

PPT to accompany Carolina K-12's lesson

# Exploring the Hypocrisy of American Slavery with Frederick Douglass' *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?*

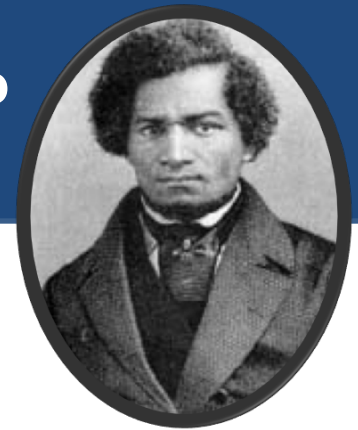


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# Who Was Frederick Douglass?



- Frederick Douglass was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, in Talbot County, MD in the early 1800s.
  - Since he was born into enslavement, he had no certainty about his birth date or birth year
- He was born the son of an enslaved woman, and, in all likelihood, her white master.
- Douglass remained a slave until he escaped at age 20.
- Douglass then shared his experiences as a slave and advocated against slavery through his writings and speeches.
- Douglass wrote three autobiographies, edited four newspapers, lectured nationally and internationally, and recruited black soldiers for the Civil War.
  - In the first of three autobiographies, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, published in 1845.
- Douglass eventually came to believe that political activism was the only way to achieve freedom. But, although vehement in his rhetoric, Douglas refused to use violence.
- He advised and pressured Lincoln to make slavery the single most important issue of the Civil War and remained committed to integration and civil rights for all Americans throughout his life.
- As a lecturer, writer, editor and ex-slave, Frederick Douglass emerged as the most prominent African American of the nineteenth century to fight for racial justice.

# The atmosphere in 1852...

## The Fugitive Slave Act

- The Fugitive Slave Act was passed as part of the Compromise of 1850.
- The Act declared that all runaway slaves must be brought back to their masters.
- As of 1852, larger numbers of protestors were condemning the law, outraged that it denied the right of habeas corpus and trial by jury to alleged fugitive slaves, as well as threatened the kidnapping of free people of color into slavery.
- Abolitionists nicknamed it the "Bloodhound Law" for the dogs that were used to track down enslaved people who had runaway.
- Now, under the American flag, said Douglass, blacks could feel "no protection," only "danger, trials, and bitter mockery."
- So deep was the fear in northern black communities that hundreds fled to Canada, causing what Douglass described as "a dark train going out of the land, as if fleeing from death."

**CAUTION!!**

**COLORED PEOPLE**  
**OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,**  
You are hereby respectfully **CAUTIONED** and  
advised, to avoid conversing with the  
**Watchmen and Police Officers**  
of Boston,  
For since the recent **ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN**, they are empowered to act as  
**KIDNAPPERS**  
AND  
**Slave Catchers,**  
And they have already been actually employed in  
**KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES.** Therefore, if you value your **LIBERTY**,  
and the *Welfare of the Fugitives* among you, *Shun*  
them in every possible manner, as so many **HOUNDS**  
on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.

