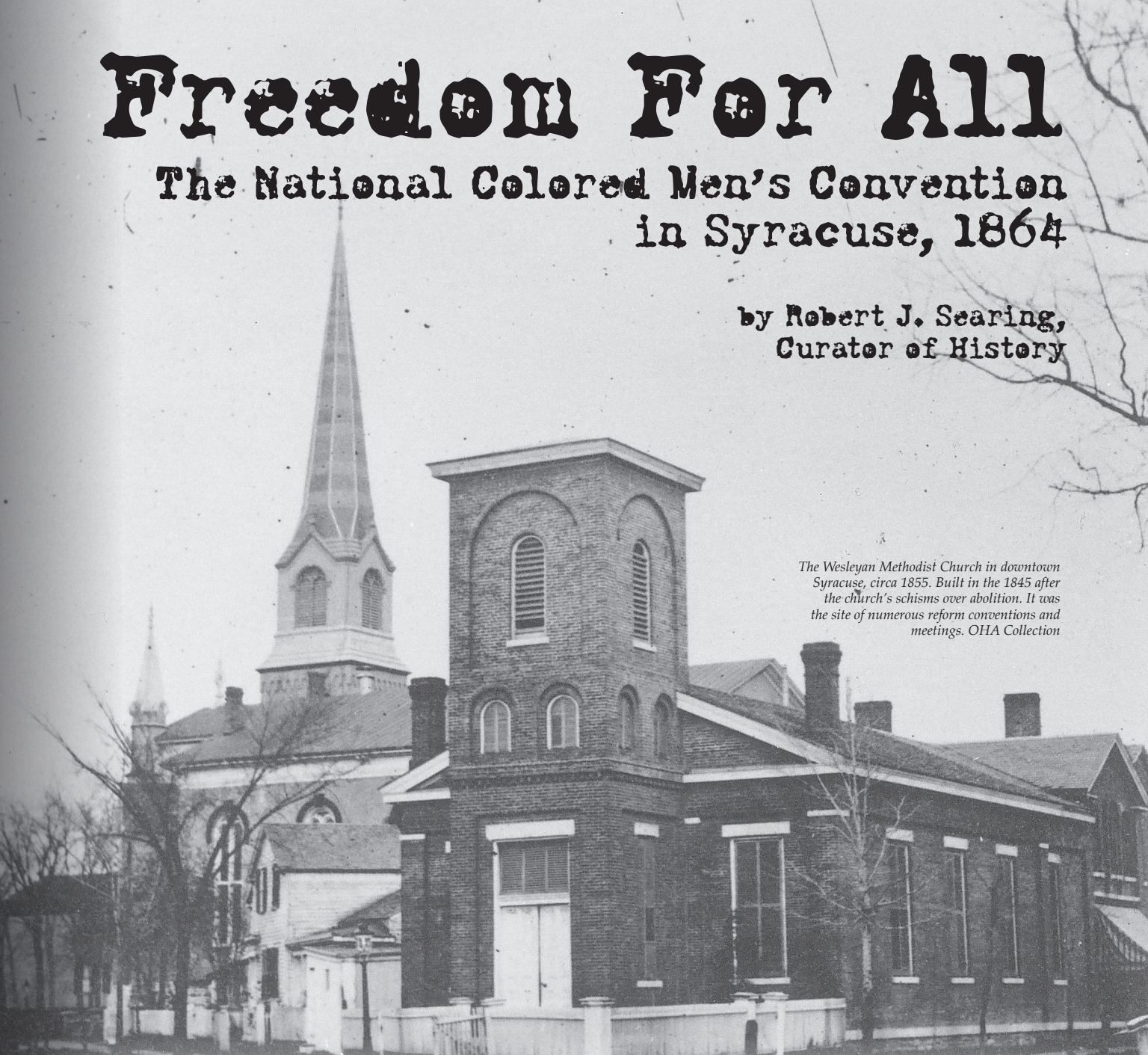


Freedom For All

The National Colored Men's Convention in Syracuse, 1864

by Robert J. Searing,
Curator of History

*The Wesleyan Methodist Church in downtown
Syracuse, circa 1855. Built in the 1845 after
the church's schisms over abolition. It was
the site of numerous reform conventions and
meetings. OHA Collection*



