

GEORGINE MARY (RUSSELL) HILL

Profile by Meredith Ebbin

Birthplace: Boston, Massachusetts, Bermuda resident since 1941.

Nationality: American/Bermudian

Education: Girls Latin, Massachusetts College of Art, graduated with a diploma in art

Husband: Hilton Gray Hill II (d. 2000)

Children: Hilton “Buddy” Hill III, Dr. June Hill

Grandchildren: Jay Butler and Russell Butler

It has been more than 60 years since Georgine Hill stepped onto the Front Street dock, with her husband Hilton and their baby son Hilton III, to begin a new life in Bermuda.

Her first impressions of the place that would become her permanent home are as vivid today as they were in August 1941. Like thousands of Americans before her, she was captivated by the limestone roofs, the pastel-coloured houses and the whiteness of the unpaved roads “I thought it was the most beautiful place I had ever seen,” she said.

The world was at war — though the attack on Pearl Harbor and the US entry into the Second World War were just four months away — and German U-boats posed a threat to Allied ships in the Atlantic. The small boat that carried the trio was better suited, she recalled, for the Boston-Halifax run. Coming to Bermuda also meant a long separation from her close-knit family in Boston. Yet she was brimming with optimism that a bright future lay ahead.

After disembarking, the Hills travelled by horse and carriage to the two family homes Old Holme and Wantley on Princess Street, Hamilton. There, the Hill-Robinson clan, a good number of them devoted aunts, eagerly awaited the arrival of the newest additions to the family.

Though Hilton and Georgine would later build a house at Spice Hill, Warwick, the young family initially set up home on Princess Street. Georgine, city-born and city-bred, soaked up island life. “When you’re young, everything’s an adventure,” she said. She loved having the freedom to ride pedal cycles in the streets — in Boston, her father had restricted her cycling to parks — but drew the line at cycling to fancy affairs. “When we went to a dance, it was strictly in a carriage,” she said.

If she became homesick for Boston, she had her pal Leonie Dismont to hang out with. Though raised in Boston, Leonie was Bermudian-born, and her marriage to Cecil Dismont, who years later would become Hamilton's first black mayor, brought her back to her childhood home.

Georgine Hill would have another child — daughter June — and during her first years in Bermuda, devoted herself to raising her children. As there was no shortage of eager babysitters in the family, she could always take time out to paint. On an island where the school-leaving age was 13, the college-educated Georgine had attained a level of education that surpassed what was available to most people in Bermuda. Her passion for the arts and culture in general would soon take her beyond the confines of home.

The Second World War brought more than just the two U.S. bases to Bermuda. It was the impetus for major social and political change. In 1940, the year the U.S. built bases at St. David's and Southampton, Bermudian women were still fighting for the right to vote and the property qualification disenfranchised most men. Cars were yet to make an appearance — pedal cycles and carriages were the main mode of transportation.

In 1944, the year before the war ended, women got the vote. Two years later, Parliament narrowly passed the Motor Car Act, that allowed cars on the island, and in response to a new political movement led by Dr. E. F. Gordon, the first trade union act. While the transformation would be gradual, cracks had begun to appear in the rigid wall of segregation and oligarchal rule.

Change was overtaking Bermuda's small arts community. After the war, several artists moved to Bermuda, the most influential of whom was Canadian sculptor Byllee Lang, who left a lasting legacy in the form of the reredos at the Anglican Cathedral. Lang had a studio and art school and taught adults and children of both races. Georgine became a friend of Lang and part of the developing art scene.

In 1947, with Sir Stanley Spurling — a parliamentarian and influential supporter of the women suffragette movement — Christine Diel and others, she helped found the Bermuda Art Association. Eight years later, she would establish the first arts programme in the public school system.

Her connection with the arts has continued throughout her life. She was a founding trustee of the Bermuda National Gallery, which was established 1992, and is a member of Masterworks and the Bermuda Arts Centre at Dockyard.

She was also a gifted singer, who became known as the 'Marian Anderson of Bermuda', after the great American opera singer. Georgine's

“rich contralto”, which is how former Government cultural officer Ruth Thomas described her voice, delighted audiences at benefit and church concerts throughout Bermuda and at the Opera House, the premier performing arts venue up to the 1950s.

And as revealed in Errol Williams’ documentary [*When Voices Rise...*](#), winner of the Audience Choice Award at the 2002 Bermuda International Film Festival, Georgine Hill was also a civil rights activist.

