

THE BEDFORD SERIES IN HISTORY AND CULTURE

# Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself

WITH RELATED DOCUMENTS

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*Edited with an Introduction by*

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**Figure 1.** Frederick Douglass, a very early photograph, taken in his twenties.  
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution / Art Resource, N.Y.

## PART ONE

### Introduction: “A Psalm of Freedom”

*“Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. It was ever present to torment me. . . . I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm.”*

— Frederick Douglass, 1845

*Therefore I will not refrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.*

— Job 7:11

Frederick Douglass was the most important African American leader and intellectual of the nineteenth century. He lived twenty years as a slave and nearly nine years as a fugitive slave; from the 1840s to his death in 1895, he attained international fame as an abolitionist, a reformer, an editor, an orator, and an author of three autobiographies, which are classics of the slave narrative tradition. As a man of affairs, he began his abolitionist career two decades before America would divide and fight a tragic civil war over slavery. He lived to see emancipation, to work actively for women’s suffrage long before it was achieved, to realize the civil rights triumphs and failures of Reconstruction, and to witness America’s economic and international expansion in the late Gilded Age. He lived until the eve of the age of Jim Crow (racial segregation), when America seemed in retreat from the very victories in race relations that he had helped to win.



Although Douglass lived long and witnessed many great events, perhaps his most important contribution to American history was the repeated telling of his personal story. Above all else, this book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, is a great story told, like most other great stories, out of the will to be known and the will to write. This tale of a young African American's journey into and out of slavery provides a remarkable window on America's most compelling nineteenth-century social and political problem. This introductory essay is a guide that may be useful either before or after reading the text. Some may wish to plunge right into Douglass's first chapter, a classic polemic against slavery's hostility to family life. Others may wish to read this introduction first and consider its many suggestions about the content and meaning of the text for American history and literature. Either way, Douglass is, of course, his own uniquely informed, artful, and often manipulative guide to his experience.

Douglass wrote the most lyrical and widely read of all the slave narratives. He saw to the core of the meaning of slavery, both for individuals and for the nation. Likewise, the multiple meanings of freedom — as idea and reality, of mind and body — and of the consequences of its denial were his great themes. In 1855 he offered this timeless explanation of his hatred of slavery and his desire for freedom: "The thought of only being a creature of the *present* and the *past*, troubled me, and I longed to have a *future* — a future with hope in it. To be shut up entirely to the past and present is abhorrent to the human mind; it is to the soul — whose life and happiness is unceasing progress — what the prison is to the body." No genre of literature has offered better descriptions of the meaning of hope, of the liberation of mind, body, and soul — that sense of future Douglass named — than the slave narratives. Douglass probed his past throughout his life, telling his story in relation to the turbulent history of his time, and hoping to control or stop time itself. But, like all great autobiographers, he would only discover how memory is both absolutely essential and bewilderingly deceptive as a means to self-understanding.<sup>1</sup>

Douglass was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, probably in the cabin of his grandmother Betsey Bailey along the Tuckahoe River, in Talbot County, Maryland, in February 1818. His mother, Harriet Bailey, was a slave owned by Aaron Anthony, a former Chesapeake schooner captain and an overseer on a large Eastern Shore plantation. Douglass saw his mother for the last time when he was seven, making him in every practical way an orphan. The actual identity of his father is still unknown, but he was undoubtedly white, as Douglass declares in the

*Narrative*. Douglass was, therefore, of mixed racial ancestry, a fact he exploited with considerable irony, even humor, throughout his lifetime. Prime candidates for the man who may have been Douglass's father are Anthony and Thomas Auld, his first two owners; his paternity, however, has never been conclusively determined.

As readers will readily see, Douglass's twenty years in slavery were marked by stark contrasts between brutality and good fortune, between the life of a favored slave youth in Baltimore and that of a field hand on an Eastern Shore farm, and between the power of literacy and the despair born of its suppression. The Frederick Bailey who became Frederick Douglass after his escape had a story well worth telling, and American and British audiences would be eager to hear and read it. Indeed, throughout his life, Douglass made it clear in three autobiographies, consisting of 1,200 pages and spaced over almost fifty years, that his personal story was the most important possession he ever owned, the primary gift he could give the world.

In 1845 Douglass felt compelled by many factors to write his story. His extraordinary life as a slave, the circumstances of his escape, his emergence as a skillful abolitionist lecturer in the early 1840s, and suspicions as well as bigoted denials that so talented a voice could ever have been a chattel slave combined with the sheer popularity of slave narratives to prompt him to tell his tale. On September 3, 1838, at the age of twenty, Douglass, disguised as a sailor and having obtained the papers of a free seaman, escaped from slavery in Baltimore, Maryland.<sup>2</sup> Within a week he was joined by his fiancée, Anna Murray, a free black woman from Baltimore who had grown up on the Eastern Shore within just a few miles of Fred Bailey. David Ruggles, the black abolitionist leader of the New York Vigilance Committee (one of a network of urban organizations by which the Underground Railroad operated), helped provide Frederick and Anna safe haven, which was no simple matter for fugitive slaves in the 1830s. On September 15, they were married by Rev. James W. C. Pennington, himself an escaped slave from Maryland's Eastern Shore. Anna wore a purple dress she had carried in her trunk on her journey from Maryland to New York. The Douglasses quickly moved from New York City to New Bedford, Massachusetts, a thriving port town with a significant free black population, where it was believed Douglass could ply his trade as a ship's caulker.<sup>3</sup> It was there that Douglass and the growing band of Massachusetts abolitionists discovered each other during the next three years.

In its content and its strategies, therefore, Douglass's *Narrative* belonged to the world of abolitionism and to the national political crisis



over slavery from which it sprang. Douglass's autobiographies are our principal sources for major aspects of his life, especially his early years. But they are perhaps as revelatory of the history of the times through which he lived as they are of his personality and his psychology. Close readings of the *Narrative* uncover not only Douglass's rhetorical devices but also a good deal about the moral and economic nature of slavery, the master-slave relationship, the psychology of slaveholders, the aims and arguments of abolitionists, and the impending political crisis between North and South that would lead to the Civil War.

