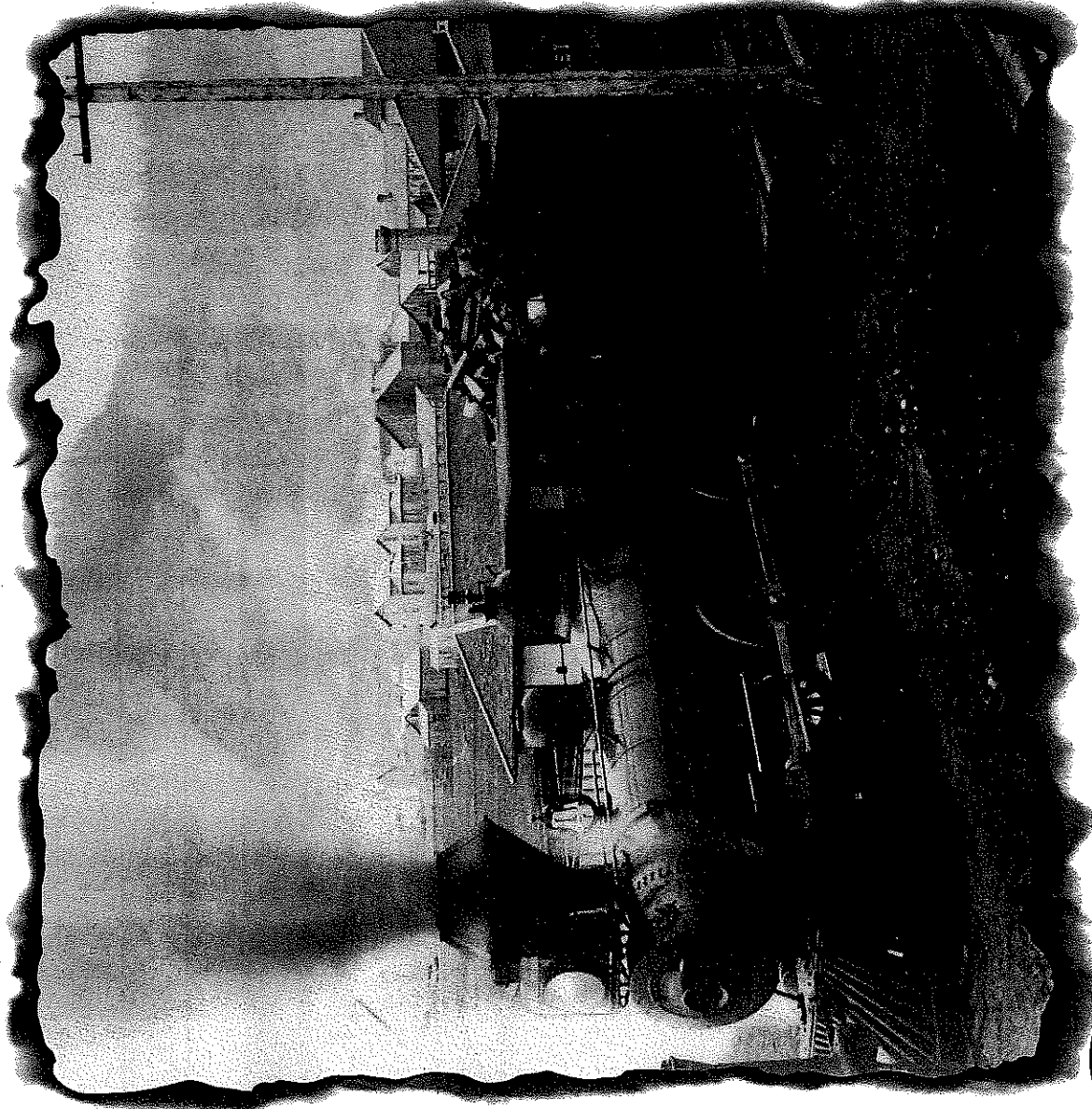


# Escape to Freedom

Frederick Douglass's mother died when he was just six years old.

Douglass, who was a slave, ended up fending for himself. Every day he did the chores his masters required. At night he slept on the dirt floor of an old shack. He had no shoes, no coat, not even a decent pair of pants. He rarely got enough to eat. To fill his stomach, he sometimes took an egg from the barn or an ear of corn from the field. Other times he fought the dogs for crumbs from under the master's table.

2 In 1826, when he was eight years old, his Maryland owners sent him to the city of Baltimore. There he went to work for Hugh and Sophia Auld.



*This train, pulled by a steam locomotive, is the type that carried Frederick Douglass to freedom.*

The Aulds treated him kindly. They gave him food, clothes, and a warm bed to sleep in. Sophia Auld even began teaching him to read, but her husband soon put a stop to that. Once slaves learned to read, he warned, they would start getting ideas out of books. Then they would become unhappy with their lives as slaves. They might even figure out a way to get free.

