

# “Let Your Motto Be Resistance”

## The Legacy of Henry Highland Garnet

Henry Highland Garnet was born enslaved on December 23, 1815. Twenty-eight years later Garnet would address a group of his peers at the National Negro Convention in Buffalo, New York with a passionate demand for resistance to slavery:

“The humblest peasant is as free in the sight of God as the proudest monarch that ever swayed a sceptre. Liberty is a spirit sent from God and like its great author no respecter of persons. Brethren, the time has come when you must act for yourselves. It is an old and true saying that, ‘if hereditary bondmen would be free, they must themselves strike the blow.’”

Garnet’s appeal to enslaved African Americans would not fall on deaf ears, and his call to “...remember that you are **FOUR MILLIONS**” would lead to discord within the abolitionist community. His opinions regarding physical defiance to enslavement would cause well-known African American leaders, like Frederick Douglass, to condemn his philosophies. Douglass, similar to many abolitionists, aligned with the belief of moral suasion—a non-resistant approach to the destruction of slavery. The convention rejected Garnet’s address and opinions, but only by one vote. Formed throughout his own quest for freedom, Henry Highland Garnet’s “radical” beliefs regarding enslavement began with his escape from Darby Plantation in Kent County, Maryland. Despite the rejection he faced at the convention, Garnet became a renowned abolitionist and minister, and his oratory skills earned him accolades in America and abroad.



Simon J. Martinet 1860 Map of Kent County, Maryland.

When the owner of Darby Plantation, William Spencer, died in March of 1822, he owned about 1170 adjoining acres in Kent County, including the following tracts: Darby and Smally, Buck Hill, Mount Hope, Smith’s Discovery, John’s Addition, Killingsworthmore, and Prickle Pear. William Spencer’s ancestors had acquired those large tracts of land in Shrewsbury Parish, Kent County beginning in the 1730s. Translating to our modern land system the family owned all of what is now considered Chesterville. In fact, the only historic structure in the town of Chesterville well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the Spencer Family Store. Spencer’s grave, along with those of his family members are located in the cemetery of Shrewsbury Parish which is not far from where the Maryland Historical Trust Henry Highland Garnet historical marker currently stands. The Darby/Smally home farm was sold by William Spencer’s heirs in 1850 to David Clements. His name appears in Martinet’s Kent County Maps of 1860 and 1877.



Amount brot forward	\$363	64 1/2
Iron ware	2	—
Table cloths	2	50
Ten Towels	1	—
15 lb Iron Thread	1	37 1/2
10 lb Flax	3	—
4 lb Iron bolts & 3 lb Hooks	2	—
2 old dutch ovens		75
1 lb. anal Iron		75
1 old Iron boiler		12 1/2
3 old frying pans	1	—
1 gridle		40
1 grid Iron		50
1 lb. anal. Irons		75
3 pine kitchen table	3	—
Wooden ware	5	—
3 salt Tanks	2	—
3 dunnage	1	50
4 cask barrels	2	—
1 dog black bottle		50
140 lbs wool a 30 Ct		42
1 Negro Miss Jacob 60 yrs old	10	—
1 do Jo Anne 40 y. J.	250	—
1 do Jo Stephen 38 J. Gables	150	—
1 do Jo Joseph 36 J.	300	—
1 do Jo Jacob 30 runaway	—	—
1 do Jo William 27 yrs old	300	—
1 do Jo Jonathan 25 runaway	—	—
1 do Jo Michael 22 yrs old bad way	200	—
1 do boy Warner 15 runaway	—	—
1 do woman Margaret 60 yrs old	6	—
1 do Turfy 33 runaway	—	—
1 do Man Robt to run 3 yrs from	100	—
next november		
2775 lbs bacon a 3 Ct		83 1/2
224 lbs lard a 3 Ct	17	80
4 old barrels		75
1 hoghead		50
3 butcher knives		—
Book case & books	50	—
1 corner pine cupboard	5	—
2 old writing desks	2	50
1 old walnut desk		50
1 old settle chest	1	—
1 old arm chair		50
1 lb. old anal Iron		25
1 walnut breakfast table	2	—
1 wash stand		75
	2051	82 1/2

