Sally McMillen

Remarkable Southern Women:

Talk for Colonial Dames

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They say well-behaved women rarely make history, but it is also true that many ill-behaved, activist women rarely make history, never receiving the recognition they deserve. Too often, women occupy a minor place in our nation’s past, if they are found anywhere at all. Instead, the focus is more likely on wars, diplomacy, presidents, and traditional masculine roles as business leaders, cowboys, and military heroes. Until suffrage was granted to women nationwide in 1920, most could not vote and thus lacked any participation in public life. By law, tradition, and religious dictates, they were deemed inferior to men. Having access to higher education and professional careers was rare until the late nineteenth century. Women typically lived in the domestic sphere, dependent on their husbands and caring for their homes and the many children they bore.

But there were exceptions. I want to provide snapshots of a few remarkable southern women—“hidden figures,” a phrase from the title of a recent movie revealing the contributions of three amazing African American women in NASA’s early space program. The seven women I selected today herald from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—though there are many more remarkable southern women than I have time for today.

Sarah (1792 - 1873) and Angelina (1805 – 1879) Grimke

These sisters were two of eight children born into a wealthy, slave-holding Charleston family. Sarah was born in 1792, Angelina, in 1803. Their father was a state Supreme Court judge; the Grimkes were extremely prominent in Charleston society. Both girls received a solid education from private tutors, one befitting young women, for Judge Grimke refused to let his daughters learn Latin and Greek as their brothers were doing. Like many wealthy southerners, they each were given a slave girl to tend their every need.

But these two sisters were different from most white southerners; they abhorred slavery. They secretly taught their slave maids to read. In 1812, Sarah accompanied her ailing father to Philadelphia, the place for the best professional medical care, limited though it was. She was drawn to that city’s Quaker heritage and abolitionist leanings. A few years later, Sarah returned on her own to live there—a brave step for a single woman back then. Younger sister Angelina joined her a few years later. The two set up residence, joined a Quaker meeting and became involved in the anti-slavery movement. Charleston society and the Anglican church disowned them—they were never allowed to return home after adopting such radical beliefs.

William Lloyd Garrison, the most radical of abolitionists who founded the anti-slavery newspaper, *The Liberator* in 1831, received a passionate letter from Angelina in 1835, encouraging abolitionists in their fight against slavery and revealing an intimate understanding of the institution. Garrison welcomed her fresh, unique southern voice to the cause and urged Angelina to write more and to lecture on anti-slavery. Her first essay, “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South,” was deeply rooted in scripture that denounced slavery, and she urged slaveholders to save themselves and the enslaved from the horrors of the institution and she urged slaveholders to save themselves and the enslaved from the horrors of the institution. Two years later, both Angelina and Sarah began to lecture to northern women involved in the early anti-slavery movement. The sisters’ fame grew as they traveled across New England. Soon men were attending their lectures as well. Angelina became the first woman in the nation to address a state legislature, speaking to the Massachusetts house on abolition.

Addressing mixed audiences of men and women was something women did not do—scandalous behavior! The Grimke sisters had crossed the line. Ministers were appalled, and at a denominational gathering of Congregational ministers, they wrote a formal protest denouncing the Grimke sisters and demanded that no church open its doors to their public speaking. This protest was read in many New England churches, demanding that women remain in their rightful place in the home. They should be silent and not assume the role of moral advisors, a duty best left to men. One unintended consequence of this Protest was that it energized and galvanized a few New England women who were chafing at their inferior status—being unable to vote, sign contracts, attend college, pursue professions, or become full citizens. One of those was Lucy Stone, who later claimed that this Protest was the spark that motivated her to spend her entire life fighting against slavery and for women’s rights.

During the ensuing controversy over the Grimke’s, Sarah emerged into the limelight, writing what became this nation’s first tract on women’s rights, “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women” in 1838.

