

THE HISTORY OF
DOUGLASS CENTER

FROM REQUEST TO REALITY

by BUD JOHNSON

FREDRICK DOUGLASS (1817-1895)



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T H E H I S T O R Y O F

D O U G L A S S C E N T E R

F R O M R E Q U E S T T O R E A L I T Y

REFLECTIONS

Researching the (unrecorded) history of blacks and their many contributions to the overall development of their communities is no easy task. Likewise, unfolding the mysteries, contradictions, and interpretations that clouded the issues, the establishment of the FREDERICK DOUGLASS COMMUNITY RECREATION CENTER, proved to be a much more difficult task than I had assumed when I agreed to tackle this project.

Fortunately, DOUGLASS CENTERS' roots are not as deeply imbedded in the past as are other monuments in this black community. Some of the folks who were instrumental in the initial negotiations and subsequent construction of the "original" DOUGLASS CENTER are still among us. Others, not as directly involved, but aware of the obstacles and circumstances involved in acquiring the center, were able to recall many of the situations that were faced in the struggle for a "colored servicemen's center."

A portion of the information presented here is based on "facts" that were "passed down" from one generation to the next. I'm referring specifically to the sons and daughters of parents who were actively involved in the creation of the "original" DOUGLASS CENTER.

I offer a "special" thanks to Mrs. Briagewater for the use of her treasured scrap book, without it DOUGLASS CENTER would still be a mystery of the past to our generation. Appreciation must also be extended to those who represent the history of DOUGLASS CENTER, and to those who will eventually make DOUGLASS CENTER a part of their history.

A COMMUNITY CENTER: WHO NEEDED IT?

To better understand the history of DOUGLASS CENTER, how and why it was conceived, one needs to be reminded of the times that prevailed, one should also be aware of the circumstances that were faced, and knowledgeable of the individuals who made the request for a community center a reality.

It was in the early 1940's, during World War II that a group of concerned individuals, representative of the "entire" Champaign-urbana black community began the initial thrust for the construction of a community center.

Not only were the armed forces segregated, but so were recreational programs and facilities in the Champaign-Urbana community. Even though black G.I.'s commuted to the Champaign-Urbana area for their social and recreation endeavors, not all military personnel deemed the trip as necessary. In response to the request for a colored servicemen's center being erected in the twin cities, Major E.F. Resek, in charge of all recreational facilities at Chanute Field expressed a "real need" for such a center in the community, although "adequate recreational facilities had been provided for colored men at Chanute Field."

Federal funds provided in part by the U.S.O. had allowed some recreational programming to be carried out in other locations prior to the centers' construction, among those were: The American Legion Post #559, located on Fifth Street between Eureka and Tremont streets. Programs were also conducted in a two-story house, owned by the Patterson Family, on the 500 block of East Tremont street. But it was in the basement of the Lawhead School building that everything came to a head. Situated on the northwest corner of Fifth & Grove streets, this building housed all recreational activities for local blacks and numerous black servicemen stationed at nearby Chanute Air Force Base. None of the establishments were considered "suitable for adequate

recreational programming" and prompted blacks in the area to request a larger and more accessible facility. Programs at Lawhead School had been under the direction of Mrs. Buford, Mrs. Wallace, Mrs. Erma Bridgewater, and Mrs. Pauline (Wood) Johnson. The following letter was written in 1943:

"To Whom It May Concern:

We the Negro Servicemen's Organization composed of civilians of Champaign and Urbana, Illinois, representing the entire Negro population, request that consideration be given to the erection of a building to be used as a Servicemen's Center in our community as the present facilities are inadequate.