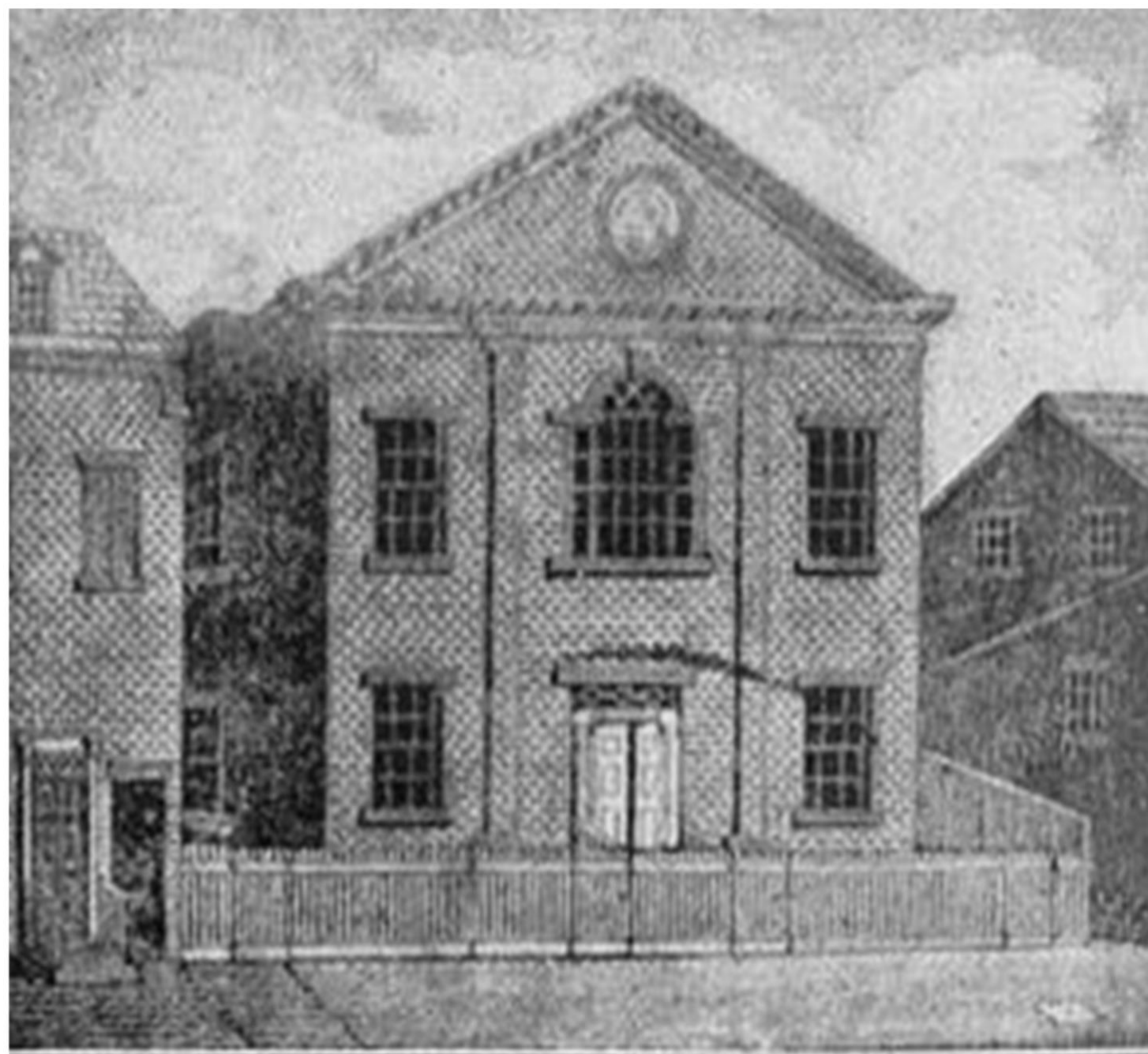
Henry Highland Garnet, born enslaved to Colonel William Spencer, lived on a plantation called “Darby” in Kent County, Maryland. Spencer, a colonel who had served in the War of 1812, owned the entirety of modern-day Chesterville. Henry’s father, George Trusty, also born on the plantation worked as a shoemaker. His mother Henrietta’s (Henny) role on the plantation is unknown; however, she most likely performed domestic service.

