Frederick Douglass
and the First Unitarian Church of Rochester

Bill Fugate, 2025
www.rochesterunitarian.org/history

The First Unitarian Church of Rochester has been active in the pursuit of social justice since its earliest days. During the mid-1800s, its more progressive members were exceptional in this regard, making significant contributions to the abolition of slavery and the advancement of women's rights. (Not everyone in the church approved. Conflicts between those who supported such movements and those who did not disturbed the congregation until after the Civil War.) These activists worked closely with Frederick Douglass, another campaigner for the abolition of slavery and the rights of women, establishing a life-long relationship.


Young Frederick Douglass

In a sense, that relationship began even before Douglass moved to Rochester in 1847. At least three members of First Unitarian had moved to Rochester from New Bedford, Massachusetts, the abolitionist stronghold where Douglass had first settled after he escaped from enslavement and where he had developed a reputation as an effective abolitionist. Although there is no direct evidence for this, it seems likely that Douglass had already become acquainted with them in New Bedford and that they shared the same circle of friends there.

Douglass also was an admirer of Myron Holley, the Unitarian abolitionist leader who had done so much to establish First Unitarian on a firm basis before his death in 1841. In his autobiography, Douglass warmly acknowledged Holley's abolitionist work, saying, "The ground had been measurably prepared for me by the labor of others – notably Hon. Myron Holley.[1]

Douglass and the activists at First Unitarian weren't just co-workers, they were friends. Douglass and his family often joined the Sunday afternoon gatherings of progressives, many of them Unitarians from Quaker backgrounds, at Daniel and Lucy Anthony's farm about a mile west of today's University of Rochester campus.[2] It is fascinating to realize that when both Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony (one of the Anthony daughters) were there, these small gatherings included two young adults who would become nationally known in the coming years as leaders in the struggle for a just society.

Frederick Douglass soon became the leading figure in the Underground Railroad in Rochester. This loose-knit network of people assisted self-emancipated African Americans on their dangerous journey from southern states to freedom in Canada. The Underground Railroad was illegal, of course, which is why it was "underground." Nonetheless, at least eight families in First Unitarian's relatively small congregation were active in it. One entry in Susan B. Anthony's diary simply says, "Fitted out a fugitive slave for Canada with the help of Harriet Tubman."

Douglass had moved to Rochester to publish the *North Star*, an abolitionist newspaper. Several members of First Unitarian helped to raise funds for his newspaper through such organizations as the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society (preferred by the more radical Quaker Unitarians) and the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society (preferred by more the moderate activists in the congregation).

They used a variety of fund-raising techniques, such as anti-slavery fairs that sold donated items, including some that had been shipped from as far away as Britain. In some cases, church members made sizeable donations to Douglass's newspaper themselves and funneled funds to him from abolitionist friends who lived in other cities.

Douglass spoke admiringly of Rev. William Henry Channing, First Unitarian's minister in the early 1850s, saying, "One of the few it was my privilege to call upon, and to call upon often, was Rev. W. H. Channing. His congregation was small, and his salary was not large, but he gave like a prince."[3] Rev. Channing roomed at Maria Porter's boarding house, which quietly doubled as a stop on the Underground Railroad and therefore would have been quite familiar to Douglass. Porter was one of the earliest members of First Unitarian.

Catherine Fish Stebbins, a member of the church, assisted Douglass's work in another way. She was the first manager of the abolitionist reading room above the *North Star*'s office, which provided tracts and other reading material for the public as well as a meeting place for activists.[4]

Sometimes members of First Unitarian assisted Douglass on a more personal basis. When Douglass found himself blocked by racial barriers while trying to buy a house in Rochester, John and Lemira Kedzie, abolitionists and members of the church, agreed to sell him their home on Alexander Street. It had abolitionists as neighbors on both sides, providing a degree of protection to the Douglass family from possible attacks by racists.[5]

Burton Francis "Frank" Blackall and his wife Sarah Colman Blackall were members of First Unitarian and close friends of Douglass, who in his autobiography described Frank as "a friend and frequent visitor at my house.[6] Frank kept the books for Douglass's rental properties in Rochester after he moved to Washington following the Civil War.[7] When Douglass published his autobiography, he gave Sarah the gold pen that he used while writing it.[8]