In 1951, she, her sister-in-law Carol Hill and members of their theatre group led a demonstration on the Bermudiana Theatre Club — one placard they carried read ‘Culture Not For Coloured Bermudians’ — to protest its ban against black patrons. News of the protest reached the House of Parliament in London, through Evelyn MacLaurin, the head of a Canadian university women’s association who was visiting Bermuda, and fired off a protest letter to the United Kingdom. The U.K. ordered Bermuda’s Governor not to attend the opening-night performance, and the American producer, backed by the Actors Equity Guild, forced the club to end its restrictive admissions policy.

Georgine, Carol and Hilton’s activism did not end with that small victory. They belonged to a group of intellectuals and activists, who called themselves the Association of Bermuda Affairs. Members included Edward De Jean and Wilfred Allen, who a decade later would become founders of the Progressive Labour Party, and David Critchley, a white Bermudian social worker. The group authored a ‘secret’ document entitled ‘An Analysis of Bermuda’s Social Problems.’ Critchley had it printed in Canada, to protect members from recrimination by the authorities, and circulated it quietly in Bermuda.

In 1959, a copy of the document ended up in the hands of the street activist Kingsley Tweed, who though not an organiser, played a important role in the Theatre Boycott, as a spellbinding soapbox orator who inspired the crowds milling about the theatres.

She takes a sense of pride from a discovery, unearthed by Errol Williams while doing research for the film at the Colonial Records Office in the United Kingdom, that the Bermuda authorities had compiled a file on her and her husband.

Mr. Williams said he decided to expand the film’s scope after interviewing Georgine. His original intent had been to focus on just the boycott — which ended segregation in public places in Bermuda on July 2, 1959.

He said: “It was through her that I realised the Theatre Boycott had a lot of precedents. That’s when I understood there was a continuous protest movement, however small, throughout the island.”

In the film, she spoke of how she and her sister-in-law had started a theatre group, which they operated from her husband’s photography studio, in the Burnaby Arcade on Burnaby Street, Hamilton. They became very excited on learning the Bermudiana Theatre Group was planning to bring in a professional group, the Berkshire Playhouse Company.

They made enquiries about tickets, only to be told that patrons “had to be of unmixed European descent.” That was all she and her sister-in-law needed to begin their protest action. Georgine explained in the film that it was a new experience for the Club, which was not used to such bold, face to face confrontation.

And the idea behind the social policy document she and Carol had a hand in writing, was that: “No change comes before the idea is planted strongly in enough minds to make a difference.”

Hilton, Georgine and Carol were among the crowds who came out to lend support as the boycott gathered momentum. She spoke in the film of hearing words over the loudspeaker that sounded familiar and coming to the realisation that the speakers, Comrade Richard Lynch and Kingsley Tweed — were reading from the same document.

Edward DeJean, picking up the story on film, said: “There was a continual linking of what we had done. That took years, but then when the right man came along — Kingsley Tweed — he had something he could show the people. It was not Mark Anthony reading Caesar’s will, but it was a very important act and it produced terrific results.”

The marriage in 1940 of Georgine Mary Russell to Hilton Gray Hill linked two families from opposite sides of the Atlantic who shared similar ideals. If the Russell family was an example of what writer, scholar and National Association for the Association of Colored People founder W. E. Du Bois called the Talented Tenth, the educated class who would lead their fellow blacks into the promised land of equality and opportunity, the Hills were their Bermudian counterparts.

The couple met through mutual friends in Boston — Hilton was studying creative writing and literature at Boston University, and Georgine was attending the Massachusetts College of Art. John Hope Franklin, who would become a distinguished historian, was part of their student circle. Georgine’s father, Dr. Alfred P. Russell, was a dentist who graduated from Harvard University. Her mother Maybelle was a music teacher, who had

studied at the New England Conservatory of Music. Maybelle's grandfather John Jay Smith was active in the Boston abolitionist movement. His barber shop was a centre for black abolitionists and a rendezvous for fugitive slaves seeking a haven in the North.

Maybelle's father Dr. George Franklin Grant was a dentist and the first black member of the Harvard faculty. An inventor, whose devices he created for the treatment of cleft palate, made him a pioneer in his field. In 1899, he patented the golf tee, although his invention did not make him wealthy.

His patients included Harvard University president Charles Eliot. Dr. Grant was the matchmaker for his daughter and Alfred Russell and persuaded him to switch from medicine to dentistry. John Jay Smith and Dr. George Franklin Grant both lived at Beacon Hill. Today their homes are historic sites on Boston's Black Heritage Trail.

Hilton's father, Hilton I, was a prosperous businessman, and Member of Parliament for Pembroke, who Georgine once wrote, "acted as an advocate for his people at every opportunity." His maternal grandfather was Samuel David Robinson, a prominent businessman and a founder of The Berkeley Institute, the premier high school for black Bermudians for more than 100 years. His aunt, Agnes Mae Robinson, founded the venerable Sunshine League, Bermuda's oldest charity.