At present a Servicemen's Center is being operated in the basement of the Lawhead School, Champaign, Illinois, in two rooms, twenty-two by twenty-five each, by the Champaign Playground and Recreation Board. This Service Center was opened on March 26, 1943, with an attendance to date of 8,000 service men and hostesses to bring the total attendance to 12,500, an average of 2,500 per month. In such a small amount of space it can readily be seen that the facilities are inadequate to carry on a successful and complete program, therefore we are requesting that a building of suitable proportions be erected for such a purpose. We will do all within our power to promote and assist in any movement that might be taken in securing said building." It was signed by: Raymond M. Scott, Pres., Cecil V. Nelson, Chas. Pettiford Homer Chavis, and Alvin Foxwell.

BLACK LEADERSHIP & WHITE SUPPORT

Spearheading the drive for acquiring a new recreational center, several black community leaders solicited support from local white businesses and social service agencies to join them in their cause. Among the first to respond was the Home and War

Chest Organization. Executive Secretary, Lyle Gallivan aided in the development and formulation of a "Cooperative Plan." This document contained approximated costs for construction and specified the responsibilities of each of the parties involved in regards to the amount of funds to be raised by each.

Total cost of the new servicemen's center was approximated at \$32,000. It was anticipated that \$18,500 would be requested from the Federal Government, and the balance, \$14,100, would be raised locally. A portion of the local share would include an allotment of \$2,500 from the Home and War Chest, and an expenditure of \$3,500 from the Champaign City Recreational Department. The remaining portion of the local share was to be raise by Negro leaders and their constitutents.

"Based on a plan of community cooperation, an application for federal assistance in constructing a Champaign-Urbana recreational center for colored servicemen will be submitted to the Federal Works Agency early next week. The application proposes a \$32,000 project and request that the federal government furnish \$18,500. It was submitted in the name of the city of Champaign, signed by Commissioner Roger E. Zombro, mayor pro-tem, who said it had the approval of all council members." This article appeared in the Champaign News Gazette, on September 4, 1943, but it was not the first attempt by the local citizenry to acquire federal funds for the project.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE---THAT CREATED PROBLEMS

