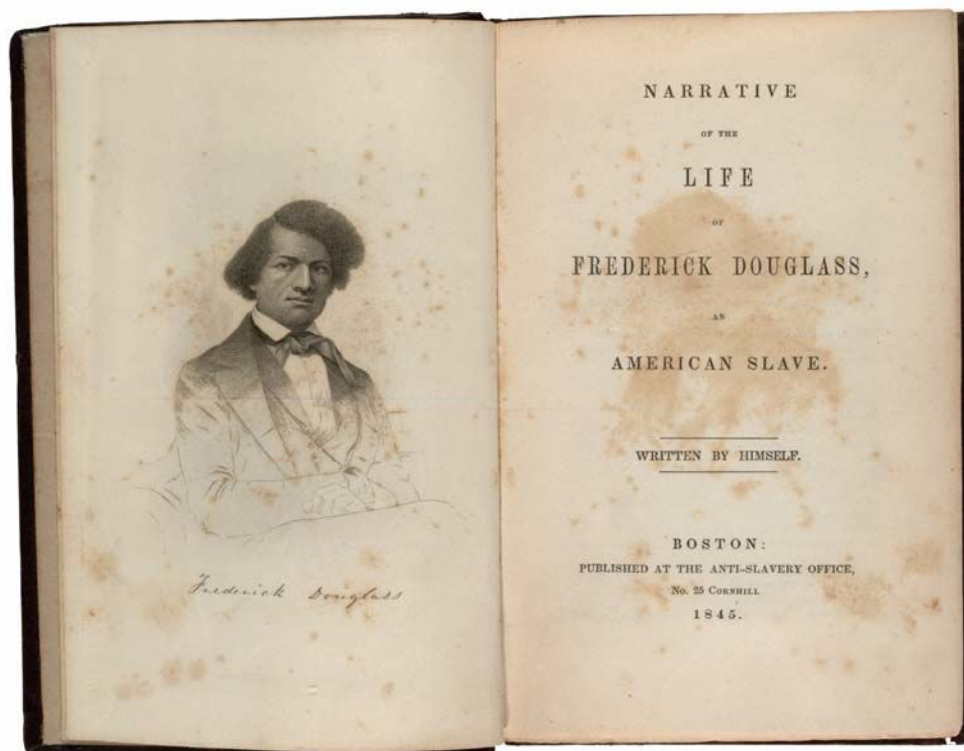


*Frederick Douglass from Slavery to Freedom:  
the Journey to New York City*

**Educator's Guide**



Developed by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History  
with a Biographical Introduction by  
Professor Steven Mintz of the University of Houston

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## **Brief Chronology of the Life of Frederick Douglass**

### **February 1818**

Born on Hill Farm, Talbot County, Maryland

### **1826**

Sent to live with Hugh Auld's family in Baltimore

### **1834**

Hired out as a field hand for a year to a "slave breaker"

### **September 3, 1838**

Escapes to New York City and then settles in New Bedford, Massachusetts

### **1845**

Publishes his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*

### **1845-1847**

Travels in Great Britain as an abolitionist lecturer

### **1847**

Publishes his first issue of weekly newspaper *North Star* from Rochester, New York

### **1859-1860**

Following Harper's Ferry Raid, flees to Great Britain for safety

### **1863**

Leads recruitment of black troops for the Union Army

**1872-1874**

Moves to Washington, D.C., and becomes president of Freedmen's Savings Bank

**1877-1883**

Holds offices in the District of Columbia

**1889-1891**

Serves as U.S. resident minister and consul general to Haiti

**February 20, 1895**

Dies at home in Washington, D.C.

# **Frederick Douglass: A Biography**

**By Steven Mintz, John and Rebecca Moores Professor of History,  
University of Houston**

Frederick Douglass- one of America's most brilliant authors, orators, and organizers and the nineteenth century's most famous black leader- was one of the first fugitive slaves to speak out publicly against slavery. On the morning of August 12, 1841, he stood up at an anti-slavery meeting on Nantucket Island off the Massachusetts coast. With great power and eloquence, he described his life in bondage. As soon as he finished, the famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison asked the audience, "Have we been listening to a thing, a piece of property, or to a man?" "A man, a man!" five hundred voices replied. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the pioneering feminist, vividly recalled her first glimpse of Douglass on an abolitionist platform: "He stood there like an African prince, majestic in his wrath, as with wit, satire, and indignation he graphically described the bitterness of slavery and the humiliation of subjection."

