

Frederick Douglass

from *Hand in Hand: Ten Black Men Who Changed America*

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Adapted by Fishtank Learning

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Frederick Douglass

b. February 14, 1817 or 1818 (exact date unknown), Talbot County, Maryland;
d. February 20, 1895, Washington, D.C.

His hands, big as hams,
struck a blow to slavery's ugly face.

Fought
by being self-taught:

Reader
Writer
Speaker
Seeker

In abolition's army
he led the charge to freedom.

Runaway slave
who escaped to the pages of his own life-story:

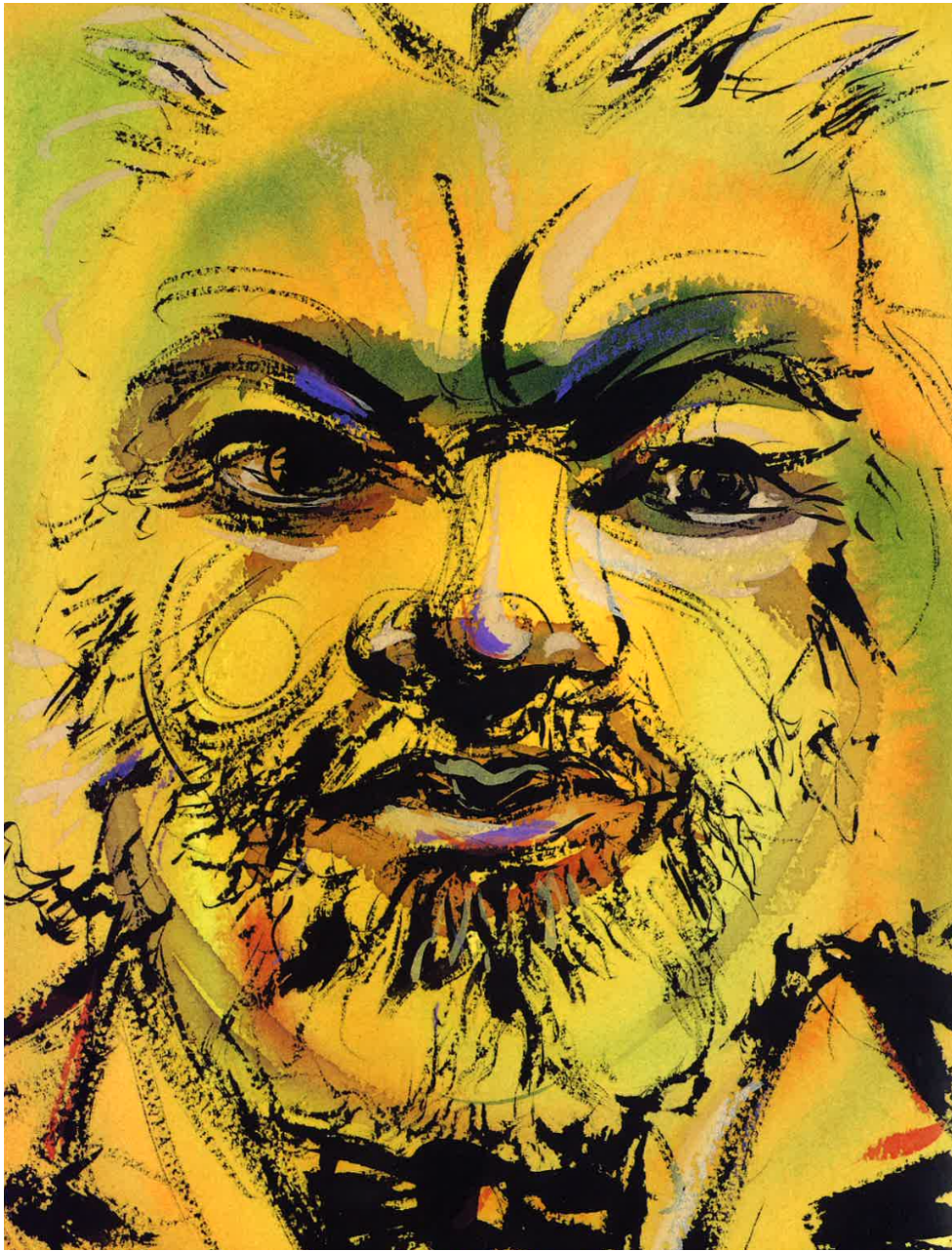
Autobiography of My Colored Soul
Beaten Red,
Black,
and Blue
by the White Whip's Lash

Oh, his oration!
Oh, his cadence!

