

**To No One More Indebted: Frederick Douglass and Julia Griffiths, 1849-1863.**

by

Dr. Frank E. Fee Jr

**Abstract**

This research examines the role of Julia Griffiths, a white Englishwoman who worked closely with former slave turned newspaper editor Frederick Douglass in the 1840s and '50s. Although historians have generally identified Griffiths as a secondary figure in the abolitionist movement, closer examination, particularly by media historians, is justified by the complexity of the relationship between Douglass and Griffiths and the nature of her influence on both the American and the British abolition movements. In 1849-50, Griffiths rescued Douglass' faltering *North Star*, and her fund-raising for Douglass and his paper throughout the decade before the Civil War energized and empowered antislavery women on both sides of the Atlantic.

The black ink was barely dry on the newborn *North Star* early in 1848 when the newspaper was in the red.<sup>1</sup> What his former mentor, abolitionist editor William Lloyd Garrison, and others had warned was coming true for Frederick Douglass. His new newspaper in Rochester, New York, was losing money and he was sinking into debt trying to keep it afloat. The enterprise for which today he is best remembered was foundering fast.

Douglass, the former slave and premier abolitionist orator, had staked much on his newspaper. Offered an annuity in 1847 by friends in the United Kingdom who already had bought his freedom, Douglass instead asked for the funds to start a newspaper. His dream, he explained, was to fight prejudice among whites and to demonstrate to the African American the potential for equality available “by disproving his inferiority and demonstrating his capacity for a more exalted civilization than slavery and prejudice had assigned him.”<sup>2</sup>

Douglass believed that “a tolerably well-conducted press in the hands of persons of the despised race would, by calling out and making them acquainted with their own latent powers, by enkindling their hope of a future and developing their moral force, prove a most powerful means of removing prejudice and awakening interest in them.”<sup>3</sup> Although in neither goal did Douglass succeed completely, he is held by most scholars to be the major black figure in antebellum America.<sup>4</sup> Over a long and remarkable career of

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<sup>1</sup> By the end of January, Douglass found himself competing, with mixed results, with William Lloyd Garrison’s sphere of newspapers for subscribers and donations. Frederick Douglass to Amy Kirby Post, Jan. 30, 1848. Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass Written By Himself in Fredrick Douglass Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 701.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass’ Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1989), 1; Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Creative Conflict In African*

fighting for black freedom and equality, Douglass, called by historian Frankie Hutton “the most illustrious of the 19<sup>th</sup> century black editors,”<sup>5</sup> found some of his greatest satisfaction in journalism.<sup>6</sup> As an editor, Douglass accrued the power and reach that helped him gain access to President Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War.

But his meetings with Lincoln lay in the future, one that likely would not have been realized had he failed at newspapering. Failure risked muting, though hardly silencing, the foremost black voice in the abolition movement. If, as Douglass believed, publishing a newspaper would create white esteem for the black race while encouraging blacks to higher attainment, closing the *North Star* would be a devastating refutation of all that Douglass believed about himself and about black ability and potential. Historian Robert Fanuzzi identifies “the high stakes that Douglass placed on the success of the *North Star* – that is, the very existence of a colored people.”<sup>7</sup>

To his rescue sailed Douglass’ salvation, a white Englishwoman named Julia Griffiths, about whom too little is known and too much is speculated. She would be at Douglass’ side for six years, putting his finances in order, appealing to leading American

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*American Thought* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 46; Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1948; New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), xv [citation to Da Capo edition]; William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 385; William L. Andrews, ed., *The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Frankie Hutton, “Democratic Idealism in the Black Press,” in *Outsiders in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Press History: Multicultural Perspectives*, Frankie Hutton and Barbara Straus Reed, ed. (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1995), 13.

<sup>6</sup> See Douglass, *Life and Times*. Historian Philip Foner states that “Douglass looked upon his decision to establish a paper as one of the most important acts of his life.” *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Early Years, 1817-1849*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1950). See also, John Sekora, “‘Mr. Editor, If You Please’: Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, and the End of the Abolitionist Imprint,” *Callaloo*, Vol. 17, No. 2. (Spring, 1994); John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Fanuzzi, “Frederick Douglass’s ‘Colored Newspaper’: Identity Politics in Black and White,” in Todd Vogel, ed., *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 61.

political and business figures for support of Douglass, helping to make his newspaper viable, and setting up networks of antislavery women on both sides of the Atlantic whose devotion to Douglass' newspapers would keep him publishing well into the Civil War. Putting herself financially and physically at risk, Griffiths brought business acumen and literary style to Douglass' struggling newspaper, creating and maintaining a continuing conversation across and on each side of the Atlantic in support of abolition and Douglass. From 1849 to 1855, Griffiths traveled the lecture circuit with Douglass, nursed him in ill health, edited his paper in his absence, and actively moved slaves on the Underground Railroad. Upon returning to England, Griffiths set up, re-energized, and actively managed nearly 20 women's antislavery groups in the United Kingdom. She corresponded with – and felt free to advise – leading political figures in the United States, and became personally acquainted with some of the leading progressives and radicals of the time. Besides abolitionists on both sides of the ocean, Griffiths in Rochester had contact with the women who led the American women's rights movement for much of the nineteenth century. She also provoked controversy and scandal. Yet today, little is known about Julia Griffiths.

Although a handful of historians, biographers, and even novelists have acknowledged her, no body of scholarship on Griffiths exists.<sup>8</sup> Historian Philip Foner is among scholars who have, following Douglass himself, come closest to recognizing

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<sup>8</sup> For historiography and Douglass biographies that feature Griffiths, see Foner, *Life and Writings*; Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*; Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*. For fiction that includes Griffiths, see Edmund Fuller, *A Star Pointed North* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946); Jewell Parker Rhodes, *Douglass' Women* (New York: Atria Books, 2002). One of the best treatments of Douglass and Griffiths in Rochester is Erwin Palmer's "A Partnership in the Abolition Movement," *University of Rochester Library Bulletin*, XXVI, no. 1 and 2 (Autumn-Winter 1970-1971), little circulated in its day but now available online at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?page=3476>. Palmer did not, however, develop Griffiths' larger, if unintended, importance to the nascent women's movements of the mid-to-late nineteenth century.

Griffiths' instrumentality in the *North Star's* survival and Douglass' celebrity: "Indeed, if not for Julia Griffiths the paper on many occasions would have been forced to suspend publication."<sup>9</sup> Yet, media historians in particular have largely overlooked her importance to Douglass, to antislavery journalism, to the abolition movement in the 1840s and '50s, and to the general sweep of social and political reform in her century. By treating Griffiths as a subsidiary character in the Douglass drama, historians have failed to create a picture of this woman that is complete enough to recognize her full significance. Moreover, by relegating Griffiths to a secondary role, scholars have failed to consider what might have happened had she not come to Douglass. This study begins an effort to recover Julia Griffiths as one of the most important figures – male or female – in the American abolition movement. Doing so not only expands and extends our knowledge of this turbulent period, it gives further insights into the life and journalism of Frederick Douglass. He credited her with improving his writing and with editing his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in 1855. Studying Griffiths focuses on important questions about the changes Douglass underwent in his politics and his writing during her years with him and afterward.

Furthermore, by studying Griffiths' efforts to stabilize Douglass' financial condition, this study sheds important light on the financial problems black and other activist newspapers faced in the antebellum period and the different strategies that were used to keep them afloat.

Finally, studying Griffiths contributes to understanding how communicative networks of women organized to support the abolitionist newspapers fueled the parallel women's rights movements in both the United States and the United Kingdom.

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<sup>9</sup> Foner, *Life and Writings*, 87.

## **Early Years**

Although Douglass had critics and rivals in the abolitionist movement – Garrison, among them – he also had friends, particularly in Rochester. In 1848-49, however, Douglass was largely on his own and sinking fast. Garrison would have been delighted to see the *North Star* fold,<sup>10</sup> removing a rival for circulation and resources and, perhaps, forcing Douglass back to his former place in the work of Garrison’s American Anti-Slavery Society lecture circuit. Had the *North Star* failed, Douglass’ stated aim of a newspaper that would be the standard of black excellence would have been crushed. With the loss of that dream, Douglass would have lost the bully pulpit he had enjoyed, and because of his celebrity, failure would be instrumental in setting a perceived limit on black aspirations.

Douglass enjoyed close friendships and strong moral support in Rochester, the adopted hometown from which he began publishing the *North Star* on December 3, 1847. These friends subscribed to the newspaper and contributed financial gifts from time to time. They visited him and invited him into their homes. Yet in 1848 and 1849, they let Douglass mortgage his house on behalf of the newspaper without offering the more substantial support he needed. Instead, these friends took steps to take over the management and operation of Douglass’ newspaper under the auspices of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society.

In an age when most newspapers of any sort were short-lived and the black and abolitionist press all the more so, most newspapers operated on the brink of bankruptcy. Financial records for the black newspapers are incomplete, where they can be found at

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<sup>10</sup> Fanuzzi, “Douglass’s ‘Colored Newspaper’”; Foner, *Life and Writings*, 86; McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*; Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*.

all,<sup>11</sup> but we know from the paucity of advertising in contrast to the mainstream newspapers of the day that subscription rates were proportionally greater contributors to the revenue streams of these newspapers than in the general business model. Given their editors' frequent complaints about non-payment, however, even a reasonably strong subscriber list did not always mean paying customers and steady income.<sup>12</sup> As did general-circulation newspapers of the day, the *North Star* also advertised job printing for such paper products as handbills, programs, pamphlets and other letterhead.<sup>13</sup> A major source of revenue, however, came from wealthy benefactors' individual gifts and from fundraising of organizations, typically women's groups' antislavery fairs or bazaars.

