

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • LITERARY

I Pine for Civilization

Charles W. Chesnutt's Fayetteville Years and the Making of an American Writer

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Contribution Track • ERA IV • Fayetteville, North Carolina

Who He Is

Charles Waddell Chesnutt was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1858 to free-born Black North Carolinians who had left Fayetteville before the war. When the family returned south around 1866, eight-year-old Charles arrived in the town that would shape him more than his birthplace ever did — and that he would eventually need to leave. He became, in 1899, one of the first Black fiction writers marketed to a general American readership by a major national publishing house. What got him there started on Gillespie Street, in a Freedmen's Bureau schoolhouse, under a principal who saw something in a barely-teenaged pupil-teacher.

Gillespie Street

Andrew Jackson Chesnutt ran a grocery on Gillespie Street, between the Market House and Russell Street, after moving his family back to Fayetteville. Charles enrolled at the Howard School, a Freedmen's Bureau institution named for Gen. Oliver O. Howard. Its principal, Robert Harris, identified the boy as gifted early and drew him into teaching by age fourteen as a pupil-teacher — an apprenticeship model where the most capable students taught the younger ones. His mother died in 1871, leaving him, still a teenager, responsible for younger siblings while he kept teaching.

Principal at the State Colored Normal School

Chesnutt taught briefly in Charlotte before returning to Fayetteville, where he rose to first assistant and then, from 1880 to 1883, acting principal of the newly established State Colored Normal School — the institution that would grow into Fayetteville State University. In 1878 he married Susan Perry, from a respected Fayetteville Black family, and the couple lived at the Perry homestead on Mumford Street. He held a position of real standing in Fayetteville's Black community. It was not enough to keep him there.

"I get more and more tired of the South; I pine for civilization." — Charles W. Chesnutt, journal entry, 1882

The line is a specific man's exhaustion with a specific set of constraints, not a generalized complaint — the ceiling Jim Crow put over what a well-educated Black professional in Fayetteville could become, no matter how capable he was or how far he rose within the limits allowed him.

Leaving the South

In 1883 Chesnutt left for New York, working briefly as a reporter for Dow, Jones and Company, then settled in Cleveland, his birth city. He clerked for the Nickel Plate Railroad, read law independently rather than through formal schooling, passed the Ohio bar in March 1887, and built a court-stenography business successful enough to underwrite the writing career he was building on the side.

The Conjure Woman and the Color Line

His fiction debut, "The Goophered Grapevine," ran in the Atlantic Monthly in August 1887 — the first fiction by a Black author the magazine had published. In 1899, Houghton, Mifflin and Company published two collections in the same year, *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*, placing him among the first Black fiction writers a major American publishing

house marketed to a general readership rather than treating as a niche or race-interest author. The House Behind the Cedars followed in 1900. Chesnutt — seven-eighths European in ancestry and, by every account, able to pass as white — never did, and the tension of the color line runs through nearly everything he wrote.

The Marrow of Tradition

His 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition* fictionalized the 1898 Wilmington massacre and coup, a documented episode of armed white supremacists violently overthrowing Wilmington, North Carolina's legitimately elected biracial government and killing an unknown number of Black residents — a North Carolina state commission later formally designated it the only successful overthrow of a legitimately elected government in United States history. Chesnutt hoped the novel would do for his era what Uncle Tom's Cabin had done for an earlier one, writing it in part to counter the sanitized accounts of the massacre already circulating in the Northern press.

Recognition

The NAACP awarded Chesnutt its Spingarn Medal in 1928, four years before his death in Cleveland on November 15, 1932. All four of his children — Ethel, Helen, Edwin, and Dorothy — graduated college; his daughter Helen became his biographer.

NC Local Lens

This is a Fayetteville story before it is anything else. The Howard School where Chesnutt was educated and then taught is the direct institutional ancestor of Fayetteville State University, and the university's Charles W. Chesnutt Library, completed in 1987, carries his name as that lineage made explicit. North Carolina Highway Historical Marker I-32, at 328 Gillespie Street, commemorates the school where he taught — though the marker's original wording and exact erection date (sources give both 1950 and 1951) should be confirmed against the state's own marker database before quoting it verbatim in any future revision of this entry. Family sites in the historical record include the Chesnutt grocery on Gillespie Street and the Perry family homestead on Mumford Street, where Charles and Susan Perry Chesnutt began their marriage in 1878.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Age at arrival in Fayetteville: sources split between age eight and age nine (circa 1866) — not reconciled here.

Marker I-32 exact text and date: two different wordings and two different erection years (1950 vs. 1951) appear across sources; confirm against the NC Highway Historical Marker Program's official database before quoting the marker directly.

"First" framing: the claim that Chesnutt was the first Black author published by a major American publisher is usually qualified by scholars as the first marketed to a general, not exclusively Black-interest, readership — keep that qualification in any public-facing copy.

Spingarn Medal citation: exact 1928 citation wording not independently confirmed — verify against NAACP archival records before quoting.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. NCpedia, "Chesnutt, Charles Waddell," State Library of North Carolina, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/chesnutt-charles-waddell>.
2. North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, "Charles W. Chesnutt, 1858–1932 (I-32)," NC Highway Historical Marker Program blog, December 29, 2023, <https://www.dncr.nc.gov/blog/2023/12/29/charles-w-chesnutt-1858-1932-i-32>.
3. Historical Marker Database, "Charles W. Chesnutt," marker no. 30892, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=30892>.
4. Documenting the American South, University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, "Happy Birthday to a Literary Leader: Charles Chesnutt at 147," accessed September 13, 2026, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/highlights/chesnutt.html>.
5. Charles W. Chesnutt Archive, "Biographical Sketch," accessed September 13, 2026, <https://chesnuttarchive.org/about/chesnutt>.
6. The Clio, "Charles Chesnutt's Fayetteville" (walking tour), accessed September 13, 2026, <https://theclio.com/tour/939>.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.