

Famous New Yorker Bessie Buchanan

As an entertainer, Bessie Allison Buchanan didn't become as famous as some of her peers in 1920s Harlem, but as a community leader she made history in a more important way.

Bessie Allison was born in New York City on March 7, 1902. She grew up in the city's theatrical district and came of age at a time of new opportunities for black entertainers. At age 19, she performed in *Shuffle Along*, one of the first all-black musicals to become a Broadway hit. As white jazz fans flocked to Harlem, she became a chorus dancer at the legendary Cotton Club. A talented singer as well, she made recordings for Black Swan records.

In 1925 she performed in the *Plantation Review* and shared a dressing room with the future international superstar Josephine Baker. After Baker made her name in France, Bessie followed her across the Atlantic in 1927 to perform at the famous Moulin Rouge theater. While Baker stayed in Europe, Bessie eventually returned to New York. In 1929 she married Charles Buchanan, one of Harlem's most successful businessmen, who managed the Savoy Ballroom nightclub.

The Savoy became a center of the swing band movement of the 1930s, while Bessie Buchanan became part of Harlem's social elite. Ranked among Harlem's best-dressed women, she strove to improve medical services in Harlem and wrote a regular column for her husband's weekly newspaper, *The People's Voice*.

Even one of Harlem's elite could still be humiliated by racial discrimination. In October 1951 Buchanan took Josephine Baker to dinner at the stylish Stork Club, but the white staff refused to serve them. The snub sparked a protest campaign and raised Buchanan's profile as a champion of equal rights.

Powerful New Yorkers saw Buchanan as a potential political leader. In the 1950s, the Democratic party in New York City gave voters more voice in choosing candidates for office. In Harlem, Democrats noticed that more women than men were registered to vote. Party leaders set a goal of electing the first black woman to the State Assembly in 1954.

Bessie Buchanan seemed ideally suited for this historic role. She was a celebrity in Harlem and could finance a campaign with her husband's money. The Democratic leadership endorsed her in the primary for the 12th Assembly District against a Democratic incumbent. Buchanan won the nomination, 3,832 votes to 2,586. Whoever won the general election would make history, since the Republican party also nominated a woman, Lucille Pickett. Buchanan won in a landslide.

Assemblywoman Buchanan served four terms in Albany, earning respect as an advocate for equal rights. She might have become the first black woman elected to Congress, but her husband's friendship with the powerful incumbent in her district, Rep. Adam Clayton Powell, kept her from challenging him.

In 1960 Governor Nelson Rockefeller, a Republican, made Buchanan a delegate to a White House conference on aging. In 1962, after deciding not to seek a fifth term, Buchanan surprised Democrats by endorsing Rockefeller for reelection. He rewarded her with an appointment to the state Human Rights Commission. She combated discrimination as a commissioner until her retirement in 1967. Bessie Allison Buchanan died on September 7, 1980, still revered as a symbol of Harlem's cultural vitality and political activism.

For more information about the New York State Assembly go to <http://assembly.state.ny.us/>. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2014.



**Bessie Buchanan with Governor
Nelson Rockefeller, 1962
Source: New York State Archives**



Harlem is within the northern section of the borough of Manhattan. Since the 1920s, it is a major African-American residential, cultural and business center.