The Grimke sisters inflamed the anti-slavery and women’s rights causes in the 1830s, but their lives did change. In 1838, Angelina married Theodore Weld, a firebrand abolitionist and editor of *American Slavery As It Is*, a book of documents and slave testimonials that gave Harriet Beecher Stowe the facts she needed to write *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Angelina subsequently bore three children, and her health suffered. Sarah moved in to help care for the children. To make ends meet, they opened a progressive school in New Jersey. While they never lectured or wrote with the passion as they had in earlier years, reformers flocked to visit them and gain inspiration. One post script: After the Civil War, the sisters heard about a young mulatto man who had graduated from Harvard and who shared their last name. He was the son of their brother and his slave mistress.

Sarah died in 1873; Angelina in 1879. They were two remarkable women, all the more so because it was two southern women who ignited a spark that gave ammunition to the anti-slavery crusade and fostered the women’s movement.

Moving forward several decades: Ida Wells Barnett (1862 – 1931)

Ida was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1862, the eldest of eight children. Her parents had been slaves who gained their freedom at the end of the Civil War when she was three. Her father was the son of his white master and a slave woman. Ida attended Rust College in Holly Springs but ended her education in 1878 when her parents died of yellow fever. She was determined to keep the family together and began teaching. In 1881, Ida moved to Memphis with her younger siblings and there she taught school.

Two years later, Ida purchased a first-class train ticket. She was soon asked to vacate the ladies’ car where she was sitting and move to the grubby smoking car, a space designated for African Americans. She refused, but the conductor forced her to move. Days later, Ida filed suit against the railroad and won in a lower court, but upon appeal, the state supreme court reversed the decision, upholding Jim Crow laws of racial segregation. This incident fostered her radicalism and a second career in journalism. Ida began to write for a local black newspaper. In 1891, the Memphis school board refused to renew her contract because one of her articles had criticized the city’s miserable black schools.

The next year, three young black men who were friends of Ida’s, were lynched. A white man, who resented the successful grocery they owned that competed with his store, was responsible, though he was never found guilty. Ida was outraged. She began to write about the evils of lynching, which she claimed targeted black men, using the pretext of their having sexual relationships with white women. Ida insisted that whites used lynching to keep black men in their place. One day when she was out of the newspaper office, a group of white men burned it down.

Fearing for her life, Ida moved to New York City where she continued writing, including a pamphlet, “Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases,” the first of many essays on the subject. She saw lynching being used to undermine black achievement, for as blacks became better educated and more successful, lynching increased. Her message caught on in the North, and soon Ida was in demand as a public speaker, including her lecture at the 1893 Chicago World Exposition. Two years later, she married Ferdinand Barnett, a journalist, bore four children, but continued her activism. While her attacks were mostly aimed at whites, she also criticized black men such as Booker T. Washington for his “cast down your bucket” message to fellow African Americans, in which he urged his people to accept their lowly place in life but work hard. Ida’s radicalism attracted enemies as well as supporters among people of her own race.

Wells participated in the founding of the National Association of Colored Women in 1896 and the NAACP in 1910. On a lecture tour in England and Scotland, she drew huge, enthusiastic crowds. Back home, in 1913 Wells joined a women’s suffrage parade to integrate it, but white suffragists pulled her out, for they did not want to complicate their single-issue cause. She was active in the Republican Party (back then, this was the liberal political party that attracted African Americans—the party of Abraham Lincoln.) She wrote her autobiography and ran for state senate from Illinois. She died in Chicago in 1931.

Despite Wells’s activism and passionate fighting lynching and various anti-lynching laws introduced into Congress, the federal government failed to address the issue due to the political power of southern Senators and Congressmen. Not until the 1960s, with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, did lynching become a national crime.

Lillian Smith (1897 – 1966)

Lillian was born in Jaspar, Florida in 1897, the eighth of ten children. Her father was a successful businessman and civic leader; her childhood was happy and secure. When an older brother died of typhoid fever, her father bought land in the Georgia mountains and built a summer home for the family and several cabins for visitors. Her privileged life ended in 1915 when her father lost his business, and the family had to move to this mountain home in Clayton, Georgia. It was a far cry from Jaspar; an area of moonshine, impoverished residents, and unpaved roads. Smith worked her way through a year at Piedmont College, taught at a local mountain school, and helped her family run a mountain hotel.

