

# The Davis Bottom History Preservation Project

## General History: Establishment (1860s-1890s)

### The Davis Bottom Valley

Before development, Davis Bottom was a narrow, swampy valley located about a half-mile southwest of downtown Lexington. The lower branch of Town Branch Creek (now encased in a cement culvert) ran down the center of the valley, which was part of the original 400-acre settlement of Colonel Robert Patterson, one of the founders of Lexington. In his 1902 compilation map of historic surveys, W.H. Polk, noted that "Patterson's Big Spring" was located at the base of the northern ridge near an historic quarry, which was covered by the modern ballpark. The Davis Bottom valley often flooded due to the creek and spring. Until the 1860s, the valley was primarily used as farmland. Several orchards were located on the slopes, as well as pastures for livestock. Merino Street is named after the imported Merino sheep, which once grazed in Davis Bottom.

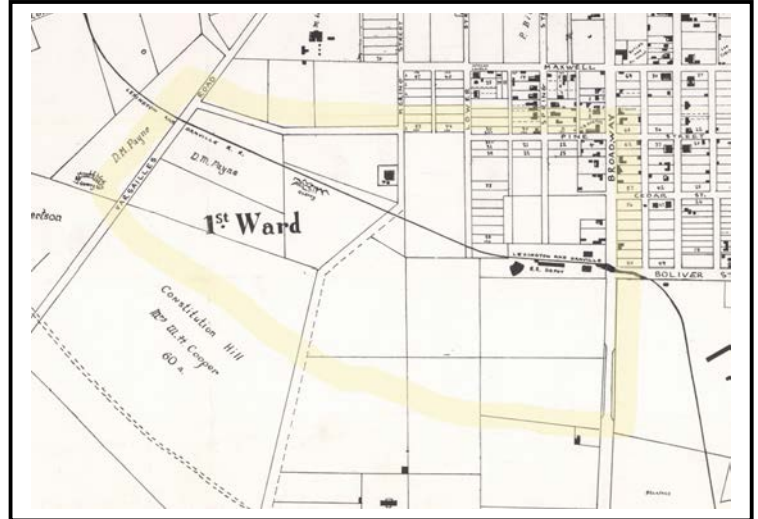


Figure 1: The Davis Bottom valley (outlined) from a map, "City of Lexington, Fayette County, KY, 1855" Courtesy, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.

By 1855, the Lexington & Danville Railroad ran along the northern ridge of the valley. The Lexington & Danville Railroad also built a small depot near South Broadway. Attorney D.M. Payne owned a large tract of land in the valley, which became part of Lexington's 1st Ward in early census records (Hart 1855). Fort Clay, one of two Union Army fortifications built in Lexington during the Civil War, was located on the southern ridge of the valley near Versailles Pike. Union Army soldiers and conscripted African American men built Fort Clay in 1863. The fort was pressed into action during Confederate General John Hunt Morgan's raid of Lexington on June 8, 1864. Fort Clay's artillery batteries fired numerous rounds over downtown streets at Confederate forces, which were setting fires at a railroad station once located near Eastern State Hospital.



Figure 2: A Union Army Engineer's survey map of Fort Clay marks the approximate location of the fort just off Versailles Pike. Survey map courtesy, National Archives. Aerial photo courtesy, Kentucky Transportation Cabinet.

## Namesake

Davis Bottom is named after William “Willard” Davis, an attorney, Republican politician and land developer who lived in Lexington from 1864 to 1870. Willard Davis performed legal work for several railroad companies from his office on Short Street. He also represented several newly formed black organizations before state legislatures. Davis was a vocal, civil rights advocate during the era of Reconstruction. He was also a land speculator; one of a handful of wealthy, white men who sold housing to newly freed African American families after the Civil War. In 1865, Davis purchased 43 narrow lots along Brisbin Street (now DeRoode), which he then subdivided and sold to individual families (Dollins 2011). In 1867, Willard Davis also sold 25 parcels to Rudolph DeRoode, another land developer, who is the namesake of DeRoode Street (Dollins 2011).

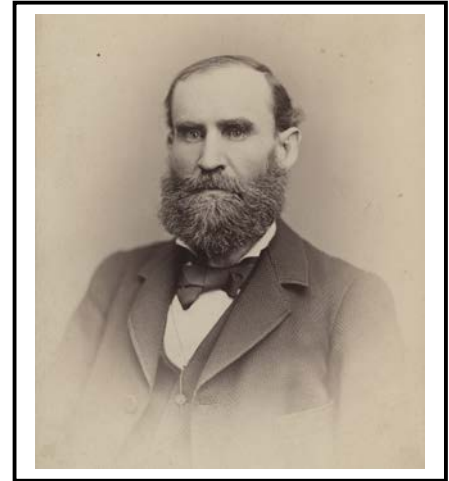
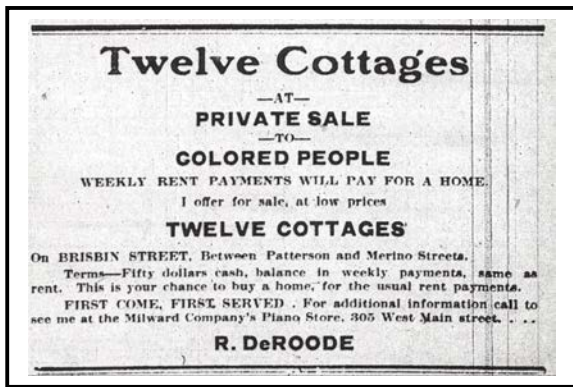


