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"Slaves Waiting for Sale: Richmond, Virginia." Image of 1861 oil painting by British artist Eyre Crowe. Online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

America's system of chattel slavery meant that slaves were the property of slave holders. Put differently, people legally *owned* other people.

When slave owners died, their slaves were processed - often at auction - just like other items owned by the decedent. It is impossible to comprehend how human beings felt as they were valued along with horses and plows, silverware and table linens. When he was between the ages of ten and eleven, Frederick Bailey went through the humiliating experience:

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 the moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder. (Narrative of the Life, [at page 45] of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself.)

How was it that slaves, en masse, did not routinely revolt? Why did they not band together to throw off the yoke of chattel slavery? Young Frederick learned the answers to those questions early in life when he was sent to Baltimore to serve as a house slave. Having the good fortune to live with a kindly mistress, who had never before controlled a slave, Frederick was given a rare opportunity: She would teach him to read. The lessons didn't last:

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. And Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. (Narrative, page 33.)

How could learning a basic skill - like reading - be so detrimental? Frederick answers that question, using Mr. Auld's own words:

It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. (Narrative, page 33.)

More importantly, the young slave began to understand the source of the master's power over his people:

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. (Narrative, page 33.)

That "pathway" was education. And education began with learning to read and write.

Although she had been kind to Frederick when he first arrived, Mrs. Auld soon followed her husband's directive. Not only were the reading lessons over, so were her endearing ways:

Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me...The first step in her downward course was in her ceasing to instruct me. She now commenced to practise her husband's precepts. She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself...Nothing seemed to make her more angry than to see me with a newspaper...She was an apt woman; and a little experience soon demonstrated, to her satisfaction, that education and slavery were incompatible with each other. (Narrative, page 37.)

Undeterred in his quest to read, Frederick befriended white children in his Baltimore neighborhood. He developed a good barter system - he would give them food if they would give him lessons:

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read...I used also to carry bread with me...This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. (Narrative, page 38.)

The more he read, the more upset he became with the whole concept of slavery. This passage of his *Narrative* emotionally makes the point:

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. (Narrative, page 40.)

There was nothing for Frederick to do but escape.

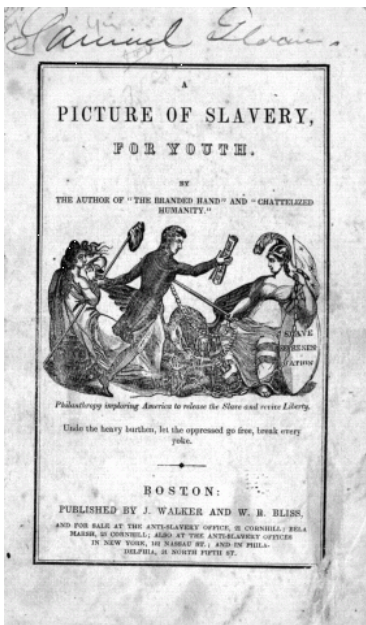
See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/GET-EDUCATED-Frederick-Douglass-From-Slave-to-Leader>

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/GET-EDUCATED-Frederick-Douglass-From-Slave-to-Leader>

Media Stream



"A Picture of Slavery, for Youth" - Children's Book

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