

# Anna Murray Douglass

“The traveler standing at the base of a high mountain viewing for the first time its lofty peak as it towers above him feels his insignificance. He scans its rugged sides with an irresistible desire to know what is hidden at its summit. Not content to stand looking upward, feeding his imagination by silently gazing, he must mount and explore and with no realization of the obstacles to be encountered, but with a determined purpose, he prepares to ascend.”

**“This but epitomizes life.**

**Real life is a struggle, an activity, a will to execute. Desire precedes effort. Life with no desire, no effort is merely an existence, and is void of the elements that make life worth living.”**

This is how Rosetta Douglass Sprague introduced her piece and opened her speech, “My Mother as I Recall Her,” in May of 1900.



Most of the words included in quotations (unless otherwise noted) come from this speech by Rosetta Douglass Sprague (May 10, 1900)

**Anna Murray** was a stern woman who took pride in the professionalism of her work and in the care of her family.

**Two lives.... “...gave me a home where wisdom and industry went hand-in-hand; where instruction was given that a cultivated brain and an industrious hand were the the twin conditions that lead to a well balanced life,” said Rosetta Douglass Sprague, Anna Murray’s and Frederick Douglass’s oldest child.**



## Denton, Maryland

**Anna Murray was born (in March of 1813, perhaps), in Denton, Caroline County, Maryland** (on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay). This is the same area of Maryland in which Frederick Douglass was born, just one county over. The exact date of her birth is unknown.

**Her father was Bambarra Murray and her mother, Mary. They had 12 children—7 of them were born in slavery and the last 5 were not. Anna, being the 8th child, escaped being born in slavery by one month.**

Anna left her parents' home when she was 17 and went to Baltimore to find employment. She found a job as a housekeeper and developed a reputation for being **thorough and respected**.

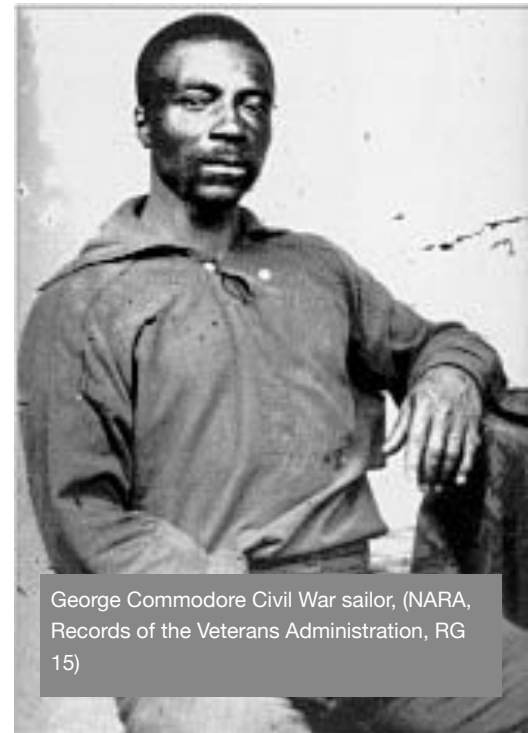
Free Black people in Baltimore, Maryland (at that time) didn't readily have enslaved people in their social circles, largely because enslavers did not want enslaved people hanging out with free Black people. When an enslaved person sought to befriend the free Black community, everyone was taking a risk, yet the enslaved person was usually welcomed with open arms—such was the case with Frederick Douglass.

Frederick and Anna met and seemed to have instantly fallen in love. She approached her support of him with the same thoroughness and dedication that characterized her work.

She was willing to use a great deal of her savings, **from working as a housekeeper, to support his attempt to become free. She also sold one of the two feather beds she owned**—all of this to pay for the costs of his escape.

The plan was for him to disguise himself as a sailor. He met an African-American man who was a seaman and who had papers that allowed him to travel freely. Although the description of the man (on the paper) looked nothing like Frederick, the plan was decided upon.

