

**FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER: LOVER OF LITERACY**

## TEACHER TOOL 3: "YANKEE TEACHERS"

The following is a brief overview of the efforts of teachers from the North working in the South during Reconstruction.

In her poem "Learning to Read" Frances Ellen Watkins Harper writes, "Yankee teachers came down and set up school."<sup>1</sup> When the Civil War ended in 1865 the work of reuniting and rebuilding the Union began. The period from 1865 to 1877 is called Reconstruction. White and black "Yankee" teachers from northern states went to the South during this era as part of the reconstruction effort to teach newly freed slaves to read and cipher. It was not unusual to find grandchildren sitting beside their elderly grandparents in schools that African Americans had already built or in places like church basements that had been converted to make-shift classrooms.

The American Missionary Association (AMA) sponsored teachers from the North to go to the South. The AMA appealed to middle class women, black and white, many of which yearned to use their education beyond their rigidly defined roles as wife and mother. The AMA recruitment pamphlet titled *Woman's Work for the Lowly* appealed to women's desire for a life beyond being "ornaments in their fathers' parlors, dreaming, restless, hoping, till [sic] some fortunate mating shall give them a home and a sphere."<sup>2</sup> White women who went to the South generally did not view their experiences with the AMA as life-long careers and stayed only 2-3 years. Black teachers, on the other hand, often saw their teaching of less fortunate members of their race as a life-long commitment. When teachers arrived from the North, they sometimes found that Southern blacks had already started schools where the most literate African American in the particular community was the teacher. Most Southern whites opposed black education, as Harper highlights noting "How the Rebs did hate it—it was agin' their rule."<sup>3</sup> While there were power struggles between the local black educators and the teachers who were sponsored by the AMA, it was generally acknowledged that the Northern women were more educated and had more knowledge to impart to former slaves.

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<sup>1</sup> Joan R. Sherman. *African-American Poetry: An Anthology, 1773-1927*. (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1997), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Alison L. Prentice and Marjorie R. Theobald. *Women who Taught: Perspectives on the History of Women and Teaching*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 128.

<sup>3</sup> Sherman, 21.

## REFERENCES

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