

Douglas Southall  
**FREEMAN**



*Douglas Southall Freeman, 1886-1953. (Image courtesy of Dementi Studio, Richmond, Virginia.)*

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**FREEMAN**

By David E. Johnson



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For Holly



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## Prologue

His mind is working before the alarm clock sounds. Time seldom runs away, Douglas Southall Freeman knows, “if the mind holds a check rein on it.”<sup>1</sup>

This morning the alarm goes off at 2:30 A.M. This hour is the destination reached as the result of a gradual movement to rise ever earlier. For many years it was 4:30 A.M., then, one delightful morning, it was 3:55 A.M., a “new early.”<sup>2</sup> After that day, the minutes retreated before a force of will determined “to sneak up a few minutes earlier.”<sup>3</sup>

He swings his feet over the side of his bed. If he looks in the mirror as he dresses, he sees a man of medium frame, with blue-gray eyes peering from behind steel-rimmed glasses. His face is unremarkable. It is not the broken aquiline nose, the cleft chin, or balding head that draw people to him. Friends know it is the “mobility of expression” and “intensity of feeling” his face can display.<sup>4</sup>

Dressed in a three-piece suit, which will be rumpled by day’s end, he takes a few steps from his bedroom and is now in a small chapel. A kneeling bench, a cross, and a stained-glass window set apart this closet-sized room. Here he kneels and prays to the God he had met in the Baptist church of his youth. What he had accepted in faith had been proven in living. “It works,” he said, “this religion of Jesus Christ,” and through it he finds his mind and spirit enlarged.<sup>5</sup> His mother had hoped he would enter the ministry. Instead, he rises from his home altar each day determined to set an “example of diligence, energy and service to mankind in recognition of the mercies I have had.”<sup>6</sup>

From the third floor he goes down for an unhurried breakfast. A few miles away, the office of the editor of the *Richmond News Leader* is dark and quiet. It will not long remain so.

His car moves out of the driveway at 3:10. The city of Richmond, Virginia, is not a typical sleepy Southern town, but sleep is an acceptable

condition at this hour. The drive takes Freeman down the spacious boulevard called Monument Avenue. In the distance, a figure begins to emerge. Set off on a large island in the center of the avenue, towering above treetops and stately homes, is the statue of Robert E. Lee.

Lee, who has been Freeman's companion for a longer time than even his beloved wife Inez.

Lee, who brought him fame and a Pulitzer Prize when he made the general come alive for all time in four masterful volumes.

Lee, his greatest hero.

As he drives by the equestrian statue, Douglas Southall Freeman raises his hand and salutes the general. This is a pattern of daily life.<sup>7</sup>

At 3:25, Freeman begins his day as editor of the *Richmond News Leader*, Richmond's afternoon newspaper. The newsroom is beginning to show signs of life. In comes young Carl, promptly at 3:30, with the morning wire dispatches.<sup>8</sup> Here is the first edition of the morning *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. Now current on the world's events, Freeman turns to his typewriter. Since 1915 he has traced the history of the world in two to three columns of editorial, Monday through Saturday. He has dissected the military operations of two world wars—so impressing Woodrow Wilson with his analysis of the war in Europe that the president kept Freeman's editorials on his desk.<sup>9</sup> Through Coolidge prosperity and Prohibition, Depression and New Deal, hot and cold wars, and Old and New Souths, he has seen the *News Leader* through years in which he knows "history is being made that will loom high."<sup>10</sup>

While his editorials are being blocked and set, his attention turns to managing the paper. Can a general request be made that all departments give the city editor any tips on news? Might we inquire about a staff photographer? Can we avoid references in headlines to the race of the subject? Is there a better method of coordinating news stories with editorial comment? Is the filing system adequate?<sup>11</sup> Turning from internal memoranda, Freeman starts on the mail of the day. During hot Richmond summers, the first letter is to Mrs. Freeman vacationing at their beach cottage. Next go letters to any of his three children out of state at camp, at school, or, in later years, at their own homes or off to war. Then come responses to governors, Cabinet secretaries, generals, chambers of commerce, daughters of the Confederacy, professors, writers, historians, and *News Leader* readers. Mail that one would expect to be received by a man who is simultaneously president of the Southern Historical Society, rector of the Board of Trustees of the University of Richmond, trustee for the Carnegie Endowment for International

Peace, and trustee for the Rockefeller Foundation. Henrietta Crump, the secretary without whom he “could not get on a day,” is as likely to bring in a note from Winston Churchill as a criticism from a reader alleging unfavorable news coverage.<sup>12</sup> Both letters will receive the same full and courteous attention.

His eyes now sweep up to his office clock. It is 7:58 A.M. and time to leave for the morning radio broadcast. The walk to the studio is two minutes from his office. He steps up to the microphone at 8:00, and thousands of Virginians mark the beginning of their day.

