The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

Inside the Vault:
David Blight discusses Frederick Douglass documents

February 3, 2022

The session will start shortly. Please note:

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During the Session

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- We will be answering audience questions throughout the session.

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Today’s Documents

- Frederick Douglass’s correspondence with Hugh and Benjamin Auld
- Douglass’s July 5, 1852 Speech “What, to the American Slave, is your fourth of July”
- Douglass’s letter to Mary Todd Lincoln
Dr. David Blight

- Dr. David Blight - The Sterling Professor of History, of African American Studies, and of American Studies and Director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University
Frederick Douglass to Hugh Auld, October 4, 1857

Hugh Auld Esq.
My dear sir,

My heart tells me that you are too noble to treat child indifference the subject I am about to make. It is twenty years since I ran away from you, or rather fled from you but from slavery, and since then I have often felt a strong desire to hold a little correspondence with you and to learn something of the position and prospects of your dear children. They were dear to me and are still--indeed I feel nothing but kindness for you all. I love you but hate slavery. Now my dear sir, will you favor me by dropping me a line telling me in what year I came to live with you in Virginia? The year the Frigate was built by Mr. Be الكريم -- the information is not for publication and shall not be published. We are all better where all distinctions are ended, Kindness to the humblest will not be unrewarded.

Perhaps you have heard that I have been Miss Howard's, that and Mrs. Sears that, and was treated kindly. Such is the fact; Gladly would I see you and Mrs. Auld and Miss Sophia as I used to call her. I would have lived with you during life in freedom though ran away from you so unceremoniously. I did not know how soon I might be sold. But start to talk about that. A line from you will find me Assistant Librarian at Rochester, N. Y. I am dear Sir very truly yours, Fred. Douglass

Frederick Douglass to Benjamin Auld, March 24, 1894

Cedar Hill,
Anacostia, D. C.
March 24, 1894

Capt. N. F. Auld,

My dear sir and friend,

My thanks you have taken to obtain for me the data when your father before he died building the Company with his Edward Hamlin in the City would have made me deeply obliged to you. Would I ever be in my power to tender you richer service of any other service. I hope you will feel decent to call before me. I value your letter highly. I think however that your reporter is mistaken, it seems have been an early a 27, when your father went into business on the River and I must have been eight years old when I came to Atkinson in 1833 to look after your brother Thomas. I know the date because Capt. Atkinson, my master died in
It is twenty years since I ran away from you, or rather not from you but from Slavery, and since then I have often felt a strong desire to hold a little correspondence with you and to learn something of the position and prospects of your dear children. They were dear to me – and are still – indeed I feel nothing but kindness for you all – I love you, but hate Slavery, Now my dear Sir, will you favor me by dropping me a line, telling me in what year I came to live with you in Aliceanna St. the year the Frigate was built by Mr. Beacham. The information is not for publication – and shall not be published. We are all hastening where all distinctions are ended, kindness to the humblest will not be unrewarded . . . .

I could have lived with you during life in freedom though I ran away from you so unceremoniously, I did not know how soon I might be sold. But I hate to talk about that.
It must have been as early as 1827 when your father went into business in the City B. and I must have been eight years old when I came to Baltimore in 1825 to look after your Brother Thomas. I know the date because Capt Anthony my master died in that year and I was then in Baltimore. I was big enough to bring a good sized bucket of water from the pump on Washington Street to our house on Allisana Street where your father lived. . . . The principle thing I desired in making the inquiries I have of you was to get some idea of my exact age. I have always been troubled by the thought of having no birth day. My Mistress Lucretia Auld, said that I was eight or nearly eight when I went to Baltimore in the Summer of 1825 – and this corresponds with what you have heard your kind mother say on the subject – so I now judge that I am now about 77 – years old.
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 denunciations 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. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.

So where you may, search where you will, roam
Allow me to thank you, as I certainly do thank you most sincerely for your thoughtful kindness in making me the owner of a cane which was formerly the property and the favorite walking staff of your late lamented husband, the honored and venerated President of the United States.

I assure you, that this inestimable memento of his Excellency will be retained in my possession while I live - an object of sacred interest - a token not merely of the kind consideration in which I have reason to know that the President was pleased to hold me personally, but as an indication of his humane interest in the welfare of my whole race.
Frederick Douglass Book Prize

JOIN US FOR A SPECIAL VIRTUAL EVENT

The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History
&
The Gilder Lehrman Center
for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition
MacMillan Center at Yale

23rd Annual

Frederick Douglass Book Prize

Thursday, February 17, 2022 · 7:00 - 8:00 p.m. ET
Join us on March 3, 2022, from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m. ET (4:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. PT) when our curators and Dr. Martha J. King discuss Mary Katharine Goddard, printer of the Declaration of Independence and postmaster of Baltimore from 1775 to 1789.