

FREDERICK DOUGLASS: A LOOK AT PEOPLE OF COLOR & EDUCATION IN
THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURY

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Young Frederick Douglass: Navigating a White Man's World

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, better known as Fredrick Douglass began his life in a world that was dominated by the white man. A young Fredrick Douglass was told that he was being shipped to a new plantation in Baltimore. Douglass was about to embark on a journey of finding his purpose and potential place in the world, if he were to ever reach freedom one day. Douglas was someone who was born into slavery, as were basically all the black males in the 1800's. Frederick Douglass's life as a slave really begins as a young boy right off the Eastern shore of Maryland on the Wye plantation. Prior to his start as a young slave on the Wye Plantation, Douglass had been separated from his mother at a very early age. Historians have technically not figured out exactly how old Douglass was when he was separated from his Mother, as it wasn't well documented by Douglass in his narrative, and in scholarly material. Regardless of the uncertainty of how old Douglass exactly was when this occurred, Douglass was a young boy when he was separated from his mother, which resulted in him staying with his Grandmother before his life as a slave picked up steam.

Douglass is described as a shy kid by author David Blight. It wasn't until Douglass found an unusual friend on the Wye Plantation. This friendship was one that was extremely odd because it was a friendship with the son of the plantation owners, Daniel Lloyd. At the time of the friendship, a twelve-year old Daniel was interacting with an enslaved Douglass who was approximately ten years of age at the time. Douglass, who is documented by Blight and other historians as being a shy kid, with not much to say in his early days on the plantation, finally hit his 'social stride' with none other than a white person in his age range. It was this unlikely friendship that gave Douglass confidence in himself and his abilities as a human being, that he could do anything if he could be free of slavery one day. In Blight's writing, Daniel and

Frederick would share secrets with one another, play together, and engage in conversation. Among some of the activities that the two boys would engage in, was bird hunting. Douglass says, “The most of my leisure time I spent in helping Master Daniel Lloyd in finding his birds after he had shot them. My connection with Master Daniel was of some advantage to me. He became quite attached to me, and was sort of a protector of me.” Douglass even went on to share that Daniel would protect him from the older boys if they ever tried to “impose on me.” Douglass then said that Daniel shared cakes with him, which gave Douglass some much needed nutrition. Lloyd even complemented Douglass calling him smart and loquacious. A young and outgoingly social Daniel was a competent young boy, and the perfect companion for Douglass to have at the fingertips of his ‘social arsenal.’ Frederick and Daniel were two peas in a pod. This was just Douglass’s first relationship, which served as a launching pad for the number of different things he was going to accomplish later in life, and the number of people he would come across and build relationships with later on in his life as a free man.¹

Douglass describes the farms/plantations that spanned throughout ‘Wye Town,’ as “the great business place.” In Douglass’s narrative, he writes a great deal about the plantation where he spent most of his life. The principle products, meaning the main source of income for his plantation consisted of tobacco, corn, and wheat. These three products were critical to the economic success of the plantation. It was indeed a big business that was being run at the hands of the enslaved by the hundreds. Douglass estimates in his narrative that Colonel Lloyd had somewhere between three-hundred and four-hundred slaves working for him. All three-hundred to about four-hundred slaves were all working on his home plantation. Just when one might think that was it, it was Colonel Lloyd who also owned many more neighboring farms with additional

¹ David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020; 21. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Dover Publication, 1995.

slave labor. It would not be surprising to estimate that Lloyd had thousands of slaves working for him.

As far as the treatment of the slaves went on plantations, the stereotypes of the white man being cruel and unfair to their enslaved workers holds true. The slaves were treated awfully, and there really wasn't much of an incentive for the hard work put into the upkeep of the plantation, and the neighboring farms for each and every slave. Douglass dives into the monthly 'allowances' of the slaves in his narrative, and just how much they would receive each month. In return for the laborious work of the adult slaves, that mostly consisted of outdoor tasks, they would receive monthly supplies of food, and clothing, but not consisting of high quality. Douglass was able to remember almost exactly what these allowances were. They would receive eight pounds of pork or fish for each slave, and one bushel of corn meal. As far as the distribution of food went for the enslaved, that was it. A slave would be considered lucky to be able to scrape out any additional food without the masters finding out. The taking care of slaves in the clothing department wasn't much better either. One who hasn't studied the history of the treatment of slaves would most likely be surprised to learn that the yearly clothing given to slaves only consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, one jacket for the cold weather months, one pair of stockings, and just one pair of shoes. Douglass claims in his narrative that the clothing given to each slave, "could not have cost more than seven dollars." This was a big let-down for slaves across Colonel Lloyd's plantation due to the fact that their supply of clothing for a given year was clearly not anywhere to close to where it needed to be realistically.²

² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 6.

The horrors endured by Douglass during his time as a slave, especially while he was a slave on the Wye Plantation, were traumatizing times. In fact, reading through his narrative might give one a disturbing outlook on the brutality that authoritative figures on the plantation did to the slaves. Douglass opens up in great detail about the pain and suffering that he dealt with, not just other slaves that he witnessed being mistreated physically. Douglass was whipped by his old master. This was obviously painful for a young Douglass, but Douglass goes on to say that the whippings he endured were the least of the pain and suffering he endured. He suffered far more from a lack of nutrition, and lack of clothing for the winter months. These two painful experiences were at the forefront of what Douglass suffered the most from. Stated by Douglass in his narrative on chapter five, page sixteen, "I suffered much from hunger, but much more from cold." In the summer months, and in the winter months, Douglass wasn't provided with shoes, trousers, or stockings. Instead, Douglass would wear, coarse tow linen shirts that only reached down to his knees. On the coldest nights of winter, Douglass would resort to the extreme act of stealing a bag that was used to carry corn and use it as a blanket to keep him somewhat warm during cold nights. Douglass did not have an official place designated for him on the plantation to sleep, and that was sad considering the fact he was a child. Douglass would still be mistreated in all different kinds of ways even after he was shipped to the Auld family's plantation. His life changed drastically when he was taken on a boat and shipped to a new life as a slave.

