



The Clerk's Black History Series

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Bessie Virginia Blount Griffin

(November 24, 1914 - December 30, 2009)

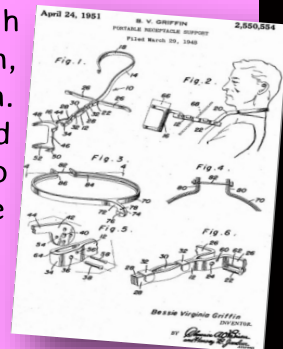
"Inventor, Expert Forensic Witness"

Bessie Virginia Blount Griffin was born November 24, 1914, in Hickory, Virginia, (now known as the city of Chesapeake). Bessie was a bright child that taught herself not only how to write with both hands, but also to write using her mouth and feet. Due to lack of educational resources for black children at the time, Bessie was forced to discontinue her education in the sixth grade. Her family relocated to New Jersey where she later earned her GED and entered the local Kennedy Memorial Hospital's nursing program in Newark. Upon graduation, she continued her education and became a physical therapist.

At the end of WWII, Bessie began working with injured and permanently disabled soldiers that were missing limbs and were unable to perform basic tasks, such as feeding themselves. Bessie witnessed how the loss of physical independence affected the soldiers emotionally and began developing a device to assist them with their physical limitations. She created an apparatus that would allow patients who didn't have use of their arms or hands, control the release of food through a tube into their mouth. She later perfected the device by adding a neck brace with a food dish holder. In 1951, Bessie received a patent for her invention, Patent# 2,550,554, under her married name of Bessie Griffin. She later appeared on a Philadelphia television show called "The Big Idea" - the first woman and first black person to appear on the show - hoping to create national interest in the invention by the American Veteran's Association (AVA) - but they showed no interest in the product.



Even though the AVA passed on the invention, the French government showed immediate interest in the "portable receptacle support" brace and she eventually donated the rights for its use. By now, Bessie was well known in the inventors circles, working with the likes of Theodore M. Edison, son of the famed inventor, Thomas A. Edison. Bessie later invented a disposable cardboard emesis basin that is used in hospitals. Again, the AVA turned down the use of the invention but this time, Bessie sold the idea to the Belgium government. A variation of her design is still used in hospitals today.



From her extensive work with disabled patients, Bessie was able to recognize various writing characteristics of people with limited use of their arms and hands and published a technical paper on "Medical Graphology." In 1969, Bessie started her second career as a Forensic Scientist and began conducting forensic research for police departments in New Jersey and Virginia. Advancing in her field quickly, she joined the Portsmouth, Virginia Police Department as Chief Examiner and in 1977, earned an invitation to train in the famous "Scotland Yard" in England. Later, when she was turned down for employment by the FBI, she opened her own business examining pre-civil war documents and historic slave papers. She operated her business until the age of 83. On December 30, 2009 in Newfield, New Jersey, Bessie Virginia Blount Griffin passed away at the age of 95.