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STREET AS SCHOOL
Ideas and Assembly in Buffalo,
Seen Through the Diary of
George Washington Jonson (1835-1849)

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The city is the school of civilization-and the soul of the city is the street. The city is a place of assembly-the "agora" in Athens, the "forum" in Rome-and it was in the commingling of men of diverse opinion that the idea of freedom took shape. Freedom ended in the ancient world with the closing of the streets and roads of Rome, and revived again in the Middle Ages with the urban renaissance of the thirteenth century. But in America, a still more daring and difficult idea emerged, for here, as Thomas Paine put it, "we have the power to begin the world all over again." If people learned democracy-self-government-in the streets of Athens, what has been learned in the streets of American cities such as Buffalo?

Immigrants to early urban America often felt that they had the power to rewrite the scripts of their own lives. The formula was laid out in the Declaration of Independence: All people are created equal and naturally endowed with the rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Governments exist to protect and secure these rights; when they fail to do so they should be altered or abolished, and a new protective system should be created in their stead. Like it or change it-not love it or leave it-was the initial challenge 150 years ago when Buffalo was born. The street activities of abolitionist George Washington Jonson illustrate a non-school type of education in nineteenth century Buffalo that was as socially significant as was the development of public schools.

Out of the free assembly of the street came the Bill of Rights and the First Amendment. Free speech meant the right to agitate on street corners, not the privilege of making proper addresses in a lecture hall. Free press was initially the transcription-the writing down-of the life of the street, the reporting of conflict and contention, wonder and agony, human laughter and the angst of human existence. Thus when the abuses of Louis Phillipe, Citizen King of France, became known to the Buffalo public in 1848, revolution seemed not only permissible but morally obligatory. As the *Buffalo Daily Courier* wrote:

He crowded the prisons of France with the conductors of public journals and forbade the peaceful assemblage of the people to discuss and deliberate upon the state of their own affairs ... what people would not rise to revolution?

The *Courier* went on to explain that since the Citizen King was installed by the revolution of 1830, there had been 1, 129 pronunciations against the public press, 57 newspapers suppressed, 7 million in fines levied on editors and 14,000 imprisonments. Many Buffalonians sympathized with the French opponents of this

repression. On April 4, 1830, there was one of the largest and most enthusiastic meetings that ever "congregated together in this city... or Western New York." From 10,000 to 15,000 people marched from Front Park by the light of "hundreds of torches" to the Liberty Pole at Main and Seneca. President of the procession was Mayor Allen, who was accompanied by 27 leading citizens. Orations and resolutions were read first in French, and then in German and English. They were then adopted to enthusiastic applause.

Resolved, That the news of the dethronement and expulsion of Louis Philippe... brings a thrill of joy to the heart of every friend of human rights. Resolved, That the right of Revolution when governments forget the high responsibility of their trust and offend against the rights of the people of which they are the reflection, is sacred and inalienable. The blood of tyrants is the seed of liberty.'

Among the throng of demonstrators was one George Washington Jonson, "GWJ" as he liked to call himself, who had come to Western New York as a young man and created a classics academy in East Aurora, where he taught Latin and Greek. There he connected with Millard Fillmore, future President of the United States.³ He read law in Fillmore's office, and when Fillmore moved to Buffalo in 1832, Jonson joined his law firm. He was later hired as an agent of the Holland Land company. On a happy day in 1835, a land speculator offered Jonson a huge piece of real estate-some 20 acres that are now the very heart of downtown Buffalo. GWJ bought the land on credit; in 3 months, he sold out for \$60,000. Thus he had his competency and could live thereafter as a scholar and gentleman. He spent 2 years in Europe, then returned to New England, where his 3 sisters lived, and worked there for the antislavery cause. In 1839, he was the Liberty Party's candidate for governor of Massachusetts. He came back to Buffalo in the early 1840s, to practice law, deal in real estate, and use his connections to build the Liberty Party.

Although news from Europe arrived on this continent 13 days after the fact, Jonson recorded the events of 1848 in his voluminous 30,000 page diary with a sense of high drama.⁴ On February 24 he reported "Revolution in Naples!! A constitutional monarchy hereafter. God be praised." March 19, according to the journal, had been "a calm day. Have not wept nor smiled. Busy and not unhappy." On March 22 he resorted to a glass of beer to "boost my poor nerves. I am looking as wild and haggard as a maniac." But on April 3, he was in the midst of the celebration: torch light procession. Music vocal and instrumental. Banners. Orations at the Liberty Pole. The most magnificent display I had ever seen in Buffalo.... Spent an hour in the streets. Viva la Republique!

