"Come Wash and Be Healed"

David Ruggles and the Northampton Water Cure

by Tom Goldscheider, David Ruggles Center for History & Education

DAVID RUGGLES is one of the great unsung heroes in the cause to abolish slavery and establish equal rights for African Americans. His remarkable work as a young man in New York City in the 1830s has begun to come to the fore. Less well known is the equally remarkable last chapter in the activist's career in Northampton as a groundbreaker in the healing arts. He played a critical role in the introduction of a new practice known as the "Water Cure."

David Ruggles was born into a free Black family in Norwich, Connecticut, in 1810. He moved to New York City and opened a grocer's business at 17 and was quickly drawn into the cause to end slavery and protect the rights of his brethren. Soon after a riotous mob burned his store to the ground, he opened America's first Black-owned bookstore, reading room, and lending library attached to his own small press. A prolific writer with only a grade-school education, Ruggles published the nation's first Black-owned magazine, the *Mirror of Liberty,* in 1838.

Young Ruggles rapidly earned a reputation as "the most active man in the city," and a "one-man army" fighting for his people in perilous times. As Secretary of the nation's first Committee of Vigilance he battled kidnappers and illegal slave traders who were wreaking havoc in his community. He worked at a dizzying pace, taking on an average of a new "case" every day. He has also been named one of the founders of the Underground Railroad for his role in assisting more than 600 self-emancipated enslaved persons to freedom out of his apartment in Lower Manhattan.

The activist developed what was called the "Ruggles Style": bold, brash and confrontational. He never shied away from naming names among the upper echelons of power, or from the threat of physical violence. He was operating in an extremely hostile political environment in New York City and the stress this created began to take a toll on his health. As early as 1837, he wrote that he felt "compelled to retire from the city and take refuge in the country"[1] due to his ailments. Things got worse the following year after he was thrown down two flights of stairs by a man he confronted with selling three free Black teenagers into slavery.

At age 27, Ruggles suffered from "liver complaint and dyspepsia," and he began to lose his eyesight. He attributed his illness to "great mental anxiety."[2] The editor placed a notice in his final issue of the *Mirror of Liberty* for "an active and intelligent boy, who will serve as 'eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame.'" He eventually resigned all his posts in New York and returned to his native New England, broken in body, but never in spirit.

The man who rode a wave of notoriety and fame in the nation's greatest metropolis suddenly found himself in an acutely vulnerable position: Black, blind, alone, and short of funds. Fortunately, his reputation preceded him. William Lloyd Garrison, the Boston-based abolitionist, hosted several successful fundraising events in his honor. Garrison also suggested that his comrade-in-arms visit a utopian experiment in communal living outside of Northampton.

David Ruggles found "shelter in the storm" at his darkest hour. He arrived at the Northampton Association of Education and Industry (NAEI) in what is now Florence, Massachusetts, in November 1842. The NAEI had been founded earlier that year on principles of what they called "radical equality." Every member enjoyed the same set of rights without regard to race, gender, religious affiliation, or social standing, a unique outlook

