



Lanie Davis/Star-Tribune

The Almagro Outreach Center served as a school for the children in the community.

# Danville's Almagro neighborhood tells story of community, success

By LANIE DAVIS  
*Star-Tribune Staff Writer*

Since 1976, Rev. Dr. Cecil Bridgeforth, Sr. has been preaching at Shiloh Baptist Church on Betts Street in Danville. The church's home, the Almagro community, became Bridgeforth's home, and over the years, he has continued to advocate for the community that so many black Danvillians have flourished from.

While its exact establishment

date is unknown, Almagro was a town to itself just west of Danville, and according to Bridgeforth, was incorporated in Chatham.

The town, located off of what is now Industrial Drive, had its own post office and police department. Bridgeforth said it was one of the very few black towns in the country.

"There were only about a handful of black incorporated towns in the United States, and Almagro was one of them," Bridgeforth, Sr. said.

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# Almagro

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## A thriving community

Eventually, Almagro was annexed into Danville, but continued to be self-sufficient, with its grocery stores, school, a baseball field and several community churches.

One of those churches belonged to Pastor Ruby Woodson, a true pioneer during a time where women didn't usually stand in front of a congregation and preach. Ruby Woodson built Mt. Zion United Holy Church on Betts Street.

Grandson Jimmie Woodson was a co-pastor at the church while his grandmother was still living, before it was turned over to Barry Adams.

"She was a tremendous woman," Woodson said. "She founded five churches from the ground-up and erected about six. She was an amazing woman in her day."

Although Ruby Woodson died around 30 years ago, her church with painted bricks and green windows still stands today, at least sixty years later.

"Almagro was a tremendous community of persons, and it was a wide church community," Woodson said. "You had Shiloh up the street from my grandmother. You had Bibleway founded by Bishop Campbell of course...There was a church on every hill."

Winslow Hospital, which was the black community's only option for care, was also located on Betts Street. According to a sign outside of the still standing hospital building, in the early 1920s, the only facility for black Danvillians to receive care was in a ward at the Danville Community Hospital on Jefferson Avenue, and black doctors had nowhere to practice. In 1940, the Winslow Hospital was built, named after Dr. Albert Lincoln Winslow, who was the second black doctor in Danville to open a medical practice.

NAACP Danville Branch President Tommy Bennett remembers visiting his grandmother in the hospital before she passed away, and Bridgeforth said those injured in the marches of the Danville Civil Rights Movement were sent to Winslow to be treated.

"During the Civil Rights Movement, people's heads were burst open, beaten up, arms broken," Bridgeforth, Sr. said. "All of the African Americans did. That's the only place they could go."

In the 1960s, the hospital merged with Danville Memorial. The building has since served as the Danville Health Department and Ashwood Home for Adults. The sign said that Rev. George Lovelace purchased the building in Oct. 2009 and intended to open Winslow Loving Care Center in June 2012, paying homage to the building's roots.

While the Winslow Loving Care name still rests on the building, it currently sits closed and vacant.

Ed Thompson's great grandfather, William Betts, ran Almagro's general post office prior to annexation into Danville, and his grandfather, Gustavious Aldolphus Betts, had a telegraph machine at his house. Thompson recalls his grandfather receiving telegrams from the Western Union, printing them and delivering them to those in the neighborhood.

"I remember that he delivered them to families who had lost family members in the Vietnam War," Thompson said.

Thompson grew up on the street that was named after his family and currently lives in New York.

Oak Hill Cemetery, established in 1901, is also a part of the Almagro community. While acquired by the city in 1931, it was the only burial place for black people in Danville long before and after.

"That's all we had was the black cemetery," Bennett said. "All of my family members are at Oak Hill. My family plot is at Oak Hill."

In addition, Peters Park on Foster Street, which is designated by a Historical Marker, is the former baseball diamond where black leagues played. James Peters, Sr. opened the park, also called the Almagro Baseball Stadium, in 1948. Peters sponsored the Danville All-Stars, who played at the park.

