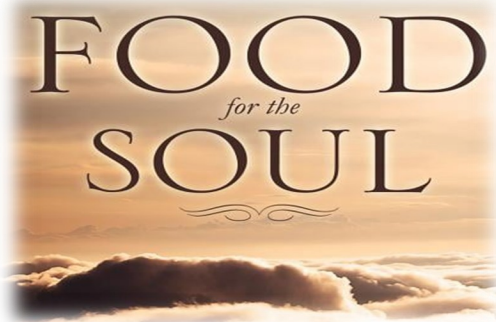




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Newsletter

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Frederick Douglass Fourth of July Speech: Rhetoric and Legacy

Celebrating the 4th of July?!?!?

On July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass stood before an audience of roughly 600 people at Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York, and delivered what historian David Blight has called “the rhetorical masterpiece of American abolitionism.” Invited by the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society to give an Independence Day address, Douglass used the occasion not to celebrate American liberty but to expose the chasm between the nation’s founding ideals and the daily reality of enslaved people. The speech, formally titled “Oration, Delivered in Corinthian Hall, Rochester, by Frederick Douglass, July 5th, 1852,” is a sustained work of irony, constitutional argument, and moral urgency that continues to shape how Americans reckon with the contradictions at the heart of their democracy.

Historical Context and Setting

Douglass delivered the speech at an extraordinary political moment. The Fugitive Slave Act, signed into law by President Millard Fillmore on September 18, 1850, had nationalized the enforcement of slavery by requiring citizens in free states to assist in the capture

As the United States of America celebrates 250 years, her Black and Brown citizens are asking a question, similar to that asked by Fredrick Douglass on July 5, 1852,
“What, to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”

The Black and Brown people, along with others built this country with their blood, sweat and tears. So I say yes, I will celebrate because this administration and a few scared white men will not rewrite us out of OUR history, change OUR present or deny OUR place in the future of this country!!

The Declaration of Independence was signed July 4, 1776 and the Constitution was signed 12 years later in 1788!!! Each Amendment charted another chapter in this Nation’s history, with 27 amendments to date, including the Bill of Rights.

So I say, WE THE PEOPLE MUST STAND UP and VOTE,
MUST DEMAND A SEAT AT THE TABLE
MAKING SURE A WAY FORWARD IS CHARTED for
ALL AMERICANS!!!

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of escaped people and by denying accused fugitives the right to testify on their own behalf. Federal commissioners overseeing these hearings received ten dollars for ruling an individual was a fugitive but only five dollars for ruling the evidence was insufficient, a payment structure Douglass would seize upon in the speech as legalized bribery. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been published earlier that year, and a presidential election loomed. The question of slavery's constitutional status was, as Douglass himself had put it, "the QUESTION OF QUESTIONS" for the anti-slavery cause.

The Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society had been formally organized in August 1851 by six women, with Susan Farley Porter serving as president and Julia Griffiths as secretary. All of the society's members were white, and the group had been founded specifically to support Douglass's abolitionist work, providing crucial financial backing to keep his newspaper, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, solvent. Beyond fundraising, the society assisted fugitive slaves en route to Canada; its records for 1855 and 1856 alone tracked 136 fugitives aided by the group.

Corinthian Hall, the venue, had opened in 1849 and was widely praised as one of the finest acoustical spaces in the country. Attendees paid twelve-and-a-half cents for admission. That Douglass spoke on July 5 rather than July 4 was itself a pointed statement: the date coincided with the anniversary of the end of slavery in New York State, and Douglass made clear throughout the address that the Fourth belonged to white Americans, not to the enslaved.

The Three-Part Structure

Scholars and commentators consistently identify a deliberate three-part architecture in the speech. Understanding these sections is essential to grasping how Douglass built his argument, because each phase performs a distinct rhetorical function that depends on what came before it.

