

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



Kossie Gardner, Sr. (1897-1990)

Born out of humble and unstable beginnings, the intrepid and self-made Kossie Gardner, Sr. grew into one of Nashville's most prominent and highly respected businessmen of his era. Carthegeerius Cosby began his life in Pulaski, Tennessee on May 24, 1897. When the boy's father abandoned the family less than two years later, his mother, Orleans Cosby, found herself unable to care for her baby and signed him over as an indentured apprentice to farmers Daniel and Ella Gardner.

Though well nurtured by his new family, a young Carthegeerius (renamed "Kossie Gardner") lacked inclination toward farming and instead pursued work as a Pullman porter. The railroad assigned him to a route between Nashville and Atlanta, but he initially turned down the role, fearing encounters with ongoing racial unrest in the South. After a brief and unsuccessful employment search in Chicago, Gardner returned to Nashville and accepted the railroad position. However, after being falsely accused of robbery during a ride from Nashville to Memphis, Gardner left the railroad to pursue better opportunities.

As Gardner began to re-orient his pursuits, a refined and aristocratic great uncle named Pete Hayden entered his life. Hayden invited Gardner to live with him and his wife, a gesture which the penniless and unemployed young man gladly accepted. Upon Hayden's death, Gardner made a sudden and peculiar decision that ultimately set his career into motion. Though he lacked any professional mortuary training, he decided to become an undertaker—with his great uncle serving as the first client. Gardner called upon two friends, an embalmer and a young doctor, to help guide him through the funeral process. Unable to purchase Uncle Hayden's casket, Gardner approached William Tarver, a white manager at the Fourth and First National Bank branch located in Nashville's Black Bottom district. There he boldly secured a \$500 loan that covered the casket cost plus initial expenses for an ambitious new undertaking business, including licenses and a car purchase. He also attained a degree from the Gupton-Jones School of Mortuary Sciences.

Gardner & Company began to take shape, offering funeral direction and embalming services initially provided out of a rented room at the "Colored YMCA" building at 411 Cedar Street. As the fledgling company's business manager, Gardner partitioned the meager 12' x 15' space into separate functional reception and workspace areas. Mrs. Katie Foster Battle, the scientific embalmer of Gardner & Co., held twelve years' prior experience with one of the leading white firms in the city. Praised in the company's 1925 Nashville Colored Directory listing, Gardner "won a host of friends for his firm by his liberal dealing. His pleasant disposition and friendly attitude have proven a source of comfort to his many patrons in their hours of sorrow." Even with such success, Nashville's youngest funeral director nearly lost his hard-earned burgeoning business during a lawsuit after trying to help a client with insurance payments.

As Gardner's funeral company garnered patronage, he realized the intrinsic need for efficient transportation of his clients. During this time, even city-owned ambulances were no more than horse-drawn vehicles outfitted with bells. Sensing that a motorized version would be far superior, Gardner narrowly amassed enough funds to purchase a 1922 model Hudson sedan. He hired a local auto body firm to complete a custom ambulance conversion by hinging a portion of the car's front seat, allowing it to flatten into a bed. Thus, a 27-year-old Kossie Gardner became the innovator behind Nashville's first motorized ambulance. Unfortunately, Gardner lost both the Hudson and a similarly-converted later model Buick to the bank after failing to keep up with payments. This loss, however, did not spell defeat for K. Gardner Funeral Home.

Around 1925, Gardner moved the business to its first location along Jefferson Street near 12th Avenue North. By 1928, K. Gardner Funeral Service moved again, this time to its permanent home at 1511 Jefferson Street. Housed in a handsome one-and-one-half-story Craftsman style bungalow with convenient side porte-cochère, the company provided undertaking, embalming, funeral direction and "superior ambulance

This publication is a project of the 2022 Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture. The author compiled the information. The Metropolitan Historical Commission edited and designed the materials. Image credit: Portrait of Kossie Gardner, Sr., undated. Courtesy of Keisha Gardner-Beard.

service” from this “new and modern funeral apartment, open day and night.”

