



Deborah Cannon Partridge Wolfe, 1916-2004

by Jean Kreiling

At birth, she was named Olive Deborah Juanita Cannon. Later she was known as Deborah and still later, because she was married twice, her name became Deborah Cannon Partridge Wolfe.

She was born in Cranford 100 years ago on December 22, 1916 at her family's home at 62 S. Union Avenue. The home stood on the corner of Lincoln Avenue near Cranford's first school, the Little Red School House, which was later moved and subsequently torn down. The population of Cranford was then about 3,000 and the houses were few and far apart. At the time of Wolfe's birth, there was a 9-hole golf course across the street where Lincoln Park now stands.

Wolfe was the youngest child of the Reverend David Wadsworth Cannon, a graduate of Princeton Seminary and his wife Gertrude Moody Cannon, a graduate of Evangel Theological College. Reverend Cannon was the pastor of the First Baptist Church on High Street and his wife was the principal of the Rice Memorial School in New Brunswick.



Rev. David Wadsworth Cannon

Education was of the utmost importance to the Cannons and even though they were poor, there were always plenty of books in the house. Deborah had two siblings, a brother David and a sister Mary. They were all exceptional students and when they graduated from Cranford High School, each of them went on to earn a doctorate. This was quite unusual at a time when few Blacks went to college. Reverend Cannon had been called to serve at the First Baptist Church in 1911. When he and his wife arrived in Cranford, they found that the church had no parsonage. They had to search a long time before they were able to find a home to buy. Wolfe loved this home, and while her career took her to many places, she always returned to it and lived in it until she moved to a retirement community.

The Cannons were hard working, innovative and forward thinking. These were important qualities at a time when the Black church had to take care of many of the social, in addition to the religious, needs of its congregation. During the long period between the Civil War and the civil rights movement, institutional racism not only kept African-Americans out of housing and good paying jobs, but it also prevented them from doing many things which other people took for granted. They often could not join clubs, participate in athletic activities, stay at hotels, eat at restaurants, get loans from banks or even sit where they wanted in theaters or trains. As a result, the Black church often formed a community of its own within the larger community and duplicated many of its services.

In interviews, Wolfe and her mother Mrs. Gertrude Cannon Moody discussed the church's activities. They said on Sunday afternoons, and after Wednesday prayer meetings, their home was opened to children so they could play and socialize. All kinds of parlor games were played and the tablecloth was taken off the dining room table so that ping pong could be enjoyed. Refreshments were always served and there was singing around the piano. At the church on other days there was a dramatic club, social club meetings, dress-up events and different clubs that helped children practice manners and learn skills. There was also a church bus to take people to picnics, hikes, skating parties and different affairs. To help children understand the effects of smoking and drinking, Mrs. Cannon created scientific demonstrations and she asked them to join a children's temperance club and sign a pledge that they would never smoke or drink.

Help was also available to adults. If a man or woman never had the chance to go to school, the Cannons would teach them how to read and write. Reverend Cannon encouraged the members of his congregation to buy their own homes so they could become independent. He also urged them to buy homes on different streets so that neighbors would interact and people would get to know and respect each other. (Wolfe would later say that the reason there was no de facto segregation in Cranford was because it had no ghetto.) But home ownership was difficult because the men could not get good-paying jobs and were forced to take landscaping and other part-time manual work and the women mostly had to do domestic work. This didn't change until a can factory opened in Kenilworth that began to employ Blacks.

Cranford's schools, K-12, which Wolfe attended were desegregated. This was not true of the schools in southern New Jersey and even in many northern cities. Princeton, for example, did not desegregate its schools until 1948. Wolfe always praised the education she received in Cranford, but she also recounted some incidents of prejudice. She said she had been put back a year when she returned to grade school after recuperating from chicken pox. When Mrs. Cannon learned that this had happened to all of the Black children, but to none of the Whites, she complained to the principal

and Deborah was returned to her class. In high school, when she wanted to learn how to play tennis, Wolfe found that Blacks were not allowed on the town's courts. To help children like her, Reverend Dr. Benjamin Allen, who was then the pastor of the First Baptist Church, had a tennis court built on the church grounds. An incident that was especially painful occurred when Wolfe discovered that she had not been included in the photograph of the National Honor Society in her high school yearbook. After pointing out to the principal that she had always been on the honor roll and had better grades than some of her classmates in the photo, she was initiated into the society.