According to the 1820 US Census, Spencer enslaved 22 men, women, and children. Spencer died on March 8, 1822, leaving Garnet’s family – then using the surname Trusty – at risk for separation and sale by Spencer’s heirs. Spencer’s entire estate was left to his brothers, Isaac and Jervis, and his sister, Charlotte, and their children. Isaac, the administrator of the estate, held all responsibility for paying debts that Spencer owed. He additionally controlled all Spencer’s holdings, including enslaved people.

James McCune Smith, an early Garnet biographer, detailed that the Trusty family felt uneasy after the death of William Spencer. Rather than risk a potential separation the family began to plan their escape. Under the guise that they were attending a family friend’s funeral on a neighboring Delaware farm, the group escaped using two horses and a wagon. The assembly consisting of the Garnet family and a few other of Spencer’s slaves traveled through Delaware where they received aid from Thomas Garrett. Garrett, a young Quaker, aided many of those traveling the underground railroad. The group eventually split and traveled to different locations with the Trusty family settling in New York City. Once settled the Trusty family changed their surname to Garnet. Henry’s father became George, his wife Henny renamed Elizabeth, and their two children became Henry and Eliza.

During May, 1822, two months after William Spencer died, Isaac Spencer began paying slave catchers James Woodall and John Newcombe, as well as his brother Jervis Spencer to apprehend the freedom seekers and stolen horses. This probate record identifies the following enslaved people as “runaway”: Jacob, aged 30, Jonathan, aged 25, Warner, aged 15, William “Bill”, aged 27, Stephen, 38, Pere, 40, Michael, 22, Joseph, 36, and Trusty[? illegible], 33. By January 1825, Bill, Stephen, Pere, Joseph, and Michael had been apprehended. Later, John Spencer captured Warner near New York City.






NEW YORK AFRICAN FREE SCHOOL, No. 2, built a century ago

Be it Remembered that on the Eleventh day of January, in the Year Eighteen Hundred and thirty, a Manumission was brought to be enrolled among the Records of Kent County, the true whereof here ensues in the following words and figures, to wit:

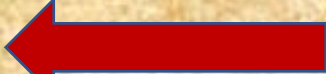
To All whom it may concern, be it known, that I Isaac Spencer, of Kent County, in the State of Maryland for divers good causes and considerations (me therunto moving, as also in further consideration of a Post Note of One hundred dollars of the United States Bank, to me in hand paid, have release from Slavery, liberated, Manumitted and set free, and by these presents do hereby liberate, Manumit and set free my Negro woman named Henny Christy, now in the State of New York being of the age of about Forty years, and her the said Negro woman named Henny Christy, I do declare to be henceforth free, Manumitted and discharged from all manner of servitude or Service to me my Executors or Administrators forever.

