

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Nashville Christian Institute Gymnasium
other names/site number House of God Church

2. Location

street & number 2420 Batavia Street NA not for publication
city or town Nashville NA vicinity
state Tennessee code TN county Davidson code 037 zip code 37208

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set for in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Herbert L. Gage 1/31/25
Signature of certifying official/Title Date
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Tennessee Historical Commission
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See Continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet
- determined eligible for the National Register.
 See continuation sheet
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register.
- other,
(explain:)

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Carole D. Hull

3-10-05

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in count)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

| Contributing | Noncontributing | |
|--------------|-----------------|------------|
| 1 | 0 | buildings |
| 0 | 0 | sites |
| 0 | 0 | structures |
| 0 | 0 | objects |
| 1 | 0 | Total |

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

Number of Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION/school

EDUCATION/education-related housing

RELIGION/church school

RECREATION AND CULTURE/sports facility

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/sports facility

RELIGION/religious facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

NO STYLE

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE

walls CONCRETE

BRICK

roof METAL

other METAL

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** moved from its original location.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS): N/A

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- Previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

- EDUCATION
- ETHNIC HERITAGE/African-American
- RELIGION
- SOCIAL HISTORY

Period of Significance

- 1956-1967
- 1956-1958 (for Keeble)

Significant Dates

- 1956
- 1967

Significant Person

(complete if Criterion B is marked)

Keeble, Marshall

Cultural Affiliation

NA

Architect/Builder

Unknown

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
 - Other State Agency
 - Federal Agency
 - Local Government
 - University
 - Other
- Name of repository:
MTSU Center for Historic Preservation

Nashville Christian Institute Gymnasium
Name of Property

Davidson Co., TN
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property .48 acres Nashville West 308 NE

UTM References

(place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

| | | | | | | | |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | <u>16</u> | <u>516810</u> | <u>4001882</u> | 3 | <u> </u> | <u> </u> | <u> </u> |
| | Zone | Easting | Northing | | Zone | Easting | Northing |
| 2 | <u> </u> | <u> </u> | <u> </u> | 4 | <u> </u> | <u> </u> | <u> </u> |

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Jaime Woodcock, Graduate Assistant and Laura Stewart Holder, Graduate Research Assistant
organization MTSU Center for Historic Preservation date November 23, 2004
street & number MTSU Box 80 telephone (615) 898-5990
city or town Murfreesboro state TN zip code 37132

Additional Documentation

submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 Or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO) or FPO for any additional items

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name House of God Church Keith Dominion, c/o Deacon John Thomas
street & number 2717 W. Heiman Street telephone (615)329-1625
city or town Nashville state TN zip code 37208

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listing. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20303.

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Nashville Christian Institute Gymnasium
Davidson Co., TN

7. DESCRIPTION

The only remaining building of the Nashville Christian Institute (NCI) is a large brick-veneer auditorium, gymnasium and classroom facility located in Nashville's historic Fisk-Meharry neighborhood at the corner of Batavia Street and 24th Avenue North. The NCI constructed this steel-frame building in 1956 for use as an auditorium, gymnasium and dormitory. Built through donations from Church of Christ patrons, the building's east façade features a flat-roof, enclosed entrance used for ticket collection during sporting or other recreational events. The dormitory or classroom spaces are found on the west elevation of the building. There is also a sizeable basement area under the gymnasium. Houses surround the building toward the north and south, and there are paved parking lots to the east and west. This modern-style building retains its original appearance and remains a landmark in this African-American community.

The NCI building has a rectangular plan and rests on a concrete block foundation. The land slopes downward toward the western end of the building and allows a partial basement area above grade. The walls of the steel-frame building are made of concrete block and are covered on the exterior by a brick veneer. The only decorative features of this stripped down building come from its polychromatic brick veneer of reds and grays. Window and door surrounds are metal, and all windows feature concrete sills. The auditorium/gymnasium portion of the building has a very shallow-pitched gable roof, and the dormitory or classroom portion has a flat roof like the building's enclosed central entrance. Each roofline is covered with raised-seam metal roofing.

The two story east façade has a low pitch gable roof with a gable vent and no embellishments. It is dominated by a single-story rectangular enclosed brick entryway that spans almost the length of the facade. The entrance has a flat roof, and contains two sets of centrally located ca. 1956 metal double-doors. The north and south sides of the entrance feature six-paned casement windows set in a slightly arched opening.

