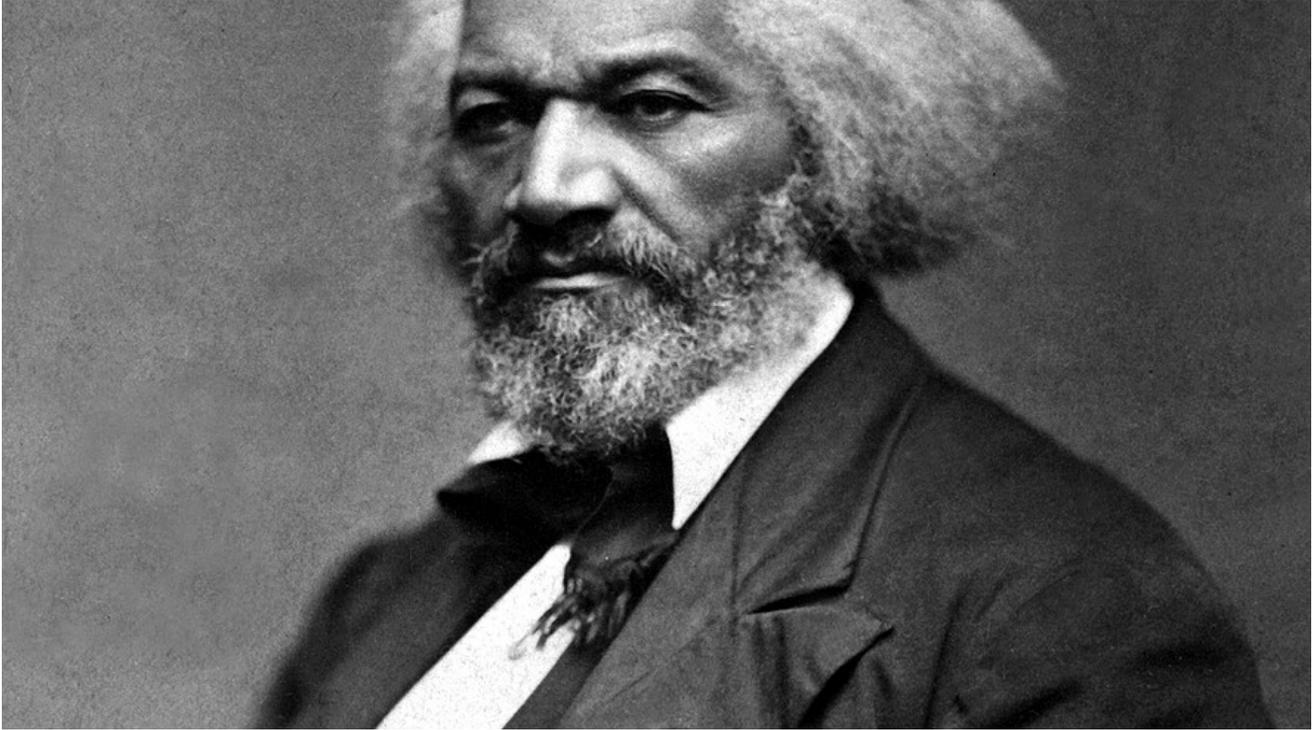


The Abolitionists: Frederick Douglass

By Biography.com Editors and A+E Networks, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.20.16

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Frederick Douglass Frederick Douglass Portrait, National Archives and Records Administration

Synopsis: Frederick Douglass was born into slavery around 1818 in Maryland. He became a free man and an abolitionist who spoke out against slavery. One of the most famous intellectuals and thinkers of his time, Douglass gave advice to presidents and spoke before thousands about slavery and women's rights. Douglass wrote several books describing his experiences as a slave and his life after the Civil War, including the well-known "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave." He died on February 20, 1895.

Life In Slavery

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was born into slavery in Talbot County, Maryland, around 1818. He celebrated his birthday on February 14. He lived with his maternal grandmother, Betty Bailey. At a young age, he was sent to live in the home of the plantation owner, who might have been his father. His mother died when he was about 10.

Douglass was 12 years old when he was sent to the Baltimore home of Hugh Auld, where Auld's wife, Sophia, taught him the alphabet. It was against the law to teach slaves to read and write. When Auld found out about the lessons, he was angry and stopped them. Douglass continued to learn from white children in the neighborhood.

It was through reading newspapers and books that Douglass' ideas against slavery began to form. "The Columbian Orator," a school textbook that taught reading and speaking, formed his ideas about human rights, and Douglass shared his knowledge with other slaves.

