

# Douglass Community Center: Through the Years



# From Small Beginnings: Laying the foundation for the Douglass Center

- One of the first community centers in Champaign was known as the Neighborhood House
- Founded in 1934, the Neighborhood House provided a recreational space for African Americans who were denied access to local segregated facilities
- The community center was a six bedroom house located at 503 east Washington street

# Neighborhood House Funding

- Community Chest funds paid for the center's monthly rent while utilities were provided by the Township Supervisor
- The Neighborhood House also received financial support from the federal Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) under President Roosevelt



**DISCUSS BUDGETS.** Thirteen of the 15 members of the budget committee of Champaign County's Community Chest were on hand for a meeting earlier this week, when final decisions on allocation requests were made. Here, members of the committee make final adjustments on re-

quests from the Chest's 13 agencies prior to submitting recommendations to board of directors for final approval. Pictured here, from left to right, are: Mrs. Cecil Bridgewater, Paul Simon, John Hanafee, Arthur [unreadable], William Archdeacon, Mrs. Trenna Lamkins, Hiram Scovill.



In 1939 the city of Champaign created the Department of Recreation which assisted the Neighborhood House in paying rent as well as all operational expenses until 1967 when the merger of Champaign Parks and Recreation occurred



Free programs that were offered during the early years of the Neighborhood House included cooking and sewing, as well as classes in nutrition and first aid



Other Neighborhood House activities offered in the late 1930s included:

After school programs for children such as craft-making and tumbling (taught by Mrs. Odelia Wesley, past director of the center)

And crocheting as well as piano lessons and sewing (taught by Mrs. Erma Bridgewater, past director of the center)



The Neighborhood House also provided junior and adult programs centered around softball, baseball, track, shuffleboard, and chess



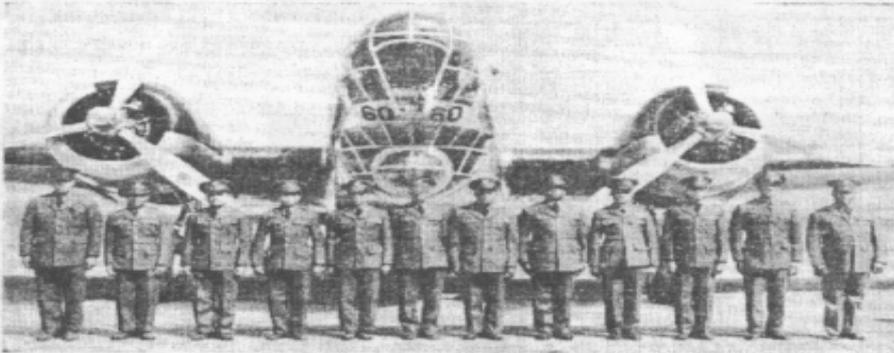
# The Neighborhood House moved to three more locations between 1939- 1941:

- The American Legion Hall on North 5th street
- The basement of the CME Church on North 5th street
- The Lawhead School basement where the Neighborhood House became known as the Lawhead Serviceman's Center



African American servicemen visiting Champaign from the Chanute Air Force base in Rantoul, Il were not allowed to participate in area USO (United States Service Organization) activities

**Illinois Men In Colored Squadron At Chanute**



A group of Illinois colored men are included with the more than 240 recruits who are members of the newly created 99th pursuit squadron, the Army Air Corp's only colored unit, and now in training at Chanute Field. In the group are, left to right, James Reed, Atlanta, Ga., Myron Wilson, Danville, Quentin Draper, Chicago, Ernest Nelson, Champaign, Harold McFarrin, Chicago, Concord Turner, Danville, Robert Wilson, Alton, James Webb, Champaign, Alfred Scott, Chicago, Leonard Nelson, Champaign, Elsworth Dansby, Decatur, and Anthony Ridley, Douglass, Ariz. (Army Air Corps photo.)

*Photograph is circa 1941*

**Chanute Museum Exhibit Tribute to 99th Pursuit Squadron Technical Command**



The center provided a place for social functions including movie nights, dances, ball games, boxing, card game nights, picnics, and much more



**TABLE TENNIS CHAMPS.** Two Champaign youths, Charles Hascell, left, Dunbar Court, and Walter Jackson, Burch Village, which won them undisputed doubles championship in the 1955 Illinois State Fair at Springfield. Hascell and Jackson also came in one-two in the singles competition.