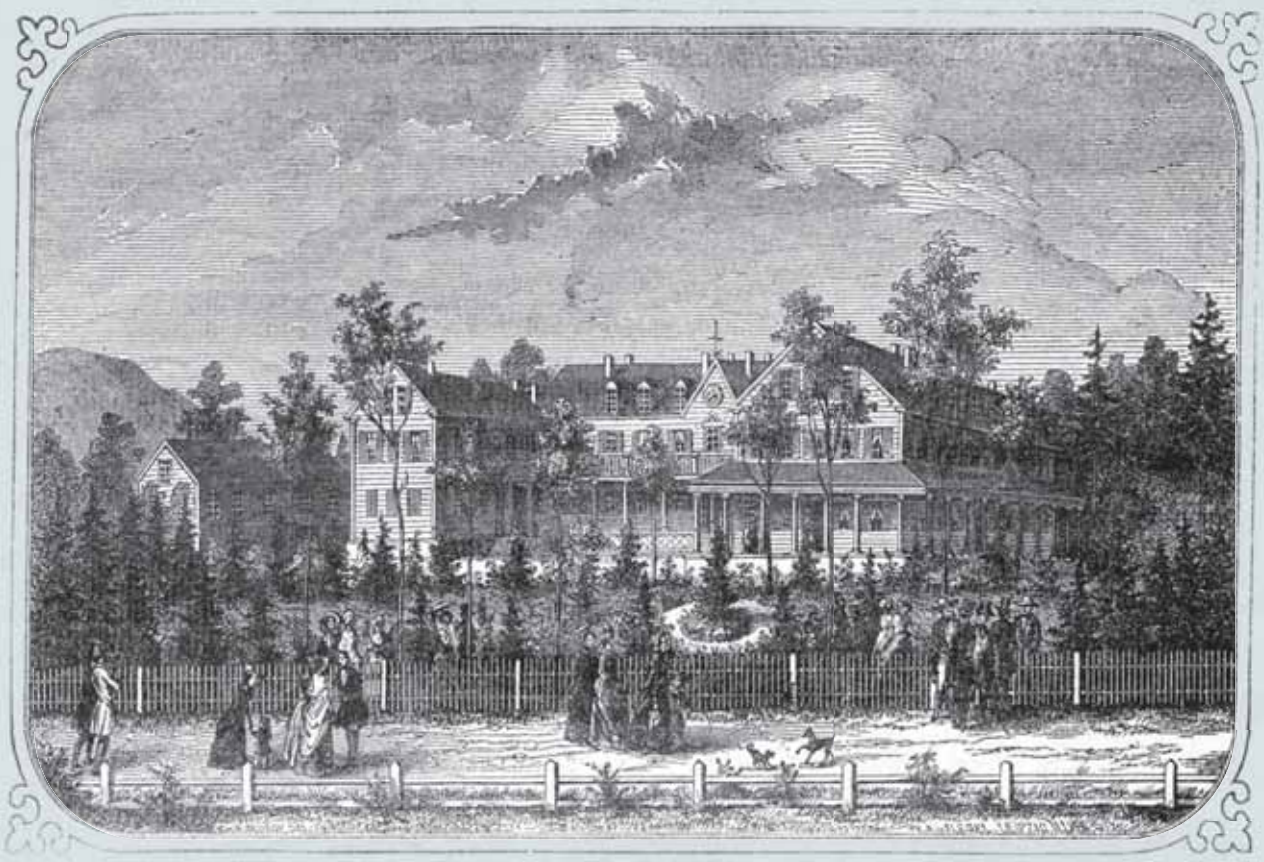
even among utopian communities. Ruggles was the first African American to join as a member, followed by several others, including the famed orator and activist, Sojourner Truth. He mentored the itinerate preacher and arranged her first political address on the steps of Northampton's new City Hall.[3]

Ruggles called the NAEI his "promising Home for Humanity."[4] Here at last he was surrounded by respectful, kind-hearted people. He soon rose to a position of leadership and the family he lived with treated him as one of their own. In spite of his improved situation, however, his health continued to deteriorate from allopathic treatments in New York where he had been "repeatedly bled, leached, cuffed, plastered, blistered, salivated, dosed with arsenic, nux vomica, iodine and strychnine and other poisonous drugs."

The fierce fighter for civil rights now fought for his life as his body began shutting down. He was completely

