

Maria W. Stewart

Maria W. Stewart (Maria Miller) (1803 – December 17, 1879) was an free-born African American who became a teacher, journalist, lecturer, abolitionist, and women's rights activist. The first known American woman to speak to a mixed audience of men and women, white and black, she was also the first African-American woman to make public lectures, as well as to lecture about women's rights and make a public anti-slavery speech.^[1]

The Liberator published two pamphlets by Stewart: *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build* (which advocated abolition and black autonomy) in 1831, and another of religious meditations, *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria Stewart* (1832). In February 1833, she addressed Boston's African Masonic Lodge, which soon ended her brief lecturing career. Her claim that black men lacked "ambition and requisite courage" caused an uproar among the audience, and Stewart decided to retire from giving lectures. Seven months later, she gave a farewell address at a schoolroom in the African Meeting House ("Paul's Church"). After this, she moved to New York City, then to Baltimore, and finally Washington, DC, where she worked as a schoolteacher, and then head matron at Freedmen's Hospital, where she eventually died.

Maria W. Stewart	
Born	<div>Maria Miller</div> 1803 <div>Hartford, Connecticut, USA</div>
Died	<div>December 17, 1879</div> (aged 75–76) <div>Washington, DC, USA</div>
Occupation	Domestic servant, teacher, journalist, lecturer, abolitionist, and women's rights activist
Spouse(s)	James W. Stewart

Contents

Early life

Public speaking

Writings

Evangelism

Speeches

Death and legacy

See also

Works by Stewart

Works about Stewart

References

External links

Early life

She was born Maria Miller, the child of free African-American parents in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1803. At the age of five she lost both parents and was sent to live with a minister and his family. She continued as a servant in that home until she was 15, without receiving any formal education. Between the ages of 15 and 20, Maria attended Sabbath School before church service on Sundays and developed a lifelong affinity for religious work.^[2]

On August 10, 1826, Maria Miller married James W. Stewart, an independent shipping agent, before the Reverend Thomas Paul, pastor of the African Meeting House, in Boston, Massachusetts. She took not only his last name but his middle initial.^[3] Their marriage lasted only three years and produced no children; James Stewart died in 1829. The executors of his estate deprived Maria as his widow of any inheritance. However, James had served in the War of 1812 and eventually a law was passed allowing veterans' widows their husbands' pensions.^[4]

Public speaking

Stewart was the first American woman to speak to a mixed audience of men, women, whites and blacks (termed a "promiscuous" audience during the early 19th century).^[5] The first African-American woman to lecture about women's rights — Stewart focused particularly on the rights of black women — religion, and social justice among black people. She was someone who could be called a Matronist: one of the matriarchs of black feminist thought during the Jim Crow era. She also became the first African-American woman to make public anti-slavery speeches.^[6] One of the first African-American women to make public lectures for which there are still surviving copies, Stewart referred to her public lectures as "speeches" and not "sermons", despite their religious tone and frequent Biblical quotes. African-American women preachers of the era, such as Jarena Lee, Julia Foote and Amanda Berry Smith, undoubtedly influenced Stewart, and Sojourner Truth later used a similar style in her public lectures.^[7] Stewart delivered her speeches in Boston, to organizations including the African-American Female Intelligence Society.^[8]

David Walker, a prosperous clothing shop owner, who was a well-known, outspoken member of the General Colored Association, also influenced Stewart. (A house at 81 Joy Street where from 1827 till 1829 Walker and his wife were tenants subsequently also became home to Stewart.)^[9] A leader within Boston's African-American enclave, Walker wrote a very controversial piece on race relations entitled *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829). In 1830, he was found dead outside of his shop, just one year after Stewart's husband had died. These events precipitated a "born again" spiritual experience for Stewart. She became a vocal and militant advocate for "Africa, freedom and God's cause".^[6] However, she was far less militant than Walker, and resisted advocating violence. Instead, Stewart put forth African-American exceptionalism, the special bond she saw between God and African Americans, and advocated social and moral advancement, even as she vocally protested against social conditions African Americans experienced, and touched on several political issues.

In 1831, before her public speaking career began, Stewart published a small pamphlet entitled *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build*. In 1832, she published a collection of religious meditations, *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria Stewart*. She wrote and delivered four lectures between 1832 and 1833. While her speeches were daring and not well received, William Lloyd Garrison, a friend and the central figure of the abolitionist (anti-slavery) movement, published all four in his newspaper, *The Liberator*, the first three individually, and later, all four together. Garrison also recruited Stewart to write for *The Liberator* in 1831.^[6]

Stewart's public-speaking career lasted three years. She delivered her farewell lectures on September 21, 1833, in the schoolroom of the African Meeting House, known then as the Belknap Street Church, and today (2019) part of Boston's Black Heritage Trail. Upon leaving Boston, she first moved to New York, where she published her collected works in 1835. She taught school and participated in the abolitionist movement, as well as literary organization. Stewart then moved to Baltimore and eventually to Washington, D.C., where she also taught school before becoming head matron (nurse) of the Freedmen's Hospital and Asylum in Washington, later the medical school of Howard University. She ultimately died at that hospital.^[10]

