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## Charlotte Rhone: First African American Registered Nurse

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### Abstract

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# Charlotte Rhone: First African American Registered Nurse

*By NCNA Members Olivia Jenkins, RN, MSN, and **Phoebe Pollitt, RN, PhD**, Nursing History Council Chair and Vice Chair*

New Bern, North Carolina, can proudly claim to be the home of the first African American Registered Nurse in the United States. Charlotte Rhone was born on December 16, 1874, to John and Henrietta Williams Rhone.

In the late 1890s, Rhone decided she wanted to become a nurse, but none of North Carolina's six white hospital schools of nursing would accept African American students or employ African American nurses. In fact, most segregated hospitals in the state would not accept African American patients, even in life-threatening situations. In 1898, Rhone enrolled in the Freedmen's Hospital School of Nursing in Washington, D.C. She studied hard, did well, and graduated on May 7, 1901. After graduating, Rhone returned to New Bern and practiced private duty nursing, the most common way nurses earned a living until the Great Depression of the 1930s. She was the only North Carolina nurse to attend the founding meeting of the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses in Washington DC in 1908.

In 1922, New Bern suffered a huge fire that destroyed almost one third of the city. Rhone was hired by the county as a welfare worker (now called social worker) to care for the physical, psychological, and social needs of African Americans affected by the fire. She spent the rest of her career as a social worker, using her nursing skills to provide holistic care for the people of Craven County. Rhone died in 1963.