Julia Ward Howe wrote the “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” That one sentence biography obscures her deep commitment to abolition and women’s equality and suffrage.

“Lastly and chiefly…I have had the honor of pleading for the slave… and helping to initiate the women’s movement in many States of the Union.” Julia Ward Howe, Reminiscences, 1899

Coming to Boston

Julia Ward’s father was a wealthy New York banker. On a visit to Boston she met the noted reformer Samuel Gridley Howe, eighteen years her senior. A celebrated figure, Howe had volunteered in the Greek war of independence, a romantic cause aimed at restoring democracy to its birthplace. He was known internationally as director of the Perkins Institution for the Blind. Abolition of slavery was another of his causes. The couple married in 1843.

Out of the Shadows: The Battle Hymn of the Republic

On a visit to Washington D.C. in 1862 Julia Ward Howe listened as soldiers sang “John Brown’s Body,” eulogizing the radical abolitionist hanged for raiding the arsenal at Harper’s Ferry. Staying at the Willard Hotel, she awoke during the night with an idea for new lyrics. She wrote a draft, fearful that she might forget them. Majestic and inspiring, her words for the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” cemented her place in American history.

Her Own Woman

In 1868 Julia Ward Howe attended an organizational meeting at Boston’s Horticultural Hall. Suffragist Lucy Stone spoke and Julia felt that her ideas “harmonized with my own aspirations.” Invited to speak the next day she said only, “I am with you.” Howe became a close friend of Lucy Stone and an editor of the influential Woman’s Journal. On cross country lecture tours she learned to set aside her upper class, socialite persona and relate to women of all backgrounds.

Marching On

Winston Churchill requested that the Battle Hymn of the Republic be sung at his funeral. It was also performed at the funeral of Robert Kennedy. Martin Luther King Jr. quoted from it the night before his death. The music for the hymn has been traced to a Swedish drinking song.