

Ellen Garrison Jackson Clark (1823-1892)



What is Ellen's Legacy?

"I feel as though I ought to strive to maintain my rights."

BY KERRI GREENIDGE, TUFTS UNIVERSITY

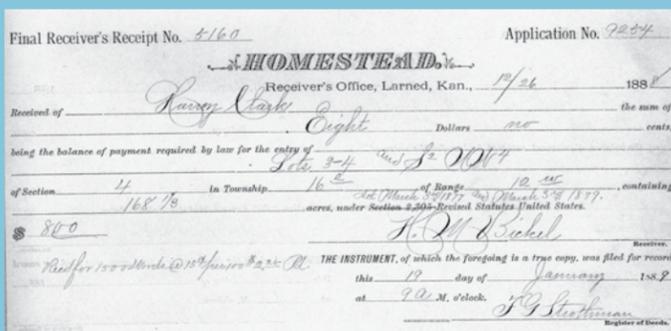
THE ROBBINS HOUSE
CONCORD'S AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

However a Maryland grand jury dismissed the case, a pattern that would continue as Southern courts failed to extend civil rights protections to African Americans well into the 20th century. Despite this loss, Ellen remained true to her calling—teaching newly freed people of color in order to “elevate our own race.”

KANSAS, 1879-c.1890 TEACHING EXODUSTER CHILDREN

As Radical Reconstruction faced violent repression across the South, Ellen Garrison found a new site for her activism in Kansas. African Americans, driven from Mississippi and Louisiana by white violence and a desire for economic opportunity, migrated to Kansas in 1879 as part of the Exoduster movement. Inspired by promises of cheap land provided through the 1862 Homestead Act, and supported by African American ministers and community leaders who described Kansas as a promised land of opportunity, these Exodusters built communities that required the very skills that Ellen Garrison perfected throughout her teaching career.

After she passed the Kansas teacher's exam in 1879, Ellen taught at two schools in Barton County, Kansas. Her ties to the growing African American community strengthened after her marriage to local farmer, Harvey Clark. Much like his new wife, Clark's own successes contributed to his local leadership—in addition to running his 168-acre farm and raising four children from a previous marriage, Clark bore public witness for numerous Exodusters as they claimed their rights to land.



▲ Ellen's second husband Harvey Clark paid the final homestead receipt for their 168 1/3 acres in January 1889, shortly before moving to Pasadena, California.

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA, c.1890-1892 ELLEN'S FINAL YEARS

By 1890, as southern states revised their constitutions to disenfranchise and segregate African Americans, Ellen moved again, this time to Los Angeles, California, where Southern California's mild climate and the opening of the transcontinental railroad in 1885 lured migrants of all races. Ellen and Harvey Clark settled in Pasadena, where the previous arrival of racial egalitarians from Indiana attracted a number of former abolitionists. Three of John Brown's grown children, including Owen Brown who participated in the 1859 raid on the federal arsenal in Harper's Ferry, Virginia, arrived in Pasadena in 1884.

Although Ellen suffered from tuberculosis and passed away two years after moving to Southern California, she no doubt took comfort from the fact that her final days were spent in a community of like-minded former activists. Her husband Harvey and stepson George were both active in Pasadena's African American community. Harvey was a founding member of the African American McKinley Club, and George was elected second lieutenant of Pasadena's "Colored Cavalry Troop D." After her death in 1892, and having made a full migration across the country, Ellen Garrison Jackson Clark was buried in Pasadena's Mountain View Cemetery along with many of her fellow activists.



▲ Pasadena in 1890, located at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains and 25 miles from the Pacific Ocean, was known for its dry, warm climate thought to help cure tuberculosis.

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FROM THE ROBBINS HOUSE IN CONCORD TO CALIFORNIA

In 1823, when Ellen Garrison was born in Concord, Massachusetts, slavery was firmly established in the U.S. legal, economic, and political system.

The granddaughter and daughter of formerly enslaved men, **Ellen Garrison** (1823-1892) spent a lifetime in the fight for liberty and equal rights for all people. Hers was a national saga in the constant fight for racial justice, during which she saw more of the expanding country than most of her Concord contemporaries.

CONCORD, 1823-1841

SCHOLAR AND EMERGING ACTIVIST

Much of Ellen Garrison's commitment to abolitionism and racial equality developed in her native Massachusetts. While slavery no longer existed in the Bay State when Ellen was a child, racial discrimination was common. In one instance, 12-year-old Ellen was ill-treated and "crowded out" of a Concord procession. To spare her child further humiliation, Ellen's mother forbade her from walking in the parade when Concord prepared for its bicentennial celebration in 1835. Ellen's mother only relented after a white schoolmate, Abba Prescott, offered to hold Ellen's hand, and the two girls marched defiantly, side-by-side:

And notwithstanding the incredulous gaze of the school ... [the two girls went holding hands] in the procession ... beneath the gaze of curiosity, surprise, ridicule and admiration.

(Excerpt from Abba Prescott Brooks' obituary, 1851)

This act was only the beginning of the Garrison women's lifelong challenge to racial injustice. In 1837, Ellen's mother, **Susan Garrison**, was a founding member of the Concord Female Antislavery Society; she hosted the group's second meeting in her home. The next year, at age 15, Ellen took up the cause of another oppressed group—Cherokee Indians who were forcibly removed from their ancestral homeland in Georgia. Together with her mother, sister, and 200 other Concord women, Ellen Garrison signed a petition to Congress protesting this act. Such petitioning introduced Ellen to a lifetime of activism.

