

Frederick Douglass Biography

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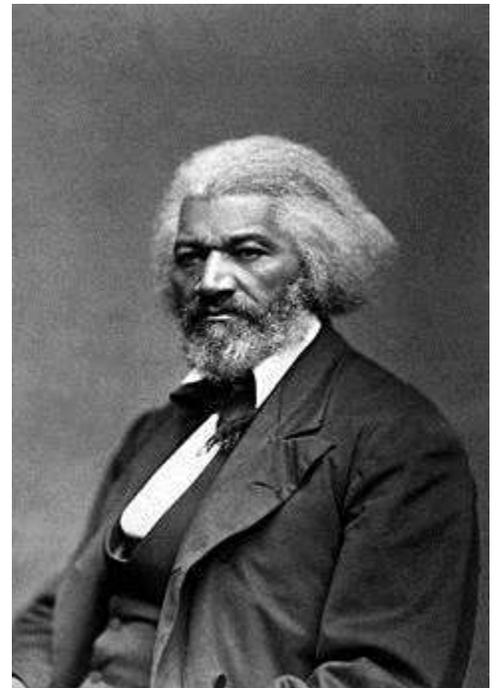
Frederick Douglass (1818 – 1895), African American, anti-slavery campaigner.

Frederick Douglass [also known as Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey] was a former slave who escaped and became a powerful anti-slavery orator. Douglass wrote three autobiographies describing his experiences as a slave and then gaining his freedom. His writings and speeches became powerful testimonies to support the abolition of slavery. Douglass was the most influential African-American leader of the Nineteenth Century, and exemplified great moral courage in opposing slavery and injustice.

Early Life Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery in Talbot County, Maryland. His mother, Harriet Bailey was a slave; his father was probably his mother's slave owner. He saw little of his mother when growing up, and she died when he was 10. The young Douglass was brought up by his grandmother until the age of seven, when he was sent to Baltimore to serve Hugh Auld.

Although still a slave in Baltimore, the young Douglas was taught to read by the wife of his Master – Sophia Auld. Douglas had fond memories of Sophia and felt he was treated like a human being; these early steps in learning to read would prove critical for awakening in Douglass a greater aspiration for freedom. Douglass said that going to Baltimore was crucial in enabling him to eventually escape slavery.



Going to live at Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity.

He also said that even in his darkest hours of slavery, he always held onto an inner conviction that *'slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace'*. He saw the hand of Providence in guiding him to eventual freedom, writing, *'This good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise.'*

However, when Hugh Auld discovered his wife had been teaching Douglass to read, he expressed his strong displeasure. Like many slave owners, he feared that if slaves became educated they would have an even greater desire for freedom. This made it more difficult for Douglas to be educated, but he continued to try, in secret, to read newspapers and books which gave him a broader education. He wrote:

“Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read.” (Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, ch.6)

In particular, he later credited the newspaper, *The Colombian Orator* for developing his strong ideals on human dignity and individual freedom. The attitude of his slave master, in trying to prevent him from reading, was also a cautionary lesson for Douglass and throughout his life he emphasised the importance of education to help ameliorate the conditions of African Americans.

His ability to read was hugely influential. When he was moved away from the home of the Auld's, Douglass made an effort to educate other slaves on how to read the New Testament at a weekly Sunday School. Douglass was able to act as teacher for a large group of slaves for six months, before the activity was broken up by slave owners – incensed by the idea of their slaves being educated.

Escape from Slavery

In 1833, Douglass was sent to work for Edward Covey a farmer and notorious slave driver. Covey regularly whipped Douglass and his other slaves. The experience left Douglass with deep mental and physical scars, but it strengthened his resolve to escape from slavery. Douglass began formulating a plan, but his plans were discovered and he was sent to prison. However, he came into contact with Anna Murray-Douglass a free black women. The two fell in love, and she used her savings to help Douglass escape. In September 1838, Douglass, dressed in a sailor's uniform, escaped via train and steamboat to Philadelphia and then on to New York. He stayed, temporarily, in the home of New York abolitionist David Ruggles. He later wrote of his overwhelming joy in escaping the life of a slave and finding himself a freeman on free soil.

