

# African American Brilliance

By Patricia Carter Sluby\*

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Two sisters from the Charlotte area were nurtured in creative thinking long before they became adults. Mary Beatrice Davidson Kenner (1912–2006) and her sister Mildred Davidson Austin Smith (1916–1993) began inventing devices as little girls. They believed that their natural talent for discovery came from their inventive father, Sidney Nathaniel Davidson, who encouraged them. When Kenner was a toddler, Davidson started working on a pants presser that was patented in 1914. Their maternal grandfather, Robert Phromeberger, of German and Irish lineage, tinkered with objects to make them work better. He invented many devices, including a tricolor light signal for trains.

Neither girl had specialized formal training. They looked at a problem and just figured out an answer. Kenner was the family's most prolific inventor. Her first idea came to her as a small child when she devised a way to keep a screen door from squeaking. During her teen years, Kenner came up with another idea that she was unable to patent. She moved to Washington, D.C., married, and ran a floral business before she returned to inventing items to make life less troublesome. Her patented toilet-tissue holder easily gives people the leading loose end. Kenner's patent for a special attachment for an invalid walker included a hard-surfaced tray and a soft pocket for carrying items. She continued to develop new ideas throughout her life. Months before she passed away, she talked of another invention on which she wanted to file a patent application. Although she did not profit from her efforts, her creative spirit remained high.

Kenner's sister loved music and became a professional singer. Smith married and had two sons, then fell seriously ill with multiple sclerosis. Largely confined to her home in Washington, D.C., she had lots of time to think. She came up with a game to teach family relationships, for which she received a patent in 1980. She got a trademark on the game's name, "Family Treeditons," and copyrighted its written instructions. Mainly designed for young people to help them understand their place in the extended family, the game became popular with adults. Early sales were strong, but Smith's marketing and distribution methods did not make her rich. She did recover part of the money spent getting her product marketed.

Alonzo Parker, of Durham, frowned at people who eased into sofa cushions instead of biking, running, walking, or swimming. He developed an idea that might offset the lack of a regular physical exercise program, especially for the elderly. In 1988 Parker received his first patent on a therapeutic exercise machine and chair, a one-unit fitness program. Its components included movable and stationary tables, a stationary bench, and a movable leg device. With simple adjustments and arrangements, the user can perform pull-ups, sit-ups, body twists, and other motions totaling more than thirty exercises. He acquired other

patents for improvements.

The Reverend John S. Thurman, of Hallsboro, suffered years of anguish and pain at the loss of his first innovation. Walking home from work at a North Carolina shingle mill in the 1930s, the twenty-one-year-old Thurman had decided that there was a better way to give turning signals from cars than by hand. His “automobile signal” innovation consisted of an electrically wired case with niches for “left,” “right,” and “stop.” But someone Thurman had trusted with the invention documents never filed them at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. Thurman developed a new idea for a vehicle motion-signaling system fifty years later. The discovery earned a patent in June 1988. Thurman had passed away a month earlier but knew that his second invention was a winner.

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