

# ZORA NEALE HURSTON **in** St. Augustine

## A Collaboration Between Libraries, Museums, & Theatre



SPECIAL AND AREA STUDIES COLLECTIONS

**LAURA MARION** / GOVERNORS HOUSE LIBRARY COLLECTIONS COORDINATOR

**FLORENCE TURCOTTE** / LITERARY COLLECTIONS ARCHIVIST

**CASEY WOOSTER** / GOVERNORS HOUSE LIBRARY COLLECTIONS ASSISTANT

Fig 1.: Above - Portrait of Zora Neale Hurston taken in 1938 by Carl Van Vechton. Credit: Zora Neale Hurston Papers, Manuscripts Collections, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida. Source: <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/uf00076710/00001>.

**Celebrated Black writer, anthropologist, and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston is best known for her work associated with the Harlem Renaissance period. Her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was published in 1937.**

Many people don't realize that Hurston visited St. Augustine, Florida several times over the course of her life, most memorably in 1927 and 1942. The city provided Hurston a wedding venue, a research setting, and "a quiet place to sit down and write." St. Augustine also served as the dramatic setting for her 1926 play, *Color Struck*, which was published in *Fire!* Magazine in 1927 and helped launch Hurston's career.

## Color Struck

A Play in Four Scenes

Time: Twenty years ago and present.

Place: A Southern City.

### PERSONS

JOHN	- - - - -	A light brown-skinned man
EMMALINE	- - - - -	A black woman
WESLEY	- - - - -	A boy who plays an accordion
EMMALINE'S DAUGHTER	- - - - -	A very white girl
EFFIE	- - - - -	A mulatto girl
A RAILWAY CONDUCTOR	- - - - -	A DOCTOR

Several who play mouth organs, guitars, banjos.  
Dancers, passengers, etc.

SETTING.—Early night. The inside of a "Jim Crow" railway coach. The car is parallel to the footlights. The seats on the down stage side of the coach are omitted. There are the luggage racks above the seats. The windows are all open. They are exits in each end of the car—right and left.

ACTION.—Before the curtain goes up there is the sound of a locomotive whistle and a stopping engine, loud laughter, many people speaking at once, good-natured shrieks, strumming of stringed instruments, etc. The ascending curtain discovers a happy lot of Negroes boarding the train dressed in the gaudy, twaddly best of 1900. They are mostly in couples—each couple bearing a covered-over market basket which the men hastily deposit in the racks as they scramble for seats. There is a little friendly pushing and shoving. One pair just miss a seat three times, much to the enjoyment of the crowd. Many "plug" silk hats are in evidence, also sun-flowers in button holes. The women are showily dressed in the manner of the time, and quite conscious of their finery. A few seats remain unoccupied.

Enter Effie (left) above, with a basket. ONE OF THE MEN (standing, lifting his "plug" in a grand manner). Howdy do, Miss Effie, you'se lookin' jes lak a rose.

(Effie blushes and is confused. She looks up and down for a seat.) Fack is, if you wuzn't walkin' long, ah'd think you wuz a rose—(he looks timidly behind her and the others laugh). Looka here, where's Sam at?

EFFIE (tossing her head haughtily). I don't know an' I don't keer.

THE MAN (visibly relieved). Then lemme scorch you to a seat. (He takes her basket and leads her to a seat center of the car, puts the basket in the rack and seats himself beside her with his hat at a rakish angle.)

MAN (sliding his own along the back of the seat). Howdy do, Miss Effie, you'se lookin' jes lak a rose.

look at Ada when Ah got a chance tuh be wid you? Ah always wuz sweet on you, but you let ole Mullet-head Sam cut me out.

ANOTHER MAN (with head out of the window). Just look at de darkies coming! (With head inside coach.) Hey, Dinky! Heah come Ada wid a great big basket.

(Dinky jumps up from beside Effie and rushes to exit right. In a moment they re-enter and take a seat near entrance. Everyone in coach laughs. Dinky's girl turns and calls back to Effie.)

GIRL. Where's Sam, Effie?

