

Philadelphia Freedom

August 1st 1859. The celebration of British Abolition of Slavery in the Caribbean colonies in 1838—Emancipation Day—was a militant march by the Frank Johnson Guards, named in honor of Philadelphia’s own composer and organizer of a military band soon after the War of 1812. ¹ Armed, as was the colored military band in 1814, the focus of Emancipation Day commemorations in the United States was the abolition of slavery in this country.

John Brown was not pleased.



William H. Johnson was born to free parents in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1833. In his 1900 *Autobiography*, Johnson—later a noted civil rights leader in Albany—wrote of meeting John Brown that summer of 1859, and Brown’s dismay that the Frank Johnson Guards were armed and openly drilling in preparation for Emancipation Day parades on August 1st. The authorities would follow them, Brown told the group, and as events became reality, so they did, confiscating the “forty muskets which were in the possession of the colored military company that paraded in this city a few months since.” ²

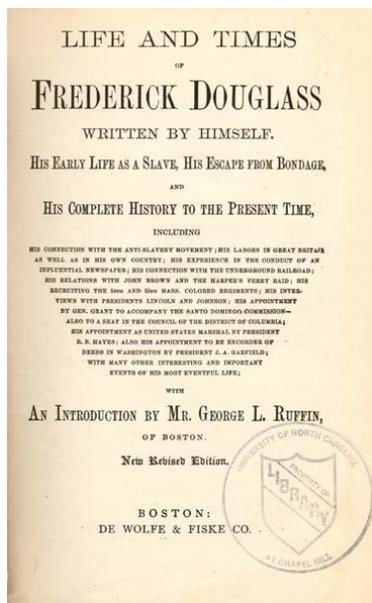
John Brown’s recruitment efforts in Philadelphia centered around a group called the Leaders, often described as the black elite. Thomas J. Dorsey was notable among them: an escaped slave who prospered in business and real estate. He and three brothers came from Frederick County, Maryland, just adjacent to the headquarters of Brown in Washington County. The thrilling story of the Dorsey brothers’ resistance to enslavement was written by Robert Purvis, who helped them through conditions of recapture and arrest in 1836.³ It was a cautionary tale for John Brown, as the group was betrayed by extended family in the guise of assistance.

William Johnson continued his story of the Philadelphia military company and John Brown:

On October 13th, I met him again at Dorsey’s house, where a meeting of the leaders was again held. Captain Stevens, who was hung with him at Charleston, in the following month, was with him that night. He told us that he was about to make a raid into Virginia. ‘But,’ said he, ‘it will be a failure. Our little band will be but the forlorn hope of what might have been a grand expedition, but blood must be shed or the bonds of the colored men will never be broken.’ Frederick Douglass had a list of young men from Philadelphia, who were willing to join in the raid. Brown asked him how many of the men were married and Douglass told him. ‘Are you married?’ he asked, turning to me. I told him that I had been married for seven years. ‘Have you children?’ he then asked. I replied that I had not, but expected to be a father in a few weeks. ‘Then you can’t go,’ said he with a sad smile. I did not go, but would have done so if I could.’ ⁴

Who else tells the story?

The primary source account of William H. Johnson meeting with Frederick Douglass, John Brown, and Aaron Stevens at the Philadelphia home of “the Dorseys” is not included in histories of the John Brown raid. We are all aware of the cuts and purges of historical works when they are published in the present day. The following narrative by Frederick Douglass, which was in his 1892 revised autobiography, was removed from the edition published by Bonanza Books in 1979 (with a New Introduction by Rayford W. Logan) as “reprinted from the 1892 edition.” It is with much gratitude to *Documenting the American South* (DocSouth), a digital publishing initiative sponsored by the University Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, that Thomas J. Dorsey is present as Frederick Douglass wrote of him.

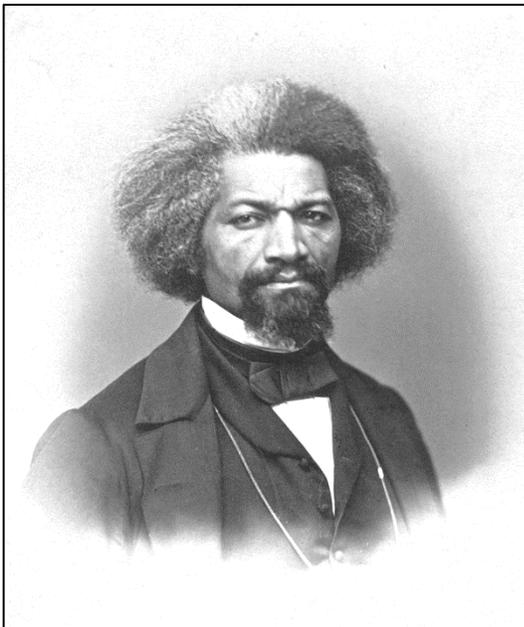


Frederick Douglass corroborates in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself. His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time, Including His Connection with the Anti-slavery Movement; His Labors in Great Britain as Well as in His Own Country; His Experience in the Conduct of an Influential Newspaper; His Connection with the Underground Railroad; His Relations with John Brown and the Harper's Ferry Raid...* published in Boston New Revised Edition by De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892.⁵

