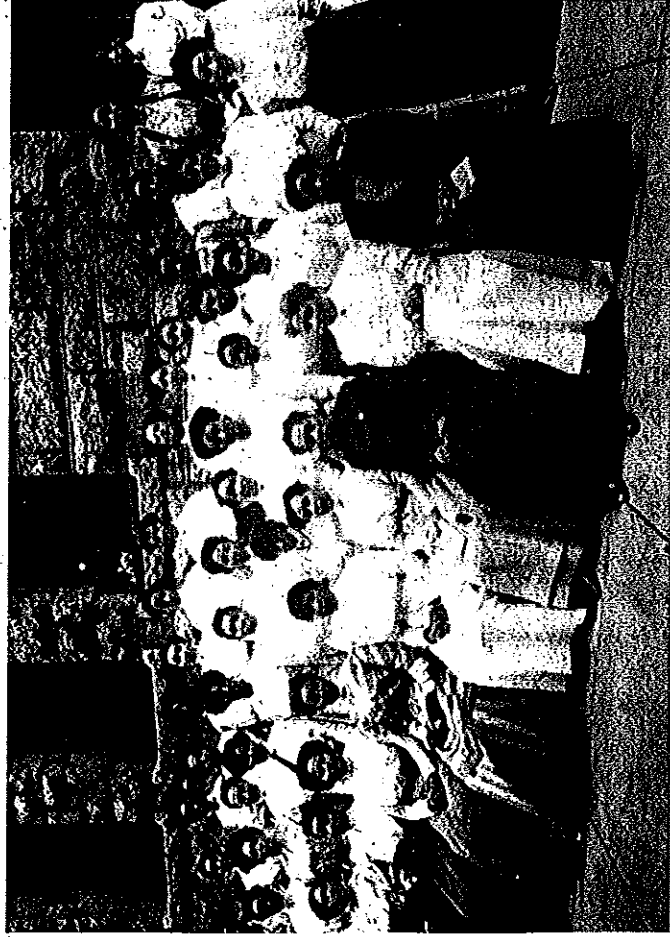


Profiles in Meriden's Black History Martha M. Franklin, Part 2



1909 NACGN Convention in Boston. Martha Franklin is 4th from right in the first row. Photo use courtesy of the Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

None of the Meriden homes Martha Franklin's family lived in are standing today but one. And that home, 63 Cherry Street, may not have seen much of Martha, who was pursuing a nursing career during a crippling economic depression and living in one of the most vibrant black neighborhoods in the world - West 135th St. in N.Y.C. during the Harlem Renaissance. Martha's mother, Mary Gauson Franklin, lived at 63 Cherry St. from 1923 - 1933. She was at the end of a long life of hard work, some of it doing laundry for Martha Jeffrey, a woman of color and successful businesswoman. Daughter Florence came home to take care of her for four years ('29 - '33). The two moved to New Haven in 1933, and Mary Franklin died a year later, at age 86.

Florence W. Franklin graduated from Meriden High School in 1888 from a class of six students, the only student of color in her class. The *Meriden Daily Republican* reported she passed the teachers exam in New York in 1891, and had begun to teach there. (MDR, 10/5/1891, p.1) There were opportunities in New York for Florence to teach that were not available to her here - Meriden's first teachers of color were honored at a Black History Celebration on February 14th, 2004, at Parker Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church; those first teachers of color began teaching in Meriden in the 1950s and 60s. By the depression years, Florence was living in New Haven. Her obituary (1/2/1960), in the *New Haven Journal-Courier*, described her work as a cafeteria supervisor in the New Haven public schools, as an active member of the Dixwell Avenue Congregational Church, the Neighborhood Reading Circle, and the Twentieth Century Club. She was 91 years old. Her sister Martha, founder of the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses, was 89 or 90 years of age and able to ensure proper death notices for Florence.

Sadly, Martha M. Franklin's death in New Haven on September 26th, 1968 at age 98 was to pass with only a brief notice in the *New Haven Register*. It is to be hoped she was one of the 21 individuals who received citations in 1951 at the ceremony held in New York City to mark the formal end of the organization Martha had founded on August 25th, 1908. The *New York Times* covered that event in an article entitled "Negro Nurse's Group Disbands Near Goal of 42-year Effort to attain Integration."

Upcoming Submission Deadlines

April Issue

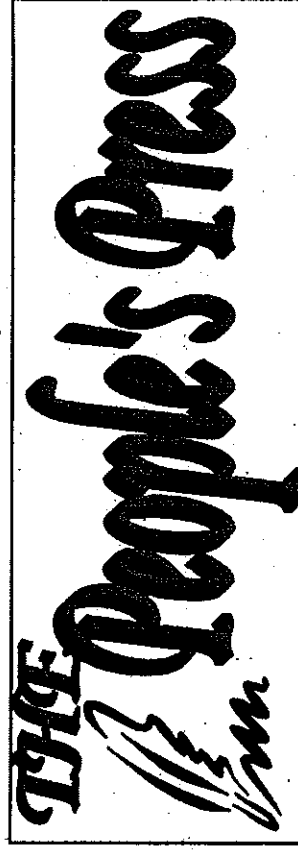
Friday, March 26th

Early-Mid May

Monday, April 26th

There are several ways to make a submission.

