

# A Beautiful Journey: The Life of the Main Line's Mildred Miller Burruss

Penny L. Washington

One of the most significant functions of history is to provide a viable means to reclaim the accomplishments of previous generations. The struggles and sacrifices African American women made ensured the race's survival. African American women would make progress individually and collectively. The details of their efforts have become the narrative of our private and public histories. The story of how African American women have expressed their full humanity is inspiring and instructive for all.

Historians are making valiant attempts to document the lives of a wider range of people than had previously been the subject of serious study. The lives of everyday women are worthy of respectful consideration. Studying the life of long-time Main Line resident Mildred Miller Burruss provides us with opportunities to learn about little-known aspects of our shared local history.

Mildred Miller (later Burruss) was born on April 10, 1919 in the rural farming community of Vanndale, Arkansas. She was the sixth of nine children born to Dovie and William Dave Miller. Mildred spent her early years within the loving embrace of her family. Despite her family's best efforts to provide her with a good life, she would, as an African American woman, be subjected to a life of segregation and limited opportunities. When asked, Mildred tells that the primary reason she migrated North was to avail herself of better opportunities. According to Mildred, African Americans were only allowed to obtain an eighth grade education. Her decision to leave her Southern birthplace was one many other African American women would make in successive waves of migration North. The years following Emancipation saw vast numbers of African American women leave the South for the North. Historians have referred to this voluntary internal relocation as the Great Migration. According to Sharon Harley's work *The Timetables of African American History*, between 1910 and 1930 nearly one million African Americans migrated North and obtained jobs which had opened as a result of World War I defense-related industries.

We shall now turn our attention to how African American women participated in this historical movement. For a deeper understanding of how gender affected this development, the book *Black Women In America* provides excellent insights. According to research contained within the book, African American women outnumbered their male counterparts in participation in the Great Migration epic.

African American women mostly found work as domestics upon their arrival North. Northern employment agencies sought out African American women for domestic work because they had cooked, cleaned, and cared for others for generations. These women were promised higher wages than could be earned in the South. This fact compelled African American women to seek work as domestics in large numbers during the period of the Great Migration. The work was hard—demanding on the body and taxing to the spirit. African American domestic workers also faced the sometimes real possibility of physical and sexual abuse from their white employers. Despite the challenges she would face, Mildred made her way North. A better life beckoned.

Mildred boarded a train in the nearby town of Wynne, Arkansas carrying only a few personal belongings. The trip would be a journey of several days in a segregated train car. She arrived at the Paoli station on June 17, 1939. She was 21 years of age. Thomas "Shorty" Jackman, an African American "red cap," called her brother-in-law Ernest Hopkins to come and pick her up and take her to her new home located at Devon's Maple Grove Inn. Her sister Theophilus Hopkins had moved North in 1934 and had found work on the Main Line as a domestic.

**Red Cap:** "The practice of railroad station porters wearing red-colored caps to distinguish them from blue-capped train personnel with other duties was begun on Labor Day of 1890 by African-American porter John Williams in order to stand out from the crowds at Grand Central Terminal in New York City. The tactic immediately caught on, over time adapted by other forms of porters for their specialties." Source: Wikipedia:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Porter\\_\(carrier\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Porter_(carrier))

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As a domestic, Mildred cooked, cleaned, and cared for children. She earned \$8.00 weekly, as opposed to the \$2.00 weekly available to her in the South. In time she made \$10.00 to \$15.00 weekly. Mildred felt the work was honorable but hard.

Many African American women found work as domestics. In certain Northern cities, 84 percent of African American working women were employed as domestics during the period of the Great Migration. African American women would become the dominant workers in the field. There are several reasons for this occurrence. In earlier years, White women immigrants worked as domestics. Increasing educational opportunities and labor shortages brought about by male participation in wars opened up clerical and industrial jobs for White immigrant women. Newly married Whites preferred African American women domestics who were often required to wear uniforms. Whites desired to visually maintain distinctions that spoke of their privileged position.

