

ANNIE FISHER

Eighty-five years after her death, a culinary entrepreneur's success story still resonates.

by MACKENZIE
MARTIN



BACK IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, before commercial leaveners like baking powder were ubiquitous, cooks had to put in some serious elbow grease if they wanted their quick breads to rise in the oven.

One of the most laborious recipes of the era was the beaten biscuit. These tender, flaky hardtack rolls, not much thicker than a cracker, were often made by enslaved cooks and domestic servants. A cook might spend as much as an hour creating delicate layers in the dough by whacking it with anything from a rolling pin to an ax handle.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the most famous beaten biscuits in Columbia, Missouri, were those made by culinary entrepreneur Annie Fisher. Serving her beaten biscuits at a party or dinner was a major hostess flex.

Clement Richardson, editor of the *National Cyclopedia of the Colored Race*, wrote in 1922, “It is possible that many people in Missouri can make beaten biscuit, but none of them are Ann[ie] Fisher’s biscuit.”

These days, the kind of success that Annie Fisher enjoyed might be attributed to an impressive marketing plan, investors, or, at the very least, access to a bank loan.

But as a Black woman in Jim Crow Missouri, Fisher was essentially denied access to those advantages. Yet she amassed a fortune anyway.

“That’s the miracle of the whole situation. That woman had every opportunity to fail—and didn’t,” says Columbia, Missouri, resident Verna Laboy.

Laboy, who began her side project in historical reenactment more or less on a whim, has spent much of the last thirty years piecing together how Fisher did it. It’s largely thanks to her work, with additional research by a handful of Missouri historians and journalists, that we have a snapshot of Annie Fisher’s life.

In the 1990s, when Verna Laboy was a recent transplant to Columbia, she heard that the Boone County Historical Society needed reenactors for its annual Hall of Fame induction gala. Laboy didn’t have professional acting experience, but as a self-professed “drama queen,” she volunteered to play Annie Fisher, one of that year’s Hall of Fame inductees. To prepare for the role, Laboy started interviewing community members to learn more about Fisher, who passed away in 1938. And she didn’t stop after the gala. She was hooked.

“It’s almost like her story captivated my soul,” she says.

LEFT: Meg Vatterott; RIGHT: Missouri State Archives



ABOVE: Annie Fisher, ca. 1916; OPPOSITE: Verna Laboy, dressed as Annie Fisher, presents to students at West Boulevard Elementary School in Columbia, MO, 2017.

Though she works full-time in public health, Laboy has been giving historical presentations about Annie Fisher ever since. Laboy’s telling of Fisher’s story evolves as she learns new information.

Laboy says it’s important to her, as a Black woman, that young people know who Annie Fisher was. In school, she says, they learn about slavery and Jim Crow. Fisher’s story—that of a Black businesswoman who ran a wildly successful catering enterprise mostly on her own—adds triumphant complexity to those narratives. That’s why Laboy takes vacation time from her day job to present at school assemblies. She wants to push her audience to dream big, like Fisher did.



ANNIE KNOWLES FISHER WAS BORN into a large family in Boone County, Missouri, in 1867. Her parents, Robert and Charlotte Knowles, were born into slavery.

Fisher developed a love of cooking while taking

care of children in white homes, when she was not much older than a child herself.

“Oftentimes, when the baby was asleep, I would steal down in the kitchen, climb up on a stool and help the cook peel potatoes, and make biscuits,” Fisher told the National Negro Business League in 1919. “Sometimes they were not altogether right, and no matter if, at times, they were only half-baked, I enjoyed them very much, for those biscuits were the product of my own hands.”

Fisher went on to cook at the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity house at the University of Missouri and in some of Columbia’s wealthiest households.

One day, around the turn of the century, her white employer asked, “Annie, why don’t you go into the catering business?”

“I began to think seriously over the idea and became convinced that it would pay very well if I could get her support and the trade of her friends. She told me that if I started such a business she would try and induce the society people and the church people to help me with their patronage,” Fisher reflected later.

The catering operation began small, with just hot rolls at first. Then she added pies, cakes, and her eventual claim to fame: beaten biscuits.

