

# TENNIS IN NORTH CAROLINA

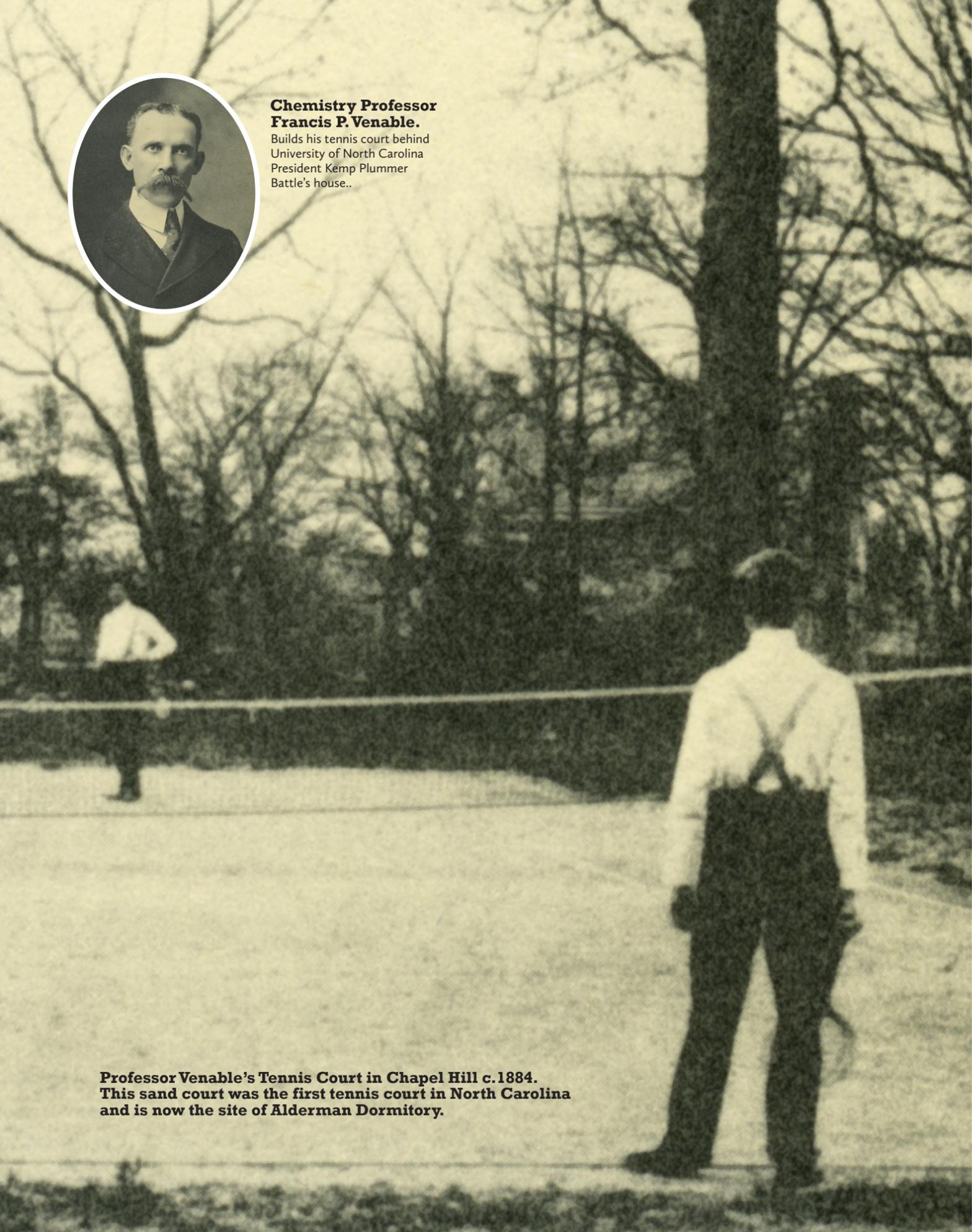
CELEBRATING OUR HISTORY

**Troupe Noonan**



**Chemistry Professor Francis P. Venable.**

Builds his tennis court behind University of North Carolina President Kemp Plummer Battle's house..



**Professor Venable's Tennis Court in Chapel Hill c.1884. This sand court was the first tennis court in North Carolina and is now the site of Alderman Dormitory.**

**CHAPTER ONE**

# Tennis Comes to North Carolina

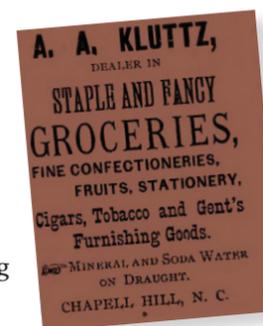
**I**N THE QUIET summer of 1884 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, had you been strolling east down dusty, deeply rutted Franklin Street, perhaps after buying some jelly beans or marshmallows at kindly old Dr. A.A. Kluttz's store, you would have certainly enjoyed the shade from the leafy canopy stretched overhead from trees on both sides of the street. Taking care to avoid the horse droppings, you might have strolled on, reflecting on how good it was the university had opened again 12 years before, after closing during the Civil War, or pondering the presidential race that fall between Democrat Grover Cleveland and Republican James G. Blaine.

After passing the vine-covered Episcopal church, Chapel of the Cross, and reaching Raleigh Road, you might have turned right past the modest president's house, the second in the life of the university, set well back on the left and presently occupied by Dr. Kemp Plummer Battle. Further down Raleigh Road, well behind Battle's

house and across from the boggy pasture<sup>1</sup> on your right, you might have paused at the curious sight of 25-year-old chemistry professor Dr. Francis P. Venable, broad handlebar mustache dripping with sweat, grading a large plot of land and vigorously spreading sand about.

Venable, who in 16 years would become UNC's 11th president and move into Battle's house, was building what is now thought to have been the first tennis court in North Carolina. Venable had become enchanted with the game several years before while pursuing his doctorate at the University of Göttingen in Germany, and had become intent on bringing it back to America.

The game of tennis<sup>2</sup> at that point involved the familiar rectangular court and a set of rules that were very similar to the game we know today, but the net was badminton height, at five feet high on each side, and the service boxes still ran 26 feet deep from the net. It was only two years earlier, in 1882, that London's All England Club had adopted the dimensions by which we recognize courts today—nets



**Advertisement for Kluttz Store on Chapel Hill's Franklin Street.**



**Franklin Street in the late 1890s.**

three feet high in the center and service boxes running only half-way to the baseline. As Venable had left Europe in 1881, before the All England Club modernized the court, it is likely he first built his court with the old high nets and

#### A LOVE GAME

*In the 1890s, Chapel Hill's Sallie Anderson possessed a very popular private court, but the regular stream of players was said to be more directly attributable to Sallie's allegedly fascinating and flirtatious daughter, Mary, a reigning belle of the day, than to the unquestioned merits of the new game of tennis.*

