

HISTORY MAKER

MABEL HAMPTON

Born: May 2, 1902, Winston-Salem

Died: Oct 26, 1989, Bronx, New York

Known for: An activist for Black and lesbian rights, a dancer and singer during the New York Harlem Renaissance and a philanthropist. She was a co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

The Harlem Renaissance, the African American cultural explosion that followed World War I, was just gearing up as Mabel Hampton came of age in New York City. The petite Black woman spent much of the '20s and '30s performing in chorus lines at clubs, Carnegie Hall and the 1939 World's Fair.

Parties and bars were filled with authors, intellectuals, musicians and actors who reimagined what it meant to be Black in America.

Traditional boundaries were shed, as well, and Mabel – who had been attracted to other girls from a young age – became as vocal in her support of lesbian and gay rights as she was for racial equality. She read voraciously, volunteered in community organizations, and collected Black and lesbian literature, ephemera and memorabilia.

Even after she left the stage to work as a domestic, she continued to work to advance civil and human rights.

She was celebrated as an elder in the LGBTQ+ community in New York City, where she lived openly in a romantic relationship with Lillian Foster, her partner of 46 years, well before the 1969 watershed Stonewall riots that are credited as the turning point for the lesbian and gay communities.

In 1976, she donated much of her collection to the Lesbian Herstory Archives, one of the largest repositories of lesbian historical information in the world.

Deborah Edel, co-founder of the



MORGAN GWENWALD, 1982, COURTESY LESBIAN HERSTORY ARCHIVES

Mabel Hampton lived with her partner, Lillian Foster (shown in portrait behind her) for 46 years.

archives, said of Mabel, "She became a folk hero to people. They would make pilgrimages to the archives just to see her."

Mabel was born in Winston-Salem, and her mother died just weeks later. Mabel was raised by her grandmother Ada Hampton, surrounded by family, on a small farm with "a big, big yard" on Hauser Street in the city's third ward. She talked about her life in Winston extensively in oral history recordings at the archives.

After her grandmother died in 1909, Mabel lived with her mother's older sister in New York City and later with a family in New Jersey.

Visibility and community involvement were important to her. She volunteered with the New York Defense Recreation Committee for GIs during

World War II. She supported the Negro Opera Company and the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Fund as well as many gay and lesbian organizations.

"You've got to stand up for your rights," she said in the 1989 oral history. And stand she did.

In October 1979, she was among the crowd of the first march for gay and lesbian civil rights in the nation's capital. In 1984, she spoke at the New York City Lesbian and Gay Pride Parade, and the next year, she was the grand marshal.

"I, Mabel Hampton, have been a lesbian all my life, for 82 years, and I am proud of myself and my people. I would like all my people to be free in this country and all over the world. We need to make the world a better place for everybody," she said.