



# Accessible Archives

*WHITE PAPER SERIES*

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## Once a Household Name: Frances E.W. Harper

An African American Hero

Written by  
Jill O'Neill



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## Introduction

Why is Accessible Archives a key resource for learning more about Frances E.W. Harper? The ***African American Newspapers Collection*** found in Accessible



Mrs. Frances E. W. Harper  
Public Domain Image, Collection of  
Library of Congress

Archives is uniquely suited to understanding the social and political environment of black Americans in the 19th century. Two publications in particular, ***The Christian Recorder*** and the ***National Anti-Slavery Standard***, were key outlets for Harper's published work. Without access to this material, we could not properly understand the influence Harper exerted in a variety of causes – abolition, temperance, and universal suffrage.

Frances Ellen Watson Harper is deserving of greater fame. A free-born African American woman, she became a leading author and poet, but was also a striking advocate for such causes as the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage and for the temperance movement. Her

position as a public figure in the nineteenth century may seem surprising given the description of a friend who called her “... *the bronze Muse, a strong face with a shadowed glow upon it indicative of thoughtful fervor and of a nature most femininely sensitive but not in the least morbid. Her form is delicate, her hands daintily small, she stands quietly beside her desk and speaks without notes with gestures few and fitting. Her manner is marked by dignity and composure. She is never theatrical, never assuming...*” [1]

That description presents Harper as a poised speaker before an audience, a woman of intelligence, a woman in command of persuasive language as well as hard facts in her presentations. A subsequent audience member offered even higher praise of her gifts as a public speaker, writing “*We have heard Frederick Douglass, and hesitate not to say that for beauty of expression, richness of illustrations, and, in a word, rhetorical finish, she is his superior. He is more massive than Mrs. H., but she is more polished than he, and fully his equal in warm and glowing eloquence. While she spoke she held the audience spellbound—an audience of both colors and sexes- all of whom, even those who did not agree with her advanced sentiments, joined in the verdict that no common mind dwelt in that modest frame. She can do much and will do it.*” [2]

## Early Life

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Born in Baltimore in 1825, Frances Watkins was orphaned when she was three. She was fortunate to be raised by her uncle and aunt. Her uncle was William Watkins, head of the William Watkins Academy for Negro Youth, and himself a published author whose work appeared in William Lloyd Garrison's paper, ***The Liberator***. Watkins was an acquaintance of William Lloyd Garrison from an early age. A report from 1849 appearing in ***The Liberator*** mentions a presentation by William J. Watkins at a local meeting and an early tie to William Lloyd Garrison:

*“Wm. J. Watkins concluded an effective speech by a reminiscence of his first interview with Wm. Lloyd Garrison—himself a child when the pioneer of immediate emancipation was a prisoner in Baltimore jail. After his liberation, Mr. Garrison visited his father's house , and on leaving said to him. 'If you live to be a man, be an abolitionist.' These words were indelibly impressed upon his soul, and wherever he found pro-slavery or prejudice bearing upon his fellows in suffering, he ever meant to make their cause his own, and do battle for the right.”* [3]

Growing up in the home of William J. Watkins, Frances would have been strongly influenced by their views on abolition. At the age of fourteen, however, Frances

left her uncle's care to earn her living as a seamstress in the home of a Quaker book merchant by the name of Armstrong. Unusually, Armstrong permitted the young woman full access to his library.

Her first publication appeared in 1846, a small chapbook of poetry entitled *Forest Leaves*. In 1850, she left Maryland to take a teaching position at the Union Seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio. After two years in Ohio, Frances Watkins relocated to Pennsylvania, first to the town of Little York and then to the more vibrant urban environment of Philadelphia.

