

# Women of Achievement

Written for  
The Fireside Schools

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Woman's American Baptist  
Home Mission Society

by

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## I.

# INTRODUCTION.

## The Negro Woman in American Life

In the history of the Negro race in America no more heroic work has been done than that performed by the Negro woman. The great responsibilities of life have naturally drifted to the men; but who can measure the patience, the love, the self-sacrifice of those who in a more humble way have labored for their people and even in the midst of war striven most earnestly to keep the home-fires burning? Even before emancipation a strong character had made herself felt in more than one community; and to-day, whether in public life, social service, education, missions, business, literature, music, or even the professions and scholarship, the Negro woman is making her way and reflecting credit upon a race that for so many years now has been struggling to the light.

It was but natural that those should first become known who were interested in the uplift of the race. If we except such an unusual and specially gifted spirit as Phillis



Wheatley, we shall find that those who most impressed the American public before the Civil War were the ones who best identified themselves with the general struggle for freedom. Outstanding was the famous lecturer, Sojourner Truth. This remarkable woman was born of slave parents in the state of New York about 1798. She recalled vividly in her later years the cold, damp cellar-room in which slept the slaves of the family to which she belonged, and where she was taught by her mother to repeat the Lord's Prayer and to trust God at all times. When in the course of the process of gradual emancipation in New York she became legally free in 1827, her master refused to comply with the law. She left, but was pursued and found. Rather than have her go back, however, a friend paid for her services for the rest of the year. Then there came an evening when, searching for one of her children that had been stolen and sold, she found herself without a resting-place for the night. A Quaker family, however, gave her lodging. Afterwards she went to New York City, joined a Methodist church, and worked hard to improve her condition. Later, having decided to leave New York for a lecture tour through the East, she made a small bundle of her belongings and

informed a friend that her name was no longer *Isabella*, as she had been known, but *Sojourner*. Afterwards, as she herself said, finding that she needed two names she adopted *Truth*, because it was intended that she should declare the truth to the people. She went on her way, lecturing to people wherever she found them assembled and being entertained in many aristocratic homes. She was entirely untaught in the schools, but tall and of commanding presence, original, witty, and always suggestive. The stories told about her are numberless; but she was ever moved by an abiding trust in God, and she counted among her friends many of the most distinguished Americans of her time. By her tact and her gift of song she kept down ridicule, and by her fervor and faith she won many friends for the anti-slavery cause.

It was impossible of course for any single woman to carry on the tradition of such a character as Sojourner Truth. She belonged to a distinct epoch in the country's history, one in which the rights of the Negro and the rights of woman in general were frequently discussed on the same platform; and she passed—so far as her greatest influence was concerned—with her epoch. In



more recent years those women who have represented the race before the larger public have been persons of more training and culture, though it has been practically impossible for any one to equal the native force and wit of Sojourner Truth. Outstanding in recent years have been Mrs. Booker T. Washington and Mrs. Mary Church Terrell. The spread of culture, however, and the general force of the social emphasis have more and more led those who were interested in social betterment to come together so that there might be the greater effect from united effort. Thus we have had developing in almost all of our cities and towns various clubs working for the good of the race, whether the immediate aim was literary culture, an orphanage, an old folks' home, the protection of working girls, or something else similarly noble. Prominent among the pioneers in such work were Mrs. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, of Boston, and Mrs. John T. Cook, of Washington, D. C. No one can record exactly how much has been accomplished by these organizations; in fact, the clubs range all the way in effectiveness from one that is a dominating force in its town to one that is struggling to get started. The result of the work, however, would in any case sum up with an astonishing total.

