

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

Z. Alexander Looby, Robert E. Lillard, and the Chartering of Metropolitan Nashville and Davidson County



In 1951, Zephaniah Alexander Looby and Robert E. Lillard became the first African Americans elected to the Nashville City Council since 1911. These two attorneys played a role in the establishment of Metropolitan Nashville and Davidson County. Both men came from humble beginnings, one originally from Antigua, British West Indies, and one a native Nashvillian. Despite their humble beginnings, both men became leaders in Nashville's African American Community.

Zephaniah Alexander Looby, son of John Alexander and Grace Elizabeth (Joseph) Looby, was born in Antigua, British West Indies, on April 8, 1899. After the death of his father, young Looby departed for the United States, arriving by 1914. He earned a bachelor's degree from Howard University, a Bachelor of Law degree from Columbia University, and a Doctor of Juristic Science from New York University. In 1926, he came to Fisk University as assistant professor of economics and remained until 1928. He later served as a lecturer at Fisk University and Meharry College. In 1929, Looby was admitted to the Tennessee bar. He practiced law in Memphis for the next three years and met a schoolteacher named Grafta Mosby, whom he married in 1934. Unwilling to "pay the moral price" demanded of Memphis' attorneys and "Boss" Edward H. Crump, Looby returned to Nashville. He helped establish the Kent College of Law, Nashville's first law school for African Americans since the old Central Tennessee College's department of law (1877-1911).

Robert Emmitt Lillard was born March 23, 1907, in Nashville, Tennessee, to John W. and Virginia (Allen) Lillard. He received his education at Immaculate Mother's Academy and in local public schools, then attended Beggins Commercial College, although his ambition was to become a lawyer. In 1932, Lillard enrolled at Kent College of Law, where he graduated in 1935, and organized the 15th Ward Colored Voters and Civic Club. Though Lillard passed the bar exam in 1936, he was appointed to Nashville's Fire Engine Company No. 11, where he remained until 1950. Lillard moved into full-time legal practice and participated in local

politics. He also founded the Tennessee Federation of Democratic Leagues. He championed the city's transformation of Cameron Junior High School into the second high school for local African Americans and secured an ordinance to desegregate the Parthenon in Centennial Park. During the 1960s, he opposed the plan to consolidate the Nashville and Davidson County governments because he felt this would dilute the Black voting strength. Lillard became the first African American to serve as Vice Mayor Pro Tem (1967) and retired from the Metro City Council in 1971.

When the African American civil rights movements of World War II began, Looby became the local leader. From 1943-1945, he presided over the James C. Napier Bar Association. He ran for the city council in 1940, although a White opponent beat him in a runoff election. In 1946, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) hired Looby, Maurice Weaver, and Thurgood Marshall to represent Black residents of Columbia, Tennessee, who were charged with murder following race riots. Looby's legal defense helped acquit twenty-three defendants. He crisscrossed the state in the company of other Black lawyers, arguing against Jim Crowism and discrimination. Looby is credited with desegregating the Nashville Airport's dining room and the city's non-private golf courses.

Looby felt politics could change an oppressive system. In 1951, he and Lillard became the first Blacks elected to Nashville's city council since 1911. Nashville's 1951 elections presaged a shift in race relations in the "Athens of the South" that perceived itself as a forward-looking southern city. As older leaders within the African American community left the scene, a new generation of leaders came to the forefront and like those before them, worked for the benefit of their community. Although they came from different backgrounds and represented different electorates within the African American community, both Looby and Lillard dedicated themselves to increasing the African American influence and power within city government.

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Nashville's 1951 election also connoted a changing of the guard for the city's White political establishment. Councilmen Looby and Lillard focused on legislation and policies that benefited their constituents, abolishing Jim Crow-era laws that stipulated the separation of the races. Attorney Looby introduced bills to desegregate public facilities. In addition to sustained strained race relations, the city's tax base decreased as Whites moved out to the county, which struggled to provide the services needed to sustain the population growth. In response, the city council and Davidson County Court created a joint commission of fifteen members to investigate and make recommendations, including merging the two governments. In 1952, the Community Services Commission published "A Future for Nashville," a comprehensive study of the challenges of growth and possible solutions to the problems of providing adequate government services to all residents in an efficient manner. During the course of the study, it became apparent that Nashville and Davidson County both had something to offer the other. The study provided the foundation for the creation of a city-county commission that would write a charter for a unified system of government. In 1954 the United States Supreme Court handed down its unanimous *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka, Kansas* verdict which outlawed racially segregated schools on a national level. A year later, known as the "Dean" of Nashville's African American attorneys, Looby filed a suit against the local public schools on behalf of African American barber A. Z. Kelley, whose son Robert was denied access to a nearby White school. In 1957, the same year a federal court issued an order for Nashville's public schools to desegregate one grade per year, a city-county commission was established to write a charter that would consolidate the city of Nashville and Davidson County governments.

City mayor Ben West and county judge Beverly Briley each appointed five members, including African Americans, to serve on the commission. West appointed Looby and Briley appointed pharmacist and prominent African American business leader Dr. George S. Meadors (1893- 1977), founder of People's Pharmacy. In 1958, the committee produced a charter endorsed by both West, Briley, and the *Nashville Banner* and *Tennessean* newspapers. Nashville's African American community found itself divided over the governmental merger. African Americans who followed Looby's reasoning felt that if consolidation generated economic growth, all Nashvillians would

benefit, including African Americans. Lillard's supporters feared that if the city and county governments merged, the political gains realized would be lost. While the charter referendum passed in the city in June 1958, county residents voted against it over concerns about increased taxes. Four years later, officials attempted a second charter.

In 1962, a second charter commission convened and the mood in Nashville changed. African American college students largely managed to sustain their movement to desegregate public accommodations causing the town that saw itself as a moderate southern city to change, although many Whites opposed desegregation of the city's public facilities. African Americans lost faith in Mayor West because he did not endorse complete desegregation of all public facilities. Although West and the *Banner* opposed the second charter as written, it was presented to the voters for their approval. Looby remained steadfast in his support of a consolidated government and Dr. Vivian Henderson, an economics professor at Fisk University who implemented the economic withdrawal during boycotts of downtown merchants, joined Looby in support of the consolidated government. They believed that through consolidation, African Americans could sustain political power by drawing intentional district lines for the thirty-five member Metropolitan Council outlined in the new charter. As a result of Attorney Looby's relentless justification for majority African American councilmanic districts during the commission meetings, six of the thirty-five districts were drawn to preserve and represent Black majorities. Dr. Henderson and Looby contended that economic gains promised by consolidating the two governments would create additional employment opportunities for both African Americans and Whites.

On June 28, 1962, the charter passed in both the city and the county, despite being rejected by fifty-five percent of African American voters. On April 1, 1963, Beverly Briley was sworn in as the first mayor of Metropolitan Nashville and African American council members Mansfield Douglas, John Driver, and Harold Love, Sr. joined Looby and Lillard among the forty members of the first Metropolitan Council.

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