

Late Black Wilmington tennis champ an ‘unsung hero’



From left, a photo from the day when Wilmington tennis star Nathaniel Jackson played Wimbledon champion Fred Perry in an exhibition match on the court at 1406 Orange St. From left, Jim Hendricks, Dr. Hubert Eaton Sr., Nathaniel Jackson and Fred Perry. [PHOTO COURTESY OF ONE LOVE TENNIS]

By John Staton
Wilmington StarNews
USA TODAY NETWORK

For at least one day, Nathaniel Jackson achieved a greatness that had been denied him. So the story goes, that’s the day when Jackson, a Black singles and doubles champion in the 1930s on the segregated American Tennis Association circuit, defeated white British tennis great Fred Perry, who won Wimbledon three years running between 1934 and 1936. (Perry would be the last Brit to win Wimbledon until Andy Murray in 2013.) The legendary but little-known exhibition match took place on the fabled court at 1406 Orange St., home to the One Love Tennis program today, where Wilmington doctor and civil rights activist

“He was the best of all. This man was unbelievable. ... He used to beat Althea, it didn’t matter. But he never got a chance to play on the USLTA (United States Lawn Tennis Association) circuit because of the color of his skin.”

Lenny Simpson,
One Love Tennis program

Hubert Eaton Sr., a fine tennis player in his own right, helped train the great Althea Gibson in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s. Gibson, of course, would go on to win two Wimbledon titles herself, as well as French and U.S. Open crowns, and was the first Black player to win a Grand Slam tennis championship.

As for the match between Jackson and Perry, very little

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NATHANIEL JACKSON
JUNIOR CHAMPION, A. T. A., 1929-1930 —
WINNER OF S. I. A. A. CHAMPIONSHIP AT TUSKEGEE

Nathaniel Jackson grew up in Laurinburg but later moved to Wilmington, where he played tennis with the likes of Althea Gibson and Dr. Hubert Eaton and taught Lenny Simpson. Seen here after winning the 1929 ATA singles junior championship. [PHOTO COURTESY OF BLACK TENNIS HALL OF FAME]



A new home is for sale on Grateful Way just off Wrightsville Ave. in Wilmington, N.C., Friday, February 12, 2021. The home is currently pending after being on the market for only four days. [MATT BORN/STARNEWS]

Wilmington-area home sales break records – again

By Emma Dill
Wilmington StarNews
USA TODAY NETWORK

The real estate industry is booming in Southeastern North Carolina. Last year, home sales in New Hanover, Brunswick and Pender counties broke records month after month. That trend has continued into 2021. In January, New Hanover County saw the highest number of home sales in any January ever, according to data compiled by Wilmington-based realtor Wade Wilson. The hot real estate market extends beyond New Hanover into Brunswick and Pender County, Wilson said. The high demand for Wilmington-area homes isn’t new, but it’s picked up in the last few months, said Tom Gale, the 2021 president of Cape Fear Realtors. Gale has worked in real estate in the Wilmington area for 16 years. “It’s been a seller’s market for a while,” Gale said, “but it’s really accelerated within the last six months to where you’re pretty much guaranteed to be in a multiple offer situation and the question is how much above asking price is (a home) going to sell for?” New Hanover real estate has become a “seller’s market” because the inventory of available homes has “all but disappeared,” Wilson said.

Low inventory, high demand

Right now, there are approximately 500 homes on the market in New Hanover County. That’s the lowest Wilson has seen inventory in the 12 years he’s worked in local real estate, he said. Last year at this time, Wilson estimates there were at least 1,000 homes up for sale.

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Local officials cut the ribbon to celebrate the grand opening of the new Division of Juvenile Justice building located at 138 N. Fourth Street on Monday. [KEN OOTS]

New Hanover welcomes new juvenile justice complex

By Kryss Merryman
Wilmington StarNews
USA TODAY NETWORK

There is a new state-of-the-art building in downtown Wilmington, and it means more to New Hanover County than just a building. While the county’s new Division of Juvenile Justice building

features two courtrooms, it also has technology to better serve the children of the community. To Julia Olson-Boseman, chairwoman of the New Hanover Board Of Commissioners, the technology means added help for youth. She emphasized the safety of child

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is known about how things went down on the Orange Street court that day. There are more questions than answers. How did the match come about? What year did it happen? How informal or competitive was it?

But Lenny Simpson, who calls Nathaniel Jackson “my coach and mentor” and now runs the One Love Tennis program at 1406 Orange St., refuses to let the story, or Jackson’s contributions to tennis, be forgotten.

“He’s like the forgotten plug of everybody,” Simpson said. “No one has heard of Nat Jackson except the people who played with him and knew how great he was.”

