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By: Pheobe Pollitt

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Charlotte Rhone: Nurse, Welfare Worker, and Entrepreneur

Remembering the life and legacy of an unsung African American heroine.



This portrait of Charlotte Rhone hangs in the Charlotte S. Rhone Cultural Center in New Bern, North Carolina. It is reproduced with permission of the Climbers Club of New Bern. Photo by Victor T. Jones Jr., New Bern–Craven County Public Library.

Charlotte Rhone, a pioneering African American nurse born in Craven County, North Carolina, at the end of the post–Civil War Reconstruction era, grew up in a society shaped by the harshly discriminatory Jim Crow laws enacted in her home state and in others across the American South. Her choices in education and employment were severely limited because of these racist policies, but Rhone’s tenacity, flexibility, and intelligence overcame many obstacles that oppressed poverty-stricken African American women in turn-of-the-century rural North Carolina. She went on

to use her education and skills for the good of her community well into the 1950s.

For more than a decade after the Civil War, Union troops occupied the former Confederate States to enforce the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which had abolished slavery, ensured citizenship and due process under the law to newly freed former slaves, and gave African American men the right to vote and run for office.¹ Formerly enslaved people were then free to enroll in public schools, enjoy parks and other public places, own property, and start businesses.

However, because the outcome of the 1876 U.S. presidential race between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel Tilden was fiercely disputed, the two political parties struck a deal known as the Compromise of 1877 to end the standoff.^{2,3} Congressional Democrats allowed Hayes to be declared president; in return, the Republicans agreed to withdraw federal troops from the South, effectively ending Reconstruction. Without federal troops to keep the peace, racial bigotry and violence ensued.

An incident that would have far-reaching consequences occurred in 1892 when an African American man, Homer Plessy, refused to give up his seat to a white man on a train in New Orleans, as he was required to do by state law.⁴ Plessy was arrested. His lawyers argued that the Louisiana law separating African Americans from whites on trains violated the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. In 1896, *Plessy v. Ferguson* was heard in the U.S. Supreme Court, and by a vote of seven to one, the justices ruled against Plessy, allowing states to enact segregation laws as long as public facilities were “separate but equal.” Thereafter, until the 1960s, schools, playgrounds, and hospitals across the South remained segregated—but rarely, if ever, were they equal.

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Charlotte Rhone was born on December 16, 1874, to John and Henrietta Williams Rhone in New Bern,

North Carolina. She had a close-knit family with five siblings: Carolina, James, Walter, Amy, and Henrietta.⁵ The 1910 census described her father as a “restaurant keeper.”⁶

Rhone decided she wanted to become a nurse and follow in the footsteps of Mary Mahoney, Martha Franklin, and other pioneering African American graduate nurses.⁷ However, none of North Carolina’s six white hospital schools of nursing would accept African American students or employ African American nurses. In fact, most segregated hospitals in the state would not accept African American patients, even in life-threatening situations. Before the turn of the 20th century, the only nursing school in North Carolina open to African American students was at St. Agnes Hospital, on the campus of St. Augustine College, an African American school in Raleigh.⁸

In 1898, Rhone enrolled in the Freedmen’s Hospital School of Nursing in Washington, DC. She studied hard, did well, and graduated on May 7, 1901.⁹ Freedmen’s Hospital served as the clinical training site for medical and nursing students attending Howard University. A local newspaper, *The Colored American*, ran an article on June 22, 1901, reporting that Rhone had returned to New Bern and that “she is a woman of amiable disposition and positive character. Encircling her is the confidence of all who knew her to prove her profession honorable.”¹⁰ This echoed an 1897 item in a Raleigh newspaper, *The Gazette*, which noted, “Miss Charlotte Rhone, one of New Bern’s[sic] beautiful and charming society young ladies, attended the [state agricultural] Fair here last week. Miss Rhone is very entertaining, and made many friends in Raleigh during her stay, and all who have met her are sorry to have her leave our city.”¹¹

Despite Rhone’s qualifications, no hospitals in or near New Bern would hire an African American nurse. Rhone practiced as a private duty nurse for families in and around her hometown, providing home health care for people with chronic and acute diseases and helping women in labor and during the postpartum period. Her nursing work was fondly remembered in New Bern for many years. In an interview conducted in 1991 as part of the Memories of New Bern Oral History Project, local resident Mary Bray Mullineaux, then 90 years old, recalled, “I was delivered by [Dr. R. S. Primrose] and a nurse, a Negro registered nurse known and loved by everyone in New

