Margaret Douglass: Literacy Education to Freed Blacks in Antebellum Virginia

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Margaret Douglass’ Resistance to Virginia’s Anti-literacy Law Restricting the Education of Slaves and Freed Blacks

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In the 19th century, voices for social reform reached a high pitch—both figuratively and literally. Recognizable women’s voices were heard in various reform movements: Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, Dorothea Dix, Harriet Tubman, Catherine Beecher and her sister Harriet Beecher-Stowe. These women were active in bringing about change in the societal roles and treatment of women, children, slaves, freedmen, and persons who were illiterate, disabled, poor, or incarcerated. A name not as recognizable, yet often held as an example of activism for educational rights of emancipated blacks, is that of Margaret Douglass—a white Virginian woman who was jailed for a month for violating an 1849 law prohibiting the teaching of reading and writing to freedmen. Although Douglass’ actions and the consequences faced for them have earned her a modicum of notoriety, further consideration may affirm that the limited status she holds as a social activist is warranted.

By no means does exploring such a thesis intend to discredit the commendable actions of Douglass or in any way to question her motives. It is a significant pursuit, however, to understand how benevolence toward a marginalized group or how provision of a valuable service to them may not equate to social activism that intentionally pushes boundaries to transform society. Questions to be considered include the following: (1) To what degree did Douglass’ resistance result in societal reform? (2) Was reform actually her intent, and—if so—what was her role and how sustained were her efforts? (3) What methods did she implement in her civil disobedience?
Background

From the Colonial era through the Early Republic, there was little perceived threat to white society by teaching slaves or freed blacks to read or write.¹ Prominent among the various religious groups who committed themselves to this work were the Quakers, who began black schools in Norfolk in the late eighteenth century,² and when the Sunday school movement spread to Virginia, churches commonly taught literacy both to white and black children in separate classes.³ After the 1831 Nat Turner Rebellion, however, these literacy efforts were viewed with increased suspicion for fear that literate blacks might embolden slaves to rebel.⁴ In 1849, the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia passed a series of anti-literacy laws. Of which, Chapter 198, Section 32, stated, “If a white person assemble with negroes for the purpose of instructing them to read or write, . . . he shall be confined in jail not exceeding six months, and fined not exceeding one hundred dollars . . .”⁵

After the law’s enactment, Sunday schools were expected to present orally their biblical and moral lessons to black children, but many churches continued to do so in written format.⁶


⁴ See Foner and Pacheco, Three Who Dared, xv; Cornelius, When I Can Read, 32.


⁶ Foner and Pacheco, Three Who Dared, xv.
There is no record, however, of any church-related instance in which an individual was charged with violating the law.\textsuperscript{7} Though there were many violations,\textsuperscript{8} rarely were whites brought to trial.\textsuperscript{9} There was a great deal of “winking at the violation,”\textsuperscript{10} and most infractions were handled extra-judicially by intimidation and social pressure.\textsuperscript{11} Only one known prosecution of the law exists, and that is of Margaret Douglass.\textsuperscript{12}

**Trial of Margaret Douglass**

Much of Margaret Douglass’ life is a mystery. After the death of her son in 1845, she moved to Norfolk from South Carolina with her teenaged daughter Rosa.\textsuperscript{13} Though she identified herself as “Mrs. Douglass,” it is unknown whether she was widowed or divorced. Whatever the circumstances of her son’s death and the absence of her husband, Douglass led a seemingly paradoxical life of isolation from her community\textsuperscript{14} while also being recognized, even by Norfolk’s Mayor Stubbs, as a humanitarian who cared for sick children and women victims of


\textsuperscript{10} Woodson, *The Education of the Negro*, 79.

\textsuperscript{11} Cornelius, *When I Can Read*, 43-44.

\textsuperscript{12} Capers, “Reading Back, Reading Black,” 19.

\textsuperscript{13} Margaret Douglass, *Educational Laws of Virginia: The Personal Narrative of Mrs. Margaret Douglass, a Southern Woman Who was Imprisoned for One Month in the Common Jail of Norfolk, Under the Laws of Virginia for the Crime of Teaching Free Colored Children to Read* (Boston: J. P. Jewitt & Co., 1854), 5.

