

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

**The Centennial Year of American Baptist College,
1924-2024**



On September 14, 2024, American Baptist College, the mecca of the Nashville Student Movement of the late 1950s and 1960s, will celebrate its centennial year. Referred to by some as the “University of Nonviolence,” the theological seminary had its beginnings in 1895 when the idea germinated with the founding of the National Baptist Convention (NBC) and its Educational Board. However, it took 18 years before the idea took root when the convention formed a seminary committee that garnered the support of the Southern Baptist Convention. Because of a major misunderstanding, the NBC split into two factions: National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (UNBCA), and National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated (NBCI). When the dust settled, the two African American Baptist Conventions opened two separate theological institutions. In 1916, the NBCI opened the National Baptist Theological Seminary and Bible Training School in Memphis’ Howe Institute and two years later, the UNBCA established the National Baptist Seminary and Missionary Training School on the Nashville campus on the former white Boscobel College campus. The NBCI moved its school from Memphis in 1918 and located the classes in the former facilities of Roger Williams University on Whites Creek Pike.

With help from the Southern Baptist Convention, the NBCI purchased land next door in 1921 and constructed facilities by 1923. On September 14, 1924, the American Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) opened its doors. From 1925 to 1926, Sutton Griggs served as ABTS president Seminary and the first faculty consisted of William T. Amiger, J.H. Garnett, and O. L. Hailey. Griggs had served as the corresponding secretary of the National Baptist Convention and as pastor of First Baptist Church, East Nashville.

Notwithstanding its founding, American Baptist Theological Seminary’s centennial year coincides with the 60th anniversary of the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

American Baptist Theological Seminary played a significant role in the founding of the Nashville Student Movement, the city’s sit-in movement, and the Freedom Rides. Bernard Lafayette, James Bevel, William Barbee, John Lewis, Julius Scruggs, and C. T. Vivian met at ABTS and took classes together. There they had their first encounters with nonviolence through the teachings of Rev. Kelly Miller Smith, Sr., pastor of First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill and an instructor at ABTS. From 1956 to 1958, Smith served as president of the Nashville Branch of the National Association of Colored People (NAACP). A member of the board of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Smith and others founded the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC) in January of 1958. A homiletics professor at ABTS, Smith’s gospel message like Sutton Griggs’ message had social relevance. In the words of his former student, the late Congressman John Lewis, Smith was “concerned about the way people lived and [how they were] treated in Nashville. Not just on Sunday morning at 11:00 a.m., but on Monday morning and through the week.” For Kelly’s leadership, *Time* magazine credited him with Nashville’s transition from a segregated Jim Crow city to one that became racially desegregated. In 1954, *Ebony* magazine named Smith one of America’s Ten Most Outstanding Preachers.

Like the students who sat in Griggs Hall, other students at Fisk and Tennessee A&I State Universities, and Meharry Medical College sat in their dorm rooms and wondered how to overcome the racial injustice they faced. They pondered how they could serve as catalysts to change explicit

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racism in American society. The success of Nashville's Civil Rights Movement, like other movements throughout the South, depended on youth and student involvement. Nashville students became the driving force in the movement as it moved into the Deep South. John Lewis, Bernard Lafayette, C.T. Vivian and James Bevel were all students at ABTS who came to the movement under the guidance of Rev. Kelly Miller Smith, Sr. It was in Griggs Hall that these young men bonded and became activists in Nashville's movement. While photos and film of the Nashville Student Movement depict downtown and the stores where they conducted sit-ins, those images would not exist without the American Baptist Theological Seminary that provided these individuals with the foundational experience that put them on the trajectory to become leaders—not only at the local level, but in the national Civil Rights Movement as well. ABTS served as a gathering place for leaders in the long Civil Rights Movement who preached in its church, taught in its classrooms, studied in its library, and slept in its dormitory. The ABTS campus was instrumental in helping to bring the Nashville Student Movement into the Athens of the South, helped lead the charge for desegregating towns, and assisted in gaining voting rights for African Americans across the South. Because of the historical significance and role that the theological seminary played in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, four buildings on the campus of ABTS were listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

After the State Review Board, an entity housed in the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and operated through the auspices of the Tennessee Historical Commission, approved the nomination for the American Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) Historic District, the SHPO submitted the nomination to the National Park Service. The Secretary of the Interior listed the ABTS Historic District in the National Register of Historic Places on June 14, 2013. This honorary designation recognized the institution's significance for African American ethnic heritage, education, and religion, as well as its role in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The contributing elements in the historic district include the historic plan and landscape of the

campus at 1800 Baptist World Center Drive in Nashville, as well as three historic buildings: Griggs Hall (built in 1924), the J.B. Lawrence Administration Building (built in 1947), and the T.L. Holcomb Library (built in 1954).

Several students from the modern civil rights era period became noted leaders in civil rights history and American politics. Individuals like the late Congressman John Lewis, Bernard Lafayette, a former president of American Baptist College, and Julius Scruggs have gone on to become major names in civil rights history, American politics, and theology.

Under President Charles E. Boddie, the institution gained accreditation in 1971. By 1995, the Southern Baptist Convention withdrew its support and its members of the board of trustees. On March 25, 2013, American Baptist College, during the current administration of Dr. Forrest E. Harris, was named as a Historically Black College and University (HBCU).

Recognized on the local, state, and national levels and as the first building on the American Baptist College campus, Griggs Hall's legacy of activism must not be forgotten—but more than a passive remembrance is needed. Just like the mid-20th century called warriors to the battlefield to fight against criminal, economic, and social injustices including racial segregation and voting discrimination, warriors are needed today more than ever. During the modern Civil Rights Movement, civil wrongs could be adjudicated in the courts and generally receive a fair hearing and outcome. Through legislation, policies could be introduced, and passed by Congress to overcome injustices perpetrated upon the rights of African Americans, women, and other avenged groups. Today, that path has become more complicated as members of legislative bodies on the local, state, and national levels appear determined to return America to a post-Reconstruction period.

As David Halberstam noted in his book *The Children*, American Baptist College was a place “filled with political ferment and passion. Its faculty was gifted and its students, many of them diamonds in the rough, were hungry to learn.”

Linda T. Wynn
