

# NEGROES IN AMERICAN HISTORY:

A FREEDOM PRIMER



# Negroes in American History

## A Freedom Primer

---

Text:

Bobbi Cieciorca  
Frank Cieciorca

Drawings:

Frank Cieciorca





## Introduction

This is a history book about us. It is about a history that has been denied us by lies about what we are and what we have been. It is a book with pictures that can be colored with crayons. But most of all, this is a book to be used. This is a book we helped make and can continue to help make (and not just with crayons). What all of this means is that this is really a history book about us today, as well as about us yesterday.

What we learn from this book about us is that there is a lot about us that we don't know. Which raises the question why we don't know. That big question why is a threat and a challenge to the people who have kept us from knowing us. Which makes this a very dangerous book to those who don't want us to know about us. Probably it won't be used in any schools, except for the schools we make.

You see, to ask questions really means to try and find truth, which really means to ask more questions. To ask more questions means to make more challenges, which really means to do things you think are important to you. That's dangerous



too, and usually isn't allowed by the same people who keep us from knowing about us.

As you read, ask why haven't I learned about Cherokee Bill, Nat Turner, Peter Salem, Sojourner Truth and the many others of us in this book. Think about how you should know about many of us in this book who fought against being slaves, and fought for freedom in this country, and weren't "happy and satisfied." Think about freedom. Freedom is fought for by the people who question and challenge slavery. Ask, as you read, am I free? If I am not free, who do I question and challenge? How do I question and challenge?

All of this is to say think about making a book of your own, about you today. Call it maybe a freedom fighting history book. But before doing that, make a freedom fight.

—charlie cobb

## A Note About the Revisions

When we wrote the first edition of the Freedom Primer, we wrote it for the kinds of kids we had met and talked to while working in a Freedom School in Marshall County, Mississippi. We didn't know then that the book would be used outside the freedom schools of the South. So the language and the kinds of ideas and people we put into the book were included with that idea in mind.

Since that time, some criticisms have come in about the book. Some people didn't understand who we had written the book for and felt that it should have been longer, included more people and other aspects of the Negro struggle.

Neither the first nor second edition were written as definitive works on Negro history. They were written simply so that young people like yourselves who did not know about men like Du Bois and Denmark Vesey and all the others could learn a little about them. There are many people and events important to Negro history which could not be included here because we didn't have enough



room. So, when you read this, we want you to understand that there are many more black people like those you'll read about in this book. And if you want to find out about them, you can look through some of the books we talked about earlier or you can ask around for the names of some more books.

These primers are now being used by folks like yourselves in Harlem, Chicago, Philadelphia, Watts, and many more communities around the country.

We've gone into a second edition so that we'd have enough books for all those who wanted them. And we thought while we were at it, we would make the book better by using some of the suggestions other people have given us. We've added more drawings and some questions we felt you could try to answer about your history and about yourselves. We hope you like the new things we've added.

-f.c. & b.c.

## Contents

Introduction	
A Note About the Revisions	
The American Revolution	1
Toussaint L'Ouverture	7
Slave Revolts	11
Negroes and Indians	15
Women in the Movement	19
Frederick Douglass	23
Negroes in the Civil War	29
Negro Cowboys	33
Reconstruction	37
W. E. B. DuBois	45
The Modern Movement	51
More About Negro History	63









## Negroes in the American Revolution

AT ONE TIME, the king of England owned America. He made laws that people in America had to obey. When a country is owned by another country, it is called a colony. New England was part of the colony of America. The people in New England used to have mass meetings. They called the meetings Town Meetings.

At these meetings they spoke against the way England made decisions for them. They didn't want to pay taxes to England when they didn't get to help decide what the laws should be. They didn't want British soldiers to live in their towns and order them around. They didn't want England to control how much money they could earn when they sold what they made. Like Negroes in the South today, they had no voice in the government.

But many people who came to the mass meetings were Toms for the English. So when someone spoke up, he often got in trouble. After a while, people started thinking they should be free from England. They decided that they would fight Britain if that was what they had to do to be free. They were tired of being almost like slaves to England.



