

LOCAL CONFERENCE ON AFRO-AMERICAN CULTURE & HISTORY

MINUTES

October 31, 1991

CHB D-7

Present: Lovett, Mitchell, Wynn, Paine

The Metro Arts Commission Grant is tentative. Mrs. Paine will know in about two weeks. \$500 for Jubilee Singers. If all \$500 is not obtained, the Singers will take less said Dr. Mitchell. Delise Hall should be contacted for the Jubilee Singers.

Profiles:

Emma Bragg, "Susanna McGavock Carter."

Linda T. Wynn, "The Nashville Sit-In Demonstrations."

Dovie Shuford, "Mother M. L. Tate."

Luncheon - Discussion in progress.

Winston-Derek Bookstore will furnish the refreshments, coffee and doughnuts.

Donations are confirmed from Woodcuts (\$25), First Baptist East Nashville (\$50), and Jefferson Street Baptist Church (\$50).

Ophelia Paine reported on publicity. As usual, WPLN, newsletters, TV stations, student newspapers, and TSU Public Relations.

Viola Wood still contacting artists for the Art Exhibit.

NEXT MEETING, DECEMBER 5, 1991, THURSDAY, 11:45-12:45, CHB D-7.

① Frison Annudation
② THS(?)
③ First Baptist Church, Capital Hill

MEMORANDUM

TO: Sandra Duncan and Sandra Trotter

FROM: Ophelia Paine

RE: Afro-American Culture and History Conference

DATE: November 4, 1991

Each February the Historical Commission and the College of Arts and Sciences at TSU cosponsor a one-day local conference on African-American culture and history in recognition of Black History Month. The eleventh annual conference will be held February 12, 1992, from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. at the Avon N. Williams, Jr., downtown campus of TSU.

On behalf of the Commission and TSU, we would like to ask the Mayor to make opening remarks at the beginning of the day. This part of the program is scheduled to begin at 8:50 a.m. Those invited to speak will be Dr. James A. Hefner, President of TSU; Dr. Bobby Lovett, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; and our executive director Ann Reynolds. Each person speaks approximately five minutes to welcome participants.

I have enclosed copies of last year's newsletter announcing the conference and a sample program. The event usually draws 400 or more people ranging in age from teenagers to Senior Citizens. The public is invited and the small registration fee of \$6 includes a hot lunch, publications, a musical performance, and an art exhibit in addition to the papers presented. This year we have invited the Fisk Jubilee Singers to perform.

In 1990, the American Association of State and Local History recognized the Afro-American Conference with a Certificate of Merit, the only project in Tennessee to receive an award that year. This is a very special event which encourages interest in and expands awareness of the contributions of African-Americans to the history of Nashville and Middle Tennessee. It is rare to see a crowd as enthusiastic about history as this one.

We hope the Mayor will be able to be with us for part of the conference this year. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call. We look forward to hearing from you.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: Ophelia Paine

January 7, 1992

(615)862-7970

11TH ANNUAL AFRO-AMERICAN CULTURE & HISTORY CONFERENCE

The 11th annual Afro-American Culture and History Conference will be held Wednesday, February 12, at the Avon N. Williams, Jr., downtown campus of Tennessee State University, 10th and Charlotte. Cosponsored by the Metro Historical Commission and the College of Arts and Sciences at TSU, the one-day event is open to all individuals interested in the contributions of African Americans to the history of Nashville and Middle Tennessee. Highlighting this year's conference will be a 11 AM performance by the Fisk University Jubilee Singers. Hours are 8:30 AM to 3:30 PM. Registration is \$6, which includes lunch and publications. For more information or to preregister, call the Historical Commission at 862-7970.

EVENT: Afro-American Culture and History Conference

DATE: Wednesday, February 12

TIME: 8:30 AM to 3:30 PM

PLACE: Avon N. Williams, Jr., Downtown Campus of TSU,
10th and Charlotte.

Afro-American Conference, page two

Bar Association," and "The Life of James Fisher, Former Slave," a dramatization by the Actors Playhouse.

