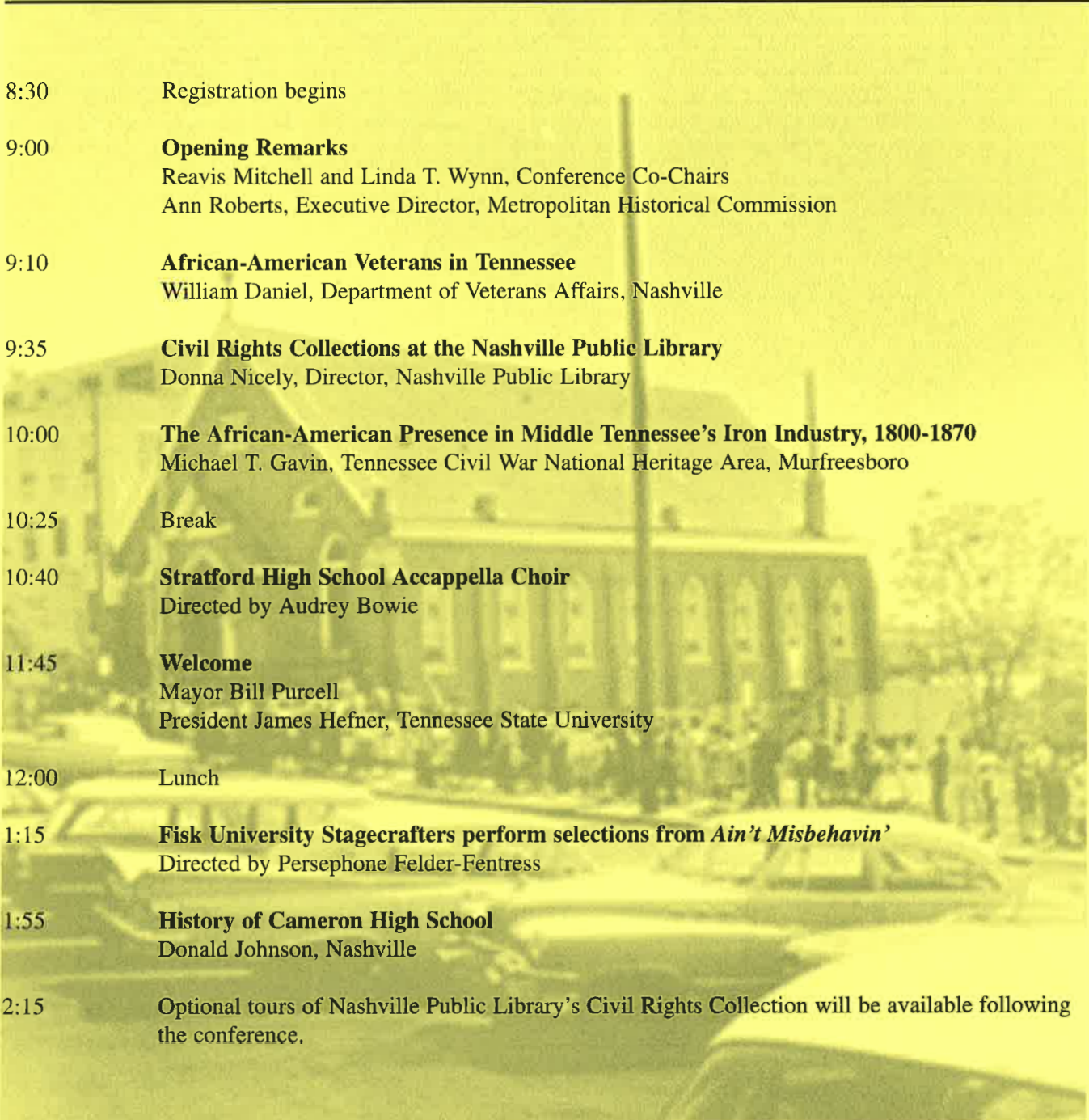


Tennessee State University and Metropolitan Historical Commission

# Conference on *African-American* History & Culture

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2004  
TSU AVON N. WILLIAMS, JR., CAMPUS  
9:00 AM - 2:30 PM  
10TH AND CHARLOTTE AVENUES

