



Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

**Mighty mountains
loom before me
and I won't stop
now.**

From *Midway*, by
Naomi Long Madgett (1923-2020)

**Godmother of
African-American Poetry**



Naomi Long Madgett. Photo by jmu.edu

Award-winning poet, ground-breaking publisher and educator, Naomi Long Madgett, (1923-2020) was so dedicated to empowering the voices of African-American writers, that she was eulogized as [“the godmother of African-American poetry.”](#)

“I felt that publishing other poets was more important than the work of one poet,” she said in [Star by Star](#), a documentary about her remarkable life.

Madgett embodied the tenacity of the opening line of *Midway*, one of her most famous poems. It reads: “I’ve come this far to freedom and I won’t turn back.” Frustrated by the lack of opportunities for black writers and unable to find a suitable publisher for her fourth book, in 1972 she launched her own imprint, Lotus Press. Even as its literary prestige grew, Madgett ran the company from her home, mostly by herself. Small, but mighty, Lotus Press introduced the world to many now famous [African American writers](#).

Yet, even as she nurtured the careers of others, Madgett also became a successful poet. At the time of her death, she had published eleven books, earned a Ph.D., and won numerous awards, including serving as Detroit’s Poet Laureate from 2001 – 2020. She published her first poem at age thirteen and her first collection at age seventeen. Ten years later, her work was included in an anthology of black poets alongside that of her early mentor, Langston Hughes.

Madgett was also an educator. When she discovered that the literature departments of Detroit public high schools didn't include black authors, she created her own curriculum, which was later adopted by the school system. She also taught college classes in creative writing.

Reminiscent of Langston Hughes, Madgett's poetry often reflects African-American spirituality and the struggle for civil rights. Described as having a "blues-based lyricism," many of her works have been set to music. Read her [work](#).



NY Public Library
Jarena Lee: Preacher. Author. Abolitionist. Suffragist.

A Woman of Many Firsts

Last year as I prepared to teach a class on the history of women's suffrage, I struggled to find stories of early Black suffragists. Thankfully, Martha S. Jones has since published [Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All](#). Her remarkable book brings to life voices we should have learned in school.

Among them is Jarena Lee, the first woman preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She also became an abolitionist and a powerful voice within the emerging women's rights movement of the 1830s and 40s.

Born in 1783 to a poor, but free, Black family in New Jersey, as a child Jarena was hired out as a live-in servant for a White family. Around age 20, she moved to Philadelphia. At a church service,

she "became filled with the Holy Spirit...converted to Christianity"...and later heard "the voice of God" telling her to preach. But in 1807 women – whether Black or White – were barred from preaching. Jarena's pastor refused to make an exception. She married in 1811, had two children, and was widowed soon after. Her desire to preach grew stronger.

One day in church, a male minister struggled with his sermon, then abruptly stopped speaking. Jarena rose from her seat and began to preach. Deeply moved by her words, the pastor relented and authorized Jarena to preach. Over the next 30 years, she spread the Gospel from Maine to Virginia, logging 2,325 miles in one year alone.

Jarena's beliefs put her at odds on multiple fronts. Her religious calling went against social and religious norms, and she endured relentless scrutiny. As an abolitionist, she worked alongside both Blacks and Whites and faced racial hostility. And, as an early suffragist, she battled sexual discrimination.

In 1839, Jarena broke yet one more boundary when she wrote and published her autobiography, [The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee](#). It was among the first published accounts of a Black woman in America. She died in the mid-1850s, but her legacy lives on.



*Abolitionist and suffragist,
Angelina Grimke Weld – 1805 - 1879*



*Poet, playwright
Angelina Weld Grimke, 1880 - 1953,
named for her great aunt.*

The Two Angelinas: An Unstoppable Legacy of Courage

Angelina Grimke Weld was a White abolitionist and supporter of women's suffrage. Her niece, also named Angelina Grimke in her aunt's honor, was considered Black under the law. In the 19th century, anyone with "one ancestor of Black ancestry (["one drop"](#) of Black blood), was legally Black."

The elder Angelina was the daughter of a wealthy plantation owner in South Carolina. Believing slavery contrary to all moral and religious teachings, Angelina and her sister moved North to join the abolition movement. Recounting the horrors and mistreatment of slaves that she had witnessed, Angelina published numerous essays, including for the prominent abolitionist paper, *The Liberator*. She also traveled throughout New England giving speeches and at times stone-throwing mobs encircled the meeting halls where she spoke. Initially, many Northerners doubted stories about the cruelty of slave owners. A woman addressing a mixed audience of men and women violated accepted norms and contributed to their suspicions that such stories could not be true.

Like other abolitionists and suffragists, Angelina believed in fulfilling the promises of the Declaration of Independence. After one of her brothers was widowed, he openly lived with one of his female slaves and fathered children. When her brother died, Angelina raised his mixed-race children as her own. The boy, Henry Grimke, grew up to become a scholar, and was the second African American man to graduate from Harvard Law School. He married a White woman and they named their daughter, Angelina, in honor of his aunt.

Henry's daughter, Angelina, was born in 1880 and faced racial prejudice throughout her life. But like her courageous and strong-willed great aunt, the younger Angelina

also picked up a pen. She wrote about the injustices of facing African Americans, especially racism and lynching, in her short stories, poetry, and plays. Angelina became the first Black, female playwright to have her work staged. Angelina also broke sexual boundaries as a lesbian. She died in 1953.

Sue Monk Kidd's best-selling book, *The Invention of Wings*, is loosely based on the elder Angelina Grimke and her sister, Sarah.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

The women featured in this issue all put themselves at great personal risk in standing up for their beliefs. They each harnessed the power of the spoken and written word to make their voices heard.

Ask yourself: Would you put yourself in harm's way for your beliefs? If so, for what cause?

Ask a friend: What unique impact do words have that other forms of expression may not?



[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex-ed and reproductive rights activist, after she married Dennett's greatgrandson. Last year, [Time magazine](#) included Dennett as one of the most important women in American history.

Sharon has spent ten years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her journalism has appeared in BOLD and Utah Stories. She lives near Salt Lake City with her family and dog, Gus.

Sharon is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements in the early 20th century. Contact her at: Sharon@SharonSpaulding.com.

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Share the newsletter and invite others to subscribe. Follow me on social media. www.SharonSpaulding.com

