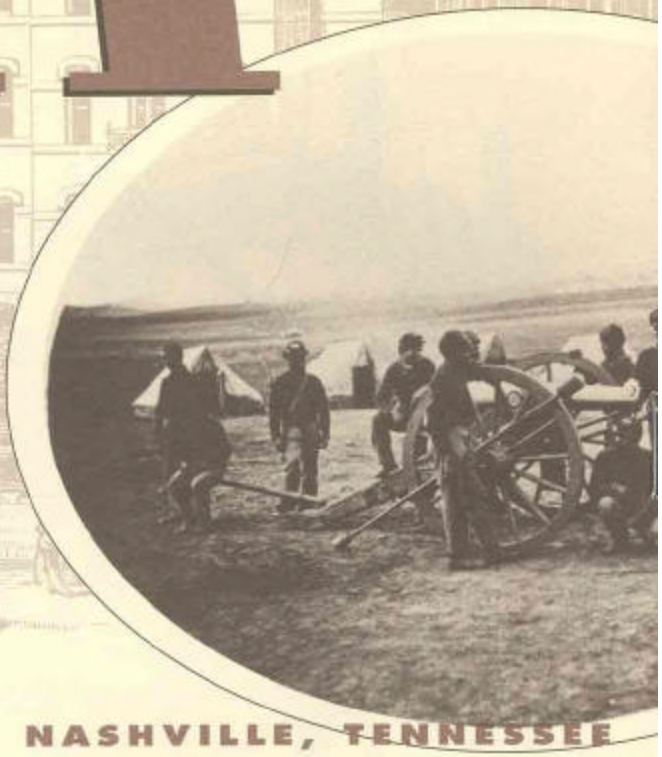
AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORIC SITES



NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

A BRIEF HISTORY OF NASHVILLE'S AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

African Americans are Nashville's largest ethnic community, approximately one fourth of the city's total population.

The history of this community began in 1748 when blacks accompanied white explorers into the Middle Tennessee area. In 1779, a black man was among the eight men who came with James Robertson from the Wautauga settlement in North Carolina to stake a claim to the land on the Cumberland River bluffs. Several black families were also among the Donelson party arriving at the new settlement by flatboat in the spring of 1780.

Few of the names of these early pioneers survive. Most came as slaves to live and work side by side with white settlers. Local historic house museums like The Hermitage, Travellers Rest, and Belle Meade Mansion have begun to research, reconstruct, and exhibit the history of the black families and workers who lived on these large plantations.

Fifteen to twenty percent of the earliest black settlers were free persons. Until 1835, they could vote in all elections.

Free blacks owned property, operated hack stands, barbershops, and rooming houses. Robert ("Black Bob") Renfro ran a tavern on the public square which was frequented by Andrew Jackson. Sara Estell owned an ice cream parlor on Fifth Avenue, North, and catered the city's annual firemen's celebrations.

The center of Nashville's free black population was just north of Cedar (now Charlotte) Street in the shadow of Capitol Hill. Between 1833 and 1856, free blacks conducted schools for black children in this neighborhood.

During the Civil War and the Federal occupation of Nashville (1862-65), the promise of freedom attracted over eight thousand new blacks into town, tripling Nashville's black population to over twelve thousand. Thousands of black men joined the Union Army and served in combat. Some two thousand blacks helped build Fort Negley, Nashville's largest Union Army fortification. The black men and women who died in battles across Tennessee were buried in the National Cemetery here.

After the war, Nashville was the center of Tennessee's civil rights movement. Local African American leaders organized the State Colored Men's Conventions and the Tennessee Chapter of the Equal Rights League to work for citizenship for former slaves and the right to vote, granted to men in 1867.

The first black man was elected to the Nashville city council in 1868, the first black to the Tennessee General Assembly in 1872. Until the late 1880s and the beginning of Jim Crow legislation, dozens of blacks held elective office in Nashville and Davidson County. James C. Napier, a prominent black lawyer, city councilman, and anti-segregationist, was appointed Registrar of the U.S. Treasury in 1911 under President Howard Taft.

