Frederick Douglas Biography (1818-1895)

Lit. 214

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The son of a slave woman and an unknown white man, "Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey" was born in February of 1818 on Maryland's eastern shore. He spent his early years with his grandparents and with an aunt, seeing his mother only four or five times before her death when he was seven. (All Douglass knew of his father was that he was white.) During this time he was exposed to the degradations of slavery, witnessing firsthand brutal whippings and spending much time cold and hungry. When he was eight he was sent to Baltimore to live with a ship carpenter named Hugh Auld. There he learned to read and first heard the words abolition and abolitionists. "Going to live at Baltimore," Douglass would later say, "laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity."

Douglass spent seven relatively comfortable years in Baltimore before being sent back to the country, where he was hired out to a farm run by a notoriously brutal "slavebreaker" named Edward Covey. And the treatment he received was indeed brutal. Whipped daily and barely fed, Douglass was "broken in body, soul, and spirit."

On January 1, 1836, Douglass made a resolution that he would be free by the end of the year. He planned an escape. But early in April he was jailed after his plan was discovered. Two years later, while living in Baltimore and working at a shipyard, Douglass would finally realize his dream: he fled the city on September 3, 1838. Travelling by train, then steamboat, then train, he arrived in New York City the following day. Several weeks later he had settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, living with his newlywed bride (whom he met in Baltimore and married in New York) under his new name, Frederick Douglass.

Always striving to educate himself, Douglass continued his reading. He joined various organizations in New Bedford, including a black church. He attended Abolitionists' meetings. He subscribed to William Lloyd Garrison's weekly journal, the Liberator. In 1841, he saw Garrison speak at the Bristol Anti-Slavery Society's annual meeting. Douglass was inspired by the speaker, later stating, "no face and form ever impressed me with such sentiments [the hatred of slavery] as did those of William Lloyd Garrison." Garrison, too, was impressed with Douglass, mentioning him in the Liberator. Several days later Douglass gave his speech at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society's annual convention in Nantucket-- the speech described at the top of this page. Of the speech, one correspondent reported, "Flinty hearts were pierced, and cold ones melted by his eloquence." Before leaving the island, Douglass was asked to become a lecturer for the Society for three years. It was the launch of a career that would continue throughout Douglass' long life.

Despite apprehensions that the information might endanger his freedom, Douglass published his autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written By Himself. The year was 1845. Three years later, after a speaking tour of England, Ireland, and Scotland, Douglass published the first issue of the North Star, a four-page weekly, out of Rochester, New York.

Ever since he first met Garrison in 1841, the white abolitionist leader had been Douglass' mentor. But the views of Garrison and Douglass ultimately diverged. Garrison represented the radical end of the abolitionist spectrum. He denounced churches, political parties, even voting. He believed in the dissolution (break up) of the Union. He also believed that the U.S. Constitution was a pro-slavery document. After his tour of Europe and the establishment of his paper, Douglass' views began to change; he was becoming more of an independent thinker, more pragmatic. In 1851 Douglass announced at a meeting in Syracuse, New York, that he did not assume the Constitution was a pro-slavery document, and that it could even "be wielded in behalf of emancipation," especially where the federal government had exclusive jurisdiction. Douglass also did not advocate the dissolution of the Union, since it would isolate slaves in the South. This led to a bitter dispute between Garrison and Douglass that, despite the efforts of others such as Harriet Beecher Stowe to reconcile the two, would last into the Civil War.

Frederick Douglass would continue his active involvement to better the lives of African Americans. He conferred with Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War and recruited northern blacks for the Union Army. After the War he fought for the rights of women and African Americans alike.

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Importance:

Frederick Douglass has been called the father of the civil rights movement. He rose through determination, brilliance, and eloquence to shape the American nation. He was an abolitionist, human rights and women's rights activist, orator, author, journalist, publisher, and social reformer.

Committed to freedom, Douglass dedicated his life to achieving justice for all Americans, in particular African-Americans, women, and minority groups. He envisioned America as an inclusive nation strengthened by diversity and free of discrimination.

Douglass served as advisor to presidents. Abraham Lincoln referred to him as the most meritorious man of the nineteenth century. In his later years Douglass was appointed to several offices. He served as U.S. Marshal of the District of Columbia during Rutherford B. Hayes' administration and President James Garfield appointed him the District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds. In 1889 President Benjamin Harrison appointed him to be the US minister to Haiti. He was later appointed by President Grant to serve as secretary of the commission of Santo Domingo. Douglass had hoped that his appointments would open doors for other African-Americans, but it was many years before they would follow in his footsteps.

Frederick Douglass rose from slavery to become the leading African-American voice of the nineteenth century. At an early age, he realized that his ability to read was the key to freedom. All of his efforts from then on focused on achieving freedom. As a young man, he came into contact with black preachers and taught in the Sabbath School in Baltimore. Here he refined his reading, writing, and speaking skills. At age twenty, Douglass escaped north to freedom. He settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts with his wife Anna Murray Douglass and joined the abolitionist movement.

Frederick Douglass was a compelling force in the anti-slavery movement. A man of moral authority, Douglass developed into a charismatic public speaker. Prominent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison recognized his oratory skill and hired him as a speaker for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.

Douglass worked with many notable abolitionists of the nineteenth century including Wendell Phillips and Abby Kelley. Douglass also had a close relationship with John Brown and his family but disagreed with Brown's violent tactics, dramatically displayed in Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859. With the abolishment of slavery at the close of the Civil War, Douglass then turned his attention to the full integration of the African-American into political and economic life of the United States.

Douglass established his own weekly abolitionist newspaper, the North Star, that became a major voice of African-American opinion. Later, through his periodical titled the Douglass Monthly, he recruited black Union soldiers for the African-American Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteers. His sons Lewis and Charles both served in this regiment and saw combat.

Douglass worked to retain the hard-won advances of African-Americans. However, the progress made during Reconstruction soon eroded as the twentieth century approached. Douglass spent his last years opposing lynching and supporting the rights of women.

The antislavery crusade of the early nineteenth century served as a training ground for the women's suffrage movement. Douglass actively supported the women's rights movement, yet he believed black men should receive suffrage first. Demonstrating his support for women's rights, Douglass participated in the first feminist convention at Seneca Falls in July of 1848 where he was largely responsible for passage of the motion to support female suffrage.

Together with abolitionist and feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Douglass signed the Declaration of Sentiments that became the movement's manifesto. His masthead of his newspaper, the North Star, once read "Right is of no Sex - Truth is of no Color." A women's rights activist to the end, Douglass died in February 1895, having just attended a Woman's Council meeting.

Courtesy of the National Park Service