“It makes you hurt for him,” Simpson added. “He is a footnote. He was ‘just’ the ATA national champion. And he never had the opportunity to play against the best in the world and show them that he was as good as they were.”

At least until Jackson got to go up against Fred Perry. Simpson, who was born in 1948 and began learning tennis from Jackson, a neighbor, when he was 5, says the match must’ve happened in the late 1950s or perhaps even 1960, because he remembers hearing it talked about as a kid.

Both Jackson and Perry would have been at least in their late 40s, and Perry might have been over 50. Past their primes, no doubt, but once a champion, always a champion.

There’s no video footage, no photos of the match itself, although One Love does have an undated photo of Jackson, Perry and Eaton standing together while wearing tennis garb.

Wilmington newspapers of the day barely mentioned Althea Gibson’s accomplishments and connection to Wilmington, if they did at all. Given the times, Perry’s visit to the Port City to play at Eaton’s home, known as “the Black country club,” would’ve most likely gone unmentioned.

Perry moved to the United States and became an American citizen after he turned professional, perhaps feeling snubbed by a British public that, in those days, looked down its nose at amateur champs who turned pro. Perry, who grew up in a working-class home in Northern England, was extremely class-conscious and a champion of social causes.

As a former Wimbledon champ who always returned for the London tournament, even after he became a U.S. citizen, Simpson said Perry struck up a friendship with Gibson, who helped arrange his visit to the Orange Street court.

Hazy as the details might be, however, one thing’s for certain: Nathaniel Jackson was no slouch.

“He was the best of all. This man was unbelievable,” Simpson said. “He used to beat Althea, it didn’t matter. But he never got a chance to play on the USLTA (United States Lawn Tennis Association) circuit because of the color of his skin.”

A native of Laurinburg (on U.S. 74 between Whiteville and Charlotte), Jackson grew up playing tennis with his brother, Franklyn, with whom he would form a formidable doubles partnership. They were inducted into the Black Tennis Hall of Fame, which recognized them as “pioneers,” in 2019.

After Nathaniel won the ATA junior men’s championship in 1929 and 1930, he and Franklyn were ATA national doubles



NATHANIEL JACKSON
1934 National Singles
and Doubles Champion

Nathaniel Jackson grew up in Laurinburg but later moved to Wilmington, where he played tennis with the likes of Althea Gibson and Dr. Hubert Eaton and taught Lenny Simpson. Seen here after winning the 1934 ATA singles and doubles championship. [[PHOTO COURTESY OF BLACK TENNIS HALL OF FAME]

champions in 1931, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936 and 1938. After losing the men’s final in 1933, Nathaniel won the ATA national men’s singles championship in 1934. Franklyn followed his brother as ATA national men’s singles champion in 1935 and 1938.

As a player, Simpson said, Jackson was “just tenacious ... He was a package player. He had all the shots, all the shot-making,” a master of the art of the “chip and charge,” an approach that’s fallen out of favor in an era of big serves and hi-tech racquets.

“He could rally from the baseline,” Simpson said. “He was a heady player.”

By the end of the 1940s, most likely through his friendship with Eaton, who won the ATA’s junior men’s championship in 1933, Jackson had moved to Wilmington, where he was one of the city’s first Black mail carriers.

Jackson has a daughter, Natalie Jackson Royster, who lives in Virginia, but she could not be reached to comment for this story.

To hear Simpson tell it, he might never have started playing tennis if not for Jackson.

“The reason why I started playing tennis was because of the Coca-Cola,” he said. “I had no idea about tennis. But I would see Mr. Jackson come down the sidewalk in front of my mom and dad’s house with a Coca-Cola in his hand. You could set your watch by it. I wanted to know where he got that Coca-Cola. One day

I finally got up enough nerve to say, ‘Mr. Jackson, where’d you get that Coca-Cola?’”

As it turns out, Jackson was getting the Coke from Eaton’s. With the permission of Simpson’s parents, he eventually took the little boy over there one day, and introduced Simpson not just to the Eatons but also to Althea Gibson. As a high-schooler and young adult, she split time between Orange Street and Virginia, where she worked with Dr. Robert Walter Johnson — a friend and associate of Eaton’s — and his American Tennis Association Junior Development Team, which attracted the top Black players in the country.

“Mr. Jackson would be on one side of me, (Gibson would) be on the other side,” Simpson said. “And that’s how I learned the game of tennis.”

He calls Jackson “my unsung hero, the guy nobody talks about. Because he never had a chance.”

By the mid-1950s, of course, when Gibson began to integrate the world of tennis, Jackson was in his 40s, too old to play against the best in the world. The fact that he never got a fair shot weighed on Jackson.