Douglass's personal story, like American history itself, is both inspiring and terrible. Few writers have better combined experience with the music of words to make us see the deepest contradictions of American history, the tragedy and necessity of conflict between slavery and freedom in a republic. Douglass exposes the bitterness and absurdity of racism at the same time that he imagines the fullest possibilities of the natural rights tradition, the idea that people are born with equal rights in the eyes of God and that those rights can be protected under human law. Few have written more effectively about the endurance of the human spirit under oppression. And in American letters, we have no better illustration of liberation through the power of language than in Douglass's *Narrative*. With his pen, Douglass was very much a self-conscious artist, and with his voice and his activism, he was a self-conscious prophet.

Readers of the *Narrative* quickly come to realize that language, written and oratorical, had been a fascination and a weapon for Douglass during his years as a slave. When he first spoke before a meeting of New Bedford blacks against African colonization in March 1839, and when he delivered his first public speeches before a gathering of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society on Nantucket Island in August 1841, he was not merely appearing as the spontaneous abolitionist miracle he was often portrayed—and portrayed himself—to be. No doubt the first effort at “speaking to white people” at the Nantucket meeting was a “severe cross,” as he describes the experience in the *Narrative*.<sup>4</sup> But Douglass was no stranger to oratory, or to the moral arguments, sentimentalism, and evangelical zeal that characterized the antislavery movement during that era. By 1841 he had been reading abolitionist speeches, editorials, and poetry in William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper, *The Liberator*, for at least two years. And as the *Narrative* tells us in a variety of ways, Douglass had been a practicing abolitionist of a kind even while he was a slave. He had read the Bible extensively, and he had discovered and modeled his ideas and style on a remarkable 1797 schoolbook.

On a day in 1830 in an alley near Durgin and Bailey's shipyard, in the Fell's Point district of Baltimore, Douglass (then Frederick Bailey), a twelve-year-old slave boy, listened as a group of white boys recited passages from a reader assigned to them in school, Caleb Bingham's *The Columbian Orator*. The slave boy was very much part of the group; he often pulled out his lone book, Noah Webster's speller, and looked up or asked his playmates about words they used. The young slave had brought along bread to trade for the conversation and knowledge he obtained from these encounters; poor white boys living near the docks did not eat as well as the family of Frederick's master. In these exchanges, Frederick likely heard passages that included irresistible words like *freedom*, *liberty*, *tyranny*, and *the rights of man*.

That day in Baltimore, Frederick took fifty cents he had earned polishing boots, went to Knight's bookstore on Thames Street, and bought his own copy of *The Columbian Orator*. Young Frederick attended no formal school, but he was now armed with the same schoolbook his playmates were using; he too could listen to formal language, recite passages, perform to imaginary audiences, and invent his own uses of the words he seized and cherished. Most important, the young slave, who had bitterly reminded his playmates about his status as a “slave for life,” could begin to understand the world beyond his thralldom.<sup>5</sup> *Destiny* is an old-fashioned word, but words were the destiny, as well as the hope, the nourishment, and eventually the legacy of the young slave who would become Frederick Douglass.

*The Columbian Orator*, a selection from which is reproduced in this volume, had a lasting effect on young Frederick's intellectual and spiritual growth. “Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book,” Douglass remembers in the *Narrative*. The book's compiler, Caleb Bingham, was a teacher and a pioneer of public schools in Massachusetts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A bestseller as a school text for several decades, *The Columbian Orator* was both an elocution manual and a collection of some eighty-four selections, including prose, verse, plays, invented dialogues, and political speeches by famous orators from antiquity and the Age of Enlightenment. Cato, Cicero, Socrates, John Milton, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, William Pitt, and Daniel O'Connell all appear at least once. Most selections deal with themes of nationalism, individual liberty, religious faith, or the democratic value of education. The book as a whole has an antislavery tone and served Douglass, he later said, as a “powerful denunciation of oppression.” Moreover, from Bingham's introductory essay, “General Directions



for Speaking,” Douglass learned that orators are not born of nature; they have to practice and harness elements of nature’s power and beauty in words. With Bingham’s book, Douglass began his journey toward his extraordinary eloquence, on the platform and in print. He learned much about cadence, pace, variety of tone in the voice, and even gestures for the orator’s arms, hands, shoulders, and head. From Bingham, Douglass learned that the greatest of Greek orators, Demosthenes, had overcome a speech impediment.<sup>6</sup>

Douglass’s remarkable ability to hear the beauty of language in his head, to write and speak so artfully at so young an age, is due in part to his discovery of *The Columbian Orator*. It gave Douglass confidence, a sense of the heroic, and an expanded imagination about human rights, the character of legitimate government, and how to argue against slavery. His dreams, his practicing manual, indeed his compulsion to write, traveled in Douglass’s pocket when he rode ferryboats and trains out of slavery. *The Columbian Orator* was one of the few possessions he carried with him during his escape in 1838.

From the earliest period of his public career, Douglass knew that whether in the slave South or in the free North to which he had liberated himself, literacy was power. The nineteenth-century Western world owed much of its values and mores to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment’s faith in human reason and its assertion of individual rights. To be judged truly human and a citizen with social and political recognition, therefore, a person had to achieve literacy. For better or worse, civilization itself was equated with cultures that could *write* their history. The former slave who could write his or her story, publish it, garner readers, and join the community of letters could therefore create a “public self.”<sup>7</sup>

The Douglass who spoke at Nantucket was quickly hired by Garrison and the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society to be a traveling lecturer, first around New England and eventually across the North. Thus the fugitive slave found his voice and his calling. From 1841 to 1845, on almost countless platforms, the itinerant Douglass began to tell the “free story” that he would soon publish to great acclaim in the *Narrative*.<sup>8</sup>

In many ways, Douglass’s *Narrative* is a careful, artistic summing up of the many speeches he had delivered in the three years he spent on the abolitionist lecture circuit before he sat down in 1844 to create his own character and to try to make the world stop seeing him as a mere curiosity. To tell his story of suffering and liberation from slavery on platforms was one thing; to publish it for a reading public eager for the tales of escaped slaves was quite another. On the lecture platform it

might appear that he only told stories. But in the *Narrative* he sought authentication. He wanted the world to know that fugitive slaves had histories and that they could *write*.

