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FREDERICK DOUGLASS

A Biography

C. James Trotman

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GREENWOOD

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To HIM who is HONOR and GLORY
and
For Anita who blesses me.

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CONTENTS

Series Foreword ix

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction xiii

Timeline: Events in the Life of Frederick Douglass xxiii

Chapter 1 I Been [Re]'Buked, 1818–1826 1

Chapter 2 Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen, 1826–1838 11

Chapter 3 Amazing Grace, 1838–1847 33

Chapter 4 Steal Away, 1847–1858 59

Chapter 5 Wrestlin' Jacob, 1859–1870 91

Chapter 6 Roll, Jordan, Roll, 1870–1895 115

Chapter 7 Climbing Jacob's Ladder 139

Selected Bibliography 147

Index 153

SERIES FOREWORD

In response to educators and public library needs, Greenwood developed this distinguished series of full-length biographies specifically for student use. Prepared by field experts and professionals, these engaging biographies are tailored for high school and college-level students who need challenging yet accessible biographies. Ideal for secondary school assignments, the length, format and subject areas are designed to meet educators' requirements and students' interests.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So much good fortune has come my way by travelling in Douglass circles over the past 15 years that the greatest disappointment I face is not being able to name everyone who should be acknowledged in my journey. There were the formal connections that one makes from conference papers and critical discussions with scholars and students. There were also many informal contacts from conversations with folks who had lasting memories of reading a Douglass book here or there, or of having read one of the speeches. Some, when learning of my teaching and academic interests in the great abolitionist and statesman, even gave me one of their Douglass books, or a newspaper article about him that they kept over the years because, I suspect, the book or article made a personal connection with him or the history he influenced. The sources varied but the overall effect on me has been to take an extraordinary journey with this extraordinary human being and American activist. If I have done justice to these many voices, I humbly thank them; if not, I take full responsibility for not having listened more attentively to their suggestions.

Special thanks are due to Dr. Milton Sernett who recommended me to Greenwood Press. Dr. Frank Faragasso, Dr. Washella Turner Simmons, and Melva Lawson Ware have my thanks for reading parts of the book and

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I want to thank my editor Sandy Towers for her editorial gifts; for the staff at Cedar Hill, for their many kindnesses and for keeping the legacy of the Sage of Anacostia alive; and to the Trustees of West Chester University for the award that permitted me to travel to the National Library of Ireland and to the National Library of Scotland for a sabbatical year to do the research for the book.

Finally, I am deeply grateful for the love I receive from my family, in addition to Anita, especially from my sons Thane and Braeden and their families.

INTRODUCTION

October 3, 1894

Cedar Hill: Anacostia D.C.

Dear Mr. Philips:

I think I may safely promise you a lecture on the first—February 1895 if life and health permit. I will therefore put West Chester, Penna. for that date. I find myself unable to be as confident in making appointments than I once was. I begin to feel the weight of age. I am glad to know that a few of my Abolitionist friends in West Chester are still living—and it will give me joy to be there.

Yours Truly,
(signed) Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass gave his last public lecture on the campus of West Chester University of Pennsylvania on February 1, 1895, 19 days before he died. He was a frequent guest in the town of West Chester, visiting every decade after his escape from slavery in 1838.

Located approximately 25 miles from center city Philadelphia, the Borough of West Chester, originally called Turk's Head, had been a seat of radical abolitionism, primarily due to its Quaker roots and to a certain degree of high-mindedness among its civic leadership. West Chester offered Douglass rest from the demanding schedule of the abolitionist movement, time for fellowship with friends and supporters such as the prominent Darlington family and George Morris Philips, his host on February 1, and the first principal of West Chester Normal School, now West Chester University of Pennsylvania. The borough was an oasis for Douglass, enabling him to relax and reflect upon the stages of a life that made his name among the most internationally recognized of Americans and the most distinguished voice of freedom to come from the African American community in the 19th century.

By the time of this lecture, and nearing his death on February 20, 1895, Douglass's name and recognition were synonymous with social reform, particularly in the movement to abolish chattel slavery. He became famous in 1845 with the publication of the first of three autobiographies, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself.* The ex-slave wrote compellingly about the experience of chattel slavery. In some of the most memorable prose in American letters, he drew readers into the traumatic experience of this captivity by describing what he saw with his own eyes. His direct accounts and the narrative skills used to tell his story opened up new understandings for his first readers and left a historical document for future generations.

For all of slavery's damage to human souls, Douglass showed how it was possible to transform the trauma of chattel slavery into a triumphant journey toward freedom. One has only to read chapters 6 and 7 of the 1845 *Narrative* to discover the personal meaning of truth that came to him through reading and writing in an age when slave culture in America forbade it. These two chapters are among a number of exceptional discussions in Douglass's body of writings and speeches in which learning about one's self and the world is achieved through literacy and rigorous thought, although he never spent a day of his life in a schoolroom. And they are two of the best chapters to be found on this subject in Douglass's body of writing. The chapters are repeated in the two autobiographical sequels, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) *and the Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1882). The three autobiographies, a triptych of rev-

elations about his life and times, along with his surviving speeches and editorials, continue to be relevant resources today for understanding the nature of subjugation, its victims, and their malefactors, and the victory made possible through human struggle and growth.

In the brutal and ambiguous world of slavery in which normal human interactions were replaced by unexplainable cruelty and forced acts of human degradation, Douglass and his works are primary sources for having initiated a broader discussion of slavery and eventually its constitutional abolishment.

The struggles of his life made him well known, first as a speaker much sought after for the abolitionist movement and then as a writer. But he made certain to note over and over again in the spoken or written word about his thoughts and feelings that his struggles mirrored the pain of others in bondage and in freedom as well.

While including the major facts and dates surrounding this historical figure, I have attempted in this biography to call attention to the spiritual dimensions of Douglass's life as an important part of his legacy. "Spirituality" is not easy to define, but that does not justify ignoring it when it can help us to understand our subject. I am using it primarily because Douglass used the word. The word exists repeatedly throughout his speeches and written works, although the meaning shifts. Semanticists and other philosophers of language would acknowledge that "spirituality" is a polymorphous term. In other words, it is the name for a wide range of ideas and concepts that have significance in ordinary, day-to-day conversations, usually referring to the unseen and the unexplainable; among philosophers it is a term used to symbolize the process for interpreting meaning in the subjective life; among theologians it is a term for the divine, the supernatural, and the unseen but powerful forces in religious thought and experience.

What are the roots of this spirituality in the slave environment that Douglass knew? We know from sound scholarly sources, especially the seminal histories written by John Blassingame, John Hope Franklin, and Herbert Gutman, much more about the characteristics of slave plantations and slave life than did previous generations. Thanks to their scholarship and the splendid biographies on Douglass by Benjamin Quarles, Philip S. Foner, Nathan Huggins, Waldo Martin, and William McFeely, and the intellectual discussions by David Blight, John Stauffer,

Robert S. Levine, Gregory P. Lampe, Maria Diedrich, Charles Blockson, Margaret Aymer, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston Baker, David Chesebrough, Cynthia Willett, Paul and Stephen Kendrick, James Oakes, and Robert Wallace, they all demonstrate that slaves were not passive figures at all; in other words, they were not asleep at the switch of their existence. Collectively, the slaves had a capacity for mentally turning down the noisy chatter of their insignificance and turning off many of the negative messages sent out through a culture of bondage that they were nothing at all. Now more than ever, information is available about the survival skills of slaves: the significance of their prayers, their worship rituals, and songs as measures of resistance that sought to alter, at least in their minds, the dismal grind of life for them into the epic development of a group within America's multicultural fabric and its multilayered history.

The former slave turned citizen-reformer spoke and wrote about spirituality as a private source for describing his subjective struggles with identity and for understanding the dynamics of slavery. For Douglass, the word had authority and a number of interpretations that enabled him to explain history to himself and to others as he experienced it, wrote and spoke about it. Beyond the benefits of personal understanding, the word provided him with a vocabulary to articulate the development of his own world vision. In this context, therefore, by reviewing some familiar and some lesser known works from his writings and speeches, I hope to provide a picture of the uses of spirituality as a term embracing the complexity of his feelings, to identify it as a powerful and personal source for establishing his personal identity, and to see it used as a means to present the complexity of his faith. Douglass had faith in the divine, in God, and he was a Christian, but he was not bound to a denomination, although he regularly attended the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in his later years. It is one of the complexities in examining the role of spirituality in Douglass's life that while he acknowledged a supreme being and was ordained as a youth in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, he was nevertheless unyieldingly critical in his speeches and writings of religious institutions for their support of slavery.

I have used the names of well-known spirituals from African American culture as chapter titles for this book. They are an acknowledged source of black folk life and they predate acquired literacy in the black com-

munity. They are as much a part of a process of critical thought among slaves as they are a part of human history. They are rooted in the collective expression of an oppressed people who uttered words and sounds together, to make sense of their lives, before schooling was permitted and before their music became acceptable to the larger society. This music spoke in simple terms about a complex world the slaves experienced and about those who oppressed them.

The spirituals are of course religious by nature, but their connection with the supernatural or divine is not just to provide a backdrop for the presentation of history and culture. They are meaningful and serious human actions. They were calls to worship. They brought about healing to many and hope against the bleakness of the moment for slaves. They represent artifacts of the past to be sure, but they are as much about today as they are about yesterday. They have evolved within creative hands like Douglass's to mold the literary form we know as the slave narrative. The spirituals became a resource for future novelists, poets, and prose writers. They were also a primary ingredient for the institution we know as the black church, which is not a religious denomination at all, but the name for the powerful religious force in the African American community shielding black women, men, children, and families collectively and individually from the horrific and alienating consequences of racism. And at their core is the use of the Bible.

When Douglass was in Belfast, Ireland, in 1846, speaking on abolitionism, he was presented with a Bible as a token of the Irish reformers regard for him. His response described the importance of the Bible to him:

> This is an excellent token of your regard. It is just what I want from you. It contains all the Words of Heavenly Wisdom—it is opposed to everything that is wrong and it is in favor of all that is right. It is filled with that Wisdom from above, which is pure, and peaceable, and full of mercies and good fruits, without prolixity, and without hypocrisy. It knows no one by the color of his skin. It confers no privilege upon one class, which it does not confer upon another. The fundamental principle running through and underlying the whole is this—"Whatsoever ye would that men do to you, do you even so to them."[1]

Today, in the celebrated artistry of the painter Jacob Lawrence, the poetry of Rita Dove, and the prose mastery of the Nobel Prize–winning novelist Toni Morrison, the legacy of the spirituals continues as a source for artists and their vision of the human condition. For this book, they serve to remind us of ancient sounds and meanings that gave fortitude to those who had nothing else but hope in the songs to lift them up as they rose with the morning sun. The spirituals are therefore a legacy within any account of the American life of Frederick Douglass.

Chapter 1, “I Been [Re]’Buked,” benefits from Frederick’s 1845 *Narrative*, as do most discussions about his early life. It begins on the Wye Plantation in Maryland, with the drama of chattel slavery personalized through its impact on his childhood. Through his story, readers witness the relationships with his grandparents, his loss of childhood innocence, and then participate with him through his exceptional social analysis of the plantation’s systematic violence and control of those under its domination. The slave society as presented on the Wye Plantation served to reverse most of the ordinary relationships between human beings. One of the continued interests of this story is the manner in which Douglass’s skills as a storyteller are used to illustrate the tragic drama of plantation life itself.

Chapter 2, “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” follows Frederick’s early years when he lived in Baltimore beginning in 1826. One of the ways that slave masters turned a profit was to create a contract with others for the use of their slaves, in return for which the master received the slave’s pay. The centerpiece of this chapter is Frederick’s intellectual growth shown by describing the events leading to his learning to read and the circumstances under which that happened. The growth discussed in the chapter was physical and mental, as the restlessness of his nature became abundantly clear to his masters. One book, *The Columbian Orator,* helped him to think through some of the critical questions related to his own personal identity and slavery. We then see him organizing an escape from freedom, only to realize failure at first. Hugh Auld, his master, sends him back to live in St. Michaels, where he confronts the slave-breaker Covey. It is an episode that changed Frederick’s life. He is then sent back to Baltimore where he meets the love of his life, Anna Murray. He escapes from chattel slavery with Anna’s help. He becomes a father for the first time and learns about the political strategies for abolishing slavery,

setting the path for a career in political reform. The efforts to escape the plantation are described alongside his determination to become a free man, a family man, and a responsible citizen.

Chapter 3, "Amazing Grace," focuses upon Frederick's initial response to freedom after having escaped slavery in 1838. The chapter describes the new life for the fugitive and his bride. His contacts with the Underground Railroad in New Bedford result in his changing his name, which for slaves and others is an important part of the American experience. We see him living in relative freedom, although there was always the threat of slave catchers. Frederick attended abolitionist meetings in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and met William Lloyd Garrison, the leader of the radical wing of the movement and certainly one of its most passionate voices. When he heard Frederick speak, he heard something special. It was the authentic and articulate voice that the struggling abolitionist movement needed to affirm itself and its public repudiation of slavery. Their meeting became mutually beneficial as each found a need for the other and their common goal: the elimination of slavery. Garrison's abolitionist group hired Frederick to lecture. Those lectures became the basis for his first autobiography. Threats to his life follow, forcing him to leave the United States for a lecture series in England, the British Isles, and in Ireland. He was an innocent abroad when he landed in Liverpool in 1845. Less than two years later, however, his speeches and lectures had been so well received that their success transformed him into a celebrity for the abolitionist movement. In England, the antislavery organization in England, led by British women, raised enough money to purchase his freedom from his Maryland master, Thomas Auld.

Chapter 4, "Steal Away," traces Frederick's return from a nearly two-year exile in Europe to his founding of the *North Star* in 1847, an abolitionist newspaper. The turn to journalism represented his movement into the mainstream where he could expand upon his work and voice as a social reformer. At this point in his life, we see him engaging feminist leadership, writing on women's rights, and increasingly receiving their help and support on other political topics. Julia Griffiths and Ottilie Assing represent European women who come to America and are part of his life. These white women were the sources of innuendo given 19th-century attitudes toward black and white relationships. Frederick is now confronting society as a free man, developing his own independent

thoughts on the ideas commonly held by the abolitionist movement, especially the Garrison branch of it. The year 1848 is as important as any in his life. For the first time, he meets with John Brown and over the next decade converses with Brown about the Kansas preacher's plans to eliminate slavery with the famed insurrection at the military arsenal at Harper's Ferry in Virginia. Later in 1848, Douglass joined the feminists at the Seneca Falls Convention in New York. In the next decade, he delivered the signature speeches of his career on American democracy and slavery in the famous 1852 Corinthian Hall address, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Five years later he presented a critique of American law by challenging the Supreme Court in its ruling of the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857, a case famous for its legalizing slavery and for denying the slave citizenship. In addition to these speeches, other important speeches are highlighted in a decade in which Douglass's voice bursts forth for justice while he distances himself from the bedrock Garrison belief that the Constitution is a slave document.

Chapter 5, "Wrestlin' Jacob," follows the significance of John Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry in 1859 and its consequences. Douglass is linked with Brown's assault and is forced to flee the country, first to Canada and then to England. The Civil War dominates the decade of the 1860s with Douglass's life divided between the politics of recruiting black men for the Union army and making the case for the Emancipation Proclamation. He meets with President Abraham Lincoln three times, urging him on two of these occasions to use the momentum of the Emancipation Proclamation to push for an end to slavery and to enlist black men as soldiers in the war. Lincoln's death leaves Douglass without a valuable ally, but nothing deters him from his quest to push for legislation that would create citizenship status for blacks.

In chapter 6, "Roll, Jordan, Roll," we see Frederick Douglass serving the cause of social and political reform in several capacities. With the end of the Civil War, he reached out to support radical Republican reconstruction plans and continued his advisory role with U.S. presidents, meeting first with President Andrew Johnson and later campaigning for President Ulysses S. Grant. We also see him resuming his conversation with women leaders and extending his public service. At one point during the 1870s, he is nominated for the office of vice president of the United States. He did not run for the office but he did accept several

other appointments, including serving as the president of the Freedmen's Bank. President Benjamin Harrison appointed him to lead the diplomatic mission to Haiti and to the Dominican Republic. He also paid a sentimental visit to his former slave owner and his home on the Maryland eastern shore. He then resumed his journalistic career by purchasing majority ownership of the *New National Era* newspaper. A fire destroyed his Rochester home, which led him to move his family to Washington. In addition, this is also a period of very profound personal change and loss. Anna, his wife of 44 years, died. He remarried Helen Pitts, a white woman, the union between the two creating its own controversy as a result of their racially mixed marriage. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing his leadership role in the Chicago World's Fair of 1892.

Chapter 7, "Climbing Jacob's Ladder," ends the book by considering the subject of Douglass's legacy. One source for discussing Douglass's place in history is his own self-reflections. He is well aware of the significance of his life. Another and perhaps more persuasive source is his impact on others, using here as a case in point his impact on the renowned painter Jacob Lawrence, whose earliest work was inspired by Douglass's life. Although there are numerous examples of Douglass's presence in world culture, the final chapter argues for his life to resonate on a broad contemporary scale, with none more fitting than continuing to bring his life before today's readers, and thus continue his legacy of agitating for a better world and a more effective democracy for all of us.

NOTE

1. Margaret P. Aymer, *First Pure, Then Peaceable: Frederick Douglass, Darkness and the Epistle of James*, New York: T &T Clark International, 2008, p. 1.

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TIMELINE: EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

I Been [Re]'Buked

February 1818 Born as Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey on the Holme Hill farm on Tuckahoe Creek, Talbot County, on the eastern shores of the state of Maryland.

1824 Sent to live on the Lloyd plantation.

1825 Sees his mother Harriet Bailey for the last time; she dies in 1826.

1826 Sent to Baltimore to live with Hugh and Sophia Auld.

Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen

1827 Sophia Auld teaches Frederick how to read.

1831 Discovers *The Columbian Orator* and religion.

1834 Has famous fight with Covey; hired as field hand to William Freeland.

1836 Escape plot fails; jailed and sent back to Auld in Baltimore.

Amazing Grace

September 3, 1838 Successfully escapes from slavery.

September 15 Marries Anna; they settle in New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Frederick chooses the name Douglas from heroic figure in Sir Walter Scott's poem "Lady of the Lake" and adds "s."

1839 Speaks against African colonization; becomes licensed preacher in African Methodist Episcopal Zion church.

June 24 Daughter Rosetta born.

October 9, 1840 Son Lewis born; William Lloyd Garrison hears Douglass speak at antislavery meeting.

1841 Delivers three speeches at Massachusetts antislavery convention on Nantucket Island and is hired as a lecturer by Garrison.

1841–1844 Travels extensively throughout New England and New York as abolitionist speaker, drawing large crowds.

March 3, 1842 Son Frederick born.

September 1843 Severely beaten in Pendleton, Indiana, and suffers broken hand.

October 21, 1844 Son Charles born.

May 28, 1845 The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself* is published in Boston and provides full background to his identity thus leaving him vulnerable; forced to escape the country; begins celebrated tour of first Ireland and then the British Isles; sells a Dublin edition of the *Narrative*.

1846 Lectures in Scotland and English cities as a much sought after speaker; his freedom is purchased for 150 pounds ($711) by British antislavery friends.

Steal Away

1847 Returns to the United States, moves to Rochester, New York, and begins the *North Star,* an antislavery newspaper, with Martin Delany.

December 3 *North Star* first published.

February 1848 Meets Kansas radical John Brown in Springfield, Massachusetts.

July Attends the historic meeting of the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York.

March 22, 1849 Daughter Annie born.

1850 Breaks with Garrisonians over political action and the antislavery interpretation of the Constitution; becomes friends with Gerrit Smith, a wealthy New York abolitionist.

1851 Changes name of newspaper to *Frederick Douglass' Paper.*

1851–1855 Becomes involved in antislavery politics through the Liberty and Free-Soil parties.

1852 Delivers famous "Fourth of July" speech in Rochester, New York. It is one of the greatest speeches found anywhere on freedom and slavery in the republic.

1855 Publishes *My Bondage and My Freedom,* the second and more thorough autobiography.

1857 Calls for political action against the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision and delivers powerful speech against the ruling.

Wrestlin' Jacob

1859 Sails to England for six months to avoid arrest for allegedly serving as an accomplice to the John Brown raid on Harper's Ferry in October.

1860 Returns to America after the death of his 11-year-old daughter Annie; supports and works for the election of Abraham Lincoln.

February–July 1863 Recruits blacks for the creation of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteers with sons Charles and Lewis among the first recruits; Meets with President Abraham Lincoln for the first time; publishes *Douglass' Monthly*.

1864 Meets with Lincoln again on matters related to Lincoln's reelection.

March 1865 Attends second inauguration of President Lincoln; speaks frequently at Jubilee gatherings in black communities.

April Eulogizes Lincoln's death and compares it to the loss of a family member and kin.

1867 Meets with brother Perry in reunion after having been sold from Maryland. Builds Perry a family house in Rochester.

1868–1869 Celebrates the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment that gives black men the right to vote; disagrees with and disappoints women's rights advocates over the amendment's failure to include women.

Roll, Jordan, Roll

1870 Becomes owner and editor of the *New National Era* newspaper in Washington, D.C.

1871 Accepts offer of President Ulysses S. Grant to become assistant secretary of commission to Santo Domingo.

1872 Rochester home destroyed by fire and arson suspected; moves family to Washington, D.C., where he is closer to political power. Nominated to be vice president of the United States on national ticket with Victoria Woodhull as president on the National Radical Reformer's Party.

1874 Becomes president for short time of Freedmen's Bank whose debts are hidden from him; ends publication of *New National Era*.

1876–1877 Appointed U.S. marshal for the District of Columbia by President Rutherford B. Hayes.

1877 Visits St. Michael's after nearly 41 years; meets with Thomas Auld on his deathbed.

1878 Buys Cedar Hill, a 15-acre estate in Anacostia section of Washington, D.C.

1881 Accepts appointment as recorder of deeds by President James Garfield; publishes the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, the third and final autobiography.

August 1882 Anna Murray Douglass, his wife of 44 years, dies and leaves him in a depressed state.

January 1884 Marries Helen Pitts, a white woman who was his secretary; controversy surrounds the interracial marriage. Neither family accepts the spouse of the other.

1885–1887 The couple tour England, France, Italy, Egypt, and Greece.

1889 Accepts appointment from President Benjamin Harrison to be minister and consul general to Haiti.

July 1891 Resigns in protest over reports of government policy aimed at controlling Môle Saint Nicolas and personal attacks against his competence.

1892–1893 Accepts appointment as commissioner of Haiti pavilion at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago; joins protest of journalist Ida B. Wells and issues pamphlet *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*.

1894 Delivers "Lessons of the Hour," a searing critique of lynching in America at the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C.

1895 Delivers last public lecture at West Chester Normal School in Pennsylvania on the topic of lynching.

February 20 Collapses after dinner from a heart attack in Cedar Hill.

February 25 Buried after national services as a state burial at Metropolitan A.M.E. Church.

February 26 Buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery in Rochester.

Chapter 1

I BEEN [RE]'BUKED, 1818–1826

> I been 'buked and I been scorned,
> I'm gwine ter lay down dis world,
> An' shoulder up my cross,
> An' take it home ter Jesus
> Ain't that good news.

In every time and place, our names have always been important. A person's name might express a wish, a desire to wrap another in good fortune, provide protection from unknowns, or represent continuity. No matter what the purpose or circumstance, names have always mattered because they carry a message or an idea to be passed on—like a family quilt. Each case is personal, but it is always connected to a larger context, usually with a sense of history and culture, and maybe a hint of destiny.

Frederick Douglass was not the birth name of our subject. He was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, and for him, as for all those held in American slavery, the notion of family, the thought of belonging to a family, was one of the many complexities of slave culture. Knowing one's real name, like knowing one's exact date of birth, was rare among all those who followed the first generation of African slaves. On the

slaveholders' part, this was an intentional action, a way of dehumanizing the slaves while simultaneously keeping the slave master from being held accountable to the slave as a human being. Frederick, however, grew up knowing more about himself than most and lived a life demanding from others that the truth of his life—the concerted institutional effort to dismiss him from the human family—be recognized in all of its deliberateness and the resistance to it. His first name means "peaceful ruler."

Born a chattel slave in 1818, probably on Valentine's Day, February 14, Frederick was in search of his exact birth date until the last days of his life and could only guess about the date's accuracy. Few born into American slavery, with the possible exception of the first generation of slaves, knew anything about themselves, their ancestors, their African homes, or their parentage. The naming process for the child slave we know as Frederick was an early yet small indication of the different path his life would follow from slavery to freedom.

The earliest records we have indicate that Frederick's surname, Bailey, was derived from Baly, or Baleli, a Muslim name that was the first recorded male name in five successive generations and eventually became the family name for Frederick. The first ancestor, the one uprooted and brought to America, started a journey that became part of the earliest history of a slave family on the eastern shores of Maryland. Such historical longevity resulted in Frederick having not just one name but four: Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey. However, Frederick would know and really care about one "name" as a child, that of his grandmother Betsy, who would be the most stable and reliable person in his childhood. Her presence and influence would foreshadow the important role of women throughout his life.[1]

Frederick was born on the Holme Hill farm in Talbot County on the eastern shore of Maryland. The nearest town was Tuckahoe, and it was surrounded by a small creek and woods, noisily echoing the sounds of nature. It was rural flatland and quiet, except for the sounds of running water and small animals darting in and out of brush. Birds flew all around; deer and rabbits made their havens and holes. When Frederick looked east, he could see the eastern shoreline, where the peninsula dropped off into the Atlantic; however, the closest body of water was the Chesapeake Bay. Long and windy, the bay was a tributary to streams and tidal waters where it wrapped around trees and divided fields.

Frederick's own words in the 1845 *Narrative* about his early years remain the most authoritative account that we have. When he reflected on Tuckahoe, the name and the place left him with mixed feelings, usually sad ones. He wrote, "A want of information concerning my own [birthday] was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood."[2] Much of the unhappiness was due to the trauma, the despair, and sorrow in recalling the events and the degradation brought on by slavery. Most slaves knew little about themselves, and the slaveholders viewed them as their property, with little distinction made between animals in stalls and humans in bondage—the latter restrained by psychological bars, invisible fences but fences nonetheless. Both masters and slaves were locked in a titanic struggle between the forces of slavery and liberty. It was its own kind of war, with one side aiming to rule bodies and capture minds and customs, against the other side resisting with unforgiving and unyielding restlessness, without any perceivable end to the conflict. In many ways, thanks to the extant Douglass stories and writings, future generations have not been deprived of seeing the national implications of this war, in which the presence of slavery permanently juxtaposed itself against the ideals of the republic.

With his excellent memory, Frederick described his earliest reflections in this titanic battle not only in personal terms but in painful detail. He started with contrasts between what was normal against the abnormalities of slave culture, beginning with how little a slave knew about himself. The fact is that the goal was to eliminate distractions from work. Frederick knew little about his mother, except that her name was Harriet Bailey and that they were separated from each other. He remembered seeing her, but, in his memory, he recalled her touch and the whispered words of maternal love. As only a mother could, she made the most of their time together so that he would know forever her flesh and spirit. These meetings were rare; there were only four very brief meetings with his mother during his childhood.

Frederick knew that his father was a white man, but nothing more. In this time period, the parentage of a slave, particularly if it involved a white person, was not openly discussed. As a topic, it became part of a community's secrets, the basis for some of its folklore, the events seen but unseen, hushed over but rarely if ever discussed. The slave system separated parent from child as early as possible so that these difficult

Engraved portrait of Frederick Douglass used as the frontispiece of his Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, *published in 1845. National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site.*

questions of identity would never enter into what the slaves knew about themselves. Frederick understood that this was part of the tension on plantations caused by masters and fathers who were sometimes one and the same. Many slave masters, therefore, carried a dual identity, and a double burden, of being both parent and master-criminal. These disconnections between parent and child opened up new ways to enact cruelty on the slave and to allow for expanded acts of irresponsibility on the part of slave masters. Therefore , separations in slave culture were physically and morally ambiguous, creating a chilling environment and one without legal restraints on the masters.

Frederick's story portrays this climate through his descriptions of violence. Slaves were beaten and lashed arbitrarily. No rationale was required for a slave to be beaten; the behavior fell into the abyss of unclassified cruelties where just the impulse, the thought of brutalities, became justification on its own for beating a slave. And as Frederick wrote about the whippings, the descriptions of shouts of pain are paired with the sounds of the whip used to beat the slaves into submission as well as

into silence. Early in the narrative we learn about Aunt Hester, for example, whose beatings typified the brutality on the plantation, especially for women, where punishment and sexual violations were dispensed without any rules by those who needed no excuses to carry out their most savage acts. Hester's story is a twice-told tragedy of being a slave and a woman who attracted the attention of two men, one a slave called Ned, and the other a slave master, Captain Anthony, who beat her unmercifully. As Frederick described it, she was beaten for being in the company of her admirer Ned when she should have been attending to her duties for the master. Stripping her down from her neck to her waist, he beat her until he was exhausted. Frederick documented the beating; his readers are left to contemplate Hester's nakedness and her shame.

> After crossing her hands, he tied them with a strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist, put in for the purpose. He made her get upon the stool, and tied her hands to the hook. She now stood fair for his infernal purpose. Her arms were stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes. He then yelled to her, "Now you d____d b___h, I'll learn you how to disobey my orders!" and after rolling up his sleeves, he commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor.[3]

These horrors and the names of those who caused them are described against the simple but profoundly human world that the slaves made for themselves. Not surprisingly, given slavery's violent and all-consuming attempts at dominance, the slave's world began inconsequentially, with human sound, inchoate perhaps, but mutterings that transformed themselves into music. Frederick wrote about this music, particularly the music the slaves created and sang to themselves. He talked about his lack of understanding of the words being connected to strange sounds, but his emphasis is on the feelings that came through the tone of the songs. They were sounds that celebrated themselves in spite of all that was done to persecute them. Each note and tone denied slavery's control over them and everything it stood for. Each song celebrated the wish for freedom,

if not in this world, then in the next. And each song, in choral unison, was an act of collective resistance. Each voice, with its own individuality, asserted itself as a personal protest against the idea of one person being owned by another. And each was a "prayer to God for deliverance from chains."[4]

For the young Frederick, the most meaningful figures in this otherwise unforgiving picture of endless cruelty and suffering were his grandparents, Betsy and Isaac Bailey. They were fixtures on the Wye Plantation. They could be called "settlers"; in the American vernacular, they could be in a sense community pioneers, though this was not the case, of course, because of their confinement to plantation life. Nevertheless, Frederick remembered that Betsy, or "Grandmother Betty" as he heard her being called in the thick tongue of plantation speech, had an unusual measure of respect and esteem in the community. To some she was nature's talisman, a "good luck" charm because of her success with crops and cooking fish in Tuckahoe and in Denton Hills and Hillsboro, some of the surrounding villages.

Unlike other slaves, Betsy and Isaac did not live in the slave quarters but were nevertheless surrounded by the children of slaves. Some were their own grandchildren from their five daughters, as named by Frederick, including Harriet, his tall, dark-complexioned mother, who was a field hand at a neighboring plantation. Harriet could read, Frederick stated, although we are not told how she learned to read. In other words, Betsy's house, Frederick's grandmother's home, was a day care center in a sense, the place where those too young to work were placed under the watchful eye of the Wye Plantation's own version of the senior citizen watch.

Frederick's grandparents provided him with his first sense of family, while at the same time training him and other children to prepare for one of the many predictable events characteristic of slavery's abnormal trappings: the destruction of the traditional family and its role in human development. Here, on the plantation, unacknowledged and fused relationships through bloodlines typically crossed between a slave mother, master-father, and offspring, the consequences of which shattered the normal human channels for identity and self-awareness. In other words, the young Frederick and other slaves were invisible as children to the masters because their preparation was for a lifetime of slavery—sometimes

in a far, far away place. They were investments in an attempt to ensure a way of life. In the conscious denial and refusal to acknowledge their offspring, the master class created one of the major consequences of chattel slavery. It left children wondering about their roots, becoming in fact, if not in name, wanderers in the only place they knew to call home. For many slaves, the rebuke signified spiritual death. For their violations, the oppressors faced further removal from the reality of their acts, and therefore closer to the quicksand of denial from which truth has no grounds to exist and sinks into oblivion.

The psychology enforcing this system of captivity was simple and yet complicated. It required a sustained and fierce control over mind and body. Choice disappeared, and the rules of conduct dominated all aspects of life. The application started early. For his part, Frederick soon began to feel that the darkest part of the Wye Plantation were those moments when he heard the words "father" and "master" meet. The words created confusion in younger minds, and Frederick would have to let his imagination wander in childlike curiosity about the meaning of those moments, remembering them for the story he would later tell to a larger abolitionist audience about what it felt like to meet uncertainty and then to try and explain it.

