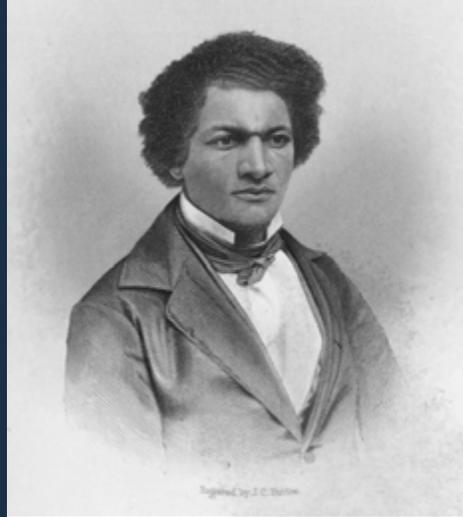




Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture/NYPL



1854

# FREDERICK DOUGLASS

## An enslaved caulker in the Baltimore shipyards, 1835-1838

in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855

Born enslaved in Maryland in 1818, Frederick Douglass was hired out as a teenager to a shipbuilder in Baltimore. From 1835 until he escaped to the North in 1838, Douglass worked as a caulker, sealing the seams of ship planks to make them watertight. Here he recounts his white coworkers' hostility (often encouraged by the white bosses to forestall united action by their laborers). He recalls his later business success as an independent caulker and his resentment at forfeiting his weekly earnings to his master. As he pursued his education and lived a life near that of a free man, flight from slavery became his inevitable next move. "To make a contented slave," he understood, "you must make a thoughtless one." Twenty-year-old Douglass was not a thoughtless slave.

Very soon after I went to Baltimore to live, Master Hugh [Auld] succeeded in getting me hired to Mr. William Gardiner, an extensive ship builder on Fell's Point. I was placed here to learn to calk, a trade of which I already had some knowledge, gained while in Mr. Hugh Auld's shipyard, when he was a master builder. Gardiner's, however, proved a very unfavorable place for the accomplishment of that object. Mr. Gardiner was, that season, engaged in building two large man-of-war vessels, professedly for the Mexican government. These vessels were to be launched in the month of July of that year, and, in failure thereof, Mr. G. would forfeit a very considerable sum of money. So, when I entered the shipyard, all was hurry and driving. There were in the yard about one hundred men; of these about seventy or eighty were regular carpenters — privileged men. Speaking of my condition here, I wrote, years ago — and I have now no reason to vary the picture — as follows:

"There was no time to learn anything. Every man had to do that which he knew how to do. In entering the shipyard, my orders from Mr. Gardiner were, to do whatever the carpenters commanded me to do. This was placing me at the beck and call of about seventy-five men. I was to regard all these as masters. Their word was to be my law. My situation was a most trying one. At times I needed a dozen pair of hands. I was called a dozen ways in the space of a single minute. Three or four voices would strike my ear at the same

*calk*, i.e.,  
caulk: seal  
the seams  
of wooden  
boats and  
ships

*man-of-war*:  
sailing ship  
armed with  
cannons



Maryland Historical Society

Baltimore harbor, daguerreotype, 1849 (detail)

"I lived on Philpot Street, Fell's Point, Baltimore, and have watched from the wharves the slave ships in the Basin, anchored from the shore, with their cargoes of human flesh, waiting for favorable winds to waft them down the Chesapeake."

Douglass, speech known as "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" 1852

National Humanities Center, 2007: [www.nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/](http://www.nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/). In Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), Ch. 20, "Apprenticeship Life." Full text in Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library) at [docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass55/menu.html](http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass55/menu.html). Sidenotes and bracketed comments added, and some spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing modernized, by NHC. 1854 engraving of Douglass in *Autographs for Freedom*, ed. Julia Griffiths, 1854. 1890s photograph of Douglass in C. V. Roman, *American Civilization and the Negro*, 1916. Complete image credits at [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm).

