

1850

Fugitive Slave Law Convention

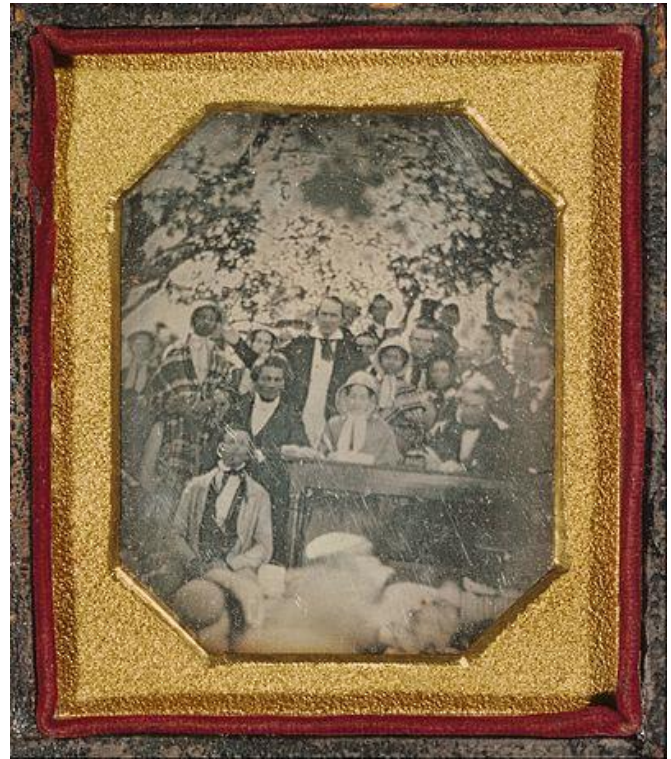
In 1850 the U.S. Congress considered the controversial [Fugitive Slave Law](#), which empowered the federal government to capture escaped slaves, even in free states, and obliged free-state residents to cooperate with apprehension efforts. (The measure passed on September 18, as part of the [Compromise of 1850](#).) Outraged northern [abolitionists](#) held numerous protest conventions in anticipation of the law. [The August 21–22 convention](#) in Cazenovia is remarkable because of its high turnout relative to the size of the community, and because a [Daguerreotype](#) of convention leaders became a defining image of the northern abolition movement.

Antislavery activism in west-central New York State would later climax in the [Jerry Rescue](#) of October 1, 1851. On that date, a raiding party of abolition activists led by abolitionist leader and philanthropist [Gerrit Smith](#) and Underground Railroad leader [Jermain Loguen](#) raided a Syracuse police station and freed William “Jerry” Henry, an escaped slave who ultimately fled to Canada. That event would be recalled as a crowning triumph of northern abolition activism. The event is now celebrated by a [monument](#) in downtown Syracuse.

The Cazenovia convention was organized by Gerrit Smith in his capacity as president of the New York State Vigilance Committee. [Frederick Douglass](#) chaired the proceedings. On August 21, the convention began at the Congregational Free Church on Lincklaen Street.

The building could not accommodate all desiring to attend, so on August 22, proceedings were moved to an apple orchard owned by Grace Wilson, a member of the Cazenovia Ladies Antislavery Society. Some 2,000 persons attended the convention’s second day—the same number of people as resided in Cazenovia at the time. The crowd was not altogether welcome in the relatively conservative community.

The Convention produced an open letter “To American Slaves from Those Who Have Fled from American Slavery,” advocating immediate abolition of slavery and condoning the use of violence in efforts to escape. It is widely believed that the letter was authored in whole or in



part by Smith. Many speakers and newspaper editors, even in the north, attacked the convention and the open letter as overly radical.

Convention participants included [Frederick Douglass](#), Gerrit Smith, [James Caleb Jackson](#), and the [Edmonson sisters](#), former slaves from Washington, D.C. An estimated fifty fugitive slaves attended. During the second day's proceedings at the apple orchard, pioneer photographer [Ezra Greenleaf Weld](#), brother of the prominent abolitionist [Theodore Weld](#), made a Daguerreotype of convention leaders that continued to be widely circulated even when the convention itself faded into history. Additionally, the image is also renowned as a milestone in early photography; a copy is displayed in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

The Building and Site. The Free Church was later replaced on the site by an opera house, now the restored [Catherine Cummings Theatre](#), operated by Cazenovia College. Grace Wilson's apple orchard is the site of an apartment house; a historical marker placed in 2010 describes the Convention.

Source

Sites of Fugitive Law Convention, freethought-trail.org