In 1933, Wolfe graduated from Cranford High School and enrolled at Jersey State College. To afford books and tuition, she tutored, gave piano lessons, did secretarial work and was hired by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to teach at a night school for adults at Cranford's Lincoln School. Although this was her first teaching position, she quickly rose to become both the head teacher and the principal.

Mrs. Cannon told her that the National Council of Churches was looking for someone to teach the children of migrant workers in Maryland. These children had come to her attention during her travels to different towns to address classes about the dangers of smoking and drinking. Wolfe subsequently spent two summers teaching and doing community work with them. This experience affected her deeply and altered her thinking about education.

Wolfe was shocked to discover that the children could not understand what she was trying to teach them. Never having been allowed to attend either the local schools or the churches, they had no experience beyond the crowded hovels in which they lived and had no idea what she was talking about when she mentioned goals and aspirations. From this Wolfe discovered the need to understand the backgrounds and beliefs of children in order to provide them with educational materials they could relate to and thereby begin to learn.

When Wolfe needed to do her student teaching, despite her superior grades, Cranford rejected her. She then turned to Westfield which accepted her. After graduating from college in 1937 she enrolled at Teachers College Columbia University, received a master's degree in 1938 and then applied for a teaching job in Cranford. Unsuccessful, she applied to other schools throughout New Jersey, but none would hire her. It was a time when the only jobs African-American teachers could get were in the Black schools in southern New Jersey.

Mabel Carney, Wolfe's Columbia professor, suggested that she apply to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Carney wrote a letter of recommendation citing Wolfe's exceptional maturity and abilities and in 1938 Tuskegee offered her a position on the faculty to create educational programs for its two laboratory schools. Tuskegee quickly recognized Wolfe's talents and appointed her to be the head of both its education and graduate studies departments. In 1940, Wolfe married Henry Roy Partridge, a Tuskegee professor. While her husband was away at war, she returned to Teachers College and in 1945 earned a doctorate in education. She then went back to Tuskegee and in 1947 gave birth to a son who was named after his father. Divorced in 1950, she returned to New Jersey and in 1951 she became an Assistant Professor of Education at Queens College where she was the first African-American member of the faculty. Unable to get affordable housing near the college because of a No-Blacks policy, she stayed in Cranford and commuted two or three hours each way to Queens. In 1959, she married Estemore A. Wolfe, a teacher and businessman. This marriage

ended in divorce in 1966.

Wolfe wrote articles on education, traveled extensively, lectured throughout the country and was active in many organizations devoted to education and civil rights. As her reputation grew she came to the attention of Washington. In 1963, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. asked her to become the Chief of Education of his powerful Education and Labor Committee. After taking a leave of absence from Queens College, she went to Washington where she embarked on one of the most important tasks of her life which was to help to craft and move the Civil Rights Bill through Congress.

After 3 1/2 years in Washington, she decided it was time to return to her professorship at Queens College and to resume her life in Cranford with her son.



Dr. Wolfe with NAACP president Roy Wilkins and her son H. Roy Partridge

He was in his senior year at Cranford High School and she wanted to spend time with him. In 1970, Wolfe became the first African-American woman to be ordained as a Baptist minister and in 1975 she became the associate pastor of Cranford's First Baptist Church where her father had been the pastor. Her life had now come full circle. "I stand where Papa stood," she said.

Wolfe retired from Queens College in 1986, but continued to be active on many fronts. She served on the New Jersey Board of Higher Education and was unanimously elected its chair in 1987. She also served on the Executive Committee of the United Nations Committee of Non-Governmental Representatives. Her accomplishments were so many that by the time she died in 2004, she had received 26 honorary doctorates.

Sources:

1. Oral History interview with Mary Gertrude (Moody) Cannon and her daughter Dr. Deborah Partridge Wolfe, 6/22/1967, Cranford Historical Society, CD.
2. Marcia McAdoo Greenlee interview, Deborah Wolfe (1916-2004), Cranford, New Jersey, November 6, 1979, the Black Women Oral History Project Interviews, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, 1976-1981.
3. Stephanie Van Hover, Dissertation, *Deborah Partridge Wolfe's Contributions to Social Education*, University of Florida, 2001.

4. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, Duke University Press, 1990.

Remembering the Reverend Dr. Deborah Cannon Partridge Wolfe

...Teacher, Preacher, Daughter of Cranford

*by Betty Crawley**

I met Dr. Deborah Cannon Partridge Wolfe in 1985 at the First Baptist Church of Cranford when I became a member and she was the associate pastor. She had recently retired from Queens College where she was a professor of education for 36 years. At the time of our meeting, she was teaching religion courses at Princeton University. Although she taught at various universities and colleges throughout her career and lived all over the country, she always called Cranford home and First Baptist her home church.



