



Episode 1: A Virginia Luminary and Her Writing Desk

Ren Hollis: Welcome to the Virginia Museum of History & Culture Podcast, featuring an exploration of the *Treasures of Virginia* exhibition. I am your host, Ren Hollis.

Ren Hollis: Located on the second floor of the Virginia Museum of History & Culture is the *Treasures of Virginia* exhibition, a 400-square-foot room featuring a rotating display of artifacts that are integral to Virginia's story.

Today, we will be speaking with Dr. Karen Sherry and Shaun Spencer-Hester about one of these artifacts: a writing desk owned by the Lynchburg poet and civil rights activist Anne Spencer!

Dr. Karen Sherry: Hi, I'm Karen Sherry, the senior curator here at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture, the VMHC.

Shaun Spencer-Hester: Hello, my name is Shaun Spencer-Hester, and I am the director and curator at the Anne Spencer House & Garden Museum in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Ren Hollis: Not only does Shaun Spencer-Hester have a career working at the Anne Spencer House & Garden Museum, but she also has a personal connection with today's artifact because, as the granddaughter of Anne Spencer, she grew up taking care of it.

Shaun Spencer-Hester: I have known this object for most of my life. I have dusted it most of my teen years, but it wasn't until I was later on in my years as an adult, in 2008, [...that] I came to Lynchburg to spend some time with my mother and I looked across the street at my grandparents' legacy, the Anne Spencer House & Garden Museum, and decided, "Let me just decide what I can do over there!"

Ren Hollis: Helping to preserve and share the story of Anne's writing desk is not the first time Karen and Shaun have worked together. Over the years, they have collaborated on multiple exhibitions and become good friends.

Dr. Karen Sherry: As a curator, I first learned about Anne Spencer when I was working on an exhibition here at VMHC that opened in 2019. It was an exhibition on Black history in Virginia called *Determined: The 400-Year Struggle for Black Equality*. I discovered Anne Spencer and was kind of shocked that I hadn't learned about her before, given her national importance and her importance as a cultural figure here in Virginia. And through my work on Anne Spencer, I got to meet Shaun Spencer-Hester and visit the historic house, which is an amazing place. And through Shaun's great efforts, that house has been preserved, so I am thrilled to have additional opportunities to feature the work of this important poet and civil rights activist.

Ren Hollis: To better understand the significance of Anne Spencer's life and work, it's important to learn about how she grew up. Now let's learn more about Anne Spencer and her role in Virginia's history!

Shaun Spencer-Hester: Anne Spencer was born in Henry County, Virginia, in 1882. And she was born to parents who had been enslaved in Henry County, Virginia, at The Rock Spring Plantation. Her mother's name was Sarah Louise Scales and her father's name was Joel Cepheus Banister. They grew up on that plantation. By the time the Civil War was over in 1865, these two people were three and five years old, but both remember being enslaved.

When Annie Bethel Scales Banister is born—we know her today as Anne Spencer—she's an only child, and she was born on that same land. And her father moves her [and] the family eventually to Martinsville and opened some pubs. But [for] my great grandfather Joel, and even Sarah Louise, education was something that was very important for them, that they wanted for their daughter. They end up separating, and that's when Anne Spencer goes to Bramwell, West Virginia, with her mother. You might even read that she was born in Bramwell, West Virginia, but that's not the total truth, and I say that because my grandmother made that decision.

When my grandmother was published in the *Norton Anthology*, she was published as the first African-American woman from Virginia. She was so proud to live to have seen that day. I believe it was published in [19]73. It might've been '74, but it was before she passed away in '75. It was a celebration, and my father said to his mother—he called her mother—he said, "Mother, but there's an error in your bio. They said that you're born in Bramwell, West Virginia," and my grandmother says, "I know. I'm going to leave it that way because I'd much rather be born in a free state than a non-free state." So, for you writers out there, she was born in Henry County, Virginia, but it was my grandmother's choice not to correct it

in the anthology. That's one of the reasons why she's important to Virginia history; she was published in *Norton Anthology*.

