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Edward J. Robinson

Texas College, erobinson@TexasCollege.edu

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## “He Led the Way”: Preston Taylor and African American Leadership in the Stone-Campbell Movement

BY EDWARD J. ROBINSON<sup>1</sup>

Noted historian, Maceo C. Dailey Jr., recently observed that “History is not a panacea and will never be perfectly conceived and written, but we can ask for more: a closer reading of the past.”<sup>2</sup> Preston Taylor’s story is not a perfect one. Yet an examination of his inspiring and dramatic life offers keen insight into the American past and affords us an opportunity to study history more carefully and closely.

In the 1870s, when White contractors brazenly and biasedly excluded Black laborers from railroad work in Kentucky, the latter appealed to Preston Taylor (1849–1931), a compassionate churchman and courageous community leader, for his intervention. He offered to build two sections of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad with African American workers. After receiving the contract, Taylor then amassed a labor force of 150 Black men with 75 horses, mules, carts, and wagons. He and his crew completed two miles of railroad tracks on difficult terrain within fourteen months, prompting Collis P. Huntington (1821–1900)—a premier White railroad industrialist—to exclaim, “I have built thousands of miles of road but I never before saw a contractor who finished his contract in advance.” Preston Taylor “led the way.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1887 William J. Simmons (1849–90), a Black Baptist minister and college educator in Kentucky, published a collection of 177 biographical sketches of fellow African American leaders. He singled out Taylor as an evangelist and entrepreneur who had just recently relocated to Nashville, Tennessee. Simmons said of Taylor, “Mr. Taylor is a man who will impress you when you meet him as thoroughly in earnest. He is never idle, always with new plans, warm hearted, generous, sympathetic and a true brother to all men who deserve the cognizance of earnest, faithful workers of Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Williams’s commendation of Taylor provides a glimpse into the latter’s character and demeanor: innovative, impassioned, energetic, compassionate, and willing to step beyond racial, gender, and religious barriers to serve his fellowman.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward J. Robinson is Associate Professor of History and Religion at Texas College in Tyler, Texas.

<sup>2</sup> Maceo C. Dailey Jr., *Emmett J. Scott: Power Broker of the Tuskegee Machine* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2023), 6.

<sup>3</sup> William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 298.

<sup>4</sup> Simmons, 300–1.

The Stone-Campbell movement traces its spiritual lineage back to two principal leaders, Barton W. Stone (1772–1844) and Alexander Campbell (1788–1866), who sought to restore primitive Christianity in the modern world. The significant work of other African American leaders in the Stone-Campbell movement has been partly examined. The contributions of S. R. Cassius (1853–1931) and Marshall Keeble (1878–1968) have been assessed by students of Stone-Campbell history.<sup>5</sup> But how does Preston Taylor stand in comparison to the two previously mentioned Black leaders? What makes Taylor's contributions to the Stone-Campbell movement unique? This paper argues that while Cassius and Keeble both made indelible marks on African Americans in their chosen fellowship, Taylor's legacy in distinct ways towers above them all. Cassius boldly assailed White racism in American society. Keeble planted numerous Black congregations across the South. But Taylor, while also toiling as an earnest churchman, worked for racial uplift through economic independence. Cassius and Keeble both cared deeply about the souls of Black people, but Preston Taylor tended to the souls and bodies of African Americans in life and in death.

Born an enslaved person in 1849 in Shreveport, Louisiana, Preston and his mother, Betty, relocated with the family of President Zachary Taylor (1784–1850). Preston's childhood remains shrouded in mystery. What stands clear is that a White member of the president's family sired Preston with one of his young slaves, Betty. After Preston Taylor's death on April 13, 1931, the *Nashville Banner* reported that he was "owned by the family of Zed Taylor, a brother of President Zachariah Taylor."<sup>6</sup> Because of light complexion, young Preston likely benefitted from what some scholars called the "mulatto advantage." Light-skinned enslaved people, who often toiled in the Big House, had access to better health care, wore better clothing, ate better food, and had more opportunities to acquire literacy.<sup>7</sup> But the first major turning point for Preston Taylor was not in the Big House, it was in the Union Army.

### A Turning Point in Preston Taylor's Life

At age thirteen, Taylor became one of 5,405 Black men who enlisted in the United States military at Camp Nelson, Kentucky.<sup>8</sup> Preston was assigned a drummer boy to

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<sup>5</sup> Don Haymes, "Marshall Keeble," in *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, eds. Douglas Foster, Paul Blowers, and Anthony L. Dunnavant (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 441–42. See also: J. E. Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll: A Biography of Marshall Keeble* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1974); Edward J. Robinson, *To Save My Race from Abuse: The Life of Samuel Robert Cassius* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007); and Edward J. Robinson, *Show Us How You Do It: Marshall Keeble and the Rise of Black Churches of Christ in the United States, 1914–1968* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> See "Preston Taylor's Rites Thursday," *Nashville Banner*, April 16, 1931, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Howard Bodenhorn, "The Mulatto Advantage: The Biological Consequences of Complexion in Rural Antebellum Virginia," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 33 (Summer 2002): 21–46.