A well-educated black man meant someone broke the law. Well, not exactly. Laws that made it illegal for the enslaved to learn how to read and write were not enforced as much as one may think, but when these laws were enforced, the consequences were harsh. In fact, it was very difficult for slave owners/masters to micromanage every single little aspect of a slave's life. Despite all of this, slaves were technically not to be taught how to read or write under law in the

Southern states, due to the fact that the white man feared their slaves would start to become difficult for them to keep in line. Luckily for Douglass at his new plantation, Sophia Auld, the wife of Hugh Auld, had begun to teach Douglass the English alphabet, which translated into Douglass becoming literate. Sophia always saw to it that Frederick was properly clothed, fed, and slept in a proper bed with sheets and a blanket early on in Douglass's tenure at the plantation. While Sofia was in fact documented by Douglass as decent & fair care taker, Douglass even went on to say that Sofia was a "kind-hearted woman who treated him as a human being should always."

According to Douglass, his reading lessons with Sophia did not last as long as he would have liked them to. In Douglass's narrative, he speaks in depth about how Mr. Auld, who was the husband of Sofia, put a stop to his ongoing lessons of learning to become literate with the English language. It was when Mr. Auld caught his wife in the act of teaching a young Douglass how to read.³ According to Douglass, Mr. Auld stated, "if a slave learned to read, he would become dissatisfied with his condition and desire freedom." Douglass also goes on to say in his narrative that Mr. Auld's discouraging words, and his putting an end to his reading lessons, was the first anti-abolitionist speech he had ever heard. Mr. Auld's ranting and raving about how the enslaved ought to not be educated in any way, shape, or form was all processed by a twelve-year old Douglass at the time. The really bad part was Sophia not disobeying her husband's order. Sophia obeyed her husband, and stopped teaching Douglass altogether as a result. There was no documentation of any push-back whatsoever from Sophia to possibly continue teaching Douglass how to read. According to scholarly content, and Douglass himself, Hugh was successful in convincing Sophia that education and slavery were 'incompatible.' After that,

³ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 20.

Sophia even went as far as to hide all the books and reading material so a young Frederick could not further his literacy skills even during his own leisure time.⁴ Eventually though, Douglass learned to successfully read and write. It was from local neighborhood kids that he observed, as well as getting glimpses of written material where he worked on the fields, that really propelled his education. Douglass speaks about how he formulated his plan to further his education despite Mr. Auld and his anti-educational attitude.

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends with all of the little white boys whom I met in the streets. As many of these as I could, I converted them into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge.⁵

An Escape for the Ages!

Douglass had been shipped back and forth some more throughout his time as a slave. He would be shipped to another cruel slave owner named Mr. Covey. Mr. Covey would whip Douglass and treat him unfairly which Douglass was accustomed to for most of his life. Slaves being shipped to different plantations was quite common. Slaves were constantly being shipped and traded to others throughout slavery's existence in the United States. When talking about Douglass finally coming to the bold decision to escape slavery though, he needed a master plan, and a lot of luck for his escape to work. Douglass was clearly tired of being a slave. As Douglass's narrative progresses, his writing gets closer to the one thing he was itching for, freedom. He knew the risks of what could potentially happen if he was caught in the act of an

⁴ "Sophia Auld Teaches Douglass to Read," World History Project.
<https://worldhistoryproject.org/1827/sophia-auld-teaches-douglass-to-read>.

⁵ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 23.

attempted escape. There were so many possibilities that spanned from being killed in his tracks, being shipped back to another plantation with even crueller punishments, and so many more unimaginable things. Despite this, Douglass was determined to escape, or die trying. This was the 'end game' for the slave life of Douglass.

The first escape attempt by Douglass failed. It is believed that another slave decided to betray him and put a halt to his attempt. This resulted in Douglass being shipped back to Baltimore. He was jailed for a period of time, and was punished for his actions by being assigned more labor intensive work. His fate as a slave for the rest of his life was pretty much solidified, and it was very unlikely that he would even have the opportunity to have another opportunity to escape slavery. After Douglass was caught escaping, part of the work that Douglass was required to do was working at a ship yard somewhere on the coast of the Chesapeake Bay in Baltimore. Douglass did not specifically account where this shipyard was exactly. Throughout Douglass's time as a ship yard worker, he would pick up common ship yard phrases, learned about the insides and outsides of the ships, and admitted in his narrative as well that he pretty much knew all the nuances that a ship yard worker was expected to know. Douglass not only developed a new skill as a result of working in the ship yard, he was practically viewed by others as a sailor. Douglass's adapting to this new environment was brilliant.

Douglass's next idea was as bright as one could ever think of when talking about possible ideas for an ultimate escape, and would become one of the most brilliant escapes that occurred in this country. As noted in his narrative, he could remember the date he escaped. September 3rd 1838. He disguised himself as a sailor and headed to a local train station. A very nervous Fredrick hopped on a train in Baltimore, and never looked back. This was the successful attempt that led Douglass to his desired destination of New York.

This very methodical escape had much to do with the fact that there were so many sailors in Baltimore. It would not at all be surprising for anyone to witness a free black man who was a sailor. In fact, there were quite a few. It would be very hard for anyone to accuse Douglass of being a slave. All he had to do was act like a sailor if questioned, and show that he was a free man who just happened to be going on a trip of sorts. Douglass writes in his narrative, "my knowledge of ships and sailor's talk came much to my assistance, for I knew a ship from stem to stern, and from keelson to cross-trees, and could talk sailor like an 'old salt.'"⁶

Douglass: After the Escape & Later Years

Douglass was approximately just twenty years of age when he escaped. Luckily for Douglass, he escaped with the critical skillset of being able to read and write. This was far more of an advantage for him as opposed to having just escaped with absolutely no prior education. These skills were critical for his later endeavors and extremely valuable because most blacks in this country were not literate because of the limited opportunities for many slaves, and even free people of color for that matter. Douglass knew that anything was possible for the future of his new life as a free man. Douglass had a great deal of academic potential when he fled Baltimore, it was the beginning of a 'feel good' story waiting to be complete. When Douglass made it to the North where slavery was illegal, and a black man was able to enjoy the benefits of being free from bondage, William Lloyd Garrison was one of the first noteworthy abolitionists that he met. It was Garrison's abolitionist newspaper that inspired Douglass to create his very own abolitionist newspaper. After Douglass was able to get the opportunity to actually read without

⁶ "Remembering Frederick Douglass' Escape from Slavery," National Constitution Center. <https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/blog/remembering-frederick-douglass-escape-from-slavery>.

looking over his shoulder in fear that someone might stop him, Garrison's newspaper sparked a bright light in the brain of an up and coming Frederick.