- The Douglass Community Service Center Committee was founded in 1941 in order to raise funds for the new complex that was to be built on two empty lots adjacent to the Douglass Park.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 25, 1965.

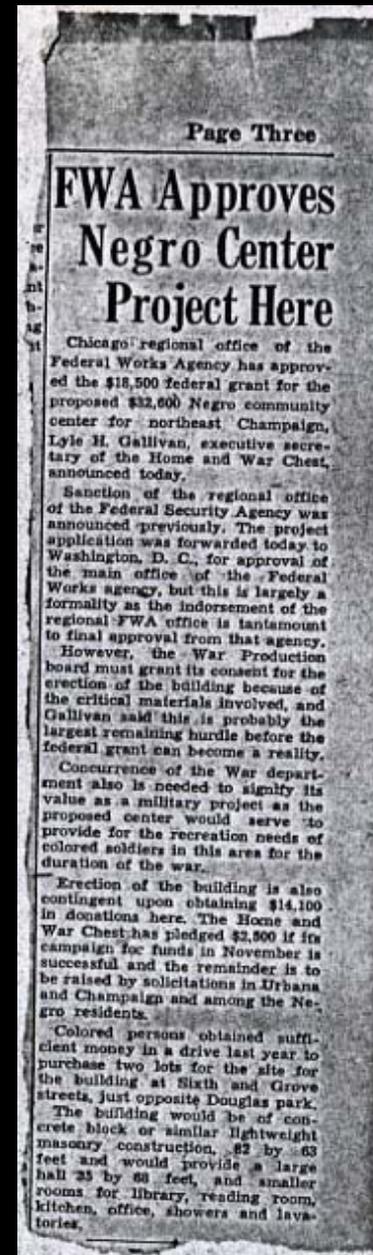


**HONOR DOUGLASS FOUNDERS.** Several of the original committee and staff of Douglass Community Center were honored Sunday at a celebration of the 20th anniversary of the founding of the center. Pictured at the celebra-

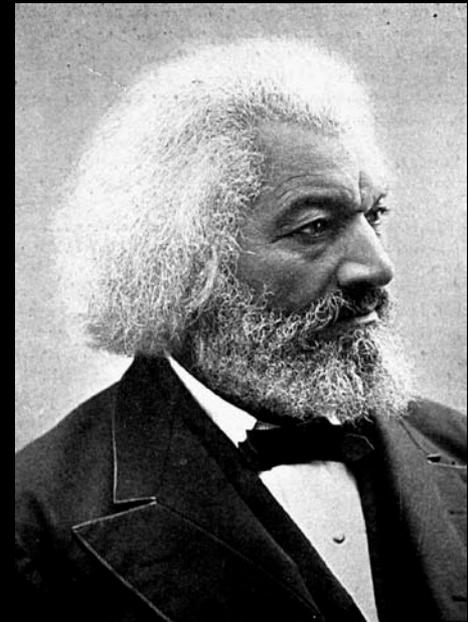
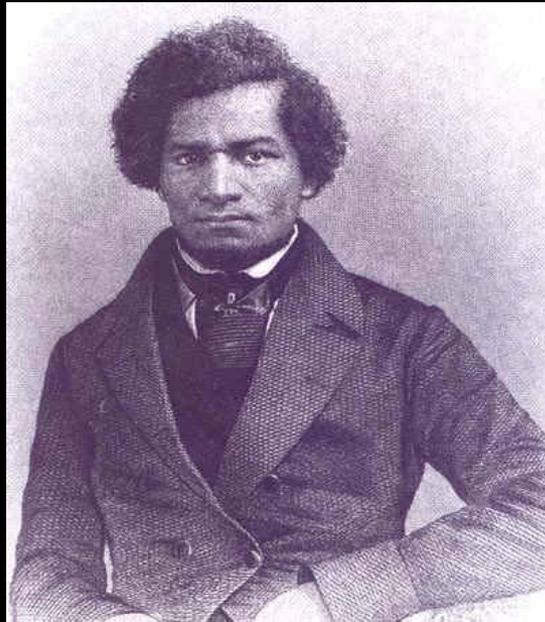
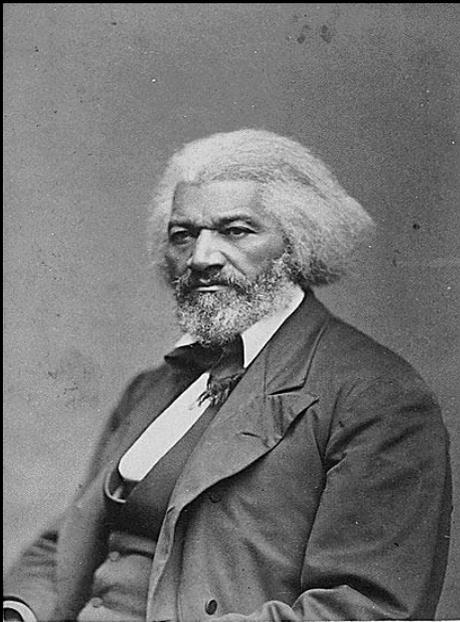
News-Gazette Photo by Ron Beckle  
 tion, left to right, are Mrs. Raymond Scott, wife of one of the founders; Mrs. Edna Diffay, past secretary; Richard R. Edwards, past board chairman; Taylor Thomas, first director; and Odelia Wesley, past secretary.

