Proposed Extended Area: "The Hill"

A proud African-American Community in the Original Township of Arlington, Texas
North Arlington Residential Historic District –
Proposed Extended Area: "The Hill"

This application is submitted as an amendment to the application filed under the historic name: North Arlington Residential Historic District, as filed in January of 1999. This is the proposed Extended Area.

"The Hill" defined – A proud African American Community in the Original Township of Arlington. (See boundary description below) Because early Black Settlers were discouraged from reading or writing, few records remain of the development of this neighborhood. What you are about to read are only remnants of what was once a thriving, African American community.

Period of Significance – c. 1890 – 1950

Geographic location of "The Hill"
"The Hill" existed approximately one block West of the western-most boundary of the proposed North Arlington Residential Historic District - Oak Street - and lies adjacent to the Western-most boundaries of the original incorporated township boundaries of the City of Arlington, West Street.

The streets of "The Hill" included: N. West Street (now N. L. Robinson Drive), Indiana Street, Watson Street (now Echols Street), Taylor Street, Houston Street, Prairie Street and W. Sanford Street. “The Hill” is bordered on the North, by Sanford St., on the South by Prairie, on the East by N. West Street, and on the West by Taylor Street.

This thriving community roughly encompassed approximately 15-25 acres of land and included property owned by J. E. Wilkinson¹, a Trader who purchased land in the Solomon Davis Survey. He divided the land into plots of 50 ft. by 140 feet. Although the Sanborn maps of 1900 and 1927 do not reflect “The Hill’s” boundaries, it may be because several of its inhabiting streets were not paved yet.

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¹ The Landmark Preservation Committee report on African American History submitted to THC, June 1999

Submitted by Mount Olive Baptist Church 06/22/99
**The Remnants of African-American History in Arlington**

**JOHNSON STATION**

The history of “The Hill” can be traced back to the days of the founder of Tarrant County and early pioneer, Middleton Tate Johnson, of Johnson Station - a trading post and plantation located just three miles South of Old Town Arlington. When Johnson arrived here from East Texas in 1846, his family and about 75 slaves accompanied him. Between 1846-1850, Johnson had as many as 150 slaves working on his 140 acre Plantation. Hannah Mullins, a former slave of the Johnson Plantation, tells of the day to day life at Johnson Station:

> “It was like a little city with buildings and all that. Each family had a double log house and two rooms separated by a hall. The houses were in rows. There was a show shop, and a blacksmith shop, a gin mill, spinning room for cotton and wool. Master Johnson’s plantation is self-supporting... I raised cotton for the money crop. The other crops were small, like vegetables. Each family received rations on Sunday morning after the bell rings. Each family took their rations to their cabin where the women folk would cook when needed. If the family had good workers, they received a cow or a hog to raise. There was also a nursery on the plantation where I was raised until I was about five years old. Mothers brought their babies until after they were finished working. My mother was the midwife for the whole plantation... Mrs. Johnson had four or five children. The Johnson kids could have made it hard on me but they did not. We all played together as if I was white as they were, ate the same food and even wore the same clothes.”

**EMANCIPATION**

Emancipation was declared by the federal government to be effective on January 1, 1863, although the slaves of Texas were not officially notified of their freedom until June 19, 1865.

Betty Bormer, a slave born in 1857, recalls standing with 74 other slaves on the front lawn of Colonel Middleton Tate Johnson’s plantation, and being told, “You ah now free. You can go whar you please.” Those who left were given a mule or a cow. Those who stayed received wages to work the land. Many of them stayed for fear of being captured and/or killed.

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2 Arista Joyner’s “Arlington: The Birthplace of the Metroplex.” 1976
3 Hannah Mullins, age 81, Texas Slave Narratives: WPA Federal Writer’s Project 1937. This portion of her interview was translated from its original dialect by Pam Roach. (Original Interview attached in Appendix)
4 Slave Narrative of Betty Bormer, age 80, c/o Sheldon F. Gauthier WPA Federal Writers Project, 1937

Submitted by Mount Olive Baptist Church 06/22/99
"According to the 1870 Census, there were 672 slaves remaining in Tarrant County after Emancipation, indicating that the county was a difficult place in which to live for former slaves. Many who remained in the county, however, had no money, land, nor had they been taught how to find work. Freed slaves could not work without their former master’s consent or recommendation. They also had to deal with the day to day terror of being the objects of violence perpetuated by large gangs of the local Ku Klux Klan.

