

The Davis Bottom History Preservation Project

General History: The Second Generation (1900s-1940s)

The second generation in Davis Bottom saw technological changes their parents could not have imagined. Electricity, streetcars, airplanes, automobiles, telephones, movies and radio became part of American life during the early 1900s. The City of Lexington expanded its municipal services such as sewer and water lines, paved roads, healthcare and public education. While some of these “modern” conveniences came late to Davis Bottom, the neighborhood’s population still grew with the development of nearby railroad facilities, tobacco markets and service industries. Davis Bottom also became the destination for another wave of immigration as Appalachian families moved to urban centers during the Great Depression and World War II. Through good times and bad, Davis Bottom remained a safe, diverse, and close neighborhood.



Figure 1: Congregation and ministers in front of the first chapel, Nathaniel Mission on DeRoode Street, ca 1930s. Courtesy, Nathaniel United Methodist Mission.

Demographics

There are relatively few written accounts about daily life Davis Bottom during the early 1900s. The demographic data found in maps, deeds, censuses, and city directories is helping scholars better understand the community. In 2011, Heather Dollins completed an extensive demographic study of Davis Bottom and East End for her Master’s Project at The University of Kentucky.



The population of Davis Bottom peaked at about 1,050 residents between 1910 and 1920 (Dollins 2011). The working-class neighborhood remained an uncommonly diverse community. In 1900, 62% of the residents living in Davis Bottom were black, according to the U.S. Federal Census. In 1934, the percentage of black residents fell slightly to 56%. A few streets within Davis Bottom were racially segregated, but most had a mixture of black and white residents. A high percentage of residents lived at or below the poverty line, and a growing number of residents rented their homes. In 1900, 30% of the Davis Bottom residents owned their homes. In 1930, only 12% of the residents were homeowners.

Figure 2: DeRoode Street, March, 1940. A WPA photographer took this image of Davis Bottom after documenting the school lunch program at Lincoln Elementary. The original photo caption reads, “Type of house where children live that are eating school lunches.” Courtesy, Goodman-Paxton Photographic Collection, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.

Development

Davis Bottom grew as a commercial center for the railroad and tobacco industries. In 1906, the W.L. Petty tobacco stemmery opened for business on Hayman Avenue in Davis Bottom. Within ten years, Lexington had become the world's largest market for white burley tobacco. Davis Bottom was surrounded by dozens of tobacco factories and warehouses where residents worked as tobacco twisters, stemmers and sorters. Several other commercial businesses located operations in and around Davis Bottom. In 1908, Combs Lumber Company completed its "mammoth" lot at 908 West High Street. The Lexington Syrup & Beverage Company operated a distribution center on Christie Street. And, The Indian Refining Company had operations at the corner of DeRoode and West High. Commercial development provided much needed jobs, but it came at a price. Hundreds of residential homes were demolished for factories and warehouses.



Figure 3: Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, Lexington 1907. The 1907 Sanborn Map shows portions of Davis Bottom, mainly those with commercial businesses, in a series of panels. The map key is shown lower left. Courtesy, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.

Occupations

The occupations of Davis Bottom residents are listed in the 1900 U.S. Federal Census and the 1902 Lexington City Directory. Most men, white and black, are listed as "laborers." Many women worked as servants, laundresses, cooks and dressmakers. Within a few decades, residents worked as bricklayers, masons, plasterers, tinnerns, shoemakers, linemen and construction foremen. The Cincinnati Southern Railway employed residents as laborers, porters, flagmen, brakemen, engineers, conductors and clerks. A significant number of residents also worked as grooms, trainers and saddle makers at racetracks for the Kentucky Association, and the Kentucky Trotting Horse Breeders Association (Red Mile). Some Davis Bottom residents provided professional services as artists, clergy and physicians. A growing number ran their own businesses, including eight locally owned grocery stores.

Cincinnati Southern Railway



Figure 4 (above): The Cincinnati Southern Railway's Queen & Crescent Freight Station in Davis Bottom, August 24, 1914.

Figure 5 (right): The Cincinnati Southern Railway's second passenger station at 701 South Broadway, ca 1908.

Images courtesy, Louis Edward Nollau F Series Photographic Print Collection, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.