<sup>8</sup> Richard D. Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky: A Civil War History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), xxxix.

the 116th United States Colored Troops (USCT). Musicians were non-combatant soldiers, yet they issued calls with drums or bugles each day. They sometimes sharpened surgeons' utensils, carried water for soldiers, removed wounded servicemen from the battlefield, and helped bury the dead. Civil War historian, James M. McPherson, has observed, "Traditional practice in both armies assigned regimental musicians and soldiers 'least effective under arms' as stretcher-bearers to carry the wounded from the field and assist surgeons in the field hospitals."<sup>9</sup> Altogether more than 186,000 Black men fought under the Union flag during the Civil War.<sup>10</sup> As a musician and attendant to soldiers, Taylor saw death and destruction firsthand, which certainly prepared him for future lines of work as a preacher and funeral director.<sup>11</sup>

### Life and Work in Kentucky

After the Civil War, Preston Taylor worked as a porter on the Louisville and Chattanooga Railroad. According to a contemporary biographer, William J. Simmons, Taylor became one of the "best railroad men in the service, and when he resigned he was requested to remain with a promotion to assistant baggage-master; but as he could be no longer retained, the officers gave him a strong recommendation and a pass over all the roads for an extensive trip, which he took through the North."<sup>12</sup> After a short stint as railroad porter, he became the preacher for the Christian Church in Mt. Sterling, Kentucky, from 1871 to 1885. While there, he developed that church into one of the largest Black Disciple congregations in the state of Kentucky.

In addition to leading a thriving congregation, in 1879 he began serving as editor of "Our Colored Brethren" in the *Christian Standard*. In this position, he kept the paper's readers abreast of happenings among African American Disciples of Christ. He announced weddings, reported on funerals, and sometimes rallied his readership to support mission efforts beyond the Bluegrass State. When Clara Schell—a devoted Black woman to the Stone-Campbell movement—collaborated with her husband, W. H. Schell, to launch a mission school among African Americans in Washington, DC, Taylor rallied *Christian Standard* readers to support their efforts, stating, "It should be a pride to our churches to assist in this much needed cause. The white brethren have given, but they have much to be done, and we must rally to this call."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 484.

<sup>10</sup> John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 9th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011 [1947]), 218.

<sup>11</sup> Edward J. Robinson, *To Pave the Way for His People: A Life of Preston Taylor* (Indianapolis: Christian Board of Publication, 2024), 17.

<sup>12</sup> Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 297.

<sup>13</sup> Preston Taylor, "Our Colored Brethren," *Christian Standard* 17, April 22, 1882, 123. See also Clara Schell, "A Sketch of the Colored People of Washington, D. C.—2," *Christian Monitor* XXI, October 1882, 472.

While living and preaching in Kentucky, Preston Taylor helped to revive the Louisville Bible School, renamed it New Castle Bible School, and relocated it to New Castle, Kentucky. Serving as principal fundraiser for the school, he succeeded in garnering \$2,200, but the school eventually fizzled out because of poor management and insufficient monetary support.<sup>14</sup>

The collapse of the New Castle Bible School coincided with Preston Taylor's troubled family life. Court records show that his first marriage to Ellen (or Ella) Spradling ended in divorce. On June 11, 1880, he then married Anna Hoffman, who bore a son, Preston, and later a daughter, Hattie Whitney. Both children died in infancy. In 1882, his mother, Betty, passed away.<sup>15</sup> All these tragedies deeply touched the preacher. But he persevered and shook off these disappointments and moved to a new state, where he would leave an indelible mark on the lives and history of Black people in Middle Tennessee and beyond.