"Whites of Tarrant County and Fort Worth resisted Emancipation for as long as they could until that attitude became economically infeasible for them to maintain." By 1880, many of the remaining African-American population had moved to more friendly territory in Mozier Valley in Fort Worth, or East Texas. They left carrying the surnames of some of the early settlers of Tarrant county such as Brinson, Johnson, Ditto, Johnston, Standifer, Ish, and Bentiener.

POST-EMANCIPATION POPULATION & EMPLOYMENT (1880-1900)

"During the last two weeks of June of 1880, Mr. E. F. Foscue walked the streets of Arlington to record the Census. Out of 275 total residents, only four black families remained after Emancipation, totaling 16 persons. The adults had been born into slavery, so their occupational choices were somewhat limited in Arlington. One man was a farmer, another worked as a farmhand, and two were servants to white families."

According to the 1900 Census, Arlington’s total population increased to over three times its original occupancy of 1880, from 275 to 1,072 total residents. Ninety-four (94) were African-American, making up nine percent of the total population. However, none of the blacks from the 1880 Census could be traced to the Census of 1900, indicating that there was somewhat of a migration to other more prosperous areas for blacks.

By 1900, seven African-American families owned their own homes in Arlington. Those who had sharecropping arrangements remained near Johnson Station where cotton picking was their sole source of income. Others relocated just north of the Union Pacific Railroad’s newest stop, Old Town Arlington. In fact, in 1876, when the Union Pacific Railroad began to bring its line through town, local business owners now had access to Dallas and Fort Worth. This new access would change the face of Arlington.

Within just a few years, merchants began to relocate their businesses from Johnson Station closer to town; thereby creating more job opportunities for people of all colors, as well as a greater diversity of available work. Local African-Americans were now able to leave the cotton fields and work as wood cutters, cattle drivers, maids, cooks, midwives,

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7 In the Shadow of Giants: Arlington, Texas 1884-1905, pp. 276, 277 by Carolyn Carney
8 Ibid p.280
boot blacks, porters, janitors, blacksmiths, herb doctors, farmers, preachers, and slaughterers of livestock.

By 1900, there were two African American ministers in Arlington; seven men and one woman worked as servants in white households and lived in their employer’s homes; one woman did laundry; seventeen men and one woman were day laborers.⁹

By the end of the 19th Century, the face of Tarrant County had changed as well. Some African Americans had moved into more prestigious and professional occupations countywide, such as, doctors, teachers, lawyers, mail clerks, editors of newspapers, and undertakers.¹⁰ Black professionals generally found their home in Fort Worth due to the city’s enclave of prominent African-American citizens just north of downtown.

The Beginning of African-American’s relocation to “The Hill”

Arlington’s economic growth of the 1880’s and 1890’s caused African Americans to move from Johnson Station, closer to the pulse of this growing city. They relocated to a residential district just north of town that was owned and developed by businessman, J. E. Wilkinson; an area that later became known to whites as “The Wilkinson District”, and to blacks as “The Hill”.¹¹

To this day, there is no record of why this name was used.

The Wilkinson District was divided into plots of land equaling 50 feet by 140 feet, located in the Solomon Davis Survey. This neighborhood was developed just one block west of homes owned by prominent white businessmen. Still, by 1900, Whites had not grown used to the idea of diverse residential neighborhoods; and Blacks were often not allowed to own property.

Therefore, Blacks were forced to rent homes from Whites. These homes were modestly developed, two-room shotgun houses, or three-room bungalows made with inexpensive wood, and little or no heating or plumbing. Sometimes, families with as many as 12 children lived in one of these homes.¹²

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⁹ Institute of Urban Studies the University of Texas at Arlington’s, Historical Vignette of the Black Population of Fort Worth, Texas. January 1991
¹⁰ Ibid. p. 3
¹¹ Oral Interview, Thelma Walker, born 1911, June 10, 1999
¹² Oral Interview, Harry Gates, May 1999

Submitted by Mount Olive Baptist Church 06/22/99
Community Life in “The Hill” (1920-1950)

By 1920, “The Hill” became an exclusive neighborhood of its own. Not by choice. The reality of life for blacks in Arlington was that, as former slaves and descendants of slaves, they owned little property, had no power, and though they had the right to vote, were antagonized at the polls by zealous white politicians. 13 Blacks quickly learned that one must stay “in their place” if they wanted to survive in this city.

