

## Frederick Douglass in Carlisle

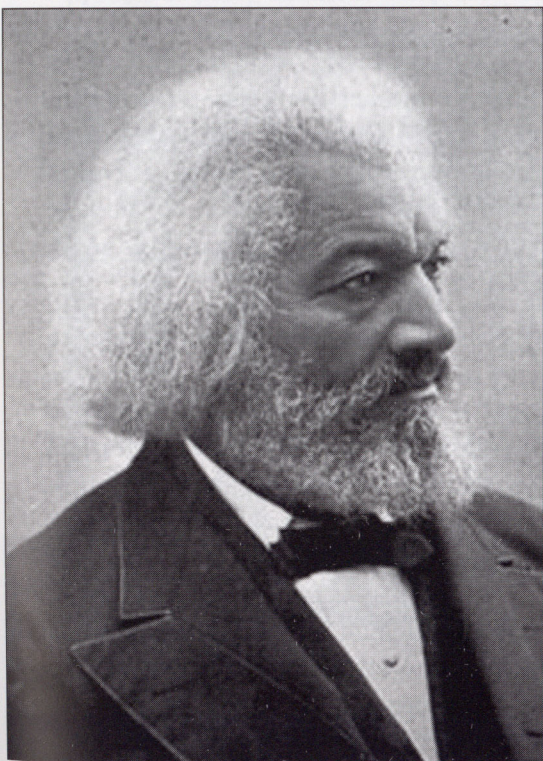
by David L. Smith

Transcriptions of newspaper articles by Mark W. Podvia and Joan McBride

On April 7, 1893, the *Evening Sentinel* reported that Frederick Douglass was making his first visit to Carlisle when he addressed the students at the Carlisle Indian School. His presence at the school was also subsequently reported in the school's publication, *The Indian Helper*, on April 14, 1893 and April 21, 1893. The text of his speech was later printed by the Indian School's press. Until recently it was not generally known that this was not Douglass' first visit to the area. A prior visit was reported in both the *American Volunteer* and the *Carlisle*

*Herald* on March 7, 1872 and March 14, 1872 respectively.

This earlier visit was apparently unscheduled, based on information gleaned from the articles. However, Douglass was invited to speak at Rheem's Hall the evening of his visit to Carlisle. Although his speech did not create a stir, his experiences in the town during his stay led to controversy, as reflected in the articles in each of the papers. The full text of each of the articles follows.



Frederick Douglass—  
photo taken about the time  
of his visit to Carlisle in 1872.



Two locations mentioned in the articles may be of interest. The first, Rheem's Hall, where Douglass spoke, was located immediately behind the Old Court House. It is a parking area today. The second, the Bentz House, where Douglass stayed, was located on part of the land that is today the former Wellington Hotel on East High Street.

Both articles are presented here in the order of their publication. They provide interesting insight into racism and the role it played politically in 1870s Cumberland County. Each of the newspapers had a particular political viewpoint as will become evident as each article is read.

*American Volunteer*, March 7, 1872

#### LECTURE BY FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Very unexpectedly to our people, Frederick Douglass, the celebrated colored orator, stopped off here on Saturday, (on his return home from Chambersburg,) and in the evening he lectured in Rheem's Hall, to an attentive audience. His subject was "San Domingo," on which he discanted for a full hour and a half. Having accompanied the Commission sent out by President Grant to examine the island with a view of annexing it to the United States, he spoke of the country, its people, resources, tropical fruits, etc., with a good understanding and knowledge. He is not the "great orator" that his admirers represent him to be; but yet he is an agreeable and forcible speaker, and a fair elocutionist. Of course he favors the annexation of San Domingo; all those sent out by Grant to visit this island of snakes were pledged to report in favor of annexation before they left our own shores. The speaker, it must be confessed, made several good points in advocacy of annexation as good, indeed, as could be made in behalf of a bad cause.

