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In Search of Helen Maria Chesnutt (1880-1969), Black Latinist

MICHELE VALERIE RONNICK

Abstract: Classical scholars have begun to delineate the dynamic pattern of black classicism. This new subfield of the classical tradition involves the analysis of the creative response to classical antiquity by artists as well as the history of the professional training in classics of scholars, teachers and students in high schools, colleges and universities. To the first group belongs Helen Maria Chesnutt (1880-1969). Born in Fayetteville, NC, Chesnutt was the second daughter of acclaimed African American novelist, Charles W. Chesnutt (1858-1932). She earned her B.A. from Smith College in 1902 and her M.A. in Latin from Columbia University in 1925. She was a member of the American Philological Association and the Classical Association of the Middle West and South. Her life was spent teaching Latin at Central High School in Cleveland, OH. This is the first full scale account of her career.

Keywords: African-American intellectuals, Latin language, female classicists, black philologists, high school pedagogy, classical education

My search for Helen Chesnutt began many years ago when I added an image of her from Smith College Archives to my photo installation, "12 Black Classicists," which with the support of the James Loeb Classical Library Foundation made its debut at the Detroit Public Library in September, 2003. Helen's photo was added in 2004 and the installation became "13 Black Classicists." In my efforts to stimulate interest in her, I gave a lecture in April, 2005 at the 101st annual meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South in Madison, Wisconsin titled: "Within CAMWS Territory: Helen M. Chesnutt (1880-1969) Black Latinist." In March, 2013 I spoke about her via SKYPE to Mary Lou Burke's students at Deep Creek High School in Chesapeake, Virginia and in October of the same year I presented "Helen Maria Chesnutt (1880-1969): Pioneer African-American Latin Teacher," to the members of the Classical Association of the Atlantic States in Philadelphia. In April, 2018 I studied her father for the CAMWS panel that inaugurated the James S. Ruebel Memorial Scholarship in Albuquerque, New Mexico giving a paper titled: "Apuleius in the Work of African American Novelist, Charles W. Chesnutt (1858- 1932)."¹ Here is the most recent account of my findings, a portrait of Helen Maria Chesnutt from cradle-to-grave.

Susan Perry Chesnutt (1861-1940), a teacher who was from a well-established family in Fayetteville, NC, and Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858-1932) were married June 6, 1878. She was four days from her seventeenth birthday, and he was just shy of his twentieth. He was a consummate autodidact and was constantly reading and working on self-improvement. He studied, German, French, and Latin on his own and at one point hired a graduate of Davidson College named Hodges to tutor him in ancient Greek.² From 1877 to 1883 he worked at the Howard Normal School in Fayetteville where he was principal for four years. In 1880 he

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Paul Hay of Case Western Reserve University for his help in locating various articles concerning Helen Chesnutt's career published in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and to Craig VanDevere, Ethel Chesnutt's great grandson for attending the presentation of this study on March 20, 2020. See Joy Hakanson Colby, "Exhibit Uncovers Little-Known African-American Intellectuals," *Detroit Free Press* (Sept. 6, 2003): B-1. See <https://camws.org/meeting/2005/abstracts2005/ronnick.html>, <https://caas-cw.org/caas/meetings/> and <https://camws.org/2018PanelsWorkshops> and Michele Valerie Ronnick, "Chesnutt, Helen Maria," <https://dbs.rutgers.edu/all-scholars/north-american-scholars/chesnutt-helen-maria>

² Concerning her father's study of Latin, French, German and Greek see Helen M. Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1952): 16, 22, 23, 26, 27, 30 and Frances Richardson Keller, *An American Crusade: The Life of Charles Waddell Chesnutt* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1978): 49, 60-61, 76-77.

started a Latin class at his home where ten men and women met twice a week in the evenings. Each paid one dollar a month -which turns out to be roughly thirteen cents a session.³

Their first three children were born in Fayetteville: Ethel in April, 1879, Helen Maria in December, 1880, Edwin Jackson Chesnutt in September 1883. Dorothy Katherine was born in Cleveland in December, 1890.⁴ By 1884 the Chesnutts were settled in Cleveland and all four children would attend Central High School (CHS) there. In September, 1893 Ethel and Helen entered CHS, and both took the classical course.⁵ After the sisters' graduation Cleveland's Western Reserve University was immediately considered for college, but Charles and Susan found the girls acting disillusioned and dispirited. After inquiry they learned that a student at CHS had told the sisters: "After all. . . you are negroes. We know that you are nice girls, and everybody thinks the world of you, but Mother says that while it was all right for us to go together when we were younger, now that we are growing up, we must consider Society and we just can't go together anymore."⁶ That is when Charles and Susan decided on Smith College in Northampton, MA. Charles had visited Northampton in March, 1889 at the invitation of his friend the writer George Washington Cable and he had liked what he saw there.⁷

