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## Frederick Douglass

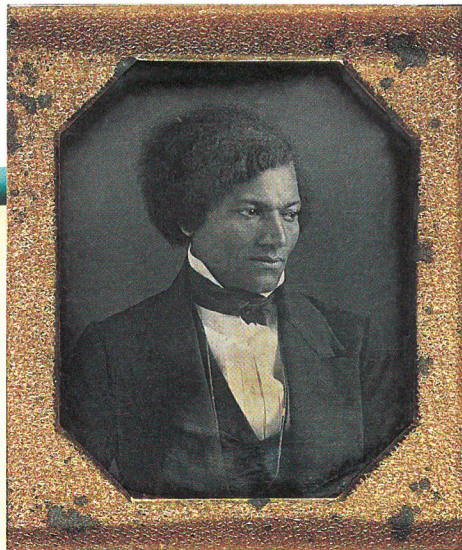
(1817?–1895)

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery in Talbot County, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and was separated from his mother soon after his birth. "The practice of separating children from their mothers," wrote Douglass years later, "and hiring the latter out at distances too great to admit of their meeting, except at long intervals, is a marked feature of the cruelty and barbarity of the slave system. But it is in harmony with the grand aim of slavery, which, always and everywhere, is to reduce man to a level with the brute. It is a successful method of obliterating from the mind and heart of the slave all just ideas of the sacredness of *the family*."

Since birth records were not kept for children born into slavery, Douglass was never sure of his exact age. "Genealogical trees do not flourish among slaves," he was to remark ironically later. Although Douglass received no formal education, he did teach himself to read with the help, at first, of members of the household he served. Later these same people became furious when they saw Douglass reading a book or a newspaper; education, they decided, was incompatible with being enslaved.

When Douglass was about twenty-one, he satisfied his hunger for freedom by escaping to Massachusetts, where he married and soon started to make public speeches in support of the abolitionist cause. He changed his last name from Bailey to Douglass, after the hero of the Romantic novel *The Lady of the Lake* by Sir Walter Scott.

In 1845, Douglass went to England, largely because of the danger he faced as a fugitive, especially after the publication that same year



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of his autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. In England he mobilized antislavery sentiment and became independent when British friends collected around seven hundred dollars to purchase his freedom.

When he returned to the United States, in 1847, Douglass founded a newspaper, the *North Star*. (The name was chosen because escapees used this star as a guide north.) In his newspaper, Douglass championed the abolition of slavery. In 1855, he published a revised version of his life story, titled *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Escape narratives, like earlier captivity stories (page 37), were enormously popular, and Douglass's were widely read and very influential in the abolitionist cause.

When the Civil War began, Douglass worked ardently for the Underground Railroad, the secret network of abolitionists that helped many people held in slavery escape to the North. He also energetically helped to recruit black soldiers for the Union armies.

Continuing to write and lecture after the war, Douglass argued that the surest way to rehabilitate his tragically scarred people was through education. In 1881, he published yet another version of his autobiography, titled *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Today Douglass is revered for the courage with which he insistently proclaimed his profoundly humane values, and he is admired for the quiet eloquence of his writing style.