After graduating from Boston University, Hilton studied at the New York Institute of Photography. On returning home, he opened Hill Studios in the Burnaby Arcade, which his grandfather Samuel David Robinson had built. His first foray into politics ended with a narrow defeat in the 1948 election. He was successful in 1953, the same year, businessman and parliamentarian Henry Tucker appointed him to be a member of Select Committee on Race Relations, which Tucker chaired.

Barred because of his race from being a journalist, he became a news photographer. He and Richard Saunders, working as free agents, supplied photos to the local media, Both men would later leave Bermuda in search of better opportunities overseas. Richard Saunders became an internationally known photographer while Hilton established a travel agency in New York and became a pioneer in the development of black tourism. His initial focus was the Bermuda market, which was segregated up to the 1960s, but later expanded into international destinations, including Africa. It would mean years of shuttling between Bermuda and the U.S.

Georgine grew up in a home that put a high premium on social activism and cultural enlightenment and the family was “steeped in black history”.

“It was not something that started with me, “ she said. “It was something that was handed down. My father fought for the rights of blacks all his life in Boston.”

Her mother, who played piano and organ, wanted to be professional musician, but her father, “paid her not to go on stage”

The family was raised Episcopalian, though one sister, a scientist and pharmacist who did her undergraduate education at Bryn Mawr College, and also studied at Howard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, later became Franciscan nun, Sister Alfred Marie. Her other sister Inez was a teacher who retired as a supervisor in Boston’s public school system.

Georgine was the youngest. Their father wanted all his daughters to be teachers. “My father felt that teaching was such a noble career,” she recalled. The three girls did not take to his suggestion, but it’s what all ended up doing. Georgine studied dance and music throughout her childhood and was particularly drawn to art, a talent she says she inherited from her maternal grandmother.

“From the time I was a little girl, I started drawing,” she said. And her father proudly collected her paintings. Education and financial security gave the family some measure of protection in segregated America, though they were aware of the horrors of the South because their father was born in Virginia.

“We lived in a single-family home,” she said. “We played in swings, built tents in the front. We had an attic and put on all kinds of shows. We opened a lending library, but we found it was easier to lend than it was to collect. It was a happy childhood. We played all the kinds of games the kids don’t know how to today.”

The Russells were no strangers to art galleries; they visited them regularly. “Boston’s Fine Arts Museum had a wonderful Egyptian art collection that used to be my favourite as the people looked all looked like me,” she said.

Art took a back seat to academics when, following in the footsteps of her mother and sisters, she won a place at Girls Latin, the female division of Boston Latin, one of America’s oldest high schools. The curriculum was rooted in the classics; students took Latin throughout their six years of schooling.

Art returned to the forefront when she enrolled in the Massachusetts College of Art, which her family never discouraged her from attending. She said art school “was wonderful. We did all facets of art — sculpture, painting, etching, printmaking, just everything.”

While she has painted landscapes, her best efforts have been portraiture. Bermuda’s light and colours were never the inspiration for her that they were for other artists. She said: “In Bermuda, God had done such a good job, you were never going to get close to what he had done.”

As a new Bermuda bride, she began forming friendships from within her husband’s circle and the emerging group of black leaders. One of her first dinner invitations came from Madree and E.T Richards, who years later, in 1972, would become Bermuda’s first premier and the first black person to head the government. (Henry Tucker, on whose committee her husband served, was the first government leader.)

On Sundays, Clara Gordon, the cultured wife of Dr. E. F. Gordon, brought together people of similar interests at her salon in Somerset. Clara Gordon was a singer who had attended prestigious Oberlin University in Ohio. She would have been a doctor as well, had she had not dropped out of medical school to marry Gordon.

Georgine was introduced to Joseph Richards at one of Clara’s gatherings. It’s where he first heard her sing. “He was like an oasis in the desert,” she said. Richards, who later taught music at Berkeley Institute, was a first-rate musician “who never felt appreciated in Bermuda.”

He became her voice coach, and she began performing in Bermuda. She sang solo at concerts put on by Dr. Fordham, who came to Bermuda regularly to train church choirs.

Georgine held the now commonly accepted belief that art enriches lives. Forty years ago, it was something of a hard sell on an island that gave short shrift to the development of its people.

It was with this in mind that the Art Association established a gallery at Hamilton Hotel, where the City Hall and Arts Centre and the home of the Bermuda national gallery, is now located. Members exhibited regularly, held art classes for adults and children and brought in artists in residence from the U.S. They also held photography exhibitions, with outside adjudicators, and exhibited important works from abroad including those of photographer Yousef Karsh and Georges Braque, a colleague of Picasso.