With trunks full of beautiful clothes, which Helen described as "[c]hallis dressing sacks with flutings of gay ribbon all round them; lounging robes of French flannel and eiderdown; dresses, the skirts of which were lined with silk and interlined with horse hair, and edged with brush braid to stand the wear as they swept along the sidewalks. Braids and buttons and bands for trimming; leg o' mutton sleeves, collars heavily boned to stand up straight behind the ears; these filled the wardrobe with beauty, and the hearts of the girls with joy," the two girls arrived at Smith in the fall of 1897.⁸ And their parents, as Helen recalled "were both going to college along with their daughters."⁹ Soon after on September 30, 1897 Charles advised Ethel: "Remember that you are there not only to have fun, but to study and prepare yourselves for future usefulness."¹⁰

Documents from Smith College Archives reveal that Helen and Ethel took four years of Latin and one of Greek. Ethel also took courses in French and German. Helen took courses in French and Italian as well.¹¹ Their stay at Smith was not without trouble. A diary notation written on January 9, 1899 by Professor Mary Augusta Jordan, one of Smith's best-known English professors, described the situation. "Then I had a sad interview with the younger Miss Chesnutt. They are experiencing the color line in a place where they ought to be secure. I appealed to the President who proposes to take a hand himself." The president at that time was L. Clark Seelye, and what he did is not clear for the incident is not mentioned in his personal papers.

We do know that Helen and Ethel had four different residences during their years at Smith. About this Nanci Young chief archivist at Smith College told me: "While boarding students off campus was not unusual at this time . . . I do think that it is unusual to have

³ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 26.

⁴ See the collections of photographs at the Cleveland Public Library, *The Miscellaneous Memorabilia of Charles W. Chesnutt* <https://cplog.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4014coll12>.

See also various materials at the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH <https://www.wrhs.org/research/search/>, The Charles Chesnutt Archives and Special Collections at Fayetteville State University, Fayetteville, NC <http://library.uncc.edu/archives/about-special-collections/finding-aid-for-charles-w-chesnutt/biographical-information> and in the John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library at Fisk University, Nashville, TN <https://www.fisk.edu/academics/library/special-collection-and-archives/>

⁵ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 66.

⁶ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 75.

⁷ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 50, 76.

⁸ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 79.

⁹ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 81.

¹⁰ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 82.

¹¹ See the letter dated April 16, 1971 written by Helen B. Bishop, Smith College Registrar, to Frances Richardson Keller who had inquired at the time about the courses Ethel and Helen took in the Smith College Archives.

students reside in 4 different places over the 4 years. Whether the ‘colorline’ the Chesnutts [were] was experiencing was within the Smith community or the town community, I am afraid I can’t determine.”¹²

Letters sent to and from Cleveland reveal that the sisters were also concerned with social activities. Helen’s father, the man who had spent much time in his youth teaching himself Latin, jestingly told Helen in a letter dated February 28, 1898: “It pains me to learn that you haven’t time to learn how to ‘skee.’ I haven’t the faintest idea of what ‘skeeing’ is, but it is a keen disappointment to me that you don’t learn everything in the curriculum. Can’t you take up ‘skeeing’ in your second or third year? Is it harder or easier than Latin? Perhaps you could drop mathematics and take it up.”¹³

On October 12, 1900 the sisters’ parents met the parents of Julia Harwood Caverno (1862-1949), who would rise during her career at Smith College from Instructor to Professor of Greek, at the home of Chesnutt family friends, the Amblers. Otelia Cromwell, the first black student to graduate from Smith College, had lived in Caverno’s home for two years.¹⁴ In 1905 Caverno was the only woman on the founding committee of Classical Association of New England (CANE) and she served as the association’s president in 1926-1927. About the Cavernos, Charles wrote to his daughters: “They expressed their intention of looking you up, or hoping to see you at Northampton ... I hope you may meet them as they are very nice people.”¹⁵

Not long after Helen suffered a bout of severe eye strain and debilitating headaches, and she returned home to Cleveland. After six weeks at a Normal High School learning techniques of pedagogy, she went to Baltimore to teach English for a short time at a colored high school, and then in March, 1902 she returned to Smith College to finish her degree.¹⁶