### Publications and Public Life

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In Philadelphia, she met William Still, an author and key player in the Underground Railway movement. It was Still who introduced the young Frances Watson's work to the larger public through the pages of the **Provincial Freeman**:



William Still in 1898. Public Domain, Library of Congress

*To the Editor of the Provincial Freeman:*

*DEAR MADAM, - I know of no way at the present, whereby I can do more to interest yourself, and, I trust, your readers, than by calling your attention to a book of poems which is about to be issued from the pen of the gifted Miss Frances E. Watkins, late of Baltimore, but now of this State.*

*In order that you may have some idea of the ability of the young authoress, as well as the quality and nature of her productions, I now take this occasion to forward you a piece of her prose, and also a piece of her poetry, hoping that you will give them a place in the columns of your paper, as specimens of her style...I think I may take the liberty to predict that it will rank as high, if not higher, than any production of the kind ever published in this country by a colored person. It will not be large, but what there will be of it will be all heart: and it is to hoped that sufficient encouragement will be shown to the writer, to induce her to make still further progress in the cultivation of her own mind, whereby she will be enabled to accomplish great good in the advocacy of the rights of her fellow creatures. [4]*

Less than three weeks later, a poem entitled "The Slave Auction" appeared in the **Frederick Douglass Paper**:

## **THE SLAVE AUCTION**

BY FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS.

*The sale began young girls were there,  
Defenseless in their wretchedness,  
Whose stifled sobs of deep despair  
Revealed their anguish and distress.*

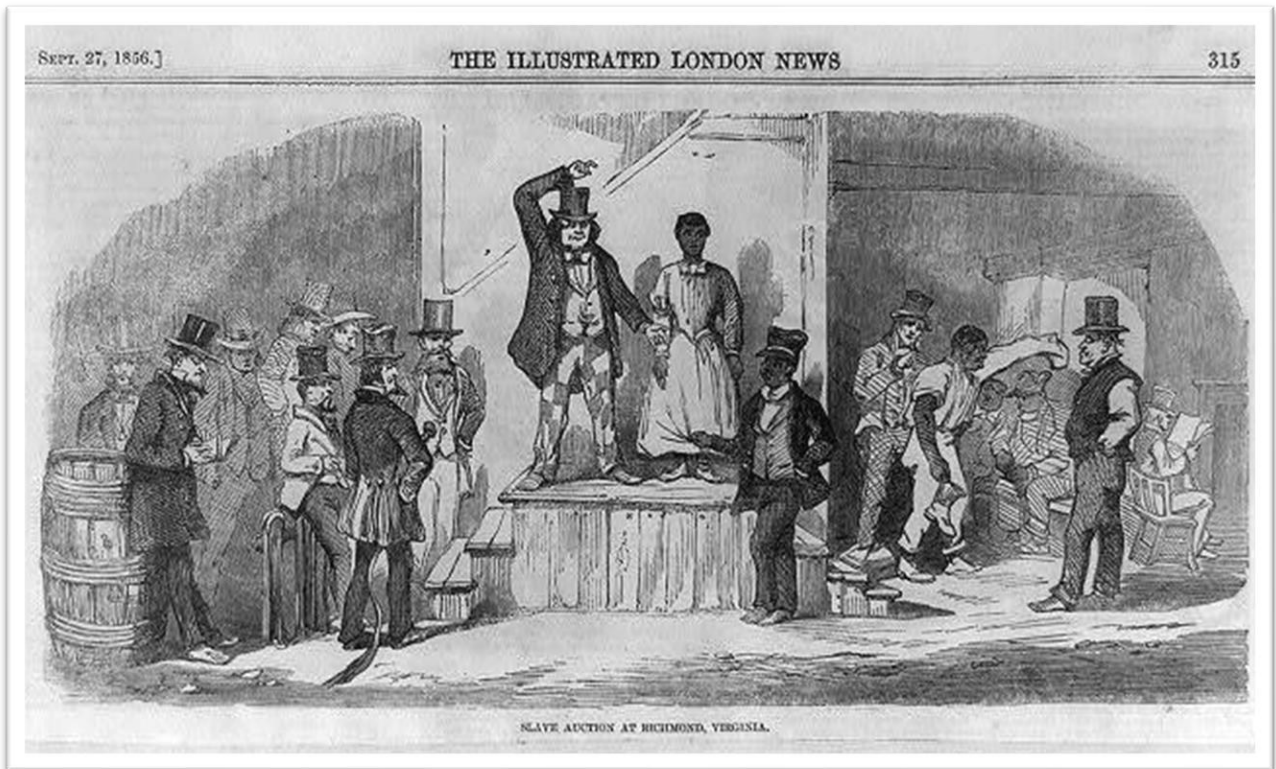
*And mothers stood, with streaming eyes,  
And saw their dearest children sold;  
Unheeded rose their bitter cries,  
While tyrants barter'd them for gold.*