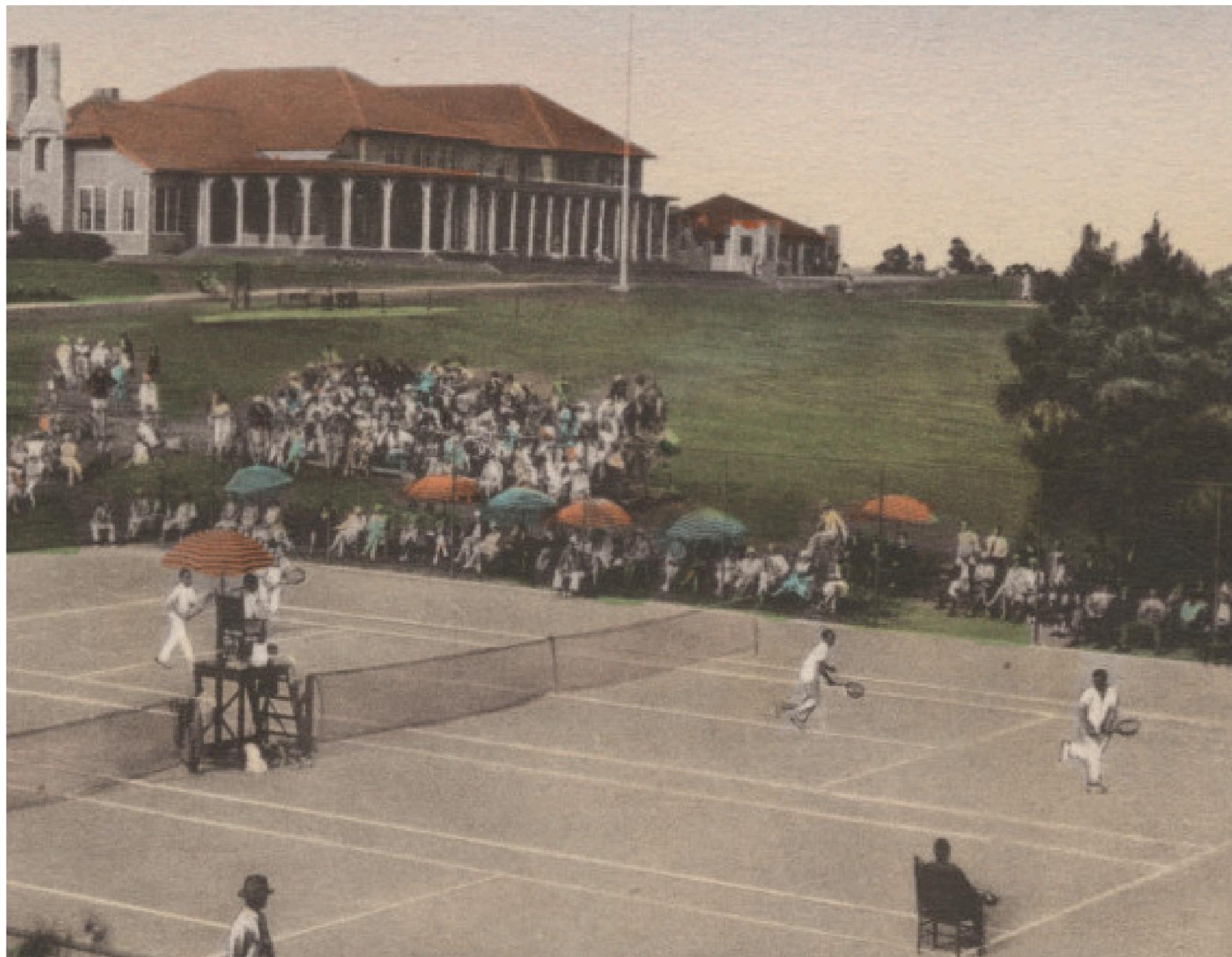
deep service boxes, but the first pictures from 1892 showed it with modern nets.

Venable's passion spread, and Venable and his friends founded the University Lawn Tennis Association.

Over the next 15 years, as many as 15 courts were laid out on campus, most of them south of Gerrard Hall in the corner of today's quad. By 1899 students and faculty alike were energetically playing the new game.

#### Pinehurst and Western North Carolina

As courts were popping up in Chapel Hill, similar sand clay courts, both red and white, appeared at hotels in the resort communities of both Pinehurst and Asheville. Pinehurst's first court seems to have been constructed on the property of the Holly Inn in 1895, with other courts following at the Carolina Inn, the Carolina Hotel, and the old Pine Grove Hotel. By the turn of the century, it was common to see women in long dresses and parasols and gentlemen in sport jackets wielding wooden racquets with unevenly shaped heads, enjoying genteel social tournaments in the mild winter climate of the Sandhills.



NEED TO GET THIS IMAGE FROM UNC WILSON LIBRARY. BARBOUR POST CARD COLLECTION "CLUB HOUSE AND TENNIS COURTS, PINEHURST, NC."

#### An Early Game at the Pinehurst Hotel..

The Pinehurst area was one of the first areas to which the game spread in the late 19th century. The Pinehurst Hotel courts were naturally among the most popular.



**Early Western N.C. Players.**  
The Sylva Collegiate Institute tennis club in Jackson county, N.C., c. 1921

From Pinehurst, tennis spread throughout the area. A private court was built in Aberdeen on Page Hill, and another by J. Talbot Johnson at his residence. The Highland Pines Inn in Southern Pines built a court and there were soon several school courts in town.<sup>3</sup>

**WHOOOPS!**

*In 1903, when Mr. William Raoul and his son Thom opened the Manor Hotel and Cottages on Charlotte Street in Asheville, they built one clay court, but, perhaps ignorantly, oriented it east and west. Not a problem...on cloudy days.*

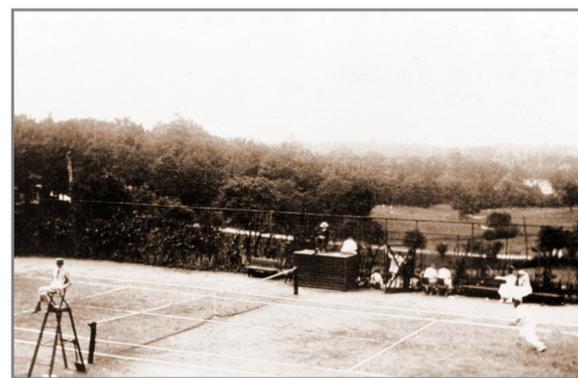
fee was required to play.

As it did in the Pinehurst area, activity quickly spread beyond Asheville to the rest of western North Carolina. Summering Charlestonians from South Carolina added courts to their estates in Flat Rock, near Hendersonville; four grass courts were installed both at the Eseeola Lodge in Linville and at the Highland Country Club, which

were patronized by visitors from Atlanta, Nashville, Birmingham, and other southern cities seeking relief from the summer heat. Summer visitors from the New Orleans Lawn Tennis Club brought the game to other venues as far away as Waynesville and even the Kenilworth Hotel in Sulphur Springs, just north of Mount Airy.

Asheville also continued to build. In addition to courts built in 1903 at the Mayview Manor Hotel and Cottages, in 1912 the new Asheville Country Club built three excellent sand clay courts, and in 1913 the Grove Park Inn offered two sand clay courts for their guests. In 1915 the new Asheville YMCA sported four sand clay courts, right in the downtown district. Local business people could play tennis after work, shower at the Y, and be home at a reasonable time for dinner.

**PLAYING ON A SAND COURT**  
*The early courts, often referred to as "sand clay," didn't play like today's common green clay courts. If you played on Venable's court in 1884, you might find some surprising bounces if it hadn't been packed tightly or rolled recently.*



**Grove Park Sand Courts.**  
The Grove Park Inn built two sand courts in 1913.

**Charlotte**

Charlotte was late starting, but when it did, most tennis centered around clubs and private courts there as well. The hub of tennis in the 1930s was a privately owned club consisting of five courts on Baldwin Avenue that was run for many years by the Moseley family. The city's top tennis was played there until the pro, Corwin Gelwick, went to teach at the Myers Park Country Club. The Charlotte Country Club had pro Abe Barrett before World War II for a few years, and then Bill Lufler after the war. Lufler subsequently took successful college positions at Davidson, Presbyterian, and Miami of Florida, and ended up the pro at New York's famed West Side Tennis Club, home for decades of the U.S. Nationals.

**Raleigh & East**

Shortly after the turn of the century, tennis was initially played in Raleigh on private courts. The Drake family, Judge Winston, and the Brown Shepherds, all on Blount Street, had courts. Publicly, the YMCA, St. Mary's, and Peace Institute had courts. Around 1910 the Carolina Country Club on Glenwood Avenue put in two clay courts below the 18th green. In 1928 a group of enthusiasts led by Bob Winston built four courts and a clubhouse on Dover Road and christened them the Raleigh Tennis Club.