1. Email to peoplespress@peoplespressnews.com
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Call 203 235-9333 if you have any questions.

(1/27/1951, p. 9) Mrs. Jackie Robinson, nurse and wife of the Brooklyn Dodger team member who broke the color line in baseball, chaired the sponsor's committee for the dinner.

Martha Franklin lived in Meriden during her early childhood and young adulthood (1875 - 1906). She graduated from the Meriden High School in 1890 from a class of 31, the only person of color in her class. The graduation ceremonies were held at the First Congregational Church, where Martha gave a prophetic speech entitled "What Next?" The Negro Handbook of 1946-47 listed only six nursing schools in Connecticut that admitted black and white students. What was next for Martha, wishing a nursing education in 1890, was to find a nursing school that would accept a student of color. Connecticut nursing schools remained all white until at least the mid-1920s. Described in Adah B. Thom's "Pathfinders, A History of the Progress of the Colored Graduate Nurses" as "a woman of keen vision, of much initiative and of an unusual amount of executive ability and determination," Martha did just that and graduated as again the only person of color in her class from the Woman's Hospital in Philadelphia in 1897. Again, the same discrimination and apartheid held Martha back from obtaining nursing work other than private duty nursing in Connecticut. Her nursing career, apart from and perhaps because of her work with the NACGN, blossomed in an African-American hospital in New York City, Lincoln Hospital, where she found the opportunity to do post-graduate work circa 1920. She subsequently took graduate courses at Columbia University, and worked as a public school nurse in New York City. Slowly she is beginning to receive the recognition due to her as the founder of an organization that broke down racial barriers in the American nursing profession.

The NACGN merged with the American Nursing Association in 1951 after years of putting pressure on that and other all white nursing institutions. Martha Franklin was inducted into the ANA's Hall of Fame in 1976. The web site for the University of Pennsylvania (nursing history and education) contains a moving story entitled "Etched in Stone." Rita Beatty, a volunteer at UPENN's Center for the Study of Nursing, realized Martha M. Franklin's name had not been added to the family tombstone at Walnut Grove Cemetery in Meriden. Through her efforts, on June 13th, 1998, Chi Eta Phi Sorority, Inc. of Hartford placed a commemorative plaque on Martha's grave. The Chi Chapter's Black History Committee of Hartford represented the sorority. Although there was apparently no media coverage of the event, then mayor Joseph Marinan remembered it as a day the rain poured down, and that June 13th, 1998 was officially proclaimed "Martha Minerva Franklin Day" in Meriden. After the graveside ceremony, participants gathered at Parker Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church. "Etched in Stone" contains one unfortunate error - it stated: "The city of Meriden recently named a scholarship in Franklin's honor and will be awarded annually to a high school graduate who articulates to a nursing school." In reality, the scholarship was given only the one time in 1998.

Volunteer Rita Beatty was one of those who traveled all the way to Meriden from Philadelphia for the ceremony. She read a "sketch of Franklin's life" - the initial papers she had run across at UPENN were biographical documents by nurse educator Althea T. Davis. Davis published "Early Black American Leaders in Nursing - Architects for Integration and Equality" in 1991, an outstanding resource on Martha Franklin and the NACGN. Davis also wrote the entry for Martha Franklin featured in "American National Biography," a reference book which is available at the Meriden Library. Web sites that feature Martha Franklin include the ANA Hall of Fame and the African-American Registry. (NACGN)

Althea Davis' "Early Black American Leaders in Nursing" featured the illustration reprinted in this article with permission from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. She identified Martha Franklin as the fourth woman from the right in the front row. Davis' book studies the work of three early members of the NACGN. Adah Thom is seated to the left of Martha Franklin and Eliza Mahoney, the 1st black graduate nurse in America, is between Martha and Adah in the row directly behind them. The picture was taken at the 1st NACGN Convention held in Boston in 1909. The National Medical Association, a black physician's organization, was meeting there as well and had extended its hand in support of the newly organized NACGN.

Martha served as president of the NACGN in the years 1908 and 1909. She presided over the 1910 convention in Philadelphia. Although nominated for president at the 1911 convention in Washington, D.C., she apparently felt someone else should take over and "refused all nominations." She was honorary president of the NACGN for life and also historian. One of her best friends in her elderly years was Dr. Ernest Saunders, founder of the Afro-American Historical Society of New Haven (Davis, pgs. 76 - 90).

The last chapter of Davis' "Early Black American Leaders in Nursing" is entitled "Implications for the Future." She observed, among other things, that nurses are no longer required to take History of Nursing courses during their training. We live in a time in which civil rights are increasingly viewed as "political" in nature. Disparities in medical care in this country for people of color are, however, well documented, and the need for medical personnel to be "culturally competent" is certainly recognized. The story of Martha Franklin's and the NACGN's struggle for African-American equality is an integral part of American history. When a community, nation or institution denies, omits, or ignores the struggle for African-American freedom it makes it more difficult for all of us to face the challenges in front of us. It will be what we do with the history of Martha Franklin that will define, for us, what is next.

Written by:

Colleen Cyr, member of the Afro-American Historical Genealogical Society and historian for the Meriden-Wallingford branch of the NAACP



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