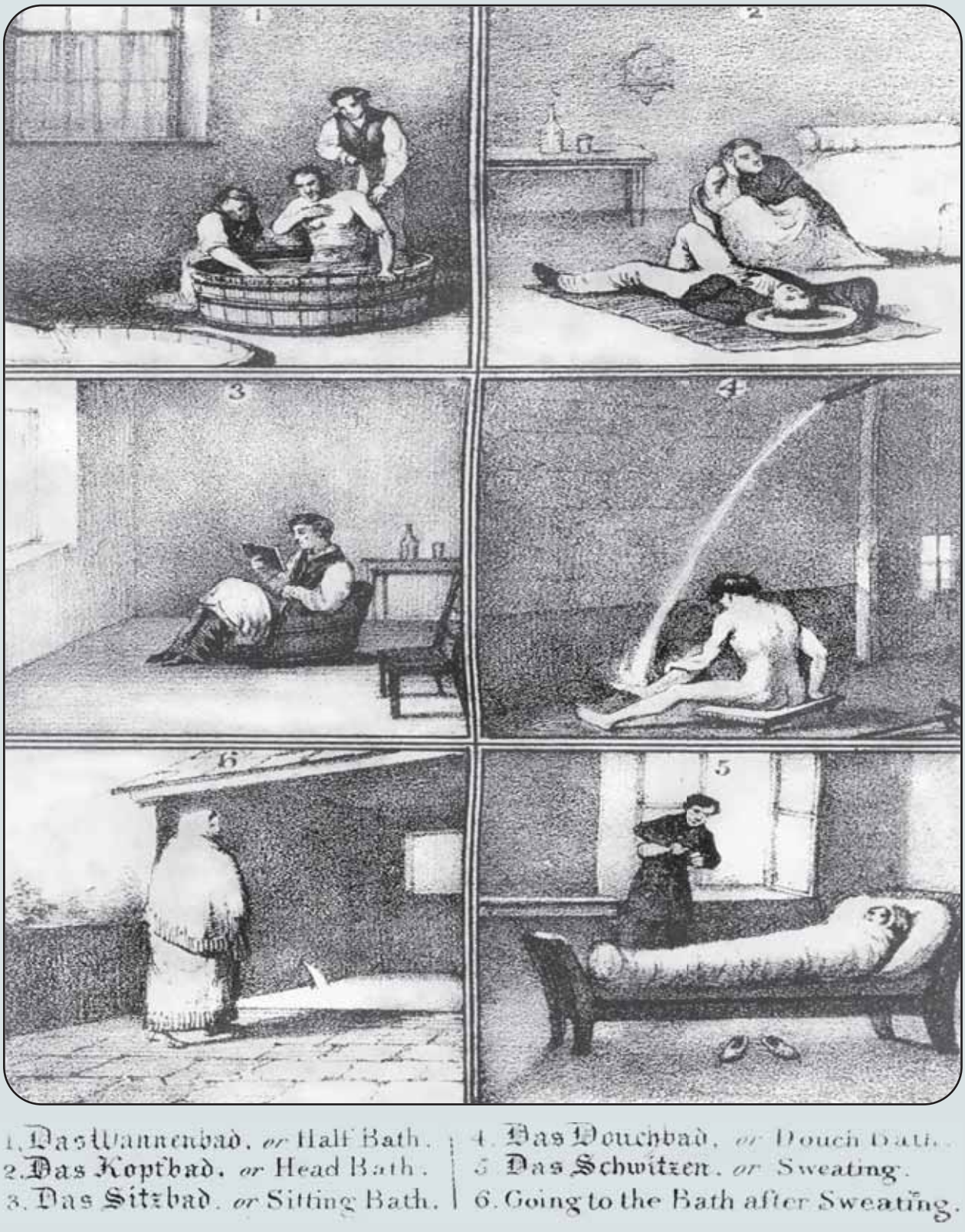
Detail from a satiric print of David Ruggles, flanked by Isaac Hopper and Barney Corse, as "The Disappointed Abolitionists," by Edward W. Clay (New York, 1838). This is the first American cartoon to feature a recognizable Black personality, as opposed to a generic caricature. Courtesy of Richard West, Periodyssey.

Below: Lithograph of the Water Cure hospital of Charles Munde, David Ruggles' successor. From the cover of *Florence Water Cure Quadrilles* by C.H. Weber. Halmer & Weber (St. Louis, 1854). Library of Congress.



Dr. Charles Munde's Water-Cure Establishment,

AT FLORENCE, MASSACHUSETTS.



Frontispiece of *Hydropathy; or, the Cold Water Cure, as Practised by Vincent Priessnitz, at Graefenberg, Silesia, Austria* (London, 1842).
Medical Historical Library, Harvey Cushing/John Hay Whitney Medical Library, Yale University.

blind, his digestive system was in an uproar, and now his skin had become "insensible to the prick of a pin or extreme heat." Disillusioned with conventional methods, he turned to a new alternative treatment being talked about in abolitionist circles: the "Water Cure." He began by experimenting on himself, quite alone, literally and figuratively in the dark. He initiated a correspondence course with Dr. Robert Wesselhoeft who had introduced the Water Cure to America from his native Germany. The doctor was "not sanguine of success" given his patient's condition, but Ruggles persevered, following orders he received in the mail. Eighteen months later his sight was partially restored and his "whole system was attended with an unaccountable sensitiveness."[5]

