

ROCHESTER HISTORY



Racial Segregation in Rochester Schools: 1818-1856

By Justin Murphy

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The former Clover Street Seminary still stands at the corner of Clover Street and Elmwood Avenue in Brighton. Today it is a private residence. The school, which was founded in 1838 and operated at this location from about 1848 to 1858, taught black and white girls together in the 1840s. Photograph by Elizabeth P. Spring, 2009. From the collection of the Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

Front cover: This painting of Austin Steward teaching Sunday School by Rochester artist Athesia Benjamin hung in the Rochester Riverside Hotel, 130 W. Main St., until recently. It is part of a triptych Benjamin created in 2002 to represent key aspects of Steward's life. The two other paintings in the series depict Steward taking an opportunity to learn to read while he was still enslaved and working in his meat market and dry goods store after taking his freedom and moving to Rochester. The store was located on the property where the hotel sits today. Photograph courtesy of Christine L. Ridarsky, 2019.

ROCHESTER HISTORY

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Dear *Rochester History* Reader,

Author Justin Murphy has uncovered an ugly truth about education in Rochester with this issue of *Rochester History*: Black children in this city have had educational opportunities thwarted for more than 150 years. Murphy's research focuses on the early to mid-nineteenth century, when African American families faced a dual dilemma: Their children were discouraged from going to school with their white neighbors, but separate schools for black children were too expensive to sustain. He traces the activism of men like Austin Steward, the Rev. Thomas James, and Frederick Douglass but focuses on the power of black parents in demanding that their children be educated. Fast-forward to 2019, and you still find African American parents and activists like Lovely Warren, Jackie Campbell, Jerome Underwood, Tanishia Johnson, and Toyin Anderson demanding better education for their children. One hundred and fifty years ago, it was parents who ultimately achieved the desegregation of Rochester schools, and it is today's parents who continue to fight for the best education possible for their children.

Patricia Uttaro, *Library Director*

About Rochester History

Rochester History is a scholarly journal that provides informative and entertaining articles about the history and culture of Rochester, Monroe County, and the Genesee Valley. Since 1939, we have sought to study local history as a microcosm of U.S. history, an approach that has brought insight and understanding to readers around the globe. The journal is funded in part by the Frances Kenyon Publication Fund, established in memory of Ms. Kenyon's sister, Florence Taber Kenyon, and her friend Thelma Jeffries.

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Racial Segregation in Rochester Schools: 1818-1856

by Justin Murphy

The first half of the nineteenth century was a period of momentous change in public education in the United States as increasing numbers of children gained access to low-cost or free tax-supported schooling. Rochester's first free school opened in 1813 on land set aside on Fitzhugh Street by village founders Nathaniel Rochester, Charles Carroll, and William Fitzhugh. The school was "free" only in the sense that it was open to any child whose parents could afford to pay an "assessment ... in money, in wood, or in services."¹ Though public schools were ostensibly intended to serve *all* students, in truth white students were the primary beneficiaries. Black students continued to face serious obstacles in access to, funding and quality of education throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, even in relatively liberal places like Rochester.

Here, as in other northern urban centers, white abolitionists struggled to square their anti-slavery convictions with the notion of allowing black students to share their own children's classrooms. Consequently, black children were educated first in privately supported Sunday schools, then in nominally public institutions whose existence depended nonetheless on unreliable private support, both from parents and philanthropists. Rochester's public school officials agonized over financial and ethical considerations but failed for decades to take action to ensure that black students received the same level and quality of education as their white peers. They even operated separate schools for black and white students for a period. Despite this, Rochester's schools became increasingly desegregated in fact, if not in policy. When the city's separate school for black children closed for good in 1856, leaders found it impossible to uphold segregationist policies, and Rochester became the first major city in New York to formally integrate its schools.

Throughout the pre-integration period, progress was fitful. Rochester's African Americans had a difficult task in advocating for their children. Hardly any of the city's black parents were themselves educated; many had escaped slavery or had been emancipated. The majority of the men worked as laborers, the women as domestic servants. They were outnumbered fifteen to one by white residents and were effectively unrepresented in local government, including the board of education, organized in 1841. Prominent African American men such as Austin Steward, Thomas James, Jacob Morris, and Frederick Douglass spearheaded the struggle for equal education for stretches of time, but the credit for desegregation ultimately belongs to black parents. They petitioned and organized and, as a last resort, withheld their children from school rather than expose them to what they believed were unsafe conditions and prejudiced instruction. They did not know then, of course, that the fight for educational equality would remain active more than 150 years later.

The early years, 1818–1831

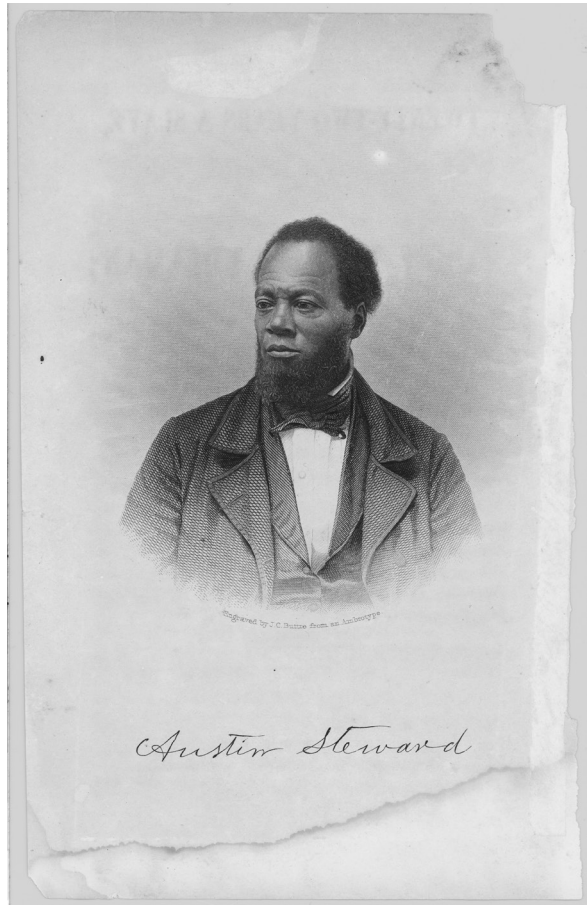
The story of black education in Rochester begins with Austin Steward. Steward was born into slavery around 1793 in Prince William County, Virginia, and was sold with his family at age seven to William Helm, a penurious minor landholder with a weakness for gambling and a family tie to William Fitzhugh, one of Rochester's founding fathers. In 1801, Helm sold his Virginia property and relocated to Sodus Bay, New York, entirely unprepared for the rigors of life in what Steward called "almost an unbroken wilderness."² Slavery had been banned in New York State in 1799, though a series of grandfathering provisions postponed its final sunset until 1827. Thus, Steward remained enslaved after the move. Helm, however, failed to take note of a provision of state law that prevented slave owners from leasing out enslaved people they had brought into New York from elsewhere.³