Figure 3: Willard Davis, ca 1880s. Courtesy, Kansas Historical Society.



Rudolph DeRoode was born in Holland. He came to Lexington in the 1850s and began to teach music and compose sacred songs. Professor DeRoode also owned a piano store and invested heavily in real estate, including several tracts in Davis Bottom. DeRoode developed homes along Brisbin Street, and “Curds” lot, which he bought for \$287 from the estate of Thomas Gormley.

Figure 4: De Roode's advertisement, *The Lexington Leader*, June 4, 1911. Courtesy, Lexington Public Library.

## The First Generation

The population of African Americans in Lexington rose from about 3,000 in 1860 to 7,000 in 1870. Housing was in short supply, so land speculators and factory owners developed about a dozen neighborhoods close to downtown known as “ethnic enclaves” (Kellogg 1982; Faberson 2006; Giles 2011). These neighborhoods were located on less valuable land near cemeteries, factories, stockyards, railroads and in swampy, disease-prone valleys called “bottom” land. Some of the first residents of Davis Bottom were Union Army veterans. U.S. Colored Troops were among the few African Americans who had enough money to buy or lease property after the Civil War. Isham Jackson, Robert Hathaway and Cyrus Hathaway likely pooled their Union Army pay to establish a homestead at 208 West Pine Street.

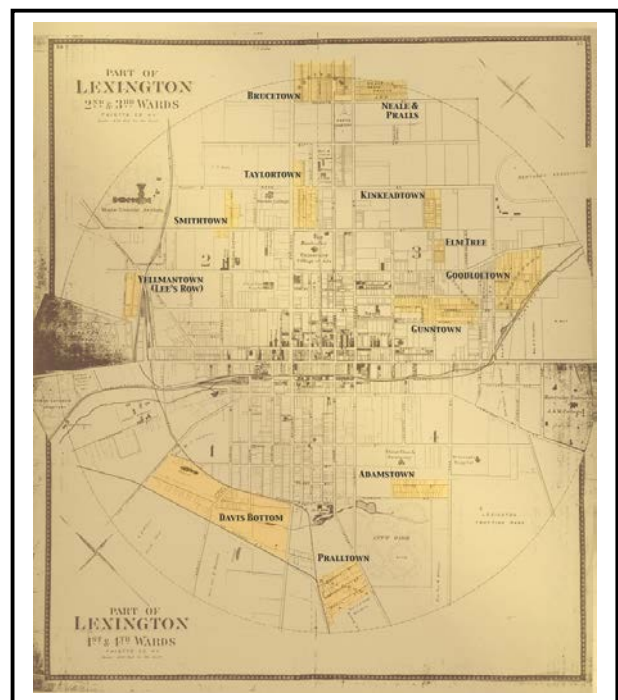


Figure 5: Lexington's ethnic enclaves, 1860s-1890s. Courtesy, KAS/KHC, 2012.



From the start, Davis Bottom was a unique neighborhood because of its diverse mixture of African American, European and white families. The "Town of Manchester," later known as "Irishtown," was established just northwest of Davis Bottom in 1812. Many "Irishtown" residents worked at nearby distilleries and railroads. Some Irish families also lived in Davis Bottom, according to Federal Census records. Prussian (German) stonemasons may have also lived along "Wilgus Row," housing somehow connected to the G.D. Wilgus Brick Yard, which was located on the southern ridge of the Davis Bottom valley from 1868 to 1877. The exact location of "Wilgus Row" within Davis Bottom is unknown.

### Development

Housing in Davis Bottom was developed in stages. In general, the higher elevated areas were developed first. Lower, flood-prone sections were developed last. The 1877 Beers map of Lexington shows some streets, lots and businesses in Davis Bottom, including the Baker Coal Yard along Blackburn Street (now McKinley). By 1880, Davis Bottom was bordered on three sides by railroad tracks. The Cincinnati Southern Railway purchased existing tracks on the northern ridge, and then built new tracks on the southern ridge of the valley.

