"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 Charter of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, enacted in 1663, no white adult male who did not own $134 in land in the state could vote, which meant that more than 60 percent of this demographic was disenfranchised.[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 treating landholding as a qualification for voting and institute universal suffrage for all adult white males living in the state. In November of that year, the Suffrage Association began publishing a weekly newspaper, the *New Age and Constitutional Advocate*, to rally supporters.[2] On May 5, 1841, the Association held a mass rally in Newport. On July 5, the leaders of the movement held a procession and convention in Providence to formally organize a "People's Convention" to begin drafting a new constitution in the city on October 4 (the first Monday of the month). Convention members sought to draw up their "People's Constitution," to replace the old landholder system, which they described as being plagued with "rotten borough"[3] representation that gave agricultural towns outsized political power. Urban areas, such as the city of Providence, had the state's largest populations but were underrepresented in the legislature.

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

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[1] Arthur M. Mowry, "Chapter VI: The Charter Criticized," *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), 34–37.

[3] An English term for a borough that was able to elect a representative to Parliament despite having very few voters, with the choice of representative typically in the hands of one person or a family oligarchy.

by the participation of African American men and moved swiftly to deny them 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[5] despite the ambivalence of the poll station warden about allowing light-skinned people of color to vote. 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 at an organizational session of the convention's executive committee, where members rescinded Niger's nomination to the position of

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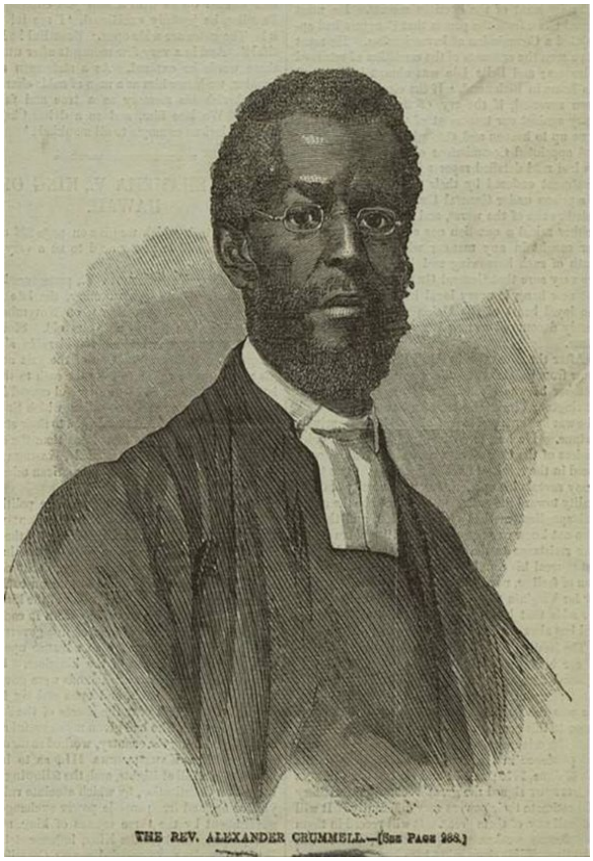
[4] Alfred Niger was born in 1797 in the Old Saybrook area of Connecticut. He moved to and worked as a barber in Providence at 87 High, Spring Street—once located within the boundaries of Fricker, Westminster, Cahir, and Broad Street, at the site of Central and Classical High School—from 1824 to his death in 1862. Niger began his career in Black civil rights in the 1830s. He represented Providence at the 1830 National Colored Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison hired Niger to be an agent for the newspaper *The Liberator* in Rhode Island. In Providence, Niger also served as an agent for *Freedom's Journal*, the first African American-owned newspaper in the United States. Niger joined the New England Anti-Slavery Society and served as a delegate from Providence, and in 1836, he 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 Black leaders George Waterman, James E. Ellis, George C. Willis, and George McCarty. Their concern was twofold: a fee per annum charged in taxes 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, as taxes only paid for white children's public education. They drafted a petition and submitted it to the Rhode Island General Assembly, but nothing came of it. In January 1841, Alfred Niger and George McCarty submitted a similar petition on behalf of fifteen other African American community leaders regarding taxation, which met the same fate as in 1831, with assembly members rejecting it.

In 1846, Niger served as a delegate from Providence 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 joined in 1857. Alfred Niger died on August 25, 1862, in Providence, Rhode Island. He is buried in the Locust Grove Cemetery in Elmwood, Providence.

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, https://smallstatebighistory.com/the-mustard-seed-providences-alfred-niger-antebellum-black-voting-rights-activist/

[5] Providence's Sixth Ward boundaries in the 1840s encompassed the West End and sections of Upper South Providence.