### **Trials and Triumphs in Tennessee**

When Preston Taylor relocated to Nashville in 1885, he became one of 43,350 African Americans living there. Shortly after his arrival in Nashville, he assumed the role of preacher for the Gay Street Christian Church. Conflict and controversy soon engulfed the congregation, however, when he sought to remove the existing leaders and replace them with younger ones. This action resulted in his abrupt departure. Around 1890 he then organized the Lea Avenue Christian Church in the same city. Some noteworthy members of the latter congregation included: S. W. Womack (1851–1920), Alexander Campbell (1862–1930), and Marshall Keeble (1878–1968). Indeed, Taylor baptized fourteen-year-old Keeble around 1892.<sup>16</sup>

Within a decade, however, friction surfaced at the Lea Avenue Christian Church, when Womack, Keeble's father-in-law, decried "innovations," which crept into the newly planted congregation. He specifically denounced Taylor's practices of welcoming denominational preachers outside the Stone-Campbell tradition into his pulpit, his use of extra-biblical practices to raise money, and his employ of missionary societies to engage in evangelism. Such erroneous practices prompted Womack to withdraw from the Lea Avenue congregation and to plant the Jackson Street Church of Christ in Nashville. Writing in 1902, Womack explained, "We have no entertainments, no clubs, no ladies' aid societies; but we believe in meeting these obligations through the church, the God-given institution provided for all his work."<sup>17</sup> Convinced that the actions of Taylor and the Lea Avenue Christian Church were unscriptural, Womack asserted, "I

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<sup>14</sup> David Edwin Harrell Jr., *Sources of Division in the Disciples of Christ, 1865–1900: A Social History of the Disciples of Christ* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003 [1973]), 2:194.

<sup>15</sup> See Robinson, *To Pave the Way*, 26, 45.

<sup>16</sup> B. C. Goodpasture, ed., *Biography and Sermons of Marshall Keeble, Evangelist* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1938 [1931]), 10.

<sup>17</sup> S. W. Womack, "Church News," *Gospel Advocate* 44, April 10, 1902, 237.

know of no other way taught in the Book to succeed in the work, but to work, talk, and trust God by doing what he says, just as he says it."<sup>18</sup> Womack transmitted his aversion for missionary societies to his son-in-law, Marshall Keeble, who, after baptizing more than one thousand people in 1930, declared, "This shows that we do not need the missionary society to do the work of the church." The trio of Womack, Campbell, and Keeble bolted from the Lea Avenue Christian Church and launched the Jackson Street Church of Christ—the "mother church" for African American Churches of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

Even though key members withdrew from his new congregation, Preston Taylor was busy making a name for himself by addressing the needs of the African American community in Middle Tennessee. Around 1888, he established Greenwood Cemetery, and he soon opened Taylor Funeral Home in Nashville. In 1892 three African American firefighters—Charles C. Gowdy, Hardy Ewing, and Stokely H. Allen—died while fighting a fire in downtown Nashville. A local newspaper reported, "Undertaker Preston Taylor had the entire charge of all the funeral arrangements yesterday and the perfections with which they were carried out elicited much favorable comment."<sup>20</sup> Twenty-one years later, a leading Black newspaper recalled, "On the occasion of that funeral, the whole city was bowed down in mourning and seemed impossible for anyone to have enough physical strength to handle so mammoth a crowd as assembled at the State Capitol on the day of the funeral."<sup>21</sup> Preston Taylor's wise and skillful guidance during a dark chapter in Nashville's history stamped him as an impressive and important leader in Middle Tennessee.

Historian Bobby L. Lovett has observed, "By 1892, Taylor and Company Undertakers had become Nashville's largest and most prestigious funeral home, gaining more publicity in 1892 when it took charge of the public funeral for the three black firemen who lost their lives in a downtown fire. Taylor constructed an ingenious carriage to carry the fireman's bodies side by side during the public funeral processional."<sup>22</sup> The devastating blaze of 1892 catapulted Preston Taylor to regional and national acclaim. Indeed, the *Nashville Globe* honored him as a "Nashville Pioneer" for his creation of Greenwood Cemetery and Greenwood Park. "Greenwood Cemetery," wrote the paper's editor in 1908, "is one of the greatest achievements of Mr. Taylor. The colored people had only one cemetery, and that was becoming very crowded. He saw the need and found the remedy, and as a result the Negroes of Nashville can boast of having the most beautifully arranged and the best kept cemetery in this vicinity." Because the burial

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<sup>18</sup> Womack, 445.

<sup>19</sup> For Keeble's reference to the Church of Christ at Jackson Street in Nashville as the "mother church," see "Keeble to be Here," *Gospel Advocate* 83, December 25, 1941, 1,242. For Keeble's disapproval of missionary societies, see Robinson, *Show Us How You Do It*, 18–21.

<sup>20</sup> "Laid to Rest," *Daily American*, January 7, 1892, 5.

