

William J. Moore: Portrait of a Teacher

By Molly Tully

(The following article appeared in the Star and Wave, July 31, 1997, on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of the birth of William J. Moore, in a 2-part series. Another version of this story by the same author ran in the Cape May Star and Waver in 1975 on the occasion of his 100th birthday.)

He attended the festivities honoring his 100th birthday on a stretcher. But unlike most centenarians who might be expected to be suffering from normal deterioration, William J. Moore's distress was due to a fall on a tennis court the previous week when he had posed for photographers anxious to publicize the forthcoming event. He tripped, fell, broke his hip and was rushed off to the hospital, only to insist on being returned on a stretcher to be present for the celebration which devoted citizens of Cape May, New Jersey, and members of the Tennis Club had planned for weeks. They were dedicating the courts to him, henceforth to be known as the William J. Moore Tennis Center. He was their friend, their teacher, the organizer of their tennis club and their pro for over 50 years.

At the time of his death, less than a year later, in June 1973, William Moore had accomplished more than most human beings dream of in a lifetime. More than the oldest living and first black tennis pro in America, he was a remarkable human being, a dedicated teacher, an inspiring leader in his community, and - perhaps most important - a devoted husband and father.

Born in 1872 of parents who had been released from slavery after the Emancipation, he grew up in West Chester, Pennsylvania. The first black to graduate from the local high school, he went on to Howard University, graduating from their Normal School in 1892, and began a teaching career which covered fifty-three years and included at least three generations of black youth in West Cape May.

He didn't take up tennis until he was in his thirties and not only perfected the technique but worked out a unique teaching method which was later published in a manual still recognized as a major contribution to teaching the game. In his spare time he wrote articles for the Cape May County Geographic Society and the County Historical Society on conservation, nature, early Negro settlers in the County and other subjects.

When he was honored by Howard University during its centennial celebration in June 1967, for his outstanding achievements in education and athletics, he was only incidentally the oldest living alumnus. In 1969, he received a plaque from the Middle States Lawn Tennis Association at the Spectrum in Philadelphia for "loyal and meritorious service to tennis." And in 1972, he was honored by the New Jersey Education Association for his contributions to education.

But all this recognition, these honors, these awards, don't begin to capture the depth of William Moore as a human being. Interested in everything around him, and with a love and appreciation of his fellow man, his family, his students and the country which had given him so many opportunities, his life was an example of what one man can achieve in a lifetime.

William J. left behind a lively and fascinating autobiography in which he tried to enumerate the important influences in his life. Reading it, one can feel the sparkle and depth of his character. Growing up in the small, predominately Quaker town of West Chester was a circumstance to which he attributes a great deal of his success. "I never felt any color line in West Chester," he states. "This gave me a chance to develop without the frustration of race prejudice. I went everywhere and joined in everything that my playmates did."

Because his father was sexton of the First Presbyterian Church there, and the family lived on the church grounds, his playmates were white, upper middle class, well educated children of professionals. His parents determined that he should have a good education. As the oldest of three and quite a bit older than the next two, he received the devoted attention of parents and grandparents who "furnished me with a comfortable wholesome home life and a heritage of spotless character to emulate, and who insisted I take full advantage of educational opportunities and meet their standards. They impressed upon me that school was my job, that no studies were too hard - and "in all matters the teacher was always right!"

It was a happy childhood with ample opportunity for play, and exploring the out-of-doors. During the summer months, William and his "gang" of

playmates explored nearby Brandywine Creek, wandering for miles up and down its shores, building boats, fishing, swimming, observing wildlife, collecting rocks, leaves, bird eggs and butterflies, later identifying their specimens from books or professional acquaintances.

From his paternal grandfather, who had escaped from slavery via the Underground Railroad, he learned the names of all the constellations which was a big help later at Howard. He recalls an incident that happened one evening as he was crossing the campus. An astronomy professor was giving a star-gazing lecture, but was having trouble putting a finder on the Beehive cluster. "Can I help you?" asked Moore, and immediately found the spot. This chance encounter led to many hours of extracurricular physics and chemistry in the professor's laboratory. "Grandfather was a great stickler for character often showing with pride his testimonials and recommendations from prominent citizens for whom he had worked. He impressed upon me, his namesake, my duty to live up to the standards of the family name."

