

*History of the Frederick Douglass Monument –Dedication 1899
Central Avenue and St. Paul Blvd., Rochester, New York*

A MONUMENTAL DREAM REALIZED

By Andrew J. Williams, II

On June 9, 1899, John W. Thompson, a young local African American, learned from experience that one man can influence history by following his dream.

The story had begun 4 ½ years earlier at a meeting in November 1894 of Eureka Lodge 36, Free and Accepted Masons, Prince Hall. That evening, Thompson, a waiter at the Powers Hotel, had submitted a proposal for erecting a unique monument in Rochester to memorialize “African American” soldiers and sailors who had died in the Civil War.

The lodge enthusiastically embraced the proposal and established the Civil War Veteran Monument Committee to direct the project.

When Thompson was appointed committee chairman, he had no idea of the trials to come the next several years. He was to see his initial proposal modified several times and abandoned by some of its strongest supporters. But eventually his idea would become reality in the nation’s first memorial for an African American citizen.

Even before the project got off the ground, there were controversies and conflicts. Many residents, both black and white, thought Rochester already had a monument that honored all Civil War veterans.

The Lincoln monument had been unveiled in 1892 in Washington Square Park, to commemorate fallen heroes of the Civil War.

President Benjamin Harrison and Frederick Douglass, U.S. Ambassador to Haiti, had been central figures at the unveiling.

But Thompson argued that the Lincoln monument did not represent all soldiers and sailors of the Civil War. *“I have visited the monument in Washington Square and made an examination of the bronze figures,” he said. But the features of the military figures in the monument “represent the American white soldiers and sailors, one Irish soldier and one the German, while the Afro-American is not represented in features.”*

Thompson realized that his project needed the endorsement of a prominent figure connect with Rochester. During the late 1800’s Rochester was best known, throughout the nation and the world, as the former home of Frederick Douglass. Thompson wrote to Douglass, who was then living in Washington, D.C., and within a few weeks Douglass responded:

"I am more than pleased with the patriotic purpose to erect in Rochester a monument in honor of the colored soldier who, under great discouragements, at the moment of the national peril, volunteered to go to the front and fight for their country – when assured in advance that neither by our own government nor that of the Confederates would they be accorded the equal rights of peace or of war. The colored soldier fought all the same. I shall be proud if I shall live to see the proposed monument erected in the city of Rochester, where the best years of my life were spent in the service of our people – and which to this day seems like my home."

That letter from Douglass sparked the support of the community at large. But the monument committee decided to make the proposal even more attractive by giving the monument a dual purpose. Editorials soon appeared in the most local newspapers, approving the new plans to depict the "colored" heroes in granite and the "Great Negro Leader" Frederick Douglass in bronze.

On the night of February 20, 1895, however, news reached Rochester that Douglass had died suddenly. The next morning several newspapers quoted Thompson as saying the monument would be erected "solely in memory of the late Frederick Douglass."

The announcement drew overwhelming support and soon was carried in papers throughout the state and the nation.

The Smith Granite Co. of Westerly, R.I., was contracted to design, produce and install the 17-foot-tall memorial. An 8-foot likeness of Douglass, made of imperishable bronze, would stand on a 9-foot pedestal of Westerly gray granite. The youngest Douglass son, Charles, eventually posed for the sculpture by Smith Granite employee Stanley Edwards.

Rochester already was quite familiar with the Smith Granite Co.'s craftsmanship. Many of the monuments in area parks, gardens and cemeteries had been produced by the company.

Although the people of Rochester showed a lot of interest in raising the \$10,000 needed for the monument, funds were hard to collect. The country was going through a depression in the mid-1800s, and there seemed to be little money available for this type of venture. After a short struggle that raised \$2,500, the monument committee turned in its solicitation books and decided to abandon the effort.

But Thompson refused to give up. He went before the finance committee of the New York State Assembly in January 1897 to ask for a \$5,000 appropriation toward the monument fund. The Assembly and the Senate unanimously passed an amended bill that gave the fund \$3,000.

