

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



Callie Guy House (1861-1928)

The movement for reparations among African Americans has a long history, one that dates back at least to the 1780s. The first formal record of a petition for reparations made in the United States occurred in 1783, when a 70-year-old woman of African descent known only by the appellation of “Belinda” petitioned the Massachusetts legislature for years of unpaid labor from the master who enslaved her. Belinda’s narrative is told in the tome *Belinda’s Petition: A Concise History of Reparations For The Transatlantic Slave Trade* by Raymond Winbush, a research professor and the Director of the Institute for Urban Research at Morgan State University. Belinda, kidnapped from her home in Ghana before her twelfth birthday, argued that Isaac Royall profited from her labor and therefore entitled her to file against his estate. She won and was granted £15,12 shillings per year, payable from the Royall family estate.

All are familiar with the phrase “Forty acres and a mule” resulting from the 1865 directive issued by Field Orders No. 15. Delivered to assist those recently emancipated from enslavement, incorporated into society, and given the opportunity to accumulate wealth, this order is one of the most well-known efforts. However, President Andrew Johnson of Tennessee reversed the edict that gave the land back to its former Confederate owners. Reparations have been a recurrent idea in the politics of the United States. Because of the nation’s proclivity for racial intolerance and discrimination, African Americans—rather in their communities or the sagacious initiators—sounded the clarion call for reparations. One such person was a woman born enslaved in Tennessee’s Rutherford County who later moved to Nashville, where she campaigned for reparations for formerly enslaved American Southerners—seventy years before the modern Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Born in 1861, Callie Guy lived with her widowed mother, sister, and her sister’s husband, Charlie House. Guy received some primary schooling. In 1883, she

married William House and they later moved to Nashville. House bore six children, five of whom survived. After the demise of her husband, House supported her family by washing clothes. Akin to other women in the African American sistren, she was concerned about poverty’s tenacious hold that kept them in its grip, despite their best efforts to rise above economic stagnation. Aggrieved by the abject paucity of economic resources faced by the formerly enslaved, House became an early proponent of reparations by urging them to petitioned the U. S. government for pensions. She developed an interest in politics and social justice and became an active participant and leader in the movement for reparations in the U. S.

In 1891, a tract entitled *Freedmen’s Pension Bill: A Plea for American Freedmen* began circulating in Middle Tennessee’s African American communities. The tract championed the concept of financial compensation as a way to rectify enslavement’s past exploitation and prompted House to become involved in the cause that became her life’s work. She worked with Isaiah Dickerson to organize the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association in 1894, chartered in 1898. The National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association served everyone, irrespective of religious affiliation, socio-economic status, or race. The association operated on both the local and national levels. House raised funds across the South for the Association, which relied on the U. S. postal system to secure financial resources and for publicity. With House’s assistance, by the beginning of the 20th century, the Association’s membership netted almost 300,000 members.

While the reparations movement gained some acceptance among those recently emancipated from the institution of enslavement, many African American leaders and those in the middle class during the pre-modern civil rights era focused on education and equality, not the reparations movement. Many in the middle class followed leaders like Booker T.

Washington, who at least publicly believed in the politics of accommodations, and W. E. B. DuBois basically ignored the reparations movement. Others considered reparations a scam. White southerners viewed the reparations movement with suspicion; they saw Callie House's organizational efforts as confusing and misleading to African Americans. Whites felt there was no chance of Congress passing reparations legislation and assumed that House and Dickerson's organizing efforts were defrauding African Americans of their hard-earned money.

A February 1903 *New York Times* article entitled "Ex-Slaves in a Mass Meeting," ridiculed those African Americans who supported U. S. Republican Senator Marcus Alonzo Hanna's bill seeking pensions for the formerly enslaved. The article stated that "many intelligent [sic] negroes here are constantly warning the members of their race of the character of their scheme." Notwithstanding the article's perspective, local association chapters rose up across the country. Monthly dues provided burial expenses for members and cared for those who were sick and disabled. The group also worked on a national level to lobby Congress for reparations legislation.

Committed to emboldening low-wealth African Americans, House advocated for their lawful right to petition the government which alarmed numerous federal agencies. Agency officials regarded House and others campaigning for the benefit of the formerly enslaved as troublemakers, even anarchists. Federal officials in the Justice Department, Treasury, and Postal Service all battered and harassed members of the Association. The U. S. Postal Service withheld its mail and accused the Association with attempting to defraud an already impecunious and vulnerable formerly enslaved population.

In 1916, Postmaster General A. S. Burleson sought an indictment against Callie House. On May 10, 1916, Nashville District Attorney Lee Douglass filed indictments against House and other officers of the Association, charging that they secured money from those formerly enslaved by fraudulent handbills indicating that pensions and reparations were forthcoming. After being indicted, House refused to accept a plea deal. Although the evidence was weak, an all white male jury convicted Callie House on mail fraud. The presiding judge sentenced her to one year and one day, which she served in the Jefferson City, Missouri penitentiary from November 1917 to August 1, 1918. House earned early release from good behavior.

While the national component of House's organization dissolved with criminal charges against it, other individuals and organizations continued House's efforts to secure reparations and assistance for African Americans throughout the twentieth century. House's grassroots organizing presaged the upsurge of other African American groups and individuals, making her a reparations pioneer within the African American community. After being diagnosed with cancer, Callie House's life ended on June 6, 1928. Her body was interred in an unmarked gravesite in Nashville's Mt. Ararat Cemetery.

In 2012 with annual seed funding from the College of Arts and Science Dean's Office, the African American & Diaspora Studies at Vanderbilt University launched the Research Center, later renamed the Callie House Research Center for the Study of Global Black Cultures and Politics. In March 2015, Dr. Mary Frances Berry, the Geraldine R. Segal Professor of American Social Thought and Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania, former U.S. Civil Rights Commissioner, native Nashvillian and author of *My Face is Black is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations*, inaugurated the Callie House lecture. The research arm of the academic program, the Callie House Research Center sponsors lectures, conferences, working groups, professional development and academic seminars, and activities associated with the peer-reviewed journal, *Palimpsest: A Journal of Women, Gender, and the Black International* (SUNY Press).

House's early pursuit of reparations enlightens one about the diversity of African American women's political activism and the early role that African American woman played in the reparation's movement.

Linda T. Wynn

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