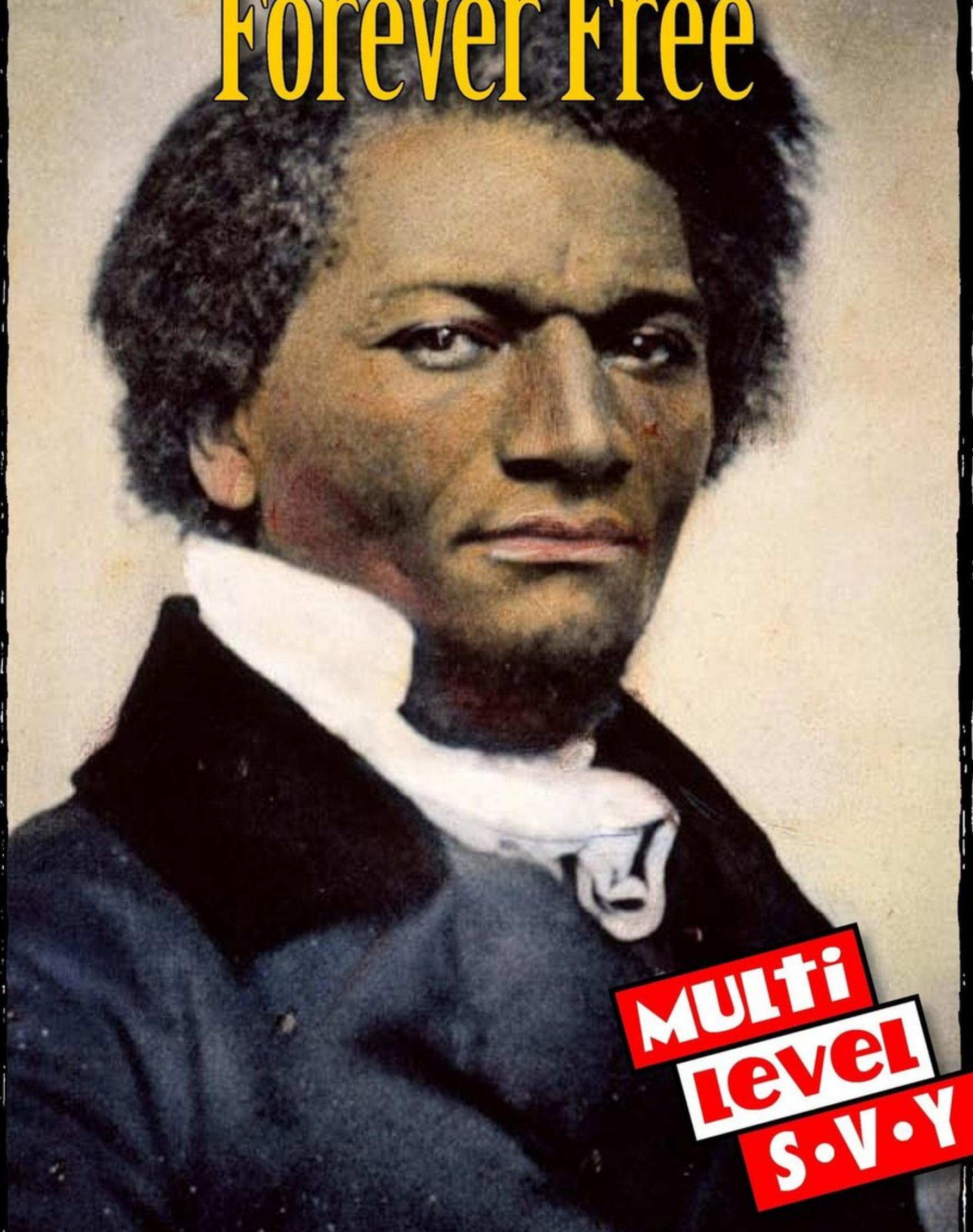


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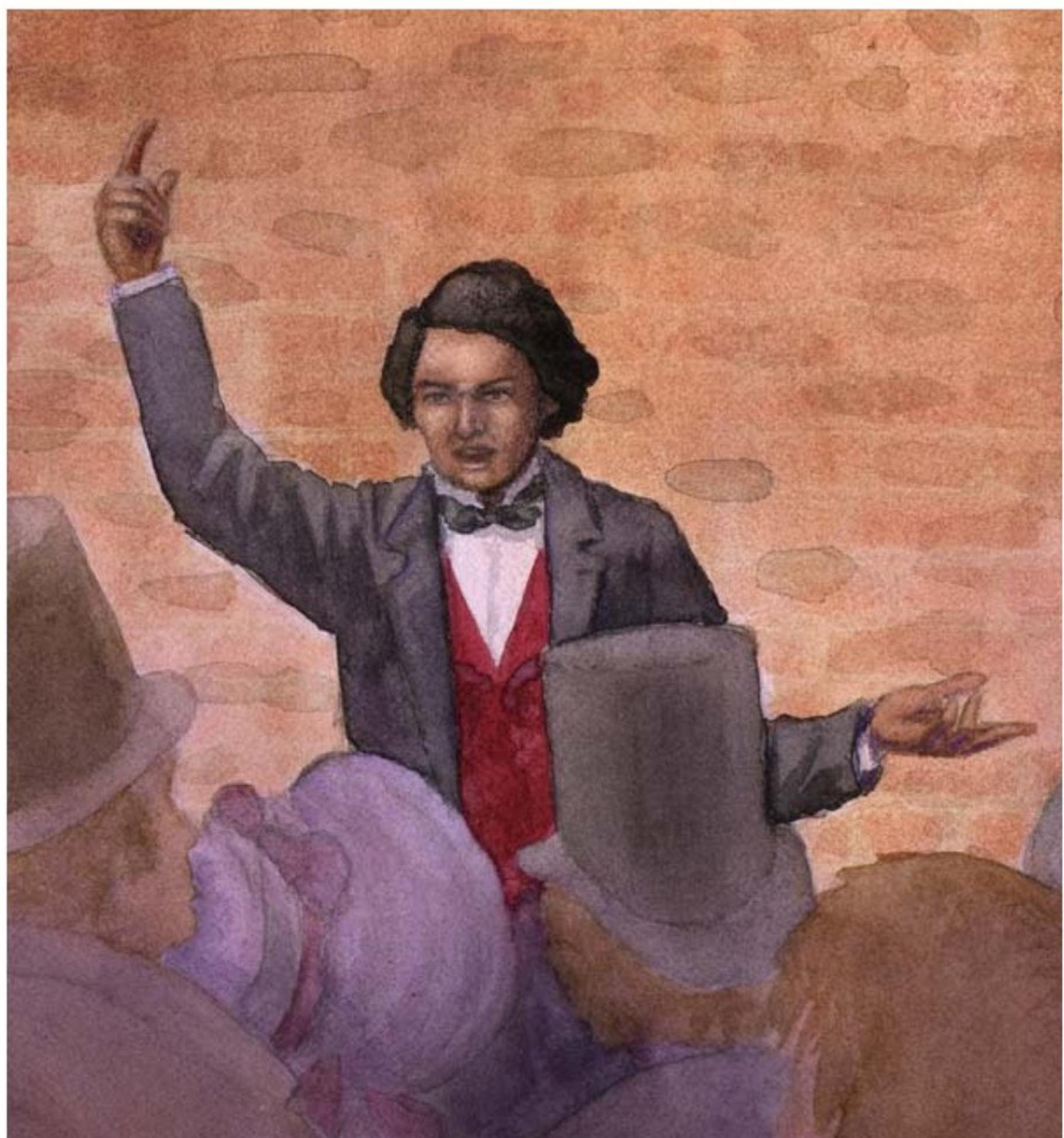
Frederick Douglass: Forever Free



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Written by Jennifer McStotts

