

City of Philadelphia



Council of the City of Philadelphia
Office of the Chief Clerk
Room 402, City Hall
Philadelphia

(Resolution No. 110085)

RESOLUTION

Recognizing the Week of February 20, 2011, as Frances Harper Week in Commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of her Death on February 22, 1911, in Philadelphia, and Honoring her as a Writer, Lecturer and Political Activist, who Promoted Abolition, Civil Rights, Women's Rights, and Temperance, Nationally and in the Greater Philadelphia Region.

WHEREAS, Frances Ellen Watkins was born on September 24, 1825, to a free black family in the city of Baltimore, in the slave state of Maryland and became an orphan three years later; and

WHEREAS, Watkins was raised by her uncle and aunt to be a strong advocate for civil rights. Her uncle was the abolitionist William Watkins, director of the Academy for Negro Youth in Baltimore and father of William J. Watkins, who would become an associate of Frederick Douglass; and

WHEREAS, Watkins began her literary career in 1846, at the age of 21, with the publication of her first book of poetry, *Forest Leaves*; and

WHEREAS, Following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, conditions for free blacks in the slave state of Maryland deteriorated and the Watkins family was forced to flee Baltimore. While her uncle went to Canada, Frances Watkins went to Ohio to teach at the Union Theological Seminary, where she met William Still; and

WHEREAS, In 1853, Frances Watkins moved to Philadelphia, compelled by the desire to become active in the Underground Railroad and make herself useful in the struggle against slavery in any way she could. In the following year, she moved to New England, published *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, and became a noted public speaker for the Maine Anti-Slavery Society, all while maintaining strong ties to the Philadelphia community; and

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WHEREAS, In April of 1858, Watkins confronted the issue of segregated trolley cars in Philadelphia. In her own words, “The other day, in attempting to ride in one of the city cars, after I had entered, the conductor came to me, and wanted me to go out on the platform. Now, was not that brave and noble? As a matter of course, I did not. Some one interfered, and asked or requested that I might be permitted to sit in a corner, I did not move, but kept the same seat. When I was about to leave, he refused my money, and I threw it down on the car floor, and got out, after I had ridden as far as I wished. Such imprudence!”; and

WHEREAS, Frances Watkins’ principled resistance to such discriminatory practices in the city of Philadelphia occurred some 100 years before Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her own bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama which precipitated the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955; and

WHEREAS, Over the years, Watkins’ work increasingly took on the themes of racism and women’s oppression and most of the earnings from her 1854 book *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (which sold over 10,000 copies) and other texts, went to help free the enslaved; and

WHEREAS, In 1859, Watkins again returned to Philadelphia to stay with and give comfort to John Brown’s wife, Mary Brown, while she awaited her husband’s execution at the hands of the state. In this same year, Watkins’ tale, “The Two Offers,” was printed in the *Anglo-African*, becoming the first short story to be published by an African-American. The story highlighted the important life choices that young women faced in their struggles to act with agency and independence in the formation of their relationships with men; and

WHEREAS, In 1860, Frances Watkins married Fenton Harper, moved to Ohio, gave birth to her daughter, Mary, and became known thereafter as Frances Harper. In 1864, Frances Harper found herself newly widowed; and

WHEREAS, In 1867, following the end of the Civil War, Frances Harper toured the South extensively for four years, speaking to large audiences, encouraging education for the formerly enslaved, and aiding in reconstruction. She worked extensively with the Freedman’s Bureau and selections from her writings were included in *The Freedman’s Book*, a collection used to help those formerly enslaved learn to read; and

WHEREAS, Harper formed alliances with several strong figures in the feminist movement, including Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton. In 1866, Harper gave a moving speech before the National Women’s Rights Convention, demanding equal rights for all, including black women. In 1869, she participated in the American Equal Rights Association meeting in a debate over the proposed Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which would grant suffrage to black men. The question of whether or not to support the passage of this amendment, given its failure to include women’s

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suffrage, became a source of profoundly heated discussion and led to a divisive split in the abolitionist-feminist alliance. Harper adamantly supported the amendment's passage, while Susan B. Anthony left the meeting in anger; and

WHEREAS, In 1870, Harper moved to Philadelphia permanently, purchasing a house at 10th and Bainbridge Streets, and joining the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. From this home, she wrote most of her poetry, articles, stories and novels in the decades that followed. Harper also worked with a number of churches in the black community near her residence, feeding the poor, preventing juvenile delinquency, and teaching Sunday School at the Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Three of her novels, in fact, were first published as serials in the AME journal, *The Christian Recorder*; and

WHEREAS, Given the prolific number of magazine articles Harper published in the final decades of the 19th Century, she has been referred to by many as "the mother of African-American journalism." Her pieces appeared with frequency in periodicals with circulations that were white and black alike; and

WHEREAS, In 1892, Harper published her final and most famous novel, *Iola Leroy*, which takes as its heroine a free-born, mulatta woman. The novel tells the story of Iola's struggles with enslavement, separation from her mother, her difficult search for work, and her experiences of conflict with the racist limitations of nineteenth-century society. The book, like the rest of Harper's career, highlights the connections between the issues of racism, classism, and sexism in ways that many of Harper's contemporaries failed to recognize as either related or intersecting. *Iola Leroy* is also one of the few novels to explore the mid-nineteenth century experience from an African American viewpoint; and

WHEREAS, In 1894, Harper helped found the National Association of Colored Women and served as its Vice President, from 1895 until her death. During this same period, Harper also wrote and lectured against lynching in company with Ida B. Wells, a celebrated journalist, women's rights advocate and anti-lynching crusader; and

WHEREAS, Frances Harper helped found or held high office in several national progressive organizations including: the Philadelphia and Pennsylvania Women's Christian Temperance Union, the National Association of Colored Women and the Universal Peace Union; and

WHEREAS, Throughout her life, in both her artistic practice and social activism, Frances Harper presented a program for human progress through personal development, altruism, non-discrimination, and racial pride that she embodied. As a poet and fiction writer, she preached morality and counseled the oppressed on how to free themselves from their demoralized condition; and

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WHEREAS, Much of Harper's body of work and thinking fell into obscurity for the first half of the 20th Century, she has since been rediscovered by feminists and African-American scholars and activists who have recognized the importance of her efforts and struggle – both to the city of Philadelphia and worldwide; now therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That the Week of February 20, 2011 – the 100th Anniversary of the Death of Frances Harper– shall be Recognized as Frances Harper Week in Honor of her Life-long Literary and Advocacy Contributions to the World, as well as to the Ongoing Influence of her Words and Ideas as they Continue to Inform Contemporary Dialogues on the Nature of Race, Class and Gender in America.

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CERTIFICATION: This is a true and correct copy of the original Resolution, Adopted by the Council of the City of Philadelphia on the seventeenth of February, 2011.

Anna C. Verna
PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Michael A. Decker
CHIEF CLERK OF THE COUNCIL

Introduced by: Councilmembers Blackwell and Kenney

Sponsored by: Councilmembers Blackwell, Kenney, Rizzo, Greenlee, Jones, DiCicco, Krajewski, Goode, Reynolds Brown, Miller, Clarke, Tasco, Council President Verna, Councilmembers Sanchez, Kelly, Green and O'Neill