

★ "Freedman writes with clarity, intelligence, and a fine sense of detail ...
a well-researched, wonderfully readable book." —*Booklist*, starred review

Abraham
LINCOLN



&

Frederick
DOUGLASS

THE STORY BEHIND AN AMERICAN FRIENDSHIP

RUSSELL FREEDMAN

Newbery Medal winner for LINCOLN: A PHOTOBIOGRAPHY



The White House, around 1865.

ONE

Waiting for Mr. Lincoln

Heads turned when Frederick Douglass walked into the White House on the morning of August 10, 1863. It was still early, but the waiting area leading to Abraham Lincoln's office was crowded with politicians, officials, patronage seekers, and citizens of all kinds seeking an audience with the president.

Douglass was the only black man among them. The others seemed surprised to see him, and some were none too pleased.

Lincoln tried to meet with as many callers as he possibly could each day. He said he enjoyed his "public opinion baths" and found them a useful way to find out what people were thinking. When first elected, he had refused to limit his visiting hours. "They do not want much," he said of the throngs of citizens waiting to see him one day, "and they get very little. . . . I know how I would feel in their place."

But the crowds became unmanageable. People showed up before breakfast and were still waiting to see him late at night. At times, even U.S. senators had to wait a week or more to speak with the president. As his work piled up, Lincoln realized that he had to restrict his visiting hours. He saw callers from ten o'clock in the morning till one in the afternoon. Priority was given to cabinet members and congressmen; if any time remained, ordinary citizens were admitted.

It wasn't easy to see the president. Not everyone got in.

Douglass handed his calling card to a clerk and looked around for an empty chair. None was available, so he found a place to sit on the stairway leading to Lincoln's office. The stairs were filled with other men hoping for a moment with the nation's chief executive.

Douglass had no appointment. He had no idea how long he might have to wait, or even if he would be granted an interview. By meeting with the president, he hoped "to secure just and fair treatment" for the thousands of black troops who had enlisted in the Union army and were now fighting for the North in America's Civil War.

When the war began, federal law prohibited blacks from serving in the army. But as the fighting continued, with mounting casualties and no decisive victories, the North finally allowed African Americans to enlist. Black soldiers fought with distinction, but they were paid only half as much as white soldiers and were not being promoted for outstanding service. Worse, black prisoners of war were being executed or enslaved by their Southern captors.

Douglass had come to Washington to "lay the complaints of my people before President Lincoln." At forty-five, formally dressed for his visit, he was a commanding figure, taller than most men,

with a powerful athlete's build, graying hair, penetrating brown eyes, and a carefully trimmed beard. A former slave, he had escaped to freedom and become a famous author, newspaper editor, and abolitionist. He had spent his career as a free man demanding that slavery be abolished in America and equal rights extended to whites and blacks alike.

Douglass and Lincoln had never met, but they had some things in common. They had both risen from poverty and obscurity to international prominence. Both were self-educated. Lincoln, born dirt poor, had less than a year of formal schooling. Douglass, born a slave, wasn't permitted to go to school. He taught himself to read and write in secret, hiding the few books he was able to get his hands on. And in fact the two men had read and studied some of the same books.

Even so, in the year 1863 it required plenty of "nerve," as Douglass put it, for a black man to walk unannounced into the White House and request an audience with the president.

Millions of blacks were still enslaved on farms and plantations in the Confederate South. In the North, African Americans were free but were denied many rights. Just a month earlier, rioters in New York, protesting the military draft, had beaten and lynched innocent blacks and burned the Colored Orphan Asylum to the ground.

"The distance between the black man and the white American citizen was immeasurable," Douglass later recalled. "I was an ex-slave, identified with a despised race, and yet I was to meet the most exalted person in this great republic. . . . I could not know what kind of reception would be accorded me. I might be told to go home and mind my business. . . . Or I might be refused an interview altogether."

He was determined to wait.