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Table of Contents

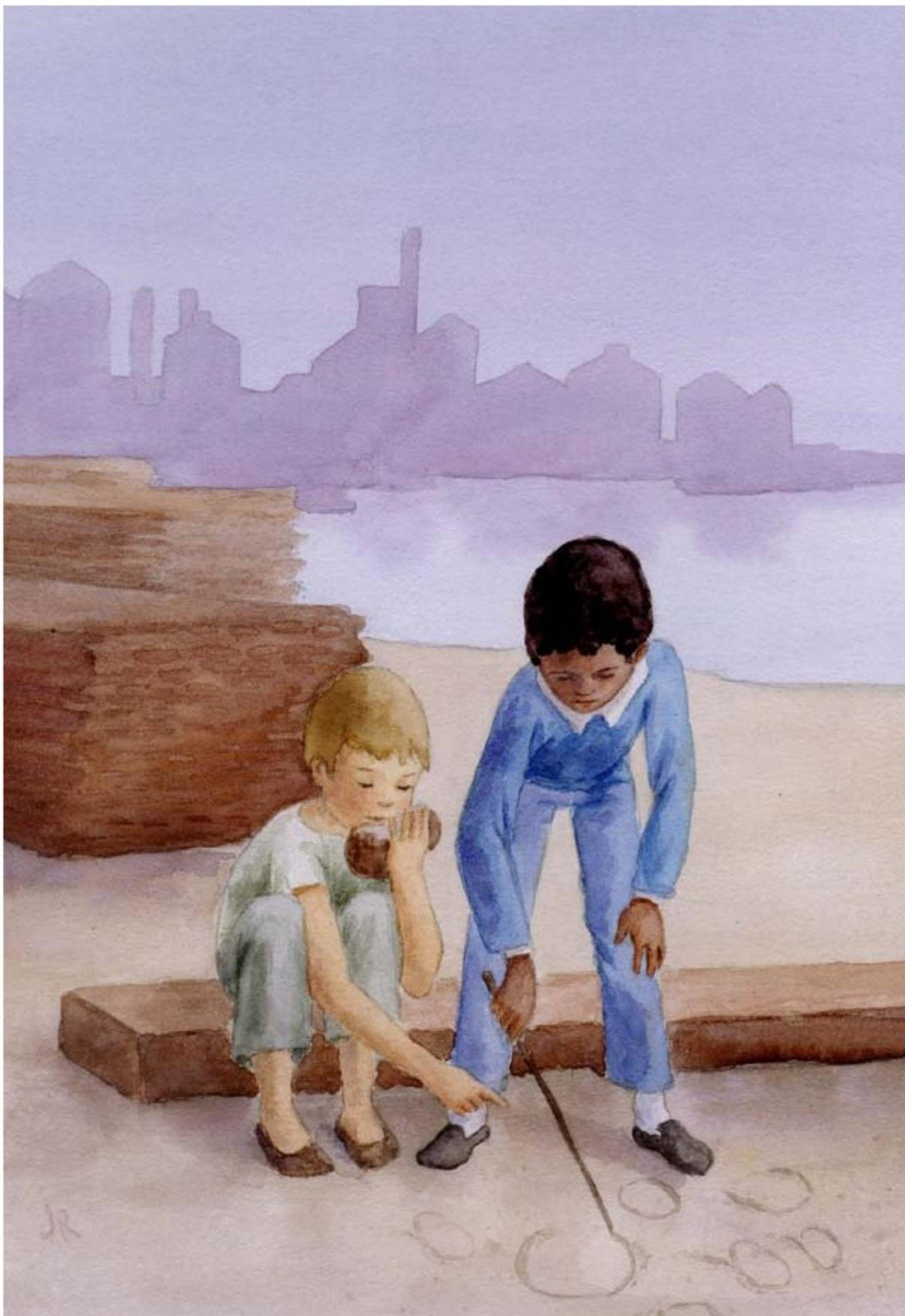
Bread for Lessons	4
Born a Slave	6
Escape!	8
Writing and Speaking.....	11
Land of the Free.....	13
Glossary	16

Bread for Lessons

Eight-year-old Frederick Douglass grabbed a loaf of bread from the kitchen and slipped out the back door to run errands. Frederick was a slave, but he was allowed to take as much bread as he liked. He knew he had more to eat than some boys in his neighborhood, so he took food to trade with them. While he had plenty of bread, the other boys had something he wanted even more—they knew how to write.