New York Public Library



Caulking a ship's planks with pitch to make them watertight, detail of image in *Knight's Pictorial Gallery of Arts*, 1858

Maryland Historical Society



Caulker's mallet and pitch funnel

Maryland Historical Society



Model of *Ann McKim*, famed clipper ship built in the Baltimore shipyards in the 1830s

moment. It was—"Fred, come help me to cant this timber here."—"Fred, come carry this timber yonder."—"Fred, bring that roller here."—"Fred, go get a fresh can of water."—"Fred, come help saw off the end of this timber."—"Fred, go quick and get the crowbar."—"Fred, hold on the end of this fall."—"Fred, go the blacksmith's shop, and get a new punch."—"Hurra, Fred! run and bring me a cold chisel."—"I say, Fred, bear a hand, and get up a fire as quick as lighting under that steam-box."—"Halloo, nigger! come, turn this grindstone."—"Come, come! move, move! and *bowse* this timber forward."—"I say, darkey, blast your eyes, why don't you heat up some pitch?"—"Halloo! halloo! halloo!" (Three voices at the same time.) "Come here!—Go there!—Hold on where you are! D—n you, if you move, I'll knock your brains out!"

*cant:*  
tilt at  
an  
angle

*fall:*  
free  
end  
of a  
tackle  
rope

*bowse*  
pull or  
haul  
with a  
tackle

Such, dear reader, is a glance at the school which was mine during the first eight months of my stay at Baltimore. At the end of eight months, Master Hugh refused longer to allow me to remain with Mr. Gardiner. The circumstance which led to his taking me away was a brutal outrage, committed upon me by the white apprentices of the shipyard. The fight was a desperate one, and I came out of it most shockingly mangled. I was cut and bruised in sundry [various] places, and my left eye was nearly knocked out of its socket.

The facts leading to this barbarous outrage upon me illustrate a phase of slavery destined to become an important element in the overthrow of the slave system, and I may therefore state them with some minuteness [detail]. That phase is this: *the conflict of slavery with the interests of the white mechanics and laborers of the south*. In the country, this conflict is not so apparent; but in cities such as Baltimore, Richmond, New Orleans, Mobile, &c. [etc.], it is seen pretty clearly. The slaveholders, with a craftiness peculiar to themselves, by encouraging the enmity [hostility] of the poor laboring white man against the blacks, succeeds in making the said white man almost as much a slave as the black slave himself. The difference between the white slave and the black slave is this: the latter belongs to *one* slaveholder and the former belongs to *all* the slaveholders, collectively. The white slave has taken from him by indirection [indirectly] what the black slave has taken from him directly, and without ceremony. Both are plundered, and by the same plunderers. The slave is robbed by his master of all his earnings, above what is required for his bare physical necessities; and the white man is robbed by the slave system of the just results of his labor, because he is flung into competition with a class of laborers who work without wages.

The competition and its injurious consequences will one



View of Baltimore harbor, ca. 1850, watercolor, detail (unknown creator)

day array the non-slaveholding white people of the slave states against the slave system and make them the most effective workers against the great evil. At present, the slaveholders blind them to this competition by keeping alive their prejudice against the slaves *as men* — not against them *as slaves*. They appeal to their pride, often denouncing emancipation as tending to place the white working man on an equality with negroes, and by this means they succeed in drawing off the minds of the poor whites from the real fact that, by the rich slave-master, they are already regarded as but a single remove [step] from equality with the slave. The impression is cunningly made that slavery is the only power that can prevent the laboring white man from falling to the level of the slave's poverty and degradation. To make this enmity deep and broad between the slave and the poor white man, the latter is allowed to abuse and whip the former without hindrance.

But — as I have suggested — this state of facts prevails *mostly* in the country. In the city of Baltimore there are not unfrequent murmurs that educating the slaves to be mechanics may, in the end, give slave-masters power to dispense with the services of the poor white man altogether. But, with characteristic dread of offending the slaveholders, these poor white mechanics in Mr. Gardiner's shipyard — instead of applying the natural, honest remedy for the apprehended evil, and objecting at once to work there by the side of slaves — made a cowardly attack upon the free colored mechanics, saying *they* were eating the bread which should be eaten by American freemen, and swearing that they would not work with them. The feeling was, *really*, against having their labor brought into competition with that of the colored people at all; but it was too much to strike directly at the interest of the slaveholders; and therefore — proving their servility and cowardice — they dealt their blows on the poor colored freeman and aimed to prevent *him* from serving himself, in the evening of life, with the trade with which he had served his master during the more vigorous portion of his days. Had they succeeded in driving the black freemen out of the shipyard, they would have determined also upon the removal of the black slaves. The feeling was very bitter toward all colored people in Baltimore about this time (1836) and they — free and slave — suffered all manner of insult and wrong.

