

Frances Harper



Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (September 24, 1825-February 22, 1911), was an African-American writer, lecturer, and political activist, who promoted abolition, civil rights, women's rights, and temperance. She helped found or held high office in several national progressive organizations. She is best remembered today for her poetry and fiction, which preached moral uplift and counseled the oppressed how to free themselves from their demoralized condition.

Early Life

Frances was born in Baltimore, Maryland, to free parents whose names are unknown. After her mother died in 1828, Frances was raised by her aunt and uncle. Her uncle was the abolitionist William Watkins, father of William J. Watkins, who would become an associate of Frederick Douglass. She received her education at her uncle's Academy for Negro Youth and absorbed many of his views on civil rights. The family attended the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church.



Baltimore, Maryland

Life as an Activist

After coming of age, Harper left the Watkins' residence to become a slavery abolitionist, women suffrage advocate, and writer attributed to a number of great acts. For example, in 1858, at the age of 33 – and before the U.S. Civil War – Ms. Harper refused to ride in the “colored” section of a segregated trolley car in Philadelphia. This was 100 years before Rosa Parks' great stand for justice in the USA.



Following the passage in 1850 of the Fugitive Slave Law, conditions for free blacks in the slave state of Maryland deteriorated and the Watkins family fled Baltimore. Frances Watkins moved on her own to Ohio, where she taught sewing at Union Seminary. She moved on to Pennsylvania in 1851. There, alongside William Still, Chairman of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, she helped escaped slaves along the Underground Railroad on their way to Canada.

In 1860, Frances Watkins married Fenton Harper, a widower with three children, and moved to Ohio. Their daughter, Mary, was born in 1862. Fenton died in 1864. After the war was over, Frances Harper toured the South, speaking to large audiences, encouraging education for freed slaves, and aiding in reconstruction.

With slavery a thing of the past, Harper turned her energy to women's rights. She spoke up for the empowerment of women and worked with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton to secure votes for women. Unlike Anthony and Stanton, Harper supported the Fourteenth Amendment, which, together with the Fifteenth, granted the vote to black men but not to women. Recognizing the ever-present danger of lynching, she reasoned that the African-American community needed an immediate political voice. With that would come the possibility of securing further legal and civil rights.

Harper first became acquainted with Unitarians before the war, due to their support of abolition and the Underground Railroad. Her friend Peter H. Clark, a noted abolitionist and educator in Ohio, had become a Unitarian in 1868. When Harper and her daughter settled in Philadelphia in 1870, she joined the First Unitarian Church.



First Unitarian Church - Philadelphia, 1870

Although busy as a writer and active in public life, Harper continued to engage personally in social concerns at the local level. She worked with a number of churches in the black community of north Philadelphia near her home, feeding the poor, preventing juvenile delinquency, and teaching Sunday School at the Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church.

Writing Career

At the age of fourteen, Frances had worked as a domestic in a Quaker household, where she was given access to their library and encouraged in her literary aspirations. Her poems appeared in newspapers, and in 1845 a collection of them was printed as *Autumn Leaves* (also published as *Forest Leaves*).

Watkins continued to write, and in 1854 her *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* attracted critical notice and became her biggest commercial success. In these poems she attacked not only racism but also the oppression of women. Most of the earnings from this and her other books went to help free the slaves. In 1854 she also began her lecturing career. She was much in demand on the anti-slavery circuit and she traveled extensively in the years before the Civil War.

In 1859 Watkins's tale "The Two Offers" appeared in the *Anglo-African*, the first short story to be published by an African-American. Although cast in fictional form, the piece is actually a sermon on the important life choices made by young people, women in particular. The tale relates the tragedy of a woman who mistakenly thinks romance and married love to be the only goal and center of her life.

"Talk as you will of woman's deep capacity for loving, of the strength of her affectional nature. I do not deny it; but will the mere possession of any human love, fully satisfy all the demands of her whole being? . . . But woman—the true woman—if you would render her happy, it needs more than the mere development of her affectional nature. Her conscience should be enlightened, her faith in the true and right established, and scope given to her Heaven-endowed and God-given faculties."



The poems in Harper's *Sketches of Southern Life*, 1872, present the story of Reconstruction, as told by a wise and engaging elderly former slave, Aunt Chloe. Harper's serialized novel, "Sowing and Reaping," in the *Christian Recorder*, 1876-77, expanded on the theme of "The Two Offers." In "Trial and Triumph," 1888-89, the most autobiographical of her novels, Harper presented her program for progress through personal development, altruism, non-discrimination, and racial pride.

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In 1873, Harper became Superintendent of the Colored Section of the Philadelphia and Pennsylvania Women's Christian Temperance Union. In 1894, she helped found the National Association of Colored Women and served as its vice president, 1895-1911. Along with Ida B. Wells, Harper wrote and lectured against lynching. She was also a member of the Universal Peace Union.



*Frances E. W. Parker House
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

For the rest of her life, Harper remained a highly sought after speaker by women's groups throughout the country. Through her publications and speeches, Harper inspired a generation of African Americans and feminists. Frances Harper died in her Philadelphia home on February 22, 1911, nine years before ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment guaranteed women the right to vote. Though passing from an imperfect world, her vision of freedom, expressed so eloquently in "Bury Me in a Free Land," first published in 1864, had been realized.

Make me a grave where'er you will,
In a lowly plain, or a lofty hill;
Make it among earth's humblest graves,
But not in a land where men are slaves...

I ask no monument, proud and high,
To arrest the gaze of the passers-by

All that my yearning spirit craves,
Is bury me not in a land of slaves.