HISTORY OF THE PRALLTOWN COMMUNITY
LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

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Notable Kentucky African Americans Database
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THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRALLTOWN, 1868

It has often been said that Pralltown was the first African American neighborhood in Lexington, KY. That's not quite true. The development of Pralltown was predated by Lee's Row, Davis Bottom, Brucetown, Peach Orchard, Gunntown, Goodloetown, and Kinkeadtown. All of these communities were often grouped together in conversation and in observation, as can be seen in the 1880 U.S. Census records. Though, the communities are not in the same geographic areas. The common factor was that each community had a majority African American population.

Prior to there being a community named Pralltown, the area was part of the 18 acres purchased in July 1867 by John Davis, James Perkins, and Peter Johnson. The three-men partnership was dissolved when James Perkins purchased 10 of the 18 acres. The 10 acres were plotted and Frederick Montmollin, Jr. purchased five acres in January of 1868. Montmollin was the name of the principle street. John Andrew Prall also purchased five acres (36 lots) in December of 1868 for $1,968.00. Prall Street was the principle street on his property. Also in December of 1868, Willard Davis, Sr. purchased 43 lots with Colfax as the principle street. The entire area, including Colfax, Montmollin, and Prall Streets, was designated as Pralltown on the D. G. Beers & Co.'s 1877 map. All of the streets in Pralltown were perpendicular to the Kentucky Central Railroad.

The Prall Street land adjoined the property that John Andrew Prall had previously purchased from J. W. Bourne. This previously owned land is where John Andrew Prall made his home along Winnie Street, as can be seen on the 1877 Beers map. There was a distinct boundary between Prall's home lot and the lots on Prall Street. When the 36 lots on Prall Street were purchased, there were seven additional lots that already had names on them, as noted on the 1868 plat. It is not known who was first to select one of the lots. African Americans were purchasing lots of land even before the community became known as Pralltown. Jacob Small, a white carpenter from Maine, was the first to purchase a lot from John Andrew Prall in 1869. He purchased lot 29, which was across Prall Street from Jim Sellers lot.

JOHN ANREW PRALL, FREDERICK MONTMOLLIN, JR., AND WILLARD DAVIS

John Andrew Prall (1827-1907), was born in Woodford County, KY. He lived in Bourbon County after his marriage to Nannie Williams. His wife was the daughter of George W. Williams, the first mayor of Paris, KY. John A. Prall read with George W. Williams in preparation to become

an attorney. He practiced law in Bourbon County, starting in 1860. He is remembered as a politician, a Kentucky senator representing Bourbon County, a pro-Union supporter, and he was a slave owner. According to the 1860 U.S. Census Slave Schedule, John Andrew Prall owned eight slaves while living in Bourbon County. Prall was also one of two Kentucky senators who were opposed to black men enlisting as Union soldiers; it was feared that black soldiers would weaken the Union cause in Kentucky which could lead to secession. After the U.S. Civil War, John A. Prall moved his law practice from Bourbon County to Lexington in 1868. By 1877, he was living on his home lot, a property next to his land investment that had been named Pralltown. The three streets in Pralltown are Prall, Montmullin (present day spelling), and Colfax. The street names and locations have not change over time, though the spelling was changed from Montmollin Street to Montmullin Street. [See John A. Prall (online) in Civil War Governors of Kentucky, Kentucky Historical Society]

Frederick Montmollin, Jr. (1826-1875), was a Kentucky native with family ties in Pennsylvania. He purchased five acres of what would became part of Pralltown. The Montmollin property adjoined the Prall Street property. Fred Montmollin, Jr. was a very wealthy man. He was a grain dealer and manufactured flour and meal. In 1860, his personal estate was valued at $20,000 in the U.S. Census. His manufacturing company was located on the s w c of Broadway and Vine Street, near the Pralltown property. Frederick Montmollin, Jr. was also a slave owner. He is listed in the 1860 U.S. Census Slave Schedule as owning 17 slaves. In the 1870 U.S. Census, Fred Montmollin was a retired merchant. The Montmollin company was last listed in *Maydwell's Lexington City Directory for 1867*, one year before the purchase of the property on Montmollin Street.

