George Boyer Vashon, 1824-1878:
Black Educator, Poet, Fighter for Equal Rights
Part One
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Among contemporaries of Frederick Douglass in the struggle for equality, the contributions of Martin R. Delany, Lewis Woodson, John Mercer Langston, William G. Allen, and John S. Rock have been traced by present-day historians. George Boyer Vashon worked with these Northern black leaders, striving to foster elevation of his race by education, agitation for equal rights, and demonstration to the forces of prejudice that skin color has nothing to do with talent or intellect. Douglass’s efforts received international recognition; Vashon’s endeavors, perhaps from his own choice, were known only to “the few kindred spirits who took part in his labors.”

He seems to have written no published books, nor were his poems, essays, or speeches collected; only one extended correspondence has been located.

Pittsburgh, Oberlin, Haiti

The only son of John Bethan Vashon and his wife Anne, their fourth and youngest child, George Boyer Vashon was born on July 25, 1824, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. John, a master barber, moved to Pittsburgh in 1829, where four years later he opened the City Baths on Third Street between Market and Ferry streets. Until his death in December 1853, John led the self-help efforts of Pittsburgh’s black community, aided in maintenance of interracial harmony, and partici-
pated in the black convention movement. He supported the national antislavery cause, enjoying warm friendships with William Lloyd Garrison and other abolitionists.4

Pittsburgh did not then provide public education for black children. John Vashon took the lead in 1832 toward establishment of a school in the basement of Little Bethel Church on Wylie Street.5 Martin R. Delany and George Vashon, among others, attended this school taught by the Reverend Lewis Woodson. From about 1837, when it became possible, George went to a public school. By the age of thirteen he had learned all that his teacher could impart (so the teacher told John Vashon), and the boy assisted in instructing other pupils.6 The next year, in the first of his many organizational affiliations, George and his schoolmates formed “the earliest Juvenile Anti-Slavery Society west of the mountains.”7

In 1840, when he was sixteen years old, George enrolled in Oberlin Collegiate Institute near Cleveland, Ohio. Though a man of some means, John had to make many sacrifices to finance his son’s education at Oberlin, then one of the few colleges in the United States to admit black students “to equal privileges.”8 They participated freely in academic and social life. This policy, along with commitments to coeducation, stern Christian morality, and abolitionism, made Oberlin a center of controversy. Because early student records burned with the college chapel in 1903, little is known of George’s Oberlin career. It was said

8 John Vashon, Pittsburgh, to Hamilton Hill, treasurer of Oberlin College, Jan. 13, 1847, in BAP, reel 5, frame 358; and to Gerrit Smith, Oct. 4 (or 11), 1852, Gerrit Smith Collection, Bird Library, Syracuse University, Syracuse, N.Y. (unless otherwise noted, the Smith letters cited are from this collection); Nell, Colored Patriots, 186-87. “An Expression of the Sentiments of the Colored Students of the Oberlin Institute,” July 7, 1841, signed Committee in Behalf of the Colored Students, which included GV, in BAP, reel 4, frame 94.
that he had one of the best minds in the freshman class. He gave orations during the August 1, 1842, celebration at Oberlin of the West Indies emancipation and on other occasions. He was a member of the Union Society (later Delta), the college's elite men's literary society. In the 1843 winter term, he taught school at Chillicothe, Ohio. One of his young pupils, John Mercer Langston, who would become dean of Howard University's law school and a representative to Congress from Virginia, remembered Vashon as "a person of rare scholarly character, attainment and name . . . and a teacher of unusual ability" who encouraged young Langston to pursue a higher education at Oberlin. A professor there summed up Vashon's academic record: "While in Mathematics and English studies he was an average scholar, in the Languages he was very superior. . . . As an essayist, also, he was above the average. He was always tasteful and pleasing in his work, as he was also in his dress and personal bearing." On August 28, 1844, Vashon received Oberlin's bachelor of arts degree, the first black to do so. The Oberlin Evangelist praised his commencement oration, "Liberty of Mind"; it "evinced that genius, talent, and learning are not withheld by our common Father" from persons of color. He had acquired classical learning, developed his talent for oratory and fine writing, and absorbed antislavery arguments, all of which he used selfconfidently in his lifework. In 1847, when the last payment was made on his debt to Oberlin, Vashon wrote: "... I feel I am freeing myself only from the pecuniary claims of the Institute, whilst there are other obligations existing, which, I will never be able to liquidate."


