

The life and times of frederick douglass



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The history of America cannot be written without including the regrettable chapter of slavery which for too long, served as a crippling blight on the promise of this country. For more than two hundred and fifty years, a large portion of the American population was forced into very hard and oppressive physical labor as their dignity and self respect was slowly stripped away from them.

As a result, American history in the decades before the beginning of the Civil War and in the immediate decades after its bloody conclusion, slavery monopolized the social and political scene and cannot be separated from this time in our history. From the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, both Missouri Compromises, the Dred Scott Case, the Civil War and Reconstruction and the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments, the issue of race was being wrestled with by very different factions in this country. The most important slave narrative that was published at this time was Frederick Douglass's three part autobiography. The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, first published in 1854, spoke so bluntly about the issue of slavery and how he was treated.

Douglass witnessed and later identified the hypocrisy that came from a country that fought the British for independence, yet was unwilling to extend that right to his own people as well as the hypocrisy that existed in Christianity in which the religion was used by slave owners, to justify the continuation of the institution. In this book, Douglass touches on a number of important subjects. Douglass would spend his lifetime answering that question for himself as well as for every African American who had been adversely affected by the crippling racism that was so much a part of

America's past. There is no slave narrative in American literary history that is as famous and as widely demanding of praise than Frederick Douglass' Narrative of the Life and Times of Frederick Douglass. Anyone who is interested in getting into the mind of a slave has he travels a self imposed journey in order to try to make sense of the "peculiar institution" that is American slavery, then this should be the first book on your list. The context of the life and experiences of Douglass and the plot of this book, so closely parallel each other than the book reads as a great literary as well as historical source for what constituted one of the most regrettable chapters in American history.

Douglass was born into slavery in Maryland as Frederick Bailey in either 1817 or 1818. The inability of Douglass to know his real birthday was a source of contention for the rest of his life. Douglass learned how to read; a weapon that the slave owners went to great lengths to avoid giving to the slave. Douglass, like most people, could not have accomplished all that he had, if it had not been for the help and assistance of friends.. Even though Douglass and Garrison had conflicting visions about the role that Douglass would play in the abolitionist movement, his efforts helped Douglass greatly, eventually indirectly helping Douglass to start a newspaper of his own, The North Star.

It was Garrison who had written in the preface, his contention that the book was indeed written by Douglass as his command of the English language was so superior to all preconceived notions about the capabilities of African Americans, and many believed that somebody other than Douglass had written the book. Garrison wrote: " Mr. Douglass has very properly chosen to <https://assignbuster.com/the-life-and-times-of-frederick-douglass/>

write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ some one else. It is, therefore, entirely his own production; and, considering how long and dark was the career he had to run as a slave, – how few have been his opportunities to improve his mind since he broke his iron fetters, – it is, in my judgment, highly creditable to his head and heart.... ” Such efforts helped to give the book its weight of credibility.

The most important and controversial court decision of the 19th century was the 1857 Dred Scott vs.

Sanford decision brought down by the Supreme Court. Dred Scott was an enslaved man who was purchased in 1833 by Dr. Emerson from another United States surgeon; Peter Blow. Scott moved with the doctor wherever he was his property. The problem occurs when the doctor brings his slave to a free state who, under their state constitution, does not recognize the property rights that one person has over the other.

Since the doctor brought Dred Scott to Illinois and Missouri; both free states and under their state constitutions, did not recognize the rights of the owner, Dred Scott could have attempted to leave the personal jurisdiction of the doctor. Scott’s main argument throughout the legal battle that would last for the next eleven years was that while the doctor traveled to Free states across the country, coupled with the fact that these states did not recognize the rights of a master over a slave, he should be freed. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney stated: Consequently, no State, since the adoption of the Constitution, can by naturalizing an alien invest him with the rights and privileges secured to a citizen of a State under the Federal Government, although, so far as the State alone was concerned, he would undoubtedly be entitled to the rights of

a citizen, and clothed with all the rights and immunities which the Constitution and laws of the State attached to that character....

. beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect. Taney's decision disallowed African Americans from being treated as equals. Within the Northern states, there had always existed a small minority of radical Republicans like William Seward, a future member of Abraham Lincoln's cabinet and more notable figures like John Brown, who preached immediate abolition of all the slaves. They were always in the minority but gained more converts after the Dred Scott decision. In 1858, Abraham Lincoln gave his famous House Divided Speech in which he said that a nation can no longer remain half slave and half free and that a civil war was bound to occur.

However, at this time, and it was echoed by President Lincoln, the main objective of a civil war as well as the efforts of his administration would be designed to preserve the Union. Only after the Emancipation Proclamation was written did the Civil War officially become the chief reason for the Civil War. Within the Southern States, their view of slavery was much more concrete. There was a natural belief in the inferiority of the slaves as well as the importance of the institution of slavery among the Southern States.

After the end of the Civil War, the question of what exactly to do with more than four million former slaves who, by the design of slavery, was in possession of few skills. The Freedman's Bureau was formed to help solve that question. The Bureau helped to establish, more than one hundred

hospitals as well as hundreds of tons of food for the refugees during their tenure in the South. The Bureau gave more than fifteen million rations of food to African Americans and there was no disputing their presence within the South. It was the efforts which were exerted in the field of education which resulted in the greatest reaction from the Southern whites at that time. By the end of 1865, just six months after the end of the Civil War, over 90, 000 slaves were enrolled in school.

Such efforts were met with stiff resistance by Southern whites and many of these schools were burnt down in reaction. By 1870, more than 1, 000 schools which were established in the South and enrollment and attendance were only increasing during the time that these schools were present. In all, over 4, 300 schools were opened for African Americans as a result of the Freedman's Bureau. What would later be seen as a sense of contention was the fact that these schools were completely segregated. This was to be understood and at this time, little to no efforts was made for these schools to be integrated.

It was first the motivation of the Freedman's Bureau to even maintain the existence of the schools in the first place. Integrating these schools was the same as trying to cross a bridge a thousand miles in the future. However, the South would not relinquish their superiority, at least as the law was concerned, just because they had lost the Civil War. The Black Codes acted as some of the most glaring efforts of the South to retain their dominance over the landscape of Southern Society.

“ Negroes must make annual contracts for their labor in writing; if they should run away from their tasks, they forfeited their wages for the year. Whenever it was required of them they must present licenses” This was not specific to only the Deep South states of Georgia and Mississippi. In South Carolina, the state which was the first to succeed from the Union, also enacted similar restrictions to the freedoms of African Americans the Southern whites, as well as now on paper, which not only forced the compliance in legal issues which Whites and African Americans might find themselves in, but also sought to dictate the actions and etiquette of African Americans as well. “ They must be “ especially civil and polite to their masters, their masters’ families and guests,” and they in return would receive “ gentle and kind treatment. Corporal and other punishment was to be administered only upon order of the district judge or other civil magistrate. A vagrant law of some severity was enacted to keep the Negroes from roaming the roads and living the lives of beggars and thieves.

” Such laws enacted a high level of rage within the Northern community would could feel a dominance of their own being erased from the area. It was not just the efforts of the Radical Republicans to ensure that the Civil War was not fought in vain.