

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

Gardner's Gold Coast: Nashville's First African American Subdivision



Kossie Gardner, Sr. was born in Pulaski, Tennessee, to Carthegeuis and Orleans Cosby on May 24, 1897. However, before age two, his father left the family. Unable to provide for her young son, Orleans Cosby apprenticed him as an indentured apprentice to farmers Daniel and Ella Gardner. Young Gardner stayed with his new parents and helped them on the farm. As Gardner grew into a young man, he decided to seek better opportunities in Nashville, approximately seventy-five miles from Pulaski. He promised his parents that if they allowed him to go to Nashville, he would return home and help them harvest the crops.

After an unsuccessful attempt at farming, he became a Pullman porter for a short period of time. He returned to Nashville and his great-uncle Pete Hayden and his wife invited Gardner to move in with them. When Hayden died, Gardner was asked to go Preston Taylor's funeral home. However, Gardner thought, "If I was in the undertaking business, here's one body I could get."

With absolutely no experience and financial resources, that thought ushered Gardner into the undertaking business. He borrowed a friend's car and engaged Jim Pillow, an embalmer. He borrowed five-hundred dollars, purchased a license, casket, and a car that he transformed into an ambulance. Gardner's first office was located in the YMCA building on Fourth Avenue, North and Cedar Street. By 1925, the *Nashville Colored Directory* listed him as the "youngest funeral director in the city." Prior to locating to 1511 Jefferson Street, Gardner's funeral business was located at 12th Avenue, North and Jefferson Street. Gardner and his two embalmers, Odel Dawner and Dewith Payne, competed with Nashville's other morticians in a business that appeared to be recession-proof.

Gardner's business acumen brought him success as he entered into other commercial endeavors. He owned, developed, and built the first house in the "Gold Coast," Nashville's first African American subdivision, founded a trade school for Clarksville veterans, and established a school in Nashville for waiters. For more than ten years he sponsored a live radio program on WNAH from K. Gardner's Funeral Home chapel at 1511 Jefferson Street. Gardner also established and developed the Hills of Calvary Cemetery in Northwest Nashville. A 32nd degree Mason with the Hella Temple 105 of the Shrine and a member of the Pride of Tennessee Elks Lodge, Gardner bought and was instrumental in the development of the African American Masonic Lodge on 4th Avenue, North, which fell prey to urban development a year later. Reportedly, Gardner ran for a seat on the Nashville Council because he felt an African American could best represent the interests of those living in the predominately African American ward. He said, "I want to serve the best interests of the people of the ward, who are for the most part colored." He wanted to promote amity among those in the community, irrespective of background. The nonagenarian's long and productive life came to an end on March 1, 1990 and he was interred in Hills of Calvary Cemetery. Notwithstanding all of the accomplishments of this self-made entrepreneur, perhaps, the Gold Coast development was one of Gardner's more enduring business ventures.

Nashville's affluent African Americans had few neighborhood choices that reflected their successes until Kossie Gardner, Sr, developed Gardner's Gold Coast. Platted in December 1953, this Bordeaux enclave became Nashville's first affluent African American subdivision. Constructed between 1957 and 1966, most houses in the neighborhood exhibit either

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traditional Ranch or Split-Level styles. The Gold Coast subdivision included twenty-four new homes and two new streets. Houses in the original section of the subdivision line Windover Drive, while those along Red Rose Court are part of the Gold Coast Addition, platted in October 1960. The Gold Coast attracted noted African American physicians, entrepreneurs, and academicians, both collegiate and secondary. From 1961 to 1963, the Rev. Dr. Joseph Lowery, a co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, lived in the neighborhood. In 1958, residents of this neighborhood--then considered the most affluent African American subdivision in Nashville--fought to defend their homes and investments from a planned Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) power line routing through the neighborhood, when there were other plausible alternate options. After robust vocal support from the Hydes Ferry Civic Group and Dr. Matthew Walker (Meharry Medical College and founder of the Matthew Walker Comprehensive Health Center) reinforced their position, TVA re-routed the line, which allowed homes to be built across four then-vacant lots. Another affluent African American subdivision, Enchanted Hills, was later developed in the Bordeaux area not far from the Gold Coast.

Enchanted Hills was platted between 1962 and 1989 as one of Nashville's most prestigious African American neighborhoods. In a November 1988 real estate advertisement published in *The Tennessean*, Enchanted Hills was considered as the "Belle Meade of North Nashville." The architect-designed "ultra-modern" houses retain striking examples of Mid-Century Modern and Contemporary architecture. Like their neighbors in the Gold Coast, residents of Enchanted Hills fought against several issues including environmental injustices. They rallied against a proposed routing of a Briley Parkway extension to connect Cockrill Bend with Interstates 40 and 24. In 1986, the residents of Enchanted Hills joined together to defend their neighborhood from activity at a 32-acre excavation site on Hydes Ferry Pike that endangered their health and property values. In 2002, resident Melvin Gill, Jr., filed suit over a state re-districting plan, in which he claimed illegally

diluted and disenfranchised the African American voting power of Enchanted Hills residents.

In 2020, Nashville paid homage to Kossie "K." Gardner, Sr., when the Metro Nashville Parks Department established a pocket park in his memory, situated on Jefferson Street across the street from his funeral home's former location. The park celebrates Gardner's contributions to the community, which included the creation of the Gardner's Gold Coast and creation of the first motorized ambulatory service in the Nashville area. The youngest funeral owner in Nashville, Gardner's commercial enterprise was part of Jefferson Street's establishment as an economic hub that produced a successful African American middle class. While many of the original owners of homes in the subdivisions no longer live there, several of their children or heirs continue living in Gardner's Gold Coast. Like other neighborhoods in the city that became desegregated, a few Whites have moved into the neighborhood. Many of the homes on the Gold Coast and in Enchanted Hills have been deemed eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

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