

Julia Ward Howe, 1819-1910: The Anti-Slavery Activist Wrote One of the Great Civil War Songs

The "Battle Hymn of the Republic" caught the spirit of the Union soldiers of the North. *Transcript of radio broadcast:*
12 January 2008

VOICE ONE:

I'm Ray Freeman.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Shirley Griffith with the Special English program, PEOPLE IN AMERICA. Every week we tell about a person important in the history of the United States.

Today, we tell about Julia Ward Howe. She wrote one of the great songs of the American Civil War, the "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Marching soldiers. No end to the lines of soldiers marching across the land. They came from the northern states fighting to keep the Union together. And they came from the southern states fighting for a separate Confederate government that would protect their right to have slaves. In summer and winter, the fighting continued. The sun burned like fire. The soldiers marched on. The cold winter winds blew snow in their faces. The soldiers marched on.



Julia Ward Howe

The United States was a nation cut in two by a bitter struggle over slavery and a state's right to leave the Union. America's Civil War lasted four years. It destroyed the land. And it destroyed the young men of the nation.

VOICE TWO:

Many stories have been told about the soldiers of the Civil War. They have told of the soldiers' fear and terror. Their great and heroic acts. How they suffered and died. And how they sang before and after battle. One song, more than any other, caught the spirit of the Union soldiers of the North. The song is the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Here is the first part of the song, sung by Odetta:

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

The words are religious. They are like a hymn, a song of praise to God. This is the story of the woman who wrote the song.

(MUSIC: "Battle Hymn of the Republic")

VOICE TWO:

The place was Washington, D.C. The year was eighteen sixty-one. It was a wet winter night. There were thousands of soldiers in the city. The hospitals were full. The field of battle was just across the Potomac River in the southern state of Virginia.

A woman lay asleep in her hotel room. She had had a long, hard day. She had come to Washington to visit the Union troops. The sight and sounds of the soldiers gave her no rest. Even in her sleep she seemed to hear them. She heard their sad voices as they sat beside their fires. She heard them singing. They sang a marching song she knew. It was a song about John Brown, an activist against slavery. The song told about how his body turned to earth in the grave. It told about how his spirit lived on.

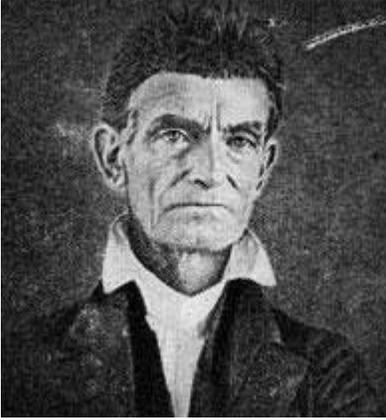
VOICE ONE:

The woman's name was Julia Ward Howe. She was a writer and social reformer. She was born in New York City in eighteen nineteen. Her father was a wealthy banker. Julia married Samuel Gridley Howe. He was a reformer and teacher of the blind. Julia and Samuel Howe moved to Boston. Missus Howe raised five children. And she published several books of poetry.

VOICE TWO:

Julia Ward Howe and Samuel Gridley Howe were leaders in the movement in America to end slavery. They published an anti-slavery newspaper called the "Commonwealth."

Missus Howe had met John Brown. Like him, she was an anti-slavery activist. She opposed those Americans who used black people as slaves. Unlike him, she did not approve of using violence to end slavery.



John Brown

In eighteen fifty-nine, John Brown tried to start a revolt of slaves. He led an attack on Harper's Ferry, a town in what was then the state of Virginia. The town had a factory that made guns for the army. It also had a storage center for military equipment. The attack on Harper's Ferry failed. John Brown was put on trial for treason. He was found guilty and was executed.

VOICE ONE:

In the northern states, John Brown became a hero. His story was told through song. The song was most popular with soldiers. It became the unofficial marching song of the Union Army.

Julia Ward Howe also liked to sing the song. She felt that the music was beautiful, but the words about John Brown were not. So she decided to write different words to the music.

Those words came to her that night as she lay in her hotel room in Washington. She was awakened by her dreams of marching soldiers.

VOICE TWO:

"I found to my surprise that the words were forming themselves in my head. I lay still until the last line had completed itself in my thoughts.

Then I quickly got out of bed. I thought I would forget the words if I did not write them immediately. I looked for a piece of paper and a pen. Then I began to write the lines of a poem:

'Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored,

He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword,

His truth is marching on.'

I wrote until I was finished. Then I lay down again and fell asleep. I felt something important had happened to me."

VOICE ONE:

An American magazine, "The Atlantic Monthly," bought Missus Howe's poem. She was paid four dollars. The magazine published the poem in eighteen sixty-two. The poem became very popular. It had just the right words for the great marching music. The soldiers of the Union Army began to sing the words Julia

Ward Howe had written. It soon became their official marching song -- "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

VOICE TWO:



**President Abraham
Lincoln**

Julia Ward Howe became famous. She was invited to the White House to meet President Abraham Lincoln. After dinner at the White House, the guests talked about the Civil War. They were sad. The Union army had suffered many defeats. Then someone began to sing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Missus Howe and President Lincoln joined in the singing. There were tears in the President's eyes. Here is the last part of the song, sung by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir:

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

After the North won the Civil War in eighteen sixty-five, Julia Ward Howe became involved in other social reform movements. She became a leader in the movement to gain equal rights for American women, including the right to vote. She helped establish the New England Woman's Club in eighteen sixty-eight. This organization worked for equal rights for women in education and business. She served as president of the group for more than thirty years.

VOICE TWO:

Julia Ward Howe also became involved in the movement for peace. In eighteen seventy, she issued an "Appeal to Womanhood Throughout the World." This was a call for an international conference of women to support the peaceful settlement of conflicts. The next year she helped organize the American group of the Woman's International Peace Association. She became president of the group.

Julia Ward Howe continued to write books and make speeches about the issues she felt were important. Through the years, thousands of people came to hear her recite her most famous poem. She died in nineteen ten. She was ninety-one years old.

VOICE ONE:

The "Battle Hymn of the Republic" still is one of America's great traditional songs. No one knows for sure who wrote the music. But the song lives on. And so does the name of the woman who made the music famous with her words: Julia Ward Howe.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

This Special English program was written by Shelley Gollust. It was produced by Lawan Davis. I'm Shirley Griffith.

VOICE ONE:

And I'm Ray Freeman. Join us again next week for another PEOPLE IN AMERICA program on the Voice of America.