

**Frederick Douglass vs. William Lloyd Garrison:**  
**An Exploration of Differing Opinions on Ending Slavery**

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### **Abstract**

The following paper will examine several documents which analyze the relationship between Frederick Douglass and William Llyod Garrison as well as their differing opinions in abolishing slavery. Garrison, originally a mentor of Douglass, held extremely radical beliefs in abolishing slavery immediately and seceding from the Union because he viewed the Constitution as pro-slavery, while Douglass developed beliefs in editing the Constitution in order to create a more harmonious country. The following paper will attempt to answer several questions: Why did Garrison believe the Constitution was pro-slavery? Why did Douglass' opinion of the Constitution change? How did Douglass add to the abolitionist movement after ending his mentorship with Garrison? Who was the more affluent abolitionist? Why did Douglass become more popular in modern history? The research has been done with digitized editions from the Library of Congress website and online published academic sources from various institutions such as the University of Rochester and Statista.

**Key words:** Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Abolition, Pro-slavery, Slavery, Constitution, *The Liberator*, *The North Star*.

## An Exploration of Differing Opinions on Ending Slavery

When American children learn about famous abolitionists in elementary, middle, and high school, no name resonates more in the history lessons than Frederick Douglass. Many children neglect to hear about the extremist views of Douglass' mentor William Lloyd Garrison. Although both are well-known American journalists and abolitionists, unless one is a history fanatic or learning about it in college, the average citizen could not tell you the differences between Garrison and Douglass' views of the Constitution and abolishing slavery. However, to many historians, they might argue that Garrison was the more influential figure in the 1800s regarding the abolishing of slavery, even though Douglass has become the more renowned face. The question remains: why is Frederick Douglass perceived and portrayed as more significant than Garrison to so many? The answer is a varied one, however, Douglass' modern and post-modern media prominence is most likely due to him being the less radical and more patriotic of the pair, rather than the more influential or noteworthy in regards to abolishing slavery; it could also have to do with Douglass' experience as a slave and writings retelling the horrors of enslavement, while Garrison was a caucasian writer who believed the free states should secede and form a new country.

Before becoming one of the most famous journalists in history, Frederick Douglass spent about twenty years as a slave and was taught how to read and write before escaping to the North to begin his career after changing his name to avoid recapture.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, he moved to New York City where he met William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of the *Liberator*, who became his mentor.<sup>2</sup> Douglass' oratory skills and lectures inspired audiences and made him extremely popular in the 1840s and 50s. Three years after writing his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass began publishing his own newspaper, titled the *North Star*, in

Rochester, New York, in an attempt to expand his and Garrison's ideals westward. In addition to writing about the abolition of slavery and equal rights for African Americans, Douglass also wrote about early women's rights and even went as far to attend the Seneca Falls Convention as the only African American attendee.

Due to Garrison's influence as Douglass' mentor, in his early days of journalism, Douglass held many of the same opinions as Garrison regarding the Abolitionist movement and criticized the founding fathers for including "the pro-slavery principle," which he and Garrison believed encouraged "supporting and perpetuating this monstrous system of injustice and blood."<sup>3</sup> Douglass' writings on the American Revolution and the Constitution primarily utilized alienation and heavily criticized the hypocrisy within the preamble and its talk of "the blessings of liberty to ourselves and prosperity"; he also wrote that the Constitution "converts every white American into an enemy to the black man in that land of professed liberty."<sup>4</sup> Douglass' writings were heavily impacted by Garrison's extremist point of view which consisted of him protesting the Constitution and trying to gain support to discard it altogether in order to create a new and improved one.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Douglass also briefly studied ethnology in order to investigate the culture surrounding slavery and further understand what factors divided African American and European America; Douglass' findings were extremely negative and only angered him.<sup>6</sup> In one of his speeches, Douglass expressed his anger at the subject and claimed that European Americans exaggerated and distorted the differences between the races like a sort of trend which prevented harmony from existing in his present time.<sup>7</sup> Several biased studies, the most famous of which were written by Louis Agassiz and Samuel George Morton who claimed that Egyptians were caucasian, were also utilized in some Congress decisions and presented as evidence to support the notion of continued slavery within the south; Douglass expressed that

studies like these only justified racism with unscientific notions, “this is a sample of the reasoning of men who reason from prejudice rather than from facts.”<sup>8</sup> Douglass argued that racism and these negative philosophies had become a popular fashion amongst Southerners and would continue the ideals of slavery if the truth is not reported and believed. Despite Douglass’ anger with the subject, overtime he and Garrison began to have different points of view regarding the Constitution and the abolishing of slavery.

