

5

Ora Washington

*The First Black Female
Athletic Star*

PAMELA GRUNDY

On a now-forgotten day in the mid-1910s, a young African American woman stepped off a train car, and on to the bustling streets of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As Ora Washington gathered her belongings and set off to stay at an aunt's home, she likely attracted little notice. The Great Migration was underway, and black southerners had become a dime a dozen in Philadelphia, pouring into the city by the tens of thousands in search of work and of some respite from rising racial oppression. Washington, arriving from rural Virginia, was just one more.

But there was far more to Ora Washington than met the eye. In Philadelphia, she found not only a job, but an outlet for an extraordinary set of athletic gifts. By the mid-1920s, the young Virginian had become one of the brightest stars on a growing African American tennis circuit. By the 1930s, she was the nation's first full-fledged black female sports star, dominating not only black women's tennis, but basketball as well. No African American woman had ever played the way she did. Black newspapers across the country dubbed her "Queen Ora," describing her as "brilliant," "peerless," and "inimitable."¹

"No one who ever saw her play could forget her," recalled one admirer, "nor could anyone who met her."²

Washington's fame, however, proved short-lived. Her career stretched from the mid-1920s into the mid-1940s, ending just as many racial barriers in American sports began to crumble. After World War II, a hopeful black public focused much of its attention on a new generation of racial pioneers, barrier breakers such as Jackie Robinson, Althea Gibson, and Wilma Rudolph. Stars of the Jim Crow era faded out of view. In 1963, when veteran sportswriter A. S. "Doc" Young profiled Washington for his

book *Negro Firsts in Sports*, he termed her “virtually an unknown name.” A private person, Washington herself rarely talked about her achievements. “She wasn’t a person to tell you too much,” recalled nephew Bernard Childs. “She would tell you some things, some parts of her career. . . . Older people might have known a little bit, but we didn’t.” When she passed away, in May 1971, her death attracted little notice.³

In many ways, Ora Washington remains an enigma. Photographs show a tall, light-skinned woman with a square jaw, a quietly serious expression, and a sharply incised set of muscles. Descriptions of her play make clear that she possessed enormous natural talent, backed by a keen sense of strategy and a fierce competitive drive. But she left no memoir. The friends and family who knew her best have passed away. The reporters who rhapsodized over points scored and games won rarely dipped below the surface to chronicle what she thought of her life and accomplishments.

Still, even in fragmentary, enigmatic form, hers is an emblematic story. Washington belonged to a remarkable group of working-class black women who seized on the opportunities created by the Great Migration, traveling from the rural south to the urban north and pioneering careers as businesswomen, evangelists, blues and gospel singers, even airplane pilots. Her triumphs point to the remarkable fortitude these women possessed and to the family and community resources on which they drew. The obstacles she faced make clear how taxing these struggles were. Together, they tell a story at once sobering and inspiring, about human potential both thwarted and achieved.

Ora Washington blazed her own trail. She was born at the close of the nineteenth century, into a world where female athletic stardom was not even a far-fetched dream. Her parents—James Thomas “Tommy” Washington and Laura Young Washington—lived on a family farm amid the gentle hills of Virginia’s Caroline County, about halfway between Richmond and Washington, D.C. In the small, rural community of File, farming was the main occupation, and the Washington’s nine children—Ora was number five—lived lives focused on home and family, moving between the fields, the two-room File school, and Jerusalem Baptist Church, which had been founded by former slaves in 1866.

The Washingtons had escaped the fate of most of the South’s African Americans, who were forced to eke out a meager living as sharecroppers,

laboring for others in the region's massive and debilitating cotton economy. File was home to a cluster of black families who owned their own farms, their good fortune likely due to the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad, which laid a trunk line through the county in 1836. In the years after the Civil War, a local historian once noted, the railroad proved a ready customer for cordwood and railroad ties, and newly freed slaves seized eagerly on the chance to earn money, which many spent on land.⁴

The Washingtons raised corn, wheat, vegetables, and hogs, as well as some tobacco for cash. There was plenty of work—tobacco was a labor-intensive crop, with tasks for small hands as well as large. But there was playtime, too. Community baseball was a popular summer pastime, and the children developed a lifelong love of sport and games. Decades later, whenever family members visited Caroline County, competition was fierce. "They all used to love to play croquet," Childs recalled. "On Saturdays, the yard would be full of croquet players, playing against each other."⁵