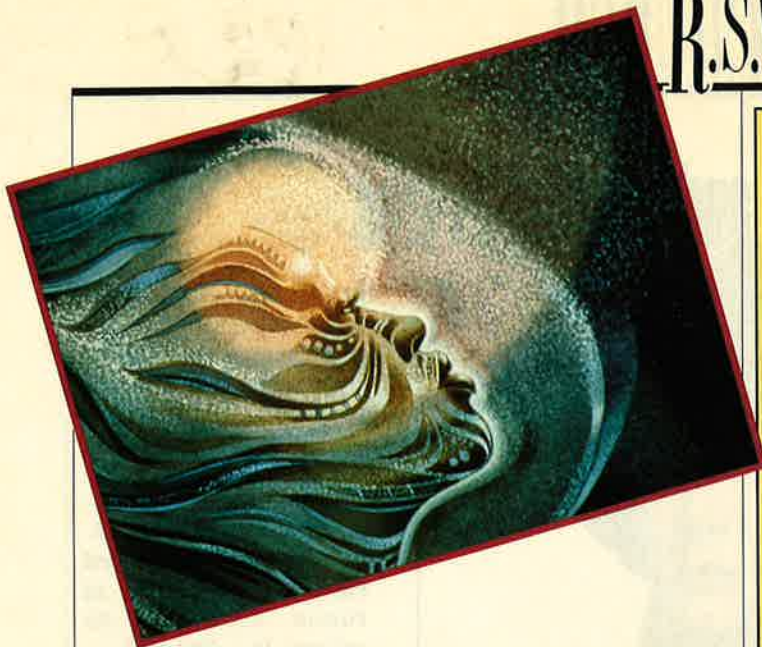
This year's art exhibit will feature the works of Fisk University graduates John Ashworth, Melvin Davis, LiFran Fort, Buist Hardison, Nina Lovelace, Roderick Owens, and Viola Wood.

Continuing a series of publications on African American leaders and organizations, profiles of Susanna McGavock Carter by Dr. Emma Bragg, the Nashville Sit-Ins by Linda T. Wynn, and Mother M.L. Tate, founder of the House of God, by Dovie Shuford are free with the price of admission.

The one-day conference begins at 8:30 AM and concludes at 3:30 PM. Registration is \$6 which includes lunch. For more information or to preregister, call 862-7970.

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010792



AFRO-AMERICAN CULTURE AND HISTORY CONFERENCE

The "Nashville sound" usually brings to mind country music, but an early influence of the genre was actually black gospel music, according to the Metro Historical Commission. The tradition began after the Civil War with the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who first brought attention to Nashville music. The historical influence of African Americans in Middle Tennessee is uncovered this month at the 11th annual Afro-American Culture and History Conference.

"The conference is really a grass-roots effort," according to Ophelia Paine, Metro Historical Commission. "We have a rich African American history, which was not researched and recorded formally until the '70s. It's a hidden history in a way." Historians, educators and

the general public gather each year to promote research in and awareness of local African American history. Topics at this year's conference include country music's African American roots, a look at the Napier-Looby Bar Association, the history of women's track and field, and a performance by the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

"Fisk Jubilee Singers preserved black spiritual music as an art form, and contributed proceeds from their touring to Fisk University," states Paine. "They also funded the building of Jubilee Hall — the first structure in the nation built for the higher education of African Americans."

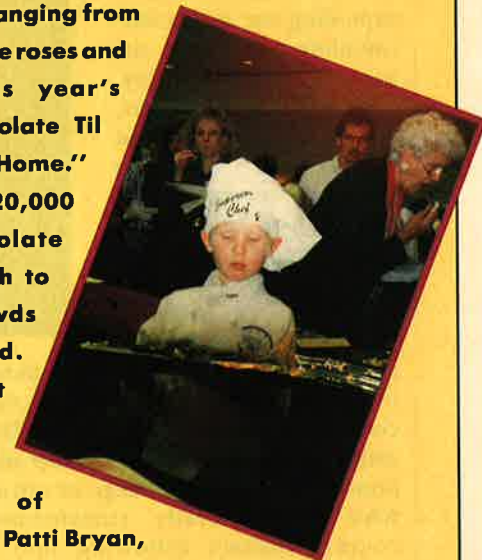
The 11th Annual Afro-American Culture and History Conference occurs at Tennessee State University Campus on February 12 from 8:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Call 862-7970. ■

INCREDIBLE EDIBLE CHOCOLATE FESTIVAL

Less is not always more, especially in the case of Nashville's all-you-can-eat chocolate extravaganza, the Incredible Edible Chocolate Festival. This year's goal is to gather 100,000 chocolate confections to offer local sweet-tooths.

Sponsored by Outlook Nashville, the fund-raiser encourages Nashville dieters to throw resolve to the wind for a good cause. Those who attend can make their own Valentine samplers, watch chef competitions and demonstrations during which local chefs will create confections ranging from fudge to chocolate roses and sculptures. This year's theme is "Chocolate Til the Cows Come Home."

Last year, the 20,000 pieces of chocolate were not enough to feed the crowds that attended. "We want to let everyone know that this year there's plenty of chocolate," says Patti Bryan, Outlook Nashville.



Festival fare consists of chocolate-dipped fruit, chocolate chip cookies, all types of chocolate candy (including chocolate cows), and chocolate milk. Demonstrations and displays of chocolate for sampling will fill four ballrooms at the Maxwell House Hotel. The festival is the premier fundraiser for Outlook Nashville, which provides a wide range of services to the handicapped and community education through the travelling puppet show "Kids On the Block."