The man agreed to let Frederick use his



George Commodore Civil War sailor, (NARA, Records of the Veterans Administration, RG 15)

You can get an idea of what a sailor might have looked like from this Civil War era photo.

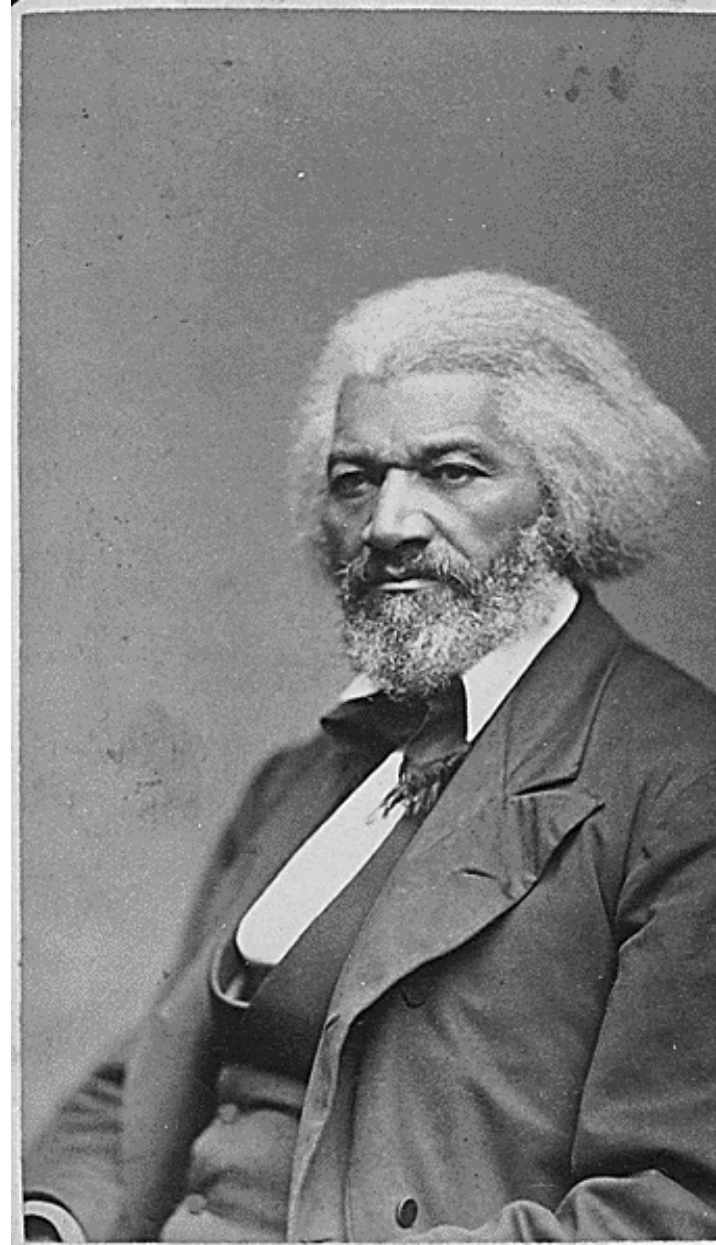
seaman's protection papers for his trip.

**Anna Murray used her money to get the materials for his disguise. She then sewed the sailor's suit for him. Frederick was going to take a train for the first leg of his trip and he knew that the conductor on the train might not check his papers well, because he might be busy as everyone was bordering the train —so Frederick bought his ticket at the train station and boarded just as it was taking off.**

He took a train from Baltimore to Delaware...and then took a steamboat to Philadelphia. From Philadelphia, he took a train to New York which took an incredible 24 hours to complete (due to its route).

**Along the route (especially in Maryland and Delaware) any white man or woman could've questioned his presence on the train; if they did, the train would**

**have stopped and Frederick would have been examined and questioned by authorities**—this never happened, although he saw someone on the train who definitely knew him, but this person did not “blow his cover.”