April 6 brought news of the Republic of Liberia, which Jonson admired and thought would do much good. On April 7, he noted that all Europe was in commotion. He walked to the docks and then spent an hour at the Young Men's Association Reading Rooms, the predecessor of Buffalo's public library. On April 8, he reported an encounter with Old Cuff Harrington.

Because I said Frenchmen were as capable of self-government as Americans and as intelligent, Cuff fell to abusing me. He said he had heard people say I was mad and he believed I was. He gave me the lie. In return I told him he was drunk, which annoyed him, and as a notorious debaucher and liar, he was not worth minding.

While the script for revolution was set down in print-in books and newspapers-GWJ acted out the drama in all of his social relations. A street corner conversation was never merely talk, but agitation in the cause of human freedom.

For years, Jonson had been Buffalo's leading abolitionist. In 1835, he had drafted the constitution of the Buffalo and Erie County Anti-Slavery Society. He recounted that he had become a "practical abolitionist" in spite of himself, when he had been caught in the midst of a mob on Main Street in Buffalo that same year. An agent of a slave owner had recaptured some runaway slaves, who were then recaptured by Buffalo Negroes. The blacks were the clear victors in the fight, but about 10 of them were arrested and jailed. "The design of the mob," says GWJ, "seemed to be to mob [the attorney] Pepper for defending the Negroes." In what may have been his first attempt to educate others about abolition in the street, Jonson had faced the crowd:

During two hours, I stood in the mob, alone, defending the Negroes and denouncing the mob, swearing myself in special constable, to aid the constable to defend the passage.... The majority of the people of the city profess a horror of Abolitionism and are in favor of the rights of the poor Negroes being overridden. Shame on such a community-a burning shame. [Journal, July 18, 1835]

For the next 30 years, Jonson worked to eradicate that shame; and in the 1860s, people would congratulate him for having been righon slavery continued. In 1842, he petitioned the city council to after all. Day in and day out, the dialogue integrate the public schools, pointing out,

1. But an apology for a school is provided [for black children]. No regular salary to the teacher as in the white schools. . . . Teachers [are] wretchedly incompetent. Mr. Hawkins had to withdraw his children, the master being incompetent to teach them.

2. There is but a single central school, while the scholars live in the extreme parts of the city, where their parents and guardians are only able to own property and reside S. A. Wards's children, from 5 to 7 years old, are more than a mile away, and yet are directly opposite a white school, to support which his house and lot are taxed.... The daughter of Henry Hawkins was forcibly excluded from the white school.

3. There are 20 public schools for white children in the city, from all of which colored children are excluded, though their parents are taxed to support them, and the number of children comparatively insignificant. [Journal, June 30, 1842]

The petition was signed by several black families, and while it did not immediately alter the school situation, petitioning the council was in itself a significant political act of citizenship for blacks. The Jonson diaries of 1843 and 1844 reflect the accelerating momentum of the Anti-Slavery movement and its chief catalyst, the Liberty Party. It was Jonson who brought Frederick Douglass to Buffalo in the summer of 1843. When both the churches and the city government denied Douglass a hall in which to speak, Jonson managed to use his personal influence with Mayor Masten to open up the city's park to Douglass and his fellow black abolitionist Charles Remond. For the first time, white Buffalonians heard the oratory of blacks, and they were moved by the experience. Even

a couple of Southern slave owners were moved-and troubled-by Douglass's arguments, according to Jonson.

In August, a national convention of colored people ("numerously attended by delegates and some very eloquent ones") was held in Buffalo. The attitude of the white community began to "change from contempt to admiration" as Buffalonians had an opportunity to gain "a higher idea of the ability and worth of colored people" (August 19, 1843). The Liberty Party followed with its convention a week later. Many central figures in the abolitionist movement participated, and for days Buffalo talked of nothing else:

August 3 1: Large audience filled tent. Surging as yesterday. Miss Abby Kelly addressed the convention in opposition to the Liberty Party, was patiently listened to.

September 2: ... to my hotel where... conversed on the slavery question, which is now uppermost in every mind, thanks to our persistent agitation of it.