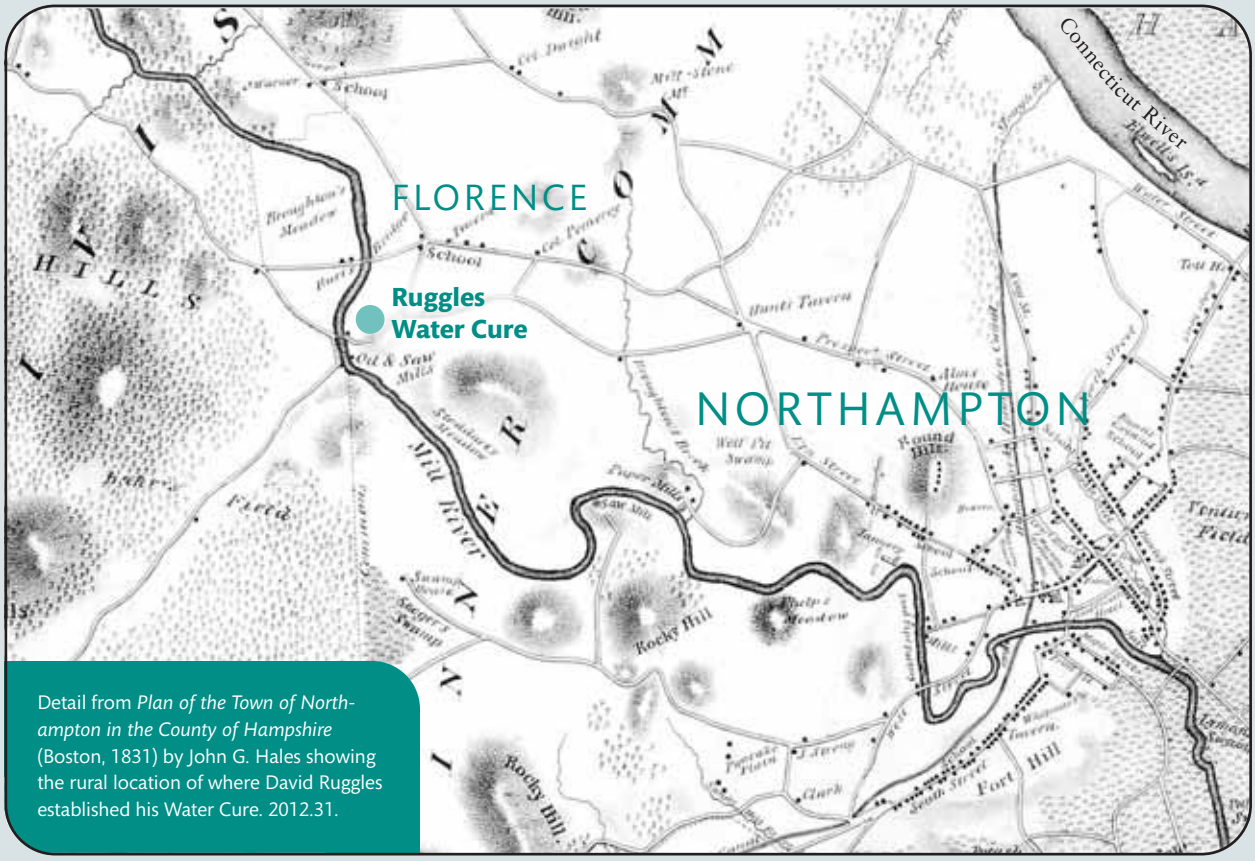
The Water Cure was originally developed by Vincent Priessnitz, a Silesian farmer with no formal medical training. He used it to treat his own case of pleurisy, and created a system of "hydropathy" that swept across Europe. The wet sheet, or "Lein-tuch," was considered his "greatest discovery." Patients remained snuggly wrapped, or "packed," in cold, wet linen from head to foot for up to an hour at a time, followed by a series of cold or tepid baths. In between treatments, patients exercised and drank copious amounts of cold water. Wet "bandages" applied to specific parts of the body, and a variety of bathing options, were prescribed on a case by case basis. This purification process based on cooling the body rather than sweating sought to eliminate the "debris" of accumulated toxic material often manifested as "eruptions" on the skin. The arduous procedure of inducing a bodily "crisis" after weeks of daily treatments required the patient's fortitude and stamina.

