

“One of His Choicest Treasures”: Robert Purvis and the Meaning of Equality

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Passports can symbolize many different things: a remembrance of special trips to other countries, an important piece of identification to carry and protect while traveling, perhaps even an example of a photo one would rather tuck away than present. But to Robert Purvis, a Black man born in South Carolina in 1810, the passport he received in 1834 meant much, much more. Decades later, when he was interviewed at the age of 80 by a Philadelphia newspaper reporter about his life, Purvis stated that the passport he received at age 24 was “one of his choicest treasures.”¹

This article explores the stories and importance of Robert Purvis’s passport through State Department records held at the National Archives, as well as accounts that Purvis shared publicly. The narrative reflects the inherent challenges and struggles in Purvis’s life and the lives of other free Black people in the decades leading up to the American Civil War. The passport application also illustrates ideas in that era about the defining characteristics of race as based both on skin color and blood.

Robert Purvis was born in Charleston, South Carolina. His father was a wealthy white merchant born in England and raised in Scotland, and his mother was the daughter of an

enslaved African woman and a Jewish man in Charleston. When Robert Purvis was nine, his father decided to move the family to northern England or Scotland. In preparation for that big move, the family relocated to Philadelphia while the elder Purvis started to settle his business affairs. However, Robert’s father died while the family was still in Philadelphia. Robert’s mother received a sizable bequest; and Robert and his two brothers shared an estate valued at about \$250,000 (more than \$5 million in today’s terms).² This meant that they would not have to work for a living, could hire household help, and live a life of relative ease as other wealthy gentlemen.

In the spring of 1834, Robert Purvis, now an up-and-coming and fiery advocate for abolition and equal rights, decided to travel to Great Britain at the urging of his friend and fellow abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison had given Purvis letters of introduction to several people whom he had met on a trip the year before. While meeting English abolitionists, Purvis would also advocate against another issue important to him: colonization. Purvis was adamantly opposed to colonization—a movement to send Black people in the United States “back” to Africa—because of its underlying unfairness and racism. Purvis believed that Black people born in the United States had as much right to live in and enjoy this country as their white counterparts.³

Purvis applied for a passport ahead of his departure date, but according to a letter in his passport application file, and the account he related throughout his life, he was offered a “special form” instead, because



(Courtesy of Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College)

Picture of Robert Purvis (seated center) with other members of the The Board of the Pennsylvania Antislavery Society, 1851.

he was a person of color. This was not atypical at the time—it was not until after the Civil War and the 1868 ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment that the United States legally considered Black people to have equal protection and standing under the law. However, Purvis, outraged that he was not being treated like any other American citizen, solicited the help of a prominent Philadelphia friend, Roberts Vaux. Vaux wrote a letter of support that became central to Purvis's passport application file.⁴

In Vaux's May 16, 1834, letter to Secretary of State Louis McLane, whom he addressed as "Esteemed Friend," he noted that Purvis had received a special form from a representative

in Philadelphia and explained why he believed this to be unfair: "The paper in question describes him as a person of colour, & denies him his title of citizen of the United States, a designation which is expressed even in seamens protections, without distinction of colour."

Vaux continued his letter by listing Purvis's bona fides as a gentleman, including wealth and education: the "considerable estate" from his father, and his attendance at "one of the Eastern Colleges." Vaux then moved on to the issue of Purvis's physical appearance. By all contemporary accounts and photographs, Purvis was very light skinned. Vaux contrasted Purvis's complexion with other skin tones, using common

language and concepts of the time about the differences—and perceived inferiority—of so-called Black blood: "As to his African descent it is scarcely perceptible in his appearance, his hair is straight, & many Southern complexions are as dark, in which not a drop of negro blood imparts the tinge."⁵

We don't know if Robert Purvis played any role in shaping the letter's argument, or if he ever saw the letter. It is conceivable that Vaux wrote and sent it without showing the letter to Purvis, especially if, as Vaux indicates, time was of the essence. But based upon the written record Purvis left, it is unlikely he would have agreed with the second

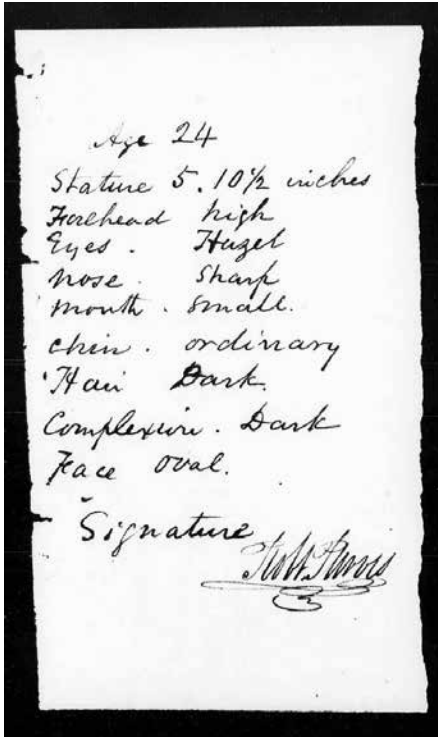
part of Vaux's argument—that Purvis deserved a passport because he didn't look Black. Throughout his life, Purvis espoused equality for all people regardless of skin color or sex; he strongly believed there was only one race: the human race. He echoed this outlook in one of his final interviews: "I believe in the oneness and indivisibility of the human family."⁶