**Early Piedmont Triad Courts**

In the then small cities of the North Carolina Piedmont, courts were

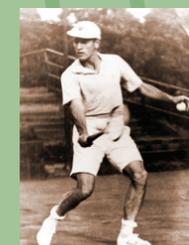
built by prominent families on private land. As pointed out by tennis enthusiast Gray Smith of Winston-Salem, "The first court in Winston was built in 1905 in the yard of [tobacco magnate] R.J. Reynolds. In the early 1920s, the Hanes family donated the land for Hanes Park, which was built next to Reynolds High School, and which has served as the home for



**Bo Roddey.**  
The first North Carolinian to play on the U.S. Junior Davis Cup where he paired up with Tony Trabert.

**CHARLOTTE'S PLAYERS**

The two best players to come out of the Queen City in the early part of the century were Bob Crosland, who played out of Myers Park, and Teddy Burwell, a member of Charlotte Country Club. Crosland won five Charlotte City Championships between 1926 and 1931, and was the first North Carolina men's singles champion in 1927.



**Teddy Burwell.**

singles and doubles titles in 1927 and 1928. He won the Old Dominion tournament in Richmond with Julian Robertson in 1929 before heading off to the University of the South, where he was a finalist in the NCAA's and then a Rhodes scholar. Burwell went on to win four state titles and five national titles overseas. He was ranked 17 in the nation in 1932, and was the first North Carolina player to go deep in a Grand Slam event, reaching the quarters at Wimbledon. Later

he won senior titles on grass, clay, and hard courts.

Another top Charlottean, Bobby Spurrier, uncle of famed football coach Steve Spurrier, won the state high school singles and doubles for Charlotte Central between 1939 and 1941, and went on to play number two behind Vic Seixas at UNC. "There just wasn't a lot of tournament play," said Bo Roddey, perhaps the top Charlotte player of the post-war generation, "except perhaps for the mid-Atlantic, which drew players from all over the east for about seven or eight years in the 1930s."

Roddey grew up with the four Keesler brothers, who had their own court, and Heath Alexander.



**Bob Crosland in 19xx.**

"We tended to dominate the state juniors in the late '40s," said Roddey. "Three of us were usually in the semifinals of our age group up in Greensboro."

In 1948 Roddey became the first Tar Heel ever to play on national Junior Davis Cup team, where he played doubles with Tony Trabert. At tournaments he suffered close losses to Pancho Gonzalez and Budge Patty. He would have a distinguished playing career before heading to medical school.

**THE "MOST FAMOUS" PRIVATE COURT IN RALEIGH**

Shortly after World War II, not more than a half dozen still-playable tennis courts remained open to the general public. To ameliorate this problem, George Geoghegan decided to refurbish the court behind his White Oak Road home.



Dodge Geoghegan, George's son, rolling the court at "Royster Stadium" on White Oak Road in Raleigh.

The court had been built in the early 1920s by Dr. Hubert Royster when he developed the neighborhood. Completely surrounded by a forest of 100-year-old oak trees, the site was lovely and private. Geoghegan built a three-tiered wooden bench, which led to the facetious name "Royster Stadium."

Royster Stadium became a busy weekend venue for an entire community of memorable characters in the 1950s and 1960s such as Judge Frank Dupree, Joe Cheshire, James Dorsett, Dr. Sidney Martin, and George London, who played with unorthodox strokes, unconventional racquets, and much chatter.

numerous tennis events, large and small, for many years."

In neighboring Greensboro, the first court is believed to have been built privately by textile magnate Caesar Cone on the family's land.

The Cones and other prominent Greensboro families were to be major benefactors of tennis across the state for decades to come. The city's central location, plus local enthusiasm for the sport, has contributed to its role today as

the permanent home of the N.C. Tennis Association and the Hall of Fame of the N.C. Tennis Foundation.

**Smaller Towns**

Many towns in the more rural areas of the state were fortunate to have great tennis enthusiasts when the sport was in its infancy in the early 20th century. Typically, the first court in town was built by a family, rather than by the town or a local club, and often courts were built in the backyard out of local red clay with fences and nets made out of chicken wire and other agricultural supplies. Over time, a great deal of effort was required to maintain the courts,

and most fell into disrepair as play gradually switched to clubs, colleges, and public facilities.

Some notable early courts were those of the Memory family in Columbus County, Prof. George Paschal in Wake Forest, the J.C. McNeill family in Scotland County, and the Winstead family in Roxboro.

In Wilmington, early courts were located at Robert Strange Park at the corner of 8th and Anne Streets. Charles Boney, who played on the state high school championship team in 1942, recalls that a German immigrant named Gerken faithfully rolled and limed the three red clay courts every day. In the late 1940s, impromptu teams from

**BEECHMAN ALFORD**

*Much of the tennis played in Raleigh for 40 years fell on the shoulders of Beechman Alford, an African American who never played the game. Alford personally constructed and, for decades, maintained the tennis courts at NC State, the old Raleigh Tennis Club on Dover Road, and even Royster Stadium.*

other towns in the eastern part of the state would play matches there. Across town, Dr. Hubert Eaton built and maintained a court and



**Hanes Park, Winston-Salem.**

Built in the 1920s, Hanes Park has been a mecca for every day play and major competitions ever since.



**Early College Players.** Senior Class at North Carolina College for Women, Greensboro, 1921.

program that eventually assisted in the development of great players such as Althea Gibson and Lenward Simpson.

The same story played out for decades all over North Carolina.

**Early Competitions**

About 25 years after Dr. Venable sank the first court into North Carolina's mucky red clay in Chapel Hill, formal competitions began to flourish around the state.

The very first organized tennis championship, the Midwinter Championship, was held in Pinehurst in the fall of 1911.

"Pinehurst enters the field this year with [its first] annual Championship...which soon promises to occupy a place equal in importance with golf and trap shooting," noted the optimistic January 7, 1911 issue of *The Pinehurst Outlook*.

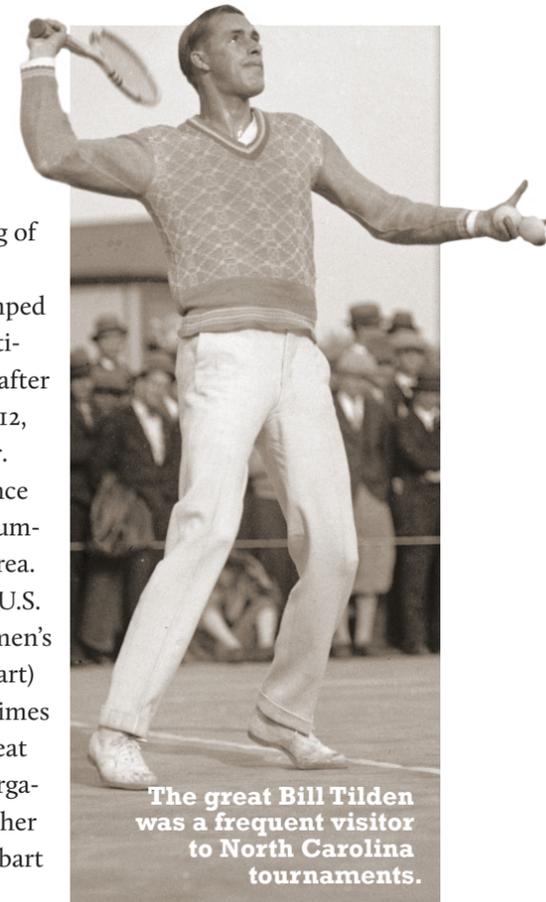
In the roaring 1920s, when Pinehurst was in its heyday for

wealthy northern tourists, the tournament changed its name to the North and South Championships, moving the schedule to mid-April so as to attract big-name players. Indeed, players such as Bill Tilden, Vinnie Richards, John Van Ryn, Harold Throckmorton, U.S. Davis Cup captain Howard Voshell, and others played until the North

and South was discontinued at the beginning of World War II.

Asheville jumped into the competition fray a year after Pinehurst, in 1912, shortly after Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Hobart began summering in the area.

Hobart, runner-up for the U.S. men's singles in 1891, and men's and mixed (with Mrs. Hobart) national champion many times over, brought to town a great deal of knowledge about organizing tournaments. Together with Stanley Howland, Hobart established "The Annual



**The great Bill Tilden was a frequent visitor to North Carolina tournaments.**



**Archibald Henderson Meets the Queen.**

North Carolina's Henderson met Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth at Wimbledon in 1945 during an inter service match between the US and the British Empire.

