

## The New York Times

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# *Willie Lee Rose, Historian of Reconstruction, Dies at 91*

By **Sam Roberts**

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Willie Lee Rose, a historian who upended the scholarly consensus of her time by shifting the primary blame for the failure of Reconstruction after the Civil War from freed slaves and Northern interlopers to irresolute federal officials, died on June 20 in Baltimore. She was 91.

Her death was confirmed by her niece and closest survivor, Vickie Sherertz.

Before being incapacitated by a stroke in 1978, when she was 51, Dr. Rose — a protégé of the eminent Civil War historian C. Vann Woodward — taught at the University of Virginia and Johns Hopkins University and became a prominent advocate for women who aspired to teach history.

In 1970, she concluded in a report commissioned by the American Historical Association that colleges and universities should hire more women as faculty members, arguing that this would coincide with “the permanent interest of the historical profession.”

Dr. Rose’s greatest legacy was her recasting of the prevailing view of Reconstruction, when federal troops occupied the defeated South and a slave-owning society was grudgingly adapting to emancipation.

“She looked at the ground level at how the end of slavery unleashed a tremendous set of conflicts over what should follow,” the Columbia University historian Eric Foner, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book “The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery,” said by email.

He added, “Her book ‘Rehearsal for Reconstruction’ depicted Northern teachers, the Army, Treasury Department agents, Northern cotton planters and the former slaves themselves, battling over access to land, control of labor, access to education and political power.”

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Reviewing “Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment” (1964) for The New York Times Book Review, the Amherst professor Henry Steele Commager wrote: “In the rewriting of history, which is continuous, historians are coming increasingly to emphasize not the sufferings of

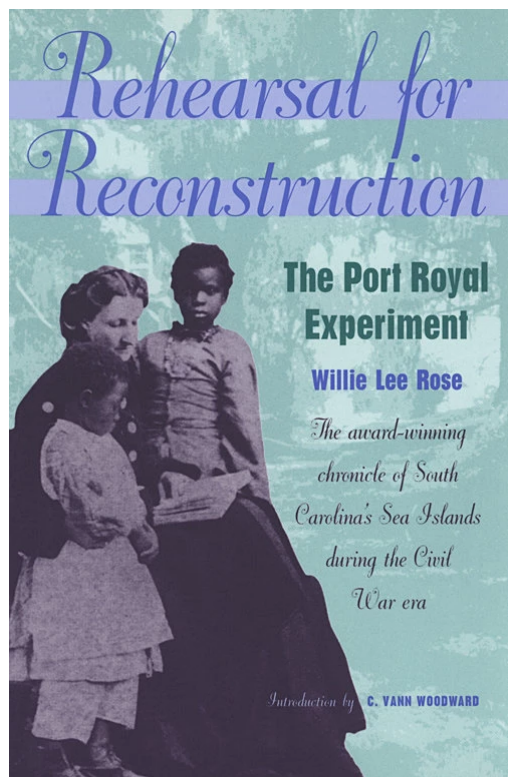
Southern whites but the betrayal of Southern Negroes as perhaps the most significant feature of the Reconstruction era.

“That betrayal,” he continued, “is commonly acknowledged, or confessed, in general terms; it is one of the many merits of Willie Lee Rose’s narrative that it provides us with a case study set forth with careful detail. It is an added merit that she does not pronounce easy moral judgments but is content to explain how the betrayal came about.”

In that book, Dr. Rose explored the experience of 10,000 blacks in Port Royal, S.C., who were freed early in the Civil War when a Union flotilla captured the city in 1861 and plantation owners fled. She argued that even before the war ended — before it started, in fact — black people had already been shaping what the nation would look like after slavery.

This experiment in emancipation had mixed results — an influx of altruistic volunteers known as Gideon’s Band, the establishment of schools for the freed slaves, their conscription by the Union Army, and an economy that was self-sustaining but also undermined by capricious government decisions about distributing land — all of which foreshadowed the conflicts that would doom Reconstruction after the war.

“Rehearsal for Reconstruction,” Professor Commager wrote, “revealed not a deliberate decision to repudiate the Negro but the absence of any sense of obligation and any imagination where the Negro was concerned.”



A later edition of Dr. Rose’s award-winning book, originally published by Bobbs-Merrill in 1964.

Dr. Rose focused on what she described as “the folly of the federal government’s granting voting rights without providing for national assistance to education, thrusting upon the impoverished South the responsibility for a public school system that it had not possessed in its flourishing days.”

“The North had plainly concluded that in granting the franchise, the national obligation to the freedmen had been fulfilled,” she concluded. “The North was not so much indifferent as tired, and the nation seized simple excuses that left the Northern conscience easier.”

“Rehearsal for Reconstruction” won two prestigious awards from the Society of American Historians: the Allan Nevins Prize for best dissertation and the Francis Parkman Prize for the best work of American history.

Dr. Rose was born Willie Lee Nichols on May 18, 1927, in Bedford, Va., to Grady and Willie (Chafin) Nichols. Her father owned a farm supply store.

She graduated in 1947 with a bachelor’s degree in history from Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Va. (then a women’s affiliate of the University of Virginia and now the University of Mary Washington). In 1949 she married William G. Rose. He died in 1985.

She taught high school English and history in Maryland before earning a doctorate in history at Johns Hopkins in 1962. In 1965 she was hired as a history professor at the University of Virginia, where she worked until 1973, when she returned to Johns Hopkins as a professor.

Her advocacy for women in academia was notably expressed in 1970, when she was chairwoman of an American Historical Association commission that cited in a report “the necessity of vigorous steps to remove existing disabilities and to establish a genuine parity for women historians.”

In 1991, the association presented her with its Troyer Steele Anderson Prize, awarded every 10 years to the person judged to have “made the most outstanding contribution to the advancement of the purposes of the association.”

In 1977, succeeding Professor Commager and Professor Woodward among others, Dr. Rose became the first woman to be appointed the Harold Vyvyan Harmsworth visiting professor of American history at Oxford University.

She published a collection of letters, diaries and other ephemera in 1976 titled “Documentary History of Slavery in North America.”

Two years later, after her stroke, Dr. Rose gave up teaching but continued to edit a collection of her essays, “Slavery and Freedom,” published in 1982.

Reviewing that book in *The Times Book Review*, Robert F. Durden of Duke University characterized Dr. Rose as “a masterly practitioner of the ironic and compassionate approach to history.” She had concluded, he wrote, that slavery was somewhat less brutal in the 19th century than it had been in the 17th and 18th.

Professor Durden was particularly admiring of her pithiness.

“In one sentence,” he wrote, Dr. Rose “untangles some of the most puzzling problems about the antebellum South and its peculiar institution: ‘Still another characteristic of a domesticated regime was that plantations less harmful to the body (of the slave) could be more afflicting to the soul.’ ”

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