
The Civil Rights Movement in the Nineteenth Century

Frederick Douglass: 'Knowledge unfits a child to be a slave'

by Denise M. Henderson

Frederick Douglass was one of the leaders of America's nineteenth-century civil rights movement, and one of Abraham Lincoln's chief lieutenants in the fight to save the Union. A former slave and leader in the fight against slavery, Douglass found himself a leader in the fight for the U.S. Constitution itself. His understanding of the anti-slavery struggle as a struggle for the Constitution, arose out of his own intellectual integrity and willingness to think through profound ideas and to think for himself, whether others agreed or not.

As a "self-made man," as he described himself, he knew the importance of education, from the simple act of teaching a slave to read, to the development of the ability to think for oneself. His life story is a shining example of the high intellectual and moral caliber of leaders of the civil rights movement of his day.

Unfortunately, today, despite the fact that Douglass was among the handful of Lincoln allies who guaranteed the success of the Union Army in the Civil War, he has been confined once again to the ghetto, so to speak, by the creation of "Afro-centrism"—something he would not tolerate were he alive today.

It is our hope that with this article, and as part of the centennial celebrations of Douglass's death, we will be able to remove the chains from Douglass's memory and restore him to his proper place in U.S. history.

Childhood: 'Why am I a slave?'

Frederick Douglass was born on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in February of (probably) 1817, though his date of birth was not recorded. It is generally assumed that he was the son of his master.

As a baby, he was allowed to live with his grandmother, with whom he had been left by his mother, whom he only saw once. When he was six, he was brought to the "big house," given barely enough food to get by, and destined to be trained for field work on the plantation.

Very early on, Douglass developed a passionate hatred for slavery. He knew that the distorted relations between human beings on the plantation were not right. By the age of nine, Douglass says, he was inquiring "into the origin and nature of slavery. Why am I a slave? Why are some people

slaves and others masters? These were perplexing questions and very troublesome to my childhood. I was very early told by some one that '*God up in the sky*' had made all things, and had made black people to be slaves and white people to be masters. . . . I could not tell how anybody could know that God made black people to be slaves." Douglass added, "I was just as well aware of the unjust, unnatural, and murderous character of slavery, when nine years old, as I am now."

In 1825, Douglass, who was about eight at the time, was sent to live in Baltimore with his master's cousin, Hugh Auld, and his wife. The move to a city, one of the major industrial and shipbuilding centers on the U.S. East Coast, was to give Frederick a chance to expand his horizons both mentally and physically. It was at the Aulds that Douglass came to a more conscious understanding of his hatred of slavery and his love of learning.

Douglass developed a passion early on for reading, a passion which, ironically, was provoked by the debased conception of his master, Hugh Auld. Douglass called Auld's lecture to his wife, on why she should stop teaching the boy to read, "the first decidedly anti-slavery lecture" he ever heard, and a revelation which drove him to learn as much as he could.

In *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, the great man explained: "The frequent hearing of my mistress reading the Bible aloud . . . awakened my curiosity . . . to this mystery of reading, and roused in me the desire to learn. Up to this time I had known nothing whatever of this wonderful art, and my ignorance and inexperience of what it could do for me, as well as my confidence in my mistress, emboldened me to ask her to teach me to read. . . . My mistress seemed almost as proud of my progress as if I had been her own child, and supposing that her husband would be as well pleased, she made no secret of what she was doing for me. Indeed, she exultingly told him of the aptness of her pupil and of her intention to persevere, as she felt it her duty to do, in teaching me, at least, to read the Bible."

What was the reaction of the presumably God-fearing, Christian slave-owner, Hugh Auld? "Of course he forbade her to give me any further instruction, telling her in the first place that to do so was unlawful, as it was also unsafe, 'for,'

said he, 'if you give a nigger an inch he will take an ell. Learning will spoil the best nigger in the world. If he learns to read the Bible it will forever unfit him to be a slave.' " Apparently unaware of the rather extraordinary admission he had just made, Auld continued, " 'He should know nothing but the will of his master, and learn to obey it. As to himself, learning will do him no good, but a great deal of harm, making him disconsolate and unhappy. If you teach him how to read, he'll want to know how to write, and this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself.' "

"Such was the tenor of Master Hugh's oracular exposition, and it must be confessed that he very clearly comprehended the nature and the requirements of the relation of master and slave," added Douglass.

