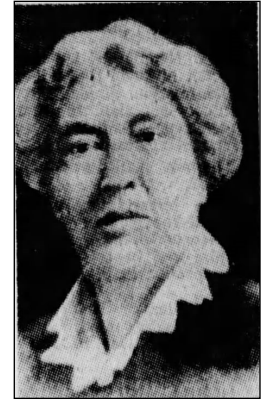


# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



## Minnie Lou Crosthwaite (1860-1937)

A native Nashvillian, Minnie Lou Scott Crosthwaite was an educator, university registrar, and club woman. Notably, she was also the first African American woman to pass the teacher's exam in Nashville's racially segregated school system. Nashville educational officials only hired white teachers to staff the schools attended by African American students. This policy emboldened Crosthwaite in her attempt to disrupt the system by passing the teacher's exam and ultimately teaching in a city school. Educated in Nashville's African American schools, Minnie Lou Scott Crosthwaite became a member of the city's new generation of African American leaders.

Scott was born to Frances McAlister Scott in Nashville, Tennessee, on August 20, 1860, eight months prior to the beginning of the American Civil. According to several sources, the name of her father is unknown. After the end of the war, Scott began her education at five years of age, attending Fisk from 1865 to 1867, when the educational institution offered primary and secondary schooling. After matriculating at Fisk, where she witnessed the arrival of Fisk's first president Erastus Milo Cravath and his wife in a carriage accompanied by Tennessee Governor William G. Brownlow, she entered Nashville's segregated public schools for African American children, where she remained until 1874. Later that year, she entered Fisk University's Teacher Training Program, which she completed in 1877. During this period, African Americans in Nashville expressed their continued concerns about the exclusionary policies preventing the hiring of

African American teachers. A newly elected member to the Nashville Council, attorney and businessman James Carroll Napier proposed a resolution to hire African American teachers. The resolution passed with conditions that paused its immediate implementation. Seven years later, Scott found new horizons that enhanced her personally and professionally.

On June 12, 1884, Minnie Lou Scott married Scott Washington Crosthwaite, a graduate of Meharry Medical College in Nashville (1889) and Chicago Homeopathic Medical College (1891), and a graduate of Fisk University with a divinity degree (1901). To their union, Holcomb Sinclair, George Scott, Scott Washington, Jr, and Lenida Thomas Crosthwaite were born. The same year she married Crosthwaite, Minnie Lou passed the Nashville segregated school system's teachers' exam, becoming one of four African American teachers hired for a teaching position in the city's African American schools. Five years later, her husband, Dr. S. W. Crosthwaite, who practiced medicine from 1891 to 1896 and taught in the Nashville school system, became one of the city's first African American principals. He initially served as principal at Belle View School where his wife also taught. Later, he became the principal at Pearl School.

During her tenure in the Nashville school system, Minnie Lou Crosthwaite taught John W. Work II and became cognizant of his aptitude for music. After high school, Work furthered his education at Fisk University, where ultimately, he and

---

Crosthwaite became colleagues. It has been noted by historian Howard Rabinowitz that the “display of black power had its costs.” Both were well aware of the racial violence waged against African Americans in Nashville. Her husband, Dr. Crosthwaite, witnessed the April 30, 1892 lynching of Ephraim Grizzard, three days after the lynching of his brother Henry.

Minnie Lou Crosthwaite taught in the Nashville schools for fourteen years. The family moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, where they remained for six years before returning to Nashville. Upon their return, Crosthwaite enrolled at Fisk and completed her bachelor’s degree, which she earned in June 1903. She later joined the Fisk faculty and ultimately held several positions at the university.

Crosthwaite became a math instructor at Fisk, principal of its Normal Department, registrar (1910), and served as an instructor in the Normal Department until 1916. She retired in 1925–26, and the university honored her with the title of “registrar emeritus” two years later. In 1963, Crosthwaite Hall residence hall was named in her honor. In the January-February 1937 issue of *Fisk News* published after Crosthwaite’s demise, Mary D. Shane (Fisk class of 1927 and registrar) said of Crosthwaite:

She was friend, adviser, counselor and mother. She had time for the little problems to grown-ups, but all important to the student who needed to be guided very carefully during the tempestuous adolescent stage.

Minnie Lou Crosthwaite not only used her talents on the campus of Fisk University, she extended her fortes beyond her academic community to the African American community at large. Crosthwaite raised funds for soldiers during the First World War and became an important early figure in the

foundation of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) for African American women, heading the chapter at Fisk University. Concerned about the racial discrimination perpetrated against African Americans by whites seeking to maintain the status quo of post-Reconstruction, she joined the Southern Interracial League. She was active in other local African American organizations such as the Day Homes’ Clubs, an organization founded in 1907 by Nettie Langston Napier to support African American children in Nashville.

As she continued her work within the African American community, Crosthwaite became associated and friends with women interested in bettering the lives of those in the African American community. She befriended Napier, Juno Frankie Pierce, and Dr. Josie Wells. With Pierce, she founded the Tennessee Vocational School for Colored Girls on October 9, 1923. After she retired from Fisk, she became the first Fisk alumna to join the Fisk Board of Trustees in 1927. Later that year, the family moved to the “Twin Cities” of Minneapolis–Saint Paul, Minnesota. In 1928, they moved once again to Detroit, Michigan. Educator, college registrar, clubwoman, and activist, Minnie Lou Scott Crosthwaite died at home in Detroit on January 13, 1937.

*Linda T. Wynn*

#### Sources Used:

Bobby L. Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991.

Mary Ellen Pethel, “Lift Every Female Voice,” in *Tennessee Women: Their Lives and Times, Vol.2*. Edited by Beverly Greene Bond and Sarah Wilkerson Freeman, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015.

Jessie Carney Smith, *Notable Black American Women, Book 11*. Detroit: Gale Research, Inc. 1996.

---