At seven o'clock on the evening of October 4, 1864, Reverend Henry Highland Garnet, recently of New York City, and on his way to Washington D.C. where he would make history as the first Black man to preach in the Capitol, stepped to the pulpit of Syracuse's Wesleyan Methodist Church and called to order the National Convention of Colored Men. It had been nine years since the last convention met in Philadelphia in 1855. As Yale historian, David Blight, noted in his Pulitzer Prize winning biography of Frederick Douglass, the Syracuse convention was arguably the largest and most significant gathering of prominent African American leaders yet assembled in the United States. Approximately 150 luminaries representing seventeen states, including the Confederate states of Missouri, Virginia, Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina, Mississippi, and Tennessee, as well as the District of Columbia, were selected in smaller statewide conventions. The group, comprised of the best and the brightest minds in the abolition movement, including lawyers, clergymen, publishers, doctors, philanthropists, activists, and others descended on the Salt City just a few weeks before the most consequential Presidential election in the history of the republic.

The fate of the nation and the freedom of millions was on the ballot.

Since that last National Convention of Colored Men in Philadelphia, the world had changed in dramatic ways for every American, but for the Black leaders gathered in Syracuse the very real prospect of slavery's demise was, until just a few months prior, almost unimaginable. In the intervening years, a series of events beginning with Bleeding Kansas, the Dred Scott decision, and John Brown's failed mission at Harper's Ferry in 1859, had ratcheted up the sectional crisis to the brink of secession. Now, on that brisk fall evening in Central New York, they convened again, in the middle of a bloody civil war, which began over three years earlier to preserve the institution of slavery and had, ironically enough, set it on a course to ultimate extinction. In his first inaugural address on March 4, 1861, President Lincoln, whose election was the catalyst for secession, stated his position clearly. Despite the assertions of the secessionists, Lincoln stated categorically, "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so." The Confederate shelling of Fort Sumter just a few weeks after Lincoln's speech and the war that followed provided Lincoln with a military imperative and justification to do exactly what he said he would not do; to save the union he would attack the south's "peculiar institution." After January 1, 1863, the date set forth in Lincoln's proclamation that "freed" the enslaved in the Confederacy (Tennessee and some coastal areas of Virginia and Louisiana controlled by the Union forces were exempted. The Emancipation Proclamation also did not apply to the border states of Maryland, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Delaware), emancipation followed the Union

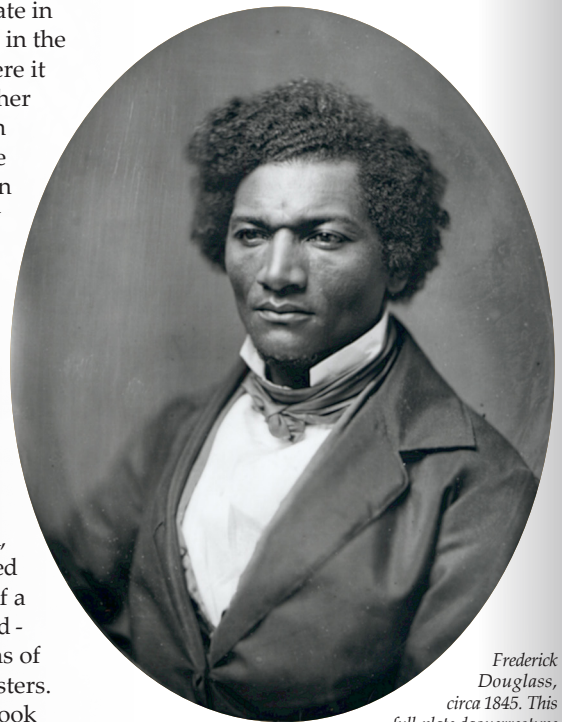
Army, which by October 1864 had made significant inroads into Confederate territory. With each passing day, more enslaved people made their way across Union lines.