<sup>21</sup> "Quarter of a Century's Progress," *Nashville Globe*, April 11, 1913, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Bobby L. Lovett, *The African-American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780–1930* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 109.

ground was so well kept, the paper added, "One does not feel that he is among the dead when in Greenwood Cemetery."<sup>23</sup>

Researchers on the Black funeral industry have pointed out that White racism excluded Black bodies from White cemeteries. Historian Suzanne E. Smith has asserted that in compliance with segregation laws, "many African American funeral directors were working to establish black-owned-and-operated cemeteries to secure a dignified burial ground for their respective communities. Perhaps no one person better exemplifies the way black funeral directors used their capital and prestige as local community leaders to fight the indignities of racial segregation at the turn of the century than the Reverend Preston Taylor of Nashville, Tennessee."<sup>24</sup>

### To "Breathe" Freely

Not only did Preston Taylor seek to bestow honor and dignity on deceased African Americans, but he also created Greenwood Park in 1904—a place and space where they could enjoy leisure and laughter free from White oppression. The park consisted of a lunchroom, barbecue stand, bandstand, gardens, baseball stadiums, picnic area, old plantation scene, merry-go-round, shooting gallery, roller coaster, skating rink, and theater. Taylor built Greenwood Park to promote Black pride and progress. As Lovett has noted, the park "operated with order and dignity; his large home was there; and he did not allow cursing, drinking, or fighting in Greenwood Park. The patrons had to dress up and act with good manners."<sup>25</sup>

Greenwood Park hosted many significant events, but none more important than Emancipation Day, which Black people in Middle Tennessee used to commemorate Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. For Black Nashvillians and many other southern Black people, Abraham Lincoln was their hero, not Thomas Jefferson. In the perspective of African Americans in the Progressive Era, Independence Day was a time to celebrate their freedom from chattel enslavement, not an occasion to observe the nation's severance from British rule. Preston Taylor used the first annual Emancipation Day to formally dedicate Greenwood Park. The *Nashville Globe* announced that Taylor, "proprietor of Greenwood Park, that beautiful resort that has added hours of rest and a place of recuperation, has arranged to dedicate the park on that day to the Negroes of Nashville and the state of Tennessee."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> "A Nashville Pioneer," *Nashville Globe*, September 4, 1908, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Suzanne E. Smith, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2010), 57, 59. See also Karla G. C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 181.

<sup>25</sup> Lovett, *The African-American History*, 123, 125.

<sup>26</sup> "Emancipation Celebration," *Nashville Globe*, July 24, 1908, 1.

## Uplifting the Race

Unlike S. R. Cassius—who devoted much of his life to resolving America’s race problem—and Marshall Keeble—who dedicated his evangelistic efforts to planting Black Churches of Christ across the South—Preston Taylor contributed to helping his people economically. In 1904, Taylor, R. H. Boyd, and J. C. Napier established the One-Cent Savings Bank and Trust Company to “encourage frugality.” Boyd served as the bank’s president; Napier worked as cashier; and Taylor chaired the board of directors.<sup>27</sup> Bobby L. Lovett, in his insightful biography on R. H. Boyd, has noted, “The new black bank had some rough times to weather. But with excellent leadership in Boyd, Taylor, Napier, and others, the One-Cent Savings Bank survived one economic depression after another although many white banks collapsed.” During the financial panic of 1907,” adds Lovett, “Boyd called a special board meeting to spread the word that the One-Cent Savings Bank was solvent. Stocks of currency were available for the customers to see. The bank balanced its books with \$43,907.69. Boyd praised the bank’s employees including ‘the janitor who sweeps the floor and lights the building’ who keep the institution strong and successful. Boyd argued that ‘Because the Negro by unjust legislation and political discrimination is robbed of every vestige of self-government, his religious and benevolent institutions are his most important agencies for uplifting the race.’”<sup>28</sup>

Taylor’s position as a stockholder in the One-Cent Savings Bank and Trust Company stamps him as unique among African American leaders in the Stone-Campbell movement. Cassius contested racial and racist proscriptions to “save my people from abuse.” Keeble sought to lift up his people by pointing them to the “pure gospel.” Conversely, Taylor toiled to uplift African Americans by providing them with a cemetery, a recreational facility, and a safe place to stash away their hard-earned wages. This is not to say that Taylor did not care about the spiritual needs of his people. Of course, he did. Yet, he endeavored to lead and serve Black people beyond the confines of the pulpit and the church house.

## Preston Taylor and Young People

Ironically, Preston Taylor loved children, but none of his own biological children survived infancy. Because segregation laws in Nashville excluded Black youth, in 1917 Taylor led an effort to organize a Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in the city. The *Nashville Globe* announced, “The Negro is where he belongs but he needs to have such training as will make him manually capable, intellectually alert and moral straight. To give him just that training, there is no better equipped agency than the YMCA.” The city’s Black newspaper galvanized African American women across Nashville, who

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<sup>27</sup> Don H. Doyle, *Nashville in the New South, 1880–1930* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 116; Lovett, *The African-American History*, 117–18; Gabriel A. Briggs, *The New Negro in the Old South* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 48.