*The movement is sometimes called a "Negro Revolution." What is a revolution? Was the American Revolution like the freedom movement today?*



So they wrote the Declaration of Independence. It said that all men were equal and that men should not be controlled by other men. Many of the people who signed the declaration also owned slaves. Some of them felt that Negroes should be free. But many of them thought that freedom was for whites only.

IN THE DAYS before the war, Boston was one of the towns where British soldiers stayed. The soldiers' coats were red so the people called them "redcoats." The people and the soldiers hated each other and they would often have small fights.

One day there was a bad fist fight between some soldiers and town people. When everybody heard about it the next day, they were very angry. Many of them went out into the streets to wait for something to happen. One little boy got hit over the head by an angry soldier. The people picked up rocks and sticks and marched up to where the soldiers stayed.

The leader of the people that day was a tall, strong Negro named Crispus Attucks. He was a runaway slave who had become a sailor. He stood in front of the people and told them the soldiers would not dare to shoot. The people shouted at the redcoats, "Shoot and be damned! Shoot and be damned!"

A soldier shot into the air to scare the people away. They didn't have tear gas and cattle prods in those days. Instead of running away, the people threw rocks at the soldiers. The angry soldiers started shooting at the people. Crispus Attucks fell to the ground, killed by a soldier's bullet. Then the people attacked the soldiers with stones and sticks. They were too mad to care about bullets.

Finally the soldiers backed away and the fighting stopped. Four Americans lay dead in the



street. The people carried them away and they were all given a hero's funeral. Crispus Attucks, a black man, was the first person to die for American freedom.

A FEW YEARS after Attucks was killed, the war for freedom really began. Most Negroes were slaves then but some were free. At first the American army would not use Negroes as soldiers, not even free Negroes. But Negroes fought anyway, right from the start.

After a while, the British army started promising freedom to any slaves who would fight on their side. Thousands of slaves ran away and joined the English army to fight for their freedom against their masters. After that the American army let Negroes join too.

Negroes fought for American freedom in all the biggest battles. Often it was their fighting which made the difference between winning and losing. A Negro, Peter Salem, was a hero in the battle of Bunker Hill. Another, Salem Poor, was spoken of by 14 army officers. They said he acted like an officer and was a very brave soldier. Some Negroes also worked as spies for the army.

Many slaves died fighting in the war and many ran away and found freedom. But many were still slaves. Lots of people did not think it was right that people who fought in the war for freedom were still slaves. So the first big emancipation of slaves in the United States came after the war. Many black men were set free as a reward for fighting in the war. Some slave owners thought about the words of the Declaration of Independence. They freed their slaves even if they didn't fight in the war.

There was a movement in the North called the Rights of Man movement. This movement felt it was wrong for any man to keep another man in

*Does the government  
sometimes say one thing and  
mean another?*





*Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "The nation cannot expect colored people to feel that the United States is worth defending if the Negro continues to be treated as he is now." Do you agree with this?*

slavery. Through laws and in the courts, legal slavery was ended in the North.

It looked like slavery would die in the South too. But then the cotton gin was invented. The gin meant that people could clean cotton much faster than before and make more money selling it. People in the South decided to keep their slaves and grow cotton. To them, making money was more important than freedom and equality for all men.















## Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution

THE COUNTRY OF Haiti is part of an island in the Gulf of Mexico. A few French planters and about 500,000 Negro slaves lived there in 1790. Just as in the South, the slaves worked in the fields. They raised sugar and other crops. The planters made lots of money from these crops. The slaves came from Africa just like the slaves in America did. Many of the same slave ships carried slaves to both places.

A revolution was going on in France. It was a war between rich people and poor people. The cry of the poor people was "Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood!" Slaves heard the French planters talking about the revolution. They started thinking about the words . . . liberty . . . equality . . . Drums began to beat in the hills.

The French planters thought the Negroes were having religious ceremonies. But the black men were planning their own revolution. In 1791, a group of slaves from many different plantations met in the hills. The time was set. On August 22, all over the French colony, plantations were in flames and white people were killed. One hundred thousand slaves had revolted.



