Young FREDERICK DOUGLASS

The Slave Who Learned to Read

by Linda Walvoord Girard

IN 1826 eight-year-old Frederick Bailey arrived in Baltimore. He had been sent from a plantation in the country to be the slave of Hugh Auld, his wife Sophia (or "Miz Sopha," as Frederick called her), and their young son Tommy.

For the first time in his life, Frederick had a straw bed and enough to eat. He wore trousers instead of a tattered, knee-length linen shirt, and instead of scooping his meals from a trough, he sat at a dinner table. And his mistress was very kind.

After dinner Mrs. Auld would often get her Bible and read aloud. One night, when Mr. Auld was gone, she read from the book of Job. Suddenly, Frederick understood that the marks on a page could tell a story. He gathered his courage and asked Miz Sopha to teach him to read. Since she was getting ready to teach Tommy the ABCs anyway, Mrs. Auld agreed that Frederick could listen.

One day Mr. Auld came home while Mrs. Auld was teaching the boys. Miz Sopha bragged that Frederick was learning to read, and wasn't it amazing? Wasn't it amusing?

Mr. Auld sent Frederick out of the room. Then he began to lecture his wife. Teaching a slave was against the law, he told her. A slave who could read would be "spoiled." He would get ideas. He'd want to write as well, and if he could write, there was no telling what mischief he'd dream up. From his listening place outside the door, Frederick heard Mrs. Auld promise never to teach him again.

WHO WOULD WRITE A LAW AGAINST TEACHING SOMEBUGGY TO READ WHAT THEY'VE WRITTEN?

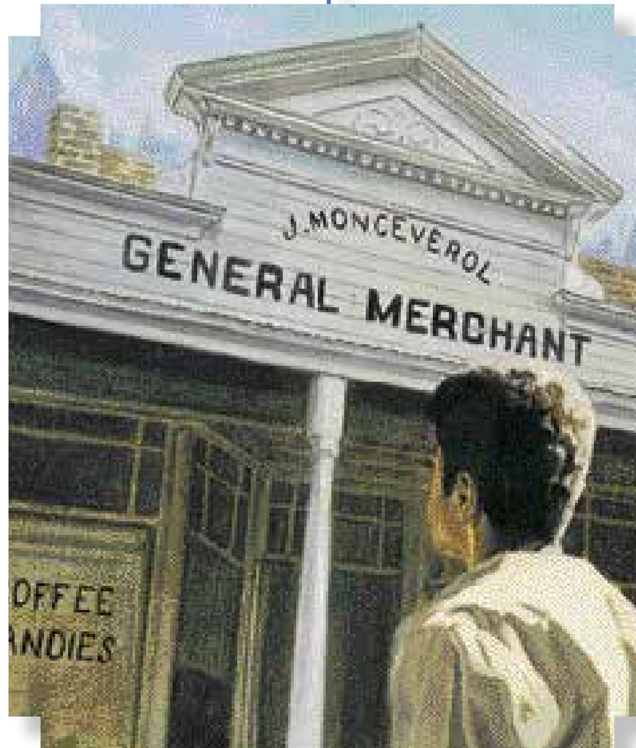
Now that he knew reading was forbidden, Frederick was determined to learn. If a newspaper was blowing

Illustrated by Colin Bootman

about in the street, Frederick picked it up. If somebody left a schoolbook on the playground, it went home with him. And on errands, he studied street names and the packages and signs in stores. He spelled things out, and his reading got smoother and faster.

White schoolboys who had become his friends told him to get a book of great speeches called the *Columbian Orator.* In that book, they said, a slave debates his master and wins his freedom!

Frederick blacked boots to get the fifty cents he needed. He walked to a bookstore and bought the *Columbian Orator.* In it he discovered eloquent speeches from history, including the dialogue between master and slave. He read the speeches over and over until he understood them all. But could a slave truly win freedom by argument? he wondered. Would whites listen if a slave spoke? As his master, Mr. Auld, had feared, this slave had gotten ideas.



Frederick often played and did chores in the shipyards of Baltimore. He watched as the carpenters sawed and shaped pieces of lumber. On each piece, they wrote the initials for a part of the ship.

