

# FREDERICK DOUGLASS

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## A LIFE IN DOCUMENTS



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*Frederick Douglass, by an unidentified photographer, ca. 1870  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC06198)*

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## A LIFE IN DOCUMENTS

*Historians Present Documents from  
the Gilder Lehrman Collection*

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*Front Cover: Frontispiece from My Bondage and My Freedom by Frederick Douglass, 1855 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC05820)*



*James O. Horton at the opening of Free at Last: A History of the Abolition of Slavery in America at Federal Hall in New York City in November 1997. Horton co-curated this Gilder Lehrman traveling exhibition, which was hosted by more than 130 schools, libraries, and museums in thirty-four states.*

This volume is dedicated to the memory of

James Oliver Horton  
(1943–2017)

—scholar, teacher, friend, and supporter of  
The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

Jim Horton, the Benjamin Banneker Professor Emeritus of American Studies and History at The George Washington University, was a member of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Scholarly Advisory Board from the Institute's founding in 1994; led Teacher Seminars from 1997 to 2003; wrote essays for *History Now*, the Institute's online journal; made other significant contributions to the Institute (including the essay reprinted in this volume); and supported all our work with teachers, students, and the general public. He was an indefatigable leader in keeping African American history at the center of the larger American story, deftly bridging academic and public spheres. He is deeply missed.



## CONTENTS

FOREWORD <i>by James G. Basker</i>	ix
MAJOR EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS	xi
1. “Do Something”: A Letter from Frederick Douglass to an Abolitionist in Ireland <i>Manisha Sinha</i>	1
2. Douglass and the US Constitution: The <i>Dred Scott</i> Decision <i>Randall Kennedy</i>	7
3. “I Love You but Hate Slavery”: Douglass Writes to a Former Master <i>Lois E. Horton</i>	10
4. Admiration and Ambivalence: Frederick Douglass and John Brown <i>David W. Blight</i>	15
5. “Your Late Lamented Husband”: Douglass to Mary Todd Lincoln <i>David W. Blight</i>	20
6. “A Vulgar and Senseless Prejudice”: A Protest against Segregation in the North <i>Steven Mintz</i>	27
7. Frederick Douglass and the “Merits of This Fearful Conflict” <i>David W. Blight</i>	33
8. “The Seed Time of a Great Harvest”: Douglass Recalls Fellow Abolitionists <i>Quandra Prettyman</i>	39
9. “One of the Noblest Wisest and Best Men”: Douglass on President Lincoln <i>James Oakes</i>	45
10. “The Post in the Centre of My House”: Douglass Mourns His Wife Anna <i>Leigh K. Fought</i>	51
11. Frederick Douglass and the “Progress of American Liberty” <i>James O. Horton</i>	56
12. “Hidden Practices”: Frederick Douglass on Black Achievement in the South <i>Edward L. Ayers</i>	60
13. Frederick Douglass on the Disfranchisement of Blacks in the South <i>Lucas Morel</i>	65
14. Frederick Douglass: An Example for the Twenty-First Century <i>Noelle N. Trent</i>	70
15. Reaching across the Racial Divide: Douglass to Benjamin Auld <i>David S. Reynolds</i>	74
CONTRIBUTORS	79



## FOREWORD

To commemorate the bicentennial of the birth of Frederick Douglass, a man many regard as one of the greatest Americans in our history, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History has gathered here short essays by leading scholars focused on selected documents written by Douglass. He has been of central importance to the Gilder Lehrman Collection since Richard Gilder and Lewis Lehrman established the archive in 1991. Over the years that followed, they built one of the finest collections of American historical documents ever assembled, and then decided to dedicate it to the service of K–12 education, and the edification of the larger literate public, by making it the centerpiece of the Gilder Lehrman Institute when it was founded in 1994. Among the treasures are more than fifty Douglass manuscripts and artifacts along with other African American materials ranging from the years of the American Revolution, the antebellum period, and the Civil War, to the Tuskegee Airmen in World War II and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Each of the documents in this volume is introduced by a historian who offers insight into its context and significance. The historians are a distinguished group. They include prize-winning authors, among them such past winners of the Frederick Douglass Book Prize as David Blight for *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* and Manisha Sinha for *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*, and winners of the Lincoln Prize, including James Oakes (twice) for *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (2008) and *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865* (2013), David Blight again for *Race and Reunion*, and most recently Edward Ayers for *The Thin Light of Freedom: The Civil War and Emancipation in the Heart of America*.

Among the other contributors are writers who bring a variety of historical and contemporary perspectives to bear on Douglass: Leigh Fought, an editor of *Frederick Douglass's Correspondence* and author of *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass*; Randall Kennedy of Harvard Law School, constitutional law expert and wide-ranging commentator on race in America; Noelle Trent, director of interpretation, collections, and education at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis; Steve Mintz at the University of Texas, a historian specializing in the history of families, children, and youth; Lucas Morel, professor of politics at Washington and Lee, a specialist in Lincoln and black American politics; David Reynolds, English professor at the City University of New York, author of books on John Brown and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; and Quandra Prettyman, a poet and scholar who has been teaching African American literature at Barnard College since the 1970s. At the center of them all are the late James Horton of George Washington University and his beloved spouse Lois Horton, professor emerita of history at George Mason University, who together wrote such books as *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* and *Slavery and the Making of America*, among many others. In recognition of Jim Horton's innumerable contributions over many years as scholar, teacher, mentor, and public historian, and his role as a key advisor to the Gilder Lehrman Institute since its inception, this volume is dedicated to his memory.

While many of these essays were recently commissioned, others—including Jim

Horton's—were written as “keepsakes” for the Frederick Douglass Book Prize ceremonies, which have been held annually since 1999. Indeed, the Frederick Douglass Book Prize, which awards \$25,000 to the author of the best book on any aspect of slavery and abolition, was one of the first projects launched by the Gilder Lehrman Institute in its early years, in partnership with our sister institution, the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University. The first and still the largest book prize to focus exclusively on the field of slavery studies, over the past nineteen years the Frederick Douglass Prize has recognized an honor roll of great historians.

Frederick Douglass and the history he represents are a major part of the programming and resources that the Gilder Lehrman Institute offers to the tens of thousands of teachers and millions of students in its educational network. The Institute has curated exhibitions on Douglass at the New-York Historical Society and the Morgan Library, as well as digitally on its website, which is visited by millions of users each year. In 2004 the Institute created a traveling exhibition on the life and achievement of Frederick Douglass that has been circulating across the United States ever since, having visited more than 145 sites—most of them schools—in thirty-nine states (as of January 2018). Meanwhile the Institute has printed four different classroom posters about Frederick Douglass; a total of 16,000 copies have been distributed through our network, free, to thousands of schools in all fifty states. In short, Frederick Douglass is never far from the center of the American story as presented by the Gilder Lehrman Institute.

For anyone who takes an interest in American history, in Douglass's life, or simply in great stories, the documents reproduced in this book are bound to touch a responsive chord. Who could fail to be moved by the emotions emanating from Douglass's 1859 letter explaining that he fled the United States to England lest he “be implicated with John Brown” and perhaps put to death; or in the wake of America's bloodiest war ever, his speech at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in 1871; or his reminiscences about Lincoln in 1880, honoring him as “one of the noblest wisest and best men I ever knew.” One feels the sorrow of two grieving souls in communion with each other, as he writes Mary Todd Lincoln in August 1865 to console her and thank her for the gift of her late husband's walking cane. And the rising dismay and anger he felt, perhaps even a premonition of the century to come, when in 1888 he noted “the clamour raised for the disfranchisement of the colored voters of the South.” Perhaps the most moving and evocative of them all is Douglass's letter to his former owner Hugh Auld, twenty-one years after he had fled to freedom in the North, in which he delicately explores their shared history and assures Auld that he is not bitter—“I love you, but hate Slavery.” When in the history of humanity has an escaped slave ever written to his former master in such terms?

As Frederick Douglass begins his third century in American memory, we hope this book will help future generations understand and value his unique contributions to our country's history, and the possibilities his spirit represents for our future.

JAMES G. BASKER

*President, The Gilder Lehrman Institute*

*Richard Gilder Professor of Literary History, Barnard College*

## MAJOR EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

**1818**

*February*

Born at Holme Hill Farm, Talbot County, Maryland.

**1826**

*March*

Sent to live in Baltimore with Hugh and Sophia Auld.

**1827**

Begins learning to read.

**1831**

Buys first book, *The Columbian Orator*.

**1833**

Returned to Thomas Auld, Hugh's brother.

**1836**

First escape attempt failed.

**1838**

*September 3*

Escapes slavery by impersonating a sailor.

*September 15*

Marries Anna Murray in New York City.

**1839**

Daughter Rosetta is born, first of five children.

**1841**

Hired as a lecturer by the American Anti-Slavery Society.

**1845**

*May*

Publishes first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*.

*August*

Begins two-year lecture tour of Great Britain.

**1846**

*October*

Freedom purchased by British supporters.

**1847**

*December 3*

Publishes first issue of the *North Star*.

**1848**

*July*

Attends Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York.

## MAJOR EVENTS, CONTINUED

**1851**

*May*

Openly breaks with William Lloyd Garrison.

*June*

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

**1855**

*August*

Publishes second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

**1859**

*October*

Following John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, flees to Canada, then Great Britain.

**1863**

*February*

Begins recruiting African American soldiers.

*August*

Meets at the White House with President Lincoln on unequal pay for black soldiers.

**1865**

Speaks at opening of the Douglass Institute, an African American school in Baltimore.

**1866**

Co-founds the American Equal Rights Association with suffragist leaders.

**1870**

Buys *New National Era* newspaper in Washington DC.

**1872**

Runs as vice president on the Equal Rights Party ticket.

**1874**

Serves as last president of Freedman's Savings Bank.

**1877**

Appointed US marshal for the District of Columbia.

**1881**

*January*

Publishes third autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*.

*March*

Appointed recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia.

**1882**

*August 4*

Wife Anna Murray Douglass dies.

**1884**

*January 24*

Marries Helen Pitts.

**1886**

*September*

Begins yearlong tour of Europe and Egypt with Helen.

**1889**

Serves two years as US resident minister and consul general to Haiti.

**1892**

Publishes revised edition of *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*.

**1894**

*January*

Delivers last great address, against lynching of African Americans in the South.

**1895**

*February 20*

Dies at Cedar Hill home in Washington DC.



*Frontispiece from My Bondage and My Freedom by Frederick Douglass, 1855  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC05820)*

# 1

## “Do Something”: A Letter from Frederick Douglass to an Abolitionist in Ireland

BY MANISHA SINHA

A letter to Maria Webb in Ireland, written by Frederick Douglass during his lecture tour to the British Isles (1845–1847), reveals his emergence as an independent voice of abolition. Already famous as a lecturing agent for William Lloyd Garrison’s Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, Douglass’s star turn on the international abolitionist lecture circuit broadened his horizons. A reporter for the *Herald of Freedom*, the journal of the New Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society, described Douglass’s oratorical skills: “He was an insurgent slave, taking hold on the right of speech, and charging on his tyrants the bondage of his race.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1845 under Garrison’s auspices, Douglass had published his bestselling *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. It was the unprecedented success of his narrative, selling nearly five thousand copies in the first four months of its publication, that led to a hastily arranged lecture tour abroad. In the book Douglass had revealed his identity and that of his erstwhile masters and, as Garrison warned him, he was in danger of re-enslavement under the federal Fugitive Slave Law. It seemed prudent for him to leave the country for a time.

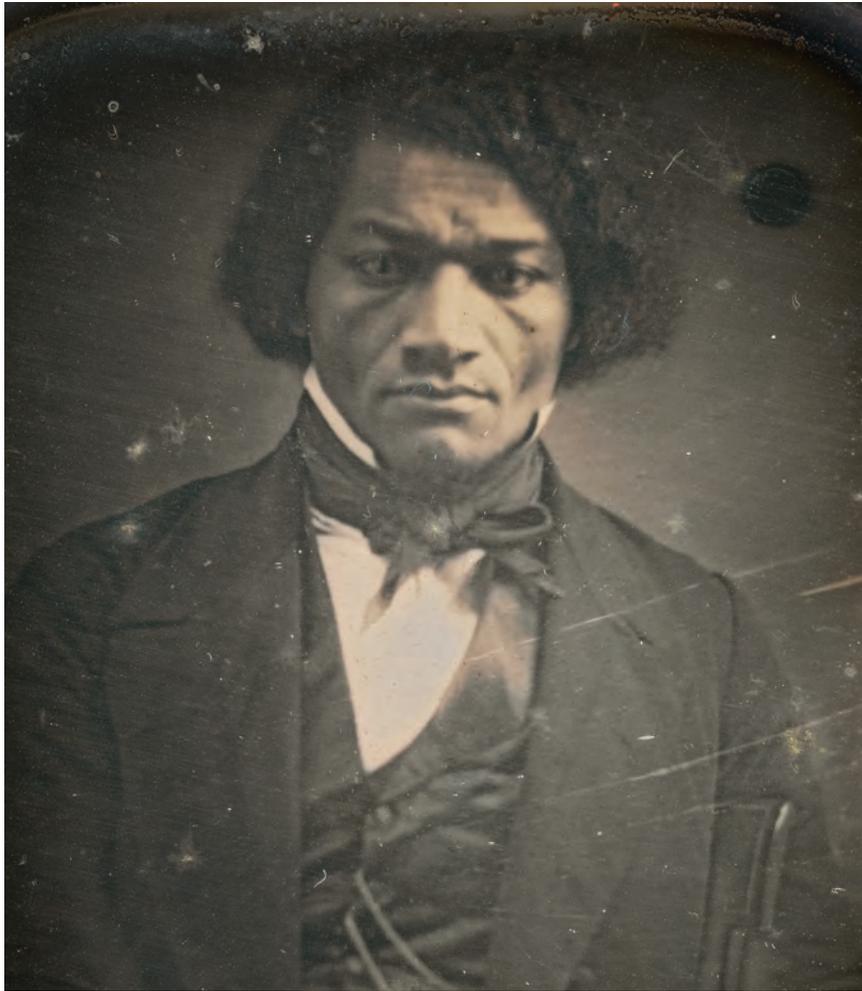
While in Britain, Douglass remained identified with the Garrisonians, calling himself “an out and out old organized abolitionist.”<sup>2</sup> The Garrisonian-dominated American Anti-Slavery Society was known as Old Organization or Old Org and the newly formed American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, composed mostly of anti-Garrison evangelical abolitionists, was called New Organization or New Org after the abolitionists split in 1840 over politics, religion, and women’s rights.

Feted abroad, Douglass gradually outgrew the Garrisonian wing of the abolition movement. However, Douglass’s letter shows that, like many black abolitionists before him, he was now loath to engage in internecine warfare with other abolitionists and clearly felt that all factions of the abolition movement should train their fire on their “common enemy”: slaveholders and their defenders. As the editors of the black abolitionist newspaper

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1. Reprinted in *The Liberator*, February 24, 1844.

2. Frederick Douglass to Maria Webb, December 3, 1846, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC08360c.



*Frederick Douglass, by an unidentified photographer, 1847 (National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution)*

the *Colored American* feared, divisions among abolitionists led to “forgetting the slave and the outraged colored community.” The newspaper recommended “independence of thought and principle” among black abolitionists.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Douglass makes clear in the letter his respect for all abolitionists who are “laboring earnestly for our Common object,” the destruction of slavery: “let us not waste time in picking flaws in the Character of this or that society.” He urges all abolitionists to “Do Something” and adds, “So says the slave.” In short, Douglass is asking abolitionists from different factions of the movement to set aside their personal and political differences to labor together in the slave’s cause.<sup>4</sup>

Douglass clearly penned this letter in a hurry, in the midst of his highly successful lecture tour, but his words highlight his position as a bona fide leader of the abolition movement. He gave more speeches during his eighteen-month sojourn than any other American abolitionist. Garrison, who joined him in the latter half of the tour, reported

3. *The Colored American*, February 10 and 17, 1838.

4. Douglass to Webb, December 3, 1846.

that he was the “lion of all occasions.” Douglass met abolitionists of all stripes and lectured for a variety of causes—abolition, temperance, and the peace movement. He collaborated with British Garrisonians such as George Thompson, who lectured with him, and Richard Webb, the Quaker abolitionist and printer in Ireland, who helped him publish the British edition of his popular *Narrative*. He also attended meetings of the anti-Garrisonian British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society by invitation and spoke before it. With Garrison, Thompson, the American Garrisonian Henry C. Wright, and William Lovett and Henry Vincent of the London Workingmen’s Association, he founded the Anti-Slavery League, an alliance between abolitionists and the Chartist movement, which was fighting to get the right to vote for working men in Britain. As he makes clear in his letter, Douglass did not hesitate to work with opposing factions of the abolition movement.

The fact that Douglass’s letter is addressed to Maria Webb, who was probably related to Richard Webb, is also significant. Richard Webb, a staunch Garrisonian, arranged Douglass’s lecture engagements in Ireland. He and his extended family hosted Douglass on many occasions. It is quite likely that Douglass had stayed in Maria Webb’s home since he asks her to convey his “regards” to her husband and “dear children.” While Richard Webb and Douglass cooperated to make his stay abroad a success, they did not get along personally. Webb found Douglass to be too arrogant, overly sensitive, and disrespectful of his companion, the Quaker abolitionist James N. Buffum. Buffum had traveled in steerage with Douglass during their transatlantic journey when Douglass was refused a first-class berth on the Cunard liner *Cambria*.

Douglass seems to have had a better relationship with Maria Webb, who was married to William Webb, was a member of the Belfast Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, and wrote several books on Quaker history.<sup>5</sup> Letters from Maria Webb decrying Garrisonian religious views in the 1840s and 1850s reveal that she was not a Garrisonian like Richard Webb. Perhaps that is why Douglass writes about overcoming factional differences within the abolition movement to her. She later supported Douglass during his break with Garrison.

Douglass’s successful British sojourn helped him raise funds to buy his freedom and start his own newspaper. He remained identified with the Garrisonians on his return to America in 1847, when he moved to Rochester, New York, and started publishing the *North Star*. It was not until 1851 that Douglass broke with his mentor Garrison over Garrison’s interpretation of the US Constitution as a proslavery document that protected the institution, believing that a liberal reading of the Constitution could support an anti-slavery interpretation. In this, Douglass joined political abolitionists like Gerrit Smith associated with the abolitionist Liberty Party. This independence of spirit and views is already evident in this remarkable letter of 1846 when Douglass calls upon abolitionists to bury their differences and wage a united war against slavery. That was precisely what would happen during the Civil War, when abolitionists of all stripes supported the Union war effort and pressured the Lincoln administration to act on emancipation.

