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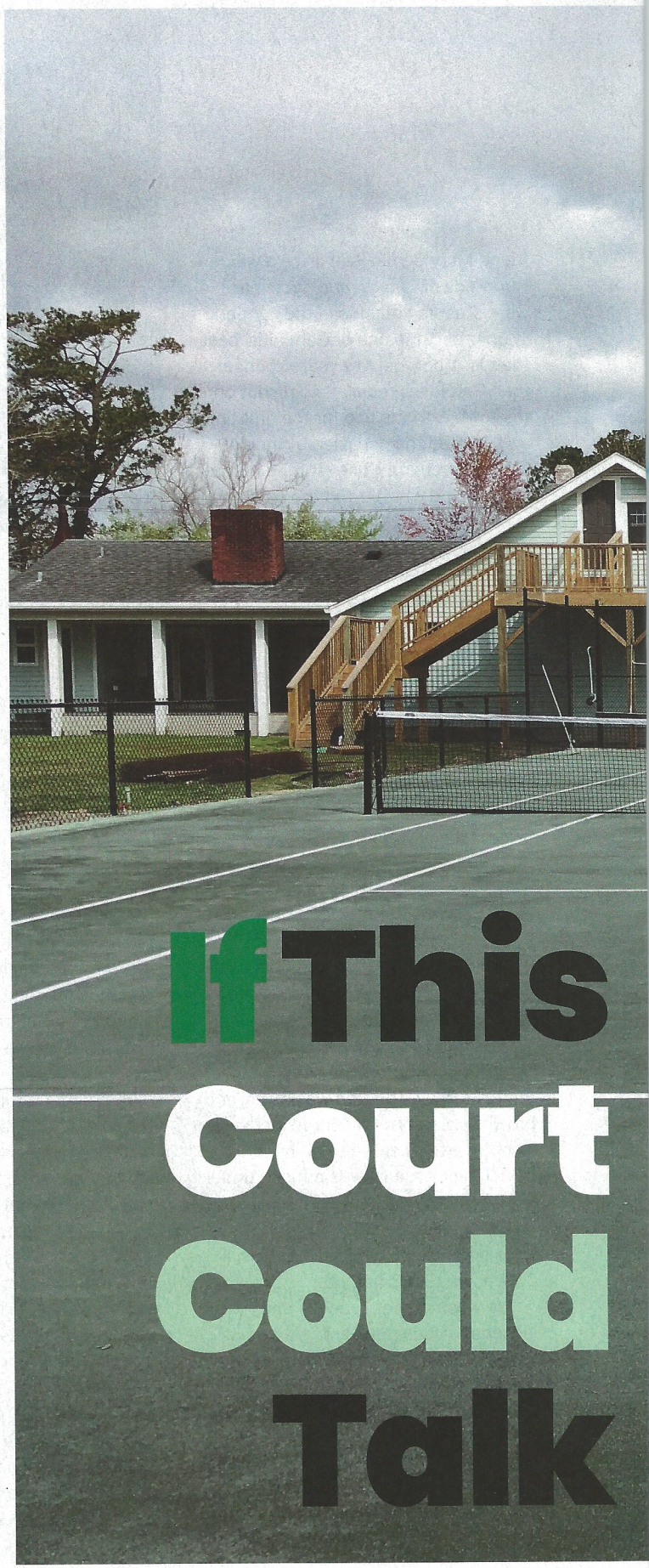

# If This Court Could Talk

**If the rectangle of clay at 1406 Orange Street could talk, Lenny Simpson knows exactly what it would say. This spring, the 71-year-old Simpson presided over a re-opening ceremony, complete with ribbon cutting, for a backyard tennis court at this address in Wilmington, NC.**

**At first glance, you might wonder why there would be so much fanfare over such a modest facility, in a residential neighborhood, in a town that has never been known as a hotbed for the sport. But Simpson, a former tour player who grew up on the same block in the 1950s, understands firsthand how significant this patch of clay is to the history of American tennis.**

by Stephen Tignor

**The revival of a historic tennis court in North Carolina, and the dedication of a statue at the US Open, shine a belated spotlight on the civil-rights legacies of Althea Gibson and her mentor, Dr. Hubert Eaton**

ONE LOVE TENNIS

"The property was immaculate," Simpson says of his first encounter, as a 5-year-old, with the home of Dr. Hubert Eaton at 1406 Orange St. "But I could only hear what was happening in the yard, I couldn't see it."

"Finally I peeped under the hedges, and it was like looking into a different world. There was a pool and a tennis court. Everyone was dressed in white, they had racquets, and they were playing this game. It was magical."

Still, there was something else that made Simpson's eyes really pop out: "They were drinking Coca-Colas. I thought, 'How can I get a Coca-Cola?'"

In those days, Simpson says, it was a "special privilege" for someone from the neighborhood to be invited into the home of Dr. Eaton, who was the chief surgeon at the African-American hospital in then-segregated Wilmington. When Simpson eventually found his way in, he was greeted with a smile by the doctor. But it was the words of the tall, lanky, young woman on the other side of the net that would stay with Simpson forever.