Garrison's newspaper inspired Douglass to follow in his footsteps by publishing his own abolitionist newspaper. This was one of Douglass's most impressive accomplishments, among other incredible things he pursued. Douglass, who then started his own newspaper titled, *The North Star*, became a passionate abolitionist speaker, thus his career in oratory had begun. Among different human rights groups, his character as a former slave, and speaking out about how slavery needed to be abolished, appealed to many. As a speaker for the abolitionist movement, Douglass received the opportunity to go on speaking tours in Great Britain & Ireland, which made his voice even louder to the world.⁷ It was those speaking tours that raised enough money, in which Douglass used to further fund *The North Star*. With money raised from his English supporters, as well as Irish ones, Douglass had enough financial resources to run his newspaper out of a church basement in Rochester, New York. The newspaper soon became one of the leading abolitionist papers of its time, competing with Garrison's National Anti-Slavery Standard.

After Douglass fled Baltimore, he made his way to New York City and the home of abolitionist David Ruggles. He had met and fallen in love with an older free black woman named Anna Murray, and upon his arrival in New York, and his newfound freedom, he sent for Murray to join him in the big city of New York. They were married on September 15th, 1838, just eleven days after Douglass had arrived in New York City. The couple moved to New Bedford Massachusetts, which at the time, was a center of abolitionist activity and home to a free black

⁷ Grace Grove, "*Frederick Douglass in the British Isles: The Craft of Sailing Away from Garrisonianism*," University of Central Arkansas — UCA. April 21, 2021. <https://uca.edu/cahss/files/2020/07/09-Grove-CLA-20201.pdf>.

community that was considerably large at the time. They eventually moved to Lynn Massachusetts a few years later and changed their name from Johnson to Douglass. Frederick became a licensed preacher in 1839 which helped him tremendously in his public speaking skills.⁸ He originally planned on joining the Methodist Church but was dissuaded when he found out that the Methodist Church was segregated. He eventually joined the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church which was an independent black denominated church. Douglass taught Sunday school, was a Superintendent, served as a steward, and as a sexton. He would eventually gravitate solely to the role of abolitionist. He delivered a speech in Elmira NY in 1840 to a group of black parishioners who would eventually form the largest black church in the region. Elmira was already a major stop on the Underground railroad and Douglass was set on the path of being one of the abolitionist movement most vocal and talented orators.

Frederick subscribed to Willian Lloyd Garrison's weekly newspaper *The Liberator*. This newspaper had a profound influence on Douglass helping to shape his future beliefs and vision about the basic inhumanity and injustice of slavery. After hearing Garrison speak in 1841 Douglass was then persuaded to embark on a speaking tour of various cities in the Northeast and Midwest to preach the abolitionist gospel. At many of these events Douglass was booed, harassed and many times attacked by mobs of angry white people who objected to any discussion of the black man being freed. Douglass penned an autobiography in 1845 called *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. This firmly established Douglass as one of the most eloquent and fervent chroniclers of the black slave experience in America and the Abolitionist movement which sought to abolish it. He later published another book in 1855 titled *My Bondage and My Freedom* and finally, after the civil war his last book in

⁸ "*Later Years and Death*," Frederick Douglass Heritage — The Official Website. June 3, 2013, <https://www.frederick-douglass-heritage.org/after-years-death/>.

1881 called *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Douglass was by far the most prolific and eloquently spoken black authors of his time. Leading to his true career and calling; that of newspaper publisher.

First however, Douglass at the urging of friends and supporters decided to leave the US for fear that all the publicity might entice his former owner to seek to come after him. He chose a tour of Ireland and Great Britain which was a popular venue for free blacks and members of the Abolitionist movement.⁹ Douglass set sail for Liverpool, England on August 16th, 1845 and did not return until the spring of 1847. During his visit to Ireland, he met and spent time with the Irish Nationalist Daniel O'Connell who became a great inspiration for him. He also spent time with Thomas Clarkson one of the last great Abolitionists of Great Britain.¹⁰ Clarkson was famous in the world of pro-abolitionists for convincing the parliament to abolish slavery throughout the British empire. During his time abroad, Douglass became a legally freed man. With help from various supporters abroad and at home he raised funds to purchase his freedom from his former owner Thomas Auld.

Frederick Douglass returned to the US in the spring of 1847 a free man. Upon his return Douglass promptly set about putting his new vision in practice. Douglass also participated in the Underground Railroad offering runaway slaves' food and lodging in their journey's north. He also continued to give speeches wherever and whenever he could. In 1848 *The North Star* also took up the cause of Woman's rights. Douglass saw tremendous similarities in the treatment of women and their role in society to that of the black slave. However, after the Civil war as the 15th

⁹ Grace Grove, "*Frederick Douglass in the British Isles: The Craft of Sailing Away from Garrisonianism*,"

¹⁰ Nial O'Dowd, "*Frederick Douglass Was Quickly Captivated by Daniel O'Connell in 1845 Ireland*," IrishCentral.com. September 30, 2020. <https://www.irishcentral.com/roots/history/frederick-douglass-daniel-oconnell>.

Amendment was being hotly debated Douglass split with the Women's movement over the Amendment which would give black men the right to vote but would continue to deny all women the right to vote. He feared that linking the two causes would doom the opportunity for black men to gain the vote and that he could not allow.

Like most abolitionist Douglass saw education as critical to the black man and his future as an accepted race in America. He pressed hard for full integration into public schools for black children but was rebuked. He also went so far as to meet with radical abolitionist John Brown but would not support Brown's plans for armed insurrection. Douglass made it clear to Brown that attempting an armed insurrection was not the way to go, and that violence would only make things worse. Despite the fact that Douglass always hosted Brown in his New York home, and supported him and his abolitionist ideas, Douglass was reluctant to take part in a raid that could potentially cost lives.

