

FREDERICK DOUGLASS: Readin', Writin' and Freedom
by James Dawson

If you've ever doubted the importance of literacy, then take a look at the life of Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, who the world knows as Frederick Douglass. Born a slave in my native Talbot County, Md. he literally set himself free with words he wrote on a scrap of paper. He not only learned how to read, but would write his own books. His powerful autobiography survives as an almost unique testament to the evils of slavery written from the perspective of a former slave and demonstrates how much an individual can do to better himself even in the worst of circumstances.

Frederick was never quite sure when he was born or who his father was and barely remembered his mother who worked as a field hand on a neighboring farm. One February night after work, she visited her valentine and give him a heart shaped ginger cookie and because of that, Frederick always imagined that he was born on Feb. 14th, but wasn't ever sure what year. She left early to walk the 12 miles back to her home in time to start work at daybreak and that was the last time he ever saw her.

A book would prove Douglass' birthday to be Feb. 1818 something Douglass never knew. In his excellent biography *Young Frederick Douglass The Maryland Years*, Dickson Preston would find the proof of his birth in an old account book. Those of us with birthdays take them for granted and even want to forget them sometimes, but they can be an important part of who we are. Douglass may never have been exactly sure of who he was, but he knew who he wanted to be.

Slaves were kept ignorant and anyone caught teaching a slave to read and write could be in serious trouble. It is easier to dominate and control an illiterate people and an educated slave would be a real problem. Douglass' owner even quoted appropriate Bible verse when whipping his slaves.

However, the Good Book also started young Frederick on the road to literacy. Auld, his owner, sent Frederick to Baltimore to live with his brother, sister-in-law and their son Thomas, where he heard "Miss Sophia" reading out loud from the Book of Job and that simple act of reading seemed like magic to him. "From that night", he wrote later, "I date my thirst for knowledge...The next day, I asked Mrs. Auld to teach me to read. She consented, and soon taught me the alphabet and to read words of three or four letters." Freddy was a very bright boy and learned quickly, until Mr. Auld found out and put an end to it. The action was misguided he thundered to his wife and would ruin him as a slave and ended his tirade with the prophetic words "If you learn him now to read, he'll want to know how to write; and, this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself". Of course, Frederick was all ears about that. If that knowledge would make a person unfit to be a slave that was exactly what he wanted.

Even though he knew how to read it was very difficult for him to learn how to write without a teacher. At age 11, he was put to work at a local shipyard and he noticed that workmen chalked a letter "s" on timbers intended for the starboard side of the ship, an "l" for larboard", an "a" for aft, "f" for fore and so forth. So he had four letters already and practiced writing them in the dirt with a stick or with a piece of chalk on a board. If he had four, he could get more and cleverly picked them up from Master Thomas and his friends. He would write an "s" or an "a" on a fence, then boast to the other boys "Lets see you beat that!" and when they chalked up other letters, he would add them to his

list. He found some of Tommy's old copy books up in the attic and practiced his letters using a flour barrel for a desk and studied *Webster's Spelling Book* until he knew them by heart. Finally, by age 14, he had taught himself to write.

Soon he was secretly reading books he found around the house and got a copy of *The Columbian Orator* by Caleb Bingham, which was a collection of patriotic speeches by famous men throughout history intended to inspire young readers. It was tough sledding for Frederick, but he made it through with the help of *Webster's Dictionary* and was profoundly influenced by it. Fortunately, Auld never saw the book because it also contained some antislavery material mixed in with the patriotic orations including a dialogue between a master and a slave where the slave uses logic to make the master look foolish. "Now I am indeed your servant, though I am not your slave" were inspiring words to Frederick who had never heard such language before. He was more determined than ever to be free.

It was at this time that he heard a new word "abolition" which he thought had something to do with slavery, but couldn't find out exactly what. *Webster's Dictionary* was no help either. In that infuriating way that dictionaries sometimes have, it defined the word as "the act of abolishing" and this circular logic told him nothing. Abolish *what*?

At age 18, when Frederick was back working on a farm in Talbot, he and four friends vowed to escape. With his new writing skills, he penned fake passes called protections for everyone, giving themselves permission to travel to Baltimore for Easter, but in reality, they planned to paddle a canoe 70 miles up to the head of the Chesapeake Bay and walk north to freedom. The protections would come in handy if they were stopped along the way. Everybody knew slaves couldn't write.

On the morning of their escape, they had a feeling that something has gone wrong. Sure enough someone, apparently another slave, had turned them in and a group of men came to arrest them and take them to jail. After a scuffle, they were marched in chains ten miles to the county jail, but were released the next day for lack of evidence (they had eaten the passes). Auld would let Frederick stay in jail for a week to teach him a lesson, he knew that only Frederick was capable of pulling a stunt like that.

Frederick fully expected to be sold down south which was the usual solution for rebellious slaves, but much to his surprise, Auld sent Frederick back to Baltimore. Frederick and Auld had a curious relationship. Auld, and just about anyone else who met Frederick, knew there was something special about him. In his own way, Auld seemed to like Frederick and if their relationship was not exactly father and son, it seemed to be more than master and slave. Auld could have really cooked Frederick's goose if he had wanted to because he was easily worth \$1,000 on the slave market and that would be a great incentive to get rid of any problem slave. Back in Baltimore, Frederick would finally escape on a train disguised as a sailor. When the conductor asked him for his pass, Frederick gave him another fake one that he had written giving himself permission to go to Philadelphia. This time it worked.

Once in New England, Frederick's talents were put to good use. Since he was technically stolen property, he changed his name with the help of a character in another book "*The Lady of the Lake*" by Sir Walter Scott. He went on the lecture circuit speaking against slavery using skills learned from the *Columbian Orator* and wrote articles for William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*. By now, Frederick knew what that strange word "abolition" meant. His autobiography *Narrative of the Life of*

Frederick Douglass an American Slave published in 1845 was extremely popular and sold over 30,000 copies in a few years and was followed by an expanded and improved version *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855. Douglass would start his own newspaper *The North Star* and earn the respect of Abraham Lincoln, who asked his advice on several occasions. After the war, he would hold several government offices including consul general to Haiti.

Many years later, he would revisit his beloved Maryland (it was only the slavery aspects of the state he hadn't liked) and be reconciled with his former master. "I always knew you were too smart to be a slave" Auld told him and said that if he were in his place, he would have escaped, too. Douglass would slowly earn the respect of the state that had enslaved him, although he couldn't help but notice that he still spoke to segregated audiences there. There was still a long way to go, but progress had been made.

Literacy gave Douglass the power to be his own man. Books *can* set you free. Knowledge *is* power.

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