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5. There was another Maria Webb, wife of Thomas Webb, in the Belfast Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, but the Maria Webb addressed in Douglass’s letter was most likely the author married to William Webb.

Manchester - 3<sup>d</sup> Dec. 46

My dear Friend - your news Newcastle reached me yesterday  
I was most happy to hear from you - and especially to find  
you still active - and determined to persevere in the good  
cause, I am a lover of freedom - and am no dictator -  
My course is clear - I am an out and out Abolitionist  
abolitionist - and would that all others were the same  
but if such they are not - and cannot be - and do  
not think it their duty to be - why however much  
I may deprecate the disagreement - ~~but~~ I trust  
always to be able to respect and appreciate their  
motives -  
and even take pleasure in their movements if they  
be laboring earnestly for our common object  
The slave holder, and his apologists are our common  
enemies - against him and them let our bolts be  
hurled - and let us not waste time in picking  
flaws in the character of this or that Society  
or this or that individual. Do something is my  
Motto - If you can't do as I do - Do something;  
Let something be done. So says the slave

A letter from Frederick Douglass to Maria Webb, December 3, 1846  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC08360c, p. 1)

*Transcript of a letter from  
Frederick Douglass to Maria Webb, December 3, 1846*

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Manchester 3<sup>d</sup> Dec. 46

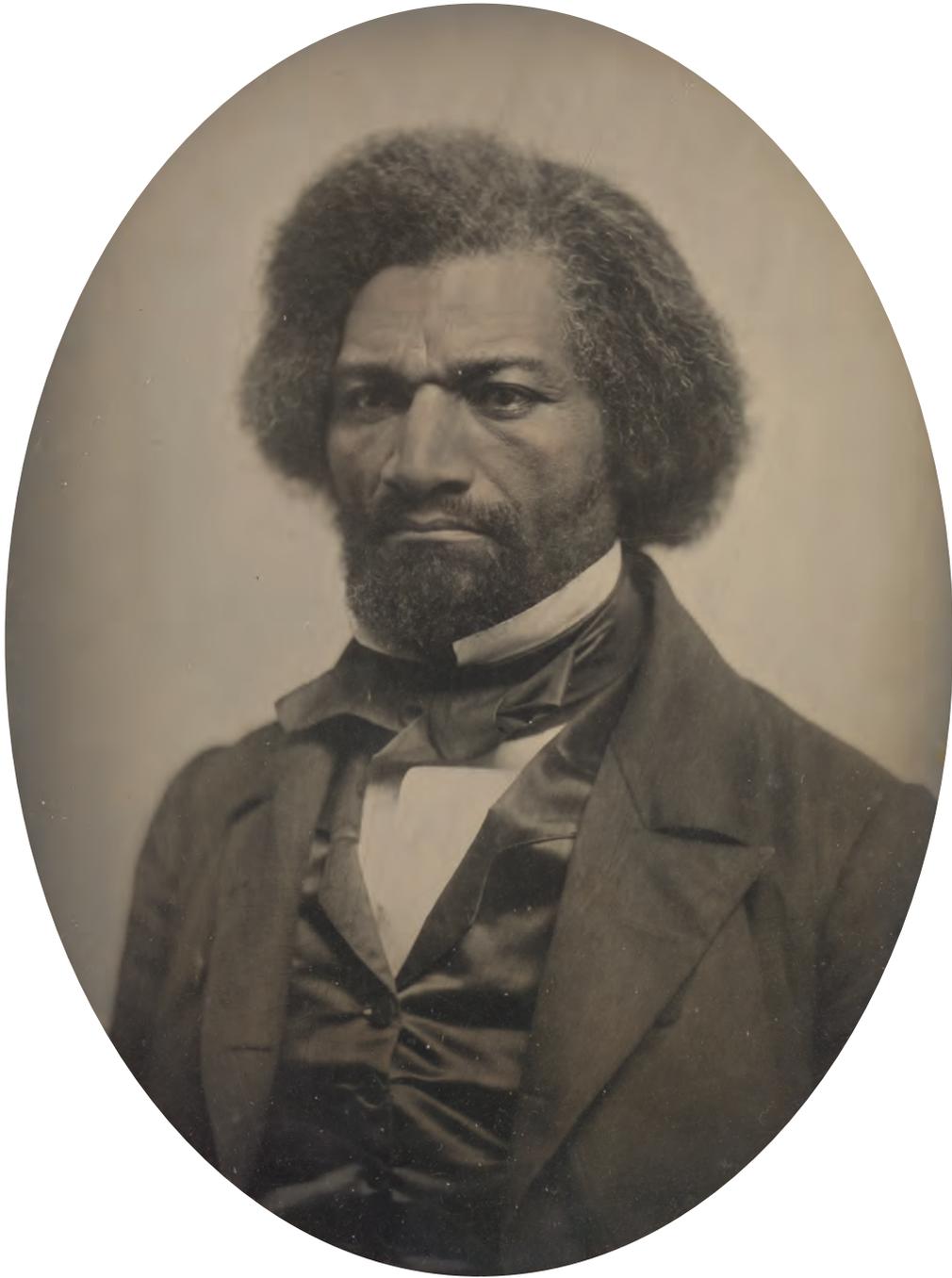
My Dear Friend—Yours via, Newcastle reached me yesterday. I was most happy to hear from you— and especially to find you still active — and determined to persevere in the good cause, I am a lover of freedom — and am no dictator — My course is clear. I am an out an out old organized abolitionist, and would that all others were the same but if such they are not — and cannot be — and do not think it their Duty to be — Why however much I may deprecate the disagreement — yet I trust always to be able to respect and appreciate their motives and even take pleasure in their movement. If they be laboring earnestly for our common object, The slave holder, and his apologist are our common enemy — Against him and they let our bolts be hurled — And let us not waste time in picking flaws in the character of this or that society or this or that individual, Do Something is my Motto. If you can — & do as I do — Do Something. Let something be done. So says the slave.

I am in too much haste to write you a long letter. I am surrounded by pressing engagements though all of this you know — and I shall therefore [*not*] attempt any apology.

My Dear Friend with kind regards to Mr. Webb and the  
Dear children

I am most sincerely

Frederick Douglass



*Frederick Douglass, by an unidentified photographer, 1856 (National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, acquired through the generosity of an anonymous donor)*

# Douglass and the US Constitution: The *Dred Scott* Decision

BY RANDALL KENNEDY

Frederick Douglass's restless efforts on behalf of social justice prompted him to embrace at different stages of his life both of the major camps that have dominated commentary about the prospects for racial decency in America: the pessimists and the optimists.

The pessimists contend that racial equality in the United States is an impossibility. Alexis de Tocqueville was in that camp. "I do not believe," he wrote in *Democracy in America*, "that the white and black races will ever live in any country upon an equal footing. But I believe the difficulty to be greater still in the United States." Abraham Lincoln resided predominantly in that camp as well. A fierce critic of slavery, Lincoln repeatedly investigated the feasibility of repatriating the black population because of his sense that racism rendered virtually impossible the creation of an egalitarian, multi-racial republic. Invidious perceptions of racial difference, he declared, "will probably forever forbid [whites and blacks] living together upon the footing of perfect equality."<sup>1</sup>

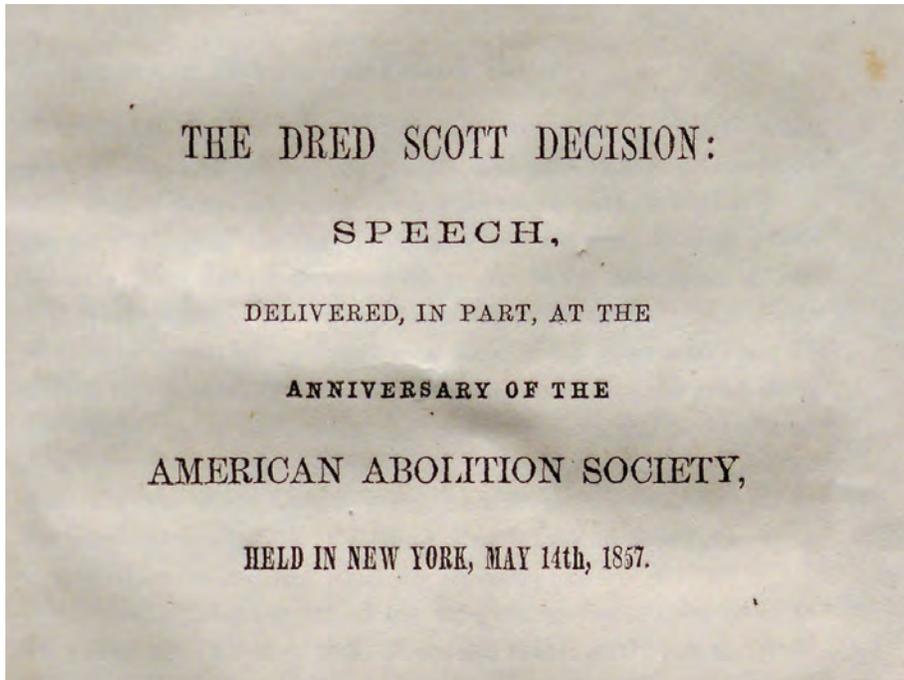
By contrast, optimists contend that racial equality in the United States is possible. In the twentieth century, the outstanding racial optimist was Martin Luther King, Jr. In August 1963, in his landmark "I Have a Dream" oration, King upbraided America for its default on its promises of liberty and justice for all. But he insistently refused to believe that its "bank of justice" is bankrupt. Five years later, in his final speech, King assured his followers that he had reached the mountaintop and glimpsed the racial Promised Land and that they would, in time, reach it.

In his early years as a vocal abolitionist, Frederick Douglass was pessimistic, in line with the views of his mentor, William Lloyd Garrison. He believed that absent a revolutionary reconfiguration—the amputation of the slaveholding states—"No union with slaveholders!"—the United States was irredeemable. Addressing a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1847, nine years after his own daring escape from bondage, Douglass averred:

I have no patriotism. I have no country. . . . The only thing that links me to this land is my family, and the painful consciousness that here there are three

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1. Abraham Lincoln, Speech at Columbus, Ohio, September 16, 1859 in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy Basler (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 3:402.



*Title page from a pamphlet edition of Frederick Douglass's Dred Scott Decision Speech, 1857 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC07591)*

millions of my fellow-creatures groaning beneath the iron rod of the worst despotism that could be devised. . . . I cannot have any love for this country, as such, or for its Constitution. I desire to see it overthrown as speedily as possible, and its Constitution shivered in a thousand fragments.<sup>2</sup>

Eventually, however, Douglass transformed himself into the outstanding racial optimist of the nineteenth century. Abjuring certain tenets of Garrisonianism, Douglass became a committed Unionist, urged abolitionists to engage in pragmatic conventional political action (e.g., supporting the Republican Party even though it was not an abolitionist party), and switched his view of the federal constitution. Repudiating the position that the Constitution was an utterly disgraceful pro-slavery compact warranting total condemnation, he later contended that the Constitution as written was actually anti-slavery in tendency.

An example of Douglass's newfound optimism and revised constitutional interpretation is contained in his May 1857 response to the *Dred Scott* decision. He acknowledged the challenge posed by this dreadful ruling, the acme of Supreme Court pro-slavery constitutionalism:

This infamous decision of the Slaveholding wing of the Supreme Court maintains that slaves are within the contemplation of the Constitution . . . that slaves are property in the same sense horses, sheep, and swine are property . . . that the right of the slaveholder to his slave does not depend upon the local law, but is

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2. Frederick Douglass, *Frederick Douglass Papers. Series One: Speeches, Debates and Interviews*, ed. John Blasingame, vol. 2, 1847–1854 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 60.

secured wherever the Constitution of the United States extends; that Congress has no right to prohibit slavery anywhere; . . . that colored persons of African descent have no rights that white men are bound to respect; that colored men of African descent are not and cannot be citizens of the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Douglass's reply, however, was undaunted. "[Henry] Clay, [John C.] Calhoun, and [Daniel] Webster each tried his hand at suppressing [emancipationist] agitation," Douglass remarked, and they all "went to their graves disappointed and defeated." The same would be true, he predicted, of Chief Justice Roger Taney's effort. Despite this "devilish decision," Douglass asserted, "my hopes were never brighter than now. I have no fear that the National Conscience will be put to sleep by such an open, glaring, and scandalous tissue of lies."

Douglass put his faith in God. "You may close your Supreme Court against the black man's cry for justice," he declared, "but you cannot . . . shut up the Court of Heaven." He put his faith in the text of the Constitution. Ignore Taney's invocation of original intent, Douglass argued, and instead focus on the Constitution's language. "Neither in the preamble nor in the body of the Constitution," Douglass noted, "is there a single mention of the term slave or slave holder, slave master or slave state, neither is there any reference to the color . . . of the people of the United States." He put his faith in the American people. "If it were at all likely that the people of these free states would tamely submit to this demoniacal judgement," Douglass confessed, "I might feel gloomy" and think that "it might be necessary for my people to look for a home in some other country." But "we, the abolitionists and colored people, should meet this decision, unlooked for and monstrous as it appears, in a cheerful spirit. This very attempt to blot out forever the hopes of an enslaved people may be one necessary link in the chain of events preparatory to the downfall and complete overthrow of the whole slave system."

At a nadir in African American history, Douglass voiced an inspirational message that turned out to be thoroughly realistic. "Oppression" he observed, "will appear invincible up to the very hour of its fall." On December 6, 1865—eight years and nine months after the Supreme Court announced the *Dred Scott* decision—the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery, became part of the federal constitution. But as we have seen, even before the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, Douglass had articulated an extraordinary statement of faith in the American democratic project. Speaking in May 1863, Douglass asked whether "the white and colored people of this country can be blended into a common nationality, and enjoy together . . . under the same flag, the inestimable blessings of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, as neighborly citizens." He answered boldly: "I believe they can."<sup>4</sup>

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3. Frederick Douglass, "The Dred Scott Decision . . . May 14th, 1857" in *Two Speeches by Frederick Douglass; One on West India Emancipation, Delivered at Canandaigua, August 4th and the Other on the Dred Scott Decision, Delivered in New York . . . May 1857* (Rochester NY, 1857), 31.

4. Frederick Douglass, "The Present and Future of the Colored Race in America" in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Philip Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1952), 347 and 352.

### 3

## “I Love You but Hate Slavery”: Douglass Writes to a Former Master

BY LOIS E. HORTON

An affectionate letter from Frederick Douglass to Hugh Auld illustrates the complexity of emotional ties, family relations, and attachments to home that could connect enslaved men and women and slaveholders. Those complex connections allowed Douglass to write, “I ran away from you, or rather not from you but from Slavery. . . . I love you, but hate Slavery,” to someone who had held him in bondage.<sup>1</sup>

Hugh and Sophia Auld were very important in Douglass’s formative years. Frederick Douglass (then Frederick Bailey) was owned by Thomas Auld, Hugh’s brother, but lived with Hugh and Sophia in Baltimore from age eight to age fifteen and returned to them again at age eighteen until his escape from slavery two years later. In common with many other slaves, Douglass never knew his date of birth, and he tried several times to get further information about his age from the Aulds. He writes here to ask Hugh exactly when he first came to live with them.

Douglass assures Auld that his response will not be published. This seemingly strange statement was perhaps necessary because in 1848 Douglass had published an open letter to Thomas Auld in his newspaper, the *North Star*, and republished it in the appendix to his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. That letter was an anti-slavery polemic from the former slave to his former master. Therein, he excoriated Thomas Auld for abandoning Douglass’s grandmother, Betsy Bailey, to a lonely cabin in the woods in her old age, an accusation for which he later publicly apologized.

Douglass spent his earliest years with his grandmother on the Eastern Shore; he remembered only a few nocturnal visits from his mother, who was enslaved on a farm some distance away. When he was six, his grandmother took him to live and work in the big house on the Wye River plantation of US Senator Edward Lloyd, managed by Frederick’s owner at the time, Aaron Anthony. When Anthony retired to one of his farms in 1826, he took his slaves with him, while Anthony’s daughter, Lucretia, and her husband, Thomas Auld, moved nearby to run a store. A short time later, Anthony and then Lucretia died, and Thomas inherited ownership of Frederick. He was sent to live and work at the home

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1. Frederick Douglass to Hugh Auld, October 4, [1859], The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC07484.06.

of Thomas's brother Hugh, a shipbuilder in Baltimore, his wife, Sophia, and their two-year-old son, Tommy.

While with the Aulds in Baltimore, Frederick became something of a big brother to Tommy. Indeed, they may have had an indirect family relationship. Douglass was never certain, but it is likely that Aaron Anthony was his father, which would have made him a half-brother to Lucretia Auld, Tommy's aunt by marriage.

Sophia, a religious woman from a poor family, first helped Frederick learn to read, an ability crucial to his later accomplishments. Hugh tolerated though disapproved of Sophia's efforts. Douglass later agreed with Auld's assertion that being able to read unsuited him for slavery. When Douglass was fifteen, Thomas and Hugh had an argument over Hugh's refusal to take a maimed enslaved woman into his household, and Thomas demanded that Frederick be returned.

On his return, Thomas beat him regularly and then hired him out to a slave breaker named Covey, with whom Douglass had a physical fight famously recounted in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* as the occasion that marked his passage into manhood. In 1836, after about three years, Douglass's future was in great jeopardy. He was jailed for leading a group of other young men in an unsuccessful escape attempt, but instead of selling him farther south, Thomas Auld sent him back to Hugh in Baltimore. There he worked in the shipyard as a caulker until his successful escape in 1838.

After publishing his *Narrative* in 1845, Douglass fled to England, and British abolitionists applied to Thomas Auld to purchase his freedom. To effect the transaction, Thomas sold Douglass to Hugh for \$100. In 1846, abolitionists paid Hugh the equivalent of about \$700 in exchange for Douglass's freedom papers.

In the second paragraph of this letter, Douglass mentions having seen Amanda, the daughter of Thomas and Lucretia Auld. He hadn't seen her in more than twenty years, since she was a child. In 1859, Douglass was told that she had heard him speak in Philadelphia, where she lived with her husband, John Sears. Learning this, Douglass visited Sears at his office hoping to see Amanda and get information about his still-enslaved relatives. After some hesitation, Sears staged a large gathering at their home, which Douglass suspected of dramatically testing his recollection of Amanda. He did recognize Amanda, and she and Frederick had a joyful reunion. Douglass spoke with her about her mother, Lucretia Auld, who had died when Amanda was a child.

In writing to Hugh requesting information about his early life, Douglass drew throughout the letter on the affection between himself as a child and youth and the family of Hugh Auld. He had suffered in slavery and escaped from bondage to the Auld family, but his hope for Auld's cooperation rested on their complex relationship. Unfortunately, Douglass never did learn the exact year of his birth.