The Incredible Edible Chocolate Festival occurs February 2 at the Maxwell House Hotel, from 12 to 4 p.m. Admission is \$8 for ages 12 and up, \$6 for age 6-11, and free to ages 5 and under. Call 834-7570. ■

Afro-American Culture & History

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| 8:00-8:45 AM | Registration and Refreshments, Atrium |
| 8:50-9:20 AM | Opening Remarks
Mayor Philip Bredesen
Dr. James A. Hefner, President Tennessee State University
Ms. Ann Reynolds, Executive Director, Metro Historical Commission
Dr. Bobby L. Lovett, Dean, TSU College of Arts and Sciences |
| 9:25-9:50 AM | "History of Women's Track and Field and the Tigerbelles at Tennessee State University,"
Coach Edward Temple, Tennessee State University |
| 9:55-10:20 AM | "Life of James Fisher: Former Slave," a dramatization by the Actors' Playhouse of Nashville, Inc. |
| 10:25-10:50 AM | "Thomas Talley, Black Folklorist: The Nashville Connection," Dr. Charles Wolfe, Middle Tennessee State University |
| 10:50-11:00 AM | "Background on Art Exhibit," Ms. Viola Wood, Tennessee State University |
| 11:00-12:00 NOON | Fisk Jubilee Singers, Fisk University
Mrs. DeLise Hall, Music Director* |
| 12:00-1:00 PM | Lunch, Atrium |
| 1:10-1:35 PM | "Black Architectural History: Renovations at Fisk University," Dr. Reavis Mitchell, Fisk University |
| 1:40-2:05 PM | "History of the Napier-Looby Bar Association in Middle Tennessee," Robert Smith, Attorney, Smith and Hirsch Law Offices |
| 2:10-3:15 PM | Discussion/Tour of Art Exhibit |
| 11:00-2:45 PM | Art Exhibit, Atrium
Works by John Ashworth, Melvin Davis, LiFran Fort, Buist Hardison, Nina Lovelace, Roderick Owens, and Viola Wood |

*The Jubilee Singers performance is funded by a grant from the Metro Nashville Arts Commission and is free and open to the public.

Planning Committee:
Ms. Nina Lovelace
Dr. Bobby L. Lovett
Miss Lois C. McDougald
Dr. Reavis Mitchell
Ms. Ophelia T. Paine
Ms. Vallie Pursley
Ms. Viola Wood
Mrs. Linda T. Wynn

Financial Supporters:
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Citizens Bank
Davis Campbell-McClain Funeral Home
First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill
First Baptist Church, East Nashville
Frierson Church of Christ Foundation
Holy Trinity Episcopal Church
Inglewood Baptist Church
Jefferson Street Baptist Church
National Baptist Publishing Board
Pleasant Green Baptist Church
Spruce Street Baptist Church
Tennessee Historical Society
Winston-Derek Booksellers
Woodcuts Shop

Co-Sponsored by:
Tennessee State University
College of Arts and Sciences
Metropolitan Historical Commission

Leaders of Afro-American Nashville



SUSANNA MCGAVOCK CARTER: A BELLE MEADE SLAVE

Susanna was born circa 1812 in Williamson County, Tennessee of, an Indian mother and an English father. Her grandmother was Jonah, a full-blooded Creek Indian, who was born circa 1780-90 and lived on Cedar Knob (Capitol Hill), in Nashville. Susanna's sisters were Ann, Jo Anna, Martha, and Fannie. Ann's father carried her to New Orleans where they both contracted cholera, and the father died. Ann returned to Nashville. (Ann was the author's father's grandmother and the author's great-grandmother.) Ann's sisters were left in the custody of Randal McGavock, a wealthy citizen and a mayor of Nashville.

McGavock claimed the sisters as his slaves after the father died. He gave Susanna to his daughter, Elizabeth Irwin, on January 2, 1840, when she married William Giles Harding, owner of Belle Meade Plantation. Susanna became Harding's trusted house servant. Susanna married a Belle Meade slave, Issac ("Big Ike") Carter and had four children: "Little Ike," Joe, Porter, and Willie. Susanna was one of Harding's 140 slaves at the 3,500-acre Belle Meade Plantation just west of Nashville.

Susanna sent two letters (June 3 and August 25, 1862) when her master, W. G. Harding, was in prison at Fort Mackinac Island, Michigan, for supporting the Confederate rebellion against the United States during the Civil War. The letters were remarkable, considering that slaves were not allowed to read and write or dictate letters. Her letters richly describe plantation life near Nashville during the Union army occupation. The letters told her master about Belle Meade Plantation, its slaves and crops, and the family's efforts to survive the war.