Open Tennis Tournament for the Championship of the Carolinas” in 1912 at the Asheville Country Club, one of the first major USLTA-sanctioned events. In 1928 the event was moved to the Biltmore Forest Country Club, where it remained until being discontinued in 1969.

**The Southerns and a USLTA Circuit Come to North Carolina**

In July of 1919, North Carolina's growing tennis reputation was recognized when the Asheville Country Club was given the honor of hosting the prestigious Southern Tennis Championships, the top regional tournament in the South. The tournament was a success, and the new Biltmore Forest Country Club served as host from 1922 to 1925 when the Asheville School for Boys assumed the role of tournament host. This transition of such a prestigious southern tournament from one site in North Carolina to another could be considered the beginning of what was to become North Carolina's prominence and leadership on the broad southern stage.

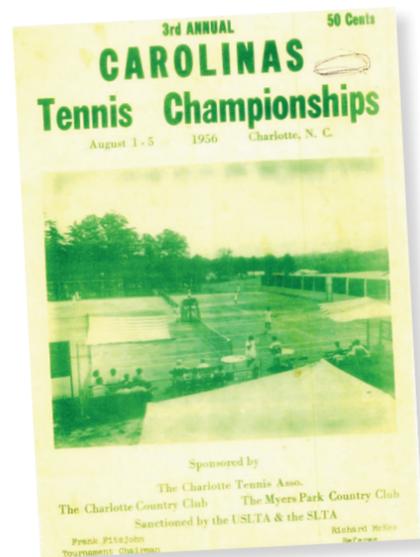
In 1938, the Southern Championships returned to Biltmore Forest Country Club. Due to continuous rain, the matches were moved to a makeshift indoor court. All events were completed except the men's finals between Ernie Sutter of New Orleans, and Charles Harris of West Palm Beach, Florida. In 1940 the Southern Men's Open was held at Myers Park Country Club and the Charlotte Country Club. UNC star Bitsy



**Biltmore Forest Country Club, 1922.**  
Site of the Championship of the Carolinas from 1928 to 1969.

Grant defeated teammate Archibald Henderson in the finals.

Around the same time that the Southerns were first returning to North Carolina, in the mid-1920s, the United States Lawn Tennis Association, or USLTA, established an amateur southern circuit, and looked to North Carolina to play a role. Beginning in the winter in Florida, sanctioned tournaments were scheduled each week, allowing nationally ranked players to work their way northward and arrive in time to play the Eastern circuit. The schedule included Palm Beach; Jacksonville; Augusta; Pinehurst; Asheville; Hot Springs, Virginia; and White Sulphur



**Myers Park, Charlotte.**  
A program from one of the many tournaments held over the years at Myers Park.

Springs, West Virginia.

The Asheville tournament, the Western North Carolina Open Championships, was first held in April of 1926 at the Asheville Country Club. Top national players such



**Caesar Cone...**  
One of John Kenfield's early Greensboro players in the 1930s.

as Voshell, Tilden, and Japanese Davis Cup player Tacky Harada competed annually with top North Carolinians such as Reeves Rutledge, Tench C. Coxe, Jr., Bretney Smith, F. C. Ivey, Dick Covington, Bob Crosland, and Caesar Cone. Mrs. Charlotte Chapin was among the competitors who played in the women's division. The public was invited to enjoy these outstanding matches at no charge, and in the first year particularly enjoyed a thrilling semifinal encounter in which Tilden beat George O'Connell 15-13, 6-2 before going on to win the championship.

**The State Closed Championships: A Greensboro Institution**

If the locals wanted some respite from the top stars carpetbagging to win their tournaments, starting in 1925 they could compete in the North Carolina State Closed Championships, first held at the Raleigh Tennis Club on Dover Road. Charlotte produced the state's first singles champion that year when Bob Crosland topped the 24-man field by defeating Hugh Lefler of Raleigh in a three-hour marathon, 11-13, 6-4, 6-1, 3-6, 6-3. Mrs. G. Ward Finley of Chapel Hill won the women's singles, Lefler and Jasper Memory of Raleigh won the men's doubles,

and Mrs. Finley and her husband won the mixed.

The state tournament eventually moved to Greensboro, beginning at the Sedgefield Country Club in 1935 and subsequently moving for a long run at the Greensboro Country Club. Much later, it moved to Greensboro's Latham Park, then the J. Spencer Love Tennis Center, and finally around the state to other cities such as Raleigh and Chapel Hill. Players from the 1940s and 1950s still associate the tournament with the Greensboro Country Club.

For years, Greensboro was blessed with prominent families who served as leading patrons of tennis not just in their city but also for the entire state, and their efforts led to Greensboro becoming the fulcrum of tennis in the state. Families such as the Preyers, the Holdernesses, the Cones, the Armfields, the Loves, the Kavanaughs, the Harrises, the Davenportes, and others promoted the game both financially and otherwise. For instance, when the State Junior Closed was played there, many of these families graciously housed and fed junior players from across the state.

“The North Carolina State Closed in Greensboro was always over Labor Day weekend,” said Jack Warmath, doubles champion many times over with numerous partners. “It was held in Greensboro because that was central and we had the best tennis situation. We had the best courts.

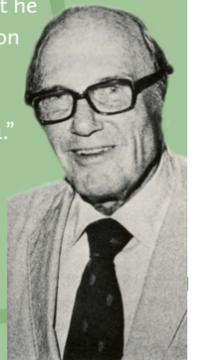
“The Greensboro Tennis Association ran the tournament with the help of the Recreation

**JULIAN ROBERTSON PLAYS TILDEN**

Salisbury's Julian Robertson, himself a good player, recalled a match he played against the world's best player, Big Bill Tilden, in Atlanta in 1925. “Early in the match, when not many spectators were present, Tilden hit easy balls to my forehand—the strongest part of my game—and I put them away... Suddenly I was leading 3 to 1 in the first set.

“When the word got around, in no time Tilden had the crowd standing around our court. Suddenly with a grin, he really applied the pressure on me with all his force and strategy, and before I knew it he had won the match 6-3, 6-1.”

Julian Robertson in 19XX.



**HOW TO MAKE THE TEAM**

Goldsboro native John Allen Farfour's roommate at UNC, a boastful 6'-4" New Yorker, happened to be the tennis team's top player. He challenged John Allen to a money match, betting \$10 to \$1.

With the dorm and tennis team watching, John Allen beat him, 6-3, 6-2. *The Daily Tar Heel* newspaper wrote it up and Farfour was quickly moved into the lineup.

**NC State Tennis Club, 1920.**

Tennis was organized as a varsity sport two years after this photograph of recreational players at the college.



Department," Warmath continued. "We had good crowds. It was the tennis event of the state held at Greensboro Country Club until the early '60s when it went to Latham Park."

"The State Closed was the tournament that players across the state trained for and most wanted to win," said Billy Trott, one of Raleigh's top players in the 1960s.

Other tournaments too numerous to mention sprang up around the state, but no discourse would be complete without mentioning one of the longest-running tournaments in state history, the City of Asheville Tennis Championships, which began at the Asheville YMCA on Woodfin St. Park in 1928 and continues more than three-quarters of a century later. Legendary Dick



**Greensboro's Jack Warmath.**

Warmath won the state doubles with numerous partners and was one of the first officers of the North Carolina Tennis Association.

Covington won the first six titles, and two of the next three. Eventually the tournament moved to Aston Park, where it is played today.

