

## Battle Hymn of the Republic - The Song that saved the Union.



When Julia Ward Howe first awoke, early morning of November 21, 1861, the words to *the Battle Hymn of the Republic* arranged themselves in her mind. In a darkened room, trying not to wake her children, she scratched down the verses to the poem, knowing something of importance had just happened. The words she scrawled on an old sheet of paper, Lincoln would later say was “the song that saved the Union.”<sup>1</sup> *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* was a divinely inspired masterpiece of poetry on God and country, which could not have come at better a time for the Union. The Civil War was not going well for the North, many battles had been lost, morale had slumped and recruitment numbers were running low. The poem soon became a motivating song sung by the Union troops in glory to God. One other song sung by the North, and less controversial to the South was *The Battle Cry of Freedom*. Those on the Confederate side sang, *God Save the South* and *The Bonnie Blue Flag* song. The South

hated the Union’s battle hymn song, because it inferred that God was on the side of the North.

There is a timeless truth contained within the words of the hymn, reflective of Old Testament biblical passages, a truth that seems to touch at a spiritual dimension into the human heart. The words of the song tend to elicit a strong emotional response in many people. It was this spiritual dimension to *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, that Mark Twain commented, “I conceive [it] to be the most beautiful and the most sublime battle hymn the world has ever known.”<sup>2</sup> The words in the hymn are as motivating today, as they were when they were sung by the Union Army during the Civil War. It was the song that saved the Union.

“For inquire, I pray you, of bygone ages, and consider what the fathers have found; for we are but of yesterday, and know nothing, for our days on earth are a shadow. Will they not teach you, and tell you, and utter words out of their understanding? Can papyrus grow where there is no marsh? Can reeds flourish where there is no water? While yet in flower and not cut down, they wither before any other plant. Such are the paths of all who forget God; the hope of the godless man shall perish. His confidence breaks in sunder, and his trust is a spider's web. He leans against his house, but it does not stand; he lays hold of it, but it does not endure.”

— Job 8:8-15 RSV, date estimated from 1950-1500 B.C. (pre Moses) to 1000-300 B.C.

Julia Ward was born in New York City on May 27th of 1819, daughter of a wealthy banker. She had a solid education from an early age; home tutored, and later attended private schools. By the age of twenty, she had written literary criticism, which was published anomalously in the *New York Review* and *Theological Review*, and could speak a number of different languages. Julia had a gift of poetry, some suggest she may have inherited from her mother. Her writing and love for poetry would soon be repressed by her future husband.

At the age of 21, Julia married a Boston philanthropist by the name of Samuel Gridley Howe. Samuel had been involved in the Greek War of Independence against the Turks. Back in the states, he helped found a school for the blind in Boston. The newlyweds traveled throughout Europe with their first child born in Italy in 1844. Julia and her husband had six children, one died in childhood. For Julia, writing was a passion, which her husband actively, and angrily discouraged. Against his wishes and demands, Julia had a book of her poetry titled, *Passion-flowers* published anonymously in 1854. “‘Chev was very angry about the book,’ Julia wrote to her sister, ‘and I really thought at one time that he would have driven me to insanity, so horribly did he behave.’”

In her journal she wrote: ‘I have been married twenty years today. In the course of that time I have never known my husband to approve of any act of mine which I myself valued. Books—poems—essays—everything has been contemptible in his eyes because not his way of doing things. ... I am much grieved and disconcerted.’”<sup>3</sup> Her marital trials with Samuel would be a motivating force behind her later work in the Woman’s Suffrage movement.

After the death of her father, Samuel received, and lost most of Julia’s family inheritance on unwise investments. Not unusual for the day, Samuel handled the family finances, of which Julia had limited input. At one point in their marriage, things had gotten so bad that she seriously considered divorce. Custody threats, and potential loss of her children, prevented her following through with any legal action. Samuel was involved in the Free-Soil Party, and founded an antislavery paper in Boston in the 1850’s. Soon after John Brown’s bloody raid at Harpers Ferry made headlines, Samuel published a disclaimer in his newspaper and temporarily fled to Canada, after it became known that he was one of the Secret Six that funded John Brown.

