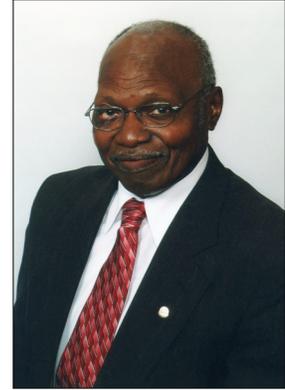


# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



## **The Reverend Dr. Charles Edward Kimbrough (1927-2025)**

The Reverend Dr. Charles Edward Kimbrough dedicated sixty years of his life to advancing civil rights and combating racial discrimination in America. His unwavering commitment to justice and equality is evident in his numerous accomplishments and the lasting impact he made on the movement. Dr. Kimbrough played a pivotal role in founding several chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Through his leadership, he helped organize impactful voter registration drives that empowered individuals to participate in the democratic process. His involvement in landmark events such as the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and Justice, as well as the 1965 Selma to Montgomery march, highlighted his dedication to the cause. An active member of Phi Beta Sigma, Inc., Dr. Kimbrough also mentored young people, preparing the next generation to continue the fight for justice and equality. Recognizing the vital importance of civic participation, he devoted significant efforts to organizing voter registration initiatives. These drives enabled countless marginalized individuals to exercise their right to vote, thereby strengthening their voices within the democratic process and contributing to the broader advancement of democracy.

Charles Edward Kimbrough, the third of Sterling and Azie Kimbrough's six children, was born on June 24, 1927, in rural Prospect, Tennessee. He experienced racial discrimination early in life, notably when African American children were prohibited from riding the school bus, an occurrence that many African American children experienced. As a result, he spent two years working on his family's farm until transportation became available, allowing him to begin high school at the age of eighteen. He completed the tenth grade at Pulaski's Bridgeforth High School. Motivated by the opportunity to pursue higher education through the GI Bill, Kimbrough enlisted in the U.S. Army. He earned his high school diploma in

one year via the GED Program and excelled in medical-related courses, graduating at the top of his Army Medical Technology class.

Kimbrough spent six years in the U.S. Armed Forces. During his military tenure, he encountered racism and discrimination. He remained steadfast, standing firm against injustice and refusing to waver in his principles. His commitment to confronting inequality was evident in the face of adversity within the military, reflecting his lifelong dedication to civil rights and justice. An injury during the Korean War required him to be hospitalized for seven months stateside. Although he was not required to return overseas, he chose to return during his second three-year commitment rather than train another soldier, not of African descent, to replace him as the orthopedic ward master. For his valiant service, he was awarded the Bronze Star, Korean Service Medal, and the Purple Heart.

Within three months of receiving an honorary discharge, Kimbrough enrolled at Tennessee A & I State College (now Tennessee State University), where he earned a degree in Biology with honors in 1956. He then pursued veterinary medicine at Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) in Tuskegee, Alabama. While attending Tuskegee, he became politically active, which further developed his understanding of discriminatory practices. When the Alabama State Legislature restricted the NAACP, the Tuskegee Civic Association emerged to oppose discriminatory practices and fight for civil rights. The Association was headed by Professor Charles Gomillion, who worked with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to increase voter registration in the South among African Americans. Kimbrough was one of its dedicated members, joining with a resolve to challenge racial inequalities, including participating in sit-ins. Upon graduating from Tuskegee's School of Veterinary Medicine, and passing the state boards, he became one of the first

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African American veterinarians in Tennessee. Before coming to Nashville's scene of civil rights activity, Dr. Kimbrough was already a seasoned civil rights activist.

In the summer of 1967, he worked alongside Roy Wilkins and Althea Simmons, prominent figures in the NAACP's National Registration Project, helping register African Americans in Southeast Missouri's "Boot Hills," an area known for widespread poverty. He also joined the second Selma march and returned to Selma on September 11, 2000, for the NAACP's Get-Out-the-Vote Campaign, held just before the September 12 election. Before the NAACP began their campaign, many of the 69.7% African American residents felt threatened and hesitated to vote out of fear for their safety or livelihoods. Thanks to the NAACP's efforts, Selma elected its first mayor of African descent on that memorable day.

Kimbrough participated in both the inaugural March on Washington and its thirtieth Anniversary commemoration, as well as various local demonstrations, including the 1990 Tennessee State University student protest spearheaded by Student Government Association President Jeff Carr. This protest culminated in a two-week sit-in at the Avon Williams Campus, ultimately prompting the state to allocate \$120 million for campus improvements requested by the students. Dr. Kimbrough was present throughout the entire duration of the sit-in. An active member of the NAACP in general and the Nashville branch in particular, he made numerous contributions to the organization.

Dr. Kimbrough held numerous leadership positions, including serving as President of the Nashville Branch of the NAACP from 1973 to 1980, as well as chairing several standing committees responsible for executing the Association's core initiatives. Throughout 2003 and into early 2004, he dedicated himself full-time as a volunteer, ensuring the branch maintained regular office hours. He also recruited additional volunteers to support these operations, thereby enabling senior leadership to focus on strategic objectives, such as hiring staff to sustain consistent office availability.

Dr. Kimbrough championed justice for individuals frequently affected by inequities within the judicial system. Through collaborative efforts with others,

including court-appointed attorneys, his advocacy contributed to the exoneration of several incarcerated individuals. Notably, one such individual was released after serving over thirty years in a correctional institution. As a trooper for the NAACP, he and others fought to force the city's Board of Education to provide the only inner-city comprehensive high school, Pearl-Cohn Comprehensive High School. Not only was Dr. Kimbrough a warrior for the rights of his people, but he was also an ardent practitioner of his Christian faith.

Dr. Kimbrough served as pastor of New Hope Baptist Church in Sparta, Illinois; Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Watertown, Tennessee; and later as an associate minister at Nashville's Spruce Street Baptist Church, where he was an active member. Known as "Doc" to many, Dr. Kimbrough was assisted in many of his endeavors by his wife of more than thirty years, Dr. Blondell Strong Kimbrough. On March 1, 2025, the Reverend Dr. Charles Edward Kimbrough, who spent a lifetime in the struggle for civil and human rights for all people joined the elders. He set an example for those who toil today in the vineyard of civil and human rights to follow, while focusing on contesting systemic racism, defending voting rights, combating inequitable strategies, advancing racial and gender equity in education and criminal justice, and supporting economic equality, all while countering narratives that seek to dismantle civil rights progress.

*Linda T. Wynn*

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