On his trip he needed, not only the first train ticket, but tickets for the **steamboat to Philadelphia and tickets for the additional train to New York. Anna Murray was, indeed, his biggest support on his trip.**

From the clothes that he wore, to the good deal of money that was used for his escape—**she supported him from the beginning.**

During his escape, “He wore a red shirt, a tarpaulin hat, and a loosely tied black scarf around his neck. To complete his disguise he also carried with him papers that said he was free.” (NPS, *Freedom Seeker*)

**“Her courage, her sympathy at the start was the main-spring that supported the career of Frederick Douglas.” (Rosetta Douglass Sprague)**

**When Frederick made it to New York, he wrote Anna right away and (as was the plan) she joined him there. Anna Murray and Frederick Douglass married, immediately, upon her arrival in New York. Their ceremony was performed by Rev. James W. C. Pennington, the famous future writer of *The Fugitive Blacksmith*.**

They settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts in a home that had two rooms. Anna brought with her, from Baltimore, “a feather bed with pillows, bed linen, dishes, knives, forks, spoons” and a



Rosetta Douglass Sprague, NPS Image

trunk full of clothing for herself; including her “plum colored, silk” wedding dress.

**They literally built their home and their foundation together—** as she went out to do washing during the day and he cut wood and did hard jobs to make ends meet.

## **THEIR CHILDREN:**

### **1. Rosetta Douglass (1839-1906) - married Nathan Sprague**

- Annie Rosine Sprague Norris
- Harriet Bailey Sprague
- Alice Louise Sprague
- Estelle Irene Sprague Weaver
- Fredericka Douglass Sprague Perry
- Herbert Douglass Sprague
- Rosebelle Mary Sprague Jones



Lewis Henry Douglass, NPS Image

### **2. Lewis Henry Douglass (1840-1908) - married Helen Amelia Loguen**

- No children

### **3. Frederick Douglass Jr. (1842-1892) - married Virginia Hewlett**

- Frederick Aaron Douglass
- Jean Hewlett Douglass
- Lewis Henry Douglass
- Maud Ardelle Douglass
- Charles Paul Douglass
- Gertrude Paul Douglass
- Robert Small Douglass



Charles Remond Douglass, NPS Image

### **4. Charles Remond Douglass (1844-1920) - married Mary Elizabeth Murphy**

- Charles Frederick Douglass



Frederick Douglass, Jr., NPS Image

- Joseph Henry Douglass (His son, Frederick Douglass III, would go to marry Booker T. Washington's granddaughter, Nettie Hancock Washington)
- Annie Elizabeth Douglass
- Julia Ada Douglass
- Mary Louise Douglass
- Edward Douglass

Married Laura Antoinette Haley, had one child—Haley George Douglass

## 5. Annie Douglass (1849-1860)

**The first three of their children were born in New Bedford, Massachusetts and the family, later, moved to Lynn, Massachusetts. Importantly, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was published in 1845 and Douglass, and his family, were now in a new kind of spotlight and danger.**

**Douglass** courageously named real people and places in his autobiography—partly because so many questioned whether he was actually ever enslaved because he was so smart and well-spoken (which is ridiculous).

**This put him in danger because he was not legally free and, since his wife helped him in his escape, she was also in danger if authorities found this out.**

It was decided that anti-slavery workers and supporters in New England would help look out for Anna and the children and that Frederick would go to Europe to teach about the evils of slavery and to escape the danger that was likely coming his way.

Douglass, reluctantly, agreed.

## Anna Murray Takes Charge

Anna then had to take care of their, then, four children. This made the years 1845 and 1846 very difficult for Anna and Frederick. As we have mentioned, he was reluctant to go, but the support they received from anti-slavery activists and the real danger he was in having been one of the first to name actual names in relation to his enslavement, while still not being free, all forced and encouraged him to leave.

