



FIRST AMENDMENT IN HISTORY

FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND PRESS: FREDERICK DOUGLASS (1818-1895)

RESOURCES

- <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1539.html>
- http://www.americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/aa/activists/douglass/leader_1
- <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/doughtml/doughome.html>

ACTIVITY

Frederick Douglass was born a slave in Talbot County, Maryland, in 1818. His master's wife broke the law by teaching him how to read. He loved learning and reading, and memorized classical speeches from Roman times. He prayed constantly to be delivered from slavery, and resolved to plan an escape. In 1838, he escaped from slavery with the help of friends.

He settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts where he continued to read, go to church, and attend abolitionist meetings. At those meetings, he met others who were also working to end slavery. In 1841, when he was 23, he gave a speech at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. The speech was so stirring and eloquent that the Society asked Douglass to begin a three-year lecture series on slavery. He began traveling throughout the country giving speeches and participating in conventions, including those for women's rights. He later traveled throughout Europe, speaking to large, rapt audiences about his life as slave. He spoke with President Abraham Lincoln about how black soldiers were being treated by the Army in 1863. He was probably the most famous black person in the country by the time of the Civil War.

In addition to his speeches, Douglass published his thoughts. He published a weekly newspaper called *The North Star*, whose title was a reference to escaped slaves who would follow the star in their journey north. His most famous and important work was his autobiography, entitled *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. It was incredibly popular and, like his speeches, opened many peoples' eyes to the horrors of slavery.

Douglass also spoke and wrote in favor of a constitutional amendment securing voting rights and other liberties for former slaves. The Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery (1865); the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) prohibited states from denying people equal protection of law; and the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) stopped states from using race or "previous condition of servitude" as a qualification for voting. In this manner, Douglass used his First Amendment rights of free speech and press in order to expand American freedom.

In his later life Douglass was appointed to several political offices, and finally settled in Washington, D.C. He continued to work for equal rights for former slaves and for women. The boy who memorized classic speeches from Roman times would spend his life delivering original and powerful speeches in his own right: speeches which changed many minds, as well as the course of history.

QUESTIONS

1. How did Frederick Douglass's speech at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society change his life?
2. How would you describe Douglass's career as an orator?
3. How did Douglass exercise his right to freedom of the press in support of abolition?
4. Frederick Douglass said: "The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never has and it never will." What did he mean? Do you agree?
5. How did Douglass's exercise of free speech and press contribute to the expansion of American freedom?



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ANSWERS

1. Douglass's speech was so successful that the Society asked Douglass to lecture for them for three years.
2. Douglass's career as an orator was very successful, including travel across two continents to large audiences. He was so well-known and respected that he advised the President on Civil War matters.
3. Douglass published a weekly abolitionist newspaper as well as his autobiography.
4. Douglass meant that those in power do not give it up without being forced too, and that winning freedom will always involve a fight, whether it's a moral or physical one. Answers will vary.
5. Douglass's career as an orator as well as his writings opened the eyes of many Americans and Europeans to the evils of slavery. He exercised his First Amendment rights on behalf of causes he believed in: the abolition of slavery and equal civil and political rights for African Americans (as well as women). His efforts helped bring about the ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which helped secure many of those rights.