Freedom Readers

What does reading mean to you? For African-American slaves, it meant freedom.

By Fran Downey

You can read whenever you want to. That has not always been true for everyone in the United States. Some people in the past had to struggle for the freedom to read.

Long ago, slave owners did not teach slaves to read. They were afraid that if slaves could read, they would want freedom. Many owners punished slaves who had books or tried to learn to read.

Still, many slaves did learn to read. They knew that reading was important. They knew that reading would help them gain freedom. Let's meet some of these freedom readers.
Oludah Equiano was born in Africa in 1745. His father was a chief. Young Equiano had lots of free time. He spent many days playing.

One day, he was playing with his sister when a group of strangers surprised them. The strangers kidnapped them. Brother and sister were marched to the coast. Equiano was about ten years old at the time.

A naval officer bought Equiano. He was taken aboard a ship. He was forced to work as the officer's servant.

Aboard ship, Equiano saw many strange things. One of them was books. He saw his master and other people reading books. However, he could not figure out what they were doing. He knew his master learned from books. But he didn't know how.

Equiano tried everything he could think of. He held books to his ears, but they were quiet. He even asked books questions. That did not work either. The books did not speak to him.

Later, Equiano found out that books do not talk. Friends taught him to read and write. After growing up, Equiano spent some of his free time working. He earned enough money to buy his freedom. He moved to England. There, he wrote a book about his life. It told people that slavery was evil. Through his book, Equiano worked to abolish, or end, slavery.
Phillis Wheatley was born in Africa in about 1753. She too was kidnapped and sold into slavery. She did not know what would happen next. Her captors took her from Africa to Boston, Massachusetts. There, she was sold at a slave auction. John Wheatley bought her. She was just seven years old.

The Wheatley family wanted the young slave to work in their home as their servant. That soon changed. The Wheatleys raised her with their two children. They treated her as if she were one of their daughters. They taught her many things. She thrived.

Wheatley was very smart. One of the other children taught her to read and write English. By the time she was 12, Wheatley could also read and write Greek and Latin. Neighbors soon learned about this smart girl.

When she was 13, Wheatley wrote her first poem. She went on to write many more. In 1773, she became the first African-American woman to write a book. It had 39 poems.

During the American Revolution, Wheatley wrote poems about freedom. She even met George Washington. She also wrote that slavery should end.
Frederick Douglass was born into slavery in about 1818. He was born on a plantation, or large farm, in Maryland. When he was six years old, Douglass was taken to another plantation.

A few years later, Douglass was taken to Baltimore. Life in the city was different than on a plantation. He had to run errands and take care of his master’s young son.

Douglass asked his master’s wife to teach him to read. She agreed. He quickly learned the alphabet and wanted to learn more.

Things changed when Douglass’s master found out. He stopped the lessons.

Young Douglass then learned to read in secret. He tricked children into teaching him to read. He read newspapers at home. His master yelled whenever he caught Douglass reading.

Douglass kept on reading. He also learned to write. He then ran away from his master. He boarded a train and moved to the North, where slavery was illegal.

This is just the beginning of Douglass’s amazing story. He spent many years fighting slavery. He started a newspaper. It was called the North Star. He wrote several books. He even met President Abraham Lincoln. His efforts helped end slavery in 1865.
So far, you've met three African-American slaves who learned to read. They were not the only ones. Many others also learned to read. They risked their lives to do so.

No one knows exactly how many slaves learned to read. Most kept the skill a secret because they were afraid of being punished.

Lucius Holsey owned five books. Two of them were spelling books. One by one, he learned all the words in the spelling books.

Thomas Jones also learned to read from a spelling book. He paid another child six cents a week to teach him to spell. The child taught him words that had one and two syllables. After that, Thomas taught himself new words.

Not all slaves had spelling books. Some had to learn to read in other ways. A slave who lived in Georgia learned to spell before he could read. He heard people spell words out loud. He repeated what he heard. Then he read street signs and store signs. Many other slaves also used signs to learn to spell.

Many slaves learned to read because they wanted freedom. Take Sella Martin, for instance. He wanted to run away from slavery. He spelled words he saw on signs. News quickly spread that Martin could read.

One night a group of slaves showed up at the hotel where Martin worked. Each had stolen a book or newspaper for Martin. They all wanted to help him learn to read.

The Civil War ended slavery in 1865. Many former slaves went to school. They knew that reading would help them live as free people.