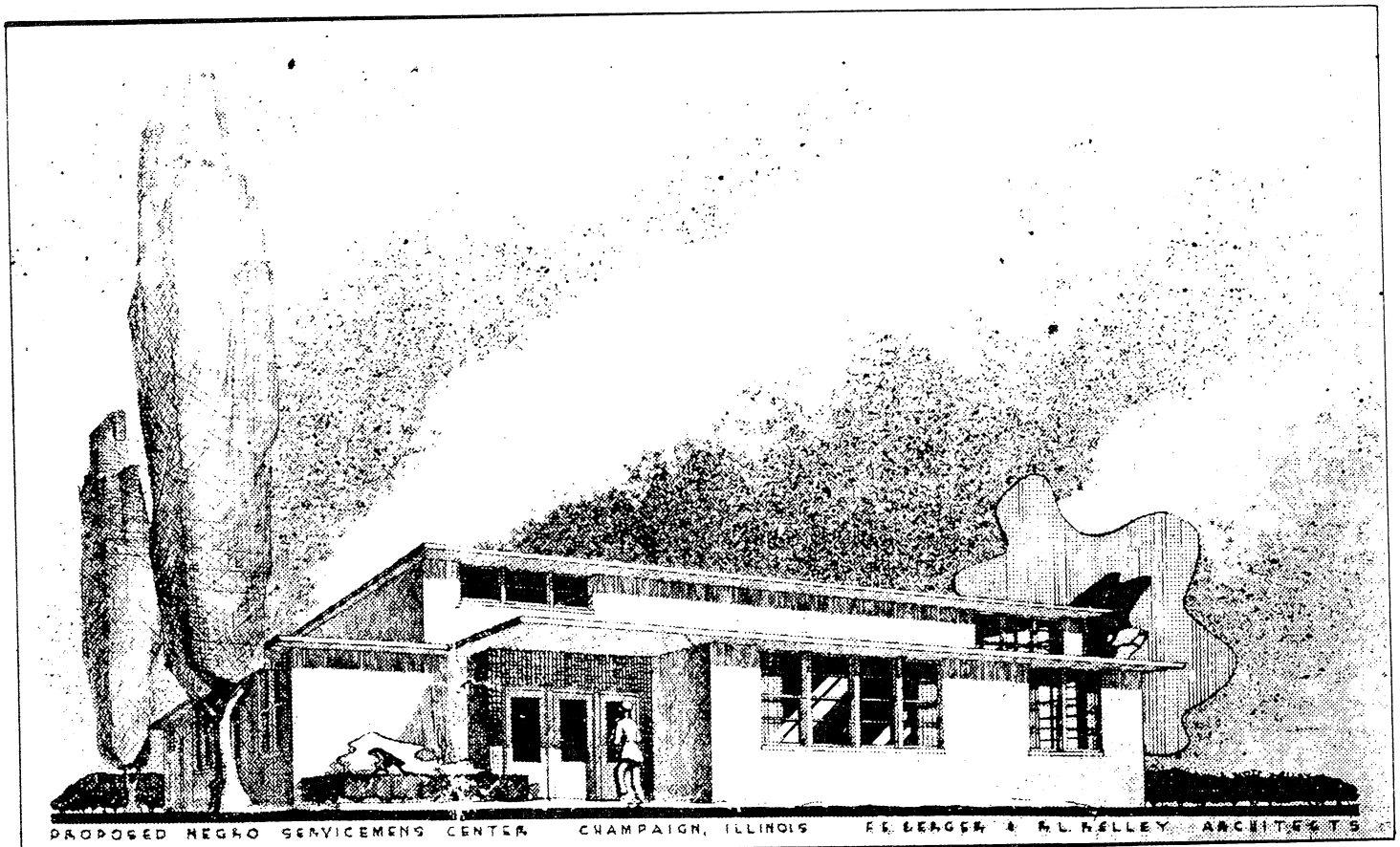
Perhaps it was Commissioner Zombro who cast the first shadow of doubt on the possible construction of the servicemen's center when he remarked, "The whole deal is off if the community fails to raise its share of the cost." However, it was the prime funding agency that caused the greatest concern. In 1942 and 43, the Federal Works Agency denied the citys applications for funding for the "Negro Servicemen's Center." In an article published in the Champaign-Urbana Courier on Thursday, November 30, 1944, it stated that the Federal Works Agency had refused to grant the necessary funds on the grounds that there was an "insufficient number of colored soldiers and sailors stationed in the area to justify the expense."

Thursday, November 30, 1944

Chest May Make \$15,000 Gift to Colored Center

Subscribers Asked to Approve Grant From Surplus Funds.

Headlines appearing in local newspaper. (Page 5)



Architects drawing of the "Original" center. (Page 5)

COLORED CITIZENS TO MEET FRIDAY

Maintaining a strong commitment to the eventual construction of a community center, dedicated individuals and groups continued to fight for the facility. A meeting of all "colored citizens of Champaign-Urbana" was held to discuss possible fund raising projects for the proposed center. "The meeting will take place at 7:30 pm, Friday, at the C.M.E. Church, Fifth and Tremont streets. The meeting is sponsored by the Colored Servicemen's Organization."

Another banner headline read: ASSURE URBANA DONATION FOR NEW CENTER. The Urbana Chamber of Commerce had agreed to contribute a donation of \$2,000 to the existing fund. CHEST MAY MAKE GIFT OF \$15,000 TO COLORED CENTER, read another. Individuals who had subscribed to the Home and War Chest Fund were asked to give their approval for donating a surplus of \$15,000 to the committee for Douglass. All subscribers to the chest fund were mailed returnable post cards and asked to indicate on the card, whether or not they would object to such a gift being donated to the charitable cause.

PERSISTENCE PAYS OFF

A major breakthrough! The Chicago Regional Office of the Federal Works Agency approved the \$18,500 federal grant for the Negro Community center. The application was then forwarded to Washington D.C. for final approval, a mere formality, it was called. However, due to the "critical materials" involved in the construction of the project, and the fact that it had to be regarded as a "military project," final approval had to come from the War Department. Many advocates for the center considered this to be the biggest hurdle to overcome, as land for the anticipated center had been purchased previously by local blacks. Situated on the North-east corner of Fifth and Grove Streets were two vacant lots, awaiting the construction of the Negro Servicemen's Center.