In any case, Vaux's direct appeal to McLean on behalf of Purvis must have worked, for at the top of the letter, in a penmanship distinct from Vaux's, is this note: "Passport W3373 sent same day." It is notable that Robert Purvis's passport application is only one of two pre-Civil War passport applications for free Black men discovered to date at the National Archives. Both passports required the personal intervention of prominent white men.⁷

Throughout his lifetime, Purvis publicly related the story of acquiring a passport, most notably when citizenship for Black people was being hotly debated—e.g., following the *Dred Scott* Supreme Court decision in 1857, in which Black people were declared not eligible for U.S. citizenship; and after Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed enslaved people in the states in rebellion. Purvis also touched on the topic later in his life in *The Philadelphia Press* interview. One curious, but consistent twist to Purvis's account is

the personal involvement of President Andrew Jackson in the concession of the passport.

Robert Purvis was known to be an accomplished and thunderous orator in his speeches against slavery and for equal civil rights. This



Passport Application for Robert Purvis.

was evidenced in an April 1857 Philadelphia meeting to denounce the *Dred Scott* decision and discuss, according to *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, "other outrages to which the colored people are subjected under the Constitution of the United States."⁸ Purvis offered a declaration and a series of resolutions relating to citizenship and civil rights and was then asked by an attendee whether he had been treated as an American citizen in

the past. He spoke about his passport, highlighting where the critical support had come from—President Andrew Jackson—not the government itself. Purvis acknowledged the assistance of Roberts Vaux, but then added:

I was indebted for this not to the American Constitution or to the American Government, but to the generous impulses of General Andrew Jackson, who had on more occasions than one in the then late war publicly tendered his gratitude to colored "citizens" for their brave assistance in the defense of the country.⁹

Andrew Jackson's involvement in the case, and his support of Purvis's passport application, is surprising on several levels: Jackson was an ardent anti-abolitionist slave owner perhaps best known for his Indian removal policy and the Trail of Tears. But Purvis, who had little reason to praise Jackson's actions otherwise, attributed Jackson's support to his remembrance of the free Black men who fought under him as a general in the War of 1812—a war 20 years in the past when Purvis applied for his passport. The connection seems tenuous, but history is full of such connections, and it clearly was what Purvis believed.

Passports and their connections to citizenship were on Robert Purvis's mind again in

Letter Transcript:

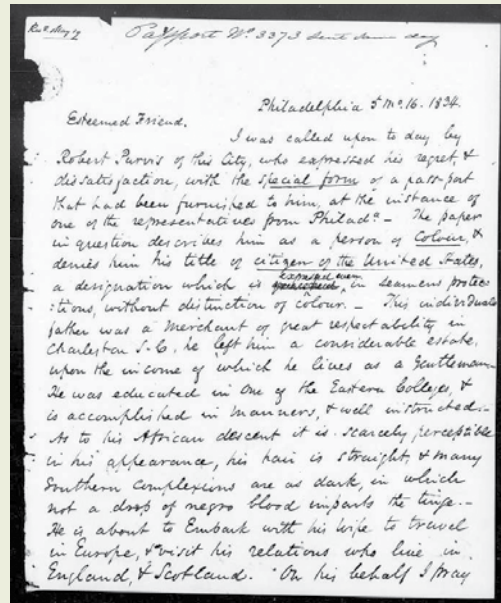
Supporting Letter for Robert Purvis Passport Application.

Page 1

Philadelphia 5 Mo. 16. 1834

Esteemed Friend.

