

Mary Ann Shadd Cary – by Adrienne Shadd

To colored women, we have a word - we have "broken the Editorial ice," whether willingly or not, for your class in America; so go to Editing, as many of you as are willing, and able, and as soon as you may, if you think you are ready...

Thus was the rallying cry of Mary Ann Shadd in the June 30, 1855 issue of her newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman*. Being at the helm of a weekly paper had been a difficult introduction to the newspaper business. She had suffered insults and criticisms as the outspoken *editress* but, undaunted, she intended to keep it going *by any means necessary*. She unflinchingly called on more Black women to take their seat in the editor's chair of the nation's newspapers and periodicals. And by so doing herself, she had forever made her mark on history as the first Black woman to publish and edit a newspaper in North America.

Mary Ann Shadd was the first of thirteen children born into a prominent abolitionist family in Delaware on October 9, 1823. Their story was the stuff of romance and legend. Mary Ann descended from Hans Schad, a German mercenary who fought for the British in General Braddock's army, and a free woman of colour named Elizabeth Jackson, who nursed a wounded Schad back to health and married him a year later, in 1756.¹ Thus began the saga of a free African American family who fought for justice and equality for African Americans and African Canadians for the next 250 years.

Her father, Abraham Doras Shadd, was a shoemaker in Wilmington, Delaware and a leader of the Black convention movement of the 1830s-1850s. These conventions sought to end slavery and oppression, as well as to voice their stance against African "colonization," or the

repatriation of free Blacks back to Africa. Not much about her mother, Harriet Parnell Shadd, is known. She was born in North Carolina and married Abraham at a young age.² Their home was a stop on the Underground Railroad that assisted escaping slaves out of Maryland and Delaware into the free state of Pennsylvania and beyond.³

Such was the activist household that Mary Ann grew up in, and those tumultuous years clearly had a profound impact on her world view and her own future activism. The educational opportunities in Wilmington were scant in the 1820s and 30s, and Mary Ann's parents decided to move the family to West Chester, Pennsylvania, where their thirteen children were able to receive an education at a Quaker-sponsored school under Miss Phoebe Darlington.⁴ Mary Ann clearly loved learning and took her responsibility as someone with an education very seriously because, according to her daughter Sarah Cary Evans, at the tender age of 16 she returned to Wilmington and opened a school there for "colored children."⁵ As biographer and scholar Jane Rhodes noted, "In so doing, she carried out the expectation articulated by her father and other black leaders that educated members of the race must lend their talents to uplift those less fortunate."⁶ Mary Ann Shadd was one of many free Black women who participated in the "uplift" of the race. Thus did she begin at a very early age her life's work in the cause of freedom and the uplift of her people.

By 1850, Shadd had been teaching for over ten years in various towns and cities on the eastern seaboard of the United States, including Norristown, Pennsylvania, Trenton, New Jersey and New York City. Her services were requested by Henry and Mary Bibb, Black newspaper publishers and activists living in Sandwich, Canada West (Ontario), near Windsor.⁷ The Fugitive Slave Law had just been passed which not only allowed slave hunters and owners to track fugitives into free states, as was the case with the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act, but now compelled

ordinary citizens to participate in the capture and return of freedom-seekers. Anyone assisting runaways with food, shelter, transportation or other forms of support were subject to a fine of \$1000 and jail time of up to six months. Special judges were to hear cases, and were paid more money for returning alleged bondsmen and women than for setting them free, and the so-called fugitives could not testify on their own behalf. Even free African Americans were sometimes kidnapped and held in unforgiving servitude.⁸ As a result of this law, thousands of former slaves living in freedom in northern states felt compelled to pick up their lives and make a mad dash across the border into Canada where slavery had been officially abolished by Great Britain in 1833.⁹

Mary Ann heeded the call of the Bibbs and moved to Windsor where she began teaching a private school for the children of fugitives, most of whom had never seen the inside of a school room before. Although it was officially an integrated school – Mary Ann staunchly opposed separate schools – there is no evidence that any white children ever attended. Parents were to pay 1 shilling per week in school fees, but many did not or could not pay. Consequently, Mary Ann pursued financial assistance from the American Missionary Society, a religious anti-slavery organization that paid a stipend to teachers willing to instruct former slaves and their children. With what was frankly a meagre salary, she taught a first-class education, including classes in reading, grammar, spelling, geography and arithmetic, later adding history and botany to the curriculum.¹⁰

As valuable as her position as a teacher among the fugitives was, Shadd was also involved in community affairs and became increasingly vocal about the significance of Canada as a haven for African Americans. In 1852, she published *A Plea for Emigration; or Notes of Canada West*¹¹ which touted the country as a major refuge not only for escaping slaves but also

for free African Americans experiencing increasing restrictions on their lives in northern states, as was the case with her own family. However, her public outspokenness and willingness to take on male leaders in the community, both Black and white, got her into hot water. A dispute with the Bibbs over the question of segregated schools, the management of the Bibbs' Refugee Home Society land scheme and "begging"¹² spilled onto the pages of their newspaper, the *Voice of the Fugitive*, and led to her firing from her teaching position. It also changed history.

