

**I'LL TAKE
YOU THERE**

**EXPLORING
NASHVILLE'S
SOCIAL JUSTICE
SITES**

EDITED BY
AMIE THURBER AND LEAROTHA WILLIAMS JR.

NASHVILLE
TENNESSEE
1900
COMPILED BY R. H. ...
SCALE 1000 FEET
OFFICE OF REAL ESTATE
N. C. & S.

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My most vivid memory of Memorial Gymnasium is what happened there on the evening of April 5, 1968—the day after Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed in Memphis. Rock-throwing violence erupted in North Nashville, injuring Metro’s assistant police chief and triggering the activation of the National Guard. Mayor Beverly Briley imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew. From my dorm room window on Vanderbilt’s campus overlooking West End Avenue, I could see armored personnel carriers, jeeps, trucks loaded with troops, and tanks rolling down the empty street. Troops bivouacked in Centennial Park and fires burned in dumpsters.

That night, Julian Bond (the African American social activist and civil rights leader, then a member of the Georgia House of Representatives) was scheduled to speak on campus as part of a student-led symposium. The Metropolitan Government granted Vanderbilt an exception from the curfew, and I remember sitting on the tarpaulin covering the basketball court when Mr. Bond slowly approached the podium, then stood and waited silently. When Memorial Gymnasium got so quiet you could hear a pin drop, Mr. Bond softly and slowly spoke: “nonviolence died last night in Memphis.” I don’t remember anything else that was said that evening, but I still feel a chill up my spine whenever I remember hearing those words.

James Berry, Vanderbilt University, Class of 1971

5.11 MEMORIAL GYMNASIUM

210 25th Ave. S.,
Nashville, TN 37240

In the heart of Vanderbilt University stands a historic symbol of the power of both words and sport to promote racial equality. Memorial Gymnasium, designed by architect Edwin Keeble and dedicated to all Vanderbilt men and women who served in World War II, has been home to the Vanderbilt Commodores basketball team since December 6, 1952. Two events in 1967, however, gave this sporting landmark an even deeper social significance. The first occurred on April 7 and 8, 1967, and had nothing to do with basketball. In the fourth year of Vanderbilt’s historic, student-organized Impact Symposium series, thousands

of Nashvillians gathered in the gym to hear the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. give a speech titled “The Future of Integration.” Other featured speakers were US senator Strom Thurmond, with his speech, “Conservative Individualism,” the poet Allen Ginsberg reading from his works in a talk entitled “The Individual in American Society,” and Stokely Carmichael, whose speech “The Individual and Black Power” received a standing ovation from the mostly White Vanderbilt audience. Following the speeches, sporadic outbreaks of violence occurred throughout the city. Most members of the local press blamed the unrest on Carmichael’s “more inflammatory” speeches at Fisk and Tennessee State Universities, two Nashville HBCUs whose students could cite a history of mistreatment from the police during Jim Crow.



Figure 5.16. Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichael at the 1967 Impact Symposium in Memorial Gymnasium. Photo courtesy of Vanderbilt University Special Collections and University Archives

The second significant event at Memorial Gymnasium occurred in the fall of 1967, when Perry Wallace, a Vanderbilt basketball player, broke the color barrier by becoming the first African American athlete to play in the Southeastern Conference (SEC). Bishop Joseph A. Johnson integrated Vanderbilt in 1953, and the first Black undergraduates arrived in 1964. But until Wallace, the Commodores remained all White. A Nashville native and Pearl High School basketball standout, many assumed Wallace would attend a historically Black school, like Tennessee State University, or a Northern university. After numerous scholarship offers, Wallace chose to stay in his hometown, to play for Vanderbilt University and desegregate the SEC.

Despite having been recruited by Vanderbilt, many on campus were openly hostile toward Wallace. Indeed, his years on campus were marked by social isolation, and his time playing basketball in the SEC was clouded by racism. The University of Mississippi opted to cancel its scheduled game rather than play against an integrated Vanderbilt team. Wallace endured and ultimately prevailed, graduating with many honors, including All-SEC and NABC Silver Anniversary All-America Team. He was inducted into both the Tennessee and Vanderbilt Sports Halls of Fame and was voted “most outstanding engineering student” as well as “most outstanding undergraduate student.”

Wallace went on to get a law degree from Columbia University and work for the US Department of Justice, and became a law professor at American University in Washington, DC. Vanderbilt Athletic Director David Williams declared that Wallace's strength could be reflected in the brick walls of Memorial Gymnasium and that "Perry Wallace was the Jackie Robinson of basketball in the SEC. There are not a lot of people that could have endured what he did during that time." He continues, "It is amazing to think that it all happened in Nashville, Vanderbilt University's Memorial Gym represents a key place of change and equality." Wallace's jersey was retired in 2004. After Wallace's death in 2017, Vanderbilt University and Nashville Metro Council collaborated to rename the portion of Twenty-Fifth Avenue South that passes through campus and in front of Memorial Gym "Perry Wallace Way."

Memorial Gymnasium's location is unchanged, and it has become one of Vanderbilt's proudest attractions. Known as having a certain "Memorial Magic," the spirit of equality and feelings of accomplishment can be experienced, appreciated, and radiated throughout all of Nashville.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ashley Vega was a defender/midfielder for the Vanderbilt Women's Soccer team (2011–2015), and graduated from Vanderbilt's Community Development and Action program.

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Research and Action at Vanderbilt University and played basketball at Swarthmore College (1976–1980).

ADDITIONAL READING

Andrew Maraniss. *Strong Inside: Perry Wallace and the Collision of Race and Sports in the South*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014.

NEARBY SITES OF INTEREST

Bishop Johnson Black Cultural Center

(off West Side Row): Named in honor of the first African American graduate of Vanderbilt University, this center serves as a cultural hub of Black life on campus.

5.12 VANDERBILT KIRKLAND HALL / OCCUPY VANDERBILT

2201 West End Ave.,
Nashville, TN 37235

The most visible arm of Vanderbilt's first student-led divestment campaign was a sustained action on the lawn of Kirkland Hall, the administrative hub of Vanderbilt University. In 2011, as the United States was experiencing its worst recession since the Great Depression, the "Occupy" movement sprang up in hundreds of urban centers around the country, including Nashville. Aiming to challenge the political control of the wealthiest 1 percent of the population, Occupy was a social movement against inequality and unrealized democracy.