When Helm hired Steward out, Steward consulted with Canandaigua abolitionists and declared himself a free man in 1815. Immediately upon collecting his first wages, he enrolled in a private academy in Farmington. He arrived there at age 23, "yet to learn what most boys of eight years knew," and continued to attend classes for three winters.⁴ Steward moved to Rochester in the spring of 1817 and that September opened a meat market. The village's first black-owned business immediately became the target of vandalism and other "unmanly proceedings."⁵ Less than a year later, in the summer of 1818, Steward began teaching a Sunday school, likely at his Buffalo Street business, for "the neglected children of our oppressed race."⁶ Steward wrote in his memoir:

For a while it was well attended, and I hoped to be able to benefit in some measure the poor and despised colored children, but the parents interested themselves very little in the undertaking, and it shortly came to nought [*sic*]. So strong was the prejudice then existing against the colored people, that very few of the negroes seemed to have any courage or ambition to rise from the abject degradation in which the estimation of the white man had placed [them].⁷

In opening a Sunday school, Steward joined a rising and democratizing trend in education. During the colonial period and the fledgling United States' first half-century, there was no single,

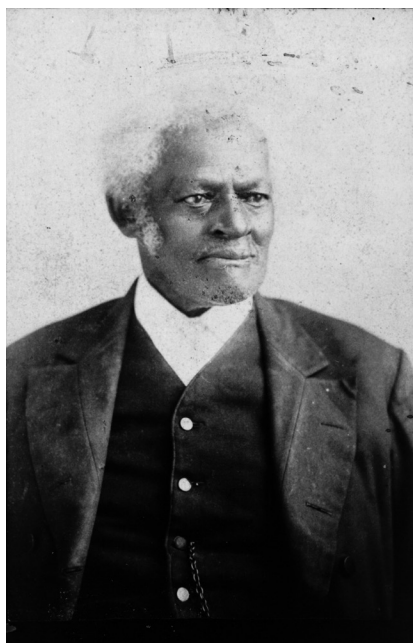
recognizable educational paradigm. The current distinctions between public, private, and parochial models were yet to be established, and opportunities varied widely depending on a child's geographic location, social class, race, and gender. Young, white, male aristocrats, particularly in the northeast, might study with a private tutor then advance to a preparatory academy before attending an early university. Their female counterparts might spend several years in a seminary, learning etiquette, dancing, and French—skills meant to prepare them for marriage rather than a career. As the education historian Lawrence Cremin explained, academies and seminaries “came in every size, shape, and form, and under every variety of sponsorship ... [and] seemed infinitely adaptable to particular needs and opportunities.”⁸



Austin Steward (1793–1869) opened the first school for black children in Rochester in 1818. Portrait engraved by John Chester Butte from an ambrotype, 1867. From the collection of the Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

Black and poor white children's educational options were more limited. Some churches sponsored "African schools" that provided a rudimentary education for black students. But even where schools existed, poor students, black or white, often were precluded from participating by their own families' economic need for the income their labor provided.

Sunday schools, usually taught by volunteers, emerged in the beginning of the nineteenth century as a way to provide basic, low-cost education to children and adults, white and black—usually taught separately—who were excluded from more prestigious opportunities. According to historian Carleton Mabey, such schools provided "the established classes a means to influence the poor—to convert them to religion, to teach them orderly habits of work, and to reduce their danger to the stability of society."⁹ Lessons were mostly



Undated photograph of the Rev. Thomas James (1804–1891), school teacher and founder of Rochester's African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church. From the collection of the Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

limited to learning to read, with emphasis on the Bible. In 1858, a Sunday school teacher in Geneva, New York, bragged that a young black girl in her class had recited 709 verses of Scripture in a single session.¹⁰

Steward's establishment of a Sunday school in 1818 marked the first known formal educational opportunity for black children in Rochester. It was apparently fleeting, however, as he makes no further mention of it in his memoir. He later joined white village schoolmaster Zenas Freeman "in conducting a Sabbath school for young Negroes for several seasons" on Buffalo Street.¹¹ One of the pupils at that school was to become another of early Rochester's leading black citizens, the Rev. Thomas James.

Born into slavery in Canajoharie, New York, in 1804, James escaped when he was in his late teens and settled in Rochester in 1823. He "knew nothing of letters or religion" but enrolled at Freeman's Sunday school and supplemented his formal education with

lessons from the clerks at the warehouse where he worked.¹² He joined the African Methodist Episcopal Society in 1823, then started his own school for black children on Favor Street.¹³ James' Sunday school and the AME Zion Church, established by the society in 1828, received

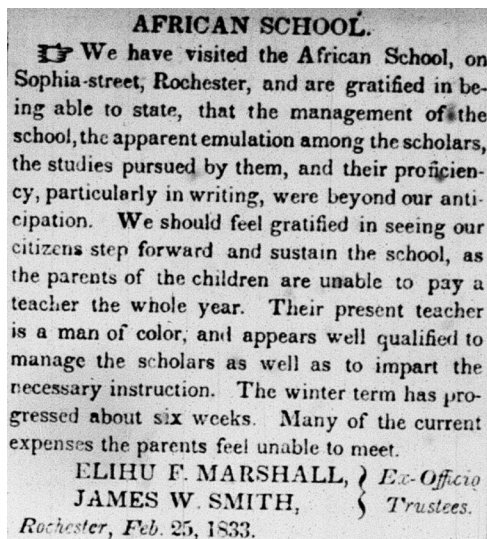
substantial financial support from Rochester's white religious institutions, including individual clergy and the various Sunday school associations that had sprung up in the city. Given James' emergence as a civic leader and Steward's departure from Rochester for the Wilberforce colony in Canada in 1831, it is likely that the Favor Street Sunday school was the primary educational option for the village's few hundred black children and adults prior to 1832. Thus, the education of black children was a matter of private charity, not public interest.