*Could what happened in  
Haiti happen in the South?*



ON ONE PLANTATION there was a slave who was a carriage driver. He was about 50 years old. His name was Toussaint L'Ouverture. He had listened to the white people enough to know that the revolt would need order and training to win. He knew there were enemies who would try to end the revolt if the joyful slaves were not well organized. Toussaint became the organizer.

The British and French and Spanish all hoped to end the revolt and take over Haiti. Toussaint set them fighting against each other until they were all weak. Then Toussaint forced them all to withdraw from the island. He claimed leadership of the whole island. He started to make it into a good country for everyone who lived there. He built roads and forts and schools and hospitals. He set up courts of law, a system of taxes and an army. He made peace with the white people who were still on the island and with the free mulattoes who had been afraid of him. Soon he was a hero to them as well as to the black people.

Haiti remained a part of the French empire in name even though it was run by black people. But Napoleon, the French ruler, had plans for Haiti. And his plans needed slaves. Toussaint was in his way. So, Napoleon sent General Le Clerc with 25,000 soldiers to win back the island. Toussaint's army was weak so he withdrew to the mountains. His soldiers burned crops and destroyed roads to leave nothing the French could use. Toussaint waited.

Then one of his generals became a Tom for the French. Toussaint was afraid the French knew all his plans. So he asked for a temporary peace. He hoped he could go on waiting and soon the fever would kill many of the French troops. But before that happened, the French tricked Tous-



saint and captured him. He was sent to France and kept in prison. He died there in 1803.

Dessalines, one of Toussaint's helpers, took over the leadership of Haiti. He finally drove out the French. Haiti became free from France just like America had become free from England.

The black people of Haiti remember Toussaint, the "first of the blacks", as the hero of their revolution. And many slaves in America heard of Toussaint and remembered him too. Toussaint proved that slaves could revolt and win.

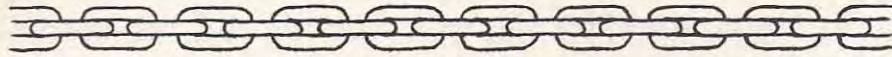
*What is it like in Haiti today?*











## Slave Revolts

SOME HISTORY BOOKS try to make us believe that slaves were content to be slaves. Actually, ever since there first was slavery in the United States, there were also slaves trying to be free. All through the days of slavery, the white people feared that the slaves might revolt and fight back at the people who mistreated them. White people wrote the books that said Negroes were happy. That was what the white people wanted to believe.

But slaves were not happy. They knew that trying to revolt was almost hopeless. They had no weapons to fight with. White people had guns and whips. Even so, during slavery there were about 250 slave revolts in the United States. The revolt of the slaves in Haiti gave hope to many slaves who wished to be free. And it made the white people in the South even more afraid.

In 1800, Gabriel Prosser, a slave, wanted to revolt. His plan was to gather followers and attack the nearby town of Richmond, Virginia. They would kill all the white people in the town. Then they would use the town for a fort and attack other towns. One very stormy night Gabriel and



*What did the slave revolts accomplish? What is a rent strike? How is a rent strike like a slave revolt?*



several thousand followers started for Richmond. The rain had washed out the bridge so they could not use the road. They planned to wait a few days. But one slave told his master of the plan and the people in Richmond were warned.

When the slaves started out again, they were attacked and caught. Gabriel was hanged. Many of the white people said that Gabriel probably would have captured the town if the storm hadn't stopped him. They said the town was poorly defended and the slaves outnumbered the townspeople.

DENMARK VESEY HAD been born a slave. He bought his freedom and became a carpenter in Charleston, South Carolina. Denmark loved freedom and hated to see anyone be a slave. He asked all the slaves he met, "Don't you want to be free?" He would tell them about the revolt in Haiti where all the slaves were now free. He spent many years agitating among the slaves. They all looked to him for a leader. Then he started to organize a revolt.

There were about 9,000 people in Denmark's slave army. He organized them very carefully. The people he worried about most were the slaves who worked in white people's houses. They often got to work in the houses because they were Uncle Toms and would tell their masters what the other slaves were doing. Denmark was afraid that the house slaves would tell about the revolt.

Just two days before the revolt was to happen, one house slave did tell. Denmark tried to revolt anyway, but the white people knew too much. They caught Denmark and all the leaders and hanged them. The white people were very scared when they found out how carefully Denmark had planned the revolt. They killed many Negroes to make sure none of the leaders were



still alive.