Susanna's letters are quoted in the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* (1974) and in some books. She was viewed as a faithful slave. Indeed, the slaves, especially house slaves and mulattoes, were mere extensions of

the white families on most slave farms. During the Civil War, when Harding was imprisoned, Susanna collected and hid the family silver to prevent its falling into Yankee hands. After the end of the war, Susanna recovered the silver, polished it, and presented it to the white family members. Typical of a house slave, Susanna viewed herself as a member of the Harding family and was considered a member of the family by the white owners. Susanna claimed that no slaves "disgraced themselves" by fleeing to the Yankees. Several other slaves offered the Hardings money and protection during the presence of the federal army.

Although Harding worked hard to be humane and a "model southern slave owner," really most field slaves detested the evil white slave owners and often rebelled and ran away, escaping even from Belle Meade Plantation. Several Belle Meade slaves served in labor battalions and military regiments of the Union Army of the Cumberland. Dozens of Belle Meade slaves became fugitives in Nashville during the occupation. After the war, Harding, now released from prison, opposed the establishment of a Freedmen's Bureau school for Negroes on his land.

By 1870, most of the former slaves had abandoned Belle Meade Plantation where a wage system replaced slavery. Only five black families lived at Belle Meade by 1870. William G. Harding died in 1886, leaving the land to his successors.

Susanna and her family remained attached to Belle Meade Plantation until her death circa 1892. Susanna was noted for her famous "syllabub" which consisted of whipping cream and other ingredients for cakes. Belle Meade was sold in 1906, the year that Bob Green, a famous Belle Meade freedman and horse trainer, died. Susanna was the great-aunt of the author of this article.

— Emma White Bragg

Leaders of Afro-American Nashville



MOTHER MARY MAGDALENA L. TATE, 1871-1930

Saint Mary Magdalena L. Tate is recognized as the founder of the First Holiness Movement in the United States. The Church of God, a member of the Holiness-Pentecostal denomination, is located in dozens of states and Jamaica with headquarters in Nashville since 1924.

Saint Mary Magdalena L. Tate was born on January 3, 1871. During her youth, because of her character and demeanor, she was called "Miss Do Right." Mary Tate's followers were known as "The Do Righters."

Mary Magdalena L. Tate became known by many of her faithful followers as Mother Tate. This unique black woman, along with her two sons, Walter Curtis Lewis and Felix Early Lewis, in 1903 founded and established the House of God which is the Church of the Living God the Pillar and the Ground of the Truth Without Controversy [1 Timothy 3:15-16]. (Cited hereafter as House of God.)

After she was ordained by God, Mother Tate boldly preached the Gospel in cleanliness of the word of God and of things pertaining to the Kingdom of God. Many persons were amazed and wondered at the demonstration of the Gospel which was preached by this blessed servant of God. She preached her first sermon at Brooklyn, Illinois. In 1907, Mother Mary Magdalena climaxed a career as a world evangelist of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In Alabama, over 900 persons were converted to Christianity through her preaching. She boldly went into the water and baptized many of the converts through the physical strength given her by the Lord's power.

Mother Tate was baptized in 1908 and was approved and accepted as Chief Apostle Elder, president, and first chief overseer of the formally organized church in Greenville, Alabama. Additionally, she was ordained to the Bishopric by the Board of Trustees and Bishops of the Church of God.

Mother Tate organized and presided over the First General Assembly of the Church of God from June 25-July 5, 1908, in Greenville. A number of ministers were ordained, and several pastors were appointed at this meeting.

In 1910, the first Church of God was established in Waycross, Georgia. During the following year, the first Georgia State Assembly of the Church of God was held in Waycross where the first presiding elders were appointed and pastors received financial support from the general church.

One of the most significant developments in the Church of God was the creation of the Decree (Covenant) Book during the 1914 General Assembly at Quitman, Georgia. Also at this meeting, four state bishops were appointed to serve in Georgia.

In 1914, Mother Tate organized the first Church of God in Florida in the City of Ocala. The first Florida State General Assembly followed at Ocala.

By 1916, under the leadership of Mother Tate, charters were issued to Church of God members in more than twenty states and the District of Columbia. Between 1930 and 1962, fourteen state charters were granted to establish the Church of God. Four more states were added to the Church of God roster by 1981. By 1992, some forty-three states and Jamaica were chartered by the Church of God.

—Continued

This publication is a project of the 1992 Nashville Conference on Afro-American Culture and History. The authors compiled the information. Tennessee State University's Department of History and Geography edited the materials. The Metropolitan Historical Commission completed the design and printing.

In 1924, the Church of God's headquarters was established on Heiman Street in Nashville, Tennessee. The original building, although no longer used for services, still stands on Heiman Street. The present headquarters sanctuary was dedicated in 1981. The Church of God, a member of the Holiness-Pentecostal Denomination, is experiencing the greatest growth in membership of any Christian organization in the United States of America.

Mother Mary Magdalena L. Tate died on December 28, 1930, and was buried in the family plot in Dickson, Tennessee. Her remains were relocated in Nashville's historic Greenwood Cemetery in 1963. A marker to memorialize Mother Tate was erected near the entrance to the cemetery.