During Reconstruction, Nashville's African American community grew dramatically, reaching forty percent of the total population by 1890. Nashville developed a reputation as the black Athens of the South because of the number of educational institutions established for African Americans here.

A BRIEF HISTORY – continued

Blacks and northern missionaries started four colleges: Fisk University (1867), Roger Williams University (1864), Central Tennessee College, later Walden University, (1867), and Tennessee Manual Labor University (1867). Meharry Medical College began as a department of Walden University in 1876, and Tennessee State University as Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School in 1912.

By the turn of the century, there were dozens of black-owned businesses, including iron dealers and the Lowery and McGavock Shoe Manufacturing Company. Before 1920, most black businesses were located along Charlotte Avenue between Fourth and Tenth avenues, North. By the end of World War II, Jefferson Street, near the prosperous suburbs of Fisk University and Meharry Medical College, became the new commercial center.

James C. Napier

The number of African American churches also grew rapidly after the Civil War and have been a mainstay of the black community throughout the twentieth century. In 1925, the Nashville Colored Directory listed 88 black churches. Today there are close to 250, some of which trace their history to before the Civil War. In the 1960s, when the Civil Rights movement rocked the nation, it was local ministers, as well as educators, who organized effective, nonviolent sit-in demonstrations which served as a model for other similar demonstrations throughout the South.

From the beginning of Nashville's history, African Americans have contributed to the institutions and traditions for which the city is justly recognized — education, business, religion, politics and music.

The Original "Nashville Sound"

The original "Nashville Sound" had its roots in the black community. The tradition began with Fisk University's Jubilee Singers, whose worldwide singing tours saved the university from financial collapse in the 1870s and gave Nashville a national and international reputation as a center for black religious music. In the early twentieth century, the now famous Fairfield Four (1921) toured the United States and maintained a decade-long radio spot on Nashville's clear-channel radio station WLAC. Other performers and groups followed — the Fireside Singers, J. Robert Bradley, The Voices of Nashville, and today's Bobby Jones and the New Life singers.

In the realm of country music, "Harmonica Wizard" Deford Bailey played a role in the naming of the Grand Ole Opry in 1926. Bailey's rendition of "Pan American Blues" opened the now legendary WSM Barn Dance program which followed an hour of symphonic music and inspired announcer George Hay to introduce the radically different music program as "the Grand Ole Opry." Bailey's contributions to country music are represented in the Country Music Hall of Fame.

Jazz, rhythm and blues, and soul music musicians joined Nashville's black music scene in the 1950s through the 70s. Night clubs on Jefferson Street featured some of the hottest popular music acts in the country — Little Richard, Muddy Waters, Ray Charles, and Sarah Vaughn as well as local favorites Cecil Gant and The Prisonaires. Nashville's Excello records became one of the most successful rhythm and blues labels in America.

The strong roots of Nashville's black music heritage continue today to produce gifted performers in all forms of music.

The Jubilee Singers, October 6, 1871

Morris Memorial Building (1924)
McKissack and McKissack Architects

Built by the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., the Morris Memorial Building (1924) is an example of the design work of McKissack and McKissack (now McKissack & McKissack & Thompson), the first architectural firm in the United States organized and staffed by African American architects and draftsmen. The building's neoclassical design is stylistically typical of its era with refined and well-executed detail on the interior and exterior of the building. Both the architectural firm and Citizens Bank had offices in this building at one time.

The McKissack family's involvement with the building business began over a century ago with Moses McKissack, a freed slave who became a mason and contractor. His grandson, Moses McKissack III, came to Nashville from Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1905 and began to advertise as an architect in 1909. In 1922, Calvin McKissack, after practicing in Dallas, Texas, since 1912, joined his brother Moses to form the architectural firm, which is still in family hands. The McKissacks also designed the George Hubbard House (1920) (see Hubbard House), the Carnegie Library (1908) on the Fisk University Campus, several public schools in Nashville, and selected buildings on Tennessee State University's campus.