Edward Lloyd, or the Colonel, as he was called, owned the plantation and everything on it. His authority was uncontested. Frederick saw this and recognized the power that created fear, later conveying it in every moment the Colonel is mentioned in Frederick's *Narrative*. The most significant result of the use of this power was buying and selling slaves, especially those who were members of the same family. In language that gains power by using as few words as possible, Frederick wrote about the moment when he became a direct witness to the helplessness of being separated from his grandmother, and for the first time meeting his siblings.[5]

> Grandmama looked sad. She was soon to lose another object of affection, as she had lost many before. I knew she was unhappy, and the shadow fell from her brow on me, although I knew not the cause.
>
> All suspense, however, must have an end; and the end of mine, in this instance, was at hand. Affectionately patting me on the

> head, and exhorting me to be a good boy, grandmamma told me to go and play with the little children. "They are kin to you," said she, "go and play with them." Among a number of cousins were Phil, Tom, Steve, and Jerry, Nance and Betty.
>
> Grandmother pointed out my brother Perry, my sister Sarah, and my sister Eliza, who stood in the group. I had never seen my brother or sisters before; and, though I had sometimes heard of them, and felt a curious interest in them, I really did not understand what they were to me, or I to them. We were brothers and sisters, but what of that? Why should they be attached to me, or I to them? Brothers and sister we were by blood; but slavery made us strangers.[6]

In August 1824, when he was six years old, Frederick fell under Old Master's control. Grandmother Betsy took him to live on the plantation of Colonel Lloyd, in the house of Aaron Anthony, who became Frederick's master. Forced to leave his grandmother and the brothers and sisters he knew, and, in the next year, to see his mother Harriet for the last time, Frederick's life quickly turned upside down. He had been the moving passion of his mother's life. Sacrificing all in needing to see, feel, and touch the only living thing that mattered to her, Harriet risked travelling more than 14 miles so that she could hold tightly her sweet boy, her little valentine. It was the name he remembered and identified with his birth date for most of his life. Visiting her son at such risk clearly meant so much more to her than the oppressiveness of the day; rather than discouraging Harriet, the visits actually stimulated her body through the long day's journey into night to comfort him and herself. Nothing more is known about her, whether she had more children on this plantation or others, or what feelings, if any, she may have had for the father of her child. What's left is her single-minded determination to give all she could to her "little valentine." Nevertheless, their forced estrangement from regular contact with each other left Frederick in distress when he learned of her death. No documentation exists to indicate the moment when Frederick learned about her death. He wrote in the *Narrative* that the news of her death left him with "much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger."[7]

Frederick's story about life on the plantation describes two worlds, one dark and violent and the other seeking to express resistance and relief

from the reality of bondage. The darkness was brought on by the sound of the lash, which crackled as Frederick described the whip of the slave master ripping the flesh of his Aunt Hester. He also described scenes in which bullets tore into the body of a slave who disobeyed the master's orders and is shot and killed in defiance. There was no court of law in which to present a petition. In all, Frederick recorded murders and other forms of physical and mental cruelty in his narrative. Later in his life, when he was to confront the question of retaliation, these memories reminded him of the choices slaves routinely made between life and death. Only death, real and spiritual, was the slave's daily constant on the plantation.

In spite of these circumstances, the slaves made another world for themselves. Away from the masters' ears, the quiet but slow building murmurs of sounds at night turned to humming around the fire or the large kettle used to muffle sound. It drew one slave, another, and then another, including Frederick. More gathered, and although they spoke in broken almost indecipherable English, Frederick heard at those moments more than noise. The sound of humming, chants, and muffled drums conveyed as much expression as it did the sounds of wishes, dreams, and cries from the very depths of their souls into night. He understood enough to know that they told a group tale of "woe," to use his word, and every utterance was a testimony against slavery and a prayer for deliverance. If nothing else, they knew that the night would lead into a transformation of mourning, a death wish that would soon be washed away into another day of life, another victory over despair as soon as the sun broke forth. More bondage; more fear of a permanent condition. But this was the moment that Frederick could not fully understand with his head but could feel in his soul, and it would not be easily forgotten.

The two worlds formed a legacy, one with nearly unspeakable abominations, shockingly violent, aimed at destroying the human spirit; the other, searching for and discovering comfort in song and quiet meditation. Both of these worlds created in Frederick an awareness of the possibilities in front of him. With danger and peril, the misery and the mystery of resistance, the child born into slavery would lose his innocence without ever having lived it.

In spite of the atrocities, the experience of slavery for those who, like Frederick, survived it meant that their judgments on life, death, and

eternity would be a permanent part of their thoughts and actions. They would not see the democratic process the same way as did their white masters, nor would its sacred words ("We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal") be heard in the same way. When Frederick realized this loss, although as yet unspoken by him, there emerged out of his own personal experiences a dedication to assume responsibility to remember his life as a slave but not to remain one, in order to fulfill a quite different destiny.

NOTES

1. Dickson Preston, *Young Frederick Douglass: The Maryland Years*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, p. 4.

2. Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself; My Bondage and My Freedom; Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, New York: The Library of America, 1994, p. 15. Referred to as *Autobiographies* in subsequent citations.

3. *Autobiographies*, p. 19.

4. *Autobiographies*, p. 24.

5. *Autobiographies*, p. 149.

6. *Autobiographies*, p. 149.

7. *Autobiographies*, p. 16.

Chapter 2

NOBODY KNOWS THE TROUBLE I'VE SEEN, 1826–1838

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Nobody knows but Jesus
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen

—*Glory Hallelujah*

After the death of his mother Harriet in 1826, Frederick was sent to live in Baltimore with Hugh and Sophia Auld, relatives of Aaron Anthony, his new master. With its active shipping port drawing in goods and with a large, more diverse population than he had known to date, Baltimore became one of the more influential places in Frederick's early years. It expanded his world. Moreover, in his relationship with the Aulds, he encountered a different kind of authority and bondage from what he had known on the plantation. And as a slave, he discovered another level of exploitation in being leased out to earn money for his owner.

Aaron Anthony also died in 1826. Frederick was then forced to return to the Maryland eastern shore plantation in order to be present when the last will and testament was made public. He was, after all, property. Had Frederick's path been typical in the buying and selling of

human property, he would have been sent to another plantation, in the Deep South perhaps, and we would not have this story because Frederick's life in all likelihood would have taken an all-too- familiar path from the appointment he would keep as a change-agent in the legacy of slavery and a critical reformer shaping American history. That recognition would come later; for now, Frederick's life would be shaped by plantation politics.

Thomas Auld, Hugh's brother, made certain that he too would be present at the reading of Anthony's will. When the slaves were named and tagged for shipment to another working plantation, Thomas made it clear that he wanted Frederick. So he bought him and returned him to Baltimore for the purpose of running errands and serving as the companion to his brother's only son, Tommy. Frederick, now eight years old, spent the next seven years of his adolescence being influenced by this household and by the bustling environment of the urban experience. Baltimore turned out to be a more fluid and less restrictive environment than the plantation with its unyielding dreariness. It was not uncommon for masters to send their most trusted and talented slaves to work in the city. There, the master could expand his investment by putting his human property to work in a more lucrative setting and thereby increase his income. For the slave, working in the city meant fresh experiences with new people, a chance to practice skills and mingle in an urban environment. Above all else, for the opportunistic slave worker, the opportunity also meant hearing other voices, learning about the news of the day, and bringing information back to his base and sharing it. Numerous unknown networks of people and information were likely formed out of this circumstance, and out of the master's sight. Frederick understood the possibilities being offered and this explains why he called the urban slave "almost a freeman."[1]

Shy in some ways, cautious in public as slaves were conditioned to be, Frederick was nevertheless an unusually curious child. He brought an excitement to the home of the Aulds with his insatiable inquisitiveness about everything, with energy and a charming personality to match. When he could, he roamed through the Auld house, sometimes unattended, and discovered their study, where books, magazines, and other reading materials sat on shelves or in the middle of tables. Some, like *Landscape Art*, offered astonishing pictures of gardens with cascading

rows of multicolored flowers and bushes. Others, such as *Harper's Magazine,* pictured powerful looking personalities who dressed formally and looked very important, like Colonel Lloyd. Others, meanwhile, on the magazine covers of *Scribner's Monthly,* were dressed in western clothing, on top of horses, chasing bison. Others had pictures of men in military dress with shining swords and sabers held across their bodies with colorful sashes and fringed borders. Most of the pictures kept little Frederick's eyes flicking back and forth between new covers and faded ones with colors almost disappearing as the light touched them from the room's windows. And the books seemed to pull him up. He wanted to touch them all, even though he could not reach most of them. And none of them was he able to read, but he desperately wanted to.

Before her marriage to Hugh Auld, Sophia toiled as a weaver. She never owned a slave, had never been interested in owning one, and found the discussion of slavery unappealing, especially as the talk turned to human "profits." But she also sensed, without actually having examined her feelings, that slavery was wrong and that it operated outside of her world of Christian fellowship. Her understanding of slavery came from overheard conversations or from quick glances at newspaper and magazine headlines. These were moments that had forced her to form opinions, to make judgments, because the subject of people for sale, even when mumbled in conversation or headlined in papers, was everywhere. From her perspective, the subject was sinful and she would have as little to do with it as she could. She withdrew into herself at the thought of this kind of engagement with controversy. The topic made her uncomfortable and she retreated from what she sensed was a situation that put her conscience in a state of anxiety.

These moments pushed back curtains that psychologically separated the past from the present. Now there was confusion; now, the talk about slavery posed a danger to Sophia Auld's understanding of her soul because the topic meant, possibly, a continuation of violations between her faith and the God she worshipped. It created a bleak existence, and at times a tortuous one. No activist, Sophia nevertheless had a social conscience, and it made her both vulnerable and complicit with slave culture, an adult but a social waif at the same time. Except for young Frederick, Sophia was too isolated from events and removed to threaten slavery's presence, and she was too limited in her worldview to realize

that it was impossible to escape except through denial, which she had already started with her habit of withdrawing as much from the topic as she could. Sophia was middle-aged and middle class. And then there was the slave boy Frederick.[2]

It was not long before Frederick's interest in the books in the study struck the mistress of the house as an especially interesting circumstance. When he was not with her son Tommy, she heard Frederick moving about the house when he finished his chores. As he moved closer to the study, she realized that the movement stopped and motion ceased. One day she grabbed her knitting and went looking for him, to see where he stopped, or rather where the motion stopped. She, with her knitting bag, found him looking at the books and the magazines. When he saw her, he smiled, adorably, and handed her the magazine and pointed to the words.

Instinctively, she put her knitting aside and sat next to the boy Frederick and began to sound out the words that, to him at first, sounded no different from the unintelligible sounds coming from the songs the slaves sang on the plantation: "A . . . Bee, Ceee." Her instincts were right, however. He was interested in the words and in reading. He also awakened her interest in helping him; in fact, in her mind it was an opportunity to share the gospel, since he was a heathen, like other slaves, to Christianity and needed to hear the gospel. She could do that.

The time for teaching and reading, for bonding in fact, became a regular part of their days. They enjoyed their time together as teacher and student. She saw how eager he was to learn and how quickly he mastered her lessons. Later, he captured this experience poignantly and profoundly in chapters 6 and 7 of the *Narrative*. Her attentiveness and care, her maternal instincts nurturing this spiritual hunger for knowledge, recalled for him the loving care of his mother. Harriet in fact belonged to countless numbers of unnamed women in slave culture who had been violated and raped in slavery, but who nevertheless transformed their nightmares into extraordinarily tender moments for their loved ones. The more time Frederick spent with Sophia Auld, the more he was reminded of Grandmother Bailey, whose strong arms and commanding presence allowed him, her grandson, to move around the plantation without the constraints that other slave children faced.

These early and positive experiences with women, although not without tragedy rooted in slavery, depicted a foreground for his future engagement with women's worlds. Later in his life, he would share the same platform with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton to protest in favor of the right of women to vote. Later, the fearless Harriet Tubman would befriend him as she crossed interstate borders leading slaves to freedom. An English woman named Julia Griffiths and a German-Jewish woman named Ottilie Assing were two of the many European women who were instrumental in aiding his cause to abolish slavery. Women were very much a part of his political alliances. In between, there would be the 44 years of marriage to Anna Murray, a free black woman, and later to Helen Pitts, a white woman.

Sophia's contribution to this varied political and social tapestry that eventually distinguished him publicly was a threshold from which other developments can be traced. She taught him to read, and thus provided him with the first steps, which he took aggressively, toward unlocking his own thoughts about who he was. This moment of self-awareness brought with it an excitement and understanding that words had the power to liberate him and could feed his desire to be free—while not altogether sure yet from what. Yet buried in his subconscious was the possible realization that the source for this critical experience was a white woman, who would join others from many backgrounds to eventually form a personal and historical personality for the ages. None of this came at once of course. They were all steps, most of them resembling complex parts waiting to merge into a physical freedom he increasingly sought.

All these feelings grew in him and forged a temperament and a personality that expanded his independence of spirit and served to match his intelligence. While living in Baltimore with the Aulds, the sessions with Sophia became so routine that they were totally caught off guard when her husband stumbled on one of their tutoring sessions. Hugh Auld's words left such an indelible imprint on Frederick's mind that he chose to quote Auld in his *Narrative*: "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. 'Now,' said he, if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how

to read, there would be no keeping him. It would ever unfit him to be a slave.' "[3]

As a dramatic picture of the corruptibility of chattel slavery and its fundamental assault on normal relationships between people with similar interests, this scene is richly symbolic. It showed the method for making victims and for deepening a profound sense of worthlessness. "I now understood," Frederick wrote in the now-classic slave narrative, "what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man."

The significance of the 1845 *Narrative* is no stronger than it is in chapters 6 and 7 where Frederick boldly described the insight that reading did for his understanding of his world of slaves and slave masters. At that moment, more precisely a series of connected moments, his thoughts began to progressively unfold a picture of himself as being apart from Hugh Auld's stabbing comments. He was not certain of any sequence but the room looked smaller, the house became less of a place to explore and more confining. His feelings changed, too. Auld's words returned the boy to the unspeakable separation from Grandmother Betsy, her warmth and their firmness. No formula of thought could trace the paths that these moments evoked, but he became aware of a new impulse. He now wanted to be released from these feelings, to follow the notions and hints derived from what we would call today literacy. It had opened the door for his desires to be free. It was no longer a personal mystery now. While Sophia's husband insisted that she stop teaching Frederick to read, because it would "spoil the best nigger in the world," the slave boy did not stop his journey of self-discovery and literacy. The tutoring, along with Bible studies, had introduced him to Christianity, to the faith based on the story of the Nazarene carpenter. In dreams he found himself desiring his liberty. Now he prayed for it to happen through his invocations to the God to whom Sophia had introduced to him.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom* and in the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, the succeeding autobiographies, Frederick wrote about two more defining sources of his spiritual growth in chapters identically titled "Religious Nature Awakened." In general, they are similar accounts and they use the same words on most pages. In an autobiography, the author is somewhat obliged to explain as best as he can his subjective

and intellectual development. Frederick engaged his readers by showing them how Hugh Auld's words pressed him into seeking an understanding of the words that he remembered. He told his first readers that now, "slave" and "slavery" had meaning. Every time he heard those words, they received his attention. Sometimes they would take him to a dictionary and he would learn that words could be understood by their place in the book or by their place in his life experiences. In ways that he could not communicate, Frederick was developing a love for words and their capacity to be tools for linking himself linguistically to the world, and also stimulating him into wanting to know more about the world.

While the learning process had to be confusing sometimes, Frederick liked thinking about words and their definitions and for quite different reasons. On occasion, he would follow the meaning of the words in newspapers such as the *Baltimore American,* which carried stories on the "abolitionists." He began to identify himself with the abolitionists, thus giving him a context for freedom and, privately, for some revenge. He wrote that he sensed "fear" and "anger" in others as they spoke of the abolitionists because the abolitionists wanted to eliminate slavery. Gradually, the public discussions of abolitionism and slavery become personal to him. He alluded to the fact that the insurrection of Nathaniel Turner created fear and that "God was angry with the white people because of their slaveholding wickedness,"[4] and he said it only made him want to identify with the abolitionists even more. In addition to these pursuits for understanding himself and the world around him, he turned to reading dictionaries and newspapers, but others also played a role in his journey into personal and public self-awareness.

One of the first persons involved in these remembered revelations in Baltimore was a white Methodist minister named Hanson, whom Frederick judged to be an effective speaker. Yet the preaching of Hanson, however moving, was not enough for Frederick. He searched further in Baltimore and discovered what he called a "good colored man" named Charles Lawson who told him to take his burdens, pray, and to "cast all my cares upon God." Lawson becomes, according to Douglass, his spiritual father. By the end of the chapter in the *Life and Times,* Lawson is no longer a "good colored man"; he is now "Father Lawson." Furthermore, he adds that "I loved him intensely, and was at his house every

chance I could get." By then, his search led him to discover another book in the Auld home, one of the popular school books of its day, *The Columbian Orator*.[5]

This book holds a special place in Frederick's memory from his earliest days in Baltimore. Besides the Bible, it is the only book mentioned and elaborated upon in the first autobiography. When he turned to writing his autobiography, the title inspired him. Frederick was perfectly capable of seeing in his life a hint of a broader identity mirrored in the book's title: if there was indeed the Columbian orator, then why could there not be Frederick Douglass, *the* American orator? It also stirred him to see popular names, pillars of the western world in fact, being presented, with various references to Cato, Benjamin Franklin, and to victorious Roman generals. *The Columbian Orator* also perfectly reflected most of Frederick's concerns about slaves and masters. It deeply stirred in him once more the longing for freedom and presented him with a chance to understand how arguments, rational and logical approaches, could be used against slavery. Significantly, the book included a conversation in which the slave inverted the master's argument on slavery. The fact of the matter is that these readings, as much as any influence outside of the plantation, planted in his mind the idea of the importance of the spoken word, the oratory, that would later make him famous. Further, it showed him how the presumed controllers of black fate thought and provided him with ways to think about resistance. As Frederick stated in the 1845 story, *The Columbian Orator* served him well by including a dialogue about a slave's successful attempt at escaping to freedom.

In several ways, Frederick's reading of *The Columbian Orator* foreshadowed his own later thoughts about slavery and stimulated his plans to escape from it. However, nothing could have satisfied Frederick more than this affirmation of the reality of slavery: it was illogical, resting on convenient and stereotypical misinterpretations of human beings. Its actions led to the creation of social catacombs wherein slave masters, like their captives, were stupefied if not spiritually dead. The book provided just the right arguments against the permanence of slavery to strengthen his self-driven desire to become more aware of himself and his thoughts—and to strike a personal note for freedom. Having begun to learn how to read, with reading material that mattered, he shrewdly

manipulated others to teach him to write while he worked on the docks in Baltimore.

What was the revelation that explained deep and dark secrets that had been agitating Frederick's soul? It was a growing awareness of words as instruments for using his thoughts and turning them into actions. The words used to dehumanize him had just the opposite effect; they awakened him to new realities about himself and the world around him. By the time Frederick decided to escape from slavery, nearly a decade of experiences had contributed piece-by-piece to his determination. He had seen the brutal and restricted system on the plantation and the more fluid yet constraining conditions in the city of Baltimore, and he had experienced the self-empowerment created by learning to read, all of these aspects enabling him to see the world very differently. This was a period of inner growth that quickened Frederick to the choices he could make, including escaping to freedom, with thoughts and more thoughts stirring throughout his being about the meaning of that freedom.

Hugh Auld could sense over the years the growing tension in Frederick, and so, in March 1832, he sent him back to live with his brother Thomas Auld in St. Michaels. Hugh thought that St. Michaels, flat and rural, with minimal stimulation, would be a safer place for Frederick than Baltimore, with its urban energy. He was no doubt right. But Frederick had his own thoughts about what might eventually happen, because in August of that year, Thomas Auld had converted to Christianity. With his own growing attraction to religion, Frederick hoped that Thomas's conversion would lead him to becoming a kinder person and eventually lead him to free his slaves. It did not happen; in fact, according to Frederick, Thomas Auld became worse as a person following his conversion. Frederick was growing too restless and useless to Thomas, and so he lent him to a neighbor, Edward Covey, for a year.

Covey, recognized for his religious piety, was best known in the eastern shore community of slaveholders for his successful methods of breaking the spirits of slaves. Frederick began to live on the Covey farm on January 1, 1833. Covey's moment came on a day when Frederick could not control a pair of oxen in the field. Certainly strong enough, Frederick did not have the training to control these beasts of burden. As he himself described it in his autobiography, the oxen pulled him all over

the field and into trees and nearly caused him to lose his grip on the straps as they dragged him. Frederick gave no indication of how long this scene of chaos between man and beast took place, but the description, in a book rarely given to humor, invites some comic relief.

Frederick received no such levity from Covey. He beat Frederick mercilessly and continuously from this point, ordering him to undress while he beat him. It would continue like this for six more months until, on one extremely hot day, while Frederick and another slave, named Bill Smith, were fanning wheat to be put into bushels. Frederick suddenly collapsed from heat stroke. No sooner had he fallen than Covey was on top of him, kicking Frederick until he got up. Gathering himself, Frederick ran off in hopes of reaching Thomas Auld and getting out of the contract that sent him to Covey. Reaching Auld's home, sweaty and exhausted, he begged for help.

Thomas Auld refused. He allowed Frederick to sleep overnight in the barn but offered him none of the real relief that Frederick sought. There would be no sympathy from Auld, no break with the contract with Covey, nor for that matter would he give him any comfort by giving him food to relieve his hunger. Returning through the woods, he stopped under the cover of nature. In the 1855 and 1882 versions he recorded of the episode, Frederick wrote of his despair and frustration, alluding to the moment as being the perfect time for prayer. He wanted divine deliverance from Covey and from the physical menace that Covey represented. The scene was perfect for meditation, but almost immediately Frederick recoiled from turning to prayer to rejecting it, because the idea of religious hypocrisy and doubt flooded his mind. He knew that Master Auld prayed, as did Master Covey, but that their prayers and their religious pieties were "shams," to use his word. Their hypocrisy reflected his larger doubt about religion. He stopped meditating and wondered if the trauma of chattel slavery had been a curse he bore for the sins of his forbears. He did not then answer his question, or perhaps could not, but the entire episode reflected his need to know more about his situation and to understand it.[6]

The next day, still exhausted, Frederick returned to the Covey farm. Along the way he met Sandy Jenkins, a free black man, who permitted Frederick to stay overnight with him and his wife. Sandy, who was to participate in Frederick's escape plans, was at that moment an unan-

ticipated ally. He was Frederick's first contact with anyone who identified himself with Africa. Sandy showed him a talisman and a rabbit's foot. He said they would protect Frederick. But what the frightened slave really grasped was the sense of magic, of the supernatural. A new feeling came over him that was not due to the ways of religion he had known, but to the notion that this foot possessed unseen power. Fearful of what he might expect when he reached the Covey farm, young Frederick returned to the barn to care for the horses with new hope for his physical and spiritual strength.[7]

It is clear from Frederick's own words that he wanted the next scene, which involved a fight with Covey, to be the climax of the story. The section would solidify his account as both a story of his growth and strength and also one which would represent the will of all slaves, of all living under repressed conditions, to be free. If he could do it, so could they. It was to be a testament of hope, if you will, to the idea that life and freedom were indispensable and inseparable from one another. And one had to fight for them both.

When Frederick returned to Covey and went to work with the horses in the barn, Covey pulled Frederick down on the floor and tried to tie him down. Frederick's own words are best used here to communicate both the immediacy and the tension:

> Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don't know—I resolved to fight, and suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. He held on to me, and I to him.[8]

The point of the scene is Frederick's battle with an evil force and his will to fight back. The aim was to portray a small morality play in which the evil dragon Covey is taken down by Frederick, the Red Cross Knight. However committed Frederick was to the truth of his narrative, the social historian William McFeely has rightly provided some additional insight into this vignette of freedom. Omitted in 1845, but later presented in 1855, is the fact that Frederick and two slaves, Bill and Caroline, are present during this fight and the three are actually authors of this scene. When Covey orders them to help him overcome

Frederick, they ignore his orders by feigning ignorance, an act in keeping with the image of the non-thinking slave. Their uncooperativeness with Covey actually made them participants in a plot to overcome him. In other words, they actually improvised, as McFeely astutely noted, as this confrontation with Covey unfolded so that Frederick would prevail; at least that was the idea. The victory over Covey, who never again whipped Frederick, served to hasten in Frederick's mind the idea of becoming completely free.[9]

Frederick's first words about escaping slavery reveal fears, individual angst, and yet personal determination. He adroitly described the vigilance of the slave masters who devised a number of ways and means to test the spirit of a slave in order to determine the degree of rebelliousness. Simple conversations and questions between masters and slaves turned into deceptions aimed at learning about the intent of the slave.

While Frederick in his later narratives provided more detail about liberating himself and others, he was initially very reluctant to supply information that would make the slaveholding community more watchful than it already was about restless and missing slaves and what amounted to a national network of escape, the Underground Railroad. The result of such caution is more of a rhetorical stiffness in this section of the 1845 *Narrative*, with frozen images, until the later installments address these extraordinary developments in greater detail. Frederick's reasoning, of course, for not being more forthcoming was that he did not want to enable slave masters and bounty hunters to interrupt the escape plans of other slaves. Basically, it was his way of keeping silent and denying the slaveholding regimes any more information than they already had about the Underground Railroad. What made this form of resistance so formidable against the slaveholding class?

The Underground Railroad manifested a social rebellion played out between the forces of idealism and blind materialism in the making of American history. It began sometime in the late 16th century when the first Africans were brought to North America, escaped their captors, and went to live with the native peoples, escaped to Canada or the Caribbean, or found a way to live on their own.[10] It did not end until after the Civil War. And it expanded our national story by looking at another set of conflicts in a slavocracy, a nation built on forced bondage, free

labor, and a range of human abuses often too horrifying to be told in a single tale.

The name of the Underground Railroad came from the movement of slaves by way of the most advanced technology of the day, the railroad, which also provided a vocabulary for its clandestine operations. The organizers were "managers," the locations were "stations," the fugitives were "passengers," and the site leaders were "conductors." The anonymity of the fugitive slave was one of the most essential qualities of the railroad. The communities that supported this form of resistance knew that secrecy was both its strength and weakness. If exposed, any part of it could be crushed, and many connections were indeed broken by an ill-timed word here and there. But its strength lay in the capacity of the railroad to be a powerful source of resistance to slavery's tyranny by creating its own myth of invincibility, of destiny, and of fate, forcing its adversaries to worry about the number of defectors and the financial consequences of their absence.

The Underground Railroad was an act of critical intelligence and creativity. Whether one fugitive or a small group—and it had to be a small group to avoid detection—historians and other chroniclers of our national story will not be able to put names together with faces until the slave story is told. Only from the most successful do we know something of the creative ways in which the escapes happened. Disguises, falsified papers written by the slaves themselves, planned crossings over water bodies in order to throw off pursuing bloodhounds, and further connections with other, trusted slaves, even hiding in a box and shipping oneself to freedom were all part of a creative process of escaping. And the escape turned the process into a flight from the law and made the slave a fugitive, thus creating one of the most important reversals and ironies in slave culture. To be free, the escaping slave had to break the law. The ritual, however, created a deep feeling of strength within those who knew how and when to participate in flight. Still, escaping was the most dangerous path for the slave to pursue. To try and escape meant risking death or severe beatings, and since few knew about the "station," even fewer would know about the location of the fugitive.

Families, however, would know locations. They would know because in the family house, the barn, somewhere in the domicile, the

fugitive would find his or her way to a station. No single religion, race, or nationality formed the leadership or the consciousness of the Underground Railroad. Looking back at it, it is apparent that this was one of the nation's earliest collective efforts at civil disobedience: blacks helping other blacks, whites helping other whites and blacks helping whites, farmers aiding city dwellers, the educated aiding the uneducated. And, not unexpectedly, there were, of course, churches, self-help societies, neighborhoods, other institutional landmarks to be found in most communities. Some safe-havens were known, yet others appeared so insignificant to the outsider that only local folks would know what constituted a safe house or building. In short, the combinations were created out of necessity until a permanent, legal road to freedom existed.

The idea of escaping to freedom unfolded even more in Frederick's mind when Thomas Auld hired him out again in the next year, January 1834, to William Freeland, a much kinder slave master than Covey, although it is hard to conceive of anybody more severe. On the Freeland farm, the atmosphere allowed Frederick to get back to his old "tricks," as he called them, meaning that he would engage in the forbidden act of teaching fellow slaves how to read. As a group, they created a Sabbath school where other slaves from neighboring farms gathered and heard from Frederick on both biblical and political subjects. At the Freeland farm there was work, but there was also the opportunity for him to lead. His confidence grew, and as it did the words associated with freedom began to come out of his mouth and into their conversations. Slowly, and probably encouraged by Frederick, words like "escape," "change," "danger," and "promise" began to work themselves into the conversations he had with his group. During the year, a plan to escape developed, especially among the four slaves with him on the Freeland farm.

> In coming to a fixed determination to run away, we did more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death. With us it was a doubtful liberty at most, and almost certain death if we failed. For my part, I should prefer death to hopeless bondage.[11]

This was a bold and dangerous move. It was not as if one could just walk away to another site. That was normal behavior and this was an abnormal reality; planning itself required further risks. Every possible

resource was made available to the slave owner to keep his slaves. There were laws at the local and state level, clandestine traps to test the restless, and there were slaves who spied on other slaves so as to alert those watching to catch runaways. The fears of the owners at the loss of property and the fears of the slaves at the punishment facing them if they were caught created a climate of ceaseless fear and tension.

The freedom to live freely was a principle in the life of the republic. But to the slave, the principle had to be faced in reverse order, as stated earlier. To be free, the slave had to break the law and escape to freedom in order to be liberated. The process of reversing the normal path to freedom illustrated the historical inconsistency in our nation that made slavery both peculiar but nevertheless an institution in its own right.

By the time that Frederick planned successfully to escape from slavery in 1838, he knew the steps that had to be taken. He was back at the

Anna Murray Douglass in her later years. National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site.

farm of William Freeland, where the escape plan was hatched. It was hardly elaborate but it did have a single quality that contributed to its importance in Frederick's life: perseverance. The initial failures, the probable betrayal by his friend and confidant Jenkins—none of these actions would stop him or his fellow freedom-bound cohorts from chasing the dream.

If Frederick's prospects of being free can be traced to his initial stay with the Aulds in Baltimore's Fels Point, the plans can be found unfolding brilliantly in Frederick's capacity to absorb the wide range of experiences afforded by the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the bustling seaport city of Baltimore. The outline would take nearly three years to form. Hired from Thomas Auld in 1835 again, Frederick returned to Freeland. In the words of our time, Frederick was being outsourced to Freeland, Auld thus unknowingly giving Frederick more time to plot his escape. Frederick wrote, almost wistfully, and playing off of the name, that "I began to want to live upon free land as well as with Freeland; and I was no longer content, therefore, to live with him or any other slaveholder."[12]

Frederick communicated these thoughts to his closest circle of fellow slaves. One by one, he spoke to Henry Harris and then John Harris; Henry Bailey, his uncle; Charles Roberts; and, of course to Sandy, who had given Frederick the good luck charm. Eventually, they agreed to a plan that would take them by canoe on a Saturday night, paddling from the small creek into the Chesapeake Bay, making their way out of Maryland by foot following the North Star.

On Friday, April 1, 1836, with their bundles tightened around sticks and old clothing, Frederick and his companions executed a plan of escape. It failed. They had been betrayed, most likely by Sandy Jenkins, since he did not want to leave his wife and children. Questioned by Freeland and his overseers, Frederick and his companions were jailed and beaten. On the way to the jailhouse, Frederick told his companions to "own nothing," his way of communicating to them that they should "eat" the passes that Frederick had prepared. They stayed in jail for a week before Thomas Auld came to claim Frederick.

In reclaiming Frederick, Auld was as much acknowledging the restlessness of Frederick as well as the influence Frederick had to stir things up with other slaves. In another sense, Auld was also acknowledging an unspoken bond that existed between the two. He had once again come

to Frederick's aid, an action which reflected his attachment to the slave boy, not unlike that of a parent. On the way back, Auld made a promise to Frederick that he would free him at the age of 25 (nearly another six to seven years in the future) if he essentially behaved himself. There is much room for speculation as to how this conversation took place and whether Frederick would even have agreed. Auld knew that he needed to do something, to preserve his "investment" and keep Frederick alive so that he, Auld, would continue to profit from his labor. He settled on shipping Frederick back to Baltimore to live once again with Hugh and Sophia Auld.

The return to Baltimore again in 1836 opened an even more meaningful perspective that Frederick had of the city, of the Aulds, and of his own growing sense of opportunities. At 18, he looked more like a man than the boy who sat on Sophia Auld's lap and learned his ABCs. Sophia, however, now distanced herself from him. Street racism perhaps, along with teenage and adolescent self-centeredness, had found their way into young Tommy's life, so that he no longer wanted or needed a black boy to be his companion. His companions were other white friends. By a strange twist of circumstances, Hugh Auld became the most stable figure in the house upon Frederick's return to Baltimore. Soon thereafter, Hugh found work for Frederick as an apprentice caulker.