<sup>28</sup> Bobby L. Lovett, *A Black Man’s Dream: The First 100 Years, Richard Henry Boyd and the National Baptist Publishing Board* (Michigan: Mega Corporation, 1993), 149.

assembled fifty female captains with each team consisting of twenty workers. "As this account goes to press," the *Globe* declared, "some of the leaders have their teams about complete and others are busy canvassing the field for twenty or more faithful workers."<sup>29</sup>

As a result of the women's diligent toil, three thousand residents braved unpleasant weather and filled the Ryman Auditorium to support the formation of the YMCA for African American youth in Nashville. Mayor Robert Ewing lauded the Black community's zeal and achievement. "We need your co-operation and you need ours," affirmed the mayor, "and if the YMCA is good for the white boys it is good for the Negro boys. We are your friends, but you must continue to show that the tremendous advance which you have made as a race was not by accident." Ewing continued, "We are going to help you, and we want every honest mother and father among you to do your part. You should get behind the movement and give it the right kind of support, moral support as well as financial support. We cannot do for ourselves what you can do for yourselves. This movement means elevation of the colored race, and I congratulate you on the start which you have made. I stand ready to help you."<sup>30</sup>

Another White official, J. H. Allison, advised the predominantly Black crowd: "God helps those who help themselves." He then recognized that the Fisk Jubilee Singers from Fisk University in Nashville brought world-wide fame to the city. "The north and east," he acknowledged, "speak of Nashville as the home of Andrew Jackson and of Fisk University. It would be well for the Negro YMCA to have such a reputation." African Americans in Nashville cheerfully welcomed the verbal support from White officials, but they were always determined to help themselves. Still, the pledge of White support to a Black movement in the segregated South yielded hopeful sentiments. The *Nashville Globe* captured the mood: "There has been an effort in which white and colored worked together for the cause dear to the hearts of the lovers of good citizenship and better manhood. It has been a mighty interesting history making event, and those who have had a hand in it, whether much or little, are sure to share proportionately in the good results which will follow."<sup>31</sup>

By the spring of 1917 the city's Black paper announced that African Americans in Nashville had raised more than \$20,000 toward the purchase of the Duncan Building to house the YMCA. Preston Taylor led the Black community in securing the building and in organizing a clean-up committee, and he announced a clean-up week after finding

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<sup>29</sup> "The Negro YMCA," *Nashville Globe*, February 2, 1917, 1; "Women Organize YMCA Auxiliary," *Nashville Globe*, February 16, 1917, 1.

<sup>30</sup> "Three Thousand at Ryman Auditorium," *Nashville Globe*, February 16, 1917, 1.

<sup>31</sup> "Latest YMCA News," *Nashville Globe*, March 30, 1917, 2.

four hundred dirty windows, beds and mattresses are to be aired out, floors and walls cleaned, and old pictures taken down.<sup>32</sup>

The first event to be held in the renovated building was a rally to send off Company G, a Black regiment, summoned for World War I duty. Preston Taylor urged all Nashvillians to attend the city-wide affair: "Men, women and children are asked to come out and show their patriotism and loyalty in sending their boys to the front to fight for 'Old Glory.' All have been asked to come and shake hands with the boys and bid them Godspeed. The Committee of Management of the YMCA has consented to turn over the spacious building for this occasion."<sup>33</sup> Preston Taylor—a former soldier in the Union Army—continued to support the United States military, and he encouraged fellow African Americans to do the same.

Preston Taylor's devotion for his country and young people manifested itself in his support of education. In the spring of 1910 Black leaders in Nashville discussed plans to launch the first state-supported institution of higher education for Black youth. African American leaders, Benjamin Carr, and Henry A. Boyd pledged \$40,000 in bonds to secure the educational project in Nashville. Taylor enthusiastically spearheaded this effort and arranged for the "daily reports of each canvasser" to be handed in to the "headquarters" of the Taylor and Company Funeral Home. Furthermore, Taylor traversed the state of Tennessee to raise funds for the proposed institution of higher learning. His energy and enthusiasm prompted the editor of the *Nashville Globe* to say, "Dr. Taylor is one of the race's strongest leaders and has amassed a large fortune, and sole proprietor of one of the largest businesses in the Southland. Though more than sixty years of age, he is as active as a boy of sixteen. He has neither frowns nor gray hairs. Indeed, his is a happy, trustful nature seeing always the bright side of everything."<sup>34</sup> The more Preston Taylor aged, the younger he became at heart, pouring his time and efforts into the lives of young people.

