

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

FRANCES WATKINS HARPER

abolitionist, suffragist, poet, teacher, public speaker, writer
“Slavery is dead, but the spirit which animated it still lives.”



FAIR USE IMAGE

Background Information

Born: September 24, 1825; Died: February 22, 1911

Harper was born to free African Americans in Baltimore, Maryland. She was an only child, and her parents' deaths left her an orphan at age three. After that, Harper was raised by her aunt and uncle. Harper's uncle, William Watkins, was an abolitionist and medical practitioner. He also established his own school, the Watkins Academy for Negro Youth, which Harper attended until age 13. She then was expected to join the workforce, and began working as a nursemaid and seamstress. While in this position she found a love for literature and wrote her first volume of poetry called *Forest Leaves* by age 21.¹

Harper's Resistance

Harper's resistance began shortly after she began her career in teaching. After she moved to New York, the state of Maryland passed a law stating that free African Americans living in the North were no longer allowed to enter the state of Maryland. This meant that Harper was unable to return to her home state. This law impelled Harper to devote her effort toward antislavery causes. ⁱ

Harper began this work by writing poetry for antislavery newspapers. She then transitioned into travel lecturing. She mainly lectured on the antislavery cause, but was also interested in lecturing on women's rights and the temperance movement. During this time, she was still writing. Her short story about women's education called "The Two Offers" became the first short story to be published by an African American woman.¹

Harper spent the entirety of her career pursuing equal rights, opportunities, and education for Black women. To this end, she co-founded and was vice-president of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. She also acted as the director of the American Association of Colored Youth.

Achievements

Near her former home in Philadelphia, a commemorative historical marker was installed. Additionally, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture inscribed the following excerpt from her poem "Bury Me in a Free Land": "I ask no monument, proud and high to arrest the gaze of the passers-by; all that my yearning spirit craves is bury me not in the land of slaves."

Essential Questions

1. How did Harper use her art to work as a tool of resistance?
 - a. Should art depict life as it is, or as it could be?

2. Harper spent much of her career as an advocate for both civil rights and women's rights. How have her efforts continued today?

3. ***“Slavery is dead, but the spirit which animated it still lives.”***
 - a. What did she mean by this quote?
 - b. What are some institutions that “the spirit which animated it still lives” highlight the remnants of slavery in modern society?

ⁱ 1Alexander, Kerri Lee. “Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.” National Women’s History Museum, 2020. November 24, 2020.

²Keyes, Allison (2017). “In This Quiet Space for Contemplation, a Fountain Rains Down Calming Waters”. Smithsonian Magazine. Retrieved November 24, 2020.