Douglass (who was originally named Frederick Bailey, after a Muslim ancestor, Belali Mohomet) had personally experienced the many horrors of slavery. Born in 1818, the son of a Maryland slave woman and an unknown white father, he was separated from his mother almost immediately after his birth, and remembered seeing her only four or five times before her death. Cared for by his maternal grandmother, a slave midwife, he suffered another cruel emotional blow when at the age of six he was taken from his home to work on one of the largest plantations on Maryland's eastern shore. There, Douglass

suffered hunger and witnessed many cruelties that he later recorded in his autobiographies. He never forgot seeing an aunt receive forty lashes with a cowskin whip or a cousin bleeding from her shoulders and neck after flogging by a drunken overseer.

Temporarily, Douglass was rescued from a life of menial plantation labor when he was sent to Baltimore to work for a shipwright. Here, his mistress taught him to read, until her husband declared that “learning would spoil the best” slave in the world. Douglass continued his education on his own. With fifty cents he earned blacking boots, Douglass bought a copy of the Columbian Orator, a collection of speeches that included a blistering attack on slavery. This book introduced him to the ideals of the Enlightenment and the American Revolution, and inspired him to perfect his oratorical skills.

At fifteen, his master’s death resulted in Douglass’s return to plantation life. Resentful at the loss of relative freedom in a city, Douglass bitterly complained about the plantation’s food and refused to call his owner “Master.” To crush Douglass’s rebellious spirit, his owner hired him out to a notorious “slave breaker” named Edward Covey. For seven months, Douglass endured abuse and beatings. But one hot August morning, he could take no more. He fought back and defeated Covey in a fistfight. After this, he was no longer punished.

In 1836, Douglass and two close friends, John and Henry Harris, plotted to escape slavery. When the plan was uncovered, Douglass was thrown in jail. But instead of being sold to the slave traders and shipped to the deep South as he expected, Douglass was returned to Baltimore and promised freedom at the age of twenty-five if he behaved himself. In Baltimore, Douglass worked in the city’s shipyard. Virtually every day, white workers harassed him and on one occasion beat him with bricks and metal spikes,

shouting “kill him- kill him...knock his brains out.” Eventually, Douglass’s owner gave him the unusual privilege of hiring himself out for wages and living independently. During this period of relative freedom, Douglass joined the East Baltimore Improvement Society, a benevolent and educational organization, where he met Anna Murray, a free black woman whom he later married.

In 1838, after his owner threatened to take away his right to hire out his time, Douglass decided to run away. With papers borrowed from a free black sailor, he boarded a train and rode to freedom. To conceal his identity, he adopted a new last name, Douglass, chosen from Sir Walter Scott’s poem, “Lady of the Lake.”

After escaping from slavery, Douglass settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he worked in the shipyards, and began to attend anti-slavery meetings. In August 1841, he was asked to speak to a convention of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. It was then that he became one of the first fugitive slaves to speak on behalf of the abolition cause.

As a traveling lecturer, Douglass electrified audiences with his first-hand accounts of slavery. His speeches combated the notion that slaves were content and undermined belief in racial inferiority. When many Northerners refused to believe that this eloquent orator could possibly have been a slave, he responded by writing an autobiography that identified his previous owners by name. Fearing he would be kidnapped and returned to slavery following the publication of his autobiography, Douglass fled to England. For seventeen months Douglass toured England, Scotland, and Wales, gaining an international reputation as an orator. Only after British abolitionists purchased his freedom for £150 British sterling did he return to the United States.

