



Sarah Parker Remond

19TH-CENTURY
RENAISSANCE

WOMAN

By Courtney Peter

Students of African-American women's history face a daunting task: to form an understanding of the African-American female experience based on an incomplete historical record. For every celebrated black female activist there are multiple others who have been silenced by history. But during their lifetimes, these women were not silent.

"Records prove that black women, despite their absence from conventional histories, were in fact eloquently present," writes Bert J. Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, editors of *Black Women in 19th-century American Life* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976). "Differing in experience from white women, they spoke as blacks. Differing in experience from men who were black, they spoke as women. Differing from one another, they spoke as individuals."

Sarah Parker Remond was one of these women. Born in June 1826 into a socially conscious entrepreneurial family of free blacks in Salem, Mass., she became an abolitionist lecturer who addressed audiences on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Sarah later settled in Italy, where she earned a medical degree and practiced as a physician.

The Remonds of Salem

Massachusetts abolished slavery in 1783, a move that brought freed slaves to Salem in search of work. In the late 18th century, Salem was one of the nation's largest cities, as well as a center of abolitionist sentiment, where free blacks made up nearly 2 percent of the population. "By the mid-19th century, Salem was home to an educated, active and successful African-American community," notes the National Park Service publication "African American Heritage Sites in Salem."

"The Remonds, a unique free family of 10, were intricately woven into the social and historic fabric not only of Salem but [also] all of New England," writes Dorothy Porter Wesley in *The Remonds of Salem, Massachusetts: A 19th-Century Family Revisited* (American Antiquarian Society, 1986). At the head of the family were John and Nancy Lenox Remond, who married in October 1807. John, born on the Caribbean island of Curaçao, immigrated to the United States at age 10. Nancy, a cake baker, was a Massachusetts native with a Revolutionary War heritage. According to Wesley, "Her father Cornelius enlisted in the Continental Army on February 6, 1779, and served as a private in Captain

Nathaniel Heath's company until March 1, 1781, when he was discharged."

John worked as a barber and hairdresser, as well as caretaker and primary caterer at Salem's Hamilton Hall, where he also operated a store. (The historic assembly hall designed by Samuel McIntire and named for Alexander Hamilton still stands today.) As the catering business flourished, John expanded into other ventures, becoming a wholesale supplier for shipping vessels. "By the end of 1848, John Remond controlled a diversified entrepreneurial enterprise," Wesley writes.

Education, entrepreneurship and activism were core values in the Remond home. Sarah and her siblings were exposed to art, music, books, anti-slavery tracts and newspapers. Frequent visits from anti-slavery lecturers including William Lloyd Garrison augmented this education, as did the fugitive slaves who found refuge in the Remonds' home.

When faced with instances of discrimination, family members acted. For example, the Remonds moved to Newport, R.I., for the sake of their daughters' education after Sarah and her sister were forbidden from attending a Salem high school because of their race, even though they passed the entrance exam. (The family returned to Salem six years later.)

"It was this background of family social consciousness that provided the impulse for the anti-slavery activities of the second generation of Remonds," Wesley writes.

A Crusader for Equality

A product of this unique environment, Sarah worked to free others from the boundaries imposed by theirs. "Sarah Remond grew to womanhood in a free society," writes Bogin in *Black Women in 19th-Century American Life*. "She required neither protector nor sponsor; she needed but a purpose to enrich her life, and she had one."

On May 4, 1853, Sarah, her sister Caroline and a black male friend arrived at the Howard Athenaeum in Boston to attend the opera. When they were directed to the segregated balcony instead of the seats for which they had paid, they refused to go. A police officer tried to forcibly remove Sarah, who filed and won a civil suit against the officer and theater manager.

A note from Sarah to Lucy G. Ives, who at the time of the note was the president of the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem.



A number of John Remond's business ventures were based at Hamilton Hall in Salem, Mass.

The most well-known anti-slavery activist in the Remond family was not Sarah, but her older brother Charles Lenox Remond, one of the most prominent abolitionist lecturers of his time. Sarah's public speaking career began in 1856, at age 30, and she soon became one of the American Anti-Slavery Society's most compelling lecturers. After addressing crowds across the Northern states, she was invited on a speaking tour of Britain.

There, she "made a profound impression because of her color and her womanhood," Loewenberg and Bogin write. Sarah herself was moved by audiences' responses. "I have been received here as a sister by white women for the first time in my life," she said.

Her lectures condemned racial discrimination, slavery and the horrific abuse endured by female slaves. In a speech in Liverpool, England, in 1859, Sarah said, "I appeal on behalf of 4 million men, women and children who are chattels in the Southern States of America. Not because they are identical with my race and color, though I am proud of that identity, but because they are men and women."

