

Tennessee State University and Metropolitan Historical Commission

# 27th Annual Conference on African-American History & Culture

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2008  
TSU AVON N. WILLIAMS, JR., CAMPUS  
8:30 AM - 3:00 PM  
10TH AND CHARLOTTE AVENUES

- 8:30 Registration begins
- 9:00 **Welcome and Opening Remarks**  
Dr. William Lawson, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, Tennessee State University  
Mrs. Linda T. Wynn, Conference Co-Chair  
Mrs. Ann Roberts, Executive Director, Metropolitan Historical Commission  
Dr. Yildiz Binkley, Assistant Vice President of Libraries, Tennessee State University
- 9:15 **The Contributions of Dr. Otis L. Floyd, Jr., to the Field of Education**  
Ms. Madlyn P. Floyd, Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools
- 9:40 **Musical Performance**  
Hunters Lane High School Madrigal Singers, Kim Wonders, director
- 10:10 **Kelly Miller Smith: The Roots of an Activist and of the Nashville Movement**  
Ms. Crystal A. deGregory, Ph.D. candidate, Vanderbilt University
- 10:40 Break
- 11:00 **Remarks**  
Dr. Melvin Johnson, President, Tennessee State University  
The Honorable Karl Dean, Mayor, Metropolitan Nashville and Davidson County
- 11:30 **John W. Work, III and His Field Recordings in Nashville**  
Mr. Bruce Nemerov, musicologist, researcher and author
- 12:00 Lunch
- 1:30 **She'll Find Her Way Home**, by Valetta Anderson  
Fisk University Stage Crafters, directed by Persphone Felder-Fentress
- 2:00 **The Beginning of School Desegregation in Nashville, 1957**  
Mr. John Egerton, researcher and author
- 2:30 **Closing Remarks**  
Dr. Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr.

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TSU and MHC Conference on African-American History and Culture

REGISTRATION FEE: \$18 (includes lunch)

MAKE CHECK PAYABLE TO: TSU Foundation--TSU and MHC Conference  
MAIL REGISTRATION AND PAYMENT TO: MHC - Sunnyside in Sevier Park  
3000 Granny White Pike  
Nashville, TN 37204

MAIL-IN REGISTRATION DEADLINE: February 1, 2008

QUESTIONS? 862-7970  
*Preregistration is strongly encouraged. Reservations cannot be accepted over the phone.*

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

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# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



## JAMES RAYMOND LAWSON (1915-1996)

James Raymond Lawson's accomplishments as both a pioneering physicist and alumnus university president are legendary. Long before he became the first alumnus president of his alma mater, Fisk University in 1967, a leading historically black university in Nashville, Tennessee, Lawson's research as the student of Elmer S. Imes and as mentor to a host of students had made him a pioneer in the study of infrared spectroscopy. Even so, his leadership of Fisk during the turbulent mid-1960s through mid-1970s, when student dissent grew stronger and white financial support grew faint was an equally if not more impressive feat.

Physicist, professor, and university president James Richmond Lawson was born on January 15, 1915, in Louisville, Kentucky, to Daniel LaMont and Daisy Harris Lawson. A dean of Louisville's Simmons College, the elder Lawson had attended Fisk University where he was a member of the world-renown Fisk Jubilee Singers. The younger Lawson followed his father's example, enrolling at Fisk in 1931. As a mathematics and physics major, Lawson sought the mentorship of Elmer S. Imes. A distinguished physicist, Imes had become the second African American to earn a doctorate in physics when he graduated from the University of Michigan in 1918. While at Michigan, Imes also became the first African American to write a scholarly research article before he returned to teach at Fisk, his alma mater, in 1930. At Fisk, Imes continued to pioneer in infrared spectroscopy, offering Lawson enviable opportunities as his student. Lawson did not disappoint his mentor, graduating Phi Beta Kappa in 1935 with a degree in physics, the first Fisk student to do so.

Lawson's successes were not however, limited to the classroom. An avid sportsman, he held both football and basketball letters and was also known to swing

a mean racquet. However, it was his leadership experience and intellectual promise that made Lawson an ideal candidate for graduate study. The close ties that Imes maintained with the University of Michigan made the college a natural choice for Lawson. As a Julius Rosenwald fellow, he began graduate work at Michigan in 1937, and earned his Ph.D. in physics in 1939.

Having begun his teaching career at St. Augustine College, while he was still a student, Lawson served as an assistant professor at Southern University in Louisiana from 1939 to 1940, then as associate professor of physics at Langston University in Oklahoma from 1940 to 1942. Lawson's mentor, Imes died unexpectedly that same year, prompting his return to Fisk as associate professor of physics and chairman of the department. Continuing the research begun by Imes, Lawson immediately began efforts to establish and develop a research program in infrared spectroscopy. Using his ties with his University of Michigan colleagues, he acquired an infrared spectrophotometer for Fisk, similar to a model that was being constructed for Michigan's departmental research.

By the time the cutting-edge equipment arrived on campus in 1948, Lawson had successfully recruited five Fisk seniors to pursue their masters of science degree at the university. As the physics majors conducted their theses research on the new equipment the infrared laboratory flourished. They were soon presenting their research at major scientific conferences including the American Physical and American Chemical societies, both of which they effectively integrated. Enabled by grants secured in 1948, 1949 and 1950, both student and faculty-research flourished. In 1950, co-directors, Lawson and Nelson Fuson established the Fisk Infrared Spectroscopy Institute.

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After serving as chairman of the Physics Department at Tennessee A & I State University (another Nashville historically black university, later known as Tennessee State University) from 1955 to 1957, Lawson returned to Fisk as a full professor and department chair in 1957. In 1966, he became vice president of the university until 1967 when was selected as the university's eighth president, following his eighteen-month service as acting president subsequent to the resignation Stephen J. Wright, Jr.

As the university's first alumnus president, Lawson assumed the leadership of his historically black alma mater amid the social turmoil of the late 1960s. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King's nonviolent ethos was steadily eclipsed by the emergent Black Power Movement's popularization of the right to armed self-defense as well as its demands for stronger black cultural identity. Fisk students were no exception to the spirit of the age. Just as its students had been at the forefront of the nonviolent struggle with their sit-in and boycott campaigns in the spring of 1960, many Fisk students embraced the protest spirit of the "age of dissent."

Despite having transformed its Natural Science programs as a professor and administratively leading the institution to secure its largest-ever enrollment of 1,500 students, Lawson continued to face student protests throughout his seven-year presidency. The student's open dissent only further alienated the university's traditionally white philanthropist financial base, whose support had continued to wane since the beginning of Fisk's nonviolent student activism of the early 1960s. Internal student dissent, coupled with the external pressures of financial

supporters to conform student ideology that insisted on being "non-conformist" and "black" in identity, soon proved too much. With a dwindling endowment, Fisk experienced salary cuts of twenty percent and operational budget cuts of twenty-five percent that caused severe decreases in faculty, staff, and student enrollment. Lawson resigned as president of the university in 1975. Over the course of the decade that followed, he resided in Washington, D.C., where he worked for the Energy Research and Development Administration (a forerunner to the Department of Energy) as special assistant to the director of the office of university programs. Later, he served as head of NASA's University Affairs Office and Associate Director of the Institute for the Study of Educational Study at Howard University before a series of illnesses forced him into full retirement. Lawson returned to Nashville, where he later died on December 21, 1996.

A member of numerous professional organizations throughout his life, Lawson was a member of the American Physical Society, American Association of Physics Teachers, American Institute of Physics, Sigma Xi and a board member of the Oak Ridge Associated Universities as well as a member of the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. Married to the former Lillian Arcaeneaux of Opelousas, Louisiana, Lawson had four children Ronald Raymond and James Edward Lawson, both Fiskites as well as daughters Daryl and Elizabeth Lawson.

--Crystal A. deGregory

#### Sources Used:

The papers of James R. Lawson are housed in the Special Collections and Archives of the Fisk Franklin Library in Nashville, Tennessee.

Collins, L.M. *One Hundred Years of Fisk University Presidents, 1875-1975* (1989).

"James R. Lawson." *The Fisk Herald*. October 1934.