Auld's "exposition," Douglass wrote, "was a new and special revelation, dispelling a painful mystery against which my youthful understanding had struggled, and struggled in vain, to wit, the white man's power to perpetuate the enslavement of the black man. 'Very well,' thought I. 'Knowledge unfits a child to be a slave.' I instinctively assented to the proposition, and from that moment I understood the direct pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I needed, and it came to me at a time and from a source whence I least expected it. . . . Wise as Mr. Auld was, he underrated my comprehension, and had little idea of the use to which I was capable of putting the impressive lesson he was giving to his wife. He wanted me to be a slave; I had already voted against that on the home plantation. . . . That which he most loved I

most hated, and the very determination which he expressed to keep me in ignorance only rendered me the more resolute to seek intelligence."

The full story of Douglass's struggle to learn to read—how he collared white boys on the streets of Baltimore asking them to spell out words for him, and the other stratagems he used—can be found in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. But just as Douglass was not interested in being turned into someone's beast of burden, he was also not *learning for the sake of learning*. Douglass was incapable of keeping his knowledge to himself. Even knowing the risk that he as a slave ran if he were to teach other slaves—he could be sold farther South to the hideous Mississippi or Louisiana plantations, or legally murdered—he taught other slaves when he was sent back to Maryland's Eastern Shore.

Speaking out

At the age of 13, Douglass purchased out of his own pocket money *The Columbian Orator*. The great oratory he found in that 50¢ book was to give Douglass the basis for being able to speak publicly against slavery when he escaped North in 1838.

The 1820s and 1830s was the age of great oratory in America. These were the decades of such expert speakers as Daniel Webster, John Quincy Adams, and John Calhoun. The issues before the American republic were profound: slavery, and the danger of secession by the U.S. South in the late 1820s. *The Columbian Orator* became a bible for the young

Douglass: Education will subvert the slave system

On Dec. 1, 1850, Frederick Douglass gave a speech called "The Nature of Slavery," in Rochester, New York, in which he emphasized that the slave who had been bestialized by his master, was still a man, and that one of the great weapons that could be put in the hands of that slave, was the right to learn.

"The slave is a man," said Douglass, " 'the image of God,' but 'a little lower than the angels'; possessing a soul, eternal and indestructible . . . and he is endowed with those mysterious powers by which man soars above the things of time and sense, and grasps, with undying tenacity, the elevating and sublimely glorious idea of a God. It is *such* a being that is smitten and blasted. The first work of slavery, is to mar and deface those characteristics of its victims and which distinguish *men* from *things*, and *persons* from *property*. Its first aim is to destroy all sense of high moral and religious responsibility. It reduces

man to a mere machine. It cuts him off from his Maker, it hides from him the laws of God, and leaves him to grope his way from time to eternity in the dark, under the arbitrary and despotic control of a frail, depraved, and sinful fellow-man. . . .

"Nor is slavery more adverse to the conscience than it is to the mind. The crime of teaching a slave to read is punishable with severe fines and imprisonment, and, in some instances, with *death itself*. . . . The great mass of slaveholders look upon education among the slaves as utterly subversive of the slave system. . . .

"It is perfectly well understood at the south, that to educate a slave is to make him discontented with slavery, and to invest him with a power which shall open to him the treasures of freedom; and since the object of the slaveholder is to maintain complete authority over his slave, his constant vigilance is exercised. . . . Education being among the menacing influences, and, perhaps, the most dangerous, is, therefore, the most cautiously guarded against. . . . As a general rule, then, darkness reigns over the abodes of the enslaved, and 'how great is that darkness!'"

man, who was searching for words to express his thoughts. It was a book designed for those who wanted to learn to speak out, in the manner of the great orators, on issues which affected the souls of men. It was a book for those who wanted "to impart profound and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature," as the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley would have said. And that was precisely what Douglass was impelled to do.

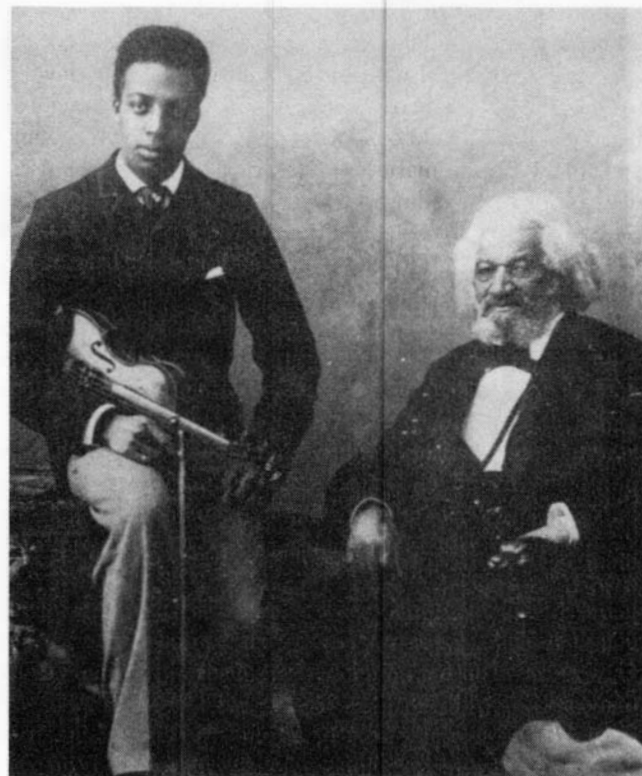
He wrote: "The reading of these speeches added much to my limited stock of language, and enabled me to give tongue to many interesting thoughts which had often flashed through my mind and died away for want of words in which to give them utterance. The mighty power and heart-searching directness of truth, penetrating the heart of a slaveholder and compelling him to yield up his earthly interests to the claims of eternal justice, were finely illustrated . . . and from the speeches of Sheridan I got a bold and powerful denunciation of oppression and a most brilliant vindication of the rights of man."

