

Frederick Douglass on the disfranchisement of black voters, 1888

Introduction

Frederick Douglass, a former slave and premier champion of civil rights for African Americans and women, was the nineteenth century's most famous black leader. In this letter, written in December 1888, he protests the disfranchisement of black Southern voters following Reconstruction. Douglass wrote that he was "a good deal disturbed just now by the clamour raised for the disfranchisement of the colored voters of the South." He compares the disfranchisement argument that black suffrage would encourage "negro supremacy" to "the old cry you and I so often heard in the old time about the negroes going to cut their masters throats." The argument was "all humbug," Douglass wrote, "There is nothing in it."

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript, view the image, and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. Define "disfranchisement."
2. Note the date of the letter. Explain the connection between Douglass's letter and conditions facing African Americans at the same time in many southern states.
3. Why did suffrage for African Americans cause extreme fear among many white southerners?

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Image

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

My dear Robert Adams.

Thanks for the paper containing
an account of the Fall over Adamsmanic
reunion. 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 was a good deal disturbed
with you by the clamour raised for
the disfranchisement of the colored voters
of the South. The cry about negro suffrage
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 times
there is nothing in it. Kind regards to
Mrs Adams and yourself in which Mrs
Douglass joins me. Yours very truly
Fred. Douglass

Frederick Douglass to Robert Adams, December 4, 1888. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC04997)

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Transcript

Frederick Douglass to Robert Adams, December 4, 1888. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC04997)

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 recession. 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 [*sic*] joins me. Yours very truly

Fred^k Douglass