EFFIE. Lawd knows, Ada.

GIRL. Lawd a mussy! Who you gointer walk de cake wid?

EFFIE. Nobody. Ah reckon. John and Emma gointer wed it up.

Fig 2.: Above - 'Color Struck: A Play in Four Scenes' by Zora Neale Hurston was originally published in *Fire!!* in November 1926. Credit: Wallace Thurman Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Source: [https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/15947166?child\\_oid=15947302](https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/15947166?child_oid=15947302).

Fig 3.: Right - Drawing of Zora Neale Hurston with signature found in *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*. 1942. J.B. Lippincott. P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Special & Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries.

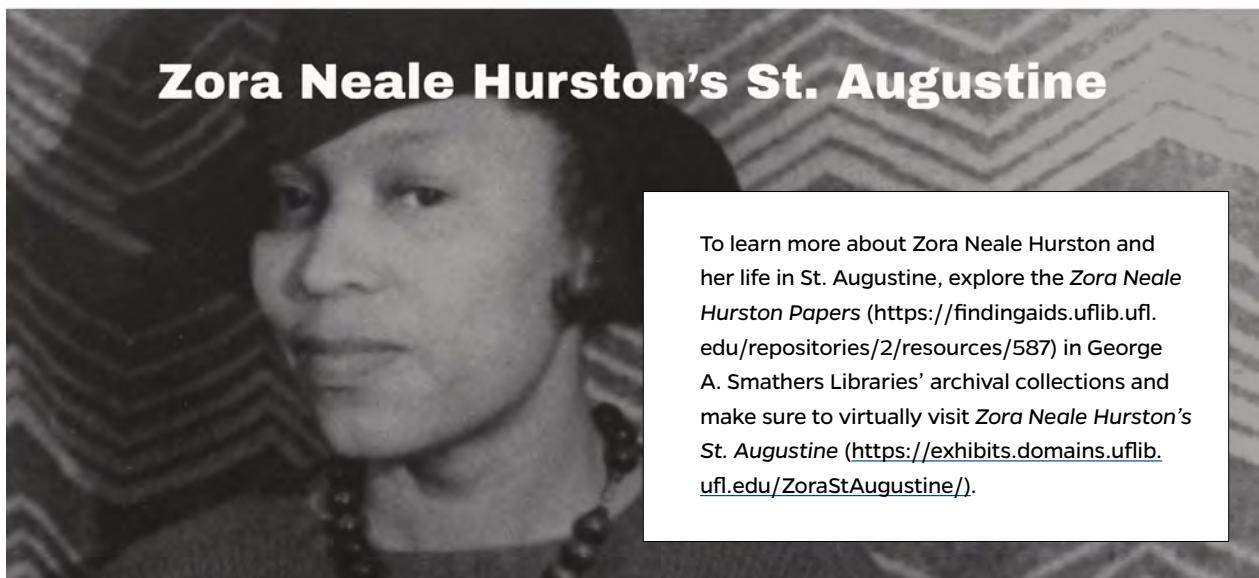


*Color Struck* opens on a segregated railway car in 1900, with members of the Black community from Jacksonville, Florida heading to St. Augustine to participate in a cakewalk competition.

The cakewalk was a dance contest with a cake awarded as the prize, originally held at gatherings on Black slave plantations before and after emancipation in the South. The contest depicted in *Color Struck* provided a natural connection to Hurston's own experience in the Ancient City since it takes place in St. Augustine.

Exploring and celebrating this important but previously unheralded time of Hurston's life was the goal of a team of historians, cultural heritage professionals, and artists as they came together under the umbrella of George A. Smathers Libraries.

Collaborative efforts to highlight Hurston's time in St. Augustine first took shape in 2021, as staff members at Governor's House Library, an affiliated branch of George A. Smathers Libraries, and Lincolnville Museum and



## Zora Neale Hurston's St. Augustine

To learn more about Zora Neale Hurston and her life in St. Augustine, explore the *Zora Neale Hurston Papers* (<https://findingaids.uflib.ufl.edu/repositories/2/resources/587>) in George A. Smathers Libraries' archival collections and make sure to virtually visit *Zora Neale Hurston's St. Augustine* (<https://exhibits.domains.uflib.ufl.edu/ZoraStAugustine/>).