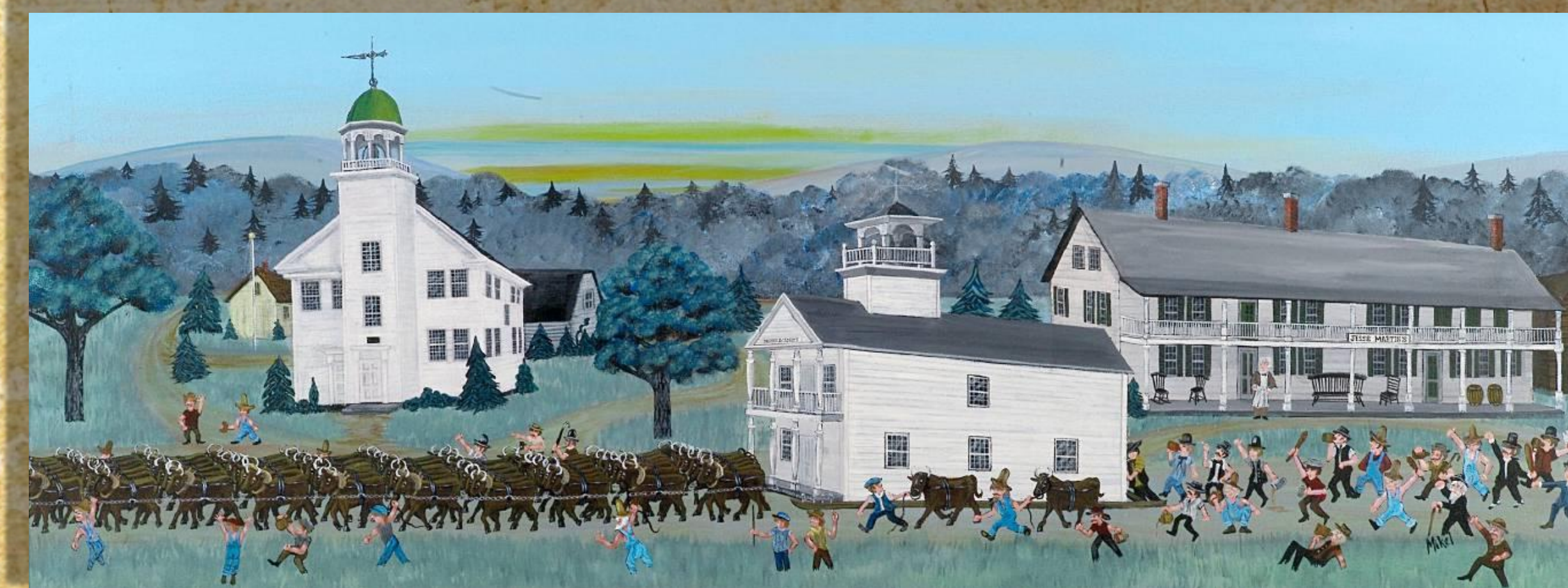
In Testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and affixed my seal this Eleventh Day of Jan'y, Eighteen Hundred and thirty

Signed, Sealed and  Isaac Spencer (Seal)

In the presence of us - 3

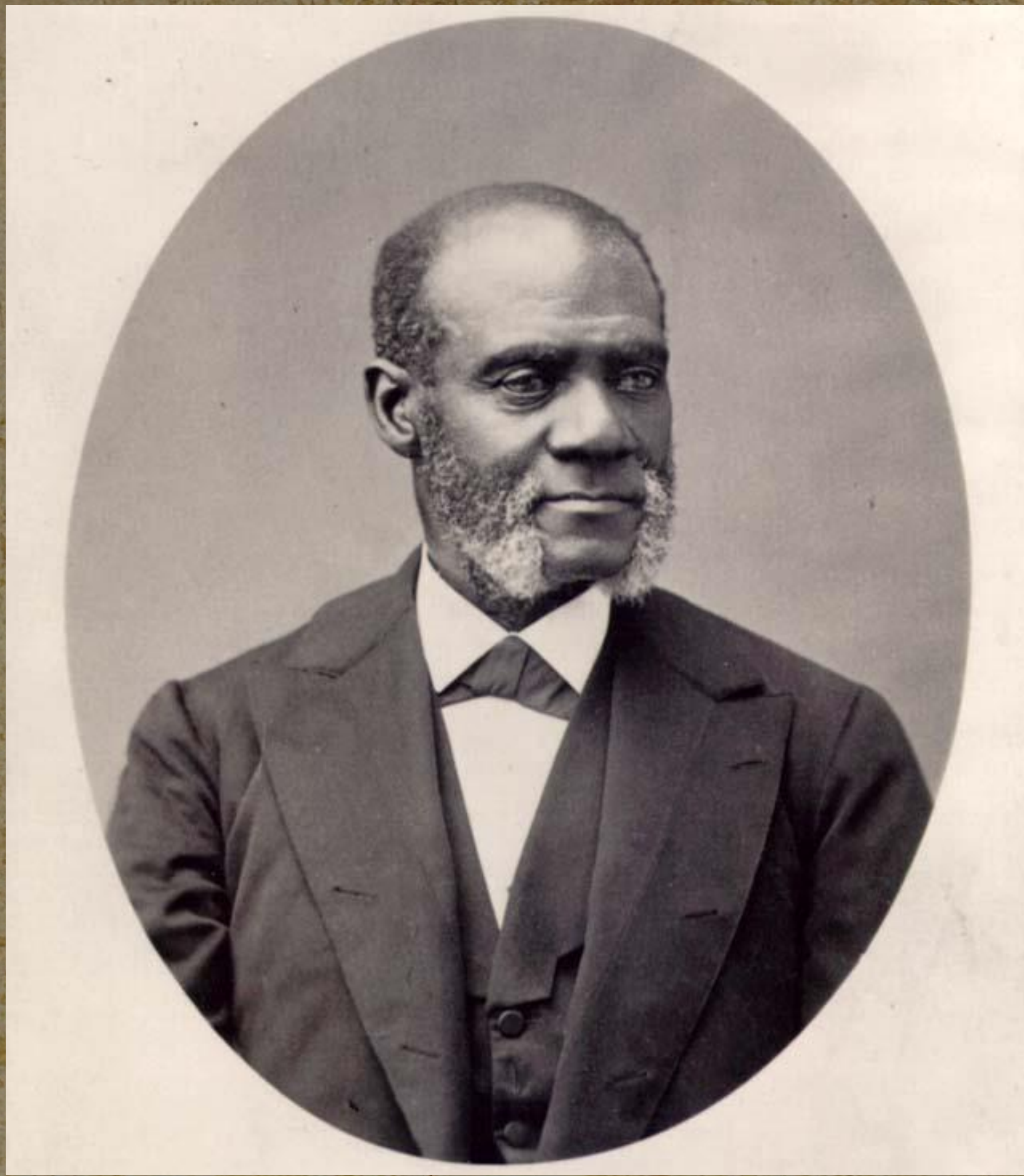
John L. Labell } Justices of the Peace in Kent  
Richd. H. Seymour } County State of Maryland