Until a very little while before I went there, white and black ship carpenters worked side by side in the shipyards of Mr. Gardiner, Mr. Duncan, Mr. Walter Price, and Mr. Robb. Nobody seemed to see any impropriety in it. To outward seeming, all hands [workers] were well satisfied. Some of the blacks were first-rate workmen and were given jobs requiring the highest skill. All at once, however, the white carpenters knocked off and swore that they would no longer work on the same stage with free negroes.



Baltimore harbor, daguerreotype by Henry H. Clarke, 1849 (detail)

Taking advantage of the heavy contract resting upon Mr. Gardiner to have the war vessels for Mexico ready to launch in July, and of the difficulty of getting other hands at that season of the year, they swore they would not strike another blow for him unless he would discharge his free colored workmen.

Now, although this movement did not extend to me *in form*, it did reach me *in fact*. The spirit which it awakened was one of malice and bitterness toward colored people *generally*, and I suffered with the rest, and suffered severely. My fellow apprentices very soon began to feel it to be degrading to work with me. They began to put on high looks and to talk contemptuously and maliciously of “*the niggers*,” saying that “they would take the country,” that “they ought to be killed.” Encouraged by the cowardly workmen who, knowing me to be a slave, made no issue [complaint] with Mr. Gardiner about my being there, these young men did their utmost to make it impossible for me to stay. They seldom called me to do anything without coupling the call with a curse; and Edward North, the biggest in everything, rascality included, ventured to strike me, whereupon I picked him up and threw him into the dock. Whenever any of them struck me, I struck back again, regardless of consequences. I could manage any of them *singly*; and while I could keep them from combining I succeeded very well.

In the conflict which ended my stay at Mr. Gardiner’s, I was beset by four of them at once — Ned North, Ned Hays, Bill Stewart, and Tom Humphreys. Two of them were as large as myself, and they came near killing me in broad daylight. The attack was made suddenly and simultaneously. One came in front, armed with a brick; there was one at each side and one behind, and they closed up around me. I was struck on all sides, and while I was attending to those in front, I received a blow on my head from behind, dealt with a heavy hand-spike. I was completely stunned by the blow and fell heavily on the ground among the timbers. Taking advantage of my fall, they rushed upon me and began to pound me with their fists. I let them lay on for a while after I came to myself, with a view of gaining strength. They did me little damage so far; but finally, getting tired of that sport, I gave a sudden surge and, despite their weight, I rose to my hands and knees. Just as I did this, one of their number (I know not which) planted a blow with his boot in my left eye, which for a time seemed to have burst my eyeball. When they saw my eye completely closed, my face covered with blood, and I staggering under the stunning blows they had given me, they left me. As soon as I gathered sufficient strength, I picked up the hand-spike and, madly enough, attempted to pursue them; but here the carpenters interfered and compelled me to give up my frenzied pursuit. It was impossible to stand against so many.

Dear reader, you can hardly believe the statement, but it is true, and therefore I write it down: not fewer than fifty white men stood by and saw this brutal and shameless outrage committed, and not a man of them all interposed a single word of mercy. There were four against one, and that one’s face was beaten and battered most horribly, and no one said, “that is enough;” but some cried out, “kill him — kill



Baltimore from Shot Tower, photograph, 1849 (detail)

him — kill the d—d nigger! knock his brains out — he struck a white person.” I mention this inhuman outcry to show the character of the men, and the spirit of the times, at Gardiner’s shipyard, and, indeed, in Baltimore generally in 1836. As I look back to this period, I am almost amazed that I was not murdered outright in that ship yard, so murderous was the spirit which prevailed there.

On two occasions while there, I came near losing my life. I was driving bolts in the hold through the keelson with Hays. In its course, the bolt bent. Hays cursed me and said that it was my blow which bent the bolt. I denied this and charged it upon him. In a fit of rage he seized an adze and darted toward me. I met him with a maul and parried his blow, or I should have then lost my life. A son of old Tom Lahman (the latter’s double murder I have elsewhere charged upon him), in the spirit of his miserable father, made an assault upon me, but the blow with his maul missed me. After the united assault of North, Stewart, Hays, and Humphreys, finding that the carpenters were as bitter toward me as the apprentices, and that the latter were probably set on by the former, I found my only chance for life was in flight. I succeeded in getting away without an additional blow. To strike a white man was death, by Lynch law, in Gardiner’s shipyard; nor was there much of any other law toward colored people at that time in any other part of Maryland. The whole sentiment of Baltimore was murderous. . . .

