

Cooper, Anna Julia Haywood ^[1]

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Cooper, Anna Julia

10 Aug. 1858-27 Feb. 1964

by Ansley Wegner, Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History, 2010
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Portrait of Anna J. Cooper, from her *A Voice from the South*, published 1892 by the Aldine Printing House, Xenia, Ohio.

^[3]Anna Julia Cooper, educator, writer, activist, and feminist, was born about 1858 in Raleigh to Hannah Stanley, a slave in the Dr. Fabius J. Haywood ^[4] household. Little is known of the years that she spent in slavery however, although he was never identified, scholars are in agreement that Cooper's father was Fabius Haywood. After the Civil War ^[5], Staley worked as a domestic servant in Raleigh to support her daughter's education. Cooper later wrote about her mother's sacrifice saying that "many an unbuttered crust was eaten in silent content that she might eke out enough from her poverty to send her young folks off to school." Cooper's two older brothers were both independent by that time, but Staley was always on hand to help them and their families, as well.

Cooper enrolled at [St. Augustine's Normal School](#) [6] and Collegiate Institute when it opened in 1868. Already on a scholarship for tuition, the ten year old Cooper earned extra money by serving as a tutor to her classmates. It was at St. Augustine's, a school for African Americans, where Cooper first encountered gender discrimination. Hereafter she advocated both racial and gender equality without placing one's significance over the other. She graduated from the high school program in 1877 and continued to take courses and teach at St. Augustine's until she enrolled at Oberlin in 1881. Having received advanced placement for her coursework at St. Augustine's, Cooper earned a B. A. in mathematics with the class of 1884, becoming the fourth female to graduate from Oberlin. As in Raleigh, she attended Oberlin on a tuition scholarship and worked on campus to pay her expenses.

After teaching at the college level for three years, with positions at Wilberforce College and St. Augustine's, Cooper was awarded a M. A. in mathematics from Oberlin in 1887. That year she was offered a position at the prestigious Preparatory High School for Colored Youth in Washington, D. C. Initially teaching math and science, she was eventually promoted to principal of the "M Street School," later Dunbar High School. In Washington Cooper honed her writing and oratory skills as an advocate for gender and racial equality and progress. She published her most influential book, *A Voice from the South* [3], in 1892. It is considered the "first book-length feminist analysis of the condition of African Americans." The collection of essays addresses topics such as education, segregation, woman suffrage, and poverty, and also examines the portrayal African Americans in literature. She wrote, "It would be subversive of every human interest that the cry of one-half the human family be stifled. Woman in stepping from the pedestal of statue-like inactivity in the domestic shrine, and daring to think and move and speak,--to undertake to help shape, mold, and direct the thought of her age, is merely completing the circle of the world's vision." In reference to the book, Henry Louis Gates called Cooper a "prototypical black feminist."

In *A Voice from the South* Cooper underscored the importance of [African American folklore](#) [7]. To this end she co-founded the Washington Negro Folklore Society, which "sought to collect and document African American folklore before it disappeared from cultural and familial memory." Cooper enjoyed international acclaim for her writings and speeches, always using her renown to enhance her advocacy programs and social change. She began work toward a doctorate degree at Columbia University, which she eventually completed at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1925. She retired from Dunbar High School in 1930, at which time she was selected to serve as president of Frelinghuysen University, an institution geared toward working adults who sought higher education.

Through her publications and lecture, work in education, and community activism, Cooper is credited not with originating, but advancing and providing firm foundation for the Black feminist movement. *A Voice from the South* remains in print after more than a century. Anna Julia Haywood married George A. C. Cooper in 1877. He died two years later and she never remarried. Later in life she took in two foster children and adopted her brother's five orphaned grandchildren, whom she raised and educated. Cooper died in Washington in 1964 and is buried in Raleigh's City Cemetery next to her husband. The United States passport includes Cooper's words, "The cause of freedom is not the cause of a race or a sect, a party or a class – it is the cause of humankind, the very birthright of humanity." In 2009 Anna Julia Cooper was featured on a [postal stamp](#) [8].

Update from N.C. Government & Heritage Library staff:

Anna Julia Cooper was honored by the Episcopal Church (USA), along with educator Elizabeth Evelyn Wright, with a Feast Day on the church's liturgical calendar on February 28.

References:

Vivian M. May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist* (2007).

Karen Baker-Fletcher, *A singing Something: Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper*, 1994.

Louise Daniel Hutchinson, *Ana J. Cooper, A Voice from the South* 1981.

Anna J. Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, as it appears at <https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/cooper/menu.html> [9]

Additional Resources:

Cooper, Anna J. *A Voice from the South*. Xenio, Ohio: The Aldine Printing House. 1892. <https://archive.org/stream/voicefromsouth00coop#page/n7/mode/2up> ^[3] (accessed February 4, 2015).

"Anna Julia Haywood Cooper, 1858-1964." Leadership Gallery, The Church Awakens: African-Americans and the Struggle for Justice. Archives of the Episcopal Church. <https://episcopalarchives.org/church-awakens/> ^[10] (accessed February 5, 2015).

"Anna Julia Cooper's Biography." Center on Gender, Race and Politics in the South. <http://cooperproject.org/about-anna-julia-cooper/> ^[11] (accessed February 5, 2015).

"Holy Women, Holy Men | Celebrating the Saints." New York: Church Publishing. 2010. <https://diobeth.typepad.com/files/holy-women-holy-men.pdf> ^[12] (accessed February 5, 2015).

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