

**Mary Francis Berry**

There were a number of Black women who were deeply engaged in the anti-slavery movement, the abolitionist movement. And some became speakers on the circuit of going around to anti-slavery meetings and organizations and working with white women abolitionists and educating some of the white women about what they should be doing about this issue. All I can say is that they had to be courageous just as any woman who did this at the time had to be, because having a woman by herself, going out to all these places and showing up and being willing to speak to audiences at sometimes on the way in and out, and sometimes in the building where they were speaking, there were people who were very angry about them, even having the nerve to speak out about this. And those who were able to, were writers, wrote many things that they published essays. They wrote some of the pamphlets. Some of them wrote speeches, for the big male anti-slavery figures like Garrison, for example, even Lloyd Garrison, for example. So that they were very, very visible in this movement.

Frances Watkins Harper, who was born in Baltimore as a free woman of color became educated. She was a poet. She wrote some wonderful poetry. She also was a strong anti-slavery person, abolitionist person, and worked with the white women in the women's suffrage movement too. And she traveled around the country going to anti-slavery meetings, showing up. And in fact, she was one of the people who was best known in the 19th century as a Black woman, as a public figure. And that may surprise people who think that there was nobody except Sojourner Truth or somebody they've heard of, one or two people. But she was really the one that everybody looked to and when she was coming to town to speak, people wanted to hear her analysis of what they should be doing. And her writings are available for us to read and to look at, and she was respected by the men in the movement, by everybody who was in the movement. So I think that she's an important voice at this time.

I remember something she wrote about how people thought that since white women were working for suffrage, that they might all be like, I think she put it, like buttermilk drops – all perfect people – and that they weren't perfect and that you couldn't expect them, even if they got the vote, to do everything we would want to have done, because some of them would do the right thing and others wouldn't, just like men wouldn't. But she put it in very poetical terms, but that what we should do is stand for them having the vote anyway, because of the ones that we could get to come over to our side and do what we needed. I just thought that was wonderful.

To the extent that people who have studied history or who read about it know anything about the abolitionist movement, they would think that the people who led it were these white men, they've heard about like William Lloyd Garrison and you know, William Graham Sumner and so on. And that these were the people. Some of them may not have heard of Frederick Douglass, but if they did, they would have heard of him, but they would not have heard of the women who were involved in the movement and of some of the men who were involved in it.

But there were a lot of people in cities and towns all around the country who were had groups of who were not only involved in the Underground Railroad, which people have heard of, even if they're not quite sure what it is, that spirited slaves, who were running away and helped them. But that people who were abolitionists and who went out and spoke about it and talked about it and were not celebrated at the time. And in particular, this was true of the women.

And it is clear that many of the abolitionists themselves, the white abolitionists, would not hire the Black folks, who they were supposed to be standing for being free to work. And they certainly wouldn't deal with them socially and look down on them and didn't consider them equal and free human beings. That was one of the faults of the movement and the ones who felt that way, the abolitionists who felt that way, the white abolitionists thought that it was enough that they were saving the poor slaves, the poor fugitives, from their fate. And they had helped them to come along. It didn't mean that they had to uplift them or see to it that they were treated equally. And that was one of the things that tell us about the perpetuation of white supremacy. Even among people who are supposed to be allies and who were supposed to be doing good and who was supposed to be helpful. That's a little hard, isn't it? It's true though. It's true now and it was true then.

**Lonnie Bunch**

The story of women in the abolitionist movement, especially Black women, is little known and is unbelievably powerful. People like Frances Harper are brilliant because what they're able to do is take their own experiences and give voice to the experience of many others. Her poetry is so powerful – “bury me not in the land of the enslaved.”

For me, what you really see is that women play crucial roles in non-ascribed leadership. They're not the leaders of the anti-slavery movement, but they're essential. When you come into a city like Newark or Philadelphia, is Black

that help create these vigilance associations to give aid to the newly freed, to newly emancipated. And so I think people like Frances Harper are now being rediscovered because what they do is help us see a fuller picture of the enslaved experience, not just through the lens of the male. And I think that is really very powerful and very important.