Out of that reality came a thriving African-American Community, known as “The Hill”. It was alive and well with churches, restaurants, night clubs with live entertainment, and it was home to this area’s only public elementary school for Blacks, Booker T. Washington, established in 1896 near the he Northside School (later renamed Kooken Elementary School).

The progress of the 1920’s brought more blacks to Arlington, and “The Hill”. Some blacks lived off The Hill – e.g. in servants quarters or on farms, with a few in tiny enclaves just west of Collins Street, but always north of the railroad. “The Hill” remained the magnet for African Americans.

Arlington was now home to more schools and churches, The City’s first Park, Meadowbrook, opened with a golf course and swimming pool. The first Library was built in 1923. Farmers’ National Bank opened and later acquired Arlington State Bank. Thamisch Chevrolet Company was opened.

Not surprisingly, African Americans could not get bank loans, nor could they play in city parks. If you wanted to find African-American children playing, or if you wanted to see the neighborhood softball or basketball game, you could go to “The Pasture”, which was located in an area just North of Sanford Street, across the street from where George Stevens Park is today.

During this time, the city had separate water fountains, restrooms, and entrances to restaurants. Blacks were not allowed in movie theaters in Arlington until the 1960’s. It is for this reason that “The Hill” became more and more like a place of refuge for its inhabitants.

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13 Hannah Mullins, age 81, Texas Slave Narratives: WPA Federal Writer’s Project 1937. This portion of her interview was translated from its original dialect by Pam Roach. (Original Interview attached in Appendix)
THE ECONOMY OF "THE HILL"

By 1930, Arlington had grown to over 3,000 residents. The African American population was at 302. The city’s economic base changed as well. It broadened from the cotton business, to dairying, fruit, and vegetable gardening, and a nursery industry.  

After the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the effects of Great Depression ensued, the plight of local African-Americans quickly worsened. Wages were cut drastically in some cases. Blacks, who were the last to be hired, were the first to be fired. Many businesses went bankrupt across Texas, causing the ranks of unemployment to rise.

ORAL INTERVIEWS

Thelma Walker, 88, presently residing at 514 Taylor Street, has lived in The Hill most of her life. She tells of life in The Hill during the Depression:

"I don't think about the Depression much. I thought whatever we ate, or whatever we had, we had it, and that's all we could do. We had bread and meat and my brother done the cookin'. We'd eat bread and bacon and biscuits... He sho* could make biscuits and bacon... We didn't have nothin' (else to eat). He didn't do nothin' but cook bread and meat. That's all I was brought up on."

Robbie Pointer Johnson, 79, is a descendant of Allen and Trula Oliver Pointer, one of the largest pioneering African-American families in Arlington. She tells of life in "The Hill" during the Great Depression. "It was a time when everyone took care of everyone else."

"My mother died in 1928 of Typhoid fever. After she died, my daddy and my older sister, Nell, did most of the cooking. During the Depression, I remember my daddy used to go downtown and he would get commodities like canned meat, cheese, dried milk, butter, dried beans and rice, flour, cracklers, and summer sausages... We couldn't buy clothes until things got better. It was kind of a hard life."

By 1927, "The Hill" consisted of six streets: N. West, Indiana, Watson, Taylor, Houston, Prairie, and Sanford Streets. None of the streets were paved until the 1960’s. Ms. Johnson said that when it rained, they would get in the street and wade in the water because there was no drainage system:

"When we first moved to Arlington from Rockdale in 1925, we lived on George Christopher's Farm, across from Middleton Tate Johnson's Plantation Cemetery. That was our first home. A few years later we moved to the corner of West Street and Division, where the Arlington Night Shelter is today. There used to be a Café there owned by the Wright..."

16 Oral Interview, Robbie Lee Pointer Johnson, 79, Arlington resident since 1925
Brothers. My father ran the Café® and sold hamburgers and played dominoes. The Café® had juke box music, and soda pops. We lived in the same building as the Café® until we found a house to rent on Sanford and Taylor Street. That house used to be owned by the Mrs. Gertrude Kindle & Family. My father later rented a house from Mr. Tom Ditto. He also worked in Ditto’s Pool Hall and landscaped his yard.” The Post Office would not deliver mail to “The Hill”, so we had to go and pick it up. Everyone had to go downtown to buy groceries. There was a little store across the highway (Fort Worth & Dallas Highway- now Division Street, or Hwy. 180) to get a big supply of groceries from the A. & P., or Safeway. That’s mostly where we traded. We walked to town and packed groceries on our backs in bags. We bought our clothes at Norman’s Dry Goods store downtown, or Mr. James Leftwich. There was a dress shop called, “Francine’s.” We could not shop there. Thelma Johnson Walker could. She used to work for Ms. Francine.