Douglass’s oratorical brilliance, the “curiosity” of his audiences, and the relationship of the *Narrative* to the style and content of his early speeches are attested to by two addresses reprinted in this volume. The first, delivered in Concord, New Hampshire, on February 11, 1844, and recorded by Nathaniel P. Rogers, offers a striking picture not only of Douglass “narrating his early life” but also of an angry young man who insists that Americans imagine slavery as a scene of horror. Rogers’s description of the rhetorical pivot in the speech is stunning: Douglass finished narrating the story and “gradually let out the outraged humanity that was laboring in him, in indignant and terrible speech. It was not what you could describe as oratory or eloquence. It was sterner—darker—deeper than these. It was the volcanic outbreak of human nature long pent up in slavery and at last bursting its imprisonment.” Undoubtedly, some of those prison metaphors that soon appeared in the *Narrative* emerged in the speech Rogers heard. Rogers was an abolitionist newspaper editor and adept in his own way at antislavery propaganda, but he seems to have been convinced that he had just listened to a latter-day prophet whose “terrible voice” would one day “ring through the pine glades of the South, in the day of her visitation.” He was surely right in his observation that he had watched “an insurgent slave taking hold on the right of speech.”<sup>9</sup> Shortly after this speech, Douglass was hard at work writing the *Narrative*. The second speech reprinted here was delivered in New York City on May 6, 1845, only a little more than a week after Douglass finished writing the *Narrative* and just three weeks before it was published. It is believed to be the first time he divulged numerous specific facts about his slave background beyond the general contours of the story which he had told many times. Both speeches provide a historical and rhetorical context in which to read the *Narrative*.

Although antislavery sentiment emerged in a variety of ways during the age of the American Revolution, the formative decades of organized abolitionism were the 1820s and 1830s, the period in which Frederick Bailey grew up a slave in Maryland. In the *Narrative*, following the moving passages about his achievement of literacy and the discovery of *The Columbian Orator*, Douglass describes his gradual realization of the antebellum meaning of the words *abolition* and *abolitionist*. He “always



drew near” when those words were spoken, “expecting to hear something of importance to myself and fellow-slaves. The light broke in upon me by degrees.” With the life-giving power of literacy also came an “unutterable anguish,” as Douglass so honestly puts it. “It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but no ladder upon which to get out.” Literacy afforded the young Douglass a whole world of thought, stirring dreams of freedom thwarted at every visible turn of his daily life. The truly thoughtful slave, as Douglass’s master had predicted, was a desperately discontented one. Such slaves possessed a language by which to imagine freedom, but this awareness only made their condition more wretched. “It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me,” writes Douglass. But “every little while,” he remembers taking heart, because, as he says, “I could hear something about the abolitionists.”<sup>10</sup>

Douglass’s journey to and seizure of literacy, both reading and writing, makes one of the most enduring elements of the book. What he heard, and read in Baltimore newspapers, were stories of organized groups that sent petitions to the U.S. government demanding the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia as well as stories of the interstate slave trade. He learned of activists who published their own antislavery newspapers and crusaded to change the condition in which he lived. He realized that many of those abolitionists considered slaveholding a mortal sin. Above all else, perhaps, he gained the simple awareness that in the northern states slavery either did not exist or was rapidly dying out. Some of the reformers he read about would turn out to be racist and patronizing, but some of them would provide the community, friendship, and mentorship in which Douglass found his life’s work. As he sat on a crate during break time as a caulker in the dockyards of Baltimore or lamented away afternoons on William Freeland’s farm on the Eastern Shore, he realized in half-formed ways, as he had learned from *The Columbian Orator* and the Bible in metaphorical ways, that up there in the free North there was an “argument” about slavery.<sup>11</sup>

Under the influence of evangelical religion, a growing realization of southern commitment to slavery, and especially the British antislavery movement, American abolitionists found their ideological roots in the 1820s. The campaign to end slavery in the British Empire profoundly shook the increasingly active defenders of slavery in the American South and helped to cause a steady radicalization of antislavery tactics in the North. After 1831, when William Lloyd Garrison founded *The Liberator* in Boston, as abolitionist societies sprang up across the North, and as a growing number of fugitive slaves and other free blacks entered the movement on their own behalf, American abolitionism became an organized

crusade. By 1838, the year Douglass escaped from slavery, the movement had flooded Congress with petitions, experienced intense and deadly anti-abolition violence, awakened a defiant South, and caused many conversions in the reformist North. It had also fomented the beginnings of antislavery political parties and, like most great reform movements, had fallen into bitter factional disputes. Douglass was deeply inspired by Garrison himself and by his newspaper. When Douglass fell in with the Garrisonians in 1841, they represented the largest and most radical wing of the antislavery movement.

Garrison and many of his loyal followers were fierce radicals; they devoted their lives to ridding America of slavery and worked vigorously to eliminate discrimination against blacks and women in northern society. They roamed the frontiers of reform ideology in antebellum America. By the late 1830s, Garrison himself had taken some positions that increasing numbers of abolitionists found untenable and impractical. He denounced churches, the U.S. Constitution, political parties, and voting itself as institutional or personal complicity with the evil of slaveholding. “No Union with the Slaveholders,” part of the masthead of *The Liberator*, became the slogan of a Garrisonian doctrine of “disunion,” which urged northern abolitionists to sever all political and religious ties to the South. Such a plan would, through a strange logic, isolate slaveholders and their accomplices under the blinding light of moral condemnation and lead to emancipation through peaceful, ethical renewal. This was the doctrine of “moral suasion” taken to its fullest extent: The hearts and minds of the American people were first to be persuaded of the evil of slavery, then the laws and political structure would change.