Slave children.

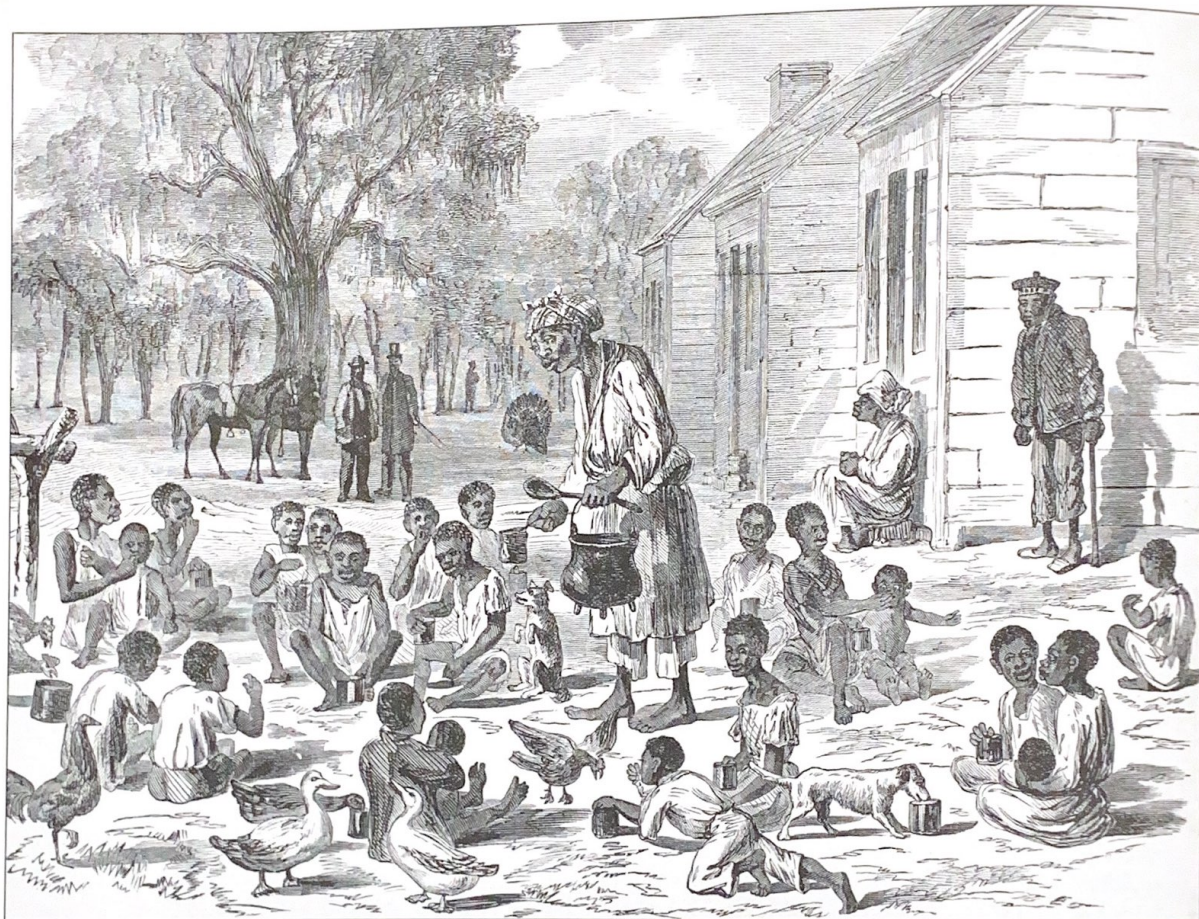
TWO

Born into Slavery

Born into slavery on a Maryland plantation, Frederick Douglass never knew exactly when his birthday was. "I have no accurate knowledge of my age," he wrote, "never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters . . . to keep their slaves thus ignorant."

