

AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLECTION

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The Legacy of the Rose Family Exposed in a New Book

For all the historical analysis of the hardships of the Great Depression of the 1930s, very little is focused on the life of African Americans in Pittsburgh. Outside of the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the volumes of studies on Jazz and Negro League baseball, the life experiences of African Americans are rarely a topic. The Heinz History Center recently published a book, *Heart and Soul: The Remarkable Courtship and Marriage of Josh and Virginia Craft Rose* based on the letters of a couple who attended the University of Pittsburgh in the 1930s. The story follows the relationship and marriage of Joshua R. Rose and Virginia Dupree Craft from their first meeting in 1929 to Josh's death in 1987 and offers insight into two people who impacted communities across the country.

The letters between Josh and Virginia frame the love and admiration of two highly educated members of one of black America's distinguished families. The 53-year marriage that produced three children was also surrounded by an extended family that included historic names: Craft, Trotter, Dammond, DeCosta, and Jefferson. Their life together would take them from Pittsburgh to New York City, and New Jersey to Oakland, California. It

was a marriage between a working-class youth of Pittsburgh's Hill District and the daughter of the heir to one of the most daring freedom seeking escapees from American bondage.

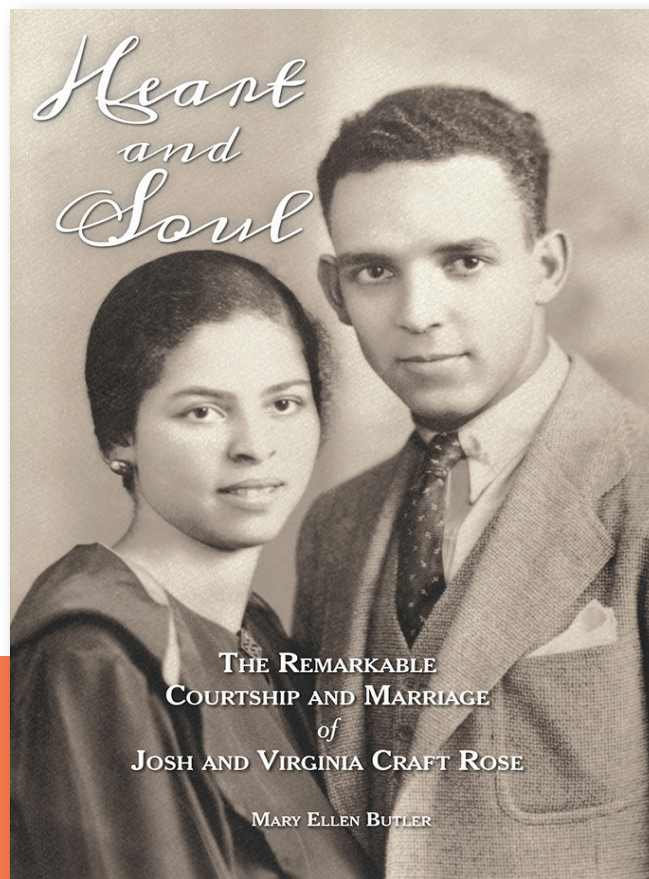
The Craft lineage begins with the marriage of William and Ellen Craft, a union born in American slavery. Ellen Craft was the slave of her half-sister in Macon, Georgia. Their father, Major James Smith, owned a plantation in Clinton, Georgia, and used his power as slave master to impregnate his female slaves. Ellen was the half-sister and slave to Eliza Smith Collins who was married to Dr. Robert Collins. In addition to owning Ellen, the Collins' also contracted for the slave William Craft, a carpenter.

William and Ellen met, fell in love, and married — but were not allowed to live together because they were owned by different families. Their solution to find love and togetherness was to conceive an escape plan unlike any other known from the story of American slavery. William knew all too well that the black family unit in slavery was tenuous. His own mother and sister had been sold away splintering his family. Under America's chattel slavery, the slave master held the rights to the enslaved person's children and William did not want that to happen to he and Ellen when they became parents.

Because of her mixed-race appearance, Ellen could pass for white. They devised an escape in plain

sight of the world; she would disguise herself as a male slave owner and her husband would play her servant. They were careful to have clothes for Ellen that were typical for slave holder aristocracy and their mannerisms had to conform to the attitudes of slave and owner. Ellen was careful not to show any personal affection for William for fear that their plan would fail.

In December 1848, Ellen and William traveled by train from bondage near Macon, Georgia, to Savannah. From Savannah, they traveled by steamboat to Charleston, South Carolina, then Wilmington, North Carolina, then by train to Petersburg and to Richmond, Virginia, then to Washington, D.C., then Baltimore, and on to freedom in Philadelphia, where they arrived on Christmas Day — a journey that took eight days. By 1848 Philadelphia had become the capital of abolitionist activism. William Still was operating at the Anti-Slavery Society and



A portrait of the young couple in the 1930s graces the cover of *Heart and Soul*, which is available in the History Center Museum Shop and online at Amazon.



Josh Rose, Holy Cross, Pittsburgh, 1928.

Josh and Virginia on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, 1953.



A graduation portrait of Virginia Craft from Sumner High School, St. Louis, Missouri, 1929.

