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Rescuing Ernestine Rose (1880-1961): Harlem Librarian and Social Activist

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Abstract: This article profiles Ernestine Rose, who served as a New York City branch librarian starting in 1908. She then became a World War I Service librarian in Paris and Coblenz, professor, author, president of her State Library Association, and a leader in her hometown, located at the eastern tip of Long Island. Rose led in redefining the meaning of branch libraries in New York and in establishing the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Her story demonstrates how a white woman from a rural background moved to various cities in the world and, in retirement, returned home to become a civic advocate. The analysis shows how Rose articulated and implemented her ideas on race and culture. It maintains that possible sources for her moral impulse toward social activism rest within the particular family and community in which she was raised. The article also illustrates historians' need to scavenge in unique places, even dumpsters, for evidence.

Keywords: African American; Bridgehampton; black; ethnic; Harlem; race; Rose; Schomburg

Ernestine Rose was an only child, born in 1880 to two Anglo Americans, farmer Stephen Rose and teacher Anna Chatfield. Her parents and paternal grandparents lived in Hay Ground, a settlement considered at the time to be part of the hamlet of Bridgehampton, located on the South Fork of the eastern end of Long Island, about 100 miles from Manhattan.



Figure 1: Rose House, Hay Ground, built about 1730. The photograph is dated 1880. Bridgehampton Historical Society, Bridgehampton, NY.

From these seemingly modest beginnings, she would grow up to become a city librarian, World War I Service librarian, professor, author, president of her state library association and, in retirement, a civic-minded leader in her beloved hometown. I first encountered “Miss Rose,” (her legacy, that is), when I began to research my history of Bridgehampton, *Grandfather Lived Here*.^[1] At that time I was struck by her work in local community-building, and that recognition helped me to recall that in the 1950s, I had greeted her on Main Street, Bridgehampton, listening as she and my mother dissected some tidbit of local history. These memories stuck with me.

The next time I noticed her, around 2005, she was on film. “Problems of a Small Community” (produced by the United States Information Service in 1950) featured Rose, along with other Bridgehampton notables. Its initial distribution was intended for post-World War II occupied Germany, to show democracy at work. Then I found myself reading about her in articles in the *New York Times* archive on the Internet.

Still, her life remained a mere curiosity to me, until a chance meeting with Averill Geus, a local historian. I mentioned my findings about Rose to her and then I listened to Averill’s remarkable story: in 2005, on a tip, she had learned about a dumpster sitting in front of the farmhouse of Rose’s long-deceased first cousin. He had lived in a village to the east of Bridgehampton. Averill proceeded to locate this dumpster and remove everything that appeared salvageable, including some of Rose’s papers, the family’s photographs, and other artifacts, put there by a younger generation of cousins who were cleaning out the attic, readying the property for sale. Averill gave these treasures to me and they are now at Bridgehampton’s Hampton Library. After many years, I realized that Ernestine Rose deserved further study. Here are my findings—and a few speculative thoughts.

Although her father “seems to have been absent,” as one researcher has suggested, Ernestine had role models, in the professions, on her mother’s side of the family. Descended from men who had fought in the American Revolution, Anna Chatfield Rose (1859-1916) had become the principal of the District Nine School in Bridgehampton in 1891. Ernestine, the future librarian and professor, was eleven years old.^[2]

Her uncle, Anna’s brother, Justice Henry Chatfield (1866-1912),

practiced law throughout Southampton town. He served as the first president of the Bridgehampton National Bank from 1910 to 1912, and as president of the Board of Education from 1908 to 1912, the year he died. Given the family's emphasis on education, it is not surprising that Ernestine would graduate from the private Bridgehampton Academy (1859-1907), where she pursued a course in the liberal arts.



Figure 2: Ernestine Rose, about 1898, perhaps at the time of her graduation from the Bridgehampton Academy. Copy of photograph found in the dumpster. Hampton Library, Bridgehampton, NY, Long Island Room, Ann Hansen Sandford Collection. The dumpster was on Main Street, hamlet of Wainscott, Town of East Hampton. All photographs from the dumpster are now in the Sandford Collection.