By 1943, land was purchased thanks to the tireless efforts of many. The building project received a grant from the Federal government totaling \$18,500 with the stipulation that the community raise an additional \$14,500

Funds were raised from a number of sources including the Black community (\$3000), Home and War Chest Organization (\$2500), City of Champaign City of Urbana (\$2000), and individual donations



- The decision to name the Douglass Park after Frederick Douglass, the American abolitionist and writer who escaped from slavery and became an influential lecturer, was made in 1933 by park board members J.W. Stipes, D.C. “Pick” Dodds, and Lee Greenman as well as by area residents of the park
- Due to the location of the new center and popular sentiment towards the major historical figure, community members opted for the name: Douglass Community Center



# Ground was broken for the Douglass Center on February 18, 1944

THE EVENING COURIER

GROUND BROKEN FOR NEGRO COMMUNITY CENTER



## Battle Veteran Breaks Ground At New Center

Consummation of the community's long-cherished hope for a Negro community center was signalized Sunday afternoon as between 125 and 150 spectators gathered in the cold February sunshine to witness the breaking of ground for the building at 810-812 East Grove street.

Hours of turning the first bit of earth went to Sgt. George Evans, son of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Evans.

Ray Scott, president of the Douglas Community Service organization, introduced Mayors George J. Babo and George F. Hurd, the members of the Home and War Chest building committee, members of the Champaign recreation and playground board, and others interested in the project.

Rev. M. A. Crowder, pastor of the C. M. E. church, gave the in-

DOUGLAS CENTER DEDICATED SUNDAY



Dedication ceremonies for the \$35,000 Douglas community center, 510-12 East Grove street, drew a capacity crowd to the building's auditorium Sunday afternoon. Speaking is Raymond M. Scott, who recounted the four-year struggle for realization of the center idea.

Seated in the background on the speaker's platform, reading from the left, are Richard R. Edwards, chairman of the advisory committee and master of ceremonies for Sunday's program.; Rev. A. S. Webb, Rev. M. A. Crowder, Lyle H. Gallivan, executive secretary of the

Home and War Chest; Miss Hazel Jungerfich, director of the recreation department; Mayor George J. Babb of Champaign, and Mayor George F. Hurd of Urbana. In the foreground are members of the Community chorus who were heard in five numbers.

## The new community center offered numerous programs, a few of which included:

- Piano and saxophone lessons
- Sewing lessons
- Tennis games and other activities in the park
- Art classes in drawing, painting, and water color
- Track
- Junior as well as adult softball, baseball, and basketball
- Shuffleboard and chess in the park
- Ballet classes in the 1970s



NEWS-GAZETTE Photo by Steve Moreland  
**NCY TRANSPORTATION.** Two of the contestants Douglass Park's Wheel Day are shown with their decorated bikes. Prizes were given in a number of categories. Under the umbrella is Cassandra Bridgewater, 7, her companion is Phillip Friend, 6.

The center also provided a meeting place for neighborhood get-togethers and other social gatherings



**MOTHERS DAY GUESTS:** The Dukes and Duchesses clubs of the Douglass Community Center served tea and punch at a luncheon for their mothers Sunday at the center. Among those attending, from the left, were: James Lewis, Ruth King, Alma Roberts, secretary; Helene Brock, treasurer; Kathleen Abernathy, vice president; Mrs. James L. Williams, and Mrs. James Roberts.