More often than not, most white workers in the shipyard resented the presence of the black youth and felt free to express their contempt. Outsourced slaves on the job meant that white workers would have fewer jobs. Frederick's bondage and the racism he faced from other workers combined to create an incendiary environment in the workplace. It was not long before the antagonisms would lead to violence. Frederick found himself in repeated fights with whites, and eventually was badly beaten by a mob of them. There were exceptions which have been memorialized into our day. Two Irish workers, aware of Frederick's circumstances, encouraged him to think beyond the shipyard and about his freedom for the rest of his life. Frederick recorded their words, and the Irish memorialized the experience with a mural dedicated to Douglass's visit to Belfast, Ireland, in December 1845, and the memorial can be seen today.[13]

The times, however, would bring Frederick more positive influences. Among the difficult and painful times with other workers and with his growing need to be free, Frederick found time to explore Baltimore's

free black community and in doing so met Anna Murray. She was a free black woman whose parents, Mary and Bambarra Murray, had been manumitted before Anna's birth, probably in 1813. What we know about Anna is that through a courtship with Frederick, she became a major influence for encouraging him in his plans to escape and helping to make it happen by financing his escape to freedom.

Anna Murray was very much a part of the Baltimore experience. Frederick met her at the Eastern Baltimore Improvement Society as early as in 1836. In this vibrant port city, there was already a large, free population of blacks, free Negroes as they were called. They possessed 10 churches and more than 35 benevolent societies—self-help organizations. In his free time with her, usually after work but before he was due back to the Aulds, they talked and fell in love with one another. As couples have always done throughout the ages, they spoke about their lives, the people who were closest to them and, in Frederick's conversation, the experience of being a slave, a slave on the plantation, a slave in the city, a slave who had learned how to read and write. For Anna, any discussion meant an overview of her domestic work and the people who employed her. He would talk about his work as a caulker and the daily struggle with the white men around him. When together, they found a common yearning to escape the oppression that Frederick faced on a daily basis and to think about themselves as a couple, and even a couple with a family in freedom on their own.

The organization that enabled Anna and Frederick to meet and to grow in love for one another was derived from Philadelphia's Free African Society, established in 1876 by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. These organizations provided the first signs of organized community life in these cities and offered neighborhood life and institutional support to meet the needs of the black community. They provided schools, banks, stores, and the collective advantage of purchasing goods, without which there would be fewer opportunities to have a family and to provide for it. Meeting Anna, falling in love, and wishing for marriage only accelerated the passion for freedom that was already on fire in Frederick. This time, his plan to escape succeeded because of Anna and because at 20 years of age, Frederick had a more seasoned understanding about the barriers he would have to navigate in order for his escape to be successful.

Frederick Douglass escaping to freedom in 1838, depicted in a sheet music cover illustration for "The Fugitive's Song" by Jesse Hutchinson Jr. Boston: Henry Prentiss, 1845, lithograph, E. W. Bouve, Boston; Library of Congress/LC-USZ62-7823.

And he did escape, alone, on September 3, 1838. It culminated events that were carefully choreographed after he realized that he was not going to convince either of the Auld brothers about loosening his grip on him so that he could make more money for them and also for himself in a city that offered those opportunities. He and Anna planned meticulously, from the clothes he would wear (How could you hide him?) to the roads, trains, and ferries he would take. None of the three autobiographies outlined the specific routes Frederick took to escape. He declared that such information would jeopardize others' future efforts. Years later, however, he said that his plan was one that he had successfully used with other slaves. The route he took involved getting to Long Island Sound and then to New York City.[14]

Anna Murray followed and met up with him in New York. They were married on September 15, 1838, by the Reverend James W.C. Pennington in New York City.

What did it feel like to be free and to now have the responsibility that went with it? The experience of freedom found no better words to match Frederick Bailey's:

> I have been frequently asked how I felt when I found myself in a free State. . . . In writing to a dear friend, immediately after my arrival at New York, I said I felt like one who had escaped a den of hungry lions. This state of mind, however, very soon subsided; and I was again seized with a feeling of great insecurity and loneliness. . . . Let him be a fugitive slave in a strange land—a land given up to be the hunting-ground for slave-holders . . . let him place himself in my situation—without home or friends . . . let him feel that he is pursued by merciless men-hunters, and in total darkness as to what to do, where to go, or where to stay . . . let him be placed in this most trying situation—the situation in which I was placed—then, and not till then, will he fully appreciate the hardships of, and know how to sympathize with, the toil-worn and whip-scarred fugitive slave.[15]

Having been rebuked as a human being because he was born into the systematic institution of chattel slavery in America, Frederick now made his way to the leadership of the abolitionist movement. Through them he would ascend to the national stage for the purpose of using his oratorical eloquence to eliminate slavery as a politically sanctioned activity. He would express the outrage against humanity and make claims for the slaves' reality by holding up a mirror to his own.

And soon, in less than a decade, the nation would know his name and the trouble he'd seen.

NOTES

1. *Autobiographies*, p. 38.
2. *Autobiographies*, pp. 36, 215, 530.
3. *Autobiographies*, p. 37.
4. *Autobiographies*, p. 231.
5. *Autobiographies*, p. 225.
6. *Autobiographies*, compare p. 278 with p. 583.
7. *Autobiographies*, pp. 278, 582.

8. *Autobiographies*, p. 64.

9. William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1991, p. 48.

10. Charles L. Blockson, *The Underground Railroad*, New York: Hippocrene Books, 1994, p. 15.

11. *Autobiographies*, p. 74.

12. *Autobiographies*, p. 72.

13. Fionnghuala Sweeney, *Frederick Douglass and the Atlantic World*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007. Also McFeely, p. 127.

14. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 70.

15. *Autobiographies*, p. 89.

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Chapter 3

AMAZING GRACE, 1838–1847

Through many dangers, toils, and snares
I have already come;
'Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far
And Grace will lead me home.

—*John Newton*

"No matter how deep an individual has sunk, he can sink still deeper, and this 'can' is the object of anxiety," declared the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard in 1844. While he may not have been thinking about the particular life of Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, Kierkegaard, as one of the most influential thinkers of the 19th century, shared in the moment with Frederick's feelings about the darkness of captivity and the experience of escaping from that darkness.[1]

What creates the anxiety that Kierkegaard discussed was an awareness, a knowledge of good and evil and its impact on the individual's sense of self. As this proposition applies to Frederick, it provides a frame of reference for understanding his first steps and thoughts as he entered into freedom upon successfully arriving in New York in 1838, and then travelling on to New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Characteristically articulating his deepest feelings about his itinerary to his first readers in 1845 and again in 1855, in the first several paragraphs of both autobiographies, Frederick reflected upon his connection between slavery and freedom in spiritual and providential terms.

> May not this, after all, be God's work? May He not, for wise ends, have doomed me to this lot? A contest had been going on in my mind for years, between the clear consciousness of right and the plausible errors of superstition; between the wisdom of manly courage, and the foolish weakness of timidity. The contest was now ended; the chain was severed; God and right stood vindicated. I was a FREEMAN, and the voice of peace and joy thrilled my heart.[2]

Yet before he moved to the next topic, he quickly returned to the realities of his uncertainties, or anxieties, as the Swedish philosopher termed this condition of the self. He said, "Free and joyous, however, as I was, joy was not the only sensation I experienced. . . . I was soon taught that I was still in an enemy's land."

New York was a dangerous place for a fugitive. It had become fertile ground for slave catchers roaming the streets for runaways and, as Frederick noted in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, the city's environment was difficult. Some runaways, he said, preferred to return to the iron hand of the slave master rather than endure "the life of loneliness, apprehension, hunger, and anxiety, which meets them on their first arrival in a free state." Frederick, benefitting from good connections throughout his life, had helped others escape and therefore understood perhaps better than most how to conduct himself under new circumstances. He had been exposed to city life in Baltimore and was keenly aware of the Underground Railroad networks provided by Quakers, churches such as the African Methodist Episcopal Zion, known as the "AME Church," and by the free black community. Frederick was therefore better prepared than most to deal with the routes of escape and the fears associated with it to northern sites of freedom.

Moreover, his determination was reinforced by the anticipation of meeting up with Anna Murray, his betrothed, and keeping his prom-

ise to marry her once he safely escaped. They were in fact married in New York on September 15, 1838, in a ceremony led by the Reverend James W. C. Pennington, himself a fugitive, and witnessed by David Ruggles, a black man who was a leader of the New York Vigilance Committee and a conductor on the Underground Railroad. The couple then made their way to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where they would begin to live the life of freedom in the enemy's land, as Frederick called it, before he would claim it for his own.

Like Baltimore, New Bedford created opportunities for Frederick to enter into a life away from the punishment of plantation life and closer to a normal existence. The reminders of his past, however, were all around him, although they were now competing with the new excitement that flooded his mind about a new beginning. He had to remain vigilant. However, the city of New Bedford offered possibilities, of course, that slavery could never offer, even if on a limited scale. Blacks were free to be literate, and many were. David Ruggles, one of the many invaluable figures who made it his business to know about the network of persons available to help fugitives, had notified the Johnson family about the arrival of Frederick and Anna, thus allowing some preparation to take place for the newlyweds.

Mary Page and Nathan Johnson were critical contacts for Frederick and Anna in terms of integrating them into the heart of New Bedford life. This family was a picture of how the Underground Railroad operated beyond the practice of aiding runaways to escape, though certainly that was an achievement and a risk in itself. Runaways were social outsiders and the Johnsons' role was to know just the right touches of clothing, places, and connections to make the runaways look like they belonged in the community and that they came from some place other than a plantation. They knew that the goal was to make them appear connected, while remaining ever alert to the threat of slave hunters, whose power was in their acquired sense of recognizing the fugitives' behavior, whether from anxiety in being in a new location or fear of detection. The Johnsons, whose home is a family landmark in New Bedford today, were exemplary but not exceptional to the world of slavery and the network of resistance to it. They knew the community and the politics that drove it, particularly the shadowy world of the slave catchers who watched for the newest black faces in town.

Like the William Still family of Philadelphia, who were famous for their efforts in documenting the history of the Underground Railroad, the Johnsons of New Bedford were a welcoming committee, their home was a safe house, and their awareness of the community became an indispensable resource for Frederick and Anna. They opened their doors to the young couple and oriented them in how to survive.[3]

Among their first steps was to encourage Frederick to change his name from "Frederick Johnson." He could be a Frederick, and the Maryland runaway insisted on keeping his first name, but he could not be Frederick Johnson, a surname he had chosen for himself before he reached Massachusetts. He did not know it at the time, but the fact of the matter was that the name was too common. There were just too many Johnsons, and hence that name would draw suspicion from spies in the black community and from slave catchers. There was money to be made by capturing blacks who could be transported through clandestine channels that the slave catchers created through their own network of collaborators. With this awareness, Frederick's mentors took steps to change his identity.

It was in fact Nathan Johnson, influenced by reading Walter Scott's poem "Lady of the Lake," who suggested that Frederick adopt the name after the poem's heroic figure, called Douglas. Did Nathan see a heroic quality in Frederick? Was it just the timing of reading and having a name to offer? It is hard to know, of course, but what we do know is that Frederick later wrote that he was willing to give up Bailey for Douglas, while adding another "s" to the name, but not the name Frederick. That name was his link to the most personal, the most intimate of memories; it was the name that meant the most to him because it was what he had been called all his life, especially by his mother and grandmother.

Frederick Douglass, as the latest New Bedfordian, embraced his new freedom with the earnestness and curiosity that he had not been permitted in his years as a slave. He could now dream about new possibilities, which he did almost every conscious moment of his life. Now he could actually take walks and realize those hopes in wandering daydreams. He strolled around his new neighborhood with a watchful blend of delight and eagerness. Afternoon strolls, some lasting until dark, found him passing by children playing, adults conversing in and outside of buildings, with a sense of belonging to a free community that

was altogether a new experience to him. Besides the fellowship with the Johnsons, he had a new confidence about the security of his new surroundings, and it gave him a bolder sense of choices. For a change, work meant money to support himself and Anna, a goal that added to his determination to function as a free man. He would be paid, and the pay would go directly into his pockets, not into the pockets of a master who had done no work but expected to profit from his slave-property.

Frederick, of course, would find work, and it would give him an inexpressible happiness to earn money from and not to have to turn it over to anyone. It was his money, he held and turned the coins over and over in his large hands, and he would smile to himself over the first real evidence that he was his own man. Even more important was a profound sense of responsibility, which slavery prohibited. Responsibility was like a bonding agent to his freedom. It aligned itself to new thoughts and to a new and deeper sense of self.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Frederick thought about his freedom broadly as a representative of other slaves and concluded, rightly, that without slaves, there was no wealth. He had seen poverty among whites only when they did not own slaves. Wealth and slavery were inseparable. He wrote, "A free white man, holding no slaves in the country, I had known to be the most ignorant and poverty stricken of men, and the laughing stock even of themselves—called generally by them in derision, 'poor white trash'." New Bedford not only offered a better place but a remarkable experience in his capacity to refine his social vision by being able to see the laboring classes living in "comfort" and "refinement."[4]

For his first job, Douglass stacked wood for the pastor of New Bedford's Methodist church. The pay was not much, but it was still his first paid job ever. This was a special moment for Douglass to experience the fruit of his labors and to know, to really know for the first time, that honest labor was rewarded, and that one did not have to give it away to anyone else. There was a social catch, however. When he sought work as a caulker, Douglass found that the old ways of slave culture and discrimination were not limited to Maryland. The white caulkers refused to work with a black man. Douglass, knowing that his wife was pregnant and more concerned about the security of his family than personal pride, borrowed a wood-horse and a saw from Nathan Johnson and

for the next three years used them to earn a living. He earned about a dollar a day or more, but it was enough to feed and house his family. And while discrimination still plagued him, he would not permit the old ways to take away from the excitement of and the responsibility of being reborn as Frederick Douglass.

For a while, he really did not care what he did. The priorities of maintaining himself as a family man were now the highest duties that he had. So he hauled lumber, swept chimneys, shoveled coal, drove a coach, waited on tables, sawed wood—anything that would pay. While he worked, so did Anna. She secured domestic work; her amiable and folksy personality opened doors for this woman of quiet dignity and strength. She also knew how to save money and cut corners so that nothing was wasted; after all, she had saved enough money for Frederick's escape. In many ways, the Baltimore experience gave each of them a background for the heady calling of being a newly wedded black couple seeking to determine their own destinies.

These new surroundings released other interests that were either restricted or outlawed by slave culture. Douglass, in spite of the daily demands of survival, remained hungry to know what was going on around him. In his exploration of New Bedford, he found that political topics of the day were featured at many open forums, and that many such forums could be found in the black community, mostly in black churches. Not long after his arrival, he joined a local Methodist church, but found that they practiced segregation with their black congregants by forcing them to sit in separate sections. He left that church and soon discovered that there was a small Zion Methodist congregation, his faith church, that welcomed him. Soon he was one of their leading members and one of their preachers as well.

Douglass continued the habit he started in Baltimore of reading William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, with its columns and news about the abolitionist movement. He also sought out public meetings where current events were being discussed. At one of the many meetings he attended the forum focused upon African colonization. This was the name for a debate unfolding among some in the moral community made up of religious groups, philosophical societies, and others about slavery and the future of the African captive. The politically minded asked whether the black slave would be better off back in Africa or in Tous-

saint's Haiti. The advocates of recolonization, especially the influential Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, saw this plan as an opportunity to end the discussion of what to do with the blacks by sending them out of the country and back to Africa if possible. Opponents of the idea, and Douglass was one of them, considered it unrealistic, and in fact an unconscionable act, in view of the near century of labor given by the slave in the hope that someday slavery would cease and the black person would become a citizen with full rights and responsibility.

Two fundamental propositions were being contested. One was the definition of civilization in terms of who claimed it for themselves. Is it owned just by Europeans or are there other groups that have a stake in its definition? The second was present by inference: what standards and criteria were being used to include some cultures and groups but used

Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site.

to eliminate others? As Douglass expressed it repeatedly in some of his best known remarks of the 1850s, the human condition is inseparable and indivisible.

During these early years in New Bedford, Douglass stepped up, spoke out, and used these forums to polish his speeches, clarify his thoughts, and strengthen his spirit. As much as the topics excited him, there was also the impulse to speak, to release those oratorical gifts that would distinguish him—in an age when oratory was at a highpoint. This round of debating and thinking about the serious ideas of the times would serve him well in two later circumstances. The first would be when he entered the debate over the Constitution as a slave document.[5] It would be a conversation that would place him directly before the *Liberator*'s editor, William Lloyd Garrison, who asserted that the Constitution was indeed a slave document. This debate, which took place in the 1850s, would be fiery and personal. The other involving the question of civilization would come in the closing years of Douglass's life, when he protested a world's fair that intentionally or not excluded the contributions of blacks to world civilization. At the moment in New Bedford, however, these events were not yet a part of his world, but his interest in the signs of the times would prepare him for these and later debates.

On August 9, 1841, Frederick finally met William Lloyd Garrison for the first time, at the Bristol Antislavery Meeting being held in New Bedford. Moved by the passions of the occasion, Douglass spoke up but so did Garrison, both impressing one another but realizing that their words were being heard in different ways by their audience. Douglass was an unknown. He was in the presence of one of the greatest abolitionists in the person of Garrison, the person who defined much of the abolitionist movement and its uncompromising tone, and who was a powerful orator himself. He had been connected with Benjamin Lundy, the abolitionist pioneer, had been jailed for his beliefs, and had founded the New England Abolitionist Society in 1832. Later that year, he was responsible for drafting the American Antislavery Society position through the Declaration of Sentiments. Garrison was no stranger to the bodily threats that the movement often faced. He had been assaulted by a mob and dragged half naked through the streets of Boston. So prominent a threat was Garrison to defenders of slavery that the

State of Georgia had an astounding $5,000 reward for his capture and conviction.[6]

In Liberty Hall, an old building without doors and many broken windows, the result of stones being thrown to break up abolitionist meetings, Douglass had heard his idol Garrison for the first time. Garrison spoke and in his passion for the elimination of slavery and the tone of resoluteness that went with it, Douglass for the first time since his reading of *The Columbian Orator* back in Baltimore heard the organized thoughts about the evils of slavery that seemingly all at once produced an epiphany. Garrison's remarks shifted Douglass's perspective from the immediacy of the moment into a vision of what he might do. Douglass could now see and envision the work, the mission, the commitment to eliminating slavery that he wanted to pursue. So moved was he by Garrison's remarks, and by the company of support he heard from the audience, that Douglass got up, as indicated earlier, and felt compelled to speak as well.

He outlined for this audience of mostly whites his experiences as a slave, careful to describe its brutalities and the unpredictability of it from the irrational behavior of slave owners. Smartly, he spent more time on subjects with which they could most easily relate: the breakdown and loss of the family, the abandonment of justice and human and God-given dignity, although he avoided mentioning institutional religions. As he reflected on his talk, he did not think much of his presentation he later said; others, however, including Garrison, felt quite differently. They heard, some probably for the first time, the testimony of one who had been a slave, who could effectively communicate the horrors before an audience eager to hear as well as to believe his story. More pressing for the audience was that the timing of the speech could not have been more appropriate. The audience listening to him and Garrison was in need of the reassurance that could only come from the testimony of a slave. Of course most of them thought that slavery was wrong and inhumane, but in general they had an ideological relationship to the causes of abolitionism, not a personal or direct one. As a consequence, when the defenders of slavery began to intensify their campaign asserting the relative benign character of slave life, most of the abolitionists had little if any factual information to offer as counterarguments.

The Maryland fugitive helped to persuade the uncertain among them that slavery was indeed morally wrong and reprehensible; for those in search of facts, the fugitive provided authenticity on the subject where there had been little to none before.

Whatever unease Douglass felt before this educated audience of social reformers, he more than made up for it in the clarity of his approach to the facts of his life and to the truthfulness of his experiences. All the prior experiences with the Sabbath school, the planning for escapes, learning to read and write, all came into focus now. He presented his story in an organized, thoughtful manner and, most importantly, with the tone of authority after having been a slave. His rich baritone speaking voice, his impressive physical presence, and his conviction made speaking seem almost natural to those who heard him. Slavery's apologists had a new opponent in the making. No one would know at that precise moment what the future would hold for the fugitive slave, but it was clear that the abolitionist arsenal now had an additional weapon in the voice which could and would rebuke the benign descriptions of slavery, and the fitness of the African to bear the white man's burden.

The meeting between Garrison and Douglass would launch a career for Douglass that he could not have possibly imagined, nor, for that matter, could Garrison. What Douglass saw in Garrison was the apotheosis of the images that young Frederick had read about in the Bible and in *The Columbian Orator,* in which clarity, passion, the authority of individualism, and the power of following one's destiny could overcome the "master-slave" model of relationships. It was a meeting between the real and the ideal, an intersecting point in this case where thoughts and actions meet to create a new direction. In Garrison, Frederick was meeting in the flesh the figure of social justice in his time. Reinforcing all of this was their joint trip to Nantucket the next day. The Garrisonians had decided to sail there for their next meeting, and on the ship they gathered to protest the ship's policy of color discrimination. Nothing is known about this discussion, but it surely must have impressed the young reformer about their level of commitment and to declare before him that no place was off limits where justice was being denied.

American history, like other national tales, is full of complexities. The grandest of our complexities, meaning dramas on an epic scale, stem from contradictions between glorious ideals about personal liberty and

the effort to retain them against the realities of slavery that only a civil war could resolve institutionally. Some of the practices seem irreconcilable against social customs. As a nation we still make claims of freedom for all but deny it to some; we have capitalistic enterprises that lead to wealth for few but not all because the opportunities have been controlled. But of all the political and cultural ironies, the one that cuts deepest in terms of race relationships are those rare and meaningful contacts between blacks and whites that lead to true collaborations. Historically trapped in images of slavery and in "otherness," maintained by walls of power, poverty, and segregation, the meeting that took place between Garrison and Douglass said a great deal about Garrison, too. He saw the humanity, the quality of character in Douglass.

Douglass, regardless of his outward appearance in this early encounter with the high priest of abolitionism, had presence and character. Farm life and work had hardened his body and together with his natural intelligence had given him a bearing of purpose. Garrison saw the man who had been a slave but who was now a man. When Douglass spoke, his voice and his message only confirmed Garrison's deepest belief that the slave was not only an oppressed human tied to a cultural and systemic order of oppression. In Frederick Douglass, Garrison saw the whole man in the flesh, stripped away from his chains.

Garrison, the editor of *The Liberator,* and Douglass, the future editor of *The North Star,* impressed each other and were drawn to each other like magnets. Garrison needed a living witness to the venalities of slavery in order to expand his army of believers. Douglass needed a vocation that would command his mind, body, and soul toward a fulfillment of justice that even his expanded but limited opportunities in New Bedford denied. After hearing Douglass speak, Garrison offered him a job as a speaker for the movement. Douglass accepted, with a mixture of enthusiasm and some hesitation as to what this would mean to him as a family man, and one with a young family at that. Yet in spite of these questions and others to emerge, this offer gave him a rush of excitement, a surge of energy about a fight for justice that would not only make life better for himself and Anna but also for their children. They had a son and a daughter by this time; Rosetta, who was born on June 24, 1839; and Lewis, born on October 9, 1840. If he accepted this offer, it would also be for countless others in chattel wondering about their

own destiny. Maybe he could carry out a larger purpose in this way; there was no way to be certain. But the unanswered questions could not stop the rush of expectations he felt that this was a moment like no other for him.

In making the offer, Garrison wanted Douglass to leave immediately with other abolitionists to attend a convention in Nantucket. Douglass joined this small group of abolitionists, who were black and white. He was a willing learner, and Garrison was a willing tutor on the movement's use of moral suasion. This was the name for an approach to reform which sought to change public opinion about slavery through lectures, debates, discussions, and editorials, all nonviolent approaches to the emancipation of the slave and, by implication, to bring the republic closer to its stated ideals and promises about equality for all men and women. All of this orientation must have seemed at first strange to the newest hire of the abolitionists. And one can only imagine the excitement that he must have felt in his quiet moments when he pondered it all. Would he lead in this group as he led in others, although those were groups of his peers who were slaves? Where would the movement lead him, as the former slave, or the vile slave master, or the nation? How could he speak for himself and for others, too? He wanted to be clear that none should mistake his story as just an example but that it was a representation of greater suffering that millions were forced to endure. He also had to make sure that they understood that liberty and slavery had consequences for whites to bear also, whether they were slave owners or not. On more than one occasion, Douglass spoke about God's intervention into the emancipation of slavery. Surely the month of August 1841 must have given him cause to stop and give thanks for the opportunities set before him and a prayerful call for wisdom and strength.

No record exists about the conversation that Douglass had with Anna about the recent events in Liberty Hall with the offer from Garrison to join the abolitionists as one of their speakers; however, enough evidence exists to draw some reasonable conclusions.

The context for their lives had always been a collaboration to break the chains of slavery, first for themselves. They both knew the meaning of his status as a fugitive and the risk that it involved for their family. Sometime during their intimate moments when they shared the hopes

and dreams of a life together, when they could move about easily, go to church together, shop together, walk hand-in-hand together without looking over their shoulders at the second glance of a stranger who might be a messenger for a bounty hunter. For them, the unspoken fears and promises were sealed with a lover's embrace. They would find a common goal in any activity either pursued. Threatening times demanded an extraordinary commitment and bold attachment to one another. These were those times when a black family could be separated by the thinnest of justifications. They remembered their start as a couple. She provided the money for his successful escape from slavery, and he promised to rejoin her, which he did. He told her that once they were safely out of the most intense danger zones of slave catchers that he would marry her, which he did. Once married, they both worked to support the family, he taking on any labor available and she doing domestic work. They were lovers and partners in the building of a family and of each other; furthermore, it is unlikely that either would be known by history without the assistance of the other.

By the time that Douglass approached Anna about this new opportunity, they had already created an emotional bond, a trust fund with each other so to speak, so that neither would jeopardize the foundations of the marriage covenant and the family structure they had built. Fame, his fame in future years, would challenge their vows in the minds of others, but that was not a concern at the moment. With such a foundation in place, it was probably not easy for Douglass to talk about leaving his wife and family, but the strength of their relationship would have made it possible for them to talk through the complications and difficulties that such a venture might entail. Anna no doubt saw the excitement sweep over him, as he excitedly described recent events and the opportunities to be heard. He no doubt knew that the woman who brought him out of slavery might hear in his discussion a way to a better life for herself and their children. Or, by contrast, the future might bring unknown possibilities of danger and death.

After a long evening of talking, they agreed that he should go. Anna kissed him and made sure that he had clean, well-pressed clothes for his journey, laundered like those of the whites for whom she labored. Frederick did not know these people, except for their program of abolition,

and neither did Anna. But they knew each other, trusted one another, and perhaps felt that New Bedford was the place where the unexpected would be good for them both.[7]

The trip to Nantucket with Garrison and others immediately brought Douglass's head out of the clouds of speculation into the realities of color discrimination. The trip typified the problem of public accommodations for Douglass and his travelers in an age of overt racial discrimination. Captain Phinney of the steamboat *Telegraph* refused to leave until the blacks went below. The white abolitionists refused and reached a compromise in which the upper deck was reserved for all the abolitionists traveling together. They then held a meeting on the upper deck to protest the captain's actions. No record exists about this conflict, but to Douglass the protest may have had a familiar ring to him; however, their passion to do what was right in the face of adversity must have added to his conviction that he was with the right company.

When they reached Nantucket on August 12, 1841, Garrison introduced Douglass, who continued to speak with a personal testimony and facts that moved his audience. Stirred by the newest abolitionist's presentation, Garrison stood before the group and made his famous comment when he asked the audience "Have we been listening to a thing, a piece of property, [No!! they shouted] or to a man? [Yes!!]." Garrison used the moment to further solidify his case for hiring Douglass to lecture for the cause.[8]

The lectures were a prime source of public discussion in these days when there were limited media sources of information. Douglass was paid $450 per year,[9] a salary that provided him with an income for his growing family. Frederick, Jr., was born on March 3, 1842.

The lecture platform enabled Douglass to polish his speaking skills and to improve the quality of his own narrative; however, no abolitionist gathering was immune from the threat of violence, no matter how nonviolent their strategies may have been. The threat expanded exponentially when the speaker was the black former slave. The physical price on more than one trip was constant harassment from the audiences, many of whom objected to the portrait of slavery that he drew. They threw any and everything they could toss, from eggs (cooked and uncooked) and bottles to carpenters' nails and boards, concealed under their coats when they came into the lecture halls. There were also beat-

ings and threats of death. In Pendleton, Indiana, on September 15, 1843, for example, Douglass was beaten so badly that his right hand was permanently damaged. He created as much chaos and disorder as he received. When travelling by train, for example, he was a source of disruption by insisting on sitting in cars reserved for whites. After a while, conductors were told by their superiors not to stop if they knew he was going to get aboard. Slowly, but inexorably, he began to see the need to write the scenes that now dominated his lectures. Between 1843 and 1845, he wrote the story that has become known as a classic among slave narratives and forever changed the public conversation on slavery. On May 28, 1845, the Antislavery Office in Boston published the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself.*

By the time he published the *Narrative,* Douglass had traveled extensively as an abolitionist speaker in New England, New York, and across much of the North. His orations drew large crowds, and with each one he became more confident as a speaker. Crowds, of course mostly whites and a small number of free blacks, wanted to hear his story about plantation life and he was more than happy to oblige them. He became famous for his imitation of plantation owners, with their puffed-up pride, their speeches, and his own sarcastic renditions of clergy sermons, as he mocked and ridiculed religious supporters of slave owners. Over time he became an accomplished mimic of the "masters," to the extent that his stage presence not only became a source of abolitionist information but of entertainment as well.

The first autobiography followed a familiar form that had been used by hundreds who had written about their lives in chattel bondage. It starts with the denial of human identity that begins at birth for the slave who cannot connect with family in any meaningful way. Parenthood is unclear to the child slave, who probably would know his mother, but the identity of his father was most often lost in the ambiguous world of slavery, where father and plantation master were the same and, in the absence of any personal responsibility, would, could, and usually ignored paternity. Then there was unending rigor of work from sunup to sundown, the ruthlessness of the slave master and the slave breaker, and the traumatic effects of a debilitating and suffocating subjugation on the spirit of the slave. Much of the control in slave culture was

administered by acts of violence to the body and to the mind. The beatings discussed earlier were like theaters of savagery, where the intention was to stress the pain of the whip or the lash in a public setting where other slaves could see it and take in the message of torture and abuse. These were all essential parts of the slave narrative. Viewed as a body of writing, with an exceptional degree of coherence for its first generation of readers, these stories aimed at breaking through a social barrier of disbelief by humanizing the slave through stories that could only be delivered by other humans, thus chipping away at the belief that because the slaves were mostly of a different color that they were also not human. The narrative of chattel slave life becomes its own figure of speech as an oxymoron; that is to say, the slave who wrote made a lie out of the distorted logic that his condition of bondage made him or her a nonhuman. The reader of the slave narrative, in the intimacy created between him and the text, would have new information to consider about his nation, and at best an awareness that the truth of the world he lived in included a poisonous institution. What made Douglass's story distinct?

From his platform experiences as an abolitionist, Douglass made his life story a picture of the despicable and the heroic, with sharply drawn characterizations in black and white of desperation: those who wanted to be free and those who wanted to keep others in bondage. For the nation, the Maryland fugitive created the full title of the narrative to reflect his American consciousness. The dual but conflicting realities between slavery and freedom would lead to the epic conflict of civil disobedience, led in the late 1850s by the radicalism of Douglass's friend John Brown, and to the inevitability of civil war. It is not too speculative to say that Douglass knew that this would be the theater of operation in the future, which most in his audience did not yet see.

A small book of slightly more than 90 pages, the *Narrative* is nonetheless filled with page after page of five interlocking perspectives. The first is what Douglass as narrator sees of slave culture, from his own struggle to hold onto his humanity to the absolute control of the slave by a structured system of oppression and violent intimidation. The second is his insight into the way that this system is creepy and surreal; those with pretentions of correctness and authority are revealed to be hollow

figures who search for meaning among helpless servants who, with a grain of wit, survive endless scrutiny by staying one thought ahead of those who believe that the slave has no thoughts. Third, if the environment had a quality of madness, it was no more evident than in the reversal of norms that ran consistently throughout the narrative's picture of slavery. Born a slave, no human expectations existed, beginning with your name and most often not even knowing the names of both parents or of birth dates. The freedom to grow up and to leave one's "home" was a crime, so that the only way to be free was to break the law, a reversal of the norm in society. And fourth, the text itself is a skillful portrayal of Frederick's spiritual growth and determination to struggle to understand the world around him in order to escape the traumatic consequences of chattel bondage. The narrative was a parable of American slavery, wrapped though it was in the life of one who refused to accept any destiny but freedom.

In chapter 7, for example, Frederick displayed a powerful understanding of the complex process whereby language, thought, and action come together to produce understanding and knowledge. The word "abolition" is the focus of this revelation. It was Frederick's Rosetta stone. It captured both the mysteries of words in their capacity to move people but also their deep meaning in that he could grasp the definitions before reading them in the dictionary by having carefully listened to the public conversations on the topic by others. In New Bedford, the realities of those experiences took on an added significance when Frederick attended meetings with other blacks who were discussing abolition. It eventually led to his meeting the architect of the radical branch of the movement, William Lloyd Garrison.

