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Frederick Douglass, engraving in “An Anti-Slavery Album of Contributions from Friends of Freedom, 1834–1858.” Manuscript Division.

“What, to the American Slave, Is Your 4th of July?”

July 15, 2020

Posted by: [Arlene Balkansky](#)

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What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons

“The Celebration at Corinthian Hall,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* (Rochester, N.Y.), July 9, 1852, p. 3.

On July 5, 1852, eminent African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass delivered a brilliant speech to nearly six hundred people filling Rochester, New York’s Corinthian Hall, as organized by the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Sewing Society. His powerful indictment of American slavery and racism, presented to a predominately white abolitionist audience, has resonated for 168 years, including in NPR’s recent video of [five young descendants of Douglass reading excerpts from the speech](#). Those excerpts are mainly drawn from the ones Douglass himself chose to include in “[What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?](#)” as an “extract from an oration,” in [My Bondage and My Freedom](#), his second autobiography, published in 1855. The passages in the extract have been the ones generally quoted over the years.

There is value, though, in reading the entire text. You can find the full speech printed in Douglass’ own newspaper, [Frederick Douglass’ Paper, July 9, 1852](#), beginning on page 2, six short paragraphs below the title, “[The Celebration at Corinthian Hall](#).” Following a deferential opening and acknowledgment of the bravery of those who led the country to independence, Douglass pointedly and repeatedly excluded himself and all Black Americans from celebrating that independence.

to me. This Fourth July is *yours*, not *mine*. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me by asking me to speak today? If so, there is a parallel to your con-

“The Celebration at Corinthian Hall,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* (Rochester, N.Y.), July 9, 1852, p. 2.

He provided ample evidence in support of his stance with searing descriptions of the horrors of American slavery, from the [internal slave trade](#) to the tyranny of the [Fugitive Slave Act](#).

The July 5th date for the event, instead of the 4th, is significant. The reason given for this date in an announcement in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, July 1, 1852, is that “[the 4th of July comes on Sunday](#),” but that was not the only reason. As Douglass emphasized, celebrating the July 4th Independence Day while millions of Black Americans were enslaved was the height of hypocrisy. In addition, the July 5th date had special importance for African Americans in New York. On July 5, 1827, [Black New Yorkers marched through lower Manhattan to celebrate the abolition of slavery in the state](#), which took effect the day before. One reason for their choice of July 5th then was concern of violence from white July 4th revelers. Another despicable association with July 4th was that slave auctions were sometimes conducted on that date.

For the information of our friends, we feel it our duty to state, that there will be two **Celebrations** in this City, in honour of the Abolition of Slavery in this State. One party will celebrate the Fourth of July, without any public procession; and the other, the Fifth, with a **Grand Procession, Oration and Public Dinner**.

Freedom's Journal (New York, N.Y.), June 22, 1827, p. 2.
[Wisconsin Historical Society](#).

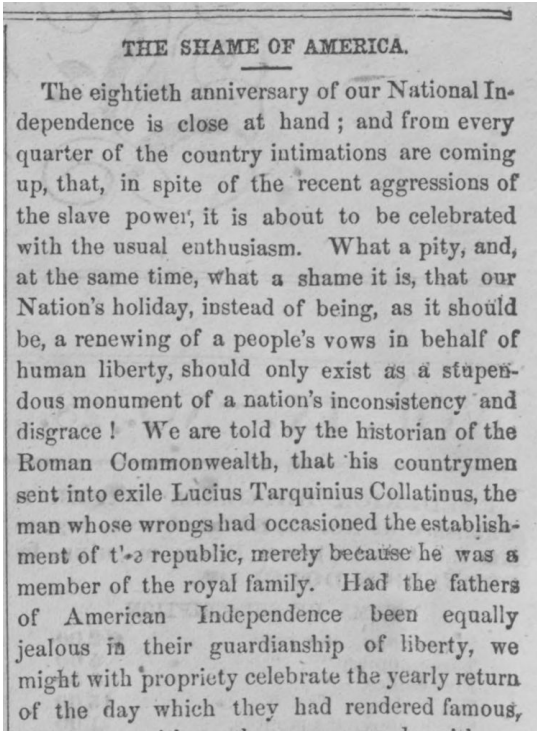
The coloured people of Albany have had a meeting to adopt resolutions for the celebration of the abolition of slavery in this state on the 4th of July next. In order however, that they may not interfere with the festivities of the white citizens, on that day, they resolved to postpone their celebration until the 5th.

