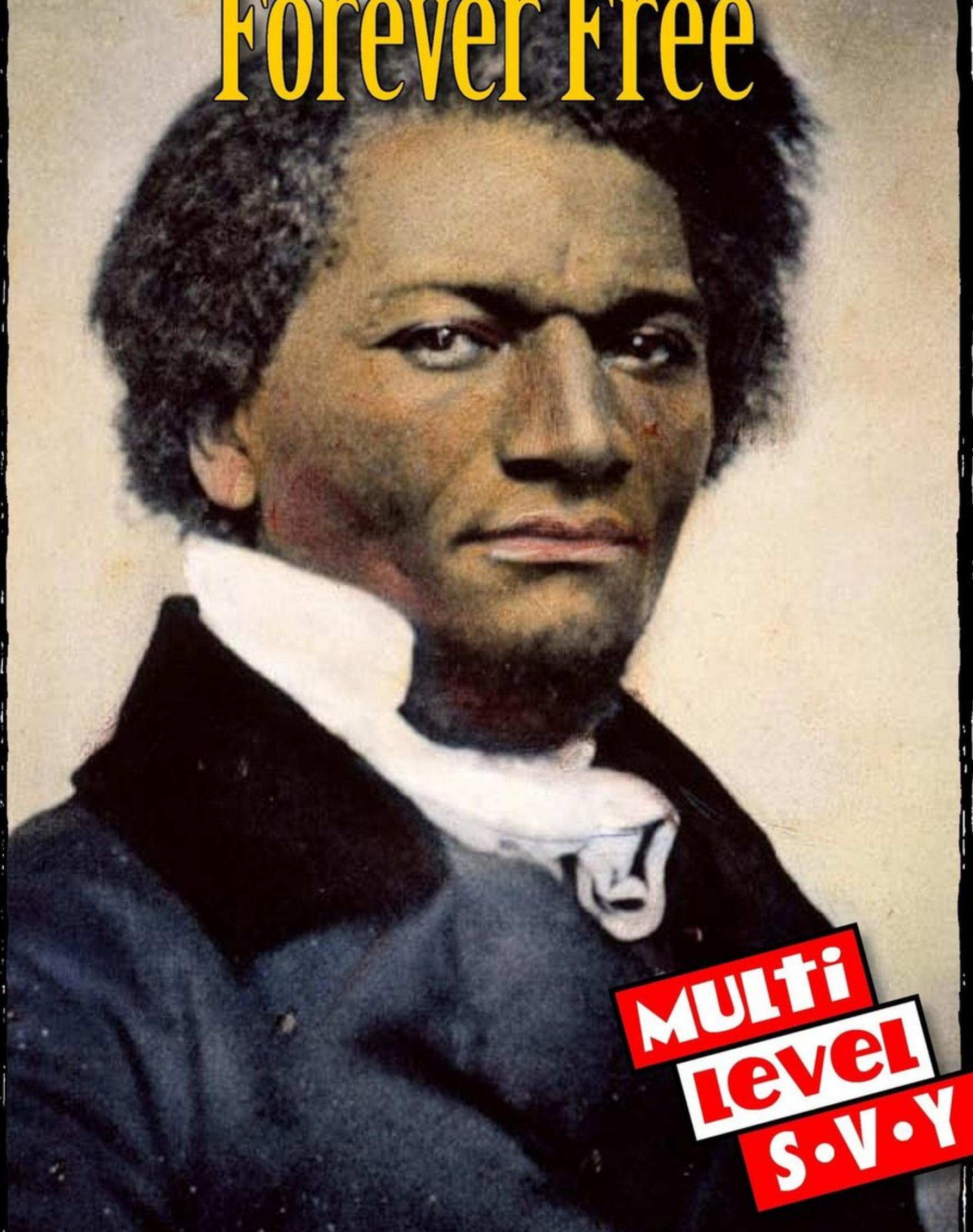


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