

Hampshire Life

THE GAZETTE'S WEEKLY MAGAZINE FOR THE PIONEER VALLEY



The Story of **DAVID RUGGLES**

The fiery black abolitionist left his mark on Florence.
Now residents are taking steps to keep his memory alive. PAGE 16

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The Story of DAVID RUGGLES

The fiery black abolitionist left his mark on Florence. Now residents are taking steps to keep his memory alive.

By Steve Pfarrer

When talk turns to the abolitionist movement in the first half of the 19th century, it's commonly depicted as a push led by whites opposed to slavery, though a few prominent black names are also linked to the movement. Consider Frederick Douglass, one of the greatest black orators of the day, and Sojourner Truth, who became an early symbol both of feminism and black pride.

But what about David Ruggles?

If the name doesn't ring a bell, it might soon. A group of local historians aims to open a museum and research center dedicated to the history of early Florence, a center that will be based in large part around the story of Ruggles, who lived in Florence for the better part of the 1840s.

And it's a major story, historians say, that's remained largely untold. Ruggles was a free black man and leading abolitionist in the 1830s and 1840s who called not just for an end to slavery but for greater equality for blacks in the northern United States – and he wasn't afraid to use civil disobedience to make his point. He landed in jail a number of times. One of the nation's first black journalists, a printer and a prolific writer on abolition, he was also a key link on the Underground Railroad in New York City, helping to send hundreds of escaped slaves, including Douglass, further north to freedom.

Along the way, Ruggles, who died in 1849 at age 39, fought his own battles against racism, including an attempt by slave catchers to kidnap him and put him into bondage in the Deep South. He also suffered serious health problems, including near blindness, yet pioneered a form of "water therapy" in Florence that became a popular treatment in its day.

"David Ruggles is one of the unsung heroes of the abolitionist movement," says Steve Strimer, a member of the David Ruggles Center committee who has become a central researcher of Florence's history during the past decade. "And he's a key part of the unique history we have here in Florence."

Graham R. Hodges, a professor of history at Colgate University in New York who has a biography of Ruggles due out next year, calls Ruggles a leading national figure of his day, well known not just to members of the black community, but to many whites as well. "In the turmoil of the 1850s, the run-up to



Courtesy Richard Samuel West/Periodyssey

At left, the only known image of David Ruggles, from an 1838 political cartoon. Ruggles is the middle of the three men. Above, Sojourner Truth, who met Ruggles when the two lived in Florence in the 1840s; inspired by his example, she became a fervent abolitionist herself.



Above, Boston abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, whom David Ruggles treated with his water cure in Florence in 1848. At right, the water cure business, then located on Spring Street; the illustration depicts an expansion of the complex by a new owner who took over after Ruggles died in 1849.



Illustrations courtesy Ruggles Center committee



Courtesy Ruggles Center committee

the Civil War, his reputation got kind of overtaken by events and other names," Hodges says. "But in his day he was a truly remarkable personality among black abolitionists."

Ruggles, Hodges notes, was also a big influence on Sojourner Truth, helping turn her into a fierce anti-slavery advocate after the two met in Florence in the 1840s.

The David Ruggles Center for Early Florence History & Underground Railroad Studies (www.davidrugglescenter.org) will be located in a historic house on Nonotuck Street within walking distance of the statue of Truth erected in 2002. It will examine many aspects of Florence history, says Strimer, from early industries to the arrival of a significant Irish-American community in the second half of the 19th century. Archives and rotating galleries will be part of the mix. But describing Ruggles' life, and the role Florence played in the Underground Railroad, is also of great importance, he says.

"Here we are in Florence in the early to mid-1840s, and we have three vital figures from the abolitionist movement – Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth and David Ruggles – living here or

visiting," says Strimer. "And early on, Ruggles was by far the biggest of those three. We've been able to tell the story of Sojourner Truth [in Florence]. Now we have the opportunity to tell Ruggles' story. That's exciting."