After returning from his first trip to England in 1847, and having experienced a growing sense of organizational and intellectual independence, Douglass broke with his Garrisonian comrades in a protracted and bitter dispute. This split with his first abolitionist mentor had both ideological and personal causes. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, especially after his move to Rochester, New York, and the founding of his own newspaper, the *North Star*, Douglass became a more open, though no less committed, pragmatist about antislavery tactics. Under new influences, especially the New York abolitionist and philanthropist Gerrit Smith, Douglass came to believe that the Constitution could be used to exert federal power against slavery, especially its expansion into the West. He also embraced the use of political parties, and eventually even certain instances of violence, as a means of destroying slavery. Moreover, during and after his nearly two-year tour of the British Isles, and because of his brilliant oratory, the impact of the *Narrative*, and the force



masters; Colonel Lloyd's slaves contending that he was the richest, and Mr. Jepson's slaves that he was the smartest, and most of a man. Colonel Lloyd's slaves would boast his ability to buy and sell Jacob Jepson. Mr. Jepson's slaves would boast his ability to whip Colonel Lloyd. These quarrels would almost always end in a fight between the parties, and those that whipped were supposed to have gained the point at issue. They seemed to think that the greatness of their masters was transferable to themselves. It was considered as being bad enough to be a slave; but to be a poor man's slave was deemed a disgrace indeed!<sup>16</sup>

## CHAPTER IV

Mr. Hopkins remained but a short time in the office of overseer. Why his career was so short, I do not know, but suppose he lacked the necessary severity to suit Colonel Lloyd. Mr. Hopkins was succeeded by Mr. Austin Gore, a man possessing, in an eminent degree, all those traits of character indispensable to what is called a first-rate overseer.<sup>17</sup> Mr. Gore had served Colonel Lloyd, in the capacity of overseer, upon one of the out-farms, and had shown himself worthy of the high station of overseer upon the home or Great House Farm.

Mr. Gore was proud, ambitious, and persevering. He was artful, cruel, and obdurate. He was just the man for such a place, and it was just the place for such a man. It afforded scope for the full exercise of all his powers, and he seemed to be perfectly at home in it. He was one of those who could torture the slightest look, word, or gesture, on the part of the slave, into impudence, and would treat it accordingly. There must be no answering back to him; no explanation was allowed a slave, showing himself to have been wrongfully accused. Mr. Gore acted fully up to the maxim laid down by slaveholders, — "It is better that a dozen slaves suffer under the lash, than that the overseer should be convicted, in the presence of the slaves, of having been at fault." No matter how innocent a slave might be — it availed him nothing, when accused by Mr. Gore of any misdemeanor. To be accused was to be convicted, and to be convicted was to be punished; the one always following the other with immutable certainty. To escape punishment was to escape accusation; and few slaves had the fortune to do either, under the overseership of

<sup>16</sup>Jepson was actually Jacob Gibson, who was not nearly as wealthy as Colonel Lloyd. Here Douglass suggests a world of reciprocity and paternalism in the master-slave relationship similar to that portrayed in Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1974).

<sup>17</sup>Douglass inaccurately remembered the first name of Orson Gore, overseer.

Mr. Gore. He was just proud enough to demand the most debasing homage of the slave, and quite servile enough to crouch, himself, at the feet of the master. He was ambitious enough to be contented with nothing short of the highest rank of overseers, and persevering enough to reach the height of his ambition. He was cruel enough to inflict the severest punishment, artful enough to descend to the lowest trickery, and obdurate enough to be insensible to the voice of a reproving conscience. He was, of all the overseers, the most dreaded by the slaves. His presence was painful; his eye flashed confusion; and seldom was his sharp, shrill voice heard, without producing horror and trembling in their ranks.

Mr. Gore was a grave man, and, though a young man, he indulged in no jokes, said no funny words, seldom smiled. His words were in perfect keeping with his looks, and his looks were in perfect keeping with his words. Overseers will sometimes indulge in a witty word, even with the slaves; not so with Mr. Gore. He spoke but to command, and commanded but to be obeyed; he dealt sparingly with his words, and bountifully with his whip, never using the former where the latter would answer as well. When he whipped, he seemed to do so from a sense of duty, and feared no consequences. He did nothing reluctantly, no matter how disagreeable; always at his post, never inconsistent. He never promised but to fulfill. He was, in a word, a man of the most inflexible firmness and stone-like coolness.

His savage barbarity was equalled only by the consummate coolness with which he committed the grossest and most savage deeds upon the slaves under his charge. Mr. Gore once undertook to whip one of Colonel Lloyd's slaves, by the name of Demby.<sup>18</sup> He had given Demby but few stripes, when, to get rid of the scourging, he ran and plunged himself into a creek, and stood there at the depth of his shoulders, refusing to come out. Mr. Gore told him that he would give him three calls, and that, if he did not come out at the third call, he would shoot him. The first call was given. Demby made no response, but stood his ground. The second and third calls were given with the same result. Mr. Gore then, without consultation or deliberation with any one, not even giving Demby an additional call, raised his musket to his face, taking deadly aim at his standing victim, and in an instant poor Demby was no more. His mangled body sank out of sight, and blood and brains marked the water where he had stood.

<sup>18</sup>Bill Denby. Douglass uses both spellings. Lloyd plantation records indicate that Denby died in 1823, lending some credence to this story of Gore's alleged killing of the slave. See Preston, *Young Frederick Douglass*, 72-73.



A thrill of horror flashed through every soul upon the plantation, excepting Mr. Gore. He alone seemed cool and collected. He was asked by Colonel Lloyd and my old master, why he resorted to this extraordinary expedient. His reply was, (as well as I can remember,) that Demby had become unmanageable. He was setting a dangerous example to the other slaves, — one which, if suffered to pass without some such demonstration on his part, would finally lead to the total subversion of all rule and order upon the plantation. He argued that if one slave refused to be corrected, and escaped with his life, the other slaves would soon copy the example; the result of which would be, the freedom of the slaves, and the enslavement of the whites. Mr. Gore's defence was satisfactory. He was continued in his station as overseer upon the home plantation. His fame as an overseer went abroad. His horrid crime was not even submitted to judicial investigation. It was committed in the presence of slaves, and they of course could neither institute a suit, nor testify against him; and thus the guilty perpetrator of one of the bloodiest and most foul murders goes unwhipped of justice, and uncensured by the community in which he lives. Mr. Gore lived in St. Michael's, Talbot county, Maryland, when I left there; and if he is still alive, he very probably lives there now; and if so, he is now, as he was then, as highly esteemed and as much respected as though his guilty soul had not been stained with his brother's blood.

