On September 3, 1838, dressed as a mariner and carrying another man’s seamen’s protection papers, Frederick Douglass, then Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, boarded a train in Baltimore, Maryland. He was twenty years old.

The young fugitive arrived in Havre de Grace, Maryland. Then, he crossed the Susquehanna River by ferry and boarded another train bound for Wilmington, Delaware. In Wilmington, Frederick Bailey took a steamboat to Philadelphia, then a train to New York City.

In less than twenty-four hours, Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey had escaped slavery.

In New York, Bailey changed his name to Frederick Johnson, and on September 15, only a few days after his escape, he married Anna Murray. Frederick met Anna sometime in the late 1830s while she was working as a domestic servant in Baltimore, and sent for Anna to come to New York when he escaped.

Douglass did not reveal the precise details of his escape from slavery until his third autobiography in 1855. His autobiography, published seven years after his escape in 1845, however, sheds light on Douglass as a stereotypical fugitive, barefoot and fleeing with only a few possessions. His story of escape in 1834, however, shows Douglass as a determined agent of the fugitive-assisting New York Vigilance Committee, witnessed the escape in the city, and arranged in advance by Ruggles. With their help, Frederick and Anna landed in Newport the next morning, and their meeting may have been arranged by Ruggles.

The meeting of Frederick and Anna in Newport, Rhode Island in 1839, was not by accident. Douglass, tired of the constant hounding of the Fugitive Slave Act, planned his escape from New York City and had arranged with Ruggles to bring Anna to Newport.

Douglass’s daughter, Rosetta Douglass Spague, later recorded in a memoir of her mother, Anna Murray Douglass: My Mother as I Recall Her, 1900, reprint 1923: “In 1839 I was taken by my father to these rooms on Elm Street, New Bedford, Massachusetts, overlooking Buzzards Bay. This was my birthday. Every detail as to the early housekeeping was given over; it was indelibly impressed upon his mind, even to the hanging of a towel on a particular nail. Many of the dishes used by my mother at the time were in our Rochester home and kept as souvenirs of those first days of housekeeping.”

In 1841, the Douglass family moved to larger quarters at 111 Ray Street (now Avenue A), New Bedford, Massachusetts. Douglass worked several jobs in New Bedford. His first job was for the Unitarian minister Ephraim Peabody.

Douglass moved his family to the newly established African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and became active “in the several capacities of sexton, steward, class leader, clerk and local preacher” (Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself, 1845). Meanwhile, Douglass was becoming an avid reader of The Liberator, an abolitionist paper, and was increasingly fueled by New Bedford’s strong anti-slavery activity.

As people of color, they were compelled to sit in the church’s gallery and Douglass’s experience during communion impelled him to seek worship with his African American brethren.

Douglass himself registered to vote less than a year after arriving in New Bedford, and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church became his platform for articulating his beliefs about slavery and freedom.

“‘The paper (The Liberator) came, and I read it week to week with such feelings as it would be quite idle for me to attempt to describe. The paper became my meat and drink. My soul was set on fire.’”

In 1855, Douglass described Clifford as “pro-slavery.” Clifford was attorney John H. Clifford.

In New Bedford, Frederick and Anna Douglass maintained their commitment to the Methodist faith and attended the predominantly white Elm Street Methodist Church. As people of color, they were compelled to sit in the church’s gallery and Douglass’s experience during communion impelled him to seek worship with his African American brethren.

Douglass moved his family to the newly established African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and became active “in the several capacities of sexton, steward, class leader, clerk and local preacher” (Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself, 1845).

While walking toward the wharves shortly after he arrived in New Bedford, Douglass saw a pile of coal in front of the Peabody’s home at 174 Union Street and asked Mrs. Peabody if he might put the coal away. She consented and paid Douglass two silver half-dollars for his work.
DOUGLASS’ NEW BEDFORD LEGACY

Frederick Douglass hated slavery and dreamed of freedom from an early age. His desire to know a better world triggered his effort to learn to read and write long before he was able to escape slavery—but his exposure to a community of politically aware and active people of color in New Bedford gave life to the idea that he might himself become an effective foe of slavery and advocate for freedom.

Douglass was not the only fugitive to go from a life in New Bedford to antislavery activism. But his presence and prominence helped to stamp the city as a refuge for fugitives, a past of which the city remains proud to this day.

Three of Douglass’ five children were also born in New Bedford.

Rosetta Douglass was born on June 24, 1839. She married Nathan Sprague in 1863 and bore five daughters. Before beginning her family, she taught school in Philadelphia.

Lewis Henry Douglass was born on October 9, 1840. He married Angelina Grimké after the Civil War. They had no children. Lewis was a member of the famed 54th Regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the first Civil War regiment of color raised in the North. He served as a Sergeant Major and was a friend and confidant of Sergeant William H. Carney of New Bedford, the first black soldier to win the Congressional Medal of Honor. Lewis later entered the printing business with his younger brother, Frederick.

Frederick Douglass, Jr. was born on March 3, 1842 before the Douglass family moved to Lynn, Massachusetts. Frederick married Virginia M. Hewlett and had seven children. Frederick and Lewis were printers and partners in Washington, D.C. for many years.

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD WALKING TOURS

Craving more history? Join the National Park Service and New Bedford Historical Society for walking tours of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom and other historical sites in New Bedford, including the Nathan and Polly Johnson House.

Visit www.nbhistoricalsociety.org for more information.

NEW BEDFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.

The New Bedford Historical Society, Inc. was founded in October 1996 and awarded 501(c)(3) status in September 1999 as a not-for-profit organization dedicated to documenting and celebrating the history, legacy and presence of African Americans, Cape Verdeans, Native Americans, West Indians and other people of color in New Bedford, Massachusetts.

The Historical Society is headquartered at the Nathan and Polly Johnson House at 21 Seventh Street in New Bedford.

The Historical Society acquired the Nathan and Polly Johnson House in December 1998. From the early years of the 19th century until the onset of the Civil War, this house was an important stop on the Underground Railroad for many escaped slaves who later became residents of New Bedford or passed through the city on their way to points further North and to freedom.

The Johnsons were prosperous African Americans who were well known for their extensive work in the anti-slavery movement; their home was the base for the couple's catering and confectionary business.

In addition, the Johnsons were instrumental in assisting Frederick Douglass as he settled into his new life in New Bedford as a free man after escaping slavery in 1838. The Johnson House is the only remaining structure in which Frederick Douglass lived during his six years in New Bedford (1838–1844).

Through the work of the New Bedford Historical Society, the Nathan and Polly Johnson House was designated a National Historic Landmark by the Secretary of the Interior in 2000, one of a select few properties in New Bedford that has won this status.

The Johnson House is also a site on the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.

www.nbhistoricalsociety.org

Ph: 508-979-8828
Fax: 508-979-8836
Email: nbhistory@verizon.net

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

FREEDOM IN NEW BEDFORD

"Mr. Johnson assured me that no slaveholder could take a slave from NEW BEDFORD; that there were men there who would lay down their lives, before such an outrage could be perpetuated."

My Bondage and My Freedom
Frederick Douglass, 1855