Mickens, Ronald E. "James Raymond Lawson." *Physics Today*. October 1997.

"The Inauguration of James Raymond Lawson as Eighth President of Fisk University." October 6, 1968.

Sutherland, Frank. "Lawson Quits As President of Ailing Fisk." *Nashville Tennessean*. July 25, 1975.

Yates, Jon. "James Lawson, ex-president of Fisk, dies." *Nashville Tennessean*. December 23, 1996.

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# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



## Fisk's Stieglitz Collection Controversy: *Radiator Building* in Retrospect

In 1927, when avant-garde artist Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) painted New York City's American Radiator Building, the 23-story skyscraper designed by architect Raymond M. Hood was but three years old. From the beginning of the tower's construction, however, this "precursor of Art Deco" was the center of publicity and controversy. The sleek skyscraper was constructed entirely in manganese-clad black bricks, with gold highlights added by a coating of bronze powder on the cast-stone creating the pinnacles, finials, and parapets. The dramatic effect of the black and gold was, in a word, stunning --especially at night, when floodlights illuminated the façade.

The racial symbolism of an all-black building was obvious in 1925, according to an article in the *New York Times Magazine*. The Harlem Renaissance was "in full flower and race consciousness-and animosity-were generally running high. [Architect] Hood has broken through the color line," wrote Orrick Johns. Four years later, in 1929, architectural illustrator Hugh Ferriss observed that the American Radiator Building "has one undeniable virtue: it has undoubtedly provoked more arguments among laymen on the subject of architectural values than any other structure in the country."

O'Keeffe's oil painting, *Radiator Building-Night, New York*, revealed the artist's "personal vision of unique, peak moments of revelation" in uncluttered, American modern abstract style and marked a "key moment" assuring her successful career. She had been a watercolorist through 1916, when she met photographer Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) at his 291 gallery in New York, and her watercolors were exhibited at 291 the following year. Stieglitz became her mentor, then her husband in 1924, and encouraged her use of oil paints as she explored new modes of creative expression. As O'Keeffe began to develop her individual style, Stieglitz

began making photographs of her. His obsession with O'Keeffe photographs became public knowledge in early 1921, when 45 of his photographs were exhibited at the Anderson Galleries. Many of the images were of O'Keeffe, some of which were in the nude. The O'Keeffe photographs created a public sensation-which would continue to surround O'Keeffe's life and to which the taciturn artist never responded.

From the 1920s through the 1940s, both Stieglitz's and O'Keeffe's artistic reputations and popularity grew. Honors and commissions accrued to the pair in rapid succession. O'Keeffe discovered the brilliant colors of New Mexico and the American Southwest in the late 1930s and abandoned the cityscapes for large-scale paintings of brilliant flowers, canyon walls, and myriad desert subjects. She was in New Mexico painting when Stieglitz suffered a cerebral thrombosis in New York; she flew to the city to be with him when he died on July 13, 1946.

O'Keeffe was executrix of her late husband's estate, including a 1,000+ collection of his own photographs and paintings, prints, and African sculpture/tribal art. He had left to her discretion the distribution of his collection. She designated six institutions as recipients of portions of the Stieglitz collection, one being Fisk University. The latter recipient was suggested by their close friend, Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964), who shared with O'Keeffe his plan to donate a portion of his own private collection to Fisk, a small private school founded in Nashville in 1866 for the education of newly emancipated slaves.

Arrangements were made in 1948 for the establishment of the Alfred Stieglitz Collection at Fisk University. During the November 4, 1949, dedication of the Stieglitz Collection housed at Fisk, only a few explanatory words were offered by Stieglitz's taciturn

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widow O'Keeffe: "These paintings and sculptures are a gift from Stieglitz. . . . I hope you will go back and look at them more than once."