Henry's father made his living in New York City as a shoemaker. Once settled in their new home Henry began school for the first time at the New York African Free School at the age of eleven. The Garnet family knew that Isaac Spencer would be looking for them so they began to take further steps to conceal their identity. To remain hidden from Spencer, Henry sought employment aboard a shipping vessel. This new occupation provided Henry with the ability to travel extensively while remaining hidden. While Henry was at sea slave catchers found his mother Henny in New York City in 1829. Abolitionists negotiated Henny's freedom through purchase. Isaac Spencer recorded this transaction in the Kent County Courthouse by signing Henny's emancipation on January 11, 1830. 



Shortly after his mother's safe return Henry entered into apprenticeship with a Quaker man. This decision was most likely an attempt to remove himself further from the reach of Spencer's slave catchers. At the end of his two-year indenture Henry enrolled in high school to study Latin and Greek. In 1835, at the age of 20, Henry decided to move to New Hampshire and attend the Noyes Academy. Despite the welcoming nature of the academy those living around the school were not supportive of its mission to educate African Americans. Tensions eventually led members of the community to rally and pull the school off of its foundation and burn it to the ground. Realizing that it was unsafe to remain in the area Henry left to return to school in New York City. Despite many setbacks in his search for an education Henry graduated from the Oneida Institute in 1840.