Background: The Quaker Unitarians

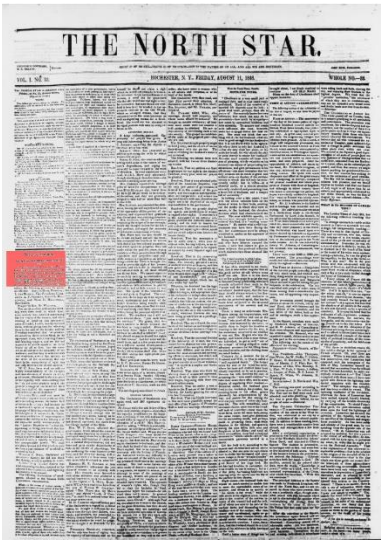
Increasing numbers of Quakers were becoming active in abolitionist organizations despite the objections of many of their co-religionists who believed they should not mix with non-Quakers any more than necessary. In 1848, tension reached a breaking point at a regional meeting of the Hicksite branch of the Quakers near Canandaigua, New York. About two hundred progressives left the main Quaker body then to form a new organization called the Friends of Human Progress, which promoted ideas that were radically advanced for that time. Years before the Unitarians removed their theological restrictions on membership, the Friends of Human Progress did much the same thing by declaring that membership in their group was open, in their words, to "Christians, Jews, Mahammedans, and Pagans."[9] It also declared that all people are inherently equal regardless of race or sex. According to a historian who studied this organization, it may have been unique in its time in declaring this belief.[10]

Several of these progressive Quakers became part of First Unitarian, including the Anthony family and the now-famous Susan B. Anthony. According to Harold Sanford's 1929 history of First Unitarian, "Our church was probably by strong majority abolitionist, an earnest group of Hicksite Quakers having attached themselves to the church ... the Anthonys, Hallowells, Willises, Posts, Fishes, etc."

Only a month after these progressive Quakers formed their new organization and decided to work for social justice with non-Quakers, three women from this group who lived in the Finger Lakes area worked with Lucretia Mott, a visiting Quaker activist, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a young women's rights supporter, to organize the world's first Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls. Frederick Douglass played an important role in this convention, helping to win approval for Stanton's demand for women's right to vote. He traveled to the convention in the company of four Quaker women from Rochester who had already begun to associate with First Unitarian.[12]

Two weeks after the Seneca Falls Convention, a follow-up convention was organized at the Unitarian Church in Rochester primarily by women from this same group of progressive Quakers who had begun to attend services at the church. They nominated a woman as chair of this convention, a step that the organizers of the Seneca Falls Convention had felt was too radical to consider. The Women's Rights Convention at First Unitarian became the first convention of both men and women in the U.S. to elect a woman as chair. Frederick Douglass played a significant role in this convention also.

Susan B. Anthony's sister and parents attended the convention at First Unitarian, but she herself was teaching school in central New York at the time and missed these historic events. After her return to Rochester, she joined First Unitarian and embarked on a long career of working for progressive causes. She was undoubtedly inspired to do so partly by the passionate discussions about social justice at the gatherings of activists at the Anthony farm, discussions that often included the vigorous opinions of Frederick Douglass. In 1856, she became the New York state agent for the American Anti-Slavery Society. During the Civil War, she partnered with Elizabeth Cady Stanton to organize a national petition campaign for a constitutional amendment to outlaw slavery, which gathered more signatures than any previous petition in U.S. history. She is best known for her later work in campaigning for what became the Nineteenth Amendment, which guaranteed women's right to vote. It was sometimes called the Susan B. Anthony Amendment because she was so closely identified with it.



THE NORTH STAR.

Selections.

WOMAN'S RIGHTS CONVENTION.

At a Convention, held in the Unitarian Church in the city of Rochester, on the 2d day of August, 1848, to consider the Rights of Women: politically, socially, religiously, and industriously.