The building contract was awarded to E.N. DeAtley, architects for the project were Berger and Kelly Associates.



Photo of Ground Breaking Ceremony of "Colored Servicemen's Center" (Page 6)



Members of Servicemen's Committee, Champaign Recreational Council, and the first director of the center. (Page 6)

GROUND BROKEN FOR NEGRO COMMUNITY CENTER

The pomp and ceremony that occurred at the initial ground breaking festivities were considered to be the "consumation of the community's long-cherished hope for a Negro community center." Among those who were in attendance and recognized for their contributions to the project were: Mayor George Babb (Urbana), Dr. D.L. Diffay, Mr. H.D. Ellis, Richard Edwards, Sergeant George Evans, who ceremoniously broke the ground and was presented the shovel as a souvenir. Also present were Alvin Foxwell, Lyle H. Gallivan, Mrs. L.T. Gregory, Mayor George F. Hurd (Champaign), Delores Huxtable, Isaac Kuhn, A.H. Lybyner, Cecil Nelson, Ray Scott, and Royal A. Stipes Jr. The ceremony was attended by approximately 130 members of the community.

A LEGEND BEGINS

To attempt to mention the various activities that the center has facilitated over the years would be impossible. It would be fatal also to estimate the number of children and adults the center has served. May it suffice to say that the "original" DOUGLASS CENTER served three generations and housed activities ranging from kindergarten to Senior Citizens, from theatrical performances to community meetings, and from roller skating to basketball. In essence, DOUGLASS CENTER was the heart of the black community for nearly 31 years.

Since opening its doors in 1945, ten men and one woman have served as directors and directores of the facility. The reigning individuals and the approximated years in which they served are: Taylor Thomas (1945-48), Ernest Nelson (1948-50), James Jones (1950-52), Lee Carey (1952-54), Paul Hursey (1954-60), Erma Bridgewater (1961-63), Augustus Williams (1963-65), Booker Ford (1966-69), Edgar McKnight (1969-72), Percy Gordon (1972), Nathaniel Dixon (1972-present).

MOVING ON UP

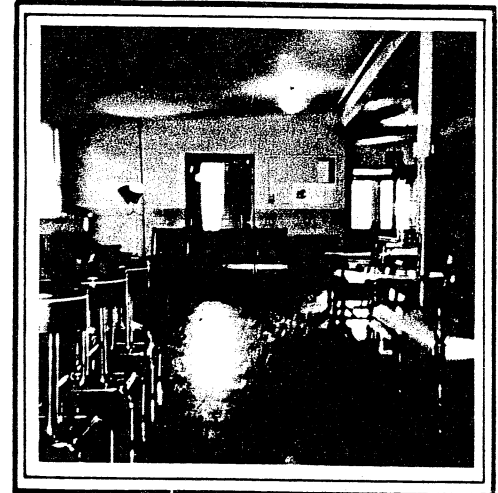
The physical appearance of the "original" center changed slightly with the addition of the Hartwell C. Howell room. Named after the gentleman who donated the funds for the addition, the room was used for a small library and reading room.