Rochester Oct. 4<sup>th</sup> (1857)

Hugh Auld Esq

My dear Sir.

My heart tells me that you are too noble to treat with indifference the request I am about to make. 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 & 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.

Perhaps you have heard that I have seen Miss Amanda that was, Mrs. Sears that is, and was treated kindly such is the fact, Gladly would I see you and Mrs. Auld - or Miss Sophia as I used to call her.

I could have lived with you during life in freedom though I ran away from you so uncerimoniously, I did not know how soon I might be sold. But I hate to talk about that. A line from you will find me Addressed Fred<sup>d</sup> Douglass Rochester N. York. I am dear Sir very truly yours. Fred: Douglass

A letter from Frederick Douglass to Hugh Auld, October 4, [ca. 1859], copy in Benjamin Auld's hand (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC07484.06, p. 1)

*Transcript of a letter from  
Frederick Douglass to Hugh Auld, October 4, [ca.1859]  
in Benjamin Auld's hand, ca. 1890<sup>1</sup>*

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Rochester Oct. 4<sup>th</sup> (1857)

Hugh Auld Esq

My dear Sir.

My heart tells me that you are too noble to treat with indifference the request I am about to make, 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

Perhaps you have heard that I have seen Miss Amanda that was, Mrs. Sears that is, and was treated kindly such is the fact, Gladly would I see you and Mrs. Auld – or Miss Sopha as I used to call her. 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. A line from you will find me Addressed Fred<sup>k</sup>. Douglass Rochester N. York. I am dear sir very truly yours. Fred: Douglass

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1. The original letter in Frederick Douglass's hand, in the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University, is dated only "October 4," with no year. The copy in the Gilder Lehrman Collection shown here is a copy made by Benjamin Auld, Hugh and Sophia's younger son, possibly in the 1890s. The addition of "1857" was probably a guess on Auld's part. The reference in the letter to the meeting between Douglass and Amanda Sears suggests that the original letter was written circa 1859.



*John Brown, photograph by J. B. Heywood, Boston, Massachusetts, June 18, 1859; painted by  
N. B. Onthank (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC04447)*

## Admiration and Ambivalence: Frederick Douglass and John Brown

BY DAVID W. BLIGHT

John Brown did not make it easy for people to love him—until he died on the gallows. Frederick Douglass, from his first meeting with Brown in 1847, through a testy but important relationship in the late 1850s, had long viewed the visionary abolitionist with a combination of admiration and ambivalence. In this remarkable letter to Maria Webb—a friend in Dublin, Ireland, whom he had met in 1846–1847 and who raised money to help launch his newspaper, the *North Star*—Douglass defends both himself and Brown, “that brave and I believe good man.”<sup>1</sup> Brown’s militancy and violence against slavery had greatly influenced Douglass’s own evolving radicalism in the 1850s. However, the secrecy and strategic ineptness of the warrior from Bleeding Kansas left Douglass wary at the moment of truth when Brown had all but begged him to join the Harpers Ferry raid.

In late January 1858, Brown arrived at Douglass’s home in Rochester, New York, and stayed for a month. Living those winter days secluded in an upstairs room, Brown composed his “provisional constitution” for the state of Virginia, which he hoped to overthrow with his raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry. It is likely that Brown told his host more details about his revolutionary plans than perhaps Douglass ever admitted. But the great orator-editor, who did indeed hope that Brown’s schemes might foment a successful Union-breaking assault on slavery, never found Brown’s plans, nor his leadership, convincing. Douglass did not attend Brown’s “convention” in Chatham, Ontario, on May 8, 1858, where the guerrilla leader tried to recruit African Americans to his cause. Douglass twice met Hugh Forbes, an Englishman whom Brown hired as his military strategist, when the soldier of fortune passed through Rochester in 1857–1858. Here again, Douglass was much intrigued with these clandestine plotters against slavery, but he found Forbes to be unreliable with both money and personal trust. John Brown and his plans were rays of hope and fascination, but he was hard to love.

In early fall 1859, as Brown made final preparations for his raid, Douglass, driven by curiosity and hope, paid a visit to the “old man” in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. They met secretly in an old stone quarry, Douglass accompanied by a fugitive slave named

1. Frederick Douglass to Maria Webb, November 30, 1859, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC08360.04.

Shields Green, whom he had brought along as a possible recruit for Brown's band of rebels. They sat down on large rocks and discussed Brown's plans. Brown beseeched Douglass to join his rather pathetically small band of willing warriors. "I want you for a special purpose," Douglass remembered Brown saying to him. "When I strike, the bees will begin to swarm, and I shall want you to help hive them." Douglass was dismayed; he had earlier understood that Brown really intended to liberate slaves in Virginia and funnel them into hideaways in the Appalachian Mountains. Now, Brown appeared obsessed with attacking the federal arsenal, a desperate mistake, in Douglass's judgment. The former fugitive slave told the Kansas captain that he was "going into a perfect steel trap, and that once in he would not get out alive." Douglass said no to Brown's pleas, but let Shields Green decide his own fate. According to Douglass, Green said "I b'leve I'll go wid de ole man"; he would die at Harpers Ferry.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, Douglass headed north to anxiously await word of what was to come. News of an attack on October 16, 1859, against the federal arsenal at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers by a band of abolitionists electrified the nation. Among the documents seized from Brown in the wake of his arrest was a brief letter to the old warrior from Douglass written in 1857. Thus, Douglass could legally be construed by outraged Virginians to have been a co-conspirator in Brown's deeds. Douglass was in Philadelphia lecturing as news came of the raid, and he hastily took the train home to Rochester. If caught and sent to Virginia, this black abolitionist who had spent twenty years in slavery assumed that he would be killed "for my being Frederick Douglass." In the dark of night on October 22, with a warrant out for his arrest and federal marshals soon to arrive in his upstate New York hometown, Douglass took a ferry across Lake Ontario, the same route on which he had himself ushered many a runaway slave. Anxious and without options, he sailed for England in early November on a lecture trip he had already planned, but not under these circumstances. Douglass's letter to Webb was written just two days before the dramatic hanging of Brown in a field outside Charlestown, Virginia, on December 2, 1859. He had been convicted of treason, murder, and inciting slave insurrection.

The "Mr. Cook" referred to in this letter is the twenty-seven-year-old John E. Cook, one of Brown's men who, captured and jailed, denounced Douglass in the press for allegedly abandoning his promises to join the raid. Under this cloud of suspicion, Douglass, living in the home of his old friend Julia Griffiths Crofts and her husband, the Rev. H. O. Crofts, in Halifax, Yorkshire, felt compelled to defend himself against the accusations both of treason and of betrayal of his friends. Before leaving Canada, Douglass wrote a public letter (referred to in the letter to Maria Webb), published in the *Rochester Democrat*, October 31, 1859. Sharply rejecting Cook's denunciation, Douglass declared that he "never made a promise" to join the raid, and that the "taking of Harpers Ferry was a measure never encouraged by my word or by my vote. . . . My field of labor for the abolition of slavery has not extended to an attack on the United States Arsenal." But as he made a case for his legal innocence, he also embraced violence and declared himself very much John Brown's moral ally.

This became a common position among many abolitionists, and even some Republican

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2. Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford CT, 1881), 389–390.

Party politicians. “I am ever ready to write, speak, publish, organize, combine, and even to conspire against slavery,” said Douglass, “when there is a reasonable hope of success. Men who live by robbing their fellow-men of their labor and liberty have . . . voluntarily placed themselves beyond the laws of justice and honor, and have become only fitted for companionship with thieves and pirates.” Douglass wanted it widely known that he objected only to Brown’s particular means and tactics, not his ultimate ends or his justification. Even Harriet Beecher Stowe had demonstrated in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that lawlessness was the abolitionists’ necessary weapon. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 had made virtually all radical abolitionists law-breakers. Douglass was willing to be lawless, willing to kill “pirates.” But he knew that such acts against slavery and its national police power in America required more than courage and justification; it would take extraordinary cunning, skill, mobilization, and military prowess.

Douglass returned to America from England in early summer 1860, drawn home by the news that his beloved daughter Annie had died that spring at age eleven. As the election year intensified, the federal government ceased its pursuit of Brown’s alleged accomplices among abolitionists. Douglass came back to a grief-stricken family and a nation on the brink of disunion. In his personal arsenal of rhetorical weapons against slavery, and soon the Confederacy, would always be John Brown’s dead body. Hard to love in life, Brown was of enormous value in death. Douglass saw Brown’s enduring worth to the cause of black freedom, and he never ceased to eulogize the martyr, the classical hero, whose sacrifice made his gallows as sacred as the Christian cross.

In an 1881 speech at Storer College, in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, Douglass declared that the hour of Brown’s “defeat was the hour of his triumph,” his “capture” the “victory of his life.” As though remembering his own ambivalence about Brown’s plans in 1859, but also the power of his symbol in the wake of the execution, Douglass summed up the old warrior’s significance. “With the Allegheny mountains for his pulpit, the country for his church and the whole civilized world for his audience,” announced Douglass, “he was a thousand times more effective as a preacher than as a warrior.”<sup>3</sup> Brown had used revolutionary violence, however ineptly, to foment a larger revolution in America. For that, Douglass would forever honor him as the greatest abolitionist hero. At some of Douglass’s speeches recruiting black soldiers during 1863, he broke into “John Brown’s Body,” singing as he called young men forward in the fight to destroy slavery. Brown had become not only lovable, but a “soul” that kept a cause alive and marching in dark times to come.

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3. Frederick Douglass, *John Brown: An Address by Frederick Douglass, at the Fourteenth Anniversary of Storer College, Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia, May 30, 1881* (Dover NH: Morningstar, 1881), 18.

Pullen Parsonage. Halifax. Yorkshire-

November 30<sup>th</sup> 1859-

My dear Friend: I am not unmindful of your kind  
note received just before leaving America in which  
you kindly welcome me to your dear home when  
it may be my good fortune to come to Dublin, or  
I certainly hope it will be. You have of course  
heard of the circumstances under which I was  
left no alternative but to leave the States or  
be implicated with John Brown - and perhaps,  
share his fate. I find here, as in America, some  
misapprehension as to my relation to that brave  
and I believe good man. My letter, published in  
reply to the sayings of Mr. Cook, published in the  
American papers did much to set me right  
before the American people and I have  
no doubt will do much in the same direction  
here.

A letter from Frederick Douglass to Maria Webb, November 30, 1859  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC08360.04, p. 1)

*Transcript of a letter from  
Frederick Douglass to Maria Webb, November 30, 1859*

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Salem Parsonage. Halifax. Yorkshire-  
November 30<sup>th</sup> 1859

My dear Friend: I am not unmindful of your kind note received just before leaving America - in wh<sup>h</sup> you kindly welcomed me to your dear home when it may be my good fortune to come to Dublin, as I certainly hope it will be. You have of course heard of the circumstances under which I was left no alternative but to leave the states or be implicated with John Brown - and perhaps, share his fate. I find here, as in America, some misapprehension as to my relation to that brave and I believe good man. My letter, published in reply to the sayings of Mr Cook, published in the American papers Did much to set me right before the American people and I have no doubt will do much in the same direction here. You will have probably met with this letter- and will, I am sure, be glad that I am able to deny any part of the charges brought against me in connection with the Harpers Ferry Affair. I went to Canada after the troubles at Harpers Ferry, because I had reason to know that measures were in progress to carry me into Virginia- And even if the courts of that slave state should acquit me, as they would not have been very likely to do, I could never hope to get out of that state alive. If they did not kill me for being concerned with Dear Old Brown they would have done so - for my being Frederick Douglas.

My friends here are doing their utmost to counteract the influence of the false statements of Cook which have found their way into some of the English papers- and to bring me well before the people of Yorkshire. What constant trouble do I give my friends? I hope to justify their kind solicitude in the end. My good friends Mrs Crofts- and the Doctor have made me welcome to a home with them while I stay in the Country. Julia is the same zealous, active and untiring worker that she ever was- and you may well suppose that our meeting was a joyous one. I am to lecture here next Wednesday night- under the auspices of the Halifax Ladies Anti Slavery Soc: James Stansfield M.P. is to take the chair. Hoping to see you ere many months- I am, with love to your Dear Husband and household

Your ever grateful friend  
Frederick Douglass

## 5

# “Your Late Lamented Husband”: Douglass to Mary Todd Lincoln

BY DAVID W. BLIGHT

On March 4, 1865, Frederick Douglass attended President Abraham Lincoln’s second inauguration. Standing in the crowd, Douglass heard Lincoln declare slavery the “cause” and emancipation the “result” of the Civil War. Over the crisp air he heard Lincoln’s determination that, to win the war, “every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.” Four years earlier, and many times in between, Douglass had dreamed of writing that speech for Lincoln. That the President himself wrote it in those tragic days of spring 1865 is a testament to the power of events, to Lincoln’s own moral fiber, and to the political and rhetorical bond he shared with Douglass.

Douglass attended the inaugural reception that evening at the Executive Mansion. At first denied entrance by two policemen, Douglass was admitted only when the President himself was notified. Weary of a lifetime of such racial rejections, Douglass was immediately set at ease by Lincoln’s cordial greeting: “Here comes my friend Douglass.” Lincoln asked Douglass what he thought of the day’s speech. Douglass demurred, urging the President to attend to his host of visitors. But Lincoln insisted, telling his black guest, “There is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours.” “Mr. Lincoln,” replied the former slave, “that was a sacred effort.” We can only guess at the thrill in Douglass’s heart, knowing that the cause he had so long pleaded—a sanctioned war to destroy slavery and potentially to reinvent the American republic around the principle of racial equality—might now come to fruition. He could fairly entertain the belief that he and Lincoln, the slaves and the nation, were walking that night into a new history.<sup>1</sup>

But nothing during the early months of Reconstruction came easily, especially in the wake of Lincoln’s assassination at the dawn of peace. In her grief, and with the assistance of her personal aide, Elizabeth Keckley, Mary Todd Lincoln sent mementos to special people. Among the recipients of some of the President’s canes were the black abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet and a White House servant, William Slade. But to Douglass Mrs. Lincoln sent the President’s “favorite walking staff.” In his remarkable letter of reply,

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1. Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), 445.



*Frederick Douglass, photograph by Samuel Root, 1867 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC07752.02)*



*Mary Todd Lincoln, by Mathew Brady, 1861 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09192.02)*

Douglass assured the First Lady that he would forever possess the cane as an “object of sacred interest,” not only for himself, but because of Mr. Lincoln’s “humane interest in the welfare of my whole race.” In this expression of gratitude, Douglass evoked the enduring symbolic bond between the sixteenth President and many African Americans.<sup>2</sup>

Douglass’s relationship with Lincoln had not always been so warm. Indeed, his attitude toward Lincoln moved from cautious support in 1860 to outrage in 1861–1862, and eventually to respect and admiration in 1863–1865. At the outset of the war Douglass wanted precisely what Lincoln did not want: a “remorseless revolutionary struggle” that would make black freedom indispensable to saving the Union. In September 1861, Douglass denounced Lincoln’s revocation of General John C. Frémont’s unauthorized emancipation order in Missouri. In 1862–1863 he was offended by the administration’s plans for colonization of the freed people. Indeed, nothing disappointed Douglass as much as the President’s August 1862 meeting with a black delegation at the White House, when Lincoln told his guests that “we [the two races] should be separated” and that the only hope for equality rested in their emigration to a new land. Douglass reprinted Lincoln’s remarks in his newspaper and penned his harshest criticism ever of the President, calling him an “itinerant colonization lecturer” and a “genuine representative of American prejudice.”<sup>3</sup>

But much changed in Douglass’s estimation of Lincoln with the advent of the

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2. Frederick Douglass to Mary Todd Lincoln, August 17, 1865, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC02474.

3. *Douglass’ Monthly*, September 1862.

Emancipation Proclamation and the policy of recruiting black soldiers in 1863. As the war expanded in scale and purpose, Lincoln and Douglass began to move toward a shared vision of its meaning. On August 10, 1863, Douglass visited Washington DC for the first time and met with Lincoln for a frank discussion of discrimination practiced against black troops. Lincoln said he understood the anguish over unequal pay for black men, but considered it a “necessary concession” in order to achieve the larger aim of getting blacks into uniform. Although they did not agree on all issues, Douglass came away from this meeting impressed with Lincoln’s forthrightness and respectful of the President’s political skills. Douglass relished opportunities to tell of his first meeting with Lincoln. “I felt big there,” he told a lecture audience, describing how secretaries admitted him to Lincoln’s office ahead of a long line of office-seekers. Disarmed, even awed, by Lincoln’s directness, Douglass remembered that the President looked him in the eye and said: “Remember this . . . remember that Milliken’s Bend, Port Hudson and Fort Wagner are recent events; and . . . were necessary to prepare the way for this very proclamation of mine.” For the first time, Douglass expressed a personal identification with Lincoln. The “rebirth” of the nation about which Lincoln spoke so famously at Gettysburg in November 1863 had long been Douglass’s favorite metaphor as well.<sup>4</sup>

By the end of 1863, Lincoln and Douglass spoke from virtually the same script, one of them with the elegance and restraint of a statesman, and the other in the fiery tones of a prophet. In his Annual Message of December 8, 1863, Lincoln declared that “the policy of emancipation . . . gave to the future a new aspect.” The nation was engaged in a “new reckoning” in which it might become “the home of freedom disenthralled, regenerated, enlarged.” Lincoln’s language makes a striking comparison to a speech Douglass delivered many times across the North in the winter of 1863–1864. In “The Mission of the War” Douglass declared that however long the “shadow of death” cast over the land, Americans should not forget the moral “grandeur” of the struggle. “It is the manifest destiny of this war,” he announced, “to unify and reorganize the institutions of the country,” and thereby give the scale of death its “sacred significance.” “The mission of this war,” Douglass concluded, “is National regeneration.”<sup>5</sup> Together, Lincoln and Douglass had provided the subjunctive and declarative voices of the Second American Revolution—and by the last year of the war, they were nearly one and the same.

In the summer of 1864, with the war at a bloody stalemate in Virginia, Lincoln’s reelection was in jeopardy and Douglass’s support of him temporarily waned. He briefly considered supporting John C. Frémont’s candidacy to unseat Lincoln in the Republican Party. But in August Lincoln invited Douglass to the White House for their extraordinary second meeting. The President was under heavy pressure from all sides: Copperheads condemned him for pursuing an abolitionist war, while abolitionists sought to replace him with the more radical Frémont. Lincoln was worried that the war might end without complete victory and the end of slavery, so he sought Douglass’s advice. Lincoln had drafted a letter, denying that he was standing in the way of peace and declaring that he could not

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4. Frederick Douglass, “Our Work Is Not Done,” *Proceedings of the American Anti-Slavery Society at Its Third Decade . . . December 3d and 4th, 1863* (New York, 1864), 117.