First Baptist Church

A fine public speaker, she attributed her speaking ability to her early training at First Baptist where her father Reverend David Wadsworth Cannon was the pastor for several years. She had a very powerful voice. When she preached, you listened! She was a biblical scholar and had studied at both Union Theological Seminary and the Jewish Theological Seminary. Dr. Wolfe believed in working, as she would say, “across lines.” She never isolated herself from any racial, ethnic or religious group. One of her greatest assets was bringing people together and to encourage and inspire them. This was a philosophy that she adopted early on.

As an expert in the field of education, she was called on several times to serve the United States government. She was one of the few women, and certainly one of the few African-Americans, to hold a high ranking staff position on Capitol Hill. In 1950, she received an invitation from President Harry S. Truman to join the White House Conference on Children and Youth. In 1955, she was invited by President Dwight D. Eisenhower to take part in the White House Conference on Aging. From 1959, well into the 1960s, she served on the Citizens Advisory Committee on Youth Fitness to which she had been appointed by President Eisenhower. This was a fitting appointment as Dr. Wolfe was a lifelong athlete who had participated in hockey, tennis, soccer and basketball at Cranford High School.

In 1962, Dr. Wolfe was appointed Education Chief of the House of Representatives' Committee on Education and Labor. She received this appointment from Committee Chairman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. who was a Democratic Representative from New York. In this role, she was the committee's chief educational consultant and was in charge of research and the drafting of educational legislation. She guided 35 public laws through Congress many of which were groundbreaking. The Higher Education and Facilities Act of 1963 funded Head Start for pre-schoolers and introduced community colleges throughout the United States. The Higher Education Act of 1965 created scholarships and low interest loans for students. Dr. Wolfe believed in hands-on educational methods so she sat down with individual members of Congress to explain and answer questions about the legislation her committee was proposing. She wanted people to fully understand the laws they were deciding on.

Throughout her service to our great nation, Dr. Wolfe always kept children's learning at the forefront of her thinking. She knew the importance of exposing young children to books and she knew they needed to see themselves in books. During the time she was working in Washington, I was employed by the Elizabeth Public Library. With the Civil Rights movement at hand, demonstrations and freedom marches were taking place all around. Suddenly, the Elizabeth Public Library began to receive books about African- Americans and their contributions to society. I had never seen so many books about minorities, especially African-Americans. I found this astonishing because, when I was a young girl growing up in Elizabeth in the late 40s and early 50s, my elementary school library had no books about famous African-Americans or African-American children.

These new books had come about because of the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965. Under this act, the federal government assumed direct responsibility for providing all children, particularly the disadvantaged, with a quality education. Under Title II of the act, Congress authorized one hundred million dollars for public libraries, and opened the door for public school libraries to have access to these funds. Publishers literally scrambled over each other to create a series of books about African-Americans which could qualify for this new funding. Dr. Wolfe's work paved the way for the early development of mainstream multi-cultural literature, especially within the education arena. Among all of Dr. Wolfe's contributions, which were many, as a retired librarian of 43 years I truly believe this was one of her greatest.

On January 17, 1995, I invited Dr. Wolfe to my school for a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. celebration. Dr. Wolfe was always happy to share her life experiences with students. She was able to connect with our students and told them all about Dr. King and her association with him. She told them how she had shared the stage with Dr. King during his famous "I Have a Dream" speech and the powerful effect it had on her.



Dr. Wolfe on grandstand with Dr. King

She told them how, five years later, she had visited the King home to express her condolences upon his death. She told us about 13 year old Yolanda King, Dr. King's eldest daughter, who at the time of her father's death was the same age as my middle school students. Dr. Wolfe emphasized Yolanda's presence of mind at such a young age during that difficult time. It was quite an experience for my urban middle school students and faculty to meet someone who had personally known Dr. King.

Dr. Wolfe's work has been celebrated throughout the nation with notable dedications. To honor her work at Tuskegee Institute, Macon County in Alabama named a high school for her. The College of New Jersey also honored her by giving her name to a residential dormitory. Then in 2007, New Jersey City University named its college of education The Deborah Cannon Partridge Wolfe College of Education. Sadly, Cranford, her beloved home town, where she was born, raised and schooled has not yet honored her.

** Betty Crawley is a retired media specialist*