[6] Martin, "The 'Mustard Seed.' "



Alexander Crummell, circa 1866. Courtesy of the Providence City Archives.

convention treasurer. Conflicting nominations were put forward for Niger, and a white man, Thomas Greene. The committee member who put Niger on the ballot, whether or not known by Niger, was an anti-Black inclusionist named Mr. Field—attempting to root out abolitionist sympathizers.[7] Meeting minutes printed in the *Providence Daily Journal* revealed another anti-Black delegate named Mr. Russell, supporting Field's ploy, as "he hoped all would vote in this ballot and vote their sentiments, in order that all might known how many 'wolves in sheep's clothing' [abolitionists] were among them."[8] The affair served as a ruse to expose and subdue those who supported Black enfranchisement in the convention. Those in favor of nominating Niger were ignored or backed down. The subject ended, and Mr. Greene became treasurer.[9] The Black community ran out of patience.

On October 8, 1841, Alexander Crummell,[10] an African American Episcopal priest, approached Thomas Dorr—a former representative in the Rhode Island General Assembly in

[7] J. Stanley 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 populace in Providence as an Episcopal minister at Christ Church and a professor of theology. Crummell helped draft the petition for the "colored community" to the People's Convention in October 1842. He claimed that he secured the community's "political rights in Rhode Island": "The leading

1834 who joined the Suffrage Association and later led its movement—with a petition he drafted on behalf of the Black community's grievances. At the convention, where many believed it to be a ruse constructed by abolitionists, Dorr presented the petition at the Masonic Hall in Providence.[11] Dorr assured the convention members that it was "written by Alexander Cromwell [sic], 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.[12] 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:[13] Ichabod Northrup, a laborer living on Cushing Street; Samuel Rodman, a laborer living on Union Street; James Hazard, a clothes dealer at 49 South Main and 148 North Main Street; George J. Smith, a coachman residing on Power Street; and Ransom Parker living on Congdon Street—all addresses belonging to Providence.[14] Delegates then voted on whether to keep or remove the

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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.

[11] Located on the third story of the Market House in Market Square. See footnote no. 17.

[12] "Suffrage Convention, Friday Evening," *Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841.

[13] "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, printers, 1844), 111–113, Special Collections & Archives, Robert L. Carothers Library and Learning Commons, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI.

[14] 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 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 public 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), 184–86; Robert

white-only clause from the People's Constitution; eighteen voted to remove it, and forty-six voted to keep it.[15]

The petitioners presented by Dorr were not alone in the fight for Black 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 Hall[16] in Providence—the Society agreed to petition for the right of African American men to vote.[17] Frederick Douglass and abolitionists from across the Northeast were present at this gathering. Representatives from the American Anti-Slavery Society[18] convened: William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Lenox Remond,[19] female abolitionist Abby Kelley, and lesser-known figures such as Stephen S. Foster,[20] James Monroe,[21] and Parker

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J. Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees: Providence's Black Community in the Antebellum Era* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 100, 128–29, 76, 58, 99; J. Stanley Lemons and McKenna, "Re-enfranchisement of Rhode Island Negroes," 6.

[15] "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.

[16] 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.

[17] *Burke's Report*, 113–14.

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

[19] 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*. He was a renowned orator for his anti-slavery speeches and toured the Northeastern United States, England, and Europe. Remond recruited 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 his death 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

[20] Stephen Symonds Foster (November 17, 1809–September 13, 1881), an abolitionist and advocate for women's rights, was known for his radicalism and aggressive oration skills. He spoke out against Christians who did not support the abolition 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).

[21] James Monroe, an abolitionist referenced in Douglass's memoir, accompanied him during speaking tours in Rhode Island and New England during the Dorr Rebellion. See Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of*

Pillsbury[22] spoke against throngs of angry anti-Black suffragists. Attendees at the anti-slavery meeting, many of them African American, raised over $1,000 in donations to fund a statewide speaking tour to encourage Rhode Island voters to protest the white-only clause in the People's Constitution and reject it.[23] An excerpt printed in the *Suffrage Examiner*—the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society's newspaper, specifically established to attack the Suffrage Association—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.[24]

On the twelfth, the Black suffrage question came to a head when John Brown, president of the Suffrage Association, who had supported African American male voting rights at the People's Convention, confronted the abolitionists during their discussions. Brown tried to defend the white-only clause in the People's Constitution by advocating a gradual inclusion of African Americans in a future amendment. William Lloyd Garrison and others—including Douglass—denounced Brown's claims, and the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society officially declared they would no longer support the Suffrage Association. Douglass exclaimed, "What we wanted, and

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Frederick Douglass. Written by Himself. His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time (Hartford: Park Publishing Co., 1882), 273.

