

To Remember or to Forget: The Story of Philanthropists Catherine Williams Ferguson and Isabella Marshall Graham's Unlikely Interracial Collaboration



Perhaps ten-year-old Katy Williams's heart beat a little faster or her hands shook before she spoke up that day sometime in the 1780s. She was addressing an adult, a respected man, after all, with a deal she wanted to make. If he would free her, Katy told her owner, she would "serve the Lord forever."

Katy's master was an elder in one of New York's Presbyterian churches, so she may have thought that the offer would appeal to his religious sensibilities. But she had another, more important reason to devote her life to serving God: it was what her mother expected of her.

Some years earlier, she later recalled, their enslaver had "sold my mother away." She remembered that "before we were torn asunder," her mother "knelt down, laid her hand on my head, and gave me to God." She never saw her mother again and never forgot that day. Her feelings of anguish at the loss sparked her compassion for children, she told reformer Arthur Tappan when he interviewed her late in her life. That conversation is the basis for nineteenth-century articles on Katy, which, along with traces in newspapers and city directories, form the main sources of scholarly writing on her.

By the time she died in 1854, Katy had become Catherine Ferguson and was famed as "an active life-long Christian philanthropist" and a "mother in Israel" to Black and white New Yorkers alike. The illiterate woman was regularly celebrated as the founder of the first Sunday school in New York. If that wasn't enough, she had "taken forty-eight children--twenty of them were white children--some from the almshouse and others from" vulnerable families "and brought them up" or got them situated in life. Her obituary was printed and

reprinted in newspapers around the country, and the memory of the “remarkable woman” lived on in religious periodicals, history books for youth, and other publications throughout the nineteenth century. Well into the twentieth century, no less than the famed Black scholar W. E. B. Du Bois ranked Ferguson among the most notable “colored women of importance,” alongside some names that today are better known including Phillis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman. Du Bois also featured her in his trailblazing monthly magazine for Black children.



Figure 1: *According to nineteenth-century author Benson Lossing, this portrait of Ferguson is based on an 1850 daguerreotype taken at the behest of Lewis Tappan, evangelical reformer and Arthur’s brother. Catherine Ferguson, Unidentified engraver, public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).*

Few of the nineteenth-century stories on Ferguson failed to mention that the “sainted Isabella Graham” had regularly invited Ferguson’s “scholars to her house, to say their catechism, and receive religious instruction.” Graham, likewise devout, was a groundbreaking philanthropist. At a time when some clergymen railed against the women beginning to found and run charities, Graham led the creation of New York’s first female-led charity, the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children. And that was just the beginning of her charitable leadership in New York. When she died in 1814, she was eulogized for “awaken[ing] the charities of a populous city, and giv[ing] to them an impulse, a direction, and an efficacy, unknown before.”

Recognized in their day as leaders thanks to their piety and benevolence, these women shared an evangelical faith that enabled them to work together. Yet their cooperation was unlikely in their time. It has been remembered or ignored by their biographers according to the racial politics of the era.

Ferguson and Graham’s paths crossed in the 1790s through their church. Graham had only just moved to New York. Two decades earlier, her husband died while they were living in Antigua, leaving her with three young girls and another child on the way and not much by means of support. She returned to her native Scotland and struggled to provide for her family. In 1789, hoping to get out from under “the debt hang[ing] over [her] head[er],” she reluctantly left Edinburgh to open a school for girls in New York. Soon George and Martha Washington, John Jay, and other prominent families were sending their girls to “Mrs. Grahams boarding school.”

Meanwhile, Catherine was determined to be free. Around age fifteen, she was born again and sought out the Rev. John Mason, a white Presbyterian minister whose church she attended, for spiritual counsel. When she “found [herself] in the minister’s presence, [she] trembled] from head to foot. One harsh word would have crushed me.” But Mason welcomed the conversation and accepted her in the congregation. Within a couple of years, the girl, now in her mid-teens and at growing risk to possible sexual abuse, forged a deal to buy her freedom with

the help of her church members. A woman, evidently Graham, purchased Ferguson for \$200 with the understanding that Ferguson would labor, likely at domestic work, for six years to pay off the cost of her freedom. In time, though, Graham's new son-in-law, Divie Bethune, raised \$100 to discharge the debt while Graham herself reduced the time Ferguson owed her to eleven months.

Around this time, with "no less than four new boarding schools" opening and Graham's business "at a stand," she retired, and in 1797, she and other white women in her circle launched the Widows Society. Most charities at the time gave aid based on religious or ethnic affinity. The Widows Society innovated by helping white women without ties to sectarian charities, though it excluded Black women. Graham had been a mover and shaker in charities in Edinburgh in the 1780s so with her experience, as well as her stature as an older, respected woman, she was a natural choice as leader. That didn't mean the path was easy. Initially, the Widows Society was "the jest of most, the ridicule of man, and it met the opposition of not a few," she explained to a group of young women volunteering to teach at a new school for poor children. "The men could not allow our sex the steadiness and perseverance to establish such an undertaking." But she had stood up to sexism before, even having excoriated a man behind in paying his daughter's school bill, for not treating her the same as he would "any ordinary correspondent in the mercantile line." Facing the challenges to establishing charities to aid needy women and children didn't daunt her.



