

ABOLITION

"Rachel Weeping for Her Children": Black Women and the Abolition of Slavery

by Margaret Washington

During the period leading up to the Civil War, black women all over the North comprised a stalwart but now largely forgotten abolitionist army. In myriad ways, these race-conscious women worked to bring immediate emancipation to the South. Anti-slavery Northern black women felt the sting of oppression personally. Like the slaves, they too were victims of color prejudice; some had been born in Northern bondage; others had family members still enslaved; and many interacted daily with self-emancipated people who constantly feared being returned south.

Anti-slavery women such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman were only the most famous of the abolitionists. Before either of these heroines came on the scene and before anti-slavery was an organized movement, black women in local Northern communities had quietly turned to activism through their church work, literary societies, and benevolent organizations. These women found time for political activism in between managing households, raising children, and working.

In the late 1820s, Zion's African Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City, Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, and the African Meetinghouse in Boston were centers of female anti-slavery activity. Black women proclaimed that their cause was "let the oppressed go free." They organized bazaars to promote the purchase of goods made from free labor, met in sewing circles to make clothing for those fleeing bondage, and raised money for *Freedom's Journal*, the nation's first black newspaper. In 1830, when Boston editor William Lloyd Garrison proposed his idea of publishing a newspaper devoted solely to immediate emancipation, a committee of black women began raising funds for it. The first copy of the *Liberator* appeared on January 1, 1831, with strong financial backing from black women. At their literary-society meetings, black women switched from reading European classics to discussing the *Liberator* and anti-slavery pamphlets, and inviting male speakers to expound on the evils of slavery.

Throughout the 1830s, black women engaged heavily in activism. They vowed to "heed the enslaved mothers' cry for children torn away" and designated their dwellings as "free homes" for those fleeing bondage. For example, Hester Lane of New York City, a successful black entrepreneur, used her home as an Underground Railroad station. Lane also traveled south to purchase enslaved children whom she freed and educated. Mary Marshall's Colored Sailors' Boarding Home was another busy sanctuary. Marshall



Sojourner Truth, 1864 (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

kept a vigilant eye out for refugees from bondage, and was determined that "No one who had the courage to start should fail to reach the goal." Other black women organized petition drives, wrote anti-slavery poetry, hosted traveling abolitionists, and organized fairs. By 1832, black women had formed the first female anti-slavery society in Salem, Massachusetts. They also held executive offices in biracial female anti-slavery societies in Philadelphia, Boston, and elsewhere.

Anti-slavery black men insisted that black women work only behind the scenes, but women sometimes refused to do so. In New York City, a group of black women confronted white authorities in a courtroom where several self-emancipated women were about to be returned to bondage. Black men accused the female protesters of bringing "everlasting shame and remorse" upon the black community and upon themselves. In 1831, black women in Boston organized the African American Female Intelligence Society. This organization became a forum for Maria Stewart, the first woman to speak publicly against slavery. Stewart proclaimed that she was called by God to address the issues of black emancipation and the rights of black women. "We claim our rights," she asserted, "as women and men," and "we are not afraid of them that kill the body." Stewart also published a pamphlet in the *Liberator* on behalf of black women and the enslaved, but Boston's black male community censored Stewart for her public expressions and forced her into silence. She soon left the city. Although she never again spoke publicly, she remained active through women's organizations and conventions. She joined other black women who held office, served as delegates, and otherwise participated in the biracial women's anti-slavery conventions in 1837, 1838, and 1839.

The anti-slavery movement took a more progressive turn in the 1840s, when the American Anti-Slavery Society (Garrisonians) welcomed women as officeholders and speakers. Most black women continued their quiet anti-slavery work, but some were outspoken. The first black woman to take the public stage for the American Anti-Slavery Society was Sojourner Truth. Born into slavery in 1797 among the Hudson Valley Dutch and emancipated in adulthood, Truth was already known as a preacher when she joined the Garrisonians in 1844. She made anti-slavery speeches throughout New England, and in 1845, gave her first address at the American Anti-Slavery Society's annual convention. Sojourner Truth became known from Maine to Michigan as a popular and featured anti-slavery speaker. Truth published a *Narrative* of her life and used the proceeds to purchase a home and finance her abolitionist work.

