

# Leaders of Afro-American Nashville



**MARSHALL KEEBLE 1878-1968**

Photograph courtesy of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society

Marshall Keeble, one of the few African Americans to participate in the "Restoration Movement" of New Testament Christianity on a national basis, was a world-wide evangelist. He preached to racially diverse audiences, baptized thousands of persons, established hundreds of congregations, worked with a number of schools, and served as president of the Nashville Christian Institute. A well-known and effective traveling proselytizer, Keeble rose above the twentieth-century's dilemma of "the color line," and brought white believers into the Church of Christ.

Keeble was one of four children born to ex-slave parents Robert and Mittie Keeble on December 7, 1878, in Rutherford County, Tennessee. According to two of his biographers, Keeble's father was the slave of John Bell Keeble, who served as dean of Vanderbilt University Law School. During the Civil War, Keeble's grandfather (also named Marshall), the slave of Confederate Major Horace Pinkney Keeble, traveled with and served as the major's personal valet.

At the age of four, Keeble moved to Nashville with his parents. The family resided on High Street (now Sixth Avenue, North). Attending Bellview and Knowles Schools, Keeble's formal education did not extend past the seventh grade. Ten years after he moved to Nashville, Keeble was baptized by the Reverend Preston Taylor in the Gay Street Christian Church.

In 1896, Keeble married Minnie Womack, a graduate of Fisk University. To this union five children were born, two of whom died in infancy. A third child died suddenly at age ten when he touched an exposed high voltage wire on a utility pole in front of the Keebles' home. After 36 years

of marriage to Keeble, Minnie Womack Keeble died on December 11, 1932. In November 1935, approximately three years after the death of his wife, Keeble's daughter, Beatrice Elnora died. Robert Keeble, his only surviving child died in 1964.

To support his family, Keeble worked in a soap factory owned by the Cassety Coal Company. Later, he went into business for himself and opened a small grocery store on Hamilton Street. Keeble also operated a produce wagon and later opened a second store on Jefferson Street managed by his wife. Philistia Womack, his sister-in-law, managed the Hamilton Street Store.

One year after marrying Minnie Womack, Keeble entered the ministry in 1897. He preached his first sermon at the Jackson Street Church of Christ where he remained a member until his death. In 1914, Keeble decided to "preach the gospel" on a full-time basis. Considering data submitted by Keeble to the *Gospel Advocate*, between 1915 and 1918, he traveled more than 23,000 miles, preached 1,161 sermons, and baptized 457 persons. Because of Keeble's success he came to the attention of affluent and influential whites such as Nashville millionaire A.M. Burton, founder of the Life and Casualty Insurance Company. After 1920 he traveled extensively at Burton's expense and was supported by the Nashville company.

According to Don Haymes, less than a year before his death, Keeble stated that Booker T. Washington's style of instructions helped him. "I got a lot out of how he made his points," said Keeble "...any man who can make things simple is a great teacher." Keeble, like his mentor, made things clear. Similar to Washington, Keeble also

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influenced others. Early in his career, Ira North (Madison Church of Christ) traveled the evangelistic circuit with Keeble and later credited Keeble with influencing his style of preaching. An astute observer of Washington's fund raising activities, Keeble later utilized Washington's paradigm to raise money from whites for the Nashville Christian Institute.

In 1934, after a formal courtship, Keeble married his second wife, Laura Catherine Johnson (1898-) of Corinth, Mississippi. Eight years after Keeble's marriage to Laura Johnson, he became the first president of the Nashville Christian Institute (NCI) in 1942. Opening in 1940, NCI served as a night school for adults. The same year that Keeble became president, NCI opened as a fully accredited elementary and high school. He served the school as president until 1958 when he became President Emeritus. Nashville Christian Institute closed on June 2, 1967.

Marshall Keeble spoke annually in the Tennessee State Prison for approximately 30 years. From the 1930s to the 1950s, the decades of Keeble's greatest fame and accomplishments, his unique gifts influenced race relations in the Churches of Christ. It has been said that Keeble was the first person in the Churches of Christ who transcended the twentieth-century's color line. Notwithstanding, according to historian Bobby L. Lovett's *The African-American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930*, Keeble infuriated many African Americans by "reserving racially segregated seating for white visitors."

During his long career, Marshall Keeble received many honors. He was the first African American to become the subject of academic studies among leading preachers of the Churches of Christ. In 1954, Keeble

was honored as the "Man of the Hour," on WLAC sponsored by the Business and Professional Women's Club. Two years later, he was presented a citation by President Hugh H. Tiner of George Pepperdine College. In 1960, he was made an honorary chief of the Nigerian tribe; in 1964, he was featured in the "Magazine Section" of the *Nashville Tennessean*. A year later, Harding University in Arkansas awarded him an honorary doctor of Laws degree; Governor Frank G. Clement appointed him the first African-American "Colonel Aide-De-Camp," an honorary colonel on the Governor's staff, and Mayor Beverly Briley presented Keeble (on his birthday) with a bronze plaque.

Marshall Keeble preached his last sermon on April 17, 1968. He died on April 20, 1968. Five days later, Keeble's funeral service was held at the Madison Church of Christ where his eulogy was delivered by Benton Cordell Goodpasture, editor of the *Gospel Advocate*. Keeble's body was buried in Greenwood Cemetery. In 1984, the African Christian Schools foundation established the Marshall Keeble Scholarship Fund.

Some thirty years after Keeble's death, his life's work continues to be recognized and honored. In 1996, Tracy Blair completed a master's thesis, "For a Better Tomorrow: Marshall Keeble and George Philip Bowser, African-American Ministers," at Middle Tennessee State University. On October 15, 1999, The Tennessee Historical Commission approved the placement of a historical marker commemorating the life of Marshall Keeble, one of the most notable and most conquering itinerant ministers of the Churches of Christ.

-Linda T. Wynn

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