As Frederick walked down the streets of Baltimore, Maryland, he thought about how unjust it was that he wasn't allowed to read. Just the day before, his owner's wife, Mrs. Sophia Auld, had snatched a newspaper away from him as he tried to read it in secret. All Frederick wanted was an education, but that wasn't allowed for slaves in the 1820s. In fact, it was against the law.

That's why Frederick had made friends with poor white boys in the city—they had been allowed to attend school. First he'd tease them, saying, "I bet I know more of the alphabet than you do!" He'd write a few letters in the dirt, the other boys would write what they knew, and Frederick would learn to write those new letters. Now, he was bartering food for proper lessons in reading and writing.



Up ahead, Frederick saw one of his friends waiting to give him a lesson and hurried to join him. Frederick would give up his lunch every day to learn!

Born a Slave

Frederick was born in February of 1817 or 1818. He never knew the date of his birth, and though he knew his father was white, he never knew who he was. His mother was Harriet Bailey, but Frederick was raised by his grandmother, Betsey Bailey. When he was eight years old, Frederick was sent to work as a houseboy for some of his owner's relatives, the Auld family in Baltimore, Maryland.



When Frederick first came to the Aulds, Sophia Auld helped teach him the alphabet. She gave him several lessons before her husband forbade her. Education and slavery were incompatible, he said—a slave who learned to read would become dissatisfied with his condition and desire freedom.

This proved to be true. The more books and newspapers Frederick read, the clearer his own thoughts about slavery became, the more he despised slavery, and the more dejected he was.

For some time, Frederick struggled to comprehend the word **abolition**. Whenever a slave ran away or did something a slaveholder disliked, abolition was blamed. Frederick tried looking up the word in the dictionary, but it merely said “the act of abolishing.” What was being abolished?

In 1831, Frederick read an article about the abolition movement and the people who were striving to end slavery. Now he understood—some white people wanted to abolish slavery, too! He also learned that blacks were free in some states, and he began dreaming of escape.

“Once you learn to read,” Douglass wrote later in life, “you will be forever free.”

Understanding that education and freedom went hand in hand, he began giving lessons to other slaves until slaveholders stopped his Sunday school. He earned a reputation among slaves as a leader—and among slave owners as a troublemaker.

Escape!

For years, Frederick had lived the easier life of a slave in the city. At fifteen, he was sent to work on a farm as a field hand for Edward Covey, a brutal man known as a “slave breaker.” Covey would beat slaves into obedience. Loaning Frederick to Covey may have been Auld’s way of punishing Frederick for trying to educate other slaves as well as himself.

