Home + News

How Travel Shaped Frederick Douglass’ Famous Speech 'What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?'

Douglass delivered the famous speech to a crowd of 600 people on July 5, 1852, in Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York.

BY **KWIN MOSBY** | JULY 01, 2020

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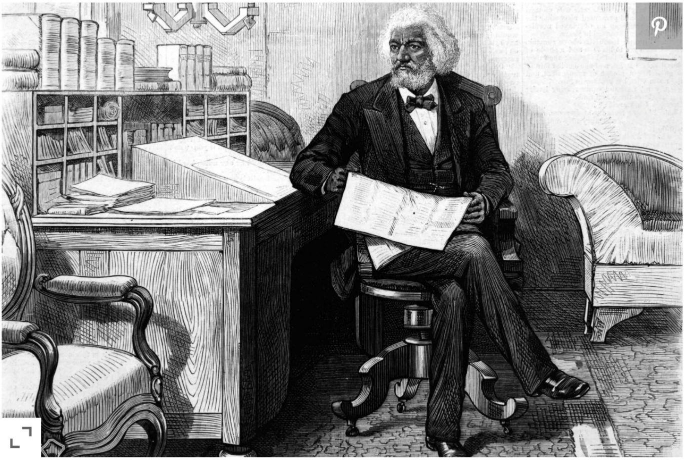

PHOTO: HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Cookouts, hot dogs, and fireworks are just a few of the things we typically associate with the Fourth of July. The national holiday is recognized every year to commemorate the Continental Congress signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, which gave 13 colonies their freedom from

British rule. But as most Americans celebrated, millions of Black slaves were in bondage.

Abolitionist Frederick Douglass called out the hypocrisy of the holiday in his speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?", delivered to a crowd of 600 people on July 5, 1852, in Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York. The Ladies Anti-Slavery Society of Rochester, New York, invited him to speak on July Fourth, but he spoke on the fifth to discredit the national holiday, as well as to commemorate July 5, 1827 — the end of slavery in New York.

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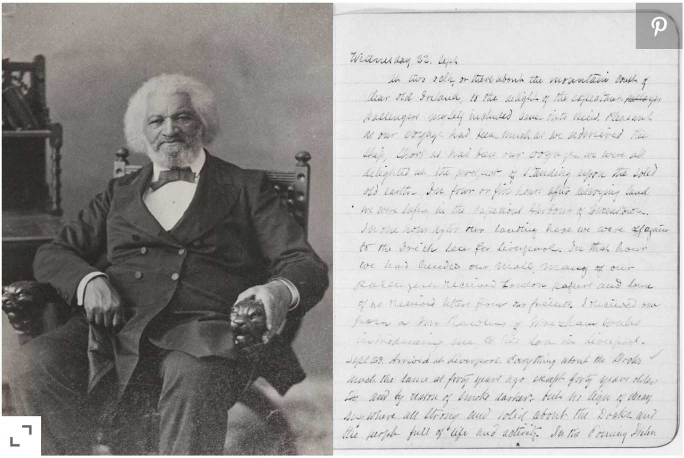
His famous speech still resonates with the African-American community today, just as it did almost two centuries ago. In order to grasp the importance of Douglass' speech, all Americans should not only understand the man who penned it, but also understand how traveling to Europe profoundly transformed his perspective and emboldened his determination to end slavery in the United States.

The Story Behind the Abolitionist



Wednesday 22. Sept
At two o'clk or there about the mountain coast of
dear old Ireland, to the delight of the expectant ~~passages~~
passengers myself included came into view. Pleasant
as our voyage had been much as we admired the
ship, short as had been our voyage we were all
delighted at the prospect of standing upon the solid
old earth. In four or five hours after sighting land
we were safely in the capacious Harbour of Queenstown.
In one hour after our landing here we were off again
to the Irish Sea for Liverpool. In that hour
we had landed our mail, many of our
passengers received London papers and some
of us received letters from our friends. I received one
from a Mr Rawlins of Wrexham Wales
introducing me to his son in Liverpool.
Sept 23. Arrived at Liverpool. Everything about the Docks ✓
much the same as forty years ago except forty years older
&c and by reason of smoke darker but no sign of decay
anywhere all strong and solid about the Docks and
the people full of life and activity. In the Evening Helen

PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, MANUSCRIPT DIVISION, THE FREDERICK DOUGLASS PAPERS AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS/SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE, PHOTOGRAPHS AND PRINTS DIVISION, THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