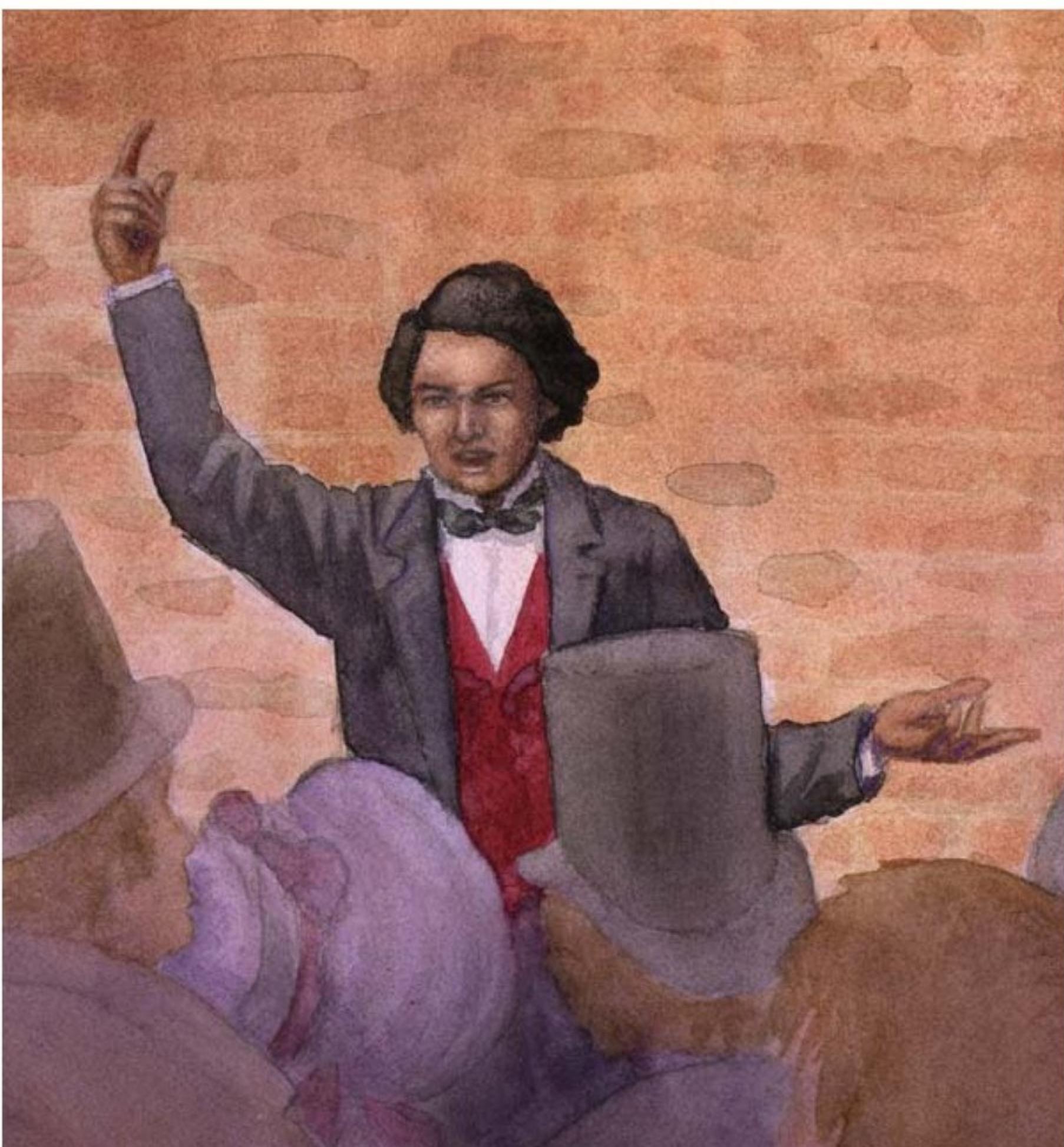
Frederick Douglass: Forever Free