She hosted many people here in her house, and she also was a teacher. She was the first African-American librarian employee here in the city of Lynchburg. So how she becomes the librarian is through, I guess, maybe an ad in the newspaper they put out for this librarian. Where she was applying to was at the George Jones Memorial Library, which was an all-white library. Lynchburg, at the time, didn't have a library open to Blacks. There was no place to go to check out a book; they couldn't even check out a book at the back door of the George Jones Memorial Library. So, my grandmother's decision to want to apply for this position was not necessarily for the money, because she didn't particularly need the money. Edward was providing everything that she needed and for the children to go on to college, all three of them: Bethel, Elroy, and Chauncy.

But my grandmother at that time, she was published in James Weldon Johnson's anthology. The first one was published without his name, then republished again in the 1920s. So, she took that under her arm wearing her red dress in her red hat that she would put on when she was going out into the community for activism and went to the George Jones Memorial Library to apply for this job. She had five poems published in that book, and so she showed those five poems to the librarian, and the librarian, I guess, saw fit, that now you [Anne Spencer] can continue onto the next phase. Now you [Anne Spencer] can go appear in front of the board who was likely all white people. I kind of feel like it was all white males at that time. And they give her the job, but she wants this job because if she gets in there, she can give access to her community, and that's another reason why she's important to Virginia's history.

She was a gardener, an avid gardener. And she was a member of the Progressive Garden Club here in Lynchburg.

Ren Hollis: The Progressive Garden Club that Anne Spencer was a member of was one of five African-American garden clubs in Lynchburg, Virginia, during the 1940s-50s. These garden clubs were a safe haven for African-American women during that time. Anne Spencer wasn't the only one who enjoyed gardening, either. Her husband, Edward, was allowed to join the Progressive Garden Club with her.

Shaun Spencer-Hester: I have to give a plug to my grandfather because my grandfather was progressive, he married a very progressive woman. He knew that there were no surprises, so he must have loved that about her. He's doing things for this woman, my grandmother Anne Spencer, that most men in Lynchburg would not do, like build her a

cottage in her garden. So, her own writing studio. Anne Spencer had a “she-shed” in the 1930s! But she was also on a United States postal stamp in 2019. It was The Voices of Harlem Renaissance series, along with her colleagues Alain Locke, Nella Larsen, and Arturo Schomburg.

When I saw that, it was so exciting. I knew the stamp was coming out, but I didn’t know the series it was going to come out in, and when I saw the other people that she was associated with, it was so cool because these were all people that she knew and people who had known her.

[transition music]

Announcer: This podcast is brought to you by the Virginia Museum of History & Culture. Be sure to subscribe to get notifications about future episodes.

[transition music]

Shaun Spencer-Hester: She eventually moved from the George Jones Memorial Library one year later and then moved to Dunbar High School. She was always advocating for something good in her community, and she’s recognized nationally for her contributions as a Harlem Renaissance writer and hosting the people that [she] started it out with. Hosting these many people who came to visit like James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B Du Bois, George Washington Carver, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Thurgood Marshall, Adam Clayton Powell Jr.— you know, many people. She’s important. She was not a person who sought to be important or sought out any recognition. She just wanted to make the world a better place for her family, her community, and her friends because if everybody’s happy, then we’re all happy. I don’t know if we will ever see that day, but she always had hope, and I have hope.

Dr. Karen Sherry: Maybe I’ll just amplify a few things that Shaun said. I discovered Anne Spencer through my research into the Harlem Renaissance, or as it was called, the New Negro Renaissance Movement, which really took off after World War I. And it’s often called the Harlem Renaissance because Harlem, the Black neighborhood in New York City, was the heart of the movement, but there were activities in this Renaissance across the country. And Lynchburg—the Spencer home in Lynchburg—was really an important hub of this Renaissance. It was a movement in which Black intellectuals, writers, artists, musicians, and dancers really celebrated their own unique forms of expression and worked

to utilize the arts to bring about social change. To bring about equality, social justice, and so forth.

