

DAVID RUGGLES



David Ruggles. Print. Amistad Collection. Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

David Ruggles was a prominent member of New York City's abolitionist community. Ruggles helped to expand the opportunities available to New York's growing Black community and worked to end slavery in the United States, pushing the city to the forefront of the fight for freedom.

EARLY LIFE

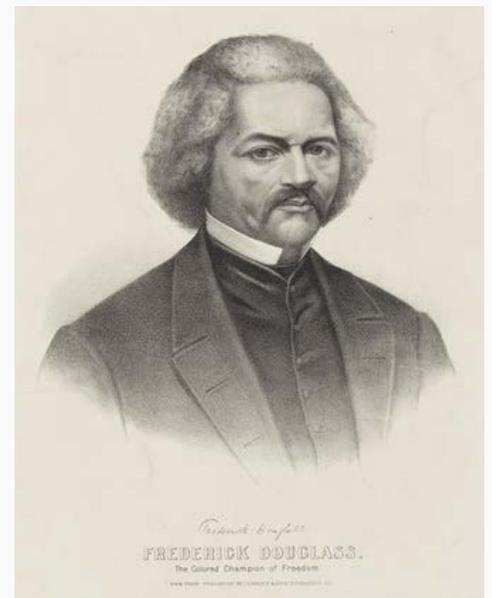
Ruggles was born free in Connecticut in 1810, and settled in New York in 1828, one year after enslaved people were emancipated or freed in New York State. He came to New York City as a sailor, one of the few professions open to Black men of his generation. With the abolition of slavery in New York State in 1827, growing numbers of free African Americans created their own neighborhoods, businesses, churches, and schools. However, severe limits on freedom for Black New Yorkers persisted: most Black men lost the right to vote in 1821 when a poll tax was imposed on Black voters, and many Black New Yorkers were barred from well-paying work and forced to take low-paying, grueling, or dangerous jobs to make a living.

ACTIVISM

Newcomer David Ruggles was committed to fighting slavery, and he used a variety of tactics to advance the abolitionist cause. He opened a grocery store and joined the Quaker "Free Produce" movement, selling only food made without slave labor. He opened a bookshop as well as an antislavery lending library, and in 1838, he launched the *Mirror of Liberty*, the first magazine founded by an African American.

David Ruggles was also a founding member of the New York Committee of Vigilance, a radical multiracial organization that protected the rights of free Black New Yorkers and assisted fugitive Black people on their escape to freedom. Members of the Committee took direct action to safeguard Black freedom: they boarded ships in search of captive Black people, informed newly freed Black New Yorkers of their rights, and provided financial support and legal aid to people fleeing slavery for freedom in northern states and Canada.

By the 1830s, abolitionists in the northeast had also started to develop a network of safe houses for enslaved people fleeing to the North and to Canada—the Underground Railroad. Ruggles became a key organizer in New York's network of homes and churches that harbored those who escaped slavery, defying laws against aiding fugitives and threats of violence to help nearly 600 enslaved people attain freedom. One of the people Ruggles helped was Frederick Douglass (shown), who became one of the nation's leading voices for



Currier & Ives. Frederick Douglass. *The Colored Champion of Freedom*. ca. 1873. Print. Museum of the City of New York. 56.300.1011

abolition of slavery. In 1838, at age 20, Douglass stayed for several nights at Ruggles' home at 36 Lispenard Street when he first arrived in New York after escaping slavery in Maryland. Douglass became known across the world for speaking out against the evils of slavery and advocating for women's suffrage.



Ruggles remained part of a growing community of Black antislavery activists in New York until 1841. After his health and eyesight began to fail, he left New York for a radical commune outside Northampton, Massachusetts. In fewer than 15 years in the city, he had helped to radicalize the Black antislavery movement and to build an underground network that would, over the next decades, bring hundreds of enslaved people to freedom.

QUESTIONS

How did David Ruggles create positive change in his community?

What were some of the long-term effects of Ruggles' work in New York City?

What would full emancipation (freedom) in our society look like today as the struggle for racial justice continues?

LEARN MORE

David Ruggles is featured in the [New York At Its Core](#) exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York.

To learn more about David Ruggles and discover primary sources that bring his story to life, check out the NYCDOE and MCNY curriculum supplement *Hidden Voices: Untold Stories of New York City History* at weteachnyc.org/resources/resource/hidden-voices.

Information about the Museum's programs for teachers, students, and families, as well as online lesson plans and educational resources, can be found on the Museum's Digital Education Hub: mcny.org/DigitalEd.

ACTIVIST NEW YORK

Visit the [Activist New York](#) exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York to learn more about the city's history of activism and the people who have propelled social change from the 1600s to today.

Explore the [Activist New York](#) online exhibition and discover classroom resources and [lesson plans](#) by visiting activistnewyork.mcny.org.

SOURCES

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SUPPORTERS

Education programs in conjunction with *Activist New York* are made possible by The Puffin Foundation, Ltd.



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The Frederick A.O. Schwarz Education Center is endowed by grants from The Thompson Family Foundation Fund, the F.A.O. Schwarz Family Foundation, the William Randolph Hearst Endowment, and other generous donors.