**Keep a Sharp Look Out for**  
**KIDNAPPERS, and have**  
**TOP EYE open.**

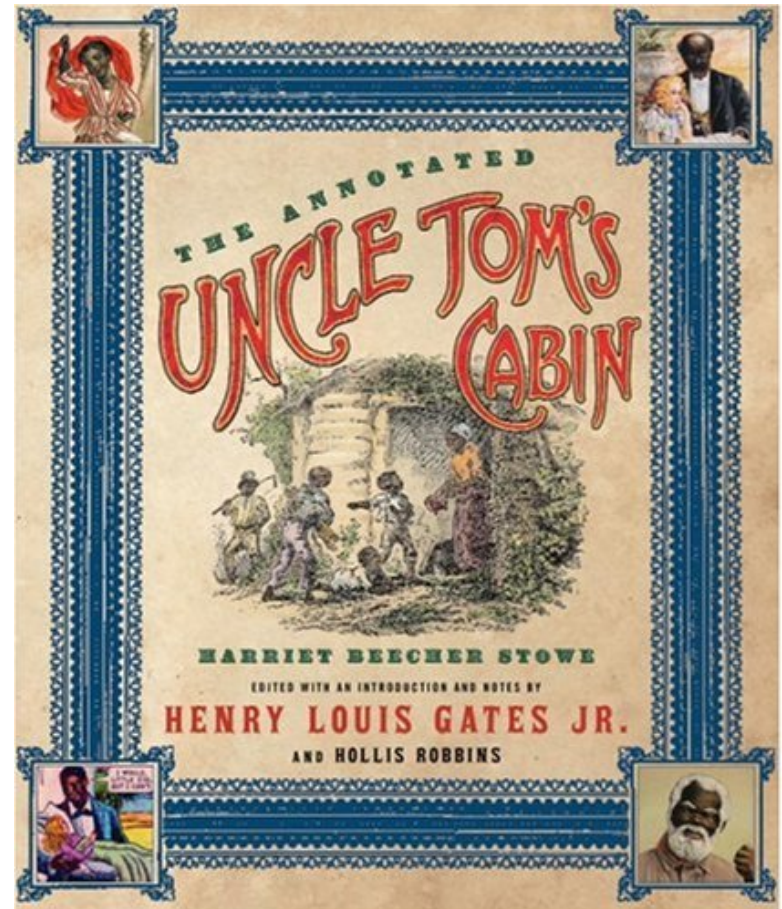
**APRIL 24, 1851.**



# The atmosphere in 1852...

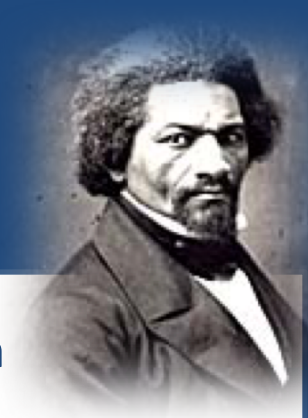
## *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

- In March 1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in Boston.
- The anti-slavery novel greatly influenced many people's thoughts about African Americans and slavery in the United States.
- By June 1852, 14 steam presses ran day and night to produce enough copies to meet the high demand for the book.