Next he was sent to a plantation owned by William Freeland, where he taught other slaves to read the Bible at weekly church services. As many as 40 slaves would attend lessons. Other local slave owners did not approve and showed up with clubs and stones to stop the meetings.

Douglass was then sent to work for Edward Covey, who was known as a "slave-breaker." Covey was cruel to the 16-year-old, who eventually fought back. Covey never beat him again.

Freedom And Abolitionism

Douglass was determined to escape from slavery and he succeeded on his third try. Anna Murray, a free black woman in Baltimore with whom he had fallen in love, helped him. On September 3, 1838, Murray gave him money, a sailor's uniform and papers from a free black seaman. Douglass got on a northbound train in Maryland and made his way to the safe house of David Ruggles in New York in less than 24 hours. Ruggles was an abolitionist who worked to end slavery.

Douglass sent for Murray and the two were married on September 15, 1838, using the name Johnson so as not to be traced. The couple settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts. They chose the name Douglass as their married name. It came from a poem, "Lady of the Lake," by Sir Walter Scott. It was about Ellen Douglas and her search for love.

Douglass joined a black church and attended abolitionist meetings. He also read William Lloyd Garrison's weekly paper, *The Liberator*. Garrison began writing about ending slavery in 1831.

Douglass was asked to tell his story at abolitionist meetings. Garrison heard about it and printed the story in *The Liberator* in 1841. A few days later Douglass gave his first speech at a Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society convention. He did so well that he began speaking across the country. Some crowds were not friendly, though. In 1843, Douglass was chased and beaten by an angry mob before being rescued by a Quaker family.

Douglass wrote his first autobiography, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave," in 1845. The book sold well in the United States and was translated into several languages. Some people felt that a former slave could not write such a book. Douglass then published more complete versions of his life story, including "My Bondage and My Freedom" in 1855.

Douglass left the country in 1845 because some people wanted him captured and sent back to Maryland. Douglass sailed to Ireland and England where he stayed for two years, speaking to large crowds on the evils of slavery. During this time, money was raised to pay his owner for his freedom and by 1847, he returned to the United States a free man.

Upon his return, Douglass published abolitionist newspapers: The North Star, Frederick Douglass Weekly, Frederick Douglass' Paper, Douglass' Monthly and New National Era.

Douglass became an outspoken supporter of women's rights. In 1848, he was the only African-American to attend the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York. Elizabeth Cady Stanton spoke in favor of women's suffrage, or their right to vote. Douglass told the group that as a black man, he could not accept the right to vote if women could not also vote. Later, In 1869, Douglass would come into conflict with women's rights groups for supporting the 15th Amendment, which allowed black men to vote, but still did not help women to get the right to vote.

Civil War And Reconstruction

During the Civil War, Douglass was one of the most famous black men in the country. In 1863, he worked with President Abraham Lincoln to get better treatment for black soldiers, and later worked with President Andrew Johnson on black voting rights.

President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which began January 1, 1863, freed all slaves in the South. However, Douglass supported John C. Frémont in the 1864 election, because Lincoln did not say freed black men could vote. In 1865, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution outlawed slavery everywhere in the United States.

After the war Douglass served as president of the Freedman's Savings Bank and represented the United States government in the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

Douglass became the first African-American to be nominated for vice president of the United States as Victoria Woodhull's running mate on the Equal Rights Party ticket in 1872. However, Douglass was unaware he was being chosen and he did not campaign before the election.

In 1877, Douglass visited one of his former owners, Thomas Auld. Douglass had met with Auld's daughter, Amanda Auld Sears, years before. The visit was important to him, but others criticized Douglass for forgiving his former owner.

Family Life And Death

Frederick and Anna Douglass had five children: Rosetta, Lewis Henry, Frederick Jr., Charles Redmond and Annie, who died at the age of 10. Charles and Rosetta worked on their father's newspapers.

After his wife's death, Douglass married Helen Pitts, who was the daughter of Gideon Pitts Jr., an abolitionist who had worked with Douglass. She was a college graduate and worked hard for women's rights. Their marriage upset many, including their children, since Pitts was white and nearly 20 years younger than Douglass.

Douglass and Pitts remained married until his death 11 years later. On February 20, 1895, he attended a meeting of the National Council of Women in Washington, D.C. Shortly after returning home, Douglass died suddenly of a heart attack or stroke. He was buried in Mount Hope Cemetery in Rochester, New York.