*And woman, with her love and truth  
For these in sable forms may dwell  
Gaz'd on the husband of her youth,  
With anguish none may paint or tell.*

*And men, whose sole crime was their hue,  
The impress of their Maker's hand,  
And frail and shrinking children too,  
Were gathered in that mournful band.*

*Ye who have laid your lov'd to rest,  
And wept above their lifeless clay,  
Know not the anguish of that breast,  
Whose lov'd are rudely torn away.*

*Ye may not know how desolate  
Are bosoms rudely forced to part,  
And how a dull and heavy weight  
Will press the life drops from the heart." [5]*



Slave Auction at Richmond, Virginia, The London Illustrated News, September 1856.  
Public Domain image from the collection of the Library of Congress

During the previous year of 1853, Harper had submitted a poem to **The Liberator** referencing the newly published novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and its author, Harriet Beecher Stowe. The poem, "Miss Eliza Harris" is a retelling of the true story of a young black woman escaping a cruel slave master with her young child; the same historical incident was used by Stowe in her novel.

A second piece appearing in 1854 in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* was a tribute of thanks to Stowe herself, spoken as woman to woman:

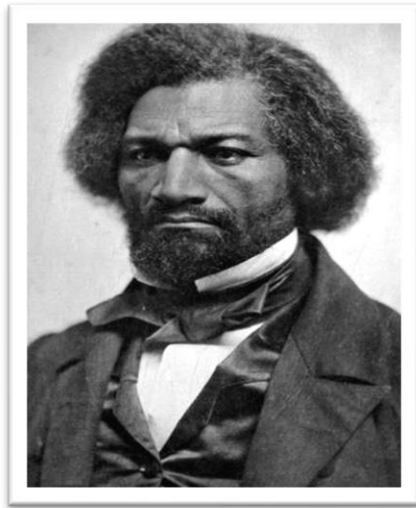
*For the sisters of our race  
Thous't nobly done thy part  
Thou hast won thyself a place  
In every human heart. [6]*

In 1857, a brief notice of a book of poetry written by Frances Watkins with an introduction by William Lloyd Garrison praising the work appeared in *The Liberator*. Garrison wrote that the book indicated "the possession of a talent

*which, if carefully cultivated and properly encouraged, cannot fail to secure for herself a poetic reputation.” [7]*

Even more noteworthy was the publication of the short story, *Of Two Offers*, in 1859 by Frances Watkins. Serialized in the New York-based magazine, *The Anglo-American*, the story is believed to be the first short story by an African American author. It deals with the lives of two cousins, who follow different pathways in life with the spinster cousin enjoying the more useful, longer, and happier life of the two.

One of her earliest speeches on behalf of the abolitionist movement was reported on in the ***National Anti-Slavery Standard*** in 1857 when she spoke before the American Anti-Slavery Society. While the male reporter did not