"What's that, Massa?" Frederick would ask.

"That's the letter *S.*"

"Oh, the letter *S.* And what does that mean?"

"Means 'starboard.'"

"*S,* starboard. Yes, Massa, I'll remember that," he'd say. "And what's that, Massa?"

"The letter *L*—'larboard.'"

"Why, I'll remember that, Massa." And so on.

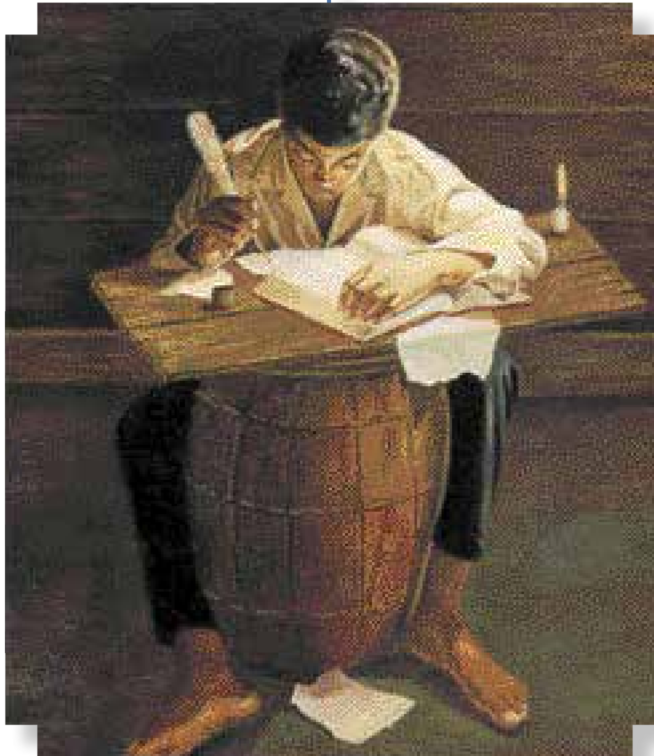
When the carpenters went to eat, Frederick would copy the letters. He knew if he could learn a few letters, he could learn the rest as well.

Often, when Frederick met white boys, he would suggest a writing contest. Using chalk, he'd draw the letters he knew on the pavement or on a wall. "Beat that if you can," he'd say.

The other boys would scrawl letters he didn't know, laughing at the idea that a slave boy could win a writing contest. Frederick lost the contests. But he would copy the new letters.

In the evening, in his small room above the kitchen, Frederick struggled on. He copied the tiny letters from a hymn book and a Bible he'd found in the house. He "borrowed" Tommy's old copybooks—small booklets in which students practiced penmanship. Frederick made his own practice letters in the empty spaces under

Tommy's writing. He could have been whipped for messing up Tommy's precious keepsake schoolbooks, but luckily he was not found out. He slipped the books back into their places, and no one ever noticed the extra writing. By the time he was thirteen, Frederick could read and write very well.



A year later Frederick was given to a new master—Hugh Auld's brother, Thomas, who lived in the village of St. Michael's, Maryland.

When other slaves in St. Michael's learned that Frederick could read, they asked him to teach a Sunday school. The class met secretly in a free black man's house where there were desks, spelling books, and Bibles. During the second week, Thomas Auld burst in with a white mob. The men broke up the school with clubs and warned the students never to meet again.

Thomas Auld sent Frederick to a cruel slave "breaker" named Edward Covey. Frederick worked in Covey's fields from dawn to dark. Covey often whipped him for no reason. Soon Frederick's back was covered with scars, and he nearly lost an eye from a beating.

One hot summer morning, Covey started to beat him again. Frederick fought back. "I won't let you beat me," he said over and over. Their struggle lasted two hours. To Frederick's amazement, Covey finally gave up and never tried to beat him again.

When Frederick's year with Covey came to an end, Thomas Auld hired him out to a farmer named William Freeland. Then he lent him back to his brother, Hugh, in Baltimore.

Starving for educated companionship, Frederick joined a club of free young black people called the East Baltimore Mental Improvement Society. Tall and poised, the handsome Frederick Bailey stood out in this group. It was here that he met a special, gentle young woman named Anna Murray.