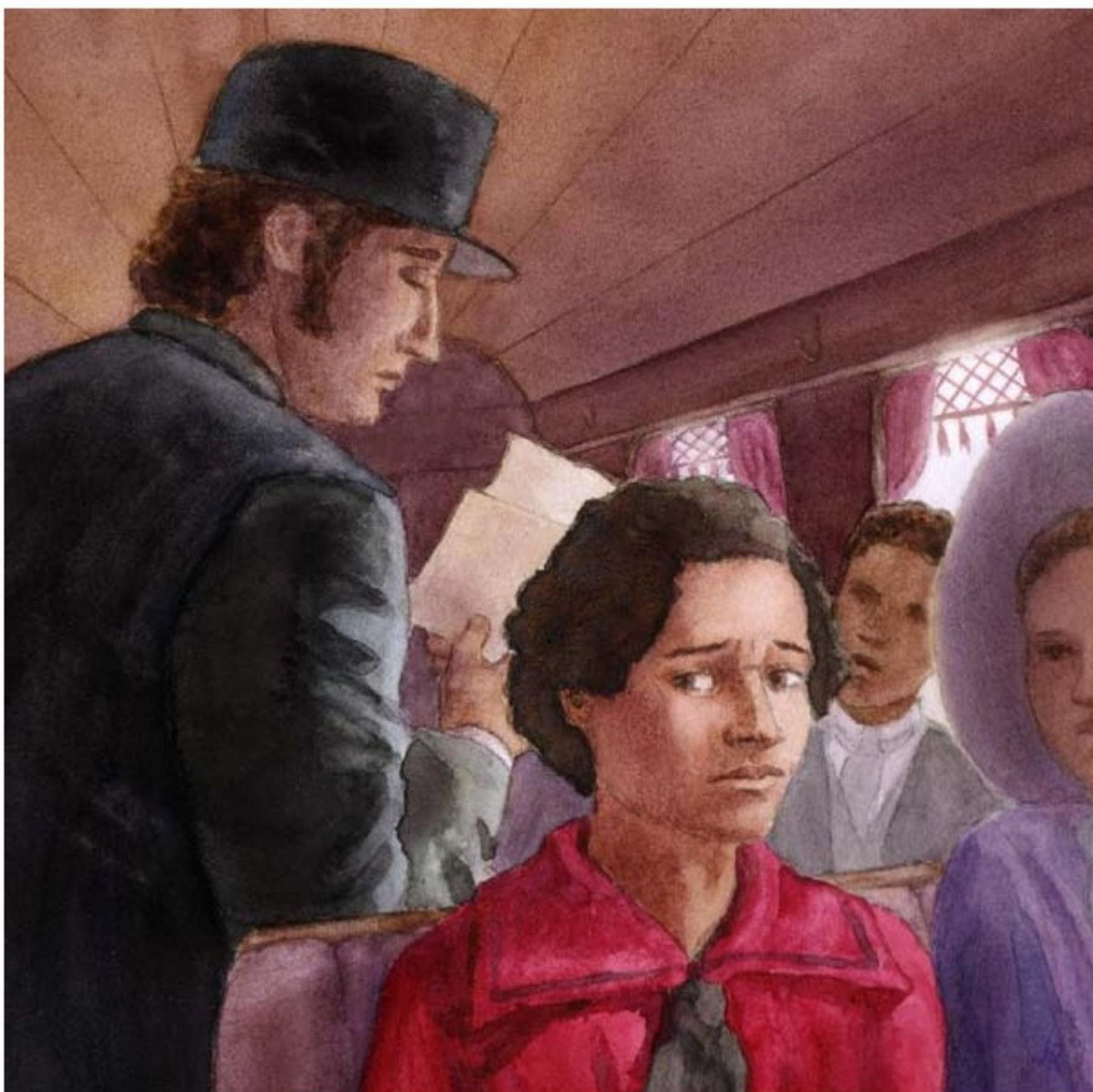
Covey almost succeeded in breaking his spirit. After enduring six months of abuse, though, sixteen-year-old Frederick fought back.

Later, he wrote, “We were at it for nearly two hours. Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted, he would not have whipped me half so much. The truth was, that he had not whipped me at all.”

After their confrontation, Covey never tried to beat him again, but Frederick began to plan his escape in earnest. He tried once and was caught. Still, Frederick continued to dream of freedom and work on his literacy, even joining the East Baltimore Mental Improvement Society, a debate club. It was there that Frederick met Anna Murray, a free black woman.

Together, Anna and Frederick planned his escape. Dressed in a sailor's uniform and carrying a freedman's passport, Frederick traveled through Delaware and Pennsylvania to New York. The escape took a little less than twenty-four hours, but as Frederick later wrote, "I lived more in one day than in a year of my slave life."

Speaking to audiences years later, Frederick would say, "I appear before you this evening as a thief and a robber. I stole this head, these limbs, this body from my master and ran off with them."



Escaping didn't mean that a slave like Frederick was truly free. Slaves who made it to a free state could live as if they were free, but they could still be seized and taken back to a slave state.

Frederick sent for Anna to join him, and they were married in 1838. Since Frederick was a **fugitive** who could be caught and forced back into slavery, they took a new name: Douglass. The newly wed Mr. and Mrs. Douglass settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and had five children together.

A Railroad for Runaways

Abolitionists organized a secret network to help fugitive slaves in the 1800s. This network came to be called the *Underground Railroad*. Places with food, clothing, and shelter were called *safe houses* or *stations*. Because many fugitives traveled on foot, people helping the slaves—known as *conductors* or *stationmasters*—tried to provide a station every fifteen miles.