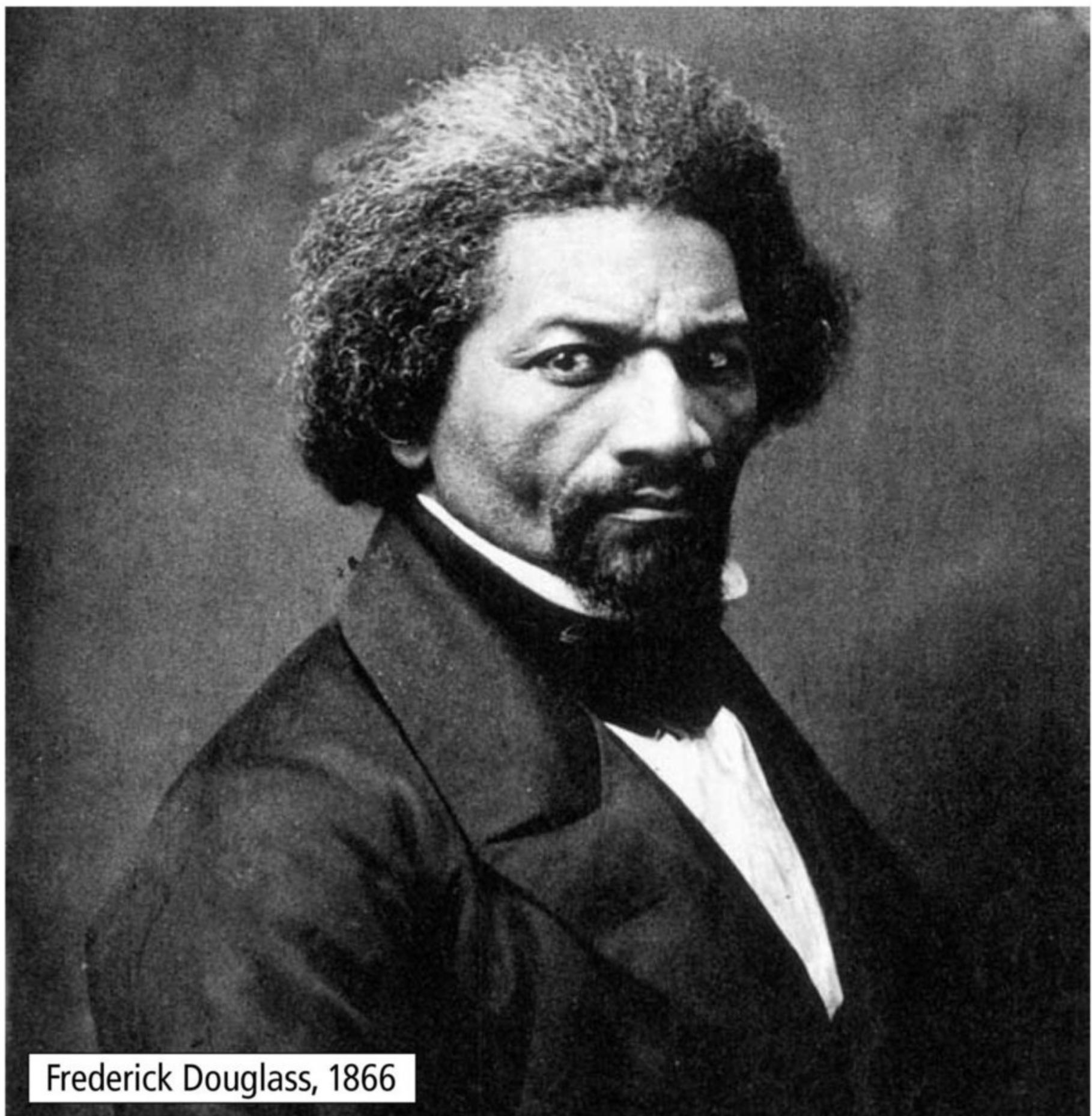
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Written by Jennifer McStotts

Frederick Douglass: Forever Free



Written by Jennifer McStotts



Frederick Douglass, 1866

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 took a loaf of bread from the kitchen and slipped out the back door to run errands. Frederick was a slave, but he knew he had more to eat than some boys in his neighborhood. So he traded them bread for something he wanted even more—an education.



