

Rock House
Charlottesville, Virginia
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When I first received this invitation, I thought “Rock House” meant that I was being called upon to deliver my much-admired and frequently requested presentation on the history of modern American popular music. It is called “Crossing the Color Line: From Rhythm and Blues to Rock and Roll.”

But “rock” referred not to the music, but to the man – Charles Holt, who like his house, must have been rock solid.

The man who built “Rock House” was born the son of a slave in 1872 in North Carolina. Even as his home state and the other Southern states were undergoing a retreat from Reconstruction, that retreat was fostering a vibrant black culture of opposition, despite great odds.

In the year of his birth, Congress passed the Amnesty Act, pardoning almost all former Confederates who had been made ineligible to hold office under the 14th Amendment. The United States had won the Civil War, but was now joining hands with and embracing the losers.

Virginia, where 60% of the war’s battles were fought, took special efforts to enshrine a version of the war’s history that insisted the “lost cause” had not been lost at all. The state capitol became an outdoor museum preserving a romanticized view of the war.

University of Virginia student Mary Mason Williams wrote in 2005,

“In Virginia romantic views of the Confederacy which ignored the importance of the slavery issue in the Civil War, continued to

cloud white perceptions of race relations throughout the twentieth century as black Virginians sought civil rights.ⁱ

Williams was writing about the 1960s, over a decade after Charles Holt had died.

Holt probably did not know that, in the year of his birth, a delegation of “prominent colored men”, including a group from Richmond, called on the President in Washington to ask for integration of “common carriers”ⁱⁱ, but he must have learned – as all blacks did - at an early age of the racial restrictions of the world in which he lived and the efforts of many to overcome them.

A hostile Supreme Court had refused to give meaning to the Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1875. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the U.S. Constitution were rendered worthless by adverse court decisions, climaxing in 1896’s *Plessy v. Ferguson*, giving legal sanction to "separate but equal".

Holt may well have learned of Nat Turner’s Southside Virginia insurrection in 1831. Surely Southern whites held fearful memories for many years afterward that a similar black uprising would occur again.

The race riot in Danville in 1883 that left four black men dead and the Roanoke riot of 1893 were part of public memory among blacks and whites too. Virginia’s lynchings – 70 of them of blacks – between 1880 and 1930 were past and present-day reminders that savagery lay just under the Virginia veneer.ⁱⁱⁱ

Charles Holt’s life spanned the nadir of black life in the 19th century to the dawning of the mid-century freedom movement in the 20th. We know he was an artisan – a carpenter and an umbrella repairman. And from that, we know he belonged to a small but growing class of black craftsmen and small entrepreneurs.

In 1899, W. E. B. DuBois has described the class that Charles Holt would join. DuBois estimated black businessmen at five thousand – grocers, barbers, printers, realtors, plumbers and so on.^{iv}

We can surmise – and it can only be surmise – that like many others of his time and place, Holt’s thought was balanced between the industrial and wealth accumulating philosophy of his fellow Virginian Booker T. Washington and the social justice advocacy of DuBois.

We know that Holt had settled in Charlottesville by 1900. Just ten years before, in 1890, local papers here may have carried the news of the hanging of four black people in Rocky Mount, Virginia. They were accused of burning a considerable portion of the town the previous fall. Rocky Mount AME minister Robert Davis wrote to the Christian Recorder to ask: “How long, oh Lord ... will colored men have to stand on the scaffolds of the South and plead for their innocence in vain?”^v

1900 was the year that black homes and schools were destroyed by a white race riot in New Orleans, and the year that whites attacked blacks in New York City. If he knew of it, Holt may have been cheered by the fact that a leader of the great black exodus out of the South had told a Congressional committee in 1880 that Holt’s new state – Virginia – was the best of the Southern states for people of color.^{vi} That was the year Virginia segregated steamships and railroads.

Being best among the worst was no achievement, then or now.

Black life expectancy when Holt settled here was 34 years; for whites, it was 48.

Holt moved here when nationally fewer than 24% of all blacks owned their homes, when there were only 21,000 black teachers, 1,734 doctors, 212 dentists, 728 lawyers, 4 black banks, 2000 blacks holding college degrees, and one black Congressman in the entire United States.^{vii} Virginia was one of four states that had a black college.

Virginia's "Constitutional Convention of 1901–1902 established poll taxes and literacy tests to inhibit voting by blacks and poor whites. On June 14, 1906, a law went into effect in the state requiring segregated seating on streetcars, despite boycotts and strident editorials in the black press."^{viii}

In 1909, when he was 37 years old, Holt purchased his first property, on 4th Street, NW, and used it as both his residence and his carpentry shop. This was the same year the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded. The original incorporation papers of the NAACP listed as its goals:

"To promote equality of rights and eradicate caste or racial prejudice among the citizens of the United States; to advance the interests of colored citizens; to secure for them impartial suffrage; and to increase their opportunities for securing justice in the courts, education for the children, and complete equality before the law."

While the white opposition was less violent here in the Commonwealth than in states further south, the black culture of opposition was no less vigorous in Virginia than in other states. In Virginia, the NAACP would file more civil rights lawsuits than in any other state.

