

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • LEGEND

What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?

Frederick Douglass and the Argument for Freedom

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Contribution Track • ERA III • Raleigh, North Carolina

Who He Is

Frederick Douglass was born enslaved around February 1818 in Talbot County, Maryland — he said himself he had no accurate knowledge of his own age, since enslavers commonly withheld birth dates from the people they held as property. He later chose February 14 as a symbolic birthday, tied to a memory of his mother calling him her "little Valentine." Sent to Baltimore as a boy, he learned the alphabet from his enslaver's wife before her husband forbade it, telling her that literacy would make a slave "unfit" to be a slave — a warning Douglass later said taught him exactly what he needed to escape.

Escape and The North Star

He continued learning to read in secret, trading bread for lessons from poor white children and studying The Columbian Orator's arguments for natural rights. On September 3, 1838, disguised as a sailor and using borrowed identification papers, he escaped to New York in under a day, aided by his fiancée Anna Murray, a free Black woman who funded and helped plan the escape. He founded the abolitionist newspaper The North Star in Rochester in 1847, its masthead declaring "Right is of no Sex — Truth is of no Color — God is the Father of us all, and we are all Brethren."

What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?

Delivered July 5, 1852, in Rochester, this remains his most quoted address, asking his audience directly what the nation's founding holiday meant to those it still enslaved.

"What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? ... 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." —

Frederick Douglass

The War and After

Douglass recruited Black soldiers for the Union, including for the 54th Massachusetts, and met with Lincoln at the White House to press for equal pay and treatment for Black troops. After the war he served as U.S. Marshal and later Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia, and as Minister Resident to Haiti. He died February 20, 1895, at his home in Washington, D.C., at seventy-seven.

NC Local Lens

Douglass visited North Carolina twice, both times in Raleigh — not Cumberland County — and this entry represents that tie honestly rather than stretching it. On July 25, 1872, he delivered a Republican campaign address at Metropolitan Hall ahead of that year's state election, sharing the platform with Senator John Pool and Black Radical Republican James H. Harris. On October 1, 1880, he delivered the opening address at the North Carolina Industrial Association's annual fair, a Raleigh-based organization of Black businessmen and farmers, urging attendees toward education and economic self-sufficiency and declaring that "emancipation was not the destruction, but the salvation of North Carolina." No Fayetteville or Cumberland County visit is documented, and none is claimed here.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Birth date: Feb. 14 is a chosen commemorative date, not a documented birthdate; year 1818 rests on later biographical research, not Douglass's own certain knowledge.

Exact quotation wording: widely cited passages should be checked against a primary-text edition before verbatim use.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Frederick Douglass," National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/frdo/learn/historyculture/frederickdouglass.htm>.
2. "Frederick Douglass Timeline," Library of Congress, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/frederick-douglass-papers/articles-and-essays/frederick-douglass-timeline/>.
3. "Vote the Regular Republican Ticket: An Address Delivered in Raleigh, North Carolina, on July 25, 1872," Frederick Douglass Papers Project, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://frederickdouglasspapersproject.com/s/digitaledition/item/18404>.
4. "Frederick Douglass and the North Carolina Industrial Association Fair," NC State University Libraries Special Collections Research Center, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.lib.ncsu.edu/news/special-collections/frederick-douglass-and-north-carolina-industrial-association-fair>.
5. "Frederick Douglass," National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/frederick-douglass>.
6. "Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln," White House Historical Association, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/frederick-douglass-and-abraham-lincoln>.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.