

10 FASCINATING WOMEN IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA HISTORY, P. 48

# VERVE

MARCH 2011

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## EDITOR'S NOTE



### Whatever you do, don't take Women's History Month for granted.

**Yes, it's one of those forced calendar holidays that people often forget about.** But the fact that March is Women's History Month is remarkable for many reasons. First, the women who lobbied for the federal designation in the 1980s were an interesting bunch. Molly Murphy MacGregor, a former high school social studies teacher, rallied a group of feminists and educators in Santa Rosa, California, to talk about why less than three percent of their history textbooks were devoted to content about women. They lobbied Congress in 1980 to make one week in March National Women's History Week. By 1987, they had convinced Congress and the Reagan administration to make it a whole month. Now, their nonprofit National Women's History Project aims to teach as many people as possible about women's roles in history.

But it's not just the designation that's amazing. Consider this: Just 91 years ago, women didn't have the right to vote in this country. It's a fact that makes Lillian Exum Clement's accomplishments all the more notable (see Katy Nelson's roundup of the most fascinating women in WNC history, starting on page 48). Clement was born in Black Mountain in 1894 and worked in the Buncombe County Sheriff's office before becoming Asheville's first female attorney to practice without male partners. People addressed her as "Brother Exum." In 1920, a few months *before* the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment passed and gave women the right to vote, Clement beat two male opponents in a Democratic primary landslide and eventually won a seat in the North Carolina House of Representatives. She was the first woman in the South to be part of any state legislative body.

In the next few weeks, if you can't make it out to any women's history events (see our roundup, page 20), celebrate cool women in history in some other way. Read a book by one of Asheville's most famous authors, Wilma Dykeman, or listen to an album by Tryon native Nina Simone. It must seem ludicrous to some modern women (me included) to think that, just a short time ago, American women couldn't own property or vote. This is the month to celebrate the great ladies who helped make those rights—and so many others—a given.

Happy reading,

Jess McCuan  
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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Katy Nelson** did some great research and legwork to find our most fascinating women in Asheville's history (see page 48). Though she is an Asheville native, Katy began the assignment not knowing much about these remarkable women. "I learned so much from the librarians and archivists at Pack Memorial Library's North Carolina Room, Western Carolina University's Hunter Library and D.H. Ramsey Library's Special Collections at UNC-Asheville," she says.

"Then, interviewing locals impacted by our honorees made the story even more meaningful." Nelson is a graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill and received a master's degree from Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism.



Few people love women's history like Asheville writer **Joanne O'Sullivan**—especially when it comes to artists and explorers. She's written a collective biography and young adult novel featuring real and imagined women artists from the Renaissance (unpublished, so far) including Sofonisba Anguissola, the first internationally famous female artist, and Elisabetta Sirani, who



started the first art school for girls in Bologna. She also loves Freya Stark, an English woman with a bohemian upbringing who was one of the first women to explore the Middle East. Her favorite quote from Stark: "On the whole, age comes more gently to those who have some doorway into an abstract world—art, or philosophy, or learning—regions where the years are scarcely noticed and the young and old can meet in a pale, truthful light."

Novelists, doctors, jazz singers and  
banjo pickers. VERVE picks the

# 10 most fascinating women in WNC history.

by Katy Nelson

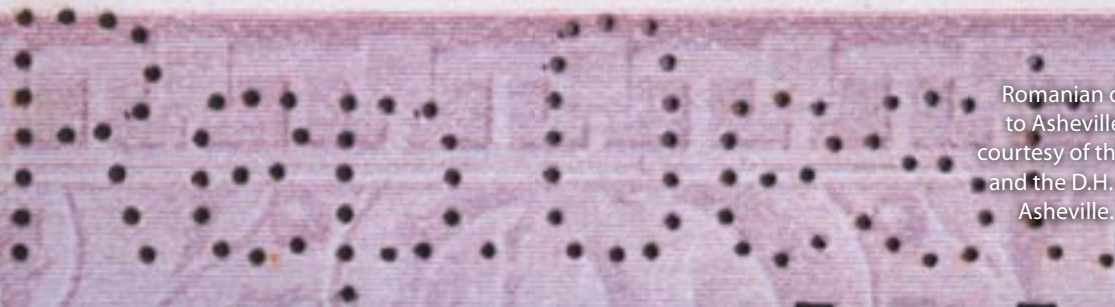
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**M**arch is Women's History Month. That gave us an excellent excuse to delve into Asheville-area archives for a little research project of our own. We were looking to compile a list of the most fascinating women in Western North Carolina history.

