

"The Double Curse of Sex and Color": Robert Purvis and Human Rights

IN 1869 A NATIONAL WOMAN'S SUFFRAGE convention was held for the first time in Washington, D.C. The Fourteenth Amendment had recently been ratified and the Fifteenth was about to be introduced into Congress. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and other women present used the opportunity to object to black men receiving the vote before women, both black and white, were enfranchised. Their arguments were countered by those of Frederick Douglass, Edward M. Davis, Dr. Charles Burleigh Purvis, and others, who maintained that the Southern black male needed the shield of suffrage to protect him from the reign of terror being visited upon him by former slave owners.¹

A tall slender man with fair skin and white hair rose at his seat and began to speak. Elizabeth Stanton invited him to come forward and address the convention from the platform. Robert Purvis of Philadelphia said that he was willing to wait for the vote for himself and his sons and his race until women were also permitted to enjoy it. It was important to him that his daughter be enfranchised, since she bore the double curse of sex and race. He chided his son, Dr. Charles Purvis, for holding a narrow position, and reminded him that his sister Hattie also deserved to be enfranchised.²

Alone among the black men who had supported women's rights in the antislavery movement, Robert Purvis remained an advocate of suffrage for

¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage* (hereafter, *HWS*) (6 vols., New York, 1881-1922), 2:346-47. Frederick Douglass was an escaped slave who became a well-known writer and lecturer on abolition. Edward M. Davis was a Philadelphia merchant and abolitionist, the son-in-law of James and Lucretia Mott. Dr. Charles Burleigh Purvis, a graduate of Oberlin College and Wooster Medical School, was at the time assistant surgeon of the Freedman's Hospital in Washington, D. C.

² Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, *HWS*, 2:358.

women throughout the period of debate and schism over the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments. In 1888 he was honored by Susan B. Anthony at the International Council of Women, meeting in Washington, D.C., for his courageous stand in 1869 in opposition to his own son.³

Purvis's advocacy of women's rights was rooted in his deeply held convictions on human rights. He believed strongly that the struggle for equality for blacks could not be separated from that of women, of American Indians, of Irish nationalists demanding home rule, of all minorities. He objected to all associations based on color alone and rejected the term "African-American." "There is not a single African in the United States," he told a Philadelphia audience in 1886. "We are to the manner born; we are native Americans."⁴

Purvis's position on human rights undoubtedly stemmed in part from his own mixed-race background. His grandmother, Dido Badaracka, was born in Morocco. Purvis described her as a "full-blooded Moor of magnificent features and great beauty. She had crisp hair and a stately manner." In approximately 1766, at the age of twelve, she was captured by a slave trader along with an Arab girl. The two had been enticed to go a mile or two out of the city where they lived to see a deer that had been caught. They were seized, loaded on the backs of camels, and carried to a slave market on the coast. Here they were loaded onto a slaver and transported to Charleston, South Carolina. At the slave market in Charleston, Dido was bought by a kind white woman, named Day or Deas, who educated her, treated her as a companion, and left instructions that she was to be freed when the woman died, nine years later, in 1775.⁵

According to Purvis's account, Dido married a Jewish merchant, Baron

³ International Council of Women, *Report of the International Council of Women: Assembled by the National Woman Suffrage Association* (hereafter, *Report, NWSA*) (Washington, D.C., 1888), 342.

⁴ Isaiah Wears, memorial to Robert Purvis, April 18, 1899. Leon Gardiner Collection, box 9G, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter, HSP). *New York Times*, May 1, 1886.

⁵ *Friends Intelligencer*, April 1898, 336. Robert C. Smedley, *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania* (Lancaster, 1883), 353-54. There is some question about Dido's background. A Moor is usually described as a descendant of a mixture of Berber and Arab tribes. The Berbers were originally of Caucasian origin. They had light skin and straight or wavy hair. Purvis, however, identifies strongly with black Africans, and his description of Dido's "crisp hair" does not fit the Moor category. Dido's daughter, Harriet Judah, was once described by a former neighbor as a "tight headed Negro woman." Anonymous to William Still, May 11, 1874, in Alberta Norwood, "Negro Welfare in Philadelphia, Especially as Illustrated by the Career of William Still," master's thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1931, 172.

Judah, in a Methodist ceremony. No record of such a marriage has been found in the Charleston archives nor in the extensive material on the Judah family of Charleston. A grocer, Jacob Judah, lived there at approximately the same time. It may be that Dido lived in his household and bore three of his children. Robert Purvis's mother, Harriet Judah, was born in 1784.⁶

Harriet first appears in the Charleston city directory as Hariott Juda, "a colored woman" living on Elizabeth Street, in the borough of Mazyck, in 1809. She is listed in the South Carolina state archives as a femme sole, having bought two young black girls as slaves in February and March of 1812 and having sold another during the same period. This surprising information may be accounted for by the fact that she was at the time the mistress of a white cotton trader. William Purvis, an English merchant, had occasion to acquire slaves in the course of his business, although he disliked the institution.⁷ Born in Ross in Northumberland, England, in 1762 and brought up in Fife, Scotland, Purvis came to South Carolina around 1787 and became a naturalized American citizen in 1790. He was one of several brothers who immigrated and thrived as merchants and cotton dealers. Sometime prior to 1806 he met Harriet Judah, and the two lived near each other in Charleston. Harriet gave birth to three Purvis sons: William (born 1806), Robert (1810), and Joseph (1812).⁸

According to Robert Purvis, his father made a fortune in cotton but despised slavery and refused to hold slaves, preferring to hire slave gangs to work on his cotton boats, a distinction he apparently regarded as important. South Carolina records, however, show that he did in fact come into the possession of slaves, once when he and his brother Burrige Purvis bought out the business of their older brothers, John and Alexander, in 1809, and again in 1823 when he took over Burrige's estate following his brother's death at sea in 1816. There is also a record of his having bought five slaves in 1819 when he was settling his affairs in Charleston. It may be that Robert never knew of these transactions. It may also be that William Purvis acquired

⁶ *Friends Intelligencer*, April 1898, 336. Letter to author from American Jewish Archives, May 16, 1995. Material on Judah family of Charleston from city directory and city archives, compiled by Harold M. DeLorme, Jr., for John R. Purvis, March 10, 1994.

⁷ Charleston city directory and South Carolina State Archives, miscellaneous records, book 4 F, 55, 105, and 110, compiled by DeLorme.

