The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass

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Key Dates in the Life of Frederick Douglass

- February 1818--Born on Hill Farm, Talbot County, Maryland.
- 1826---Lives with Hugh Auld and family in Baltimore.
- 1834--Works as a field hand for a year with Mr. Covey.
- September 3, 1838--Escapes North and settles in New Bedford, MA.
- 1845--Publishes first autobiography.
- 1845-47--Travels to England to lecture on abolition.
- 1847--Establishes *North Star* from Rochester, NY.
- 1859-60--After John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, flees to England for safety.
- 1863--Assists in the recruitment of black troops for Union Army.
- 1872-74--Serves as president of Freedmen’s Savings Bank in D.C.
- 1889-1891--Serves as U.S. resident minister and consul general to Haiti.
- February 20, 1895--Dies at his home in Washington, D.C.
Douglass’ children...and his last wife

Helen Pitts Douglass, a cousin to Presidents John and John Q. Adams and Douglass’ personal secretary, marries him in 1884.
More Douglass Family Portraits...

Frederick Douglass and his grandson, Joseph.

Joseph H. Douglass’ family: Fannie Howard Douglass, Blanche, and Frederick III

Frederick Douglass III, Nettie Howard, and Booker T. Washington III

* All photos taken from the Frederick Douglass Family Foundation website: [http://www.fdff.org/aboutus.html](http://www.fdff.org/aboutus.html)
The Works of Frederick Douglass

- *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845)
- *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855)
- *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, 1891)
- Founder and editor of abolitionist newspaper *The North Star, 1847--1851*
Douglass, the publisher...

Despite the failure of earlier African American newspapers, Douglass founded the *North Star* in December 1847. The masthead contained the motto:

"Right is of no sex; truth is of no color, God is the Father of us all--and all are brethren."

In 1851 it merged with the *Liberty Party Paper* and soon changed its name to the *Frederick Douglass Paper*. A contemporary African American journalist observed that Douglass's ability as a newspaper editor and publisher did more for the "freedom and elevation of his race than all his platform appearances."
Douglass, the abolitionist and suffragist...

- In 1846, British abolitionists purchased Douglass’ freedom from Hugh Auld.
- His weekly newspaper, the *North Star* (1847), allowed Douglass to spread the abolitionist and women’s political message.
- In 1848, Douglass attends the first women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, NY.
- Douglass used his Rochester home as a base for his abolitionist and suffragist activities, and sometimes, fugitive slaves found refuge in Douglass’ home.
- He alone helped boost the city’s reputation as a liberal city.
“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”

~Excerpt from a speech given July 5, 1852 in Rochester, NY.

“What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy--a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.”
Seminal Moments from Douglass’ Narrative
MOMENT #1: The Beating of Aunt Hester

- Excerpt from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. All quotations from the 1993 Bedford Books edition, edited by David Blight.

- “The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped the longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowhide. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It stuck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most horrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it.” (p.42-43)
Seminal Moments from Douglass’ Narrative

MOMENT #2: The Fight Scene with Covey

“This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.” (p.79)
**Seminal Moments from Douglass’ Narrative**

**MOMENT #3: Learning to Read with Mrs. Auld**

- “If you give a nigger and inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. “Now,” he said, “if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave.” (p. 57)

- “The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery.” (p. 61)
“The wretchedness of slavery, and the blessedness of freedom, were perpetually before me. It was life and death with me. But I remained firm, and, according to my resolution, on the third day of September, 1838, I left my chains, and succeeded in reaching New York without the slightest interruption of any kind. How I did so, --what means I adopted, --in what direction I traveled, and by what mode of conveyance, --I must leave unexplained, for the reasons mentioned before.” (p. 98)
Today, interested scholars can tour Frederick Douglass’ Washington, D.C. home, which is a National Historic Site and operated by the National Park Service.

http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/douglass/home.html
Image Credits and Links


• Slide 3: Family Tree, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/doughtml/famtree.html

• Slide 4: Portraits of children and wife from African American History of Western New York website: http://www.math.buffalo.edu/~sww/0history/hwny-douglass-family.html

• Slide 5: All photos taken from the Frederick Douglass Family Foundation website: http://www.fdff.org/aboutus.html