Public education

The initial, small step toward change came on January 23, 1832, when a group of 32 black parents, with the support of the local Commissioner of Common Schools, petitioned the state legislature to fund the establishment of a separate public school for black children. By this time, Rochester had about six small district schools and many private schools.¹⁴ The petition suggests that at least some black children had been admitted to the existing public schools.¹⁵ A document penned by the Commissioner of the Common Schools that was filed with the petition likewise supports that conclusion, arguing that "under the present organization, our schools are open to all, and yet it is obvious that in them the literary and moral interests of the coloured [*sic*] scholar can hardly prosper."¹⁶ It should be kept in mind, however, that from Rochester's first non-indigenous settlement until well into the twentieth century, black residents made up a tiny fraction of the population. In 1834, about 360 black people resided in Rochester, less than 3 percent of the overall population. That included about 100 school-age children, of whom 83 were recorded as having attended at least some school in the winter of 1833–34.¹⁷ The parents' petition supported the commissioner's observations:

The fact is too notorious, that ... [our] children are despised, called negroes, and completely discouraged by the white children. ... We do humbly believe that if the prayer of our petitions be granted, our children might be encouraged to learn: and although they are black, they may be made comely members of society ... and we, their parents, would forever feel ourselves under the most solemn obligation.¹⁸

It appears that there was some unity among Rochester's ruling class around the idea of providing a semi-public school for the city's black children, as well. The parents' petition had been signed not only by people of color, "but by a very respectable portion of other inhabitants of the place."¹⁹ The state legislature quickly approved the request and provided an unknown sum of money for "the children of color of the village of Rochester to be taught in one or more separate schools."²⁰ The joint Gates and Brighton common school commissioners



School trustees Elihu F. Marshall and James W. Smith reported on difficulties in sustaining the African School on Sophia Street. From the Rochester Daily American, February 28, 1833.

school closed one year later, in March 1834. According to the local abolitionist newspaper, *The Rights of Man*:

The teacher was a colored man; possessing a very respectable English education, and all the qualifications of a teacher of a common school, ... But he has now closed it for two reason [*sic*]*—*first, the house, which was rented, has been sold and has gone into other hands for a school for the more favored and wealthy whites, and second, for the want of funds; the colored people being too poor to pay him for his services, even with the aid of the public money.²³

There is no evidence that anything immediately replaced the Sophia Street school after it closed in 1834, and it does not appear that many—if any—black students returned to white classrooms. Thus, black children again had to depend upon private benevolence for their education. The Board of Education Special Committee on the Colored School System published a report in the *Daily Advertiser* in 1850 that noted that after 1832 black students were “aided by the munificence of their friends, till more ample and permanent provisions were made” in 1841, when the Rochester Board of Education was established.²⁴

There are a few reasons why education for black children may have fallen by the wayside in the mid-1830s. Rochester was officially incorporated as a city in April 1834, just

were enlisted as trustees, suggesting that the school operated as a governmental function and not a charity. Such distinctions remained ambiguous, though, for the schoolhouse itself, located at Spring and Sophia streets in the Third Ward, was purchased and refitted “by the assistance of a few friends of the colored people.”²¹

The legislature did not finalize its work until April 1832, meaning the school likely opened the following fall. In February 1833, trustees Elihu Marshall and James W. Smith toured the new school and reported that while the students’ proficiency was “beyond our anticipation,” parents were unable to continue to pay the teacher’s salary.²² As a result, the

a month after the black school closed. The administration of schools was then transferred from the towns of Brighton and Gates to the new city's Common Council, which may have lacked enthusiasm for the subject or at least neglected to take it up promptly among its other myriad responsibilities. A separate centralized school district and board of education was not formed until 1841. It was also a time of transition in leadership among the still small black community. The Rev. Thomas James left Rochester in 1835 to establish a church in Syracuse and did not return for 21 years. Austin Steward, who had moved to Canada in 1831, returned to Rochester in 1837 but stayed only a few years before relocating permanently to Canandaigua in 1842. He remained a prominent businessman and anti-slavery advocate in the region but necessarily had a lesser role in Rochester itself.²⁵ Meanwhile, the great abolitionist, orator, and newspaper publisher Frederick Douglass did not arrive in Rochester until 1847. Thus, as in the earlier period, Rochester's black churches continued to be the primary source of support for black education. *The Rights of Man* reported in 1834 that two of the city's three black churches—Abyssinian Baptist and Methodist Episcopal—operated Sunday schools. The AME Zion Church in particular was noted as having a well-attended Sunday school.²⁶

Segregation codified, 1841

Nine years passed before the next recorded public protest against the lack of schools for black children. It came in January 1841 from an unidentified black father who asked for tax relief on the basis that his own children were barred from the common schools.²⁷ The father's petition left the school trustees red-faced. They referred it to a committee, which in turn referred it to John Spencer, the state Superintendent of Common Schools. Spencer responded: "It is certainly desirable that this unfortunate class should have all the benefits of instruction, ... The laws contemplate their instruction and provision must be made for it."²⁸ Nonetheless, he noted some possible loopholes:

There must, however, be some discretion by the Trustees. Persons having infected [*sic*] diseases—idiots—infants, incapable of receiving any benefit from the school—and persons over 21, who may be deemed too old—may be excluded. ... The admission of colored children is in many places so odious, that whites will not attend. In such cases the Trustees would be justified in excluding them, and furnishing them a separate room.²⁹

The Rochester Common Council followed this advice and instructed the school trustees, "for the moral good as well of the colored as of the white population ... to make

provisions for the said children in a school separate by themselves, and when such provisions are made to reject them from [the white students'] school house."³⁰ This resolution, unanimously passed on February 11, 1841, made school segregation the rule for the first time in Rochester's history. By that point, the white community's position on its responsibilities regarding the education of black children was clear. Guidance from the state Education Department, and school leaders' own internal deliberations, had established an obligation to educate black students as part of the public education system. At the same time, it had been definitively decided that black and white children should be educated in separate systems. It did not take long, however, for the newly constituted board of education to realize that it would be much more expensive to build a separate school for a hundred or so black children than to disperse them among the dozen or so schools already operating throughout the city.

In July 1841, the board received an estimate of \$1,500 to build a separate black schoolhouse and promptly deemed that expenditure "inexpedient." It opted instead to rent space in the Third Ward. A white man, Leonard Risingh, was appointed as teacher after an unsuccessful search for a black instructor. Austin Steward, temporarily back in the city, was named a school trustee along with prominent black merchant and abolitionist Jacob Morris and clothing renovator John Bishop.³¹ According to the Special Committee on the Colored School System, "the school went on, for aught the committee can discover, quietly and successfully" until the next legislative action was taken in 1845.³² This avowed ignorance is indicative of the value the white community placed on black education at the time. The 1844 city directory shows that 152 students attended the black school in a rented space on Spring Alley with Samuel Boothby, a white man, serving as principal.³³

In 1845, the board passed a pair of laws affirming its duty to provide public schools for black children and exempting their parents from taxation until such schools were provided. At the same time, it again formally barred black children from white schools, "except with the consent of the Board of Education."³⁴ This last provision had the unintended consequence of drawing a request for the very consent it described. In March 1846, a black woman named Phebe Ray asked that her children be allowed to attend the public school in District 11 on Chestnut Street near her home on Mechanic's Alley. The request was referred to a committee and resurfaced the following month as a report from the legal committee; it was promptly tabled and abandoned.³⁵ In May 1846, the city opened its second black school, this one in a building on North Washington Street rented from the Female Charitable Society and taught by a white woman, Mary Conning. The institution was to run "while funds last." After that,