I speak advisedly when I say this, — that killing a slave, or any colored person, in Talbot county, Maryland, is not treated as a crime, either by the courts or the community. Mr. Thomas Lanman,<sup>19</sup> of St. Michael's, killed two slaves, one of whom he killed with a hatchet, by knocking his brains out. He used to boast of the commission of the awful and bloody deed. I have heard him do so laughingly, saying, among other things, that he was the only benefactor of his country in the company, and that when others would do as much as he had done, we should be relieved of "the d——d niggers."

The wife of Mr. Giles Hick, living but a short distance from where I used to live, murdered my wife's cousin, a young girl between fifteen and sixteen years of age, mangling her person in the most horrible manner, breaking her nose and breastbone with a stick, so that the poor girl expired in a few hours afterward.<sup>20</sup> She was immediately buried, but had not been in her untimely grave but a few hours before she was

<sup>19</sup>The correct name is Thomas Lambdin, a ship's carpenter.

<sup>20</sup>No record has been found of this murder, nor of the warrant for the woman's arrest. But a Mr. Giles Hicks did live in Caroline County, Maryland, which is where Anna Murray grew up. Preston, *Young Frederick Douglass*, 74.

taken up and examined by the coroner, who decided that she had come to her death by severe beating. The offence for which this girl was thus murdered was this: — She had been set that night to mind Mrs. Hick's baby and during the night she fell asleep, and the baby cried. She, having lost her rest for several nights previous, did not hear the crying. They were both in the room with Mrs. Hicks. Mrs. Hicks, finding the girl slow to move, jumped from her bed, seized an oak stick of wood by the fireplace, and with it broke the girl's nose and breastbone, and thus ended her life. I will not say that this most horrid murder produced no sensation in the community. It did produce sensation, but not enough to bring the murderess to punishment. There was a warrant issued for her arrest, but it was never served. Thus she escaped not only punishment, but even the pain of being arraigned before a court for her horrid crime.

Whilst I am detailing bloody deeds which took place during my stay on Colonel Lloyd's plantation, I will briefly narrate another, which occurred about the same time as the murder of Demby by Mr. Gore.

Colonel Lloyd's slaves were in the habit of spending a part of their nights and Sundays in fishing for oysters, and in this way made up the deficiency of their scanty allowance. An old man belonging to Colonel Lloyd, while thus engaged, happened to get beyond the limits of Colonel Lloyd's, and on the premises of Mr. Beal Bondly.<sup>21</sup> At this trespass, Mr. Bondly took offence, and with his musket came down to the shore, and blew its deadly contents into the poor old man.

Mr. Bondly came over to see Colonel Lloyd the next day, whether to pay him for his property, or to justify himself in what he had done, I know not. At any rate, this whole fiendish transaction was soon hushed up. There was very little said about it at all, and nothing done. It was a common saying, even among little white boys, that it was worth a half-cent to kill a "nigger," and a half-cent to bury one.

## CHAPTER V

As to my own treatment while I lived on Colonel Lloyd's plantation, it was very similar to that of the other slave children. I was not old enough to work in the field, and there being little else than field work to do, I had a great deal of leisure time. The most I had to do was to drive up the

<sup>21</sup>The correct name is John Beale Bordley Jr. The portrayal of these murders illustrates Douglass's use of his autobiography to write a stinging polemic against all the worst evils of slavery, such as these crimes committed in a lawless environment. *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ten years later, was a much more introspective work, muting somewhat these public-polemical features.



cows at evening, keep the fowls out of the garden, keep the front yard clean, and run of errands for my old master's daughter, Mrs. Lucretia Auld. The most of my leisure time I spent in helping Master Daniel Lloyd in finding his birds, after he had shot them. My connection with Master Daniel was of some advantage to me. He became quite attached to me, and was a sort of protector of me. He would not allow the older boys to impose upon me, and would divide his cakes with me.

I was seldom whipped by my old master, and suffered little from any thing else than hunger and cold. I suffered much from hunger, but much more from cold. In hottest summer and coldest winter, I was kept almost naked—no shoes, no stockings, no jacket, no trousers, nothing on but a coarse tow linen shirt, reaching only to my knees. I had no bed. I must have perished with cold, but that, the coldest nights, I used to steal a bag which was used for carrying corn to the mill. I would crawl into this bag, and there sleep on the cold, damp, clay floor, with my head in and feet out. My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes.<sup>22</sup>

We were not regularly allowanced. Our food was coarse corn meal boiled. This was called *mush*. It was put into a large wooden tray or trough, and set down upon the ground. The children were then called, like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush; some with oyster-shells, others with pieces of shingle, some with naked hands, and none with spoons. He that ate fastest got most; he that was strongest secured the best place; and few left the trough satisfied.

I was probably between seven and eight years old when I left Colonel Lloyd's plantation. I left it with joy. I shall never forget the ecstasy with which I received the intelligence that my old master (Anthony) had determined to let me go to Baltimore, to live with Mr. Hugh Auld, brother to my old master's son-in-law, Captain Thomas Auld. I received this information about three days before my departure. They were three of the happiest days I ever enjoyed. I spent the most part of all these three days in the creek, washing off the plantation scurf, and preparing myself for my departure.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Note the two senses of time in this passage: then and now, past and present. This metaphor of the pen in the gashes caused by shoelessness in the cold is one of Douglass's uses of indirection to stress the meaning of literacy to a slave. On this notion of two senses of time, see Albert E. Stone, "Identity and Art in Frederick Douglass' Narrative," *CLA Journal* 17 (1973), 192–213.