Beyond that revolutionary executive proclamation, the continuation of the war and a Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery were at the center of the national discourse and the election between Lincoln and his Democratic opponent, General George McClellan, the former Commanding General of the U.S. Army, who was relieved of command by Lincoln in March 1862. In stark contrast to Lincoln and the Republicans, McClellan's Democratic Party promised to end the war as soon as possible and bring the Union back together with slavery intact.

As for the Thirteenth Amendment, it had been passed by the Senate in April 1864, but it was stymied in the House of Representatives where it was voted down in June. Further evidence of the seismic shift in the political landscape was the language in the 1864 Republican Party Platform, which was now uncompromising on the issue of abolition. "That as slavery was the cause, and now constitutes the strength of this Rebellion... we are in favor, furthermore, of such an amendment to the Constitution... as shall terminate and forever prohibit the existence of Slavery within the limits of the jurisdiction of the United States." Thus, it was that abolition, the life's work of the men gathered inside that small church - itself a stop on the Underground Railroad - was on the horizon for millions of their enslaved brothers and sisters. Exactly what freedom might look like for those millions still enslaved and how, if it came, might it be strengthened and maintained was

the impetus for the convention.

With such weighty matters before them, one can only imagine the tide of emotions felt by the delegates as they raised their voices in unison to sing the hymn, "Blow ye the trumpet, blow" before they set to their work: "The year of jubilee is come; return, ye ransomed sinners, home; return, ye ransomed sinners' home." This stirring scene set the tone for the next four days, as many of the sessions ended with the singing of hymns or patriotic songs. After some procedural housekeeping, agenda setting, and committee assignments, John M. Langston, esq., a graduate of Oberlin College, attorney, and future United States Congressman, introduced the man elected by his peers as president of the Convention, Rochester's Frederick Douglass, perhaps the most famous Black man in the western world.



Frederick Douglass, circa 1845. This full-plate daguerreotype was most likely made in Boston and is one of the earliest images of the great civil rights leader. It is part of the Onondaga Historical Association collection. At the time of the convention, two of his sons, Lewis and Charles, had both joined the Union Army and the famed Massachusetts 54th Colored Regiment.

Douglass accepted the honor bestowed upon him, a “compliment,” he pointed out, “not wholly undeserved.” Recognizing that this was a room full of accomplished men, each with their own egos and opinions, Douglass called on his fellow attendees to maintain the proper “order and decorum.” “Gentlemen,” he said, “with your assistance and support we shall have harmony, which is essential to our deliberations.” The cause they had come to Syracuse to promote was “sacred.” “Nowhere,” he continued, “can men be found coupled with a cause of greater dignity and importance.” At stake was no less than “the freedom, progress, elevation, and perfect enfranchisement, of the entire colored people of the United States.” The work of this convention was instrumental to demonstrate that “like all progressive races of men, we are resolved to advance in the scale of knowledge, worth... and claim our rights as men among men.” After Douglass concluded his remarks, the convention adjourned for the evening. The attendees set out to their various places of lodging, coordinated by the “King of the Underground Railroad”, Syracuse’s Rev. Jermain Wesley Loguen, the chair of the reception committee and a member of the finance committee.



Rev. Jermain Loguen: Loguen escaped slavery in Tennessee. He settled in Syracuse in 1841. A noted orator, preacher, and writer in the cause of abolition, he and his wife, Caroline, are said to have helped Shepard 1,500 people to freedom on the Underground Railroad. Loguen died in 1872. He is buried in Oakwood Cemetery.

