



# **A Mysterious Life and Calling: From Slavery to Ministry in South Carolina (Wisconsin Studies in Autobiography)**

*Charlotte S. Riley*

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Preacher, teacher, and postmistress, Charlotte Levy Riley was born into slavery but became a popular evangelist after emancipation. Although several nineteenth-century accounts by black preaching women in the northern states are known, this is the first discovery of such a memoir in the South.

Born in 1839 in Charleston, South Carolina, Riley was taught to read, write, and sew despite laws forbidding black literacy. Raised a Presbyterian, she writes of her conversion at age fourteen to the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, embracing its ecstatic worship and led by her own spiritual visions. Her memoir is revelatory on many counts, including life in urban Charleston before and after emancipation, her work as a preacher at multiracial revivals, the rise of African American civil servants in the Reconstruction era, and her education and development as a licensed female minister in a patriarchal church.

Crystal J. Lucky, who discovered Riley's forgotten book in the library archives at Wilberforce University in Ohio, provides an introduction and notes on events, society, and religious practice in the antebellum era and during the Civil War and Reconstruction, and places *A Mysterious Life and Calling* in the context of other spiritual autobiographies and slave narratives.

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