The question of his correct birth date and age plagued Douglass throughout his life. "The white children could tell their ages," he recalled. "I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit."

According to a slave inventory by Frederick's owner—evidence that was



Feeding slave children, 1861.
Illustration from Harper's Pictorial
History of the Civil War.

unavailable to him—he was born in February 1818. His mother was a young slave named Harriet Bailey. “My father was a white man,” he wrote. “He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage.” As with his age, the boy could never be quite certain who his father was. The name given to him by his mother was Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey.

As an infant he was placed in the care of his grandmother, who

was too old for field labor. Frederick rarely saw his mother before she died, when he was about seven. She would visit him at night after finishing her day's work and lie down with him and hold him until he fell asleep. When he awoke, she was always gone. "She was a field hand," he wrote, "and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise."

Whippings of slaves became seared into the boy's memory. He remembered hiding terrified in a closet while his first owner, Aaron Anthony, was whipping Frederick's aunt Hester. "The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped, and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped the longest. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember anything. . . . I dared not venture out [of the closet] till long after the bloody transaction was over. I expected it would be my turn next."

When Aaron Anthony died, his son-in-law, Thomas Auld, became the boy's new owner.

Frederick must have been a very bright and appealing youngster. Before he was old enough to work in the fields, he was picked from among the other slave children and sent to Baltimore to live with the family of Hugh Auld, Thomas's brother. He would work as a houseboy for Auld's wife, Sophia, and help look after the couple's little son, Tommy.

Sophia Auld was a kindly person who had never before had a slave under her control. She decided to teach Frederick to read, but when her husband found out, he ordered her to stop the lessons at once. As Frederick stood by silently, Hugh Auld warned his wife that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. If the boy learned to read, "there would be no keeping him," said Hugh. "It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable and of no value to his master. As

to himself, it would do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy."

Hugh's words came as a revelation to Frederick. "I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. . . . From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. . . . Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read."

During the seven years that Frederick lived with the family of Hugh Auld, he taught himself to read and write. All that time he had to hide his efforts to learn. If he was caught with a newspaper or book, it was snatched away.

Advertising for slaves.

CASH!

All persons that have SLAVES to dispose of, will do well by giving me a call, as I will give the

HIGHEST PRICE FOR

**Men, Women, &
CHILDREN.**

Any person that wishes to sell, will call at Hill's tavern, or at Shannon Hill for me, and any information they want will be promptly attended to.

Thomas Griggs.

Charlestown, May 7, 1835.

PRINTED AT THE FAIR PRESS OFFICE, CHARLESTOWN.

He studied secretly. When he was left alone in the house, he studied the *Webster's Spelling Book* that Tommy had brought home from school. When he was sent out on errands, he made friends with the neighborhood white boys whom he met on the street. "As many of these as I could, I converted to teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read."

When the neighborhood boys talked about what they would be when they grew up, Frederick reminded them that he had no such choice. "You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one," he would say, "*but I am a slave for life!* Have not I as good a right to be free as you have?" Those words seemed to trouble his young white friends. They would express their sympathy and their hope that he would someday be free. "I do not remember ever to have met with a boy while I was in slavery, who defended the slave system," he wrote.

One of the neighborhood boys had a book called *The Columbian Orator*, a collection of speeches and dialogues about freedom, democracy, and courage compiled by Caleb Bingham, a Boston bookseller. This book, widely popular at the time, made a deep and lasting impression on young Frederick Bailey—"that gem of a book," he called it, "with its eloquent orations and spicy dialogues, denouncing oppression and slavery." With fifty cents he had somehow managed to save, he bought a secondhand copy of the book. When he was out on an errand, he would find a quiet spot where he could be alone. Then he would pull *The Columbian Orator* out of his pocket and read aloud, listening to the sound of his voice as he recited some of the great speeches of the past.