Indeed, after two years of diligent toil of Preston Taylor, J. C. Napier, R. H. Boyd, and others, the dream of an institution of higher education for Black youth came to fruition in 1912, when Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School for Negroes (now Tennessee State University) was founded. William J. Hale became the first president of the newly formed school. Walter S. Davis, with a PhD from Cornell University, succeeded Hale to become the university's second president.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "\$20,140.88 Raised for YMCA," *Nashville Globe*, April 6, 1917, 1; "The Call is to All," *Nashville Globe*, April 20, 1917, 8.

<sup>33</sup> "Patriotic Demonstration for Co. G," *Nashville Globe*, August 3, 1917, 1.

<sup>34</sup> "Great Activity," *Nashville Globe*, March 18, 1910, 1; "Educational," *Nashville Globe*, April 15, 1910, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Tommie Morton-Young, *Nashville, Tennessee, Black America Series* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2000), 57.

## Preston Taylor and the National Christian Missionary Convention

Preston Taylor was equally zealous for the spiritual uplift of fellow African Americans. Therefore, in 1917 he organized the National Christian Missionary Convention (NCMC) to foster unity among White and Black Disciples of Christ. In his first address before attendees of the NCMC in Nashville, Taylor upbraided White members in the Stone-Campbell movement, stating, "The attitude of our white brotherhood on the race question accounts largely for our smallness. Without intentional wrong or neglect, the relation of the white to the colored brotherhood has been little more than trifling." He then added that the "Disciples of Christ have set the pace in heartless, unnecessary and silly racial discrimination."<sup>36</sup>

Scholar Lawrence A. Q. Burnley has insightfully observed that Preston Taylor's critique of anti-Black views of White adherents of the Stone-Campbell movement challenged them to live out the "biblical mandate to restore the primitive church [and] to include racial equality in every social, economic, and political sphere." "In a real sense," contends Burnley, "Taylor implies a rejection of white Disciples theology due to the wide gap between the rhetoric of Christian unity and the love of Christ and their dehumanizing treatment of Blacks."<sup>37</sup> Preston Taylor, then, was not only an advocate for primitive Christianity, but he also a champion of racial equality and social justice.

## The Leadership of S. R. Cassius, Marshall Keeble, and Preston Taylor

Born in Prince William County, Virginia, in 1853, S. R. Cassius and his mother, Jane, made their way across the Potomac River into Washington, DC, in response to the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation. He recalled shaking hands with Abraham Lincoln (1809–65), the Black man's "Moses." Cassius never forgot this encounter as he later named his oldest son, Amos Lincoln Cassius (1889–1982), who later emerged as an influential Black preacher in Churches of Christ.<sup>38</sup>

Around 1883 S. R. Cassius converted to the Stone-Campbell movement in Brazil, Indiana, after hearing a sermon on "Faith." Two years later, he started preaching before landing in 1891 in the Oklahoma Territory, where he toiled as farmer, justice of the peace, educator, and evangelist. Like many other African Americans, Cassius was an admirer of Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), a former enslaved person who emerged a nationally recognized educator and leader from 1895 to 1915. What Washington had accomplished in his Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Cassius sought to duplicate in the Oklahoma Territory. Truly, after he organized his Tohee Industrial School in Tohee,

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<sup>36</sup> R. E. Pearson, *Report of the First General Convention of the Christian Church Colored in the United States, September 5–9, 1917* (Bethany, WV: Disciples of Christ Historical Society Archives), 23.

<sup>37</sup> Lawrence A. Q. Burnley, *The Cost of Unity: African-American Agency and Education in the Christian Church, 1865–1914* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 248.

<sup>38</sup> Edward J. Robinson, *To Save My Race from Abuse: The Life of Samuel Robert Cassius* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 16–17, 161–62.

Oklahoma Territory, in 1899, his good friend and White editor Frederick Rowe (1866–1947) lauded Cassius as the “Booker T. Washington of Oklahoma.”<sup>39</sup>

Preston Taylor and S. R. Cassius were both born enslaved persons, yet there are no known extant writings revealing the former’s experiences in chattel enslavement. Cassius was vastly different in that he often castigated the practice of slavery as the “cancer of human slavery” and the “curse of slavery.”<sup>40</sup> Cassius pointed out that some of the lingering moral deficiencies in Black people could be traced directly back to chattel enslavement, since they were held in the “most degrading circumstances” and because they were “taught no morals, no sense of virtue, and no regard for the marriage ties.” In fact, Black men who saw firsthand the sexual assault of their mothers, sisters, and wives by white slaveowners obtained a “brutal desire to do the same” to their own women.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, there is no known extant documentation that Preston Taylor openly denounced the racist literature of Thomas Dixon’s *Clansman* and the racist caricature of D. W. Griffith’s movie, *Birth of a Nation*, which depicted Black men as rapists and glorified the Ku Klux Klan as the “savior” of White civilization and White womanhood. But Cassius was different. He published at least two or more editions of his book, *The Third Birth of a Nation*. Cassius consistently railed against what he called “mind poisoning,” fussing, “Never in the history of the world had such a cunningly arranged compilation of falsehoods been placed before the public. Not satisfied with the story in print, it was worked out in studios and thrown upon the screen in moving picture shows, and these pictures have caused more lynchings and burnings than all other things that have been done or said.”<sup>42</sup>

