



THE FASCINATING STORY OF ALICE H. PARKER

The African-American Woman Who Invented Modern Home Heating

BY ALICIA BROOKS WALTMAN

Imagine, for a moment, that you invent something that helps transform life as we know it all over the world. And then you disappear from history books. This is the story of Alice H. Parker, an African-American woman from Morristown, who, in 1919, developed an early concept of the modern home heating system. Her system gave birth to the thermostat and the familiar forced air furnaces in most homes today, replacing what was then the most common method for heating – cutting and burning wood in fireplaces or stoves.

When the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce came across Parker’s contribution and the impact it had on the world, we did the natural thing: We named her to our list of Top 25 innovators in New Jersey history.

Here’s the problem. When it was time for us to write Parker’s profile, we learned that few people know anything about this pioneer. There are few records of her life, family and friends. In fact, nobody knows if she has descendants.

So let’s start with what is known: Parker lived in Morristown, according to the patent she filed. She took classes at Howard University, the school confirmed. And a copy of the patent granted to her on Dec. 23, 1919, contains her design for a natural gas-fueled “new and improved heating furnace.” It was the first time anyone had thought of using natural gas for home heating.

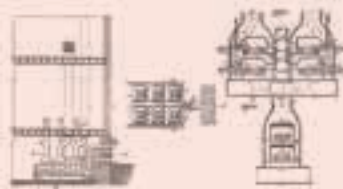
The North Jersey History and Genealogy Center at the Morristown & Morris Township Library has a small file on Parker that includes a copy of her patent. “We have never been able to find any information about Alice regarding her life here in Morristown; where she lived, what she did, whether she was married, or had children, or anything else about her life,” states a summary in the file.

Parker’s patent is mentioned in the book *African American Firsts in Science and Technology* (Gale, 1999) by Raymond B. Webster, and on the website About.com. Pictures of her can be found online.

Howard, a historically black university in Washington D.C., confirmed that Parker received a certificate from the university’s academy in 1910. In fact, Parker took Howard University classes with honors in an era when few African-Americans – let alone African-American women – were college-educated. The Academy generally prepared students to study at the university, but it appears that Parker did not go on to further her studies there, according to Teddy Abebe, a senior archivist at the Howard



Parker’s life is a mystery.



University Archives. “This represents a break from the industrial and domestic labor that most African-Americans were doing at that time,” Brunson said. “This (also) is a break from the culture of a woman who is supposed to be in the home. Instead, (Parker) is out inventing a product. And not just any product, a complicated, technical product.”

He added, “A woman was not supposed to be doing this – an African-American woman especially.”

The idea of centralized heating was not new in the early 20th century. The ancient Romans had it, using slaves to feed a central furnace whose heat was then circulated beneath the floors and through the walls of wealthy Roman homeowners. And various designers throughout the 18th and 19th century designed systems that used steam to create warmth. (The U.S. patent office had issued more than 4,000 patents for heating stoves and furnaces by 1888.) But Parker’s intricate design (see accompanying diagrams) is akin to the “zoned” heating systems in use today. Using gas as fuel, it sought to draw air from a single cold air box into individual heating units, which then delivered the air through ducts into various parts of the house.

It’s not known if anyone purchased or manufactured Parker’s design, but it laid the groundwork for central heating. “The difficulty African-Americans experienced with the design and sale of their products was enormous,” Brunson said.

So the life of the woman who designed and patented a heating system that revolutionized the way we live remains a mystery. ❖

If any of our readers know anything about Alice H. Parker or her descendants, please contact us on Twitter (@njchamber).