# Douglass Center float-Samba dancers



1958 Douglass Center  
Sewing Class Spring style  
show (Erma Bridgewater  
and daughter Cassandra  
pictured)



News-Gazette photo by Dick Swans  
**MOTHER-DAUGHTER DUO.** Mrs. Cecil Bridgewater  
and her daughter, Cassandra, model spring coordinated  
oufits which Mrs. Bridgewater made as her project in

# Memorable Moments at the Douglass Center

Here is what Douglass-goers had to say:

- Christmas pageants
- Late night dances and swing bands
- Modern dance as well as Samba and Rumba (Afro Cuban/Spanish dance) classes
- Outdoor movie nights shown on bed sheets
- Picnics in the park
- Boxing
- The Drum and Bugle Corps

## Locals Do Well In Jamboree

Representatives from Champaign put on a real good showing Friday afternoon in the Illinois State Jaycee Sports Jamboree held at Stagg Field.

Out of the three divisions, midgets, juniors, and intermediates, the Champaign youths walked off with nine trophies, three of them first place efforts.

The young track stars, coming mainly from Douglass Center, competed against youths from all over the state in the meet that was sponsored by the Jaycees and Illinois Youth Commission.

And, it wasn't only the boys who walked off with top honors in the meet. Three Champaign girls in the junior division ended with a first place trophy and three second place trophies.

The best performer from Champaign was Ron Bridgewater. Bridgewater stole the show as he claimed first place in two events. He ran the 40-yard dash in :05.5 to take first and then leaped 14-7½ to win the broad jump in



**GIRLS WIN, TOO.** Girls from Douglass Center also won trophies in the Jamboree at Stagg Field. Kneeling, left to right, are Christine Harden, Givendolyn Harden, and Maxine Harden. Standing, left to right, are Mattie Newls, Shelia Jackson, and Mrs. Cecil Bridgewater, Douglass Center director.



# Douglass Athletes



**PLENTY OF TROPHIES.** Four young Champaign athletes show the trophies they won Friday in the Illinois State Jaycee Sports Jamboree in Chicago. Left to

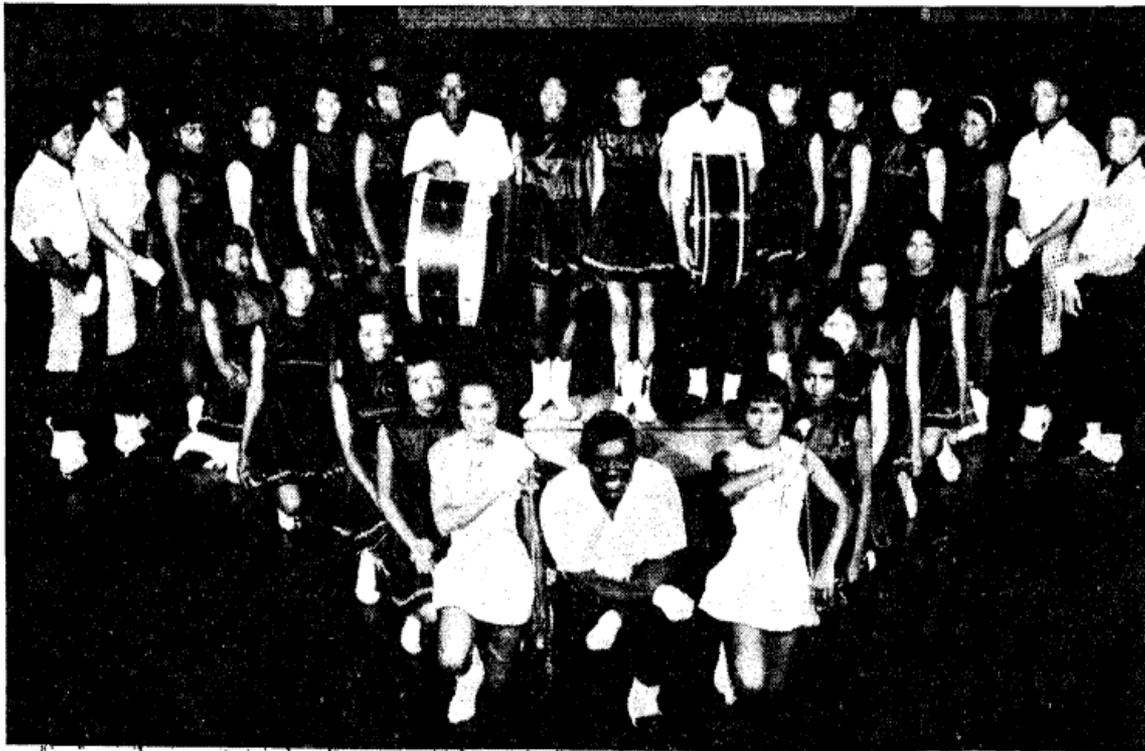
right, are William Harden, Tierese Sibley, Ronald Bridgewater and Kobby Grinkmeyer. Douglass Center director Paul Hursey looks on.

