



# CIVIL STEPS

## Tennessee's crucial role in the civil rights saga

*Photographs courtesy of Nashville Public Library, The Nashville Room, from the Nashville Banner Archives.*

Tennessee has had its share of civil rights chapters. In fact, some of the most important milestones in the civil rights movement took place here. Since February is Black History Month, I thought I'd list some of the more interesting chapters of the civil rights movement that are related to the Volunteer State:

### Ida Wells and James Napier

Everyone today seems to think that the civil rights movement started in the 1950s and peaked in the 1960s. Not true. Black Tennesseans such as Ida Wells and James Napier were working for the cause of civil rights in the late 19th century. In 1884, for

instance, Wells was forcibly removed from the first-class ladies' coach on a railroad, and she sued the railroad as a result. Wells later conducted a written campaign to draw national attention to the problem of lynchings. But that campaign drew so much criticism from white Memphians that she moved to Chicago out of fear that she, too, might be killed.

### Mordecai Johnson

Many of the civil rights leaders and workers in the 1960s went to Howard University in Washington, D.C., which was, for a time, the most important educational institution for African-



Grace McKinley escorts her daughter, Linda Gail McKinley, and a friend to Fehr Elementary School, at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Garfield Street in Nashville on Sept. 9, 1957. Mrs. McKinley walks through an irate crowd of segregationists and public school desegregation protestors carrying picket signs.



Americans in the United States. The president of that institution from 1926 until 1960 was Henry County native Mordecai Johnson.

### Highlander Folk School

Some of the most prominent people in the civil rights movement received training and support from the Highlander Folk School in Grundy County. This private institution, started in the 1930s, promoted labor unions during the Great Depression and shifted to promoting racial equality in the 1950s.

The Highlander Folk School trained many civil rights leaders — including Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — in nonviolent protest methods. In fact, there is a famous photograph of King sitting next to Highlander founder Myles Horton that was distributed in an attempt to discredit King. In 1959, the school was investigated by the Tennessee General Assembly. It was later shut down by the local sheriff.

### Mink Slide riots

The first race riot in America after World War II occurred in Maury County in October 1946. It all started with an argument between a black Navy veteran and a white shopkeeper. Later that same day there was shooting, fighting and rioting between whites and blacks in a part of Columbia known as Mink Slide. Several people were later charged with rioting and attempted murder; the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People attorney who came to Columbia to defend the African-Americans in the case was Thurgood Marshall. Marshall, of course, later became the first black member of the U.S. Supreme Court.

### Clinton High School

In 1956, Clinton High School in Anderson County became the first high school in the South to integrate. People there still believe that things would have gone smoothly if it weren't for the fact that people came in from all over the country to protest what was happening. Eventually things got violent, and Gov. Frank Clement sent in state troopers to restore order. Later that school year, Bobby Cain became the first African-American to graduate from an integrated public high school in the South.

### Sit-in movement and bombing in Nashville

Then there was the sit-in movement, which was most dramatic in Nashville. In early 1960, after months of careful planning, about 100 students staged sit-in protests at stores with lunch counters in downtown Nashville such as Woolworth's and Walgreens. At first, both Nashville newspapers were critical of the students. But eventually, public opinion turned. The majority of the people in the African-American community began boycotting downtown retailers in protest. The Tennessean changed its tone and began sympathizing with the students. When Vanderbilt University expelled a divinity student, James Lawson, for being a leader in the movement, many members of the faculty protested.



**Student demonstrators are arrested and escorted into a paddy wagon after a nonviolent protest at the Greyhound Bus Terminal at Sixth Avenue and Commerce Street in Nashville on March 3, 1960. Students continued demonstrations in an effort to desegregate all public accommodations.**

Then, on April 19, 1960, someone hurled a bomb through the window of the home of Z. Alexander Looby, one of Nashville's most prominent black lawyers and a man who had been representing the students. No one was killed, but later that day, an estimated 3,000 people marched from Tennessee State University to the courthouse. Under pressure, Nashville mayor Ben West said he would order all lunch counters to be integrated. Nashville's sit-ins achieved their goals so peacefully that Martin Luther King later referred to it as a "model movement."

### Perry Wallace

It wasn't that long ago that all the athletes in the Southeastern Conference were white. But this changed in the 1960s. The first high-profile black athlete, and the first scholarship basketball player, was Perry Wallace. Wallace grew up in Nashville and went to Pearl High School (now Pearl-Cohn). He was a star basketball player for Vanderbilt from 1967 until 1970. Today he is a professor at the Washington College of Law at American University.

### Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Finally, it was within our borders that the assassination of Martin Luther King occurred. King was here to show support for Memphis sanitation workers who had gone on strike a couple of months earlier. (Most, but not all, of those workers were black.) The strike started in February 1968. By late March, the strike and the reaction to it had led to riots and the occupation of the city by 4,000 National Guardsmen.

These were tense times. On the night of April 3, King made his famous speech at Mason Temple in Memphis, predicting that "I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land." The next day, while he was standing on the balcony of his hotel, he was shot and killed by James Earl Ray. King's assassination led to riots all over the United States, and in the wake of his death, the city of Memphis (under pressure from President Lyndon Johnson) began working with the sanitation workers' labor union.

The Lorraine Motel, where King was killed, is now the National Civil Rights Museum. ➡

## Tennessee History for Kids



*Bill Carey is a Nashville author and executive director of "Tennessee History for Kids," an online Tennessee history textbook. For more great stories of Tennessee history, go to [www.tnhistoryforkids.org](http://www.tnhistoryforkids.org).*