

Rosina Cohen oral narrative from the Lorenzo D. Turner Collection (1932)

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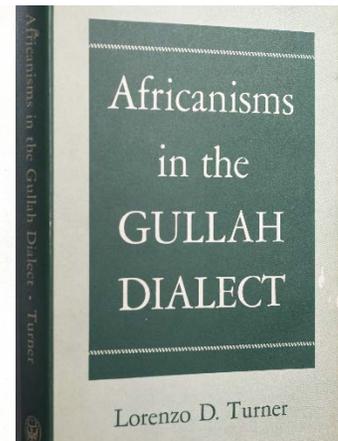
Essay by Alcione M. Amos (guest post)*



Turner, c. 1917



Turner's 100-pound recording machine



Turner's book, 1949

Dr. Lorenzo Dow Turner, the First African American Linguist

When Lorenzo Dow Turner was born in 1890, his paternal African American family was already free for four generations. His father, Rooks Turner, born in 1844, in Pasquotank County, North Carolina, could not attend school until after the Civil War. Still, in 1866, he was admitted at a school established by the Freedmen's Bureau and, even though he was already in his 20s, he had to enter first grade. By 1877, only 12 years after the Civil War, Rooks Turner had completed his college degree at Howard University and returned to Elizabeth City, North Carolina. He founded the first public school for African Americans in the eastern section of the state and a teacher's college, which would become the foundation for today's Elizabeth City State University. Later on, he became a teacher in the segregated schools of Montgomery County, Maryland, and obtained a Master's degree from Howard University in Washington, DC. Lorenzo Dow Turner went to elementary and middle school in Rockville. He attended Howard University's high school and entered college there in 1910, graduating in 1914. While in college, he dated a young beauty named Geneva Calcier Townes. He married her in 1919. Although they eventually divorced, she played an important part in the beginning of his Gullah research.

Turner received his Master's degree from Harvard in 1917. He then accepted a position to teach English at his *alma mater*, Howard University. Conscious of the need to further his education, Turner applied and was admitted in 1919 to the University of Chicago to pursue his Ph.D. Lack of money was always a factor, and he attended the courses part-time while continuing to teach at Howard. The situation was improved when Turner received a scholarship and attended school full time for the academic year 1924-25, which allowed him to graduate in 1926. He became one of the first 40 African Americans to obtain a doctorate.

Turner left his position at Howard University in 1928 and briefly published a newspaper. In 1929, he went to teach at the summer session at South Carolina State College at Orangeburg (now South Carolina State University). There, Turner heard two of his students speaking an unfamiliar language. He visited their homes on John's Island on the coast and concluded that the language that they and their neighbors spoke was not "bad English" or "baby talk," as most scholars had believed. Turner was sure it was a distinctive language with a different cadence than the English spoken by African Americans in the South and containing words that he could not understand. These first encounters with Gullah speakers put Turner on the seminal research path that defined his career.

By the fall semester of 1929, Turner was teaching at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he stayed until 1946 when he accepted an appointment at Roosevelt College in Chicago. Turner was the first African American professor to receive an appointment to a white institution. Turner stayed at Roosevelt College, later Roosevelt University, until the end of his academic career. In 1966, he had to retire due to his age, but he remained at the university as a professor emeritus until 1970, when he left because of poor health.

Turner's exposure to Gullah speakers in South Carolina in 1929 sparked his interest in undertaking a long-held desire to study the speech of formerly enslaved individuals. He then decided to pursue training in linguistics, and in the summer of 1930, he attended an institute run by the Linguistic Society of America. This connection led to an invitation to work for the Linguistic Atlas of the United States Project, which intended to map the dialects spoken in the United States. This new job led to his seminal work on Gullah and its African connections. By 1931, Turner had become the first African American member of the Linguistic Society of America. In 1932, he was awarded a grant by the American Council of Learned Societies to begin his research on Gullah.

Turner obtained a Fairchild recorder manufactured by the Recording Instrument Division of the Fairchild Aerial Camera Corporation. The recorder weighed more than one hundred pounds. It consisted of a disc-cutting device that slowly moved a cutting stylus onto the surface of an aluminum disc covered in acetate, producing exact spiral grooves. It was a record player in reverse. It produced sound recordings that could then be replayed on a phonograph. The equipment, which had been acquired by the American Council of Learned Societies for Turner's use, and, according to him, was only the third to be produced in the United States, was shipped by train to Charleston, South Carolina, where Turner was starting his research.

Reaching the Sea Islands and the people Turner wanted to interview was an adventure in itself. Turner used the tides to take him back and forth. Sometimes, the rowboat he occupied could not reach the shore, and he had to wade in. Most of the time, there was no electricity at the locations where Turner was interviewing his informants. He had to ferry them to the mainland, where the recording machine could be connected to power.

Turner obtained his interviewees' trust first because he was an African American, as they were, and second because of his courteous and engaging manner, which included the gift of tobacco, groceries, and, sometimes, small amounts of money. His subjects were so delighted to hear themselves once the discs were recorded and played back that Turner had no trouble at all in

gathering the information he wanted. Despite all the technical difficulties, Turner made recordings that have defied the distance of time and have reached us today to bring the voices, the music, and Gullah speakers' reminiscences.

Turner began his research in the Sea Islands in June of 1932 and stayed until December. He returned in the summer of 1933. He interviewed more than 50 people. Usually, Turner would spend six hours a day in each community, talking to three people for about two hours each. Turner would first fill out the standard questionnaire for the Linguistic Atlas. The questionnaire included, among others, questions about where the person was born, how long they had lived in their present location, membership in community organizations like churches and societies, school attendance, and visits to outside communities, especially larger cities. He then would move to the second phase of the research process when he would record his informants. These recordings--most of which are today housed in the Archives of Traditional Music, Indiana University--include prayers, narratives, and songs. He would then spend the evenings listening and transcribing the recordings. His first wife, Geneva, helped with these transcriptions.

It was probably during these extended daily stays in the Gullah communities that Turner was able to collect the material with which he produced his seminal work, "Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect," first published in 1949. After its first edition, "Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect," elicited some controversy. It was well-received by many academics but more skeptically by others. The fact that it has withstood the test of time attests to its importance. It had two more editions, one by the University of Michigan Press in 1974 and the other by the University of South Carolina Press in 2002. It is a standard reference work for creolists--linguists who study creole languages--to this day.

Today Dr. Lorenzo Dow Turner papers and recordings are held at several locations. The Archives of Traditional Music, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, mainly hold the recordings he made in the Sea Islands in the 1930s, Brazil in the 1940s, and Africa in the 1950s.

<https://libraries.indiana.edu/dow-turner>

Some of his papers, spanning the years 1915-1973, are held at the Africana Manuscripts Collection, Melville J. Herskovits Library, Northwestern University, IL.

<https://findingaids.library.northwestern.edu/repositories/4/resources/851>

More papers spanning 1895-1972 and all of his photographic collections are held at the Archives of the Anacostia Community Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

<https://anacostia.si.edu/collection/archives/sova-acma-06-7>

A much smaller collection of papers and photographs spanning 1906-1985 is held by the Amistad Research Center, Tulane University.

<http://amistadresearchcenter.tulane.edu/archon/index.php?p=collections/findingaid&id=294&q=Lorenzo+dia+turner>

Alcione M. Amos is a Museum Curator at the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum. In 2010, she curated an exhibit titled "Word Shout Song" on the life and work of Dr. Lorenzo Dow Turner. The exhibit was displayed at the Museum and then traveled in the United States. Later,

the exhibit was translated in Portuguese and, under the US Department of State's auspices, traveled to Brazil. She has also written articles and blogs about Dr. Turner's work.

Photo details:

Photo 1 - Lorenzo Dow Turner when he received a Master's degree in English from Harvard University in 1917. Lorenzo Dow Turner Papers, Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution. *Gift of Lois Turner Williams.*

Photo 2 - Turner 100-pound recording machine, Fairchild Recording Instrument, Fairchild Aerial Camera Corporation. The recorder had to be transported to different locations where electricity was available and where the recordings were being made.

Courtesy Lorenzo Dow Turner Collection, Africana Manuscripts, Melville J. Herskovits Library, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL

Photo 3 – “Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect,” first edition, 1949

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.