

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

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Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

by David Safier



Frances Ellen Watkins Harper — popular 19th century poet, the first African American woman to have a published short story, one of the first African American woman to have a published novel, abolitionist, lecturer and much more — was raised a few blocks northwest of the Otterbein neighborhood.

Ms. Harper was a significant figure in some of the important social movements of her time, and her written work was much read and well known. However, she faded from popular memory after her death, until the 1980s when her biography and accomplishments began to be revived. She is still little known in the area of Baltimore where she grew up. This short biography might help correct that omission..

Raised on Camden Street

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was born in 1825. Her parents died when she was three, so she was raised by her aunt and uncle in a house on Camden Street between Howard and Eutaw, across the street from where Camden Station now stands (Neither the train tracks nor the station were there at the time). The Black community in that area is considered to be the beginnings of the historic Sharp-Leadenhall neighborhood.

Harper's uncle William Watkins was a minister at the nearby Sharp Street Methodist Church located on Sharp Street near Pratt, which is considered the “Mother Church” of Black Methodism in Maryland. Watkins was also a school teacher, writer, lecturer, an outspoken advocate for the abolition of slavery and one of the leading voices of Baltimore's Free Black community. Harper received her formal education at his school. Her uncle was known as a gifted teacher and a taskmaster, so she likely received a strong formal education. She attended his school until she was 13.

When Harper was in her early 20s, she published her first collection of poetry, “Forest Leaves.”



Title page of the only known copy of Forest Leaves, at the Maryland Historical Society.

Poet, Lecturer, Essayist, Novelist

Harper left Baltimore for Ohio in 1851, becoming the first Black teacher at a school for Free Black students. Because of a Maryland law declaring that any Free Black person who left the state for more than 30 days could not return, she was not allowed back in Maryland until after the Civil War.

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Harper became active in the Anti-Slavery Society in 1854 and went on a two year lecture tour with the group. That same year, she published her second volume of poetry. It was reprinted numerous times and made her the most popular African American poet of her time.

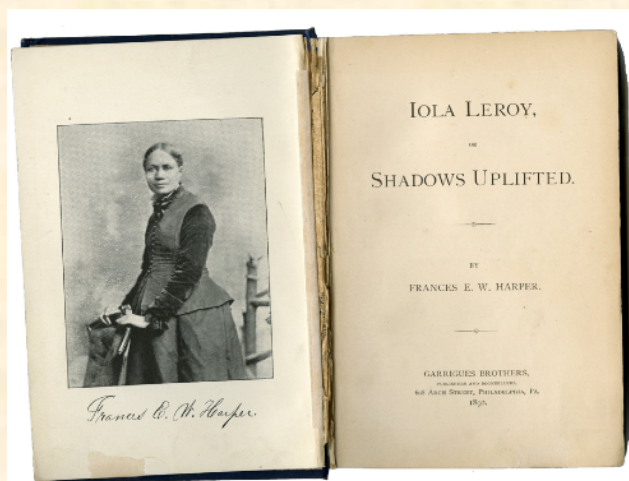
Her 1859 short story, “The Two Offers,” was the first published story by an African American woman author.

After the Civil War, Harper lectured on the subjects of universal suffrage, education and temperance, and she continued to write and have her poetry, fiction, essays and lectures published.

Harper worked with suffragists like Susan B. Anthony to win the vote for women, but she split with her white colleagues when she supported the right of Black men to vote even if women continued to be denied the same right. She helped found the American Woman Suffrage Association and the National Association for Colored Women and was active in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union.

Three of Harper’s novels were serialized in periodicals. In 1892, at the age of 67, Harper published *Iola Leroy*, which is one of the first — possibly the first — novel published by an African American woman.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper died in 1911.



Acknowledgement and Honors

Though Harper’s popularity waned from the time of her death until recognition of her life and accomplishments was revived in the 1980s, she was never entirely forgotten. Below is a list of some ways her life continued to be celebrated in Baltimore and elsewhere.

- A Baltimore school, Francis Ellen Harper School, was named in her honor.
- The Harper-Tubman House, an honors dormitory at Morgan State University, is named for Harper and Harriet Tubman.
- Harper’s home in Philadelphia, PA, is a National Historic Landmark.
- Harper has been inducted into the National Abolition Hall of Fame.
- The New York Times wrote an obituary for Harper in February, 2023, as part of its “Overlooked” series of important people who were not recognized with a Times obituary at the time of their death.

In recent years her life has been celebrated in articles in the Baltimore Sun and the Baltimore Banner.

Below is one of Harper’s most famous poems, “Bury Me In A Free Land,” published in 1858. An excerpt of the poem is on the wall of the Contemplative Court in the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, and it is read in a short film by writer and director Ava DuVernay, “August 28: A Day in the Life of a People.”

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Bury Me In A Free Land

You may make my grave wherever you will,
In a lowly vale or a lofty hill;
You may make it among earth's humblest graves,
But not in a land where men are slaves.

I could not sleep if around my grave
I heard the steps of a trembling slave;
His shadow above my silent tomb
Would make it a place of fearful gloom.

I could not rest if I heard the tread
Of a coffle-gang to the shambles led,
And the mother's shriek of wild despair
Rise like a curse on the trembling air.

I could not rest if I heard the lash
Drinking her blood at each fearful gash,
And I saw her babes torn from her breast
Like trembling doves from their parent nest.

I'd shudder and start, if I heard the bay
Of the bloodhounds seizing their human prey;
If I heard the captive plead in vain
As they tightened afresh his galling chain.

If I saw young girls, from their mothers' arms
Bartered and sold for their youthful charms
My eye would flash with a mournful flame
My death-paled cheek grow red with shame.

I would sleep, dear friends, where bloated might
Can rob no man of his dearest right;
My rest shall be calm in any grave.
Where none calls his brother a slave.

I ask no monument proud and high
To arrest the gaze of passers by;
All that my spirit yearning craves,
Is — bury me not in the land of slaves. —