11 Albert A. Wright, "Memorial of George B. Vashon," read before the alumni, June 1879, GV file, Oberlin College Alumni Records Office.

12 "Order of Exercises at Commencement, Oberlin Collegiate Institute, Wednesday, August 28, 1844," Oberlin College Archives; Oberlin Evangelist 6 (Sept. 11, 1844): 151. I found no evidence that GV was valedictorian of his class; because graduates spoke in alphabetical order, his speech was the last listed in the commencement program.

13 For some months thereafter GV attended courses in the college's theological department: GV file, Oberlin College Alumni Records Office. GV, Pitts-
On his return to Pittsburgh he worked on Delany's newspaper, The Mystery, and from January 1845 had a law clerkship in the office of the Honorable Walter Forward, a prominent figure in Pennsylvania politics. Two years later, when Vashon completed his law studies, he applied for admission to the Allegheny County bar. Notwithstanding Forward's support and influence, Vashon's application was rejected. The 1838 revision to the state constitution limited the franchise to white men; black men, therefore, had no political existence and could not be admitted to law practice. Disappointed, Vashon planned to emigrate to Haiti. Somewhat to the surprise of his friends, he paused in New York City, and during the evening of January 10, 1848, with eighteen other candidates, he stood for the oral bar examination before justices of the Supreme Court of New York State for the First Judicial District, New York City. Here Vashon showed "a perfect knowledge of the rudiments of law, and a familiar acquaintance with Coke, Littleton, Blackstone, and Kent." The next day he was admitted to practice as an attorney, solicitor, and counselor in the several courts of New York. He may have been the first black admitted to the bar in that state.

Nonetheless, he decided that better opportunity awaited him in Haiti, the first black republic. He sailed from New York City on February 2, 1848. Probably on the recommendation of Delany, now coeditor of Frederick Douglass's newspaper The North Star, Vashon

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14 Ullman, Delany, 45, 48-49, 62, 75. GV and Delany were members of St. Cyprian's Lodge No. 13, Free and Accepted A.Y. Masons. Pennsylvania Freeman (Philadelphia), Aug. 20, 1846, in BAP, reel 5, frame 257; Walter Forward, Pittsburgh, to Gerrit Smith, Feb. 9, 1847; John B. Vashon, Pittsburgh, to Gerrit Smith, Feb. 12, 1847; "Forward, Walter (Jan. 24, 1786-Nov. 24, 1852)," Dictionary of American Biography, 6: 537-38.


16 Nell, Colored Patriots, 328. "The examination was made on Monday evening, before Justices Strong, McCoun and Edwards, by Messrs. James T. Brady, Joseph W. Bosworth, and H. W. Warner. Mr. Bosworth examined on Practice, Mr. Warner on Jurisdiction of Common Law, and Mr. Brady on Counsel": New York Tribune, Jan. 12, 1848; an editorial paragraph noted that GV had been denied admission to the bar in Pennsylvania on account of his race.
was appointed its Haitian correspondent. During 1848-1849 the paper published seven of his letters over the signature "Harold." According to Delany, this pseudonym reflected Vashon’s deep admiration for Lord Byron and his poem "Childe Harold." Vashon arrived just as Faustin Soulouque (1788-1867) completed his first year in Haiti’s presidency. "Harold’s" letters alluded to the dark events of Soulouque’s rule and included translations from the French of his decrees. In one letter forty lines of "Harold’s" verse extolled the natural beauty of Port-au-Prince; later these would be rewritten to form segments of Vashon’s great poem "Vincent Ogé.”

Though in time to come Vashon would refer to Haiti as "the country of my soul," he had not found his promised land. Haiti’s "unsettled state," he wrote, "deterred me from carrying out my intention of becoming a citizen thereof; and I was, in consequence, debared from the exercise of practicing my profession there." Instead, for two and a half years he taught Latin, Greek, and English at academies in Port-au-Prince and at College Faustin, the principal national school. He acquired an "acquaintance with the history and other matters pertaining to that island," became "well and favorably known to many persons of high consideration," and attained fluency in reading, writing, and speaking French. For all his accomplishments, Oberlin conferred upon him in 1849 its honorific master of arts degree.

