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### Washington State's Greatest Civil Rights Advocate

Many scholars associate the struggle for civil rights with the protest movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960's. The Pacific Northwest is not known for its role in the battle against racism. However, more than 50 years before the Montgomery bus boycott and the "I Have a Dream" speech, Nettie J. Asberry had already started to fight for equal rights in Washington State.

Having been born and raised in segregated Kansas, Asberry was no stranger to what she called the "tense world racial situation," but in Washington she decided to take action to improve it (Bence). Asberry has been recognized for her numerous efforts to combat racial inequality, but her greatest act of civic courage was establishing the Tacoma chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People -- the first of its kind in the Pacific Northwest.

Nettie J. Asberry had been born Nettie Craig in Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1865. She was the youngest child of farmer William P. Wallingford and his slave, Violet. After she and her children were emancipated from slavery, Violet changed the family surname to Craig in order to break away from their history of involuntary servitude. When little Nettie Craig was eight years old, she developed an interest in music and began practicing piano. At the age of 13, Nettie heard Susan B. Anthony give a speech advocating for women's rights in Leavenworth. Listening to Anthony's speech awakened Nettie's interest in the fighting for equal rights, and she became the secretary of a Susan B. Anthony club. Nettie went on to attend the University of Kansas, which, unlike the rest of the state, was not racially segregated (Asberry). She graduated at the age of 18 and went on to earn a Ph.D. in musical instruction. Some sources list Nettie Craig as the first African-American woman in the United States to receive a doctorate degree (Henry).

Nettie Craig first came to Washington State in 1890 with her husband, Albert Jones. Upon arriving in Seattle, she became the first musical director and organ player for the newly formed First African Methodist Episcopal Church. Jones died three years later, prompting Nettie to briefly travel back to Kansas before returning to Washington with her family. Two years later she met Henry J. Asberry, a local businessman who became her second husband. The happy couple settled in Tacoma, where Mrs. Asberry became the choir director and organ player for the Allen AME Church.

Initially, Mrs. Asberry made attempts to incorporate her musical skills into her pursuit of social justice. She started by giving piano lessons to children in Tacoma. Unlike most educators at the time, Asberry provided all of her students with the same education regardless of their ethnicity. Many of her non-white pupils would not have had access to the instrument without the education she provided. Asberry was passionate about teaching piano, but as the child of a slave and a former resident of segregated Kansas, she felt compelled to take action against inequality. “After I was no longer young, I turned to social work for which there seemed such an endless need,” she recalled when interviewed by the *Tacoma News Tribune* (Bence). Asberry soon moved on from teaching and devoted almost the entirety of her life to improving race relations in Washington State.

At the time that Asberry started working with the NAACP, her fellow African-Americans were regularly treated with relentless disrespect and cruelty by white Washingtonians. In Washington's movie theaters, Klu Klux Klan propaganda films such as *Birth of a Nation* were greeted with thunderous applause from white audiences (Broussard). One African-American mother recalled that a posse of teenage white boys held down her seven-year-old son and urinated in his face as a punishment for attending a predominantly white school in Seattle.

Another African-American family living on Beacon Hill went berry picking in Puyallup, only to return home and find that their white neighbors had burned their house down (Mumford).

Asberry risked her personal safety by starting a civil rights organization in such a hostile environment. However, she refused to stand by as her fellow African-Americans suffered in silence.

Other civil rights advocates might have organized protest marches or temporary sit-ins to raise awareness of the mistreatment of African-Americans in Washington State. While such demonstrations were not without meaningful effect, Asberry's decision to start an organization of like-minded civil rights leaders has had a longer-lasting impact on Washington's attitudes towards people of color. More than 100 years after Asberry founded it, the Tacoma branch of the NAACP still actively protects the Constitutional rights of non-White Washingtonians.

Asberry was a strong individual who had no qualms about taking action to protest racial inequality on her own. She successfully advocated for the observation of "Negro History Week" in Tacoma's schools and organized letter-writing campaigns to protest racially segregated theater balconies and racist behavior from store clerks (Henry). However, Asberry was able to promote change more quickly and effectively by uniting progressive Washingtonians under a greater organization. Even a person as tenacious and dedicated to civil rights as Nettie J. Asberry couldn't address the racial inequality in Washington entirely on her own. Asberry realized this, and it was with this in mind that she turned her attention to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which had begun fighting for the constitutional rights of African-Americans in the northeastern United States.

The first NAACP had been formed in New York City on February 12th, 1909, in response to the lynching and race rioting in Springfield, Illinois. Today, the NAACP is a highly

influential organization whose presence can be felt all across the country. The broad influence currently enjoyed by the organization is due in no small part to Nettie J. Asberry's successful effort to bring the NAACP west of the Rocky Mountains. Before Asberry started the Tacoma chapter of the NAACP in 1913, the group had only been able to develop offices in a few states, none of which were within a thousand miles of Washington (the closest branch was in Missouri). The many non-white Washingtonians who suffered under the state's discriminatory racial attitudes did not have any organizations nearby to turn to for help. Asberry gave these individuals a voice by setting up an organization that would help non-white Washingtonians stand up to their oppressors.