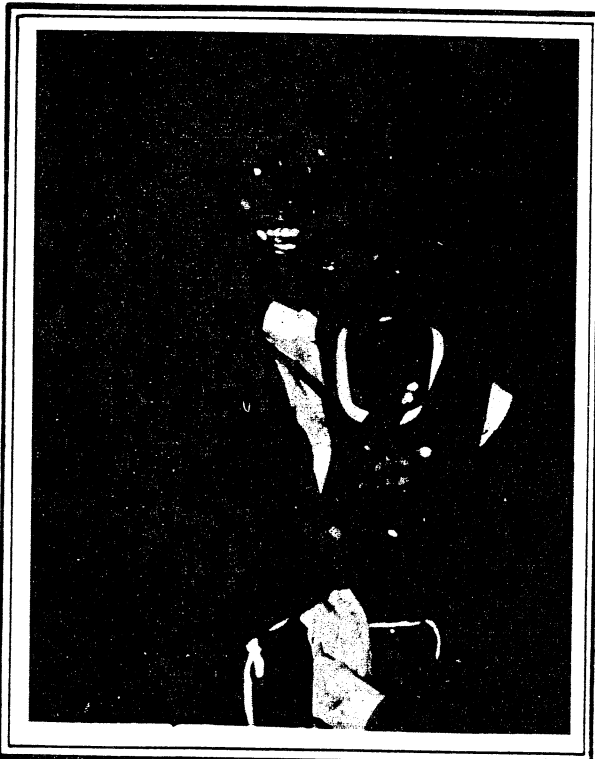
Memories

Of Days

Gone by.







The room was added in 1955.

Another change that affected the operations at DOUGLASS CENTER occurred in 1967, when the Champaign Recreation Board ceded the Champaign City Council and became its own taxing body. The decision to sever economical ties with the city provided a larger tax base for the newly formed park district by allowing them to annex surrounding areas within the district. The park district was also free to seek other federal and state funding agencies that they previously could not without authorization from the city.

HARD TIMES

In the mid-1960's, a renewed thrust for a larger and more modern facility began. The wear and tear on the "original" center had taken its toll and the building was again incapable of providing the necessary space and structure for the growing community.

In 1972, the Champaign Park District won voter approval on a tax referendum which authorized them to either make the necessary repairs to the center or construct a new facility. DOUGLASS CENTER, by now old and dilapidated, given first priority, was scheduled to be rebuilt.

The prolonged controversy that prevented immediate construction of the "new" center was reminiscent of the early 1940's perhaps, but this was an entirely new situation, that at times became more emotionally involved than either politically or economically, although each factor played a major role in the erection of the new DOUGLASS CENTER.

THE POWERS THAT BE

Not unlike the construction of the "original" DOUGLASS CENTER in 1945, the "new" center posed problems from the drawing board to its eventual construction in 1976.

It was during a period of extreme inflation when the construction project was undertaken, consequently, original plans for the proposed center were altered,



Concerned residents listen to the Steering Committee's proposal for the "new" center. (Page 8)

which was one of the major concerns of the black community, primary users of the facility. Among the deleted portions of the original design were: a kitchen, lounge area, and an additional wing that was to be attached to the main facility by a breeze way, and used primarily by Senior Citizens. Also lost in the construction project was a library.

Neither the Champaign or Urbana Public Librarians chose to contribute the \$30,000 cost for including the library space as part of the "new" center.

Emphasizing that the Champaign Park District could not meet the inflationary cost of the initial plans for the center, the board of commissioners considered the alternative construction plan as the only acceptable plan for construction.

Bi-Centennial Center, another new center under construction during this period, was being completed and had not cost as much as originally assumed. Unused funds from this project were transferred and utilized on the DOUGLASS CENTER project.

The alternative plan for construction of the center included: a regulation-sized gymnasium as the major feature, adjoining restroom and locker room facilities. Also included was a stage, bleachers seating approximate 250 people were located on the south side of the gymnasium, a large storage area and mechanical room were attached to the gym. The upstairs portion included office areas, a lobby and an upstairs gameroom.

Despite verbal objections and physical confrontations pursuant to the construction of the "new" center, authorization was given to initiate construction on the center, following guidelines established in the alternative plan.

