

Frederick Douglass

Tuckahoe, Maryland · New Bedford · Rochester · Washington, D.C.

In Sixty Seconds

Origins. Born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey in February 1818 in Tuckahoe, Maryland. The exact date was never recorded, because enslaved people were forbidden to know their birthdays. Separated from his mother as an infant. Taught the alphabet by Sophia Auld in Baltimore until her husband forbade the lessons. He taught himself the rest by trading bread to white boys in the streets for reading instruction.

Work. On September 3, 1838, at age twenty, he boarded a northbound train in Baltimore dressed as a sailor and carrying borrowed free-seaman papers. Twenty-four hours later he was in New York. He took the name Douglass and began speaking for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1841. He published three autobiographies, edited *The North Star* for four years, and spent the Civil War lobbying the Lincoln White House.

Impact. He argued the Black man into the Union Army, the Thirteenth Amendment into the Constitution, and the Black vote into the Fifteenth. He met with Lincoln three times. He held federal office for fourteen years after Reconstruction collapsed. He sat for portrait after portrait because he understood that the photographic record of a Black citizen was itself an argument.

Legacy. His three autobiographies remain in print. His home at Cedar Hill in Anacostia is a National Historic Site. The Frederick Douglass Bridge in Washington was rebuilt and renamed in 2021. A U.S. quarter bearing his image was issued in 2025. David W. Blight's 2018 biography won the Pulitzer Prize for History in 2019.

The Network

Anna Murray Douglass

First wife (1838-1882). A free Black woman working as a domestic in Baltimore when she met him. She planned and financed his escape with her own savings, sewed the sailor's uniform he wore, and followed him to New York within days of his arrival. She kept the Rochester house that served as an Underground Railroad station while he traveled. Forty-four years of marriage, five children.

William Lloyd Garrison

First publisher, then estranged. Editor of *The Liberator* who hired Douglass as a traveling lecturer after the 1841 Nantucket speech. Published the first edition of the 1845 *Narrative* with his own preface. Split with Douglass in 1847 over whether abolition required political action and armed resistance or only moral suasion. They reconciled in person in 1873.

Helen Pitts Douglass

Second wife (1884-1895). A white abolitionist and suffragist who had been his secretary at the Recorder of Deeds office. Her family disowned her for the marriage. After his death she founded the Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association and spent eight years preserving Cedar Hill as a memorial. The Frederick Douglass National Historic Site exists because of her.

Harriet Tubman

Lifelong friend and co-conspirator. Underground Railroad conductor who stopped at the Douglass house in Rochester on her trips north. Douglass wrote in an 1868 letter that while he had worked in daylight with applause, she had worked at night with no witness but heaven. He was one of her most consistent public defenders.

For Discussion

1. Douglass sat for more than 160 portraits between 1841 and 1895 and wrote four essays on photography. What does it mean that a formerly enslaved man put this much thought into how he was depicted, and how does his practice read against the visual economy that shapes Black public figures today?
2. Douglass wrote three autobiographies across forty years: *Narrative* in 1845, *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855, and *Life and Times* in 1881 and again in 1892. What pattern of self-revision does the sequence reveal across decades, and what is the effect on the historical record when one life is told three times by the same person at widely different stages?
3. At the March 4, 1865 inaugural reception, Lincoln called across a crowded room, "Here comes my friend Douglass." Six weeks later Lincoln was assassinated. What does that public acknowledgment in the final days of the presidency signal about the private influence Douglass had exercised across three wartime White House meetings, and what does it leave unanswered?
4. Anna Murray, a free Black woman, planned and financed the September 1838 escape. She is almost entirely absent from the monuments, the autobiographies, and the photographic record. What is the cost of a story organized around a single protagonist when the actual work was distributed across a household, and who tends to be the one written out?
5. Douglass held federal office for fourteen years across three administrations and resigned the Haiti post in 1891 over ethical differences with the State Department. When a public figure accepts multiple federal appointments and eventually resigns one, what obligations does the service create and what does the resignation accomplish?

Primary Sources

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