



Ellen Craft



I write these few lines merely to say that the statement is entirely unfounded, for I have never had the slightest inclination whatever of returning to bondage; and God forbid that I should ever be so false to liberty as to prefer slavery in its stead. In fact, since my escape from slavery, I have gotten much better in every respect than I could have possibly anticipated. Though, had it been to the contrary, my feelings in regard to this would have been just the same, for 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.

— Anti-Slavery Advocate, December 1852



Quick Facts

- * 1826?-1897?
- * Escaped from slavery, and with her husband wrote the escape narrative *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*

Biography

Many an audience became fascinated with the remarkable story of Ellen Craft as she and her husband William toured the abolitionist lecture circuit in the mid-nineteenth century. Although stories of escape told by former slaves were not uncommon to abolitionist audiences, Ellen’s story proved especially intriguing since she courageously passed as both white and male in order to get herself and William to freedom in the North.

Ellen Craft was born around 1826 in Clinton, Georgia. Her mother was a slave and her father was her mother’s owner. As William tells in the published account of their escape, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, Ellen was so white that she was often mistaken as one of her master’s family. This angered her mistress so much that she gave the eleven-year old Ellen as a wedding gift to one of her daughters.

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Biography continued

During the Christmas season of 1848, Ellen daringly decided to use her light skin to pass as white in order to travel by train and boat to the North, with William posing as her slave. But in order to carry out this plan, Ellen also had to pass as male since a single white woman would not have been traveling alone with a male slave at this time. Although they encountered several close calls along the way, the plan worked. Eight days after they began in Georgia, William and Ellen arrived in Philadelphia on Christmas day.

Soon after their arrival, abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and William Wells Brown encouraged them to tell of their escape in abolitionist circles. For the next two years, the Crafts made public appearances where William told their story, and Ellen, silenced by a society that disapproved of women speaking publicly, stood nearby so that audiences could see the woman who braved such an escape.

In 1850, however, William and Ellen went to England for fear that the Fugitive Slave Bill would end their freedom. The Crafts continued to make appearances abroad, and made a life there, including having four children. In 1868 they returned to the U.S. and eventually bought land in Georgia and opened an industrial school for young African Americans. Around 1897, Ellen died and was buried in Georgia under her favorite tree. Their narrative, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, offers a unique opportunity to study race, gender, and class in the nineteenth century. It is an exciting example of racial passing, cross-dressing, and middle-class performance in a society where each of these boundaries was thought to be distinct and stable.

Their escape, and particularly Ellen's disguise, illustrates the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class, for Ellen's passing had to be successful in all three arenas simultaneously in order for them to travel undetected. And since William's narrative voice actually tells the story, *Running* also shows how difficult it was, even for a woman bold and daring enough to escape slavery in this way, to find a public voice as a black woman. Indeed, like her disguise, which involved poultices that "muffled" her and allowed her to avoid conversation, Ellen's voice is given through the filter of William's perspective (*Running* 290).



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Biography continued

We can never know exactly how much input Ellen had in the narrative, but she obviously affects the writing of the text. Her physical presence, for instance, proved crucial to audiences who listened to William's story -- they felt, as one newspaper notes, "considerable disappointment" in the event of Ellen's absence (*National Anti-Slavery Standard*, January 30, 1851, 141). And since William had over ten years to tell again and again the story of their escape and witness first hand audiences' reactions to Ellen's role and Ellen herself, the published account he presented in 1860 undoubtedly reveals Ellen's influence. Thus, even momentarily silenced, Ellen's voice is readily available for audiences today.

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