

*Preserving  
Family Memories by*

# REMEMBERING AN ICON

Rochester Blackalls are descended from a long line of anti-slavery activists.

BY SALLY PARKER

**W**hen retired stenographer Gertrude Blackall sat down in 1929 to type up her childhood recollections of Frederick Douglass for the Rochester Historical Society, she shared happy memories of a family friend. Far from political observations of a famous civil rights activist and commanding orator, her stories were intimate snapshots of a man who cherished time spent with children and loved a good laugh.

Gertrude's family supported Douglass during his fifty-year fight to abolish slavery and to gain equal rights for African Americans. He relied on his supporters' collective financial, political, and moral support—at times heavily. Gertrude's

reminiscences, along with letters between their families, provide a closer look at the personal connections Douglass and his family had with supporters.

Douglass—then Fred Bailey—escaped from slavery in Maryland in 1838, aided by his wife-to-be, Anna Murray, a free black woman. They settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where they adopted the Douglass surname and started a family. Douglass joined the anti-slavery movement, and in 1847, they moved to Rochester and lived there for twenty-five years, where he rose to the international stage as a sought-after anti-slavery speaker and publisher.

Born in 1867, Gertrude lived in Rochester most of her life. In the 1890s, when women in business were a rarity,

she ran her own stenography business and school. Her memories of Douglass in Rochester reach back to her younger years; a young child when Douglass and his family left Rochester for Washington, DC, she remembered he rode a large white horse, “and being so tall and handsome, with such a massive and commanding figure, and such unusual dignity of bearing, he was a striking personality.”

Gertrude recalled a little boy in her neighborhood who would yell out a racial epithet at Douglass when he rode his horse. One day, Douglass, watching for him, jumped from his horse, caught the boy and held him aloft “in his powerful grasp,” echoing the word back to the child.

For many years, Gertrude's

family had a warm friendship with Douglass, his first wife, Anna Douglass, and his second wife, Helen Pitts Douglass. Children were a source of much delight for him. He had five children and twenty-one grandchildren.

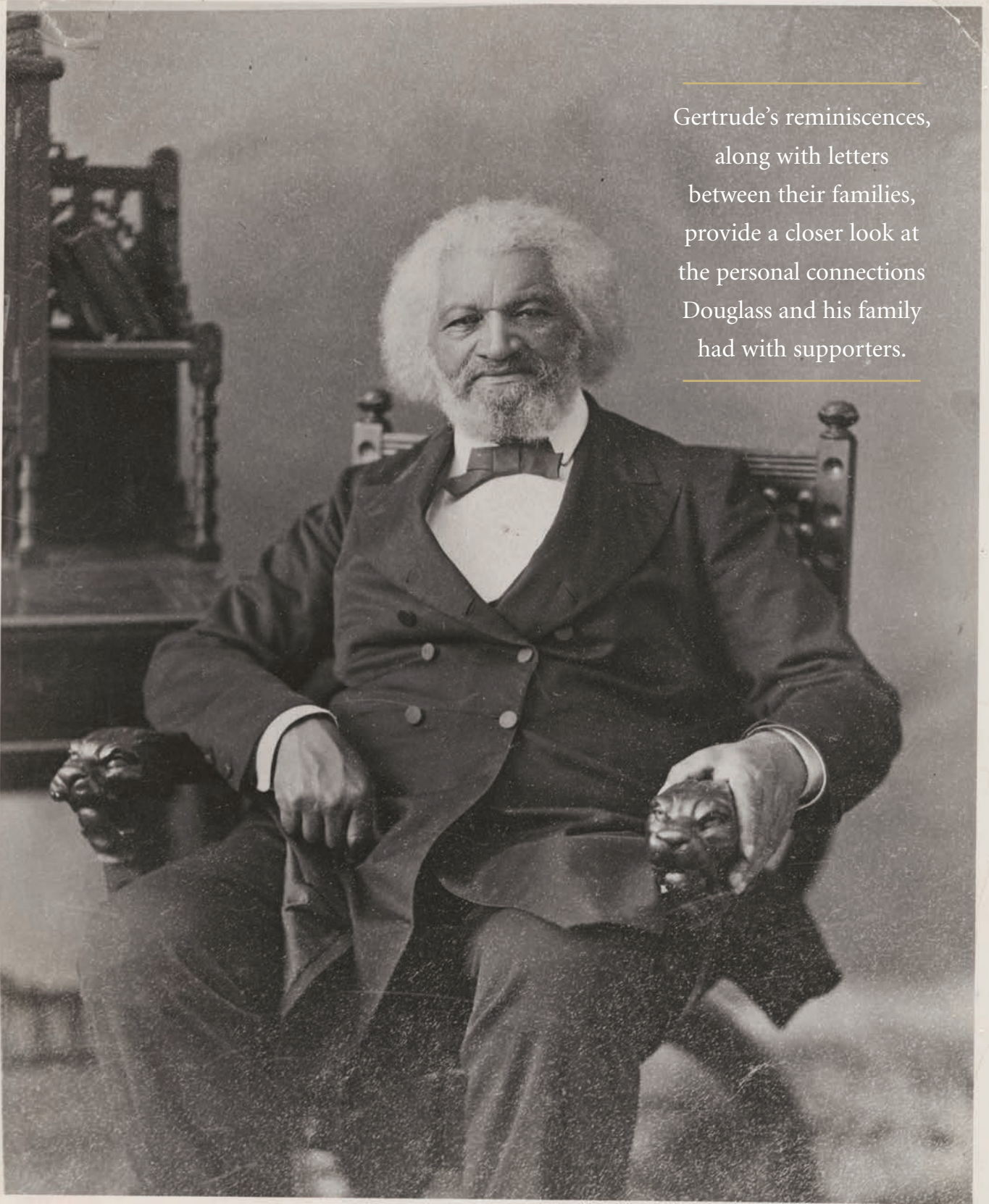
“Mr. Douglass had a great fondness for young people,” wrote Gertrude, whose siblings were Minnie, Robert, and Florence. “He taught my brother to whistle on his fingers, an accomplishment which delighted his boyish heart, as well as the child-heart of Mr. Douglass. All of us children loved him, because he was one with us in spirit.