According to the marker, the stadium was state of the art and was among the first in the country to have lights for nighttime usage.

"Peters Park was the highlight of Almagro," Bridgeforth said. "It was the first ballpark with lights. It's historical in that they began to have night games, and it was the only field available. The white baseball team would come over and use it."

Shiloh Baptist Church eventually purchased the park and sold half to the Boys and Girls Club for their Danville facility.

## Living in Almagro

Over the years, the Almagro community has been home to several families, with children that have grown up to be successful in several different professions.

Elizabeth and Albert Harris, 91 and 96 respectively, have made their home in the Almagro community. Over their 74 years of marriage, they raised three children who have grown up and moved on to become a teacher, a nurse and an airport manager.

Elizabeth has lived in the neighborhood since she was a young girl and remembers a time when Industrial Drive was an unpaved Diamond Street. She recalls walking to the two-room schoolhouse where she got her education.

"We called it Almagro School," Elizabeth said. "...We had two or three teachers there. We didn't have a cafeteria, but we would carry potatoes or onions or something like that, and the teachers would cook our lunch like that."

Prior to Gibson Elementary School's opening, neighborhood children were taught at the community school. After the larger school opened on Foster Street, the schoolhouse served as a kindergarten for neighborhood children. It eventually became an outreach center.

Growing up, Elizabeth used to love playing with the neighborhood children, as 15 to 20 of them would play outside under the streetlights.

Cora Towns, a teacher in adult education and an adjunct professor at Danville Community College, also grew up in the Almagro neighborhood and recalls having nearly every necessity in the area, so they rarely had to leave. She said she had a "very happy childhood" there in the community where everyone knew each other.

"We really had lots of fun," Towns said. "...We used to do skate parties, as most of us would get skates for Christmas, and we'd just skate in the street. People [in cars] would move out of your way."

## It takes a village

Those who lived or spent time in the community know it as a "big family," including Cecil Bridgeforth, Jr., who practically grew up in the neighborhood where his father preached.

"The saying is that it takes a village to raise a child, and I consider the Almagro community a village where everyone took part in raising everybody's child," Bridgeforth, Jr. said. "It's a wonderful, beautiful community of well rounded people."

Bridgeforth, Jr. calls himself a "proud product" of Almagro, where he was raised in the church, baptized, started playing music and ultimately gave his first sermon.

Likewise, Jimmie Woodson recalls a cohesiveness to the community where both he and his grandmother served as pastors, despite some difference in socio-economic status of its residents.

"It was really tribal to some degree," Woodson said. "It was a great community."

## Future of Almagro

Over the years, Bridgeforth, Sr. has worked to see the neighborhood flourish and advocated for improvements such as updated sewage, the addition of sidewalks and the widening of streets, none of which have happened yet.

While Peters Park is marked as historical, Bridgeforth, Sr. wants the entire neighborhood to be recognized for its history.

"I've tried to keep it in the forefront before it disappears," he said. "...After a while, the Almagro we once knew, we won't know anymore."

Since 1976, Bridgeforth, Sr. has seen several changes in the neighborhood, including families moving away and young people venturing off to other opportunities.

"A lot of people that were here when I got here are gone," Bridgeforth, Sr. said. "The streets are vacant...the young people have come through, went to school, graduated and left, so we have a skeleton of Almagro now."

The NAACP Danville Branch would also like to see life brought back to the neighborhood that holds so much history.

"As the NAACP, we would love to see that whole community, especially since it used to be incorporated, revamped and become a historical site for Danville," Bennett said.



Lanie Davis/Star-Tribune  
Pastor Ruby Woodson built her first church in Almagro at least 60 years ago.



Lanie Davis/Star-Tribune  
Established in 1901, Oak Hill Cemetery was the only place where black people could be buried.