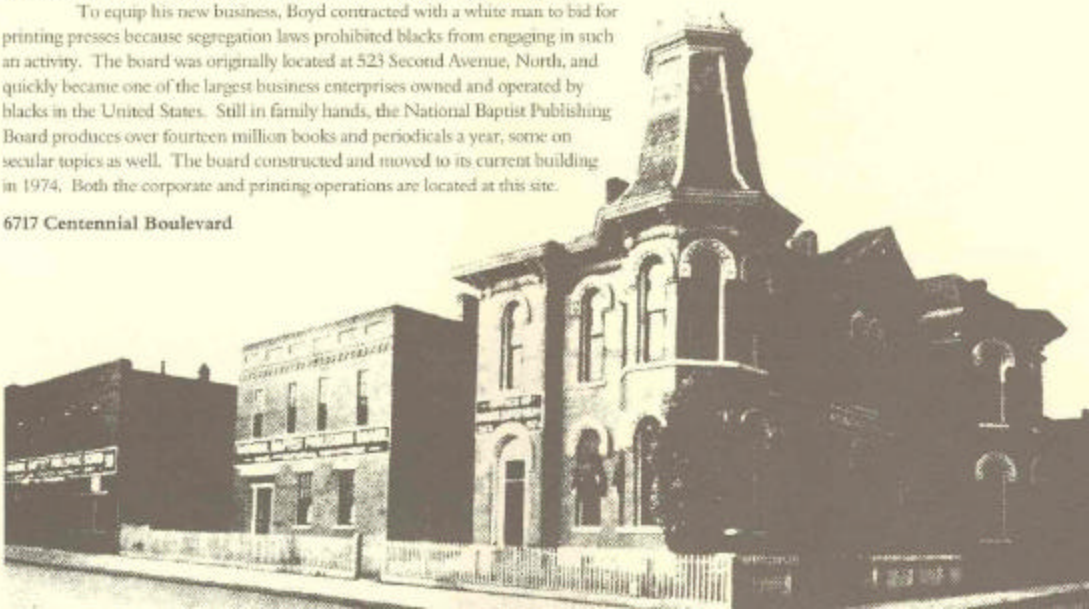
Northeast corner of Deaderick Street and Fourth Avenue, North, in downtown Nashville

National Baptist Publishing Board (1896)

The National Baptist Publishing Board was established in 1896 by the Reverend Richard Henry Boyd (1843-1922), a founder of Citizens Bank and Secretary of the Home Mission Board of the Negro National Baptist Convention. Born a slave in 1843, Boyd fought in the Civil War, became an ordained minister, and moved to Nashville from Texas in 1896 to found the publishing board. The purpose of the board was to publish denominational literature relevant to the African American experience for the Negro National Baptist Convention's member churches.

To equip his new business, Boyd contracted with a white man to bid for printing presses because segregation laws prohibited blacks from engaging in such an activity. The board was originally located at 523 Second Avenue, North, and quickly became one of the largest business enterprises owned and operated by blacks in the United States. Still in family hands, the National Baptist Publishing Board produces over fourteen million books and periodicals a year, some on secular topics as well. The board constructed and moved to its current building in 1974. Both the corporate and printing operations are located at this site.

6717 Centennial Boulevard



Citizens Bank (1904)

In 1904, the One Cent Savings Bank, now Citizens Bank, became the first minority-owned bank in Tennessee. Only one other bank, a branch of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company Bank (1865) based in Washington, D.C., had been operated for the African American community in Nashville since the Civil War. Now the oldest continuously operating minority-owned bank in the United States, Citizens Bank was founded by distinguished community leaders, including James C. Napier, Reverend Richard Henry Boyd, and Preston Taylor. The bank first opened in Napier's law office at 411 North Cherry Street (now Fourth Avenue, North) near other businesses which served Nashville's black population.

In 1922, Citizens Bank relocated to the former Duncan Hotel, home of the Colored YMCA and other black-owned agencies, on the southwest corner of Charlotte and Fourth avenues. When other local banks failed during the Great Depression, Citizens Bank survived through conservative lending policies and by encouraging systematic savings. The bank moved to the Morris Memorial Building in 1974, and in 1985, into its present building on the former site of the Duncan Hotel.