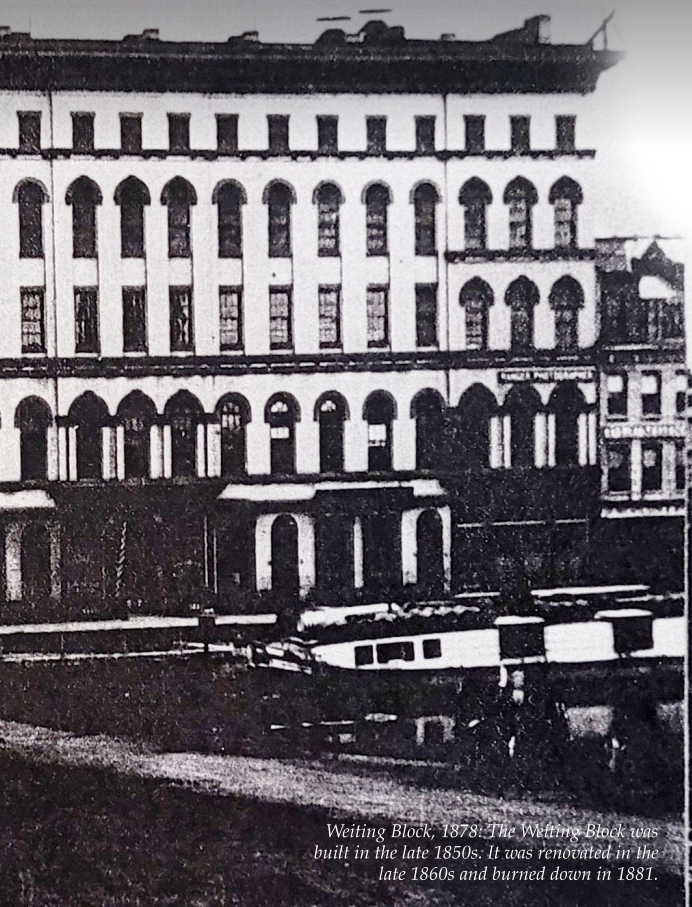
Over the course of the next three days, the proceedings took place in the Weiting Opera House in Clinton Square, where they aroused keen interest amongst the city’s residents. Not everyone in Syracuse, however, was pleased to see this impressive gathering of African American luminaries in their city. Shortly before the end of the morning session on October 5, Mr. Samuel Murray, an honorary delegate from Maine, asked the convention to provide financial remuneration to Rev. Garnet so that he might replace his cane, which had been stolen. Garnet was accosted by a group of “rowdies” upon his arrival in Syracuse that Monday. Though the proceedings of the convention contain no further elaboration, a detailed account of the attack appeared in the October 21, 1864 issue of William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator*, the abolitionist paper of record since its founding in 1831, under the headline “A Copperhead Victory,” (Copperhead was a term used to describe northern Democrats).

Arriving in Syracuse by train, Garnet checked into the St. Charles Hotel on the corner of Washington and Warren streets, just south of Vanderbilt Station. In the evening, Garnet and three associates ventured to the train station to welcome other delegates. Upon his return to the St. Charles, he was set upon by three or four angry whites; one of them, who according



to the Syracuse State League correspondent was “well-known” in the city, punched Garnet in his face, knocking him to the ground. The “rowdies” proceeded to take Garnet’s gold-headed cane, a gift from his friends in New York City. Beyond the abject humiliation and trauma, the loss of his cane was a significant problem for Garnet as he suffered from a debilitating leg disease since he was a boy that rendered him nearly crippled. The thugs also threw Garnet’s papers into the Erie Canal and set off. According to that same report, the attack on Garnet “produced considerable excitement among the delegates.” So much so, that Garnett apparently urged the delegates to reconsider Syracuse as a location. Over the course of the next three days, other delegates complained of threats and aggressive behavior from the locals.

Juxtaposed to such sordid racial



Weiting Block, 1878: The Weiting Block was built in the late 1850s. It was renovated in the late 1860s and burned down in 1881.

violence was the most moving of scenes. During that Wednesday afternoon session, delegate Captain James Ingraham, of the First Louisiana Colored Troops, presented the flag his men carried into the siege of Port Hudson, LA, which lasted over 40 days between May and July 1863. Port Hudson was the first time that Black troops were given the opportunity to fight in a large-scale military operation. Fighting wide-spread racism within the Union Army, in addition to the Confederate forces, they had more than proved themselves the equal of their white counterparts. Capt. Ingraham recounted the bravery of the men, which was met with "great applause" and a standing ovation. The battle flag adorned the platform for the remainder of the convention. The actions of the First Louisiana

