

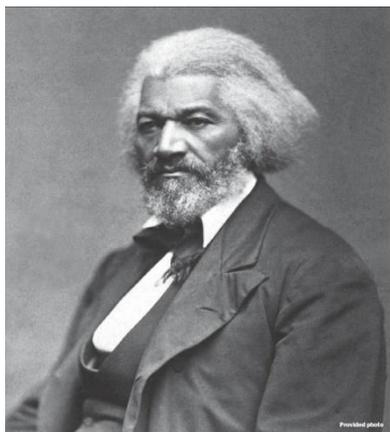
Frederick Douglass critical cog for North

By Randy Koch

SANDUSKY

On March 16, 1864, noted abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass spoke to the citizens of Sandusky at the Norman Hall on West Water Street. The Douglass lecture, "The Mission of the War," sought to reclaim waning support for the war effort in the North.

When civil war erupted in 1861, few foresaw the abolition of slavery as an objective and end result. The vast majority of initial recruits enlisted with a patriotic fervor, solely to preserve the Union.



Throughout the summer of 1862, the struggling Northern army suffered continuous defeats in the eastern theater and changed commanding generals with more frequency than today's inept sports franchises change coaches.

As battlefields swallowed Northern blood, the passion for the war steadily drained away. Lincoln believed the North now approached a critical juncture necessitating a drastic measure. On July 22, 1862, he unveiled the Emancipation Proclamation to his cabinet. While he abhorred slavery, the motivation to impede the Confederate war effort on the home front and to subdue European sympathy for the South, particularly in Great Britain, provided the impetus for the document.

In Washington, Lincoln also hoped to pacify his party's radical antislavery wing while conferring moral cause upon the conflict.

Secretary of State William H. Seward suggested that the administration release the document only in conjunction with a Union victory, to dispel an image of desperation.

In September, the Battle of Antietam allowed publication of the document, effective the first day of 1863. Despite significant Union successes at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in early July, 1863 ended without victory on the horizon.

The fortunes of the black man, meanwhile, continued teetering on a precarious pinnacle with each Northern success and failure. Fearing hard fought abolitionist gains might dissolve, Frederick Douglass launched a lecture tour in late 1863.

He traveled throughout the North, where war's harsh realities eroded the exuberance so prevalent three years earlier.

In 1863, the army even instituted a draft to fill thinning ranks and to augment dwindling enlistments. When draft riots erupted in New York City only days after the decisive victory at Gettysburg, the insurgents directed their animosity away from the wealthy, who could pay for substitutes, and instead assaulted black residents. They murdered more than 100 black people and brutally beat numerous others.

The day before Douglass spoke in Sandusky, newspapers touted the call for another 200,000 Union men. Feeble responses forced the local 101st OVI regiment to entice former veterans and inexperienced men to enlist, with bonuses of \$402 and \$302, respectively. By early summer, the army would also lose many experienced soldiers, as three-year enlistments expired. Military service became even less appetizing with the Daily Commercial Register's headline announcing that prisoner exchanges had terminated.

To add to Northern dismay, constant negative news raised gold prices, while decreasing the paper greenback's value. Apprehension enveloped abolitionists with the prospect of a failed Lincoln re-election bid in November.

Despite his skepticism of the president, Douglass astutely acknowledged the alternative. At one time, Lincoln strongly supported colonization to resettle blacks in Africa. In mid-1862, Lincoln wrote to Horace Greeley that he "would save the Union with slavery or without slavery."

A month later, the Emancipation Proclamation only freed slaves in territory in rebellion against the United States. Until actually meeting Lincoln in August 1864, Douglass viewed Lincoln's sluggish actions as moral indifference, although he anticipated a more aggressive approach to the war with Grant's March 1864 appointment as the supreme military commander of Union forces.

In reference to the former commander, who would eventually receive the Democratic nomination to run against Lincoln, Douglass said, "It has not been a war of conquest, but rather a war of conciliation. George McClellan had been trying, apparently, to put down the rebellion without hurting the rebels, certainly without hurting slavery, and the government seemed to cooperate with him in both respects."

Douglass astutely believed that, should a Clement Vallandigham or a McClellan become president, Confederate independence, or a negotiated reunification, would follow.

The slavery issue, a longtime pawn throughout the war, would assuredly become an expendable negotiating chip traded for a peaceful settlement.

As Douglass said in his speech: "We had been nearly drugged to death by proslavery compromise."

Within this political and social climate, Douglass launched his battle from the podium, armed with the necessary skills. At the age of 9 he learned to sound letters and form words from books. Six years later, the ravenous reader organized and taught those skills in a black Sunday school, until local whites closed it. During this period, he also obtained a book of famous speeches and developed his oratorical skills. In 1838, as a 20-year-old, he fled bondage in Baltimore for freedom in Massachusetts, only to discover racial barriers existed in the north, too.

In a short time, however, the abolitionist movement discovered a dynamic speaker with a magnetic presence, leading to his renown throughout the country and Europe. Excerpts from his speech state, "this war is, and of right ought to be, an Abolition war. An Abolition war, therefore includes Union, Constitution, Republican institutions, and all else that goes to makeup the greatness and glory of our common country. The blow we strike is not merely to free a country or a continent, but the whole world, from slavery; for when slavery fails here, it will fall everywhere."

His fears surfaced as he declared: "It is true we have the Proclamation of 1863. It was a vast and glorious step in the right direction. But unhappily, excellent as that paper is — and much as it has accomplished temporarily — it settles nothing. It is still open to decisions by courts, canons and Congresses. I have applauded that paper and do now applaud it, as a wise measure — while

I detest the motive and principle upon which it is based. By it the holding and flogging of Negroes is the exclusive luxury of loyal men.”

He concluded: “I end where I began — no war but an Abolition war; no peace but an Abolition peace, liberty for all, chains for none; the black man a soldier in war, a laborer in peace; a voter in the South as well as the North; America his permanent home, and all Americans his fellow country men. Such fellow citizens, is my idea of the mission of the war.”

“Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory 1787-1900,” which contains the entire Douglass speech, is available at the Sandusky Library.

Randy Koch is president of the Erie County Historical Society and chairman of the Erie County Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee.