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2018

### Nettie Langston Napier

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#### Recommended Citation

Williams, Learotha, "Nettie Langston Napier" (2018). *Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture*. 47.

<https://digitalscholarship.tnstate.edu/conference-on-african-american-history-and-culture/47>

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# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



## Nettie Langston Napier

Nettie Langston Napier, former chair of the National Association of Colored Women, historic preservationist, president of Nashville's Day Home Club, and noted civic and social activist, was born in Oberlin, Ohio, on June 17, 1861. Born the daughter of John Mercer and Carrie Wall Langston, Nettie grew up in one of the most prestigious African American families in the United States, an upbringing that exposed her to the central tenets of civic engagement and the struggle for black equality in the North. Growing up in the Langston household had a tremendous effect on her activism during the decades of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

At the age of 18, while enrolled at Oberlin College, she met, was wooed by, and consented to marry the up and coming Nashville businessman and politician, James Carroll Napier. In what can be described as the African American "Wedding of the Century" during the period immediately following Reconstruction, their nuptials received acclaim from blacks and whites throughout the United States. Her wedding dresses—one a dress created by the famed African American White House modiste, Madame Elizabeth Keckley, and the other a gown that was reported by observers to reflect "various hues of the rainbow" under certain lighting—made the wedding an event that showcased the wealth and potential of African Americans as freed persons.

It was Napier's residency in Nashville, however, that initiated the activism that would define her life and provide her both national and international acclaim. Shortly after her arrival in

the city, she became involved in Nashville's Women's Club movement. Arguably, her crowning achievement was the success of the city's Day Home Club, an institution that she had first imagined while enrolled at Oberlin. The Day Home Club, first located at 618 4th Avenue South, was created to provide a place for working mothers who had jobs that required them to leave home early or return late to drop off their children while they worked. While at the Day Home Club, the staff provided childcare, meals, education, healthcare, and shelter at no cost to the women or their families.

The Day Home Club's operation depended largely on private donations and volunteers from the Nashville community, and its overall success came as a result of Napier's skills as an organizer and fundraiser. As leader of the Day Home Club, she appointed vice presidents for each of Nashville's city wards, making them responsible for raising money and soliciting donations for the home and its children. Donations came into the house from all segments of the city's African American population, with private donations ranging from fifty cents to \$5. At her request, Preston Taylor, prominent Nashville African American undertaker and founder of the popular Greenwood Park and Cemetery, completely furnished one of the rooms, while Castner Knotts' Dry Goods had quilts, sheets, and other goods delivered to the location.

While her exemplary work with the Day Home Club gave rise to her growing acclaim in Nashville's social circles as someone with a deep and abiding interest in the well-being of the city's underclass, it was her work as a member of

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This publication is a project of the 2018 Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture.

The author compiled the information. The Metropolitan Historical Commission edited and designed the materials.

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the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) that brought her national fame. Organized in Washington, DC, in 1895, the NACW became the first national black organization in the United States. Operating under the slogan, "Lifting as We Climb," this group, spearheaded by middle to upper-middle class African American women like herself, sought to provide much-needed social services to the African American community. The NACW's vital tasks included providing childcare, medical care, job training, and education for black women and their children.

It was while serving as the custodian of funds for the Douglass Memorial Historical Association that Nettie Langston Napier was involved in perhaps her greatest accomplishment, the saving of the Frederick Douglass Home in Anacostia, Washington, DC. Between July 1916 and July 1922, the NACW collected more than \$18,000 in donations on behalf of the site, a figure sufficient to pay off the home's remaining mortgage, begin renovations, and beautify the grounds. Under her watch, Frederick Douglass's Cedar Hill home became a "museum for generations unborn," and it stands today as a monument to Napier's activism.

Although her work with the NACW and Douglass Home kept her on the road for much of her career, Napier remained very active in the Nashville community. An accomplished pianist, she could often be found playing and raising her contralto voice at public and private musical programs throughout the city. She was also a source of relief for many needy young adults who

came to the city seeking an education, and often offered assistance to them at the local black colleges. During World War I, she was selected by the Red Cross to assist in its campaign to send comfort items such as hand-knitted socks, sweaters, razors, and surgical dressings to Allied troops and civilians in Europe.

As America entered into the throes of the Great Depression, Napier's health began to decline, causing her to remain under a physician's care for the last years of her life. In August 1938, her condition took a turn for the worse, and her physicians moved her from her home at 120 15th Avenue North to Hubbard Hospital where she succumbed to congestive heart failure on September 27, 1938. Upon her death, Nashville lost one of its most outstanding citizens. During her lifetime, Nettie Langston Napier's grace and empathy for the plight of the marginalized and forgotten in American society made her one of the most extraordinary African Americans in Nashville's past.

-- Learotha Williams, Jr., Ph.D.

For Further Reading:

Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson,  
*A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America*. Broadway Books, 1999.

Beverly Bond and Sarah Wilkerson Freeman,  
*Tennessee Women: Their Lives and Times—Volume 2* (Southern Women: Their Lives and Times), University of Georgia Press, 2015.

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