

Nonfiction Excerpt 1: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

an excerpt from the book by Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was born a slave in Maryland in 1817. In the South before the Civil War, it was against the law for a slave to learn to read and write. But a few, like Douglass, managed to learn. When Douglass was twenty-one, he escaped from slavery and made his way to Massachusetts, where he joined the abolitionist movement and began making powerful speeches against slavery.

From the time that I was very young, I knew that I would not remain a slave for the whole of my life. I was born in Tuckahoe, Maryland. Like most of those who were born into slavery, I have no knowledge of the year I was born, as masters did not like to provide slaves with any such information. . . . My mother was traded to another plantation early on, and I only saw her a few times in my life, and then only at night.

I have been owned and leased by several masters in my life and worked as a house servant, a field hand (the most cruel of labors), and a ship carpenter. When young, I lived at the Great Farm House. It was considered a great sign of trust for an overseer to permit a slave to collect the pay and supplies there. As he made his way, a slave's singing could be heard throughout the quiet woods. Every tone was a prayer to God for deliverance from his chains. I have been utterly astonished to hear that people in the North often mistake that singing for happiness. A slave's songs represent the sorrows in his heart, and he finds relief through them as if they were tears.

When I was twelve or so, I was leased to my master's relative. For a time, my mistress taught me my ABCs, and would have gone further had her husband not forbidden it. He thought that education would make a slave unruly and discontented. He was right: the more I learned, the more determined I was to be free. I carried books with me whenever I was sent on an errand, and traded bread for reading lessons from the little white boys playing in the street. When my master's son left school, I secretly copied the handwriting in his practice book, and then challenged the street boys to handwriting competitions. I learned to read and write in the only way possible for a slave: I stole the knowledge.

At sixteen, I was leased again to a Mr. Covey, an overseer with a reputation of breaking untamed slaves. If at any one time of my life more than another, I was made to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery, that time was during the first six months of my stay with Mr. Covey. In that time, hardly a week passed without

his whipping me. Mr. Covey gave us enough to eat, but not enough time to eat it. We were often given less than five minutes for taking our meals. We worked in all weather. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow, too hard for us to work in the field. Work, work, work, was the order of both the days and the nights. The longest days were too short for Mr. Covey, and the shortest nights too long for him. We were often in the field from the first approach of day till its last lingering ray had left us; at certain seasons, midnight often found us in the field binding blades. I had been at my new home but one week before Mr. Covey gave me a very severe whipping. He lashed me till he had worn out his switches, cutting me so savagely as to leave the marks visible for a long time after. This whipping was the first of a number just like it. His excuse for whipping me was almost always my awkwardness. I was seldom free from a sore back. I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months of his discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, my desire to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and I turned from a man into a brute!

Then came the turning point in my life as a slave. One morning, Mr. Covey met me with a rope, intent on punishment. For the first time in my life, I resisted. I tossed him to the ground, and fought. When he saw that I had no intention of stopping, he walked off. My long-crushed spirit rose. From then on, I let it be known of me that the white man who succeeded in whipping me, must also succeed in killing me. For the entire six months afterwards that I spent with Mr. Covey, he never laid his finger upon me in anger. He would occasionally say that he didn't want to get hold of me again. "I'm sure that you don't," I thought, "for if you do, you will come off worse than you did before." Though I remained a slave for four more years, I was never beaten again.

On the first of January, 1834, I left Mr. Covey, and went to live with Mr. William Freeland. I soon found Mr. Freeland a very different man from Mr. Covey. Though not rich, he was what would be called an educated Southern gentleman. He, like Mr. Covey, gave us enough to eat; but, unlike Mr. Covey, he also gave us enough time to take our meals. He worked us hard, but we never began work before sunrise or ended after sunset. He required a good deal of work to be done, but gave us good tools with which to work. His farm was large, but he employed enough men to work it easily, compared with many of his neighbors. My treatment, while in his employment, was heavenly, compared with what I experienced at the hands of Mr. Edward Covey. The year passed smoothly.

It seemed only about half as long as the year that preceded it. I went through it without receiving a single blow. I will give Mr. Freeland the credit of being the best master I ever had.

At the close of the year 1834, Mr. Freeland again hired me for one year. It was then that I resolved that 1835 should not pass without my securing my liberty. However, it was not to be. My attempt at escaping that year met with failure. It was not for several years that I finally succeeded in escaping.

In the early part of the year 1838, I became quite restless. It is impossible for me to describe my feelings as the time of my contemplated start drew near. I had a number of warmhearted friends—friends that I loved almost as I did my life—and the thought of being separated from them forever was painful beyond expression. It is my opinion that thousands would have escaped from slavery but for the strong cords of affection that bound them to their friends.

The thought of leaving my friends was decidedly the most painful thought with which I had to contend. The love of them was my tender point, and shook my decision more than all things else. Besides the pain of separation, the fear of failure haunted me. I had already failed one time. I felt sure that if I failed in this attempt, my case would be a hopeless one—that I would surely remain a slave forever. The wretchedness of slavery, and the blessedness of freedom, were perpetually before me. It was life and death with me. But I remained firm, and, according to my resolution, on the third day of September, 1838, I left my chains. I succeeded in reaching New York without the slightest interruption of any kind. I have been frequently asked how I felt when I found myself in a free State. I have never been able to answer the question with any satisfaction to myself. I can only say that it was a moment of the highest excitement ever experienced.

I cannot tell you how or who was kind enough to help me, as this information might be used against those who may attempt freedom later. But I settled in New Bedford with my wife (who was already free), where I have lived with a pleasure never known before. Here, people are far wealthier than any plantation owner—they are rich with freedom. Until I die, I will strive for the abolition of slavery and the freedom of all my brethren.