

# Frederick Douglass Biography

Frederick Douglass (1818 -1895) was the most prominent African-American leader of the 19th century. A fiery orator, dedicated editor, bestselling author, and presidential advisor, Douglass crusaded for human rights as an abolitionist, a strong advocate for women's suffrage, and a voice for social justice.

Douglass was born into slavery as Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey to an African slave mother and white father in Tuckahoe, Maryland in the month of February, 1818. He was separated from his mother when he was only a few weeks old and was raised by his grandparents. When he was six years old, his grandmother took him, without warning, to his master's plantation to live. At age eight, he was sent to live with his master's relatives, Hugh and Sophia Auld. Sophia started to teach him to read and write as a child, in violation of state laws. He escaped slavery at age 20, married, and later moved to Massachusetts. He adopted the name "Douglass" and began to speak on behalf of abolitionism. Eventually, he embarked upon a three-year speaking tour of northern cities, building public support for the abolitionist cause, by educating audiences about the evils of slavery with his powerful rhetorical style of speech.

In 1845, Douglass wrote his first autobiography and called it ***Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave***. Written to address the righteousness of the abolitionists' movement, this moving book told of his struggle to gain his freedom. He identified his owner by name, and his book became a national bestseller. With his identity revealed, Douglass was forced into exile in England in order to avoid capture by slave traders. In 1846, British antislavery friends purchased his freedom.

Douglass returned to the United States in 1847, moved to Rochester, New York, and established his own abolitionist newspaper called ***The North Star***. Douglass' children helped publish the four-page newspaper. As the abolitionist movement gained strength in the 1850s, Douglass became more directly involved with the Underground Railroad. Harriet Tubman and other "conductors" often stayed at Douglass' home en route to Canada. The notorious Dred Scott decision of 1857, in which the Supreme Court ruled that black people had no rights under the United States Constitution, infuriated Douglass and deepened the national debate over slavery.

Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States in 1860. In 1861, the Civil War began after eleven southern states seceded from the Union in part as a response to Lincoln's promise to limit slavery's expansion. Douglass perceived the Civil War as a moral crusade to free slaves and establish a true democracy. During the war, Douglass traveled around the country calling on Lincoln to end the practice of slavery and enroll black troops in the war effort. After Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, Douglass helped recruit black soldiers for the Union Army.

Douglass continued to advise Lincoln throughout the Civil War, and advocated for constitutional amendments that would ban slavery and provide blacks a legally guaranteed place in society. With the North's victory, Douglass saw these goals realized: The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment banned slavery, the 14th Amendment gave citizenship to everyone born in the United States, and the 15th Amendment granted voting rights to males over the age of 21. (Women did not gain the right to vote until 1920 with the passage of the 19th Amendment.)

After the war, Douglass held a number of government posts. President Rutherford Hayes appointed Douglass the Federal Marshal of Washington D.C. in 1877. In 1889, Douglass became Minister to Haiti, a position he held for two years. During the 1890s, Douglass returned to the lecture circuit in order to condemn lynchings occurring across the country and "Jim Crow" laws that limited the rights of blacks, both part of a new wave of racism sweeping the South. Douglass died on February 20, 1895, after attending a meeting advocating women's suffrage.

Frederick Douglass sought to embody three keys for success in life:

- **Believe in yourself**
- **Educate yourself and prepare for any opportunity**
- **Use the power of spoken and written language to effect positive change for yourself and society**

Douglass said, "***What is possible for me is possible for you.***" By taking these keys to leading a successful life and making them his own, Frederick Douglass created a life of honor, respect, and compassion that would never have been possible without the fundamental liberties he worked so tirelessly to attain. Frederick Douglass' life of remarkable service is a testimony to the influence that one person can have on the lives of others.