In October 1897, Thompson invited the government of Haiti to help fund the monument. Douglass had served as U.S. Minister to Haiti and was held in high esteem by its citizens. Haiti contributed \$1,000.

At that point a new group, the Frederick Douglass Monument Committee, was organized to take over the fund-raising.

A site for the monument was the next order of business. The choice involved as much controversy as the earlier decision about the monument's character.

Meeting with city officials and the Parks Board, Thompson proposed Plymouth Park in the Third Ward as the monument site. Since the early 1800s the Third Ward had been one of two main Rochester neighborhoods where blacks lived, owned businesses and worshipped. In fact, Douglass had begun publishing his first anti-slavery newspapers, *The North Star*, in the basement of the First A.M.E. Zion Church of Rochester, as the corner of Spring and Favor streets.

The site was approved by unanimous vote. But within a few months, the strong objections arose from residents and property owners in the area we now know as Corn Hill. Although they claimed to be admirers of Douglass, they did not wish to have his likeness in the neighborhood. Signed petitions to the Parks Board demanded an alternative site and suggested the heart of the city or one of the larger county parks.

After much argument and several meetings of city and county officials and the monument committee, alternative sites were chosen: Highland Park, Genesee Valley Park, and a small triangle of land at the corner of North St. Paul Street and Central Avenue, opposite the New York Central Railroad Station.

The corner near the railroad station was selected for its accessibility to viewers, both Rochester resident and railway travelers.

"It is fitting that it should stand near a great portal of our city," Mayor George Warner said in a proclamation, "where thousands who enter may see that she is willing to acknowledge to the world that her most illustrious citizen is not a white man."

With the monument's design and destination provide for, the committee only had to arrange the unveiling exercise and raise the rest of the funds.

In April 1898, the Smith Granite Co. notified Thompson that the two-piece memorial would be installed by August 2nd. Excitement was in the air. Newspapers and magazines nationwide announced that on September 14th Rochester would unveil the first monument in the nation to memorialize an African American citizen.

Elaborate arrangements were made for the day-long celebration. Special invitations were sent to members of the Douglass family, government officials, famous abolitionists, foreign diplomats and other persons of note.

Two days before the scheduled celebration, Thompson received a shocking telegram from the Smith Granite Company. Somehow, someone at the company had forgotten to forward a letter stating that the statue couldn't be delivered until late September.

Thompson and the others connected with the project were embarrassed, disappointed and even angry. No one was quite sure what to do. Out-of-state guests and diplomats were already arriving for the ceremonies.

Among them was Charles Douglass, who had posed for the statue and felt very close to the project. He recommended going ahead with the unveiling: The pedestal was in place and a lot of time, energy and resources had gone into the arrangements.

An estimated 3,000 people gathered on September 14, 1898. Music by the famous 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Colored Regiment Band opened the ceremonies. Two of Douglass' sons, Lewis and Charles, had been among the first to enlist in the regiment during the Civil War.

Guest speakers included suffragist Susan B. Anthony of Rochester, along with Ida B. Wells of Chicago and T. Thomas Fortune of New York City – prominent orators and editors of leading black newspapers. One of Douglass' grandsons, Joseph, played a violin solo.

Representing the Monument Committee, Walter Stewart interrupted the program to commend Thompson for his dream and leadership.

"John W. Thompson being imbued with the spirit of his race arose in a Masonic meeting and first started this work," Stewart said. "Often he had to tread the wine press alone, yet I believe there was an unseen influence assisting him so that he could not fail. Today John W. Thompson ought not to be without reward."

Thompson received a gold medallion with an engraving of the monument. An elegant evening reception with singing and dancing concluded the celebration.

Three weeks later, the 1,200-pound bronze statue finally arrived in Rochester and was immediately installed on the granite pedestal. The canvas-covered monument awaited a second unveiling ceremony, scheduled for October 12th. The plans attracted more national media coverage.

Three days before the event, however, Thompson fell critically ill and the unveiling had to be postponed indefinitely. The nature of Thompson's illness was not reported.

