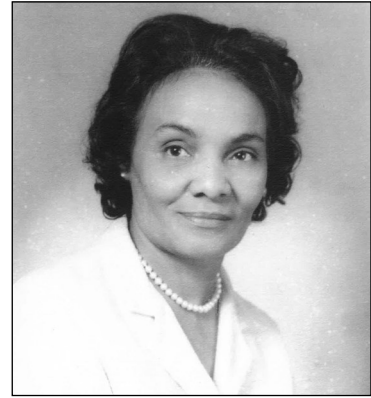


# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



**JohnEtta Hayes (1915-2008)**

JohnEtta Featherstone Hayes began her life on April 7, 1915 in Dechard, Franklin County, Tennessee. As one of eleven children born to Henry and Maude Featherstone, she moved to Boise, Idaho at the age of twelve to live with her grandmother after her parents' passing. JohnEtta finished high school in Boise and returned to Nashville, where she attended Tennessee Agricultural & Industrial College and met her husband of sixty-one years, Culous McCoy Hayes, Sr. The couple went on to have three children together, Culous Jr., William, and Elaine.

Beginning in the 1940s, Hayes became a well-known and respected fixture in Nashville's African American community through her numerous civic roles and ongoing commitment to the local civil rights movement. Deeply engaged in her children's education through the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), in 1953 she was elected to serve a three-year term as the President of the Nashville Council of the Tennessee State Congress of Colored PTAs. The "Negro Parent-Teacher Association" was an involuntarily segregated group who worked in partnership with volunteers from local chapters of the NAACP and the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE, founded in 1956) to support school desegregation efforts in the late 1950s. As community outreach became a larger priority in her work, Hayes also co-chaired an intergroup relations study course, "Creating Better Relations Between Races," sponsored by the Nashville Council of Colored PTAs in 1958.

Hayes further expanded her community involvement by working for the Nashville chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP, est. 1909). In January 1957, the Nashville branch of the NAACP elected the Rev. Kelly Miller Smith to his second consecutive term as President and JohnEtta Hayes as the new Vice President. There she chaired the Education and Community Coordinating committees and used this platform to participate in local panel discussions and mass meetings, calling out needs in the educational system like youth assistance with school desegregation and overcrowded facilities. During a June 1957 community meeting at Clark

Memorial Methodist Church, she advised, "Parents of children who are being integrated must go in with the idea of cooperation. We must have faith in the board of education and be assured of their support as we integrate." Hayes was keenly aware of the challenges that Nashville schools--and those across the nation--faced as they moved towards eventual desegregation, but her words of assurance elicited a spirit of unity from those around her. This mindset and dedicated community activism prepared her well for several subsequent leadership roles.

The first day of school desegregation in Nashville came on September 9, 1957, beginning with children in the first grade as part of the approved "stairstep" plan. Hayes, then the state chairperson of the PTA's Intergroup Relations Committee, and groups of volunteers from the NAACP, CORE, and local churches accompanied parents and their children attempting to integrate Nashville's elementary schools. She walked proudly alongside twenty-one-year-old mother Grace McKinley and her daughter Linda Gail, whose terrifying journey through crowds of agitated White protestors were immortalized in the local media coverage, as they walked to Fehr Elementary for Linda's first day at the formerly all-White school. Hayes and the other volunteers provided unwavering, silent moral support for these families and children whom they didn't even know. She later recalled those tense and pivotal moments, "It was unbelievable coming from mature human beings. Crowds of jeering Whites met us as we made our way to the school entrance. White policemen stood guard. White parents and their children vented their hate by striking out at the Black parents and children." She modestly characterized her own role in these events as "it was something positive we could do."

During this time, Hayes also served on the Executive Council of Highlander Folk School, located in Monteagle, Tennessee. Founded in 1932, Highlander functioned as an incubator for the civil rights movement by offering trainings and workshops geared towards community improvement and most notably

This publication is a project of the 2023 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 JohnEtta Hayes, undated. Courtesy: First Community Church.