401 Charlotte Avenue in downtown Nashville

Site of Roger Williams University (1864)

Roger Williams University, one of four colleges founded in Nashville for freed slaves, began in 1864 as Bible classes in the home of Daniel W. Phillips, a white Baptist minister from Massachusetts. In 1866, the "Baptist College," which met for some time in the basement of First Colored Baptist Church, was renamed the Nashville Normal and Theological Institute. The school was funded by the American Baptist Home Mission Society of New York, its goal was to prepare ministers and teachers. The Nashville Normal and Theological Institute operated briefly from two north Nashville sites before settling on thirty acres of land on Hillsboro Road in 1874, where Peabody College of Vanderbilt University stands today. The school grew and expanded and, in 1883, was incorporated as Roger Williams University.

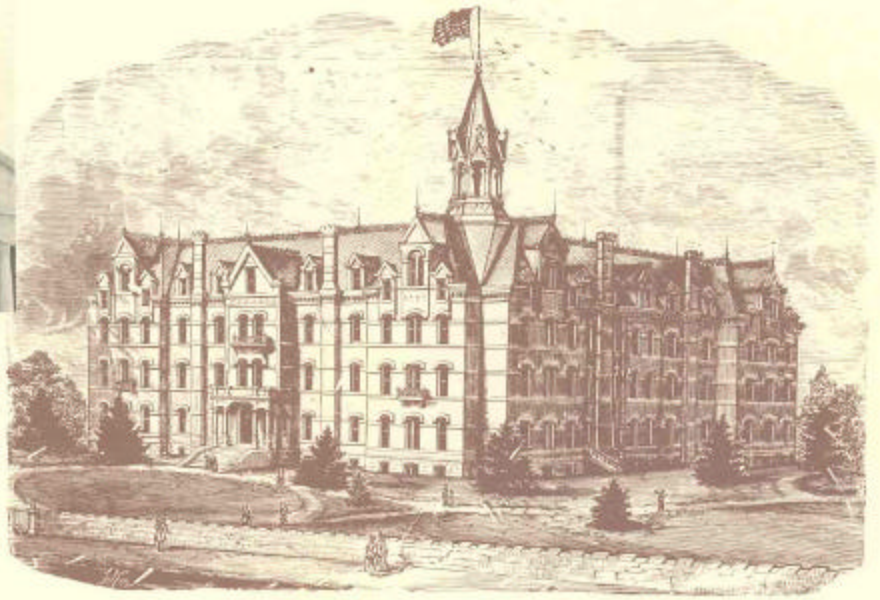
After the turn of the century, the suburbanization of West Nashville, spurred by the development of Centennial Park and the advent of electric streetcars, prompted realtors to attempt to buy the land on which Roger Williams stood. In January 1905, Centennial Hall, a major building, was burned by a fire of unknown origin; a second building burned in May. The school was forced to close, and the American Baptist Home Missionary Society sold the land to realtors and George Peabody College.

Backed by the Negro Baptist Association of Tennessee, Roger Williams reopened in 1909 on Whites Creek Pike with its first black president. In 1929, the school merged with Howe Institute of Memphis (LeMoyne-Owen College). The Whites Creek Campus is now occupied by the American Baptist College.

Peabody Campus of Vanderbilt University on 21st Avenue, South

Roger Williams University

TSU Administration Building



JUBILEE HALL, FISK UNIVERSITY, NASHVILLE

Tennessee State University (1912)

In 1909, the Tennessee legislature authorized a teacher training institution for each grand division of the state and one for Tennessee's 472,987 "colored people." Black Nashvillians lobbied hard for placement of the new state normal school in Nashville; and in 1912 the Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School opened to summer session students on part of the old Hadley Plantation two miles west of Fisk University. William J. Hale was appointed head of the new school which was officially designated a college in 1922.

During the 1920s and 30s, Hale acquired numerous public and private grants to expand the campus and develop the educational curriculum. Harned Hall (1927), named for Tennessee's first commissioner of education, the old library (1927), and the Women's Building (James E. Elliot Building)(1931) are among the oldest buildings on the campus.

After several name changes, the school became Tennessee State University in 1969. The institution's graduates include noted scientists, college presidents, a U.S. Congressman, elected public officials, and other professionals. TSU's women's track coach Edward Temple, has produced more Olympic medal — gold, silver, and bronze — winners than any other university coach.

