



Anne Bannister Spencer  
1882-1975  
Lynchburg

Poet Anne Spencer influenced a generation of writers during the Harlem Renaissance. Born Anne Bethel Bannister in Henry County, Anne and her mother moved to West Virginia after her parent's marriage ended. Her mother's poverty led Anne to be placed in the home of William T. Dixie, where she learned to read and to appreciate the written word. Anne eventually enrolled in the Virginia Seminary (previously the Lynchburg Baptist Seminary) in Lynchburg and graduated in 1899. She was chosen to give the valedictory address because of her "intellectual aggressiveness." While at Virginia Seminary she met Edward Spencer, the first parcel postman in Lynchburg, whom she married in 1901.

Anne began writing poetry at her home, Edenkraal, where her talents were discovered by James Weldon Johnson. He introduced her to H.L. Mencken who helped Anne publish her first poem, "Before the Feast at Shushan." Spencer's poems appeared in some of the period's most prestigious collections of the 1920s, including James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) and Robert T. Kerlin's *Negro Poets and Their Poems* (1923). She was the first African-American and first Virginian to be included in the *Norton Anthology of American Poetry*.

Highly personal and full of nature imagery, her works are often classified as part of the neoromantic tradition. Many of Spencer's poems addressed issues concerning women. Editors solicited her work, but she seldom obliged, and thus fewer than thirty of her poems appeared in print during her lifetime. Unfortunately, much of her work was lost, as she often wrote her thoughts on unusual items—paper bags, envelopes, telephone bills, and on the backs of checks—that were thrown away after her death.

In addition to publishing poetry, Anne Spencer was closely associated with some of the most influential figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Spencer's home became a prime destination for black writers, entertainers, and civil rights leaders, including W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, Thurgood Marshall, and George Washington Carver. The dynamic conversations on literary and social issues that took place in her home had a significant impact on the Harlem Renaissance. Her home continued to attract famous artists and thinkers even after her death from cancer in 1975.

Anne Spencer was also known as a feminist and advocate for civil rights. She was the first black librarian in Lynchburg, serving the Dunbar High School for more than 20 years. This was the only access to library services for blacks in her community. She was instrumental in organizing the Lynchburg chapter of the NAACP in 1918. Anne Spencer's thirst for social justice and love of the written word have been an inspiration to artists of all races.