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Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



Nashville and Davidson County Public Schools Named for African Americans

Many students, both former and present, graduated from or go to public schools in Nashville and Davidson County that are named for African Americans. However, many of these students may not have known or know for whom these schools are named. According to Debbie Oeser Cox, two years after the Civil War ended, "The City Council called upon the Board of Education to select locations and provide suitable buildings for the accommodation of the colored scholastic population of Nashville and to bring the colored children of the city under the provisions of the existing city laws that related to the Public schools". Cox compiled a listing of some 50 traditional African American schools that included such schools as Ashcraft, Belle View School, Carter School, Hadley School, Merry School, Mt. Pisgah School, Peebles School, and Trimble Bottom to name a few. Yet, the quest to educate and be educated among African Americans began in antebellum Nashville before the formalization of public education.

Some African Americans in Nashville began receiving underground schooling in 1833 when Alphonso M. Sumner, an African-American barber, opened a school for free African American students. The school experienced rapid growth and within three years served approximately 200 students. Sumner hired Daniel Wadkins as a teacher for the growing number of students. Later, as noted in Wadkins' *Origin and Progress Before Emancipation*, officials accused Sumner of writing and sending letters that aided the efforts of those trying to escape the institution of enslavement, compelling him to flee Tennessee. His forced departure from the city caused his school to remain closed until 1838, when John Yandle, a white man from Wilson County, taught at the school. Wadkins, as well as Sarah Porter Player, also a free black, assisted Yandle. In 1841, Player continued instruction by opening a school in her home and hiring Wadkins as her assistant. The following year she moved the school to the home of a supporter. In 1842 Daniel Wadkins opened his own school on Water Street and for the next fourteen years it operated at various locations to avoid public scrutiny. Fearing insurrections among African Americans in 1856, although as historian Bobby L. Lovett states "no real evidence existed of insurrectionary plots despite rumors and reactions," Nashville's governing body established unyielding constraints on its African-American population and

closed the instructional facilities established by both Player and Wadkins.

Antebellum schools in Nashville for African Americans ceased operation until federal troops took control of the city in 1862. It was then that Wadkins, assisted by J.M. Shelton and his wife, resurrected his school in the First Colored Baptist Church. Eighteen months later Wadkins moved his school to High Street. The following year, white United Presbyterian Church of North America minister Joseph G. McKee with missionary funding opened Nashville's first free colored school. Following McKee's free school for African Americans, in December of 1865 the American Missionary Association opened the Fisk Free Colored School (dedicated on January 9, 1866), the progenitor of Fisk University. The Tennessee General Assembly established a system of public education in 1867 for both white and African American children. In 1871, a compilation of the school board's Annual Report listed the two schools for African Americans. Belleview School, located at 305 North Summer Street was a two-story brick structure that housed grades one through six with six teachers. Mr. G. W. Hubbard served as the Principal. Trimble School, a two-story brick building given to the city by John Trimble, Esq., was located at 524 South Market Street.

In 1976 the Metropolitan Nashville-Davidson County Public Schools under the auspices of the Bicentennial Committee, the Department of Public Information and Publications and the Department of Audiovisual Services published A Bicentennial Chronicle of those schools existing during the 1975-1976 academic year. Many in Nashville are familiar with the following schools but may not know for whom these schools received their appellations.

Cameron bears the name of Lt. Henry A. Cameron, a former school instructor of science at Pearl High School, who lost his life in the Battle of Argonne Forest, France on October 30th, 1918, two weeks before World War I ended. **Carter-Lawrence Elementary School** is the combination of two schools. Carter School was an early African-American educational institution named for Howard C. Carter, an early African-American educator, who died in 1895. Lawrence School carried the name of Judge John Lawrence, a member of the Board of Education of the Nashville City Schools. **Carter-**