During his speech, he frequently diverged from his subject to refer to himself personally and the colored race of America. In one sentence he hit somebody hard. He said the Commission appointed by President Grant to visit San Domingo, was composed of distinguished and learned men. He was the only colored man in the party, but yet notwithstanding his color, he was recognized, in every respect, as an equal. He ate at the same table with the Commissioners, occupied the same stateroom in the ship's cabin, and in San Domingo they occupied the same sleeping apartments. He was treated as a gentleman, just as all were treated. "But here in Carlisle, as well as in some other towns," remarked the speaker, "I am not treated in this way; here caste is still recognized; here a man is denied certain privileges because of his color. I am not annoyed;



I care little about it; am not much hurt on this account," continued Douglass. "It is only a matter of time; we (the colored men) must wait patiently, and in the course of a few years we will be fully recognized as equals everywhere. There are many colors but only one humanity."

What did the speaker refer to? Where had he been snubbed in Carlisle? Upon inquiry, we learned that he had stopped at the "Bentz House," a most excellent hotel kept by our Republican friend, Mr. Geo. Z. Bentz. Mr. Bentz very properly gave Douglass a good room in his house, but when supper was announced he just as properly informed his sable guest that he could not eat at the public table with his white boarders. Douglass, it was evident from his dejected look, had not expected this kind of treatment. The "Bentz House" has a Republican for its landlord, and nearly all if not all the boarders are also Republicans, and it was not much wonder then that Douglass felt disappointed. He said little, however, and consented to take his meals in his room by himself. With all their professions, then, we have in this circumstance positive evidence that the Radicals are just as loath to recognize negro-equality as the Democrats are. Put them to the test and they squirm like eels in the process of being skinned, when they are asked to take a seat at the same



1924 view of the Sentinel Building, formerly Rheem's Hall,  
Court House Avenue, Carlisle.

*CCHS Collections*



table with a negro. We don't blame them; human nature is human nature; but we desire the "colored troops who fought bravely," to note the facts here mentioned.

Frederick Douglass is a man between sixty and seventy years of age. His hair is long, curly and quite white. He has more the appearance of a Spaniard than a negro. He says he is a mulatto, and perhaps he is, but he shows little if any of the negro character. He remained here over Sunday, and on Monday morning took the cars for his home in Washington.<sup>1</sup>

*The Carlisle Herald*, March 14, 1872

### THE OLD QUESTION IN NEW SHAPE

The *Volunteer* in a notice of Frederick Douglass, raises a question that we were inclined to allow to adjust itself. It says:

"What did the speaker refer to? Where had he been snubbed in Carlisle? Upon inquiry, we learned that he had stopped at the "Bentz House," a most excellent hotel kept by our Republican friend, Mr. Geo. Z. Bentz. Mr. Bentz very properly gave Douglass a good room in his house, but when supper was announced he just as properly informed his sable guest that he could not eat at the public table with his white boarders. Douglass, it was evident from his dejected look, had not expected this kind of treatment. The "Bentz House" has a Republican for its landlord, and nearly all if not all the boarders are also Republicans, and it was not much wonder then that Douglass felt disappointed. He said little, however, and consented to take his meals in his room by himself. With all their professions, then, we have in this circumstance positive evidence that the radicals are just as loath to recognize negro-equality as the Democrats are. Put them to the test and they squirm like eels in the process of being skinned, when they are asked to take a seat at the same table with a negro. We don't blame them; human nature is human nature; but we desire the "colored troops who fought bravely," to note the facts here mentioned."

