

CEDAR HILL (JOHN VAN HOOK HOUSE)

Frederick Douglass House
14th and W. Streets, SE.
Washington, D. C.

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Washington 25, D. C.

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. DC-97

THE FREDRICK DOUGLASS HOME

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Location: 14th and W Streets, Southeast
Washington, D. C.

Present Owners: The National Park Service

Present Use: Memorial to Fredrick Douglass

Significance: The house was the residence of the Marshal and Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia, Minister to Haiti and run-away slave, Fredrick Douglass. The structure is an example of a mid-19th Century farm residence.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The site of the Fredrick Douglass Home was originally purchased by John VanHook ca. 1855. He built the main portion of the present house soon after that. For a portion of 1877 the house was owned by the Freedom Savings and Trust Company and then on 1 September 1877 it was purchased by Fredrick Douglass.

At the time the house was owned by Fredrick Douglass it was known as the "Old VanHook Mansion" or "Cedar Hill" and sat on about 8½ acres. At two different times the house was added to and much interior and exterior redecoration carried out - much of this was undoubtedly done during Fredrick Douglass's occupancy. Douglass lived in the house from about 1889 to his death in 1895.

In 1900 Douglass's widow founded the Fredrick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association. In 1916 the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs joined with the Fredrick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association. These groups owned the house to 25 June 1964, when the Federal Government took deed to the House through the National Park Service, with the intent of restoring and preserving it.

The original structure was an L-shaped, brick, gable roofed, two story house with three main rooms on the first floor. These included the two front principal rooms and the present dining room. To this main house there were later changes and additions in the form of the two story library wing and the two story kitchen wing added to the south.

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The ornamentation at the cornice lines and on the front porch was changed during some of these alterations. The only record of a building permit issued for the house is one dating from 12 July 1889 and there is no indication of what construction work was done at that time. Surface evidence indicates that the kitchen and library wings were added at different times. To the south of the house and connected to it by a breezeway is a small, brick, gable roofed, care-takers cottage which was added after the death of Fredrick Douglass between 1917 - 1920.

At the time of transfer of the deed of the Fredrick Douglass Home to the National Park Service a complete set of interior and exterior photographs was taken to show both the condition of the house and the contents at that time. There had been little change to the house fabric at the time of these photos in 1964. Also included in this set of photographs are duplicates of old photographs located on the premises.

References:

Federal Writers' Project Works Progress Administration. WASHINGTON CITY AND CAPITAL. American Guide Series, Washington, 1937. Pages 78, 458-459.

Historical Report by Steven H. Lewis for the National Park Service in June of 1964.

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PART II ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The Fredrick Douglass Home is a two and a half story, brick, gable ended residence with two, wooden, rear wings. The structure has an ornate, bracketed cornice, a standing seam metal roof, exterior blinds on all windows and is painted buff yellow with green and white trim. This central hall house is set on a high hill overlooking Anacostia and the City of Washington.

The prime importance of this structure comes from the fact that it was the home of the famous abolitionist and freed slave, Fredrick Douglass, and has been little altered since his death in 1895. The house has been maintained as a memorial to Fredrick Douglass since 1900 by various groups.

At the time of this inspection in June 1964, the house stood in a moldering and untouched state. The structure had experienced little vandalism or damage from fire or earthquake. The grounds were overgrown and the building suffered from the lack of paint and proper roof. The interior of the house showed signs of severe settlement and most rooms were not square in the vertical or horizontal direction. Floors had pulled away, moldings no longer fitted and the main mantles on the first floor showed signs of moving away from the walls. In places the floor was rotted through and many soft places indicated that the timbers below the floors were either rotted or termite eaten. Some of the exterior blinds were missing and a few windows broken. None of the mechanical equipment was operative. Though the house was equipped at one time with electric lights, plumbing and hot air heat. The fabric of the house did not seem sound but the furniture and pictures were all in place as were all of the other household items. These things seemed to be in good order.

The overall size of the house with porches and wings is 73 by 43 feet. The 43 foot dimension being that of the front of the house which faces North. In the center of the first floor is a double door, each section of which has one panel above another, double hung side-lights are on either side of the doors and there is a transom over the whole assembly. The front porch extends across the entire front of the first floor of the house. On either side of the doors and also under the porch are two 6/12 light double hung windows. These extend from the floor of the porch to the ceiling and have wooden exterior blinds.

The porch is three wooden risers above the grade line and has a wooden floor and wooden trim. There are four wooden Doric columns across the front of the porch supporting a strip of lattice work above and then the cornice for the porch.

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The center of the second floor of the front of the house has a three sided bay with the sides at 45 degrees. This has French doors in the front and double hung windows in the sides. On either side of the bay on the second floor is a 6/6 light double hung window with blinds.

The east side of the house shows several stages of change and development in the house. From here the two frame additions to the rear of the house are visible as is a pair of rectangular bays with molded brick of a date later than the original house. These are obvious additions, due to size of brick, brick courses not matching, etc. These bays have one over one light double hung windows.

