

# African American Activists in Buffalo, NY

*"[We] ask where can be found. . . a class of men that have been more subservient to the laws, made a more rapid progress, and [at] less expense to the city than we, the colored citizens of Buffalo?" (1838)*

~Signed by: Abner Francis, John L. Watson, Peyton Harris, James Linchcomb, George Weir, Sr., John Morrell, Anthony Curtis, Thomas Harris, Randall Caesar, Henry Jackson, F. Jenkins, David Smith, Daniel Moten, A. Washington, Richard Jones, Robert Banks, Robert Brister, Nimrod Linchcomb, James Garrit, Lewis White, Alexander Brokenborough, Henry Moxley, J. Cary, Limus Miller, F. Washington, W. Low, Richard Scott, James Clarkston, Carr Johnson, Samuel Charles, George Dover, John Williams, Henry Hawkins, Joseph Adams, James Whitfield, Henry Fields, Nathan Steward, Alfred Crosby, Dennis Marshall, George Conway, Joseph Gilman, George Whitfield, Charles Lewis, Robert Moore, William Quails, and John Dandridge

While researching the reaction of African American Buffaloians to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 the names of key activists were discovered, but information on these people was scattered in various sources. . . .it seems helpful to have a "who's who" of activism. The community was not large in this period nevertheless, these eras form an important part of the community's history.

## William Wells Brown



## William Wells Brown-

Perhaps the most well known activist in Buffalo was William Wells Brown. Brown was born into slavery near Lexington Kentucky about 1814 in Missouri<sup>1</sup>. Harris was the son of George Higgins (plantation owner) and his mother Elizabeth (slave). He escaped and settled in Cleveland Ohio in 1834. On the way he worked as a cook on a steamship from Cleveland to Buffalo. He moved to Buffalo in 1836<sup>2</sup> and he lived in Buffalo until 1844 during which time he worked as a steam boatman. He used this a venue to ferry slaves through the Underground Railroad to Canada. During the spring, summer, and fall of 1842

Photo Source: [people.virginia.edu/~rcc8j/Stowe\\_Society/ALA\\_2007.html](http://people.virginia.edu/~rcc8j/Stowe_Society/ALA_2007.html)

<sup>1</sup> Farrison, William E. "William Wells Brown in Buffalo." *Journal of Negro History*, v.XXXIX, no.4, October 1954.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

William Wells Brown delivered 70 slaves to their freedom<sup>3</sup>.

William Wells Brown became an anti-slavery lecturer, historian, playwright, and novelist. He served on the Committee on the Roll of Delegates, the Committee on Rules, and the Committee on Finance in the 1843 convention<sup>4</sup>. At the Mass Meeting of Colored Citizens in 1847 he voted against Garnet's proposal. It appears that Garnet's account of the vote pertaining to the Liberty Party was erroneous, as Brown said it was.<sup>5</sup>

In the city directory for 1844 William W. Brown, "lecturer," was listed as a house holder at 13 Pine Street. In 1847 after leaving Buffalo, Brown published the *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*.

**Eagle Street Theater**



Photo Source: [buffaloah.com/h/eagleth/1.jpg](http://buffaloah.com/h/eagleth/1.jpg)

### **Paul D Brown-**

Paul Brown was a barber in the African American community. He sought to bring attention to the need for abolition, and in 1845 performed a play in Buffalo about abolition at the Eagle Street Theater.

### **Nathaniel Dunlap-**

Ran a saloon in Buffalo (mid-1840s), and was the president of the Mass Meeting of Colored Citizens in 1850<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Goldman, High Hopes: The Rise and Fall of Buffalo New York, State University of New York Press, Albany 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, William W. *The Black Man: his Antecedents, his Genius, and his Achievements*. New York: Thomas Hamilton 1963. Article from the *Scotch Independent*, June 20, 1852.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> North Star (Rochester, NY), October 24, 1850

## **John Dandridge-**

Worked as a waiter, and was one of the first trustees of the Michigan Street Baptist Church.<sup>7</sup>

### **Michigan Street Baptist Church    Rev. Samuel Davis-**



Photo Source: .aaregistry.com/eimage/  
MichiganStreetBaptistChurch(1837).gif

Samuel Davis was born August 13 1810 in Temple Mills Maine<sup>8</sup>. Reverend Davis attended Oberlin College, which in 1835 allowed African Americans to be admitted<sup>9</sup>. Davis moved to Windsor Ontario, then to Buffalo in the late 1830s<sup>10</sup>. Davis became the principal teacher for the African American School in Buffalo from 1842-1844<sup>11</sup>. At the 1843 National Convention of Colored Citizens, held in Buffalo, Samuel Davis was elected Chairman Pro Tampere, and gave the keynote speech<sup>12</sup>. Davis left Buffalo in June 1846, when his teaching contract was up. Davis was a mason by trade, and used this to help build the Michigan Street Baptist church, and laid the corner stone.<sup>13</sup>

## **Peyton Harris-**

Peyton Harris came to Buffalo in 1832 from Virginia. He became a successful business man, and the chairman of "Colored Citizens of Buffalo,"<sup>14</sup> later appointed vice-president of "Colored Citizen's of Buffalo."<sup>15</sup> Harris was a trustee of Michigan Street Baptist

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<sup>7</sup> History of the City of Buffalo and Erie County, Henry Perry Smith

<sup>8</sup> Afro-American in NY Life and History, Vol. 33 No.1, "The Life and Times of Samuel H Davis: An Anti-Slavery Activist", William H Richardson, pg 47.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pg 53

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pg 58

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pg 59

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pg 59

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pg 61

<sup>14</sup> Buffalo Courier, Thursday March 5, 1857.