Meanwhile, Hugh Auld decided to "rent" Frederick in the shipyards. Each Friday Frederick had to hand his master his wages—at first $6.50 a week, later $9.00. That was more than some of the white dockworkers earned, and once, jealous workers severely beat him. His life had become impossible. And as long as he was a slave, he could never marry Anna.

Slaves could not sign papers or make legal ties such as marriage.

When he was twenty, Frederick decided to make a daring escape. With money Anna lent him, he would buy a ticket and go north by train.

Frederick knew that a black person traveling north would have to show papers proving he or she was free. And "free papers" were legal documents with official seals. Frederick couldn't fake these.

A good friend, a free black sailor named Benny, lent Frederick his sailor's "protection paper." This showed Benny was registered as a seaman with an American shipping company. Across the top of this certificate, a big American eagle spread its wings. Below was a description of Benny.

It was a risky plan. If Frederick was caught, he would be sold south into harsh slavery. And Benny could go to jail.

Frederick made his run for freedom on September 3, 1838. He promised to write Anna as soon as he was safe. Because she was free, she could come north to meet him.

Frederick carefully planned every detail. He wore a sailor's red shirt, tarpaulin hat, and black neckerchief, loosely tied. He knew it could be dangerous for a black man to wait in the station with luggage, so he hired a cabdriver to race to the train with his bag and toss it to him at the very last moment.

With Benny's paper, he settled in the "Negro car." His heart was pounding, but he acted calm.

The conductor came through and checked the papers of several free black passengers. "I suppose you have your free papers?" he asked Frederick.

"I never carry my free papers to sea with me," said Frederick. "I have a paper with the American eagle on it that will carry me around the world." With this he pulled out the impressive-looking sailor's protection paper. The conductor never checked to see if Frederick matched the description of the paper's owner.

Frederick's luck held, and the day after his escape, he arrived in New York City. His money was nearly gone, and he had to sleep on the docks one night. But friendly sailors warned him that the docks were patrolled for runaways, and the next night a sailor named Stewart took Frederick to his own home. The following day Stewart took him to find David Ruggles, a free black abolitionist in New York.

While staying with Ruggles, Frederick wrote to Anna. She hurried north, and they were married on September 15.

For safety, Frederick changed his name from Bailey to Douglass, and shortly afterward, he got a job in a shipyard in New Bedford, Massachusetts. In his spare time, he began speaking about his life as a slave and the evil of a system that bought and sold human beings. He toured the New England states as a speaker for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. Eloquent and passionate, Douglass held his audiences spellbound.

Because of his eloquence, many people did not believe that Douglass had ever been illiterate and a slave. To convince the

AN ABOLITIONIST IS SOME BUGGY WHO WANTS TO ABOLISH, OR END, SLAVERY.

doubters, in 1845 he published an autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.* In it he revealed his slave name and the name and location of his master. Now he was in greater danger of being seized and returned to slavery. He left for England, where he stayed two years giving lectures for the abolitionist cause. In 1846 English friends bought his freedom from Thomas and Hugh Auld for about $700.

A year later Frederick and Anna moved to Rochester, New York, where Douglass established the *North Star,* an antislavery newspaper. Their home became a station on the Underground Railroad.

Douglass continued to work for the rights of black people. He fought for job equality and for integration in schools and churches and on trains. When traveling, he would sit in one of the railroad cars reserved for white passengers. Sometimes angry railroad workers dragged him out of his seat.

During the Civil War, he met Abraham Lincoln. "I know who you are, Mr. Douglass," the president told him. Lincoln had read the *North Star* when he was a young, unknown lawyer in Illinois. Now the president and the former slave discussed the slaves Lincoln would soon free.

Douglass went on to become Recorder of Deeds in the District of Columbia and later served as U.S. minister to Haiti. He also wrote two more autobiographies.

By the time of his death, Frederick Douglass, the slave who'd taught himself to read and write, had become the most important black leader of his time. Writer, orator, publisher, reformer, and statesman, he died in 1895 at the age of seventy-eight.