The family also faced its share of challenges. Agricultural depression plagued much of the nation from the late nineteenth century into the twentieth, pressing landowners as well as sharecroppers. The Civil War had wreaked havoc on Virginia's finances—the cash-strapped state did not even issue birth certificates from 1896 to 1912, making Ora's exact date of birth yet another mystery. Educational opportunities were scant; the area's only black high school was in the county seat of Bowling Green, too far away for rural students to attend unless they boarded in town. Even as black farmers struggled to make ends meet, a rising tide of white supremacy augured a darker era. Although Virginia saw few of the violent lynchings that terrorized black communities further south, the state's African Americans watched their rights slip away. In 1900 state legislators rewrote the state's election laws in ways that robbed African Americans of the vote. Other measures began to enforce strict racial segregation, steadily pushing African Americans into second-class citizenship.⁶

In addition, the large, close Washington family suffered its share of tragedy. In 1908, Laura Washington died while giving birth to her ninth child. Although Tommy Washington supplemented the farm income with work as a house plasterer, such jobs were scarce. At the time of the

1910 census he had been out of work for months, and the family farm had been mortgaged.⁷

Like many of their peers, the Washingtons began to look north for opportunity. They set their sights on Philadelphia, a five-hour train ride away. Ora's aunt, Mattie Washington, was the first to leave. Philadelphia apparently suited her—she married, settled in the up-and-coming suburb of Germantown, and then offered to help her nieces establish themselves in the city. Ora made the trip sometime in the mid-1910s, and may have attended high school in Germantown. In January 1920, a Philadelphia census taker found her working as a live-in servant in a home on Springfield Avenue. By then, other family members had made their way to the city as well—Washingtons would travel back and forth between Philadelphia and Caroline County for decades.⁸

Moving to Philadelphia did not liberate the Washingtons from racial struggle. The city's African Americans were generally confined to the bottom rungs of the economic ladder—most men worked as laborers, and most women as maids or housekeepers. Philadelphia saw its African American population grow from 84,000 in 1910 to 134,000 in 1920, and the new arrivals crowded black neighborhoods to bursting, overwhelmed social services, and heightened racial tensions. Unofficial segregation also spread through civic institutions, as organizations that provided housing, medical care, and cultural activities barred African Americans from their programs. Black citizens fought long battles over growing segregation in the city's public schools. The Ku Klux Klan enjoyed a brief heyday in the early 1920s, gaining 30,000 members by 1922. Philadelphia also became known for the many white, working-class neighborhoods where young black men ventured at their peril.⁹

Such setbacks, however, were balanced by opportunities. As in black communities across the country, Philadelphia's African Americans responded to a hostile racial climate by turning inward. Southern migrants proved avid entrepreneurs, filling the city's black neighborhoods with restaurants, beauty parlors, churches, and nightclubs. A black-owned bank, the Citizens and Southern, became one of Philadelphia's most stable financial institutions. The city's black theaters showcased nationally renowned performers such as Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Marian Anderson. At the Royal Grand movie palace,

lucky moviegoers could sometimes find jazz great Fats Waller manning the organ.¹⁰

Migration proved a particular boon to black sports, swelling the ranks of players and spectators throughout the country. Growing enthusiasm for black men's basketball led to the formation of several professional teams, including Chicago's Harlem Globetrotters and New York's Harlem Renaissance. Black tennis enthusiasts, shut out of the United States Lawn Tennis Association (USLTA), formed the alternative American Tennis Association, which sponsored local and national black championships. Philadelphia's Hildale baseball team was a key player in the Eastern Colored League, the eastern counterpart of the midwest-based Negro National League. Black colleges, churches, YMCAs, YWCAs, and other organizations all expanded their athletic offerings.¹¹

The institution that would mean the most to Ora Washington opened in Germantown in 1918. The "colored" branch of the Germantown YWCA, formed in response to the rapid growth of Germantown's black community, combined cultural programs with classes and activities designed to meet the needs of single working women such as Washington. It sponsored classes in shorthand, bookkeeping, mathematics, dressmaking, and domestic science, as well as black history, literature, and music. It ran rooming and employment agencies that helped find lodgings and positions for new arrivals, and offered afternoon and evening entertainments designed to be "so attractive that the girls will want to come to the Association instead of going in town." Lecture programs, often held on Thursdays to coincide with the traditional maid's day off, featured leading black intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and James Weldon Johnson. True to the YWCA emphasis on mind, body, and spirit, the Y also organized a broad range of sports programs. From the start, administrators were particularly proud of the facility's tennis courts.¹²