Shadd poured out her frustrations to George Whipple of the AMA:

What a vast amount of mischief a man like H. Bibb can do with an organ of his own to ... insinuate and "fling" away the reputation of others and how much he has already done to persons who have had no means equally intensive at their controls to counteract it is appalling...

she penned in one letter to him.

I have not a paper of my own and must leave the result with God.¹³

However, Whipple turned out not to be a faithful ally of Miss Shadd's and, although other notable individuals had come to her defence – among them well-known and respected abolitionist Samuel Ringgold Ward – her actions and outspokenness did not bode well for the continuation of her school. The AMA rescinded further funding for it, forcing her to shutter its doors in March 1853. However, by this time she had already begun developing plans for a new venture.

Shadd decided that she would establish her own newspaper where *she* could control how her ideas and opinions were disseminated. She solicited support and encouragement from the Black community in Windsor¹⁴ and her family and friends in West Chester, Pennsylvania. A report in the *Pennsylvania Freeman* of February 17, 1853 revealed that a meeting was held to

raise the means to aid fugitive slaves passing through West Chester, as well as to encourage the establishment of a newspaper to counter the *Voice of the Fugitive*, which, according to the meeting, misrepresented the condition and views of the people of Canada West. George Shreve, Mary Ann's brother-in-law, was secretary of the meeting and her father, A.D. Shadd was also a vocal participant.

Not long thereafter, a first edition of the *Provincial Freeman* was published in March 24, 1853. Interestingly, Shadd had asked Samuel Ringgold Ward, Black abolitionist and agent of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, to lend his name, experience and influence as editor. Although the paper was clearly her initiative, she was aware that her name on the masthead could alienate a readership that preferred the strict gender codes of nineteenth century society. Shadd then spent a year drumming up subscriptions and interest in her paper by taking to the lecture circuit. On March 25, 1854, *The Provincial Freeman* began publishing weekly out of Toronto. With this endeavour, Shadd became the first Black woman in North America to establish and edit a newspaper and one of the very early newspaperwomen in Canada.

First and foremost, the *Provincial Freeman* was an anti-slavery newspaper but as a leading emigrationist, Shadd strongly advocated Canada West (Ontario) as a place for Blacks to settle and the paper attacked "begging" and racism, even within the abolitionist movement. The paper's motto was "Self-reliance is the true road to independence," and hence, the importance of Black self-reliance and integration into Canadian society was a key component of the paper's philosophy. All Blacks were advised to insist on fair treatment, and to take legal action if all else failed. The *Freeman* continually stressed that the de jure equality that Blacks enjoyed in Canada was one of the most significant aspects of life on British soil and needed to be taken full advantage of. The paper also implicitly championed women's rights, documenting the lectures of

prominent activists like feminist Lucy Stone Blackwell and abolitionist Lucretia Mott. Moreover, it provided a forum for Black women, showcasing their talent and accomplishments. For example, the paper sang the praises of such women as African American poet and orator Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and gave public recognition to the work of local women and their activities and benevolent organizations.

Some of the leading Black leaders of the day were involved as editors or contributors to the paper. After moving to Chatham, Canada West, in 1855, Baptist minister and abolitionist William P. Newman, and well-known activist H. Ford Douglas, for example, acted as editors at one time or another, and such leading lights as Dr. Martin Delany and poet and abolitionist James Madison Bell made valuable contributions. Shadd's family, namely her brother Isaac, sister Amelia and sister-in-law Amelia Freeman Shadd, either sat in the editor's chair or contributed articles. Mary Ann often went on speaking tours in Canada and the United States to obtain subscriptions and generate interest. However, keeping the paper afloat was a daunting task, particularly in a community which had received little if any education and which was dependent for its readership upon a small educated elite.

After a valiant effort to keep it going, the paper finally succumbed in the year 1860. However, seven years of publishing a newspaper under such circumstances was quite an achievement and, according to Rhodes, places it among a very small group of influential Black publications, including Frederick Douglass's newspapers. Shadd Cary engaged in investigative reporting and muckraking at its best, and she wielded her pen like a mighty sword, not afraid to attack venerable institutions such as the Black church, or anything and anybody she believed was engaged in wrongdoing, particularly at the expense of the Black community.¹⁵ In addition to

providing an important voice for the Black community in Canada, it has provided an invaluable window on that community for modern-day researchers.