Amy Post, called the meeting to order and reported on behalf of the Com-

Douglass's newspaper, *The North Star* printed a lengthy report of the Women's Rights Convention at the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, beginning at the red mark.[11]

John Brown's Raid

In a dramatic story that has only recently been brought fully to light, members of First Unitarian helped Frederick Douglass at a dangerous moment in his life. In the period just before the Civil War, an abolitionist named John Brown led an attack on the U.S. armory at Harper's Ferry in Virginia, intending to seize weapons and spark a slave uprising. The attack failed, and Brown and six of his companions were captured and executed for their role in the attack.

Frederick Douglass knew of Brown's plans, having discussed them with him at length. He declined to support the attack on Harper's Ferry, however, and was lecturing in Philadelphia when the attack occurred. Despite that, federal authorities sent a telegram to the sheriff in Philadelphia with

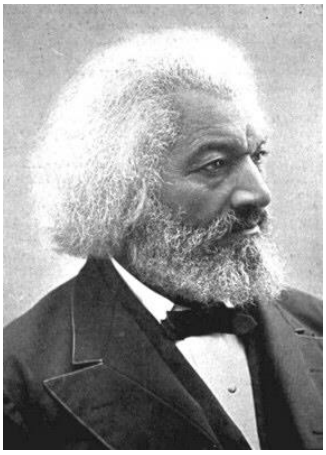
instructions to arrest Douglass as a collaborator with Brown. The message was received there by a telegraph operator named John Hurn who had close family ties with members of First Unitarian in Rochester.[13] Risking severe legal penalties, he notified Douglass of the danger he was in and delayed delivery of the telegram until Douglass had time to slip across the river into New Jersey.

Douglass, knowing he had papers in his home in Rochester that could be used against him, sent an unsigned telegram to his close friend Frank Blackall, a telegraph operator in Rochester and the member of First Unitarian who was mentioned above, that simply said, "Tell Lewis (my oldest son) to secure all the important papers in my high desk." Blackall, knowing that Douglass's oldest son was named Lewis, understood the anonymous message and conveyed it to members of the Douglass family, who ensured that the papers would not be found.[14]

Because Douglass was easily recognizable through his fame as a public speaker, he decided to return to Rochester surreptitiously and make plans for leaving the country. Amy and Isaac Post, Underground Railroad activists with close ties to First Unitarian,[15] secretly conveyed him on the first part his flight to Canada. Douglass was met there and taken to safety by William Hallowell, a member of First Unitarian who happened to be in Canada on business.[16] Douglass traveled from there to Britain where he remained until it was safe to return. Imagine the tragic – and momentous – consequences if things had gone differently.

None of the earlier histories of First Unitarian told of this event. Probably very few people knew about it. After all, everyone involved was violating federal law, and the federal government was in the hands of people who were friendly to the South. Many of the details appeared for the first time in a biography of Amy Post by Nancy Hewitt that included information discovered in letters and other original materials.

Frederick Douglass's Funeral


Frederick Douglass

Douglass died in 1895 in Washington and was honored there with a funeral service attended by many dignitaries. His old friend and co-worker Susan B. Anthony spoke briefly at the service. They had been together for the last time at a women's rights meeting in Washington a short time earlier, where, after his introduction to the audience, he took a seat beside her on the platform.

Douglass's family accompanied his body to Rochester for a funeral service in that city and for burial in Mount Hope Cemetery. Susan B. Anthony was still in Washington, so her sister Mary spoke at this funeral. Rev. William C. Gannett, the minister of First Unitarian, officiated at the funeral and delivered the main address.[17] Booker T. Washington, the African American president of the Tuskegee Institute, later said of Rev. Gannett, "No other in the United States was better qualified by natural disposition and breadth of mind to give adequate estimate of Douglass as a man." Rev. Gannett said of Douglass, "Here was a man who used to the uttermost all the opportunities that America held forth to him, and when opportunities were not at hand, he made them," a fitting tribute to a man who opposed injustice so persistently and so effectively.[18]

End Notes

This document summarizes information from "The Quaker Unitarians of Rochester" and "History of the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, 1829-2024," which provide more extensive citations. Both are available on First Unitarian's website at rochesterunitarian.org/history.

