

“Making A Way”

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First Church in Boston

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In March of 1832, Frederick Douglass was sent from the city of Baltimore to the country town of St. Michaels. He was about fourteen or fifteen years old. As a boy in Baltimore, Douglass had learned to read—first from the wife of his enslaver, and then by taking bread from his enslavers’ house to trade with poor white boys for their lessons. In Baltimore, Douglass eyed the boats headed north and began to imagine a life of freedom. But then he found himself in St. Michaels struggling beneath the cruelty of his new enslaver, Thomas Auld.

In the same year Douglass was forced to leave Baltimore, abolitionists in the North were organizing. On January 6, 1832, at the African Meeting House here in Boston, an interracial community founded the New England Anti-Slavery Society. While white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison is often credited as founding the organization, he was but one man in a group of men that included blacks and whites, Unitarians and Trinitarians.

To organize people, you need to get people together. Literally. You need a big room. Perhaps that is why the Standing Committee of the Proprietors of the First Church in Boston received a letter from the New England Anti-Slavery Society at the end of that same year. In 1832, the church was meeting in a relatively new building on Chauncey Place, near today’s Downtown Crossing. As I [mentioned last week](#), the Proprietors, or pew owners, had just recently incorporated a few years earlier in 1829. As the owners of the building, they—or their representatives on the Standing Committee—decided when and how the church building would be used. And, on December 23, 1832, they voted no.

During 1832, Douglass was forced to labor for another man while bearing witness to all manner of dehumanizing cruelty—often justified in the name of religion. In a matter-of-fact understatement, Douglass writes, “My master and myself had quite a number of differences.” (34) When 1833 began, Auld sent Douglass to a man, Covey, who had a reputation for “breaking” enslaved people. Of this time with Covey, Douglass wrote:

“Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery close in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute.” (38)

After a particularly heinous beating, Douglass walked seven miles in pain to seek Auld's intervention with Covey's brutality. After being forced to return to Covey, Douglass decided to fight back the next time Covey attempted him harm. He writes:

“[Covey] asked me if I meant to persist in my resistance. I told him I did, come what might; that he had used me like a brute for six months, and that I was determined to be used so no longer.” (43)

After a two-hour fistfight, Covey let him go. Although striking a white man was crime, Covey did not have Douglass arrested—presumably to preserve his reputation for “breaking” the enslaved.

During that year up North, the New England Anti-Slavery Society expanded to become the American Anti-Slavery Society with many local chapters opening. In May of 1833, as Douglass was nearing his six-month breaking point with Covey, the Rev. Joshua Danforth, an agent for the American Colonization Society asked the Standing Committee for use of the building. The Colonization Society, founded in 1816, promoted the relocation of free and emancipated blacks to Africa—rejecting the possibility of their integration into U.S. society. Again, the Standing Committee said no. Neither the Anti-Slavery Society, nor the Colonization Society would be given use of the space.

However, lest you think that the Standing Committee always said no to outside groups, in this same May 1833 meeting, they “unanimously Voted” to grant space to the Committee of the [Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company](#). Chartered in 1638 by Governor John Winthrop of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Artillery Company is a militia group with a long history. To this day they maintain offices and a museum in Faneuil Hall. I can't tell you why the Standing Committee said yes to them--whether because of the Company's long history, their connection to Winthrop who also founded this church, or alignment with military values and tactics. I can tell you they often said yes to the Company over the years.

When 1833 ended, Douglass was sent from Covey's to the farm of Mr. William Freeland. While still enslaved, he found his new circumstances less cruel. With careful secrecy, he began a Sabbath School to teach unfree folks how to read. With even more secrecy, he collaborated on a plan of escape with a handful of friends. When their plan was discovered, Douglass was sent back to Baltimore where he worked in shipyards for several years. When 1838 began, he was feeling “restless.” By September of that year he escaped north—briefly to New York City and then to New Bedford, Massachusetts.

While Douglass was still working in the shipyards of Baltimore, the Rev. Samuel Joseph May wrote a letter requesting use of First Church for an Anti-Slavery meeting. Meeting after church

on January 10, 1836, the Standing Committee voted “without debate” to “refuse.” As in previous records, no reason is given. But the pattern seems clear: there is no desire to get involved with the most politically, socially, and economically charged issue of the day—namely, some people stripping other people of their freedom, their dignity, and their networks of family and friends.

