



Journal of Charlotte Forten

Free Woman of Color

Selections from 1854 to 1859
(age 16-21)

Charlotte Forten was born in 1837 in Philadelphia into a prominent free black family. At age 16, having been denied admission to the city's white schools, she moved to Salem, Massachusetts, to attend a private school as the only African American among the school's two hundred students. Continuing her family's abolitionist work, she soon joined the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society and became acquainted with many of the leading black and white abolitionists of the time.

Soon after her arrival in Salem in May 1854 she began a journal which she maintained through 1864 (with a two-year break between 1860 and 1862). Only days after she began her journal, one of the pivotal events in her formative years as an abolitionist occurred — the trial of Anthony Burns, a fugitive slave captured and returned to Virginia under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

1854

May 24, 1854 [first entry in Forten's journal; age 16].

Rose at five. The sun was shining brightly through my window, and I felt vexed with myself that he should have risen before me; I shall not let him have that advantage again very soon. How bright and beautiful are these May mornings!—The air is so pure and balmy, the trees are in full blossom, and the little birds sing sweetly. I stand by the window listening to their music, but suddenly remember that I have an Arithmetic lesson which employs me until breakfast; then to school;¹ recited my lessons, and commenced my journal. After dinner practiced a music lesson, did some sewing, and then took a pleasant walk by the water. I stood for some time, admiring the waves as they rose and fell, sparkling in the sun, and could not help envying a party of boys who were enjoying themselves in a sailing-boat. On my way home, I stopped at Mrs. Putnam's² and commenced reading "Hard Times," a new story by Dickens. . . .



Charlotte Forten Grimké, ca. 1878

A wish to record the passing events of my life, which, even if quite unimportant to others, naturally possess great interest to myself, and of which it will be pleasant to have some remembrance, has induced me to commence this journal. I feel that keeping a diary will be a pleasant and profitable employment of my leisure hours, and will afford me much pleasure in after years, by recalling to my mind the memories of other days, thoughts of much-loved friends from whom I may them be separated, with whom I now pass many happy hours, in taking delightful walks, and holding 'sweet converse'; the interesting books that I read; and the different people, places and things that I am permitted to see.

Besides this, it will doubtless enable me to judge correctly of the growth and improvement of my mind from year to year.

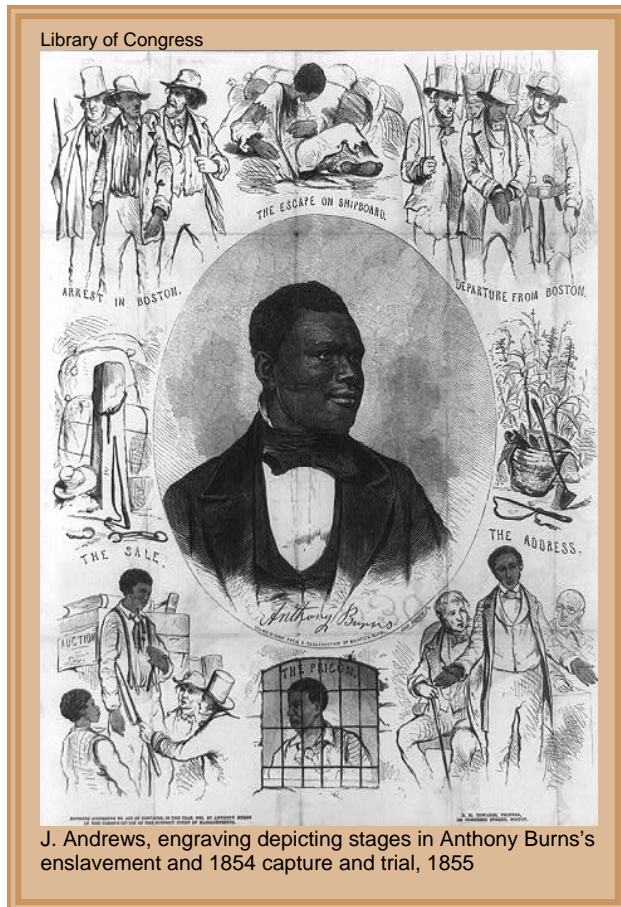
C. L. F.

Salem, May, 1854

National Humanities Center, 2007: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Selections from *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten: Free Negro in the Slave Era*, ed. Ray Allen Billington (Dryden Press, 1953) Footnotes from Billington, 1953. Bracketed comments (other than first names) and images added by NHC. Permission pending. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm.

¹Miss Forten was sixteen years old when she moved to Salem, seeking something more enlightened than the segregated schools of her native Philadelphia. Schools in Salem had been opened to all persons, regardless of color, in 1843. . . . Miss Forten was one of the 188 students in the Higginson Grammar School for Girls. [Footnote continues.]

²*The Salem Directory, 1855* (Salem, 1855) lists no Mrs. Putnam who answers the descriptions in the *Journal*. In all probability, however, Miss Forten refers to Caroline E. Putnam, a Salem Negro woman, who was a frequent contributor to antislavery societies. [Footnote continues.]



May 25, 1854. Did not intend to write this evening, but have just heard of something that is worth recording;—something which must ever rouse in the mind of every true friend of liberty and humanity, feelings of the deepest indignation and sorrow.³ Another fugitive from bondage has been arrested [Anthony Burns; see footnote 3]; a poor man, who for two short months has trod the soil and breathed the air of the “Old Bay State,” was arrested like a criminal in the streets of her capital, and is now kept strictly guarded,—a double police force is required, the military are in readiness; and all this done to prevent a man, whom God has created in his own image, from regaining that freedom with which, he, in common with every human being, is endowed. I can only hope and pray most earnestly that Boston will not again disgrace herself by sending him back to a bondage worse than death; or rather that she will redeem herself from the disgrace which his arrest alone has brought upon her. . . .

May 26, 1854. Had a conversation with Miss [Mary] Shepard⁴ about slavery; she is, as I thought, thoroughly opposed to it, but does not agree with me in thinking that the churches and ministers are generally supporters of the infamous system; I believe it firmly. Mr. Barnes,⁵ one of the

most prominent of the Philadelphia clergy, who does not profess to be an abolitionist, has declared his belief that ‘the American church is the bulwark of slavery.’ Words cannot express all that I feel; all that is felt by the friends of Freedom, when thinking of this great obstacle to the removal of slavery from our land. Alas! that it should be so.—I was much disappointed in not seeing the eclipse,⁶ which, it was expected would be the most entire that has taken place for years; but the weather was rainy, and the sky obscured by clouds; so after spending half the afternoon on the roof of the house in eager expectation, I saw nothing; heard since that the sun made his appearance for a minute or two, but I was not fortunate enough to catch even that momentary glimpse of him. . . .