She traveled to visit other community centers, other communities where this New Negro or Harlem Renaissance was thriving. She also regularly corresponded with members of the movement, [and] I think, particularly in active correspondence with people like Langston Hughes—and people would ask for her critique of their work. She was a very important figure, not only as a very important contributor to the Harlem Renaissance—the poetry she wrote appeared in Harlem Renaissance publications—but also the camaraderie and conversations and exchanges she had with others in the movement.

Ren Hollis: Throughout our discussion today, as well as during a visit to the VMHC, you may notice the use of terminology from other historical periods that does not align with acceptable modern language. So how do museums approach words within a historical context that may be considered derogatory today?

Shaun Spencer-Hester: So when I'm writing about "African-Americans", "Blacks", or even as they were also known as "Negroes", I use those three different terms if I'm writing about the period associated with that word. For example, "Negro" was known all the way up until the early 1900s - 1940s; it might have still been used. Then 1950 came, Black Power, and that word kind of came about. African-Americans, I think for me, it's the term that I use, at least for myself, but I do know people that prefer to be called Black because that's just the way that they associate. I was raised to be an American; that's what I am.

Dr. Karen Sherry: To underscore the point Shaun was making, that usage of terms changes over time. During Anne Spencer's lifetime, "Negro" was a very common word for describing people of African descent. That term has fallen out of favor now. Another changing term, to a certain extent, has been "African-American". It was a term that developed in the beginning of the 20th century, mostly by scholars of African descent to look at their history in America, and they developed that term to specifically describe the generations of people who were brought to this country as enslaved Africans as well as their descendants. That term is still widely used, widely embraced by people. As Shaun pointed out, some people prefer to say "Black people" to describe contemporary African-Americans, People of Color. Part of the reason for that is because so many Black Americans have been here for so long or come to America from other parts of the world that are no longer as closely linked to the Transatlantic Slave Trade that the early



generations of Americans were. So I think we just have to be sensitive to some of those histories and personal preferences and just respectful of changes of language.

[transition music]

Announcer: To learn more about future VMHC podcast episodes and upcoming events, follow us on Instagram and Facebook @VirginiaHistory.

[transition music]

Ren Hollis: Now, back to Anne Spencer's desk. On loan to the VMHC from the Anne Spencer House & Garden Museum, this tabletop writing desk was made around 1910 from wood, coated with black lacquer, and embellished with mother-of-pearl inlay. While its design resembles styles from Asia, particularly Japan, its location of origin is unconfirmed. Approximately 20 inches across by 18 inches deep, the desk has a slanted top so the writer can adjust it to their preferred writing angle. The lid opens to reveal a storage space for paper and writing supplies. So why was this object chosen to represent Anne Spencer at the VMHC?

Dr. Karen Sherry: One of the reasons I wanted to include that particular object in our *Treasures* gallery to represent Anne Spencer is because I feel that it was her writing, through her pen, that she established her importance in our state and our country's cultural history.

Ren Hollis: Anne Spencer made waves in the Civil Rights Movement by helping establish one of the earliest chapters of the NAACP in Lynchburg, Virginia, in 1913. In addition, Anne Spencer wrote extensively about and advocated heavily for women's rights and gender equality. Because of its compact size, this desk was easily portable for Anne Spencer to take with her wherever she wanted to write, whether on her lap or a tabletop, inside her home or during her travels by train and steamship. The significance of Anne Spencer's writing desk doesn't just represent her history but also the history of access to materials like paper for African-Americans, as Shaun Spencer-Hester explains.

Shaun Spencer-Hester: You know, when people were traveling on steamships and writing notes and letters, that was an important time because that was how people communicated back and forth, and paper was a valuable resource. They wanted to keep it

in something very special while they're traveling on these steamships; they are gone for months at a time. But when I was thinking about that, I was thinking about African-Americans for the first time being able to write. That was important for my grandmother, and I think this is how she really used that piece as far as her time in the house. Edward made her a table for it, and it's in what they used to call the parlor or the living room. So, this was a very formal room, and my grandmother did more formal writing here on that desk, with that antique writing desk in front of her. You know, she's writing notes and letters and postcards. We have a huge collection of postcards [and] letters that were sent back and forth in the early 1900s.

Dr. Karen Sherry: I think Shaun underscores a really important point and a good reminder for contemporary audiences that the exchange of letters—you know, writing—was the primary medium for communication. The telephone existed. Not all households had a telephone in the early 20th century, but the telephone existed, as did the telegraph. But we did not have digital communications.

[transition music]

Announcer: Be sure to leave a review for the Virginia Museum of History & Culture Podcast and let us know what you think of this episode!

[transition music]

Ren Hollis: Anne Spencer's writing desk is displayed on a pedestal covered by a clear Plexiglas humidity-controlled casing in the *Treasures of Virginia* exhibition. As the head curator for this artifact, Dr. Karen Sherry explains the importance of keeping the desk in such a protected condition.

Dr. Karen Sherry: Well, it is in a small gallery titled the *Treasures of Virginia*. There's a variety of artifacts in that gallery, some of which are very light-sensitive, which is why the lighting levels low. We do keep artifacts under glass, in this case, Plexiglas. That's again for their protection so nobody can touch them. It's very tempting to touch things, especially beautiful objects like the Anne Spencer Writing Desk! We don't want people to do that because we all have oils and substances on our skin that, over time, can deteriorate an object. And so, for object safety and preservation, we keep things in museums. With a cover, you can get up close to it— You can walk around the object, at least three sides of the object, but you can see the object from various angles in the way we have it presented



in the *Treasures [of Virginia]* gallery. We wanted to give viewers as much access to the object as possible while also keeping the object safe and preserving it for future generations.

Ren Hollis: When it comes to Anne Spencer's poetry, she wrote non-stop, her ideas constantly flowing, but in her lifetime, she only published approximately 30 poems herself. More were later released in a biography written by a dear friend of the family, Dr. J. Lee Greene, that Shaun keeps in her personal collection. Anne Spencer and Dr. J. Lee Greene's unlikely friendship started around 1970-71.

Shaun Spencer-Hester: This is what I call Anne Spencer's Bible, and this is her biography. It was written by Dr. J. Lee Greene published in 1977, [Time's Unfading Garden: Anne Spencer's Life and Poetry](#) by J. Lee Greene.

Ren Hollis: To see a view of Shaun displaying her copy of Dr. Greene's book, please visit VirginiaHistory.org/podcast.

Shaun Spencer-Hester: And how this book came about: J. Lee Greene was a young student at UNCG [University of North Carolina Greensboro] and he was working on his doctorate, and somebody told him about Anne Spencer. So, he came down and met my grandmother, who was not very receptive. My grandmother was very protective of herself, you know, with people. Not that she was afraid, particularly at that time. I don't think she was too interested in talking about her life.

Eventually, my grandmother came around to J. Lee Greene. J. Lee Greene told me that my grandmother would not let him take any notes for the first two years, so he just had to sit and listen to her in the house and talk for hours. Wouldn't let him take any notes, and when he tried recording, she said, "Shut that thing off; I don't like my voice!" And so, J. Lee Greene said he would sit here for hours with her, and so he would get in his car and go around the corner and sit there for hours, writing everything down that she said. But eventually, she allowed him to take notes. J. Lee Greene really got to know our family; he visited with my Aunt Elroy's family in Alroy, New York, and my Aunt Bethel, who we called Aunt Teen, in New Jersey, and my father in California. So, J. Lee Greene became a friend of ours. He has now passed away.

Ren Hollis: When Anne Spencer was writing poetry or just making lists for her daily life, she would use any material on hand to capture her thoughts, referring to these fragments as “her scribblings.”

Dr. Karen Sherry: We talked a little bit about her artistic spirit and how she had her own studio in the garden. She was writing constantly. I think, you know, an idea might inspire her. She would get a thought for a line in a poem and she would grab whatever paper was handy and jot down the words on that piece of paper. The Spencer House has many of these “scribblings,” and some of the scribblings appear on the back of an envelope, or the back of a receipt. As I said, she would just kind of grab whatever paper was handy. Shaun, do you want to add anything about the “scribblings” or maybe tell us about the writing on the very walls of the house?

