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This Day In History

JULY | 5

1852

Frederick Douglass delivers his “What to the slave is the Fourth of July?” speech

During an Independence Day celebration in Rochester, New York on July 5, 1852, [Frederick Douglass](#) delivers what would become [his most celebrated speech](#), “What to the slave is the Fourth of July?” Tensions over slavery in the early 1850s are high, and the famed abolitionist’s oration serves as a [searing reminder](#) that at the time, only a fraction of the U.S. population enjoyed the freedom celebrated by the nation.

Delivering his address to an audience of about 600 at the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society at the newly built Corinthian Hall, Douglass, who [escaped slavery](#) at the age of 20, acknowledged the signers of the [Declaration of Independence](#) as “truly great men.” But he scathingly pointed out “the hypocrisy of the nation” where “the rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me.”

Douglass’s powerful speech came more than a decade before the [13th Amendment](#) to the [Constitution](#), which would abolish slavery in the U.S. During its apex, the great orator declared, “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 national greatness, swelling vanity...your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; y 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.”

Douglass, originally named Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, was [born into slavery](#) in 1818 in Talbot County, Maryland. Disguised as a free Black sailor, he [escaped](#) to freedom in New York City before eventually making his way to New Bedford, Massachusetts and changing his name to conceal his identity. Douglass would become the most prominent Black man in 19th-century America, known both for his work in the anti-slavery movement and for his advocacy of broader human rights, including the right of women to vote. He published three bestselling [autobiographies](#), including *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (published in 1845), which immortalized his years in bondage. Douglass also edited and published an [influential Black newspaper](#) and became a respected [advisor to President Lincoln](#).

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Heat wave strikes Northeast, killing hundreds

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Trial starts for Chicago White Sox players accused of throwing 1919 World Series

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 WORLD WAR I

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