

## ALICE WEST FLEET

We want to tell the remarkable story of the granddaughter of slaves, who was born on a farm in the early part of the 20th century and who achieved many firsts. She was:

- the first black to integrate the Hot Shoppe in Arlington
- the first black reading teacher in Arlington
- the first black teacher in an all white school in Arlington
- one of the first black women to join American Association of University Women
- Among the first black women to receive a Master's Degree at the formerly all-male University of Pennsylvania

This woman is Alice West Fleet, a tenacious woman who had a goal and a dream, at a time when few blacks dared to dream , who knew at a very young age that she wanted to be a school teacher and despite the many obstacles, including being black and a woman, realized her dream; who worked each summer, went to school during the winter and eventually obtained her undergraduate degree, and who with the same tenacity and hard work obtained her Master's Degree and went on to earn 34 hours towards her PhD.

Alice was born on an estate in Mecklenburg County, Virginia called Preswould Farm. She was the second oldest of three children. Her father, William West, was the farm caretaker and a skilled stone mason (a major accomplishment for a black man at that time). Alice says that most of the stone buildings in the Boydton, Virginia area were built by her father. Alice says that it is her hope to return and see the records indicating the stone buildings built by her father.

Her mother Rose Skipwith West was a quiet, retiring housewife who took great pride in her family.

When Alice was six years old, the family moved to Skipwith, Virginia named for the slaveowners of her maternal grandparents and where the children went to primary school. Because of the limited availability of education for black students in Mecklenburg County, from 6th grade on she attended boarding schools and only home during the summer. Alice graduated from The Thyne Institute, a Presbyterian boarding school for minority students.

There were many black students at Thyne Institute and two black teachers, who were very close to the students. Alice recalls when she was at Thyne, the white teachers would take the students to the theatre where they were allowed to sit in the balcony. The school matron, who was also white, would take them shopping where other blacks were not allowed to go. The people and the merchants recognized and called them the "Thyne Institute children."

After graduation from Thyne Institute Alice taught in Mecklenburg County and attended Virginia State College in Petersburg, Virginia, during the summer, eventually earning her undergraduate degree in Elementary Education. It was during this time that she met and married Edmond C. Fleet, a widower with three children, and moved to Arlington. When she first came to Arlington everything was segregated and separate; housing, schools, theatres, restaurants and all recreational facilities.

She taught at Gum Springs Elementary School in Fairfax County for two years before she received a position in the Arlington County School system. She continued going back to Virginia State College to complete her undergraduate work. Alice feels that this was quite an achievement -- going to school in the summer, working during the winter, and looking after a family.

Teaching during the school year and going to summer school continued as Alice earned her Master's Degree in reading from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Alice notes that she went to the University of Pennsylvania because the University of Virginia would not accept her. With the support of her husband, she attended George Washington University and completed all but her thesis towards her PhD.

When one of Alice's instructors from the University of Pennsylvania was superintendent of the Arlington Schools, a vacancy occurred in the reading department and Alice was asked to fill that position. She was the first black reading teacher in the county. Alice was teaching at Hoffman-Boston Elementary School at that time.

After the Arlington schools were integrated, Alice became the first black teacher assigned to a white school -- Woodmont Elementary School. It was around Christmas time that year at the white school, she realized that her students no longer thought of her as a black teacher. They just considered her the reading teacher. Alice taught in the Arlington County School system for 31 years. She taught at Hoffman-Boston, Woodmont, Drew and later at Reed School, from which she retired in 1971.

After retirement, Alice became more involved than ever in the community. A partial lists of her involvement includes: appointed by Governor Chuck Robb to the Virginia State Commission on the Status of Women for two terms; served on the Board of Directors, Sheltered Occupational Center of Northern Virginia; and was appointed by Delta Sigma Theta, a black sorority, as the national director of health careers information. Her job with Delta Sigma Theta was to inform minorities of opportunities in the para-professional health fields and about the availability of financial assistance.

Alice was one of the first black women to join the American Association of University Women. Alice says that her membership made history and several chapters withdrew in protest. Because there was no YMCA facilities for blacks in Arlington, Edmond and Alice Fleet were leaders in establishing the Veterans YMCA in South Arlington. Alice still serves on the Board of Directors.

After her husband died, Alice established the Edmond C. Fleet scholarship fund at the Mt. Zion Baptist Church which helps needy college students.

Alice said that when she was young, no one ever told her, "you can't", so she never questioned what she wanted to do with her life. She always had a goal and worked towards it. "Let nothing and no one stop you." This is her advice to young people of today.

## PROFILE -- ALICE WEST FLEET -- APT. 407

"Let nothing and no one stop you," has been the lifelong motto of Alice West Fleet, new resident in Apt. 407. She knew early on that she wanted to be a teacher and nothing deterred her. Alice was born on an estate in Mecklenburg County, Virginia, where her father was farm manager and stone mason.

When Alice was six years old the family moved to Skipworth, Virginia, where she attended public school until the sixth grade. Because of limited educational opportunities for blacks there, Alice attended The Thyne Institute, a Presbyterian boarding school for minorities. After graduation from Thyne, Alice taught public school during the winter and attended Virginia State College at Petersburg during the summer. It was from Virginia State that she received her undergraduate degree in Elementary Education. Going to school at night and during summer vacations, she earned her Master's in Reading from the University of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia. Over the ensuing years she attended The George Washington University and completed all the requirements for a Ph.D. except the thesis.

Along the way, Alice met Edmond C. Fleet, a widower with three children. They married and moved to Arlington. Alice first taught at the Hoffman-Boston Elementary School. When Arlington was integrated, Alice taught at previously all-white schools. The first was Woodmont Elementary, where she taught the children of Peggy Fisher (933). Alice was the first black reading teacher in the county.

She taught in Arlington schools for 31 years. Her other schools were Drew and Walter Reed Elementary. After retirement, Alice became intensely involved in community affairs. She was appointed by Governor Charles Robb to the Virginia State Committee on the Status of Women. She became a member of the Sheltered Occupational Center for Northern Virginia and was appointed by Delta Sigma Theta, a black sorority, as National Director of Health Career Information. Alice was one of the first black women to join the Arlington Association of University Women.

There were no YMCA facilities available to blacks in Arlington. Alice and her husband were leaders in organizing and setting up the Veterans YMCA in South Arlington. She still serves on its Board of Directors. When her husband died, Alice established the Edmond C. Fleet Scholarship Fund at Mt. Zion Baptist Church to help needy college students. Alice still attends services at that church every Sunday.

The Fleets traveled around the world several times. A wide variety of art collected on their travels decorates Alice's apartment here.

With her motto still guiding her, there is no telling what Alice Fleet might accomplish here at Goodwin House West. A sincere welcome!

(A special thanks to Jo Barber (734) who interviews, writes and edits these profiles for publication in West Winds.)