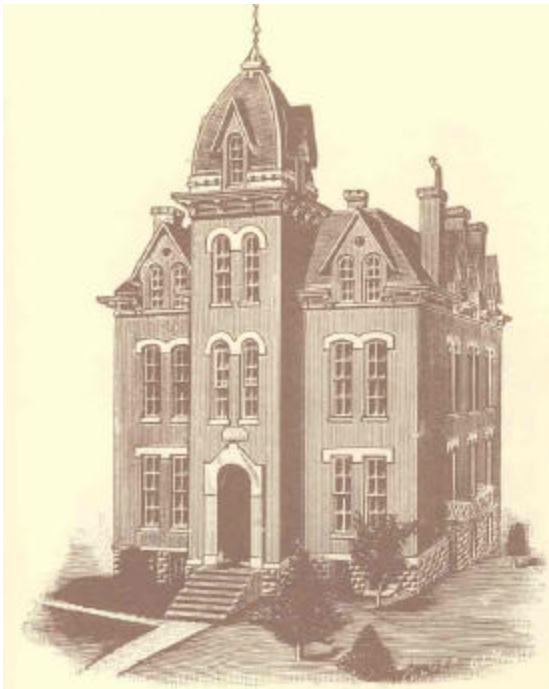
3500 John A. Merritt Boulevard

Fisk University (1866)

Founded by the American Missionary Association and the Western Freedman's Aid Commission, Fisk University began in 1866 as the Fisk School, a free school for blacks in Nashville. Jubilee Hall, completed in 1875, was the first permanent building erected for the higher education of African Americans in the United States. Money for its construction was raised by the Jubilee Singers whose worldwide singing tours brought them international acclaim. A portrait of the original singing group by Queen Victoria's court painter hangs inside Jubilee Hall. The building is a National Historic Landmark.

Also on the campus is the Carl Van Vechten Art Gallery, named for the New York music critic, art collector, and photographer who inspired the 1949 donation of the Steiglitz Collection to the university by Alfred Steiglitz's widow Georgia O'Keeffe. The collection includes original works by Cezanne, Picasso, Renoir, and O'Keeffe, among others. Also in the gallery's collection are paintings by Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglass, who headed the Fisk Art Department for many years.

1000 Seventeenth Avenue, North, between Charlotte Pike and Jefferson Street



ENTRAL TENNESSEE COLLEGE—MEHARRY MEDICAL COLLEGE.

Meharry Medical College (1876)

Meharry Medical College was the first medical education program established for African Americans in the United States and is now the country's largest private institution for the training of black health care professionals. Organized in 1876 as the medical department of Central Tennessee College (later Walden University), Meharry was named for the family that gave liberally towards its financial support. In 1900, the name was changed to Meharry Medical College of Walden University, and in 1915 a separate charter was granted to Meharry by the State of Tennessee.

In 1931, having outgrown its old plant at First Avenue, South, and Chestnut Street, Meharry moved to northwest Nashville near Fisk University. The twenty-six-acre North Nashville campus includes four schools: Medicine, Dentistry, Graduate Studies, and Allied Health Professions. Hubbard Hospital — dedicated to George Hubbard (see Hubbard House)—is the primary clinical teaching facility for the college.

1005 D.B. Todd Boulevard

Cameron-Trimble Neighborhood (1860s)

Cameron-Trimble is the oldest surviving African American neighborhood in Nashville. The name Trimble comes from the owner of the plantation once situated here and on which the Colored Troops of the Army of the Cumberland began their December 1864 attack on General Hood's Confederate Army troops in the Civil War Battle of Nashville.

Central Tennessee College (1866), later Walden University, located here in 1869 on the corner of First Avenue, South, and Chestnut Street. The presence of Walden University and the Meharry Medical Department drew professors, students, doctors, and nurses to settle in the area. Other schools and churches followed. Because of financial problems, Walden was forced to close in the late 1920s; Meharry moved closer to Fisk in northwest Nashville in 1931.

Of interest to the visitor today are Hubbard House and the Seay-Hubbard United Methodist Church built with some of the bricks from the original Walden University Auditorium which stood next door.