This attempt became known as the Harper's Ferry raid that Brown led. On October 16th, 1859, John Brown pulled the trigger on what became an absolute disaster on all fronts of his efforts to arm the enslaved. Almost every single individual who tried to storm the armory and steal as many weapons as possible, and arm as many slaves as could possibly be armed, were hanged to their death, or captured. Unfortunately for Brown, he was one of the people was captured, and hanged a little over a month later. After Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry, Douglass fled to Canada for a time to avoid what he believed might be guilt by association. Despite Douglass's warnings to Brown about how he was walking into 'a steel trap,' brown did not listen, and his not listening to Douglass's advice cost him his life.¹¹

¹¹ Tim Ott, "John Brown and Frederick Douglass Had a Complicated Friendship," Biography. October 2, 2020. <https://www.biography.com/news/john-brown-frederick-douglass-friendship>.

After the Civil war, Douglass continued to fight for equality for African Americans and women. He served as president of the Freedom Reconstructive Bank and took an active role in politics particularly after the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in the South and the re-emergence of white supremacy politics by the Southern Democrats. He supported Ulysses S. Grant's run for presidency and became the first Black American to be nominated for Vice president when Victoria Woodhull ran for President in 1872 on the Equal Rights party ticket. After the election Douglass's home in Rochester was burned to the ground and he moved to Washington DC to live out his final years. Douglass and his wife Anna had five children. After Anna died in 1882, Douglas married a white Abolitionist Helen Pitts which provoked a hailstorm of protests. Helen was the daughter of Gideon Pitts, an abolitionist and a friend of Douglass. She was twenty years his junior, and a black marrying a younger white woman during this time was not received well by critics. Douglass continued to travel and give speeches throughout his later years, and was nominated for various posts in the Harrison administration. He also helped to build housing for blacks in the Baltimore area known as Douglass Place in Fells Point. The complex still exists and in 2003 was listed in the National register of Historic Places. In 1885 Douglass attended a meeting of the National Council of Women in Washington DC. He received a standing ovation.¹² Not long after returning home that night he suffered a heart attack and died. He was seventy-seven years of age. His funeral in DC was attended by thousands and after the ceremonies his coffin was transported back to Rochester NY where he had lived for 25 years, and he was buried next to both his first, as well as his second wife in the family plot in Mount Hope Cemetery.¹³

¹² "Later Years and Death," Frederick Douglass Heritage — The Official Website. June 3, 2013. <https://www.frederick-douglass-heritage.org/after-years-death/>.

¹³"Later Years and Death," Frederick Douglass Heritage

It is more than appropriate to say that Frederick Douglass left an illustrious career and legacy that profoundly impacted blacks in not only the United States, but people of color around the entire globe. Education and fighting back was his secret weapon. Douglass believed heavily in education and getting back up, even after being knocked down. Douglass once said, and this quote might be one of his most famous, as well as most inspirational, “if there is no struggle, there is no progress.” This quote is powerful. Powerful because the African American struggle in this country was one that had obstacle after obstacle. In this quote, Douglass is alluding to the African American struggle. This struggle is one that was able to make progress in equality slowly, but surely. There is no ‘single’ word that can be used to perfectly describe what life was like for all slaves in this country.

Frederick Douglass was a guy who didn’t use his fists to punch his enemies, but a guy who used his fists to grip a pen or pencil and write his thoughts and ideas. His legs? He used his legs to not only just sneakily walk on a train that eventually landed him in the free state of New York, he used his legs to march forward in the fight for as many different aspects of equality that he could preach on behalf of people of color in this country during his life.

As mentioned earlier, education of the enslaved was illegal. While educating the enslaved was against the law, these laws were difficult to enforce. Besides, there were thousands of slaves, and catching a slave in the act of being educated by someone, or attempting to ‘self-educate’ was hard nevertheless. Luckily for Douglass, the worst that ever happened to him in terms of his educational journey was Sophia Auld’s husband bursting into the room and telling Sophia not to continue her teachings of the alphabet to Douglass. Douglass was lucky in one small respect. He was able to get a head start from Sophia on the alphabet. This was before Douglass really started to seek out help from others, and self-educate, or seek out help from others. Douglass did have to

be extra careful of not being caught by his master, or any other authoritative figures on the plantation, because Douglass already heard the worst anti-abolitionist speech about how his people were not to be educated, and why the black man should not be able to desire freedom of any kind. As far as anti-slave laws went, what do these laws say, and what are their consequences?

Literacy Laws: A survey of Anti-educational Attitudes of Slaves

If a black individual was fortunate enough to be taught just like Douglass was early on, how were those enslaved people taught? Where were they taught? The real question is, if a slave was not under the control of an evil and cruel slave owner, and that owner saw it fit to educate their slaves, how was knowledge delivered to blacks in this country during these times of slavery?

Whereas, the having slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences; Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe, in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person or persons shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds, current money.¹⁴

This was a law passed by South Carolina in the 1740's. As the text of the law reads, it's straight forward with what it expects the citizens to abide by, and what the potential punishment was for breaking this law. Now, since there was not a single school that actually admitted black children during the eighteenth century, it was quite difficult for this law to be enacted. This law

¹⁴ "Education of Slaves," Spartacus Educational. <https://spartacus-educational.com/USASeducation.htm>.

was most likely not enforced as much as one might think. It was enforced if someone reported it with the state, and the state would determine an appropriate punishment for the slave who was either being taught, or trying to 'self-educate.' Again though, that's a big 'if.'

Educating slaves was just not a priority for the vast majority of slave owners. Slave owners wanted to keep their slaves in line, and did not want the institution of slavery to become difficult to uphold because blacks were starting to become smarter, and thinking more for themselves. Had this happened, this would have been a nightmare for slave owners and authoritative personnel to manage on the plantations, as well as off the plantations as well. When the 19th century started, the debate on whether or not a person of color should be able to seek out an education was about to get really heated, and there were many arguments on both sides of the coin. The world that the slaves' built was about to get a whole lot different. The risks associated with black education that were taken, became serious offenses. Laws were going to be enforced upon slaves far more often in this century than ever before.

