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## Maria W. Stewart: The First Female African-American Journalist

Rodger Streitmatter

The first African-American female journalist was a Boston abolitionist, Maria W. Stewart. A domestic with little formal education, in 1831 she began her public career by publishing a fiery anti-slavery message in *The Liberator*. William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of the country's leading abolitionist newspaper, saw merit in Stewart's work. He showcased her essays by creating a "Ladies' Department" -- complete with a woodcut of a black woman in chains -- for them in *The Liberator*, as well as reprinting them as pamphlets.

Although Stewart has not been recognized as a journalist, history has remembered her as a public speaker. Scholars of political discourse, evangelism, and feminism have documented that Stewart was the first American woman -- black or white -- to lecture in public.<sup>1</sup>

Historians of journalism have failed to recognize the contributions of Maria Stewart, and that failure can be attributed to the fact that most of the research has focused on the contributions of wealthy and powerful white men -- not on the story of a poor and powerless black woman. In addition, historians of journalism have devoted their attention to the objectivity of the mainstream newspapers, rather than to the "subjectivity" of advocacy newspapers like *The Liberator*. In addition, because scholars have identified Stewart as an historically significant public speaker, those journalism historians who have focused on the contributions of women and minorities may have discounted her published newspaper articles as merely the printed texts of her lectures. In reality, though, only two of Stewart's

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1. See William L. Andrews, ed., Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century (Bloomington, Indiana, 1986), p. 22; see also Eleanor Flexner, Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the United States (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 44-45 and 343.

contributions to *The Liberator* originated as lectures.<sup>2</sup> The others appear to have been written specifically for publication in the newspaper.

Indeed, Stewart's words first appeared in *The Liberator* a year and a half before she presented her history-making speech.<sup>3</sup> So Stewart clearly deserves recognition as an historically significant journalist. The biographical details of Stewart's life merit the attention of historians of journalism, and her writings should place her among the leading Massachusetts abolitionists.

Stewart's work was consistently religious in tone. She argued for racial reform, demanding not only an end to slavery but also an end to the oppression of free Blacks. Stewart believed that African-Americans could achieve justice for their race only if they led moral lives; she also believed that it was imperative for them to lead the fight for their own rights. Stewart exhorted African-American women to expand beyond their limited role, because she believed that women could best lead the struggle for Black civil rights.

After two years, opposition to a woman being outspoken forced Stewart to leave Boston and to end her work for *The Liberator*.<sup>4</sup> Her journalistic career, though relatively brief, broke new ground for African-American women. Stewart set a standard of defiance that generations of her sisters have fought vigorously to sustain.

In 1803, Maria Miller was born into a family of free Blacks who resided in Hartford, Connecticut. Orphaned at the age of five, Maria was "bound out" as a domestic servant to the family of a clergyman. Her classroom education lasted only six weeks, but she studied the *Bible*, and she may have had some access to the literary world, through the minister's personal library. She later wrote: "I was deprived of the advantages of education,

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2. On February 27, 1833, Stewart delivered a lecture at the African Masonic Hall, in Boston, and it was reprinted in *The Liberator*, April 27, 1832; her September 21, 1833, lecture to the New England Anti-Slavery was published in *The Liberator* on November 17, 1832.

3. Stewart's first contribution to *The Liberator* was published on March 19, 1831; her first public speech was on September 21, 1832.

4. Maria Stewart's first contribution to *The Liberator* was published on March 19, 1831; her last essay was published on May 4, 1833.

though my soul thirsted for knowledge."<sup>5</sup> At the age of fifteen, Maria left the clergyman's home, and for the next five years she worked as a domestic, while attending Sabbath schools.<sup>6</sup>

When Miller was twenty-three years old, she married James W. Stewart, a forty-seven year-old independent businessman from Boston. He had served as a seaman on several ships during the War of 1812, and he was captured and held prisoner in England. When the war ended and Stewart returned home, he parlayed his shipping skills into his own business, as a shipping master who outfitted whaling and fishing vessels. The couple were married in Boston in 1826.<sup>7</sup> The Stewarts settled into Boston's small African-American middle class.