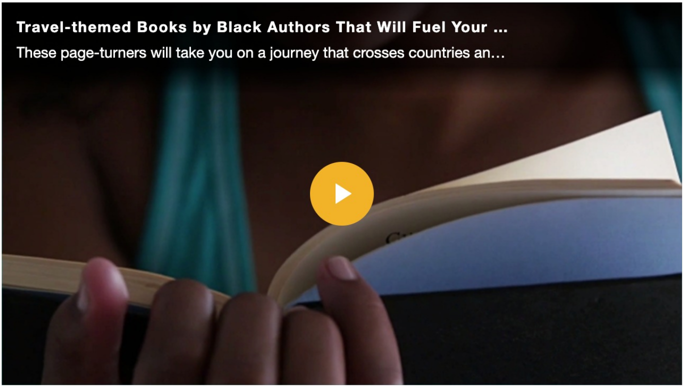
The son of Harriet Bailey and an unknown white man, Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was born in February 1818. He spent the first few years of his life with his maternal grandmother, Betsy Bailey, in Talbot County, Maryland. And even though his mother lived on a plantation 12 miles from them, he would only see her a few times before she died. When Douglass was six years old, he was separated from his grandparents and was moved to the Wye House Plantation, where Aaron Anthony (allegedly his father) worked as an overseer.

In 1826, when Anthony passed, Douglass was given to the Auld family in Baltimore. Sophia Auld taught him the alphabet, but her husband halted the tutoring, claiming that literacy would encourage slaves to crave for their freedom. At 12 years old, Douglass continued to secretly teach himself how to read and write, and it was also the first time in his life that he heard about abolitionists.

Douglass wanted a different path for his life, and on Jan. 1, 1836, he made a promise that he'd be free by the end of the year. Unfortunately, in April of the same year, he was thrown in jail after his plan to escape was discovered. It would be two years before Douglass would finally follow through on his promise to himself. While working at a shipyard in Baltimore, Douglass fled the city by train and steamboat, and didn't stop until he arrived in New York City, where he reconnected with Anna Murray, a freed slave he met in Baltimore. The couple got married and several weeks later, they settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts. The abolitionist and his wife decided to adopt the last name Douglass from the narrative poem, “The Lady of the Lake,” by Sir Walter Scott. It was a move to keep Douglass’ former slave owner off his trail. While living in New Bedford, Douglass attended abolitionists’ meetings and befriended a prominent white abolitionist and mentor, William Lloyd Garrison.

Douglass became an abolitionist lecturer traveling in the north, from Maine to Michigan, attracting anti-slavery supporters.

In 1845, Douglass published his first autobiography, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.” Friends feared that the publicity from the book would attract the attention of his ex-owner, Hugh Auld, who could legally ask to take his “property” back. So, for his safety, Douglass was encouraged to embark on a trans-Atlantic journey that would change his life forever.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These page-turners will take you on a journey that crosses countries an...

His Transformative Trans-Atlantic Tour

In August 1845, Douglass set sail on the Cambria, a ship headed for Britain. Traveling abroad offered a very different cultural experience because Britain had ended the British Atlantic slave trade in 1807, and slavery was abolished in 1833. Freedom was more than an intangible word used in his lectures. For the first time, Douglass experienced it firsthand in a country where many people respected him for rising from a life of servitude and becoming an eloquent orator.

From Liverpool, Douglass traveled to Ireland, staying in hotels or with abolitionists across the country. He shared the stage with well-known anti-slavery leaders, including Daniel O'Connell, known to most as the Irish Liberator and a supporter of Catholic rights in Parliament. Douglass visited Belfast, Dublin, Limerick, and the Giant's Causeway. But he didn't always receive a warm welcome — some Irishmen demanded he be sent back to America. And even though his lecture brochures and advertisements were branded with graffiti, he still appreciated this unique opportunity to see another part of the world. His biggest discovery as he toured multiple countries: the United Kingdom was a land of freedom, and the United States was not.

Crowds flocked to hear Douglass speak, including in Dundee, Scotland, where three of four scheduled meetings became so crowded that organizers had to issue tickets for the last meeting. He was popular among anti-slavery Scots because he used his powerful oratory skills to try and shame the Free Church — an independent sect of the Church of Scotland — since they were known to send missionaries to support slave owners in their fight to maintain slavery in the U.S.

Touring Europe, Douglass exposed the cracks of freedom and the cruelty of slavery by giving audiences a firsthand look at tools such as manacles, chains, and whips. And he attacked the symbols of freedom, including the Declaration of Independence against Britain. Douglass spoke in huge industrial towns and small fishing villages on the coast of England. He used every form of transportation available — steamship, omnibus, carriage, and train — to reach the masses. The abolitionist chose the right time to visit the United Kingdom because the country was experiencing a major railway boom, which provided him and other abolitionists with the option to travel between cities and speak on the day of their arrival — an early form of tourism and the perfect vehicle to help spread their anti-slavery message.

In 1846, Douglass' tour continued to gain momentum in Europe, which allowed him to meet reputable abolitionists, such as Thomas Clarkson, a British abolitionist who persuaded Parliament to abolish slavery in Great Britain's colonies. With the tour momentum came notoriety, which some British supporters worried about. So, supporters like Anna Richardson and her sister-in-law, Ellen Richardson, led a fundraiser to buy Douglass his freedom from his American owner, Thomas Auld. The funds were raised, and Douglass became a free man. Friends urged him to stay, but in 1847, Douglass returned to U.S. for his wife Anna and because he felt a sense of urgency to continue the fight for the millions of Black men and women still in bondage in the country.