Religious instruction for slaves was beginning to become a cornerstone in the methods used to educate people of color. Slaves were being taught significantly more in the 19th century, then they were in the prior century. Historians who have researched and written about how education was delivered to blacks in this country have very well established the fact that education of blacks was a concern to slave owners not necessarily because of the difficult nature of dealing with someone educated, but because of the possibility of a violent rebellion. On August 21st 1831 a man named Nat Turner was going to pull off perhaps one of the deadliest slave rebellions in this country's history.

Nat Turner was a Virginian slave who was also a preacher with a big following. Throughout his time as a slave, Turner had rallied different people of color from all walks of life.

There were slaves just like him who joined his rebellion as well as freed blacks. Many of the freed blacks who jumped on the 'rebellion train' were able to read and write just like Turner.¹⁵ Turner, who was a minister, was looked up to by many people who were inspired from his knowledge of religion, and his cleverness. Had he not previously had a following, this slave insurrection may not have been possible. Nevertheless, Nat Turner much like Douglass, was able to read & write and displayed intelligence beyond belief to his peers. The ironic contrast between Nat Turner and Frederick Douglass's lives as slaves was that Nat Turner's original slave owner, Benjamin Turner, allowed for a young Nat to be instructed in reading and writing.¹⁶ It's also very much worth noting that Nat Turner was also given religious instruction to compliment his basic reading and writing skills. The religious instruction that Turner was receiving from a young age was the beginning to Turner becoming a preacher.

When Turner decided to pull the trigger on the start of his rebellion, his main reasons were because he felt like the white man was being extremely controlling of what slaves were able to do, such as reading and writing, and holding slaves from being at the very least, somewhat educated from the bible and having religious beliefs.¹⁷ Turner obviously wanted to make a bold statement if he were to rebel, but his main focus was to lead slaves out of bondage, teach them to read and write, and rid the white man from all involvement in the average life of a black man living in this country, especially the South. A successful rebellion was unlikely because Turner did not have the numbers to pull off a successful rebellion.

¹⁵ "Mrs. Margaret Douglass," PBS: Public Broadcasting Service.
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2945.html>.

¹⁶ History.com Editors. "Nat Turner." HISTORY. December 2, 2009.
<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/nat-turner>.

¹⁷ "Mrs. Margaret Douglass," PBS: Public Broadcasting Service.

The rebellion ended up failing, and Nat Turner was killed for his actions. What happened during the rebellion? What did the aftermath of this rebellion result in? This was a very unorganized attempt at rebelling. There was no clear objective, and it just resulted in the killing of whites, and of the people who were rebelling after slave owners all across the state went on alert and fought back. Turner's slave owner at the time of the rebellion, Benjamin Travis, was killed along with his family by Turner and six other slaves.¹⁸ After initially killing his owner and his family, Turner and his fellow rebellion managed to secure fire arms as well as horses, and enlisted about seventy-five other enslaved people right after the initial killing of Benjamin Travis and his family. This insurrection resulted in the murder of over fifty people in total.¹⁹

The aftermath of Nat Turner's revolt was dreadful for the enslaved population amongst the slave states. Harsher laws, as well as legal measures were put forth by the state of Virginia, where the Nat Turner insurrection took place, as well as almost every other slave state. Virginia made it official by making it illegal for slaves to read and write. This wasn't just another law that was passed and never once cited in a court of law to convict someone. Virginia meant business, and they went ahead and passed some of the most strict anti-literacy laws aimed at slaves. There were only three states that did not follow in Virginia's footsteps after Nat Turner's rebellion. Maryland, Kentucky, and Tennessee.²⁰

Slavery was now an institution in this country with even more restrictions placed on its victims after 1831. These anti-learning laws aimed at the slaves were even aimed at freed blacks who were living in Southern states such as Virginia, Texas, Louisiana, and so forth. It's been established that guys like Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner learned to become literate with the

¹⁸ History.com Editors, "*Nat Turner*," HISTORY.
<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/nat-turner>.

¹⁹ History.com Editors, "*Nat Turner*," HISTORY.

²⁰ <https://americanexperience.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Literacy-as-Freedom.pdf>.

English language and think for themselves when the issue of reading, writing, and thinking for oneself was not thought to feature the outcome of a slave rebellion and cost lives of the white man. Well, slaves were still able to learn to read, write, and learn about religion even after these new laws were passed. It just took a hefty amount of strategic planning, and sneakiness by people willing to go to great lengths, and there was one woman who took it upon herself to teach freed blacks in antebellum Virginia. This woman had the courage to do something that had the potential to ruin her life if caught.

19th Century Women: A Risk Willing to be Taken

When we think about women, especially during the 19th century. The women who had extremely impactful presences on reform movements were women such as, Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, Dorothea Dix, Harriet Tubman, Catherine Beecher and her sister Harriet Beecher-Stowe. Those names are common in the world of women's history, and the women in history who we almost can never overlook when talking about women during the slave period, and lack of fundamental rights for women in this country. There are plenty of similarities between women and slavery. One woman who often gets overlooked, who had one of the biggest impacts on educating people of color, after most of the slave states had already put forth laws making education of slaves' illegal, was a woman named Margaret Douglass.

Margaret Douglass, a native of Norfolk Virginia, was a white woman who was literate, and educated on subjects regarding religion and different moral values. Margaret was mostly interested in the, "moral and religious instruction of colored children."²¹ Margaret did not see the typical Sunday school that children of color were allowed to attend as enough of an education. With that belief firmly planted in her, she decided to take matters into her own hands. In 1853,

²¹ *"Mrs. Margaret Douglass,"* PBS: Public Broadcasting Service.

Margaret began teaching free black children. She gave those children religious instruction, taught them about morals, and most of all, general reading and writing instruction. Much of this reading instruction was from, the bible.

