

Life And Times Of Frederick Douglass, Written By Himself

These selections are excerpted from chapter "VII. Triumphs and Trials" of Frederick Douglass' memoirs. In this chapter Douglass discusses his decision to settle in Rochester, New York and edit an abolitionist newspaper (section 1), his work on the underground railroad (section 2) and his experience living in Rochester (section 3). Frederick Douglass started out a strong ally of William Lloyd Garrison and his newspaper *The Liberator*. However Douglass' views and those of Garrison diverged. Garrison rejected the United States Constitution as a pro-slavery document. Douglass came to oppose the dissolution of the union and believed that the constitution in its "letter and spirit" was "an anti-slavery instrument" (section 4).

1. [I]nstead of issuing my paper in Boston, among New England friends, I went to Rochester, N. Y., among strangers, where the local circulation of my paper --"THE NORTH STAR"--would not interfere with that of the *Liberator* or the *Anti-Slavery Standard*. . . . The North Star was a large sheet, published weekly, at a cost of \$80 per week, and an average circulation of 3,000 subscribers. There were many times, when in my experience as editor and publisher, I was very hard pressed for money, but by one means or another I succeeded so well as to keep my pecuniary engagements, and to keep my anti-slavery banner steadily flying during all the conflict from the autumn of 1847 till the union of the States was assured and emancipation was a fact accomplished. . . . During the first three or four years my paper was published under the name of the North Star. It was subsequently changed to Frederick Douglass' Paper in order to distinguish it from the many papers with "Stars" in their titles. . . .

[T]here were moral forces operating against me in Rochester, as well as material ones. There were those who regarded the publication of a "Negro paper" in that beautiful city as a blemish and a misfortune. The New York Herald, true to the spirit of the times, counselled the people of the place to throw my printing press into Lake Ontario and to banish me to Canada, and while they were not quite prepared for this violence, it was plain that many of them did not well relish my presence amongst them. This feeling, however, wore away gradually, as the people knew more of me and my works. I lectured every Sunday evening during an entire winter in the beautiful Corinthian Hall, then owned by Wm. R. Reynolds, Esq., who though he was not an abolitionist, was a lover of fair-play and was willing to allow me to be heard. If in these lectures I did not make abolitionists I did succeed in making tolerant the moral atmosphere in Rochester. . . . I did not rely alone upon what I could do by the paper, but would write all day, then take a train to Victor, Farmington, Canandaigua, Geneva, Waterloo, Batavia, or Buffalo, or elsewhere, and speak in the evening, returning home afterwards or early in the morning, to be again at my desk writing or mailing papers. . . .

2. One important branch of my anti-slavery work in Rochester, in addition to that of speaking and writing against slavery, must not be forgotten or omitted. My position gave me the chance of hitting that old enemy some telling blows, in another direction than these. I was on the southern border of Lake Ontario, and the Queen's Dominions were right over the way--and my prominence as an abolitionist, and as the editor of an anti-slavery paper, naturally made me the station master and conductor of the underground railroad passing through this goodly city. Secrecy and concealment were necessary conditions to the successful operation of this railroad, and hence its prefix "underground." My agency was all the more exciting and interesting, because not altogether free from danger. I could take no step in it without exposing myself to fine and imprisonment, for these were the penalties imposed by the fugitive slave law, for feeding, harboring, or otherwise assisting a slave to escape from his master; but in face of this fact, I can say, I never did more congenial, attractive, fascinating, and satisfactory work. True as a means of destroying slavery, it was like an attempt to bail out the ocean with a teaspoon, but the thought that there was one less slave, and one more freeman,--having myself been a slave, and a fugitive slave--brought to my heart unspeakable joy. On one occasion I had eleven fugitives at the same time under my roof, and it was necessary for them to remain with me, until I could collect sufficient money to get them on to Canada. It was the largest number I ever had at any one time, and I had some difficulty in providing so many with food and shelter, but as may well be imagined, they were not very fastidious in either direction, and were well content with very plain food, and a strip of carpet on the floor for a bed, or a place on the straw in the barn loft.

The underground railroad had many branches; but that one with which I was connected had its main stations in Baltimore, Wilmington, Philadelphia, New York, Albany, Syracuse, Rochester, and St. Catharines (Canada). . . . Misses Mott and Stephen Myers, were forwarders from Albany; Revs. Samuel J. May and J. W. Loguen, were the agents in. Syracuse; and J. P. Morris and myself received and dispatched passengers from

Rochester to Canada, where they were received by Rev. Hiram Wilson. When a party arrived in Rochester, it was the business of Mr. Morris and myself to raise funds with which to pay their passages to St. Catharines, and it is due to truth to state, that we seldom called in vain upon whig or democrat for help. Men were better than their theology, and truer to humanity, than to their politics, or their offices.

On one occasion while a slave master was in the office of a United States commissioner, procuring the papers necessary for the arrest and rendition of three young men who had escaped from Maryland, (one of whom was under my roof at the time, another at Farmington, and the other at work on the farm of Asa Anthony just a little outside the city limits,) the law partner of the commissioner, then a distinguished democrat, sought me out, and told me what was going on in his office, and urged me by all means to get these young men out of the way of their pursuers and claimants. Of course no time was to be lost. A swift horseman was dispatched to Farmington, eighteen miles distant, another to Asa Anthony's farm about three miles, and another to my house on the south side of the city, and before the papers could be served, all three of the young men were on the free waves of Lake Ontario, bound to Canada. In writing to their old master, they had dated their letter at Rochester, though they had taken the precaution to send it to Canada to be mailed, but this blunder in the date had betrayed their whereabouts, so that the hunters were at once on their tracks. So numerous were the fugitives passing through Rochester that I was obliged at last to appeal to my British friends for the means of sending them on their way. . . .

