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Tribute to Charles Chesnutt- Fayetteville State University 1968

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TRIBUTE TO CHARLES WADDELL CHESNUTT

I pay tribute to a North Carolinian, a Fayettevillian, a scholarly educator, a humanitarian, a pioneer in the field of literature. Charles Waddell Chesnutt was a Fayettevillian inspite of his having been born in Cleveland, Ohio. Both his mother and father migrated from this city to Ohio in rebellion to a way of life which offerred them few opportunities more than a century ago.

They did return after Charles was born, and his father, Andrew Chesnutt served both as County Commissioner and as Justice of the Peace in Cumberland County. Gillispie Street, the Market House and the Wilmington Road were familiar scenes in the life of Charles Chesnutt, and it was here, in this city, that he gathered materials for the volume with which he was to make his debut into the literary world.

Chesnutt was indeed a scholar. At age 14, he was a teacher-pupil in the Howard School on Gillispie Street; at age 20, he was appointed to a position of considerable importance as principal of the New Normal School established in 1877 by the State of North Carolina to train teachers for colored schools. This was housed on the upper floor of the Howard School.

Though Charles served brilliantly his position in the most important school for Negroes in the State of North Carolina, he was too ambitious to spend his life in conditions that were so circumscribed. Having already exercised his scholarship in many other ways, when he was 22 years old he wrote these words: "I think I must write a book. I am almost afraid to undertake a book so early and with so little experience in composition, but it has been

my cherished dream, and I feel an influence that I cannot resist calling me to the task. Besides, I do not know but I am as well prepared as some successful writers. A fair knowledge of the classics, speaking acquaintance with the modern languages, an intimate friendship with literature, seven years experience in the school room, two years of married life and a habit of studying characters have, I think, left me not entirely unprepared to write even a book."

But, it took courage for Charles Chesnutt to write a book. There was no encouraging precedent to follow. At that time, in the United States only two Negroes - Paul Laurence Dunbar and Phillis Wheatley - had been published. Abroad, only three had been able to establish themselves as writers, the Dumas father and son in France and Alexander Pushkin in Russia.

It is a mistake to think that no bravery is required to face the hostile arrows of publishers, literary critics and an instinctively hostile public. Charles Chesnutt, a pioneer, found his road twice as hard to travel as did the average writer; therefore, the recognized Negro authors of today owe a debt of gratitude to him for helping to pave their way.

In spite of obstacles, Charles Waddell Chesnutt had the zeal to realize his cherished dream; he did not just write a book, he placed his name firmly before the literary world with the publication of several important novels, a biography of Frederick Douglass and numerous short stories.

Perhaps his success in life came from the philosophy by which he lived and on which he nurtured his family - he taught: "We believe in equality and all that it implies. We shall live our lives as Americans pure and simple, and whatever experiences we encounter shall be borne with forebearance, and fortitude, and amusement if possible."

Like many writers, Chesnutt was at first a wanderer - restless, discontented,

searching always for a place of peace and promise. He did find a measure of safety, security and contentment in Cleveland, Ohio, and it was there in November 1932, that his full, rich life came to an end. He rested in his library surrounded by his beloved books.

Jew and Christian, Protestant and Catholic, black and white, rich and poor, underprivileged and highly cultured, old and young were all there showing their love and respect. Messages and flowers came from all over the country; among the most beautiful were those sent from the State Normal School at Fayetteville, North Carolina where he had served as principal fifty years before.

Today, at Fayetteville State College we honor - this state, this city and ourselves even more than we honor him when we call our new library building **THE CHARLES WADDELL CHESNUTT LIBRARY.**