Conning was to “continue it by subscription until another appropriation”—again, showing the holes in public support for the education of black children. The two-school arrangement lasted one year, after which only the North Washington Street building remained open, with Conning staying on as teacher. The school continued at that location until 1849.³⁶

Comparatively little information is available about whether black children were allowed in the region’s various private schools in the mid-nineteenth century. There is evidence that at least one of these schools was integrated. The Clover Street Seminary was established by Isaac Moore in 1838 with his sister-in-law Celestia Bloss, a member of a prominent local abolitionist family, as teacher and, eventually, principal.³⁷ Bloss’s brother William became a close confidant of Frederick Douglass and eventually played a role in desegregating the public school system. One of the teachers at the Clover Street Seminary was Myrtila Miner, a white woman who went on to found the Normal School for Colored Girls in Washington, D.C., in 1851. Her stay in Rochester was brief (1843–1844) but profound, according to a later profile: “In the Rochester school ... were two free colored girls, and this association was the first circumstance to turn [Miner’s] thoughts to the work to which she gave her life.”³⁸

Frederick Douglass arrives, 1847

The next boisterous period of change began in 1848, following Frederick Douglass’ arrival in Rochester. Douglass was born into slavery in Talbot County, Maryland, around 1818. As a



Celestia A. Bloss (1812–1855) presenting a gold medal to Clover Street Seminary student Frances McVean, 1851. Bloss served as teacher and principal of the racially integrated private school in Brighton. From the collection of the Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

child, he acquired some basic reading skills from Sophia Auld before her husband, Douglass's master Hugh Auld, put a stop to it:

Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. ... "Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave."

These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. ... I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. ... I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read.³⁹

Douglass built on his early lessons with Sophia Auld by bartering bread with the poor white children living in his neighborhood in Baltimore: "This bread I used to bestow on the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me the more valuable bread of knowledge."⁴⁰ His Baltimore education came to an end in 1838, when he escaped with the help of his wife



Myrtilla Miner (1815–1864) reported that her work as a teacher at Rochester's racially integrated Clover Street Seminary inspired her to establish the Normal School for Colored Girls in Washington, D.C. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, n.d.

Anna and boarded a train headed north. He moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where the public schools had been integrated the same year. He shortly struck up a relationship with the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who in the following decade was to devote much energy to the integration of schools in the North. During Douglass' time in Massachusetts, the state witnessed the country's most pitched battle over school segregation to date. In the late 1830s, the state Education Secretary, Horace Mann, helped introduce the concept of free, publicly funded schools for all. According to historian Lawrence A. Cremin, Mann's proposed "common school" was "common, not as a school for the common people ... but rather as a school common to all people."⁴¹

Douglass and his wife, Anna Murray Douglass,

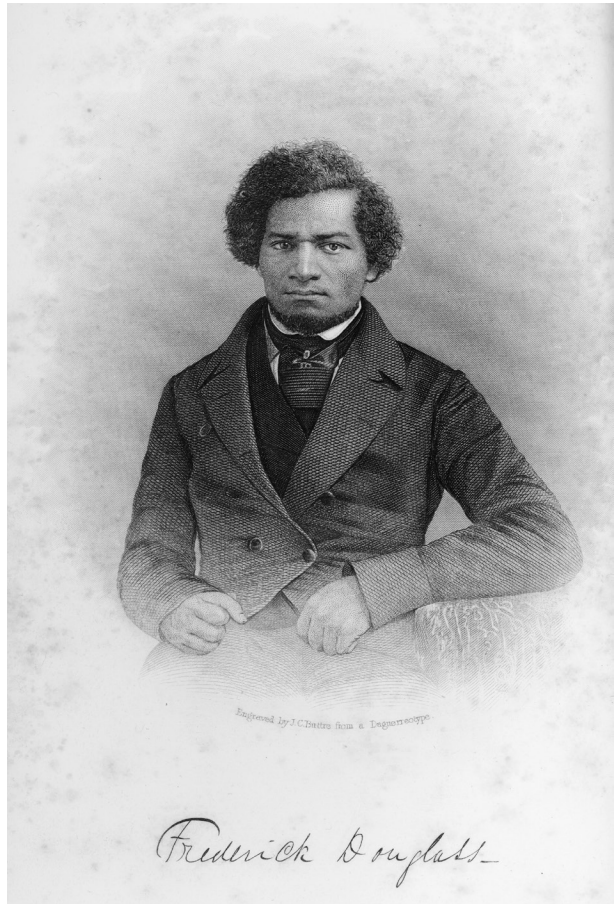
moved to Rochester in the winter of 1847–48 with four children under the age of ten. The following summer he arranged for the eldest, his nine-year-old daughter Rosetta, to attend the private Seward Seminary, the city’s most prestigious academy for girls. Sarah Seward had founded her school upon moving to Rochester in 1833 and two years later relocated from Spring Street to a newly constructed building on a five-acre lot on Alexander Street, near the city’s eastern border. It attracted between 75 and 100 girls each year from throughout the northeastern United States and Canada. After Seward married in 1841, leadership of the school fell to the head teacher, Lucilia Tracy.⁴²

In 1849, the girls’ curriculum consisted largely of the “ornamental branches”—

for example, the growing and

arranging of flowers in place of the biology lessons that would have been taught in schools for boys.⁴³ It qualified nonetheless as the city’s best educational option for girls and, for Rosetta Douglass, had the advantage of being located just a few minutes’ walk from her house at 4 Alexander Street (now 297 Alexander Street). It would be the first school experience for Rosetta, who, to that point, had studied in Albany with Abigail and Lydia Mott, Quaker abolitionists and cousins of Lucretia Mott.⁴⁴

Douglass was out of town when the school year began. He returned to find that Rosetta, instead of being seated with the rest of the class, “was merely thrust into a room



Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), engraved by John Chester Buttre from a daguerreotype. From Douglass’s autobiography, My Bondage and My Freedom (New York and Auburn: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1856), in the collection of the Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

separate from all other scholars, and in this prison-like solitary confinement received the occasional visits of a teacher appointed to instruct her.”⁴⁵ Douglass went to speak with Miss Tracy, who told him the board of trustees had objected to his daughter’s presence and that she didn’t feel free to disregard their wishes, having “remembered how much they had done for her in sustaining the institution.” She offered that if he and Rosetta could tolerate the treatment for a semester or so, “the prejudice might be overcome, and the child admitted into the school with the other young ladies and misses.”⁴⁶

While Douglass deliberated with his wife, Miss Tracy went back to her students and asked them each individually whether they objected to Rosetta’s presence. The way she phrased the question, Douglass wrote, was “well calculated to rouse their prejudices,” yet each of the girls, “thanks to the uncorruptible virtue of childhood and youth, in the fulness of their affectionate hearts, [said] they welcomed my child among them, to share with them the blessings and privileges of the school, and when asked where she should sit if admitted, several young ladies shouted, ‘By me, by me, by me.’”⁴⁷ Tracy then took the question to each of the girls’ parents, asking whether they were comfortable having a black child in the school. According to Douglass, only one objected—Horatio Gates Warner, the influential Democratic lawyer and editor of the Rochester *Courier*.