— E Dovie Shuford

Leaders of Afro-American Nashville

NASHVILLE SIT-INS

On February 1, 1960, four North Carolina Agriculture and Technical College students captured America's attention when they sat down at Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, and requested service. However, prior to this demonstration and between 1943 and 1960, sit-ins had taken place in Chicago, St. Louis, Baltimore, and at least fifteen cities including Nashville, Tennessee. The earlier protests did not gain full attention from the media. But, in 1960, the southern civil rights movement gained momentum, and the movement thrust the sit-ins into the nation's moral conscience.

Although Nashville was considered to be the "Athens of the South" and a few blacks served on the Board of Education, the city council, and the police force by the 1950s, blacks and whites were racially segregated. The pattern of racial exclusiveness prevailed in Nashville's schools and public facilities, including rest rooms, waiting areas, snack counters, transportation terminals, libraries, theaters, hotels, restaurants, and neighborhoods. Jim Crowism pervaded all aspects of life in Nashville and throughout the South.

In 1958, local black leaders founded the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC), an affiliate of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. On March 26-28, 1958, NCLC members held a workshop on nonviolent tactics against segregation. Under the leadership of NCLC president, the Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, pastor of First Colored Baptist Church on 8th Avenue, North, the workshops continued in the church's basement throughout 1958. Early in 1959, the NCLC began a movement to desegregate downtown Nashville.

During November and December 1959, the institutionalized policy of segregation was tested at Harvey's and Cain-Sloan department stores. The reverends Smith and James M. Lawson, Jr., students John Lewis, Diane Nash, James Bevel, Marion Barry, and others bought goods and then attempted to desegregate the lunch counters. Before the end of 1959, other college students were being trained to participate in the protests. The students were from Nashville's black colleges, including Fisk University, Tennessee A & I State University, Meharry Medical College, and American Baptist Theological Seminary. However, the Greensboro, North Carolina, student demonstrations received the first publicity on February 1, 1960.

—Continued



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Twelve days later, February 13, 1960, Nashville's black college students launched their first full-scale sit-ins. The students convened at the Arcade on Fifth Avenue, North, and entered Kress's, Woolworth's, and McClellan's stores at approximately 12:40 p.m. They made purchases and then occupied lunch counter seats. Nearly two hours later, the stores closed their lunch counters, and the students left without incident.

For the next three months the students continued the sit-ins, adding Greyhound and Trailways bus terminals, Cain-Sloan, Grant's, Walgreen's, and Harvey's department stores as targets. The students' principles of direct nonviolent protest and written rules of conduct became models for later southern protests. When the students were met with white violence and arrests on February 27, the black community rallied to support them with attorneys and bail money. Some 81 students who were found guilty of disorderly conduct on February 29 refused to pay the fines and chose to serve time in jail. Vanderbilt University's administrators expelled the Reverend James Lawson, a divinity student, for participating in the sit-ins.

On March 3, Mayor Ben West appointed a biracial committee to investigate the issues. The mayor's committee recommended on April 5 that lunch counters be divided into white and black sections. The NCLC rejected the proposal.

On April 19, the home of black attorney Z. Alexander Looby, a counsel for the demonstrators, was dynamited. Blacks marched to City Hall where the mayor said "yes," lunch counters should be desegregated. On May 10, 1960, Nashville became the first major city to begin desegregating its public facilities.

In September 1990, the Metropolitan Historical Commission erected a historical marker on the southwest corner of Charlotte and Eighth Avenue, North, commemorating the Nashville sit-in movement and its NCLC headquarters, the former site of First Colored Baptist Church (Capitol Hill).

— Linda T. Wynn

Afro-American Culture & History

8:00-8:45 AM	Registration and Refreshments, Atrium
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*The Jubilee Singers performance is funded by a grant from the Metro Nashville Arts Commission and is free and open to the public.

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Dr. Bobby L. Lovett
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Ms. Vallie Pursley
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Financial Supporters:
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Holy Trinity Episcopal Church
Inglewood Baptist Church
Jefferson Street Baptist Church
National Baptist Publishing Board
Pleasant Green Baptist Church
Spruce Street Baptist Church
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Co-Sponsored by:
Tennessee State University
College of Arts and Sciences
Metropolitan Historical Commission

11th ANNUAL LOCAL CONFERENCE ON AFRO-AMERICAN CULTURE AND HISTORY

Registration Fee: \$6 (adults); \$5 (senior citizens and students) — includes lunch and publications

Make check payable to: TSU Foundation: Local Conference
Mail form and check to: Metropolitan Historical Commission
400 Broadway, Suite 200
Nashville, TN 37203 Phone 862-7970

Name _____ Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Metropolitan Historical Commission
400 Broadway, Suite 200
Nashville, TN 37203

Afro-American Culture & History

21st Annual Local Conference

Afro-American Culture & History

21st Annual Local Conference

Tennessee State University and the Metropolitan Historical Commission are the sponsors of the eleventh in an ongoing series of annual conferences which coincide with Black History Month. The conference brings together historians, educators, students and other interested individuals for a program on local Afro-American history and culture. The conference will be held at Tennessee State University's Avon N. Williams, Jr. Campus, Downtown, 10th and Charlotte, Wednesday, February 12, 1992.

