

Remembering Ms. Washington

Mary T. Washington Wylie, the nation's first African-American female CPA, blazed a trail for other black accountants.

By Allison Enright

Mary Thelma Washington Wylie (nee Morrison) (1906-2005) led a life that demonstrated to others the importance of perseverance and perfection. As the nation's 13th African-American CPA, and the first female of the group to attain her license, she became a leader for future generations of accountants. The firm she began in her basement on the South Side of Chicago in 1939, known today as Washington, Pittman & McKeever, remains one of the largest African-American owned firms in the nation.

Born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, Washington moved to Chicago at the age of six to live with her maternal grandparents. After earning her diploma from Wendell Phillips High School, Washington took a position at Binga State Bank, one of only a few African-American owned banks in the 1920s. Arthur Wilson, the bank's vice president and Washington's

supervisor, took note of her bookkeeping skills and encouraged Washington to pursue her business degree. Wilson himself was an accomplished CPA, having the notable distinction of being only the second African-American in the United States to earn his CPA license in 1923.

When she attended Northwestern University's School of Chicago Business in the late 1930s, Washington found that she was the only woman in the program, and certainly the only black female student. Being light-skinned, however, she was easily accepted as white, as Washington's daughter, Barbara Shepherd, a retired Chicago Public School teacher, explains.

Washington earned her degree in 1941 and was able to serve her apprenticeship with Wilson. When she sat for the CPA licensing exam, again, she was the only woman in the room.

"I remember telling people at school she was a CPA—and nobody believed me," Shepherd recalls. "It was important for me to prove that she was what she was. And then one day she came to school. She had such a commanding presence, and those school kids were so impressed.

"She had a profound impact on me as a child and adult. There was no problem she could not solve. She had all the answers," Shepherd adds. "She was a workaholic in some ways, and pursued what she did and really enjoyed doing it. She loved being a CPA."

Washington began building her tax-season clientele in 1939, and focused on serving the community of small black-owned businesses in her area. One of her early and long-time clients was S.B. Fuller, a self-made millionaire and owner of the cosmetics company Fuller Products Company. Fuller came to rely heavily on Washington's services and advice, and later leased some of his business office space to her to accommodate her growing business.

Judge Willie M. Whiting, who sits on the Circuit Court of Cook County, worked for Washington's first secretary while attending college. She learned a valuable lesson from Washington: Perfection.

"She was always very sweet, but it had to be correct," Judge Whiting recalls. "I was hired to be a statistical typist, and a typist I was not. But never did she interfere except in a positive way. Eventually, I learned to type those reports."

As time went by, Washington fostered the development of young African-American CPAs who needed to

A Tribute to Perseverance & Perfection

1939—Established Mary T. Washington & Company in her home

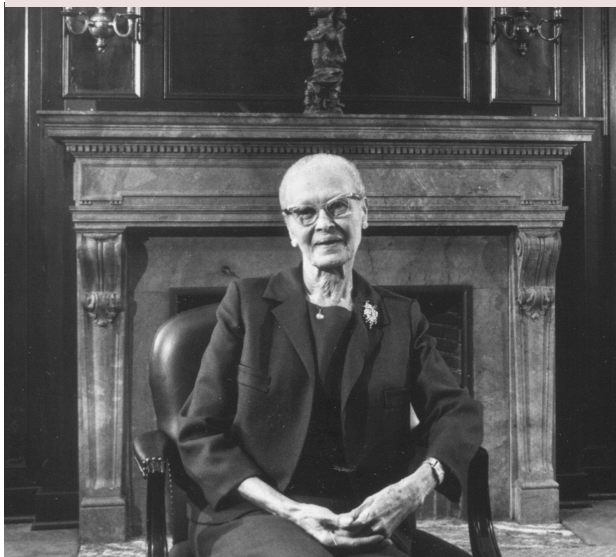
1941—Earned a business degree from Northwestern University's School of Chicago Business

1968—Established the firm of Washington & Pittman

1976—Firm becomes known as Washington, Pittman & McKeever, LLC

1985—Retired at age 79

Picture courtesy of Janice Aaron, Washington, Pittman & McKeever, LLC



serve apprenticeships to earn their CPA licenses. Hiring was typically done through references from friends and associates. Frederick Ford, currently the vice chairman of the board at Draper & Kramer, the Chicago-based real estate firm, came to Washington looking to serve his apprenticeship in 1949. "None of the big CPA firms would hire blacks, so Ms. Washington offered to let me come and work. She really opened the way for a number of black CPAs," he says.

According to Theresa A. Hammond in her book *A White-Collar Profession: African-American CPAs Since 1921* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), aspiring young accountants would move across the country to have the opportunity to work for Washington. As a result of her generosity, by the 1960s Chicago was recognized as having the largest number of black CPAs of any city in the nation, most of whom served the city's significant black community.

In Chicago's tight-knit African-American accounting community of the 1950s and 1960s, Washington was certainly a leading figure, having been associated with nearly every black CPA through one channel or another. To draw the community more closely together, Washington threw annual holiday parties at her home, inviting her own employees and the rest of the city's achieving black CPAs to the event, as well as clients, many of whom remained lifelong friends and professional admirers.

Hammond, who is also the chairperson of the Accounting Department at Boston College, says Washington, "was not simply

wealthy, successful and highly regarded in the community. She set an example by creating opportunities for others and by generously supporting their careers, even after they had left her firm. Her training, mentoring and encouraging of others distinguished her from most professionals, who get too focused on their own success and don't have time for others. Her devotion to others' development...is a major reason that she is so well remembered today."

Lester McKeever, Washington, Pittman, & McKeever's current managing partner and principal and former chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, came to work for Washington part-time during the busy tax season, and while away from the Army. When he was called back, Washington petitioned for his early release from service, but was denied. And when his time in the Army was up, he returned to work at the firm full-time; it came to be known by today's name in 1976.

Thanks to Washington's long-time leadership, the firm she established and that McKeever continues to uphold, now audits some of the largest accounts in the area; it is a joint auditor for the City of Chicago and for Cook County, for example, audits several area universities, including Chicago State University and Western Illinois University, and handles the employee benefit plans for electric utility company Commonwealth Edison and printer RR Donnelly.

Washington passed away in July 2005 at age 99. Her three daughters, two son and nine grandchildren survive her. □

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