

Honoring Dr. Robert Walter Johnson



Lynchburg historical property hallowed grounds for breaking racial barriers and producing legends in the game of tennis.

Dr. Robert Walter Johnson (1899-1971) originally from Norfolk, VA was a Lynchburg, VA physician, the first minority doctor in the entire city to be granted practice rights at the Lynchburg General Hospital. In addition to his work, Dr. Johnson was a successful trainer for promising African American tennis players. His American Foursquare style home, built in 1911, includes an adjacent tennis court on the lot next door in the Pierce Historic District in Lynchburg, Va. The property was placed on the National Historic Registry in 2002.

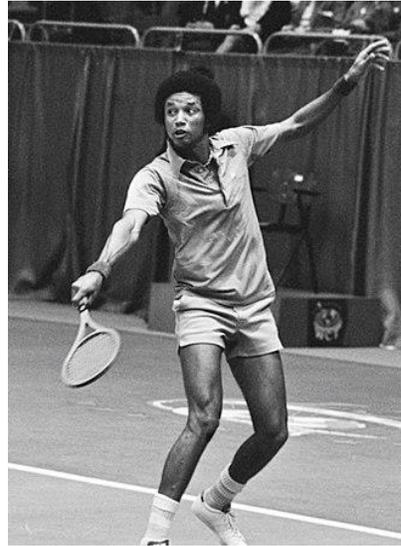
Known as the “godfather” of black tennis, Johnson founded an all-expense-paid tennis camp for African American children and with hired instructors. In these years in the segregated South, they had no public courts where they could learn tennis, and many did not have money for tennis lessons. Johnson was instrumental in encouraging the athletic careers of Althea Gibson and Virginia’s own Arthur Ashe, whom he personally coached.

Althea Gibson was originally from Clarendon County, South Carolina. Her family later moved to Harlem in New York, NY where she was introduced to tennis and many other sports. In 1946 she entered and won her first tennis tournament. The American Tennis Association (ATA) New York State Championship. Gibson’s success drew the attention of Dr. Johnson, the training and mentorship began. Under Johnson, Gibson gained access to more advanced instruction and more important competitions. In 1956, she became the first African American to win a Grand Slam title (French Open). The following year she won both Wimbledon and the US Nationals (now the US Open). The following year she won both again in 1958 and was voted Female Athlete of the Year by the Associated Press in both Years.

Arthur Ashe a Richmond, VA native and tennis player received the boost he needed from Dr. Johnson early in his career. Ashe had access to tennis at Brookfield Park, Richmond’s largest blacks-only public playground. After being spotted by a student-asst. coach at Virginia Union University, Ashe was introduced to Dr. Johnson. In 1953 Ashe (age 10) was coached and mentored at Dr. Johnson’s tennis summer camp in Lynchburg, VA. Ashe attended the summer camps through 1960. Johnson helped fine-tune Ashe’s game and taught him the importance of racial socialization through sportsman, etiquette and composure that would later become an Ashe hallmark. He was told to return every ball that landed within two inches on a line and never argue with an umpire’s decision. In 1958, Ashe became the first African American to play in the Maryland’s boy’s championship. It was also his first integrated tennis competition. And the rest they say, is history. Ashe was the first black player selected to the United States Davis Cup team and the only African

American man to ever win the singles title at Wimbledon, the US Open and the Australian Open. He retired in 1980 with a #1 world ranking.

In celebration of Black History Month, Virginia Amateur Sports would like to honor the contributions of Robert Walter Johnson for his vision and mentorship. And to Althea Gibson and Arthur Ashe for their fortitude in tearing down barriers and changing the world of sport.



Article Compiled by Dan Foutz

Sources for Article & Photos:

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