

# Anna Julia Cooper: from slave to school principal,

by Johnnie Douthis  
Smithsonian News Service

It isn't what we say about ourselves, it's what our life stands for.

—Anna J. Cooper  
Aug. 10, 1958

She was the first woman from the District of Columbia to earn a doctorate from the Sorbonne. She was among the first black women to earn a bachelor's degree from an American college. And she became principal of the first public high school for black people in the United States.

Anna Julia Cooper, feminist, human rights advocate, educational reformer and teacher, was born into slavery as Annie Haywood in Raleigh, N.C., about 1858 (her exact birthdate is unknown).

But Cooper's life represented far more than a resume of achievements. It illustrated, concludes Louise Daniel Hutchinson, Cooper's biographer and historian at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in Washington, D.C., that significant accomplishments could be made by a black woman against seemingly insurmountable odds for blacks late in the 19th century.

"When we consider," Hutchinson writes, "that she... began her life under the most adverse circumstances and at a time when the mental capacity of blacks and women was questioned and disparaged, her achievements take on greater significance."

Cooper, indeed, has won a large place of respect in American history for steadfastly refusing to bow to the prevailing view held in the late 1800s that black people should forego higher education for work in the trades and fields—work, this thinking proceeded, that would help blacks better themselves and improve their relations with southern whites embittered by post-Civil War Reconstruction politics.

Fate gave Anna Cooper a very long life, one that for American blacks spanned a century of tumultuous history—servitude, Civil War, emancipation, Reconstruction and the brief hope of full citizenship, reaction, segregation and, at last, the slow movement toward real equality. Cooper died in the 1960s as the civil rights movement was coming to life; yet her life's work aided that cause. She also was well ahead of her time in arguing for women's rights.

The Civil War was barely three years over when little Anna, encouraged by her self-sacrificing mother (whose child presumably was fathered by her master, Dr. Fabius J. Haywood Sr.), went off to school at Raleigh's new St. Augustine's Normal School and Collegiate Institute, established by the Episcopal Church to prepare black teachers to

developed between the young woman and her Greek studies teacher, ministry student George A.C. Cooper, and at the close of the 1877 school year, they were married. "He was probably just the kind of balance wheel that this intense young woman needed in her life," Hutchinson suggests. But the shared life and plans they had made were not to be; George Cooper died two years later, on Sept. 27, 1879.

Now 21 and a full-time teacher at S. Augustine's Cooper in 1881 looked toward the possibility of higher education, applying to Ohio's Oberlin College, among the first U.S. schools to admit blacks and, especially important to this woman, admired for its academic standards. With her characteristic directness and candor, Cooper wrote the school's president asking to be accepted as a "free tuition"

*A slaveowner could be whipped or jailed if caught teaching his slaves to read and write. In some southern states, that slave could be killed. Those who knew how to read surreptitiously taught other slaves their skill.*

instruct black youth. Bright and precocious, Anna served as a tutor at the school, where she received a small stipend to pay for board and tuition, but as she would later recall, "after a while I had a great deal of time on my hands. I had devoured what was put before me, and... was looking for more."

In that quest, Anna developed a courageous side that would serve her well in her professional life. Generations before it was in vogue, she fought against sexism at St. Augustine's confronting the issue as she tried to enroll in a Greek class. Told the class was for males only, she fought back, won a victory—and a seat in class.

Ironically, a close friendship de-

veloped between the young woman and her Greek studies teacher, ministry student George A.C. Cooper, and at the close of the 1877 school year, they were married. "He was probably just the kind of balance wheel that this intense young woman needed in her life," Hutchinson suggests. But the shared life and plans they had made were not to be; George Cooper died two years later, on Sept. 27, 1879.

student. "Southern schools pay very meanly," she declared, but "I expect to have money enough to keep me one or two years at college...." Managing, resourcefully, to complete a classical curriculum at Oberlin in 1884, Cooper soon found another chance to take a stand against sexism. She had been promised a professorship by the president of St. Augustine's but that commitment was ignored by his successor, who instead offered Cooper the position of "teacher in charge of girls." She refused, then headed for Wilberforce College, a black church school in Xenia, Ohio, to chair the science and modern language departments.



Smithsonian News Service Photo, circa 1925, by Addison N. Scurlock, courtesy of Regia Bronson and Regina Smith.

Feminist, human rights advocate, educational reformer and teacher, Anna Julia Cooper (c.1858-1964) led a remarkable life. Born into slavery, she was among the first black women to earn a bachelor's degree from an American college. Later, she earned a doctorate from the Sorbonne in Paris. In 1925, she wrote: "My one aim is and has always been, so far as I may, to hold a torch for the children of a group too long exploited and too frequently disparaged in its struggling for the light."

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Banneker was a surveyor on a six-person team that helped lay out the blueprint for the city. When the chair of the committee, Major L'Enfant, abruptly resigned and returned to Paris with his plans, Banneker — using his precise memory — reproduced the plans in their entirety!



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