The Jubilee Singers
October 6, 1871



File
PRESERVERS

P.O. BOX 607638 ORLANDO, FL 32860 (407) 886 3100

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Results of 1992 Afro-American Conference Questionnaire

52 Received

1. How would you rate this conference?

Good - 11

Fair - 2

Excellent - 39

2. Which presentation(s) did you enjoy the most?

9 people said that "everything" was great.

29 mentioned Coach Temple

20 mentioned the Jubilee Singers

Dr. Mitchell, Dr. Wolfe, and Robert Smith ran a close third!
One person said, "Thank you for this conference!"

Suggestions for future speakers or subjects of interest?

TSU band history/Mr. Greer

A play

Classroom teacher presentation on successful ways of teaching
black history

Black builders

Black musicians

African-American Learning styles and the curriculum

Women Speakers

Dr. Benjamin Carson

Success of a large family despite the odds

Medical Field

Performance of talented black students or children in churches

Nashville Sit-In Movement

Continuation of Coach Temple

Pearl High School - famous black educators

Church histories

School histories

Greenwood Park and Preston Taylor

Maybe some sort of short drama or section of a longer
drama/replace the music for a change

More slide presentations

What we can do to keep our youth interested in learning about their heritage. Not only youth, but many of the older folk don't want to look back because of the pain.

History of cosmetology- Edna Page

1704-B/8th Avenue, South
Nashville, TN
255-HAIR/home 876-2457

Elementary and high schools for blacks

Nashville in the 1890s

TSU Marching Band History

Black High Schools' band history

Someone to speak about Nashville's years as a rhythm and blues recording and performance center - also slides of Jefferson Street prior to urban/renewal construction

Rutherford County African American historical preservation representatives

More youth like the playhouse actor

More art and local writers for exhibit

Elder Lloyd, musician, singer and Primitive Baptist minister to give history of their church and do copies of their music

Other:

Improve lunch organization, let speakers and performers go first

Intersperse entertainment with informational presentations

Better sound

More space for larger groups

More time on some topics

Be more interesting, play a game

3. Would you be willing to pay \$8.00 for adults and \$5 for students and senior citizens?

Yes - 46

No - 7 (one person said \$7)

Actors 'Playhouse of Nashville, Inc.

a Non-Profit Organization

2318 West End Avenue * Nashville, Tennessee 37203 * (615) 327-0049

Dr. Lovett,

Here is the monologue we'd like to present during the Black History month.

It will be a premiere for this work.

The presentation will then tour nine metro schools, thanks to a grant from the Metro Arts Commission, seen in tandem with another living history character, Miss Jane Thomas/.

Black actors interested in performing this part are encouraged to call the theatre at 327-0049. Auditions will be held in December. Thanks to the grant, the actors will be paid an honorarium for their work.

Thanks. Feel free to call me at the theatre or at my home (399-8022), Dr. Lovett, if you have any questions.



Stephen Meigs
Living History Project
ACTORS' PLAYHOUSE, INC.

THE NARRATIVE OF JAMES FISHER, FORMER SLAVE
(as reported in the National Anti-slavery Standard,
April 13, 1843)

edited by: Thomas Heine
385-9166

THE NARRATIVE OF JAMES FISHER

My name is James Fisher. I am twenty-six years old. I was born in Nashville, Tennessee in the month of October 1817. My mother's name was Mary Davis. She was a Cherokee Indian, taken prisoner when she was a child and sold into slavery. My father's name was Thomas Fisher. He fled from bondage when I was a small child. They pursued, but never caught him. I have one brother, who, the last I knew, was living near Mobile, claimed as an article of property. I have two sisters in Nashville, both free women.

My mother was a very industrious woman. By washing and ironing, she earned enough money to buy herself for \$500. After that, she paid \$800 to the widow Stump for my sister Ellen; and some time after, by hard labor and close saving, paid 600 more to Dick Perry for my sister Elizabeth. This made \$1,900 that she paid for the freedom of herself and children from a system of oppression and cruelty.

When I was in my fifteenth year, the widow Stump sold me to a man who kept a boarding-house in New Orleans, by the name of Shawl. He paid \$500 for me, and I lived with him, as a house-servant, for four years. He was a drinking man and when he was in liquor, sometimes abused me cruelly. When he came sober, he never seemed to know he had done anything wrong. I endured the abuse as well as I could, and laid by every sixpence, in hopes of finding a chance to escape from suffering. For fifty silver

dollars, I brought the free papers of a colored man, whose name I will not mention, not wanting to cause him any trouble. And believing I had as good a right as other people to choose where I would go, I left my master on the 7th of July, 1838.