Mildred turned to her sister for help in facing the challenges of her new life. African American women relied on an informal network of family and friends for support in creating their new expanded lives.

Mildred recalls her days as a member of the Berwyn Thimble Club. The club was made up of African American Main Line domestic workers and met at Devon's Maple Grove Inn on Thursdays, the domestics' days off. The women met to socialize. They enjoyed traveling to Philadelphia to shop at Strawbridge & Clothier, Gimbel's, and Wanamaker's, and to eat at the Horn & Hardart Automat restaurant. Mildred has warm memories of church gatherings going to the Elks Home and the Star Social Club in West Chester. These were exciting times and Mildred was experiencing independence.



Mildred Miller (later Burruss). Taken at Maple Grove Inn in 1940, where she resided after she arrived from Arkansas in the late '30s. *Courtesy Penny L. Washington*



Mildred Miller (later Burruss). Taken in Berwyn in the 1940s at the home of Jesse Vause. *Courtesy Penny L. Washington*



Members of Berwyn Thimble Club on an outing to the Star Social Club on E. Market Street in West Chester, PA. Mildred may be seen seated on the right in the front row. Note that the ladies were dressed very fashionably. *Courtesy Penny L. Washington*



All women engage in efforts to define and celebrate their beauty. African American women are no different in this regard. In the process of participation in caring for their skin and hair, African American women commercialized what had been a private concern.

Women of African descent have a rich history of participating in beauty and grooming practices that were in use before their time of bondage in the Americas. Despite the hardships in their lives, African American women took the time to care for their hair. Throughout history, African American women were able to work as hair care professionals. These slave and free women took care of the hair care needs of White women. Several factors supported the creation of an African American beauty industry. In the latter years of the nineteenth century these three factors coalesced:

1. the emergence of a small African American middle class whose women had the money to professionally care for their hair;
2. the vast influx of Southern African American women who had migrated North, thus creating a new market for the services of a developing beauty industry; and
3. the African American press that urged their female readers to beautify their hair as one of the ways to gain upward mobility in society.

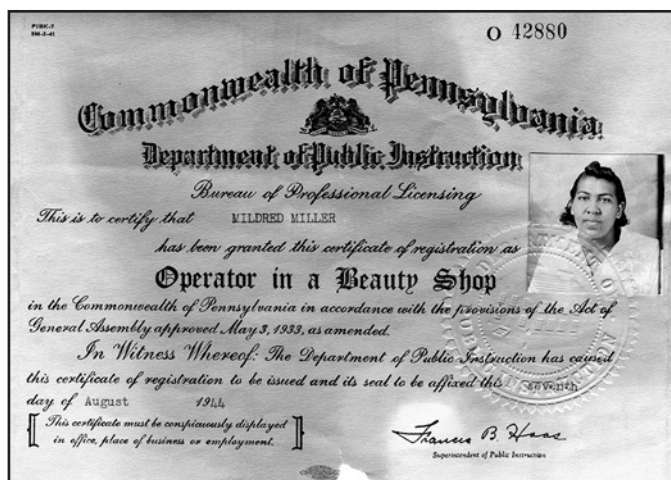
One of the ways African American women would enter the business world was through the beauty industry. Education would become the tool African American women would use to build new lives for themselves.

Mildred would follow in her sister's footsteps. Theophilus Miller Hopkins had migrated North in 1934, worked as a domestic on the Main Line, and sought professional training to become a beautician. Mildred would do likewise. Theophilus eventually opened her own beauty shop in a small space she rented in the Robinson Wellburn Elks Lodge, on Lancaster Avenue near Walnut Avenue in Berwyn.

Theophilus and Mildred became beauticians. African American beauty pioneers Annie Turnbo Malone and Madame C. J. Walker built international beauty empires by developing an extensive African American female work force that would sell skin and hair care products to women of their race. In time, beauty schools would train generations of African American beauticians. Mildred attended the Kingrow School of Beauty Culture located in the city of Philadelphia. Classes were held from 7 to 10 pm on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings. One thousand hours of instruction were required, and the course of study could be completed in six months. The cost of this instruction was \$125.00. A theory book cost \$3.50 and a professional kit cost \$20.00. The kit contained various combs, brushes, curling irons, and special tools used to straighten and style African American women's hair. Mildred worked hard to master her new trade and graduated from the school on June 20, 1944.

