

POETIC WOMEN IN HISTORY

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Did you know that a woman wrote The Battle Hymn of the Republic? Or that the hymn Blessed Assurance was written by a woman? What about the poem on the base of the Statue of Liberty which was written by a woman? In this issue, we profile five poets across the span of U.S. history: Phillis Wheatley, Fanny Crosby, Julia Ward Howe, Emma Lazarus, and Sandra Cisneros. We suspect that most, if not all, of them will be unfamiliar names to you. We did not know some of their names when we first began our research

to write our beautiful book *Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America*.

Phillis Wheatley was sold into slavery in Boston when she was about seven years old. Her owners taught her to read and encouraged her education. She wrote poetry and became known in Boston society. In 1773, the Wheatley family sent her to London on the advice of the family physician and there her book of poetry was published, *Poems on Various Subjects*,



Religious and Moral. Wheatley's fortunes turned difficult after the deaths of her owners, John and Mary Wheatley. One bright spot occurred in 1776 when a poem she had written to General Washington was published and she was

invited to visit his headquarters in Cambridge. Wheatley is remembered as the first African-American woman to have a book published.

Blinded at the age of six weeks, **Fanny Crosby** is probably best known as the writer of the hymn Blessed Assurance. She studied at the New York Institution for the Blind for eight years where her



talents as a poet were recognized. She received training in poetry and was often asked to perform before visitors to the school; this included educators, statesmen, and artists. Twice, with other blind students from

the school, she appeared before the U.S. Congress.

Crosby's first published volumes of poems, *The Blind Girl and Other Poems*, appeared in 1844. In 1851, she began to fit her poetry to music. In 1864, she began writing hymns. Her output has been described as prodigious; it is estimated between 5,500 and 9,000 hymns in total. The exact number is not known because she wrote under a variety of pseudonyms. *Blessed Assurance* was written in 1873. Crosby lived to the age of ninety-four and wrote two autobiographies.

The third poet we want to bring to your attention is

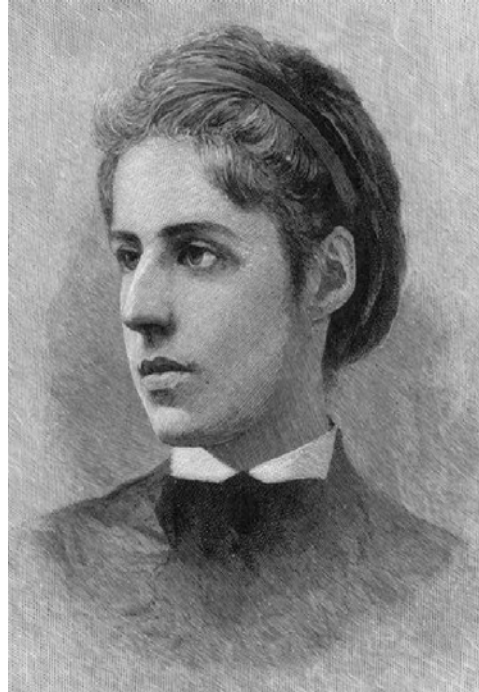
Julia Ward Howe. During the Civil War, she published her now famous poem *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. It, of course, was later turned into a song. Howe, the mother of seven children, was a writer of poetry, drama, and occasional travel articles for the *Atlantic Monthly*. She was also active in the suffrage movement and a founder of the *New England Women's Club*; it later became the *American Woman Suffrage Association*.



The Battle Hymn of the Republic made Howe one of the most famous women of the 19th century. For the forty years after her husband's death, she traveled the world seeking women's rights and social reforms. She was also a driving force behind the establishment of Mother's Day. Howe was the first woman elected to the Society of Arts and Letters and worked for world peace. In awarding her an honorary degree, Smith College stated that she was "Poet and patriot, lover of letters and learning, a sincere friend of all that makes for the elevation and enrichment of women." Her biography, written by her children, received the Pulitzer Prize. Howe has been inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning
To breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your
teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless,
tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside
the golden door!*