If Warner had hoped his objection would be confidential, he soon learned otherwise. Douglass wrote a blistering three-page open letter to Warner in the *North Star*; it was later reprinted in full in newspapers across the country, including William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator*. In it, Douglass explained:

If this were a private affair, only affecting myself and my family, I should possibly allow it to pass without attracting public attention to it; but such is not the case. It is a deliberate attempt to degrade and injure a large class of persons, whose rights and feelings have been the common sport of yourself, and persons such as yourself, for ages, and I think it is unwise to allow you to do so with impunity. ... We have a press, open and free, and have ample means by which we are able to proclaim our wrongs as a people, and your own infamy, and that proclamation shall be as complete as the means in my power can make it.⁴⁸

Warner never responded publicly, but neither did he or the school relent, so Rosetta never returned to the Seward Seminary.⁴⁹ Douglass wrote in his third autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, that his children were barred from the nearby public school and instead would have had to attend the “inferior colored school” in the Third Ward:



MRS. R. D. SPRAGUE,
Daughter of Frederick Douglass.

Rosetta Douglass Sprague (1839–1906), daughter of Frederick and Anna Murray Douglass, ca. 1893. Rosetta was the only African American pupil of Miss Seward's Female Seminary when she enrolled in 1848. Photograph from Frederick Douglass the Orator, by James M. Gregory (Springfield, MA: Willey Company, 1893), in the collection of the Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.



MISS SEWARD'S FEMALE SEMINARY.
In Alexander-street, near the east line of the City of Rochester. See account.

Miss Seward's Female Seminary, ca. 1838. The private school stood at 45 Alexander Street, not far from the Douglass family home. Rosetta Douglass attended the school for a short period until her father discovered that she was segregated from her peers in a separate room. From the collection of the Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

"I hardly need say that I was not prepared to submit tamely to this proscription, any more than I had been to submit to slavery, so I had them taught at home for a while, by Miss [Phebe] Thayer."⁵⁰

Caution is required in drawing a straight line between Rosetta Douglass' rejection from the Seward Seminary and her father's subsequent participation in the fight to integrate the public schools. For one thing, the Seward Seminary was private, not public. For another, school segregation had been an important cause for Douglass even before he moved to Rochester, so the campaign may have drawn his energy in any case.⁵¹

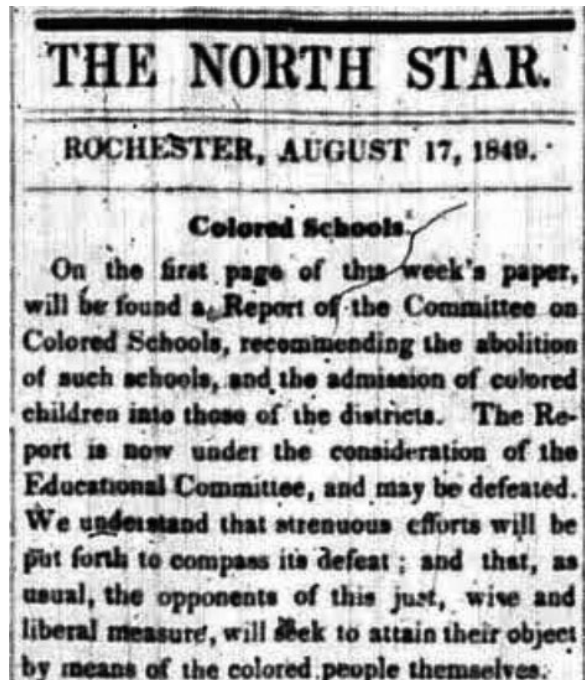
Victory at last

The battles over school integration between 1848 and 1851 proceeded along a number of contested fronts. Douglass' arrival helped energize, and give a voice to, Rochester's black community, whose protests became more forceful and effective than they had ever been previously. They were supported by a growing number of white people, for the local abolitionist movement had gained great momentum by 1848. Evangelical preacher Charles Finney, through hundreds of revival meetings in Western and Central New York in the 1830s,

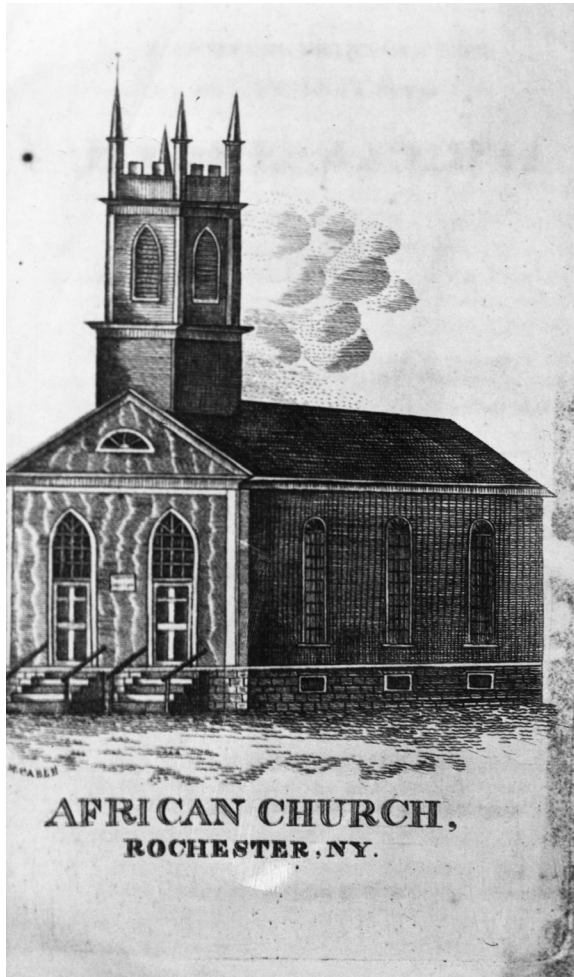
helped make Rochester a nationally significant nexus of social justice. His preaching, former Rochester City Historian Blake McKelvey wrote, “released and coordinated the moral energies of a community already throbbing with optimistic individualism.”⁵² Two anti-slavery societies had been established in Rochester in 1833, and the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of New York was held in the city in 1843 and again in 1846.⁵³ Social progressives, including members of the school board, were perhaps finding it increasingly harder to overlook discrimination in their own community while moralizing against slave owners in the South. As Douglass wrote in 1849: “Our white countrymen ... [once] could say the

negro ought to be free, [and] they felt they had uttered a radical and philanthropic sentiment, but ... something more than the mere act of emancipation is now thought to be due to this long neglected and deeply injured people.”⁵⁴ Last, and perhaps most decisively, the school board came to see the financial burden of operating a separate building for its few black students who otherwise could easily have been accommodated in the common schools. This fiscal crisis was fostered in turn by boycotts and other protests by the black community.