I boarded the ship Hercules, bound for Philadelphia. The custom-house officers looked closely at my papers. I could not read the words and did not know all what they said, but the officers pronounced them good. I was a free man on that ship, from New Orleans to Philadelphia.

As soon as Mr. Shawl missed me, he made diligent inquiry and discovered that I had boarded the Hercules. So he came by steamboat straight up to Wheeling, and from there to Philadelphia and when we landed a little below the city, behold there he was, with two men he had hired to grab me and lead me back. I can never describe what a desire I had for liberty on that occasion. While they were taking me from Delaware to Baltimore, I planned to escape when the boat landed, but Mr. Shawl frustrated my design, by locking my arm in his, and walking out of the boat in that style, as if he really loved me. Thus, much against my will, I was taken back to New Orleans, where I remained in prison for twelve weeks, waiting for my master to have a good chance to sell me. He ordered me to receive two floggings with a big driver's whip. I suffered terribly while undergoing those unmerciful whippings. If I were to tell half the cruelties and abominations practiced in that prison, during the twelve weeks I remained, I am certain that many people would not believe I kept

within the bounds of truth.

At last, Mr. Shawl came with a gentleman by the name of Gamble, a merchant, from Athens, Alabama. He asked me if I was willing to go and live with him. I told him I would go anywhere rather than stay any long^e in the prison. So I went with him. But at the end of four months, he failed in business, and his property was all seized, myself among other articles, and was to be sold. Rather than risk the chance of being sold into the rice swamps or cotton fields, I concluded again to try the experiment of traveling. So one night I took one of Mr. Gamble's best horses and set off for Nashville, to consult with my mother and sisters what I had better do.

I swam the horse over Elk river, which divides the states of Alabama and Tennessee. This made me very chilly, but I rode on till morning when I came near some little children, who had a fire by the road, to keep them warm. I stopped to dry my wet clothes and to rest and feed the horse. Then I travelled all night. At one place, the toll-gate was shut and the keeper demanded why I was traveling so late. I told him I had received news that my wife was dangerously ill in Franklin, and I was in a great hurry to get there. He approved the motive, and I passed without difficulty. The horse was very much fatigued and frequently wanted to stop. I got asleep on his back several times, but I would soon wake and urge him on, for I did not dare stop.

Just before daylight, I reached Nashville. Mother was so

delighted to see me, that she could hardly speak. But she could not bear the thought of my having run away. In the first place, she was afraid I would be caught and dreadfully abused; and even if I did succeed in getting to Canada, it would be such a long way from her that it would be almost like having me die. After long and earnest consultation, she thought it would be best to have me ~~leg~~ally taken up, and she would bail me out of jail in the sum of one thousand dollars. She addressed a letter to Mr. Gamble, informing him where I was, and proposing to buy me. Instead of writing an answer, he came to Nashville, and urged me to go back with him. I was not willing to return, for I longed inexpressibly for liberty, and mother was trying to raise money to buy me. In the midst of this dilemma, my old master, Mr. Shawl, came to Nashville to claim me as Mr. Gamble's property, as a payment for Mr. Gamble's indeptedness to him. But he lost his suit, because Judge Lane of Huntsville had a mortgage on me, and came to Nashville to secure me. Here were three gentlemen who left their businesses and their homes to hasten to Nashville, merely because I had taken a fancy to visit the place. There was quite a squabble among them, who should have me; and all this time, mother was trying with all her might to buy me. At last, I was very unwillingly obliged to go with Judge Lane. The judge promised ^{to} use me well, and let me visit my mother once a year. She advised me to try and content myself, assuring me that she would spare no pains to get me honorably free.

I had serious doubts as to whether my poor mother would ever

be able to comply with the rigid terms Judge Lane exacted. I, therefore, thought it wise to learn to write, in case opportunity should offer to write myself a pass. I copied every scrap of writing I could find, and thus learned to write a tolerable hand before I knew what the words were that I was copying. At last, I met with an old man, who, for the sake of money to buy whiskey, agreed to teach me the writing alphabet, and set me copying. I spent a good deal of time trying to improve myself; secretly, of course. One day, my mistress happened to come into my room, when my materials were about; and she told her father, old Capt. Davis, that I was learning to write. He replied, that if I belonged to him, he would cut my right hand off. After that, he sometimes talked to me an hour at a time, to convince me that I was better off than I should be if I was free. He said slaves were better off than their masters, much better off than the free colored people, and vastly better off than they would have been if left in the wilds of Africa; because there they fought, killed, and ate each other. But here, said he, masters are bound by law to provide well for you, and will be punished if they do not do it. He told me that the reason why they murdered and devoured one another in Africa, was because there were no white people there to make them behave themselves.

