

SAMPSON KEEBLE

Tennessee's first elected African American legislator was born a slave in Rutherford County in 1833. After the Civil War he moved to Nashville, where he worked as a barber, studied law, and served on the Board of Directors of both the Freedmen's Bank and the Colored Agricultural and Mechanical Association.

In November 1872, swept into office along with President Ulysses Grant's entire Republican ticket, the 39-year-old Keeble was elected to represent Davidson County in the 38th Tennessee General Assembly.



Bust of Sampson Keeble
Roy W. Butler, 2009

Keeble served one term in the House of Representatives. During the next session, the legislature passed Chapter 130, the first of the so-called Jim Crow laws, legalizing discrimination in public facilities. In spite of such obstacles, thirteen other African Americans would be elected to the Tennessee legislature during the next 15 years. Keeble himself served from 1877 to 1882 as a magistrate in the Davidson County Court. He died in 1887 and was laid to rest in Greenwood Cemetery.

For more background on legislative history or other information about the Tennessee State Capitol, please contact

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AFRICAN AMERICAN LEGISLATORS



Greene E. Evans ▲



Styles L. Hutchins ▷

William C. Hodge ▽



of 19th CENTURY TENNESSEE

John W. Boyd (1881-1884)

TIPTON COUNTY

A former slave, Boyd became a respected attorney in Mason, Tennessee. He was elected to two legislative terms and was still representing the 10th District as a magistrate on the County Court as late as 1900, though by that time he was the only black member remaining on the court.

Thomas F. Cassels (1881-1882)

SHELBY COUNTY

The first African American admitted to the bar in Memphis, Cassels was Ida B. Wells' lawyer in her lawsuit against the C&O railroad. He was appointed to the office of Assistant Attorney General of Memphis in 1878 and was a Presidential elector in 1888.

Isaac F. Norris (1881-1882)

SHELBY COUNTY

A wealthy Memphis businessman, Norris made his living as a wood and coal dealer. Soon after his term ended, he moved his family first to Oklahoma territory and later to Seattle, where he was active in civic affairs.

Thomas A. Sykes (1881-1882)

DAVIDSON COUNTY

Sykes, a revenue collector and gauger, had served in the North Carolina legislature before moving to Tennessee. He was active in political reform efforts in Nashville, and his leadership was instrumental in moving many African Americans into city jobs.

Leon Howard (1883-1884)

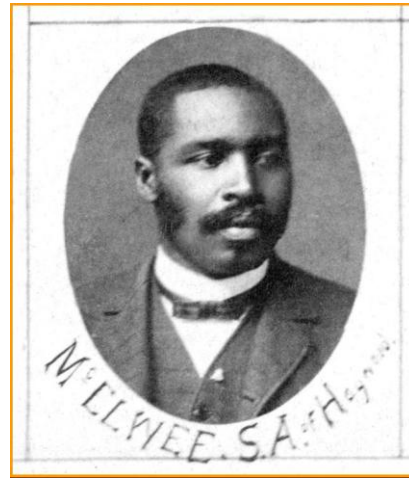
SHELBY COUNTY.

Howard's defeat of Norris & Price, black candidates who ran as Democrats in 1882, was a surprise upset. He later moved his family to Bakersfield, California.

Samuel A. McElwee (1883-1888)

HAYWOOD COUNTY

Born a slave in Madison County, McElwee became a successful attorney. The first black to serve 3 terms in the General Assembly, he was nominated to be Speaker of the House during his 2nd term, winning 1/3 of the votes.



David F. Rivers (1883-1884; x1886)

FAYETTE COUNTY

A Peabody Scholarship student at Roger Williams University when he was elected, Rivers later taught theology there. He was elected to a second term but had to flee the county for his own safety and was unable to serve. He was pastor of the Berean Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., until 1941.

Greene E. Evans (1885-1886)

SHELBY COUNTY

This onetime slave hauled gravel and laid sod to pay his way to Fisk University, where he sang bass in the earliest group of Fisk Jubilee Singers. In Memphis he served as deputy wharf-master and city councilman. By 1900 he had moved to Chicago, where he listed his occupation as a coal dealer.

William A. Feilds (1885-1886)

SHELBY COUNTY

Feilds was a school teacher, principal, & Justice of the Peace. He brought legislation for compulsory school attendance, fair land and labor contracts, and fair elections.

William C. Hodge (1885-1886)

HAMILTON COUNTY

The first African American to represent Hamilton County in the legislature, Hodge held many jobs there, from railroad agent to jailer. He also served as a member of the Chattanooga city council for many years.

Monroe W. Gooden (1887-1888)

FAYETTE COUNTY

The only black Democrat among these early legislators, this wealthy and influential man eventually came to own the very plantation on which he and his family had been slaves.

Styles Linton Hutchins (1887-1888)

HAMILTON COUNTY

The first African American attorney admitted to the Georgia bar, this tireless activist and his law partner argued a precedent-setting case before the U.S. Supreme Court, winning a landmark victory but having to flee from Tennessee to save their lives. Hutchins died in Illinois in 1950, at the age of 98.

Jesse M. H. Graham (x 1897)

MONTGOMERY COUNTY

A Clarksville newspaper editor, Jesse M. H. Graham was removed from his House seat on a technicality. During WWI he was one of only 638 blacks graduating from Army officers training school. After the War he worked in the U.S. Bureau of Audit.

NO AFRICAN AMERICANS SERVED IN THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY FROM 1887-1965.