



The Historical  
Society of  
Pennsylvania

*Collection 3075*

**Ruth Johns Ferguson (1902-1989)**

*Papers*

*1901-1985 (bulk 1950-1962)*

*4 boxes, 4 flat files, 1.7 lin. feet*

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### Abstract

Ruth Johns Ferguson (1902-1989), born Ruth Elizabeth Booker Johns, was a beauty culture expert, co-proprietor of the Apex School of Beauty Culture franchise in Philadelphia, and member of the National Beauty Culturists' League and its national sorority, Theta Nu Sigma. She worked for the Apex Hair and News Company, the company that created the Apex beauty school, in the early part of the twentieth century. Eventually, Ferguson chose to teach the younger generations about beauty culture. Ferguson and her partner, Naomi T. Fassett (1908-1983), opened an Apex beauty school branch at 525 South Broad Street in Philadelphia, which they ran for about 35 years. Classes at Apex consisted mostly of young African-American women from Philadelphia and the surrounding region, who wished to become beauty culture experts. Ruth Johns Ferguson stood out among her contemporaries as an African-American woman running her own successful business in the mid- to- late twentieth century.

The Ruth Johns Ferguson collection is small yet varied and includes her father's personal diary, a 1956 Apex School of Beauty Culture yearbook, National Beauty Culturists' League/Theta Nu Sigma booklets, newspaper articles, diplomas, certificates, and a dark blue vinyl document bag. Photographic prints make up a majority of the collection. Ferguson kept pictures of friends and family as well as formal photographs of Apex graduation classes and National Beauty Culturists' League/Theta Nu Sigma-related gatherings and events.

### Background note

Born on October 24, 1902, in Salisbury, Maryland, to Reverend Joseph E. A. Johns (b. 1868), Ruth Elizabeth Booker Johns was the youngest of four children. She had two brothers, Preston Leon (b. 1890) and Edward Atmore (b. 1896), and one sister, Carrie Greta Jeanette (b. 1898).

For Joseph E. A. Johns, a Methodist preacher, traveling was a job requirement. In the early 1900s, although he lived and preached in Salisbury, Maryland, he often traveled to neighboring cities and states to spread the word of God. In his diary entries, he describes his engagements at numerous parishes throughout southern Maryland, Delaware, southern Pennsylvania, and southern New Jersey. The family moved

whenever the reverend was selected to work at another church in another state. Their final move was to Germantown, Philadelphia, sometime between 1907 and 1919. In April 1919, Reverend Johns was appointed pastor of Janes Memorial United Methodist Church at 47 East Haines Street<sup>1</sup>, and the family lived about four blocks away in the church's parsonage. Ruth Johns remained in Philadelphia for more than half of her life. She eventually met a young doctor and Philadelphia resident, Emanuel Ralph Ferguson (1899-1985), who would become her husband. The two found a permanent home at 5612 Baynton Street.

Ruth Johns Ferguson had a thriving career in beauty culture. She maintained the Apex School of Beauty Culture in Philadelphia for 35 years. Ferguson found her calling by following the path laid by accomplished African-American beauty culture pioneers, such as Madame C. J. Walker (1867-1919) and Sara Spencer Washington (1881-1953).

In the early 1900s, the formula for beauty success was written in Harlem, New York, by Madame C. J. Walker (born Sarah Breedlove McWilliams Walker). She invented a hair straightening process with the use of a pomade and a flat iron that she termed the "Walker System." In her shop, she taught small groups of students how to use the system. As the popularity of her system grew, so too did the number of students that wanted to learn its use. Eventually, she opened up a larger school where, upon graduation, students were granted the right to use the Walker System in their own shops and then received the proper supplies and equipment. Her business grew out of Harlem and into neighboring states where her beauty system reached more and more people. She also formed the Walker College of Hair Culture, where the Walker System and fundamental beauty ideals were taught to thousands of students; and the Walker Manufacturing Company, through which she created her own line of premium beauty products for African-American women.<sup>2</sup>

Madame Walker's success continued long after her death in 1919, and Sara Spencer Washington was among those to pick up the reins. Washington founded the Apex News and Hair Company in the early 1920s. Based out of Atlantic City, New Jersey, she offered the motto "Now is the time to plan for your future by learning a depression-proof business."<sup>3</sup> The "Apex System" followed the same premise as the Walker System, with its own line of high-quality beauty supplies and equipment. Washington exhibited at trade shows and employed "Apex agents" to use and sell her products. Her business expanded with the popularity of beauty shops and salons in the United States, and Washington began the Apex School of Beauty Culture in the early 1930s. By the 1960s, there were eleven Apex franchises throughout the United States.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Welcome to the Janes Memorial UMC Web Site," <http://www.gbgm-umc.org/janeschurchofphila/Hist3.htm> (accessed 7 February 2006).