All these factors came into play in an August 1849 school board committee report on the question of whether to open a second, eastside school for black children.⁵⁵ First, the committee noted that educating black students separately would cost at least three times more per pupil. This alone, they believed, was enough to foreclose the idea of keeping the segregated schools open. The only reason to oppose integration, the committee members suggested, was “to gratify a morbid public sentiment against the colored race.”⁵⁶ Writing in



Frederick Douglass' lengthy editorial on the ca. 1849 Report of the Committee on Colored Schools warned that opposition from racists could threaten implementation of the committee's recommendation that the city's segregated black schools be closed and their students integrated into common schools with their white peers. Excerpt from The North Star, August 17, 1849.



The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church at Spring and Favor streets, ca. 1831–1879. A segregated school for black children was housed in the church basement in the 1850s. From the collection of the Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.

the following week's *North Star*, Douglass wholeheartedly approved the committee's recommendation to integrate the schools, saying it would be "a noble example of justice and liberality worthy of the city of Rochester."⁵⁷ Nonetheless, the resolution—to close the sole black school and disperse its students among the common schools—was not adopted. Several board members raised objections. John Quinn noted that gender barriers had only recently been taken down, "and no citizen would want a colored boy sitting in school beside his daughter."⁵⁸ Instead, a new eastside school for blacks was opened on Division Street, and the board started scouting for sites for a new westside school, as the North Washington Street site apparently had become untenable.⁵⁹

In November, the board committee recommended renting space in the basement of AME Zion Church, and the plan was quickly

adopted. From Douglass' perspective, the city's black citizens had not only lost their present integration battle but had also taken a major step backwards in having their children relegated to the "low, damp and dark cellar" of the church. He heaped scorn on the "stupid creatures who officiate as Trustees in Zion Church" for providing a lifeline to the segregated system:

For such base and cringing servility we have no language sufficiently strong to express our indignation and contempt. ... The *cellar* of that church is about as fit

for a school-house for tender children as an *icehouse* would be, and we have been credibly informed that *that* has been the use to which this *cellar* has been put.⁶⁰

Douglass concluded, for the moment, by noting that the fight for integrated schools was “just now, the question of questions for the colored people of this place,” and called for resistance. The news was all the more harmful because, as soon as the eastside school opened, all black students living in that part of the city were ejected from the integrated common schools they had been attending.⁶¹ Douglass’ call to action was heeded the following month when a large group of residents, both black and white, met at the courthouse in protest, and put forth a resolution stating that “the people of Rochester may justly share the reproach of slavery in South Carolina if they give countenance to this wrong.”⁶²

In January 1850, the board again declined to vote for formal desegregation. Nonetheless, cracks in the official policy continued to emerge. The new eastside school was plagued by boycotts; it had only seven or eight black students and “a dozen or so ragged white children” who lived nearby, Douglass reported.⁶³ And the school board reported in March that, of the 73 black children in Rochester between the ages of five and sixteen, 24 were attending common (white) schools, with half of them at School 15 on Alexander Street, near the Douglass’ house. By contrast, average daily attendance at the segregated school for blacks on the westside was 38 students.⁶⁴ African American parents continued to boycott the eastside school, leading to its closure in the fall of 1851.⁶⁵

<i>Whole number of colored children in the several Districts between the ages of 5 and 16 years.</i>	<i>Whole number of colored children attending Schools in the several Districts in which they reside</i>
Do. in Dis. No. 1, Nineteen.	Seven.
Do. " 2, Twelve.	
Do. " 3,	
Do. " 4, Two.	
Do. " 5, Eight.	
Do. " 6, Six.	Three.
Do. " 7,	
Do. " 8,	
Do. " 9,	
Do. " 10, Seven.	
Do. " 11, One.	One.
Do. " 12,	
Do. " 13, Three.	
Do. " 14, Four.	Two.
Do. " 15, Eleven.	Eleven.
Do. " 16,	

Desegregation was a fact in the classroom, if not in the law or the boardroom.

By 1850, a number of African American students were attending the common (white) schools in the districts where they lived, demonstrating that de facto integration was on the rise. From the Rochester Daily Advertiser, March 27, 1850.

In his 1852 annual report, Superintendent Reuben Jones concluded that the benefits of “relieving [common schools] from the colored children in attendance” would not outweigh the cost associated with maintaining a second black school on the east side of town. “It seems ... [that] a rule requiring all colored children to attend said school [the westside school], who can do so without great inconvenience, is the best plan that can be adopted,” he wrote.⁶⁶ Still, the board—at least what Douglass called the “pro-slavery Irish faction”—would not admit defeat.⁶⁷ They pointed to the petitions of 1832 and 1849, both purporting to show support among the black community for a segregated school that would provide “a place of refuge for colored children who would not be kindly received in other schools.”⁶⁸

The record of Douglass’ advocacy goes silent in 1851. This may have been a result of him shifting his attention back to his more typical sphere of national affairs after passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850; it is also possible that any later writing on the subject was lost when his house (and many of his papers) burned in 1872. The black community nevertheless continued its fight and protested again in 1854 when the teacher of the segregated school, a white man named William Barnes, was rehired by the board over the wishes of both the parents and “sixty or seventy other respectable white citizens.”⁶⁹ Barnes, the protesters wrote, had “manifested his love of the intellectual improvement of the colored race, by closing the door and pocketing the key, to prevent young men of color from meeting to improve their minds.”⁷⁰ What was more, the board had agreed to pay Barnes an annual salary of \$650. The black families’ preferred candidate was an unidentified African American man “who has labored for those with whom he is identified, as a letter-writer, as a lecturer, and as a poet,” and who was unable to work at another trade due to a disability. He requested a salary of \$600, fifty dollars less than Barnes, but was still passed over. The parents called the decision “a disgrace to the city and age in which we live,” and promised to “agitate and agitate, until our rights are respected and our wrongs are redressed.”⁷¹ The episode reinforces how otherwise unknown black parents, rather than Douglass or any other prominent individual, provided the energy and activism for desegregation.