The fifth theme is the autobiography's reflection of the audience. What did the fugitive from Maryland know about his audience that they did not know about themselves?

The goal of chattel slavery was to destroy the human essence of the captive African, to eradicate his or her sense of personality. The sentencing was to a spiritual death. Part of the purpose of Frederick's narrative was to portray the resistance to their goal and the resilience required to overcome it. Finally, the title of this slave tale was important and a guide to the themes that Douglass wanted to convey. It is important

to restate that the barriers Douglass faced as a writer were similar to those he faced as a speaker. The culture of slavery had created an invisible work force, to be seen only through the narrow lens of animals and stereotypes. That is, Douglass knew that no slave was considered human, thus no slave had a story to tell, and therefore his story and similar ones were considered unreal by his first audiences, either on the speaker's platform or in the reading room. The narrative from a slave was an oxymoron at best.

Given this social and historical setting, the story, or the slave narrative as it is now known, fell outside the appreciations of human accomplishment. Typically known as the *Narrative*, the full title aptly reflects Douglass's desire to affirm his identity as a human being, as an American and, without using the philosopher's language, as a moral agent in which the accounts, the names, and the developments were his responsibility and his alone.

The history of the book has shown that publications do indeed have lives of their own; this is certainly true of this book. It became an instant success, carrying the endorsement of the abolitionists, and by 1848 it had been translated into French and German, with nine printings having been published in England. However, by writing so candidly about himself, Douglass announced to the general public his fugitive status, thus exposing his location to slave catchers. Friends like abolitionist Wendell Phillips, who had read the manuscript, warned him about the danger in which the book placed him by naming his master and other leaders in the community who were partners and collaborators in maintaining chattel slavery. Other readers, such as Gerrit Smith and James Buffum, saw this time as the perfect moment for Frederick to take his story and the abolitionist platform to Europe. On August 16, 1845, Douglass, accompanied by two abolitionist friends, James Buffum and John Hutchinson, sailed for Liverpool, England.[10]

Douglass lectured in Ireland, Scotland, and finally in England until August 1847. It was an exhilarating experience. For the first time in his life, he enjoyed the ordinary experiences of meeting and talking with strangers, of joining with shoppers moving in and out of stores. He warmed up to the homes of newfound friends. These movements and human contacts far outweighed his customary reminders of being a slave, of being different and nonhuman, and of having to endure the

gaze that is never ending from those who do not see a person but a stereotype, a thing, or an animal born to endure mankind's burdens.

It was also a profound learning period. Douglass's gifts of intellect served him especially well because he could perceive through his own experiences the relationships between the abolitionist mission and other areas calling for social reform in other cultures. In the temperance movement in Ireland, for example, he understood the connections between antislavery and the necessity of liberating a society, in this case Irish culture, from the excesses of alcohol. How could a drunk understand slavery or work for its elimination when he could not analyze and reason because of his own sickness? Douglass asked.[11]

Douglass's maturation during this 19-month stay in the British Isles exceeded all expectations, especially his own. The excitement of feeling socially unfettered and being respected by others lifted his spirits immensely. The more he spoke, the more requests he received on the platform to both explain and critique the system of slavery he had escaped. He spent four months in Ireland, speaking at Belfast and Cork, and spent another five weeks in Dublin, endorsing temperance and paying respect to the grave site of Daniel O'Connell, the heroic and popular Irish liberator. These lectures and the supporters who organized them provided the happiest moments he had known in the campaign. He lectured more than 50 times in Ireland. His lectures carried a new confidence as well as a renewed commitment to moral suasion. Douglass found in the national personality of the Irish a natural audience for his message of freedom. The Irish also responded to his style, a mixture of performance styles that was sometimes serious and sometimes comedic. The country and its culture helped to persuade him that his struggle was part of a larger effort. He began to see, as he wrote Garrison on February 26, 1846, that he could not separate himself from a larger struggle:

> Though I am more closely connected and identified with one class of outraged, oppressed and enslaved people, I cannot allow myself to be insensible to the wrongs and sufferings of any part of the great family of man. I am not only an American slave, but a man, and as such, am bound to use my powers for the welfare of the whole human brotherhood.[12]

Scotland was the next stop on his itinerary. He arrived in the spring of 1846. Out of respect for a poet he had come to admire, Douglass paid tribute to the culture and the country by visiting the grave of the poet Robert Burns and, later, calling on his sister. It was on this visit that Douglass spoke out against the Free Church of Scotland proposal.

In Scotland, he indeed found another connection with the abolitionist movement through his opposition to the Scottish Free Church Movement. With a history growing out of the Presbyterian Church and the Church of Scotland, Free Church Movement defenders went to the American South to raise funds. They raised 3,000 pounds in support of their cause. Its program aimed to strengthen independent congregations by allowing them to determine their own doctrines. Those that signed on received money to establish this idea in their local congregations. Douglass and other abolitionists quickly understood how the slave holders would make use of this opportunity. The southern slave holders would use the money in the church movement and its policies to expand segregationist acts and to add legitimacy to their actions.[13]

Antislavery and abolitionist leaders on both sides of the Atlantic were outraged because they saw the contributions as money coming directly from a slave economy. "Send back the money!" was the crusading cry. In September 1846, in Edinburgh, Douglass joined William Lloyd Garrison in denouncing the Free Church fundraising efforts. They both further pointed out the irony in that the Free Church's efforts to eliminate slave supporters in their movement, "slavehavers" Douglass called them, had just the opposite effect in their southern program by legitimizing the slaveholding class in America.

While in Edinburgh, George Thompson, the leading British abolitionist, came to hear Douglass speak and proposed an idea that shocked him, temporarily at least. Thompson proposed that Douglass bring his wife and family and live in England. The expenses would come from the antislavery community.

To be sure, the success of his campaign must have raised thoughts in his mind about the prospects of living in England or in Ireland because of the warm reception he had received in both places. How could he not think that the opportunities there would be better for him? He could put aside the threats of physical violence and possible beatings every time he wanted to ride a train or sail on a boat or ship. His children would

have the benefits of desegregated schooling, something that was integral to his core values and that had become a permanent part of his vision of what was essential for human growth, an inalienable right for everyone. Perhaps not all the stereotypes would disappear, but the stigma of color and race prejudice would not dominate the thinking surrounding all of their choices. He felt it and knew it because he had experienced that level of personal freedom while in Ireland, Scotland, and England. And there was Anna. He might be able to free her from the tasks of domestic labor and possibly enjoy a wider circle of activities beyond just doing laundry and cleaning houses, hers and others. She might increase her self-confidence by expanding her activities, such as becoming involved in some of the ladies' organizations that had introduced themselves to him or maybe enjoy a hobby that would occupy her mind once the children were in school.

Yet his own popularity and reputation entered into the decision. How would it look for one of the leading abolitionist voices, and certainly the best known black abolitionist, to leave America? The moral community he served would become increasingly suspect if he accepted the offer. More to the point, what would his departure say about the chances of those millions already struggling to survive and hoping for emancipation from slavery, eventually to be recognized as U.S. citizens, not as United States chattel?

No, he decided, he would not accept the offer.

On July 31, 1846, Garrison arrived in Liverpool and joined Douglass on the speaking campaign. They were genuinely delighted to see one another. They discussed events in Europe and in America, with Garrison realizing from his protégée's reports that this was not the same person who fewer than five years earlier had had trouble pronouncing words. Now, however, the flow of words with the attending ideas about what had been working must have surprised even the structured and formidable Garrison. And then, on August 4, Douglass heard the word "freedom" applied to his own liberation, a turn of events that had come unexpectedly.

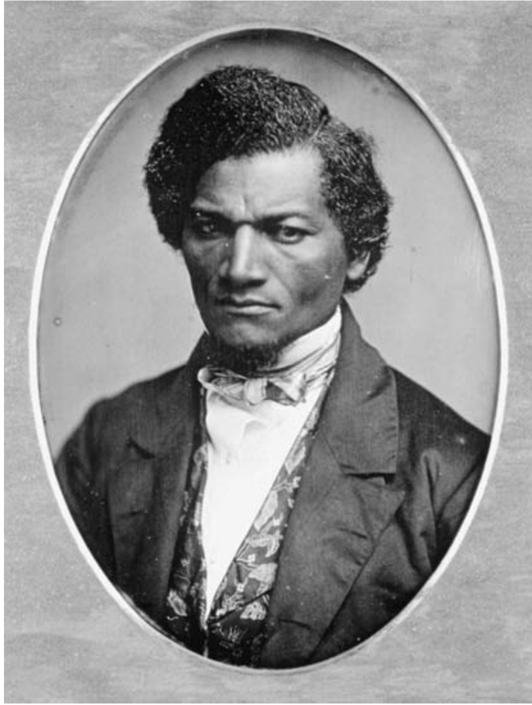
When Douglass declined Thompson's offer, the idea of his freedom became the cause for others in Great Britain who had grown to hold Douglass in high esteem and respect. Douglass had not only won audiences by portraying the irrationality and the trauma of slavery and its

inhumanity, but he had also won their hearts by his own deeply felt sensitivity for justice and the injustices being perpetrated upon millions of slaves. Douglass had become famous and highly respected. He had also found admirers and benefactors. Undoubtedly in conversations with George Thompson, Ellen and Anna Richardson, two very prominent sisters in the antislavery movement, from New Castle, had raised $710.96 to purchase Frederick's freedom from Hugh Auld, who had inherited Frederick from his brother Thomas. Douglass was surprised at the announcement, yet overjoyed at the idea of returning to America as a free man without having to be concerned about slave catchers shadowing him, an even greater danger now because of his fame. But not everyone in the Garrisonian wing of a demanding moral community felt that this was unconditional freedom.[14]

Critics of the purchase of Douglass's freedom objected to what was a violation of one of the principles of the movement, and it was part of a debate for more than three months in abolitionist publications. The abolitionist principle was that no slave holder was to be paid for a slave. Paying for Douglass violated that rule. Garrison, who in fact ironically contributed to the pool of money, argued rightly that the liberation of the slave, especially Douglass, trumped any principle that would keep a slave, especially one of such prominence as Douglass, in bondage.

As he prepared to return home, Douglass reflected upon these last months. His own words from the *Narrative* came back to him. In the fight with the slave breaker Covey, Frederick spoke to his first audience directly by saying to them that prior to the fight they had seen a man changed into a brute; now, after having fought back, he told his readers they would now see a brute transformed into a man. It was in many ways a picture of the accomplishment of Douglass's European campaign. If the Covey battle was a fight for his soul's release from the spiritual imprisonment of chattel slavery, then the success of the European tour was in fact a rite of passage and a personal declaration of independence. He had arrived in England a fugitive slave, a piece of property to be bought and sold. Now, however, he was leaving the continent with an entirely different status. He had fame, friends, and freedom. Known to only a few when he came, now he was known to thousands on two continents.

How else to explain this except to join in the folk voices of the past and declare that an amazing grace had lifted him from slavery and ano-



Daguerreotype of Frederick Douglass as a young man, taken between 1847 and 1852 by Samuel J. Miller. AP Photo/Art Institute of Chicago, HO.

nymity to leave a mark on history and on the conscience of humanity. Frederick Douglass found his voice, gained a broader appreciation for the wider audience resisting the spread of slavery in the world, and deepened his motivation to broaden the outrage against slavery. The historian Philip Foner astutely identified this theme in one of the most eloquent speeches Douglass gave just before his departure, saying:

> Since I have been in this land I have had every inducement to stop here . . . I should have settled down here in a different position to what I should have been placed in the United States. But, sir, I prefer living a life of activity in the service of my brethren. I choose rather to go home; to return to America. . . . I know that victory is certain. I go, turning my back upon the ease, comfort,

> and respectability which I might maintain even here, ignorant as I am. Still, I will go back, for the sake of my brethren. I go to suffer with them; to toil with them; to endure insult with them; to undergo outrage with them; to lift up my voice in their behalf; to speak and write in their vindication; and struggle in their ranks for that emancipation which shall yet be achieved by the power of truth and of principle for that oppressed people.[15]

The issue of chattel slavery which had been debated had more converts against the institution of slavery than ever before. And during the course of the debate, Frederick Douglass had come to know a much richer, complex world, in which his feelings and appreciations for history, culture, and contentment had been made as much a part of reality as had been the fear of a life in bondage. His lifelong quest for truth, his willingness to learn, and his willingness to challenge the misperceptions of the day had made him a champion among the antislavery crowd.

On March 30, 1847, Douglass attended a public farewell party for him with 1,400 persons. It was an extraordinary moment for Douglass and a testament to his influence among so many in such a short period of time. Tired from the exhausting tour but resolved and strengthened by this experience, he would not know how long the struggle would take. The next decade would prove to be difficult and discouraging at times. It would be followed by five years of civil war. The entire nation would be in turmoil before four million were set free.

Douglass returned to his family and America on April 20, 1847.

NOTES

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 113.

2. *Autobiographies*, p. 350.

3. Philip S. Foner, *Frederick Douglass: A Biography*, New York: The Citadel Press, 1969, p. 23; William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1991, p. 78.

4. *Autobiographies*, p. 355.

5. Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 7.

6. Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass,* New York: Atheneum, 1948, p. 13.

7. Rosetta Douglass Sprague, "My Mother As I Recall Her," Delivered May 10, 1900, before the Anna Murray Douglass Union, Washington, D.C. The value of this document is that it identifies the nuances of the relationship between Frederick and Anna from their daughter's perspective.

8. Foner, *Frederick Douglass,* p. 26.

9. Foner, *Frederick Douglass,* p. 27.

10. Foner, *Frederick Douglass,* p. 60.

11. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass,* p. 124.

12. Foner, *Frederick Douglass,* p. 63.

13. Proceedings of the Great Anti-Slavery Meeting Held in the Reverend Mr. Cairn's Church on Wednesday, September 23, 1846. Including the speeches of William Lloyd Garrison, Esq., and Frederick Douglass, Esq. Taken in short hand by Cincinnatus.

14. Foner, *Frederick Douglass,* p. 71.

15. Foner, *Frederick Douglass,* p. 71.

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Chapter 4

STEAL AWAY, 1847–1858

> Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus
> Steal away, steal away home, I ain't got long to stay here.
>
> —*Wallace Willis*

Frederick Douglass's stature as an abolitionist speaker and thinker grew substantially in the decade before the Civil War. He immersed himself in antislavery matters, but not to the exclusion of other social reforms, especially the rights of women and, in his view, their right to vote. His social critiques stood out and put him on a level with the other leading political voices of the day: Henry Clay and Susan B. Anthony, for example. Among members of the abolitionist community, his opinions, even if they did not always adhere to abolitionist doctrine, took on an even more independent character shortly after he arrived back in the United States. He announced then his intention to expand his platform for expressing his views by starting his own antislavery newspaper.

On December 3, 1847, Douglass founded and published the *North Star* out of Rochester, New York, where in 1848 he moved his family into a nine-room house on Alexander Street. Rosetta, the first born in New Bedford in 1839, was now the oldest child and sister to Lewis

Henry (1840); Frederick, Jr. (1842); and to Charles Remond (1844). This was the first of two Rochester houses that would be the primary residence for the abolitionist and soon-to-be-recognized antislavery editor and his family. The second was a farmhouse south of town that he would purchase in 1852 but would be destroyed by fire in 1872. The cause remained unknown, mysterious, however—and from the family's point of view, ignored. All of these circumstances aroused Douglass's ire and will be discussed later in the chapter.

The house on Alexander Street was big enough for Douglass to have a study where he could maintain the discipline of a thinker and learner. It was large enough for him to pin to the wall a list of words that he found difficult to spell or pronounce, for example, as well as the names of people and places that he wanted to study, or even his schedule of work and speeches. At any time, this space also afforded him some personal privacy, moments when he could slip into the comforts of what made him relax. For instance, he would stop his routines and play the violin, an instrument first introduced to him in Baltimore when he was serving as a child escort at the Aulds and he used the opportunity to learn how to play it. Anna encouraged his playing while they were courting in Baltimore, knowing that it brought peace and quiet to his restless soul. Later in his life, he would delight in the fact that his grandson Joseph, Charles's son, would become a concert violinist.

The study also provided him with a place to prepare the next steps for a night visit. The fact is that at any hour after sunset, he and his family would find themselves aiding runaway slaves. The house in Rochester was headquarters for the Underground Railroad and the city's population was supportive. As one historian has noted, "No United States marshal ever made a seizure in Rochester, nor was the city ever the scene of a disturbance resulting from an effort to apprehend a fugitive."[1] Douglass served as its superintendent and Anna as a station manager, in the coded but cryptic language used in this resistance movement. This station of the Underground Railroad aided numerous runaway slaves to reach Canada.[2] He and Anna fed them and sometimes paid for the next journey of their escape.

Douglass called the newspaper he started the *North Star.* He named it for the astrological body that guided countless numbers of slaves on their journey northward to sites of freedom. The newspaper added an-

other forum for Douglass to express his views on slavery and his voice in the marketplace of ideas on other contemporary issues. This newspaper was not the only one of its kind. It joined a list of nearly 20 black newspapers being published around the country. At a time when literacy was not easily available, these newspapers provided a powerful indication of the black community's interest in participating in mainstream life but also having its own say. They were writing for themselves about life as they saw and experienced it, even if no one else would listen. These were important sources of communication between and among communities.[3] For Douglass, the creation of his own newspaper would continue and expand upon a characteristic pattern of independence that would lead him into separating himself from Garrisonian ideology on abolition, but not at the moment. Lecturing for the abolitionists paid the bills, but his ownership of the newspaper made him the sole recipient of its income and helped him to become an independent and authoritative voice as well. The masthead of the newspaper spoke specifically to the newspaper's moral standard and pointed directly to the divine authority it recognized that would guide the publication: "Right is of no Sex—Truth is of no color—God is the Father of us all and we are all Brethren."

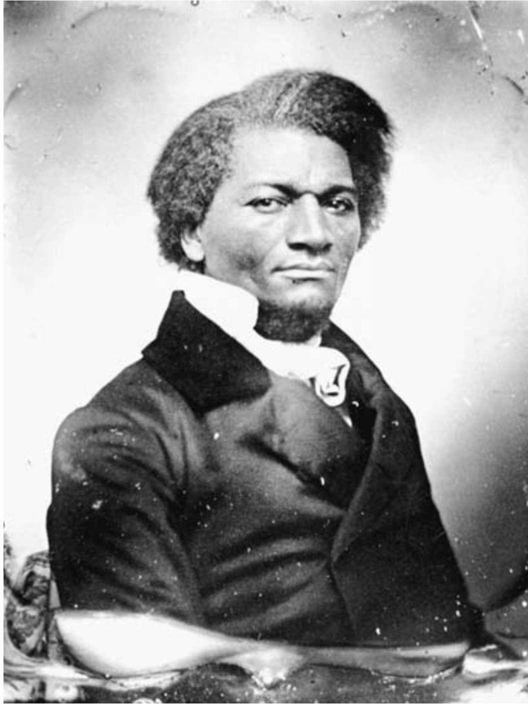
> The first issue of the *North Star* proclaimed its mission. It was to attack slavery in all its forms and aspects; advocate Universal Emancipation; exact the standard of public morality; promote the moral and intellectual improvement of colored people; and to hasten the day of freedom to our three million enslaved fellow countrymen.[4]

Initially, Douglass shared the early editorial responsibilities with Martin Delany, who brought his experiences to the paper after having owned and edited the (*Pittsburgh*) *Mystery*, a reformist weekly, until he sold it to the AME Church. Delany's coeditorship with Douglass has become controversial. The issue for most is over the length of time he and Douglass actually worked together; some say 6 months, others 18. What is not controversial is that for a relatively short period of time, Douglass was in the company of one of the more educated blacks of his generation. Delany (1812–1885) had formal schooling and would eventually practice

medicine, having attended Harvard Medical School. Later, in 1856, he moved to Canada and planned for an African American settlement in Africa. This was Delany's idea of "black nationalism," meaning his social and political blueprint for black independence. Delany is not as well known as the editor of the *North Star,* but he was nevertheless an important influence on Frederick Douglass.[5]

To look at this relationship another way, the collaboration between the unschooled but talented Douglass and the formally trained Delany, however brief their time together, brought together under one roof two representative schools of thought emerging within the black community as a response to its oppression. One response, championed by Delany, considered integration of the slave into the fabric of American life nearly impossible, given slavery's grip on laws and social attitudes toward blacks by most whites, to such a degree that it would make daily living in society an unbearable and permanent condition, no matter what level of accomplishment the black person achieved. Separation is the sine qua non of this response. Delany had in mind an African country, but not necessarily Liberia, which had become a republic in 1839 and provided an example of an African country where the question asked by some abolitionists of what to do with blacks, free blacks in particular, had an answer. The American Colonization Society, a branch of the abolitionist movement, saw Liberia as a possible home for free blacks. The agitation of free blacks for abolition turned the slave holders into supporters of the Liberian plan, thus bringing together two groups that ordinarily disagreed with one another about the destiny of the black in America.[6] However, the idea of a physical separation has taken on a number of interpretations over time, from independent states to other autonomous regions. By contrast, Douglass belonged to those who viewed the fate of the black person in America to be an integral part of the American experience and its covenant with the people: that equality for all is the mission of the republic. Some of Douglass's most impassioned speeches in the 1850s would in fact condemn America for compromising its ideals in favor of deepening its support of institutionalizing slavery.

Despite their differences, Delany and Douglass shared passions for the black person's freedom. It was common ground for many discussions about the ways and means this could be done. In addition, Douglass, with his commitment to learning, would not have missed the opportu-



Undated daguerreotype portrait of Frederick Douglass. AP Photo/File.

nity to add to his intellectual growth some recommended readings from the well-schooled Delany. For his part, the former editor of the *Mystery* found inspiration in the idea that there were probably more men like Douglass out there who had the will to be free and who needed just a small opportunity to exercise a bigger wish to be free and human and responsible for their lives.

These strong-willed and perceptive men wrote about the prospects of life in America bound by slavery very differently. Delany explained his position in the 1852 publication *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered*.[7] For Douglass, while there would be further discussions about the slave's future with the Kansas radical John Brown, the *North Star* editor remained convinced that the slave had the right and the moral obligation to demand freedom for himself in America. He said this in one of

his earliest speeches as well as in his last great one, the "Lesson of the Hour," before the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington on January 9, 1894.[8]

For the next quarter of a century, journalism would be an important vehicle for the editorial voice that became associated with Douglass. The names of the newspapers would change. First there would be the *North Star*, then *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (1851), followed by *Douglass' Monthly* (1863) and, lastly, the *New National Era* (1870). He owned these publications or was the majority owner, and therefore had control over their content. He used his newspapers to advance the great cause of abolition, of course, but as that discussion expanded into constitutional and states' rights topics, the newspapers at various times served to clarify positions on other ideas of the times and added commentary for their readers to consider.

One debate in this era, for example, as mentioned in the discussion on the philosophical and political differences between Delany and Douglass, focused on proposals for sending slaves back to Africa, to Liberia, or to Haiti—or anywhere beyond the United States. The idea had been in the republic from the very beginning. These were proposals that Douglass was fully aware of from both sides of the debate. He considered them outrageous considering the fact that generations of slaves had sacrificed so much in this country, and sought not to escape their fate but to have full participation in the nation as citizens. Once the Civil War started, Douglass used the editorial page on two occasions to successfully persuade blacks, free and those under bondage, to join the Union forces. He had in mind not just victory but a chance for the black man to assume a position of shared responsibility in the sacrifices of war. In this way, the black man would be a contributor to his own destiny. In other editorials, he addressed political campaigns of presidents and decisions of the Supreme Court. Journalism added a layer of thought and deepened his reputation for reform. He was well aware of the fact that American journalism was part of a tradition, a heritage of protest, and a forum for resistance. He was determined to be a part of that legacy.

Few matters in history are as straightforward as they seem. The date for the initial publication of the *North Star* is one thing; just when Douglass decided that he needed it is another. His success from the British Isles tour increased his personal confidence that he had something to

say, that people would listen, and that the antislavery cause needed another newspaper in which to make its case. The *North Star* would provide that opportunity and would also provide additional income to help support a young and growing family. As noted earlier, the *North Star* did have competition from other publications in its time. Notable among them was the Reverend Henry Highland Garnett's *Clarion* and, as noted earlier, Martin Delany's the *Mystery* before it was sold and Delany came to work with Douglass. The more formidable challenges, however, came from within the abolitionist movement itself. If Garrison was his mentor on political matters, he would also be his model and to some extent his competitor through the *Liberator*, the Garrison-edited newspaper that was the voice for the branch of the movement history names after him.

The fact of the matter is that the *North Star* has a special place in American journalism. It served to document the thoughts and aspirations of black people in Douglass's times, thus leaving for history and posterity the record of an enslaved people's thoughts. And it was frequently a publication that demonstrated an integrated work force, yet one with black leadership. The editorials, particularly those in 1849, announced to its readership that Douglass as the editor was studying a number of issues, especially those related to the Constitution. He studied that most revered of national documents and the criticisms that were being used in the lecture halls to defend or reject it as an instrument serving the ideology of the slave-holding class. This study forged in his mind a very real distinction between the document and the interpretation of the national document. It became increasingly clear to the *North Star* editor that the pro-slavery positions in the Constitution that Garrison identified and that led him to defend the idea of the Constitution as a pro-slavery document did not satisfy Douglass's own review and understanding of the Constitution. In challenging the Garrisonian view of the role of the Constitution as being an accomplice with slave owners, Douglass was step by step pulling away from his mentor and benefactor and, most important, from Garrisonian ideology. It asserted that there was to be no link, no connection, with the federal government or its operations.[9]

Frederick Douglass and the *North Star* have a personal, symbiotic relationship, to the cultural image of the black in antebellum America. His standards for the newspaper were very high, tolerating no grammatical

or syntactical oddities that would serve to mock the newspaper's entry into the mainstream. The newspaper also added to the picture of resistance to slavery in America. Perhaps no better examples of this are the editorials in which Douglass specifically addressed the roles and responsibilities of free blacks to seek and secure the freedom of other blacks who were caught in the muddled immoralities of chattel slavery. The paper also provided points of reference within the abolitionist movement by reprinting articles from other papers whereby contrasts and comparisons could be identified to show the diversity of thought and the rationales behind them. Not every reader believed in his approach to antislavery or in his commitment to women's rights. When placed within a historical context, the *North Star* was a product of its founder and succeeded not because of any journalistic originality but on the strength of its founder's drive, writing skills, and popularity.[10] History underscores the fact that its founder came to journalism from the dark and restricted world of chattel slavery.

Through it all, the newspaper left a track record of voices, not just contributors to the newspaper but also to the leadership from the black community, especially those who stood collectively with Douglass to form a moral line of resistance. They stood steadfast against the deeply ingrained myth that the black people of America were born inferior and placed here to serve at the discretion of white dominators. As we shall see, the years that followed his return to America would call upon his skills to face further challenges and directions.[11]

In little more than a year, however, after his return to the United States, Douglass was struggling to meet the costs of managing the newspaper. He had to mortgage his home in Rochester in order to pay bills. His schedule of speaking engagements, newspaper duties, and his responsibilities as a father to a young family put a strain on him and his slender resources. In the early years of the newspaper, he received support from a number of sources, an important one being Gerrit Smith, a wealthy white sympathizer of antislavery, who even offered free land to blacks from the land he inherited in Peterboro in upstate New York.[12] But even his contributions could not keep the newspaper from bad economic times. Fortunately for Douglass, the news about his financial crisis with the newspaper spread further than many imagined.

Julia Griffiths, an English activist and friend of William Wilberforce, who knew Douglass from his European tour and was a supporter of the

newspaper, heard about the crisis and came to his aid. She moved to America with her sister and, with her considerable organizational skills, rescued the newspaper and extended Douglass's life in journalism. With these skills and her dedication to antislavery and her friendship with him and his family, Griffiths rearranged the expenses by paying off some bills and delaying or reducing payment on others, which enabled her to find ways to eliminate the newspaper's debt, as well as some of Douglass's other personal liabilities. Before she returned to England in 1855, Julia Griffiths had also contributed to Douglass's literary and historical stature. With the help of the Rochester Antislavery Society, she was the driving force behind the publication of *Autographs for Freedom* in 1853, a work that included Douglass's only published fiction, a novella entitled "The Heroic Slave."[13]

Douglass wrote the story using the historical facts of the 1841 insurrection on the slave ship *Creole*. The outline of the actual story is simple enough. The Creole was transporting more than 130 slaves bound for New Orleans from Virginia. The ship's cook led the slave revolt and, when in control, ordered that they be taken to the island of Nassau. There, under British rule, after Britain had already ended slave trade, the British officials refused to send them back to the United States as requested. The slaves were declared free. Their leader, the ship's cook, was named Madison Washington, surely two of the most familiar names in American history. The name would undoubtedly have interested Douglass the writer, no stranger to the importance of the naming process—in this instance by joining the names of U.S. presidents with a revolutionary slave. In creating a fictional story, Douglass's "Heroic Slave" revised the historical account to reflect a man whose image ran counter to the stereotype of the slave. The hero would personify refinement and physical beauty: "Madison was of manly form. Tall, symmetrical, round, and strong. In his movements he seemed to combine, with the strength of the lion, a lion's elasticity. His torn sleeves disclosed arms like polished iron. His face was black but comely." He was not only the essence of personhood but his spirit, like that of the first Americans, cried out to be free in the search for personal and political liberty. And like the slave, in fact like the former Frederick Bailey, Madison Washington would be the essence of the ideal person in search of justice and righteousness. For most readers, there is little doubt that the inner drive, if not a considerable

amount of the outward courage of the heroic character behind the story's protagonist, is modeled on that of the editor of the *North Star*.[14]

Julia Griffiths represented Douglass's lifetime dismissal of arbitrary social barriers, which he intentionally crossed, and sometimes at considerable personal risk. A black man and white woman in an intimate relationship in the 19th century was a social and cultural taboo. They were not supposed to be seen together, much less thought about as spending private time together. Rumors grew and persisted about Griffiths and her relationship to Douglass. Newspapers and even Douglass's abolitionist friends contributed to the tabloid tone of the prospects of sexual liaisons taking place between the two of them. No documents exist to confirm that their relationship was anything but friendly, respectful, and professional, however. Similar stories would exist surrounding Ottilie Davida Assing. Born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1819 and raised in a family of progressive thinkers and activists, Ottilie was herself an outspoken German feminist.[15] In 1856, with characteristic boldness, she knocked on the door of the Douglass home and introduced herself to the *North Star* editor. Like Griffiths, Assing became acquainted with Douglass through her contacts with members of the abolitionist movement. And after reading *My Bondage and My Freedom*, she decided that the man and the movement were important enough for her to want to meet the author herself and to supply her German readers with an interview with Rochester's most famous black abolitionist.[16]

Their meeting formed the background for a relationship that would last for more than a quarter of a century. Rumors once again circulated about the nature of the relationship. For her part, Assing left an abundance of correspondence to Douglass to warrant speculation as to whether they had an adulterous relationship beyond the intellectual attractions they enjoyed sharing with one another. No evidence exists that they had a sexual liaison. What does exist is evidence of her attraction to Douglass that grew over time between one of the most well-educated women that Douglass had known in his life and her hope that in fact one day she would become his wife. Her letters make this clear, while Douglass's view of this matter may have been lost in the fire that would have consumed this and other documents when the Rochester house burned down in 1872. Ottilie committed suicide in 1884, distraught at learning that Douglass, after Anna's death, would marry Helen Pitts. The mat-

ter was closed for Douglass, since he ordered his letters to Ottilie to be burned at the time of his death. Her influence on him was undoubtedly educational in that she oriented him to radical 19th-century German thought with its emphasis on analytical reasoning and served to reinforce his skepticism of organized religion. However, as she wrote, she was never able to disabuse Douglass of his relationship to his "personal Christian God."[17]

In 1848, the year after starting the newspaper, two historic events took place that profoundly shaped Frederick Douglass's life. In February, he met John Brown for the first time. A fiery Connecticut-born Kansas preacher who dedicated himself to the elimination of slavery by violent means, Brown developed a disdain for the political process and for the religious community. Over a 10-year period of time, he and Douglass had many conversations about how to bring about the end of slavery, a topic that Douglass had been discussing most recently with Martin Delany. In general, Brown's presence, coming on the end of conversations with Delany, influenced Douglass to confront other approaches about liberation for the slave and for redefining himself as an agent for the abolitionist movement.

The second critical event took place in July 1848, when Douglass attended the now historic gathering of feminists and women suffragists in Seneca Falls, New York. The women's leadership and the editor all met on July 19–20, 1848, to chart the course for women's right to vote. Douglass was there because he believed in women's rights and, always a practical man, to sell subscriptions to the *North Star.* With his presence at Seneca Falls, moreover, the *North Star* editor added another indelible mark on his journey as a social reformer who saw freedom indivisibly for all humans. He was one of the few men, and the only black man, to participate in the historic Seneca Falls Convention. Planned by the indefatigable Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the very first session in the nearby Methodist Chapel brought forth the convention's famous Declaration of Sentiments, the purpose of which was to reaffirm the right of women to establish a political and social defense for their right to vote.

