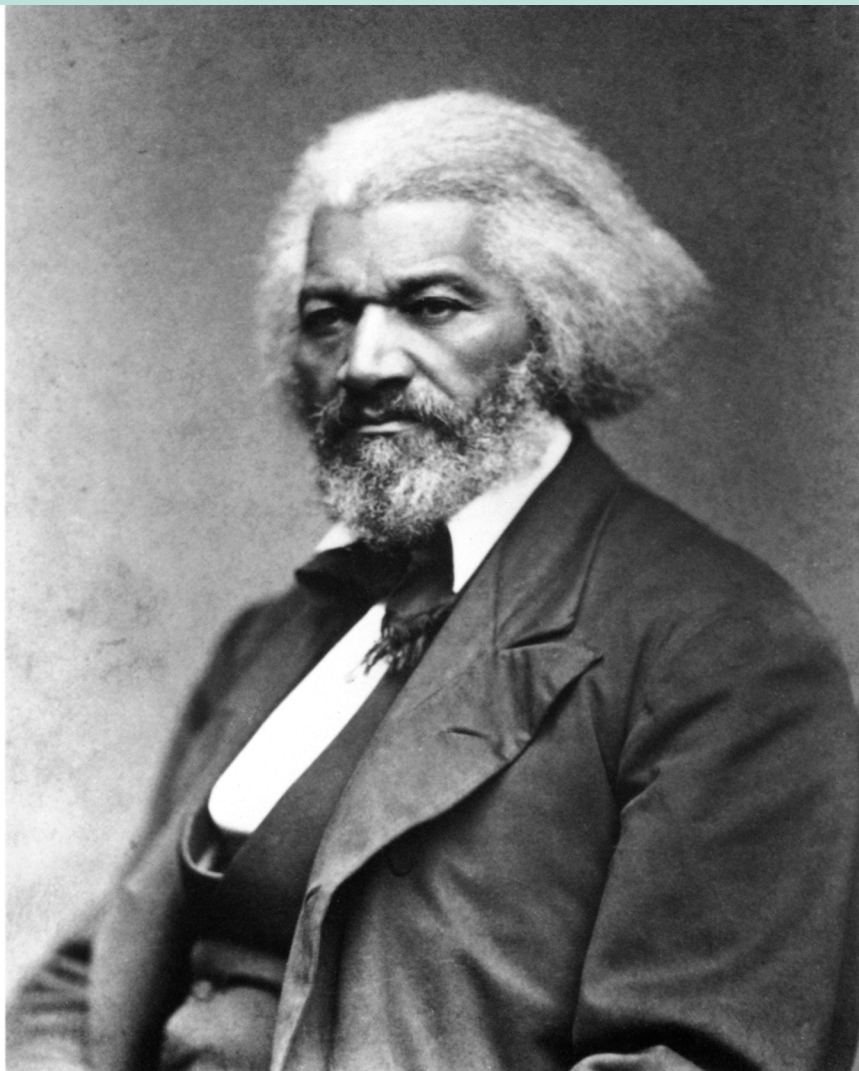


# History Topic of the Month

## Frederick Douglass (1817-95)

Some of the greatest campaigners against slavery understood how evil it was better than others: they had been enslaved themselves. Frederick Douglass was born into slavery, escaped and became one of the most famous abolitionists and writers in the world. He campaigned against slavery and also for many other social causes, including women's rights. He worked with Presidents and served in a number of Government positions. Internationally famous, he was one of the most important American intellectuals of the 19th century – and walking proof that the argument that Black men could never be intelligent enough to be American citizens was racist nonsense.



Contributor: © Glasshouse Images / Alamy Stock Photo

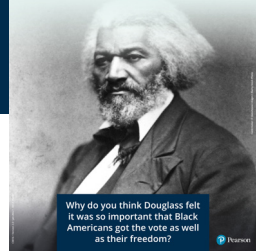
Frederick Douglass (1817-1895) African-American social reformer about 1874.

### Birth and early years

Douglass was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey in Maryland. He never knew who his father was (“Genealogical trees do not flourish among slaves” he wrote) – although he was probably a white slaveowner – nor did he know when his birthday was, eventually picking February 14 as his mother nicknamed him her “Little Valentine”. When he was very young his mother was moved to another plantation – he only saw her a few times before she died when he was 7.

By the time he was 12, Douglass was enslaved in the house of Thomas Auld in Baltimore, Maryland. He taught himself to read and write – he said “knowledge was the pathway from slavery to freedom”. He began to teach his fellow enslaved people to read at a Sunday school. Aged 16, Auld sent him to work for a “slave breaker” who beat him viciously – until, after one cruel beating, Douglass fought back.