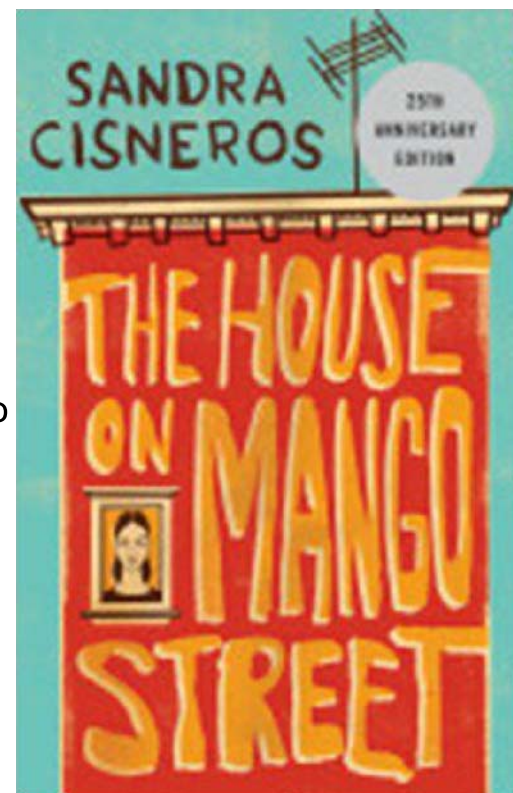
These words, engraved on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, are from the poem The New Colossus written in 1883 by **Emma Lazarus**. Lazarus actually composed the lines to aid a literary auction raising money to help fund the erection of the statue. Lazarus was a writer and poet whose first poetry vol-



ume was privately published when she was seventeen and published commercially a year later. She benefited from the mentorship of Ralph Waldo Emerson. After the assas-

sination of Czar Alexander II of Russia led to persecution of Jews in that country and mass migration to the U.S., Lazarus became an activist in her writing and used her poetry, drama, and prose to help Jewish causes. She co-founded New York's Hebrew Technical Institute which helped provide agricultural opportunities and technical training for the Russian Jews who were emigrating to New York City. Lazarus has been inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

Finally we want to highlight a living poet – MacArthur Fellow **Sandra Cisneros**. She is both a writer and a poet. Cisneros' book, *House on Mango Street*, is the story of a young girl coming of age in Chicago who is fighting low expectations from the world.



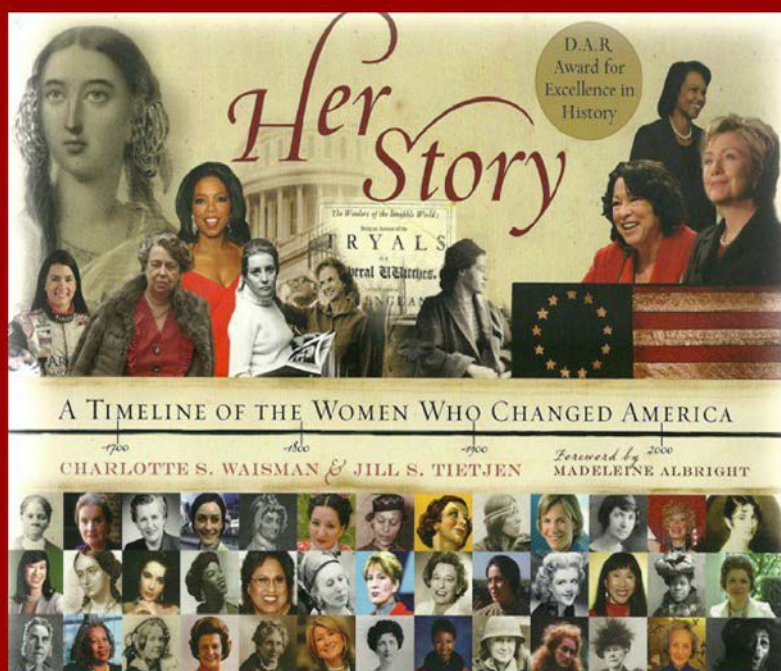
It has sold over two million copies and has been published internationally. To date, Cisneros has published two poetry books as well as novels, children's books, and collections of her writings. Cisneros says "I believe in la Divina Providencia because of the extraordinary places my life has taken me. I believe in the power art has to save lives, because it saved mine." She has received numerous awards in addition to the MacArthur Fellowship including the Texas Medal of the Arts.

Women contribute to our lives across so many fields of endeavor. We are proud to stand on their shoulders. Each of us, in our own ways, contributes to the rich fabric of America.

Charlotte S. Waisman, PhD, co-author of *Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America* (HarperCollins), is a national champion and advocate for women as a professor and keynote speaker.

Jill S. Tietjen, PE, co-author of *Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America* (HarperCollins), is an author, speaker and electrical engineer.

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Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America
Written by Charlotte S. Waisman and Jill S. Tietjen, with a foreword by Madeleine Albright, *Her Story* is a vivid documentation of the breadth and diversity of American woman's achievements throughout U.S. history since the 1500s. The women featured in *Her Story* range from writers, artists, actors and athletes to doctors, scientists, social and political activists, educators, and inventors, and include women of all backgrounds and philosophies.

"Her Story is like a slideshow of American women's history."

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