We had a few in mind at the start—like author Wilma Dykeman, considered by many to be the voice of Appalachia—or North Carolina's first female legislator, Lillian Exum Clement Stafford. Then, after spending a few hours in the library, we found Samantha Bumgarner, one of the first people in the country to record banjo music, and Thelma Caldwell, the first African American woman to become executive director of a YWCA in the South. On our hunt, we reached out to historians, librarians and people who knew the ladies we chose. Some cheeky librarians at Western Carolina University nominated two murderers (we're saving them for a future story).

The original plan was to honor three women, but we ended up with ten. Who's on your list?

Romanian ophthalmologist Sprinza Weizenblatt moved to Asheville in 1927. Above, her passport photograph, courtesy of the R. Henry Scadin Photographic Collection and the D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections at UNC Asheville. Special thanks to librarian Helen H. Wykle.



Frau – Femme



Lichtbild  
Photo



Unterschrift des Inhabers:  
Signature du titulaire:

*Sprinza Weizenblatt*

und seiner Frau:  
et de sa femme:



Im Namen der Landesregierung  
Für die Paßbehörde:  
Signature de l'agent délivrant le passeport:

Der Polizeipräsident

*[Handwritten signature]*



Courtesy of the NC Collection at Pack Memorial Public Library in Asheville.

## Wilma Dykeman

1920-2006

Wilma Dykeman lived her entire life on either end of the French Broad River, dividing her time between Newport, Tennessee, her husband's birthplace, and Asheville, hers. Her first book, *The French Broad*, launched an incredible literary career of both nonfiction and novels. Appalachian life was central to Dykeman's work. In an interview with the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, Dykeman said: "I got to know the mountain people that I cherish so."

Dykeman never shied from tough topics, like religion and the environment. She was a passionate environmentalist and published *The French Broad* in 1955, seven years before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. "Before anyone knew about sustainable development, Wilma Dykeman defined it," says Karen Cragolin, executive director of RiverLink, which named its West Asheville RiverWay development project after Dykeman.



Courtesy of Special Collections at the Hunter Library at Western Carolina University.

## Samantha Bumgarner

1878-1960


On a trip to New York City in 1924, banjo player "Aunt" Samantha Bumgarner of Jackson County became the first female country music artist in the nation to have her music recorded. Her father discouraged her from the fiddle, the "devil's box," so Bumgarner picked up a banjo as a teen and played until a year before her death at age 82. At a 1935 folk music revival in Asheville, a young Pete Seeger caught a Samantha show and said of it, "I lost my heart to the old-fashioned, five-string banjo played mountain-style." Pam Meister of Western Carolina University's Mountain Heritage Center curated an exhibit, *Women's Work: Stories from the Appalachian Women's Museum*, which features Bumgarner and runs through June.

## Sprinza Weizenblatt

1895-1987

Sprinza Weizenblatt was born in Romania and raised in Austria but moved to Asheville in 1927. She studied to become an ophthalmologist in Vienna and was the only ophthalmologist in Asheville when she moved here. Though Weizenblatt shunned publicity, the Wellness Center at UNC-Asheville is named after her, and sometime in the late '80s, she made a \$500,000 donation to UNCA, the largest donation in the university's history at that time.



 Courtesy of the NC Collection at Pack Memorial Public Library in Asheville.

## Lillian Exum Clement Stafford

1894-1925

“I want to blaze a trail for other women,” Lillian Exum Clement told a reporter in 1921. Clement, who went by her middle name, Exum, did indeed blaze a trail. She was North Carolina’s first woman legislator and Asheville’s first woman lawyer, elected by a landslide (10,368 to 41) on a wave of suffrage activism. Amazingly, she entered office just prior to passage of the 19th amendment, in 1920, which gave women the right to vote. Clement’s bills championed forest conservation, tuberculin testing of cow’s milk, aid to abandoned wives and private polling booths. Not all of Clement’s ideas were met with public approval, however: An Asheville crowd threw eggs and vegetables at her when she proposed creating homes for unwed mothers.


Jan Allen is co-founder of Lillian’s List, a Raleigh political action committee named after Clement. Allen once met Nancy Stafford, Clement’s daughter. Allen asked her if her mother would have approved of the progressive causes of Lillian’s List. According to Allen, Stafford said: “She would have been delighted.”

## Francine Delany

1937-1992

Francine Delany was UNC-Asheville’s first African American graduate. She was a beloved educator and the namesake for an Asheville charter school. Deborah Miles, Director of UNC-Asheville’s Center for Diversity Education, knew Delany: “Francine would have loved the notion of ‘Keep Asheville Weird,’” she says. Apparently, Delany was all about new and authentic experiences, both for herself and for the teachers and students she taught. Delany was a yoga enthusiast and a free thinker—“a doer, not a sitter,” Miles says.