Initially, Douglass supported William Lloyd Garrison and the radical abolitionists, who believed that moral purity was more important than political success. The radicals questioned whether the Bible represented the word of God because it condoned slavery, withdrew from churches that permitted slavery, and refused to vote or hold public office. Douglass later broke with Garrison, started his own newspaper, The North Star, and supported political action against slavery. He was an early supporter of the Republican Party, even though its goal was to halt slavery's expansion, not to abolish the institution. Following the Civil War, the party would reward his loyalty by appointing him marshal and register of deeds for the District of Columbia and minister to Haiti.

Douglass supported many reforms, including temperance and women's rights. He was one of the few men to attend the first women's rights convention, held in Seneca Falls, New York. In fact, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a leading suffragette, could get no women to support her resolution demanding the vote for women, she turned to Frederick Douglass, who seconded her resolution with a resounding speech.

Nevertheless, Douglass's main cause was the struggle against slavery and racial discrimination. In the 1840s and 1850s, he not only lectured tirelessly against slavery, he also raised funds to help fugitive slaves in Canada. Taking a great risk, the Douglass home in Rochester became a stop on the Underground Railroad. During the Civil War, he lobbied President Lincoln to make slave emancipation a war aim and organize black regiments. Declaring that "liberty won by white men would lack half its luster," he personally recruited some 2,000 African-American troops for the Union army. Among the recruits were two of his sons, Louis and Charles Remond, who took part in the bloody



Union assault on Fort Wagner in South Carolina in July 1863, which resulted in more than 1,500 northern casualties— but which proved black troops’ heroism in battle.

Douglass never wavered in his commitment to equal rights. During Reconstruction, he struggled to convince Congress to use federal power to safeguard the freedmen’s rights. Later, as the country retreated from reconstruction, Douglass passionately denounced lynching, segregation, and disenfranchisement. Toward the end of his career, he was asked what advice he had for a young man. “Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!” he replied. Despite old age, Douglass never stopped agitating. He died in 1895, at the age of seventy-seven, after attending a women’s rights meeting with Susan B. Anthony.

It is a striking historical coincidence that the year of Douglass’s death brought a new black leader to national prominence. Seven months after Douglass’s death, Booker T. Washington, the founder of the Tuskegee Institute, delivered a speech in Atlanta, Georgia, which catapulted him into the public spotlight. The “Atlanta Compromise” speech called on African-Americans to end their demands for equal rights and instead strive for economic advancement. “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the finger,” Washington declared, “yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” Washington’s philosophy of accommodation with segregation represented the polar opposite of Douglass’s goal of full civil and political equality.

**Excerpts from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,*  
*Written by Himself***

\*All quotations are drawn from the 1993 Bedford Books edition, edited by David Blight.

**Life Under Slavery**

Frederick Douglass was born in March 1818 in a cabin on a large Maryland plantation, to a slave mother and an unknown father. As a young boy, he experienced the horrors of life under slavery in the United States.

*Pg. 39 – Birth* “A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it.”

*Pg. 42-43 – Aunt Hester* “The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It stuck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it.”

*Pg. 45 – Overseer Mr. Severe* “Mr. Severe was rightly named: he was a cruel man. I have seen him whip a woman, causing the blood to run half an hour at the time; and this, too, in the midst of her crying children, pleading for their mother’s release. He seemed to take pleasure in manifesting his fiendish barbarity. Added to his cruelty, he was a profane swearer. It was enough to chill the blood and stiffen the hair of an ordinary man to hear him talk.”

*Pg. 49 – Constant Fear* “The poor man was then informed by his overseer that, for having found fault with his master, he was now to be sold to a Georgia trader. He was immediately chained and handcuffed; and thus, without a moment’s warning, he was snatched away, and forever sundered, from his family and friends, by a hand more unrelenting than death. This is the penalty of telling the truth, of telling the simple truth, in answer to a series of plain questions.”

*Pg. 51 – Complete Power* “No matter how innocent a slave might be – it availed him nothing, when accused by Mr. Gore of any misdemeanor. To be accused was to be convicted, and to be convicted was to be punished; the one always following the other with immutable certainty. To escape punishment was to escape accusation; ...”

*Pg. 64 – Slaves* “We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination. Silvery-headed age and sprightly youth, maids and matrons, had to undergo the same indelicate inspection. At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder.”