Their security was short-lived. Three years after their wedding, James W. Stewart became severely ill with heart disease. He died on December 16, 1829, leaving a twenty-six year-old widow and no children. In keeping with a request in Stewart's will, his widow added the middle initial "W," from his name, to her own.<sup>8</sup>

Maria W. Stewart experienced the vulnerabilities of a young Black woman of the early nineteenth century. As the widow of a successful businessman, she should have received her husband's substantial holdings. Instead, the white executors of her husband's estate conducted a series of legal maneuvers that

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5. Maria W. Stewart, Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart (Boston, 1835), p. 3.

6. Stewart provided details about her personal life in her two books, Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart, pp. 3-4 and 24, and Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart (Washington, D.C., 1879), pp. iii-iv and 13-23. Another source of information is an obituary, "The Late Mrs. Maria W. Stewart," in People's Advocate, February 28, 1880, p. 1. The latter was a newspaper published by Blacks in Alexandria, Va.

7. The marriage license, on file at the Registry of Marriages, reads: "James W. Stewart & Maria Miller, people of color, married by the Rev. Thomas Paul, 10 August 1826."

8. A Copy of the death certificate is part of the pension file that Maria W. Stewart filed in 1879. See Service Pension, War of 1812, Widow's Brief No. 35165, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

ultimately denied Stewart her rightful inheritance, leaving her destitute and forcing her to once again become a domestic.<sup>9</sup>

Stewart sought comfort from God. In 1830, in the midst of the religious revivals of the period, she underwent a religious conversion and became a born-again Christian. A year later, she publicly announced that she had consecrated her life to God's service. Specifically, she felt called to express herself through the written word, even though her association with literature had been limited almost exclusively to her reading of the *Bible*.<sup>10</sup> As a result, throughout her journalistic career, Stewart framed her words in biblical terms.

Her initial written work was in the form of meditations upon the values of morality. Emboldened by reading William Lloyd Garrison's remarks on the power of female influence, Stewart took several of her essays to *The Liberator* office. The exact date of Stewart's first contact with Garrison is unknown, but it must have been soon after he founded the abolition newspaper on January 1, 1831, as her first contribution appeared on March 19, 1831.

Garrison later recalled his first meeting with Maria W. Stewart, writing to her: "You were in the flush and promise of a ripening womanhood, with a graceful form and a pleasing countenance."<sup>11</sup> Stewart asked Garrison only for criticism and advice, but the abolitionist editor was so pleased to discover passionate prose written by an African-American woman that he published the essays in his newspaper. He also printed the essays in pamphlet form, promoting Maria W. Stewart as "a respectable colored lady," and he sold the tracts from his office.<sup>12</sup>

Because of Stewart's scant association with literature, in order to argue against repression, she relied on her knowledge of the *Bible* and on her experiences of suffering. Her voice was bold and passionate, fired by the unwavering conviction of religious

9. Edward James, ed., Notable American Women (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), III: 377-378; Gerda Lerner, Black Women in White America: A Documentary History (New York, 1971), pp. 83-85.

10. Stewart, Productions, p. 4.

11. Garrison to Stewart, April 4, 1879, in Stewart, Meditations, p. 6.

12. The Liberator, October 8, 1831, p. 163.

fervor, and the personal sorrows of an individual who had been denied her human rights.

A devoted Episcopalian, Stewart possessed a spiritual fervor that was central to all of her journalistic work. In one of her first essays in *The Liberator*, she indicated why she was pursuing a career in journalism, writing: "It was God alone who inspired my heart to publish the meditations."<sup>13</sup> In her next essay, she again described her motivation, this time more dramatically, by stating:

Methinks I heard a spiritual interrogation  
-- "Who shall go forward, and take off the  
reproach that is cast upon the people of color?  
Shall it be a woman?" And my heart made this  
reply -- "If it is thy will, be it even so, Lord  
Jesus!"<sup>14</sup>

Drawn to religion by the difficulties in her own life, Stewart adopted Christ as her saviour and became an evangelist. Her missionary zeal was part of the evangelistic movement that flourished in Northern cities in the 1830s and 1840s. Because of increasingly repressive legislation and unjust behavior by whites, articulate free Blacks preached the words and teachings of the *Bible* as their salvation.<sup>15</sup>

Although Stewart described the love of Jesus Christ, she said that He did not always approve of the actions of humankind. She speculated that Christ would not sanction the behavior of many men and women who professed Christianity, writing:

Were our blessed Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ,  
upon the earth, I believe he would say of many  
that are called by his name, "O, ye hypocrites, ye

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13. Stewart, "An Address Delivered Before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston," in *The Liberator*, April 28, 1832, p. 66.

