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Douglass Liaisons: The Female Correspondents of Frederick Douglass 1842–52

Leigh Fought

For the past twenty years, historians have recognized the role that women played in the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement. Works by Gerda Lerner, Nancy Hewitt, Jean Fagan Yellin, Clare Taylor, and Maria Diedrich, among others, have demonstrated that women spoke, organized, promoted, and wrote on behalf of the movement to end slavery.¹ Yet, the published volumes of the Frederick Douglass Papers have obscured that fact. Although women supported and often saved Douglass throughout his career, their voices have been conspicuously absent from the seven volumes of the Douglass Papers. With the impending publication of the first correspondence volume, which covers the years 1842–52, the project can correct this oversight by emphasizing the contributions of women to abolitionism and to Douglass's life. Moreover, in these letters, Douglass's complex relationships with women and among the women themselves become more apparent and intriguing.

The Douglass Papers project has published five volumes of Douglass's speeches and two volumes of his autobiographies. The Speeches series appeared in the 1980s, with the last volume being published in 1992. The first volume of the Autobiographies series, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, A Slave*, was published in 1999; and the second, *My Bondage and My*

¹Maria Diedrich, *Love Across Color Lines: Otilie Assing and Frederick Douglass* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999); Nancy Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1922–72* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Gerda Lerner, *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Woman's Rights and Abolition* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1967); Clare Taylor, *Women of the Anti-Slavery Movement: The Weston Sisters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995); Clare Taylor, ed., *British and American Abolitionists. An Episode in Transatlantic Understanding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1974); Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

Freedom, in 2003. While women are present in all of these volumes, they do not play prominent roles, nor are they engaged in debate or in partnership with Douglass. The project published ten of Douglass's speeches on the rights of women and several others in which he touched upon the conditions of female slaves.² In these, however, women generally serve the function of rhetorical abstractions. Speakers such as Abby Kelley Foster, Douglass's most frequent female companion on the stage, and Lucretia Mott appear in the headnotes of the speeches;³ but Douglass does not address points on which they speak as he does his male companions. He also tended to avoid commenting upon the activism of any particular woman, with the exception of his 16 February 1894 eulogy to abolitionist and suffragist Lucy Stone.⁴ Despite the fact that women organized and attended the events at which Douglass performed these speeches, raising money for his salary, selling subscriptions to his newspaper, and often sharing the stage with him, the impression created in the project's volumes might falsely lead readers to assume that women were not particularly concerned with the issue of slavery.

In the *Autobiographies* series, women do appear in the texts as actors. Douglass's mother, grandmother, aunts, wife, and slaveholding mistresses influenced his awareness of his enslaved status, the development of his self-reliance, and his escape to freedom. The actions of these women, however, are entirely mediated through Douglass as the author, if he gives them a presence at all. Furthermore, as the plots progress, women play less of a role in the action. The women who were enslaved or who owned slaves play a larger role than those who helped him escape or fight against slavery. The most glaring example of this omission is Anna Murray, Douglass's free black wife, who raised the money to buy his train ticket and provided him with the sailor suit disguise that aided his escape. She merits less than a paragraph in either of his autobiographies, without reference to her aid in his escape.⁵

Likewise, the chapters on the abolition movement in *My Bondage and My Freedom* almost entirely exclude women. Douglass does not mention any of the women who spoke on the stage with him, nor does he comment upon

²Frederick Douglass, *Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, 5 vols. The Frederick Douglass Papers, ed. John Blassingame (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979–92), 1:346, 366; 2:12, 26, 248, 451; 4: 172–86; 5:247–63; 348–57; 378–88.

³Douglass, *Speeches*, 1:21, 27, 394; 2:84, 117–18, 128, 183, 235, 248.

⁴Douglass, *Speeches*, 5:608–13.

⁵Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies*, vol. 1, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, A Slave*, vol. 2, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Frederick Douglass Papers, ed. John Blassingame (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 1:76–77; 2:196.

their financial or organizational support. Only in regard to the assistance that he received in securing his legal freedom does he mention Anna Richardson, calling her “Mrs. Henry Richardson.”⁶ Women had been central in securing Douglass’s legal freedom, raising the funds that allowed him to launch the *North Star*, and providing him with an organizational network in Rochester when his supporters in Boston opposed his plans to start his own newspaper. Yet, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, when Douglass writes about this period of his life, his feminine supporters disappear almost entirely, while their male counterparts fill the pages.

