

Hidden History

The Unsung Saga of the Black Man

as told by



John P. & C. Buck West

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FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Ex-Slave Who Rose to Be
a Mighty Champion of Freedom
(1817-1895)

(Third of a four-part series on the great Abolitionist as annotated by the late historian-anthropologist, J. A. Rogers in Vol. II of the author's "World's Great Men of Color")

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"HIS LIBERTY NOW purchased, Douglass went to Rochester, New York, and started his paper, "The North Star," later "Frederick Douglass' Paper" through which he fought not only for the emancipation of the slaves but full equality for Negroes. In this he was opposed by many of the abolitionists who felt that in their attack on slavery they already had a big enough fight. He says, 'They did not want a Negro newspaper and even the Negroes ridiculed me.' Undismayed, however, he persisted. Later, Rochester was to be very proud of him.

"On the lecture platform he worked closely with the white abolitionists, especially Wendell Phillips, Theodore Tilton, and John Brown. When the latter begged him to join in his raid on Harper's Ferry, however, he refused. He saw the futility of the attempt and wisely decided that his life could be used to better advantage than in such a quixotic attempt.

"IN SPITE OF this he found himself involved. His name was found among John Brown's papers and to avoid arrest he fled to Canada, and then again to England. What he feared most was not implication in the raid but disclosure of his activities as a station-master on the "Underground Railway," a system of freeing slaves by aiding their escape from the South and smuggling them into Canada.

"In England he was received with even greater acclaim but his heart was in America and he longed to return. Then sentiment in the North swung in favor of John Brown. The latter was no longer "a traitor and a fanatic" but a martyr, a hero. Douglass, feeling that he would be safe, returned and when the Civil War broke, threw all his energies into it. His slogan was "Union and Emancipation; Abolition or Destruction."

"CONSISTENT WITH his policy of equality, he demanded that colored men should be used as soldiers and not merely as servants and laborers. Northern color prejudice opposed him, and Lincoln, whose declared goal was to save the Union if it were necessary to retain slavery and color discrimination, obeyed the popular will. But Douglass went on fighting for the use of Negro soldiers until the need for men became so urgent that the Union Army had to use them. Lincoln later admitted, no less than four times, that the Negroes furnished the balance of power which decided the conflict in favor of the North. For instance, in a letter to Charles G. D. Robinson in August 1864, he said, 'Drive back to the support of the rebellion the physical force that the colored people now give and promise us, and neither the present nor any coming administration can save the Union. Take from us and give to the enemy the hundred and thirty, forty, or fifty thousand colored persons now serving as soldiers, seamen and laborers, and we can

no longer maintain the contest.

"The party who could elect a President on a War and Slavery Restoration, would of necessity lose the colored force; and that force being lost, it would be as powerless to save the Union as to do any other impossible thing."

"DOUGLASS HELPED to raise the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Regiments, his sons, Charles and Lewis, being the first to enlist. He himself, was promised the post of Assistant to General Thomas by Secretary of War Stanton, but Stanton never kept his promise, although Douglass reminded him of it several times.

"With colored soldiers now in the Army, Douglass' next task was to see that they were fairly treated. The South was hanging all colored prisoners. As Horace Greely said: 'Every black soldier now goes to battle with a halter about his neck.' Douglass insisted that the North should retaliate on such occasions. He demanded equal pay for the colored soldier with the white, and the same opportunity for promotion.

"He fought stubbornly and went often to the White House. At first Lincoln regarded him as a pest. Later, when the Negro soldiers proved their worth, Lincoln learned to appreciate him and, in the darkest moments of the conflict, sent for him to ask his advice.

"IN SPITE OF THIS an attempt was made to bar him from Lincoln's second inaugural ceremony on account of color. Fairbank, a white man who was present, relates the episode thus: 'Douglass was stopped at the door. "Hold on, you, you can't go in," someone said. Another interposed and said: "This is Frederick Douglass." Douglass replied for himself: "I don't want to go in as Frederick Douglass, but as a citizen of the United States."

"At this point Lincoln, noticing the trouble, came over, and with his long arms outstretched over the heads of the crowd, said: 'How do you do, Frederick? Come right in!'

"Lincoln wanted to know what Douglass thought of his inaugural speech. 'Mr. Lincoln,' replied Douglass, 'I must not detain you with my poor opinion. There are thousands waiting to shake your hand.'

"No, no" insisted Lincoln, 'you must stop a little. There's no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours. I want to know what you think of it.'

"Mr. Lincoln," responded Douglass, 'that was a sacred effort.'