Concluded Douglass: "Light had penetrated the moral dungeon where I had lain, and I saw the bloody whip for my back and the iron chain for my feet, and my *good, kind* master was the author of my situation. The revelation haunted me, stung me, and made me gloomy and miserable. . . . I saw that slaveholders would have gladly made me believe that, in making a slave of me and in making slaves of others, they were merely acting under the authority of God, and I felt to them as robbers and deceivers. The feeding and clothing me well could not atone for taking my liberty from me. . . ."

Escape to the North

Douglass was soon returned to the Eastern Shore, to be turned into a field hand. But at the age of 16, another turning point occurred in his life which made it only a matter of time before he decided to escape North. This was his dramatic, two-hour physical contest with William Covey, the slave-breaker to whom he had been hired out, in order to break his will and turn him into a manageable field hand. Having been pushed far enough by this slaver, Douglass fought him. After two hours, Covey let go of him. "This battle with Mr. Covey, undignified as it was . . . was the turning-point in my life as a slave," wrote Douglass. "It brought up my Baltimore dreams and revived a sense of my own manhood. I was a changed being after that fight. I was nothing before—I was a man now. It recalled to life my crushed self-respect, and my self-confidence, and inspired me with a renewed determination to be a free man. A man without force is without the essential dignity of humanity. Human nature is so constituted, that it cannot honor a helpless man, though it can pity him, and even this it cannot do long if signs of power do not arise."

Finally, on Sept. 3, 1838, with the help of the Underground Railroad, Douglass escaped. While sitting on Kennard's wharf, waiting to leave, Douglass wrote that he "saw men and women chained and put on the ship to go to New



Frederick Douglass with his grandson Joseph Douglass, a concert violinist. The two played duets together.

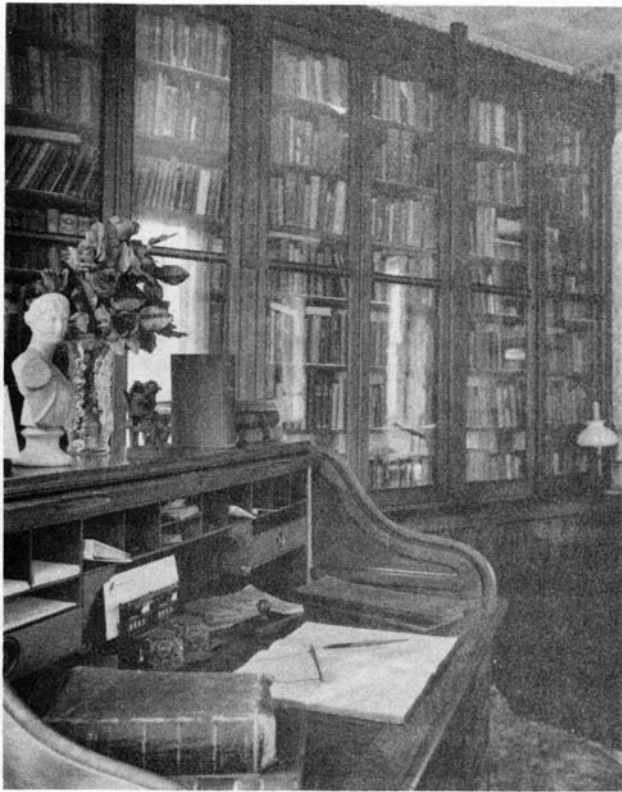
Orleans. I then resolved that whatever power I had should be devoted to the freeing of my race. For 30 years, in the midst of all opposition I have endeavored to fulfill my pledge."