On November 26, 1902, after graduating from Smith College Ethel married Edward Christopher Williams (1871-1929).¹⁷ The couple’s wedding was held at the Chesnutt home on 64 Brenton Street in Cleveland and Reverend Wilson Reiff Stearly, rector of Emmanuel Episcopal, a white Church, to which the Chesnutts belonged, officiated.¹⁸ Williams had trained as a librarian at Adelbert College and is considered today to be the first professionally trained black librarian. He was principal of Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. and in 1916 became Librarian at Howard University where he also served as chair of the Romance Languages Department. Between 1925-1926 he published as a serial in the *Messenger* an epistolary novel of the Harlem Renaissance titled *When Washington Was in Vogue*.¹⁹ Helen’s own interests were ‘stellar’ shall we say in their own way. In 1901 she was a Senior Member of the Telescopium Society at Smith College.²⁰

¹² See my earlier examination of this incident in Michele Valerie Ronnick, “Classical Education and the Advancement of African American Women in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *Women Classical Scholars: Unsealing the Fountain from the Renaissance to Jacqueline de Romilly*, eds. Rosie Wyles and Edith Hall, Oxford University Press, 2016): 189-192. Criticism across racial lines was not unilateral however. In 1914 after appointment as a probation officer to the Juvenile Court in 1914, Dorothy was described by Mrs. P. Johnson Tarrer and Mrs. Lethia Cousins Fleming, two well-known African-American women, as “not ‘in touch’ with her people of the community.” See “Cleveland Sixth City,” *Cleveland Gazette* (January 24, 1914): 2.

¹³ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 90.

¹⁴ See George E. Dimock, “Caverno, Julia Harwood,” <https://dbc.rutgers.edu/all-scholars/8600-caverno-julia-harwood>. See “Otelia Cromwell: The First African American to Graduate from Smith: Class of 1900,” <https://smithbs.tripod.com/id15.html> Caverno also gave shelter to another African American student, Carrie E.S. Lee, class of 1917 when her would-be roommate objected Miss Lee’s presence. See <https://libex.smith.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/black-students-alliance/carrie-lee>

¹⁵ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 153.

¹⁶ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 164.

¹⁷ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 166-168; 183.

¹⁸ *Cleveland Gazette* (Nov. 29, 1902); 3; *Colored American* (December 6, 1902): 2.

¹⁹ E.J. Josey, “Edward Christopher Williams: A Librarian’s Librarian,” *Journal of Library History* (April, 1969): 106-122. He also published a short essay titled “Latin Again,” *Howard Record* 17(Dec., 1922): 66-67.

²⁰ On the members of the Telescopium Club in 1901, see *Smith College Annual*, 1901, p. 108. Helen also published an essay during this period titled, “The Problem of the South,” *Smith College Monthly* (November,

Helen was not happy, however, about returning to Cleveland, and told her father: "I am not comfortable in Cleveland and never was, and I have always vowed that I would not settle down in that city ... And now you ask me to return ... I can't imagine anything more distasteful. I tell you all this because I want you to know exactly where I stand in this matter."

Despite her misgivings, ultimately her father's wishes prevailed and she reluctantly accepted his plan: "It seems to be up to me to do it. Well, I have stood a lot more than people give me credit for, and a few more blows won't materially affect my ultimate good."²¹

Helen began her career working as a substitute teacher at CHS from 1902-1904; in 1905 she taught biology and in 1910 Algebra and Latin.²² CHS was not only the oldest school in Cleveland, it was the first free public high school west of the Allegheny Mountains.²³ College preparatory work was its focus. In 1918 for example the school had four full time Latin teachers.

Her sister, Ethel, had also been teaching, and at William H. Council's school (today Alabama A & M University) was an instructor of Latin and English in 1905-1906.²⁴ Council (1848-1909) had been born in slavery in Fayetteville, and was sold south to Alabama where he had seen two of his brothers auctioned away in 1857, never to see them again.