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

[23] Martin, "The 'Mustard Seed.' "

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

what we labored to obtain, was a constitution free from the narrow, selfish, and senseless limitation of the word *white*."[25]

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 House[26] 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[d]."[27] The commotion most likely came from anti-Black inclusive Suffrage Association supporters who sent younger affiliates to disturb the conference's deliberations. A response in the *Providence Daily Journal* further explained the harassment:

> What kind of men were 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!"[28]

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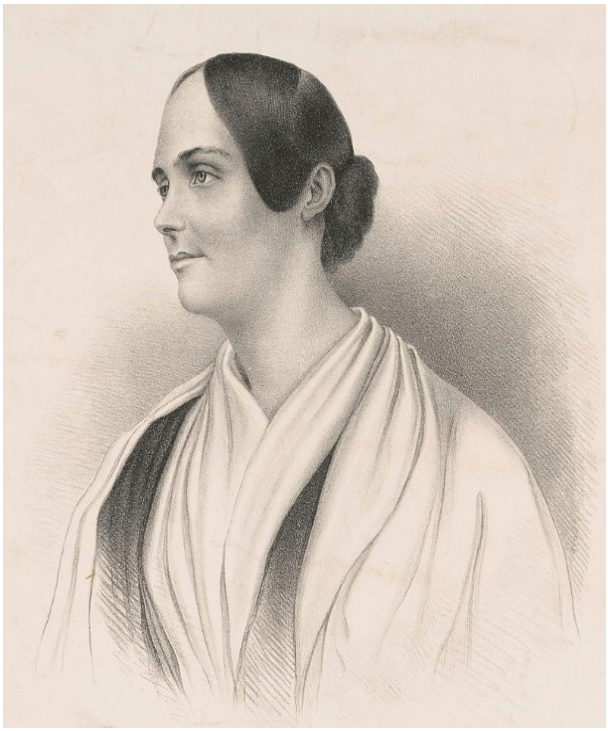
[25] *Burke's Report*, 115; Douglass, *Life and Times*, 274.

[26] Built in 1723 as a Congregational church, the Town of Providence bought the building in 1794 to host Town Council meetings and public functions. In 1851, the old Town House became the central station for the Providence Police Department. 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.

[27] "Anti Slavery Meeting," *Providence Daily Journal*, December 13, 1841.

[28] "Be Not Alarmed," *Providence Daily Journal*, December 29, 1841.



Abby Kelley, circa 1846. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

In a chapter titled "Recollections of Old Friends" from his memoir, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, he remarked of Abby Kelley's "youth and simple Quaker beauty, combined with her wonderful earnestness, [and] her large knowledge and great logical power, [which] bore down all opposition to 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 hall in the city of Providence, and pelted with bad eggs." Douglass admired her bravery.[29] 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."[30] Members of the Anti-Slavery Society probably felt the sentiment more than the state's general population did, 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 his ideas." Despite the critique of his rhetoric, Douglass held Foster in high regard for his commitment to abolitionism,

[29] Douglass, *Life and Times*, 274, 573.

[30] 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.

remarking, “No white man ever made the black man’s cause more completely his own” in his advocacy during the suffrage affair.[31]

The debate lapsed when the Suffrage Party (the political apparatus of the Suffrage Association, a.k.a. People’s Party) held its referendum and approved the People’s Constitution on December 29, 1841, tabulating the final results on January 12. In the Spring of 1842, voters across the state elected Thomas Dorr as governor on April 18 and swore him in on May 3. Sitting Governor Samuel Ward King refused to recognize it, arguing that the election was illegal, and on May 4, 1842, King authorized a wave of arrests under the “Act in Relation to Offenses against the Sovereign Power of the State,” enacted on April 2, which declared that it was 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 edict as the “Algerine Law.”[32] The Suffrage Association’s cause came to a crossroads: if the Dorrites could not take power legally, they would take it by force.

The Black populace would not support Dorr’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 17–18, 1842, at the Cranston Street Arsenal in Providence and another on June 28, 1842, at Acote’s Hill in Chepachet. After the final conflict, the state militia, composed of both white and Black men, gathered under the banner of Law and Order and effectively put an end to the rebellion.

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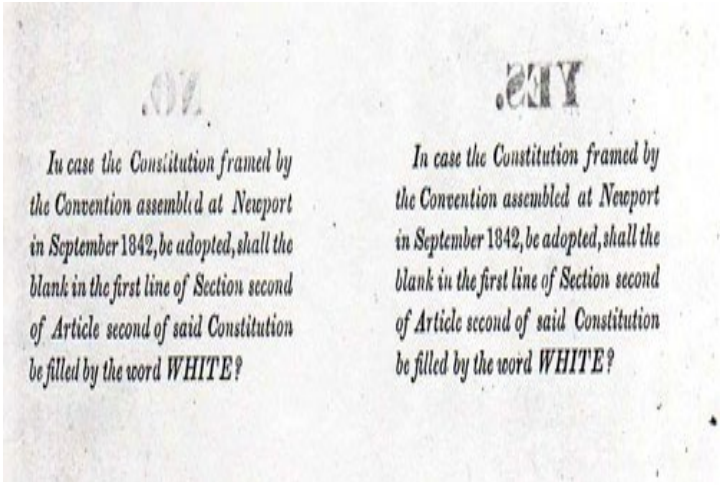
[31] Douglass, *Life and Times*, 274.