Figure 2: *Used in biographies of Graham and other publications featuring her story, this image circulated to many readers in the nineteenth century.* Isabella Graham, public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Meanwhile, Ferguson had begun taking vulnerable children into her home. She had married at eighteen and had two children, but the children had died (contemporaries were silent on her husband's fate). In the Black community, it wasn't unusual for others to care for children when their parents couldn't, though forty-eight kids, both white and black, was a lot. And expensive! So generous was she that when asked if she'd managed to save up any money from her successful career as a cakebaker, Ferguson replied that "I gave away all I earned." Ferguson was the wedding cakebaker of choice for New Yorkers' nuptials and, similar to other Black women who vended foodstuffs at street markets, she also sold her "small, delicious" "pound and sponge" cakes around the city from a market basket, according to the recollections of a city resident. Producing baked goods that were "past belief in toothsome-ness" for both special occasions and everyday treats, she did well enough that her monetary donations amounted to "much money," as an observer put it. In addition to succoring children in the here and now, Ferguson cared about their fates in the hereafter. She prayed for her charges and brought them into Graham's home weekly. On Sundays, she "regularly collected the children in the neighborhood, who were accustomed to run in the street on the Lord's day, into her house," where she arranged for

“suitable persons” to teach them the fundamentals of Christianity. Sometime around this point, Ferguson began holding weekly prayer meetings for adults with African Americans and whites attending. Ever politic, Ferguson “always secured the aid of some good man to conduct these meetings,” and that was how a former enslaved woman gave Isaac Ferris, a future chancellor of New York University, his start in public preaching.



Figure 3: *The Power of Faith Exemplified in the Life and Writings of the Late Mrs. Isabella Graham of New York*, sixth edition (New York: Jonathan Leavitt, 1828), digital image, [Google Books](#).

As a Black woman, Ferguson faced even greater obstacles to public leadership than Graham did. African Americans in New York, as in other cities, worked to establish institutions free of white control. Ferguson had created an endeavor that involved whites, but she ran it. Until, that is, sometime in the 1810s when her pastor folded it into the church. “We must not leave you to do all this,” he told her when he learned of the effort. Concerned about her workload though he may have been, the end result was that the school was now under his control.

Willingly or not, she must have acquiesced to her pastor taking over her school, just as she’d turned to Graham to help instruct her students and to white male ministers to lead her prayer meetings. All those decisions were either savvy moves or reluctant bows to reality. Graham had used her evangelical networks to launch her boarding school and her charities. Ferguson did the same with her endeavors.

So maybe the women’s cooperation was born of pragmatism, yet it was still notable. Not only was women’s and African Americans’ public leadership new and controversial, but also, well into the 1800s, Black and white women didn’t typically cooperate in charitable activity or reform efforts.

Back in the 1760s and early 1770s, when Graham, her husband, and their little girls had been living at Fort Niagara, the family had two enslaved Native girls, Diana and Susy. Graham taught them reading, sewing, and Christianity, so teaching children of color wasn’t new to her. But this was different. These children weren’t her chattel. They were “scholars” coming to her under the supervision of a Black woman of some standing in their community.

White evangelical antislavery writers writing in the mid-1800s about Ferguson loved to remember the connection between the women. Here was a story about a Black woman leader that could be told in a way that highlighted the cruelty of enslavers in separating Black families while assuring white Americans that racial harmony was possible—on their terms.



Figure 4: *Ferguson shepherded a donation of \$9.86 from the New York Female Bible Society of People of Colour to the American Bible Society in 1821. The ABS building featured in this scene opened in 1823. Ferguson's and Graham's organizational and financial contributions to Sunday schools, missionary efforts, and more helped build the constellation of evangelical missionary charities, known as Benevolent Empire, that helped spark and drew energy from the revivals of the Second Great Awakening.* "View of a section of Ann and Nassau streets—taken from the south corner," including the American Bible Society's building to the right of the low-lying buildings, in the *New-York Mirror*, September 4, 1830, drawn by Davis. Engraved by Anderson., public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Ferguson played the game she knew she had to. But there was another, more assertive side, one that harked back to the young girl who tried to bargain for her freedom. When the city directory writers came calling, she defined herself by her skilled occupation—first as a silk dyer, then, emphasizing expertise with a specialty textile, as a merino shawl washer, and finally, in the field she would be best known, as a cakebaker. She made sure her name appeared in the newspaper when she brokered a donation to the prominent American Bible Society on behalf of her prayer group. And when a group of well-to-do white men in the city took up a collection to buy the freedom of an imprisoned fugitive enslaved man, Jack, she donated too. Newspapers publicized the effort and the donors: hers was the only female name listed. Public memory of Ferguson never referred to her donation for Jack. Maybe Tappan or other writers didn't know about it or maybe the incident didn't fit the story of the influential but nonthreatening Black woman of faith. Either way, her contribution lets us know that she gave independently in the cause of Black freedom.