⁸ [John Purvis, ed.] *The Purvis Family: 1694-1988* (Tillicoultry, [Scotland], 1988), 216-17.

slaves reluctantly and divested himself of them quickly. This might account for Harriet Judah's short stint as a slave trader.⁹

At any rate, William Purvis taught his sons to despise slavery and gave them antislavery books to read. He wanted to leave South Carolina and raise his sons in England. In 1819 he moved Harriet and the boys to Philadelphia, intending it as an interim stop while he attempted to close out his complicated financial affairs. He settled his family in a house on Paper Alley. According to Robert's account, his father started a small school for middle-class black children on nearby Spruce Street. No records of this school remain, so it was apparently of short duration. All three sons were later enrolled in the Clarkson School on Cherry Street run by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society.¹⁰

Purvis's financial problems dragged on without resolution. In 1826 he fell ill and died of typhus, leaving his considerable estate to "my dear friend Harriet Judah" until his sons came of age. William, the oldest, was sickly and died of consumption in 1828. Robert Purvis thrived, continued his education, and learned to ride horseback. In 1826 he was enrolled in Amherst Academy and rode his own horse all the way to Amherst, Massachusetts. Threatened with expulsion the following summer, because of a Fourth of July prank with classmate Samuel Colt of revolver fame, he left the academy and finished his education at nearby Pittsfield, probably at the recently established Berkshire Gymnasium.¹¹

As a young man, therefore, Robert Purvis was well educated and considered a young gentleman. He was extremely good looking, according to contemporary accounts and the pictures that have come down to us. He was tall and graceful, with an erect carriage, dark wavy hair and sideburns, dark eyes, fine brows, high cheek bones, a well-formed mouth and chin, and very light

⁹ Ibid. South Carolina miscellaneous records, secretary of state, bills of sale, 48, courtesy of Julie Winch.

¹⁰ *Friends Intelligencer*, April 1898; Smedley, *Underground Railroad*, 353-56; Philadelphia city directories, 1820-22. Purvis Records, Committee of Education, Pennsylvania Abolition Society, HSP.

¹¹ *Philadelphia Press*, Aug. 3, 1890. It has often been said that Robert Purvis attended Amherst College. However the college has no record of him or of Colt. It is more likely that he attended Amherst Academy, which was closely affiliated with the college in the early days. His younger brother, Joseph, attended the academy from 1828 to 1830, but records for Robert's dates are not available. Since he would have been sixteen in 1826, it seems likely that it was indeed the academy. For the Berkshire Gymnasium, see David D. Field, *History of the County of Berkshire, Massachusetts, in Two Parts* (Pittsfield, Mass., 1829), 165.

skin. He traveled extensively and sometimes stayed in fashionable places where he was often mistaken for white. Told that he was black, reporters guessed that he had one-eighth, one-sixteenth, or one-thirty-second African blood.¹²

Nevertheless, Robert Purvis was never tempted to "pass." Instead, he was very proud of his African grandmother and his African blood. When Joseph Cinque was in jail in New Haven, Connecticut, as captain of the crew that had mutinied and seized the slave vessel *Amistad*, Purvis commissioned Nathaniel Jocelyn to paint Cinque's likeness and kept the portrait on his dining room wall for many years. He always identified himself as black in public meetings and resented any discussion of his paler complexion.¹³

Robert Purvis inherited a small fortune from his father. He set about augmenting it by the judicious purchase, rental, and sale of real estate in Philadelphia and in Bucks County. He sometimes entered into these transactions alone, sometimes in partnership with his good friend Joseph Cassey. He also occasionally backed small business enterprises. He invested money in William Still's coal business in 1866.¹⁴

As a young man Purvis was very much influenced by James Forten, a wealthy black sailmaker who had served on a privateer during the Revolutionary War and volunteered during the War of 1812. Forten had opposed the American colonization movement since 1817, based on his firm belief that he and other blacks had an equal right to full American citizenship. Purvis became a fervent critic of colonization, bringing to his opposition impressive rhetorical skills. In 1832 he joined with William Whipper in denouncing a group of prominent Philadelphia citizens who had called on the U.S. Congress to raise money for the emigration of free blacks to African countries. Their petition was motivated by the reaction to the recent uprising of Nat Turner in Virginia and its echoes of the earlier Gabriel Prosser rebellion. The group based its argument on a recent rumor that a white woman had been seized in Virginia and had confessed to being the agent for

¹² Photograph, "Members of the Executive Committee of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society," Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, 1851. Photograph, "Robert Purvis," Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College (no date). *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (hereafter, *NASS*), Nov. 20, 1860; Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, *HWS*, 2:358.

¹³ Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, 1975), 76, 77. Phil Lapsansky, "Bias in Art Has a Long Tradition," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 16, 1988.

¹⁴ Record of deeds, Bucks, Burlington, and Philadelphia counties, compiled by Julie Winch. Purvis to William Still, Jan. 30, 1866, Leon Gardiner Collection, box 9, folder 10, HSP.

a group of blacks in Philadelphia intent on stirring up slave rebellion. The woman herself denied this accusation.¹⁵

Slave rebellions, Whipper and Purvis argued, were not the result of machinations of abolitionists but of slavery itself. "We can only say to Virginia and other slave-holding states that so long as they continue to raise up Gabriels and Nats [Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner] just so long you may expect to see these scenes acted over and over again." Only the granting of simple justice would convert enemies to friends. "By rendering every man his due then you may lie down in peace."¹⁶

The petitioners claimed to be friends of black people, although their opinions had not been sought. Blacks, meanwhile, regarded Pennsylvania and Philadelphia as their home where they had a perfect right to remain. "All we ask is, give us those privileges and rights in common with other citizens, and if you respect the prayer of those who address you respecting colonization it is, *Let us alone*, and if the spirit of voluntary emigration becomes implanted in our hearts, we will in due time inform you."¹⁷

Robert and his brother Joseph had grown up in and out of the Forten household, and were acquainted with Forten's talented and beautiful daughters, Margaretta, Sarah, Harriet, and Mary Isabella. All were well educated and active in civic affairs. Sarah was a poet of note. Harriet, a year older than Robert, became his special friend. On September 13, 1831, Robert and Harriet were married by the Right Reverend Bishop Onderdock of the Episcopal Church. In 1838 Joseph Purvis married Sarah Forten, so the two families became even more closely related.¹⁸

Robert and Harriet Purvis's marriage was one of equals. Although she became in time the mother of eight children, Harriet always had a governess to assist her, as well as a domestic staff, and was thus able to pursue many interests outside the home. She and her sisters belonged to several literary societies. She joined the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society when it was launched in 1833 and was extremely active in its annual fairs to raise

¹⁵ Julie Winch, "James Forten, the Sailmaker," *Log of Mystic Seaport* (1995), 69. Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787-1848* (Philadelphia, 1988), 133. *A Remonstrance Against the Proceedings of a Meeting Held November 23, 1831, at Upton's, in Dock Street, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1832).