THE STEERING COMMITTEE

In opposition to the park boards decision to erect an alternative facility, and in hopes of presenting some alternative solutions to the construction project, a group of local black leaders formed a body known as the Steering Committee for Douglas Center. Although there were differences in opinions as to what type of construction would best suit the needs of the community, it was generally agreed that only three options were open to them. One was to do nothing, meaning that they would attempt to physically stop any type of construction short of building



*Community residents picketing McCabes Construction Company
to halt demolition of the "old" center. (Page 9)*

a "complete" facility. Another of the choices the committee felt possible was to build a "shell" or a simple building with no furnishings. It was felt that by building such a structure, they would be eligible for other federal funding and a complete facility could be built once funds were granted. A third position that was taken was to allow the construction of the center as planned, providing it be erected so that additional wings could be added once other funds were secured.

PICKETS GO UP

Picketing of the English Brothers Construction Company, general contractors for the construction project, and of the McCabe Construction Company, demolition crew and sub-contractors was initiated by the Steering Committee.

The issues involved were: 1. They did not want the "old" center torn down until concrete plans were made to determine the future of DOUGLASS CENTER, in regards to the "new" facility. 2. They did not want construction to begin until they had expressed to the board, their desires in relationship to what the new center should contain and the type of construction they preferred. 3. Another issue was a concern that a substantial percentage of blacks be employed in all phases of the construction project.

THE SHOW GOES ON

Meanwhile, amid the continuing controversy and preparations for construction of the "new" DOUGLASS CENTER, recreational programs were being carried out at other facilities. After school programs for elementary aged youths were conducted at the DOUGLASS ANNEX, high school and junior school aged youth participated in activities held temporarily at Kinney Gymnasium on the Urbana-Champaign campus. Adult basketball programs were held at Franklin Junior Highschool in Champaign.

The lack of a neighborhood facility and scattered programs resulted in a reduction in program participation in the Fall and Winter of 1975. It also indicated the pressing need for construction of sort to be completed.



Honored guest, present park district commissioners attend ribbon cutting ceremony of the New center in 1976. (Page 10)

THE FINAL ANALYSIS

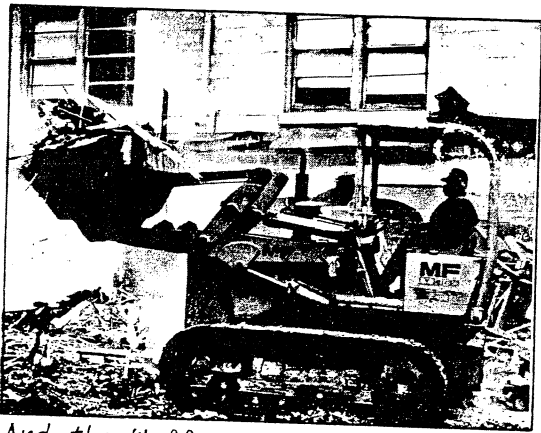
During this period of uncertainty, the Champaign City Council approved a major request from the park board for funds to complete renovation of the DOUGLASS ANNEX. The additional \$20,000 allowed complete remodeling of the annex, including a new roof and bricks for the outer perimeters of the former IGA grocery store. The majority of the Senior Citizens were satisfied with the remodeling plans as they had chose not to be attached to the proposed "new" center. They chose rather to have their programs conducted in the separate facility, adjacent to the "new" center. Furnishings for the annex were made possible in part, by funds received from the Champaign County Department on Aging.

As pickets were removed and most of the controversy subsided, the steering committee had accepted the park boards decision to erect the alternative facility. One former member of the steering committee was arrested after construction had began however, in an attempt to prevent futher construction until more blacks were hired on the construction project. An outspoken critic of the project since its initial conception, Roy Williams wanted 90% black employment on the construction project.

THE GRAND OPENING

There was a air of excitement as well as a feeling of neglect on the day of the grand opening. No one would dare say that the "new" center was not a physical improvement on the "old" one, yet many expressed dissappointment that it was not a larger facility than it was.