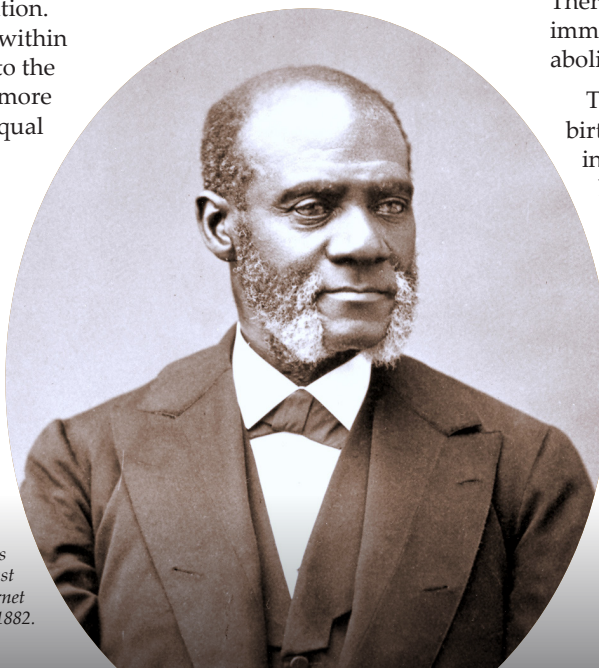
and all the other Black Union troops, which included two of Douglass' sons, were particularly gratifying for Douglass and for Loguen. Both men had been early and vociferous advocates for the enlistment of colored troops. In fact, at the outbreak of the war, Loguen recruited a company of Black soldiers, Loguen's Guards, in Binghamton, but they were not allowed to enlist at Albany. For the delegates, the equal treatment of Black soldiers and the recognition of their sacrifice was a critical outcome.

Later that evening, the convention reassembled with President Douglass presiding and a large crowd filling the hall in anticipation of the impressive list of speakers scheduled to address the convention. He led the audience in another song, this one dedicated to a man known and respected by

many attendees for giving his life for the cause of abolition, "The John Brown Song" (John Brown's Body). Before the evening of speeches commenced, which included young Syracuse native, Edmonia Highgate, praised by Douglass as "our Anna Dickinson" and just recently returned from teaching newly freed people in Virginia, the Business Committee reported a Declaration of Wrongs and Rights.

Like the attendees at Seneca Falls sixteen years earlier, the Colored Men of America modelled their grievances on the Declaration of Independence, calling out its hypocrisy, while affirming its principles. In six articles, this "branch of the human family" delineated how they had suffered "every cruelty and indignity possible to be heaped upon human beings." Through no fault of their own, they had been "declared incapable of self-government...denied the ownership of our bodies, our wives, homes, children, and the products of our labor." Echoing the calls of the American Revolution, they decried taxation without representation, while their enslaved brothers were "led to shambles and sold like beasts of the field." After two centuries of inhumane debasement, the eminent members of the convention declared the "fundamental principle" that "all men are born free and equal." Therefore, they demanded "the immediate and unconditional abolition of slavery."

They also reaffirmed their birthright citizenship as Americans, in direct opposition to the 1857 Dred Scott decision. In this notorious 7-2 ruling, Chief Justice Roger Taney, the scion of a wealthy slave-holding Maryland family, appointed to the post by Andrew Jackson, held that "a negro, whose ancestors were imported into [the U.S.], and



Henry Highland Garnet: Born into slavery in Maryland in 1815, his family made it to freedom in New York City in 1825. Garnet's 1843, "Address to the Slaves of the United States of America," which urged slaves to rise up against their masters made him a national figure. Garnet supported colonization and died in Africa in 1882.

sold as slaves," whether enslaved or free, could not be an American citizen. Taney wrote, "They [African Americans] had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit." Therefore, gaining the status as citizens of the Republic was of paramount concern and the subject rightly took up

most of that day's session. As the delegates declaration succinctly stated, "to realize and attain these rights, and their practical recognition, is our purpose."