There and then, Douglass declared his support for the rights of women. In a *North Star* editorial of July 28, 1848, he wrote, "We are free to say that in respect to political rights, we hold woman to be justly entitled to all we claim for man." As if to solidify his idea of freedom's universality,

he returned to his press room convinced about the importance and appropriateness of the young newspaper's motto: "Right is of no sex; truth is of no color. God is the father of us all and we are all brethren." And in January 1848 he wrote of his respect and admiration for women who have contributed to the antislavery movement through the fairs they established to communicate with other women and to raise money:

> We never feel more ashamed of our humble efforts in the cause of emancipation than when we contrast them with the silent, unobserved and unapplauded efforts of those women through whose constant and persevering endeavors this annual exhibition is given to the American public. Anti-slavery authors and orators may be said to receive compensation for what they do, in the applause which must, sooner or later, redound to them; but not so with the thousands whose works of use and beauty adorn this fair. It is for them to work, unnoticed and unknown, and sometimes unenquired [*sic*] for, and many of them unable to see the good that results from their efforts.[18]

These encounters in 1848, first with John Brown and then with feminist leaders at the Seneca Falls Convention, have their own special place in Douglass's life, of course. Biographically speaking, these engagements demonstrate the complexities of the period and the difficult choices Douglass had to make in his commitment to universal freedom. He liked and respected John Brown but ultimately was not willing to join Brown in the assault on Harper's Ferry. He persuaded his feminist allies to change their habit of speaking in segregated meeting establishments, and they stopped the practice. However, he would later break with his feminist allies by not supporting women's right to vote with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment that gave black men, and black men only, the right to vote. In all, the years ahead were full of some of the most challenging decisions he would have to face. With Brown and the introduction of women's right to vote, Douglass found himself facing more questions about social reform now that he deliberately took into account a broader path for human liberation: the elimination of slavery and political justice for women.

These associations made Douglass think about many questions. For example, when was violence the proper method of liberation? Is it pos-

sible to "read" the Constitution differently from the Garrisonian abolitionists? Does the liberation of the slave help women in their pursuit of the right to vote, and is the reverse true; in other words, does the woman suffrage movement aid the liberation of blacks? And then there was the general proposition applicable to all groups seeking to be independent agents of their own destiny: how do the oppressed help themselves to be free?

Brown and Douglass first met in Brown's home in Springfield, Massachusetts, 11 years before the famous 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry. The time they spent together exposed Douglass to John Brown's brand of antislavery passion. It was Bible-based, grounded in the Calvinistic tradition of God's sovereignty, which should, as Brown saw it, make it one's responsibility to eradicate slavery. It was at some point political in that Brown was part of the Radical Abolition party that grew out of the National Liberty party. This was a party that would nominate Douglass for New York state political posts in the 1850s. Brown's position on the absolute eradication of slavery was an expression of the "perfectionism" and "purity" of his vision of an angry God. As Brown interpreted his role in this vision, a violent uprising was the only answer to chattel slavery, and he was determined to carry it out.

Over many conversations, Brown shared his plans for creating an escape route for slaves through the Allegheny Mountains. The most courageous of the slaves would serve as armed guards at various points along the way, while others would be in the fields encouraging others to escape. There, he was going to establish a separate state and thus cut off contact with the U.S. government. Not only did he have in mind political and social separation, Brown had gone so far as to draft a constitution, identify the offices for a cabinet, and perhaps the biggest inducement of all, was the suggestion that Douglass, or later Delany, would be its president. In this black archipelago, Brown assigned himself a military role. This was probably wise for him to do; as a white man there would have been resistance to assigning himself the role of the ultimate leader. That would not have been welcomed by the independent-minded black men and women he wanted to persuade to join him in this action.

Those who watched carefully the ebb and flow of the abolitionist movement, whether through the antislavery newspapers or by word-of-mouth, knew that John Brown had plans, but exactly what they were was not clear, except to a few, including Douglass. Some had been listening

to this plan for a while and had contributed to its development by rounding off some of its edges, such as the organization of this new body of freedmen. Brown, driven by a sense of having a divine calling, was also charismatic. By the time he had conceptualized the raid on Harper's Ferry, he was already the white slave owners' worse nightmare: fearless in his pursuit of abolition and committed to its total eradication. Brown had already demonstrated a zeal that had attracted blacks and whites to, if need be, embrace violent ends, as he showed when he fought against pro-slavery attackers on Lawrence, Kansas, on May 21, 1856.[19]

John Brown brought more than just excitement to the movement because men and women like Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Delany, no matter what their differences in philosophy and strategy might be, were practical but impatient people who wanted to create or connect with plans that would speed up the day when freedom from slavery would become a reality. Given his short but compelling place in this epoch, Brown and his reputation for action had everything to do with why black leadership would be alert to, if not approving of, Brown's every movement. And why not? Who would not consider at least the prospects of a quick solution to slavery in contrast to the protracted legislative and moral imperatives of a nonviolent abolitionist campaign that had the potential to span several generations?

As Brown refined his plan, he took a final outline to a meeting in Chatham, Ontario, a place that had a substantial population of fugitive slaves. In May 1858 Brown met with a group of both black and white leaders and presented them with his plans for a state in exile. The purpose of the meeting was to adopt a paper that would support the Declaration of Independence but rebuke and condemn slavery. Douglass was not there, nor was Tubman, who helped shape and supported the Kansan's plans, but Delany was present. Brown had, in fact, invited Delany to the meeting, since Delany was already practicing medicine in Chatham. Undoubtedly, Brown spoke about the prospects of bringing about freedom for the slave. He also made it clear that he had money for the assault, having raised it from a group of white philanthropists from the Boston and New York area that history now calls the Secret Six: Samuel Howe, Thomas Higginson, Gerrit Smith, Theodore Parker, George Sterns, Franklin Sanborn.[20] Just how unknown they were to others acquainted with Brown's plans is hard to determine. However, one point is with-

out debate: these six white men (there were no women) would bankroll Brown; they would not be present when Brown acted. The meeting was in fact if not in name a sort of dress rehearsal for Brown's dream of what a black government would look like after a successful Harper's Ferry assault, although that site is never mentioned in the meeting's minutes.[21]

Just prior to the Chatham meeting, Brown had met Harriet Tubman for the first time and was personally impressed with her and her achievements. He shared his plan with her and had every expectation that Tubman would participate in it. Brown called her General Tubman because of her leadership and detailed knowledge of Virginia escape routes.[22] She certainly had the background and the will. She was, after all, an escaped slave, like Douglass, from Maryland, from the Brodess Plantation, which was located south and west of Tuckahoe but not far from Bucktown, Maryland. Her birth day is uncertain, as is its year—either 1820 or 1822, no one can be certain.[23] She was named Araminta by her parents, Harriet Green and Benjamin Ross, a slave couple. Although never taught to read or write, her mind was filled with Bible stories and religious lore by her mother, who had memorized verses, while nursing her through childhood sicknesses. By the time she married John Tubman in 1847, Araminta Ross, soon to be Harriet Tubman, was about to make her mark on the abolitionist world by "stealing" several hundred slaves from bondage, including "her sister, her two children, and her aged mother and father."[24]

On a dozen or so trips to the Deep South, Harriet Tubman led slaves to free states and to Canada. According to legend, she liked to leave on Saturdays so that it would be at least until Monday before the masters would put out the alarms for missing slaves. Motivated by a deeply personal revulsion to enslavement and to its practice of destroying families, including her own, Tubman made it clear that her successes had to do with divine intervention. She declared to the abolitionist Thomas Garrett of Delaware that she had faith in God, asked Him for direction, and He always answered; furthermore, she confided, "He never deceived me."[25]

Given the tenacity of her faith, Harriet tolerated no sudden weakness or equivocation from her escapees. Their journey was to the North and to freedom and she was known to threaten to kill any slave who wanted to turn back. So remarkable were her escapes that not only were

there bounties out to find her, kill her, or put her in jail, she also became the stuff of legend and myth, which only added to her reputation. Slaveholders detested her, which raised her stature in the esteem of John Brown, but among slaves and their supporters, including Douglass, the admiration and respect for her can be understood by the appellation used to identify her public persona: they called her Moses.[26]

Douglass's meetings with Brown outlined dramatic lessons for the editor of the *North Star*. He was torn between existing, and sometimes competing, approaches to abolitionism. Brown and Garrison, Douglass's political teacher and father figure, had the same objectives. They both wanted to eliminate slavery completely, but their approaches were very different from one another. Garrison was decidedly nonviolent, with moral suasion being his instrument to end slavery. John Brown saw violence as the best means to end this sinful abomination before an angry and just God.[27]

The fact of the matter is that Brown's militancy and the connection with the determined feminists were powerful influences shaping Douglass's growing intolerance for what he felt at times was the slow pace of freedom. Little disagreement exists over his feelings in that regard, as far as scholars and historians are concerned. However powerful those influences, there was none more powerful than the memory of slavery and the meaning of slavery itself. In this broader yet personal context, he could now embrace the unassailable truth: the social default in his time was the absence of political freedom. That meant social death for slaves unless they could be released from the physical chains of slavery and the constraints designed to shut down their opportunities for making human choices. Moreover, the absence of freedom for some, no matter how small the number, meant the absence of freedom for all. In this sense, the reform-minded Douglass had discovered his voice and political identity by understanding slavery through subjective means, the struggles of his life, while setting those struggles against a public conflict that would lead to civil war.

While it is absolutely true that John Brown and the woman suffragists were critical influences in Douglass's growth as a radical firebrand, it is essential to keep before us his wonderful ability to critically recall and articulate the darkness of slavery, the pain of bondage, and the lingering consequences of a national tragedy too often dismissed rather

than pursued for understanding slavery's consequences and the process for healing, if possible, on both sides of slavery's line.

Douglass's "darkness" provided him with light. In other words, having had the benefit of literacy, travel, and the stimulating company of others who were reformed-minded, Douglass never lost sight of his life as a slave, as an American slave; that is to say he found the violation of the nation's promise of equality to be a source for thinking and making moral and ethical judgments about life. Using this foundation, trying to understand the consequences of slavery from every conceivable perspective, but especially from his experiences, helped him to grow as a person. The questions emerged as truth began to form in his thoughts: Does race matter? What are the "claims" of a slave anyway? What were the influences of the framers of the Constitution?[28] These and other questions, questions that are philosophically rooted in "interdisciplinary" and "multicultural" examinations before the words became commonplace, enabled him to see with his heart and soul the truth of social politics and the reforms he wanted to see take place.[29] In the next decade, Douglass's rhetoric grew more critical about the abolitionist movement, bolder, and more militantly analytical about the institutional support of slavery. In this time period, he was about to deliver some of the most important speeches and statements of his career.

The times demanded nothing less, for Douglass was to speak before a divided America. The political questions sought to find an answer to balancing newly declared slaveholding territories in Texas, for example, with the rest of the union. The passage of the 1850 Missouri Compromise, with its Fugitive Slave Act provisions terrorizing black communities, exacerbated tensions and street violence that solved nothing as far as slavery was concerned. States that wanted the right to be slave states, using state sovereignty as a legal basis, stood in direct opposition to northern states that did not want an expanded political base in the South which would challenge the country's covenantal idea of liberty for all. The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 persuaded some, like Douglass, that opposing forces were inexorably headed toward civil war.

Significantly, the speeches in this decade also include many references to religion, to the divinity of God, and to a cluster of words connected with our subjectivity: he identified for his listeners and readers

the relationship between their thoughts and the way he hoped that they felt about these critical topics.

In May 1851, at the American Antislavery Society meeting held in Syracuse, the black abolitionist took public steps toward separating himself from Garrison when he reached the conclusion that the Constitution was not inherently a pro-slavery document and that there was no need to dissolve the union. What bothered Douglass deeply was that the abolitionists' call for dissolving the union, and without provisions for reconstituting itself, could not be found in the language of the Constitution and that, furthermore, the abolitionists made no provisions for the slaves. The slaves, vulnerable and powerless, were without a nationwide social structure to meet their needs. They could find themselves victims again if the direction of abolitionism, as defined by Garrison, disengaged itself from the slave. Douglass then found himself and the *North Star* being pushed outside the circle of Garrisonians and their defenders. The separation was immediate and severe in that it cost Douglass the attachment he had to the man who was his mentor and his spiritual father, and the support group that had brought him a sense of community, and at times served as an extended family.[30] The most famous of Douglass's speeches, however, would come in the next year.

In tone and feeling, the speech, which carries the date of July 4 (1852) in its title, was actually given on July 5. The Rochester Ladies Antislavery Society asked Douglass for an oration to be delivered on July 4. He rejected the offer to speak on the fourth as an insult to him and others. How could they ask him, he reasoned, without mocking this very proud man who saw himself as a representative person, when millions in the country did not have this freedom, especially other blacks bound in slavery ("This Fourth of July . . . is yours, not mine"); but he agreed to speak the next day.

Rochester's citizens, many of whom were already committed to antislavery, poured into Corinthian Hall to hear what many consider to be Douglass's signature speech and an abolitionist template against slavery and, equally as important, a reformer's voice for freedom. Entitled "What, to the American Slave, is Your Fourth of July?" the speech, stinging his listeners with shame and outrage, critiqued democracy and warned them about God's wrath over the fact that the country was ignoring the existence of slavery by dismissing the country's roots in rebellion and religion.

Inviting no sentiment about the past, he declared, “My business, if I have any here today, is with the present. The accepted time with God and His cause is the ever-living now.” Then in prophetic language, he proceeded to remind this gathering that the past has its value in terms of redirecting their thoughts on the importance of this moment of celebration. He presented the now famous core of the critique:

> What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.[31]

Later in the speech, he explained the failure of the religious community to exercise its responsibilities:

> Let the religious press, the pulpit, the Sunday School, the conference meeting, the great ecclesiastical, missionary, Bible and tract associations of the land array their immense powers against slavery, and slave holding; and the whole system of crime and blood would be scattered to the winds, and that they do not do this involves them in the most awful responsibility of which the mind can conceive.[32]

The moral depth of the speech and its continued relevance can be understood another way, the consequences on the human spirit. Through this subjectivity Douglass devotes his time to the separation, the alienation that he and others like him experience from being distanced from the nation’s creed, or more precisely from its declaration about all men [and women] being equal with rights and within a stated covenant relationship with God, who is named 24 times in the speech. He reminded

them of a universal principle concerning slavery. It corrupts and depresses the human soul, or, as he quoted in the speech, "Oppression makes a wise man sad." But the reason was that there had developed a callousness toward their fellowman in slave chains that they dismissed and that burdened him. To stress the victim's outrage, he repeatedly used the possessive pronoun, the grammar and meaning pointing significantly to the word's use for both individuals and groups. He referred to *your* Fourth of July, *your* celebration, and *your* holiday as noted above. He was not just trying to encourage them to go home and reread their school books about the origins of the republic; that was not the point at all. He wanted them to reimagine history with the slave in it, not out of it, so that they might understand the slave's experiences, the daily struggle to live without a future, to face the psychological slip into madness, and the slave's darkness.

To gather a sense of the powerful, prophetic, and visionary language that Douglass summoned for the speech into our national archives is to simply create substitutions. Take Douglass's title and refrain, "What to the ______?" Fill in the blank with any of yesterday's or today's oppressed groups and it is apparent how penetratingly sensitive and insightful Douglass's words become in invoking the invisible and marginalized populations in his or any time in the life of the republic, or in the global human family. The history lesson, in other words, is about looking at experience through the eyes of others and using existing institutions to do it. In another way, the speech is prophetic in its anticipation of the war on its horizons and the condition, as one historian has noted, of our time when Douglass said:

> There is consolation in the thought that America is young.—Great streams are not easily returned from channels, worn deep in the course of ages. They may sometimes rise in quiet and stately majesty, and inundate the land, refreshing and fertilizing the earth, with their mysterious properties. They may also rise in wrath and fury and bear away on their angry waves, the accumulated wealth of years of toil and hardship. They, however, gradually flow back to the same old channel, and flow on as serenely as ever. But, while the river may not be turned aside, it may dry up, and leave nothing behind but the withered branch, and the unsightly rock,

> to howl in the abyss-sweeping wind, the sad tale of departed glory. As with rivers, so with nations.[33]

On July 12, 1854, a little more than two years after the Corinthian Hall speech, Douglass turned to another cultural foothold for his social critique. This time his object was science, more precisely what we call ethnology. In a stirring lecture at Western Reserve College in Ohio, he challenged the scientific thought of his day in a speech entitled "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered." Douglass argued for a realistic distinction between "good" and "bad" science, asserting that any approach that excluded a group from the human family, if indeed there ever could be a valid separation, was "bad" science.

> The proposition to which I allude, and which I mean next to assert, is this, that what are technically called the Negro race, are a part of the human family, and are descended from a common ancestry, with the rest of mankind. The discussion of this point opens a comprehensive field of inquiry. It involves the question of the unity of the human race. Much has and can be said on both sides of the question.[34]

Douglass's claims have a contemporary tone to them. He reasoned that the persistence of prejudice had everything to do with the continuing image of the "other," where marginalized communities—blacks, ethnics, and religious minorities and women—were involved. He knew that the social order of his day reflected for many, to paraphrase another famous reformer to come in the 20th century, that people were being judged by the color of their skin—or their noses or foot sizes or cranial sizes—or their gender rather than by the content of their character.

In the speech, he illustrates how this starting point leads to a misdirected path. For black people, the exclusion happens when the legacy of the Egyptian as an African is ignored and thus begins the process of turning away from Africa for its contributions to civilization. The fact is that Frederick Douglass's voice, his arguments cutting away established superficialities between the races, strengthened his position by showing his peers how to see differently, how to feel differently, and how to empathize with everyone in the struggle for personal fulfillment

and political freedom. He argued that the truth of history is scientific when we turn to its moral basis as evidence.

Related to but different from the great Corinthian Hall address of 1852 is the lecture delivered before the Rochester Ladies' Antislavery Society of 1855 and titled "The Anti-Slavery Movement." How is it different from the Corinthian Hall speech? The difference may be described in this way: if the Fourth of July was a sham and a fraud to the nation from the slave's point of view in the 1852 speech according to Douglass, then the 1855 lecture explained how that corruption developed within the nation's moral structure.

Always deferential to his audience, he wanted the point of this lecture to be the necessity of our country to have a permanent memory of slavery to guide itself in the future. As the historian David Blight observed, Douglass was convinced that action was necessary to rid the country of slavery but that future generations needed to have a record, a living, national will so to speak, of the horrors and misdirection of slavery and the institutions that supported it.[35] The lecture featured Douglass as a teacher, abandoning his sermonic posture, in favor of explaining and illustrating the history of the antislavery movement. It is full of documentation and a considerable amount of deconstruction of terms and ideas such as "emancipation," "immediatism," and "gradualism." [We have discussed Douglass's critical approach to examining words and contexts earlier in this book; his approach is similar here, and no less fruitful.] Furthermore, the lecture has an additional context. It illustrated the growing discord between Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison over the progress of abolitionism. It was a question that entailed the pride and vision of two very determined men.

The antislavery movement was not new, according to Douglass. Called "recent history," the antislavery movement was anything but recent, Frederick recants. His awareness of how selective were the uses of history led Frederick into a discourse on our common humanity that included the Bible, the example of the exodus of national Israel, and the invisibility of African history and culture. The conventional perspective on the antislavery movement was further troubling to Douglass because it ignored the work of church organizations; for example, Methodists, Baptists, Quakers and others of established denominations who supported antislavery. For those hearing his lecture for the first time,

denominational activism was presented in extraordinary detail. Douglass quoted from the minutes of general assemblies and referred to historical texts. He effectively made rhetorical comparisons between abolitionist publications with those published by faith groups, pointing out that the latter offered even more severe criticism of slavery and the slave trade. If this legacy of antislavery is old, even ancient, why then does slavery still exist he asked, as if anticipating the question from his first readers? His own words fittingly respond:

> The country was like a savage drunkard, roused from his slumbers. Speaking and writing on the subject of slavery became dangerous. Mob violence menaced the persons and property of the Abolitionists, and their very homes became unsafe for themselves and their families.[36]

And the churches? Instead of becoming fiercer advocates for antislavery they "receded from their anti-slavery ground" and now became "the friends of the oppressor, and the bulwark of slavery."[37] Douglass presents this history of the church to verify and validate its abandonment of its historical role. The language is theological and scriptural. How can the souls of men be denied their place in the human family and still maintain that the principle of man is being made in the image of God? Slavery's destruction would create the opportunity for the church to offer a "blessing" to the world and to her "honor."

Douglass then shifted his focus to the abolitionists and celebrated them and their commitment to the antislavery movement. He called them "apostles." For the closing section of the lecture, the abolitionists are presented as not just one group but divided into four divisions, each with its own vision and version of what is right and proper to do about slavery. They were by no means perfect but their moral outrage against slavery and the slaveholder presented a picture of the diversity of resistance within the movement. He started with the Garrisonians, or the American Antislavery Society, led of course by the passionate voice of William Lloyd Garrison, and reiterated his criticism expressed in 1851, which was essentially that they had no social plan for the newly freed slave. The second group, the American and Foreign Antislavery Society, lacked credibility by not having any agents in the field. No one was

talking about abolishing slavery and as a consequence the society was not supplying any rebuttals against slavery.

The third group was the Free Soil Party, whose motto was "Slavery Local—Liberty National." Douglass critiqued this slogan with the same criteria used against the Garrisonians. The Free Soil slogan left the slave as a victim to self-liberate himself at the exclusion of any social network. However, the Liberty Party was the fourth division of the antislavery movement. Based chiefly in New York State, this group found favor with Frederick. They were the only abolition organization in the country, according to Frederick. It aimed "for a clean sweep of slavery everywhere." He compared it with the other segments of the abolitionist movement and judged it to be exactly in the right place, at the right time, and with the right moral tone, which to Frederick meant that they saw the slave as both a man and a brother.

Before closing, Frederick pleaded with his audience to remember the antislavery cause. It was not about the life of groups but about the *light* in humankind, which no matter how few in number, would sustain the cause of freedom. It is in this closing section that the Christian principles of forgiveness and repentance are not only voiced and articulated but are used to explain the permanence and durability of the movement. The movement existed because its greatest principle was the application of justice. The mighty hand, or to use his words, the arm of God, is one that is stronger than any human arm, and made it possible for this faith to triumph. His own words present it best:

> Ladies and gentlemen, I am not superstitious but I recognize an arm stronger than any human arm, and an intelligence higher than any human intelligence, guarding and guiding this Anti-slavery cause. . . . Let us trust that arm—let us confide in that intelligence—in conducting this movement; and whether it shall be ours to witness the fulfillment of our hopes, the end of American slavery or not, we shall have the tranquil satisfaction of having faithfully adhered to eternal principles of rectitude, and may lay down life in the triumphant faith, that those principles will, ultimately, prevail.[38]

Conflict and discord were everywhere to be found in the decade before the Civil War. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 was at the center

of most of the discord. This act created the two states of Kansas and Nebraska but served to inflame the issue of states' rights and the expansion of slavery. Rioting broke out with the opening of Kansas to slavery, and political realignments shaped the landscape. The birth of the Republican Party in 1854 emerged as the heir to the antislavery Democrats, the Liberty Party, and to the Free Soil Party. What drew Douglass to this changing political landscape were the possibilities of the Republican Party strengthening the distinction between freeing the slave and dissolving the union. Douglass played a cautious role in the high stakes gamble that the Republicans were attempting. However, he was not cautious about the constitutional ruling that is most synonymous with the legal status of the slave, the famous *Dred Scott* case.[39]

In addition to his other critiques, Douglass's comments on the famous *Dred Scott* case demonstrated his legal acumen and the final step of his separation from Garrisonian ideology. The *Dred Scott* case [*Dred Scott v. Sandford,* 1857] was a landmark ruling by the Supreme Court on March 6, 1857. It legalized slavery, as stated earlier, and recognized the slave as property. It found that Scott, coming from a slave state, was still a slave and had to be returned to slavery. In one of the most infamous sentences to come out of the history of jurisprudence, Supreme Court Justice Taney wrote that blacks were inferior, unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; further, in some of the most racially cast lines in jurisprudence, he stated that the black man had no rights that the white man was bound to respect.

Frederick responded in a speech, entitled "The Dred Scott Decision," given on the occasion of the anniversary of the American Abolition Society in May 1857, in Rochester, New York. It might be best to turn to one sentence early in the speech because it captured Frederick's intentional use of the spiritual as a divine force. Acknowledging the authority of the Supreme Court as being very great indeed, he then established its limits. It cannot be greater than the Supreme Court of the Almighty. Douglass said:

> Judge Taney can do many things, but he cannot perform impossibilities. He cannot bale out the ocean, annihilate the firm old earth, or pluck the silvery star of liberty from our Northern sky. He may decide, and decide again; but he cannot reverse the decision of the Most High. He cannot change the essential nature of things—making evil good and good evil.[40]

Three qualities establish the importance of this speech in Douglass's body of orations. The first is the context of the ruling itself. The highest court in the nation permitted no blacks to appear before the Supreme Court. One Douglass biographer rightly maintained that the speech showed how effective Douglass would have been as a lawyer and speculates on the outcome his presence would likely have brought during the 1880s when civil rights laws were being debated before the Supreme Court.[41]

The second quality is the way Douglass constructed his argument. He turned to the most basic of all assertions by maintaining that understanding the role of slavery in the Constitution, using an approach he discovered early when reviewing the word "abolition," must begin with the word itself. The word "slavery" is not in the Constitution, or to quote him: "I must see that it is there plainly stated that one man of a certain description has a right of property in the body and soul of another man of a certain description." He continued by pointing out that the words "slave, slave holder, slave master, or slave state," do not exist in the document either. Further there is nothing implied to affirm the existence of slavery in the country at all. Where, then, is the law sanctioning slavery? It is in there by an interpretation, Douglass argues, that "by assuming that the written Constitution is to be interpreted in the light of a secret and unwritten understanding of the framers, which understanding is declared to be in favor of slavery."[42]

Moreover, another important development in the lecture was the challenge to the Garrisonians about the Constitution. Their position was that it was a slave document, as noted earlier. Douglass, like the proverbial doubting Thomas, pressed every angle of the Garrisonian argument for its basis in fact. He wanted them to show him without a measure of doubt where he could place his finger on the Constitution's support of slavery or the slaveholder. I do not know of a better place to show Douglass's intellectual qualities than here. The disassembling of the myth about the African that Taney used, and quoted by Douglass, presumed a slave culture in which the presence of blacks in bondage disqualified them from being human beings protected by the Constitution. What was there, according to Taney-like thought, was the construction of slavery from the idea that those who composed the Constitution in the moment of slavery were in fact placing it in there. Douglass would have none of

that sapless logic. “As a man,” he said, “an American, a citizen, a colored man of both Anglo-Saxon and African descent, I denounce this representation as a most scandalous and devilish perversion of the Constitution, and a brazen misstatement of the fact of history.”[43]

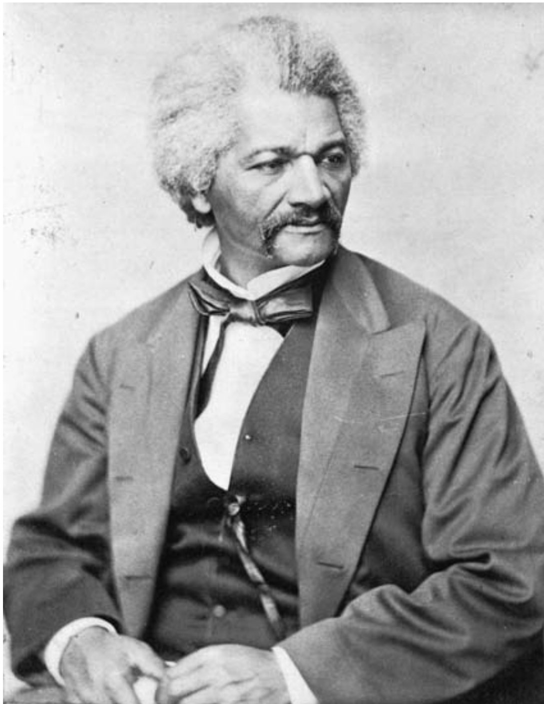
Just as important as the denunciation of *Dred Scott* was the unequivocal affirmation of the mainstream religious denominations’ protest against slavery from the beginning of the republic. Citing chapter and verse of their documents, he attacked the idea that Garrison and Taney misread the Constitution. Garrison dismissed the Constitution without rigorously examining it in relation to slavery. To Douglass, Taney imposed law, created bad law in fact, on the realities of a document he ignored in favor of serving a race-based and ideological racial bias.

The speeches of the 1850s and, at mid-decade, the publication of *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855, his second autobiography, represent a remarkable personal achievement. It is quite natural to think of *My Bondage* as a sequel to the 1845 *Narrative*, and of course to a large extent it is. Some contexts did not change for the most famous black writer of what we now call the slave narrative. He still had to depend on white readers for sales and most of all for understanding the times, and to be part of the abolitionist cause that was the foundation of his story. The publishing risks remained for him. How many readers could break through the stereotypes about blacks? How many would still doubt that a former slave had the capabilities and intelligence to write a story at all? He must have received some encouragement from home and abroad because his work had become a best seller.

The second autobiography answered some of the questions from the first, differed from the first essentially through the author displaying a more profound understanding of how slave owners desired slavery. It was not only a financial investment but grew into an insatiable appetite for everything imaginable. They desired it all, from the material to the carnal, and slavery was the vehicle for them to possess it. In speaking about the ordered structuring of the plantation, “even the overseers’ children go off somewhere to school; and they, therefore, bring no foreign or dangerous influence from abroad, to embarrass the natural operation of the slave system. . . . The plantation is a little nation of its own having its own language, its own rules, regulations and customs. . . . The holidays become part and parcel of the gross fraud, wrongs, and inhumanity

of slavery. Ostensibly, slave owners see the plantation as institutions of benevolence . . . but practically, they are a fraud, . . . The slave's happiness is not the end sought, but, rather, the master's safety."[44] The second autobiography's description of captivity and its process of liberation makes a strong connection with the exodus story of the Bible and perhaps implicitly with himself as a Moses to his people.[45] With this deeper understanding of the nature of slavery and his repugnance toward its social acceptance and its sustainability, Douglass, upon further reflection, might have retitled it *My Bondage and My Fury*.

In less than 20 years from slavery, and without ever having stepped foot in a single classroom, as another historian asserted,[46] Douglass had published two books, started a newspaper, lectured on multiple occasions, and given a memorable speech on July 5 that has been passed down to generations of Americans about how to think about freedom,



Douglass in middle age. Library of Congress/ LC-USZ62-15887.

especially about those denied it. In the same speech, he created a template of justice for the oppressed, an example for later legal experts, philosophers, and other thinkers to consider when taking a self-assessment of freedom in their own time.

In this decade, Douglass's analytical skills were on full display, his vision of the nation's future never clearer, and although deeply frustrated at the slow and increasing irrelevance of some abolitionist approaches to the emancipation of the slave, his reputation as one of the most respected abolitionists contributed to the distinctive authority of his voice and to the independent character of his spirit. Frederick Douglass had begun to walk a path toward history by boldly engaging the major subjects of his day which indeed overlapped with his own personal concerns. The dual visibility of slavery and his personal experience with it served to enhance his conviction that he was in the right position at the right time to perform an important service to the nation and to himself. He did all this while reminding himself and others about those who lacked a ballot with which to vote and a platform on which to speak. He could no more ignore them than abolitionists could ignore his warnings about their just cause. He would continue to establish foundations for the nation to face its obligations to the present, and perhaps join the unknown composers whose words inspired the spiritual call to return the nation to its roots and not "steal away" to doctrines unrecognizable to its origins.

NOTES

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2. Victoria Sandwick Schmitt, "Rochester's Frederick Douglass: Part Two," *Rochester History*, vol. 67, no. 4, Fall 2005, p. 3.
3. Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 81.
4. Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 81.
5. Robert S. Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997, p. 2.
6. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (eds.), *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999, p. 1156.

7. Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 215.

8. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 377.

9. Foner, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 94.

10. Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 84

11. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 150; Philip S. Foner, *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, pp. 158, 525. Henceforth referred to as *Speeches*.

12. John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 155.

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14. Philip S. Foner (ed.), *Frederick Douglass on Women's Rights*, New York: DaCapo Press, 1976, p. 10.

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16. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 183.

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18. Foner, *Women's Rights*, p. 37.

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24. John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, Sixth Edition, New York: McGraw Hill, 1988, p. 172.

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27. Stauffer, *The Black Hearts*, p. 120.

28. Bill Lawson and Frank Kirkland, *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader,* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999. Chapters 2 and 8 are especially relevant to this discussion.

29. Margaret Aymer, *First Pure, Then Peaceable: Frederick Douglass Reads James*, New York: T&T Clark International, 2008, p. 22.

