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 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 Verdians, 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
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.

The young fugitive arrived in Haver 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 1881. This sheet music cover (above) alludes to seven years after his escape in 1838, however, showing Douglass as a stereotypical fugitive, barefoot and fleeing with only a kerchief full of belongings.

The Fugitive’s Song, published by Henry Prentis.

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