

# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

## College Hill



The area of North Nashville that became the College Hill neighborhood stood largely undeveloped until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was still well outside city limits. During the Civil War, two federal defense lines existed near here--an interior line that intersected with nearby Fort Gillem, and an outer line that ran south before intersecting with Fort Casino. The U.S. federal line guarded by General A. J. Smith and his troops ran through or just east of the future College Hill lands. This area served as an important Union defensive area during the Battle of Nashville, with historical ties to the Clare and Harding family estates.

In 1912, plats for the Midway subdivision and Fisk University Place established the layout for much of the northern and eastern sections, respectively, of the future College Hill neighborhood. Located in Midway's northeast corner and dedicated on July 4, 1912, the city established 34-acre Hadley Park, the first park in Nashville and one of the earliest in the country "set aside for the exclusive use of colored people" by municipal authorities. The park derived high land value from its proximity to two of the South's most prominent African American schools, Fisk University and Meharry Medical College, with the newly-established Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial (A&I) Normal School to its west.

By 1948, plans for the College Hill subdivision included 500 units of housing constructed specifically for African Americans. Celebrated local Black architectural firm McKissack & McKissack, tasked with Tennessee A&I's large-scale expansions, served as architects, developers, and builders with B. L. Mitchell as development manager. Local media lauded the project as a revolutionary "new era in Negro housing...[that] when completed will approach the ultimate in scientific planning, skillful engineering and attractive landscaping."

The first College Hill units included single family homes and duplexes priced from \$5,000 to \$7,000 and rental housing. In total, the development project would accommodate 400 families, with most of the family dwelling units leased specifically to Tennessee A&I

professors and students. Original development plans also included a shopping center similar to the one on South Nashville's Melrose Avenue but on a smaller scale. The total cost for this development, including the shopping center, amounted to approximately \$10 million. College Hill Development took shape as a new modern center for Nashville's African American community.

Several factors led to the development of College Hill, designed to provide large-scale housing centered around Nashville's Black educational institutions. Upon College Hill's inception, Meharry Medical College stood poised to become a southern regional institution and, as the first medical school for African Americans in the South, had already established a reputation for excellence in education. Around this time, expansions at Meharry and two other Historically Black College and University (HBCU) institutions, Fisk University and Tennessee A&I, caused further housing shortages for students and faculty who required nearby accommodations. Tennessee A&I addressed these deficits by constructing new dormitories in 1948, yet the institution still required more available housing, which served as a major driver of the College Hill development. As the first large-scale African American housing development in Nashville since Andrew Jackson Courts (1938) and Napier Place (1941), College Hill further distinguished itself as the city's first major African American housing project developed by private enterprise.

On April 15, 1950, groundbreaking commenced on Section I of the College Hill Apartments and College Hill Housing, offering a combined total of 216 rental units. When asked about the College Hill projects in 1951, architect Calvin McKissack stated:

We plan to provide space for teachers and others in an income bracket whose income would not allow them to live in Federal Housing. We also want to encourage veterans and their families to move into the project...The housing situation was pretty bad in this area; the land was all marginal. In that connection we are

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spending considerable money on landscaping and we are hopeful that this project will make one of the most desirable places for Negroes to live in this area.

On April 13, 1950, the McKissacks deeded land at the corner of Batavia and 37th Street to St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, one of the oldest Black congregations in Nashville. The firm designed a stately, 2-story Neoclassical brick edifice to be built by Boone Contracting Company at a cost of \$100,000. Quite notably, the cost was "the most that has ever been invested in a church for Negroes in the Southern Presbyterian Assembly," with the church providing access to about 4,000 students from the three nearby HBCUs. Construction began in summer 1951, and the church held its first service in the new building on May 3, 1953.

In 1953, McKissack and McKissack, acting as developers, filed a plan for Section II of the College Hill Subdivision. Levels of investment in College Hill were quite significant at this point—over \$1 million in Federal Housing Administration loans for 216 units under College Hill Apartments, Inc. and College Hill Housing, Inc. As this area experienced rapid growth and development, the need for a new elementary school increased. Brothers and architects Moses and Calvin McKissack, developers of the College Hill neighborhood, had plans for residential property along the west end of the district; however, they were persuaded to sell the land to Nashville's Board of Education for the new school. When Moses died during construction, the school was named in his honor in recognition of the family's generosity. As was the case with St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, this was yet another instance where the McKissacks forewent their own development interests and sold family land to serve larger community purposes. Moses McKissack School opened in 1954, serving grades 1-6. In November 1962, Moses McKissack School became the first Tennessee educational institution to receive accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

In the late 1950s, College Hill flourished as a community of professionals, including doctors, university faculty and community leaders; Sections III -VII developed accordingly between 1957 and 1959. Dr. Lemuel Arthur Bowman, treasurer of the National Baptist Convention Sunday School Publishing Board, made his home at 3514 Geneva Circle. Dr. E. E. Cardwell lived at 3504 Geneva Circle. Carl and Inez Crutchfield, who also lived on Geneva Circle, both led very involved careers and community positions. Carl

Crutchfield served as a Master Sergeant in the Army before becoming an instructor, then Business Manager and Dean of Admissions at Tennessee State University (TSU) until 1973. He went on to work as the Administrative Assistant to the Commissioner of the Tennessee Board of Education and ended his working career at Viacom Cablevision as Program Director. Inez Crutchfield served as an assistant professor for health education at TSU from 1949 to 1985, and engaged heavily in Nashville's nonviolent civil rights movement during the 1960s. Her civic involvement also extended to the League for Women Voters, where she became one of the first African American members of the Davidson County Democratic Women coalition.

Despite its clear initial and sustained success and thriving community, College Hill could not escape damage from the city's mid-20<sup>th</sup> century growth and urban renewal efforts. Like many other parts of North Nashville, College Hill suffered permanent scars from the devastating and racially motivated routing of Interstate 40 through this historically Black neighborhood, an indelible action which removed large swaths from the eastern grid of the Midway plan and the entire 6.7-acre Section III, including 42 lots between 34th and 36th Aves. Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century residential development also encroached upon Midway's western section, further chipping away at the McKissacks' original vision. Unfortunately, after years of neglect and a political scandal involving the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the State purchased the College Hill Apartments in the late 1980s and demolished them in 1989 to allow for expansions at Tennessee State University.

Most of the single family homes in the core sections of College Hill remain highly intact, situated on quiet, winding streets with simple landscaping, low stone walls, and a few chance opportunities for access to expansive vistas. Residences in College Hill showcase a spectrum of sleek mid-century styles ranging from traditional and Transitional Ranches, Split Level, Minimal Traditional and Contemporary houses to isolated Colonial Revival Ranch and Mansard examples. Undoubtedly, the McKissacks' vision for a highly desirable housing enclave is sustained in this geographically and architecturally elevated neighborhood that stands as a symbol of community development excellence.

*Caroline Eller*

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