Willard Davis, Sr. (1833-1885), was an attorney and a politician who held many positions in Kentucky government, including his tenure as Fayette County Attorney. He was also a slave owner, having inherited the slaves from his father, James Davis, who had 4 slaves according to the 1830 U.S. Census. Willard Davis, Sr. was born in Madison County, KY. He has been described as a land speculator. He is most remembered for developing the Davis Bottom community in Lexington, Kentucky, starting in 1865. He later purchased the land around the Colfax Street area in what would become known as Pralltown. In 1870, Willard Davis owned $1,000 in real estate. He left Kentucky for Kansas in the fall of 1870, and would later become Attorney General for the state of Kansas. [See *The Davis Bottom History Project* by Yvonne Giles, Kathy Vockery, Heather Dollins, and Gary Cox, 2013. Available online.]

AFRICAN AMERICANS MOVE INTO PRALLTOWN, 1868-1876

The African American population in Fayette County had almost doubled from 685 in 1860 to 12,513 in 1870. The ten-year period was witness to the first wave of post-Civil War African American migration from rural areas to urban areas in Kentucky. African Americans were seeking jobs, education, safety, and an overall better way life. The migration to Lexington created an affordable housing shortage for African Americans. In response, wealthy white developers began buying less desirable lands near warehouses, industries, and railroads, and swampy bottom lands that were prone to flooding. Pralltown was considered bottom land.

These lands were plotted into narrow lots and made available for purchase by individuals (mostly African Americans) and other land speculators. Over the decades, as the African American land and housing market grew, the narrow lots, such as the ones in Pralltown, were subdivided, thus adding many more people and homes into the small enclaves. The white land developers had their own motives for selling land to African Americans, and whatever those motivations may have been, their efforts were not always appreciated by other whites. The three land developers for Pralltown had been slave owners, and slavery (in theory) had ended, though African Americans were still generating income as new, long term, mortgage paying land owners. The comfort to those who opposed the construction of the majority black communities was that the African American landowners would be confined to the 12 or so black enclaves in Lexington.

By 1875, African Americans had had their freedom for a decade. They were property owners who were navigating the world according to their needs and personal wishes. Pralltown was slowly developing. Some of the African American residents were included in *Prather's Lexington City Directory, 1875-76*. The idea of an annual city directory was fairly new. Pralltown residents named within the city directory had the designated location of Pralltown with a few entries noted as living on Colfax Street or near the railroad tracks. Not everyone got included in the directory, and for some, there was no occupation listed. The 26 entries for Pralltown are all African American men. It is of note that John A. Prall was not considered a resident of Pralltown, his home was located between Winnie Street and what was then named Nicholasville Pike near the city limit [Limestone Street].

Prior to the year 1900, it was not uncommon for African Americans to be left out of city directories and the U.S. Census population counts. Between 1868 and 1875, the owners of some of the homes in the Pralltown community had changed. Homes and land were lost due to the inability to make the mortgage payments, homes and land were sold, rented, and leased. In spite of the turnover, Pralltown continued to be a predominately African American community with an increasing population that was making it work for the residents.

<u>THE SEVEN EARLY LOT OWNERS in 1868</u>

1) Jerry Wingate (b.1820), farm laborer, African American. (census)
2) Bazil Black – no information.
3) Jim Sellers – no information.
4) Nathan Biggs, grocery store owner, African American. (directory, p.33)
5) Ben Johnson, servant for Dr. Whitney, African American. (directory, p.93)
6) Eliza Cheatham, mother of 3 adult children, African American. (census)
7) Nancy Walker, a domestic servant for banker Ephraim Sayre, African American. (census)

Sources: Plat accompanying John A. Prall deed for Pralltown. 1860 and 1870 U.S. Census Records. *Maydwell's Lexington City Directory for 1867* in Ancestry.com. Accessed 09/21/2020

<u>PRALLTOWN RESIDENTS 1875-76</u>

1) Boswell, David ~ painter, African American, lived on Colfax Street.
2) Brachor, Samuel ~ no occupation listed, African American, lived on Colfax Street.

