

# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



FRANCES EUPHEMIA THOMPSON (C. 1900-1992)

Artist and educator Frances Euphemia Thompson was born in Spring Hill, Tennessee, and studied in the United States and Europe. With a career spanning over five decades, she was named one of the "greatest influences on Tennessee African-American visual arts."<sup>1</sup> Thompson's education began at the Agricultural and Industrial Normal School (now Tennessee State University) where her instructor, Olive Giovanna Talieaferro, encouraged her to continue her artistic training at Massachusetts College of Art in Boston. After graduating with honors in 1923, Thompson returned to Nashville to begin her long career at Tennessee A&I teaching, creating art, and promoting art education. She served as the art department director, a professor of art beginning in 1944, and professor emeritus beginning in 1974.

In the 1930s, with an increasing interest in art as an educational tool, Thompson returned to the Massachusetts College of Art to study. In 1936, she graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Art Education. Following her return to school, Thompson applied for a Rosenwald Fellowship to continue her studies in art and art education in Czechoslovakia. These fellowships were available through the Julius Rosenwald Fund for both black and white southerners who wanted to research a topic related to the South and planned to work in the region following their fellowship. Thompson's application was accepted and she left for Prague, Czechoslovakia, in September 1937 to study the folk art of middle Europe at Charles University. Thompson visited Sweden, Denmark, Germany, England, and France. While in Prague, she stayed at a student dormitory run by the Protestant church, visited museums, learned Czech silver-smithing and lacemaking, lectured on art and art education, and performed recitals of African-American folk songs and spirituals. The German military action that preceded World War II forced Thompson to leave Europe earlier than anticipated; however, her fellow-

ship and study in Czechoslovakia remained a pivotal experience in her life.

Thompson returned to her teaching position at Tennessee A&I following her European fellowship. After three years, she enrolled at Radcliffe College in Boston to earn a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) in education and fine arts and graduated in 1945. She once again returned to Nashville to accept a professor position and spent the rest of her career at Tennessee A&I, where she directed the art department and taught. In 1943 the Tennessee State Department of Education published her book, entitled *Art in the Elementary Schools, A Manual for Teachers*.

In addition to teaching, Thompson helped organize and participated in the "Faculty Breakfast Group," an intercollegiate group made up of faculty members from Tennessee A&I and the other historically black colleges in Nashville—Meharry Medical College and Fisk University. The cooperative organization held discussions and lectures on a variety of topics related to higher education and scholarly fields. Thompson was also a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, the Gaiete de Coeur Art Club, and the National Art Education Association. Throughout her life, she remained an active club member, church member of First Baptist Capitol Hill, artist, teacher, speaker, and writer. Her speeches and writings combined her philosophy on art, religion, and education. She saw art as a media for expression. In 1974, she observed,

Education should aid the realization that art expression touches all of life's objective functions. It always has, and I believe it always shall. Art sometimes is not beautiful. According to known standards of beauty it is often ugly. But whichever it is accorded to be, it must be right. And right means order, harmony, proportion, balance, rhythm and emphasis.<sup>2</sup>

---

Thompson took private commissions for paintings and sculpture working in a variety of media, including oils, polymers, water colors, German pastels, gesso, gold silver, enamels, wood, bone, and plastics. She painted murals, portraits, and landscape scenes. She exhibited her work at TSU, the Van Vechten Gallery at Fisk, the Parthenon in Nashville, the Massachusetts College of Art, and Harvard University. Thompson also designed baptistry murals for many churches, including the Progressive Baptist Church in Nashville, the Ramsey Street Church of Christ in Nashville, her own First Baptist Church Capitol Hill, the Indianapolis Metropolitan Baptist Church, the Fairfield Baptist Church in Nashville, and the Antioch Baptist Church in Nashville. Her baptistry paintings in the Fredonia Baptist Church in Haywood County, First Baptist Church East Nashville, and the First Baptist Church in Gallatin depict scenes of flowing water in a natural landscape. Thompson also demonstrated her commitment to faith-based art by illustrating church literature for over fifty years for the Baptist Sunday School Publishing Board in Nashville.