"With the Civil War won, Douglass' next fight was to have the freed men made citizens. Lincoln was opposed to this as was his successor Andrew Johnson. Lincoln had said in a speech at Charleston, Illinois, September 18, 1858, 'I am not, nor have ever been, in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office.' The Civil War had perhaps modified his views on this but very little. He strongly favored colonization of the blacks outside of the United States. In 1862, when a deputation of Negroes called on him at the White House he advised them to encourage their people to leave America because of the physical differences between black and white. 'This,' he said, 'is a reason why, at least, we should be separated.'

"IN 1862, Lincoln proposed an amendment to the Constitution for settling Negroes outside the United States and had Congress give him \$600,000 to colonize Negroes on the Ile de Vache off the coast of Haiti. The attempt was not only a miserable failure but more than a hundred Negroes lost their lives on that desolate island. Still, after the Civil War, he proposed to General Grant to send the Negro veterans to dig the Panama Canal where they would have perished like flies as did the French. As Douglass pointed out had the free Negroes followed Lincoln's advice and left the country the Union forces would not have had their most invaluable services.

"Had Lincoln lived Douglass would probably have had greater difficulties with him than he did with his successor, Andrew Johnson, whose Reconstruction policies had been largely outlined by Lincoln. Under Johnson's plan, the freedmen would have become peons, this in an attempt to coax the South back into the Union. Douglass fought this new kind of slavery with as much vigor as he had fought the old. He demanded the ballot for the Negro. American liberty, he said, depended on three boxes: the ballot box, the jury box, and the cartridge-box.

"FROM THE FIRST," he says, 'I saw no chance of bettering the condition of the freedman and become a citizen. I insisted that there was no safety for him or anybody else in America outside the American Government. I set

THIS WEEK IN NEGRO HISTORY

AN "NPI" FEATURE

- Dec. 15, 1784 Phyllis Wheatley-Peters, poetess, was brought from Africa at age 7; died at age 31.
- Dec. 15, 1791 The Bill of Rights was passed by Congress and ratified by the states.
- Dec. 15, 1870 The Christian (formerly Colored) Methodist Episcopal church was established.
- Dec. 15, 1864 Negro troops participated in the Battle of Nashville.
- Dec. 16, 1859 John A. Copeland, Jr., member of John Brown's raiding party, was executed.
- Dec. 16, 1934 Maggie Lena Walker, bank president, wealthiest Negro woman in America, died in Richmond, Va.
- Dec. 17, 1807 John Greenleaf Whittier, anti-slavery poet, born.
- Dec. 17, 1903 First successful airplane flight by Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk, N.C.
- Dec. 17, 1951 Genocide in U.S. petition presented to United Nations.
- Dec. 18, 1815 Battle of New Orleans had more than 500 free Negroes as soldiers.
- Dec. 18, 1865 Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery ratified.
- Dec. 19, 1875 Dr. Carter G. Woodson, historian-founder, Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, was born. He established Negro History Week.
- Dec. 19, 1899 Birth of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., father of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Stockbridge, Ga.
- Dec. 20, 1850 Harriet Tubman made first Underground Railroad trip. Smuggled more than 300 slaves to freedom. Served as scout and spy in Civil war.
- Dec. 20, 1860 South Carolina seceded from the Union, giving rise to the Civil war.
- Dec. 20, 1892 Paul Laurence Dunbar, Negro poet, published "Oak and Ivy."
- Dec. 20, 1952 First time in 72 years, in which no lynchings occurred in the United States.
- Dec. 20, 1958 Harry Willis, boxer, died.
- Dec. 21, 1956 Montgomery, (Ala.) integrates its buses following a year-long boycott by Negroes.

myself to work with whatever force I possessed to secure this power for the recently emancipated millions.

"Douglass' proposal was ridiculed even by most of the abolitionists. Garrison, himself, had to be won over to the idea by Wendell Phillips. Thanks to Douglass, the Negro was thus enfranchised decades before he otherwise would have been.

"With the winning of the ballot for the Negro, Douglass' chief task was done. There were honors, such as they were, in store for him. He served as U.S. Commissioner to Santo Domingo; Minister to Haiti; member of the Legislative Council of the District of Columbia; presidential elector of New York; and Marshal of the District of Columbia, in which capacity he officiated at the inauguration of President Garfield. At one Republican convention, he was among those named for the Presidency.

"LATER HE WENT on the lecture platform. (See HISTORY, page 4)

LAS VEGAS VOICE

A WEEKLY NEWSPAPER (Published every Thursday) DEDICATED to the INTERESTS and ASPIRATIONS for a BETTER LIFE of the NEGRO CITIZENS of the STATE of NEVADA

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958 West Owens Ave. (Golden West Shopping Center) Las Vegas, Nevada
Telephone: 642-5308

ADVERTISING RATES FURNISHED UPON REQUEST

Price per copy - 15¢ * One year - \$6 * Two years - \$10
(Application for 2nd Class Mailing Permit pending at Las Vegas, Nevada)