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- 8:30 Registration begins
- 9:00 **Opening Remarks**  
Reavis Mitchell and Linda T. Wynn, Conference Co-Chairs  
Ann Roberts, Executive Director, Metropolitan Historical Commission
- 9:10 **African-American Veterans in Tennessee**  
William Daniel, Department of Veterans Affairs, Nashville
- 9:35 **Civil Rights Collections at the Nashville Public Library**  
Donna Nicely, Director, Nashville Public Library
- 10:00 **The African-American Presence in Middle Tennessee's Iron Industry, 1800-1870**  
Michael T. Gavin, Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area, Murfreesboro
- 10:25 Break
- 10:40 **Stratford High School Accappella Choir**  
Directed by Audrey Bowie
- 11:45 **Welcome**  
Mayor Bill Purcell  
President James Hefner, Tennessee State University
- 12:00 Lunch
- 1:15 **Fisk University Stagecrafters perform selections from *Ain't Misbehavin'***  
Directed by Persephone Felder-Fentress
- 1:55 **History of Cameron High School**  
Donald Johnson, Nashville
- 2:15 Optional tours of Nashville Public Library's Civil Rights Collection will be available following the conference.

# Profiles of African Americans in Tennessee

## NASHVILLE AND ITS ROLE IN DESEGREGATING THE SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

As this year is the 40th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (PL88-352), it is only fitting that some attention be given to the sports arena, specifically the desegregation of the Southeastern Conference (SEC) and the role that Nashville played in bringing down the conference's "Jim Crow" walls and racially diversifying its teams. In May 1966, Perry E. Wallace, Jr., who played center on Pearl Senior High School's championship varsity basketball team, signed with Vanderbilt University and became the first African-American "Commodore" to participate in the school's varsity sports and in SEC basketball. Just as young college students at the beginning of the sixth decade of the 20th century led Nashville in becoming the first major city in the South to desegregate its lunch counters during the sit-in movement, an academically talented, physically agile, and well-disciplined student athlete from North Nashville continued the civil rights struggle in the sports arena and led the desegregation of the SEC.

Known for his slam-dunks and referred to as "king of the boards," Wallace was graduated from Pearl on June 7 as class valedictorian. During his high school basketball career, he averaged 19 rebounds and 12 points per game. A high school All-American, Wallace was recruited by more than 80 colleges and universities across the country. His graduation from high school occurred in the midst of the modern Civil Rights Movement and racial cordons across the spectrum were down or coming down every day. Yet, the SEC continued to conduct business as usual and remained racially segregated.

Wallace and his Pearl High teammates broke the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association's (TSSAA) color barrier when they became the first African-American high school team to win the TSSAA's Boys' State Basketball Tournament (1966). Pearl High School's legendary Coach Cornelius Ridley suited a team of well disciplined, cerebral, and poised athletic student warriors.

A self-confident and disciplined Perry Wallace assumed a leadership role both on and off the basketball court. In the spring of 1966, both the Nashville *Tennessean* and *Nashville Banner* covered the flurry of recruiting surrounding Wallace and watched with great anticipation to see with which institution of higher education he would cast his lot. According to Roy Neel, who covered his signing as a sports reporter for the *Banner*, the high school All-American was "the best player in the region." Said Neel, "It was a daily drama." The excitement reached its apex when Wallace signed with Vanderbilt University, an SEC member school. He entered Vanderbilt University that fall as an engineering major and joined Vanderbilt's freshman basketball team. The same year, Roy Skinner, the Commodores basketball coach, also signed Godfrey Dillard from Detroit, Michigan, another African-American freshman basketball player.

During their first year, the African-American players encountered segregation's "flood of hatred" during games at Mississippi State, the University of Tennessee, and Auburn University. In spite of vitriolic racism, the players successfully completed their first year. However, Dillard left the team because of numerous injuries, leaving Wallace as the only African-American player on the Commodores squad. On December 2, 1967, he became the first African-American varsity student athlete to compete in the SEC.

According to Brad Golder's article "Breaking Barriers: The Story of Perry Wallace, the SEC's First Black Athlete," in the Vanderbilt *Hustler* (February 26, 2002), Wallace was handicapped before his first season on the varsity team began. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), with "strong support from Kentucky Head Coach Adolph Rupp and Oklahoma Head Coach Henry Iba, outlawed the slam-dunk in college basketball." The "dunk shot" was Wallace's high school trademark. Like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (Lew Alcindor) of UCLA and other black collegiate basketball players, he executed it with precision. In 1966, Rupp's

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Kentucky Wildcats were upset in the National Championship by five black starters at Texas Western. "The NCAA crapped on Perry," Skinner said. "They took away his game." Notwithstanding, Wallace persevered and developed into one of the SEC's best post players.