Douglass' financial problems had several causes. First, he had a lot of competition for the support from the comparatively small number of people receptive to such a newspaper, and he was hemmed in geographically. The pre-eminent abolitionist newspaper was Garrison's *Liberator* in Boston, but other black and abolitionist publications were being published in 1847-48, including the *Ram's Horn*, *Mirror of Liberty*, and *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, all in New York City; the *National Era* in Washington, D.C.; and the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* in Ohio.<sup>14</sup> All of these publications were

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<sup>11</sup> Fragmentary ledgers are held in the Frederick Douglass Papers in the Department of Rare Books, Special Collections and Preservation, Rush Rhees Library at the University of Rochester. A library intern's essay suggested that Douglass' accounting system contributed to the *North Star*'s shaky foundation. See, Will Fassett, "The *North Star*, 1847-1849: Based on Evidence Found in the Paper's Ledger," Frederick Douglass Papers, University of Rochester (Fall 2003). Accessed on May 17, 2010, at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?PAGE=2524>.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, "BILLS! BILLS!! BILLS!!!" *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Nov. 19, 1852. The problem was not confined to the minority press. Similar appeals were issued by the white press of Rochester. See, for instance, "Notice to Our Patrons," *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, Dec. 6, 1847. See, also, Charles G. Steffen, "Newspapers for Free: The Economics of Newspaper Circulation in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 23, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 381-419.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, "Job Printing," *The North Star*, Oct. 6, 1848.

<sup>14</sup> Frankie Hutton, *The Early Black Press in America, 1827-1860* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993); Ford Risley, *Abolition and the Press: The Moral Struggle Against Slavery* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008); Roland E. Wolseley, *The Black Press, U.S.A.* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1971).

scrambling for resources and influence, and because of their focus, they tapped virtually the same sources.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, it has been estimated that nearly half Douglass' subscription base lived outside the United States.<sup>16</sup> Circulation abroad meant higher delivery costs and less dependable service.<sup>17</sup> A circulation complaint inadvertently hinted at yet another problem common to all newspapers of the period, the practice of subscribers mailing newspapers to friends, thereby extending a paper's reach without adding revenue.<sup>18</sup>

Another major source of Douglass' financial grief was his inexperience in business in general and newspaper publishing and editing in particular. For instance, it is unclear on whose advice – if anyone's – he was acting, but in 1847 he proudly invested in a new press that immediately proved unsuitable. The cost of contracting out the printing of the *North Star* added to the project's peril.

By the time Griffiths arrived in Rochester in late March 1849, there was talk of shutting down the *North Star*. In a gloomy letter to Liberty Party leader Gerrit Smith, Douglass confided that he was about \$2,000 in debt and would have to return to the lecture circuit to try to raise the money he needed. Ruefully, Douglass analyzed his predicament:

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<sup>15</sup> See also, Fanuzzi, "Frederick Douglass's 'Colored Newspaper.'"

<sup>16</sup> Fassett, "The *North Star*, 1847-1849."

<sup>17</sup> A Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) subscriber complained that the newspaper "comes very irregularly thus far – one at a time, when the same mail brings me three *Independents* and *Eras*. Does our friend Douglass understand my case? ... I shall be sorry to lose any of these good papers, as I think it an able one, and I mean to send now and then one to our friend Judge Lee. I see not why a Rochester paper should not come as regularly as a Washington one. How shall I secure it regularly?" Letter from J.S. Green to Gerrit Smith, Esq.," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Nov. 19, 1852.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* On antebellum culture and postal distribution of newspapers, see David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).



Many of my best friends ... look upon it [the *North Star*] as an unnecessary, if not a useless instrumentality for promoting the cause of the slave and believe I would be more serviceable as a public speaker than I can be as an editor. I started the paper against their wishes and against their advice, they feel therefore little or no interest in its support. Besides this, the paper is not a party paper and looks with grateful friendship upon all classes of abolitionists and is not disposed to denounce as knaves those who believe that voting is a duty. The failure to do this is perhaps the most grievous omission of which the paper is guilty in the eyes especially of my Boston friends. On the other hand the paper is not enough of a Liberty party paper or in other words it is too strongly Garrisonian to be looked upon with much favor by Liberty party men. In a word there does not appear to be charity and magnanimity enough among the two classes of Antislavery friends to support a paper that can see good in each party.<sup>19</sup>

Then, a trip to New York in April produced a flurry of subscriptions. A buoyed Douglass wrote to his close friends Isaac and Amy Kirby Post in Rochester during that trip that "My success here has been far greater than I had any idea it would be. I shall not despair of the *North Star* yet."<sup>20</sup> In that letter, Douglass mentioned the Griffiths sisters, telling the Posts that the women's ship was overdue in New York and that "I shall try to persuade Julia and her sister Eliza to remain in New York to attend the annual meeting [of the American Anti-Slavery Society] and not come home with me at this time."<sup>21</sup> At the close of the AASS meeting, Douglass and the Griffiths sisters did adjourn to Rochester, where the Englishwomen moved in with the Douglass family.<sup>22</sup> As she knew by then, Julia Griffiths was taking on a financial crisis that a few new subscriptions to the *North Star* were not going to solve.

An alternative to shutting the paper was to take management of the paper away from Douglass. On May 7, 1849, Isaac Post wrote to his wife of plans to put the *North*

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<sup>19</sup> Frederick Douglass to Gerrit Smith, March 30, 1849, Gerrit Smith Papers, Bird Library, Syracuse University.

<sup>20</sup> Frederick Douglass to Amy and Isaac Post, April 22, 1849, Post Family Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Historian Nancy A. Hewitt suggests that the arrangement actually reinvigorated antislavery efforts as townspeople sought to learn more about why the Griffiths women were living with the Douglasses. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change*, 140.

*Star* under financial control of a committee if Douglass' finances could not be improved. "I don't see how FD can tell how he stands without a regular look over to see how things stand," Post wrote.<sup>23</sup> The plan was for abolitionists Post; his son-in-law, William R. Hallowell; and Post's nephew, Edmund Willis, to review the *North Star's* finances and come to a recommendation, if not a resolution, on its fate. "Edmund says he thinks if it is only \$400.00 behind it is not best to give it up so," Post wrote. Noting the possibility that Douglass' "English friends would rather do more than they have than hear of its stopping," Post added. "I want all these things looked at ... [and] if it shall then appear best to stop then do so for I should be very sorry to have FD saddled with debt that he cannot easily get rid of. I hope some way yet will be made to avoid a wreck."<sup>24</sup>

Pressure mounted over the summer to do something about the *North Star*. In a conversation with Douglass on Sept. 11, 1849, Amy Post threatened to use her position on the executive committee of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society to block further donations to Douglass' paper. Douglass was stung. Later that day he wrote to tell Amy Post that:

Especially do I feel grieved at your declaration of intention not to vote in favor of any further donations to the *Star* until I put the economical concerns of the paper under the charge of a committee. ... The holding such a threat over me may be the best mode of heating [sic] me but I am free to say that I think it otherwise.

I have no possible objection to having the books and papers of the *North Star* freely examined by any member of the Board of Managers of the Western New York Antislavery Society and never have had. If those books have not been examined it is no fault of mine. I have said this again and again. Now if any

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<sup>23</sup> Isaac Post to Amy Kirby Post, May 7, 1849. Post Family Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* Interestingly, Douglass would have been familiar with how a finance committee could perform without undercutting editorial control of the newspaper. In 1838-39, his mentor, William Lloyd Garrison, had taken the initiative to form just such a committee to guide him and the *Liberator*. See Henry Mayer, *All On Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 253.

person thinks that I am disposing of the public's money improperly or fraudulently the books are open to them.<sup>25</sup>

Inasmuch as Douglass launched the *North Star* with his own funds, attempts by his Rochester friends to take over management of the paper struck him as unfair, unjust, and illegal:

I want you now to understand my entire feelings in regard to having a committee to take over the pecuniary charge of the paper. In the first place, I consider that the paper is my own – to be used for the good of the Slave. I am personally responsible for its character – and for its debts – and must or ought to share the pecuniary advantages of the paper if there should any arise from it. Such a responsibility brings with [it] the rights to manage the paper as I may deem best.

And while I should be glad to have a committee who would kindly see that the Books of the Concern are honestly and properly kept – and to put out where there can be a saving – and where there should be improvements, I can never consent to give up the entire control to persons who are not responsible for the debts of the concern. Such a course would be degrading to me as a man – and making me a mere cipher – in my own affairs.<sup>26</sup>

However reluctantly, Douglass remained open to a panel that would be purely advisory, and he closed by telling Post that he would ask Hallowell and Willis to serve in that capacity.<sup>27</sup> On September 16, 1849, Douglass wrote to Isaac Post and his son-in-law, asking them to be his advisors

It appears Griffiths had other ideas. Working with Douglass in his dealings with the Posts, Julia Griffiths quickly set to work to ensure that Douglass kept his paper. “In a single year by her energetic and effective management,” Douglass wrote, Griffiths “enabled me to extend the circulation of my paper from 2,000 to 4,000 copies, pay off the debts and lift the mortgage from my house. Her industry was equal to her devotion. She

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<sup>25</sup> Frederick Douglass to Amy Kirby Post, Sept. 11, 1849, Post Family Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

seemed to rise with every emergency, and her resources appeared inexhaustible.”<sup>28</sup> As part of their devotion, the Griffiths sisters assumed the mortgage Douglass had taken out on his home until he could repay it.

### First Meetings

Frederick Douglass spent much of 1845-47 as a fugitive lecturing in England against American slavery. Tall, handsome, in his mid-twenties, and eloquent on the stage, he was an escaped slave, largely self-taught, brilliant, and articulate. Douglass quickly gained the same fame in the United Kingdom that he had enjoyed in the United States. Abolitionist audiences lionized him, and British friends raised the \$100 needed to buy Douglass’ freedom before he returned to the United States.<sup>29</sup> When they then offered to create an annuity for him, Douglass asked instead for money to enter the newspaper business. With \$2,500 raised by British supporters, Douglass began the *North Star* in Rochester, in upstate New York.<sup>30</sup>

Julia Griffiths and her sister Eliza met Douglass during his tour of Great Britain,<sup>31</sup> and Julia Griffiths and Douglass continued to correspond after he returned to the United

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<sup>28</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times*, 706.

<sup>29</sup> Transfer of ownership from Thomas Auld to Hugh Auld, Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom in Douglass Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 376-377.

