

# Leaders of Afro-American Nashville



VIVIEN T. THOMAS  
1910-1985

*Portrait of Vivien T. Thomas by Bob Gee, Oil on Canvas, 1969. Johns Hopkins University.*

The contributions by those of black African ancestry to medical science are overwhelming. The Father of Medicine, Imhotep, was African. By the fifteenth century, youth from Africa and Europe traveled to the University of Sankore in Timbuktu for medical and surgical instruction. The first known black physician in colonial America was James Derham, who began his practice in 1754. The earliest known black graduates of medical schools in America were David Peck, who was graduated from Rush School of Medicine in 1847, and Rebecca Lee, who was graduated from the New England Female College in 1864. However, with the growth of slavery and racism in America, it became increasingly difficult for African Americans to advance to the honorable and prestigious status of physician. Vivien Theodore Thomas, a man ahead of his times, personified the struggle against the "racial ceiling" in the twentieth-century American South.

Born in Lake Providence, Louisiana, on August 29, 1910, Vivien T. Thomas was the fourth of five children born to William Maceo Thomas and Mary Eaton Thomas. His father, hoping to improve the family's condition and to escape constant flooding of the Mississippi River, moved the family in 1912 to Nashville, Tennessee. Maceo Thomas, an industrious carpenter and contractor, bought three city lots containing over a half-acre of land (to facilitate a garden) and built the family home. The structure, just over two miles from Fisk University, stood until it was demolished about 1970 to make way for the expanding campus of Meharry Medical College.

Young Vivien, at age six, was sent to kindergarten in nearby Fisk University, then enrolled the following year in public school; he was graduated from Pearl High School in 1929. Recalling his youthful acquisition of a strong work ethic, he remarked, "My father took advantage of the propensity of boys to

hammer on things and brought us up in his own trade of carpentry...He never kept us out of school for a day of work, but we were required to report after school hours to whatever job he had in progress."

Utilizing his carpentry skills, acquired from age thirteen through his high school years, Vivien worked summers at Fisk University's physical plant to save money for his college education. His graduation from high school in the summer of 1929, however, found the country in the early throes of the Great Depression. Although he had bought his school clothing and saved enough money for books and tuition for his first semester at Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State College (now Tennessee State University), he had no resources for the school's second semester. So he held in abeyance his plans for college and medical school until he could earn the needed money.

Early in February, 1930, Vivien Thomas approached his friend Charles Manlove about possible openings at Vanderbilt University, where Manlove was employed as a laboratory technician. Through Manlove came an introduction to Dr. Alfred Blalock, a young physician who had headed the Experimental Surgery Laboratory at Vanderbilt Medical School since 1927. Although the salary for laboratory technician was lower than Thomas' salary at Fisk University, he accepted Blalock's job offer. "I was very much interested in what was going on in the laboratory. I had also been favorably impressed by Dr. Blalock," recalled Thomas in his 1985 autobiography, *Pioneering Research in Surgical Shock and Cardiovascular Surgery: Vivien Thomas and His Work with Alfred Blalock*. Thomas' string work ethic, attention to detail, and skilled hand as a carpenter were precisely what Blalock needed in a laboratory assistant. In correlation, Thomas' native intelligence was stimulated and expanded by his work with Blalock, postdoctoral Fellows, surgical residents,

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and interns working on experimental surgical procedures. "Until about 1935, the major focus of the work in the laboratory was on the problem of shock," Thomas observed. "Numerous other projects were being done concurrently...[and] these projects involved surgical procedures from which I began to learn something of surgical techniques." By 1935, Thomas was independently performing preparatory procedures on animals for Blalock's review and recording copious notes on each experiment. In mid-1936, when Blalock decided to try the first transplantation of a kidney, none of them had experience in vascular surgery. "This was the project on which we...learned or taught ourselves vascular surgery," Thomas recalled. "We had so much technical success with the kidney transplantation that some time later Dr. Blalock decided we should try to transplant the adrenal gland. The rate of success of the transplantation was about 50 percent."

