

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!'"