Figure 5: *Most of what we know about Ferguson comes from an 1850 interview Arthur Tappan conducted with her and then used in the writing of an evangelical tract.* Arthur Tappan, Engraving by J. Andrews after a daguerreotype by Bundy & Co., public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

For their part, Graham's son-in-law and daughter didn't mention the women's relationship in the biographies they crafted of Graham at all. One reason for the silence may be because the family told a selective story about Graham and slavery, presenting her as a slaveholder with moral qualms about slavery. New research in original documents has turned up more enslaved people in Graham's life than the family revealed and likewise raises questions—possibly irresolvable—about the story her daughter Joanna Bethune, who was firmly antislavery, told about her mother's views. Graham's son-in-law also had a nephew who was a "colored lad." Perhaps sensitivity about that relationship was another reason the family avoided a story about an interracial partnership, even one involving religious friendship. As sectional tensions over slavery rose, newer editions of Graham's biographies cut out references to Graham's reported opposition to slavery. Critics of the change charged Graham's

grandson, the Rev. George Bethune, with trying to “conciliat[e] slaveholders with silence upon the evils of slavery. By 1860, when George Bethune came to write a memoir of his mother, Joanna Bethune, he credited her with being “The Mother of Sabbath-schools in America.” “[T]he facts and dates,” he insisted, “show that Providence intended for Mrs. Bethune the distinction” birthing the Sunday school movement in the United States. Joanna Bethune, an influential philanthropist in her own right and indeed a key leader of the Sunday school movement, had long been in her mother’s shadow and now her son wanted to put her in the limelight. There was no room in this origins story for a formerly enslaved Black woman.

Hailed by some and ignored by others, in both cases because of the politics of race, Ferguson and Graham’s unlikely cooperation to spiritually educate underserved children was one dimension of each woman’s role as a founding philanthropist.

The Widows Society was fading by the mid-1900s. But one of its spinoffs, a child welfare agency originally known as the Orphan Asylum Society of the City of New York and now known as Graham Windham, remains in operation today and has been supported by the cast and crew of *Hamilton: An American Musical*. Over two centuries after Ferguson and Graham, separately and to some degree together, cared for New York’s vulnerable children, Graham Windham has a Black women president, Kimberly Watson, an ordained minister.

Further Reading

Anne M. Boylan, “Benevolence and Antislavery Activity among African American Women in New York and Boston, 1820-1840,” in Jean Fagan Yellin and John Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women’s Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

Anne M. Boylan, *The Origins of Women’s Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (New York: Knopf, 2010).

Jane E. Dabel, “‘I Have Gone Quietly to Work for the Support of My Three Children’: African-American Mothers in New York City, 1827-1877,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 27 (no. 2, 2003).

Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Allen Hartvik, “Catherine Ferguson: Black Founder of a Sunday School,” *Negro History Bulletin* 35 (no. 8, 1972): 176-77.

Robert J. Swan, "John Teasman: African-American Educator and the Emergence of Community in Early Black New York City, 1787-1815," *Journal of the Early Republic* 12 (no. 3, 1992): 331-56.

Kyle B. Roberts, *Evangelical Gotham: Religion and the Making of New York City, 1783-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

Margaret Washington, "Going 'Where They Dare Not Follow': Race, Religion, and Sojourner Truth's Early Interracial Reform," *Journal of African American History* 98 (no. 1, 2013): 48-71.

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century accounts of Ferguson and Graham include:

[Divie Bethune], *The Power of Faith Exemplified in the Life and Writings of the Late Mrs. Isabella Graham* (New York: J. Seymour, 1816).

[Joanna Bethune], *The Power of Faith, Exemplified in the Life and Writings of the Late Mrs. Isabella Graham. A New Edition. Enriched by Her Narrative of Her Husband's Death and Other Select Correspondence* (New York: American Tract Society, 1843).

Joanna Bethune, *The Unpublished Letters and Correspondence of Mrs. Isabella Graham: From the Year 1767 to 1814; Exhibiting Her Religious Character in the Different Relations of Life* (New York: Theological and Sunday School Bookseller, 1838).

Memoirs of Mrs. Joanna Bethune, by her Son, the Rev. George W. Bethune, D.D. With an Appendix, Containing Extracts from the Writings of Mrs. Bethune (New York: Harper Brothers, 1863).

"Catherine Ferguson" in "City Items" section, *New-York Daily Tribune*, July 20, 1854. This obituary was republished, in modified form, in various antislavery and evangelical periodicals. Later in the century, writers retold the story in religious periodicals. See, for example, "Katy Ferguson," *New York Evangelist* 62:5 (January 29, 1891).

Mrs. John W. Olcott, "Recollections of Katy Ferguson" in *The Southern Workman* 52 (1923): 463.

Primary sources on Ferguson include:

"For the Commercial Advertiser," *New-York Spectator*, July 14, 1821.

"The donations for the slave Jack, amount to \$937 50," *New York Journal of Commerce*, August 27, 1835.

See also listings for Catherine Ferguson in the Longworth's *New York City Directories* from 1814-1850 (available digitally from the New York Public Library).

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