Unfortunately, this story of a woman helping to teach free people of color had an unflattering close to it. It had been learned by her state that she had been teaching black children, and they were not particularly willing to let this case go unpunished. Mrs. Douglass attempted to plead ignorance to the law stating that the law was not supposed to be aimed at free blacks.²² In her defense, she demonstrated that teaching free black children to read had been a common practice in the city's Sunday schools for years.²³ To sum up Mrs. Douglass's argument in simple terms, "hey, I'm not the only one teaching free black children in my state. Why are you coming after me, even though there are plenty of other people doing the exact same thing as me." This was a classic example of a state stretching its powers, to even further expand a law to reach another group of people, who technically were not included in that law. When the law was able to be used in manipulating fashion, it was typically used to further undermine slaves.

It would have to take a really 'law literate' attorney to get Mrs. Douglass out of the mess she was in. Unfortunately, most attorneys during this time were not exactly exuberant when it came down to fighting these types of laws. Ironically enough, Mrs. Douglass actually refused to hire an attorney to back her during her court case. According to the court documents, Mrs. Douglass did not have an attorney present.²⁴

²² *"Mrs. Margaret Douglass,"* PBS: Public Broadcasting Service.

²³ *"Mrs. Margaret Douglass,"* PBS: Public Broadcasting Service.

²⁴ *"Mrs. Margaret Douglass,"* PBS: Public Broadcasting Service.

On the subject of Mrs. Douglass, her state's court, including the judge himself, did not see her teaching free children of color as compliant with the law. The court decided to sentence her to one month in jail where she served.²⁵ If the court had decided to go the 'fine route,' the fine in Virginia for assembling with the goal to educate blacks who were both enslaved and free in Virginia, was between \$1-\$100.²⁶ Despite this happening, Margaret Douglass made a name for herself, and was praised by abolitionists, especially those who were ordinary women like herself. Margaret Douglass inspired a generation to do great progressive work in their communities, and create change for the better.

An interesting fact of this whole fiasco regarding Margaret's prison sentence of one month was actually quite generous from the court. Compared to other states, the guilty verdict that Margaret was given, was not close to anything someone would consider to be tragic. Other slave states that were located further down South were a lot stricter to people like Margaret. At the end of the day, Margaret didn't pay a single dollar because she paid in the form of one month in jail. The Alabama slave code was far more of a harsh punishment than any other Southern state that made education of slaves' illegal. While Virginia's penalty for education of slaves was between \$1-\$100, it is worth noting the state of Alabama, and its punishments for this crime at the time.

Alabama's approach was very tough when it came down to the illegality of the education of slaves, and ensuring the preservation of this law. Alabama's slave codes were far more expensive to the offender of the law, and far more troubling for people who were convicted of such a crime in this state. In section thirty-one of Alabama's law against the education of slaves,

²⁵ *"Mrs. Margaret Douglass,"* PBS: Public Broadcasting Service.

²⁶ <https://americanexperience.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Literacy-as-Freedom.pdf>.

it reads, “Any person who shall attempt to teach any free person of color, or slave, to spell, read or write, shall upon conviction thereof by indictment, be fined in a sum of not less than two-hundred fifty dollars, nor more than five-hundred dollars.”²⁷

When talking about people like Mrs. Margaret Douglass, it’s vital to know that she was only one piece of the puzzle in the effort to educate children of color. It was well established that the Southern states were racist without any question. While the North was a safe haven for black people from all different walks of life, whether you were a free black man or an escaped slave with other strong abolitionists helping you watch your back, you could pretty much consider yourself safe from slavery and go about everyday life with necessary caution. What you were not safe from, was racism.

The Northern states featured everything that the South did in the nineteenth century. The only major difference between the North and the South was the simple fact that slavery was only legal in one part of the country. The other part of the country, the part of the country that did not allow for the institution of slavery (the North), was still filled with racist behavior all throughout, just like the South. The common misconception amongst young history students is, “since the North did not have slavery, they were the good guys.” To a very large extent, yes, the North was the place to be if you were a person of color, because they did in fact outlaw slavery long before the South had to have their slaves freed after the Civil War. Racism existed everywhere in this country regardless of slavery being an institution or not.

In Frederick Douglass’s case, he was very fortunate to have had a very large support system once he arrived up North, and many admirers abroad following his freedom. People like

²⁷ <https://americanexperience.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Literacy-as-Freedom.pdf>.

Margaret Douglass just did not have enough luck along with her efforts to get recognition. Very similar to Mrs. Margaret Douglass, was a woman who attempted to do the exact same thing as her, only about twenty years earlier. The only difference, this woman wanted to educate free blacks in the North. A woman named Prudence Crandall was about to face the ultimate test.

Prudence Crandall was responsible for opening her doors to a black woman who wished to be taught at Crandall's Connecticut school where she was the head mistress. Prudence Crandall, a school teacher, a Quaker, and someone who did not see a problem with skin color and educational opportunities for everyone, was a part of an ongoing trend of religious values helping to justify the education of non-whites. Sarah Harris, the black woman, who was also an aspiring school teacher, was accepted into Crandall's school.²⁸ This caused a great deal of controversy and outrage for simply being black among an 'all white' student population. Many parents of the white children at Crandall's school were not pleased that she allowed a person of color to be accepted. The parents went as far as to pulling their kids out of the school, or petitioning for Sarah Harris to be expelled indefinitely.²⁹ Crandall was under pressure to make her school an institution exclusively for white students' once again. Crandall would need help in fighting back, because there were not many people at her disposal to help her out with all the drama that was being caused for her actions.

It was clear, in the North, or at the very least, Connecticut, feared the rise of educated people of color. This was a racist mindset that caused impulsive behavior such as boycotting a school because someone who's black was admitted, or trying to put so much public pressure

²⁸ Debra Michals, "*Prudence Crandall*," National Women's History Museum, 2015. <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/prudence-crandall>.