In the fall of 1850 Vashon returned to Pittsburgh only to find that the new Fugitive Slave Law and the political climate that had engendered it made this a most inopportune time for him to reapply for admission to the Allegheny County bar. He decided, therefore, to pursue his profession elsewhere.

17 Letters so far identified: North Star, Apr. 21, June 9, Aug. 4, 21, Oct. 27, 1848; Apr. 7, Sept. 28, 1849.
19 GV, Pittsburgh, to James Redpath, June 3, 1861, Pine and Palm (Boston), Aug. 3, 1861, in BAP, reel 13, frame 676.
21 GV, Washington, D.C., to Gerrit Smith, Mar. 15, 1869.
22 Before 1898 Oberlin conferred an M.A. on any bachelor of arts of three or more years’ standing who had engaged in literary or scientific pursuits and had sustained a good moral character. The college’s Alumni Registers and GV’s folder in the Alumni Records Office show him with the degree; there is no extant official record of its award.
23 GV, Pittsburgh, to Gerrit Smith, Nov. 16, 1850, in Quarles, “Letters from Negro Leaders”; R. J. M. Blackett, “. . . Freedom, or the Martyr’s Grave”: 
Syracuse and McGrawville

Vashon moved to Syracuse, New York, to practice law in the state where he had been admitted to the bar. His modest, tasteful “card” in the January 1851 issues of the Syracuse Daily Standard read: “George B. Vashon, Attorney and Counsellor at Law, Office in the Empire Block, Adjoining the Supreme Court Room.” 24 This city of 22,000 persons had a small black community led by the Reverend Jermain Wesley Loguen, conductor of a well-publicized station on the Underground Railroad.25 Syracuse was almost the only Northern city of any size where antislavery activists included businessmen, lawyers, physicians, and clergymen. With passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, thirteen of these prominent citizens had formed a vigilance committee to see to it that no person was deprived of liberty without due process of law.26

On occasion this mostly conservative group invited the more radical political abolitionist, Gerrit Smith, the wealthy philanthropist of Peterboro, New York, to join in their activities. Smith headed what remained of the Liberty party, financed its newspapers, and spoke at nearly every antislavery gathering in central New York. From 1841 to the eve of the Civil War, the tiny third party and its successors represented the first sustained effort by reformers to attempt moral change through the political system. However, few voters agreed with Smith’s declaration: “... I claim that [the Federal] Government has power, under the Constitution to abolish every part of American Slavery, whether without, or within the States; and that it is superlatively guilty against God and man for refusing thus to use it.” Several black spokesmen supported the party — which Douglass called “the Gerrit Smith School of Abolitionists” — because it accepted them as equals in its councils and included them in slates of candidates.27

Black Pittsburgh’s Aid to the Fugitive Slave,” WPHM 61 (Apr. 1978): 124-28, described the effect of the Fugitive Slave Law on the community.
24 Syracuse Daily Standard, Jan. 15, 16, May 7, 1851.
25 Daily Journal City Register and Directory for 1851-’52 (Syracuse, N.Y., 1851), 197-98, listed eighty-eight names at the end of the book in a separate section headed “Colored Persons.”
26 Gurney S. Strong, Early Landmarks of Syracuse (Syracuse, N.Y., 1894), 295; Esther C. Loucks, “The Anti-Slavery Movement in Syracuse from 1839-1851” (M.A. thesis, Syracuse University, 1934).
Loguen; Samuel Ringgold Ward, Henry Highland Garnet, James McCune Smith, and later Douglass were among those active in the party. Gerrit Smith's correspondence showed his high personal regard for the black activists; he relied on them for advice and supported their endeavors. Vashon's letters repeatedly thanked Smith for good counsel and acts of generosity. Over the next two years, Vashon often served as a secretary of the several reported conventions, meetings, and projects of the Syracuse vigilance committee and the Liberty party, whose memberships overlapped. The 1855 and 1857 party conventions nominated him for the office of state attorney general. During Reconstruction Vashon used parts of the radical abolitionists' Constitutional argument in memorials urging passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments.

