

## OVERVIEW

### HISTORY

*Three historical forts located on current aerial photograph*

Edgehill is one of Nashville's oldest neighborhoods. Over the years the neighborhood has been reshaped again and again, yet through it all runs a common thread of perseverance. In the face of natural disasters, urban renewal, and the continual encroachment on neighborhood boundaries, the residents of Edgehill have maintained solidarity through strong neighborhood identity. As a result, Edgehill is one of Nashville's most vocal and active communities.

Edgehill's beginnings date back to the early 1800's when Robert Brownlee Currey, an early mayor and postmaster of Nashville, built a settlement on top of what would later become Rose Hill, the second largest of the three hills rising near Franklin pike just southwest of downtown. After Currey's home was consumed by fire the hill took on the name Currey's Hill, a name that remained until the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> In 1862, the Union army marched into Nashville and, after setting its sights on the three hills, enlisted black laborers to construct Fort Morton, Fort Casino, and Fort Negley.



When Fort Negley was completed in December, 1862 it was the largest Union fort west of Washington, D.C. In 1864, the Union army established a contraband camp for fugitive slaves near Fort Negley. When the Confederates tried to retake the city, the contraband fugitives were made to defend the fort with picks and shovels rather than being given weapons. After the Union army pulled out of the area, the contraband camp developed into a black neighborhood. Its population grew as newly freed slaves arrived from the plantations south and west of Nashville.<sup>2</sup>

Edgehill's reputation as a community of aspiring working-class African American families attracted people from other parts of the city. The burgeoning community soon established such important neighborhood institutions as Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (1866), Kayne Avenue Baptist Church (1882), Bass Street Baptist Church (1887), and Lea Avenue Christian Church (1892).

While Fort Negley remained intact, growth and development in Nashville explains the disappearance of Forts Morton and Casino. A quarry was excavated where Fort Morton once stood atop Currey's Hill. (By that time, the hill had become known as Meridian Hill.)<sup>3</sup> In 1889 the city built the Nashville Reservoir on top of Kirkpatrick Hill on the site of Fort Casino. The reservoir, built with rock from the Meridian quarry, supplied water to the whole city. On November 5, 1912, a section of the reservoir wall collapsed, sending 25 million gallons of water crashing into the neighborhood. Fortunately no lives were lost, but over 25 houses were significantly damaged.<sup>4</sup> The reservoir was repaired, and residents again were allowed to walk or bicycle along its walls until 1917. The outbreak of World War I prompted fears that Germany might try to poison the city's water supply and the reservoir was closed to the public.

*Historic image of Reservoir after its wall broke*



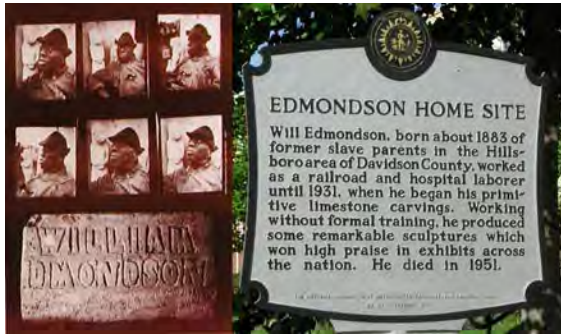
The arrival of a streetcar line to Edgehill around 1890 made the neighborhood more attractive to downtown professionals. White commuters began to settle along 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Avenues on the eastern border of the neighborhood and along 15<sup>th</sup> Avenue to the west. Before long, the Great Migration brought a flood of rural black migrants into Nashville as they sought work in the city or stopped there on the way north. The large growth in Nashville's African American population coincided with the rise in popularity of the automobile. Many of Nashville's white residents moved to new suburban areas further from downtown, segregating the once-integrated inner city neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup>

As white flight continued into the 1940s and 1950s, African American professionals began moving into West Edgehill. Having won more equitable wages in federal court, the growing black middle class built large family homes in areas such as the west side of Edgehill. The neighborhood boasted its own doctors, dentists, and lawyers. M. G. Blakemore, the first African American representative in Tennessee was a resident of Edgehill. Sculptor William Edmonson, who in 1937 became the first African American artist to be granted his own show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York also called Edgehill home.