THE CHURCHES OF “THE HILL”

By the End of the 19th Century, three African-American churches sprang up in the Wilkinson district. They were:

- Mount Olive Baptist Church, organized in 1897, was located in the middle of what became N. West St. Later; West Street was renamed after the prominent African-American Pastor of the Church, Rev. Norman L. Robinson.

In 1964, the church relocated because of a street improvement program. A new building was constructed in 1966 still stands at 414 West Street. By the mid 1970’s, the members had outgrown the new sanctuary. Therefore, in 1978 a new edifice was built and stands at 402 N. West Street where they stayed until 1989. The new church was built just one block north of the existing building. It is located at 301 W. Sanford St.

- Emmanuel Church of God in Christ, organized in 1895., located at 515 Indiana (now known as Arlington Church of God in Christ).

- Armstrong African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1898, located at 401 W. North St.

Just one block north of the three churches, was a “baptismal tank” that the local black congregations used for baptizing new converts. Some referred to the “tank” as a river or a creek, depending on the ethnicity of the storyteller.
EDUCATION IN “THE HILL”:
BOOKER T. WASHINGTON SCHOOL FOR NEGROES

(Disclaimer: The name, “Booker T. Washington School for Negroes” is different throughout this narrative. It is referred to in the early official records as “The Negro School”, next as “The Colored School”, then finally as “Booker T. Washington”. There were no official resolutions passed to indicate when the name changes took place. All that is certain is that, all references to the school, no matter what the name, there was only one school African-American students could attend. There was only one school in Arlington for African-American children to attend during the period of 1896-1968)

After the Civil War, the federal government decreed free schools for the education of former slaves. In 1880 in Arlington, of the four black families that remained after Emancipation, there was 100% illiteracy. The adults had been born into slavery, and the school-aged children had not attended classes during the census year. 17 Across the state of Texas, freed African Americans were eager for instruction and made extraordinary efforts to learn to read.

By this same time, for African Americans in Arlington, there were only two educational choices for their children to attend in Tarrant County: I. M. Terrell high school in Fort Worth, or “The Negro School, later named Booker T. Washington elementary school.

Black Churches of Fort Worth were meeting the educational needs of its African-American population. By 1882, the city rented five private schools and one Negro church for public school use. This is what made the city of Fort Worth more attractive to freed African American families. Not only could they become educated, but also because of Fort Worth’s growing professional community, there was suitable employment available after high school graduation. For those who achieved a higher education, there were not as many barriers to achieving success.

In 1896, for those who remained in Arlington, a “School for Negroes” was constructed. It was located near what was then the Northside School. Maps and official reports about its exact original location are not available. However, according to oral interviews with Ms. Thelma Johnson Walker, (88) and Ms. Robbie Lee Pointer Johnson, 79, who attended the school, each since the age of seven (7), the original school building was located in The Hill, just west of the original site of the old Mount Olive Baptist Church, organized in 1897, and just South of the old Armstrong Chapel A.M. E. Church, organized in 1898, and located at 401 W. North Street.

The school consisted of one wood building, which was rated by the Superintendent in 1908 to be in very poor condition. The schoolhouse and grounds were valued at $125. The building contained five double desks and a recitation bench capacity of fifteen. There were thirty-seven pupils and one teacher, and the school was kept open for seventy-five days. 18

17 In the Shadow of Giants: Arlington, Texas 1884-1905, by Carolyn Carney
18 “A Parorama of the Arlington Public School System”, by Texas Wesleyan College, 1955
By 1897–1898, there were thirty-seven pupils and one teacher. The school was kept open for 80 days. In 1899–1900, there were thirty-five, and in 1900–1901, there were twenty-nine pupils with only 70 school days in that school year.

In July of 1903, the Public School Board reported that the White and Negro School buildings were destroyed in a storm. The board voted to hold a $12,000 bond election to replace the School building for white children, originally named, The Northside school. In September, the Board voted to accept bids to reconstruct a 20-foot by 30 foot, 12 feet of cubing, frame building to house the Negro children. The bids came in at $115.00, $111.00, and $109.00 was the lowest bid. Once constructed, the school was a four-room wood-framed building, heated by a pot-bellied stove. It was valued at $125.00. It was constructed near what is now, North, and Indiana Streets.

