

Douglass, Frederick (Feb. 1818-20 Feb. 1895), abolitionist, civil rights activist, and reform journalist, was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey near Easton, Maryland, the son of Harriet Bailey, a slave, and an unidentified white man. Although a slave, he spent the first six years of his life in the cabin of his maternal grandparents, with only a few stolen nighttime visits by his mother. His real introduction to bondage came in 1824, when he was brought to the nearby wheat plantation of Colonel [Edward Lloyd](#). Two years later he was sent to Baltimore to labor in the household of Hugh and Sophia Auld, where he remained for the next seven years. In spite of laws against slave literacy, Frederick secretly taught himself to read and write. He began studying discarded newspapers and learned of the growing national debate over slavery. And he attended local free black churches and found the sight of black men reading and speaking in public a moving experience. At about age thirteen he bought a popular rhetoric text and carefully worked through the exercises, mastering the preferred public speaking style of the time.

Literacy and a growing social consciousness made Frederick into an unruly bondsman. In 1833, after being taken by master Thomas Auld to a plantation near St. Michael's, Maryland, he organized a secret school for slaves, but it was discovered and broken up by a mob of local whites. To discipline Frederick, Auld hired him out to a local farmer who had a reputation as a "slave breaker." Instead he became increasingly defiant and refused to allow himself to be whipped. Hired out to another local farmer, he again organized a secret school for slaves. Before long, he and his pupils had plotted to escape to the free state of Pennsylvania, but this too was discovered. Expecting further trouble from Frederick, Auld returned him to Baltimore in 1836 and hired him out to a local shipyard to learn the caulking trade. Taking advantage of the relative liberty afforded by the city, Frederick joined a self-improvement society of free black caulkers that regularly debated the major social and intellectual questions of the day.

After an unsuccessful attempt to buy his freedom, Frederick escaped from slavery in September 1838. Dressed as a sailor and carrying the free papers of a black seaman he had met on the streets of Baltimore, he traveled by train and steamboat to New York. There he married Anna Murray, a free black domestic servant from Baltimore who had encouraged his escape. They soon settled in the seaport of New Bedford, Massachusetts, where Frederick found employment as a caulker and outfitter for whaling ships, and began a family; two daughters and three sons were born to the union in a little more than a decade. At the urging of a local black abolitionist, he adopted the surname Douglass to disguise his background and confuse slave catchers. He also joined the local African Methodist Episcopal Zion church and became an active lay leader and exhorter.

Soon after arriving in New Bedford, Frederick Douglass was drawn to the emerging antislavery movement. He began to read the *Liberator*, a leading abolitionist journal edited by [William Lloyd Garrison](#), and to attend antislavery meetings in local black churches, occasionally speaking out about his slave experiences. His remarks at an August 1841 convention of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society on Nantucket Island brought him to the attention of Garrison and other leading white abolitionists. Society officials, impressed by Douglass's eloquence and imposing presence, hired him as a lecturing agent. Over the next two years, during which time he moved his family to Lynn, Massachusetts, he made hundreds of speeches for the society before antislavery audiences throughout New England and New York State. In 1843 he joined other leading abolitionist speakers on the One Hundred Conventions tour, which sought to strengthen abolitionist sentiment in upstate New York, Ohio, Indiana, and western Pennsylvania. His oratorical skills brought him increasing recognition and respect within the movement. But antislavery lecturing was a hazardous business. Douglass and his colleagues were often subjected to verbal assaults, barrages of rotten eggs and vegetables, and mob violence. And, as a fugitive slave, his growing visibility placed him in constant danger of recapture. He had to conceal or gloss over certain details in his life story, including names, dates, and locations, to avoid jeopardizing his newfound freedom.