<sup>23</sup>An image perhaps of baptismal, ritual cleansing, foreshadowing freedom in that new, mysterious place called Baltimore.

The pride of appearance which this would indicate was not my own. I spent the time in washing, not so much because I wished to, but because Mrs. Lucretia had told me I must get all the dead skin off my feet and knees before I could go to Baltimore; for the people in Baltimore were very cleanly, and would laugh at me if I looked dirty. Besides, she was going to give me a pair of trousers, which I should not put on unless I got all the dirt off me. The thought of owning a pair of trousers was great indeed! It was almost a sufficient motive, not only to make me take off what would be called by pig-drovers the mange, but the skin itself. I went at it in good earnest, working for the first time with the hope of reward.

The ties that ordinarily bind children to their homes were all suspended in my case. I found no severe trial in my departure. My home was charmless; it was not home to me; on parting from it, I could not feel that I was leaving any thing which I could have enjoyed by staying. My mother was dead, my grandmother lived far off, so that I seldom saw her. I had two sisters and one brother, that lived in the same house with me; but the early separation of us from our mother had well nigh blotted the fact of our relationship from our memories. I looked for home elsewhere, and was confident of finding none which I should relish less than the one which I was leaving. If, however, I found in my new home hardship, hunger, whipping, and nakedness, I had the consolation that I should not have escaped any one of them by staying. Having already had more than a taste of them in the house of my old master, and having endured them there, I very naturally inferred my ability to endure them elsewhere, and especially at Baltimore; for I had something of the feeling about Baltimore that is expressed in the proverb, that "being hanged in England is preferable to dying a natural death in Ireland." I had the strongest desire to see Baltimore. Cousin Tom, though not fluent in speech, had inspired me with that desire by his eloquent description of the place. I could never point out any thing at the Great House, no matter how beautiful or powerful, but that he had seen something at Baltimore far exceeding, both in beauty and strength, the object which I pointed out to him. Even the Great House itself, with all its pictures, was far inferior to many buildings in Baltimore. So strong was my desire, that I thought a gratification of it would fully compensate for whatever loss of comforts I should sustain by the exchange. I left without a regret, and with the highest hopes of future happiness.

We sailed out of Miles River for Baltimore on a Saturday morning. I remember only the day of the week, for at that time I had no knowledge of the days of the month, nor the months of the year. On setting sail, I



walked aft, and gave to Colonel Lloyd's plantation what I hoped would be the last look. I then placed myself in the bows of the sloop, and there spent the remainder of the day in looking ahead, interesting myself in what was in the distance rather than in things near by or behind.

In the afternoon of that day, we reached Annapolis, the capital of the State. We stopped but a few moments, so that I had no time to go on shore. It was the first large town that I had ever seen, and though it would look small compared with some of our New England factory villages, I thought it a wonderful place for its size—more imposing even than the Great House Farm!

We arrived at Baltimore early on Sunday morning, landing at Smith's Wharf, not far from Bowley's Wharf. We had on board the sloop a large flock of sheep; and after aiding in driving them to the slaughterhouse of Mr. Curtis on Loudon Slater's Hill, I was conducted by Rich, one of the hands belonging on board of the sloop, to my new home in Alliciana Street, near Mr. Gardner's ship-yard, on Fells Point.

Mr. and Mrs. Auld were both at home, and met me at the door with their little son Thomas, to take care of whom I had been given. And here I saw what I had never seen before; it was a white face beaming with the most kindly emotions; it was the face of my new mistress, Sophia Auld.<sup>24</sup> I wish I could describe the rapture that flashed through my soul as I beheld it. It was a new and strange sight to me, brightening up my pathway with the light of happiness. Little Thomas was told, there was his Freddy,—and I was told to take care of little Thomas; and thus I entered upon the duties of my new home with the most cheering prospect ahead.

I look upon my departure from Colonel Lloyd's plantation as one of the most interesting events of my life. It is possible, and even quite probable, that but for the mere circumstance of being removed from that plantation to Baltimore, I should have to-day, instead of being here seated by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom and the happiness of home, writing this Narrative, been confined in the galling chains of slavery. Going to live at Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity. I have ever regarded it as the first plain manifestation of that kind providence which has ever since attended me, and marked my life with so many favors. I regarded

<sup>24</sup>Sophia Auld, wife of Hugh Auld. She is Douglass's "Miss Sophia" in both *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 142, and *Life and Times*, 76. Douglass learned to read with Sophia Auld, and he frequently told this tender part of his story on the abolitionist platform, using Sophia as both a potential mother symbol and an example of slavery's denial of such attachments.

the selection of myself as being somewhat remarkable. There were a number of slave children that might have been sent from the plantation to Baltimore. There were those younger, those older, and those of the same age. I was chosen from among them all, and was the first, last, and only choice.

I may be deemed superstitious, and even egotistical, in regarding this event as a special interposition of divine Providence in my favor. But I should be false to the earliest sentiments of my soul, if I suppressed the opinion. I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than to be false, and incur my own abhorrence. From my earliest recollection, I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom.<sup>25</sup> This good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise.

## CHAPTER VI

My new mistress proved to be all she appeared when I first met her at the door,—a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings. She had never had a slave under her control previously to myself, and prior to her marriage she had been dependent upon her own industry for a living. She was by trade a weaver; and by constant application to her business, she had been in a good degree preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery. I was utterly astonished at her goodness. I scarcely knew how to behave towards her. She was entirely unlike any other white woman I had ever seen. I could not approach her as I was accustomed to approach other white ladies. My early instruction was all out of place. The crouching servility, usually so acceptable a quality in a slave, did not answer when manifested toward her. Her favor was not gained by it; she seemed to be disturbed by it. She did not deem it impudent or unmannerly for a slave to look her in the face. The meanest slave was put fully at ease in her presence, and none left without feeling better for having seen her. Her face was made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music.

