



FISKE GENEALOGICAL FOUNDATION

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In Honor of Black History Month, February 2023

Frederick Douglass & the Free Church of Scotland



U.S. History Images

Frederick Douglass raised consciousness and hackles when he came to Paisley, Scotland.

My genealogical research centers on Paisley, Scotland, much of it involving clergymen and church affiliations. Church history in Scotland is a complicated business as seen on this [chart](#). But I was surprised when I ran into an account of Frederick Douglass' visit to the town in 1846. [5]

Frederick Douglass was born a slave in Maryland around 1818. At age 20 he escaped. He was licensed as a preacher and due to his articulate and powerful oratory became an anti-slavery lecturer. His autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave published in 1845*, proved so popular it increased his risk of being kidnapped and returned to slavery. He was sent on a speaking tour of Britain and Ireland for his own sake as well as that of the anti-slavery movement. His goal was to raise support and funds for the American abolition movement, but he also joined a local campaign involving the newly formed Free Church of Scotland.

British merchants had amassed great wealth from the transatlantic slave trade and from the sugar, cotton and tobacco produced on slave plantations. In the 1780s abolition societies across Britain petitioned parliament to end the slave trade, succeeding in 1807, but it wasn't until 1833 that slavery was abolished across the British Empire. "By the 1830s slavery had become the leading moral issue in Scotland and the majority of people believed that slavery was a sin." [2]

Douglass exposed the insidious influence of slavery upon American churches, now transferred to the Free Church and any who maintained Christian fellowship with their American counterparts. The Free Church had acquired startup funding from American Presbyterians in the Southern slave states and was under fire for it. Nevertheless, Douglass denied being against the Free Church--his goal was the "salvation and purification" of any church not

(Continued on page 2)

willing to oppose slavery. "My motto is, 'No union with the slave-holder.' (Cheers.) Because, I believe there can be no union between light and darkness.. Justice can have no fellowship with injustice. Liberty can have no fellowship with slavery." Douglass noted that leading Doctors of Divinity in America, and Professors in Colleges, were in favor of slavery. [2] This may have had much to do with another Scotsman.

The Rev. John Witherspoon (1723-1794), minister in Beith, Ayrshire, Scotland (1745-1758) and then at Laigh Kirk, Paisley (1758-1768) emigrated to become president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton) in 1768. Politically active, he was a delegate for New Jersey and the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. He taught Moral Philosophy and would influence a generation of American leadership in government and religion. But he held contradictory views on slavery as did many of our founding fathers.

In Beith he had baptized an enslaved man giving him the same religious instruction as any white congregant and in America he tutored a number of both enslaved and free blacks, but he held slaves of his own. He believed the act of taking a person into slavery was a sin, but owning persons already enslaved was not. "I do not think there lies any necessity on those who found men in a state of slavery, to make them free to their own ruin." He helped to draft the Articles of Confederation in 1777 where slavery was codified as a national institution. Witherspoon also both lectured and voted against the abolition of slavery in New Jersey; he believed it would die out naturally, but his descendants were southern slaveholders. [11]

Douglass pointed out the inconsistency of the American churches, that while professing the love of God they should uphold and sustain "a system by which three millions of people have been divested of every right and privilege which they ought to enjoy." [2] Slavery was a cesspool of corruption within the church and within the souls of the slaveowners. Douglass noted that "Christian" slaveowners were the worst of the masters he'd known due to this deep seated conflict of conscience.