3) Clark, Urias ~ no occupation listed, African American.
4) Davis, Daniel ~ whitewasher, African American.
5) Dewitt, D. ~ shoemaker, African American, lived on Colfax Street.
6) Haggins, Andrew ~ no occupation listed, African American, near railroad.
7) Haggins, Charles ~ no occupation listed, African American, near railroad.
8) Haggins, Willis ~ no occupation listed, African American, lived on Colfax Street.
9) Harris, John ~ baker, African American.
10) Harris, John B. ~ whitewasher, African American.
11) Holly, Daniel ~ no occupation listed, African American.
12) Holly, James ~ no occupation listed, African American.
13) Johnson, David ~ no occupation listed, African American.
14) Knox, Jesse ~ no occupation listed, African American.
15) Lewis, Alfred ~ works for J. C. Young, African American, boards at Pralltown.
16) Martin, Adam, Bart, & Jerry ~ no occupations listed, African Americans.
17) Merritt, William ~ no occupation listed, African American, near railroad.
18) Page, David ~ no occupation listed, African American, lived on Colfax Street.
19) Sanders, Nelson ~ Methodist preacher, African American, lived on Colfax Street.
20) Tinsley, Samuel ~ porter, African American.
21) Vince, Aaron ~ works at Young's Brickyard, African American.
22) Vince, Nathan ~ no occupation listed, African American, lived on Colfax Street.
23) Welsh, Jacob ~ African American, near railroad.
24) West, Charles ~ whitewasher, African American, lived on Colfax Street.
25) Williams, Elias ~ blacksmith, African American.
26) Williams, George ~ house painter & paper-hanger at W., S. S., & G. W., African American.

Source: *Prather's Lexington City Directory, 1875-76*. Available online at the University of Kentucky, Special Collections Research Center. Explore UK. https://exploreuk.uky.edu/catalog/xt7z0863690p#page/1/mode/1up Accessed 09/21/2020.

FUTHER DEVELOPMENT OF PRALLTOWN, 1876-1940s

In the 1880 U.S. Census, Pralltown was included in the City of Lexington enumeration district 068 that included many of the communities with significant African American populations: Adamstown, Brucetown, Davis Bottom, Goodloetown, Gun[n]town, Kinkeadtown, Lee's Row, Peach Orchard, Pralltown, Princetown, and Yellmantown. These are many of the same African American communities mentioned earlier in this report. The Pralltown residents are listed on pages 45-51 of the 1880 U.S. Census with 339 persons enumerated: 293 Blacks and Mulattoes, 46 Whites. It should also be noted that the 1880 U.S. Census records sometimes included entire communities in the 068 district without street names. This was the case for Pralltown. The thoroughness of the enumeration of district 068 in 1880 is partially attributed to the fact that a detailed-oriented and well educated African American census worker had been hired to enumerate the district. His name was John Henry Jackson.

John Henry Jackson was a Lexington native and Berea College graduate (1874). He returned to Lexington and became the principal of the second Colored School, located on Corral Street.

John Henry Jackson was the first and third president of Kentucky State University (then known as State Normal School for Colored Persons – SNSCP). He also served as president of the Kentucky Negro Educational Association (KNEA); and president of Lincoln High Schools in Kansas City, MO. The U.S. Census Bureau was not aware that there had been a Negro enumerator prior to 1910. When W. E. B. Du Bois enquired about the employment of Negroes by the Census Bureau, he was told, "More than 2,000 Negro enumerators were employed in 1910, but none were employed at previous censuses or in 1920." [Source: Letter from the United States Bureau of the Census to W. E. B. Du Bois dated January 17, 1922. Available online at UMassAmherst Special Collections and University Archives.] [Sources: John Henry Jackson at the Berea Hutchins Library website; and The Jackson Family Legacy in Kentucky by Aleta Hodge @ KentuckyAncestors.org]