Her commissions came from many prominent people in Tennessee and outside the South. Some of her portraits included attorney J. C. Napier, Meharry Medical College doctor C.W. Johnson and his staff, Dr. and Mrs. William Crump from Washington, D.C., Dr. and Mrs. Charles Nobles from Baton Rouge, and Dr. Elsie Lewis Makel of New York City. She designed two-dimensional sculptures on the facades of four Tennessee State University buildings--Memorial Library,

Educational Agriculture, Health, and Physical Education--for the Nashville architectural firm of McKissack and McKissack. Her other work with the firm for the college included mosaic floor designs for the library and Physical Education buildings.

In the 1970s, the Alumnae Association of her alma mater, Massachusetts College of Art, named the college's art gallery and a minority scholarship after her. Unfortunately, when the school moved the gallery in 1986, her name was not retained on the gallery. The scholarship has since been absorbed by a more general one.

Thompson was a contemporary and friend of the prominent Harlem Renaissance painter Aaron Douglas (1898-1979). From New York, Douglas came to Nashville in 1940 to start an art department at Fisk University, where he taught for almost thirty years. Both Thompson and Douglas represent the increasing stature of African-American visual artists within the art community. Whereas Douglas has received national recognition for his paintings and his role in providing blacks with art education opportunities, Thompson's work is relatively unknown as an artist and art educator. More research is needed to fully document her career. However, her legacy can still be seen in her public art in churches and on the TSU campus, which includes the current school seal that she designed for Tennessee A&I in 1922.

--Leslie N. Sharp

---

<sup>1</sup> Aaron Douglas, Thompson's friend and contemporary, was also named by George Ridley, Jr., in "Visions of My People," *Contemporaria Magazine* (31 January 1998): 12. Additional information for this Profile was obtained from the Tennessee State University archives.

<sup>2</sup> In 1974, the Tennessee State University Women's Club sponsored an exhibit of Thompson's work. As a part of the opening, Thompson spoke on her philosophy of art. Frances E. Thompson papers, Tennessee State University archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

# Profiles of African Americans in Tennessee

## ECONOMIC WITHDRAWAL DURING THE NASHVILLE SIT-INS

For most Americans, the 1950s were years of increasing personal prosperity. The booming economy brought about the growth of suburbs, as homeownership came to symbolize success and respectability in America. Even so, the culture and politics of the "Affluent Society" were shaped mostly by the world's anxiety over the Cold War. This dynamic created several of the most important factors contributing to the rise of American black protest, including the return of black soldiers from foreign service during the Second World War, the growth of an urban black middle class, the growing influence of television and other forms of popular culture, the embarrassment Americans experienced as they tried to present their nation to the world as the paragon of democracy while racial injustice persisted at home, and the political mobilization of northern blacks. These factors brought the nation's social and racial problems more sharply into focus.

After decades of struggles, an open crusade against racial intolerance and discrimination began in the 1950s. At the onset of the modern Civil Rights movement, Montgomery, Alabama, was one of the first cities where economic pressure was used to combat segregationist practices. According to Bruce J. Dierenfield's account in *The Civil Rights Movement*, bus company records indicated that 99% of the usual 30,000 black riders walked, hitchhiked, bicycled, and used car pools to make their way about the city after Rosa Parks refused to relinquish her seat on a Montgomery bus and was arrested. Black Montgomery's boycott caused the bus company, downtown businessmen, and the city to lose approximately \$1 million. The economic boycott and a favorable ruling by the United States Supreme Court in the 1956 *Browder v. Gayle* case, desegregating Montgomery's city buses, brought about a major civil rights victory. Infused with an economic component, the Montgomery boycott succeeded in establishing a new form of racial protest based on passive resistance,



Protesters march downtown during the Easter Boycott. Nashville Public Library, The Nashville Room

which soon spread throughout the South and the nation at large.

