



NETTIE CRAIG ASBERRY

By Lorraine Rath

The entrance to Oakwood Hill Cemetery is easy to miss, tucked away at the end of a quiet side street in the Edison neighborhood of Tacoma. I've managed to find it on a second try, and as I walk through the open gates I see a field of old stone markers and large oaks sloping off to the left, and a dilapidated and curious old mausoleum looming on a hilltop to the right. The whole place feels rather forgotten. I have brought flowers, which are already starting to wilt in the hot July air, and a card of remembrance for a woman long deceased. In my other hand is a plot map, which I'm hoping will lead me to the grave of one of Washington's many lesser-known suffragists—a Black woman who was a leader in her community, and a tireless fighter for social justice. A woman beloved and ahead of her time in many ways. I'm looking for Nettie Craig Asberry.

Nettie Craig was born on July 15th, 1865 in Leavenworth, Kansas. Her father was a plantation owner named William Wallingford, and her mother, Violet Craig, was enslaved on his plantation. Nettie was one of six children, the youngest and the only one born free. From a very early age, Nettie proved to be bright and talented. She took to music readily, and was taking piano lessons as early as age 8. She also demonstrated leadership qualities and an interest in social justice at an unusually early age. She was only thirteen years old when, inspired by a speech by Susan B. Anthony, she became secretary of a local club honoring the social reformer and women's rights activist—a club that was working in support of women's suffrage.

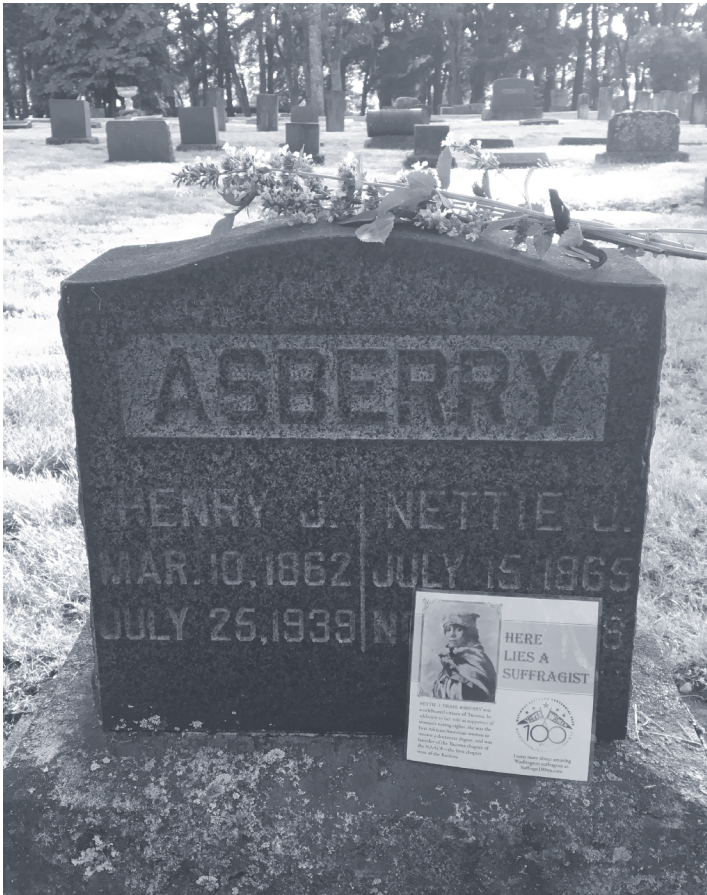
It was a rarity at the time for any woman—let alone a woman of color—to attend and to graduate from college. But Nettie took advantage of the free tuition offered at the time at the University of Kansas, earning her undergraduate degree there before moving on to the Kansas Conservatory of Music and Elocution, where she earned a Doctorate of

Music on June 12, 1883—just a month shy of her eighteenth birthday. Nettie Craig was one of the first Black women to receive a PhD.