Like her uncle, she earned a bachelor's degree from Wesleyan University in Connecticut, which she attended along with three other young women from the village, also Academy graduates. [3] One of them became the librarian at the Hampton Library just before World War I. [4] Upon Ernestine's graduation from college she trained at the New York State Library School in Albany, where she received her degree in 1904.

Four years later, now twenty-eight, the young librarian accepted a position that would crystallize the direction of her thinking and her leadership activities for the next forty years: she became the librarian of a "Carnegie library," at the branch of the New York Public Library known as the "polyglot" library, according to the *New York Times*. It was located in a largely Chinese neighborhood on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. There, in 1911, she began to add books in Chinese, mostly on science, in order to augment the collection that already included works in many languages. She was among the earliest public librarians to do so. At other branches where she served, she exhibited the works of local artists. [5] In 1917, the year the United States entered World War I, Rose became a published writer, documenting her more than ten years of experience in New York's branch libraries.

Her pamphlet, "Bridging the Gulf, Work with the Russian Jews and Other Newcomers," argued that a library must bring different ethnic groups together, not to "Americanize" them, but to serve as the vehicle

for implementing what we today would call a multicultural vision. A library staff must understand the “history, traditions, and literature of each nationality that the library expects to serve,” she wrote, and it must offer “friendly service,” in a non-patronizing environment. Serving her Jewish patrons, she declared: “One must be as familiar with Jewish holidays as with Christian.” [6]

But World War I interrupted Ernestine’s work, and her writing. Like other Americans, she felt called to serve and accepted a series of war-related jobs as a member of the American Library Association’s (ALA) Library War Service, which distributed books to soldiers in army camps and hospitals, stateside and abroad.

In Paris during the “demobilization period,” as her 1919 passport application states, Rose organized separate library services for black soldiers, as required by army practices of segregation. The highlight of that year in Europe, however, was her work in organizing the soldiers’ library for the American Army of Occupation in Germany, headquartered in Coblenz, in the Rhine Valley. Artifacts from this period form the core of the surviving farmhouse dumpster collection—a map, watercolor book, and her photographs of the American library, its staff, and the war’s destruction.



Figure 3: Soldiers’ Library, 1919. Photograph from the dumpster, Sandford Collection.



Figure 4: War destruction near Coblenz. Photograph from the dumpster, Sandford Collection.

Upon her return from Europe in 1920, these experiences—work with African Americans in Paris, with other American soldiers from many ethnic backgrounds, and her earlier successes in immigrant neighborhoods—qualified her as an ideal candidate to lead the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library, known as the Harlem branch. She accepted the position.

During the ensuing decade of the 1920s, the years that witnessed the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance, this institutional reformer became the first librarian in a major city to assemble an integrated professional staff. She was also one who fought racism: in a 1921 article entitled “Serving New York’s Black City,” Rose described a still growing neighborhood of about 150,000 people. She argued that a library, integrated into its community, served as an “entrance into American life” for its patrons. It could create “a bridge...between races” and promote “mutual understanding.” Her staff would serve as the model.

While acknowledging the heritage of slavery, whites’ “social ostracism” of blacks, and their economic hardship, Rose posed her view of the dilemma Negroes faced: in Harlem as a whole, she argued, living a “separate life” from whites impeded the advancement of black people.^[7]

In 1922, even more boldly, she published her article, “Where White and Black Meet.” Here, she outlined her library’s activities, which were available to everyone. Among them: evening book discussions and lectures advised by a committee comprising “people of the neighborhood,” and art events to “stimulate race consciousness.” The “most serious duty” of the library, however, was to lead “intellectual thought”—through book clubs, publishing book reviews, story hours for children. Books, Rose maintained, are the “medium of progress.”^[8] Her friend Langston Hughes would have agreed. Reflecting on the Harlem where he settled in the early 1920s, the African American poet wrote, forty years later, that Rose was “a warm and wonderful librarian...[who] made newcomers feel welcome.”^[9]