HISTORY HAS NOT COMPLETELY ignored David Ruggles. There are numerous 19th-century accounts of him and his work, including mention in the *Gazette* in the 1840s. His own writing survives in various publications, including an abolitionist periodical he founded in New York, *The Mirror of Liberty*. Frederick Douglass paid tribute to him years after his death, recalling for Charles Sheffield, author of the 1894 study "History of Florence Massachusetts," how Ruggles, a "man of sterling sense and worth ... had assisted me as well as many other runaway slaves, on the road to freedom."

But the past 100 years have paid him less attention, says Hodges, in part because starting in the late 19th century, white scholars focused on the white leaders of the abolitionist movement, such as William Lloyd Garrison, president of the American Anti-Slavery Society and editor of a major abolitionist newspaper in

Boston (Garrison's brother-in-law, George Benson, was one of the co-founders of the Northampton Association of Education and Industry, a Florence utopian community in the 1840s). A mid-20th-century writer and librarian, Dorothy Porter, wrote a number of articles about Ruggles in various publications, but outside of that there hasn't been much, says Hodges, who has written previous books about early black history in America.

And whereas Truth, Douglass and other 19th-century black leaders were documented by photographers and artists, only one image of Ruggles is believed to exist today – a caricature from an 1838 political cartoon put out by a New York publisher, H.R. Robinson.

However, the cartoon, drawn by artist Edward W. Clay, might well provide an accurate image of Ruggles, according to Richard West, owner of Periodyssey in Easthampton, a business that buys and sells 19th- and early 20th-century American periodicals. West discovered the cartoon several years ago after obtaining a collection of Robinson's publications.

"It's really a portrait of Ruggles," says West. "It doesn't have any of the distorted or exaggerated features of people that we

often associate with these kind of cartoons.” The drawing, captioned “The Disappointed Abolitionists,” shows Ruggles standing between two white men; he wears a top hat, a dress jacket and leggings or stockings, as well as a pair of small wire-rimmed glasses. The three men are being confronted by a third white man, a slave owner accusing them of trying to extort money from him.

West says Robinson was a staunch conservative opposed to abolition and likely wanted to portray Ruggles accurately so that readers would shun the businesses he ran, including a bookstore. “He wanted to discredit Ruggles and the other abolitionists,” adds West. “He was trying to mold public sentiment.”

The drawing also provides a footnote of sorts that testifies to Ruggles’ historical significance: West says it was the first time that a drawing in a U.S. publication did not depict a black person in some grotesque, monkey-like way: “[Ruggles] looks human. That in itself is absolutely remarkable for that period.”

IT’S NOT KNOWN EXACTLY what led Ruggles to activism. But those who have researched his life point to a few possibilities.



Gordon Daniels

This house at 225 Nonotuck St., dating from about 1849, will be the location of the David Ruggles Center. Three condominiums, in a style that blends with the house, are slated to be built behind it.

For starters, he was born in Norwich, Conn., in 1810. His parents were free blacks. His father was a blacksmith, while his mother was a well-known caterer in the town and also a founding member of a local Methodist church. The oldest of seven children, Ruggles was educated at religious charity schools in town. His mother did business with some wealthy white families, and Hodges says,

“He saw how his mother interacted with whites and he became accustomed himself to dealing with socially powerful whites.”

Linda Ziegenbein, a member of the Ruggles Center committee and a doctoral student in anthropology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, has been writing her thesis on Ruggles’ life. In his day, she says, blacksmiths were held in high regard. “It’s a really powerful position,” she says, “that’s seen to have an almost mystical quality, to be spiritually powerful.” Her theory is that Ruggles’ father’s position in the community helped give his son a solid footing. But she says Ruggles likely also had a strong personality, perhaps “a little more Malcolm X and a little less early Martin Luther King, Jr.”

Ruggles is described in one written account as being “of ordinary size, with an athletic form and dark complexion.” He moved to New York City in 1827 – the year slavery was officially abolished in New York state – and worked for a time as a mariner. Later, with the help of others from Norwich who were also living in Manhattan, he opened a small grocery store.