Frederick Douglass stayed in safe houses when he first escaped. He himself later became a stationmaster in Rochester, New York, helping some slaves escape to Canada.

Writing and Speaking

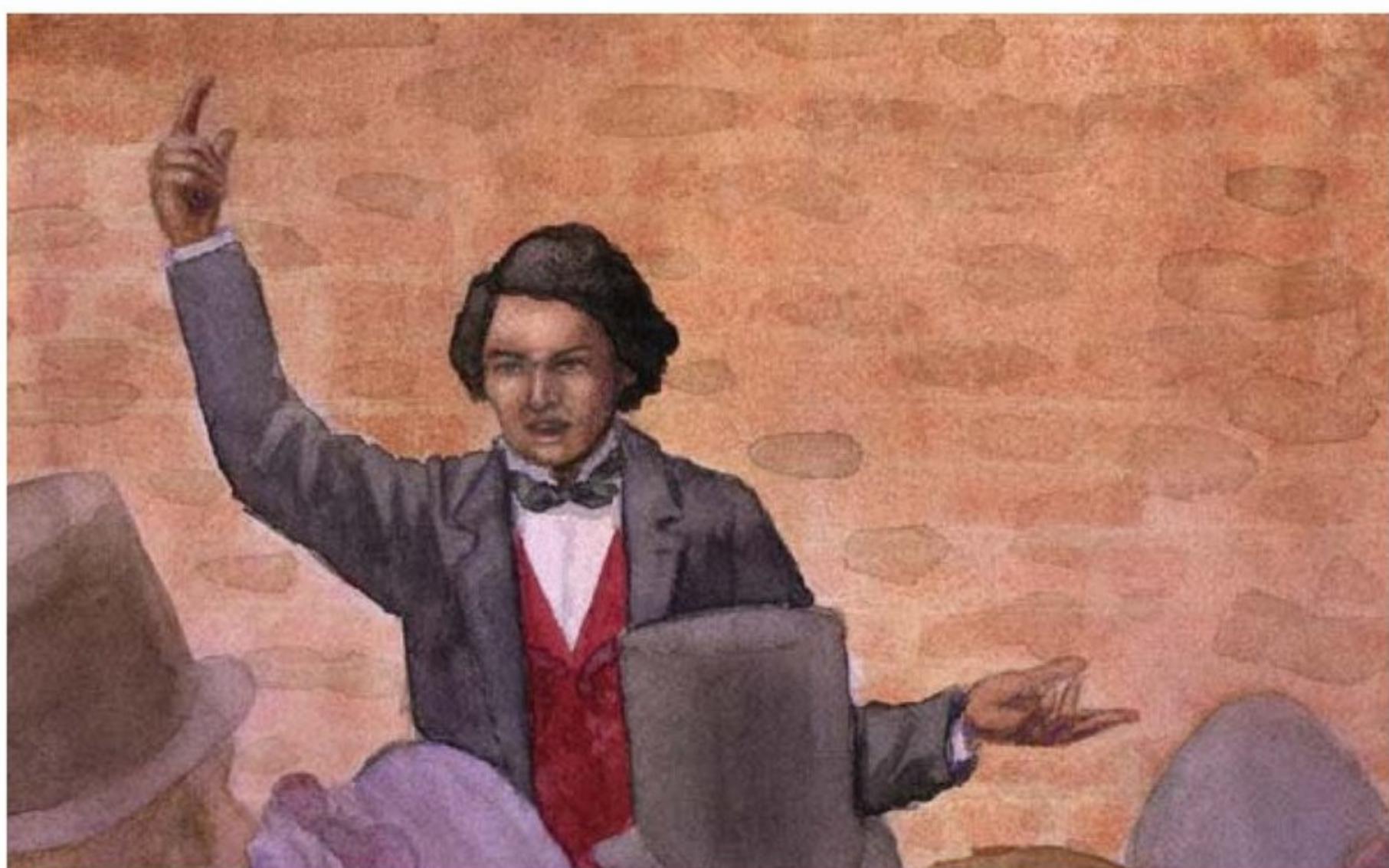
Douglass began to speak at antislavery meetings. With his firsthand account of life as a slave and of his bold escape, he became the voice of the abolition movement. His very existence countered the slaveholders' argument that slaves lacked the intellect to function as free American citizens. Yet Douglass was so **articulate** that some whites refused to believe he had ever been a slave.