Judge Lane^e was circuit judge of several of the counties where he lived. He was what would be called a kind master, but he did not let me go to see my mother as he had promised, not did he let me know, that she had written several letters to him, trying

to buy me. At the time of her death, she was working hard to raise money to buy me. My sisters wrote me that she talked a great deal about me during her sickness; saying she hoped to meet me in heaven, if she was never permitted to see me on earth again.

Not long after my mother's death, I received a letter from my stepfather, who was residing at Memphis. He wanted me to propose to my master to let me hire my time, in order to purchase myself. He said if I could get that permission, he would furnish me with a horse and a dray, and render me whatever assistance he could, to make money enough to pay my master for my time. When I spoke to Judge Lane about it, he asked me if I was dissatisfied with living with him. I told him that I would as soon live with him in the condition of a slave, as with anybody; but that I wanted to get an opportunity to work for my own benefit. "If you had your freedom, you would not be so well off as you are now," he said. "I have all the trouble of planning and thinking for myself and all the rest of you." I told him I greatly wished to relieve him from the task of thinking for me. I should much prefer to think for myself. Judge Lane smiled, and said I was a fool.

Twelve days after this, my master had occasion to go to Mobile. When he started, he charged me to mind whatever Mrs. Lane told me, and when he came back I should go visit my relations in Nashville. My mistress was by nature irritable, and crabbed; and before master had been gone three days, she ordered

her brother, Nicholas Davis, to give me a flogging. He came into the kitchen and struck me on the arm with the edge of a heavy board. In a sudden flash of anger, I snatched it out of his hand, pushed him up against the wall, and choked him a little. He ran and told his sister I had nearly killed him. She was about to send for an officer to take me to jail, but he told her not to do it, for he had done wrong to strike me as he did, and he was sorry for it. Then she sent a servant to tell old Capt. Davis, her father, that Jim was ~~driving~~^{driving} them all off the place, and he must come the next morning to flog him. The old captain had often expressed a wish to get a chance to give me a good thrashing. He was noted for severity to his servants. It was said that he had killed several, including a poor old man who used to tend him when a baby. He had a very big whip which he called "the negro ruler"; and he made it a point to break or kill every one he undertook to flog. I was not willing to fall into the hands of this old tyrant. He was sent for on Sunday morning, and as soon as I got my kitchen work done that day, I set myself to writing passes, till I got one that suited me. It was permission to go to Nashville, and stay two weeks, signed with my mistress' name. In the evening, I went to the stage office, and asked the landlord if I could take passage to Nashville, the next morning. He demanded my pass. I showed it, telling him that mistress was not much used to writing passes for the servants, and she wished him to look at it, and see if it was correct; if not, he would please to send it back again, and she would alter

it as he said. He examined the pass and wrote accordingly. I ran back to my room and read the note, in which he said that the pass was most fine in every particular. I burned his note, went back to the tavern and paid my passage to Nashville.

The next morning I rose before anybody was astir, carried my trunk to the stage-office, and hurried back to prepare breakfast for the family. I had just sent it in when I heard the stage horn. I ran up to the tavern, and found the stage just starting to come to the house for me. I jumped in and in four days was safely landed in Nashville. I stayed two days with my sisters, and left them saying I was going to see my stepfather at Memphis. I did not tell them that the pass that had brought me to Nashville was the work of my own hands and I did not give them any hint that I was "flying from the wrath to come."

Before leaving Nashville I wrote myself another pass, pretending to be the slave of a man by the name of Jones. When I went to the wharf, to take passage to Smithfield, the captain asked if I was free. I told him no. He demanded my pass, and I gave it to him; so I paid my fare and went on board. At Smithfield I boarded at fifty cents a week, trying all the captains to get a passage up to Louisville. None of them would allow me to come on board, unless I could bring some white man with me, who knew me. Ten days rolled away, and I was almost discouraged. At last I stepped up to a white man, who had spoken with me several times at the house where I boarded. I told him a fair story, and asked him to go on board with me. He looked

sharp at me, and said, "I reckon you can't be a runaway, or you wouldn't be staying here so bold." I told him he needn't feel the least afraid.; that I was trying to get service as a cook in a steamboat, and I had waited so long, my money was most gone. So he went with me and told the captain he didn't think there would be any danger in taking me. The boat stopped awhile at Louisville. I went on board several other boats, and then went back to the captain, and told him as I couldn't get a berth to suit me, I should like to pay my fare as far as Cincinnati, if he was willing. He said, "Very well." So I went on to Cincinnati; and there I found friends both colored and white, who astonished me by their kindness. They all seemed to think that my own title to myself was better than that of Judge Lane, or any other man. When I find myself safely landed in Canada's snowy garden of liberty, I may perhaps send some messages to my old oppressors, who used to claim me as their property.