Frederick Douglass: From Slavery to Freedom

by Steven Mintz

This essay is provided courtesy of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

Engraving of Frederick Douglass as US Marshal in Washington DC, from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, April 7, 1877. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

Frederick Douglass 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. With great power and eloquence, he described his life in bondage. As soon as he finished, the 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 many of slavery's worst horrors. 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, an enslaved midwife, he suffered a 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 chronic hunger and witnessed many of the cruelties that he later recorded in his autobiographies. He saw an aunt receive forty lashes and a cousin bleeding from her shoulders and neck after a flogging by a drunken overseer.

Douglass was temporarily rescued from a life of menial plantation labor when he was sent to Baltimore to work for a shipwright. There, his mistress taught him to read until her husband declared that "learning would spoil" him. Douglass continued his education on his own. With fifty cents that 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, following his master's death, Douglass was returned to plantation life. He was unwilling to show deference to his new owner, whom he refused to call "Master." To crush Douglass's rebellious spirit, he was hired 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 fist fight. Covey never mistreated Douglass again.

In 1836, Douglass and two close friends plotted to escape slavery. When the plan was uncovered, Douglass was thrown into jail. Instead of being sold to slave traders and shipped to the deep South, as

he had expected, Douglass was returned to Baltimore and promised freedom at the age of 25 if he behaved himself.

In Baltimore, Douglass worked in the city's shipyards. Virtually every day, white workers harassed him and on one occasion beat him with bricks and metal spikes. Eventually, Douglass's owner gave him the unusual privilege of hiring himself out for wages and living independently. It was during this period of relative freedom that Douglass 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 own time and keep a portion of his wages, 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."

He settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he worked in the shipyards, and began to participate in anti-slavery meetings. As a traveling lecturer, Douglass electrified audiences with his first-hand accounts of slavery. 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. Fearful that his autobiography made him vulnerable to kidnapping and a return to slavery, Douglass fled to England. Only after British abolitionists purchased his freedom 1846 did he return to the United States.

Initially, Douglass supported William Lloyd Garrison and other radical abolitionists, who believed that moral purity was more important than political success. 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 rewarded his loyalty by appointing him marshal and register of deeds for the District of Columbia and then US 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, and he was the only man to vote for a resolution demanding the vote for women. His main cause, however, 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 reach safety in Canada. During the Civil War, he lobbied President Lincoln to make slave emancipation a war aim and to organize black regiments. Declaring that "liberty won by white men would lack half its lustre," he personally recruited some 2,000 African American troops for the Union Army. Among the recruits were two of his sons, 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 disfranchisement. 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 77, 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 died, Booker T. Washington, the founder of the Tuskegee Institute, delivered a speech in Atlanta, Georgia, that catapulted him into the public spotlight. The "Atlanta Compromise" speech called on African Americans to end their demands for equal rights and strive instead 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. It would be more than half a century before civil rights activism began to transform Douglass's ideal of social equality into a reality.

Steven Mintz, a historian at Columbia University and director of the Columbia Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Teaching Center, would like to express his profound debt to John Stauffer of Harvard University for sharing his many insights into the novel. Mintz is author of *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood; Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life*; and *Moralists & Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers.*

Before Jackie: How Strikeout King Satchel Paige Struck Down Jim Crow

by Larry Tye

This essay is provided courtesy of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

St. Louis Brown's pitcher Satchel Paige, 1952. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

Satchel Paige was pitching in the Negro Leagues in California when he got the news he had been anticipating for two decades. Brooklyn Dodgers president Branch Rickey had just signed a Negro to a big-league contract-the first Negro in modern times. Word tore through America's clubhouses and grandstands that October afternoon in 1945: a black man was going to be in the minors, then the Major Leagues. Jackie Robinson would topple baseball's color bar. And Leroy "Satchel" Paige would not.

Earthshaking-almost like the emancipation of the slaves, integration supporters proclaimed. It was fitting "that the end of baseball's Jim Crow law should follow the conclusion of a great war to preserve liberty, equality and decency," wrote Lee Dunbar of the *Oakland Tribune*. A desecration of the natural order, segregationists shot back. "We live happier with segregation in athletics as well as all other activities," argued Bud Seifert of South Carolina's *Spartanburg Journal*. Bob Feller, the Cleveland Indians flamethrower with a golden arm and a tin ear, told reporters that if Jackie "were a white man, I doubt if they would consider him as big league material."

The public listened to the cacophony of voices, but the one it wanted to hear most of all was Satchel's. What did America's best-loved black ballplayer-the man everyone had assumed would be first-make of the Dodgers' historic move? "They didn't make a mistake by signing Robinson," Satchel said. "They couldn't have picked a better man." The words ate at him even as he uttered them. Not only was he being bumped, he was being bumped by his Negro Leagues teammate, an untested rookie who could not hit a curve, gun a throw to first, or land the job as the Kansas City Monarchs' second baseman until an injury forced out the incumbent.

Other seasoned Negro Leaguers were resentful that the young slugger had never served his time in the sandlots and barnyards, eating dust and fending off slurs. Robinson had not proven himself against the best white ballplayers the way Satchel would do again that next night in San Diego against Feller's All-Stars from the all-white majors. Rather than show deference to the old hands who had proven themselves, Jackie showed disdain. He complained about the seedy hotels. He objected to puny paychecks and uneven umpiring.

