

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper House

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Bella Vista had a thriving African-American community in the early 19th century which nourished the abolition movement and Underground Railroad. A February 13 article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* provides a walking tour of Underground Railroad sites, two of which are in Bella Vista, the William Still House at 625 S Delhi Street (covered in the BVNA newsletter spring 2108) and the Frances Ellen Watkins Harper house at 1006 Bainbridge Street.

Among the many abolitionists in Philadelphia, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, known as “the mother of African-American journalism,” was a resident of Bella Vista. She was a writer, poet, novelist, lecturer and civil rights leader who was widely published and traveled throughout the states lecturing on abolition, civil rights and reform.

Her home at 1006 Bainbridge Street, a State and Federal historic site, was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1976. Between 10th and Alder Streets on Bainbridge it is a classic three-story row house with a brick front. Frances Harper lived here from 1870 until her death in 1911.

Originally from Baltimore, Frances Harper was born in 1825 of free African-American parents. After being orphaned at a young age she was raised by her aunt, a seamstress, and her uncle who ran the Academy for Negro Youth where she received her education. As a teen she worked for a Quaker book store owner and was, again, able to read widely; she began writing in the 1830s. Her first book of poems was published at age 20 in 1845, making her one of the first African-American published writers.

The fugitive slave act passed in 1850 upset this path and prompted a move to Ohio where she would be safer. Her experience with fugitive slaves during this time inspired her to devote her life to abolition and civil rights and provided material for her poetry, novels and lectures. She joined William Still at the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and began helping escaped slaves. Also at this time she toured through the states as a lecturer for the Maine Anti-Slavery Society, reading her poetry and fighting for civil rights.

After the war, she also lectured throughout the southern states representing the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, highlighting the struggles of the freed slaves, opposing lynching and supporting reconstruction. With the advent of Jim Crow laws after reconstruction, she fought for civil rights and women’s suffrage and was widely published on these issues.

In 1875 at the Centennial Anniversary of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery she lectured of *The Great Problem To Be Solved*:

“Whether or not there is strength enough in democracy, virtue enough in our civilization, and power enough in our religion to have mercy and deal justly with four millions of people but lately translated from the old oligarchy of slavery to the new commonwealth of freedom; and upon the right solution of this question depends in a large measure the future strength, progress and durability of our nation.”