

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • LITERARY

Their Eyes Were Watching God

The Long Silence and Rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston

Prepared for the Two Americas Archive

September 13, 2026

Contribution Track • ERA IV–V • Eatonville, Florida

Who She Is

Zora Neale Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama, and raised in Eatonville, Florida — one of the first incorporated all-Black towns in the United States — a childhood she treated as formative to everything she wrote. Her birth year is itself disputed: most institutional sources give 1891, while Hurston herself claimed 1901 for most of her adult life, a discrepancy Alice Walker preserved on the headstone she later placed at Hurston's grave. She studied at Howard University and then Barnard College, where she trained in anthropology under Franz Boas — a discipline she carried directly into her literary work.

Folklore as Literature

Mules and Men (1935) collected Black Southern folklore using the anthropological fieldwork methods Boas had taught her, treating vernacular speech and storytelling as literature in its own right rather than as raw material for someone else's polish. She was a prominent, sometimes contentious presence in the Harlem Renaissance — her collaboration with Langston Hughes on the play *Mule Bone* collapsed into a bitter authorship dispute that ended their friendship, a rupture still debated by scholars rather than settled.

Their Eyes Were Watching God

Published in 1937, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* follows Janie Crawford through three marriages toward self-possession, told substantially in Black vernacular dialogue that some contemporary Renaissance critics — including Richard Wright — dismissed as minstrel-adjacent. The novel fell out of print and out of the canon for decades before its rediscovery reversed that verdict entirely.

Obscurity and Rediscovery

Hurston died in poverty in 1960 in a Florida welfare home and was buried in an unmarked grave. In 1973 Alice Walker traveled to Fort Pierce, Florida, found an approximate site in the segregated cemetery, and placed a headstone reading "Zora Neale Hurston, A Genius of the South." Walker's 1975 *Ms.* magazine essay "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" launched the recovery that returned *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to print and to the center of the American literary canon.

NC Local Lens

No Fayetteville or Cumberland County connection is documented for Hurston, and none is claimed here. The one confirmed North Carolina tie is Durham and Chapel Hill: in 1939–40 she taught briefly at North Carolina College for Negroes, now North Carolina Central University, and moved informally in playwright Paul Green's circle at segregated UNC-Chapel Hill as an unofficial "secret student." This is a Durham/Orange County story, not a Cumberland County one, and this entry represents it at that scale.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Birth year: 1891 per most institutional sources vs. 1901 as Hurston herself claimed and as inscribed on her headstone — present as disputed, not settled.

Birthplace: Notasulga, Alabama per birth records vs. the Eatonville, Florida identity she claimed throughout her life and work — both are documented; this entry treats Eatonville as her formative home rather than her birthplace.

Date Walker marked the grave: 1973 in most sources, 1972 in at least one — not reconciled here.

Mule Bone authorship dispute: genuinely contested in the scholarly record between Hughes's and Hurston's own accounts — present both sides rather than adjudicating.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Zora Neale Hurston," Library of Congress, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/zora-neale-hurston/>.
2. "About Zora," Zora Neale Hurston Trust, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://zoranealehurstontrust.org/about-zora/>.
3. "Zora Neale Hurston at North Carolina College for Negroes," North Carolina Central University, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nccu.edu/>.
4. "Hurston, Zora Neale," Encyclopedia of Alabama, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/zora-neale-hurston/>.
5. "Zora Neale Hurston," City of Fort Pierce official history timeline, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.cityoffortpierce.com/>.
6. Alice Walker, "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," Ms. Magazine, March 1975.
7. "Langston Hughes in Chapel Hill" and related Southern Sources posts, UNC Libraries Southern Historical Collection blog, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://blogs.lib.unc.edu/shc/>.

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