

Sarah Mapps Douglass

1806-1882



“One short year ago, how different were my feelings on the subject of slavery! It is true, the wail of the captive sometimes came to my ear in the midst of my happiness, and caused my heart to bleed for his wrongs; but, alas! The impression was as evanescent as the early cloud and morning dew. I had formed a little world of my own, and cared not to move beyond its precincts. But how was the scene changed when I beheld the oppressor lurking on the border of my own peaceful home! I saw his iron hand stretched forth to seize me as his prey, and the cause of the slave became my own. I started up, and with one mighty effort threw from me the lethargy which had covered me as a mantle for years; and determined, by the help of the Almighty, to use every exertion in my power to elevate the character of my wronged and neglected race. One year ago, I detested the slaveholder; now I can pity and pray for him.”

Sarah Mapps Douglass

1806-1882

Sarah Mapps Douglass was born free on September 9, 1806, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her parents were the well-recognized abolitionists and activists Robert Douglass and Grace Bustill Douglass. She was raised a Quaker and enjoyed a very privileged upbringing in Philadelphia's elite African American society. Grace Bustill Douglass, Sarah's mother, founded a school in 1819 for Black children which Sarah attended sporadically; however, Sarah Mapps Douglass was for the most part privately tutored in the family home. Early in her life, she received a distinguished education that allowed her a great deal more freedom of choice than the majority of free or enslaved Black women of the time could ever imagine.

After completing her formal education, Sarah Mapps Douglass taught for a while in New York City, but returned to Philadelphia to take over her mother's school. Once ensconced again in Philadelphia, Douglass helped to establish a number of organizations, including the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia in 1831, the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, and later, the Sarah M. Douglass Literary Circle. Once she took over the reins of the school, she was financially backed by her parents for a while, but this arrangement proved unsatisfactory

as a result of her parents' inability to pay all expenses consistently. She later asked the Female Anti-Slavery Society to assume the fiduciary responsibilities of the school, but this situation too was unsuccessful. Sarah Mapps Douglass accepted outright financial and structural responsibility for the school and was the director of the institution from 1840 until 1852, when the school was forced to close its doors. From 1853 to 1877, Sarah Mapps Douglass served as principal of the Girls Preparatory Department of the Quaker Institute for Colored Youth. During this time, she was also enrolled in the Pennsylvania Medical University and frequently lectured on topics of women's health.

In 1855, Sarah Mapps Douglass was married to Reverend William Douglass, the minister of St. Thomas's African Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. He was a widower with nine children and was more than twenty years her senior. Her husband passed away in 1861, and Douglass was once again able to devote her efforts to teaching and civil rights issues. She also became vice-chairperson of the Woman's Pennsylvania Branch of the American Freedmen's Aid Commission following the Civil War. It is clear that the education and class distinction possessed by Sarah Mapps Douglass gave her a greater modicum of freedom to move about and enabled her to become more active in her chosen causes.

Throughout the 1830's and 1840's, Sarah Mapps Douglass wrote regularly for *The Liberator*, the *Colored American*, the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, the *National Enquirer* (no relation to the current tabloid), the *Anglo-African Magazine*, and *Constitutional Advocate of Universal Liberty*. She wrote poetry, prose, and letters to the editor of a political nature. She wrote under her own name and under the pseudonyms of 'Sophanisba' and 'Ella'. While most of her work dealt with religious and educational concerns, she often segued into the realm of women's rights and abolition and was an early defender of basic civil rights. One of her most outstanding causes was her ardent criticism of the Quakers. The American Society of Friends were outspoken opponents of enslavement, yet did not allow African American Quakers to sit or intermingle with White members during religious services or at other organizational activities. She wrote of her views in a letter reprinted in *The Liberator* in 1831 which is included in this

anthology. Later, in a letter dated December 1837, Sarah Mapps Douglass wrote to William Bassett – noted Quaker abolitionist – to outline the discriminatory practices within the Quaker church. That letter is also reprinted in this volume.