The north elevation contains banks of four, six-paned casement windows. The first set of windows is separated from the rest by a large brick exterior chimney. A sidewalk from the main central entrance leads to metal double doors beside one six-paned casement window and a bank of four casement windows on the basement level. The dormitory/classroom section of the building extends outward and features evenly spaced, four-paned casement windows on all three stories. On the north side of the dormitory/classroom section, there are concrete steps leading from the sidewalk to a recessed single metal door entrance.

The west elevation, like the other elevations, is devoid of embellishments. Each of the building's three stories has three pairs of double-paned casement windows. The southern part of the first story contains an additional window. Although there is a rear parking lot in front of this side of the building, this elevation does not have entry doors. A sidewalk from the main entrance leads to the basement level of the south elevation, where there are three entrances. One doorway is located under a small flat-roof awning next to a row of

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seven, six-paned casement windows. Two additional doors share a larger flat-roof covering. Two slender four-paned casement windows are located above these two doors. Banks of four six-paned casement windows line the third story of the south elevation and are separated by four brick pilasters.

The building's simplified interior reflects its functional style and construction materials. The interior wall surfaces throughout the building consist of painted concrete block. The gymnasium's exposed steel rafters display the building's steel-frame construction and serve as a decorative element in this largely unadorned building. The gymnasium's west wall features an elevated stage area with vertical wood paneling and a decorative painted wood backdrop. Retractable wooden bleachers, a wood floor, and wood door surrounds comprise additional interior features of the gymnasium. A stairwell on the northwestern corner of the building leads to the dormitory and classroom areas. The dormitory/classroom section has two-toned painted concrete block walls, carpeted floors, and wood door surrounds.

A small lawn occupies the east portion of the building lot. A concrete parking lot is located behind the building. A gravel road runs along an alley to form the lot's east boundary, and a sidewalk forms the west boundary. The neighborhood surrounding the building is completely residential, primarily comprised of early to mid-twentieth century brick homes and shotgun-style houses. The neighborhood that houses the NCI is bordered to the north and west by Jefferson Street, and to the east by the Meharry Medical College and Fisk University (NR2/29/78) campuses. These surrounding neighborhoods are some of Nashville's most well known historic African-American neighborhoods, and continue to serve as educational, cultural, and business centers for the black community.

The original campus was comprised of two buildings, the former Ashcraft School building built ca. 1906 (which has since been demolished) and the auditorium/gymnasium built in 1956. Despite changes wrought by desegregation and interstate construction to this area during the second half of the twentieth century, the NCI building continues to serve as a neighborhood anchor and community institution for youth and religion, much as it did during its function as the auditorium/dormitory of the Nashville Christian Institute.

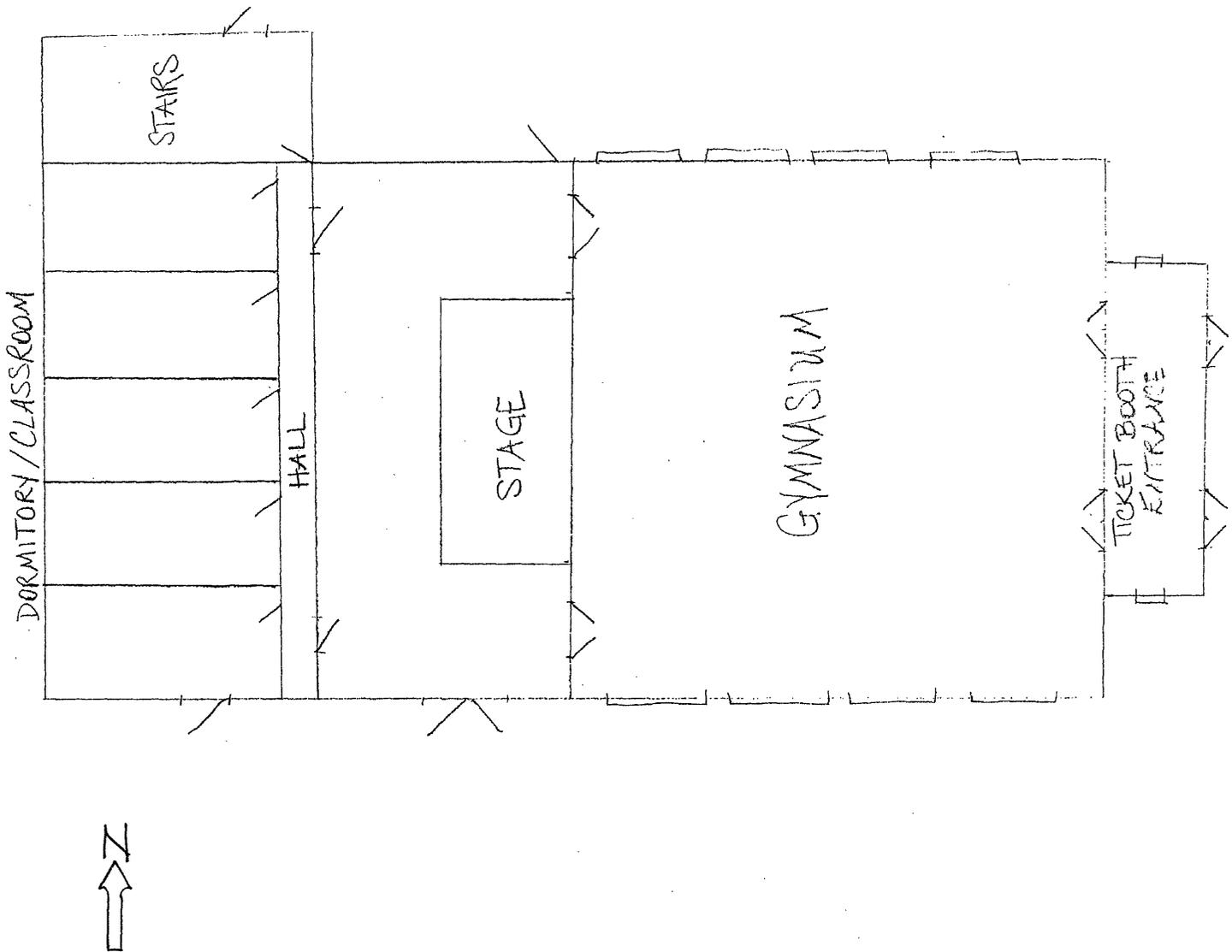
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Sketch plan not to scale