She has said the Association was “the first group on the island that brought people of different backgrounds together.” It later split into two groups, which in 1956, merged to become the Bermuda Society of Arts. It

was through the Society of Arts Georgine and Byllee Lang established an annual exhibition of children's art, which led to the annual schools show, which is now a fixture on the cultural calendar. She worked with the Society of Arts for years and held the post of vice-president.

Her teaching career began in 1954, when Girls Institute of Arts and Crafts headmistress May Francis asked her to teach art at the school where her sister-in-law Carol taught drama. Miss Francis believed art would benefit the students taking dressmaking.

At around the same time, headmaster Albert Jackson appealed to her to teach art at St. George's Secondary School. The problem was getting funding for an art teacher's salary and art supplies. "I decided the best thing to do was to go to D.J. Williams {the director of education}," she recalled. "I said, 'I'm willing to go into the school for the rest of the year to show you that there is talent in Bermuda, that there is room for a real art programme. Do I have your permission?' He said: 'yes'."

She supplied her own material and her photographer husband lent his support. Her stint as an unpaid teacher came to an end when she took a portfolio of her students' work to the powerful D.J., who gave the green light for funding for her salary and art supplies. Williams also agreed to her proposal for double periods for art classes. Her teaching career would last 21 years, and for most of the time, she split her time between Girls Institute, later Prospect Secondary School for Girls, and St. George's Sec., working at each school two days a week.

Some students took art up to GGE 'O' level, which was also a first. Boys and girls took to her instruction, but she found boys "for some reason are very good at things that required perspective."

One grateful student is Jean Johnson, one of the Cartwright twins, who is an artist today. Her twin Joan Evans, whose arts education led to a career as a window dresser, was in the same class.

Jean Johnson said: "I remember her being very encouraging. I did a self-portrait in charcoal and I remember getting an A-plus. She gave me the confidence to do what I am doing now."

Georgine's teaching career came to an end in 1975 and she began to spend more time travelling with her husband. She continued with her charity work. She served on the Board of Teen Services, and was its chair for 20 years.

By then, Bermuda's social and political scene had changed for the better. There was a greater emphasis on the educational and cultural development of Bermudians — the school leaving age was raised to 16 in the mid-1960s — and people who had toiled for the good of the community

with little or no financial reward were beginning to get public recognition for their contribution.

She received awards from the Ministry of Community and Cultural Affairs and an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in 1993. She travelled to London to receive the award at Buckingham Palace a year later. More accolades followed in November 2001, when she received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Bermuda Arts Council, and in 2002 when *When Voices Rise....* played to sell-out audiences.

Portraits she has painted over the years hang on the walls of her home — subjects include daughter June as a young ballet dancer, sister-in-law Carol, and former student Angela Ming-Bean, who is an artist. Although she paints infrequently now, she recently received a commission to do a portrait of Dr. Otelia Cromwell, the first black to graduate from Smith College in Massachusetts.

Georgine Hill is one of the last surviving members of a generation who participated in the social movements that brought lasting change to Bermuda during a pivotal period in the 1950s and 1960s. She worked with people across the racial spectrum from Sir Stanley Spurling to Byllee Lang, to Clara Gordon, E. T. Richards and Wilfred Allen. Some of the groups she joined, including the Bermuda Women's Civic and Political Association, were the first interracial organisations in Bermuda.

Georgine's son Buddy is a singer and a former advertising executive. Daughter June Hill is a pediatrician. The sons of June Hill and Dale Butler, now Community and Cultural Affairs and Sports Minister in the Progressive Labour Party Government that came to power in 1998, have been steeped with the legacy of their illustrious forbears. Jay attends Harvard University, and Russell, who attends boarding school near Philadelphia, is a budding rock musician.

Georgine Hill continues to be an inspiration for many artists — filmmaker Errol Williams considers her a mentor. He said her activism has not dampened with age. Some years ago, while in a wheelchair, she was at the head of the line in a march protesting violence against women. "Her thinking is so current," he said. "She seems so well informed. Her concern for equality and justice struck me."

It's not hard to envision her participating in a march or performing on stage. She wears bold jewellery and striking colours well. She has lost none of that sense of fashion — and fighting spirit — that she, giant wardrobe trunk in tow, brought to the polite society that was Bermuda six decades ago.

"My life has been interesting," she said. And clearly continues to be.

Note: There was a Bermuda Art Association, dating back to 1928 and which was still in existence in 1938, according to articles in *The Bermudian*. It appears to be a different organisation from the Bermuda Art Association to which Georgine refers. An article written in the March 1959 issue of *The Bermudian* by artist Donald Kirkpatrick. confirms its formation around 1947.

Freelance writer Meredith Ebbin is a former editor of The Bermudian magazine.

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