Calling Out the Hypocrisy in Celebrating the Fourth of July

Prior to his return to the U.S., Douglass and his longtime friend, William Lloyd Garrison, who also occasionally toured with him in Europe, went their separate ways. Douglass thought Garrison was becoming too radical by denouncing churches, political parties, voting, and proposing the break-up of the Union. After his two-year stint in Europe, Douglass became more of an independent thinker and more pragmatic. With financial help from British supporters, Douglass started publishing *The North Star*, his first abolitionist newspaper in Rochester.

In addition to his newspaper, Douglass and his wife were an integral part of the Underground Railroad, offering lodging and whatever they had to more than 400 escaped slaves. The great orator and abolitionist continued championing freedom for slaves. In 1948, he became the only African American to attend the First Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. But one of the Black abolitionist's most memorable moments was his speech, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" After traveling on his lecture tour, visiting cities and towns in England, Scotland, and Ireland, the prolific orator was able to draw comparisons and call out the hypocrisy of celebrating Independence Day.

Douglass said in a section of his speech:

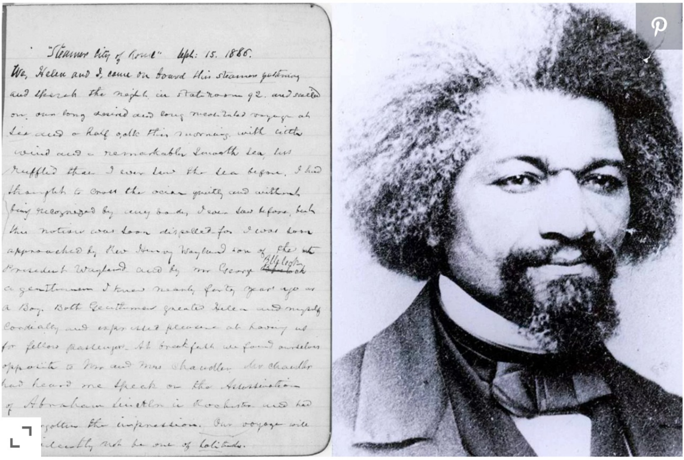
"The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn."

Mary Frances Berry, the Geraldine R. Segal Professor of American Social Thought and professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania, believes Douglass' experiences while traveling abroad allowed him to draw historic comparisons, which made this a powerful speech. "In his speech, he was able to make a lot of references to compare the United States. After colonists claimed there was oppression, the country was able to free itself from the Brits to seek liberty and justice for everybody," said Berry. "And yet they held people in bondage; meanwhile the Brits have abolished slavery."

In another section of the speech, Douglass said:

“What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy — a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.”

Berry, a member on the Editorial Advisory Board for the Frederick Douglass Papers, said that Douglass’ speech calls out ministers and religious leaders for not doing anything, in comparison to Britain, where the abolitionists witness something completely different. “With Christianity, the church [did not take] any leadership in calling attention to the inconsistencies of holding men and women in bondage,” said Berry. “But in Britain, the church was at the forefront of the movement to end the slave trade and then to end slavery.”



"Steamer City of Rome" Sept: 15. 1886.

We, Helen and I, came on board this steamer yesterday and spent the night in state-room 92. and sailed on our long desired and long meditated voyage at six and a half o,clk this morning with little wind and a remarkably smooth sea, less ruffled than I ever saw the sea before. I had thought to cross the ocean quietly and without being recognized by any body, I ever saw before, but this notion was soon dispelled—for I was soon approached by Rev Henry Wayland son of the late President Wayland and by Mr George ~~[illegible]~~ Blylock a gentleman I knew nearly forty years ago as a Boy. Both Gentlemen greeted Helen and myself cordially and expressed pleasure at having us for fellow passengers. At breakfast we found ourselves opposite to Mr and Mrs Chandler. Mr Chandler had heard me speak on the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln in Rochester and had rgotten the impression. Our voyage will idently not be one of solitude.

PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, MANUSCRIPT DIVISION, THE FREDERICK DOUGLASS PAPERS AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS/SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE, PHOTOGRAPHS AND PRINTS DIVISION, THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Two years in Europe transformed Douglass’ perspective. He left a place that treated him less than human to tour a number of countries where, for the most part, people embraced and respected him. And even though slavery was abolished when the 13th Amendment passed in 1865, the remnants of slavery still exist today, according to Berry.

“Black lives are at great risk and the equality and justice that one might have wanted and predicted — with abolition and independence — have not occurred,” said Berry. “Symbolism is important, but symbolism is no substitute for change in a positive direction.”