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Mary Ann Shadd Cary: Abolitionist

History

Mary Ann Shadd Cary: Pioneer Newspaperwoman, Antislavery Activist, and Leader of the Emigration Movement to Canada

By Adrienne Shadd

Mary Ann Shadd was born free in the slave state of Delaware in 1823. Her parents, Abraham and Harriet Parnell Shadd, were abolitionists, and their home was a station on the Underground Railroad. Abraham, a shoemaker, was also a leader of a series of national conventions held by Black leaders in the 1830s and 1840s. When Shadd was a young girl, the family moved to Westchester, Pennsylvania, where she and her brothers and sisters attended school—an opportunity denied Black children, slave or free, in Delaware. While still a teenager, Shadd completed her education and became a teacher. She established a school in Wilmington and later taught in the Black communities of Norristown, Pennsylvania, and Trenton, New Jersey.

In 1850, the United States Congress passed the *Fugitive Slave Act* to aid slave owners in recapturing their escaped human "property." This law stipulated that any white person could arrest and detain anyone of African descent who was suspected of being a runaway slave. Unless the so-called slave possessed irrefutable proof of freedom, there was little recourse in the courts. This odious legislation affected not only the recently escaped slaves, but also those who had escaped long ago and those who had been living in freedom for years. Even those born free were at risk of being captured and dragged into bondage. As a result, thousands of Blacks living in freedom in northern states picked up their lives and fled to Canada. The Shadds were one of these families.

Canada Gains an Activist

In the meantime, Shadd was teaching in New York City. In September 1851, she attended the Convention of Colored Freeman in Toronto where she met Henry and Mary Bibb, Black activists and publishers of the newspaper *Voice of the Fugitive*. They convinced her to take a teaching position near their base in Sandwich, Canada West. Shadd heeded the call and moved to Windsor, where she opened a school for the area's growing fugitive slave population.

In 1852, she published *A Plea for Emigration; or Notes of Canada West*, which touted the country as a major refuge, not only for slaves who had escaped, but also for free Blacks in the northern states experiencing increasing restrictions. However, her public outspokenness and willingness to take on male leaders in the community, both Black and non-Black, got her into hot water. A dispute with the Bibbs over the publicizing of her financial support by the American Missionary Association spilled onto the pages of their newspaper and led to her firing from her teaching position. It also changed history.

The Provincial Freeman is Born

Shadd decided to establish her own newspaper where *she* could control how her ideas and opinions were disseminated, and the first edition was published on March 24, 1853. Interestingly, she persuaded Samuel Ringgold Ward, Black abolitionist and agent of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, to lend his experience and influence as editor. Although the paper was clearly her initiative, she was aware that having her name on the masthead could alienate a readership that yielded to the strict gender codes of 19th-century society. On the other hand, Ward was a newspaper man in his own right having published in the United States several abolitionist newspapers, including the *Impartial Citizen*. He thus had journalism experience and was certainly an appropriate person to help Shadd in her endeavours.

For the next year, Shadd took to the lecture circuit to drum up subscriptions and interest in her paper—a necessary practice she continued even after the paper was established. On March 25, 1854, *The Provincial Freeman* began publishing weekly out of Toronto. With this endeavour, Shadd became the first Black woman in North America to establish and edit a newspaper, and one of the earliest newspaperwomen in Canada.

The Provincial Freeman was first and foremost an antislavery newspaper. But as a leading emigrationist, Shadd strongly advocated Canada West (Ontario) as a place for Blacks to settle, and attacked—even within the abolitionist movement—racism and "begging." Begging was the practice of raising funds for "poor, unclothed, downtrodden fugitives" and presenting them in an unfavourable light, when in fact, most found work and got on their feet fairly quickly. It was also questionable how much the funds raised in these "begging" efforts actually reached those for whom it was intended.

The importance of Black self-reliance and integration into Canadian society was a key component of the paper's philosophy. Shadd advised all Blacks to insist on fair treatment and, if all else failed, to take legal action. The *Freeman* continually stressed that the *de jure* equality of Blacks was one of the most significant aspects of life on British soil and needed to be taken full advantage of.

The paper also implicitly championed women's rights, documenting the lectures of prominent activists like feminist Lucy Stone Blackwell and abolitionist Lucretia Mott. It sang the praises of such Black women as poet and orator Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and publicly recognized the work of local women's organizations.

Some of the leading Black leaders of the day were involved as editors or contributors to the paper. After moving to Chatham, Canada West, Baptist minister William P. Newman and well-known activist H. Ford Douglas acted as editors at one time or another. Leading lights, such as Dr. Martin Delany and poet and abolitionist James Madison Bell, also made valuable contributions. Shadd's brother Isaac, sister Amelia and sister-in-law Amelia Freeman Shadd either sat in the editor's chair or contributed articles.

Shadd was instrumental in forming the Provincial Union, an antislavery organization run by and for the Black community for which the *Freeman* was the official organ. One of the Provincial Union's responsibilities was to host teas and sponsor an annual fair to help raise funds for the paper. The paper depended on a small, educated elite for its readership and keeping it afloat was a daunting task, particularly among a population that had received little, if any, education.

After a valiant effort to keep it going, the paper finally succumbed in 1860. However, seven years of publishing a newspaper under difficult circumstances was quite an achievement—one that places it among a very small group of Black publications, including the newspapers and writings of Frederick Douglass. In addition to providing an important voice for the Black community in Canada at the time, *the Provincial Freeman* offers an invaluable window on that community for modern-day researchers.

Still a Pioneer

After the demise of the *Freeman*, Mary Ann Shadd Cary (she had married Toronto businessman Thomas F. Cary in 1856) continued to set pioneering standards. She was hired by Martin Delany as perhaps the only woman to recruit Black soldiers during the Civil War, and she later went on to study and practise law in Washington, D.C., being one of the first women of her race to do so. During her later years, she became increasingly vocal and active on the issue of women's rights and suffrage.

After a lifetime of achievements and firsts, Shadd Cary died on June 5, 1893. Perhaps her greatest contribution was the role she carved out for herself as a Black woman in the public sphere, whether as a teacher and community activist, writer, newspaper editor, public speaker, recruiting agent for the Union Army

or lawyer. By pushing the boundaries and limitations normally ascribed to her race and sex, she blazed a trail not only for Black people but also for generations of women.

Mary Ann Shadd Cary has been designated a Person of National Historic Significance in Canada, one of her many posthumous honours.

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