He read one selection, "Dialogue Between a Master and Slave," so many times, he could still quote from it decades later. The

THE
COLUMBIAN ORATOR:

CONTAINING A VARIETY OF
ORIGINAL AND SELECTED PIECES:

TOGETHER WITH
R U L E S,
CALCULATED
TO IMPROVE YOUTH AND OTHERS

IN THE ORNAMENTAL AND USEFUL
ART OF ELOQUENCE.

BY CALEB BINGHAM, A. M.
Author of the *American Preceptor, Young Lady's Accidence, &c.*

"Cato cultivated ELOQUENCE, as a necessary mean for defending
THE RIGHTS OF THE PEOPLE, and for enforcing good Counsels."
HOLLIS.

EIGHTEENTH EDITION.



New-York:

PUBLISHED BY E. DUYCKINCK, 102 PEARL-STREET.

J. C. Totten, printer.

1816.

Title page of The Columbian Orator, first published in 1816.

slave has been captured after running away for the third time. His master says that he has been kind and the slave should be grateful. The slave replies that kindness has nothing to do with it; he wants liberty. Each argument that the master puts forward in defense of slavery is dismissed by the slave with such power and conviction that in the end, the slave wins his freedom.

"The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. . . . That very discontent that Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul. . . . I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. . . . From that time I resolved to run away."

Frederick was sent back to the plantation when he was fifteen and put to work for Thomas Auld, his owner. Thomas proved to be a harsh and unpredictable master, "cruel and hateful in all his ways." He found Frederick "unsuitable to his purpose. My city life, he said, had . . . almost ruined me. . . . Master Thomas at length said he would stand it no longer. I had lived with him nine months, during which time he had given me a number of severe whippings, all to no good purpose. He resolved to put me out, as he said, to be broken."

The boy was hired out as a field hand to Edward Covey, a professional "slave breaker," whose job was to beat troublesome young slaves into submission, much as horses are broken. Frederick was now, for the first time, a field hand. "I found myself even more awkward than a country boy appeared to be in a large city. I had been at my new home but one week before Mr. Covey gave me a very severe whipping."

Frederick lived with Covey for a year. With other slaves he labored in the fields from dawn to dusk. "We were worked in all

weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow too hard for us to work in the field." Frederick's lack of experience handling workhorses and farm tools infuriated Covey, who whipped the boy regularly.

On Sundays, when the slaves were not required to work, he would spend his leisure time "in a sort of beast-like stupor between sleep and wake, under some large tree. . . . I was sometimes prompted to take my life, and that of Covey, but was prevented by a combination of hope and fear."

He would walk to the shore of nearby Chesapeake Bay and watch "with saddened heart and tearful eye" the white sails moving toward the ocean beyond and wish that he were on one of those ships, heading for freedom: "O that I were free. I will run away. I will not stand it. . . . It cannot be that I shall live and die a slave. I will take to the water. The bay shall bear me into freedom."

After several months Frederick, now a strapping sixteen-year-old, found the courage to stand up to Covey and his bloody cowhide lash. One morning, when Covey was about to whip him again, "I resolved to fight, and . . . I seized Covey hard by the throat. . . . He held on to me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected, that Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf."

They grappled and struggled and fell to the ground. "Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted, he would not have whipped me at all."

From that time on, Covey never attempted to lay a finger on Frederick. He could have asked the sheriff to haul Frederick to the public whipping post and whip him for raising a hand against a white man. But he didn't. "The only explanation I can think of," Douglass wrote years later, "[is that] Mr. Covey enjoyed the most unbounded reputation for being a first-rate overseer and

negro-breaker. . . . That reputation was at stake; and had he sent me—a boy about sixteen years old—to the public whipping post, his reputation would have been lost, so, to save his reputation, he suffered me to go unpunished.”