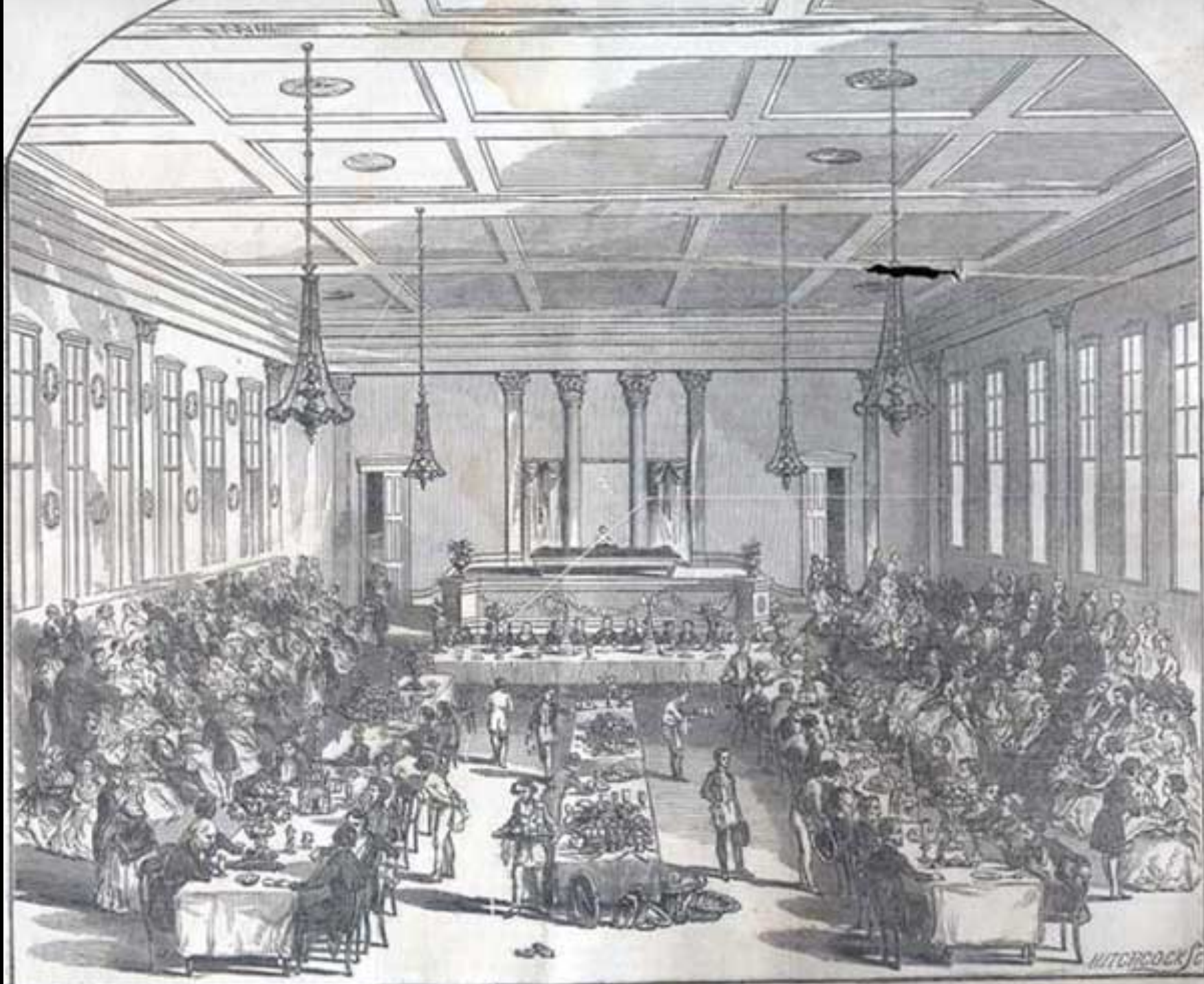


# The atmosphere in 1852...

## Frederick Douglass



- The summer of 1852 was a time of great tension in the nation and in Frederick Douglass's own life.
- Douglass was struggling financially; his newspaper, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, survived only on donations, and he could hardly support his growing family on meager lecturers' fees.
- During this time, 34-year-old Frederick Douglass was invited to deliver a speech for the Fourth of July to the Rochester Ladies Antislavery Society.
- As was the tradition in black communities of New York state, Douglass insisted on speaking on the 5th and not the 4th of July.
- The event took place at Corinthian Hall in Douglass' adopted hometown of Rochester, N.Y. There were nearly 600 people in attendance.
- After a local minister read a copy of the Declaration of Independence, Douglass rose and delivered his now famous speech, **"What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"**
- "In style and substance, no 19th century American ever offered a more poignant critique of America's racial condition than Douglass did on July 5, 1852..."



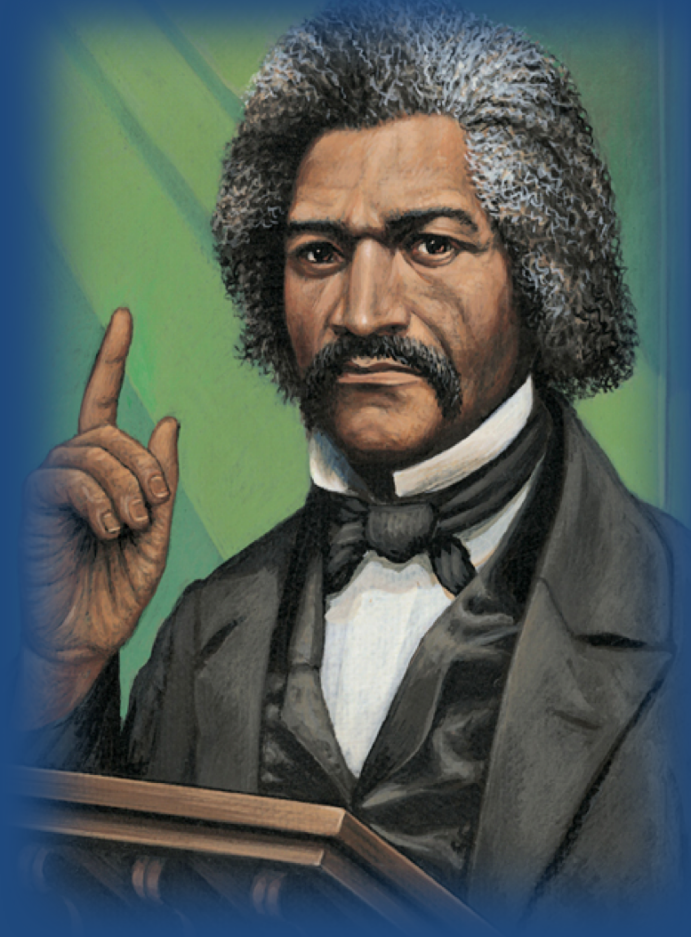
HITCHCOCK & CO.