The Williams were a dynamic couple and *inter alia* gave an evening reception for W. E. B. Du Bois at their Cleveland home, 71 Elberon Avenue, on December 10, 1903. Ethel was herself busy writing, lecturing and teaching. In 1906 the *Cleveland Gazette* announced that Ethel had "earned a literary reputation in her own right. She is the author of some very meritorious poems which have been published here and there in a number of magazines and newspapers. Mrs. Williams is at present engaged in teaching at Normal, AL being the instructor of Latin and German at Prof. W. H. Council's school."²⁵

9719 Lamont Avenue was the Chesnutt family home from 1904 to 1936. It was a spacious and book filled house. And Helen was a serious gardener. *The Cleveland Gazette* noted in 1916 the "garden of 3,000 tulips" that she had planted.²⁶

Her sister Dorothy, younger by eleven years, also studied classical and modern languages, but she did this at Western Reserve University (WRU). In May of 1911 she dressed up as the goddess Themis at Western Reserve.²⁷ After her graduation from WRU's College for Women, Charles wanted Ethel's husband, Edward, to help Dorothy get a position at Dunbar High School in Washington, but she did not like Washington and returned to Cleveland. She worked in the probate court for two years and later taught French, Latin, and English in Wilson Junior High School. In the summer of 1921, she studied at the University of Chicago. In March, 1924 she married John Gamaliel Slade (1890-1976), a physician who had trained

1902):116-121.

²¹ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 165.

²² See *Central High Monthly*, (Feb., 1913): 15. *Central High Monthly*, (1905): 8 which lists biology and *Central High Monthly* (1911): 31 which lists algebra and Latin.

²³ "Central High School," *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, <https://case.edu/ech/articles/c/central-high-school>

²⁴ See *Organization Lists of the Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations in the United States: U.S. Department of Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, December, 1905): 8. See Christopher Blue, "William Hooper Council (1849-1909)," <https://www.blackpast.org/african-americanhistory/council-william-hooper-1849-1909/> and Alabama American history, <https://alafrikanamerican.com/2013-honorees/william-hooper-council/>

²⁵ *Cleveland Gazette* (Dec. 12, 1903):3; *Cleveland Gazette* (May 19, 1906): 3. See also Ethel's address at the Y.M.C.A. "At the National Capitol," *Indianapolis Freeman* (Feb. 19, 1901): 1. On hosting her sisters. see "The Week in Society," *Washington Bee* (Dec. 24, 1910): 5 and "Mrs. Williams Received," *Washington Bee* (Dec. 30, 1911): 5. *Cleveland Gazette* (Sept. 25, 1909):3 reported on Ethel's plans to teach at Tuskegee.

²⁶ See "Sixth City," *Cleveland Gazette* (May 20, 1916): 3.

²⁷ Sarah Starr, Western Reserve Historical Society Library and Archives, personal correspondence (Nov. 29, 2003) provided a description of the writing on the back of a photo of Dorothy dressed as Themis: "DKC in the Golden Mean [. . .] presented by the College for Women [Fee?] Day, May 6, 1911." Dorothy's wedding was announced in the papers, "Cleveland Social and Personal," *Cleveland Gazette* (April 19, 1924): 3 and the invitation that W.E.B Du Bois received to the event is in the W.E.B. Du Bois Papers at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. <https://credo.library.umass.edu/vew/full/mums312-b026-i229>

at Howard University's Medical School. They had a son, John Chesnutt Slade (1925-2001) and resided in Cleveland.²⁸

Between 1914 and 1919 Helen was regularly mentioned in Chicago's leading black newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*, as one of the women teaching in Cleveland's schools. The columnist Alexander O. Taylor, who mentioned her over the years, wrote on September 21, 1918: "Our citizens of Cleveland have reason to feel proud of the splendid recognition given our girls as teachers in the mixed schools of the city regardless of color. We have fifty-five race girls and women teaching ... Cleveland can rightfully claim to be the banner city in this respect."²⁹

In 1910 Helen suffered digestive trouble, and that summer Booker T. Washington invited her to stay at his home, The Oaks, on the campus of the Tuskegee Institute. Her brother Edwin had begun working as Washington's secretary that same year and would stay on until 1912. During her stay she was especially thrilled "by the awe-inspiring experience to see Halley's Comet spreading out all over" the Alabama skies.³⁰

She resumed teaching at CHS. In January 1913 the Olympian Club for Latin students put on a play titled, "The Roman School House," by Susan Paxson of Omaha, Nebraska. The play was performed in full costume and the *Central High Monthly* in February, 1913 reported that the "Cicero students took much pleasure in the flogging of Catiline."³¹ She was also working with the Girls Literary Society that year.³²

During this period she set up the Home Garden Club. A photo of Helen with the club shows her with one of CHS's most famous pupils, Langston Hughes, who was vice-president of the club.³³ But she knew other talented students such as Robert Coleman, the fourteen-year-old class valedictorian in 1930. Helen was quoted in the *Pittsburgh Courier* saying: "Robert is one of the most remarkable boys I have ever taught ... Latin and mathematics, which are usually the most difficult subjects to teach, are his favorites. He seems to grasp the most complicated assignments with amazing swiftness. To me he is a genius."³⁴

In the summer of 1921, Helen taught Latin at the Foreign Language School at Western Reserve University.³⁵ In January, 1923 she gave a party for the senior high school women teachers. The party started at 4 p.m. There were thirty-two guests, music by the high school orchestra, and supper.³⁶ By then already in her early 40s she entered the graduate school of Arts and Sciences at Columbia University. On October 28, 1925 she graduated with an M.A. degree in Latin.³⁷ She was two months from her 45th birthday.

