



Sallie Holley

(1818-1893)

By Elizabeth Schmidt

Myron Holley's medallion portrait on his obelisk in Mount Hope Cemetery has long been eroded beyond recognition, while the likeness of his daughter's face on the shared stone is still recognizable. Sallie Holley, one of the twelve children of Myron and Sally House Holley, was born in Canandaigua, New York, on February 17, 1818. Early in her life, she was influenced by her father's antislavery beliefs and his religious liberalism.

While visiting a sister in Buffalo in 1843, she first heard and was impressed by a Frederick Douglass lecture. Many years later at a memorial service for her before the Women's Suffrage Convention in Washington, D.C., Douglass recalled his initial acquaintance with her. John White Chadwick recorded part of that recollection in his biography of Sallie Holley, *A Life for Liberty*.

"On the third day of our motley meeting, made up entirely of men, I observed with some amazement, as well as pleasure, a stately young lady, elegantly dressed, come into the room, leading a beautiful little girl. The crowd was one that would naturally repel a refined and elegant little lady, but there was no shrinking on her part. The crowd did the shrinking. It drew in its sides and opened the way, as if fearful of soiling the elegant dress with the dirt of toil. This lady came daily to my meetings in that old deserted building, morning and afternoon, until they ended. The dark and rough background rendered her appearance like a messenger from heaven sent to cheer me in what seemed to most men a case of utter despair."

The lady was Miss Sallie Holley, and this story illustrates her noble, independent, and humane character. She was never ashamed of her cause nor her company.

After her father's death in 1841, Holley briefly taught school in Rochester. In 1847, encouraged by a Unitarian minister who also gave her \$40.00 for expenses, she attended Oberlin College on a scholarship. When her money was gone, she worked at various jobs on campus. At Oberlin, she first met Caroline Putnam and formed a friendship that lasted a lifetime. A decisive event in Holley's life during her college years was hearing a lecture by Abby Kelley Foster, a Garrisonian abolitionist. It led to her choice of career.





After graduation in 1851, Holley became an agent of the American Anti-Slavery Society. She lectured regularly and wrote for Garrison's *Liberator*. Caroline Putnam often accompanied her on trips. Although she admitted to a fear of lecturing that never disappeared, Holley was an effective and appealing speaker who drew large crowds. And because she publicly advocated a cause, rare for a woman at that time, she endured the stigma attached to women lecturers that sometimes caused acquaintances to cross the street rather than speak to her.

Even after the slaves were freed, Holley continued working for their benefit by collecting clothing and lecturing on suffrage for them. In 1870, the American Anti-Slavery Society disbanded. She thought this a mistake.

"Does not the simple existence of such a Society in the nation's midst, such a watchful, wise friend, save the poor black race from much neglect, contumely, and wrong? Does not such a fact guarantee a respect and aid they cannot afford to relinquish?" (Chadwick, p. 210)

She joined her friend, Caroline Putnam, in Lottsburg, Northumberland County, Virginia, where Putnam had established a school for former slaves two years previously. The operation of this school became Holley's work until her death.

Reading, writing, and vocational skills were taught to the African-Americans. The school, called the Holley School, depended on contributions from Northern supporters.

In a way, the two women's existence was a self-imposed exile and martyrdom. The white, Southern community ostracized Northerners who moved South to establish schools for the freedmen and freed women. Only letters and visits from their Northern friends and vacations relieved their isolation. Regularly, Sallie Holley would travel to New York City in January to visit friends and attend cultural events. It was on such a visit in 1893 that she became ill with pneumonia and died on January 12.

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