For slaves in the 1820s, learning how to read and write was against the law. Frederick had a trick, though. He'd "show off" by writing a few letters in the dirt. The poor white boys would write other letters, and before long, Frederick knew the alphabet. Soon he started trading food for lessons in reading and writing.

Frederick would give up his lunch every day to learn!

Born a Slave

Frederick was born a slave 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 for the Auld family in Baltimore, Maryland. When Frederick first arrived, Mrs. Auld helped teach him the alphabet. Then her husband stopped her—an educated slave would just want to be free, he said. So Frederick read the newspaper in secret to practice his skills.

For some time, Frederick struggled to understand the word **abolition**. Whenever a slave ran away or did something a slaveholder didn't like, abolition was blamed. Frederick tried looking up the word in the dictionary, but it just said "the act of abolishing." What was being abolished?

In 1831, Frederick read in the newspaper about the abolition movement and the people trying to end slavery. Now he understood—some white people wanted to abolish slavery, too! Frederick 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."

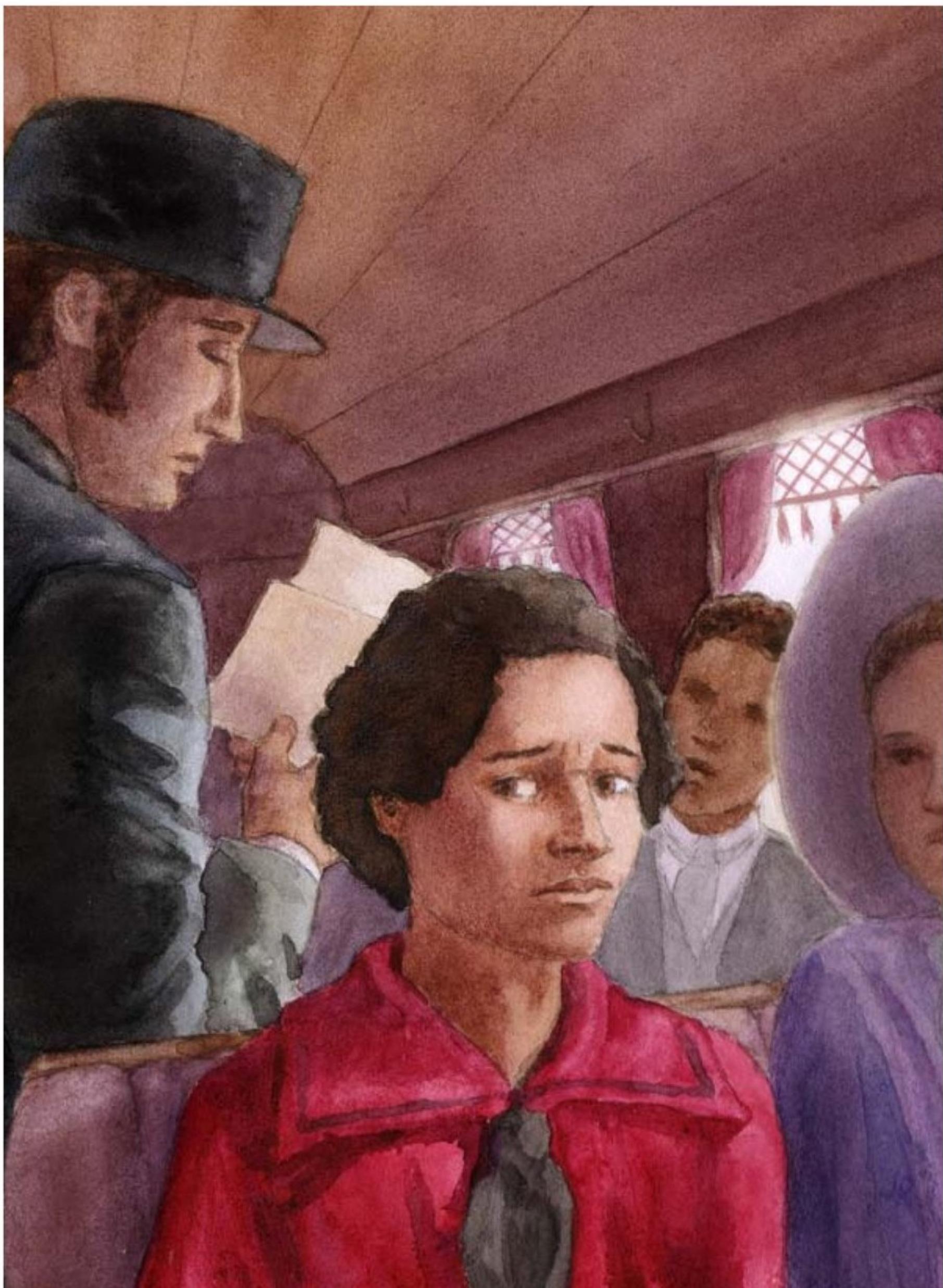
Escape!