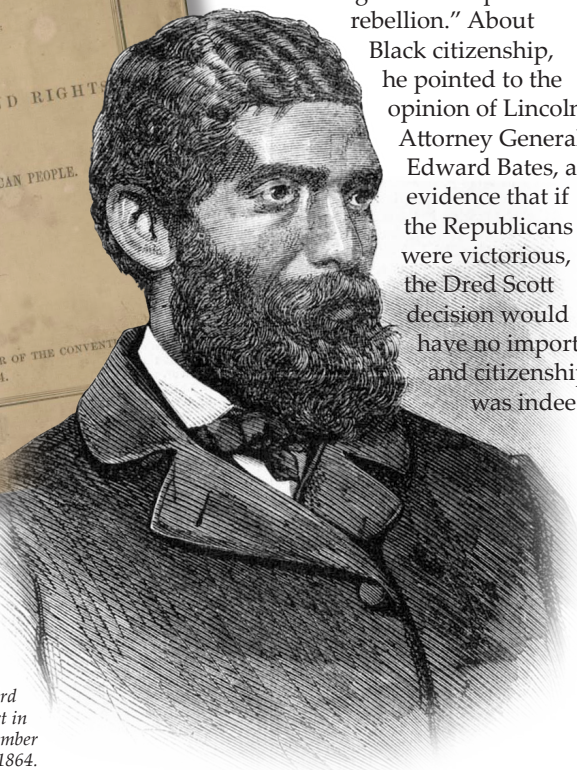
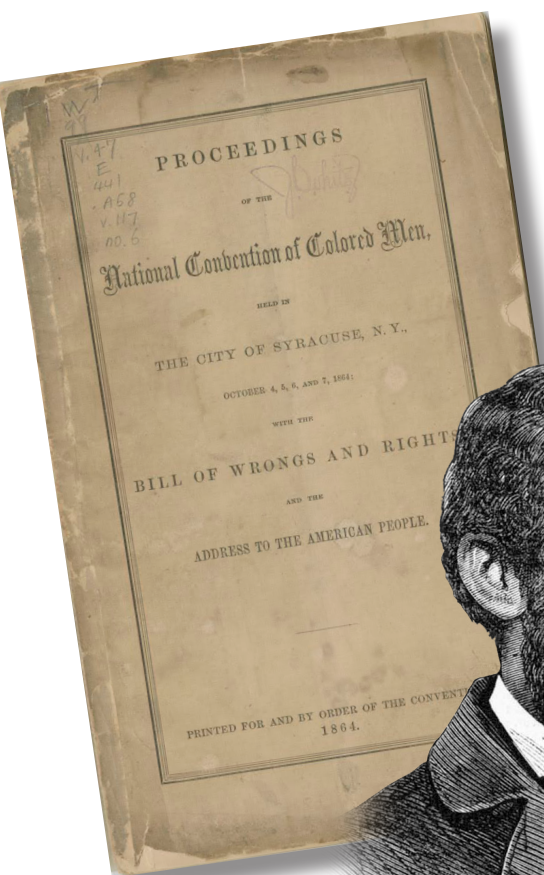
Douglass proceeded to speak on the need for the convention, which was of "necessity from the state of feeling in the country toward the colored man." Douglass pointed to the treatment of the delegates, including the beating of Garnet and the menacing glares of some Syracusans yelling, "where are the damned n-----s going?" as the delegates traversed the streets. The speeches continued for several hours, as the gifted lecturers touched on a host of topics. Rev. J. Sella Martin of New York hoped that "liberty and enfranchisement" might finally bless the "whole people." After Miss Highgate addressed the assemblage, John M. Langston struck a tone for unity of cause. He asserted that "all people in the land, white and colored, were slaves to the oligarchy which inaugurated the present rebellion." About

Black citizenship, he pointed to the opinion of Lincoln's Attorney General, Edward Bates, as evidence that if the Republicans were victorious, the Dred Scott decision would have no import and citizenship was indeed

attainable. The evening ended with an inspired version of "Battle Cry of Freedom."