5. Frederick Douglass, “The Mission of the War,” January 13, 1864, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers. Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, vol. 4, 1864–1880 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 16 and 21.

sustain a war to destroy slavery if Congress did not will it. Douglass urged Lincoln not to publish the letter and ultimately, because of events and perhaps Douglass's advice, he never did.

Even more importantly, Lincoln asked Douglass to lead a scheme reminiscent of John Brown and Harpers Ferry. Concerned that if he were not reelected, the Democrats would pursue a negotiated, proslavery peace, Lincoln, according to Douglass, wanted "to get more of the slaves within our lines." Douglass went North and organized some twenty-five agents who were willing to work at the front. In a letter to Lincoln on August 29, 1864, Douglass outlined his plan for a "band of scouts" channeling slaves northward. Douglass was not convinced that this plan was fully "practicable," but he was ready to serve. Because military fortunes shifted dramatically with the fall of Atlanta, this government-sponsored underground railroad never materialized. But how remarkable this episode must have been to both Douglass and Lincoln as they realized they were working together now to accomplish the very "revolution" that had separated them ideologically in 1861. Garry Wills has argued that Lincoln performed a "verbal coup" that "revolutionized the revolution" at Gettysburg. By 1864, that performance reflected a shared vision of the meaning of the war. Ideologically, Douglass had become Lincoln's alter ego, his stalking horse and minister of propaganda, the intellectual godfather of the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural.

When news of Lincoln's assassination reached Rochester, New York, on April 15, 1865, Douglass had just returned from a lecture tour on which he witnessed great joy at the war's ending. He shared the shock of fellow Northerners as a springtime of relief turned overnight into horror and mourning. A throng of Rochester citizens gathered at City Hall, as Douglass remembered, "not knowing what to do in the agony of the hour." Called upon to speak, Douglass described himself as "stunned and overwhelmed." "I had . . . made many speeches there which had more or less touched the hearts of my hearers," he recalled, "but never till this day was I brought into such close accord with them. We shared in common a terrible calamity, and this 'touch of nature made us' more than countrymen, it made us 'kin.'"<sup>6</sup>

Douglass would later write brilliantly and honestly about the necessity and the struggle of African Americans to sustain their sense of kinship with white Americans and with Abraham Lincoln. But history, with Douglass and Lincoln inextricably bound, had forged the possibility of such a national kinship—itsself a brave American dream.

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6. Douglass, *Life and Times*, 451–452.

Rochester, N.Y. August 17, 1865.

Mrs Abraham Lincoln:

Dear Madam: Allow me to thank you, as I certainly do thank you most sincerely for your thoughtful kindness in making me the owner of a Case 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 - as an object of sacred interest - a token not merely of the kind consideration in which I have reason to know that <sup>the</sup> President was pleased to hold me personally, but as an indication of ~~his~~ <sup>his</sup> humane ~~disposition~~ interest & regard for my whole race.

With every proper sentiment of respect and esteem

I am, Dear Madam, your Obedt Servt

Frederick Douglass.

A letter from Frederick Douglass to Mary Todd Lincoln, August 17, 1865  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC02474)

*Transcript of a letter from  
Frederick Douglass to Mary Todd Lincoln, August 17, 1865*

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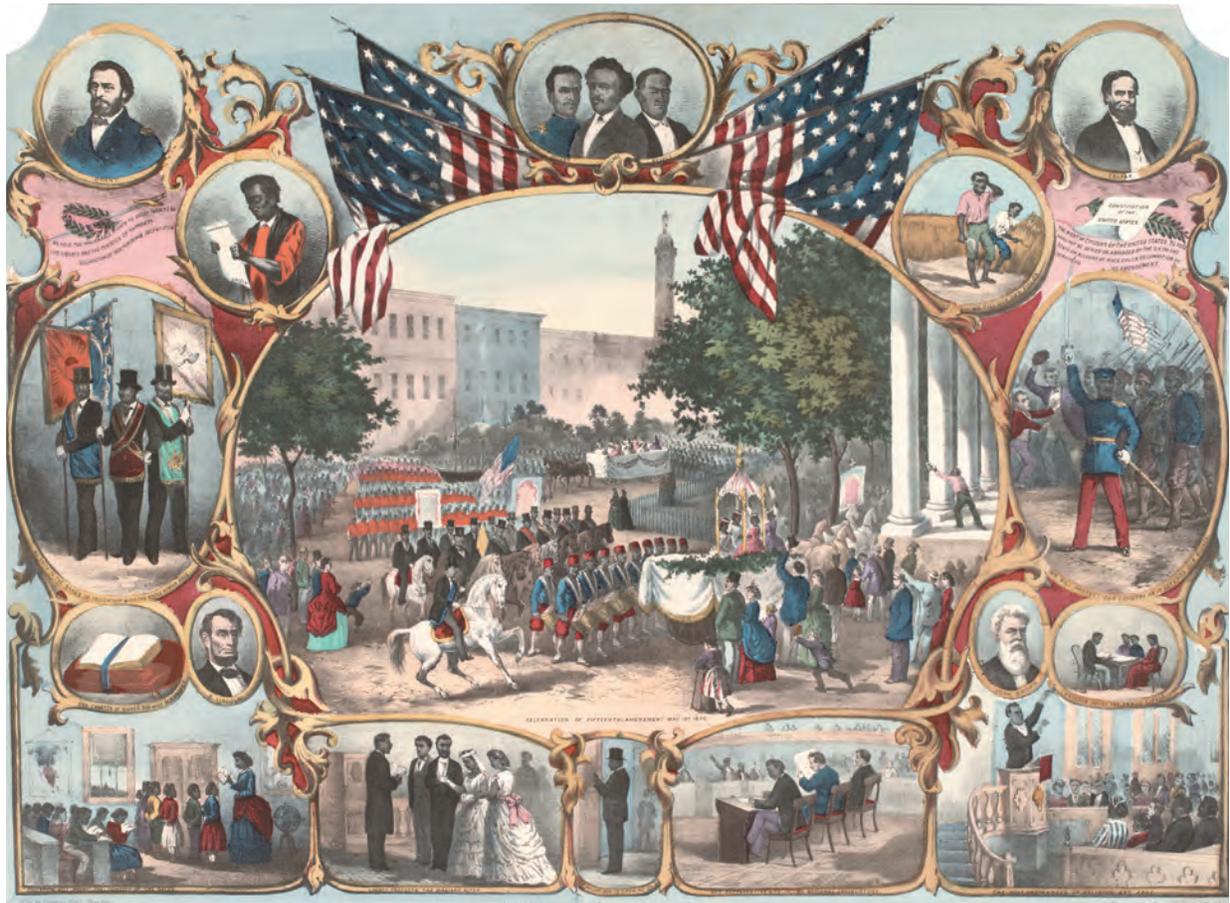
Rochester. N.Y. August 17. 1865.

Mrs Abraham Lincoln:

Dear Madam: 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 ~~of~~ as an indication of ~~the~~ his humane ~~consideration~~ interest [*in the*] welfare of my whole race.

With every proper sentiment of Respect and Esteem  
I am, Dear Madam, your Obe<sup>d</sup>t Serv<sup>t</sup>.  
Frederick Douglass.



*"The Fifteenth Amendment. Celebrated, May 19th, 1870," lithograph print by Thomas Kelly, New York, 1870 (Private Collection)*

## 6

# “A Vulgar and Senseless Prejudice”: A Protest against Segregation in the North

BY STEVEN MINTZ

Eighty-five years before Rosa Parks refused to comply with a Montgomery, Alabama, ordinance mandating segregated seating on the city’s buses, Frederick Douglass, the nineteenth century’s most renowned African American leader, took a similarly forceful stand against racial discrimination. In a letter written in 1870, he refused to lecture at the Philadelphia Academy of Music because African Americans would not be admitted to the venue on an equal footing. Denouncing the Academy’s “servile deference to a vulgar and senseless prejudice,” and observing that Philadelphia “clung longer” to segregation in transportation and even in church membership “than any other city in the North,” Douglass turned down the invitation, preferring to wait for “the progress of enlightenment . . . which will . . . surely open the doors of the ‘Academy of Music’ as freely to me and my race as to other men and other races.” Such was his commitment to principle that he dismissed the idea of dodging the issue by moving the lecture to a different hall.<sup>1</sup>

In 1870, when Douglass wrote this eloquent condemnation of segregation, he was not alone in expressing guarded optimism about the future of race relations in the United States. In that year, the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, extending the vote to black men, was ratified, and Hiram Rhodes Revels, a Republican from Mississippi, became the first African American to serve in the US Senate. Also in 1870 Congress enacted legislation making it a crime to interfere with the right to vote.

But over the next four decades, race relations badly deteriorated. Between 1881 and 1907 every southern state except Missouri segregated its railroads and streetcars. By the early twentieth century, twenty-six states, including California, Indiana, Nebraska, and Oregon, forbade interracial marriages. Schools were segregated in every southern state, most border states, and many northern states.

Twenty-nine years before writing his letter to the Philadelphia Academy of Music, Douglass had become one of the first fugitive slaves to speak out publicly against slavery. On the morning of August 12, 1841, he stood up at an anti-slavery meeting on Nantucket Island. With great power and eloquence, he described his life in bondage. As soon as he

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1. Frederick Douglass to Thomas B. Pugh, November 17, 1870, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01954.

finished, the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison asked the audience, “Have we been listening to a thing, a piece of property, or to a man?” “A man! A man!” five hundred voices replied. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the pioneering feminist, vividly recalled her first glimpse of Douglass on an abolitionist platform: “He stood there like an African prince, majestic in his wrath, as with wit, satire, and indignation he graphically described the bitterness of slavery and the humiliation of subjection.”<sup>2</sup>

Douglass (who was originally named Frederick Bailey) had personally experienced many of slavery’s worst horrors. Born in 1818, the son of a Maryland slave woman and an unknown white father, he was separated from his mother almost immediately after his birth, and remembered seeing her only four or five times before her death. Cared for by his maternal grandmother, a slave midwife, he suffered a cruel emotional blow when, at the age of six, he was taken from his home to work on one of the largest plantations on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. There, Douglass suffered chronic hunger and witnessed many of the cruelties that he later recorded in his autobiographies. He saw an aunt receive forty lashes and a cousin bleeding from her shoulders and neck after a flogging by a drunken overseer.

Douglass was temporarily rescued from a life of menial plantation labor when he was sent to Baltimore to work for a shipwright. Here, his mistress taught him to read, until her husband declared that “learning would spoil” him. Douglass continued his education on his own. With fifty cents he earned blacking boots, Douglass bought a copy of the *Columbian Orator*, a collection of speeches that included a blistering attack on slavery. This book introduced him to the ideals of the Enlightenment and the American Revolution and inspired him to perfect his oratorical skills.

At fifteen, Douglass was returned to plantation life. He was unwilling to show deference to his owner, whom he refused to call “Master.” To crush Douglass’s rebellious spirit, he was hired out to a notorious “slave breaker” named Edward Covey. For seven months, Douglass endured abuse and beatings. But one hot August morning he could take no more. He fought back and defeated Covey in a fistfight. Covey never mistreated Douglass again.

In 1836, Douglass and two close friends plotted to escape slavery. When the plan was uncovered, Douglass was thrown into jail. Instead of being sold to slave traders and shipped to the deep South, as he expected, Douglass was returned to Baltimore and promised freedom at the age of twenty-five if he behaved himself.

In Baltimore, Douglass worked in the city’s shipyards. Virtually every day, white workers harassed him and on one occasion beat him with bricks and metal spikes. Eventually, Douglass was given the unusual privilege of hiring himself out for wages and living independently. It was during this period of relative freedom that Douglass met Anna Murray, a free black woman whom he later married.

In 1838, after his owner threatened to take away his right to hire out his own time and keep a portion of his wages, Douglass decided to run away. With papers borrowed from a free black sailor, he boarded a train and rode to freedom.

He settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he worked in the shipyards, and

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2. Theodore Stanton and Harriot Stanton Blatch, eds. *Elizabeth Cady Stanton As Revealed in Her Letters, Diary and Reminiscences* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1922), 2:311.

began to participate in anti-slavery meetings. As a traveling lecturer, Douglass electrified audiences with his first-hand accounts of slavery. When many northerners refused to believe that this eloquent orator could possibly have been a slave, he responded by writing an autobiography that identified his previous owners by name. Fearful that his autobiography made him vulnerable to kidnapping and a return to slavery, Douglass fled to England. Only after British abolitionists purchased his freedom for \$711.66 in 1846 did he return to the United States.

Initially, Douglass supported William Lloyd Garrison and other radical abolitionists who believed that moral purity was more important than political success. Douglass later broke with Garrison, started his own newspaper, the *North Star*, and supported political action against slavery. He was an early supporter of the Republican Party, even though its goal was to halt slavery's expansion, not to abolish the institution. Following the Civil War, the party would reward his loyalty by appointing him marshal and register of deeds for the District of Columbia and US minister to Haiti.

Douglass supported many reforms including temperance and women's rights. He was one of the few men to attend the first women's rights convention, held in Seneca Falls, New York, and he was the only man to vote for a resolution demanding the vote for women. His main cause, however, was the struggle against slavery and racial discrimination. In the 1840s and 1850s, he not only lectured tirelessly against slavery, he also raised funds to help fugitive slaves reach safety in Canada. During the Civil War, he lobbied President Lincoln to make emancipation a war aim and to organize black regiments. Declaring that "liberty won by white men would lack half its lustre," he personally recruited some 2,000 African American troops for the Union army. Among the recruits were two of his sons, who took part in the bloody Union assault on Fort Wagner in South Carolina in July 1863, which resulted in more than 1,500 northern casualties—but which proved black troops' heroism in battle.

Douglass never wavered in his commitment to equal rights. During Reconstruction, he struggled to convince Congress to use federal power to safeguard the freedmen's rights. Later, as the country retreated from Reconstruction, Douglass passionately denounced lynching, segregation, and disfranchisement. Toward the end of his career, he was asked what advice he had for a young man. "Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!" he replied. Despite old age, Douglass never stopped agitating. He died in 1895, at the age of 77, after attending a women's rights meeting with Susan B. Anthony.

It is a striking historical coincidence that the year of Douglass's death brought a new black leader to national prominence. Seven months after Douglass's death, Booker T. Washington, the founder of the Tuskegee Institute, delivered a speech in Atlanta, Georgia, that catapulted him into the public spotlight. The "Atlanta Compromise" speech called on African Americans to end their demands for equal rights and strive instead for economic advancement. "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the finger," Washington declared, "yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." Washington's philosophy of "accommodation" with segregation represented the polar opposite of Douglass's goal of full civil and political equality. It would be more than half a century before civil rights activism began to transform Douglass's ideal of social equality into a reality.

Washington D.C. Nov. 17. 1870

My dear Sir:

Since accepting your kind invitation to deliver one of the lectures of the "Star Course" now in ~~the~~ progress in the Academy of Music Philadelphia, I have learned with some surprise considering our recently improved civilization, that in servile deference to a vulgar and senseless prejudice against my long abused and proscribed people, the Directors of that popular Hall persist in refusing to allow it to be used for a lecture to which my race shall be admitted on terms of equality with others. This course on the part of these Directors who thus make themselves the devoted ministers of a rapidly decaying caste, will oblige you, if I lecture in your "Star Course" at all to go out of your "Star Course" at least so far as the Hall is concerned and thus make my lecture an exception. Hoping that you will not deem me too sensitive on the point, I beg to decline any such an arrangement as the procurement of another Hall and if it must be so, I prefer to wait the progress of enlightenment and liberality which will yet surely open the doors

A letter from Frederick Douglass to Thomas B. Pugh, November 17, 1870  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01954)

*Transcript of a letter from  
Frederick Douglass to Thomas B. Pugh, November 17, 1870*

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I believe that the "City of Brotherly love" with its hundreds of Alters to the "Lamb of God" stands almost alone in the intensity of its wolfish hate and snobbish pride of race. It clung longer to proscription on its cars and other modes of travel than any other city of the north, and the "Jim Crow pew" is retained there more extensively than in any other North of Mason and Dixon's line. Nevertheless, I do not despair of speedy improvement, and can well afford to confine my labors to other towns and cities, until such time as shall bring more favorable conditions than the christian, and enlightened Directors of the Academy of Music would impose,

I am, dear sir,

Very truly yours

Frederick Douglass

T. B. Pugh Esqr



*The Massachusetts 54th, the first African American regiment formed in the North, attacked Fort Wagner in Charleston, South Carolina, on July 18, 1863. Douglass's son Lewis was wounded in the battle. Storming Fort Wagner, published by Kurz & Allison, Chicago, 1890  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC00317.02)*

## Frederick Douglass and “the Merits of This Fearful Conflict”

BY DAVID W. BLIGHT

In the spring of 1871, Frederick Douglass was worried. Six years after Robert E. Lee had surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox, Grant was President of the United States, the union of northern and southern states was restored, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments were the law of the land. But a growing indifference toward the freedpeople among northern whites, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in the South, the resurgence of the Democratic Party and its openly white supremacist politics, and a wholesale amnesty toward ex-Confederates put all questions of black rights and security in a cloud of uncertainty by 1870–1871.

Douglass, the former abolitionist, and now editor of the *New National Era*, a newspaper in Washington DC, was at a crossroads in his career. He had moved his family permanently to Washington after a fire, the probably act of an arsonist, destroyed his home in Rochester, New York. He set himself up in the nation’s capital as a stalwart Republican, an advisor to several presidents, and the leading spokesman of black America through a dizzying lecture schedule. But perhaps the central concern of Douglass’s post-war life was his fight, through advocacy and the weapon of rhetoric, to sustain an abolitionist-emancipationist vision of the meaning and memory of the Civil War.

By the time Douglass stepped to the platform to speak on Memorial Day, May 30, 1871, in Arlington National Cemetery, he was already concerned that he and his people, as well as their white allies, were losing the struggle over who would control the nation’s memory of slavery, the war, and its consequences. Standing at the mass grave of the unknown Union dead, on the former property of Robert E. Lee and in the shadow of the Custis-Lee Mansion, with President Grant and members of his Cabinet in attendance, and looking down on the Washington Monument and the United States Capitol across the Potomac River, Douglass raged against forgetfulness and false reconciliation: “We are sometimes asked in the name of patriotism to forget the merits of this fearful conflict and to remember with equal admiration those who struck at the nation’s life and those who struck to save it – those who fought for slavery and those who fought for liberty and justice.” Douglass stood tall with indignation and called the nation to remember its dead not through shared glory and sacrifice alone, nor with mere sorrow, but through the meaning

# MEN OF COLOR TO ARMS! TO ARMS! NOW OR NEVER

This is our golden moment! The Government of the United States calls for every Able-bodied Colored Man to enter the Army for the

## Three Years' Service!

And join in Fighting the Battles of Liberty and the Union. A new era is open to us. For generations we have suffered under the horrors of slavery, outrage and wrong; our manhood has been denied, our citizenship blotted out, our souls seared and burned, our spirits cowed and crushed, and the hopes of the future of our race involved in doubt and darkness. But now our relations to the white race are changed. Now, therefore, is our most precious moment. Let us rush to arms!