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stood as a staunch supporter of desegregation. Many of Tennessee's most well-known civil rights leaders attended Highlander's seminars, including Marion Barry, C.T. Vivian, Diane Nash, James Bevel, and John Lewis. At a 1961 "New Alliances in the South" Highlander workshop, Hayes, Lewis, and Vivian led a session called "A Case Study in Community Action: The Nashville Story," which examined the impacts of the Nashville sit-ins.

In early March 1959, Hayes was installed as the assistant secretary for the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC, founded in 1958), alongside President Rev. Kelly Miller Smith, 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President Rev. Robert W. Kelley, 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President Rev. C.T. Vivian, and Secretary Rev. Andrew White. NCLC's mission followed that of its parent organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), both of which implemented a strategy of non-violent resistance throughout the civil rights protests. At a May 1960 mass meeting and fundraiser after the bombing of Z. Alexander Looby's home, Hayes spoke alongside NCLC President Rev. Kelly Miller Smith, Councilman Looby, Dr. Matthew Walker, and the Rev. Ralph Abernathy of Montgomery, Alabama. This public meeting, held at Clark Memorial, brought together some of the most significant civil rights leaders in the South and spurred community contributions to the Looby-Ezell Fund for repairs to the damaged properties.

After a year of service in the Vice President capacity, Hayes succeeded A.Z. Kelley as President of the Nashville branch NAACP on January 31, 1961, and concurrently took on the role of Chair on its executive committee. She became the first person to assume this dual leadership role of the local NAACP branch as granted by a changed constitutional ruling. Under her directorship, the branch established a "Freedom Fund" in April 1961 to assist with legal fees incurred by the student protesters arrested during sit-ins in Mississippi. This fund fed into the Education and Legal Defense Fund, Inc., a separate division of the NAACP geared towards civil rights matters including school desegregation cases. That fall, the Nashville NAACP branch published its first newsletter, including an open letter from Hayes asking local pastors to make announcements about school desegregation, especially as it pertained to transfer possibilities. Throughout her NAACP presidency, Hayes grew their membership, created a program to increase job opportunities for African Americans, and extended support to distressed Black families in Fayette and Haywood counties. Claude Walker succeeded her as

Nashville NAACP President in January 1962, but she continued her work with the organization in other ways. In February 1962, Hayes presented a petition to the Nashville Board of Education calling for desegregation of Hume-Fogg Technical High School. She once again chaired the Nashville chapter's Education Committee (1964), served as interim President (February 1966) and 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President (April 1966), and was later elected to the executive committee (December 1966).

In addition to her numerous leadership roles, Hayes' penchant for grassroots galvanization around social and civil rights causes also translated into "boots on the ground" work and significant advisory roles. She and her fellow members of First Community Church, under the Rev. C.T. Vivian's pastorship, participated alongside students and other supporters in marches and sit-ins at segregated restaurants, theaters, businesses, and churches that occurred locally in 1959 and 1960. Hayes maintained her connections with other local and regional civil rights organizations and leaders through her September 1960 appointment as Assistant Secretary of the Tennessee Christian Leadership Conference (TCLC, an SCLC affiliate) and as an NCLC board member (1961-1962). Her robust experience in the civic and civil rights realms and informed leadership approach distinctly qualified her to serve on a committee that provided input to President Lyndon B. Johnson and Congress as part of an equal opportunities study associated with the Civil Rights Bill of 1964. In September 1966, Nashville Mayor Beverly Briley established a permanent 15-member Metro Human Relations Commission, of which Hayes was the only female member.

Among her various other affiliations, JohnEtta Hayes served on the Nashville City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, College View Club, the Board of Phyllis Wheatley Homes, American Baptist College Women's Auxiliary, and the Trustee Board of First Community Church (where she was a member for seventy-one years). She passed away in 2008 and was interred at a family plot at Greenwood Cemetery.

*Caroline Eller*

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