

Recovering the Rare African-American Novel: *A Charleston Love Story*


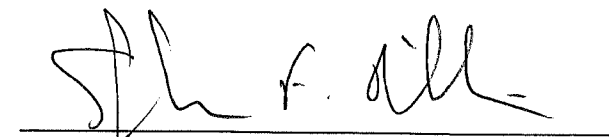
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Abstract

It is sometimes unclear just why some fiction is read by every high school sophomore and some is read by no one. There are certain characteristics that assist in securing for a novel a place of contention. A timeless theme, a recognizable setting, captivating characters, purchases and readings contemporary to the publication, a reliable publisher and promoter, and a critical response all help.

This novel, *A Charleston Love Story*, has been "lost." There are only three existing copies, or at least, their libraries have cataloged three. This novel does have a strong setting, interesting characters and plot, and fuel for critical discussion. The author published a couple of other texts. However, the publisher went bankrupt several times, the novel seems to have been offered as a "race novel." And there were no known reviews of it written. For whatever reason or combination of reasons, *A Charleston Love Story* is among the least known American or African-American fiction.

In *A Charleston Love Story*, Leonard Howell is a white officer in the Massachusetts 54th Colored Regiment, part of the force occupying Charleston, SC immediately following the Civil War. While in Charleston, Lieutenant Howell

meets Hortense Vanross, a daughter of Charleston's small middle-class. Howell, returning to his northern home, promises to return to Charleston to visit the Vanross family, with whom he has become a friend. He does return, to visit and to court Hortense. Meanwhile, Hortense's sister, Lavinia, falls in love with and marries a northern missionary minister, and makes her new home in Brooklyn, NY. Howell returns to Charleston again, on his way to a banking position in still frontier-ish central Georgia. He and Hortense marry and establish themselves in Macon, GA. Leonard's religious views, earlier causing some concern in the pious Hortense, resurface, enforced by the new "liberal sentiments" of the water cure and free love. Hortense is tortured by her husband's divergence from her intimacy with the church. She suffers an extended and debilitating illness, and dies, extracting a promise from her husband to raise their children according to her wishes and in the community of her church. Howell is saved, and returns North to establish his children in his brother-in-law's congregation where they grow up to be good Christians.

AS@UVA has done a marvelous job of hypertextualizing some of the most important works of American Studies and literature. The text has been made available to a wide audience, and the experience of reading it has been expanded by the variety of accompanying student projects. This project, **A Charleston Love Story: a hypertext**, uses the same techniques as other XRoads projects, but applies the design to a slightly different type of core text.

In this site, users can read the novel, *A Charleston Love Story*. The novel can then be searched thanks to hosting by the Electronic Text Center at the University of Virginia. The editor has broadened the reading experience by including additional context for the novel:

A Charleston Souvenir Book is a virtual postcard-type book, photographs of Charleston from the same year that the novel was published.

The Book as Artifact presents materials included in the published book, but not a part of the novel, such as advertisements. Images were taken from the copy of *A Charleston Love Story* owned by Kent State University Libraries. Imaging was done at the University of Virginia's Special Collections Digital Center.

Charleston: a history is a history of the city in which the novel is set from colonization through Reconstruction.

Publishing and Authorship discusses the publisher and a biography of the man now believed to have authored *A Charleston Love Story*. Images were created by the Special Collections Digital Center from materials in the Special Collections of the University of Virginia Libraries.

The Massachusetts 54th Volunteer Regiment is a history of the regiment, which plays a significant part in the early portion of the novel. Information was gathered largely from a history of the regiment by Luis Emilio, one of its white officers.

Macon: a history is a history of the city that hosts the latter portion of the novel. The text is based on an account by the city newspaper.

A note on decorative images: the banner which has been used to identify different project sections, is taken from the cartouche of a nineteenth century map of the city. Elements of this image have been used as navigational elements, such as the back and forward buttons. I have chosen to use these images because they convey something of the popular representation of Charleston's black citizens. The man with a watermelon and the be-turbaned mammy figure are considered negative stereotypes, and yet they are the only portrayal of humanity in the figure.

Almost every image found in this site are small thumbnails, linking to larger and higher quality versions. This feature is especially useful in investigating the physical nature of the novel.

Interesting features of the novel which have not yet been addressed in this project include: the millennialism or "liberal philosophies" the main character embraces in the late portion of the novel; the tradition of African-American writers using white main characters; and the changing social traditions in a middle-class just beginning to emerge in the Southern Reconstruction period. It is hoped that by "reintroducing" this novel it may become possible for scholars to address these issues. It is equally desirable that readers will find this an interesting, and perhaps charming, forgotten tale of a not unfamiliar culture.

The on-line version of this project can be found at:

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA97/danforth/charleston/cshome.html>