Fig 4.: Zora Neale Hurston's St. Augustine digital exhibit is available through George A. Smathers Libraries.



Cultural Center worked together with twelve other cultural institutions in St. Augustine to form Resilience: Black Heritage in St. Augustine. This project allowed cultural heritage professionals from across the community to work together to highlight the history

and contributions of Black St. Augustinians throughout the city's 450+ year history. As the staff at Governor's House Library developed its contributions to the project, highlighting the work of Zora Neale Hurston seemed to be a natural fit. Initially, we contacted local St. Augustine historians David Nolan and Darien Andreu, who have engaged in decades of research on Hurston's life and connections to Northeast Florida. We also invited Florence M. Turcotte, Literary Manuscripts Archivist, to provide her expertise as the curator of the Zora Neale Hurston papers at the University of Florida. Together, we brainstormed projects that would engage the public in Hurston's time in St. Augustine and bring this underrepresented history to life.

Through much discussion, the group initially decided to create a digital exhibit that Governor's House Library staff would curate and

host. As the exhibit progressed, the group wondered if there were other ways to present this story to the public in-person, and discovered that to our knowledge, Hurston's play *Color Struck* had never been staged and performed in the state of Florida, despite being Hurston's home for most of her life.

A smaller collaboration turned into a larger initiative with partners throughout the local community, which became known as The Zora Project. In addition to the initial collaborators, we engaged the expertise of St. Augustine playwright and director Deborah Dickey to produce the Florida premiere of *Color Struck* and partnered with Lincolnville Museum and Cultural Center to host the production and rehearsals. Lincolnville Museum is located in the historically Black neighborhood of Lincolnville in St. Augustine, and its building originally served as Excelsior High School, the first public Black high school in St. Johns County. Dickey worked with choreographer Antonio Scott, Fine Arts Program Specialist for the St. Johns County School District, to portray the play's cakewalk scene. Funding for the production was generously provided through the sponsorship of George A. Smathers Libraries and the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Society.



The limited run of *Color Struck* was performed to sold-out audiences from April 28-30, 2023 at Lincolnville Museum. Of the production, Dickey stated, “This production of *Color Struck* was a true collaboration bringing together the community of St. Augustine... what better way to honor Zora Neale Hurston than to present her work in Lincolnville, literally blocks away from where she had resided in St. Augustine.” Following the final performance, a talkback with cast and Zora Project members gave the audience a chance to learn more about Hurston and discuss the cultural and historical context of the play.

Following the production, the digital exhibit *Zora Neale Hurston’s St. Augustine* premiered online thanks to the Exhibitions Program at George A. Smathers Libraries. Curated by Governor’s House Library’s Collections Assistant Casey Wooster, the exhibit explores the impact of the Ancient City on the life, correspondence, and work of Hurston. To build on the existing research of Andreu, Nolan, and Turcotte, Wooster sifted through archives and collections from George A. Smathers Libraries and institutions across the country for mentions of Hurston’s time in St. Augustine. The resulting exhibit maps Hurston’s connections to landmarks past and present as well as continued connections after her final departure in 1942.


The success of this collaboration is a testament to the power of partnerships that bridge institutional silos and community boundaries. Historian David Nolan spoke to the importance of collaborations such as this, saying, “for almost half a century I have been trying to get Hurston’s connection to St. Augustine to be widely known and acknowledged. I am so grateful to the Smathers Libraries for making possible the premiere production of *Color Struck* and for producing the accessible web version of the famous author’s connections to the Ancient City!” 



Fig 5.: Above: Promotional graphic for the 2023 production of *Color Struck* at Lincolnville Museum and Cultural Center. Credit: Lincolnville Museum and Cultural Center.



Fig 6.: Cast photograph from the 2023 production of *Color Struck* at Lincolnville Museum and Cultural Center. Credit: Glo MacDonald.