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## Same-Sex Marriage: Lessons from the Ghosts of the Abolitionists

Boston's Forest Hills Cemetery is home to many abolitionists. When it comes to today's social issues, their voices can still be heard.

posted by [John Stark](#), June 20, 2012 [More by this author](#)



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For 14 years I lived steps away from the historic Forest Hills Cemetery in Boston. I was reminded of the cemetery the other day, when President Obama endorsed same-sex marriage. I know this may sound strange, but hear me out.

Located in Boston's Jamaica Plain neighborhood, the 175-year-old cemetery is where many of America's most influential abolitionists are buried, including William Lloyd Garrison, whose newspaper, *The Liberator*, served as the voice of the anti-slavery movement for more than 30

years.

Because it was practically in my backyard, I visited the cemetery almost daily. It's where I walked my dogs. The place is like an enormous park, full of trees and nature, and over time I got to know my way around its 245 landscaped acres.

I also became familiar with many of the 100,000 or more citizens of this underground city. I thought of Eugene O'Neill, e.e. cummings and Anne Sexton — three of my favorite writers — as neighbors. But I was especially drawn to the abolitionists. Although most had been dead since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I learned to hear their voices. They had a lot to tell me, these ghosts.

Reading about them in history books, I discovered how diverse they were. The abolitionists crossed all cultural and social lines: white and black, male and female, rich and poor, university- and self-educated. They included citizens and soldiers, blue bloods and runaway slaves. I found out that their commitment to equality didn't end with the passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment in January 1865. They also fought for educational reform, integration, decent housing, women's rights and child labor laws. The abolitionists never quit fighting for social justice until the day they died.

And most of them died younger than I am today.

The abolitionists of Forest Hills Cemetery were so successful in helping change opinions that much of what they fought for is now taken for granted. In 2012, their social causes would stir no controversy, letters to the editor or Rush Limbaugh tirades.

But it wasn't always that way. Just hear them out:

Near the cemetery's main gate, for example, is a large family plot that contains 47 members of the activist May family, whose forefathers came over on the Mayflower. Buried among them is abolitionist Abigail Williams May, who was Louisa May Alcott's first cousin.

Described in history books as "wonderfully business like," May shook Boston's educational world to its core when, in 1868, she and two other women campaigned to be elected to the all-male Boston School Committee. And they won.

The reaction was fierce. Maintaining that a woman's place was not on a school board, the committee refused to seat them — until May and others took legal action. After many contentious hearings, the school board drafted a bill that stated, "No person shall be deemed to be ineligible to serve upon a school committee by reason of sex."

Stop the presses! In those days, that was front-page news. Famed abolitionist and feminist Lucy Stone, writing in her publication, *Woman's Journal*, called the ruling "the greatest practical woman's rights in Massachusetts."

Not everyone I encountered at the cemetery was deceased. I also befriended a crusty, 70-something ex-Marine named Al Maze, who was the place's "unofficial historian." One early morning, as a fall Nor'easter roared across New England, he drove me around the cemetery in his Jeep SUV to visit some of his favorite abolitionists, including William Cooper Nell, whose unmarked tombstone stands in a commoners' section, far from where the Mays are buried.

Mostly self-educated in history and law, Nell wrote for both *The Liberator* and Frederick Douglass' newspaper, *North Star*. More than any other individual, he is responsible for desegregating Boston's public schools.

As Al told me about Nell, this abolitionist came vividly alive. His story emphasized the importance of forward-thinking views, and acting on them.

Today it would be unthinkable — and illegal — for school administrators to deny an honor student an achievement award based solely on his or her skin color. But that's exactly what happened to Nell when he was 13.

After Nell graduated at top of his class from the segregated Abiel Smith School in 1829, he wasn't allowed to attend an awards ceremony at Faneuil Hall because he was African-American. He did attend, but not as a guest — dressed as a waiter, he sneaked in and helped serve dinner. As he watched white students receive their awards — while he was denied his — he made a vow to desegregate Boston's public schools.

Twenty-six years later, Nell saw that promise fulfilled. In 1855, thanks largely to his efforts, Boston's public schools were desegregated, the first in the nation. Although Nell's name has been largely forgotten, his vision lives on.

Located in the heart of the cemetery, on a grassy plain, is William Lloyd Garrison's modest granite monument. Considered to be the nation's most influential abolitionist, Garrison spent most of his life exposing the cruelties of slavery through his "inflammatory" writings, first in Baltimore, where he was jailed, then in Boston, where he founded *The Liberator*, which he published weekly for three decades.

Although 19th-century Boston was a hotbed for progressive thinkers — from the Unitarians to the Transcendentalists — it was nonetheless a dangerous place for anyone who didn't believe that human beings should own other human beings. In 1835, pro-slavery businessmen abducted Garrison while he was walking on Beacon Hill. They were members of the Broadcloth Mob, known for their fancy duds. If not for the intervention of a Good Samaritan, they would have lynched him.

Also laid to rest at Forest Hills are legal theorist and anarchist Lysander Spooner, runaway slave John J. Smith (whose Beacon Hill barbershop was an abolitionist gathering spot) and the indomitable feminist Lucy Stone, whose dying words to her daughter were, "Make the world better." And there's a reason they are all here: When it opened in 1837, the cemetery was on public land, which meant anyone could be buried in it, regardless of race or religion. And when the cemetery went private 20 years later, its original policies remained. Historians say that Boston's community of abolitionists also may have wanted to be buried near one another.

Buried just steps from Garrison are his close friends James Freeman Clarke and Edward Everett Hale, a great nephew of Nathan Hale. Both were religious scholars known for their impassioned writings and lectures about slavery and other social ills, including political corruption, alcoholism and substandard housing.

Of course, same-sex marriage was not an issue taken up by the abolitionists. But it does stir controversy and ignite passions the way their causes did more than a century ago. And it will be some time before the matter is settled: President Obama's endorsement of same-sex marriage came just a day after the citizens of North Carolina voted to ban it.

Abolitionist James Freeman Clark wrote: "We are all progressing or retrograding all the while; there is no such thing as remaining stationary in life."

That still holds true today. To be on the right side of history, you must go forward. Just ask the ghosts of Forest Hills Cemetery.