

‘I Knew I Must Try’

‘AFFRONTED AND DETERMINED,’ HUBERT EATON SUCCEEDED IN CHANGING LIFE FOR HIS COMMUNITY AND HIS COUNTRY

Hubert Arthur Eaton earned his medical degree from the University of Michigan in 1942, at a time when very few African-Americans were being admitted to medical schools, much less graduating from them. And although Eaton went on to become a highly respected physician and a courageous warrior in an unending battle against racial discrimination in his home town of Wilmington, North Carolina, the ties of this social pioneer to the University of Michigan have been largely forgotten.

When Eaton is remembered, it’s usually in connection with his tutelage of Althea Gibson, a remarkably gifted athlete who became the first African-American to play her way into the rigidly segregated world of women’s professional tennis. Gibson, who died in 2003 at the age of 76, won two singles titles at Wimbledon and added two more U.S. Open championships in the 1950s before shattering another color barrier by becoming the first black person to compete on the women’s professional golf tour.

Eaton, an accomplished tennis player himself, brought Gibson to Wilmington in 1946 and helped perfect her game on the court he had built next to his home. He also convinced the somewhat rebellious teenager from New York City to continue her education by graduating from high school. Three years later the former high school drop-out was admitted to Florida A&M College in Tallahassee as a scholarship athlete in basketball and tennis. In her autobiography, *I Always Wanted to be Somebody*, Gibson credited Eaton with helping her “cultivate the grace and dignity (she) needed to succeed both on and off the court.”



Hubert Eaton, Althea Gibson and Hubert Eaton Jr.

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Eaton, whose father and father-in-law were also physicians, left Ann Arbor in June 1942 as a newly degreed doctor determined to bring the highest standards of medical care to his patients. In returning to North Carolina, Eaton was painfully acquainted with the pervasive and oppressive Jim Crow laws that divided the races, but he saw himself as a healer and not a social engineer.

That changed dramatically in 1947, when Eaton was summoned to the New Hanover County Court House in Wilmington to testify regarding a patient involved in an insurance liability case (see “Healing a Nation,” *Medicine at Michigan*, Summer 2000). As he took the witness stand, the bailiff asked him to swear the customary oath on a Bible — a battered Bible that was wrapped

with a strip of dirty adhesive tape and labeled “Colored.”

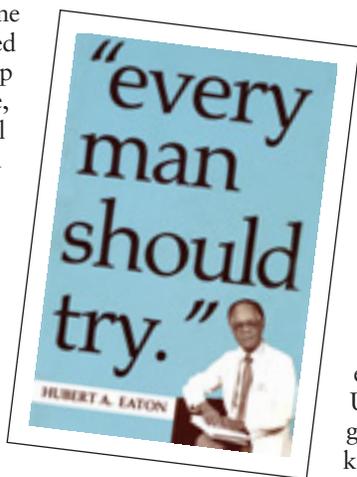
“I was stunned,” he recalled in his memoirs. “My eyes fogged, my ears hummed and a quiver ran down my spine. I almost gasped.”

As Eaton left the courtroom, he couldn’t erase the image of that grimy Bible from his mind. “The charge built up in me by years of racial prejudice had finally exploded,” he wrote. “That my children should grow up in a community that required them to swear in court on a segregated Bible was unconscionable.

“I’m going to have to do something to change some of the things I have seen in this town if I’m going to live in it,” I said to myself. How I would accomplish this was not yet clear to me but I knew I must try. There were measly black schools, segregated hospitals, segregated tennis courts, all-white government, segregated libraries, and segregated Bibles. Back at the office, I got out of my car a different Hubert Eaton.”

The new Hubert Eaton became a tireless figure in the struggle for civil rights and the fight to end racial discrimination in his community. He fought to eliminate segregation in a hospital where black patients were housed in a separate wing — victimized by inadequate care and substandard toilet facilities. He went toe-to-toe with the local board of education when it refused to honor the order of the U.S. Supreme Court and desegregate a school system that relegated black and white students to separate and decidedly unequal facilities.

He stood his ground against sheriff’s deputies who were members of the Ku Klux Klan, then survived a trumped-up murder charge and a politically motivated income tax audit. Eaton even learned to play golf so he could help desegregate a local course, and he persisted in a legal showdown with the local YMCA, which had refused to desegregate its facilities until the national organization threatened to revoke its charter. As Eaton recalled in his 1984 autobiography *Every Man Should Try*, “The examples of discrimination seemed endless.”



And so did Eaton’s protracted battles against injustice. But his dogged persistence and unshakable faith in the legal process eventually paid off. New Hanover County schools were forced to desegregate and comply with the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. Eaton’s efforts also gained staff privileges for black physicians at James Walker Memorial after an eight-year tug of war in the courts that ended in 1964. The case attracted national attention by articulating the principle that hospitals using public funds cannot discriminate on the basis of race — a precept that became a key element in the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964.

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“That victory,” Hubert Eaton Jr. says of the successful legal effort to overturn Walker Memorial’s racist policies, “was the one my father was most proud of. It had a tremendous impact all over the South, and I’m not exaggerating by saying it was the medical equivalent of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. It was a precedent-setting suit that was very, very far-reaching in forcing hospitals to change the way they regarded black patients and doctors.”

The younger Eaton earned his M.D. at Meharry Medical School in 1969, and did his residency and internship at Harlem Hospital before returning to Wilmington and joining his father’s practice.

“I think my father enjoyed his days at the University of Michigan,” Eaton Jr. says. “I know he had no hard

feelings or bitterness over the way he was treated, and even spoke fondly of the time he spent in Ann Arbor. He once told me that Army recruiters came to the medical school just before he graduated — World War II was going on at the time — and they were really trying to convince the white students to join up. They just sort of ignored him, however.”

The elder Eaton earned his undergraduate degree in zoology at Michigan, completing his studies in three years before being accepted to the Medical School. His wife, Celeste, earned a master’s degree while he was studying medicine, and the family connections to the U-M don’t end there: A sister, Hazelle, came

to Ann Arbor in 1936, and went on to a long career as a teacher.

Eaton died in 1991 at the age of 74.

He was remembered as a driving force behind the civil rights movement in Wilmington. As a local newspaper put it, “Dr. Eaton was an affronted and determined man. But he didn’t shout. He murmured. He didn’t go into the streets. He went into the courts. He persistently prodded Wilmington toward doing what was right. He helped make that inevitable transition peaceful and civil.”

The title of Eaton’s autobiography, *Every Man Should Try*, was inspired by Jacqueline Kennedy’s remarks about her assassinated husband at the John F. Kennedy Library exhibit: “John Kennedy believed so strongly that one’s aim should not just be the most comfortable life possible — but that we should all do something to right the wrongs we see. ... He believed that one man can make a difference — and that every man should try.” [m](#)

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