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 man known as a “slave breaker.” Covey beat slaves, including Frederick.

For six months, Frederick took Covey’s beatings until one day Frederick fought back. The fight lasted for nearly two hours. Once Covey let him go, he never tried to beat him again. Still, Frederick continued to dream of freedom.

Frederick worked on his **literacy**, too. He even joined a debate club, where he met Anna Murray, a free black woman. Together, Anna and Frederick planned his escape.

Dressed in a sailor’s uniform and carrying a free man’s passport, Frederick traveled by train 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. Yet 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 could still be caught and forced back into slavery, the newlyweds changed their name to Douglass. They settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and had five children together.

A Railroad for Runaways

A secret group of people organized to help runaway 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 runaways 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.

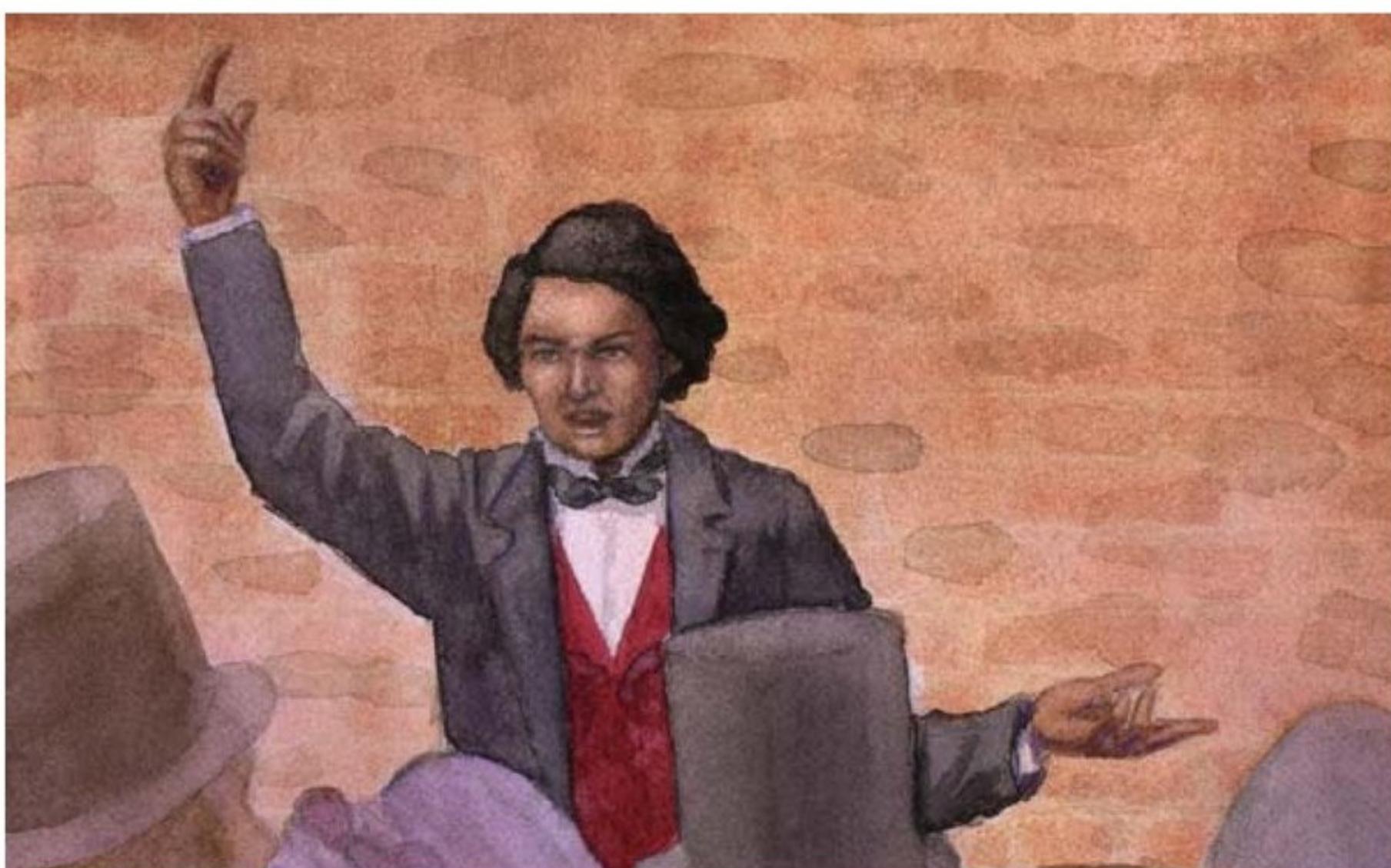


safe house in Ripley, Ohio

Writing and Speaking

Slaveholders argued that slaves weren't smart enough to be free. Each time Douglass spoke at antislavery meetings, he proved them wrong. Yet he spoke so well that some whites refused to believe he had ever been a slave.

To prove he had been a slave, Douglass wrote an **autobiography**. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was published in 1845. Critics said that the book, like Douglass, was fake: no slave could write so well, they argued. Yet the book was a huge success and convinced many people that a slave could have a great mind.



At the same time, the book included details that could have led to Douglass's arrest. In order to avoid capture, Douglass left the country on a two-year speaking tour. An **electrifying** speaker, Douglass was a star in England. Fans there raised \$711 to buy Douglass's freedom.

When Douglass returned to the United States in 1848, he founded a newspaper. He also wrote thousands of speeches and **editorials** calling for an end to slavery. "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?" In it, Douglass surprised his audience by asking 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 . . . extended to us?"