<sup>2</sup> "Madame C. J. Walker (Sarah Breedlove McWilliams Walker) Inventor, Businesswoman," <http://www.strawberrylady.com/blackhistory/walker/MadameWalker.htm>, (accessed 3 February 2006); Gladys L. Porter, *Three Negro Pioneers in Beauty Culture*, (New York: Vantage Press, 1966), 38, 44-45.

<sup>3</sup> Porter, 43. How true it is when Porter writes "As long as there are women in the world, there will be beauty establishments," and there will always be those women for whom beauty has no price limits.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43; Edward G. Perry, "Looking Back on the Harlem Business Men's Club First Annual Trade Week," *The Beauty Specialist* 1, no.1 (September 1932): 18.

Ruth Johns, as a single woman, was an employee of the Apex News and Hair Company in Philadelphia in the early part of the twentieth century. She became a member of the National Beauty Culturists' League (NBCL), organized in 1919 in Philadelphia,<sup>5</sup> and its national sorority Theta Nu Sigma, founded by NBCL president Cordelia Green Johnson in 1946. As a sorority member, Ferguson would have had a Bachelor of Arts degree from the National Institute of Cosmetology. Her beauty culture skills and knowledge helped her become a well-known leader in the field, and she served as the sorority's supreme basileus (national president) for many years. In this role, Ferguson served as a decision-maker and representative for the sorority on a national level. Along with local officers, she inducted new pledges to the sorority, organized Theta Nu Sigma events, and educated her fellow "soros" (sorority members) on the latest advances in beauty culture. She also attended cosmetology-related conventions, seminars, and meetings across the United States on behalf of Theta Nu Sigma.

Sometime in the 1940s, Ruth Johns and Naomi T. Fassett (1908-1983), her business partner, opened a franchise of the Apex School of Beauty Culture at 525 South Broad Street, Philadelphia. Also around this time, Johns married medical doctor and World War II veteran Emanuel Ralph Ferguson. She kept her maiden name, added Emanuel's, and became Ruth Johns Ferguson.

Ferguson and Fassett formed a haven at the Apex School of Beauty Culture for local African American students, most of whom hailed from Philadelphia's predominantly African American-populated West and North-Central neighborhoods. The majority of students were women; however, a small percentage of men also graduated from the school each year. At Apex, these students found a place to be themselves and to better themselves; and Ferguson worked tirelessly as a manager, teacher, and mentor. Apex graduates successfully worked in the field as beauticians, hair stylists, and barbers, or opened their own shops; some even worked on developing their own lines of hair treatments and beauty products.

Ruth Johns Ferguson experienced health problems in her later years and had to shut down the school in the mid 1980s. She regretted having to do so, but she could no longer physically or financially contribute to Apex. She died at age 86 in 1989.

## Scope & content

This small collection, the bulk of which dates from the 1950s to the early 1960s, is about Ruth Johns Ferguson as co-owner of the Apex School of Beauty Culture in Philadelphia and as a member of the National Beauty Culturists' League (NBCL). The collection contains photographs of Apex graduates and NBCL conventions and events; certificates awarded to Ferguson; diplomas belonging to her husband Emanuel; a 1956 Apex yearbook, and Theta Nu Sigma booklets. In addition, there are some personal items, including Reverend Johns's personal diary and possible family photographs. There is little information about Ferguson's private life; and there are no records (curricular, financial, or administrative) from the Apex school itself.

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<sup>5</sup> The National Beauty Culturists' League, "The NBCL," <http://www.nbcl.org> (accessed 6 February 2006).

The collection is broken down into four series. Series 1 (*Family Materials*) and Series 2 (*Beauty School and Affiliations*) are comprised of items that best document the Johns family and Ruth Ferguson's beauty culture accomplishments and associations. Reverend Johns's personal diary, which he kept intermittently from 1901 to 1903, is the most notable item in Series 1. In 1919, Johns returned to this diary and wrote a single entry. The same happened in 1920, and he wrote the last few entries in the diary. This diary provides an interesting and somewhat personal look into the daily life and travels of a Methodist preacher in the early 1900s. In Series 2 there is a 1956 Apex School of Beauty Culture yearbook, a 1981 National Beauty Culturists' League convention booklet, and Theta Nu Sigma National Sorority booklets from 1964 and 1985. This series also holds the family's diplomas, certificates, reports, and other paper ephemera.