In 1913, Asberry contacted the NAACP's office in New York and proposed starting a branch of their organization in Tacoma. Asberry personally mailed the request for a charter to the NAACP New York office. Within the year, the NAACP accepted Asberry's application and sent her their charter, which required the members of the new branch to meet regularly to engage in "the study of local racial conditions," as well as to put forward "efforts to lessen race discrimination and to secure full civil, political and legal rights to colored citizens and others" (Asberry). The NAACP's requirements aligned perfectly with Asberry's vision for Washington State, and she quickly began recruiting new members to the branch she had started in Tacoma.

Establishing the Pacific Northwest's first NAACP chapter was a true milestone for the area's civil rights movement. The organization was able to counteract several attempts to undermine the rights of non-white Washingtonians. For example, shortly after Asberry formed the Tacoma NAACP, the Washington State legislature began drafting a ban on interracial marriage. Appalled, Asberry and the Tacoma NAACP planted an undercover worker in the state

legislature who overheard the details of the bill, which would have prevented Washington State's citizens from marrying outside of their own race.

Working together under Asberry's leadership, Tacoma's new NAACP members were able to foil the state legislature's attempt to pass a ban on interracial marriage. "Overnight we got together a caravan of several cars of people of several races, whites, colored, Filipinos, and others," Asberry recalled 48 years later in an interview with the *Tacoma News Tribune*, "We descended on the powerful rules committee as a surprise and defeated the measure." No ban on interracial marriage ever passed in Washington State afterwards.

A less dedicated person might have retired from the civil rights battle after achieving such a milestone, but Nettie J. Asberry continued to work with the NAACP to combat Washington State's hostile attitudes towards its non-white citizens. From her position as the Field Secretary of the Tacoma NAACP, Asberry was able to start other branches in Seattle and Spokane. Once Asberry had established several other NAACP chapters in Washington State, she was able to expand the organization's influence across the entire Pacific Northwest by starting branches in Oregon and Alaska. Asberry's civic courage inspired young civil rights advocates in the same way that Asberry herself had been inspired by Susan B. Anthony as a teenager. Asberry's admirers even created a "Nettie Asberry Cultural Club" in her honor, in much the same way that Asberry had joined a "Susan B. Anthony Club" in her youth.

After spending several years in a leadership role at the Tacoma NAACP, old age began to catch up to Nettie J. Asberry. She gave up the role of Field Secretary and served for a time as the Secretary of the Treasury for the Tacoma branch instead. Eventually, Asberry returned to her beginnings as a music teacher, and continued teaching piano to Tacoma's schoolchildren until well into her '90s.

After spending her life advocating for minorities in Washington State, Nettie J. Asberry passed away at the age of 103, on November 17th, 1968. One year later, Tacoma Mayor A.L. Rasmussen designated May 11th as "Dr. Nettie Asberry Day." Asberry was mourned by many of the members of the organizations she had started and inspired. "We shall work more diligently to keep the fire burning for Nettie J. Asberry," wrote Theresa Hooks, the President of the Tacoma City Association of Colored Women's Clubs, one of several organizations for which Asberry served as an inspirational figure. Hooks remembered that Asberry "foresaw the need of...working together cooperatively for the common good of all and did something about it" (Asberry).

Hooks' eulogy summarizes the motivation behind Nettie J. Asberry's greatest act of civic courage. Asberry regularly thought of the future in her efforts to combat inequality, and she realized that most of the racial issues in Washington would take time to solve. "Some have estimated that ten years will see the ironing out of most racial difficulties. I believe it will take much longer," Asberry had predicted in an interview with the Tacoma News Tribune a few years before her death. Asberry knew that she couldn't solve all of the civil rights issues in Washington on her own, or even in her own lifetime. As a result, she chose to start an organization where like-minded civil rights leaders could continue to make the Pacific Northwest a more accepting environment for its non-white citizens.

"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 insult by quietly asserting their rights as human beings," Asberry stated on her 96<sup>th</sup> birthday (Bragg). Nettie J. Asberry demonstrated exceptional courage and grace at many points of her life, but her single greatest act of civic courage was establishing the Tacoma chapter of the NAACP. Nettie J. Asberry was never slow to take action against racial

injustice, but she also realized that her vision for equal rights would take time to realize. By establishing the first NAACP chapter in the Pacific Northwest, Nettie J. Asberry made it possible for future generations to continue the fight for racial equality after old age took her from the battlefield. The Tacoma chapter of the NAACP has been fighting for the rights of non-white Americans for the past century, and their success is a direct result of the civic courage demonstrated by Nettie J. Asberry.

**Essay Word Count: 1984 words**

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