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2013

### Metropolitan Consolidation and Nashville's African-American Community

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#### Recommended Citation

Bucy, Carole, "Metropolitan Consolidation and Nashville's African-American Community" (2013). *Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture*. 18.  
<https://digitalscholarship.tnstate.edu/conference-on-african-american-history-and-culture/18>

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# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



## Metropolitan Consolidation and Nashville's African-American Community

The 1951 local elections in Nashville, Tennessee signaled a turning point in race relations in a city that prided itself on being a progressive southern city. An new generation of leadership had emerged within the African-American community of the city during World War II and now that generation was about to step forward. The election of Z. Alexander Looby and Robert Lillard as the first African Americans elected to the city council in more than forty years was the first step of this new group into the political arena. Dr. Looby and Mr. Lillard came from different backgrounds and represented different constituencies within the black community, but both were committed to seeing African-American influence in local government expand. In this same election, Ben West narrowly defeated the incumbent mayor of Nashville Thomas Cummings and his election marked a changing of the guard for Nashville's white political establishment as well. With the support of Nashville's NAACP chapter, Councilman Looby immediately began to introduce bills to desegregate public facilities.

Throughout out the early 1950s, white Nashvillians began moving out of the city into Davidson County's newly built suburbs that began to surround the city. While Davidson County, headed by County Judge Beverly Briley, struggled to provide essential services to these residents, Mayor West and the City Council began to see their tax revenues shrinking. In this environment, the city council and the county court created a joint commission of fifteen citizens to study the needs for local government and make proposals, including a consolidated system. This group became known as the Community Services Commission and in 1952 published "A Future for Nashville," a comprehensive study of the challenges of growth and possible solutions to the problems of providing

adequate government services to all residents in an efficient manner. A major theme was that the city and the county were economically inter-dependent and the county residents needed city services. The report planted the seeds for an extended discussion about changes in the current system that led to the creation of a city-county commission to write a charter for a unified system in which the city of Nashville and Davidson County would be consolidated into one governmental unit. This idea became known as simply "Metro".

Z. Alexander Looby was one of Mayor West's five appointees to the 1957 charter commission and Mayor Briley appointed Dr. George S. Meadors, a well-known black community leader and businessman. These appointments gave African Americans 20% of the representation on the 10-member commission that wrote the first charter for metropolitan government. This charter was endorsed by both Mayor West and County Judge Briley, as well as both of Nashville's daily newspapers. At the time of the writing of this charter and the referendum on it that followed, there were less than 10,000 registered black voters in Davidson County out of 70,000 who were actually eligible to vote. African Americans who now made up a third of the population of the city were divided over the benefits of consolidation. They had steadily gained strength in city government and Councilman Bob Lillard feared that African Americans could lose their hard-won political gains if the city and county governments were merged. Z. Alexander Looby, however, believed that consolidation would bring economic growth that would benefit all Nashvillians, including African Americans. When a referendum on the charter was held in June 1958, it passed in the city but failed in the county, where residents were fearful of increased taxes.

This publication is a project of the 2013 Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture. The author compiled the information. The Metropolitan Historical Commission edited and designed the materials. Photograph of the 1962 Charter Committee provided by Metropolitan Government Archives.

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With the failure of the first charter, Mayor West and his city council began taking controversial steps to solve the city's financial problems by annexing two significant areas of the county that included over forty-two square miles and 82,000 residents. These annexations, along with a wheel tax on county residents who drove their cars into the city, created an outcry among county residents who by 1962 were calling for another charter. When a second charter commission convened, however, the racial atmosphere in Nashville, a city that regarded itself as a moderate southern city, had dramatically changed. The Nashville sit-ins had ushered in a wave of protests and boycotts that continued for several years because many white Nashvillians remained opposed to integration. After the sit-ins, many African Americans became disenchanted with Mayor West and his political allies at the Nashville Banner because of West's reluctance to endorse complete integration of all public facilities and the Banner's outright opposition to ending segregation. It was in this highly charged environment that a second charter, now opposed by Mayor West and the Banner, was written and presented to the voters for approval.

Z. Alexander Looby and Fisk University economics professor Vivian Henderson were the most vocal spokesmen in support of consolidation within the black community. They argued that the annexations would ultimately dilute the black vote by increasing the numbers of white voters in the city. Only through consolidation would African Americans be able to maintain political power through the deliberate drawing of district lines for the 35-member metropolitan council now included in the new charter. Because of Dr. Looby's persistent defense of majority black districts during the commission meetings, six of the thirty-five councilmanic districts were drawn to preserve black majorities in them. Dr. Henderson and Dr. Looby also argued that economic gains promised by consolidation would create additional job opportunities for both blacks and whites. In the June 28, 1962 referendum, the charter passed in both the city and the county, in spite of the fact that fifty-five percent of black voters rejected it.

On April 1, 1963 Beverly Briley was sworn in as the first mayor of Metropolitan Nashville and Mansfield Douglas, John Driver, Robert Lillard, and Harold Love, Sr., joined Z. Alexander Looby as African Americans among the 40 members of the first Metropolitan council. Nashville's struggles with ending segregation, however, were not over with the implementation of consolidated government.

Shortly after Metropolitan government went into effect in 1963, violence erupted at several Nashville restaurants when demonstrators attempted to picket segregated establishments. African-American leaders pressured Mayor Briley to take action. Six weeks after Briley's inauguration, he created the Metropolitan Human Relations Committee to work to bring both the demonstrators and the business community together. That same month President John F. Kennedy came to Nashville and gave an eloquent speech about race relations before 30,000 spectators at Vanderbilt Stadium. In this speech the President challenged Nashvillians and Southerners to accept their full responsibilities of citizenship and voluntarily desegregate. In spite of all of the gains that African Americans made politically, desegregation of public places was not fully achieved for many years to come.

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For further reading:

Benjamin Houston, *The Nashville Way: Racial Etiquette and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Southern City*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012.