A report from Illinois, fairly representative of the stronger work, mentioned the following activities: "The Cairo hospital, fostered and under the supervision of the Yates Club of Cairo; the Anna Field Home for Girls, Peoria; Lincoln Old Folks' and Orphans' Home, founded by Mrs. Eva Monroe and assisted by the Women's Club of Springfield; the Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People, Chicago, founded by Mrs. Gabrella Smith and others; the Amanda Smith Orphans' Home, Harvey; the Phillis Wheatley Home for Wage-Earning Girls, of Chicago." In Alabama the State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs has established and is supporting a reformatory at Mt. Meigs for Negro boys, and the women are very enthusiastic about the work. A beautiful and well ordered home for Negro girls was established a few years ago in Virginia. Of the White Rose Mission of New York we are told that it "has done much good. A large number of needy ones have found shelter within its doors and have been able to secure work of all kinds. This club has a committee to meet the incoming steamers from the South and see that young women entering the city as strangers are directed to proper homes." All such work



is touching in its tenderness and effectiveness. The National Association of Colored Women's Clubs was founded in 1896. The organization has become stronger and stronger until it is now a powerful and effective one with hundreds of members. One of its recent activities has been the purchase of the home of Frederick Douglass at Anacostia, D. C.

In education, church life, and missions—special forms of social service—we have only to look around us to see what the Negro woman is accomplishing. Not only is she bearing the brunt of common school education for the race; in more than one instance a strong character, moved to do something, has started on a career of success a good secondary or industrial school. Representative are the Voorhees Normal and Industrial School, at Denmark, S. C., founded by Elizabeth C. Wright; the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls, founded by Mrs. M. M. Bethune; and the Mt. Meigs Institute, Mt. Meigs, Alabama, founded by Miss Cornelia Bowen. Noteworthy for its special missionary emphasis is the National Training School of Washington, of which Miss Nannie H. Burroughs is the head. One of the most important recent developments in education has been

the appointment of a number of young women as supervisors in county schools under the terms of the will of Anna T. Jeanes, a Quaker lady of Philadelphia who left a considerable sum of money for the improvement of the rural schools of the South. In church work we all know the extent to which women have had to bear the burden not only of the regular activities but also of the numerous "rallies" that still so unfortunately afflict our churches. Deserving of special mention in connection with social service is the work of those who have labored under the auspices of the Young Women's Christian Association, which has done so much for the moral well-being of the great camps in the war. In foreign mission work one of the educational institutions sustained primarily by Northern Baptist agencies—Spelman Seminary—stands out with distinct prominence. Not only has Spelman sent to Africa several of her daughters from this country, the first one being Nora Gordon in 1889; she has also educated several who have come to her from Africa, the first being Lena Clark, and for these the hope has ever been that they would return to their own country for their largest and most mature service.



In the realm of business the Negro woman has stood side by side with her husband in the rise to higher things. In almost every instance in which a man has prospered, investigation will show that his advance was very largely due to the faith, the patience, and the untiring effort of his wife. Dr. B. T. Washington, in his book *The Negro in Business*, gave several examples. One of the outstanding instances was in the story of Junius G. Groves, famous potato grower of Edwardsville, Kansas. This man moved from his original home in Kentucky to Kansas at the time of the well-known "Exodus" of 1879, a migration movement which was even more voluntary on the part of the Negro than the recent removal to the North on the part of so many, this latter movement being in so many ways a result of war conditions. Mr. Groves in course of time became a man of large responsibilities and means. It is most interesting, however, to go back to his early days of struggle. We read as follows: "Soon after getting the crop planted Mr. Groves decided to marry. When he reached this decision he had but seventy-five cents in cash, and had to borrow enough to satisfy the demands of the law. But he knew well the worth and common sense of the woman he was to marry. She

was as poor in worldly goods as himself; but their poverty did not discourage them in their plans. \* \* \* \* During the whole season they worked with never-tiring energy, early and late; with the result that when the crop had been harvested and all debts paid they had cleared \$125. Notwithstanding their lack of many necessities of life, to say nothing of comforts, they decided to invest \$50 of their earnings in a lot in Kansas City, Kansas. They paid \$25 for a milk cow, and kept the remaining \$50 to be used in the making of another crop." In the course of a few years Mr. Groves, with the help of his wife, now the mother of a large family, gathered in one year hundreds of thousands of bushels of white potatoes, surpassing all other growers in the world. Similarly was the success of E. C. Berry, a hotel-keeper of Athens, Ohio, due to his wife. "At night, after his guests had fallen asleep, it was his custom to go around and gather up their clothes and take them to his wife, who would add buttons which were lacking, repair rents, and press the garments, after which Mr. Berry would replace them in the guests' rooms. Guests who had received such treatment returned again and brought their friends with them." In course of time Mr. and Mrs. Berry came to own the leading



hotel in Athens, one of fifty rooms and of special favor with commercial travelers.

