

Frederick Douglass' Visits to Pendleton

By: Tim McClintick
Pendleton Historical Museum

The best-known visit made to Pendleton by Frederick Douglass was in 1843. This visit was for the purpose of delivering one of the 100 New England Anti-Slavery Society lectures that were to be made across the country to educate the citizens of the North against slavery. George Bradburn and William A. White accompanied Mr. Douglass to Pendleton.

The speeches were to be delivered on a platform that had been erected in a grove on the west side of Colonel Parker's house. Just as the speeches were commencing, a group of men from surrounding communities attacked the speakers with clubs and eggs; the sympathizers of the lecturers could not prevent the attack and fled the scene and were followed by the attackers.

Frederick Douglass made it to the south side of Fall Creek where the physical abuse continued. Several local citizens arrived at this site and overran the mob and began to administer aid to the wounded. The speakers were too badly hurt to continue with the lecture and were taken to the home of Neil and Elizabeth Hardy by Wm. W. Lukens where the wounds were dressed. Mary Ann Swain, mother of Dr. Joseph Swain, dressed the wounds of Frederick Douglass. The women of Spring Valley nursed the injured while the men fearlessly guarded their safety.

The three men were able to speak at the Friends Meeting House on the Sunday afternoon following the Friday attack. The friendly crowd was reported to be too large for the building and was moved outdoors. All the lecturers spoke with bandages on their injuries; and Mr. Douglass would never regain the full use of his damaged arm.

The Republican State Central Committee of Indiana employed Douglass to make twelve Republican speeches in 1876. The Republicans of Fall Creek requested that the State Committee send Mr. Douglass to Pendleton to speak; they responded that the only time available was the evening before the election. The locals accepted and Mr. Douglass was glad to come. Mr. Douglass spoke to a large audience on a beautiful evening and stayed through the night and until noon the next day when he visited with some of his friends. Among these friends were John Thomas Sr. and Mary Ann Swain who had made arrangements to attend the Centennial in Washington D.C. and had the pleasure of Mr. Douglass' company. Later, the two of them met Mr. Douglass by appointment and viewed Washington D.C. from his two-horse carriage and then went to Mr. Douglass' home. During the visit, John Thomas Sr. who had been six years old at the time of Mr. Douglass' first visit and had been splattered with egg during the assault, told Mr. Douglass that the captain of the mob who had attacked him on his first visit was anxious to meet him at Pendleton but was prevented by sickness. He wanted to ask forgiveness. Mr. Douglass replied, "Why, I forgave him long ago."

According to Thomas, Frederick Douglass' final visit to Pendleton was in 1880.

The spirit and compassion of Frederick Douglass will return to Pendleton for "The Encounter at the Falls" hosted by the Pendleton Historical Museum. Dr. Bonaface Hardin will be portraying Frederick Douglass in the same spirit he shares with this historic international figure during the living history event on May 2nd.