When Frederick's year with Covey was up, the young slave was hired out to a neighboring planter named William Freeland. “My treatment, while in his employment, was heavenly compared with what I experienced at the hand of Mr. Edward Covey. . . . I went through [the year] without receiving a single blow.” And yet Frederick found that the better his treatment, the more he felt the injustice of his servitude, and the greater his yearning for freedom. He resolved that before another year passed, he would attempt to escape.

He met secretly with five fellow slaves who agreed to join together in a flight to freedom. Their plan was to escape by water aboard a large canoe belonging to one of their masters. When they reached the head of Chesapeake Bay, about eighty miles away, they would cast the canoe adrift and continue traveling north by land, guided by the North Star.

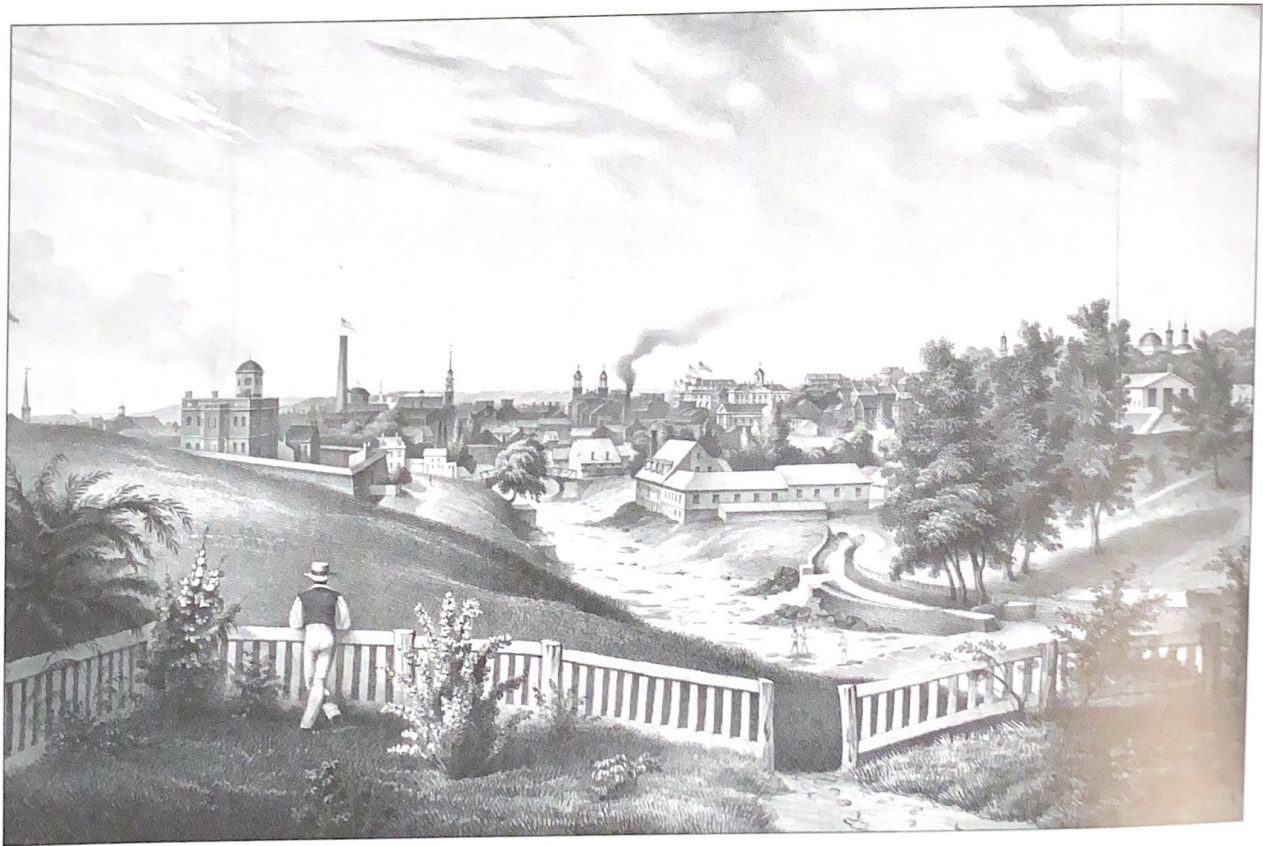
But someone, they never knew who, betrayed them. On the morning of their planned escape, while they were working in the field, the horn was blown as usual, calling them to the house for breakfast. There they were seized, their hands lashed together, and dragged fifteen miles behind horses to the local jail, where “we all denied we ever intended to run away.”

