

Frederick Douglass (1818-95)

Frederick Douglass was a prominent American abolitionist, author and orator. Born a slave, Douglass escaped at age 20 and went on to become a world-renowned anti-slavery activist. His three autobiographies are considered important works of the slave narrative tradition as well as classics of American autobiography. Douglass' work as a reformer ranged from his abolitionist activities in the early 1840s to his attacks on Jim Crow and lynching in the 1890s. For 16 years he edited an influential black newspaper and achieved international fame as an inspiring and persuasive speaker and writer. In thousands of speeches and editorials, he levied a powerful indictment against slavery and racism, provided an indomitable voice of hope for his people, embraced antislavery politics and preached his own brand of American ideals.

An abolitionist, writer and orator Frederick Douglass was the most important black American leader of the nineteenth century. Born Frederick [Augustus Washington](#) Bailey on Maryland's Eastern Shore, he was the son of a slave woman and, probably, her white master. Upon his escape from slavery at age twenty, he adopted the name of the hero of Sir Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake*. Douglass immortalized his years as a slave in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). This and two subsequent autobiographies, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), mark his greatest contributions to American culture. Written as antislavery propaganda and personal revelation, they are regarded as the finest examples of the slave narrative tradition and as classics of American autobiography.

Did You Know?

After his autobiography was published, Douglass went on a two-year speaking tour of Great Britain and Ireland in order to avoid recapture by his former owner, whose name and location Douglass had mentioned in the narrative.

Douglass's life as a reformer ranged from his abolitionist activities in the early 1840s to his attacks on Jim Crow and lynching in the 1890s. For sixteen years he edited an influential black newspaper and achieved international fame as an orator and writer of great persuasive power. In thousands of speeches and editorials he levied an irresistible indictment against slavery and racism, provided an indomitable voice of hope

for his people, embraced antislavery politics, and preached his own brand of American ideals. In the 1850s he broke with the strictly moralist brand of abolitionism led by William Lloyd Garrison; he supported the early women's rights movement; and he gave direct assistance to John Brown's conspiracy that led to the raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859.

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 have 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 welcomed the Civil War in 1861 as a moral crusade against slavery. During the war he labored as a propagandist of the Union cause and emancipation, a recruiter of black troops, and (on two occasions) an adviser to President [Abraham Lincoln](#). He viewed the Union victory as an apocalyptic rebirth of America as a nation rooted in a rewritten Constitution and the ideal of racial equality. Some of his hopes were dashed during [Reconstruction](#) and the Gilded Age, but he continued to travel widely and lecture on racial issues, national politics, and women's rights. In the 1870s Douglass moved to [Washington, D.C.](#), where he edited a newspaper and became president of the ill-fated Freedman's Bank. As a stalwart Republican, Douglass was appointed marshal (1877-1881) and recorder of deeds (1881-1886) for the District of Columbia, and chargé d'affaires for Santo Domingo and minister to Haiti (1889-1891).

Brilliant, heroic, and complex, Douglass became a symbol of his age and a unique voice for humanism and social justice. His life and thought will always speak profoundly to the meaning of being black in America, as well as the human calling to resist oppression. Douglass died in 1895 after years of trying to preserve a black abolitionist's meaning and memory of the great events he had witnessed and helped to shape.

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