“I lived more in one day than in a year of my slave life. It was a time of joyous excitement which words can but tamely describe. In a letter written to a friend soon after reaching New York, I said: ‘I felt as one might feel upon escape from a den of hungry lions.’ Anguish and grief, like darkness and rain, may be depicted; but gladness and joy, like the rainbow, defy the skill of pen or pencil.”

Life and Times of Frederick Douglass. p. 170.

Eleven days after arriving in New York, he married Anna, who had helped him escape from slavery. Douglass was married to Anna for 44 years, until she died in 1882. They had five children.

Work as Anti-slavery campaigner

The Douglass' settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where they became active in anti-slavery campaigns. An important influence was William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison was a fierce anti-slavery campaigner, who held uncompromising views on abolishing slavery. Listening to Garrison speak was an important moment for Douglass, and he became more committed to the movement. Garrison also mentioned Douglass in his weekly journal – *The Liberator*.

In 1841, aged 23, he was invited to give a speech to an anti-slavery meeting. Overcoming his nervousness, Douglass got up and gave a passionate speech about his painful life as a slave and the

joy of gaining freedom. Garrison became a friend and supporter of Douglass and invited him on a lecture tour of the US.

Douglass spent six months travelling through the mid-west and East US giving lectures on the abolition of slavery. It was a courageous action because, at the time there was great resistance to the idea of abolishing slavery. Douglass was frequently attacked physically and verbally. In Pendleton, Indiana, he suffered a broken hand, when being attacked by a mob. Many were amazed to see a black man speaking with great eloquence and intellect; his powerful speeches challenged many people's views – prevalent at the time – that black men were racially inferior and couldn't be properly integrated into society. Douglass was a powerful example of intellect, humanity and charisma – undermining the racist views of the day. He made a strong moral case against slavery.

“No man can put a chain about the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck.”

– Frederick Douglass, Civil Rights Mass Meeting, Washington, D.C. (22 October 1883)

In 1845, Douglass wrote his first autobiography – *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave*. It became a best seller and was reprinted several times. It was a ground-breaking work, one of the earliest first hand accounts of slavery. Some even doubted whether a slave was capable of writing so well. It launched him as a national figure. In 1855, he followed up with a second book, *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

Lecture tour in the British Isles

This was still a dangerous time to be a freed slave. After naming his former slave owner in his autobiography, he feared recapture. If he was recaptured, the law wouldn't protect him. Douglass, supported by friends, decided to go on a two-year lecture tour of Ireland and Britain. He arrived in Ireland in 1845, and was amazed at the lack of racial prejudice – which he had become so accustomed to in America. His lecture tour was a great success, with Douglass speaking to packed audiences at churches and meeting halls across the two countries. He developed friendships with

many people sympathetic to the cause of abolishing slavery. Supporters raised sufficient funds to be able to buy his freedom from his slave owner. He met with Thomas Clarkson, a prominent abolitionist. Douglass was encouraged to stay in England to be safe from the threat of being put back into slavery. But, he felt a need to return to the US and work for the emancipation of the three million slaves still captive in the US.

Douglass' campaigns for human rights in the US

His English/Irish friends gave him £500 [approximately \$65,500.00 in today's currency] to use for the anti-slavery cause. Douglass used it to fund newspapers, publishing his message. One newspaper, Douglass published was *North Star* – its motto was:

“Right is of no Sex – Truth is of no Color – God is the Father of us all, and we are all brethren.”

In 1848, he attended the women's rights convention in Seneca. Douglass was the only African American to attend. He spoke passionately in favor of women's suffrage and became a lifelong supporter for the women's rights movement, becoming acquainted with prominent women's rights activists such as [Elizabeth Cady Stanton](#). Douglass felt rights for black people should be linked with rights for women's rights. However, after the Civil War, he felt he had to drop support for women's suffrage to enable the passage of the 15th Amendment, giving black men the vote. Douglass feared if women's suffrage was attached to the bill, it would mean failure for both. Though he made of point of saying he never argued against women's right to vote.

Split with Garrison.

Although grateful to Garrison for his support and friendship, Douglass split with Garrison over his views on the constitution. Garrison saw the US constitution as a justification for slavery, and publicly burnt it – angering even liberal supporters. Douglass took another, more pragmatic, view

that the US constitution could be used to support the inherent equality of men and be used to help end slavery. Douglass felt that the lofty ideals of the opening declaration, should be incorporated into the abolitionist movement.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...”