But overall, says Hodges, Ruggles discovered a level of prejudice and segregation in New York

A compromise makes way for history

By Steve Pfarrer

“Win-win situation” has become a particularly tired cliché in many ways. But in the case of the future David Ruggles Center, the expression appears to have real merit.

The museum/education center – its full title is The David Ruggles Center for Early Florence History & Underground Railroad Studies – will be located in a modest house on Nonotuck Street that dates from 1849. The house, though, was slated for the wrecking ball in 2007 before the owner, local historians and town officials worked out a deal to preserve it.

Leeds developer Jim Harrity acquired the house a few years ago and, unable to sell it, planned to tear it down and replace it with a small commercial building. When Florence historian Steve Strimer learned of that, he did some research and discovered that in the 19th century the house had been part of a mixed neighborhood of working-class blacks and whites, which included abolitionists.

The city’s Historical Commission agreed that the house had historical value and, in December 2007, halted the demolition plan and hired an architectural historian to do further research. Harrity says he wasn’t happy, but was willing to listen to Strimer’s arguments. “I’ve known Steve



Gordon Daniels

From left, supporters Kimball Howes, Steve Strimer, Kris Thomson and Emikan Sudan in the future home of the Ruggles Center.

awhile, and he’s taught me a lot about Florence history,” he says. When Strimer told him about David Ruggles, and how the Nonotuck Street house could serve as a center for some of that history, Harrity warmed up to the proposal.

“From a cultural and historical perspective, this project makes a lot of sense,” says Harrity, who has a doctorate in education. In fact he hopes one day to open a nonprofit center himself that would research ways to close the education achievement gap between races. “[The Ruggles Center] is along the same kind of lines, since it’s all about a time in history where people were trying to bring about social justice,” he says.

The Ruggles Center committee is preparing to buy the house from Harrity, primarily with a \$150,000 grant from the city’s Community Preservation Committee. The Ruggles center group, which hopes to open the center by Memorial Day, is seeking an additional \$150,000 from donations and bank loans to complete the purchase and make some renovations to the building.

As part of the agreement, Harrity plans to build three 2,000-square-foot condominiums, with work and living space for artists and craftspeople, in a two-story barn behind the house. The building will be modeled to match the style of the house.

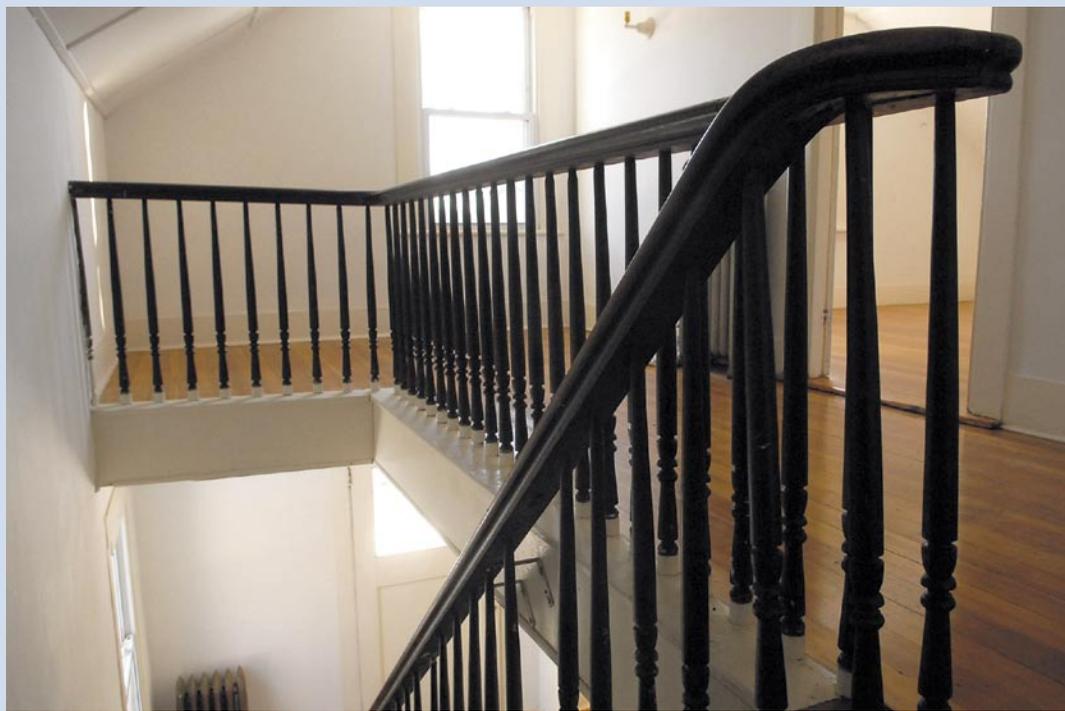
“The whole project started out with the possibility of being pretty contentious – two forces coming up against each other that looked like they’d be in opposition,” says Mark Wamsley of the Ruggles Center committee. “But everyone has really worked hard – just a lot of cooperation and coming together – to make this happen.” □

