

U.S. Postal Service Honours educator, feminist and activist Anna Julia Cooper with 2009 Black Heritage Series Stamp



With the 32nd stamp in its Black Heritage series, the U.S. Postal Service honors Anna Julia Cooper, an educator, scholar, feminist, and activist who gave voice to the African-American community during the 19th and 20th centuries, from the end of slavery to the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Cooper—who once described her vocation as “the education of neglected people”—viewed learning as a means of true liberation. She is best known for her educational leadership, her challenges to the racist notion that African Americans were naturally inferior, and her groundbreaking collection of essays and speeches, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (1892).

Anna Julia Haywood was born into slavery around 1858 in Raleigh, North Carolina. As a child, she developed a love of learning and wanted to become a teacher. In 1868, she received a scholarship to enter the inaugural class at St. Augustine’s Normal School and Collegiate Institute (now St. Augustine’s College), a local school for African Americans created by the Episcopal Church and the Freedmen’s Bureau, where she earned part of her tuition by tutoring

fellow students. She continued to teach at St. Augustine’s after completing her studies in 1877. That year she married George A.C. Cooper, who was studying for the ministry at St. Augustine’s.

Two years after her husband’s unexpected death in 1879, Cooper enrolled at Oberlin College in Ohio. In 1884 she graduated with a degree in mathematics, becoming one of the first African-American women to graduate from the school. Cooper returned to Raleigh and taught math, Greek, and Latin at St. Augustine’s until 1887, when she was invited to teach math and science at the Preparatory High School for Colored Youth (later known as M Street and today as Dunbar High School) in Washington, D.C., the largest and most prestigious public high school for African Americans in the nation.

In 1892, Cooper published *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South*, the first book-length volume of black feminist analysis in the United States. Cooper explored a variety of topics including race relations, poverty, and gender inequality. Across the contexts of religion, education, and literature, she examined the place of African Americans, especially women, in American society. “The time is ripe for action,” she wrote, urging all readers to assume an active role in liberating themselves and others from both racism and sexism in order to realize their fullest potential. She encouraged the African-American community to take advantage of education and to develop and promote its own folklore, literature, and artistic culture. Well received by black and white critics alike, the collection was regarded as “one of the most readable books on the race question of the South” by the *Kingsley Times* of Iowa.

Because white women routinely excluded them from the growing feminist movement, Cooper and other black women across the nation began to create clubs and associations in the late 19th century that were dedicated to the interests and well-being of the African-American community. In Washington, D.C., Cooper helped establish local organizations for women, young people, and the poor that addressed a range of issues including education, housing, and unemployment. Cooper also used public speaking as a platform for change. In 1893, she spoke about the needs of African-American women at the Chicago World’s Fair, and she was one of only two African-American women to address the first Pan-African Conference in London in 1900.

In 1902, Cooper became principal of the M Street High School and immediately worked to strengthen the curriculum, which stressed both liberal arts and vocational training. “We are not just educating heads and hands,” she stated, “we are educating the men and women of a race.” Refusing to use inferior textbooks, Cooper sought to better prepare students for admission to some of the nation’s top colleges and universities, including the Ivy League. Four years later, she was removed from her position under allegations of incompetence and misconduct, but more likely because of her steadfast resistance to the racist notion of African Americans’ intellectual inferiority. Cooper then taught languages at Lincoln University in Missouri until 1910, when she was invited to return to the M Street High School to teach Latin.

Noted for the breadth of her education, Cooper studied French literature and history for several years before enrolling as a doctoral student at Columbia University in 1914 while also remaining a full-time teacher. As part of her graduate work, she translated *Le Pèlerinage de Charlemagne* (The Pilgrimage of Charlemagne), a medieval epic poem, from Old French into modern French. However, because of her race, the translation—which was published in Paris in 1925—was never published in the U.S. despite the professional recognition it garnered. In 1924, Cooper transferred to the University of Paris, Sorbonne, in France and, in 1925, successfully defended her doctoral dissertation, which explored the attitudes of the French toward slavery during the late-18th-century revolutions in France and Haiti. She was only the fourth African-American woman in the U.S. to earn a Ph.D. and the first black woman from any country to do so at the Sorbonne.

Cooper retired from teaching at Dunbar High School in 1930 but continued to give lectures, publish essays, and be active in community affairs. During this time, she also served as president of Frelinghuysen University, which offered affordable liberal arts and professional courses for working African Americans in Washington, D.C. She retired from her role as president in 1940 but continued to serve Frelinghuysen, which was partly located in Cooper’s own home for several years. She privately published her memoir, *The Third Step*, around 1945.

Cooper died in her home at 201 T Street in Washington, D.C., on February 27, 1964. She is buried next to her husband in Raleigh, North Carolina.

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The stamp features a portrait of Cooper created by Kadir Nelson, who based his painting on an undated photograph.

Anna Julia Cooper (c.1858-1964) was an educator, author, and activist who challenged biased notions of racial and gender inferiority. Cooper fought for social justice and civil rights for African-American women, young people, and the poor through her scholarship, community outreach, and innovative educational leadership.