Shaun Spencer-Hester: Yes, if she couldn’t find paper, she’d write on the walls, particularly in her bedroom! So, my grandfather was a hard-working guy; he was a Renaissance Man himself. So, although his profession was [as a] U.S. postal worker, he also was a notary and did taxes, and he owned property real estate, so he dabbled in real estate. So, when you really think about it, when I was talking about Anne Spencer going to put on this red dress and go to become this librarian, she had been married to Edward for over 20 years without working outside of the home. And this was unusual, particularly for an African-American woman or even a white woman.

So, my grandfather, he was early to bed, my grandmother was a night owl, and she didn’t want to bother Edward in the middle of the night. Her bed was nearest to the door and nearest to the wall. So she used that wall as her nighttime writing tablet, and she would write poetry. She wrote her poem “Dear Langston,” which started out on my wall and is now a published poem. She would write things that she wanted to get from the grocery store or what she wanted to plant in the garden, just whatever. She didn’t want to bother Edward, so she sometimes used the hall light to write on that wall.

A funny story with that: there were so many parties and big things going on here in this house, especially when their special guests came into town. Whether it was James Weldon Johnson or Du Bois [or] Langston Hughes, they had a party. I read about them in one of the Black newspapers that they had Langston Hughes, and they had over 250 people in this house and the garden. On the third floor, Edward made into his man cave. And so the men would have to come through the master bedroom to get up to the door to the man cave. So they’re seeing this writing on the wall. So think about what Karen told you: Edward’s married a woman who wears pants—we’re talking about the 1900s, even through the 1940s and ‘50s probably—she’s wearing pants. She was refusing to take public



transportation because she refuses to sit in the back [of segregated buses], so she jumps on the backs of farmer's wagons. And so, you know, the men were a little suspicious about Anne Spencer, you might say.

Ren Hollis: This is where the oil painting titled *Cocktail Party* comes about. Anne Spencer commissioned her friend, Dolly Allen Mason, to create a 4-foot by 6-foot canvas painting of people at a cocktail party putting on “phony smiles,” as Shaun likes to describe it.

Shaun Spencer-Hester: So now the men have to walk by and see the phonyism that they have. You know, they think that she's the one who's phony, they're the ones who're phony. But that's still on the wall. We finally raised \$5,000 and had it taken off the wall, so we now have it framed and copy-pasted there, and that will eventually go into our new education center.

[transition music]

Announcer: This podcast is brought to you by the Virginia Museum of History & Culture!

[transition music]

Shaun Spencer-Hester: So I always talked about the garden being the only restored garden of an African-American in the United States, but the house is now noted as one of the most intact house museums in the United States. Meaning that we have a collection that's all original, aside from what Karen mentioned. Her papers and her books are now held at the University of Virginia in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library.

So you can come into this museum and see where all of these luminaries sat and walked in their garden. I tell people: you are walking in their footsteps when you're here; you are sitting on the chair that they sat on. We even called the bathroom the W.E.B. Du Bois bathroom because that's how he comes to the house the Virginia Seminary (where my grandparents meet), I guess you would say college at that time. Du Bois is traveling [in] the South, and he's doing these lectures, and the Seminary didn't have indoor plumbing or electricity. But guess who did? The Spencers! This is a National Historic Site listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It's a big deal, it really is a big deal.

Ren Hollis: The Anne Spencer writing desk isn't the only artifact in the Virginia Museum of History & Culture that gives a glimpse into the poet's life. Beyond the *Treasures of Virginia* exhibition, there are other artifacts among our collections that provide further insight into the life and work of Anne Spencer.

Dr. Karen Sherry: We do have some publications in our library collection—not just J. Lee Greene's biography—but some publications from the 1930s and beyond that include examples of Anne Spencer's poetry. She's been featured in a few exhibitions: the *Treasures [of Virginia]* exhibition; the *Determined* exhibition that I mentioned earlier; and an exhibition on celebrating the centennial of the Garden Club. Because the Spencer House had such an extraordinary garden, the preservation of that garden was a project of one of the garden clubs and she's featured in that exhibition. So in the materials related to those exhibitions, there are also materials about Anne Spencer.