We do not know who her professors were, but on the staff at that time were: Grace Goodale, Frank Moore, Gertrude Hirst, Nelson McCrea, Eugene Strittmatter, Cassius Jackson Kesyer, William Westermann, Charles Knapp, William Oldfather and Moses Hadas.³⁸ Wes Lawrence who interviewed Helen for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in 1967

²⁸ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 276, 295.

²⁹ Alexander O. Taylor, "Brief News from the Buckeye State: Banner City for Race Teachers," *Chicago Defender* (Sept. 21, 1918): 3; See also n. a. "Cleveland, Ohio," *Chicago Defender* (Sept. 22, 1914): 2; n. a., "Cleveland, Ohio," (July 4, 1914): 2; Alexander O. Taylor, "Brief News from the Buckeye State," *Chicago Defender* (Feb. 2, 1915): 2; Alexander O. Taylor, "Brief News from the Buckeye State," *Chicago Defender* (Sept. 18, 1915): 2; Alexander O. Taylor, "Cleveland Women Appointed Teachers," *Chicago Defender* (Sept. 22, 1917): 2; Alexander O. Taylor, "The Buckeye State," *Chicago Defender* (Oct. 14, 1919): 15.

³⁰ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 234-237.

³¹ See *Central High Monthly* (Feb. 1913): 15.

³² See *Central High School Annual* (1913): 52.

³³ See Helen M. Chesnutt, "The Home Garden Club of Central High School," *Cleveland Women* 1 (March 9, 1919): 18; "Cleveland Social and Personal," (Jan. 12, 1918): 3; *Central High School Annual* (June, 1919) lists her as faculty advisor and Hughes as the club's vice-president.

³⁴ See "14 Year Old Lad Class Valedictorian," *Pittsburgh Courier* (June 7, 1930): 5.

³⁵ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 289.

³⁶ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 292.

³⁷ Abby M. Lester, Assistant Archivist, Columbia University Archives and Columbiana Library, personal correspondence, (May 13, 2003): "There is no listing of a master's thesis for Helen Chesnutt."

³⁸ Personal correspondence with Jocelyn K. Wilk, Associate Director, Columbia University Archives and

quoted her as saying: “I got a master’s degree from Columbia. . . But this was years later, in 1925, and I got it as a matter of convenience. They kept asking me to teach summer school in Cleveland, and I tired of it. So I went to summer school at Columbia and got my degree.”³⁹ She had joined the American Philological Association (APA) five years before in 1920 and was on the group’s Executive Committee in 1920. She remained a member until 1934, and it is quite likely that she is the first black woman to join the APA.⁴⁰

In 1925 Helen published an article in the *School Review* entitled “The Story of the Fasces at Central High School.” In it she described her students’ interest in the fasces on the U.S. dime, and how her students had drafted a letter on the chalkboard to send to A.A. Weinman, the coin’s designer. They were thrilled when he replied. Helen wrote: “Then the Olympian Club . . . composed of eleventh and twelfth grade Latin students . . . acquired a romantic and thrilling interest in the beauty and significance of the fasces [and] decided to adopt it for its symbol.”

With parents’ help, the students made a life size model and put it up on a classroom wall. They decided that new initiates to the Olympian Club would have to wear pins of miniature fasces, and that they would make them out of twine, gold-colored safety pins and twigs. These little pins and the club were wildly popular, and Helen noted: “One little boy from the junior high school came in to ask: How long does a fellow have to take Latin before he can wear one of those things?”