Lillian had always played the piano. She fell in love with a male violinist—an intense affair that ended when she found out he was married. But he encouraged her to attend music school, and from 1917 to 1920, she studied piano at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore. She worked odd jobs, boarded with local families, and often walked the 24 blocks to school because she could not afford to ride the trolley. Lillian adopted a bohemian, roaring-twenties look, with her bobbed hair and short skirts that shocked everyone when she returned home to Clayton.

In 1920, her father and brother converted their mountain home and cabins into Laurel Hills Camp, the first private camp for girls in Georgia. Initially Lillian showed little interest in it but served as its music teacher for two summers. She gave up her piano studies when she realized she had neither the drive nor the talent to succeed. In 1922 she accepted a three-year teaching position as a music teacher in Huchow, China. Her time there ended prematurely when her parent’s poor health necessitated her return to Clayton to help run Laurel Hills Camp.

Under Lillian’s direction, the camp thrived. She had found her passion. In 1927, she took courses at Columbia University in psychology and education, and the camp became a laboratory for her radical ideas on child rearing. She offered southern girls an innovative exposure to the arts, music, dance, and psychology. She sought to instill self-esteem in them, urging them to question traditional ideas, explore new ones, and open their minds to accepting racial, social, and sexual differences. In 1928, she purchased the camp from her father.

Girls who attended Laurel Falls said it changed their lives forever. It was there where Lillian met Paula Snelling, a native of Pinehurst, Georgia, who served as the camp’s athletic director. She and Lillian established a life-long partnership, and Snelling nurtured Lillian’s writing and public career. Though Lillian never openly admitted their intimate relationship, it figured prominently in her writings, and she often attacked society’s narrow views of sexuality.

In producing a camp newsletter, Lillian realized how much she loved to write. From 1936 to 1945, she and Paula published a liberal literary magazine, *The North Georgia Review*, later called *South Today.* They featured and reviewed works by African Americans and women and welcomed liberal ideas that challenged romantic views of the Old South.

With the publication of her novel, *Strange Fruit*, in 1945, Lillian became famous nationwide—both celebrated and vilified. The novel sold 25,000 copies in its first week, though cities like Boston banned it because of its interracial love affair. Ultimately the book sold over three million copies during Lillian’s lifetime, was translated into fifteen languages, and made into a Broadway play. Lillian was in demand as a lecturer on stage and radio. Her letters and essays appeared in the *New York Times*, the *New Republic*, the *Nation*, and the African American newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*.

Her memoir, *Killers of the Dream*, published in 1949, is a series of brilliant, searing essays. The book affronted many southerners and was not financially successful at the time because it was so frank. The book was confessional and autobiographical, a social commentary on the region, especially the South’s commitment to Jim Crow and to racial violence. Its subject matter and innovative style did not fit well with Cold War America nor with southern mores.

Smith wrote other books, including *One Hour* in 1959, which dealt with the mass hysteria, anti-communism crusade, and censorship of the McCarthy era and widespread fears associated with taboo sex. In 1955, while teaching at Vassar, two white boys burglarized and set fire to her Clayton home, a fire that destroyed her personal belongings and thousands of letters and unpublished manuscripts.

While Lillian made enemies in the South, she was deeply admired by groups and individuals seeking human justice and racial understanding—the NAACP, CORE, and SNCC. She was involved in the Civil Rights movement. She celebrated the 1954 Brown decision and wrote *Now Is the Time* in response to that ruling, urging the South to desegregate. Lillian battled cancer for thirteen years, dying in Clayton in 1966. She is buried at Laurel Falls Camp. Two years after her death, her family established the Lillian Smith book award to honor outstanding writing on the South. Since her death, three volumes have been published with her articles, speeches, essays, and letters.

Gladys Avery Tillett (1891 - 1984)

This woman was called “one of the great spirits of North Carolina” and a “role model for every female politician.” Gladys was born in Morganton, North Carolina, in 1891. Her family was among the elite of that small town, her father a lawyer, judge, and associate justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court. Her mother was an ardent supporter of women’s rights, well before women won the right to vote. Politics and service for the greater good were messages she heard throughout her childhood.