**Tennis in Schools**

In 1912, University of North Carolina professor Dr. Louis Round Wilson got

university president Dr. Francis P. Venable to allocate \$600 for a university Extension Division, with one-third of that amount earmarked for the beginning of the North Carolina High School Athletic Association. State championships were held in football and track in 1913 and tennis soon followed with the first boys' championship in 1916. Women's high school tennis did not



**Atlanta's Bitsy Grant.**

Started a flood of top players arriving at UNC from outside the state.

start crowning champions until 1970.<sup>4</sup>

College tennis was also getting its start in the early part of the century. In 1907, when Wake Forest College was located in the town of Wake Forest outside of Raleigh, the tennis team used the lone court in town, located in Professor Paschal's yard. Despite this handicap, E.B. Earnshaw and H.M. Poteat led Wake to Southern Intercollegiate



**Courts at NC State, 1920s.**

A popular Raleigh venue before private clubs. Zoology Building is in background.

titles. Eleven years later, in the fall of 1918, when freshman Jasper Memory enrolled, there still was only one court in town, but as he recalled, "In February 1920 some of us organized a Tennis Club with 60 members, and I was made Manager,

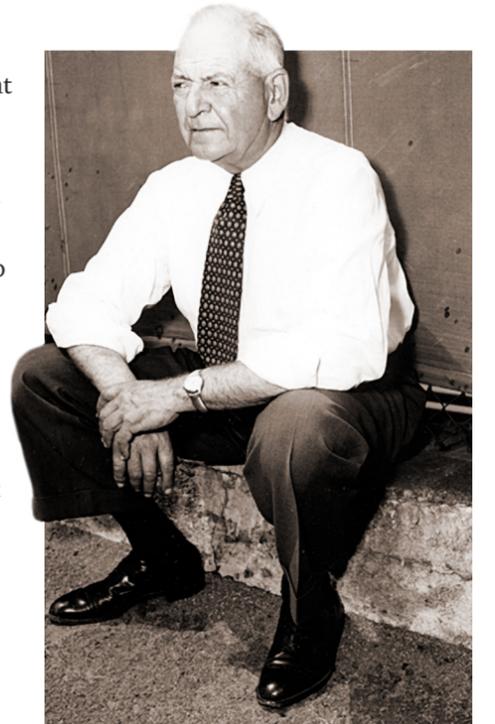
with broad powers. We pitched in \$3.00 apiece, and with the \$180.00 built in two months the four sand-clay courts in the field north of the library." By the late 1920s, Memory was coaching successful Wake teams led by John Vernon of Burlington.

Although the University of North Carolina had a tennis association from almost the moment Venable strung his net, the sport did not attain varsity status until 1908. By 1925, it is said, there were as many as 40 to 50 sand courts on campus, although not all were maintained.

Carolina had some good teams in the early years of the century, but it didn't have a varsity coach until 1927 when candy magnate John Kenfield was hired from the Lake Shore Country Club in Chicago. "Like most incoming coaches, he didn't care too much for those who wouldn't be around much longer, so Coach Kenfield didn't spend much time with the seniors," remembered Greensboro's Caesar Cone, who played number 3 in 1928.

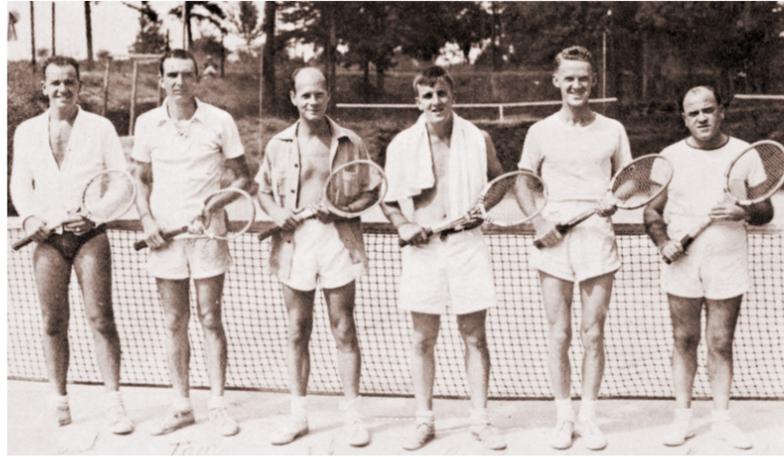
Under Kenfield's guidance the sport rose to great prominence at Carolina. His teams were unbeaten in nine out of 11 years between 1930 and 1941. It was not until 1940, however, that tennis was deemed a major sport at UNC, a recognition the team

**BABY RUTH**  
*Coach Kenfield taught tennis in the Chicago area, while serving as vice president of the Curtiss Candy Company. While with Curtiss, he was responsible for naming the "Baby Ruth" candy bar.*



**The Legendary John Kenfield.**

Responsible for many UNC championships.



**Shelby Team, 1930s.**  
Need names...

repaid a few years later by running a national record winning streak of 67 matches in a row, which stood until the late '40s.

Most of UNC's top collegiate players were from out of state. Future Davis Cupper Bitsy Grant from Atlanta was the greatest star of the early Kenfield years, and he was followed by future Wimbledon champion Vic Seixas

of Philadelphia in the late 1940s. In 1958, Don Skakle, one of Kenfield's former players, took over as coach and continued the winning tradition set by Kenfield. Kenfield's son, John, Jr., an excellent student of the game and a man of strong principles, began coaching at NC State in 1954 but refused to recruit high school prospects because he felt that recruiting was inconsistent with

a university's academic mission. He left in 1966 to coach at Dartmouth.

In the 1946-1950 era, Davidson's tennis team came into prominence with a squad composed of mostly native North Carolina boys. In 1950 this group won the Southern Conference Team Championship by defeating UNC 5 to 4. Charlotte star Bo Roddey, playing for Davidson, defeated UNC's Clark Taylor 6-4, 6-3, 6-2 for the singles title, and teamed with Durham's Whit Cobb in the doubles to beat Taylor and Charlie Rice 6-2, 5-7, 6-4, 6-3.

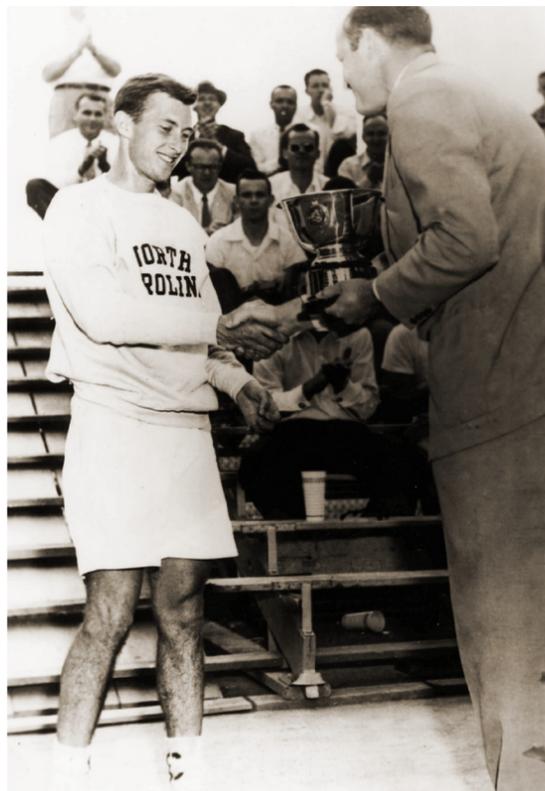
Many top college players were attracted to the game but did not fully blossom at tennis because they played multiple sports. For instance, Davidson's Cobb, was a multisport athlete who was voted into the North Carolina Athletic Hall of Fame ahead of golfer Arnold Palmer. Semi Mintz played tennis and set NCAA basketball records at Davidson; Jim Donnan played tennis and was the quarterback on a bowl-champion football team at NC State; Charlie Shaffer played tennis and basketball at Carolina; and, later, John Lucas of Durham played tennis and basketball at Maryland and eventually played in the NBA.

**Teaching Pros**

Teaching pros were few and far between in the early decades of the 20th century. As a sport that was not year-round, tennis could scarcely support year-round teaching professionals. Outstanding players like Harris, Cobb, Roddey, Warmath, and Charlotte's Herb Browne were learning their games on their own or from personal mentors.

