

Famous Floridians: Zora Neale Hurston

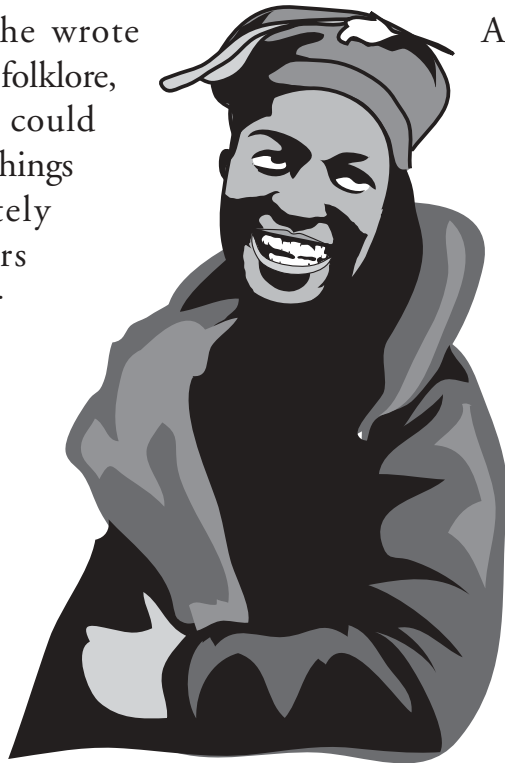
Zora Neal Hurston wrote, “Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to ‘jump at de sun.’ We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground.” Hurston certainly “jumped at de sun.”

Hurston is noted as the first Black American to collect and publish African-American and Afro-Caribbean folklore. She wrote stories, novels, anthropological folklore, and an autobiography. She could write about the most ordinary things and make them infinitely gorgeous. Her characters appeared real and human. Her works have increased in popularity with the passing of time.

She was born in Alabama. In the first year or two of her life, her family moved to Eatonville, Florida, a small black community near Orlando. This community shaped her life and her writing. She once wrote, “I’ve got the map of Florida on my tongue.” She was so proud of her heritage as a black Floridian that in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, she claimed she was born in Eatonville.

In 1904, thirteen-year-old Zora was devastated by the death of her mother. Later that same year, her father removed her from school and sent her to care for her brother’s children. A rambunctious and restless teenager, Zora was eager to leave the

responsibility of that household. She became a member of a traveling theater at the age of sixteen. After that she did domestic work for a white household. It was in this home that Hurston’s intellectual spark was discovered. The woman for whom Zora worked bought Zora her first book and arranged for her to attend high school.



Zora Neale Hurston

After high school graduation, Hurston held jobs as a waitress and a manicurist. She attended Howard, Barnard, and Columbia universities, where she studied anthropology. She returned to the South in the 1920s. She collected materials for her four novels and book *Mules and Men*. *Mules and Men* has been called “the greatest book of African-American folklore ever written.”

In 1925, Hurston headed to New York City and became part of the Harlem Renaissance*. She attended parties with other notable African-American writers. Hurston apparently cut quite a figure in Harlem society. With her hat perched jauntily on her head, she entertained groups with her tales of Eatonville. In this stylish period, she was considered flamboyant and somewhat shocking. She was also sometimes considered controversial. Her writing was the first time black folk in the South were presented as normal people—not downtrodden by prejudice, not victims of racism.

Over the next several years, Hurston would travel in the South, interviewing storytellers in Florida and Voodoo doctors in New Orleans. This would provide material for her writing. The 1930s and early 1940s marked the peak of Hurston's literary career. Her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is generally considered to be her most powerful novel. It is about a young black woman's coming of age in rural Florida.

Hurston returned to Florida in 1948 and faded into obscurity. She was rediscovered in the 1970s. Today she is studied in college courses. She is generally looked upon as one of the finest American novelists of the first half of the 20th century. But Hurston would probably consider her highest accolade to be a festival held in her honor every year in Eatonville, the town she loved to claim as her own.

Eatonville

Eatonville, Florida is a small community of great significance to African-American history and culture. Of the more than one hundred black towns founded between 1865 and 1900, fewer than twelve remain today. Eatonville is the oldest.

Reconstruction after the Civil War was a time of joy and for building a better way of living for blacks. At first, newly freed blacks began to establish homes and businesses in white communities. By the 1800s, tensions from this new coexistence gave rise to segregation, the separation of blacks to a particular area in the community.

Rather than endure the indignities of restriction, some blacks established race colonies, communities of their own. These colonies often



Eatonville is located on the East side of Florida.

resembled extended families. They were centered on education and religion. Eatonville was a community founded in this tradition.

On August 15, 1887, 27 registered voters, all black men, met in a building they call Town Hall and voted unanimously to incorporate. Eatonville was born and history was made.

Eatonville's cultural importance was secured when the town was immortalized in the works of its renowned native daughter, Zora Neale Hurston. Her words captured forever the culture of the community and painted an image of an environment typical of the rural southern working-class African-American. Today the town continues to celebrate its connection with Hurston through the annual arts and humanities events at the Zora Neale Hurston Festival

***Harlem Renaissance refers to the Black literary and cultural movement of the 1920s—during this period, Harlem (a part of New York City) was the center for many creative Blacks from the Caribbean and the United States.**