

Anne P. Adams, “An Orphan Girl of New England”: The Search for Annie Parker

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Since the publication of *Autographs for Freedom* in 1853, readers and scholars alike have speculated over the identity of Annie Parker, the heretofore unknown author of the short story “Passages in the Life of a Slave Woman,” and whether the story was, in any way, autobiographical. Best known today for Frederick Douglass’s contribution, his novella “The Heroic Slave,” *Autographs for Freedom* was a collection of antislavery poems, short stories, and essays contributed by a number of well-known nineteenth-century activists, writers, and politicians, including Charles Sumner, Horace Greeley, Gerrit Smith, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Caroline W. H. Dall, Catherine M. Sedgwick, William H. Seward, and John G. Whittier. Edited by Julia Griffiths under the auspices of the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society and published by the Boston firm of John P. Jewett, *Autographs for Freedom* was essentially a gift book designed to raise funds to help support *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*.

Unlike most of her fellow contributors, however, fewer than ten pieces—published in *Frederick Douglass’ Newspaper*, a temperance newspaper based in Geneva, New York, and the *Cayuga Chief* of Auburn, New York—can be attributed with any degree of certainty to Annie Parker prior to the publication of *Autographs for Freedom*. Moreover, aside from a few references indicating some familiarity with Rochester and Brooklyn, New York, and an apparent proximity to the Finger Lakes district and the central region of Upstate New York, this slim number of publications offered few clues to the identity of Annie Parker. The lack of biographical information has led to much speculation over such matters as her age, race, social status, and so forth.

In conjunction with the publication of the Frederick Douglass Papers’ scholarly edition of *The Heroic Slave* in 2014, my coeditor, John R. McKivigan, published a blog post in which he considered the possibility that Annie Parker might in fact have been a pseudonym for Harriet Jacobs, author of one of the best known slave narratives, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1859). Like “Passages in the Life of a Slave Woman,” Jacobs’s autobiography also dealt with the abuse and exploitation of enslaved African American women. Additionally, there were clear overlaps between Annie Parker’s life and Harriet Jacobs’s life, including both a connection to Douglass (at one point Harriet Jacobs worked in the same building that housed Douglass’s newspaper office) as well as to Jacobs’s one-time employer, Nathaniel Parker Willis, as Parker referenced Willis in a piece she wrote about a trip to the resort at Silver Lake, Pennsylvania.¹

However, the answer to the question of Annie Parker’s identity, including both her race and whether her story might have been autobiographical, has now been discovered in an obscure item of correspondence in the papers of Gerrit Smith. In a letter dated 16 August 1851, Joseph Comstock Hathaway asked Smith if he would be willing to send a small amount of money to their mutual friend Frederick Douglass so that he could provide some additional compensation for Annie Parker, who had recently contributed a few articles to Douglass’s newspaper. Hathaway then explained that Anne P. Adams, who he praised as a “great reformer” and described as a

¹Adams referred to the Charlotte Canda mausoleum, which was completed in 1847 and is located in Brooklyn’s Greenwood Cemetery, in her article, “Rural Cemeteries.” Annie Parker, “Rural Cemeteries,” *Frederick Douglass’ Newspaper*, 13 August 1852. She mentioned Willis and her visit to Silver Lake, Pennsylvania, in the *Cayuga Chief*. Annie Parker, “From Annie Parker,” *Cayuga Chief*, 20 July 1852.

“young orphan girl of New England,” was in fact the author of the “Annie Parker” articles.² Armed with this new information, the search for the real “Annie Parker” could begin in earnest.

What I discovered was that Anne P. Adams was, according to the 1850 U.S. Census, a single, White female born circa 1821 in New Hampshire, living in the household of Joseph Comstock Hathaway (the very man who would later identify her as Annie Parker) in Farmington, New York, a community twenty-five miles southeast of Rochester.³ Further investigation of census records indicated that she continued to reside with the Hathaway family through at least 1860.⁴ Although no occupation was given in the 1850 Census, beginning with the 1855 state census, Anne P. Adams’s occupation was listed as teacher.⁵ By 1870 she was living in her own home in Dansville, New York, where once again her occupation was listed as teacher, and she was described as possessing real estate valued at \$6,000 and a personal estate valued at \$3,000. At the time, she shared her home with a wealthy physician, a fellow teacher and her child, a cook, a domestic servant, and the servant’s child.⁶ In the 1875 state census, however, she was still working as a teacher and living in Dansville, but the composition of her household had changed drastically, and now consisted of another single female boarder from Canada, and a small family of German immigrants composed of a husband, wife, and two young children.⁷

Further research exposed additional information on Annie Parker’s life, such as the fact that in 1849 Anne P. Adams was one of a group of five Quaker women who organized a racially integrated school, known locally as the “Bird’s Nest School,” in Macedon, New York, specifically to teach the famous Edmondson sisters (Mary Catherine and Emily) alongside local White children.⁸ Notes in a couple of 1858 issues of the *Letter-Box*—the Glen Haven, New York, newspaper—indicated that Adams taught at the Brooklyn Female Seminary (known as the Packer Institute after 1854) sometime between its founding in 1845 and 1849.⁹ She also published a few short stories and poems, under her own name, in the *Student and Family Miscellany* in 1854.¹⁰

After settling in Dansville, Annie P. Adams also served as the first librarian of the Livingston County Circulating Library from 1874 to 1875. In 1881, she became the first president of the local chapter of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, and in 1888 she was the vice president of the Dansville Village Improvement Society. Although her date and place of death has still not been determined, the last record of her public activities dates from 1893, when she was appointed one of the first trustees of Dansville’s library after it became part of the state library system.¹¹ After this, the trail runs cold and no further information about Anne P. Adams, or Annie Parker, has been discovered. Even so, at least part of the mystery of the woman who was Annie Parker can now be cleared up, and perhaps over time more details about the life, career, and writings of Anne P. Adams will also come to light.

² Historical Records Survey Program, *Calendar of the Gerrit Smith Papers in the Syracuse University Library*, 2 vols. (Albany, N.Y.: The Works Progress Administration, 1941), 2:108.

³ 1850 United States Census, Farmington, Ontario County, New York, 555.

⁴ 1860 United States Census, Farmington, Ontario County, New York, 45–46.

⁵ 1855 New York State Census, Farmington, Ontario County, 39.

⁶ 1870 United States Census, Dansville, Livingston County, New York, 328.

⁷ 1875 New York State Census, Dansville, Livingston County, 19B.

⁸ Judith Williams et al., eds., “Uncovering the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, and African American Life in Wayne County, New York, 1820–1880,” *The Wayne County Historian* (2007–2009), 25.

⁹ *The Letter-Box* (Glen Haven, N.Y.), 15 September 1858.

¹⁰ Anne P. Adams, “The Lily and the Rose. From the German of Herder,” *The Student and Family Miscellany...A Monthly Reader for Schools*, vol. 9 (June 1854), 61; “Elihu Burritt,” vol. 10 (November 1854), 83–86.

¹¹ A. O. Bunnell, ed., *Dansville, 1789–1902: Historical, Biographies, Descriptive* (Dansville, N.Y.: Instructor Publishing Company, 1903), 63, 82, 99.