The south and the west sides of the house also show the additions of the frame wings. These are T & G on the library wing and clapboard on the kitchen wing. Most windows in the rear and the sides of the house and its additions are six over six light double hung with wooden exterior blinds.

At the roof or cornice line of the house there is evidence of a wooden built-in gutter and a later metal gutter. The soffit is bracketed at about five feet on center. In the center of the front of the roof is a small peak, or triangular gable end dormer with a small round window in it.

The foundations of the Fredrick Douglass House are of brick. There is a basement under most of the house and the kitchen wing, with one stone interior partition wall.

There are four chimneys in the house, all of them interior. Two occur on the ends of the main house and two occur in the kitchen wing. All are brick and protrude at the ridge lines of their various wings.

The floor plan of the original portion of the Fredrick Douglass Home is L-shaped, with a center stair hall flanked on either side by a primary room. To the rear of one side is another primary room.

The two wings to the rear of the house were built flush to each other extending south and filling the entire width of the rear of the house. On the east side of the rear extends the Library wing, consisting of one small room. To the west of the rear extends the kitchen wing, built on the end of the L of the original house. This kitchen wing consists of a stairway to the second floor, a large kitchen and three smaller rooms.

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The second floor has one large bedroom over the small section of the original house, behind this is another bedroom connected by a wide doorway and located over the library wing. Across the center stair hall from these is a series of three bedrooms in the original portion of the house. Behind these and over the kitchen wing is another bedroom, a later bathroom and a large hall. This hall is connected to the kitchen below by the above mentioned stairway.

The third floor has four finished attic rooms and a closet. All are small and have sloped ceilings.

The main stairway in the center hall has a straight run from the first floor to the second and an L-shaped run from the second floor to the third. In the kitchen wing the utility stair running from the kitchen on the first floor to the second floor is a straight run. There are two basement stairways, an exterior one on the west side of the house and an interior one from the kitchen in a straight run underneath the kitchen stair to the second floor.

The floors in the Fredrick Douglass Home are of wood board ranging in width from three to five inches. In most cases these have been painted. There are indications that some portions of the first floor had wall to wall fabric floor coverings.

Most interior doors are four panels with simple molding on the panels, the panels being two over two. Doors and windows have an Italian-type of molding.

The house has a variety of late 19th Century hardware and a collection of early 20th Century lighting fixtures.

The heating system is of the gravity flow hot air type. There is evidence of the use of stoves in some places for heat on the second floor and in the kitchen wing. The two primary, or front rooms, on the first floor are equipped with matching fireplaces. These are black polished stone and slate and are of low proportions. The fire openings are semi-circular arches with carved moulding. The shelf above is gently curved and reverse from above. The dining room has a varnished walnut fireplace that might best be described as Victorian in design. This mantel has a mirror and shelves as well as carvings for ornamentation. The pattern of carving on the mantel is non-symmetrical with ribbons, stars and some nested circular grooves. The hearth is small ceramic tiles. The over-mantel contains the shelf and mirror with a flat broken pediment above. On either side of the fireplace are columns running from the base up to the shelf on the top of the overmantel. The mirror has one large center panel with two smaller side panels. Small shelves hang at the junctures of these mirrors.

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There is one fireplace on the second floor in the northeast bedroom. This has a painted wood mantel with a low proportion of the Greek Revival type. There is evidence that a similar fireplace was removed from the bedroom across the hall.

The property on which the Fredrick Douglass Home was built was originally quite a large farm tract of several hundred acres. The house was built at the top of a hill, called Cedar Hill and faced north. A long curving road was built to the top of the hill from the street corner of 14th and W, S. E.

During the 1964 investigation only one outbuilding remained in tact, while there were three others in ruins. The complete outbuilding was the little care-taker's cottage connected to the south of the main house by a breeze-way. The structure had been built between 1917 and 1920.

Of these ruins remaining, the largest structure, about 20 x 30, was the brick, gable roofed stable. This structure collapsed, but old photos show the arch-headed windows and door openings, the wooden shingles, and the star ended tension rods. At the time of inspection the walls were all down, but had been left in their places of collapse. Only a few fragments of window and door frames and a few structural timbers remained on the site. This building was located several hundred feet to the south of the main house.

Several feet to the north-west of the stable and also several hundred feet south of the main house and partly built into the side of the hill was a brick, gable ended structure about eight feet square. At the time of inspection, the roof, floor and door frames were all missing.

East of the stable about 60 feet and also several hundred feet south of the main house stood a small (six foot square) stone gable roofed hut with a brick chimney. Only the chimney remained at the 1964 inspection.

The road up the hill to the house is dirt and graded, the walks around the house and up to it from the street below are of cement and brick. At one time there were railings along the road and stairways.

The house is surrounded by regular residential planting and lawn. Many high trees are on the site, but few of them are the cedars from which Cedar Hill got its name. These high trees obscure much of the magnificent view of Washington, which the house enjoys. From the front of the house most of the major landmarks in the city are visible.

Prepared by Mr. Donald B. Myer
Architect
National Park Service
Washington, D. C.
July, 1964

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