*Frederick Douglass in 1856. Public Domain. Library of Congress.*

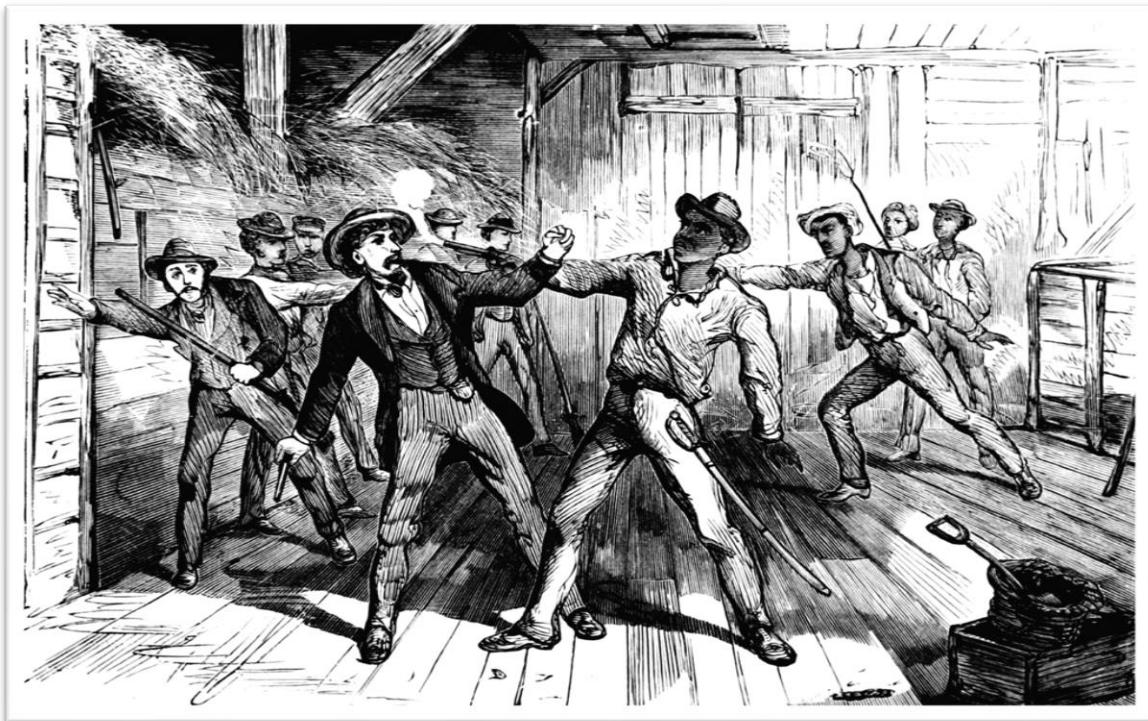
provide us with the full text of her speech, he was much impressed by specific passages of her rhetoric:

*“But a few months since a man escaped from bondage and found a temporary shelter almost beneath the shadow of Bunker Hill. Had that man stood upon the deck of an Austrian ship, beneath the shadow of the house of the Hapsburgs, he would have found protection. Had he been wrecked upon an island or colony of Great Britain; the waves of the tempest-lashed ocean would have washed him deliverance. Had he landed upon the territory of vine-encircled France and a Frenchman had reduced him to a thing and*

*brought him here beneath the protection of our institutions and our laws, for such a nefarious deed that Frenchman would have lost his citizenship in France. Beneath the feeble light which glimmers from the Koran, the Bey of Tunis would have granted him freedom in his own dominions. Beside the ancient pyramids of Egypt, he would have found liberty, for the soil laved by the glorious Nile is now consecrated to freedom. But from Boston harbor, made memorable by the infusion of three-penny taxed tea, Boston in its proximity to the plains of Lexington and Concord, Boston almost beneath the shadow of Bunker Hill and almost in sight of Plymouth Rock, he is thrust back from liberty and manhood and reconverted into a chattel. You have heard that, down South, they keep bloodhounds to*

*hunt slaves. Ye bloodhounds, go back to your kennels; when you fail to catch the flying fugitive, when his stealthy tread is heard in the place where the bones of the revolutionary sires repose, the ready North is base enough to do your shameful service (applause).*

*Slavery is mean because it tramples on the feeble and weak. A man comes with his affidavits from the South and hurries me before a commissioner; upon that evidence ex parte and alone he hitches me to the car of slavery and trails my womanhood in the dust. I stand at the threshold of the Supreme Court and ask for justice, simple justice. Upon my tortured heart is thrown the mocking words, "You are a negro; you have no rights which white men are bound to respect" (loud and long-continued applause)! Had it been my lot to have lived beneath the Crescent instead of the Cross, had injustice and violence been heaped upon my head as a Mohammedan woman, as a member of a common faith, I might have demanded justice and been listened to by the Pasha, the Bey or the Vizier; but when I come here to ask for justice, men tell me, "We have no higher law than the Constitution (applause)". [8]*



Public Domain, Illustration from William Still's book, *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, Etc.*



In 1860, Frances Ellen Watkins married Fenton Harper, just prior to the opening battles of the Civil War. He had three children by a prior marriage. A daughter was born to Frances in 1862 just as she learned that her husband had died in the war. She was once again alone and required to support both herself and her family. She returned to the paid lecture circuit to supplement her income.

