

Richardson, Willis ^[1]

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by Pattie B. McIntyre, 1994

Related Entry: [African Americans](#) ^[2]

5 Nov. 1889–8 Nov. 1977



Willis Richardson.
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'Today in African
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2010. ^[3]

Willis Richardson, playwright, was born in [Wilmington](#) ^[4], the son of Willis Wilder and Agnes Ann Harper Richardson. After the [riot of 1898](#) ^[5], he moved with his parents from [Wilmington](#) ^[4] to Washington, D.C. There he attended elementary schools from 1899 to 1906 and was graduated from the M Street High School in 1910. Richardson entered government service on 7 Mar. 1911 and on the fourteenth was appointed a skilled helper in the [Wetting Division of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing](#) ^[6]. After receiving numerous promotions, he was appointed custodian of presses effective 17 Sept. 1936. He retired from the bureau in 1954. From 1916 to 1918 he prepared himself for playwrighting by taking correspondence courses in poetry and drama.

Richardson was the first Black playwright to have a serious play produced on Broadway when [The Chip Woman's Fortune](#) ^[7] opened at the [Frazee Theatre](#) ^[8] on 15 May 1923. Earlier this play had opened in Chicago as a production of the Ethiopian Art Players (29 Jan. 1923), in Washington, D.C. (23 April), and on 7 May at the [Lafayette Theater](#) ^[9] in Harlem. In the early twenties Black drama groups were searching for plays by black writers, and Richardson was the first to fulfill this need with his black history plays and plays that "emphasized the physical strength, the nobility, and the courage of his heroes."

The Gilpin Players of Cleveland produced Richardson's *Compromise* at the [Karamu Theater](#) ^[10] on 25 Feb. 1925, their first play by a Black playwright. [Reuben Silver](#) ^[11], in his dissertation on the history of the Karamu Theater, praised Richardson for "urging the retention of the Negro heritage through the Arts." Among the other early Black theater groups producing Richardson's plays were the Howard Players in Washington, D.C., and the Krigwa Players in New York.

Richardson was awarded the Amy Spingarn Prize in the drama contest conducted by [Crisis magazine](#) ^[12] in 1925, with [Eugene O'Neill](#) ^[13] as one of the judges. He won a second time in 1926 and received honorable mention in the [Opportunity magazine](#) ^[14] drama contest in 1925. Richardson, whose play *The Idle Head* ^[15] was published in *Carolina Magazine* (April 1929), was identified by the editor of this "Negro Play" number of the magazine as "the foremost playwright of the younger group." Recognized by [Darwin Turner](#) ^[16], critic of Black theater, as the first significantly productive African-American playwright, Richardson wrote more than forty plays and edited two anthologies of plays by Black writers, [Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro](#) ^[17] (1930) and, with [May Miller](#) ^[18], [Negro History in Thirteen Plays](#) ^[19] (1935).

In his plays and in the anthologies he edited, Richardson attempted to dramatize Black heroes and to give a realistic view of Black life. As early as 1919 in a *Crisis* magazine essay, he stated his philosophy and purpose of the plays he hoped to write: "the kind of play that shows the soul of a people." His plays reflected this philosophy throughout his writing career. Richardson was a member of the Dramatists' Guild of the Authors' League of America, the Harlem Cultural Council, and the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) ^[20].

Richardson married Mary Ellen Jones on 1 Sept. 1914, and they had three daughters: Jean Paula, Shirley Antonella, and Noel Justine. He was a Roman Catholic.

References:

M. Marie Booth Foster, *Southern Black Creative Writers, 1829–1953* (1988)

James V. Hatch, *Black Image on the American Stage* (1970)

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Fannie E. F. Hicklin, "The American Negro Playwright" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1965)

Memoranda of Designations of Employees, Bureau of Engraving and Printing, Civil Archives Division, 1911–51 (Record Group 318, National Archives)

Linda Metzger, *Black Writers* (1989)

Bernard L. Peterson, Jr., "An Evaluation: Willis Richardson: Pioneer Playwright," *Black World* 24 (April 1975)

Willis Richardson, "The Hope of a Negro Drama," *Crisis* 19 (November 1919), and interview, 1972 (audiotape in Hatch-Billops Archive, with duplicates in Cohen Library, CUNY, and in Schomburg)

Theresa G. Rush, *Black American Writers, Past and Present* (1975)

William F. Sherman (National Archives) to Pattie B. McIntyre, 8 Sept. 1982

Reuben Silver, "A History of the Karamu Theatre of Karamu House, 1915–1960" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1961)

Darwin T. Turner, *Black Drama in America* (1971)

Who's Who Among Black Americans (1950)

Who's Who in Colored America (1927–44).

Additional Resources:

African American Literature Forum: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041443> ^[21]

