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An Abolitionist Daguerreotype, New York, 1850

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On 21 August 1850, only two days after the Senate passed the Fugitive Slave Law, approximately 2,000 abolitionists gathered in Cazenovia, New York, where they enacted a social, written, and photographic protest.¹ Part of the Compromise of 1850, the law enraged abolitionists because, among other things, it penalized northerners for failing to aid in returning fugitive slaves.² A key purpose of the convention was to write “A Letter to the American Slaves from those who have fled from American Slavery,” which was actually penned by white radical Gerrit Smith and endorsed by the fugitives in attendance. The letter characterized slavery as a state of war and urged slaves “to plunder, burn, and kill, as you may have occasion to do to promote your escape.”³ Many who authorized the letter also posed for Cazenovia daguerreotypist Ezra Greenleaf Weld.

While scholars have focused on artists, illustrated presses, technological shifts, and wars as the engines of American news photography from the 1840s to the 1860s, a look at the Cazenovia daguerreotype reveals social movement image-making as an important force in this history. At first glance, the photograph reflects the interracial and inter-gender composition of abolitionism. But for those at the convention, the daguerreotype held more specific purposes and meanings, which surrounded one particular white abolitionist: William L. Chaplin. Only a few days before the convention, Chaplin had been imprisoned for seeking to help the slaves of two Georgia congressmen escape in Washington, DC.⁴ Since his arrest came so close to the start of the convention, Chaplin played an unusually prominent role in its activities. The “Letter to American Slaves” advised bondspeople of how Chaplin’s “precious name . . . has been added to the list of those, who, in helping you gain your liberty, have lost their own.”⁵ At Cazenovia, abolitionists agreed to raise \$20,000 to aid this “willing martyr.”⁶ As the abolitionist organ *The Liberator* reveals, they also sought to aid Chaplin with a photograph:

Novel Idea. — . . . in order to give him an idea of the meeting at which he was prevented by ‘circumstances’ from attending, a daguerreotype picture of the Convention, with some of the most prominent members on the stand, was taken, to be sent to him. This must be highly gratifying to him, as affording a sensible proof that the Convention are not unmindful to ‘remember them that are in bonds.’⁷



Figure 1.3 Ezra Greenleaf Weld, *Fugitive Slave Law Convention, Cazenovia, New York*, daguerreotype (sixth-plate image), 22 August 1850. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Digital image courtesy of Getty's Open Content Program.

The notice suggests that the daguerreotype was intended as a concrete means of communication between the group and Chaplin, as well as a symbol of protest and togetherness. His fiancée, the bonneted Theodosia Gilbert, literally took center stage, seated next to Frederick Douglass. The Edmonson sisters, ex-slaves who had gained their freedom with Chaplin's help, stood behind the desk; white abolitionist Gerrit Smith stood between them.⁸ It is not clear if Chaplin ever received the daguerreotype. But this much is clear: the intended circulation of the daguerreotype reveals a moment of experimentation in which abolitionists harnessed a new medium to convey movement news to a distant but familiar participant.⁹

If the daguerreotype was meant to spread news amongst activists, it became news through the press. Since *The Liberator* did not reproduce the daguerreotype as an engraving, the image reached the public through its written description. Words, alone, conveyed the power of this visual object in the media. By highlighting the activists' efforts to visually communicate with Chaplin, *The Liberator* stressed the capacity of photography to serve as proximate witness—and, thus, stand in for Chaplin's inability to see the convention firsthand. The paper drew upon an imagined sense of image circulation to emphasize his forced separation. But *The Liberator* also celebrated this image-making as notable in its own right. The notice—terming the instance a “Novel Idea”—reflected and fueled an emergent trope about photography as news that would grow more prominent in future decades. *The Liberator* considered the image as evidence of political struggle and of abolitionists' cultural ingenuity in the nascent years of photographic news pictures.

The Cazenovia daguerreotype fits uneasily into narratives about early American photography. Scholars have tended to define “photojournalism” in opposition to the conventions associated with unique, private images in the mid-nineteenth century—most notably the sentimental exchange of portraits amongst families and friends.¹⁰ But this abolitionist portrait reveals a messier history of early photographic practices. Abolitionists fused the daguerreotype's capacity to document a public event and the newspaper's power to circulate information with the dominant practice of exchanging unique portraits to express affective ties. At Cazenovia, they created a picture that shared and became news in the service of radical politics.

Notes

- 1 John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001): 163–5; and Deborah Willis and Barbara Krauthamer, *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013): 30–3.
- 2 James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery*, rev. edn (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997): 124.
- 3 “A Letter to the American Slaves from those who have fled from American Slavery,” *The North Star*, 5 September 1850. Accessible Archives: African American Newspapers.
- 4 Stauffer, *Black Hearts of Men*: 164; “An Affray—The Arrest of William Chaplin,” *The National Era*, 15 August 1850. Accessible Archives: African American Newspapers.
- 5 “A Letter to the American Slaves. . . .”
- 6 “A Letter to the American Slaves . . .”
- 7 *The Liberator*, 6 September 1850. Accessible Archives: The Liberator.
- 8 Stauffer, *Black Hearts of Men*: 163–5.

- 9** There are two archived copies of the photograph. They are held by the Getty Museum and the Madison County Historical Society.
- 10** Michael L. Carlebach, *The Origins of Photojournalism in America* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992). On private exchanges, see David Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006): 57–60.