Douglass' tour of Britain and Ireland made a huge impact. "By far the ablest man of the African race who had reached our shores, he was listened to with rapt attention by crowded audiences throughout the country, as in burning words he told the story of his wrongs and pleaded the cause of the coloured people." [4] Douglass visited the town of Paisley in March and April of 1846 speaking at the United Secession Church, the West Relief Church and elsewhere. My family were active members in each of these churches and were likely present. [5] [1]

The attitude of the Church in Scotland regarding social awareness and responsibility was mixed. Prejudice against poverty vied with compassion and the fear of political radicalism. Paisley--a one industry town focused on thread manufacture and textiles--was still reeling from a deep economic recession in 1840/1841. The town itself went bankrupt and the population found themselves in dire straits. Authorities were on high alert against protests and political activism. [6]

Douglass was joined in Paisley by abolitionist Patrick Brewster, a moderate activist and minister who had been suspended for forming a Society for the Protection of the Destitute Poor. But Douglass took exception to his claim that the British worker was "as much at the mercy of his Master, as if he was a Negro Slave." Douglass had seen extreme poverty in Britain, but he insisted that the "evils stalking this land.. are nothing like American slavery. I protest against the use of the term slavery being applied in such a manner – it is an awful misnomer." [6] Douglass articulated in detail the true nature of American slavery where men, women and children were reduced to nameless marketable commodities, with absolutely no control over their bodies, minds or souls, subjected to every abuse without recourse, and killed with impunity. [1]

Not everyone was thrilled with his oratory, particularly members of the Free Church who felt personally attacked. In the Great Disruption of 1843 the national Church had split over the issue of congregational

freedom to choose their own ministers. The Free Church claimed about one-third of the ministers and laity of the Church of Scotland. The problem was that they had to give up their manses, their incomes and their church buildings. There was no money to establish a new church. They appealed to American churches for help and raised around £3,000 (about £301,671 in today's money), but it came primarily from slave-owning Presbyterian churches in the Southern states. Many Scots felt that accepting the money meant the Free Church was supporting slave-owners. Douglass became the figurehead for the campaign whose rallying cry was "Send Back the Money!"



Rev. John MacNaughton,
National Galleries Scotland

Douglass declared, "There came from this land, the inhabitants of which are distinguished for their love of freedom...a land to which the slave had a right to look for sympathy, for aid, and for deliverance from his bondage.. a Church calling itself free! free! free! (great cheering).. they leave their homes and go to the United States, and strike hands in good Christian fellowship with men whose hands are full of blood.. all they possess, the result of the unpaid toil of the poor fettered, stricken, and branded slave." [3]

The Rev. John MacNaughton, a minister at Paisley High Church, in 1843 left the parish taking elders and half the congregation with him to establish the "Free High" or Orr Square Church. In the first five years the enthusiastic congregation baptized more than one new member a week including my great-grandfather. The Free High Church opened Sabbath Schools offering day and evening classes for reading, writing, grammar, arithmetic and geography. All of this was financed by covenants and offerings of the congregation. [8]

Enraged by Douglass and the abolitionists, MacNaughton argued in April 1846 that they were stirring up controversy to "create a false impression regarding one of the noblest institutions in the land." MacNaughton was against excommunicating slaveholders, because this act would be insulting to those who had helped the Free Church in its time of need. He denounced the phrase "Send Back the Money" for its impractical and hypocritical implications. If the money was to be returned, he said: "We must not buy [American] cotton, nor wear it, we must not use their rice nor purchase their tobacco, [for] the stamp of slavery is on them all." [9]

But he was also reported to have dismissed Douglass as an "ignorant runaway slave who had picked up a few sentences." At the West Relief church on 25 April, 1846 Douglass gave his response: "The man whose pockets are lined with the gold with which I ought to have been educated, stands up charging me with ignorance and poverty. The man who enjoys his share of the three thousand pounds taken from the slaveholder, and robbed from the slave, stands up to denounce me as being ignorant. Shame on him." [5]

For Free Church leaders it was a moral dilemma they were not ready to face. The moderator of the Free Church, Dr. Chalmers, a respected Scotch divine, envisioned an egalitarian, close-knit and cooperative community. Their initial concern was providing an income for their ministers and places of worship for their people. By 1847 they had succeeded in building more than 700 churches followed by manses and schools due to the generosity of their communicants. But asked by his membership about whether religious fellowship could be extended to slaveholding churches, he felt that the refusal of fellowship would be "most unjustifiable." This response was picked up by the *New Orleans Picayune* newspaper in appreciation. The same paper contained ads for escaped slaves identified by their mutilations.

