



Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins

“

Fiction is of great value to any people as a preserver of manners and customs--religious, political and social. It is a record of growth and development from generation to generation. No one will do this for us; we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lies dormant in our history, and, as yet, unrecognized by writers of the Anglo-Saxon race.

— Contending Forces

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Quick Facts

- * 1859-1930
- * African-American magazine editor, novelist, and playwright
- * Wrote the novel *Contending Forces* (1900)

Biography

Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins was a multifaceted figure, who, at one time or another during her wide-ranging career, was a playwright, journalist, novelist, short story writer, biographer, and editor. She is, perhaps, best remembered as a pioneer in the use of the traditional literary form of the romantic novel as a means to explore and challenge prevailing racial and gender representations that were foremost in the minds of middle-class African Americans in the early part of the twentieth century. In addition, during her tenure at the *Colored American Magazine* -- one of the first major literary magazines targeted at a largely African American audience -- she is credited with laying the groundwork for the evolving African American literary style that would later become associated with the literati of the Harlem Renaissance. She has been characterized as “the most prolific African American woman writer and the most influential literary editor of the first decade of the twentieth century” (Gruesser 1996).

This page was researched and submitted by Robin M. Dasher-Alston on 9/5/98.



Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins

Biography continued

Hopkins was born in 1859 in Portland, Maine, but was raised in Boston, Massachusetts, by her parents Northrup Hopkins and Sarah Allen. Her skill as a writer gained recognition in 1874, when, at the age of fifteen, she received first prize in a contest for her essay titled “Evils of Intemperance and Their Remedy.” At the age of twenty, she completed her first play, *Slaves’ Escape; or, the Underground Railroad*, which was later performed in a stage production and renamed *Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad*. From 1900 until 1904, she served as writer and editor-in-chief for *Colored American Magazine (CAM)*.

Understanding the power of the written word, Hopkins used the magazine as a forum to correct those aspects of American history which excluded or misrepresented the contributions of African Americans. Two series were published that presented biographical sketches of African American women and men of note: “Famous Women of the Negro Race” and “Famous Men of the Negro Race.” During this period, Hopkins also wrote a number of short stories and essays that appeared in *CAM*. Her first novel, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* was published in 1900.

Hopkins’s association with *CAM* ended in 1904 when an ally of Booker T. Washington’s, who disliked her editorial perspectives and “unconciliatory politics,” “bought the magazine and fired her” (p.ix). Although Hopkins did continue to write, and served as editor of the *New Era Magazine* in 1916, her literary productivity declined sharply after 1905. From all accounts, she was employed as a stenographer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at the time of her death in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1930.

It was not until the mid-1980s, when scholars began to rediscover Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, that her literary achievements received serious attention. In 1988, Oxford University Press reprinted all of her novels and most of her short stories in its Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers series, which was edited by Henry Louis Gates.



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