

“Douglass, Frederick”: Frederick Douglass’s Forgotten Autobiography

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The fact that Frederick Douglass wrote three separate autobiographies over the course of his long public career is a remarkable achievement often celebrated by scholars. Never before noted in scholarship or reproduced for close examination was a short autobiographical sketch that Douglass prepared for the *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*. A letter from one of the encyclopedia’s editors, George R. Prowell, recounts that it had taken a visit to Cedar Hill to fulfill a commitment by Douglass to write a fifteen-hundred-word entry on his life. In a letter to Douglass, Prowell stated that the new encyclopedia sought “to have the sketches of notable living men come from official sources and be recognized as accurate.” Busy serving as U.S. minister plenipotentiary to Haiti under the end of July 1891, Douglass had delayed preparing the entry. Prowell had to warn Douglass, on 4 September 1891, that his sketch was needed by the first of the following month, when the editor would visit Washington to pick up the copy. Written in the third person, Douglass’s autobiography almost exactly met the requested word length. The entry was planned to appear in late 1891 in the inaugural edition of the *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* alongside sketches of many antebellum reformers and abolitionists. Publication of the encyclopedia by the New York City–based firm headed by James Terry White was suspended, however, and the volume with Douglass’s entry was not released until 1895. It was reprinted in later editions with the notable addition of a new concluding sentence reporting Douglass’s death in Washington, D.C., on 22 February 1895. The *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* with Douglass’s autobiographical entry continued to add new volumes until the 1980s.¹

DOUGLASS, Frederick, orator and U. S. minister to Hayti, was born a slave to Capt. Aaron Anthony, chief agent of the estate of Col. Edward Lloyd, in Talbot county, Md. His father was of white and his mother of brown complexion. The exact date of his birth is unknown, but from a remark in his hearing by the daughter of Capt. Anthony, he thinks it was in February, 1817. Separated from his mother in infancy he was placed with his grandmother to be reared with other slave children, till five or six years old, when he was removed from her log-cabin near Hillsborough, to the home of Capt. Anthony on the Lloyd estate in the county of his birth. Here he remained until he was eight years old, seeing a great deal during his stay of the hardships and cruelties incident to the condition of slavery. Much of the harsh treatment, it seems, was due to the bad temper of the colored woman who had charge of him. Lucretia Auld, the daughter of his master, the wife of Capt. Thomas Auld, to whom he afterward by inheritance belonged, was very kind to him and often defended him from the brutality of the woman. By her he was transferred from the home of her father to Baltimore, to take care of Thomas, the son of Hugh Auld, brother to her husband. The change was greatly to his advantage, inasmuch as it was a change from hunger to plenty, from brutality to refinement, and from misery to comfort. His new mistress, Sophia Auld, was kind to him and taught him the alphabet and to spell, though without the knowledge of her husband, who, when it became known to him, promptly forebade it. He told her that a knowledge of letters would ruin a slave and make him discontented. Young as Douglass was, he

¹ George R. Prowell to Douglass, 4 September 1891, General Correspondence File, reel 6, frames 234–35, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