¹⁶ *A Remonstrance Against the Proceedings*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Notices of Marriages and Deaths in Poulson's American Daily Advertiser, 1831-1833* (Philadelphia, 1907), 29, for marriage of Robert Purvis and Harriet Forten; *Purvis Family*, 230.

money for the antislavery cause. She traveled to New York City in 1837 to participate in the first annual convention of Anti-Slavery Women, and attended the two subsequent conventions held in Philadelphia. When the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society admitted women, she was the first black woman to join.¹⁹

More important, perhaps, Robert and Harriet Purvis were joint partners in many enterprises. Shortly after their marriage they began to entertain antislavery workers in their home and continued the practice for many years. They also opened their home to escaping slaves. When they lived on Lombard Street in Philadelphia, they had a special trapdoor that led to a cellar where slaves could hide. They also secreted fugitives on a farm they owned in Bensalem, Bucks County, and later, on a farm they bought in Byberry, Philadelphia County. They frequently traveled together to antislavery conventions in New York or Boston. William Lloyd Garrison, who was often a guest in their home over a twenty-year period, indicates that their marriage was a very happy one. The Purvis children were William (born 1832), Robert (1834), Joseph (1837), Harriet, always known as Hattie (1839), Charles Burleigh (1841), Henry (1844), Granville (1847), and Georgianna (1849). William and Robert died of tuberculosis as young men, and Joseph of typhus at age fourteen. Georgianna died in 1877, two years after Harriet herself. Charles became a well-known doctor, Granville a dentist, and Henry a civil servant. Hattie was active in women's rights. The loss of three of their eight children was a bitter blow to the Purvises but served to deepen their bonds.²⁰

¹⁹ Janice Sumler-Lewis, "The Forten-Purvis Women of Philadelphia, and the American Anti-Slavery Crusade," *Journal of Negro History* 66 (1981-82), 281; Julie Winch, "You Have Talents—Only Cultivate Them': Philadelphia's Black Literary Societies and the Abolitionist Crusade," in Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, 1994), 103n, 116. Minutes, Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, 1833, HSP; *Pennsylvania Freeman*, Nov. 18, 1847; Dec. 20, 1849; March 30, 1854; *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, Held by Adjournment from the 9th to the 12th of May, 1837* (New York, 1837); *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, Held in Philadelphia, May 15th, 16th, 17th, and 18th, 1838* (Philadelphia, 1838); *Proceedings of the Third Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, Held in Philadelphia, May 1st, 2d, and 3d, 1839* (Philadelphia, 1839).

²⁰ William Lloyd Garrison to Robert Purvis, Dec. 10, 1832, Anti-Slavery Papers, Boston Public Library. U.S. Census, Philadelphia County, 1840; Records, Burial Ground of Byberry Friends Meeting and Fair Hill Burial Ground, Friends Historical Library (hereafter, FHL), Swarthmore College. Mott manuscripts, FHL. Records, Central College, 1850. Alumni Records, Oberlin College. Rayford W. Logan and Michael R. Winston, eds., *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York, 1982), 508-10.

Harriet was of much darker complexion than Robert, a situation that led to some confusion. In May of 1838, abolitionists and other reformers celebrated the opening of Pennsylvania Hall in Philadelphia as a place where antislavery meetings could be held. One such meeting was the second Annual Convention of Anti-Slavery Women. From opening day, the hall was surrounded by an angry mob, which on the fourth day of the meetings broke in and burned the hall to the ground. The managers of the hall brought suit against the city for its failure to protect the property. The city's defense rested on the theory that the abolitionists had caused the riot by the public mixing of black and white, men and women. One witness described seeing a white man help a black woman from a carriage, and escort her into the hall, arm and arm. He described the carriage and the clothes the two were wearing. Robert recognized the couple as himself and Harriet.²¹

"It was both a painful and ludicrous affair," Robert Purvis wrote to Joseph Sturge, an English abolitionist who had visited Philadelphia recently. "At one time the fulness of an almost bursting heart was ready to pour forth in bitter denunciation—then the miserable absurdity of the thing, rushing to my mind, would excite my risible propensities."²²

Only once did Robert Purvis turn his propensity for being taken for white to his advantage. In 1834 he traveled to England to present the argument against colonization. He was at first denied a passport, since blacks were not considered American citizens. President Andrew Jackson personally intervened on his behalf, making him probably the first American black to possess a passport. The shipping company of Cope Brothers in Philadelphia, with which he booked passage, next tried to dissuade him when a Southern businessman, Bernard Carter, objected to traveling with a black man. Purvis originally intended to retain his ticket but decided to take a different ship. On the return voyage he traveled by coincidence with Carter. Mistaking Purvis for a white Southern gentleman, Carter introduced Purvis to his circle of Southern friends and insisted on his dining with the group and dancing with the women. Only when they arrived in New York harbor did Purvis reveal his real identity, to the extreme discomfort of Carter and his friends and the amusement of the rest of the ship's passengers.²³

²¹ Margaret Hope Bacon, *Valiant Friend: The Life of Lucretia Mott* (New York, 1980), 75-79. Joseph Sturge, *A Visit to the United States in 1841* (London, 1842), 45-47.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Joseph Borome, *Negro History, Bulletin* 3 (1967), 8-10. *Philadelphia Press*, Aug. 9, 1890.