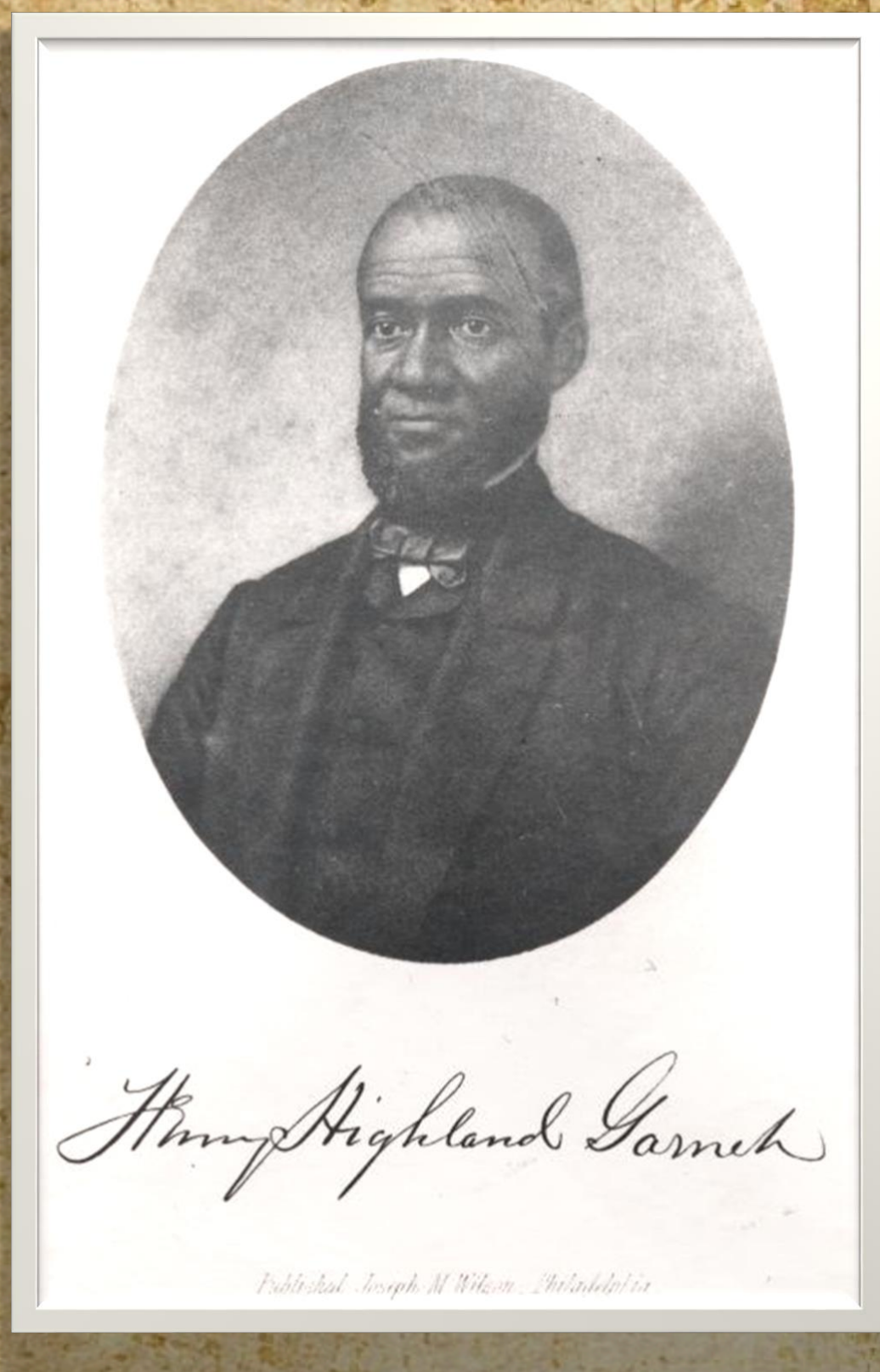


Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church C. 1899

In 1841, Henry married his classmate, Julia Matthews. The two would go on to have three children, only one of whom would survive into adulthood. In 1843, Garnet became the pastor at Liberty Street Church in Troy, New York, where he remained until 1848. During the 1840s Henry became more outspoken regarding African American emancipation. In 1843, he spoke at the National Negro Convention in Buffalo, New York giving a speech now entitled “Call to Rebellion.” It was no mystery what Garnet was trying to inspire his peers to do in his statements which included direct calls for physical resistance: “Brethren, arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties. Now is the day and the hour. Let every slave throughout the land do this and the days of slavery are numbered. You cannot be more oppressed than you have been – you cannot suffer greater cruelties than you have already. *Rather die freemen than live to be slaves.*” Frederick Douglass, at the time a rising abolitionist, and other delegates would go on to denounce Garnet’s ideas. After the rejection of his impassioned speech, Garnet focused his attention on religion and education. However, he never lost his desire for total African American emancipation and encouraged many to seek their freedom regardless of the means through which they found it.

By 1849, Garnet began supporting the emigration of African Americans to Mexico, Liberia, or the West Indies, where he thought they could lead better lives. In support of this, he founded the African Civilization Society. In 1850, Garnet traveled to England to speak on behalf of the Free Produce Movement, which encouraged Englishmen to stop supporting American markets that used slave labor for profit. Even though Garnet had traveled extensively the United States government had become hesitant about granting African Americans passports since this could award them the same rights and privileges as white citizens. Nevertheless, Henry received his passport which prompted the English *Anti-Slavery Reporter* to hail Garnet as the “First Black Citizen of the Dis-United States.” With his document in hand, Garnet spent over two years traveling promoting the African Civilization Society. Shortly after his speaking tour, Garnet and his family went to Jamaica as missionaries. He and his family spent three years there opening a training school for girls called the Female Industrial School. When the American Civil War began Garnet ended his hopes for emigration and returned to the states to organize African American army units. Henry moved his family to Washington, DC, to support soldiers and the Union cause. While in DC he began serving as the pastor of the prominent Liberty (Fifteenth) Street Presbyterian Church.