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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Nashville Christian Institute (NCI) Gymnasium is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and B. From 1956, when this building was constructed, until the school closed its doors in 1967, the NCI Gymnasium was a significant factor in African-American religious education, and the history of the Church of Christ and Nashville's African-American Christian community during segregation and the Civil Rights Movement. An all-black co-educational institution, the NCI educated as many as 500 preachers during its history and served as "a gathering place and focus of encouragement for black Christians."¹ The NCI is also eligible under Criterion B from 1956 to 1958 due to its association with Marshall Keeble (1878-1968), an African-American evangelist known worldwide for his preaching abilities. Born in Rutherford County, Tennessee, to former slaves, Keeble came from a long line of preachers and began his own evangelical career at the age of eighteen. Keeble served as president of the NCI from 1942 to 1958 and President Emeritus until the school closed in 1967. Throughout his seventy-one years of preaching, Keeble established hundreds of churches and baptized tens of thousands of blacks and whites all over the country and world. Admired by blacks and whites alike, Keeble was the best-known African-American leader in the Church of Christ during the twentieth century. Despite its status as a religious property, the NCI meets Criteria Consideration A due to the broad historical importance of the school and its famous leader, Marshall Keeble, to Nashville. Constructed in 1956, the nominated property also meets Criteria Consideration G because it is the only remaining building of the historically significant NCI. The NCI gymnasium/auditorium, the last remaining vestige of Keeble's most influential base for ministry, evangelism, and education, is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its exceptional significance to African-American Christian education in Nashville, the role it played in race relations between black and white Church of Christ members across the country, and for its deep connection to Marshall Keeble, whose evangelism affected lives across the nation and world and continues to be felt today through the work and leadership of the students he taught at NCI.

NARRATIVE

The NCI, established in 1940, was a co-educational school for African-American students from elementary to high school level. Affiliated with the Church of Christ, its primary objectives were to provide African-American boys and girls with a Christian education, and to train young men for the ministry. These goals were actively pursued by renowned African-American evangelist Marshall Keeble, president of the NCI from 1942 until his retirement in 1958. Although white Church of Christ patrons generously funded the school, it had no regular endowment and suffered from lack of funds for most of its existence. The NCI closed in 1967, shortly after the integration of all Nashville schools, and its archives are now held at David Lipscomb University in Nashville.

¹ "An Angry Peace: Race and Christian Education," *ACU Today*, Online Edition, Spring 2000. Available: <http://www.acu.edu/acu-today/spring2000/cover02a.html> [31 March 2003].

