

Christian County Women of Purpose

A celebration of Women's History Month and the United States' 250th anniversary through the exemplary lives of women connected to Hopkinsville.

[by Bobbie Smith Bryant](#)

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These profiles of women connected to Hopkinsville provide a celebration of Women's History Month during the United States' 250th anniversary year.

Nancy "Nannie" Jones — 1860 – 1939

Nannie Jones was born in Hopkinsville and grew up in Memphis. She graduated from Fisk University in 1886 and also attended Lemoyne Institute, a school for African Americans in Memphis. While still in college, she taught in Alpika, Mississippi, and later joined the First Colored Baptist Church in Memphis. Nannie became the first unmarried Black woman commissioned by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. In 1888, she traveled to Kambini in Inhambane, Mozambique.

In Kambini, she met up again with her Fisk classmates, Benjamin and Henrietta Ousley. Together, they started a school where children learned to read, practice their faith and gain practical skills. The students also worked two hours each day to help provide food and clothing. When the Ousleys left for a time due to health issues, Nannie kept the mission running. After the station closed under Portuguese rule, she moved to the Gazaland Mission in Rhodesia.

There, under British rule and complicated missionary politics, Nannie was isolated. As the only Black missionary, she was not allowed to share housing, lost her classroom duties, and was given domestic chores instead. She stayed until 1897, when she returned to Memphis to rest and began teaching again. Records show she lived at 400 Broadway and cared for a young African girl named Mary Jones, who came to America with her.

Nannie Jones' dedication to education, faith, and courage took her to places where schools were few and prejudice was common. Her story shows future teachers that courage and compassion can make a real difference in the lives of every student.

Christine Johnson Smith — 1911-2010

Christine Johnson Smith's life revolved around music, from church choirs and small-town recitals, to school plays all the way to Broadway. She was born in Hopkinsville and grew up in Owensboro's musical community. She finished high school in 1929 and went on to study at the Nashville Conservatory.

She moved to New York in 1937 and worked for NBC's Radio City Music Hall, Lyn Murray and the Columbia Symphony Orchestra. When she had the chance, she toured in concert across North America. On Broadway, she played many roles, including in "Macbeth," "Carmen," and "Rigoletto."



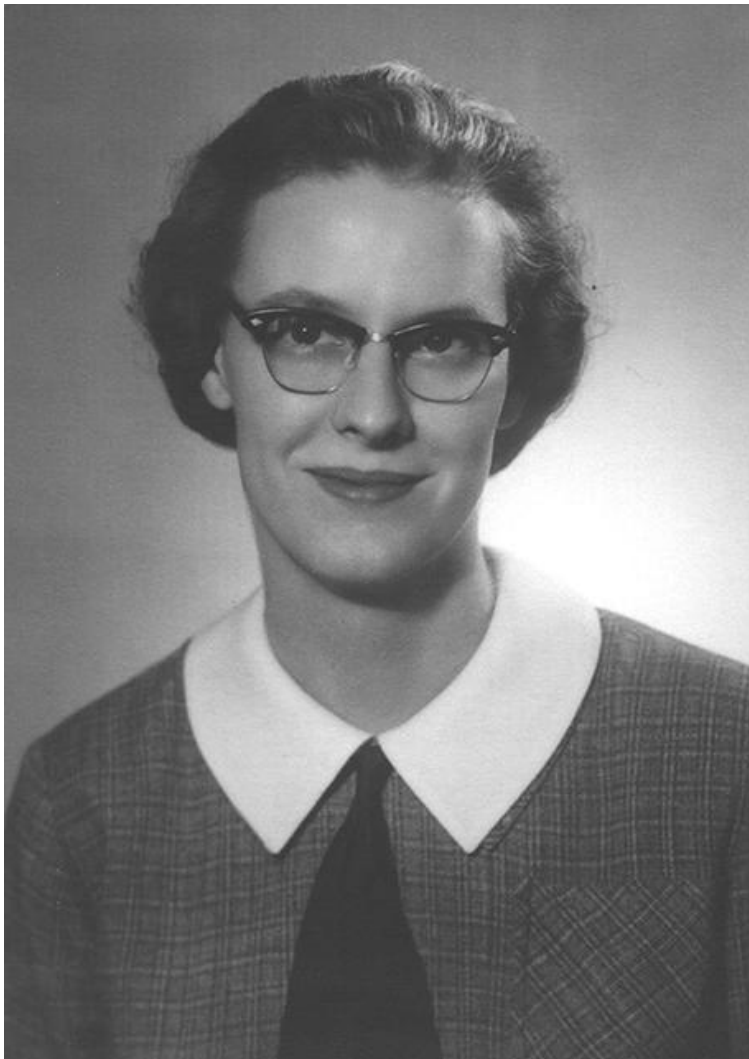
Christine Johnson Smith (Photo from Kentucky Fandom)

In 1945, she created the role of Nettie Fowler in "Carousel." Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote "You'll Never Walk Alone" just for her, and she sang it on the original cast album. She stayed

with the show for hundreds of performances, toured Italy, and later rejoined the show for its national tour and Broadway revival in 1949.