Purvis had a busy and productive time in England. William Lloyd Garrison had given him letters of introduction to Joseph Sturge, William Allen, Daniel O'Connell, and many other abolitionists. Purvis was seized upon as abolitionist property, as he wrote Garrison, and made doubly popular by the fact that he was identified as a colored American. One high point of his visit was a trip to the House of Commons where the Reverend John Scoble, his guide, introduced him to O'Connell, the Irish patriot, as an American gentleman. Mistaking him for white, O'Connell at first would not shake hands. When told that Purvis was not only an abolitionist but was black, he shook his hand warmly, explaining that he made it a matter of principle never to take the hand of an American without first knowing his principles in regard to slavery and to the American Colonization Society.²⁴

A month later Purvis was introduced to Sir Thomas Foxwell Buxton, leader of the antislavery forces, who received him warmly. He traveled to Glasgow, where he spoke to the female antislavery society and may have visited some of his Scots relatives. He also made a brief trip to the continent.²⁵

Robert Purvis worked closely with white abolitionists. A founding member and officer of both the American Anti-Slavery Society and the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, he was a colleague of William Lloyd Garrison, James and Lucretia Mott, Miller McKim, and others. He also established close friendships with Garrison and the Motts. When he founded the Vigilant Association of Philadelphia (later the Vigilant Committee), in 1837, to deal with the cases of escaped slaves, he invited white members to serve on the group. (Later it was found more practical to work in the black community only.) Philosophically he was opposed to organizations based on racial lines. Invited in the fall of 1840 by David Ruggles of New York to attend a National Reform Society of Colored Citizens, Purvis and William Whipper refused, stating that the American Moral Reform Society, of which they were both prominent members, remained opposed to organizing philanthropic societies on a "complexional" basis. Separate schools, separate churches, separate societies were no longer required, the two argued, and the creation of separate institutions in which they had both participated had been done in error.²⁶ "Let us boldly, fearlessly, and earnestly contend for the

²⁴ Robert Purvis to William Lloyd Garrison, July 13, 1834, in the *Liberator*, Aug. 23, 1834.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *NAASS*, Sept. 10, 1840.

great principle of man's equality and leave the pro-slavery advocates the hated task of dividing sunder human affections and ejecting their fellow human beings from the platform of common humanity," Robert Purvis wrote.²⁷ David Ruggles responded by pointing out that the oppressed must free themselves if their freedom was to be genuine. But Purvis believed strongly that only by enlisting whites in the campaign could blacks achieve full human rights, and he did not attend the convention. He supported Ruggles personally, writing in 1841 in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* that "the name and fame of David Ruggles are destined to outlive the base calumnies upon his noble character."²⁸

Problems within the community of black abolitionists arose again in 1853. Frederick Douglass broke with the Garrisonians over their efforts to discipline him and when they urged blacks to continue to support the *Liberator* over Douglass's newly created *North Star*. Purvis had hired Douglass in 1845 as an antislavery lecturer for the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, and the two had had cordial relations and would do so again during the Reconstruction period. But their differences in regard to cooperating with white allies brought them into conflict at this point.

Stung by some critical remarks made in a public meeting, Douglass attacked Charles Remond and Robert Purvis as "practical enemies of the colored people." He spoke of those who lived on "blood stained riches," referring to the estate that Purvis's father had left him. Purvis wrote to Garrison defending himself from this attack and stating that his father had never been a slaveholder, but always a friend of the free and enslaved colored people.²⁹

The next attack on Purvis came from James McCune Smith, a black New York doctor and a backer of Douglass. He was one of the organizers of the Radical Political Abolitionists, a group that attempted to enter national politics in 1855. Writing for *Frederick Douglass's Paper* under the pseudonym "Communi paw," Smith questioned the motives of the white abolitionists, asserting that they discriminated against their black members. Specifically, he picked out Robert Purvis, claiming that he had been insulted in public by the white abolitionists at a recent antislavery meeting.³⁰ "Last spring when Robert Purvis rose to speak in the presence of his host, his manhood was

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *NASS*, Oct. 1, 1840, May 6, 1841.

²⁹ *Liberator*, Sept. 16, 1853.

³⁰ *NASS*, Jan. 13, 1855.

insulted by Mr. Garrison who distinguished him as a colored man, and his holiest feeling outraged by Mr. Furness, who said that he had demeaned himself to marrying a dark brown woman when he could have had a white one."³¹ Purvis had in fact protested at the May antislavery meeting in 1854 when the Reverend William Furness had made his unfortunate remark, saying that he was proud of his twenty-five percent Negro blood, and that he hoped no such remark would be made again.³² Smith also stated that Purvis's son Robert had been turned down for a position in the accounting house of Edward M. Davis because of his color. Again, Purvis did not reply directly, but he urged Garrison to do so and later thanked him for his "well-deserved castigation of 'Communi-paw.'"³³

While he was engaged in these ideological battles, Purvis was increasingly concerned with the fate of the escaped slaves who were caught in the city of Philadelphia and returned to their slave masters. In 1837, following the escape of four slaves from Maryland and the recapture of one, Purvis organized the Vigilant Association of Philadelphia, "to create a fund to aid colored persons in distress." James McCrummell was chosen as president and Jacob White as secretary. In 1838 a Female Vigilant Committee was organized.³⁴

In May of 1839, the Vigilant Association was reorganized and renamed the Vigilant Committee. Robert Purvis was elected president, Quaker Edwin Coates, vice president, and Jacob White was freed of his duties as secretary so that he could devote full time to acting as agent.³⁵ Under Purvis the organization was tightened and made more efficient. Runaways were hidden in private homes, provided with legal help if needed, given medical attention, and sent on their way north. Often they were entrusted to David Ruggles and his New York Vigilance Committee. Between June and December 1839, the committee sent forty-five fugitives on their way to freedom. In 1840 it was decided to confine membership to blacks alone and to hold meetings in the home of Robert Purvis. Jacob White was no longer paid as acting agent. Instead, a three-man acting committee was entrusted with the work of aiding fugitives, with Purvis as the organizer. The total

³¹ Ibid.

³² *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, May 19, 1854.

³³ *Liberator*, Jan. 13, 1855.

³⁴ Joseph Borome, "The Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 92 (1968), 320-51.