May 27, 1854. . . . Returned home, read the Anti-Slavery papers, and then went down to the depot to meet father;⁷ he had arrived in Boston early in the morning, regretted very much that he had not reached there the evening before to attend the great meeting at Faneuil Hall.⁸ He says that the excitement in Boston is very great; the trial of the poor man takes place on Monday.⁹ We scarcely dare to think of what may be the result; there seems to be nothing too bad for these Northern tools of slavery to do.

³Anthony Burns, an escaped slave from Richmond, Virginia, was arrested in Boston on May 24, 1854, by the United States Marshal, Edward G. Loring. His trial was set for Saturday, May 27. Excitement mounted all day Friday as crowds milled through the Boston streets demanding his release.

⁴Mary L. Shepard was principal of the Higginson Grammar School and one of Miss Forten’s closest friends. [Footnote continues.]

⁵The Reverend Albert Barnes, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, was an outspoken opponent of slavery.

⁶*The Liberator*, May 26, 1854, reported that a total eclipse of the sun, visible throughout the United States, would begin in Boston at 4:30 in the afternoon. The clouds that covered Salem did not obscure vision in Boston and other parts of New England. *Salem Register*, May 29, 1854.

⁷Robert Bridges Forten, of Philadelphia.

⁸A giant mass meeting to protest Anthony Burns’s arrest was held in Faneuil Hall, Boston, on the night of May 26; speeches were given by Theodore Parker and Wendell Phillips. While the meeting was in progress, word arrived that a group of abolitionists, led by Lewis Hayden and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, had attempted a forceful rescue of Burns. They broke into the Court House, but were repulsed after a United States marshal was killed. From that time on, both state militiamen and federal troops guarded the prisoner. [Footnote continues.]

⁹The trial was postponed from Saturday until Monday to give Burns’s lawyers more time to prepare their defenses. *The Liberator*, June 2, 1854.

May 28, 1854. [Sunday] A lovely day; in the morning I read in the Bible and wrote letters; in the afternoon took a quiet walk in Harmony Grove,¹⁰ and as I passed by many an ‘unknown grave,’ the question, ‘who sleeps below?’ rose often to my mind, and led to a long train of thoughts, of whose those departed ones might have been, how much beloved, how deeply regretted and how worthy of such love and such regret. I love to walk on the Sabbath, for all is so peaceful; the noise and labor of everyday life has ceased; and in perfect silence we can commune with Nature and with Nature’s God. . . .

May 30, 1854. Rose very early and was busy until nine o’clock; then, at Mrs. Putnam’s urgent request, went to keep store for her while she went to Boston to attend the [New England] Anti-Slavery Convention. I was very anxious to go, and will certainly do so to-morrow; the arrest of the alleged fugitive will give additional interest to the meetings, I should think. His trial is still going on and I can scarcely think of anything else; read again today as most suitable to my feelings and to the times, “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” by Elizabeth B. Browning; how powerfully it is written! how earnestly and touchingly does the writer portray the bitter anguish of the poor fugitive as she thinks over all the wrongs and sufferings that she has endured, and of the sin to which tyrants have driven her but which they alone must answer for! It seems as if no one could read this poem without having his sympathies roused to the utmost in behalf of the oppressed.—After a long conversation with my friends on their return, on this all-absorbing subject, we separated for the night, and I went to bed, weary and sad.

I am not mad: I am black.
I see you staring in my face—
I know you, staring, shrinking back—
Ye are born of the Washington-race:
And this land is the free America:
And this mark on my wrist . . . (I prove what I say)
Ropes tied me up here to the flogging-place.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning
“The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” 1848
Stanza 23 [full text of poem, pp. 18-20]

May 31, 1854. . . . Sarah [Remond]¹¹ and I went to Boston in the morning. Everything was much quieter—outwardly than we expected, but still much real indignation and excitement prevail. We walked past the Court-House, which is now lawlessly converted into a prison, and filled with soldiers, some of whom were looking from the windows, with an air of insolent authority which made my blood boil, while I felt the strongest contempt for their cowardice and servility. We went to the meeting, but the best speakers were absent, engaged in the most arduous and untiring efforts in behalf of the poor fugitive; but though we missed the glowing eloquence of Phillips,¹² Garrison,¹³ and Parker¹⁴, still there were excellent speeches made, and our hearts responded to the exalted sentiments of Truth and Liberty which were uttered. The exciting intelligence [news] which occasionally came in relation to the trial, added fresh zeal to the speakers, of whom Stephen Foster and his wife were the principal.¹⁵ The latter addressed, in the most eloquent language, the women present, entreating them to urge their husbands and brothers to action, and also to give their aid on all occasions in our just and holy cause.—I did not see father the whole day; he, of course, was deeply interested in the trial.—Dined at Mr. Garrison’s; his wife is one of the loveliest persons I have ever seen, worthy of such a husband. At the table, I watched earnestly the expression of that noble face, as he spoke beautifully in support of the non-resistant principles to which he has kept firm; he is indeed the very highest Christian spirit, to which I cannot hope to reach, however, for I believe in ‘resistance to tyrants,’ and

¹⁰Harmony Grove, Salem’s principal cemetery, was famed as an arboretum [footnote continues].

¹¹Sarah Parker Remond, sister of the well-known Negro abolitionist, Charles Lenox Remond, lived with her brother at 9 Dean Street, Salem. Active in the antislavery movement herself, she later became well known as a speaker. At this time she was thirty-nine years old. [Footnote continues.]

¹²Wendell Phillips, a leading radical abolitionist, was constantly in demand as a speaker at antislavery meetings. [Footnote continues.]

¹³William Lloyd Garrison was the father of radical abolitionism. [Footnote continues.]