John Brown was a militaristic “abolitionist, who played a major part in the history of slavery in the United States leading up to the American Civil War. Brown took part in the violence during the Bleeding Kansas crisis, but his most famous action was his leadership of the raid on the Federal Armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (in modern-day West Virginia).”<sup>4</sup> On October 16, 1859, John Brown led a group of twenty-one armed men, stormed and took control of the Federal Armory. “As soon as the arsenal there was captured, Brown dispatched six armed men to capture Colonel Washington, specifically to obtain the George Washington sword that he had inherited. In Brown’s mind that sword was the “sword of state” and in his possession would enhance his political position.<sup>5</sup> Brown attempted to create an armed slave rebellion, under his leadership. However, the slaves failed to join Brown’s rebellion, and the insurrection was soon put down by Robert E. Lee. Washington’s sword proved to be no protection. After his trial, John Brown was hung and buried on his farm in North Elba, New York.

Julia and her husband were both abolitionists, heavily involved in the antislavery movement at the time the Civil War broke out. In 1861, they volunteered to work with the Sanitary Commission. They traveled with other dignitaries to view the First Battle of Bull Run [Battle of Manassas], which turned into a ruse for the Union troops. She wrote:

One day we drove out to attend a review of the troops, appointed to place some distance from the city. In the carriage with me were James Freeman Clarke and Mr. and Mrs. Whipple. The day was fine, and everything promised well; but a sudden surprise on the part of the enemy interrupted the proceedings before they were well begun. A small body of our men had been surrounded and cut off from their companions; re-enforcement were sent to their assistance, and the expected pageant was necessarily given up. The troops who were to have taken part in it were ordered back to their quarters, and we also turned our horses’ heads homeward.

For a long distance the foot-soldiers nearly filled the road. They were before and behind, and we were obliged to drive very slowly. We presently began to sing some of the well-known songs of the war, and among them,—

‘John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave.’

This seemed to please the soldiers, who cried, ‘Good for you!’ and themselves took up the strain. [By perhaps divine suggestion] Mr. Clarke said to me, ‘You ought to write some new words to that tune.’ I replied that I had often wished to do so.<sup>6</sup>

## **John Brown's Body**

John Brown's body lies a mouldering in the grave,  
John Brown's body lies a mouldering in the grave,  
John Brown's body lies a mouldering in the grave.  
His soul's marching on!

Chorus: Glory, Hally, Hallelujah! Glory, Hally, Hallelujah! Glory, Hally, Hallelujah! His soul goes marching on!

He's gone to be a soldier in the Army of our Lord,  
He's gone to be a soldier in the Army of our Lord,  
He's gone to be a soldier in the Army of our Lord  
His soul's marching on!

Chorus: Glory, Hally, Hallelujah! Glory, Hally, Hallelujah! Glory, Hally, Hallelujah! His soul goes marching on!

John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,  
John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,  
John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back.  
His soul's marching on!

His pet lambs will meet him on the way,  
His pet lambs will meet him on the way,  
His pet lambs will meet him on the way.  
They go marching along!

Chorus: Glory, Hally, Hallelujah! Glory, Hally, Hallelujah! Glory, Hally, Hallelujah! His soul goes marching on!

They will hang Jeff Davis to a tree!  
They will hang Jeff Davis to a tree!  
They will hang Jeff Davis to a tree!  
As they march along!

Chorus: Glory, Hally, Hallelujah! Glory, Hally, Hallelujah! Glory, Hally, Hallelujah! His soul goes marching on!

Now, three rousing cheers for the Union!  
Now, three rousing cheers for the Union!  
Now, three rousing cheers for the Union!  
As we are marching on!

