Before We Arrived

By David Ewing ’85

In 1915 Nashville was a growing city. Fifty years after the end of the Civil War, the Capital of Tennessee was rapidly expanding.

After the Civil War, many northern religious institutions and philanthropic people and groups decided Nashville, which had been occupied for three years by the Federal army during the Civil War, needed institutions for the education of former slaves, women and other citizens.

In the 1860’s, three new colleges were started for the education of African Americans: Fisk University, Central Tennessee College (later Walden University), and Roger Williams University. In the same decade of the Civil War, two all-girls schools, St. Cecilia Academy and Ward Seminary (later Ward-Belmont, now Harpeth Hall), were established for the education of girls. Other schools and colleges for women around the turn of the century included Price’s College for Women, Radnor College for Women, Belmont College for Women, and Boscel College.

In 1873 railroad and shipping magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt agreed to give what would amount to a million dollar gift to establish a University in Nashville. In 1891 David Lipscomb College (now Lipscomb University) was also established on the outskirts of Nashville. Another religious school, Trevecca Nazarene, was started in 1901.

One of the oldest schools in Nashville started for former slaves was Roger Williams University. Its first site was in downtown Nashville, but the college purchased land south of Edgehill in order to expand. The American Baptist Home Mission Society, the northeastern white religious group which started the school, purchased the Gordon estate (now the current site of Peabody College) in 1874, the year after Vanderbilt was started. The school’s two main academic buildings and a dorm were built on

We asked local historian (and attorney) David Ewing ’85 to sketch the character of this part of Nashville in the years before Peabody College moved into the neighborhood.

This photo of the construction of Vanderbilt Hospital shows the character of this neighborhood before Peabody and Vanderbilt transformed it. The hospital was built at the same time as the Demonstration School by the same construction company. The same photographer took pictures of both projects.
the highest point of the property along Hillsboro.

The school thrived and was an important place where many African Americans, including John Hope, a future President of Morehouse College, were educated. In 1905 two very mysterious fires burned two separate buildings there, and the northeastern religious society decided to sell the land out from under the school. The society built a new but smaller and inferior campus in the Whites Cheek area near Nashville which later closed.

Nashville’s oldest educational institution of any kind was The University of Nashville. When the newly established Peabody College, which started at the University of Nashville, searched for a new home, its board was divided whether to stay on its historic site on a hill overlooking downtown Nashville or move outside the then city limits across from Vanderbilt on Hillsboro Pike.

Past the future site of Peabody College was the most significant and historic home in the area which belonged to Adelicia Acklen: “Belmont.” One of the oldest homes in the area, it was built in 1853 as the summer home for Adelicia and Joseph Acklen. During the Civil War the mansion was briefly taken over by the Union Army. It served as headquarters for General Thomas Wood on December 1, 1864, two weeks prior to the Battle of Nashville. It was inside Belmont Mansion that General Wood and 122 of his soldiers planned their strategy. On December 15 they ordered the 13,000 troops that were stationed behind the mansion to go into battle during the first day of the Battle of Nashville.

After Acklen’s death, the mansion was sold, and in 1890 a new women’s college called “Belmont College for Women” started and held classes in the mansion. This women’s school merged with Ward Seminary in 1913 to become Ward-Belmont, which it remained until the Baptists purchased the land and the school to start a new four-year Baptist College in 1951.

The name for Edgehill Avenue came from the name of Charles A. R. Thompson’s Victorian home “Edgehill” on that street. This 75 acre estate near the corner of Edgehill and Hillsboro included the land where PDS was later built and where Scarritt-Bennett is located today. (The house “Edgehill” was later moved to Bowling Avenue.)

In 1896 on the current site of USN, Vanderbilt student Thomas Webb, Jr. and three of his friends built a crude nine hole golf course, according to Ridley Wills’ History of Belle Meade Country Club. This course, believed to be the first in Nashville, was made with tomato cans in the ground for each hole and broomsticks as pins. The cattle grazing the land kept the grass low for ideal golfing, and the course’s proximity to Vanderbilt meant they could play when not in class. The 9 hole course enticed other men to try this game, including those who a few years later founded Belle Meade Country Club.

Hillsboro Pike was a main thoroughfare out of the city of Nashville on the way to Franklin. In the 1920’s a bustling shopping district was formed along it with two significant movie houses. The Hillsboro Theatre (now The Belcourt Theatre) started as a movie house after the silent movie era. At its original entrance on Hillsboro, where the Villager pub is today, the name “Hillsboro” is still visible above the door. The Hillsboro soon had a big competitor at the end of the block called “The Belmont,” which was owned by the South’s largest theatre owner, Tony Sudekum. With its unique southwest Spanish style architecture, the Belcourt was different than the big art deco marquee theatres of the era.
Unable to compete against the Sudekum theatre empire, The Belcourt’s owners turned their house to live performances and plays. While The Belmont was showing first run movies in the 30’s, Hillsboro became the second home of the Grand Ole Opry, which had outgrown its home on the fifth floor of National Life Insurance Company in downtown.

The area around Peabody Demonstration School was a thriving middle class neighborhood with close access to Nashville. Edgehill Avenue starts at Hillsboro Pike and extends to Franklin Road. Though it’s less than two miles long, Edgehill has had more major schools than any street in Nashville except West End Avenue. Past PDS was Peabody’s campus, then today’s Carter Lawrence, then Rose Park Middle, The W.O. Smith School of Music, and, at the corner of Edgehill and Franklin, the Falls School building which opened as a public school in 1897. It is the oldest Nashville Public School building still standing today.

Former Postmaster and Mayor of Nashville Brownlee Currey lived at the highest point of Edgehill in the early 19th century. The site was considered as the site for Nashville’s reservoir because of its height before the present nearby location off of Franklin Road was picked. When Currey’s home stood there, the hill was much higher than it is today. Currey Hill later served as a rock quarry until the 1960’s, with its rock used for the reservoir. Today the Currey land is Metro’s Rose Park, which has a community center and sports fields used by Belmont University.

In 1916 and 1917 when he was a child, the famous playwright Tennessee Williams lived a few blocks away from the current site of University School. His grandfather, the Rev. Walter E. Dakin, was the pastor of The Episcopal Church of the Advent on the corner of Edgehill and 17th Avenue. Young Tennessee lived in the brick rectory next to the church, which is still standing today. In an interview years later, he fondly remembers taking trips with his African-American Nurse Ozie, who would read ghost stories to him and make up some others. “Tom,” as he was called as a child, also recalled crying when his mother dropped him off at kindergarten for the first time. It was in Nashville that Tennessee said he “rode his first streetcar.”

Another famous Edgehill area resident was William Edmonson. The son of slaves lacked a formal education and worked menial jobs before he said he was called by God to be a sculptor. His primitive limestone carving of animals, birds, and historic figures was displayed in the front yard of his home on 14th Avenue South near Edgehill, attracting the attention of numerous art patrons. In 1937 this attention allowed him to become the first African-American to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Today the neighborhood is a mix of artists, educators, young families and older African-American families who grew up in the neighborhood. As Nashville and the Vanderbilt campus have grown, the Edgehill area still feels local and welcoming to those who live there and visit.