After returning to Owensboro, Christine married and raised two daughters. She taught voice lessons, coached young performers and set high standards in community music rooms. Christine wanted to make music that mattered and to share her skills with the next generation. She devoted her life to the arts, and her legacy lives on in her recordings and in the singers she taught.

Betty Hite Thurmond — 1921-1989



Betty Thurmond

Bettye Thurmond is known as one of the most determined advocates for human dignity in Christian County. Her name often appeared in Hopkinsville's newspaper, the Kentucky New Era, because she would not ignore injustice. At a time when many people were afraid to speak out, Bettye and her husband, Hal Thurmond Sr., took action. Their work for human rights took many forms.

Bettye worked for fair treatment in housing, jobs and public services, believing that everyone deserved equal opportunity, no matter their race, income or background. She went to city meetings, challenged unfair practices and encouraged leaders to make policies based on fairness and respect. Records show she stood with community members, encouraging open conversations and helping create spaces where hard truths could be faced. She was never confrontational, showing how to hold institutions accountable while still encouraging people to work together.

For young women in Hopkinsville, Bettye was a mentor who showed that standing up for others takes conviction. Many remember how she encouraged them to speak up, write letters, attend meetings and take their place in shaping the community's future.

Mary Swope Moseley — 1909-1993

Mary Moseley was born in Ballard County. She married and raised four children, went back to school as an adult and became a teacher, principal, artist and volunteer in Hopkinsville's schools and cultural life. At 58, she graduated from Austin Peay State University and later earned a master's degree from Murray State University.



Mary Swope Mosley

Mary Moseley was a teacher, principal and artist. (Photo provided by Bobbie Smith Bryant)
Mary's career took her from being an elementary teacher in Todd and Christian counties to principal at Saints Peter and Paul Catholic School. She also taught kindergarten at Grace Episcopal Church and taught fourth grade and art at University Heights Academy, where she also served on the board of directors.

Mary sponsored the Young Mothers Organization and volunteered with Parents Anonymous, helping abused children. She believed motherhood was a sacred responsibility and once said, "I feel that to have a child ... to be given a child is life's greatest responsibility." Because of this belief, she was named Kentucky Mother of the Year and represented the state at a national convention.

Mary taught private art lessons, continued substitute teaching after she retired and showed her artwork in exhibits. She also acted with the Southern Kentucky Independent Theatre and

appeared in plays written by her son. Her story shows that education and the arts are lifelong companions, and that it is never too late to learn, teach or bring beauty into everyday life.

Katherine Graham Peden — 1926-2006

Katie Peden started her career in local media. She began at WHOP (AM) radio in Hopkinsville in 1944 and eventually became a station manager. Later, she owned WNVL in Nicholasville and worked as a national sales manager for several CBS television stations. Her experience in broadcasting gave her a unique mix of communication skills and business sense, especially for a woman of her time.

In 1963, Gov. Edward T. Breathitt, a Hopkinsville native, named her Kentucky's Commissioner of Commerce, making her the first woman to hold that position in the state. Business Week called her bold recruitment strategy the "Pedenblitz." This attention helped bring new industry and jobs to Kentucky. While she was in office, the state saw more jobs and higher personal income.



Katherine Peden during an unsuccessful run in the 1968 U.S. Senate race in Kentucky.

(Wikimedia Commons photo)

President John F. Kennedy appointed her to the President's Commission on the Status of Women. Later, she was the only woman on the Kerner Commission, which President Lyndon B. Johnson created to look into civil unrest in the 1960s. These roles showed her reputation as a practical problem-solver and a rare female voice in important policy discussions at the time. Peden also broke barriers in business. In 1969, she joined the board of Westvaco (now MeadWestvaco), becoming one of the first women to serve on the board of a Fortune 500 company. Her work on corporate and public boards helped open doors for other women in business leadership.

Hopkinsville remembers Peden as a hometown leader who showed how local talent can influence state and national policy. Her mix of media skills, economic strategy and public service is still a model for civic-minded leadership. Her story continues to inspire leaders in Kentucky who want to combine business growth with public service.

In an earlier version of this article, Katie Peden's last name was incorrect in a sub-headline.



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Special to Hoptown Chronicle

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