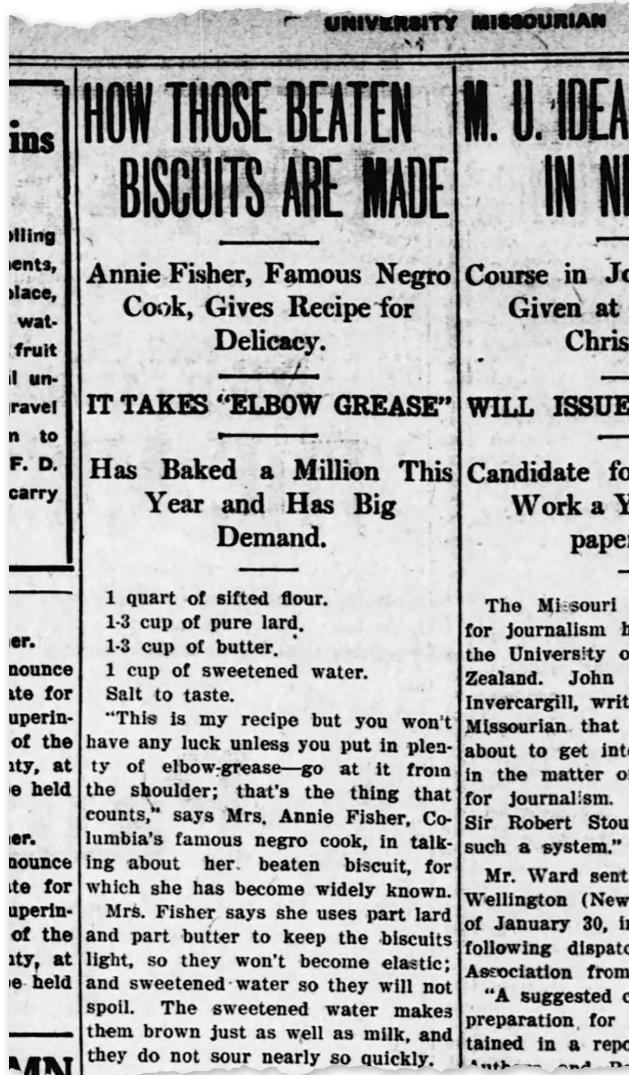
Described as “fluffy, flaky, and creamy,” Fisher initially sold her beaten biscuits for just ten cents a dozen—about three dollars today. She rounded out her menu offerings with dishes like chipped potatoes, fruitcake, roast chicken, salads, and ice cream.

“It was not a party of any status if Annie Fisher wasn’t cooking,” says Laboy. “People changed their wedding dates, their debutante party dates, so that Annie could accommodate them.”

Word of Fisher’s catering prowess spread beyond Columbia. Her biscuits were even on the table in 1911 when President William Taft visited the Missouri State Fair in Sedalia, some sixty-five miles away.

Missouri historian Bridget Haney says there were unquestionably other Black female cooks in Columbia at this time, but Fisher seems to have been in a league of her own.

Haney speculates the cornerstone of Fisher’s success was indeed talent. There may have been other women who could make biscuits as flaky and delectable as hers, but what gave Fisher an edge was visibility. Glowing press and old-fashioned word-of-mouth recommendations boosted sales. But for a Black woman operating in a segregated world, there were also racial politics and



ABOVE: A clipping from the *Columbia Missourian*, Friday, March 17, 1911; OPPOSITE: Donna Battle Pierce’s beaten biscuits

social norms to navigate. Among white patrons, Fisher developed a reputation for respectability, a highly racialized form of endorsement.

Fisher didn’t guard her recipe for beaten biscuits, but she joked to reporters that what couldn’t be taught was the “common sense” needed to make them properly.

To celebrate her growing success, Fisher designed a fourteen-room mansion for herself near Sharp End, Columbia’s Black business district, and monitored its construction from a tent she’d staked on the lawn.

Fisher was married to a reverend briefly, but according to newspaper reports, she filed for divorce and offered her husband a cash settlement not to contest it—exceedingly rare in those days.

LEFT: *Columbia Missourian*; RIGHT: Donna Battle Pierce

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THIS PAGE: Verna Laboy holds the cutter Annie Fisher engineered and used for her beaten biscuits.
LOWER RIGHT: Fisher's home, ca. 1922.



“She’s a smart woman, this Annie Fisher. She’s a specialist in two kinds of dough—the kind that makes beaten biscuits and the kind that swells a bank account,” wrote a reporter for the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* in 1927.

Mackenzie Martin



Throughout the 1920s, she regularly catered for parties with guest lists in the hundreds while simultaneously running a successful mail-order business. Her daughter, Lucille Smith Merritt, was her only assistant. Hollywood celebrities and New York City stockbrokers were reportedly among those who ordered Fisher's beaten biscuits by mail.

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By 1926, at age fifty-eight, Annie Fisher had made more than enough money to retire. Instead, she opened her first restaurant. Fisher built the Wayside Inn—a grand, two-story house—on a farm where her parents had lived, just outside of Columbia. Inside, the floors were polished and the decor included elegant rugs, mahogany furniture, and leather upholstery. Fisher resided in one of the house's many bedrooms. The restaurant, which specialized in chicken dinners, was well patronized by a white clientele. And their hostess expected guests to behave themselves. Fisher's minister had sprinkled the house with holy water, and liquor and dancing were strictly forbidden.

"People can't get common around here," she told the *Globe-Democrat*. "When they comes to Annie Fisher's they comes to eat, and if they want to do any high-ballin' they must do it before they come and after they leave."

Admittedly, it was the height of Prohibition.





PART OF THE MYSTIQUE OF ANNIE

Fisher, then and now, is how tight-lipped she was about her success. Nosy people always asked how much money she had, but she was coy. She'd only ever say something along the lines of having done pretty well for herself.