In the 1880 U.S. Census, the majority of the African American men in Pralltown were employed as farm hands. African American women were keeping house or they were cooks, house servants, and washerwomen. These were the types of jobs that African Americans had held while enslaved. The children were at school. Within the community were businessmen such as Rev. Shelton Washington, barber Scott Richardson, and grocer Eldridge Roberson. The residents possessed a number of skills, including carpentry, painting, brick masons, and William Williams was an engineer. Pralltown was a vibrant and thriving community of prospering African American home owners, land owners, and renters. The community was organized and the properties were well kept. There was a pride in being a part of the Pralltown community.

The pride of Pralltown was attractive. In 1907, there were approximately 137 lots with about 143 homes. Sellers Alley had been added to the backside of the Pralltown community, the street ran parallel with the Southern Railroad tracks. Sellers Alley connected all of the Pralltown streets and provided access to areas of the community without having to venture out to the main thoroughfare, Limestone Street. The pride of the community and the affordability of the housing and land brought many more whites into Pralltown at the turn of the century. Among the white residents were the adult children of immigrants from Ireland, Canada, and Italy. In total, there were 559 persons enumerated in the 1900 U.S. Census as living in Pralltown. There were 389 African Americans and 170 Whites. The street breakdown was Colfax Street with 154 African Americans and 35 Whites; Montmollin Street with 98 African Americans and 62 Whites; Prall Street with 119 African Americans and 73 Whites; Sellers Alley with 9 African Americans and 9 Whites. The majority of the residents were not noted as homeowners in the census records, they were renters.

The employment of the African American residents of Pralltown in 1900 included many who were employed at various jobs working with horses, and there were four jockeys: Frank Buckner Jr., Elijah Nero, Horace Wells, and Price Davis. Other more frequent employment was laundress, servant, railroad employee, cook, and day laborer. There were also porters, bricklayers and mortars, ministers, shoemakers, and barbers. The children were at school. The entire community was enumerated on 17 pages of the 1900 U.S. Census, pages 13 – 21(2). The Pralltown community was at its best at the turn of the century. [See Elijah Nero in the NKAA Database]

The addition of Sellers Alley was contained within the Pralltown community and ended where there were a few additional houses just beyond the intersection of Colfax Street. The physical confines of Pralltown had been set by 1907. The new street, Sellers Alley, was a dead-end street and it is still barred off today. There was never any intention of extending access to Pralltown with additional roadways. The community was about to go through another change. By 1930, the number of residents had started to decline and there were less whites living in the community. According to the U.S. Census, in 1930 there were 424 people living in Pralltown: 418 African Americans and 6 Whites. Pralltown residents were counted on 10 enumeration sheets, from page 1A to 5B. Colfax Street had 124 African Americans; Mountmullin Street had 144 African Americans; Prall Street had 127 African Americans and 2 Whites; and Sellers Alley had 23 African Americans and 4 Whites.

In 1930, the types of jobs held by those who lived in Pralltown were as varied as there were persons. Some worked in tobacco factories, some with the railroad companies, while others were manual laborers at the University of Kentucky, or company truck drivers, and cooks in private homes. There were more renters than homeowners. This pattern would continue well beyond the 1970s. It is also evident in the 1930 U.S. Census that there were residents who had come from the south, most from Georgia (40), followed by Alabama, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Pralltown had become a receiving location for those migrating north during the Great Northward Migration of African Americans.