<sup>25</sup>The biblical reference for "ministering angels" is probably Matthew 4:11. Douglass's discussion of divine providence, faith, and a sense of chosenness reflects his religious outlook during these years. Douglass elaborates more on his youthful religious conversion in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 166–69.



But, alas! this kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon.

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld<sup>26</sup> found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. The very decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me

<sup>26</sup>Hugh Auld (1799–1861), younger brother of Thomas. He owned a shipbuilding business in Baltimore. Neither Hugh nor Thomas Auld ever made any serious effort to capture Douglass once he had escaped from slavery. Douglass's freedom was purchased for him by British antislavery friends. In December 1846, Hugh Auld received \$711.66 for Douglass, and the bill of sale was filed in the Baltimore Chattel Records Office. Preston, *Young Frederick Douglass*, 175.

instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.

I had resided but a short time in Baltimore before I observed a marked difference, in the treatment of slaves, from that which I had witnessed in the country. A city slave is almost a freeman, compared with a slave on the plantation.<sup>27</sup> He is much better fed and clothed, and enjoys privileges altogether unknown to the slave on the plantation. There is a vestige of decency, a sense of shame, that does much to curb and check those outbreaks of atrocious cruelty so commonly enacted upon the plantation. He is a desperate slaveholder, who will shock the humanity of his nonslaveholding neighbors with the cries of his lacerated slave. Few are willing to incur the odium attaching to the reputation of being a cruel master; and above all things, they would not be known as not giving a slave enough to eat. Every city slaveholder is anxious to have it known of him, that he feeds his slaves well; and it is due to them to say, that most of them do give their slaves enough to eat. There are, however, some painful exceptions to this rule. Directly opposite to us, on Philpot Street, lived Mr. Thomas Hamilton. He owned two slaves. Their names were Henrietta and Mary. Henrietta was about twenty-two years of age, Mary was about fourteen; and of all the mangled and emaciated creatures I ever looked upon, these two were the most so. His heart must be harder than stone, that could look upon these unmoved. The head, neck, and shoulders of Mary were literally cut to pieces. I have frequently felt her head and found it nearly covered with festering sores, caused by the lash of her cruel mistress. I do not know that her master ever whipped her, but I have been an eye-witness to the cruelty of Mrs. Hamilton. I used to be in Mr. Hamilton's house nearly every day. Mrs. Hamilton used to sit in a large chair in the middle of the room, with

<sup>27</sup>In this text, Douglass tells us very little about the free black community of Baltimore, which was one of the largest concentrations of free people of color in the South. By 1850, Baltimore had approximately 7,000 slaves, 175,000 whites, and nearly 30,000 free blacks. Anna Murray, Douglass's future wife, was one of those free blacks.



a heavy cowskin always by her side, and scarce an hour passed during the day but was marked by the blood of one of these slaves. The girls seldom passed her without her saying, "Move faster, you *black gip!*" at the same time giving them a blow with the cowskin over the head or shoulders, often drawing the blood. She would then say, "Take that, you *black gip!*"—continuing, "If you don't move faster, I'll move you!" Added to the cruel lashings to which these slaves were subjected, they were kept nearly half-starved. They seldom knew what it was to eat a full meal. I have seen Mary contending with the pigs for the offal thrown into the street. So much was Mary kicked and cut to pieces, that she was oftener called "*pecked*" than by her name.

## CHAPTER VII

I lived in Master Hugh's family about seven years. During this time, I succeeded in learning to read and write. In accomplishing this, I was compelled to resort to various stratagems. I had no regular teacher. My mistress, who had kindly commenced to instruct me, had, in compliance with the advice and direction of her husband, not only ceased to instruct, but had set her face against my being instructed by any one else. It is due, however, to my mistress to say of her, that she did not adopt this course of treatment immediately. She at first lacked the depravity indispensable to shutting me up in mental darkness. It was at least necessary for her to have some training in the exercise of irresponsible power, to make her equal to the task of treating me as though I were a brute.

My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tender-hearted woman; and in the simplicity of her soul she commenced, when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another. In entering upon the duties of a slaveholder, she did not seem to perceive that I sustained to her the relation of a mere chattel, and that for her to treat me as a human being was not only wrong, but dangerously so. Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness. The first step in her downward course was in her ceasing to instruct me. She now commenced to practise her husband's precepts.

She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself. She was not satisfied with simply doing as well as he had commanded; she seemed anxious to do better. Nothing seemed to make her more angry than to see me with a newspaper. She seemed to think that here lay the danger. I have had her rush at me with a face made all up of fury, and snatch from me a newspaper, in a manner that fully revealed her apprehension. She was an apt woman; and a little experience soon demonstrated, to her satisfaction, that education and slavery were incompatible with each other.

From this time I was most narrowly watched. If I was in a separate room any considerable length of time, I was sure to be suspected of having a book, and was at once called to give an account of myself. All this, however, was too late. The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the *inch*, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the *ell*.

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent to errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids;—not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country. It is enough to say of the dear little fellows, that they lived on Philpot Street, very near Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard. I used to talk this matter of slavery over with them. I would sometimes say to them, I wished I could be as free as they would be when they got to be men. "You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, *but I am a slave for life!* Have not I as good a right to be free as you have?" These words used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and console me with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free.

I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being *a slave for life* began to bear heavily upon my heart. Just about this time, I got



hold of a book entitled "The Columbian Orator."<sup>28</sup> Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book. Among much of other interesting matter, I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away from his master three times. The dialogue represented the conversation which took place between them, when the slave was retaken the third time. In this dialogue, the whole argument in behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master — things which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master.

