

## **Esther Julia Taylor Burgess Biography**

Esther was born May 29, 1911 in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada to Thomas Richard Taylor and Julia McCarty (O'Ree) Taylor. According to Canadian census records, she was the fourth of five children born to the couple. Her mother died in 1915, two years after the birth of Thomas, Esther's younger brother. Her father farmed his own land and managed the household. Older sisters, Madeline (b. 1900) and Gladys (b. 1903), took responsibility for the siblings, though still quite young themselves. Neither 1931 or 1941 Canadian Census includes the Taylor household; Madeline left before 1921. A 1940 voter list for Fredericton lists Esther as residing with her father, sister Gladys, and brothers Ralph and Donald (and Donald's wife). On the voter list, Esther is noted as a stenographer. According to family oral history, the eldest sister deserted the house, unable to cope with the responsibility. She would have been 14 to 15 when her mother died and her four siblings would have ranged from age two to approximately 11.

The second sister, Gladys, stayed and tried her best. The growing up years were hard for the all of the children. Several sources from different periods indicate Esther was the only sibling to finish high school – and she finished in a blaze of glory. She was surely a vital source of income for the family, as the New Brunswick economy tanked just months after she graduated high school in 1929. Farming and fishing were hit particularly hard in the years of economic downturn. It was 1943 before Esther left home at age 32 to follow her dream of higher education.

While life was not easy for Esther growing up, she always had a roof over her head, food on the table, a strong work ethic, a love of learning, and a deep spiritual life (even as a child) that anchored her through good times and bad. Esther graduated first in her class (Commercial Program) from Fredericton High School (FHS) in 1929. In fact, she was the first Black woman to win an academic gold medal at FHS. The family finances, limited opportunity for women of color in New Brunswick in the late 1920s, and ultimately the impact of the great Depression initially kept Esther from pursuing college.

Early on, she secured work in the provincial government and ultimately won a position with the Federal Department of Fisheries in Fredericton. In 1943 Esther left the Department of Fisheries for Raleigh, North Carolina to attend Saint Augustine College, an historically black school founded in 1867 by the commission of the Episcopal Church. For years Esther had longed to attend college and, according to her daughters, she thought the United States offered more opportunity for her than New Brunswick did. While a student at St. Augustine, she met her husband, who was a young Episcopalian priest, at a church-related conference. They married in August 1945 in Fredericton. After a few years in Lincoln Heights, Ohio at St. Simon of Cyrene Church, the young couple spent ten years in the Washington, D.C., area, where Reverend Burgess served as chaplain at Howard University and became the first Black canon at the Washington Cathedral. While in Washington, Esther also became a U.S. citizen. *[Family oral history indicates that Esther's mother was a descendent of a relationship between Colonel Isaac*

*Maury Allen of Springhill, Pennsylvania and an enslaved East Indian girl (name unknown) he had bought in New York from a sea captain. The relationship produced three sons. Col. Allen was a Loyalist who took his family and slaves to New Brunswick, Canada at the end of the Revolutionary War. In Canada, he freed his slaves and gave each (former slave) son a small homestead grant.]*

In 1956 the Burgesses moved from D.C. to the Boston area, where the reverend held a series of leadership positions in the Massachusetts Episcopal Diocese, culminating in his election in 1969 as the first Black elected as a diocesan bishop in the Episcopal Church. After a short stay in Cambridge, the couple moved to Newton, where they bought a house in Newton Centre and raised their two daughters (from approximately 1958 to the late 1970s).

The Burgess family lived near Crystal Lake and their daughters, Julia (Weeks and Newton South) and Margaret (Hyde, Weeks, and Newton South), went to the Newton Public Schools. Mother and daughters were active in Trinity Episcopal Church in Newton Centre. They remember ice skating on Bullough's Pond and swimming in Crystal Lake. Like many teens, daughter Julia had a part time job at Brigham's at Chestnut Hill. Mrs. Burgess was active in Church Women United (CWU), as well as in local parish affairs. For several years she was Vice President for Migrant Work for the State CWU. During the 1960s she served on the board of Freedom House in Roxbury and also was an avid fundraiser for the not-for-profit Roxbury Community School, founded in the early 60s as an alternative to the Boston Public Schools for children of Boston's Black community. Esther's daughters remember their mother's tale of her chiding Boston School Committee member and staunch busing opponent Louise Day Hicks at a public hearing Hicks was chairing for sending her own children to private schools while deciding how the Boston Public Schools would impact other people's children.

Margaret and Julia remember their Newton house as usually full of people. The family rented out a small apartment on their third floor - often to an Andover Newton student or young faculty member. Their mother enjoyed guests, was an excellent cook, ahead of her time in insisting on the fresh foods and always making meals from scratch. Esther was an avid reader of both books and all sources of state, national and international news. And she set aside time each day for prayer and spiritual development. (Her daughters experienced her as more religious than their father, the bishop.) All her adult life she took classes when she had the opportunity: languages, public speaking, history, literature. And from her grade school years until into her 90s, Esther kept a personal journal. Those journals are as yet unprocessed at the archives of the Episcopal Theological Seminary (ETS) in Alexandria, Virginia, mixed in with the papers of Bishop Burgess. When the children were young, summers typically brought a long camping trip. They travelled across the country from camp ground to camp ground, with most all the camp work falling on the females - it was the 1960s!

The girls were off on their own when Bishop and Mrs. Burgess left Massachusetts and moved to New Haven where the bishop held positions at the Yale Divinity School. Upon the bishop's

retirement, the couple moved to Martha's Vineyard where they had summered since 1963. Esther passed away in Vineyard Haven in 2004; the bishop pre-deceased her in 2003.

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*This text is an excerpt from a longer paper on Esther Burgess researched and written by Anne Lerner on file at Historic Newton, 527 Washington St., Newton MA, 02465.*

*Most of the information in this brief section is from a September 2018 conference call between the author and Esther's daughters Julia Burgess and Margaret Harrison; a biographical section in Hester Campbell's Four for Freedom; Eastburn, "Concepts and Practices with the Elderly"; and a short bio from Provincial Archives New Brunswick (PANB); and a private genealogy authored by Henriette (Henderson) Jackson, a relative of Esther Burgess. Full citations are in the longer text on file at Historic Newton.*