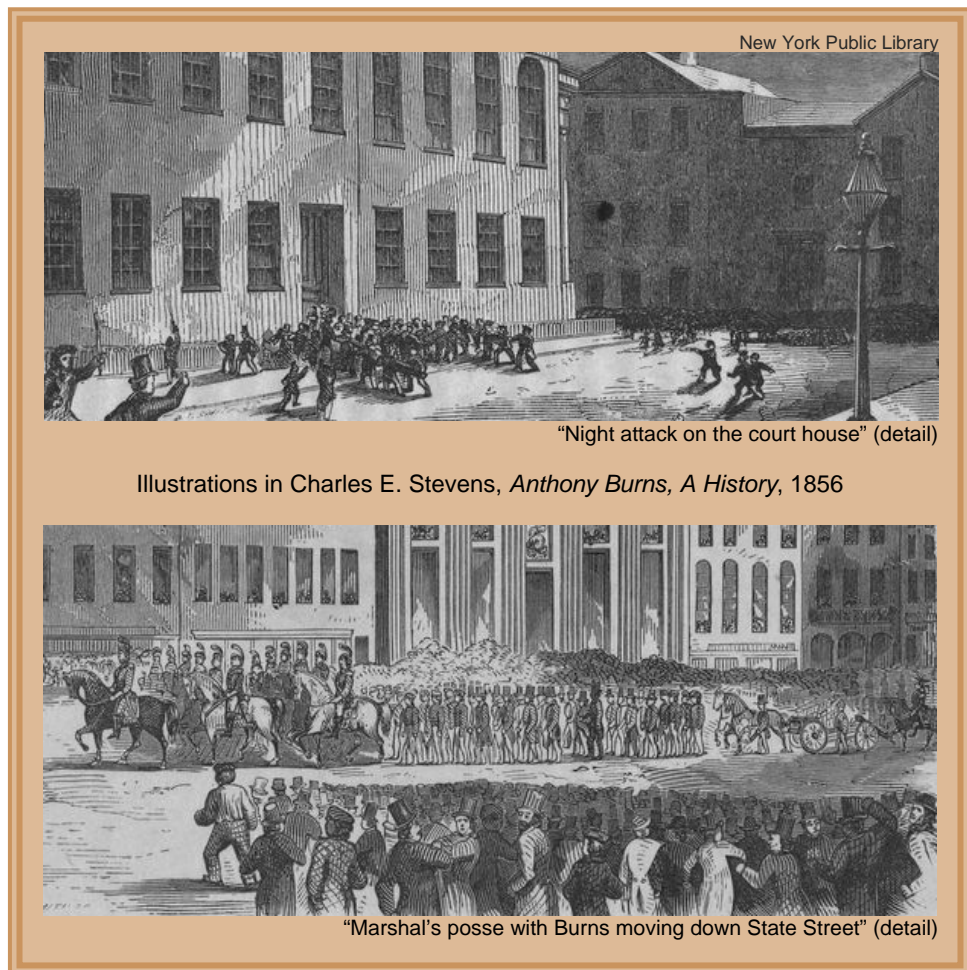
¹⁴Theodore Parker, Boston’s noted Unitarian minister, ranked with Phillips and Garrison as a favorite of New England abolitionists. [Footnote continues.]

¹⁵The only important speech delivered at the New England Anti-Slavery Society meeting on May 31 was by Stephen S. Foster, an abolitionist known principally for his rugged features, ungainly appearance, vibrant voice, and insistence that the churches were allies of the slave powers. [Footnote continues.]

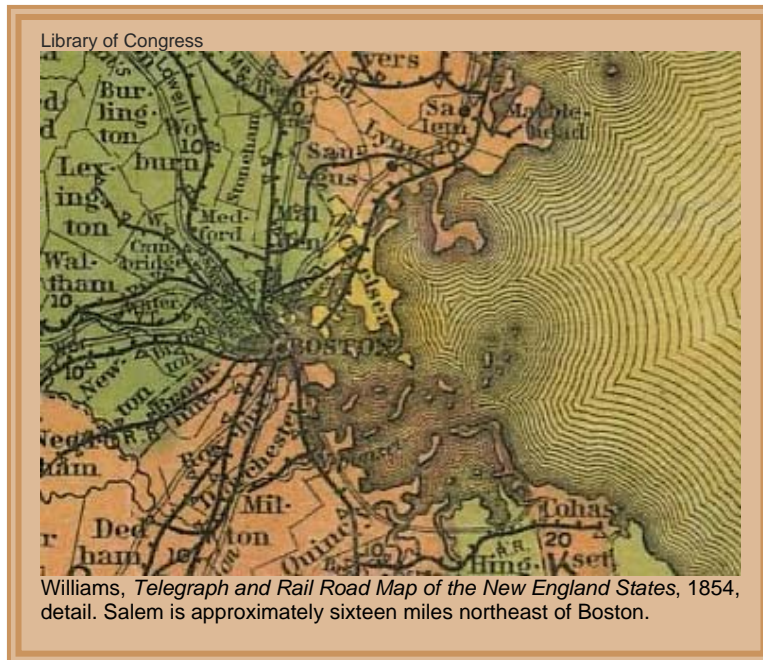
would fight for liberty until death. We came home in the evening, and felt sick at heart as we passed through the streets of Boston on our way to the depot, seeing the military as they rode along, ready at any time to prove themselves the minions [servants] of the south.

June 1, 1854. . . . The trial is over at last; the commissioner's decision will be given to-morrow. We are all in the greatest suspense; what will that decision be? Alas! that any one should have the power to decide the right of a fellow being to himself! It is thought by many that he will be acquitted of the *great crime* of leaving a life of bondage, as the legal evidence is not thought sufficient to convict him. But it is only too probable that they will sacrifice him to propitiate the South, since so many at the North dared oppose the passage of the infamous [Kansas-]Nebraska Bill.—Miss Putnam was carried this evening. Mr. Frothingham performed the ceremony, and in his prayer alluded touchingly to the events of this week; he afterwards in conversation with the bridegroom, (Mr. Gilliard), spoke in the most feeling manner about this case;—his sympathies are all on the right side. The wedding was a pleasant one; the bride looked very lovely; and we enjoyed ourselves as much as possible in these exciting times. It is impossible to be happy now.