Not surprisingly, Rose also began to work to acquire documents and artifacts for the Harlem branch that pertained to African American culture. In 1925, the formation of the Division of Negro Literature, History and Prints was announced by Rose, the branch's Citizens' Committee, and New York Public Library officials. A year later, her fundraising efforts helped in the purchase of materials collected by Arthur Schomburg, an African American from Puerto Rico. [10] Today, those items form the core of the largest archive of its kind in the world, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. It is located in a complex on the northwest corner of 135th Street and Malcolm X Boulevard—at Lenox Avenue. The Center incorporates the original, that is, 1905, branch library building. [11] In 1925, Rose had predicted the expansion and growing value of the collection because it was located in Harlem, which she called the “greatest Negro city in the world.” [12]



Figure 5: The 135th Street Branch building, designed by McKim, Mead and White and built in 1905. The photograph, taken about 1945, is from *The Legacy of Arthur A. Schomburg: A Celebration of the Past, a Vision for the Future* (New York Public Library, 1986) 57. After 1941 it housed the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the branch library was relocated nearby.

The energetic Miss Rose continued to add recognition and accomplishment to her career. By 1933, she was president of the New York [State] Library Association, about the time that the Harlem branch library was hosting a Works Progress Administration writer's project. In 1939, as chair of the American Library Association's Adult Education Board, she presented the first Library Bill of Rights to the annual conference. Its tenets reflected her life's work, including the statement that a community's interests, regardless of race or nationality, should guide the purchase of library books. [13] A year later, The American Negro Theatre was founded, with performances held in the basement of the 135th Street Branch. As one scholar has noted, it had become “the place to go.” [14] Rose retired in 1942. She was succeeded by the assistant librarian, Dorothy Homer, an African American. Twenty years later, the new head librarian was quoted in the obituary for Rose that appeared in the *New York Amsterdam News*: “Negroes should honor her,” she said, “because she took a stand for integration at a time when it

was unpopular to do so....”[15]



Figure 6: Retirement ceremony in 1942. Rose is flanked by Claude Barnett, founder of the Associated Negro Press (1919) on the left, and by Laurence Reddick, on the right. Reddick became curator of the Schomburg Collection in 1939 and later, a professor of African American history. From *Legacy*, 56; see Figure 5 above.

After her retirement from the New York Public Library, Rose continued her career as an associate in library service at the Institute on Library Services in Hospitals. At the close of World War II, she began to lead projects in the field of bibliotherapy, the curative use of books. As she had done throughout her career, Rose also continued to teach library science, mainly at the Columbia University School of Library Science.

In 1946, Miss Rose returned to Bridgehampton, where she had purchased an 1880s-era house. Ever the activist, during this emerging Cold War period she helped to organize the Community Council which was the subject of the State Department’s film mentioned above. The council’s work was to resolve practical problems, such as improving the living conditions of migrant laborers who lived in the “poorer neighborhoods” along the Bridgehampton-Sag Harbor Turnpike. A few years later, Rose led in founding the Bridgehampton Women’s Association. [16]

In 1954, Columbia University published her book, *The Public Library in American Life*, written during her retirement in Bridgehampton. Probably intended as a textbook for library schools, it outlines the history of the library in America, reviews the challenges libraries faced in the 1950s, and ends with her recommendations for reform. Rose’s conviction that “the institutions of democracy... [are the] schools and libraries” of the nation permeates the book. [17] In that same year, she became co-chair of the Bridgehampton Tercentenary Committee.

Older village residents still have fond memories of the pageant she wrote and produced for the celebration. It was called “Our Goodly Heritage—A Pageant of Life in Bridgehampton Over 300 Years” and its sentimental style stands in stark contrast to Rose’s analytic library essays and her book. She began, “We bring you a tale of our East End, when the land

was new....” Performances drew enormous crowds in late July 1956 to the “Sagaponack Village Green,” as the *New York Times* reported. [18]

Perhaps she was motivated to write in this style by childhood memories of a poem about Columbus that she had recited in 1892 during Bridgehampton’s celebration of the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America. [19] In any case, the sense of history and passion for past cultures that she communicated, and her leadership of the Tercentenary, led to her election as the first president of the Bridgehampton Historical Society in 1956. She was seventy-six.

