

The Clerk's Black History Series



Debra DeBerry
Clerk of Superior Court
DeKalb County



Althea Neal Gibson

(August 25, 1927 – September 28, 2003)

"The First African-American to Win a Grand Slam Title"

"The First African-American to Win at Wimbledon"

Althea Neal Gibson was born August 25, 1927, in Silver, South Carolina, to Daniel and Annie Bell Gibson, who were sharecroppers on a cotton farm. At the beginning of the Great Depression, Althea's family moved to New York City, where Althea grew up playing sports in the streets of Harlem. In 1940, neighbors encouraged by her athletic ability, collected money for Althea to take lessons at the Cosmopolitan Tennis Club. In 1941 she entered, and won, her first tournament at the American Tennis Association (ATA) New York State Championships. She also won the ATA girls' division national championship in 1944 and 1945. And in 1947, Althea won her first of ten straight national ATA women's titles. In 1949, Althea was the first African-American woman to play in the United States Lawn Tennis Association's (USLTA) National Indoor Championships, where she reached the quarter-finals. Her accomplishments earned her a full athletic scholarship to Florida A&M University. When she graduated in 1953, segregated tennis facilities limited her playing options and she considered joining the Army.

Around this time, another tennis professional wrote a scathing article castigating the sport for their discriminatory policies that denied Althea the opportunity to compete in the world's best tournaments.

That next year, Althea was invited to play at Wimbledon, where she immediately ranked in the top 10 of US players. Later that year, she climbed to No. 7 in the US. In 1955, a sponsorship by the United States Lawn Tennis Association sent her on a State Department tour to compete in places like India, Pakistan and Burma. Her talent and worldwide experience culminated in her landmark win at the French Open in 1956, making her the first African-American to win a Grand Slam Tournament. In 1957 she became the first African-American to win Wimbledon and the first champion to receive the trophy personally from Queen Elizabeth II, in the 80 year history of the tournament. She returned home to a ticker tape parade, only the 2nd African-American to do so, after Jesse Owens. In 1958 she won the U.S. Open, another first for an African-American. In all, Althea collected 56 singles and doubles championships before turning pro in 1959. In 1960, Althea won the

Singles Title and for the first time, started earned money as a professional. She earned a reported \$100,000 for playing a series of matches before Harlem Globetrotters games, but after the tour ended, she made a mere \$500.00 winning the single and doubles titles at the Pepsi World Pro Tennis Championships.

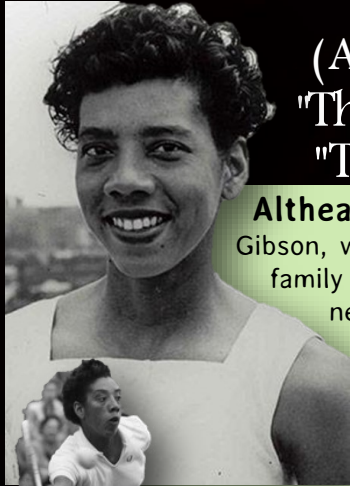
Althea Gibson was a multi-talented, athlete and persona beyond her tennis career. She recorded an album, *Althea Gibson Sings* in 1959, appeared on television, *The Ed Sullivan Show* and *What's My Line*, worked as a sports commentator and appeared in the movie *The Horse Soldiers* (1959). In 1960 she published her first memoir, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody*.

She continued breaking color barriers in 1964, when at the age of 37, she became the first African-American woman to join the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) tour. However, although her new sport was amiable to change, the rest of the world was not. Many hotels still excluded people of color, and country club officials routinely refused to allow Althea to compete. When she did compete, she was often forced to dress for tournaments in her car, because she was banned from the clubhouse. She endured another fourteen years of racial disparity before retiring from professional golf in 1978.

Althea's final years were filled with awards and recognitions, but plagued with financial struggles and health problems. In the late 1980s she suffered two cerebral hemorrhages and in 1992, a stroke. Ongoing medical expenses depleted her financial resources, leaving her destitute. Although she reached out to multiple tennis organizations for help, none offered. But when her former doubles partner Angela Buxton called on the tennis community to respond to her aid, they raised nearly \$1 million in donations from around the world.

In early 2003 Althea Neal Gibson survived a heart attack, but died September 28, 2003.

She was 76 years old. Althea's five Wimbledon trophies are displayed at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History.



Althea Gibson & Angela Buxton