On Sundays, William helped to pump the church organ, coming into contact with much of the best of church and classical music. He was an avid reader and "due to the prevalence of libraries in the town, and also my wide circle of friends, I always had access to an unlimited supply of books from which to choose." He dipped into such classics as Cooper, Irving, Holmes, Whittier, Dickens, Scott, Lytton, Thackeray and Longfellow. Learning was fun, so it was natural that he would want to continue his education after high school. Through a member of the congregation, he was encouraged to attend Howard University. There he was exposed to a group of teachers and subjects which opened up new horizons to him. West Chester had prepared him well, and he frequently found himself more knowledgeable than some of his teachers. In addition, "Washington was an exciting place in which to live, with museums to explore, lectures and concerts to attend, and new friendships to develop." At that time there wasn't so much prejudice in Washington as came later... The only way I knew about segregation was from talking to my classmates from the South." It was there he met and was inspired by many of the country's black leaders of the time. Besides having a scholarship, William Moore worked part-time in the Dean's office to help pay the cost of room (\$15 a year) and board (\$8 a month). Tuition was free in the Teaching Department.

But it was more than the ambiance of his home town or the inspiration of

an excellent education which accounted for William J. Moore's dedication to high ideals during his whole lifetime. It was in his blood. His father had been born in slavery and served as a slave in the Army before being released and moving North after the Civil War. On his mother's side, his grandmother was part Indian and had been raised on a large Virginia plantation where she had absorbed the culture and values of Southern aristocracy. It was from her that he inherited also his instinctive love of nature. His teaching always included walks through the woods and swamps of Cape May's countryside identifying the flora and fauna for his pupils.

Moore had not intended to settle in Cape May. After turning down a fellowship from Howard ("I felt my parents had supported me long enough") he accepted a teaching job in Greenspring, Delaware for a year, then spent a year teaching in West Chester. He had been offered a job in Texas, but accepted the Cape May job to be nearer home, intending to stay only a year and then move to Texas. But he saw a challenge in the situation in Cape May. Here were black children who had virtually been ignored by the system, and a growing black population, imbued with the feeling that education was important. William was anxious to work out some theories he had for a first class elementary school.

His mentor in this experiment was a man named William E. Tranks, a self-educated man who was widely read and a disciple of Henry George. For years he had advocated home ownership for blacks so they would have a say in local politics, and many of the residents did own their homes with enough land to raise poultry and vegetables. Many of the blacks who had settled in Cape May came from the South, having been freed after the Emancipation. Since many of them had come in the summers with Southern families to this elegant resort in the 1800's, it was natural that they would stay on here after the Civil War.

When Moore began teaching in Cape May in 1895, he was assigned one room in the West Cape May School where he taught eight grades of black children. He was determined that blacks learn more than the three R's. He instilled in them a sense of pride, not only in their black heritage, but in themselves as individuals, and as citizens of their great country. He used outlines of black history which today would be called Black Studies, learning about important achievements of blacks throughout history.

Gradually more and more of his pupils went on to high school and college to the intense pride and delight of their parents. As one mother remarked, "If Mr. Moore said, 'go to college' we felt we had to send them." In high school

they won many honors and were acclaimed by principals and teachers as well prepared students.

He achieved a real school spirit and pride among the students. As he says in his autobiography, "All this as a result of teaching that we, as Americans, could do anything that any other Americans could do; that it was a disgrace to fail or quit when studies were hard, and that parents and the community expected West Cape May students to succeed."

One day as they finished singing "America" - having recently been studying the history of the Pilgrims, a pupil asked what "we had to be proud of." To inspire him and others William wrote:

"We too have a right to sing 'My Country.' Old Spanish records state that we were with Columbus and Coronado. History records that we were here at Jamestown (1619) before the Pilgrims landed (1620). From then on it was our labor that changed the South from a primitive wilderness into the garden spot of America.

"Our labor created practically all the wealth of the South on which was based that culture of which they boast.

"We cut down the forests, drained the swamps, cultivated the crops and nursed and reared the families of the Southern Aristocrats.

"We have fought bravely in all the wars. On the wall of the Capitol in Washington is a picture of Commodore Perry on Lake Erie, showing a colored sailor in his crew. We have never had a traitor! On the contrary, we have loyally contributed our efforts from slave times until now, toward every movement to make America great.

"Yes, we can sing My Country with pride. We came with the first discoverers, we have been here ever since, and we're going to stay here."

It was during his first winter in Cape May that he noticed a particularly beautiful voice in the choir at the Franklin Street Methodist Church one Sunday. Susie Smothers had come to Cape May from Mount Winents, now a suburb of Baltimore, with a family which had summered there, and stayed on to work for Dr. Physick in the lovely estate which now adjoins the present tennis club. She and William Moore were married the following year.

As a family man, William was a devoted husband and father. His wife, by his own description, was "quiet, cultured, stable and good natured... Her love

for her family was boundless, and her influence on their development and lives was immeasurable.” Even years later Lavinia and Amaleta, the two daughters (both active in education, one as principal of a school in Detroit, the other a psychology professor at Hampton Institute in Virginia) remembers their mother as “always being there.” She was there when they got home from school, always knew where and when they came and went, and never retired until they were all home. “So well did they know this” says William in his description of her,”“that if some of the boys were out a little late they always brought Mother some ice cream as a sort of apology for their tardiness.”