Not long, after the students and teachers move into the new building, did they out grow it. According to longtime Hill resident, and former student, Mr. Harry Gates, at one time, the “Holiness Church”, otherwise known as, Emmanuel Church of God in Christ”, served as a temporary fix to this problem. It became an annexed schoolhouse during the week, where first through sixth graders received their lesson. The wooden school building housed the middle school children. High School students were bussed to I. M. Terrell High School for Colored Children in Fort Worth, at taxpayers’ expense.

By 1915, all of the schools had grown so much in size that for the first time teachers had to have at least two years of experience before being hired. The following is a summary of the number of African-American students and teachers in the “School for Negroes” from 1896–1956. See Table 1. on the following page.

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<th>School year</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Number of Teachers</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>1896-97</td>
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<td>1897-98</td>
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The record of African-American personnel hired at “The Colored School”, or Booker T. Washington, is not recorded until 1923 when Mr. Dennis Coleman was hired as an
Assistant Teacher at a salary of $60 per month. Other personnel of record for “The Colored School” includes:

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<th>Occupation</th>
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<td>1924</td>
<td>Al L. Jones</td>
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<td>Roberta Parker</td>
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<td>Bessie Randle</td>
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<td>Buster Chimney</td>
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<td>Principal</td>
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<td>Principal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>Gloria Echols</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
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African American teachers and principals worked for less than half the salary of their white counterparts, often causing economic hardships on their families. This was the rule more than the exception. When African-American students wanted to participate in extracurricular activities with other students, they had to participate with schools in Fort Worth. They were not allowed to play sports with their peers at white schools in Arlington.

By 1941, the record shows that 1941 then referred to "The Colored School" to as the "Booker T. Washington School for Negroes". The existing building stood until 1955 when the Arlington Independent School District built a new structure that still stands at 500 Houston Street in "The Hill. One year later, the U. S. Supreme Court ruled that separate facilities were unconstitutional in the Brown vs. Board of Education case.
Approximately 200 students were attending Booker T. Washington when integration came. There was little or no fanfare. According to Dale Pointer, one of the first African Americans to enter the all white Arlington High School in 1965, “it was a very smooth transition.” There was concern amongst the 15 or 20 students who entered with him because of stories they heard schools in other areas of the country.

In many ways, integration in changed the face of the African-American community as much as the city of Arlington. According to Bonnie Lee Pointer in an interview in 1965, “After integration, when people could, they moved (from “The Hill”). Additionally, when folks were able to live where they could, more people started coming in (to Arlington), rather than leaving.”

GLORIA ECHOLS HOME

According to Ms. Robbie Lee Pointer Johnson, all of the teachers from Booker T. Washington lived in Fort Worth. They did not live in “The Hill”. That is, everyone except Mrs. Gloria Echols, who was the fifth-grade teacher at Booker T. Washington School for Negroes for 19 years. She lived at 512 Watson Street. The street name was later renamed in her honor. Her home address changed at that time to 504 Echols Street, and it still stands today. One of her former students from Booker T. Washington lives their today, Ms. Patricia Johnson Joe, daughter of Robbie Lee Pointer Johnson.

GEORGE STEVENS PARK

There are no official documents dating when the park was named. There was no dedication ceremony; no deed of record is on file with the City of Arlington Parks and Recreation Department that records when the property was sold. There is only a handwritten letter, from George Stevens to Mayor Tom Vandergriff in December of 1959, expressing gratitude for the honor. Also, several resolutions authorizing the award of a contract for work to be completed to expand the park, dated for the years of 1980, and 1990 are included in the file (see attached plat and file). In 1963, there is a deed of record for the purchase of additional property that was added on to the park. It that had already served the residents of “The Hill” for many years. It was formerly referred to as “The Colored Park.”

George Stevens was the Principal of Booker T Washington elementary and middle school for approximately 24 years, from 1941 - 1965. He saw the school grow from 75 children and 3 teachers, teaching grades 1st -12th, to 230 children with nine teachers, teaching grades 1st-8th. When the park was named in his honor, it was in recognition of his proven leadership ability in the community serving “The Hill.” Stevens spend a great deal of his time with the first, African-American neighborhood association of “The Hill” called the United Community Progress Association, that emphasized community involvement and beautification of the city. He was also a member of the Board of management of the McDonald YMCA in Fort Worth; a steward of the St. Andrews Methodist Church; a member of the Ambassadors Social Club, and a member of the legislative council for Prairie View College Interscholastic League.