As in the Speeches series, the editors included the women in the Autobiographies through annotation. The decision to include appendices of “readers’ responses” or reviews, and introductions and appendices to foreign editions, however, allowed the project to show women as engaged in an ideological debate on slavery. These included a letter, published in the 6 June 1845 issue of the *Liberator*, which detailed a woman’s response to the *Narrative*, as well as a review written by British journalist Mary Howitt. *My Bondage and My Freedom* reproduced the introduction to the German translation, which was written by the journalist and avid Douglass promoter, Otilie Assing.⁷ The *Narrative* volume also included a plea for donations for the annual Anti-Slavery Bazaar held in Boston. This plea, which originally appeared in the 1846 Irish edition of the *Narrative*, included an exclusively female list of fundraisers to whom donations could be sent.

The main obstacle to including women in the Douglass Papers volumes has been the nature of the documents that the project has published. Both the speeches and autobiographies were public documents that adhered to nineteenth-century propriety in regard to gender and to Douglass’s oratorical and literary persona of a self-made man. The social restrictions of Douglass’s time, as well as the need to maintain a sense of social respectability surrounding the essentially marginal movement for racial and gender equality, would have prevented him from humiliating his female colleagues by naming them in public except in the briefest and most laudatory language used to soften the blow of their appearance. When he did mention Anna Richardson, for instance, he cloaked her identity with her husband’s name, called her “a clever lady, remarkable for her devotion to every good work ...,” and padded the entire reference with parentheses.⁸

⁶Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 2:215.

⁷Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 1:166–68; 173, 176, 192–99; 2:432–434.

⁸Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 2:215.

Douglass, like many abolitionists both male and female, regardless of their radicalism, also believed that women's work in the movement behind the scenes was an extension of their feminine domestic sphere. Their work, while in the service of a public cause, was essentially in the private sphere and supportive. Douglass's audience, then, may have understood that such a support network of women existed, but, because of its domestic and feminine nature, did not require him to mention either it or its members. Additionally, if Douglass had crafted for himself the character of the self-made, self-reliant individual so prevalent in nineteenth-century literature, then the recognition of such a support network would undercut such an image. This idea would not extend to his male colleagues who worked in the public sphere, essentially equal to Douglass, making them brothers-in-arms in the fight against slavery. In any case, these documents, restrained by their author and by the social and literary conventions of his times, have prevented the Douglass Papers editors from offering an accurate depiction of women's participation in Douglass's life and work.

Since most of Douglass's exchanges with women took place off of the public stage, and the documentation of interaction in the private sphere comes in the form of letters, then the publication of correspondence volumes will allow readers an insight into the role that women played in his life and his relationships with these women. Again, the Douglass Papers' project is constrained by the documents, this time because of the limited number of letters to or from women. Of the 821 letters written to or from Douglass between 1842 and 1852, the time span of this volume, 81 letters are to or from women. The project will publish 232 of the 821 letters, 43 of these published letters are to or from women, meaning that Douglass's correspondence with women will be substantially represented. Only five of these 43 letters to be published, however, were actually written by women: three from Amy Post, one from Maria Weston Chapman, and one from Harriet Beecher Stowe.⁹

The skewed ratio of letters from Douglass to other correspondents in general is one that plagues the entire project, as well as any biographer of Douglass. Most of the letters that Douglass wrote to women are clearly responses to letters written to him. Yet, these letters no longer exist. In 1872, a fire, possibly the result of arson, destroyed Douglass's home in Rochester,

⁹Five letters not being published were written by women: Maria Weddle, Mrs. A. C. Judson, Mary Mann, and Sarah L. Hallowell.

New York. A majority of Douglass's personal papers burned, and most historians assume that the missing letters to Douglass were destroyed at that time, if not earlier or later.

Most letters to Douglass that will appear in the project's first correspondence volume first appeared in the *North Star*, *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, the *Liberator*, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, or other publications. Women in the nineteenth century, as a group, even those involved in the abolitionist movement, seldom sought publication. Those letters that did appear usually publicized antislavery fairs or meetings, with the correspondent writing in her capacity as an officer of an organization. Therefore, women would tend not to advertise their anti-slavery opinions in letters to the editor or to debate Douglass on points of ideology in the pages of journals as their male counterparts would. The five letters from Post, Chapman, and Stowe (as well as the few that the project has chosen not to publish), all survived because their authors retained copies (leaving the possibility that the authors may never have actually sent the originals or substantially revised the originals) or because the authors did choose to have the letter published. Thus, the five surviving letters being reproduced in the project's first correspondence volume were all written by prominent women in the abolition movement who had already established public voices for themselves.

These five letters demonstrate exactly what had been missing from the previous volumes. First, all three women show active engagement in anti-slavery activities or debates. Post, a Quaker who was central to the abolitionist movement in Rochester, New York, wrote to Douglass to solicit donations or publicity for antislavery fairs. Chapman, known as "William Lloyd Garrison's lieutenant" in the Boston antislavery circles, and able to strike fear in many a male activist, sent Douglass finances gathered from her acquaintances in England. Stowe requested that Douglass confirm her depiction of southern plantation life in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Furthermore, all three had no problem disagreeing with Douglass on a variety of points. Post publicly challenged Douglass's assessment of the 1850 Rochester Anti-Slavery Fair. "Dost thou really wish to bring thy Western New York Friends into disgrace," she chastised him, "and turn all donations in another direction ..."¹⁰ In a later private letter, she wrote: "I do always feel diffident in presuming to express any dissent from thy judgment, as I know thy extraordinary clear vision, and logical powers of reasoning, very

¹⁰Amy Post to Frederick Douglass, Rochester, NY, 2 February 1850, Post Family Papers, University of Rochester.

easily puts my sage conclusions in a fog, and makes me feel like the merest baby before thee" Nevertheless, she continued in her letter to debate him on a point of serious concern to abolitionists, the role of violence in the movement, by writing: "I cannot feel happy about thee, since thy conclusion to give slave catchers a blood-hound reception."¹¹

Stowe also disputed Douglass on matters central to the abolitionist movement. "I have noticed with regret, your sentiments on two subjects," she wrote, "the church-& African Colonization" ¹² Douglass was not fond of one and opposed the other, while Stowe supported both. Chapman, in her letter, expressed her displeasure that Douglass had broken away from his Boston supporters in order to publish his newspaper in New York, a move that had alienated William Lloyd Garrison and his other allies in New England. "I regretted, and still regret in common with all your Boston friends," she wrote, "that one whom we so highly value, and from whom we hope so much, should be subjected to the harassing anxieties and heavy financial responsibilities of a perplexing business operation" Ever opposing the use of political parties and the legal system to end slavery, Stowe expressed her pleasure at "the annihilation of the Liberty Party," which she referred to as a "half-way political movement."¹³ Each woman demonstrated a respect and admiration for Douglass, yet also a willingness to debate him on particular points of importance not only to them, but also to the movement as a whole.

This paltry number of letters from female correspondents definitely limits the direct voice of women in the Douglass Papers' volumes. Yet, even in the letters in which Douglass responds to the no longer extant feminine missives, their voices and actions are more readily discernable than in previous volumes. Through his responses, readers learn that women supported Douglass financially, challenged him to delineate his positions on issues of importance to them, and showed concern for his family life.

Douglass's repeated letters of gratitude to ladies' antislavery societies and sewing circles for their donations highlight their activities, and his awareness of the importance of their activities in supporting his career. "I beg that you will accept for yourself, and for the excellent Ladies' composing the society,

¹¹Amy Post to Frederick Douglass, Rochester, NY, late August 1850. Post Family Papers, University of Rochester.

¹²Harriet Beecher Stowe to Frederick Douglass, Brunswick, Maine, 9 July 1851, Acquisitions, Stowe-Day Memorial Library and Historical Foundation.