The Cameron-Trimble neighborhood is located in South Nashville bounded roughly by Fourth Avenue, South, Lafayette Street, and the railroad tracks near Brown's Creek.

▲ Cameron-Trimble today.

First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill, ca. 1904 ▶

Hubbard House (1920)

The George W. Hubbard home was built in 1920 for Dr. Hubbard when he retired as president of Meharry Medical College. A New Hampshire native and white missionary, Dr. Hubbard graduated from the medical department of Vanderbilt University and taught in Nashville's African American schools after the Civil War. In 1876, the Freedman's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church asked Hubbard to organize a medical department in Central Tennessee College. Meharry Medical Department was the first medical school established in the United States for the education of black physicians. Hubbard served as dean of Meharry from 1876 to 1921.

Designed by Moses McKissack III, Hubbard House is a four-square, Colonial Revival style home; it is the last vestige of what was the original Meharry campus. The house is now the property of the Seay-Hubbard United Methodist Church and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

1109 First Avenue, South, off Lafayette

Site of First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill (1895-1972)

Formerly located at this site was First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill. The church was one of three descendants of First Colored Baptist Church, established in 1848 as a mission of the white First Baptist Church and led by Nelson Merry, Nashville's first ordained black minister. First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill, was one of six black churches which stood in this area before the Capitol Hill Redevelopment Plan of the 1950s. All were founded in the nineteenth century and claimed the city's most prominent African American business and professional families.

During the 1960s, First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill, the last remaining church in the area, served as a headquarters of the Nashville sit-in movement. Strategy sessions, non-violence workshops, mass meetings, and victory celebrations were held here. First Baptist's pastor, the Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, Sr., was a nationally-respected leader of the movement. The well-disciplined Nashville sit-ins served as a model for civil rights demonstrations throughout the South. The present church is located just below Capitol Hill at 933 James Robertson Parkway.

Southwest corner of Charlotte Avenue and Eighth Avenue, North

Greenwood Cemetery (1888)
Mount Ararat Cemetery (1869)

Greenwood Cemetery was established in 1888 by Preston Taylor, minister and founder of the Lea Avenue Christian Church, founder of Greenwood Park, and one of the founders of Citizens Bank. Taylor was also an undertaker who opened the first black undertaking business in Nashville and operated a casket factory. Outstanding Nashvillians buried in Greenwood Cemetery include Taylor and his wife; three original Fisk Jubilee Singers; Deford Bailey, the first black Grand Ole Opry performer; TSU coach John Merritt, and civil rights leader Kelly Miller Smith, Jr.

Located nearby, Mount Ararat Cemetery (1869) was Nashville's first black cemetery. Because of little perpetual care, the cemetery suffered from neglect for many years. In 1982, it was acquired by Greenwood Cemetery, restored, and renamed Greenwood Cemetery West. One of the leaders buried here is Dr. Robert Fulton Boyd, a black physician and graduate of Meharry Medical College who ran for mayor and helped found the National Medical Association, a national association for black physicians.

Greenwood Cemetery is located at the corner of Elm Hill Pike and Spence Lane. Mt. Ararat is located in the 800 block of Elm Hill Pike.

Site of Greenwood Park (1906)

In 1906, Preston Taylor established Greenwood Park adjacent to Greenwood Cemetery. The privately-owned park opened at a time when African American citizens were not permitted in public parks.

Encompassing almost forty acres of open land, Greenwood Park included a club house, theater, skating rink, roller coaster, shooting gallery, merry-go-round, and baseball park (home of the Greenwood Giants). Taylor also maintained a track and stables at the park for the annual Colored State Fair which brought 14,000 blacks to the park on a single day. Visitors traveled by horse-drawn trams, "Pleasure Cars," and later by streetcar to the large amusement park, five miles out Lebanon Road. At his death in 1931, Taylor left Greenwood Park to the National Christian Missionary Convention which closed and sold it about 1949.