June 2, 1854. Our worst fears are realized; the decision was against poor Burns, and he has been sent back to a bondage worse, a thousand times worse than death. Even an attempt at rescue was utterly impossible; the prisoner was completely surrounded by soldiers with bayonets fixed, a cannon loaded, ready to be fired at the slightest sign.¹⁶ To-day Massachusetts has again been disgraced; again she has shewed her submission to the Slave Power; and Oh! with what deep sorrow do we think of what will doubtless be the fate of that poor man, when he is again consigned to the horrors of Slavery. With what scorn must that government be regarded,



¹⁶Between Monday and Wednesday, when evidence was being heard in the Anthony Burns case, Boston was in a state of great excitement. Troops patrolled the streets, and the public square before the Court House was roped off to keep back the mobs. The testimony, as was usual in such cases, was conflicting; the government maintained that Burns had escaped on March 24, but several witnesses testified that he had been working in Boston between March 4 and March 10. On June 2 the court ruled that he was an escaped slave and must be returned to his master. He was marched down State Street to a waiting Virginia-bound vessel through groaning, hissing lines of people. Federal troops, state militiamen, and the entire police force were on hand to prevent any attempts at rescue. [Footnote continues.]



which cowardly assembles thousands of soldiers to satisfy the demands of slaveholders; to deprive of his freedom a man, created in God's own image, whose sole offense is the color of his skin! And if resistance is offered to this outrage, these soldiers are to shoot down American citizens without mercy; and this by the express orders of a government which proudly boasts of being the freest in the world; this on the very soil where the Revolution of 1776 began; in sight of the battle-field, where thousands of brave men fought and died in opposing British tyranny, which was nothing compared with the American oppression to-day. In looking over my diary, I perceive that I did not mention that there was on the Friday night

after the man's arrest, an attempt made to rescue him, but although it failed, on account of there not being men enough engaged in it, all honor should be given to those who bravely made the attempt. I can write no more. A cloud seems hanging over me, over all our persecuted race, which nothing can dispel.

June 4, 1854. A beautiful day. The sky is cloudless, the sun shines warm and bright, and a delicious breeze fans my cheek as I sit by the window writing. How strange it is that in a world so beautiful, there can be so much wickedness; on this delightful day, while many are enjoying themselves in their happy homes, not poor Burns only, but millions beside are suffering in chains; and how many Christian ministers to-day will mention him, or those who suffer with him? How many will speak from the pulpit against the cruel outrage on humanity which has just been committed; or against the many, even worse ones, which are committed in this country every day? Too well do we know that there are but very few, and these few alone deserve to be called the ministers of Christ, whose doctrine was 'Break every yoke, and let the oppressed go free.'—During the past week, we have had a vacation, which I expected to enjoy very much, but it was of course impossible for me to do so. Tomorrow school commences, and although the pleasure I shall feel in again seeing my beloved teacher, and in resuming my studies will be much saddened by recent events, yet they shall be a fresh incentive to more earnest study, to aid me in fitting myself for laboring in a holy cause, for enabling me to do much towards changing the condition of my oppressed and suffering people. Would that those with whom I shall recite to-morrow could sympathize with me in this; would that they could look upon all God's creatures without respect to color, feeling that it is character alone which makes the true man or woman! I earnestly hope that the time will come when they will feel thus. . . .

June 5, 1854. Rose very early, after passing a sleepless night.—Studied my lessons, and then went to school. Miss [Elizabeth] Church [a white Canadian student] and I counted the merits of the first and second classes for Miss Shepard; after school, had an hour's conversation with her about slavery and prejudice. I fully appreciate her kindness, and sympathy with me; she wishes me to cultivate a Christian spirit in thinking of my enemies; I know it is right and will endeavor to do so, but it does seem difficult. . . .

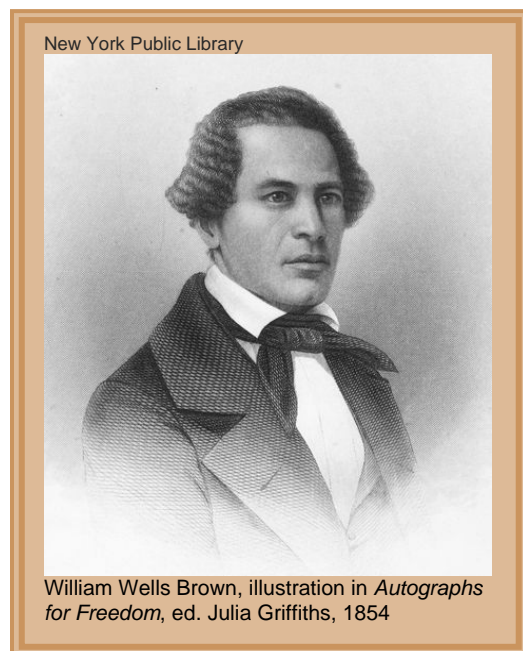
June 10, 1854. Received two letters, one from father. . . . To my great disappointment, father has decided not to remove to N[ew] England. He is, as I feared he would be, much prejudiced against it on

account of the recent slave case, or, he says, he is so against Boston, and I think he extends that feeling to the whole state at least. I shall write to-morrow, and use every argument I can think of, to induce him to change his opinion. I do not wish to have my long-cherished plan of our having together a pleasant N[ew] England home, defeated. In the afternoon went to impart the unwelcome tidings to Miss [Sarah] Remond, who assured me that she had been quite certain of it before. She had a volume of Mrs. Browning's poems, from which I read "Prometheus Bound" and "Casa Guidi Windows". . . .

Aug. 17, 1854. My birthday [age 17].—How much I feel to-day my own utter insignificance! It is true the years of my life are but few. But have I improved them as I should have done? No! I feel grieved and ashamed to think how very little I know to what I should know of what is really good and useful. May this knowledge of my *want* of knowledge be to me a fresh incentive to more earnest, thoughtful action, more persevering study! I believe it will. . . .

Sept. 5, 1854. . . . I have suffered much to-day,—my friends Mrs. P[utnam] and her daughters were refused admission to the Museum, after having tickets given them, solely on account of their complexion. Insulting language was used to them—Of course they felt and exhibited deep, bitter indignation; but of what avail was it? none, but to excite the ridicule of those contemptible creatures, miserable doughfaces who do not deserve the name of men. I will not attempt to write more.—No words can express my feelings. But these cruel wrongs cannot be much longer endured. A day of retribution must come. God grant that it may come very soon! . . .

Sept. 27, 1854. Have just received a letter from father, which contains a very unexpected summons.—I must return home next month.—It would give me much pleasure to see the loved ones there. [Charlotte Forten's mother had died years earlier.] But I cannot bear to think of leaving Salem, now that I have just begun to learn.—Most earnestly do I wish to possess what is most invaluable,—a thorough education. I will write immediately and use every argument to induce father to permit me to remain a little longer.—I feel as if I *cannot* go now. Oh! I do hope that father will consent to my staying.



Sept. 30, 1854. My dear, kind teacher [Mary Shepard] has written to father; I cannot but hope that *her* letter will have some effect.—My friends are very unwilling to have me go; they all sympathize with me in my desire to acquire all the knowledge that I possibly can. . . . [A month later Charlotte's father wrote allowing her to stay in Salem.]