Such examples could be multiplied indefinitely. It is not only in such spheres that the worth of the Negro woman has been shown, however. Daily, in thousands of homes, in little stores and on humble farms, effort just as heroic has been exerted, though the result is not always so evident. On their own initiative also women are now engaging in large enterprises. The most conspicuous example of material success is undoubtedly Mme. C. J. Walker, of the Mme. C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company, of Indianapolis and New York, a business that is now conducted on a large scale and in accordance with the best business methods of America. Important also in this connection is the very great contribution that Negro women—very often those without education and opportunity—are making in the ordinary industrial life of the country. According to the census of 1910, 1,047,146, or 52 per cent. of those at work, were either farmers or farm laborers, and 28 per cent. more were either cooks or washerwomen. In other words, a total of exactly 80 per cent. were doing some of the hardest and at the same time some of the most necessary work in our home and indus-

trial life. These are workers whose worth has never been fully appreciated by the larger public, and who needed the heavy demands of the great war to call attention to the actual value of the service they were rendering.

The changes in fact brought about within the last few years, largely as a result of war conditions, are remarkable. As Mary E. Jackson, writing in the *Crisis*, has said: "Indiana reports [Negro women] in glass works; in Ohio they are found on the night shifts of glass works; they have gone into the pottery works in Virginia; wood-working plants and lumber yards have called for their help in Tennessee." She also quotes Rachel S. Gallagher, of Cleveland, Ohio, as saying of the Negro women in that city: "We find them on power sewing-machines, making caps, waists, bags, and mops; we find them doing pressing and various hand operations in these same shops. They are employed in knitting factories as winders, in a number of laundries on mangles of every type, and in sorting and marking. They are in paper box factories doing both hand and machine work, in button factories on the button machines, in packing houses packing meat, in railroad yards wiping and



cleaning engines, and doing sorting in railroad shops. One of our workers recently found two colored girls on a knotting machine in a bed spring factory, putting the knots in the wire springs."

In the professions, such as medicine and law, and in scholarship as well, the Negro woman has blazed a path. One year after Oberlin College in Ohio was founded in 1833, thirty years before the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation, the trustees took the advanced ground of admitting Negro men and women on equal terms with other students. Of the Northern colleges and universities Oberlin still leads in the number of its Negro women graduates, but in recent years other such institutions as Radcliffe, Wellesley, Columbia, and Chicago have been represented in an increasing number by those who have finished their work creditably and even with distinction in many instances. More and more each year are young women at these institutions going forward to the attainment of the higher scholastic degrees. In connection with medicine we recall the work in the war of the Negro woman in the related profession of nursing. It was only after considerable discussion that she was given a genuine oppor-

tunity in Red Cross work, but she at once vindicated herself. In the legal profession she has not only been admitted to practice in various places, but has also been appointed to public office. It must be understood that such positions as those just remarked are not secured without a struggle, but all told they indicate that the race through its womanhood is more and more taking part in the general life of the country.

In keeping with the romantic quality of the race it was but natural that from the first there should have been special effort at self-expression in literature, music, and other forms of art. The first Negro woman to strike the public imagination was Phillis Wheatley, who even as a young girl wrote acceptable verse. Her *Poems on Various Subjects* published in 1773 at once attracted attention, and it was fitting that the first Negro woman to become distinguished in America should be one of outstanding piety and nobility of soul. Just a few years before the Civil War Frances Ellen Watkins, better known as Mrs. F. E. W. Harper, entered upon her career as a writer of popular poetry. At the present time attention centers especially upon Mrs. Georgia Douglas Johnson, who early in 1918



produced in *The Heart of a Woman* a little volume of delicate and poignantly beautiful verse, and from whom greater and greater things are expected, as she not only has the temperament of an artist but has also undergone a period of severe training in her chosen field. In the wider field of prose—including especially stories, essays, and sketches—Mrs. Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson is prominent. In 1899 she produced *The Goodness of St. Rocque, and other stories*, and since then has continued her good work in various ways. The whole field of literature is a wide one, one naturally appealing to many of the younger women, and one that with all its difficulties and lack of financial return does offer some genuine reward to the candidate who is willing to work hard and who does not seek a short cut to fame.