On the evening when the news came that John Brown had taken and was then holding the town of Harper's Ferry, it so happened that I was speaking to a large audience in National Hall, Philadelphia. The announcement came upon us with the startling effect of an earthquake. It was something to make the boldest hold his breath. I saw at once that my old friend had attempted what he had long ago resolved to do, and I felt certain that the result must be his capture and destruction. As I expected, the next day brought the news that with two or three men he had fortified and was holding a small engine-house, but that he was surrounded by a body of Virginia militia, who, thus far, had not ventured to capture the insurgents, but that escape was impossible. A few hours later and word came that Colonel Robert E. Lee with a company of United States troops had made a breach in Capt. Brown's fort, and had captured him alive, though mortally wounded. His carpet-bag had been secured by Governor Wise, and it was found to contain numerous letters and documents which directly implicated Gerritt Smith, Joshua R. Giddings, Samuel G. Howe, Frank P. Sanborn, and myself. This intelligence was soon followed by a telegram saying that we were all to be arrested. Knowing that I was then in Philadelphia, stopping with my friend Thomas J. Dorsey, Mr. John Hern, the telegraph operator, came to me and, with others, urged me to leave the city by the first train, as it was known through the newspapers that I was then in Philadelphia, and officers might even then be on my track. To me there was nothing improbable in all this. My friends for the most part were appalled at the thought of my being arrested then or there, or while on my way across the ferry from Walnut street wharf to Camden, for there was where I felt sure the arrest would be made, and asked some

of them to go so far as this with me merely to see what might occur; but, upon one ground or another, they all thought it best not to be found in my company at such a time, except dear old Franklin Turner--a true man. The truth is, that in the excitement which prevailed my friends had reason to fear that the very fact that they were with me would be a sufficient reason for their arrest with me. The delay in the departure of the steamer seemed unusually long to me, for I confess I was seized with a desire to reach a more northern latitude. My friend Frank did not leave my side till "all ashore" was ordered and the paddles began to move. I reached New York at night, still under the apprehension of arrest at any moment, but no signs of such an event being made, I went at once to the Barclay street ferry, took the boat across the river, and went direct to Washington street, Hoboken, the home of Mrs. Marks, where I spent the night, and I may add without undue profession of timidity, an anxious night. The morning papers brought no relief, for they announced that the government would spare no pains in ferreting out and bringing to punishment all who were connected with the Harper's Ferry outrage, and that search would be made for papers as well as persons. I was now somewhat uneasy from the fact that sundry letters and a constitution written by John Brown were locked up in my desk in Rochester. In order to prevent these papers from falling into the hands of the government...

Frederick Douglass telegraphed his family in Rochester to destroy the documents, which was accomplished by his son Lewis, breaking into the locked desk with a chisel.



**Frederick Douglass by John White Hurn,
Philadelphia 1862**

' Yes, sir; I am the man who saved Fred. Douglass' life when " Old John Brown " was captured at Harper's Ferry. I suppressed a dispatch addressed to the sheriff of Philadelphia, instructing him to arrest Douglass, who was then in that city, as proofs of his complicity in the memorable raid were discovered when John Brown was taken into custody.'

Seated on the doorstep of his cozy cottage, a few miles outside of Vineland, New Jersey, was John W. Hum, a pleasant, gray-bearded man of sixty, who, when questioned, answered as above respecting the aid rendered by him to the noted abolitionist.

' At that time I was a telegraph operator located in Philadelphia,' continued Mr. Hurn, ' and when I received the dispatch I was frightened nearly out of my wits. As I was an ardent admirer of the great ex-slave, I resolved to warn Douglass of his impending fate, no matter what the result might be to me. The news had just been spread throughout the country of the bold action of John Brown in taking Harper's Ferry. Everybody was excited and public feeling ran high. Before the intelligence came that Brown had been captured, the dispatch I have mentioned was sent by the sheriff of Franklin county, Penn., to the sheriff of Philadelphia, informing him that Douglass had been one of the leading conspirators, and requesting that he should be immediately apprehended.