Lion-tree leader,
told his tale with a roar.

Held all who listened in his mighty palm.
Inspired a nation divided
to believe in Emancipation's

promise.



Capitol Orator

LATE ONE NIGHT, WHEN the moon was full of milk, and the sky was as black as molasses, a boy-child was born on the Holme Hill Farm near Chesapeake Bay, Maryland. His mama named him Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey. Frederick came from two worlds. His father was the color of that moon. His mother, Harriet, was as dark and as beautiful as that sky.

The baby was his mother's special Valentine's Day gift. And though she loved him with her whole heart, she could not stay with him. She was forced to work far from her child. That was the way of slavery. When the master said *Wake*, you woke. When the master said *Work*, you worked. And if working meant leaving those you love, you did it. Even if it broke your heart.

Frederick's mama died when he was seven years old. Though he'd known her only a short time, her love stayed with him.

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Frederick never knew his father. He was sent to live with his grandmother until he was eight years old. Then Grandma Betsey took the boy to the Lloyd Plantation in Maryland, located miles from Holme Hill Farm. The plantation owner made Grandma Betsey leave without Frederick. He wanted Frederick to stay on his farm and work as his slave. Grandma Betsey had no choice in this. She couldn't even say good-bye to her own grandson. When Frederick realized what had happened, something changed within him. He now understood what slavery meant—that one person ruled over another. Right then, Frederick made a promise to himself. It was a promise to help end slavery.

Not long after his grandmother left, Frederick was sent to live in Baltimore, Maryland, at the home of Hugh and Sophia Auld, where he worked as a houseboy. Sophia embraced Frederick as if he were her own child. She taught him to read by showing him her Bible. And, oh, did that boy love letters. To him, they were like tiny dancers playing on paper—P's, B's, U's, and Q's.

Sophia loved watching Frederick learn. All those P's, B's, U's, and Q's spelled out joy to both of them. Sophia was a gifted teacher, and Frederick was an eager student.

When Sophia shared this good news with her husband, Master Hugh Auld, he stomped all over those P's, B's, U's, and Q's. He put a quick stop to Frederick's lessons. It was a crime for slaves to learn letters. But it wasn't the law that worried Master Hugh most. It was Frederick's desire. He hollered at Sophia. He told her reading would spoil Frederick and make him "forever unfit to be a slave." Hugh said Frederick should know nothing but the will of his master, and learn to obey it. He said reading would make Frederick want to "run away with himself."

Hugh's anger frightened Sophia. She stopped Frederick's reading lessons. She turned her back on Frederick. She slammed the door on their joy. Sophia Auld had become a slave to slavery.

Frederick learned a great lesson that day. Master Hugh's anger taught him that reading was powerful. If others believed that knowledge made him unfit to be a slave, he would work hard to get as much of it as he could.

While working for the Aulds, Frederick earned a little money doing errands at Master Auld's shipyard. With fifty cents, he bought a book called *The Columbian Orator*, a collection of speeches about liberty. In that book, there was a conversation between a master and his slave about slavery. The master told the slave why slavery was essential. In the story, the slave spoke as smooth as the finest silk when he told the master why slaves deserved to be free.

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Frederick had to read secretly. At night he used *The Columbian Orator* and other books to teach himself. Frederick's only light was the moon, which poured its white-white onto the pages of Frederick's books. Over time, Frederick's knowledge grew.

Reading gave Frederick many ideas about freedom. He saw freedom all around him. The trees were free. The fireflies were free. So was the breeze that carried bugs and leaves. Even the master's chickens were free to roam as they pleased. But slavery still had a hold on Frederick. He was *not* free.

Not long after Frederick learned to read, the Auld family divided their slaves among households. In 1834, Frederick was sent to live in Talbot County, Maryland, with Captain Thomas Auld, one of the meanest Auld brothers.

When Master Thomas said *Work*, Frederick worked. But to the master's way of thinking, Frederick was not working hard enough.

There was no pleasing Master Thomas.

To make matters worse, Frederick began to let Master Thomas's horse run off to a nearby farm. Frederick wanted the horse to be free. He wanted the horse to be able to play in a pasture. Frederick often followed the horse, and they frolicked in the field together.