The Party's vote in the local elections that November tells a somewhat different story, however, about its immediate influence. The total Erie County Liberty Party vote was 425. In the city of Buffalo, 66 people voted for the Party's candidates. Still the cause was flourishing, and by December the Buffalo AntiSlavery Society was able to hire a room at the old Post Office at \$75.00 a year.

During the winter of 1844, GWJ underwent his usual "agonizing ennui." The months passed quietly with scholarly endeavors predominating. He read Rousseau in French, translated the Odes of Horace, taught himself Portuguese, read Dickens **while taking daily walks in the city musing on his "selfimmolation on the hated cause of Anti-Slavery." But by May he was active again in the movement:**

May 8: Erie County Anti-Slavery at Hart's Garden Hall... 20 or so whites and coloreds collected. Judge Love in the chair. Present among others, Sam R. Ward, colored, J. J. Tatum, colored. Mr. Ward lectured to a good audience.

May 18: Still rainy. Unshaved to the Western Hotel which takes copy of the *Journal of Commerce*. . . to read about the Philadelphia riots. As usual the villainous Irish to blame.

June 4: 10 to noon Executive Committee of Erie Anti-Slavery Society, of which I am chairman.... A world of people in the streets. Walked with medical student Day and Rev. van Linge, earnestly discussing politics and trying to abolitionize them.

June 12: Letter from Samuel P. Ward proposing July 4th celebration. Mr. Ward is pure negro.... a man of decided talent and good acquirements; he speaks with great fluency and power... one of the best debaters in the state... a match in wit and argument for the best speakers in the two great parties.

June 17: Elias Hawley, school superintendent, was or attempted to be insolent because I am an abolitionist, presented to him a protest on behalf of the colored people of Buffalo against their being deprived of the benefit of city schools. If I did not return him

more than he gave... the dirty dog!! Evening with Sam R. Ward and Rev. Wilson from Herkimer County and D. W. Williams in my office, planning Ward's future lecture.

July 4: THE DAY WE CELEBRATE!! Up at 4. Full toilet. Day divine. At 6 at my hotel and took a cup of tea. Dr. Austin invited

me to sit in his buggy and at 6V4 off with him for East Aurora (20 miles away) which we reach by 9.... Encountered the insolence of the blackguard Albert Sawin. Exercises at the center of town. Drove thither. The people organized and appointed me reader of the Declaration of Independence.... Ward's oration was an able one and all passed off well.... The celebration proved in all resp.ects a success. Goodly number were present, in spite of the opposition proslavery celebration in the village.

July 10:... walked 8 miles in the city.... Rev. Ward reports he has visited every town in the county. Meetings well attended. Collected \$46.09.

July 15. In front of the American hotel a friendly discussion of Liberty Party policy and principles with Attorney John L. Talcott, who was fair, in which discussion Mr. Fillmore and Mr. Haven joined. All good natured.

August 27: Walked Main Street with Mrs. Diehl and Mrs. Judd in "splendid moonlight."

October 1: [after some time in New England] Train from Albany. Many politicians aboard, to whom I explained our Liberty Party plans and principles. All excited but courteous. I lose. no opportunity of advancing the truth, considering myself its missionary.

October 7: Evening at Mrs. Fillmore's. Beat her at backgammon.

October 12: Chat with Mr. Fillmore on the principle and policy of Liberty Party. Mr. F. is Whig candidate for governor.

October 13: Young Men's Association Reading Room [where most of the principal newspapers are available] friendly quarrel with that usurious scamp, E. G. Spaulding on politics... while excitedly talking with S. suddenly became momentarily deaf in both ears.

October 14: Forenoon. Numerous persons, white and black in [law] office.

October 18: Most of the day devoted to directing handbills and composing a circular letter for our committtee... explaining Mr. Birney's nomination.... The letter is but a page, and yet it was copied and recopied, costing me immense labor before it suited me, so difficultly do I compose.... The letter is to be printed and scattered broadcast ... 500 copies.

October 28: Birney in Buffalo... I introduced him to a crowded house, Mr. B. received with cheers and spoke 2 1/2 hours and was attentively listened to throughout.

October 30: Birney still here. Steamer can't leave because of snow. I have introduced him around... left him at the Young Men's Association Reading Rooms.

Again the heart of the day to the slave. What will be the reward my memory will receive, if remember at all-curses, as novi? No matter. I am in the line of duty and conscience.

November 1: Almost all day to our Liberty Party caucus-a party so small I could put it in my breeches pocket; never mind; it will grow.