This question is coming, and may as well be met. Mr. Bentz, of himself, had no disposition to refuse to allow Mr. Douglass to come to the dining room. He put it on the ground that there was so much prejudice here on the subject, that he could not do it without pecuniary loss. This

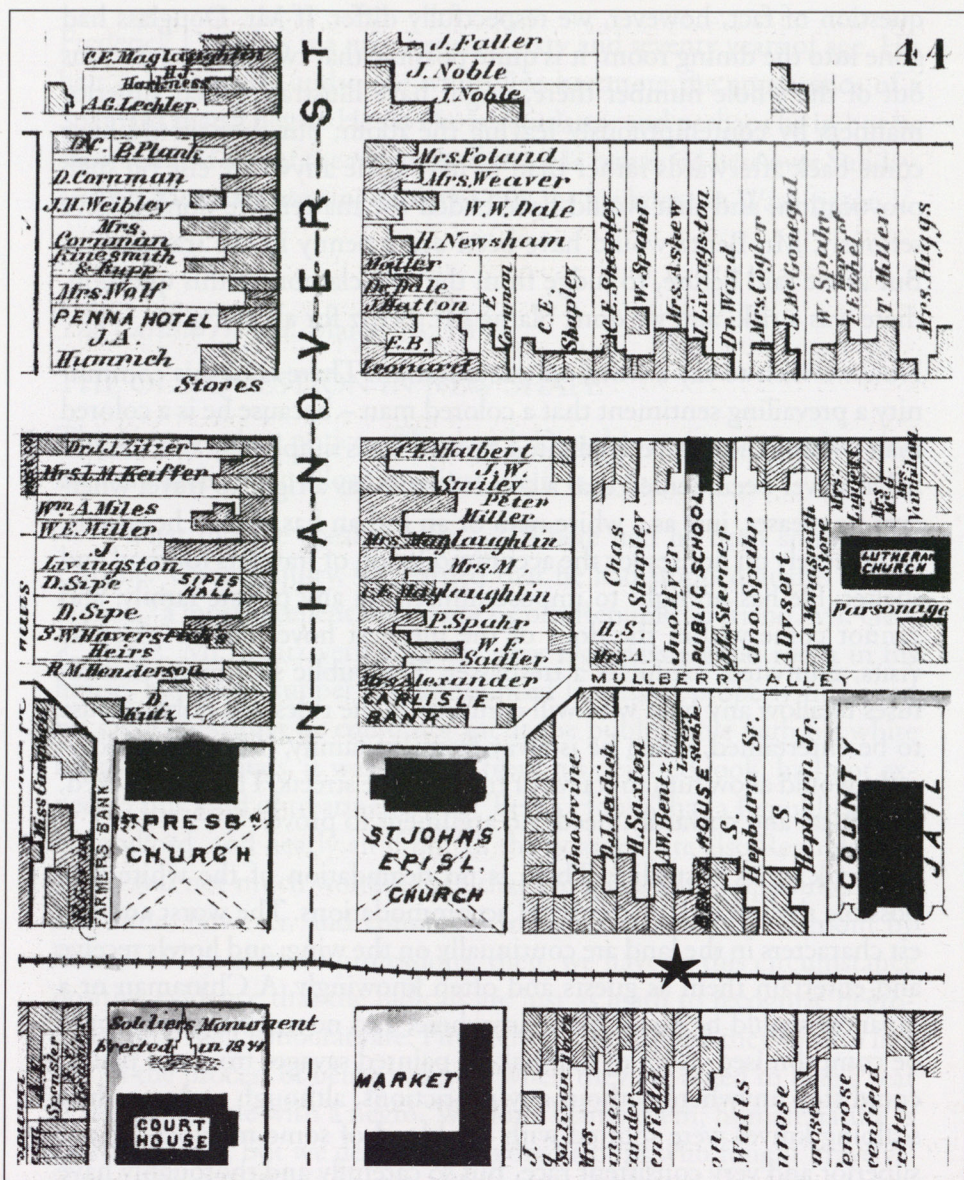


seemed to be almost certain from the ordinary street talk of the town, and, therefore, we find no fault with Mr. Bentz for his action. He was under no obligation to incur even the risk of loss in the matter. As a question of fact, however, we respectfully differ. If Mr. Douglass had gone into the dining room, it is quite possible that two or three persons out of the whole number there, might have illustrated their superior manners by contemptuously leaving the room; but they would have come back afterwards rather than to have gone anywhere else on such provocation, and that would have ended the matter. We don't believe seriously, Mr. Bentz would have been out a penny in the transaction. But as we said before, to judge from the silly clamor on this question, there was a risk, and we don't blame Mr. Bentz for avoiding it.