The Y's surviving records do not indicate when Ora Washington became a member. Nor do they record the day she first stepped on a tennis court. Still, she likely started playing some time in the early 1920s. A. S. Young's account, the most detailed available, suggests that she took up the game in an attempt to distract herself from the deep grief she felt over the death of a sister. Uncertain as that story is (many details in

Young's descriptions are inaccurate) it does coincide with the death of Washington's older sister, Georgia, who succumbed to tuberculosis early in the decade.¹³

However she began, her rise was swift. She loved the game from the start, immersing herself in the challenges of strokes and strategy. In September 1924, she entered the city championships in nearby Wilmington, Delaware, and swept the singles, doubles, and mixed-doubles titles. In 1925, she upset the reigning national singles champion, Chicago's Isadore Channels. She also captured her first national title, pairing with fellow Philadelphian Lula Ballard to win the women's doubles competition at the American Tennis Association national tournament.¹⁴

The ATA tennis championships, begun in 1916, were a major social event in black America, and Ballard and Washington returned to Philadelphia as celebrities. The Germantown Y held a reception for the newly crowned champions and presented each with a gift of expense money (although tennis was technically an amateur endeavor during the era, for whites as well as blacks, top competitors regularly had travel and other expenses paid by tournaments or other sponsors). "If our courts had done nothing more than make this possible, I am sure the Health Education Committee would think that its worries of nets, wiring and repair of courts had not been in vain," the Y's branch secretary happily reported.¹⁵

For her part, Washington was likely less satisfied. She was a focused, no-nonsense individual, unafraid of hard work and eager to succeed. On the court, she believed in getting down to business. "I didn't believe in long warm-ups," she was once quoted as saying. "I'd rather play from scratch and warm up as I went along." Rather than resting on her doubles laurels, she set her sights on the singles crown.¹⁶

It would take some time to reach that goal. Observers quickly pegged Washington as a potential title contender, noting her year-by-year growth in strength and confidence. She became a perennial doubles champion, winning twelve straight titles from 1925 to 1936. But for several years she faltered in the singles bracket. In 1926, Isadore Channels retook the title. Lula Ballard then won again in 1927 and 1928.

In the spring of 1929, perhaps to escape Ballard's shadow, Washington moved briefly to Chicago, where she worked as a hotel maid, and no doubt joined in the Windy City's thriving tennis culture. The change

seems to have done her good. In August 1929, “after six lean years of toil,” she “finally crashed through . . . to the supreme honor of National Women’s Singles Champion,” defeating Frances Gittens 4–6, 6–4, 6–2 to win the title.¹⁷

Her goal achieved, Washington became almost unbeatable, dominating the competition with powerful strokes and an intimidating intensity. “She had the strategy and was dynamic to watch,” one fan later recalled, adding that “her overhead game was terrific.” Opponents struggled to cope. “She was so strong,” recalled Amaleta Moore, whose sister competed against Washington. “It was hard for you to fight against her with the talent she had.” She also had a winner’s drive. Off the court, family members described her as a kind, caring person, who was always looking out for others. But her competitive zeal was fierce. “If you made her mad,” noted nephew Lewis Hill, “you had a tiger on your hands.” Opponents often feared her. “She was intimidating,” Moore noted. “The way she looked at you: ‘You’ve got no business in my way.’” The *Chicago Defender* concurred, noting in 1931 that “her superiority is so evident that her competitors are frequently beaten before the first ball crosses the net.”¹⁸

With no serious black rivals, Washington was apparently eager to try her skills in the white tennis world, then dominated by international sensation Helen Wills Moody. But segregation remained firmly entrenched across the country throughout the 1930s, and there was little a black woman—no matter how talented—could do about it. Although ATA officials constantly pressed the USLTA to admit black players to its tournaments, the national organization maintained its unwritten ban on African Americans until 1948, too late for Washington to make her mark.¹⁹