<sup>30</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 699-701. Douglass’ first edition of *The North Star* appeared Dec. 3, 1847. After a hiatus during which he collected his family at Lynn, Massachusetts, Douglass returned to Rochester and, commencing with the Jan. 3, 1848, edition, published his newspaper every Friday. In 1851, the paper was combined with an abolitionist sheet supported by Gerrit Smith and published as *Frederick Douglass’ Newspaper* in weekly or monthly editions until 1863.

<sup>31</sup> Douglass made three trips to Great Britain, each time, some biographers say, to escape troubles in the United States. His 1845-1847 tour was urged on him by American abolitionists who feared the celebrity resulting from his speaking engagements on the abolitionist circuit and the success of his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, published in 1845, put Douglass at risk of slave-catchers who might grab him and return him to slavery and his owner, Thomas Auld of Maryland. His second trip to Great Britain, 1859-1860, afforded him safety from authorities who linked him to the insurrection of abolitionist John Brown and his abortive raid on the United States arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Douglass’ third visit to Great Britain, in 1886, came as blacks and whites in the United States continued to fume over his marriage in January 1884 to the white Helen Pitts seventeen months after the death of Douglass’ first wife, Anna Murray Douglass, who was black. A Republican supporter from the party’s earliest days, Douglass also left behind Republican criticism of his work in the

States. Thus, Griffiths was already involved in the Rochester women's antislavery activities by the time she arrived in 1849. In her report as secretary, Amy Post wrote that organizers of the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society's fair December 20-21, 1848, "would especially express our gratitude to the Misses Griffiths, of London, through whose perseverance and industry we have received a box containing a large and an elegant assortment of useful, rich and beautiful articles, in value amounting ... about \$400."<sup>32</sup> The Griffiths sisters were regularly mentioned as collecting contributions "of every description, fancy works of every kind, books, prints, drawings, &c." from their countrywomen to be sent to Rochester.<sup>33</sup>

Probably not for the only time, Douglass, in a letter in April 1848, lamented to Griffiths his problems with the faltering *North Star*. Telling her that "my present prospect ... is far from encourageing [sic]," he wrote, "I fear I have miscalculated in regard to the amount of support which would be extended my enterprise." Enumerating various problems – black people did not flock to the paper, his co-editor, Martin R. Delaney, had brought in fewer subscriptions than expected – Douglass said he had returned to lecturing to augment finances. The picture was bleak for a paper costing \$2 per annum with fifty-five subscribers, even assuming that all were paid up:

I have expended more than the some [sic] sent me from England, and shall require sixty dollars per week for six months to come in order to keep my paper a float [sic]. The average increase of subscribers amounts to twenty five dollars a week. I feel sure if I can keep the paper in existance [sic] one year I can sustain it permanently. "The North Star" must [be] sustained. It has alredy [sic] accomplished somthing [sic]. It has taken a respectable stand among (at least) American newspapers – and in a measure demonstrated the slave's capacity for higher achievements. It has also impressed the colored people themselves, that

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Democratic administration of President Grover Cleveland, the first Democrat president (1885-1889) in 24 years.

<sup>32</sup> *North Star*, Jan. 12, 1849.

<sup>33</sup> *North Star*, June 9, 1848.

they are destined [for] higher attainments – even in this country than [they] now enjoy. This is very little to have accomplished but is somet[hing]<sup>34</sup>

That there is no signature on the letter suggests there was at least one more page. Whether – or when – he actually asked her to come to Rochester is unclear, although he did not mention such a trip in what we have of that particular letter.

### **Fundraiser for Douglass**

Griffiths arrived with a job to do and wasted no time in shoring up Douglass' finances. Only a few months after their arrival in the United States, Julia and Eliza Griffiths took to the columns of the *North Star* to exhort “the Anti-Slavery Ladies of Great Britain and Ireland” in a letter that shows the breadth of their network:

Through the medium of the columns of the NORTH STAR, we earnestly desire to solicit your aid and co-operation in the good Anti-Slavery cause; and we would plead with you more especially for assistance, on behalf of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society.

One of the objects of this Society is to help to sustain the NORTH STAR newspaper, which is, we believe, one of the best Anti-Slavery instrumentalities now in operation.

The Annual Anti-Slavery Fair will be held at Rochester towards the close of the year; and a series of Anti-Slavery Fairs are now being held in the towns and villages of Western New York; consequently there is an unusual demand for useful and fancy articles. We earnestly entreat our British friends to send us renewed help in the way of contributions.

To our London friends, and to those living in Birmingham, Coventry, Leicester, Leeds, Sunderland and Bristol, we would suggest that they forward their contributions, by the third week in October, to Miss Carpenter, of Bristol, who has this year kindly consented to forward the London box.

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<sup>34</sup> Frederick Douglass to Julia Griffiths, Rochester, New York, April 28, 1848, Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress 1848 (Series: General Correspondence). See also, John R. McKivigan, L. Diane Barnes, Mark G. Emerson and Leigh Fought, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers. Series Three: Correspondence, Vol 1: 1842-1852* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 302-303. Also quoted in Foner, *Life and Writings*, 306-307. The letter indicates that they had been corresponding for some time, and that she had been sending him copies of the *London Times* and the *Illustrated News*.

To the friends in Carlisle and Manchester, who sent boxes to Rochester last year, we renew our appeal, hoping and believing that they will continue to give us their aid; and we trust that the Friends in Newcastle-on-Tyne, Northampton, Colebrookdale, Edinburgh, Belfast; and Cork, who then joined them in this good work, will testify, on the present occasion, that they are “not weary in well-doing.”<sup>35</sup>

A member of a well-to-do British family, Griffiths had natural intelligence and the education and social background that afforded her organizational skills and the ability to direct fundraising in support of Douglass’ newspaper.<sup>36</sup> In Rochester, she was among a core group of women who reorganized the moribund Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Sewing Society, becoming secretary of the newly formed group. Under Griffiths’ influence, the Rochester Female Anti-Slaving Sewing Circle<sup>37</sup> continued – indeed, strengthened – its emphasis on supporting the *North Star* through fundraising fairs and bazaars. It also coordinated with women’s antislavery societies in the United Kingdom and Canada to direct more support to Douglass than he had enjoyed previously.<sup>38</sup>

Griffiths was aggressive in personally soliciting funds for his newspaper. An 1851 letter to William H. Seward, twice governor of New York state (1838-1842) and at the time U.S. senator from New York (1848-1860)<sup>39</sup> was one of many that Seward and others

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<sup>35</sup> Julia and Eliza Griffiths, “Address To the Anti-Slavery Ladies of Great Britain and Ireland,” *North Star*, Sept. 21, Sept. 28, Oct. 5, 1849.

<sup>36</sup> Eliza Griffiths Dick, “The Griffiths Family – Written by Mrs. John Dick (nee Griffiths) in the Year 1876.” Personal collection of Jenny Cliff. In this memoir fragment, Eliza Dick recounts that Julia “was naturally clever and she polished very well. Her musical powers were considerable. Schools and masters, and travelling were used to bring the young lady forward.” Eliza, too, was educated in England and France.

<sup>37</sup> “Constitution of the Rochester Female Anti-Slavery Sewing Circle.” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, Sept. 4, 1851. Within a couple of years the word *sewing* would be dropped from the name, *circle* became *society*, and the women later would rename themselves the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society.

<sup>38</sup> The power to draw money to Douglass at various times raised complaints from the Garrisonians in Boston and from one of the few women to edit an abolitionist newspaper, Mary Ann Shadd Cary in Canada, all of whom thought their papers needed support no less than Douglass’. For the Garrisonians, of course, shutting down or off Douglass’ money supply would remove him as a competitor for circulation and ideas, possibly bringing him back into the Garrisonian fold.

<sup>39</sup> Seward lost the 1860 Republican nomination for president to Abraham Lincoln but became his secretary of state (serving his successor, as well, until 1869). In a letter consoling Seward on losing the

of his station would receive from Douglass and his field commander. "A year since, you kindly forwarded a donation in aid of Mr. Frederick Douglass' paper," Griffiths reminded Seward, "and at the same time expressed your kind intention of favoring him with an annual donation. I beg very respectfully to remind you of this considerate promise: the exigencies of the times demand more than ever, such a paper as 'the North Star'; and I trust you will continue your kind patronage."<sup>40</sup> To ensure the continued patronage of Seward, Gerrit Smith, and other wealthy and influential abolitionists, Griffiths kept a steady drumbeat of letters seeking donations to Douglass' papers. These appeals were undertaken not always with Douglass' knowledge.<sup>41</sup> On at least one occasion, Douglass had to apologize when both he and Griffiths independently and simultaneously solicited money from the wealthy Gerrit Smith.<sup>42</sup>

These money requests were regular and numerous, but Griffiths launched two more ambitious fundraising projects. One was a gift book, *Autographs for Freedom*, published under her editorship by the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society. This book contained generally brief statements by leading abolitionists and included the signatures of each contributor in its pages, hence its name. *Autographs*, like most gift books that were highly popular in antebellum America, was timed for holiday giving.<sup>43</sup> It was sold at the annual RLASS holiday fair, at which goods made or acquired by the society were

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presidential nomination, Crofts told him, "The American people seem peculiarly partial to unknown presidents." Julia Griffiths Crofts to William H. Seward, June 15, 1860. Seward Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

<sup>40</sup> Julia Griffiths to William H. Seward, April 8, 1851. Seward Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, Frederick Douglass to Gerrit Smith, July 10, 185[?], Gerrit Smith Papers, Bird Library, Syracuse University. "My friend (Griffiths) acted in the matter without consulting me."

<sup>42</sup> Frederick Douglass to Gerrit Smith, Sept. 2, 1851, Gerrit Smith Papers, Bird Library, Syracuse University.