Reflective of his growing reputation in surgical research, Dr. Blalock received an invitation in late 1940 to become Surgeon-in-Chief and Chairman of the Department of Surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital; he asked Vivien Thomas to accompany him as surgical research technician. Thomas agreed and on July 1, 1941, joined Blalock's surgical team at Johns Hopkins. A month later, he brought his wife and two daughters to a small apartment in the "congested, treeless, grassless environment" of urban east Baltimore, Maryland. Never one to sidestep a challenge, Thomas set about acclimating himself to his new environment and adjusting to being the only African American working on the Johns Hopkins' surgical staff.

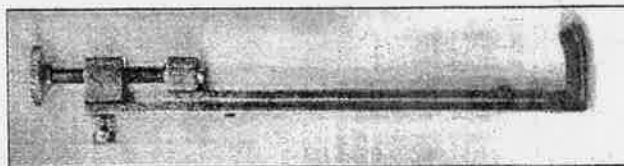
Over the next three years, Thomas' prowess with surgical research procedures rapidly increased, as did the range of his responsibilities to include chemical determinations for their experiments, calculation of the results and the maintenance of precise records, and creation of more efficient surgical instruments. He became a major contributor to the development of operative techniques, and he and Blalock collaborated on the design of surgical equipment. A clamp devised for Blalock's use for the temporary occlusion of the pulmonary artery became known as the "Blalock clamp." Thomas also was a "key player in pioneering the anastomosis of the subclavian artery to the pulmonary artery...[and] the work he performed with Alfred Blalock paved the way for the successful outcome of the Blalock-Taussig shunt" performed on November 29, 1944, when surgeon Blalock saved the

life of a fifteen-month-old "blue baby" by creating an artificial channel between the aorta and pulmonary artery. "The procedure, developed in conjunction with Hopkins pediatrician Helen Taussig and surgical assistant Vivien Thomas, ushered in a new era for heart surgery," according to writer Melissa Hendricks' "Pioneers of Discovery" in *Johns Hopkins Magazine* (April 2000).

Thomas supervised the surgical laboratories at Johns Hopkins for over 35 years. While performing his work in surgical research, he also helped train many of the hospital's surgeons in the delicate techniques necessary for heart and lung operations. In 1969, the Johns Hopkins Hospital expressed its appreciation for Thomas' contributions by commissioning an oil portrait of him by artist Bob Gee; the portrait was unveiled in the School of Medicine in 1971. Five years later, Thomas was presented with the degree of Honorary Doctor of Laws by the Johns Hopkins University and appointed instructor in surgery at the university's School of Medicine. In 1979, upon his retirement, he became instructor *emeritus* of surgery at the School of Medicine, holding that position until his death on November 26, 1985. His personal papers from 1980-1986 make up the Vivien T. Thomas Collection of the Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives at the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions.

On June 7, 1995, Vivien Thomas' work again was honored when the Johns Hopkins departments of Surgery and Pediatrics celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the first Blalock-Taussig shunt in 1944 and the men and women who made it possible, including chief surgeon Alfred Blalock, pediatric cardiologist Helen Taussig, and surgical research technician Vivien Thomas. Further recognition will come to Thomas in February, 2002, when Spark Media, Inc., of Washington, DC, premieres its documentary film, *Partners of the Heart*, a chronicle of the collaboration between Thomas and Blalock, on Maryland Public Television.

-Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr.



Blalock clamp. Photograph by M.W. Keboe. Johns Hopkins University

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**EVA LOWERY BOWMAN**  
1899-1984

Eva Lowery Bowman, a humanitarian, businessperson, civic leader, and community organizer, actively participated in the representative process to make the community and state more responsive to the needs of the African-American populace. The first African-American beauty inspector and examiner of cosmetology for Tennessee, she served in the administrations of Governors William Prentice Cooper (1939-1945), Jim Nance McCord (1945-1949), and Gordon Weaver Browning (1937-1939 and 1949-1953). In 1960, according to reports, Bowman became the "first Negro woman in the South to run for public office." A guiding beacon in the world that American blacks made for themselves, Eva L. Bowman illuminated the access road so that others could correspondingly ingress the thoroughfare to opportunity.

One of eight children, Eva Lowery was born on April 25, 1899, to William and Alice Lowery in Nashville, Tennessee. She received her education in the city's public schools, including Pearl High. Lowery furthered her education by attending Walden University and Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State Normal College (now Tennessee State University). Subsequently, in 1929, she studied cosmetology at Madam C.J. Walker's Lelia College in Indianapolis, Indiana. She continued her cosmetology training at the Institute of Cosmetology in Jersey City. Lowery married Dr. Leonard Cardell and later married Dr. L.A. Bowman.

Bowman established, owned, and operated Bowman Beauty and Barber College, Alice's Beauty Shoppe and Beauty School, Physio-Therapy Institute, and Bowman Art School. An innovator in the beauty culture business, in 1946 she introduced the "cooler curl—a curl without hot irons of grease." She helped to organize and became president of the Nashville Chapter of Beauty Culture. Serving for twelve years, Bowman organized approximately 7,000 beauticians across the state. During the administration of Governor William Prentice Cooper, she became Tennessee's first African-American beauty inspector and examiner of cosmetology. Bowman maintained her position for eight years and continued serving under the administrations of Governors Jim Nance McCord and Gordon Weaver Browning. Through her lobbying efforts and others, during Browning's administration, in 1951 the Tennessee General Assembly passed legislation stating "that there shall be a Negro Chief Inspector and Examiner to the Board of Cosmetology."

As an advocate for those attending the Tennessee Vocational School for Colored Girls, she asked the state to expand the school's curriculum and include cosmetology as a course of study. The request was granted under Cooper's administration. Bowman also requested and received permission to establish a Cosmetology Institute to assist African-American cosmetologists stay abreast of the changes, rules, and regulations governing the Cosmetology Board. Held at Tennessee A & I during the summers, beauty school owners and licensed

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beauticians attended the institute.

Bowman's interests extended beyond the sphere of beauty culture. In 1951, at her expense, she escorted Tennessee A. & I. State University's Jean Patton (1949 and 1950 Women's 100 Meters Champion) to the first Pan-American Games held in Buenos Aires, Argentina. As a humanitarian, she often used her resources to help those in need, especially at risk and troubled youth. On numerous occasions, she opened her home to troubled children. Often, Bowman worked with the juvenile court on behalf of youth.

In 1956, after conducting a survey of the city's recreational facilities for African Americans, she concluded that more parks were needed. After organizing and becoming president of the South Nashville Civic League, Bowman demonstrated the need to the Nashville Board of Parks. As a result of her survey, the Nashville City Council passed a bond for the E.S. Rose Park and Easley Community Center. Additionally, the Frederick Douglass Community Center, Napier Park Recreation Center, Watkins Park Bath House, Hadley's Park gymnasium, and Dudley Park were opened. Under her leadership, the Southwest Nashville Civic League Committee, the Metropolitan Council of Nashville and Davidson County allotted \$600,000 to keep the city's swimming pools open all summer.

When blacks in America moved the structural support for civil rights and human dignity beyond the courts to massive resistance by ordinary people to demolish the wall of segregation, Bowman became an assertive participant. Between the years of 1959 and 1960 when many of the state's African-American citizens in West Tennessee began crusading for their civil and political rights, she made many trips to Fayette County's "Tent City." Not only did she convey food and clothing to Somerville's terrorized community of tent dwellers, Bowman secured the necessary means to bring twenty persons to Nashville for a program to benefit Tent City's cause. In January of 1960, as

president of the United League and interested in improving the economic and social conditions of Nashville blacks, Bowman sought to establish a branch of the Urban league. Under the auspices of the United League, she contacted the Urban League's executive director, Lester B. Grange, in New York. After working with concerned citizens, business and community leaders, the Nashville Urban League, Incorporated, was established eight years later. Later, in 1960, Bowman entered the political arena and announced her candidacy for a seat in the Tennessee House of Representatives. The first African-American woman to seek legislative office in Tennessee, she was defeated in the August Democratic Primary.

Bowman served on the boards of the South Street Center and Grace Eaton Day Home and was a volunteer panelist on WVOL's "What Do you Think?" She was a member of the Business Women's League, City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, the Tennessee Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, the National Council of Negro Women, the Washington Garden Club, and the Imperial Coterie. A steadfast member of the Spruce Street Baptist Church, she was an active participant in the choir, the Christian Women's Auxiliary, and as a member of the church's Scholarship Committee. As inspector for the City Beautiful Commission, in 1971 the Nashville Housing Authority cited Bowman for "exceptional service toward the betterment of the Edgehill Community."

