

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



Edgehill

Generations of African Americans have lived in the part of Nashville now known as Edgehill since the first half of the nineteenth century. The neighborhood traces its beginnings to approximately 1830, when residences and farms were established on and around Meridian Hill, now the location of E.S. Rose Park, south of the city corporation line. The presence of enslaved African Americans on these estates is documented in census records and in a detailed description of the manor and grounds of Robert Brownlee Currey at the summit of the hill. Currey was a former mayor and postmaster of Nashville, for whom Meridian Hill later came to be known as “Currey’s Hill.”

The Union occupation and defense of Nashville during the Civil War brought dramatic changes to the area, including the physical transformation of the landscape and vastly increased numbers of African American residents. Because of their elevation and their location along the Franklin Turnpike, Meridian Hill, Kirkpatrick Hill, and St. Cloud Hill became the sites of Fort Morton (initially “Fort Confiscation”), Fort Casino, and Fort Negley respectively. A large contraband camp in the area housed thousands of conscripted African Americans, who labored in the construction of these fortifications and other war-related tasks under extreme and often fatal conditions of coercion and privation.

In spite of persisting harsh conditions, African Americans began building neighborhood institutions immediately after the war. “New Bethel” and “Rocktown” appear in postwar newspaper sources as the names of early communities. The oldest churches in the Edgehill

neighborhood date from broadly the same period, including Greater Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (1866) and New Hope Missionary Baptist Church (1885), which is still at its original location. Edgehill’s Carter-Lawrence Elementary School is a 1940 merger of two schools from the post-Civil War decades: the William Penn School, renamed in honor of Judge John Lawrence in 1889, and the Granny White School, renamed in honor of the African American educator Howard C. Carter in 1896.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Edgehill developed into an economically diverse African American neighborhood adjoining the railroad and warehouse district now known as the Gulch to the north and segregated white “streetcar suburbs” to the east, west, and south. These decades feature prominently and positively in the public memory of the neighborhood as a time characterized by the strength of community institutions, the vitality of local businesses, and the recognized professional and cultural achievements of residents.

Moses McKissack III and Calvin McKissack, founders of the country’s first architectural firm owned by African Americans, both resided on Edgehill Avenue during this era. Two state historical markers in the neighborhood also honor individuals active during these years: internationally acclaimed sculptor William Edmonson and DeFord Bailey, the first African American Opry musician. The iconic polar bear sculptures that became the symbol for the Edgehill neighborhood date from the period as well. The two surviving sculptures stood for many years at the residence of Elder Zema W. Hill on

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Image courtesy of the Edgehill Neighborhood Coalition.

Edgehill Avenue along with others at his funeral home business on South Street.

Urban renewal radically altered Edgehill from the 1950s through the early 1970s, beginning with the construction of “Edgehill Homes,” at the corner of 12th and Edgehill Avenues, and eventually expanding to encompass a vast “Edgehill Project Area” of over 1,000 acres, extending from Division Street to Bradford Avenue and from Villa Place to the eastern side of Fort Negley. The promised benefits of urban renewal, where realized, came at an enormous cost to Edgehill in the demolition of homes, displacement of families, relocation or loss of businesses and churches, damage to the historical street grid of the neighborhood, and the reinforcement of segregation. The construction of I-40, I-65, and Wedgewood Avenue cut off the neighborhood to the north, east, and south, with its western border spared only by the failure of a proposed Music City Boulevard that was finally abandoned in the early 1970s.

An ironic legacy of the urban renewal period was the definitive naming of Edgehill. Since the late 1800s “Edgehill” had referred to the home of Charles A.R. Thompson on the Hillsboro Turnpike, to Edgehill Avenue, and to a small, segregated African American park between its intersections with 11th and 12th Avenues. Both the designers of urban renewal and civil rights

groups working to preserve and protect the community from the program’s abuses adopted and applied the name “Edgehill” more broadly. The racially integrated Edgehill United Methodist Church was established in 1966; the Organized Neighbors of Edgehill formed the following year; and the South Street Community Center, founded on the old Lawrence School site in 1942 and moved to Edgehill Avenue in 1971, became the Edgehill Community Center in 1990. By the early twenty-first century, the name “Edgehill” had increasingly come to assert a neighborhood identity grounded in the area’s African American history and a determination to continue its legacy of solidarity and resilience.

-- Joel Dark
Tennessee State University

Suggested Further Reading:

Bobby L. Lovett, “From Plantation to City: William Edmonson and the African-American Community,” in *The Art of William Edmonson*. Nashville: Cheekwood Museum of Art; Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999.

David C. Morton and Charles K. Wolfe. *DeFord Bailey: A Black Star in Early Country Music*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993.