Anna supported the family by binding shoes. In the later part of the 1800s shoes were made from a mold of a person's feet, this mold was called a last. The leather part of the shoe (the upper part) was sewn together and the soles (bottom part of the shoes) were made separately. The final part of the process required the upper part (made of leather) to be stretched over the mold and stitched, by hand, into the sole to complete the shoe. This was tedious work—even in the late 1800s.

But, Anna did this work, all while attending and supporting anti-slavery meetings in Lynn, Massachusetts **and saving money from a certain number of shoes she bound to donate to the anti-slavery cause in Massachusetts.**





Their oldest daughter, Rosetta, had been taken to Albany, New York to stay with anti-slavery supporters (relatives of activist Lucretia Mott) to help lighten the load on Anna, but she still had three, very young, children to care for.

Meanwhile, she was still able to save money and pay the bills.

Things would soon change for the family and for Frederick. The attention brought to him by the publication of his book, and the momentous reception of it, caused anti-slavery activists in Europe to reach out to the people who still owned Frederick, to see if they were willing to set him free—legally.

**Thomas Auld (of St. Michaels Maryland) was technically Frederick Douglass's owner, but he had loaned Frederick out to his brother, Hugh Auld, for some time. So a deal was reached between Hugh and Thomas Auld...and between Hugh Auld and the friends of Frederick Douglass in England.**

He received his freedom in 1846 (several documents highlight the events as follows):

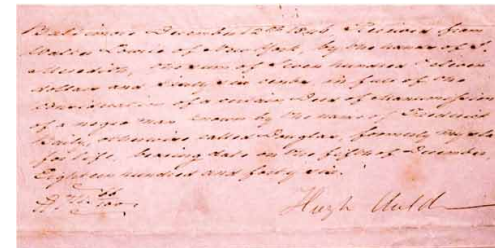
### **November 30, 1846**

Written in ink by Thomas Auld to Hugh Auld of Baltimore in the sale of a negro man named Frederick Baily alias Douglas (sic) for \$100.

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Mary Richardson, a Quaker and the wife of Henry Richardson of Newcastle-upon-tyne, England, wrote to Hugh Auld asking him whether Douglass's freedom had a price.

Hugh Auld replied in **October of 1846** that he would manumit Douglass for £150 sterling.



Deed for sale of Frederick Douglass, from Hugh Auld, NPS Image

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Anna Richardson and her sister-in-law, Ellen Richardson, took steps to raise the purchase money and made arrangements with American abolitionist, Ellis Gray Loring **of Boston to handle the details of the negotiation. On November 24, 1846, Walter Lowrie of New York City, an abolitionist, also carried out the negotiations and notified Hugh Auld that the £150 had arrived in New York and directed him to produce proof of legal ownership of Douglass.**

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Less than a week later Thomas Auld filed a bill of sale (FRDO 3861) in Talbot County signifying the transfer of Douglass to Hugh Auld, and **on December 5, 1846**, Hugh Auld filed Douglass's manumission papers in Baltimore county.

**One week later the transaction was consummated, Hugh Auld handed over the papers to Lowrie a copy of the bill of sale from Thomas Auld, a deed of manumission for Douglass and a receipt showing he had received \$711.66 for Douglass's freedom. All of these papers were placed in Douglass's hands shortly afterwards. (Bill of Sale for Frederick Douglass, National Park Service)**

Frederick Douglass was, thus, freed at the end of the year 1846, Douglass, then returned home in 1847.

While he was away, he would send money home to Anna and the family, as best he could, but he naturally thought that Anna would

be in some economic trouble and would have contracted some debt in his absence.

When the two of them sat down to talk, after his return, about their financial situation, she got up quietly and went over to the bureau drawer. **She pulled out a bank book which showed the deposits into the account of the money that he had sent them and the deposits she had made from working—not one single debt had been contracted, since he left. THAT WAS THE KIND OF WOMAN ANNA DOUGLASS WAS.**



## The Underground Railroad

**In 1847 the family moved to Rochester, New York and Frederick Douglass began the newspaper, *The North Star*... along with several people, including Martin Delany.** It was here that the family's efforts on the Underground Railroad became even more impactful.

