

Anti-Fugitive Slave Law Meeting

1851

“... we pour out upon the Fugitive Slave Law the fullest measure of our contempt and hate ...”

— Gerrit Smith and Frederick Douglass

Annotation: By the 1850s, a growing number of Northerners had come to believe that an aggressive Southern slave power had seized control of the federal government and threatened to subvert republican principles. Some were convinced that the slave power had dispossessed Indians from their homelands and fomented revolution in Texas and war with Mexico in order to expand the South’s slave empire. At the same time, an increasing number of Southerners believed that antislavery radicals dominated Northern politics and would “rejoice” in the race war and racial amalgamation that would surely follow emancipation.

At an Anti-Fugitive Slave Law meeting held in 1851 in Syracuse, New York, Gerrit Smith and the famous fugitive slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass drafted resolutions against the new law.

Full Text:

1st. Resolved, that we pour out upon the Fugitive Slave Law the fullest measure of our contempt and hate and execration; and pledge ourselves to resist it actively, as well as passively, and by all such means, as shall, in our esteem, promise the most effectual resistance.

2d. Resolved, that they who consent to be the agents of Southern oppressors for executing this law, whether as Commissioners or Marshals, or in any other capacity, are to be regarded as kidnappers and land-pirates.

3d. Resolved, that it is our duty to peril life, liberty, and property, in behalf of the fugitive slave, to as great an extent as we would peril them in behalf of ourselves.

4th. Resolved, that obviously and grossly Unconstitutional as is this Law, nevertheless this is not the chief reason why we condemn and defy it: for equally, whether they are Constitutional or Unconstitutional, we do condemn and defy all laws, which insult Him, who is above all Constitutions, and which, aiming not to protect, but to destroy, rights, are, therefore to be regarded as no laws.

5th. Resolved, that horrible as is this law, we must bear in mind, that it is but a perfectly natural and not at all to be wondered at exaction of slavery; and that, hence our first and great work is to get rid, not of the law, but of slavery — as it would be our first and great work to pursue and kill the mad-dog, instead of pausing, until we had effected the cure of one of his bites.

6th. Resolved, that between corrupt politics on the one hand and corrupt churches on the other — between the politicians and parties, who enacted this Law, and the priests who are preaching its enforcement — there is no hope for this Nation, unless it shall very speedily be brought to prefer honesty to knavery, both in its religious teachers and civil rulers.

7th. Resolved, that, were the current religion of this country to be exchanged for rank infidelity, the abolition of slavery would be comparatively easy.

8th. Resolved, that when the immortal writer of the Declaration of Independence said: “If we do not liberate the enslaved by that generous energy of our own minds, they must, they will, be liberated by the awful process” of St. Domingo Emancipation, he uttered words, which there is but too much reason to believe are rapidly approaching their fulfillment.

9th. Resolved, that inasmuch as sound principles and sound teachers are as indispensable in our Institutions of Learning, as in our pulpits, we rejoice to know, that, under the progress of antislavery sentiment, there are already several Colleges in our country, which are opened to colored students; and that there are two of these in which colored students find themselves emphatically at home. There are Oberlin College in Ohio, and Central College in New York — in the latter of which there is a colored Professor.

10th. Resolved, that, inasmuch as every National party in this Nation must, because it is a National party, spare, if not indeed, positively favor, slavery, it follows, that whoever belongs to the Whig or Democratic party, or to any ecclesiastical National party, does, however unwillingly or unwittingly, give his influence and support to slavery.

11th. Resolved, that the time has come, and had long ago come, for gathering a Northern political party, which shall be both determined and able to carry out the principles of the Federal Constitution and the principles of humanity and religion, in overthrowing the base and bloody system of American slavery, and in establishing a righteous Civil Government. ...