

Virginia Proctor Powell Florence: A Life, A Legacy

Every person has a legacy. You may not know what your impact is, and it may not be something that you can write on your tombstone, but every person has an impact on this world.

--Dara Horn

Virginia Proctor Powell Florence (1897-1991, hereafter Florence), the first Black woman and second Black person in the United States to earn a professional degree in library science, blazed the trail for scores to follow.

Born Virginia Proctor Powell on October 1, 1897, Florence was the only child of Edward Socrates Powell and Caroline Elizabeth “Carrie” Proctor. In February 1904, her mother died of pneumonia and exhaustion¹ and her daughter was sent to live with family members in her maternal grandmother’s household in Pittsburgh. It is unclear why Florence and her father were separated after her mother’s death or how closely they were in contact afterward. What is clear, however, is that Edward Powell died in July 1945; Florence’s signature appears on the death certificate as the informant.²

It seems that attending Oberlin College was a family tradition, as indicated on various Oberlin College alumni questionnaires that Florence filled out and returned. Her mother was enrolled in Oberlin’s preparatory course in 1890-91, and Florence listed several relatives who either attended or graduated from Oberlin from the mid-1800s through the early 1900s³, including:

- Sarah Jane Woodson Early (1856)⁴

- Hannah Woodson (enrolled 1852-54 at Oberlin Academy Preparatory School)
- Sara Jane Woodson Cohron (1877)
- Julia Ann Woodson (1879)
- Grace Woodson (1924)

After graduating from Pittsburgh's Fifth Avenue School in 1915, Florence continued the family tradition and enrolled at Oberlin. She pursued a course of study that might be expected from an institution of the "liberal arts and sciences" such as Oberlin,⁵ including courses in English composition and literature, religion, German and Latin, history, economics, physical training, philosophy, sociology, and fine arts. In addition to scholarly pursuits, she was active in student organizations such as the Aeliolian Literary Society and the Young Women's Christian Association (Y.W.C.A.).

From early on in Oberlin's history, literary and religious societies were important threads in the fabric of the student experience. The Aeliolian Society was one of the ladies' literary societies active on campus between 1846 and 1952. Such societies were created to provide forums for discussion, oratory, and debate. According to Oberlin's *Hi-O-Hi* 1919 yearbook, the Aeliolian Society "fulfilled its wish to live up to the name of a literary organization, and still cover some phase of history, politics, and art, in the study of the development of Russian literature."⁶

During the time that Florence was involved (1917-1918), Oberlin's Y.W.C.A. chapter was primarily concerned with "unit[ing] the women of the institution in a growing comradeship and in a deepening loyalty to Jesus Christ."⁷ Campus activities such as teas and luncheons, practical

work, and Bible studies all served as an overall socializing effort to interest and encourage them in the organization's work.

After graduating in 1919 with her BA in English Literature, Florence went to St. Paul, Minnesota, where she served for one year with the Y.W.C.A.'s Girl Reserves of the Colored Girls Work Section. The Girl Reserves clubs were created to help girls and young women "develop a well-balanced personality, grow physically and take on social responsibility." This club system was specially designed to "meet the needs of young women and girls of color."⁸ Part of her duties included taking the girls on picnics, to visit museums, and telling them stories. This work stoked her desire to become a teacher.⁹

Realizing her dream would not prove easy, though. After leaving St. Paul, she went back to Pittsburgh to look for work as a teacher. However, as well-educated and experienced as she was, there were no opportunities for her; the schools were integrated for children, but not for Black teachers.¹⁰ Eventually, Florence gave up on finding a teaching job in the Pittsburgh schools and worked for the next two years at Proctor's Hair Shop, the hair and beauty salon owned by her aunt Jennie M. Proctor.

Charles Wilbur Florence, whom she would later marry, saw her frustration in trying to secure a position as a teacher and encouraged her to consider librarianship as a career. As she would recount later in her life, "I have always liked books and reading since I was a little girl because I was very much alone."¹¹ She applied to the Carnegie Library School in Pittsburgh, though apparently the principal of the school was concerned about where she would work upon graduation, since "no black had ever been hired in any capacity in a Pittsburgh-area library and

there seemed to be little likelihood that the situation would soon change.”¹² Nevertheless, she was accepted to the program in 1922 and began training as a children’s librarian.^{13,14}

The classroom portion of the program included courses that one would expect, such as Classification and Subject Headings; Bibliography, Book Selection, Government Documents, and Reference; and History of Libraries, Administration of Libraries, and General Practice. This was the part of the curriculum where students received in-person experience working in local branch libraries in Pittsburgh.¹⁵ For those like Florence who were studying to become children’s librarians, there were also courses on children’s literature and storytelling.