In March of 1947, Gardner decided to run for city council as a candidate from the first district of the fifth ward, which encompassed Fisk University, Meharry Medical College, and Tennessee State Agricultural & Industrial (A&I) College. Due to the majority Black population in this part of the city, he felt “a man of my race can best interpret the needs of the people” but advocated for “good will between all people, regardless of race or religion.” He lost the vote that May, behind fellow fifth ward candidates J. J. Bell and Z. Alexander Looby.

In 1947, the established undertaker briefly invested in an 80-acre dairy farm in Nashville. Unfortunately, the farming business once again would not pan out for Kossie Gardner. His cattle became diseased and, as a Black man operating a farm in a White neighborhood, Gardner felt compelled to sell the operation.

In the 1950s, Kossie Gardner, Sr. branched out into a completely new arena—real estate development. During a time when many Black Americans did not have access to homebuying, developers like Gardner helped by creating suburbs geared towards African American residents. This created stable communities where Black Nashvillians could own their own homes and have access to a lifestyle previously denied to them. Gardner’s Gold Coast, located off Ashland City Highway on former agricultural lands, was the earliest such planned Black suburban community in Nashville.

Platted in 1953, the “Gold Coast” subdivision boasted modest Ranch style homes that were initially sold almost entirely to Black doctors, college professors, school teachers and other professionals. When built, the Gold Coast subdivision included twenty-four new homes and two new streets. All of the Gold Coast home exteriors employed brick which, in addition to the presence of low stacked-stone walls, driveway curbing, and culverts throughout the neighborhood, were a nod to Gardner’s masonic talents. Most houses in the neighborhood were constructed between 1957 and 1966 in either traditional Ranch or Split-Level styles. A few Contemporary-style homes were also incorporated, with bold details such as a broad front gable roof, butterfly roof, or variegated brick veneer.

Gardner planned the original Gold Coast section along Windover Drive and in 1960 created the Gold Coast Addition with Ranch and Split Level homes along Red Rose Court. Between 1958 and 1960, Gardner developed a small, adjacent subdivision known as

Gardner Meadows. The mid-century residential enclave included six modest brick Ranch houses with frontage along Ashland City Highway.

Along with these residential projects, Gardner was instrumental in the creation of the Hills of Calvary Cemetery, a large burial ground primarily used by Nashville’s Black community. Established by Gardner and a group of other undertakers in 1958, Hills of Calvary Memorial Park Cemetery has been in the Gardner family for three generations. Previously managed by Gardner, his wife Eleanor, and son Kossie Gardner, Jr., the site is now operated by Keisha Gardner-Beard, granddaughter of the elder Gardner.

Another of Gardner’s real estate interests included the Black masonic building at 419-421 Fourth Avenue North. Gardner purchased and developed this former temple, a modern fireproof structure that included elevator service and housed some of the city’s finest medical clinics and specialists, attorneys, photographers and other sundry professionals. The edifice featured a spacious 4th floor dining room, club rooms, and a 5th floor dance hall. Formerly known as the Masonic Temple, the newly-revitalized K. Gardner Building succumbed to destruction from urban renewal a mere one year after its redevelopment.

Throughout his lifetime, Gardner consistently demonstrated an interest and need to be invested in the wider community. In addition to his remarkable mortuary and real estate career ventures, he also operated a variety of trades schools for veterans, one at a Clarksville location, and for fifteen years hosted a live religious program for local radio station WNAH. As an esteemed 32nd degree mason, Gardner served as illustrious potentate of Hella Temple 105 of the Shrine and member of the Pride of Tennessee Elks Lodge, a fraternal organization housed in the former Club Baron on Jefferson Street.

Kossie Gardner, Sr. passed away on March 1, 1990 at the age of 92. He was laid to rest at the Hills of Calvary Cemetery. At the time of his death, K. Gardner Funeral Home had operated on Jefferson Street for 64 years, a resoundingly successful institution beloved by the community it served.

Caroline Eller