During his tenure as pastor in Washington DC, Garnet became associated with President Abraham Lincoln. In February of 1865, President Lincoln asked Garnet to deliver the memorial sermon to celebrate the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment in the House of Representatives, which he did on Sunday, February 14. In his sermon, titled "Let the Monster Perish," he spoke of his childhood as a slave on the Eastern Shore of Maryland:

I was born among the cherished institutions of slavery. My earliest recollections of parents, friends, and the home of my childhood are clouded with its wrongs. The first sight that met my eyes was a Christian mother enslaved by professed Christians, but thank God, now a saint in heaven. The first sounds that startled my ear and sent a shudder through my soul were the cracking of the whip and the clanking of chains. These sad memories mar the beauties of my native shores and darken all the slaveland, which but for the reign of despotism, had been a paradise. But those shores are fairer now. The mists have left my native valleys, and the clouds have rolled away from the hills, and Maryland, the unhonored grave of my fathers, is now the free home of their liberated and happier children.

In July of 1865 Garnet was invited by the American Home Missionary Society to be their exploring agent among the freedmen. He would spend the next four months traveling in the south and southwest. His first stop was in New Market (Now Chesterville), Kent County, Maryland. While he was there, he spoke with a number of former slave-holders. Henry wrote a letter to Gerrit Smith on October 23, 1865, in which he said:

I am now on my homeward journey from the South after an absence of four months. I have traveled on a tour of observation among my freed brethren from the eastern shores of Maryland to the banks of the Mississippi. I have been to my native plantation in New Market, Kent County, Maryland, from which place my parents fled twenty-nine years ago. I there freely spoke my sentiments by special invitation of ex-slaveholders and was most kindly received. Strange to say, they actually seemed to be quite proud that even a black man, a native of Kent, received some consideration from his fellow men.







Palm Grove Cemetery, Monrovia

In 1868, Garnet was appointed president of Avery College in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. In 1870, Garnet returned to Shiloh Church in New York where he remained for over ten years. He remained politically active throughout his time in Pennsylvania and New York and was a supporter of the Cuban independence movement. After the death of his first wife, Julia in 1879, Henry would marry Sarah Smith Tompkins. Sarah a teacher, principal, and suffragette remained by Henry's side for the remainder of his life.

Garnet preached his farewell sermon at Shiloh on November 6, 1881. In 1883, President James Garfield appointed Henry Highland Garnet to serve as United States Minister and Counsel General in Liberia, fulfilling Garnet's lifelong dream of living in Africa. He arrived in Liberia on December 28, 1881, only to die of malaria on February 13, 1882. Garnet was given a state funeral by the Liberian government at Palm Grove Cemetery in Monrovia. Documenting the funeral Alexander Crummell stated:

[T]hey buried him like a prince, this princely man, with the blood of a long line of chieftains in his veins, in the soil of his fathers. The entire military forces of the capital of the republic turned out to render a last tribute of respect and honor. The President and his cabinet, the ministry of every name, the president, professors and students of the college, large bodies of citizens from the river settlement, as well as the townsmen, attended his obsequies as mourners. A noble tribute was accorded him by Rev. E. W. Blyden, D. D., LL. D., one of the finest scholars and thinkers in the nation. Minute guns were fired at every footfall of the solemn procession.

Today, the elementary school in Chestertown proudly bears the name of Garnet. The school, built in 1916, served as an African American school and continued in that role until desegregation in 1967. The Maryland Historical Trust erected a historical marker at the corner of 290 and 291 in order to honor the location of Henry's escape from slavery. Recently, the Historical Society of Kent County successfully submitted a grant to have the Henry Highland Garnet escape site included on the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. Garnet's story is a multifaceted one and one which cannot be fully explained in a simple exhibition. The Society encourages everyone to research and learn more about Henry Highland Garnet.