Frederick Douglass once met with the radical abolitionist John Brown, but disapproved of his plan for an armed rebellion, fearing it would inflame public opinion.

During the Civil War, Douglass actively supported the Union war effort – hoping that the war would see the end of slavery. He campaigned for African Americans to be allowed to engage in the fight for freedom, and Douglass later served as a recruiter for African Americans into the Union army. Douglass was delighted with Lincoln’s *Emancipation Proclamation of 1863*, writing of the event:

“..we were watching ... by the dim light of the stars for the dawn of a new day ... we were longing for the answer to the agonizing prayers of centuries.”

In 1865, after the civil war, the 14th and 15th Amendment to the US constitution were passed providing in law, equal citizenships and equal rights for all men, regardless of colour.

Douglass was not a universal admirer of [Abraham Lincoln](#). In the 1861 Presidential address, at the start of the civil war, he criticised Lincoln’s reluctance to publicly commit himself to the Emancipation Movement. Though he later understood why Lincoln needed to keep the fracturing Union together.

However, he also appreciated that fundamentally Lincoln opposed slavery and enabled its abolition through the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, and the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. Douglass warmed to Lincoln after meeting in person, he was struck by Lincoln’s warm and genuine friendship. In his last autobiography, he referred to Lincoln as *‘America’s greatest President’*.

“Mr. Lincoln was not only a great President, but a *great man* — too great to be small in anything. In his company I was never in any way reminded of my humble origin, or of my unpopular color.”

– *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892), Part 2, Chapter 12: Hope for the Nation

After the civil war, he was appointed to various government positions, and continued his work as public speaker and writer. He supported the Presidential campaign of Ulysses S. Grant; in particular he was grateful to Grant for sending federal troops into the south to disrupt the activities of the Klu Klux Klan, and the passage of the second and third Enforcement Acts.

Post-Civil War, was still a difficult time for non-white Americans, with white supremacists making black voter registration in the South very difficult. Although constitutionally there was equality after the war; in practice overt racism continued to be a serious problem in the US, especially the south. Douglass saw his work to combat the endemic racism of society.

“So long as my voice can be heard on this or the other side of the Atlantic, I will hold up America to the lightning scorn of moral indignation. In doing this, I shall feel myself discharging the duty of a true patriot; for he is a lover of his country who rebukes and does not excuse its sins. It is righteousness that exalteth a nation while sin is a reproach to any people.”

– Frederick Douglass, speech Syracuse, New York (24 September 1847)

The ongoing discrimination against African Americans caused a new movement of young blacks to move to new cities, hoping to set up their own enclaves and communities. Douglass opposed this ‘isolationist’ approach and argued African Americans should seek integration and not separation. This position was sometimes unpopular with many younger African Americans and, in later years, he was booed by fellow African Americans who wanted a more radical approach.

In 1882, his first wife Anna died, leaving a great sense of personal bereavement. But, he re-married two years later to a white feminist – Helen Pitts, 20 years his younger. Inter-racial marriages were very rare and the couple was several criticized for their decision. Douglas responded that his first marriage was to someone of his mother’s color, and his second marriage was to someone of his father’s color.

Towards the end of his life, he visited Europe again. In America, he achieved many firsts, such as the first African American to receive a vote for President of the US. He also appeared on a ticket as Vice-President for the Equal Rights Party in 1872 (though he was not told he was to be nominated)

On February 20, 1895, Douglass died of a heart attack or stroke in Washington D.C. Thousands attended his funeral at the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal church.

