

Douglass Houghton
Michigan's Pioneer Geologist, Doctor and Teacher
By Deborah K. Fronteira, illustrated by Joanna Walitalo

Dedication:

To my grandchildren, who should know more about the area in which their grandmother grew up: Hailey, and Averie; James and Riley

About the 19th Century

It is important for readers to realize that a work of nonfiction, especially a biography, must remain true to the era in which that person lived, even though some aspects of that person's life, or of the times in which that person lived, may not be politically correct in today's world. The first half of the 1800s was a time when the general opinions of most people in the United States were dominated by white men. It was before the Civil War and slavery was still legal. Women did not have any political rights. It was a time when the idea of Manifest Destiny was popular. There was a general disregard for the rights of Native Americans, who were continually pushed off their lands as the US Government and people violated treaty after treaty. Today, most people see those times as "wrong." But the past is what it was in its time. We cannot change it. We can only learn from it and try to do better. This book is about the life of Douglass Houghton and how his accomplishments affected his time and, of course, ours by extension. We should not judge the past by today's standards. We should recognize the difference and try to shape our lives and opinions accordingly.

Douglass Houghton: Michigan's Pioneer Geologist, Doctor, and Teacher

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Chapter 1

Early Life

On September 21, 1809, Judge Jacob Houghton and his wife Mary Lydia welcomed their fourth child and named him Douglass. Because he was small and weak at birth, they might have worried he would not survive until his first birthday. The death of babies was quite common then. Some records show that, on average, if a mother had eight children, as few as three might live to become adults.

As Douglass grew to boyhood, he became stronger and healthier in his parents' care. But he was always small. Even as a man, he was only five feet four inches tall. Most people might not think that such a small person would accomplish much. But what difference does size make? Or strength? Is it possible that his short height made Douglass work all the harder to do well?

The Houghton family grew in number until they reached seven children. There were five boys: Alured, Alexander, Richard, Jacob Jr., and Douglass; and two girls: Lydia and Sarah. They were a busy bunch for their parents to raise. The Houghtons were not rich, but neither were they poor. Judge Jacob Houghton and Lydia valued education above all. They used the money they had to provide their children with what many families at that time could not afford or did not consider important, including music education.

Jacob and Mary also wanted more opportunities for their family than Troy, in eastern New York, offered. They may also have wanted a fresh start in a new area that had many opportunities to grow. They decided to move to Fredonia, which was then called Canadawa, on the western side of the state. That 400-mile trip through the wilderness of "upstate" New York took them several weeks. Travel by horse team and wagon was not easy when roads might be mere ruts in the dirt.

Douglass was only three years old, so he probably rode in the wagon with his mother. Some of the younger children in the family may not have been born at the time of this move. Douglass' older brothers would have walked next to the wagon. Imagine walking all day and then gathering wood for a fire to cook a simple meal. They may have used a tarp attached to one side of the wagon to make a tent, or they may have slept out in the open.

Only a few rough homes stood in the forest near Canadawa when the Houghton family arrived, but the people living there welcomed them. They needed a good lawyer with experience as a judge to record who owned which pieces of land. Jacob soon had many clients, and by 1813, he was able to build his growing family a home. He chose land on top of a hill near the village. He even made a trip to Maryville not far away and returned with his boot full of tree cuttings to plant an orchard.



The Houghton home in Fredonia, NY J. Walitalo

The Houghtons' land sloped gently to the shores of Lake Erie. Before long, the boys had dug out a turf-covered cave/room into a bank near the shore, big enough for three or four to sit in. They brought in simple benches and shelves and went there to do their lessons. While that

might seem like a strange place for schooling, their parents went along with it. No games, no fun in that space. But the boys probably thought it was more fun than sitting inside with their books.

Very few village friends were allowed in their cave except their sisters, and that was only once in a while. With forests, the lake, and the Canadaway Stream winding through the village down to the lake, could anyone wonder why Douglass began to love the natural world and wanted to learn all about it?

Douglas learned from the fish in the creek, the birds, squirrels, and chipmunks in the woods, the wildflowers, tulip trees, and the rocks that stuck out from the higher banks along the stream. He even observed that gas bubbles rising from the stream in some places could burst into flames. He used that knowledge to frighten village girls who would run away screaming that Douglass was going to burn up the creek! To convince his mother that it would catch fire, he put some of the oily film on the creek's surface in his hat, setting it on fire when he got home. Imagine the look on his mother's face that day!

Many years later, that area would become one of the first natural gas wells to produce energy for people there. Natural gas found underground is still an important source of energy today.

Douglass attended a local school for a few years, but his parents wanted more for all their children. Douglass' father, Jacob, had many books in his personal library that the whole family used. During these years, Jacob kept at his law business, becoming a justice of the peace, helping to settle legal arguments between people. He even served as postmaster for a time. He was soon the judge for the county.

One day, Judge Houghton discussed his son Douglass with a friend. Douglass was very good at sciences, but he disliked math and Latin, the language of ancient Rome. Jacob's friend suggested that he let his son study what he liked and only do the most necessary things in Latin and math. Fortunately, Jacob listened to his friend's advice.

The Houghton family decided that traditional school might not be right for Douglass. In 1824, they turned part of their home into a school called Fredonia Academy. Children from the village also came there for school. At a time when most people felt girls didn't need much education, the Houghton girls attended the academy. Some of the village girls did, too.

Shortly after the opening of Fredonia Academy, Douglass and a friend decided to learn to make gunpowder. One day after about a year, Douglass was carrying a pan of powder past the stove in the family's mill. Perhaps a spark landed in it. The powder blew up, knocked Douglass to the ground, and burned his face and hair.

Douglass plunged his face into water to ease the pain, but he was unaware of how seriously he was hurt. His vision was blurry, so he wobbled as he walked home, reportedly saying to his mother that he was not hurt much. Later, his mother told friends that he was quite a

sight! He was temporarily blinded! His sight came back gradually over several days, but the scars on his face from the burns were there all his life.

Perhaps that accident made Douglass realize he must try to control his curiosity and think about safety. He also realized he needed to learn Latin and math because they were important for studying plants, animals, and geology. He even took an interest in music and learned to play the flute. At the academy in his parents' home, Douglass became an outstanding student. Teachers and fellow students liked him and considered him a leader.

Douglass learned more than science, math, and Latin during his early life. He experienced how his parents loved and cared for him and his brothers and sisters. He saw their beliefs in action and how they gave time and money to others around them and worked to make their town better. Throughout his own life, Douglass lived these ideals as well.

Around the Same Time in History:

In 1809, James Madison was inaugurated as the fourth President of the United States, and Robert Fulton gained a patent for his steamboat.

The War of 1812, sometimes called "The Second War for Independence," with Great Britain began. The term "Uncle Sam" to refer to the government was used for the first time.

In 1814, Francis Scott Key wrote "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Also, around this time, boxing and horse racing were popular sports.