

# ANNA ELIZABETH DICKINSON

## 19TH CENTURY ORATOR

b. October 28, 1842

d. October 22, 1932

**She was a women's rights advocate, an abolitionist and the first female to speak before Congress.**

*"See to it, women who listen to me ... that no man take your crown."*

Anna Elizabeth Dickinson was an early American orator who advocated for women's rights and the abolition of slavery. During the Civil War, she helped secure key political victories for the North and became the first woman to address Congress.

Dickinson was born to a Quaker family in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her father, an abolitionist, died when she was 2, leaving her mother financially strapped. As a teen, Dickinson supported the family, working as a copyist and a schoolteacher.

At age 13, Dickinson wrote an impassioned anti-slavery essay for the radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper, "The Liberator." Garrison was so impressed, he arranged speaking engagements for Dickinson. At the time, women rarely spoke in public, much less about controversial issues. Dickinson became well known throughout the Northeast, denouncing slavery and supporting women's rights. Her fervor and eloquence captivated thousands of paying spectators. More than 5,000 people attended her first lecture in New York City.

When the Civil War began and Northern morale plummeted, the chairman of the New Hampshire State Republican Committee invited Dickinson to deliver the pro-Union message to antiwar audiences. Dickinson's oratory prowess prompted campaign organizers in other states to enlist her help. She stumped for candidates in Connecticut, Maine, Pennsylvania and New York, earning substantial fees. Her ability to galvanize audiences helped secure key victories in the 1863 elections and earned her the moniker the "American Joan of Arc."

In 1864 legislators invited Dickinson to speak before Congress. She became the first woman ever to do so. With President Lincoln, military officers and civilian leaders in attendance, Dickinson received a standing ovation. She was 21 years old.

Immediately after the war, Dickinson became one of the most popular, highly paid speakers in the nation, addressing such issues as reconstruction, temperance, civil rights, and a few sensational topics, like venereal disease. Dickinson and Frederick Douglass shared a podium to advocate for Black men's voting rights.

When the demand for paid lectures diminished in the Panic of 1873, Dickinson turned to writing. She authored novels and plays and enjoyed a stint as an actor. Consistently defying gender norms, she played Hamlet on Broadway and became the second white woman to summit Pike's Peak.

Though many eligible men pursued her, Dickinson never married. Her letters and interviews suggest she had love affairs with women, including Sallie Ackley, who was married.

Dickinson never quite recovered from the postwar loss of her early celebrity. She later fell into poverty and struggled with mental health issues. She died a week before her 90th birthday.



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