

**Frederick Douglass in Buffalo**  
**January 1, 1864**  
**The Proclamation Celebration**

On New Year's Day, 1864, Buffalo hosted an anniversary celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation, signed a year earlier by President Lincoln. The all-day event at St. James Hall, which included talks by several of Buffalo's leading clergy, culminated with an evening lecture by Frederick Douglass.

**St. James Hall**

The Hall was located on Eagle Street, between Main and Washington, the present site of Minoru Yamasaki's M & T Bank headquarters building. The Eagle Street Theater, built in 1835 by Benjamin Rathbun, had burned down at that location in 1852. A new structure with a pedimented front was built a year later. In 1854, the name was changed to St. James Hall.

The Hall was used for community events such as concerts, readings, lectures, musical recitals and opera performances. The German Leidertafel concerts were often performed there. In February of 1861, Abraham Lincoln, during his stop in Buffalo while on his Inaugural Journey to Washington D. C., attended a lecture at the Hall with former President Millard Fillmore and listened to Father Beeson, who had recently lived with the Native Americans in the West, lecture on the unjust cruelties they were receiving from the white population. Four years later, in April 1865, the Lincoln funeral train stopped in Buffalo. The assassinated President was laid out in St James Hall where up to 100,000 western New Yorkers (and some Canadians) offered their respects and passed by his open coffin.

The Commercial Advertiser reported on a New Year's Eve celebration on December 31, 1863 at the Hall. The Ball was given by the Rescue Hook and Ladder No. 1.

St. James Hall was crowded last evening, and the exhibition went off to the satisfaction of all present. At the conclusion, the floor was cleared of the seats, and a large number engaged in the dance till the small hours.

**New Year's Day: January 1, 1864**

From the Buffalo Morning Express of January 1, 1864:

The most noteworthy celebration of today will be that at St. James Hall, in commemoration of the President's Emancipation Proclamation. The exercises of the morning and afternoon will be conducted by some of our most eloquent divines and laymen, and in the evening Fred. Douglass delivers an oration.

## **The Winter Storm**

The Buffalo Daily Courier, the Democrat political organ, reported a similar beginning to the celebration.

Mr. Lincoln's ...Bull achieved the first anniversary on New Year's Day and the event was ... celebrated by the leading colored people of the city attended by a number of abolitionists, lay and clerical. The celebration exercise was held at St. James Hall, and commenced in the forenoon of Friday, when a very small audience of whites and blacks had assembled, notwithstanding the storm.

Due to a massive New Year's Day winter storm, few were expected to attend the celebration. Throughout the Midwest and Northeast, extreme levels of cold, wind and snow were reported. St. Louis stated that closings in its city were due to the temperatures falling as low as -20F. Below zero numbers were reported in various other cities including New York City, Chicago and Cincinnati, while the winds were coming from the North in treacherous volumes. Transportation and Commerce came to a halt. It seemed nearly impossible for the Buffalo New Year's Day Celebration to take place. But it did.

Morning Express (January 4, 1864)

The elements proclaimed their sway with such terrible violence on New Year's Day, that we deemed it hardly possible for considerable number of our citizens to buffet(?) their way to St. James Hall to take part in celebrating the anniversary of the President's Proclamation of Freedom. When we reached the hall, at half-past ten o' clock, there were but two persons present, and from so inauspicious a beginning we reasonably, but not rightly, deduced failure. We say not rightly for there were mere stout hearts than we wot(?) of in Buffalo, who in their thankfulness and joy for the boon of liberty vouchsafed to all the land, were ready to brave all opposition that they might unite in praise and encourage each other to stand firmly by the right till the glorious consummation of "Liberty and Union" had been accomplished.

This was quite a dramatic way of saying that Buffalonians were ready to brave the elements and not let mere winter blizzard-like conditions keep them from attending the celebration. The Morning Express continued:

By half-past eleven o' clock a very respectable audience of both white and colored people had assembled and the exercises of the day were opened.

## **The Morning Session**

After singing "The Day of Jubilee is Come" and a prayer from Rev. Lore, Dr. Henry Smith opened the commencements, followed by Dr. Lord, Dr. Lore and Dr. Heacock.

Rev. D. D. Lore was the pastor of the Grace Methodist Episcopal on Michigan St. between north and south Division.

Rev. Henry Smith, D.D. was the pastor of the North Presbyterian on Main St. between Huron and Chippewa.

Rev. Grosvenor W. Heacock was the pastor of Lafayette Street Presbyterian, between Main and Washington, north of the Court House Park, now Lafayette Square.