¹³Maria Weston Chapman, Paris, France, 22 September 1848, Weston Sisters Papers, American Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

my heartfelt thanks," he wrote to Susan Farley Porter, whose sewing circle had just donated \$233 to him, "not more for the valuable donation, than for the kind, appreciation of my Labors which it implies."¹⁴ Similarly, in October 1847, he wrote to Julia Griffiths, "Please accept my warmest and sincerest thanks, and extend the same to the many kind friends who co-operated with you in presenting to me the most excellent and valuable collection of books, pamphlets, tracts, and pictures, which through your own persevering industry, have just come to hand."¹⁵

Griffiths seems to have continued to inquire about the financial well-being of Douglass's enterprises, as indicated by Douglass's letter six months later in which he wrote: "Do accept my warmist thanks for the unfaltering interest which you continues to take in my humble welfare."¹⁶ He continued his missive by explaining the problems that he had in finding and keeping subscribers to the *North Star*. A month later, in May 1848, a British circular containing the names of fourteen women, including Griffiths, was published, calling for donations to the Rochester Anti-Slavery Fair that helped to support Douglass's paper.¹⁷ Another circular requesting donations and subscriptions for the *North Star* appeared at the same time, listing male collectors who were all related to the women endorsing the Rochester fair.¹⁸ Douglass, then, seems to have understood the influence that Griffiths wielded in the British antislavery movement. Without directly requesting aid, he suggested his difficulties to her, and she sprang into action.¹⁹ In 1849, Griffiths moved to Rochester to assist Douglass in running the *North Star*; and his later references to her in his letters to others indicate that she became an important business collaborator. Taken together, these letters demonstrate that Griffiths, Porter, and Post by organizing women in England and Rochester, New York, helped sustain Douglass financially, allowing him to carry on his antislavery work.

¹⁴Frederick Douglass to Susan Farley Porter, Rochester, NY, 27 March 1852, Porter Family Papers, University of Rochester.

¹⁵Frederick Douglass to Julia Griffiths, Lynn, Mass., 13 October 1847, National Anti-Slavery Standard, 13 January 1848.

¹⁶Frederick Douglass to Julia Griffiths, Rochester, NY, 28 April 1848, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁷Circular for Rochester Anti-Slavery Bazaar, [c. May 1848], Samuel May Jr. Papers, American Antislavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

¹⁸Circular advertising *North Star* in Britain, [c. May 1848], Samuel May Jr. Papers, American Antislavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

¹⁹Douglass's rivals in the antislavery movement also recognized Griffiths's influence, as indicated by their very negative reaction to her efforts to organize on Douglass's behalf and their efforts to slander the friendship between the two. This subject, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Other letters from Douglass show that women also challenged him to delineate his positions on particular ideological points. In a letter to British abolitionist Elizabeth Pease, Douglass wrote: "You ask me if I go with friend Garrison on the non resistant principle. In answer, I think there is a slight difference between us." He then outlined his position, "to use Physical force to restrain persons bent upon the commission of crime."²⁰ This is the first time in the volume that he mentions his ideological differences with his patrons, and on such an important matter as the role of self-defense, which Garrison's supporters had eschewed.

Another letter shows women soliciting Douglass's aid in their own struggle for liberation. In 1848, he responded to a letter from Elizabeth McClintock by writing, "To be sure I will do myself the pleasure of accepting your kind invitation, to attend the proposed woman's convention at seneca falls."²¹ This is the first direct mention of this first women's rights meeting in the project's volumes and Douglass's earliest action in support of women's rights. When William Lloyd Garrison had taken a similar stand only eight years earlier at the World Antislavery Convention in London, England, by sympathizing with the women who had been barred from speaking at that meeting, the American antislavery movement had fractured. Douglass, by 1848, had begun alienating many of the Garrisonians, not only by starting his own newspaper, but also by seeking the patronage of people like Gerrit Smith, who believed that the Constitution of the United States did not inherently support slavery and political action could therefore be used to end slavery. Yet, those who had opposed the full participation of women in the abolitionist movement, who had barred them from speaking at the World Antislavery Conference, and who had broken away from the Garrisonians in 1840, subscribed to those very same principles. Douglass, in openly supporting women's rights at this particular juncture in his career, began to define his own brand of antislavery thought, one that would embrace the tactic of political action supported by one side of the antislavery movement and the concept of full gender and racial equality endorsed by the other. Women became the agents of this development because, through his conversations with women, Douglass found a means to refine his ideas. Feminine contributions to his career thus also extended beyond their material support.

²⁰Frederick Douglass to Elizabeth Pease, Belfast, Ireland, 6 July 1846, Oswald G. Villard Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

²¹Frederick Douglass to Elizabeth McClintock, Rochester, NY, 14 July 1848, private collection of Mary Beth Neely, received by the Frederick Douglass Papers project from Mary Gordon, ed., Elizabeth Cady Stanton-Susan B. Anthony Papers project.