Lanie Davis/Star-Tribune  
Recognized by a historical marker, Peters Park was home to the Danville All-Stars, a black baseball team.

## PUBLIC NOTICE

Effective Monday, February 22, 2021, the Voter Registration and Elections Department will open for services at our new facility, located at 18 Depot Street, Chatham, Virginia 24531.

All county citizens may seek the following services at the new location:

- Voter registration/ address changes / cancellations
- Candidate processing for all local elected offices

Please be advised that the following voting locations have changed:



Lanie Davis/Star-Tribune

At the entrance to the Holbrook Ross Historic District is a historical marker, with the original Sacred Heart Catholic Church building pictured behind.

# There's a Story Here:

## *Holbrook-Ross neighborhood provides insights to a once segregated City of Danville*

By LANIE DAVIS

*Star-Tribune Staff Writer*

From the 1880s through the Civil Rights Movement, the Holbrook-Ross neighborhood in Danville served as the first neighborhood for black professionals and families during a time when they were not always welcome in other spaces around town.

In the 1880s, Holbrook and Ross streets were created from the estate of Thomas B. Doe and separated into lots. By 1900, black professionals began building their homes in the community along Holbrook and Ross, as well as on Maury, John, Doe, and Gay streets, with help from their communities, each putting their own personal touches on their homes.

In a neighborhood with architectural styles ranging from Queen Anne to craftsman stood the homes of doctors, dentists, lawyers and educators. There were three churches, two funeral homes, a mini golf course, a community center, a beauty shop, grocery stores and a kindergarten school. Westmoreland Elementary School was located just down the street, as was Langston High School until 1963.

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# Holbrook

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One of these professionals was Dr. Bishop Merritt, a dentist who worked as a carpenter prior to attending dental school. He served as the general contractor for the building of his brick home at 364 Holbrook Street in the early 1950s and built the two-car garage behind the home.

The home served as a community center of sorts, with his wife Willette holding meetings of the Jack and Jill of America organization. It also served as a meeting place for members of the Danville chapter of The Links, Incorporated, which was chartered in 1953.

Bishetta Merritt, daughter of Bishop and Willette, also remembers her house as a gathering place for her friends. Growing up, her mother would be home after school, and her friends would come by to have a good time.

“Because there were no places for large groups to meet other than a church, some of my mom’s clubs would meet in the basement,” Bishetta said. “...It was a lot of fun.”

Graduations for Esdelia Boyd’s kindergarten class took place in the Merritts’ basement. Willette and Mabel Hughes, of Cunningham and Hughes Funeral Home down the street, convinced Boyd, the first black principal at Grasty School, to teach the kindergarten class out

of her home at 310 Holbrook Street, as neighborhood children needed preparation before going to first grade. It was called the Four/Five School.

“You had to be four or five before you could go, and I was in the first graduating class,” Merritt said.

In addition, the family attended Holbrook Street Presbyterian Church just across the street from their home.

Paula Martin Smith recalls skating up and down Holbrook Street and going over to Bishetta’s home in the afternoons after school while her mother taught at Langston. Willette always gave Smith a cookie when she visited.

While Smith lived in the county, she spent a lot of time in the neighborhood where her mother worked from around fourth grade to seventh grade. She remembers playing with the Hughes’ son Jimmy and going to Dr. Winslow’s home across the street where his housekeeper made sandwiches for them.

“It was just a little neighborhood to me,” Smith said. “I would play and visit friends on that street.”

Smith also attended Calvary Baptist Church, the same church where Camilla Williams, the first black woman to secure a contract with a major U.S. opera company, was a parishioner and sang in the choir. Actress Edith Whitman was also a member.

Smith also remembers meeting up on Holbrook Street when a group wanted to visit Prince Edward State Park, a park that was created for black use after her father M.C. Martin sued Virginia for equal access and use of the state parks.

“The cars would line up at Bishetta’s house, and we would move on down to the park,” Smith said. “They were such good days.”