<sup>43</sup> One of the few scholars to study gift books is Ralph Thompson, "The *Liberty Bell* and Other Anti-Slavery Gift Books," *New England Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (March 1934): 154-168. See also, Thompson, *American Literary Annuals & Gift Books, 1825-1865* (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1936). Thompson's book catalogs 855 gift book titles.



sold to raise money for the group's antislavery activities, chiefly Douglass' newspapers but also Underground Railroad activities in the area. *Autographs* also was sold throughout the year at Douglass' newspaper office and at bookstore in Rochester, New York, and Philadelphia, among other locations.<sup>44</sup> Intended to be an annual, *Autographs* was published in 1853 and in a second edition the next year in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Among nearly 100 men and women contributing to the two volumes were novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, Seward, poet John Greenleaf Whittier, black physician and antislavery activist James McCune Smith, Gerrit Smith, *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley, former Liberty Party presidential nominee James G. Birney, and Douglass.

Griffiths' other major fundraising project was a subscription to create a contingent fund for Douglass' journalism. As she told prospective contributors, it had been suggested that if 100 people each pledged \$10, Douglass would have an endowment that would keep his paper solvent. Of course, she relied on men like Smith and Seward to continue their usual donations as well, and by her many efforts she also planned that women's antislavery groups would continue to favor Douglass with the proceeds of their bazaars and fairs. A report on the contingent fund's progress listed \$10 contributions from 42 people, including Gerrit Smith, Seward, the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, Stowe, education reformer Horace Mann, and Greeley, and wealthy abolitionists Arthur and Lewis Tappan, who had founded the

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<sup>44</sup> See, for instance, "The Autographs for Freedom," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, May 26, 1854. The second volume of *Autographs* was advertised at "the extremely low price of \$1.25 in plain muslin; 1 50 [sic] gilt edges; \$2 full gilt sides and edges." "Autographs for Freedom," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Jan. 6, 1854.

American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in opposition to Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>45</sup>

Among antislavery women with whom Griffiths established contacts were members of the Toronto Ladies' Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Fugitives. In 1854, Griffiths encouraged the Toronto women to organize a fundraising fair whose wares would include surplus British-made items that the Rochester society had on hand. By moving the goods to Toronto, Griffiths was able to convert them into money that the Toronto women then donated to Douglass. The generosity of the Toronto women touched off a controversy, however, when Mary Ann Shadd Cary, the black editor of the *Provincial Freeman* in Ontario, complained that the Canadians should instead be supporting local black relief efforts – and the *Freeman* – instead of Douglass;

“A lucky paper, that! The Rochester Bazaar is held every year for its support. It has, we are informed, a paying subscription list, numbering thousands. The first installment of the UNCLE TOM FUND, was given by MRS. STOWE for its support. It has private patronage incredible, besides, very recently, an addition to its coffers has been made, called the “Thousand Dollar Fund,” – a sum contributed by one hundred persons, and gotten up, mainly, we are told, by a great effort on the part of Miss Griffiths, and now, Toronto must pay her golden Tribune, by solicitation of the same untiring Miss. Griffiths.

“Will not Miss Griffiths leave a few coppers behind?” Cary asked. “The Underground emigrants come on in great numbers, and may ‘need’ a little something in the cold winter.”<sup>46</sup> The Toronto bazaar went forward, but the controversy led to the demise of Toronto Ladies' Association's activism after 1854.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Frederick Douglass, “A Contingent Fund for Frederick Douglass' Paper,” *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, April 14, 1854.

<sup>46</sup> Mary Ann Shadd Cary, “A Bazaar in Toronto for ‘Frederick Douglass' Paper,’” *Provincial Freeman*, Toronto, Canada, June 3, 1854.

<sup>47</sup> Karen Leroux, “Making a Claim on the Public Sphere: Toronto Women's Anti-Slavery Activism, 1851-1854. M.A. Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1996, pp. 56-59.

Although she raised thousands of dollars for Douglass and his newspapers over the years, Griffiths also contributed considerable amounts of her own money to the enterprise. Sometime after arriving in 1849, Eliza Griffiths became holder of the mortgage to Douglass' house in Rochester, which passed to Julia to hold until the debt was paid off.<sup>48</sup> There is no record to indicate she spent any but her own money in traveling to the United States, residing and traveling in America and Canada for six years, and then traveling throughout the United Kingdom from 1855 to 1859 on behalf of the cause. Douglass occasionally noted gifts from Julia or the Griffiths sisters in letters to other benefactors.<sup>49</sup>

### **Griffiths as Editor**

Among her many contributions to Douglass' fortunes, Griffiths is credited with raising the level of editorial excellence in his newspapers.<sup>50</sup> One of Douglass' chief goals in publishing a newspaper was a pristine sheet that would show whites what his race could do if only given opportunity. Among other tasks, Griffiths was arts editor of Douglass' *North Star* and later, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. Contemporary and present-day readers have found her articles and in particular, her book reviews, to be cogent, shrewd, eloquent examples of the form. A book reviewed by Griffiths clearly had been read, thought about, and subjected to intelligent, rigorous analysis. Her accomplishments included music, and two songs she wrote have surfaced.

For all his eloquence of thought and expression, Douglass was still human and had his limitations. In the early years of the *North Star*, Douglass had been reading and

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<sup>48</sup> Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, 111.

<sup>49</sup> See, for instance, Frederick Douglass to Amy Post, July 17, 1849. Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

<sup>50</sup> See, for instance, Foner, *Life and Writings*; McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*; Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*.

writing regularly for less than a decade and some of the fundamentals remained to be refined. Jacob K. Post, son of Douglass' Rochester mentors Isaac and Amy Post, recalled that "once when he left our house to go on a lecture tour we found in his room a slip of paper on which was written a long list of words in common use. They were hard ones for Frederick, for across the top of the slip he had written, 'Words that I find hard to spell.'"<sup>51</sup>

Douglass' early colleague and publisher, William C. Nell, was little help in such details at the paper.<sup>52</sup> Among other challenges, it fell to Julia to improve spelling in the *North Star* if Douglass would achieve his goal of an ably printed newspaper that would be a credit to his race. To writer Jane "Jennie" Marsh Parker, a friend and former neighbor, Douglass detailed his debt to Griffiths: "Think what editing a paper was to me before Miss Griffiths came! I had not learned how to spell; my knowledge of the simplest rules of grammar was most defective. I wrote slowly and under embarrassment – lamentably ignorant of much that every school-boy is supposed to know."<sup>53</sup> Parker recalled that "He rewrote his autobiography [*My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855] under her supervision, and she did much for his education in many ways."<sup>54</sup>

As an editor of Douglass' newspapers and secretary of the RLASS, Griffiths was uniquely positioned to shine the spotlight on RLASS activities and correspondingly, diminish attention to rivals. Griffiths exhibited a crisp efficiency and attention to detail, even in the brief announcements of RLASS meetings, which in her role as secretary she

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<sup>51</sup> "Anecdotes of Douglass," *New York Times*, Feb. 25, 1895.

<sup>52</sup> McFeely says that Nell's "spelling put the *North Star*'s text in grave danger," *Frederick Douglass*, 152. See also, Constance Porter Uzelac, "Editor's Preface," *William Cooper Nell: Nineteenth-Century African American Abolitionist, Historian, Integrationist. Selected Writings 1832-1874*, ed. Dorothy Porter Wesley and Constance Porter Uzelac (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2002). Nell was listed as publisher of the *North Star* until 1852, when he returned to Garrison in Massachusetts.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Jane Marsh Parker, "Reminiscences of Frederick Douglass," *Outlook*, April 6, 1895.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

would write and in her role as an editor she would place in the paper. Nearly all of her announcements noted that the meetings would begin “at *half past two o’clock precisely*,”<sup>55</sup> but often members were further instructed to “be punctual in attendance.”<sup>56</sup> To ensure attendance at another RLASS meeting, Griffiths added the helpful information that “The East Avenue Omnibus leaves the corner of Exchange Street at *two o’clock and four o’clock every afternoon*.”<sup>57</sup>

### **Griffiths as Organizer**

Besides propping up Douglass’ newspaper in the immediate term, Griffiths’ challenge in Rochester was to reconstitute women’s antislavery efforts in order to effect a lasting support base for Douglass. The immediate impediment was the existing anti-slavery women’s circle that she found on her arrival,

There had been women’s antislavery organizations in the community on and off since the 1830s, but when Griffiths arrived the existing women’s group was problematic to her on two counts. First, it was largely inactive. More importantly, its membership comprised a “network of Quaker ultraists,”<sup>58</sup> a faction of the antislavery movement inimical to her own philosophy. Historian Nancy A. Hewitt has found in antebellum Rochester three distinct types of women’s activism, which can also be found in other communities on both sides of the Atlantic. The earliest form was benevolence, seeking to soften the effects of social ills. “A second pattern of women’s activism was forged in the fires of Evangelicalism. Campaigns for moral and social perfection – seeking to rid the world of vice, intemperance, and slavery... . Female perfectionists, so named because

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<sup>55</sup> Julia Griffiths, “The Annual Meeting,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, Jan. 13, 1854. Italics in original.

<sup>56</sup> Julia Griffiths, “A Business Meeting,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, Feb. 3, 1854.

<sup>57</sup> Julia Griffiths, “The Rochester Ladies,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, Nov. 3, 1854.

<sup>58</sup> Hewitt, *Women’s Activism*, 122.

they sought to eradicate rather than ameliorate social ills.”<sup>59</sup> Deeply religious, Griffiths was a perfectionist in this sense of the term. The third group was the ultraists, radicals who, starting in the mid-1840s, “advocated, among other things, complete legal, social, and economic equality for blacks and women.”<sup>60</sup> In many respects, the divisions between the ultraists and the perfectionists matched the growing divide between the Garrisonians and the Liberty Party abolitionists.

Garrisonians denounced organized religion because the churches would not break with slaveholders; denounced the Constitution as a document that facilitated slavery in the United States; advocated “moral suasion” and marshalling public opinion rather than democratic political participation to end slavery; and supported equality among men and women in the antislavery cause. Rather than accommodate slavery in any form, the Garrisonians favored dissolution of the Union, following their leader’s motto on the *Liberator* nameplate, “No Union With Slaveholders.” Douglass had come to prominence as a Garrisonian, but in the late 1840s he began to drift toward the Liberty Party ideas of using political action to achieve his objective. Garrisonians believed that two factors influenced Douglass’ change of heart, the largesse of New York’s Liberty Party leader, the philanthropist Gerrit Smith, and what they saw as the perfidy of Julia Griffiths.