14. Stewart, "Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall," *The Liberator*, November 17, 1832, p. 183.

15. On Stewart being part of the evangelistic movement of the 1830s, see Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit*, p. 22, and Sue E. Houchins, "Introduction," in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *Spiritual Narratives* (New York, 1977), pp. xxix-xliv.

generation of vipers, how can you escape the damnation of hell?"<sup>16</sup>

This quotation illustrates Stewart's reliance on the *Bible* as a literary source, as it is a variation borrowed from the Book of Matthew (23: 33): "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" Many of her writings were peppered with such rephrasings of biblical verses.

As Stewart's journalistic writing matured, she used the framework of spiritualism to discuss various secular issues. Primary among them was urging free Blacks to fight for the abolition of slavery. She wrote:

African rights and liberty is a subject that ought to fire the breast of every free man of color in these United States, and excite in his bosom a lively, deep, decided, and heartfelt interest."<sup>17</sup>

Stewart based her anti-slavery stance on the Bible. She compared the United States to ancient Babylon, observing that both civilizations were morally corrupt because they sanctioned the sale of human souls -- and concluding that both civilizations were, therefore, doomed.<sup>18</sup>

The pioneering journalist was so fervent in her commitment to the abolition of slavery that she publicly stated, as did Garrison, that she would not hesitate to sacrifice her life in order to spread the Gospel. She wrote: "I will willingly die for the cause that I have espoused; for I cannot die in a more glorious cause."<sup>19</sup> On another occasion, Stewart wrote: "Life has almost lost

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16. Ibid.

17. Stewart, "An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall in Boston," The Liberator, May 4, 1833, p. 72.

18. Ibid.

19. Stewart, "An Address Delivered before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston," The Liberator, April 28, 1832, p. 66.

its charms for me; death has lost its sting, and the grave its terrors," this time borrowing language from First Corinthians.<sup>20</sup>

As Stewart became more confident as a journalist, her writing became increasingly caustic in tone. Contempt characterized one of her final essays, when she sarcastically referred to white men as "lordly," telling her readers: "Cast your eyes about, look as far as you can see; all, all is owned by the lordly white."<sup>21</sup>

Like many African-Americans, Stewart opposed the colonization movement, which advocated the deportation of Blacks to Africa. By 1832, the American Colonization Society had been established, and more than a dozen state legislatures had approved of the society's efforts to ship African-Americans to Liberia.<sup>22</sup> Stewart steadfastly opposed the colonizationists, writing that "Their hearts are so frozen toward us they had rather their money should be sunk in the ocean than to administer it to our relief."<sup>23</sup>

The uncompromising Stewart preferred to fight for increased rights, rather than to attempt to escape from hostile whites. Again dramatically expressing her willingness to become a martyr, she wrote that the colonizationists "would drive us to a strange land. But before I go, the bayonet shall pierce me through."<sup>24</sup>

Stewart praised the work of the white abolitionists who had organized anti-slavery societies, but she believed that the impetus for racial reform had to rise from the African-Americans themselves. And she chastised the African-Americans for their inaction, writing: "It is of no use for us to sit with our hands

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20. Stewart, "An Address, Delivered at the African Masonic Hall in Boston," The Liberator, May 4, 1833, p. 72. First Corinthians 15:15 reads: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

21. Stewart, "An Address, Delivered at the African Masonic Hall in Boston," The Liberator, April 27, 1833, p. 68.

22. On the colonization movement, see John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Ross, Jr., From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans (New York, 1988), pp. 154-157.

23. Stewart, "An Address, Delivered at the African Masonic Hall in Boston," The Liberator, May 4, 1833, p. 72.

24. *Ibid.*



folded, hanging our heads like bulrushes, lamenting our wretched condition."<sup>25</sup>

According to Stewart, African-Americans could achieve equality by following a two-pronged strategy. First, she urged them to strengthen their own morality. This theme was clearly articulated in the title of her first essay in *The Liberator*: "Religion And The Pure Principles Of Morality, The Sure Foundations On Which We Must Build."<sup>26</sup>

As a devout Christian, Stewart was convinced that the sinful behavior of her people had led to the downfall of the race, and that, therefore, untainted moral behavior would allow the African-Americans to rise to their proper status. Like her Black sisters of the nineteenth century, Stewart considered morality to be the province of the African-American woman.<sup>27</sup> She considered part of her responsibility as a female journalist to serve as a guiding moral voice for her people. She wrote that if free Blacks turned their attention more assiduously toward moral worth:

