

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



Kelley v. Board of Education: The Beginning of School Desegregation in Nashville

Fifty-one years ago most of the Southern region was in an uproar over school desegregation, which was mandated by the unanimous decision of the United States Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, Kansas's case that overturned the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. Yet, despite the court's ruling, American black elementary and high school students endured angry crowds protesting school desegregation. Across the region, despite their youth, these students and their parents met the challenge that offered them access to "equal" educational opportunities and preserved.

In Nashville, like Arkansas's "Little Rock Nine", Clinton, Tennessee's "Clinton Twelve" caused their respective cities to adhere to the Supreme Court's school desegregation ruling, sixteen black six-year olds and their parents ended the "Jim Crow" era of education in the "Athens of the South" on September 9, 1957. They too, walked past protesting whites into seven of the city's previously all-white elementary schools. Black and white children had never before shared classrooms in the city's educational history. Even during the Reconstruction, when the divided nation attempted to reunify itself, did blacks and whites have equal access to public education.

Nashville's school desegregation was in response not only to the *Brown* decision but also to the *Kelley v. Board of Education* case, which Nashville black families filed in 1955. Nashville attorneys Z. Alexander Looby and Avon N. Williams, Jr., joined by Thurgood Marshall, legal director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) Legal and Educational Fund filed suite against the Nashville public schools, in federal district court, to bring the city into compliance with the *Brown* decision. The lead plaintiff in the Nashville case was

Alfred Z. Kelley, a Nashville barber, whose son, Robert commuted to Pearl High School although East High School was within walking distance of his home. Two years later, Judge William E. Miller decided in favor of the plaintiff and ordered the Nashville School Board to desegregate its public schools and to submit to the court a desegregation plan by January 1957. In the spring of the same year, the court accepted the school board's plan to desegregate the first grade in the fall and one grade a year thereafter. However, in deciding with the plaintiff, the court placed emphasis on the 1955 Supreme Court's decision in *Brown II* "with all deliberate speed," and stressed the adjective "deliberate" rather than the noun "speed." Given the zeitgeist of the era, white resisters, led by the Klan, the White Citizens Council, and the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government (TFCG). Vanderbilt University's English Professor, Donald G. Davidson, one of the noted fugitives, who defended racial segregation, led the TFCF. Despite their protestations, the school desegregation process in Nashville had been set in motion.

On September 9, 1957, nineteen African-American children, all six years old and formally registered to attend the first grade, were slated to desegregate all-white Buena Vista, Jones, Fehr, Bailey, Glenn, Emma Clemons, and Hattie Cotton schools. However, because of "improper transfer papers," three students were unable to attend opening day. Still, sixteen six-year-olds braved the crowd of white resisters and desegregated the Nashville Public School System. Fourteen students successfully entered Buena Vista (Erroll Groves, Ethel Mai Carr, and Patricia Guthrie); Jones (Barbara Jean Watson, Marvin Moore, Richard Rucker, Charles E. Battles and Cecil Ray, Jr.); Fehr (Charles E. Ridley, Willis E. Lewis, Bobby Cabknor, Linda McKinley, and Rita Buchanan); Glenn (Lajuanda Street,

Fehr Elementary School, 9 September 1957. Photograph courtesy of Nashville Public Library, The Nashville Room. This publication is a project of the 2008 Nashville Conference on African-American History and Culture. The author compiled the information. The Metropolitan Historical Commission edited and designed the materials.

Jacqueline Griffith, and Sinclair Lee, Jr.); Emma Clemons (Joy Smith) and Hattie Cotton (Patricia Watson), received one student each. For all practical purposes, the first day of school desegregation in the "Athens of the South" appeared to have been a relatively peaceful success.

Resistant forces were determined to shatter the city's process. In the wee hours of the following morning, Hattie Cotton School was dynamited. An outside agitator from the North, named Frederick John Kasper, incited the cowardly deed. Despite Kasper's agitation and intended intimidation and terrorizing of the young trailblazers and their families, the pusillanimous act of violence only served to reinforce their resolve to peacefully end racial segregation in the public schools of Nashville. Although Hattie Cotton was unable to open, the other schools, with the assistance of law enforcement authorities, opened without incident and eleven of the

sixteen first-graders attended class. In spite of the reprehensible bombing of Hattie Cotton, supporters of Nashville school desegregation attained their desired goal. While the actual number of African-Americans first graders who desegregated the public schools was negligible on September 9, 1957, figuratively, they were incalculable.

In the forthcoming years, there would be many battles facing school desegregation in Nashville. Because of many controversies and disputes, the Kelley v. Board of Education case became Tennessee's longest running school desegregation case, which was finally settled in 1998. A debt of gratitude is owed to the sixteen first-graders placed in harms way so that all may access the educational opportunities of the city's public school system.

-- Linda T. Wynn