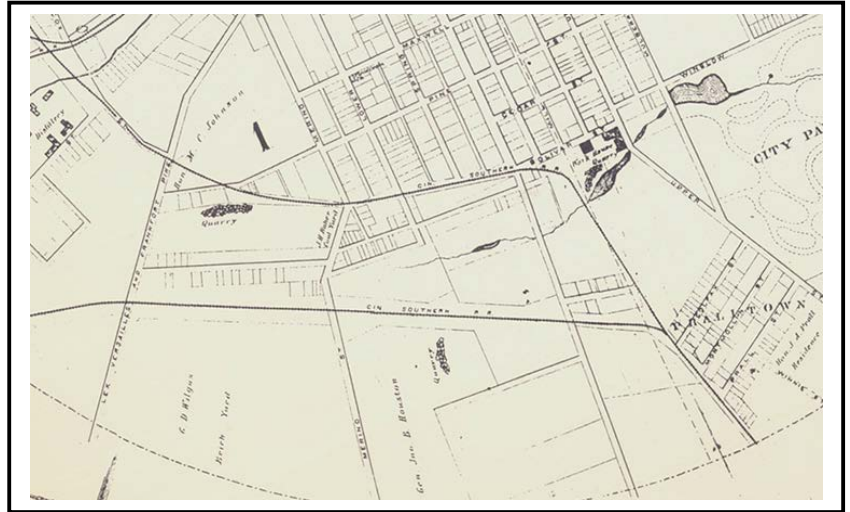


Figure 6: "Part of Lexington, Fayette Co., KY, G.D. Beers and Co., 1877." Courtesy, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.

The Cincinnati Southern Railway built two passenger stations near Davis Bottom. The first, a three-story, wooden structure, served passengers on the famous "Queen and Crescent" line, which connected Cincinnati (the Queen City) to New Orleans (The Crescent City). The first train arrived at this passenger station on July 23, 1877, according to the *Lexington Press*. A long pipeline once ran from the station's locomotive water tank to Patterson's Big Spring in Davis Bottom (Polk 1902).



Figure 7: The Cincinnati Southern Railway's first passenger station at 701 South Broadway, Lexington, ca 1890s. Davis Bottom is just below the horizon. Courtesy, Lexington Public Library.

Numerous residents from Davis Bottom worked for the railroad as laborers, flagmen, porters, stewards, clerks, crew and engineers, according to U.S. Census Records. The Cincinnati Southern Railway not only provided jobs, but the railway's passenger station and freight depot also attracted a variety of businesses to the area, ranging from factories and stores to boarding houses and hotels. The J. Forbing & Son chair factory was located off Chair Avenue in Davis Bottom from the 1880s until 1892 (Pauli 1888).



Figure 7 (above): Railroad workers in Lexington, ca 1897. Courtesy, Lyle Family Photographic Collection, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.

Figure 8 (right): The Queen & Crescent Freight Station at 601 South Broadway in Davis Bottom (photo dated August 24, 1914). Courtesy, Louis Edward Nollau F Series Photographic Print Collection, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.

## Housing

The most common style of home in Davis Bottom was the shotgun house. These long, narrow houses usually had two rooms heated by a fireplace or potbelly stove. Water was pumped from wells or cisterns. Most homes had an outdoor privy. Many families had gardens and chicken coops. The shotgun homes in Davis Bottom were often built on wood-post piers to protect against flooding (Faberson 2006). Fire was a constant threat. Many residents died of diseases spread by mosquitoes and rodents, or from pandemics of cholera, yellow fever, smallpox and influenza. Despite social, health and economic hardships, the population of Davis Bottom rose substantially in the late 1800s.

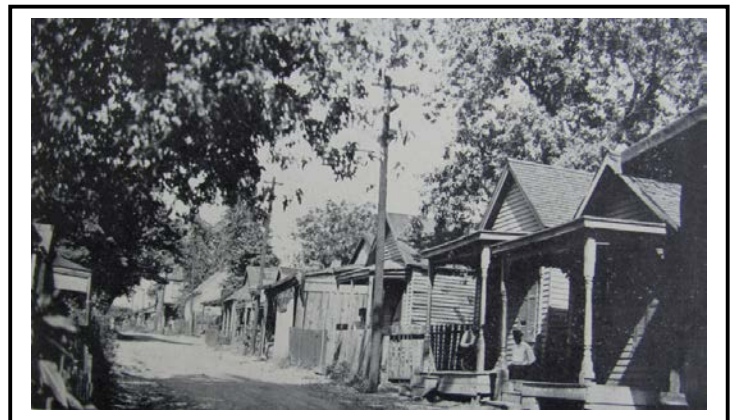


Figure 9: Shotgun homes on unidentified street, ca 1931 from "First Comprehensive Plan of Lexington and Its Environs." Courtesy, Lexington Public Library.