Prejudice would gradually diminish, and the whites would be compelled to say: 'Unloose those fetters! Though black their skins as shades of night, their hearts are pure, their souls are white.'<sup>28</sup>

The essays that Stewart published in *The Liberator* provide a list of the specific forms of moral behavior that she believed her people should adopt. First among them was frugality. In her initial essay, Stewart urged her readers to establish their own churches, schools, and stores. Anticipating the response of her readers, she followed her urging with the question she expected them to ask -- and then she answered it. She wrote: "Do

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25. Ibid.

26. Stewart, "Mrs. Stewart's [sic] Essays," *The Liberator*, January 7, 1832, p. 2. Garrison published only about one-fifth of Stewart's first essay in *The Liberator*; he published the entire essay in pamphlet form.

27. On nineteenth century African-American women seeing themselves as the moral leaders of the race, see Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, 1984), pp. 99-101.

28. Stewart, "Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall," *The Liberator*, November 17, 1832, p. 183.

you ask where is the money? We have spent more than enough for nonsense."<sup>29</sup>

One form of "nonsense," in Stewart's mind, was the purchase and consumption of alcoholic beverages. She urged free Black men to form their own temperance societies, suggesting that nothing would raise the respectability of Blacks more than their overcoming the evils of alcohol, a weakness that continued to plague whites.<sup>30</sup> Two other forms of behavior to which Stewart objected were gambling and dancing. She scolded her readers, urging them to

Flee from the gambling board and the dance-hall; for we are poor, and have no money to throw away. It is astonishing to me that our fine young men are so blind to their own interest and the future welfare of their children as to spend their hard earnings for this frivolous amusement; for it has been carried on among us to such an unbecoming extent that it has become absolutely disgusting.<sup>31</sup>

The second step in Stewart's strategy for her race to achieve progress was through militancy. Each of her essays contained a call to action. The aggressive journalist wrote:

I am of a strong opinion that the day on which we unite, heart and soul, that day the hissing and reproach among the nations of the earth against us will cease. Let us make a mighty effort, and arise.<sup>32</sup>

Stewart was an advocate of political power, and she often spoke with a defiance that had rarely, if ever, emanated from an African-American woman of the early nineteenth century.

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29. Stewart, "Mrs. Stewart's [sic] Essays," The Liberator, January 7, 1832, p. 2.

30. Stewart, "An Address, Delivered at the African Masonic Hall in Boston," The Liberator, May 4, 1833, p. 72.

31. Ibid.

32. Stewart, "Mrs. Stewart's [sic] Essays," The Liberator, January 7, 1832, p. 2.

Indeed, Stewart insisted that it was not only the right of African-Americans to protest -- it was their patriotic duty. Only those Americans who demanded equal rights, she said, were true Americans in the tradition of the patriots who had won independence from Britain four decades earlier. Stewart wrote:

Did the pilgrims, when they first landed on these shores, quietly compose themselves, and say, "The Britons have all the money and the power, and we must continue [to be] their servants forever"? Did they sluggishly sigh and say, "Our lot is hard, the Indians own the soil, and we cannot cultivate it." No; they first made powerful efforts to raise themselves. My brethren, have you made a powerful effort?<sup>33</sup>

The militant attitude that Stewart espoused is intriguing because it contradicts the philosophy of most persons devoted to the teachings of the Bible. Not only did Stewart defy the peaceful and submissive stance of most devout Christians, but she also openly criticized African-American ministers, saying that they had helped to create the difficulties which were continuing to plague the race. If Black ministers were properly discharging their duties, she wrote, they would acknowledge the existence of racism, instead of ignoring it. She insisted: "They have kept the truth, as it were, hid from our eyes, and have cried, 'Peace, Peace!' when there was no peace."<sup>34</sup>

Stewart, by contrast, believed that God had called her not only to tell her readers about the racism that divided the country, but also to chide those readers into mustering the moral courage to demand their rights. She wrote:

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33. Stewart, "Lecture Delivered at The Franklin Hall," The Liberator, November 17, 1832, p. 183.

34. Stewart, "An Address Delivered Before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston," The Liberator, April 28, 1832, p. 66.

