



# Frederick Douglass

FREDERICK DOUGLASS was born into slavery in 1818 and died a prominent statesman 77 years later. Raised on a Maryland plantation, Douglass was separated from his parents and subjected to brutal punishment. With a thirst for education, he was a self-taught reader who saw the ability to read and write as a key to his own emancipation and that of his fellow slaves. He managed to survive the brutality of slavery and eventually escaped to New York City in 1838, though he was not legally free until several years later when British anti-slavery advocates helped purchase his freedom.

Douglass traveled to Europe in 1845 where he started to give vibrant and electrifying anti-slavery speeches. After he returned to the U.S. a few years later, he continued to be a tireless advocate for the abolition of slavery through his speeches and writings. Today, his powerful autobiography stands as one of the most widely read American literature classics. This one-hour program chronicles Douglass' incredible life, from his childhood in slavery to his role as an abolitionist leader, to his position as United States Minister to Haiti. This program provides students with a valuable visual companion to readings of Douglass' influential speeches and writings.

## Primary Source

***The Constitution of the United States: Is It Pro-Slavery or Anti-Slavery?* (Excerpt) by Frederick Douglass, March 26, 1860 from Glasgow, Scotland**

"...Here are its own objects as set forth by itself: 'We, the people of these United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America.' The objects here set forth are six in number: union, defence, welfare, tranquility, justice, and liberty. These are all good objects, and slavery, so far from being among them, is a foe of them all. But it has been said that Negroes are not included within the benefits sought under this declaration. This is said by the slaveholders in America – it is said by the City Hall orator – but it is not said by the Constitution itself. Its language is 'we the people;' not we the white people, not even we the citizens, not we the privileged class, not we the high, not we the low, but we the people; not we the horses, sheep, and swine, and wheel-barrows, but we the people, we the human inhabitants; and, if Negroes are people, they are included in the benefits for which the Constitution of America was ordained and established."

## Curriculum Links

**Biography®: Frederick Douglass** would be useful for American History and Culture, African-American History, Literature, Ethics and Speech courses. It is an excellent resource for Black History Month activities and lesson plans. It is appropriate for middle school and high school students.

## Terms to Define

Using a dictionary ([www.merriamwebster.com](http://www.merriamwebster.com)) or an encyclopedia, students may want to define or explain the significance of the following terms from this program:

- Abolition
- Creed
- Emancipation
- Fugitive
- Insurrection
- Orator
- Posterity
- Proclamation
- Purge

## Discussion Questions

1. How did Frederick Douglass learn to read, and what were the risks involved with his quest to become literate?
2. How and when did Frederick Douglass escape to freedom? What were his key decisions and tactics?
3. Explain how William Lloyd Garrison was an important figure in the abolitionist movement. How did Garrison and Douglass meet?
4. When did Douglass travel to Europe, and what were his major activities while he was there?
5. Why did some white Americans refuse to believe that Douglass had written his own autobiography? How did he convince them otherwise?
6. How did Douglass become involved in the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society convention? How did his participation bolster his position within the abolitionist movement?
7. According to Douglass, what was the purpose of the Civil War? What role did he play in helping the Union achieve victory?
8. In many of his speeches, Douglass describes the contradiction between American democracy and slavery. What were some of his main arguments about the status of slavery in the United States?
9. What was the Emancipation Proclamation? How did the Battle of Antietam, the bloodiest one-day battle in the Civil War, help to advance the preliminary draft of this document?
10. Throughout this documentary, you hear portions of many of Douglass' speeches. Which of these do you find most powerful and why?
11. After the end of the Civil War, did Frederick Douglass think freedom and equality existed for all people in the U.S.? In what ways did the struggle continue?
12. What do you think is Douglass' most lasting legacy?

## Extended Activities

1. **Douglass Depicted.** Ask students to make a collage that depicts the talents and accomplishments of Frederick Douglass. Students can incorporate images of Douglass, quotes from his speeches, and key dates in his life.
2. **Douglass and Lincoln.** Working in small groups, ask students to research the interactions between Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. Then, have them reenact a conversation between President Abraham Lincoln and Douglass as they discussed the issues surrounding the Emancipation Proclamation.
3. **Voices of Abolitionism.** Ask students to choose a passage from one of Douglass' speeches or writings and deliver it aloud. They should attempt to impart the essence, tone, and importance of the speech – just as Douglass would have delivered it.
4. **In His Words.** Ask students to write a journal entry or letter from Douglass' perspective on any event in his life. Some suggestions include his days as a slave in Maryland, his work recruiting soldiers for the Union army, or his time as a diplomat representing the United States.
5. **Remembering Frederick Douglass.** Douglass' tombstone in Mt. Hope Cemetery, Rochester, New York, simply reads: "FREDERICK DOUGLASS 1818-1895." Write your own epitaph or obituary encapsulating Douglass' life and significance.

## Additional Resources

### Websites

Learn more about Frederick Douglass on Bio.com:

[www.biography.com/articles/Frederick-Douglass-9278324](https://www.biography.com/articles/Frederick-Douglass-9278324)

American Visionaries - Frederick Douglass (National Park Service Virtual Exhibit): [www.cr.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/douglass](https://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/douglass)

The Frederick Douglass Papers: The Library of Congress' online collection of Frederick Douglass' papers.

[www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/doughtml/doughome.html](https://www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/doughtml/doughome.html)

### Books

Blight, David W. *Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee*. (Louisiana State University Press, 1991).

Douglass, Frederick, and Henry Louis Gates. *Frederick Douglass: Auto-biographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave / My Bondage and My Freedom / Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. (Library of America, 1994).

Douglass, Frederick, Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor. *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*. (Library of Black America series). (Lawrence Hill Books, 2000).

McFeely, William S. *Frederick Douglass*. (W.W. Norton & Company, 1991).