\textsuperscript{14} Foner and Pacheco, *Three Who Dared*, x.
domestic violence.\textsuperscript{15} She was a well-spoken, confident woman, who described herself as an “independent spirit” and a “superior work woman,” earning a modest income, with Rosa’s help, sewing and embroidering vests for wealthy men.\textsuperscript{16}

In 1852, Douglass learned from a freed black barber that he and his five children were illiterate. Thinking that the anti-literacy law applied only to slaves, she offered to have Rosa tutor his children at no cost.\textsuperscript{17} He took her up on the offer, and—after teaching for a short while—Rosa expressed that she enjoyed it so much that she would rather teach than to sew vests. With the help of the barber’s family, the Douglasses announced that they were opening a school for freed black children in their home. It would begin June 1, 1852, and would cost three dollars tuition per quarter, per child. On the first day of class, Rosa opened school with twenty-five boys and girls in a second-floor room of their home. She taught basic reading and writing while her mother assisted in biblical and moral instruction.\textsuperscript{18} They were committed to students and their families beyond academic instruction. They often visited the children, taking food to them when they were sick, and cared for one ill child until her death.\textsuperscript{19}

Eleven months after school opened, class was unexpectedly disrupted May 9, 1853, when a law-enforcement officer knocked on the door and insisted to access the upstairs classroom. Douglass described Rosa as being “paralyzed” and the children as “clinging in terror” as they all

\textsuperscript{15} Douglass, \textit{Educational Laws of Virginia}, 16.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{17} Foner and Pacheco, \textit{Three Who Dared}, 58.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{19} Foner and Pacheco, \textit{Three Who Dared}, 60.
were led like a “flock of little lambs going to the slaughter” on their way to meet Mayor Stubbs.20 Douglass explained that she was unaware that the law applied to freed black children and that she would close the school immediately. Seeming satisfied, the mayor dismissed her without bond, and—although the case would be presented to the grand jury for review—she assumed the matter was resolved.21

Two months later, however, she received a summons to appear for trial in November. Since Rosa was a minor, the charges were directed only at Margaret. As she waited for her trial date, she refused to discuss the matter with anyone or to seek counsel. She would represent herself.22

In her boldly-written memoir, Douglass meticulously described the morning of November 15. She deliberately dressed to appear authoritative and carried a small red pocket Bible.23 In her preparations, she seemed aware of the elements of class, gender, religion, and race that were very much a part of her situation—all of which she would reference that day in her defending arguments.

Upon arriving at the courthouse, Douglass informed the attorney that she would serve as her own counsel and “would employ no other.”24 The Baltimore Sun described the sensation that was created when the “intrepid female” sat at the bar—a place reserved for those in “coats and

22. Foner and Pacheco, Three Who Dared, 63.
pantaloons.” 25 She called three men as her witnesses—all of whom were prominent wealthy men in the community and who were members of Christ Church where she and most of her students worshipped. 26 Her line of questioning was to indicate that the church’s Sunday school program had taught literacy to the same children for some time, that the books the children used in her school were provided to them by the church, and that, if she were guilty of violating the crime, so were many of the Sunday school teachers at the church. Court documents reveal Douglass’ words to her witnesses and also to the jury as being confident, bold, articulate, logical, and pointed. 27 Though the men denied the teaching of literacy within the church, they were far from convincing. One claimed ignorance because the “ladies had all to do with that.” 28 Another admitted to knowing the children were literate because he had heard them read the Bible aloud, but he feigned ignorance as to how they got to be so. He stated, “When they came to the hard words, I allowed them to skip over them.” 29

In her closing arguments, Douglass told the jury that she was not an abolitionist, was not acting on behalf of Northern instigators as accused by the press, had been a slaveholder herself, and “would be again if so disposed.” 30 Although she did speak of the “misery and distress” of

28. Ibid., 134.
30. Ibid., 135.
blacks, she affirmed her loyalty to the South and to its traditions, including that of slavery.\textsuperscript{31} She claimed complete ignorance of the law, stating, “Had I known . . . I would not have set myself in opposition to the law.”\textsuperscript{32} She then went on to address a socially taboo topic and, by doing so, may arguably have brought on her guilty verdict by the jury and the judge’s sentence. The topic of miscegenation.