Given that the United States was headed toward civil war, and that the British were significant consumers of Southern cotton, grown using slave labor, it was vital to win Britain's support for the abolitionist cause. "What is most striking about Remond's speeches is her keen understanding of British complicity with the American institution of slavery through

*Salem Dec 28th 1858.
My Dear Mrs Ives. Please
accept my warmest
thanks, and return
the same to my friends,
for the beautiful gift
I received last evening.
I am very truly
Yours, Sarah Remond.*

the growing global culture of capitalism,” writes Michelle Diane Wright in *Broken Utterances: A Selected Anthology of 19th-century Black Women’s Social Thought* (Three Sistas Press, 2007).

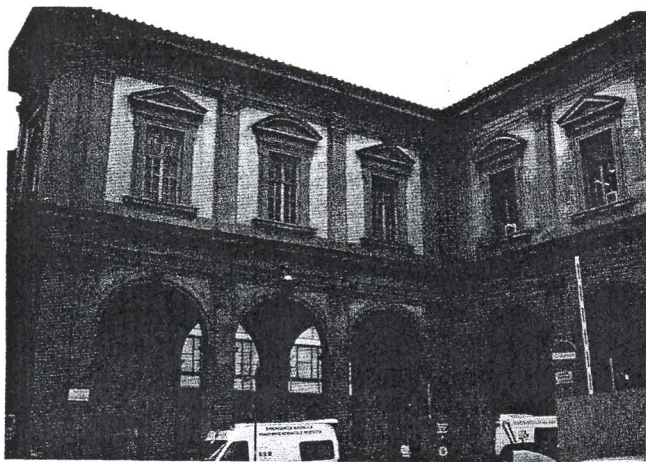
“I ask you, raise the moral public opinion until its voice reaches the American shores,” Sarah entreated an audience in Manchester, England, on September 17, 1859. “Aid us thus until the shackles of the American slave melt like dew before the morning sun. . . . I am met on every hand by the cry ‘Cotton! Cotton!’ I cannot stop to speak of cotton while men and women are being brutalized.”

In three years, Sarah delivered more than 40 lectures in England, Scotland and Ireland, while also taking classes at the Bedford College for Women, now part of the University of London. After the Civil War, she began a new chapter of her own by moving to Florence, Italy, to study medicine at Santa Maria Nuova, a hospital dating to the 13th century. She received a medical degree in 1871 and built a successful practice.

On April 25, 1877, Sarah married Lazzaro Pintor, but their relationship appears to have been short-lived. “She was in her 50s when they wed in Florence, and she was on her own in Rome within three years,” writes Marilyn Richardson in “Sarah Parker Remond: An African American Woman in 19th-century Europe,” published on the Wellesley Centers for Women website. Sarah died on December 13, 1894, in London.

Sharing Her Legacy

Today this worldly anti-slavery advocate’s story remains relatively unknown, both in her native country and abroad. Two projects in Italy—one recently completed, the other in progress—aim to change that.



Florence, Italy’s Santa Maria Nuova, where Sarah studied and received a medical degree in 1871.

“I appeal on behalf of 4 million men, women and children who are chattels in the Southern States of America. Not because they are identical with my race and color, though I am proud of that identity, but because they are men and women.” — SARAH REMOND, 1859 SPEECH IN ENGLAND

In 2013, a memorial plaque dedicated to Sarah was installed on the wall of Rome’s historic Non-Catholic Cemetery, also known as the Protestant Cemetery. Richardson, former curator of the Museum of African American History in Boston’s Beacon Hill neighborhood, and Francis Mayo, former president of the Salem Athenaeum, led the effort to place the marker.

Marking Sarah’s gravesite was not a straightforward endeavor, because for many years her interment could not be located in the cemetery’s records. Several years ago, cemetery administrators and historians discovered why: Her burial was recorded under the name Sara [sic] Remond Pintor.

Despite the confirmation that Sarah is buried at the Non-Catholic Cemetery, the exact location of her grave is unlikely to be found. “As is common in many older European burial grounds, if there is no fund maintained by family or others for the upkeep of a gravesite, the remains are eventually removed and respectfully, but anonymously, reburied in a designated communal area,” Richardson writes.

The cemetery plaque inspired members of Pax Romana DAR Chapter, based in Rome, to learn more about the activist and physician who made her home in their city. Initially, “I had no idea who she was,” said past Chapter Regent Cara Kavanaugh.

As the chapter learned more about Sarah’s life, members identified strongly with “the connection between a grandfather who fought for freedom in the Revolutionary War and the granddaughter who fought in Europe for freedom for all Americans,” Ms. Kavanaugh said.

During the course of her research, Ms. Kavanaugh began corresponding with Mayo, who showed her a copy of a letter that Sarah wrote to Frederick Douglass. The return address on the letter read Piazza Barberini No. 4. “That’s when I got the idea to place a marker on the building where she lived,” said Ms. Kavanaugh.

She has been in contact with Italy’s cultural ministry and the cultural attaché at the U.S. embassy, who are helping to secure approval for the marker. Progress continues on other fronts. A marble company already agreed to donate the stone for the plaque and to chisel the inscription. “We’re getting closer,” said Ms. Kavanaugh. “We want as many people as possible to know about her.”