And in Charlottesville, the NAACP was chartered in July 1918 and was an active part of the community for a quarter of a century. It was re-chartered in 1945.

Meanwhile, Charles Holt labored on, successfully enough that he was able to purchase this property in 1917. That, of course, was a year of turmoil at home and abroad. He must have been earning a 'living wage'.

The United States entered World War I in April. In July, at least 40 blacks were killed in an East St. Louis, Illinois race riot, and in August, black soldiers and white civilians clashed in Houston, for which thirteen blacks were later executed.

In 1918, more than 25 race riots occurred across the United States. There were 83 lynchings recorded that year.

Between 1922 and 1923, as estimated 500,000 blacks fled the South. In 1925, 40,000 Ku Klux Klansmen marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC.

The next year, in 1926, nine years after he purchased his double lot, Charles Holt, rock by rock, had completed his house.

The year Holt completed his house, a nine-acre tract across the street was designated as Booker T. Washington Park – “a public park and playground for the colored people of Charlottesville.” That same year an annex to Jefferson School opened as the first local high school for black students.

In those days, “[t]he law, the courts, the schools and almost every institution ... favored whites,” John Hope Franklin tells us. “This was white supremacy.”^{ix}

It would last throughout the remainder of Charles Holt's life and beyond.

Martin Luther King, Jr. explained it this way:

“When you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking: “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?” ... when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly on tip-toe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness’ – then,” King concluded, “you will understand.”

In Charles Holt’s day, most southern Blacks could not vote. They attended inadequate, segregated schools, if they went at all, and many attended only a few months each year. Most could not hope to gain an education beyond high school. Most worked as farmers, or semi-skilled laborers. Few owned the land they farmed, or even the homes in which they lived. When Holt completed this house, African-Americans were one-third of Charlottesville’s population, but owned only about 6.5% of the local real estate.

In dedicating the Rock House, we honor Charles Holt and countless others, black women and men who prevailed against a system designed to crush them.

Charles Holt would not be crushed; he was rock solid.

And now both the story of his house and the house itself have been preserved. It could have been sold. It could have been torn down. Or it just could

have been allowed to continue to deteriorate.

But the Legal Aid Justice Center decided to restore it. Last month it received designation in the Virginia Landmarks Register.

Next month, the Rock House will once again be a home – home to a partnership of the law firm of Hunton and Williams and the University of Virginia Law School designed to provide legal services concerning immigration and domestic violence.

Like its builder, Rock House is once again rock solid.

My grandfather was born a slave in 1863, in Kentucky, nine years before Charles Holt. Like Charles Holt, he was the son of a slave. Freedom didn't come for my grandfather until the 13th Amendment was ratified in 1865.

He and his mother were property, like a horse or a chair. As a young girl, she had been given away as a wedding present to a new bride, and when that bride became pregnant, her husband – that's my great-grandmother's owner and master – exercised his right to take his wife's slave as his mistress.

That union produced two children, one of them my grandfather.

At age 15, barely able to read and write, he hitched his tuition – a steer – to a rope and walked across Kentucky to Berea College and the college took him in.

When my grandfather graduated in 1892, the college asked him to deliver the commencement address.

He said then:

“The pessimist from his corner looks out on the world of wickedness and sin, and blinded by all that is good or hopeful in the condition and progress of the human race, bewails the present state of affairs and predicts woeful things for the future.”

“In every cloud he beholds a destructive storm, in every flash of lightning an omen of evil, and in every shadow that falls across his path a lurking foe.”

“He forgets that the clouds also bring life and hope, that lightning purifies the atmosphere, that shadow and darkness prepare for sunshine and growth, and that hardships and adversity nerve the race, as the individual, for greater efforts and grander victories.”^x

‘Greater efforts and grander victories.’

That is how Charles Holt lived his life and what the renovations of his house represent. We salute him and all those who have made this dedication possible.

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ⁱ Mary Mason Williams, “The Civil War and Public Memory in Virginia” copyright Mary Mason Williams and the Virginia Center for Digital History, 2005.

ⁱⁱ New National Era (January 18, 1872).

ⁱⁱⁱ The Roanoke Riots, WSLN News Channel 10, July 29, 2005; Strange Fruit by Lauren Chestnut, Danville Register & Bee, July 30, 2005; “The Race Riot of 1883” by Gerald Witt, Danville Register & Bee, July 31, 2005.

^{iv} Lewis, David, W. E. B. Dubois: Biography of a Race, 1868 – 1919, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1993.

^v Christian Recorder, (September 11, 1890).

^{vi} Senate Report 693, 46th Congress, 2nd Session, part 2, pp 101 - 111.

^{vii} The Chronological History of the Negro in America by Peter M. Bergman, Harper & Row, 1969.

^{viii} The Civil Rights Movement in Virginia, organized by the Virginia Historical Society

^{ix} John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss, Jr., From Slavery to Freedom (12th Edition).

^x “Commencement Address,” by James Bond, Berea College Reporter (June 1892).