
Leaders of Afro-American Nashville

JEFFERSON STREET

From the Hadley plantation on the west to the Cumberland River on the east, there developed a wide footpath that evolved into a wagon road. This was the antecedent of North Nashville's Jefferson Street. When the Union army occupied Nashville, 1862- 1865, during the Civil War, several large contraband camps were established in the city. (The newly freed African Americans were emancipated as the federal army swept southward and were considered contraband or prizes of war. The women and children were sent to camps, while newly freed black males were sent to serve as support or soldiers in the federal army.) A large contraband camp was opened in the area around the site of federal Fort Gillam, north of downtown Nashville. Bisecting Fort Gillam was the wagon road later designated as Jefferson Street.

With the end of the Civil War, many groups began organizing efforts to provide education opportunities for African Americans. On January 9, 1866, a school named in honor of Union General C. B. Fisk, who was in charge of federal occupation, was opened in Nashville.



Otev's Quality Market at 1801 Jefferson Street.

Fisk Free Colored School opened in former federal barracks next to the present site of the railroad's Union Station. These facilities deteriorated rapidly, forcing the school to search for new facilities. The efforts of the now-famous Fisk Jubilee Singers during 1871-1872 resulted in the school's purchase of the former site of Fort Gillam and the construction of the school's Jubilee Hall. The impressive structure stood on the high point between thoroughfares later named Seventeenth and Eighteenth avenues (north), with the old footpath / wagon road behind it. The emerging school, rechartered as Fisk University in 1872, possessed a robust population using the old artery and demanding expansion of the bustling thoroughfare. Just to the west, the congregation of the Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church, organized in 1868, constructed a magnificent edifice on what is today Eleventh Avenue, North, and Jefferson Street in the 1870s.

By the turn of the century, according to the Nashville *Globe*, the Abraham Lincoln Land Company and the Realty Saving Bank and Trust Company offered lots for sale in the Fisk University Place subdivision, where Negro buyers paid five dollars down and five dollars a month to purchase a lot. The development was located "within four blocks of the Jefferson Street car line." Through an act of the state legislature, Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School was chartered and opened in 1912 along the western edge of Jefferson Street. The several residential communities springing up around the A. & I. campus established another populace for the

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street's commerce. With the return of African-American veterans of World War One, the student populations of both Fisk and A. & I. expanded. These veterans made greater demands for services to the African-American community, and the response was manifested in increased commercial development of Jefferson Street.

The Great Depression affected various sectors of Nashville's black economy. The Cedar Street downtown black business district suffered decline, due to the devastating consequences of the economic collapse on working-class blacks. Yet another business district was already forming along Jefferson Street, in what was then suburban North Nashville, and supported by the more affluent, middle-class blacks; this commercial district weathered the economic depression better than downtown Cedar Street, according to research by historian Bobby L. Lovett. Funeral parlors and retail outlets became the foundation for Jefferson Street businesses. K. Gardner's Funeral Home, Isom's Beauty Shop, William Hawkins' North Side Ice Cream Company, William Hemphill's Press, Terrance Restaurant, Jefferson Street Pharmacy, Menefee and Bauer Tire & Battery Service, I. E. Green Grocery Company, Terry's Pharmacy, and Frank White's Cleaners were prominent businesses located along Jefferson Street. To obtain the tonsorial services of a professional barber, the North Nashville residents continued to patronize establishments on downtown Cedar Street, and it was not until the late 1930s that the first barbershop for blacks, Crowder's, opened on Jefferson Street. The many beauty shops owned by Negro women continued operations, mostly in the front rooms of the operators' homes.

In the mid-1930's, Meharry Medical College moved from South Nashville to a new campus across from Fisk University; Jefferson Street became the northern boundary of the medical college with its teaching hospital. To serve the needs of the educational and medical complex developing within the radius of the Jefferson Street thoroughfare, a number of new retail businesses began to flourish. The 23-block area from Fifth Avenue, North, to Twenty-eighth Avenue, North, also contained some of the oldest church congregations within black Nashville. At Twelfth Avenue and Jefferson, there was a fire hall, Engine Company No. 11, which also

functioned as a gathering spot and an informal community center.

The 1930s also witnessed the birth of a formal entertainment industry as a component of the Jefferson Street montage. Eventually, everything from small, intimate hole-in-the-wall Chicago-style "speak-easys" to grand nightclubs, supperclubs, dance halls, beer joints, and pool rooms flourished along what became popularly nicknamed "Jeff" Street. There were small eateries and elegant cafes, as well as ice-cream parlors, interspersed from the local landmarks designated as Good Jelly's Club to A.& I.'s barn.

In the age of Jim Crow, black Nashvillians filled the Ritz Theater to enjoy first-release movies, where they were free to enter through the front door and sit in the main audience. For the merchants and residents along Jefferson Street, there was an ease of contact without regard to race. There were four department stores and three were operated by Jewish merchants. Although the African-American Otey family operated a major retail-grocery outlet, several white-owned-and-operated groceries, some with integrated staffs and some with white staffs, were prominent along the thoroughfare. The life-affirming bustle along Jefferson Street flowed through bakeries, hardware stores, service or gasoline stations, dry-cleaning establishments (some of which offered made-to-order men's apparel), insurance agencies, and shoe shops...all in proximity to the after-life enterprises of mortuaries or funeral homes.

Many long-time Nashvillians consider the 1935-65 period as the Golden Age of Jefferson Street. The historic street always reflected the spirit of the season: holidays were always festive, and the smells of seasonal fare greeted the visitor. Thanksgiving morning marked the traditional celebration of A. & I.'s homecoming, with a parade down Jefferson Street. The 1950s and 1960s erupted along Jefferson Street in the marches of the civil rights era and the destructive violence of social protest. These manifestations, in concert with the construction of Interstate 40-West in the mid-1960s led to the shattering demise of the transportation artery's vigor, as well as the burial of the myriad culture that symbolized Jefferson Street.

-Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr.