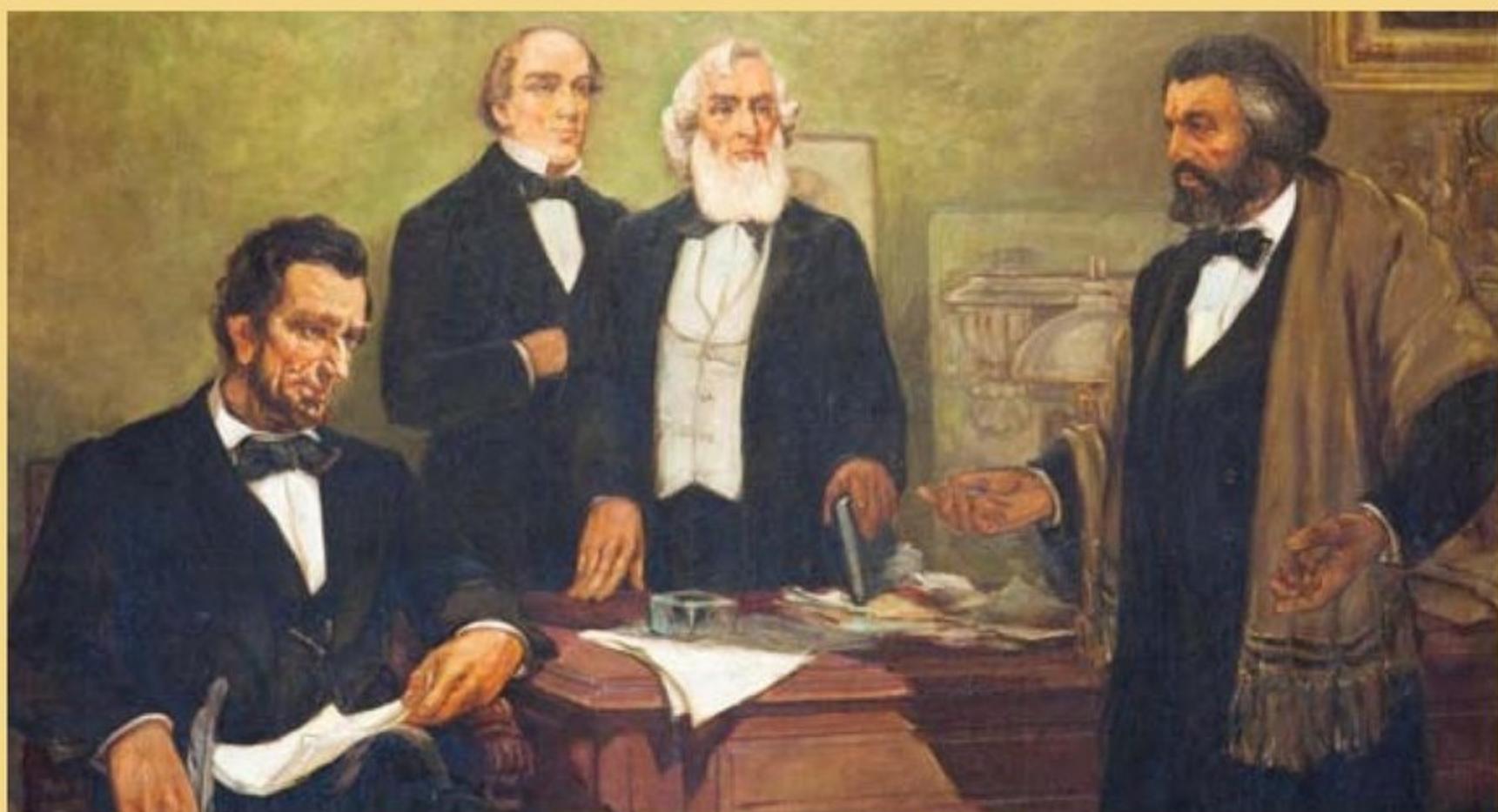
Land of the Free

By the Civil War, Douglass was the most famous black man in the United States. In 1863, he served as President Lincoln's advisor on the Emancipation Proclamation, an order that freed most of the slaves. Some historians think Douglass helped **inspire** Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address.

Douglass also convinced Lincoln to allow black soldiers to fight for the North. When they did, two of Douglass's sons were among them.



Guards of the 107th United States Colored Troops



Douglass and President Lincoln

After Lincoln died, Douglass spoke about him at a memorial in Lincoln's honor. 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.