After her education, Nettie went on to teach music and to perform in traveling choirs. It was around this time that she married Albert Jones, her first husband, and moved with him in 1890 to Seattle where that city's tragic fire of 1889 had created a boom of rebuilding. It didn't take long for Nettie to find a place for her talents, becoming an organist and then music director for the First African Methodist Church. But her time in Seattle would not last long. Albert died in 1893, and Nettie moved to Tacoma, Washington in the same year, after a brief return to Kansas City.

It is in Tacoma where Nettie met and married her second husband, Henry Asberry. Henry was an established and successful businessman who ran the barber shop of the popular Tacoma Hotel. His was considered to be the best shave in town, and his client list reads like a "who's who" of influential visitors to Tacoma: Calvin Coolidge, William

Photograph of Nettie Craig Asberry, as featured in the Colored Women's Federation of Washington Club journal, 1922–1925. Washington State Historical Society, S1992.2.47.



Nettie Craig Asberry's grave, located in the Oakwood Hill Cemetery, Tacoma, Washington. Photo by Lorraine Rath.

Rockefeller, Mark Twain and Joaquin Miller to name a few. Henry and Nettie married on February 23, 1895, and the two enjoyed considerable prosperity.

Together, they created a home that was to become a hub of activity in their community. Nettie taught music to hundreds of children over the years, and established a music club to expand the cultural and musical appreciation of young people in Tacoma.

Tacoma is also where Nettie's activism really started to flourish.

In the early 1900s, women's clubs were growing in popularity across the country, in large part due to the women's suffrage movement. Women in communities everywhere were coming together to join forces and be heard in their communities on a variety of subjects and issues, some with political themes and some as seemingly innocuous as sewing groups. Nettie became very interested in this idea, and traveled across the state of Washington, encouraging women of color to form their own clubs in an effort to better organize and give voice to their causes. Influenced by the teachings of Booker T. Washington, these clubs frequently focused on self-reliant grassroots

activism and improving the sociopolitical status of women and Black people in society. The Washington State Federation of Colored Women was created in 1917 to bring these clubs together from as far away as Idaho and British Columbia. Nettie became its president.

In addition to her ongoing efforts toward women's rights, Nettie helped to establish the Tacoma Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1913—the first to open west of the Rockies. She was increasingly outspoken on all matters of racial discrimination, starting letter-writing campaigns to newspapers protesting the unjust practices she witnessed in her community. Her activism became legendary through several highly visible actions, including writing to the press to protest the movie *Birth of a Nation* which portrayed freed Blacks as depraved and a threat to white people. She also organized protests against segregation practices at Fort Lewis and at businesses in the area.

By the time Nettie Craig Asberry died in 1968—at the incredible age of 103—she had become a celebrated and beloved Tacoma icon. To honor her lifelong efforts toward equality and social justice, Tacoma created the Nettie Asberry Cultural Club, a version of which still exists today. And in the year following her death, Mayor A. L. Rasmussen proclaimed that May 11, 1969 would be known in Tacoma as Dr. Nettie Asberry Day.

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The plot map proves helpful, and I am soon standing over a modest, worn stone, adorned with dried moss and bearing only the scantest of information: Nettie C. Asberry, July 15, 1865–November 17, 1968. Given all that Nettie accomplished in her lifetime, it feels sadly underwhelming. To a passerby, her grave looks like any other, offering no clues at all to the many significant accomplishments achieved in that dash between the dates. To remedy this—at least temporarily—I'm leaving flowers and a card which tells of her place in history and her contributions to the rights of women. Perhaps now, as we celebrate the centennial of the 19th Amendment granting women the hard-won right to vote, a passerby will read it and give proper thanks to a brave activist who helped make that possible.

Nettie Asberry is one of hundreds of Washington women and men whose tireless efforts helped secure women's voting rights. The National Women's History Alliance project "Here Lies a Suffragist" encourages people around the state to locate the graves of suffragists and to honor them by leaving a remembrance. If you would like to find a suffragist near you, please visit NationalWomensHistoryAlliance.org or Suffrage100WA.com. 🌸