Douglass's growing sophistication as a speaker brought other difficulties in the mid-1840s. At first, his speeches were simple accounts of his life in bondage. But as he matured as an antislavery lecturer, he increasingly sought to provide a critical analysis of both slavery and northern racial prejudice. His eloquence and keen mind even led some to question whether he had ever been a slave. As Douglass's skills--combined with his circumspection--prompted critics to question his credibility, some white abolitionists feared that his effectiveness on the platform might be lost. They advised him to speak more haltingly and to hew to his earlier simple tale. One white colleague thought it "better to have a *little* of the plantation" in his speech (quoted in McFeely, p. 95).

Douglass bristled under such paternalistic tutelage. An answer was to publish an autobiography providing full details of his life that he had withheld. Although some friends argued against that course, fearing for his safety, Douglass sat down in the winter of 1844-1845 and wrote the story of his life. The result was the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (1845). The brief autobiography, which ran only to 144 pages, put his platform tale into print and

reached a broad American and European audience. It sold more than 30,000 copies in the United States and Britain within five years and was translated into French, German, and Dutch. Along with his public lectures, "the *Narrative* made Frederick Douglass the most famous black person in the world" (David W. Blight, ed., *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* [1993], p. 16).

Although the *Narrative* enhanced Douglass's popularity and credibility, it increased the threat to his liberty. He was still a fugitive slave--but now one with a bestselling autobiography. Antislavery colleagues advised Douglass to travel to Britain to elude slave catchers, also hoping that his celebrity would mobilize British abolitionists to bring international pressure against American slavery. He sailed in August 1845 and remained abroad twenty months, lecturing to wildly enthusiastic audiences in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Douglass broadened his reform perspective, grew in confidence, and became increasingly self-reliant during this time. English antislavery friends eventually raised the funds necessary to purchase his freedom from the Aulds and permit his return home. They also collected monies to allow him to begin his own antislavery newspaper in the United States. In December 1847 Douglass moved his family to Rochester in the "burned-over district," a center of reform activity in upstate New York. There he launched the weekly reform journal *North Star*, which promoted abolitionism, African-American rights, temperance, women's rights, and a host of related reforms. Like his later journalistic ventures, it was well written and carefully edited and carried Douglass's message to an international audience. While it served as a personal declaration of independence, it initiated an ever-widening rift between Douglass and his Garrisonian colleagues, who sensed that they were losing control of his immense talent.

Douglass's movement away from Garrisonian doctrine on antislavery strategy also signaled his growing independence. Unlike Garrison, who viewed moral suasionist appeals to individual conscience as the only appropriate tactic, Douglass was increasingly persuaded of the efficacy of politics and violence for ending bondage. He attended the Free Soil Convention in Buffalo in 1848 and endorsed its platform calling for a prohibition on the extension of slavery. In 1851 he merged the *North Star* with the *Liberty Party Paper* to form *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, which openly endorsed political abolitionism. This brought a final breach with the Garrisonians, who subjected him to a torrent of public attacks, including scandalous charges about his personal behavior. Nevertheless, Douglass endorsed the nascent Republican party and its moderate antislavery platform in the elections of 1856 and 1860. At the same time, he increasingly explored the possibilities of abolitionist violence. As early as 1849 Douglass endorsed slave violence, telling a Boston audience that he would welcome news that the slaves had revolted and "were engaged in spreading death and devastation" throughout the South (Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom* [1974], p. 67). After passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which put the federal government in the business of capturing and returning runaway slaves, he publicly urged resistance to the law, with violence if necessary. And he became active in the Underground Railroad, hiding numerous fugitives in his Rochester home and helping them on the way to Canada West (now Ontario). Douglass's growing attraction to violence is evident in his 1852 novella, *The Heroic Slave*, generally considered to be the first piece of African-American fiction, which glorified the leader of a bloody slave revolt. Later in the decade Douglass became involved in the planning for [John Brown's](#) 1859 raid at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, and secretly helped raise funds for the venture, although he thought it ill conceived. When the raid failed, he fled to Canada East (now Quebec), then on to England, fearing arrest on the charge of being Brown's accomplice. He returned home in 1860, disillusioned about African-American prospects in the United States, and planning to visit Haiti in order to explore the feasibility of black settlement there.