November 5: Evening invited men to meet at my office; it has been full of whites and blacks, awaiting the announcement of the result in the city. All in good spirits.... 9 p.m. The long agony is over. The Democrats have a majority of 54 over the Whigs. Our vote is 65, about the same as last year. Considering the forgeries, perjuries, abuse we had to withstand, we are satisfied.

November 6: In city and county we about hold our own... 447 to 445 last year.

November 7: In American Hotel midnight with a few [Liberty] party men in corner of the bar, when Democrats drunk rush in shouting Polk is President. Whigs in the bar abuse Liberty Party people saying damned abolitionists cost them presidency.

November 8: Polk! Polk! Nothing but Polk. God! What a name! What a man! A holder of his fellow men in slavery, the Democratic President of a Democratic people. What will the nations, what will history, say?5

Jonson's own role in history was an obscure one. Isolated from the larger world in this tiny town of Buffalo, he nevertheless saw himself as shaping history. Only an observer, he became a participant through the written word of his enormous secret journal which, a century after his death, remains almost untouched. An enormously learned man, schooled in the classics and fluent in French and Italian, Jonson kept a daily running commentary on the events of the wider world as well as the local scene.

He wrote a scathing denunciation of the Mexican War in 1847:

May 12: Cursed bells of the cursed churches singing in honor of the cursed victories.

May 31: ... a body of our murderers in California have been cut up by the Mexicans. Pray God it proves true!

July 11: For the honor of our common humanity, it is hoped ten million Mexicans will not allow themselves to be conquered by ten

thousand Americans. God give them victory. Thus prays GWJ for his own country's good, being a patriot.

He was Buffalo's main agent for the Underground Railroad, a connecting link between the networks of the white community and the miniscule black population. Blacks often came to him soliciting funds to help other blacks. He usually passed these people on to the churches as a means of educating the clergy, and the clergy often brought him fugitives in need of a black connection. Thus, in 1847,

July 24: About 11 at night a man rattled at my office door. Opened hesitative. It was Rev. G. W. Hosmer, Unitarian minister of Buffalo. Wanted my aid. Was very much agitated,

he. A minister named East had commended to his care a colored fugitive slave [named Brown] wife, children. Hurried off with H. to rouse some of the colored folks here to take them. Not a Negro in the streets. Went way over to Quarles on Michigan street... got his son to go to a colored boarding house, and after much debate, induced three or four blacks to accompany me to Hosmer's It was now raining smartly. Found the fugitives on side walk Young, their white guide, holding an umbrella over them.... The fugitives were quartered among the colored people I learned that Brown had escaped from prison in Philadelphia The next day Brown went on to Detroit.... Quite an amount contributed here for the fugitives.... I must do Dandridge and other colored men the justice to say they did their whole duty.... I laugh at Hosmer's nervousness and fussing, this being about his first experience in such business, which he contrived to shirk on me and the colored folks. Why did he not take the whole family into his spacious house, temporarily at least? But H. did much and is a good man-for a priest.

Though at times painfully introverted, GWJ moved easily through many social circles. He was of but not in the local elite, especially after 1844 when the abolitionists defeated the Whigs and elected, inadvertently, the Democrats, both locally and nationally.

Enmity arising from that election would simmer for years. At times Jonson saw his own eccentricity as bordering on madness; whether this is reality or a projection cannot be known, for while GWJ wrote accounts of others, he himself is never written about, until his obit in 1880. There he is described as unservingly true to his convictions ... with the quiet tone of the well-bred scholar... he argued with such gentle force that one with whom he differed would generally find himself disarmed at the outset. "6

However, while in the street, Jonson never ran from an argument. To make it on the street in Jonson's social circle required a unique linguistic facility; men had to know how to argue, joke, tell a story, and deal with drunks.

June 7, 1847: Annoyed, last evening, by abuse from drunk Birdseye Wilcox, and despised myself for feeling annoyed. Instead of standing my ground, ought to have retreated as did ... others. Whatever it requires to stand blackguardism in a crowd, coming from one whom it would be folly to notice, and to stand the laughter which it excites of fools! I don't possess it. Yet young Hodgas said I stood it admirably. The burden of poor Wilcox's abuse was my being an abolitionist and defeating Clay. Wilcox made half an apology that he was drunk and complimented my influence, disclaiming any personal ill-will; but this was aside and not in the hearing of the crowd.