Writings

In her writings, Stewart was very cogent when she talked about the plight of the Negro. She said, "Every man has a right to express his opinion. Many think, because your skins are tinged with a sable hue, that you are an inferior race of beings ... Then why should one worm say to another, Keep you down there, while I sit up yonder; for I am better than thou. It is not the color of the skin that makes the man, but it is the principle formed within the soul."^[11] She understood that education about God and country would lift the Negro out of ignorance and poverty. "She expressed concern for African Americans' temporal affairs and

eternal salvation and urged them to develop their talents and intellect, live moral lives, and devote themselves to racial activism. Stewart challenged her audience to emulate the valor of the pilgrims and American revolutionaries in demanding freedom, and advised them to establish institutions such as grocery stores and churches to support their community.^[12]" Stewart's radical point of view was not well received by her audience. William Lloyd Garrison said of her,

Your whole adult life has been devoted to the noble task of educating and elevating your people, sympathizing with them in their affliction, and assisting them in their needs; and, though advanced in years, you are still animated with the spirit of your earlier life, and striving to do what in you lies to succor the outcast, reclaim the wanderer, and lift up the fallen. In this blessed work may you be generously assisted by those to whom you may make your charitable appeals, and who may have the means to give efficiency to your efforts.^[11]

She wanted to help the black community to do and be better as they circumnavigated their way around a country where subjugation of the Negro was the law of the land.

Evangelism

Maria W. Stewart was humble and deeply determined to preach the word of God. She evangelized during a time when educated women, especially educated Negro women, were frowned upon. She once wrote,

having lost my position in Williamsburg, Long Island, and hearing the colored people were more religious and God-fearing in the South, I wended my way to Baltimore in 1852. But I found all was not gold that glistened; and when I saw the want of means for the advancement of the common English branches, with no literary resources for the improvement of the mind scarcely, I threw myself at the foot of the Cross, resolving to make the best of a bad bargain ...^[13]

Stewart was shocked that the conditions in the south for African Americans did not measure up to what she imagined. She eventually took a job as a teacher where she taught reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic. She was paid 50 cents a month while other teachers were paid \$1. Her salary was barely enough to cover her monthly expenses. She readily admitted she was not good at handling her finances and to some degree people took advantage.

Women evangelists were often very poor and leaned on the kindness of strangers, friends and religious leaders to help sustain them. One such friend went by the name of Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave, seamstress and civil rights activist she wrote of fondly, "There was a lady, Mrs. Keckley, I knew, formerly from Baltimore, who proved to be an ardent friend to me in my great emergency. ..."^[13] Stewart was born free and Keckley a slave, but both women saw a need to be active in the burgeoning civil rights movement of the late 19th century.

The preaching of God's word during the 1800s was seen in society as patrilineal, even among some Negro religious institutions. As one writer said: "Women in the black churches were relegated to positions that posed no real threat to the power structure maintained by preachers, deacons, and other male leaders. Women were usually assigned roles of Sunday school teachers, exhorters, secretaries, cooks, and cleaners. Such positions paralleled those reserved for women within the domestic sphere of the home."^[14]

Stewart believed wholeheartedly that she was called to do God's work even at great peril to herself. She used her platform to talk about racial injustices and sexism by highlighting the contradictions between the message of peace and unity preached from the pulpits of the white churches verses the reality of the slavery. According to one writer:

"For Stewart, this ... newly freed community ... barely one generation from slavery, yearning for a fully realized freedom rather than a nominal one. Given the small size of the free Black community,^[15] it is easy to assume solidarity, cohesion, and unquestioned allegiance to the Black church. But just as revolutionary Americans had to grapple with what it meant to be 'American,'... Blacks ... just 50 years from slavery in Massachusetts, were grappling with their identity as free people, and there were likely competing agendas being cast forth of what Blacks should 'do' and how they should operate."^[16]

Stewart loved her work and her people. She knew they could be successful if they had the proper tools to succeed. That is why she started a school for the children of runaway slaves. Stewart knew education and faith in God was the great equalizer.

Speeches

Maria Stewart delivered four public lectures that *The Liberator* published during her lifetime, addressing women's rights, moral and educational aspiration, occupational advancement, and the abolition of slavery.

She delivered the lecture "Why Sit Ye Here and Die?" on September 21, 1832, at Franklin Hall, Boston, to the New England Anti-Slavery Society. She demanded equal rights for African-American women:

I have asked several individuals of my sex, who transact business for themselves, if providing our girls were to give them the most satisfactory references, they would not be willing to grant them an equal opportunity with others? Their reply has been—for their own part, they had no objection; but as it was not the custom, were they to take them into their employ, they would be in danger of losing the public patronage.