Oct. 7, 1854. This evening Mr. and Mrs. Remond arrived from Syracuse. W[illiam] Wells Brown¹⁷ accompanied them. He has improved greatly both in appearance and conversation during his residence in England.

Oct. 8, 1854. This morning I had a delightful ride to Lawrence with Mr. and Miss R[emond] and Mr. B[rown]. The country now looks very beautiful. The trees are tinted with the brilliant and gorgeous hues of autumn. We went to the anti-slavery meetings,—which were extremely interesting and well-attended. I had the great pleasure of conversing with Mr. Garrison and Mr. Phillips. We were looking at some fine pictures of the Queens of England, and afterwards at some grand old Italian and German

¹⁷William Wells Brown was one of several escaped slaves who were prominent in the abolition movement. Fleeing from his Missouri master in 1834, he was sheltered for a time by an Ohio Quaker whose name he adopted, then obtained work on Great Lakes steamboats. In this position he helped many other slaves to find refuge in Canada, at the same time studying so effectively that by 1843 he could become an agent of the Western new York Anti-Slavery Society and the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. While visiting England as a lecturer, he learned that the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 so imperiled his position that he dared not return to America. [Footnote continues. Brown returned to the U.S. in 1854.]

cathedrals, and Mr. Phillips told me about some of them which he had visited. To me it was a great enjoyment and privilege to listen to the conversation of one so highly gifted.

There are some very picturesque little waterfalls formed by the great dam in Lawrence; the town itself is new—a busy manufacturing place, quite unlike quiet, old-fashioned Salem. I prefer the latter. . . .

Charlotte Forten graduated from the Higginson School in February 1855. To prepare for a career as a teacher, she entered the Salem Normal School.

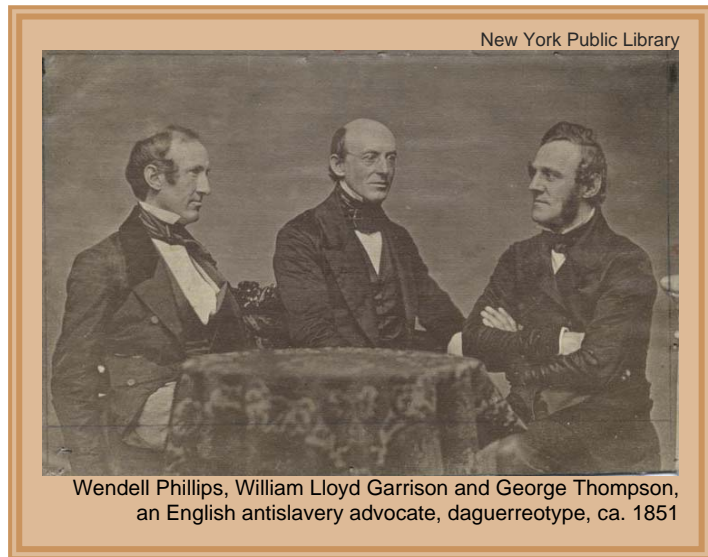
1855

Sept. 12, 1855. To-day school commenced.—Most happy am I to return to the companionship of my studies,—ever my most valued friends. It is pleasant to meet the scholars [her

fellow students] again; most of them greet me cordially, and were it not for the thought that *will* intrude, of the want of *entire sympathy* even of those I know and like best, I should greatly enjoy their society. There is one young girl and only one—Miss [Sarah] B[rown] who I believe thoroughly and heartily appreciates anti-slavery,—*radical* anti-slavery, and has no prejudice against color. I wonder that every colored person is not a misanthrope. Surely we have everything to make us hate mankind. I have met girls in the schoolroom[—]they have been thoroughly kind and cordial to me,—perhaps the next day met them in the street—they feared to recognize me; these I can but regard now with scorn and contempt,—once I liked them, believing them incapable of such meanness. Others give the most distant recognitions possible.—I, of course, acknowledge no such recognitions, and they soon cease entirely. These are but trifles, certainly, to the great, public wrongs which we as a people are obliged to endure. But to those who experience them, these apparent trifles are most wearing and discouraging; even to the child's mind they reveal volumes of deceit and heartlessness, and early teach a lesson of suspicion and distrust. Oh! it is hard to go through life meeting contempt with contempt, hatred with hatred, fearing, with too good reason, to love and trust hardly any one whose skin is white,—however lovable, attractive and congenial in seeming. In the bitter, passionate feelings of my soul again and again there rises the questions “When, oh! when shall this cease?” “Is there no help?” “How long oh! how long must we continue to suffer—to endure?” Conscience answers it is wrong, it is ignoble to despair; let us labor earnestly and faithfully to acquire knowledge, to break down the barriers of prejudice and oppression. Let us take courage; never ceasing to work,—hoping and believing that if not for us, for another generation there is a better, brighter day in store,—when slavery and prejudice shall vanish before the glorious light of Liberty and Truth; when the rights of every colored man shall everywhere be acknowledged and respected, and he shall be treated as a *man* and a *brother!*

Sept.—, 1855. This evening Miss B[rown] and I joined the Female Anti-Slavery Society.¹⁸ I am glad to have persuaded her to do so. She seems an earnest hearted girl, in whom I cannot help having some confidence. I can only hope and pray that she will be true, and courageous enough to meet the opposition which every friend of freedom must encounter. . . .

After graduating in July 1856, Charlotte Forten became the only black teacher in a white grammar (elementary) school in Salem.



¹⁸The Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society, which had conducted sewing circles and lecture series in Salem since its formation in 1834.

1856

June 18, 1856. Amazing, wonderful news I have heard to-day! it has completely astounded me. I cannot realize it.—Mr. Edwards [principal] called me into his room with a face full of such grave mystery, that I at once commenced reviewing my past conduct, and wondering what terrible misdeed I,—a very “model of deportment” had committed within the precincts of our Normal [school] world. The mystery was most pleasantly solved. I have received the offer of a situation as teacher in one of the public schools of this city,—of this conservative, aristocratic old city of Salem!!! Wonderful indeed it is! I know that it is principally through the exertions of my kind teacher, although he will not acknowledge it.—I thank him with all my heart. I had a long talk with the Principal of the school, whom I like much. Again and again I ask myself—‘*Can it be true?*’ It seems impossible. I shall commence to-morrow.—¹⁹

June 19, 1856. To-day, a rainy and gloomy one I have devoted to my new duties. Of course I cannot decide how I like them yet.—I thought it best to commence immediately, although the term has not quite closed. I could not write about it yesterday, the last day of my school-life. Yet I cannot think it quite over until after the examination, in which Mr. Edwards has kindly arranged that I shall take part.