Gladys attended and graduated from the State Normal and Industrial School, later renamed the Woman’s College of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (today UNC-G). She embraced the ideas of many of her progressive teachers, including women’s equality and their right to vote. When North Carolina’s governor came to campus, he told the students, “As I look into your beautiful faces…I know that you’re not in favor of voting.” Silence followed. Students then marched in protest and hung him in effigy. Gladys and some classmates organized the school’s first student government association; she was elected president. At graduation, classmates voted her the “most magnetic” and the “most executive.”

She married Charles Tillett in 1917, a rising Charlotte lawyer whom she met through her brother. They bought a home in Charlotte, and Gladys bore three children. She cast her first vote for president in 1920, the year women gained suffrage nationwide. Two years later, she founded a local chapter of the League of Women Voters, a non-partisan group, and she was instrumental in registering women to vote and sponsoring forums so candidates could better inform the public. These activities were unusual among Glady’s elite friends, but being a wife and mother made her less threatening and less likely to be the victim of sexist criticism. In 1933, she was elected president of the North Carolina LWV, championing causes such as the secret ballot, increasing the age of consent from 14 to 16, and allowing women to serve on juries and evolution being taught in school.

Gradually Gladys recognized politics as the place where she could have the greatest impact. She campaigned for Al Smith in the 1928 presidential race, though it was an uphill battle for a Catholic New Yorker and anti-prohibitionist. But her campaign skills became evident, and she was chosen to serve on the state’s executive committee of the Democratic National Committee. One of her first causes was a “fifty-fifty” plan, to make half of all party positions be filled by women. North Carolina became one of the first states to demonstrate gender equality in that area. In 1932, she was chosen one of four state representatives to attend the Democratic Convention that nominated Franklin Delano Roosevelt as its presidential candidate.

Democrats recognized the importance of female voters, and through its newly-formed Women’s Division, set about to attract women to the party. Gladys now headed the state’s Reporter Plan and in 1936, the Speakers Bureau for the Women’s Division of the DNC. She played a key role in publicizing and explaining Roosevelt’s New Deal to voters and gaining support for it. In 1940, she was elevated to vice-chair of the DNC and head of the Women’s Division. She spent two days each week in Washington and the other days in Charlotte. Gladys worked tirelessly at this job for five years and kept copious notes of everything she did (all notes are housed in dozens of boxes at UNC’s Southern Historical Collection). She organized conferences, hosted teas and dinners, lined up speakers, raised money, promoted legislation, sponsored radio programs, created campaign literature, and toured the country lecturing and meeting people—always promoting the Democratic Party and the New Deal.

When the United States entered World War II, her focus became the nation’s commitment to war and how women on the home front could help those serving overseas. In 1944, she became the first woman to speak at the Democratic National Convention. She also made a point to reach out to African American women to ensure their representation in the DNC.

Roosevelt carried the South in all four elections, and no doubt Gladys’s efforts helped. She was beautiful, charming, thoughtful, well-mannered, and tastefully dressed—a southern lady in the best sense of that phrase. It was hard to find fault with her.

At the end of World War II and plans emerging about creating the United Nations, Gladys played a key role in a preliminary meeting at Dumbarton Oaks to discuss the idea. She began to promote this international organization, and she and Charles traveled to San Francisco in April 1945 for the founding of the UN.

Tillett left her post in 1950 to return home and work on the Senate campaign of Frank Porter Graham, a close family friend. This was probably Glady’s first encounter with negative campaigning and dirty tricks, promoted in this election by a young radio announcer, Jessie Helms. Though Graham was widely admired and respected, 1950 was not a good time to run as a New Dealer. The campaign was nasty—Graham was denounced as a Communist and supporter of African American equality. Gladys and husband Charles worked non-stop. Graham was devastated when he lost, as were his friends and his many supporters.

In December 1952, Glady experienced her biggest tragedy—the suicide of husband Charles, who suffered clinical depression, no doubt exacerbated by his relentless work on behalf of Graham and his disappointment afterwards.