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[1] *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass (1881), page 276.
[2] *The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony* by Ida Husted Harper, Vol. 1 (1898), pages 60-61. The location of the Anthony farm is provided by Blake McKelvey in "Names and Traditions of Some Rochester Streets," *Rochester History*, Vol. XXVII, July 1965, No. 3, page 18.
[3] *Memoir of William Henry Channing* by Octavius Brooks Frothingham (1886), page 258.
[4] *Radical Friend: Amy Kirby Post and Her Activist Worlds* by Nancy A. Hewitt (2018), page 123. Hewitt is a professor emerita at Rutgers University.
[5] Victoria Sandwick Schmitt, "Rochester's Frederick Douglass, Part One", in *Rochester History*, Vol. LXVII, Summer 2005, No. 3, page 20. The site of Douglass's home is identified by a historical marker on the west side of Alexander Street a few dozen steps south of East Avenue.
[6] *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass, 1892, page 378.
[7] *Preserving Family Memories by Remembering an Icon* by Sally Parker, in *New York Archives Magazine*, Spring, 2018, Volume 17, Number 4.
[8] Victoria Sandwick Schmitt, "Rochester's Frederick Douglass, Part Two," *Rochester History*, Vol. LXVII, Fall 2005, No. 4, page 29. Sarah Colman Blackall's stepmother was Lucy Colman, a social activist who accompanied abolitionist Sojourner Truth when she met with Abraham Lincoln at the White House in 1864.
[9] "Call to Congregational Friends Meeting", *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, May 26, 1854, reprinted in Judith Wellman, et. al., *1816 Farmington Quaker Meetinghouse, Farmington, New York, Historic Structure Report*, 2017, page 100.
[10] Nancy A. Hewitt, "Feminist Friends: Agrarian Quakers and the Emergence of Woman's Rights in America," 1986, in *Feminist Studies* 12, No. 1, Spring 1986, reprinted in Claire Goldberg Moses and Heidi I. Hartmann, *U.S. Women in Struggle: A Feminist Studies Anthology*, University of Illinois Press, 1995, page 36.
[11] For a more legible image of this issue of Douglass's newspaper, see the image at the Library of Congress.
[12] The four progressive Quaker women who accompanied Douglass were Amy Kirby Post, her stepdaughter Mary Post Hallowell, Amy's sister Sarah Kirby Hallowell, and Catherine Fish Stebbins. The last three became members of First Unitarian, and Amy Post often attended services there also.
[13] John Hurn's son, daughter-in-law and sister-in-law (who taught Sunday School) either were or later became members of First Unitarian. He himself had lived in Rochester for a while and almost certainly had attended services with them at the church.
[14] *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass, 1892, page 378.
[15] Isaac Post had close friends at First Unitarian but, as his main interest was spiritualism, he did not normally attend services there. Amy Post was more closely associated with the church and regularly attended services there in the latter years of her life in the company of her children who had become active members of the church. Funeral services for both Amy and Isaac Post were held at First Unitarian.
[16] *Radical Friend: Amy Kirby Post and Her Activist Worlds* by Nancy A. Hewitt, page 222.

[17] Douglass's religious affiliations were complicated. He had historical ties with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church in Rochester, having published the first issues of his newspaper in its basement. He later attended Rochester's Plymouth Congregational Church (according to Susan B. Anthony's remembrances, as reported on page 74 of *An Authentic History of the Douglass Monument* by John W. Thompson, 1903). When Douglass moved to Washington, he became a member of that city's AME Church. (The AME and the AME Zion Churches are different denominations.) Representatives of both the AME and AME Zion churches were on the speakers' platform at Douglass's funeral in Rochester, with the minister of the AME Zion church reading from the scriptures. Douglass demonstrated that he shared at least some of the liberal religious values of the Unitarians by serving as a vice president of the Free Religious Association, a national organization with many Unitarian ministers in its leadership, including Rev. Gannett. Like today's Unitarian Universalist Association, it welcomed into its membership people with a wide variety of religious views. Additional information about Douglass's funeral is available in a scrapbook of newspaper articles at the Monroe County Library called "Douglass, Frederick. Obituaries, accounts of his funeral and other material. 1895. Scrapbook of Rochester, N.Y., newspaper clippings."

[18] See page 344 in *Frederick Douglass* by Booker T. Washington (1907) for the quote by Washington and page 345 for the quote by Gannett.