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Memphis Tennessee Garrison

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Memphis Tennessee Garrison



Memphis Tennessee Garrison. Photo courtesy of Marshall University Special Collections

Memphis Tennessee Garrison was born Memphis Tennessee Carter in Hollins, Virginia on March 3, 1890. She moved with her family to Gary, WV, as a young child. She was named after the city where her aunt worked as a teacher; Memphis, Tennessee, had a large black population. Her parents, Wesley Carter and Cassie Thomas Carter, were former slaves. She had an older brother by 10 years, John Carter, who moved to Columbus, Ohio, as an adult and worked in a steel mill.

Memphis spent much of her life in Gary. Gary Hollow is a collection of towns in along the Tug Fork River in McDowell County, West Virginia, named after Elbert Henry Gary one of the founders of United States Steel. The towns that made up Gary were connected by paved roads and railroad spurs. According to e-wv: The West Virginia Encyclopedia, "The work force was highly diverse; a 1915 West Virginia Bureau of Mines report listed 1,479 hand-loading miners employed at Gary, with 227 white Americans, 271 [African-Americans](#), 360 [Hungarians](#), 224 Rumanians, 135 [Italians](#), 145 [Poles](#), and 117 miners of Slavic descent."

Wesley Carter was a coal miner. When Memphis was about 7 or 8, her father was killed when he was hit by a train while visiting family in Virginia. Cassie Carter never remarried. Cassie was a deeply religious woman whose father was a slave preacher. Cassie learned to read at a later age, but her knowledge of the Bible was immense, and she served as the President of the Missionary Society.

Memphis went to school in Ennis, Wv, near Elkhorn, in a one room schoolhouse for eight grades. Since there were not public high schools for blacks near Gary, Memphis went to high school in Ohio. She graduated from Bluefield State College, in Bluefield, WV, in 1939.

Memphis married William Melvin Garrison on October 5, 1918, exactly one year after they met. William was an electrician with United States Steel in Gary, WV. Melvin Garrison was a "boss" at the mines; he was responsible for assigning electricians jobs around Gary. Memphis said that she thought that maybe the bosses did not know or did not care that her husband was black and that is why he had such autonomy. The Garrison's never had children of their own but as a teacher, Memphis cared for children her whole life and she and her husband assisted many children when they went off to college. William Melvin Garrison died in Gary, WV, in 1942.



William Melvin Garrison. Photo courtesy of Marshall University Special Collections.

Memphis taught school in McDowell County, WV, where she took an interest in helping children who now would be labeled as "special education students." She also saw that when her students were hungry, they had a harder time studying and learning and often fed her students from her own kitchen. She experimented with different ways to teach and used methods that would help all of her children learn.

The West Virginia State Teachers' Association (WVSTA) was established in 1891 by black teachers who were not permitted to join the white teachers' association. Memphis was the first woman President of the WVSTA from and served from 1929-1930. The WVSTA was dissolved in 1954 as the result of the Brown V. Board of Education which intended to eliminate school segregation.

While still living in Gary, Memphis acted as a community mediator and a sort of social worker. She helped the black miners talk with the mine bosses and with the union

organizers. She learned about the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) while she was in college and started reading the NAACP magazine, *The Crisis*. Memphis helped set up several NAACP branches in southern West Virginia. She served as the national Vice President for the NAACP and, as a field secretary, she established the Christmas Seals Project to raise money for the NAACP.

After years of teaching and public service, Memphis Tennessee Garrison retired to the 1701 10th Avenue in Huntington, WV where she lived and worked as a substitute teacher for 30 years. She continued to help her community; for example, she advised students in the 1960s who were members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). She passed away on July 25th, 1988.



Memphis Tennessee Garrison house at 1701 10th Avenue, Huntington, WV. Photo courtesy of the Huntington Herald Dispatch.

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