[32] Mowry, *The Dorr War*, 128–138; “Algerine Law” alludes to the tyrannical rulers, called Deys, in Algiers, Africa, and the oppressive laws they enacted on their people, as well as their support for 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.

Governor King's forces broke Dorr and his supporters, arresting many, but they could not defeat the movement's ideas.[33]



This image shows an uncut sheet of two election ballots used between November 21–23, 1842, regarding Black voting rights. The reverse side of the sheet was printed with either "YES" or "NO." A "NO" vote indicated that African Americans would be granted the right to vote by failing to include the word *white* in the new constitution as a requirement for enfranchisement. Patrick T. Conley Collection.

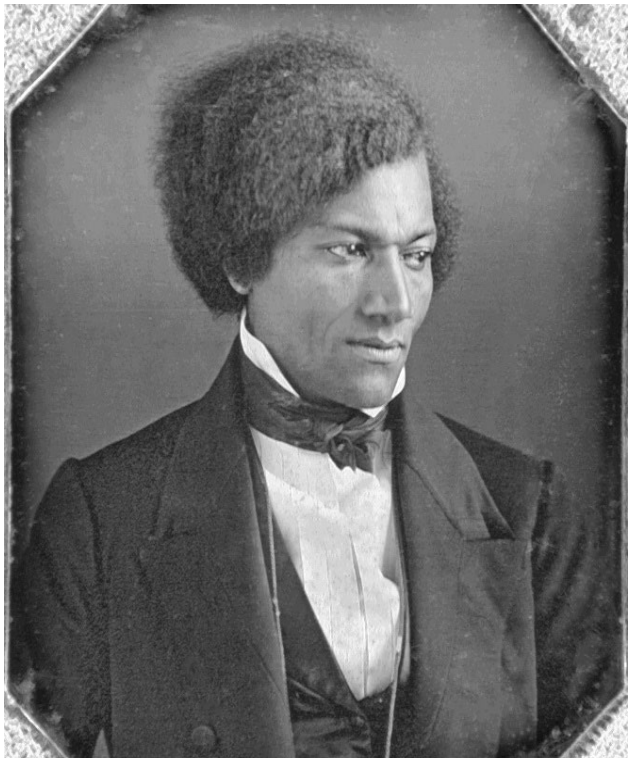
In the aftermath of the Dorr uprising, the legal government of Rhode Island realized it needed to compromise to end ongoing hostilities. In September 1842, the Law and Order Party drafted a new constitution—which extended universal suffrage to all native-born adult males—to replace the old charter. The question of Black male suffrage arose as African Americans supported the party during the outbreak of the rebellion. The Law and Order Party held a referendum on November 21–23 to remove or keep the white-only clause from their constitution and to submit it to a ratification vote among qualified voters across the state, including eligible men of color (excluding Narragansett Indians), who were allowed to vote.[34] Most votes supported removing the white-only clause and ratifying it. The total number of votes

[33] William G. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1986), 134–35.

[34] An increase of 200 votes in Providence in the November 1842 referendum compared to the balloting numbers in the failed March 1842 referendum for the Freemen's Constitution, backed by the Law and Order Party to replace the old charter, appeared to be caused by the bloc vote of the city's adult Black male populace. This aggregate helped tip the balance in favor of Black male enfranchisement by voting "no" against a white-only clause in the Law and Order Constitution. See Gettleman*, Dorr Rebellion*, 145, 148.

in favor of including eligible Black men was 3,845, while 1,412 voted against it. In a separate vote, the constitution was ratified with a tally of 7,024 to 51.[35]

On May 2, 1843, the General Assembly enacted the Law and Order Constitution, which remained a doctrine of Rhode Island government well into the late twentieth century. Black men became enfranchised.


Frederick Douglass, circa 1848. Courtesy of the Albert Cook Myers Collection, Chester County Historical Society.

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

> I think that our labors 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 those labors 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 color. Such a constitution was finally adopted.[36]

[35] See Caleb Troy Horton, " 'The Tide Taken at the Flood:' The Black Suffrage Movement during the Dorr Rebellion in the State of Rhode Island (1841-1842)," 31, Providence City Archives, Providence, RI.

[36] Douglass, *Life and Times*, 274–75.

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."[37] Dorr's demise was partly tied to his failure to muster his party's support to extend voting privileges to Black men. The Law and Order Party took on 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: "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."[38] Through these aims, local African American 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.

[37] Ibid., 274, 272.

[38] Excerpted in the *Providence Daily Journal*, July 12, 1842.

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