

### **Hortense King McClinton (1918 – )**

- Overcame the obstacles of a Jim Crow society and distinguished herself as a pioneer in desegregating the social work profession
- Accepted an appointment in 1966 as the first African American on faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- Lauded nationally for teaching the knowledge and modeling the skills that prepare social workers to practice "without racial and cultural basis"

Hortense McClinton was born on August 27, 1918 and grew up in Boley, Oklahoma, one of the state's thirty-two all-Black towns. On her father's side, she was the granddaughter of slaves. Boley was a center of early civil rights activism, and as a child, McClinton quickly picked up lessons in self-reliance, self-help, and racial uplift that would define her later life and career. She finished high school in Boley, studied for one year at Langston College in Oklahoma City, and in 1936 followed her older brother to Howard University in Washington, D.C. Howard was the nation's leading Black institution of higher education. There, McClinton was profoundly influenced by sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, who drew tight connections between the academic study of social problems and the practical solutions implemented by social workers. McClinton graduated from Howard in 1939, and then moved to Philadelphia, where she found work with the American Friends Service Committee and the Wharton Centre, a settlement house in largely Black North Philadelphia. McClinton lived in-house at Wharton, alongside many of her clients. Through that experience, she developed an approach to social work that aimed to develop the capacity of local people to participate as active citizens and make effective claims on the forms of social provision that would enable them to live secure, productive, and fulfilled lives. McClinton pursued these ideas and practices further at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Work. She was the school's only Black student at the time, and the third to take a degree in its graduate program.<sup>1</sup>

Soon after completing her graduate studies, moved to Durham, where her husband worked as an auditor for the North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company, the largest Black-owned business in the nation. From 1954 to 1956, she worked at the Durham County Department of Social Services, where a white supervisor made it publicly known that he would "never have more than three Negroes on his staff at one time." McClinton left that job when her second child was born, and four years later, accepted a position at the Veterans Administration hospital in Durham, where she was the first African American employed as a member of the professional staff. At the VA, McClinton worked as a research supervisor and mentored students from UNC's School of Social Work who were completing their clinical rotations. In 1966, she accepted an invitation to join the school's faculty. She was the first

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Carlton-LaNey, "The Importance of Place in the Life and Career of a Social Work Pioneer: Insights from Interviews with Hortense King McClinton," *Affilia: Journal of Women in Social Work* 30 (Issue 1, 2014), 117-22.

African American to hold a tenure-track appointment in UNC's then-175-year history. McClinton retired in 1984. She will soon celebrate her 103<sup>rd</sup> birthday.<sup>2</sup>

During her time on faculty, McClinton regularly taught courses on casework, human development, family therapy, and institutional racism. Students recall that she often shared lessons from her early years in Philadelphia. Professor McClinton "said as social workers, we must get to know each person individually," one doctoral student remembered. "She said you have to understand each client's background." Doing so required building bridges across the racial divisions that persisted from the era of legal segregation, particularly in McClinton's early years on faculty. "It was incredibly important for her to be here," Kenan Professor Maeda Galinsky, explained. "She represented a whole portion of knowledgeable social workers who had not been allowed into the institution before. It was good for students, good for the school, and certainly good for African American students to have people of color in our faculty. [And] it was equally good for white students." During her years on faculty, McClinton also helped to establish the predecessor organization to the Carolina Black Caucus and worked with various units on campus to improve services for students with disabilities.<sup>3</sup>



Hortense K. McClinton, "A First Black Professor Remembers Her Segregated Education," National Public Radio, May 18, 2014

In her time at UNC, McClinton served on numerous departmental and university-wide committees, where she was frequently the only woman – and almost always, the only Black woman – at the table. Too often, that service to the institution reminded her that being 'first' is not always pleasant, and that change comes slowly to organizations that perceive it as a threat. In the face of that challenge, McClinton remained a steadfast champion of fairness and equity.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 123-27.

<sup>3</sup> Susan White, "Blazing Trails: Hortense McClinton," *Contact* (published by the School of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Fall 2008, 19.

She devoted herself to the students who inspired her and gave her work purpose; she led by example; and she labored to build up the School of Social Work's reputation through her own record of outstanding achievement.

Among social work educators and practitioners, and particularly among social workers of color, McClinton is legendary for her intellectual contributions and for her ability to mentor those who shared a desire to improve the profession by making it more respectful of all the people it aspired to serve. In 2014, National Public Radio featured an interview with McClinton in its Sunday Conversation series, and a year later, the National Association of Social Workers added her to its prestigious roster of Social Work Pioneers. The association bestows that honor on a select few "who have paved the way for thousands of other social workers to contribute to the betterment of the human condition." The official commendation reads, in part: "McClinton's professional competence demanded that hiring policies change at the [University of North Carolina] and that direct practice approaches be tailored more appropriately to acknowledge diversity. She illuminated the significance of culturally competent practices and taught the skills and knowledge that social workers needed to provide services without racial and cultural bias."<sup>4</sup>

McClinton also received a Legacy Award for distinguished service from the university's Black Faculty and Staff Caucus in 2009, and a Faculty Service Award from the UNC General Alumni Association in 2021. Inspired by McClinton as a teacher and role model, others have established awards in her honor. They include the Hortense K. McClinton Faculty Award, given by UNC's Black Student Movement; the Hortense K. McClinton Outstanding Faculty Staff Award, given by the General Alumni Association's Black Alumni Reunion; and the Hortense McClinton Senior Service Award, given by the Omicron Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.<sup>5</sup>

McClinton retired in 1984 but remains closely connected to the University. She is a regular at concerts put on by Carolina Performing Arts, lectures and symposia at the Stone Center for Black Culture and History and the School of Social Work, and other campus events that resonate with her lifelong commitment to bettering the lives of others. This summer, she will celebrate her 103<sup>rd</sup> birthday.

Based on evidence presented here, we recommend that the Board of Trustees affix McClinton's name to one of the buildings from which they removed other honorific names in July 2020. As specified in UNC's "Policy on Naming University Facilities and Units," naming a building for an "individual, family, or organization" is a "high and conspicuous honor" that should be reserved "for those who have made a substantial and sustained contribution to the university or have brought special distinction to the university, to the state [of North Carolina], or to society at large by services rendered."<sup>6</sup> Hortense McClinton meets and exceeds that

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<sup>4</sup> "A First Black Professor Remembers Her Segregated Education," Weekend Edition Sunday, National Public Radio, May 18, 2014, <https://n.pr/3eVqcZj>; "Hortense McClinton," National Association of Social Workers Foundation, NASW Pioneers Biography Index, <https://bit.ly/3bhml2j>.

<sup>5</sup> "Hortense McClinton"; "Hortense K. McClinton, Faculty Service Award Citation," UNC General Alumni Association, <https://unc.live/2PLMeF7>.

<sup>6</sup> "Policy on Naming University Facilities and Units," <https://unc.live/3umJZql>.

standard. She acquitted herself admirably over these many years. Now, it is time for us to distinguish ourselves by placing her name upon the landscape of the institution that she loves and has made better than many imagined it could be.

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Prepared for the committee by James Leloudis

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