

**Remarks by Kenneth B. Morris, Jr.**

*For the Annual Frederick Douglass Statue Commemoration*

*Rochester, New York – June 9, 2025*

Good afternoon,

Please allow me to express my deepest gratitude to Juanita-Elizabeth Carroll for inviting me to submit remarks for this important annual commemoration. And to my friend David Shakes, thank you again for lending your powerful voice to share my words. I am truly honored.

I regret that I cannot be with you in person. I'm currently leading our annual *Footsteps to Freedom* Underground Railroad study tours—journeys that take hundreds of educators across the landscape where freedom-seekers once walked and yearned to be free. While I may not be standing with you physically, I am most certainly with you in spirit and shared purpose.

June 9 is sacred on our calendar—a day to reflect on history, to honor legacy, and to recommit ourselves to justice. It was on this day in 1899 that the city of Rochester unveiled the nation's first statue dedicated to an African American. To see my great ancestor, Frederick Douglass, so honored reveals the depth of his legacy and the rare spirit of a city that welcomed his presence and unflinching truth.

The statue's original placement in front of Rochester's train station was no accident. It was a statement. Mayor George E. Warner wanted every traveler arriving in or departing from this city to see whose legacy defined Rochester's character. In an age when monuments to African Americans were unheard of, this one stood as a radical declaration: that Frederick Douglass, abolitionist, orator, editor, and statesman, was not only Rochester's most celebrated citizen but a symbol of its conscience.

Over the years, the statue has moved across the city, much like Douglass himself, always standing tall and always facing forward. And in every location, it has continued to challenge us. Because monuments, when done right, are not just markers of what was. They are mirrors that ask us: *what now?*

The answer to that question is unfolding right here in Rochester with the development of the Frederick Douglass Museum and Cultural Center. We are building more than a museum; we are building a living legacy. A place where stories will breathe, where the past will speak, and where the next generation will find inspiration to shape the future.

I am pleased to share that the project is moving forward thanks in large part to the early and essential support of Mayor Malik Evans, County Executive Adam Bello, Congressman Joe

Morelli, Governor Kathy Hochul, and many others who recognize the power of this moment and the importance of this work.

And while we rightly venerate Frederick Douglass, let us never forget the powerful woman who made so much of his life possible, my great-great-great-grandmother Anna Murray Douglass. It was Anna who sold her belongings to fund his escape from slavery. Anna anchored their home, offering shelter to hundreds of freedom-seekers. It was Anna who nurtured a family while Frederick traveled the world. In every chapter of the Rochester story, Anna is there quiet but essential, firm but often unsung.

The Douglass family walked these streets, worshipped in these churches, and buried loved ones in this soil. Rochester is not just part of our history—it is part of our heart.

So today, as you gather around this monument, I hope you feel the weight of history and the warmth of legacy. We are all stewards of this story. And we each carry a responsibility to ensure that what Frederick Douglass called "the glorious morning of liberty and justice" is not just a dream deferred but a promise fulfilled.

With heartfelt thanks,

**Kenneth B. Morris, Jr.**

President Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives