

# The Davis Bottom History Preservation Project

## General History: Living Memories (1950s-2010)

On December 18, 1980, *The Lexington Leader* published "Valley of Neglect," a special twelve-page article about deteriorating living conditions in Davis Bottom and Irishtown. Reporter John Woestendiek and photographer Ron Garrison provided a detailed account about the plight of residents in two of the most impoverished neighborhoods in Fayette County. The article described substandard housing, the lack of some modern utilities, the high percentage of absentee landlords and the impact of the Newtown Pike Extension Project. This proposed road construction project, planned since the 1930s, left residents, landowners and government officials in a state of uncertainty about the future of the valley. While chronicling tough challenges, the newspaper article also captured the culture and spirit of the residents living in Davis Bottom, encapsulated in a quote by Larry Johnson, Pastor, Nathaniel United Methodist Mission, "They'll drop anything for the family" (Woestendiek 1980).

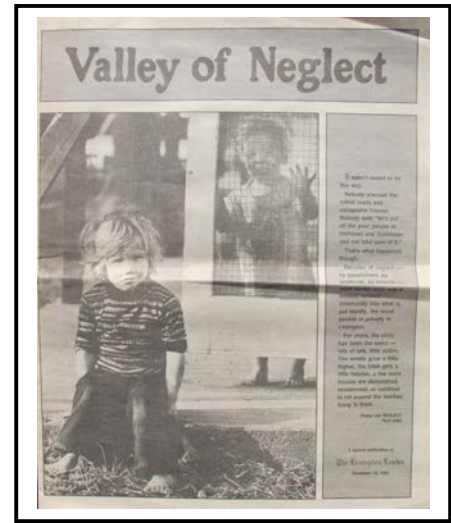
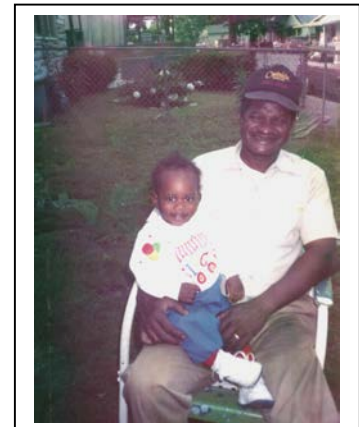


Figure 1: "Valley of Neglect", *Lexington Leader*, 12/18/1980. Courtesy, John Woestendiek, Ron Garrison, *Lexington Herald-Leader*.



Davis Bottom, from the 1950s to the present day, is a story of change, adaptation and resilience. Today, the community remains a strong, tight-knit neighborhood in the face of enormous physical transformations. The community's contemporary history is coming to light through academic research, newspaper articles, and, most of all, the living memories of residents who have generously provided their stories and family photographs to The Davis Bottom History Preservation Project. (See Anthropology section for oral histories and family photographs)



Figures 2-4: (Top) Thomas and Robert Tuttle on DeRoode Street, ca. 1955, Kinzer Family Collection; (left) Richard and Cindy Reynolds, ca. 1977, Reynolds Family Collection; (middle) Marie Laffoon and Bill Garret, ca. 1950-60s, Laffoon Family Collection, (right) Felix Demus with grandson Gary Jr., ca 1990s, Demus Family Collection; Courtesy, Family Archive, The Davis Bottom History Preservation Project.

## Demographics

The population of Davis Bottom declined after its peak of 1,050 residents in the 1920s. Most of this decline stemmed from the loss of housing to commercial development (Dollins 2011). Davis Bottom was, and continues to be, zoned for industrial use. Since the 1950s, dozens of homes have been demolished for the construction of factories and tobacco warehouses. Some families moved to new suburban neighborhoods. But many Davis Bottom residents “stayed put” in order to keep close to friends and relatives. Homeownership rates remained low in Davis Bottom. A majority of residents - up to 80% - lived in rental properties. Some families rented the same home over the course of several generations. The uncertainty surrounding the Newtown Pike Extension Project exacerbated the deteriorating housing conditions (Kellogg 1982; Dollins 2011). Few homeowners, landlords or government officials were willing to invest funds for major home repairs and street upgrades into a neighborhood potentially facing demolition. Davis Bottom “never had sidewalks,” a representative point raised by many residents during oral history interviews.

