

FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER: LOVER OF LITERACY

STUDENT HANDOUT 1

The following is a poem written by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper from her *Sketches of Southern Life* collection of poems first published in 1872.

“Learning to Read”

Very soon the Yankee teachers
 Came down and set up school;
But, oh! how the Rebs did hate it,--
 It was agin’ their rule.

Our masters always tried to hide
 Book learning from our eyes;
Knowledge didn’t agree with slavery--
 ’Twould make us all too wise.

But some of us would try to steal
 A little from the book,
And put the words together,
 And learn by hook or crook.

I remember Uncle Caldwell
 Who took pot-liquor fat
And greased the pages of his book,
 And hid it in his hat.

And had his Master ever seen
 The leaves upon his head,
He’d have thought them greasy papers,
 But nothing to be read.

And there was Mr. Turner’s Ben,
 Who heard the children spell,
And picked the words right up by heart,
 And learned to read ’em well.

Well, the Northern folks kept sending
 The Yankee teachers down;
And they stood right up and helped us,
 Though Rebs did sneer and frown.

And, I longed to read my Bible,
For precious words it said;
But when I begun to learn it,
Folks just shook their heads.

And said, there is no use trying,
Oh! Chloe, you're too late;
But as I was rising sixty,
I had not time to wait.

So I got a pair of glasses
And straight to work I went,
And never stopped till I could read
The hymns and Testament.

Then I got a little cabin--
A place to call my own--
And I felt as independent
As the queen upon her throne.

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