Former Pralltown residents spoke of the migrants during the recording of the 2019 KET, Kentucky Life video titled *Pralltown*. African Americans from the south would arrive at the Southern Railroad Depot. The depot was 200 yards west of Pralltown, on the other side of Broadway. Through word of mouth, it was known that families in Pralltown would provide room and board to African Americans coming from the south and arriving at the Southern Railroad Depot in Lexington. Some of the new arrivals became permanent residents of Pralltown. The year 1930 was the early days of the Great Depression that would occur from 1929 to 1939. In Pralltown, there were a lot of people living in a small area. All of the homes in Pralltown were frame buildings, mostly shot-gun houses. Looking at the homes on the 1934 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, there were about 150 homes on 115 lots that provided a safe haven for over 400 people. Pralltown was a community working together during tough economic times in a city with segregated housing and discriminatory employment. The idea of community continued to be maintained.

Pralltown was starting to change for good by 1941. In *Polk's Lexington (Fayette County, KY.) City Directory, 1940-41* there were 175 people and 13 vacant addresses. Nineteen of the homes were owned by kinfolk of the persons living at a given address. There were 171 African Americans and 4 Whites. The street breakdown was 5 African Americans and 2 Whites on Sellers Alley; 60 African Americans and 2 Whites on Prall Street; 59 African Americans on Montmullin Street; and 47 African Americans on Colfax Street. The businesses in the community were James Gaines Restaurant at 168 Prall Street; Prall Street Christian Church at

131 Prall Street; Ideal Baking Company at 106 Montmullin Street; and Bud Marrs Restaurant at 115 Montmullin Street.

The year 1940 marked the start of the Second Great Migration when more than 5 million African Americans moved from the south to locations in the north, Midwest, and the west. They were drawn to more skilled jobs with better wages. The out-migration increased after the United States entered World War II following the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. In Kentucky, the African American population decreased by 12,009 persons: from 226,040 in 1930 to 214,031 in 1940. The shift impacted the African American labor force (14+ years of age) in Kentucky with a decrease of 9,636 persons: from 72,796 in 1930 to 63,160 in 1940. Kentucky experienced a negative growth for the African American population and labor force, while Fayette County was on the receiving end of the Second Great Migration. There were 16,449 African Americans in Fayette County in 1930, and that increased to 16,669 by 1940. Individual housing for African Americans in Fayette County was no longer heavily regulated to the 12 or so enclaves that were established during the post-Antebellum Period. A new form of segregated housing had come about with the housing projects that were managed by the City of Lexington, starting with Charlotte Court in 1939. The new idea was that Negro slums could be replaced with public housing financed by federal dollars. Pralltown was still a community with "older" housing occupied by African Americans who were striving to stay in place. [Sources: 1940 Census of Population. Volume 2. Characteristics of the Population. Kentucky in Part 3: Kansas – Michigan. Available online at U.S. Census Bureau; and Segregated Public Housing Projects in Kentucky and Charlotte Court(s) in Lexington, KY, both in the NKAA Database.]

SUMMARY OF PRALLTOWN RESIDENTS 1868-1940

YEAR	STREET	AFRICAN AMERICANS	WHITES	STREET TOTALS	YEAR TOTALS
1868	Prall	7		7	7
1875-76	Pralltown	19		19	
	Colfax	7		7	26
1880	Pralltown	293	46		339
1900	Colfax	154	35	189	
	Montmollin	98	62	160	
	Prall	119	73	192	
	Sellers	9	9	18	559
1930	Colfax	124		124	
	Montmullin	144		144	
	Prall	127	2	129	
	Sellers	23	4	27	424
1940-41	Colfax	47		47	
	Montmullin	59		59	
	Prall	60	2	62	
	Sellers	5	2	7	175

Sources: John Andrew Prall land plat, 1868. *Prather's Lexington City Directory, 1875-76*.
1900 U.S. Census records. 1930 U.S. Census records. *Polk's Lexington (Fayette County, KY.) City Directory, 1940-41*.

THE DISMANTLING OF PRALLTOWN, 1950-PRESENT

By 1950, the Pralltown community was viewed as a low income community with houses that were failing due to neglect. These were many of the same homes that had been built in the late 1800s. The intention to remove the community came from the government and from those who saw profit in the dismantling of Pralltown. There was also the thought that it would be good to revitalize Pralltown with the federal assistance needed for affordable housing for the present residents. For all of the good intentions, depending on how you look at it, none of the plans came to fruition.