Bern. Her name was Charlotte Rhone. She came along with the doctor to administer to my birth.”¹²

Ms. Mullineaux’s daughter was interviewed for a 2005 college newspaper article about Rhone. The reporter wrote: “Lifelong New Bern resident Kitty Van Buskirk recounted an old story of Rhone attending the birth of a baby and then hurrying downstairs to scold the men who sat around a kitchen table playing cards, drinking whiskey, smoking cigars and making a great deal of noise.”¹³

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COLORED GRADUATE NURSES

Rhone was distinguished not only for the care she provided in her hometown; she was also active in promoting the new profession of nursing. A 1938 letter from the clerk of the Craven County Superior Court to the secretary of the Board of Nurse Examiners states that Rhone registered on June 23, 1903, approximately three weeks after the first white nurse registered.¹⁴ As North Carolina was the first state to pass a nurse practice act that permitted nurses to register and use the title “registered nurse” and the designation RN,¹⁵ this documentation suggests that Rhone may well have been the first African American graduate nurse to become an RN.

None of the nurses’ associations in the Southern states accepted African American nurses until the middle of the 20th century, and being a member of a state association was a requirement for joining the American Nurses Association, so African American nurses were effectively barred from the national organization. Nevertheless, they sought the same benefits of a professional organization that white nurses enjoyed: leadership and continuing education opportunities, association with peers, and a unified voice in

political venues. In 1908, Martha Franklin of Connecticut wrote to 1,500 of her fellow African American nurses across the country and asked them to meet in New York City to discuss issues of common concern. As a result of this meeting the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN) was founded to promote the welfare of African American nurses; ensure high educational and professional standards among African American nurses and nursing schools; build relationships with nursing leaders in the United States and around the world; and break down racial discrimination in nursing schools, workplaces, and professional organizations.^{7,16} Of the 52

nurses who attended the meeting, Charlotte Rhone was the only one from North Carolina. She became a charter member of the NACGN and a member of its executive board.¹⁷ Rhone remained active in the organization, attending annual meetings and holding several offices.

In August 1910, Rhone moved to Durham, to become the matron (head nurse) at the infirmary of the National Religious Training School, now known as North Carolina Central University.¹⁸ She is listed as a teacher at the school in the Durham city directories from 1910 through 1914. Rhone returned to New Bern circa 1915 and resumed her career as a private duty nurse.

In addition to her activities as a nurse, teacher, and advocate, Rhone was also engaged in volunteer efforts at civic improvement. She established a Girl Scouts organization and collected clothes for the needy.¹⁹ In December 1907 and January 1908, two local newspapers recorded Rhone's name in program notes of Emancipation Day ceremonies to which she contributed a poem.^{20,21} Another example of her civic engagement appears in a brief item in the September 29, 1921, *New Bern Sun Journal*, entitled "Colored Citizens War Against Rats."²² The chamber of commerce appointed Rhone to a committee responsible for the extermination of the rodents "in the colored section of the city." Another article reported that she was directress of the African American community playground, which contributed to the "health, discipline and moral uplift" of the youth of the community.²³

THE GREAT FIRE AND A NEW CAREER

New Bern and its African American population were changed forever on December 1, 1922, when a fire spread by high winds destroyed 40 blocks of primarily African American housing and businesses, leaving thousands of people homeless and unemployed. The fire was of such magnitude that state and national officials from the American Red Cross and the nearby U.S. Army base at Fort Bragg came to survey the damage and offer assistance.²⁴

No local hospitals would admit African American patients, so St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church became an emergency ward. A local committee composed of white officials was established to meet the needs of

those harmed by the fire; they, in turn, appointed a separate African American committee to address the needs of the affected community. A newspaper article published a week after the fire described the work of this group and noted that Charlotte Rhone was a member.²⁴

The same article reported that a general from nearby Fort Bragg ordered "1,000 tents, 3,000 cots and 5,000 blankets" to shelter the residents who lost their homes.²⁴ Hundreds of men were put to work building "Tent City" and razing the burned buildings. Rhone had lost her home in the fire and applied for a tent. Many people lived in the tents for two years, through cold winters and hot summers, before more adequate housing could be built.²⁵ Rhone and many others helped the tent residents survive the physical, psychological, and social trauma associated with the fire and their subsequent homelessness and unemployment. Rhone was hired as Craven County's first African American welfare worker, which was not unusual in that many early social workers were trained nurses.²⁶ Rhone applied many of the skills and much of the knowledge acquired during her years as a nurse to help her neighbors in this new capacity.