## Height of Her Powers

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Over the course of the Civil War, Frances Harper continued to speak publicly in support of the Union efforts and the plans of Abraham Lincoln. In 1862, just days after the bloody 12-hour battle of Antietam, **The Christian Recorder** provided a lengthy piece where again Harper's rhetoric posed a challenge to the existing status quo:

*“Heavy is the guilt that hangs upon the neck of this nation, and where is the first sign of national repentance? The least signs of contrition for the wrongs of the Indian or the outrages of the negro? As this nation has had glorious opportunities for standing as an example to the nations leading the van of the world's progress and inviting the groaning millions to a higher destiny; but instead of that she has dwarfed herself to slavery's base and ignoble ends, and now, smitten of God and conquered by her crimes, she has become a mournful warning, a sad exemplification of the close connexion between national crimes and national judgments.*

*This lesson she should have learned amid the wrecks of ancient empires, buried beneath the weight of their crimes. She should have learned it from Egypt, seared with the wrath of God, and weeping over her first-born and her dead. She should have read it on the tombstone of proud Babylon, who said in her fancied security, I sit a queen and shall see no sorrow, when destruction was preparing its mines beneath her feet, and ruin brooding over her head. You wonder at the blindness of the nation in refusing the negro's aid, in rejecting the services of men acquainted with both the enemy and the country, who might have, ere this, led their stumbling feet to victory. I am not surprised. It looks as if the nation, stultified by its crimes, with the loss of its moral power, had also parted with its mental perceptions.*

*The North, if I understand her position aright, lacks one great element of success, and that is enthusiasm. In this battle she lacks the enthusiasm of love and the fanaticism of hate. The South has the latter - a terrible fanaticism that has given vigor to their arms and strength to their labors. If the age would only give another Peter, the hermit, to set every heart to throbbing with a hatred of oppression and a love of freedom, then we*

*might witness another crusade, not to rescue the sepulchre of our once dead Savior, but temples of a living Christ, from the great Mausoleum of American oppression.” [9]*

Her piece continued with an argument against efforts to relocate African Americans away from the United States:

*“...while we admit the right of every man to choose his home, that we neither see the wisdom nor expediency of our self-exportation from a land which has been I a measure enriched by our toil for generations, till we have a birth-right on the soil, and the strongest claims on the nation for that justice and equity which has been withheld from us for ages - ages whose accumulated wrongs have dragged the present wars that overshadow our head. And even were we willing to go, is the nation able to part with us? What Christian land under heaven is able to part with four millions of its laboring population? And should this country ever emerge from this dreadful war, with its resources diminished, its strength crippled, and industry paralyzed, will it not want our labor to help rebuild the ravages of war and the wastes of carnage?” [10]*

The fight – from Harper's perspective – would be for the freed men and women to claim their status as equal citizens before the law and rebuilding the country anew.

## Post War and Reconstruction

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If anything, the victory of the Union armies strengthened Harper's belief in the available reforms promised by Reconstruction. **The Christian Recorder** continued to cover her public speaking engagements, providing a summation of one of her speeches before an audience in Rhode Island:

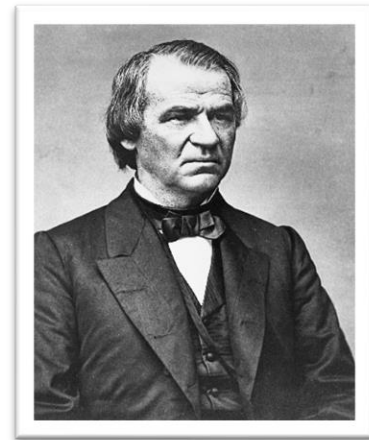
*“The speaker alluded to the great mistake of the early founders of the Republic, in permitting slavery to infuse its leprous distilment into the veins of the young nation. She spoken of the fatal permission, which was given to the African slave trade, and the' reign of these things was now over, yet there was a great deal more to be done, so that the oppressed might have not only bare freedom but be clothed with all the rights that are necessary to a complete citizenship. She drew a contrast between the old Union of '76 and the new republic of '65. In the former, slavery was the dominant power of the land; in the latter, slavery is at our feet, its death-groans in our ears, and words of triumph are on our lips.*

