

Arts, Music, and Equal Rights: Nettie Asberry

by Abby Rhinehart

Nettie Craig was an African American woman born in 1865 in Kansas. She was the youngest of six children. Her brothers and sisters were born slaves and freed after the Civil War. Nettie was the only one of her mother Violet's children who was born free.

Craig started playing piano when she was eight, and was very skilled. At age 13, Craig became interested in women's suffrage and became the secretary for a local club that supported giving women the right to vote.

At the time, it was not common for women or people who were not white to attend college. But Craig enrolled in the University of Kansas, and stayed in until she got a doctorate of music. A "doctorate" program is school that people can stay in if they want to continue studying a topic after college. Craig is probably the first African American woman in the United States to get a doctorate. She got this degree in 1883.

Craig taught music in Kansas City and Denver. She spent a lot of her time playing for churches and directing choirs. In 1893, Craig moved to Tacoma. She was organist and musical director for the First African Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1895, Nettie married Henry Asberry, a well-known African American businessman. He owned the Tacoma Hotel Barbershop.

In 1910, Washington state gave women the right to vote. However, many places created extra barriers to stop African Americans from voting, like reading tests.

Nettie organized clubs to support art and music. She started a music club for children called the Mozart Musical Club. She also helped start the Cloverleaf Club. This club put together a display of art by African American women at the 1909 Alaska-Yukon Pacific Exposition.

Nettie also helped create a branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Tacoma in 1913. The NAACP argued for the rights of African American people. That was the first branch of that club formed on in the West. This club successfully fought for the right for people of different races to marry each other in Washington state. Nettie also protested racial segregation at the Fort Lewis military base.

Nettie Asberry died in 1968 at age 103. Throughout her life, she fought for the rights of women and African Americans and supported the arts and music.

Sources:

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Nettie Asberry. Image via HistoryLink.org



Henry, Mary T. "Asberry, Nettie Craig (1865-1968)." HistoryLink.org. <https://historylink.org/File/8632> (accessed Aug. 13, 2019).



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Footer images, left to right: "Woman forever march," Washington State Historical Society Catalog ID Number: 2010.151.4; "Woman's suffrage pin," Washington State Historical Society Catalog ID Number: C2008.0.132; "Votes for women: official organ of Washington Equal Suffrage Association," Washington State Historical Society Catalog ID Number 2000.104.38.14