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Frederick Douglass: Hero of Progress #48

Early Life

Frederick Douglass was born a person who was enslaved in Maryland around 1818. Like many people who were enslaved, he did not know his birthday. He picked February 14 as his birthday because his mother called him her "Little Valentine." He was taken from his mother as a baby and only saw her a few times. He lived with his grandma until he was 6 years old. Then, he moved to different farms.

When he was 12 years old, his owner's wife, Sophia, started teaching him letters. She gave him good food and clothes. But her husband stopped the lessons. He said that reading would make people who were enslaved want to be free. But Douglass did not stop learning. He taught himself to read and write. He found papers and books to help him learn. He even started a school to teach other people who were enslaved how to read. Some farm owners got mad and stopped his school lessons.

Escaping Slavery

In 1838, Douglass ran away from slavery. He used a sailor's uniform and papers from a free African American man to take a train to New York City. There, he married Anna Murray, a free African American woman whom he had met in Baltimore. They moved to Massachusetts, where many free African American people lived.

Powerful Speaker and Writer

Douglass became a strong speaker against slavery. He went around the country giving talks. To show his story was real, Douglass wrote a book about being a person who was in enslaved in 1845. The book became very famous and was printed in many places.

To keep from being caught and sent back to slavery, Douglass went to England and Ireland for two years. He made new friends there and talked about why slavery was wrong. Before he came back to America, his friends gave him money to buy his freedom so he would not be a person who was enslaved in America.

Ending Slavery

During the Civil War (1861–1865), Douglass was an adviser to President Abraham Lincoln. He told Lincoln that African Americans should be able to fight in the war if they want. He also told the president to free the people who were enslaved.

Douglass worked together with many people to help create important additions to the US Constitution:

- The 13th Amendment ended slavery (1865).
- The 14th Amendment gave citizenship to African Americans (1868).
- The 15th Amendment gave African American men the right to vote (1870).

Throughout his life, Douglass fought for equal rights for all people. He was the first African American to be nominated for vice president. He also received a vote for president at the 1888 Republican National Convention.

Frederick Douglass died on February 20, 1895, at the age of 77. Today, many schools, parks, and statues honor him. His work helped change how Americans thought about slavery and helped millions of African Americans become free.

Comprehension Questions

1. How did Frederick Douglass first learn the alphabet?

2. Why was it brave for Frederick to secretly continue to teach himself to read after his lessons with Sophia stopped?

3. How did Frederick run away from slavery?

4. Why was it brave for Frederick to run away from slavery? What could've happened if he was caught?

5. Why did Frederick give speeches across the country?

6. Speaking in front of people can be scary. What does it take to speak up for something you believe in?

7. Why did Frederick Douglass keep working to free other people who were enslaved, even after he was free from slavery himself?