Rev. John C. Lord was arguably the most dominant and well known of all Buffalo clergy, serving his congregation at Central Presbyterian located at the corner of Genesee and Pearl. In his memoir, Samuel Manning Welsh wrote that Dr. Lord was “a leading man among our list of eminent clergymen”. Lord had a “national reputation for wisdom and ripe scholarship” and was known to give “logical and brilliant sermons.” He was Calvinistic, conservative and orthodox in his Presbyterian outlook in a day when the evangelical view was moving to the mainstream. The author David Gerber wrote that in his antebellum period, Lord referred to the abolitionists not only as fanatics, but also as heretical, since the Bible sanctioned slavery. Lord’s viewpoint had apparently changed, yet this still made Dr. Lord an unlikely speaker at this celebration.

For a detailed reading of these morning lectures, please refer to the January 4, 1864 edition of the Buffalo Morning Express. However, below are some excerpts from their talks.

Rev. Henry Smith:

... that ancient bell (the Liberty Bell) had not yet obeyed the sound (of its origin). Slavery did not die, but grew into a demon of Power; laid hold of the central pillar of liberty and expected to bury the nation in its ruins. If that ancient prophet of Freedom still swings in its watch tower, when it struck the hour of twelve, ushering into being the 1<sup>st</sup> day of January 1863, it at length fulfilled its mission and accomplished its destiny. Then for the first time it obeyed the mandate of its legend “Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.”

Rev John C. Lord:

Rev. Lord’s talk was rather pedestrian considering his reputation as the dominant man among the local clergy. He opposed slavery but emphasized the degrading effects it had on the poor whites of the South and that upon them was the greatest curse. That, of course, was news to anyone serving a life sentence as a slave. However, Lord did give credit to the enslaved and the black soldiers for their “noble conduct”.

The barbarities practiced by the rebels, not by the blacks, was another method by which attention was drawn to the degrading effects of this system upon the whites. The introduction of the black troops into the service and their noble conduct has done more. He (Lord) sought to raise in the minds of the common people sympathy and respect for the slave more than anything else. It was feared the blacks would rise and practice barbarities, but he (Lord) was compelled to say that they did not and that from whites have come the worst exhibitions of savage ferocity.

Lord ended on a weak argument that the freed slaves should stay in the south.

It is at the South that the black man will have the best chance to become a man, as the prejudice against color does not exist there as it does here (in the North).

Aside from being an incredible statement of southern tolerance, the argument that the African-American cannot survive the deadly prejudice of the northerners was dubious. Especially disheartening in this statement was Dr. Lord's apathy in taking a lead role in the Buffalo community that his pulpit, reputation, and respect gave him, to bring the common folks together and remove those prejudices. Obviously, that would have taken a great and special leader for that dangerous yet vital role. Dr. John C. Lord was not to be that individual.

Rev. D. D. Lore

Pastor Lore of the Grace Methodist Episcopal Church followed Lord. He spoke about his time in the south and witnessing slavery while there.

I have seen something of slavery, having lived at the South. While I have seen much of slaves and masters, and have seen kind slaveholders, I never have seen any bright spots connected with slavery, or to mitigate the system. The first time I was in New Orleans, I saw a large sign hung out to attract attention, "Slaves sold here". The salesman came up to me, as I stepped up to the door, wanting to know if I desired to purchase, and what kind of hands, field or plantation. A mother with her child, then three years old, was sold on the block – body, brains and blood. I do not wonder at the cost of this war; we are paying the price for our complicity with this system. We distilled gold from the blood of the slaves; now blood is being distilled from our gold. I pray God that the end will not come until we are done with it.

Mr. Lore closed with an eloquent appeal to the colored persons present, some of whom had on the United States uniform, to be brave in battle, and to maintain in every sphere of life their manhood.

Dr. Grosvenor W. Heacock

... It is said in bringing the slaves from Africa we elevate and christianize them. In Africa they do have their system of blood and cruelty, but in this century for us with our light is our treatment of the slaves intended to elevate them? Suppose I take a poor Indian boy from the woods, take him to my dog kennel, brick up a place, throw in a few rags for him to sleep on, and boilies for him to eat; would you think that I was elevating or christianizing the boy? And what would be done if I treated him thus? You would knock down my barn or kennel and free the boy. These slaves brought here have all their noble impulses crushed out...

With the end of Dr. Heacock's address, the morning session ended.

### **The Afternoon Exercises**

The snowstorm picked up in intensity as the 3:00 P.M. sessions began. There was an even smaller audience than in the morning; small enough to consider cancelling the assembly.