 Courtesy of the NC Collection at Pack Memorial Public Library in Asheville.

## Leah Chiles

1885-1953

Leah Chiles had a habit of rising to the occasion. When she was only 18, she took over her father’s sculpture business after his death. But at age 40, Chiles had an even tougher assignment: her husband, Jake Chiles, died, leaving her to manage his Kenilworth Development Company while raising two sons. Always ambitious, she also found time to begin a political career and in 1928 became the mayor of Kenilworth—a move that made her the first woman mayor in North Carolina.

During her campaign, the city of Asheville was eyeing Kenilworth for annexation. Chiles had won the election by a large margin but knew annexation was unpopular with Kenilworth residents. Still, her son John Chiles told the *Asheville Citizen-Times* in 1994 that his mother supported annexation. “She knew the big picture... She was a businesswoman and didn’t take it lightly.” In 1929, Kenilworth residents voted by one vote to become a part of Asheville.

## Dr. Mary Frances “Polly” Shuford

1897-1983

Dr. Mary Frances Shuford was born into one of Asheville’s earliest and most prominent families. Her father was a superior court judge and her brother a congressman. Upon receiving her medical degree from the University of Chicago, Polly (as she was better known) returned to Asheville and pushed for African Americans to have equal access to healthcare. Some fellow physicians and family members discouraged Shuford’s efforts even though there was a dire need: only 18 of 400 hospital beds in Asheville were available for the 15,000 African American residents. After setting up a clinic on College Street, Shuford was a primary force behind the Asheville Colored Hospital, which in 1948 became part of Memorial Mission Hospital. “What she did was very controversial,” says Gwen Ashburn, dean of humanities at UNC-Asheville. “She was able to accomplish things because her family had such clout here. Medically, it was a horrible situation for blacks. People died because they weren’t allowed through the doors of the hospital.”



## Louise Bailey

1915-2009

She loved telling stories of the people and places of Henderson County and chronicled its history in weekly newspaper columns and nine books. Bailey was a descendant of one of the first families to call Flat Rock home. After earning her biology degree at Winthrop College in South Carolina and later graduating from Columbia University in New York with a degree in library science, Bailey got to know the poet Carl Sandburg. She worked as an assistant to Sandburg, typing up the manuscript for his first and only novel, *Remembrance Rock*. But Henderson County residents got to know Bailey through her weekly column, which ran in the *Times-News* for 42 years. Last year, her son Joe and friend Terry Ruscin compiled the columns into a book, *Historic Henderson County: Tales From "Along the Ridges."*

## Thelma Caldwell

1912-2004

Thelma Caldwell moved mountains in integrating the Asheville YWCA in the early 1960s—one of the first Asheville organizations to do so. Caldwell became the first black woman to be executive director of a YWCA in the South, and the second in the nation. Keep in mind this was a decade prior to the national YWCA adopted “eliminating racism” as a goal. Current YWCA executive director Holly Jones says Caldwell was “incredibly gifted and graceful” in integrating the Y in stages. “The way she brought things together laid the foundation for that diverse, inclusive place it is today,” Jones says.

Al Whitesides, vice chairman of the Asheville City Schools Board of Education, fondly recalls Caldwell’s influence on his life and the community. “She was one of the best I’ve ever seen in bringing diverse groups together. That was her strength,” he says. “When you look at the YWCA, Thelma’s handprint is all over it.”



## Nina Simone

1933-2003

Music icon Nina Simone was known around the world as a classically-trained pianist, jazz singer, songwriter and civil rights activist. But in her hometown of Tryon, where she was born in 1933, she was known as Eunice Waymon.

A musical prodigy, Waymon picked up the piano at age 3 and spent her childhood studying Bach with a local tutor. She also accompanied church services and studied at Asheville’s Allen High School, an all-girls’ African American boarding school, where she graduated valedictorian in 1950. She raised tuition money for one year at the Julliard School of Music in New York City from several local supporters.

After Julliard, though, she was rejected from a prestigious conservatory due to her race. Realizing she could make more money as a jazz singer than a music teacher, Eunice began singing in an Atlantic City nightclub. Afraid her religious mother would find out, Waymon took on the stage name Nina Simone. A record producer soon discovered her, and her Top 40 hits began piling up. One of them was her 1967 version of the Civil Rights movement anthem *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free*. ♡