In the mid-1950s there were still

**Charlotte's Herb Browne.**  
State champion and then active volunteer in North Carolina tennis for fifty years.



**Top North Carolina Players, 1940s.**  
Bo Roddey, XXXX Alexander, XXXX Spurrier, and XXXX Keesler at the Roanoke Exchange tournament in 1947

only a handful pros in the state, the most prominent being Harry Brown in Southern Pines, Dick McKee in Charlotte, Charles Rice at Biltmore, and Don Skakle, who held the position at Old Town Country Club in Winston-Salem and the Greensboro Country Club simultaneously. College players such as Browne, who taught at the Greensboro Country Club while he attended UNC and Harvard Law School, often taught in the summer.

**Coming Together, 1946-1961**

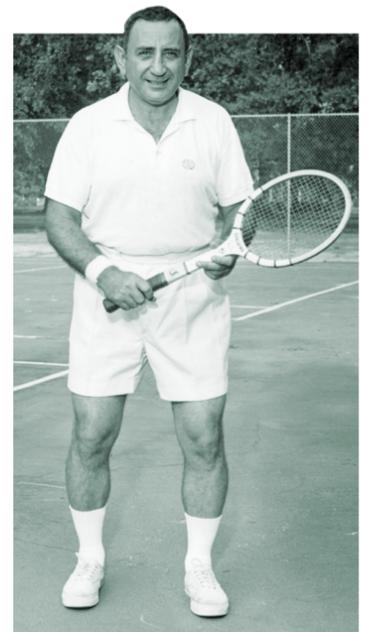
While tournaments abounded in the first half of the 20th century, they largely operated in a vacuum, on a purely local or regional basis, or occasionally as a part of a national enterprise, such as the USLTA Southern circuit. With the exception of the State Closed tournament in Greensboro, very little happened on a statewide basis.

"North Carolina is a very long state," said Billy Trott, a lawyer and longtime tennis volunteer. "From

Wilmington to Asheville is a huge distance, and players just didn't communicate with each other. Players in Raleigh went to tournaments in Virginia and the Middle Atlantic area; if you lived in Charlotte, you would go to tournaments in Atlanta or even Columbia."

As tournaments became more established in the 1930s through the 1950s, players improved, and interest in the game spread; however, like today, many people who didn't have the time or talent to compete against the top players still wanted to play. Regional competition between cities within regions—a precursor of today's league play—gradually developed.

"There were three regions in North Carolina—Eastern, Piedmont, and Western," said Winston-Salem player and volunteer Mildred Southern, who is as responsible as anyone for the growth of tennis in her city. Organized tennis in each of these regions developed as a result of tireless work by, in most cases, a couple of dedicated individuals, and



**John Allen Farfour.**  
Owner of Sports and Music store in Greenville, Farfour was the father of tennis in eastern North Carolina.

**DICK COVINGTON: A LEGEND IN THE WEST**

Dick Covington was not only one of the best players in the western part of the state, but he also fostered the game on many levels.

“Dick had an influence on tennis in western North Carolina that was unbelievable,” said former Asheville Parks and Recreation administrator and NCTA volunteer Jeff Joyce.

“He kept tennis active in the mountains, in Asheville.

“The tennis association would call a meeting and we might have 15 or 20 people there, and that’s all, but they would come from all around.

“Dick was a crusty old guy, but his passion for the sport of tennis was unmatched by anyone. He loved the game. He lived the game. He sold the game.”



**Dick Covington.**

Playing on court one at the famous Homestead resort in Hot Springs, Va. Covington was a champion from Asheville and a major benefactor of tennis in the western part of the state.

with a lot of help from many other volunteers and supporters in the area.

“In all these regions there were top people in place,” noted North Carolina Tennis Hall of Famer Vicki Everette. “There was Dick Covington in Asheville, Mildred Southern and John Peddycord in Winston-Salem, John Allen Farfour in the eastern part of the state, Buck Archer in Shelby, Marshall Happer in Raleigh. These were people who loved the game and did not mind helping out.”

**The Eastern Carolina Tennis Association**

Prior to World War II many towns in eastern North Carolina had active programs and already sponsored some intercity play. In the fall of 1945, as the war was winding down, Lionel Weil, Jr., of Goldsboro, C.R. Council of Raleigh, and Billy Harrison of Rocky Mount met to discuss expanding the activi-

ties. Along with John Allen Farfour, owner of Music and Sports Sporting Goods in Goldsboro, a longtime local champion and tournament organizer, this group created in the spring of 1946 one of the first major regional



**Charlotte’s Keeslers in 1947.** E.Y. Keesler Sr., center, is surrounded by his four tennis-playing sons, from left to right: Dewey, Teddy, Lenoir, and Lacy at the Second Annual city-wide tournament at the Charlotte Tennis Center.

associations, the Eastern Carolina Tennis Association, to promote tournaments and competition between interested communities. With the dearth of tournaments at the time, this regional league they created was critical in providing an opportunity for the best players in the eastern part of the state to compete against each other.

During the ECTA’s first year, Beaufort-Morehead, Goldsboro, Kinston, Rocky Mount, and Wilson participated in home-and-home matches. The Beaufort-Morehead City team augmented its team with some good players from nearby Camp Lejeune. Raleigh and Rocky Mount tied for first, and Raleigh won a playoff match held on the UNC varsity courts.

Raleigh then scheduled a follow-up match in Chapel Hill with a team from Charlotte to determine the state champion, and their luck ran out. Harvey Harris won the only match for Raleigh over Eddie DeGray, both former players at UNC. Bob Chapman, former number one player at Duke, played the number six position for an extremely powerful Charlotte team, which also included Bo Roddey, Bobby Spurrier, and Teddy and Dewey Keesler. From 1946-1978, the Raleigh team would gain the upper hand, dominating by winning the ECTA League competition 24 times.

Also in 1946, Goldsboro, Kinston, Raleigh, Rocky Mount, and Wilson fielded teams in the ECTA women’s league, using a format of four singles and two doubles. Wilmington eventually replaced Kinston in 1947 and, like Raleigh in the men’s league, dominated the competition.

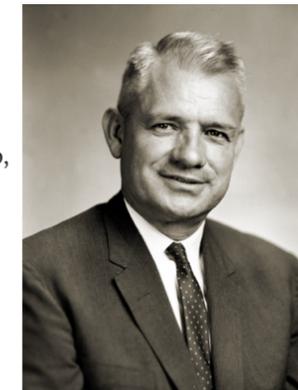
In addition to the adult ECTA leagues, a junior league program was also established. Lee Adams from Goldsboro was charged with forming this league in 1946, which in its initial season consisted of teams from Goldsboro, Rocky Mount, and Wilson. Teams from Wilmington, Raleigh, Kinston, and Chapel Hill were quickly added over the next several years.

Early on, leagues provided an outlet for the best players to compete against each other on a team, with matches usually played at public courts throughout the region. The ECTA was “a pretty big deal,” said

Trott, who played on Raleigh’s team as a junior in the 1960s. “During that era there were people who played at parks, clubs, or college courts, but they didn’t play outside of that location unless they were asked to play in the ECTA, which was for the top players. So the ECTA ran the leagues for these top players.

Typically you’d have about eight guys and you’d play just like a college match with six singles and three doubles.”

“Both men and women competed in the early leagues.... There were many hotly contested team matches over the years,” wrote C.R.



**C.R. Council.**

Tenacious player and one of NCTA’s original officers.