I was called upon to day by Robert Purvis of this City, who expressed his regret, & dissatisfaction, with the [underlined] special form of a pass-port that had been furnished to him, at the instance of one of the representatives from Philada. - The paper in question describes him as a person of [underlined] colour, & denies him his title of [underlined] citizen of the United States, a designation which is expressed even in seamens protections, without distinction of colour. - This individual's father was a merchant of great respectability in Charleston S.C., he left him a considerable estate, upon the income of which he lives as a Gentleman. - He was educated in one of the Eastern Colleges, & is accomplished in manners, & well instructed. - As to his African descent it is scarcely perceptible in his appearance, his hair is straight, & many Southern complexions are as dark, in which not a drop of negro blood imparts the tinge. - He is about to Embark with his wife to travel in Europe, & visit his relations who live in England, & Scotland. On his behalf I pray



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leave to solicit for him a passport in the usual form, to which as a free born American he considers himself entitled from the Department of State - the document granted to him he thinks, & others also think, will not avail him for all the purposes of protection, especially on the Continent. -

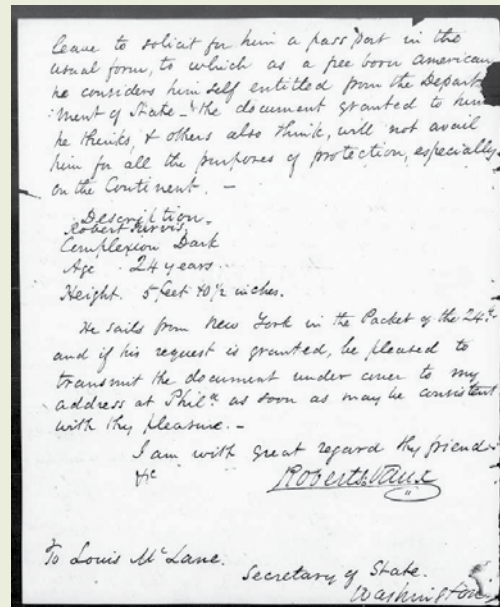
Description -
Robert Purvis.
Complexion Dark
Age 24 years.
Height 5 feet 10 1/2 inches.

He sails from New York in the Packet of the 24th and if his request is granted, be pleased to transmit the document under cover to my address at Phila. as soon as may be consisted with the pleasure. -

I am with great regard thy friend &c

Roberts. Vaux

To Louis McLane.
Secretary of State.
Washington



Passport Application #3373 Issued to Robert Purvis; 5/19/1834; Passport Applications, 10/31/1795 - 12/31/1905; General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. [Online Version, www.docstoc.org/documents/document/passport-applicationpurvis]

1863, when he spoke joyfully at an abolitionist gathering about the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Lincoln on January 1, 1863:

For the first time since this Society was organized, I stand before you a recognized citizen of the United States.... And let me add, for the first time since your government was a government is it an

honor to be a citizen of the United States! Sir, old things are passing away, all things are becoming new. Now a black man has rights, under this government, which every white man, here and everywhere, is bound to respect.... The black man is a citizen, all honor to Secretary Bates, who has so pronounced him. The black man can take out a passport and travel to the

Teaching Suggestions

1. What Does it Mean to be a Citizen?

- a. Ask students to think about and define, in their own words, what “citizenship” means and what the benefits are of citizenship in a country. Compile the responses.
- b. Ask students to read all three pages of Robert Purvis’s passport application, found online at www.docsteach.org/documents/document/passport-application-purvis.
- c. Guide students through analyzing the document using the National Archives document analysis worksheet, found online at www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/worksheets/written_document_analysis_worksheet.pdf
- d. Ask students to discuss what they learned from the passport application, including the contextual information, which informs students about the extreme rarity of a passport being granted to a free Black man during this time period.
- e. Lead a group conversation about how citizenship and equality were defined and intertwined during this time, and why his passport was important to Robert Purvis.

2. Viewpoint Compare and Contrast

- a. Divide students into small groups. Ask half of the groups to review Robert Purvis’s remarks about what he called the “atrocious decision” of the Supreme Court *Dred Scott* case, in the *Anti-Slavery Standard* of April 11, 1857. The article is available online at <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83035487/1857-04-11/ed-1/seq-2>.
- b. Ask the other half of the groups to review an excerpt from a speech Frederick Douglass gave in May 1857 about the same topic. They should read page 3 of that speech, available online at www.utc.edu/sites/default/files/2021-01/fddredscottspeechexcerpt2018.pdf

- c. Have each group answer the questions on the National Archives new Understanding Perspective document analysis worksheet at www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/worksheets/understanding-perspective-worksheet.pdf.
- d. Once students have a good sense of the document they are analyzing, bring the groups back together and have them share what they learned about each speech and the viewpoints of the speakers.
- e. Lead a group discussion about issues of citizenship and equality raised in the *Dred Scott* case.

3. Writing and Speaking for Equality. Robert Purvis was under 20 when he gave his first antislavery speech. The issues he fought against—slavery—and that he fought for—equal rights—were important and controversial topics of his time. What issues do students consider important today, and how are they similar and different to those that Purvis challenged?