²⁹ Debra Michals, "*Prudence Crandall*," National Women's History Museum, 2015. <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/prudence-crandall>.

upon Crandall, the black person would just leave from relentless acts of hatred. Luckily for Crandall, there was a way around all of this controversy that would allow for her to continue her career as an educator. Enter William Lloyd Garrison. A very prominent individual in the world of abolition, a platform none other than a fairly popular anti-slavery newspaper, and friend of Frederick Douglass. Prudence Crandall got her 'big break' when William Lloyd Garrison pledged his support for Crandall after meeting each other at an anti-slavery society convention in 1832.³⁰

William Lloyd Garrison extending a helping hand to Prudence Crandall made all the difference in the world for her. What did Garrison do that was so generous, and game changing? Garrison ran an advertisement in his abolitionist newspaper talking about Prudence Crandall and her school.³¹ Garrison even went as far as providing Crandall with the names of African American families in states located in the North East who might be interested in sending their daughters to Crandall's school. Crandall became fairly well known as a result of this advertisement, but not surprising due to the fact that William Lloyd Garrison had a huge following of supporters from not just the country, but the world.

After Garrison's efforts helped in filling Prudence's school with people of color, the relentless racist rhetoric did not stop. The townspeople were still using taunting, threats, and violence to push for Prudence's school to shut down for good. Despite all of this, Prudence had something rare. Something that a lot of school teachers did not have the courage to do. Running a school for people of color, and something that is also worth noting, this school was mostly black females. Unfortunately, a law was passed by Connecticut's general assembly. This law

³⁰ Diana Moraco, "Prudence Crandall Fights for Equal Access to Education," Connecticut History | a CT Humanities Project, September 4, 2020. <https://connecticuthistory.org/prudence-crandall-fights-for-equal-access-to-education/>.

³¹ Diana Moraco, "Prudence Crandall Fights for Equal Access to Education"

called, “the black law.” “The Black Law” made it illegal for out-of-state African American students to attend a Connecticut school without local permission.³² If you lived in an area of New York that was extremely close to Connecticut, this law would disenfranchise you from attending Crandall’s school because you were technically still considered out of state. A fair number of students in Crandall’s school were out of state students who attended without permission from the state because that law was passed after Prudence admitted black students. In an effort to stop even more students from joining, this is where that law came in to play. This all resulted in Prudence’s arrest, and a legal battle awaiting trial.³³

The court case against Prudence Crandall was one that was complicated for the court to decide on. Unlike Margaret Douglass, Prudence was wise, wise because she decided to put together a legal defense team. At the end of all the trials that occurred, it was decided by the court that there was not enough evidence to convict Prudence, and that free African Americans are not necessarily unprotected by the constitution in this very particular scenario. Prior to this ruling, Prudence was originally ruled as a guilty verdict. Early on, the judge did agree with the ‘black law’ being a reasonable argument to justify Prudence as being guilty. At the end of the case though, Crandall’s legal team was persuasive enough, and she did have her charges dropped. After this, Prudence was free to go back to teaching her students. To briefly summarize each trial individually, the first trial ended in a ‘hung jury.’ A hung jury is when a verdict could not be decided on. The second trial, Prudence was found guilty and was given a sentence. The third trial was actually decided by a higher court of appeals. That higher court of appeals was Connecticut’s Supreme Court which over-ruled the original court that found her guilty in the

³² Diana Moraco, "Prudence Crandall Fights for Equal Access to Education"

³³ Diana Moraco, "*Prudence Crandall Fights for Equal Access to Education*"

previous trial. After this, Prudence was ruled as technically compliant with the law.³⁴ After the court proceedings took place, Prudence eventually came to the difficult decision of closing down her school. After she did that, Prudence still remained an activist for the rights of everyone to pursue an equal education.

White women who were religious, more specifically, Quakers, lead the charge in toleration which helped in their decisions of whether or not to include people of color to learn from them. Before the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the Quakers had dealt with their own struggles with regards to equality and lack of laws protecting certain freedoms. One of those freedoms were religious freedom, and religious freedom became the forefront of their fight for equality when modern day Flushing Queens was under Dutch control. Eventually, the Flushing Remonstrance was put into effect, and to make a long story short, the Flushing Remonstrance document laid the ground work for what an up and coming New York city would become, a melting pot. People from all different walks of life. Different people of religious faiths, race & ethnicity, and so forth.

After the Flushing Remonstrance, Quakers and their efforts didn't stop there. For years, Quakers had been forced to put up with so much persecution back in places like England, and here in the colonies when they arrived. The simple reason why people like the Quakers didn't decide to go back was because it was far worse anyway, and, traveling back was even worse. By the nineteenth century, Quakers had built a very strong resume here in the United States with regards to fighting for freedom and defying odds when those odds were heavily stacked against

³⁴ "(H)our History Lesson: Prudence Crandall, Sarah Harris, and a Struggle for Black Women's Education (U.S. National Park Service)," NPS.gov (U.S. National Park Service), last modified February 19, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/-h-our-history-lesson-prudence-crandall-sarah-harris-and-a-struggle-for-black-women-s-education.htm>.

them.³⁵ This was a big reason why Quaker women like Prudence Crandall took a big risk by educating free black people. Her religion was all about tolerance. The real reason why Quakers and also Catholics value everyone equally and oppose oppressive behavior, (whether that oppressive behavior may be violence or discriminatory verbal acts), is because they believe that there is something of God in everybody, and that each human being is of some sort of unique worth.³⁶ This mostly applies to Quakers, but in Protestant dominant areas, many Quakers like Crandall had underlying similarities with Quakers whether she was conscience about them or not.

Prudence Crandall was clearly someone who did a very good thing for free people of color by risking her life to give them educational instruction. It was her religion that helped guide her in doing this. This has been established in America's religious history. This raises another important question. Were there any free women of color out there doing the same thing, if not something similar to Crandall, or Mrs. Margaret Douglass? If so, was this free person of color associated with any religion of sorts? It is clear that enslaved individuals like Nat Turner were prominent preachers and had followings of other slaves who learned from him, but yet again, this raises something far more intellectually challenging to think about. Free women of color! Not just free women of color, free women of color in the South! Yes, there was, and it was a woman named Henriette DeLille, and her story vastly differs from most white women who tried to achieve the same goals in this historical sphere.