Another surge of radicalism occurred in 1850 with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. It decreed that any citizen could be enlisted in the service of a slaveholder to capture an enslaved person, and it nullified the individual civil rights that a state guaranteed its citizens, including those formerly enslaved. That same year, Harriet Tubman, a thirty-year-old self-emancipated Marylander, began defying the Fugitive Slave Law by leading enslaved men, women, and children out of the South. With slave catchers lurking everywhere and a price on her head, Tubman safely conducted her charges through the Northern states and on to Canada. Mary Ann Shadd (Cary) was a twenty-five-year-old freeborn schoolteacher when the Fugitive Slave Law was passed. Inspired by her father, whom she described as a "chief breakman" on the Delaware Underground Railroad, Shadd soon moved to Canada and established herself as a militant abolitionist, influential emigrationist, and the first black woman newspaper editor (of the *Provincial Freeman*).

In 1854, twenty-eight-year-old Frances Ellen Watkins (Harper) joined Sojourner Truth on the Garrisonian lecture circuit. Born into a well-connected Baltimore family, Watkins was a poet and teacher. She was drawn into the abolitionist struggle by the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which rescinded the restrictions on

slavery in the remaining territories acquired under the Louisiana Purchase. Watkins traveled throughout the Midwest, sometimes with Sojourner Truth. Watkins spoke eloquently of the wrongs inflicted upon her people; she sold her books of poetry at anti-slavery lectures and used the proceeds to support the Underground Railroad. In 1858, Watkins joined black male leaders in Detroit and led a large group of angry citizens in storming the jailhouse. The group attempted to remove from protective custody a black "traitor" to their cause, who had intended to expose the operations of the Underground Railroad.

Despite the Fugitive Slave Law, the Underground Railroad remained the "heart's blood" of black resistance. Black woman abolitionists played a vital role in this work. They were often the ones who intercepted refugees; who provided them with food, clothing, shelter, health care, and spiritual and psychological comfort; and who directed them to the next station. Women sometimes confronted slave catchers and kidnappers, who were often right on the heels of the "fugitives." Caroline Loguen, the wife of Syracuse, New York, abolitionist the Reverend Jermain Loguen, answered many a midnight knock during her husband's frequent absences. Once she and her sister successfully fought off slave catchers attempting to enter her home in pursuit of "fugitives."

In 1858, Anna Murray Douglass, wife of black leader Frederick Douglass, hosted John Brown, the famous white abolitionist, for a month. Brown was in hiding after having been charged with murdering pro-slavery farmers in Missouri. In the Douglass home, Brown perfected his plans for the raid on Harpers Ferry. In an 1859 meeting with Brown in Maryland just before the assault on Harpers Ferry, Douglass gave him ten dollars from the wife of a Brooklyn couple, the J. N. Gloucesters, who like Douglass himself were close to Brown. Along with the money, Mrs. Gloucester "sent her best wishes." When Brown was captured, tried, and sentenced to death, black woman abolitionists sent money to his wife, Mary, and wrote letters expressing their deep regard for her husband. Frances Ellen Watkins also sent gifts as well as one of her poems, "Bury Me in a Free Land," to Brown's condemned men.

During the antebellum era, black woman abolitionists moved, in keeping with the urgency of the times, from quiet activism to militancy. By 1858, even Sojourner Truth, the archpacifist, recognized that war with the South was inevitable if black people were to obtain their freedom. Black women furthered the goal of emancipation during the Civil War by continuing their abolition work. Harriet Tubman offered her services to the Union Army. Sojourner Truth lectured throughout the Midwest, where she confronted threatening pro-slavery (so-called "Copperhead") mobs. Black women organized petition campaigns to Congress and the president; they sent food and clothing to the Union front lines for destitute blacks; and they went into Union-occupied areas to provide education for black refugees. After the Emancipation Proclamation was signed on January 1, 1863, black women immediately began working on the next phase of their mission—the task of uplifting their race as a free people.

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