Firstly, no, I am not related to Samuel Joseph May—although I would be proud to be. May was a leading abolitionist. Born to an elite Boston Unitarian family, the Boston Association of ministers ordained May at the “Chauncy Place” church in 1822—which is to say that same First Church meeting house we’ve been talking about. Perhaps May had his ordination day in mind when he wrote asking for the use of the building for an antislavery meeting. Perhaps May thought his connection might help draw First Church into supporting the work of abolition.

In reading a book like Douglass’ *Narrative*, there is no doubt that Douglass was creative, intelligent, and fierce in resisting his unfreedom and in pursuing self-emancipation. In a sense, his is an “underdog” story of facing overwhelming odds and successfully reaching freedom. But to frame his story—and that of other slave narratives—as “underdog” stories is problematic if we only focus on heroic individuals.

Firstly, Douglass did not act entirely alone. Along the way, Douglass learned from others as a boy. At Freeman’s farm, he collaborated not only on an escape plan with others, but also on minimizing the fallout when the plan was discovered. Throughout his *Narrative*, he speaks of *love* as well as his fear of separation from beloved friends. And, within days of escaping to freedom, he married Anna, a free black woman from Baltimore, who joined him in New York. Douglass may have been remarkable, but he was not an isolated individual.

Underdog stories are also problematic if we don’t pause to also ask—why are the odds so high? Why is this system so unfair, so unjust to some people? Sometimes we need to focus our attention beyond celebrating “underdogs” to ask how we can dismantle systems that create challenges that must be overcome.

A powerful example of stories of collective resistance, survival, and thriving can be found in the “*Making a Way Out of No Way*” exhibit at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in DC. Drawing on stories of resistance to racial oppression, the exhibit “explores themes of agency, creativity, and resilience.” Like Douglass’ story, many of the stories reflect networks of relationships and support that enable the possibility of *making* a way forward when there is no clear path. Not *finding* a path—because the system is not going to offer you one. But *making* paths through collective effort “to survive and thrive in the midst of racial oppression.”

As a white woman who has been educated within and lived in predominantly white spaces, I have had to reconsider how to tell the stories of our nation and of our faith—especially around

legacies of racial oppression. I fear that too often the stories reflect white folks as *the* leading figures while minimizing the ongoing, creative, collective effort by Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color to actively resist systems of racism and bigotry. Again and again, Black folks have *made* a way out of no way. They have found a path forward even when white individuals and institutions stood in the way.

I tell stories from history because I believe it can shift how we understand our own moment. Our church records make it clear that in the 1830's as abolitionism was on the rise here in Boston, they chose to not get involved. In our moment, racism is resurging in both individual acts and in the systematic dismantling of protections against racial bias. How will we respond—as individuals and as an institution? As with the First Church meetings nearly 200 years ago, how to respond institutionally are choices we make together. And they are choices we face *at the same time* that some people are actively facing loss of their freedom, their dignity, and their networks of family and friends. Someday people will be telling the history of this moment. What story would we want told?

Amen. Ashe. Blessed Be.

READING:

Today's reading comes from 3 brief excerpts from the Records of the First Church in Boston. These particular entries are from meetings of the Standing Committee of the Proprietors (or pew owners) of the congregation. As pew owners, they controlled use of the building, including its use by outside groups.

A Meeting of the Committee was held December 23, 1832.

An Application for the use of the house, for the purpose of "making an appeal in behalf of the Slaves, and to remove mistaken prejudices in relation to the principles and measures of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, and Also to invite personal and pecuniary cooperation" signed Arnold Buffum, President, was read, And it was Voted that it is inexpedient to grant the request.

D. L. Gibbens Clerk.

Boston, May 11, 1833.

The Clerk communicated the application of the Reverend Mr. Danforth, for the use of the Meeting house this afternoon at five oClock, to preach a Charity Sermon on behalf of the Colonization Society, And it was voted unanimously, that it is inexpedient to grant the request.

Application was also made by a Committee of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company, for the use of the house on the first monday in June next, for the performance of religious services on their anniversary, and it was unanimously Voted that the request be granted.

Daniel L. Gibbens Clerk.

The Standing Committee met after morning service, January 10, 1836.

A letter from the Rev Mr. May was read, requesting the use of the Church for an Anti Slavery meeting—whereupon Voted, without debate to refuse the same, and that the Clerk be requested to answer the same accordingly.

B. B. Appleton Clerk.