30. Foner, *Biography*, p. 143.

31. Philip S. Foner, *Speeches*, p. 196. Henceforth referred to as *Speeches*.

32. Foner, *Speeches*, pp. 196–201.

33. Foner, *Speeches*, p. 189.

34. Foner, *Speeches*, p. 285.

35. David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee*, Baton Rouge: Lousiana State University Press, pp. 76–77.

36. Foner, *Speeches*, p. 319.

37. Foner, *Speeches*, p. 321. This section of the speech anticipates Martin Luther King's condemnation of the church in the extraordinary defense of nonviolent direct action in "Letter from Birmingham Jail" written in August 1963.

38. Foner, *Speeches*, p. 331.

39. Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 153.

40. Foner, *Speeches*, p. 347.

41. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 205.

42. Foner, *Speeches*, pp. 353–55.

43. Foner, *Speeches*, p. 355.

44. *Autobiographies*, p. 159.

45. Levine, *Martin Delany*, p. 112.

46. Conversation with Dr. Frank Faragasso, former historian for National Historical Site, Douglass's house at Cedar Hill, on July 11, 2009.

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Chapter 5

WRESTLIN' JACOB, 1859–1870

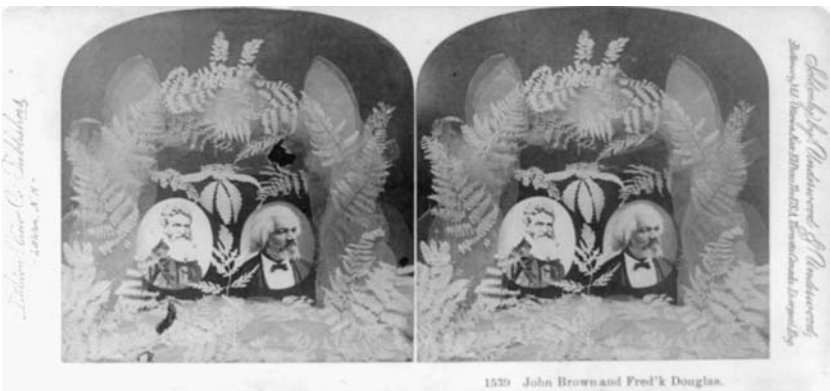
O, wrestlin' Jacob, Jacob, day's a breakin';
I will not let thee go!
O, wrestlin' Jacob, Jacob, day's a breakin';
He will not let thee go!
O, I hold my brudder wid a trembling hand;
I would not let him go!
I hold my sister wid a trembin hand;
I would not let her go!

Frederick Douglass and John Brown continued to meet during the decade of the 1850s. An important and penultimate meeting took place in Douglass's Rochester home on February 1, 1858. Brown stayed for several weeks, using the time to discuss with Douglass his plans for a slave revolt and to raise as much money as he could for this action which he believed would change the course of American history by stirring up slaves to rebel. In August of the next year, before the ill-fated attack on the government arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, Douglass met with John Brown for the last time in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. At this meeting, Douglass was confronted with what he must have known was

coming: the inevitable request by Brown to assist him in the assault planned on Harper's Ferry. Considering the time they spent with one another and the advanced stage of the plan after consultations with people like Tubman, Brown undoubtedly spoke to Douglass about his position in the planned government in exile, probably as its president; furthermore, he needed Douglass's visibility in a successful insurrection to reassure blacks with a respected leader and a known member of the larger black community.[1] While he was willing to assist Brown with helping slaves to escape, Douglass rejected joining the attack as an impossible action involving so few against the army of the United States. That was their last face-to face meeting.

On October 16, 1859, Brown ordered the attack. Leading 22 men, 17 whites and 5 blacks, Brown stormed the arsenal.[2] By morning, the raiders were either killed or captured by a company of Marines under the command of Colonel Robert E. Lee, the future commanding general of the Confederate troops during the Civil War. John Brown was arrested and tried for treason. He was sentenced and hung on December 2, 1859, in Charlestown, Virginia.[3]

John Brown had been uncompromising in his position on the liberation of the slave, and therefore the time he spent time with Douglass, explaining and defending his course of action, added a radical edge to the impulses of his friend and confidante in Rochester. It was his



Paired stereograph portraits of John Brown and Frederick Douglass produced by the Littleton View Company, publishers ca. 1891. Library of Congress/USZ62-94342.

influence that moved Douglass into reconsidering the continuing debate in abolitionist circles about the best course of action for attaining justice and freedom for the slave. Under Garrison's tutelage, Douglass had been taught that liberation was best achieved through moral suasion, nonviolence, and noncooperation with the federal government. John Brown thought otherwise. In his mind any action that fell short of liberation was in fact, if not in practice, collaboration with the enemy. However, when taken together, these radical reformers were strong influences. Brown, Garrison, and the woman suffragists were major players in the most critical areas of 19th-century America. Taken together, they were indeed powerful factors in pushing Douglass to greatness and thrusting him into using bolder language toward achieving his own preeminence in the 19th century.[4]

After Brown's attack, investigators searched for accomplices and had little difficulty in making a connection between the editor of *Frederick Douglass' Monthly* and the Kansas militant. Newspaper accounts put the two together, and the reaction made Douglass an accomplice (and guilty) by association. Moreover, letters found on Brown implicated Douglass with having at least enough knowledge for them to seek him out as a person of interest. Once this connection was publicized, a frenzy concerning the assault escalated, and Douglass's friends urged him to leave the country. Two weeks after the failed insurrection, he attacked the media for what he described as their effort to dismiss the value of Brown's assault. In an editorial in the *Monthly*, in language as violent as the bullets that rang out at Harper's Ferry, he wrote in defense of Brown against charges that the militant was "insane":

> It is an appalling fact in the history of the American people, that they have so far forgotten their own heroic age, as readily to accept the charge of insanity against a man who has imitated the heroes of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill. . . . Posterity will owe everlasting thanks to John Brown for lifting up once more the gaze of a nation grown fat and flabby on the garbage of lust and oppression, a true standard of heroic philanthropy, and each coming generation will pay its installment of the debt.
>
> His daring deeds may cost him his life, but priceless as is the value of that life, the blow he has struck, will, in the end, prove to

> be worth its mighty cost. Like Samson, he has laid his hands upon the pillars of this great national temple of cruelty and blood, and when he falls, that temple will speedily crumble to its final doom, burying its denizens in its ruins.[5]

Not every one of Douglass's audiences was as sympathetic to Douglass's response, and when it became clear that his ties to Brown were going to be used against him, the threat of his incarceration moved his friends to step up their encouragement to him to leave the country. Messages went back and forth among Amy Post, Ottilie Assing, and Philadelphia's William Still, chronicler of the Underground Railroad, urging him to leave immediately lest he become, with Brown, the symbolic captive in this failed insurrectionary action. Douglass agreed. In what must be described as an unceremonious flight, he barely escaped his pursuers, fleeing to Canada using the Underground Railroad network that he and many others established for runaways. He was a fugitive again.

The historian Benjamin Quarles has written that while this escape plan was not heroic for Douglass, it made sense. Had he been presented with federal papers, Douglass would have had to appear in court and subject himself to the judicial process, probably in Virginia. With his characteristic wit, Quarles wrote about Douglass's possible appearance in a Virginia court that: "The presence of a Negro abolitionist in the courts of Virginia in October 1859, would have placed a severe strain on the quality of mercy."[6] Ultimately, though, Douglass was headed for England, with a brief stop in Canada.[7]

Canada had always been an important destination of the black diaspora. Records show that the earliest blacks were explorers, seeking the familiar pursuits of adventure and fortune in uninhabited regions. For most blacks, however, Canada stood as a sanctuary and a political oasis for many during the 18th and 19th centuries. It was in many respects the fugitive slave's biblical Canaan, a place of security and safety. This sovereign country was tolerant and hospitable to blacks, whether they came from British conquests, French maroons, or fugitives traveling on the Underground Railroad. No single reason seems to account for the acceptance of outsiders found in Canada, particularly in the western Ontario region. There were a number of settlements that

included fugitive blacks who were able to raise families and to live in some semblance of normality. In addition to the opportunity to work, the passage of the British Imperial Act of 1833, abolishing slavery throughout the empire, all came together to make freedom possible for the runaways. Many former slaves went to Canada for any one of those reasons. As a result, communities like Buxton, Chatham, and Owen developed. Others, such as the religious-based community of St. Catherine's, were in fact major depots for one of the Underground Railroad's most celebrated conductors, Harriet Tubman.[8] It has since come to be known as the Niagara Freedom Trail.

Douglass's escape to Canada to flee federal authorities following John Brown's raid gave him a chance to respond to a rare charge that he had broken his word to Brown by not participating in the assault. He was called a coward. One of the captives, a man named John E. Cook, reported to the newspapers that had Brown taken his advice and ran to the mountains, he would have encountered Cook, who was collaborating with Douglass, who would then have met them with a larger force of runaway slaves. According to Cook, however, the plan fell apart primarily because Douglass never showed up. The pusillanimity implied in the charge demanded a response. Douglass answered, of course, in his best sarcastic prose to the Rochester *Democrat*, and primarily to his white abolitionist friends, that he not only did not know Cook but that Cook was constructing this connection while in jail, meaning that as a prisoner he was speaking under duress and that any statement he made needed to be considered taking his imprisonment into account. Without missing a stroke of the pen, he added that Cook's prevarications were part of a larger set of falsehoods. Never passing up the opportunity to attack the slave oligarchy, Douglass began his defense of Brown, in anticipation of charges of madness being thrown at the preacher, by saying that any attempt to overthrow the slave system called for a more accurate and detailed view of circumstances and a review of the action on its own terms.[9]

This flight to Canada was not Douglass's first visit. As part of his earlier abolitionist travels, Douglass had travelled to Toronto on April 3, 1851, to address the newly formed Antislavery Society of Canada (ASC). It was the lead organization for a weeklong series of lectures sponsored by the antislavery movement. With a growing reputation for

his oratory, Douglass specifically addressed an "appeal to Canada." His subject was the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law and the need for Canada's expatriate black community to return and remain in the United States. His interpretation of their residency in Canada did not come from the most sincere of positions. He was undoubtedly reflecting upon his own decision not to remain in England as a free man but to return and remain fully engaged in the struggle for black liberation. He did not think that the fugitives in Canada served the larger goal, his goal in any event, by staying in Canada. He asserted that their Canadian residence undermined the struggle in the mainland by reducing the numbers of blacks capable of resisting the slave law and eluding slave catchers.

The core of his speech was basically an abolitionist appeal to motivate the black expatriates to stay connected to the movement. This may have been one of the rare moments when this student of history would have forgotten to think about someone else's; in this case, the passage of time among the fugitives. He did not address the matter of their circumstances, meaning the jobs and families they had, the institutions and communities they had created for themselves, or their prospective plans to return to the United States, if they had any. It is unclear if he even asked if such plans figured in the lives of this group, many of whom were still considered fugitives. Of course, the growing popularity of Douglass at that time permitted him to speak in generalities, implying that the focus he brought was on the larger needs. In a sense the idea was for the blacks to consider returning to the "Lower 48," as the states below Canada were called. He wanted them to become abolitionist warriors in the fight for eliminating slavery. Douglass wanted to expand their legacy as fugitives to fighting as free men and women, and thus stimulate fear in the minds of the slave oligarchy and create inspiration in the hearts of those in chains. Not everyone felt inspired by Douglass's call to liberation on the home front.

One of the dissenters to emerge out of Douglass's first Canadian appearance in 1851 was the abolitionist Mary Ann Shadd Cary. Born in Wilmington, Delaware, on October 9, 1823, she was the daughter of Harriet and Abraham Shadd, who had been active in the abolitionist movement and specifically had served as subscription agents for Garrison's *Liberator*. Following their example, Mary Ann herself was active

and aware of abolitionist developments, having written a letter to the *North Star* in 1849 urging freed blacks to use their freedom by rejecting consumerism and becoming more of a producing class of people. She joined the black migration to Canada as a result of the threat imposed on them and other free blacks from the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. As noted earlier, this act created opportunities for slave bounty hunters to snatch blacks away from wherever they found them, claim them as fugitives with the permission of local magistrates, and then take them over ground to plantations. She did not agree with the position that Douglass took on the Canadian black emigrant history. Her view of the situation was based much more on regional loyalty and history. If Douglass could not celebrate the emigration of the fugitive to Canada, she could and did celebrate it, and went so far as to suggest along with some others that he was a "foreigner" meddling in their affairs.

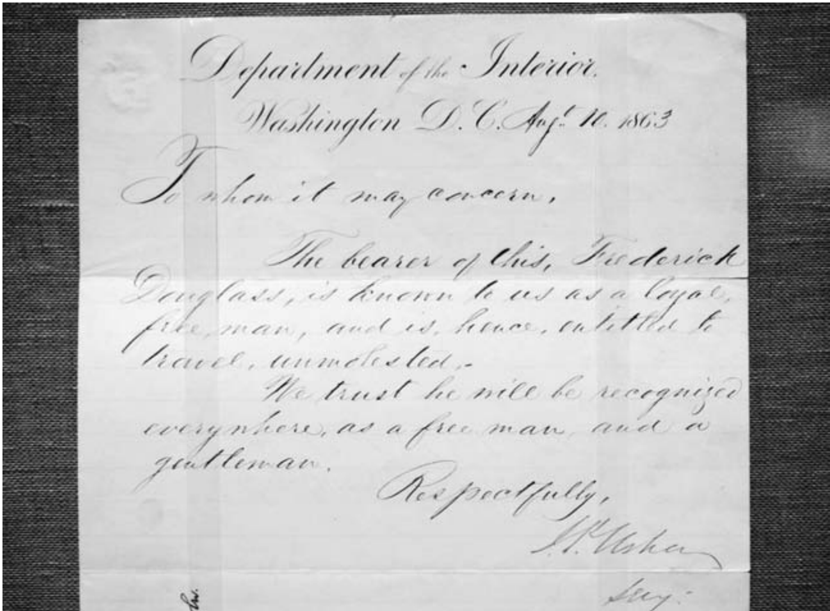
In 1852, Mary Ann Shadd wrote "Notes on Canada West," which attempted to persuade blacks to come to Canada. Already well educated and a dedicated abolitionist following her parents' example, she founded the *Provencial Freeman,* in 1853, her own abolitionist newspaper, thus making her the first black female editor and publisher. Shadd became known for her editorial attacks on slavery and promoting self-reliance. While she may have resisted Douglass's call to return to the United States initially, she nevertheless returned to Washington, D.C., in 1861. When the Civil War started, she recruited for the Union Army. After the war, she taught in Wilmington's black schools before moving to Washington, D.C., where she attended the law school of Howard University, graduating in 1883 as only the second black woman to earn a law degree in the United States.[10]

The entire issue of repatriation, or reemigration as it was termed, was a continuing topic being discussed in the Lower 48 with debates around the question of where to send African slaves as one of the solutions to the question of slavery. It was an old question. The more it was proffered as a solution to slavery, and more generally to the standard themes of white supremacy, which were to send the blacks to another part of the world, the more it lost any strategic effectiveness as time went on. In a sense, this viral vestige of racism in American culture has been inoculated by democracy's own vaccine, inclusiveness and

political participation. It certainly does not carry the same significance as racial segregation does in American life, which seems to mutate into whatever is fashionable in the cultural conflicts involving racial attitudes and other forms of xenophobia. Later in the decade, after his first Canadian trip, Douglass rephrased the question after the Harper's Ferry episode. Always in the forefront of reformist, political thought, he decided to speak about a new question. To him, the response now to the problem was not about the slaves but what should be done with the system that had enslaved them.

When the English learned about Douglass's imminent return in 1859, they greeted his arrival on November 12 in Liverpool with as much fanfare as they could. He lectured on the current state of slavery and on the purpose of John Brown's raid. His lectures filled lecture halls and newspapers. Douglass was again reminded of how liberating the English experience was for him. He was a celebrity here and had become an even bigger star than when he left 12 years earlier. He would probably have remained longer had it not been for news from home that his youngest daughter Annie had died. She was the "light and life of my house," he said. He cut short his lectures and, after only five months, immediately returned home to America in 1860. No trip could have claimed a greater mixture of joy and sadness.[11]

These were exceptional political times. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 had created chaos in black communities, especially those in the North. The question of whether there would be freedom or slavery in Kansas, the rebellious state of John Brown, was a subject discussed in lecture halls and in newspapers throughout the country. *Dred Scott* and the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, as well as the political campaign of Abraham Lincoln, not to mention Douglass's growing unease with abolitionist ideology were all part of the climate that constituted the prewar years. Douglass stood behind Abraham Lincoln near the end of his 1860 campaign because he saw in the Illinois candidate a chance for a fresh start in the presidency for the abolition of slavery. With his editorial work now being done under the name of *Douglass' Monthly*, the editor wrote one of the more important analytical assessments of Lincoln as a candidate and, as it suggests the engagement with moral issues surrounding slavery, the editorial became one of the most important political and prophetic statements that Douglass made.



Department of the Interior.
Washington D.C. Augt. 10. 1863

To whom it may concern,

The bearer of this, Frederick Douglass, is known to us as a loyal, free man, and is, hence, entitled to travel, unmolested.-

We trust he will be recognized everywhere, as a free man, and a gentleman.

Respectfully,
J.P. Usher
Secy.

Free Pass letter issued to Frederick Douglass by the U.S. Department of the Interior. Dated August 10, 1863, it declares him free to travel "unmolested." AP Photo/Matt Rourke.

> Mr. Lincoln is a man of unblemished private character; a lawyer, standing near the front rank at the bar of his own State, has a cool, well-balanced head; great firmness of will; is perseveringly industrious; and one of the most frank, honest men in political life. He cannot lay claim to any literary culture beyond the circle of his practical duties, or to any of the graces found at the courts, or in diplomatic circles, but must rely upon his "good hard sense" and honesty of purpose, as capital for the campaign, and the qualities to give character to his administration. His friends cannot as yet claim for him a place in the front rank of statesmanship, whatever may be their faith in his latent capacities. His political life is thus far to his credit, but it is a political life of fair promise rather than one of rich fruitage.[12]

While these mainstream political activities dominated the times, nothing preoccupied Douglass's thinking more than the actions needed

to end slavery in the republic. Lincoln's inaugural address of March 4, 1861, in fact, disappointed Douglass. From his perspective, the president equivocated on eliminating slavery. Lincoln declared that he would do nothing to states that already had slavery but would not let it expand into states that did not. That position was not good enough for this black abolitionist and editor. He wanted more decisiveness from the president. Douglass was intensely focused on one idea—and on one idea alone—and that was the elimination of slavery. Everything else was secondary, a distraction at best. However, when war broke out and with the surrender of Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, Douglass was ecstatic, lifting his arms and declaring, "God be praised!"[13]

Douglass felt that the war was the answer to a prayer; furthermore, he felt that the conflict would also answer his question about the role of the black man in a conflict where his cause could be victorious, unlike the failed and tragic attempt of John Brown. Yet there is a sense that Brown's influence never left Douglass, or at least not immediately. It was a source for understanding Douglass's renewed commitment to secure the role of the black man in fighting for his own freedom, and by extension the freedom of all people. The struggle at the national level resonated personally with Douglass. This was one of the many ways in which the Civil War between the North and the South became an outward conflict that the intellectual historian David Blight has rightly labeled an inner conflict, too.

This would also be Frederick Douglass's civil war. He would seek to explain the war through journalism, interpret it with his abolitionist passion for the elimination of slavery, and participate in it by recruiting for the new administration, even accepting a commission for himself that never materialized. One of the results was an initiative by Douglass to get black men involved in Lincoln's army, and therefore to assume rights and sacrifices, the way others assumed responsibility on the battlefield and, in Douglass's view, off the battlefield as well. Douglass's point was that the war on battlefields would bring about a new life for the slave by taking him away from life in cotton fields. He wanted to remove the generational habits ingrained in both blacks and whites that involved the absence of a relationship with one another that was based on mutual respect and dignity. The war may not complete such a transformation but it would be a catalyst for initiating change. Eventually,

the North needed soldiers and that need would be readily answered by black men serving in the army of the North. For that to happen, there had to be an executive order from the president of the United States. In fact, Lincoln had been thinking about the message of the proclamation for at least a year.[14]

On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. It heralded a new day and a new direction in the war. Douglass's own words reflect the extraordinary emotions that he felt that day. He waited, along with numerous others in Faneuil Hall in Boston, for what seemed like hours for the official teletype to arrive with the announcement. Expectations were as high as they had ever been for a significant government change toward slavery. When it came, the musicians broke out and began playing Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." Douglass called it the "moral bombshell" needed in the war effort.[15]

Douglass met with President Lincoln three times, the first being on a hot, steamy August 10, 1863, again on August 25, 1864, and finally at Lincoln's second inauguration on March 4, 1865. All three meetings are important but for different reasons. Douglass's own accounts of the meetings have been a vital and reliable source for this historical account of the developments that led to a black man and a former slave being invited to the White House by the president of the United States in the 19th century.[16] For their first meeting, Douglass was escorted through Capitol Hill by the Kansas senator Samuel Pomeroy to see Edward Stanton, Lincoln's secretary of war. He listened to Douglass's plea for blacks to be recruited into the army. He also promised Douglass a commission to serve as an officer and aid to General Lorenzo Thomas, who was engaged in recruiting black soldiers in Mississippi. The appointment never happened, but until then its prospects must have raised Douglass's spirits as he and Pomeroy proceeded to visit the White House.

The meeting between President Lincoln and Douglass was an opportunity for the two men to size up one another, and to discover, as men with their proven ability can sometimes do, that they had a good deal in common with one another. Both had humble origins, separated of course by the ogre of slavery, but humble nevertheless. Both had little to no formal schooling, and yet became known as two of the most dedicated men to education and two of the most learned men of their

Lewis Henry Douglass, 1840–1908, and his wife, Helen Amelia Loguen Douglass. National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site.

generations. Both were devoted family men who experienced the loss of children. Both men are acknowledged as embodiments of the idea of the "self-made man" in the 19th century. Both were hand-clasping and warm men who knew how to put people at ease—if they wanted to. Perhaps most important of all was that each found himself struggling with the moral issues of his day on justice and equality that would resonate well into the nation's future. No area illustrated the moral and political complexities of the questions they faced more than did the subject of race and its impact on public policy.[17]

They were both in leadership roles, though certainly with different kinds of responsibilities. And on the matter of race, they differed fundamentally. Neither of course wanted to see human cruelty, beatings, and some of the other atrocities that humans inflicted on one another. Slavery and race were complicated matters for Lincoln and Douglass.

Frederick Douglass Jr., 1842–1892. National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site.

Lincoln, however, believed that he could separate slavery and race by abolishing slavery and allow states to continue their state-based systems of racial discrimination. Having been a slave, Douglass saw no logic in that position at all. How could one objectively separate the victim, the black person, from the crime of slavery in a democracy?[18]

When they met initially, Lincoln was aware of Douglass through the editorials about him. He wanted to make it clear that as a person and as president he would not vacillate on issues, especially slavery. He would keep his word. Douglass, for his part, urged President Lincoln to issue an executive order that would create a fighting unit of "colored troops." Both men were talking about personal responsibility. Douglass understood that unless there was the need for a personal involvement of black men in their own liberation, their freedom, if won at all, would be owed entirely to others and not to their own sacrifices. Whether they were teaching, preaching, cajoling, or in some other form of conversation, the discussions between Lincoln and Douglass have persuaded historians

Charles Remond Douglass, 1844–1920. National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site.

that the two men were significant influences on one another. Not only did they listen to one another; their actions from these discussions speak for themselves.

Ideologically speaking, Lincoln, while wary of the prejudices against blacks and the heightened racial tension brought on through the war, did not want his recent military victory at Gettysburg to create a backlash from whites if his administration was seen to favor black equality.[19] However, the moral authority of the now famous Gettysburg Address given on September 19, 1863, has a spiritual legacy that can be assigned back to Douglass. According to at least one influential historian of both men and their relationship, Douglass was "the President's unacknowledged and unpaid alter ego, the intellectual godfather of the Gettysburg address."[20]

For his part, Douglass agreed to recruit aggressively for this administration, and in fact had already begun that effort through editorials. In March 1863 the abolitionist editor published in the newspaper car-

rying his name one of the most anticipated and convincing editorials on why black men should fight. In "Men of Color, To Arms" a stirring message, Douglass implored black men on ideological, historical, and patriotic terms to join the fight:

> A war undertaken and brazenly carried on for the perpetual enslavement of colored men, calls logically and loudly for colored men to help suppress it. Only a moderate share of sagacity was needed to see that the arm of the slave was the best defense against the arm of the slaveholder.
>
> . . . Who would be free themselves must strike the first blow.
>
> . . . In good earnest then, and after the best deliberation, I now for the first time during this war feel at liberty to call and counsel you to arms.[21]

The result of this personal but public declaration, an apologia in a sense, and from his meeting with Lincoln in August, was the formation of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment under the command of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. Lincoln agreed to this action, and two of Douglass's sons, Lewis Henry and Charles Remond, served, with Lewis serving at the rank of sergeant major. This was a direct result of the petitions and other appeals that Douglass made to Lincoln and to the readership through *Douglass' Monthly*. In his newspaper, his editorials, and columns being carried in other northern newspapers as well, he continually urged blacks to run and enlist and to fight for the North.

As expected, not all black men were persuaded. Opponents to blacks fighting in the war and opposing Douglass's recruiting effort felt that the war was not the event that would decisively change the culture where blacks were concerned. It would not bring about a change in the racist rules of society. Those who held this position were neither uninformed nor uncommitted to black freedom. They just did not see the war as making that much of a difference in their daily lives where black freedom was concerned. They lived segregated lives, even in the North, so there was little to be gained by risking their lives or the lives of their loved ones in a war that would not make them free. Against these powerful positions and arguments, Douglass declared that loyalty to country and the necessity of manpower placed the black soldier in a

preferred place against Copperheads who wanted peace with the Confederacy and an answer to the North's need for more troops.[22]

To Douglass, the mobilization meant the possibilities of positive outcomes on several levels, including Union victory, the assertion of black manhood, and a chance to lift the consciousness of the nation toward seeing blacks in a more conventional human role instead of as an oppressed group, perpetually positioned being bent over in the posture of picking cotton. Moreover, he believed that it was a requirement of the black man to fight, to make choices, to learn the way of arms, and to pronounce himself both soldier and citizen. Douglass gladly volunteered to recruit for the 54th; and, as stated earlier, his son Charles Remond was the first to enlist, with son Lewis Henry following shortly thereafter. Douglass wanted to destroy the military and social role that many blacks, especially in the South, had been forced into through acts of exploitation. Southern blacks were being used by the Confederacy as cooks, hospital attendants, stretcher bearers; in other words, blacks in the South were being used in a variety of ways that were in fact mimicking life on the plantation. Furthermore, these blacks were put in the position of strengthening Confederate units of war by extending the support system of the Confederate army.

By contrast, northern blacks who wanted to become soldiers were encountering their own struggles as first-time enlistees in the battle for the Union and for themselves. Douglass, in fact, warned them that they would be fighting on two fronts, a physical and spiritual right to be free, but that the most important thing for them was not to lose sight of the goal. What they did as soldiers would establish the basis for their citizenship and equality. But they would have to endure, and depending on how well they handled challenges, they would be able to draw their own picture of their destiny; nevertheless, the obstacles were formidable.

For the northern black recruit, the acts of discrimination began with their pay. Blacks were not being paid at the soldiers' level but as day laborers. Black men showed up from many places to fight for the Union and to fight for their own dignity and self-respect. In "Call to Arms," a subsequent editorial on the role of black men in the war, Douglass promised them that "you will receive the same wages, the same rations,

the same equipments, the same protection, the same treatment, and the same bounty, secured to the white soldiers." It would not be true.

The early history of the new regiment became an old story of racial prejudice and discrimination. The pattern of unequal treatment existed not only in pay but also in having to wear secondhand clothing. Not long after hearing about this situation, Douglass attempted to correct these unfair practices and other insults that surfaced. For one of the few times in his career, Douglass took a compromising position. It would not be the first time that Douglass would demonstrate his practical response to reality for the sake of moving his agenda forward. From his perspective, the insults faced by the black troops at having to be treated as inferior soldiers were not as important as the necessity for them to remain active participants in their own liberation.

While some black soldiers protested and refused even to sign up as enlistees once they heard about the pay inequalities, others heard Douglass's call for perseverance and stayed committed to a larger vision. They would tolerate and ignore these inequalities and insults to their manhood for the sake of the larger picture. To add to the discriminatory practices was the lack of opportunity for promotion, inferior equipment, including weapons that would not fire, and assignments to the most degrading tasks of cleaning latrines and other such noncombat regimens. During this effort to achieve equality and respect, Douglass himself became a symbol of the black soldier's frustration over bureaucratic and institutionalized racism. After having been promised a commission as assistant adjutant general, Douglass prepared himself to go south to begin his service as a Union officer. The commission never materialized and Douglass, deeply disappointed, refocused his attention on the executive proclamation that had been directed by President Lincoln.

While he continued to recruit troops for the war and to lecture against the inequalities that left the slave as a second-class citizen, Douglass remained focused on the goal of citizenship for black people. On the day the Emancipation Proclamation was announced, there was no happier man to be found anywhere. While the document did not free a single slave, it started the process of untying the physical and psychological knots of slavery from around the nation, especially the

legal structures that made slavery legitimate. It did not transform the nation into "the city on the hill" nor did it change the nation into the "promised land," but it did make it appear that hope was on the horizon. Through the president's proclamation, a legal basis now existed for abolishing slavery with a constitutional amendment. However, this was not going to be a swift process.

President Lincoln invited Douglass to the White House on August 25, 1864. It was their second meeting, just a year and two days after their first. Like the first, which focused on the role of the black as a soldier in the Union Army, this meeting also centered on race as a national agenda item. If the president appeared relaxed to Douglass the first time they met, this time he found the president full of anxiety over "the politics of race." The president was concerned about the climate of compromise that was growing within his own party concerning the end of the war. Pressured by party leadership, especially by Horace Greeley, who was nevertheless a strong advocate of emancipation, Lincoln wrote a public letter clarifying his position that the end of conflict would also bring about the end of slavery. The letter, reviewed by party leaders, inflamed Democrats and raised concerns among enough Republicans that Lincoln feared that the party might lose in the next election; if it did, so would the chance to constitutionally abolish slavery. After discussing this matter with his invited guest, Lincoln never sent out this letter.

Beyond this immediate and dire concern for his and the Republican Party's political future, Douglass had become a subtext for their meeting. The president wanted more blacks to join the army and did not understand why the proclamation had not resulted in more doing so. Douglass responded by reminding Lincoln that the slave owners had many ways of keeping information from the slaves. He then proceeded to make an outline that the president approved of for greatly increasing the number of runaways to escape and join the army of the North. Finally, another topic was on Lincoln's mind. His first meeting with Douglass had generated its own controversy by Douglass having described the "gentlemanly" meeting between the president and the former slave. It had become an open discussion for racists who used the meeting as a way to unmask racial bias and racism about a black man in the White House.

Their third and final meeting took place on March 4, 1865, the day of the second Lincoln inaugural address. On a dreary day, the sun broke as Lincoln spoke and delivered these memorable words and images of reconciliation: "With malice towards none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who has borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a first, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

Many in the audience were black; some even estimate that nearly half were. Douglass, moved by the address, wanted to personally congratulate the president but he also knew that a black man attending the inaugural reception would probably bring shouts of outrage. Nevertheless, he stood in the long line to get into the reception. Stopped by guards who said falsely, but out of their own learned prejudice, that blacks were not to be admitted to the reception, Douglass beckoned a familiar face and asked him to relay to Lincoln that Douglass was being denied entry to the reception. Eventually admitted to the East Room where the reception was being held, Douglass wrote about the "grand simplicity and home-like beauty of the President." Suddenly their eyes met. Douglass told the president that the speech—and Lincoln definitely wanted to hear Douglass's opinion—was a "sacred effort" and that he liked it very much.

When Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy, fell to Union troops in April 1865 and the surrender at Appomattox was all but inevitable, thus bringing an end to the military conflict, the moral conflict over rights would continue. However, before any of those legal barriers could be destroyed, the euphoria over the proclamation and the military triumphs of the Union troops would turn to tragedy as the nation was forced to suddenly reflect upon the death of Abraham Lincoln.

Assassinated on April 14, 1865, in Ford's Theatre by John Wilkes Booth, an apologist for the South and slavery, the 16th president of the United States left an indelible and complex mark on history and his relationship to Douglass. Lincoln's death was a major loss in the momentum that Douglass thought had been created for the climate of emancipation. The historian David Blight has written accurately about the special words that Douglass spoke in Rochester before those who

gathered at the announcement of Lincoln's assassination.[23] On this occasion, Douglass spoke about Lincoln's death in very intimate terms. The words he used placed his comments as an encomium not just from his point of view but for the nation. On behalf of the nation, he categorized and projected the loss at a more subjective level by expressing the death as the loss of a family member and as one only understood by "a hush upon the land, as though each man in it heard a voice from heaven." Further, in Lincoln's death, he said we "shared in common a terrible calamity, and this touch of nature made us more than countrymen, it made us Kin."[24]

Lincoln's death presented Douglass with the chance to bring forth reconciliation. For in it Douglass saw the prospects of a new beginning of life for the black community and the nation to heal with the end of the military conflict. The journey for equality, however, was just beginning. No one understood better than he that the reconstruction of the nation would become another call for him to abandon any thoughts of retirement to a quiet farm life in favor of finishing the goal of citizenship. His mission now was to work for the passage of legislation that would guarantee citizenship to the newly freed slave, with all the rights and responsibilities.