Helen’s principal suggested that the club make 200 of the pins to “send as souvenirs to the members of the Ohio Latin Conference which was soon to meet at Oberlin.” After two weeks of careful work, Helen said “200 little fasces had been made. They were tagged with ribbon that said ‘Compliments of the Olympian Club, Central High School,’ & packed into a 5 pound candy box for shipment to Oberlin.”⁴¹ Some fifty years later in 1985, a friend of Langston Hughes, Rowena Jelliffe recalled CHS as ‘quite an extraordinary place’ “having an unusually competent group of people. . . [t]here was Helen Chesnutt’s excitement, even in the teaching of Latin, which made her classes something that everybody wanted to get into.”⁴² According to Wes Lawrence, Helen was “remembered by hundreds of Clevelanders and former Clevelanders as the vivacious and brilliant teacher under whom they studied Latin at Central High School.”⁴³

In November, 1927 she suffered a ruptured appendix and was rushed to the Cleveland Clinic Hospital. Peritonitis set in and she was very sick. She was back in the hospital in June, 1928, but after some months of rest her health was restored, and she sailed to Europe in July, 1929 with her friend and fellow teacher Alta Myrtle Bien. They stayed until September.⁴⁴

In January 1931 she published “Ecce Vergilius” in which she described how her students celebrated the bimillennium of Vergil’s birth by putting on an elaborate production of Frank Justus Miller’s 1908 play “Dido the Phoenician Queen.”⁴⁵

In 1932 she co-authored with Martha Taylor Whittier Olivenbaum (1880-1959) and Nellie Lucille Price Rosebaugh (1896-1989) a beginning Latin textbook entitled *The Road to Latin: A First-Year Latin Book* with the John C. Winston Company which was edited

Columbiana Library (May 15, 2003) who sent catalogue pages with faculty for the years 1922/23, 1923/24, 1924/25 and 1925/26.

³⁹ Wes Lawrence, “The Road to Latin,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (February 23, 1967):11.

⁴⁰ *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 61(1930): lxxvi shows 1920 as her first year of membership and *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 65(1934): lxxxviii shows 1934 as her last. To learn more about African American members of the APA see Michele Valerie Ronnick, *Twelve African American Members of the Society for Classical Studies: The First Five Decades (1875-1925): A Special Publication for the Sesquicentennial of the Society for Classical Studies* (New York, Society for Classical Studies, 2018).

⁴¹ See Helen M. Chesnutt, “The Story of the Fasces at Central High School,” *School Review* 33(1925): 303-306.

⁴² See St. Clair Bourne, “Rowena Jelliffe on Langston Hughes,” *The Langston Hughes Review* 15(Winter, 1997): 79.

⁴³ See Wes Lawrence, “The Road to Latin,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Feb. 23, 1967): 11.

⁴⁴ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 299, 302, and 309.

⁴⁵ See Helen M. Chesnutt, “Ecce Vergilius,” *Classical Journal* 26 (Jan. 1931): 273-278.

by Emile de Sauzé, (1878-1964), director of Foreign Languages of the Cleveland Board of Education.⁴⁶ The reviews of *The Road to Latin* were favorable. Dorrance S. White of the University of Iowa wrote: "The subject matter is cleverly chosen and arranged. It affords an excellent medium for teaching Roman private life, legend, myth and history. It has in mind the pupil who can take only one year and would like to get the most out of his Latin study ... Despite several blemishes, the reviewer would place it among the few leading first year Latin textbooks." A few years later Mark E. Hutchinson made a brief mention of the book in a survey article that he wrote, and B. W. Mitchell summed up the book in his 1939 review as one that "supplies a very adequate road, paved solidly and smoothly. There are no detours, no aimless wanderings ..."⁴⁷ The book was published again in subsequent years: 1938, 1945, and in 1949.

Helen's co-authors were of Caucasian descent. Nellie Lucille Price Rosebaugh was a student at Central High School in 1914 whom Helen must have met at the time. She went on to earn a B.A. at WRU's College for Women in 1918, and an M.A. from the same institution in 1942. Martha Taylor Whittier Olivenbaum earned her B.A. from the University of Wisconsin in 1904 with a thesis titled: "The Influence of Politics upon Art at Athens" and in 1906 an M.A. from Ewing College.⁴⁸

The book, 544 pages in length, is very well illustrated and has more women in it than one might expect including matrons, slave girls, and hand maidens. Suffice it so say a full analysis of the book has yet to be made. It was advertised in an issue of *Auxilium Latinum* published in Brooklyn NY in November, 1932, and it was used at the University of Michigan as the book to use for its correspondence course in Latin in 1938.⁴⁹

In 1935 John Winton issued a companion volume titled *A Workbook to Accompany The Road to Latin* by Virginia Gatch Markham (1898-1999).⁵⁰ Markham, who had earned an M.A. from the University of Chicago in 1925, taught in the Cleveland schools from 1930-1963. Emile de Sauzé was the editor of her book, and it is not clear why Markham did the work and not the original authors. But they came together again in 1940 to write *The Cleveland Plan for Teaching of Foreign Languages with Special Reference to Latin*, (John C. Winston, 1940). Both the textbook and the workbook were advertised in the *Classical Journal* in October, 1939.