In fact, the board had already considered and rejected an even more economical option for the school. Barnes was rehired only after the board insisted on a male teacher. A minority of the board members would have preferred “a competent female teacher [who] could be employed at half the cost, who would do equal justice to the pupils of the school.”⁷² The board again studied the question of closing the black school in January 1855 and again declined to act, despite noting a major drop in attendance. And despite the fact that it cost the

city four times more per pupil to educate the 26 students being taught in the basement of the AME Zion Church than it did to educate the city's white students.⁷³ Superintendent Reuben Jones blamed black families for the dilemma, criticizing them for having "shown so little appreciation of the advantages thus offered."⁷⁴ The ballooning expense did persuade the board to follow its original plan of hiring a cheaper female teacher in place of Barnes, though.⁷⁵ Their choice was Lucy Colman, a 39-year-old abolitionist at the beginning of a long career in social activism. She was given \$350 for the year, but, as she admitted later, "I had an object in view in taking that school, which I accomplished, other than earning my living."⁷⁶ As she recalled in her *Reminiscences*:

I took the situation, determining in my own mind that I would be the last teacher, and that that school should die. It died in just one year. I persuaded the parents in the different districts to send the more advanced children to the schools in their own districts, suggesting that they always see to it that they went particularly *clean*, and to impress upon the pupil that his or her behavior be faultless as possible. I then advised the trustees of the church to withdraw the permission for any further use of the building, save for church purposes. When the time came for the opening of the new year's school, there were neither scholars nor school-house. The death was not violent. No mention was made of the decease in the papers, and I presume there were not ten persons in the city that knew, or if they had known would have cared, that the disgrace was abolished.⁷⁷

AME Zion did not actually withdraw approval for use of the building but rather increased the rent, requesting to a figure beyond the board's already waning appetite.⁷⁸

Superintendent John Atwater commented on the futility of maintaining the segregated school in his Annual Report of March 1856:

The children who attend here could be accommodated in the neighboring schools, without any inconvenience, except what might arise from prejudice, and experience proves that this is not a very serious obstacle, for in most of the Schools of the city there are already more or less colored children, and in some instances they are among the brightest and most intelligent scholars in our Schools.⁷⁹

The *coup de grace*, as Colman noted, came quietly. A committee reported to the school board in July 1856 that it had been "entirely unable to procure a suitable room" for the black school. As a result, the board decided to close the school "for the present term."⁸⁰ That brief

announcement marked the end of official racial segregation in Rochester schools; black children henceforth attended the common schools near their homes, as the white children did. The move came 24 years after the city first acknowledged at least partial responsibility for “this unhappy class” and 38 years after Austin Steward conducted the first formal classes for African American children in 1818.

As long as the struggle had been, Rochester was in fact the first major school district in New York to become fully desegregated. A similar campaign in Buffalo went on unsuccessfully for more than a decade more before some black students were grudgingly admitted to their neighborhood schools beginning in 1855, then given free choice of schools in 1872. Unlike in Rochester, though, the denouement for Buffalo’s segregated school did not come until 1880, following a lawsuit based on Reconstruction-era legislation.⁸¹ Many other cities declined to act until the 1873 passage of a state law that prohibited segregation by race in public facilities, including schools. The law was driven through by William H. Johnson, a prominent black citizen of Albany. The capital city, along with Troy, Geneva, Schenectady, and Poughkeepsie complied more or less faithfully.⁸² New York City, like Buffalo, maintained a designated black school long after allowing African American students to attend the common schools.

In a preface to Lucy Colman’s memoir, Quaker abolitionist Amy Post claimed that Colman, “by her own exertions, without help from any one, removed from our city of Rochester the blot of the *colored* school.”⁸³ This, of course, was not true. But why did Rochester achieve the distinction of having the first integrated school system in New York? Some credit goes to the white activists, including those on the school board, who inveighed against segregated schooling for years. Frederick Douglass, for his part, certainly brought the issue to its greatest prominence, first through the exposure of the Seward Seminary and then as an organizer and publisher of the *North Star*. But the most significant contribution—and, what is more, the one most likely to escape documentation—surely came from black parents, their names mostly lost to history, who advocated for decades on behalf of their children. The unidentified father who asked in 1841 why he should pay taxes for schools from which his children were barred. Phebe Ray, the domestic servant, who petitioned the board for access to a closer school in 1846. And groups of black parents—perhaps a majority of those in the city at the time—who participated in a series of protests in the late 1840s and again in the mid-1850s, then boycotted the African American school until its final demise. It was their energetic activism that made Rochester, at least for a time, the most progressive city in

the state in terms of the opportunities afforded its children. This achievement could serve as inspiration for those who still today advocate, in the same community, for the elusive ideals of equity and integration in education.



About the Author

Justin Murphy covers education, including the Rochester City School District, for the *Democrat & Chronicle* newspaper, where he has been a reporter since 2012. He has a bachelor's degree in linguistics from the University of Chicago and a master's degree in journalism from the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. This article is adapted from his forthcoming book on the history of school segregation in Rochester.

Endnotes

1. Rochester Board of Education, *A History of the Public Schools of Rochester, New York, 1813–1935*, ca. 1935, 2–3, unpublished manuscript, Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.
2. Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 23.
3. *Fish vs. Fisher*, 2 Johnson’s Cases 89 (N.Y. Supreme Court, 1800), cited in Edgar J. McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1966), 177.
4. Steward, 54–55.
5. Ibid., 63–64.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783–1876* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1988), 165.
9. Carleton Mabee, *Black Education in New York State: From Colonial to Modern Times* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1979), 36.
10. Sunday School Teachers of the State of New York, “Doings of the Third Annual Convention” (New York: Biglow and Bleecker, 1858), 22, quoted in Mabee, *Black Education in New York*, 37.
11. Blake McKelvey, “Lights and Shadows in Local Negro History,” *Rochester History* 21, no. 3 (October 1959), 2.
12. Thomas James, “The Autobiography of Rev. Thomas James,” *Rochester History* 37, no. 4 (October 1975), 4.
13. Ibid., 5.
14. Rochester Board of Education, *A History of the Public Schools of Rochester, New York, 1813–1935*, 3.
15. Documentation of black children’s experiences from that period is scant. Howard Coles, the pre-eminent scholar of black history in Rochester, wrote that the Rev. Thomas James had opened his school on Favor Street in 1828 “because, at that time, colored children were not allowed to attend the public schools of Rochester.” Coles does not provide a citation, though, and his discussion of black education in early Rochester is generally limited. See Howard

Coles, *The Cradle of Freedom: A History of the Negro in Rochester, Western New York and Canada* (Rochester, NY: Oxford Press, 1943), 129.