Douglass "hoped the unanimous cry of the people.. to the Free Church of Scotland, and all the other Churches, would be, 'Have no communion with the American slaveholders;' and that the next thing the Free Church should do would be to send back the blood-stained money which they had received."

Douglass and his fellow abolitionists established offices in Edinburgh for the final push of the campaign leading up to the Free Church General Assembly at the end of May. Douglass attended this event, but was sorely disappointed in the justifications presented and refusal to take a stand.

An official letter from the Free Church did reach the Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church in May 1847 and the official Free Church position was described as being "very strongly against slavery." However, the abolitionist hope for a strong outcry of public opinion, expressed by a return of the money along with a refusal to commune with slave-holders, was never realized.

~ Submitted by Marjorie Jodoin

Sources:

1. [The Free States, Slavery, and the Sin of the Free Church: An Address Delivered in Paisley, Scotland, March 19, 1846](#)
2. [Frederick Douglass in Scotland, Church of Scotland website.](#)
3. [A list of digitized speeches is available on this Yale site. Scroll down to "Douglass."](#)
4. *Paisley & Renfrewshire Gazette*, 13 May 1882, p. 5; <BritishNewspaperArchives.co.uk>
5. [Spotlight: Paisley, Bulldozia website.](#)
6. Sylvia Clark, *Paisley: A History*, 1988.
7. [The Free Church & Scotland, Yale website.](#)
8. ["Orr Square Church," Oakshaw Trinity Church website](#)
9. "The Free Church and American Slavery – Slanders Against the Free Church Met and Answered in a Speech, John MacNaughton, Paisley, April 1846.
10. [John Witherspoon, Princeton website.](#)
11. [Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Free Church of Scotland". Encyclopedia Britannica, 20 Jul. 1998.](#)

Surplus Books

We are still overstocked with surplus books, many of which contain specific data on individuals, families and locations. We also have general histories for context, and a lot of research guides with useful information. Even if out-of-date, these guides can prove helpful.

Our Surplus Books Half-Price Sale will continue during this reopening phase. I am currently doing a complete re-inventory, so check the Surplus page frequently for updates. Now is the time to consider purchasing some of the higher priced books which might benefit your research. Our surplus periodicals are being discarded. If you have an interest in any particular title or region let me know as soon as possible.

~Marge Jodoin, *Surplus Books Manager*
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The Fiske Genealogical Foundation is a nonprofit organization that provides genealogical training and resource materials.

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<https://fiskelibrary.org>

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SPRING 2023 EDUCATION

All classes are scheduled from 10:00 A.M. until noon unless otherwise noted. Presentations are currently virtual. Please check the website for linking information ahead of the start time and any class notes. **Check the home page frequently for announced schedule changes.** Information on any TBA entries will be updated as soon as available.

2023	Topic	Instructor
Wednesday March 22	Genealogica Italiana: Researching Italian Records	Janet O'Connor Camarata
Wednesday March 29	Special Collection Repositories: Finding Women's Stories and Voices	Janice Lovelace
Wednesday April 5	An Unexpected Exodus: Southern Quakers to the Midwest	Steven W. Morrison
Wednesday April 12	SPRING BREAK — NO CLASS	
Wednesday April 19	Fleshing out Your Family Using City Directories	Lisa Gorell
Wednesday April 26	Evernote for Genealogists	Janet O'Connor Camarata
Wednesday May 3	Recreating Your Ancestor's World	Mary Kircher Roddy
Wednesday May 10	TBA	
Wednesday May 17	TBA	
Wednesday May 24	Finding Your Immigrant Ancestors	Claire Smith
Wednesday May 31	TBA	

Fiske Library Reopened

Fiske Library has reopened with limited hours on Wednesdays.