Ruggles' success in healing himself convinced other Northampton Association members to submit to his treatments. One of the first to step forward was Sojourner Truth. At first, she felt better, and then she began to feel worse. After five weeks she derided the Cure as a "humbug": "I shall die if I continue in it, and I may as well die out of water as in it." The next week, however, she experienced the desired "grand crisis, a humor exuding from the legs below the knees, coursing from her feet, and the very end of her toes." After ten weeks she was declared cured and her "scrofulous humors and dyspepsia" never returned for the rest of her long life.[6]

David Ruggles never planned on being a full-time health-care practitioner. He hoped to "re-enter the arena" of anti-slavery work as soon as his own health returned. Nonetheless, he moved into a small nearby house where he could treat up to six patients at a time, and positive testimonials started pouring in. He cured a ten-year-old Association member of a crippling congenital disorder; and the 84-year-old Reverend Payson Williston threw away his crutches and went back to walking four miles a day after treatment. His sons, the industrialists Samuel and J.P. Williston, joined the Association's Samuel L. Hill in backing the expansion of Ruggles' operation to accommodate up to 40 patients with "separate parlors, bathing and dressing rooms, for ladies and gentlemen."

"Dr. Ruggles," as he became known, began advertising his services in a variety of journals and newspapers. He offered cures for headaches, "nervous debility," rheumatism, and "inflammations of the bowels" among many other disorders. The expensive rates ranged from $5.50–$9.00 a week, depending on the room. Patients

Carte-de-visite of Sojourner Truth. Although copyrighted 1864 on the verso, the photo was probably taken in 1851, not long after her "Ain't I a Woman" speech in Akron, OH. National Portrait Gallery.



Detail from *Plan of the Town of Northampton in the County of Hampshire* (Boston, 1831) by John G. Hales showing the rural location of where David Ruggles established his Water Cure. 2012.31.

were advised to bring their own linens along with "an umbrella, and a pair of slippers."[7] Already popular in Europe, this was the first dedicated Water Cure establishment in the United States. Within a year of opening his doors in 1846, Ruggles had to turn away applicants for care, and began advising other practitioners around the country by mail.

Always a trailblazer, Ruggles originated the "principle of Cutaneous Electricity" used to diagnose his patients. Initially subjected to "some degree of ridicule," his theory gained credence over time. Using a "delicate sense of touch," he could "feel through the surface of the skin of a healthy person a regular and forcible action or emission, indicating vitality or power."[8] He used these readings to prescribe treatments or to turn away prospective patients because he felt they could not withstand the rigors of the Water Cure. Many of his patients presented difficult cases where other remedies had failed—making this a cure of last resort.

The guest list at the Northampton Water Cure read like a who's who of prominent abolitionists. William Lloyd Garrison began complaining of chronic inflammation and fevers in 1847. Ruggles invited him to "come wash and be healed" at his Cure, free of charge. He attributed his friend's symptoms to "overexertion in speaking upon the public square" and prescribed "*total abstinence* from all anti-slavery meetings" for at least five to six weeks.[9] Garrison arrived by train the following summer and submitted to the cure. In a series of letters written against Ruggles' expressed orders, he described being woken up at three o'clock in the morning to the sound of "the packers stirring about, prepatory to packing their patients." He disliked his bedding "composed of straw," but found his morning bath "refreshing" followed by a "fine ramble" in the picturesque surrounding countryside. He said of his day: "We are either in the woods or in the water."[10]

Exercise, rest, and diet were critical components of the cure. Garrison's breakfast consisted of "wheat and rye bread, cracked wheat boiled like hominy, stewed prunes, milk, and cold water." Patients followed a diet developed by Northampton's Sylvester Graham that

barred the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, coffee, tea, sugar, refined flour, red meat, and rich, salty foods more generally. This diet stood in sharp contrast with what most Americans ate and drank at the time: excessive portions of roasted meats with vegetables and cakes cooked in lard, all washed down by long draughts of potent hard cider or local ale. For this reason, the period became known as "the great American stomach-ache."