Northwest corner of Elm Hill Pike and Spence Lane adjacent to Greenwood Cemetery

Preston Taylor

Fort Negley (1862)

Located on St. Cloud Hill, Fort Negley was part of a chain of Union Army fortifications surrounding Nashville during its Civil War occupation by Federal troops (1862-65). Two thousand free blacks recruited by Union troops under the direction of General James Negley helped build the fort, Nashville's largest and most important Union Army fortification. The octagonal fort measured 600 feet by 300 feet and was constructed of stone, logs, earth, and railway iron. On 15 December 1864, the guns of Fort Negley opened the decisive Battle of Nashville.

After the war, the fort was abandoned and some of the stones were used to build the Eighth Avenue Reservoir. In the 1930s, Fort Negley was partially reconstructed by the Works Progress Administration. A road was built circling the hill and a parking lot constructed. The project was not completed, and today the remains of this construction have greatly deteriorated. Fort Negley is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Corner of Ridley Boulevard and Chestnut Avenue off Eighth Avenue, South

Hadley Park (1912)

Established in 1912, Hadley Park is thought to be the first public park for African American citizens in the United States. The thirty-four-acre park stands on part of the antebellum plantation of John L. Hadley, a white slave-owner committed to helping post-Civil War freed men and women adjust to their new status. At Hadley's invitation, Frederick Douglass spoke to former slaves in 1873 from the porch of the Hadley house which stood in this park until 1948. Tennessee State University stands on another portion of the Hadley land.

During the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration built the Hadley Park entrance gates, and the McKissack and McKissack architectural firm designed the 1952 community center and swimming pool. Today Hadley Park also offers ball diamonds, tennis courts, picnic shelters, a playground, and summer concerts.

28th Avenue, North, and Centennial Boulevard

Fort Negley in an 1863 drawing.

Site of Will Edmondson's Home

> I was out in the driveway with some old pieces of stone, when I heard a voice telling me to pick up my tools and start to work on a tombstone. I looked up in the sky and right there in the noon day light He hung a tombstone out for me to make.

Born in Davidson County about 1883 of former slave parents, Will Edmondson worked as a railroad and hospital laborer until 1931, when he began to produce primitive limestone carvings. A deeply religious man, Edmondson believed that he was called by God to carve stones and, without formal training, began carving first simple tombstones and later primitive animals, angels, Biblical characters, and even celebrities such as Eleanor Roosevelt.

Louise Dahl-Wolfe's photographs of Edmondson's work for *Harper's Bazaar* led to a 1937 exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Edmondson was the first black artist to be honored with a one-man exhibit at this museum.

Will Edmondson died in 1951 and is buried in Mount Ararat Cemetery. Examples of his work can be seen at the Cheekwood Fine Arts Center on Forest Park Drive in southwest Nashville.

Murrell School now stands on this site at 1450 Fourteenth Avenue, South.

Site of Millie Hale Hospital (1916)

On July 1, 1916, Millie Essie Gibson Hale opened a twelve-bed hospital at 523 Seventh Avenue, North, to provide medical care for black people who could not afford to go elsewhere. A registered nurse, Mrs. Hale was a graduate of Fisk University and the Graduate School for Nurses in New York City. Her husband, John Henry Hale, was a physician and professor at Meharry Medical College.

Hale served as nurse and superintendent of the Millie Hale Hospital which grew to seventy-five beds by 1923 and offered a three-year nurse training department. The Hales also converted their home several blocks away into a prenatal and infant welfare clinic run by the Millie E. Hale Hospital Auxiliary. Members of the auxiliary organized health education programs and took food, money, and coal to needy, ill, and homebound people in Nashville, transporting nurses into 7,687 homes in 1923 alone.

Hale died in 1930 and is buried in Greenwood Cemetery. The Millie Hale Hospital closed in 1938.

The Millie Hale Hospital stood at 523 Seventh Avenue, South.

1. Morris Memorial Building
2. National Baptist Publishing Board
3. Citizens Bank
4. Roger Williams University
5. Tennessee State University
6. Fisk University
7. Meharry Medical College
8. Cameron-Trimble Neighborhood
9. Hubbard House
10. Site of First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill
11. Greenwood Cemetery/Mount Ararat Cemetery
12. Site of Greenwood Park
13. Fort Negley
14. Hadley Park
15. Site of Will Edmondson's Home
16. Site of Millie Hale Hospital

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