Gladys eventually re-entered public. In 1957, Governor Hodges appointed her head of the state’s UN celebration. She campaigned for Adlai Stevenson in his run against Eisenhower and did the same for John F. Kennedy in 1960, delivering an effective speech across the South, “Religious Freedom and the Ballot Box.” She served as state co-chair of the presidential campaigns of Hubert Humphrey in 1968 and George McGovern in 1972. She was chosen to serve on the UN Commission on the Status of Women, a position she held for several years, traveling world-wide to attend conferences and meet women from other countries to discuss ways to improve their lives. In 1972, her final commitment to public life was serving as honorary president of the North Carolina ERA United, trying to convince the legislature to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment. Ultimately, North Carolina turned it down.

Gladys remained active in her three children’s and ten grandchildren

S lives. She was an avid gardener, devoted church-goer, member of the Colonial Dames, and on the boards of the YWCA and UNC. She received three honorary degrees—from UNC, UNC-G and Queens University. She died in September 1984 at the age of ninety-two, heralded by the *New York Times* as a woman who “rose higher than any previous woman in the Democratic party” and a devoted public servant.

Ella May Wiggins (1900 – 1929) (Featured in Wiley Cash’s new novel)

Ella May was born in Sevierville, Tennessee, in 1900 into a large family whose parents were hardscrabble farmers. When she was ten, her parents began working in the timber industry and moved the family from one lumber camp to another. At a young age, Ella May entertained workers with her ballads and songs. In her late teens, she married a much older man, John Wiggins, an adulterer and poor bread winner. After their first child was born in 1918, they moved to the Carolina Piedmont to work in textile mills, eventually settling in Gastonia, North Carolina. By 1926, Ella Mae had borne eight children (some died as infants or youngsters), and John had left the family. Ella had no choice but work in a factory. Conditions were bad as competition increased—miserable, unhealthy factories, low wages, and stretch outs, which meant increased workloads. Managers were inflexible about work hours, making it hard on single mothers. Many like Ella May had to work night shifts while their children slept, typically twelve hours long, with no time for bathroom breaks or meals. Factories were filled with lint, fostering poor health and what was later diagnosed as brown lung disease. Machinery accidents were common. Workers compensation did not yet exist.

The only way to break the power of the textile owners was through unions. But they had long faced difficulty breaking into southern industries—people were poor, needed work, and did not want to go on strike. Union leaders tended to be outsiders from the North, creating suspicion in southerners’ minds. Management did everything possible to counter such outside intervention. The Communist Party in the 1920s was often behind these strikes, such as its National Textile Workers Union. But labor strikes did begin, with a few bold workers demanding higher wages, better housing and working conditions, cheaper rents, equal pay for equal work, and union recognition.

In 1919, Ella May, like so many other women, worked sixty-hour weeks and earned $9, trying to support her five children. They lived in a dilapidated cabin in an African American neighborhood where rents were cheaper. Her youngest son died of pellagra when he was one and a half, while she was at work and he, under the care of her oldest daughter.

The first major textile strike occurred in March 1929 in Elizabethton, Tennessee, and agitation soon spread to North and South Carolina and Virginia. Women played major roles in these strikes, especially as picketers. Ella May was drawn to the cause. She attended union classes after her night shift ended and soon became a recognized leader with her compelling, heart-breaking narrative in trying to support five children. They rarely had enough to eat, and she could not afford the medicine her children needed. Soon Ella May was writing and singing ballads that became popular at union rallies. It was through song where she could express her personal anguish and hardships. Her most famous song, later retitled “Mill Mother’s Lament,” became an anthem for working women in Gastonia:

“We leave our home in the morning,

We kiss our children goodbye,

While we slave for the bosses

Our children scream and cry.”

The song closed with “Let’s stand together, workers, And have a union here.” To Ella May and other working women, one way to gain sympathy was to sing about motherhood and the deprivation children faced, unable to afford adequate food for the table or a new pair of shoes. Yet while May’s ballads gained sympathy, she was hardly an ideal, typical mother—living with a man who was not her husband in an African American neighborhood.

