

FLIGHT AND FREEDOM

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



Douglass did not reveal the precise details of his escape from slavery until his third autobiography in 1881. This sheet music cover (above) published seven years after his escape in 1834, however, shows Douglass as a stereotypical fugitive, barefoot and fleeing with only a kerchief full of belongings.

The Fugitive’s Song, published by Henry Prentiss Lithograph 1834 - Reproduction courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia



African American Presbyterian minister J.W.C. Pennington conducted their wedding ceremony. David Ruggles, an African American agent of the fugitive-assisting New York Vigilance Committee, witnessed the marriage and then brought the couple to the *John W. Richmond*, a steamer bound for Newport, Rhode Island.

Frederick and Anna landed in Newport the next morning, and there they met Quakers William C. Taber and Joseph Ricketson of New Bedford, Massachusetts. Their meeting may have been arranged in advance by Ruggles. With their help, Frederick and Anna boarded a stagecoach and traveled north to New Bedford.

LIFE AND WORK IN NEW BEDFORD

On September 17, 1838, Frederick and Anna stepped from the Newport stagecoach onto the streets of New Bedford.



21 Seventh Street, home of Nathan and Polly Johnson



Anna Murray Douglass, wife of Frederick Douglass

They were welcomed by African American abolitionists Nathan and Polly Johnson into their home on 21 Seventh Street.

Here, at 21 Seventh Street, Nathan Johnson encouraged Frederick to adopt the surname Douglass.

In 1839, Frederick and Anna Douglass moved into their own lodgings on 157 Elm Street, an African American neighborhood in the West End of New Bedford.

Douglass’ daughter, Rosetta Douglass Sprague, later recorded in a memoir of her mother, *Anna Murray Douglass: My Mother as I Recall Her*, 1900, reprint 1923:

“In 1890 I was taken by my father to these rooms on Elm Street, New Bedford, Massachusetts, overlooking Buzzards Bay. This was my birthplace. Every detail as to the early housekeeping was gone 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 Acushnet Avenue), north of downtown, to accommodate their growing family.

111 Ray Street was near the wharves where Douglass often worked. Douglass worked several jobs in New Bedford. His first job was for the Unitarian minister Ephraim Peabody.

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:

“I was not long in accomplishing the job, when the dear lady put into my hand two silver half-dollars. To understand the emotion which swelled my heart as I clasped this money, realizing that I had no master who could take it from me—that it was mine—that my hands were my own, and could earn more of the precious coin, one must have been in some sense himself a slave.”

Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Written by Himself, 1893

Douglass also worked as a caulker on the wharves for Rodney French, George Howland and Gideon Howland, although he encountered resistance from white caulkers. He also worked at Anthony D. Richmond’s foundry, and as a servant in the home of attorney John H. Clifford.

In 1855, Douglass described Clifford as “pro-slavery.” Clifford was not well-liked among New Bedford’s abolitionists at the time of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Clifford later become Governor of Massachusetts.

A SHARPENING POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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 soon 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).

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.

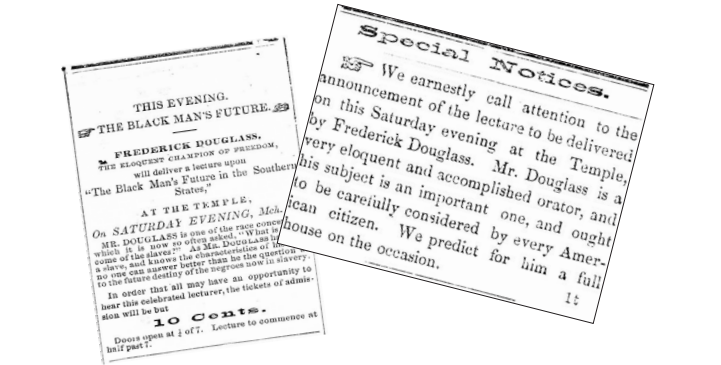
Less than a year after Douglass settled in New Bedford, the “colored abolitionists” of the city nominated one of their own,

mariner and grocer Nathaniel A. Borden, to represent Bristol County in the Massachusetts House of Representatives. The colored abolitionists also resolved not to vote for any candidate that did not openly support immediate abolition. “The whole town is up in arms with Elections,” wrote one New Bedford woman, “as the col’d people hold the balance of power all the politicians are violent abolitionists.”

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.

Local bookseller William C. Coffin heard Douglass speak, probably in 1841 when the church was located on Second Street, and was so impressed by Douglass’ sermon that he invited Douglass to speak in Nantucket.

Douglass traveled to Nantucket in August 1841, and there, delivered an impassioned address that launched his career as an antislavery lecturer.



Additional resources about Frederick Douglass:

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass An American Slave* Written by Himself

*Frederick Douglass: Freedom’s Voice* Gregory P. Lampe

*Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* edited by Eric Foner

Frederick Douglass National Historic Website: [www.nps.gov/history/museum/exhibits/douglass](http://www.nps.gov/history/museum/exhibits/douglass)

SPEAKING OUT AGAINST SLAVERY

Frederick Douglass rose quickly to prominence as a favorite abolitionist and anti-slavery speaker, traveling throughout the country and world to shed light on the horrors of America’s “peculiar institution.”



He was a powerful orator and influential political figure, using his personal experience to give a human face to the sufferings of slavery.

He campaigned tirelessly across the country, speaking nearly everyday to audiences large and small in public parks, town squares, lecture halls, churches, schoolhouses and any place an audience could be assembled.

He endured day-to-day hardships, loneliness, and physical demands. Often braving bricks, rotten eggs, verbal attacks, racist remarks and threats of physical assault, he at times risked his life speaking against slavery. But his memories and knowledge of the slave experience formed a forceful attack on America’s racial problems: slavery in the South and racial prejudice in the North.

**Douglass also worked hard for the equal treatment of all races and genders.** He was one of the few men who attended the first Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848; he fought for the right for black men to serve in the Union Army in the Civil War; he served as a political delegate in the Reconstruction South to ensure black suffrage; he spoke out frequently in support of equal employment and social opportunities and against lynchings, discrimination and “Jim Crow.”

By the end of his life, Douglass could proudly claim to have served as advisor, political ally, and friend to six presidents, abolitionists Gerrit Smith and William Lloyd Garrison; women’s rights activists Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Mott; and authors Samuel Clemens (a.k.a. Mark Twain) and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Frederick Douglass will long be remembered as a noted orator, writer, publisher, politician, entrepreneur, political activist, national celebrity, and historical figure. He left an indelible mark on the social, economic, and political landscape of the nineteenth century.

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 Amelia Loguen 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](http://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](http://www.nbhistoricalsociety.org)

Ph: 508-979-8828

Fax: 508-979-8836

Email: [nbhistory@verizon.net](mailto: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