

Tennessee State University

## Digital Scholarship @ Tennessee State University

---

Nashville Conference on African American  
History and Culture

Tennessee African-American History

---

2019

### Zema W. Hill (1891-1970)

Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr. (Revised 1990)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalscholarship.tnstate.edu/conference-on-african-american-history-and-culture>

---

#### Recommended Citation

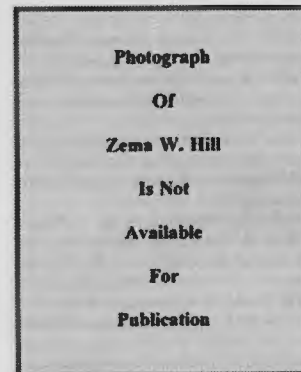
Mitchell, Jr. (Revised 1990), Reavis L., "Zema W. Hill (1891-1970)" (2019). *Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture*. 59.

<https://digitalscholarship.tnstate.edu/conference-on-african-american-history-and-culture/59>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Tennessee African-American History at Digital Scholarship @ Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship @ Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact [XGE@Tnstate.edu](mailto:XGE@Tnstate.edu).

# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

Zema W. Hill (1891-1970)



Zema W. Hill was a faithful and devoted minister, a funeral-home owner, and a notable leader in the Nashville African-American community. He was born in Franklin County, in the community of Asia near Winchester, Tennessee, on April 2, 1891. He became a Christian at an early age, joined the Macedonia Primitive Baptist Church during its revival services, and became an evangelist during his teenage years. In 1916, Hill moved to Nashville where he preached and evangelized in Hightower Hall. His elegance, good looks, and magnetic preaching style enlarged his South Nashville congregation until the services had to be moved under a large tent.

In 1919, a house of worship was dedicated at Overton and Division streets. Elder A. M. Bedford, the moderator of the Cumberland River Association of the Order of the Primitive Baptist Church, dedicated the building as "Hill's Tabernacle." Elder Zema Hill faithfully served the congregation for thirty years.

In the year his church building was dedicated, Hill also established the Zema W. Hill Funeral Home at Fourth Avenue South and Peabody Street. During this period, no black insurance companies existed in Nashville and there were few black funeral homes. The demand for services caused the Hill funeral business to expand so rapidly that a large facility was acquired at Fourth Avenue South and Franklin Street. Hill not only arranged the funerals, he also preached and sang at the

services. Although he catered to the black elite, Hill's civic-minded zeal caused him to arrange funerals for the destitute as well. These were known as his "silver services," where the plate was passed to collect money from the audiences.

The Zema W. Hill Funeral Home moved to 1306 South Street and became one of the first black businesses in the area. He purchased a fleet of Packard automobiles in the mid-1930s, and his business flourished despite the economic depression. Over the years, Hill bought many other fine automobiles, including Cadillacs, Chryslers, and Lincolns. He attracted attention to his business by printing "Zema W. Hill" in gold letters on his cars' windows. He also placed two six-and-a-half-foot concrete polar bears in front of the funeral home--two more bears were placed in front of Hill's Edgehill home.

Elder Hill left his imprint on the African-American community in Nashville through 1930s and 40s, whites and blacks, political leaders, and famous persons attended services at Hill's Tabernacle. Even some of Nashville's underworld figures could be seen at Hill's Sunday night services. He was renowned for sermons such as "The Resurrection of the Dead" and "If a Man Should Die, Shall He Live Again." Elder Hill's ministerial work was highlighted with his selection as a moderator emeritus of the Cumberland Association of Primitive Baptists and builder of the Cumberland Tabernacle in 1944.

This publication is a project of the 2019 Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture. It was originally printed for the 1990 conference. The author compiled the information. The Metropolitan Historical Commission edited and designed the materials.

---

Zema W. Hill died on February 5, 1970, after 17 years of illness. A year before his death, Hill's Tabernacle was rebuilt. At his funeral services on the morning of February 9 at the Cumberland Primitive Baptist Tabernacle, Elder C. R. Wooten and others lauded the late Elder Hill as ". . .a faithful and devoted minister, a loving father, neighbor and friend, and [who] was respected by all who he came in contact with of both races...." Hill, who was interred in Mount Ararat Cemetery in Nashville, was survived by two children: Doris Hill Griner and Clarence D. Hill.

*Reavis L. Mitchell*

Further Reading:

Zema Hill recoded by John Vincent, "Service at a Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn." American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/afc9999005.17367/>

---