that he hadn't experienced before. "Finding work is very difficult for blacks, and I think he finds the reality of the situation pretty crushing – it fires his anger about slavery and about racism."

By the early 1830s, Hodges notes, Ruggles became caught up in the growing anti-slavery movement in New York. Some argued slavery needed to end immediately; others favored gradual emancipation. Though some whites supported abolition, others called for "colonization" – a euphemism for shipping all free blacks to Africa. Slave owners favored the idea, fearing that free blacks were provoking slaves to rebel or escape. Many Northern whites also believed the two races were socially incompatible and worried that free blacks would compete with them for jobs.

Ruggles was infuriated by the colonization proposal, Hodges says, and he was joined in his anger by a cluster of young blacks who refused to accept the idea. He became active on several fronts: writing articles for abolitionist publications, printing some of his own anti-slavery pamphlets, selling subscriptions for an abolitionist newspaper, giving speeches

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Gordon Daniels

The Ruggles Center house is in good shape overall, supporters say, but still needs some renovations, particularly to the exterior. The Nonotuck Street house will be included on walking tours that focus on 19th-century Florence history.

Florence has a feisty past

By Steve Pfarrer

There's a consensus today that Northampton is divided politically, with a liberal downtown and center district flanked by the more conservative villages of Florence and Leeds. But 165 years ago, the reverse was true.

The 1840s saw the creation of the Northampton Association of Education and Industry in Florence, the utopian community that believed in shared wealth, women's rights and abolishing slavery. The Florence group became home to black abolitionists David Ruggles and Sojourner Truth, among others, and Florence village also became an integral "spur" on the Underground Railroad; an 1850 census reveals a number of blacks born in Southern states – former slaves – living in Florence.

But in Northampton as a whole, the attitude toward slavery and the races was more ambivalent. Frederick Douglass, the famed black orator and former slave who visited the Florence commune, once had rocks thrown at him while giving an anti-slavery speech at Northampton Town Hall. An 1843 Gazette article protested the seating of a former slave at a First Church service: "This was not in very good taste." Some in the community had business or social ties with Southerners and called for "colonization" – shipping all free blacks to Africa.

In the late 1830s and early 1840s, Lydia Ma-

ria Child, a noted writer and abolitionist from Boston, lived for a few years in Florence – then just a small village – and found many people in Northampton indifferent or hostile to the anti-slavery cause. In an 1839 letter to a friend, she wrote, "I never was in a place I liked less than Northampton ... the human soul is stagnant there. My strong love of freedom could ill endure the bigotry and intolerance that prevails."