Ren Hollis: Shaun holds in her heart a special place for the memory of her grandmother and the monumental contributions Anne Spencer made to the development of human rights in Virginia.

Shaun Spencer-Hester: You know she was an incredible lady, before her time. Some of these things that we may have talked about today may not seem trailblazing today, but they were trailblazing, you know, back in the time. I'll tell you one thing: when I was a little girl, Karen talked about the color in the house and the pattern and stuff like that, but my grandmother dressed that way. So when I was a little girl, I always admired that about her, that she wore color and she could wear flowers and stripes and prints and made it work, you know. And she loved this part of this writing desk — it has this Asian influence, and when you come to the Anne Spencer House & Garden Museum, it has this Asian influence inside of it, you know. But that was one of the things that I admired about my grandmother, just the way she dressed. She was so colorful!

Dr. Karen Sherry: Shaun, you give such wonderfully evocative descriptions and stories about your grandparents, and I remember when you first told me about how she would walk through town because she would refuse to ride segregated public transportation. How she'd hop onto the back of a farm wagon wearing pants, all of which was not very respectable for a woman to do in that period. I think one of my favorite things about her is just her indomitable spirit and her independence. She's someone who lived her life with the belief that everyone should be equal, everyone should have equal access, and she was

willing to take risks and blaze trails in living those ideals; and maybe I'll just end my remarks with a quote of hers which she wrote to her good friend, James Weldon Johnson. She said, "I react to life more as a human being than as a Negro being." I think those words very much capture the humanism and her devotion to fighting racism, sexism, any kind of inequality that she encountered in life. I love that notion of the kind of universality of being a human as something to celebrate and something to embrace and to cherish in our world today!

Shaun Spencer-Hester: Right on! Right on sister!

Ren Hollis: Thank you for listening to the Virginia Museum of History & Culture Podcast. We hope you enjoyed this deep dive into a fascinating part of Virginia's history. Special thanks to today's guests, Shaun Spencer-Hester and Dr. Karen Sherry.

To book a tour of the Anne Spencer House & Garden Museum and learn more about Anne Spencer, please visit annespencermuseum.org. That's a-n-n-e-s-p-e-n-c-e-r-museum.org.

See Anne Spencer's writing desk in person daily from 10 am to 5 pm in the *Treasuries of Virginia* exhibition at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture in Richmond, Virginia. Visit VirginiaHistory.org to plan your visit.

Your host today was Ren Hollis.

The Virginia Museum of History & Culture Podcast was produced by Nicole Martorana, Ren Hollis, and Tracy Schneider. Be sure to subscribe to get notified about upcoming episodes in this mini-series.

As a special bonus, we are pleased to present a reading and analysis of Anne Spencer's poem, "Po' Little Lib", read by her granddaughter Shaun Spencer-Hester.

Shaun Spencer-Hester: I have this poem that my grandmother titled "Po' Little Lib," and that's "po" with an apostrophe and "little lib". I selected it because it touches on topics of race and nature and arts and themes of feminism, but when you hear it, you may not tie it to race, or nature or feminism. Most of my grandmother's poetry is tied to one of those three, but she kind of flowers it over a little bit. So this is "Po' Little Lib":

*Half-inch, brown spider
Black Spotted back*

*Moves through the grass, white-sheeted pack
Moves through the grass, oh god, if it chants for the draught-driven air turned sleet
into lance
Run!
Escape!
Weave when you're free!
How delicately she re-knits her vast pain.
Chants did set her free
What bound her again?*

So the children love this poem because they think it's about a little spider. But let's go back to the title: "Po' Little Lib." "Lib": it's about woman's liberation, and she's using the metaphor of this spider who continuously has to fix this web when the wind blows or blows it out, whatever happens. You've got to reknit it back, and you've got to carry those babies, that pack, on your back over and over again. And how is this going to go on? When are you going to be set free? And even the babies that have a chance to go or maybe even the mother had a chance to go at one time! But she's not set free. She's always bound again.

Ren Hollis: This podcast was brought to you by the Virginia Museum of History & Culture in Richmond, Virginia. Thank you for listening.