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CPA license. Her life illustrates the difference that one enterprising professional can make for many future generations.

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Mary T. Washington Wylie in 1943 became the nation's first Black woman to earn the CPA license, a notable achievement in a remarkable life filled with many accomplishments. Washington Wylie also made it her life's mission to hire and mentor Black aspiring CPAs. Her story illustrates the importance of early Black CPAs' success and the advances they made for future generations of accountants.

A decision to pay it forward

Born in Mississippi, Washington Wylie (1906–2005) was a young child when she was sent to live in Chicago with her grandparents after her mother's death. Eager to

escape a home life with an abusive grandmother, she was about to drop out of high

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Binga State Bank, a Black-owned bank. Bank vice president Arthur Wilson, who in 1923 became the second Black person to become a CPA, encouraged her to go back to school to study business and made sure she would have the experience she would need to qualify for licensure. She ultimately graduated from Northwestern's College of Business in 1941, the only woman in her graduating class. Becoming a CPA in 1943, she started her own practice in her basement after no firm would hire her.

Among the 14 Black CPAs in the United States at the end of World War II (Washington Wylie was the 13th), one-half were in Chicago, according to *A White-Collar Profession: African-American Certified Public Accountants Since 1921*, by Theresa A. Hammond, CPA, Ph.D., accounting professor at San Francisco State University's Lam Family College of Business. A large number of Southern Black people moved to the city seeking opportunity after the war, and many of the Black accountants there took it upon themselves to help other aspiring Black professionals.

Washington Wylie dedicated herself to making her firm a gateway into the profession for future generations. She hired her first full-time employee, Hiram Pittman, when she read about him passing his CPA Exam in a Black-owned newspaper. She later hired Lester McKeever, who could not find work at any other CPA firms. McKeever remembers her as a taskmaster and perfectionist. "You really grew under her," he said.

Most clients of Washington Wylie's firm were small Black-owned businesses and not-for-profits, along with numerous large Black-owned companies, including the Fuller Products Company, which made beauty products for the Black community. Its owner, entrepreneur Samuel B. Fuller, offered Washington Wylie's firm office space in his company's building, subsidized half of Pittman's pay for six months when he was hired, and kept the firm on retainer for 35 years, according to Hammond.

Pittman and McKeever would become Washington Wylie's partners, and McKeever

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2010, the country's largest community-based accounting firm, New York-based Mitchell Titus, acquired most of her firm. A division of Washington, Pittman & McKeever continues to this day.

An active family life

Washington Wylie also had a strong commitment to family and community. She was the mother of five children and grandmother of nine. "She loved to cook and did her own laundry on an old-fashioned washing machine that you fed through a roller," her granddaughter remembers. "She taught us how to make homemade ice cream, and she enjoyed making spiked eggnog for Christmas." The grandchildren gathered at her house on Sundays so their grandfather could teach them to play pool. Washington Wylie worked on taxes at a desk nearby but always stayed part of the fun.

For her 95th birthday, the family asked loved ones to skip gifts and instead write testimonials about something Washington Wiley had done for them. The outpouring of examples of her generosity was overwhelming, with stories of her giving people down payments for homes and for the headquarters of a sorority that supports Black professional women, helping to pay off a mortgage, or sending a child to college. "Everyone benefited because of her, and we were grateful," Spencer said. Washington Wylie retired at 75 and lived to be 99. "Even toward the end of her life, she used to love to help my children with their math homework," Spencer said.

A strong influence

Her influence and example extended even to those who never knew her. "Early female CPA leaders and pioneers are critically important to the profession because they confirm that, if given the opportunity, people and particularly people of color can thrive and add value not just to their own firms or employers but to their communities at large and the league of professionals that follow in their footsteps,"

said Genevia Gee Fulbright, CPA, CGMA, president and COO of Fulbright & Fulbright

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the Accounting Hall of Fame. She is the first Black woman CPA to be conferred that honor.

“Visionary, Trailblazer, Mentor.” Those words were printed on banners that hung on lampposts in Chicago in 2018 when the city honored Washington Wylie on the 75th anniversary of her becoming a CPA. Mentored by a Black CPA, she made it her life’s mission to hire and train others, open doors, and inspire future generations.

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*The **Black CPA Centennial** is a yearlong effort to honor, celebrate, and build upon the progress Black CPAs have made in shaping the accounting profession. The celebration is a collaborative effort of the AICPA, Diverse Organization of Firms, Illinois CPA Society, National Association of Black Accountants, and National Society of Black CPAs.*

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