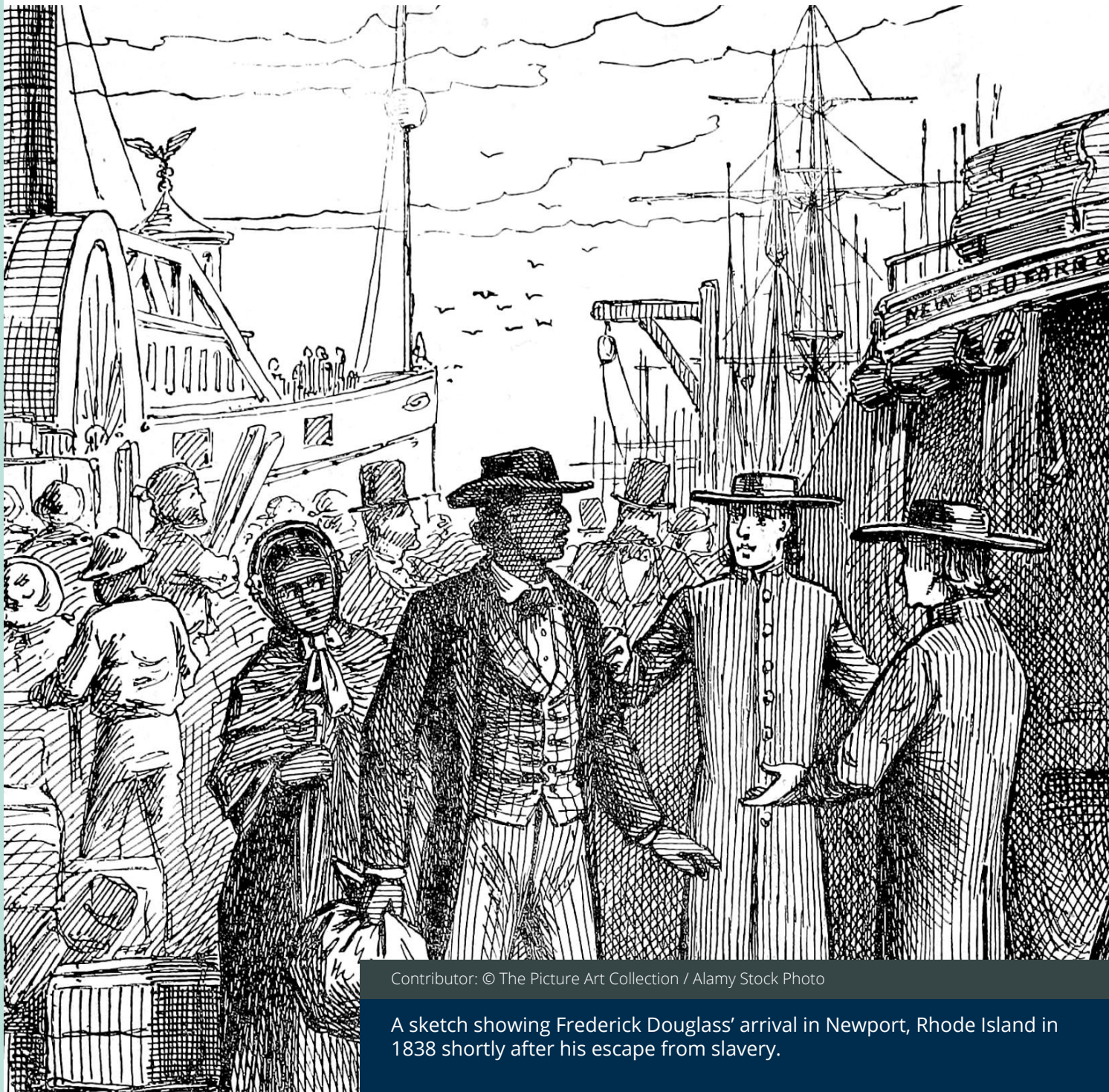
# History Topic of the Month: Frederick Douglass (1817-1895)



## Escape from slavery and getting a new name

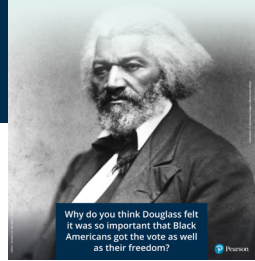
In 1837 Douglass had met and fallen in love with Anna Murray, a free Black woman. She inspired him to try to escape from Baltimore. On 3 September 1838 he boarded a train disguised as a sailor. His dangerous journey took him from Maryland, through the slave state of Delaware, to Pennsylvania. If he had been caught he would have been brutally beaten and perhaps even killed. 24 hours after he left, he found refuge in the New York house of the abolitionist David Ruggles.