When assessing the root cause of such racist distortion, Cassius explained that the White man “fears that the black man will supplant him in the matters of trade, business and profession.” Therefore, White southerners “undertook to poison the minds of the Northern and Western white men against the negro by picturing the negro as a licentious brute that was roaming around seeking an opportunity to assault white women. No better means could have been used to inflame the minds of white men against colored men.”<sup>43</sup> Without question, Preston Taylor agreed with Cassius and detested *Birth of a Nation*, but we have no known extant evidence that he openly denounced it.

Actually, while Cassius was vigorously contesting the racist portrayals of Black people swirling around the United States, Taylor was busy leading a public protest in 1905

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<sup>39</sup> Robinson, 95–110, 117.

<sup>40</sup> S. R. Cassius, *The Third Birth of a Nation*, 2nd ed. (Cincinnati: F. L. Rowe, 1925), 34, 85, 91. Robinson, *To Save My Race from Abuse*, 143.

<sup>41</sup> Cassius, 11–12, 28–29.

<sup>42</sup> Cassius, 140.

<sup>43</sup> Cassius, 141.

when White legislators in Nashville legalized segregated streetcars. Determined to defeat the disgraceful statute, Taylor organized the Union Transportation Company (UTC) to rally Black residents to develop their own transportation system. Even though the boycott eventually fizzled out, the formation of the UTC clearly demonstrates that Preston Taylor was willing to fight social indignities and racial discrimination in all forms.<sup>44</sup>

Yet Cassius seems to have been inordinately preoccupied with resolving America's race problem. He testified that his primary concern was to "make the Church of Christ see its duty to the Negro of the United States."<sup>45</sup> He added, "I got it fixed in my head that my race had need of me, and even when I could not provide food, I gave more thought to the needs of my race than to the needs of my family."<sup>46</sup> In Cassius's view, the primary "needs" of Black people consisted of hearing what he called the "pure gospel": namely, worshiping without musical instruments in worship, partaking of the Lord's Supper weekly, and evangelizing without missionary societies.<sup>47</sup>

Preston Taylor and S. R. Cassius espoused similar racial postures and embraced the same faith tradition, yet their theological positions differed. The latter strongly opposed evangelizing through missionary societies and using instruments of music in worship. "I condemn every attempt," affirmed Cassius, writing in 1904, "to substitute human forms, plans and ideas for the plain written word of God contained in the Bible, believing that God has given us a complete revelation of his will, and that he will not accept any addition to or subtraction from his word. I believe that it is a sin to place an organ in a congregation to use in 'worship,' and that all societies are ungodly."<sup>48</sup> Taylor, of course, felt no misgivings about using mechanical instruments in worship. Taylor and Cassius attest to the racial complexity and theological diversity in their chosen faith tradition. Additionally, even though Cassius railed against what he perceived to be deviant practices of fellow members of the Stone-Campbell movement, he often appealed to them for monetary assistance.

The night S. R. Cassius died in Colorado Springs, Colorado, August 10, 1931, Marshall Keeble was busy planting a Black Church of Christ in Valdosta, Georgia. Generously funded by White Christians in Tennessee and beyond, Keeble committed his life to

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<sup>44</sup> See "Union Transportation Co.," *Nashville Globe*, May 3, 1907, 1. See also August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, "Negro Boycotts of Jim Crow Streetcars in Tennessee," *American Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (Winter 1969): 760; Robinson, *To Pave the Way for His People*, 62.

<sup>45</sup> Robinson, *To Save My Race from Abuse*, 7.

<sup>46</sup> Robinson, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Robinson, 172.

<sup>48</sup> S. R. Cassius, "My Position on All Questions of Fellowship," *Christian Leader* 11 (September 21, 1897): 4. See also Edward J. Robinson, ed., *To Lift up My Race: The Essential Writings of Samuel Robert Cassius* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008), xxii.

fulltime evangelism in 1914 and kept going until his death in 1968. Over a five-decade period, he succeeded in establishing several congregations that still exist.

