



Julia Ward Howe devoted her life to causes such as the abolition of slavery, education reform, prison reform and women's rights. Her home in Portsmouth, Oak Glen, became a gathering place for the intellectual elite of America and beyond.

LOOKING BACK AT OUR CIVIL WAR

# Beyond the 'Battle Hymn'

Julia Ward Howe, who spent much of her life in Portsmouth, was ahead of her time as a leader of social reforms

By Fred Zilian

Julia Ward Howe, a talented, independent-minded woman of the 19th century — poet, writer, playwright, preacher, lecturer and reform leader — spent much of her life at her Oak Glen country home in Portsmouth.



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She is best remembered for writing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in 1861. She traveled to Washington, D.C., met President Abraham Lincoln and visited military camps in the area. During these visits she heard the tune popular at the time, "John Brown's Body," celebrating his martyrdom for the anti-slavery cause.

As she lay in her hotel bed early one morning, the words came to her. She explained: "I awoke in the gray of the morning twilight; and as I lay waiting for the dawn, the long lines of the desired poem began to twine themselves in my mind. Having thought out all the stanzas, I said to myself, 'I must get up and write these verses down, lest I fall asleep again and forget them.'"

The poem was first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine in February 1862 and was quickly put to the tune of "John Brown's Body," becoming an unofficial anthem of the Union. For it, she received a mere \$5 from the magazine editor.

Howe's other notable achievements are often forgotten. She was clearly a woman ahead of her time on many fronts. Even as a young woman, she clashed with her father and eventually her husband, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, 20 years her senior, both of whom wished her to be the more conventional, deferential, domestically oriented type of woman.

A gifted writer, she achieved great literary success. By the age of 17, she was contributing to literary magazines. In 1852, she published "Passion Flowers," dealing with Italian and Hungarian patriots, and in 1853, "Words for the Hour." She soon became a regular contributor to *The Atlantic Monthly*, a new periodical.

When she and her husband joined the anti-slavery crusade, she became an editor and writer for her husband's journal, *The Commonwealth*. She also co-edited and wrote for *The Woman's Journal*. She had many other published works, including "Sex and Education," "Modern Society," "Is Polite Society Polite?," "Reminiscences" and two tragic plays, "Lenore" and "Hippolytus." Fluent in seven languages, she was the first woman elected to the Society of Arts and Letters.

While contributing to such causes as the abolition of slavery, education reform and prison reform, her greatest energy was devoted to women's suffrage.

## 'Battle Hymn of the Republic'

Here is "Battle Hymn of the Republic" as written by Julia Ward Howe when she published it in February 1862 in the *Atlantic Monthly*:

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;  
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;  
He hath loosed the fatal lightning of His terrible swift sword:  
His truth is marching on.  
I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps,*



Fred Zilian photo

Oak Glen in Portsmouth as it appears now. The current owner, Jerry Deilisle, is a lover of history and is doing his best to maintain the property.

She wrote and lectured widely on it for most of her life both in the U.S. and in England, and eventually served as the president of the New England Woman's Suffrage Association.

Howe was deeply distressed by the physical, social and psychological devastation she had witnessed during the Civil War. With the wars of German unification erupting in Europe, she called on women everywhere to oppose war in all its manifestations. Howe hoped to join women across nationalities in the cause of universal peace, issuing a "Mother's Day Proclamation" in 1870:

*"Arise then ... women of this day!  
Arise, all women who have hearts!  
... Our husbands will not come to us,  
reeking with carnage ...  
Our sons shall not be taken  
from us ..."*

Her efforts helped to lay the foundation for the establishment of Mother's Day as a national holiday in 1914.

This distinguished, national celebrity spent much of her life at her beloved country home, Oak Glen, now 746 Union St., in Portsmouth. The Howes bought the 4.7 acres, overlooking Lawton Valley, in 1852. She and her husband had homes in both Boston and Newport; however, they decided to establish this home "out in the country." Other wealthy individuals such as Cornelius Vanderbilt and H.A.C. Taylor also had farms in Middletown or Portsmouth to grow crops and flowers and to maintain prize horses and livestock.

At Oak Glen, the Howes were primarily focused on their six children, outdoor activities, the reception of literary and artistic friends, and certainly their own work and interests. They lived there several months each year, sometimes as long as eight months. Their guests included famous people from the

U.S. as well as Europe, including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, George W. Curtis, Thomas Higginson and Oscar Wilde, who were treated to picnics, sailing parties and theatricals. Oak Glen must have come to be one of the centers of New England's reform and intellectual movements of the later 19th century, with Julia continuing this after the death of her husband in 1876.

It was at Oak Glen in 1910 that Howe died. In summing up her life, she stated: "I have written one poem which ... is now sung South and North by the champions of free government. I have been accounted worthy to listen and to speak at the Boston Radical Club and at the Concord School of Philosophy. Lastly and chiefly I have had the honor of pleading for the slave when he was a slave, of helping to initiate the women's movement ... and of standing with illustrious champions of justice and freedom for woman's suffrage when to do so was a thankless office involving public ridicule and private avoidance."

Some have referred to her as "The Queen of America."

(The author would like to thank Beth Murphy Ward for her assistance with this essay.)

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*shall never call retreat;  
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat:  
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!  
Our God is marching on.  
In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,  
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:  
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,  
While God is marching on.*