3 Douglass heard what Hugh Auld said. He decided to keep working on his reading, no matter what. As the years passed, Douglass found ways to improve his reading skills. He read old papers. He read posters and signs. At the age of 12, he paid 50 cents to buy his first book. One of the stories in the book was about a slave who read so well and knew so much that he was able to talk his master into setting him free. That story gave Douglass even more incentive to become a good reader.

4 By 1838 Hugh Auld had died, and Frederick Douglass had been sent to work in a Baltimore shipyard. It was there that he put together a bold plan. He decided to make a run for freedom. In order to succeed, he would have to get out of Maryland. He would have to

make it to one of the northern states, where slavery was illegal. Douglass knew that if he were caught he would be whipped and chained. He might even be killed. But he was willing to risk death for the chance to be free.

5 Douglass already knew some blacks who were free. Known as "freemen," each of them carried "free papers." The documents proved that the holder was free and not a slave. Once in a while, a slave would borrow someone's "free papers" to make an escape. When the runaway reached a free state, he or she would send the papers back. The trick was to get the papers from someone who looked like you. The papers stated such things as height, weight, color of skin, any scars, and so forth.

6 Douglass did not know any freemen who looked much like him. He did, however, have a black friend who was a sailor. This man had a set of papers stating that he was a free American sailor. At the top of the page was an American eagle. It looked very impressive. Douglass thought that these papers might work like "free papers." Unfortunately, the papers called for someone with skin much

darker than Douglass's. Still, Douglass decided it was worth a chance. He would use the sailor's papers to make a break for freedom.

7 From Maryland the nearest free state was Pennsylvania. The best way to get there was by train. But Douglass couldn't just walk into the train station and buy a ticket. His papers would be checked too closely. So he waited until the train was pulling out of the station. Only then did he hop on board. He



A young Frederick Douglass

was dressed in a borrowed sailor's suit. He tried to look calm, but every nerve inside his body was on edge.

8 After a while, the conductor began checking tickets. When he got to the car carrying blacks, he also checked their papers. The conductor acted rude to some of the people in the car. This made Douglass even more nervous. But the conductor's face brightened when he got to Douglass. Perhaps it was because of the sailor's uniform. Most Americans had kind feelings for sailors at this time.

9 Still, the conductor had a job to do, so he said to Douglass, "I suppose you have your free papers?"

10 "No, sir," answered Douglass. "I never carry my free papers to sea with me."

11 "But you have something to show that you are a freeman, haven't you?"

12 "Yes, sir," said Douglass, "I have a paper with the American eagle on it."

13 Douglass handed over his papers to the conductor. The man barely glanced at them. He took Douglass's ticket money and left. Douglass was thrilled, but he was not out of danger yet. He was still in Maryland. He might be discovered and arrested at any moment. "I saw on the train several persons who would have known me in any other clothes," wrote Douglass. Amazingly, the sailor's uniform seemed to fool them all.

14 Slowly, the train moved north. To Frederick Douglass the minutes seemed

like hours. At one station Douglass looked out the window and caught his breath. Just a few feet away was a man named Captain McGowan. Douglass had done work for him earlier that week. If McGowan noticed him, Douglass's plan would be foiled. Luckily, McGowan didn't look Douglass's way.

15 "This was not my only hair-breadth escape," wrote Douglass. At one point a German blacksmith who knew Douglass well looked straight at him. After a few seconds, he went back about his business. "I really believe he knew me," wrote Douglass, "but had no heart to betray me."

16 At last Douglass reached Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Quietly but joyfully, he moved on to New York City. In less than 24 hours, he had gone from being a slave to being a free man. "No man now had a right to call me his slave," wrote Douglass.

17 Douglass kept the details of his escape a secret for more than 40 years. He didn't want to hurt other slaves who might use the same plan. Escaping was hard enough without giving away any secrets to slave owners. Also, Douglass didn't want to cause trouble for anyone who had helped him. Helping a slave to escape was a high crime. As Douglass said, "Murder itself was not more sternly punished."

18 Frederick Douglass went on to become world famous. He spent years fighting slavery. He published his own newspaper, called *The North Star*. Douglass wrote best-selling books about his life. He made friends with white leaders such as Abraham Lincoln. He urged the president to free the slaves. In 1863 Lincoln freed all the slaves in the southern states. So Douglass, who died in 1895, lived to see his people freed.

19 Over the years Frederick Douglass was often asked how his first day of freedom felt. He said, "I felt as one might feel upon escape from a den of hungry lions." He added, "My chains were broken, and the victory brought me unspeakable joy."



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**Reading Time: Lesson 8**

Minutes \_\_\_\_\_ Seconds \_\_\_\_\_