On 15 September 1838 he married Anna Murray. Douglass decided to choose a new name for himself to mark this new chapter in his life. He chose Douglass, because he admired the poem *The Lady of the Lake* by Walter Scott which was about two men called Douglas.



Contributor: © The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo

A sketch showing Frederick Douglass' arrival in Newport, Rhode Island in 1838 shortly after his escape from slavery.



Why do you think Douglass felt it was so important that Black Americans got the vote as well as their freedom?

# History Topic of the Month: Frederick Douglass (1817-1895)

## Starting a new life

Douglass wanted to use his hard-won freedom to help his fellow Black Americans. The Northern states of America had a strong abolitionist community, made up both of white liberals and Black American campaigners.

*At this time slavery was legal in some US states (mostly in the South) but not others (mostly in the North). Abolitionists (people who campaigned to end slavery) helped enslaved people to escape to states in the North where they could claim freedom. Arguments about whether the US Government would allow individual states to choose whether they allowed slavery or not would lead directly into the American Civil War.*

He became a supporter of the Underground Railroad, which helped enslaved people escape from the South. He was first invited to speak at abolitionist meetings in 1841. He discovered he had a gift for speaking, being able to both move and educate his audiences. He became an important part of the abolitionist movement.

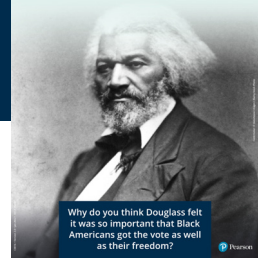
In 1843, he was a speaker on a national tour of the American Anti-Slavery Society. In Pendleton, Indiana, Douglass was attacked by slavery supporters and only saved by a family of Quakers. His hand was broken and, even though it healed, it caused him pain for the rest of his life.

## Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave

Douglass published his first autobiography in 1845. His book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* told, in detail, the events of his life and his experience of slavery. Readers were deeply moved by his story, and the eloquence with which he told it. It was a huge best-seller. Within four months, 5,000 copies had been sold and by 1860 over 30,000 had been sold.

Racist critics argued the book was so eloquent, it could never have been written by a Black man. Other slavery-supporters claimed Douglass had invented his experiences.

Douglass had wanted to write the book to 'reclaim' his story and to prove that Black people were just as capable of discussing political and moral issues as white people.



Why do you think Douglass felt it was so important that Black Americans got the vote as well as their freedom?

# History Topic of the Month: Frederick Douglass (1817-1895)

## International fame

Douglass took a huge risk writing his autobiography. As an escaped enslaved person, his former owner Thomas Auld could have demanded the 'return' of his 'property'. Douglass decided to tour Britain and Ireland to avoid this. He spent two years there.

Although there was racism in Britain and Ireland, Douglass found the country (which had abolished slavery in most of the British Empire in 1833) more welcoming than America. He wrote of his experience: "I gaze around in vain for one who will question my equal humanity, claim me as his slave or offer me an insult". He compared the segregation of America to his freedom in Britain to sit in the same cab, and stay in the same hotels, as white people. It's important to remember though that Douglass was a famous guest in the country and his talks were attended by supporters of his cause – not everyone in Britain may have been as welcoming. He also wanted to make a positive comparison with America, to help the anti-slavery campaign in his home country.

He was angered though by the huge poverty and social injustice in Britain and Ireland (which was in the middle of the Great Famine), supporting campaigns against these. Douglass lectured across the country at sell-out events and his British supporters raised money to formally buy his freedom in America.

## Returning to America

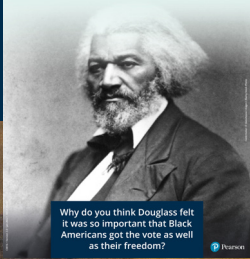
Douglass returned in 1847 and started publishing his own newspaper, *The North Star*. The newspaper campaigned for an end to slavery. Douglass continued to support the Underground Railroad, providing money and a place to stay for almost 400 escaped enslaved people. Douglass also worked hard to support women's rights, especially the right to vote.

In July 1852 he gave a famous speech that came to be known as *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?* The speech argued celebrations of liberty and freedom in America were hypocritical and offensive when millions of Black Americans lived as enslaved people. He said Independence Day "reveals to [the Slave], more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim". He urged Americans to listen to the spirit of the Constitution and end slavery.

