

Trailblazing Women Who Called Montclair Home

CONTRIBUTED BY JANE M. ELIASOF, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MONTCLAIR HISTORY CENTER

MONTCLAIR HAS ITS SHARE of famous people. This year, in honor of the centennial anniversary celebrating women's right to vote, we'll pay tribute to several women who called Montclair home at some point in their lives and who broke through barriers in their respective fields. This month, we highlight Lillian Gilbreth and Althea Gibson.

ALTHEA GIBSON: ATHLETE

Two years before the Great Depression, Althea Gibson was born to Daniel and Annie Bell Gibson, sharecroppers in South Carolina. In 1930, when Althea was three years old, the family moved to Harlem.

Their apartment was located on 143rd Street. During the day the street was blocked off to traffic to allow children to play. She learned paddle tennis, becoming the New York City's Women's Paddle Tennis Champion when she was just 12 years old in 1939.

Two years later, she began to play tennis at the Harlem River Tennis Courts and a year later won a tournament sponsored by the American Tennis Association, an African American organization. She continued to play in that league, winning championship after championship. She earned a sports scholarship to Florida A&M, graduating in 1953. Because of the restrictions against African American players at tennis clubs and organizations, her career was stymied. She considered leaving the sport entirely and joining the military.

In 1950, tennis pro Alice Marble wrote an article in American Lawn Tennis urging the powers that be to allow African American players, particularly players with Althea's talent, to

compete in all tournaments. In 1950, she was the first African American woman to play in the US National Championship (now the US Open).

In 1951, Althea was the first African American player to be invited to compete at Wimbledon. One year later, in 1952, she ranked in the top ten of all women's US tennis players. In 1953, she was #7 in the US. In 1956, she won the French Open. In 1957 and 1958, she won the US National Championship and Wimbledon. In 1959, she turned professional after winning 56 singles and doubles championships.

Despite her talent, throughout the 1950s, Althea continued to be faced with discrimination. Hotels refused to book rooms for her. She had to change in the car because she was not allowed in locker rooms. One restaurant even refused to take her reservation for a luncheon in her honor! "I tried to feel responsibilities to Negroes, but that was a burden on my shoulders. Now I'm playing tennis to please them, not me."

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, she played matches before Harlem Globetrotter games, released an album *Althea Gibson Sings*, and wrote her memoir *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody*. She also played Lukey, an enslaved worker, in the movie *The Horse Soldiers*, only after she fought to play the part without a demeaning dialect. She continued to break

barriers in 1964 when she became the first African American woman to join the Ladies Professional Golf Association.

In 1976, she became the New Jersey Commissioner of Athletics. She also served on the State Athletics Control Board until 1988 and the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness until 1992.

In 1965, Althea married William Darben, the brother of her



friend and fellow tennis player Rosemary Darben. They lived at 69 Pleasant Way in Montclair. After 11 years of marriage, they divorced. Several years later, she married Sydney Llewellyn but that marriage lasted only five years. Althea died in 2003 in East Orange. She is buried at Rosedale Cemetery, less than a quarter-mile from her home in Montclair, with her first husband William.

In 2012, a bronze statue of Althea was unveiled at Branch Brook Park. In 2013, the Post Service printed an Althea Gibson commemorative stamp. She was the first female athlete with a stamp in the Postal Service's Black Heritage series.

LILLIAN GILBRETH: ENGINEER

Born to William Moller and Annie Delger in 1878, Lillian Gilbreth was the oldest of eight children in their family in Oakland, California. She began school when she was nine years old and clearly enjoyed it because she wanted to continue her education at the university level. Her parents, not unlike many in the 19th century, did not see a need for her to go to college. She fought against them and won - as long as she went to the University of California Berkeley so she could live at home. She graduated with a degree in literature and wanted to pursue her Masters degree at Columbia University in New York. Far from home, Lillian was miserable and returned to UC Berkeley to complete her Masters in English Literature.

On a grand tour of Europe following graduation, she met Frank Bunker Gilbreth, ten years her senior, and married him in 1904. Frank was a well-known builder in Boston and was becoming known for his work on discovering the "one best way" to accomplish tasks through motion studies. In today's parlance, his work would be known as efficiency studies.

Lillian and Frank were partners in work as well as in their domestic life. Lillian had the education and writing skills to write and publish their studies. With her at his side, he gave up his building work and focused on improving efficiency in the workplace. Their reputation as management consultants - and their family - continued to grow. With the help of Frank's mother and several domestic workers, Lillian was able to devote a significant amount of time to their work.

Lillian earned her Ph.D. from Brown University with a dissertation titled "The Psychology of Management" in 1915. Whereas Frank was most interested in processes that improved efficiency, Lillian was interested in how workers responded to the work. Together they looked at the most efficient ways to lay bricks, make soap, wash dishes, and brush teeth, to name a few.

To be closer to New York City, they moved their family from

Rhode Island to 68 Eagle Rock Way in Montclair. They applied their efficiency skills to their home, developing the "Gilbreth System," which was immortalized in the book and movie *Cheaper by the Dozen*.

Frank died in 1924 in the Lackawanna Train station on his way to New York City. They had been scheduled to speak in Europe shortly after his death and Lillian, realizing the business was now in her hands and knowing that she, as a woman, had to prove she was up to the task, boarded a ship just days after his death to attend the conference.

After his death, Lillian continued to consult, research, and write. She taught at Purdue University, the Newark College of Engineering, and the University of Wisconsin. She began to apply their motion studies and management ideas to the home. She introduced the concept of the "work triangle" in the kitchen, the foot-pedal trashcan, and the egg keeper and butter tray on refrigerator doors.

Lillian Gilbreth was a trailblazer in the engineering world. She was the first woman elected to the National Academy of Engineers, the second woman elected to the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, and the first woman to receive the Hoover Award, which is given by five engineering organizations recognizing "great, unselfish, non-technical services by engineers to humanity."

She is included in Who's Who in American Women, Notable American Women, and American Men of Science.

The home where Lillian and Frank lived at 68 Eagle Rock Way is no longer there. Her contributions to science, however, have withstood the test of time. Lillian passed away on January 2, 1972. In 1984, Lillian M. Gilbreth was recognized by the U.S. Postal Service with a commemorative stamp in the Great Americans series. ■



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