Barred from expanding her tennis ambitions, Washington instead cemented her position as the nation’s dominant black female athlete by taking up basketball. Women’s basketball had become a popular sport in working-class communities during the 1920s, sparking interest in high schools, athletic clubs, colleges, and other organizations. African Americans were especially enthusiastic. Concerns about health and propriety prompted many white teams to play with a modified set of half-court “girls’ rules,” and most predominantly white colleges limited their female students to intramural play. In African American communities, where women’s work was the norm and female strength a necessity,

teams often met fewer restrictions. Black women's squads frequently competed with full-court "boys' rules," and many historically black colleges fielded highly competitive varsity teams.²⁰

Washington entered the fray in the fall of 1930, when she moved back to Philadelphia and began playing center for the Germantown Hornets, based at the Germantown Y and coached by Lincoln University track coach Joseph Rainey. From 1930 into 1931, the Hornets traveled up and down the Eastern seaboard, playing teams from New York, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, New Jersey, and Washington, D.C., as well as Philadelphia. At the end of the season, they boasted a 22–1 record, and proclaimed themselves black national champions (in the absence of a national tournament, the team with the top record generally claimed the national title). Washington had lived up to her championship billing, averaging almost thirteen points a game. When the *Philadelphia Tribune* summed up the season's action, it placed Washington "in a class by herself."²¹

The Hornets' achievement set the stage for one of the most exciting basketball seasons Philadelphians had ever seen. Capitalizing on their popularity, the Hornets parted ways with the Y and became a full-fledged professional squad. Rising to challenge them was a new rival—the newspaper-sponsored Philadelphia Tribune Girls. The *Tribune's* entrepreneurial circulation manager, former Negro League baseball star Otto Briggs, had organized a men's basketball team in 1931. The Hornets' success convinced him that there was money in women's ball as well. In the fall of 1931 he agreed to sponsor the city's second-best women's team, Inez Patterson's "Quick Steppers." Their name was changed, and the Tribune Girls were born.²²

Inez Patterson was already a Philadelphia legend—she had won city high school championships in several sports and gone on to excel at then-predominantly white Temple University. Aided by several other strong competitors, including Hampton Institute veteran Rose Wilson and the multitalented Helen "Midge" Davis, the Tribunes began to match the Hornets victory for victory. Spiced by enthusiastic *Tribune* coverage, interest in the teams mounted, and the women's games began to outdraw those played by the Tribune's male squad, teams from nearby Lincoln University, and even the professional Harlem Renaissance. By January, the two teams launched into prolonged public negotiations over

the details of a championship series, aimed, as Joseph Rainey put it, at “giving the public what it wants while it wants it.”²³

The teams finally settled on a five-game series, which got off to a rousing start on February 3. “From the opening ’til the closing whistle the fans stood en masse and amid the most rabid and demonstrative exhibition of partisanship, yelled themselves so hoarse that on one occasion a halt had to be placed on hostilities to put a quietus on the pandemonious gathering,” wrote the *Tribune* sports editor Randy Dixon. For their part, “the players went stark berserk in their quest for victory. Every conceivable shot was attempted. Many found their mark for precious markers but more circled the rims and then rolled off to inject additional cause for delirium.” Near the end of the game, with the Tribunes leading, Washington went into action, executing “a foul goal then a left-handed stab on the run, and another heart-winger made on the left side of the basket over her left shoulder.” The Hornets triumphed, 20–15.²⁴

The series stretched on for almost two months, tensions building all the while. Three weeks after the Hornets’ initial triumph, the Tribunes rallied to win the second game, 33–24, handing the Hornets their first defeat in more than forty games. The Hornets returned to win the third, 22–18, and the Tribunes took the fourth, 33–27.²⁵

The fifth and deciding game, played on Easter Monday, again showcased Washington’s talents. At the end of the third quarter, with the Tribunes ahead, Washington “let go a humdinger from way back beyond the center of the court.” The ball fell straight into the basket. “It was an awe provoking effort,” Randy Dixon noted, “and gave the Hornets the necessary impetus to inaugurate a rally. Ora came right back to dribble down the left side of the court, stop abruptly to shake off two men, pivot, and sink a heart-twister off balance that cut the cords clean as a whistle.” Two clutch free throws by Tribune forward Helen “Midge” Davis sent the game into overtime. When the Tribunes scored eight unanswered points in the overtime period, triumphing 31–23, the crowd exploded with delirium.²⁶

“It was fully ten minutes before order could be restored,” Dixon reported. “The cash customers fanned to fever heat by the ardor and closeness of combat gave outlet to all kinds of riotous impulses. They stood on chairs and hollered. Others hoisted members of the winning

team upon their shoulders and paraded them around the hall. They jigged and danced, and readers believe me, they were justified. It was just that kind of a game."