Of his nine offspring, seven went to college; six went on for advanced degrees all of whom followed him in a career of teaching. Three survive today: Amaleta and James Alexander who reside n West Cape May and Silvius who remains at Hampton University where all three had teaching careers. The others: Hiram, Wilbur, Frank, William, Osceola and Lavinia have passed away, but all spent most summers and retirement years back home in West Cape May.

It was always assumed in the Moore family that you would go to college. Lavinia tells of listening to her older brother Wilbur talk about his life at Howard, and how as a member of the football team he had traveled to West Virginia University to play. He described the beauty of the countryside there with great enthusiasm. When Lavinia was asked by classmates where she was going to college, she thought quickly and blurted, “Why, West Virginia University!” She did indeed end up there mainly because they gave Moore the best exchange rate for his scrip with which a schoolteacher was paid in those days of the Depression.

(Star and Wave, August 7, 1997: Portrait of Wm. Moore continues):

(Editor note: Part 2 celebrates the 125th anniversary of the birth of William J. Moore. Molly Tully paints a rich portrait of a man and his times on Cape Island. Another version of this story written by the same author ran in the Cape May Star and Wave in 1975 on the occasion of Moore’s 100th birthday.)

By Molly Tully

Special to the Star and Wave

Because a schoolteacher’s salary was not sufficient to send nine children to

college, William spent the summers working at the Golf Club. The Moores always found ways to economize and save. They grew their own vegetables and canned them in the summer. They picked berries and made jams and preserves. Seafood was plentiful and cheap and so was wood to burn; somehow they never felt poor or frustrated by the exigencies of life. In 1910, they managed to buy the land on which they built their house. The older boys, Hiram, Frank and William, remember helping their father clear the land and prepare the foundation. A local contractor built it for \$2,500 and helped them work out way to finance it.

In September, Moore received two salaries, one from school and one from the club, so that was the month when they laid in supplies of potatoes, bacon, canned goods and fruit at wholesale prices. The children all had jobs during the summers which helped with expenses, and the girls and their mother made a lot of their own clothes. Even the smaller children gathered and sold wildflowers during the summer while the older ones worked at farming, caddying, bootblacking, domestic service and greenskeeping at the club. They gathered wood in the fall and helped their mother with the garden and chickens. Mrs. Moore was the family banker and kept each child's earnings separate, helping them budget for clothes and other needs.

William Moore managed to make the West Cape May School (later called the Annex School) not only a place of learning and achievement but a community center and second home to his pupils. He thought of new ways to occupy their leisure time by teaching them manual skills, carpentry weaving and whittling. They made kites, bows and arrows and whistles. These projects he planned for rainy or stormy days, in order to encourage regular attendance. He organized a small orchestra consisting of violins, ukuleles, drums, mandolins and guitars, which was often asked to perform around town. His children remember evenings at home when the orchestra would practice in their dining room.

His geography lessons would consist of asking the children to tell him just how they would send a shipment of coal (or cotton or wheat) from some place in America to a particular spot on the other side of the world. They would have to sit down with an atlas and give him detailed explanations of which rivers or railroads or ports they would use, and name every state, every body of water and every country they would pass through.

He had a great way of teaching children the importance of working, saving

their money and budgeting. Each Spring, as the eighth grade pupils were getting ready for the local integrated high school, he had them make out a list of what clothing they would need for the following school year, making selections mostly from a Sears catalog. They then earned the necessary money over the summer, and in September he would take them up to Philadelphia on the train to buy all their school clothes with their summer earnings. Knowing how important it is at this age to keep up with peers, this had the dual effect of giving them a sense of pride as well as the value of savings and budgeting.

It was during the summers, working at the Golf Club, that Moore first came in contact with tennis. His first summers were spent working at some of the local hotels (the Windsor, Congress Hall and the Colonial among them) as porter and luggage man. But with the rapid turnover of management and ownership of these hotels, he sought something more permanent and lucrative to do with his summers. Although he knew nothing about the game of golf, he was a determined learner, and after serving as locker room attendant for a while gradually took on more responsibility. Eventually, he was promoted to "handicapper" and became general factotum in charge of membership dues, grounds maintenance, golf handicapping and social arbiter (meaning that when newcomers came to Cape May to play golf he determined who would make compatible partners for them in terms both of their golf expertise as well as their professional interests.) One day he was advised that he would henceforth also be in charge of the new tennis courts which had been carved out of one corner of the Club.

He read everything he could find about tennis, just as he had done with golf, and started playing with some of the members. He traveled the middle states observing the great players and noting their technique. He studied court composition and maintenance and perfected a clay composition that was unique. As a born teacher he soon worked out a teaching technique that was successful with the children of club members. Gradually he developed a following among the families of Cape May who insisted that only William Moore could teach their children the game. Two of his star pupils, the Strobhar sisters, competed in the top ranks of the Middle States. The older sister had the distinction of giving champion Alice Marble a hard match at Forest Hills. When a reporter asked her where she learned her game she gave William Moore the credit for

teaching her the fundamentals.