# "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"

- The speech has three major rhetorical moves. First, Douglass sets his audience at ease by offering compliments to the genius of the founding fathers.
- He calls the Fourth of July an American "Passover" and places hope in the youthful nation, "still impressible" and open to change.
- He calls the Declaration of Independence the "ringbolt" of the nation's destiny and urges his listeners to "cling to this day... and to its principles, with the grasp of a storm-tossed mariner to a spar at midnight."
- But his use of pronouns is a warning of what is soon to follow.
  - The nation is "**your** nation", the fathers "**your** fathers."  
The nation's story is taught in "**your** common schools, narrated at **your** firesides, unfolded from **your** pulpits."
- As Douglass reminds his white audience of their national and personal deterioration, the speech finds its theme—**the hypocrisy of slavery and racism in a growing republic.**





“Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here today? What have I, or those I represent, to do with *your* national independence? ...Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in the Declaration of Independence, extended to us? Would to God, both for your sake and ours, that an affirmative answer could be truthfully returned to these questions!”



# “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”

- Douglass answered his rhetorical questions in no uncertain terms: To the slave, Independence Day is a...
  - “day that reveals to him, more than any other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, *your celebration is a sham.*”
- What then flows is Douglass’ famous and relentless attack on America's deepest contradiction.
  - As the painful analysis unfolds, he issues a litany of accusative pronouns: “*This fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.*”
  - To invite him as Independence Day speaker, says Douglass is mere “*mockery and sacrilegious irony.*”
  - He would not sing a praise song on the nation's birthday, because “*above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions!*”
- He sang no anthems, no spirituals, only a requiem for his people and for the nation.

# “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”

- In the second section of the speech, Douglass drags his audience into the "sights and scenes" of slavery itself—the slave trade, brutal punishments, sales at auction, and denials of African American humanity.
- He implicates the church and the state in supporting slavery, and he calls to attention the evil done by Americans to other Americans.
- After a tirade highlighting America's wrong doings regarding enslaving human beings within its states, Douglass issues a warning to his religious audience:
  - "Oh! be warned! be warned! a horrible reptile is coiled up in your nation's bosom; the venomous creature is nursing at the tender breast of your youthful republic; for the love of God, tear away...."





# “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”

- For 20 minutes, the crowd must have felt strapped in their seats, bearing up to a hailstorm of humiliation.
- Then, in the third stage of the speech, Douglass eases up on his audience and ends on cautious hope.
- He says the principles of the Declaration of Independence still exist; the founders' best wisdom can still be tapped. It is not yet too late.
- He ended the speech by reciting an abolitionist poem, "God Speed the Year of Jubilee," transcending his audience.
- “Freedom in America had never found such a voice at once so terrible and so truthful.”
- As Douglass took his seat, 600 white Northerners roared, wrote a journalist, with "a universal burst of applause."



# What to Frederick Douglass is the Fourth of July?



- For Douglass, Independence Day was not a time of national self-congratulation; it was a painful reminder of national hypocrisy, of the evil of slavery and of promise unfulfilled.
- Throughout his life, even after slavery was abolished, Douglass viewed the Fourth of July not as “a day of complacent self-congratulation, but a day in which all Americans reflect on how far they have come in realizing the noble ideals of the nation’s Founders.”
- In “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” Douglass criticized America’s “fraud” and “deception” about the institution of slavery. He used a series of rhetorical questions to underline the contradictions between the nation’s “ideals and practice with regard to human rights.”
- “He had used language to move people and mountains; he had explained a nation's condition, and through the pain of his indictment, illuminated a path to a better day...The meaning of slavery and freedom in America had never found such a voice at once so terrible and so truthful.”

# Sources

- [http://origin.web.fordham.edu/campus\\_resources/enewsroom/fordham\\_magazine/book\\_reviews/frederick\\_douglass\\_a\\_23868.asp](http://origin.web.fordham.edu/campus_resources/enewsroom/fordham_magazine/book_reviews/frederick_douglass_a_23868.asp)
- <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/bio.html>