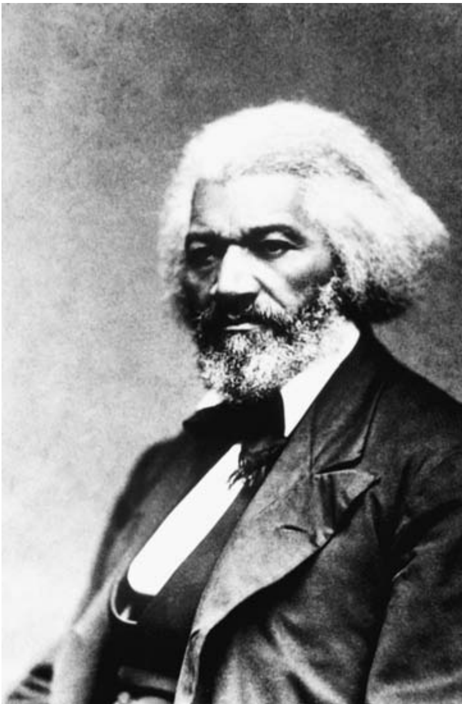
After Lincoln's death, Douglass returned to politics and supported the Republican Party's plans which he felt would be the next step toward extending suffrage to blacks. He understood that there would be no freedom without the ballot. But in President Andrew Johnson, Douglass saw an administration reappointing men who had been a part of the old South, and that in southern states the old ways had been reconstructed under the "black codes," statewide policies designed to reinstitute chattel slavery in spirit if not in fact. For example, they would specifically create legislation to limit the mobility of the black person, the practical effect being to keep the former slave in his place. If there was a better paying job elsewhere, this kind of legislation made it a crime to pursue it. In Mississippi, for example, legislation existed that would make it punishable for a former slave to be arrested if he was not working.

Actions like these only reinforced Douglass's conviction that the ballot was the only cause for him right now, and he began to support the Republican Reconstruction Plan. In 1867, Congress adopted this plan overriding President Johnson's veto. The first step gave the suffrage to

blacks in the District of Columbia, again over President Johnson's veto. But on February 25, 1869, Congress passed legislation in both houses approving the Fifteenth Amendment, which provided black men with the right to vote and was sent forward to states for ratification.

The congressional legislation that liberated black men from the social corruption of slavery ushered in a new era by allowing black men at least to walk away from the circumstances of chattel slavery and move into the public hall of responsible citizenship.

This is the spiritual message of "Wrestlin' Jacob." Like the Old Testament patriarch Jacob who struggled with supernatural forces, Douglass led the fight for black freedom by refusing to surrender against extraordinary, and what must have appeared to him at times to be, supernatural odds. The Emancipation Proclamation created the foundation for freedom but did not grant it unconditionally. Political alliances created the vote for black men but permanently left black and white women to fight a separate battle for the right to vote. And for a generation to



A number of portrait engravings were based on this undated daguerreotype depicting Frederick Douglass in later life. National Archives.

come, the Civil War ripped apart the nation's cloak of unity, leaving legacies of racism to be undone. The struggles to repair the souls of a damaged nation would remain paramount in Douglass's mind. Neither northern victory nor southern submission reflected his humane vision. Like the patriarch in the spiritual, he would continue to hold onto all sides for the sake of unity that the nation required.

Now that Lincoln was gone, hope in the future and reconciliation growing out of war would be the only eulogy that would satisfy Frederick Douglass.

NOTES

1. Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, p. 79.
2. Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, p. 75.
3. Foner, *Biography*, pp. 174–85.
4. Foner, *Biography*, p. 181.
5. Foner, *Speeches*, pp. 374–75.
6. Quarles, *Douglass*, p. 181.
7. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, pp. 199–201.
8. Appiah and Gates, Jr., *Africana*, p. 182.
9. Quarles, *Douglass*, p. 182.
10. "Women in History: Mary Ann Shadd Cary Biography," *Lakewood Public Library*. Date accessed July 25, 2009. The first black female law school graduate was Charlotte Ray from Howard University in 1870. Although the date of her actual graduation is not certain, she was the first black woman to graduate in law.
11. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 207.
12. Foner, *Speeches*, p. 393.
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14. Paul Kendrick and Stephen Kendrick, *Douglass and Lincoln: How a Revolutionary Black Leader and a Reluctant Liberator Struggled to End Slavery and Save the Union*, New York: Walker & Company, 2008, p. 100.
15. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 215
16. *Autobiographies*, p. 784.
17. John Stauffer, *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln*, New York: Hachette Book Company, 2008, pp. 15–24.

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20. David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 15.

21. Foner, *Speeches*, p. 526.

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Chapter 6

ROLL, JORDAN, ROLL, 1870–1895

Roll, Jordan roll;
Roll, Jordan roll;
I want to go to heaven when I die
To hear old Jordan roll.

Like most of the classic spirituals, "Roll, Jordan, Roll" acknowledges the hardships of any given day along with an equal feeling, equally as relevant, by pointing to another place. Usually this place is heaven in the spirituals, where life's turmoils are replaced with a lasting peace. In most of the stanzas, the song symbolically expresses the work of the imagination diligently at work to heal, to cope, to survive, when nothing else will. The Fifteenth Amendment that brought exultation to some by granting black men the vote had an opposite effect on those seeking a broader application of the law. It granted the vote to one segment of the disenfranchised and yet, no matter how partisan one's passion, the amendment did not, nor could it, satisfy everybody's idea of equality. Unlike the spiritual, the politics of the franchise left behind a bitter disappointment, for example, for women and their allies on both sides of the color line by withholding from them the right to vote. It was a painful heartache that

lingered after a fierce but unfinished battle for political freedom. A wish from the spiritual has a direction, however. Like the aching resolve of the spiritual, the failure of women to gain the right to vote in a democratic setting stirred their minds and hearts to further action.

To Douglass, the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 by the states brought jubilation and personal disappointment. He believed that his abolitionist allies and friends had narrowly interpreted the military gains of the Civil War into thinking that the slave was now free and could manage his own affairs. In their naïveté, they did not realize, or ignored, the enormous needs of the slaves in a postbellum era. As Douglass saw it, and he was right, simply removing the physical chains would not remove the social, cultural, and psychological scars of bondage; in other words, how do you deprogram institutionalized slavery from the hearts and souls of the victim and his oppressor? Nor would freedom without social orientation and education prepare the newest citizens to reach for opportunities for gainful employment so that they might eventually become part of an effective workforce. Further, there were other practical aspects of understanding how to function in society, such as how to use money and the important questions related to property, only this time with choices being made on the freedom side of ownership.

Douglass was faced with challenges from the woman suffrage movement as well. The women's movement for freedom and equal rights presented the editor with a very personal and a unique set of circumstances. How could he not help feel a sense of incompleteness, and perhaps guilt, considering the indebtedness that he owed to the women in his life, beginning with his mother Harriet, Grandmother Betsy, or the commitment of Julia Griffiths and Ottilie Assing, or the respect he had for the courageous hearts of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, not to mention the contribution of British women of the antislavery movement who had successfully negotiated for and purchased his freedom from Hugh Auld? But how could he ignore the political opportunity to grant black men with one stroke the chance to vote in order to make choices? One Douglass biographer is right in calling the separation of the women's and the abolitionist movements one of the saddest divorces in American history.[1]

In defense of the vote for black men, Douglass maintained that it was necessary to conceive of the struggle in terms of opportunities. Who

could the least among us afford to lose out on the moment, he reasoned? He felt that women had far more opportunities than black men, who had only this one chance to enter citizenship. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, leaders of the woman suffrage movement and Douglass's friends, saw the matter quite differently of course. When it became clear to them that the war was nearly over, these two fierce advocates for women's independence decided on a strategy to link their goals with those of black male suffrage. In May 1866, for example, they changed the Woman's Rights Convention into the Equal Rights Association, the aim of which was to create a movement for universal suffrage. They even included Frederick Douglass as one of the three vice presidential positions. The strategy proved to be ineffective. Douglass alerted his feminist freedom fighters that the differences between their circumstances and those of the black man as they related to voting were irreconcilable in this historical moment. Before the Fifteenth Amendment was passed, the feminists withdrew their effort to join black men in the quest for suffrage. At this time the right to vote would not be universal. It would be for black men only.[2]

The woman suffrage movement was, nevertheless, a lifetime concern of Douglass's. He was as much a feminist as he was an abolitionist for his entire life. He was aware of their historic fund- raising efforts in this country and abroad, especially so since British women "paid" for his freedom. He knew about the historic debates that separated women's rights from the broader initiatives on human freedom. When he was in Ireland, he took the pledge to be a "temperance man," thus joining reformers who were fighting for women to have the rights of law when they were being attacked by their drunken husbands.[3] He constantly wrote about women in the *North Star.* He accepted their equality, as would be noted when he will be nominated for the office of vice president of the United States on a ticket with Elizabeth Woodhull in 1872. His declaration of support at the historic women's rights convention of Seneca Falls in 1848 was as much a test of his commitment to the rights of women as was his resolve to help eradicate slavery through the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, statutes abolishing slavery, creating citizenship, and granting black men the right to vote.

On March 30, 1870, Douglass rejoiced as President Grant announced that the Fifteenth Amendment had become law. In his remarks on that

day Douglass did not forget women, however, by calling for the immediate passage of a Sixteenth Amendment which would grant women the franchise.[4]

That year was also notable for Douglass's purchase of majority ownership in the *New National Era* newspaper. It added to his journalistic resume and announced that he would once again return to his role as editor, with the intent of making his voice heard in reconstruction, the nation's new era, hence the symbolic meaning of the newspaper from his perspective. Signs of this new period would come much sooner than perhaps even he could have anticipated. Douglass supported President Ulysses S. Grant and was appointed as assistant secretary of commission to Santo Domingo, and he supported Grant's interest in annexing the Caribbean island. While that was unfolding, an extraordinary event took place among woman suffragists, pushing forward their political goals.

Shortly after arriving in Washington from New Orleans where he was clearly the star of a convention of "colored men" meeting to discuss the direction for blacks in the South, Douglass was being considered for a larger recognition. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the circumstances had everything to do with the woman suffragists leadership repositioning themselves for another attempt to gain full citizenship privileges with voting rights. While Douglass was in New Orleans at the men's meeting, Victoria Woodhull, a journalist, publisher, and supporter of women's suffrage, convinced Elizabeth Cady Stanton of the need for the National Women's Suffrage Association to sponsor a new political party at its people's convention. On May 11, 1872, in the Apollo Hall of New York City, the delegates at the convention decided to break routines by having a historic ticket, one that would find no similarity until the latter part of the 20th century, when a woman was on the national ticket, and later in the opening decade of the 21st, when a black man would run for office and win the presidency. The Equal Rights Party nominated Frederick Douglass for the office of vice president of the United States on the party's ticket in 1872, with the liberal and liberated feminist Victoria Woodhull being nominated for the office of president. Mrs. Woodhull accepted her nomination in June. The efforts of the new party and its ticket never really created a campaign, due chiefly to a lack of funds. Douglass never officially accepted

the nomination. For him, there were more pressing family matters back home.[5]

On June 3, 1872, fire destroyed Douglass's Rochester home and many, many valuable documents of personal and historical value. He had lived in this city with his family for more than a quarter of a century. There were letters, pictures, and other mementoes reflecting the life of a prominent and successful middle-class family. There were also books, hundreds of them, thrown out onto the yard but unsalvageable. The fire was considered suspicious. Local authorities spent little time investigating what most regarded as arson. While the Douglass family escaped unharmed, the loss of many of his private letters and the only known and complete collection of his newspapers (the *North Star, Frederick Douglass' Paper,* and the *Douglass Monthly*) constituted an irrevocable loss. Douglass was in Washington, D.C., at the time of the fire. The fire and the less than aggressive role of the investigators infuriated Douglass, although one historian maintains correctly that the fire and the personal losses are events in which we do not see the depth of his feelings.[6] Convinced that it was time to move on and to be closer to the center of power, Douglass permanently relocated his family to Washington, D.C., in 1872.

Back in the nation's capital, Douglass accepted the position of president of the Freedmen's Bank, believing that his reputation would not only be good for the bank but also for implementing plans for the freedman that many of his abolitionist friends ignored. Unfortunately, those who knew did not tell Douglass, now known as the Sage of Anacostia, that the bank had been mismanaged for some time. In 1874, the bank closed and he also personally lost more than $1,000.[7]

In 1877, under President Rutherford Hayes, Douglass was appointed U.S. marshal for the District of Columbia. This was not one of the more important positions for a politician of his stature to hold. The sum total of his responsibilities was to distribute jobs, but the assignment did have a long-range value in that he was in a position to hand out minor jobs to a growing black middle class in Washington, D.C., thus strengthening the grip of black civil servants on federal jobs. And, for the first time, Douglass had enough income from this post to reduce the number of speeches that kept him on the road for six months or more during the year. With more time at home, he could keep up with

his considerable correspondence. The time also allowed him a more casual existence by visiting friends and reading with the Uniontown Shakespeare Club.[8] Most important of all, he could spend time with his grandchildren. Their visits and his income provided him with motivation to seek greater stability now. At the age of 60 and feeling very much like a patriarch, he wanted to have more unscheduled time and to take advantage of every impulse. One of those impulses, and in fact a longing for one so sensitive to the past, came as he prepared to return to the Wye Plantation, the place where he might actually discover a personal prize: the specific date of his birth.

In June 1877, Douglass spoke in the town of St. Michaels in Maryland. Part nostalgia, yet feeling perhaps some unease for the settings that once sought to dismiss his humanity, he spoke before a crowd that included many who had known him, including children of his sister Eliza Mitchell who, like most of Douglass's relatives make only cameo appearances in his autobiographies. Just as many came to see the celebrity, the distinguished public figure, the Sage of Anacostia, the orator, the editor, and internationally known politician. According to reports from the *Baltimore Sun,* the speech was part sermon, part inspirational because Douglass could see for the first time in nearly 40 years how much of the landscape had not changed. There was political freedom to vote, at least for black men, and yet he sensed that the freedom of opportunity had not grasped the sinews of the black population. Far too many blacks remained in the same economic straits. While his nieces and nephews rushed to be closer to the most famous of the Bailey clan, still numerous in Talbot County, little reflection on that moment surfaced in any of the famous autobiographer's accounts. The visit and the speech turn to Thomas Auld, his old master. That was the real subject of the occasion and the purpose for the visit.

Always introspective, but now worldly and political, a person with a name that thousands recognized, Douglass was in a period in his life that encouraged even deeper introspection. On the eastern shores of Maryland, he was on the soil of his roots. It stimulated his thoughts about being the leading black chronicler of the slave epoch. His purpose was to keep those memories of slavery alive in the American collective consciousness. Living a prosperous life, what would this return to his roots mean for him? As he looked around, his eyes shifted to take

in old familiar sites. His mind would try to connect these memories with his life, with this tree, that road, that face which had been in the crowd. Could it have been a relative unknown to him, or might that house or this rail station bring to life a more complete picture of himself and others? He wanted to remember everything that happened in his life. After more than 41 years, nothing more seemed to matter in returning to St. Michaels than meeting with Thomas Auld who was now on his death bed.[9]

The meeting between the two lasted no more than 20 minutes or so, with Douglass starting with a nervous informality for both of them by telling his old master to just call him Frederick and not Marshal Douglass as Auld had done at the start of the visit. These two old adversaries desired a peace to take place between them, and it did. Auld was dying. Douglass wanted to know a number of things. He wanted to know about his family, especially his grandmother. What was the truth about her and her last days? Had she had been turned out by Auld, as had been declared in the now famous publication, "Letter to My Old Master," first published in 1848 edition of the *North Star*? Auld corrected that story and Douglass apologized in a sense for having presumed otherwise, but the visitor also wanted to know about his birth date, the exact date of his birth.

"Was it 1817? No, replied Auld; it was 1818 in February." So Frederick left his old master convinced that there had been a reconciliation and that he now had the year, if not the exact date, of his birth. Not all of the important events in the next year were as dependent upon these informal reflections, nor upon the uses of memory to define a legacy.

In September 1878, Douglass moved from his comfortable house on A Street in Washington, D.C., to a spacious and impressive house he had bought, sitting alone on a hill and on a 15-acre estate in the Anacostia section of Washington. An experienced businessman in real estate by this time in his life, Douglass paid approximately $7,000 for this property on a loan from Dr. Charles B. Purvis, a surgeon, a Freedman's Bank board member, and a member of a well-known black family. A year later Douglass added 15 more acres.[10] Naming it Cedar Hill, for the great grove of cedars on the property, the Sage found that the house offered one a splendid view of the nation's capital. In the most specific application of the word "appropriate," he viewed the house and its

Rosetta Douglass Sprague, 1839–1906. National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site.

setting as having the right touch of prominence to match the stature of the man. As he entered the house, the main hallway separated a formal reception area on the left for the many visitors who came to the house. Behind it the richly carpeted floor led into his book-lined study. Pictures and souvenirs from his travels and gifts from friends set off each of the rooms. Downstairs and on the right, there was a living room, a dining room, and kitchen where hired help served the family. Upstairs, there were rooms for the patriarch; his wife Anna when she became ill; and for the children and the grandchildren, who usually found more fun by running up and down the backstairs, in rooms set aside for servants and for the grandchildren to sleep. Most important to all was the grand view of the nation's capital from the front windows on the second floor, which when opened provided a flow of air against the stifling heat of the summer.

When the Marshal of Washington rode into the district, or paraded with other government dignitaries, he and the many guests who often and repeatedly filled the house after the parades would know that the former slave who started life without any material possessions would be their host. They returned to a house that he paid for and owned from a government-appointed job that he held.

Appointed recorder of deeds by President James Garfield, Douglass published the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* in 1881. A much longer book than the previous autobiographies because he had lived longer and had more to say, the *Life and Times* did not find a ready audience interested in the grand sweep of his life. A few old abolitionist friends in Rochester purchased copies, some sold at conventions, and others sold among black students, whose numbers were climbing in the first generation of historically black colleges in Washington, D.C.; in Atlanta, Georgia; and in the suburbs of Pennsylvania and Ohio. The *Life and Times* had new and expanded sections to attract first-time readers, especially those that put a fresh perspective on his early years for readers curious about the war, about slave resistance, and about the duty left to all, in his opinion, to continue to work to improve democracy and its institutions. The writing was characteristically clear and retained his talent for establishing contrasts and tensions in the narrative describing the closing years of his life. However, public interest in the life of this slave transformed into the voice for freedom was no longer in demand. Whatever personal disappointment Douglass had over the lack of sales dimmed immediately against the sadness he faced with the prolonged illness of his wife. On August 4, 1882, Anna Murray Douglass died from her painful, prolonged struggle with rheumatism and a stroke that paralyzed her left side, from which she never recovered. She had been his wife for 44 years, and her death devastated him and, according to reliable evidence, pushed him into a state of depression.[11] There was no doubt at the time of Anna's death that Frederick Douglass possessed qualities and had achieved extraordinary gains in a society that at first marked him for invisibility in the cauldron of chattel slavery. The image of Anna in this relationship is entirely different. In the most generous accounts she is described as ordinary and, to complicate matters, illiterate. How does one explain the ordinariness of Anna and the greatness of the abolitionist editor through 44 years of marriage? What kind of

chemistry was at work? I have already alluded to the bond they had from their first decision about planning for his escape, and her financing of it, to raising a family. None of these events and developments precluded marital infidelity, of course. The rumors persisted, and the problem is that they persisted against a seemingly implacable foe: the image of the black woman through the social and historical lens that has always placed her as a stereotype of being either a lustful vixen or a mammy-like figure whose head is wrapped for domestic duty, most of it in the kitchen. The pictures of Anna are matronly and of a middle-aged woman, albeit one with dignity.

In Anna's defense, Rosetta, the oldest daughter, heard about the rumors that circulated about her parents. She eventually wrote about the dignity of the Douglass home and the role her mother played in maintaining that dignity throughout her life. Anna was the anchor of the household. To be sure, she is scarcely a part of the famous man's autobiographies and there are gaps that are not filled in, but while these

Helen Pitts Douglass. National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site.

empty spaces do exist, they do not mean that Anna is in a black hole. As Rosetta, who was named probably for the Rosetta stone and must have been a wonderful discussion for new parents, makes it very clear that her mother instilled through family discipline the values of pride, hospitality, kindness, and gentleness. Moreover, Anna was deeply interested in her husband's work and honored him and their marriage by "keeping things straight . . . at home, so that he might not be distracted while on tours and lectures."[12]

Perhaps Anna had not been the fashionable figure that so many women had been who surrounded the famous black statesman and adviser to presidents, a trumpeter whose voice alone could summon black men to fight for the union and for their freedom as citizens. Frederick's own words, however, captured the deep despair that Anna's death brought him. He wrote to his longtime friend Amy Post in Rochester where he and his children buried Anna:

> When death comes into one's home—a home of four and forty years, it brings with it a lesson of thought, silence and humility and resignation.[13]

To Grace Greenwood, another friend, he wrote, "There is not much room for pride or self-importance in [the] presence of this event."[14]

Anna's death took out a cornerstone of his life. Their lives together had been a spiritual journey to match the age. They had survived chattel slavery, flights from bounty hunters, eager abolitionists, and aggressive, intellectually and physically attractive women, not only white but black women too, who wanted to be around and become intimate with one of the great and powerful figures of their time. Power is its own source of attraction. In spite of all the tales and rumors of unproven infidelities, Douglass went home to Anna wherever they decided to call home—but now the house would be empty of her presence, leaving behind only the physical remnants of her life: the bed she slept in, the clothes she wore, her sewing machine and the unfinished cloth next to it. He closed and locked the door of her bedroom room at Cedar Hill, never to open it again in his lifetime. Her death produced an emptiness he had never felt before, and it temporarily paralyzed the soul of the Sage of Anacostia.

A strong person like Douglass seems to have few wants and needs to outsiders, even in the midst of personal loss. Anna's death was painful to him, but most did not see it. He suffered in solitude. More than a year went by for the grieving widower, who was now under a physician's care, before close friends intervened. Martha and Frank Greene saw that his condition had deteriorated. As old friends, they knew he was under the care of a physician for what must have been depression, but they knew they could help in other ways. In the summer of 1883, they took him to Poland Springs, a resort in Maine, where he could get complete rest.[15]

Always in the past he had been ready to lecture; now the grieving widower did not make any public appearances until he was asked to be a leading delegate to the National Convention of Colored Men scheduled for September 1883. The invitation awakened his passions for becoming involved in politics again. Of course he still grieved, but he nevertheless saw the moment as an opportunity to pass the torch, to speak directly to a new generation of leaders about the struggles of the future. However, he never attended the conference but sent his remarks which were read publicly. The fact of the matter was that new events would serve to remind the democratic warrior that the stigmas of a racial past that he was ready to turn over to the next generation were not over for him. In January 1884, Frederick Douglass, the recorder of deeds of the District of Columbia, married Helen Pitts, a white woman.

For the country's most prominent African American to marry a white woman created a controversy and a social issue that did not disappear quickly from newspapers or gossipers. The couple themselves seem to have been the only ones who were happy about their plans. Others saw violations of racial preferences and social codes in which a romantic relationship between a black man and a white woman would evoke the most extreme racial antipathies in American life. In this boiling conflict of racial irrationality, the ashes are all that remain of the human connection in the minds of those who permit social bigotry to exist. In other words, a spiritual death existed and the couple as humans and as individuals no longer mattered. Few took the time to know Helen Pitts. In fact, had those who wanted to look beyond the color of her skin taken the time to familiarize themselves about her, they would have seen a fellowship of reformers in her union with the recorder of deeds for Washington, D.C. Helen belonged to a long line of family ac-

tivists, including her parents, who were abolitionists. Born in Honeoye, New York, in 1838, making her 20 years younger than her husband, she probably first met Douglass as a child when her father had invited him to their home in 1884 after one of his many speaking engagements. Whether Helen was there or she was too young to remember—she would have been six years old at the time—is without evidence, but there is ample documentation about Helen's career.

Before she married the Sage of Anacostia, Helen used her education from Mount Holyoke Seminary to teach at Hampton Institute in Virginia, one of the earliest of the historic black colleges to exist, the future alumni of which would include Booker T. Washington, one of Douglass's earliest biographers and a major political force during Reconstruction and in the first quarter of the 20th century. To illustrate the kind of determination she brought to social reform, Helen had local residences arrested for insulting and abusing her students. Lingering tension from that episode resulted, however, and that constant reminder of her rebellion combined with health issues led her to decide to move to Washington, D.C. She was subsequently hired by the best known of the abolitionists. Douglass hired her as his clerk in 1882 when he was recorder of deeds. There is no doubt that Helen knew who her new employer was and the larger historical context which defined his life and family. Her impending marriage to Douglass provided something of a Rorschach test for racial tolerance in their time. Viewed through the social prism of that experiment, society failed.

Frederick Douglass and Helen Pitts were married on January 24, 1884, in the home of the much esteemed clergyman of the 15th Street Presbyterian Church, the Reverend Francis Grimke. He was brother to the famed abolitionists Sarah and Angelina Grimke and was himself the product of one of the nation's most notable interracial families. The former Mississippi senator Blanche K. Bruce, the first former slave to preside over the Senate, and his wife Josephine witnessed the marriage. Neither of the couple's families attended the ceremony. Douglass did not inform his children. Rosetta wrote later that it was an unhappy time for her family.[16] As expected, the wedding was controversial both within their families and in the broader society. Helen had no reservations and stood by her convictions. She said, "Love came to me, and I was not afraid to marry the man I loved because of his color."[17]

Frederick Douglass's grandson Joseph, who became a concert violinist. Joseph was the son of Charles Remond Douglass and his wife Mary Elizabeth Murphy Douglass. National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site.

Douglass may have thought that his prominence immunized him from the racial detritus that accompanied interracial marriages. If he did, he was quickly disabused of such thoughts by the responses from his family and beyond. There was outright hostility from his children and grandchildren as well as various forms of disapproval expressed by her family. His own words in a letter to his friend Amy Post typified his response to the social uproar:

> Helen and I have had a delightful tour . . . and what is remarkable and gratifying not a single repulse or insult in all the journey . . . I return home with a higher estimate of the progress of American liberty and civilization than I started out with. You will be glad to know that my marriage has not diminished the number of invitations I used to receive for lectures and speeches—that the momentary freeze of popular disfavor caused by my marriage has passed away. I have had very little sympathy with the curiosity of the world about my domestic relations.[18]

In his final comments on his marriage, he wrote:

> What business has the world with the color of my wife? It wants to know how old she is. How do her parents and friends like her marriage? How I courted her? Whether with love or with money? Whether we are happy or miserable now that we have been married seven months? You would laugh to see the letters I have received and the newspaper talk on these matters—I do not do much to satisfy the public on these points—but there is one upon which I wish you as an old and dear friend to be entirely satisfied and that is: Helen and I are making life go very happily and that neither of us has yet repented of our marriage. I give you, thanks my dear friend, for your congratulations and good wishes.[19]

Two years later, in September 1886, the Douglasses travelled in the manner of the fashionable upper class to Egypt and to some of Europe's major cities including London, Paris, Naples, and Rome, and in Africa to the Suez Canal and Cairo. In keeping with the contentedness of the marriage spoken of previously, his diary of the journey served only to reinforce those sentiments. For example, he noted that they decided to extend their stay in Egypt and in Greece, and the prospects of seeing historical and biblical sites made this most serious of men a little giddy with anticipation.

> We decided today to extend our visit to Egypt and Greece—and if all is well we shall go on board the largest steamer afloat and shall steam away over the blue waters of the Mediterranean to the Land of the Pharaohs. The thought of this trip to Egypt and Greece will probably keep me awake [*sic*] to night. This tour is entirely outside of my calculation when leaving home, but it will be something to contemplate when it is done. It is no small thing to see the land of Joseph and his brethren and from which Moses led the children of Abraham out of the house of Bondage.[20]

On February 14, 1887, Douglass made a note in his diary about how he felt on his 70th birthday, saying that he had a little sea sickness perhaps but, in general, "I am quite well, strong and cheerful . . . and

certainly better when compared to the way the rough seas have affected Helen and the other women on the ship," he noted.[21] When they sailed and landed in Egypt's Port Said two days later, the appearance of the workers reawakened Douglass's sociological interest in ethnology and racial categorizing. He watched carefully to see who was working, who was in charge, and also took an interest in the way they looked. Their work at unloading cargo reminded him of New Bedford, more than 50 years earlier, when he was doing the same kind of work—and with as much enjoyment. As he watched the workers, he remarked at how the "sable children of the desert" worked equally with their counterparts, presumably nonblacks. The scene reinforced for Douglass an ancient commonality shared by all humans: it is possible to work together.

> Everything we see reminds us of the days of Moses. I do not know of what color and features the ancient Egyptians were, but the great mass of the people I have seen would in America be classed with mulattoes and negroes. I can easily see why the Mohomidan religion commends itself to these people, for it does not make color the criterion of fellowship as some of our so called Christian nations do. All colors are welcome to the faith of the Prophet.[22]

His visit to this part of the world resolved for Douglass one of those lingering questions of identity that had haunted him from the time he learned to read, or at least the challenge of literacy when Hugh Auld first discovered and stopped his wife Sophia from teaching him how to read. He saw in the Egyptian people the very same mixtures that he was made of and the experience not only taught him an ethnological lesson about cultural contact but a personal lesson as well. He was part of what the poet would call the "ancient flow of human blood in human veins."[23] The Douglasses moved on to Greece, where he noted the spectacular view of the Plains of Attica as something never to be forgotten. As one oriented to people, however, Douglass returned to their hotel in Greece, where he was met by "a lady of very fine appearance" who introduced herself as Mrs. John Beddulph Martin of Hyde Park. The woman was formerly Mrs. Victoria Woodhull, the presidential candidate he never met and whose ticket he never joined. The meeting was brief and, in Douglass's view, cordial.[24]

Returning to England, Helen received another notice about her mother's health, the first one having been sent to her during their stay in Greece. This time the notice said that her mother was gravely ill and, with Frederick remaining behind to finish a schedule of lectures, she left for home to be by her mother's side when she died. By August 1877, the couple were together again at Cedar Hill.

Ending the sixth decade of life, a time when most are enjoying a more relaxed life surrounded by children and grandchildren, Douglass remained active in national politics and in the Republican election of Benjamin Harrison as president. Always aggressive about equality, Douglass reminded the newly elected president of just that principle. In a speech before the Bethel Literary and Historical Society in Washington, he said that he expected Harrison to honor the party's platform commitment to racial equality. No record exists to determine whether the president received the message directly, but he knew enough about the importance and the capabilities of Douglass to consider him for an administrative appointment.

On July 1, 1889, President Harrison appointed Frederick Douglass to the office of Minister-Resident and Consul-General to the Republic of Haiti, adding later in the year the title and assignment of chargé d'affaires to Santo Domingo. It was a position that Douglass gladly accepted, though others thought it not high enough. Certainly the first stages in securing travel arrangements brought little personal satisfaction and some all-too-familiar experiences based on racial bias. Despite his new diplomatic standing, the Douglasses were not permitted to eat at the captain's table on the steamer taking them to Port-au-Prince. Captain Kellog of the *Ossippee* refused to dine with a Negro, as blacks were called then. Douglass, of course, protested to the government but no record exists to show a response.[25]

Haiti, the second oldest democracy in the North American hemisphere after the United States, was the historical setting for one of the most important insurrections in the Western Hemisphere and for one of the great revolutionary figures in Toussaint L'Ouverture. He led Haitians to overthrow the French and their imperialistic grip on the island in 1797. Douglass knew about slave rebellions and insurrections from the stories of Madison Washington, Nat Turner, and John Brown. As a student of history and of self-made men, the newest minister to

Haiti, now in the winter of his years, felt an extraordinary pull in this assignment to a culture and people whose struggle he understood. The Haitians seemed to have felt similarly. They welcomed him effusively, noting his own rise from slavery to a very high level of diplomatic authority. Similarly, he acknowledged unceasingly their history and the dignity of the Haitians in their triumph over oppression. However, the revolution had not lifted their living conditions. When Douglass arrived he first became depressed at the poverty and the apparent backwardness of the people.[26] Furthermore, his arrival placed him between political forces in Haiti and the imperial designs on the island by his own government.

Under the administration of Haiti's president Florvil Hyppolite, the government sought American aid in order to improve its infrastructure, activities which Douglass repeatedly noted in his own record. Nevertheless, in return for this aid, the Harrison administration wanted a lease for Môle St. Nicholas, a harbor located on the northwestern tip of Haiti. With such a lease the U.S. Navy would have control of that part of the sector of the Caribbean.

