

A Pretty Little Place on Lincoln Street

CONTRIBUTED BY MIKE FARRELLY, MONTCLAIR TOWN HISTORIAN

IN THE 1870S Richard and Sophia Sears had a house and owned property along Orange Rd. in the South End. The property extended all the way to Lincoln St. It stayed in the Sears family until the 1920s. In the mid-1920s they sold the lots bounded by Sears Pl. (named for the family), Irving St. and Lincoln St. to the Y.C.P Development and Construction Co. who put in Sears Pl., sewers and built a number of houses, including this house. Y.C.P. built the house in 1927 and also provided the mortgage. The first owners were Albert and Corrine “Cora” Johnson. Albert was a chauffeur for various private families. He was also a mechanic and became a truck driver.



Photo courtesy Mike Farrelly

Most notably he drove for the New Jersey Forwarding Co. which had a terminal on Commercial St. in Newark. Cora said that she was the “proprietor of a beauty parlor” on the 1930 Census. She had run a hairdressing business out of her home on North 6th St. and, later, on North 11th St. when she and Albert lived in Newark. It is probable that she continued to run the business out of her home when she lived on Lincoln St. but her business is not listed in any Montclair directory. It doesn’t seem to be in any Newark directory either. The Johnsons stayed in this house until 1937 when they moved to Orange. They had fallen behind on the mortgage, Y.C.P. foreclosed on the property and the house was sold in a sheriff’s sale.

The next owners were Arthur M. and Marion (Thompson) Wright. They lived in the house with her mother, Minnie Thompson. Arthur was a letter carrier and postal clerk in the Newark Post Office. Marion was one of Montclair’s treasures. This article is more about her than anything else.

Marion was born in East Orange. There are some differences in the records but it seems that she was born in 1903 or 1904. She grew up in Newark, attending the Newark public school system. She was admitted to the prestigious Barringer High School. She was one of only two African Americans at Barringer (in the early 20th Century) and was treated differently than the other students. In her junior year, at the age of 16, Marion got pregnant and married a young man, William Moss, who was only a year older than she was. They had two children together, Thelma and James. At her mother’s insistence she left the kids with her mom and finished high school at the top of her class. Her mother urged her to divorce her husband and continue her education. She applied to Howard University (Washington DC) in 1923 but, like most colleges of the time, Howard would not take women who were married, had children or were divorced. She enrolled under her maiden name, pretended that she was younger than her actual age and left the children in NJ. In 1925 William was granted a divorce and was given full custody of Thelma and James. Marion managed to keep all of this secret from the university. She continued to write letters to her children but remained estranged from them until later in her life when she effected some measure of reconciliation.

She devoted herself to her studies. She received her B.A. in education in 1927 and went on to receive an M.A. in education a year later. She taught at Howard for a couple of years.

1931 was a busy year for Marion. It was during the Great Depression. She returned to Newark, married Arthur and began a doctoral program in history at the Teacher’s College, Columbia University. She stopped to work for the Newark Department of Welfare and the New Jersey Emergency Relief Administration (NJERA). Under the guidance of Merle Curti, a white professor at Columbia who believed that African American history was a legitimate field of study, Marion completed and defended her dissertation “The Education of Negroes in New Jersey” in 1940. She became the first African American woman in history to receive a Ph.D. She was invited to teach at Howard. She maintained an apartment in Washington.

Marion was one of the first teachers to create curriculums for the study of African American history. She remained concerned that states had laws on the books that demanded equal education for blacks and whites but had found ways to circumvent these laws. She became an editor and contributor for the Journal of Negro Education published by Howard. Her work and subsequent research became the foundation of the NAACP’s case against the Topeka Board of Education (Brown v the Board of

Education) that led to the Supreme Court’s decision to end segregation in public schools in 1954. One of the owners, Marion Wright, became the first African American woman in history to receive a Ph.D.—from Columbia University! Her 1940 dissertation was titled “The Education of Negroes in New Jersey”

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Marion was loved by her students and respected by the faculty at Howard. She put together many important papers and books on African American history and the inequality of education between black and white students. She did not return home much until her mother became sick in 1953. She returned to Montclair to take care of her dying mother. She and Arthur divorced in 1958 but he continued to live in the Montclair house. Marion passed away in Washington suddenly (and under questionable circumstances) in 1962. In 1989 her son, James spoke at a tribute to Marion. James said that it was a shame that she was in the process of reconnecting with her children when she

passed. She also allowed her daughter, Thelma, to live in the house while she was studying at Rutgers in Newark.

Thelma studied medical technology at Rutgers. She worked as a lab technician at Clara Maas Hospital in Belleville while she was going to school. After she graduated, she accepted a teaching position at Rutgers in the College of Pharmacy. She moved to Metuchen when Rutgers moved the college to Piscataway in 1971. Arthur passed away in 1969. ■

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