In her library career of forty years, Rose was a leader in the movement to redefine the meaning of branch libraries to neighborhoods within the New York Public Library system in the largest metropolitan area in the world. Through the programs she supported, her activities in professional organizations, teaching, and her writings, she worked to improve people’s lives through access to books. Her people were immigrants, African Americans, soldiers, the sick, and her students at Columbia University and elsewhere.

Given her particular focus on immigrants and African Americans, I became curious about possible sources for her moral impulse toward social activism. I suggest that one source rests with the family and community in which she was raised. Let me illustrate. A unique photograph from the dumpster shows Ernestine’s uncle, Judge Henry Chatfield, and his family in a formal portrait with an African American family—parents and six children—taken around 1910.

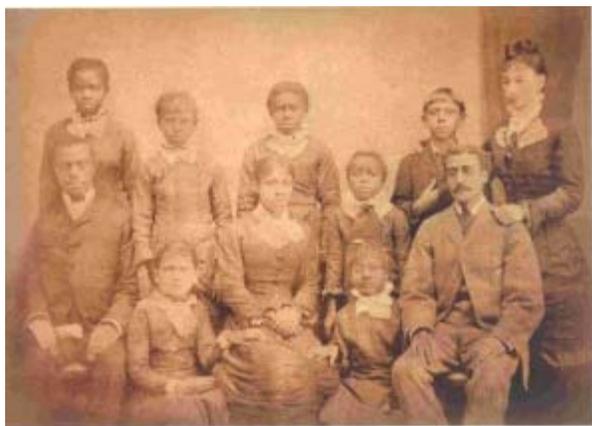


Figure 7: The Judge Chatfield family with African American family friends, about 1910. Photograph found in the dumpster, Sandford Collection.

The feeling projected is of mutual respect and affection. This photograph belonged to Ernestine, who kept it all of her life. As a girl growing up in rural Bridgehampton, she would have known some among the blacks who had journeyed north after the Civil War, just as she might have interacted with some among the small group of Irish immigrants that settled in the hamlet in the late nineteenth century to work on the farms. [20] Experiences with diversity, I suggest, coupled with her family’s positive attitudes toward ethnic groups may go far to account for Rose’s fierce commitment to social equality in her adult life.

Despite her reform impulse and many accomplishments, three authors, commenting on her impact from the perspective of recent decades, note

that Ernestine Rose's legacy had dimmed since the height of her career in the 1920s and 30s when she was widely known within American library circles. Her book was not listed in the Hampton Library's catalog, although it is held by more than 350 (primarily academic) libraries. [21]

Much of the problem rests, I believe, in the nature of institutional reform, as opposed, say, to political and social reforms which impact a broader spectrum of the citizenry and are often widely publicized through the media. In addition, her cultural pluralism may have become even less attractive during the cultural upheavals of the 1960s than it was during the period between the two world wars. Obviously, reassessments are overdue and deserve wider audiences. [22]

On the occasions of her library retirement in 1942 and at her memorial service in 1961, this champion of social uplift was proudly honored. At the retirement ceremony held at the Branch, testimonials of gratitude were delivered and a plaque bestowed. It read: "Librarian Friend of Harlem." [23] In 1956, the South Fork Civic Conference on Long Island presented Miss Rose with its annual award for "outstanding public service" for her leadership of the Tercentenary celebration. [24]

In this paper I have explored a number of topics, including the need for the student of local-world history to scavenge in unique places, even dumpsters, for their sources. The story told here describes how a white woman from a rural background moved to various cities in the world and, in retirement, returned home to become a civic advocate. The analysis demonstrates how Rose articulated and implemented her social values and her ideas on race and culture. I hope another scholar will expand upon these findings and place Rose's biography where it deserves to be—in the broader context of the history of cities, immigrants, women, and African Americans in the period from the 1910s to the 1930s.

Notes

[1] Ann Sandford, *Grandfather Lived Here: The Transformation of Bridgehampton, 1870-1970* (Sagaponack, NY: Poxabogue Publishing, 2006).