And such is the powerful force of prejudice. Let our girls possess what amiable qualities of soul they may; let their characters be fair and spotless as innocence itself; let their natural taste and ingenuity be what they may; it is impossible for scarce an individual of them to rise above the condition of servants. Ah! why is this cruel and unfeeling distinction? Is it merely because God has made our complexion to vary? If it be, O shame to soft, relenting humanity! "Tell it not in Gath! publish it not in the streets of Askelon!" Yet, after all, methinks were the American free people of color to turn their attention more assiduously to moral worth and intellectual improvement, this would be the result: prejudice would gradually diminish, and the whites would be compelled to say, unloose those fetters!

In the same speech Stewart emphasized that African-American women were not so different from African-American men:

Look at many of the most worthy and interesting of us doomed to spend our lives in gentlemen's kitchens. Look at our young men, smart, active and energetic, with souls filled with ambitious fire; if they look forward, alas! what are their prospects? They can be nothing but the humblest laborers, on account of their dark complexions ...

She continued the theme that African Americans were subjected not only to Southern slavery but to Northern racism and economic structures:

I have heard much respecting the horrors of slavery; but may Heaven forbid that the generality of my color throughout these United States should experience any more of its horrors than to be a servant of servants, or hewers of wood and drawers of water! Tell us no more of southern slavery; for with few exceptions, although I may be very erroneous in my opinion, yet I consider our condition but little better than that.

Notably, Stewart critiqued Northern treatment of African Americans at a meeting in which Northerners gathered to criticize and plan action against Southern treatment of African Americans. She challenged the supposed dichotomy between the inhumane enslavement of the South and the normal proceedings of capitalism in the North, arguing that the relegation of African Americans to service jobs was also a great injustice and waste of human potential. In doing so, she anticipated arguments about the intersection of racism, capitalism, and sexism that would later be advanced by womanist thinkers.

Her Christian faith strongly influenced Stewart. She often cited Biblical influences and the Holy Spirit, and implicitly critiqued societal failure to educate her and others like her:

Yet, after all, methinks there are no chains so galling as the chains of ignorance—no fetters so binding as those that bind the soul, and exclude it from the vast field of useful and scientific knowledge. O, had I received the advantages of early education, my ideas would, ere now, have expanded far and wide; but, alas! I possess nothing but moral capability—no teachings but the teachings of the Holy spirit.

Maria W. Stewart delivered the speech entitled "An Address" to a mixed audience in 1833. It was not received well and it would be her last public address before she embarked on a life of activism. The speech says in part:

Most of our color have been taught to stand in fear of the white man from their earliest infancy, to work as soon as they could walk, and to call "master" before they scarce could lisp the name of mother. Continual fear and laborious servitude have in some degree lessened in us that natural force and energy which belong to man; or else, in defiance of opposition, our men, before this, would have nobly and boldly contended for their rights ... give the man of color an equal opportunity with the white from the cradle to manhood, and from manhood to the grave, and you would discover the dignified statesman, the man of science, and the philosopher. But there is no such opportunity for the sons of Africa ... I fear that our powerful ones are fully determined that there never shall be ... O ye sons of Africa, when will your voices be heard in our legislative halls, in defiance of your enemies, contending for equal rights and liberty? ... Is it possible, I exclaim, that for the want of knowledge we have labored for hundreds of years to support others, and been content to receive what they chose to give us in return? Cast your eyes about, look as far as you can see; all, all is owned by the lordly white, except here and there a lowly dwelling which the man of color, midst deprivations, fraud, and opposition has been scarce able to procure. Like King Solomon, who put neither nail nor hammer to the temple, yet received the praise; so also have the white Americans gained themselves a name, like the names of the great men that are in the earth, while in reality we have been their principal foundation and support. We have pursued the shadow, they have obtained the substance; we have performed the labor, they have received the profits; we have planted the vines, they have eaten the fruits of them.^[13]

This very powerful and thought provoking speech about the greatness of African-American people gives us today a glimpse into the mind of an important historical figure in African-American history.

Death and legacy

Stewart died at Freedmen's Hospital on December 17, 1879.^[10] She was buried in Graceland Cemetery,^[17] which was closed two decades later after extensive litigation and most of the land used by the Washington Electric Railway. The liturgical calendar of the Episcopal Church (USA) remembers Maria Stewart annually, together with William Lloyd Garrison, on December 17.

The title of *Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology of Words and Writings by Women of African Descent*, edited by Margaret Busby (1992),^[18] is inspired by Stewart's 1831 declaration, in which she said:

O, ye daughters of Africa, awake! awake! arise! no longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties.^[19]

See also

- [Sojourner Truth](#)
- [Abolitionism in the United States](#)
- [Boston Women's Heritage Trail](#)

Works by Stewart

- *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart presented to the First African Baptist Church and Society of the City of Boston* (<http://digilib.nyu.org/dynaweb/digs/www9722/>). Boston: Friends of Freedom and Virtue, 1835. Reprinted from *The Liberator*, Vol. 2, No. 46 (November 17, 1832), p. 183.
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External links

- [BOAF \(http://www.nps.gov/boaf/\)](http://www.nps.gov/boaf/)
- "African Meeting House" (<http://www.nps.gov/boaf/historyculture/amh.htm>), BOAF History
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