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The origin of the NCI was closely connected to the founding of a small school at the Jackson Street Church of Christ in Nashville, created to inspire the next generation of young African-Americans "through spiritual and academic training."² Originally called the Silver Point School, it was founded in 1907 by George Phillip (G.P.) Bowser, S. W. Womac, Aleck Campbell, and Marshall Keeble, who served as the school's treasurer. G. P. Bowser, another well-known and respected preacher in the black community, left the staff in 1918 and the school closed two years later due to a lack of sufficient funding and well-trained teachers. The dream of opening a Christian school for black children was again resurrected with the short-lived Southern Practical Institute as well as with plans for a Nashville Bible Institute, but both were ultimately unsuccessful.³

In 1920, P. H. Black, J. E. Holmes, J. D. Fowler, and white Church of Christ patrons were eager to help their brethren acquire a Christian education.⁴ The men purchased the Heffernan property, a seven-acre tract containing a 12-room antebellum home for \$7,000. They planned to use the building to house a new school for blacks, "the only Christian school known among the colored brethren of the Churches of Christ," now called the Nashville Christian Institute.⁵ Despite efforts to repair and stock the school with supplies, a lack of funding and proper organization delayed the school's opening for several years. In 1939, the city of Nashville wanted the Heffernan property for a new elementary school, and gave the NCI \$11,500 and the old Ashcraft School Building on 24th Avenue North for their school. A year later, the Nashville Christian Institute opened in the former Ashcraft School Building, and became the first Church of Christ school for black children in the country.⁶ The school briefly functioned as a night school for adults, offering classes in Bible, English, history, mathematics, public speaking, and some vocational trades, but quickly became a school for black children, offering an Christian education both boys and girls.⁷ The opening of the school provided the realization of a lifelong dream for Keeble. "Keeble's great desire was to found a school to train ministers . . . his dream became a reality in the establishment of the Nashville Christian Institute, a school to 'supply the many millions of colored people of this land and other countries with gospel workers and evangelists.'"⁸

² J.E. Choate. *Roll Jordan Roll: A Biography of Marshall Keeble.* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1974), 109.

³ Ibid, 109-110.

⁴ See article by Fred M'Gee in *Gospel Advocate* (1928): 271.

⁵ *Gospel Advocate* (1928): 271.

⁶ "An Angry Peace: Race and Christian Education." *ACU Today*, Online Edition, Spring 2000. Available: <http://www.acu.edu/acu-today/spring2000/cover02a.html>. [31 March 2003].

⁷ Tracy L. Blair, "For a Better Tomorrow: Marshall Keeble and George Phillip Bowser, African-American Ministers," MTSU Thesis, 1996, pp. 50ff; and J. E. Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1968, pp. 109-112. Sometime before 1940 the name was changed from Nashville Bible to Nashville Christian Institute.

⁸ Paul D. Phillips, "The Interracial Impact of Marshall Keeble, Black Evangelist, 1878-1968." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 36, 1977, 72.

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From the NCI's inception, Marshall Keeble maintained a close involvement with the school's development as well as the spiritual and educational development of its students. During the school's first two years, he served on the Board of Directors. In 1942, the school became an accredited school through donations from Church of Christ members that allowed it to purchase the necessary books and equipment required by the Tennessee Board of Education. As a result, the school was now able to include co-educational classes from kindergarten through twelfth grade. That same year, Marshall Keeble became the school's first administrator to hold the title of "President."⁹ The NCI fulfilled Keeble's philosophy of the importance of Christian education for black children. The school's curriculum included Keeble's view of a "good secular education," but those studies remained secondary to the study of the Bible and religious teachings.¹⁰ Primarily, Keeble wanted to educate his students for life in the ministry, specifically the Church of Christ ministry. "When brethren help us in the work at Nashville Christian Institute," he wrote in 1952, "they are helping us prepare these young men to meet anyone who may oppose them or who may challenge the church of Christ."¹¹

In addition to teaching and administration, during his NCI presidency Keeble was highly influential in maintaining the school's expansion and upkeep through continual fundraising. Keeble's dedicated leadership inspired fellow Church of Christ member A.M. Burton to provide much-needed financial support to the NCI. One of Keeble's first patrons, A. M. Burton founded The Life and Casualty Company of Nashville. Burton initially took an interest in Keeble in the 1920s when the latter was building an illustrious career as an itinerant preacher and evangelist.¹² Burton's interest followed Keeble to the NCI, and he helped the school gain its first accreditation, as well as expand beyond the original Ashcraft building. He credited his support of Christian education for African Americans to the influence of David Lipscomb, Restoration preacher, longtime editor of the *Gospel Advocate*, and founder of the university that bears his name.¹³ Burton became chairman of the NCI's board of directors and retained that position throughout the school's history. J. E. Choates, in his biography of Keeble, implies that one of the reasons for NCI's closing was diminished interest on Burton's part that accompanied Keeble's diminished role in the school after his retirement in 1958.¹⁴

Although he relied heavily on his close friend Burton for funds, Keeble himself was an effective fundraiser for the school, frequently writing columns in the *Gospel Advocate*, the oldest journal published by the Church of Christ, and *The Christian Chronicle*, an international newspaper for Church of Christ members, describing the school's continuing needs and imploring financial help

⁹ Choate, *ibid.* p. 113.