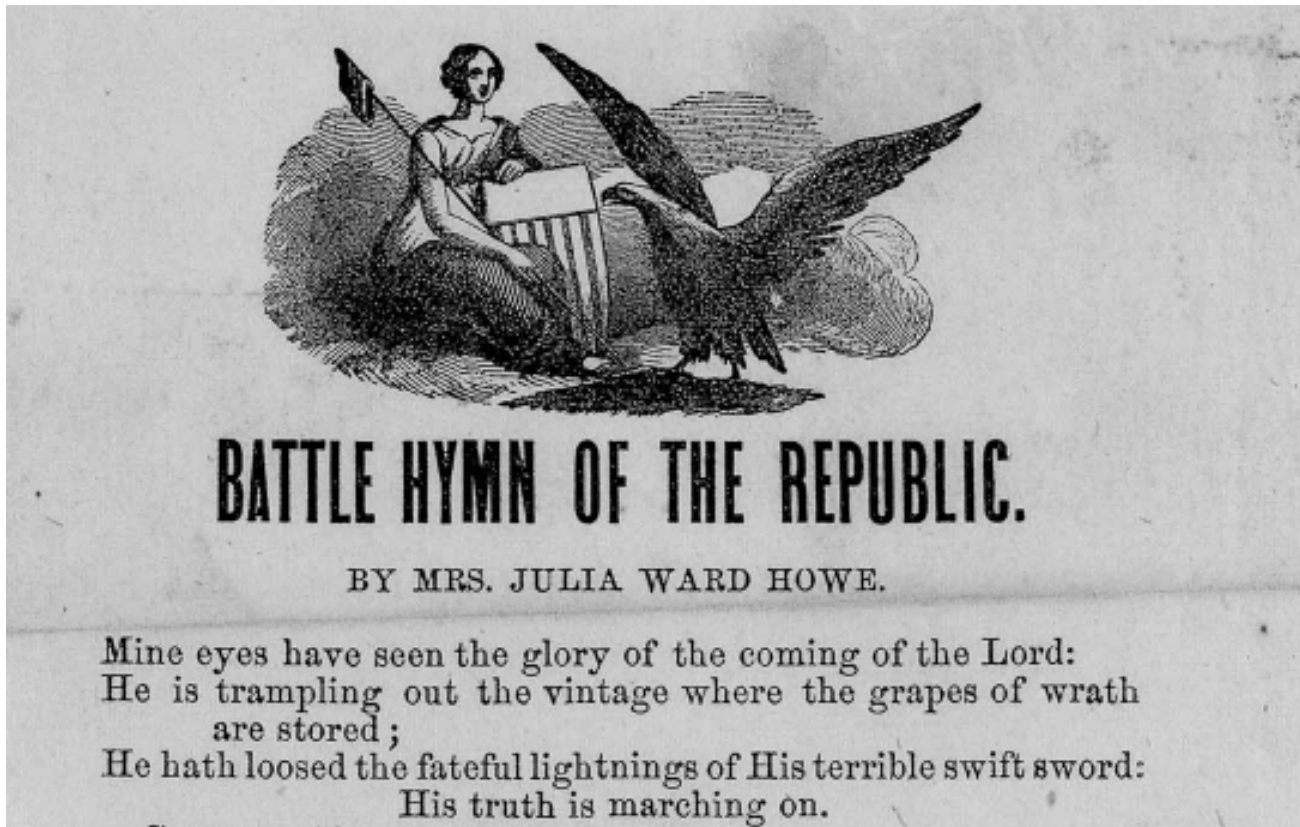
Chorus: Glory, Hally, Hallelujah! Glory, Hally, Hallelujah! Glory, Hally, Hallelujah! hip, hip, hip hip, Hurrah!<sup>7</sup>

The words came to Julia as she woke the next morning, she wrote:

In spite of the excitement of the day I went to bed and slept as usual, but awoke the next morning in the gray of the early dawn. And to my astonishment found that the wished-for lines were arranging themselves in my brain. I lay quite still until the last verse had completed itself in my thoughts, then hastily rose, saying to myself, 'I shall lose this if I don't write it down immediately.' I searched for an old sheet of paper and an old stub of a pen which I had the night before, and began to scrawl the lines almost without looking, as I learned to do by often scratching down verses in the darkened room when my little children were sleeping. Having completed this, I lay down again and fell asleep, but not before feeling that something of importance had happened to me.<sup>8</sup>

After Julia recorded those words, she knew something important had just happened. It would only be in hindsight of the events in her life, that she would fully see the importance of what had happened that morning. She said that "It was almost indecipherable; if I hadn't copied it that day after it was written, I probably would

have lost it.”<sup>9</sup> Julia sent the poem on to Atlantic Monthly, where the editor, James T. Fields added the words to the title of her poem. Julia received \$5 for her work; it was published, February of 1862.



