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## Living Black History: Noted Fashion Historian Rosemary Reed-Miller an Accidental Pioneer

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By: Jackie Jones, BlackAmericaWeb.com

When Rosemary Reed-Miller opened her Toast & Strawberries boutique in the tony Dupont Circle area of Washington, D.C. in 1966, she had no idea she was making history.

Traditionally, Rock Creek Park had been an unofficial dividing line by race and income for the city. Longtime Washingtonians know that the area "west of the park," which includes Connecticut and Wisconsin Avenues and such neighborhoods as Cleveland Park, Glover Park, Kalorama and Dupont Circle, was generally unavailable to black people, except as a place to work.

"I didn't realize the west side of Connecticut Avenue was a boundary," Reed-Miller said. "I had trouble getting the place, and I had to go to the human relations commission. At first they said I was too young" -- she was in her 20s --



When Philadelphia native Rosemary Reed-Miller (above) opened her Toast & Strawberries boutique in the tony Dupont Circle area of Washington, D.C. in 1966, she had no idea she was making history.



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"and threw up all kinds of barriers."

Once she opened the store, early visitors often came more out of curiosity than a desire to shop.

"People were curious," Reed-Miller told [BlackAmericaWeb.com](#). "They wanted to know, 'How did that happen?'"



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The unique gift and apparel shop became a landmark in the city.

“I thought D.C. was ripe for an interesting store, and I chose the Dupont Circle area because it was an international area,” located near Embassy Row with a number of shops and restaurants that catered to a diverse clientele.

After nearly 40 years in that neighborhood, Reed-Miller closed the freestanding store in later 2005 and turned it into an [online boutique](#) that provides a variety of services, from sewing and designing wedding dresses to creating fashion shows and fundraisers. Singers Aretha Franklin, Angela Bofill and Anita Baker are among the store’s customers.

Opening a fashion business was not Reed-Miller’s intention at first.

“I kind of backed into it,” she said. “My background was in history and art.”

A graduate of Temple University in Philadelphia with a degree in history and anthropology, she was focused on emerging countries in Africa. The money for graduate school didn’t come, and so she headed to Jamaica to “do work on ‘New World Africans,’” she once said in an interview.

She wrote for newspapers there, including the *Daily Gleaner*, and in the U.S. for *Women’s Wear Daily*, *Fairchild Publications*, *The Miami Herald*, *The Miami News* and *The Amsterdam News*.

“I also did crafts and was selling things to department stores,” she told BlackAmericaWeb.com. That work led her to open a store so that she could sell her merchandise and that of local designers and artists.

Reed-Miller’s background in history also led to another labor of love: Documenting black fashion history.

Her book, "The Threads of Time: The Fabric of History" is in its third printing and will be republished in the spring. It profiles black dressmakers and designers from 1860 to the present.

Reed-Miller said she wrote the book to fill in the gaps about the contributions of black designers before the 1960s.

"In terms of fashion, it was like we didn't exist before 1960," she said.

The book, which Reed-Miller said is her proudest accomplishment, is a continual work in progress. Each edition includes additional designers and dressmakers she discovers between printings.

"I'm up to 38 (designers)," Reed-Miller said. "It's kind of lopsided on the East Coast, and I'd like to get more people, geographically. I'm still looking for people from the West Coast and Chicago. Through these people, I am able to talk about black history through clothes."

For example, she said, when talking about a black family who own a clothing store in Tulsa, Okla., and their history there, Reed-Miller can address the Tulsa race riots of 1921 in which the racially segregated black neighborhood of Greenwood was set afire, leaving dozens dead, destroying residences and leaving thousands homeless.

Elsewhere, she said, she found a store in Hampton, Va., that, during segregation, allowed black people to try on clothes in the store and allowed an International Ladies Garment Workers Union local organize there.

Reed-Miller researched the work of such dressmakers as Anne Lowe, a society dressmaker who designed Jacqueline Bouvier's debutante dress and, later, her wedding dress for her marriage to John F. Kennedy, and Elizabeth Keckley, "who worked for Jefferson Davis' wife and Robert E. Lee's wife and Abraham Lincoln's wife."

Keckley was so exacting about the details of dressmaking that people who worked with her “shook in their boots before they went into her because she knew her stuff,” Reed-Miller said.


“Blacks participated in fashion since the nation was founded, either in just doing the necessary sewing then copy European designs in the 1700s for their mistresses, then by designing for average and upper-income women,” Reed-Miller said in an earlier interview with BlackAmericaWeb.com.

The Philadelphia native said she is inspired by, “people and their stories. I love stories. I can listen to anybody. If I met a garbage man at a party, I would say, ‘Really? What’s that like? What kinds of things do you find? What do people throw away?’”

In fact, Reed-Miller said, history is her muse.

“If I had had a restaurant,” she said, “I would have written about the history of blacks and restaurants.”

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