In 1933, journalist William Brown, a reporter for the *Afro American* newspaper, toured southeastern North Carolina to visit federally funded New Deal programs set up to help unemployed citizens during the Great Depression. His account of New Bern included the following²⁷:

The most interesting project that came to my attention . . . was a shirt and dress factory operated by Miss C. S. Rhone, for the relief agency. Miss Rhone told me that she conceived the idea to put women to work rather than issue a dole. The experiment was highly successful, and was afterwards adopted for both races. The shirts and dresses made in this little factory were exhibited in the largest store in New Bern, and received the highest praise.

Although Charlotte Rhone had no formal training in the new field of social work, she became a leader in the North Carolina Negro Social Work Association. Rhone was a featured speaker and team leader at the 20th Annual Public Welfare Institute for Negro Social Workers, held in Raleigh in 1940.²⁸ Rhone's hard work was recognized: according to the 1937 city directory, she held the position of assistant superintendent of the Craven County Welfare Department.²⁹ It would be another generation before an African American would become the department's superintendent.

RHONE AS ENTREPRENEUR

In addition to her work as a county social worker, in 1923 Rhone, along with her sisters Amy and Henrietta, opened Rhone's Hotel in a modest two-story brick building at 512 Queen Street in New Bern; the building still stands today.

Located at the confluence of the Neuse and Trent Rivers near Pamlico Sound—and not far from North Carolina's Outer Banks—New Bern had been a tourist destination for many years. However, under the segregation laws then in effect, African American travelers could not enter any public restaurants or hotels in New Bern. The sisters chafed under these conditions and wanted to encourage African Americans from other parts of the country to travel to New Bern for business and pleasure. The time seemed right for this new business venture. Rhone and her sisters lived on the second floor of the hotel and rented out rooms on the first.

For more than three decades before the beginning of the civil rights era, Rhone's Hotel provided comfortable accommodations for many African American families visiting the area. In 1951, journalist J. L. Hicks described the establishment for his *Afro American* readers³⁰:

It is listed in the official records as "Rhone's Hotel" . . . but throughout the nation there are weary travelers who have lived here and who prefer to call it simply, "The Rhone Home." For indeed, the Rhone Hotel is really not a hotel—it's a home run by three elderly sisters who open their doors to weary travelers of this segregated State.

Hicks noted that Charlotte, then in her 70s, was working at the county welfare department at the time of his visit.

The establishment and growth of the African American library in New Bern was another of Rhone's major accomplishments. The New Bern Circulating Library had opened in 1902, but under the Jim Crow laws, admission was barred to African American patrons. During the Great Depression, Rhone was one of several African American leaders who established a community lending library in the local African American school. They secured a grant to buy books to fill the library shelves from the federal Works Progress Administration.³¹ Rhone served as the third president of the library and worked to upgrade the library building and grounds. Her obituary, written on June 7, 1965, four days after her death, stated: "The West Street Public Library had its beginning through her diligent work and untiring efforts. After her dream was realized, the building completed and well equipped,

she served as chairman of the Library Board of Directors and filled this position with dignity and pride."³²

A final group dear to Rhone's heart was the Climbers Club of New Bern. Her sister Carrie organized the club in 1921 and Rhone was an active member.³³ The purpose of the organization was to uplift and sustain communities through local activities and by supporting women's suffrage, prohibition, and civil rights. The Climbers Club continues to serve as the local chapter of both the North Carolina Federation of Negro Women's Clubs and the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs.

Charlotte Rhone was among the first African American RNs in the United States; as it did for many other pioneering African American nurses, her profession provided a way out of poverty and afforded her a measure of social authority. If employment opportunities had not been denied to her because of her race, she may well have continued working as a nurse throughout her career. However, as a welfare worker for Craven County she used her nursing knowledge, skills, and judgment every day, and in caring for the physical, social, and psychological health needs of her patients and her community, she personified the ethos of holistic care. Nurses today should remember Charlotte Rhone and honor her for breaking racial barriers, promoting nursing, and helping her community become a better, more healthful place for all to live. ▼

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