Among the most significant items in the collection are those in Series 3 (*Photographs*). There is one folder of mostly unidentified photographs of friends and family. There are also two oversized folders of large-scale photographs, one of Apex graduation classes and the other of NBCL events. Those searching for family members who graduated from or who were associated with Apex or the NBCL might have luck finding their pictures here. However, this is not a comprehensive set of photographs; only a few graduating classes and events are represented, and fewer still are labeled with names. Lastly, there is one oversized folder of miscellaneous photographs that indirectly relate to this collection and do not appear to contain Ferguson but may contain her acquaintances or family members.

Finally, Series 4 (*Artifacts*) is made up of a single unusual item: a blue vinyl document bag from the Woman's Division of Christian Service. Aside from Reverend Johns's diary, it is the only item that defines Ferguson by her religion. Both she and Emanuel were Methodists and attended her father's church, Janes Memorial United Methodist.

## Overview of arrangement

Series I	Family Materials, 1901-1947	1 folder, 1 flat file
Series II	Beauty School and Affiliations, 1956-1985	1 box, 2 folders, 1 flat file
Series III	Photographs, ca. 1905-1970	2 boxes, 1 folder, 2 flat files
Series IV	Artifact, ca. 1950-1960	1 box

## Series description

### Series 1. Family materials, 1901-1922 (Box 1)

There are two folders in this series: one for the Johns family and one for the Ferguson family. Among the items in the Johns family folder is Reverend Joseph E. A. Johns's sporadic diary, which reveals a man devoted to God. He writes about his travels, sermons, knowledge of the Bible, and contacts among the church community. While his writings seem somewhat aloof, he does mention a few

personal moments, such as packing for a move, enjoying cake and ice cream at a fourth of July party, driving with his son, and attending to his sick wife.

Removed from the diary but kept in the folder are four items, seemingly of some importance to Reverend Johns. One item is a handwritten sermon excerpt called "The cross is Christ's glory." The second item is a partial "letter to the editor" dated January 19, 1903. The third item is a flyer from the Iowa Christian College, Oskaloosa, Iowa. The last item is a 1922 seminar paper titled "The Realization System of Practical Psychology" by Daniel A. Simmons and Edwin C. Coffee.

Another document in the folder is a copy of a handwritten "Births" record of members of the Johns family: Joseph, his sister Rosella, and his children Preston Leon, Edward Atmore, Carrie Greta Jeanette, and Ruth Elizabeth Booker. There are also two souvenir folders from Camp Meade, Maryland, and Los Angeles, California, respectively, which are both written from U.S. soldiers to "Ruth Johns" during the early twentieth century.

The second folder, Flat File 1, contains diplomas and medical license certificates belonging to Ruth Ferguson's husband Emanuel Ralph Ferguson. In this folder is also a selective service certificate issued to Emanuel Ferguson on October 17, 1940, which names him the examining physician of Philadelphia City Local Board No. 34, Pennsylvania. Two other interesting items housed here are diplomas for Ethel Ferguson and Dorothy A. Ferguson, respectively, possibly Emanuel's sisters.

## **Series 2. Beauty school and affiliations, 1918-1985 (Box 1, Flat file #1)**

The first folder in this series contains items related to Ruth Ferguson's career as an owner and educator at Philadelphia's Apex School of Beauty Culture, the most interesting one being a copy of Apex's 1956 yearbook. It begins with a short "Class History" and an appreciative message from the editor of the yearbook to co-owners Ruth Ferguson and Naomi Fassett. What sets this yearbook apart from others is the records of students' pictures, names, and *addresses*, demonstrating that there was a sense of community among the students. Demographically, in 1956 the school's enrollment was about 85 percent female, 15 percent male, and the majority of students lived in North-Central and West Philadelphia. However, about 24 percent of the students had addresses in the Philadelphia suburbs, Delaware, or New Jersey, indicating the familiarity of the Apex name and reputation throughout the tri-state area. At the end of the book, there are a few advertisements, notably one for the Apex News and Hair Company celebrating the success of the Apex colleges.

Also in this folder is a 1959 copy of *Jet* magazine. The cover story is about a young model, Vivian Jackson, who won a role in the Ebony Fashion Fair, a new and popular touring fashion show. Ferguson may have used beauty and cultural magazines to teach her students about the world of beauty culture outside the salon.

There is an oversized folder, Flat File 2, in this series that contains two 1959 *Philadelphia Tribune* articles adhered to cardboard. The primary article's headline

reads, "Battling Apex Students Kiss, Make Up in Court," and describes the circumstances surrounding a fight between two Apex students. The smaller article, entitled "Apex Owners Protest Story of Feud, Fight," is a rebuke from Apex co-owners Ruth Ferguson and Naomi Fassett about the "Battling Apex Students" article. Fassett, speaking for both herself and Ruth Ferguson, argued it hurt Apex's good name and that some of the information therein was erroneous.