“As we grew older, we heard him deliver some of his masterly orations, in that soft, rich voice of his, which was capable of such great power.”

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Rochester Aug 6-44  
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My Dear Brother Frederick, -  
I have had you  
in mind for a long time.  
Last night I dreamed of  
you and have risen early  
this beautiful Sunday morning  
to pen a few words to you.  
I returned Friday night  
from a visit of a few days  
to Robt Ibe lives in the D. U.  
Chapter House with about  
twenty very nice boys.  
Jennie, Minnie, Florence and  
myself went. They had a party  
the first night. The house  
was trimmed very prettily and  
all the boys were very kind  
to us and did every thing to



Sarah Colman Blackall wrote to Douglass often, and the two exchanged gifts and news over their decades-long friendship.

Sarah's correspondence with Douglass is chatty and affectionate, with news of the latest between long-time friends.

#### Remarkable Family

Gertrude's stories about Douglass had another, perhaps unintended, effect: to preserve the legacy of her own remarkable family. At the heart of her story is the decades-long friendship between the famous abolitionist and her mother, Sarah Colman Blackall.

Sarah was born in Boston in 1835 to a long line of anti-slavery activists. Her great-grandfather was Benjamin Colman, a Congregational deacon whose condemnation of slave owners—including the pastor of his own church—had him suspended from the church for nearly two years shortly after the Revolutionary War.

Sarah married Burton Francis Blackall in 1853, and

they moved to Rochester five years later. Frank, as he was known, was born to English immigrants in Albany in 1832. Fervent abolitionists, they fit right in; Rochester was buzzing with radical reform movements. From the 1870s to the 1900s, the Blackalls lived in various homes on North Union Street, University Avenue, and Vine Street—all within walking distance of Douglass's home on Alexander Street.

Sarah was in a group of activists who met at the home of Mary and William Hallowell in the Corn Hill neighborhood. They represented hundreds of families in upstate New York whose daily choices to stand up for human rights turned the wheel of progress in a time of upheaval. Nationally known abolitionists attended the meetings from time to time, including Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, Parker Pillsbury, Gerrit Smith, and John Brown.

#### Letters from Afar

Sarah's correspondence with Douglass is chatty and affectionate, with news of the latest between long-time friends.

"I cannot tell you just how much pleasure your visit to Cedar Hill gave my wife and myself," Douglass wrote to Sarah in February 1892 from his home in Washington, DC. "Nothing has occurred to me lately to bring back to me so much of my Rochester life as your visit has done."

"My Dear Brother Frederick," Sarah wrote in June 1894, "I have had you in mind for a long time. Last night I dreamed of you and have risen early this beautiful Sunday morning to pen a few words to you." Her letter told of a visit to her son at Cornell University with her daughters, a fire in a house they owned, and a lecture she attended on the ethics of religion. She also wrote of congressional politics with wry humor. "If I were in Washington now, I should go

to hear those tariff discussions. ... If there is anything I enjoy more than perfect sense, it is a good square fight, and by the paper's report of the speeches, they have them in Congress."

