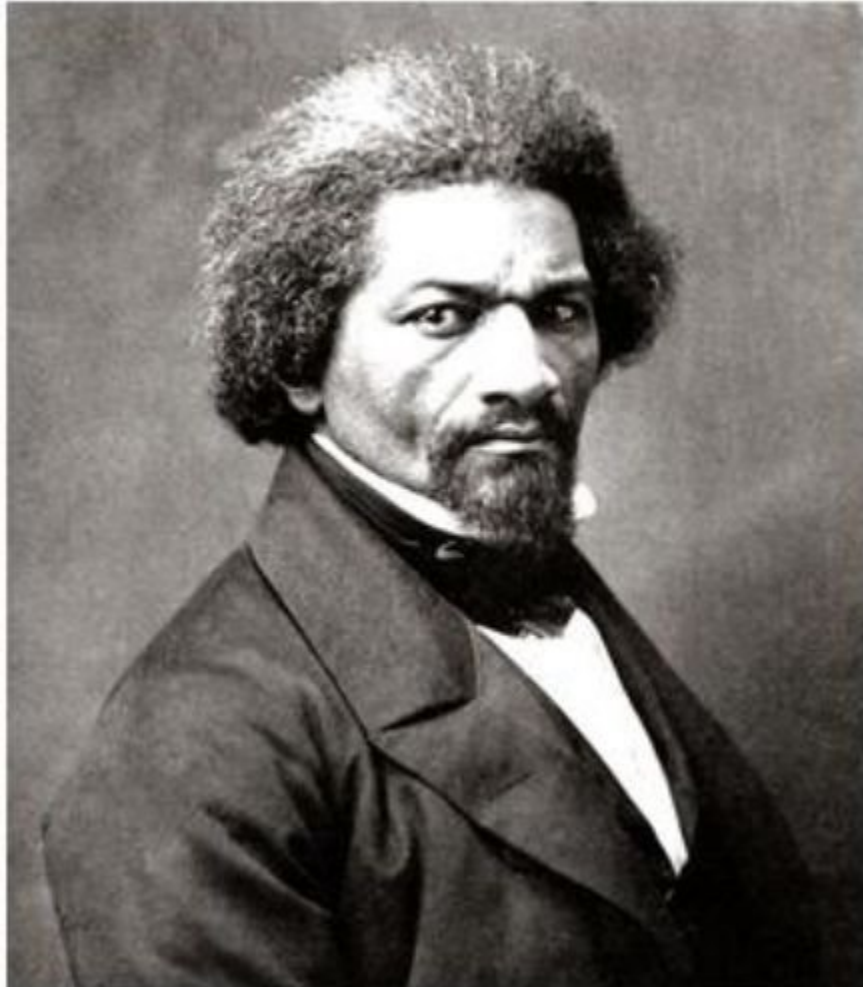


The Legacy of Frederick Douglass

by ReadWorks



Frederick Douglass never knew his exact birth date. He never knew his father, either, though whispers in the halls of his slave master's home pointed to the Master himself. He only saw his mother four or five times in his life; he was forcibly separated from her at a young age. All of these things, he explains, were used as a means to keep the slave ignorant, and to keep the slave master in power.

He was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey in Talbot County, Maryland, in approximately 1818. He describes his early life as one typical of the American slave. He witnessed violent beatings of all slaves, regardless of their age or sex. When he was just seven years old, Douglass was sent to work for Hugh Auld, a ship carpenter, in Baltimore. Living in the city, instead of at the plantation, awarded Douglass certain freedoms. Most importantly, Auld's wife taught Douglass to read and write despite a ban on teaching slaves to read and write, until Auld eventually forbade it.

Even at a young age, Douglass understood the value of education and knowledge. Over the course of his time in Baltimore, he succeeded in learning by whatever means necessary. Sometimes he paid

hungry white children in pieces of bread for reading lessons.

When he was fifteen, Douglass was sent back to the plantation and returned to a life of hardship and struggle. He began to resist slavery in earnest, believing it to be tyrannical and unjust in nature. Shortly afterward, he was hired out to Edward Covey, a man with a reputation for "breaking" disobedient slaves. Douglass endured a year of beatings and torture that culminated in a fistfight between the two men. Covey lost the fight and never laid a hand on Douglass again. Douglass was then hired out to another landowner, William Freeland.

