

School 12 renamed for Anna Murray Douglass

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Anna Murray Douglass never went to school. Born in Maryland in 1813 to parents who had been slaves, as a young woman she worked as a domestic servant in the homes of wealthy white residents of Baltimore; it was there that she met her husband of 44 years, Frederick Douglass.

Even as Douglass became one of the pre-eminent writers of the 19th century, his wife never learned to read or write. She was busy maintaining their house on South Avenue, which served as an active hub on the Underground Railroad.

“Unfortunately an opportunity for a knowledge of books was denied her, the lack of which she greatly deplored,” her daughter, Rosetta Douglass Sprague, wrote in a short biography. “Her increasing family and household duties prevented any great advancement, altho’ she was able to read a little.”

Imagine her surprise, then, were she to have known that a school in her adopted hometown of Rochester would be renamed in her honor.

School 12, which stands on the former site of the Douglass household on South Avenue, is officially being renamed the Anna Murray Douglass Academy. The Rochester Board of Education approved the measure Thursday night.

It previously had been named for James P.B. Duffy, a longtime school board member and one-term member of Congress.

The Anna Murray Douglass Academy becomes just the fifth city school or program to be named after a woman, joining School 2 (Clara Barton), School 45 (Mary McLeod Bethune), School 50 (Helen Montgomery) and the Florence S. Brown Pre-K Center.

By contrast, 27 are named for men. That does not include the Frederick Douglass campus, home of Northwest Junior High and Northeast College Prep, or the North STAR program on Hart Street, named after Douglass’ newspaper.

“She was really an unsung hero,” school board President Van White said. “No one talks much about her, notwithstanding the fact that she put her home and her family’s safety in jeopardy to serve as a stop on the Underground Railroad.”

The school board announced in the spring that it was considering a name change for the school and solicited input from staff, faculty, parents, students and neighbors.

Anna Murray Douglass worked to support the family when they first moved to Massachusetts by taking in laundry and sewing shoes. Later, when Douglass began to travel tirelessly for work, she raised their four children alone for long stretches.

During her life and now, she was best known and most respected for her prodigious work in welcoming fugitive slaves on their way to Canada.

“It was no unusual occurrence for mother to be called up at all hours of the night, cold or hot as the case may be, to prepare supper for a hungry lot of fleeing humanity,” Douglass Sprague wrote.

“Unlettered tho’ she was, there was a strength of character and of purpose that won for her the respect of the noblest and best.”

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