

Frederick Douglass: Self-Made “PROPHET OF FREEDOM”

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Frederick Douglass is arguably one of the most influential figures in American history. An internationally renowned orator, statesman, anti-slavery crusader, and author, the child born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, came to exemplify what is best and most enduring about American ideals and the promise of our country's constitution.

son until her untimely death when Frederick was a young boy. Viewed as property to be bought, sold, or transferred in ownership, Douglass was hired out as cheap labor to a number of slave masters.

Long before his physical freedom, Frederick was liberated by the power of words. Ignoring the laws of the times, one of Frederick's slave mistresses taught him the alphabet. It proved to be a transformative event in Douglass' life. He recounts in his 1845 bestselling autobiography that

instrumental in his escape, and settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts. While working as a laborer to support his young family Douglass began to frequent anti-slavery rallies. He was soon up on stage, reluctantly but powerfully sharing his story.

VANGUARD OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

1841 proved to be a fateful year for Douglass. He gave his first major speech at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society's annual convention and launched his influential career as an antislavery crusader. The famed abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison was so moved by Frederick's magnetic stage presence and powerful personal story that he enlisted him to lecture with the American Anti-Slavery Society at meeting halls across the Eastern and Midwestern United States. It was often dangerous work. Douglass became known for his clear, direct, and articulate oratory style. He spoke truthfully and eloquently about his life as a slave, sometimes inciting riotous mobs that weren't ready to face the American south's horrifying and morally inept “peculiar institution.”



Douglass in his Cedar Hill library c1890. (NPS)

Douglass used words to eloquently and unapologetically speak, write, and educate northern whites about American slavery. He unapologetically named in detail after detail slavery's horrific injustices, white slavemasters' and even religious abolitionists' moral ineptitude, and called to task northern whites who turned a blind eye to slavery's insidiousness. He called on all Americans to look directly and unflinchingly at slavery's cost, not only for America's slaves, but also for the entire nation.

At a time when freedom was only a vague promise on the horizon for most black Americans, Douglass was a resounding voice of hope, justice, and dignity for African Americans. He elevated the national discussion on slavery, helping to hasten its demise.

Here is a brief biography of the man known as the “Prophet of Freedom”:

EARLY LIFE

Douglass' early life was lonely and tragic. Born a slave sometime in 1818 in Talbot County, Maryland, Frederick Douglass' father was rumored to be his mother's white slave owner. His mother, who was enslaved on a nearby plantation, would walk twelve miles to visit her



Anna Murray Douglass (1815-1882) married Frederick Douglass in 1838 shortly after helping him escape from slavery. (NPS)

“Learning the alphabet gave me the key to reading; I took that key and, with a little help from my friends, learned how to read, thus becoming a free man in my mind.” With an audacious sense of purpose that flowered as he matured into adulthood, the young Frederick convinced his white childhood friends to teach him to read and write in exchange for food. He read at every opportunity, even after being sold into hard slave labor in rural Maryland. His steely desire for knowledge never faltered. He soon organized a Sunday school for fellow slaves and quickly earned a reputation for being a headstrong troublemaker.

In 1836, Douglass impersonated a sailor and escaped to freedom during a time when abolitionist fervor was growing across the U.S. He married Anna Murray, a free black woman



Rosetta Douglass Sprague (1839-1906) was the first child of Anna and Frederick Douglass. (NPS)



Lewis Henry Douglass (1840-1908) was the second child of Anna and Frederick Douglass. (NPS)



Frederick Douglass, Jr. (1842-1892) was the third child of Anna and Frederick Douglass. (NPS)



Charles Redmond Douglass (1844-1920) was the fourth child of Anna and Frederick Douglass. (NPS)

Douglass' first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, mentioned details about his life as a slave, including the name and residence of his former master. To avoid recapture, Frederick spent two years touring and lecturing to abolitionists in Great Britain. The tour earned him

He recounts in his 1882 autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, that his home served as one of the Underground Railroad's main stations and helped spirit runaway slaves to Canada and freedom.

Douglass' fame and influence grew as the abolitionist movement and the

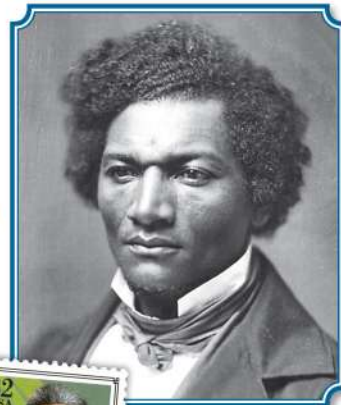
African-American Civil War veterans during the Reconstruction era.

Buoyed by the Civil War victory but bitterly disturbed by the failures of Reconstruction, Douglass was a vigorous opponent of Jim Crow segregation until his death from a heart attack in 1895.

ENDURING LEGACY

Following Frederick Douglass' death in 1895, his home, Cedar Hill, was at risk of being sold after his will was ruled invalid under District of Columbia law. His second wife, abolitionist and suffragist Helen Pitts Douglass, borrowed \$15,000 to purchase the property from Douglass' heirs and preserve it. In 1900, she established the Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association to maintain the home and its contents, including Douglass' papers and personal belongings. She spent the rest of her life raising funds and working to preserve the site, laying the foundation for its long-term preservation. The federal government acquired Cedar Hill in 1962, and it is now preserved as the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site.

Cedar Hill, Douglass' family home, is maintained as part of the National Park Service and was designated a National Historic Site in 1988. His great great granddaughter Nettie Washington Douglass established the Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives to preserve his legacy and create awareness about modern day slavery, which today affects an estimated 27 million people worldwide. Visit www.fdfi.org to learn more.



Above: The Frederick Douglass stamp, issued February 14, 1967 as part of the Prominent Americans Definitive stamp series.



to the war's effort in the famed fight for Fort Wagner and helped legitimize black troops.

Never one to shy away from controversy, Douglass was also an early supporter of the women's suffrage movement.

Right: The Frederick Douglass stamp, issued June 29, 1995 to honor the 150th Anniversary of the end of the Civil War.

international fame and he returned to the States intent on helping African Americans gain the freedoms he enjoyed while abroad.

In 1847 he began publication on *The North Star*, his uniquely successful and influential anti-slavery newspaper, so named for the bright star said to guide fugitive slaves to freedom along the Underground Railroad. In numerous speeches, writings, and publications, Douglass doggedly promoted the end of slavery. During this time, Douglass was also a conductor on the Rochester, New York arm of the Underground Railroad.



Cedar Hill Frederick Douglass' home in Anacostia, Washington, D.C., as it appears today. (photo credit NPS)

Helen Pitts Douglass. PHOTO: NPS.org



L.R. Douglass' newspaper, *The North Star*. (NMAAHC; Washington, D.C.'s Metropolitan A.M.E. Church gave this Bible to Frederick Douglass in 1889. (PHOTO: NPS); Frederick Douglass (PHOTO: NPS)

political winds of change brought the issue of slavery to the forefront of American politics. His second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, is a more detailed account of his life as a slave and his evolution as a thinking, self-made man who valued faith and literacy. When the Civil War broke out, Douglass' morally persuasive arguments against slavery were at the vanguard of slavery's demise.

When Douglass spoke, national leaders paid attention. Douglass outspokenly called for the right of black men to fight for their freedom and boldly petitioned President Lincoln for the fair and equal treatment of African American men in uniform. He helped recruit troops for the first official Civil War infantry of free northern black men. Immortalized in the 1989 movie *Glory*, the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment significantly contributed