Under Freeland, Douglass began to teach other slaves how to read the New Testament at a weekly church service. Through education, Douglass believed, the system of slavery could be changed and eventually eradicated. Freeland did not interfere with Douglass's classes, but slave owners at nearby plantations did not approve.

Douglass believed that he, and all slaves, should be free, but he also realized that liberty could not be attained simply by hoping for it. He attempted to escape from slavery twice before he succeeded. In his final, and successful attempt, he was assisted by a freed black woman in Baltimore named Anna Murray with whom he had fallen in love.

He hatched a plan to escape when he was hired out to work at a Baltimore shipyard for wages. Murray provided him with a sailor's uniform and some money, and Douglass carried identification papers obtained from a free black seaman. He headed to a safe house in New York, and began his life as a free man.

Douglass married Murray and the two moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts. The area had a large freed black community, and Douglass joined a black church and began to get involved in the abolitionist movement. Additionally, he subscribed to William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist journal *The Liberator*. Garrison was a like-minded individual, believing not only in the freedom of slaves, but advocating for the rights of women.

With encouragement from other abolitionists, Douglass began to share his story, and eventually came to speak at abolitionist meetings. Garrison saw him talk at a meeting and wrote about him in *The Liberator*, describing his courage and bravery. Soon Douglass became a well-known speaker on the tyrannical system of slavery.

Garrison encouraged Douglass to document his struggles as a slave. After much urging from the abolitionist community, Douglass penned his first autobiography, titled *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, in 1845. Over the course of his life, Douglass would edit and expand on his autobiography, publishing *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855 and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* in 1881 (he revised the latter in 1892).

Fame for an ex-slave in abolitionary America was a dangerous thing. After the publication of his first autobiography, Douglass feared retribution and fled the country to tour Ireland and parts of Europe. Upon his return to the States, Douglass found that his views had diverged from those of Garrison.

Garrison was a more radical thinker in the abolitionist movement. He believed that the dissolution of the Union was necessary for the integration of slaves into society, and that the Constitution was, by its very nature, pro-slavery. Douglass, on the other hand, believed that the crumbling of the Union would isolate and alienate slaves in the South.

In addition to speaking against slavery, Douglass enriched the lives of black Americans in other ways, too. He encouraged education, and even counseled Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War, recruiting northern blacks for the Union army.

By the time the Civil War began, Douglass had become one of the most famous black men in America. Despite conferring with Lincoln about the abolition of slavery, Douglass ultimately supported Lincoln's opponent in the 1864 election, John C. Fremont. Although Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation declared the freedom of all slaves in Confederate territory, Douglass did not approve of Lincoln's decision not to endorse suffrage, or voting rights, for black Americans.

Following the end of the Civil War, the abolition of slavery with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, and Lincoln's death, Douglass continued to improve the rights of both blacks and American women. He believed that despite the abolition of slavery, "the wrongs of my people were not ended."

He held a number of significant and influential positions during this period. He was appointed to the District of Columbia's city council and served as a presidential delegate for the Republican party of New York. He became the first black person nominated as vice president of the United States, as Victoria Woodhull's running mate, in 1872. He was nominated without his knowledge or consent.

Douglass became one of the most influential and successful black men of his time. His life, speeches, and written works speak to the strife associated with being a black American before and after abolition.

His message guided many black men and women long after his death. He insisted that African-Americans must "make the best of both worlds-but to make the best of this world first because it comes first," and his legacy continues even to this day.

Name: _____ **Date:** _____

1. According to the text, what had Douglass become by the time the Civil War began?

2. The text describes the sequence of key events in Frederick Douglass's life. When did Douglass escape slavery?

3. Douglass understood the value of education and knowledge, even when he was young. What evidence from the text supports this statement?

4. Why was Douglass probably sent to work for Edward Covey, a man who was known for "breaking" disobedient slaves?

5. What is this text mostly about?

6. Read the sentences and answer the question.

"Garrison encouraged Douglass to document his struggles as a slave. After much urging from the abolitionist community, Douglass penned his first autobiography, titled 'Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,' in 1845."

What does the word "document" mean as used in the text?

7. What word or phrase best completes the sentence?

Douglass believed that education was important; _____, he taught other slaves how to read the New Testament at a weekly church service.

8. Identify two ways Douglass fought for the rights of slaves before and during the Civil War.

9. Why did Frederick Douglass write his first autobiography?

10. Even at a young age, Frederick Douglass understood the value of education and knowledge. How did this understanding impact his life? Use information from the text to support your answer.