Desegregating the SEC was not an easy task for the first African American who competed in its conference. He experienced intense ire from segregationists. Their blatant display of racism was at its worst in Alabama, Mississippi, and his home state of Tennessee. Cheerleaders led a volley of invective racist cheers against him. Although members of opposing teams made him the target of physical abuse on the court, referees refused to acknowledge their actions as intentional fouls. Fans threatened to beat, castrate, and lynch the trailblazing student athlete. When the Commodores played at Oxford, Mississippi, the catcalls, threats, and racially disparaging expletives were so vociferous, they were discernible over the radio airwaves. At Tennessee's Stokely Athletic Center, a group of opposing fans near the baseline threatened lynching, shouting "We gonna string you up, boy!" Wallace was harangued, taunted, and threatened throughout his SEC career.

Struggling to stay inbounds between whites who wanted him to fail and African Americans who expected him to be a "superstar," Wallace became the quintessential "organization man." He never retaliated against players who maliciously fouled him. He realized that any perceived misconduct on his part would impede the progress of SEC desegregation. Wallace remained silently focused and let his performance on the basketball court speak for him. He met the test with dignity, decorum, and determination. The academically astute and well-disciplined student athlete set new criteria for SEC athletics. The first African-American

"Commodore" and the first to complete four years in the SEC, Wallace ended his tenure as captain of the Vanderbilt varsity team. As a testament to his athletic prowess, notable bravery, and despite the racial bigotry he encountered, Wallace continued to reign as "king of the boards." According to Golder, Wallace still ranks "second on Vanderbilt's all-time rebounding list with 894 career rebounds." He stated, this is "a number that is even more amazing considering that he only played three varsity seasons."

A pioneer in the desegregation of SEC sports, Perry E. Wallace, Jr. earned a bachelor's degree in engineering in 1970. After his graduation, the universities of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Kentucky opened the 1970 SEC season with desegregated varsity teams. With the assistance of Vanderbilt University, its coach, basketball team, and a well-disciplined student athlete from Pearl Senior High School, who became the first African American to compete in the Southeastern Conference, Nashville led the way in bringing down the conference's walls of racial segregation. Because of Vanderbilt's actions, the universities that belonged to the SEC diversified the players who suited-up for their courts or playing fields. After 1970, the SEC no longer conducted business as usual or adhered to a restrictive color barrier. In December 2003, after 71 years of existence, the SEC secured its first African-American head football coach when Mississippi State University hired Sylvester Croon, thus bringing down another conference color barricade. Forty years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, its member teams are desegregated as well as its coaching staffs.

--Linda T. Wynn

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# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



*Photograph courtesy of the author*

## MRS. CURLIE (C.E.) MCGRUDER

Mrs. Curlie E. McGruder served in a variety of capacities during her adulthood. She was an educator, pianist, coach, and mother. However, Nashvillians will best remember her for her endeavors and resilience as a civil and social activist.

Curlie E. Haslip was born to Troy E. and Bessie Haslip on November 11, 1927, in Fairfield, Alabama. She received her elementary education from the Jefferson County School System and completed her secondary education at Selma University Prep High School. After completion of her formative education, Haslip moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, where she received her undergraduate degree from Knoxville College. While there, she was Miss Knoxville College and pledged the Pi Zeta Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta sorority. After completing her undergraduate studies, Haslip returned to Alabama, where she taught and coached the girls' basketball team at Clay County Training School.

In 1952, Curlie Haslip married Charles E. McGruder, thereby retaining her initials, which later became her trademark. In 1954, the McGruders moved from Toledo, Ohio, to Nashville, Tennessee, so he could complete his residency at Meharry Medical College. In a short period, Curlie McGruder gave birth to two sons. Later, she attended Fisk University for graduate studies in sociology. She was more committed to her family and her involvement in community organizations, however, and she did not complete her master's degree.

Much of Mrs. C.E. McGruder's community service involved activities with the Nashville chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). From the 1960s, McGruder held many different positions in the local chapter, including President (1964-65), Youth Director, Public Relations, and Life-time Board Member. In 1964, she was instrumental in organizing a march for freedom around Nashville. During the

march, white police were instructed to pick up all organizers. Some march organizers, including McGruder, hid in a car near Fisk University's campus and continued to instruct and encourage students with techniques to carry out a successful march. This was only one of many marches that McGruder organized throughout the 1960s. Others included a silent march to protest the bombing of Birmingham's Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church, where four little girls died. As a result, the Nashville chapter of the NAACP drafted a letter to President Kennedy requesting more federal troops be dispatched to Birmingham to protect citizens of color. Another important march involved a demand for a public accommodations ordinance. That effort included civil rights activist John Lewis, national chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Mrs. McGruder organized this march in her capacity as President of the local chapter of the NAACP along with SNCC and local churches and ministers. Activities such as these brought McGruder an abundance of criticism and rejection among both blacks and whites, but she forged ahead in her quest to secure equal rights for people of color. Because of her efforts in the 1960s as Local and State Youth Director and Second Vice President for the State of Tennessee, the National Youth Council and College Division of the NAACP gave McGruder an award of appreciation.