¹⁰ Darrell Broking, "Marshall Keeble and the Implementation of a Grand Strategy: Erasing the Color Line in The Church of Christ," ETSU Thesis, 2003, 53.

¹¹ Marshall Keeble, *Gospel Advocate* (1952): 486.

¹² Keeble is said to have baptized anywhere from 15, 000 to 50, 000 souls during his life's career.

¹³ See Burton quoted in Choate, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

¹⁴ Choate, *ibid.*, p. 127: "The plain truth is that A. M. Burton became primarily interested in the Nashville Christian Institute as a training ground for Negro preachers under the talented guidance of Marshall Keeble."

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from readers. The closing paragraphs of his columns often read, "Brethren, after you read this, send us a donation. . . . Pray for us."¹⁵ Keeble's ability to secure donations was critical to the school's existence and expansion as enrollment grew. Many of the school's needs were met with the help of donations he raised; as a result, the school acquired a bus in 1949, refurbished the Ashcraft School Building in 1955, and built a dormitory and a gymnasium in 1956.¹⁶ Upon completion of the new building under Keeble's direction, NCI Bible teacher J.W. Brents noted in an article to the *Gospel Advocate* that "truly the school is built around this outstanding man of God."¹⁷

Despite the new building, the school was constantly in need of supplies and classroom materials, and could not offer its teachers as much as the public school system. Although the school was poor in resources, it was not lacking in the enthusiasm of Keeble, its staff, and its students. J. W. Brents taught at NCI for eighteen years, and referred to his students as "my boys."¹⁸ Mary Campbell, a speech teacher, and Annie Tuggle, a history teacher, were educators with devoted careers at NCI. The school also boasted a chorus that performed at many churches in Nashville, both black and white.

Keeble's personal pride and joy, however, were his "boy preachers," young students whom he personally trained as his protégés in preaching the gospel and often took with him to preach at revivals and meetings across the country. These boys impressed crowds with their knowledge of the Scripture, often being able to recite passages at great length from memory, and their public speaking talents attracted many donations to the school. Keeble made sure these students received practical training in preaching by sending them out to different congregations and other gatherings. "Many of our boys," Keeble wrote, "go out on week ends and preach for weak congregations near by, and during the summer hold meetings and bring precious souls to our Lord."¹⁹ These special students thus fulfilled what Keeble and most donors considered the most important work of the school; training young African Americans to work in the churches and preach to their own people.

In addition to training and mentoring his students, one of Keeble's crowning achievements at NCI was an annual lecture series for the public, first held in the Central Church of Christ. Later the lectureships were held at the NCI campus in the new auditorium/gymnasium built in 1956, where Keeble taught Bible classes and lectured.²⁰ The programs ran from one to eight weeks and included lectures and sermons by some of the Church of Christ's best speakers, both white and black. For a modest tuition fee, men and women attended lectures on the Bible, Christian

¹⁵ *Gospel Advocate* (1949): 402-403.

¹⁶ Furthermore, Keeble and his wife boarded female students at their house for many years. Choate, 124.

¹⁷ *Gospel Advocate* (1956): 589.

¹⁸ Choate, *ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁹ *Gospel Advocate* (1950): 842.

²⁰ Choate, 123. Choate states that "programs of this kind were presented in the Marshall Keeble Hall on the Institute campus." This is the only reference found which refers to the gymnasium/auditorium as "Marshall Keeble Hall."