In 1986, the park merged with Goodwin Lake Recreation Area to form Twin Lakes State Park. A historical marker is now placed at the junction of Route 360 and Route 621. M.C. Martin now has a park named for him on Memorial Drive.

Smith also remembers going to Pringle’s Blue Room, which was located at 358 Holbrook Street. George and Ruth Pringle lived upstairs and operated a restaurant in the basement of their house, during a time when black people were not allowed to dine in white restaurants. Patrons entered the restaurant through the left side.

“We loved to go to the Pringle’s restaurant on Sundays and eat,” Smith said.

Having a restaurant in the neighborhood was not only convenient for Smith’s family, but for travelers in the area as well. A few houses away, 320 Holbrook Street was listed in the Negro Motorist Green Book. The

home of Worden and Howard Yancey, the residence was a safe place for black tourists to stay while on the road. For travelers, the neighborhood as a whole was able to meet many needs.

The Yancey home was eventually donated to Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority.

Today, a historical marker stands at the head of the neighborhood, at the intersection of Holbrook and Ross Streets, along with the original building of Sacred Heart Catholic Church. While the church has since moved twice, it is fitting at the entrance to the neighborhood, as Sacred Heart School on West Main Street was the first school to integrate in the 1960s before it was mandated by law.

For Bishetta and Smith, spending their formative years in the neighborhood carried a weight that both did not quite understand at the time.

“I was an only child, so I was always glad to be over on Holbrook Street with my friends over there,” Smith said. “It was different from being out in the country...I was grateful and fortunate to have been a part of that history.”

Bishetta credits the neighborhood with giving her a “very rich experience” of substantial values and friendships that are still maintained to this day. She said the community instilled

a deep appreciation for all types of people and occupations from nurses to electricians to doctors.

“It was a wonderful time period,” she said. “...You name it, they lived on Holbrook or Ross Streets. If you can see it, you can be it, and we had that kind of experience...The community in which we lived had all these different people who were a part of your life that were successful... These were the kinds of people you wanted to be. You wanted to be an upstanding citizen that made contributions to your community and all these people did that.”

This, Bishetta said, was a positive, supportive and nurturing environment that made them very strong.

While Bishetta currently lives in Washington D.C., where she taught at Howard University for 33 years, she still owns two properties on Holbrook Street, her parents’ home and the apartments they owned.

To find out more about the Holbrook-Ross Historic District, the Danville Historical Society offers an hour-long tour of the district called “There’s a Story Here” and has been for the past 10 years. The oral history for the tour was provided by Nannie Geary Armstrong, Valeria Brodnax, Bertha Bruce and Paula Smith. For more information about the tours, visit [danvillehistory.org](http://danvillehistory.org).



Submitted photo  
Harold Middlebrook (left) and Bishop L. G. Campbell (right) march in downtown Danville during the Civil Rights Movement.

# Civil Rights Movement, King's visits to Danville remembered

By LANIE DAVIS

*Star-Tribune Staff Writer*

In 1865, two months after the end of the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery, 81 black members of First Baptist Church in Danville asked to be dismissed so they could form their own houses of worship.

Some of those pioneers went on to create High Street Baptist Church, which would be the headquarters of the local Civil Rights Movement nearly 100 years later.

At the start of the Civil Rights Movement in Danville, Reverend Lendall Chase opened the doors of High Street to those who wanted to join the cause.

The church, which at that point had burned and rebuilt twice in 1878 and 1901, saw droves of people in what were called "mass meetings," according to church member Carolyn Wilson.

There, she said, those wanting to be involved in the Civil Rights Movement listened to speeches and were given instructions on what to do. The mass meetings happened each night in the sanctuary for at least two years, according to Wilson, with standing room only available from the front of the house to the balcony. They would take up collections to fund their cause at the meetings.

"We had to keep people motivated and stirred up to keep everyone involved and wanting to see this thing through," Wilson said.

