

Asberry, Nettie J. Craig (15 July 1865 – 17 Nov. 1968), classical pianist, civil rights activist, and social worker, was born Nettie Craig in Leavenworth, Kansas, the daughter of William P. Wallingford, a wealthy British immigrant farmer and Violet Craig, his former slave. Wallingford fathered six of Violet's children. Nettie was the youngest, and the only one born free.

Seen by her siblings as intelligent and musically gifted, they pooled their financial resources to assist with her education. She began studying the piano at eight years of age. Nettie's love of classical music helped her to master the piano. Later she composed her own music. Nettie was granted a Teacher of Music degree from the Kansas Conservatory of Music and Elocution in Leavenworth, Kansas, on June 12, 1883 and later attended the University of Kansas when few women of any race were attending college. She is believed to be one of the first black women to receive her Ph.D.

Nettie took her musical talent with her and taught school and music in the Black town of Nicodemus, Kansas where she and her family were early settlers. Later she taught in Denver, Colorado where her stepfather, Taylor Turner, her mother, and several siblings began settling in the late 1880's. Spiritually astute and devoted to her church community, Nettie played for churches and directed choirs. When the great Seattle fire occurred in 1889, it sparked her interest in the Pacific Northwest. In 1890, after a Kansas marriage to Albert Jones, they relocated to Seattle, Washington. She was chosen as the first organist and musical director for The First African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME Church) in Seattle. In 1893, after Albert's tragic death, Nettie returned to her family. In 1895, she resettled in Tacoma, Washington, where she was

organist and musical director for Tacoma's First AME Church. On February 23, 1895 she married Henry J. Asberry. Referred to as the "barber de luxe", and a well liked businessman, Henry was the owner of the Tacoma Hotel Barbershop. Among his clients were many dignitaries including Mark Twain, and Vice Presidents Calvin Coolidge and Charles W. Fairbanks. Neither marriage produced any children.

Assertive and self-assured, and a devoted wife, Dr. Nettie J. Asberry, as she was then referred to, devoted much of her time to teaching music. Many students of diverse races studied piano in her beautiful library and music room. There she organized "The Mozart Music Club"; its goal was to broaden young people's scope of musical culture and to study the careers of the great music writers. Her annual piano recitals presented 45 or more students. Motivated by the burning desire to uplift her race Dr. Asberry also taught black history to her neighborhood youth.

The black women in Tacoma and the surrounding counties were progressive and devoted to their communities. In 1908, Dr. Asberry was among these women who founded the Cloverleaf Club, an organization formed to exhibit their needlecraft and artwork. These club members were determined in their pursuit to participate in the Washington women's exhibit of the Seattle World's Fair in 1909. They paid for their exhibit space by selling "colored dolls." At the Fair they earned a gold medal for their entire exhibit; a bronze medal for the handmade Battenburg lace opera coat Dr. Asberry and her sister Martha Craig Johnson made, and a bronze medal for the ceramics and paintings of another club member, Mrs. Hiram Moore-Baker. The opera coat is preserved in the Nettie J. Asberry collection at The Washington State Historical Museum, in Tacoma, Washington.

As one of the Northwest founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Dr. Asberry, helped establish branches in Tacoma, Seattle and Spokane, Washington, Portland, Oregon, including cities in Canada and Alaska. With Tacoma setting the pace, Dr. Asberry submitted the Tacoma charter application to the New York office. In 1913 Tacoma became the first NAACP group chartered west of the Rocky Mountains. Subsequently, she served as regional field secretary and later as the local branch secretary.

When the film “Birth of a Nation” debuted in 1916, it evoked Dr. Asberry’s strong-willed, militant side. She wrote a letter to the Tacoma newspapers protesting the movie’s release and its racist depiction of black people. She stated, “My blood was at the white heat point...No one can witness the production of this movie and be the same as before he saw it. No city can afford to have the equilibrium of its people disturbed” (*The Tacoma Ledger*, 1916).

In 1917, Dr. Asberry started numerous charitable women’s clubs, all of which became charter members of the Washington State Federation of Colored Women’s Organizations of Washington and Jurisdiction where she presided as president. The preamble to their constitution states their mission was to uplift their race. Dr. Asberry was also a member of the Progressive Mother’s Club of Tacoma and the Tacoma Inter-Racial Council. The Nettie J. Asberry Papers, found in Special Collections at the University of Washington Libraries in Seattle document the organizations’ agendas and progress.

Family oriented, socially astute, stylish in her attire, and quick witted in her conversation; she entertained friends at her lawn parties by playing croquet. Whether it

was her recovery from severe burns on her legs at age 85, from a floor heater, or fighting racism she used the same strength and determination to help build her community.

With devotion in her heart for her beloved Tacoma, in 1918, Dr. Asberry served compassionately as auxiliary chairman of the A. M.E. Red Cross Auxiliary. She said there was an infinite need for people who needed assistance and therefore volunteered much of her senior years to social causes and social work.

Dr. Asberry's achievements were recognized in a 1943 issue of the NAACP's official magazine, "The Crisis", where she was recognized as one of the "First Ladies of Colored America." On her 96th birthday Dr. Asberry told *The Tacoma News Tribune* that, "Courage is the saving grace in this tense world racial situation. Courage of the white people who dare to show their fairness by helping us achieve positions of human dignity; and courage of those of other races who risk insults by quietly asserting their rights as human beings" (*The Tacoma News Tribune*, 1961).

Dr. Nettie Asberry died, 17 November 1968, at 103 years old. She was a proactive crusader for human rights whose voice was vividly heard and a classical musician whose instrument was used to nurture and uplift lives. During her lifetime Dr. Asberry was instrumental in bringing influential people to the Northwest, including Mme. C.J. Walker, W.E.B. DuBois, Clarence C. White, Roland Hayes, James Weldon Johnson, William Pickens, and Mary B. Talbot. In memory of her achievements, the mayor of Tacoma, proclaimed, May 11, Dr. Nettie J. Asberry Day. Named in her honor, The Asberry Cultural Club of Tacoma, in November 2004, celebrated its fiftieth

anniversary. The Tacoma African American Museum maintains an exhibit on Dr. Nettie J. Asberry.

Dr. Asberry was a member of the Baha'i faith for twenty-five years, an organization that bases its values on the brotherhood of man. In her quest for "harmony between the races" (*Tacoma News Tribune*, 18 April 1976, page E3) she hoped to see the end of racism and worked tirelessly within her community to make it a place where people from diverse walks of life could live a dignified existence.

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Further Reading:

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