All HHC Detre L&A, Joshua R. and Virginia Craft Rose Family Collection.

helping freedom seekers find refuge once they arrive in the city. One of Still's compatriots was Robert Purvis, president of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society who helped the Crafts find a safe home in Philadelphia. Once in Philadelphia, the abolitionists there convinced the Crafts to journey to Boston instead of Canada, their original destination.

The Crafts lived in Boston for two years until the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act

the Crafts travelled to Portland, Maine, for passage to England. This was the option that many of the formerly enslaved had taken. The migration of freedom seekers extended to Canada, Central America, England, and Africa. Thousands of freemen and the formerly enslaved found freedom outside of the country. The Crafts would have their children in England and return to the U.S. South — of all places — after the Civil War.

brought Georgia slave hunters to the city and threatened their freedom. Boston Marshalls held a warrant for the Craft's arrest. It was decided that the best option for them now was to move on to England. Fearful of being apprehended if they traveled

by boat from Boston Harbor,

The progeny of William and Ellen Craft would include many of the noted families of black history. The Craft's grandson, Henry (Virginia Craft Rose's father) would marry Bessie Trotter, the daughter of James Monroe Trotter. James was a Civil War veteran of the Massachusetts 55th Regiment and father of William Monroe Trotter, publisher of the *Boston Guardian* newspaper. He was an opponent of Booker T. Washington's accommodationist ideals, a noted compatriot of W.E.B. Du Bois, and co-founder of the black civil rights organization, Niagara Movement. Virginia's sister, Ellen (named for her great-grandmother Ellen Craft) would marry Donald Dammond, the nephew of the University of Pittsburgh's first African American graduate William Hunter Dammond.


Joshua R. Rose was born in Lexington, Virginia, in 1906. Snuggled near the George Washington and Thomas Jefferson National Forest and west of Charlottesville and Lynchburg, Lexington is in the heart of the Old Dominion with a long history of slavery, founding fathers, and the Confederacy. Around the age of 10, Josh and his family migrated to Pittsburgh. This was a mid-WWI migration for the Rose family. They settled in the Hill District and Josh attended Hill District schools, graduating in 1926 from Schenley High School. He worked at the Centre Avenue YMCA after high school and met his new boss, Henry Craft, and his daughter Virginia in 1929. Josh moved from the Centre Avenue YMCA in Pittsburgh to the Montclair, New Jersey, colored YMCA where he worked from 1935 until 1939 while completing requirements in 1937 for a degree from Pitt.

When Joshua R. Rose and Virginia Craft began their courtship in the 1930s, both had a lineage that strengthened their determination to succeed. By 1932, Virginia's father, Henry, had been offered the director position at the 135th Street Colored YMCA branch in Harlem, New York. He moved his family

there which gave rise to frequent letter writing communication between Josh and Virginia. Before Henry Craft left to assume leadership of the largest Colored YMCA in the country, he promoted Josh to full-time assistant boys' work secretary and physical director. Part of Josh's duties was to manage the Indian Hill Camp for YMCA children. One of the counselors at the Camp was Donald Dammond, future brother-in-law of Josh and Virginia. Three hundred and seventy-five miles may have separated the two young lovers but writing letters back and forth kept the relationship going. From 1929 to 1934, Josh would not only write letters to Virginia but also travel to New York City from Pittsburgh in his car, bringing along his friend and fellow Pitt alum Everett Utterback as co-pilot for the long drive.

Virginia preserved 153 of the letters the couple exchanged in a pillowcase for 77 years. After her death in 2011, her daughter Mary Ellen Butler came to possess the letters and eventually wrote the book, *Heart and Soul*, about her parent's relationship and marriage. The letters are more than just love letters. Their contextual information reveals a time and place in black Depression-era Pittsburgh that

can scarcely be found in any other primary source. Josh and Virginia discussed not only their relationship and feelings but also events happening around the city. From politics, sports, and social activities to friendships, work, school, and community. Within these letters, we learn of Joshua Rose's struggles to financially make ends meet to support his educational endeavors, care for his mother and sister, as well as plant the seeds of success that would support his future bride.

Mary Ellen Butler, a retired journalist, used the letters to tell the story of her parents' lives, and she recently donated the collection of letters, photographs, awards, and clippings to the Heinz History Center. Now future generations will have the opportunity to read the primary documents that open the window into the word of Depression-era black Pittsburgh. 

Order your copy of *Heart and Soul* today at shop.heinzhistorycenter.org

SOURCES: HHC Detre L&A, Joshua R. and Virginia Craft Rose Family Collection. Butler, Mary Ellen. *Heart and Soul* unpublished manuscript.

LOGO: *Spirit Form* Freedom Corner Monument, Pittsburgh, Pa., © artist Carlos F. Peterson.



Smithsonian Connection

Patent model of a railroad car for transporting petroleum, c. 1866.

James and Amos Densmore, founders of Densmore Oil Company near Meadville, designed and patented the first practical rail car for transporting petroleum. It solved the problem of how to get oil from the field to the refinery in bulk without leaking a significant amount of product. It also considerably reduced the price of shipping by eliminating individual barrels. Modes of oil transportation evolved quickly during the oil boom of the 1860s and the industry soon moved away from the Densmore vertical vats to horizontal riveted iron tanks and eventually to pipelines that carried oil hundreds of miles at much lower cost and risk.

Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, L2016.9.1.

Photo by Nicole Lauletta.