Henriet DeLille is of African and French Creole descent because her Grandmother is documented as a slave who was originally from West Africa, and her Father was of French

³⁵ Zhu, Wei. *"The Forgotten Story of the Flushing Remonstrance."* The Immanent Frame. March 24, 2021. <https://tif.ssrc.org/2014/01/15/the-forgotten-story-of-the-flushing-remonstrance/>.

³⁶ *"Quakers,"* BBC. July 9, 2003, https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/quakers_1.shtml.

Creole descent.³⁷ Henriette's mother is documented as a woman who was considered to be racially mixed. Jean-Baptiste Lille Sarpy, Henriette's father, was fortunate enough to come from a wealthy French Creole family, and was able to provide for Henriette and her two other sisters growing up in a slave laden Louisiana. Living a life as a free family of color in a Southern State like Louisiana was considered hard to say the least. Whenever the majority of your race was enslaved, and you only made up a small minority of free people of color, there were many challenges in that regard. Lots of backlash, and a great deal of skepticism from white neighbors definitely draws attention, and reason for 'treading lightly. Having money like Henriette's family definitely helped their cause, but one significant takeaway that was extraordinary about the DeLille family was that they were not labeled as people of color on the census.³⁸ It's unknown whether or not the wealth of the DeLille family was able to help aide them in ensuring their social status was secure, nonetheless on the census records at the time. A wise historian would not come to a conclusion as to how DeLille's family was able to list themselves as white on the census at the time, but rather leave open ended possibilities through evidence that could be in relation to that. Since we know that Henriette's family was in fact wealthy, that could be a possibility, but we just don't quite know for sure how that came to be.

As a result of the Henriette's family, and them being labeled as white, Henriette was considered to be a 'quadroon.'³⁹ At the time, this word meant 1/4th black. Henriette was considered to be mostly white, which worked in her favor because she was viewed as white by most people anyway. Henriette DeLille's story as a 'god-like' humanitarian was one that gave

³⁷ "*VENERABLE HENRIETTE DELILLE, 1812 - 1862 "SERVANT OF SLAVES"*," Home.
<https://www.sistersoftheholymfamily.com/henriette-delille>.

³⁸ "Delille, Henriette 1813–1862," Encyclopedia.com | Free Online Encyclopedia.
<https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/delille-henriette-1813-1862>.

³⁹ "Delille, Henriette 1813–1862,"

the people of Louisiana hope at that time though. She is remembered in nineteenth century women's history as a feminist, social worker, and an educator.⁴⁰ Her love for helping other people in the toughest of circumstances was truly a testament to the kind of extraordinary person that she was. Furthermore, it was her love and admiration of Jesus Christ and the Gospel that led to her sympathy for mostly the poor, and translated into actions of lending a helping hand.⁴¹

DeLille did not do all of this humanitarian work on her own, she in fact would need help if she was going to pursue her religious driven goals as a free woman of color. Not only just trying to achieve these goals would be difficult, but being a person of color in an extremely unfriendly state like Louisiana was even more of a challenge for an up and coming DeLille. Fellow women Juliette Gaudin and Josephine Charles, dedicated much of their time to teaching, caring for the elderly, and giving back to the poor as well. In 1836, a young Henriette wrote the rules and regulations for the women she worked alongside. These rules and regulations drafted by DeLille would become known as the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family.⁴²

Among the charitable and gracious acts that were put into action by Henriette and her fellow sisters, to be specific, they served the enslaved as well as free people of color, orphans, the sick, the poor, the elderly, and so forth, they also educated many of them, and that was perhaps the best gift of all. Among these groups that they lended a much needed helping hand to, DeLille and her 'religious fueled' mission. Furthermore, the sisters served both children and adults when it came down to teaching.⁴³ There was no recorded case of The Sisters of the Holy

⁴⁰ LibGuides: Black History Month: Henriette Delille," LibGuides at Southeastern Louisiana University. 2020. <https://selu.libguides.com/BlackHistorySELA/delille>.

⁴¹ "Venerable Henriette Delille," *Archdiocese of Washington*. May 10, 2018. <https://adw.org/living-the-faith/our-cultures/black-history-month/venerable-henriette-delille/>.

⁴² "Venerable Henriette Delille," *Archdiocese of Washington*

⁴³ "Venerable Henriette Delille," *Archdiocese of Washington*

Family turning down a single person. These sisters were servants of the Lord. The Sisters of the Holy Family even went as far as providing care for those that were sick during the highly infectious & deadly yellow fever epidemic when it hit New Orleans and its people hard in 1897.⁴⁴ Caring for the sick during the Yellow Fever epidemic made their mark as one of society's most charitable and caring groups in the nineteenth century.

Throughout Henriette's life, she encountered a great number of challenges. Her encountering challenges was expected. Not even the preaching of the bible, God, and Jesus Christ was enough to allow her a pass from the intolerant that stood in her way. Among intolerance aimed at Henriette and her fellow sisters featured the resistance to the idea of forming a Black religious congregation. As a result of this, people pulled their support and Henriette faced a lack of funding to fully be able to help people in need with her newest venture. Despite this, she remained the woman she had always been.⁴⁵ A servant to her lord and savior Jesus Christ.

"If there is no struggle, there is no Progress." That is a quote by Frederick Douglass who lived quite a life for a former slave. The life of Frederick Douglass is one that fully encompasses what the African American struggle was all about in pretty much every single aspect that historians can think of with regards to the many obstacles that Douglass had to overcome. During times of slavery being legal in the Southern states, racial tensions being at perhaps the highest they have ever been in United States history, and very little windows of opportunities for blacks in this country, Douglass was tested against some of the most extreme circumstances imaginable.

⁴⁴ *"Venerable Henriette Delille,"* Archdiocese of Washington

⁴⁵ *"Venerable Henriette Delille,"* Archdiocese of Washington

Frederick Douglass's quote about how there is no progress unless there is a struggle involved, is one that resonates with most of the experiences that people of color faced in trying to achieve simple goals before the Civil War concluded and slaves were freed. Even after slaves were free, there was still an incredibly difficult struggle just to be recognized as regular citizens. It was civility that blacks in this country had to fight for, even after slavery had ended.

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