

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper



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On September 24, 1825, Frances Ellen Watkins was born in Baltimore, Maryland to parents who were freed from slavery. Harper was her parent's only child; not much is known about her father and her mother died when she was three years old. She was orphaned until she was adopted by her aunt Harriet and Uncle Rev. William Watkins; many of Rev. Watkins' jobs included teaching, head of the Academy for Negro Youth, preaching, shoe making, medicine, and a civil rights activist. Harper was well educated at her uncles Academy for Negro Youth; after graduation she would become a seamstress. Working as a seamstress for a white family she took advantage of her access to the multitude of books and began reading as much as she could. She would soon begin writing poetry which led to her composing and publishing her first book of poems, *Forrest Leaves*, in 1845. Harper had strong relationships with legendary abolitionist [William Still](#) and William Lloyd Garrison which helped her get the best support in publishing and selling her book. She would also become a popular speaker on the anti-slavery lecture tour, her popularity allowed her to earn enough money to contribute to funding the Underground Railroad.

Harper published her second book titled *Poems On Miscellaneous Subjects* in 1854, which became a very popular book being reprinted a number of times. She published a short story titled "The Two Officers" in *Anglo-African Magazine* in 1859; this publication would make her the first black woman to publish a short story. *Iola Leroy* is the name of the book that is considered her first novel which was published in 1888. In 1892 the book was published under a new title, *Shadows Uplifted*. She used her writings to help bring attention to the social issues the plagued black Americans regularly. Harper would move to Ohio in 1850 and became the first female teacher at the Union Seminary.

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The Union Seminary was established by the AME Church along with Wilberforce University, which is the first black college in the United States. Harper was able to use her oratory skills once again when becoming a lecturer and member of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Her first lecture was so successful that it led to her touring with the society for the next two years, a stint that lasted into the 1860's.

The abolition of slavery and women's suffrage were two of the many causes Harper gave her attention to. She was well known for writing her letter to famous abolitionist John Brown and publishing her popular poem "Bury Me In A Free Land". She refused to give up her seat to a white person on a segregated trolley in 1858, she became another black woman who was disrespected by white America and forgotten. She was brave enough to make sure she included fighting for the rights of black women in her speech at the National Women's Rights Convention, in 1866. Usually black women's rights are overlooked or excluded from the women's rights fight. She published poems in 1872 titled *Sketches of Southern Life* which was written to bring attention to the dire living conditions of free blacks.

She became very popular for her activity in many organizations created to help improve the living and social conditions of black Americans. She worked extensively with the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union; she believed the organization could manipulate federal power to help her causes. She fought tirelessly for the rights and protection of women, especially black women and became a mentor to influential women such as [Ida B. Wells-Barnett](#), Kate D. Chapman, Victoria E. Matthews, and Mary Shadd Cary. Harper joined forces with Mary Church Terrell in 1894 to form the National Association of Colored Women. The organization was formed when Harper became disenchanted with white feminist, Frances Willard, because she overlooked black women's issues for white women's issues. In 1860, Frances Ellen Watkins married Mr. Fenton Harper and they both lived on their farm in Ohio. Harper was a brave woman who often put the safety of others before her own safety. She would challenge white supremacy as often as she could, with all her might. Harper died in 1911, but left an honorable legacy of elite artistry and social activism. Mrs. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, we proudly stand on your shoulders.

J.A. Ward.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tp2RP8yNrcw>

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