

Famous New Yorker Sara Jane Clarke

Sara Jane Clarke made a name for herself in the mid-19th century as the popular writer “Grace Greenwood” but risked her name and career by taking a stand against slavery.

The youngest of eleven children, Sara Jane Clarke was born in Pompey, Onondaga County, on September 23, 1823. When her family moved to New Brighton, Pennsylvania, she enrolled in the Greenwood Institute. The school most likely inspired her choice of “Grace Greenwood” as a pen name.

Sara Jane began publishing articles and poems in local newspapers, under her own name or pseudonyms, before she moved to Pennsylvania. She emerged from Greenwood more determined to make a living for herself as a writer. While writers often used pen names to protect their privacy, Clarke became “Grace Greenwood” in her social life as well as in print.

Grace Greenwood had a national following by the end of the 1840s. Her work was published in many of the period’s leading magazines. Behind the scenes, she became an assistant to pioneer female editor Sarah J. Hale at *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, the most popular women’s magazine of the era. Greenwood herself edited a companion publication, *Godey’s Dollar Newspaper*.

Greenwood started a controversy when she began writing for *The National Era*, a weekly paper dedicated to the abolition of slavery. Her new role offended some southern readers of the Godey magazines. Publisher Louis A. Godey hoped to keep a nationwide audience by keeping his journals and their personnel neutral on slavery. He fired Greenwood, but advertised her reinstatement after protests from northern readers. Greenwood refused to return.

Cutting ties to Godey emboldened Grace Greenwood to take a stronger stand against slavery and focus more on politics in her writing. On assignment for the *National Era*, she became the second female reporter to cover the House of Representatives. On the editorial side, she helped prepare Harriet Beecher Stowe’s landmark antislavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for publication. She soon broadened her scope further as a European correspondent and first female reporter for the *New York Times*.

Grace Greenwood was many things to many audiences. For radical thinkers, she was an opponent of slavery and a champion of women’s rights. For readers seeking entertainment she was an author of sentimental poetry and prose and an accomplished travel writer. For children, starting in 1853, she was the editor of *The Little Pilgrim*, a magazine published by her new husband, Leander Lippincott.

Throughout her career, Grace Greenwood affirmed that women had the right to speak for themselves in politics and the arts. She believed that women could stand on their own as writers, artists and thinkers. She proved it before she married, and again after Lippincott abandoned her to avoid arrest for financial misconduct. For the rest of the 19th century, Greenwood worked steadily as an author and lecturer to support her family. She published numerous works of poetry and prose, including a biography of Queen Victoria, while writing regularly for the *Times* and the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Grace Greenwood did not write any literary masterpieces and was forgotten by all but historians after her death on April 20, 1904, but Sara Jane Clarke’s diverse career as an author and journalist blazed a trail for generations of talented women to follow.

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Pompey is a town located approximately 17 miles southeast of Syracuse in Central New York State.