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*William Edmondson's marker at Murrell School (above)*  
*\*Grocery store with housing on South Street, 1956 (below)*



Commercial retail was plentiful along 12th Avenue and South Street. Hardware stores, bakeries, meat markets, drug stores, and large-scale grocery stores lined the streets. Restaurants, such as the popular Cotton's, were also neighborhood fixtures. Although outsiders owned many businesses in Edgehill, it had its share of locally owned African American businesses. Clemons' Drug Store on 12th Avenue and Patton's Funeral Home, an early site of the famed polar bear sculptures, were both



*\*Hicks Grocery with houses on South Street, 1956 (above)*  
*\*Interior of a cafe on South Street (below)*



owned by African American Edgehill residents. In the 1950s, Edgehill remained culturally and economically vibrant. In addition to the well-to-do residents in west Edgehill, many high profile African Americans stayed in the neighborhood as they passed through the city. Touring African American musicians, barred from segregated hotels downtown, stayed in a rooming house in west Edgehill.



By the 1960s, however, powerful external forces changed the character of Edgehill forever.<sup>6</sup>

In the late 1950s Owen Bradley's recording studio moved to 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue South on the border of west Edgehill. It was the first recording studio in the area, and its success, in conjunction with the boom of the country music industry, led to a large-scale migration of record companies to the area now known as Music Row. As record companies rushed to purchase residential houses, the city was happy to accommodate with zoning changes, and as a result Edgehill's character changed drastically. Many of the prominent families living in west Edgehill left the area as the music industry continued its expansion. Today, although there is still fear of encroachment from Music Row, the western boundary of the neighborhood is well-defined and communication between the two communities has improved dramatically.

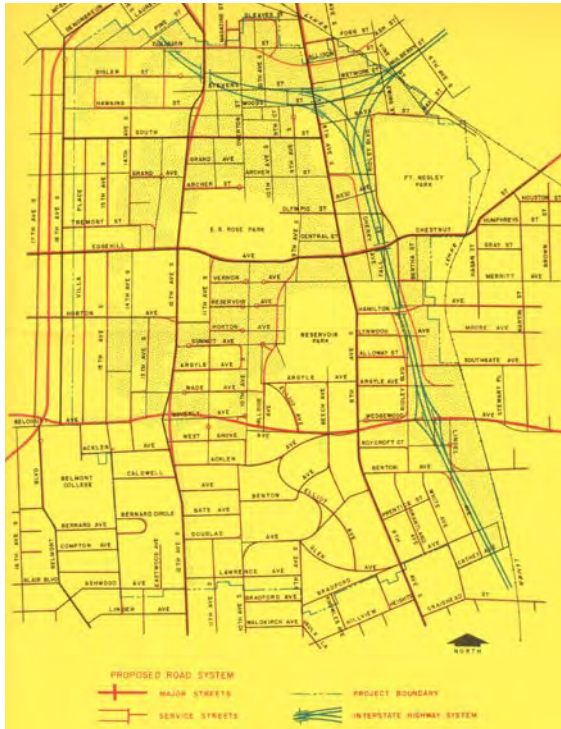
The most devastating development to affect Edgehill was the federal urban renewal program, which tragically altered the design and fabric of the neighborhood. The program's mission was to completely redevelop "blighted" areas with goals that included:

- the expansion of neighborhood schools and parks, the widening and realignment of certain streets, the redevelopment of public housing, the elimination of incompatible land uses and obsolete structures, the separation of storm water and sewage lines, and the clearing of land for the expansion of Belmont University.<sup>7</sup>

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Nashville Housing Authority (MDHA) urban renewal plan for Edgehill - infrastructure implementation plan, 1960s



Pervasive in the philosophy of urban renewal was the importance of right-of-way for interstate highway expansion. With the construction of I-65 and I-40, the northern and eastern boundaries of the neighborhood were truncated. Direct connections to downtown and Fort Negley were limited to two bridges that focused mainly on automobile traffic. The project also sought to create major traffic arteries to free motorists of the congestion brought about by commercial properties, and to reduce traffic on residential streets. To reinforce this idea, the redevelopment plan called for transforming the majority of the traditional residential street grid into dead-end cul-de-sacs.