³⁵ Ibid.

number of fugitives rescued rose, with 117 saved between June 9 and September 8, 1841.³⁶

Public prejudice against the abolitionists had continued to grow. It found expression in a convention held in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to amend the constitution to eliminate the voting rights of free blacks. Despite protests, the Pennsylvania legislature changed the constitution in January 1838, limiting the franchise to adult white men. This measure stripped the blacks of a voting right they had enjoyed for forty-seven years. Purvis wrote a protest that was adopted by a mass meeting held in Philadelphia on March 14, 1838. The "Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens, Threatened with Disenfranchisement, to the People of Pennsylvania" argued against taxation without representation and recited the contribution of blacks in the Revolutionary War, the time of the yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia, and the War of 1812. Purvis produced statistics to prove that blacks were law-abiding citizens who paid their taxes, and he pled eloquently for fair play:³⁷

We love our native country, much as it has wronged us; and in the peaceable exercise of our inalienable rights, we will cling to it. The immortal Franklin, and his fellow laborers in the cause of humanity, have bound us to our homes here with chains of gratitude. We are PENNSYLVANIANS, and we hope to see the day when Pennsylvania will have reason to be proud of us, as we believe she has now none to be ashamed. Will you starve our patriotism? Will you cast our hearts out of the treasury of the commonwealth? Do you count our enmity better than our friendship?³⁸

Unmoved by this appeal, the voters accepted the change in the constitution in the fall of 1838. For Robert Purvis's proud spirit it was a bitter blow, and he continued to protest, producing petitions and memorials and speaking against the disenfranchisement in public gatherings. In 1855 he wrote a second memorial, this one addressed to Congress, arguing once more the blacks' patriotism, good citizenship, and record as taxpayers. But there was no response, and he began to feel increasingly bitter.³⁹ Not until 1870

³⁶ Ibid. Wilbur H. Seibert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1899), 23.

³⁷ *Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens, Threatened with Disenfranchisement, to the People of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1838).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ *Memorial of Thirty Thousand Disenfranchised Citizens of Philadelphia to the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives* (Philadelphia, 1855).

did he and his fellow citizens of African descent regain the right to vote.

In 1841, when the state was asking citizens to pay an additional property tax in order to retire a public debt, Purvis wrote a letter to the *Public Ledger*, stating that he paid \$160 a year in taxes and was being asked to pay an additional \$50. Why should he pay such a tax to a state that had robbed him and 40,000 others of their manhood? The public reacted swiftly to his letter; the night of its publication his house was surrounded by an angry mob. He was afraid for the safety of his family. Fortunately, the rumor was spread that there was a large number of armed and dangerous men in the house. The mob turned aside and vented its anger by burning a black church in the vicinity.⁴⁰

Purvis was subjected to mob attack again the next year. On August 1, 1842, black citizens marched in honor of Emancipation Day in the West Indies. The marchers were attacked by hoodlums. When they attempted to defend themselves, the whites retaliated by attacking the black section of town, wounding or murdering those blacks they could catch, setting fire to houses, and pillaging stores. The riot continued a second day, with little or no police intervention. On both days of the riot, Robert Purvis's house was surrounded by an angry mob. Purvis sent Harriet and their four children upstairs as he sat on the staircase, fully armed, preparing to defend his family with his life. The first night several large fires in the neighborhood drew off the attention of the crowd. The second night a courageous Catholic priest, Father Patrick Moriarity, intervened and rebuked the rioters.⁴¹

While his beloved family was saved, Purvis's spirits were dashed. His continuing hope that solid elements in the white community would see the justice of the cause of the blacks and rebuke the extremists was again frustrated. When his friend and fellow abolitionist Henry Wright wrote to him asking for details of the riot, hoping to use them in England to promote abolitionist sentiment, Purvis wrote back that he was too discouraged to answer properly. The brutality and murderous spirit of the mob was bad enough; what had really hurt him was

the apathy and *inhumanity* of the *whole* community; Press, Church, Magistrates, Clergymen and Devils are against us. . . . From the most painful and minute investigation, in the feelings, views and acts of this community in

⁴⁰ *Pennsylvania Freeman*, Nov. 17, 1841. *Philadelphia Press*, April 16, 1898.

⁴¹ Borome, "The Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia," 320-51.

regard to us, I am convinced of our utter and complete nothingness in public estimation—I feel that my life and those tendrils of my heart, dearer than life to me, would find no change in death, but a *glorious* riddance of a life, weighted down and cursed by a despotism whose whole sway makes Hell of Earth, we the *tormented* our persecutors, the *tormentors*.⁴²

After the second night of rioting Purvis took his family to their country home at Bensalem. Always before the farm had functioned as a pleasant escape from the heat of the city. Now, however, he began to weigh the possibility of moving permanently to the country to save his children from the constant danger of mob attack. Not long after the riots he acquired two large farms in Byberry Township, one adjacent to the Quaker meetinghouse, and the second directly behind the first. In 1844 he moved there permanently, forsaking his city home and some of his involvement in city life.⁴³

The Vigilant Committee which he had founded in 1837 became relatively inactive without his presence in the city. In 1851 he helped to organize a second General Vigilance Committee, which he chaired. The day-to-day operation of this group fell to William Still, whom Purvis had hired as a janitor and clerk in the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery office. Still kept records of all the cases he handled, and in 1872 published *The Underground Railroad*, in which he took full credit for the operations of the General Vigilance Committee and ignored its predecessor. When Wilbur Seibert wrote to Still about interviewing veterans of the Underground Railroad, Still replied that all the information in regard to its operation could be found in his book. Seibert persisted and in 1895 interviewed Purvis. Purvis told him that he had destroyed the records of the Vigilant Committee soon after the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, but he estimated that during its existence it sent north an average of one escaping slave per day. This is a larger number than Still claimed. Fragmentary records of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society seem to bear out these figures. Purvis deserves to be regarded as a major figure in the history of the Underground Railroad.⁴⁴

Although he escaped mob violence by his move to the country, Robert Purvis did not escape racism. The local public schools forced his children to

⁴² Robert Purvis to Henry Wright, Aug. 22, 1842, Anti-Slavery Papers, Boston Public Library.

⁴³ William Wells Brown, *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius and His Achievements* (Boston, 1863), 256-57. Notes by Myra Hall, Byberry Meeting library.