*Lynch law*, i.e., hanging without due process of law (a trial or judge’s order); mob lynching

While I was on the Eastern Shore, Master Hugh had met with reverses which overthrew his business; and he had given up ship building in his own yard on the City Block and was now acting as foreman of Mr. Walter Price. The best he could now do for me was to take me into Mr. Price’s yard and afford me the facilities there for completing the trade which I had began to learn at Gardiner’s. Here I rapidly became expert in the use of my calking tools; and, in the course of a single year, I was able to command the highest wages paid to journeymen calkers in Baltimore.

The reader will observe that I was now of some pecuniary [monetary] value to my master. During the busy season I was bringing six and seven dollars per week. I have sometimes brought him as much as nine dollars a week, for the wages were a dollar and a half per day.

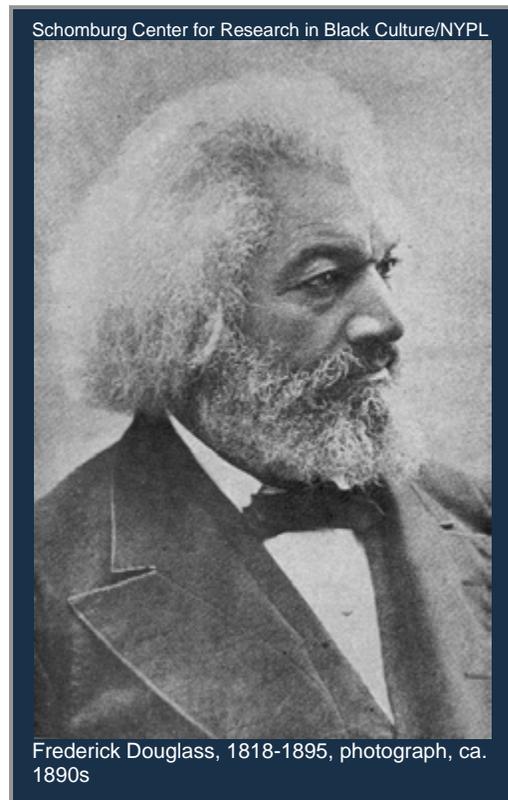
After learning to calk, I sought my own employment, made my own contracts, and collected my own earnings, giving Master Hugh no trouble in any part of the transactions to which I was a party.

Here, then, were better days for the Eastern Shore *slave*. I was now free from the vexatious assaults of the apprentices at Mr. Gardiner’s and free from the perils of plantation life, and once more in a

favorable condition to increase my little stock of education which had been at a dead stand since my removal from Baltimore. I had, on the Eastern Shore, been only a teacher when in company with other slaves, but now there were colored persons who could instruct me. Many of the young calkers could read, write, and cipher [do arithmetic]. Some of them had high notions about mental improvement; and the free ones, on Fell's Point, organized what they called the "*East Baltimore Mental Improvement Society*." To this society, notwithstanding it was intended that only free persons should attach themselves, I was admitted and was several times assigned a prominent part in its debates. I owe much to the society of these young men.

The reader already knows enough of the *ill* effects of good treatment on a slave to anticipate what was now the case in my improved condition. It was not long before I began to show signs of disquiet [discontent] with slavery and to look around for means to get out of that condition by the shortest route. I was living among *freemen* and was, in all respects, equal to them by nature and by attainments. *Why should I be a slave?* There was *no* reason why I should be the thrall [slave] of any man.

Besides, I was now getting — as I have said — a dollar and fifty cents per day. I contracted for it, worked for it, earned it, collected it; it was paid to me, and it was *rightfully* my own; and yet, upon every returning Saturday night, this money — my own hard earnings, every cent of it — was demanded of me and taken from me by Master Hugh. He did not earn it; he had no hand in earning it; why, then, should he have it? I owed him nothing. He had given me no schooling, and I had received from him only my food and raiment; and for these, my services were supposed to pay from the first. The right to take my earnings was the right of the robber. He had the power to compel me to give him the fruits of my labor, and this power was his only right in the case. I became more and more dissatisfied with this state of things and, in so becoming, I only gave proof of the same human nature which every reader of this chapter in my life — slaveholder or non-slaveholder — is conscious of possessing.



To make a contented slave, you must make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision and, as far as possible, to annihilate his power of reason. He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery. The man that takes his earnings must be able to convince him that he has a perfect right to do so. It must not depend upon mere force; the slave must know no Higher Law than his master's will. The whole relationship must not only demonstrate to his mind its necessity, but its absolute rightfulness. If there be one crevice through which a single drop can fall, it will certainly rust off the slave's chain.