THE MOST FAMOUS slave revolt of all was Nat Turner's. Nat was a very religious man. He felt that God had some great job for him to do. One day Nat thought he saw a sign from God. He decided that God wanted him to revolt. The county seat of Southampton County, Virginia, was called Jerusalem. Nat decided that he should march to Jerusalem and kill all the white people.

At midnight one night in 1831, Nat and seven other slaves started out. They had a hatchet and a broad axe. First they marched to Nat's master's house. Everyone was asleep. They went inside and killed the whole family. They took guns and powder and set the house on fire. They went on all night, burning houses and killing white people. As they went, other slaves joined them until there were 70 in the band. Finally they rested, about three miles from Jerusalem. Someone warned the people in town. They came out and attacked Nat's band.

Nat and his men had to run away. They never got back together. They were hunted down and killed. Nat hid in the swamps and wasn't found for about two months. The white people killed many Negroes because they were so scared. They even killed some slaves who had nothing to do with the revolt. Even after Nat was caught and killed, the white people were still afraid. Many of them moved away and none of them ever forgot Nat Turner and his revolt.

*Was the Watts incident like a slave revolt? Should the people of Watts want to revolt?*











## Negroes and Indians

IN THE EARLY days of the United States, settlers sometimes used Indians for slaves. They did not make very good slaves because they would often die when they were kept in slavery. Also, they knew the country better than the white people. They could easily hide when they ran away so that the white people could never find them.

White people very soon found that Negroes made much better slaves. They could be used for years and years. They could be treated very badly before the hard work would kill them. It was a strange land for the black folk. Even when they did run away they were usually caught.

Some whites did keep Indians for slaves as well as Negroes. And even when they weren't slaves, Indians often lived near the white people. Whites usually treated Indians in the same way they treated Negroes. So, Negroes and Indians were usually friendly with each other. Some Indians were afraid of the blacks. They called them "devil-gods". But often their hatred of white people made Indians and Negroes friends. Many of them intermarried so that Negro slaves had free Indian husbands and wives. Sometimes they inter-



*Should the government pay  
the Indians for the land they  
took?*



married so much that whole Indian tribes became part of the Negro race.

When slaves ran away from their masters, they would often go to live with the Indians. Negroes joined just about every Indian tribe in the whole United States, even the ones in the far West. Usually runaway slaves lived with the nearby tribes in the South. Most often they joined the Seminoles.

Some of the Indians kept runaways as slaves for themselves. But most of the time the Negroes would live with the Indians. Sometimes they lived in separate villages just like the Indian villages. The blacks would become members of the tribes. They would be warriors and sometimes even chiefs. They helped the Indians by telling them about the white people. When Indians had to talk with whites, Negroes would often do the talking for them. Negroes knew more about the white people and could talk with them better.

THERE WERE MANY wars between whites and Indians. Negroes would sometimes help the Indians in these wars. When the Indians won one of these wars, they would kill all the white people they captured. They almost never killed the Negro slaves. Sometimes white people would fight wars with Indians just to get back runaway slaves.

Once, about a thousand slaves took over a fort in West Florida. It had belonged to the British. They abandoned it after the War of 1812. The United States government decided that too many Indian raids were coming from West Florida—which was not a part of the United States then. So, in 1816, the government sent Andrew Jackson with an army to attack the fort. He attacked and captured it. He sent all the slaves who weren't killed back into slavery. Many Indians



were killed too. That started the first Seminole war.

The war ended in 1818. In 1835, a runaway slave girl who had married a Seminole warrior was caught and sent back to slavery. Her angry husband led the Seminoles in an attack which started the second Seminole war. During this war at least 500 Negroes were caught and sent back into slavery. Many more Indians were killed. The reason the government gave for the wars was Indian attacks. But the real reason for both wars was to get back some of the slaves who had run away.

The Seminoles and the Negroes stuck together. In 1839, when the Indians and the government made peace, the Seminoles were sent to live in Oklahoma. And the black Indians went with the red ones.

