

LOOKING BACK AT OUR CIVIL WAR

From slavery to greatness

Frederick Douglass' story, speeches fired up abolition movement

Next to Martin Luther King, Frederick Douglass was probably the greatest African-American in U.S. history.



FRED ZILIAN

Unlike King, Douglass — born Frederick Bailey in February 1818 — was not killed by an assassin's bullet, but rather lived until Jan. 9, 1895.

Douglass was born a slave. His mother, Harriet Bailey, was black, while his

unknown father was white, perhaps Col. Edward Lloyd, the plantation owner, or one of Lloyd's sons. He lived on the eastern shore of Maryland and also in Baltimore until the age of 20, when he and his future wife, Anna Murray — a free black — escaped.

With a sailor's garb and false free black seaman's papers, Douglass and his wife in 1838 made their way through Philadelphia, New York City and Newport to their final destination of New Bedford, Mass., a town with a population of 12,354, including 1,051 blacks. Having never been to a free state, Douglass was surprised at the "wealth, refinement, enterprise, and high civilization" of the city, having believed that without slavery, "poverty must be the general condition of the people of the free states."

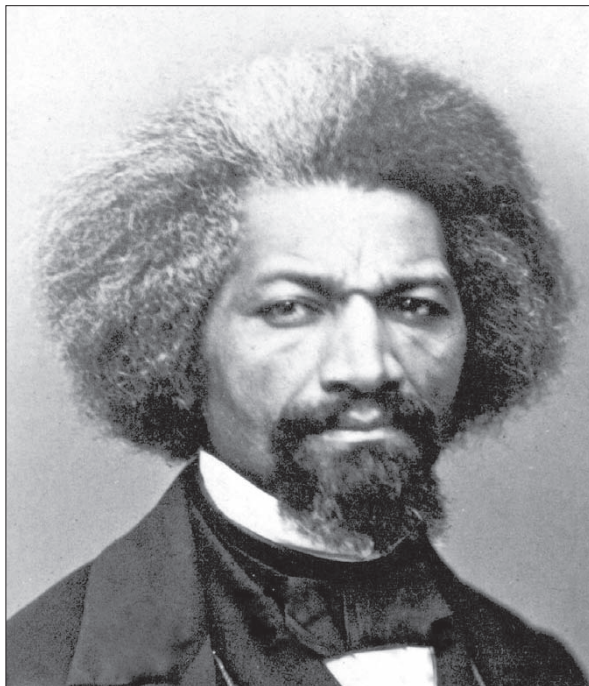
Before he left Baltimore, he had changed his name to Johnson. On the advice of his friends, he now changed his name to Douglass. Working as a free man and earning decent pay, he was "imbued with a spirit of liberty." Within a few years, Douglass, Anna and their three children became respectable members of the black community.

During his years in New Bedford, Douglass came to realize his tremendous gift of oratory, which he soon employed in the great cause of the day — abolitionism. William Lloyd Garrison led this movement, and soon Douglass was reading his newspaper, *The Liberator*. Garrison's words, ideas and unwavering conviction helped to crystallize Douglass' calling. This gift of oratory made its debut at the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society on Aug. 16, 1841, on Nantucket. With his personal story of slavery and his powerful voice, he succeeded in transfixing the audience. He had found his calling, and he would be heard.

Over the course of the next two decades, Douglass made more than 100 speeches each year in the antislavery crusade leading up to the Civil War in 1861. This young man, who learned the power of words early as a slave boy studying Webster's Spelling Bee and then later *The Columbian Orator*, was not only a great orator but also a great writer. He wrote for Garrison's newspaper and other publications, including his own antislavery newspaper, *The North Star*, and eventually the *Douglass' Monthly*. During his lifetime he also wrote three books, all autobiographical. With his violin he enjoyed playing Mozart, Haydn and Handel.

In 1848, Douglass first met the zealously antislavery John Brown and learned of his bold scheme to foment a slave insurrection and to establish a black state in the Appalachian Mountains. Douglass resisted participating in Brown's seizure of Harpers Ferry, Va., in 1859; however, he had knowledge of it and was pursued by his enemies. Douglass fled first to Canada and then to Great Britain, returning the following year after the death of his daughter.

During the Civil War, Douglass



Frederick Douglass, who escaped slavery and became a great orator, writer and abolitionist leader, is shown circa the 1860s.



The Nathan and Polly Johnson House in New Bedford, Mass., is where Frederick Douglass and his wife stayed soon after their escape from slavery, before they found a home of their own.

Photo courtesy of Daniel Case

worked tirelessly for the emancipation of slaves and for equal rights for African-Americans.

Striving to maintain as many states as possible in the Union, President Abraham Lincoln emphasized until September 1862 that the paramount goal of the war was to restore the Union, not to abolish slavery. Douglass and other abolitionists attempted to change his mind. "Sound policy ... demands the instant liberation of every slave in the rebel states," Douglass said. He also argued for the recruitment of blacks into the Union military forces. In January 1862, he said, "We are striking the guilty rebel with our soft, white hand, when we should be striking with the iron hand of the black man."

After Emancipation on Jan. 1, 1863, Douglass had his first of three meetings with President Lincoln. During the first in August 1863, Lincoln defended his policies toward blacks and hoped that Douglass saw this not as "vacillation" but as slow but steady progress in securing the rights of blacks. Douglass left the meeting jubilant over Lincoln's gracious and respectful manner toward him.

After the Civil War, he championed the vote for blacks — and for women — and served as the president of the Freedman's Bank in Washington, D.C., as the marshal of that city, and as the American minister to Haiti. These years were filled with frustrations and defeats as well as triumphs; however, Douglass never relinquished his efforts for full racial equality in America, or — like Martin Luther King — for our country to live up to the promises in its founding documents.

A retired Army officer, Fred Zilian teaches history and political science at Portsmouth Abbey School and Salve Regina University and is a member of the Rhode Island Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration Commission Advisory Council. He is writing an occasional series of columns highlighting various aspects of the Civil War and their impact on Newport County and Rhode Island for The Daily News. Send him email at zilianf@aol.com or check out his blog at www.zilianblog.com and his Abe Lincoln website at www.honestaberi.com.