Council of these early competitions in North Carolina Tennis History, “many matches going down to the night match before a winner was decided. Some teams even did a little pre-match scouting of upcoming opponents, as well as getting information on the lineups to be used.” Certificates were awarded to each town listing the name of participants, with Raleigh listing



**Local Tournaments Received Good Press.**

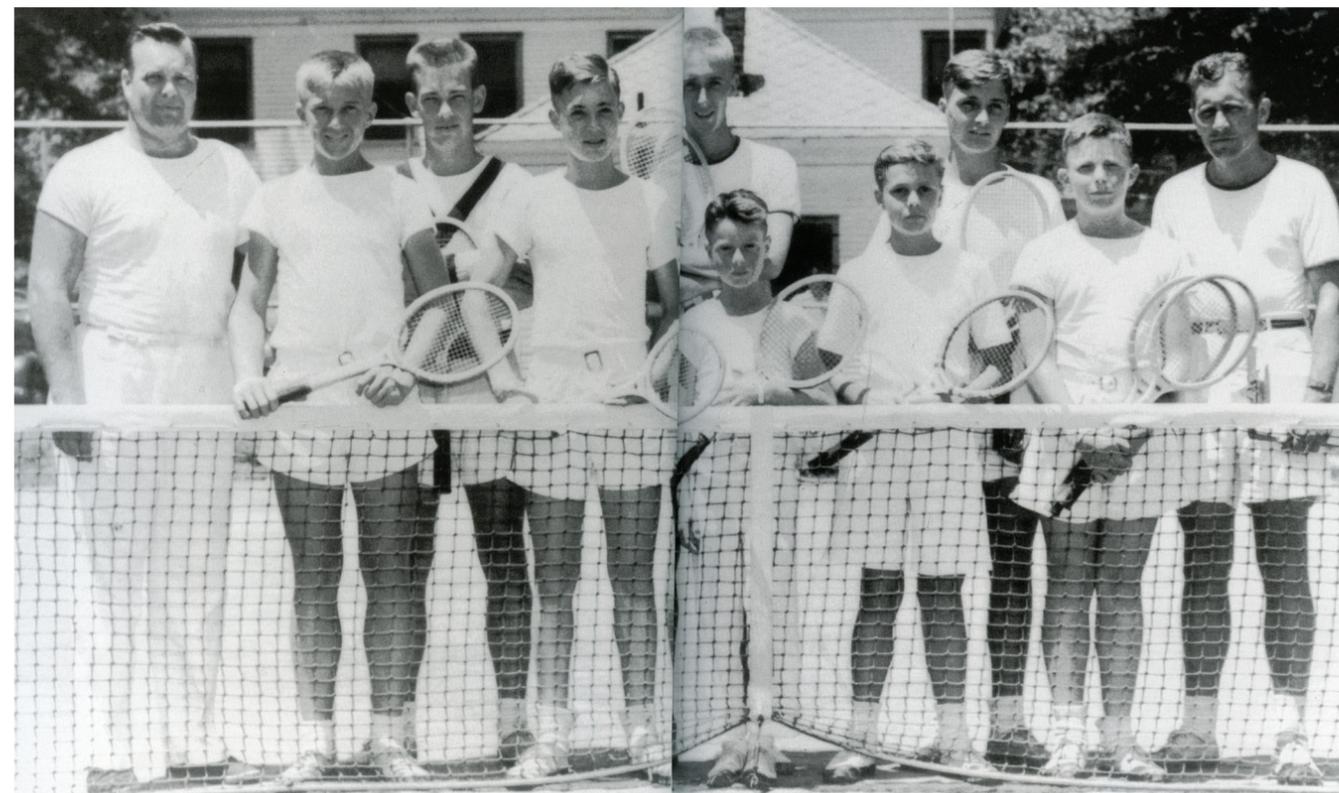


**East Carolina Tournament, 1955.**

Left to right: Joanna Holloway and Whit Cobb of Durham, Eion Felton and Marshall Happer of Kinston.

**Southern Juniors, Presbyterian College, Clinton, S.C., June, 1945.**

Left to right: John Stevens, Buddy Behrens, Tom Malloy, Bo Roddey, Wade Herron, Donnie Merritt, Steve Potts, Dick Mouledous, Tony Trabert, Bill Lufler.



27 players. “The general approach,” said Council, “except for maybe a few grudge matches, was to use as many different individuals as possible...and still win.”

Eventually A

and B leagues were formed, and some of the larger towns had a team in each league.

**The Western North Carolina Tennis League**

Building on its early tennis history and subsequent activity, much of which was generated by Dick

Covington, the Western North Carolina Tennis Association came into being about eight years after the ECTA. “A meeting was held in my home in the spring of 1954 to form a League,” reported Newton’s John Tate. “A full schedule was played that summer on a home-and-home basis,” with teams from places like Shelby, Hickory, Newton, Morganton, Elkin, Statesville, and Gastonia. Asheville joined in 1955 and Charlotte in 1956.

Tate was the first president of the league, serving from 1954-1956.

“We played every other Sunday and played each team twice,” said Shelby’s Buck Archer, a top player and volunteer. “After the league was over the last year, we had a tournament on Saturday and Sunday, September 4 and 5 in Shelby, and played all matches to

the semifinals. The semifinals were played in Morganton.”

After a brief hiatus between 1957 and 1959, the league was reorganized with teams from Newton, Hickory, Morganton, Shelby, and Gastonia. In 1960 Gastonia dropped out, Asheville re-entered, and Statesville joined.

By 1962, with Johnny Huss serving as president, the field included teams from five areas: Newton, Statesville, Mooresville, Elkin, and Charlotte. “It took plenty of work to keep the league going, but Jay Shepherd, John Tate, and I were determined not to let the league die,” stated Huss in *North Carolina Tennis History*. Such notable players as Buck Archer, Norm Chambers, Frank Love, J.A. Suttle, Roscoe West, Bob Light, Norman Jarrad, and Dick Covington competed in the Western Carolina Tennis League.

Asheville participated as a league team in the WCTA, but curiously, given its long history of tennis activity, the Asheville Tennis Association was not officially organized until April of 1961. The purpose was to coordinate the Asheville City Recreation Department, YMCA, and other local organizations interested in promoting tennis.

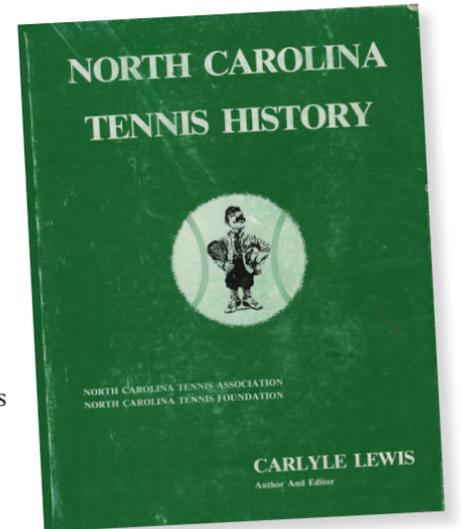
**The Roanoke Tennis League**

On June 9, 1948, the Roanoke Tennis League was formed at Woodbourne Plantation near the small town of Roxobel in a section of the state referred to as the “Far East.” The original teams, Rich Square, Aulander, Tarboro, and

Enfield all played on dirt courts. In *North Carolina Tennis History*, Tom Norfleet reported that “teams were added in 1949 and 1950 to include Roanoke Rapids and Williamston, and for the first time matches were played on black asphalt. This type of surface quickly wore the covers from balls, causing them to float and sail in long three-set matches.”

“The worst crisis of the Roanoke Tennis League came in 1951 when teams dropped out and many league tennis players switched to golf. An extensive search for new teams brought in Farmville and even included Franklin, Virginia, which played on composition courts, something new for league players. Robersonville joined the league in 1952 and Williamston, Roanoke Rapids, and Enfield soon returned. Robersonville won five league titles between 1956 and 1963 with Maurice Everette leading the team.

While the North Carolina environment of seasonal play was not necessarily as conducive to producing players who aspired to the national level as, for instance, Florida or California, the tennis milieu throughout the state was warm, encouraging, and highly competitive for players in the midsized cities

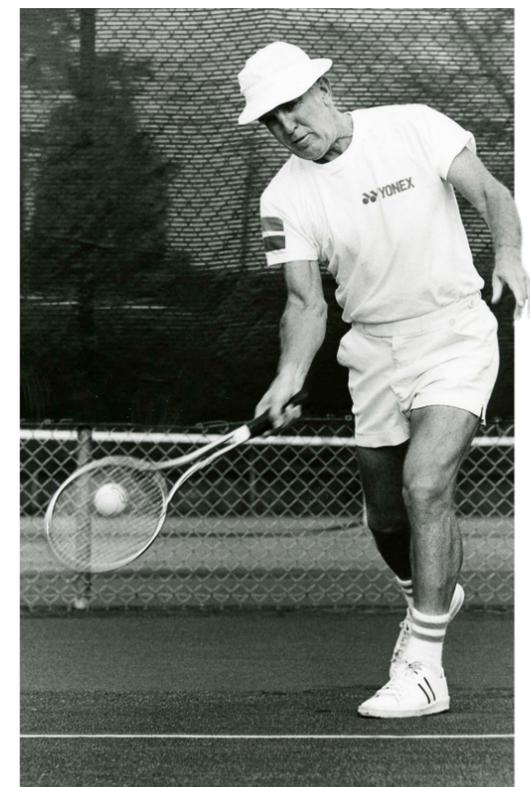


**The First History.**

Carlyle Lewis’ first history of tennis in North Carolina, published in the late 1970s, is a compendium of facts and figures about the game’s top players and venues.