⁴⁴ Seibert, *Underground Railroad*, 346; Borome, "The Vigilant Committee," 326.

sit apart from the other pupils and disciplined them so severely that Purvis brought a suit in 1848 against the school board. Later, when Philadelphia County set up separate schools for blacks, Purvis was told to transfer his children to a "colored" school, which Purvis described as a miserable shanty on the very edge of the township, "the most flimsy and ridiculous sham which any fool of a skin hating authority could have resorted to."⁴⁵

Due to the combined value of his two farms, Robert Purvis paid the highest taxes in the township. He decided to refuse to pay these taxes to protest the school segregation and wrote a letter to this effect to the township officials. They soon gave way and agreed that his children and all other black children might attend the public schools at will. He was thus credited with desegregating the township schools. The school at Mechanicsville was rebuilt some years later and renamed the Forten School in honor of Harriet Forten Purvis.⁴⁶

There were other humiliations. As a gentleman farmer and wife, Robert and Harriet raised prize livestock, poultry, and produce and displayed them at agricultural fairs. In 1853 the Philadelphia Chicken Fanciers refused to receive his chickens, although he had won first prize in the past three exhibits. And Robert Purvis, Jr., escorting two young women, was turned away from an exhibit sponsored by the Franklin Institute at the Chinese museum, solely on the basis of color.⁴⁷

Worse than these petty slights was public policy deliberately designed to restrain blacks from acting as American citizens. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in September 1850 seemed to Purvis like a personal insult. He persuaded his Byberry neighbors to join him in a protest written at Byberry Hall. This is when he decided to destroy all the records of the old Vigilant Committee, which he had kept personally, lest his house be raided and resettled slaves placed in danger. At the meeting of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society in West Chester on October 17, 1850, he gave an impassioned speech against the act, saying "should any wretch enter my dwelling,

⁴⁵ *Pennsylvania Freeman*, Feb. 10, 1848; Purvis to Friend Burleigh, *Liberator*, Sept. 16, 1853.

⁴⁶ Purvis to Garrison, *Liberator*, Sept. 16, 1853. Information from librarian, Byberry Friends Meeting.

⁴⁷ *Pennsylvania Freeman*, Sept. 16, 1853; Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, 1969), 134.

any pale faced spectre among ye, to execute this law on me or mine, I'll seek his life, I'll shed his blood."⁴⁸

In 1854 he again petitioned the Pennsylvania state government in Harrisburg to restore voting rights to the black man in an "Appeal of 30,000 disenfranchised citizens of Philadelphia." Once more he based his argument on the patriotism, the lawfulness, and the industriousness of the black community, which had the right to be treated as any other citizen. Once more he was bitterly disappointed by the outcome.⁴⁹

The Dred Scott decision angered and depressed him. Handed down in 1857 by Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Robert Taney, it ruled that a black man could not claim any of the rights of citizenship or any rights that white men are bound to respect. Speaking at the annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, he said it was impossible for him to speak without passion about the issues involved. While some abolitionists were claiming that the Constitution was actually an antislavery document, he believed it benefited those who made it, "slave holders and their abettors." "And I am free to declare, without any fears of contradiction that the Government of the United States, in its formation and essential structure as well as in its practice, is one of the basest, meanest, and most atrocious despotisms that ever saw the face of the sun."⁵⁰

At the 1860 annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, Purvis said that the United States government was not his. He had recently been refused admission to a courtroom in Philadelphia where he had gone to provide bail for men who had risked their lives for a fugitive. It was, he believed, an insult to his race. "Are we not men? Have we not eyes? Have we not hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions: Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same weather winter and summer? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do not we die; and if you wrong us, shall we not seek revenge?"⁵¹ The mobs that ruled American cities were largely foreign born, he

⁴⁸ Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 201.

⁴⁹ Garrison to Purvis, April 9, 21, 1854, Walter Merrill, ed., *Collected Letters of William Lloyd Garrison* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 296. *NASS*, May 20, 1854.

⁵⁰ *NASS*, May 23, 1857.

⁵¹ Robert Purvis, *Speeches and Letters, Published by the Request of the Afro-American League* (n. p., [1864]).

argued. Although some could not speak English, they had the franchise that was denied to blacks. He was neither a nativist nor a Republican, he said, for the Republicans favored immigration and conspired to expel the black man from his country. Even Horace Greeley, one of the founders of the Republican Party, had recently expressed his personal dislike for Negroes.⁵²

At the annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society that fall, Purvis was irritated when a clergyman from Long Island, Hiram P. Crozier, stated that "he had never had the consciousness of prejudice against color . . . he had eaten with black men; he had *slept* with a black man; and this perhaps was as severe a test as a man's antislavery character could be put to." Purvis responded vigorously:

Sir, what has eating with a man, or sleeping with a man, to do with the question of human rights? This, sir, is a novel anti-slavery doctrine; and in the name of the cause, I utterly, and in my own name, scornfully repudiate it! Sir, we ask no favors of any man or any class of men, in this contest. A white man may eat and otherwise associate with colored men, without conferring thereby any favor. It is quite possible that the favor may be on the other side! Sir, this is a question, not of complexion but of principle. Social intercourse is regulated by irreversible social laws. Every man will find his level. Gentlemen will associate with gentlemen; vulgarity will find its natural place, and true refinement will be respected without regard to color and that, sir, is what this glorious anti-slavery enterprise is teaching the American people.⁵³

Crozier replied that he had not meant to imply he was conferring a favor by associating with colored men. But Purvis was not appeased, and later in the meeting the two tangled again. Crozier defended the Constitution as antislavery and added that its author, Thomas Jefferson, was "a good anti-slavery man." This was too much for Purvis, who pointed out that Jefferson was a slave owner and reputedly had sold his own daughter. "If true, this proves him a *scoundrel* as well as a traitor." As for George Washington, he too was a slave owner, and had once tried to recover a slave who had fled to New Hampshire.⁵⁴

Citizens of Kennett Square, where the meetings were held, were incensed at this attack upon the "sacred and venerated dead" and responded with an

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

ad in the local newspaper signed by a number of men. Purvis noted that these men were all Republicans, and many shared the surname of Taylor. Bayard Taylor, a travel writer, had recently stated publicly his belief that the Egyptians could not be considered members of the "Negro race." Blacks were represented in the tombs as slaves or captives of war, he noted, never as rulers. Purvis had remarked at the meetings that the celebrated traveler was using his popularity to depress further a race ground into the dust. In a letter to the editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* Purvis stated that he believed it was this remark, not his thoughts on Jefferson or Washington, that had produced the response.⁵⁵

Taylor answered in the next issue of the paper, saying that "whatever my views regarding the negro race may be, they have nothing to do with the question of human rights. I appeal from the morbid sensitiveness of that 1/8th of him which was insulted to the sober commonsense of the 7/8s which cannot possibly have been insulted."⁵⁶

Purvis responded that Taylor's beliefs about Negroes in Egypt were at variance with Herodotus, Stanhope Smith, Alex and Edward Everett, and many others. His remark about human rights was ridiculous and about one-eighth versus seven-eighths insulting: "This is as if some *man* were to get up at a Woman's Rights Convention and say, 'I believe after much travel and research that woman is the natural inferior of man, but that has nothing to do with the question before the Convention.' Imagine Mrs. Mott, Miss Grew, Miss Anthony rising in reply. It takes a woman to understand woman's wrongs, and it takes a man of African blood to understand the contempt which is cherished by a certain class of people against people of African blood."⁵⁷

Like many of his fellow blacks, Robert Purvis initially greeted the Civil War with enthusiasm, seeing the federal resolve to hold the union together as a sign that people were at last taking equal rights seriously. He was soon disillusioned by the government's refusal to free slaves in the border states and by the government's reluctance to let the blacks join the army. When black regiments were at last introduced, his joy was soon offset by his anger that black soldiers were paid less than white soldiers and were not allowed

⁵⁵ *NASS*, Nov. 12, 1860.