The Quakers’ Garrisonian leanings had proved hospitable to Douglass as a fellow-Garrisonian in the mid-1840s, but by decade’s end his political abolitionist leanings were straining the relationship. Griffiths needed to adjust the local base in order to provide a framework more in line with her own politics and those Douglass was beginning to embrace by which British antislavery women could continue to channel

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

their support to Douglass. Connecting with other perfectionists, a group that “had never played a role in the WNYASS and simultaneous with its rise had retreated from antislavery activity entirely,”<sup>61</sup> Griffiths emerged in fall of 1852 as secretary of the new Rochester Female Anti-Slavery Sewing Circle.<sup>62</sup>

Griffiths’ success was a blow to the Garrison camp. William C. Nell, a loyal Garrisonian who had been the *North Star*’s first publisher, lamented, “[W]hat magic potency seems embodied in JG = Is it not a shame that she should thus remain so successful = when the resources of genuine antislavery in Rochester would be formidable if roused up by a gallant spirit and marshaled (not against the good but put forth by others but) in righteous and consistent defense of themselves and their position.”<sup>63</sup>

Even before going to Rochester, she had organized antislavery women in Britain to provide goods to be sold at antislavery bazaars, or fairs, in the United States. Several times in the first year and a half of the *North Star*, Douglass acknowledged the Griffiths sisters’ “valuable contributions” to Rochester’s antislavery bazaars, from which he derived small operating revenue.<sup>64</sup> Upon their arrival in Rochester, the sisters pitched in directly with the work of antislavery sewing circles. Amy Post, a close friend of Douglass, reported that “we are especially grateful to our English friends Julia and Eliza Griffiths, for their preserving and strenuous efforts to render these fairs successful.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>62</sup> “Constitution of the Rochester Female Anti-Slavery Sewing Circle,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, Sept. 4, 1851.

<sup>63</sup> William C. Nell to Amy Kirby Post, Boston, Nov. 21, 1854, in *William Cooper Nell: Nineteenth-Century African American Abolitionist, Historian, Integrationist. Selected Writings 1832-1874*, ed. Dorothy Porter Wesley and Constance Porter Uzelac (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2002).

<sup>64</sup> See, for instance, Frederick Douglass, “The Sixth Rochester Anti-Slavery Bazaar,” *North Star*, Jan. 12, 1849.

<sup>65</sup> Amy Post, “Report of the Fair Committee,” *North Star*, Nov. 16, 1849. Post and her husband, Isaac, were among Douglass’ earliest friends in Rochester and remained friends and advisers for many decades.

Griffiths' perfectionist ideals included the separation and subordinate role of women. As a strategy, this enabled her to work behind the scenes yet exercise considerable power, and her perfectionism also helps explain why Griffiths apparently was a single-issue reformist. Despite living in upstate New York, where Rochesterian Susan B. Anthony along with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, and others were fomenting the women's rights movement, which very much involved Douglass, there is no evidence that Griffiths strayed out of her abolitionist role to promote women's rights. To the contrary, on a number of occasions she disavowed being a women's rights activist.

### **Secret Agent**

There was one more side to Griffiths that came out of her Rochester years, though by its nature few details exist. In his 1855 valedictory to Griffiths, Douglass noted her work with the Underground Railroad. This work called for guile, grit, and good luck if the whites and free blacks who were "station agents" and "conductors" on the "railroad" – and the fugitive slaves being handed link-by-link to refuge in Canada – were to elude slave-catchers. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 meant arrest and return of the escapees to their owners and fines and imprisonment for those who aided their escape. One of the last legs before Canada, Rochester was a key stop on the Underground Railroad, receiving about 150 fugitives each year by one estimate,<sup>66</sup> and Douglass, Griffiths, and the RLASS were key components.<sup>67</sup> In his third autobiography, Douglass recalled that once three runaways, safely in Canada, wrote a letter to their former owner, dating it Rochester,

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<sup>66</sup> Amy Post, "The Underground Railroad in Rochester," in William F. Peck, ed., *1884 Semi-Centennial History of Rochester* (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., 1884), 458-462.

<sup>67</sup> The RLASS regularly provided money to escapees traveling through Rochester on the Underground Railroad, and Douglass frequently sent notes to treasurer Maria Porter seeking one or two dollars apiece for the fugitives. See for instance, "A Sister Rescued From Slavery," *North Star*, Rochester, N.Y., Dec. 3, 1847. 1858 The RLASS said it gave aid to 126 fugitives in 1858. "The "8<sup>th</sup> Annual Report of the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society," 1859. Papers of the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.



“and this blunder in the date ... betrayed their whereabouts, so that the hunters were at once on their tracks.”<sup>68</sup> In 1851, three fugitives from the so-called “Christiana Riot” made it to Rochester. “The hours they spent in my house were ... hours of anxiety as well as activity,” Douglass wrote in his autobiography.<sup>69</sup> As he told it, “I dispatched my friend Julia Griffiths to the landing three miles away on the Genesee River to ascertain if a steamer would leave that night for any port in Canada.”<sup>70</sup> As Griffiths told the story to Gerrit Smith, “We have had great excitement in our house since we parted with you on Friday - on Saturday – THREE FUGITIVES (conducted by a reliable colored man) came to Alexander Street [Douglass’ home] to ask aid -- They proved to be William Parker himself and two others engaged in the Christian[a] affair. We secreted them for 8 or 9 hours ... Mr. Loguen and I drove to the LANDING - to make necessary inquiries concerning Canada, Boats, etc. -- Frederick consulted with Mr. S. D. Porter first.”<sup>71</sup> Griffiths felt that trying to travel overland to the Niagara River crossing “would attract attention” and counseled that if they could find an “English boat it would be safer to put them on board.”<sup>72</sup> Griffiths and Loguen did find a British ship at the Rochester port, which carried the three Christiana fugitives to Canada. Biographer Benjamin Quarles estimated that Douglass helped four hundred fugitives over ten years.<sup>73</sup> At one time Douglass harbored as many as eleven fugitives under his roof, and the subterfuge put

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<sup>68</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 710.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 725.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Julia Griffiths to Gerrit Smith, quoted in Palmer, “Partnership.” Jermain Wesley Loguen of Syracuse was, like Douglass, an escaped slave and a conductor in the Underground Railroad. Also like Douglass, he often accompanied fugitives to their next stop on the railroad. Douglass’ consultation with Rochester abolitionist Samuel D. Porter began with a hasty note to Porter: “There are three men now at my house - who are in great peril. I am unwell, I need your advice. Please come at once. D.F.” Frederick Douglass to Samuel D. Porter, September 1851. Frederick Douglass Papers, Frederick Douglass Institute, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester. Douglass in his newspaper and some personal notes in the late 1840s and early 1850s often transposed his initials.

<sup>72</sup> Griffiths to Smith, in Palmer, “Partnership.”

<sup>73</sup> Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, 119.

Douglass and anyone working with him at risk of fines and imprisonment. As a non-citizen, Griffiths could not even avail herself of whatever Constitutional rights might have accrued to American women had she been caught helping runaway slaves escape to Canada.

### **“Prejudiced, Sectarian Delilah”?**

From the force of her own personality and the abolition politics she and Douglass were moved to, it is likely Griffiths had few or no close friends in the Rochester community. After Gerrit Smith’s wife visited the newspaper offices in February 1851, Douglass reported to Smith: “Mrs. Smith smiled upon us yesterday. ... Poor Julia to whom the sun light of a sympathizing face is as cordial, was delighted.”<sup>74</sup>

One measure of Griffiths’ influence is in the extent to which she was demonized by the Garrisonians, who longed for the days “before Rochester affairs were Griffithised.”<sup>75</sup> Griffiths’ success in strengthening the newspapers’ financial standing coincided with a change in Douglass’ approach to abolition and, rightly or wrongly, Garrisonians held Griffiths responsible for Douglass’ change of heart.<sup>76</sup> Certainly, she was a party to his decision. When he began his lecture career, it had been under the mentorship of Garrison, the leading abolitionist, antislavery lecturer, and editor of the *Liberator* (1831-1865). Garrison’s abolitionism, in part, eschewed participation in the political process – even voting – in favor of “moral suasion,” letting the moral rightness of the cause persuade the public to end slavery. As Douglass became more and more independent of the Garrisonians, his onetime mentor blamed Griffiths for turning

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<sup>74</sup> Frederick Douglass to Gerrit Smith, Feb. 5, 1852, Gerrit Smith Papers, Bird Library, Syracuse University.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> See, for instance, “Of Frederick Douglass’ Paper, *Liberator*, Aug. 26, 1853.

Douglass' head toward political abolitionism. Others accused Griffiths of shutting off their access to Douglass. In a note to Amy Post, William C. Nell indicated interrupted correspondence: "Mr. Garrison informed me that your letter to George Thompson had been answered in one to Miss Griffiths and he felt surprised that you were yet ignorant of it."<sup>77</sup> One Garrisonian feared "Miss G. reads all F.D.'s letters."<sup>78</sup>

Some writers have focused on suggestive but thinly supported implications that the Griffiths-Douglass relationship was more than simply a meeting of minds. Speculation among Douglass' contemporaries – critics and even some of his friends – was that their relationship was sexual and, of course, even the slightest cordiality between white and black could arouse denunciations of race mixing. In New York City, the Griffiths sisters and Douglass had set off a street riot in New York by walking arm-in-arm along the city's Battery.<sup>79</sup> Arriving in Rochester, the Griffiths sisters moved in with Douglass and his family. The close living arrangements fueled more talk of scandal, and Douglass' strolls with a Griffiths on each arm provoked the same resentment among some Rochesterians that they had in New York City.<sup>80</sup>

Some local gossips made it a scandal that Griffiths lived in the Douglass household, prompting a heated defense by Douglass in a letter to one of his friends, Samuel D. Porter. In it, Douglass expressed outrage at intimations of impropriety, pointing out that while two months earlier, Griffiths "of her own free will preferred to

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<sup>77</sup> William C. Nell to Amy Post, Dec. 24, 1850. Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

<sup>78</sup> Isabel Jennings to Mary Estlin, May 24, 1851. Weston Sisters Papers, Boston Public Library. Quoted in McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 170.