## FAIL NOW, & OUR RACE IS DOOMED

On this the soil of our birth. We must now awake, arise, or be forever fallen. If we value liberty, if we wish to be free in this land, if we love our country, if we love our families, our children, our home, we must strike now while the country calls; we must rise up to the dignity of our manhood, and show by our own right arms that we are worthy to be freemen. Our enemies have made the country believe that we are craven cowards, without soul, without manhood, without the spirit of soldiers. Shall we die with this stigma resting upon our graves! Shall we leave this inheritance of shame to our Children? No! a thousand times NO! We WILL Rise! The alternative is upon us. Let us rather die freemen than live to be slaves. What is life without liberty? We say that we have manhood; now is the time to prove it. A nation or a people that cannot fight may be pitied, but cannot be respected. If we would be regarded men, if we would forever silence the tongue of Calumny, of Prejudice and Hate, let us Rise Now and Fly to Arms! We have seen what Valor and Heroism our Brothers displayed at Fort Hudson and Milliken's Bend, though they are just from the galling, poisoning grasp of Slavery, they have startled the World by the most exalted heroism. If they have proved themselves heroes, cannot WE PROVE OURSELVES MEN!

## ARE FREEMEN LESS BRAVE THAN SLAVES

More than a Million White Men have left Comfortable Homes and joined the Arms of the Union to save their Country. Cannot we leave ours, and swell the Ranks of the Union, to save our liberties, vindicate our manhood, and deserve well of our Country. MEN OF COLOR! the Englishmen, the Irishmen, the Frenchmen, the Germans, the Americans, have been called to assert their claim to freedom and a manly character, by an appeal to the sword. The day that has seen an undaunted race in arms has, in all history, seen their last trial. We now see that our last opportunity has come. If we are not lower in the scale of humanity than Englishmen, Irishmen, White Americans and other Races, we can show it now. Men of Color, Brothers and Fathers, we appeal to you, by all your concerns for yourselves and your liberties, by all your regard for God and humanity, by all your desire for Citizenship and Equality before the law, by all your love for the Country, to step at once to the colors, there to stand that shall deter you from rallying for the Army. Come Forward, and at once Enroll your Names for the Three Years' Service. Strike now, and you are hereafter and forever Freemen!

E. D. Bassett,	Rev. J. Underdue,	P. J. Armstrong,	Rev. J. C. Gibbs,	Elijah J. Davis,
William B. Forten,	John W. Price,	J. W. Simpson,	Daniel George,	John P. Burr,
Frederick Douglass,	Augustus Dorsey,	Rev. J. B. Trusty,	Robert M. Adger,	Robert Jones,
Wm. Whipper,	Rev. Stephen Smith,	S. Morgan Smith,	Henry M. Cropper,	O. V. Catto,
D. D. Turner,	N. W. Depee,	William E. Gipson,	Rev. J. B. Reeve,	Thos. J. Dorsey,
Jas. McCrummell,	Dr. J. B. Wilson,	Rev. J. Boulden,	Rev. J. A. Williams,	I. D. Child,
A. S. Cassey,	J. W. Cassey,	Rev. J. Asher,	Rev. A. L. Stanford,	Jacob C. White,
A. M. Green,	James Needham,	Rev. Elisha Weaver,	Thomas J. Bowers,	Morris Hall,
J. W. Page,	Ebenezer Black,	David B. Bowser,	J. C. White, Jr.,	J. P. Johnson,
L. R. Seymour,	James R. Gordon,	Henry Minton,	Rev. J. P. Campbell,	Franklin Turner,
Rev. William T. Catto,	Samuel Stewart,	Daniel Colley,	Rev. W. J. Alston,	Jesse E. Glasgow,

A Meeting in furtherance of the above named object will be held

And will be Addressed by

U. S. Steam-Power Book and Job Printing Establishment, Ledger Buildings, Third and Chestnut Streets, Philadelphia.

*Recruiting poster for African American soldiers, supported by Frederick Douglass (first column, third row) and other community leaders, printed in Philadelphia, ca. 1863 (Private Collection)*

of the cause in which Union soldiers died. "I am no minister of malice," he announced. "I would not strike the fallen. I would not repel the repentant, but may my right hand forget its cunning, and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I forget the difference between the parties to that terrible, protracted, and bloody conflict."<sup>1</sup>

In an autographed quotation Douglass sent in the 1880s, now a prize in the Gilder Lehrman Collection, he remembers the passage slightly differently from the original. But his point is the same. He demanded, in season and out, that Americans never forget that slavery lay at the root of the Civil War, and that the nation only survived and experienced a rebirth of freedom through the liberation of the slaves. Douglass now witnessed

1. Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), 506.

the emancipationist historical memory fading in a sentiment and a politics of sectional reconciliation spreading throughout American society. He feared a national reunion achieved at the costs of the very liberty and equality African Americans gained from the blood of Gettysburg and Fort Wagner, and from the verdicts of Appomattox and the Reconstruction Acts.

Were Douglass's worries justified? From the context in which he spoke that day at Arlington we can only conclude yes. At the heart of Douglass's indignation was the rise of Ku Klux Klan violence in the South. In winter and spring of 1871, he filled his newspaper with stories about "Ku Klux outrages." Douglass documented how the Klan's purposes were essentially political: it sought to destroy the Republican Party, to maintain white supremacy through the resurgence of the Democratic Party, and to restore labor discipline and economic dependency among the freedpeople. By whippings; rapes; the burning of houses, schools, and churches; and hundreds of murders and lynchings the Klan used terror to win back as much of an antebellum status quo as it could achieve. One estimate suggests that at least 400 murders, the majority black, occurred at the hands of Klansmen in the period 1868–1871 alone across the South. To this must be added countless acts of torture and intimidation committed in the name of establishing white self-rule and the elimination of federal authority under the Reconstruction governments.

Douglass saw this reign of terror as a revival of the "brutalizing . . . debasing effect . . . of the barbarism of slavery" among defeated southerners. He declared southern violence a new "rebellion . . . far more difficult to deal with than that suppressed, but not annihilated, in 1865."<sup>2</sup> Douglass did rejoice that in the same month as his Arlington speech Congress had begun its Ku Klux Klan Hearings, an unprecedented investigation conducted in seven southern states that left thousands of pages of testimony to a record of terror most Americans would prefer to ignore. He was also heartened by the passage that April of the Ku Klux Klan Act by Congress, which made offenses against the political rights of individuals punishable by federal law and enforceable by federal troops.

But already the former abolitionist could surmise that the savagery of the Klan had achieved many of its political aims and was likely to leave a deep emotional legacy of fear in black communities. Indeed, mob violence injected poisons into Civil War memory that only resistance, decades of time, and turns in history could begin to eradicate. To Douglass, the Civil War was hardly over; former Confederates had achieved the safety to "carry on the war within the Union." Hence the power of Douglass's admonitions against the reconciliationist brand of forgetting on Memorial Day at Arlington in 1871. He waved the bloody shirt in its ideological, not merely political, form, and begged his audience to "never forget that victory to the rebellion meant death to the Republic," and to "never forget that the loyal soldiers who rest beneath this sod flung themselves between the nation and the nation's destroyers." Amidst the flowers of late spring's splendor, Douglass asked the nation to worry with him about how Americans would remember their Civil War.

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2. "Barbarism against Civilization," and "Demands of the Hour," *New National Era*, April 6, 1871.

"We are sometimes asked in the name of patriotism  
to forget the merits of this fearful conflict and to  
remember with equal admiration those who  
struck at the nation's life and those who strove  
to save it—those who fought for Slavery and those  
who fought against it. I am no minister of  
malice: I would strike the fallen foe. I would ~~repel~~  
the ~~repentant~~ repentant but may my right  
hand forget her cunning and my tongue  
cleave to the roof my mouth if I forget  
and fail to remark the difference between  
the respective parties to that protracted,  
bloody and terrible conflict."

Frederick Douglass.

The above was spoken  
at the Tomb of the unknown loyal dead  
at Arlington Va

A passage from Frederick Douglass's Memorial Day speech, May 30, 1871,  
written by Douglass, ca. 1880s  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC07926.01)

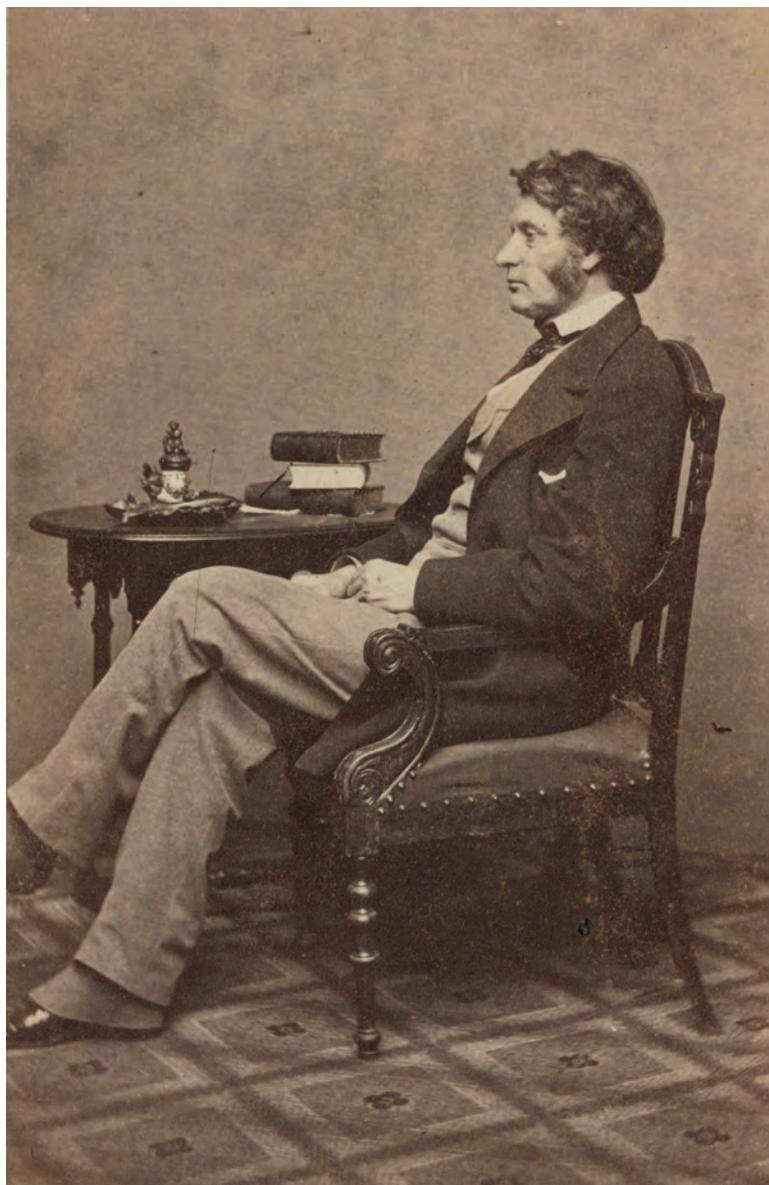
*Transcript of an autographed passage from  
Frederick Douglass's Address at the Graves of the Unknown  
Dead at Arlington, Virginia (May 30, 1871), ca. 1880s*

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“We are sometimes asked in the name of patriotism to forget the merits of this fearful conflict and to remember with equal admiration those who struck at the nation’s life and those who struck to save it— those who fought for slavery and those who fought against it. I am no minister of malice: I would [not] strike the fallen foe. I would [not] repel the repentant but may my right hand forget her cunning and my tongue cleave to the roof [of] my mouth if I forget and fail to remark the difference between the respective parties to that protracted, bloody and terrible conflict.”

Fred<sup>k</sup>. Douglass.

The above was spoken at the  
Tomb of the unknown loyal dead at Arlington Va



*Charles Sumner, US Senator from Massachusetts, Brady's National  
Photographic Portrait Galleries, New York, ca. 1860  
(Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)*

## “The Seed Time of a Great Harvest”: Douglass Recalls Fellow Abolitionists

BY QUANDRA PRETTYMAN

In a letter written on March 2, 1880, Frederick Douglass reflects upon memories stirred by reading *Reminiscences of a Journalist* (1880) by his old friend and colleague Charles T. Congdon. For Douglass, the book “brought to life a phase of the ‘dead past’ of which I never think without emotion. It was not merely the seed time of a great harvest but the hard time when old and knarly oaks were to be hewed down . . . I shall never cease to be glad that I had a small share in this rough and flinty work.”<sup>1</sup>

Beginning with his first job delivering newspapers, Charles Congdon (1821–1891) never left the world of journalism. The journalist, he wrote, has “no calling to the clerical profession; he does not desire to dose his fellow-creatures; the law tempts him not; a purely literary life means beggary: but in journalism he may be always near human interests, and where he may always hear the beating of the great human heart.”<sup>2</sup> Congdon had worked on several newspapers in New Bedford, Massachusetts, by 1857 when Horace Greeley asked him to come to New York and work for the *New York Tribune*. A prolific writer, Congdon also contributed articles to many leading magazines of the day, among them the *North American Review* and the *Knickerbocker*.

In *Reminiscences*, Congdon recalls Frederick Douglass’s early days in New Bedford where, within a few days of his escape from slavery, Douglass and his wife, Anna Murray Douglass, settled. Douglass was then “a day-laborer upon the piers, or was engaged in the still humbler occupation of whitewashing.”<sup>3</sup>

Congdon, a New Bedford native, draws a picture of race relations in the town. According to him, the town was “antislavery from the start, being full of Quakers . . . and the people all Abolitionists before William Lloyd Garrison began his wonderful work.”<sup>4</sup> New Bedford was a major destination for fugitive slaves; the cook for Congdon’s own family was an escaped slave. In *Reminiscences*, he describes this fugitive population as

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1. Frederick Douglass to Charles T. Congdon, March 2, 1880, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09238.

2. Charles T. Congdon, *Reminiscences of a Journalist* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1880), 378.

3. Congdon, *Reminiscences*, 171.

4. Congdon, *Reminiscences*, 17.



*New Bedford, Massachusetts, in the 1840s, when Frederick Douglass worked on the docks. From Panorama of New Bedford by Benjamin Russell and Caleb Pierce Purrington, 1848 (New Bedford Whaling Museum)*

“self-emancipated people . . . and a thrifty and well-behaved class.” It was not all a rosy picture. Congdon recalls, as well, the presence of “colorphobia . . . in full and fierce and most uncharitable force.” He attended “a public school in which the black boys were seated by themselves, and the white offenders were punished by being obliged to sit with them.”<sup>5</sup>

When Frederick and Anna arrived in New Bedford, they were delivered to the home (now a National Historic Landmark) of two African Americans, Nathan and Mary Johnson. Both were highly successful in business (Nathan as a caterer and Mary, a confectioner) and anti-slavery activists, providing sanctuary for fugitives as well as involving themselves in multiple activities in the broader black community. Most notably, as Douglass acknowledges in his *Narrative*, “I gave Mr. Johnson the privilege of choosing me a name.”<sup>6</sup>

Not long after settling in, Douglass made his first public speech, and Congdon recalls his “good fortune to listen to [Douglass’s] earliest rhetorical efforts” when he “was persuaded to address a meeting called to consider the case of the fugitive, George Latimer.” Congdon sketches one lively episode when Douglass was hissed (hostile interruptions of anti-slavery speakers being common), observing that “the sharpest of such intruders never meddled with Mr. Douglass without being sorry for the temerity.”<sup>7</sup>

In his letter to Congdon thanking him for a copy of *Reminiscences*, Douglass takes special notice of Congdon’s references to Charles Sumner and Henry Clapp, Jr. “You will have to know something about Henry Clapp if you want to know all about me,” Walt Whitman had asserted. Indeed, Clapp’s name survives today primarily as an early and ardent champion of Whitman, whose work he published as the editor of the *Saturday Press*. Although he is largely forgotten now, his obituary in the *New York Times* begins, “No man was better known in the newspaper and artistic world a few years ago than the eccentric and gifted King of the Bohemians—Henry Clapp, Jr.”<sup>8</sup> In his early years, Clapp advocated temperance and anti-slavery, but a sojourn in Paris introduced him to

5. Congdon, *Reminiscences*, 171 and 38–39.

6. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston, 1845), 112.

7. Congdon, *Reminiscences*, 171–172.

8. Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1906), 1:214; *New York Times*, April 11, 1875.

a new and raging Bohemianism. By the time he returned to New York, he had forsaken temperance, although an ardent abolitionist he remained. Douglass's note follows Clapp's sad trajectory: "I can never think of that brilliant little man but with deep sadness. I knew him long and well in his best days and when his best qualities guided him and I knew him then to love and admire as afterwards I knew him to deplore and pity him."

Congdon portrays Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts as a man whose "entire and perfect integrity" he would no sooner question than "the sun-rise, or the ebb and flow of the tide, or the Copernican system," taking notice that in political party matters, he was a man "who began by bolting; he went on bolting; as a bolter he ended."<sup>9</sup> Douglass's relationship with Sumner was long, full, and complicated by the qualities Douglass mentions in this note: a "vain" man who was, as well, "mentally and morally . . . a giant."

Sumner's political life was devoted not only to the abolition of slavery but to the removal of barriers to full citizenship for African Americans and to racial equality, arguing unsuccessfully in the famous early case against school segregation, *Roberts v. City of Boston* (1849). He was a founder in 1848 of the Free Soil Party, which opposed both the extension of slavery into United States territories and the admission of slave states into the Union, and was active among the Joint Committee of Fifteen whose work supported the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the US Constitution. Sumner's uncompromising idealism is recollected in Congdon's *Reminiscences* and Douglass's brief, graceful thank-you note.

In Douglass's recollections of these two admired, nevertheless flawed, men, one hears "the beating of the great human heart."

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9. Congdon, *Reminiscences*, 162.

Washington D.C. March 2<sup>d</sup> 1880

Charles T. Congdon Esqr.