In the course of things, Mildred met Charles Percy Burruss and later married him on October 16, 1944 in Elkton, Maryland.

Charles Burruss was the son of James and Mary Ray Burruss, who wed on November 1, 1893, and whose marriage certificate Mildred keeps as a carefully preserved family heirloom. Charles Burruss was hard-working and secured a job with the Tindle family of Valley Forge Farms and in later years, the Alan Wood Steel Company. In 1945 Charles and his wife Mildred purchased an older home located at 230 Hearn Avenue. Over the years, their home



Mildred Miller's notarized Beauty Shop Operator's license dated 7 August 1944. Courtesy Penny L. Washington



Marriage Certificate of James D. Burruss and Mary A. Ray, dated 1 November 1893 with officiant J. Wellington Thurston. Courtesy Penny L. Washington



underwent extensive renovations. Mildred recalls the close decades-old connections she established while living on Hearn Avenue. Longtime African American neighbors included the Bayliss, Boggs, Hearn, and Mitchell families.

The ability to buy a home is an accomplishment for anyone. African Americans on the Main Line worked hard for their homes and took pride in ownership. For African Americans, a house represented more than a legal dwelling space. Homes represented a sheltering, nurturing space. The world of 1940s America was still beset by the wrongs of racism, segregation and discrimination. Nevertheless, African American women would move forward. Purchasing and caring for a home was viewed by African Americans as a mark of progress.



Charles Burruss (on the left, holding the reins), driving a small cart with an unidentified man at Valley Forge Farm, c. 1943.

*Courtesy Penny L. Washington*



Mildred Miller (later Burruss) on the right, with two unidentified friends on a trip they took together. *Courtesy Penny L. Washington*

GOOD ONLY IN COUNTY WHERE ISSUED		<b>Marriage License</b>		STATE OF MARYLAND		No. 29484	
CECIL COUNTY							
<b>I Hereby Certify,</b> That on this <u>16th</u> day of <u>Oct</u> , Nineteen hundred and <u>Forty-four</u>							
the below, were by me united in marriage at <u>Elkton</u> in accordance with the License issued by the Clerk of the Circuit Court of the County herein indicated.							
<u>CHARLES P. BURRUSS</u> <small>(Name of Groom)</small>				<u>MILDRED V. MILLER</u> <small>(Name of Bride)</small>			
Residence of Groom <u>VALLEY FORGE, PA.</u>		Age <u>34</u>		Color <u>COL.</u>		Nativity <u>PA.</u> <small>(State or Country)</small>	
Occupation <u>FARMER</u>				and who is <u>SINGLE</u> <small>(State here whether single, widower or divorced as the case may be)</small>			
Residence of Bride <u>BERWYN, PA.</u>		Age <u>25</u>		Color <u>COL.</u>		Nativity <u>PA.</u> <small>(State or Country)</small>	
Occupation <u>HAIR DRESSER</u>				and who is <u>SINGLE</u> <small>(State here whether single, widow or divorced as the case may be)</small>			
Name of Person consenting if Groom is a Minor _____ <small>(Parent or Guardian)</small>							
Name of Person consenting if Bride is a Minor _____ <small>(Parent or Guardian)</small>							
<u>NOT RELATED</u> <small>(State here whether the contracting parties are in any way related)</small>							
Signature of Officiating Clergyman <u>Rev. William H. Applegate</u> <u>Minister</u> <u>148 E. Main St. Elkton Md.</u> <u>Penny L. Washington</u>							
This Certificate to be given to the Contracting Parties.							

Marriage license for Charles and Mildred Burruss, from Elkton, Maryland and dated 16 October 1944. *Courtesy Penny L. Washington*



Burruss family photo in Berwyn, taken in the 1950s. From left: Mildred, her mother Dovie Miller, her daughter Gwen, and her husband Charles. *Courtesy Penny L. Washington*



African American beauticians were respected figures in their communities. Respect derived from the economically independent position these women held.