Douglass wrote the first of three **autobiographies**, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. When it was published in 1845, critics charged that the book, like Douglass, was fake: no slave could write so eloquently, they argued. Yet the book was an instant success and persuaded many people that a slave could possess a great mind.

At the same time, the book included details that could have led to Douglass's arrest as a fugitive slave. In order to avoid capture, Douglass went abroad for two years on a speaking tour of Ireland and England. An electrifying speaker, Douglass was a star overseas, and fans there raised \$711 for Douglass's freedom, a purchase called *manumission*.

When Douglass returned to the United States in 1848, he founded a newspaper. He also penned thousands of speeches and **editorials** calling for social justice. “I expose slavery in this country,” wrote Douglass, “because to expose it is to kill it. Slavery is one of those monsters of darkness to whom the light of truth is death.”

One of his most famous speeches was “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” When he delivered the speech on July 5, 1852, Douglass surprised his audience by posing questions about what Independence Day meant for slaves and former slaves. “What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great **principles** of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?”



Land of the Free

By the Civil War, Douglass was the most admired African American in the United States. In 1863, he served as President Lincoln's advisor during the drafting of the Emancipation Proclamation, an order that freed the majority of slaves. Yet the abolition of slavery wasn't a stated goal of the war, though Douglass repeatedly urged Lincoln to make it one.

Some historians think Douglass helped inspire the renowned Gettysburg Address and a Lincoln **inaugural address**. Douglass also convinced Lincoln to allow black soldiers to fight for the North. The Union Army's 54th Massachusetts Regiment was the first to be comprised of black soldiers, including two of Douglass's sons.



Guards of the 107th United States Colored Troops

Douglass and President Lincoln

Lincoln and Douglass didn't always see eye to eye.



After Lincoln died, though, Douglass gave the keynote address at a memorial honoring him. The crowd gave Douglass a standing ovation, and the president's widow, Mary Todd Lincoln, gave him Lincoln's favorite walking stick in appreciation. The walking stick still rests in Douglass's house.

Douglass's writing and speaking helped end slavery with the Thirteenth Amendment, passed after the Civil War ended in 1865. Three years later, the Fourteenth Amendment granted citizenship to former slaves, and shortly after that, in 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment granted every male citizen, including former slaves, the right to vote.