The best-documented action of the vigilance committee was the "Jerry rescue" of October 1, 1851. Under the Fugitive Slave Law, police arrested a cooper, William Henry, known as "Jerry," who had worked for several years in Syracuse. The warrant charged him to be a slave escaped from a Missouri plantation. A crowd of about twenty-five hundred gathered in front of the police station where Jerry was held; amid a great uproar and with some violence, the vigilance committee removed Jerry from the station, filed off his irons, and sent him to freedom in Canada. Vashon's direct involvement in this incident is not known; he did help organize county-wide mass meetings called by the vigilance committee for October 7 and 15 and may have prepared the "Address from the Freemen of Onondaga County" with resolutions urging solidarity and financial aid for any rescuers who might be arrested for treason. The meetings enthusiastically approved these resolutions.

Vashon must have been well known in Syracuse for these activities and for his participation in the debates of the Young Men's Lyceum on current affairs. Nevertheless, in early 1852, in a letter to Gerrit

31 GV file, Onondaga Historical Association, Syracuse.
Smith, Vashon ruefully admitted that his law practice had not developed to the point of providing him a livelihood, though he had cases in the justice of the peace and county sessions courts. Despite the most careful economy, he found himself in debt. Later that year his father wrote these bitter words to Gerrit Smith:

I made a woful mistake in educating my son a lawyer . . . I then was simple enough to believe, that if a young man of good natural ability, well educated in the law, and with a good moral character, the Anti slavery friend would encourage and put all the business in his hand they could and many things to help him on would they do. . . . He is in a suffering condition, notwithstanding he is located in the best anti slavery district in the State of New York; and some have said it is the best in the country.

John Vashon here echoed a long-standing complaint: two decades of militant agitation had not improved the free blacks' situation. Numerous antislavery groups stated their intention to foster elevation of the black American; however, few white abolitionists in business, trades, or professions had hired, trained, or provided entrée to qualified black men.

Nonetheless, in early 1853 Frederick Douglass came to believe that the immense popularity of Uncle Tom’s Cabin indicated aroused public sympathy for the black man’s condition. Also he had recently converted to Gerrit Smith’s political abolitionism. Douglass’s optimism resulted in the “Call for a Colored National Convention” to be held in Rochester, New York, July 6-8, 1853; George Vashon and his father were among the forty-two signers of the call.

During this most important of all the black conventions, John was a vice-president; George served with Douglass and James M. Whitfield, the barber-poet of Buffalo, New York, on the Committee on Declaration of Sentiments and helped write the address. This eloquently demanded justice and equality under the law for black Americans. The younger Vashon also served on a committee that urged establishment of a manual labor school, a goal of the black convention movement since its beginnings in 1832. Working with him on this committee was

32 GV, Syracuse, to Gerrit Smith, Jan. 19, 1852.
33 John Vashon, Pittsburgh, to Gerrit Smith, Oct. 4 (or 11), 1852.
34 Contributing to Douglass’s political faith was Gerrit Smith’s election in November 1852 to Congress for New York’s Madison and Oswego counties. Illness prevented him from assuming his seat until December 1853; he resigned on Aug. 7, 1854, because, he said, of “pressure of my far too extensive business.” Vashon and others politely protested the resignation; GV, Syracuse, to Gerrit Smith, Aug. 21, 1854; Ralph Volney Harlow, Gerrit Smith: Philanthropist and Reformer (New York, 1939; reprint ed., New York, 1972), 320-31; Foner, Douglass, 2: 77-78.
Charles L. Reason, for many years a teacher in the New York City public schools and the nation's first black to hold a professorship at a collegiate-level institution.