There is not room here to discuss in great detail the racial discrimination and “otherness” that Florence faced during the practical portion of her coursework, but that was certainly a part of her experience. As Arthur Gunn states in his profile of Florence’s life, “The supervising librarians believed, that, as a black student, Virginia should not be allowed to assist white patrons.”¹⁶ So, while her classmates had the opportunity to apply their classroom knowledge and sharpen their skills in actual library settings, she had to step aside so that white librarians could assist library patrons. The same was true during the storytelling programs for children. However, Florence proved to be a quick learner and successfully finished the program despite obstacles and challenges. It would be over twenty years before another Black student would be admitted to the school.¹⁷

In 1923, Florence’s hard work and persistence paid off when she was appointed to an assistant librarian position at New York Public Library’s (NYPL) 135th Street branch in Harlem.¹⁸ By all accounts, this branch was a bustling hub of activity among Black patrons, although it had not started out that way. When the branch location first opened in 1905, its

patrons were 95% white, but by 1925, the demographics shifted and its patrons were 95% Black.¹⁹ Ernestine Rose, a white librarian who became the branch librarian in 1920, inherited an all-white staff but took steps to hire Black library assistants, thereby creating an integrated library staff. Rose's policy also made integrated staffing possible at other NYPL branches as well, which seemed to crack open the door for other Black women to join the profession.²⁰ The 135th Street branch was one of a very few which permitted the employment of Black library assistants; in 1925, it had five, including Regina Andrews, Catherine Latimer, and Florence herself.²¹

The practice of institutionalized discrimination at NYPL was of particular interest to W.E.B. Du Bois, the American sociologist, socialist, historian, civil rights activist, Pan-Africanist, author, writer, and editor. In a series of letters between Du Bois, Rose, and others in NYPL's administration during the early 1930s, he advocated hiring and promoting of qualified Black women to serve as librarians and assistants across the NYPL system. He even pointed to other major cities like Chicago, which had "a colored population smaller than that of New York" and should be looked at as a model of employment equality.²² Du Bois had worked to help Andrews gain her appointment as First Assistant Librarian and was also working on behalf of Latimer, NYPL's first Black librarian, regarding her apparent demotion to field worker in the new Adult Education Program. Apparently, this decision was made in favor of hiring Arturo Schomburg to be Head Curator of the Schomburg Collection, which NYPL had recently acquired.²³ Du Bois contacted Florence by letter in 1931 to inquire about her experience working in the NYPL system and specifically for Rose. He especially desired to know the facts regarding Florence's "very unpleasant time with Miss Rose"²⁴ so that he could continue to advocate for

change in NYPL, but Florence had left the 135th Street branch in 1927 to work as a librarian in the Seward Park High School.

By the time Du Bois wrote to her in 1931, she had married her sweetheart Charles Wilbur Florence, and they were living in Jefferson City, Missouri, where he was serving as the President of Lincoln University. Their long courtship had been delayed so that they could each focus on their education and careers.

Of her time at NYPL, she stated in her reply to Du Bois: “My public library career was by no means a happy one but I do not attribute my difficulty to Miss Rose. I am not trying to defend Miss Rose, for while she certainly did nothing definite to help me, I do not know that she tried in any way to impede my progress.” She went on to state that her “greatest difficulty in the New York public library system came while [she] was working in another branch and not with Miss Rose.” She also offered a bit of criticism of the system: “My criticism of the New York public library system is that promotion is given to those who catch the eye and favor of some of the powers that be. Those who refuse to ingratiate themselves in their favor are not promoted.”²⁵ Her reply to Du Bois never indicated exactly what led to her profound unhappiness while working at NYPL or who was responsible for it. She must have had reasons for not divulging details, but they may never be known.

While Charles Florence served as president of Lincoln University from 1931 to 1937, she was not employed as a librarian; she set her career aside to perform the duties of the University’s first lady. These included serving as the President of the Association of College Women and Secretary of the Modern Priscilla Art & Charity Club; she was also a member of several

organizations, including the Faculty Women's Auxiliary of Lincoln University and the Y.W.C.A.²⁶

When her husband accepted a position as Chairman of the Education Department at Virginia Union University in 1938, she again struggled to find a position as a librarian in Richmond. She ultimately found a librarian position at Cardozo High School in Washington, D.C. She worked until 1945, when ill health caused her to retire. When her health recovered, she worked as a school librarian at Maggie L. Walker High School in Richmond from 1950 until she retired again in 1965.

Florence and her husband were “especially interested in civil rights and better race relations” and worked with their church, the Young Men's Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.), the Y.W.C.A., the Richmond Crusade for Voters²⁷ and their Black Greek Letter Organizations (Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. and Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., respectively) toward that end.

