

Frederic Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*

Report by Tom Mason

Frederick Douglass, ca. 1818–1895, was an American abolitionist. He was born near Easton, on the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. He was the son of a slave, Harriet Bailey, and an unknown father. Douglass learned to read and write while in the household of Hugh and Sophia Auld in Baltimore. He made a second, successful, attempt to escape slavery in 1838. He took the name of Douglass, from the hero in Sir Walter Scott's poem *The Lady of the Lake* (1810). At New Bedford, a whaling port in Massachusetts, he found work as a day laborer. He gave an extemporaneous speech to a meeting at Nantucket (an island off the coast of Cape Cod) to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1841. His speech was so effective that the society made him one of its agents. By the nineteenth century, Boston had become ground zero for the antislavery movement and publishing. Douglass wrote *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston: The Anti-Slavery Office [Massachusetts Antislavery Society], 1845). This was the first of three autobiographies that Douglass wrote. Later accounts included *My Bondage and My Freedom: Part I. Life as a Slave, Part II. Life as a Freeman* (1857) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (1892). Douglass feared capture as a fugitive slave and spent two years in England and Ireland. The United Kingdom had abolished slavery in the British Empire in 1833. After English friends purchased his freedom, Douglass returned to the United States in 1847. At Rochester, New York, Douglass established the *North Star*, an abolitionist weekly newspaper, and edited it for seventeen years. Douglass advocated political action—unlike the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who wrote a preface to Douglass's *Narrative*. Garrison opposed political action—which resulted in a split in the organized antislavery ranks during the late 1830s. During the Civil War, Douglass helped to organize two Massachusetts African American regiments and recruited other African Americans to the ranks of the Union army. During Reconstruction he advocated civil rights legislation. President Benjamin Harrison appointed Douglass as consul-general to Haiti (1889–1891).