When black leaders and students in Nashville began their formal sit-in movement, they, too, added an economic prong that devastated downtown merchants and business owners. The Nashville sit-ins, which were the largest and best organized of the sit-ins across the South, began in November and December 1959 when black leaders and students challenged the exclusionary racial policy of downtown eateries in the major department stores. Approximately one month after students began their full-scale movement in February 1960, Fisk University professor Vivian Henderson estimated that blacks in Nashville poured approximately \$50 million a year into the coffers of white businesses. This sum was

---

particularly significant since many white customers were moving to the suburbs, leaving downtown merchants increasingly economically dependent on Nashville's black population. The Reverend Kelly Miller Smith and Henderson organized a boycott of downtown stores just before Easter, an important shopping holiday. Empowered with their slogan, "No Fashions for Easter," the black community's "economic withdrawal" deprived storeowners of incalculable amounts of business.

By the beginning of April 1960, Nashville department stores were virtually empty as whites also stayed away. Many joined in the boycott as a show of support for the student demonstrators. A few white women mounted their own form of protest by turning in their credit cards at their favorite stores. "No Fashions for Easter" had achieved its goal. In its wake, one store merchant commented, while looking at the deserted downtown streets, "You could roll a bowling ball down Church Street and not hit anyone these days." Black women, through daily phone calls, mobilized the boycott in a display of unity with the students and sustained the "economic withdrawal" for almost seven weeks. Downtown retail merchants lost approximately 20 percent of their business. Downtown's empty streets and empty cash registers caused merchants to seriously consider dismantling Jim Crow customs in Nashville's retail district.

As the student demonstrators continued in their efforts to dismantle the Jim Crow system, Nashville businessmen met behind closed doors to discuss their predicament. As *Time* magazine described them, most of the storeowners were "pocket book integrationists." They were more committed to their bottom line than they were to the city's proscriptive system of racial segregation. Nashville's merchants realized the inevitability of desegregation, but they did not want to become catalysts for social change. However, the disruption of business and the boycott made it economically unsound for them to carry on without coming to some resolution. "It is inevitable," said Fred Harvey, Sr., in a telegram directing his store's treasurer, Greenfield Pitts, to desegregate. Pitts, also chair of the Chamber of Commerce's Retail Merchants Division, and Cain-Sloan President John

Sloan, worked diligently with storeowners to ease Jim Crow out of Nashville's downtown. Relenting under the pressure of the economic boycott, six stores, led by Cain-Sloan and Harvey's, rendered service to Nashville blacks on May 10, 1960.

By the middle of 1960, the Civil Rights movement in Nashville gained momentum as downtown store and restaurant owners surrendered to the economic demand for desegregation. They saw no advantage to losing black trade (and the profits that accompanied it) and provoking continued disruptions. Between 1961 and 1963, protests shifted to movie theatres (by May 1961 theatre owners capitulated), employment practices, downtown hotels, and every other type of public accommodation. By the spring of 1963, Nashville witnessed daily demonstrations against segregation, unfair employment practices, and discrimination against blacks in general. In March, the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference announced a "full-scale-assault" on segregation practices in Nashville. In addition to using marches, leaders and students of the Nashville movement implemented the proven weapon of an Easter economic boycott against downtown merchants and department stores to protest against unfair employment practices. By 1964, segregation had all but disappeared in most of the city's public accommodations. On July 2 of the same year, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, one of the nation's most important and most comprehensive pieces of civil rights legislation.

Department store owners had no excuse for discriminating against black Nashvillians at lunch counters or in the provision of other services, especially when they accepted their dollars for goods and not services. The decrease in dollars flowing into the cash registers of downtown merchants and businessmen helped cause the walls of racial segregation to fall. Nashville blacks effectively used the premise put forth by Reinhold Niebuhr in 1932, when they put into action economic and political pressures that "exert[ed] coercion upon the white man's life" and, more importantly, adversely affected his businesses.

--Linda T. Wynn

---