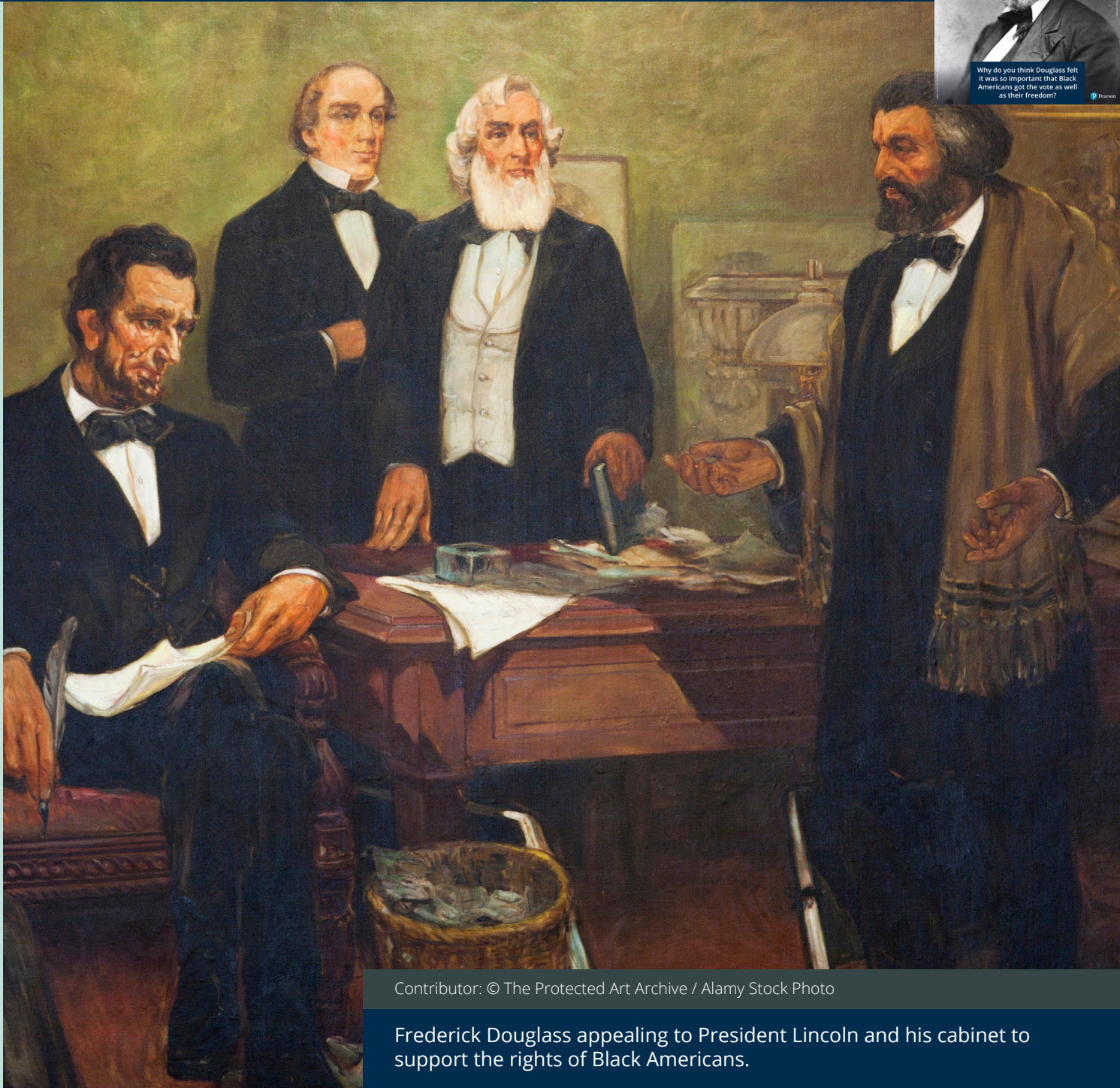
Douglass' speeches and writings helped enormously to grow support for the abolitionist movement. His campaigning helped turn ending slavery for good from a minority argument to one supported by major figures in America, like President Abraham Lincoln.

## American Civil War (1861-65)

By the 1860s Douglass was possibly the most famous Black man in the world and one of the greatest orators and writers living. In 1861, the slave-holding Southern states declared themselves an independent country (the Confederate States of America) – they were desperate to protect their rights to keep enslaved people working on their plantations. Eventually war broke out between the Northern states, led by Lincoln, and the Southern



## History Topic of the Month: Frederick Douglass (1817-1895)



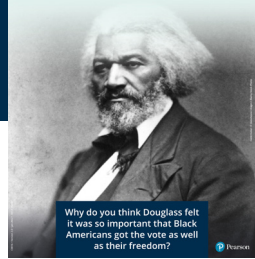
Contributor: © The Protected Art Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Frederick Douglass appealing to President Lincoln and his cabinet to support the rights of Black Americans.

states.

