

Charlotte Forten Grimke: An Author and Activist

Charlotte Forten Grimke was born Charlotte Louise Bridges Forten on August 17, 1837 into the free Black abolitionist Forten family in Philadelphia. Forten's mother, Mary Virginia Woods Forten, died when Charlotte Forten was three. Once Forten turned 16, she was sent to board with the Remond family in Salem, Massachusetts because her father did not want her to attend the segregated schools in Philadelphia.

Forten attended the Higginson Grammar School and was the only African American student in the student body of 200 (Warlach, 2013). Around this time that she began writing in a diary, and soon after, the trial of Anthony Burns under the Fugitive Slave Act influenced her time as an abolitionist. Forten wanted to be able to support herself without having to marry, so she graduated from the Salem Normal School, a teacher training school, in 1856.

Forten then accepted a position as a teacher at Epes Grammar School, which was an all-white institution, however she returned to Philadelphia after two years because of tuberculosis. In 1862, the federal government launched an experimental program with the goal of educating formerly enslaved people. They sought volunteers to teach these formerly enslaved people, and Forten traveled to St. Helena and began working there as a teacher for 2 years. In July of 1863, Forten nursed the wounded soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts regiment after they were defeated (Schultz, 2021). She wrote about her time at St. Helena, and her essay "Life on the Sea Islands" was published in 1864.

In 1872, Forten taught at an all-black school, and later became a clerk in the Treasury Department in 1873. In 1878, she married Francis Grimke, who was a minister. They had one daughter, who died after 5 months. Forten continued to publish her writing, and in 1896, became one of the founding members of the National Association of Colored Women, which later became the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. She and several other

Charlotte Forten Grimke: An Author and Activist

African-American women formed the organization because of the fact that white suffragists weren't always welcoming to African-American suffragists (Timmons, 2017). She died on July 23, 1914.

I believe that the motivation for Charlotte Forten Grimke to rise up against discrimination was first the fact that she knew she was a lot more privileged than the majority of African-Americans because she was born free and she wanted to change this by supporting the end of slavery. She supported the effort of Robert Gould Shaw to desegregate the Union Army by nursing the 54th Massachusetts Regiment (one of the first all-black regiments) after a defeat. Later, after the Civil War was over, and African-American men had gained the right to vote, Forten became an active African-American suffragist. At the time, most white suffragists weren't always completely welcoming to African-American suffragists, which led to Forten and several other women forming the NACWC, an organization that aimed for the betterment of African-American women.

I think that one challenge that must be overcome when individuals are standing up against discrimination is lack of support from others fighting for the same cause. I think an example of this would be Charlotte Forten Grimke and several other African-American women creating the NACWC because white suffragists didn't always allow the African-Americans to join them. I also believe that the consequences to inaction lead to problems in society continuing to worsen. If abolitionists hadn't taken a stand against slavery, would the American south have seceded and started the American Civil War? If Martin Luther King and the hundreds of other activists who went against racist, discriminatory laws had never done anything, would those laws still exist today? If Minoru Yasui had never taken action to fight the curfew order, would the racism behind it have completely gotten overlooked?

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While he was an activist, Minoru Yasui took action against discrimination. However, he is most notably known for his stance against the military curfew order that was established after the Pearl Harbor attacks. In 1942, a series of military orders created a curfew that ordered all “German nationals, Italian nationals, and persons of Japanese ancestry to remain in their homes between the hours of 8 p.m. and 6 a.m.” (Nagae, 2021). Yasui believed that the curfew was unconstitutional when applied to U.S. citizens and the court would uphold these constitutional rights. After he wasn’t able to find another Japanese American U.S. citizen to break the curfew, he chose to do so himself and was arrested.

When Yasui was tried in federal court, his attorney argued that Yasui was protected by the 14th and 15th Amendments to the U.S. constitution. However, the judge ruled that “Yasui, having worked for the Japanese Consulate, had abrogated his U.S. citizenship and, therefore, was an enemy alien to whom the military curfew did apply” (Nagae, 2021). However, Yasui appealed his case, which traveled up to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruled that Yasui would not lose his citizenship, but based on the war situation, Yasui’s rights could be overridden. However, in 1982 he learned that materials from the National Archives proved the curfew was based on racial discrimination rather military necessity. He filed a petition to the district court to declare the curfew order unconstitutional, but ended up dying before that could happen.

In light of the stand that both Minoru Yasui and Charlotte Forten Grimke took, I can try to make changes in my community. At the start of this school year, I created the Asian Culture Club at my school with two other people. It started as an effort to unite the Asaina community in our school, and now we plan on taking action to celebrate Asian American/Pacific Islander History Month in May. Most of the Asian students at our school didn’t know about this month and so we chose to ask our school to spread awareness about this month, especially in light of the

Charlotte Forten Grimke: An Author and Activist

recent anti-AAPI hate crime. It might not be a huge change, but it will affect Asian students in my school in a positive way.

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Charlotte Forten Grimke: An Author and Activist

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Charlotte Forten Grimke: An Author and Activist

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