After the turbulent 1960s, McGruder continued her efforts to bring about better communities and racial, social and economic equality. During the 1970s, she joined the ranks of the Davidson County Independent Council and retained her position(s) with the local chapter of the Young Adult Chapter of the NAACP. McGruder focused much of her attention on enfranchising more people of color in Nashville. With the help of local ministers such as the Revs. Dogan Williams and Amos Jones and college students from the local black colleges and universities, hundreds of black Nashvillians, who otherwise would not have registered

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to vote, were given that opportunity. She focused on voting issues in Nashville and other urban and rural areas. To assist in bringing down the walls of racial injustice beyond Nashville, college students under McGruder's direction organized numerous fundraisers to facilitate their travels to Clarksville, Murfreesboro, Louisiana, and Mississippi. She also joined forces with comrade Joe Kelso to seek federal and local funds for the restoration of the Fort Negley project. McGruder continued to receive accolades in the 1970s, including Dedication and Outstanding Leadership (WVOL radio); Outstanding Service Award, Youth Adviser of the National Youth Work Committee NAACP (61<sup>st</sup> National Convention), Certificate of Appreciation for community and public service (Governor Ray Blanton), and Invaluable Contribution to the Civil Rights Struggle (NAACP Youth Council).

In her later years, McGruder continued to work feverishly for any cause that benefited the black community, even if that included shaking up Metropolitan and state government. The omnipresent crusader continued to march in response to issues that affected Nashville. She marched against issues such as apartheid, lack of employment for blacks, and the lack of minorities in political positions, and pushed for a national holiday to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Although McGruder ran unsuccessfully for city council, she continued to endorse and support others. Among her greatest achievements in the 1980s was the establishment of an annual citywide march and breakfast held every January in honor of Dr. King. During the 1980s and 1990s, Mrs. C.E. McGruder received numerous awards and accolades for her dedication to the Nashville community. They included: Social Action Award (Eta Beta Sigma Chapter of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc.),

Honorary Registrars-at-Large in recognition of Outstanding Service to the Nashville Committee (Davidson County Election Commission), Appreciation of Devoted Service and Invaluable Service to the David B. Todd, Jr. Foundation, an Appreciation Award for Dedicated Service, Davidson County Independent Council (DCIPC), and the Freedom Fighters Plaque for Community Service (NAACP).

In the early 1990s, as the struggle continued for racial and social equality, McGruder's health began to wane. Despite poor health she remained dedicated to community service, and it was the masses and college students that were most receptive of her actions. According to Dr. Charles E. McGruder, "If someone called at 2 am from East Nashville and needed assistance, and Curlie was in North Nashville, she would tell them to send a car and she would be there for the cause." She was outspoken and often a thorn in the side of her opposition.

On the evening of December 17, 1993, McGruder attended her last board meeting of the NAACP. In a matter of hours after the meeting was adjourned, Mrs. C.E. McGruder was forever silenced. In death, as in life, she continued to receive recognition of outstanding proportions. The annual Martin Luther King Birthday Breakfast, which was created to bring community leaders together at Jefferson Street Missionary Baptist Church, was renamed the C.E. McGruder Celebration Breakfast. But her greatest honor came in 2003, when the Metropolitan School Board, with the encouragement of school board member Edward Kendall, renamed the abandoned John Early Elementary school the C.E. McGruder Family Resource Center.

--Pamela Lane-Bobo

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# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

## THE CLINTON HIGH SCHOOL DESEGREGATION CASE

In the early 1950s, racial segregation in the nation's public schools was the custom across America. Although all of the academies in a given school district were supposed to equal, as enunciated in the United States Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, which made "separate but equal" the standard, most schools attended by African-American children were significantly substandard to the schools attended by children of European descent. On May 17, 1954, a unanimous United States Supreme Court overturned the *Plessy* doctrine and required the desegregation of schools across the nation. While the Court's decision did not abolish segregation in other public arenas or required the desegregation of public schools by a specific date, it did affirm that the permissive or *de rigueur* segregation, which existed in a number of states, was unconstitutional. However, before the Court's mandated public school desegregation ruling became a reality, African Americans in a number of southern cities protested against the region's *de jure* practice of racial segregation in its schools, and some had previously filed suits against their respective school boards and districts.

