

# Inspiring Greatness

*The life of Frances Wright, forgotten pioneer of women's rights*

By Lena Anthony

Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton—these names are synonymous with women's rights. But before them, there was Frances Wright, who is believed to be the first American woman to speak publicly for gender equality when she did so in 1828.

**W**right died in 1852, never witnessing the changes she advocated, but she had a lasting legacy nonetheless, serving as an inspiration for those who would go on to transform women's place in society.

According to Celia Morris, the author of *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* (University of Harvard Press, 1984), both Anthony and Stanton, among other notable American feminists, were familiar with Wright's writings, and Anthony even had a large portrait of Wright in her home. Morris visited Anthony's home while researching Wright's life.

"It was terribly exciting to see that," said Morris in a recent interview with *American Spirit*. "I pictured her looking at that portrait, asking, 'How am I doing, Fanny?'"

But America's most famous feminists differed from Wright in at least one respect. Whereas they were reformers, she was a radical. In fact, to be called a "Fanny Wrightist" in the 1830s was similar to being labeled a Communist in the 1950s, according to Morris.



Like those who followed her, Wright advocated for equal education, birth control, the right to vote, and more rights for married and divorced women. Less popular were her beliefs that the factory system and organized religion were avenues to suppress women.

“Fanny didn’t take moderate positions,” Morris said. “She was temperamentally extreme. It colored everything that she did.”

### Roots of Rebellion

Even in her youth, Wright could have been considered a radical. She was born in Scotland in 1795, but by the time she was 3 years old, both of her parents had died. She became separated from her brother, Richard, who went to live with a great-uncle, James Mylne, in Glasgow, and younger sister, Camilla, who was put into foster care.

Fanny went to London to live with her grandfather, Royal Marine Major General Duncan Campbell, and his daughter, both of whom Wright regarded as being lazy, privileged and ungenerous.

“By her own account, Fanny came early to distrust the self-indulgence that made that life so sweet,” Morris writes.

In 1806, Wright moved with her aunt to the seaside town of Dawlish, where she was reunited with Camilla. (Richard died in 1809 in a skirmish with the French, while he was on his way to India.) There, she continued to grow impatient and disillusioned with the privileged world around her and its lack of great expectations for women.

“Her disdain for drawing rooms prompted her to pour her energies into becoming a scholar,” Morris writes. “She learned French and Italian. She read classical literature. She spent years confronting the disciplines of history, philosophy and mathematics.”

In 1816, she and Camilla returned to Scotland to live with Mylne, a professor of moral philosophy at Glasgow

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– CELIA MORRIS

College. He provided Frances with access to the library at the university and surrounded her with progressive philosophers. She was particularly influenced by the women around her, including Robina Craig Millar, a friend of the Mylne family.

Wright became fascinated by America, and after reading Italian historian Carlo Botta’s highly acclaimed account of the Revolution, she wanted nothing more than to make the journey there.

While Frances and Mylne did share many of the same views, he didn’t necessarily encourage her social activism and unsuccessfully tried to stop her from going to America.

“Fanny wanted to see if life in a republic was as promising as it seemed, but she made her decision for other reasons as well,” Morris writes. “It was one step further in her rejection of the comfortable role that women of her class were expected to play.”

### Coming to America

Wright, along with her sister, arrived in New York in September 1818. Immediately, she was impressed by what she saw.

“Everywhere she looked, Fanny found things to praise,” Morris writes. “She admired the abundance of comfortable private homes. Every working man seemed honest and industrious.”

The sisters settled into a new routine quickly, which included socializing

with members of New York society, to whom they were introduced through friends back home. Just five months after arriving, “Altorf,” a play she wrote about the struggle for Swiss independence, was staged at the Park Theatre.

The reviewers, while writing of the play in glowing terms, assumed a man had written it. Morris writes that, against her better judgment, Wright’s closest friends convinced her that she should keep her identity a secret, for propriety’s sake.

The experience also helped fuel a successful writing career. Wright would go on to publish many other works, including *Views of Society and Manners in America* (1821), which offered an oftentimes-romanticized peek into American issues large and small, from American Indians to women’s fashions. Later she became what is thought of as the first American woman to edit a journal, when she began working on the *New Harmony* (Ind.) *Gazette* in 1828.

### Her Most Important Relationships

By the time they set sail for London in May 1820, Wright and her sister had met a whole roster of important figures in American society, including President James Monroe and Henry Clay, as well as Joseph Bonaparte, brother of Napoleon, and José Correia de Serra, the ambassador to Portugal and a close friend of Thomas Jefferson.

But for all the connections that America had offered her, Wright would forge her most important relationship upon her return to Europe. In 1821, Wright met Marquis de Lafayette, which, she said in one of her first letters to him, was “one of the earliest and fondest wishes of my youth.”

Wright’s friendship with Lafayette would last the rest of his lifetime and would be marked by skepticism and scandal, as many believed her to be Lafayette’s mistress. Both Wright and Lafayette insisted that it was more like a bond between father and daughter, and indeed some of her letters to him might suggest that.

“My friend, my father, if there be a word more expressive of love and reverence and adoration I would fain use it,”

“I dare say you marvel sometimes at my independent way of walking through the world just as if nature had made me of your sex instead of poor Eve’s ... I who was thrown in infancy upon the world like a wreck upon the waters have learned, as well to struggle with the elements as any male child of Adam.”

— FRANCES WRIGHT IN A FEBRUARY 11, 1822, LETTER TO THE MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE

Wright wrote to Lafayette in 1822. “I am only half alive when away from you.”

Wright and her sister followed Lafayette on his 1824–1825 visit to the United States, where she was able to spend time at Monticello with Thomas Jefferson, whom she regarded as her hero, even more so than Lafayette. In Jefferson, Wright saw someone who shared her ideals of equality for all, including slaves. And she listened intently as he and Lafayette discussed the topic at Monticello.

“It was not wholly untrue, but I think that she felt that she was among peers when she was with them,” Morris said. “On one hand, here she was, a very impressive woman, extremely well-educated, articulate and forceful. But on the other hand, she knew how to play up to people like that. She worshipped them, and they would have been very callous if they hadn’t responded.”

What she discovered, though, was that Jefferson was not as eager as she was in her quest to end slavery, and so she took matters into her own hands.

Robert Owen’s New Harmony, Ind., utopian community, where Wright spent some time, she hoped Nashoba would be a place to educate and free slaves with no loss to slaveholders. The experiment failed financially after three years.

“She was deeply offended by slavery and tried to do everything she could to address it,” Morris said. “It’s not surprising that her efforts failed because they were so ambitious. But her willingness to take on huge challenges is something that should always be admired.”

### Later Life

In 1831, Wright married a French physician, William Phiquepal D’Arusmont, whom she later divorced. They had one child, Frances Silva D’Arusmont. Wright became active in the Popular Health Movement between 1830 and 1840, advocating for women health practitioners and more female involvement in health and medicine.

She spent her retirement years living with her daughter. She died in 1852 of complications from a fall on ice, and was buried in the Cincinnati, Ohio, Spring Grove Cemetery.

Though forgotten for a time, her remarkable life has been revived by historians and others fascinated by her activist-before-her-time outlook. Writes Morris, “She was right in saying that later generations would know that she, and not those who attacked her, spoke for a sane and healthy morality.” 🐼

### The Community at Nashoba

Shortly after becoming a U.S. citizen in 1825, Wright became one of the first women in America to act publicly against slavery. That same year she purchased a small tract of land outside of present-day Memphis, Tenn., where she set up the Nashoba Community to foster racial harmony. Inspired by

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