already had dreams of being free some day, and the prohibition imposed upon his teacher only stimulated his resolution to learn to read, in every way open to him. Thereafter his reading lessons were taken from little school-boys in the street and out-of-the-way places where he could not be interfered with or observed. In fact the street became his school and the pavements and fences in the neighborhood his copy-books and blackboards. When eleven years old he was put to work in his master's shipyard to beat and spin oakum, to keep fires under the pitch boiler and turn the grindstone on which the carpenters sharpened their tools. There he practiced writing by imitating letters on different parts of the ships in process of building. His progress in his studies was so great as to be a surprise to himself as well as to others about him, for in that day there seemed to be a doubt of the ability of one of African descent to learn, even under favorable conditions. But this progress soon received a formidable check. In 1833 he was taken from his easy home in Baltimore, and placed on the farm of Edward Covey, where he was subjected for a time to hard labor, and often to brutal chastisement, so that, as he expresses it, his young human ambition was nearly destroyed, his desire to read and study deserted him, food and rest became his only wants, and he felt darkness closing over his mind and heart. This broken condition did not continue long. Roused to desperation by cruel treatment, he refused to submit to chastisement, and successfully resisted the attempt of Covey to flog him. This daring resistance on his part, committed in a moment of intense feeling and without calculating consequences, finally became a settled disposition and purpose. Success made him fearless and he determined to repeat his conduct should another attempt be made upon him. No further attempt was made, and he often said afterward, "He is whipped oftenest who is whipped easiest." In 1836, after his experience at Covey's, he planned an escape from slavery for himself and three others, but the plot was discovered before it could be carried out, and he was arrested and put in prison and exposed for sale to the slave-traders. For some reason his master refused to sell him, and sent him again to his brother Hugh in Baltimore, to work in the shipyard, where he learned to caulk vessels, working at the trade two years and six months. From here he escaped from slavery on Sept. 2, 1838, was married to Anna Murray, a free woman, and went to New Bedford, Mass. Not being allowed, on account of his color, to work at his trade, he went to work as a common laborer and stevedore in fitting out whaling ships for sea. During his stay in New Bedford he often spoke in public meetings where questions affecting the colored race were being discussed. His speeches attracted the attention of the abolitionists of that city, and in August, 1841, he was persuaded to devote his time and talents to the cause of his people. He was employed successively by the Massachusetts anti-slavery society, the Rhode Island anti-slavery society, and the American anti-slavery society, and in 1843 he was sent, with several other speakers, by the New England anti-slavery convention to hold one hundred anti-slavery conventions, beginning in the state of New Hampshire and ending in the state of Indiana. At one of these, in the last-named state, he was set upon by a mob and badly beaten, having his right hand broken in a fight. In 1844 he wrote a narrative of his life, in which, to remove doubts of his having been a slave, he told his master's name and residence, thereby exposing himself to the danger of being returned to slavery. To avoid this he went abroad, traveling and lecturing on slavery, in England, Ireland and Scotland until 1847, when, having been ransomed by Mrs. and Miss Richardson, of Newcastle-on-Tyne, at the price of £150 sterling, and being no longer in danger of recapture, he returned to the United States to continue his work for the emancipation of his people. In December, 1847, he began to edit and publish a weekly paper in Rochester, N. Y., called the "North Star," which was afterward published as "Frederick Douglass's Paper." He continued its publication during sixteen years, lecturing in the meantime all over the northern states, until the emancipation proclamation of President Lincoln made further agitation unnecessary. In 1859 he

Frederick Douglass

was indicted for being concerned in the John Brown raid, and for a time again took refuge in England, but soon returned to use his pen and voice as before against slavery. On the outbreak of the civil war in 1861, he advocated arming the slaves and making the war directly against slavery, and had several interviews with President Lincoln on the subject. He assisted in raising the 54th and 55th colored regiments in Massachusetts, in which two of his sons, Lewis and Charles, were non-commissioned officers. At the close of the war he was in much demand as a lyceum lecturer, and in this vocation traveled extensively. At the close of the war he was a prominent advocate for instant and complete enfranchisement of the freedmen of the South, had a notable debate with President Johnson on the subject, and during two years edited and published a paper in Washington called the "New National Era." In 1871 he was sent by President Grant with the commissioners B. F. Wade, Dr. Samuel J. Howe, and Andrew D. White, to St. Domingo, to inquire into the condition of that country and the disposition of its people as to annexation to the United States. The same year he was appointed a member of the upper house of the territorial government of the District of Columbia. In 1872 he was one of the electors-at-large in the state of New York, being selected by the electoral college of that state to take the vote of New York to Washington, and in 1877 he was appointed by President Hayes U. S. marshal of the District of Columbia. His appointment to this office created a sensation throughout the country, he being the first of his color to whom that high office had been assigned. On the 4th of August, 1882, his first wife, the mother of his five children died, and on the 24th of January, 1884, he was married to Helen Pitts, of New York state. In 1881 he was appointed by President Garfield to be recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia. In 1889 he was given by President Harrison the mission to Hayti as minister resident and consul-general, and *Chargé d'Affaires* to Santo Domingo. He resigned in 1891. At different times during the fifty years of his public life he was elected president of national conventions of colored citizens, notably at Cleveland in 1848, Syracuse in 1866, and at Louisville, Ky., in 1883. In politics, until 1856, he was a member of the liberty party. Since then he has steadily supported the republican party, often taking the stump for its candidates. Few men have spoken oftener, or more effectively, or to a larger number of the American people, than Frederick Douglass.

Source: "Douglass, Frederick," *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York, 1891), 2:309–10.