

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

Nashville Christian Institute (1940-1967)



The Nashville Christian Institute (NCI) played a prominent role as a socio-cultural center in the Nashville community from 1940-1967. The idea to create NCI as a Black preparatory school started in 1920 from the friendship of Marshall Keeble, Andrew Mizell "A.M." Burton, and numerous Black members of the Church of Christ in Tennessee and Arkansas. The initial property purchased for NCI in 1928 near Fisk University was sold to the City of Nashville at a profit, since the City wanted that land for an elementary school. In exchange, the Ashcraft City School building was sold to the NCI organizers and NCI had its home at 801 24th Avenue, Nashville.

When NCI initially opened in 1940, it served as a night school for working adults to complete their secondary education. By 1943, it also offered 6–8 week preacher training courses and a co-ed K-12 education with residential housing. Andrew Clarence "A.C." Holt was the first principal of NCI. Holt brought experience as a former State Department of Education employee and transitioned NCI into a fully accredited elementary and secondary school with only Board-certified teachers.

Keeble served the school as President from 1944 to 1958, when he became President Emeritus. Many referred to Keeble as "the man with the boy preachers" who traveled the country collecting donations and showing his fellow Christians the best and brightest from NCI. Fred Gray recalled Keeble's statement from their travels, "These are the type of boys that we produce at the Nashville Christian Institute. You send your son to us and we will send him back a good man."

Many men and women of faith were called to NCI over the years it was in operation. E.R. Wilson of Statesville, North Carolina attended the 1943 Minister Lecture Course. The 1944 Minister Lecture Course included seven attendees: Bennie Arms, W.H. Bates, and Mark McCloud of Montgomery, Alabama; John Henry Clay of Decatur, Alabama; Quincy Cater of Bowling Green, Kentucky; George Reeves of College Park, Georgia; and C.L. Capteron of Atoka, Oklahoma.

Jack Evans attended NCI as a teenager and in 1959 he graduated from Southwestern Christian College. Being one of Keeble's "boy preachers" understandably played an instrumental role in Evans serving as Southwestern's President from 1967 to the end of 2016. Evans took a public stance against White racism, practices of White brethren, and the need for Blacks to financially support their own institutions.

As an NCI adult student, Shelton T. W. Gibbs, Jr. received additional ministerial development to become one of the first preachers in the Church of Christ to have his sermons mass produced in record album format, including "Going Home Without Jesus," "The Minister, His Support and Security in Retirement," and "God with Us."

John W. Harrison of Indianapolis, Indiana was a traditional aged high school student who attended NCI from 1940-1944. Harrison is but one example of the students who traveled from other states to attend this institution. One could argue that his rationale for leaving the Midwest and attending NCI was to receive the finest spiritual preparatory education.

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Albert Johnson, a 1954 graduate of NCI, later became the first Black mayor of Las Cruces, New Mexico.

John Oscar Williams attended NCI as an adult and took theology classes at nearby Fisk University. It was during this time that he became editor of NCI's newspaper, *The Crusader*.

Minnie Beatrice Keeble, daughter of Marshall Keeble, was one of the first females enrolled at NCI at the age of seven. Her husband, Jimmy Lymon, graduated from NCI and later went on to teach Bible and history, while also serving as the basketball coach. This union bore their two daughters, Gwendolyn and Laura, who both finished at NCI.

While NCI did have dorms, female students were housed with Keeble's second wife, Laura Catherine Johnson Keeble, at their private residence. Marshall Keeble's first wife and mother of his five children, Minnie Womack, died on December 11, 1932.

A White Station, Tennessee native, Minister General Andrew Jackson and his wife Elizabeth Thomas Jackson made the decision to enroll as the first adult students at NCI seeking Christian training in 1940. Elizabeth made the sacrifice to work outside the home to help finance her husband's high school and ministerial instructional training at NCI.

The cause of NCI's closure is complex. On June 2, 1967, a predominately White school board decided to close the school, citing low enrollment. NCI alumni argued that NCI closed "without giving the Black members of the church an opportunity to raise enough money to keep it open." The premise of the lawsuit was that Lipscomb and NCI's Board of Directors had violated the rights of many benefactors to NCI by turning the monies over to a college that just started integrating. But the court's decisions on federal district and appellate levels found that the \$400,000 NCI assets would be awarded to Lipscomb College, under the guise of scholarship monies for Black students at Lipscomb.

Steps toward racial reconciliation between members of the church were made evident in April 2012 when the president of Lipscomb University, L. Randolph Lowry III, awarded Fred Gray an honorary doctorate. The university awarded \$1.6 million in aid to 216 Black students at Lipscomb as a means to right the wrongs of the past.

Some saw Marshall Keeble as one who passively acquiesced to White racism out of necessity and who accommodated the southern practice of segregation in order to gain favor among White leaders within Churches of Christ who financially supported NCI. Others would argue that he had redemptive principled vision as a man of faith and subtle diplomacy in an era that minimized Black voices. But all would agree his actions were grounded in love and his conviction in God. It is this legacy that was instilled in the NCI alumni producing leaders of faith across the nation.

In 2005, the National Park Service listed the NCI Gymnasium in the National Register of Historic Places as the last remaining vestige of the former NCI campus. Built in 1956, this building served as an auditorium, gymnasium and dormitory. It stands as a testament to Nashville's religious education during segregation and the civil rights era.

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