⁵⁶ *NASS*, Nov. 21, 1860.

⁵⁷ *NASS*, Dec. 4, 1860.

to become officers. Although he recruited black troops, he continued to protest the unequal treatment.⁵⁸

In Philadelphia blacks suffered a special humiliation when the horse-drawn trolleys, which took black families to visit the young men in training at the army's Camp William Penn, were segregated. A campaign to boycott the trolleys was mounted in the black community, supported by white allies from the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society and the Female Anti-Slavery Society. Harriet Tubman, Lucretia Mott, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper were among the many women who participated.⁵⁹ Purvis was one of a group of blacks who supported the campaign. At an indignation meeting held at Concert Hall on January 13, 1865, he spoke passionately. "We ask no favors, but in the name of the living God, give us justice!" Later, seeing some black soldiers evicted from a streetcar, he wrote an angry letter to the *Press*. He continued to work with a group of blacks, headed by his friend William Still, until the state passed a law banning such discrimination in March 1867. When William Still was criticized by younger and more radical black men for using elitist arguments to win the passage of the legislation, Purvis chaired a meeting at Liberty Hall to give Still a chance to respond to the criticisms and to state his position.⁶⁰

However he did not support Still that same year when Still and a number of other blacks organized the Social, Civil and Statistical Association, a black group that planned to collect information on the status of black Philadelphians as well as arrange a series of lectures and other cultural events. Purvis was invited to be a member and declined on the basis of conscience, once more making the point that he was opposed to all separate organizations "when the necessity of the case does not demand it." "Now what is to be gained . . . in collecting facts in regard to the material prosperity or worth of the colored people? Is it to astonish the people [whites] of this State? May they not console themselves, and say that after all, our oppression of these people serve as a good stimulant. See how they thrive.

⁵⁸ Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston, 1956), 35; *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, 509; *NASS*, Feb. 14, 1863.

⁵⁹ [William Still], *A Brief Narrative of the Struggle for the Rights of the Colored People of Philadelphia in the City Railway Cars* (Philadelphia, 1867). Philip S. Foner, "The Battle to End Discrimination Against Negroes on the Streetcars," *Pennsylvania History* 40 (1973), pt. 1: 261-90, pt. 2: 355-79. Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, *HWS*, 2:39.

⁶⁰ Roger Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia and Ours: On the Past and Future of the Black City in America* (New York, 1991), 111. *Philadelphia Press*, Jan. 14, April 1, 1865.

. . . The great fundamental law of our Republican Government is *Equal rights for all men by virtue of their common humanity.*"⁶¹

In the 1870s, Purvis and Still worked together in reform politics in Philadelphia. When they decided to back a reform candidate for mayor, many in the black community thought they were acting as traitors to their race. An anonymous writer called William Still "Mr. Nigger" and threatened to burn down his coal yard. Purvis was accused of trying to pass for white, despite the fact that his mother had been a "tight headed Negro woman."⁶²

The triumph of the end of the Civil War was marred for Purvis, as for many black Americans, by the death of Lincoln and the compromises of Andrew Johnson. Purvis was wounded as well by the split in the ranks of the American Anti-Slavery Society and the desertion, as he saw it, of his old mentor and close friend, William Lloyd Garrison. He was offered the job as head of the Freedmen's Bureau by a Johnson aide, only to discover it was a strategy to get rid of General Oliver Otis Howard and to weaken the bureau. His son, Henry Purvis, a member of the South Carolina state legislature during reconstruction, reported being shot at by angry Southerners. Another son, Dr. Charles Purvis, was made assistant surgeon at the Freedmen's Hospital in Washington but denied membership in the Medical Society of the District.⁶³ Incensed by this slight to his brilliant son, Purvis poured out his accumulated bitterness in a letter to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. "What is life to us," he asked, "when encircled and hampered by this accursed prejudice. We either agonize in the torments of hell or with deadened sensibilities exist in unservicable barrenness."⁶⁴

It was from this background of belief in human rights and sensitivity to racial slurs that Robert Purvis developed his philosophy of feminism. He first expressed it politically in 1840 when Abby Kelley, a fiery abolitionist orator from Massachusetts, was placed on a committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society. The conservative members of the society who opposed the participation of women opposed her appointment; the more radical

⁶¹ Robert Purvis to Parker Smith, Esq., Feb. 22, 1867, copy of letter, Gardiner Collection, HSP.

⁶² Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia*, 106. Anonymous to William Still, Nov. 5, 1874, in Norwood, "Negro Welfare in Philadelphia," 172.

⁶³ Robert Purvis to Wendell Phillips, Sept. 9, 1867; Sept. 18, 1867; Wendell Phillips to Robert Purvis, Sept. 13, 1867, Harvard University Library. *NASS*, Aug. 29, 1868; *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, s.v. Purvis, Charles Burleigh. *NASS*, July 3, 1869.

⁶⁴ *NASS*, July 3, 1869.

Garrisonians supported it. Purvis was among the supporters, a fact of which he was proud in subsequent years.⁶⁵

In 1866, when the American Equal Rights Association was organized in New York City to work for voting rights for both blacks and women, Purvis was present as a founding member. The next year he was elected vice president and presided in the absence of president Lucretia Mott. In his speech he declared that equality of rights for all, without regard to color, sex, or race, was the basis of a republican system of government, and that freedom for all citizens rested on the ballot.⁶⁶ Following this meeting, Purvis joined Lucretia Mott in founding the Pennsylvania Equal Rights Association. For many years he was an officer of this group, which changed its name to the Pennsylvania Woman Suffrage Association.