The convention's main goal was to set up a National Council of Colored People, "for the purpose of improving the character, developing the intelligence, maintaining the rights, and organizing a Union of Colored People of the Free States." State councils, elected by all who paid a modest poll tax, chose members to the national council, the work of which was to be carried forward by several committees. This initial attempt at such a structure failed, but Vashon and his colleagues persisted in experimenting with the idea over the next twenty years. Delegates to the Rochester convention vehemently argued over enabling resolutions for the council. "Ethiop" (William Wilson), a veteran columnist for Frederick Douglass' Paper, wrote: "I might . . . say something of the last night of the session . . . the last hour — an hour fast ebbing out, yet upon which hang weighty and important, though unfinished matters. George B. Vashon is making a speech — powerful, beautiful, eloquent — while his father . . . sits a monument of admiration and approval." 36

In late 1853 Vashon crowned this period of creativity with publication of the lyric "Hope" and of the 359-line poem "Vincent Ogé." The thirty-two lines of the first are technically competent and rewarding to the reader. The Syracuse Chronicle printed it along with an announcement of the second anniversary celebration of the Jerry rescue, of which Vashon was secretary. 37 "Vincent Ogé" is headed "fragments of a poem hitherto unpublished, upon a revolt of the free persons of color, in the island of St. Domingo (now Hayti), in the years 1790-1." 38 The eleven fragments include as well meditations on Haiti's beauty, on the love of mother for son, and on a freeman's obligation to fight for freedom even unto death. Critics commented that in "Vincent Ogé" Vashon produced "surely the most imaginative poem by a black man of his century," and that the poem succeeds

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36 FDP, Dec. 16, 1853.
38 Julia Griffiths, ed., Autographs for Freedom (Auburn, N.Y., 1854), 44-60; "Vincent Ogé" was dated "Syracuse, N.Y., August 31st, 1853."
because it is "based on the life of a Negro hero and inspired by the abolitionist spirit which in the fifties was pushing the Negro forward." 39

Soon after the Rochester convention, Pennsylvania black leaders organized the State Council of Colored People. John Vashon, an elected delegate, started to its meeting in Philadelphia but died of heart failure in the Pittsburgh train station on December 29, 1853. He left his wife, a daughter Mary Frances (Mrs. Benjamin F. Colder), his son George, and four Colder grandchildren. 40

A few weeks before his father's death, George had joined the faculty of New York Central College, McGrawville, Cortland County, New York. He was now six months short of his thirtieth birthday; a contemporary described him as "of mixed blood, in stature of medium height, rather round face, with a somewhat solemn countenance, — a man of few words, — needs to be drawn out to be appreciated." 41 The college's president declared: "Professor Vashon did not request to be appointed to this or that chair or to teach this or that branch of study; the question for him was, 'Which chair do you wish me to fill?' or 'What branches am I required to teach?'" 42 Surviving records show that nearly all freshmen and sophomores completed his courses in Latin classics. 43 Among his students were Asaph Hall (1829-1907) who became a professor of mathematics at the United States Naval Observatory; Judson Smith (1837-1906), a prominent Congregational


40 New York Tribune, Dec. 31, 1853. Douglass's brief eulogy was in his Paper, Jan. 6, 1854; a fuller one by Delany appeared there on Jan. 20. Delany presided at two commemorative meetings in Pittsburgh and "formally convey[ed] to the Vashon family the condolences of the entire city": Ullman, Delany, 183, and FDP, Feb. 3, 1854. One of John's last acts had been an effort to mediate the public feud between Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison caused by the latter's derogatory remarks about Julia Griffith's relationship with Douglass. John wrote an open letter defending Douglass's able English-born assistant and urging the men to come to peace: John Vashon, Pittsburgh, to Frederick Douglass, Dec. 17, 1853, ibid., Jan. 13, 1854.

41 William Wells Brown, The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements (Boston, 1865; reprint ed., Miami, Fla., 1969), 227. GV may have slowly wound up his legal practice in 1854, "commuting" the forty miles to Syracuse.

42 Quoted by Walter Dyson, Howard University: The Capstone of Negro Education, a History, 1867-1940 (Washington, D.C., 1941), 352.

43 "Record of the Standing, Conduct, Attendance, and Scholarship of the Students in the Various Classes of New York Central College," manuscript rollbook, Lamont Memorial Library, McGraw, N.Y.
minister and professor at Oberlin; David Roselle, postmaster of Charleston, South Carolina, during Reconstruction, and John Bunyan Reeve (born 1831), organizer of the theological department at Howard University.

