

# My bondage and my freedom

[Philosophy](#), [Freedom](#)



My Bondage and My Freedom is Frederick Douglass' second autobiography, written in 1855. It is important to remember that this work was written before Abraham Lincoln was elected President and before the Civil War. Slavery was becoming a volatile issue in the South and was threatening to split our young nation in two. Additionally, it is important to remember that while slavery had some supporters in other sections of the nation, it was mainly a Southern issue.

This is where the slaves were bought and sold and this is where the plantations depended so heavily on slave labor to be able to produce a product that was then sold and reaped great profits. White American's attitude differed depending on where they lived and how close they were to the issue; for the purpose of this paper the focus will be on attitudes in the South.

In 1790 all white persons were granted citizenship in the United States. This indicates how most white people felt about African Americans. They were seen as, at best, a lower class and, at worst, no better than the animals that helped around the farm; the cows and the horses. However, in some small towns slaves became part of the family and the family worked alongside their slaves to ensure survival. This, unfortunately, was not Douglass' experience. Douglass writes, "After the valuation, then came the division. This was an hour of high excitement and distressing anxiety. Our destiny was now to be fixed for life, and we had no more voice in the decision of the question, than the oxen and cows that stood chewing at the haymow." (138)

Choices afforded to slaves were few and far between. They were told where they would work, live, and be. If they were lucky, they worked in a home where it was warm and relatively comfortable. If they were unlucky or rebellious they were sent to slave breakers who were considered professionals at breaking the will of slaves who constantly ran or disobeyed their owners. Douglass writes of his experience with one such man whom he calls Mr. Covey. "I was a victim of his violence and brutality. Such a narration would fill a

My *Bondage and My Freedom* volume much larger than the present one. I aim only to give the reader a truthful impression of my slave life, without unnecessarily affecting him with harrowing details." (170) As any reader could see, slaves really had no choices. Little more, yet enough more to make it appealing, were afforded free African Americans in America.

Douglass writes of the isolation of being a free slave, "For a time, every door seemed closed against me. A sense of my loneliness and helplessness crept over me, and covered me with something bordering on despair. In the midst of thousands of my fellowmen, and yet a perfect stranger!" (253)

In his life Douglass chose not to give into the helplessness or despair that he writes of. He chose to speak out and found himself at home with the abolitionist cause. Douglass was an eloquent orator who constantly strove to bring his people into a different light. One of his main objectives was to, "Change the estimation in which the colored people of the United States were held." (xxiii) He would do this through educating himself, through the

speeches he gave, through the books he published and through newspapers like the North Star. It seems he chose to educate rather than violate.

The ramification of Douglass' life and his choices were felt far and wide. From the early beginnings of the abolitionist movement to the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment, to the eventual de-segregation of schools in the 1950's, early pioneers of the anti-slavery movement set the wheels in motion for later events.

Douglass closes his book by saying, " I shall labor in the future, as I have labored in the past, to promote the moral, social, religious, and intellectual elevation of the free colored people; never forgetting my own humble origin, nor refusing, while Heaven lends me ability, to use my voice, my pen, or my vote, to advocate the great and primary work of the universal and unconditional emancipation of my entire race." (300) His work and his words still continue today.