

## “The Meaning of the Fourth of July for the Negro”

Reading Frederick Douglass during the Presidency of Barack Obama

By Pleun Bouricius

“Fellow citizens, why am I called upon to speak here to-day? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak today? What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July?” Thus began Frederick Douglass’s fiery July 5, 1852, speech, *The Meaning of the Fourth of July for the Negro*, in which the great orator famously took exception to being asked to commemorate the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

This Fourth of July season, community groups, libraries, towns, organizations, families, and individuals are invited to read the speech communally. Mass Humanities has developed a Web resource with everything you need to organize your own shared reading: the speech, discussion materials, supporting articles, and PR guidelines, which you can download at [www.masshumanities.org](http://www.masshumanities.org). This statewide project will kick off on Tuesday, June 2 at noon. You are invited to join us in front of the State House, where Massachusetts politicians and residents together will read and discuss the speech. Partnering with Mass Humanities in this project are Community Change Inc. (where the idea originated), the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice, the Ella Baker House, Boston African American National Historic Site, the New Bedford Historical Society, and others.

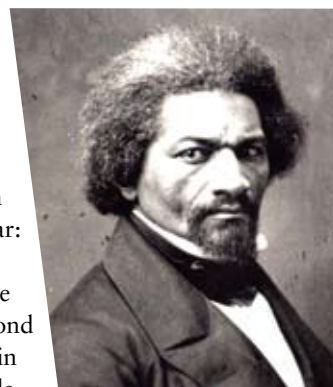
With this program, we mark the bicentennial year of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, by taking up the

challenge leveled by Barack Obama at Constitution Hall in Philadelphia last year: “I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle.

Race is an issue this nation cannot afford to ignore right now. To work for ‘a more perfect union’ we need to start to understand complexities that we’ve never really worked through. [This] requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point.”

“What better way to remind ourselves that we aren’t there yet,” asks David Harris of the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice, “than with the speech of a man who was as eloquent as our president on the issue of race and a source of inspiration for Lincoln himself?”

Douglass gave his address in 1852, a galvanizing year in the history of slavery and abolition. That March, Boston’s Jewett & Company published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to national acclaim, outrage, and general sensation. The book had been serialized in 1851 and 1852 in the antislavery weekly, the *National Era*, which had 15,000 subscribers when it started and 19,000 at the conclusion of the novel.<sup>1</sup> As historian David Blight puts it, “If *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is the fictional masterpiece of American abolitionism ... then Douglass’s Fourth of July address is abolition’s rhetorical masterpiece ....



Reserve seats early!

### Benefit Dinner Featuring Rachel Maddow

Following our annual public symposium on November 7, Rachel Maddow, host of MSNBC’s “The Rachel Maddow Show,” will speak at our annual benefit dinner on the symposium’s theme of “Soldiers & Citizens: Military and Civic Culture in America,” at Boston College’s Gasson Hall. Individual seats and sponsorships—which include group seating and public recognition—are available. Reserve seats at our Web site, [www.masshumanities.org](http://www.masshumanities.org). To enquire about sponsorships, contact John Sieracki at [jsieracki@masshumanities.org](mailto:jsieracki@masshumanities.org). A reception with symposium panelists will take place at BC’s McMullen Museum between the symposium and the dinner.



## Pioneer Valley

\$10,000 to Sons and Daughters of Hawley to create a historic site at the location of the old town common by adding paths and signage as well as stabilizing cellar holes and dug wells that surrounded the old meetinghouse ▼ CED

\$9,950 to the Springfield Library & Museum Association to support *John Brown, Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War* an exhibit about the fight over slavery as it played out in Springfield, including the roles of the African-American community, John Brown, and the arms industry ■ LJA

\$2,862 to the Sunderland Historical Commission to support research on North Sunderland's relation to the natural resources of the Connecticut River, and to incorporate insights from natural and environmental history in a historic tour ▲ SIR

\$5,000 to the Veterans Education Project of Amherst for *100 Faces of War Experience*, an exhibition of oil portraits of American soldiers and civilians who have returned from the theaters of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, at the Springfield Armory Museum, and for related programming and materials

## Southeast

\$10,000 to the Robbins Museum/Massachusetts Archaeological Society for *We, the Peoples*, a hands-on, primary-source teacher education program on Native-American history that utilizes artifacts from the Robbins Museum, and allows participants to design their own curricula ■ LJA

\$5,000 to the Scituate Historical Society for a pair of traveling exhibits on the history of the Minot Ledge Lighthouse and the story of the underwater archaeological search for its remains

\$3,000 to the Westport Historical Society to support interpretive planning focused on the Society's collection of clothes used by women in the rural community of Westport during the nineteenth century ▲ SIR

An artist's interpretation of John Brown meeting with the League of Gileadites. In response to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, John Brown established the League of Gileadites, which worked to protect escaped slaves from slave catchers.



Connecticut veteran Phil Goreman having his portrait painted by Matthew Mitchell as part of 100 Faces of War Experience.



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In style and substance, no 19th-century American ever offered a more poignant critique of America's racial condition than Douglass."<sup>2</sup>

Douglass, in fact, had become so radicalized by the 1850 passage of the Fugitive Slave Act—which made it illegal for anyone to harbor a person who was technically a slave in states that recognized slavery—that in this speech, he took to referring to the United States as “your” nation and the Founding Fathers as “your” fathers. Douglass himself had escaped from slavery in 1838, and upon publication of his autobiography in 1845, had been urged to leave his new home in New Bedford for England to avoid capture. While he was abroad, supporters ensured his

safety from slave catchers by paying off his former master. Upon his return to the United States two years later, Douglass settled in Rochester, N.Y.

In Massachusetts, communities became galvanized against the Fugitive Slave Law on June 2, 1854, when a Boston federal court ordered escaped slave Anthony Burns to be returned to his owner. An estimated 50,000 outraged citizens lined the streets of Boston as an army of soldiers escorted Burns to the waterfront. “Plenty to chew on during Lincoln’s bicentennial year,” opines Paul Marcus of *Community Change*.

Join us this June 2nd at noon in front of the State House for the public reading, or organize an event in your own community.

## Soldiers & Citizens: Military and Civic Culture in America

Our annual fall symposium again will take place at the Robsham Theater at Boston College in Chestnut Hill, 12:30–5 pm. The symposium will examine the ways in which military culture and civil society interact over time in the United States. Don't miss it!

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Railton, ed. *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*. ([www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/uncletom/utcp.html](http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/uncletom/utcp.html))

<sup>2</sup> David W. Blight, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” *Time*, Sunday, June 26, 2005. ([www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1077058,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1077058,00.html))