The letters to women also allow readers a rare glimpse into Douglass's private life and interpersonal relationships through the information that he directly reveals in his confidences to the women and through the tone of the interaction in the letters themselves. Douglass's relationship with his first wife, Anna Murray Douglass, has provoked much speculation among historians because so little information has survived about her.²² She did not write to her husband nor did she keep any record of herself. Their marriage also seemed strained to outsiders, and many of Douglass's white friends suggested to one another that he had married beneath himself, and that Anna was not "in all respects a companion for him."²³ Douglass's letters reveal the tension in his marriage, but also his level of concern for his wife. "Anne has not been well—or very good humored since we came here," he wrote to the Mott sisters, Lydia and Abigail, just after the Douglass family had moved to Rochester, a sudden change that Douglass imposed upon his family in November 1847. "She however looks better—as I feel better today. We are a weak set of mortals."²⁴ In 1843, he wrote to Maria Weston Chapman, "I have received a few lines from my wife asking for means to carry on household affairs. I have not to send hir. Will you please see that she is provided with \$25 or \$30."²⁵ During his trip to England he worried that she was looked after. "Your devotion to my little boys your attention to Dear Anna," he wrote to his friend, Harriet Bailey, "... has made you double Dear to me ... What you do for Anna and my children I shall consider as done to myself ..."²⁶ When he decided to extend his stay, he lamented to Isabel Jennings, "I had already written to my Anna telling her to expect me home on the 20th Nov. It will cost her some pain." Clearly not effusive in his emotions about his wife, he exhibited a dutiful devotion to her care, if not a great concern for her desires. His statements to Bailey also suggest a patronizing attitude in its assumption that his wife required supervision. This seems doubly insulting when reading his further request that Bailey "Read the enclosed letter

²²The document containing the most information about Douglass's first wife is an essay, "My Mother As I Recall Her" (1900; Washington, D.C., 1923), written by Rosetta Douglass Sprague, in both memory and defense of Anna Murray Douglass.

²³Isabel Jennings to Maria Weston Chapman, Cork, Ireland., 2 August 1847, Weston Sisters Papers, American Antislavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

²⁴Frederick Douglass to Abigail and Lydia Mott, Rochester, NY, 21 February 1848, Ida Harper Papers, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, Huntingdon Library.

²⁵Frederick Douglass to Maria Weston Chapman, Cambridge, Indiana, 10 September 1843, Weston Sisters Papers, American Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

²⁶Frederick Douglass to Harriet Bailey, [England], 16 May 1846, "Small Backlog," Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

which I send to my Dear Anna over and over again till she can fully understand its contents,”²⁷ and which he repeated in the next letter: “I want you to read over and over again until Dear Anna shall fully understand their contents.”²⁸

Douglass’s relationships with the other women in his household seem to have a similar tone, even as they reveal important information about the workings of that household. Douglass had sent his daughter, Rosetta, away to school when she was only nine years old. At that age, most girls would have been serving an apprenticeship in housekeeping under their mothers, learning the labor of managing an early industrial era household, providing child care for younger siblings, and assisting in piecework taken in by the household. Douglass, however, sent his daughter not to a school in nearby Boston, but in Albany, New York, where she would learn skills such as sewing and cooking from white women rather than her own mother. He corresponded with these white women, Lydia and Abigail Mott, about Rosetta’s progress. “I am not tired of hearing from my Dear Rosetta,” he wrote to the sisters, but hinted “I should like once more to see her hand writing.” He wanted to know “that she is behaving like a nice Dear Daughter of Frederick Douglass.”²⁹ Not only had Douglass dictated the extreme terms of Rosetta’s education, but he also insisted that she identify herself as his daughter and act accordingly, with no reference to her mother.

The most fully realized of these familial relationships in letters appears in the unusual correspondence that Douglass carried on with Harriet Bailey Adams, alias of Ruth Cox Adams. Adams, a fugitive slave from Maryland, lived with the Douglass family from 1842 to 1847. The letters that he wrote to her during his first journey to England in 1845–47 reveal that he considered her a close friend. He confided his loneliness and depression to her, writing: “I am miserable—unhappy—and it seems I must so live and Die.”³⁰ On another occasion, he confessed, “Harriet I got real low spirits a few days – ago – quite down at the mouth. I felt worse than ‘get out.’ My under lip hung like that of a motherless colt ...I was in a terrible mood—‘dats a fac!’” He alleviated this mood by playing his violin, but found solace in her “lov-

²⁷Frederick Douglass to Harriet Bailey, [England], 16 May 1846, “Small Backlog,” Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁸Frederick Douglass to Harriet Bailey, Belfast, Ireland, 17 July 1846, “Small Backlog,” Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁹Frederick Douglass to Abigail and Lydia Mott, Rochester, NY, 21 February 1848, Ida Harper Papers, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, Huntingdon Library.