The coming of the Civil War revived Douglass's hopes. From the beginning of the conflict, he pressed President [Abraham Lincoln](#) to make emancipation a war goal and to allow black enlistment in the Union army. After Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863, Douglass spoke widely in support of the measure. Believing that military service might allow black men to demonstrate their patriotism and manhood, winning greater equality as well as helping to end slavery, he recruited for the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Colored Infantry, the first African-American regiment organized in the North. His stirring editorial, "Men of Color, to Arms," was often reprinted in northern newspapers and became a recruiting poster. Nevertheless, Douglass was disgusted by the government's failure to keep its recruiting promises and met with Lincoln to protest discrimination against black troops. Before long, the War Department offered him a commission to enlist and organize African-American regiments among the slaves fleeing to Union lines in the lower Mississippi Valley. He stopped publication of *Douglass' Monthly*, which he had begun in 1859, and waited. But the commission never came, and Douglass, refusing to go South without it, continued to lecture and recruit in the North. As the war wound toward a conclusion in 1864-1865, he worked to shape public memory of the war and the character of the peace. He reminded audiences that the conflict had been fought to abolish slavery; it would only be successful, he argued, if the former slaves were granted equal citizenship rights with other Americans.

The end of the war and the Thirteenth Amendment outlawing slavery posed a crisis for Douglass. After a quarter of a century as the preeminent black abolitionist, he wondered if his career was at an end. But he soon recognized that important work remained to be done. In an 1865 speech to the American Anti-Slavery Society, many of whose white members were calling to disband the society, he forcefully argued that "the work of Abolitionists is not done" and would not be until blacks had equal citizenship rights with other Americans. Although he vigorously supported the Fourteenth Amendment and other civil rights statutes, he believed that a meaningful Reconstruction required two essential elements: keeping the old leadership elite from returning to power in the South, and giving the freedmen the vote. Putting the ballot in the hands of black men, he argued, would prove the key to uplifting and protecting African-American rights. When President [Andrew Johnson](#) refused to endorse these principles in an 1866 meeting with Douglass, the race leader became one of his most vocal critics. He lobbied hard for passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, even at the cost of a breach with many friends who opposed the measure unless it also granted women the vote.

The 1870s were a "time of troubles" in Douglass's life. An 1872 fire destroyed his Rochester home and the files of his lengthy journalistic endeavors. He moved his family to Washington, D.C., where two years earlier he had purchased the *New National Era*. Through careful editorial guidance, he attempted to shape the weekly into a mouthpiece for the race. But persistent financial troubles forced him to stop publication of the paper in 1874. That same year Douglass was named president of the Freedman's Savings Bank, a federally-chartered savings and lending institution created to assist the economic development of former slaves. He soon found that the bank was in severe financial distress; it was forced to declare bankruptcy in a matter of months. These two failed ventures cost Douglass thousands of dollars and some public respect. Other black leaders increasingly criticized his alleged moderation on key race questions, his devotion to American individualism (most clearly seen in his oft-repeated lecture, "Self-Made Men"), and his unswerving loyalty to the Republican party. They openly attacked his failure to criticize the party's abandonment of the Reconstruction experiment in 1877.

The end of Reconstruction dashed Douglass's hopes for a meaningful emancipation. Even so, he never abandoned the fight for African-American rights. And he still regarded the Republican party as the likeliest vehicle for black advancement. A skilled practitioner at "waving the bloody shirt"--linking Democrats with slavery and the Confederacy--he campaigned widely for Republican candidates during the 1870s and 1880s. Partisanship brought rewards. President [Rutherford B. Hayes](#) appointed Douglass as the U.S. marshal for the District of Columbia (1877-1881), and President [James A. Garfield](#) named him the district's recorder of deeds (1881-1886). These offices made him financially secure. But changing family circumstances unsettled his personal life. His wife Anna died in 1882. Two years later he married Helen Pitts, his white former secretary. This racially-mixed marriage stirred controversy among blacks and whites alike; nevertheless, it failed to limit Douglass's influence.

