

## ELIZA LEE CABOT FOLLEN BIOGRAPHY

Author, editor, and abolitionist, Eliza Lee (Cabot) Follen was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on August 15, 1787, the fifth of thirteen children born to Samuel and Sarah (Barrett) Cabot. She was raised in a cultivated and well-connected household where she was able to meet many distinguished and influential figures of her time, but her father's health and financial circumstances made for frequent moves and uneasy circumstances. Following the death of her parents, Eliza and two of her sisters established a home together on Mt. Vernon Street in Boston in 1819, and were part of a large circle of acquaintances with literary, social, and religious interests, including Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, novelist Catharine Sedgwick, and theologian Henry Ware.

Channing's Federal Street Church served as the focus for many of Eliza's activities, where she co-founded a Sunday School and became interested in developing the spiritual lives of children, going on to edit *The Christian Teacher's Manual* (1828-1830) and *The Child's Friend* (1843-1850). Evenings spent at Channing's house covered many topics, including discussions of European literature and developing a literary tradition unique to the United States. In 1825 she met Charles Follen, a political refugee from Germany who had recently been appointed to teach German at Harvard College, an institution that was then turning its attention towards German scientific ideas and teaching methods. Follen's arrival in Boston coincided with these trends which were profoundly influential among Unitarians, Transcendentalists, and authors, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, of the New England Renaissance.

Echoing Charles Follen's belief that religion should liberate the human mind from prejudices and doctrines, it was Eliza who first suggested to him in 1827 that he become a Unitarian minister. Following theological training with Channing, he was ordained in 1836. Eliza and Charles married in 1828 and settled in Cambridge; their son, Charles Christopher Follen, was born in 1830. Their views on marriage were recorded by Eliza: [it] "cannot change the principal ground of equal, mutual respect; otherwise it would be a degrading, immoral connexion. Equality of the sexes. Equal moral obligations." It was in Cambridge in 1833 that the Follens introduced their decorated indoor Christmas tree to New England, a custom documented by their close friend, Harriet Martineau, who wrote about it in *Godey's Lady's Book* magazine.

Unitarianism, however, was suffering a paradoxical split between its intellectually liberal and socially conservative factions, which was especially evident in the face of the growing abolitionist movement. For most, socially radical ideas had no place in church services. The Follens, however, became increasingly involved in the anti-slavery movement in the 1830s. Eliza related a conversation they had in 1833: "If I join the

Anti-slavery society, I shall certainly lose all chance of a permanent place in the College, or perhaps anywhere else. If it were only for myself, I should not be troubled by it, but to involve you and Charles in the evils of real poverty, I shrink from that.” “You have,” said Eliza, “sacrificed your country, your home, and all that makes home dear, for the sake of freedom and humanity; – do not think that we are not worthy and able to make the slight sacrifices, which we may be called upon to make in this cause.”

Their support of abolitionism and Charles’s public writings on the matter made it difficult to find employment. In 1839 they moved to Lexington where Follen accepted the invitation of a small liberal group to become its minister; he designed the octagonal building of what would become Follen Church, which still stands on Massachusetts Avenue in Lexington. The following year Charles Follen was returning from New York City when he died in a fire aboard the steamer *Lexington*.

Widowed with a small son to support, Eliza undertook a biography and compilation of the works of Charles Follen, publishing a five-volume set in 1846. She continued with her writing for children, composing numerous stories, poetry, and plays which were couched in gentle, amusing language—a talking tea kettle, a garrulous musket—while often providing a moral dimension. Her “Three Little Kittens” is still read by children today, and her *Gammer Grethel* (1840) was the first American edition of Grimm’s fairy tales. Eliza Follen’s adult fiction included *The Skeptic* (1835) and *Sketches of Married Life* (1838), and among her abolitionist writings were *To Mothers in the Free States* and *Anti-Slavery Hymns and Songs* (both 1855). Follen was a stalwart supporter of the Massachusetts and American anti-slavery societies, serving on their executive committees, a founder of the Boston Female Anti-slavery Society, a contributor to *The Liberty Bell*, and an inveterate organizer of their fundraising events, right up until her death from typhoid fever in 1860. She and her son are buried in Mt Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge. James Russell Lowell remembered her in verse:

And there, too, was Eliza Follen,  
Who scatters fruit-creating pollen  
Where’er a blossom she can find  
Hardy enough for Truth’s north wind,  
Each several point of all her face  
Tremblingly bright with inward grace,  
As if all motion gave it light  
Like phosphorescent seas at night.