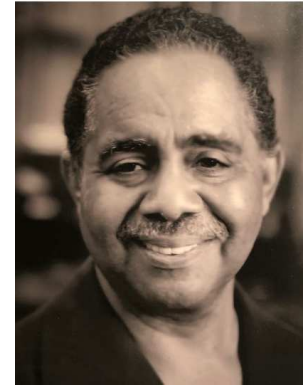


Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



Reavis L. Mitchell (1947-2020)

Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr. began his life's journey in Nashville, Tennessee, on July 12, 1947. The oldest of four children born to Reavis L. and Thelma Wilkes Mitchell, Sr., he attended St. Vincent DePaul Catholic School, Wharton Jr. High School, and was graduated from Pearl Senior High School in 1965. He continued his post-secondary education at Fisk University, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in history; Tennessee State University where he received the Master of Science degree; and a Doctor of Arts from Middle Tennessee State University. He also completed postdoctoral studies at Harvard University.

From 1980 to June 2020, Professor Mitchell served on the Fisk University faculty in the Department of History and Political Science. During his tenure, he held several administrative positions, including Director of Institutional Advancement, Executive Assistant to President Henry Ponder, Dean of Academic Affairs, Dean of the School of Humanities and Behavioral Sciences, Professor Emeritus, and University Historian Emeritus. He held adjunct professorships at the College of St. Francis and Vanderbilt University. He treasured the pursuit of knowledge and the opportunities it afforded to teach about the history, contributions, and impact of African Americans on American history.

As an academician, he and his colleagues in the Department of History produced over 50 students who went on to earn their Doctor of Philosophy degrees in history. Dr. Mitchell was often sought out as a consultant on various projects relating to African American heritage, which he viewed as useable teaching moments that could be beneficial

in advancing conversations about race and inclusivity in American society and beyond. As an administrator, colleague, collaborator, faculty member, scholar, and public servant, Dr. Mitchell was valued for his ability to build consensus across the spectrum. As an administrator and faculty member, he inspired his students, colleagues, and fellow administrators to engage in activities that were relevant beyond academia, by encouraging them to participate in activities that would transform the world in which they and their children lived. As a scholar and public intellectual, Dr. Mitchell promoted a deeper understanding of and appreciation for African American history in Nashville, the United States, and in all areas of the African Diaspora. A consummate public servant, Dr. Mitchell was a lifelong member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated, where he served two terms as the organization's national historian, and a member of Sigma Pi Phi's Chi Boulé. He served as vice-chair of Citizens Bank Board of Directors, the country's oldest continuous operating African American bank. A life-long parishioner of St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church, he was also a member of the Knights of St. Peter Claver.

Professor Mitchell served as a consultant for the PBS film titled *The American Experience* that highlighted the Fisk Jubilee Singers. He also served as a consultant to Spark Media in Washington, D. C. for the documentary film, *Partners of the Heart*, which chronicles the life of Vivian T. Thomas, a pioneering surgical technician. He also served as on-air consultant to WTVF Channel Five in Nashville. It was not unusual to find his comments in such publications

This publication is a project of the 2021 Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture. The author compiled the information. The Metropolitan Historical Commission edited and designed the materials.

as *Time*, *Ebony*, *Black Enterprise*, *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* and *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*. A contributor to the *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, his *Thy Loyal Children Make Their Way: Fisk University Since 1866* was published in 1995, as well as hundreds of historical monographs in journals, magazines, and newspapers. In 2003 he wrote an illustrative chapter, "Alexandria, Tennessee in the Shadow of Progress" that appeared in *Critical Essays on W. E. B. DuBois' Souls of Black Folk*, *An Anthology* from the University of Missouri Press.

He gave generously of his time and talent to serve the State of Tennessee and Metropolitan Nashville as the Chairman of the Tennessee Historical Commission (THC), Chairman of the Tennessee State Review Board and the Metropolitan Historical Commission (MHC), and board member and Secretary of the Tennessee Historical Society challenging them to become more diverse in their identification, analysis, interpretation, and celebration of Tennessee History and its public spaces. A member of the THC for twenty-one years, Dr. Mitchell was the second longest serving current member. Elected as chair of the commission in 2015, at the time of his demise, he was serving his third consecutive term as chair. As chair of the THC, he also served as a member of the Tennessee Capitol Commission. Since 1993, he was also a member of the Tennessee State Review Board of which he also served as chair. A member and former chair of the MHC, he was also Executive Vice President of the Tennessee Historical Society. Members of the THC remember Chair Mitchell's balanced leadership of the commission as "a gentleman and scholar." The vineyard he most enjoyed was that of the academy and his interactions with faculty and students, many of whom he considered not only as colleagues but friends, a term he did not use loosely. One of those whom he considered as a friend was Dr. William D. Piersen.

Mitchell relished honoring the late Dr. William D. Piersen, who hired Dr. Mitchell into Fisk's History Department in 1980. The two colleagues-turned-friends respected each other's accomplishments and contributions to the discipline and Piersen felt Mitchell added a new dimension and visibility to the department. Dr. Mitchell and his colleagues instituted the Pierson Lecture Series (focused on primary research about Fisk) and personally funded a scholarship for Fisk's Currier Scholars program to help recipients purchase books. Soon after his death, colleagues and friends in the Department of History and Political Science renamed the Pierson Lecture Series to the Pierson/Mitchell Lecture Series. The School of Humanities and Behavioral Sciences, of which he served as dean, established the Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr. Scholars Award for Excellence in Teaching in his memory. Through the benevolence of the Peyton Manning Foundation, Fisk established an endowed scholarship in his name.

Dr. Mitchell broadened his brand into the public history arena as a Planning Committee member and co-chair of the Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture (NCAAHC). During his tenure, Dr. Mitchell provided leadership, energy, passion, humor, instruction, and a spirit of discernment regarding the conference's direction and activities. He also contributed approximately twenty profiles to the conference's series *Leaders of African American Nashville*. In June 2020 the NCAAHC adopted a resolution recognizing Dr. Mitchell's achievements and contributions to the study of history and education in Tennessee.

Dr. Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr.'s life journey ended on June 16, 2020. After the funeral service at Fisk University, his body was interred in the historic Greenwood Cemetery.

-Linda T. Wynn