***NOTE:** names in bold are associated with the Robbins House.

BOSTON, 1841-1860

ADVOCACY AND MARRIAGE

Boston was the center of the African American community in Massachusetts, and Ellen Garrison had strong ties to the First African Baptist Church. Located on the north slope of Beacon Hill, this church was established in 1806 by abolitionist minister Thomas Paul. Ellen's uncle, Obed Robbins, was one of many African Americans who helped found the church, and Thomas Paul presided over Robbins' marriage in 1807. Ellen's mother was very likely a First African Baptist Church founding member since she was living in Boston at this time. Although both Obed Robbins and Susan Garrison died before Ellen arrived in Boston, she followed their earlier example and joined the First African Baptist Church. Ellen's sister **Susan Garrison** also lived on the north slope of Beacon Hill. Through these family connections, and through her own alliance with activists in this church, Ellen was able to move beyond her already strong ties with Concord's white abolitionists to ally herself with some of the leading black and white reformers in Boston and across the state.

Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, Ellen participated in a variety of abolitionist campaigns. She signed petitions urging an end to racial segregation in Boston's schools and demanding a law barring Jim Crow cars on the railroads. In 1851 she donated to the Boston Vigilance Committee to support the rescue of fugitive slaves. Amid her public activism, Ellen managed to carve out a private life. In 1857, she married a black farmer from Delaware named John W. Jackson. But the union was cut short within a few years and the widowed Mrs. E.G. Jackson, as she called herself, returned to the fight for racial justice.

MARYLAND AND VIRGINIA, 1865-1870

FREEDMEN'S TEACHER

By 1863, Ellen was teaching school in Newport, Rhode Island. Inspired by President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which undermined slavery across the South, and the American Missionary Association (AMA), which announced plans to establish schools for freed people, Ellen applied for a teaching position in the South. In a letter to the AMA, Ellen expressed her enthusiasm: "I have a great desire to go and labor among the Freedmen of the South," she explained. "I think it is our duty as a people to spend our lives in trying to elevate our own race. For who can feel for us if we do not feel for ourselves, and who can feel the sympathy that we can, who are identified with them?"

At the war's end in 1865, Ellen joined hundreds of Northern women, black and white, in the AMA's efforts to send teachers to southern freed people. Founded in some cases by free blacks, these schools reached thousands of African Americans of all ages, and Ellen Garrison was one of their most dedicated teachers. Facing violent white opposition to black education, Ellen's commitment never wavered. In her letter of April 11, 1865, Ellen wrote to her employers: "It is unsafe to go out, that is for colored people, for they are stoned and driven about at the pleasure of the rowdies. ... I have found out one thing about these people. If they attack you be careful to stand your ground and they will leave you, but if you run they will follow." And when white authorities doubted her students' potential, she was adamant that they would succeed. Every time the AMA questioned the "colored scholars' equal capacity" with whites, Ellen consistently wrote one simple word: "Equal."

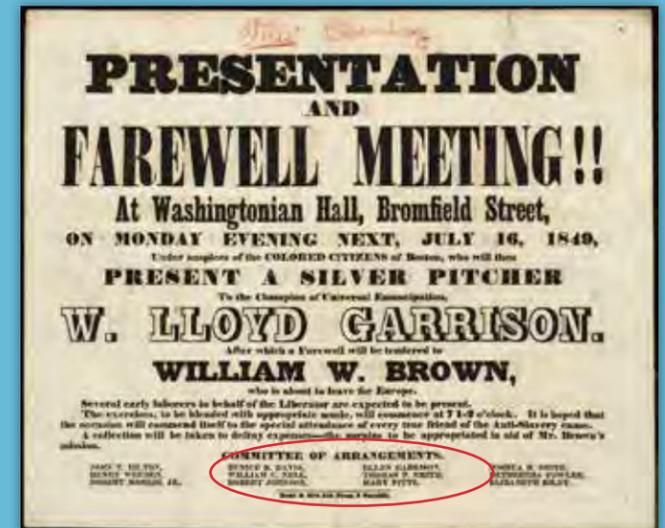
BALTIMORE, 1866

APPLYING THE FIRST CIVIL RIGHTS ACT

In 1866, while teaching in Maryland, Ellen Garrison launched one of the most significant protests of her life after she and fellow teacher Mary C. Anderson were thrown out of a train station's waiting room in Baltimore. Such segregation was supposedly unlawful under the Civil Rights Act, just passed by Congress the previous month. Invoking its provisions, Garrison and Anderson sued the railroad company for discrimination; theirs was one of the earliest cases to apply the new law.



▲ The Robbins house, originally built in a field on the outskirts of Concord in the early 1820s, childhood home of Ellen Garrison.



▲ Ellen Garrison served on the Committee of Arrangements to present white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, editor of *The Liberator* newspaper, with a silver chalice, and black writer William Wells Brown with a farewell celebration before his abolitionist lecture tour of Europe.



▲ Ellen Garrison's first Freedmen's School (1865-1868) was in Port Deposit, Maryland, on the banks of the Susquehanna River, a train ride away from Baltimore.