

Learning to Read

The following is a poem written by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper from her *Sketches of Southern Life* collection of poems first published in 1872.

"Learning to Read"

- 1) Very soon the Yankee teachers
 Came down and set up school;
- 2) But, oh! how the Rebs did hate it,--
 It was agin' their rule.

- 3) Our masters always tried to hide
 Book learning from our eyes;
- 4) Knowledge didn't agree with slavery--
 'Twould make us all too wise.

- 5) But some of us would try to steal
 A little from the book,
- 6) And put the words together,
 And learn by hook or crook.

- 7) I remember Uncle Caldwell
 Who took pot-liquor fat
- 8) And greased the pages of his book,
 And hid it in his hat.

- 9) And had his Master ever seen
 The leaves upon his head,
- 10) He'd have thought them greasy papers,
 But nothing to be read.

- 11) And there was Mr. Turner's Ben,
 Who heard the children spell,
- 12) And picked the words right up by heart,
 And learned to read 'em well.

- 13) Well, the Northern folks kept sending
 The Yankee teachers down;
- 14) And they stood right up and helped us,
 Though Rebs did sneer and frown.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's "Learning to Read"

- 15) And, I longed to read my Bible,
For precious words it said;
- 16) But when I begun to learn it,
Folks just shook their heads.

- 17) And said, there is no use trying,
Oh! Chloe, you're too late;
- 18) But as I was rising sixty,
I had not time to wait.

- 19) So I got a pair of glasses
And straight to work I went,
- 20) And never stopped till I could read
The hymns and Testament.

- 21) Then I got a little cabin--
A place to call my own--
- 22) And I felt as independent
As the queen upon her throne.