

About SACRED SPACES: THE HOME OF ANNE SPENCER—Photographs by John M. Hall with an introduction by Jeffery Beam:

Purchase a copy of [Sacred Spaces: The Home of Anne Spencer](#)

A colorful document of the existing home of the Afro-American Harlem Renaissance poet Anne Spencer in Lynchburg, VA. Personal style abounds in these original rooms and their historic vibrations. Open to the public and run by her granddaughter Shaun Spencer Hester, it is an historical landmark, as is the entire neighborhood there on Pierce Street. An example of a vital, thriving middle class Afro American world.



Purchase a copy of the issue of *Southern Cultures* with the article [Sacred Spaces: A Look Inside the Home of Harlem Renaissance Poet Anne Spencer](#) by Jeffery Beam, with new photographs by John M. Hall.

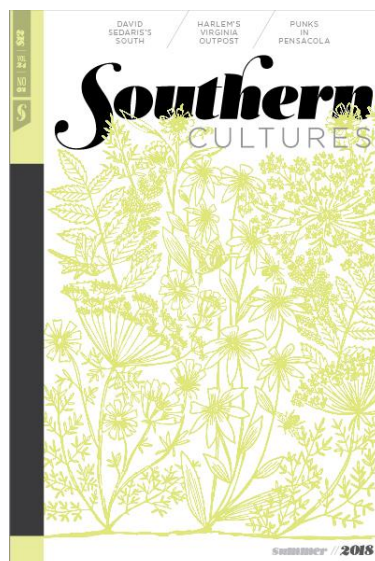




Photo © John M. Hall



[Anne Spencer House & Garden Museum](#)

[Exhibition opening celebration](#): "Sacred Spaces: A Look Inside the Home of Harlem Renaissance Poet Anne Spencer."

["Sacred Spaces" explores poetry and passion of the Harlem Renaissance](#), *The Daily Tar Heel* blog 2015.

# *Colorful Things: The Poetry of Anne Spencer's Home*

I want to share this further, somewhat expanded, and more political expression of Anne and Edward Spencer's life and work.

This essay was the first draft for the exhibition essay for the *Sacred Spaces* show at UNC-Chapel Hill's Center for the Study of the American South in 2015. We opted for a less political approach to the exhibition and thus the different title *Sacred Spaces*, and a different focus for the essay, both in the show and later in their magazine [Southern Cultures](#). The exhibition took place after wonderful articles in [The New York Times](#) and [The Washington Post](#), both of which included John M. Hall photos. Since then, as of 2018, there has been an exhibition of John's photos and materials from the Anne Spencer archive at the [Library University of Virginia in Charlottesville](#), and articles in *New York Magazine's* blog [The Cut](#) and [The World of Interiors](#) (both with John's photos), and also in [The Oxford American](#) as well as in other media.

The title of this exhibition and the catalog that accompanies it is taken from one of Anne Spencer's best poems, but also one of her most uniquely political. Anne's poetry usually fixed on more personal subjects, and on her beloved garden. But her poems frequently evoke the garden and nature through synesthesia, frequently with color.

Most things are colorful things-  
-the sky, earth, and sea.  
Black men are most men;  
but the white are free!  
White things are rare things;  
so rare, so rare  
They stole from out a silvered  
world--somewhere.

Best known for her garden tended for over fifty years and lovingly restored in the mid-1980s and again recently, Anne Spencer described it in one poem as half of her world. It has been the subject of numerous magazine articles and books. But the other half of her world was her home, her and husband Edward's sanctuary from racism and all of its effects. Those two halves make for a fascinating account of an artistically gifted person in overcoming, and even overthrowing in many ways, societal obstacles. Anne mused once, "We have a lovely home—one that money did not buy—it was born and evolved slowly out of our passionate poverty-stricken agony to own our own home, happiness."

Not many people know that the Harlem Renaissance had a vibrant outpost in the South, nor of this remarkable couple that birthed and nourished it—the poet Anne, and her devoted and no less talented husband. Their story, preserved in their home in Lynchburg, Virginia embodies Civil Rights history, the foundations of the NAACP, African-American literature and music, and enhances one's understanding of the rise of the African-American middle class and the issues affecting it such as circumscribed educational and business opportunities.

The Spencer's home became a wayside stop for distinguished African-American intelligentsia as they moved up and down the East Coast. Hotels and motels for blacks were non-existent. Among visitors and overnight guests were Marian Anderson, George Washington Carver, Countee Cullen, W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall (who spent his honeymoon there), Adam Clayton Powell, and Paul Robeson. The Spencer's home, partly because of Anne's poetry and the force of her personality, became a salon of sorts, a protectorate in the South of the cultural, political, and social advancements slowly being made across the country.

Edward's role was no less important. His high regard in the community at large (he was a parcel post delivery man); his canny ability for re-use of materials collected from local places such as Randolph-Macon College, the movie theater, and the rock quarry; and his craftsmanship, hard work and attentiveness to Anne's vision of place that allowed for the creation of what might be called a singular poetic environment, made even more captivating by its historical associations. A place they



inhabited for 72 years.

As the Assistant in Carolina's then Couch Botanical Library I became aware of the garden when the *American Horticulturist* published an article about the garden's restoration. I was intrigued, being a poet myself, by a poet's garden, and thought someday I might visit and write about it. Somehow I had never gotten around to it. Then in 2012 friend and fellow North Carolinian photographer John Hall arrived with a portfolio of photographs taken after his "riveting" visit to meet Shaun Spencer-Hester, the granddaughter now in charge of the House and Garden Museum. John has a long and distinguished career in New York as a photographer of interiors and gardens for the great shelter magazines: *House and Garden*, *House Beautiful*, *Architectural Digest*, *Garden Design*, *Verandah*, and in *The New York Times*. His excitement was palpable and the photographs were, as you can see, gorgeous while capturing the distinctive experience of the interior.

I became riveted too, having long been a disciple of the Omega Workshops (a visual arts offshoot of the Bloomsbury Group) that decorated every inch of everything in their homes, and as equally determined as Anne was to have my home reflect my poetics. I had no idea Anne's story also embodied the decorative arts.

By the time John had introduced me to Shaun, whose careful and sympathetic guardianship of her grandparent's vision has awakened the world to it, we three collectively began looking for every opportunity to carry the banner forward, and pleased when Dr. J. Lee Greene, Anne's biographer, joined us for this project.

These interiors, which must be visited and enjoyed through Shaun's absorbing and instructive tour, suggest influences from many decorative traditions—African, Asian, Victorian, Art Deco, and other early 20<sup>th</sup> century Middle Class models. Their aesthetic adds another layer of enchantment to the history of the home. Here color and form and pattern, just as in Anne's garden, convey life's fullness and energy, and refuses limitations.

Welcome to the colorful and free world of Anne and Edward Spencer.

*Jeffery Beam, © 2015*

*Spencer was the first African-American woman poet to be featured in the Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry. The garden is maintained by Lynchburg's Hillside Garden Club with support from the Garden Clubs of Virginia. The Spencer House and Garden is included on the National Register of Historic Places and was designated a Virginia Historic Landmark in 1976. It is also a Friends of the Library USA Literary Landmark, and a Historic Landmark from the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History. UNC Professor Emeritus J. Lee Greene authored the only critical biography of Anne Spencer entitled Time's Unfading Garden: Anne Spencer's Life and Poetry.*