

An African American protests the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850

Introduction

This 1850 letter written by Henry Weeden is a statement against slavery by a free African American. Weeden was one of Boston's leading abolitionists. In the 1840s, he had been an activist for the integration of Boston's schools.^[1]

Henry Weeden was also a tailor with a shop at 10 Franklin Avenue in Boston. On December 4, 1850, Weeden's shop received an overcoat in need of repair from Watson Freeman (1797–1868), a US Marshal in Massachusetts appointed by President Franklin Pierce. One of Freeman's jobs as a marshal was upholding the Fugitive Slave Law, passed in September 1850 as part of the Compromise of 1850.

Upon receiving Freeman's overcoat, Weeden wrote this strongly worded letter to Freeman refusing his business and returning the coat. Weeden wrote that he did "crave the patronage of no Being that would volunteer his services to arrest a Fugitive Slave" and had "take[n] this method of returning [the coat] without complying with Your request." Weeden closed his letter by responding to a declaration Freeman had once made of his "readiness to hang any number of negroes remarkably cheap."^[2]

A dedicated abolitionist who would not overlook his commitment to equality in order to make a profit, Weeden wrote, "With me[,] Principle first. Money afterwards."

^[1] William C. Nell, Henry Weeden, Thomas Cummings, and James J. Jiles, "New-England Freedom Association," *The Liberator*, December 12, 1845.

^[2] "Slave-Hunters in Boston," *The Liberator*, November 1, 1850.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

1. Why can Henry Weeden's letter be read as not only a refusal to perform a service, but also as a strong repudiation of the Fugitive Slave Law? Why did Weeden write this letter and not just refuse to repair the coat?
2. How does this letter help us to understand the tensions that existed in states in which abolitionists were very active?
3. From what you know of American history, what other actions were taken by abolitionists

An African American protests the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850

to oppose the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850?

An African American protests the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850

Image

.01

Boston Dec 4. 1850

Mr Watson Freeman

Sir

Your Coat came to me this morning for repairs: I take this method of returning it - without complying with your request - With me Principle first - Money afterwards

Though a poor man I have the patronage of no Being that would volunteer his services to arrest a Fugitive Slave or that "would hang 100 Niggers for 25 cents each -

Henry Weeden
10 Franklin Avenue

Henry Weeden to Watson Freeman, December 4, 1850. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC09028.01)

An African American protests the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850

Transcript

Henry Weeden to Watson Freeman, December 4, 1850. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC09028.01)

Boston Dec 4. 1850

Mr Watson Freeman

Sir

Your Coat came to me this morning for repairs. I take this method of returning it. without complying with Your request. With me Principle first. Money afterwards.

Though a poor man I crave the patronage of no Being that would volunteer his services to arrest a Fugitive Slave or that would hang 100 Niggers for 25 cents each –

Henry Weeden
10 Franklin Avenue

[*address*]

Watson Freeman
Court Square
Boston