

David Ruggles (1810-1849)

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David Ruggles was a free-born African American born in 1810 in Norwich, Connecticut. He attended the Sabbath School for the poor which admitted people of color starting in 1815. In 1827 he left Connecticut for New York City where he operated a grocery store for the next four years. He then quit the grocery business to open his own bookshop in early 1834. Ruggles is generally known as the first African American bookseller. In September 1835, in a New York era of extreme anti-black violence, a white pro-slavery mob burned his store.

Ruggles extended many publications and prints promoting the abolition of slavery and in opposition to the efforts of the American Colonization Society which promoted black settlement in Liberia. In doing so, Ruggles enraged moderate abolitionists. He began writing for radical abolitionist newspapers and for his own pamphlets against slavery.

Then in 1835 he began his most dangerous work against slavery. He and several other young black men formed the New York Committee of Vigilance, an interracial group. They put their lives on the line to free kidnapped blacks, to attack slavers and to help escaped slaves traveling on the Underground Railroad. Slave catchers patrolled the streets of Manhattan then, trying to kidnap fugitive slaves or free blacks and send them into bondage. David Ruggles and the other members of the Committee of Vigilance confronted them on the street. At that time in New York, any slave brought to the state was free after nine months. Ruggles would actually go to private homes to tell people they were free.

Ruggles was active on the Underground Railroad. His work with the committee led to his involvement in numerous court cases where he helped organize the legal defense against fugitive slaves who had fled to the North. If a fugitive slave were recaptured, Ruggles would be present in the jails and courtrooms during their trials, as a form of public awareness regarding what happened to them. In September 1838 Ruggles took on the case of an escaped Maryland slave, Frederick Washington Bailey. Later Bailey changed his name to Frederick Douglass: "I had been in New York but a few days, when Mr. Ruggles sought me out, and very kindly took me to his boarding-house at the corner of Church and Lespenard Streets," wrote Douglass. He noted David Ruggles was 'watched and hemmed in on almost every side,' but 'he seemed to be more than a match for his enemies.' David Ruggles put up Frederick Douglass for a few days and helped him bring his fiancée to New York so they could marry. They wed in his parlor. From his experiences, Ruggles forged a new philosophy for the attainment of black liberation. One of the most radical men of his times, Ruggles advocated self reliance, and felt that those "who would be free, themselves must strike the first blow." He dedicated himself to helping anyone who wished to do this. David Ruggles helped 600 enslaved people to freedom during the 1830s despite attempts to kill him, kidnap him and burn down his business.

In 1836, David Ruggles heard that a Portuguese sea captain held five kidnapped Africans in his ship, planning to sell them in the South. At that time slave trading was illegal but practiced illegally. Ruggles obtained a writ of habeas corpus and demanded the authorities take the

captives to a local jail until they had a hearing on their status. He also got the captain arrested on charges of slave trading.

The Portuguese sea captain, free on bail, and a slave catcher sought revenge on Ruggles. They knocked on David Ruggles' door and demanded to speak to him. When he refused they tried to break down his door. David Ruggles escaped, returned with a watchman and revealed the plot to grab him and sell him into slavery.

In 1841, Ruggles refused to sit in the "Blacks-only" section of a steamer headed for Nantucket. A month later, he boarded a "White car" at the railway station, dragged off he filed a lawsuit against the company. This provoked other anti-discrimination suits, unfavorable publicity and acts of civil defiance by others. Ruggles was jailed many times before he was thirty years old, and these experiences finally broke his health affecting his vision. Ruggles would die in 1849 at the age of 39, just 11 years before the election of Abraham Lincoln