# basketball team



# Douglass Drum Corps





**STRIKE THE MUSIC.** Ready to march in competition Sunday is Douglass Center drum corps and drill team, scheduled to perform in Midwest Elks Parade at Mil-

waukee. The groups, headed by Paul Hursey, earned their fare with winter shows.

News-Gazette Photo by Curt Beamer

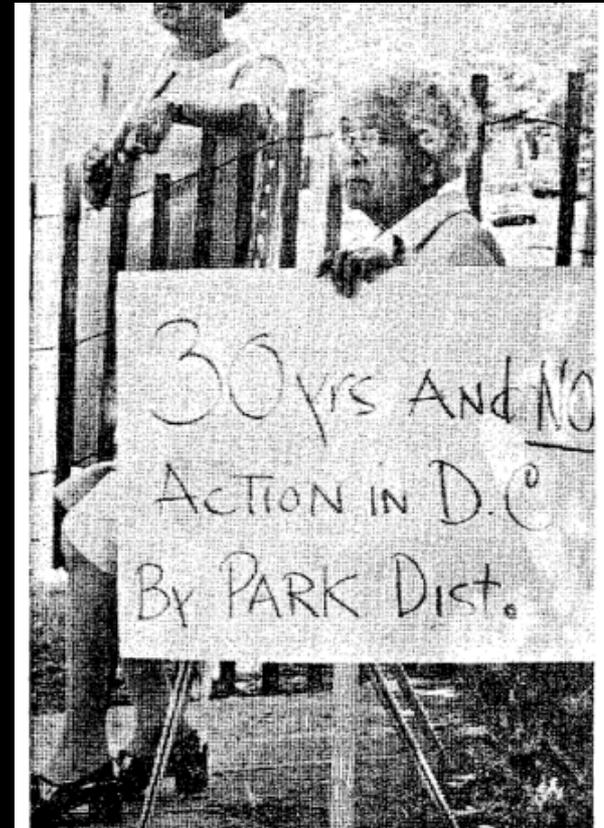


News-Gazette Photo by Chuck Farmer

R. The Douglass Center drill team, left to right, Rita Thomas, Ilene Lillard, and Gloria Smith. Third row, left to right, Ruth King, Catherine Johnson, and Mertle Beckrum.

drum corps and drill team

- In 1975, after much debate amongst the Champaign Urbana community, the Douglass Center was torn down due to the building's dilapidated state
- The new (present day) Douglass Center was opened on December 12, 1976



**DOUGLASS PROTEST**

Erma Bridgewater (left) and her mother Sarah Scott stand beside a protest sign Sunday at Boneyard dedication ceremonies in Scott Park. They were protesting the Champaign Park Board's decision to demolish the present Douglass Center and eliminate a library from plans for the

center replacement to be built. John Lee Johnson and Ken Stratton, members of a committee formed to protest the demolition plans, also picketed. A rally was held Sunday night in Douglass Park to protest the planned demolition.

(Photo by Richard Davis Jr.)

# Douglass Library and Annex

- The Douglass Center Library was organized in 1970 where books were housed in a room at the Douglass Center for five years
- The current site for the Douglass Branch Library was established in 1997
- The Douglass Annex was opened in March 1978 in order to serve the senior citizen community
- A few of the annex activities include bowling, weekly card games, mystery trips, and long distant trips (in the past seniors have traveled to New Orleans, Nashville, Atlanta, Colorado, and New York)



# To New Beginnings



# Credits

- Erma Bridgewater (Interviewee; former director of Douglass Center)
- Peter Mcfarland (Interviewee; Douglass Center baseball/softball coordinator and long time volunteer with the sports department)
- Doris K. Wylie Hoskins Archive and the Early American Museum, Mahomet, IL (exhibit/slideshow material and recording equipment)
- Rebecca Vaughn (slide show coordinator)
- Champaign Park District (Douglass photographs and center history)
- Special thanks to:
- Barbara McGhee for use of the Douglass annex
- Champaign County African American History Committee (photographs and historical information on Douglass Center)
- The Evening Courier Newspaper (photographs)
- The News Gazette (photographs)