<sup>15</sup> Meeting of Colored Citizens, October 3, 1850.

Church- c.1842<sup>16</sup>. Along with William Qualls found the site of the present Michigan Street Baptist Church<sup>17</sup>. He was a delegate of the Michigan Street Baptist Church at the 1849 National Colored Convention in Troy NY, and is described as one of the founders of the church. Peyton Harris was one of Buffalo's largest landowners with parcels valued at 12,000\$ in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>18</sup>. Harris also served in the War of 1812.<sup>19</sup>

## **Henry Moxley-**

Henry Moxley was born into slavery in Virginia. Moxley was able to escape, and eventually settled in Buffalo. He became an important person in the religious and political community, was a deacon of the A.M.E.Z. church and an organizer the 1843 National Convention of Colored Men. In 1867 Moxley went to court, in Moxley vs. The Buffalo School Board, over the Henry Moxley leading a group of Black parents appeared before the School Committee of the Buffalo Common Council to argue that the segregated Vine Street African School violated their rights. Blacks should be allowed to send their children to the other schools on Buffalo's East side (District 32). When the Council ignored their plea, Moxley and the others enrolled 18 of their children in two other East Side schools. The Buffalo Common Council had the children sent back to the Vine Street African School and Moxley and the parents sued the Superintendent and the School Committee of the Common Council. The suit was thrown out of court.

**Charles L. Reason**



Photo Source:  
[blackpast.org/files/blackpast\\_images/reason\\_charles.gif](http://blackpast.org/files/blackpast_images/reason_charles.gif)

## **Charles L. Reason-**

Charles Reason has the honor of becoming the first black math professor at the Free Mission College.

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<sup>16</sup> Origins of the Michigan Street Baptist Church Buffalo, New York- Monroe Fordham

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Stranger's in the land of Paradise, Lillian S Williams

<sup>19</sup> NY Times obituary, February 3 1882

## **William Qualls-**

William Qualls was a mulatto agent for the Colored American. Qualls earned his living as barber, and was a trustee of the Michigan Street Baptist Church<sup>20</sup>. He organized a meeting of the three African churches in Buffalo following the incident of a black man selling his wife back into slavery.<sup>21</sup>

## **James Whitfield-**

James Whitefield was a founding member of the Buffalo City Anti- Slavery society, when it was first organized in 1838. In 1845 he had a book of anti-slavery poems published. Whitfield became the secretary of the Meeting of Colored Citizens in Buffalo, in 1857.<sup>22</sup>

## **Abner Francis-**

Abner Francis was born in Trenton, New Jersey, and settled in Buffalo in 1835-1836. He was one of antebellum Buffalo's most affluent African Americans. Francis claimed that his clothing and dry cleaning store grossed \$20,000-\$30,000 annually by 1848<sup>23</sup>. Abner Francis was among the Buffalo agents for the Colored American<sup>24</sup>. Francis frequently contributed articles to both the Colored American and the North Star. Frederick Douglas's North Star, based in Rochester, N.Y., was first published in 1847. Francis was a mulatto integrationist. Francis, with Buffalo barbers Thomas Tatum and Brazil Linchcomb, attended the N.Y. State Convention held the following year in Troy, N.Y. Rev. Weir and Francis were both nominated for offices at this 1841 Convention.

Francis was a prominent member of the New York State Anti-Slavery Society. He was treasurer of the local society from 1847-48, and he was on the governing executive

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<sup>20</sup> Howard Bell, ed, Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions. 1830-1864

(N.Y.: Arno Press, 1969), 1848 Convention, p. 6. United States Census Ms., 1850. Monroe

Fordham, A History of Bethel, A.M.E. Church of Buffalo. N.Y.. 1831-1977 (Buffalo: Bethel

Historical Society), p. 8-9.

<sup>21</sup> Frank H. Severance in Old Trails on the Niagara Frontier (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1903), pp. 197-8

<sup>22</sup> Buffalo Courier, Thursday March 5, 1857.

<sup>23</sup> Colored American, February 25, 1837.