The University of Kentucky (UK) began buying property in Pralltown in the 1950s. In April of 1954, in the UK Monthly Report of the Comptroller, it was reported that there was an approved offer of $1,100 for the property at 163 Prall Street. The university had purchased the vacant lot for $800 the previous year when the Slum Clearance Commission was interested in purchasing all of Pralltown. In May of 1957, among the purchase recommendations for nearby properties, it was suggested that the UK Board of Trustees purchase a lot of four houses on Sellers Street in Pralltown for $800. The purchase could be made from Ester Greenfield through Virginia C. Wolking, agent.

In 1969, the University of Kentucky purchased 30 lots on Montmullin and Colfax Streets and turned the properties into a parking lot. The University also owned the building at 152 Colfax Street that was leased to the Pralltown Community Center. This information comes from the 1975 Pralltown Development Study that was conducted by the College of Agriculture at the University of Kentucky for the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government. A copy of the study is available online, provided by the Lexington Public Library, Kentucky Room. It was during this time that there was hope for Pralltown to actually be revitalized. [See the 1975 Pralltown Development Study conducted by the College of Agriculture at the University of Kentucky for the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government]

Additional information in the 1975 study was that from 1970-72 the Urban Renewal Community Development Agency Program had cleared about 5 acres of land in Pralltown. The land had held 42 homes that were demolished. As the homes and land were disappearing, an out-migration occurred. African Americans were moving out of Pralltown and not returning. The housing in Pralltown was considered substandard and deteriorated. Homeowners and renters had been holding on to the community for as long as they could. In 1975, the remaining community consisted of 78 residential homes with 103 families, and that translated into about 300 people living on 22 acres of land. Seventy-four percent of the land was owned by non-residents, people who did not live in the Pralltown community. There were 22 elderly persons living alone and 42 single women who were head of their households. The median income was $3,100.00. The residents of Pralltown voiced that they were ready for there to be less talking and more action to upgrade the housing and save the community.

On August 7, 1975, the University of Kentucky presented a news release to say that they would be adhering to their 1969 policy to not buy any more land in the Pralltown community. It was explained that the University of Kentucky had purchased land in Pralltown with the intent of extending the College of Education into the Pralltown area. Those plans had changed, though, the University of Kentucky had no intention of selling the property they owned in Pralltown. They would be more than willing to consider negotiations if there were interested buyers. The land in Pralltown continues to be purchased by individual buyers who have replaced homes with apartment complexes and rental housing. At least half of the community is housing for University of Kentucky students. The current map of the Pralltown community lots shows the configuration of the area today.

There are still homeowners who hold fast to the idea of community and remember those who "came from Pralltown." Pralltown resident, James Herndon (1892-1983), known as "Sweet Evening Breeze," was an African American gay man who was a respected community leader and he was an entertainer. He fought for gay rights that led to the city abandoning its "no drag" policy in 1969. Another Pralltown resident was Louis "Lou" Johnson, a professional baseball player. He was the first African American from Lexington to play in major league baseball. Lou Johnson Way and Lou Johnson Park, both in Pralltown, were named in his honor. George Washington Haggins (1878-1949) was also from Pralltown. Haggins was a professional boxer known as "The Human Frog" because of his boxing style. After his career, he was the director of a boxing and athletic facility in Dayton, OH. The Haggins family members had lived in Pralltown since the 1870s. One other memorable person was Mitchell Lewis (1875-1927) who was paid to poison the Mulligan family with a salmon dish laced with arsenic. Lewis changed his mind and no one ate the meal. The Mulligan family were the original owners of Maxwell Place that now serves as the home of the president of the University of Kentucky. [See the NKAA entries for George Washington Haggins, James Herndon, Lou Johnson, and Lewis Mitchell in the Notable Kentucky African Americans Database]

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