Her team may have lost the title, but Washington remained the sport's top star. When Randy Dixon picked the year's all-star team, he called her "the greatest girl player of the age." While Washington was "lacking the perfection of smoothness that goes with the finished product," he concluded, she "can do everything required of a basketball player. She passes and shoots with either hand. She is a ball hawk. She has stamina and speed that make many male players blush with envy. And despite . . . elaborate defenses especially mapped out to stop her she has averaged 16 points per game with a high total of 38 points in one game."²⁷

Washington's skills were not lost on Otto Briggs. When basketball season opened the next fall, Washington was sporting a Tribunes uniform. The Tribune Girls would be an integral part of Philadelphia's vibrant black sporting scene for the rest of the 1930s, laying an undisputed claim to the black national championship at the end of every season. The team received regular coverage in the national black press, and spectators flocked eagerly to their games, which often included dancing or other entertainment. "Start saving 25c now so you can attend on Thanksgiving Nite the TRIBUNE Girls big opening BASKETBALL Game and DANCE," a 1932 ad suggested, noting that the dance would be conducted by "the Peppiest Orchestra this Side of Hades." The copy continued: "Don't miss seeing ORA WASHINGTON and INEZ PATTERSON in action. They are two of the greatest girl players in the world. They make you forget the Depression."²⁸

The combination of promotion and high-level play proved enormously successful. The team drew well at home and on the road—in 1933 so many spectators showed up for one New Jersey contest that the playing floor had to be roped off. By 1934, the players had become so popular that Briggs scheduled an extended tour of the South and Midwest, with an eye toward profit as well as publicity.²⁹

The Tribunes' widespread appeal showed clearly at the tour's first stop, in Greensboro, North Carolina. A game against historically black Bennett College had been booked in Greensboro's spacious city arena, where black teams rarely played. More than a thousand fans showed up

to see what a local newspaper called “the fastest girls’ team in the world,” paced by “the indomitable, internationally famed and stellar performer, Ora Washington.”³⁰

The Tribunes opened the game dressed in red and white, their sleeveless tops cut low in back, and their socks chosen to match. At halftime they changed into a second set of uniforms, these in gold and purple. The outfits read “Tribune” in script on the front, and had no numbers—a touch that conveniently threw the referees off guard. They played at a level few in Greensboro had ever seen. Decades later, Bennett star Ruth Glover spoke of them with unabashed admiration. “They just had it all together,” she recalled. “They could dribble, and keep the ball and make fast moves into the basket which you couldn’t stop.” Washington scored thirteen points as the Tribunes defeated Bennett, 31 to 22.³¹

Washington’s intensity set the tone for the team. “She was one of those strong players,” Glover explained. “She wasn’t a huge person, or very tall. But she was so fast. And see, they fed her the ball. . . . The team was built up around her.” She also knew how to use her elbows. As she faced off against Washington, Bennett center Lucille Townsend recalled, she heard a whispered warning: “Don’t outjump me.” Townsend disregarded the admonition at her peril. “I never saw her when she hit me, but she did it so quick it would knock the breath out of me, and I doubled over,” she explained. “She could hit, and she told me that she had played a set of tennis on her knees and won it.”³²

Even as she built her basketball career, Washington stayed atop the tennis world, winning seven of eight singles titles from 1929 to 1937 and maintaining her reputation as a singular athletic talent. When the Tribunes launched a second southern tour in 1938, the *Atlanta Daily World* reported that the team’s Atlanta appearance would be “a double feature in itself,” as it included “the famous Ora Washington, national tennis champion for seven consecutive years.” Washington, the article continued, “moves as sprightly in the hard wood court as she does on the clay court and those who have never seen her manipulate on either court, will have this rare treat . . . when she appears here in company with her fellow national cagers.”³³

By 1938, however, Washington was in her late thirties, and her athletic career was winding down. She had gone full tilt for almost a decade, playing basketball in the winter and tennis in the spring and summer.