"She said, 'Welcome, champ, to the court,'" Simpson says. "I never forgot that. Here were all these other, older players, and I hadn't even hit a ball. But she called me champ."

It wasn't just the word that meant something to him; it was the person who spoke it. This was Althea Gibson, the 25-year-old from New York who had broken tennis' color barrier in 1950 by becoming the first black player to enter the U.S. Nationals, and who would go on to become the first African-American to win at Roland Garros, Wimbledon and Forest Hills.

"There was an aura around Dr. Eaton and Althea when they walked out to the court," Simpson remembers. "They were here to play, and everything had to be ready. I learned the game from them; they stood by me and coached me while I hit against a backboard."

Gibson spent her youth in Harlem, but it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that she grew up, as a player and person, while living and training at Dr. Eaton's house in Wilmington.

The two met in 1946, at the American Tennis Association's (ATA) national championships in Wilberforce, OH. The ATA was the sport's African-American federation, but Eaton and his friend, Dr. Robert Johnson of Virginia, were looking for a young black player who might be able to integrate tennis, the way Jackie Robinson was in the process of integrating baseball. Robinson would debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers the following year.

Watching the teenage Gibson compete in the ATA women's final, they thought they might have found their pioneer. She was all arms and legs, she was wildly erratic, and she didn't know much about tennis tactics, but she was among the most talented athletes they had ever seen. So, as journalist Doug Smith wrote in *Whirlwind*, a book about Johnson, the two doctors "collaborated on a prescription" for the teenager.

Knowing Gibson would struggle to improve without better coaching and guidance, Eaton hatched a plan: during the school year, she would live at his home; during the summer she would live at Johnson's home, in Lynchburg, VA, where he also had a tennis court.

"Who wouldn't be interested in a deal like that?" Gibson said when Eaton and Johnson made their pitch.

"If it weren't for Dr. Eaton and [his wife] Celeste," Lenny Simpson says, "there would be no Althea."

**FOR GIBSON** and her legacy, 2019 has been a year of long-awaited recognition. While she was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1971, and took her place in the US Open's Court of Champions in 2007, she hasn't enjoyed anything close to the level of acclaim that has been accorded to her fellow African-American tennis pioneer, Arthur Ashe, or her fellow women's-tennis pioneer, Billie Jean King. The USTA named the Open's biggest stadium for Ashe and dedicated a statue of him on the grounds; in 2006, the National Tennis Center was named for King. Until now, though, there has been little evidence of Gibson's contributions in Queens.

That's set to change this year, when a statue designed by sculptor Eric Goulder will be erected in her honor at Flushing Meadows. Former USTA president Katrina Adams was instrumental in getting the project off the ground, and she recruited King to close the deal with a speech in front of the USTA's decision-makers.

"I said, 'She's our Jackie Robinson of tennis, and she needs to be appreciated for it, and she's not,'" King told *The Undefeated* website. "I wanted something there that was permanent. I didn't want just a one-day highlight."

King and Adams got their statue, and why shouldn't they? It's a fitting, if belated, tribute to a native New Yorker who had a more profound impact on her home tournament than any other player in its 138-year history. It's also fitting that it will go up in the same year that the court at the Eaton house will be reopened in Wilmington. The two disparate locales—New York and North Carolina, North and South—together formed the person and player that Gibson would become.

As Gibson biographer Bruce Schoenfeld chronicles in *The Match*, her transition from the big city to the Jim Crow South wasn't an easy one. Until then, the 18-year-old had rarely attended school in Harlem, and she didn't even qualify to be a freshman at Williston High in Wilmington. Up north, she had the freedom to roam the streets; she took subway rides and frequented pool halls across Manhattan. Down South, she had to wear dresses and make-up, and she had to adjust to a highly circumscribed society, where whites had eliminated virtually all contact between the races. Gibson also needed to improve her manners; they were so bad that, at first, the Eatons had her eat meals in their kitchen.

Still, Gibson thrived in Wilmington. She played the saxophone in the Williston High band, and was a high scorer on a basketball team that went undefeated. As far as tennis went, she validated everything that Eaton and Johnson believed they had seen in her that day in Ohio. Not only would she go on to play with whites, she would go on to dominate them.

"Everything about Dr. Eaton was about discipline and structure," Simpson says. "He saved her life."