³⁰Frederick Douglass to Harriet Bailey, Leamington, England, 31 January 1847, “Small Backlog,” Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

ing letters” that had “made you doubly Dear to me.” Their intimacy appears also in his use of dialect, including, “ole missus—is you got any ting for poor nigger to eat!!!”³¹ Moreover, he relied upon her advice, writing: “Speak Dear Harriet just what you think—even though differ from me. I will love you all the more for speaking out.”³²

Yet, his toleration for dissenting opinions did not mask that essentially patriarchal attitude toward matters of his family that he had demonstrated in his letters about Anna and Rosetta. Harriet’s announcement of her engagement to Perry F. Adams of Springfield, Massachusetts, apparently did not reach Douglass in England. So, when she requested that he purchase a wedding dress for her, his reaction was “shocked and surprised” He then proceeded to chastise her for having become engaged without consulting him. “You don’t honor me so much as to ask my advice,” he wrote, “Now My Dear Harriet—this is not treating me well—it is not treating me as a sister ought to treat a brother.” He continued to vent his frustration, fearing that she had chosen an “ignorant and unlearned person,” or “some ignorant—idle worthless person unable to take care of you or himself either.” “The man who marries you,” he counseled, “should remember he takes you from a brothers house and a brothers home—and he should at least see that you have as good a home after marriage as before marriage.”³³ Douglass’s brotherly concern seems almost tinged with jealousy at a man whose identity he does not yet know. This feeling escalated to fury. In the next extant letter, he wrote, “It was with no little pain, that I spoke as I did to you – in the letter asking you to leave my house.” He begged her forgiveness, “now almost persuaded that I have done you serious injustice.” “If you have not absolutely resolved to leave,” he continued, “I now wish you to stay in my family.”³⁴ Bailey, for her part, seems to have remained with the Douglass family until her marriage in November 1847, but the two did not resume their correspondence for another fifty years.

His close friendship with Lydia and Abigail Mott also began to fall apart over time. Early in their correspondence, Douglass not only entrusted his

³¹Frederick Douglass to Harriet Bailey, [England] 16 May 1846, “Small Backlog,” Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

³²Frederick Douglass to Harriet Bailey, Belfast, Ireland, 17 July 1846, “Small Backlog,” Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

³³Frederick Douglass to Harriet Bailey, London, England, 18 August 1846, “Small Backlog,” Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

³⁴Frederick Douglass to Harriet Bailey, Leamington, England, 31 January 1846, “Small Backlog,” Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress. The letter in which Douglass dismissed Bailey from his house is not known to have survived.

daughter to their care, but he also turned to the sisters for educated discussions. Douglass's earliest extant letter to Abigail in 1846, an excerpt of which she sent to the Albany *Evening Journal* for publication, details his love of Robert Burns's verse as he describes a visit to the birthplace of the Scottish poet. "Read his poems," Douglass begged Mott, "and as I know you are no admirer of Burns, read it to gratify your friend Frederick."³⁵ Douglass seems to have believed that Mott, a former teacher, could provide useful insight to his observations and understand Douglass's appreciation for the poet, even if she did not herself like him. The Motts, however, provided more than literary conversation, lending their support and understanding to his struggles. "Many thanks for the subscribers," he wrote to the sisters for their help in finding support for his struggling newspaper in 1848. He added his gratitude to "Dear Lydia, for her kind words," in his defense of desegregated education and discussed his troubles in explaining the divisions within the anti-slavery movement to its British supporters.³⁶ Douglass, then, seems to have turned to Lydia and Abigail for sympathy.