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This enraged Master Thomas, who whipped Frederick several times for taking these liberties. That didn't stop Frederick. He continued to let that horse roam.



Master Thomas had had enough. He worried that he couldn't control Frederick, so he sent Frederick to live with Edward Covey, a "slavebreaker." It was Covey's job to make Frederick more obedient by wearing him down. And Covey... whew! He was evil.

He stood over Frederick while he worked. He made him chop wood till his back was about to break. When Frederick stopped to take a rest, Covey smacked him with a branch. During his first week on the Covey farm, Frederick let Covey's team of oxen run wild. Covey beat Frederick hard for this.

As the months passed, Covey did all he could to "break" Frederick. He kicked him. He punched him. He tied him to a tree and whipped him. This went on for almost a year. Covey's

cruelty was starting to work on Frederick. Frederick was beginning to break, but he was determined to withstand Covey's abuse.

Though Frederick had been beaten, he stayed strong. When Master Covey came at Frederick again, Frederick refused to back down. Now *he* was the one punching and kicking. Frederick and Covey fought for hours, until Covey finally gave up. Frederick had broken the slave-breaker!

Frederick was still enslaved, but now he was free of fear. He knew that he could survive the harshest treatment ever. Through this experience, Frederick changed from a boy to a man.

Four years had passed. Master Thomas sent Frederick back to Hugh and Sophia Auld in Baltimore. Frederick met a free black woman named Anna. Frederick wanted to marry Anna but would not propose to her until he was free.

Now Frederick was more determined than ever to gain his freedom. By escaping to the North, where black people were not enslaved, Frederick could be free. He borrowed money to buy a train ticket from Baltimore to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

One of Frederick's friends let Frederick use his "sailor's protection"-a paper that said he was a free seaman. Frederick dressed as a sailor and got on the train. He worried the whole way. If he was caught, he would be killed. He did not fit the description on the paper. And his sailor clothes didn't fit right, either. But Frederick was fit to flee. After all that he had endured, he was ready to run.

A true blessing smiled on Frederick that day. The train's conductor didn't even check his papers. He hardly noticed Frederick. There were even passengers on the train who recognized Frederick, but they kept quiet when they saw him.

As the train sped through the slave state of Delaware, Frederick's heart raced, too. At Wilmington, Delaware, Frederick boarded a steamboat for Philadelphia. Then, that night, Frederick took another train to New York City. He traveled all night. He didn't sleep. There was too much excitement leaping up in him.

It was a ride he would never forget. From the window of the train, Frederick watched the sky and the moon. As the white in that moon tucked its face deep into the black pocket of the sky, Frederick traveled northward to freedom. It was September 4, 1838.

To make sure no one from his past would find him, Frederick changed his name to Frederick Augustus Douglass.

Frederick sent for Anna. She came to New York. They married, and over time had five children, three boys and two girls.

Frederick was eager to help other enslaved people. In August 1841, Frederick attended a convention of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. The event was held on Nantucket Island, in Massachusetts.

It seemed like the hottest day ever on Nantucket. There were nearly a thousand people crammed into that room. They were abolitionists, men and women who believed slavery was wrong and fought to end it.

Frederick stood quietly at the back of the meeting hall. He was ready to listen. But when someone found out he was there, folks urged him to address the group. Some had heard

Frederick preach at a nearby church. They knew that he could deliver a speech like nobody else. They wanted to hear the story of his life in slavery.

Frederick was apprehensive, but the crowd encouraged him.

Even though Frederick was six feet tall and strong, he was nervous in front of so many strangers. But he remembered the promise he'd made to himself when he was a child—the promise to help end slavery. He could now do this by telling his story.

When Frederick stepped to the platform, his knees wobbled. His shoulders trembled. So did his size-fourteen feet.

As scared as Frederick was, he spoke with conviction. He told the people about Master Hugh Auld forbidding him to read, and about the cruelty he'd suffered with Edward Covey.

Every person in that place listened closely to Frederick. The room was quieter than the air itself. No one wanted to miss a word. When Frederick finished, the crowd clapped and cheered. Some people even cried. Many had never heard a former slave tell of his experiences. Of course they knew that slavery was wrong, but hearing Frederick tell his story so clearly reinforced how terrible slavery was.

Those listening loved Frederick's speech, but it filled them with hatred. After hearing Frederick, they hated slavery more than ever. When leaders of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society asked Frederick to join their group, he immediately agreed to become a member.