Praise of the Founders

Douglass opened by honoring the signers of the Declaration of Independence as "statesmen, patri-

ots and heroes" who were "great enough to give frame to a great age." He praised their willingness to defy a tyrannical monarch and acknowledged the courage their revolution demanded. This was not flattery for its own sake. By establishing common ground with his predominantly white audience and affirming the principles of liberty and natural justice, Douglass set a trap: every word of praise for the founding ideal would sharpen the indictment to come. As David Blight notes, Douglass believed in the "creeds and principles" of the Declaration even as he fought against the nation's failure to honor them.

Condemnation of Hypocrisy

The pivot was sudden and devastating. Douglass asked his audience why he, a formerly enslaved man, had been called upon to speak at a celebration of freedom. "Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?" he demanded. He answered his own question with one of the speech's most quoted passages: "This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn."

This middle section formed the bulk of the address and was its moral center. Douglass argued that the time for politely reasoning about slavery's wrongfulness had passed, since slaveholders themselves conceded the humanity of the enslaved through the very existence of laws governing their behavior. What was needed instead, he declared, was "scorching irony, not convincing argument" to expose the nation's crimes. He laid out a comprehensive catalogue of the nation's offenses: the Fugitive Slave Law, the internal slave trade, and the complicity of the American church.

A Hopeful Conclusion

Despite the fury of the middle section, Douglass did not end in despair. He declared, "I do not despair of this country," and expressed confidence that the "doom of slavery is certain" based on the "great principles" of the Declaration and "the obvious tendencies of the age." He reframed the Constitution itself as a tool of liberation. This final turn was not mere optimism; it was a strategic argument that the American legal and political system, properly understood, already contained the weapons for slavery's destruction.

SJBC



HEALTH CORNER



**JULY IS
UV SAFETY MONTH**



✓ **SEEK SHADE**

Reduce UV radiation by taking shelter under a tree, umbrella, or another shady spot.

✓ **APPLY SUNSCREEN**

Apply sunscreen 30 spf or above 20 minutes before sun exposure. Reapply every 2 hours.

✓ **WEAR A HAT
& SUNGLASSES**

Broad-brimmed hats can provide protection for your face and neck.

✓ **LIMIT YOUR TIME
IN THE SUN**

Especially between 10 AM and 4 PM.

Regularly check your skin for any changes or anything unusual. See a doctor if needed.



Help Needed!!!

At the 2025 Annual Church Meeting, a couple of vacancies were announced during the Permanent Organization Committee report:

+ House Committee Chair

If you are interested in assisting SJBC by filling this vacancy, please see *Mrs. Mary Ann Corpal-Clay*, Chair of the Permanent Organization Committee.

New Church Clerk: Faye Williams, granddaughter of the late Rev. A McEwen Williams, *SJBC's* 9th Senior Pastor, has accepted the call and was voted *SJBC's* new Church Clerk. ***Congratulations and THANK YOU for answering the call!!!!***

Call Meeting: Sunday, July 12th, immediately following the 11:00 am services.

Agenda: Update from the Search Committee including recommendations of the list of finalists. A vote will be taken whether or not to accept the Committee's recommendations and the next steps forward.

STEWARDSHIP

Stewardship is...

- An equal giving of our Time, Talents and Treasures
- Time – limited to 24 hours each day
- Talents – the unique characteristics that God has blessed you with
- Treasures – giving of your self, your belongings or your financial resources

St. John, like many households, we are experiencing the effects of rising costs. Utilities, outreach supplies, and ministry expenses have all increased.

Your faithful giving has carried us this far, and we are truly grateful.

To keep *St. John* thriving, we ask each member to prayerfully consider a small increase in their regular tithes and offerings — even \$5 or \$10 more per week can make a significant difference when **WE** all do it together!!!

Thanks!!!