*What about Indians and other minority groups today? Do Negroes and minority groups work together? Should they? What can happen when they do? What are reservations like today?*











## Women in the Movement

**FREEDOM!** That was the dream of every slave. Not just men, but women too. They dreamed of a day when they would be free. Harriet Tubman was such a woman. Born a slave in Maryland, Harriet escaped to the North when she was 25. But freedom for just herself was not enough and soon Harriet was heading South again.

She knew she would be a slave again if she were caught but Harriet went back to her old home. She led out her brothers and her old mother and father. The way was long and hard. They had to travel at night so they wouldn't be seen. They had to swim across rivers and much of the way they had to walk. Harriet brought them all to freedom. But even that was not enough. There were still too many of her people in slavery. Harriet returned to the South 19 times and led out over 300 slaves.

All the slave owners hated her. They said they would pay as much as \$40,000 to anyone who caught her. But Harriet was careful and never got caught. She always seemed to know when there was trouble ahead and what to do about it.



*Is there a freedom underground railroad today?*



Even in the middle of the night she seemed to know which way to turn.

Sometimes she had to be hard with the people she was leading. Not everyone was as strong and brave as Harriet Tubman. If there was a baby in the group, Harriet would feed it dope. Then it would stay asleep and not cry. She always carried a gun with her. One time a man was very tired. He said he couldn't go any farther. Harriet pointed the gun at him and said, "Dead folks tell no tales. You go on or die." So the man went on to freedom.

Sometimes Harriet led the people all the way to Canada. There were laws in the United States that said runaway slaves had to be sent back to their masters. Harriet was a famous part of what was called the "underground railroad". The underground railroad didn't have trains or tracks. It wasn't a real railroad at all. It was the name given to all the people who helped slaves escape.

There were people, both black and white, all along the way to the North who would hide slaves in their barns and cellars. They would feed them and give them clothes. These people hated slavery just as much as Harriet did. They helped runaway slaves even though it was against the law. When Harriet talked about the underground railroad she would say, "I never run my train off the track and I never lost a passenger." And out of all her trips, she never did lose anyone.

With the Civil War, it looked like slavery would soon come to an end. But Harriet did not feel her job was done or that the war was for men only. She served as a nurse on the battlefield and as a spy for the Union army.

THERE WAS A slave named Isabella who grew up in New York. She became free when New



York law freed all the slaves in that state. She was a very religious woman and she believed in freedom. One day she walked out of New York City carrying a bag of clothes and 25 cents. She started to preach freedom all over the country. She changed her name to Sojourner Truth. Sojourner means someone who stays for only a little while and then goes on. Sojourner travelled, stopping here and then there, and always talking about freedom.