Carl Van Vechten also spoke briefly, downplaying his pivotal role as benefactor in connecting his three friends-Fisk President Charles Johnson (who joined the school's faculty in 1928 and became the first black president in 1946), New York photographer Alfred Stieglitz, and artist Georgia O'Keeffe-for the benefit of the visual arts program at Fisk. After the ceremony, those assembled walked across campus to the Stieglitz Collection's new home in the Carl Van Vechten Art Gallery, facilitated by interior renovation of the 1888-89 gymnasium building. This eclectic, austere setting for the 97 pieces of contemporary art provided an unadorned contrast to the university's crown jewel across the campus: the massive Victorian Gothic structure, Jubilee Hall, which houses the floor-to-ceiling c.1880 oil portrait of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. After the Singers' 1873 performance for England's Queen Victoria, she had commissioned court painter Edward Havell to paint the singers' portrait, completed c.1880 and later presented to the university.

The addition of selections from Alfred Stieglitz's art collection further enhanced Fisk's established reputation as a cradle of creative expression. Items donated included nineteen of Stieglitz's stunning photographs on chloride-illustrative of his technique that "defined photography as a fine art form"-and five pieces of African sculpture/tribal art (in the early 1900s, Stieglitz mounted the "first exhibition of African sculpture in the United States" at his 291 gallery in New York). Also included were paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe, John Marin (1872-1953), Marsden Hartley (1877-1943), Arthur G. Dove (1880-1948), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Charles Demuth (1883-1935), and Diego Rivera (1886-1957), and prints by Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and Pierre Auguste Renoir (1841-1919).

Carl Van Vechten, a prolific novelist, essayist, and photographer, was a patron of the Harlem Renaissance that began in New York City in the early 1920s and lasted until the onset of the Great Depression of the 1930s. He was fascinated by African-American culture and made photographic portraits of many of the creative black figures of the period, including writer James Weldon Johnson, poet Langston Hughes, actor Paul Robeson, singer Bessie Smith, writer Zora Neale Hurston, and writer-historian Arna Bontemps. Van Vechten created more than 15,000 photographic images and was an "avid collector of ephemera and books pertaining to black arts and letters." During his lifetime, Van Vechten donated various parts of his extensive collection to several universities, including Fisk University.

Thus, Carl Van Vechten's role as benefactor of the university continued to illustrate why Van Vechten Art Gallery was named in his honor. Georgia O'Keeffe also continued as a Fisk benefactress, initially loaning a number of paintings from her personal collection to the school in the early 1950s, then making the paintings permanent gifts. In 1954, O'Keeffe donated her *Radiator Building-Night, New York*; in 1956, O'Keeffe donated her smaller painting, *Flying Backbone*, to Fisk's growing art collection.

Although O'Keeffe died in 1986, controversy has continued to surround her paintings. In late 2005, local controversy erupted when Fisk sought court permission to sell two of its paintings, O'Keeffe's *Radiator Building-Night, New York* and Marsden Hartley's *Painting No. 3*, to raise funds for the financially challenged university. Litigation and negotiation have transpired from Tennessee to New Mexico to Arkansas, with media publicity and "advice" from every interested quarter to the present time. The completion of the *Radiator Building* in retrospect has yet to be decided.

— Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr.

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# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



## **Kelley v. Board of Education: The Beginning of School Desegregation in Nashville**

Fifty-one years ago most of the Southern region was in an uproar over school desegregation, which was mandated by the unanimous decision of the United States Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*'s case that overturned the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. Yet, despite the court's ruling, American black elementary and high school students endured angry crowds protesting school desegregation. Across the region, despite their youth, these students and their parents met the challenge that offered them access to "equal" educational opportunities and preserved.

In Nashville, like Arkansas's "Little Rock Nine", Clinton, Tennessee's "Clinton Twelve" caused their respective cities to adhere to the Supreme Court's school desegregation ruling, sixteen black six-year olds and their parents ended the "Jim Crow" era of education in the "Athens of the South" on September 9, 1957. They too, walked past protesting whites into seven of the city's previously all-white elementary schools. Black and white children had never before shared classrooms in the city's educational history. Even during the Reconstruction, when the divided nation attempted to reunify itself, did blacks and whites have equal access to public education.