Only two weeks after joining the union, she traveled to Washington D.C. with her co-workers to testify on southern factory conditions and to share their woes. Ella May also advocated an interracial union, an unpopular stance in the South. She was soon blacklisted by her bosses, and violence broke out between anti-union groups and pro-union workers. One night when Ella May was on her way to a union meeting, an angry mob started firing guns at protestors, and someone shot May near her right breast. She died minutes later. Fellow strikers and the Communist Party believed the company had hired assassins to target her. Though five men were indicted for her murder, no one was ever found guilty. Defense attorneys argued the men were acting in a patriotic manner, for May and union followers were trying to overthrow the government. With her murder and declining funds, the NTWU ended its Gastonia campaign.

But May had made an indelible impact on the union movement, and her songs were sung and celebrated for decades as workers across the South fought for better working conditions.

Pauli Murray (1910 – 1985)

Pauli was born Anna Pauline, in Baltimore in 1910. Her father was a school teacher and her mother, a nurse. She was tri-racial—African, Caucasian, and Native American. Her mother suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died in 1914. Her father was unable to care for his young daughter, so he sent her to Durham, North Carolina, to live with her grandparents and aunt, who adopted her. In 1923, her father was murdered while residing in a state hospital.

Pauli attended the all-black Durham High School. Because it only went through eleventh grade, she moved to New York for her senior year. In 1928 she entered Hunter College, changed her name to Pauli, was briefly married in 1930 (later annulled), and graduated with a BA in English in 1933. During the Depression, she worked for the WPA as a remedial reading teacher. In 1938, she applied for graduate study at UNC Chapel Hill, where her white great grandfather and great-great grandfather had been trustees. The school rejected Pauli because of her race. She wrote a letter of protest to UNC’s president and hoped the NAACP would use her as a test case—but it did not. Such activism embarrassed her family and friends in Durham.

In 1940, Murray became involved in civil rights. She rode a bus through the South to visit her North Carolina family, sitting in the front seats which were reserved for whites. She was arrested for disorderly conduct, refused to pay the fine, and spent time in jail. She challenged the constitutionality of segregated seating on interstate buses. Pauli tried to help defend a black sharecropper accused of killing his landlord, feeling he did not have equal protection under the law. When the all-white jury found him guilty, her outrage prompted her to apply to law school. She earned a law degree from Howard University in 1944, graduating first in her class. Wanting to teach law, Pauli applied to Harvard Law School but was rejected, not because she was black but because she was female. Instead, she attended the University of California at Berkeley, earning an LL.M in 1945. Years later she earned a J.D.S. from Yale. Pauli worked for various organizations and spent time until 1960 in private practice.

Activism was in her blood. In 1962-63 she served on President Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women and worked behind the scenes on the Civil Rights Act of 1964. She was a founding member of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and established an African American women’s counterpart. She taught in Ghana, served as vice president of Benedict College in South Carolina, and taught at Brandeis.

In 1973 she felt a call to the ministry and three years later earned a M. Div. from Union Theological Seminary in New York. She was ordained as an Episcopal priest in 1979 after the church changed its view on ordaining women.

Throughout her life, she wrote essays and articles, including her fascinating account of her North Carolina family, *Proud Shoes*, a volume of poetry, and her prize-winning autobiography, *Song in a Weary Throat*, published posthumously. She received numerous honorary degrees, and a few years ago, was sainted by the Episcopal Church.

All her life, Pauli struggled with gender identity, seeing herself as a boy-girl. She wore her hair short, often dressed in men’s clothing, and maintained close relationships with women. She died in 1985.

These are only a handful of southern women who made their mark. They represent a spectrum in identify, class, race, and causes. One hopes over time, we uncover and celebrate many more women as we move toward achieving true equality in this country.

Sally McMillen, Author of: *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth and Infant Rearing* (LSU Press); *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 3rd ed. (Wiley);

*To Raise Up the South: Sunday Schools in Black and White Churches, 1865 – 1915* (LSU Press);

*Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women’s Rights Movement* (Oxford UP); and *Lucy Stone: An Unapologetic Life* (Oxford UP)

Also, the University of Georgia Press has published a series of books that include essays on important southern women, each one written by a different scholar. They are organized by state, such as *North Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times* that Michele Gillespie and I edited. In that is the essay I wrote on Gladys Tillett.