### **The Battle Hymn of the Republic**

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 fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;  
His truth is marching on.  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch fires of a hundred circling camps  
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;  
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps;  
His day is marching on.  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! His day is marching on.

I have read a fiery Gospel writ in burnished rows of steel;  
“As ye deal with My contemners, so with you My grace shall deal”;  
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with His heel,  
Since God is marching on.  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Since God is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that 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.  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! 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 live to make men free;  
[originally ...let us die to make men free]  
While God is marching on.  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! While God is marching on.

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave,  
He is wisdom to the mighty, He is honor to the brave;  
So the world shall be His footstool, and the soul of wrong His slave,  
Our God is marching on.  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Our God is marching on.

### **God Save the South**

This song for a while was the National Anthem of the Confederacy.

By: Earnest Halpin

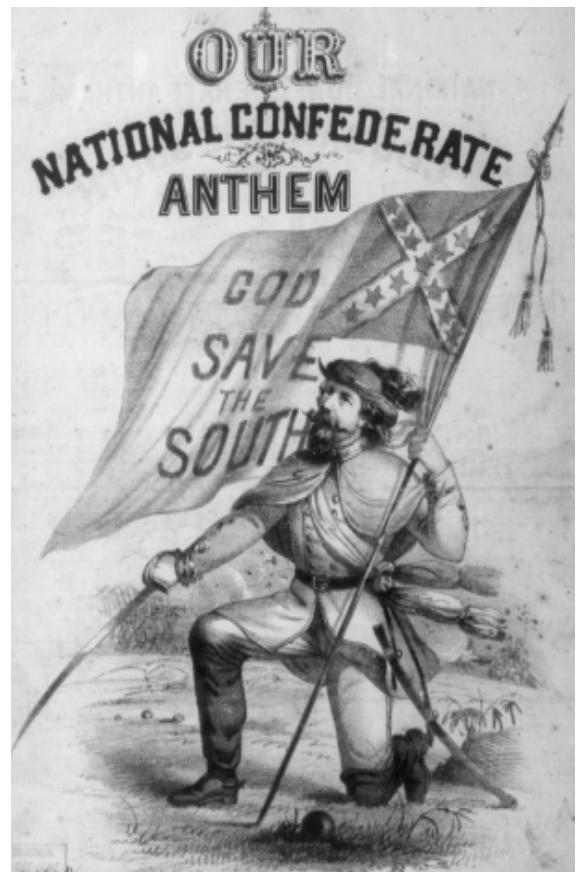
God save the South, God save the South,  
Her altars and firesides, God save the South!  
Now that the war is nigh, now that we arm to die,  
Chanting our battle cry, "Freedom or death!"  
Chanting our battle cry, "Freedom or death!"

God be our shield, at home or afield,  
Stretch Thine arm over us, strengthen and save.  
What tho' they're three to one, forward each sire and son,  
Strike till the war is won, strike to the grave!  
Strike till the war is won, strike to the grave!

God made the right stronger than might,  
Millions would trample us down in their pride.  
Lay Thou their legions low, roll back the ruthless foe,  
Let the proud spoiler know God's on our side.  
Let the proud spoiler know God's on our side.

Hark honor's call, summoning all.  
Summoning all of us unto the strife.  
Sons of the South, awake! Strike till the brand shall break,  
Strike for dear Honor's sake, Freedom and Life!  
Strike for dear Honor's sake, Freedom and Life!

Rebels before, our fathers of yore.  
Rebel's the righteous name Washington bore.



Why, then, be ours the same, the name that he snatched from shame,  
Making it first in fame, foremost in war.  
Making it first in fame, foremost in war.