As the American representative, Douglass was expected to negotiate a deal with the Haitians. As the historian Philip Foner noted, it was not the American presence in the region that the minister objected to. Sensitive to Haitian pride and loyalty to his country, Douglass knew that it was far better to have an American navy patrolling the Caribbean than a European power. The harbor was an attractive source for American business interests. What the minister objected to and which finally led to his resignation was the attitude of the American press. This was a criticism that he made as early as 1861 when he wrote in his *Monthly* that

> Both the press and the platform of the United States have long made Haiti the bugbear and scare-crow of the cause of freedom. Ignorant of her real character in some instances; willfully blind to her obvious virtues in others, we have done her people the most marked injustice. The fact is, white Americans find it hard to tell the truth about colored people . . . Haiti has thus constantly been the victim of something like a downright conspiracy to rob her of

> the natural sympathy of the civilized world, and to shut her out of the fraternity of nations. . . . It is quite time that this interesting people should be better understood.[27]

Now, nearly 30 years later, the press placed the blame for the breakdown of negotiations over the harbor on Douglass, calling him unfit and unpatriotic, with particular criticism coming from southern newspapers which asserted that his failures stemmed from a lack of judgment. They played the race card by declaring that he was identifying himself too closely with the blacks in Haiti and not the government he was sent to represent. The American minister resigned on July 30, 1891, and eagerly returned to America to tell his side of the story. In doing so and looking now with the benefit of history, Douglass was vindicated with the knowledge that his actions had not undermined the mission he was sent to complete. In resigning from his post, he nevertheless retained the respect and affection of the Haitian people.[28] It would not be his last association with them either.

The World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago from 1892 to 1893, demonstrated the continuing affection shared by Haiti and their former American minister. Created by an act of Congress, the exposition's purpose was to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus's finding of the New World—new at least to Europe's explorers but hardly "new" in any original sense since the lands were already inhabited by indigenous peoples. The Haitian government, out of their appreciation for him, made a direct request for Douglass to comanage their pavilion, which he agreed to do. Everyone involved or who planned to be involved did so with the understanding that the fair would have a global theme, although slanted toward the West, and would be characterized by inclusiveness. Simply put, nobody from the Western world would be left out who had something to offer. It also had an underlying economic theme in that the exposition would create an interest in new commodities and new markets to present their goods. The business end was complemented by a family sector where people of all ages and cultures would enjoy a comprehensive exposure to the best of the West. In the end, the Chicago World's Fair, as it was popularly known, made millions of dollars for Chicago and for the fair's investors.[29]

But as Douglass toured the exhibition with Ida B. Wells, the fiery black journalist who had uncovered widespread cases of lynching taking place in the country, the two protested about the absence of black American representation in the exhibition and the very limited representation of an African presence as well. White women had a tent, some Native American presence was on display, but three decades after the Emancipation Proclamation, there was no plan for an African American exhibit, nor had any African Americans been a part of the overall planning. Douglass, Wells, and Ferdinand Barnett (Wells's husband to be), and others forcefully argued their positions in a pamphlet entitled *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*.

The pamphlet, authored mostly by Wells, was modeled on the lynching pamphlets that had become her stock and trade. They had brought her fame and influence. Because of them, she had been personally responsible in bringing national attention to lynching. Wells wrote the preface, entitled "To the Seeker of Truth," and had it translated into French and German hoping to draw an international audience. Douglass wrote the introduction, with an early paragraph that described America in all of its accomplishments except for the presence of slavery. His point was that the nation's history like the exhibition is incomplete and misleading if blacks and slavery are omitted. The rest of the pamphlet includes articles on the convict-lease system, a criticism of the law, and a piece on American progress since the Civil War that included republications of some articles and statistics on race in America.

Douglass and Wells's persistence and protest over the absence of black American representation became an opportunity for President Hyppolite to expand the Haitian compound. It now included, and with pride bordering on hubris, an African American representation in the pavilion of the independent black country of Haiti.[30]

Douglass and Wells, figures representing two generations of the black leadership struggle of the past and, in Wells, of the future, would find themselves with another common foe in their pursuit of social reform and justice. Perhaps the most vile and insidious form of violence and hatred enacted by whites against blacks was lynching. It was the one act that profoundly disturbed Douglass. Once again he went directly to

the White House with Mrs. Mary Church Terrell, an activist and future founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). They both explained to President Harrison the need for him to speak out forcefully against lynching. While no record exists to show that President Harrison did, there is proof that lynching awakened the passions of the old abolitionist. His last major speech and his last recorded lecture show the great orator again in his role as exhorter, moralist, social reformer. He was also an American critic reminding his country that it had a commitment to all of its fellow citizens, and that the commitment was to the universal application of justice in the United States. The great work of his life, which was to bring the nation in line with its covenant of liberty for all was, not finished.

In the last major speech, "The Lessons of the Hour," a denunciation of lynching, was presented at the Metropolitan AME Church, in Washington, D.C., the only place that could actually be called his home church because he worshipped there whenever he was in the nation's capital. On January 9, 1894, Douglass delivered "The Lesson," the title he gave it, though it is somewhat misleading. The speech does not evaluate the moment in any existential sense at all. It is a speech from a guardian voice of democracy addressing the ages. In it, he attacks the ruling class of the South for allowing mobs to lynch blacks and to create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation that increased attacks on white women, as the latest excuse for violent attacks to take place.

Always the moral historian, Douglass reminded his audience that violence against blacks had been used in slavery's days to keep the slaves from insurrection. During Reconstruction, lynching was being used at the presumed threat of black domination. He went on to expose the false logic of this portrayal and to reveal its basic aim which was to "degrade the Negro." In rousing oratory, Douglass dissected the social fever of lynching by tying it to the opposition of whites to the advancement of blacks. The so-called problem was not that of blacks but of whites and a system that wanted to deny blacks the right to vote, the right to an education, the right to be an American, the latter a response to those who had suggested again that colonization to Africa was the most appropriate response to the race question.

On October 3, 1894, Douglass accepted a speaking engagement at West Chester Normal School of Pennsylvania, now West Chester

University, from George Morris Philips, the school's principal and its first modern-day educator. Douglass had been to West Chester many times and knew Philips. As a lover and collector of books, Philips extended an invitation to the great abolitionist to come and speak to his public speaking class. Douglass, expressing reluctance to travel due to age, yielded to Philip's persistence and accepted the speaking invitation for February 1, 1895.

During a lifetime of public speaking, Douglass always addressed the signs of the times, usually topics of the times or controversial subjects. The most controversial subject throughout his life was slavery, the lifetime bondage of captured Africans and their descendants who were treated and traded as property, along with its consequences on the republic. The slave trade twisted and tainted the nation's lofty goals, turned human beings into commodities to be bought and sold, and turned normal life into trauma for most blacks and many whites.

Douglass's subject on the night of his last lecture in West Chester permitted him to demonstrate again the consequences of slavery's legacy by drawing on contemporary accounts. The laws abolishing slavery now had been in force for nearly 30 years. He spoke about the new wave of terrorism in the form of lynching, murders, and the new wave of "lawlessness," to use his term, against black people in particular. While targeted against blacks, Douglass made it clear that the headlines in his day had an impact on all communities, North and South. With a lifetime of speeches in his arsenal, he began analyzing the current situation by drawing attention to the inaccuracies being reported in the press, as he had done earlier in his speech in Washington at the Metropolitan AME church. He spoke directly to the evidence which identified those who attended the lynchings, and then critiqued the judicial process that exonerated the accused but left crimes unsolved and significantly without criminals to prosecute.

Although nearing the end of his life and near the close of a distinguished public career, the content and passion of his lecture were quintessentially Douglassasian. Entering his 77th year, Douglass showed no signs of having lost his analytical power, as he offered a candid examination of the question of justice nearly three decades after the Emancipation Proclamation. What was the impact of the Civil War amendments, the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth, which abolished slavery and created citizenship, and gave the vote to black men of the United

States? Where is the nation if it still finds itself engaged in a continuing struggle for justice and normal treatment of its black population?

For a community that knew him and his work since his first visit in 1838 after his escape from slavery, the visit and the lecture were celebrations in many ways, and he was treated as a visiting dignitary by his hosts, the Darlington sisters, members of a well-known local family. While travelling and lecturing took their toll at his age, he nevertheless left West Chester with fond memories of having become reacquainted with old friends and having had the opportunity to address a new generation about the quest for justice and democratic freedom.

After returning to Cedar Hill, Douglass accepted an invitation to speak before a women's rights rally on February 20, 1895, where he was warmly greeted by the leaders, including Susan B. Anthony. He returned home that afternoon to have supper and then to have Helen join him for a later meeting they were to attend in a church in Anacostia. Rising after dinner and mimicking one of the grand speakers earlier in the day, Douglass fell to the floor, like a massive oak tree, and died of a heart attack that evening of February 20.

The death of the Sage of Anacostia drew condolences from near and far, from the most intimate of his friends to those who knew him only as a public figure. Four days after his death, the schools of Washington, D.C., were closed so that the children might walk past his open casket as it lay in his home church of Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church. Justice John Marshall, United States senators John Sherman and George Hoar, along with the entire faculty of Howard University, were among those who came to honor the great abolitionist, journalist, public servant, and American hero.

And hero he was. His family—Helen, Rosetta, Lewis, and Charles; Frederick had died in 1892—took the body back to Rochester, where he lay in state in City Hall for another service, later to be buried next to Anna and his daughter Annie in the baroque funeral ground setting of Mount Hope.

NOTES

1. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 266.
2. Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, pp. 245–46.
3. Foner, *Women's Rights*, p. 17.

4. Foner, *Biography*, p. 266.
5. Foner, *Frederick Douglass*, pp. 301–302; Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 263.
6. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 275.
7. Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 271.
8. Foner, *Biography*, p. 335.
9. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, pp. 292–95.
10. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 282.
11. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 313.
12. Rosetta Douglass Sprague, "My Mother As I Recall Her," delivered May 10, 1900, before the Anna Murray Douglass Union, Washington, D.C.
13. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 312.
14. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 312.
15. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 313.
16. Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, pp. 298–99.
17. Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 298.
18. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 322.
19. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 322.
20. Unpublished diary of Frederick Douglass, p. 33; cf. with McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, pp. 329–30.
21. Diary, pp. 35, 350; in McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 350.
22. Diary, p. 40; McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 331.
23. Langston Hughes poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers."
24. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 332.
25. Foner, *Biography*, p. 353.
26. Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, p. 256.
27. Foner, *Speeches*, p. 441.
28. Foner, *Biography*, pp. 352–61.
29. Barbara Ballard, "African-American Protest and the Role of the Haitian Pavilion at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair," in *Multiculturalism: Roots and Realities*, C. James Trotman (ed.), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 109.
30. Ballard, "African-American Protest," pp. 110–11.

Chapter 7

CLIMBING JACOB'S LADDER

> We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
> We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
> We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
> Soldiers of the cross.
>
> ****
>
> Every round goes higher, higher,
> Every round goes higher, higher,
> Every round goes higher, higher.

The legacy of Frederick Douglass is deeply rooted in the social reforms that most of us enjoy today and take for granted. If we are more diligent about providing justice for all, more attentive to our freedoms, more sensitive to those who live on the edges of our communities, and more willing to engage one another in the debate over opportunities, Douglass has much to do with those improvements. The Sage of Anacostia does not stand alone in the annals of accomplished reformers, but he does merit his own place in the front lines of Americans who have moved this country closer to fulfilling its mission. His own words reflect

a personal understanding that he had lived an exemplary life of service to others and that he was, in his words, indebted. . .

> To the cause of my people, and if I had forty years more they should all be sacredly given to the same great cause. If I have done something for that cause, I am, after all, more a debtor to it than it is debtor to me.[1]

In *Life and Times* he wrote in a chapter entitled "Honor to Whom Honor" about his understanding of the rights of women, certainly a major force in his life as models of courage, kindness, duty, and most outstandingly their empathy for the slave.

> Observing woman's agency, devotion, and efficiency in pleading the cause of the slave, gratitude for this high service early moved me to give favorable attention to the subject of what is called "woman's rights" and caused me to be denominated a woman's rights man. I am glad to say that I have never been ashamed to be thus designated. . . . In a word, I have never yet been able to find one consideration, one argument, or suggestion in favor of man's right to participate in civil government which did not equally apply to the right of woman.[2]

When others spoke or wrote about Douglass's life, they too spoke and wrote with a sense that this was a special life to be claimed by future generations.

There is, for example, the poignancy in the recollections of the Reverend J. T. Jenifer, who was the pastor of the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, "AME Church" as it is known in religious circles, where Douglass worshipped most of the time. He spoke about the final conversation he had with Douglass before he died. Reverend Jenifer stated that Douglass's ultimate interest was in the liberty of the soul. The pastor said that the reformer's interests were not just in a license, and by implication a worldly certificate, but in a spiritual liberty broader than what he saw in the American church. To Jenifer, "Frederick Douglass was a converted man."[3] This is a powerful description in religious thought, with "conversion"

as a word pointing to one being touched, anointed, and handpicked by God.

Jenifer in fact recalled hearing Douglass say as much about his own self-awareness the year before his death, at a conference before AME Church members gathered in Fells Point, Baltimore, the place of so many important childhood memories, saying: "Then and there I caught a stream of light and I have followed that light ever since." It was a scene reminiscent of the well-known biblical story of Paul of Tarsus when he experienced the divine revelation on the road to Damascus which instructed him that his purpose in life was to serve God. The pastor also referred to an earlier episode when Douglass spoke to a friend in very spiritual terms. Outraged and frustrated by the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, Douglass was visited in Rochester by the noted preacher and abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher who, after listening to the *North Star* editor's contempt for the slave catchers' expanded reach, preached to Douglass about the biblical prophecy of the multitude being saved in the last days, using Revelation XIX:VI for his text. At the end of the sermon, Douglass declared that he was now changed. "I arose a changed and delivered man. Now, I am in the trade winds of the Almighty!"[4] Mr. Jenifer's recollections, if accepted on their own terms, are a point at which it becomes necessary to ask about the relevance of Douglass today.

It should not surprise anyone that much of Douglass's legacy is maintained by countless activists and world figures who have embraced his life and, in doing so, have gained more of an insight into their own social pursuits of equality and justice. For example, when the distinguished educator and politician Booker T. Washington sought a model to underscore the importance of education for the first generation of freed slaves, he found an inspired life example in Douglass and a direction for his work as an educator-politician. He wrote a biography of Douglass to illustrate a model life of one who had escaped slavery; not only that but he could show how important education was to the founding editor of the *North Star* toward establishing social respect and political responsibility.[5] When the eminent sociologist and theorist W.E.B. DuBois published *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), he described a new way to think about the character of black people and their survival skills in America against the yoke of slavery and the effects of racism.

He discussed Douglass as an example of heroism in the struggle for black freedom and social dignity.[6] In 1976, Robert Hayden became the first African American poet named to the post of Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. In his poem "Frederick Douglass," he presents Douglass's life as a exemplar of freedom. And when South Africa's first black president, Nelson Mandela, accepted the Liberty Medal on July 4, 1993, Mandela invoked Douglass by quoting from Douglass's famous July 5 speech. Moreover, when Barack Obama, the first African American President of the United States, taught legal theory, he used Douglass in the courses he taught at the University of Chicago Law School.[7] Finally, there is at least one other example that helps us to see more of the direct relevance of Douglass's life and times to our own.

When the New Jersey–born and renowned painter Jacob Lawrence started his career, he walked into New York City's Schomburg Library in 1938 at 21 years of age to explore its specialized holdings in black

Frederick Douglass depicted as U.S. marshal of the District of Columbia in his series The Life of Frederick Douglass. *© 2010 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image provided by Hampton University's Archival and Museum Collection/ Hampton University/ Hampton, VA.*

culture. According to his own record, Lawrence knew little if anything about Douglass. While we do not know the circumstances around which he discovered Douglass's life, we do know that once he was introduced to the life of the great abolitionist, he found himself irresistibly pulled toward him. In the battles Douglass waged against the effort to destroy his personhood through chattel slavery, racial antipathy, injustice, and inequality, the risk and courage to take on the establishment of his time was more than enough information to excite the imagination of so talented an artist as Lawrence. How extraordinary this solitary black man in the 19th century must have appeared to the young artist, and he must have been impressed that Douglass could affect so much change so powerfully by using his voice and his pen.

Jacob Lawrence began his journey toward self-discovery and artistic prominence with his encounter with Douglass's life and times. Lawrence devoted his first historical series of paintings to the 1845 *Narrative* and became famous for them. It is represented in 32 paintings, just about equal in size of about 12 x 17 inches. Each one, like the chapters of the *Narrative* itself, can stand alone. They offer its viewer a snapshot of the dramatic tension Lawrence created using yellows, blues, and reds of the paintings, accented by fluid cubic-like figures. The images are as compelling on canvas as were the words on paper that Lawrence read.

The influence of Douglass down through various educational, scholarly, and artistic channels constitutes its own growth industry. There are statues of Douglass in Rochester, New York, probably best known because it sits just outside of the park next to Mt. Hope where he is buried; at Lincoln University (Pennsylvania) where another statue honors him. There are busts at the University of Rochester and Cedar Hill, Douglass's home in Anacostia, which is now a historical site supervised by the National Park Service, and in the Firestone Library of Princeton University. There are portraits of him in the Smithsonian and a likeness of him on a mural in Belfast, Ireland, as stated earlier, noting his visit to Ireland and the role of two Irish dock workers that encouraged him to escape from slavery.

The scholarly community will continue its contribution to Douglass studies by frequently connecting him with other American icons. President Lincoln and Maryland's native son are already tied together in the crucible of civil war. Just their record alone offers content for reassessing

the nature of what we mean when we determine that something fits the richest designs of a "critical democratic multiculturalism" when political policy makers and national personalities meet at the highest levels.[8] Scholarship in the humanities will add to the further riches by continuing to make its case by rereading Douglass. Consider the connections with Herman Melville, another literary icon, who travelled throughout New York and was in many of the same places that Douglass frequented in the 1850s in the states of New York and Massachusetts. In 1855, they added important works to their respective body of writings with Douglass's publication of *My Bondage and My Freedom* and Melville's "Benito Cereno," Melville's stunningly remonstrative short story about the slave's humanity. These two literary and cultural titans read one another, drew characters and styles from one another, and in all probability crossed each others' paths, but there is no concrete evidence to date to confirm an actual meeting between the two.[9] But the connections between them are real and suggestive.

Philosophers and students of intellectual history have found delight in Douglass's critical approaches to the ideas of his time. While acknowledging the fact that he was not a systematic thinker in the sense that we use the terminology to describe in general academically trained inquiries, the editor of the *North Star* found in the events of his life approaches to important questions about the quality of life and how to assess it.[10] Wherever one starts with this reformer, the end result is a rigorous display of intellectual processes leading to truth. Sometimes it may be an ultimate principle (all men and women are *indeed* created equal); or it may be a truth reached through a very subjective process ("You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.").[11]

The fact of the matter is that the Sage of Anacostia never ceases to transfer his drive for knowledge and understanding to those who come in contact with him. Anyone who has taught Douglass, as I have over the past 20 years, knows that the bond he formed with his first readers extends to today's. It is a bond forged by the value he placed on the interconnectedness of his life with others, at a time when those expectations did not exist. Who then was going to believe in a black man's struggle to be human and to cry out for the integrity of his life? At some point in the future of scholarly examinations of Douglass works,

his writings and speeches will shed more light on global thoughts and actions and on the methodologies used by others to break from the bondage of conventional thought and their own private places of subjugation.

Besides Jacob Lawrence in the visual arts, there are performing artists, such as the respected actor Fred Morsel, who devote their lives to interpreting Douglass before audiences throughout the nation. Furthermore, nearly 30 public schools are named for him in the United States, in addition to numerous community centers and other neighborhood sites. And, since 1999, the 14 campuses in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education have developed a partnership devoted to using the life and times of the best known African American reformer of the 19th century through an academic program aiming to stimulate further study of the unfinished developments in our national journey in the search for justice, humanity, and freedom.

The influence of Frederick Douglass will remain timeless, in my opinion. Whether his influence will be defined by his struggles or by his relationship to the greatness of women who raised him, such as Grandmother Betsy, or who mentored him, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, or who inspired him, such as William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, and Abraham Lincoln, the value of the life of Frederick Douglass will resonate with each generation that searches for meaning through its own struggles with identity and fate.

The spirit of Douglass is not a dead end but, like Jacob's ladder of the spiritual, it offers hope to others who wish to step and reach for their fate and destiny. It is a legacy captured by the poet Robert Hayden when he wrote of the lasting significance of Douglass. His life was not to be celebrated on its own terms but with "the lives grown out of his life, the lives fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing."[12]

NOTES

1. *Autobiographies*, p. 914.
2. *Autobiographies*, pp. 906, 908.
3. *In Memoriam: Frederick Douglass*, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971, p. 27.
4. *In Memoriam*, p. 27.

5. Booker T. Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, New York, 1907, Reprint, 1968.

6. W.E.B. DuBois, *Writings: The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade. The Souls of Black Folk. Dusk of Dawn. Essays and Articles*, New York: The Library of America, p. 397.

7. Jodi Kantor, "The Long Run: Teaching Law, Testing Ideas, Obama Stood Slightly Apart," *New York Times*, July 30, 2008.

8. Cynthia Willett (ed.), *Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to the Current Debate*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, p. 440.

9. Robert K. Wallace, *Douglass and Melville: Anchored Together in Neighborly Style*, New Bedford, MA: Spinner Publications.

10. Bill E. Lawson, "Frederick Douglass and African American Social Progress: Does Race Matter at the Bottom of the Well?" in Bill Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland (eds.), *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader,* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, p. 366.

11. *Autobiographies*, p. 54.

12. Robert Hayden, "Frederick Douglass," in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, p. 1508.

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INDEX

African colonization, 38–40, 62, 64
American Abolition Society, 83–85
American and Foreign Antislavery Society, 81–82
American Antislavery Society, 81
American Colonization Society, 62
Anthony, Aaron, 5, 8, 11, 12
Anthony, Susan B., 59, 117, 137
"Anti-Slavery Movement, The" (Douglass), 80–82
Antislavery Society of Canada, 95–96
"Appeal to Canada" (Douglass), 95–96
Assing, Ottilie Davida, 68–69, 94
Auld, Hugh, 11, 15–16, 19, 27, 54
Auld, Sophia, 11, 13–14, 15, 16, 27
Auld, Thomas (slave master), 12, 19, 20, 26–27, 54, 120–21
Auld, Tommy (slave master's son), 12, 27

Bailey, Betsy (grandmother), 2, 6, 7–8, 14, 121
Bailey, Harriet (mother), 3, 6, 8, 14
Bailey, Isaac (grandfather), 6
Baltimore, 11, 12–19, 27–29
Beecher, Henry Ward, 141
"Benito Cereno" (Melville), 144
Bethel Literary and Historical Society, 131
Bill (slave), 21–22
"Black codes," 110

Black right to vote, 110–11, 115–18
Black soldiers, in Civil War, 100–101, 103, 104–7, 108
Blight, David, 80, 100, 109–10
Bristol Antislavery Meeting, 40–43
British Isles, trip to, 50–56
Brown, John, 69, 70, 71–73, 74, 90–94

"Call to Arms" (Douglass), 106–7
Canada, 94–96
Caroline (slave), 21–22
Cary, Mary Ann Shadd, 96–97
Cedar Hill, 121–23, 131
Chicago's World Fair, 133–34
Children: of master-fathers, 4, 7–8; separation from parents in slave system, 3–4; in slave system, 6–7
Church organizations, in anti-slavery movement, 80–81
Civil War, 100–101, 104–7, 109, 111–12
"Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered, The" (Douglass), 79–80
Clay, Henry, 39, 59
Columbian Orator, The, 18, 41, 42
Constitution, 40, 65, 70–71, 76, 84–85
Cook, John E., 95
Corinthian Hall, 76–79
Covey, Edward, 19–22, 54
Creole (slave ship), 67
Delany, Martin, 61–64, 65, 71, 72
Douglass, Anna Murray (wife): children, 43, 46, 59–60, 98; death, 123, 125–26, 137; Frederick's escape, helps with, 29; Frederick's job offer with Garrison, 44–45; marriage to Frederick, 29, 34–35, 123–25; meets Frederick, 27–28; pregnancy, first, 37; Underground Railroad, 60; work in New Bedford, 38
Douglass, Annie (daughter), 98, 137
Douglass, Charles Remond (son), 60, 105, 106, 137
Douglass, Frederick: abolitionists, begins meeting with, 38–43; abolitionists, learns about, 17; Anna's death, reaction to, 123, 125–26; artistic representations of, 143, 145; as bank president, 119; birth, 2, 121; British Isles, lecture trip to, 50–56; childhood and adolescence, 11–30; children, 43, 46, 59–60, 98; curiosity, 12–13; death, 137; early years, 1–10; England, proposal to settle in, 52–53, 55–56; escape attempts, 26–27, 29–30; escape plans, 22, 24–26, 28–29; father, 3; fire destroys Rochester home, 119; Free Church of Scotland proposal, 52; freedom, first experience of, 30, 33–37; freedom, purchase of by Richardsons, 54; Garrison,

discord with, 80, 81; Garrison, initial meeting with, 40–43; Garrison's job offer, 43–46; Ireland, lecture trip to, 51; journalism, 59, 60–67; legacy, 139–45; Lincoln, comparison to, 101–3; Lincoln, meetings with, 101, 103–4, 108–9; marriage to Anna, 29, 34–35, 123–25; marriage to Helen, 68, 126–29; meet cousins and siblings for first time, 7–8; meets Anna, 27–28; as minister to Haiti, 131–33; name, 1–2, 36; Nantucket convention, 42, 44–46; oratory, 40, 41–42, 43, 46–47, 50–56; reading, 14, 15–16, 18–19; religious and spiritual life, 16–17, 38, 75–76, 82, 140–41; scholarly studies of, 143–45; Scotland, lecture trip to, 52; as shipyard worker, 27; as slave, 8–10, 11–28; trip to Egypt and Greece, 129–30; as U.S. marshal for District of Columbia, 119–20; as vice presidential nominee, 118–19; violin playing, 60; women, early and positive experiences with, 14–15; words, interest in, 17, 19; work, first paid, 37–38
Douglass, Frederick, Jr. (son), 46, 60, 137
Douglass, Helen Pitts (wife), 68, 126–30, 131, 137
Douglass, Lewis Henry (son), 43, 59–60, 105, 106, 137
Douglass, Rosetta (daughter), 43, 59, 124–25, 127, 137
Douglass' Monthly, 64, 93–94, 98–99, 104–5, 119
Dred Scott case, 83–85
"Dred Scott Decision, The" (Douglass), 83–85
DuBois, W.E.B., 141–42

Eastern Baltimore Improvement Society, 28
Egypt, 129–30
Emancipation Proclamation, 101, 107–8, 111
England, 52–53, 55–56, 94, 98, 131
Equal Rights Association, 117
Equal Rights Party, 118–19
Ethnology, 79–80, 130

Fifteenth Amendment, 111, 115–18
54th Massachusetts Regiment, 105, 106, 107
"Frederick Douglass" (Hayden), 142
Frederick Douglass' Paper, 64, 119
Free Church of Scotland proposal, 52
Freedmen's Bank, 119
Freeland, William, 24, 25–26
Free Soil Party, 82, 83
Fugitive Slave Act (1850), 75, 96, 97, 98, 141

Garrison, William Lloyd: British Isles, lecture trip to, 52, 53;

Brown, John, compared to, 74; Constitution as slave document, 40, 65, 76, 84; discord with Douglass, 80, 81; Free Church of Scotland proposal, 52; *Liberator,* 38, 40, 65; meets Douglass, 40–43; Nantucket convention, 42, 44, 46; offers Douglass job as speaker for abolitionist movement, 43–46; Richardsons' purchase of Douglass' freedom, 54
Gettysburg Address, 104
Grant, Ulysses S., 117, 118
Greece, 129, 130
Greene, Frank, 126
Greene, Martha, 126
Griffiths, Julia, 66–67, 68
Grimke, Francis, 127

Haiti, 38–39, 64, 131–33, 134
Harper's Ferry raid, 70, 71, 72, 73, 91–93
Harrison, Benjamin, 131, 132, 135
Hayden, Robert, 142, 145
"Heroic Slave, The" (Douglass), 67–68
Hester (aunt), 5
Hyppolite, Florvil, 132, 133

Ireland, 51

Jenifer, J. T., 140–41
Jenkins, Sandy, 20–21, 26
Johnson, Andrew, 110–11
Johnson, Mary Page, 35–36
Johnson, Nathan, 35–36, 37

Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854), 75, 82–83
Kierkegaard, Søren, 33

"Lady of the Lake" (Scott), 36
Lawrence, Jacob, 142–43
Lawson, Charles, 17–18
"Lessons of the Hour, The" (Douglass), 64, 135
"Letter to My Old Master" (Douglass), 121
Liberator, 38, 40, 65
Liberia, 62, 64
Liberty Party, 82, 83
Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (Douglass), 16–17, 123, 140
Lincoln, Abraham: assassination of, 109–10; black soldiers in Civil War, 103, 104, 105, 108; as candidate for president, 98–99; Douglass, comparison to, 101–3; Douglass, meetings with, 101, 103–4, 108–9; Emancipation Proclamation, 101, 107–8, 111; Gettysburg Address, 104; inaugural addresses, 100, 109
Lloyd, Edward, 7, 8
L'Ouverture, Toussaint, 131
Lynching, 134–35

Mandela, Nelson, 142
Massachusetts Regiment (54th), 105, 106, 107
McFeely, William, 21–22
Melville, Herman, 144

"Men of Color, To Arms" (Douglass), 105
Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church (Washington, D.C.), 135, 136, 137, 140, 141
Missouri Compromise, 75
Mitchell, Eliza (sister), 8, 120
Mole St. Nicholas, Haiti, 132–33
Music, in slave system, 5–6
My Bondage and My Freedom (Douglass), 16–17, 34, 37, 85–86, 144

Names, importance of, 1–2
Nantucket convention, 42, 44–46
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave (Douglass), 47–50; Auld, Hugh, relationship with, 15–16; Auld, Sophia, relationship with, 14; Covey, fight with, 54; early years, 3; escape from slavery, 22; Lawrence's paintings about, 143; mother's death, 8; themes, 48–49; writing and publication of, 47
National Convention of Colored Men, 126
National Women's Suffrage Association, 118
Ned (slave), 5
New Bedford, Massachusetts, 35–46
New National Era, 64, 118
New York, 33, 34–35
North Star, 59, 60–67, 69–70, 76, 119
"Notes on Canada West" (Cary), 97

Obama, Barack, 142

Parents, separation from children in slave system, 3–4
Parker, Theodore, 72–73
Pennington, James W. C., 29, 35
Philips, George Morris, 135–36
Phinney, Captain, 46
(Pittsburgh) Mystery, 61, 63
Provincial Freeman, 97

Quarles, Benjamin, 94

Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition, The, 134
Reconstruction Plan, 110–11
Repatriation, 97–98
Republican Party, 83, 108, 110–11
Richardson, Anna, 54
Richardson, Ellen, 54
Rochester, New York, 59–87, 119
Rochester Democrat, 95
Rochester Ladies' Antislavery Society, 76–79, 80–82
"Roll, Jordan, Roll" (spiritual), 115–16
Ruggles, David, 35

Sanborn, Franklin, 72–73
Scotland, 52
Scott, Walter, 36

Scottish Free Church Movement, 52
Secret Six, 72–73
Seneca Falls Convention, 69
Slave masters, as father of slave children, 4, 7–8
Slave system: children in, 6–7; life of slaves away from masters, 9; music, 5–6; parents separated from children, 3–4; violence against slaves, 4–5, 8–9
Smith, Gerrit, 48, 66, 72–73
Souls of Black Folk, The (DuBois), 141–42
St. Michaels, Maryland, 19–22, 24–27, 120–21
Stanton, Edward, 101
Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, 117, 118
Sterns, George, 72–73
Still, William, 36, 94

Taney, Roger B., 83, 84, 85
Telegraph (steamboat), 46
Terrell, Mary Church, 134–35
Thompson, George, 52, 53, 54
Tubman, Harriet, 72, 73–74, 95
Tuckahoe, Maryland, 2–3, 6

Underground Railroad, 22–24, 35–36, 60, 94
U.S. Supreme Court, 83–85

Violence against slaves, 4–5, 8–9
Voting rights: blacks, 110–11, 115–18; women, 59, 69–70, 115–18

Washington, Booker T., 127, 141
Washington, D.C., 119–26, 131, 134–37
Washington, Madison, 67
Wells, Ida B., 134
West Chester Normal School, 135–37
Western Reserve College, 79–80
"What, to the American Slave, is Your Fourth of July?" (Douglass), 76–79
Women's rights, 59, 69–70, 115–18, 137, 140
Woodhull, Elizabeth, 117, 118, 130
World's Columbian Exposition, 133–34
Wye Plantation, 6–8, 120–21

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