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education, and various topics of Christian living. Several of the lectureship classes were designed for women, concentrating specifically on women's roles in the Church and in educating young girls in Christian living. By the mid-1950s, the lecture series was attracting more than three hundred attendees a year and was considered important for forging relations between black and white Church of Christ leaders, as well as for raising funds for the school. The lectureship series, which ran under Keeble's direction for 18 years, provided an outlet for both fellowship and learning. Mary Lambert Campbell, who assisted him in planning the programs, stated that "It was Brother Keeble who gave life and leadership to all that was done. . . during the program various brethren spoke; but it was Brother Keeble who, by his comments, before and after each speech, by answering questions, settling differences, scripturally and tactfully, dealing with current issues, gave a tremendous lift to all who attended."²¹ In addition to preaching and baptisms he had performed across the country, the lecture series also extended Keeble's influence far beyond Nashville; attendees to the lectures in the 1950s came from twenty different states.²² Keeble extended an invitation to all his readers: "Come, brother, and let us do you good."²³

Keeble's profound influence within the Churches of Christ during the first half of the twentieth century is remarkable considering the racism that pervaded the denomination during the twentieth century. As the Civil Rights era gained momentum, churches were often the centers of early Civil Rights movements. The Churches of Christ, however, focused on the advancement of the church itself rather than for social change. During this time, the socially conservative Churches of Christ rejected the idea of the "social gospel" which focused on social ministries designed to help the physical and emotional needs of poor and less fortunate. The church believed its mission, as dictated by a strict literal reading of the Bible, was to save individual souls through spreading the gospel, rather than working to provide for the worldly daily needs of others.²⁴ Working to gain equality for their black brethren fell into the latter category. Most congregations failed to acknowledge the Church's institutionalized segregation or any responsibility to change it, while others went so far as to endorse segregation by having members in the Ku Klux Klan.²⁵

Because of this attitude within a majority of the Churches of Christ, it is a testament to Keeble's generous spirit, outstanding preaching ability, and far-reaching influence that he was allowed to preach and lecture at a number of all-white churches and schools. Keeble was highly respected by many white Christians for his powerful speaking ability, deep faith, and dedication to the NCI, and was frequently asked to speak at all-white institutions such as Freed-Hardeman in Henderson, Tennessee and Abilene Christian College in Abilene, Texas in an era when schools and churches throughout the South were highly segregated. However, Keeble's interaction with white Churches

²¹ *Gospel Advocate* (1968): 460.

²² *Gospel Advocate* (1956): 503.

²³ See *ibid.*, (1956): 213, 503.

²⁴ Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Stories of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids,

MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 278-9.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 281.

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of Christ remained a separate one; he was allowed to preach to white congregations, yet was rarely allowed to eat with, stay with, or at times even shake hands with white church members. Heavily dependent on white members for resources, he tolerated numerous indignities in order to make the most of white financial support that allowed him to spread the gospel.²⁶ Church historian Richard Hughes states that “one finds in Marshall Keeble, therefore, a man who exploited the prevailing patterns of institutionalized racism in order to preach the gospel to as wide an audience as possible.”²⁷

Many whites in the Jim Crow South appreciated him for his humility and deference in a white-controlled society, and this attitude helped diffuse some of the Church’s racial tensions.²⁸ However, his reluctance to press sensitive racial issues which endeared him as innocuous to many whites often branded him as weak to many blacks. Some black leaders in the Churches of Christ such as G.P. Bowser, the second most influential black preacher in the Churches of Christ, adamantly rejected white paternalism and segregation.²⁹ Bowser opposed Keeble as a racial accommodationist, much in the way W. E. B. DuBois had opposed the views of Booker T. Washington a generation before. Like Washington, however, Keeble believed that he had to appeal to white benefactors to keep his school in adequate financial standing, although, “. . . [i]n fact, his message promoted meekness and racial deference.”³⁰ What other people considered deferential behavior; however, Keeble considered being a good Christian and living according to the teachings of the Bible. Keeble explained his philosophy best by saying, “Force is wrong. We used to have more integration but we didn’t know it had a name. We thought it was just being friendly.”³¹ Keeble believed that “the gospel of Christ will knock out of us all the prejudice and malice we have against any man.”³²

Although he was not usually explicit about his social and Civil Rights views to white audiences, Keeble often counseled his NCI students about race issues, telling them to “adjust [their] gears” in the face of social discrimination. What was truly most important to him was whether a person tried to be a good Christian, and not how a person involved himself in social issues. He did not skirt sensitive issues for the sake of white benefactors, because he simply did not consider these issues to be as important as that of true Christian education and Christian living.³³ He told his students at chapel hour that “[m]an is recognized because of his conduct, not because of his color.

²⁶ Ibid., 282.

²⁷ Ibid., 283.

²⁸ Phillips, 74.

²⁹ Ibid., 285.

³⁰ Blair, “For a Better Tomorrow,” p. 61

³¹ George Barker, “Brother Keeble and the Lord,” *Nashville Tennessean Magazine* (29 March 1964).”

