

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# Frederick Douglass: A Biography

By National Park Service  
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*Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) was born a slave but died an accomplished and respected individual. This short biography traces his life's work and involvement in the abolition movement, which worked to end slavery. As you read this text, identify Douglass's contributions to social change during his lifetime.*

- [1] In his journey from captive slave to internationally renowned<sup>1</sup> activist, Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) has been a source of inspiration and hope for millions. His brilliant words and brave actions continue to shape the ways in which we think about race, democracy, and the meaning of freedom.

## Slavery and Escape

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was born into slavery on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in February 1818. He had a difficult family life. He barely knew his mother, who lived on a different plantation<sup>2</sup> and died when he was a young child. He never discovered the identity of his father. When he turned eight years old, his slave owner hired him out to work as a body servant<sup>3</sup> in Baltimore.

At an early age, Frederick realized there was a connection between literacy and freedom. Not allowed to attend school, he taught himself to read and write in the streets of Baltimore. At twelve, he bought a book called *The Columbian Orator*. It was a collection of revolutionary speeches, debates, and writings on natural rights.

When Frederick was fifteen, his slave owner sent him back to the Eastern Shore to labor as a field hand. Frederick rebelled intensely. He educated other slaves, physically fought back against a "slave-breaker,"<sup>4</sup> and plotted an unsuccessful escape.



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1. **Renowned (adjective):** known by many people
2. From the 1700s to the mid-1800s, plantations were large estates that grew cash crops, like cotton and sugar, using slave labor.
3. Body servant was a term for a slave who worked inside their owner's household performing the duties of a maid.

- [5] Frustrated, his slave owner returned him to Baltimore. This time, Frederick met a young free black woman named Anna Murray, who agreed to help him escape. On September 3, 1838, he disguised himself as a sailor and boarded a northbound train, using money from Anna to pay for his ticket. In less than 24 hours, Frederick arrived in New York City and declared himself free.

## The Abolitionist Movement

Frederick and Anna married and moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where they adopted the last name "Douglass." They started their family, which would eventually grow to include five children: Rosetta, Lewis, Frederick, Charles, and Annie.

After finding employment as a laborer, Douglass began to attend abolitionist meetings and speak about his experiences in slavery. He soon gained a reputation as an orator, landing a job as an agent for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. The job took him on speaking tours across the North and Midwest.

Douglass's fame as an orator increased as he traveled. Still, some of his audiences suspected he was not truly a fugitive<sup>5</sup> slave. In 1845, he published his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, to lay those doubts to rest. The narrative gave a clear record of names and places from his enslavement.

To avoid being captured and re-enslaved, Douglass traveled overseas. For almost two years, he gave speeches and sold copies of his narrative in England, Ireland, and Scotland. When abolitionists offered to purchase his freedom, Douglass accepted and returned home to the United States legally free. He relocated Anna and their children to Rochester, New York.

- [10] In Rochester, Douglass took his work in new directions. He embraced the women's rights movement, helped people on the Underground Railroad, and supported anti-slavery political parties. Once an ally of William Lloyd Garrison<sup>6</sup> and his followers, Douglass started to work more closely with Gerrit Smith<sup>7</sup> and John Brown.<sup>8</sup> He bought a printing press and ran his own newspaper, *The North Star*. In 1855, he published his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, which expanded on his first autobiography and challenged racial segregation in the North.

## Civil War and Reconstruction

In 1861, the nation erupted into civil war over the issue of slavery. Frederick Douglass worked tirelessly to make sure that emancipation<sup>9</sup> would be one of the war's outcomes. He recruited African-American men to fight in the U.S. Army, including two of his own sons, who served in the famous 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. When black troops protested they were not receiving pay and treatment equal to that of white troops, Douglass met with President Abraham Lincoln to advocate<sup>10</sup> on their behalf.

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4. A slave-breaker was a person who would use violence and intimidation to control slaves who were considered "unruly."
  5. someone who has escaped from a place or is in hiding to avoid being arrested
  6. William Lloyd Garrison was an abolitionist and reformer who helped found the American Anti-Slavery Society.
  7. Gerrit Smith was a reformer who gave financial support to abolitionists.
  8. John Brown was an abolitionist who believed that using armed resistance was the best method to end slavery.
  9. the fact or process of being set free from legal, social, or political restrictions; the end of slavery

As the Civil War progressed and emancipation seemed imminent,<sup>11</sup> Douglass intensified the fight for equal citizenship. He argued that freedom would be empty if former slaves were not guaranteed the rights and protections of American citizens. A series of postwar amendments sought to make some of these tremendous changes. The 13th Amendment (ratified in 1865) abolished slavery, the 14th Amendment (ratified in 1868) granted national birthright citizenship, and the 15th Amendment (ratified in 1870) stated that no one could be denied voting rights on the basis of race, skin color, or previous servitude.