The membership list of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South for 1935-1936 included three of the four women: Rosebaugh, Markham, and Chesnutt. Helen had been a member of the Association since 1917, and again as in the case of the APA, she

⁴⁶ Dr. Sauzé created the "Cleveland Plan" for foreign languages which emphasized listening and speaking as well as reading and writing to teach foreign languages in Cleveland's schools. See Walter W. DuBreuil, "A Tribute to Dr. Emile de Sauzé," *The Modern Language Journal* 32(1948): 608-609.

⁴⁷ See Dorrance S. White, "Chesnutt, Helen M., Olivenbaum, Martha W., and Rosebaugh, Nellie P., *The Road to Latin*: Philadelphia, The John C. Winston Company (1932) Pp. xvi+544. \$1.05," *Classical Journal* 28(1932-1933): 540-544; Mark E. Hutchinson, "Some Needed Research in the Teaching of Latin," *Classical Journal* 29(Feb. 1934): 350; B. W. Mitchell, "The Road to Latin. A First Year Latin Book. By Helen M. Chesnutt, Martha Whittier Olivenbaum, Nellie Price Rosebaugh, Edited by E.B de Sauze, Ph.D. director of Foreign Languages, Cleveland Board of Education. Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company (1932). Pp. xvi, 544." *Classical Weekly* (May 11, 1939): 188-189. D.P.L. "Book Notes: The Road to Latin by H. M. Chesnutt, M. W. Olivenbaum and N. P. Rosebaugh," *Classical Outlook* 16 (November, 1938): 19 makes brief mention of the 1938 edition noting: "To the former edition have been added at the chapter ends Latin proverbs, word derivation, interesting additional notes on the material in the chapter, vocabulary exercises, etc. At the back of the book five pages of review have been added in the form of completion, identification and translation exercises."

⁴⁸ On Rosebaugh see *Central High School Annual* (1914): 19, 22, 102 and *The College for Women in the City of Cleveland: Catalogue for 1918-1919* (Western Reserve University Press, Cleveland, OH, 1919) "degrees conferred June 12, 1918," on page 75. Personal correspondence with Tom Steman, archivist at Case Western Reserve University Archives (June 18, 2004), states that Nellie earned "an M.A. from the graduate school on 1942." On Olivenbaum see *University of Wisconsin Yearbook*, (1904): 124 and *A Detailed Record of Delta Delta Delta, 1888-1907*, eds. Amy Olgen Parmalee and Rachel Louise Fitch (Mail Print Company, 1907): 164.

⁴⁹ University of Michigan, *Supervised Correspondence Study Courses, 1938-1939* 40 (Dec. 7, 1938): 15.

⁵⁰ Virginia Gatch Markham, *A Workbook to Accompany The Road to Latin* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1935).

may be the first black woman to join the group.⁵¹

Helen's family was starting to shrink. Her father had died in 1932, her brother Edwin, who had earned his B.A. at Harvard and his D.D.S. at Northwestern University, died in 1939 at the age of 56.⁵² Her mother died the following year in 1940.⁵³ Helen was still teaching at CHS in 1943 with three other Latin teachers, Sylvia Excell, Juanita C. Thomas and Helen M. Gates, but retired not too long after, an event which Langston Hughes mentioned in his *Chicago Defender* newspaper column.⁵⁴

She began working on a biography of her father. Titled *Charles Waddell Chesnutt Pioneer of the Color Line*, the book was published in 1952 by the University of North Carolina.⁵⁵ In November of the same year Helen was at the Festival of Music at Fisk University leading a seminar with Sterling Brown about her father.⁵⁶ In 1958 she helped set up an exhibit about him at the Cleveland Public Library on the hundredth anniversary of his birth and appeared on the library's radio program "Book That Live," in June, 1958 to advertise the exhibit.⁵⁷ During these years she lost both of her sisters.⁵⁸

At some point she moved from 1337 East Boulevard N.E. into a senior living facility, the Margaret Wagner House at 2373 Euclid Heights Boulevard.⁵⁹ Earlier this year Sandra Everett who had met Helen in 1967 sent me this account:⁶⁰

"When I was a young librarian at Cleveland Public Library, I was employed in what was then a department that served those outside normal library usage, i.e. the hospitalized, the blind, the prisoners, and shut-ins. Miss Chesnutt lived at the Margaret Wagner House in Cleveland Heights and was a regular borrower of the few books in Latin that the Library owned. She read them over and over and seemed to never tire of them. One day when I visited she was so excited to tell me that Langston Hughes had sent her the book "Best Short Stories by Negro Writers" and her father's story was the first chapter. I was surprised to learn he had been her student! I do remember being shocked the day she told me about the "Short Stories" book because I had known her for over a year at that point and had no idea she considered herself to be African-American. I'm pretty sure she mentioned having written a Latin textbook but not a biography of her father. I had never heard of him but I must have "looked him up" immediately. I mostly remember her being a lovely and very proper sort of lady with white hair."

