

Carl A. Cowan

Youth

Carl Cowan was born in Knoxville and lived on College Street, near the Knoxville College campus, with his father and mother, Hugh and Maggie, and his younger brother, Clause. A gifted athlete and scholar, Carl credited part of his success to his inquisitive nature and the early lessons he learned in telling right from wrong. As a young child, he and his brother and friends enjoyed running footraces along College Street, as well as football, baseball and sledding in the winter.

Mr. Cowan attended Knoxville College and was active in student civic, social, and athletic organizations. He was a member of Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, played halfback on the Knoxville College football team, among other extracurricular pursuits. Mr. Cowan eventually became a teacher and coach at Knoxville College in 1926-27, becoming the first paid coach in the Negro Division. Mr. Cowan was later to say that he believed amateur school sports and professional sports ultimately aided in the fight for desegregation and civil rights for all.

Mr. Cowan went on to receive his law degree from Howard University College of Law, Washington, D.C. which led him to his life's work: using the existing laws to advance the rights of people of color in the United States.

Adult

After receiving his law degree from Howard University, Carl Cowan practiced law in Knox County from 1934 until 1980. Mr. Cowan was a member of Knox County Court and was appointed the first African American Assistant District Attorney in Knox County in 1953.

Perhaps he will be best remembered for his work as a civil rights attorney. Mr. Cowan was the plaintiff's attorney for the NAACP, where he challenged segregation in Knoxville, Clinton, Sweetwater-Madisonville, Johnson City school systems, and the University of Tennessee. His wife, Esther, an English teacher, was part of the historic desegregation of Austin High School and East High School. Carl Cowan was a close associate of future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and was instrumental in the 1954 landmark Supreme Court decision that ended the legal racial segregation of the public schools in America.

Elder

Throughout his life and even after his retirement, Carl Cowan remained active in professional, social and civic organizations. He served in TVA, the Knoxville College board of trustees, the Knox County Draft Board, the Republican Primary Board, and the Shiloh Presbyterian Board of Trustees. Mr. Cowan received the Meritorious Service and Outstanding Service awards from the NAACP, the Whitney Young Freedom Service Award from the Knoxville Area Urban League, and the Brotherhood Award from the Knoxville Round Table of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. In addition, Mr. Cowan was presented with numerous awards recognizing his support of the YMCA, the Girl Scouts, and other groups focusing on youth and athletics.

Carl Cowan was a member of the Knoxville Sports Hall of Fame, the Knoxville College Hall of Fame, and was honored by Knoxville College with a Recognition Day and a State of Tennessee Joint House Resolution for his commitment to improving the general welfare of minority groups in Tennessee.

Carl Cowan often said, "Change is hard to come by, but change will come" and thanks to his efforts, it did. He will be remembered as a great man who helped change the face of Knoxville and the nation.

This plaque is dedicated by the Beck Cultural Exchange Center, Inc., African American Appalachian Arts, and the Black Business Contractors Association. More information can be found on Mr. Carl A. Cowan and other influential African Americans from East Tennessee at the Beck Cultural Exchange Center, Inc.

Appalachian Quilt Trail

The Knox County Appalachian Quilt Trail is part of a larger quilt trail stretching through the Appalachian Region made up of outdoor replications of quilt blocks on outbuildings. The purpose of the Appalachian Quilt Trail is to stimulate economic development through tourism in rural areas and increase sales of local art, produce, value added products, accommodations and amenities. Rural Conservation and Development Districts are coordinating the project throughout the Appalachian region, supported by groups such as the East Tennessee Foundation and Knox County Parks and Recreation.

Knox County is part of the Smoky Mountain Resource Conservation and Development Council and is developing four loops starting in downtown Knoxville that circle out to the rural areas to cross one of the four major rivers that flow through Knox County- the French Broad River, the Holston River, the Clinch River, and the Tennessee River.