In 1872, the Douglasses moved to Washington, D.C. There were multiple reasons for their move: Douglass had been traveling frequently to the area ever since the Civil War, all three of their sons already lived in the federal district, and the old family home in Rochester had burned down. A widely known public figure by the time of Reconstruction,<sup>12</sup> Douglass started to hold prestigious<sup>13</sup> offices, including assistant secretary of the Santo Domingo Commission,<sup>14</sup> legislative council member of the D.C. Territorial Government, board member of Howard University, and president of the Freedman's Bank.

## Post-Reconstruction and Death

After the fall of Reconstruction, Frederick Douglass managed to retain high-ranking federal appointments. He served under five presidents as U.S. Marshal for D.C. (1877-1881), Recorder of Deeds for D.C. (1881-1886), and Minister Resident and Consul General to Haiti (1889-1891). Significantly, he held these positions at a time when violence and fraud severely restricted African-American political activism.

- [15] On top of his federal work, Douglass kept a vigorous speaking tour schedule. His speeches continued to agitate for racial equality and women's rights. In 1881, Douglass published his third autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, which took a long view of his life's work, the nation's progress, and the work left to do. Although the nation had made great strides during Reconstruction, there was still injustice and a basic lack of freedom for many Americans.

Tragedy struck Douglass's life in 1882 when Anna died from a stroke. He remarried in 1884 to Helen Pitts, an activist and the daughter of former abolitionists. The marriage stirred controversy, as Helen was white and twenty years younger than him. Part of their married life was spent abroad. They traveled to Europe and Africa in 1886-1887, and they took up temporary residence in Haiti during Douglass's service there in 1889-1891.

On February 20, 1895, Douglass attended a meeting for the National Council of Women. He returned home to Cedar Hill in the late afternoon and was preparing to give a speech at a local church when he suffered a heart attack and passed away. Douglass was 77. He had remained a central figure in the fight for equality and justice for his entire life.

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10. **Advocate** (*verb*): to publicly recommend or support
  11. **Imminent** (*adjective*): about to happen
  12. Reconstruction was the period from 1865 to 1877, when the country was rebuilt after the Civil War and changes were put in place to transition from the end of slavery.
  13. **Prestigious** (*adjective*): inspiring respect
  14. The Santo Domingo Commission (1869-1871) investigated and recommended that the United States attempt to annex, or take, the country now known as the Dominican Republic.

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## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best captures the author's perspective on Frederick Douglass's life?
  - A. Douglass's life was typical of freed slaves who were able to live in Northern cities.
  - B. Douglass made important contributions to the abolition movement by advocating for change both inside and outside of government.
  - C. Douglass was rewarded with important appointments as a result of his connections to other influential abolitionists.
  - D. Douglass would not have accomplished much if he had not learned to read and share stories from his life as a slave.
  
2. PART B: Which sentence from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "At an early age, Frederick realized there was a connection between literacy and freedom." (Paragraph 3)
  - B. "For almost two years, he gave speeches and sold copies of his narrative in England, Ireland, and Scotland." (Paragraph 9)
  - C. "When abolitionists offered to purchase his freedom, Douglass accepted and returned home to the United States legally free." (Paragraph 9)
  - D. "Frederick Douglass worked tirelessly to make sure that emancipation would be one of the war's outcomes." (Paragraph 11)
  
3. PART A: What does the word "orator" mean as it is used in paragraph 7 of the excerpt?
  - A. traveling protestor
  - B. supporter of freedom
  - C. skilled public speaker
  - D. escaped slave
  
4. PART B: Which section from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "In less than 24 hours, Frederick arrived in New York City and declared himself free." (Paragraph 5)
  - B. "The job took him on speaking tours across the North and Midwest." (Paragraph 7)
  - C. "Douglass's fame as an orator increased as he traveled." (Paragraph 8)
  - D. "Still, some of his audiences suspected he was not truly a fugitive slave." (Paragraph 8)

5. How does Paragraph 17 contribute to the development of ideas in the text? Summarize the description and analyze why it is included in the biography.

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