Urban renewal plan for Edgehill - planning objectives, 1964 (above)  
Two cul-de-sacs separated by a fence - Edgehill, 2003 (below)



While cutting off through-traffic was thought to benefit the residents, it developed isolated areas which later attracted crime.



Nashville Housing Authority (MDHA) urban renewal plan for Edgehill - master plan development, 1963



The Edgehill public housing campaign began at the center of the neighborhood with the construction of Edgemoor Homes at the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue South and Edgemoor Avenue. The project was completed in 1954, and while it did away with deteriorating structures, it completely eradicated the traditional design of the neighborhood and eliminated commercial space along 12th Avenue, the neighborhood's historic spine.

1950s urban renewal foreshadowed the next decade's calamitous interventions forced upon the neighborhood's structure. Public and elderly housing was built throughout the neighborhood with a *tabula rasa* mentality, completely ignoring the existing neighborhood fabric. Homes were razed and neighborhood streets

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erased to make way for new “superblock” subdivisions. An estimated two thousand, three hundred people were relocated to make way for new public housing.<sup>8</sup>

Commercial property on 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue was virtually eliminated when the street was expanded to five lanes. The major traffic artery of Wedgewood Avenue swooped through the historic street grid, and separated the neighborhood from Belmont University. In 1964, the abandoned rock quarry on top of Meridian Hill was filled in and Rose Park, Rose Park School, and the E.S. Rose community center were built. The large swath of land was not landscaped and had few access points, making the majority of the park inhospitable to its neighbors. In the northwest portion of the neighborhood, streets were cut off with cul-de-sacs that created a distinct boundary between Edgehill and Music Row. Initially considered a hostile boundary, the cul-de-sacs disrupted the street grid and reduced access to the neighborhood.

Urban renewal coincided with the Civil Rights movement, prompting neighborhood residents to become active in protesting both segregation and proposed redevelopment of the neighborhood. Under the leadership of Reverend Bill Barnes, Edgehill residents became active in protesting urban renewal by opposing a new housing development proposed for the South Street area. Largely due to their efforts, the development was scrapped. Instead, the area was incorporated into Rose Park with single-family Turnkey III homes built on the north side of the hill. Nevertheless, the damage had been done. Businesses in Edgehill all but disappeared, and residents were left with one grocery store where, at one time, there were fifteen.<sup>9</sup>

Although Urban Renewal destroyed much of the neighborhood, some prominent historic institutions (such as churches, Patton Brothers Funeral Home, and

the White Way Cleaners complex) survived. In response to the drastic changes brought about by Urban Renewal – and with the resolve that Edgehill was still a thriving community – Organized Neighbors of Edgehill (ONE) was created in 1967 to give residents a voice to express their concerns and a vehicle with which to take action. Longtime Edgehill residents such as Reverend Barnes and King Hollands became instrumental in mobilizing the community to take action and fight for development to keep in mind the interests of the residents. ONE began sending delegations to Metro Council meetings and defeated attempts by the Music Industry to rezone property on the western border of Edgehill for commercial use. The group organized around such issues as crime reduction, public school monitoring, and the humane construction of new public housing developments. ONE created the first Community / Police contract for crime reduction, and set up a substantial scholarship fund that supports students from the neighborhood.

Hopes are high that commercial development will be revitalized in the neighborhood's once thriving central artery. The owners of the White Way complex in west Edgehill are planning on redeveloping the building for mixed use purposes. Plans for the development of a new park incorporating the Edgehill Community Gardens along 13th Avenue are also under way. Carter Lawrence School has been demolished and a new school will be built in its place. With the assistance of MDHA, the community has purchased the polar bears and plans to relocate them in the neighborhood.

Neighborhood organization and mobilization has brought about new visions for the future of Edgehill. With the redevelopment of 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue South at Douglas Corner accomplished, Nashvillians are now turning their attention toward 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue South. The 12South Plan and the Gulch Master Plan are already being implemented north and south of the

*Carter Lawrence School, September 2003 during demolition*

neighborhood. Edgehill can play a key role in the connection of these two areas. In order for the development to benefit everyone, special attention must be paid to the design of infrastructure and buildings. As Reverend Barnes stated in one of the meetings for this study, “For once, we have the chance to be a pro-active community instead of a reactive one.”