The Cincinnati Southern Railway expanded its freight and passenger service on the two sets of railroad tracks that flanked Davis Bottom. Davis Bottom residents worked as crew on the trains, and in two facilities. The railway's Queen & Crescent Freight Station was located at 601 South Broadway in Davis Bottom. This two-story, wood structure served freight trains that ran along tracks on the northern ridge of the valley. The railway also had a passenger station on the southern ridge of Davis Bottom off South Broadway. The first passenger station was gutted by fire in 1906. The second station, a larger, Georgian Revival-style building was opened at the same site in 1908.



The Hathaway family

The Hathaway family lived in two homes on the corner of Combs and West Pine Street on the northern ridge of Davis Bottom, according to Yvonne Giles, Director, The Isaac Scott Hathaway Museum.



Robert Elijah Hathaway, a Union Army veteran, married Rachel Scott in 1869. Robert worked as a waiter, clerk and co-owner of an "eating house" until finding his true calling as a Christian preacher. The couple had four children before Rachel's death in 1874. Jenny died as an infant. Fannie attended Berea College and became a teacher and principal. Eva was a nurse. And, Isaac became a successful artist and professor. Education was of vital importance to the Hathaway family. Isaac graduated from the Lexington Normal Institute before attending art schools in Boston and Cincinnati. In 1900, he set up an art studio in the chicken coop behind their home. Isaac became a nationally recognized sculptor who established ceramics programs at almost a dozen colleges and universities through the South.

Figure 6: The Hathaway family, ca 1900. Robert (left) and his three children: Isaac (right), Fannie (left), and Eva (right). Courtesy, Mosaic Templars Cultural Center.



Figure 7 (left): The Hathaway family birth home before demolition, ca. 1980s. Courtesy, Isaac Scott Hathaway Museum. Figure 8 (right): The Hathaway's chicken coop (photo ca. 1940s), which served as Isaac's art studio from 1900 to 1907. Courtesy, Kentucky Historical Society.

Public Education

Public schools were segregated during this time period. Children who played together in Davis Bottom had to attend different schools. Black students went to Patterson Street School (No. 3), which was established in 1883. Patterson was built because of the fundraising efforts of a "school committee" from Pleasant Green Baptist Church.



Figure 9: Lincoln School, ca 1912. Courtesy, Louis Edward Nollau F Series Photographic Print Collection, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.

White students from Davis Bottom attended Abraham Lincoln School, which opened in 1912 on DeRoode Street just across the High Street viaduct in Irishtown. Lincoln was a "settlement" or community school that was built with public funds and private donations generated through the efforts of Madeline McDowell Breckenridge. The school was named after its first private donor, Robert Todd Lincoln - the son of Abraham and Mary Lincoln. Lincoln School had facilities and programs far ahead of its time, including a pool, auditorium, roof garden, laundry, carpentry shop and special evening programs for adults.

The Roaring Twenties

The "Roaring Twenties" saw explosive growth in the railroads, tobacco trade and horseracing from 1920 to 1930. This was also the period when Prohibition banned the sale and consumption of alcohol. Most of Lexington's distilleries closed. The James E. Pepper Distillery in Irishtown stayed open as a "concentration" facility to store whiskey for medicinal purposes (Joseph 2008). Prohibition gave rise to underground taverns or "speakeasies" that served alcohol. Several speakeasies were located along South Broadway during Prohibition, but the residential sections of Davis Bottom never had the taverns, brothels and illegal businesses that are often found in poor communities.

“Davis Bottom was always known as a town with poor, yet respectable people,” according to Reverend T.H. Peoples, Pastor, Historic Pleasant Green Baptist Church (Faberson 2008).

Figure 10: Members of Pleasant Green Baptist Church walk up DeRoode Street during their “Go to Sunday School” parade, ca. 1930s/40s. Courtesy, Lexington Public Library.



The Tobacco Trade



Sanborn Fire Insurance maps show about seven, large tobacco stemmeries, redryers and warehouses were operating in and around Davis Bottom by 1907. Many local residents worked at the W.L. Petty Tobacco Company on Chair Avenue. By 1935, dozens of tobacco facilities surrounded Davis Bottom. During harvest, the streets of Hayman, Patterson, Chair, Christie, South Broadway and Agliana were lined with tobacco trucks waiting to unload their cargo.