During most of that time, she also worked as a housekeeper—neither tennis expense money nor her Tribune salary was enough to pay the bills. The first sign of a slowdown came in 1936, when she lost the national singles title for the first time since 1929. Supporters blamed the loss—an 8–6, 6–1 defeat by Lula Ballard—on sunstroke, and Washington regained her crown in 1937. But in the spring of 1938, she announced her retirement from singles competition.³⁴

The reason for her decision was not entirely clear. She was still an avid player—she would continue to compete in doubles and mixed doubles for more than a decade. But her long reign as women's tennis queen had clearly sparked some consternation, and the criticism may have taken its toll. "It does not pay to be national champion too long," she told the *Baltimore Afro-American* in the summer of 1939. "It's the struggle to be one that counts. Once arrived everybody wants to take it away from you and you are the object of many criticisms." The subject was far from new. As early as 1934, the *Tribune* reported that Washington's five-year reign had "been the subject of talk for many years," with some in the sport questioning whether her dominance had "proved more harmful than helpful to the game."³⁵

On the surface, those questions focused on whether Washington's overwhelming skill discouraged potential champions from pursuing the sport. But they may also have reflected unease with the degree to which her powerful strokes and forthright demeanor clashed with prevailing notions of femininity. Although African American women often won support for athletic endeavors, this job always proved easier when they tempered their skill with the trappings of conventional ladyhood. Ruth Glover summed up the fine line many female athletes walked. "We were ladies," she explained. "We just played basketball like boys." Refined manners, fashionable dress and conventionally feminine demeanor met community expectations, and also won acclaim as a challenge to racial stereotypes. It did not hurt if an athlete was also pretty. When A. S. Young lauded the achievements of Olympic track champion Wilma Rudolph, he noted that not only did Rudolph dazzle with her skills, she was "*the first Negro woman athlete to draw world-wide praise for her beauty*," a recognition he called "indisputable proof that 'things are getting better' for Negroes!"³⁶

Washington, in contrast, made her reputation solely on the quality of her play. She dressed and spoke plainly, and rarely downplayed her

strength. She never married, living instead with family members, and with a series of female companions. Her rural roots and working-class demeanor seem to have made her an uneasy fit within African American tennis circles, which were dominated by the educators and professionals that made up the nation's black elite. Shortly after her retirement, Randy Dixon lamented that "the land at large has never bowed at Ora's shrine of accomplishment in the proper tempo." To him, the reason was simple: "She committed the unpardonable sin of being a plain person with no flair whatever for what folks love to call society."³⁷

Washington returned to singles one last time, in 1939. She had a point to make. The 1938 championship had been won by Detroit-based Flora Lomax, who was cut from a far more conventional mold than Washington. Dubbed "the glamour girl of tennis," Lomax credited her husband with teaching her to play, and gave black sportswriters plenty of copy with her trademark white pleated shorts, her love of dancing, and her penchant for hobnobbing with stars such as Joe Louis. Lomax had plenty of ardent supporters, and when Washington stayed out of the 1938 tournament, rumors began to circulate that she had retired rather than risk losing to the up-and-coming star.³⁸

In the summer of 1939, Washington responded. She entered a tournament in Buffalo, New York, defeated Lomax 6-2, 1-6, 6-2, and promptly retired again. She made no secret of her motive. "Certain people said certain things last year," she told a reporter. "They said Ora was not so good any more. I had not planned to enter singles this year, but I just had to go up to Buffalo to prove somebody was wrong. I lost the second set to her but this was the first and only set she ever won from me."³⁹

Washington continued to play with the Tribunes until 1943, when Otto Briggs died of a sudden heart attack. That blow proved fatal to the team as well. Interest in black womens' basketball was at an ebb. Newspaper coverage of the sport had plummeted. Many colleges had disbanded their women's varsities in favor of intramural play, and the constraints of wartime limited games and travel. As with tennis, there were few opportunities outside of segregated circles. The Tribunes regularly played against a handful of independent white women's teams, winning some games and losing others. But the Amateur Athletic Union, the major sponsor of top-level women's basketball, did not admit

professional squads such as the Tribunes. Most of the country's most prominent white teams were in the south, and had no interest in meeting black competitors. Although Washington and her teammates tried to find another sponsor, their search proved fruitless, and the team was forced to disband.⁴⁰

Washington won her last national title in 1947, when she and partner George Stewart defeated R. Walter Johnson and an up-and-coming teenager named Althea Gibson to win the ATA mixed doubles crown. By then, the athletic era she had dominated was drawing to a close. Newspaper columns were filling with stories of athletes who were finally getting their chance to compete against top white talent. Shortly after losing the mixed doubles match to Washington (and following careful grooming of her manners as well as her game) Althea Gibson would take on the role of tennis pioneer, winning enduring respect by becoming both Wimbledon and U.S. champion in 1957 and 1958.

