

West Indian clothier Robert Banks, pastor and emigrationist William C. Monroe, and 24-year-old William Lambert formed the Colored Vigilant Committee early in 1842. Evidence suggests that they were motivated by the dominance of white voices in the growing discussion about issues such as black voting rights and education in Michigan. In a letter printed in *The Signal of Liberty*—Ann Arbor’s Liberty Party backed paper—Lambert and Monroe laid plain their reasons for forming the committee in a declaration announced publicly at City Hall on January 7, 1843.

Surreptitiously headlining their declaration under the title “Annual Report,” the duo explained that when they first conceived of the organization, they had been instructed by “friends” that there were already agents “advocating our cause” and “endeavoring to elevate us to our rights,” and thus there was “no necessity for such a committee” because it might “retard the great enterprise which they were about to achieve.” This was a clear statement of dissatisfaction with the abolitionist and reform organization whose boards were dominated by paternalistic whites, most likely regional Garrisonians who objected to engaging in the political process to advance causes that would help black people in Detroit and Michigan more broadly. That Chairman Monroe and Secretary Lambert had copies of the report delivered to the Liberty Party’s sounding board—the *Signal of Liberty* newspaper—in Ann Arbor was no coincidence. The recently formed political party had significant influence in abolitionist circles in Michigan, and unlike the diehard Garrisonians, Liberty Party supporters viewed the franchise as a necessary right worth practicing.

The “Annual Report” is a brilliantly crafted document that underscores the ways in which the committee viewed the protection of accused “fugitive slaves” and African American access to equal education and the political process as interwoven problems facing black families in Detroit and Michigan. Monroe and the nine other committee members wanted to create a “committee of vigilance from among *our own* people, to watch over *our* interests—to draft *our* petitions to the Legislature, praying that we may enjoy the elective franchise, in common with other men, or to do any business which” the group “may deem vital importance to *our* people.”

Assisting fugitive slaves was one kind “business” that was of “vital importance” to Banks, Lambert, and the rest of the committee. The report highlighted how they worked to protect Nelson Hackett, a runaway slave from Arkansas who had been illegally captured in Chatham, Ontario but extradited under cover of night to a Detroit jail cell. The committee, ever vigilant, had been following Hackett’s case since he was first captured in Canada. Upon discovering that he had been wrongfully sent to the United States, the committee engaged in a writing campaign aimed at Members of Parliament in England who might be able to work on his behalf. Although it was “true that Nelson Hackett was returned to the prison house bondage,” his name was “now sounding upon the highest notes in the British House of Lords.” Their continued concern for Hackett, the men argued, was an example of how black citizenship could exemplify “the superiority of moral and intellectual power” over the kinds of violent, racialized conflicts that had punctuated northern cities in the 1830s and early 1840s (January 23, 1843, *Signal of Liberty*).

The Colored Vigilant Committee appears to have waned in the 1840s, but Lambert and others revived it after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. This time around, the organization took on aspects of a fraternal order and focused more directly on helping runaways escape to Canada on the “railroad.” Evidence of the workings of the new committee is scarce. In a January 17, 1886 issue of the *Detroit Tribune*, Lambert claimed that he was part of a secret order called the “African American Mysteries: Order of the Men of Oppression,” which may have been part of the revitalized Vigilant Committee. Nonetheless, with the assistance of black steamboat owner George DeBaptiste, Lambert and other members of the Colored Vigilant Committee smuggled fugitives to Canada—and openly bragged about their success in *The Liberator*, *The Provincial Freeman*, and *Douglass’s Paper*. In one two-week period in 1854, Lambert and DeBaptiste helped smuggle 53 men and women to Canada. The men claimed a year later that they assisted 1,043 fugitives across the Detroit River during a particularly active seven-month period in 1855 (Quarles 153).

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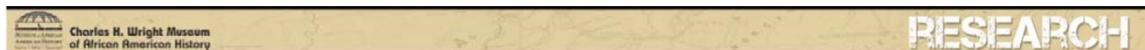
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