

HISTORY COMMENTARY

Nettie Craig Asberry, A Pillar of Tacoma's African American Community

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COLUMBIA The Magazine of Northwest History, Fall 2005: Vol. 19, No. 3

Nettie J. Craig Asberry, my great aunt, was the youngest sibling of my grandfather, Berry Benjamin Craig. When Berry Craig died in 1958, at the age of 94, he left manuscripts that he had completed in the 1930s. My first knowledge of his work came more than 42 years after his death, in 2002, when my mother, Maybelle Craig Broussard, gave these papers to me. Some of Berry Craig's manuscripts appeared to be autobiographical and thus initiated my quest to validate his work through researching my family history. Looking through his research notes, I could see that his writing was based on factual historical incidents of his time—many he apparently witnessed. I began to research his siblings. In my search I discovered a great deal about the life and times of my Aunt Nettie.

Nettie Craig was born July 15, 1865, in Leavenworth, Kansas, the daughter of William P. Wallingford, an immigrant British farmer, and Violet, formerly his slave. In 1837 Wallingford had moved his family from Kentucky and settled on the Platte purchase in Missouri. He was married three times and fathered seventeen children, including Violet's six. Nettie, the youngest of these six siblings, was the only one born free. Information is scarce about Violet, except that when freed, she considered Wallingford's name to be her slave name and, therefore, rejected it. She adopted the surname of Craig, which she considered to be her maiden name, as her and her children's family name. This name possibly came from a Craig plantation in Kentucky where Violet was born in 1835.

Nettie appreciated her freedom and passionately refined and elevated her life through education and activism. She began studying piano at eight years of age, showing remarkable ability, and later composed her own music. At thirteen she was secretary for a Susan B. Anthony club. She remembered seeing Anthony when the woman suffrage leader and abolitionist came to Kansas to visit her own brother, who had been an antislavery activist and editor of the *Leavenworth Times*. Few women of any race were attending college when Nettie attended the University of Kansas. She was granted a "Teacher of Music" degree from the Kansas Conservatory of Music and Elocution in Leavenworth, Kansas, on June 12, 1883.

In the 1880s Nettie and her family were among the early settlers in the black town of Nicodemus, Kansas, where she was a music instructor and schoolteacher. Having collected material since her arrival, Nettie eventually wrote about Nicodemus history. In July 1950 a thesis was presented by a student to the graduate faculty at Fort Hays (Kansas) State College listing Nettie's unpublished manuscript (now lost) in its bibliography. Nicodemus is the only extant western town established by African Americans during Reconstruction.

Nettie taught music in Kansas City and Denver and spent a lot of her time playing for churches and directing choirs. In 1890, after marrying Albert Jones in Kansas, the newlyweds traveled by train to Seattle where she was the first organist and musical director for the First African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. At the age of 96, Nettie talked in a newspaper interview about their Seattle arrival, "News of the great Seattle fire in 1889 aroused a lot of interest in the Midwest. Many disposed of their belongings and moved to Seattle. We arrived amid much bustle and excitement. It was a good time of friendship and good neighborliness."

In 1893, after the tragic death of her first husband, Nettie returned to her family in Kansas. But she came back to Washington before long and settled in Tacoma where she continued her activities as organist and musical director for that city's First AME Church. On February 23, 1895, Nettie married Henry J. Asberry, a well-known businessman and the proprietor of the Tacoma Hotel Barbershop. A profile written about Henry Asberry in *Horace Roscoe Cayton: Selected Writings*, compiled and edited by Ed Diaz, stated: "He was a highly respected citizen, thorough businessman, and a heavy property owner." At the time of his death Henry had accumulated a considerable amount of property which Nettie inherited. Barbershop patrons of Asberry's included many distinguished persons, including superior court judges and visiting presidents of the United States. It was the custom for regular patrons to keep handsome decorated shaving mugs bearing their names on the barber's shelves. After Henry Asberry died, July 26, 1939, Nettie presented the collection to the Washington State Historical Society in Tacoma.

In 1908 Nettie was one of the organizers of the Cloverleaf Club, an arts organization formed for the exhibition of needle craft and artwork of black women in Pierce County. These women were determined to be a part of the Washington women's exhibit in Seattle's 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition. In order to pay for their exhibit space they sold "colored dolls." The club's exhibit at the Seattle World's Fair earned them a gold medal for their entire exhibit; a bronze medal for the handmade Battenburg lace opera coat made by Nettie and her sister, Martha Craig Townsend, and a bronze medal for the ceramics and paintings contributed by another club member, Mrs. Hiram Moore-Baker. The opera coat is preserved in the collection of the Washington State Historical Society.

For more than 50 years, Nettie Asberry's slender fingers taught many races at her piano. She presented classes of 45 or more in piano recital annually. She also taught black history at her home to many of the African American youths in her Tacoma neighborhood. Her house still stands today at 1219 S. 13th Street. A few students and their descendants and former neighbors remember her large library, beautiful piano, and, most important, her dedication to teaching music. "The Mozart Musical Club, a juvenile society organized last May under the direction of Mrs. Henry J. Asberry for the purpose of broader musical culture and the study of the lives of the great music writers, began its curriculum of studies...for this season," read a notice in the November 11, 1902, *Tacoma Ledger*.

Nettie was a strong-willed, no-nonsense woman, but she was also generous and compassionate. In the early 1900s her brother—my grandfather—was in a train accident and had to have his leg amputated. Nettie was by his bedside to help him through the ordeal.

In the late 1940s Aunt Nettie was warming herself by an electric heater when her gown caught fire. She had the presence of mind to roll on the floor to put out the flames. Although she suffered severe burns on her thighs, she recovered.