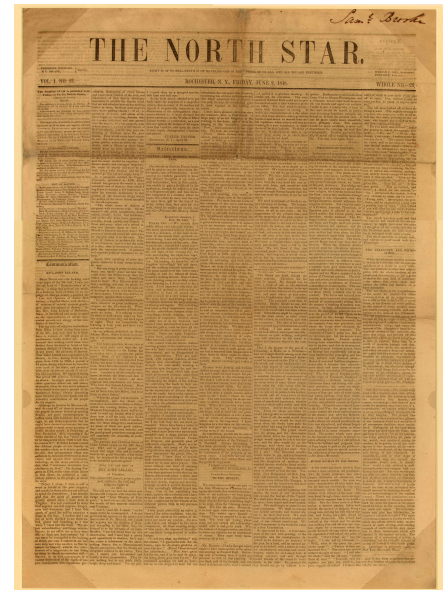
Frederick Douglass met Harriet Tubman, for the first time apparently, during his efforts here. After her escape in 1849 (and her subsequent rescues) Rochester became the last stop for Tubman, on her way to Canada.

Harriet Tubman, at least once, stayed at Frederick Douglass's house with as many as eleven people, perhaps, on that stay. Anna Murray was, of course, a key part in how the house operated as a part of the Underground Railroad. Anna would set up, anytime of the day or night, provisions for those escapees, who stopped at her house.

**She would provide food or clothing or whatever the steady hand of a professional homemaker could surely provide.**

**Frederick had the home enlarged so that a "suite of rooms" could be made for those stopping through on their escape to Canada.**

They were truly a couple in the fight against slavery, together!



## **In 1872, a fire destroyed their home in Rochester and the family moved to Washington, D.C.**

Douglass eventually became U.S. Marshal for the District of Columbia and, later, Recorder of Deeds for the District.

The family bought the twenty-room house called, Cedar Hill, in Washington, D.C. in 1878. **Anna ran that remarkable home, with the professionalism and guidance that defined her life.**

Even on her death bed, she gave instructions for the maintenance of the home...which were followed exactly. Rosetta, her daughter, said that Anna helped them take care of her, even while she was sick, with paralysis, in the last days of her life (which ended in 1882).



**To her children, she was a mother full of love who taught them industriousness and respectability in the home.**

**To escapees on the Underground Railroad she was a comfort and a guide that only a mother with strength could be.**

**To the world, she was a woman who should be remembered and mimicked due to her ability to overcome a nation full of hate for Black people and women.**

**To her husband, she was the perfect mate—without her there would have been NO FREDERICK DOUGLASS.**

## References and Images:

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## Images:

- Frederick Douglass Papers\_Family\_Papers,\_1859-1903\_ Rosetta Douglass Sprague\_ "Anna Murray Douglass, My Mother As I Recall Her," 1900.
- Caroline County, Maryland Courthouse, Danita Smith, August 31, 2013.
- George Commodore Civil War sailor, (NARA, Records of the Veterans Administration, RG 15)
- Frederick Douglass, National Park Service Photo.
- Rosetta D. Sprague\_National Park Service (FRDO 4812)
- Lewis H. Douglass\_National Park Service (FRDO 3907)
- Frederick Douglass, Jr.-National Park Service (FRDO 4954)
- Charles R. Douglass\_National Park Service (FRDO 3908)
- Deed for sale of Frederick Douglass, from Hugh Auld for 711.66 FRDO 3862
- North Star, June 2, 1848. Edited by Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany. Newspaper. Serial and Government Publications Division, Library of Congress
- Portrait of Mrs. Anna Murray Douglass, NPS Photo