Satchel tried to be philosophical. He understood that he was aging and old-school, while the twenty-six-year-old Robinson was a college boy and Army veteran who Rickey felt could bear the ruthless scrutiny of being first. Jackie did not balk at Rickey's plan to start him in the minors, in faraway Montreal. Satchel never could have abided the affront. Jackie had the table manners whites liked; Satchel was rough-hewn and ungovernable. Satchel realized he was a specter from the past rather than the harbinger of the more racially tolerant future the Dodgers wanted.

Still, it hurt. It was Paige who had proved during two decades of barnstorming across America and pitching in the shadow world of the Negro Leagues that white fans along with black would come to see

great black ballplayers, and that proof was what pushed Rickey to rip down baseball's racial barricades. Satchel threw so hard that his catchers tried to soften the sting by cushioning their gloves with beefsteaks, and had control so precise that he used a hardball to knock lit cigarettes out of the mouths of obliging teammates. Satchel was so dominating-especially when his teams were beating the best of the white big leaguers-that even good ol' boys like Dizzy Dean could not help but be impressed. Major League owners noticed, too. One of them-flamboyant Bill Veeck of the Cleveland Indians-said he tried to sign Paige and other blacks in 1944, a year before Rickey's deal with Robinson, but was blocked by the baseball commissioner. It was Satchel who brought this spotlight to the Negro Leagues, the amazing Kansas City Monarchs, and their first-year second-baseman Jackie Robinson.

Paige was savvy enough to know that Americans have room for just one hero at a time. If Jackie became the knight who slew Jim Crow, the roles of the real pioneers would be lost. Satchel felt sorry for all the great black ballplayers of the segregated era-from Fleetwood Walker and Rube Foster to Josh Gibson, the black Babe Ruth-and sorrier still for himself. He worried that he would be remembered as a Stepin Fetchit or worse, an Uncle Tom. Satchel never saw himself going to war over every racial slight, but he had stood up. He refused to play in a town unless it supplied lodging and food to him and his teammates, a defiance for which young civil rights workers would get arrested and lionized a generation later. Only a player of his stature and grace could manage that without getting his skull cracked open. It was painful, after all those years of hearing "if only you were white," to be told now "if only you were younger."

"I'd been the guy who'd started all that big talk about letting us in the big time," Satchel wrote in his memoir. "I'd been the one who everybody'd said should be in the majors." To be denied that chance hurt as badly as "when somebody you love dies or something dies inside you."

When the pain ran that deep only one person could ease it: his girlfriend and confidante, Lahoma Brown. So cherished was her advice that Satchel recalled it word-for-word seventeen years afterward, when she'd become his wife and mother to his seven children. "They took that kid off our team and didn't even look at me," Satchel told her. "He's young, Satchel," Lahoma answered. "Maybe that's why." "He's no Satchel Paige." "Everybody knows that, Satchel . . . If they let one colored player into their leagues, they'll be letting others. Maybe the major leaguers'll come to you." "They'll have to come real pretty-like. They've been puttin' me off too long to just wiggle their fingers at me now." "Don't you go sounding like you're sour. When they come for you, you know you'll go. You've been wanting it real bad for too long not to." "Well, it still was me that ought to have been first."

The sense of having been wronged never left him. Satchel Paige had etched his legend as a ballplayer and performer, but he was right about the public's memory: when it comes to integrating baseball there is only one name that today's children or even their grandparents know-Jackie Robinson. Satchel Paige had been hacking away at Jim Crow decades before the world got to know Jackie Robinson, laying the groundwork for him the way A. Philip Randolph, W. E. B. Du Bois, and other early civil rights leaders did for Martin Luther King Jr. Paige was as much a poster boy for black baseball as Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong was for black music and Paul Robeson was for the black stage-and much as those two became symbols of their art in addition to their race, so Satchel was known not as a great black pitcher but a great pitcher. Satchel Paige led blackball to the promised land of big-time baseball. He opened the national pastime to blacks and forever changed his sport and this nation.

Larry Tye, a former reporter at the *Boston Globe*, is author of five books, including *Satchel: The Life and Times of an American Legend* (www.larrytye.com)

Name: _____ **Date:** _____

Use the article "Frederick Douglass: From Slavery to Freedom" to answer questions 1 to 3.

1. What was Frederick Douglass' main cause after he returned to the United States from England?

_____

_____

_____

2. What did Frederick Douglass do to fight for his main cause? Cite at least three details from the text about Frederick Douglass's actions to support your answer.

_____

_____

_____

3. What impact did Frederick Douglass have on the fight for African American rights? Use details from the text to support your answer.

_____

_____

_____

Use the article "Before Jackie: How Strikeout King Satchel Paige Struck Down Jim Crow" to answer questions 4 to 6.

4. During two decades of pitching in the Negro Leagues, what did Satchel Paige prove

about baseball fans?

5. How did Satchel Paige "lay the groundwork" for Jackie Robinson to become the first black Major League Baseball player? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

6. Why was Satchel Paige important to the fight for social equality for African Americans? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Use the articles "Frederick Douglass: From Slavery to Freedom" and "Before Jackie: How Strikeout King Satchel Paige Struck Down Jim Crow" to answer questions 7 to 8.

7. Compare the impact that Frederick Douglass and Satchel Paige each had on African Americans' rights. Use evidence from both texts to support your comparison.

8. Contrast the ways that Frederick Douglass and Satchel Paige helped to achieve positive changes for African Americans. Use evidence from both texts to support your answer.