After the demise of the *Freeman*, Mary Ann Shadd Cary (she had married in 1856 to a Toronto businessman named Thomas F. Cary)¹⁶ continued to set a pioneering standard. She was hired by Martin Delany as perhaps the only woman to recruit Black soldiers during the Civil War¹⁷ and she later went on to study and practice law in Washington D.C., being one of the first women of her race to do so.¹⁸ She also became increasingly vocal and active on the issue of women's rights and suffrage during her later years.¹⁹

Shadd Cary died on June 5, 1893. After a lifetime of achievements and firsts, perhaps her greatest contribution was the role she carved out for herself as a Black woman in the public sphere, whether as a teacher and community activist, writer, newspaper editor, public speaker, recruiting agent for the Union Army or lawyer. By pushing the boundaries and limitations normally ascribed to her race and sex, she blazed a trail not only for Black people but for generations of women. Shadd's descendants, and those of her brothers and sisters, live all over Canada and the United States today. I am one of those descendants who is dedicated to the resurrection and preservation of the memory not only of Mary Ann Shadd but of the thousands of others who made Canada home during that period. In fact, it was Shadd's story that first fired my imagination and sparked my interest in learning more about this neglected area of Canadian history. Her life will always be a source of tremendous pride and inspiration for me. Among Mary Ann Shadd Cary's many posthumous honours, she was designated a Person of National Historic Significance in Canada in 1994, and her house on W Street N.W. is a national historic landmark in Washington D.C.²⁰

¹ Jane Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 2.

² Rhodes, p. 4.

³ R. C. Smedley, *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and the Neighbouring Counties of Pennsylvania* (Mechanicsburg, Pa: Stackpole Books, 1883/2005), 33, 337; James E. Newton and Harmon R. Carey, "Diamonds of Delaware and Maryland's Eastern Shore: Seven Black Men of Distinction," *A History of African Americans of Delaware and Maryland's Eastern Shore*, Carole C. Marks, ed. (Wilmington, De: A Delaware Heritage Press Book, 1996), 82.

⁴ Sarah Cary Evans, "Mrs. Mary Ann Shadd Cary, 1823-1893, The Foremost Colored Canadian Pioneer in 1850," in *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction*, Hallie Q. Brown, ed., The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (New York and Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1926/1988), 92. Rhodes, who has written the definitive biography of Shadd Cary thus far was unable to find any evidence that Phoebe Darlington operated a school in West Chester or thereabouts in that time period. However Mary Ann Shadd's daughter, Sarah Cary Evans, penned a short biography of her in 1926 which makes the case.

⁵ Evans, 92.

⁶ Rhodes, 19.

⁷ Rhodes, 34.

⁸ One prominent example of this type of situation was the case of Solomon Northup, depicted in the Academy award-winning film *Twelve Years a Slave*, although he was kidnapped years before the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 was enacted. The Fugitive Slave Law only emboldened unscrupulous individuals to commit even more kidnappings of free African Americans. See Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (New York: Penguin Books, 1853/2013). The motion picture was based fairly faithfully on this narrative by Northup.

⁹ For example, see Fred Landon, "The Negro Migration to Canada after the Passing of the Fugitive Slave Act," *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 5, no. 1 (January 1920): 22-36, also found in *Ontario's African-Canadian Heritage: The Collected Writings of Fred Landon, 1918-1967*, Carolyn Smardz Frost, Bryan Walls, Hilary Bates Neary and Frederick H. Armstrong, eds. (Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, a Member of the Dundurn Group, 2009), 240-252.

¹⁰ Mary Ann Shadd to Executive Members of the AMA, April 5, 1852, American Missionary Association Archives, Amistad research Center, New Orleans, on microfilm at Archives of Ontario, D25, AMA Canadian Files, MS 513, reel 1, hereafter AMA Files; Mary Ann Shadd to the Executive Committee AMA, October 24, 1852, AMA Files.

¹¹ Mary A. Shadd, *A Plea for Emigration Or, Notes of Canada West*, Richard Almonte, ed. (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1998).

¹² This was the practice of fundraising on behalf of the "poor, unclothed, downtrodden fugitives," and presenting them in an unfavourable light when in fact most were able to find work and get on their feet fairly quickly. It was also questionable how much the funds raised in these "begging" efforts actually reached those for whom it was intended.

¹³ Mary Ann Shadd to George Whipple, July 21, 1852, AMA Files.

¹⁴ Rhodes, 70.

¹⁵ Rhodes, 220-21.

¹⁶ Mary Ann Shadd Cary had two children, Sarah Elizabeth Cary (b. 1857) and Linton Cary (b. 1861). Tragically, Thomas F. Cary, her husband, died in 1860 when she was pregnant with Linton. They had an unconventional marriage, never having actually lived together during their four-year marriage.

¹⁷ Rhodes, 155.

¹⁸ Rhodes, 185-86; 209.

¹⁹ Rhodes, see Chapter 8.

²⁰ “Mary Ann Shadd,” Persons of National Historic Significance at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persons_of_National_Historic_Significance (accessed September 5, 2018); “Mary Ann Shadd Cary House,” National Parks Service at <https://www.nps.gov/places/the-mary-ann-shadd-cary-house.htm> (accessed September 5, 2018).