

Charlotte Shuster Price: A Community Activist and Archivist



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Born on October 6, 1912, in New Haven, Connecticut, Charlotte Shuster Price (1912-2013) was the youngest of ten children. She spent many years of her life dedicated to community activism in the Washington, D.C. area with her husband, Dr. Kline A. Price, Sr. They had two sons: Kline A. Price Jr., who married Bebe Drew, daughter of Dr. Charles Drew, who developed techniques for blood plasma storage and Hugh B. Price, Esq., who served as president and CEO of the National Urban League from July 1994 until April 2003. He married Marilyn Lloyd, whose mother, Ruth Smith Lloyd, was “the first black woman in the United States to earn a Ph.D. in anatomy” and a renowned professor at Howard University Medical School. [1]

“Dr. Kline A. Price, Sr., who was only the second African American physician in the United States to earn a certification from the American Board of Urology at that time.”[2]

Dr. Price, Sr., was considered a “prize catch” for any young African American woman. Yet, her parents harbored biases about race and color. They were so fair-skinned that they were possibly thought to be white. Three of Charlotte’s siblings passed (choosing to live as white). They thought Dr. Price was too “Black” to marry their daughter. He was not treated kindly by her parents, but they married anyway in 1935. The “color-struck” experiences brought many tensions, sadness, and emptiness within the family over the years. [3]

Price and her husband were a part of a community activist group made up of parents and community members who were not pleased with the conditions of the Black schools in the area. This group, Consolidated Parents, fought for school desegregation in the D.C. area. They also provided financial support for some of the legal fees incurred as Charles Hamilton Houston, their neighbor, took up the fight for Consolidated Parents against the Board of Education. [4][5] It has been said that “this work by Houston laid the legal foundation for the landmark Brown V. Board of Education ruling by the U. S. Supreme Court in 1954.” [6] This demonstrates that even before Price became an archivist, she helped different communities to set up and preserve their history. She understood the importance of community involvement and took action to support such important movements.

At the age of fifty-five, with her husband’s encouragement, Price decided to study library & information science (LIS). At the age of fifty-eight, Price transformed herself from activist to archivist by earning a master's degree in library science from Catholic University, beginning LIS work in the Moorland Room (now the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center) at Howard University. She worked with and was mentored by Dorothy Porter Wesley, an illustrious and pioneering African American librarian at Howard University. “It is Dorothy Porter Wesley who deserves the credit for transforming the potential of Moorlands gift and other related material

into a repository widely hailed as one of the very best at the time of her retirement in 1973”. [6] Wesley was one of the great scholars and archivists that set the foundation for broadening the scope of what one would collect. She expanded the holdings significantly while she was serving in the Moorland Room. “She began acquiring books and other materials in 1930 and from then until 1973, the center's holdings grew to 180,000 items from 3,000” [7]. Price was able to learn the intricacies of building a collection while working with Porter. Price explained “she actually had me going through trash cans [of Wesley]. At the end of the school year, the professors would be clearing their desks and throwing papers away and she taught me to think-that some of those papers were of real historical interest.” [8] [9] [10] Here, we can see where Price learned to dig thoroughly through history and build massive collections that were accessible to the public. Price looked beyond the big things or the things that seemed blatantly significant but also paid attention to those things which may have local significance or represented the community in a profound way.

“I met Mrs. Price at Howard University as an undergraduate student working in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center. She and fellow librarians Dorothy Porter Wesley, Dorothy McAllister (also a pioneering African American librarian at Howard University), were responsible for me pursuing a career in librarianship!” – Gladys Smiley Bell, B.S.