“He didn’t talk about it much, but he talked about it enough,” Simpson said. “It bothered him. He ended up with a drinking problem. All of that came from the past. The baggage, some deal with it better than others.”

Simpson also remembers Jackson as a bit of a shark at checkers.

“Checkers was huge” back then, Simpson said. “I’d watch him play checkers with everybody in this town.”

Jackson had high hopes for his prize student’s career, and was rightfully proud when Simpson played in the U.S. Open from 1964-1966. (The first of those years, Simpson was just 15.)

When Jackson passed away in the early ‘70s, “I was on tour,” Simpson said. “I couldn’t get back for his funeral. That’s a thing I regret to this very day.”

In paying homage to his coach and mentor, however, and in bringing Jackson’s story to the world, Simpson is helping set the record straight, perhaps repairing the past as much as it can be repaired, and bringing posthumous honor to a man denied by racism in his own lifetime.

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victims, who need to testify but won’t have to be physically present in the courtroom.

“To me, this building tells the youth of the community that we care about you,” New Hanover Commissioner Jonathan Barfield Jr. added, “We want to do everything we can to make sure these kids have a great life in our community.”

New Hanover celebrated the transformation of the juvenile justice building with a ribbon cutting ceremony on Monday.

The building, located at 138 N. Fourth Street, replaced the previous facility and constructed by New Hanover for the juvenile court system to function efficiently and effectively to serve teens in the county, according to Jessica Loeper, New Hanover chief communication officer.

The new three story-high facility is 38,875 square feet and will house court and support functions related to the juvenile court system, according to Loeper.

Judge Julius Corpening, Chief District Court Judge for the Fifth Judicial District, said there needed to be significant change in the county’s juvenile justice system.

“My hope is that this building will be a beacon of hope and healing for the children and families that we serve,” Corpening said. “That’s my hope. It’s light, it’s inviting, and I hope they will find their experience here one that will change their lives and transform them.”

New Hanover District Attorney Ben David said that this is a great day for the county.

“It says that nothing is more important than our kids,” David said. “Children are messages we send to the future. All of us in this building will ultimately be judged by how are we doing by our kids when it comes to getting justice for them and making sure we have teachable moments when crimes are carried with them.”

David said there have been terrible cases in this community involving juveniles who have been tried as adults.



One of the courtrooms in the new Division of Juvenile Justice building. District Attorney Ben David said the building being well-lit, and the colorful accents are meant to be welcoming. [KEN OOTS]



Judge Julius Corpening said he hopes this building “will be a beacon of hope and healing for the children and families” it will serve. [KEN OOTS]

According to Loeper, the “Raise the Age” law went into effect in Dec. 2019, which raises the age of juvenile jurisdiction for nonviolent crimes to age 18, so 16- and 17-year-old teens will no longer be automatically charged as adults in North Carolina. This increases the number of cases heard in juvenile court, so this new building will help ensure adequate space for those important functions.

David said a majority of the kids that will come into this building will have committed nonviolent crimes, and it will be their first offense.

“We want to look at these moments as potential healing and not just punishments,” David said. “The vast majority of kids in the juvenile justice system are kids who have made mistakes, who have learned from those mistakes, and who are going to get rehabilitation and treatment through the juvenile justice system,” David said.

According to David, using a therapeutic model in the juvenile justice system allows for a better chance at reducing crime. He said childhood trauma is the number one gateway drug to opioids.

“It is the number reason people enter into negative relationships whether that means picking a life partner that’s abusive or joining a gang,” David said. “We need to understand

that at an early stage if we can see that child not just as a defendant but as a victim who needs treatment, who has experienced adverse childhoods, might live in adverse community environments, and say now that they are within our justice system, we can get them a continuum of care that’s spread out through this community to really make them more resilient.”

David said by following this model, it will not only change these juveniles’ lives but make the entire community a safer place.

According to David, the building is designed to be a welcoming place. He said it is well-lit, has a lot of windows and brighter colors for a reason.

“It’s saying to the families we only have them in this building for a short time and you have them for a long time, so let us support you,” David said. “Let’s all work together to say, ‘If this is the worst thing you have ever done, it’s still a good life.’ We need to understand that there is no such thing as problem kids only kids who have problems.”

Bordeaux Construction Company was the contractor for the building and the architecture was designed by Moseley Architecture, according to Loeper. The project budget, including design, construction, and furniture and fixtures, was just under \$17 million and the county expects the final costs to come in slightly under the budgeted amount.

Staff is expected to move into the building later this month. It will be in full operation on March 1.

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