My dear Sir,

I am much obliged. Your Reminiscences have brought to life a phase of the "dead past" of which I never think without emotion. It was not merely the sad time of a great harvest, but the hard time when old and homely oaks were to be hewed down as lumber of the ground, their roots and branches removed and the land prepared for growths of more value. I shall never cease to be glad that I had a small share in this rough and flinty work, though I never expected to see such generous recognition of it as that shown in your graphic Reminiscences. I am touched by your reference to poor Henry Capp. I can never think of that brilliant white man but with deep sadness. I knew him long and well in his best days and when his best qualities guided him and I knew ~~the~~ him then to love and admire.

A letter from Frederick Douglass to Charles T. Congdon, March 2, 1880  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09238, p. 1)

*Transcript of a letter from  
Frederick Douglass to Charles T. Congdon, March 2, 1880*

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Washington D.C. March 2<sup>d</sup> 1880

Charles T. Congdon Esqr.

My dear sir.

I am much obliged. Your Reminiscences have brought to life a phase of the “dead past” of which I never think without emotion. It was not merely the seed time of a great harvest but the hard time when old and knarly oaks were to be hewed down as cumberers of the ground, their roots and branches removed and the land prepared for growths of more value. I shall never cease to be glad that I had a small share in this rough and flinty work, though I never expected to see such generous recognition of it as that shown in your graphic Reminiscences. I am touched by your reference to poor Henry Clapp. I can never think of that brilliant little man but with deep sadness. I knew him long and well in his best days and when his best qualities guided him and I knew him then to love and admire as afterwards I knew him to deplore and pity him. You have, with a few light touches given a perfect portrait of Charles Sumner. Those who knew him best will best understand the truth of your picture of that splendid man. He was vain, but his vanity was that of a sweet minded child pleased with a pocket in his trowsers or of a pair of new boots. This was the small side of him. It could only be seen by those who came very near him. Mentally and morally he was a giant. But I merely meant to thank you for the appreciative mention you have made of my early efforts in the cause of freedom.

Very truly yours

Fred<sup>k</sup>. Douglass



*Abraham Lincoln, photograph by Anthony Berger, February 9, 1864  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC07735)*

## “One of the Noblest Wisest and Best Men”: Douglass on President Lincoln

BY JAMES OAKES

In 1880 Osborn Oldroyd invited Frederick Douglass to write something for a collection of tributes to Abraham Lincoln, published two years later as *The Lincoln Memorial: Album-Immortelles*. Douglass was uncharacteristically brief, but in a mere sixty-eight words he captured many of the elements of character that he believed made Lincoln “a great man.” Lincoln was tender but strong, patient, a man of broad sympathies, and above all a patriot. At once unpretentious and impressive, Lincoln was, to Douglass, “one of the noblest wisest and best men I ever knew.”<sup>1</sup>

Douglass’s admiration for the sixteenth president was by then well known. As far back as 1865 he had described Lincoln as “the black man’s president” and declared that whatever the assassination might have meant for white Americans, for African Americans it was “an unspeakable calamity.” A decade later, in his longest and most thoughtful evaluation, given at the dedication of the Freedmen’s Monument in Washington DC, Douglass described Lincoln as a “statesman” who, measured “by the sentiment of his country,” had been a “swift, zealous, radical, and determined” supporter of emancipation. When an idealistic radical like Frederick Douglass falls into such effusions about a cagey and conservative politician like Abraham Lincoln, explanations are in order.<sup>2</sup>

Douglass had not always been so kindly disposed. “I cannot support Lincoln,” he wrote in 1860, vowing to cast his vote for the Radical Abolitionist presidential candidate. Well into Lincoln’s presidency Douglass found nothing but fault. The government, Douglass concluded in August 1861, “has resolved that no good shall come to the Negro from this war.” A year later, still waiting impatiently for word of an emancipation proclamation, Douglass denounced Lincoln as “a genuine representative of American prejudice and Negro hatred.”<sup>3</sup>

1. Frederick Douglass on Abraham Lincoln, 1880, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09091.

2. Frederick Douglass, Speech on Abraham Lincoln, ca. June 1865, Washington DC, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress, reel 14; Frederick Douglass, *Oration by Frederick Douglass Delivered on the Occasion of the Unveiling of the Freedmen’s Monument in Memory of Abraham Lincoln, in Lincoln Park, Washington DC, April 14th, 1876* (Washington DC: Gibson Brothers, 1876).

3. Frederick Douglass to Gerrit Smith, July 2, 1860, Gerrit Smith Papers, Syracuse University; Frederick

When the Emancipation Proclamation was issued in January 1863, Douglass's attitude toward Lincoln inevitably softened. To be sure, there were new fights to be fought, new struggles to be engaged: black and white soldiers should be treated equally, and black men should be allowed to vote. But it was different now, and Douglass had enough faith in Lincoln to tell him these things directly. The two men met for the first time on August 10, 1863. The radical spoke his piece, the President stood his ground, and Douglass left the meeting deeply moved by Lincoln. "Wise, great, and eloquent," Lincoln would "go down to posterity, if the country is saved, as Honest Abraham."<sup>4</sup>

Douglass was impressed, but he was not fully convinced. In early 1864 he cast his lot with a small faction of Republicans who hoped to replace Lincoln with a more reliably radical presidential candidate. During these months Douglass, writing privately to an English abolitionist, made some of his harshest remarks about Lincoln. The President's policy, Douglass complained, is "Do evil by choice, right from necessity."<sup>5</sup> That was the worst of Douglass's criticism, but it was also the last of it.

In the 1864 election, Lincoln easily put down his radical rivals, the Democrats spilled forth a Niagara of racial demagoguery, and Douglass threw himself into the campaign for the President's re-election. In the midst of it all, when things looked grimmest for Lincoln, he invited Douglass back to the White House for a second visit in August 1864. This time Douglass realized the President was irreversibly committed to emancipation and that Lincoln himself was utterly lacking in common racial prejudices. "In his company I was never in any way reminded of my humble origin, or of my unpopular color." Indeed, the two men genuinely seemed to like each other. They met one last time, at Lincoln's second inaugural, where the President publicly embraced "my friend Douglass" as a man whose opinion he valued and whose company he enjoyed.<sup>6</sup> A few weeks later Lincoln was dead.

But Douglass lived on, and for the next forty years his reflections on the sixteenth president were haunted by the question, *What if Lincoln had lived?* Douglass's answer was inevitably shaped by the fact that he himself had changed his mind about Lincoln. This was partly a matter of personality—although they met only three times, the more Douglass saw of Lincoln the more he liked him. Lincoln, too, had changed. He had been radicalized by the war, and this had made him more attractive to Douglass. In turn, Douglass had come to understand the power of mainstream politics and to appreciate what an astute politician like Lincoln could accomplish in a democracy where elected officials were responsible to an electorate that was rarely sympathetic to the demands of radicals like Frederick Douglass.

No doubt the assassination colored Douglass's later views. Moreover, as southern blacks were subjected to an intensifying campaign of terror, as the freedoms won in war

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Douglass to Samuel J. May, August 30, 1861, *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 469; Frederick Douglass, "The President and His Speeches," *Douglass' Monthly*, September 1862, in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1950), 3:268.

4. Frederick Douglass, "Our Work Is Not Done," *Proceedings of the American Anti-Slavery Society at Its Third Decade, Held in the City of Philadelphia, Dec. 3d and 4th, 186[3]* (New York, 1864) in *Life and Writings*, 3:385.

5. "To an English Correspondent," *The Liberator*, September 16, 1864, in *Life and Writings*, 3:404.

6. Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1893), reprinted in *Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Library of America, 1994), 797; *Life and Times*, 804.

were whittled down by an uneasy peace and the political rights hammered into place during Reconstruction were sawed away, Douglass looked back wistfully at the legacy of Abraham Lincoln. This was neither nostalgia nor hazy retrospection. The two men had been converging for years, long before Lincoln's assassination. Thereafter the same person Douglass had once denounced as the mindless mouthpiece of proslavery racism came into clearer focus as a great politician and a great man.

Douglass lived a long and remarkable life. He had known many of the greatest reformers of his age. And yet, "take him for all in all Abraham Lincoln was one of the noblest wisest and best men I ever knew." It had taken Douglass some time to reach that conclusion, but for that it was all the more heartfelt.



A great man; Tender of heart, strong of nerve,  
of boundless patience and broadest sympathies  
with no motive apart from his country.  
He could receive counsel from a child  
and give counsel to a sage. The simple  
could approach him with ease and  
the learned approached him with  
deference. Take him for all in all  
Abraham Lincoln was one of the noblest  
wisest and best men I ever knew.

Frederick Douglass

1880

Frederick Douglass on Abraham Lincoln for Osborn Oldroyd, The Lincoln Memorial: Album  
Immortelles (1882). (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09091)

*Transcript of Frederick Douglass's  
tribute to Abraham Lincoln, 1880*

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A great man: Tender of heart, strong of nerve, of boundless patience and broadest sympathies, with no motive apart from his country. He could receive counsel from a child and give counsel to a sage. The simple ~~could~~ approached him with ease, and the learned approached him with deference. Take him for all in all Abraham Lincoln was one of the noblest wisest and best men I ever knew.

Fred<sup>k</sup>. Douglass  
1880



*Anna Murray Douglass, ca. 1880*  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC007752.03)

## “The Post in the Centre of My House”: Douglass Mourns His Wife Anna

BY LEIGH K. FOUGHT

In August 1882 Parker Pillsbury wrote to express his sympathies to his long-time associate and some-time adversary Frederick Douglass on the death of Douglass’s wife Anna. Melancholic poetry infused Douglass’s response, tinged with bittersweet irony that neither probably perceived. After all, while Pillsbury extended his condolences to Frederick on the loss of Anna, Anna had lost Frederick to the abolitionist movement on the very day the two men had met forty years earlier in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Furthermore, Pillsbury had been the instrument of that bereavement. Douglass vividly recalls that anti-slavery society meeting in his reply to Pillsbury.<sup>1</sup>

Pillsbury also remembered the meeting in New Bedford’s Liberty Hall on August 9, 1841. In his autobiography, published the same year as Anna Douglass’s death, he recalls that the as-yet unknown Douglass had given a speech that electrified the Bristol Anti-Slavery Society meeting. Pillsbury and his companions, all agents for the American Anti-Slavery Society, invited him to their meeting on Nantucket the next day. There Douglass accepted a new job as a paid lecturer for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. From that day on, his fame grew and he spent ever increasing lengths of time on the road.<sup>2</sup>

Pillsbury noted Anna accompanied her husband to the Nantucket meeting, but Frederick did not mention her attendance in his own autobiography.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not she did attend had little bearing on Anna’s subsequent involvement in her husband’s work. The wives of abolitionists in similar positions never traveled with their itinerant husbands, nor were they expected to, and childbearing ultimately kept women speakers close to home. Anna was already two months pregnant with the third of five Douglass children when her husband took to the lecture circuit. She also shared in the financial responsibilities of the household, not only in management but also by taking in laundry and, later,

1. The letter is addressed to “Friend” Pillsbury, probably Parker Pillsbury, a fellow abolitionist.

2. Parker Pillsbury, *Acts of the Anti-Slavery Apostles* (Concord NY, 1883), 324–328. Douglass’s own differing memories of the New Bedford and Nantucket meetings can be found in his later two autobiographies: *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ed. John Blassingame (New Haven: Yale University Press, [1855] 2003), 205–206, and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, ed. John R. McKivigan, et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, [1881, 1892] 2012), 1:167–168.

3. Pillsbury, *Acts of the Anti-Slavery Apostles*, 325.

by sewing piecework and keeping boarders. Early in her husband's career, she joined other abolitionist wives in the Lynn Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society. But while in Rochester and later in her life she did not participate in any formal organized reform activities beyond keeping those boarders, who included abolitionists, black civil rights activists, and many of the self-emancipated of the Underground Railroad. With her husband so often absent, even after settling into his newspaper editorship, Anna became a self-sufficient manager of their household, so much so that their daughter Rosetta ended up remembering her father as "mother's honored guest."<sup>4</sup> Frederick was necessary to the existence of their household, but not its operation.

Along with the loss of her husband to the road came the loss of her husband to new worlds that Anna had neither the ability nor the interest to enter. When the young pair had met in Baltimore in 1838, they could never have envisioned the turn their lives would take a mere three years later at that anti-slavery society meeting in New Bedford. When Anna Murray had financed Frederick's escape and joined him in marriage, the young couple had probably envisioned a future in the black working class. Anna, although free, had worked for wages since she was at least sixteen and seemed to have conveyed to her daughter that her opportunity for reading and education was lost by the time she married.<sup>5</sup> They were for her already literate husband and her children to pursue.

For Frederick reading and education formed the bedrock of his sense of a liberated self. As he met a wider range of formally educated people, he discovered worlds of literature and philosophy heretofore unknown. His ability to synthesize new concepts into his ideology astounded and then alienated both his wife and new-found associates such as Pillsbury. The latter criticized the young abolitionist for abandoning his early anti-slavery strategies. The former watched the scrappy, young caulker she had met in Baltimore become a sophisticated intellectual always pursuing new ideas, and a man who found reading not merely a means to an economic end, but a pleasure unto itself.

As for Anna, her sense of self came through her ability to excel in the work she had done since she was sixteen, her pride in her own home, and her role as wife and mother. She became, in this way, the model of True Womanhood, cherishing the separate, domestic, and private feminine sphere. This was part of the conservatism to which her husband referred in his letter to Pillsbury. Yet, as Frederick became a public man, more people intruded upon their household as part of his work and out of curiosity. Anna, in her role as guardian of the private sphere, protected his and their family's privacy. Privacy, domesticity, and the model of femininity touted by the prescriptive literature of True Womanhood excluded black women. Therefore, Anna's embrace of them was itself subversive.<sup>6</sup>

The women with whom Frederick associated in reform circles, who became his

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4. The most intimate view into Anna Douglass's life comes from her daughter, Rosetta Douglass Sprague, *My Mother As I Recall Her* (1900), Family Papers, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress. See also "Anna Murray, Mrs. Frederick Douglass, 1810–1848," Chapter 2 in Leigh Fought, *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 41–69.

5. See the debate between Carleton Mabee and Margaret Washington about Sojourner Truth and literacy, in which Washington also mentions Anna Douglass, for comparison. Carleton Mabee, "Sojourner Truth, Bold Prophet: Why Did She Never Learn to Read?" *New York History* 69, 1 (1988): 55–77; Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 133, 216, 409–10 n.13..

6. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820–1860," *American Quarterly* 18, 2, part 1 (Summer 1966): 151–174. See Erica Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).



*Frederick Douglass (seated at the table at left) at an anti-slavery gathering in Cazenovia, New York, August 22, 1850, by Ezra Greenleaf Weld (National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution)*

friends, and whom he encouraged their daughter to emulate represented a new brand of womanhood who pushed against those types of roles, demanding more education, better and equal employment outside of the home, and suffrage. Douglass's second wife, Helen Pitts, fit this mold.

Over the decades, migraine, arthritis, and neuralgia had plagued Anna. The housework that she had always insisted on doing herself had taken its toll on her body, as did the stress of marriage to a man who constantly put himself in danger and strained the boundaries of their household. Confined to bed after a stroke had paralyzed her in July 1882, she persisted in commanding the younger women of the family in the daily routine, leaving no question as to who remained in charge of the household until she lost consciousness in her final days. The end came on August 4, 1882. At her bedside, her husband cried to their daughter, "Ah! Rosa, if she could have only lived a few years longer."<sup>7</sup>

Anna and Frederick Douglass would have seen their forty-fourth wedding anniversary on September 15. Of all people, she had known him longest, from his days as "Fred Bailey," the enslaved teenager with the swagger to brag that he intended to become a senator, to the sage activist courted by presidents. As in his letter to Pillsbury, in writing to another friend, Douglass affirmed that Anna was the "post in the center of my house and held us together."<sup>8</sup> Biblically and in nineteenth-century popular culture, the "house" had the connotation of both a dwelling and a sanctuary, and the central pillar bore the load of the entire structure. For the time being, with her loss, all seemed to collapse. Anna's death came as the most personal "shock and calamity." The scope of his activist life, which had accelerated when he met Pillsbury, had nearly spanned the length of his marriage to Anna, the woman who had made that life, in a large part, possible.

7. Rosetta Douglass Sprague to Susan B. Anthony, Takoma Park [DC], January 27, 1896, Frederick Douglass Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Collection, Howard University.

8. Frederick Douglass to Sarah M. Loguen, August 12, 1882, quoted in Philip S. Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass on Women's Rights* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1992), 22.

Washington D.C. August 20. 1882

My dear Friend Pillsbury.

No differences of opinion, no criticisms upon my course which you may have been called upon to make, have ever disturbed for a moment the "deep sea" of my reverence and affection for your name and character, since I first saw your face, heard your voice, and felt your amazing power of thought and feeling, in the old Liberty Hall New Bedford, now more than forty years ago. From that hour until now there has been no break in my thought and feeling towards you.

A letter from Frederick Douglass to [Parker] Pillsbury, August 20, 1882  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC07752.01, p. 1)

*Transcript of a letter from  
Frederick Douglass to [Parker] Pillsbury, August 20, 1882*

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Washington D.C. August 20. 1882

My dear Friend Pillsbury,

No differences of opinion, no criticisms upon my course which you may have been called upon to make, have ever disturbed for a moment the “deep sea” of my reverence and affection for your value and character, since I first saw your face, heard your voice, and felt your amazing power of thought and feeling, in the old Liberty Hall New Bedford, now more than forty years ago. From that hour until now there has been no break in my thought and feeling towards you. Thanks for your kind letter. Mrs. Douglass was all you say of her and more. She was the post in the centre of my house. Different we were in many things. She was conservative and I radical, she was for the old I for the new, she did not care to learn to read— and was thus measurably shut out from the things that interested me but in all the duties of mother and wife, she deserves all you have said of her. Two people could not well live together forty and four years as we have done, without the death of either being a shock and a calamity.

With best wishes for you and yours

I am yours sincerely

Fred<sup>k</sup>. Douglass

## Frederick Douglass and the “Progress of American Liberty”

BY JAMES O. HORTON

In a letter to an old friend in 1884, Frederick Douglass touches on key moments, both hopeful and discouraging, in his experience of post–Civil War America. He reveals to Amy Post his frustration with the public reaction to his recent marriage to Helen Pitts, a white woman. (His first wife, Anna Murray Douglass, a black woman, had died in 1882.) Amy Post and her husband, Isaac, were Quaker abolitionists active in the Underground Railroad. They had been friends with Douglass since the early 1840s, when he and Anna moved to Rochester. Amy had assisted Douglass in the 1850s with financial support for his newspaper, the *North Star*, and had helped look after his family when he fled authorities pursuing him for complicity in John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859. Though Isaac Post had died shortly after the Civil War, Frederick and Amy had remained close friends.