## Community Cohesion

Despite economic hardships, Davis Bottom continues to serve as a model for community cohesion and traditional family values, according to Rev. David MacFarland, Senior Pastor, Nathaniel United Methodist Mission. Unlike most ethnic enclaves established in Lexington after the Civil War, every street in Davis Bottom had a mix of black and white residents (Dollins 2011). Overall, the racial makeup of Davis Bottom stayed diverse with the large influx of Appalachian families during and after the Great Depression. In 1930, Davis Bottom had 425 black residents (56.3%) and 330 white residents (43.7%), according to the U.S. Federal Census. In the 1990s, the population of Davis Bottom was 35% black and 65% white, according to an analysis by Andy Mead and Darla Carter, in a newspaper article, “They Stay Because It Feels Like Home, Neighbors Say,” *The Lexington Herald-Leader*, November 15, 1995 (Mead 1995).

Racial diversity and community cohesion is a point of great pride with many Davis Bottom residents. “I think in some ways Davis Bottom has been on a leading edge of America and nobody ever knew it because it has been a diverse community almost since day one,” says Reverend David MacFarland, adding, “If you want to learn how to live in a diverse setting, come to Davis Bottom.”

Figure 5: Children in front of Nathaniel United Methodist Mission, 1969.  
Courtesy, Lambert Collection, DBHPP.



Residents described how friends and families “looked out for one another,” regardless of race. The word “neighbor” meant everything. Kenny Demus, whose family has lived in Davis Bottom for three generations, reflects, “Growing up in Davis Bottom, we didn’t have everything that we wanted but we had everything that we needed.” Strong neighborhood bonds helped the community overcome significant changes, including the closure of two local schools. Abraham Lincoln School on DeRoode Street in Irishtown closed in the 1950s due to the expansion of the West High Street viaduct. In 1972, George Washington Carver School on Patterson Avenue closed with four other black elementary schools as part of a citywide desegregation plan. The community also lost a key employer when the Cincinnati Southern Railway closed its freight depot in 1956, and its passenger station in the 1970s.

## Davis Bottom Park

The Davis Bottom Park played a significant role in the lives of residents. The park had a picnic shelter, gazebo, playground, basketball court and a treasured baseball field. Summer softball games attracted local teams, and teams from as far away as Louisville and Cincinnati. Resident Junelle Sykes recalls that the softball games were more like “a big old family reunion.” Dorothy Coleman, a community leader, says, “Just in my mind’s eye, I can see how there’s kid running and playing. Everybody sharing food, picnicking and the [softball] games going on from early morning until sundown. It was just absolutely the best atmosphere, ever!” Kenny Demus served as a park director from 1980 to 1997. Demus says the park kept the neighborhood intact. “It kept this community, a community until the park shut down, says Demus. “That’s when we lost contact with a whole lot of folks.”



Figure 6: Panoramic photograph of Davis Bottom Park along DeRoode Street, ca. 2000s. Courtesy, Kentucky Transportation Department.

## Nathaniel United Methodist Mission

Nathaniel United Methodist Mission, another cornerstone of the community, has provided local residents and the homeless with spiritual, medical, educational and social services for over eight decades. Nathaniel was established by a group of students from Asbury Theological Seminary in the late 1920s or early 1930s. Sunday services were held outdoors until a small chapel was built at 743 DeRoode Street.

In 1946, the First United Methodist Church in Lexington became involved, building the second mission at 616 DeRoode Street. Since then, Nathaniel has added several facilities and programs. “Nathaniel Mission strives to serve Davis Bottom and Fayette County through three basic legs - medical, church and mission,” says Reverend David MacFarland, Senior Pastor, Nathaniel United Methodist Mission.



Figure 7: Nathaniel United Methodist Mission, 2012.



Figure 8: Nathaniel congregation members, 1956. Courtesy, Nathaniel United Methodist Mission.

In 1979, Nathaniel started a free medical clinic with one volunteer doctor working out of the furnace room. Today, dozens of physicians and volunteers donate their time to the Nathaniel Mission and Refuge Clinic, which serves about 2,200 patients each year. Nathaniel provided 12,000 “mission” visits in 2012 for meal programs, special holiday events, educational programs and a veterinarian clinic. The mission plans to move to temporary quarters during the final phases of road construction, and then build a new facility in the heart of Davis Bottom.

## Future Plans

On October 11, 2007, government officials approved a final plan (Record of Decision) for the Newtown Pike Extension Project. The road is being built in phases to retain community cohesion. Residents displaced by construction have been provided temporary homes on the grounds of the Davis Bottom Park. The Lexington Community Land Trust was formed in order to help residents purchase new homes in what will become the South End Park Urban Village. Project details are available on the Newtown Pike Extension website: [newtownextension.com](http://newtownextension.com).



Figure 9: Plan for South End Park Urban Village (as of 2013) showing approximate locations of new homes and roadways. Courtesy, Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government.

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