Now we wish to say a word on this question. There is in this community a prevailing sentiment that a colored man – because he is a colored man – should not be received into a hotel. This is simply silly and wicked. It has never been denied that a colored man has a right to travel wherever he pleases, just as a white man or an Indian has. When he travels, he must rely on houses for the accommodation of travelers for food and shelter. He has no right to impose himself on any private family, and cannot come within the door of the meanest hovel, in the place he visits, uninvited, except as a trespasser. The public sentiment that refuses to allow any man who will conform to the rules of a public house to be entertained, when he is away from his family, if developed logically, would allow him to starve or freeze in the streets. That it is wicked, tyrannical and cowardly, needs no argument to prove.

But look at its absurdity. There is no degradation of the white race possible that excludes from hotel accommodations. The worst and vilest characters in the land are continually on the wing, and hotels receive and entertain them as guests and often knowingly. A Chinaman or a Japanese would be given room anywhere, and no one's dignity would be compromised. A lot of half naked, painted savages from the plains, could stop anywhere without any restrictions, although perhaps, their scalping knives were spotted with the blood of some members of our superior and very consistent race. But so carefully and thoroughly have small politicians excited the prejudices of the people of some parts of this country against the negro race, that when a man venerable in years, of learning, refinement, extraordinary ability and character in all respects; one who, without any official station or position, whatever, has been received and entertained by Presidents, governors and leading states-





Close-up of 1872 Atlas of Cumberland County, p. 44,  
with location of Bentz House identified with a star.

CCHS Collections



men of this country, visits a country town on business, he must in deference to this stupid and malignant prejudice be insulted by the information that the boarders at the hotel refuse to eat in the same room with him. This would be funny, indeed if it weren't contemptible.

But the social equality nonsense must be discussed. Who ever heard of social equality in any place on this earth where there were enough of people to relieve each individual from being directly dependent on every one also? Each person in a community chooses his own society, provided the people he likes are fit to associate with him. If they do not, he then takes himself to the society, which will endure him. A man must have a slight opinion of his neighbor's sanity, who would insist that eating in the same dining room at a hotel established or implied any other equality than that which grows out of a common brotherhood of men. It is simply right that no man should be proscribed because of his color or race, and this we will all recognize when we have outgrown our prejudices.

But we will soon have an end of this trouble. We have learned that a country can exist without enslaving black men; that the peace, order and prosperity of a community are in no wise imperiled by allowing them to vote, to sit on juries, or even to hold any office to which they may be appointed or chosen. We have also had demonstrated that it does not seriously injure the health or life of white men to give them equal accommodations on railroad cars when they pay the same fare. Most persons now living will also learn that the way-farer who pays the common charges at a hotel, is entitled to all the privileges of a guest; and after they have learned it, they will appreciate how extremely silly are all actions dictated by prejudice.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Author's note:**

Since this article was written, it has been learned that Frederick Douglass visited Carlisle on at least one other occasion. On August 9, 1847, Douglass was traveling the anti-slavery lecture circuit with the white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison.<sup>3</sup> After a speaking engagement in Harrisburg, the train on which they were traveling stopped briefly in Carlisle, and Douglass and Garrison were enthusiastically greeted by local anti-slavery advocates, who were well represented in Carlisle at the time. Not only was it the hometown of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society's J. Miller McKim, but preparations were underway for the trials that came in the aftermath of the McClintock Fugitive Slave Riot, which had taken place in June.



## Endnotes

- 1 American Volunteer, 7 March 1872.
- 2 Carlisle Herald, 14 March 1872.
- 3 Brown, Iva V. "An Antislavery Journey: Garrison and Douglass in Pennsylvania, 1847." *Pennsylvania History* Vol. 67, No. 4, 541.