Plattsburgh Republican (Plattsburgh, N.Y.), May 5, 1827, p. 3. Northern NY Library Network in [NYS Historic Newspapers](#).

Douglass’ ideas on many issues evolved over the years, but the view of the hypocrisy of celebrating the July 4th holiday while millions of African Americans were enslaved was a repeated theme for Douglass, as well as other abolitionists, before and after the 1852 oration. At least as early as July 7, 1848, just eight months after Douglass founded [The North Star](#), the original title of his newspaper, he blasted the celebration of July 4th as “This anniversary of American hypocrisy passed off in this city with every demonstration of enthusiasm.” In the editorial, “The Shame of America,” in the June 27, 1856 issue of [Frederick Douglass’ Paper](#), he lamented, “What a pity, and, at the same time, what a shame it is, that our Nation’s holiday, instead of being, as it should be, a renewing of a people’s vows in behalf of human liberty, should only exist as a stupendous monument of a nation’s inconsistency and disgrace!”

The Fourth of July.
This anniversary of American hypocrisy passed off in this city with every demonstration of enthusiasm. If the ringing of bells, waving of banners, irregular discharge of fire-arms, burning powder on the most extravagant scale, confused and tumultuous explosion of crackers, furious driving about the streets in carriages, and the uproarious shouts of an apparently purposeless multitude, be an evidence of a love of the great principles of human freedom, as set forth in the American Declaration of Independence, then are the people of Rochester and vicinity the most devoted of all the lovers of liberty. But out of all the thousands that congregated here, probably not more than one hundred desire to see those principles triumphant in this country.— Their’s is a white liberty.

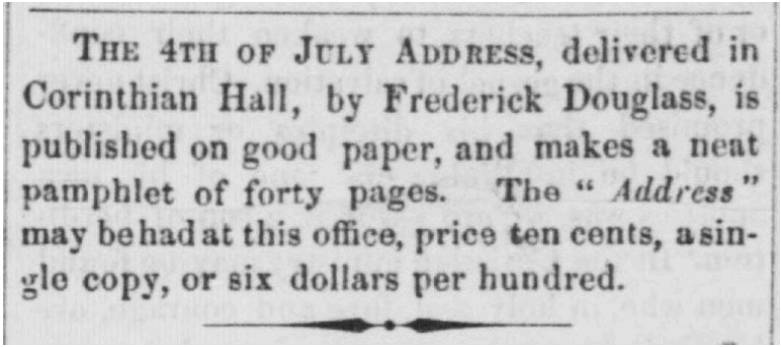
“The Fourth of July,” *The North Star* (Rochester, N.Y.), July 7, 1848, p. 2.



