

Frederick Douglass and the Dorseys

Many will recognize the name of Isabella Dorsey who with her husband, Thomas, operated a home for Black orphans on Clinton Avenue in Brighton from 1918 to 1928. The couple began the home on Bronson Avenue in the city around 1912, supporting themselves and the children by operating a hand laundry business, washing and ironing everything by hand with washboards and tubs. This effort was not sufficient to support the institution so Rochester Police Chief Joseph Quigley stepped in and organized a citizens' board to oversee operations and provide funding. In 1916 the board purchased a house and land in Forest Lawn in Webster, long a vacation spot for wealthy Rochesterians but conflicts arose when the vacationers objected to the presence of the orphanage. The search for a new site for the Dorsey Home brought them to a farm on Clinton Avenue South in Brighton in 1918, the site of the present-day McQuaid Jesuit High School. After ten years in Brighton, the Dorsey board made the difficult decision to close the home, citing costs. Only 10 of the 25 children in the home in 1928 were from Monroe County, the rest coming from outside communities that paid \$5.00 a week when the actual cost was \$9.70 cents per child. The Rochester Community Chest, forerunner to the United Way, refused to continue the deficit funding nor was there an existing institution to take over the care of the orphans so the "Dorsey Home for Dependent Colored Children" was forced to close.

Thomas and Bella Dorsey moved to Cattaraugus County and continued the work of caring for orphaned children on a farm leased to them by the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Bella died in 1932. Thomas was still alive at the time of the 1950 census.

Both Thomas and Bella Dorsey had deep roots in Chester County, Pennsylvania, an area known for its abolitionist activism. Thomas Dorsey was born in 1866, Isabella Baptist in 1873. They were married in West Chester, Pennsylvania in 1897. What brought this couple with strong roots in Pennsylvania to Rochester in 1910? It's possible that Frederick Douglass, long a Rochester resident himself, influenced the Dorseys' relocation.

Frederick Douglass visited West Chester at least four times, delivering major addresses each time. The last public lecture of his career was at West Chester State School on February 1, 1895, nineteen days before his death. It's possible that both Thomas and Bella grew up in households that revered Mr. Douglass and had relatives that attended his talks in 1844, 1863, 1875, and 1895. One can imagine that perhaps Thomas and Bella met at that last Douglass address, two years before their wedding.

The 1900 census shows that Thomas and Bella were living in Chester County, Pennsylvania, with a seven-year-old adopted son named Frederick - coincidence or namesake? The next federal census in 1910 found the Dorseys on Tremont Street in Rochester, 350 miles away from Chester County, in the city of Frederick Douglass.

Historians look for the push and pull factors when evaluating migration. What impelled the Dorseys to leave Pennsylvania? What compelled them to settle in Rochester? The pull factor in this case would seem to be the influence of Frederick Douglass.

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