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Frederick Douglass: Hero of Progress #48

Early Life

Frederick Douglass was born a person who was enslaved around 1818 in Maryland. Like many people who were enslaved, he did not know his exact birth date. He chose February 14 as his birthday because his mother called him her "Little Valentine." Sadly, he was taken from his mother when he was a baby and only saw her a few times before she died. Until he was 6 years old, Frederick lived with his grandmother. After that, he was moved between different plantations.

When he was 12 years old, his owner's wife, Sophia, began teaching him the alphabet. She made sure he had good food and clothes, as well as a comfortable bed. But her husband stopped the lessons. He said that teaching people who were enslaved how to read would make them want to be free. However, Douglass did not give up. He taught himself to read and write in secret. He found newspapers, books, and other materials to help him learn. He even started a Sunday school to teach other slaves how to read. Some plantation owners were angry about this and broke up his school.

Escaping Slavery

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

Powerful Speaker and Writer

Douglass became a powerful speaker against slavery. He traveled across the country giving speeches. To prove his story was true, Douglass wrote a book about his life as a person who was enslaved in 1845. The book became very popular and was published in many countries.

To avoid being captured and returned to slavery, Douglass went to Great Britain and Ireland for two years. He made new friends there, and he gave speeches against slavery. Before he returned to America, his new friends raised money to buy his freedom.

Ending Slavery

During the Civil War (1861–1865), Douglass became an adviser to President Abraham Lincoln. He convinced Lincoln that African Americans should be allowed to fight in the war. He also urged 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 his memory. His work helped change how Americans thought about slavery and helped millions of African Americans gain their rights.

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?