At first his teaching was limited to children, young women anxious to impress their dates, and wives who wanted to be able to play tennis with their husbands. Soon William was sought after by anyone who wanted to learn. In 1960, he discussed his methods of teaching in a booklet entitled, "Teaching Tennis to Beginners."

During the thirties the Golf Club went into receivership, and the city took over ownership of the land. The tennis courts were leased by William Moore personally during the summer to run as a concession. He continued to give lessons, string rackets, maintain the courts and organize matches.

When a developer threatened to build houses on the Lafayette Street courts, Moore felt compelled to find a way to continue tennis in Cape May. It was at that time, during the late '50's that he went to see his friend Tom Harris, a retired Dupont executive who had been summering in Cape May since the late thirties and who had finally decided to sell his forty acres near Wilmington and live there year round. He had the money and the connections, and William had the expertise. Together they made a great team, and it is largely due to them and the support of another benefactor and devoted friend of William Moore's, Bob Alexander, that tennis survives today and is one of the town's outstanding attractions to summer visitors.

Harris found that his friend Sidney Newcomer had bought the thirteen acre Physick Estate and persuaded him to sell off enough to build the first seven courts. Moore had by then perfected a composition of clay which worked perfectly on Lafayette Street, and he reconstructed the same mixture on the new courts, even bringing over some of the old clay to lay on top. Harris worked out an arrangement whereby he donated the land to the city in exchange for the Club's use of the property tax-free for twenty years. In 1952, the Cape May Tennis Club took up residence on the new site, and William Moore was designated the official "pro."

Most of William's children worked at the courts during their summers. His son, Ossie (christened Osceola in honor of his Indian grandmother), succeeded his father as pro until his death in 1983. He had spent most of his summers helping his father with the courts as did Wilbur, Silvius and "Duck" (James Alexander). Lavinia, his daughter, began helping her father

give lessons while still a young girl, patiently throwing balls over the net to the struggling students. She eventually went on to become quite a good player, and competed in many of the local and regional circuits during her teens and college days. Even much later in life she still reminded one of Althea Gibson, with her tall, graceful, lanky build. ”“My trouble” said Lavinia was that I was so used to returning balls to Dad’s students right at their feet to make it easier for them, that I found it hard to play tough competitive tennis during a tournament.”

In 1977, the city of Cape May decided to build a recreation area adjacent to the courts to include a pond, paths, and a playground. The Club, whose lease was to expire in 1982, feared the city would take over their Club and wanted assurances they could continue on their leased space for another long term. A campaign by some local politicians to oust the Club was feebly launched but fizzled when it was proved that the Club had neither asked for nor received any city money in all the years of its existence, and that every penny taken in had been plowed back into maintenance and upkeep, including the salaries of the pro and his helpers. Yet the courts are public and everyone is welcome and encouraged to use them.

Finally in the spring of 1978, the Club was able to get the city to extend its lease for another fourteen years with an option for an additional ten, taking them to the year 2002. The city even agreed to give the Club permission to build two additional courts on city-owned land when they felt the need to expand.

William Moore’s birthday is always celebrated on August 4th (or the nearest Saturday) every year, with an annual luncheon or a cocktail party and contributions to the William J. Moore memorial scholarship fund as part of the ceremony. These scholarships, established by his former pupils of West Cape May, are awarded every year to the outstanding black graduates of the regional high school and lately have amounted to \$500 each to two students each year.

Cape May is probably best known today as a National Historic Landmark City because of its large concentration of late Victorian architecture. But it also has a reputation as a lively tennis center with the best soft courts in South Jersey thanks to William J. Moore.



William J. Moore, Cape May's first tennis pro, first black tennis pro, and oldest living pro in America.



William J. and son Ossie (Osceola) who succeeded him as tennis pro from 1966-1983.



William J. taught tennis to several generations of Cape May children. He also wrote a booklet entitled, "Teaching Tennis to Beginners."



West Cape May School, 1919. William J. Moore was the first teacher of Blacks in Cape May starting in 1895 in a one-room school house (known as the "Annex School") until 1954. His pupils went on to Cape May High School and many to college.



Moore broke his hip while posing for photographers the week before his 100th birthday (August 4, 1972). Determined not to miss the party which had been planned for weeks, he insisted on being returned on a stretcher for the festivities.



Blowing out his candles on his 100th birthday, August 4, 1972.



He is surrounded by his nine surviving children: l. to r.: Silvius (Sid); William Robert; Hiram Upshur; Wilbur Dunbar; James Alexander ("Duck"); Osceola Dubois ("Ossie"); Lavina; Frank Redden; and Amaleta.