[2] Celeste Tibbets, "Ernestine Rose: A Bio-Bibliographical Sketch" (Seminar Paper, Columbia University, School of Library Service, 1987), Long Island Room, Hampton Library, 5. Photocopy of typescript.

[3] *Suffolk County News*, Island News Notes, June 27, 1902, Front page. See <http://suffolkhistoricnewspapers.org/> (accessed June 2010).

[4] May Van Scoy served as librarian from 1913 to 1957. See Paul H. Curts, ed., *Bridgehampton's Three Hundred Years* (Bridgehampton, NY: The Hampton Press, 1956), 137.

[5] *New York Times*, Mar. 26, 1911; Tibbets, 15.

[6] Quoted in Tibbets, 12, 14.

[7] Ernestine Rose, "Serving New York's Black City," *Library Journal* (Mar. 15, 1921): 255-56, 258. Copy, Hampton Library, Bridgehampton,

NY, Long Island Room, Ann Hansen Sandford Collection. Rose defined Harlem as “extending approximately from Eighth Avenue to the Harlem River and from 130th to 150th Streets.” Ibid, 255.

[8] Ibid, “Where Black and White Meet,” *Southern Workman* (Oct. 1922): 470-71. Copy, Sandford Collection.

[9] Quoted in Betty L. Jenkins, “A White Librarian in Black Harlem,” *Library Quarterly*, 60, No. 3 (1990): 224. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4308477> (accessed: 14/06/2010). Rose also incurred controversy: in 1923, she was accused of discrimination involving the talented Regina Anderson Andrews, a young librarian (without a library degree) and a playwright. Rose became entangled again in 1929 over issues of Andrews’ salary and her promotion. See Ethelene Whitmire, “Breaking the Color Barrier: Regina Andrews and the New York Public Library,” *Libraries and the Cultural Record* 42, No. 4 (2007). Copy, Sandford Collection.

[10] Stanton F. Biddle, “A Partnership in Progress—The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,” *The Crisis*, Dec. 1978, 331. Copy, Sandford Collection; *New York Times*, Jan. 15, 1927. Rose worked with the National Urban League to secure funds from the Carnegie Corporation.

[11] Arthur Schomburg served as director of the collection from 1932 to 1938. In 1940, the archive was named in his honor.

[12] galeschools.com; JSTOR, *African Studies Bulletin* 3, No. 2 (May 1960): 1-4; Biddle, 331-32; *New York Times*, Apr. 1, 1979. In 1941, the branch library was moved from its original building to a larger space at 104 West 136th Street. It was renamed the Countee Cullen Library in 1951.

[13] Jenkins, 225-26.

[14] Sarah A. Anderson, “‘The Place to Go:’ The 135th Street Branch Library and the Harlem Renaissance,” *Library Quarterly* 73 (Oct. 2003): 383-421. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4309684> (accessed:10/08/2010).

[15] Quoted in Tibbets, 22, from the obituary in the *Bridgehampton News*, April 15, 1961, 4.

[16] From the film, “Problems of a Small Community,” United States Information Service, 1950. Bridgehampton Women’s Association [BWA], Long Island Collection, East Hampton Library; Obituary, *East Hampton Star*, April 6, 1961. The BWA was founded in 1949.

[17] Ernestine Rose, *The Public Library in American Life* (New York: Columbia University, 1954), 170. In addition to the pamphlets “Bridging the Gulf” (1917) and “Experiments in Educational Service for Adults” (1940), and her book, Rose published at least twenty short articles, many only one or two pages in length, in various library journals. See the bibliography in Tibbets, 38-39.

[18] *New York Times*, June 3, 1956.

[19] *Sag Harbor Express*, Oct. 27, 1892.

[20] Sandford, 63-65.

[21] Natalie Naylor, email to the author, Dec. 7, 2010. The number of copies is based on Naylor's search in WorldCat.org.

[22] See Tibbets, 36-37; Jenkins, 217; Anderson, 383-421.

[23] Jenkins, 229.

[24] *New York Times*, June 24, 1942; *Bridgehampton News*, Mar. 31, 1961; *Ibid.*, Jul. 14, 1961. The *New York Times* did not carry an obituary.

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