June 21, 1856. I find the children rather boisterous and unmanageable; but Mr. Warren thinks there is a slight improvement in them. That is some comfort. . . .

June 28, 1856. The weather is hot; the children restless, and I find a teacher’s life not nearly as pleasant as a scholar’s. But I do not despair. Oh! no! I have faith. Ever shall my motto be, “*Labor omnia vincit.*” [“*Labor conquers all things.*”]—I found my scholars [students] very pleasant and obliging. They bring me beautiful flowers every day.—Many of them interesting children. Others very far from being so.—May I be granted strength to do my duty in the great field of labor upon which I have entered! . . .

1857

Jan. 1, 1857. Welcome in, New Year! with thy many changes; thy fullness of joy or sorrow, unknown, undreamed of now.—Have formed many good resolutions for the opening year, but think it wisest to commit none of them to paper. . . .

Jan. 13, 1857. This evening Mr. Frothingham lectured on ‘The Relation of the Bible to Slavery.’ One of the most beautiful, earnest and convincing lectures I have ever heard. It made me feel *very happy*. Do not know Mr. F[rothingham] personally, but after the lecture, longed to shake hands with him. Should not have had the courage to do so, had not my kind friend, Mrs. P[utnam] presented me to him. His kind pressure of my hand and beaming gracious smile I shall always remember. Of course *he* does not believe that the Bible sanctions slavery, and most clearly and convincingly did he *prove* that it does not. A man with such a heart and mind as his is truly a host in himself,—one of the noblest of all mankind.— . . .

Jan. 15, 1857. As usual read and studied all the evening. Feel a little lonesome at times.—Still no news from Canada. It grieves me deeply that father should act so strangely. It seems as if my only parent has quite forsaken me. I lay awake all last night, thinking about it, and could not help crying. I wish he *would* write to me.—

Jan. 16, 1857. . . . Miss S[hppard] lent me two of Hillard’s new Readers [for elementary schools]. They contain excellent selections from the best writers; but with sorrow—with contempt for the author’s cowardice, I notice that he most carefully avoided the *mention* of slavery. Even in quoting from [John Greenleaf] *Whittier*, the true poet of Humanity, and giving a beautiful sketch of him, not one word is

¹⁹Miss Forten was assigned to the Epes Grammar School, with the rank of assistant and a salary of \$200 a year. [Footnote continues.]

said of his noble devotion to the cause of the slave,—not one line of the many glorious ones he has written for freedom, does Mr. H[illard] *dare* to quote! Such moral pusillanimity is degrading, most pitiable. . . .

Jan. 18, 1857. Dined with Mr. and Mrs. P[utnam]. We talked of the wrongs and sufferings on our race. Mr. P[utnam] thought me too sensitive.—But oh, how inexpressibly bitter and agonizing it is to feel oneself an outcast from the rest of mankind, as we are in this country! To me it is *dreadful, dreadful*. Were I to indulge in the thought I fear I should become insane. But I do not *despair*. I will not *despair*; though *very* often I can hardly help doing so. God help us! We are indeed a wretched people. Oh, that I could do *much* towards bettering our condition. I will do *all*, all the *very little* that lies in my power, while life and strength last! . . .

Aug. 17, 1857—My twentieth birthday.—Very, very fast the years are passing away,—and I,—Ah! how little am I improving them. I thought so to-day after I had finished “Jane Eyre,” which has so powerfully interested and excited me. The excitement was not a healthy one, I know—and reason told me I *ought* to have been better employed.—But we have so much company now that it is impossible to accomplish anything.—This afternoon was regularly bored, victimized by two dull people.—I do wish they would leave us to the enjoyment of our own family circle, which is such a pleasant one now.—Twenty years! I have lived. I shall *not* live twenty years more,—I feel it. I believe I have but a few years to live.—Them I *must*, I *will* improve.—I will pray for strength to keep *this* resolution;—I have broken so many. *This* I *must* keep. . . .

In failing health, Charlotte Forten resigned her teaching position in March 1858 and returned to her family home in Philadelphia.

1859

April 4, 1859. Heard to-day that there has been another fugitive arrested.²⁰ There is to be a trial. God grant that the poor man may be released from the clutches of the slavehunters. Mr. P[urvis, Miss Forten’s uncle] has gone down. We wait anxiously to hear the result of the trial. How long, oh, how long shall such a state of things as this—last?

April 6, 1859. Good news! After waiting with intense and painful anxiety for the result of the three days’ trial we are at last gladdened by the news that the alleged fugitive, Daniel Dangerfield, has been released.—The Commissioner *said* that he released him because he was not satisfied [convinced] of his identity. Others are inclined to believe that the pressure of public sentiment—which was, strange to say, almost universally on the right side—was too overwhelming for the Com[missioner] to resist, particularly as his own family—even his wife, it is said, declared that they could only discard him if he sent the man into slavery. It is encouraging to know that there was so much right and just feeling about the matter. It gives

Library of Congress

CAUTION!!
COLORED PEOPLE
OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,
You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the
Watchmen and Police Officers
of Boston,
For since the recent ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN, they are empowered to act as
KIDNAPPERS
AND
Slave Catchers,
And they have already been actually employed in KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES. Therefore, if you value your LIBERTY, and the *Welfare of the Fugitives* among you, *Shun* them in every possible manner, as so many **HOUNDS** on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.
Keep a Sharp Look Out for
KIDNAPPERS, and have
TOP EYE open.
APRIL 24, 1851.

1851 broadside published by Theodore Parker after the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act

²⁰The alleged slave, Daniel Webster (or Dangerfield, as Miss Forten calls him) was arrested at Harrisburg [Pennsylvania] on Saturday, April 2, charged with being a fugitive from Athensville, Virginia. Despite the willingness of numerous witnesses to swear that he had been employed in Harrisburg for nine years, he and his family were immediately sent to Philadelphia. Abolitionists there, having been informed of his coming, were ready with counsel [attorneys] when he arrived. When Webster was brought before United States Commissioner Cooke Longstreth that afternoon, attorneys were on hand to plead for a delay. This was granted until Monday, April 4. [Footnote continues.]

one some hope even for Philadelphia. Last night the court sat for *fourteen hours*, the longest session that has ever been held in this city. Many ladies stayed during the entire night, among whom was the noble and venerable Lucretia Mott, untiring and devoted to the last.²¹ She is truly lovely—saintly in look as in spirit, for a beautiful soul shines through her beautiful face. She is indeed one of the “blest of earth,” one of those whose “very presence is a benediction!”

