



Helen Pitts Douglass
(1838-1903)

By Jean Czerkas

Helen Pitts Douglass, second wife of Frederick Douglass, was born and raised in Honeoye, Ontario County. Her parents, Gideon and Jane Pitts, were active in the abolitionist and suffragist movements.

Helen received her early education at the Genesee Wesleyan Seminary in Lima, NY. After graduating from the Mount Holyoke Seminary in 1859, she returned to her parents' home in Honeoye.

For several years she was a teacher at the Hampton Institute in Virginia, a school founded for the education of black men and women. Tensions mounted at the school when Helen caused the arrest of local residents whom she thought had insulted and abused her students. Poor health forced her to return to Honeoye.

Helen Pitts moved to Washington, DC, in 1882 to live with her uncle. She continued her interest in the women's rights movement when she was associated with Dr. Caroline Winslow, president of the Moral Education Society of Washington and the editor of Alpha, the society's radical newspaper. Helen wrote articles and assisted Dr. Winston in the publication of the newspaper.

Later Helen worked in the pension office in Washington. In 1882, she was hired as a clerk in the office of Frederick Douglass when he was recorder of deeds.

Helen and Frederick were married on January 24, 1884, a year and a half after the death of Anna, Douglass' first wife. They were married by Rev. Francis Grimke at the Washington 15th Street Presbyterian Church. Frederick was 66 and Helen was 46 at the time of their marriage. Neither Douglass' children nor Helen's family approved of the marriage.

Helen was her husband's intellectual equal unlike Anna, Douglass' first wife. She traveled extensively with him. They lived in Haiti when Douglass was appointed Minister to Haiti by President Benjamin Harrison.





After Douglass' death in 1895, she worked tirelessly to save Cedar Hills, their Washington home, as a memorial to her late husband.

Helen Pitts Douglass died in 1903 at the age of 65. She wanted to be buried on the grounds of Cedar Hill, but Washington laws prevented burials on home grounds. No funeral services were held in Washington or Rochester. Her remains were interred in the Douglass family plot at Mount Hope Cemetery.

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