Thus opens a mystery when Abigail died in 1850. Douglass responded to a request from Susan B. Anthony by refusing to run an obituary of his old friend. "There are considerations," he wrote, "connected with the well known relations subsisting between myself and the departed friend which makes a eulogy on her – forgiving disposition – somewhat out of place in the 'North Star.' Reference to this matter is exceedingly painful to me," he continued, and "is, one which I do not feel at full liberty to explain."³⁷

That this letter, and this disagreement, came from Susan B. Anthony also provokes another question. Years later, in the battle to ratify the fifteenth amendment, the abolitionist and woman's rights movement split when one faction opposed the amendment because it did not include women while another was willing to overlook women's exclusion in order to preserve what gains had been won for black men. Anthony and Douglass found themselves on opposing sides. This early letter, however, suggests that their differences predated the Reconstruction era and were more complicated than opposition or support of the fifteenth amendment.³⁸

³⁵Frederick Douglass to Abigail Mott, Ayr, Scotland, 23 April 1846, *Liberator*, 17 July 1846.

³⁶Frederick Douglass to Abigail and Lydia Mott, Rochester, NY, 21 February 1848, Ida Harper Papers, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, Huntingdon Library.

³⁷Frederick Douglass to Susan B. Anthony, Rochester, NY, [Autumn] 1850, Ida Harper Papers, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, Huntingdon Library.

³⁸For greater discussion of this rift in the woman's rights movement, see Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848–1869* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

Douglass's association with Maria Weston Chapman also becomes the clash of two strong wills when reading his letters to her. The first, written from Cambridge, Indiana, in September 1843, describes in great detail various meetings of the "Hundred Conventions" antislavery speaking tour of the Midwest. A second letter, written a year later, enclosed an essay for the gift book, the *Liberty Bell*, which she edited. A third letter, written two years later, thanked her for a copy of a later edition of the *Liberty Bell*. Thus far, Douglass demonstrated a clear understanding of Chapman's administrative role, particularly in handling finances.

In the third letter, however, Chapman's distrust of Douglass's ability to manage money becomes quite evident from his reaction to her. In defense of his placing the advertisement for the Anti-Slavery Bazaar in the Irish edition of his *Narrative*, he wrote "I have done so from no sordid motive . . ." He pointed to his own pecuniary sacrifice for the abolition movement, writing that he, "Lived in a small house paid a small rent, indulged in no luxuries—glad to get the common necessaries of life—and followed on with a glad heart and willing mind—in the thin but brave ranks of our noble pioneer William Lloyd Garrison." The cause for this defense was an attack that Chapman had made upon Douglass to Irish publisher Richard Webb. "I went forth feeling my self armed with the confidence reposed in me by your self . . ." he wrote; but he soon learned, "... you betray a want of confidence in me as a man, and an abolitionist, utterly inconsistent with all the facts in the history of my connection with the Antislavery enterprise."³⁹ Taken in this context, Chapman's letter to Douglass now seems one of veiled hostility or at least of a woman with strong opinions restraining herself. The two required one another's skills in the abolition movement—he her organizational abilities and she his oratorical gifts—but her condescension and his desire for independence were at odds.⁴⁰

Amy Post also acted as a patron to Douglass, but the relationship between the two was clearly of a different timbre than that between Douglass and Chapman. Douglass's first letter to Post indicates that the two had established a professional relationship as early as 1846. Post challenged Chapman's dominance in the antislavery movement by enlisting Douglass to promote

³⁹Frederick Douglass to Maria Weston Chapman, Kilmarnock, Scotland, 29 March 1846, Weston Sisters Papers, American Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

⁴⁰This animosity becomes more apparent in reading her letters to others in regard to Douglass, whom she characterized as "never trustworthy." Maria Weston Chapman to John B. Estlin, Paris, 9 March 1852, Weston Sisters Papers, American Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

her Rochester Anti-Slavery Fair while he toured Britain. Douglass, at the same time, promoted Chapman's Boston fair, and admitted "All the abolitionists whom I should hope to interest in your fair—have their efforts no pledged to the Bazaar at Boston." Nevertheless, he agreed to help Post and wrote: "I cannot but admire the perseverance and determination which you indicate in the course you have marked out."⁴¹ This struggle between the two fairs continued into 1848, as Douglass wrote to Post about Chapman's solicitation of donations in competition with Post's bazaar.⁴² Other women also hoped to lure Douglass from the Boston organization as suggested by his responses to letters from Ruth Dugdale and Cornelia Cowles in which he regretted not relocating to Ohio, rather than New York, from Massachusetts. These letters to Dugdale and Cowles also indicate that the Western Anti-Slavery Society for which both women worked was not as much under the influence of the American Anti-Slavery Society's Boston leadership as historians have previously believed.