**Hall of Famer Buck Archer.**

Founder of Shelby tennis association and mentor to local players, including Tim Wilkison.





**The North Carolina Closed Championships.**

The crown jewel of North Carolina closed tournaments, the championships were held for many years at the Greensboro Country Club, a central location which drew players from all corners of the state.

and small towns throughout the state. Decades before today's highly popular league tennis, successful and competitive leagues such as the ECTA and WCTA, or smaller groups like Roanoke, catered to the top players in their regions.

**The North Carolina Tennis Association**

In 1949, supporters of tennis statewide came together and formed the North Carolina Tennis Association (NCTA), the precursor of today's organization.

The NCTA, the first statewide tennis organization in North Carolina, was formed "in a meeting in Chapel Hill of tennis

players and supporters from all over the state," noted William Blackburn in North Carolina Tennis History.

"The Association's first President was Hughes Davis of Greensboro. C.R. Council of Raleigh was named Vice President for the Eastern area. Other officers elected were Burt Arey of Greensboro, Vice President for the Piedmont area; Bo Roddey, Sr. of Charlotte, Vice President for the Southern area; and Roy Jones of , Vice President for the Western area.

Whit Cobb was also a president in the early 1950s.

"The Association soon became a member of the Southern Tennis Association," continued Blackburn, "and began to furnish leaders to that organization." That tradition continues today.

Unfortunately, there is little information about the Association's

activities in its first ten years. That information gap would diminish as time went on as a result of the efforts of one journalist, Grady Elmore, who began "writing up tennis happenings," as he put it, while he was a sportswriter at the *Smithfield Herald* between 1952 and 1954. "Then I started doing some tennis col-

umns at the *Winston-Salem Journal* in 1954-56, and began a column on a weekly basis at the *Raleigh News*



**Whit Cobb.** Hall of Famer Cobb was a basketball and tennis player for Davidson and Southern conference Athlete of the year in 1950.



**Grady Elmore.** One man publicity department for NCTA in the early years.

and *Observer* from 1957-69." As the game and the Association developed and grew through the middle part of the century, there would be no more earnest supporter or focused chronicler than Grady Elmore.<sup>6</sup>

**Early African-American Tennis**

It is an unfortunate legacy of our country that, more often than not, African-American players were not allowed to participate in USLTA-sanctioned tournaments. As a result, in 1916 a group of African-American businessmen, college professors, and physicians, along with representatives from more than a dozen African-American tennis clubs, met in Washington, D.C. to form the American Tennis Association (ATA). The first ATA National Championships, consisting of three events (men's and women's singles, and men's

doubles), were held at Baltimore's Druid Hill Park in August of 1917.

In North Carolina, African-American tennis was vibrant, with a dozen neighborhood clubs—such as the Alpha and Capitol Clubs in Raleigh and the Algonquin Tennis Club in Durham—listed statewide in 1928.<sup>7</sup> The state also produced top African-American players like Nathaniel and Frank Jackson of Laurinburg, who won the ATA doubles championship in 1931.

A prominent North Carolina native, Dr. Hubert Eaton, would rise to become president of the ATA. Dr. Eaton, who was born in 1916 just four days after the ATA was founded, trained as an ob-gyn at the University of Michigan and became a force for integration in both the medical and tennis communities, but his most famous contribution to the game of tennis came on the court he built in his backyard at 1406 Orange Street in Wilmington.



**Gibson and Eaton.** Wilmington's Dr. Hubert Eaton, right, with the great Althea Gibson whom he helped mentor during her high school years.

A junior, intercollegiate, and national ATA champion in the 1930s, Eaton not only played the game while practicing medicine but also mentored youngsters. On August 24, 1946,

**AFRICAN-AMERICAN TENNIS CLUBS IN NORTH CAROLINA IN 1928**

- Cosmopolitan Club
- Rocky Mount
- Smithfield Tennis Club
- Wilmington Tennis Club
- Kittrell Tennis Club, Kittrell College, NC
- New Bern Tennis Club
- Central North Carolina Tennis Club, Laurinburg
- Alpha Tennis Club, Raleigh
- Algonquin Tennis Club, Durham
- Wilson Tennis Club, Enfield
- Winston-Salem Tennis Club
- Capital Tennis Club



**Grady Elmore.**

One man publicity department for NCTA in the early years.

**FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN AT NC STATE: CAPTAIN OF TENNIS**

Irwin Holmes, who had been ranked as high as the number two African-American tennis player in the country in high school, but had to sue to enter NC State, became State's first African-American athlete in the 1955-57 school year, playing tennis and running track and becoming the tennis team's co-captain in his senior year.

Holmes expressed loneliness as the only African-American on campus. Once, on a drive back from a competition against North Carolina at Chapel Hill in which Holmes had been the only NC State player to win a match, the team was denied service unless Holmes ate outside. The team refused to eat there and left.

Eaton and his good friend Dr. Robert "Whirlwind" Johnson, who would later become famous mentoring Arthur Ashe in Lynchburg, Virginia, saw the young Althea Gibson play in New York City and hatched a plan not only to develop her as a champion, but to help break the game's color barrier. Althea would move to Wilmington to live with Dr. Eaton and attend Williston High School during the school year, and live and practice tennis under Dr. Johnson in Lynchburg during the summers.

"As an ob-gyn," said Dr. Eaton's son, Dr. Hubert Eaton, Jr., "he couldn't get away to travel with her like Dr. Johnson could, so he just worked with her here in Wilmington on the court out back."

Althea later declared, "I owe the doctors a great deal. If I ever amount to anything, it will be because of them." In 1950 Althea integrated the US Open, which was then played in Forest Hills, N.Y. Seven years later, she won it.

Dr. Eaton is in the North Carolina Tennis Hall of Fame alongside a neighbor, Lenward Simpson, who started playing on Dr. Eaton's court when he was just eight. Simpson, a protégé of Arthur Ashe's, became an ATA champion and the youngest man ever to play at the US Open in Forest Hills.

In addition to Wilmington, Durham was a focus of African-American tennis in the early years, with the Algonquin Club

on Fayetteville Street hosting many junior tournaments. By the late 1950s, youngsters Bonnie Logan, who won the ATA Women's Championship from 1964 to 1970, and Sylvia Hooks, Logan's sometimes doubles partner and a finalist to Logan at the ATA, were promising a bright future for African-American players in the state.



**David Lash.**

Tennis and football coach Lash gave selflessly of his time and resources so kids in Winston-Salem could be introduced to tennis.

No discussion of tennis in North Carolina would be complete without mention of David L. Lash, who coached tennis at Carver, Atkins, and East Forsyth High Schools in Winston-Salem, winning seven state championships and 14 western championships. He also coached the football team to two state championships and nine western

championships and the basketball team to two state championships and six western championships.

It is arguable that tennis was his first love. As a tireless promoter of the sport, he was active well after his retirement teaching and promoting the game, and using it as a vehicle to enrich the lives of kids in Winston-Salem. "He would give kids rackets and bring them all to the courts to get them started," said his wife, Wilhelmina. "It's what he lived for."

It was the David Lashes, John Allen Farfours, Dick Covingtons, Buck Archers, and countless others who positioned North Carolina for its spectacular future in tennis in the second half of the 20th century. 🌿