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Background Reading: Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was born in 1817. "I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. . .I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. . .The white children could tell their ages. . ."

His mother was a black slave and his father a white farmer. "I never saw my mother, to know her as such; more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. . . She died when I was about seven years old, on one of my master's farms, near Lee's Mill."

By the time he was 8 years old, Douglass was sent to work at a slave plantation for the Auld family. Despite the state law against teaching a slave to read and write, Ms. Auld taught Douglass to read. Mr. Auld was less kind, and often beat and abused his slaves, including Douglass. "He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped. . ."

Douglass escaped to the North using the papers of a freed, black sailor. He was forced to do odd jobs for 3 years until he became involved with the anti-slavery movement. Douglass hoped that abolition could be achieved without violence. In 1847, Douglass began his own antislavery newspaper, *The North Star*. He also worked on the Underground Railroad with Harriet Tubman. He often led escaped slaves all the way to safety in Canada.

However, by 1859, Douglass began to doubt that peaceful means could end slavery. He met secretly with abolitionist John Brown who was planning to attack Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Brown planned to capture 100,000 guns, free slaves, and start a war. Douglass decided not to join Brown, saying the attack would be a mistake. "Here we separated; he to go to Harper's Ferry, I to Rochester." Being a part of the conspiracy, not the attack, Douglass himself had to flee to Canada. He returned to not only continue his work as an abolitionist, but eventually as the advisor to President Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War.

Guiding Questions

1. What experiences did Douglass have that led him to try to become an abolitionist?

2. What actions did Douglass take to end slavery?