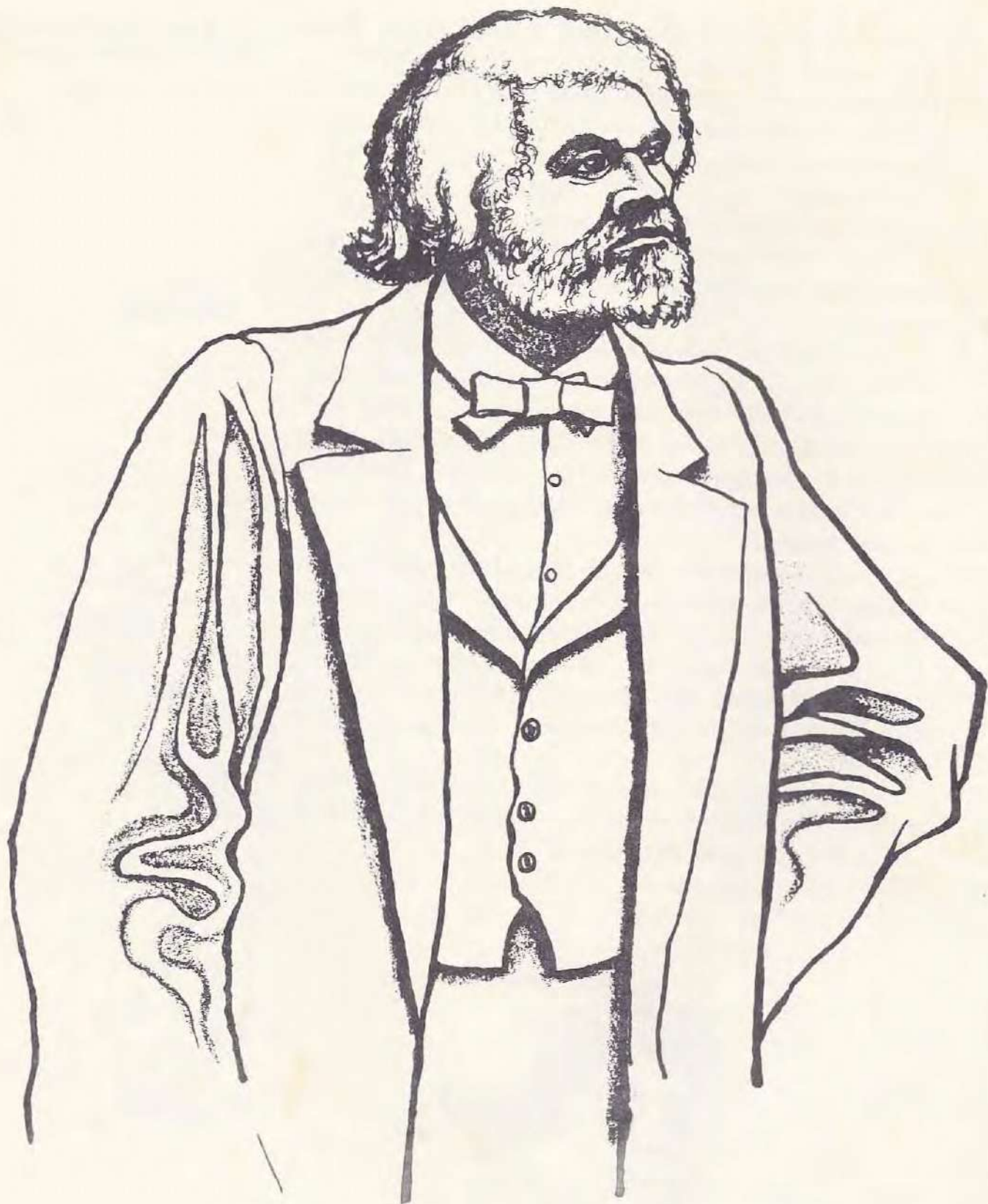
She would tell the story of going out to look at a wheat field. She saw the wheat standing there so big and tall. She took ahold of the wheat and there was no wheat there. So she asked God, "What is the matter with this wheat?" And God said, "Sojourner, there is a little weasel in it." (She meant weevil.)

And then she would talk about the Constitution and the rights of man. She said, "I come up and I takes hold of this Constitution and I feels for my rights but there ain't any there. Then I says, 'God, what ails this Constitution?' And He says to me, 'Sojourner, there is a little weasel it it.'"

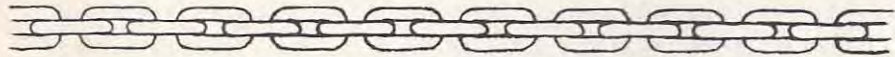
Sojourner was a famous abolitionist talker. Few of the many people who listened to this tall, dark woman ever forgot her.











## Frederick Douglass and the Abolitionists

ALL DURING SLAVERY there were people who fought against slavery. They were mostly in the North. They were called Abolitionists. Some, like Harriet Tubman, helped slaves escape. Others, like Sojourner Truth, talked about the evils of slavery. But not all abolitionists were Negroes. Many were white people. For a long time the Negroes who worked with the abolitionists didn't have much of a voice in the movement. After a while, Negroes really began to fight for themselves.

ONE OF THE most famous of Negro abolitionists was Frederick Douglass. He was born a slave in Maryland in 1817. When he was a child, he taught himself to read. Slaves did not have schools. The white people knew that learning to read and write would make the slaves want to know more. And knowledge would make them want to be free. That was just what happened to Frederick Douglass. In 1838, he ran away to New York where he could be free.

