

Updates re: the Bass Street Community at Fort Negley Park

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Last year, Andrew Wyatt, Clelie Cottle Peacock and I shared our findings about the Bass Street Community at Fort Negley Park at the Nashville Conference for African American History and Culture in a presentation entitled: “The Bass Street Community: Black Civil War Veterans, Residents, and Descendants in one of Nashville’s first Free Black Neighborhoods.” This info-sheet is a reminder about this neglected piece of Nashville history, with an update.

Please take a long look at the following image, which consists of three layers in one:



1. The first layer is a recent color aerial photograph of the North-facing side of Fort Negley Park. The big white building is the Adventure Science Center at Fort Negley Park, which sits at the corner of what is now Fort Negley Blvd. and Bass Street, where I-40 and I-65 intersect. Across from Bass Street is the Science Center parking lot.
2. Layer two is part of the *Atlas of the City of Nashville* and depicts part of the Bass Street neighborhood that used to occupy that space in 1908, about forty years after the Civil War. In these homes lived mostly Black Civil War veterans and their families. Their descendants remained there until the city removed them in the name of urban renewal in the 1950s and 60s to make room for the interstates and the Children’s Museum.

3. Layer three depicts the locations where archaeologists have investigated. Most of these investigations were small test pits made by archaeologists Wyatt and Peacock and their students at MTSU to gain an understanding of what is archaeologically possible on this “disturbed” land.

The archaeologists found many intact cultural deposits dating from the Civil War period until the 1950s. Artifact analysis is ongoing and points to a robust aspirational community with strong ties to the Bass Street Church and institutions in the areas of Chestnut Hill, Cameron-Trimble, and Edgehill, including the walnut processing plant on Bass Street, the Cameron School, Tennessee Central Railroad, and the old Meharry campus.

Late last year, Andrew Wyatt and I were awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities for me to collect the oral histories of the descendants of Bass Street while Wyatt and his team use this information from descendants to analyze what they find in a new dig. The project, titled “Descendant-led Excavation at the Reconstruction-Era Black Civil War Veteran Community at Bass Street, Fort Negley Park,” aims to work with Ms. Jeneene Blackman and the African American Cultural Alliance to bring the stories and relics of this relocated community to light. We are awaiting permissions from the state of TN to excavate and are hoping to begin later this year with support from Metro Parks Nashville.

Sites like this are once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. Most Southern cities built over Reconstruction-era Black settlements this close to the city center early in the 20th century. As part of Bass Street was on St. Cloud Hill and connected to Fort Negley, the archaeological evidence was inadvertently preserved when the area became a park and the community fought for its survival, giving us the chance to explore the history of a Reconstruction era and early 20th century Black urban community descended from the Civil War population.

Some of the information and artifacts we’ve found have been made available on the local news (see below), the new Builders and Defenders database (www.buildersanddefenders.org) and on Sutton’s social media (@DrAngelaSutton on X, Instagram, and Tiktok) or on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/@fortnegleydese>). We are always looking for more descendants and residents of Bass Street to speak with- please get in touch! Angela.C.Sutton@vanderbilt.edu

Learn more:

<https://wpln.org/post/bass-street-was-home-to-nashvilles-first-post-emancipation-black-neighborhood-descendants-want-to-keep-its-memory-alive/>

<https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2021/10/20/mtsu-vanderbilt-collaboration-unearths-african-american-history-in-nashvilles-bass-street-neighborhood/>

<https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2023/05/16/neh-grant-to-help-uncover-history-of-lost-historic-nashville-neighborhood/>

<https://wpln.org/post/episodes/fort-negley-bass-street-neighborhood-nashville/>