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Lawrence opened in 1940 and today is known as **Carter-Lawrence Math and Science Magnet Elementary School**. Built in 1940 **Ford Greene** was named for Ashcroft School principal Ford N. Greene. Opened from 1906 to 1932 for many years Ashcroft was the only elementary school for African Americans in Northwest Nashville. **Haynes School**, which began as an elementary school in 1931, was named for William Haynes, a local African American who made the land available on which the school was built. Prior to the 1962 merger of city and county governments, the only high school for African Americans in Davidson County began at Haynes in 1935 when the ninth grade was added. The last senior class graduated in 1967 and the junior high school program closed in 1970. Established in 1997, **Hull-Jackson Montessori School** was named for John C. Hull, a renowned Nashville educator and former principal of Cameron and Pearl High Schools and Oscar R. Jackson, who followed Hull as principal of Cameron. Opened in Fall 2006, **Creswell Middle School of the Arts** is named for Isiah T. Creswell, a Nashville businessman and Fisk University comptroller, who served on the Metro Board of Education. **Johnson Elementary School** (known now as Johnson Alternative Learning Center and MNPS Middle School) opened in September 1955 and was named for Hugh J. Johnson, who taught at Pearl High School then became principal at Cameron in 1929. Johnson was one of Cameron's longest serving principals, remaining in the position until his death in August 1949. Named on November 30, 2004, **Robert E. Lillard Elementary Design Center School** was given that appellation for Attorney and Circuit Court Judge Robert E. Lillard, who in 1950, was one of two African Americans elected to serve on the Nashville City Council since 1911. A former fireman with engine Company No. 11 on 12th Avenue North and Jefferson Street, in 1967 he became the first African-American to serve as vice mayor *pro tem*. **Moses McKissack Elementary School** was named for architect Moses McKissack and opened in August 1954. Built to replace the old Clifton Elementary School on 40th Avenue North, Moses and his brother and architect Calvin McKissack owned the land on which McKissack School was built. Originally planning to use the land for residential development, they sold the property to the Nashville Board of Education. Opened on March 10, 1958 **Murrell Elementary School** was named in honor of Professor Braxton R. Murrell, formerly the chair of the Math Department at Pearl Senior High School where he also served as director of the school's orchestra. A former student and the 1909 class valedictorian, Murrell also composed the Pearl's *Alma Mater*. **Napier Elementary School** opened in 1898 and was named for Henry Alonzo Napier, brother of John Carroll Napier. Alonzo Napier was the second African-American man to be admitted into West Point. He became a schoolteacher after leaving West Point in 1872. **Robert Churchwell Museum Magnet Elementary School** opened in 2010 at the former site of Wharton School (named for Confederate naval hero and educator Arthur Dickson Wharton). Nashville's first museum magnet school, it was named for Robert Churchwell, Sr., a graduate of Pearl High School and Fisk University. He became the first African-American journalist employed at a white-owned metropolitan newspaper in the South. Joining the Nashville Banner in 1950, Churchwell was

forced to work from home when Banner executives prohibited him from meetings and barred him from the newsroom until 1955. **Rose Park Math/Science Middle Magnet School**, formerly known as Rose Park Junior High School opened in the fall of 1963, with Richard Harris, a former physics teacher and assistant principal at Pearl High School. Rose Park was named in honor of the Reverend E. S. Rose (now deceased) pastor of Bethel A. M. E. Church and an active and effective leader in the community. Opening in September of 1928 for students in grades seven through nine, **Washington Junior High School** was named for George E. Washington, a prominent African American educator and former principal of Pearl High School. J.A. Galloway served as the Washington's first principal. Additions to the school were made throughout the 1940s and 1960s. Other principals of the school were Braxton R. Murrell, Isaiah Suggs, and Clarence Austin. Washington Junior High School as well as Ford Greene was demolished in the mid-1980s to make room for the newly consolidated Pearl-Cohn Entertainment Magnet School built in 1986.

These schools named for African Americans are a testament to those who mostly labored in Nashville's vineyard of education. They understood the power of education and saw it as "the universal passport to human development." Insisting that their students perform to the best of their intellect, these African-American educators provided their students a visual representation of achievement that they too could replicate.

-- Linda T. Wynn

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