Washington, in contrast, slipped out of sight, into a quiet life marked by family and work. "She was a person, she worked all the time," Bernard Childs recalled. "She was always home on Saturdays and Sundays. In fact she was home every night." She stayed close to her family and a few friends from her athletic days. She maintained her love of sports, and when she visited Caroline County she was a fierce croquet player. "She was out there mostly with somebody, about every day," Childs said. "They would go there just about every afternoon."⁴¹

Late in her life, she fell ill, gave up the apartment she had shared with another woman, and moved in with Childs and his sister. She died on May 28, 1971, and was buried back in Caroline County.

Hers had not been an easy life. But she had made the most of it, traveling farther and achieving more than anyone could have imagined for a black farm girl making her own way at the inauspicious start of the twentieth century. Accounts of her life frequently credit her with a ringing assessment of her career: "Courage and determination were the biggest assets I had." It is impossible to know if those were in fact her words. But they ring unmistakably, inspiringly true.⁴²

From: David K. Wiggins, ed., *Out of the Shadows: A Biographical History of African American Athletes* (Fayetteville, Ar.: University of Arkansas Press, 2006).

5 Ora Washington: The First Black Female Star, by Pamela Grundy

1. See *Philadelphia Tribune* April 9, 1931, 11; March 10, 1932, 10; July 24, 1930, 10. Washington's tennis achievements in particular were regularly chronicled in most of the nation's major black papers. Many of the articles cited here were shared with me by Rita Liberti, whose pioneering research into black women's basketball was essential to this project.

2. Denise Dennis, *A Century of Greatness, 1900–1999: The Urban League of Philadelphia's Tribute to the Outstanding African-American Philadelphians of the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Urban League of Philadelphia, 2002), 189.

3. J. Bernard Childs interview by Pamela Grundy, July 31, 2003, telephone; J. Bernard Childs interview by Pamela Grundy, October 4, 2003, Bowling Green, Va., in Grundy's possession. Most of this essay's descriptions of Washington family history are drawn from these conversations with Childs, the son of Washington's older sister, Lenora. Much research, however, remains to be done. The *Philadelphia Tribune* published an obituary on June 5, 1971, 2.

4. Marshall Wingfield, *A History of Caroline County Virginia from Its Formation in 1727 to 1924* (Baltimore: Clearfield Company, 1997), 34–35; 167.