The additional texts reprinted in this book include two addresses given to the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia, both in 1832 and first printed in *The Liberator*. The first address deals with the necessity of a liberal education for women and the role that education plays in the moral upliftment of a society. The second address, entitled “Mental Feast,” discusses the role that free, Christian, educated women must play in the abolishment of enslavement. Sarah Mapps Douglass should be remembered as having set the precedent for such later argued civil rights causes as desegregation and equal education, as well as for showing a distinct connection to the country’s fundamental Christian values and those causes. She died on September 8, 1882, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

To the Editor of *The Liberator*

Sir – I write at the request of a friend, to ask this question: – Why do our friends, as well as our enemies, call us ‘negroes’? We feel it to be a term of reproach and could wish our friends would call us by some other name. If you, Sir, or one of your correspondents, would condescend to answer this question, we would esteem it a favor.

I was much pleased with your remarks on the absurd practice of placing the people of color behind all others, in our houses of worship. I, Sir, would have gladly sat among the humblest of my despised race; but have been obliged, for conscience’s sake, to sit with white Christians; and often as I have met the look of scorn, and heard the whispered remark of ‘This bench is for the black people,’ – ‘This bench is for the people of color,’ as the tear gathered in my eye, and the prayer ascended from my heart to God, that he would in his own time take away our reproach; and oh! most firmly do I believe he will. This belief alone is sufficient to keep me in the path of duty.

53

Allow me, Sir, to return you my thanks and the thanks of my friends, for your unwearied and noble efforts in our cause. May Heaven’s best blessings rest on you, and on all connected with you, for your sake. Words are too poor to express my emotions of gratitude towards the authoress of the lines, entitled ‘The Black at Church,’ for expressing in such beautiful language, the sentiments of my heart. –

May the Almighty bless her –
 ‘And in her last, extremist need,
 When soul and body sever,
 For this one act may all her sins
 Be blotted out forever.’

Philadelphia, May 25, 1831

Address to the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia

My Friends, – I expect you generally understand the reason why you are called together at this time. I shall be as brief as

possible. I have long and ardently desired your intellectual advancement, upon which the progress of morality must mainly depend. It is nothing better than affection to deny the influence that females possess; it is their part to train up the young mind, to instill therein principles that may govern in maturer years; principles that influence the actions of the private citizen, the patriot, philanthropist, lawgivers, yea, presidents and kings. Then what subject can more properly claim that one more justly and loudly demands solid consideration – deep attention, – and yet what one is more carelessly dismissed from the mind, what one more neglected than the proper education of females? I say the proper education, because I do not consider that usually bestowed on them efficient; on the contrary, it tends to debase the moral powers, to enervate the understanding; and renders them incapable of filling the stations allotted them with becoming dignity, or profitably discharging the duties airing from those stations. I am aware that the education of females has become a fashionable theme, that a great deal has been said and written concerning it, that many speculations have been set afloat respecting their capacity of receiving a liberal, a classical education; and I am also aware that an opinion too generally prevails that superficial learning is all that is requisite, and to this cause, many in great measure be attributed the depravity, the embasement of society. It is not my design to descant at length upon the subject at this time; suffice it to say, I hold that the present system of education abounds with corruption and error, and I fondly anticipate the time when a complete reformation may be wrought therein. I look through the surrounding clouds and mists of prejudice for the shining forth of a light, whose rays shall dispel these vapors; then may the female character be raised to a just stand. At some future period I may explain more particularly my reasons for thinking as I do, although it should elicit the exclamation of —‘thou art beside thyself, thy great zeal hath made thee mad.’ My object at present is to call your attention to the necessity of improving the mental faculties, of exalting the moral powers, and of elevating yourselves to the station of rational, intelligent beings; accountable for the use made of the talents committed to your care. The benefits resulting from combination similar to the one proposed I need not iterate, you are no strangers to them; but allow me, my

sisters, to entreat you to banish prejudice from your hearts. If any one imagines that here talents are less brilliant than others, let her not disdain to contrast their superior attainment with her own; suffer not a feeling (shall I say of envy?) to enter that sanctuary, but rather strive to imitate their virtues; seek their society, and whenever they are disposed to aid you, extend to them the right hand of fellowship. And lastly, I would remind you that an attention to your best interests will induce you to encourage those periodicals devoted to your cause; the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* and *The Liberator*, I allude to in particular, their editors are devoting their time and talents to your service, they have subjected themselves to many privations and despise the reproach, the calumny, so literally bestowed upon them by interested, calculating, designing men, they merit your patronage.