The united front of feminists and abolitionists was broken when the Fourteenth Amendment was introduced into Congress with its reference to male voters. By the third meeting of the American Equal Rights Association in May of 1868, sides were drawn between those who supported suffrage for blacks alone, and those who desired to wait for a bill that gave suffrage to both blacks and women. In an emotional session, most of the abolitionist men and some of the women declared that it was necessary to work for male suffrage to protect former slaves from the efforts of vigilante groups to return them to serfdom. Only Robert Purvis sided with the radical women, declaring "that he would rather his son never be enfranchised, unless his daughter could be also, that, as she bore the double curse of sex and color, on every principle of justice she should first be protected," an argument he was to repeat again and again.⁶⁷

At its 1869 meeting, the American Equal Rights Association split over the issue of dropping women's suffrage for the time being in favor of suffrage for the black male. Robert Purvis again sided with the women, reiterating his argument that his daughter needed the vote as much as or more than his son. Frederick Douglass argued that the vote for blacks was a matter of life and death, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper declared that when it was a question of race, she let the lesser question of sex go. Purvis was one of very

⁶⁵ Dorothy Sterling, *Ahead of Her Time: Abby Kelley and the Politics of Antislavery* (New York, 1991), 104; *Report, NWSA*, 343.

⁶⁶ Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, *HWS*, 2:183.

⁶⁷ Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, *HWS*, 2:265.

few men, and the only black, to argue for equal rights for women.⁶⁸ Earlier that year, when the woman's suffrage convention was held in Washington, D.C., Purvis had argued with his son Charles Burleigh Purvis. According to Susan B. Anthony's later recollection, he said: "If need be, I would prefer to bide my time for twenty years before I shall deposit a ballot, if at that time I may be allowed to take my wife and daughter with me to the ballot box."⁶⁹

He wrote a letter to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in April of 1869, rejoicing in the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, but regretting that "it ignores sex as well as color." In 1870, he again spoke at the convention of the newly organized National Woman Suffrage Association, saying that he realized that as an officer of the American Anti-Slavery Society he might be censured for apparent inconsistency, but he nevertheless felt he must resist the "impious, false and infamous assumption of superiority of sex."⁷⁰

The partnership between Robert and Harriet Purvis, which had endured for forty-four years, ended with her death in 1875. Robert mourned her deeply. He was then living in Washington part-time, serving as one of three commissioners to oversee the liquidation of assets of the Freedman's Bank. But he was back and forth to Philadelphia, where he was beginning to be active in reform politics. Although he and Harriet had sold their farm in Byberry, he occasionally saw some of his old Byberry neighbors. One of them, Tacy Townsend, was a descendant of an old Quaker family in the area. Seventeen years his junior, she was a poet who had been close to both Harriet and Hattie. Sometime in 1877 Robert and Tacy were married. Whether any members of his family objected to his marrying a white woman is not known. Robert, however, would have felt that "complexional differences" should not be considered important in this aspect of his life, as in any other. He was proud of Tacy's accomplishments as an author and supported her in her work.⁷¹

During his years in Washington, Purvis was able to reconcile some old differences. He and Frederick Douglass worked together on Freedman's Bank matters, and they were chosen to accompany the body of Vice President Henry Wilson from Washington to his home state of Massachusetts.

⁶⁸ Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, *HWS*, 2:391-92; Margaret Hope Bacon, "One Great Bundle of Humanity: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911)," *PMHB* 113 (1989), 35.

⁶⁹ *Report, NWSA*, 342.

⁷⁰ Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, *HWS*, 2:418.

⁷¹ Byberry Friends Meeting library, *Friends Intelligencer*, 1898, 1900.

And in 1878 Purvis and his old friend William Lloyd Garrison began to correspond again after some fifteen years of frosty relations.⁷²

In 1880 Purvis returned to Philadelphia, where he played a role in reform politics, joining the Committee of a Hundred, and backing candidates for mayor on the basis of their commitment to jobs and opportunities for blacks. He had become a revered figure and was far less subject to criticism in the black community than his colleague William Still.⁷³

His interest in women's suffrage continued, bolstered by his daughter Hattie's involvement in the National Woman's Suffrage Association. In 1888 she was on a committee to plan a meeting of the International Council of Women in Washington, D.C. Many pioneers of the movement were honored, including Robert Purvis, who was asked to sit on the platform. He was introduced by Susan B. Anthony, who recalled his courageous stand for women in 1869 against his own son. In his brief talk, Purvis said that he was not at Seneca Falls but had voted for Abby Kelley in 1840 when the Anti-Slavery Society split over the issue of allowing women to serve on committees. "We yet hold and declare as a parallel and a paradox, that the right of voting and representation are reciprocal; that all governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed; and in face of this, in the presence of women who constitute one-half this population, we ignore the application of what we consider to be truths."⁷⁴

Behind Purvis's support for feminism was his lifelong conviction that the case for justice for blacks rested ultimately on human rights. Arguing against colonization once more during the Civil War, he stated his position eloquently:

Great God! Is injustice nothing? Is honor nothing? Is even pecuniary interest to be sacrificed to this insane and vulgar hate? But it is said that this is the "white man's country." Not so, sir. This is the red man's country by natural right, and the black man's by virtue of his sufferings and toil. Your fathers by violence drove the red man out and forced the black man in. The children of the black man have enriched the soil by their tears, sweat and blood. Sir, we were born here, and here we chose to remain. I elect to stay on the soil on

⁷² Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (New York, 1892), 418. William Lloyd Garrison to Robert Purvis, *NASS*, Nov. 21, 1878. Robert Purvis to William Lloyd Garrison, Dec. 2, 1878, Antislavery Papers, Boston Public Library.

⁷³ Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia*, 107.

⁷⁴ *Report, NWSA*, 342.

which I was born, and on the plot of ground which I have fairly bought and honestly paid for. Don't advise me to leave, and don't add insult to injury by telling me it's for my own good; of that I am to be the judge. It is vain that you talk to me about "two races" and their "mutual antagonism." In the matter of rights there is but one race and that is the *human race*.⁷⁵

Robert Purvis died on April 15, 1898, at the age of eighty-eight. At his memorial service held by the American Negro Historical Society there were many speeches. Isaiah Wears summarized Purvis's major contribution in a few words, echoing Purvis himself: "This great man . . . never in his public advocacy for human right[s] was heard to urge the claims of a recognition of *race* but rather a forgetfulness of all racial ideas and a recognition of manhood rights regardless of either race, color, or previous condition of servitude."⁷⁶

Philadelphia

MARGARET HOPE BACON

⁷⁵ Brown, *The Black Man*, 257-58.

⁷⁶ Memorial, Gardiner Collection, box 9G, HSP.