

# The Clerk's Black History Series

## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



## Mary Beatrice Davidson Kenner

(May 17, 1912 – January 13, 2006)

### “Inventor of the Adjustable Sanitary Belt for Women”

**Mary Beatrice Davidson Kenner** was born on May 17, 1912, in Charlotte, North Carolina. She grew up in a family of inventors. Her father, Sidney Nathaniel Davidson, sister, Mildred Davidson Austin Smith and even her grandparents, were inventors. As a child, Mary shared her first invention idea at the age of six. Although the self oiling door hinge never made it into production, Mary continued thinking of creative solutions to everyday problems. At the age of 12, her family moved from North Carolina to Washington, D.C.

In 1931, Mary graduated from Paul Lawrence Dunbar High School (formerly Preparatory High School for Colored Youth) and attended Howard University. Due to financial strains, Mary was not able to complete her degree and began working odd jobs. She took a job as a federal employee at the start of WWII and eventually became a professional florist. In her spare time, Mary continued developing ideas for her inventions. Mary married James “Jabbo” Kenner, a famous heavyweight boxer, in 1951. The couple fostered 5 children and adopted a son, Woodrow.

By December 1957, Mary saved enough money to file a patent application for an invention that would change the lives of women for years to come. At that time, women had limited access to sanitary products and often made their own. Mary's invention, the “sanitary belt” aimed to prevent the leakage of menstrual blood on clothing, and to securely hold a sanitary “napkin” in place. Unsecured sanitary napkins created embarrassing accidents for women and limited their ability to venture into public spaces. Mary's “sanitary belt” attached to a long plastic and cloth “pocket” at each end, and fastened around a woman's waist. Women would place cotton “napkins” or rags into the pocket and the belt would effectively hold the pocket in place. It was the pocket for padding and the moisture proof seal that made it revolutionary.

On April 14, 1959, Mary received US Patent 2,881,761 for the “Sanitary Belt with Moisture Proof Napkin Pocket.” Mary Beatrice Davidson Kenner invented the first generation of what would eventually be called the sanitary pad for women.

After the patent was filed, Mary received many letters from companies that were interested in her new invention. The Sonn-Nap-Pack Company scheduled an in-person meeting with Mary to discuss the company's interest in marketing and manufacturing her new sanitary belt. A company representative drove from New York to Washington, D.C. to meet with Mary at her home. Mary was excited to think that her sanitary belt invention may finally bring financial success. She began dreaming of buying a new home and car with the profits. However, when the representative returned to New York, Mary was informed that the company was no longer interested in working with her product. Approximately 10 years later, beltless (stick-on) pads were invented and as tampons, once considered scandalous to use, became more popular. Women stopped using sanitary belts altogether.

During her life, Mary owned four floral shops around the D.C. area. She continued inventing in spite of the lack of financial success or recognition for her inventions. In 1976, after her sister Mildred was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, Mary patented a walker with an attachable tray and pocket for carrying items. In the 1980s, she invented a toilet paper dispenser and a shower wall mounted back washer. Mary didn't receive any awards or formal recognition for her work. Her five US patents and many inventions, however, helped pave the way for products that we use today. She still holds the record for the greatest number of patents awarded to a Black woman by the U.S. government.

Mary Beatrice Davidson Kenner died on January 13, 2006, in Washington D.C., at the age of 93.