One such case occurred in Tennessee, when African Americans in Clinton, Tennessee, began the frontal assault on Jim Crow education when they sought redress for their children, who were bused to an all black high school in Knoxville. Using the litigious device of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), in December 1950 attorneys Avon N. Williams, Jr., Carl Cowan, and Z. Alexander Looby filed the *McSwain v. Board of Anderson County, Tennessee* school desegregation case in federal district court. The attorneys filed the case on behalf of black families in Clinton, who asked that their children be allowed to attend Clinton High School. Tennessee's first public school desegregation case was filed four years before the United States Supreme Court handed down its unanimous

decision in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas* case.

The case originally known as *Joheather McSwain v. Anderson County Board of Education et al.* went to trial two years later in February 1952. On April 25 of the same year, the court rendered its decision in favor of the Anderson County Board of Education. Subsequently, the case was appealed to the Cincinnati Court of Appeals, where it remained until the 1954 United States Supreme Court ruling. After the Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision rendering null and void the discriminatory racial proscriptions of the nation's public schools, the United States District Court in Knoxville ruled that Anderson County high schools desegregate by the fall of 1956.

The court's decree brought an end to Anderson County School Board's prolonged phase of litigation and resistance to school desegregation. On August 20, 1956, 12 African-American students (Jo Ann Allen, Bobby Cain, Theresa Caswell, Minnie Ann Dickey, Gail Ann Epps, Ronnie Hayden, Alva Joheather McSwain, Edward Lee Soles, Maurice Soles, Regina Turner, Alfred Williams, and Charles Williams) registered without racial confrontation for classes at Clinton High School. When classes began on August 27, most of the school's student population accepted the "Clinton 12." However, racial peace did not reign throughout the high school's desegregation process.

Out-of-state white agitators John Kasper, executive secretary of the Seaboard White Citizens Council, and Asa Carter, leader of the violent Birmingham White Citizens' Council, organized anti-black resistance in Clinton. Because of the turmoil created by their actions, Governor Frank G. Clement called out the National Guard to restore law and order and to disengage the viciously organized anti-black resistance. The "Clinton 12" withstood months of derisive ridicule and intimidation. Pioneering black students in Clinton, Tennessee, endured the same segregationist ire during the 1956-57

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school year as did the "Arkansas Nine" during the 1957-58 school year.

While the nation remembers Little Rock, Arkansas' Central High School desegregation crisis, the school desegregation crisis at Clinton High School in Tennessee has been all but forgotten. A review of the literature on the modern civil rights movement reveals a body of knowledge about the Little Rock Nine and their courageous struggle toward the desegregation of Central High School. However, although the media reported the Anderson County school desegregation case, there is little notice or no mention by the chroniclers of the modern civil rights literature that Anderson County's Clinton High School became the first public high school in the South to graduate a student of African-American heritage. On May 17, 1957, three years to the day after the United States Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Bobby Cain of the "Clinton 12," the only African-American senior eligible to graduate, became the first African American to be graduated from a previously segregated public high school in the South. The following year, Gail Ann Epps became the first African-American female to be graduated from a desegregated public high school in Tennessee.

In 1955, five years after filing the Clinton school desegregation case, attorneys Z. Alexander Looby and Avon N. Williams, Jr., filed suit against the Nashville Board of Education. On behalf of A. Z. Kelley, a barber whose son Robert was denied access to nearby white East High School, Looby and Williams, in consultation with the NAACP and Thurgood Marshall—Williams' cousin—sought legal remedy under the *Robert W. Kelley et al. v. Board of Education* case. The case was not heard until 1956, when William E. Miller,

a federal district judge, ordered Nashville's Board of Education to prepare a plan for desegregation by January of the following year. In the fall of the following year, thirteen young African-American students of elementary-school age registered at five formerly all-white schools. As the students began attending the schools, white mobs screaming racial epithets met them. Mayor Ben West ordered the city's law-keeping force to maintain the peace and to protect the rights of the first-grade students, who were instrumental in bringing down separate but unequal education in Nashville. Because of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, other cities across Tennessee also began dismantling their segregated public school systems.

On May 17, many will celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NAACP's victory in its United States Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. The accomplishments of the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund attorneys Thurgood Marshall, Charles Houston, Constance Baker Motley and others assisted in making public education accessible and equitable to all of the nation's children.

The case of *McSwain v. Anderson County Board of Education et al.* demonstrated to other Tennessee locales that, despite agitation from outsiders or the eruption of violence, efforts to delay or stall court orders to desegregate the state's public schools would ultimately fail, and children of African descent would gain the right to be educated in racially desegregated school systems.

--Linda T. Wynn

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