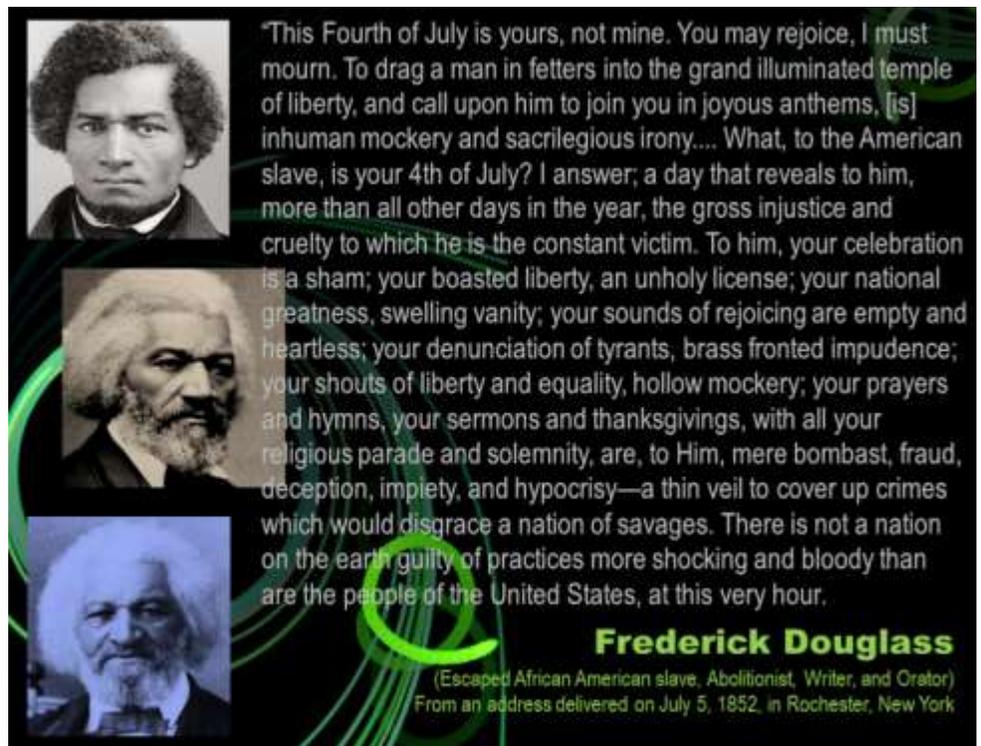
Legacy of Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass is remembered for his courageous opposition to slavery and his deeply held conviction in the equality of all people. He played a crucial role in changing public opinion about slavery and racial inequality. He was one of the first prominent African American leaders, and was an inspiration to many.

Other Materials of Relevance

[Abolitionists](#) (PBS Documentary)

- [The Meaning of the Fourth of July](#) – Speech by Frederick Douglass (1852)
- [Famous Americans](#)
- [Courageous people](#)
- [People in the anti-slavery movement](#)
- [People who fought for human rights](#)
- [Famous slaves](#)

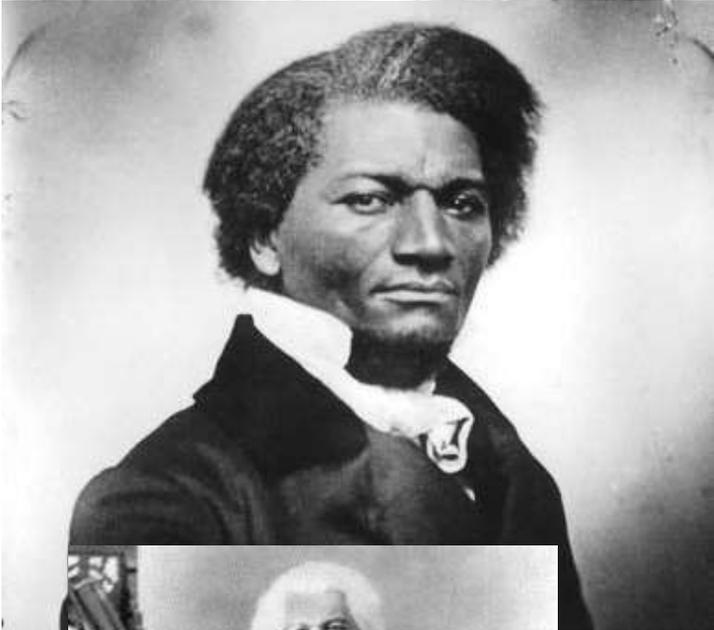


This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, [is] inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony.... What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.

Frederick Douglass
(Escaped African American slave, Abolitionist, Writer, and Orator)
From an address delivered on July 5, 1852, in Rochester, New York



Frederick Douglass with his second wife, Helen Pitts Douglass, and sister-in-law, Eva (standing).



Douglass (about 1850)



Douglass in later life