Charles died in 1974, and she remained in Richmond for the remainder of her life. In the years before she died, she received many honors and recognition for her long tenure in the library profession and for being the first Black woman to have earned a degree in library science. In 1981, she was honored by the University of Pittsburgh with a Special Award for Outstanding Professional Service. Pitt honored her again in 2004 with a plaque hung in the School of Information Sciences lobby.

While she left behind no direct descendants when she died in Richmond in 1991, Virginia Proctor Powell Florence blazed the trail in the library profession so that scores of other Black women could blaze our own trails and continue her lasting legacy.

Endnotes

1. "Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, U.S., Deaths, 1870-1905," digital image s.v. "Carrie Powell" (1871-1904), *Ancestry.com*.
2. "Pennsylvania, U.S., Death Certificates, 1906-1967," digital image s.v. "Edward Powell" (1867-1945), *Ancestry.com*.
3. *1935 Quinquennial Report Blank (Biographical Form)* (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College, 1935). Alumni Records 28/2, Series 2 (Graduates and former students), Box 335, Florence, Mrs. Charles Wilbur (Virginia Proctor Powell), Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin, Ohio.
4. I wish there was time to explore Florence's family tree. One of her ancestors, Sarah Jane Woodson Early, a lifelong educator, author, and activist, was one of the first Black women in the United States to receive a college degree. When she was hired at Wilberforce University, she was the first Black woman in the United States to serve as a college faculty member.
5. Oberlin College, *General Catalogue of Oberlin College, 1833-1908. Including an Account of the Principal Events in the History of the College, with Illustrations of the College Buildings* (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College, 1909), 1187. <http://www.archive.org/details/generalcatalogue00oberrich>.
6. Oberlin College, *The Hi-O-Hi* (Oberlin, Ohio: 1919).
7. Oberlin College, *The Hi-O-Hi* (Oberlin, Ohio: 1917).
8. "A Moment in our History: Touching the Lives of Future Generations: From Girl Reserves and Y-Teens to Girls' Summit," accessed Jul 20, 2021,

<https://www.ywcaoahu.org/ywca-oahu-120/2020/4/28/a-moment-in-our-history-touching-the-lives-of-future-generations-from-girl-reserves-and-y-teens-to-girls-summit>.

9. Teresa Lemons, "Librarian Didn't Go by Book." *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), March 1, 1989.
10. Arthur C. Gunn, "A Black Woman Wants to be a Professional: The Struggle of Virginia Proctor Powell Florence," *American Libraries*, February 1989, 154.
11. Teresa Lemons, "Librarian Didn't Go by Book," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, (Richmond, VA), March 1, 1989.
12. Gunn, "A Black Woman," 155.
13. List by Classes of Carnegie Library School graduates who received the degree of B.S. in L.S., June 1931. Box 1, Folder 13, Carnegie Library School History Collection, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
14. Florence graduated from the Carnegie Library School (CLS) in 1923 with a diploma which was eligible to be upgraded to a Bachelor of Science degree in Library Science when CLS merged with the Carnegie Institute of Technology in 1931. This offer was extended to CLS graduates who met the requirements for the Bachelor of Science degree from Carnegie Tech at the time of the merger.
15. Larry Sean Kinder, *Florence, Virginia Proctor Powell*. Oxford University Press, 2013).
16. Gunn, "A Black Woman Wants to be a Professional: The Struggle of Virginia Proctor Powell Florence," 154 156.

17. Vivian Davidson Hewitt graduated from Carnegie Library School in 1944 and was hired as the senior assistant librarian by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh following her graduation. She is believed to be the first African American librarian in Pittsburgh.

18. "Pittsburgh Girl is Given Appointment." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Sept. 15, 1923b.

19. Lester A. Walton, "Library is Barometer of Race's Growth in N.Y." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Aug. 15, 1925.

20. "135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library is Interesting Activity Center." *New York Age*, Dec. 22, 1923.

21. Walton, "Library is Barometer of Race's Growth in N.Y."

22. W. E. B. Du Bois (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963. Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to the New York Public Library, March 1, 1930. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

<http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b055-i483>.

23. Rhonda Evans. "Catherine Latimer: The New York Public Library's First Black Librarian," last modified March 20, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2020/03/19/new-york-public-library-first-black-librarian-catherine-latimer>.

24. W. E. B. Du Bois (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963. Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Virginia Powell Florence, September 25, 1931. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

25. Virginia Proctor Powell Florence, 1903-1991. Letter from Virginia Powell Florence to W. E. B. Du Bois, October 28, 1931. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.
26. Oberlin College Biographical Form (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College, unspecified date.) Alumni Records 28/2, Series 2 (Graduates and former students), Box 335, Florence, Mrs. Charles Wilbur (Virginia Proctor Powell), Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin, Ohio.
27. Ibid.