### **Jelani Cobb**

When you talk about Black women abolitionists, first, there's the double burden of being Black and being female in a society in which both of those things were the opposite. Both of those things disqualified you from being able to be a part of the public interest, or to speak in the public square, or to weigh in on the events of the day. And that's just the kind of beginning of it. Then, often, these are women who have endured the unique burdens of enslavement that women faced. And so if you read Harriet Jacobs and her autobiography, she talks about something that is, again, one of the parts of slavery that we're least willing to confront, which is sexual exploitation and rape. And you know, her hiding in a cubby, essentially, for years, until she had her opportunity to flee to freedom, and to do that and then be willing to write about that, to tell that story as a means of indicting the system in a way that only women could have, because the various arguments that were being advanced in defense of slavery all rested upon this idea that it was this educational institution or that these were familial relationships. And she's saying right there, "What about the rape? Explain that. Explain that part of the institution of slavery." And you know, even... I think, when you look at Sojourner Truth, who was enslaved in New York State, and you know, there's a kind of gradual emancipation idea that people kind of age into emancipation in New York State. They don't have a kind of one fell swoop thing. It is a point where upon reaching, you know, 18 or 21... I'll say that one again:

It's upon reaching, you know, a designated age, this person is free. And so Sojourner Truth really had the option of living her life as it was, as opposed to risking her life in this crusade against slavery. In a way, I mean, certainly there were risks for all abolitionists, the men included, but in a way that was much more immediate and much more prominent for women who were engaged in this work than it was even for the men.

### **Justene Hill Edwards**

Frances Watkins Harper was a prominent abolitionist in the 19th century. She wrote quite publicly about her support, not just of the end of slavery, of ending slavery, but really of Black women's political participation in this movement. And so she stood as a very prominent, in many ways, a stark example of the challenges that not just African Americans face, but the unique challenges that Black women faced under the systems of slavery and

really within the structure of American society.

She was really taking up the mantle of women such as Phillis Wheatley, who did not have the same platform as she had, of course. And she was serving in a role that few Black women had the chance to serve in. Harper was, again, at the forefront of conversations about the abolitionist movement, about the political end to slavery, and practically what that would mean for the millions of slaves still in the U.S. And so in many ways, she was a foremother of the later political activism of Black women in the late 19th and early 20th century, especially around the idea of putting thought to paper, in terms of one's writings.

### **Manisha Sinha**

So, African American women, as I argue in my book, were pioneers when it came to abolitionist feminism. They're often forgotten in the history of abolition, but somebody like Maria Stewart, who is one of the first American women to ever speak in public. Even before her, you look at Phyllis Wheatley. She's not just one of the first Black women to be ever published, she's one of the first American women to be ever published.

So they were pioneers, and Garrison says that in *The Liberator*. He points to the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society which is an all-Black society and later on starts allowing white women to enter it. He says to white women, "Take a lesson from your Black sisters and become active in the abolitionist movement." Or somebody like the Forten sisters on whom John Whittier, the famous abolitionist poet, wrote a poem on the Forten sisters because of their activism. They also belong to a pioneering Black abolitionist family. The patriarch of that family, James Forten, of course, had bankrolled Garrison's *Liberator* when Garrison first started publishing it.

So they came from long genealogies of abolitionist activism and pioneering Black abolitionist families. And African American women were there at the forefront in the 1830s. They are there later on with Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, who are famous iconic figures, but there are others who are not that well known, who are, it's really important for us to remember them. And I can't mention them all in this short interview, but I do talk about as many of them as possible in my book where I argue that when we think of abolition, we can't just think of singular, outstanding figures. We have to think of it as this movement, as this radical movement that involved many, many Black women who are relatively unknown today.

When we think of the heroes of American democracy, we often forget that those that really reached for its greatest potential, that pushed the boundaries of democracy and demanding human rights for all people, Black and white men and women, were abolitionists. They were people who were demanding not just an end to slavery, but equal

rights. And certainly most of the Garrisonian abolitionists were demanding women's rights.

And when you think of iconic Black abolitionists feminists like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, they were articulating and acting upon what we call intersectionalism today without using those terms. So I would argue that when you look at the origin points, for instance, of the suffrage movement, you need to look at abolitionist feminists, Black and white, that many times, we forget their activism as a precursor. Those famous women's rights conventions that took place long before the suffrage movement got started after the Civil War.

So they were really imagining democracy in the broadest way and ways in which we are still trying to live up to. And that's why I found them so fascinating to study, because they were visioning a democratic project at a time when over 90% of Black people were enslaved in the South, and where all women had no legal or political standing

at all, no rights to their wages, no rights to their children, no right, in some states, even to divorce their husbands who may be abusive. They had absolutely no legal and political standing at all, leave alone the right to vote or citizenship.

So those struggles are really long and they have been forgotten when we talk about American history. When we think about the march of democracy, we tend to think of it in very linear ways, with very few actors, and actually the story is far more richer. It's far more complex and far more contested. And it's a more interesting story that I think we should pay attention to.