- Given these conditions, what qualities must Douglass develop in order to survive and overcome slavery?
- Do the conditions Douglass lived under as a child speak to the children of today?

## Learning to Read – Hope of Liberty

At age seven, Douglass was sent to Baltimore to live in the house of his new master, Hugh Auld; there, he learned to read. Sophie Auld, his master's wife, instructed Douglass at first, but his master soon stopped the lessons he because learning to read would "forever unfit him to be a slave." Douglass then embarked on a secret and illegal program of self-education, reading newspapers, the Bible, and speeches from the *Columbian Orator*. The knowledge he gained through reading nurtured in him both a dream of freedom and a keen feeling of despair at the difficulty of escape.

*Pg. 57 – Opposed by Mr. Auld* "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave."

*Pg. 57-58 – Learning as Power* "These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty – to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom."

*Pg. 61 – Ready* "The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity ..."

*Pg. 62-63 – Way out through Writing* "I looked forward to a time at which it would be safe for me to escape. I was too young to think of doing so immediately; besides, I

wished to learn how to write, as I might have occasion to write my own pass. I consoled myself with the hope that I should one day find a good chance. Meanwhile, I would learn to write.”

- Why did slave owners make the teaching of reading to slaves unlawful?
- Why was forced illiteracy one of the more tragic aspects of slavery?
- In order to learn how to read, Frederick Douglass traded food to poor white children who attended school in return for help with reading. If you were Frederick Douglass, would you have been willing to trade food for words? What would you be willing to give for an education today?

## Turning Points

The summer of 1833 marked a turning point for Douglass life. The “rebellious” young Douglass was sent to the farm of the vicious “slave breaker” Edward Covey. In July, after a fierce fight with Covey, from which he emerged unbeaten, Douglass vowed never to spend another day in slavery without fighting to be free.

*Pg. 74-75 – Compare Freedom of Ships* “You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom’s swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! O, that I were on one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing! Alas! betwixt me and you, the turbid waters roll. Go on, go on. O that I could also go! Could I but swim! If I could fly! O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute! The glad ship is gone; she hides in the dim distance. I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery. O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave?”

*Pg. 75 – Battle with Covey* “ You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.”

*Pg. 79 – Battle with Covey* “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.”

*Pg. 85 – Mr. Freeland* “...Mr. Freeland again hired me of my master, for the year 1835. But, by this time, I began to want to *upon free land* as well as *with Freeland*; and I was no longer content, therefore, to live with him or any other slaveholder. I began, with the commencement of the year, to prepare myself for a final struggle, which should decide my fate one way or the other.”

*Pg.86 – Running Away* “In coming to a fixed determination to run away, we did more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death. With us it was a

doubtful liberty as most, and almost certain death if we failed. For my part, I should prefer death to hopeless bondage.”

*Pg. 95 – Restless – Run Away* “In the early part of the year 1838, I became quite restless. I could see no reason why I should, at the end of each week, pour the reward of my toil into the purse of my master.”

- Why would Douglass call the battle with Covey “the turning point in his career as a slave”? Why would he choose the word “career” rather than “life”?
- What would you have done in Douglass’s place?
- Were his actions foolish or courageous? Why? What risk did Douglass take in fighting back?

## Escape to Freedom

Sent back to Baltimore by his owner, Douglass planned his escape. He was strengthened in his resolve by hearing and reading about “abolitionists,” men and women like John Quincy Adams and William Lloyd Garrison who were working to end slavery. On September 3, 1838, Frederick Douglass disguised himself as a free seaman. Carrying false identification papers, he traveled by train and boat to New York City to freedom. Though “free,” Douglass remained a fugitive under the law until friends purchased his liberty.

*Pg. 98 – Freedom: N.Y.* “The wretchedness of slavery, and the blessedness of freedom, were perpetually before me. It was life and death with me. But I remained firm, and, according to my resolution, on the third day of September, 1838, I left my chains, and succeeded in reaching New York without the slightest interruption of any kind. How I did so, -what means I adopted, -in what direction I traveled, and by what mode of conveyance, -I must leave unexplained, for the reasons before mentioned.”