One of the few collegiate-level schools in the United States to admit black students, New York Central College was founded by the American Baptist Free Mission Society — an antislavery group that "came out" from the main Baptist body. When the school opened on September 5, 1849, its facilities included a three-story main building and a 167-acre farm. The founders proposed to make an education available to all regardless of race or sex; blacks made up perhaps one-third of the student body. The school offered "a thorough classical education" and a scientific course of study. To maintain the low tuition (twenty-four dollars a year in 1854-1855), the college required that every teacher and student work two hours a day on the farm or at housework. McGrawville had been chosen for the college's site because its quiet remoteness was considered conducive to study. Even so, famous reformers and abolitionists frequently visited the school; for example, commencement speakers in July 1854 included Antoinette Brown, the women's rights advocate, and the Reverend James C. Pennington, noted black abolitionist. The school was the country's first collegiate-level institution to call black professors to its faculty. Charles L. Reason of New York City had been the first. The second, William G. Allen of Virginia and Massachusetts, taught from the fall of 1850 until his resignation on March 21, 1853. After about two years of service, Vashon, the third black professor, wrote: "My situation here is, indeed, a pleasant one; and I trust it will be of long continuance." Early in September 1854 Douglass announced in his Paper that Vashon would be a regular contributor; his first piece — a translation of Schiller's poem "The Diver" — appeared two weeks later. Also

44 Ibid. The roll book listed 17 to 26 students in the collegiate course and 103 to 110 in the preparatory course for 1854-1855; about one-third of the students were women. Kenneth R. Short, "New York Central College, a Baptist Experiment in Higher Integrated Education, 1848-1861," Foundations 5 (July 1962): 250-56; FDP, Mar. 10, 1854.
47 GV, New York Central College, to Gerrit Smith, Apr. 28, 1855.
48 FDP, Sept. 8, 22, 1854, also in New Era (Washington, D.C.), Feb. 17, 1870.
in that month a cholera epidemic swept through Pittsburgh. Among its victims were Mary Frances Colder, George’s sister, and his widowed mother Anne Vashon, “a most benevolent and hospitable lady.” 49 Like her brother, Mrs. Colder had received a fine education; under the pseudonym “Fanny Homewood,” she had written for William Howard Day’s newspaper The Aliened American. She left four children.

Vashon’s next contribution to Frederick Douglass’ Paper, an essay, “The Late Convention,” concerned an event that has received great attention from historians of black nationalism — the August 1854 National Emigration Convention of Colored People, Cleveland, Ohio, called by Martin R. Delany and his associates. Despite his Haitian experience and his long friendship with Delany, the staunchly anti-emigrationist Vashon attacked the convention’s plans for a separate black nation as “impracticable” and labeled Delany’s “Report on the Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent” as “false in history, false in philosophy, and . . . false in its logical conclusions.” Alone among Vashon’s essays, this has a shrill, sarcastic tone with mistakes in grammar and logic. These may have resulted from lack of care in preparation or, more likely, embarrassment because he so profoundly disagreed with his old friend. 50 During the next year Vashon contributed several signed essays to Douglass’s Paper, the most important of which discussed the legal merits of Judge John K. Kane’s use of the habeas corpus in the Passmore Williamson case. 51 This group of essays and those published in the New Era in 1870 are admirable for their wide variety of subject matter and display of classical, historical, and scientific erudition. Unfortunately for the modern reader, Vashon wrote in an “elevated” style with long sentences, Latinate vocabulary, and convoluted logic. Most antebellum black leaders were united in the belief that “self-improvement” was the primary way in which free blacks could better their condition. 52 It is plain that Vashon offered his writings as con-

49 FDP, Oct. 6, 1854; Ullman, Delany, 171, described the heroism of Delany, the only physician for Pittsburgh’s black community and a longtime friend of the Vashon family, in combating the epidemic.
50 FDP, Nov. 14, 1854. GV’s misstatements were corrected by “F” (Martin Freeman), an associate of Delany, in FDP, Dec. 15, 1854, Jan. 4, 1855. Freeman concluded: “Since all profess to labor for the same end — the elevation of our people — why need we impugn each other’s efforts.”
52 George A. Levesque, “Boston’s Black Brahmin: Dr. John S. Rock,” Civil War
tributions to moral improvement, education, and self-help — the three interrelated elements of "self-improvement."

Because of initial undercapitalization, lack of an endowment, and the withholding of state funds by legislators averse to its nondiscriminatory policy, New York Central College relied on tuition fees and subscriptions solicited from a small number of sympathizers. In the mid-1850s enrollment declined owing to its radical reputation and the competition of nearby newly established colleges and academies. It survived for a time through sales of lots carved from its farm.

