

## 19<sup>th</sup> Century Reformers: A Close Look at Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass transcended his time with extraordinary self-determination. Of many the heroic reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Frederick Douglass stood above them all. With his self-educated mind and staunch determination to share with the world his story of enslavement, he proved to be a remarkable man. He tirelessly spoke out, so that action would be taken to dismantle the institution of slavery. Using his stardom to meet and befriend President Lincoln, he pressured him continually to do more to end slavery. Though true influence over Lincoln is not known, Lincoln did commission the first black regiment in the Army (the Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup>), issue the emancipation proclamation, and plan anti-slavery conditions for confederate states to reenter the union. Frederick Douglass is not only a man worthy of study, but worth of considerable focus.

### **National Standard**

#### **ERA 4: EXPANSION AND REFORM (1801-1861)**

The student understands the source and character of cultural, religious, and social reform movements in antebellum period.

### **Massachusetts State Framework**

- USI.31** Describe the formation of the abolitionist movement, the roles of various abolitionists, and the response of southerners and northerners to abolitionism. (H)
- A. Frederick Douglass
  - B. William Lloyd Garrison
  - C. Sojourner Truth
  - D. Harriet Tubman
  - E. Theodore Weld

### **Timeframe**

Three-Seven class periods. (60 minutes each)

### **Objectives:**

1. To understand the physical, mental, and spiritual hardships of slaves
2. To examine primary sources: Frederick Douglass's own words as they apply to his captivity in slavery
3. To understand how the institution of slavery had negative effects upon the slaveholders themselves

### **Background:**

The issue of slavery in America is well chronicled. As a brutal system of forced labor until 1865, it strongly influenced the social, economic, and political landscape of what would eventually be the United States of America.

Millions of African-Americans were born into a system slavery that they could not understand and certainly had no choice. Born into a society that had no value for them other than their labor. A society in fact that was so repulsed by the idea that they might be equals that every part of a slave's life was dictated. From the moment the slaves woke to the moment the drivers released them from the day's work, every minute was structured. Even the smallest deviation from that structure was met with the brutal lash of an overseer. Under the plantation system, gang labor was the typical form of labor management. Overseers were harsh as a rule, and brutality was common. Punishments were dealt out by overseers and owners in total freedom of legal consequences. Slaves could not own property unless allowed by a slave master, and rape of a female slave was not considered a crime. Unless of course the slave belonged to another owner, than the crime of trespassing of another man's property could be charge. Housing, food, and clothing were actually costs of doing business and nothing more. Meaning that that those items were considered minimally necessary to maintain the desired level of work. Proving to be two of most damning of all were that in most of the South it was illegal to teach a slave to read or write, and slaves could not present evidence in court against whites.

Although the system of slavery was rigidly entrenched, many slave resisted in numerous ways. Those ways ranged from simply pretending to not understand instructions to suicide. Most feared by slave owners were open revolts. The Stono Rebellion and Harper Ferry come to mind as close but still failed attempts by slave to revolt against their captures. In fact, not one slave rebellion was successful in America.

It is important for students to know and understand the desperate attempt made by both abolitionists and slavery supporters. Numerous slaves attempted to runaway, some were successful and many were not. Stories of runaway slaves help to inspire others to attempt it. This is why the stories of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman are so extreme important. Douglass successfully transcended American society by escaping slavery and ascended to the highest levels of respectability within the country that once enslaved him.

Many lessons of perseverance, self determination, dedication, self-discipline, courage, and confidence can be taught through the examples left to us by heroes like Frederick Douglas.

### **Materials:**

Every student will need a copy of the autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. (You can purchase the 76 page book for a very inexpensive price of \$1.50)

### **Procedures:**

- Discuss the events, concerns, and emotions during the period of slavery during the antebellum period.
- Read in class and out class for homework, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.
- Create a list of themes throughout the reading and create a collage of ideas.
  - This collage can be done in any number of mediums. (use of technology could allow some students the creative freedom they need)
- Create a storybook
  - an illustrated timeline
- Create a *Facebook* page on Frederick Douglass.
- Writing project: (recommend to choose one)
  - interview with Frederick Douglass
    - Students will create a list of questions that they might ask Frederick Douglass.
    - Students should create approximately 10 core questions, each with possible follow questions.
    - The questions should be pertinent to Frederick Douglass's life and any issues that would help students understand the larger picture of slavery in antebellum America.
    - Differentiated instruction: (Honors/Advanced) students should then attempt to answer in Frederick Douglass's voice.
  - 3-3 1/2 page book review
    - Provide a brief book review
    - Thesis: What did I learn from the book? Would I recommend it?

### **Bibliography:**

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1995.

## Appendix

The following can serve as a model, or to assist students who need a bit of help asking sophisticated questions for the interview.

Question: Mr. Douglass, you have escaped slavery and become educated, self-sufficient, a great orator, and famous writer, is there anything in your public life that you would change; things that you had control over that is?

Question: What would say has been the one characteristic you possess that has made the biggest difference in your life?

Question: Please expand on your situation with William Lloyd Garrison.

Question: Please tell us how your journey to Ireland has changed or influenced your perspective?

Question: What are your thoughts on the Dred Scott case?

Question: Could you please describe how your experience as a slave influenced your initial interpretation of the U.S. Constitution?

Question: What inspired you to write your narrative as a slave?

Question: How did you see African Americans' role as citizens?

Question: To what do you give credit to your great orating skills?

Question: Since escaping slavery, did you see your life turning out the way it did?

Question: Could slavery have been abolished without the Civil War?

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