The Liberator

May, 1832

“Mental Feast”

My Friends – My Sisters:

How important is the occasion for which we have assembled ourselves together this evening, to hold a feast, to feed our never-dying minds, to excite each other to deeds of mercy, works of peace; to stir up in the bosom of each, gratitude to God for his increasing goodness, and feeling of deep sympathy for our brethren and sisters, who are in the land of Christian light and liberty held in bondage the most cruel and degrading – to make their cause our own!

An English writer has said, ‘We must feel deeply before we can act rightly; from that absorbing, heart-rending compassion for ourselves springs a deeper sympathy for others, and from a sense of our weakness and our own upbraidings arises a disposition to be indulgent, to forbear, to forgive.’ This is my experience. One short year ago, how different were my feelings on the subject of slavery! It is true, the wail of the captive sometimes came to my ear in the midst of my happiness, and caused my heart to bleed for his wrongs; but alas! the impression was as evanescent

as the early cloud and morning dew. I had formed a little world of my own, and cared not to move beyond its precincts. But how was the scene changed when I beheld the oppressor lurking on the border of my own peaceful home! I saw his iron hand stretched forth to seize me as his prey, and the cause of the slave became my own. I started up, and with one mighty effort threw from me the lethargy which had covered me as a mantle for years; and determined, by the help of the Almighty, to use every exertion in my power to elevate the character of my wronged and neglected race. One year ago, I detested the slaveholder; now I can pity and pray for him. Has not this been your experience, my sisters? Have you not felt as I have felt upon this thrilling subject? My heart assures me some of you have.

And now, my sisters, I would earnestly and affectionately press upon you the necessity of placing your whole dependence on God; poor, weak, finite creatures as we are, we can do nothing for ourselves. He is all-powerful; He is waiting to be gracious to us as a people. Do you feel your inability to do good? Come to Him who giveth liberally and upbraideth not; bring your wrongs and fears to Him, as you would to a tender parent – He will sympathize with you. I know from blessed, heart cheering experience the excellency of having a God to trust in seasons of trial and conflict. What but this can support us should the pestilence, which has devastated Asia, be borne to us by the summer breezes? What but this can uphold our fainting footsteps in the swellings of Jordan? It is the only thing worth living for – the only thing that can disarm death of his sting. I am earnestly solicitous that each of us may adopt this language: ‘I have no hope in man, but much in God – Much in the rock of ages.’

In conclusion, I would respectfully recommend that our mental feast should commence by reading a portion of the Holy Scriptures. A pause should succeed the reading for supplication. It is my wish that the reading and conversation should be altogether directed to the subject of slavery. The refreshment, which may be offered to you for the body, will be of the most simple kind, that you may feel for those who have nothing to refresh body or mind.

**Letter to William Basset
Phila [Penn.] December, 1837**

Esteemed Friend,

Your favor of the 7th came safe to hand. It needed no apology. The fact of your being an abolitionist; the friend of my beloved sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimké, the friend of my poor and oppressed brethren and sisters, entitles you to my warmest gratitude and esteem. I thank God that He has enabled you to renounce error and strengthened you to come up to the help of the Lord against the mighty. I pray that you may run the race set before you without halting, keeping your eye steadfastly fixed on the great Captain of our salvation.