In May 1855 Vashon, still unmarried, took charge of his dead sister's children, a boy and three girls aged eight to fifteen years, whose father could no longer care for them. Vashon brought the children to McGrawville; his letters to Gerrit Smith described his struggle to provide for them because the college could now pay only half his promised salary of four hundred dollars a year. In October 1856 a committee of the trustees informed him that his services would not be required after the present term because, as Vashon put it, they wished to employ only "persons who could live on the least possible allowance of pay." At term's end the college president and faculty expressed their confidence in Vashon as a teacher and their wish to have him continue as their colleague, provided he made other arrangements for his sister's children. Vashon had reason to believe that "if my connection with the Institution were to cease, there would not be another colored professor employed." At great sacrifice to himself and the children, he managed to stay on until November 1857.

Pittsburgh Again

From the rural tranquillity of McGrawville, Vashon returned to Pittsburgh and the "dense, gaseous smoke which may be constantly seen issuing forth" from its furnaces and factories. He took up the duties of principal teacher of the city's black public schools at a salary of six hundred dollars a year. To Gerrit Smith he wrote: "The

54 New York Central College Records, Cortland County Historical Society, Cortland, N.Y.
56 GV, McGrawville, to Gerrit Smith, Apr. 25, 1857.
post is neither so pleasant, nor so dignified as that of a professorship in N.Y. Central College; but then, the pay is better." 58

In childhood Vashon had attended the "cellar school" established by his father with other black citizens. Since 1837 the city's Board of School Directors had provided public schooling for black children. Between 1840 and 1850 Pittsburgh's black population rose from 823 to 1,964; these persons lived in several rather widely separated neighborhoods, but only one public school, or at most two, was opened for their children, and it was usually located in a church. Students from all parts of the city were expected to come to these locations, which changed at least six times over fifteen years. 59 In 1858-1859 Vashon reported that 150 to 200 children attended the two elementary schools then existing. 60 Among his students at the Wylie Street school was Norris Wright Cuney (1846-1899), a Texan who would become a longtime member of the Republican party's National Committee and an important Galveston municipal official. 61

To help him in these schools he had an assistant teacher, Miss Susan Paul Smith. She had been born in Boston on September 19, 1838, the daughter of Elijah W. Smith, a composer and cornetist, and Anne Paul Smith, whose father, the Reverend Thomas Paul, had founded the Belknap (now Joy) Street Church in Boston. Her mother having died early in Susan's childhood, the girl was brought up by her grandmother, Catherine Waterhouse Paul. Susan graduated from Miss O'Mears Seminary, Somerville, Massachusetts. After her grandmother's death, Susan went to live with her father in Pittsburgh, where she started work in the black public schools on February 1, 1856. 62 Some time after Vashon became principal, he and Miss Smith

58 GV, Pittsburgh, to Gerrit Smith, Aug. 30, 1859.
59 Ralph Proctor, Jr., "Racial Discrimination Against Black Teachers and Black Professionals in the Pittsburgh Public School System, 1834-1973" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1979), 11, 31-33, quoted minutes of the Board of School Directors, Oct. 13, 1856: "some prominent colored citizens" wished to have a black man in charge of the black school and recommended GV. He regarded his salary as a blessing, but Proctor (p. 38) noted that white principals of the city's white public schools then received $900 a year; Wilmoth, "Pittsburgh and the Blacks," 159, 161-62.
60 GV, Pittsburgh, to Gerrit Smith, Aug. 30, 1859; Wilson, ed., Standard History of Pittsburgh, 518.
61 Maud Cuney Hare, Norris Wright Cuney, a Tribune of the Black People (New York, 1913), 4-5, told how the thirteen-year-old Cuney rescued GV from a gang of rowdies who had knocked him down and were pulling his long black beard.
married. To Gerrit Smith he wrote that his wife continued to be "my assistant teacher in the Schools under my charge here; and, in my relations with her, I feel (thanks be to God!) very, very happy." 63

[To be continued]


63 "I was married in February last": GV, Pittsburgh, to Gerrit Smith, Aug. 30, 1859.