We are pleased to announce that the library is open from noon until 3 p.m. on Wednesdays. As new volunteers are trained additional days will be added. Appointments for other times are still available. To make an appointment please phone the person listed for the day of the week you wish to visit the library:

Saturday: Larry [206 720-4719](tel:2067204719)

Other times: Dave 206 687-5249

FamilySearch SIG

Join the FamilySearch Special Interest Group

Discover the many ways to use the FamilySearch website in your research.

Lou Daly leads a Zoom meeting the first Saturday of every month November through June 10:15 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. sponsored by the Seattle Genealogical Society.

A different aspect of the website is featured at every meeting with time for Q & A. Want to join the mailing list? Email Lou: loudaly@nwlink.com



Legacy Family Tree User Group

Legacy Family Tree User Group Zoom

meetings are on the third Thursday of the month from 1-2 p.m. Our next meeting is on March 16. If you use Legacy Family Tree, please join us.

The types of topics we cover are quite varied – the last meeting we looked at how to print reports, and we took a close look at how to change the language in reports to read how one would like them to read. We also welcome questions and topic suggestions.

If you are interested in attending, please send a message to editor@fiskelibrary.org with your email contact information. We will need your email address to send out the Zoom invitation.

Siri Nelson



Thanks to our Donors

The Fiske Genealogical Foundation and Library has always been dependent upon donations, but this has been doubly true during the pandemic when the library has been closed to regular use. Your ongoing patronage and support is most appreciated. Thank you!

~ The FGF Board

FISKE LIBRARY HOURS

Monday	By appointment. Call David 206 687-5249
Wednesday	The Library is open from Noon to 3 P.M.
Thursday	By appointment. Call David 206 687-5249
Friday	Reserved for research groups from outside the greater Seattle Area. Contact David to make reservations. 206 687-5249
Saturday	By appointment. Call Larry 206 720-4719

FISKE GENEALOGICAL FOUNDATION INFORMATION

The Fiske Genealogical Foundation is a non-profit service organization providing genealogical training and resource materials. Current Board Members are:

FISKE GENEALOGICAL FOUNDATION FEES

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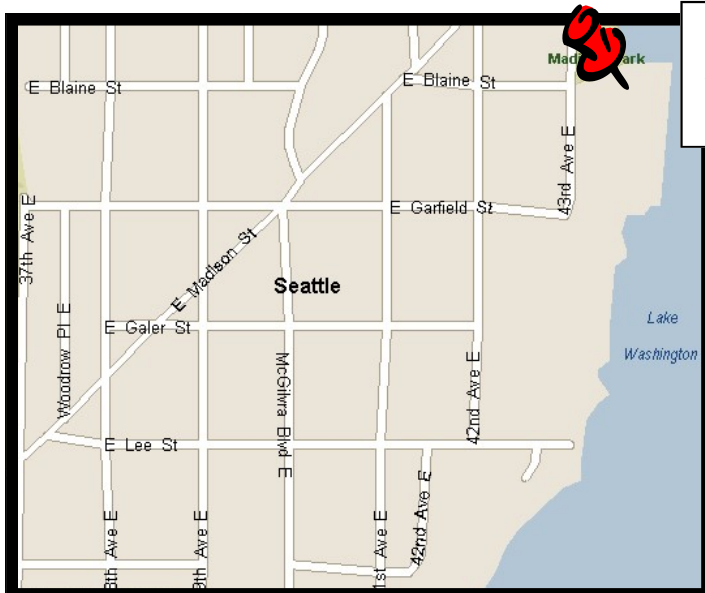
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 (30 sessions) \$85
 Newsletter—Mail Subscription
 \$6 for 4 Issues



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HOW TO FIND US!



**Fiske Library is located
on the lower level of the
Washington Pioneer Hall.**

- Drive east on E Madison Street to the third crosswalk after reduced speed zone of 25mph. The crosswalk has a yellow blinking light. A one-way street sign is on your right.
- Turn right and follow E Blaine Street to the end of the street.
- The Washington Pioneer Hall faces onto 43rd Ave. E. The Fiske Genealogical Library is located on the lower level of the building.