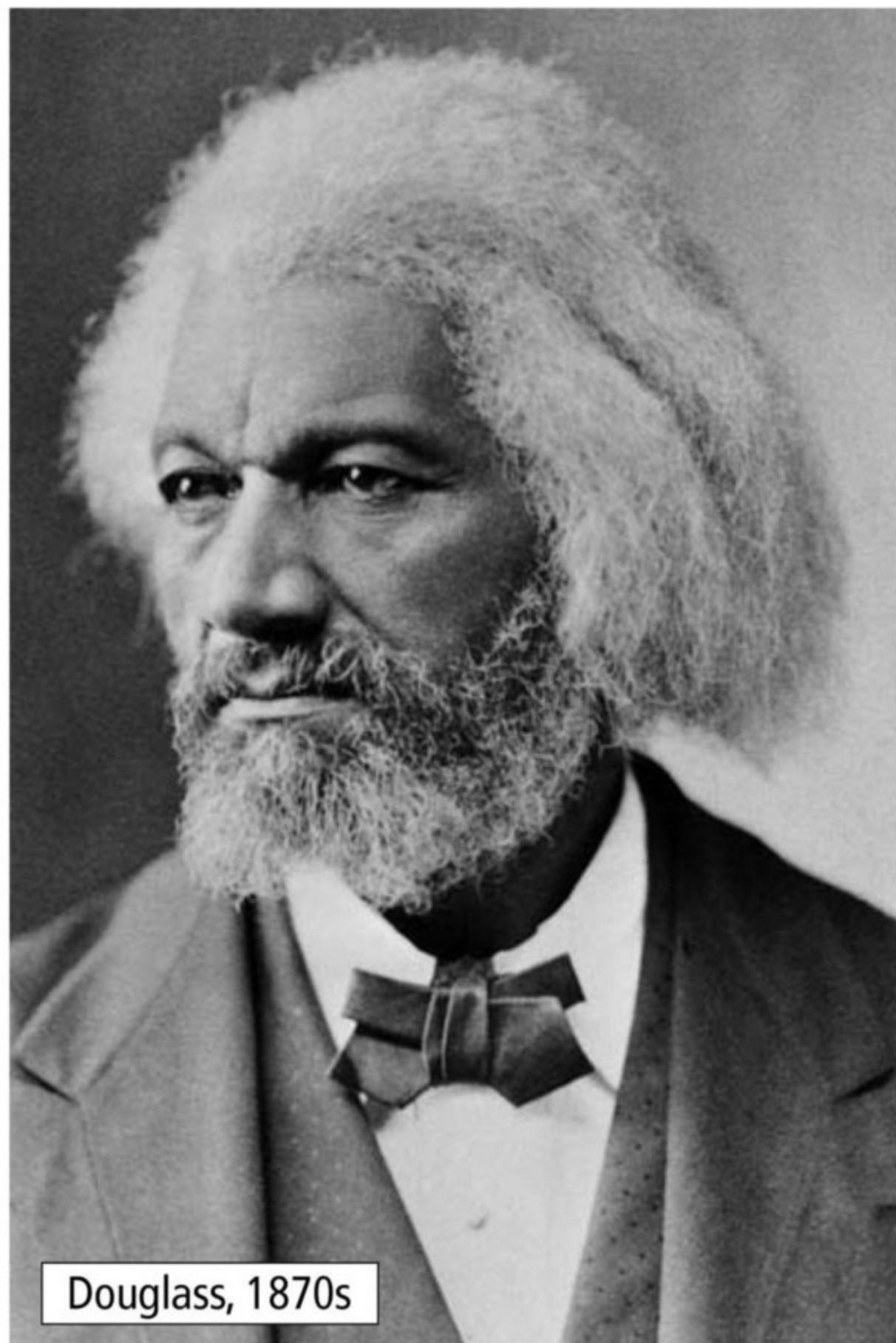
Douglass's writing and speaking helped end slavery with the **Thirteenth Amendment**, passed after the Civil War ended in 1865. Three years later, the Fourteenth Amendment gave **citizenship** to former slaves. In 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment gave every male citizen, even former slaves, the right to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

Douglass and Women's Rights

Douglass fought for women's rights until the day he died. In 1920, the states ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, giving women the right to vote.

Douglass wanted the United States to truly become 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. He continued to fight for equality for the rest of his life. Douglass died on February 20, 1895.

Today, Douglass is often called the father of the **civil rights** movement. He changed the way the country thought about slavery and race. He left behind words to continue to inspire Americans, including this 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)
amendment (<i>n.</i>)	a change or addition to a document or law (p. 14)
autobiography (<i>n.</i>)	a true story about a person's life, written by that person (p. 11)
citizenship (<i>n.</i>)	the state of being an official member of a country (p. 14)
civil rights (<i>n.</i>)	legal, social, and economic rights that guarantee freedom and equality for all citizens (p. 15)
editorials (<i>n.</i>)	articles in a newspaper or magazine that express the opinion of the publisher (p. 12)
electrifying (<i>adj.</i>)	causing great excitement or enthusiasm (p. 12)
inspire (<i>v.</i>)	to encourage a person to act (p. 13)
literacy (<i>n.</i>)	the ability to read and write (p. 8)

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