Howard University, 1972

Price took these skills with her and moved back to New England at the age of sixty-one, launching a new career as an archivist at Pilgrim Hall, a historical society. Price was appointed part-time Curator of Books and Manuscripts of the Pilgrim Society on September 12, 1973. [11]

While Price was at Pilgrim Hall, the acclaimed “Remember the Ladies” exhibition of 1976, celebrating women in the Revolutionary War, was revealed. “Curated by a powerhouse

team including scholars who helped to establish the new field of women's history and influential socialites, Remember the Ladies: Women in America, 1750-1815 was shown in New York, Washington D.C., and in Plymouth MA, where it officially opened with a ribbon-cutting by then-First Lady Betty Ford." This exhibit was considered bold during these times with its particular attention to diverse subjects. Many dignitaries and prominent women, including Lady Bird Johnson and Joan Kennedy, visited the exhibit as it traveled to different sites across the country. [12]

Price was appointed Acting Director on August 5, 1977, to serve while the Trustees searched for a new director, after the Director L. C. Geller resigned. Price served at Pilgrim Hall until she resigned in 1978. [13]

After moving to Falmouth in 1978, Price served as the first professional archivist at Falmouth Historical Society. She developed an archival system and published a guidebook: "A Guide to the Manuscripts and Special Collections in the Archives of the Falmouth Historical Society." Price's interest in the archival structures and preservation of materials led her to research and produce other guidebooks on the topic. "Her organizational system is still the backbone of the archives at Falmouth, and her Guide to Manuscripts is frequently consulted." [14] [15]

Price's contributions to historic preservation in New England did not stop there. She went on to work at Cape Cod Community College for fourteen years. There, she was responsible for the Nickerson Memorial Room, which began in 1969. She helped create several collections, one of which was the Beals Collection for Helen Abbott Beals. "There was this mass of papers every which way, " she recalled. "It looked like a hurricane had hit." [16] Price was often called to obscure places to investigate materials for the archives at Cape Cod and eventually built a

collection of over 5,000 materials. An article from *The Register* in 1981 said that “The William Brewster Nickerson Memorial Room contains the largest public collection of this kind of material in Massachusetts.” [17] Here she was considered a combination librarian, “an archivist and a conservator.” [18]

Price was instrumental in advocating for documenting the area's history, including ordinary people, colleges, movements, etc. One of the most treasured collections in the Nelson Memorial Room was the oral histories of different people who lived in the area. Price said, “the big repositories always collected papers on the ‘movers and shakers’ of the political and economic world. But now social historians are looking at the small person.” [19] This shows her appreciation for everyday history, its importance, and some of the mentorship/influence from information professionals such as Dorothy Porter Wesley. Price developed bibliographies to improve the ability to find the items in this archive. She published two guidebooks while working at Cape Cod Community College. One was the “Guide to Holdings” in the William Brewster Nickerson Memorial Room. This 149-page guide that describes all of the materials in the repository, including “rare books, maps, manuscripts, deeds, ship’s logs, oral history tapes, videotaped interviews, and other pertinent historical and literary materials dealing with Cape Cod.” [20]

Price continued to advocate and add to the collections as she found things. She was also passionate about sharing her expertise with others. She continuously organized and facilitated workshops to help other LIS professionals (including those who worked in museums) and historians in the development and maintenance of archives. These workshops included “How to use computers in archival work,” “How to catalog manuscripts,” “How to prepare a guide to the manuscript holdings in your repository,” and “How to handle the photographs in your

collection.” [21] Price would work with other professionals to teach more in-depth classes about aging items, the handling of items, and more. She made a name for herself in the archival world and consulted on special projects. A 1981 article in *The Register* was stated, “Charlotte Price of Waquoit, retired archivist at the Pilgrim Society in Plymouth, has agreed to be consulted on the organization and display of the Einstein materials.” [22]

Price was also instrumental in gathering communities together. During one of her all-day workshops, there was a conversation that sparked the idea for an association (which became known as The Cape and Island Historical Association) dedicated to sparking interest in local history near Cape Cod. Price stepped up in the beginning stages of the project and developed mechanisms to organize the work that needed to be done. “Charlotte Price has developed a comprehensive questionnaire designed to simplify and direct the project.” [23] She was so instrumental that the President of the association named her the chairperson of the first project. “Charlotte Price deserves a lot of credit. The first thing I did when I was elected President was to name her Program Chairman.” [24]

Price was very active in the special collections and archival field. She made significant contributions at each institution where she served and beyond. An article about the thirty-year celebration of that Nickerson Memorial Room at the Cape Cod Community College they spoke very highly of Price’s contributions to the college: “The library developed much of its reputation for professionalism and receptivity to researchers during the 14-year tenure of Charlotte Price, who retired two years ago and lives in Falmouth.” [25] Bell says that Price’s contributions, passion for history, and the knowledge she passed onto her were felt even after she left Howard University as an undergraduate. Bell, who currently works as a Rare Book and Special Collections librarian also notes:

Price was an inspirational African American librarian who fought for community and civil rights as well as preserving and archiving information for current and future research endeavors for all and American history.

