

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • LITERARY

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Maya Angelou's North Carolina Years

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Contribution Track • ERA VI–VII • Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Who She Is

Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Annie Johnson on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, and after her parents' divorce was sent with her older brother to live with their grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas. At age seven or eight, while staying with her mother in St. Louis, she was raped by her mother's boyfriend; the man was jailed, released, and shortly afterward beaten to death, reportedly by her uncles. Believing her words had caused his death, she stopped speaking for nearly five years, a silence she later described as the period she became a devoted reader — memorizing Dunbar, Poe, Shakespeare, and Langston Hughes — with a family friend, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, credited with drawing her back into speech.

A Life Before the Page

Before she was known as a writer, Angelou worked as a cook, a waitress, and — by her own account in her memoirs — briefly as a sex worker, before finding success as a nightclub singer and dancer under the stage name she built from "Marguerite" and her first husband's surname, Angelos. She toured Europe and Africa in a State Department-sponsored production of *Porgy and Bess* in 1954–55.

The Movement, Malcolm, and Ghana

At Martin Luther King Jr.'s request, she served as Northern Coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1959–60, organizing fundraising events in New York. She lived abroad from 1961 to 1966 — in Cairo as associate editor of *The Arab Observer*, then in Accra, Ghana, as feature editor of *The African Review*, part of a community of Black American expatriates that included W.E.B. Du Bois. There she met and befriended Malcolm X, and upon returning to the United States worked with him briefly on organizing his Organization of Afro-American Unity before his assassination in February 1965. King's own assassination fell on her fortieth birthday, April 4, 1968 — a coincidence she wrote about as a defining trauma for years afterward.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Her 1969 memoir, the first of seven autobiographies, recounted her childhood, the assault, and her silence in unflinching terms and became one of the most frequently challenged books in American schools and libraries — and one of the most widely read works of Black women's autobiography ever published.

On the Pulse of Morning

Angelou read her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at Bill Clinton's first presidential inauguration on January 20, 1993 — the first inaugural poem since Robert Frost's at John F. Kennedy's 1961 ceremony, and the first ever by a woman or a Black writer. The recording earned her a Grammy Award. She received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011.

NC Local Lens

Angelou's North Carolina story is a Winston-Salem story. She first visited Wake Forest University in 1973 and returned in 1977 for an honorary degree; the university named her its first Reynolds Professor of American Studies, a lifetime appointment, in the early 1980s. She lived in Winston-Salem for more than

three decades, teaching an interdisciplinary range of subjects, until her death there on May 28, 2014, at eighty-six. She received the North Carolina Award for Literature in 1987. No documented Fayetteville or Cumberland County connection exists — Winston-Salem sits in Forsyth County, roughly ninety miles away — and this entry does not claim one. Note for future sessions: a widely indexed "Maya Angelou Fayetteville" search result refers to a cancelled 2014 talk at the Fayetteville Public Library in Fayetteville, Arkansas, an entirely different city and state; it should never be cited as an NC connection.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Age at assault: most sources say seven; NCpedia says eight — check her memoir's own text directly rather than a secondary summary.

Wake Forest appointment start year: NCpedia gives 1981; Wake Forest's own magazine and Poets.org give 1982 — unresolved without a personnel record.

SCLC role start date: given as both 1959 and 1960 across sources.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Angelou, Maya," NCpedia, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/angelou-maya>.
2. "Remembering Dr. Maya Angelou," Wake Forest University, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://mayaangelou.wfu.edu/>.
3. Maria Henson, "Maya Angelou," Wake Forest Magazine, September 22, 2014, <https://magazine.wfu.edu/2014/09/22/maya-angelou/>.
4. "'She Found North Carolina A Good Fit For Her Love' — Maya Angelou's Southern Legacy," WUNC, May 29, 2014, <https://www.wunc.org/arts-culture/2014-05-29/she-found-north-carolina-a-good-fit-for-her-love-maya-angelous-southern-legacy>.
5. "Maya Angelou," Poetry Foundation, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/maya-angelou>.
6. Margalit Fox, "Maya Angelou, Lyrical Witness of the Jim Crow South, Dies at 86," The New York Times, May 28, 2014.
7. "On the Pulse of Morning," Clinton Digital Library, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/15928>.

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