\*Photos courtesy of Ronnie Miller.

<sup>1</sup> Walker, Hugh. The Giant Pit on Rock Crusher Hill is No More. Nashville Tennessean. 1/6/1963. p. 3-B

<sup>2</sup> Lovett, Bobby. The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780–1930: Elites and Dilemmas. Fayetteville : University of Arkansas Press, 1999

<sup>3</sup> Walker

<sup>4</sup> Zepp

<sup>5</sup> Lovett

<sup>6</sup> Interview with King Hollands & Betty Jean Forrester

<sup>7</sup> MDHA Annual Reports 1961–1972.

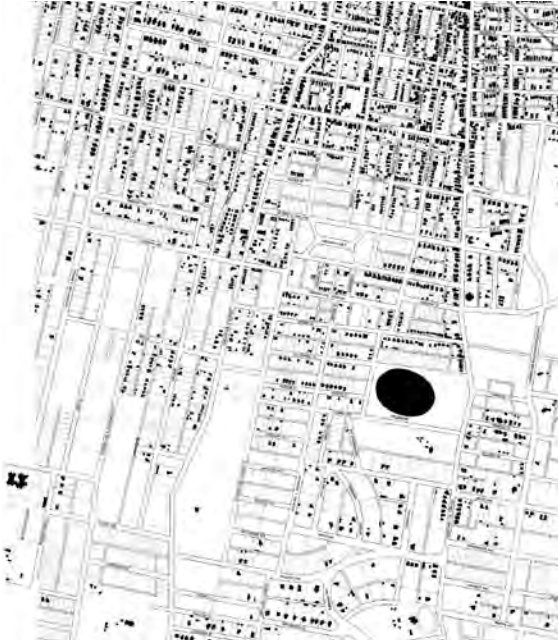
<sup>8</sup> Organized Neighbors of Edgehill

<sup>9</sup> Reverend Bill Barnes

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### COMPARISON OF FIGURE GROUND MAPS

Edgehill Figure Ground 1908



1908

- The northern portion of the neighborhood is occupied by single family residences.
- The southern portion of neighborhood was platted for development, but is still primarily undeveloped land.
- The reservoir is the dominant feature in the landscape.
- Belmont College can be seen in the lower left corner.

Edgehill Figure Ground 1951



1951

- A majority of the neighborhood is occupied by single family residences.
- Commercial areas are focused on 12th Avenue and South Street.
- WhiteWay Cleaners is located at Edgehill Avenue and Villa Place.
- Historic streetgrid is prevalent throughout neighborhood.
- Belmont University expands.

Edgehill Figure Ground 2000



2000

- Much of the traditional neighborhood fabric is gone due to urban renewal and interstate implementation.
- South Street has been widened to a boulevard, removing all of the commercial buildings.
- E.S. Rose Park has been established in the central portion of the neighborhood.
- From 1908 to 2000, the figure ground illustrates the increase in building footprint size.
- The western residential portion of the neighborhood is still very similar to its 1951 character.

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### COMPARISON OF AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS

Edgehill, 1961



1961

- Edgehill homes is first public housing to be built in the neighborhood.
- Traditional neighborhood fabric is largely intact.
- "Rock Crusher" hill quarry can be seen in the center of the neighborhood.

Edgehill, 1987



1987

- Interstates and public housing have been in the neighborhood for about twenty years.
- Wedgewood Avenue is a main east/west thoroughfare.
- 12th Avenue South is under-utilized for its width.
- Cul-de-sacs and the closing of Grand Avenue have fortified the border between Music Row and Edgehill.
- Rose Park has replaced "Rock Crusher" hill.

Edgehill, 2003



2003

- Music Circle has been added to Demonbreun Street in the north.
- The Gulch and 12South developments have begun implementation.
- Carter Lawrence school razed, construction on new school begins in Fall 2003.
- Reservoir is closed to the public in 2001.