Douglass's contentious exchanges with Chapman also raise the possibility that he courted Post's favor as a means of asserting independence from the Boston "clique." Yet, unlike his correspondence with Chapman at this time, Douglass clearly felt free to discuss more personal matters with Post. "My Dear Amy," he wrote, "I am living a singular life. Every thing is so different here from what I have been accustomed to in the United States ... I am sometimes fearful it will unfit me for the proslavery kicks and cuffs at home" He also reminisced about a prior meeting with Post in Rochester, when: "You loved me and treated me as a brother before the world knew me as it now does – & when my friends were fewer than they now are."⁴³

Eventually, finances threatened this friendship, as well. Very quickly after its inception in 1847, the *North Star* fell upon difficult times, not unusual for antislavery papers, particularly those run by African-Americans. Investors, however, were not as understanding, and these included Amy and her hus-

⁴¹Frederick Douglass to Amy Post, Edinburgh, Scotland, 28 April 1846, Post Family Papers, University of Rochester. Post also wrote to Chapman at the same time, requesting that the American Anti-Slavery Society, for which Chapman worked, allow the Rochester-based Western New York Anti-Slavery Society to employ Douglass as an agent, because "No man has ever been amongst us who in our opinion is qualified for usefulness in the antislavery field." Amy Post to Maria Weston Chapman, Rochester, NY, 1 May 1846, Weston Sisters Papers, American Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

⁴²Frederick Douglass to Amy Post, Albany, NY, 30 January 1848, Post Family Papers, University of Rochester.

⁴³Frederick Douglass to Amy Post, Edinburgh, Scotland, 28 April 1846, Post Family Papers, University of Rochester.

band, Isaac, as well as members of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society. Members of this organization proposed that the finances of the *North Star* be placed in the hands of a committee that would oversee the business operations of the paper. Should Douglass not agree to such a committee, the Society would not donate any further funds to the paper, a move apparently supported by Post. "I feel grieved at your declaration of intention not to vote in favor of any further donations to the *Star* until I put the economical concerns of the paper under the charge of a committee," Douglass wrote to Amy Post, "These were strange words to me—and you were the last person from whom I should have expected them."⁴⁴ Again, he charged, "Such a course would be degrading to me as a man . . ." The matter was then handed over to a man, Isaac Post. This did not prevent Amy and Douglass from disagreeing on finances in the future, however, such as their differing assessment of the success of the 1850 fair.

Nor did the two cease disagreement at all, for the Posts drifted into spiritualism and their efforts to bring Douglass along met with his own particular brand of disapproval for which he made a written semi-apology since, "yourself and Husband have thought me reprehensible for my conduct."⁴⁵ Nonetheless, Post and Douglass maintained their friendship regardless of disagreements and probably because Post was able to retreat or finesse major differences in ways that Chapman was either unwilling or unable to. Allowing a committee headed by her husband to intervene in the *North Star* finances, agreeing to disagree about spiritualism, and padding her criticism with self-deprecation and flattery of Douglass helped her keep peace between Douglass and herself.

The Correspondence series should prove to be the most important published by the Douglass Papers project. In this series, women are given a voice, either directly or implied through Douglass's responses to their letters, as active participants in Douglass's life and work. The letters demonstrate that his relationships with these women were nuanced, revealing the complexities of ideas and gender relationships within the antislavery movement, as well as of the individuals involved in that movement. This is both particularly true and important in regard to Douglass himself because, as he was engaged in the struggle for human equality, he also attempted to translate

⁴⁴Frederick Douglass to Amy Post, Macedon, NY, 11 September 1849, Post Family Papers, University of Rochester.

⁴⁵Frederick Douglass to Amy Post, Rochester, NY, [5 April 1850], Post Family Papers, University of Rochester.

those ideals into his personal life. These letters show how he succeeded in doing so, but also reveal the limits that his era placed upon the most progressive of individuals in fully realizing and living their ideals. By publishing these letters, the Frederick Douglass Papers project has caught up with research on women in nineteenth-century reform movements, enabling students of Douglass to enhance and surpass previous scholarship on the man, his ideas on gender, and his relationships with the women who were so crucial to his life.