Here, despite his regret at having missed Amy in Rochester, Douglass sounds upbeat looking back over his extensive honeymoon tour with Helen through the Midwest, New York State, Canada, and New England. Undoubtedly to his relief, he and his new wife had met with no insults or rebuffs, in sharp contrast to many of his travels before the Civil War, when he was turned away from eating houses, confined to segregated quarters on trains and ships, and openly insulted in the street. His recent experience seemed to have raised his estimation of the nation’s progress toward racial equality, although his optimism was shown to be premature when the Supreme Court ruled segregation constitutional in 1896, the year after Douglass’s death.

The trip was a respite from the controversy that the mixed-race couple’s wedding had caused. The private ceremony had been at the home of Francis Grimké, a black minister and the nephew of famed white abolitionists Angelina and Sarah Grimké. The wedding was an intimate affair. Blanche Kelso Bruce, a black US senator from Mississippi, and his wife attended as witnesses along with Grimké’s wife and two house guests. But the newlyweds’ privacy did not last long. That evening, newspaper reporters descended, demanding details of this wedding between a white woman and America’s most prominent black man. Criticism emerged from both blacks and whites. Grimké received hate mail, including one letter whose author, unaware that Grimké was black, threatened that “any white minister who would marry a Negro to a white woman ought to be tarred and



*Frederick Douglass with Helen Pitts, his second wife (seated), and her sister Eva Pitts  
(National Park Service)*

feathered.”<sup>1</sup> Some African Americans viewed Douglass’s marriage as a display of contempt for black women. Others charged that he had married a “common, poor white woman” for the status of her color alone. In reality, her background was hardly common. A graduate of Mount Holyoke, a descendant of *Mayflower* passengers John and Priscilla Alden, and a distant relative to the John Adams family, Helen had taught at the Hampton Institute before becoming Douglass’s secretary in the 1880s. She had assisted him in preparing revisions for his third and last autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* ([1881] 1892).

To compound their problems, family members on both sides also objected to the match. Helen’s father, Gideon Pitts, despite his lifelong abolitionism and his admiration for Douglass, refused to admit Douglass to his home and soon broke off all relations with his daughter. Douglass’s adult children also kept their distance and never completely reconciled with Helen, even after their father’s death. Nonetheless, Helen remained faithful to Douglass’s life purpose, working to preserve Cedar Hill and to memorialize her husband’s achievements as an inspiration to future generations.

The letter to Amy Post marks a high point in Douglass’s deeply mixed experience of nineteenth-century America. The acceptance he and Helen found in their travels encouraged his faith in the possibilities for the country. He recognized the nation’s multiracial character and believed in its future. Once, when challenged about his choice of wives, he explained that his first wife was the color of his mother and his second the color of his father. Amy Post, Douglass’s “dear friend,” understood.

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1. Francis J. Grimké, “The Second Marriage of Frederick Douglass” *Journal of Negro History* 19, no. 3 (July 1934): 324–329.

Washington D.C. August 27. 1884

My dear Friend Amy Post.

I wish I could tell you how glad I was to find your letter to Helen and myself on our return home from our months tour or how sorry I was not to find you in Rochester during my brief visit to my old home. Your absence made Rochester much less to me than it would have been had you been there. Then too Mrs Hallowell and Willie were both absent. Your dear boys, Jacob and Willie, were the same and as cordial as ever. All else was changed. I ought not perhaps to say this, for I looked through your parlour, where I have so often met kind friends and saw the furniture and pictures that reminded me of old times. While I regretted your absence I felt a pleasure in the thought that you had strength

A letter from Frederick Douglass to Amy Post, August 27, 1884  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC05819, p. 1)

*Transcript of a letter from  
Frederick Douglass to Amy Post, August 27, 1884*

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Washington D.C. August 27. 1884.

My dear Friend Amy Post:

I wish I could tell you how glad I was to find your letter to Helen and myself on our return home from our months tour or how sorry I was not to find you in Rochester during my brief visit to my old home. Your absence made Rochester much less to me than it would have been had you been there. Then too Mrs Hallowell and Willis were both absent. Your dear Boys, Jacob and Willie, were the same and as cordial as ever. All else was changed. I ought not perhaps to say this, for I looked through your parlour, where I have so often met kind friends and saw the furniture and pictures that reminded me of old times. While I regretted your absence I felt a pleasure in the thought that you had strength for so long a journey in the East. By this time I hope you are safely at home and that you feel about as happy in reaching it as I did on reaching my home here a few days ago. Helen and I have had a delightful tour. From here to Chicago to Battle Creek, Niagara Falls – Rochester, Geneva, Syracuse, Oswego – Thousand Islands, Montreal, White Mountains – Portland, Boston, Fall River – Plymouth – New Bedford – 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 the invitations I used to receive for lectures and speeches, and that the momentary breeze 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. What business has the world with the color of my wife? It wants to know how old she is? how 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: that 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. I felt that I had both before you wrote them. Please remember me very kindly to Willie, Jacob, and all your dear circle – and

Believe me always truly yours  
Frederick Douglass

## “Hidden Practices”: Frederick Douglass on Black Achievement in the South

BY EDWARD L. AYERS

Frederick Douglass recalled his feelings when slavery came to an end, after so much work and so many sacrifices. “I felt that I had reached the end of the noblest and best part of my life,” he admitted. But Douglass hardly underestimated the challenges facing the four million people emancipated in part by his labors. Even during the Civil War, he foresaw that “sullen, silent, and gloomy but subdued hate shall settle upon the Southern mind.” In the face of what was sure to be white resistance to every step of black freedom, “a profounder wisdom, a holier zeal, than belongs to the prosecution of war, will be required.”<sup>1</sup>

Once freedom came, Douglass offered surprising counsel to northern whites who asked what should be done “with the Negro”: “Do nothing with us! . . . All I ask is, give him a chance to stand on his own legs! Let him alone!”<sup>2</sup> Douglass wanted black southerners simply to have a fair chance. He wanted them to be treated like other Americans, with equality in the courts, at the polls, and in the marketplace. Douglass felt confident that black Americans would succeed if they had the opportunity.

Fittingly, Douglass’s major theme in the lectures he gave in the postwar era was “Self-Made Men.” He gave that speech fifty times, before every kind of audience. The talk echoed the themes of his great speeches of the antebellum years, when he told the story of his own self-fashioning as he made himself free. Douglass saw the harsh trials of the post-Reconstruction South as a test for black Americans, a crucible in which their greatness would be forged. He wanted his fellow black citizens to prove themselves, without aid and without excuse. Poverty stood as the greatest enemy of African Americans, he told a black audience in the middle of Reconstruction, because poverty “makes us a helpless, hopeless, dependent, and dispirited people, the target for the contempt and scorn of all around us.” As soon as black Americans can display a “class of men noted for enterprise, industry, economy, and success,” he assured another African American audience, “we shall no

1. Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), 453; Frederick Douglass, “The Work of the Future,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, November 1862.

2. Frederick Douglass, “What the Black Man Wants,” January 26, 1865, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, vol. 4: 1864–1880, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 68.

longer have any trouble in the matter of civil and political rights.”<sup>3</sup> In his emphasis on individual accomplishment and on the power of the marketplace as the ultimate judge of worth, Douglass shifted the responsibility onto black shoulders. His words, perhaps to our surprise, sound more like Booker T. Washington than W. E. B. Du Bois.

Douglass’s consistent view of black progress is clearly on display in a letter from 1887. Use the opportunities before you, he counsels his unknown correspondent, and have confidence that effort and experience will succeed. A “wonderful revolution in the public sentiment of the Southern states” had taken place because black lawyers were permitted to practice in southern courts, Douglass had heard.<sup>4</sup>

In the schools of the South, though, Douglass understood, African American people faced discrimination in funding; as a result, black schools suffered from shorter days and lower-paid teachers. Douglass wanted black teachers for black schools, fearing that the only whites who would teach black students did so because they were forced to by “their necessities” rather than by dedication.

In this letter, so balanced between hopefulness and despair, Douglass observes that “Our wrongs are not so much now in written laws which all may see—but the hidden practices of a people who have not yet abandoned the idea of mastery and dominion over their fellow man.” Unfortunately, the ideas of mastery and dominion were soon to take legal form. White southerners, worried that their control was being eroded by the very forces of black advancement Douglass celebrated, began to create an elaborate system of laws “for all to see,” that instituted white determination to sustain “dominion over their fellow man.” Even as Douglass wrote this letter, legislators across the South were forging laws of segregation and disfranchisement that would shackle the South for generations to come. In the late 1880s, unsatisfied with leaving black people alone and seeing them prosper, white southerners segregated one public space after another and systematically undermined black voting.

Frederick Douglass, speaking in the determined language of American self-help, did not anticipate such a campaign against black people, brought on by the fears their very success unleashed. But in his remaining years, he fought against discrimination just as he had fought against slavery, as a violation of American ideals.

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3. Frederick Douglass, “Agriculture and Black Progress,” September 18, 1873, in *Douglass Papers Series One*, 4:19; Douglass, *Life and Times*, 616.

4. Frederick Douglass to an unknown correspondent, November 23, 1887, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC08992.

My dear Sir: Pardon delay -  
answer to your letter made  
compere enquiry necessary. From  
all I can learn Colored Lawyers are  
admitted to practice in Southern Courts,  
and I am very glad to admit the  
fact. For it implies a wonderful  
revolution in the public sentiment of  
the Southern States. I have not yet  
learned what are the inequalities  
between the races as to school privileges  
at the South. In some of the States  
the time allotted to Colored schools  
is less than that allowed to whites.  
And I have heard and believe that  
in none of the States are the teachers  
of Colored schools as well paid as  
the teachers of white schools. My  
own observation has been that  
white teachers of Colored schools  
in the Southern States, show but  
little interest in their pupils.  
This is not strange, since they

A letter from Frederick Douglass to an unknown correspondent, November 23, 1887  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC08992, p. 1)

*Transcript of a letter from  
Frederick Douglass to an unknown correspondent, November 23, 1887*

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My dear sir: Pardon delay – answer to your letter made careful enquiry necessary. From all I can learn colored Lawyers are admitted to practice in Southern Courts, and I am very glad to admit the fact, for it implies a wonderful revolution in the public sentiments of the Southern States. I have not yet learned what are the inequalities between the races as to school privileges at the South. In some of the states the time allotted to colored schools is less than that allowed to whites. And I have heard and believe that in none of the states are the teachers of colored schools as well paid as the teachers of white schools. My own observation has been that white teachers of colored schools in the southern states, show but little interests in their pupils. This is not strange, since they have been selected as teachers more because of their necessities, than from any interests they have shown in the progress and elevation of the colored race. I say this not of all, but of those in Virginia for instance who have come under my observation.

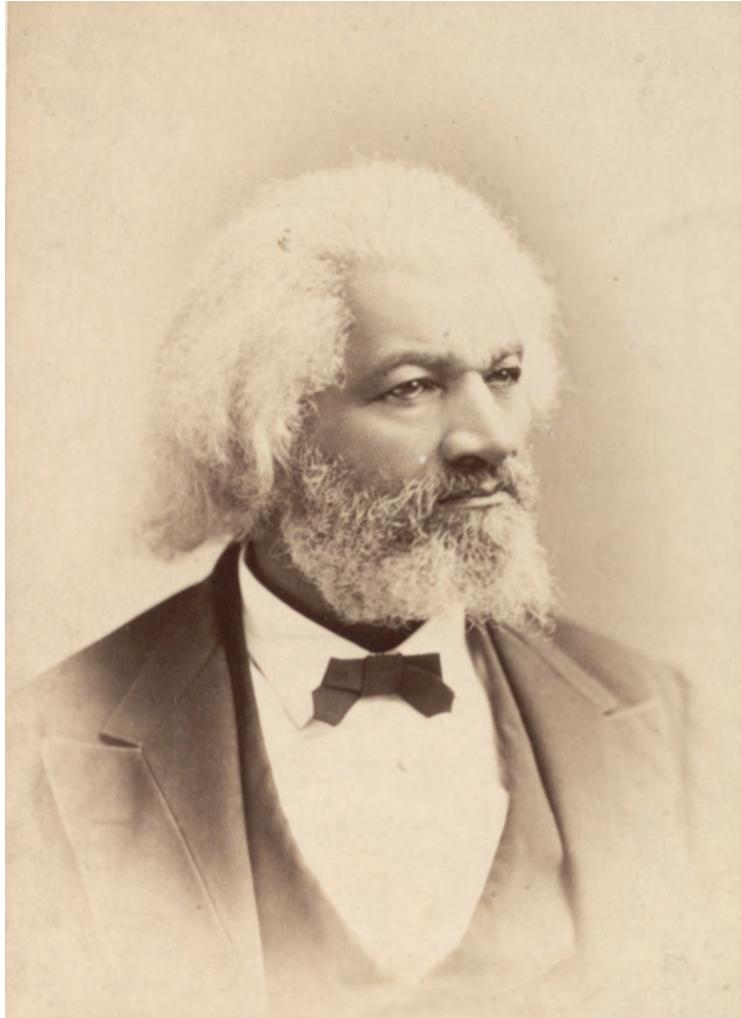
In Kentucky I believe so far as the law is concerned equal advantages are extended to colored children for Education, and the same may be true of other states. I think the Bureau of Education will give you all the information you may require on this branch of the subject of your enquiries. Our wrongs are not so much now in written laws which all may see – but the hidden practices of a people who have not yet abandoned the idea of mastery and dominion over their fellow man.

With great Respect  
Yours truly

Fred.<sup>k</sup> Douglass

Cedar Hill Anacostia D.C.

Nov: 23. 1887



*Frederick Douglass, photograph by C. M. Bell, Washington DC, ca. 1885  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC05146)*

## Frederick Douglass on the Disfranchisement of Blacks in the South

BY LUCAS MOREL

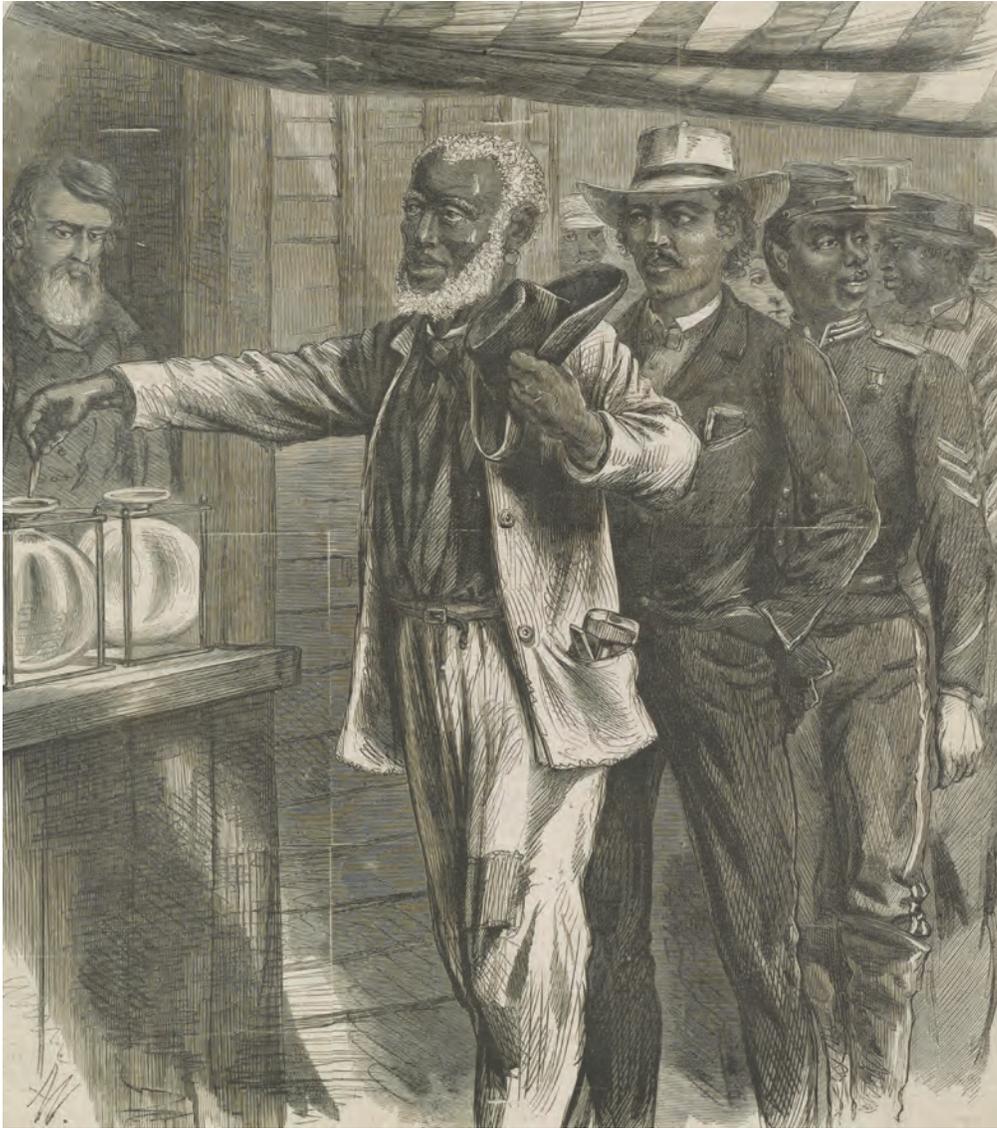
In a short but poignant letter written in 1888, Frederick Douglass shares his concern about the suppression of black voting with Robert Adams (1816–1900), a white abolitionist whom he had known for over forty years. Adams and his wife, née Lydia Ann Stowe, lived in Fall River, Massachusetts, about fifteen miles from New Bedford, where Douglass had found refuge as an escaped slave. Fall River was the home of abolition societies and a way station of the Underground Railroad for fugitive slaves fleeing to Canada. It was also one of several port towns that thrived on textile mills, an industry that pitted profit against humanity, as these communities earned their living from the commerce in cotton.

Douglass had previously expressed gratitude to Robert Adams in a March 1888 letter, sharing that upon arriving in Fall River in 1841, “I had not fully realized the possibility that a white man could recognize a colored man as a man and a brother but I saw such recognition in your face and have ever since, in sunshine and in storm, felt safe in your friendship.”<sup>1</sup> Other noteworthy black activists hosted by the Adamses included Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman.

In his December 1888 letter, Douglass worries about the scare tactics being used by whites who fear that being outnumbered by blacks at the polls—or “negro supremacy”—would threaten their rights by the exercise of mere majority might. He called it a “humbug” or empty bluster, aimed at exploiting white insecurity in the face of black freedom.<sup>2</sup> Almost twenty years had passed since the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, which supposedly guaranteed that the right to vote “shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” One can imagine Douglass’s frustration at having to defend black enfranchisement so many years after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. Douglass liked to declare, “There was a right side in the late war!” Surely the victors would not treat their enemies better than the blacks who came to their aid upon emancipation!