Though I knew it was illegal to do so, I quietly put the dispatch in my pocket, and, asking another operator to take my place, started on my search for Fred. Douglass. I went directly to Miller McKim, the secretary of the contraband, underground, fugitive railway office in Philadelphia, and inquired for my man. Mr. McKim hesitated to tell me whereupon I showed him the dispatch and promised him not to allow it to be delivered within three hours. I told him I would not do this unless he agreed to get Mr. Douglass out of the states. This he readily assented to, for it was his business to spirit escaped slaves beyond the reach of the authorities. I returned to the telegraph office and kept a sharp lookout for similar dispatches. None arrived, however, and when the allotted time expired I sent the belated message to its destination.

In the mean time those intrusted(sic) with my secret saw Mr. Douglass and urged him to leave the town as quickly as possible. He was loath to do so at first, but the expostulation of his friends overcame his objections, and in an hour he left on a railroad train. He reached his home in Rochester, New York, in safety, destroying the compromising documents, and then packed his gripsack and started for Canada. It was fortunate for him that he left so soon as he did, for immediately after his departure from Rochester his home was surrounded by officers.'⁶

The Baldwinsville [New York] *Gazette* Thursday August 3, 1882

Aftermath

Life in Philadelphia for Thomas J. Dorsey and his wife Louise Tobias—a free woman who evidently participated in gathering \$1000 to purchase Dorsey’s manumission from Thomas Sollar in Maryland—is characterized by success and independence. At the time of John Brown’s meetings at their home on 1231 Locust Street the family was increased by the birth of a grandson to William Henry Dorsey, the only son of Thomas and Louise. It was a time of growing prosperity for Thomas’s catering business, which became (in the words of W.E.B. DuBois) one of three leading entities that created “fashionable Philadelphia.”⁷ Father and son were collectors of autographs, photographs, programs, and news clippings kept in scrapbooks. After Thomas Dorsey’s death in 1875, his son William continued the collection, founding the American Negro Historical Society.⁸

William H. Johnson and several others of the leaders left Philadelphia within three weeks of the raid because of suspicion of their complicity with Brown and assistance to fugitives. He fled to Connecticut following Brown’s raid, and joined a regiment there in 1861 as an “independent man” participating in the first battle of Bull Run in Virginia and fought at Newbern, North Carolina. He became the war correspondent for James Redpath’s *Pine and Palm* in 1862, returning to Albany, New York, when his health failed, then recruiting troops for the Fourteenth Congressional District. His oration “What I know personally about John Brown and his raid on Harper’s Ferry” was delivered at Waverley, New York, on August 1, 1888--the anniversary of British Emancipation.

Endnotes

¹ <http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/francisjohnson.html> "After the war of 1812 the third company of Washington Guards established a military band composed of colored men. The leader was Frank Johnson. This was substantially a reed band, with clarionets [sic], flutes, one or two bassoons, a serpent, cymbals, triangle, bells, one or two French horns, and bugles, to give force and weight to the air, and a bass drum. There were a tenor drummer and a fifer who never played with the band, but filled up the intervals of the march while the other musicians were resting." (Scharf & Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, 1884). According to the minutes of the Third Company, Johnson had been engaged as a bandleader by December 1814.

² "A Colored Military Company Disbanded", dateline Philadelphia, October 22, in [Chambersburg, Pennsylvania] *Valley Spirit* October 26, 1859. Newspaper accounts relating to John Brown's raid that were published in Chambersburg are on the Valley of the Shadow project of the University of Virginia, <http://jeffersonvillage.virginia.edu>

³ Robert Purvis to R. C. Smedley, published in *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and the Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania*. 1883. <https://sites.google.com/site/basildorsey/escapefromslavery>

⁴ William H. Johnson's account of this meeting was published in the *Albany Sunday Press*, May 6, 1900, and included in the compilation of his writing *Autobiography of Dr. William Henry Johnson, Respectfully Dedicated to His Adopted Home, The Capital City of the Empire State, Liberty, Fraternity, Equality* (Albany: The Argus Company, 1900: 194-196).

⁵ Text transcribed by Apex Data Services, Inc. Images scanned by Lee Fallon and Natalia Smith Text encoded by Lee Ann Morawski and Natalia Smith. First edition, 2001. Academic Affairs Library, UNC-CH University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/dougl92/dougl92.html>

⁶ Jean Libby, *John Brown Photo Chronology, catalog of the exhibition at Harpers Ferry 2009*. (Palo Alto, California. Allies for Freedom publishers, 2009: 60) Appreciation to Charles Lenhart of New York for research on the photographer J. W. Hurn. See also John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American*. (Liveright, 2015: pages)

⁷ W.E.B. DuBois, "The Guild of the Caterers 1840-1870" in *The Philadelphia Negro; a Social Study* (1899: 32-38)

⁸ Roger Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia & Ours; on the Past and Future of Black Cities*. (Oxford University Press 1993)