**A Child Of Slavery Who Taught A Generation**  
By Karen Grigsby Bates  
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*This National Public Radio article reports on the life and success of Anna Julia Haywood Cooper (1858-1964), an American author, educator, prominent scholar, and one of the first black women to earn a doctoral degree in United States history. As you read, identify Cooper's accomplishments, as well as who supported and fought against her.*

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Some great teachers change the life of a student, maybe several. Anna Julia Cooper changed America.

Cooper was one of the first black women in the country to earn a Ph.D.¹ Before that, she headed the first public high school for black students in the District of Columbia — Washington Colored High School. It later became known as the M Street School and was eventually renamed for poet Paul Laurence Dunbar.²

Dunbar was a citadel³ of learning in segregated Washington, a center for rigorous study and no-holds-barred achievement. Its graduates over the years include:

- The U.S. military's first black general — Benjamin O. Davis.
- A medical pioneer who established one of the first, if not the first, large-scale blood banks — Dr. Charles Drew.
- An artist whose work is part of the permanent collections of some of the world's most prestigious museums — Elizabeth Catlett.

A steady stream of superbly qualified students flowed from this school, largely because of the vision of one educator.

“If it were not for Anna J. Cooper, the school would not have moved in the direction it did,” says Stephen Jackson, Dunbar's current principal. He has made it his mission to restore Dunbar to its glory days. Cooper insistently pushed to make sure her students had an academically focused curriculum that would put it on par with the best white private schools.

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1. The Ph.D. (which stands for Doctor of Philosophy) is one of the highest academic degrees that one can earn and requires years of research on a specific subject.  
2. Paul Laurence Dunbar was one of the first African American writers to establish an international reputation as a successful poet.  
3. **Citadel (noun):** a fortress or castle, typically on high ground
She knew it could be done because she had her own life as a powerful example.

Anna Julia Haywood was born in 1858 in North Carolina to her enslaved mother, Hannah Stanley Haywood, and the white man who owned them both. She was an avid learner, first at the Episcopal-run private school she attended while at home, and later as a stellar student at Oberlin College in Ohio.

There, she would earn both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees normally offered to male students.

**Education as the Portal to Progress**

Shortly after graduating, Cooper moved to Washington and began the work she would be known for, at the school that would become Dunbar. She insisted that her students be exposed to classic literature and foreign languages. Math was not just sums, but advanced mathematics.

She resisted giving in to the District’s all-white, all-male Board of Education, which wanted the school to teach the students vocational skills, feeling those were more practical.

Cooper’s insistence on an academic education for her students was not a diss of vocational work, says journalist Alison Stewart, the author of *First Class*, a history of Dunbar High.

“She thought (that was) fine and admirable,” Stewart explains, “but not at the expense of helping these Negro and colored students be all that they could be intellectually.”

And it wasn't just the school board that was upset. At the time, Washington, like many other black communities across the country, was riveted by the feud between activist W.E.B. Du Bois and educator Booker T. Washington.

Du Bois maintained that the “talented tenth” of the race should be the ones who would lead black America to its place alongside — not behind — its white peers. Washington, ever-conscious that slavery had only recently ended, wanted to concentrate on the other 90 percent, who would need jobs to feed and clothe their families. Domestic work and skilled manual labor, he believed, would do that.

Cooper was friends with both men but knew the time would come when black citizens would be allowed to contribute to the country's growth.

So she educated her students so well that they could not be denied. And it worked: Less than 50 years after the conclusion of the Civil War, Dunbar students went to schools like Harvard, Mount Holyoke and Brown.

And they weren’t all from elite backgrounds. Cooper was aware, says Stewart, that some students might need more help than others. Students from poor families, who’d grown up with little previous access to education, might need more time for tests or a longer deadline for schoolwork.

“If she thought a student had a spark,” Stewart says, “she would work with them until the spark would ignite.”

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4. **Vocational** (adjective): relating to employment; in education, directed at a certain occupation and its skills
5. **Rivet** (verb): to fascinate (someone)
6. **Riven** (adjective): divided
Success Creates Scandal

But being willing to do that came at a terrible personal cost, says Dana Goldstein, author of *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession*. “A scandal was ginned up against her and brought to the local press,” Goldstein says, “accusing her of having a sexual affair with her young adult foster son.”

The young man was one of five siblings Cooper began raising when her brother had died suddenly years before. Goldstein says the charges were laughable. Prominent people came forward to testify for Anna Cooper's impeccable morals. Nevertheless, the rumors remained on the front pages of the local papers for months.

Eventually, Cooper was forced to resign her principal's post. She moved to Paris, enrolled at the Sorbonne, and, at age 66, became the fourth black woman in the U.S. to receive a Ph.D. (Her dissertation, in French, was on attitudes toward slavery after the Haitian rebellion.)

Eventually Cooper returned to Washington and to Dunbar as a teacher. And in her classroom, rigor reigned. She retired in 1930 and would remain active — and an activist — on matters educational and racial for several more years. She died in 1964 at age 105.

A Lasting Legacy

Many of the things that Anna Cooper practiced a century ago were considered radical in her day, but are common now, says Goldstein. Such as eschewing IQ tests, which Goldstein says, were not really predictive of achievement.

And Cooper was ahead of her time in acknowledging that “children's performance at school is impacted by their home lives.” And giving students with special needs extra time to complete tests and papers. And considering how a student's home life may affect performance in school.

Today she's considered one of the most important figures in American education. Important enough that in 2009, the U.S. Postal Service honored Anna J. Cooper by issuing a stamp with her likeness on it.

A first-class stamp, of course.
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best describes the author’s main purpose in writing this article?  
   A. to reveal how Anna Julia Cooper overcame great odds as a black woman to change American education  
   B. to highlight how Anna Julia Cooper served as a role model for black women on how to earn a degree in higher education  
   C. to reveal how Anna Julia Cooper settled a longstanding dispute among African American scholars regarding education  
   D. to increase readers’ appreciation for the educators and teachers who helped transform public schools

2. Which of the following best describes the central idea of the text?  
   A. Cooper taught the top 10% of black students to succeed, supporting Du Bois’ goals for education.  
   B. Cooper was a great teacher because she dedicated herself to personal advancement.  
   C. Cooper believed and proved that education could elevate any black student to success.  
   D. Cooper pushed the education system to stop teaching black students vocational skills.

3. PART A: What does the phrase “ginned up” most closely mean as used in paragraph 19?  
   A. invented to amuse or entertain  
   B. announced to report fairly  
   C. revealed through investigative research  
   D. created in a dishonest manner

4. PART B: Which phrase provides the best support for the answer to Part A?  
   A. “a terrible personal cost” (Paragraph 19)  
   B. “the charges were laughable” (Paragraph 20)  
   C. “prominent people came forward to testify” (Paragraph 20)  
   D. “Cooper was forced to resign her principal’s post” (Paragraph 21)
5. How does the author’s inclusion of the feud between W.E.B Dubois and Booker T. Washington contribute to the central ideas of the article? Cite evidence from the text in your answer.

6. How did the challenges Cooper faced impact her professional and personal life? Cite evidence from the text in your answer.
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Why is it important to know about Anna Julia Haywood Cooper? What does awareness about her figure contribute to our overall understanding of U.S./world history?

2. Why do certain people – especially those in situations of adversity like Cooper – succeed? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. In the context of this article, what is the goal of education? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.