In the same book, I met with one of Sheridan's mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation.<sup>29</sup> These were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again with unabated interest. They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance. The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder. What I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights. The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the

<sup>28</sup> Caleb Bingham, *The Columbian Orator: Containing a Variety of Original and Selected Pieces Together with Rules Calculated to Improve Youth and Others in the Ornamental and Useful Art of Eloquence* (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1797). Douglass bought a second-hand copy of this book for fifty cents at Nathaniel Knight's bookstore on Thames Street in Baltimore. It contains a remarkable collection of speeches from classical times and from the Age of Revolution by Cato, Socrates, Napoleon, George Washington, William Pitt the elder, Charles James Fox, and others. In these speeches, as well as in the crucial "Dialogue between a Master and Slave," Douglass encountered passage after passage about freedom, liberty, democracy, courage, virtue, and so forth. He especially learned and recited passages about the multilayered antithesis of slavery and bondage. Bingham's book also included a guide to techniques of oratory and eloquence. The future great orator and prophet of freedom could not have found a more useful and meaningful book at this point in his youth.

<sup>29</sup> Instead of Sheridan, Douglass actually refers here to Daniel O'Connor's "Speech in the Irish House of Commons, in Favour of the Bill for Emancipating the Roman Catholics, 1795."

most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me.<sup>30</sup> There was no getting rid of it. It was pressed upon me by every object within sight or hearing, animate or inanimate. The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm.

I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed. While in this state of mind, I was eager to hear any one speak of slavery. I was a ready listener. Every little while, I could hear something about the abolitionists. It was some time before I found what the word meant. It was always used in such connections as to make it an interesting word to me. If a slave ran away and succeeded in getting clear, or if a slave killed his master, set fire to a barn, or did any thing very wrong in the mind of a slaveholder, it was spoken of as the fruit of *abolition*.<sup>31</sup> Hearing the word in this connection very often, I set about learning what it meant. The dictionary afforded me little or no help. I found it was "the act of abolishing"; but then I did not know what was to be abolished. Here I was perplexed. I did not dare to ask any one about its meaning, for I was satisfied that it was something they wanted me

<sup>30</sup> This memorable passage about the dual nature of literacy — its curse as well as its blessing — is part of a tradition in African American autobiography. For another classic example, see *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 172–73.

<sup>31</sup> Douglass was thirteen years old during Nat Turner's rebellion in August 1831. It may have been at that time that he first read about "abolitionists" in the *Baltimore American*. See Preston, *Young Frederick Douglass*, 100–101.



to know very little about. After a patient waiting, I got one of our city papers, containing an account of the number of petitions from the north, praying for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, and of the slave trade between the States.<sup>32</sup> From this time I understood the words *abolition* and *abolitionist*, and always drew near when that word was spoken, expecting to hear something of importance to myself and fellow slaves. The light broke in upon me by degrees. I went one day down on the wharf of Mr. Waters; and seeing two Irishmen unloading a scow of stone, I went, unasked, and helped them. When we had finished, one of them came to me and asked me if I were a slave. I told him I was. He asked, "Are ye a slave for life?" I told him that I was. The good Irishman seemed to be deeply affected by the statement. He said to the other that it was a pity so fine a little fellow as myself should be a slave for life. He said it was a shame to hold me. They both advised me to run away to the north; that I should find friends there, and that I should be free. I pretended not to be interested in what they said, and treated them as if I did not understand them; for I feared they might be treacherous. White men have been known to encourage slaves to escape, and then, to get the reward, catch them and return them to their masters. I was afraid that these seemingly good men might use me so; but I nevertheless remembered their advice, and from that time I resolved to run away. I looked forward to a time at which it would be safe for me to escape. I was too young to think of doing so immediately; besides, I wished to learn how to write, as I might have occasion to write my own pass. I consoled myself with the hope that I should one day find a good chance. Meanwhile, I would learn to write.

The idea as to how I might learn to write was suggested to me by being in Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard, and frequently seeing the ship carpenters, after hewing, and getting a piece of timber ready for use, write on the timber the name of that part of the ship for which it was intended. When a piece of timber was intended for the larboard side, it would be marked thus—"L." When a piece was for the starboard side, it would be marked thus—"S." A piece for the larboard side forward,

<sup>32</sup> Petitions had been a major tool of the antislavery movement in the North since the late eighteenth century. The practice was revived with great energy in the 1830s. By 1835, the volume of abolitionist petitions flooding Congress reached such a level of controversy that the infamous "gag rule" was engineered to prevent their open discussion. By 1838, the year Douglass escaped from slavery, the American Anti-Slavery Society claimed that a total of 415,000 petitions had been sent to Washington, D.C. See James B. Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 81–84.

would be marked thus—"L.F." When a piece was for starboard side forward, it would be marked thus—"S.F." For larboard aft, it would be marked thus—"L.A." For starboard aft, it would be marked thus—"S.A." I soon learned the names of these letters, and for what they were intended when placed upon a piece of timber in the ship-yard. I immediately commenced copying them, and in a short time was able to make the four letters named. After that, when I met with any boy who I knew could write, I would tell him I could write as well as he. The next word would be, "I don't believe you. Let me see you try it." I would then make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that. In this way I got a good many lessons in writing, which it is quite possible I should never have gotten in any other way. During this time, my copy-book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk. With these, I learned mainly how to write. I then commenced and continued copying the Italics in Webster's Spelling Book, until I could make them all without looking on the book. By this time, my little Master Thomas had gone to school, and learned how to write, and had written over a number of copy-books. These had been brought home, and shown to some of our near neighbors, and then laid aside. My mistress used to go to class meeting at the Wilk Street meeting-house every Monday afternoon, and leave me to take care of the house. When left thus, I used to spend the time in writing in the spaces left in Master Thomas's copy-book, copying what he had written. I continued to do this until I could write a hand very similar to that of Master Thomas. Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write.

## CHAPTER VIII

In a very short time after I went to live at Baltimore, my old master's youngest son Richard died; and in about three years and six months after his death, my old master, Captain Anthony, died, leaving only his son, Andrew, and daughter, Lucretia, to share his estate. He died while on a visit to see his daughter at Hillsborough. Cut off thus unexpectedly, he left no will as to the disposal of his property. It was therefore necessary to have a valuation of the property, that it might be equally divided between Mrs. Lucretia and Master Andrew. I was immediately sent for, to be valued with the other property. Here again my feelings rose up in detestation of slavery. I had now a new conception of my degraded condition. Prior to this, I had become, if not insensible to my lot, at least