Garrison did experience "two or three flattering crises" and an improvement in his overall health. Ruggles counselled a longer period of treatment and the Bostonian promised to "pursue it at home." The difficult patient finally declared: "My aversion to cold water has been fairly completed. I am now its ardent advocate."

It should come as no surprise that abolitionists were among the first to embrace the Water Cure. The abolitionist movement grew out of the temperance movement—the so-called "cold water army." The reformers acted on the belief that converting one soul at a time to the cause would end slavery. By extension, purification of the body led to a cleansing of the soul. The "crisis" in the Water Cure was comparable to an experience of religious conversion. They were also pacifists drawn toward less invasive, natural forms of treatment.

By most accounts, Ruggles' business was doing well by 1849. He could offer an abundance of "soft" spring water, beautiful grounds, and comfortable accommodations that included a new pianoforte. Glowing testimonials appeared in a variety of newspapers and journals beyond the abolitionist press. Patients arrived from "all parts of the Union" including some of "those numbered among the pro-slavery class" from the South.[11] He helped give birth to "The Great American Water-Cure Craze" by establishing more than 20 clinics, including two others in Northampton. The former Round Hill Seminary near the downtown was converted to a Water Cure attached to a "large, first-class Hotel…crowded with the 'upper ten' from the large cities."[12] Ruggles was an astute businessman with confident backers, but he could not compete in this arena.

To make matters worse, Ruggles' own symptoms returned that fall. The man who successfully treated others was unable to cure himself this time. He struggled to attend to a full clinic as his own condition worsened and he consulted other doctors to no avail. David Ruggles died at his Water Cure in Florence on December 16, 1849, at the age of 39. Austrian immigrant Dr. Charles Munde bought the practice soon after Ruggles' death and enlarged it "to receive patients from the better classes." Many of those patients came from the slave-holding South and Munde's business suffered during the Civil War. The Munde Water Cure burned to the ground in 1865 and the owner decided to return to his homeland.[13] It was never replaced as the practice of the Water Cure soon fell from favor.

Frederick Douglass was one of the 600 fugitives assisted by David Ruggles in New York City. Douglass called him "the first to welcome me from the land of whips and chains and to place me beyond the reach of my blood-hound pursuers." He marked Ruggles' passing in his newspaper, the *North Star,* with this remembrance: "He has literally worn himself out in humanity's service—ever ready to do with his might whatever he could do for the benefit of the [human] race."[14]

END NOTES

1. Graham Hodges, *David Ruggles* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

2. Letter to the Editor of *The Colored American* by Ruggles, November 10, 1838.

3. Christopher Clark, *The Communitarian Moment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

4. Letter to the Editor of the *North Star,* Rochester, NY, by Ruggles, March 24, 1844.

5. Ruggles' own description of his treatment and resultant condition written to the *Hampshire Herald,* Northampton, MA, January 1, 1848.

6. Ruggles' account of Sojourner Truth's treatment, re-printed in the *Journal of the National Medical Association* Vol. 49 (January 1957): 67-72.

7. Ruggles' advertisement for his "Northampton Water Cure" that appeared in numerous journals and newspapers.

8. *Journal of the National Medical Association,* January 1957.

9. Ruggles printed this in Garrison's own *Liberator,* July 20, 1843, five years before he finally took the cure.

10. Letter written by William Lloyd Garrison to his wife Helen, July 18, 1848. In: *No Union with Slaveholders 1844-1849*, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison* Vol. III (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

11. Wendell Phillips, Introduction to William C. Nell's *Services of Colored Americans in the Wars of 1776 and 1812* (Boston, 1852). Online edition https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/nell/nell.html

12. *Northampton Courier,* Northampton, MA, October 9, 1849.

13. Paul Munde described his father's water cure in: Charles Sheffeld (ed.) *The History of Florence Massachusetts* (Florence, 1895), 190-93.

14. *North Star,* Rochester, NY, February 1, 1850.