

## **Frederick Douglass: Choosing Challenge**

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was born into slavery in Talbot County, Maryland, and was named by his mother, Harriet Bailey. His birthplace was likely his grandmother's shack east of Tappers Corner and west of Tuckahoe Creek. Years later, after escaping to the North, he took the surname Douglass, having already dropped use of his two middle names. The exact date of Douglass's birth is unknown. He later chose to celebrate it on February 14. The exact year is also unknown. He was of mixed race, which likely included Native American on his mother's side as well as African and European.

### **Early Separation From His Family**

He spoke of his earliest times with his mother:

"My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant.... It [was] common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age."

"I do not recollect ever seeing my mother by the light of day... She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone."

After this early separation from his mother, young Frederick lived with his maternal grandmother, Betty Bailey. Meanwhile, at the age of seven, he was separated from his grandmother and moved to the Wye House plantation, where Aaron Anthony worked as overseer. Douglass's mother died when he was about ten. After Anthony died, the boy was given to Lucretia Auld, wife of Thomas Auld, who sent him to serve Thomas' brother Hugh Auld in Baltimore.

### **Douglass' Education**

When Douglass was about twelve years old, Hugh Auld's wife Sophia started teaching him the alphabet, although Maryland state law prohibited teaching slaves to read. Douglass described her as a kind and tender-hearted woman, who treated the boy the way one human being ought to treat another. When Hugh Auld discovered her activity, he strongly disapproved, saying that if a slave learned to read, he would become dissatisfied with his condition and desire freedom. Douglass later referred to this as the "first decidedly antislavery lecture" he had ever heard. In his autobiography, Douglass related how he learned to read from white children in the neighborhood and by observing the writings of men with whom he worked. One day Mrs. Auld saw Douglass reading a newspaper; she ran over and snatched it from him, with her face showing that education and slavery were incompatible with each other.

Frederick heard his friends read from a collection of great speeches, assigned in school. He took 50 cents that he had hoarded, went to Knight's Bookstore, and bought his own copy of *The Columbian Orator*. The book was full of great speeches by Marcus Tullius Cicero, William Pitt the Elder, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and Charles James Fox, among others. Alone, behind the shipyard wall, Frederick read aloud. Laboriously, studiously, at first, then fluently, melodically, he recited great speeches. With *The Columbian Orator* in his hand, with the words of great speakers coming from his mouth, he was rehearsing.

The book included a Dialogue between "Master and Slave", in which the slave tells the master he wants not kindness but liberty. There was also a short play, Slave in Barbary, where the ruler Hamet declares:



“Let it be remembered, there is no luxury so exquisite as the exercise of humanity, and no post so honorable as his, who defends the rights of man.”

Douglass continued, secretly, to teach himself how to read and write. He later often said, "knowledge is the pathway from slavery to freedom." As Douglass began to read newspapers, pamphlets, political materials, and books of every description, this new realm of thought led him to question and condemn the institution of slavery. In later years, Douglass credited *The Columbian Orator*, an anthology which he discovered at about age twelve, with clarifying and defining his views on freedom and human rights.

When Douglass was hired out to William Freeland, he taught other slaves on the plantation to read the New Testament at a weekly Sunday school. As word spread, the interest among slaves in learning to read was so great that in any week, more than 40 slaves would attend lessons. For about six months, their study went relatively unnoticed. While Freeland remained complacent about their activities, other plantation owners became incensed about their slaves being educated. One Sunday they burst in on the gathering, armed with clubs and stones, to disperse the congregation permanently.

### **After Freedom**

After the Civil War, Douglass continued to work for equality for African-Americans and women. Due to his prominence and activism during the war, Douglass received several political appointments. Meanwhile, white insurgents had quickly arisen in the South after the war, organizing first as secret vigilante groups, including the Ku Klux Klan. In an effort to combat these efforts, Douglass supported the presidential campaign of Ulysses S. Grant in 1868. In 1870, Douglass started his last newspaper, the *New National Era*, attempting to hold his country to its commitment to equality.

In 1872, Douglass became the first African American nominated for Vice President of the United States, as Victoria Woodhull's running mate on the Equal Rights Party ticket. He was nominated without his knowledge. In that year, he was presidential elector at large for the State of New York, and took that state's votes to Washington, DC. However, during that year his home on South Avenue in Rochester, New York, burned down; arson was suspected. A complete issue of *The North Star* was lost. Douglass then moved to Washington, D.C.

Throughout the Reconstruction era, Douglass continued speaking, and emphasized the importance of work, voting rights and actual exercise of suffrage. Douglass's stump speech for 25 years after the end of the Civil War emphasized work to counter the racism that was then prevalent in unions. In a speech delivered on November 15, 1867, Douglass said: "A man's rights rest in three boxes. The ballot box, jury box and the cartridge box. Let no man be kept from the ballot box because of his color. Let no woman be kept from the ballot box because of her sex."

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick\\_Douglass](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Douglass) ; <http://fee.org/freeman/detail/frederick-douglass-heroic-orator-for-liberty>