In 1929, it was estimated that her fortune was worth \$150,000, which is nearly three million dollars today. It wasn't just biscuit money lining her pockets, either. She also became something of a real estate mogul. In addition to her two mansions, she owned more than a dozen smaller houses in Columbia as rental properties, during a time when it was notoriously difficult for Black Americans to purchase homes.

Fisher's success is all the more extraordinary given the open bigotry that was so prevalent at the time. Just a few years earlier, in 1923, James T. Scott

was lynched by a mob in Columbia. Scott, a Black man, was falsely accused of assaulting a white girl.

"Long ago, I got the idea that the only way I could ever get ahead was to believe in myself and not the other fellow," Fisher said to the *Globe-Democrat*. "For that reason, I never tell anyone my business.... I live honest and I try to make the most of the opportunities I have."

Fisher only received a third-grade education, but she put her daughter through college and a music conservatory with her catering profits.

"Painful things happened and something beautiful came out of it. And I think that's the way life happens for a lot of us," says Verna Laboy.

Aside from the Boone County Hall of Fame induction that introduced Verna Laboy to Annie Fisher, Fisher's story essentially vanished after her death in 1938 at the age of seventy. Her daughter reportedly had no children of her own. When Laboy found one of Fisher's indirect descendants in Columbia, she was crestfallen to learn the relative knew nothing about Fisher.

In recent years, Columbia has done more to recognize Fisher. One of the local food pantries is now

Meg Vattercott

Verna Laboy demonstrates how to use a biscuit brake like the one Annie Fisher used to roll out her dough.



named in her honor. But how to protect Fisher's legacy has also become a point of tension in town.

In 2011, Sheila Ruffin, a church and community leader in Columbia, campaigned for months to preserve the Wayside Inn. She wanted it to stand as a testament to Black achievement in town. But in the end, Ruffin was unable to raise enough money and community support to save it. The owners tore it down. More than a decade later, it's still overwhelming for her to go near that part of town.

"I felt like I failed," says Ruffin. "I can't get over that."

A historical marker on the African American Heritage Trail sits near the location of Fisher's first mansion, but that one's no longer standing, either. It was demolished in 1961 during urban renewal, a period when the federal government paid cities across the country to tear down neighborhoods they argued were "blighted." Hundreds of thousands of people were forced out of their homes, mostly people of color. In Fisher's former neighborhood alone, an estimated 303 families of color were displaced in the 1960s.

The only real place to remember Fisher now is Memorial Park Cemetery. When Sheila Ruffin first came to Fisher's grave, the headstone was covered in moss and standing water. But she complained to the cemetery, and they cleaned it up. Now, people come here sometimes and pay their respects.



IT'S TEMPTING TO WONDER: WHAT IF Columbia had honored Annie Fisher all along? That's a question food columnist Donna Battle Pierce has thought deeply about. Pierce moved to Columbia as a child in the 1950s. Her parents were educators, and she and her siblings were among the first Black students to integrate Columbia's public schools.

Pierce remembers how her teacher stood up and told her class, "If you don't want to play with Donna, you don't have to."

Back then, Pierce says knowing the story of

Annie Fisher would have been deeply empowering—but she never learned about Fisher in school. Instead, she soaked up Black culture in the pages of *Ebony* magazine.

In college, Pierce was introduced to African American history and Black studies by poet Mari Evans—and she wondered why so little Black history and culture had been part of her grade-school curriculum.

Sometime in the 1990s, Pierce was back in Columbia visiting her parents when she saw Verna Laboy portraying the beaten biscuit trailblazer on television.

"I said, 'What the heck is this? How was it possible that this woman was in my community?'" recalls Pierce. It turned out that she and Fisher had a lot in common, from their love of cooking to their membership at St. Paul A.M.E Church. Pierce even realized that, as a teen, she had coveted Fisher's Wayside Inn. By that time, it was no longer a restaurant. It was just a beautiful house across from the Sky-Hi Drive-In, where she'd go with friends.

"I had no idea that a Black woman had lived there and had built that house," says Pierce. "I just could not believe that I had missed this part of Columbia's history."

In 1997, before the home was torn down, Pierce had the opportunity to tour it. She stood in the small kitchen where Fisher made thousands of beaten biscuits. In the future, she hopes Columbia will honor Annie Fisher with a museum—but until then, the best way she knows to keep Fisher's memory alive is by making her biscuits.

"There's just nothing any better in the world than a thin slice of country ham on a beaten biscuit," Pierce says.

By Pierce's estimation, there are hundreds more exceptional stories to be told just like Annie Fisher's in cities and towns across America. And Pierce says she's grateful that, thanks to people like Verna Laboy, more kids in Columbia now see themselves reflected in their city's history.

"This is what gives me energy to keep sharing Annie Fisher's story, as long as I have breath, because it's deserving," Verna Laboy says. "Her story is an American story. Her story is one of resilience and fortitude and rising above the perception of others." 🍷

Mackenzie Martin is a senior podcast producer and reporter at KCUR Studios in Kansas City, Missouri. She first reported on Annie Fisher for SFA's Gravy podcast and the KCUR Studios podcast A People's History of Kansas City.