Frederick was released to the custody of Thomas Auld, who, “to my surprise and utter astonishment,” decided to return the boy back to Baltimore, where he would live again with Hugh Auld and learn a trade. Even without evidence, the local slave owners believed that Frederick was the ringleader of a planned escape. “My master sent me away,” he believed, “because there

*Baltimore as it appeared in 1837, when
Frederick was working as a ship's caulker.
From a painting by Moses Swett.*

existed against me a very great prejudice in the community, and he feared I might be killed."

In Baltimore, Hugh Auld took Frederick to the shipyard where he worked as a foreman. The young slave was to be trained as a ship's caulker—a worker who packs the wooden seams of boats with pitch or other waterproof material. "In the course of one year I was able to command the highest wages paid to the most experienced caulkers." When there was no work to be had at



Auld's shipyard, he was allowed to seek employment at other yards. Even so, he was still a slave, so he had to turn all his earnings over to his master. "I earned it; yet upon returning [from work] Saturday night, I was compelled to deliver every cent of that money to Master Hugh."

Seeing that he could find employment on his own, Frederick went to Master Hugh with a proposal: He was earning a dollar and a half a day, sometimes more. If he were allowed to hire himself out but keep part of his wages, he could live on his own, pay his room and board, and buy his tools. In return for that liberty, he would pay Master Hugh three dollars at the end of every week. He would still be a slave under Maryland law but would be responsible for his own keep—a system widely practiced in Baltimore. "This arrangement was decidedly in my master's favor. It relieved him of all need of looking after me. . . . He received all the benefits of slaveholding without its evils. While I endured all the evils of a slave, and suffered all the care and anxiety of a freeman." Even so, "it was a step toward freedom to bear the responsibilities of a freeman."

Master Hugh agreed. He no longer needed Frederick to help look after his son, Tommy, now a teenager. He could profit from Frederick's work without having to feed and clothe him, and without losing possession of a valuable slave.

As for Frederick, the small taste of freedom he experienced as an independent worker "only increased my desire to be free, and set me to thinking of plans to gain my freedom."

Living independently, Frederick made friends among Baltimore's large community of free black people. He was invited to join a debating society made up of free black ship caulkers whom he knew from work. Frederick was the only slave belonging to the group. Reading a Baltimore newspaper, he learned that



Slaves on a South Carolina plantation, 1862.

a few reformers in the North, called "abolitionists," were "pleading for us" and "moving for our freedom." And he met people active in the Underground Railroad who helped move fugitive slaves along well-established escape routes, and who now helped Frederick Bailey work out his own escape plan.

He had fallen in love, meanwhile, with Anna Murray, a free black woman who worked as a maid, saved her money, taught him to play the violin, and encouraged his plans to escape. According to family tradition, Anna sold her featherbed to help pay for the train and ferry fares along Frederick's escape route. Once he made his way safely to the North, Anna was to join him and they would marry.

All free blacks had to carry documents while traveling to show that they were not slaves. Through his network of friends, Frederick obtained the papers of a free black seaman. He would impersonate a sailor. He was provided with the names of fellow blacks and antislavery whites who could be trusted to help him on his way north.

The risks ahead were great, and the price of failure terrible to contemplate: "If I failed in this attempt, my case would be a hopeless one—it would seal my fate as a slave forever. I could not hope to get off with anything less than the severest punishment, and being placed beyond the means of escape."