“Judge me not by the heights to which I’ve risen, but by the depths from which I have come,” declared Frederick Douglass, who escaped slavery to rise to spectacular heights as an abolitionist, orator, author, newspaper publisher and editor, human rights activist, and diplomat. This daguerreotype done between 1847 and 1852 by Samuel J. Miller shows us the man who achieved such heights against almost overwhelming odds. [See slide 1] The depths to which Douglass refers had their origin some three hundred years before his birth when in 1619 a shipload of twenty African slaves were delivered to the eastern shores of North America. The Africans were brought to bolster the economy of the fledgling colonies, particularly the agricultural plantations of the South, where the need for steady, cheap labor was crucial.

This forced migration thus launched the beginning of slavery in what would become, some 150 years later, the United States of America. For his entire free life, Douglass fought tirelessly against slavery on behalf of America to become the most important African American of the nineteenth century. “Under the whole heavens there is no relation more unfavorable to the development of honorable character,” he proclaimed, “than that sustained by the slaveholder to the slave.”

Douglass was born as Frederick Bailey in Tuckahoe, on Maryland’s eastern shore. “I have no accurate knowledge of my age,” he wrote later in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), the first of his four books. “The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege.” He was separated from his black mother in infancy—“a common custom,” he wrote—and afterwards, saw her only several times, always at night. “She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone.” A fieldhand on a plantation twelve miles away, she made the journey by foot, leaving work after sundown and arriving back on the field by sunrise; otherwise, she would be whipped. Of his white father, “I know nothing,” he said; “the means of knowing was withheld from me.”

He was brought up by his grandmother on what Douglass described as “the outskirts of the plantation where she was put to raise the children of the younger women.” Later, Douglass recounted with bitterness the story of his beloved grandmother, a slave for life: “She had served my old master faithfully from youth to old age.... She had peopled his plantation with slaves.... She had rocked him in infancy, and attended him in childhood, served him through life, and at death wiped from his icy brow the cold death-sweat and had closed his eyes forever.... Her present owners finding she was of but little value, her frame already racked with the pains of old age ... took her to the woods, built her a little hut ... and then made her welcome to the privilege of supporting herself there in perfect loneliness; thus virtually turning her out to die!”

---

* designates entry in Biographical Glossary

---

**SAMUEL J. MILLER**
At about six years of age, Douglass crossed the threshold to what he called "the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery." One of his first sights was a brutal whipping of his aunt. Stripped from waist to neck, hands tied and hung from a large hook, she was whipped until blood pooled on the floor. Her crime was that she had met a male friend one night, a fellow slave on a neighboring plantation, against her jealous master's orders. "Now you damned bitch," Douglass heard him scream, "I'll learn you how to disobey my orders!"

For the next fourteen years, Douglass was passed back and forth like the property he was, from owner to owner, from various eastern shore plantations to the bustling seaport city of Baltimore. On the plantations, he performed tasks around the main house as a child, suffering mainly from "hunger and cold." He elaborated: "I was kept almost naked—no shoes, no stockings, no jacket, no trousers, nothing on but a coarse ... linen shirt, reaching only to my knees." When he was older, he worked in the fields from sunrise to sundown, planting and harvesting tobacco, corn, and wheat.

A city slave fared better. Around age eight, he was sent to new masters in Baltimore, then the third largest city in the country. There, Douglass had enough to eat and his own straw mattress. He spent nearly ten years in Baltimore, running errands around the house and later working at the shipyards, his pay going to his owner. Most importantly, as Douglass later declared: "Going to live at Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity." For in Baltimore, Douglass learned to read and write. First he had his mistress's blessing, but soon her husband forbade her from continuing. "Learning will spoil the best nigger in the world," her husband had raged. "If you teach him to read, he'll want to know how to write, and this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself."

Although it took him many years, Douglass did just that. Practicing to read in secret, he used the discarded schoolbooks of his master's children until he earned enough money polishing boots to buy his fortuitous first book, The Columbian Orator. Not only did the collection of poems and speeches expose him, for the first time, to a point of view that morally opposed slavery, but it also provided him with models with which to practice—and perfect—his own speaking skills.