On Thursday, the delegates reconvened and unanimously passed the Bill of Wrongs and Rights and decided it should be addressed to Congress directly. That day also witnessed the creation of the constitution of the National Equal Rights League (NERL). After some wrangling over location, the first annual meeting of the NERL was set to meet in Cleveland in September 1865. According to its constitution, the NERL primary object was to "obtain by appeals to the minds and conscience of the American people or by legal process, when possible, as recognition of the rights of the colored people of the nation as American citizens." Ultimately, the members of NERL called for full citizenship for Black Americans as the rightful compensation for the military service they rendered to the Union. The NERL was the preeminent Black civil rights organization in the country, pushing for integration, education, and voting rights across the country. In 1921, the group merged with the NAACP.

During the evening session, Rev. Garnet finally addressed the convention. He offered a graphic retelling of the horrific scenes "of demonic hate" in New York City during the draft riots in July 1863, when several Black men were lynched by angry mobs. Garnett escaped a mob during the riots only to be beaten in the streets of Syracuse. Garnet's emotional speech was followed by a song. This gave way to one of the convention's most interesting speakers, Dr. P.B. Randolph of New York. Randolph was an author and a well-known Rosicrucian, who founded the Fraternis Rosae Crucis in 1858. Using all his scholarly



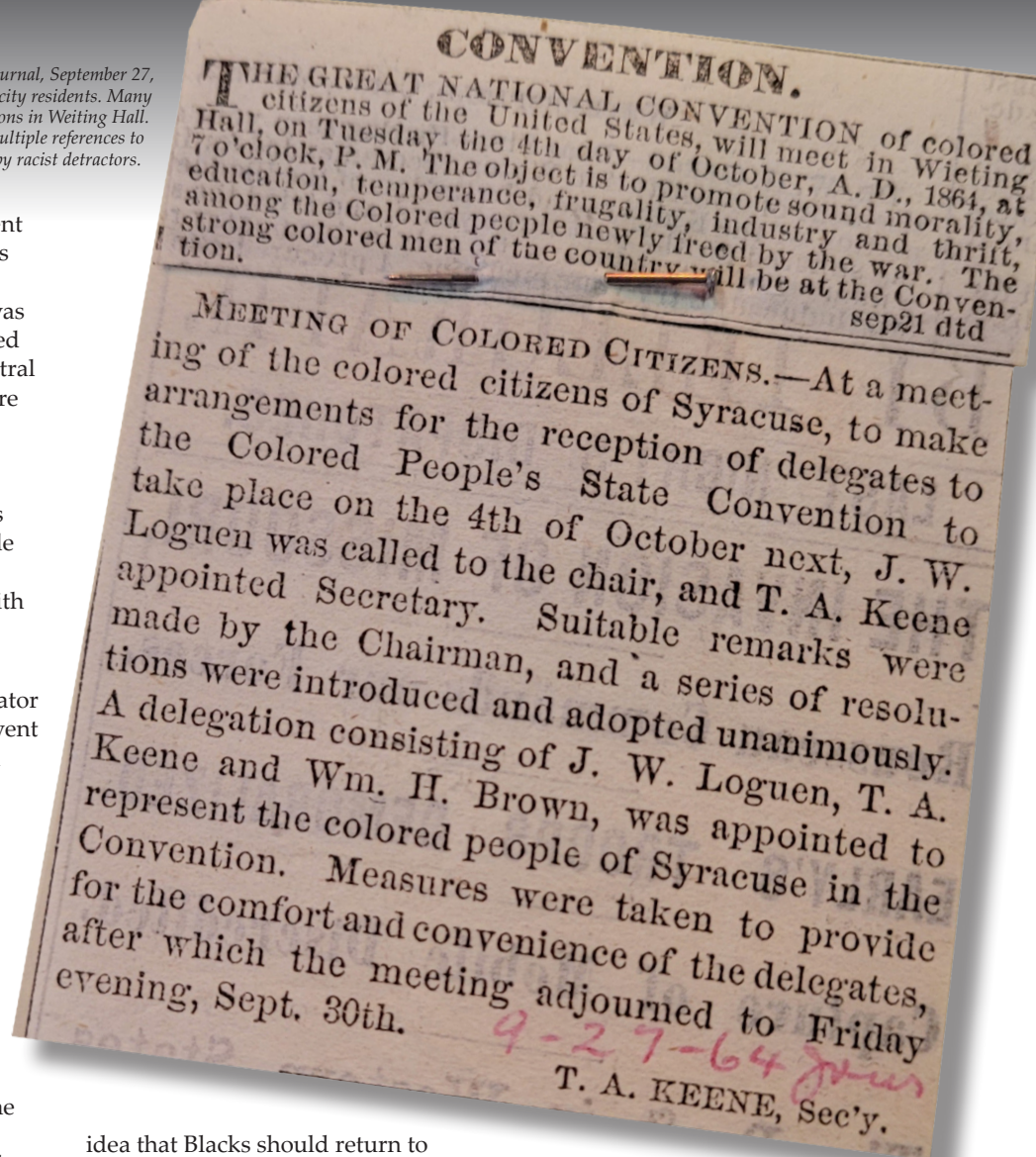
Above: Cover for the Proceedings
Tasked by the convention to publish the proceedings, the Committee on Publication, John Rock (pictured right), George Ruffin, and W. Howard Day, published the report in Boston in November of 1864.

