



Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

**"I had much rather starve
in England, a free woman,
than be a slave for the best man
that ever breathed
upon the American continent."**

*Ellen Craft, Anti-Slavery Advocate,
December 1852*



Ellen Craft dressed as a man to escape from slavery.

Ellen Craft: A Harrowing Journey to Freedom

In 1826, [Ellen Craft](#) was born into slavery in Georgia. Twenty-two years later, she disguised her race, gender, and social status, to enable her and her husband's escape to freedom in Philadelphia. The couple became celebrated abolitionists, political activists, and educators. Ellen later joined the suffrage movement.

Ellen was considered a quadroon because her mother was a slave of mixed race who became pregnant by the wealthy owner of the plantation where they lived. Ellen's skin color matched that of her White half-siblings. To avoid public humiliation, her father's wife gave 11-year-old Ellen to one of Ellen's White sisters as a wedding gift, separating the young girl from her mother. The traumatic experience stayed with Ellen and motivated a

daring choice a decade later.

In her early 20s, Ellen married William Craft, also a slave. The couple feared having children, knowing their babies could be taken away and sold at any time. In 1848 the couple embarked on an ingenious and dangerous plan to escape. Rather than flee at night, they traveled in plain sight. Since it was socially unacceptable for women to travel alone, Ellen passed as a wealthy White man accompanied by “his” slave, who in reality was Ellen’s husband, William. Illiterate, Ellen knew she would have to sign hotel registries, so she wore a sling and pretended that the injury made writing impossible. She feigned illness, calling on William’s assistance and proving the need for him to stay by her side.

To [prepare](#) for the 1,000-mile journey to Philadelphia, Ellen, a skilled seamstress, sewed several changes of men’s attire appropriate to an esteemed rank and station. She also taught herself the social graces expected of a successful young man by careful observation and mimicry of the men who were guests at the plantation. To cover expenses, the couple saved their small earnings, mostly from occasional side jobs William took as a cabinet maker. Finally, because they were both regarded as favorites by the plantation owners, the couple secured passes during the Christmas holidays. This enabled their extended absence to at first appear authorized.



Ellen Craft

On the journey North, the couple traveled in first class trains, a steamship, and stayed at the finest hotels. Boarding the first train, Ellen quickly [recognized](#) the man sitting next to her as a close friend of her enslaver. She was terrified that he had been sent to find and return her. Ellen’s panic subsided when the man greeted her. “It is a very fine morning, sir,” he said. She feigned deafness to avoid conversation. In another instance, Ellen was [chastised](#) by a military officer for saying thank you to her “slave.”

Arriving in Philadelphia on Christmas day, 1848, Ellen and her husband were quickly [embraced by abolitionists](#). For two years, they spoke to packed houses in New England about their harrowing escape and the evils of slavery. Ellen often wore one of her men’s costumes.

Sadly, their freedom was short-lived. When the [Fugitive Slave Act](#) was passed in 1850, the Crafts were [targeted](#) by bounty hunters. Although the Act made criminals of anyone caught assisting runaway slaves, people rallied to help the Crafts who subsequently fled to England.

During their [19 years](#) overseas, Ellen gave birth to five children and the couple continued their crusade against the atrocities of slavery. After learning to read and write, Ellen published articles about her experiences, joined the Women’s Suffrage Organization and turned their home into a hub of Black activism. In 1860, the Crafts published a memoir, [Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom](#).



ELLEN CRAFT

In 1868, following the end of the Civil War, the Crafts returned to the U.S. and purchased land in Georgia. They founded the [Woodville Cooperative Farm School](#) for the education and employment of freedmen. Eventually, the school met financial difficulties and, with the rise of White supremacy, the Crafts moved to Charleston, South Carolina, and moved in with one of their daughters.

Ellen Craft [died](#) in 1891. William died in 1900.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask Yourself: Would you be willing to risk everything, even your life, for freedom?

Ask a Friend: What has been your greatest act of courage? What have you witnessed in others?



[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, when she married one of Dennett's great-grandsons. Today, she curates the family's archives.

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 essays have appeared in

[Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), and others.

Sharon is speaking at the upcoming [San Francisco Writers Conference](#) in February. She is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century.

She lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs. She lives near Salt Lake City with her family and two dogs.

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



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