- a. Ask students to read Robert Purvis’s remarks about what he called the “atrocious decision” of the Supreme Court in the *Dred Scott* case, in the *Anti-Slavery Standard* of April 11, 1857 (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83035487/1857-04-11/ed-1/seq-2>)
- b. Instruct students to write down specific words and phrases that they feel are important to Purvis’s argument and explain why they think these are important.
- c. Ask students to think about important issues today and write down important words and phrases related to those issues.
- d. Discuss how the words of today’s issues are different from those Purvis used, and how they are the same.

uttermost parts of the Earth, protected by the broad aegis of the government; all honor to Secretary Seward, who was the first to recognize this right.¹⁰

In the 1890 *Philadelphia Press* interview, Purvis included a new person in the story—prominent Philadelphia attorney Horace Binney, who had helped settle Purvis’s father’s will and who “inadvertently” mentioned that Purvis was a “colored man.” He then relayed an exchange witnessed by Binney between an enraged Andrew Jackson and Secretary of State McLean, when the former found out about Purvis initially being denied a passport. According to Purvis, Jackson wrapped up the conversation with this

statement: “Well, by God, sir, I order you to make out that passport and at once, sir. No American citizen, sir, shall be deprived of his rights while I am president of this country.”¹¹

Whether these were Jackson’s actual words in 1834, or whether they were simply a sentiment remembered and filtered by more than 50 intervening years is unknown, but Purvis credited Jackson not only with facilitating the process of receiving a passport, but also with recognizing Purvis as a citizen of the United States. To have a passport meant that one was a fully recognized citizen.

At the end of his life, Robert Purvis was hailed as the “President of the Underground Railroad” by *The New York Times* and other newspapers.¹²

He had helped hundreds of enslaved people gain freedom, pushed for and helped finance equal rights causes like abolition and suffrage for Black men and all women, and even championed far-away causes like Irish Home Rule.¹³ Robert Purvis’s life work, conducted in partnership with his wife Harriet Forten Purvis, is a fascinating study. His speeches are worth reading for inspiration and for what they reveal about his time and ours. And the passport that meant so much to him? It has not surfaced in any public archive to date. Perhaps it still exists somewhere, held by his descendants as one of their “choicest treasures”—a family heirloom that is also a powerful symbol of the long struggle for equality. ■

Additional Resources

Visiting Philadelphia? Here are a few landmarks related to Robert Purvis:

Robert Purvis Historical Marker

(<https://explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-107>)

1601 Mount Vernon Street. (Walkable from Center City) Purvis’s last home in Philadelphia.

Byberry Hall Marker

(www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=82287)

3003 Byberry Road. Near the home that the Purvis family moved to when they no longer felt safe in the city.

Historic Fair Hill

(<https://historicfairhill.com/robert-purvis>)

2901 Germantown Avenue.

Robert Purvis burial site. A Quaker cemetery, and one of the first racially integrated cemeteries in Philadelphia.

Johnson House Historic Site

(www.johnsonhouse.org)

6306 Germantown Avenue.

An Underground Railroad station and house museum in the Historic Germantown section of Philadelphia, home to American Anti-Slavery Society members (see the photograph on page 424).

Notes:

1. “Robert Purvis at 80: Philadelphia’s Great Colored Anti-Slavery Leader an Octogenarian,” *The Philadelphia Press* (August 3, 1890).
2. Margaret Hope Bacon, *But One Race: The Life of Robert Purvis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 21; See also Robert Purvis, National Park Service, www.nps.gov/people/robert-purvis.htm; ExplorePAHistory.com; Robert Purvis Historical Marker, <https://explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=I-A-107>.
3. Bacon, *But One Race*, 43.
4. Passport Application #3373 Issued to Robert Purvis; 5/19/1834; Passport Applications, 10/31/1795 - 12/31/1905; General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD (www.docstoc.org/documents/document/passport-application-purvis)
5. Ibid.
6. Bacon, *But One Race*, 198; “Robert Purvis at 80,” *The Philadelphia Press*.
7. Rebecca Sharp, “A Rare Find: Passport Applications of Free Blacks,” *Rediscovering Black History* blog (July 22, 2020), Say it Loud! Employee Affinity Group of the National Archives, <https://rediscovering-black-history.blogs.archives.gov/2020/07/22/a-rare-find-passport-applications-of-free-blacks>.
8. “The Voice of the Colored People of Philadelphia,” *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* (April 11, 1857).
9. Ibid.
10. “Speech of Robert Purvis,” *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* (May 16, 1863).
11. “Robert Purvis at 80” *The Philadelphia Press*.
12. “Robert Purvis Dead – Anti-Slavery Leader Expires in Philadelphia, Aged 87 – His Work for the Black Race,” *New York Times* (April 16, 1898). “Robert Purvis Passes Away – The Well-Known Abolitionist Dies at His Home on Mt. Vernon Street,” *Philadelphia Bulletin* (April 16, 1898).
13. Bacon, *But One Race*, 2.



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