Douglass settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, with his wife, Anna Murray, and worked at various skilled jobs for several years. In August 1841, after speaking extemporaneously at his first abolition meeting, Douglass was embraced by William Lloyd Garrison and the abolitionists. Douglass, along with several other freed slaves, was to become a featured speaker on the abolition circuit. This was despite what some abolitionists viewed as Douglass's great "handicap": Although Douglass said he had been a slave, he was not only literate, but an articulate speaker.

Certainly, the influence of Douglass's study of oratory, could be heard in his speeches. Wrote the editor of the Concord, Massachusetts *Herald of Freedom* in 1841, "As a speaker he has few equals. It is not declamation—but oratory, power of debate. He has wit, arguments, sarcasm, pathos—all that first rate men show in their master efforts. His voice is highly melodious and rich, and his enunciation quite elegant, and yet he has been but two or three years out of the house of bondage."

Defense of the Constitution

Throughout the 1840s, Douglass was close to William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist faction. Garrison (like the Brit-



Douglass's library at Cedar Hill, his home in Washington, is now maintained by the National Park Service. The illiterate man is a slave, he believed, whereas the literate one can become a citizen of a free republic.

ish aristocracy, which had been trying to destroy the U.S. republic since its founding) advocated disunion with the South, which would have meant the breakup of the United States into at least two sections, perhaps more. Garrison's reason for doing so, was his contention that the U.S. Constitution was *inherently* pro-slavery. Garrison was famous, in fact, for burning the U.S. Constitution in public.

But at about the time that Douglass began to publish his own newspaper, in 1847, he began to take a more intellectually mature standpoint. Starting not from the issue of slavery, but from the issue of the *creation of the U.S. republic*, Douglass by 1849 had broken with Garrison.

In *The Life and Times*, Douglass describes the intellectual process he went through over the issue of the Constitution: "I was then a faithful disciple of William Lloyd Garrison, and fully committed to his doctrine touching the pro-slavery character of the Constitution of the United States. . . . With him, I held it to be the first duty of the non-slaveholding states to dissolve the union with the slaveholding states, and hence my cry, like his, was 'No union with slaveholders.' . . ."

"My new circumstances [i.e., as a newspaper publisher] compelled me to re-think the whole subject, and to study with some care not only the just and proper rules for legal interpretation, but the origin, design, nature, rights, powers,

and duties of civil governments, and also the relations which human beings sustain to it. By such a course of thought and reading I was conducted to the conclusion that the Constitution of the United States—instituted to 'form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty'—could not well have been designed at the same time to maintain and perpetuate a system of rapine and murder like slavery . . . that the Constitution of the United States not only contained no guarantees in favor of slavery but, on the contrary, was in its letter and spirit an anti-slavery instrument, demanding the abolition of slavery as a condition of its own existence as the supreme law of the land. . . ."

And in his 1857 reply to the infamous *Dred Scott* decision, Douglass noted that the slaveholders "do not point us to the Constitution itself, for the reason that there is nothing sufficiently explicit for their purpose; but they delight in supposed intentions—intentions nowhere expressed in the Constitution, and everywhere contradicted in the Constitution."

From the day the Civil War began, Douglass, both in his newspaper and on the speakers' platform, agitated with President Lincoln and anyone else he could to allow freedmen in the North to enlist in the Union Army. He also denounced the policy of the Union Army of returning slaves to their masters, even in captured areas of the South, and called for encouraging the desertion of slaves in the South. He also pressured the embattled Lincoln to issue the **Emancipation Proclamation** in 1862, a year before Lincoln consented to do so.

In 1863, Douglass was crucial in organizing several regiments of Colored Troops from Massachusetts and other states, including the famous 54th Regiment, in which his son Lewis enlisted.

Douglass played a crucial role in the Civil War years. He was an agitator, a morale-booster, a fundraiser. He brought those abolitionists who were wavering under the republican banner.

After the war, Douglass began to realize that Reconstruction was as much of a fight as the Civil War had been, that the "Year of Jubilee" (1863, the year of the Emancipation Proclamation) had turned into a year of embattlement. Reconstruction soon was a hollow phrase, replaced by populist and conservative legislators in both the Republican and Democratic parties who were determined to "hold the line" when it came to the rights of the newly freed slaves. As a result, Douglass founded a new newspaper, *The New National Era*, to address postwar political conditions.

Until his death on Feb. 26, 1895, Douglass was a factor in American politics. Whether an administration agreed or disagreed with Douglass, it was forced to recognize the grand old man as a voice of reason who was listened to with respect, not merely by blacks, but by many, many voters. He held numerous government posts, and until his death lived by the words "Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!"

