



- *Activist*
- *Educator*

#### **TIMELINE**

- 1837** – Given as gift to the Smith family at age 11
- 1846** – Marries William Craft
- 1848** – Escapes to Boston with husband
- 1850** – Slave catchers attempt capture
- 1850** – Flees to England

## *Ellen Smith Craft*

1826–1891

### ***Inducted 1996***

Ellen Smith Craft was born in 1826 in the town of Clinton, Georgia. Her mother was an African-American slave named Maria; her father was her mother's white owner, Colonel James Smith. Ellen's skin was very light and she was often mistaken for a member of her white family.

At age 11 Ellen was given as a wedding gift to Dr. Robert Collins of Macon, Georgia, who married the daughter of Colonel Smith's wife. In Macon, Ellen met her future husband, William Craft. William was a slave whose family had been broken up and sold to pay their master's gambling debts. William's owner apprenticed him as a carpenter to earn money from his labor.

Ellen and William were allowed to marry in 1846, but could not live together since they belonged to different masters. They endured this separation for a while, but soon began to save money and plan an escape.

Disguising herself as a white gentleman, Ellen pretended to be traveling to Philadelphia for medical treatment. William was passed as her slave. During the trip, Ellen placed her arm in a sling to cover her inability to write and wrapped her head in a bandage to hide her lack of beard.

Traveling by train and by sea the Craft's made their way to Maryland. Once in free territory, they made contact with an Abolitionist group. Ellen stayed with a Quaker family in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who nursed her through a serious illness. For safety, they then moved on to Boston, the center of the Abolitionist movement. There, they supported themselves by working in their respective trades: cabinet-making for William and sewing for Ellen. Both became active in the abolitionist movement and gained fame on the lecture circuit. Stories about them were published in *The New York Herald*, *The Boston Globe*, the *Georgia Journal* and *The Macon Telegraph*.

In 1850 the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, permitting the forcible recapture of ex-slaves from free states. Ellen's former master, Dr. Collins, sent two slave

**1851** – Lectures across England about horrors of slavery

**1852** – First child is born

**1868** – Returns to U.S.

**1869** – Settles in Hickory Hill, S.C.

**1870** – Ku Klux Klan burns the Crafts' cooperative farm

**1873** – Purchases plantation in Georgia, opens school

**1876** – White neighbors' slander damages farm business and school

catchers to hunt her down. An ex-slave group called the League of Freedom protected Ellen and William. But no longer feeling safe in Boston, the Crafts decided to flee to England, going over land to Maine to board a ship departing for England from Canada.

The Crafts lived in England for 18 years, during which time their five children were born. After a lecture tour—during which audiences were often moved to tears—William and Ellen went to an agricultural school in Surrey, broadening their skills and eventually learning to teach. Though they were offered positions of superintendent and matron of the school, they chose to

move to London, believing it was important to demonstrate that ex-slaves could be self-sufficient.

***"I had much rather starve in England, a free woman, than be a slave for the best man that ever breathed upon the American continent."***

– Ellen Smith Craft

When visitors to England from the southern United States began to spread rumors that Ellen desired to return to the security of her former home in Georgia, she

issued what became a famous disclaimer: "I had much rather starve in England, a free woman, than to be a slave for the best man that ever breathed upon the American continent."

A few years after the Emancipation Proclamation had declared an end to slavery, in 1869 Ellen and William returned to the United States, having raised enough money to start a cooperative farm for ex-slaves. They also planned to develop a school for children.

The Ku Klux Klan burned their first plantation in South Carolina, but a determined Ellen and William started a second plantation in Byron County, outside of Savannah. Slander from white opponents eventually bankrupted the plantation, also causing Ellen's school—where she taught 75 children free of charge—to close.

Ellen died in 1891. A few years later the farm she and her husband had started was auctioned off to pay William's debts.

Ellen Craft was not content simply to gain her own freedom. Through her belief in the dignity and worth of all human beings she helped to shape a better future for succeeding generations.

### **Additional Resources**

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**Tubman African-American Museum**

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**Kenneth Coleman and Charles Stephen Gurr,  
editors, Dictionary of Georgia Biography**

Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983