Nashville's school desegregation was in response not only to the *Brown* decision but also to the *Kelley v. Board of Education* case, which Nashville black families filed in 1955. Nashville attorneys Z. Alexander Looby and Avon N. Williams, Jr., joined by Thurgood Marshall, legal director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) Legal and Educational Fund filed suite against the Nashville public schools, in federal district court, to bring the city into compliance with the *Brown* decision. The lead plaintiff in the Nashville case was

Alfred Z. Kelley, a Nashville barber, whose son, Robert commuted to Pearl High School although East High School was within walking distance of his home. Two years later, Judge William E. Miller decided in favor of the plaintiff and ordered the Nashville School Board to desegregate its public schools and to submit to the court a desegregation plan by January 1957. In the spring of the same year, the court accepted the school board's plan to desegregate the first grade in the fall and one grade a year thereafter. However, in deciding with the plaintiff, the court placed emphasis on the 1955 Supreme Court's decision in *Brown II* "with all deliberate speed," and stressed the adjective "deliberate" rather than the noun "speed." Given the zeitgeist of the era, white resisters, led by the Klan, the White Citizens Council, and the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government (TFCG). Vanderbilt University's English Professor, Donald G. Davidson, one of the noted Fugitives, who defended racial segregation, led the TFCF. Despite their protestations, the school desegregation process in Nashville had been set in motion.

On September 9, 1957, nineteen African-American children, all six years old and formally registered to attend the first grade, were slated to desegregate all-white Buena Vista, Jones, Fehr, Bailey, Glenn, Emma Clemons, and Hattie Cotton schools. However, because of "improper transfer papers," three students were unable to attend opening day. Still, sixteen six-year-olds braved the crowd of white resisters and desegregated the Nashville Public School System. Fourteen students successfully entered Buena Vista (Erroll Groves, Ethel Mai Carr, and Patricia Guthrie); Jones (Barbara Jean Watson, Marvin Moore, Richard Rucker, Charles E. Battles and Cecil Ray, Jr.); Fehr (Charles E. Ridley, Willis E. Lewis, Bobby Cabknor, Linda McKinley, and Rita Buchanan); Glenn (Lajuanda Street,

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*Fehr Elementary School, 9 September 1957. Photograph courtesy of Nashville Public Library, The Nashville Room. This publication is a project of the 2008 Nashville Conference on African-American History and Culture. The author compiled the information. The Metropolitan Historical Commission edited and designed the materials.*

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Jacqueline Griffith, and Sinclair Lee, Jr.); Emma Clemons (Joy Smith) and Hattie Cotton (Patricia Watson), received one student each. For all practical purposes, the first day of school desegregation in the "Athens of the South" appeared to have been a relatively peaceful success.

Resistant forces were determined to shatter the city's process. In the wee hours of the following morning, Hattie Cotton School was dynamited. An outside agitator from the North, named Frederick John Kasper, incited the cowardly deed. Despite Kasper's agitation and intended intimidation and terrorizing of the young trailblazers and their families, the pusillanimous act of violence only served to reinforce their resolve to peacefully end racial segregation in the public schools of Nashville. Although Hattie Cotton was unable to open, the other schools, with the assistance of law enforcement authorities, opened without incident and eleven of the

sixteen first-graders attended class. In spite of the reprehensible bombing of Hattie Cotton, supporters of Nashville school desegregation attained their desired goal. While the actual number of African-Americans first graders who desegregated the public schools was negligible on September 9, 1957, figuratively, they were incalculable.

In the forthcoming years, there would be many battles facing school desegregation in Nashville. Because of many controversies and disputes, the Kelley v. Board of Education case became Tennessee's longest running school desegregation case, which was finally settled in 1998. A debt of gratitude is owed to the sixteen first-graders placed in harms way so that all may access the educational opportunities of the city's public school system.

-- Linda T. Wynn

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# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



## HENRY ALVIN CAMERON (1872-1918)

Henry Alvin Cameron was born in Nashville, Tennessee, on February 4, 1872, to Walter and Jane Bentley Cameron. The earliest known address of Henry Cameron comes from an 1880 census record of the Cameron household when he was eight years old. The family lived at 158 Line Street (currently Jo Johnston Avenue in North Nashville). There were five people living in the Cameron household at the time: Henry's father, Walter, whose job occupation was listed as a laborer; his mother Jane, a washerwoman; his older brother William and his maternal grandmother, Mary. There was also a sister named Willie who was mentioned in Henry's will that was written just days before he sailed for France to fight in World War I (A copy of his will can be found at the Eva B. Dorsey Library at Cameron School).