To the end, Bowman followed her creed "to make the pathway smooth where other feet must tread." The life of Eva Lowery Bowman, a noted humanitarian, businessperson, civic leader, and community organizer in Nashville, ended at St. Thomas Hospital on September 13, 1984. Funeral services were held three days later at Spruce Street Baptist Church. The following morning her remains were interred in Greenwood Cemetery.

*-Linda T. Wynn*

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## THE TENNESSEE RURAL AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCH PROJECT AND CRAIGS CHAPEL AME ZION CHURCH OF LOUDON COUNTY

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For more than a century, the church has been recognized as the single most significant institution in African-American life. Because of the importance of these sacred places, many of which are associated with cemeteries and schools, a program was recently established to document the state's rural African-American churches. In the fall of 1997, the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University with the assistance of the Tennessee Historical Commission and the Office of Sponsored Programs at MTSU, launched the Tennessee Rural African-American Church Project.

The goals of the project were: 1) to bring together and establish a network of scholars, activists, and preservationists across the state who are interested in the history and preservation of rural African-American churches; 2) to conduct a statewide reconnaissance survey of extant African-American churches in the Tennessee countryside and small towns; and 3) to prepare for the Tennessee Historical Commission a Multiple Property Nomination that addresses the rural African-American church as a distinct and significant property type and to begin a process of nominating eligible churches to the National Register of Historic Places. Eleven churches from across the state were included in the first multiple property nomination to come from this project.

With the completion of the project's immediate goals, including a survey of some 350 churches, the Center published, with the assistance of the



*This 1880 photograph of the teachers and students of the Lincoln School at Pikeville Chapel AME Zion Church is one of the most historic images collected by the Tennessee Rural African-American Church Project. Center for Historic Preservation.*

Southern Regional Office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, *Powerful Artifacts: A Guide to Surveying and Documenting Rural African-American Churches in the South*. This guide, intended to serve a broad audience, begins with brief denominational histories of the primary African-American churches. Next, it addresses the question of what makes these church buildings eligible for the National Register. Attention is given to questions of integrity, date of significance, and criteria of eligibility in the extended discussion of property types and registration requirements. A visual survey form is included to help identify styles and significant features of the church and surrounding landscape. A representative bibliography of scholarship about African-American history in general and African-American religion in specific concludes the guide which includes photographs of forty eight Tennessee rural churches.

One church included in both the survey and the

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publication is Craigs Chapel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church within the Greenback community of Loudon County. Individually nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, the simple white frame place of worship was built in 1896. Just three years later, the Craigs Chapel elementary school was built and served the black children of the community until the 1930s. The school building was rolled from its original location and attached to the church by 1940 where it continues to serve as the fellowship hall. An adjacent cemetery, in which two graves of previous white owners of the land are located, was consecrated by Craigs Chapel when the church's first member was laid to rest in 1903.

While Craigs Chapel, the incorporated school, and the cemetery are a significant complex in their own right, they are also a part of a larger historical landscape that holds an abiding significance for African Americans and those who believe in basic human freedoms. In the early nineteenth century, the area was known for its abolition sentiments. Spearheaded by Quakers, with settlements in nearby Friendsville and Unitia, local tradition associates several places with the Underground Railroad.

The members and friends of Craigs Chapel consider the Underground Railroad an integral part of their history and heritage. Nearby, though not on church property, is a large limestone cave that is reputed to have been a hiding place and

passage for fugitive slaves. The anti-slavery activity of the Quakers and the geographical terrain reinforce strong oral traditions that the cave was used by men, women, and children as a hiding place and passage on the long and dangerous road to freedom in the north.

The AME Zion Church was known as "The Freedom Church," claiming revered abolitionist leaders Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglass. Following the Civil War, AME Zion missionaries established six churches in Loudon County between 1884 and 1913. Of these, Craigs Chapel is the only one still in operation. It is indeed a "powerful artifact" symbolizing African-American history, culture, education, religion, and community.

*-Caneta Skelley Hankins*



*Craigs Chapel (Loudon County) was built in 1896. This view clearly shows the late 19th century school that was moved from nearby and attached by 1940. Center for Historic Preservation.*

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