5. Childs interviews.

6. J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 22–30. On her Social Security account number application, submitted in 1943, Washington listed her birth date as January 16, 1899. Application for Social Security Account Number 183204110, April 28, 1943.
7. U.S. Census of the Population, Carolina County, Va., 1910, E.D. 17, 5.
8. U.S. Census of the Population, Philadelphia County, Penn., 1920, E.D. 632, 8.
9. Charles Ashley Hardy, "Race and Opportunity: Black Philadelphia during the Era of the Great Migration, 1916–1930" (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1989), 15–16, 41–46, 53–59, 219–21.
10. Hardy, "Race and Opportunity," 445–46.
11. For an account of early black men's basketball, see Bob Kuska, *Hot Potato: How Washington and New York Gave Birth to Black Basketball and Changed America's Game Forever* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004). For a history of the Hilldale club, see Neil Lanctot, *Fair Dealing and Clean Playing: The Hilldale Club and the Development of Black Professional Baseball, 1910–1932* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Company, 1994). A description of the early years of the ATA can be found in Edwin Bancroft Henderson, *The Negro In Sports*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1949), 174–85.
12. Report of Branch Secretary, April 1919, Folder 11, Box 25, Young Women's Christian Association of Germantown collection, Urban Archives, Temple University. For a detailed description of Y activities, see Stephanie Yvette Felix, "Committed to Their Own: African American Women Leaders in the YWCA of Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1870–1970" (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1999), 123–29.
13. Young, *Negro Firsts in Sports*, 194; Childs interviews.
14. *Philadelphia Tribune*, September 13, 1924, 10; *Chicago Defender*, August 29, 1925, 2–8. For a full list of the ATA champions over the years, see Arthur R. Ashe Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African-American Athlete, 1919–1945*, vol. 2., 443–63.
15. Annual Report of Branch Secretary, 1925, and Report of Branch Secretary, September 1925. Both in Folder 11, Box 25, YWCA of Germantown collection.
16. Young, *Negro Firsts in Sports*, 195.
17. *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 29, 1929, 10. The 1930 U.S. Census recorded Washington as living in Chicago. U.S. Census of the Population, Cook County, Ill., 1930, E.D. 16–186, 15.
18. Young, *Negro Firsts in Sports*, 195; Amaleta Moore and Ruth Glover Mullen interview by Pamela Grundy, October 7, 2003, West Cape May, N.J., located at Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Lewis Hill interview by Pamela Grundy, July 31, 2003, telephone; *Chicago Defender*, March 14, 1931.
19. Young, *Negro Firsts in Sports*, 195. For efforts to integrate the USLTA, see Ashe, *A Hard Road to Glory*, 60–64.
20. For analysis of black community attitudes toward women's sports, see Pamela Grundy and Susan Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: A History of American Women's Basketball* (New York: New Press, 2005), and Rita Liberti, "We Were Ladies, We Just Played Like Boys: African-American Womanhood and Competitive Basketball at

Bennett College, 1928–1942,” in *Sport and the Color Line: Black Athletes and Race Relations in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Patrick B. Miller and David K. Wiggins (New York: Routledge, 2004), 81–99.

21. *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 9, 1931, 11.

22. The Hornets’ amicable break with the Y is described in Branch Secretary Report, October 1931, Folder 13, Box 25, Germantown YWCA collection. The transformation of the Quick Steppers, along with an account of Patterson’s athletic career, can be found in Henderson, *The Negro in Sports*, 211–15. Some of the dates in that account are inaccurate. Otto Briggs’s outstanding career with the Hilldale baseball club is described in Lanctot, *Fair Dealing and Clean Playing*.

23. *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 14, 1932, 11.

24. *Philadelphia Tribune*, February 11, 1932, 11.

25. *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 17, 1932, 11.

26. *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 7, 1932, 10. In the absence of a tournament to determine a national champion, prominent teams generally claimed their titles on the basis of overall records and opponents defeated.

27. *Philadelphia Tribune*, February 25, 1932, 11; March 10, 1932, 10; March 17, 1932, 10.

28. *Philadelphia Tribune*, November 10, 1932, 10.

29. The game at Asbury Park, N.J., is described in *Chicago Defender*, April 29, 1933, 9.

30. *Greensboro Daily News*, March 9, 1934, 12.

31. Amaleta Moore and Ruth Glover Mullen interview by Rita Liberti, July 30, 1995, West Cape May, N.J., in Liberti’s possession.

32. Moore and Mullen interview by Pamela Grundy; Lucille Townsend interview by Rita Liberti, Richmond, Va., August 6, 1995, in Liberti’s possession.

33. *Atlanta Daily World*, January 31, 1938, 5.

34. *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 29, 1936, 14.

35. *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 5, 1939, 21; *Philadelphia Tribune*, September 6, 1934, 9; July 26, 1934, 12.

36. Young, *Negro Firsts in Sports*, 197.

37. *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 21, 1939, 15.

38. *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 5, 1939, 21.

39. *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 5, 1939, 21.

40. Childs interviews. For descriptions of changes in black women’s basketball, see Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass*. Accounts of the Tribunes’ play periodically mention white teams. One white rival that received particular attention was the Leavittsburg Athletic Club, led by Susie Spoonseller, which played the Tribunes in Ohio and made at least one trip to Philadelphia. See *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 26, 1933, 10; March 29, 1934, 10; and *Chicago Defender*, February 4, 1933, 8. Another rival was the Buckstown Quintette of Buckstown, Pennsylvania. See *Atlanta Daily World*, February 25, 1938, 5.

41. Childs interview, July 31, 2003. Intriguingly, Childs noted that Washington periodically went to New York to visit a white female friend she had met through basketball.

42. Young, *Negro Firsts in Sports*, 195.