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?"<sup>35</sup>

Raising her voice as few African-American women before her, Stewart specified precise ways in which her people could empower themselves. In the 1830s, whether or not slavery should be abolished in the nation's capital had become a volatile political issue between the slave and free states.<sup>36</sup> Stewart challenged her readers to become involved in the issue, calling on her fellow Blacks to take immediate action on behalf of their fellows who remained in slavery:

Let every man of color throughout the United States, who possesses the spirit and principles of a man, sign a petition to Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia.<sup>37</sup>

The outspoken journalist also issued a powerful threat -- one that has continued to stalk this country since that time. She wrote:

Many powerful sons and daughters of Africa will shortly arise, and declare that they will have their rights; and if refused, I am afraid they will spread horror and devastation.<sup>38</sup>

Another theme that emerged from the "Ladies' Department" was support for women's rights. Stewart established in her first essay for *The Liberator* that she intended to use her journalistic forum to promote the expansion of the role that

35. Stewart, "An Address, Delivered at the African Masonic Hall in Boston," The Liberator, April 27, 1833, p. 68.

36. On the movement to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, see William H. Williams, The Negro in the District of Columbia during Reconstruction (Howard University Studies in History), no. 5 (Washington, D.C., June, 1924), pp. 1-6.

37. Stewart, "An Address, Delivered at the African Masonic Hall in Boston," The Liberator, May 4, 1833, p. 72.

38. Ibid.

women played in society. In that essay, the first Black woman journalist boldly asked:

How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?<sup>39</sup>

The question was a rhetorical one, as Stewart immediately suggested two methods by which Black women could improve their status. First, she advocated women casting aside the concept of dependence upon men, even to the point of legal action. She implored her African-American sisters: "Possess the spirit of independence. Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted. Sue for your rights and privileges."<sup>40</sup> Second, the pragmatic Stewart recognized the value of Black women entering the influential world of commerce. So she suggested that they combat the economic barriers to establishing business enterprises, by joining forces to operate stores and restaurants.<sup>41</sup> Stewart thought that Black women expanding into new spheres was, like the abolition of slavery, a cause worthy of martyrdom. The defiant journalist told her female readers: "You can but die if you make the attempt; and we shall certainly die if you do not."<sup>42</sup>

Like many African-American feminists, Stewart was ambivalent about the issue of whether the sisterhood crossed racial lines. In an early essay, she advocated interracial feminism. When she heard about white women using the profits from a community garden to erect a church, for instance, she suggested that Black women follow their example, and raise funds to build a high school for Black students.<sup>43</sup> But in later essays, Stewart criticized white women. When she asked white women to hire Black women to work for them, for example, she resented their

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39. Stewart, "Mrs. Stewart's [sic] Essays," The Liberator, January 7, 1832, p. 2.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

refusal, writing bitterly: "Such is the powerful force of prejudice."<sup>44</sup>

As her journalistic career neared its end, Stewart came to believe that Americans of African descent ultimately would have to rely on women to lead the race. She pleaded with her Black sisters to accept the formidable responsibility, writing:

O woman, woman! Your example is powerful, your influence great; it extends over your husbands and your children, and throughout the circle of your acquaintance.

O woman, woman! Upon you I call; for upon your exertions almost entirely depends whether the rising generation shall be any thing more than we have been or not.<sup>45</sup>

Members of the African-American community condemned Stewart for uttering those defiant words that questioned the ability of the Black men. Black male detractors said that it was presumptuous for a woman to speak so boldly. Translating their hatred into violence, the men publicly jeered her, and they pelted her with rotten tomatoes.<sup>46</sup> This hostility encouraged Stewart to flee from Boston in 1833.<sup>47</sup>

She moved to New York City and furthered her education by joining an African-American women's literary society, writing compositions and presenting declamations. These

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44. Stewart, "Lecture Delivered At the Franklin Hall," The Liberator, November 17, 1832, p. 183.

45. Stewart, "An Address Delivered Before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston," The Liberator, April 28, 1832, p. 66.

46. Stewart, Meditations, p. 79. See also Dorothy Sterling, ed., We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1984), p. 157; and Shirley J. Yee, Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860 (Knoxville, Tenn., 1992), p. 115. William C. Nell, a colleague of Garrison's, also recalled that Stewart received "opposition even from her Boston Circle of friends;" see "Letter from William C. Nell," The Liberator, March 5, 1852, p. 39.