Douglass's move to the nation's capital in 1872, after a quarter century in Rochester, meant leaving behind many friends. Toward the end of his life he sounded homesick.

"I only wish I was residing in dear old Rochester, just now and could see you and Zerviah [Sarah's sister] together once more," he wrote to Sarah in May 1894. "Please, my dear friend, do not think I can get letters from you or from any of our dear family circle too often. I am always glad to see the Rochester post mark on a letter addressed to me."

In August of the same year, after a particularly rough patch of sickness and death in his household, Douglass feared death would strike again. "You can easily imagine my fears that what has come twice may come three times. I am not superstitious but I fear that the number three is ominous. What I am telling you is as to a sister. I think you like to know how I feel, what I am thinking and what I am doing."

Six months later, things were looking brighter at Cedar Hill. On February 16, 1895, four days before his death, Douglass wrote: "Dear Sister Sarah ... My seventy-eighth came and passed very pleasantly. The evening was interspersed with delightful

recitations, violin and piano music. ... and yet, and yet, the whole occasion would have been more happy if I could have seen your kind and amiable presence here."

#### **Affectionate Relationship**

Over the years, Douglass and Sarah exchanged gifts. He gave her the gold pen he used to write "Life and Times of Frederick Douglass." He also gave her a lock of his white hair, now in the Rochester Historical Society's collections. Douglass kept his beloved violin in a silk case Sarah made for him from her wedding gown.

In letters Frederick exchanged with Sarah's children when they were older, his affection for the whole family comes through. In April 1894, Douglass wrote to Gertrude: "Dear Gerty, You have made us ever so happy. We are all delighted with your photograph. It is your own dear self—it looks, thinks, and almost speaks. I gave a real joyous laugh when I saw it. It was just as if you had come to Cedar Hill for a pleasant visit and thus to make us all glad."

Florence, her younger sister, shared a photograph that year, too.

"I cannot tell you how honored I feel at your request for my photograph," she wrote. "I am going to send you two—one as you used to know me when you called me Flossie, and the other taken last year."

Frank's letters to Douglass were often about business

logistics—he managed Douglass's Rochester rental properties. But he also told stories that painted a picture of the city the abolitionist missed.

"We had one of the longest torchlight processions here last night that I ever saw," Frank wrote in October 1880. "They walked 8 abreast, and it took 25 minutes to pass a given point. It was exciting to see the rockets and Roman candles shoot into the air amidst the booming of cannon on Court St. Bridge, and the whole procession singing, 'John Brown's body lies mouldering in the ground but his soul goes marching on.'"

#### **Friends on the Line**

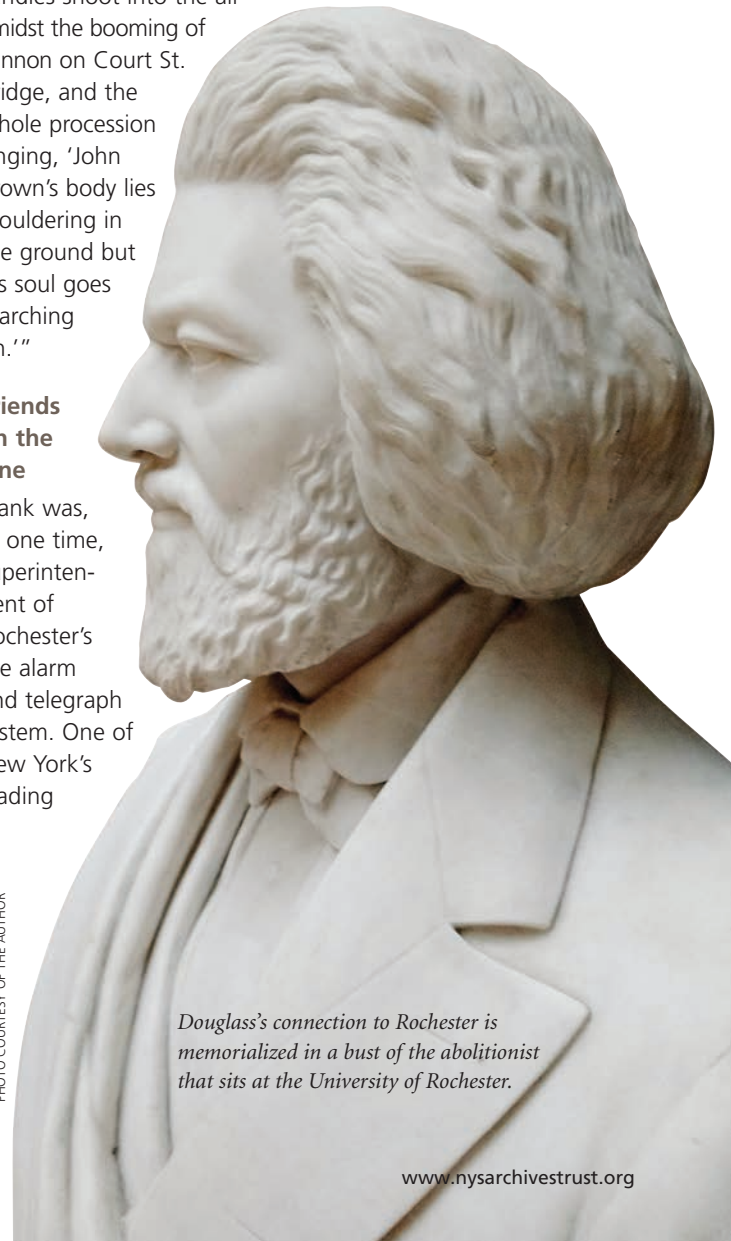
Frank was, at one time, superintendent of Rochester's fire alarm and telegraph system. One of New York's leading