After describing her own humanitarian actions to visit and care for black families, she stated, “It is not expected that gentlemen will take the trouble to seek out a negro hut for the purpose of alleviating the wretchedness he may find within it.”\textsuperscript{33} Her subsequent statements clarified that her insinuation was that men indeed seek out negro huts—but for another cause altogether:

In my opinion, we have nothing to fear from the true blooded negro. It is the half-breed, or those with more or less white blood in their veins, whom I have always found presumptive, treacherous and revengeful. And do you blame them for this? How can you? Ask yourselves the cause. Ask how that white blood got beneath those tawny skins, and let nature herself account for the exhibition of these instincts. Blame the authors of this devilish mischief, but not the innocent victims of it.\textsuperscript{34}

She later wrote in her memoir even more boldly about miscegenation: “Sable scholars . . . did I say? No, not all; for in many cases the difference could scarcely be perceived between them and white children. Yes, Mrs. D ‘condescended’ to teach free black men’s children, and free white men’s children—some of the latter being, very probably, among her real

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\item 31. Ibid.
\item 32. Ibid.
\item 33. Ibid.
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For Douglass, it was miscegenation, not slavery, that was “the one great evil hanging over the South,” and it was white women who were the greatest victims as they had to tolerate silently the smell of black women on their husbands. Regarding the anti-literacy laws, she wrote, “How important, then, for these Southern sultans, that the objects of their criminal passions should be kept in utter ignorance and degradation. They must not read the Bible because that teaches them the sin of their masters.”

The jury deliberated for two days before rendering a verdict of guilty with a one dollar fine. The length of time indicated that the decision may have been problematic, but the minimal fine—considering that the maximum allowable fine was one hundred dollars—conveyed that the jury may have sympathized with her argument, her cause, or her condition as a woman of modest means. The judge set the sentencing date for January and was not as sympathetic in his sentence or in his statement as he delivered it.

In his lengthy statement, Judge Richard Baker addressed many issues that were unrelated directly to Douglass’ crime. For instance, Baker defended the institution of slavery and railed against “Northern incendiaries” even though Douglass never taught slaves and had no connection to the North. “If you were of a different sex,” he told her, “I should regard the full punishment of six months imprisonment.” He went on to rationalize that a minimal sentence of less than a

36. Ibid, 64.
37. Ibid, 64-65.
week would be inappropriate because this had been “a case in which the question of guilt is free from doubt, and there are many facts and circumstances of aggravation.” He did not, however, expound on what the aggravation had been, especially considering that she closed the school immediately upon learning that her actions were illegal. Her sentence was one month in the city jail.  

During her sentence, the jailor and his wife showed Douglass special care. After her release, they hosted her in their home for several days before she and Rosa moved to Philadelphia. In her memoir, she described her new home as a place “where we are now quietly residing, happy in the consciousness that it is here now crime to teach a poor child, of any color, to read the Word of God.”

**Perspectives on Douglass**

The newspapers were not kind to Douglass. They described her as a “dangerous white woman” and an “intrepid female.” The *Norfolk Argus* bid her good riddance by writing, “Let her depart hence with only one wish, that her presence will never be intruded upon us again.” The *Baltimore Sun* compared her to “Lucy Stone, or any other member of the ‘strong-minded’ sisterhood.” Yet, how has she been perceived over time?

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41. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro*, 34.


A. Leon Higginbotham repeatedly recognized Douglass as an example of a white woman deserving of heroine status in the struggle for fair and just treatment of African Americans. A number of others have also portrayed her as a heroine and as one who boldly defied the law as a social activist. Some, such as Mary Cathryn Cain, have criticized her harshly. Cain cited Douglass as an example of a white woman motivated more by the negative impact of slavery on whites rather than the actual oppression of blacks. Cain used Douglass’ own words to illustrate her white supremacy, disdain for black women, and support for slavery.

Conclusion

Evidence indicates that Margaret Douglass was a true benefactor to poor, ill, and disenfranchised people—both white and black. She was a bold, outspoken woman at a time when such a quality in females was not appreciated as much as it might be in more recent times. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of her intentions regarding the teaching of the Bible and morality to freed black children. However, none of the evidence leads to the conclusion that she


was a social reformer who intentionally acted to transform society. To the contrary, her own words—both in court and in her memoir—support the notion that she never deliberately violated the law. She unapologetically admitted to having owned a slave, claimed that she would have no issue with doing so again, denied being an abolitionist, and spoke openly of the superiority of the Caucasian race. Furthermore, her decision to open a school for freed black children seemed more pragmatic than altruistic. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement. Her teenaged daughter, who enjoyed teaching more than helping her mother sew vests, was able to contribute to the modest family income while also contributing to the academic, religious, and moral instruction of the disenfranchised. Douglass’ story is interesting, a bit mysterious, and dramatic enough to merit a stage play or film. It does not, however, warrant her the status of social reformer.
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