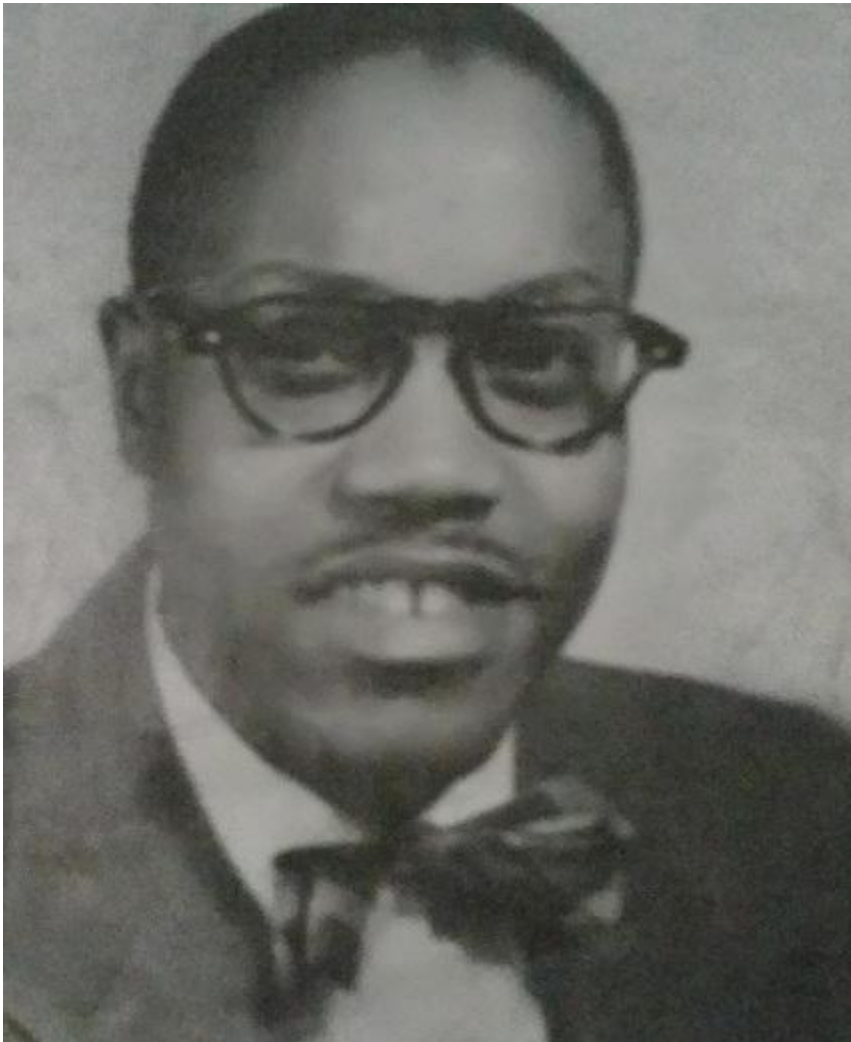


Alton's Black History: Bringing music to children

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
February 15 2018 10:33 AM



ALTON - In the 1950s, the entire nation was in the early pushes for the Civil Rights Movement, and Alton schools were reluctantly undergoing integration under duress after Elijah Conley and his committee threatened state funding.

While Conley left town with both a ruined line of credit and a ruined livelihood after a cross was burnt in his yard, others stayed in Alton to help instruct and raise another generation of Altonians to be strong, smart and hard-working, but also to have a genuine love and appreciation of music. Many black leaders in Alton in the early half of the 20th century were well-known and beloved musicians who transcended the absurd color barrier with soul-moving sounds. In the 1950s, several leaders stayed to help teach the powerful art of music.

Earl McGill was a music teacher at Central Junior High School and served as the director of the Khoraliers for more than 15 years. In his entry in *20th Century African American Leaders in Alton*, it is said McGill "molded 25 voices into one of the best amateur choral groups in the state."

One of his students was an inspirational and well-loved piano teacher.



Denise Coleman Kimball was born in Canton, Illinois, where she received her early schooling. She came to Alton in 1941 to serve as the pianist and director for the Usher Board Chorus of Union Baptist Church, according to *20th Century African American Leaders in Alton*, a book available at the Alton Museum of History and Art. She served in the church choir for 25 years.

Kimball was instructed by McGill as well as Muriel Dickerson, Emma Josting, Helen Herman Foster and Lewis and Clark Community College. She was a lifetime member of the Carbondale Chapter of the Theta Nu Sigma Society and was a member of the Alton Area Piano Teacher's Guild as well as the National Guild of Piano Teachers. Some of her students even continued their careers in music due to her tutelage.

Outside of music and church, Kimball received advanced degrees in cosmetology and served as President of the Madison County Hairdressers and was a member of the National Beauticians' League and the National Cosmetology Association.



The sister of Rev. Thomas Wright - the pastor who helped charter the Alton Branch of the NAACP and served as an early advisor to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. - Lydia

Wright Character, was born in Forrest City, Arkansas, and received her education in the Pine Bluffs, Arkansas School System.

When she came to Alton, Character was a member of her brother's congregation at St. John's Baptist Church and served as a soloist at her church and many others. She was known as a "friend to children," and would gather them for Sunday School. She would also provide children in need nice clothes using money from her own pockets. She outfitted the Angel Choir, and also hosted a weekly radio show every Sunday.