Cameron graduated in 1892 from Meigs High School in East Nashville. Among the students in his graduating class of five boys and four girls was Louise S. Brien, his future wife. In 1896, he received a B.A. degree from Fisk University and later joined the Pearl High School faculty as a science teacher. Professor Cameron received the LL.B. degree from Central Tennessee College in 1898 (which later became Walden University in 1900)---a post-secondary school for African Americans that was located at the current site of Cameron Middle School. He married Brien, his high school sweetheart, on June 7, 1899, in Nashville. Reportedly, Louise Cameron had one of the finest singing voices in Nashville and performed at many local events in the city.

Professor Cameron was a man of unusual mental ability and extraordinary physical fitness. He was an avid sports enthusiast who became the first basketball and baseball coach at Pearl High. He possessed a deep love for his students and they in turn adored him

immensely. He had a multitude of dear friends, cherished his wife Louise and involved himself in an array of successful business ventures, which included a stint as president of the Capital City Baseball League, a local baseball franchise consisting of eight teams based in the Nashville area. Professor Cameron was also actively engaged in the social, political, and civic life of his community. Some of his affiliations included serving as president of the Middle Tennessee Teacher's Association; secretary of the Tennessee Aid Association; Organic Member of the Grand Lodge of Tennessee (32nd Mason); fraternal member of the Knights of Pythias; member of the Nashville Teacher's Literary and Benefit Association; and a beloved elder of his church---St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, which was formerly located on Capitol Hill. He was often in the company of many of the prominent Nashville African-American contemporaries such as J. C. Napier, Robert H. Boyd, Preston Taylor, and John Wesley Work, Jr., only to name a few. One of his closet friends was George E. Washington - mentor, teaching colleague at Pearl, business partner, and the person for whom the former Washington Jr. High School was named.

In April 1917, the United States reluctantly entered World War I in Europe against the Germans. Two months later, at age forty-five Professor Cameron, a devoted patriot, took a leave of absence from teaching at Pearl High and volunteered for the war effort. He was commissioned on October 15, 1917, as a 1st Lieutenant in the United States Army at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, which was a segregated facility established specifically for training African American officers in World War I. After completing basic training at camps in Illinois and New York, Lt. Cameron sailed for France on June 10, 1918. He was assigned to Company M, 365th Infantry, 92nd Division, one of three African American Infantry

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Divisions in combat during World War I. For some unknown reason, the US Army reversed Lt. Cameron's first and middle names and he was listed in his service records as Alvin H. Cameron instead of Henry A. Cameron. As an officer, he was a fastidious and capable leader who always cared about the safety and well being of the men under his command. They succeeded in winning many battles against a fierce and determined German army in the face of insurmountable odds despite the overt racism received from his own U.S. Army superiors. On October 30, 1918, during the Battle of Argonne Forest, France, Lt. Cameron was killed in action while on a scout patrol with his unit. His army comrades as well as the city of Nashville went into a state of panic upon hearing the news of his death. He was the first of only three black men appointed officers in WWI from Tennessee and the first black officer to die from Tennessee. Lt. Cameron's body was not brought back to Nashville for burial. His remains are still in France at the St. Mihiel American Cemetery in Thiacourt, France.

In 1919, with the introduction of American Legion posts all over the country, the Henry A. Cameron Post 6 was established in Nashville in his honor. One of the first American Legion posts named after an African American, it is still operational. On November 26, 1928, in an act of admiration and respect for Professor Lt. Henry Cameron, the Nashville City School Board named Cameron School in tribute to this man who stood for the highest example of civic duty by giving his life unselfishly for his country. His distinguished career as an educator, businessman, lawyer, community leader, coach, churchman, soldier, and officer leaves an indelible testimonial of scholarship, commitment, and public service for all to follow. A large-scale photo of Professor Cameron now hangs in the lobby of Cameron School for students, faculty, and others to view.

**--Donald L. Johnson**

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