<sup>79</sup> McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 165.

<sup>80</sup> Jane Marsh Parker, "Reminiscences of Frederick Douglass." Douglass and his family initially had lived alongside the Marsh family, who were abolitionists, when he moved to Rochester, New York, in 1848. See also, Isaac Post to Amy Post, May 22, 1849. Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

board in a nobler family than mine. ... When she was in my family I was necessarily much in her society – our walking and riding together was natural. Now we are separate and only meet at my office at business hours and for business purposes. Where we are open to the observation of my printers and to the public from ten o'clock or earlier in the morning until four o'clock in the afternoon."<sup>81</sup>

A year later, innuendo in Garrison's *Liberator* continued to fan the flames into what became one of the nastiest exchanges between Douglass and his former mentor. Over the course of several weeks in the *Liberator* and other Garrisonian papers, Griffiths was criticized as "one of the worst advisers in his [Douglass'] printing office, whose influence over him has not only caused much unhappiness in his own household, but perniciously biased his own judgment."<sup>82</sup>

A denial to Garrison, purportedly from Anna, who was illiterate, read in its entirety, "Sir,—It is not true, that the presence of a certain person in the office of Frederick Douglass causes unhappiness in his family. Please insert this in year next paper. ANNA DOUGLASS. Rochester, Nov. 21st 1853."<sup>83</sup> In carrying the denial, however, Garrison had written, "We publish the following letter as requested by Mrs. DOUGLASS [sic] – simply remarking that it is evasive in its language, as our charge had reference to the past, and not to the present. It is not possible that Mrs. D. means deliberately to affirm, that there has been no unhappiness created in her family, in regard

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<sup>81</sup> Frederick Douglass to Samuel D. Porter, Jan. 12, 1852. Porter Family Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

<sup>82</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, "Frederick Douglass in Chicago," *Liberator*, Nov. 18, 1853, <http://www.proquest.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/> (accessed Oct. 24, 2009).

<sup>83</sup> Anna Douglass, "Letter from Mrs. Douglass," *Liberator*, Boston, Dec. 2, 1853.

to the person alluded to, although there may be no cause for such feeling at the present time.”<sup>84</sup>

In a full-page defense published in his own paper that Garrison reprinted in the *Liberator*, Douglass thundered:

As to whether my “adviser” is the best or “the worst,” is a matter of different opinions. I am, at any rate, profoundly grateful for the eminent services of that “adviser,” in opening my eyes to many things connected with my anti-slavery relations, to which I had before been partially blind, as well as for holding up my hands right nobly, in my efforts to establish my paper, and to educate my children. The judgment of Mr. Garrison is not the judgment of those who know this “adviser” best. The charge of “unhappiness in my household,” is one which I refuse to answer in this place, or in any public journal, unless required to do so by some proper and competent tribunal, known to the laws of the land.<sup>85</sup>

Unable to give Douglass the last word, Garrison shot back:

“A word in regard to our allusion to a bad adviser in Mr. D’s printing-office, whom we accused of exerting a pernicious influence upon his mind and judgment, and ‘causing much unhappiness in his own household.’ That last illusion was not meant unkindly, nor tended to imply any thing immoral; but, though it is strictly true, and we could bring a score of unimpeachable witnesses in Rochester to prove it, we regret it was made as it has no relevancy. Our only object in referring to that nameless ‘adviser’ was, to indicate to such inquirers as our Chicago correspondent, that there had been secret causes at work to alienate Mr. Douglass from his old associates, and we felt bound to throw out the intimation as a clue to much that would be otherwise inexplicable to those not familiar with the facts of the case. Mr. D. says – ‘I am profoundly grateful for the eminent services of that “adviser” in *opening my eyes (!)* to many things connected with my anti-slavery relations, to which I had before been partially blind.’ That tells the whole story, and is all we care to extort. In what condition his vision now is – and whether in slumbering in the lap of a prejudiced, sectarian Delilah, he has not enabled the pro-slavery Philistines to ascertain the secret of his strength, cut off his locks, and rejoice over his downfall – we leave our readers and the uncompromising friends of the Anti-Slavery cause to judge.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, “Letter from Mrs. Douglass,” *Liberator*, Boston, Dec. 2, 1853.

<sup>85</sup> “The Liberator, Anti-Slavery Standard, Pennsylvania Freeman, Antislavery Bugle – William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass: Or, a Review of Anti-Slavery Relations: Letter from Mrs. Douglass,” *Liberator*, Boston, Dec. 16, 1853. <http://www.proquest.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/> (accessed July 7, 2009).

<sup>86</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, “The Mask Entirely Removed,” *Liberator*, Boston, Dec. 16, 1853, <http://www.proquest.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/> (accessed July 7, 2009). Emphasis in the original.

Although Douglass hotly denied impropriety and Garrison later retracted some of his claims, the accusations had resonance once again even among Douglass' Rochester friends. By the time of these exchanges, though, Griffiths had been out of Douglass' house more than a year, possibly at the insistence of Douglass' wife.<sup>87</sup>

Griffiths particularly infuriated Parker Pillsbury, a leading Garrisonian, whose biographer Stacey Robertson notes that:

Pillsbury's denunciation of Griffiths ... took a curious dimension. He often referred to her in demeaning terms, usually emphasizing her single status by including "Miss" before each unkind or sarcastic characterization. Clearly angered by the sexual relationship he suspected between Griffiths and Douglass, Pillsbury's favorite sobriquet for Griffiths became "Miss Jezebel Douglass." ... Hoping to disparage this middle-class white woman, Pillsbury aimed for the most vulnerable point, her sexual purity. By using the term "Jezebel," a stereotype usually applied to African-American women, Pillsbury also indirectly suggested racial improprieties.<sup>88</sup>

By the time she left Rochester to return to England, Griffiths had made her mark in the local community and elsewhere in the United States. Her organizing ability, her fundraising, and her various projects left Douglass in reasonably good shape – as long as he had benefactors like Smith and Seward – and she had been instrumental, if only as a de facto lightning rod, for highlighting the differences and invigorating the debate between the Garrisonians and the political abolitionists in America.

Though creative and energetic, Griffiths was not necessarily an original thinker in her projects. Fairs and bazaars for charity were part of the scene long before she became involved,<sup>89</sup> and, indeed, Rochester's Female Charitable Society and Orphan Asylum

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<sup>87</sup> Susan B. Anthony, a Rochesterian, told Garrison that Anna Douglass had been overheard saying "I don't care anything about her being in the office, but I won't have her in my house." Quoted in Henry Mayer, *All On Fire*, 431.

<sup>88</sup> Stacy M. Robertson, *Parker Pillsbury: Radical Abolitionist, Male Feminist* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 109-110.

<sup>89</sup> See, for instance, Frederick Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999); Julie Roy Jeffrey, "Permeable Boundaries:

Association each had more lucrative fairs than the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society women's fair in 1843.<sup>90</sup> Although putatively successful in two editions, *Autographs for Freedom* was not a new idea when Griffiths launched the gift book series in 1852.<sup>91</sup> Nor did Griffiths originate the idea behind her endowment campaign of 1854. Griffiths' strength was in organizing and executing these campaigns as part of a multi-pronged effort to keep Douglass in the newspaper business.

Her focus on Douglass notwithstanding, Griffiths' work had broad and unintended implications. In organizing and promoting the fairs, Griffiths was building a sense of community among women. The Rochester fairs, like those throughout the Northeast and Middle Atlantic states, were first and foremost commercial ventures meant to raise money for various causes, in this case, antislavery efforts. Their import, however, went beyond fundraising. The fairs and bazaars required networks of local societies, and these "provided a way for the women to spread the antislavery message and to stimulate the discussion of a political question in a public setting."<sup>92</sup> The community-building facilitated by participating in the fundraising was recognized by the women. "More important than their pecuniary value, asserted the [1843 Rochester ultraist's] fair's organizers, was the cooperative effort these articles signified, 'which strengthens our hands ... and thereby prepares us for persevering in every work of reform.'"<sup>93</sup>

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Abolitionist Women and Separate Spheres," *Journal of the Early Republic* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 79-93; Benjamin Quarles, "Sources of Abolitionist Income," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 32, no. 1 (June 1945): 63-76.

<sup>90</sup> Hewitt, *Women's Activism*, 128.

<sup>91</sup> Maria Weston Chapman had been editing an annual gift book, the *Liberty Bell*, to support Garrison's *Liberator* since 1839, and the abolitionist gift books were a subset of a gift book genre that was widely popular prior to the Civil War. See Thompson, "The Liberty Bell."

<sup>92</sup> Jeffrey, "Permeable Boundaries," 83. See also, James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815-1867* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>93</sup> *Liberator*, March 24, 1843, quoted in Hewitt, *Women's Activism*, 118.

## Return to England

Some historians contend the ill feeling she experienced eventually drove Griffiths all the way back to Britain in 1855.<sup>94</sup> There had been talk of Griffiths returning to England as early as 1852, and the Garrisonians were ready for it. William C. Nell, former publisher of the *North Star*, told Wendell Phillips in October 1852, “A friend from Rochester writes me that Miss Julia Griffiths proposes leaving American within 3 months for a visit home. I if she could replace Douglass in the confidence of his old friends (where she found him) by leaving him for a season – it would be well.”<sup>95</sup> Nearly three more years would pass, however, before Griffiths did return to England.