16. The chairman of the Committee on Colleges, Academies, and Common Schools, John McDonald, presented these concerns to the New York State Assembly on February 2, 1832. The document went on to say that the experience of a black student was to be “reproached with his colour [*sic*]; he is taunted with his origin, and if permitted to mingle with others in the joyous pastimes of youth it is of favour [*sic*], not by right.” See *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New York, Fifty-fifth Session* (Albany, NY: New York State Assembly, 1832), 2:76.

17. *The Rights of Man*, April 26, 1834.

18. *Rochester Daily Democrat*, March 29, 1850.

19. *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, March 27, 1850.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, February 28, 1833.

23. *The Rights of Man*, April 26, 1834.

24. *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, March 27, 1850.

25. Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave*, 147.

26. *The Rights of Man*, April 26, 1834.

27. *Rochester Daily Democrat*, August 11, 1849.

28. *Rochester Daily Democrat*, February 20, 1841.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, July 2, 1841, and July 12, 1841.

32. *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, March 27, 1850.

33. *A Directory and Gazetteer of the City of Rochester for 1844* (Rochester, NY: Canfield & Warren, 1844).

34. *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, March 27, 1850.

35. *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, March 27, 1850; *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, April 9, 1846; Judith Polgar Ruchkin, “The Abolition of Colored Schools in Rochester, New York, 1832–1856,” in *New York History* 51, no. 4 (July 1970), 377–93; Irene A. Beale, *Genesee Valley Women 1743–1985* (Geneseo, NY: Chestnut Hill Press, 1985). Polgar Ruchkin’s work, in particular, provides a comprehensive survey of the Common Council and Board of Education during this period.

36. Rochester *Daily Advertiser*, September 1, 1847; Rochester *Daily Democrat*, April 23, 1849; *Daily American Directory of the City of Rochester for 1849–50* (Rochester, NY: Jerome & Brother, 1849).
37. Scrapbook, “Clover Street Seminary: History of the School Founded by Isaac Moore in 1838,” ca. 1894. Local History & Genealogy Division, Rochester Public Library.
38. U.S. Bureau of Education, “Special Report of the Commissioner of Education on the Condition and Improvement of Public Schools in the District of Columbia” (1871), 207.
39. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 1845, as reprinted in John W. Blassingame, John R. McKivigan, and Peter P. Hinks, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers* 2, vol. 1, no. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 31–32.
40. *Ibid.*, 34.
41. Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861: A History of the Education of the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1915), 320; Cremin, 138.
42. William F. Peck, *Semi-Centennial History of the City of Rochester* (Syracuse, NY: D. Mason and Co., 1884), 307; McKelvey, “Private Educational Enterprise Since the Mid-Century,” *Rochester Historical Society Publication Fund Series* (Rochester, NY: Rochester Historical Society, 1939), 17:155
43. McKelvey, “Private Educational Enterprise Since the Mid-Century,” 155.
44. Victoria Sandwick Schmitt, “Rochester’s Frederick Douglass, Part One,” *Rochester History* 67, no. 3 (Summer 2005), 25; Leigh Fought, *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 157.
45. *The North Star*, September 22, 1848.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*
49. References to the Douglass children’s public education are scattered but mostly consistent. See Frederick Douglass, Jr., “Frederick Douglass Jr. in Brief from 1842–1890,” and Charles Remond Douglass, “Some Incidents of the Home Life of Frederick Douglass,” in Celeste-Marie Bernier and Andrew Taylor, *If I Survive: Frederick Douglass and Family in the Walter O. Evans Collection* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 633 and 670; John W. Thompson, *An Authentic History of the Douglass Monument* (Rochester, NY: Rochester Herald Press, 1903), 157; James M. Gregory, *Frederick Douglass, the Orator* (Chapel Hill:

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001), 199–206; Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle*, October 8, 1922.

50. Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 1881, as reprinted in John R. McKivigan, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers* 2, vol. 3, no. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 210; Fought, 156–58. Phebe Thayer was a Quaker governess and a relative of Amy and Isaac Post.

51. Douglass had penned articles in *The North Star* opposing separate black churches and schools shortly after moving to Rochester. See *The North Star*, March 3, 1848; *The North Star* March 10, 1848; *The North Star*, May 19, 1848.

52. Blake McKelvey, *Rochester: The Water-Power City, 1812–1854* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945), 191.

53. *Ibid.*, 285–86.

54. *The North Star*, October 26, 1849.

55. Rochester *Daily Democrat*, August 11, 1849.

56. *Ibid.*

57. *The North Star*, August 17, 1849.

58. *The North Star*, August 10, 1849.

59. Rochester *Daily Democrat*, December 24, 1849.

60. *The North Star*, November 2, 1849.

61. *The North Star*, November 9, 1849.

62. Rochester *Daily Democrat*, December 14, 1849.

63. *The North Star*, December 21, 1849.

64. Rochester *Daily Advertiser*, March 27, 1850.

65. *Ninth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Schools of the City of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: A. Strong & Co., 1852), 20–21.

66. *Ibid.*

67. *The North Star*, November 2, 1849.

68. Rochester *Daily Advertiser*, March 27, 1850.

69. Rochester *Daily Union*, August 31, 1854.

70. *Ibid.*

71. *Ibid.*

72. Rochester *Daily Union*, August 23, 1854.

73. Ruchkin, 390.

74. *Twelfth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Schools of the City of Rochester, Presented March 26, 1855* (Rochester, NY: Lee, Mann & Co., 1855), 20–21.
75. A similar plan had been put into effect partway through the 1846–47 school year. See *Sixth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Schools of the City of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: A. Strong & Co., 1847).
76. Lucy N. Colman, *Reminiscences* (Buffalo: H.L. Green, 1891), 16.
77. Ibid.
78. *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Schools, Rochester, Presented March 24, 1856* (Rochester, NY: Daily Advertiser Press, 1856), 17.
79. Ibid., 18.
80. Rochester *Daily Democrat*, July 11, 1856.
81. Arthur O. White, “The Movement Against Jim Crow Education in Buffalo, NY, 1800–1900,” *Phylon* 30, no. 4 (1969), 375–93; Mabee, 198.
82. Mabee, 202–3.
83. Colman, iii.



*Painting of Austin Steward in his store on West Main Street in Rochester; by Athesia Benjamin, 2002.
Photograph courtesy of Christine L. Ridarsky, 2019.*



Rochester's Anna Murray-Douglass Academy, School 12, sits on the former site of the Douglass family residence on South Avenue. The library next door is named for Frederick Douglass. Photograph courtesy of Justin Murphy, 2018.