

ROBERT PURVIS: PRESIDENT OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

By Margaret Hope Bacon

Although dedicated to “improving the Condition of the African Race,” the Pennsylvania Abolition Society had no black members until 1842, when the society admitted the light-skinned Robert Purvis. Purvis remained the token black member until 1866, when the PAS invited Frederick Douglass into membership, followed the next year by William Still, Octavius Catto, and Jacob White.

Born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1810, Robert Purvis was one of three sons of a wealthy Scottish cotton merchant, William Purvis, and his mixed-race common law wife, Harriet Judah. Judah’s father was Baron Judah, the son of a prominent Jewish family. Her mother was Dido Badaracka, whom Purvis described as a “full-blooded Moor of magnificent features and great beauty. She had crisp hair and a stately manner.” Captured in Africa at the age of 12, Dido was brought to the slave market at Charleston, where she was sold to a white woman who treated her kindly, educated her, and allowed her to live separately, a not uncommon situation in Charleston at that time. Robert Purvis grew up admiring this dark-skinned grandmother, and through her he developed a lifelong identification with the African race and a passionate hatred of slavery.

In 1819, William Purvis moved his family to Philadelphia, intending this to be a way station while he prepared a home for them in England. William died, however, before his plan was completed, leaving a substantial legacy. Robert attended the Clarkson Hall, a school for black children run by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, and then Amherst Academy in Massachusetts, a secondary school closely related to Amherst College. Returning to Philadelphia, he began investing in real estate and was able to turn his share of his father’s fortune into a large estate,



Robert Purvis. Gratz Collection.

which he used to advance the cause of antislavery. At age 21 he married Harriet Davy Forten, the dark-skinned daughter of the wealthy black sailmaker James Forten, and with her had eight children. For this large family he provided a home and governess, first in downtown Philadelphia, then on a farm in Byberry. Later his children attended boarding schools, and then college. One son, Charles, became a distinguished physician and a founder of the Medical College of Howard University.

Purvis was a well-known orator and writer on the subject of slavery. He used his considerable talents primarily in support of the American Anti-Slavery Society, of which he was an officer, and the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, of which he was president from 1845 to 1850. Purvis was also the principal organizer and president of the Vigilant Association of Philadelphia, which helped runaway slaves pass safely through Philadelphia on their way to the North and freedom. This organization, born in 1837, operated the first Underground Railroad in the greater Delaware Valley and continued to do so until 1851, sending at times as many as one escapee a day on to freedom. For this work Purvis earned the moniker “the President of the Underground Railroad.”

Purvis was a strong advocate of woman’s rights, and alone among black men supported the women—led by Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Mott—who argued that black men should not get the vote before all women, black and white, were included. He also spoke up for the rights of Native Americans and for Irish home rule, though local Irishmen often opposed him. “In the matter of rights there is just one race, and that is the human race,” Purvis often said. ❖