*In speaking of reconstruction, she said that no skillful mariner would be apt to be wrecked, twice on the same rock; and the rock on which the nation had been wrecked was injustice to the colored man. The nation in reconstructing should build, not upon the shifting sands of policy and expediency, but upon the granite of eternal justice.*

*When the colored man drops the bullet, he must have placed in his hands the ballot. She spoke of the injustice done to her colored man, now under military government, for want of the elective franchise. And suppose peace should ensue; would it not be greater under the rule of the returned rebels? Would know the colored man, powerless to remove the despot under whose withering malignity he would be quivering, sink into the lowest depths of despair? What would his freedom be worth, if his feet and hands were tied, and none helped him?" [11]*

Newspapers advertised her upcoming appearances in major cities up and down the East Coast, as in this example from the **National Anti-Slavery Standard** in November of 1865:

*"MRS, FRANCES E. W. HARPER, of Boston, has prepared two Lectures upon "The Lessons of the War," and "The" Claims of the Negro," which she will deliver to Lyceums, etc., as requested. Application may be made direct to MRS. HARPER, No. 16 Blossom St., Boston, She has permission to refer to Wm. Lloyd Garrison, Esq., Rev, Messrs. R. C. Waterston, John T. Sargent and Leonard A. Grimes, Charles, W. Slack, Esq., and Mrs. J. C. Johnson, 78 Temple St." [12]*



*President Andrew Johnson, 1865. Library of Congress*

She loudly voiced her opposition to Andrew Johnson, the successor to Abraham Lincoln's presidency for his failures in ensuring the right to vote for all citizens. Johnson, less supportive of Lincoln's plan for restoring the South than anticipated, faced significant challenges in other sectors – specifically, charges of impeachment brought by members of the Congress. From the March 10, 1866 issue of the **National Anti-Slavery Standard**:

*“After the Dred Scott Decision she thought the nation had touched bottom. She said she was mistaken. The lowest depth was reached when the nation, after stretching forth its hand in the hour of peril for aid from a feeble race, spurned them in the hour of victory, saying to the black man—you were good enough for a soldier, but you are not good enough for a citizen. The force of her denunciation was increased by the instances of heroism, valor, and sacrifice that were cited, showing, in view of the black man's courage and services, how exceedingly ungrateful and cruel was the conduct of the government toward him. Her rebuke was scornfully stinging, and her denunciation was pathetically severe. Were I a white man, she exclaimed, I should be ashamed to go down to posterity branded with the guilt and infamy of withholding justice from the colored man.*

*We have heard that treason was the worst of crimes; but, she asked, would anybody know it? It is safer in this country to be a white traitor than a loyal black man. Andrew Johnson has a very peculiar way of making treason “odious.”*

*How the audience enjoyed the manner in which she held this man Andrew Johnson up for ridicule and scorn! She very candidly declared that she did not admire him . He may have in him the elements of a great man, but circumstances have been against him. He has had bad surroundings. Very likely he was badly born. Probably he was badly brought up. He has been a slaveholder. Since he has been President he has been surrounded by strange company, who have exerted a questionable kind of influence over him. His speech of the 22d I have rather enjoyed. You know I do not belong to any political party, and as you put women, negroes and idiots all together, I have a right “to speak out in meeting.” I look upon Mr. Johnson's action as being very ridiculous, and scarcely worth talking about. You remember his remark about being willing, in order to save the Union, to send all the negroes to Africa, and have that continent sunk in the depths of the Atlantic ocean! The wretched inconsistency of his course was shown, and how far his actions deviated from his promises and professions.*

