

The story of Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was born as a slave in Talbot County in Maryland in the east of the United States, His exact birth date is unknown. (1) As in the case of so many other slaves no reliable records were kept.

Douglass escaped slavery in 1838 and enlisted as a lecturer for Garrison's Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1841. (2) Frederick had already tried unsuccessfully to escape from slavery when on 3rd September 1838, he boarded a train to Havre de Grace, Maryland. He was dressed in a sailor's uniform. (3)

In 1846, Douglass travelled to Britain, although he was still legally owed by the slave owner Hugh Auld of Baltimore in the United States. However help was at hand. British supporters of Frederick raised the money so that his freedom could be bought from Hugh Auld. These supporters were led by Ellen Richardson from Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Douglass was then free to go back to the United States to write and speak out against the slavery of his fellow black people. He ran a number of abolitionist newspapers, He supported women's rights and also pointed out that the constitution of the United States, which says that "all men are created equal" was very much against slavery. This point was taken up 100 years later by the Civil Rights campaigner Martin Luther King, who visited Newcastle-upon-Tyne in November 1967, when Newcastle University became the only university in Britain to honour King in his lifetime.

In 1846, Hugh Auld of Baltimore, who despite Douglass' escape was still technically his owner, wrote a deed of manumission to Walter Lowrie of New York in the sale of a Frederick Baily, alias Frederick Douglass, for \$711.66. This amount of money would be enough to set Frederick free from slavery on December 5, 1846.

A Quaker, Mary Richardson, the wife of Henry Richardson of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, England, had written to Hugh Auld asking him whether Douglass's freedom had a price. Hugh Auld replied in October of 1846 that he would manumit or free Douglass for £150 sterling.

Ellen Richardson raised the money to free Douglass, along with her sister-in-law Anna Richardson. They were both from Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The two women made arrangements with American abolitionist, Ellis Gray Loring of Boston to handle the negotiations.

On November 24, 1846, Walter Lowrie of New York City, another abolitionist, also involved in the negotiations, notified Hugh Auld that the £150 had arrived in New York. He directed Auld to produce proof of legal ownership of Douglass. A few days later Thomas Auld filed a bill of sale (FRDO 3861) in Talbot County signifying the transfer of Douglass to Hugh Auld.

On December 5, 1846 Hugh Auld filed Douglass's manumission [literally, "releasing the hand of authority"] papers in Baltimore County. One week later the transaction was completed. (4)

Douglass became a confidant of President Lincoln during the difficult days of the American Civil War, from 1861 to 1865. As a radical abolitionist, Douglass was not happy with Lincoln's policies during the first year of the war, when Lincoln appeared to soften his line on complete abolition of slavery in the southern states. However Douglass was at ease when speaking to Lincoln and did feel respected. Indeed Douglass wrote of

the president's, "earnestness and fluency which I had not expected ...to vindicate his policy respecting the whole slavery question and especially that in reference to employing coloured troops." (5)

In 1868 Douglass supported the presidential campaign of Ulysses S. Grant, who on becoming president enacted the Klan Act, which enabled Grant to send troops into the south, resulting in 5 000 arrests and dealing the Ku Klux Klan a serious blow. Then in the next presidential election in 1872, Douglass became the first black person to be nominated for the Vice-presidency of the United States when he was nominated as Victoria Woodhull's running mate on the Equal Rights Party ticket. However, Douglass had no knowledge of his nomination beforehand and did not campaign or even acknowledge it. (6)

As white racists began to make life more difficult for former slaves after their emancipation in 1865, Douglass continued to campaign against them and it has been said that, "Douglass' stump speech for 25 years after the end of the Civil War was to emphasize work to counter the racism that was then prevalent in unions" (7) Douglass also campaigned for the rights of women.

On 20th February 1895, Douglass was at a meeting of National Council of Women in Washington D.C. when he was brought to the stage and given a standing ovation. It was only short time after he returned home that Douglass suffered a massive heart attack that killed him. (8) He was 77 years old. Douglass has been described as the "father of the civil rights movement" in the United States.(9)

Footnotes

1. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Douglass
2. D.B. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage; The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, p. 259
3. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Douglass
4. www.awesomestories.com/assets/hugh-auld-purchase)
5. D.B. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage; The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, p. 320
6. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Douglass
7. *ibid.*
8. *ibid*
9. B.J. Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement*, p.4