*Pg. 98– Freedom: N.Y.* “It was a moment of the highest excitement I ever experienced. I suppose I felt as one might imagine the unarmed mariner to feel when he is rescued by a friendly man-of-war from the pursuit of a pirate. In writing to a dear friend, immediately after my arrival at New York, I said I felt like one who had escaped a den of hungry lions. This state of mind, however, very soon subsided; ...”



## The Fourth of July Speech

Students will be able to state the reasons behind Douglass's Fourth of July speech by contrasting it to the Declaration of Independence.

- Douglass denounces the celebration of the Fourth of July as hypocrisy in a nation that allows slavery.

Students use a comparison of the Fourth of July speech and the Declaration of Independence to answer the questions below.

The quotes below are attributed to Frederick Douglass:

- a. "Stand by what you know is right."
  - b. "Courage is necessary to fight evil."
  - c. "The man who is right is majority."
- How are the ideas in the above quotes reflected in the Fourth of July speech?
  - Why did Douglass challenge the statement in the Declaration of Independence that promised Americans life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?
  - Why did Douglass believe that the Declaration of Independence reflected hypocrisy and deceit?
  - Douglass once said that to fight slavery, you had to "Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!" How is this reflected in the Fourth of July speech?
  - If Douglass were alive today, would he make the same speech?

- The Fourth of July speech offended Americans who might have been sympathetic to Douglass's cause. Should he be criticized for being radical and undiplomatic? Be prepared to justify your opinion.

### **Excerpts from Douglass's Fourth of July Speech**

In 1852, Frederick Douglass was asked to deliver a Fourth of July speech in Rochester, New York. Douglass began his remarks to a white audience by stating that this holiday “is yours, not mine.” Douglass stated that the day represented “the birthday of **your** National Independence, and of **your** political freedom.” He believed that for African Americans, July Fourth simply showed the contradiction between American ideals of liberty and equality and the grim reality of slavery.

What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.

Source: Frederick Douglass, “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro” (July 5, 1852).

## **Declaration of Independence**

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness; That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, —That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it.

## Frederick Douglass: Linking the Past and the Present

- Knowing that racism, hatred, and bigotry still exist in our nation today, how would you respond to the following situations? If Frederick Douglass appeared before you today, how might he advise you in each of these situations?
  1. You eat in a restaurant and observe that members of a racial group different from your own are refused service.
  2. You are a man who works in a large firm and observes a bright, hardworking woman who was passed over for a promotion. She asks you to support her complaint.
  3. You observe a member of your ethnic group beat and rob a member of another ethnic group. The perpetrator tells you that you must not tell the police because “our people have to stick together.”
- Frederick Douglass has been called a fighter for freedom, justice, and equality. You have been asked to inscribe a short statement on a memorial that would honor and memorialize his contribution. What words and ideas would you include to honor him?
- What qualities do people look for in their heroes today? Do today’s heroes stand up to Douglass’s example?
- If Frederick Douglass appeared before you today, would his message relate to your own life?

## Recommendations for Further Reading

Blight, David W. *Frederick Douglass's Civil War: Keeping the Faith in Jubilee*.  
Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845). Edited with an introduction by David W. Blight.  
Boston, MA: Bedford Books, 1993.\*

Horton, James Oliver and Lois E. *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

McFeely, William S. *Frederick Douglass*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1991.

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\* All quotations are drawn from this edition.

## Mission Statement

Founded in 1994, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History promotes the study and love of American history. Increasingly national and international in scope, the Institute's initiatives target audiences ranging from students to scholars to the general public. The Institute creates history-centered schools and academic research centers; organizes seminars and enrichment programs for educators; produces print and electronic publications and traveling exhibitions; and sponsors lectures by eminent historians. The Institute funds awards including the Lincoln and Frederick Douglass Book Prizes and offers fellowships for scholars to work in the Gilder Lehrman Collection and other archives.

For more information on the Gilder Lehrman Institute, visit [www.gilderlehrman.org](http://www.gilderlehrman.org),  
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