The questions you ask me, make me feel my weakness, and in view of the great responsibility that rests upon me in answering them, my flesh trembles; yet will I cast my burden on Him, who is strength in weakness and resolve to do my duty; to tell the truth and leave the consequences to God. I thank you for the "Letter to a member of the Society of Friends." I can set my seal to the truth of the following paragraph, extracted from it. "It will be allowed that the Negro Pew or its equivalent may be found in some of our meeting houses where men and women brethren and sisters by creation and heirs of the same glorious immortality are seated by themselves on a back bench for no other reason but because it has pleased God to give them a complexion darker than our own." And as you request to know particularly about Arch Street Meeting, I may say that the experience of years has made me wise in this fact, that there is a bench set apart at that meeting for our people, whether officially appointed or not I cannot say; but this I am free to say that my mother and myself were told to sit there, and that a friend sat at each end of the bench to prevent white persons from sitting there. And even when a child my soul was made sad with hearing five or six times during the course of one meeting this language of remonstrance addressed to those who were willing to sit by us. "This bench is for the black people." "This bench is for the people of color." And oftentimes I wept, at other times I felt indignant and queried in my own mind are these people Christians. Now it seems clear to me that had not this bench been set apart for oppressed Americans, there would have been no ne-

cessity for the oft-repeated and galling remonstrance, galling indeed, because I believe they despise us for our color. I have not been in Arch Street Meeting for four years; but my mother goes once a week and frequently she has a whole long bench to herself. The assertion that our people who attend their meetings prefer sitting by themselves, is not true. A very near friend of ours, that fears God and who has been a constant attender of Friends meetings from his childhood, says "Thou mayest tell William Basset, that I know that 'Friends' appointed a seat for our people at the meeting which I attend. Several years ago a friend came to me and told me that 'Friends' had appointed a back bench for us. I told him with some warmth that I had just as lief sit on the floor as sit there. I do not care about it, 'Friends' do not do the thing that is right." Judge now, I pray you, whether this man preferred sitting by himself. Two sons of the person I have just mentioned, have left attending Friends meetings within the last few months, because they could no longer endure the "scorning of those that are at ease, and the contempt of the proud." Conversing with one of them today, I asked, why did you leave Friends? "Because they do not know how to treat me, I do not like to sit on a back bench and be treated with contempt, so I go where I am better treated." Do you not like their principles and their mode of worship? "Yes, I like their principles, but not their practice. They make the highest profession of any sect of Christians, and are the most deficient in practice." In reply to your question "whether there appears to be a diminution of prejudice towards you among Friends," I unhesitatingly answer, no. I have heard it frequently remarked and have observed it myself, that in proportion as we become intellectual and respectable, so in proportion does their disgust and prejudice increase.

Yet while I speak this of Friends as a body, I am happy to say that there is in this city a "noble few," who have cleansed their garments from the foul stain of prejudice, and are doing all their hands find to do in promoting the moral and mental elevation of oppressed Americans. Some of these are members of Anti-Slavery Societies and others belong to the old abolition School.

While I have been penning this letter, living desires have sprung up in my soul that I might "nothing extenuate nor set down ought in malice." Doubtless you know that our beloved A.

E. Grimké is convalescent. Did all the members of Friends society feel for us, as the sisters Grimké do, how soon, how very soon would the fetters be stricken from the captive and cruel prejudice be driven from the bosoms of the professed followers of Christ. We were lying wounded and bleeding, trampled to the very dust by the heel of our brethren and our sisters, when Sarah and Angelina Grimké passed by; they saw our low estate and their hearts melted within them; with the tenderness of ministering angels they lifted us from the dust and poured the oil of consolation, the balm of sympathy into our lacerated bosoms; they identified themselves with us, took our wrongs upon them, and made our oppression and woe theirs. Is it any marvel then that we call them blessed among women? We value them not because they belong to the great and the mighty of our land, but because they love Christ and our afflicted brethren. Most cordially do we approve every step they have taken since they left us, believing that the unerring spirit of truth is their leader [and] friend. I hope this letter may be satisfactory to you; use it, and the account of my brother in any way you may think proper, but do not give my name unless 59 it is absolutely necessary. Please tell our beloved A. E. G. that her friends entreat her not to exert herself until she is quite strong. May the Lord bless you, and may you anchor your little bark on the rock, Christ Jesus; that so, when the storm of persecution arises, You may suffer no loss.

Prays fervently,
Sarah M. Douglass