

MY TURN

Abolitionist Frederick Douglass had many R.I. ties

By Robb Dimmick

In the 19th century, Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist, was the most famous Black man in America. Few know that he had a deep and abiding relationship with Rhode Island.

His first contact was in 1838 when, on his escape from slavery, he stopped in Newport. Considering it a possible home, he was dissuaded and quickly spirited away to New Bedford, a hub of anti-slavery activity and sentiment, unlike Newport which was rife with slave-catchers. Douglass would return time and time again to Rhode Island, building relationships that would help propel him onto the national stage and provided solace and inspiration for the work of dismantling the institution of slavery.

Beginning in 1841, Douglass transformed himself into a rebel with a noble cause and perfected his legendary oratorical skills as he crisscrossed the state campaigning against the anti-Black platform of the People's Constitution, which became known as the Dorr Rebellion. It might more accurately be called the Douglass Triumph for his success in defeating it, and, along with Black Anglican priest Alexander Crummell, gaining Rhode Island African Americans the unique right to vote in 1842.

In 1843, Douglass spent three months of consecutive Sundays lecturing in Providence on the abolition of slavery to standing-room-only crowds. From that time until well into the 1880s, Douglass routinely returned to fight for freedom and promote civil rights, to visit colleagues, and to rest and recuperate from an exhausting lecture circuit.

He spoke in and visited friends in Providence, Pawtucket, Portsmouth, Little Compton, Newport, Valley Falls, Kingston and Westerly. Among his friends were African Americans Isaac Rice, a Newport community leader (whose house has remained in his family for more than 200 years); George T. Downing, activist and the nation's foremost caterer; Sissieretta Jones, the great opera diva from Providence; philanthropist Christiana Carteaux Bannister; and Sarah Fayerweather, the first Black

student in the country to attend an all-white school. And white abolitionists Elizabeth Buffum Chace, George Benson, Charles Perry, Amaranthy Paine Sarles, Julia Ward Howe, and Miss Amey Aldrich, who wrote, "We were waked up one night and taken downstairs in our flannel night gowns to sit on the lap of the distinguished Negro, Frederick Douglass, so we should always remember him." In 1884, he lent his voice to the cause of women's suffrage, speaking at the Old State House in Providence on the same bill as Susan B. Anthony.

Rhode Island has also contributed surprisingly and significantly to the generation of Douglass iconography. In 1881, Douglass was photographed by Alexander Clark Brownell at his prestigious Providence studio. While on vacation in 1883, with rare time on his hands, he posed for a nine-foot tall oil portrait at the Portsmouth home of Sarah J. Eddy.

In 1895, two Providence Black inventors, William Purdy and Leonard Peters, commissioned a silver souvenir spoon with Douglass's likeness in the bowl and a ladder representing his ascent from slavery as its handle. An 1899 statue of Douglass was created by the Smith Granite Company of Westerly, using highly coveted Westerly blue granite as its pedestal. And in 1974, an 1844 painting of a handsome young Douglass by Elisha Livermore Hammond, donated to the Rhode Island Historical Society in 1902, was sold to the National Portrait Gallery.

The foregoing are just a few highlights of what was an extraordinary symbiotic relationship between Douglass and Rhode Island, which for each was equally transformational and beneficial. A fuller story will be told in two compelling virtual lectures Stages of Freedom is presenting this fall under support of the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities, one with Pulitzer Prize winner Dr. David Blight, the foremost Douglass scholar, and the other with Dr. John Rice of the distinguished Newport Rice family. Learn more at: [https:// www.stagesoffreedom.org/frederick-douglass](https://www.stagesoffreedom.org/frederick-douglass) *Robb Dimmick is co-founder of Stages of Freedom, a nonprofit devoted to promoting Rhode Island African American history to the entire community.*