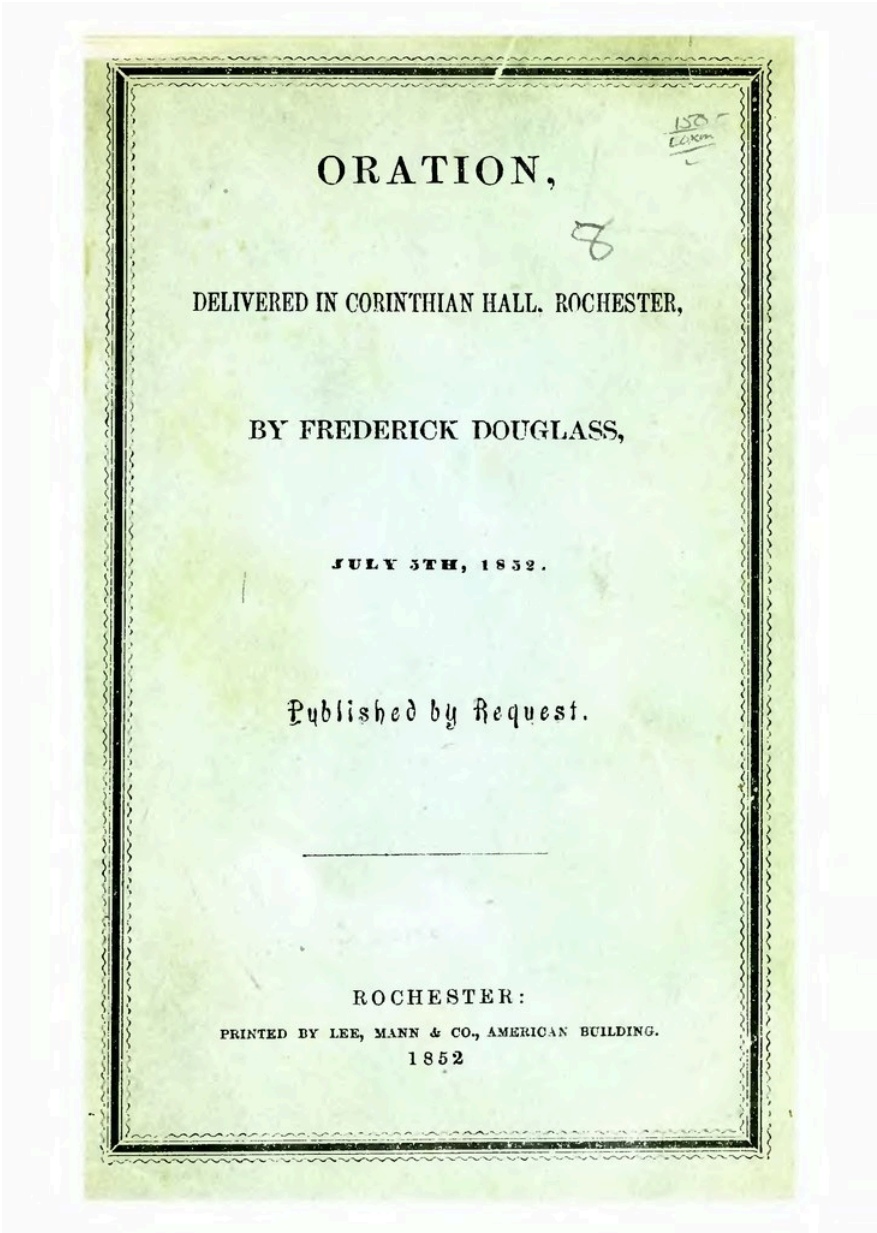
“The Shame of America,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* (Rochester, N.Y.), June 27, 1856, p. 2.

[Coverage of the 1852 speech](#) in the July 9th issue concluded with the report that Douglass received “a universal burst of applause,” a vote of thanks, and a request that the “Address be published in pamphlet form, and seven hundred copies of it were subscribed for on the spot.”

The pamphlet was advertised as available for sale as soon as a week later, in the newspaper’s July 16th issue.



Ad for “The 4th of July Address,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, July 16, 1852, p. 2.



Oration, Delivered in Corinthian Hall, Rochester, by Frederick Douglass, July 5th 1852. [Internet Archive](#).

The pamphlet provided a way for Douglass to reach an even wider audience. To do, what he strove to do: “[O! had I the ability, and could reach the nation’s ear, I would, to-day, deal out biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke.](#)” Frederick Douglass had that ability and his speeches and writings continue to reach the nation’s ear.

Discover more:

- [A Community Reading: Frederick Douglass’s “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July.”](#) A reading of the full speech sponsored by the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom of the National Park Service; introduced by David Blight, author of [Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom](#)
- [Frederick Douglass Newspapers, 1847 to 1874](#), online newspaper collection from the Library of Congress
- [Frederick Douglass: A Resource Guide](#) from the Library of Congress
- [Chronicling America](#), 1789-1963, contains additional [African American newspapers](#) and extensive coverage of Frederick Douglass. This online newspaper collection is a product of the [National Digital Newspaper Program](#) and jointly sponsored by the Library and the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#).

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COMMENTS (6)

1. selina

September 28, 2021 at 4:57 am

I need help for what the myth of what to the slave is the fourth of july

Malea Walker

October 23, 2021 at 8:09 am

If you need further help with this topic, please contact us any time through our [Ask A Librarian](#) service!

Malea Walker

October 23, 2021 at 8:14 am

If you need more information on this topic, please feel free to send us a question through our [Ask A Librarian](#) service!

2. elmo

January 24, 2023 at 12:21 pm

This is a wonderful webstie full of important and relevent information, the only thing i would change is for it to not be scary. I meant to write.

3. johnny sins

January 25, 2023 at 10:21 am

this has helped me so much and I really enjoyed reading this article I had to read it for school and it helped me a ton and then I got an A!!!!!!! thank you so much LoC i love u

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