1. Frederick Douglass to Robert Adams, March 23, 1888, Rare Books, Boston Public Library.

2. Frederick Douglass to Robert Adams, December 4, 1888, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC04997.



*"The First Vote," by Alfred Waud, Harper's Weekly, November 16, 1867  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01733.09)*

It was during the war, after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, that Douglass first called for the vote. As he saw the end of the war approaching, he believed that the urgency to secure equal rights for the freedmen would soon wane as the memory of the war faded from view. He therefore called for the vote for blacks. Without it, Douglass predicted that blacks would not be able to defend their freedom, becoming in essence the slaves of the community after being the slaves of individuals. His fears came true. Early in Reconstruction, blacks in the South exercised the vote. But when former Confederates resumed control of state government, they employed legal tactics and social intimidation to rob black Americans of their constitutional rights.

In calling out "the clamour raised for the disfranchisement of the colored voters of the South," Douglass may have been referring to an essay published by Senator Wade

Hampton in June 1888. Entitled “What Negro Supremacy Means,” it argued that South Carolina and other southern states had enough experience with blacks controlling state and local politics during Reconstruction to conclude that white submission to black rule would produce moral, social, and commercial ruin. It was a widespread sentiment among white southerners, most of whom despised what they called the “bayonet rule” of the federal government and viewed as the imposition of unqualified and corrupt black politicians during Reconstruction. Where blacks were a majority and the vote required no property or literacy qualification, “negro domination” was sure to prevail.

Douglass found this ironic turn of events a repeat of the race card played in earlier times by those who decried emancipation for fear of a race war, with “negroes going to cut their masters throats,” especially in areas where enslaved blacks outnumbered free whites. The fact that whites had long outnumbered blacks throughout the American colonies and states was lost on southern whites. They somehow forgot that white Americans, for many a generation, had used their strength of numbers to enslave most blacks and deny free blacks the full rights and privileges of American citizenship. If the federal government proved unwilling or unable to enforce the Reconstruction Amendments, blacks in the South would remain subject to “the old master class,” which led Douglass in April 1888 to denounce the “so-called emancipation as a stupendous fraud.”

A month before Douglass wrote his letter to Adams, former US senator Benjamin Harrison of Indiana was elected president. Harrison had called for “a pure ballot,” echoing the Republican Party platform as it endorsed “the supreme and sovereign right of every lawful citizen, rich or poor, native or foreign born, white or black, to cast one free ballot in public elections, and to have that ballot duly counted.” Douglass himself had lambasted southern Democrats for “outrages committed upon our political rights, by means of bull-dozing and Kukluxing, Mississippi plans, fraudulent counts, tissue ballots and the like devices.”<sup>3</sup> At the age of 70, he had campaigned for the Republican ticket in several states that fall, maintaining a hectic speaking schedule that lasted until the day he died on February 20, 1895.

In 1889 President Harrison appointed Douglass minister to Haiti and Santo Domingo (the present-day Dominican Republic). An outspoken defender of voting rights and education for black Americans, Harrison proved unable to get Congress to pass laws securing civil rights for blacks. The collaboration of blacks and whites to promote the rights for all Americans, symbolized by this December 1888 letter of Frederick Douglass to Robert Adams, continued for more than seventy-five years before Congress passed the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965.

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3. Frederick Douglass, “Parties Were Made for Men, Not Men for Parties,” in *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, vol. 5: 1881–1895 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 107.

Cedar Hill, Dec. 4, 1888  
Anacostia, D. C.

My dear Robert Adams.

Thanks for the paper containing  
an account of the Fall river Aldermanic  
election. I was glad to observe the part you  
were able to take in that pleasant session.  
I was also glad to see that your brother  
Charles was also there.

I am a good deal disturbed  
with you by the clamour raised for  
the disfranchisement of the colored voters  
of the South. The cry about negro supremacy  
is like the old cry you and I so often heard  
in the old times about the negroes going to  
cut their masters throats. At all humbug -  
there is nothing in it. Kind regards to  
Mrs Adams and yourself in which Mrs  
Douglass joins me. Yours very truly  
Fred. Douglass

A letter from Frederick Douglass to Robert Adams, December 4, 1888  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC04997)

*Transcript of a letter from  
Frederick Douglass to Robert Adams, December 4, 1888*

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Dec. 4 1888

My dear Robert Adams.

Thanks for the paper containing an account of the Fall [R]iver Aldermanic reunion. I was glad to observe the part you were able to take in that pleasant occasion. I was also glad to see that your Brother Charles was also there.

I am a good deal disturbed just now by the clamour raised for the disfranchisement of the colored voters of the South. The cry about negro supremacy is like the old cry you and I so often heard in the old time about the negroes going to cut their masters throats. Its all humbug— There is nothing in it. Kind regards to Mrs Adams and yourself in which Mrs Douglas[s] joins me. Yours very truly

Fred<sup>k</sup> Douglass

## Frederick Douglass: An Example for the Twenty-First Century

BY NOELLE N. TRENT

In 1893, approximately two years before his death, Frederick Douglass wrote a chronological summary of his life for one of his correspondents, Charles C. Pierce, a clergyman in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Douglass probably drafted the letter while sitting in his library at Cedar Hill in the Anacostia neighborhood of Washington DC.<sup>1</sup> Surrounded by hundreds of books, he might have glanced out the window at his estate, reflecting on the major achievements of his life, namely his transition from a person viewed as property to a public figure whose opinions were sought on national and international issues. In the five decades covered by his chronology for Pierce, Douglass attained his freedom in 1838, “took refuge in England from slave hunters in 1845,” “raised colored troops” during the Civil War, and served as a federal officer and diplomat in the 1870s and 1880s. Frederick Douglass was by 1893 a firmly established self-made man and civil rights activist who would continue to fight for equality until his dying day.

Recounting the events of his life was not unusual for Douglass. He published three autobiographies: *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845); *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855); and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, revised 1892). Throughout his career, Douglass was an in-demand orator. His most frequently delivered speech was “Self-Made Men,” first delivered in 1859. At the time, the idea of the self-made man was very popular. The self-made man rose to success without the benefit of external advantage, or from obscurity on strength or personal merit. The self-made man was considered uniquely American because, according to the country’s founding principles, all men were created equal and there were equal opportunities for all. However, this idealized self-made man was a white man. African Americans and other minorities were excluded, and were subject to systemic oppression and racism. In his popular speech, Douglass challenged the prevailing social notions of the self-made man, demanding that his audience reconsider the intelligence and capabilities of African Americans and advocating the creation of a more equitable society.

Douglass’s celebration of the self-made man may seem very different from his other

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1. Douglass’s final home, Cedar Hill, at 1411 W Street SE, Washington DC, now the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site run by the National Park Service, is open to visitors.

writings. However, in this speech he presented his life and the lives of his contemporaries as evidence of equality. As an enslaved child, Douglass was prohibited by law from learning to read and write. He received a few lessons from his mistress, Sophia Auld, but had to struggle to continue his education. Douglass traced the work in the notebooks of his owner's son, Thomas, and bribed local boys to teach him. He later read the *Columbian Orator*, which helped him develop his public-speaking skills. Through his own ingenuity, Douglass became an educated man and a sought-after spokesman for the abolition movement.<sup>2</sup>

If Douglass and other black people could achieve success in the midst of slavery and entrenched racism, what more could they achieve in freedom? Douglass famously stated in his speech, "The nearest approach to justice to the Negro for the past is to do him justice in the present. Throw open to him the doors of the schools, the factories, the workshops, and of all mechanical industries. If he fails then, let him fail! I can, however, assure you that he will not fail. Already has he proven it. . . . Give him all the facilities for honest and successful livelihood, and in all honorable avocations receive him as a man among men."<sup>3</sup>

Frederick Douglass loved the United States and believed in its principles. If the country was to remain true to its ideals, it would need to provide an opportunity for all men and women to succeed. But today, the types of discrimination Douglass fought still exist, from police brutality to the gender pay gap, to inequitable access to quality food, education, employment, and housing. In some ways, it's difficult to take Douglass, a nineteenth-century man, and place him in the vastly different twenty-first century. However, inspired by Douglass, we can demand that resources and access be provided to all. Today people continue to succeed without such resources, but, as Douglass did, we must imagine what more we can accomplish. Like him, we also must remain activists throughout our lives.

For Douglass, the fight for equality did not end when slavery ended, and he did not fight only for African American men. Women's rights was a lifelong passion. He had participated in the landmark women's rights conference in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 and signed the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments. On February 20, 1895, Frederick Douglass delivered his final speech to a women's rights group in Washington DC. He returned to his Anacostia home for dinner with the intention of speaking at another engagement that evening. However, he collapsed in the foyer of Cedar Hill, and passed away a few hours later. Until his last breath, Douglass was concerned with improving the world around him. President Kennedy best described Douglass's impact in 1961:

[Douglass] can give inspiration to people all around the world who are still struggling to secure their full human rights. . . . By advancing that cause through law, democratic methods and peaceful action, we in America can give an example of the freedom which Frederick Douglass symbolizes.<sup>4</sup>

As the twenty-first century successors to Douglass's legacy, we should aspire to his standard.

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2. Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 16–18, 86–88.

3. Frederick Douglas, "Self-Made Men: An Address delivered in Carlisle Pennsylvania in March 1893," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, ed. John W. Blassingame and John McKivigan, vol. 5: *1881–1893* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1992), 556.

4. John F. Kennedy to Rosa Gragg, March 2, 1961.

Cedar Hill.  
Anacostia, D. C.

A Slave 1837. Free man 1838. Took  
refuge in England from slave hunters  
in 1845. Ransomed 1846. Fugitive 1847.  
In England 1859, on account John Brown raid.  
Raised colored troops during Rebellion. Sent  
by General Grant with Commission to Santo-  
Domingo 1871. Fugitive at large, New York 1872.  
Appointed U. S. Marshal, D. C. 1877. by Act  
Fayer. Appointed Recorder of Deeds for the  
D. C. by President Garfield 1881.  
Appointed Minister and Consul General  
to Hayti, by President Harrison 1889-

Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass's account of his achievements, 1893  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC07762)

*Transcript of Frederick Douglass's account of his  
achievements to Charles C. Pierce, 1893*

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A slave 1837. Free man 1838. Took refuge in England from slave hunters in 1845. Ransomed 1846. Editor. 1847. In England 1859. on account John Brown raid. Raised colored troops during Rebellion. Sent by General Grant with Commission to Santo-Domingo 1871. Elector at large, New York 1872. Appointed U.S. Marshal. D.C. 1877. by Pres<sup>t</sup>. Hayes. Appointed Recorder of Deeds for the D.C. by President Garfield 1881. Appointed Minister and Consul General to Hayti, by President Harrison 1889–

Frederick Douglass

## Reaching across the Racial Divide: Douglass to Benjamin Auld

BY DAVID S. REYNOLDS

At seventy-six Frederick Douglass could look back on a life of singular distinction. Having escaped from slavery at twenty, he had gone on to become a celebrated reformer, orator, newspaper editor, and author. During the Civil War he had helped improve the treatment of black soldiers and had enlightened Lincoln on the issue of race. He later had promoted African American suffrage and the North's program of Radical Reconstruction. When that program collapsed in 1876, he led the movement against racial discrimination. His abilities won him government appointments, including an ambassadorship to Haiti. All along, he conducted himself with courage and dignity. A tall man of majestic bearing, he possessed undeniable magnetism.

One personal issue plagued him. He did not know his birthday. A letter of March 24, 1894, written to Benjamin Auld, the son of Douglass's master, has a special poignancy. Since many slaves, including Douglass, were the product of illicit unions between white slaveholders and female chattels, birthdays and parentage were often kept hidden. As he writes to Auld, "I have always been troubled by the thought of having no birth day."<sup>1</sup>

The scraps of information he assembles in the letter led him to conclude that he was born in 1817. We now know that he was off by one year. Douglass was born in February 1818 on Maryland's Eastern Shore, where he was owned by Aaron Anthony. When he was eight he was transferred to the family of Hugh Auld, a ship carpenter in Baltimore, where Douglass served as a domestic slave for seven years.

The 1894 letter to Hugh's second son, Benjamin, fills out our understanding of this crucial period in Douglass's life as a slave. On the Baltimore streets white bullies constantly attacked Douglass. As he puts it, "Jim Teel and other big bad boys would set upon me & beat me." He adds with stirring understatement, "I however got along pretty well and soon learned to defend myself." Even as a boy, then, Douglass had the fighting spirit that later drove his memorable fistfight with the cruel overseer Edward Covey.

The letter also shows Douglass's affection for decent whites. Douglass mentions Auld's "kind mother," Sophia Auld. Readers of Douglass's autobiography recall that Sophia was

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1. Frederick Douglass to Benjamin F. Auld, March 24, 1894, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC07484.01.

instinctively gentle with the young Frederick, astounding him with her goodness. She taught him his ABCs. Reading, in turn, contributed to his emancipation. The more he learned, the more eager he was to escape from slavery. He did so in September 1838, traveling north by train and boat disguised as a sailor.

Perhaps the most telling feature of the letter to Benjamin Auld is its gracious tone. Note the genial statements: “My dear sir and friend”; “you have made me deeply obliged to you”; “I value your letter highly”; “I give you my thanks and the assurance of my high Respect, esteem and best wishes for you and all who are dear to you.”

Why did Douglass express friendship to a man whose family had once held him as a slave?

The answer lies in Douglass’s ceaseless effort to replace division and enmity with unity and comradeship. He had long called for the integration of whites and blacks. Here he differed from many others. Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Harriet Beecher Stowe had all stated that blacks should be shipped abroad once they were emancipated due to allegedly innate racial differences. Black separatists like Henry Highland Garnet and Martin Delany advocated colonization for a different reason: so that blacks could found a nation of their own, independent of oppressive whites. After the failure of Reconstruction, disillusioned blacks known as Exodusters moved to Kansas to create all-black towns.

Douglass felt that such separation of whites and blacks dodged the race issue and created gross injustice. He affirmed the assimilation of blacks into mainstream society. He did what he could to reach across the racial divide, even when it meant embracing the son of his former master.

There is a sad irony about his friendly letter to Auld. It was written when America was moving toward the legalized segregation of blacks and whites. On February 20, 1895, less than a year after the Auld letter, Douglass died of a massive heart attack or stroke. The next year, *Plessy v. Ferguson* established the “separate but equal” doctrine that sped the rise of Jim Crow.

It would not be until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s that Douglass’s dream of equal justice for all would be revived on a wide scale. Even today, this dream is not yet fully realized.

Cedar Hill,  
Anacostia, D. C.

March 24 1894

Capt. B. F. Auld.

My dear Sir and friend:

By the pains you have taken to obtain for me the date when your father began ship building in conspiracy with Mr Edward Harrison on the city block you have made me deeply obliged to you. Should <sup>it</sup> ever be in my power to render you alike service or any other service, I beg you will not hesitate to call upon me. I value your letter highly. I think however that Mr Dorgan is mistaken. It must have been as early as '27. When your father went into business on the city block 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 matter died in

A letter from Frederick Douglass to Benjamin F. Auld, March 24, 1894  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC07484.01, p. 1)

*Transcript of a letter from  
Frederick Douglass to Benjamin F. Auld, March 24, 1894*

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Mch: 24 1894

Capt. B F. Auld.

My dear sir and friend:

By the pains you have taken to obtain for me the date when your father began ship building in company with Mr Edward Harrison on the city Block you have made me deeply obliged to you. Should it ever be in my power to render you alike service or any other service, I beg you will not hesitate to call upon me. I value your letter highly— I think however, that Mr Dorgan is mistaken. It must have been as early as 1827. When your father went into business on 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 there 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— and to carry your father's dinner from there to Dorgan & Bailey's ship yard where he was then employed. The only fear your kind mother then had in sending me was that Jim Teel and other big bad boys would set upon me & beat me. I however got along pretty well and soon learned to defend myself. We however, soon moved from Aliceana Street to a house that belonged to Dr Allender on Philpot Street near the entrance to Dorgan & Baileys ship yard. Gustavus who I am sorry to learn by your letter is in feeble health was then in the clothes of a very small boy— not big enough to send to school. 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. I am further confirmed in this because Mrs Amanda Sears was born Jan: 28. 1826. and that was after I went to live with your Father and Mother in Baltimore. In 1826. I was sent from Baltimore to Hillsboro— where your uncle Thomas lived— to be divided with the other property among the heirs— I was much exercised as to my fate. The thing I feared most was that I might fall to a branch of the family unfriendly to sending me back to my good home in Baltimore. Happy I was when I was told that I was the property of Mrs Lucretia for then I felt sure that I should go back to Baltimore to my good home. But my dear sir: You are a man of business and I must not take up your time further. I give you my thanks and the assurance of my high Respect, esteem and best wishes for you and all who are dear to you.

Frederick Douglass



## CONTRIBUTORS

**Edward L. Ayers** is president emeritus of the University of Richmond, where he is now Tucker-Boatwright Professor of the Humanities, and former dean of arts and sciences at the University of Virginia. A historian of the American South, Ayers has written and edited ten books. *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: The Civil War in the Heart of America, 1859–1864* (2003) won the Bancroft Prize for distinguished writing in American history, and *The Thin Light of Freedom: The Civil War and Emancipation in the Heart of America* (2017) won the Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize in 2018. Ayers has been awarded the National Humanities Medal.

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**James O. Horton** was the Benjamin Banneker Professor Emeritus of American Studies and History at George Washington University and historian emeritus of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. Horton's book *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (1979), co-authored with Lois Horton, his wife and scholarly collaborator, established his reputation as a leading scholar of African American social history. He edited, authored, and co-authored ten books, including *The Landmarks of African American History* (2005) and *Slavery and the Making of America* (2004), the companion book for the WNET/PBS series of the same name. Horton served as president of the Organization of American Historians from 2004 to 2005.

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**Randall Kennedy** is the Michael R. Klein Professor at Harvard Law School where he teaches courses on contracts, criminal law, and the regulation of race relations. He served as a law clerk for Justice Thurgood Marshall of the US Supreme Court. In his research and writing Kennedy addresses complex and controversial issues surrounding race in America. His most recent books include *For Discrimination: Race, Affirmative Action, and the Law* (2013), *The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency* (2011), and *Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal* (2008).

**Steven Mintz**, a professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin, is a leading authority on the history of families, children, and youth and served as founding director of the Institute for Transformational Learning at the University of Texas. He co-edited *The Boisterous Sea of Liberty: A Documentary History of America from Discovery through the Civil War* (2000), featuring documents from the Gilder Lehrman Collection, and is the author of fourteen books, including *The Prime of Life: A History of Modern Adulthood* (2015) and *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (2006).

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