The tall, handsome Douglass soon became an abolitionist speaker. The people never heard anything like him before. Most speakers were



*Do you agree with Garrison that not voting is a good way to protest against things the government does?*



white men or free Negroes. Douglass had been a slave. He could tell people first hand what it was like. He was also a very good speaker. He could make the people really feel as if they were in the slave huts of a plantation.

It is the same way today with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The people in the FDP believe that only poor people know what it is like to be poor. So they don't send lawyers and preachers to tell people in the North what it is like to be poor in the South. They send poor people.

Douglass soon was a famous abolitionist. He worked with William Garrison. Garrison was a famous white abolitionist in Massachusetts. Garrison believed in nonviolence. He believed that people's consciences would make them give up slavery if you showed them how evil it was. He did not believe in direct action or any kind of violence.

Douglass agreed with Garrison and preached the same message. They also believed that the Constitution was in favor of slavery, which meant the government was in favor of slavery too. They said the government should not be supported. Not even by voting.

Douglass visited England and was warmly welcomed. The English were shocked by slavery in America. They were always very kind to the abolitionists who visited them. While he was in England, some of Douglass' friends gathered together money and bought his freedom. After that he could not be caught as a runaway slave when he came back to America.

**AFTER HE RETURNED** to America, Douglass met John Brown, the militant white abolitionist. Brown believed in direct action. He said conscience would not change the slaveowners. He said that as long as slaves made money for their



owners, the owners would not give up slavery. Brown planned to organize an army in the Virginia mountains. He planned to raid plantations from it. He would carry off all the slaves to the mountains. There they could hide. Or they could go north to freedom. Slaves cost a lot of money to buy. Brown hoped he could carry off enough slaves to make the slaveowners lose lots of money. Then they might decide to give up slavery. Douglass did not like Brown's plan at first because he believed in nonviolence. But he was losing faith in changing men's hearts. He began to agree with Brown and to believe in more direct action.

In 1859, Brown rented a farm in West Virginia. He planned to capture the government weapons which were stored at Harper's Ferry nearby. Then he planned to use the farm as a base for raids. Douglass didn't approve of this part of the plan when he heard about it. He didn't think Brown could succeed in an attack against federal property. Brown's plot did fail and he was captured and hanged. But John Brown's militant spirit has never been forgotten.

Douglass broke with Garrison to work on his own. He started a newspaper called the **North Star**. (He chose the name because slaves followed the north star when they were escaping north to freedom.) Douglass studied the Constitution some more and finally decided that it might be used against slavery. He felt abolitionists should work to get it enforced as an anti-slavery document. Douglass and his followers tried many kinds of action. They even had sit-ins on trains in Massachusetts. One time Douglass took a part of a seat with him when he was removed from a white-only section.

ABOLITIONISTS DIDN'T WIN much in those days. There were many people in the North as well as the South who believed in slavery. Free

*Was Douglass like a freedom worker today? Was he different?*





*Could President Lincoln have done more to end slavery? Could President Lyndon Johnson do more to end oppression today?*



black people in the North were faced with a great deal of discrimination. Often abolitionist meetings were broken up by angry crowds. Sometimes the speakers were beaten and chased just like freedom workers today.

As war seemed more and more likely, abolitionists worried about what position the government would take on slavery. Many, like Douglass, believed that a civil war would mean freedom for the slaves. When the Civil War broke out, Douglass cried, "God be praised!"

President Lincoln did not like slavery but he had not said what he thought the government should do about it. Some of the states that had slavery were still with the Union. They were called border states. Lincoln was afraid they would join the Confederates if he said he was against slavery. Douglass and the abolitionists worked hard to educate the country and Lincoln. They tried to show that the war had to end slavery. Douglass even personally visited Lincoln to put pressure on him. Lincoln wanted to go slow. At one time he even suggested that the border states should end slavery by 1900!

But the Union needed Negroes to fight. It was this need, more than belief in the rights of man, that ended slavery. Lincoln issued the Proclamation of Emancipation on New Year's Day in 1863. Whatever the reason, the abolitionists were joyful. They had finally won freedom.

During the rest of the war, Douglass was busy getting Negroes to join the army. Until his death in 1895, Frederick Douglass remained a fighter for Negro rights.

He also worked for other causes, such as women's rights and world peace. Douglass was truly a freedom fighter.