For an African American woman who began her working life taking care of other people's houses to have a home of her own to care for was sweet reward indeed. Her accomplishments served as an example of what could be achieved through hard work.

While Mildred was occupied making a living and caring for her family, she found time to help others. She is a member of Wayne's Second Baptist Church. Mildred served in a number of organizations within the church. The Flower Club, the Rising Sun Club, and the Bus Committee all benefited from her participation in their activities. Mildred also worked in the church kitchen and was a member of the Florence Mills Temple # 518. The temple was a branch of the local African American Elks order. Mildred served as treasurer for the organization. In later years, she became closely associated with the Surrey Services organization. She sang with their chorus and for many years served as a greeter and cashier for their lunch program. Mildred also spent her time volunteering in support of a fitness program.

Today, Mildred lives quietly. She spends time sharing her knowledge of family and local history. Her life on the Main Line continues to be full.

Life is a journey, and it takes courage to move forward. Mildred had the strength to take hold of her future. Hard work along with belief in God and herself offered her the opportunity to have an expanded life. She participated in the Great Migration. Her life is rooted on the Main Line. She purchased and cared for a home, she married and raised a family. She participated in a successful local business and she found time to help others. Her life informs us that every life has worth and every life contributes to our shared history.

### Materials Consulted

Sharon Harley, *The Timetables of African American History*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1995

Darlene Clark Hine (editor), *Black Women in America*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005

Oral Histories of Mildred Miller Burruss

Photographs and other printed materials provided by Mildred Miller Burruss

This article is dedicated to Mildred Miller Burruss. Thank you for the honor of telling your Main Line story. Thank you to my mother Mildred Alice Lampkins Washington. She gave me the love of words.



Mildred in front of her church, the Second Baptist Church in Wayne c. 2005. Courtesy Penny L. Washington,

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## Family connections with local history

While researching this article, we discovered some intriguing connections between Charles Burruss, his uncle Morris Ray, and the Knox/Tindle family who owned Valley Forge Farm, the country estate of the prominent politician Philander C. Knox. Knox's eldest child Rebekah Page Knox married James Robert Tindle on 15 October 1904. After her father's passing in 1921, she inherited the estate and lived there with her family until her death in 1963. In 1965 her heirs sold the property to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to become part of Valley Forge Park.

It appears that Morris Ray worked for the Knox and later the Tindle families, and his nephew Charles Burruss worked for the Tindle family at Valley Forge Farm. More research will be necessary to explore and confirm these connections.



## Family connections with local history

### Photographs with stories to tell

UPPER: 1912 photo (postcard) taken in Washington, D.C.

Morris Ray in chauffeur's livery, posing next to an unidentified automobile, presumably belonging to the family for whom he worked (very possibly the Knox family, later to become the Knox/Tindle family for whom Charles Burruss worked).

Morris Ray was Charles Burruss' uncle, related through his mother Mary Ray Burruss.

MIDDLE: Photo of family with automobile near the Wawona Redwood tree in Yosemite National Park. The two license plates on the front of the car read "PENNA 1928 - 8239" and "CONGRESSIONAL - 593". We believe that the man standing in back on the left is Morris Ray, and the family may be the Tindles.

Philander C. Knox served as Senator from Pennsylvania for eight years prior to his death in 1921—a possible explanation for the Congressional plate.

LOWER LEFT: In this 1943 photo of Charles Burruss driving a cart, it appears that Mt. Joy and Valley Forge Road may be seen in the background. This field would be part of Valley Forge Farm, across Yellow Springs Road from near the Knox estate house in present-day Valley Forge Park.

LOWER RIGHT: 1927 aerial view of the Knox Estate (Valley Forge Farm) with a tenant farm visible in the upper middle area. Valley Forge Road and Mt. Joy are on the lower right. It is believed that Charles Burruss lived in the tenant farmhouse during his tenure with the Tindles.

