

## Updates: Bass Street Community at Fort Negley Park

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*Dr. Angela Sutton, Vanderbilt University, director of the Builders & Defenders database and the Fort Negley Descendants Project ([www.buildersanddefenders.org](http://www.buildersanddefenders.org))*

In 2023, Andrew Wyatt, Clélie 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.



Shortly after the conference, we were awarded a research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to perform descendant-led excavation at the Bass Street site at Fort Negley, home of a community founded by Black Civil War veterans and their descendants which was destroyed to make room for the interstates and the Children’s Museum (now the Adventure Science Center) in the so-called “urban renewal” period of our nation’s history. We have been working with Ms. Jeneene Blackman, CEO of the African

American Cultural Alliance and descendant of this community, to film oral histories with descendants and use the information they provide to interpret the archaeological record.

In October of 2024, the team secured permissions from Metro Parks Nashville to open a trench in an area of the Bass Street site which allowed the archaeologists to uncover foundations of a home and part of a communal alleyway that descendants had identified as a play area for children. Prior digs revealed all kinds of artifacts related to childhood: parts of a slate and slate pencil, marbles, rocks and fossils shaped like animals, a Hazel Atlas inkwell, the hand-stitched leather sole of a toddler-sized shoe, and a jar



of Moroline, a brand of petroleum jelly popular with African American consumers in the 1930s.



Found at Bass Street, Fort Negley Park, Nashville TN

These artifacts speak to the importance Black Nashvillians placed on education (children were playing school and doing homework together), on self-presentation (Bass Street's residents ensured that despite tight budgets, even very young children had high-quality leather shoes for church), and on community and the communal sharing out of resources during those first decades of freedom.

Some of these artifacts were identified by Ms. Georgia Harris, the daughter of Rev. Monroe Burns of the Bass Street Missionary Baptist Church. Ms. Georgia is between 96 and 100 years old (her daughter, Rev. Christina Zimmerman, is still searching for the birth certificate) and lived on Bass Street until the church was forced to relocate. Her video interview, as well as that of her daughter, are being edited and will be available shortly on the Fort Negley Descendants Project YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/@fortnegleydesc>).



Rev. Christina Zimmerman also shared some photographs of the Bass Street neighborhood to help archaeologists and historians better understand the space and the people who helped give Black Nashville a solid foundation. She is the taller little girl in this photo, standing on Bass Street with her back to the Block Brothers Walnut Processing plant, a building and adjacent property which will soon be annexed to Fort Negley Park as part of a joint effort by Metro Parks Nashville, the Friends of Fort Negley, and the American Battlefield Trust. These stories from descendants and the archaeology will become part of the park's interpretive features as Metro Nashville proceeds with the \$17.5 million renovation of Fort Negley.

**You can learn more about this history on the Builders and Defenders database ([www.buildersanddefenders.org](http://www.buildersanddefenders.org)) and on Sutton's social media (@DrAngelaSutton on Instagram, Tiktok or YouTube). We are always looking for more descendants and residents of Bass Street to speak with - please get in touch! [Angela.C.Sutton@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:Angela.C.Sutton@vanderbilt.edu).**