

Frances Ellen Harper Watkins - Overview

From being the very first African American woman to publish a short story to being a prominent abolitionist, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was a woman of many strengths. Her writings brought awareness to the issues of racism, classism, and feminism using a writing style that was very straightforward and respectable. In her activism, not only was she committed to fighting against slavery, she also advocated for the Women's Suffrage Movement and made a strong point that African American women were suffering greatly under both racism and sexism. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was very influential whether it was through the words written by her that people read, or through her tremendous efforts against slavery and the Women's Suffrage Movement.

Who was she?

- Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was born to free African American parents on September 24, 1825 in Baltimore, Maryland. At the mere age of 3, her parents died and she was instead raised by Henrietta and William Watkins, her aunt and uncle.
- Her uncle was a vocal abolitionist, practiced medicine, and established the Watkins Academy for Negro Youth, his own school, in 1820. Frances was heavily inspired by her uncle's activism and attended his academy until she was thirteen, the age where most children at the time were expected to join the workforce.
- Frances became a nursemaid and seamstress for a white family that owned a bookshop. Here she spent much of her free time reading and even began to write. At the age of twenty-one, "Forest Leaves" became the very first volume of poetry Harper wrote.
- At twenty six years, Frances left Baltimore and became the first woman instructor at Union Seminary, a school for free African Americans residing in Wilberforce, Ohio. After teaching domestic science for a year,

she moved to a school in York, Pennsylvania.

- Around the time she began working as a teacher, Maryland passed a law stating that free African Americans living in the North were no longer permitted to enter the state. If found, they would either be imprisoned or sold into slavery. Now, Frances was not allowed to return home even if she wanted to. In response, she moved in with William and Letitia George Still, abolitionists and friends of her uncle, and she devoted her efforts to fighting against slavery.
- Frances then began writing poetry for anti-slavery newspapers. “Eliza Harris”, a poem written by her, appeared in “The Liberator” as well as in “Frederick Douglass’ Paper”. In 1845, by the time she left Philadelphia, Frances had already put together her second book of poetry called “Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects”.
- During the next eight years, Frances traveled as a lecturer across the United States and Canada. She was hired as a traveling lecturer for many organizations, including the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society after her first speech “The Elevation and Education of our People” was successful. At this time, not only was her focus on the anti-slavery movement, she also put her attention towards fighting for women’s rights as well as the temperance movement.
- Frances married Fenton Harper on November 22nd, 1860, who unfortunately died four years after their marriage. Left to support her daughter Mary, and Fenton’s children from his previous marriage, Frances resumed lecturing for the anti-slavery movement, teaching, and writing poetry and novels.
- In her famous speech, “We Are All Bound Up Together”, Frances emphasized the fact that Black women were suffering under both racism

and sexism at the same time. She argued that because of this, they must be included in the fight for women's suffrage. The next day, at the convention her speech was held, a meeting took place to organize the American Equal Rights Association, an organization that worked for suffrage for both African Americans and women.

- Frances Ellen Watkins Harper then spent the rest of her career fighting for equal rights, job opportunities, and education for African American women. She co-founded and became the vice president of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs and was also the director of the American Association of Colored Youth. Frances also became the superintendent of the Colored Sections of Philadelphia as well as the Pennsylvania Women's Christian Temperance Union.

For Further Reading

<https://poets.org/poet/frances-ellen-watkins-harper>

<https://www.newamerica.org/better-life-lab/blog/frances-ellen-watkins-harper-suffragist-and-advocate-universal-freedom/>

<http://commonplace.online/article/lost-no-more-recovering-frances-ellen-watkins-harpers-forest-leaves/>

<https://poets.org/poet/frances-ellen-watkins-harper>

Sources Used

<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/frances-ellen-watkins-harper>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/frances-ellen-watkins-harper>

<https://www.biography.com/writer/frances-ew-harper>

<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/harper-frances-ellen-watkins-1825-1911/>