Douglass supported Lincoln's decision to allow Black Americans to serve in the Northern army and his campaign to end slavery which led to the 13th Amendment to the Constitution which outlawed slavery. However, he was angry that Lincoln didn't plan to give Black Americans the vote.

After Lincoln was assassinated Douglass praised him, saying in 1876 that "though [he] shared the prejudices of his white fellow-countrymen...in his heart of hearts he loathed and hated slavery".



# History Topic of the Month:

## Frederick Douglass (1817-1895)

### After the war

Douglass continued to work for equality for all Black Americans and women after the war. He started a bank – the Freedman’s Savings Bank – to help manage the money of newly freed enslaved people. He campaigned against segregation in the South and helped persuade President Grant to pass laws against the Ku Klux Klan in 1871.

He continued to speak in favour of freedoms, saying in 1867: “A man’s rights rest in three boxes. The ballot box, jury box and the cartridge box. Let no man be kept from the ballot box because of his color. Let no woman be kept from the ballot box because of her sex”.

### Final years

Douglass became the first Black American to be given a Government post when he was chosen as Marshal of the District of Columbia in 1877. That same year he visited his former master, Thomas Auld, on his deathbed and forgave him.

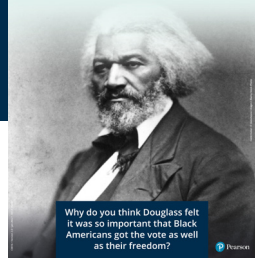
His wife Anna died in 1882 and Douglass remarried to Helen Pitts, a younger abolitionist from New York. The marriage was controversial – both because of their 20-year age difference and the fact Pitts was white. From 1886-87 he travelled across Europe and Egypt speaking in favour of civil rights for all. He was later made Ambassador to Haiti in 1889.

On 20 February 1895 Douglass gave a speech to the National Council of Women. After returning home he died of a massive heart attack. Thousands of people attended his funeral. He was buried next to his first wife Anna – 8 years later Helen Pitts was also buried next to him.

### Impact and legacy

Douglass had helped change forever how many people in America viewed Black people. Racists had argued that all Black people were less intelligent than white people. Douglass showed time and again that this was not true.

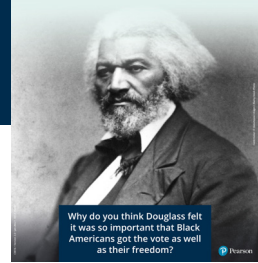
Throughout his life he campaigned for other people, using his own life story to show that there was hope for everyone. He became possibly the most famous Black person in the world and his writings helped to change millions of lives.



# History Topic of the Month: Frederick Douglass (1817-1895)

## Discussion points

- Douglass knew very little about his background, never knowing either his father or his birthday (it is not certain whether he was born in 1817 or 1818). How would not knowing these simple facts about yourself make you feel?
- Douglass made a daring escape from slavery. Why do you think what he did was so dangerous?
- What else can you find out about the Underground Railroad?
- Did Frederick Douglass visit your local area? If so, what can you find out about his visit?
- In Britain Frederick Douglass was seen as an internationally famous visitor. How might this have affected his views on attitudes in Britain to Black people? Do you think an ordinary Black person would have had the same experience?
- What else can you find out about the start of the American Civil War?
- Douglass wrote some very critical things about America and its pride in being 'the land of the free'. How do you think people might have responded to this?
- Why do you think Douglass felt it was so important that Black Americans got the vote as well as their freedom?
- Douglass' autobiographies became international best sellers. Why do you think this helped change some people's minds about slavery?
- Frederick Douglass met with and forgave his former owner before he died. Why do you think some people thought this was controversial?



# History Topic of the Month: Frederick Douglass (1817-1895)

## Books

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass

*My Bondage and My Freedom* by Frederick Douglass

*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass

*Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* by David W Blight

*Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln* by John Stauffer

## Articles

<https://www.history.org.uk/secondary/resource/6398/frederick-douglass-in-britain>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/12/the-confounding-truth-about-frederick-douglass/573931/>

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/frederick-douglass>

<https://www.nps.gov/frdo/learn/historyculture/frederick-douglass.htm>

<http://frederickdouglassinbritain.com/>

<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-no-struggle-there-no-progress/>

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/15/the-prophetic-pragmatism-of-frederick-douglass>

Take a look at Pearson's Diversity and Inclusion in History webpages for more great content.