Figure 11 (above): Tobacco wagon near South Broadway, ca 1919. Courtesy, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.

Figure 12 (right): Workers in the W.L. Petty Tobacco Warehouse, ca. 1910-1930. Courtesy, Barton Battaile Collection, Lexington Public Library.

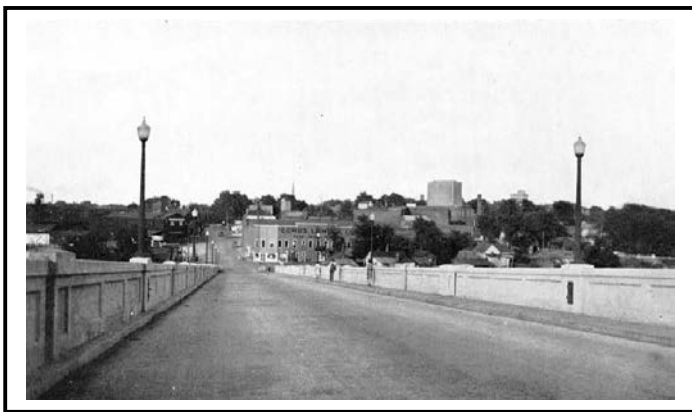


Figure 13 (left): Tobacco workers at South Broadway and Angliana, 1931. Courtesy, Long & Lafayette Collection, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.

In 1925, The Cincinnati Southern Railway demolished its original wood freight depot in Davis Bottom to build a larger facility for the tobacco market. This two-story, Art Deco-style building handled railroad freight until 1959. Sylvester Kiger recalls that circus trains would also unload at the freight depot in Davis Bottom. "They would come in late at night, and unload and parade up to the Red Mile," says Kiger, adding, "The whole neighborhood would be out at midnight to watch the circus come in." The freight depot served as a warehouse until destroyed by fire in 2007.



Figure 14: Southern Railway System Freight Station, ca. 1931. Courtesy, Lexington Public Library.



The landscape of Davis Bottom changed dramatically with construction of the West High Street viaduct in 1930. This earth and concrete structure dominates the north end of Davis Bottom.

Figure 15: West High Street viaduct (northeast view) after it opened in December of 1930. Courtesy, Lexington Public Library.

The Great Depression

The Great Depression began with the stock market crash in October of 1929. Millions of Americans lost their jobs. Davis Bottom became a "portal" community for some of the Appalachian families who moved to Lexington in search of work. During the Great Depression, homeless men, women and children camped in "Jungle Land," the local name given to the woods near the train tracks in Davis Bottom. Disease, fire and floods were a constant threat to the neighborhood. In the summer of 1930, a fire swept through seven frame homes from 749 to 761 on DeRoode Street (Leader 1930). No one was hurt, but the fire - caused by burning rags to ward off mosquitoes - resulted in \$4,000 in damages. Many homes in Davis Bottom were built on wood post or stone piers due to persistent flooding (Faberson 2011).



Figure 16: Residents stand on their porches as floodwaters rise around homes behind the W.L. Petty Company on Chair Avenue in 1932. Courtesy, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.

Nathaniel United Methodist Mission

Students from Asbury Theological Seminary in Jessamine County began to provide outdoor sermons on Sundays in Davis Bottom in the late 1920s or early 1930s, according to Reverend David MacFarland, Senior Pastor, Nathaniel United Methodist Mission. The Asbury students came “honking their horns, getting people to come out to worship on the hillside by the abandoned railroad track,” says Reverend MacFarland. For a period of time, all of the mission’s services were held outdoors. Asbury Seminary students soon built a modest chapel at 743 DeRoode Street.