The few present, however, seemed desirous of something to compensate them for the great effort made in coming out, and the meeting was called to order. A. M. Clapp, esq., was then invited to the stand and made a brief address.

Almon Clapp was the editor of the *Buffalo Morning Express*, a daily newspaper and organ of the Republican party. Clapp reviewed the history of slavery in North America beginning with the importation of slaves into Virginia. He compared the character of those pioneer colonists of the Old Dominion to the slaveholders now present there.

...the thieves, vagrants, vagabonds and prostitutes which constituted the ancestry of the "chivalrous master race" of Virginia.

Clapp also compared the Virginia colony with the New England Puritans of the same period.

It was an antagonism of system and principles at the very outset of American civilization, and we trace in it the beginnings of the "irrepressible conflict" which has culminated in this stupendous civil war.

Mr. Clapp's address was followed by a young 14-year-old male named Humaston who gave

... an admirable recitation of one of (John Greenleaf) Whittier's splendid poems.

This was followed by a brief but eloquent address by Mr. B. F. Randolph, the Principal of the colored school – one of the finest speeches in thought and delivery made during the day. We (The Morning Express) regret we are without notes for any report of it.

Unfortunately, the words of Mr. Randolph may be lost to history.

Thus ended the afternoon session.

### **The Evening Session**

The night time gathering began with a prayer and a short speech by George Weir, Jr., a local African-American grocer and abolitionist. Frederick Douglass then took the stage. The *Buffalo Morning Express* was unable to obtain a full speech, but did comment:

His speech was an eloquent one even for him to make. He seemed fairly inspired by the occasion, and advocated the fights of his race with an eloquence far above that we have ever known any of their oppressors to employ.

The *Buffalo Daily Courier*, not a fan of Douglass, had a bit more detail to add:

... Douglass, who gave a review of the war and its issues from his point of view, in quite graphic style. Like Wendell Phillips, he is not altogether satisfied with the proclamation, because it does

not, in some excepted districts (?) prohibit loyal as well as disloyal persons from holding slaves. Still, he was thankful for small favors. He congratulated the country on the prolongation of the war, in as much as a short war might not have been the death of slavery. He rebuked the conservative republican friends for attempting to explain that the war was not one for abolition. He considered it an abolition war – a n.... war, if you please, and only wished it were more so. It was folly to say it was for the Union, the Constitution, or republican institutions. All them amounted (?) to nothing, and there could be no Union until Slavery was destroyed. He went in for ????? his brethren of African descent all the ??? of citizens, and remarked that if a negro knew as much sober as an Irishman drunk, he knew enough to vote.

Douglass was thankful for Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation but, like so many others including Lincoln, he knew more was needed to guarantee the freedom of all the enslaved. By the end of the war in 1865, the actual amount of enslaved people that had obtained their freedom was around 525,000. This meant that there were still 3.5 million left in bondage, despite the Emancipation Proclamation. This is why, later in 1864 and into 1865, Lincoln and the Congress worked feverishly to change the Constitution with an amendment, the 13<sup>th</sup>, one that would forever prohibit slavery in the United States. That amendment was finally passed and entered into the Constitution in December 1865.

With the end of Douglass's oration, the festivities of the day were essentially over. A Mr. Clark sang a song and then the audience still present were given the opportunity to dance to the music of the Cornet Band. The lower hall was opened so that those who desired could receive refreshments and some social time.

George W. Jonson, Buffalo's abolitionist Liberty Party man, had spent much of New Year's Day making calls on his friends throughout the city. In the evening, he arrived at St. James Hall to listen to Frederick Douglass speak. He described the talk as

... able and witty. Then I went to the anteroom filled with colored ladies to speak to Mr. Douglass, who came toward me, grasped my hand, spoke my name, and said Gerrit Smith once introduced me to him. He said he recognized me as soon as I sat down.

### **Aftermath**

As noted above, Douglass emphasized the need to continue the process of emancipation and abolition, something only an amendment to the Constitution could provide. In mid- 1864, Lincoln was certain of his defeat for a second term. He met with Douglass in the summer to express his concerns. He suggested that Douglass try to find ways to get more of the enslaved out of the South before a new Democratic administration could take office. They both knew that if the presidency went to George McClellan, the war would end with slavery intact and legal. Those freed might even be put back into chains. Thus, Douglass's New Year's Day oration in Buffalo was appropriate and significant. Lincoln, as we all know, was re-elected, and the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment was passed in Congress (January 1865) and became law in December 1865.

## Sources

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John Fagant  
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