Clippings from the Syracuse Journal, September 27, 1864, announcing the convention to city residents. Many supportive Syracusans attended the sessions in Weiting Hall. The notes of the convention do make multiple references to harassment and verbal assaults by racist detractors.

wiles, Randolph started in Ancient Egypt and the exodus of the Jews to demonstrate that freedom, no matter how long the suffering, was attainable. Randolph championed progress and education, two central themes of the convention. "We are here to ring the bells at the door of the world; proclaiming to the nations, to the white man in his palace, the slave in his hut, kings on their thrones, and to the whole broad universe, that **WE ARE COMING UP!**" This was met with thunderous applause.

Near the end of the evening session, John S. Rock, a gifted orator and attorney from Boston who went on to become the first Black man admitted to argue in front of the Supreme Court (he died in 1866 before he was able to), took to the floor and expertly distilled the situation Black Americans found themselves in. After reading a letter written to him by John Andrew, the governor of Massachusetts, regarding the horrific treatment of Black soldiers in the famed Massachusetts 54th, he chided the national government for waiting for two years to let them fight. The glory of "every brave man who has taken up the musket in defense of liberty" had "done wonders for the race." The soul of the republic was at stake and the divide was stark. There were "but two parties in the country today. The one headed by Lincoln is for freedom and the Republic; and the other, by McClellan, is for despotism and slavery." "The fate of the republic," Rock concluded, "will be settled in this contest; and its enemies must either be subdued or annihilated, and it is of but little consequence which."

The next day, Friday, began with heated discussion of colonization (the controversial



idea that Blacks should return to Africa) and what role white allies should play in the struggle moving forward. Then, around eleven a.m., Frederick Douglass closed the convention with a lengthy speech that perfectly encapsulated their anxious optimism, their hopefulness, their anger and their joy, the enormity of the task and the opportunity before the nation. Douglass did not parse words. "The Democratic Party belonged to slavery." The slave power needed to be defeated on the battlefield and at the ballot box. In a stroke of prescience as he neared the end of his remarks, Douglass told his audience (this included the readers of the convention's proceedings across the country)

that "we may conquer southern armies by the sword; but it is another thing to conquer southern hate." Foreshadowing the 15th Amendment four years later, Douglass exhorted the Republicans to give the "elective franchise" to every 21-year-old Black man "of sane mind." These "four millions of friends" would guard "with their vigilance, and if need be, defend with their arms, the ark of federal liberty." As they closed their proceedings, the National Convention of Colored Men and their esteemed president offered this sublime distillation as true now as it was then, "If freedom is good for any, it is good for all."

"If freedom is good for any, it is good for all"