Although in his late 70s, Douglass was to find himself agitating with Ida B. Wells and others against the lynching of blacks in the South. The promise of Lincoln had faded away, and American blacks would have to wait for the appearance of another great leader, Martin Luther King, to achieve their freedom. But Douglass was certainly a key figure who prepared the way for King.

Universal education

Throughout his life, one issue which Douglass understood as non-negotiable, was that of *universal education*. In the 1890s, when Jim Crow laws took hold and lynchings of blacks were becoming common, Douglass knew that if the black American was not to have full equality, then he would have to become educated in order to fight for that right.

Thus, Douglass, who during the war had toured the North giving a speech on "The Mission of the War," after the war, toured schools and colleges, to foster the literacy of the citizens. He appreciated the difference between ignorant voters and those who were informed of their rights and privileges, and who could thus in turn appreciate the rights and privileges of the so-called downtrodden. His message was always the same: that the illiterate man was a slave, and the literate one a citizen of a free republic.

Douglass read avidly, including Shakespeare, Robert Burns, and other key English-language poets. When invited to address the Robert Burns Anniversary Festival in Rochester, New York, he noted, "Though I am not a Scotchman, and have a colored skin, I am proud to be among you this evening. And if any think me out of my place on this occasion [pointing at the picture of Burns], I get that the blame may be laid at the door of him who taught me that 'a man's a man for a' that.' "

Beyond poetry and oratory, Douglass had learnt another language, the language of music, both through singing ("Sometimes Douglass took out his fiddle, sang Scottish songs of which he was very fond, and played a few tunes," wrote Mary Church Terrell), and playing the violin. In 1838, while still a slave in Baltimore, Douglass, with the Aulds' permission, hired himself out to the Merryman family. One of his duties was to conduct one of the Merryman's children to the E.M.P. Wells School. Apparently, either some teacher at the school or Douglass's future wife, Anna Murray, a free black, took an interest in Douglass, who is also reported to have been a good singer, and began to teach him the violin.

He made sure that when he finally escaped North, he had his music books. When Frederick and Anna Douglass arrived in New Bedford, they couldn't pay the coachman who had taken them there. Instead of objecting, the driver "took our baggage, including three music books—two of them collections by Dyer, and one by Shaw—and held them until I was able to redeem them by paying to him the sums due for our rides."

Throughout his life, Douglass continued to play the vio-

lin, and he and his grandson Joseph, who became a concert violinist, played duets together.

In 1886, at the age of 69, Douglass visited Europe for the second time. In Genoa, Italy, he stood transfixed before Paganini's violin, not because of the physical instrument itself, as he wrote, but because "there are some things and places made sacred by their uses and by the events with which they are associated, especially those which have in any measure changed the current of human taste, thought, and life, or which have revealed new powers and triumphs of the human soul. The pen with which Lincoln wrote the Emancipation Proclamation, the sword worn by Washington through the war of the Revolution, though of the same material and form of other pens and swords, have an individual character, and stir in the minds of men peculiar sensations. . . . [This violin] had even stirred the dull hearts of courts, kings, and princes, and revealed to them their kinship to common mortals as perhaps had been done by no other instrument."

One of Douglass's articles, "What Are the Colored People Doing for Themselves?" which appeared in his first newspaper, *The North Star*, made the point that despite prejudice, African-Americans could still develop their potentials. "It should never be lost sight of, that our destiny, for good or for evil, for time and for eternity, is, by an all-wise God, committed to us; and that all the helps or hindrances with which we may meet on earth, can never release us from this high and heaven-imposed responsibility. It is evident that we can be improved and elevated only just so fast and far as we shall improve and elevate ourselves."

Douglass was not speaking lightly; he had lived the very words he wrote.

He continued: "The fact that we are limited and circumscribed, ought rather to incite us to a more vigorous and persevering use of the elevating means within our reach, than to dishearten us. The means of education, though not so free and open to us as to white persons, are nevertheless at our command to such an extent as to make education possible; and these, thank God, are increasing. Let us educate our children, even though it should us subject to a coarser and scantier diet, and disrobe us of our few fine garments. 'For the want of knowledge we are killed all the day.' Get wisdom—get understanding, is a peculiarly valuable exhortation to us, and the compliance with it is our only hope in this land. It is idle, a hollow mockery, for us to pray to God to break the oppressor's power, while we neglect the means of knowledge which will give us the ability to break this power. God will help us when we help ourselves."

Frederick Douglass had already learned at the age of 10, that the difference between a slave and a human being was the ability to be able to communicate ideas freely. And whether he was conscious of it or not at that point, he had singled himself out to become the champion of those who had no voice. The goal for which he fought is as vital in our day, as it was in his.