In addition to pressing his cause on every corner, Jonson took every opportunity to agitate and to educate his fellow citizens, and himself. He devoured books, mused over Locke and Hume, browsed in Butler's bookstore "reading in Milton's prose works, mostly on Divorce which I will republish in the newspaper, if I ever find time"(Journal, June 1, 1847). However, while the scope of Jonson's concerns and affairs was broad, the passion of his life was the cause of abolition. In September 1847, both Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison lectured in Buffalo. Such agitation, some claimed, caused opposition to the slave's cause. To Jonson, however, the slaves were better treated as a consequence of such agitation.

The month of September ended with more activity on behalf of fugitive slaves. One "Bob Smith, colored" came to Jonson in the Reading Room, seeking help for a fugitive slave who had been seized by two Kentuckians, agents of the owners. The slave

escaped, having walked through a crowd that opened for him, but closed and barred the slaveholders, who attempted to follow. "Quite a quiet mob," according to Jonson. "I tried the case on the sidewalk again, old 1. R. Lathrop, attorney and Dutchman Nicols, the ass, and a chap named Hall, a white-livered fellow, who is a agentfor New Orleans slaveholding proprietors of oursteamboats. The latter talked of cutting my throat. That such a wretch should be tolerated here! Didn't I give them some?"

By 1850 Jonson's friend Fillmore, "His accidency," as Jonson called him, had become president:

July 10: Millard Fillmore is now president of the United States! He will be compelled, by his position to give up everything to the South, for the sake of peace, Freedom is lost. Glad for his good fortune on personal ground, I mourn for the country and for Freedom.

His anticipations soon proved correct as Fillmore signed into law the Fugitive Slave act which made the likes of GWJ a criminal. Although the act made it illegal to help slaves escape, if it did anything, it facilitated rather than retarded the abolitionist movement. After Fillmore signed the law, GWJ refused to speak to him. This was the outrage that transcended even Jonson's brilliant invective; he was for once left without words. In later years, GWJ regained respect for Fillmore as a person; he saw him as a victim of political forces that he himself did not understand.

While Jonson agitated and educated, Buffalo grew. The harbor was jammed with "commerce increasing beyond the wildest calculation as the great west opens her furrows" (Journal, June 7, 1847). But what of George Washington Jonson? One John Bull, a young major, chatted with him on July 27, 1847, "professing great respect," Jonson says, "for my talents. [Bull] insisted I was in all respects the superior of Fillmore." Today, 135 years later, we know Bull was right. Aristotle, however, would have been in the camp of Fillmore. Ancient democracy never deliberately tampered with basic institutions like slavery, property, and marriage. Buffalonians could easily march by torchlight calling for the overthrow of distant tyrants as they did in 1848. However, GWJ, who dreamed like Thomas Paine of beginning the world all over again, worked for immediate revolution at home in Buffalo. When 1848 ended, Jonson was in his law office at Main and Swan writing of the glorious year of progress by the people. Aware of a surrounding Mystery, he called on God if ever thou listenest to human prayer, to carry forward human progress till Equality, Fraternity and Liberty llervade thy world...

. Equalize property, equalize conditions. Level up and level down.

Away with judicial murder, away with war, away with slavery ...
away with counterfeit Christianity! Christ, the democrat forever

and over! Hurrah! and Amen! Journal, [Jan 1, 1849].

Another 135 years will be needed for the rest of us to catch up with George Washington Jonson.

NOTES

1. *Buffalo Courier Express*, March 27, 1848.

2. *Ibid.*, April 4, 1848.

3. Millard Fillmore, who was elected Vice President in 1848, succeeded to the presidency of the United States in 1850 when President Zachary Taylor died.

4. Jonson kept his journal for 60 years. It ran to some 600 handwritten ledger pages a year, for a total of 60 volumes, which are now stored in the Dartmouth College Library. All quotes from Jonson in this article are taken from this journal.

5. The Liberty Party had been formed in 1839 in Warsaw, New York, with the support of Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists. The party's 1840 presidential candidate was James G. Birney, a wealthy former slaveowner from Kentucky, who polled 7,000 votes. Birney ran again in 1844 and received 60,000 votes, of which 15,000 were polled in New York state. As the election was very close, New York state was the deciding factor in the contest between Polk the Democrat and Clay the Whig. Polk carried New York state by 5,000 votes and won because, as many Whigs were quick to point out, Birney had taken so many New York Whig votes into the Liberty Party.

6. *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, August 6, 1880.