Editorials were not so kind about the second postponement. Thompson became the target of criticism throughout the country, especially among his own race.

Since Thompson was in no condition to battle public opinion, Charles Douglass took matters in hand and responded to a letter to the editor in *The Conservator*, Ida B. Wells' Chicago newspaper.

He wrote, "When Thompson was putting forth his best efforts to secure funds to erect a monument to the late Frederick Douglass, where were these critics that are now so numerous, fault-finding because the monument was not unveiled as announced, not a nickel did they give. Less than \$500 came from the pockets of the 10,000,000 negroes in the United States. The little Republic of Haiti, numbering less than a million inhabitants, gave a thousand dollars, more than was contributed by all the negroes in the United States together. The balance of the \$10,000 came from white people."

He ended his letter, *"Let Thompson alone. He had undertaken and accomplished more than has ever been accomplished before by any negro. He has erected a monument to one of his own race."*

By the time Thompson recovered, several weeks later, winter was approaching and he was reluctant to reschedule an unveiling. Another \$2,000 still was needed to meet the project's expenses. Thompson felt alone, perhaps even abandoned, as support from committee members dwindled.

Prominent members of the Grand Army of the Republic, the Union Veteran organization, asked Thompson to schedule an unveiling for the next spring, to give them the opportunity to arrange a parade. That request boosted Thompson's creative energies again.

He asked New York State Governor Theodore Roosevelt to select a spring date when he could come for an unveiling; the Governor chose June 9, 1899. Thompson then arranged for the Rochester Chamber of Commerce to help raise the rest of the monument funds and to entertain the Governor during his visit.

Mayor Warner issued a proclamation about the unveiling: *"I would respectfully request that on that day, after 12 o'clock noon, in order to fittingly celebrate the event, business will be suspended as much as possible, and that all the people assist in honoring the memory of our distinguished fellow citizen and join in showing respect to our distinguished visitors."*

What a celebration it was. As music filled the air, crowds filled every available space within 300 feet of the monument, including the roofs of surrounding buildings. American flags streamed in the wind.

About 10,000 people gathered to witness the unveiling of the Frederick Douglass Monument. More than 2,000 participated in parades that approached from various directions and converged at the newly name Frederick Douglass Park.

Nearly every military and civic organization from Rochester and Monroe County was represented. They could hardly find room in the streets to march, as thousands upon thousands cheered them along.

On that day, June 9, 1899, Rochester led the nation in honoring African American citizens. As the canvas was finally lifted from the completed Frederick Douglass Monument, John W. Thompson, at last, saw his dream become a reality.

In 1941, a special committee appointed by the city government and comprised of African-American and European-American citizens, voted to move the Douglass Monument to Rochester's famous Highland Park.

Endnotes:

An Authentic History of the Douglass Monument, 1903 - By John W. Thompson

Andrew Jackson Williams, II

Andrew Williams' interest in history and civil rights expanded when he organized the first Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Assembly at Wheatland-Chili High School (1974). After completing studies at Auburn College, he moved to Albany, NY in 1976, he wrote stories for the *South End Scene*, *Albany Eagle* and *Albany Times Union*; consulted with the NY State Library and Museum on Cultural Diversity and audience development; and served on the NY State Martin Luther King, Jr. Commission. His writing continues with Rochester's *about...time Magazine*, *Challenger Newspaper* and *Upstate New York Gospel Magazine*

He returned to Rochester in 1985 and worked at the Rochester Museum & Science Center as a Community Outreach Specialist/Educator and Special Assistant to the President. He developed exhibits highlighting Rochester's Black community—*Go'in North: The Alice Matthis Story*, *Austin Steward Exhibition* and *Images: Afro-Rochester 1910-1935*—and grew new African-American audiences. He was honored with a Smithsonian Institute Fellowship, in Washington, D.C., for his work within Rochester's cultural community.

Contact: Andrew J Williams, II * andrewnpraise@yahoo.com

He has hosted radio and television programs on college and commercial stations that promote Traditional Gospel Music.