In announcing Griffiths departure in 1855, Douglass told readers “We most heartily wish our earnest and brave friend a safe and pleasant passage to England, a happy visit with her friends, and *a speedy return to this the chosen field of her philanthropic labors.*”<sup>96</sup> In the prospectus for the ninth volume, Douglass told readers early in 1856 that Griffiths “will, *upon her return*, continue to write the Literary Notices for this Paper.”<sup>97</sup> Less than two weeks before sailing, Griffiths had told William H. Seward, “I expect to spend the next four or five months and if all be well, to return to the United States toward the close of the year.”<sup>98</sup> The Garrisonians likewise expected Griffiths to return to Rochester. Complaining that even with Griffiths gone, the Rochester

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<sup>94</sup> Sekora, “Mr. Editor, If You Please,” 612.

<sup>95</sup> William C. Nell to Wendell Phillips, Oct. 11, 1852, in Wesley and Uzelac, eds., *Selected Writings*, 312. Emphases in the original. Earlier in the year, Douglass had told a friend “she has seriously thought lately of returning to England.” Frederick Douglass to Samuel D. Porter, Jan. 12, 1852, Porter Family Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

<sup>96</sup> Frederick Douglass, “Personal,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, June 15, 1855. Emphasis added.

<sup>97</sup> Frederick Douglass, “Prospectus,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, Feb. 1, 1856. Emphasis added.

<sup>98</sup> Julia Griffiths to William H. Seward, June 5, 1855. Seward Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester. Also quoted in Palmer, “Partnership.”



Ladies Anti-Slavery Society was being run as though “someone among them wears Julia Griffiths [sic] mantle,” Nell asked Douglass’ friend Amy Kirby Post, “When is she to return from Europe. [sic]”<sup>99</sup> Although Griffiths’ intention to return to Rochester seems well-documented, the evidence is fragmentary that she ever did.<sup>100</sup>

Douglass’ biographers generally have lost interest in Griffiths’ activities once she left his side.<sup>101</sup> Yet for several more years she continued an ardent crusade to keep British antislavery women active in supporting Douglass’ newspapers. The wealthy abolitionist Lewis Tappan observed during this time, “You seem to have been indefatigable and to have succeeded very well. I am glad of it.”<sup>102</sup> Griffiths’ efforts in the United Kingdom not only were no less ambitious or productive than they had been in Rochester, but they also contributed to the larger reform movement in British social and political life. The period 1856-1860 in Griffiths’ life deserves much more attention than scholars have given her.

### **Transatlantic Journalism**

Her ship had barely left Baltimore when Griffiths began writing the first of more than 80 “Letters from the Old World,” columns that appeared nearly every month in

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<sup>99</sup> William C. Nell to Amy Kirby Post, Boston, Aug. 23, 1857, Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester. See also, *Selected Writings from 1832-1874*, 488.

<sup>100</sup> Here I differ with Nancy A. Hewitt, who has Griffiths returning to Rochester briefly in fall 1857. See, *Women’s Activism*, 185. Hewitt relies on a letter from Sarah Kirby Hallowell Willis to Amy Post (Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester) in which the handwritten date appears to be Oct. 7, 1857, and which was filed by the library under the year 1857, but might also be read as Oct. 7, 1851. The matter-of-fact tone of a Griffiths sighting, which would have been highly unusual and occasion for more comment, and references in the letter to Douglass’ risk at the hands of slave catchers, however, make it more likely the letter was written just after the so-called Jerry Rescue in Syracuse, New York, on Oct. 1, 1851, when Douglass’ safety was far more equivocal.

<sup>101</sup> See, for instance, Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992), 244 n127.

<sup>102</sup> Lewis Tappan to Griffiths, Brooklyn, New York, March 3, 1857. Papers of Lewis Tappan, Vol. 8, no. 352. Library of Congress. Tappan had contributed to Griffiths’ *Autographs for Freedom*, and also had made financial gifts to Douglass and his newspapers.

Douglass' papers until he ceased publishing in 1863. Detailing her constant travels in support of Douglass and abolition, the column provided a continuous conduit for part of what has been called the transatlantic dialogue over slavery. In the column, she often detailed her extensive travels in England, Scotland, and Ireland on behalf of abolitionism and Douglass. Though one scholar dismisses these columns as mere travelogues,<sup>103</sup> they in fact detail the lengths to which Griffiths went in her crusade. The columns' claims of continuing widespread enthusiasm on her side of the Atlantic also suggest no little moral support for the American abolitionists, particularly Douglass. Such communication became all the more important when Great Britain was deciding whether to intervene on behalf of the South in the American Civil War.

Although following the traditional form of correspondents' newspaper reports on their travels, Griffiths' "Letters from the Old World" represented a public manifestation of the private epistolary networking that women had engaged in to advance the sugar boycotts of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain and later the anti-Corn Law movement.<sup>104</sup> Reporting in Douglass' newspaper on her extensive and often exhausting travels in the United Kingdom, Griffiths defined and sustained a community of antislavery women – and men – that reached across the Atlantic. "I read, with great pleasure, the letters from Miss Julia Griffiths" wrote a correspondent from San Francisco. "She is an agreeable writer, and her descriptive powers are excellent. Her 'Letters from the Old World' will be read with much interest."<sup>105</sup> The columns gave voice, humanity,

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<sup>103</sup> Elisa Tamarkin, "Black Anglophilia; or, The Sociability of Antislavery," *American Literary History* 14, no. 3 (Autumn, 2002): 444-478.

<sup>104</sup> See, for instance, Sarah Richardson, "'Well-neighbored Houses': The Political Networks of Elite Women, 1780-1860," and "Simon Morgan, "Domestic Economy and Political Agitation: Women and the Anti-Corn Law League, 1839-1846," in *Women in British Politics, 1760-1860: The Power of the Petticoat*, ed. Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson, (London: Macmillan Press, 2000).

<sup>105</sup> Nubia, "From Our San Francisco Correspondent," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Oct. 26, 1855.

and identity to the various local women's groups nestled in central and northern England, Scotland, and Ireland. Griffiths' columns highlighted various antislavery efforts and united them in the cause of abolition and of Douglass. *Frederick Douglass' Monthly* was read regularly in the United Kingdom, so mentions of a particular local society's activities offered models for activism and encouragement to other women. As public letters, Griffiths' columns offered examples of what historian Sarah Richardson identifies as "a space for women (and men) to engage in the public realm and to exercise influence."<sup>106</sup>

In her correspondence, Griffiths underscored the centrality of Douglass' and other antislavery newspapers to the formation of an amorphous, trans-national community. Scolding Douglass for lapses in supporter relations, she wrote from England that at "the bidding of the members of some of our [ladies antislavery] societies," *Douglass' Monthly* simply had to arrive reliably. "[T]he interests of your nice new interesting paper will be ruined if the papers are not regularly sent over," she told him. "Mrs. Johnstone of Montrose (an old friend) states, she has only had 2 papers for her 10/ – all the other Montrose papers were stopped some time ago, because they did not get through regularly – and Mrs. Johnstone will stop, if her paper does not reach her. The Barnsley Society only now take one paper – and never get it. They are very angry."<sup>107</sup> Besides collecting outright donations for Douglass, Griffiths made herself his chief subscription agent in the United Kingdom, regularly sending him money from new or renewing subscribers. Ever the editor, she also was mindful of what might sell newspapers for Douglass. For

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<sup>106</sup> Richardson, "Well-neighbored Houses," 58.

<sup>107</sup> Julia Griffiths to Frederick Douglass, Haverstock Hill, England, February 4, [185-], Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress. Undated: C (Series: General Correspondence). Emphasis in original.

instance, “An article in your monthly on the ‘Countrabands’ might assist you, a little, I think,” she advised.<sup>108</sup>

Immediately on her return, Griffiths quickly set to work developing the women’s antislavery network in support of Douglass. Although always focused on Douglass and his newspapers, Griffiths created and used the local infrastructures of antislavery women in the United Kingdom and back in Rochester to yield an international network that helped keep American abolition front and center on the public agenda.

Although she professed not to be a women’s rights advocate, Griffiths clearly contributed to – and even fostered among women – the growing sense of importance and empowerment that in time would lead to increasing pressure in Great Britain to grant women the right to vote. As historian Sarah Richardson points out, “It is clear that many women were active in the ‘unofficial’ politics of the day, in spite of their protestations to the contrary, and used their informal social and kinship networks to support and sustain their activities.”<sup>109</sup> Scholars may debate the extent to which antislavery campaigns contributed directly to the women’s rights movements in the United Kingdom and the United States, but it is clear that at least among certain radical elements the lessons of the abolition campaigns were important to furthering the suffrage battles.

In the United States, of course, both Douglass and Garrison spoke out for women’s participation in public policy issues. Douglass was a friend of women’s rights pioneer Susan B. Anthony, whose family was involved in antislavery work, and Douglass was the only male invited to speak at the first women’s rights convention in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York. In Britain, the antislavery campaigns’ themes, metaphors, and

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<sup>108</sup> Julia Griffiths Crofts to Frederick Douglass, Sept. 1, 1862. Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress 1862 (Series: General Correspondence). Emphases in original.

<sup>109</sup> Richardson, “‘Well-neighbored Houses,’” 57.

imagery resonated with women who saw females everywhere as enslaved at all levels of the social hierarchy.

Nor did these women necessarily come directly out of the antislavery movement. Noting “the extensive use made of the lexicon of slavery within the radical culture at large,” historian Kathryn Gleadle has contended that “it is not surprising that British radicals should have appropriated such rhetoric, for during the early part of this period, the massive propaganda efforts of the anti-slavery movement ensured that the issue of slavery became steeped within the public consciousness.”<sup>110</sup>

Griffiths not only used her “social and kinship networks,” but also more than any other woman in Britain at that time she expanded those networks. In her antislavery, pro-Douglass zeal, Griffiths took matters further. The “network of fifteen ‘Christian’ female societies” in England, Scotland, and Ireland that Griffiths founded between 1856 and 1859 “constituted the largest group of new anti-slavery societies since the formation of local auxiliaries by BFASS [British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society] agents in the early 1840s.”<sup>111</sup> As one of the foremost organizers of grass-roots antislavery women, Griffiths showed everyday women how they could become involved in deciding essential political issues and gave them voice on one of the most critical questions of the nineteenth century. The tangible output of their efforts was a steady stream of bazaar goods and cash donations to the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society that ultimately provided considerable support to Douglass and his newspapers. Under Griffiths’ direction, both

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<sup>110</sup> Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women’s Rights Movement, 1831-51* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 63.