April 8, 1859. Long, long to be remembered. This eve. attended a very large Anti-Slavery meeting at Sansom Hall celebrating Daniel’s release. A crowd of Southerners was present and ere the meeting had progressed far they created a great disturbance, stamping, hallooing, groaning etc. so that it was impossible to hear a word that the speakers were saying. In vain did the President strive to preserve order,—the tumult increased every moment, and at one time there was a precipitate rush forward. We thought we should be crushed, but I did not feel at all frightened; I was too excited to think of fear. The veterans in the cause said that it reminded them of the time when the new and beautiful Pennsylvania Hall, which was afterward burned to the ground—was mobbed. But at last the police arrived. Many of the disturbers were arrested, and order restored. Mr. P[urvis’] speech was fine; decidedly the most effective. A young Englishman spoke fearlessly and well.—The meeting was one of deep interest. I shall long remember it.²²

April 9, 1859. The hero of the last few days came here to-night. He is a sturdy, sensible seeming man. It makes my heart beat quickly to see one how has just had so narrow an escape from a doom far darker and more terrible than death. Nor is he quite safe yet, for we hear that there are warrants out for his re-arrest. Poor man! there can be no rest for his weary feet nearer than the free soil of Canada. We shall be obliged to keep him very close.

April 23, 1859. D[aniel] has left us and we hear with joy that he is safe in Canada. Oh, stars and stripes, that wave so proudly over our *mockery* of freedom, what is your protection. Hear that the noble Whittier is in town, wish, hope that I may have the pleasure of seeing his face again. It would be *too* delightful if he would only come up here and see us. But I dare not hope that. . . .

From October 1862 until May 1864, Charlotte Forten taught with other free African Americans in a school created for newly freed slaves on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, an experience she chronicled in two articles for the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled “Life on the Sea Islands” (May & June 1864). There she also wrote the last entry in her journal, on May 15, 1864. In 1878 at age 41, she married Rev. Francis Grimké, a Presbyterian minister, and, until her death in 1914 at age 76, continued her work that “the rights of every colored man shall everywhere be acknowledged and respected.”

²¹The trial of Daniel Webster was one of the most dramatic in Philadelphia’s history. Long before the court was opened on the morning of April 4, great crowds jammed the building. Others, massed in the street, appeared so hostile that the United States Marshal felt called upon to warn the people that any attempted rescue would lead to bloodshed. When the trial began, the court was crowded with abolitionists. That day witnesses testified in behalf of the alleged owner; on April 5 so many witnesses were willing to swear that Webster had been employed in Harrisburg for many years that the court stayed in session all that night. During this entire time Lucretia Mott and thirty other women sat constantly at Webster’s side, watching every move with grim intensity. At six in the morning on April 6, with all testimony taken, the judge adjourned the session until six that evening, when the decision would be announced. At noon that day a revivalistic prayer meeting on the streets of Philadelphia offered prayers for Webster’s release. Either this public sentiment or the nature of the testimony led to the unexpected verdict of acquittal from the Commissioner. The decision was celebrated throughout Philadelphia, and Daniel Webster was escorted triumphantly through the streets in a great procession. [Footnote continues.]

²²The meeting was described in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, April 23, 1859. The editor insisted that the mob was kept from attacking by the veteran abolitionists who kept their seats, “ready to weary out their enemies, as they had often done before, by enduring patience.”

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," 1848

First published in *The Liberty Bell*, by Friends of Freedom, for sale at the Boston National Anti-Slavery Bazaar, 1848

I.

I STAND on the mark beside the shore
Of the first white pilgrim's bended knee,
Where exile turned to ancestor,
And God was thanked for liberty.
I have run through the night, my skin is as dark,
I bend my knee down on this mark . . .
I look on the sky and the sea.

II.

O pilgrim-souls, I speak to you!
I see you come out proud and slow
From the land of the spirits pale as dew. . .
And round me and round me ye go!
O pilgrims, I have gasped and run
All night long from the whips of one
Who in your names works sin and woe.

III.

And thus I thought that I would come
And kneel here where I knelt before,
And feel your souls around me hum
In undertone to the ocean's roar;
And lift my black face, my black hand,
Here, in your names, to curse this land
Ye blessed in freedom's evermore.

IV.

I am black, I am black;
And yet God made me, they say.
But if He did so, smiling back
He must have cast His work away
Under the feet of His white creatures,
With a look of scorn,—that the dusky features
Might be trodden again to clay.

V.

And yet He has made dark things
To be glad and merry as light.
There's a little dark bird sits and sings;
There's a dark stream ripples out of sight;
And the dark frogs chant in the safe morass,
And the sweetest stars are made to pass
O'er the face of the darkest night.

VI.

But *we* who are dark, we are dark!
Ah, God, we have no stars!
About our souls in care and cark
Our blackness shuts like prison bars:
The poor souls crouch so far behind,
That never a comfort can they find
By reaching through the prison-bars.

VII.

Indeed, we live beneath the sky, . . .
That great smooth Hand of God, stretched out
On all His children fatherly,
To bless them from the fear and doubt,
Which would be, if, from this low place,
All opened straight up to His face
Into the grand eternity.

VIII.

And still God's sunshine and His frost,
They make us hot, they make us cold,
As if we were not black and lost:
And the beasts and birds, in wood and fold,
Do fear and take us for very men!
Could the weep-poor-will or the cat of the glen
Look into my eyes and be bold?

IX.

I am black, I am black!—
But, once, I laughed in girlish glee;
For one of my colour stood in the track
Where the drivers drove, and looked at me—
And tender and full was the look he gave:
Could a slave look so at another slave?—
I look at the sky and the sea.

X.

And from that hour our spirits grew
As free as if unsold, unbought:
Oh, strong enough, since we were two
To conquer the world, we thought!
The drivers drove us day by day;
We did not mind, we went one way,
And no better a liberty sought.

XI.

In the sunny ground between the canes,
He said "I love you" as he passed:
When the shingle-roof rang sharp with the rains,
I heard how he vowed it fast:
While others shook, he smiled in the hut
As he carved me a bowl of the cocoa-nut,
Through the roar of the hurricanes.

XII.