Frederick Douglass

1818 - 1895

Born into slavery Frederick Douglass escaped to freedom when he was 20 years old. Possessing a great intellectual curiosity, he taught himself to read and write and became one of the leading American orators for social reform



- | | | |
|--------------|-------------|-------------|
| ABOLITIONIST | ESCAPE | NORTH STAR |
| ACTIVIST | FREDERICK | PLANTATION |
| ADVISOR | FREEDOM | PRESIDENTS |
| AUTHOR | IRELAND | READING |
| CEDAR HILL | LINCOLN | SELF-TAUGHT |
| CIVIL WAR | MARYLAND | SLAVERY |
| DOUGLASS | NARRATIVE | STATESMAN |
| ELOQUENT | NEW BEDFORD | SUFFRAGE |
| EQUAL RIGHTS | NEWSPAPERS | WRITER |

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Rhetorical Devices and Persuasive Strategy

The speech's enduring power owes much to the precision of Douglass's rhetorical technique. Scholars have identified several interlocking strategies that made the address so effective with a Northern white audience that was sympathetic to abolition but often passive about confronting slavery's reality.

Douglass's most pervasive device was the use of the second person. By repeatedly saying "your Fourth of July," "your national independence," and "your fathers," he created an unbridgeable distance between himself and his listeners, forcing them to feel the exclusion he described rather than simply hearing about it. He used antithesis and contrast to crystallize contradictions, as when he described the founders as "peace men" who "preferred revolution to peaceful submission to bondage." The parallel to abolitionists, who were routinely dismissed as agitators and radicals, was impossible to miss. By equating the abolitionists' cause with the patriots of 1776, Douglass placed the anti-slavery movement squarely within the American political tradition.

Biblical allusion ran throughout the speech. Douglass invoked *Psalm 137*, the lament of the Jewish exiles in Babylon: "**By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yea! we wept when we remembered Zion... How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?**" The analogy between enslaved Black Americans and the captive Israelites framed the abolitionist cause within a biblical tradition of suffering and eventual deliverance, lending it moral authority that carried weight with a deeply religious audience. He pledged to remember the enslaved in language drawn from the same Psalm: "If I do forget, if I do not faithfully remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day, 'may my right hand forget her cunning, and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!'" He also cited *Acts 17:26*, that God made "**of one blood**" all nations, and concluded with *Isaiah 59:1*, "**the arm of the Lord is not shortened,**" to express hope for liberation.

Scholars have also noted that the speech follows

the classical structure of argumentative discourse, moving through introduction, narrative, proof, refutation, and conclusion. His "impressive display of liberal learning" served a pointed purpose: it dismantled the racist assumption that Black people were intellectually inferior, making the very act of delivering such a speech a form of argument.

The Denunciation of the American Church

Douglass reserved some of his sharpest language for religious institutions. He called the American church the "bulwark of American slavery" and accused "Pro-Slavery Ministers" of converting religion into an "engine of tyranny, and barbarous cruelty." He condemned the church's failure to speak out against the Fugitive Slave Law as evidence that organized religion treated its professions of faith as "empty ceremony."

In other addresses from the same period, Douglass named specific denominations. He criticized the Presbyterian New School General Assembly for declaring it "inexpedient" to act on slavery and attacked the Methodist Episcopal Church for its evasive handling of Bishop Andrew, who had become a slaveholder by marriage. He drew a sharp distinction between the "oppressive false Christianity" of the American church and what he saw as the genuinely liberatory faith of Christian abolitionists, contending that the two amounted to entirely different religions. He contrasted the American church unfavorably with the British church, which had supported the abolition of slavery in the West Indies, to argue that the American clergy's complicity was a deliberate moral choice.

