

Johnson House to host symposium on Frederick Douglass's trip to Ireland

By **NATALIE SHERMAN**

nsherman@s-t.com

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NEW BEDFORD — On Jan. 1, 1846, after spending four months in Ireland, former slave Frederick Douglass delivered his impression of the island to the readers of the abolitionist newspaper "The Liberator":

"I can truly say, I have spent some of the happiest moments of my life since landing in this country," he wrote. "I am covered with the soft grey fog of the Emerald Isle. I breathe, and lo! the chattel becomes a man."

Douglass' trip to Ireland, where he met Daniel O'Connell, an Irish statesman who pushed for the emancipation of slaves and Catholics, will be the focus of a symposium Thursday at the Nathan and Polly Johnson House, where he first established himself as a free man.

The event will serve as the formal launch of the Frederick Douglass/Daniel O'Connell project and is part of a broader push by Ireland to strengthen ties with the U.S. and raise its tourist profile, particularly among members of its 70 million person global diaspora. (A Frederick Douglass in Ireland itinerary is in the works.)

About 8,000 people in New Bedford claim Irish ancestry, according to data from the American Community Survey.

"There's no large city or town near Boston that doesn't have a connection to Ireland," said Michael Lonergan, the consul general of Ireland in New England, who will attend the event Thursday. "While Boston has a lot of history, it doesn't have the monopoly."

During Douglass' own visit to Ireland, he saw conditions similar to slavery among the peasantry, and his relationship with O'Connell proved formative. That prompted him to endorse non-violent, political struggle as the best path to end slavery, a break with some of his early abolitionist mentors.

"The presumption was that he got some very wise counsel from Daniel O'Connell," said Dennis Hale, a political science professor at Boston College and one of Thursday's panelists. "They both rejected participation in armed uprisings and both felt that political activity was the only way to achieve the ends that they believed in, the justice that they sought."

The warm welcome Douglass received in Ireland stood in stark contrast to the poor relations between African-Americans and Irish in the U.S., an irony he noted later in his book, "The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass."

"It's very often that people don't deal with some of the complexities of history," said Lee Blake, president of the New Bedford Historical Society. "How the Irish who were in Ireland related to African-Americans was very different from how the Irish in America related to African-Americans in America."