300 or more persons registered their names in the guest book, many were either directly or indirectly invovled in the construction project for the "original" DOUGLASS CENTER. Among the honored guest were the wives, sons and daughters of the members of the "Negro Servicemen's Center Organization." Former directors of DOUGLASS CENTER, current board members of the Champaign Park vistrict and current staff members of DOUGLASS CENTER were there. The ocassion was attended by



*And the Walls came tumbling down!
(Page 11)*

approximately 400 individuals. Among the honored guests were: Dr. Lando Viffay, son of Mr. Viffay, a member of the Negro Servicemen's Center Organization, Mr. Richard Edwards, also a member of the organization, Mrs. Sarah Scott, wife of Raymond Scott, a member of the Servicemen's Organization, Odelia Wesley, an original member of the Servicemen's Organization. Champaign Park Board Commissioners Mrs. Patricia Leonard, Don Bresnan, Richard Helms, Dr. Morgan Powell and Newton Dodds were also present. Former park commissioner Seely Johnston and former director of DOUGLASS CENTER, Taylor Thomas were also honored guest, as was project architect, E. Hedrick Clay

This occasion, not unlike the original opening in 1945, signified the culmination of a necessary and vital project in the black community. After several months of controversy, heated confrontations, and anxious anticipation, the "new" center was officially opened for business once again on December 16, 1976.

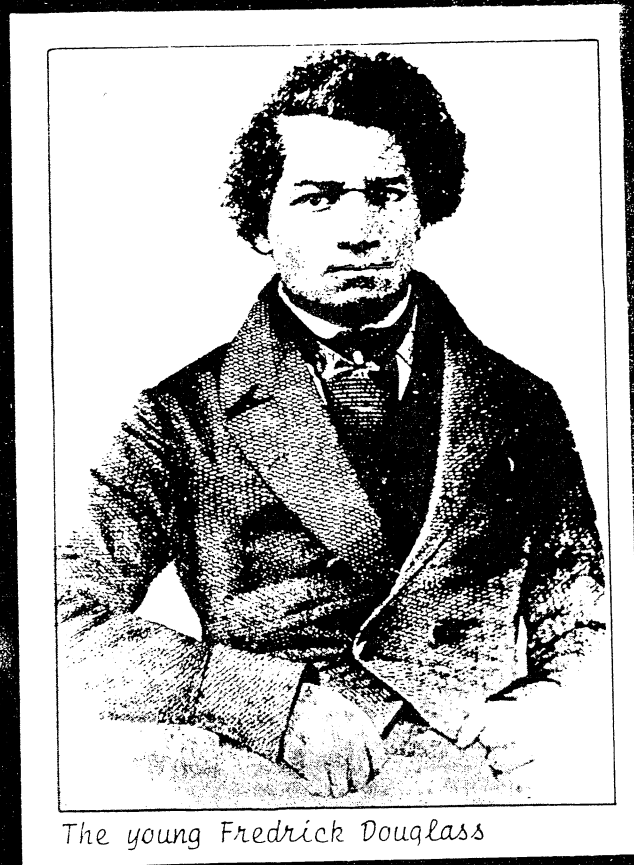
QUESTIONS YET UNANSWERED

How long will the "new" center stand? Will it adequately serve the growing community, if so, how long will it amply meet their needs? Will additional space or extended wings ever be added to the existing facility? Is the community concerned about the future of DOUGLASS CENTER? Will the board be responsive? These and other pertinent questions remain to be answered. Only time will tell!

IF WALLS COULD TALK

The original center stood for nearly 31 years before the "new" center was built, which marked another chapter in the history of the FREDERICK DOUGLASS COMMUNITY CENTER. During the dedication ceremonies of the "original" center in 1945, one of the speakers remarked, "We hope that this facility will serve the community in many ways, for years to come." That prophecy has been fulfilled. Since its initial construction, DOUGLASS CENTER has been, and continues to be, the pulse of the black community.

If walls could talk, they might say, "Standing staunch and rigid, despite the stress and strain I had seen over the years, I touched your lives, as you have touched mine. I wait now in the darkness for your sons and daughters."



The young Fredrick Douglass