

Frederick Douglass: From Slavery to Freedom

by Steven Mintz

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Frederick Douglass was one of the first fugitive slaves to speak out publicly against slavery. On the morning of August 12, 1841, he stood up at an anti-slavery meeting on Nantucket Island. With great power and eloquence, he described his life in bondage. As soon as he finished, the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison asked the audience, "Have we been listening to a thing, a piece of property, or to a man?" "A man! A man!" five hundred voices replied. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the pioneering feminist, vividly recalled her first glimpse of Douglass on an abolitionist platform: "He stood there like an African prince, majestic in his wrath, as with wit, satire, and indignation he graphically described the bitterness of slavery and the humiliation of subjection."

Douglass (who was originally named Frederick Bailey, after a Muslim ancestor, Belali Mohomet) had personally experienced many of slavery's worst horrors. Born in 1818, the son of a Maryland slave woman and an unknown white father, he was separated from his mother almost immediately after his birth and remembered seeing her only four or five times before her death. Cared for by his maternal grandmother, an enslaved midwife, he suffered a cruel emotional blow when, at the age of six, he was taken from his home to work on one of the largest plantations on Maryland's eastern shore. There, Douglass suffered chronic hunger and witnessed many of the cruelties that he later recorded in his autobiographies. He saw an aunt receive forty lashes and a cousin bleeding from her shoulders and neck after a flogging by a drunken overseer.

Douglass was temporarily rescued from a life of menial plantation labor when he was sent to Baltimore to work for a shipwright. There, his mistress taught him to read until her husband declared that "learning would spoil" him. Douglass continued his education on his own. With fifty cents that he earned blacking boots, Douglass bought a copy of the *Columbian Orator*, a collection of speeches that included a blistering attack on slavery. This book introduced him to the ideals of the Enlightenment and the American Revolution and inspired him to perfect his oratorical skills.

At fifteen, following his master's death, Douglass was returned to plantation life. He was unwilling to show deference to his new owner, whom he refused to call "Master." To crush Douglass's rebellious spirit, he was hired out to a notorious "slave breaker" named Edward Covey. For seven months, Douglass endured abuse and beatings. But one hot August morning he could take no more. He fought back and defeated Covey in a fist fight. Covey never mistreated Douglass again.

In 1836, Douglass and two close friends plotted to escape slavery. When the plan was uncovered, Douglass was thrown into jail. Instead of being sold to slave traders and shipped to the deep South, as he had expected, Douglass was returned to Baltimore and promised freedom at the age of 25 if he behaved himself.

In Baltimore, Douglass worked in the city's shipyards. Virtually every day, white workers harassed him and on one occasion beat him with bricks and metal spikes. Eventually, Douglass's owner gave him the unusual privilege of hiring himself out for wages and living independently. It was during this period of relative freedom that Douglass met Anna Murray, a free black woman whom he later married.

In 1838, after his owner threatened to take away his right to hire out his own time and keep a portion of his wages, Douglass decided to run away. With papers borrowed from a free black sailor, he boarded a train and rode to freedom. To conceal his identity, he adopted a new last name, Douglass, chosen from Sir Walter Scott's poem, "Lady of the Lake."

He settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he worked in the shipyards, and began to participate in anti-slavery meetings. As a traveling lecturer, Douglass electrified audiences with his first-hand accounts of slavery. When many northerners refused to believe that this eloquent orator could possibly have been a slave, he responded by writing an autobiography that identified his previous owners by name. Fearful that his autobiography made him vulnerable to kidnapping and a return to slavery, Douglass fled to England. Only after British abolitionists purchased his freedom 1846 did he return to the United States.

Initially, Douglass supported William Lloyd Garrison and other radical abolitionists, who believed that moral purity was more important than political success. Douglass later broke with Garrison, started his own newspaper, *The North Star*, and supported political action against slavery. He was an early supporter of the Republican Party, even though its goal was to halt slavery's expansion, not to abolish the institution. Following the Civil War, the party rewarded his loyalty by appointing him marshal and register of deeds for the District of Columbia and then US minister to Haiti.

Douglass supported many reforms including temperance and women's rights. He was one of the few men to attend the first women's rights convention, held in Seneca Falls, New York, and he was the only man to vote for a resolution demanding the vote for women. His main cause, however, was the struggle against slavery and racial discrimination. In the 1840s and 1850s, he not only lectured tirelessly against slavery, he also raised funds to help fugitive slaves reach safety in Canada. During the Civil War, he lobbied President Lincoln to make slave emancipation a war aim and to organize black regiments. Declaring that "liberty won by white men would lack half its lustre," he personally recruited some 2,000 African American troops for the Union Army. Among the recruits were two of his sons, who took part in the bloody Union assault on Fort Wagner in South Carolina in July 1863, which resulted in more than 1,500 Northern casualties-but which proved black troops' heroism in battle.

Douglass never wavered in his commitment to equal rights. During Reconstruction, he struggled to convince Congress to use federal power to safeguard the freedmen's rights. Later, as the country retreated from Reconstruction, Douglass passionately denounced lynching, segregation, and disfranchisement. Toward the end of his career, he was asked what advice he had for a young man. "Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!" he replied. Despite old age, Douglass never stopped agitating. He died in 1895, at the age of 77, after attending a women's rights meeting with Susan B. Anthony.

It is a striking historical coincidence that the year of Douglass's death brought a new black leader to national prominence. Seven months after Douglass died, Booker T. Washington, the founder of the Tuskegee Institute, delivered a speech in Atlanta, Georgia, that catapulted him into the public spotlight. The "Atlanta Compromise" speech called on African Americans to end their demands for equal rights and strive instead for economic advancement. "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the finger," Washington declared, "yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." Washington's philosophy of "accommodation" with segregation represented the polar opposite of Douglass's goal of full civil and political equality. It would be more than half a century before civil rights activism began to transform Douglass's ideal of social equality into a reality.

Steven Mintz, a historian at Columbia University and director of the Columbia Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Teaching Center, would like to express his profound debt to John Stauffer of Harvard University for sharing his many insights into the novel. Mintz is author of *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*; *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life*; and *Moralists & Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers*.