Douglass began to change his point of view of the Constitution, which was reflected in his later writings; his new point of view is regarding the Constitution is highly rooted in reading the Preamble in a different light and focusing on its wording which stated that rights were entitled to all people, including African Americans, so long as they were recognized by all as people.<sup>9</sup> This notion of recognition renewed Douglass’ efforts in trying to have African Americans viewed as people and is most likely why ethnological studies, such as the one previously mentioned in Douglass’ speech, sought to make African Americans seem less than people, or the lowest of the low, in order to preserve the right to enslave them and be supported by the Constitution. Douglass now sought to make it known in his writings and speeches that African Americans were people of equal caliber to everyone else and were therefore protected by the Constitution, which invigorated his commitment to the original document. Over time, studying ethnology and the Constitution made Douglass understand that many were influenced from a young age to view African Americans in a negative and primitive light in order for the older generations to justify free labor; this false guidance later affected several generations until it became the cultural norm for various societies, it even became an economic necessity in some cases. Douglass desired to push Americans to view African Americans as they truly are instead

of seeing them through the exaggerated, primitive lens of past generations in order to evolve as a harmonious society:

“Fashion is not confined to dress; but extends to philosophy as well - and it is fashionable now, in our land, to exaggerate the differences between the negro and the European. If, for instance, a phrenologist, or naturalist undertakes to represent in portraits, the differences between the two races - the negro and the European - he will invariably present the *highest* type of the European, and the *lowest* type of the negro ... I think I have never seen a single picture in an American work, designed to give an idea of the mental endowments of the negro, which did any thing like justice to the subject; nay that was not infamously distorted. ... hundreds of others I could mention, are all better formed, and indicate the presence of intellect more than any pictures I have seen in such works ... If the very best type of the European is always presented, I insist that *justice*, in all such works, demands that the very best type of the negro should also be taken. The importance of this criticism may not be apparent to all; - to the *black* man it is very apparent. He sees the injustice, and writhes under its sting.” <sup>10</sup>

Douglass later realized that the solution to abolishing slavery would have to be a joint effort of government support and re-educating the younger generations to see African Americans in a new light. Additionally, with Abraham Lincoln acting as president, Douglass started to believe different solutions for abolishing slavery were necessary, such as adding amendments to the Constitution that outlawed slavery, and he believed this was possible with an anti-slavery Congress gradually built over time.<sup>11</sup> With Lincoln in power, Douglass and Lincoln began to work towards abolishing slavery and suppressing the unfair treatment of African Americans.<sup>12</sup>

Douglass’ changing view of the Constitution could also be attributed to Lincoln and his realization that the document did not support the expansion of slavery westward within the United States and was worded in a way that delegated power to the federal government giving it the ability to abolish the slave trade; therefore, making the destruction of the document in its entirety unadvantageous for abolishment.<sup>13</sup> However, Garrison still did not share the same new viewpoint as Douglass; Jay Thompson, writer of the Frederick Douglass Project at University of

Rochester, believe Garrison's strong aversion to the Constitution was rooted in his stubbornness for wanting things to occur on his terms and lacking the ability to adapt and evolve his opinion on matters of slavery; Garrison was headstrong in his war against the Constitution, labeling it as "an agreement with Hell" and "the pro-slavery, war sanctioning Constitution of the United States" within his abolitionist newspaper the *Liberator* where he repeatedly advocated for rebellion against slaveholders and disunionism with its famous motto "No Union with Slaveholders!"<sup>14</sup>

According to Thompson, Douglass grew to be "more of a compromiser, looking to reform, whereas Garrison was only interested in a revolution."<sup>15</sup> Garrison and his followers held the belief that "if they worked within the political system they were merely spinning their wheels, spending their money and time on a cause that was doomed."<sup>16</sup> Garrison's strong viewpoint against the Constitution not only demanded it be rewritten but also encouraged abolitionists to ultimately try and secede the free states from the United States altogether; he believed that in disunionism and this belief was rooted in the fact that the Constitution was corrupt and had to be destroyed and, therefore, could not adapt his viewpoint like Douglass.<sup>17</sup> Their different approaches were extremely evident when it came to writing about the Compromise of 1850, Douglass focused on how it would affect the people and tried to write about the present and future suffering that could possibly be amplified by this law if Congress passed it; in contrast, Garrison wrote about the law with anger and called readers to further rally against the Union: "it is the will of the Devil... ridiculous talk!"<sup>18</sup> Douglass' wrote in *The North Star* about how the Compromise would only be an extension of slaves' suffering, "whether intended or not, the tendency of their course is to produce in the public mind a spirit of violent persecution against all who say aught against the Constitution, or who utter a syllable of

condemnation upon the vile system of slavery.”<sup>19</sup> Garrison’s approach of disunionism for all topics regarding slavery and his hate for the Constitution is likely what drove him to be less famous in modern times compared to Frederick Douglass who believed in fixing the United States as a country rather than further breaking and dividing it.

In a study done by Statista Research Department, as of June 2021, regarding an individual’s pride to be an American, about 69 percent of participants fall in the “very” or “extremely” category while only 5 percent had no pride at all.<sup>20</sup> The study also found that about 64 percent own an American flag and that patriotism “seems to span the generations as well, with Millennials being only slightly less patriotic than the Gen X’ers or even the Baby Boomers.” Based on the study by Statista, one can assume that Americans enjoy patriotism and nationalism which means they are more likely to celebrate and remember figures who had an equal level of love for the United States and its unionism; meaning that figures, such as Frederick Douglass, are more likely to be remembered and beloved by Americans and this is theory is supported by the fact that he is figure mainly attached to the idea of abolitionists and the various books and movies that are made about him in recent years. Garrison’s popularity over time most likely dwindled due to his extremist views and his lifelong hope for disunionism between states in order to abolish slavery, which do not support many Americans nationalism and patriotic ideals.



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