

# Douglass's True Story

by Karen H. Dusek



- 1 Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey lived the first two decades of his life as an enslaved person, but he dreamed of being free. After he was born around 1818, he was separated from his mother and sent to live with his grandmother on Maryland's Eastern Shore. He rarely saw his mother, and he never knew his father.
- 2 When he was about eight years old, Frederick was sent to live and work in Baltimore. The

city was a major US port for shipping and trade in the early 1800s. Frederick labored for a shipbuilder, Hugh Auld. Hugh's wife, Sophia, taught Frederick how to read until her husband put a stop to it because it was against the law to educate slaves. Frederick understood that learning to read provided him with the ability to educate himself. He also came in contact with free black Americans for the first time in Baltimore.

- 3 In the early 1830s, young Frederick worked for a year as a field hand on a farm owned by Edward Covey. Edward was a cruel man, known for his ability to break the spirit of slaves who showed too much independence. He beat and mistreated Frederick on a regular basis.
- 4 When Frederick returned to Baltimore, he worked in a shipyard. But he wished to escape from slavery, so he developed a plan. After a failed attempt to escape in 1836, he tried again in 1838. This time he succeeded with the help of a free black woman, Anna Murray, who would later become his wife. He headed first to New York and then to Massachusetts, settling in the coastal town of New Bedford. There, he became active in the antislavery movement. He also took the name Frederick Douglass to keep his identity as a fugitive slave hidden.
- 5 Frederick was sometimes asked to share his story at local antislavery meetings. In August 1841, he was invited to speak at a major antislavery convention in Nantucket, Massachusetts. The crowd of mostly white people didn't seem to notice that the 23-year-old Frederick's voice trembled as he described his life as a slave.
- 6 His speech was both eloquent and heartbreaking. Afterward, an agent for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society urged Frederick to work for the organization as a lecturer.
- 7 As Frederick repeated his story before audiences across the country, both his self-confidence and his determination to end slavery grew. Because many people believed enslaved people could not think intelligently, Frederick's friends worried that his intellectual arguments would raise doubts that he had ever been a slave. They were right. To prove that his stories were true and to set the record straight, Frederick published his first autobiography in May 1845: *Narrative of the*

*Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself.*

- 8 The book provides details about Frederick's years as a slave and his desire to be free. It conveys his realization that a lack of education kept him enslaved and that learning to read and write provided a path to freedom. It was well written and authentic, and it set a high standard for slave narratives. It had an enormous influence on the abolitionist movement as its popularity spread to France, Germany, and Great Britain.
- 9 Frederick wrote two additional stories about his life. *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) provides more details about his slave years. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881) describes his determined fight for racial equality in the United States after the Civil War (1861–1865). Frederick continued to write and speak out against racial prejudice until his death in 1895.

**“The white man’s happiness cannot be purchased by the black man’s misery.”**

**—Frederick Douglass**

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## Test Questions

*Circle the correct answer.*

**1. This question has two parts. Answer Part A first, and then answer Part B.**

**Part A: What is the overall text structure of “Douglass’s True Story”?**

- a. Problem/Solution
- b. Description
- c. Cause-Effect
- d. Chronological

**Part B: Which two sentences from the text best support your response to Part A?**

- a. When he was about eight years old, Frederick was sent to live and work in Baltimore.
- b. He rarely saw his mother, and he never knew his father.
- c. In the early 1830s, young Frederick worked for a year as a field hand on a farm owned by Edward Covey.
- d. He also took the name Frederick Douglass to keep his identity as a fugitive slave hidden.
- e. The book provides details about Frederick’s years as a slave and his desire to be free.

**2. What effect did education have on Frederick Douglass’s life?**

- a. It allowed him to work in Baltimore for a major shipbuilder.
- b. It allowed him to escape slavery and achieve his freedom.
- c. It allowed him to be hired by a farm owner named Edward Covey.
- d. It allowed him to keep his identity hidden as a fugitive slave.

**3. What is the best meaning for the word *fugitive* as it is used in paragraph 4?**

- a. permanent
- b. temporary
- c. scared
- d. runaway

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## Test Questions (*continued*)

**4. What is the theme of “Douglass’s True Story”?**

- a. Follow your dreams and never give up.
- b. Never trust anyone except yourself.
- c. Power corrupts, and greed leads to trouble.
- d. Do your best and forget the rest.

**5. Read the following excerpt from the text.**

The crowd of mostly white people didn't seem to notice that the 23-year-old Frederick's voice trembled as he described his life as a slave.

**Why do you think Frederick's voice trembled?**

- a. He was worried that no one wanted to listen to him.
- b. He was eloquent and heartbreaking.
- c. He was nervous speaking in front of so many people.
- d. He was distraught remembering his horrible past.