In 1832, as property of his recently deceased original master, Douglass was shipped back to the Maryland plantations. Because of his rebellious nature, he was soon sent to a "slave-breaker," whose task it was to crush the will of defiant slaves. Douglass would bear the scars from repeated flogging on his back for the remainder of his life. "I was broken in body, soul, and spirit," Douglass recalled, until, faced one day with yet another lashing, Douglass unexpectedly found himself fighting back. "However long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I
did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.” Douglass’s courageous act apparently so intimidated the slave-breaker that no more brutality occurred. Nor did Douglass receive the punishment he called “more relentless than death”—being auctioned off to cotton plantations in the Deep South. There, slaves suffered not only separation from families, but were treated more harshly and the likelihood of escape was remote.

Finally, six years after the decisive battle with the slave-breaker, the twenty-year-old Douglass escaped and boarded a train to freedom in 1838. He had obtained false identification papers and, pretending he was an experienced sailor bound for sea, nervously rode to New York. There, as prearranged, he met and married Anna Murray, a free black woman whom he had met in Baltimore and with whom he eventually had five children. They settled in the rich whaling town of New Bedford, Massachusetts, where Douglass worked at odd jobs for four years. (He was barred from his trade as a ship caulker because he was black.) To avoid capture, he also changed his name from Bailey to Douglass. He chose his new surname after the heroine Lucy Douglass in Sir Walter Scott’s* (1771-1832) poem The Lady of the Lake—a premonition perhaps of Douglass’s later pioneering support for women’s rights.

In 1841, at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society summer meeting in Nantucket, Douglass made a stirring speech recounting his firsthand experiences as a slave. So captivating was his talk that the society recruited him as a full-time lecturer. National exposure made people doubt that so articulate a spokesperson could have been a former slave. To prove he wasn’t a fraud, Douglass published the above-mentioned narrative of his life as a slave in 1845. But his increased fame, coupled with the facts he disclosed in his book, made him visible prey to slave-catchers. To avoid his capture, abolitionist allies sent him to England in 1845, where British admirers proceeded to raise $711.66—the amount needed to pay off Douglass’s owner—so that Douglass could return to the United States in 1847 a free man.

His speaking powers were now at their height. In 1852, asked to make an Independence Day speech in his new home of Rochester, New York, he declined, agreeing to speak the following day, July 5. Known as “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” the speech is perhaps the finest anti-slavery address Douglass ever delivered: “The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense and your Christianity as a lie.... It fetters your progress; it is the deadly enemy of improvement; the deadly foe of education; it fosters pride it breeds insolence, it promotes vice; it shelters crime; it is a curse to the earth that supports it; and yet you cling to it as if it were the sheet anchor of all of your hopes.”

This striking daguerreotype was made around the same time, between 1847 and 1852. At six feet tall, with strong, handsome features, an intense gaze and a mass of hair, Douglass was always an imposing figure. But captured
here is a certain quality, a state of barely suppressed fury, that early feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) so accurately describes: “He stood there like an African prince, majestic in his wrath, as with wit, satire, and indignation, he graphically described the bitterness of slavery and the humiliation of subjection to those who ... were inferior to himself. Thus it was that I first saw Frederick Douglass, and wondered that any mortal man should have ever tried to subjugate a being with such talents, intensified with the love of liberty.”

Circumstances had conspired to exacerbate that majestic wrath. The federal government had recently passed the Fugitive Slave Law, increasing protection for slaveholders. From a believer in peaceful agitation, Douglass now declared: “Every slave-hunter who meets a bloody death in his infernal business, is an argument in favor of the manhood of our race.” These drastic measures may have run counter to the party line of the white abolitionists who had, up until now, run his career, much as political handlers of candidates today. The scowl and furrowed brow we see here may be manifestations of Douglass’s recent radicalization—his newfound self-assertion on behalf, solely, of blacks.

Daguerreotypes were unveiled in France in 1839, one of the two original forms in which photography was invented. Daguerreotypes were unique objects, produced on a silver-coated copper plate that had been photo-sensitized. Their glory was their extraordinary clarity and detail, which made them the perfect vehicle for portraiture. With this miraculous invention, everyone, it seemed, wanted to be photographed for posterity—from famous individuals like Douglass to workmen and peasants. Responding to the demand, portrait galleries opened throughout Europe and America.

Samuel J. Miller, whose name is on the inside of this velvet case, is an example of this trend. He opened a daguerreotype shop in Akron, Ohio. Douglass probably passed through the Akron area around 1852 on one of his lecture circuits, taking a moment from his busy schedule to have this striking portrait made.