## Demographics

Lexington City Directories and the U.S. Federal Census provide some details about the population of Davis Bottom during the late 1800s. Heather Dollins analyzed this data as part of a detailed study of East End and Davis Bottom for her Master's Project at The University of Kentucky. Davis Bottom was identified for the first time as a distinct neighborhood (previously only with Ward 1) in the 1880 U.S. Federal Census. The 1880 census does not list streets or house numbers, but it does list members of a household along with their age, race and occupation.

Davis Bottom had a total population of 387 people in the 1880 U.S. Federal Census (Dollins 2011). The census taker listed 69% of the residents as black, and 31% of the residents as white. There were 82 households with an average of 4.72 people per household. Davis Bottom was a young community with an average age of 23.6 years. The 1880 Census shows that most black residents worked as laborers, brick masons, waiters, drivers, servants, housekeepers, washer or cooks. Some white men were also listed under the general term "laborer," but more are listed under occupation such as carpenters, stonemasons or painters. In the 1887 Lexington City Directory, white residents from Davis Bottom obtained more highly skilled jobs with the railroads, in factories and with the city as firemen, policemen. Several white residents were physicians or owned a business, including grocery stores and shoemakers. A few black residents in Davis Bottom began to break racial barriers with occupation such as engineers, carpenters, brick masons, grocers, barbers and ministers.

### Institutions

The Bureau of Refugees, Freeman and Abandoned Lands (better known as the Freedmen's Bureau) provided some support for emancipated slaves in Lexington after the Civil War. The Freedmen's Bureau provided general aid and protection, labor programs, banking, and pensions for soldiers. The Freedmen's Bureau also established hundreds of schools for African Americans throughout Kentucky (Lucas 1992; Kleber 1997). Yet, most of the social services for blacks living in Davis Bottom came from churches and civic organizations, including local chapters of the Masons and Benevolent Society. Robert Elijah Hathaway, a Davis Bottom resident, was a founding trustee of The Kentucky State Benevolent Association. This association was established to continue the social and political efforts discussed during The First Convention of Colored Men of Kentucky, which was held Lexington in 1866. The Kentucky State Benevolent Association helped organize an "immense" gathering of over 10,000 people, largely African Americans, that took place on the Fourth of July, 1867 in Gibson's Woods about a mile south of Lexington. The namesake of Davis Bottom, attorney Willard Davis, was invited to speak at this landmark event, which was one the largest civil rights gatherings held in Kentucky during Reconstruction

### Historic Pleasant Green Missionary Baptist Church

Churches were the center of life in most African American communities. Pleasant Green Missionary Baptist Church, located on W. Maxwell Street, provided spiritual, social and educational services for many residents of Davis Bottom. In 1874, Pleasant Green established Lexington's third school for African Americans in the basement of the "old" church building. By 1883, the school enrollment swelled to 108 students (Cooper 1969; Peoples 1990). Needing a larger building, a "school committee" raised \$900 to purchase a lot "at the lower end of Lower Street" (now Patterson). The Lexington City Commission provided funds to build Patterson Street School (No. 3), a two-story, brick building opened in 1883. Today, Historic Pleasant Green Missionary Baptist Church continues to provide spiritual and social services from a new building (1931) at its original location.



Figure 10: "Black baptism at work house pond," near Davis Bottom with clergy from Pleasant Green Missionary Baptist Church, ca 1898. Courtesy, Bullock Photographic Collection, Transylvania University Library.





Figure 11: Patterson Street School, ca. 1931 from the "First Comprehensive Plan of Lexington." Courtesy, Lexington Public Library.

Patterson Street School served African American students from first through seventh grades. A pot-bellied stove heated each classroom. The school was built about 20 feet from the tracks of the Cincinnati Southern Railway. Freight trains passed the school several times a day, causing the suspension of lessons "until the noise subsided and the building stopped shaking" (Cooper 1969). In the 1930s, Patterson Street School was demolished to make way for George Washington Carver Elementary School (now Carver Community Center), which was built farther from the railroad tracks with funds from the Works Progress Administration.

Scholars are beginning to understand more about the daily lives of residents in Davis Bottom during the late 1800s. The Davis Bottom History Preservation Project commissioned two artist's renderings to illustrate some of the archaeological and archival research compiled for this project. "Davis Bottom, ca 1890s," a 5'x3' acrylic artwork, depicts a variety of lifeway scenes on DeRoode Street, including shotgun houses, a community fish fry, gardens and an orchard. Robert Elijah Hathaway, flanked by his daughters Fannie and Eva, is shown looking for his son, Isaac Scott Hathaway (lower right), who is collecting clay along the lower branch of Town Branch Creek.



Figure 12: "Davis Bottom, ca 1890s," original artwork by Susan A. Walton. Courtesy, The Kentucky Heritage Council/Kentucky Archaeological Survey, 2012.

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