

## The Matchless Ethel Waters Visits SSI

Born in Pennsylvania in 1896, Ethel Waters overcame poverty and discrimination to achieve many firsts for African American women, including first to sing on the radio, first to star in her own television show, and first to be nominated for a Primetime Emmy Award.

After touring in vaudeville shows, Waters made her Broadway debut in 1927 and acted in her first film in 1929. She appeared at New York City's Cotton Club with Duke Ellington in the 1930s and recorded with both Ellington and Benny Goodman. In 1939, she starred in Dorothy and Dubose Heyward's acclaimed play *Mamba's Daughters*, her first dramatic role.

In 1949, Waters' role in the film *Pinky* earned her an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actress. For her performance in Carson McCullers' play *Member of the Wedding*, she won the New York Drama Critics Award for Best Actress in 1950. She repeated the role in film and received another Oscar nomination.



Despite her many successes, Waters was in poor health and deeply in debt by the mid-1950s. Seeking spiritual renewal, she attended a Billy Graham Crusade at Madison Square Garden in 1957. The religious revival was a transformative experience, and for the remaining two decades of her life, Waters was a frequent soloist at Graham's events.

St. Simons Island author Eugenia Price, also a friend of Billy Graham, was a longtime fan of Ethel Waters. Price met Waters during one of the author's West Coast speaking tours and wrote in her St. Simons memoir, "When I learned that the great Ethel Waters was to sing before I spoke, I became almost tongue-tied." In 1971, Price's friend and fellow author Joyce Blackburn suggested that she and Price work with Waters on an autobiography of the

performer's later life. Waters' best-selling first memoir, *His Eye is on the Sparrow*, had been written in 1951. After receiving Waters' approval, the writers flew to Los Angeles and recorded hours of interviews at the performer's home. Waters' recollections were edited to produce the autobiography, *To Me It's Wonderful*, published in 1972.

This month's image from the Coastal Georgia Historical Society's Eugenia Price Collection shows Ethel Waters with Price and Blackburn when she arrived at Malcolm McKinnon Airport on St. Simons in August 1971. For



several days, she stayed at their home "The Dodge" on the Frederica River, while reviewing the manuscript. Also shown is a photograph Waters inscribed "to Genie and Joyce."