

## **Woodward, Sara Griffith Stanley** <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Woodward, Sara Griffith Stanley**

by William S. Powell, 1994

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#### **1836–1918**

Sara Griffith Stanley Woodward, anti-slavery activist and teacher and one of the earliest African Americans to attend college, was born in New Bern, the daughter of John Stuart and Frances Griffith Stanley. In 1830 her father, a prosperous merchant, owned eighteen enslaved people, most of whom probably were relatives he purchased so they could remain in North Carolina; he also operated a private school for free Black Americans. Her grandfather, John C. Stanly, a barber, was the free biracial son of [John Wright Stanly](#) <sup>[3]</sup> and a biracial woman who was one of the founding members of the New Bern Presbyterian Church.

Educated by her mother, who taught in the school for Black Americans in New Bern, Sara G. Stanley was sent to [Oberlin College](#) <sup>[4]</sup> in Ohio at age sixteen. Four years later, in 1856, the Stanleys moved to Cleveland, Ohio. Members of her family, particularly the women, were very fair with blue eyes and were often assumed to be white—Sara once described herself as "a colored woman, having a slight admixture of negro blood in my veins"—yet they always operated in the "colored social circle" and took pride in their [African American](#) <sup>[4]</sup> ancestry.

The Stanleys may have lived briefly in the town of Delaware, Ohio, near the center of the state before moving north to Cleveland. The name Sara G. Staley [*sic*] appears in a [printed antislavery petition](#) <sup>[5]</sup> drawn up in Delaware and read before a convention of Black men in Columbus in 1856. It offered the support of Black women to Black men in a move for political liberty; citing the "conglomeration of hatred and prejudice against our race," it urged that religion and science cease attempts to justify racial inferiority. "One truth, the only essential truth, in incontrovertible," the petition recorded. "The Omnipotent, Omniscient God's glorious autograph—the seal of angels—is written on our brows, that immortal characteristic of Divinity—the rational, mysterious and inexplicable soul, animates our frames."

In an article in the *Weekly Afro-American* of 19 Apr. 1862 she praised the poet [John Greenleaf Whittier](#) <sup>[6]</sup> for supporting the antislavery sentiment. Although his stance reduced his popularity at the time, she stated, because he possessed a "broader catholicity, a truer humanity, because founded upon an imperishable principle—the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man," his poems would be more appreciated in the future. It was perhaps in recognition of this essay that she was one of several Black women chosen for honorary membership in the National Young Men's Literary Association, a Black organization.

Sara Stanley may have taught in the Cleveland public schools on the eve of the Civil War. Her application in 1864, when she volunteered as a teacher with the American Missionary Association, noted that she had taught in the Ohio public schools for several years. In her new position she was sent to Norfolk, Va., to teach Black Americans recently freed by Union troops. She reported less difficulty with her pupils than with white administrators and teachers who stressed "the inferiority of 'negroes'" and who opposed the social unity of the Black and white people even in the North. She maintained, however, that "Christian unity and sociality among those working as missionary-teachers in the South were essential as dissension would undercut the common goal of helping the freedmen." She particularly objected when a white matron in a teachers' dormitory wanted "all colored teachers removed," and she was articulate and outspoken in stressing the goal of racial tolerance among the staff. One Walker, a white male teacher in the Norfolk school, endorsed her views, and they became kindred souls, exchanging letters. A fellow teacher reported this friendship as a romantic involvement, and the [American Missionary Association](#) <sup>[7]</sup> recalled Miss Stanley. Walker, it was revealed, was married and living with his newly pregnant wife.

After thanking the corresponding secretary of the association for his "kindness and compassion in dealing with her 'sin,'" Sara Stanley received a teaching assignment in St. Louis, Mo. In March 1865, in a final letter, she wrote: "I must tell you before ending that I have acknowledged all my wrong-doing before God and am fully and freely pardoned." In spite of poor conditions in this school, she tried to make the surroundings attractive and to improvise in the absence of equipment and supplies. Most of her pupils were free Black Americans, many of them biracial, and here there were no complaints of racism. But in the fall of 1865, when a new, all-white city school board was elected, she applied for reassignment. Although she had requested a school on the Atlantic coast, she was sent to Louisville, Ky. Successful at the new school, where enrollment doubled to 190, she soon was promoted to principal.

Articles written by Sara Stanley appeared frequently in the [American Missionary](#) <sup>[8]</sup> between 1865 and 1867, and the [Annual Report of the American Missionary Association](#) <sup>[7]</sup> for 1866 included an account of some of her classroom experiences. By 1868 she was teaching in a freedman's school in Mobile, Ala., where she met Charles A. Woodward, a white man. He was twenty-eight, four years younger than she, a native of New York State, and a mason by training. A

resident of Detroit on the eve of the Civil War, he had enlisted as a private and served as a regimental musician with the Michigan Infantry. At the end of the war he moved to Mobile and became head cashier of the Freedman's Bank.

Woodward discovered that he and Sara Stanley had many interests in common despite the fact that he was a blue-eyed, blond, white male and she an acknowledged Black woman. They decided to marry, but the American Missionary Association disapproved, largely because it did not want to inflame local resistance when the association was on the verge of buying a large building in Mobile as a training school for teachers. Moreover, Ku Klux Klan <sup>[9]</sup> activities were getting under way, and the marriage of a white man and a Black woman would threaten the peace of the city.

The association attempted to dissuade Sara from marrying at all and certainly from marrying in the Mission House in Mobile. School officials suggested that the couple return to Cleveland, but she was insistent and after some delay they were married in the home of a friend. An infant girl born to them not long after their marriage died within six months; there were no other children. The 1870 census of Mobile recorded her as a teacher in the local Emerson Institute <sup>[10]</sup>, the new training school. Woodward, perhaps with the assistance of his better-educated wife, was the author of a history of the Freedman's Bank.

For a time Sara Woodward was employed as an assistant cashier in the bank, but in 1874 her husband was accused (but not convicted) of embezzlement. They then moved to New Jersey, where he died in 1885. Afterwards she worked as an engraver in Philadelphia and received a widow's military pension but in 1894 taught briefly at Lucy Lainey's school for Black women in Georgia. Her whereabouts are unknown until 1918, when she died, but she may have returned to Cleveland before then.

## References:

John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina* (1943)

Ellen N. Lawson and Marlane Merrill, "Sara Stanley: Documents of a 19th Century Pioneer in Race Relations" (research paper, Women's History Project, Mudd Library, Oberlin College, Ohio)

Stephen F. Miller, *Recollections of Newbern Fifty Years Ago . . .* (1874)

*The Stanly (Stanley) Family and the Historic John Wright Stanly House* (1969)

## Additional Resources:

Black Past: <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aah/stanley-sara-g-1837-1918> <sup>[11]</sup>.

## Subjects:

Biographies <sup>[12]</sup>

Black and African American People <sup>[13]</sup>

Educators <sup>[14]</sup>

Enslaved People and Slavery <sup>[15]</sup>

Women <sup>[16]</sup>

Writers, journalists, and editors <sup>[17]</sup>

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## Origin - location:

New Bern <sup>[19]</sup>

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Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press. <sup>[20]</sup>

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