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Gail Sylvia Lowe, 1950-2015

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# Milestones

## Gail Sylvia Lowe, 1950–2015

BY PAMELA M. HENSON

Gail Sylvia Lowe lived a life devoted to the scholarship and history of the African American community, especially the role of African American religion. A historian at the Smithsonian Institution's Anacostia Community Museum from 1992 to her death in 2015, Lowe was an active scholar whose contributions ranged from scholarly books to community programs, exhibits, and instruction in the collecting and care of African American artifacts. Although she held the prestigious title of senior research historian, she was always deeply engaged in the communities her museum served. Lowe was never too busy to respond to queries from around the globe or assist a church member or local history buff with preservation of family Bibles or photograph albums.

The only child of Thomas D. Lowe and Marion Berry Lowe, Lowe graduated with honors from Roosevelt High School in 1968 and was named a presidential scholar, meeting President Lyndon B. Johnson and Lady Bird Johnson. She then graduated *magna cum laude* from Radcliffe College/Harvard University with a degree in American History. Lowe continued her education, earning an M.A. in United States History from Yale University in 1974 and the M.S. in Library Science from the Catholic University of America in 1978. She earned a Ph.D. in American Civilization from the George Washington University in 1992, with a dissertation titled "A Bio-Bibliography of American Reformers, 1865-1917, with a Case Study of Temperance-Prohibition."

Lowe first joined the staff of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in 1980 as a scriptwriter and then research assistant in the Research Department,

where she worked with Historian and Director of Research Louise Daniel Hutchinson and contributed to *Mary McLeod Bethune and Roosevelt's "Black Cabinet,"* and *Black Women: Achievements against the Odds*. In 1983 the pair published "Kind Regards of S. G. Brown": *Selected poems of Solomon G. Brown*, about the self-taught naturalist and first African American employee at the Smithsonian.

After earning her doctorate and working for the American Studies Institute for African and Latin American Educators, Lowe returned to the Anacostia Museum in 1992 as historian. She was responsible for developing, researching, and writing exhibitions, including *Speak to My Heart*, on African American communities of faith, and *Banding Together: School Bands as Instruments of Opportunity* on public school music education. She co-curated *Separate and Unequaled: Black Baseball in the District of Columbia* on the Washington Homestead Grays. She also directed "The Unbroken Circle/A Sacred Trust," the museum's multi-year research and archival initiative on regional and national African American churches, reflecting her deep commitment to the Christian lay ministry. With Museum Educator Zora Martin Felton, in 1993 she published *A Different Drummer*, a biography of John Kinard, the museum's influential founding director.

Most recently Lowe edited *East of the River: Continuity and Change*, a compilation of essays, and was a key contributor to the "Urban Waterways" initiative on the Anacostia River. Her research for the exhibit, *Reclaiming the Edge: Urban Waterways and Civic Engagement*, took her to Hawaii and London, and she frequently spoke at international conferences. In Washington she was a member of the city's Historic Preservation Review Board. Within the Smithsonian, she was a valued member of the professional community, serving on committees and special projects.



Gail S. Lowe spoke on Smithsonian Day at the Anacostia Community Museum, 2014. Photograph by Susana Raab, courtesy, Anacostia Community Museum

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Lowe found great satisfaction in teaching and sharing the insights of her research with the larger community. She conducted oral history interviews and trained others to record the memories of their communities. With her unfailing smile and warm voice, she helped communities create narratives from varied resources so they could be shared with a wider audience. She developed the Museum Academy, the museum's cultural enhancement program for children, and secured grants for numerous other community and student education programs.

Outside of work, Lowe devoted her energies to the Miles Memorial CME Church, and enjoyed theater, film, dancing, and travel. She was an insatiable reader and lively contributor to her book club. Gail Lowe was celebrated during her lifetime for her intellectual generosity to colleagues and community.

### **Karla Heurich King Harrison, 1907–2014**

BY KIMBERLY BENDER

Karla Heurich King Harrison, daughter of brewer Christian Heurich and witness to a century of Washington history, died on January 21, 2014, at the age of 106 in Bethesda, Maryland. A conservationist, environmentalist, ornithologist, and avid bird-watcher, Harrison was a generous benefactor in the field of Washington history and the arts. Perhaps her most important contribution to her larger community was collaborating with her two siblings to sell her father's brewery site along the Potomac River to the federal government for construction of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

Karla Heurich was born on October 20, 1907, to Christian and Amelia Heurich at 1307 New Hampshire Avenue, NW, in Dupont Circle. She was the second daughter of the master beer brewer's third marriage, though she never learned to enjoy the taste of beer. Young Karla loved playing checkers with her father and learned to swim in an old beer vat at Bellevue, their Hyattsville, Maryland, farm. A dedicated tennis player who practiced on the court her father built across New Hampshire Avenue from their mansion, she won the District's high school tennis championship in 1924 while a student at Western High School (now Duke Ellington School of the Arts) on 35th Street, NW.

Karla Heurich was a woman ahead of her time. She graduated from Connecticut College and received a Master's degree in zoology from George Washington University. She had three children with her first husband, Charles Bowler King: Jan, Donald, and Charles, Jr. "Chip." Colonel King was killed during the D-Day invasion in June 1944, and two years later Heurich married Brigadier General Eugene Harrison. While living in post-World War II Kyoto with her new husband, she became a master of *ikebana* (the Japanese art of flower arranging), learned to speak and read Japanese, and collected Japanese art and antiques. A lifelong athlete, she was a crack marksman with a rifle, a talented golfer, and the co-founder of West Point's skeet shooting club.

Harrison's mother Amelia remained in the family's Dupont Circle home until her death in 1956, after which it became the headquarters of the Columbia Historical Society, now the Historical Society of Washington. The house was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1969. In the 1980s the Historical Society embarked on a new interpretation of the house, and Harrison participated in every facet, describing the lives of the family and servants there and explaining arcane functions of the house that she considered old-fashioned. Harrison relished giving docent tours anonymously, referring to her childhood self in the third person. In 1989 she donated \$1 million to the Historical Society to endow the house's preservation. Former Historical Society Curator Candace Shireman observed, "Anyone can just write a check and disappear. Time and again, Karla gave of herself so generously—and whenever she was asked." Harrison's gift subsequently passed to the Heurich House Museum, the building's current non-profit owner. Today Karla Heurich's birthplace offers public tours and exhibitions that interpret the history of the family and brewery and serves as a venue for public events.



Karla Heurich Harrison on her 100th birthday, 2007. Collection of Jan Evans Houser, courtesy, Heurich House Museum

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*Kimberly Bender is Executive Director of the Heurich House Museum.*