On the other hand, Florence historian Steve Strimer says Northampton businessman J.P. Williston was likely the town's principal Underground Railroad "agent," and that he employed several escaped slaves in his Florence cotton mill. He also took into his home and raised a bright young boy from New York City, William Howard Day, whose parents could not afford to educate him. Day, the only black to graduate from his class in Oberlin College, later became a noted orator, writer and newspaper editor, as well the nation's first black school superintendent.

In addition, there was no apparent effort by sheriffs, magistrates or other law enforcement personnel in town to comply with the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which mandated that authorities in Northern states assist Southerners who were seeking escaped slaves. In October 1850, in fact, 10 former slaves now living in Florence attached their names to an article published in a local paper, the Northampton



Courtesy Ruggles Center committee

Writer and abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, shown here in the mid-1860s. She helped bring an ailing David Ruggles from New York City to Florence in 1842.

Courier, that announced a public meeting to protest the law.

Strimer says that kind of open defiance likely speaks to the sense of community the ex-slaves felt in their new home. "These were working people, some of them homeowners, who had developed roots here," he says. "And in fact, in states like Massachusetts where the abolition movement was strong, there was no compliance with [the Fugitive Slave Act]." □

DAVID RUGGLES (continued from Page 19)

and opening a bookstore – evidently making him the first black to do so in the United States, Hodges notes. The shop, however, was destroyed by a pro-slavery mob in 1835.

But Ruggles didn't back down. With other black activists, he formed the New York Committee for Vigilance to thwart Southern slave catchers who, in pursuit of runaway slaves, would kidnap any black person on the city's streets. With the collusion of crooked local judges, slave catchers would "identify" a victim as a runaway in a brief hearing and pack him or her aboard a waiting ship, bound for Southern ports. Ruggles' group fought this practice, demanding jury trials for kidnapped blacks and raising money for their defense, Hodges and Strimer say.

Linda Ziegenbein notes that under New York's 1827 law ending slavery, slaves brought into New York from out of state were supposed to be freed if they stayed for more than nine months. So Ruggles made a point of going into white neighborhoods – even knocking on doors – to find black workers and alert them to the situation. He also raised money and gave shelter to runaway slaves like Frederick Douglass, who in the fall of 1838 had fled from Maryland. He was hiding by a Manhattan pier when a friendly sailor brought him to Ruggles' store. Ruggles, learning Douglass had some skill as a ship caulker, dissuaded him from going to Canada and instead sent him along the Underground Railroad to New Bedford, where he found a job in a shipyard before moving to Boston.

Ruggles also helped another runaway slave from Maryland, Basil Dorsey, make his way to Florence; Dorsey later bought a home on Nonotuck Street – close by the house slated to become the Ruggles Center – that is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ruggles' confrontational style and courage made him a well-known name in the press, Hodges says, and a hero to many blacks. It also made him numerous white enemies. One group tried to break into his apartment to kidnap him and ship him to the South. He also escaped a few lynching attempts. Hodges says Ruggles was openly assaulted by pro-slavery whites on a number of occasions – once being kicked down a flight of stairs. He was also thrown off a ferry and a train when he attempted to assert his right to sit where he pleased, not in sections designated for blacks.

Ruggles ended up breaking with some fellow abolitionists who feared his tough tactics were stoking white anger. "He reaches a point where he says, 'We cannot ask someone being kidnapped not to defend himself,'" says Hodges. "He is intent on fighting back."

As Ruggles once wrote, "My zeal is to promote the welfare of my brethren in bonds; that urges me on to this work. Believing the cause of *immediate and universal emancipation* to be the cause of truth, and of God, I trust I shall not be discouraged."



Courtesy Ruggles Center committee

An 1844 portrait of Frederick Douglass, reportedly done by Elisha Hammond, a Florence abolitionist. Douglass, whom Ruggles helped during his escape from slavery, called Ruggles "a man of sterling sense and worth" who aided hundreds of other runaway slaves.

