

Mildred Bright Payton

By Annie T. McCrimmon, March 2024



Mildred Payton from the 1939 NC A&T Yearbook

Mildred Bright Payton was not born in Chatham County. In fact, she did not stay here that long, but she left a legacy of growth and accomplishment that continues to thrive even today.

Mrs. Payton was a founding member of Chatham County's Fair. Starting out as a public-school home economics teacher, in 1947 she became a county agricultural agent in Chatham County. She filled the position of Chatham County Negro Home Demonstration Agent. As this agent, she was responsible for working with Home Demonstration Clubs and 4-H Clubs, to participate in an annual "Achievement Day." Achievement Day offered a chance for people to display their talent at household arts and to receive prizes for their work. Mrs. Payton promoted the idea for a carnival and county fair to be held annually,

with the proceeds being used to help fund the prizes for the Achievement Day. In May of 1949, the Farm and Home Organization voted in favor of the County Fair and the first fair was held in 1950. The event continues to this day.

Mildred Bright Payton graduated from North Carolina A&T State University with honors in 1939. She married while a student at A&T and had one child, Marjorie. Some 85 years after her University graduation, we are still benefiting from the works of this remarkable woman who mastered the art of working well with others. Mildred Bright Payton researched the works of George Moses Horton long before most folk realized he was a once-in-a-lifetime genius. He was a wordsmith, capable of turning words and phrases to immortalize a love, a joy, a loss, a meeting. George Moses Horton, who was enslaved for most of his life in Chatham County, was the first enslaved person to be published in the United States. Mildred Bright Payton recognized his value to Chatham and to the world beyond and portrayed him in a drama that she wrote and produced in Chatham County and later at the Greensboro Coliseum. A 60-person chorus performed the music for the drama, "A Man Called Moses."

Mildred was a genius at recognizing the merit in all people, including the rural housewife who managed sizeable households and families for employers by day and returned home at dusk to care for her own family. She looked for and demonstrated ways these women could utilize the vegetables from their homegrown gardens. Sewing by machine and hand was taught by Mrs. Payton and her many youth assistants, who would carry on in her tradition years after she moved on to other callings.



Chatham Farm and Home Association members c. 1950. Mildred Payton, front row, second from right.

Mildred Bright Payton enjoyed many careers—a public-school teacher, county agricultural agent for Chatham for 15 years, after which she quit to study law at North Carolina Central University. During her middle age, Mildred joined the newly formed Peace Corps, working in Turkey, and was later on the faculty at NC Central and Appalachian State. Her daughter, Marjorie, had become an English professor at Howard University and at the University of Texas in El Paso. Marjorie had two children—a daughter who became a CPA and a son who became a medical doctor.

When we consider all that Mildred Bright Payton accomplished during her lifetime, we become immediately cognizant of her character, the quality of her life and her endeavors; she wasted neither time nor talent. We are fortunate that some of her talents and endeavors were directed to the benefit of Chatham County. Mildred died in 2000. She would no doubt have received the most coveted heavenly welcome: "His Lord said to him, 'Well done thou good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things. I will make you ruler over many things.'" Matthew 25:23