<sup>24</sup> Colored American, 1837-1841. Agents for the newspapers solicited subscriptions and collected money.

committee of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society in 1849. Throughout the 1840's Francis and Rev. Weir helped to organize anti-slavery lecture series.<sup>25</sup>

The Convention of the Colored Inhabitants of the State of New York, held in Albany in 1840, was probably the first statewide gathering of African Americans in the United States. They convened for the specific purpose of agitating for the right of suffrage. The Convention represented the most concerted effort on the part of African Americans to regain suffrage rights previously lost<sup>26</sup>. Rev. Weir, Rev. William Monroe (pastor of the Michigan Street Baptist Church), and Abner Francis were Buffalo's delegates to this historic Convention.<sup>27</sup>

At the 1843 National Convention held in Buffalo, Henry H. Garnet hoped to secure a more aggressive stand on the slavery issue. Garnet's address advocated slave uprisings. Endorsement of Garnet's address was narrowly defeated by a 19 to 18 vote<sup>28</sup>. Francis, Rev. Weir, William Wells Brown<sup>29</sup>, Rev. Samuel Davis and William Hall, represented the Buffalo African American community at this important Convention. The Convention records show that Brown, Weir and Davis voted against Garnet's proposal. Francis was out of town the day of the vote and Hall's name does not appear on the voting record.<sup>30</sup>

### **James Garrit-**

Garrit was Abner Francis' business partner, and was among the Buffalo agents for the Colored American.

### **William Hall-**

William Hall was present at the 1843 National Convention held in Buffalo, however Hall's name does not appear on the voting record<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> North Star, December 29, 1848.

<sup>26</sup> Philip Foner and George Walker, eds., *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions. 1840-1865* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), p. 2. Litwack, p. 83. The New State Conventions were held at irregular intervals.

<sup>27</sup> *Colored American*, July 4, 1840. Francis had previously represented Trenton, N.J. at the 1833 and 1834 National Convention.

<sup>28</sup> Bell, Convention, 1843. Foner, p.xix.

<sup>29</sup> William Wells Brown was born in Kentucky, he escaped from slavery. Brown lived in Buffalo until 1844. He became an anti-slavery lecturer, historian, playwright and novelist. Brown was a mulatto.

<sup>30</sup> Bell, Convention. 1843.

<sup>31</sup> Bell, Convention. 1843.

## **Brazil Linchcomb-**

Brazil Linchcomb attended the N.Y. State Convention held the following year in Troy, N.Y in 1841.

## **Rev. William Monroe-**

Reverend William Monroe was the pastor of the Michigan Street Baptist Church. The Convention of the Colored Inhabitants of the State of New York held in Albany, 1840 was probably the first statewide gathering of African Americans in the United States. They convened for the specific purpose of agitating for the right of suffrage. The Convention represented the most concerted effort on the part of African Americans to regain suffrage rights previously lost<sup>32</sup>. Buffalo's delegates to this historic Convention.<sup>33</sup>

## **Henry Thomas-**

Henry Thomas was the only Buffalonian to attend the last State Convention of the decade. This convention, like the previous ones, dealt with ways and means of obtaining suffrage.<sup>34</sup>

## **Thomas Tatum-**

Thomas Tatum was a barber. Tatum was among the Buffalo agents for the Colored American and was present at the State Convention held in Troy, N.Y in 1841.

## **Rev. George Weir, Sr.-**

Reverend George Weir Sr. was the first regular pastor of the Vine Street African Methodist Episcopal Church in Buffalo. He occupied this position from 1838-1847. The Weirs arrived in Buffalo from North Carolina about 1835. Weir was a mulatto and a integrationist. Throughout the 1840's Rev. Weir helped to organize anti-slavery lecture series<sup>35</sup>. Rev. Weir, Rev. William Monroe (pastor of the Michigan Street Baptist Church), and Abner Francis were Buffalo's delegates to the historic Convention in

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<sup>32</sup> Philip Foner and George Walker, eds., *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), p. 2. Litwack, p. 83. The Conventions were held at irregular intervals.

<sup>33</sup> *Colored American*, July 4, 1840. Francis had previously represented Trenton, N.J. at the 1833 and 1834 National Convention.

<sup>34</sup> Foner, p.37. I found no record of the delegates at the 1844 State Convention held in Schenectady, N.Y. I suspect that Francis or Rev. Weir attended.

<sup>35</sup> *North Star*, December 29, 1848.

1841<sup>36</sup>. Rev. Weir chaired the 1841 Buffalo meeting called to organize the petition drive<sup>37</sup>. Rev. Weir, Francis, Buffalo barbers Thomas Tatum and Brazil Linchcomb attended the N.Y. State Convention held the following year in Troy, N.Y. Rev. Weir and Francis were nominated for offices at this 1841 Convention. Rev. Weir was active on the floor of the Convention articulating the views of his constituents<sup>38</sup>. During the 1843 National Convention, held at Buffalo, Weir voted against Garnet's proposal.

### **George Weir, Jr.-**

George Weir Jr. was the son of George Weir Sr. and was a grocer. He was one of the Buffalo African American community's few merchants. Like his father Weir Sr., Weir Jr. was a mulatto, and firm integrationist.

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<sup>36</sup> Colored American, July 4, 1840. Francis had previously represented Trenton, N.J. at the 1833 and 1834 National Convention.

<sup>37</sup> Colored American, Dec. 24, 1841.

<sup>38</sup> Colored American, Sept. 4, 1841.