His spirit may have held up, but his physical health did not. By the late 1830s, Ruggles had serious intestinal disorders and was rapidly going blind, possibly a result of stress from the assaults and other threats he faced, Ziegenbein says. Then came two more setbacks. He was falsely accused of attempting to extort money from a slave owner seeking a runaway slave, an incident that became the subject of the cartoon that today provides the only image of Ruggles. He also had a dispute with a black newspaper editor that ended with Ruggles having to resign from the Vigilance Committee, where he had been secretary for several years.

By 1841, Ruggles, just 31, was broke, sometimes homeless, and seemingly not far from death.

HIS TICKET TO RECOVERY came from Northampton. In the spring of 1841, writer Lydia Maria Child – author of the famous poem/song "Over the River and Through the Woods" – had moved to New York from Florence. In Florence she had been working with her husband, David, in a business trying to extract sugar from sugar beets (as an alternative, Strimer says, to slave-grown sugarcane). The business was struggling, so to earn some money Child took a position as editor of an abolitionist newspaper in Manhattan. It was there she learned of Ruggles' problems.

Child, a fervent abolitionist and women's rights activist, got in touch with members of the utopian community in Florence, the Northampton Association of Education and Industry (NAEI), that was forming. Founded by George Benson and another Northampton businessman, Sam Hill, the group believed in shared wealth, equality between the sexes and races, religious freedom and abolition of slavery. Physically, it included a silk mill, adjacent farmland, a school and housing that would at one point hold about 200 people.

Responding to his wife's request, David Lee Child asked commune members to take Ruggles in, which they did in the fall of 1842. From there, Ruggles

slowly began nursing himself back to health with what was called the "water cure," or hydropathy – a health regime based on various baths, diet, rest and other holistic techniques, which stood in stark contrast to the purgative medicine usually employed in that era.

Indeed, Ruggles once wrote that his past medical treatment had consisted of being "repeatedly bled, leeches, cuffed, plastered, blistered ... dosed with arsenic ... and other poisonous drugs," which had given him only more problems, such as an enlarged liver and chronic inflammation of the bowels.

According to Dorothy Porter, Ruggles had heard of the hydropathic technique, developed some years earlier by an Austrian, Vincent Priessnitz, and he later learned more through corresponding and meeting with a transplanted German homeopathist in Boston. Though his first efforts to treat himself were crude – Ruggles called them "vague," Porter writes – he regained some of his sight, and he began treating some other members of the Florence commune as well.

By 1846, Ruggles had not only purchased his own home in Florence, he'd opened the first water cure business in the country, Hodges says, with customers coming from around the region, and even from the South, as some wealthy Southerners liked to come North for vacations. Ziegenbein says it's possible some of these latter clients were slave owners.

Steve Strimer notes that one of Ruggles' more famous clients was Garrison, the Boston abolitionist, who stayed in the treatment center in 1848 and apparently had mixed feelings about his stay. "He didn't like it when Ruggles took all his newspapers away," Strimer says with a laugh. "That was part of the cure – getting away from your daily routine so you could relax."

But "Dr. Ruggles," as he came to be known locally, still made abolition a big part of his life. Members of the Ruggles Center committee say one question they continue to research is whether he used his business as a temporary sanctuary for runaway slaves; the evidence, they say, suggests he did. And Ruggles kept writing and speaking publicly against slavery. He mentored Sojourner Truth, the ex-slave who had come to Florence via New York and Connecticut in 1843 and joined the NAEI. Strimer says Truth gave her first anti-slavery speech in Northampton, at a presentation organized by Ruggles.

Health problems caught up with him again in 1849. He died in December, at 39, apparently of complications from inflamed bowels. His mother and sister, who had been with him during his last few days, took his body back to Norwich, Conn., for burial. The Gazette and other local newspapers spoke sadly of his passing in their obituaries.

Hodges says he's pleased to know that Florence will be opening a history center dedicated in part to Ruggles' story – a story, he adds, that deserves more exposure. "The history of black abolitionists is still unfolding ... there is much more to learn, and to tell, and David Ruggles will be at the center of that." □
Steve Pfarrer can be reached at spfarrer@gazettenet.com.