Price along with Dorothy Porter inspired me to be a librarian; I was encouraged to go to library school and I remember Price hovering over me to help with choosing a school, internships and being a public service librarian devoted to serving all members of a community regardless of acuity, income, or physical ability. Price's legacy arises and shines with the people she touched during her precious life for prosperity with the knowledge of her archival and preservation of the historical work. I know I am devoted to being very active in African American struggles for equality in my community as well as within the library profession. I know I am always cognizant of protecting our history, my history and I am reminded of a quote by Price: "Charlotte Price takes (took) history seriously and worries that much of it will be lost. 'This is what I tell people,' she says, 'Record that history before it's too late. Write it down or put it on tape.'" [26]

Price died on December 22, 2013, at Sunrise Senior Living in Columbia, Maryland. She was 101 years old. [27]

[1] Hugh Price, *This African-America Life: A Memoir* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 2017), 8, 71.

[2] *Cape Cod Times*, Charlotte Shuster Price, 101, (2013)

<https://www.capecodtimes.com/article/20140105/obits02/401050328>

[3] Hugh Price, *This African-America Life: A Memoir* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 2017), 34-35.

[4] Hardin, Daniel. "DC's fighting barber & the end of public school segregation." *Washington Area Spark*, 2015 <https://washingtonareaspark.com/tag/consolidated-parents-group/>

[5] Hugh Price, *This African-American Life: A Memoir* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 2017), 50-52.

[6] Kelly Tresk, Hugh Price (1941 –). BlackPast.org. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/price-hugh-1941/> May 26, 2011

[7] Battle, Thomas C. "Dorothy Porter Wesley: preserver of Black History." *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 12:24,

[8] Pace, Eric. 1995. "Dorothy Porter Wesley, 91, Black-History Archivist." *The New York Times*, Dec 20.

[9] Harriet Scarupa "The Energy-Charged Life Of Dorothy Porter Wesley" *New Directions* 17, no. 1 (1990)

[10] Taylor Wheaton interviewed by Tiffany Duck, June 07, 2021. Remember the Ladies Exhibit Collection. Pilgrim Hall Society Archives.

[9] Remember The Ladies. *Pilgrim Society News*, Fall 2020.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Taylor Wheaton interviewed by Tiffany Duck, June 07, 2021. Remember the Ladies Exhibit Collection. Pilgrim Hall Society Archives.

[12] *Historical Times, A Newsletter of Museums on the Green*. 2014.

<http://museumsongreen.org/wp-content/uploads/Spring-2014-Final-PDF.pdf>

[14] *The (Yarmouth) Register*, Thursday, November 19, 1981; Page: S26.

[15] Miller, 1984.

[16] Hugh Price, *This African-America Life: A Memoir* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 2017), 22.

[17] Miller, 1984.

[18] Miller, 1984

[19] *The (Yarmouth) Register*, Thursday, November 19, 1981; Page: S26.

[20] *The Barnstable Patriot*, "Archivist to hold workshops," (1985) p. 17.

[21] *The (Yarmouth) Register*, August 2, 1981; Page: S4

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] *The Barnstable Patriot*. "Nickerson Room at Community College Celebrates 30 years of service," Thursday, May 02, 1996, p. 5.

[25] Kelly Tresk, Hugh Price (1941 –). BlackPast.org. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/price-hugh-1941/> May 26, 2011

[26] Olivia Miller, "William Brewster Nickerson Room: archives and memorabilia make a modern day grandma's attic at 4C's." *The Register*, 1984.

[27] *The Washington Post*. "Charlotte Shuster Price." Dec. 29, 2013.