washington

Frederick Douglass Home

Washington DC

"to those who
have suffered
in slavery
I can say,
I, too,
have suffered . . .
to those who
have battled
for liberty,
brotherhood,
and citizenship
I can say,
I, too,
have battled."

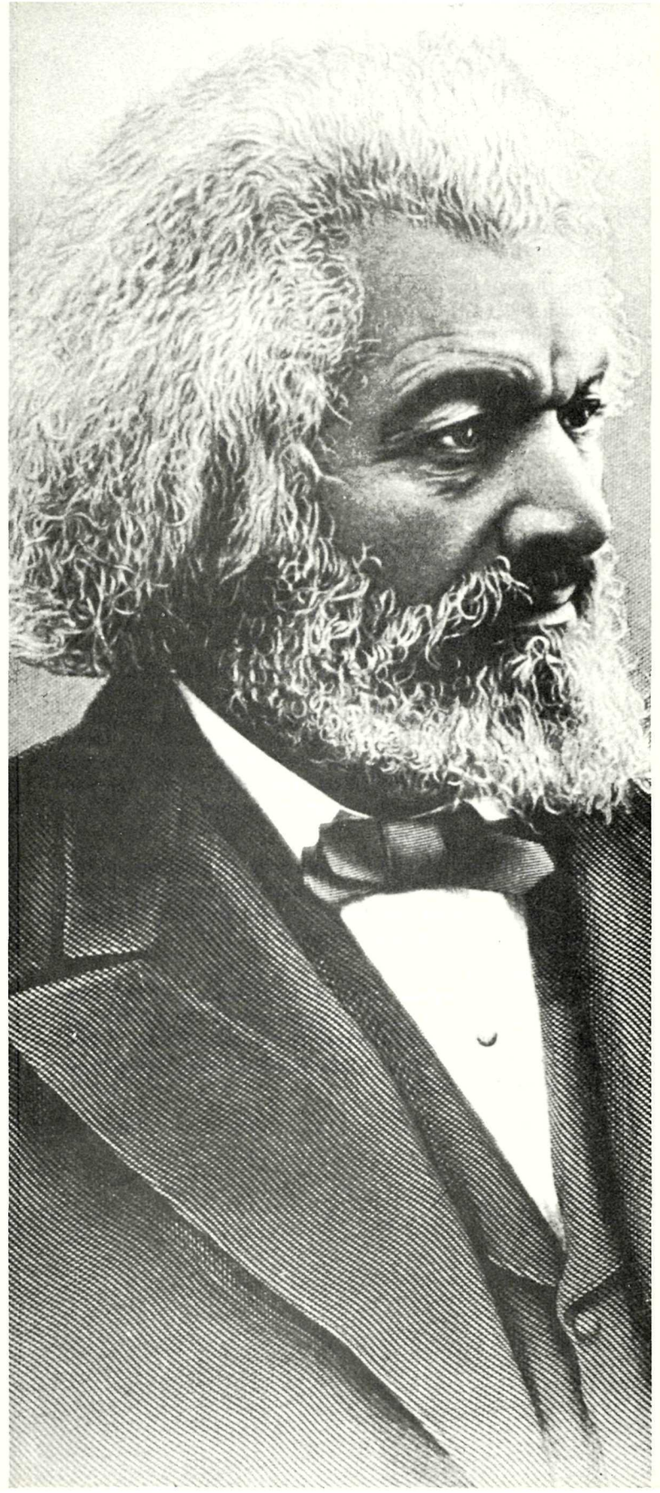
— Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was an outstanding 19th-century American Negro. A remarkable orator and writer, a noted abolitionist and anti-slavery editor, he was a fearless fighter for justice and equality and received great recognition both in the United States and abroad as a leading spokesman for the Negro people. Always a man of wide interests, Douglass in later years became the President of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, the first Negro U.S. Marshal in the District of Columbia, the Recorder of Deeds in the District of Columbia, and, finally, U.S. Minister to Haiti. However, he is best remembered as a lifelong foe of inequality.

When born, about 1817, to a slave family living near Easton, Talbot County, on Maryland's Eastern Shore, Douglass was given the name Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey. Since the "peculiar institution" of slavery did not encourage the maintenance of strong family ties, he knew little about his parents. Amid the splendors of plantation life, he grew up with scarcely enough food to eat or enough clothing to cover his body. Frederick was an intelligent lad who, despite his master's opposition, learned to read and write. With his horizons broadened, he came to understand—and thus to hate—slavery, growing more dissatisfied with his lot.

The slaveholders of the vicinity rightly regarded him as a potential source of danger. When Frederick was 17 years old, his master packed him off to the farm of Edward Covey, a professional slave breaker, who tried to keep the youth's mind inactive by endless, grinding labor, punctuated by occasional brutal beatings. One day, in the midst of a flogging, Douglass turned on Covey and overwhelmed him. The slave beater attempted no more floggings and remained silent about the incident, word of which could have ruined his reputation. Years later Douglass recalled: "I was no longer a servile coward . . . I had reached the point at which *I was not afraid to die*. This spirit made me a free man in *fact*, though I still remained a slave in *form*." He was soon afterwards returned to his master, and later sent to Baltimore to learn the trade of ship caulking.

At age 21, Douglass fled to the North, through the help of Anna Murray, a freedwoman whom he met while attending a discussion group of free Negroes in Baltimore. After his escape to New York, he and Anna were married. Settling in New Bedford, Mass., he began the struggle to earn a living in the face of local racial prejudice. (It was at this time that he changed his name to Douglass to escape arrest under the fugitive slave law.) Soon he became a supporter of the noted abolitionist editor, William Lloyd Garrison. In 1841, Douglass was unexpectedly asked to speak to a meeting of an anti-slavery society. His speech about his life as a slave was so successful that he became a regular anti-slavery lecturer. Eventually his manner became so polished that many began to doubt that he had ever been a slave; some accused him of being an imposter.



