

## Frederick Douglas

Frederick Douglass was another prominent abolitionist before, during and after Lincoln's War. He was also an author and an orator. He was of mixed race and born into slavery in February 1818 and his mother, Harriet Bailey, named him Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey. His birthplace was the Eastern Shore of Maryland in Talbot County. His exact date of birth was never known by him so he chose February 14<sup>th</sup> as the day to celebrate.

Douglass would state in his autobiography that, "I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it." He escaped to the north at the age of 20, gave himself the surname Douglass and dropped his middle names. Douglass wrote of his mother: "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. 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". He also wrote: "The opinion was whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion I know nothing. ..."



While still a slave in 1837, Douglass fell in love with Anna Murray, a free black woman five years older than he. Douglass was successful in his escape attempts on September 3, 1838 when he boarded a train on the Baltimore harbor. He exited the train at Havre de Grace, Maryland near the Delaware border. He was still 20 miles from the free state of Pennsylvania. Anna had provided him with a sailor's uniform and a free seaman had given his papers to him. So, crossing Delaware, a slave state, was accomplished without incident.

Upon his arrival in Philadelphia, Douglass sent for Anna to meet him in New York and eleven days later she arrived with the necessities to set up a household. A black Presbyterian minister married the couple on September 15. They temporarily assumed the name of Johnson to avoid any attention. In the north, Douglass became a world renowned anti-slavery activist. He would author three autobiographies: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845); *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855); and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881). They are regarded as the finest examples of the slave narrative tradition and as classics of American autobiography. Douglass and Anna had five children: Rosetta, Lewis Henry, Frederick, Jr., Charles and Annie who died at the age of ten. Charles and Rosetta helped produce his newspapers. Anna Douglass remained a loyal supporter of her husband's public work even though Douglass' relationships with Julia Griffiths and Otilie Assing, two women he was professionally involved with, caused recurring speculation and scandals.



After Anna died in 1882, Douglass married Helen Pitts in 1884, (**seated in photo at right**) Pitts was a white feminist from Honeoye, New York. Pitts was the daughter of Gideon Pitts, Jr., an abolitionist colleague and friend of Douglass. A graduate of Mount Holyoke College (then called Mount Holyoke Female Seminary), Pitts worked on a radical feminist publication named *Alpha* while living in Washington, D.C. The marriage provoked a storm of controversy, since Pitts was both white and nearly 20 years younger than Douglass. Her family stopped speaking to her; his children considered the marriage a repudiation of their mother. However, feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton congratulated the couple. Douglass responded to the criticisms by saying that his first marriage had been to someone the color of his mother, and his second to someone the color of his father.



His abolitionist battle began in the 1840s and lasted through his attacks on Jim Crow and the lynching in the 1890s. He edited a powerful black newspaper for sixteen years and became internationally famous as a speaker and writer.

In the 1850s he left the strictly moralist brand of abolitionism of William Lloyd Garrison; he supported the women's rights movement; and gave direct support to John Brown's conspiracy that ended in the 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry.

Rhetorically, Douglass was a master of irony, as illustrated by his famous Fourth of July speech in 1852: "This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*. You may rejoice, *I* must mourn," he declared. Then he accused his unsuspecting audience in Rochester, New York, of mockery for inviting him to speak and quoted Psalm 137, where the children of Israel are forced to sit down "by the rivers of Babylon," there to "sing the Lord's song in a strange land." For the ways that race has caused the deepest contradictions in American history, few better sources of insight exist than Douglass's speeches. Moreover, for understanding prejudice, there are few better starting points than his timeless definition of racism as a "diseased imagination."

Douglass viewed the Civil War as a moral crusade against slavery. (Even though the war was not started over slavery.) Throughout the war he was a propagandist for the Union and emancipation, a recruiter for black troops, and occasional adviser to President Lincoln.

He moved to Washington in the 1870s and edited a newspaper and became president of the Freedman's Bank which was bankrupt within a few months. He entered public service as a staunch Republican and was appointed U.S. marshal from 1877-1881 and recorder of deeds in D.C. from 1881-1886. He also served as chargé d'affaires for Santo Domingo and minister to Haiti from 1889-1891.

On February 20, 1895, Douglass attended a meeting of the National Council of Women in Washington, D.C. During that meeting, he was brought to the platform and received a standing ovation. Shortly after he returned home, Frederick Douglass died of a massive heart attack or stroke.

His funeral was held at the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church; thousands passed by his coffin to show their respect. Although Douglass had attended several churches in the nation's capital, he had a pew here and donated two standing candelabras when this church had moved to a new building in 1886. He also gave many lectures there, including his last major speech, "*The Lesson of the Hour.*"

Douglass' coffin was transported back to Rochester, New York, where he had lived for 25 years, longer than anywhere else in his life. He was buried next to Anna in the Douglass family plot of Mount Hope Cemetery, and Helen joined them in 1903.



**Plot for Frederick, Anna and Helen**