Materials published by and for the National Beauty Culturists' League (NBCL) and its national sorority Theta Nu Sigma are also in this series. Ferguson was a member of the sorority and served as its supreme basileus from at least 1960 to the 1980s. In this role, she often traveled to neighboring states, met with other chapters, and made public appearances on behalf of the sorority. The most substantial items in the folder include a short *Atlanta Daily World* article from 1960 on the history of Theta Nu Sigma, Theta Nu Sigma booklets from 1964 and 1985, and an NBCL convention booklet from 1981. There are a couple of items in this folder that deserve a closer look, such as a paper entitled "What has been the reaction of the negro to the Supreme Court ruling on segregation?" and an undated Award of Merit presented to Ruth E. Johns from Cordelia Greene Johnson, NBCL president from 1939 to 1957. Stamped on one side of the certificate is the phrase "Chosen 100," implying Ferguson's peers bestowed upon her a prestigious honor.

### **Series 3. Photographs, ca. 1905-1970 (Boxes 1-2, 4, Flat file #2-4)**

This series is comprised of a multitude of photographs (most of them large-scale or panoramic) of friends and family, Apex graduates, and beauty convention attendees. The older photographs may be of the Johns or Ferguson families. Some of the pictures reveal a financially sound family, two young girls dressed in nice white dresses, and a man standing next to a shiny 1920s Chevrolet car. The newer photographs (save for a picture of Emanuel Ferguson in uniform) appear to be of past Apex students and graduates.

The oversized photographs in Box 2 and Box 4 are of Apex graduation classes from 1949, 1950, 1958, 1959, 1961, 1962, and 1970. Ferguson appears in all the pictures, usually centered next to her partner, Naomi Fassett. The vast majority of students were African American and each class had a small percentage of male students. The staging of the group photographs is less formal in the later years, where they congregated in a classroom and some students had to sit on the floor, than in the earlier years, where the students gathered in a formal hall and wore rose corsages. The prints from 1958, 1959, and 1970, unlike most of those in this folder, showcase individual, named portraits of Apex teachers and students. In this folder is also a single, undated photograph of what looks like a beauty class in session. The students, dressed in white uniforms, are attentively listening to the teacher standing at the front of the class with a chalkboard and anatomical diagrams of the human head and neck. An address for Peace Photo in Philadelphia is stamped on the back of the photograph, indicating it might have been used for publicity.

The first oversized folder, Flat File 3, contains photographic prints from 1954 to 1964 of National Beauty Culturists' League conventions and group photographs of

the National Institute of Cosmetology (NIC) graduating classes. Ferguson is present in most of the pictures. As a member of the NBCL, she often attended their conventions, as evidenced in the 1954 Chicago convention photograph. "Ruth E. Johns" signed the back of this particular print. The 1964 panoramic photographs of the NBCL gathering in New York City demonstrate a sense of camaraderie among the league's members.

Miscellaneous photographs are on Box 4 and Flat File 4, the second oversized folder. In Box 4 is a group shot of Alpha Phi Alpha members at their 21<sup>st</sup> annual convention in 1928. In Flat File 4, one will find pictures of a woman (possibly Ferguson) speaking from a podium; the 1962 graduating class of the Eckels College of Mortuary Science; and a gathering of nurses at the 1936 convention of the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses, Inc.

**Series 4. Artifact, ca. 1950-1960 (Box 3)**

There is only one object in this series: a rectangular, navy blue bag that probably belonged to Ferguson. Printed on it are an address for the "Woman's Division of Christian Service," and the phrases "World Outlook," and "The Methodist Woman." Ferguson's father was a preacher at Janes Memorial United Methodist, and her family belonged to this same church throughout her life. Ruth's possession and use of this bag suggests that she may have played an active role in her church and traveled on its behalf.

## Separation report

Separated to HSP library:

Porter, Gladys L. *Three Negro Pioneers in Beauty Culture*. New York: Vantage Press, 1966.  
[TT955.A1 P6]

*The Van Dean Manual: Professional Training for Beauticians*. Compiled and edited by the Van Dean Staff. Completely revised by the Milady Staff. 1960 printing; originally published in 1940.

Wall, Florence E. *The Principles and Practice of Beauty Culture*. 2nd ed. New York: Keystone Publications, 1946.

## Related materials

In HSP serials:

*The Beauty Specialist* 1, no.1 (September 1932).

## Bibliography

National Beauty Culturists' League. "The NBCL." <http://www.nbcl.org> (accessed 6 February 2006).