Douglass replied to his critics in 1845 when he daringly published his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. It told of his birth as a slave and of his escape to the North. The *Narrative* became so well-known that his life and liberty were endangered and he was forced to flee the country. Seeking refuge in Great Britain, he continued his work, gaining widespread recognition and support from many of the most prominent men of the time. Sympathetic British friends raised enough money to buy Douglass his freedom.

In 1847, Douglass returned to the United States to renew his anti-slavery work. Settling in Rochester, N.Y., and financed by his overseas friends, he began publishing an abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star*. He did not agree with Garrison's moral-suasion approach to equal rights nor did he believe in the violent methods of John Brown. (He even advised Brown against the Harpers Ferry raid.) Douglass advocated bold political action to abolish slavery, a position that alienated some of his friends.

During the Civil War, Douglass helped to recruit Negro troops for the Union Army, especially for the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Regiments. Two of his own sons served with the Federal forces.

After the war, Douglass served as Secretary to the Commission to Santo Domingo during President Ulysses S. Grant's administration. In 1877, he became U.S. Marshal in the District of Columbia, and, in 1881, the District's Recorder of Deeds. President Benjamin Harrison appointed him Minister to Haiti in 1889, in recognition of his support of the Republican platform. Despite the high positions he enjoyed, Douglass never deserted his fellow Negroes and used his influence to improve their conditions.

Although Douglass supported the Republican Reconstruction program and expressed a willingness to see the defeated Southerners restored to full citizenship, he thought the overall aims of Reconstruction were far from complete. In 1883, he pronounced emancipation "a stupendous fraud" that left the Negro "a deserted, a defrauded, a swindled and an outcast man—in law, free; in fact, a slave." Nevertheless, Douglass saw legislative action as the only alternative to the surrender of his people to perpetual serfdom. His attitude toward the new imperialism of the age was also mixed. He saw no objection to the annexation of new territories, if the inhabitants freely consented; but he had little use for the "gunboat diplomacy" then so much in vogue.

During his later years, Douglass was showered with many honors and invitations. In 1893, for example, the Haitian Government chose him to represent Haiti at the World's Columbian Exposition. Throughout his last years, Douglass continued to speak out against all forms of inequality. In fact, just a few hours before he died on February 20, 1895, he attended a woman's suffrage meeting.

Cedar Hill

Douglass spent the later years of his life at Cedar Hill, which he purchased in 1877. John W. Van Hook was the first owner of the house and property. Van Hook, in partnership with two other men, purchased more than 237 acres in the vicinity for real estate development in 1854. The hill on which the house stands was long referred to as "John Van Hook's Hill."

The handsome brick house, with its commanding view of the Federal City, was probably begun about 1855. Van Hook's house reflected the success of the real estate venture. It was spacious and comfortable by the standards of the day, but not elaborate. By 1887, a two-story frame addition to the house had been constructed, with a kitchen on the first floor and a bedroom and hall on the second floor.

In 1887 two bay windows were added to the east parlor. A two-story addition, containing the library and a southeast bedroom, was probably also built at this time.

Helen Pitts Douglass

In August 1882, Anna Douglass died. Eighteen months later, Douglass married Helen Pitts, a white woman who had been a secretary in the Office of the Recorder of Deeds. She realized his greatness, and after his death she spared no effort in preserving his home intact as a memorial to him. To this end, she organized the Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association, chartered by Congress in 1900.

In 1916, the association joined forces with the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, and the estate and the house, with its contents, were opened to anyone who cared to visit. By Act of Congress of September 5, 1962, continued preservation of the house was assured and the National Park Service was entrusted with the care of the house and its invaluable contents. At last, the dream of Helen Pitts Douglass has come true. The example and contributions of Frederick Douglass are here preserved for the inspiration of present and future generations.

Restoration Plans

After the Douglass home became part of the National Park System, an intensive study of its condition was made. The study revealed that many structural parts had deteriorated to such an extent that it would be unsafe to allow the public to enter the building.

The home was immediately closed, pending legislation which led to the appropriation of funds for restoration. The home and its furnishings have been restored and the spacious grounds are being maintained as in Douglass' day.

Opening of the Frederick Douglass Memorial Home is the just recognition due this man. Here, high on Cedar Hill, the home stands as a physical reminder to all who may pass that the American heritage was made a little richer by Frederick Douglass.

How to Reach Cedar Hill

The Frederick Douglass Home can best be reached by crossing the 11th Street (Anacostia) Bridge to Good Hope Road, turning left on Good Hope Road to 14th Street, and right on 14th Street to W Street. The home is on top of the hill at 14th and W Streets SE.

Visitors arriving from north or south on Int. 295 (Anacostia Freeway) should use "Pennsylvania Avenue East" exit. Proceed east on Pennsylvania Avenue 2 blocks to Minnesota Avenue. Turn right on Minnesota to Good Hope Road. Turn right on Good Hope Road, proceed one-half block, and turn left on 14th Street. Public transportation is available to within a short distance of the site.

FOR YOUR SAFETY

Do not allow your visit to be spoiled by an accident. In the home and outside too, be careful when using steps. Also take care while walking the hilly grounds. Remain alert and exercise common sense and caution.

Administration

The Frederick Douglass Home is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is National Captal Parks-East, 5210 Indian Head Highway, Oxon Hill, MD. 20021, is in immediate charge.

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As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

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