Remembering MARY ANN SHADD CARY

The American-Canadian activist, publisher, and educator was the embodiment of doing more and talking less.

By: Elizabeth Andrews

IN 1848, abolitionist Frederick Douglass asked readers of his anti-slavery newspaper, the *North Star*, how the lives of Black Americans could be improved. He received a blunt response from a 25-year-old named Mary Ann Shadd, who wrote, "We should do more and talk less." Douglass published the letter, putting Shadd's fiery words in print for the first time. [1]

From an early age, Shadd—an anti-slavery activist, publisher, teacher, and lawyer—learned the importance of deliberate action over lofty rhetoric. Raised by abolitionist parents, her childhood home in Delaware was a station on the Underground Railroad.[2] Seeking liberation, enslaved Americans hid in these safe houses as they navigated the vast network of secret routes. It's here that the roots of her "do more" philosophy were planted.

Shadd's activism would blossom as she got older. At just 16, using her knowledge to support those around her, she opened up a school for Black children in Wilmington, DE, where few educational opportunities were available.[3] As a member of the women's suffrage movement, empowering young girls and women through education was greatly important to her. As she once wrote: "Our young women want a more vigorous, practical, and useful education to get her own living, to make her own course in life, to [countenance] any position she chooses to occupy."[4]

By 1850, she had been teaching for over a decade in towns and

Mary Ann Shadd Cary; original portrait by Shantel Miller

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cities across the eastern United States.[5] That same year, congress passed the *Fugitive Slave Act*. Not only was it now illegal to help an enslaved freedom-seeker, but it was also easier for slave catchers to capture unenslaved Black Americans and sell them into slavery.[6] Around the same time, Shadd was convinced to take a teaching position in what is now Ontario (where she eventually married a businessman named Thomas J. Cary). She urged others to take refuge in the North as well. In his 1920 essay "The Damnation of Women," W.E.B. Du Bois spoke to Shadd's tenacity during this time: "Well-educated, vivacious, with determination shining from her sharp eyes, she threw herself single-handed into the great Canadian pilgrimage when thousands of hunted black men hurried northward and crept beneath the protection of the Lion's paw."[7]

To promote immigration and provide an outlet to tell the stories of Black Canadians, Shadd founded the anti-slavery newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman*, in 1853, cementing her as the first Black woman in North America—and first woman ever in Canada—to publish a newspaper.[8] Having her own newspaper gave her the power to steer the conversation, and the paper's motto was "self-reliance is the true road to independence." In addition to calling for the end of slavery, the paper also championed women's rights.[9] As *CBC* writer Huda Hassan puts it: "What Shadd Cary understood was the political and social power of newspapers in disseminating reflections and information on their dire conditions, cautioning a future world under these systems." Hassan continues, "Shadd Cary and her Black feminist peers subverted public spaces, editorial rooms, education systems, and mastheads in order to be heard."[10] Considering the times Shadd Cary and her female contemporaries were born into, it is hard to overstate just how much courage this took. While it was a challenge financially, the *Provincial Freeman* was published for seven years.[11]

In an interview with the *Toronto Star*, Shannon Prince, former curator of the Buxton National Historic Site & Museum, discussed Shadd Cary's work beyond the paper, including her mission to help women seek financial autonomy. She founded the Colored Women's Progressive Franchise, which "enabled Black women to invest their money and buy stocks and bonds so they would not become financially dependent on men." This was yet another way that Shadd Cary used her voice and skills to empower others. In addition to her work as an activist, editor, writer, and educator, she was also one of the first Black women to study and practice law. Prince notes that Shadd Cary attended Howard University—a historically Black school that was all-male at the time—where "they wouldn't allow her to write her law degree until she was in her 60s." Once she got the degree, Prince adds, she "sued the university for sex discrimination."[12]

Shadd Cary's achievements are vast, and each one is impressive in its own right. As a guide and a steward to women and her community, she exemplifies the critical role Black women played and continue to play in the fight for freedom and equality. Her bravery and tenacity are profound, and in the years since her death, her legacy lives on in the countless individuals who have been influenced by her work. **M**

ENDNOTES

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