*He once said—“I am ready to have the negroes vote.” There was the opportunity, she remarked, the nation's great opportunity to take that opinion and crystalize it into grand and glorious action. What did the*

nation do? Mr. Johnson said he was ready, but looking over the country, did he find the North ready? No. There was Ohio shirking the issue. With New York and Pennsylvania, it was the same old story. Connecticut was denying the negro the ballot after the service he had rendered in the battle-field. But one bright star hung over the gloomy horizon. That was Iowa. She gave a handsome majority in favor of universal suffrage. She had placed upon her brow the laurel that Pennsylvania should be glad to wear." [13]

Meanwhile, Harper continued her successful career as author and poet.

### Successful Literary Career

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Harper continued to write of the black experience. Following a variety of journeys into Southern states, she wrote of the battle for literacy in *Learning to Read*, part of a series known as the Aunt Chloe suite included in her book ***Sketches of Southern Life*** (1872).

*Well, the Northern folks kept sending  
The Yankee teachers down;  
And they stood right up and helped us,  
Though Rebs did sneer and frown.*

*And I longed to read my Bible,  
For precious words it said;  
But when I begun to learn it,  
Folks just shook their heads,*

*And said there is no use trying,  
Oh! Chloe, you're too late;  
But as I was rising sixty,  
I had no time to wait.*

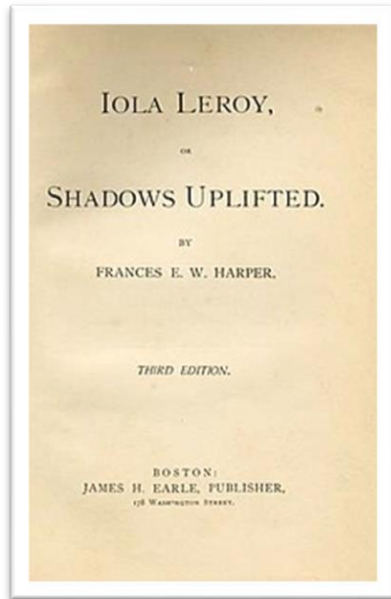
*So I got a pair of glasses,  
And straight to work I went,  
And never stopped till I could read  
The hymns and Testament.*

*Then I got a little cabin  
A place to call my own—  
And I felt independent  
As the queen upon her throne. [14]*



*Portrait of Frances E.W. Harper,  
Public Domain Image, collection of  
the Library of Congress*

In the years following the Reconstruction period, she focused on her creative output. She completed five additional books of poetry and moved into the long-form narrative of the novel, including *Trial and Triumph* (1888-1889) and *Iola Leroy* (1892). These novels captured the life experiences of black Americans during the Gilded Age, emphasizing the values of education, self-determination, and responsibility.



Title Page of Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted, January 1892. Public Domain.

Twenty years after the end of the Civil War, she continued to engage in public debate with key influencers and decision makers. In response to a well-intentioned article appearing in the magazine, *The Century*, from a bishop of the Episcopal Church asking what might be done for Harper wrote:

*“The work of blending diverse races into national concord is worthy of the statesman and Christian, and one in which the whole nation may well join; for the feeling of caste is not confined to the South. I ask no social recognition, no lavishing of gold nor patronage upon us; but I do ask what gold is ever too poor to buy - Christly sympathy, an equal chance in the race of life, the respect which is due from one human being to the other, and a reversal of the old idea of caste, which will change the cruel scorn of society for that Christian courtesy and consideration which teach us to honor all men and to call no man common or unclean.”* [15]

Harper continued to work for the causes of temperance and universal suffrage until her death in 1911. A final sentence from one such lecture urging the importance of developing moral character sums up her outlook:

**“The time has come for us...to look upon ourselves...as responsible men and women, who have our part to act in the great drama of life...”** [16]

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was inducted into the National Abolition Hall of Fame in 2018.