War to the hilt, theirs be the guilt,  
Who fetter the free man to ransom the slave.  
Up then, and undismay'd, sheathe not the battle blade,  
Till the last foe is laid low in the grave!  
Till the last foe is laid low in the grave!

God save the South, God save the South,  
Dry the dim eyes that now follow our path.  
Still let the light feet rove safe through the orange grove,  
Still keep the land we love safe from Thy wrath.  
Still keep the land we love safe from Thy wrath.

God save the South, God save the South,  
Her altars and firesides, God save the South!  
For the great war is nigh, and we will win or die,  
Chanting our battle cry, "Freedom or death!"  
Chanting our battle cry, "Freedom or death!"

Soon after its publication in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the battle hymn quickly became a popular song sung by the Union troops. "It was first sung in Washington by Dr. McCabe, the famous 'Fighting Parson.' The first time Abraham Lincoln heard him sing the stirring hymn, his eyes filled with tears, and he exclaimed: "that is a good song, play it again!"<sup>10</sup> By Lincoln's strong emotional response to the words of the song, he too understood on some level the significance of the song. Over many years of war, and many bloody battles, the song eventually helped propelled the Union troops to victory. As Lincoln voiced, it was the song that saved the Union.

By the end of the war, Julia Ward Howe had become a well-known poet. Her popularity, mainly due to *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, and her writing and speaking skills, positioned her well for her work in the women's suffrage movement. She would have a tremendous impact on opening up America society for women's rights. Samuel and Julia had finally come to a working agreement in their marriage, were both could pursue separate paths and activities. She became the first woman elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She served as president of the New England Suffrage Association from 1868-1877. Julia along with Lucy Stone helped form the American Woman Suffrage Association, and presided over the Massachusetts Suffrage association as well. Julia even started a world wide initiative to stop war, by uniting women from around the world. Through her Mothers Peace Day efforts as well as the efforts of others, Congress made Mothers Day a national holiday. Julia Ward Howe died on October 17th of 1910, "4000 people attended her funeral at Boston's Symphony Hall. It was a moving moment when those 4000 voices rang out with her song, '*The Battle Hymn of the Republic*.'"<sup>11</sup>



Through out the years, there has been much heated debate over words in *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. The words in the song have elicited strong feelings in many camps. The song is considered offensive to many Southerners, it is offensive to some Christians, but it is especially offensive to many secular non-religious, and anti-religious groups. The song has been labeled a fighting song, hate song, pro-war, Calvinist religious song or militaristic Christian and too many more inflammatory names to list. Entirely missed, by those

offended by the words in the song was the point of the song, and situation the country was in at the time the song first emerged. While history has credited Julia Ward Howe with *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, she did not write the poem. She simply recorded on paper the words that were given to her. Julia was astonished, because in her creative process of writing poems, the way the words to battle hymn came to her was very different. Moreover, she had fore knowing that something very important, something larger than her in time and space had just happened. She was an instrument used by God at the time, for His own purpose.

The country had split in two and the Union was in desperate need of assistance. The result of the song on the Army of the North was to not only to boost morale, but it gave the Union troops a greater reason, and purpose, for the war they were fighting. The song also helped to remind the country of their God, His Son Jesus, and Union, which was the spiritual nature behind the war they were fighting. Why Julia Ward Howe was chosen, we can only speculate. Only God in His infinite wisdom knows for sure. Julia was an accomplished poet with a number of books to her credit, and an abolitionist in the right social circles, were likely the reasons she was chosen. The work of a lesser known poet might not have gotten the attention of the Atlantic magazine, that is of course unless God wanted it published. The phenomenal success of the hymn, her notoriety, and reputation, put her in a perfect position to help lead the later suffrage movement for women's rights, which perhaps was part God's plan as well.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit.”

— John 15: 1-8 RSV

“The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.”

— Isaiah 40:8 RSV (around 710 B.C.)

To be added shortly

---

When a people lose their history, they lose a part of who they are.  
Reclaim your heritage, pass this on to a friend or family member.

---

[www.GodTheOriginalIntent.com](http://www.GodTheOriginalIntent.com)

**Copyright © 2008 Michael A. Shea - All Rights Reserved**

135-08