The voice they hear is not a deep radio voice, but a calm, soothing, baritone with a familiar accent. They might just be beginning their day, but he has been observing the world for more than five hours and will tell them what they need to know. The news from Europe or New York or downtown Richmond. The triumphs of goose-stepping tyrannies or the trials of animals with hoof-and-mouth disease. The weather. The day in history. What proper Southerners should fix for dinner. All without a prepared script. At 8:15, he finishes his broadcast, and Richmond begins its day.

Back in his office, his staff is assembled for the morning conference. They cannot help but notice the misspelled sign prominently displayed in his office: “Time alone is irreplaceable. Waste it not.” A not so subtle reminder that the relaxed meeting—coined by reporters as “bringing wampum” to the “great Sachem”—must move along. News tidbits are swapped, assignments discussed, and laughter heard as the latest jokes are unveiled. One morning the room is rendered uneasily silent as a newcomer begins to explain the movements of Confederate general “Jeb” Stuart in June 1862. All eyes turn to Freeman who stops the budding historian’s account with “My dear boy, in some quarters I am considered a modest authority on these matters.”<sup>13</sup>

The conference ends at 8:32 as the *News Leader* newsroom assumes the flurry common to all city papers. Freeman can hear the “distant roar” of business manager Allen Potts raising a “grave question concerning the ancestry of seventeen individuals, four firms, and three classes.”<sup>14</sup> In the midst of this commotion, it is time to receive visitors, make phone calls, and implement decisions. Why is it that the governor issues his press releases too late in the day for our paper? Labor disputes are always in the offing, and the “Big Boss,” *News Leader* publisher John Stewart Bryan, might drop in to discuss the topic from all angles. “Forty-five mortal minutes at the very rush time of the morning” Freeman complains as a conversation drags on.<sup>15</sup> At noon, visitors or not, he excuses himself for another broadcast.

When he leaves the studio at 12:15, following his mid-day update of news and history, Douglas Freeman has home on his mind. His day at the paper is complete and is soon far away as he heads back down Monument Avenue—again saluting General Lee—to home and Inez.

Inez Goddin Freeman. She had taken his heart in 1908 and held it with a tenacity reminiscent of her Confederate veteran father. To her devoted husband she is ever “so poised, so just, so loving and so humble in the beauty of character.”<sup>16</sup> They will share time in the garden. A relaxing lunch. Home news will take the stage from world news. The early afternoon belongs to them.

At 2:30 P.M., he goes back to his third-floor room for a brief nap. Sleep comes immediately and ends almost as quickly one-half hour later. A different kind of work waits.

On his desk lie notes, papers, books, letters, and manuscripts. Unconnected pieces of history. He will sift through the slightest scraps of information, determine their truthfulness, and test their veracity. Once they become organized facts, he will marshal them together with elegant prose. Here he spends almost twenty years writing the life of Lee. Here he traces the eccentric brilliance of “Stonewall” Jackson, seeks to understand the enigma of Longstreet, laughs with Stuart, and shakes his head in knowing disgust over other forgotten captains. His publisher wants one volume on Lee—he can present such a life in no less than four. The reading public clamors for a Lee-like study of George Washington, but he knows he must first honor Lee’s lieutenants. Three more volumes. As if writing the history of the leadership of the Army of Northern Virginia is not in itself an all-consuming project, he writes magazine articles, speeches, book reviews, and introductions for the books of others.

“I have no idea how many introductions I have written for books or how many addresses of mine have been put in print,” he says, even as more titles flow from his study.<sup>17</sup> *Virginia: A Gentle Dominion; The Last Parade; The South Is Still Solid; and Eisenhower in Great Military Tradition*. He will craft addresses to be delivered to students being graduated from universities and to generals being taught at war colleges. He will complain about these intrusions, but he will rarely refuse a request.

Then, with a Pulitzer for *R. E. Lee* and international acclaim for *Lee’s Lieutenants*, his study becomes George Washington’s home. Was ever there a more daunting figure? The least-known best-known hero in American history. Freeman will have to transport himself from the nineteenth century back more than one hundred years to another era with its

unfamiliar characters and terrain. But Washington needs a biography, and he is the only one who can write it.

He discounts the cherry tree story and finds young Washington full of “conflicts, gradations, and contradictions.”<sup>18</sup> Two volumes on Washington’s youth, then a third volume as the planter becomes a patriot. Now Freeman uncovers the hero, greater, he says, than we believed him to be.<sup>19</sup> The work will go past four volumes, to six in Freeman’s life, and one after his death.

The work of the day is done at 6:30. He will spend the evening with his family, his dinner guests, and his favorite music. He will recount humorous stories and allow those around him to shine.

Time has marked his day. Now at 8:30 he climbs again to the third floor, his final trip of the day. As his mind winds down—even after his body is instantly asleep—he knows to be true what he has so often said: “Fully this day I have labored and honestly I have striven to make the day’s work a thing of beauty.”<sup>20</sup>

The alarm clock will sound again in six hours.