### Further Reading:

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**A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader**

Foster, Frances Smith, The Feminist Press of CUNY, 1993

**Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper 1825-1911**

Boyd, Melba Joyce; Wayne State University Press, 1993

**Harper: A Call to Conscience**

McKnight, Utz, Polity Press, 2020

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- [1] Still, William, *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, Etc.*, Porter & Coates, 1872.
- [2] "HARVEST HOME AT PRINCETON," *The Christian Recorder*, September 15, 1866, Accessible Archives Collection, African American Newspapers.
- [3] "Meeting of the Friends of Equal School Life," *The Liberator*, Accessible Archives Collection, *The Liberator*, 1831-1865. November 9, 1849
- [4] "To The Editor," *The Provincial Freeman*, September 2, 1854, Accessible Archives Collection, African American Newspapers.
- [5] "The Slave Auction," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, September 22, 1854, Accessible Archives Collection, African American Newspapers.
- [6] "To Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, February 3, 1854, Accessible Archives Collection, African American Newspapers.
- [7] "Poems" by Frances Ellen Watkins, *The Liberator*, September 18, 1857, Accessible Archives Collection, *The Liberator*, 1831-1865.
- [8] "The Standard Anti Slavery Society Twenty-fourth Anniversary," *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*, May 23, 1857, Accessible Archives Collection, African American Newspapers.
- [9] "Mrs. Frances E. Watkins Harper On The War," *The Christian Recorder*, September 27, 1862, Accessible Archives Collection, African American Newspapers

- [10] “Mrs. Frances E. Watkins Harper On The War,” *The Christian Recorder*, September 27, 1862, Accessible Archives Collection, African American Newspapers.
- [11] “Mrs. Frances E. W. Harper on Reconstruction,” *The Christian Recorder*, March 3, 1865, Accessible Archives Collection, African American Newspapers.
- [12] “Special Notices Mrs. Frances E. W. Harper Has Prepared,” *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*, November 4, 1865, Accessible Archives Collection, African American Newspapers.
- [13] “Philadelphia Correspondence,” *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*, March 10, 1866, Accessible Archives Collection, African American Newspapers.
- [14] Foster, Frances Smith, *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, The Feminist Press of CUNY, 1993. Pages 205-206.
- [15] “Bishop Dudley and the Negro,” *The Christian Recorder*, November 5, 1885, Accessible Archives Collection, African American Newspapers.
- [16] “Mothers’ Meetings,” *The Christian Recorder*, July 8, 1886, Accessible Archives Collection, African American Newspapers.

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### Accessible Archives Collections Used in Preparing This White Paper

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Accessible Archives provides diverse primary source materials reflecting broad views across American history and culture have been assembled into comprehensive databases. The following collections were utilized in composing this white paper.

#### **African American Newspapers Collection**

This collection of African American newspapers contains a wealth of information about cultural life and history during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and is rich with first-hand reports of the major events and issues of the day. The collection also provides a great number of early biographies, vital statistics, essays and editorials, poetry and prose, and advertisements all of which embody the African-American experience. These newspapers are included: **The Canadian Observer**, **The Christian Recorder**, **Weekly Advocate**, **The Colored American**, **Frederick Douglass’ Paper**, **Freedom’s Journal**, **The National Era**, **The North Star**, **Provincial Freeman**, **The Freedmen’s Record**, and **The Negro Business League Herald**.



***The Liberator, 1831-1865***

A weekly abolitionist newspaper, printed and published in Boston by William Lloyd Garrison, it was more religious than political. The newspaper appealed to the moral conscience of its readers, urging them to demand immediate freeing of slaves. It also promoted women's rights, an issue that split the American abolitionist movement. It had prominent and influential readers and authors, including Frederick Douglass and Beriah Green. *The Liberator* reprinted letters, reports, sermons, and news stories relating to slavery which helped it to become a sort of community bulletin board for the abolitionist movement and the most influential newspaper in the antebellum antislavery crusade.

***National Anti-Slavery Standard, 1840-1870***

Comprises the full run of issues that were published and featured writings from influential abolitionists fighting for suffrage, equality and most of all, emancipation. It contained essays, debates, personal accounts, speeches, events, reports, and anything else deemed newsworthy in relation to the question of slavery in the United States and other parts of the world.

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