Publication, Reception, and Immediate Impact

As Douglass finished and took his seat, the audience rose to its feet in applause. Douglass had anticipated the speech would be a success and had arranged for it to be printed as a pamphlet by Lee, Mann & Co. of Rochester. The pamphlet ran to forty pages, and seven hundred copies were subscribed at the event itself. Individual copies sold for ten cents, or six dollars per hundred, and Douglass went on the road to sell the pamphlet in the weeks that followed. An advertisement appeared in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* one week



SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		Prayer Mtg/ Bible Study	1	2	3 Ella Dyer Terrence Walker	4 <i>4th of July</i> Pastor H. L. Key
5 Sunday Services	6 Prayer Mtg/ Bible Study Narcissia Ivy	7 Prayer Mtg/ Bible Study	8	9 Velton McDonald Reylaunda Wayne	10	11 Choir Rehearsal Deacons' Mtg Official Board Mtg
12 Sunday School Sunday Services Search Committee Call Mtg. Deacon Archie Wayne	13	14 Prayer Mtg/ Bible Study Deacon Eddie Bailey	15	16	17	18 Choir Rehearsal
19 Sunday Services	20	21 Prayer Mtg/ Bible Study	22	23	24	25 Choir Rehearsal
26 Sunday Services Sunday School	27	28 Prayer Mtg/ Bible Study	29	30	31	



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after the address.

Pleun Bouricius, a program officer at Mass Humanities, has described the speech as a “galvanizing moment in the articulation of the anti-slavery argument.” Historian David W. Blight, who devoted a substantial portion of his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* to the address, notes that Douglass delivered it during a period of severe personal and financial crisis, and yet the result was “the greatest speech he’s ever delivered, of the hundreds of speeches he delivered in his life.”

Legacy and Contemporary Significance

The speech has become a fixture of American civic life, read aloud annually on or around the Fourth of July in communities across the country. Notable performances include a widely circulated reading by actor James Earl Jones, presented as part of Howard Zinn’s *Voices of a People’s History of the United States*. Harvard Law School professor David Harris has described the address as “required reading” for anyone engaged in the study of reparations and the legacy of slavery, calling the contradiction between the celebration and the bondage it masked a demand for action.

Contemporary scholars and public intellectuals continue to use the speech as a framework for analyzing the gap between American ideals and American practice. Nikole Hannah-Jones integrat-

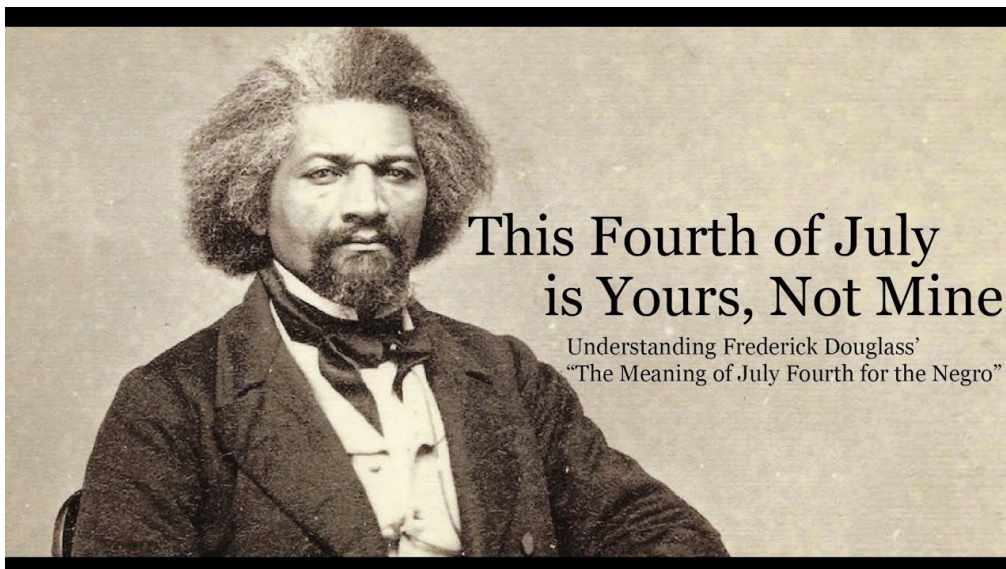
ed it into the “1619 Project” to examine the paradox between the nation’s founding rhetoric and its reliance on slavery. Michelle Alexander has called it “prophetic,” connecting it to modern mass incarceration. Ta-Nehisi Coates has cited it as foundational to arguments for reparations.³⁰ Blight has characterized Douglass as a “prose poet of American democracy” who used “savage irony” and the cadence of the Hebrew prophets to hold the nation to account.

