Frderick Douglass Essay, Research Paper

Kealan

African-American History

Mid-Term Paper

Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery in 1817, in Tuckahoe, Maryland. The exact date of his birth is not known, but he adopted February 14th as his birthday. He knew very little about his mother because she worked as a field hand on a plantation a few miles away. Douglass did not know his father but it was rumored that he was the son of a white slave master. Douglass lived a difficult childhood and was often mistreated. He was sent to Baltimore in 1825 to serve as a houseboy for Hugh and Sophia Auld. Mrs. Auld grew so enamored of the young boy that she began to teach him to read and write. As Douglass began to learn more about the evils of slavery, his hatred of the institution continued prosper. When Mr. Auld died in 1832, Frederick was passed on to Thomas Auld. Auld tried to break the spirit of young Frederick so he hired Edward Covey to work and beat him mercilessly. Douglass endured this mistreatment until one day he fought back. Shortly after that, Douglass met Anna Murray and fell in love with her. He then became more determined to be a free man. Disguised as a sailor, Douglass escaped to New York City. He met a man named David Ruggles, an Abolitionist, who took Douglass under his wing and set up his marriage. The couple then moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts. (McFeely)

Douglass began to attend Anti-Slavery meetings and became a compelling force in the abolitionist movement. A man of moral authority, Douglass developed into a charismatic public speaker. William Lloyd Garrison recognized this and made him speaker for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. His towering stature emanated strength and dignity, which gave him a commanding presence. He showed such great mastery of the English language that many people began to question whether he was ever really a slave at all. Douglass removed this doubt when he published a narrative about his life, in which he depicted the horrors of slavery. Douglass then fled to England out of fear that he might be returned to slavery. He remained there for two years before he would return.

Frederick Douglass has been called the father of the civil rights movement. He rose through determination, brilliance, and eloquence to help shape the American nation. He was an abolitionist, human rights and women s rights activist, orator, author, journalist, publisher, and social reformer. He dedicated his life to achieving justice for all Americans, in particular African-Americans, women, and minority groups. He worried not only about the effect of white supremacy on blacks, but also on whites, how it would affect America as a whole. (Martin Jr.) He felt that true freedom could not be attained for him until all Negroes were free and equal.

Douglass envisioned America as an inclusive nation that would be strengthened by diversity and free of discrimination. After the abolishment of slavery at the end of the Civil War, Douglass turned his attention to the full integration of African-Americans into the political and economic life in the United States. In his autobiography, My Bondage and My Freedom, he says, To those who have suffered in slavery I can say, I too, have suffered To those who have battled for liberty, brotherhood, and citizenship I can say, I too, have battled

Douglass was not strictly an abolitionist. Douglass urged women to fight for the right to vote. He actively supported the women s rights movement, but he believed that black men should receive suffrage first. Douglass said, In respect to political rights, we hold women to be justly entitled to all we claim for man All political rights which it is expedient for man to exercise, it is equally so for women. (Douglass pg.359)

Douglass was also a very accomplished writer. He had his own weekly abolitionist newspaper, The North Star, which became a major voice of African-American opinion. Douglass rose from slavery to become one of the leading African-American voices of the nineteenth century. He realized at an early age that it would be his ability to read and write that would be the key to his freedom. All of his efforts were focused on achieving freedom. Kelly Miller said, Douglass held up to scorn the sins of the white man Douglass spoke what he thought the world should hear. (Andrews pg. 36) Douglass worked tirelessly to retain the hard fought advances of African-Americans, but the progress made during reconstruction faded as the twentieth century commenced. He spent his last years opposing lynching and supporting women s rights. Douglass wrote provocative editorials on a variety of topics, slavery being one of them.

Douglass was also a man of action. He focused attention on the Jim Crow laws in the North. He often entered public places in which he knew these laws were enforced, risking physical ejection. He supported fugitive slaves by providing them with money. He also used his printing shop as an Underground Railroad for slaves. Douglass was intrigued with John Brown s use of revolutionary means to end slavery. However, he decided against joining Brown in his plan to overthrow the government. Douglass did not agree with Brown s violent tactics.

Douglass served many positions in the government while he was in Washington D.C. He served as an advisor to many presidents. Abraham Lincoln referred to him as the most meritorious man of the nineteenth century. In his later years he was appointed to several offices. He served as U.S. Marshall of the District of Columbia during Rutherford B. Hayes administration. James Garfield appointed him the District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds. In 1889, President Benjamin Harrison appointed him to be minister to Haiti. President Grant made him serve as Secretary of the Commission of Santo Domingo. Douglass hoped that his appointments would open doors for other African-Americans, but it would be many years before any would follow in his footsteps.

Bibliography

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