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"Please, my dear friend, do not think I can get letters from you or from any of our dear family circle too often. I am always glad to see the Rochester post mark on a letter addressed to me."

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PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



*Douglass's connection to Rochester is memorialized in a bust of the abolitionist that sits at the University of Rochester.*



them in Congress.  
 Give my kind regards  
 to Mrs Pitts and Miss  
 Loy, and love to Mrs  
 Douglass and all your  
 dear children not  
 forgetting to take a goodly  
 share for your own  
 blessed self. Please write  
 soon and tell me of the  
 good health of all at  
 Cedar Hill. I wish  
 and the girls would wish  
 to be remembered if they  
 were here. Sincerely  
 your friend and sister  
 Sarah.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Early on, Frank used his position as a telegraph operator to support Douglass.

electrical experts, he traveled extensively for his work and enjoyed a national reputation.

Early on, Frank used his position as a telegraph operator to support Douglass. In 1859, the abolitionist was out of town when he learned officials were looking for him in connection with John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. Douglass sent a telegram to Frank, then twenty-six years old, "a friend and frequent visitor at my house, who would readily understand the meaning of the dispatch: 'B.F. Blackall, Esq., Tell Lewis (my oldest son) to secure all the important papers in my high desk,'" he wrote in his third autobiography. "I did not sign

my name, and the result showed that I had rightly judged that Mr. Blackall would understand and promptly attend to the request."

Frank's son, Robert, recounted another story in a 1950 letter to a local newspaper. As superintendent of the B&O Telegraph Co., Frank overheard a competitor in the office next door tapping out a message over the wire: slave hunters were looking for Douglass. Knowing where he was hidden, Frank alerted him, and Douglass fled to Canada.

In September 1894, Douglass wrote to "My dear Sister S." that he had spent the whole summer on the Chesapeake Bay, "where I am now building a summer cottage and where I expect to spend some weeks next summer in boating and fishing and in whatever innocent employment an old man can find pleasure. ... Mrs. Douglass joins me in love to you and all your dear ones. Your Brother, Frederick Douglass."

That day never came. When Douglass died suddenly on February 20, 1895, his son Lewis sent a telegram to Sarah: "Father dropped dead tonight." His body was returned to Rochester, where he had felt most at home, for a funeral attended by hundreds. Thousands more thronged in the streets. He was buried in Mount Hope Cemetery, as was Frank Blackall six years later. Sarah Blackall lived to be almost eighty-two and died in 1917 in the home where I first ran across her name. ■

## THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

A copy of Gertrude Blackall's reminiscences is found in the Rochester Museum & Science Center (RMSC) archives. Letters quoted in this piece are housed in the Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress and at RMSC. City directories in the Local History and Genealogy Division of the Rochester Public Library told where the Blackalls lived and where Gertrude operated her business. Newspaper clippings included Frank and Sarah Blackall's obituaries. Rochester Historical Society made available the lock of hair given by Douglass to Sarah. The Frederick Douglass National Historic Site confirmed Sarah's visits to Cedar Hill. Federal and state records available on Ancestry.com were used to research Blackall and Colman family members.