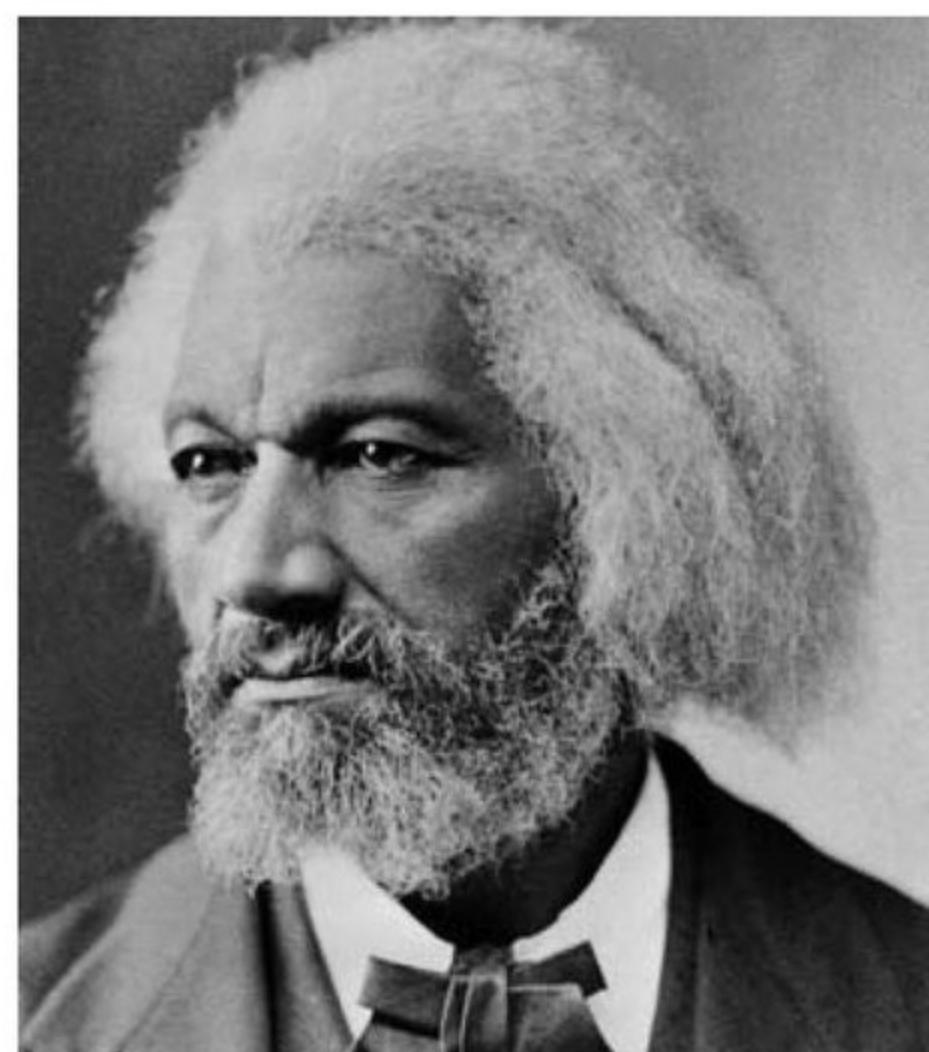
For the rest of his life, Douglass continued to promote equality for all Americans. He wanted the United States to reach its potential as a "land of the free" for blacks, women, Native Americans, and immigrants, too. "I would unite with anybody to do right and with nobody to do wrong," Douglass said.

Douglass and Women's Rights

Douglass didn't live to see universal suffrage—the right of every adult to vote—but he fought for it until he died. Eventually, in 1920, the states ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, granting women the right to vote.

Douglass remained married to Anna for forty-four years, until she passed away in 1882. Two years later he married Helen Pitts, an **advocate** for **civil rights**. Their marriage caused **controversy** since Pitts was a white woman, but Douglass sought to live in a world where race didn't matter. He died on February 20, 1895.

Today, Douglass is often referred to as the father of the civil rights movement. Seventy years after his death, at the height of that movement, the United States Postal Service honored him with his own 1965 postage stamp. He changed the way the country thought about slavery and race, and left behind words to continue to inspire Americans, including his newspaper's motto: "Right is of no sex, truth is of no color."



Douglass, 1870s

Glossary

abolition (<i>n.</i>)	the act of doing away with or ending something; the act of making slavery illegal (p. 7)
advocate (<i>n.</i>)	a person who actively supports a cause (p. 15)
amendment (<i>n.</i>)	a change or addition to a document or law (p. 14)
articulate (<i>adj.</i>)	able to communicate clearly and effectively through speaking or writing; clearly or effectively communicated (p. 11)
autobiographies (<i>n.</i>)	true stories about a person's life written by that person (p. 11)
civil rights (<i>n.</i>)	legal, social, and economic rights that guarantee freedom and equality for all citizens (p. 15)
controversy (<i>n.</i>)	a disagreement over an idea or issue (p. 15)
editorials (<i>n.</i>)	articles in a newspaper or magazine that express the opinion of the publisher (p. 12)
fugitive (<i>n.</i>)	a person who is running from something, usually legal authorities (p. 10)
inaugural address (<i>n.</i>)	a formal speech given by a president at the beginning of his or her term (p. 13)
literacy (<i>n.</i>)	the ability to read and write (p. 8)
principles (<i>n.</i>)	basic values or ideals that guide an action or decision (p. 12)

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