Notwithstanding his limited educational training, he came under the influence of several White leaders, especially David Lipscomb. The Black evangelist credited Lipscomb with "lighting a fire" under African Americans in Churches of Christ. Through the pages of the *Gospel Advocate*, Lipscomb left a lasting imprint on Keeble and the many congregations he planted. The White editor perhaps more than any other person helped to lead Keeble's father-in-law, S. W. Womack, out of the Disciples of Christ into Churches of Christ. A year after Lipscomb passed away, Keeble reported, "So I am still reading [the *Gospel Advocate*]. May God bless and lead those in whose hands the paper is to remain, and may it go forth blessing the world as it did when that great and noble servant, David Lipscomb, lived."<sup>49</sup>

Unlike Preston Taylor who endorsed using instruments in worship and relied on missionary societies, Keeble vociferously rejected such practices, insisting that "I had rather follow God's plan rather than man's."<sup>50</sup> Keeble emerged as the premier Black evangelist in Churches of Christ. He informally mentored and inspired younger preachers to follow him into the preaching ministry. Many of his proteges left indelible marks on the history of African American Churches of Christ. Luke Miller (1904–62), for example, baptized approximately 10,000 people across the South and planted several Black Churches of Christ in the Lone Star State.<sup>51</sup> Keeble later received an appointment as president of the Nashville Christian Institute (NCI), a K–12 school for Black youth in Nashville. White Christians lionized the Black evangelist primarily because of non-threatening racial posture. Unlike S. R. Cassius and Preston Taylor who overtly opposed racial discrimination, Marshall Keeble chose not to "rock the boat" of race relations in Jim Crow America.

Keeble and Cassius shared similar biblical and ecclesiological views in that they both denounced missionary societies and other extra-biblical practices. Still their posture on race relations differed. Even though Cassius and Keeble held divergent theological views from Taylor, the trio held one thing in common: all of them were admirers of Booker T. Washington. Cassius earned the appellation, the "Booker T. Washington of Oklahoma," and sent his oldest son, A. L. Cassius, to study at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Keeble as a boy read Washington's autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, "from lid to lid."<sup>52</sup>

On the one hand, the triumvirate of Cassius, Keeble, and Taylor held the "Wizard of Tuskegee" in high esteem. On the other hand, Taylor had a close relationship with

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<sup>49</sup> Marshall Keeble, "Among the Colored Folks," *Gospel Advocate* 60 (February 14, 1918): 163.

<sup>50</sup> Robinson, *Show Us How You Do It*, 11–21.

<sup>51</sup> Robinson, *The Fight is on in Texas: A History of African Americans in the Lone Star State, 1865–2000* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2008), 67–77.

<sup>52</sup> Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 21.

Washington, who as board member of Fisk University, and often visited Nashville. Such excursions afforded Taylor an opportunity to wine and dine with the prestigious educator. In short, Cassius and Keeble admired Washington from afar, but Taylor, because of his influence and business acumen, could appreciate him close and in person.

Indeed, after Washington passed away in the fall of 1915, Cassius eulogized him, stating, “. . . Booker T. Washington was in a class by himself. His race did not make him great, but he reflected greatness on the race.”<sup>53</sup> The foregoing commendation attests that African Americans in Churches of Christ understood the significance of Booker T. Washington’s work and influence across the United States. On one hand, Black people in the Stone-Campbell movement generally recognized Washington. On the other hand, the Alabama educator knew virtually nothing of them. However, there was one Black person in the Stone-Campbell movement who Washington knew and admired, namely, Preston Taylor.

In his *The Negro in Business*, Booker T. Washington bestowed lofty praise upon Preston Taylor, stating, “His philanthropic spirit is strong, and a deed of charity rendered by him during a recent severe winter will forever live in the hearts of the people of Nashville; for through his own warm and tender feeling for suffering humanity, individual help, solicitations from friends, he was enabled to feed, warm and clothe almost a thousand poor people and shield them from the cold.”<sup>54</sup>

Born into chattel enslavement and growing up in context saturated with visceral racism, Preston Taylor served as a drummer boy and hoisted the Union flag while in the Union Army. This unforgettable experience stamped him for future leadership roles in the Black church and community. Battle-scarred and battle-tested in the Civil War, Taylor emerged as a peerless leader, determined to make life better for African Americans in life and in death. In the words of his contemporary, William J. Simmons, Preston Taylor “led the way” in building congregational structures, in developing a financial institution, in establishing a cemetery, in organizing a university, and in creating a recreational facility for members of the Black community in Middle Tennessee. These and many other notable achievements confirm an indisputable fact: Preston Taylor was “in a class by himself.”

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<sup>53</sup> S. R. Cassius, “An Appreciation of Booker T. Washington,” *Gospel Advocate* 29 (December 23, 1915): 1,302. See also Robinson, *To Lift Up My Race*, 26.

<sup>54</sup> Booker T. Washington, *The Negro in Business* (Chicago: Afro-AM Press, 1969 [1906]), 102.