Perry, Edward G. "Looking Back on the Harlem Business Men's Club First Annual Trade Week," *The Beauty Specialist* 1, no. 1 (September 1932): 18-19, 39.

Porter, Gladys L. *Three Negro Pioneers in Beauty Culture*. New York: Vantage Press, 1966.

Strawberry. "Madame C. J. Walker (Sarah Breedlove McWilliams Walker) Inventor, Businesswoman." <http://www.strawberrylady.com/blackhistory/walker/MadameWalker.htm> (accessed 3 February 2006).

"Welcome to the Janes Memorial UMC Web Site." <http://www.gbgm-umc.org/janeschurchofphila/Hist3.htm> (accessed 7 February 2006).

## Subjects

African American – Business enterprises  
African American – Businesspeople – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia  
African American – Businesspeople – Social networks  
African American – Clergy  
African American – Educators  
African American – Methodists  
African American – Self-employed  
Beauty culture – Periodicals  
Beauty culture – Social aspects – United States  
Beauty culture – Study and teaching – United States  
Beauty culture – United States – History – 20th century  
Beauty culture – Vocational guidance  
Beauty shop – Supplies industry – United States  
Beauty shops – Social aspects – United States  
Beauty shops – United States – History – 20th century  
Philadelphia (Pa.) – Learned institutions and societies  
Philadelphia (Pa.) – Race relations – History – 20th century  
Philadelphia (Pa.) – Social conditions – 20th century  
Philadelphia (Pa.) – Social life and customs – 20th century  
Vocational education – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia

Ferguson, Emanuel Ralph, 1899-1985

Ferguson, Ruth Johns, 1902-1989

Johns, Joseph E. A., 1868-

Apex School of Beauty Culture

National Beauty Culturists' League (U.S.)

National Institute for Cosmetology (Washington D. C.)

Theta Nu Sigma National Sorority

## **Administrative Information**

### **Restrictions**

The collection is open for research.

### **Acquisition information**

Gift of William R. Adams, esq., 1996

Accession number 1996-052

### **Preferred citation**

Cite as: [Indicate cited item or series here], Ruth Johns Ferguson Papers (Collection 3075), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

### **Processing note**

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## Box and folder listing

### Series 1. Family Materials, 1901-1947

Folder title	Date	Extent	Box	Folder
Johns family	1901-ca. 1922, n.d.	8 items	1	1
Ferguson family: diplomas and certificates	1918-1947, bulk 1918- 1928	10 items	n/a	FF 1

### Series 2. Beauty School and Affiliations, 1956-1985

Folder title	Date	Extent	Box	Folder
Apex School of Beauty Culture	1956-1962, n.d.	12 items	1	2
Apex School of Beauty Culture: graduation classes [item has been cleaned for mold]	1970	1 item	4	n/a
Apex School of Beauty Culture: 1959 <i>Philadelphia Tribune</i> articles	31 January, 3 February, 1959	1 item	n/a	FF 2
National Beauty Culturists' League/Theta Nu Sigma	1960, 1964, 1981, 1985, n.d.	8 items	1	3

### Series 3. Photographs, ca. 1905-1970

Folder title	Date	Extent	Box	Folder
Family and friends	ca. 1905, n.d., bulk n.d.	14 items	1	4
Apex School of Beauty Culture: graduation classes	1949-1970, n.d.	10 items	2	n/a
National Beauty Culturists' League/Theta Nu Sigma: events	1954-1964	9 items	n/a	FF 3
Miscellaneous	1936, 1962, n.d.	3 items	n/a	FF 4
Miscellaneous: Alpha Phi Alpha convention [item has been cleaned for mold]	1928	1 item	4	n/a

**Series 4. Artifact, ca. 1950-1960**

Folder title	Date	Extent	Box	Folder
Dark blue vinyl document bag	ca. 1950-1960	1 item	3	n/a

**Oversize**

Folder title	Date	Extent	Box	Folder
Ferguson family: diplomas and certificates	1918-1947, bulk 1918- 1928	10 items	n/a	FF 1
Apex School of Beauty Culture: 1959 <i>Philadelphia Tribune</i> articles	31 January, 3 February, 1959	1 item	n/a	FF 2
Apex School of Beauty Culture: graduation classes	1949-1970, n.d.	10 items	2	n/a
National Beauty Culturists' League/Theta Nu Sigma: events	1954-1964	9 items	n/a	FF 3
Miscellaneous	1928, 1936, 1962, n.d.	4 items	n/a	FF 4
Dark blue vinyl document bag	ca. 1950-1960	1 item	3	n/a