Douglass was not lulled into complacency by partisan politics. He pressed Republicans as forcefully as ever on issues of concern to the African-American community, while continuing to campaign for party candidates. President [Benjamin Harrison](#) rewarded him with an appointment as U.S. minister to Haiti (1889-1891). In this capacity he became an unwitting agent of American expansionism in the Caribbean, unsuccessfully attempting to negotiate special shipping concessions for American business interests and the lease of land for a naval base at Môle St. Nicholas. He eventually resigned his post and returned home in disgust.

Douglass continued to claim the mantle of race leader in the 1890s. He denounced the wave of disfranchisement and segregation measures spreading across the South. He threw much of his energy into the emerging campaign against racial violence. Between 1892 and 1894 he delivered "Lessons of the Hour"--a speech attacking the dramatic increase in black lynchings--to dozens of audiences across the nation. He personally appealed to Harrison for an antilynching law and used his position as the only African-American official at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition to bring the issue before an international audience. He had just returned from another lecture tour when he died at his Washington home.

The most influential African American of the nineteenth century, Douglass made a career of agitating the American conscience. He spoke and wrote on behalf of a variety of reform causes: women's rights, temperance, peace, land reform, free public education, and the abolition of capital punishment. But he devoted the bulk of his time, immense talent, and boundless energy to ending slavery and gaining equal rights for African Americans. These were the central concerns of his long reform career. Douglass understood that the struggle for emancipation and equality demanded forceful, persistent, and unyielding agitation. And he recognized that African Americans must play a conspicuous role in that struggle. Less than a month before his death, when a young black man solicited his advice to an African American just starting out in the

world, Douglass replied without hesitation: "Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!" (Joseph W. Holley, *You Can't Build a Chimney from the Top* [1948], p. 23).

Bibliography

A wealth of primary sources document Douglass's life. Personal papers, including letters, manuscript speeches, and the like, are in the Frederick Douglass Collection at the Library of Congress. Three autobiographies offer detailed accounts of his beginnings in slavery and his career, as well as his ongoing attempts to construct a public image. In addition to the *Narrative*, Douglass wrote *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881; rev. ed., 1892). Hundreds of editorials can be found in the four reform journals he edited: the *North Star* (Rochester, N.Y., 1847-1851), *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (Rochester, N.Y., 1851-1860), *Douglass' Monthly* (Rochester, N.Y., 1859-1863), and the *New National Era* (Washington, D.C., 1870-1874). Many of these documents are available in modern published editions, especially *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Philip S. Foner (5 vols., 1950-1975); and *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, ed. John W. Blassingame (5 vols., 1979-1992).

Secondary sources on Douglass's life and career are equally numerous. The best biographies are Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass* (1948), and William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (1991). Dickson J. Preston, *Young Frederick Douglass: The Maryland Years* (1980), offers insights into his family background and his life in slavery. Aspects of his developing thought are explored in Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (1984); David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (1989); Leslie F. Goldstein, "Violence as an Instrument for Social Change: The Views of Frederick Douglass," *Journal of Negro History* 61 (1976): 61-72; and Peter F. Walker, *Moral Choices: Memory, Desire, and Imagination in Nineteenth-century American Abolition* (1978). Useful analyses of his autobiographies and short fiction include C. Peter Ripley, "The Autobiographical Writings of Frederick Douglass," *Southern Studies* 24 (1985): 5-29, and William L. Andrews, ed., *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass* (1991). Frederick S. Voss, *Majestic in His Wrath: A Pictorial Life of Frederick Douglass* (1995), is an excellent photographic record of Douglass's career.

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