⁵¹ Helen's name is listed in "Membership List of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South," *Classical Journal* 12(June, 1917): 639. Helen, Virginia and Nellie are listed in "Membership Directory, 1935-1936," *Classical Journal* 31 (June, 1936) on pages 606, 608, and 609 respectively. Membership lists are lacking of the early years of CAMWS as is the case for the American Classical League. Until we have them no reliable conclusion can be drawn.

⁵² See "Obituary, Dr. Edwin J. Chesnutt," *Cleveland Gazette* (Oct. 7, 1939):1.

⁵³ See "Widow of Author Dies in Cleveland," *Chicago Defender* (June 29, 1940): 12; "Cleveland Social and Personal," *Cleveland Gazette* (June 29, 1940):4; "Death Takes the Widow of Famous Colored Novelist," *Negro Star Wichita Kansas* (July 12, 1940): 3.

⁵⁴ See Langston Hughes "Here to Yonder: Cleveland—A Good Town," *Chicago Defender* (May 25, 1946): 14.

⁵⁵ For reviews of the book see Gertrude Martin, "Book Reviews," *Chicago Defender* (June 29, 1940): 12 and David Tilden, "A Pioneer Negro Writer," *Herald Tribune* (Nov. 16, 1952): n.p.

⁵⁶ "Festival of Music and Art at Fisk U. April 16," *Chicago Defender* (April 5, 1952): 20. and J.A. Wadovick, "Tribute to be Paid to Pioneer Writer of Color Line," *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (April 9, 1952): 5.

⁵⁷ See "Exhibit to Honor Early Fighter on Race Rights," *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (June 18, 1958): 8.

⁵⁸ See "Beaman, Ethel C. Williams," *Evening Star Washington DC* (March 3, 1958): A-18. Dorothy died on December 29, 1954 and was buried in Lakeview Cemetery, Cleveland, Section 5, Lot 861-B. 63. See <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/78158106/dorothy-katherine-slade>

⁵⁹ On the Margaret Wagner House see <http://www.chhistory.org/People.php?PeopleContent=MargaretWagner>

⁶⁰ Personal communications with Sandra Everett (Jan. 19, 2021).

Helen died on Thursday August 7, 1969 at the Margaret Wagner House.⁶¹ Her funeral was held at Ohio's leading African American funeral company, The House of Wills. The building, which still stands in Cleveland, was very elaborate. It had a Grecian Temple and an Egyptian Slumber Room, both of which suggest a pre-Christian perspective on the soul's immortality.⁶² Helen was buried with other members of her family in Lakeview Cemetery, Cleveland, Section 5, Lot 861-B.⁶³

In January of 1881 Helen's father recorded in his diary a conversation he had had with a former slave named Robert Hill in Fayetteville.⁶⁴ Hill had been talking with John McLaughlin, a poor white man who worked as a clerk in a local store and who was curious about Chesnutt. "What kind of a fellow is this here Chesnutt? ... What kind of education has he? Does he think he's as good a white man?" Hill replied "Every bit of it, sir." And Hill then brought up the idea of "the equality of intelligence." This was beyond McLaughlin's comprehension at the time, but it speaks volumes to us today. "Equality of intelligence" was clearly the Chesnutt family's operant principle. They were - except for Edwin - a family of teachers. We should, I think, take a lesson from Helen and her family today by making that principle our own.

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⁶¹ See "Helen Chesnutt Dies; Was Teacher, Author," *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (August 8, 1969): 28.

⁶² On John Walter Wills see *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, <https://case.edu/ech/articles/w/wills-j-walter-sr>. For photos of the building's interior, see "House of Wills: Long Abandoned Cleveland Funeral Home with Fascinating Past," <https://www.cleveland.com/life-and-culture/g661-2019/10/85aeeb239f5112/house-of-wills-long-abandoned-cleveland-funeral-home-with-fascinating-past-gets-new-life-photos.html>

⁶³ See <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/74592068/helen-maria-chesnutt>

⁶⁴ Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 25.

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