³² Phillips, 73.

³³ In this way, he exemplifies the attitudes of many Church of Christ adherents towards social issues: “The sectarian doctrine of separation from the world was often interpreted to mean that the church, as opposed to an individual, cannot become actively involved in social reform.” David E. Harrell, Jr., *White Sects and Black Men in the Recent South*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971, p. 47.

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When you live right, all men will honor, respect, and even serve you, but you gotta live right."³⁴ He supported integration, but not when it assumed an aggressive stance that he considered to contradict the instructions of the Bible. He is often quoted as saying, "Integration? I would rather get it slow than get it wrong."³⁵

How this message came across to his students during the turbulent 1950s and 1960s, however, is harder to gauge. Despite Keeble's desire to combat racism through a generous spirit and by leading souls to live a Christian life, and the fact that he taught his students by the same doctrine of turning the other cheek when confronted with injustice, the NCI's students were not immune to the Civil Rights movement. Several of Keeble's students went on to become heavily involved in the Civil Rights movement, most notably attorney Fred Gray who defended Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others in Civil Rights cases, and Franklin Florence, who successfully challenged Eastman Kodak's discriminatory hiring practices.³⁶

Through his work at the NCI, Keeble's teaching, lectures, and mentorship deeply influenced both the students and black and white Church of Christ members throughout Nashville. During the first 15 years of its existence, the NCI under the leadership of Marshall Keeble taught 3,500 black students, graduated 234, and provided lecture series for 2,500 adults. By the 1950s, the NCI was one of only three Church of Christ schools (including colleges) established for African Americans in the nation.³⁷ As a result, by 1955, school administrators began to expand the school's existing campus. Although the NCI's perpetual lack of funding prohibited the school from completing an extensive expansion, under Keeble's direction they were able to add a two-story combination auditorium/gymnasium/dormitory designed to house 140 students and seat 1,000 people, which was completed in 1956.³⁸

As Keeble's advancing age, health problems, and preaching and mission field duties across the country and in Africa began to call him away from the school, he resigned as president. However, he never faltered in his support of the NCI. Keeble continued to serve the school through by fundraising, the lectureship series, mentoring, and serving as the school's President Emeritus until it closed in the late 1960s, even delivering the final commencement address in 1967.³⁹ As biographer J.E. Choate aptly stated, "The Nashville Christian Institute was a going concern as long as A.M. Burton and Marshall Keeble were around to keep it on its feet."⁴⁰

³⁴ Willie Cato, *His Hand and Heart: The Wit and Wisdom of Marshall Keeble*, Winona, MS: J. C. Choate Publications, 1980.

³⁵ Barker, "Brother Keeble and the Lord": "[Keeble] says he is for integration in public places but the Bible is not in favor of the methods used by some civil rights groups."

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 294, 305.

³⁷ "E. Lucien Palmer," *Rochester College News*. Available: www.re.edu/news/news_palmer.htm, [11/22/2004].

³⁸ Choate, 123-124.

³⁹ Paul D. Phillips, "The Interracial Impact of Marshall Keeble, Black Evangelist, 1878-1968." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 36, 1977, 72.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

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When integration finally came to Nashville schools, the NCI was sorely in need of funds, repair, and students. NCI teachers made less than half of that of their public school counterparts, and many black parents chose to send their children to recently desegregated (and free) public schools. Without the funds or enrollment to keep the school adequately supported, the NCI Board of Directors (many of who were white, including A.M. Burton) decided to close the school. After a survey committee recommended closing the school in June of 1967, Marshall Keeble wrote an article in the *Gospel Advocate* expressing his feelings about the board's decision. In a statement that was honest about the school's future and respectful of the Board's decision, Keeble wrote, "While Sister [Mrs.] Keeble and I regret to see Nashville Christian Institute close her doors, we wholly support what we thought had to be done. We live in a new day."⁴¹ Keeble acknowledged integration only by mentioning its debilitating impact on NCI's recent enrollment. He did not place blame on those who would go to "the finer schools which are now open to all races" and are furthermore free ("you know we like things that don't cost nothing").⁴² The number one reason he stated and reiterated was lack of funds, both to expand the school and to pay the teachers. Keeble never stopped pleading for funds, even though the funds were now to go to a new recipient. To continue their devotion to Christian education for African-American children, Burton and Keeble established the A. M. Burton-Marshall Keeble Scholarship Fund of the David Lipscomb College Foundation.⁴³ However, many alumni and board members were angered by their belief that the white power structure within the Church had betrayed the black members who had worked so hard to raise and continue the only Church of Christ school for blacks in Nashville.⁴⁴

