

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



The “Divine Nine”: Black Greek-Letter Organizations, Civil and Voting Rights, and Nashville Activists

Black Greek-Letter Organizations, collectively known as the “Divine Nine,” originated during a period of challenging race relations in American history. Founded on principles such as personal excellence, racial uplift, community service, civic engagement, and kinship, their establishment coincided with key national events, including the enforcement of Jim Crow laws, the prevalence of scientific racism, and widespread racial discrimination and violence. The Divine Nine, organized under the National Pan-Hellenic Council, are: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, established 12/4/1906 at Cornell University, Ithaca NY; Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, est. 1/15/1908 at Howard University, Washington, D.C.; Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, est. 1/5/1911 at Indiana University, Bloomington, IN; Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, est. 11/17/1911 at Howard University; Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, est. 1/13/1913 at Howard University; Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, est. 1/9/1914 at Howard University; Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, est. 1/16/1920 at Howard University; Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, est. 11/12/1922 at Butler University, Indianapolis, IN; and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, est. 9/19/1963 at Morgan State University, Baltimore, MD. The growth of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the U.S. contributed to the emergence and expansion of Black fraternities and sororities. Over subsequent decades, these organizations expanded to additional universities. The Divine Nine provided a sanctuary for intellectual growth, civic engagement, and mutual support. Through collaborative work, the collective fraternities and sororities became key supporters of civil rights, forming close relationships with key like-minded entities, including the NAACP, CORE, SCLC, and SNCC.

Prominent national figures have been affiliated with the Divine Nine, but this profile will emphasize those organizations and members who played pivotal roles in shaping the leadership and strategies of the Nashville Civil Rights Movement. Divine Nine members formed civil rights organizations, initiated cases against segregated schools, planned sit-ins, participated in protest marches, helped coordinate voter registration

drives, and other corrective actions against racial injustices. Their commitment to social justice and equality inspired others within the community to join the struggle, fostering a sense of unity and purpose that was essential for achieving lasting change.

Attorney Z. Alexander Looby, a distinguished member of Omega Psi Phi and a prominent civil rights advocate, was the fraternity’s 17th Grand Basileus (International President) from 1940-1945. Renowned as “Mr. Civil Rights,” he leveraged his legal expertise and leadership to challenge segregation, representing student protesters during the Nashville sit-ins and establishing Kent College of Law. Looby directed Omega Psi Phi toward a greater focus on social action and civil rights initiatives.

In 1951, Looby and attorney Robert E. Lillard, a fellow member of Omega Psi Phi, became the first African Americans elected to the Nashville City Council since Thomas P. Solomon in 1911. Lillard played a significant role in voter registration initiatives, established the Fifteenth Ward Civic Club, and contributed financially to cover poll taxes. He was actively involved in efforts to desegregate the Parthenon and supported the enactment of anti-discrimination legislation. Lillard backed the 1960 sit-ins by forming the Sit-In Legal Defense Committee and provided legal representation for arrested students. Additionally, he assisted Looby following the April 19, 1960, bombing of his home by white supremacists.

When Looby, along with Omega Psi Phi member Attorney Avon Williams filed the 1955 *Kelley v. Nashville Board of Education* case, the Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, Sr., a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, was among the twelve parents who initiated legal proceedings against the Nashville Board of Education for noncompliance with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The resulting litigation led to the desegregation of Nashville’s public schools, though the process was implemented through a grade-a-year plan. On January 18, 1958, Smith convened fellow Black ministers at Capers Memorial C.M.E. Church to

establish the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC), subsequently designating his church, First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill, as a training hub for nonviolent protest activities preceding the Nashville Sit-ins.

Reverend C. T. Vivian, a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, and a student at American Baptist Theological Seminary (now American Baptist College), played a crucial role in desegregating Nashville's public transit system. Upon arriving in Nashville, Vivian tested the implementation of the Supreme Court's 1956 *Browder v. Gayle* decision, which prohibited segregation. He intentionally boarded a Nashville Transit Authority bus and sat near the front. When instructed by the driver to move to the back, Vivian declined, resulting in his arrest and prompting officials at city hall to confirm that Nashville would cease segregated seating on public transportation. Subsequently, Vivian became an influential participant in the Nashville Sit-in Movement and other desegregation efforts, not only in Nashville but across the South. After Mayor Ben West was publicly pressed by Vivian and Diane Nash, Nashville began the desegregation of its lunch counters on May 10, 1960.

Dr. McDonald Williams, Alpha Phi Alpha, and his wife, Dr. Jamie Coleman Williams, Delta Sigma Theta, were both professors at Tennessee A&I State University (now Tennessee State University) and deeply involved in the civil rights movement. Both played vital, behind-the-scenes roles as organizers during Nashville's downtown lunch counter sit-ins in the early 1960s. Jamie Williams, as an advisor to the NAACP's Youth Council and a member of the executive committee for the organization's Nashville branch, was instrumental in mobilizing young activists. The couple's commitment was evident in their logistical support. They organized weekly mass meetings and personally transported students from various college campuses to First Colored Baptist Church (now First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill).

Curlie E. McGruder, Zeta Phi Beta, is renowned for her determination and achievements as a civil and social activist. Her role with the local NAACP includes being President (1964-65), Youth Director, Public Relations Officer, and Lifetime Board member. In 1964, she was pivotal in organizing a freedom march in Nashville and led efforts for a march supporting a public accommodations ordinance. In the 1970s, she became involved with the Davidson County Independent Political Council and remained engaged with the Young Adult Chapter of the

NAACP. Her work centered on empowering Black Nashvillians through voter registration, aided by local ministers such as the Revs. Dogan Williams, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, and Amos Jones, as well as students from Nashville's HBCUs.

Like McGruder, Dr. Charles Edward Kimbrough, a distinguished member of Phi Beta Sigma, served as a resolute civil and voting rights advocate and former president of the Nashville branch of the NAACP. Dr. Kimbrough worked diligently to engage African Americans with the NAACP and its mission to eradicate racial discrimination through democratic processes. This growth in membership significantly contributed to addressing civil and voting rights issues within the local African American community. Among other advocates for civil and human rights are former Metro Council member and State Senator Thelma Harper, noted as the first African American woman to serve in the Tennessee General Assembly's Senate, and State Representative Brenda Gilmore. Both members of Delta Sigma Theta, these women made consistent and significant contributions to civil and human rights advancement through their political service.

The Divine Nine emerged during challenging times for race relations in the United States. These organizations were founded on key principles such as personal achievement, uplifting the African American community, service, civic involvement, and building bonds of kinship. Throughout their history, the Divine Nine and their members helped drive civil rights initiatives in Nashville and beyond, leaving a significant mark on American society through activism, leadership, and constant pursuit of justice and opportunity. Collectively, the involvement of the Divine Nine in the Nashville Civil Rights Movement underscores the powerful influence of Black Greek-letter organizations in shaping the trajectory of social justice efforts. Through their deep-rooted networks, leadership development, and unwavering commitment to service, these fraternities and sororities fostered a legacy of activism that resonates far beyond their founding years. Their impact continues to inspire new generations to advocate for equality, justice, and community advancement.

Linda T. Wynn

See also:

Bobby L. Lovett and Linda T. Wynn, *Profiles of African Americans in Tennessee*, 2nd edition (2021), Nashville Conference on African American History & Culture, www.NCAAHC.org.