The speech endures because its central question has never been fully answered. Douglass did not merely condemn slavery as a historical practice; he identified a structural flaw in how the nation relates to its own principles. “The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie,” he told his audience in 1852. Each generation of Americans has found its own reasons to revisit that charge.

To read this article, in its entirety, visit <https://legalclarity.org/frederick-douglass-fourth-of-july-speech-rhetoric-and-legacy/>

To read Fredrick Douglass’ speech, visit <https://loveman.sdsu.edu/docs/1852FrederickDouglass.pdf>

To hear James Earl Jones read Fredrick Douglass’ speech, visit https://youtu.be/O0baE_CtU08?si=zCkTqLYzD90-L4Wf



Member Spotlight

Congratulations to...

...**Mrs. Q.T. Tinnin!!!** She had the distinct honor of cutting the ribbon during the official Ribbon Cutting Ceremony at the L.V. Hull Legacy Center, Phase I, in downtown Kosciusko, MS.

Ms. L.V. Hull (1942–2008), Mrs. Tinnin’s sister, was an American assemblage artist, who was born in 1942 in McAdams, Mississippi. She spent many years in Kosciusko, Mississippi. A self-taught artist, she began painting and assembling objects in her home and garden in 1975.

Kosciusko Arts Foundation President Allen Massey opened the program by reflecting on early efforts to preserve Hull’s artwork after her passing in 2008, crediting the “Friends of L.V.” for safeguarding her collection at Kosciusko City Hall beginning around 2011 and later working with preservation partners, including the Kohler

Foundation, to conserve the work for public display. Phase I’s opening included two completed and accessible portions of the Legacy Center campus: the museum space showcasing Hull’s artwork, and the adjacent office building that will support ongoing operations and programming. Organizers also outlined the broader vision for the Legacy Center campus. Once complete, the project will include additional renovated structures for collection display, rotating exhibitions, staff offices, public programming, and a creative residency. The campus will also incorporate Hull’s original home, which is set for preservation.

The L.V. Hull Home & Studio was recently added to the National Register of Historic Places at the level of National Significance, recognized as the first home-studio of an African American woman visual artist and the first home of an African American art environment creator to receive that designation.





Declaration of Independence



ADAMS
 AMERICA
 ASSEMBLY
 BATTLE
 BEN FRANKLIN
 COLONIES
 COMMITTEE
 CONGRESS
 CONTINENTAL
 CREATOR
 DELEGATES
 DEMOCRACY
 DOCUMENT
 DRAFT
 EQUAL
 EXPLANATION
 FLAG
 FATHERS
 FREEDOM
 GLORY
 GOVERNMENT
 GRIEVANCES
 HAMILTON
 HANCOCK
 HAPPINESS
 HONOR
 IDEALS
 INDEPENDENCE
 JEFFERSON
 JOHN JAY
 KING GEORGE
 LIBERTY
 LIFE
 LOYALTY
 MADISON
 MILITARY
 NATION
 PATRIOTISM
 POLITICS
 POWER
 PREAMBLE
 PRINCIPLES
 PROUD
 PURSUIT
 RATIFY
 REPUBLIC
 REVOLUTION

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RIGHTS
 SELF-EVIDENT
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 SOLDIER
 SOVEREIGN
 TAXES
 TERRITORY

THIRTEEN
 TRIUMPH
 TRUTHS
 UNALIENABLE
 UNION
 VICTORY
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 WASHINGTON
 WORDING



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