

Charlotte Forten: Abolitionist, Teacher, Nurse



Charlotte Forten, n.d.
Courtesy Moorland-Spingarn Research
Center, Howard University

“I feel it a happiness, an honor to do the slightest service for them.”

“(I) found my patients so cheerful some of them even quite merry, I thought it could not be possible that they were badly wounded.”

Born: 1837

Died: 1914

Profession: Volunteer Nurse

Early Years: Charlotte Forten was freeborn into a wealthy abolitionist African American family. She was raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her parents valued education. She attended school in Salem, Massachusetts.

First African American Teacher: After finishing her own schooling, Forten became the first African American hired to teach in Salem, Massachusetts. In 1862, she was the first African American from the north to travel south to teach former slaves to read and write during the American Civil War.

Volunteer Nurse: In 1863, she volunteered as a nurse, caring for wounded soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment of the United States Colored Infantry. African American nurses worked both in hospitals and on the battlefields, but many served without any compensation from the government. Forten had to give up nursing when she became ill and weak.

Diary of an Abolitionist: We know about Charlotte Forten’s experience during the American Civil War from a diary she kept. In her diary, she wrote about the strength of the soldiers and their kindness to the nurses, as well as the importance of the nurses to the wounded soldiers. Forten also expressed her happiness to care for the men and her sadness when one of them died. She was inspired to serve because of her family tradition of social activism and a strong desire to work for freedom.