Even after the NCI's closing, Marshall Keeble's name remained synonymous with the school. The school was often referred to as "Keeble's school," even after it ceased to operate.⁴⁵ On his 87th birthday, Nashville's Mayor Beverly Briley presented Keeble with a plaque inscribed with the following words: "In grateful recognition of Marshall Keeble for his long-time service to his God and his fellow man, preaching and teaching the gospel, baptizing 30,000 souls and establishing 350 congregations. His life's work, including his appointment as President of Nashville Christian Institute, is a shining example of good citizenship."⁴⁶ Keeble's long and illustrious ministerial career was noted outside Nashville as well; in 1960 he was named Honorary Chief of the Nigerian tribe due to his work in Africa, received an honorary doctor of law degree from Harding University in Arkansas in 1964, and was appointed the first African American honorary "Aide-De-Camp" on

⁴¹ *Gospel Advocate* (1967): 166.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Part of this fund also goes to students in Ukpom, Nigeria, where Keeble was awarded an honorary chieftainship for his evangelical activities.

⁴⁴ Hughes, 293-4.

⁴⁵ Phillips, 63.

⁴⁶ *Gospel Advocate Website* (1968): 460.

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Governor Frank G. Clement's staff.⁴⁷ After a long and far-reaching career that spanned the country and the globe, Marshall Keeble died in Nashville on April 20, 1968.

Keeble's remarkable gifts as preacher and teacher continue to live on in the lives and careers of the many students he taught at the NCI. Since the school's closing, many of the NCI's former students from across the country have congregated for class reunions. Several alumni, such as W. F. Washington of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, have become Church of Christ ministers. On July 1, 2004, the late Marshall Keeble and his widow, Laura Keeble (now 106 years old), were honored during an appreciation dinner at Lipscomb University in Nashville. Graduates of the NCI, many of whom are now Church of Christ preachers across the country, spoke of Marshall Keeble's immense influence on them. The dinner's large crowd of blacks and whites, Tennesseans and non-Tennesseans, and young and old illustrated the outstanding and far-reaching importance of the NCI and Marshall Keeble to the history of the area and to the Churches of Christ. His importance to Nashville's black community, and significance to the Churches of Christ across the world, was also emphasized in a historical marker erected in his honor in 2000 at the new Jackson Street Church of Christ.

Marshall Keeble's far-reaching influence continues to be felt long after his death, and local efforts have been put forth to attain a National Register listing to recognize the NCI's significance to Nashville's African-American history, as well as its association with the world-famous evangelist.⁴⁸ The NCI Gymnasium is critically important as the last remaining building closely associated with the school and the life of Marshall Keeble. The original Jackson Street Church of Christ, where Keeble was a member all his life, was demolished in 1990 and a new sanctuary was built. The home that Keeble and his wife Laura lived in at 1402 Heiman Street was moved to 1608 Scovel when Interstate 40 was built, removing it from the NCI neighborhood and altering its historic integrity. The NCI gymnasium/auditorium, the last remaining vestige of one of Keeble's most influential areas for ministry, evangelism, and education, remains at the corner of 24th Avenue North and Batavia Street. It is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its exceptional significance to African American Christian education in Nashville, for its role in the continuing education, fellowship, and race relations between black and white Church of Christ members, and for its connection to Marshall Keeble, whose evangelism affected lives across the nation and world.

⁴⁷ Linda T. Wynn, "Leaders of Afro-American Nashville," *Nashville Christian Institute Reunion Souvenir Book*, 2002, no pages.

⁴⁸ Lindy Adams, "Leaders Hope to Make NCI Historic Site," *The Christian Chronicle* (14 May 2003).

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Photos by: Carroll Van West
Date: April 2004
Negatives: Tennessee Historical Commission
Nashville, TN

East façade, facing west
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1. North elevation and east facade, facing southwest
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North façade, facing southwest
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Metal door entrance to north side of dormitory/classroom, facing south
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South elevation and east facade, facing northwest
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South elevation, facing northwest
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West elevation, facing northeast
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Gymnasium and theater area, facing west
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Stage, facing northwest
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Gymnasium, facing northwest
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Gymnasium main entrance, facing east
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Gymnasium steel-beamed ceiling, facing west
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Dormitory/classroom hall, facing south
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Dormitory/classroom, facing north
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Dormitory/classroom, facing south
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