Aunt Nettie knew how to entertain and have a good time. She owned the grassy lot adjacent to her house. I remember being spellbound by all the grass and the fun of playing on it. This was where she and her guests played croquet.

Nettie's concern for her race and her community inspired her to be one of the Northwest founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Nettie personally submitted the Tacoma application to the New York office, and when it received its charter in 1913, Tacoma became the first NAACP group established west of the Rocky Mountains.

According to Aunt Nettie, the chapter's first action was to protest a measure against interracial marriages being pushed through the state legislature. She said they planted an undercover worker there who reported to them, and overnight they got together a lengthy car caravan of many people including whites, African Americans, Filipinos, and others. They surprised the powerful Rules Committee and defeated the measure.

For a time Nettie served as regional field secretary and later as local branch secretary. In 1943 an issue of *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP, published the record of Nettie's achievements and listed her as one of the "First Ladies" of colored America. On her 96th birthday Nettie said in an article in the *Tacoma News Tribune* (1961), "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."

In 1916 an insidious racism prevailed in the United States, marked by the release of the film, *Birth of a Nation*. This film was propaganda for the Ku Klux Klan, which experienced a dramatic rise in membership after its release. It portrayed freed slaves trying to rape white girls and attack white settlers, and it also showed the KKK lynching a black person. Nettie was elected secretary at a mass meeting of concerned people at the AME Church. It became her duty to draft a letter to the press protesting the release of the movie and its racist portrayal of black people. You get a feel for her activist nature as she describes how the movie affected her:

The rape scene, the intermarriage affair, the demoralized Negro soldiers—the insolence of the freemen—all pave the way for the advent of the notorious clansmen, who now come galloping over the screen by the hundreds...like a clap of thunder the applause breaks upon my ear. My blood was at the white heat point. Instantly I began to hiss in my feeling of resentment at the series of infamous lies. People turned around and stared at me, but I had lost my equilibrium; I was in a fighting mood.... 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 (Tacoma Ledger, 1916).

Nettie was known for her ambitious participation in statewide women's clubs. The mission of the self-help, charitable clubs was to uplift the black race. In 1917 Nettie started a number of these improvement clubs, all of which became charter members of the Washington State Federation of Colored Women's Organizations, which she served as president. In the preamble to its constitution the organization's purpose is stated: "We, the colored women of the State of Washington and Jurisdiction, feeling the need of united and systematic effort along moral, physical and intellectual lines, in order to elevate our race, do hereby unite into a State Federation." Nettie was also a member of the Progressive Mother's Club of Tacoma and the Tacoma Inter-Racial Council. The Nettie J. Asberry Papers, which are in the Manuscripts and Special Collections of the University of Washington Libraries contain correspondence, bulletins, notes, minutes, and agendas documenting the organizations' agendas.

In 1918, when segregation was to be established at Fort Lewis, Nettie Asberry was one of the committee members appointed to appear before the authorities and protest this racist maneuver. That same year she also served as chairman of the Allen AME Red Cross Auxiliary. She devoted much of her senior life to social causes and volunteered countless hours of social work to those who needed assistance. She said she chose social work in her senior years because there was an endless need for it.

Nettie Asberry died November 17, 1968, at 103 years of age. In 1969, in memory of her musical accomplishments and community work, the mayor of Tacoma, A. L. Rasmussen, proclaimed May 11 to be Nettie J. Asberry Day. In November 2004 the Asberry Cultural Club, named in her honor, celebrated its 50th anniversary in her remembrance. On this occasion I was presented with a quilt made by Nettie, probably in the early 1900s. A portrait of Nettie, painted and donated by Thomas Simms, hangs in the club's music room, which is named after her. In 1969 Simms was an inmate and artist at McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary.

The Tacoma African American Museum proudly displays an exhibit about Nettie Craig Asberry. Included in the exhibit is her coveted college diploma, which was lost and then found after her death in Nettie's garage by a neighbor. Aged and worn but preserved by the Asberry cultural club, it states, "The diploma assures to Nettie Craig the rights, privileges and dignities" of a Teacher of Music degree. Nettie's biography will be included in the *African American National Biography*, a book project headed by professors Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University.

For 25 years Nettie was a member of the Baha'i faith, an organization based on the brotherhood of man. She was quoted in an interview as saying, "The Baha'i faith includes intelligent people of all colors in all walks of life." In this spirit she pursued "harmony between the races." She applied the principles of music—*i.e.*, the beauty of form, harmony, and expression of emotion—and used them in a broader sense to try to heal the world's ills.

Though Nettie had no children, among her living descendants are my mother and myself—her niece and grandniece—plus three grandnephews, the younger generation of two great-grandnieces and four great-grandnephews, and the descendants of Sanford and Lulu Craig of Colorado.

Nettie Craig Asberry will be remembered as a remarkable woman, a proactive fighter for equal rights. She was constantly writing letters to newspaper editors to protest injustice and was instrumental in bringing a number of influential individuals to the Northwest, among them Mme. C. J. Walker, Mary B. Talbot, James Weldon Johnson, William Pickens, W. E. B. Du Bois, Clarence C. White, and Roland Hayes. She desired recognition for Tacoma and felt it did not deserve to live in Seattle's shadow. Along with many others in her community, Nettie worked tirelessly to make Tacoma a productive, desirable city, a place where people from all walks of life could settle and have a quality existence. She hoped to see the end of most racial difficulties there and across the country. Before she died she realized it would take much longer to iron out these problems. I continue to look up to her. Her driving spirit has given me direction and inspiration for my life.

Antoinette Broussard is an avid historian committed to the pursuit and documentation of her ancestral roots. She is currently working on a memoir about the Craig family, partially based on the manuscripts of her maternal grandfather, Berry Benjamin Craig.