But the two doctors were just getting started. Banned from white tennis facilities in the South, they used their private courts to start the ATA's junior-development program, essentially inventing the concept of the tennis academy. Ashe would learn the game from Johnson and Eaton, and so would his younger friend Lenny Simpson. The 5-year-old who discovered tennis while searching for a Coca-Cola would leave Wilmington and become a scholarship player at East Tennessee State, and later a touring pro. In 1964, at 15, he


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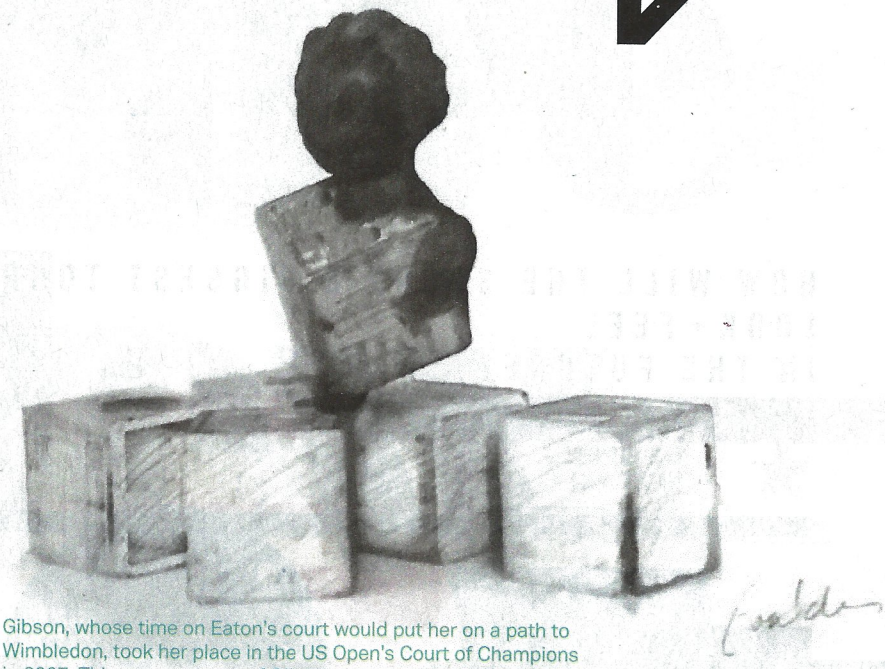

Gibson, whose time on Eaton's court would put her on a path to Wimbledon, took her place in the US Open's Court of Champions in 2007. This year, a statue of Gibson will be unveiled at Flushing Meadows. *(Sketch provided by artist Eric Goulder.)*

became the youngest player to enter the U.S. Nationals. After he retired, Simpson and his wife, JoAnn, opened a racquet club in Tennessee.

It was during a trip to his hometown in 2012 that Simpson began to think about Dr. Eaton's old court, and about carrying on his legacy. Invited to give a speech during Wilmington's Azalea Festival, Simpson reflected on how much had changed in his city, and his sport, and the role that Dr. Eaton had played in both transformations.

"I thought about when I was a kid, and some people in the town didn't want my family to be at the festival's parade," Simpson says. "Now here I was, all these years later, about to get up on the podium at the festival and give a speech. I thought, 'It's time to give back and continue that tradition.'"

Simpson and his wife returned to the Wilmington area. Through his nonprofit, One Love Tennis—along with help from the USTA and $50,000 from the city's most famous citizen, Michael Jordan—he purchased the Eaton property. After years of neglect, the court was covered with grass, but it didn't take long to return it to its former glory.

"We want to make it exactly the way it was here, as much as we can," Simpson says. "The clay is playing great."

More than anything, through One Love's junior programs, Simpson wants to make tennis accessible to neighborhood children, the way Dr. Eaton's court made it accessible to him.

"We want to serve the kids who can't belong to country clubs, or afford expensive equipment, or travel to tournaments," Simpson says. "And we want this to be a catalyst to revitalize this neighborhood. People here know the history of this house, and we want it to be a positive example."

In bringing tennis back to the Eaton home, Simpson is also putting a long-overdue spotlight back on his mentor's legacy. Most fans know that Dr. Johnson coached Gibson and Ashe; his house has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 2002, and last year the court at that home was renovated and re-opened. By comparison, Eaton's role in integrating tennis has been overlooked.

Yet that was only a small part of what Eaton achieved. Inspired to become an activist when he testified at a trial and discovered that local courts in North Carolina kept separate Bibles for black and white witnesses, Eaton would make himself "the point man for most of the civil rights cases" in the area, according to the *Wilmington Star-News*. In 1951, Eaton successfully sued to improve conditions at black schools in Wilmington. In 1964 his daughter, Carolyn, became the first black girl to attend a white school in the county. Eaton was instrumental in integrating the city's hospitals and its college, UNC-Wilmington, as well as its golf course, its YMCA and its libraries.

His tennis court, naturally, was one of the few integrated facilities in the South; Fred Perry, among many others, played there. A 2015 article about Eaton in *Wrightsville Beach Magazine* dubbed him "Doctor Equality."

"People knew what this place meant in the 1940s, '50s, '60s," Simpson says of the Eaton house. "And then it disappeared. Dr. Eaton was a strong, sophisticated, intelligent man. When he talked, everyone listened."

Eaton's voice helped Gibson and Ashe become the players and citizens they were—players and citizens who would have statues built for them at their nation's tennis championships. By bringing Eaton's court at 1406 Orange Street back to life, Simpson hopes to keep that voice, and the lessons it taught, alive for a new generation.

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