Americans in particular embraced this new medium. Writer and physician Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.* (1809-1894) called daguerreotypes “the mirror with a memory.” With Douglass’s exasperated intensity, this powerful image not only reveals his magnetic character, but reflects him at a specific juncture in time. American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1803-1882) declared that daguerreotypes were the true republican artform, because the artist steps aside and lets the sitter create him or herself. There could be no better medium, then, to capture Douglass who was, in all senses of the word, “self-made.”

As the country edged closer to the divisiveness of the Civil War (1861-1865), Douglass turned words into action. He donated funds from his
speeches to aid the **Underground Railroad**, which helped runaway slaves reach safe havens—or, as Douglass said, “get Canada under their feet.” He used his weekly paper, *The Northern Star*, to spread anti-slavery sentiment. He also developed a friendship with the radical abolitionist John Brown (1800-1859). Although Douglass did not participate in Brown’s ill-fated anti-slavery assault on Harper’s Ferry in western Virginia, a warrant was still issued for Douglass’s arrest on charges of conspiracy after federal troops raided Brown’s compound in 1859. Douglass fled again to England for several months, returning home only after Brown had been tried and hanged.

“God be praised! that it has come at last!” exulted Douglass May 1861, after the outbreak of the Civil War. Perhaps the most influential African American during the war, Douglass lobbied Abraham Lincoln, president from 1861-1865, relentlessly to make the abolition of slavery the Civil War’s main agenda. “No War but an Abolition War; no peace but an Abolition peace; liberty for all, Chains for none” Douglass declared. Dubbed by Douglass “the slow coach at Washington,” Lincoln finally signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, declaring all southern slaves free effective January 1, 1863. A jubilant Douglass proclaimed the date “a day for poetry and song.” He doubled his efforts throughout the North recruiting “men of color to arms!”

During the post-Civil War decade known as the Reconstruction era, many of Douglass’s crusades seemed successful. The Constitution of the United States abolished slavery while guaranteeing civil rights and suffrage for black males. Nonetheless, racism remained rampant. “We are not quite yet free,” Douglass lamented. “We have been turned out of the house of bondage, but we have not yet been fully admitted to the glorious temple of American liberty.” Even with the future “shrouded in doubt and danger,” Douglass remained a loyal member of the Republican party, bringing in black votes. Republican presidents rewarded him with various political posts, including that of United States Minister to Haiti.

But by the late 1880s, Douglass understood that his campaign to realize America’s ideals of freedom, equality, and justice for all was a battle without end. Mob lynchings, widespread poverty, and southern maneuvers to thwart blacks’ rights caused Douglass to proclaim: “Until truth and humanity shall cease to be living ideas, this struggle will go on.” From his hilltop home in Washington, D.C., where he had moved in 1878, he became an elder statesman for the African American cause as well as the nation’s conscience to realize its best self. “The American people have this lesson to learn,” he reminded them in one of his late speeches. “That where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob, and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.” With his ardent speeches and passion for justice, Douglass continued to captivate audiences until a year before his death, in 1895.
1. A daguerreotype is an early photography, yet poet Ralph Waldo Emerson said that daguerreotypes allowed the sitter to paint him- or herself. What does this mean? How did Douglass “paint himself”? What visual clues in the daguerreotype reveal Douglass’s temperament? Ask students to consider how they would convey their personality in a photographic portrait; what objects would they hold? What directions would they give the photographer? If cameras are available, have students photograph one another, following directions given by the sitter.

2. “Judge me not by the heights to which I’ve risen, but by the depths from which I have come,” declared Douglass. Have students create a timeline of Douglass’s life, drawing information from his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. Add to the timeline events in American history, with emphasis on milestones in the fight to conquer slavery and racism.

3. Frederick Douglass was a captivating speaker, delivering impassioned speeches about the injustices of slavery and racism to audiences around the country. Share some of his speeches with your students and discuss why they are effective. Have students pick an issue about which they are impassioned to serve as the subject of a speech that each can write and present to the class.

4. After the abolition of slavery, Douglass said “We have been turned out of the house of bondage, but we have not yet been fully admitted to the glorious temple of American liberty.” If Douglass were alive today, what would he think about the progress made towards stamping out racism in the United States? Have students discuss.