47. Stewart, Meditations, p. 79. See also Flexner, Century of Struggle, pp. 44-45; Giddings, When and Where I Enter, p. 53; James, Notable American Women, p. 378; Lerner, Black Women in White America, pp. 83-84.

activities led her into public school teaching.<sup>48</sup> After several years in the classroom, in 1847 Stewart was appointed as assistant principal for the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.<sup>49</sup>

While living in New York, Stewart compiled her writings into a book. Although she included several essays which were originally published in *The Liberator*, the bulk of the eighty-four-page volume consisted of previously-unpublished prayers and meditations. The *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart*, which was published in Boston in 1835, also contained several pages of autobiographical material.<sup>50</sup>

Stewart did not resume her journalism career after leaving Boston, but during the early 1850s she helped to raise money for the benefit of the *North Star*, Frederick Douglass's newspaper.<sup>51</sup>

In 1852, Stewart lost her position in the school system. The reason for her dismissal is unknown, but the outspoken Stewart believed that her firing was unfounded. Hearing that Southern people were more Christian, she moved to Baltimore and attempted to organize her own private school. The venture failed, however, and Stewart became destitute.<sup>52</sup> She then sought help from an influential man and woman in Baltimore's Black community. The couple offered to organize a benefit to raise the money for Stewart's rent, if she allowed them to promote the event by describing her past achievements and current difficulties. The successful event raised \$300. The couple then gave Stewart thirty dollars to pay her rent -- and they kept the rest for

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48. Giddings, When and Where I Enter, p. 83; James, Notable American Women, p. 378.

49. Robert J. Swan, "A Synoptic History of Black Public Schools in Brooklyn," in Charlene Claye Van Derzee, The Black Contribution to the Development of Brooklyn (Brooklyn, 1977), p. 64.

50. Stewart's book was reprinted as part of the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers series.

51. Stewart was listed as a member of the committee organized to plan a fair for the benefit of the North Star, which Frederick Douglass had founded in Rochester, New York, in 1847. See North Star, April 12, 1850, p. 4.

52. Stewart, Meditations, pp. 13-14.

themselves. Stewart wrote: "They laughed ready to kill themselves to think what a fool they had made of me."<sup>53</sup>

In 1861, as the Civil War began, Stewart moved to Washington, D.C., where she taught in an African-American school. After the war, the resourceful woman became director of housekeeping at the Freedmen's Hospital, which later became the Howard University Hospital. A decade later, Stewart raised \$200 to purchase a building near Howard University, for a school that for twenty years she had dreamed of founding. It was an Episcopal Sunday School for neighborhood children. She recruited faculty from the university to help her teach in the school, which charged tuition but was open to indigent children.<sup>54</sup>

It was not until the final year of her life that Stewart recovered the financial security that had been stolen from her fifty years earlier. In 1879, she took advantage of new legislation that provided pensions for the widows of veterans of the War of 1812. Maria Stewart then began receiving a monthly pension of eight dollars. Still feeling that she had been called to serve God through the written work, she used the money to publish a second edition of her collected works. *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* included a supporting letter from William Lloyd Garrison, and an autobiographical account entitled "Sufferings During the War."<sup>55</sup>

Maria Stewart died at Freedmen's Hospital on December 17, 1879, at the age of seventy-six.<sup>56</sup> Funeral services were held at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, where Stewart had been an active member, and she was buried in the city's Graceland Cemetery.<sup>57</sup> After Stewart's death, a local African-American newspaper committed thirty inches of its front page to a description of her life and contributions.<sup>58</sup>

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53. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

54. Giddings, When and Where I Enter, p. 53; James, Notable American Women, p. 378.

55. Stewart, Meditations.

56. Boyd's Directory of the District of Columbia (1877), p. 713.

57. Burial records of St. Luke's Church, Washington, D.C.

58. "The Late Mrs. Maria Stewart," in People's Advocate, February 28, 1880, p. 1.



Maria W. Stewart earned a place in history because she published her words in an American newspaper. While living in Massachusetts, this remarkable woman -- first orphaned and later widowed at an early age, a domestic inspired by a holy zeal -- demonstrated that a woman of African descent could contribute to American journalism. Despite the barriers of poverty, lack of education, racism, and sexism, from 1831 to 1833 Stewart fulfilled her journalistic mission, by raising her voice through the pages of *The Liberator*, the Boston newspaper that played a pivotal role in the abolition movement, and in American history.