<sup>111</sup> Midgley, *Women Against Slavery*, 142.

when residing in Rochester and after returning to Britain, the Rochester bazaars “received more valuable goods from Britain and Ireland than from within the United States.”<sup>112</sup>

Paradoxically, no little responsibility for maintaining the transatlantic conversation about race and slavery must go to the threat Griffiths posed to Garrison’s British base. In the competition for British approval and support – financial, political, and moral – a steady stream of representatives of the various American antislavery factions brought their appeals to the United Kingdom.<sup>113</sup> By her constant travels on Douglass’ behalf, amplified by publicity in *Douglass’ Monthly*, Griffiths energized the transatlantic debate and kept the subject a lively topic of interest. Even the infighting among antislavery factions that she occasioned kept interest and dedication high among the various parties.

Parker Pillsbury, a leading Garrisonian who was in England when Griffiths arrived in 1855, promptly canceled his plan to return to the United States in order to keep an eye on her.<sup>114</sup> Pillsbury biographer Stacey Robertson asserts, “Pillsbury became obsessed with Julia Griffiths. He constantly tracked her activities, wrote about her to Boston, and spoke about her during his private gatherings. Griffiths certainly was a first-rate antagonist; she worked with political abolitionists, promoted church antislavery, and castigated the Garrisonians. ... ‘Julia Griffiths,’ he pronounced to Samuel May Jr., ‘is the most devilish as well as the most despicable of all the present foes.’”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>113</sup> See, for instance, R.J.M. Blackett, *Building an Antislavery Wall: Black Americans in the Atlantic Abolitionist Movement, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983); Midgley, *Women Against Slavery*.

<sup>114</sup> Robertson, *Parker Pillsbury*, 109.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-110.

Likewise, Garrison complained to May that “Through the machinations of that double-and-twisted worker of iniquity, Julia Griffiths, the hue-and-cry of ‘infidelity’ is raised afresh in England and Scotland, by various religious cliques, against the American Anti-Slavery Society, in order to prevent any further contributions being made to the [Garrisonian] National Bazaar. Douglass is impudently held up as the Christian champion who is nobly battling our ‘infidel’ abolitionism, and every effort is made to extend the circulation of his paper on this account. He connives at all this villainy, being utterly unscrupulous in carrying out his own designs.”<sup>116</sup>

Griffiths’ travels, of course, were also in pursuit of material support for Douglass, money or goods that could be converted to cash at the Rochester fairs. She had been in England about a year when Douglass once again wrote in despair to Gerrit Smith about the paper’s finances. “I am almost convinced that my paper cannot be sustained,” he told his longtime benefactor. “I am now full fifteen hundred dollars in debt for it and have on hand only six hundred dollars from my friend Julia Griffiths to pay my creditors. . . . The prospect is dark.”<sup>117</sup> Douglass asked Smith about merging his paper with the American Abolition Society’s *Radical Abolitionist*, though nothing came of it and the relentless quest for operating funds continued. In 1860, while in England waiting out the repercussions of Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry, he wrote to RLASS treasurer Maria Porter asking \$100 for the paper.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> William Lloyd Garrison to Samuel J. May, Boston, 21 March 1856, in *Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, Vol. IV, From Disunionism to the Brink of War, 1850-1860*, ed. Louis Ruchames (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975), 389-392.

<sup>117</sup> Frederick Douglass to Gerrit Smith, May 23, 1856, Gerrit Smith Papers, Bird Library, Syracuse University.

<sup>118</sup> Frederick Douglass to Maria G. Porter, Jan 11, 1860, Papers of the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

## After Years

Upon her marriage in 1859 to the Rev. Dr. Henry Only Crofts, a New Connexion Methodist leader, Griffiths became stepmother to three girls, Elizabeth Ann Crofts, 18; Saley [sic] Jane B. Crofts, 8; and Martha Nicholl Crofts, age 5.<sup>119</sup> For nearly the next twenty years, Julia and Henry Crofts moved about northern England, residing in communities in three-year assignments as was customary for Methodist clergy, until they moved to St. Neots in present-day Cambridgeshire and he retired in 1877. He died January 21, 1880, in St. Neots.<sup>120</sup> While living near Leeds early in the 1860s, both Julia and Henry Crofts – “an excellent anti-slavery man,” Douglass wrote<sup>121</sup> – remained active in antislavery forums.

Griffiths continued her correspondence with Douglass and others she had known in the antislavery days. When Seward lost the Republican presidential nomination to Abraham Lincoln in 1860, Griffiths wrote him a consoling letter.<sup>122</sup> In 1860, Douglass, fleeing the repercussions from John Brown’s raid on the U.S. arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, visited the Crofts in England, calling theirs “my main home” in England.<sup>123</sup> Perhaps mindful of the inuendo that once attached his domestic relationship with Griffiths, Douglass was relieved that Henry Crofts received him well. “I found my old

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<sup>119</sup> The girls were daughters of Crofts’ first wife, Saley Ann Bucknell Crofts, who died May 18, 1854, in Nottingham. General Register Office, “Certified Copy of an Entry of Death,” Vol. 7b, p. 129, no. 311; *Dumfries Reformer*, 14 June 1854.

<sup>120</sup> *Register of Burials in the Parish of St. Neots in the County of Huntingdon, 1844-1904*, Huntingdon County Records Office, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, England, No. 1735, Page 217. General Register Office, “Deaths Registered in January, February and March 1880,” p. 80. Certificate recorded in GRO Vol. 3b, p. 211.

<sup>121</sup> Frederick Douglass, “Marriage of Miss Julia Griffiths,” *Frederick Douglass’ Monthly*, April 1859.

<sup>122</sup> Julia Griffiths Crofts to William H. Seward, June 15, 1860. William Henry Seward Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

<sup>123</sup> Frederick Douglass to Amy Kirby Post, May 1860. Frederick Douglass Institute, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester. Accessed online at <<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/rbk/douglass/letter110.stm>> on June 16, 2005.



friend Julia quite glad, of course to see me – and what was of equal importance, her husband too.”<sup>124</sup>

During this time, Griffiths remained focused on the newspaper even as Douglass’ interests were turning to more direct involvement in the war effort. “Do not I beseech of you,” she wrote from Leeds in 1862, “be hurried away into taking up arms; even if the government should be condescending enough to allow you to bear them on its behalf – Your work is with your pen, not with a sword or gun!”<sup>125</sup> The next spring she again admonished Douglass, “By everything dear to you, my friend, do not take any commission that leads you personally into the fighting ranks – Write as you please, but never go South – or killed you most assuredly will be – You are, in many respects, a marked man – Your letter of 24<sup>th</sup> ... breathes such a notion possible when the legislature of N.Y. grants “equal rights” – after all, the pen is ever greater than the sword – the head is greater than the hand – Your work is with your pen & tongue.”<sup>126</sup> Apparently she had been unaware of Douglass’ decision to discontinue the monthly after the April 1863 edition.

With slavery’s end nearing and a husband and three step-daughters to care for, Griffiths focused on family affairs in England, though writing regularly to former American associates such as Smith and Seward, who had become U.S. secretary of state under Lincoln and would continue in the Andrew Johnson administration. In an 1863 letter to Anna M. Cornell Barnes, who had succeeded her as secretary of the Rochester society, Griffiths decried the society’s decision not to send Douglass’ daughter, Rosetta,

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Julia Griffiths Crofts to Frederick Douglass, Sept. 1, 1862. Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress 1862 (Series: General Correspondence). Emphasis in original.

<sup>126</sup> Julia Griffiths Crofts to Frederick Douglass, April 3, 1863. Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress 1863 (Series: General Correspondence). Emphasis in original.

south to teach newly freed African-Americans in the temporary camps that had been set up outside Washington. “I know to[o] fully, how entirely nearly every thing American is dyed in ‘prejudice against color,’ & and how it permeates even the best of American Anti-Slavery Societies that I feared lest the rejection had been on account of color. ... [A] colored woman should have had the opportunity before anyone ventured to say, she could not do!!”<sup>127</sup> The following year saw her sending contributions to freedman’s relief.<sup>128</sup> She corresponded with Douglass into the early 1890s, although by 1894, a year before their deaths, age, arthritis, and apparent macular degeneration had rendered her handwritten letters grotesque caricatures of a once firm and certain correspondent.<sup>129</sup>

For nearly the last twenty years of her life, Julia Griffiths Crofts was proprietor of a “ladies school” in St. Neots. She died there at age 86 on May 25, 1895<sup>130</sup> – three months after Douglass’s death on February 20.

More prone to play supporting roles out of the limelight, Griffiths’ contributions to Douglass, his journalism, and to the antislavery cause have been obscured over the years. Nevertheless, her strength of character, organizational skills, literary polish, and unswerving zeal must be seen as major contributions to Douglass’ success as an editor and, by extension, as one of the most influential African-Americans of the nineteenth century. Douglass was at risk of failing as an editor, his chosen work in the years leading up to the Civil War, when Griffiths came to his side. With the structure and support

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<sup>127</sup> Julia Griffiths to Anna M.C. Barnes, Feb. 20, 1863, in Jean Fagan Yellin, ed., *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers*, vol. 2 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). Emphasis in original.

<sup>128</sup> Julia Griffiths Crofts to Maria G. Porter, Sept. 2, 1864. Papers of the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>129</sup> Julia Griffiths Crofts to Frederick Douglass, Feb. 2, 1894. Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress 1894 (Series: General Correspondence); Palmer, “Partnership.”

<sup>130</sup> General Register Office, “Deaths Registered in April, May, and June 1895,” p. 72. Certificate recorded in GRO vol. 3b, 163.

Griffiths provided him, however, Douglass became ever more powerful in the fight to end slavery. And as she helped make Douglass the figure he became, Griffiths also made significant contributions to the thought and actions of women envisioning a new place for themselves in a democratic society on two continents.