I sang his name instead of a song;
Over and over I sang his name—
Upward and downward I drew it along
My various notes; the same, the same!
I sang it low, that the slave-girls near
Might never guess from aught they could hear,
It was only a name.

XIII.

I look on the sky and the sea—
We were two to love, and two to pray,—
Yes, two, O God, who cried to Thee,
Though nothing didst Thou say.
Coldly Thou sat'st behind the sun!
And now I cry who am but one,
How wilt Thou speak to-day?—

XIV.

We were black, we were black!
We had no claim to love and bliss:
What marvel, if each turned to lack?
They wrung my cold hands out of his,—
They dragged him . . . where ? . . . I crawled to touch
His blood's mark in the dust! . . . not much,
Ye pilgrim-souls, . . . though plain as *this*!

XV.

Wrong, followed by a deeper wrong!
Mere grief's too good for such as I.
So the white men brought the shame ere long
To strangle the sob of my agony.
They would not leave me for my dull
Wet eyes!—it was too merciful
To let me weep pure tears and die.

XVI.

I am black, I am black!—
I wore a child upon my breast
An amulet that hung too slack,
And, in my unrest, could not rest:
Thus we went moaning, child and mother,
One to another, one to another,
Until all ended for the best:

XVII.

For hark ! I will tell you low . . . low . . .
I am black, you see,—
And the babe who lay on my bosom so,
Was far too white . . . too white for me;
As white as the ladies who scorned to pray
Beside me at church but yesterday;
Though my tears had washed a place for my knee.

XVIII.

My own, own child! I could not bear
To look in his face, it was so white.
I covered him up with a kerchief there;
I covered his face in close and tight:
And he moaned and struggled, as well might be,
For the white child wanted his liberty—
Ha, ha! he wanted his master right.

XIX.

He moaned and beat with his head and feet,
His little feet that never grew—
He struck them out, as it was meet,
Against my heart to break it through.
I might have sung and made him mild—
But I dared not sing to the white-faced child
The only song I knew.

XX.

I pulled the kerchief very close:
He could not see the sun, I swear,
More, then, alive, than now he does
From between the roots of the mango . . . where
. . . I know where. Close! a child and mother
Do wrong to look at one another,
When one is black and one is fair.

XXI.

Why, in that single glance I had
Of my child's face, . . . I tell you all,
I saw a look that made me mad . . .
The *master's* look, that used to fall
On my soul like his lash . . . or worse!
And so, to save it from my curse,
I twisted it round in my shawl.

XXII.

And he moaned and trembled from foot to head,
He shivered from head to foot;
Till, after a time, he lay instead
Too suddenly still and mute.
I felt, beside, a stiffening cold, . . .
I dared to lift up just a fold . . .
As in lifting a leaf of the mango-fruit.

XXIII.

But *my* fruit . . . ha, ha!—there, had been
(I laugh to think on't at this hour! . . .)
Your fine white angels, who have seen
Nearest the secret of God's power, . . .
And plucked my fruit to make them wine,
And sucked the soul of that child of mine,
As the humming-bird sucks the soul of the flower.

XXIV.

Ha, ha, for the trick of the angels white!
They freed the white child's spirit so.
I said not a word, but, day and night,
I carried the body to and fro;
And it lay on my heart like a stone . . . as chill.
—The sun may shine out as much as he will:
I am cold, though it happened a month ago.

XXV.

From the white man's house, and the black man's hut,
I carried the little body on,
The forest's arms did round us shut,
And silence through the trees did run:
They asked no question as I went,—
They stood too high for astonishment,—
They could see God sit on His throne.

XXVI.

My little body, kerchiefed fast,
I bore it on through the forest . . . on:
And when I felt it was tired at last,
I scooped a hole beneath the moon.
Through the forest-tops the angels far,
With a white sharp finger from every star,
Did point and mock at what was done.

XXVII.

Yet when it was all done aright, . . .
Earth, 'twixt me and my baby, strewed,
All, changed to black earth, . . . nothing white, . . .
A dark child in the dark,—ensued
Some comfort, and my heart grew young:
I sate down smiling there and sung
The song I learnt in my maidenhood.

XXVIII.

And thus we two were reconciled,
The white child and black mother, thus:
For, as I sang it, soft and wild
The same song, more melodious,
Rose from the grave whereon I sate!
It was the dead child singing that,
To join the souls of both of us.

XXIX.

I look on the sea and the sky!
Where the pilgrims' ships first anchored lay,
The free sun rideth gloriously;
But the pilgrim-ghosts have slid away
Through the earliest streaks of the morn.
My face is black, but it glares with a scorn
Which they dare not meet by day.

XXX.

Ah!—in their 'stead, their hunter sons!
Ah, ah! they are on me—they hunt in a ring—
Keep off! I brave you all at once—
I throw off your eyes like snakes that sting!
You have killed the black eagle at nest, I think:
Did you never stand still in your triumph, and shrink
From the stroke of her wounded wing?

XXXI.

(Man, drop that stone you dared to lift!—)
I wish you, who stand there five a-breast,
Each, for his own wife's joy and gift,
A little corpse as safely at rest
As mine in the mangos!—Yes, but *she*
May keep live babies on her knee,
And sing the song she liketh best.

XXXII.

I am not mad: I am black.
I see you staring in my face—
I know you, staring, shrinking back—
Ye are born of the Washington-race:
And this land is the free America:
And this mark on my wrist . . . (I prove what I say)
Ropes tied me up here to the flogging-place.

XXXIII.

You think I shrieked then? Not a sound!
I hung, as a gourd hangs in the sun.
I only cursed them all around,
As softly as I might have done
My very own child!—From these sands
Up to the mountains, lift your hands,
O slaves, and end what I begun!

XXXIV.

Whips, curses; these must answer those!
For in this UNION, you have set
Two kinds of men in adverse rows,
Each loathing each: and all forget
The seven wounds in Christ's body fair;
While HE sees gaping everywhere
Our countless wounds that pay no debt.

XXXV.

Our wounds are different. Your white men
Are, after all, not gods indeed,
Nor able to make Christs again
Do good with bleeding. *We* who bleed . . .
(Stand off!) *we* help not in our loss!
We are too heavy for our cross,
And fall and crush you and your seed.

XXXVI.

I fall, I swoon! I look at the sky:
The clouds are breaking on my brain;
I am floated along, as if I should die
Of liberty's exquisite pain--
In the name of the white child, waiting for me
In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree,
White men, I leave you all curse-free
In my broken heart's disdain! _____