



Frederick Douglass Biography

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.

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Video: PBS Learning: The African Americans
(5:19) <https://mpt.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/mr13.socst.us.douglass/frederick-douglass/>