In music the race has produced more women of distinction than in any other field. This was natural, for the Negro voice is world famous. The pity is that all too frequently some of the most capable young women have not had the means to cultivate their talents and hence have fallen by the wayside. Some day it is to be hoped that a great philanthropist will endow a real con-

servatory at which such persons may find some genuine opportunity and encouragement in their development in their days of struggle. In spite of all the difficulties, however, there have been singers who have risen to very high things in their art. Even before the Civil War the race produced one of the first rank in Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, who came into prominence in 1851. This artist, born in Mississippi, was taken to Philadelphia and there cared for by a Quaker lady. The young woman did not soon reveal her gift to her friend, thinking that it might be frowned upon as something too worldly. Her guardian learned of it by accident, however, and one day surprised her by asking, "Elizabeth, is it true that thee can sing?" "Yes," replied the young woman in confusion. "Let me hear thee." And Elizabeth sang; and her friend, realizing that she had a voice of the first quality, proceeded to give her the best instruction that it was possible to get. Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield had a marvelous voice embracing twenty-seven notes, reaching from the sonorous bass of a baritone to the highest soprano. A voice with a range of more than three octaves naturally attracted much attention in both England and America, and comparisons with Jenny Lind, then at the height of



her great fame; were frequent. In the next generation arose Madame Selika, a cultured singer of the first rank, and one who by her arias and operatic work generally, as well as by her mastery of language, won great success on the continent of Europe as well as in England and America. The careers of some later singers are so recent as to be still fresh in the public memory; some in fact may still be heard. It was in 1887 that Flora Batson entered on the period of her greatest success. She was a ballad singer and her work at its best was of the sort that sends an audience into the wildest enthusiasm. In a series of temperance meetings in New York she sang for ninety consecutive nights, with never-failing effect, one song, "Six Feet of Earth Make Us All One Size." Her voice exhibited a compass of three octaves, but even more important than its range was its remarkable sympathetic quality. Early in the last decade of the century appeared also Mrs. Sissieretta Jones, whose voice at once commanded attention as one of unusual richness and volume, and as one exhibiting especially the plaintive quality ever present in the typical Negro voice.

At the present time there are several promising singers; and there are also those

who in various ways are working for the general advancement of the race in music. Mrs. E. Azalia Hackley, for some years prominent as a concert soprano, has recently given her time most largely to the work of teaching and showing the capabilities of the Negro voice. Possessed of a splendid musical temperament, she has enjoyed the benefit of three years of foreign study and generally inspired many younger singers or performers. Prominent among many excellent pianists is Mrs. Hazel Harrison Anderson, who also has studied much abroad and who has appeared in many noteworthy recitals. Mrs. Maud Cuney Hare, of Boston, a concert pianist, has within the last few years given several excellent lecture-recitals dealing with Afro-American music.

As between painting and sculpture the women of the race have shown a decided preference for sculpture. While there are some students of promise, no woman has as yet achieved distinction on work of really professional quality in the realm of painting. On the other hand there have been three or four sculptors of genuine merit. As early as 1865 Edmonia Lewis began to attract attention by her busts of prominent people.



Within the last few years the work of Mrs. May Howard Jackson, of Washington, has attracted the attention of the discerning; and that of Mrs. Meta Warrick Fuller is reserved for special comment.

Any such review as this naturally has its limitations. We can indicate only a few of the outstanding individuals here and there. At least enough has been said, however, to show that the Negro woman is making her way at last into every phase of noble endeavor. In the pages that follow we shall attempt to set forth at somewhat greater length the life and work of a few of those whose achievement has been most signal and whose interest in their sisters has been unfailing.