3. My pathway was not entirely free from thorns in Rochester, and the wounds and pains inflicted by them were perhaps much less easily borne, because of my exemption from such annoyances while in England. Men can in time become accustomed to almost anything, even to being insulted and ostracised, but such treatment comes hard at first, and when to some extent unlooked for. The vulgar prejudice against color, so common to Americans, met me in several disagreeable forms. A seminary for young ladies and misses, under the auspices of Miss Tracy, was near my house on Alexander street, and desirous of having my daughter educated like the daughters of other men, I applied to Miss Tracy for her admission to her school. All seemed fair, and the child was duly sent to "Tracy Seminary," and I went about my business happy in the thought that she was in the way of a refined and Christian education. Several weeks elapsed before I knew how completely I was mistaken. The little girl came home to me one day and told me she was lonely in that school; that she was in fact kept in solitary confinement; that she was not allowed in the room with the other girls, nor to go into the yard when they went out; that she was kept in a room by herself and not permitted to be seen or heard by the others. No man with the feeling of a parent could be less than moved by such a revelation, and I confess that I was shocked, grieved, and indignant. I went at once to Miss Tracy to ascertain if what I had heard was true, and was coolly told it was, and the miserable plea was offered that it would have injured her school if she had done otherwise. I told her she should have told me so at the beginning, but I did not believe that any girl in the school would be opposed to the presence of my daughter, and that I should be glad to have the question submitted to them. She consented to this, and to the credit of the young ladies, not one made objection. Not satisfied with this verdict of the natural and uncorrupted sense of justice and humanity of these young ladies, Miss Tracy insisted that the parents must be consulted, and if one of them objected she should not admit my child to the same apartment and privileges of the other pupils. One parent only had the cruelty to object, and . . . my daughter was excluded from "Tracy Seminary". . . .

My troubles attending the education of my children were not to end here. They were not allowed in the public school in the district in which I lived, owned property, and paid taxes, but were compelled, if they went to a public school, to go over to the other side of the city, to an inferior colored school. I hardly need say that I was not prepared to submit tamely to this proscription, any more than I had been to submit to slavery, so I had them taught at home for a while, by Miss Thayer. Meanwhile I went to the people with the question and created considerable agitation. I sought and obtained a hearing before the Board of Education, and after repeated efforts with voice and pen, the doors of the public schools were opened and colored children were permitted to attend them in common with others. There were barriers erected against colored people in most other places of instruction and amusements in the city, and until I went there they were imposed without any apparent sense of injustice or wrong, and submitted to in silence; but one by one they have gradually been removed and colored people now enter freely all places of public resort without hindrance or observation. . . .

Notwithstanding what I have said of the adverse feeling exhibited by some of its citizens at my selection of Rochester as the place to establish my paper, and the trouble in educational matters just referred to, that selection was in many respects very fortunate. The city was, and still is, the center of a virtuous, intelligent,

enterprising, liberal, and growing population. The surrounding country is remarkable for its fertility; and the city itself possesses one of the finest water-powers in the world. It is on the line of the New York Central railroad - a line that with its connections, spans the whole country. Its people were industrious and in comfortable circumstances; not so rich as to be indifferent to the claims of humanity, and not so poor as to be unable to help any good cause which commanded the approval of their judgment.

4. I was then a faithful disciple of Wm. Lloyd Garrison, and fully committed to his doctrine touching the pro-slavery character of the Constitution of the United States, also the non-voting principle of which he was the known and distinguished advocate. With him, I held it to be the first duty of the non-slaveholding States to dissolve the union with the slaveholding States, and hence my cry, like his, was "No union with slaveholders." With these views I came into western New York, and during the first four years of my labors here I advocated them with pen and tongue, to the best of my ability. After a time, a careful reconsideration of the subject convinced me that there was no necessity for dissolving the "union between the northern and southern States;" that to seek this dissolution was no part of my duty as an abolitionist; that to abstain from voting was to refuse to exercise a legitimate and powerful means for abolishing slavery; and that the Constitution of the United States not only contained no guarantees in favor of slavery, but on the contrary, was in its letter and spirit an anti-slavery instrument, demanding the abolition of slavery as a condition of its own existence, as the supreme law of the land.

This radical change in my opinions produced a corresponding change in my action. To those with whom I had been in agreement and in sympathy, I came to be in opposition. What they held to be a great and important truth I now looked upon as a dangerous error. A very natural, but to me a very painful thing, now happened. Those who could not see any honest reasons for changing their views, as I had done, could not easily see any such reasons for my change, and the common punishment of apostates was mine.

My first opinions were naturally derived and honestly entertained. Brought directly, when I escaped from slavery into contact with abolitionists who regarded the Constitution as a slaveholding instrument, and finding their views supported by the united and entire history of every department of the government, it is not strange that I assumed the Constitution to be just what these friends made it seem to be. I was bound not only by their superior knowledge to their opinions in respect to this subject, as the true ones, but also because I had no means of showing their unsoundness. But for the responsibility of conducting a public journal, and the necessity imposed upon me of meeting opposite views from abolitionists outside of New England, I should in all probability have remained firm in my disunion views. My new circumstances compelled me to re-think the whole subject, and study with some care not only the just and proper rules of legal interpretation, but the origin, design, nature, rights, powers, and duties of civil governments, and also the relations which human beings sustain to it. By such a course of thought and reading I was conducted to the conclusion that the Constitution of the United States - inaugurated "to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty" - could not well have been designed at the same time to maintain and perpetuate a system of rapine and murder like slavery, especially as not one word can be found in the Constitution to authorize such a belief. Then, again, if the declared purposes of an instrument are to govern the meaning of all its parts and details, as they clearly should, the Constitution of our country is our warrant for the abolition of slavery in every State of the Union.