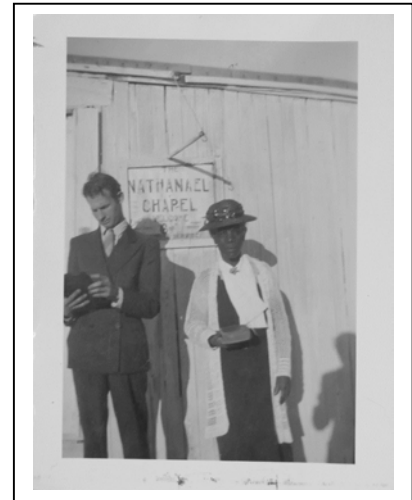


Figure 17: An Asbury Seminary student (unidentified) and a local resident (unidentified) in front of the first chapel of the Nathaniel United Methodist Mission, ca. 1930s. Courtesy, Nathaniel United Methodist Mission.

Nathaniel’s original chapel was a small, one-story, slant-roof building located at 743 DeRoode Street. The chapel was attached to a shotgun house, which may have also been owned by the mission. Asbury students provided spiritual services and food relief programs from the first chapel until 1946. That year, First United Methodist Church became involved with the mission and helped construct a larger church at 616 DeRoode Street. Nathaniel United Methodist Mission is one of the most important institutions in Davis Bottom, providing spiritual services, medical services and meals to thousands of people each year.



Figure 18: (top) The first chapel of The Nathaniel United Methodist Mission at 743 DeRoode Street, ca. 1930s. Note the two windmills in front of houses down the road.



Figure 19: (right) Interior of the first chapel, ca. 1930s. Courtesy, Nathaniel United Methodist Mission.

Historic Pleasant Green Baptist Church, Nathaniel United Methodist Mission were two of the largest spiritual centers for residents of Davis Bottom. But, several “store-front” churches were also located within the community. St. James Baptized Pentecostal Church, under Mrs. Conner, operated in a small building at 573 McKinley Street from 1931 to about 1948.

Works Progress Administration

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided relief to millions of Americans during the Great Depression. Many Davis Bottom residents received support from the WPA through its construction projects, job training programs and food relief programs at local schools and churches.

The WPA provided funding for the construction of George Washington Carver Elementary School in 1934. Carver Elementary School had ten classrooms for students from kindergarten through seventh grade. The public school closed in the 1970s, but the building now serves as the Carver Community Center.

Figure 20: Carver Community Center, 2010.
Courtesy, KAS/KHC.



The Works Progress Administration also provided funds for a nursery school, adult training classes and lunch program at Abraham Lincoln School. Mary Laffoon grew up on DeRoode Street in Davis Bottom. A student at Lincoln School, Ms. Laffoon recalls that the food relief program was a lifeline. "All of us down here, their parents couldn't afford to pay for nothing like that [lunches]" says Laffoon, "because they barely could make it you know. But, nobody went hungry."

Figure 21: Lincoln school lunch program, 1940. Courtesy, Goodman-Paxton Photographic Collection, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.

In oral history interviews, residents describe how their families survived economic hardships. Many families had chicken coops, home gardens and fruit trees to supplement food supplies. Residents canned fruits and vegetables, and gathered together for communal fish fries. Several residents earned a living as "junkers;" collecting cans, scrap metal and used furniture for resale. The Great Depression came to an end with America's entry into World War II in 1941. Many residents enlisted for military service or secured jobs in wartime industries. Yet, the third generation of residents in Davis Bottom would experience a steady decline in population and housing conditions. Throughout this period, Davis Bottom remained a diverse, tight-knit community where the word "neighbor" meant everything.

Figure 22: Felix Demus on DeRoode Street, ca. 1940s.
Courtesy, Demus Collection, Davis Bottom History Preservation Project.



Van Deren Coke Photographs



Van Deren Coke, a nationally recognized photographer from Lexington, documented Davis Bottom in two gelatin silver prints that he took from the West High Street viaduct in 1940. These rare images show the northwest end of Davis Bottom at the end of The Great Depression.

Figure 23 (left): Residents walk along DeRoode Street in Davis Bottom, 1940. Courtesy, Van Deren Coke Collection (Joan Coke), The Art Museum at The University of Kentucky.



Figure 24 (right): A view of Davis Bottom in 1940 showing homes on the northwest side of DeRoode Street, and new homes built on Neville Street. Courtesy, Van Deren Coke Collection (Joan Coke), The Art Museum at The University of Kentucky.

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