Wilson was a teenager at the time of the Civil Rights Movement and first got involved when a classmate asked her one day at school if she were going to march later that day. Wilson asked her friend what she'd have to do, and her friend replied that they would just need to march and hold a sign.

Wilson remembers marching downtown and to the courthouse steps with a sign later that same day. She doesn't even remember what her sign said, but from that moment on, she was involved with the local movement.

She remembers going out to march and returning to High Street to find women of the congregation had made food. Most of

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# MLK

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the people who did go out and protest were young, Wilson said, as they did not have jobs they could lose.

“Most of us were just young people, trying to make a difference,” Wilson said. “... If our parents were caught demonstrating and boycotting, they lost their jobs and couldn’t feed their families. So it was up to the young people. That’s why so many young people participated.”

After Bloody Monday, the June 10, 1963 incident in which police turned water hoses on protesters in downtown Danville, Wilson remembers those who were not arrested returning back to the church and getting their wounds dressed.

Wilson, however, did not go out to march because her mother would not let her on that particular day.

Famously, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. visited Danville in March 1963, speaking at the City Auditorium. He returned again

in July of that year following Bloody Monday, speaking at High Street in their sanctuary.

He returned to Danville in November 1963 to participate in a civil rights rally.

Wilson recalled one interaction she had with King. While she didn’t remember exactly when it happened or if it was during one of his public visits to the city, she said she had just gotten out of jail after spending seven days there after protesting.

Upon leaving the jail, she and some others met King at a black-owned cafe on Spring Street, where she sat next to him.

She had spent the last three days fasting in protest, and King told her to eat something light, such as soup, so she wouldn’t get sick. She described him as soft spoken and kind.

At the time, Wilson said she didn’t know that she was speaking to someone who would later become an icon. She knew King as a leader in their movement and had seen

him speak at the March on Washington, but what he would come to be was unknown to her then.

“What stands out the most about that is that I had no idea,” Wilson said. “I had no idea that he would be as great as he has come to be. He was just a nice man... and who would’ve thought that years later, I’d go to Washington and there’s a whole memorial there carved in granite? It kind of takes you back.”

High Street served as a meeting place for the local movement until at least 1965, while Loyal Baptist and Bibleway also served as locations for the cause.

Being a crucial part of the Civil Rights Movement isn’t the church’s only historical significance, as it was the meeting place of the men who came together and started First State Bank, the city’s first black-owned bank in the city, in 1919.

Today, the church building boasts its strong historical

background ranging from the creation of the bank to the Civil Rights Movement to the elections of black leaders, including Danville’s first black mayor, Charles Harris. The history is depicted from old photos, documents and newspaper clippings framed on the walls in their fellowship hall.

While looking at the displays, Wilson recounted even more context of the time, including how their pastor Rev. Chase ran for city council. While he didn’t win, it got black people involved in local politics for the first time. At Loyal Street Baptist Church, people could learn to read and write to be able to register to vote, though they still faced obstacles to be able to do that.

One of the frames holds a flyer from a boycott conducted by the Danville Freedom Movement, calling for people to not shop at stores downtown and other specific businesses and to not read the local newspaper. Contact persons listed were

Rev. Chase, L. G. Campbell and Harold Middlebrook.

Wilson remembers the boycott was around Christmastime and was pointed towards the fact that black people were not given the “nicer” jobs such as clerk or secretary. They were only allowed to clean. They called it “black Christmas” and explained to children why they wouldn’t be receiving toys.

In 1995, the church building took another hit after a storm damaged the roof so badly the church could not be used in the year it took to repair.

Even still today, Wilson, president of the senior choir and missionary president, said it’s been nearly a year since her church has held church services or any activities in the building due to COVID-19. Bible study and Sunday school are held via teleconferences, and their pastor speaks on WDVA every Sunday.

“I do miss coming to my church,” Wilson said.