


SINCE  1841

WOODLAND

HISTORIC CEMETERY & ARBORETUM

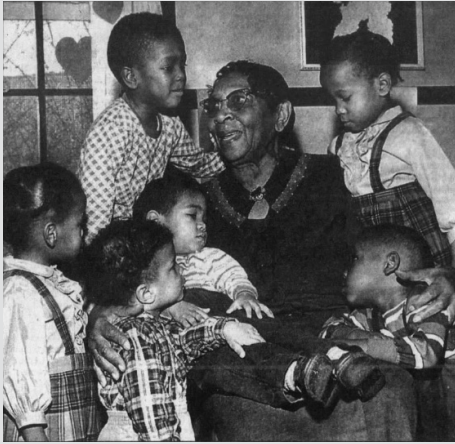


Above Photo: Dayton Daily News, 11/30/1965

Melissa Bess

1886-1965

Melissa Bess was the longtime superintendent and namesake of the Melissa Bess Day Care Center, originally called the West Side Day Nursery. Beginning in 1919 as a volunteer, Mrs. Bess became known as "Mama Bess" to hundreds of men, women and children who had spent their pre-school days at the nursery.



Born in Paris, Kentucky in 1886, as a young woman Melissa and her mother, Esther Washington, came to Dayton, Ohio. The specifics of their journey are lost to time, but according to a 1940 Journal Herald article[1], the two women arrived in 1907.

One reason Melissa and her mother may have come to Dayton could have been to secure employment. According to census research by the University of Dayton, 2,837 African American women over the age of 16 were living in Dayton in 1920. Of this number, more than half were employed outside the home; the vast majority working in domestic service occupations[2]—including mothers whose children were too young to begin school.

The 1910 census[3] lists a Melissa Washington working as a private family cook for none other than Jonathan Harshman Winters—one of Dayton's wealthiest bankers. When Jonathan H. Winters died in 1915, many "old family retainers" were remembered in his will with bequests of cash, including Melissa[4]. This inheritance from a former employer may have helped Melissa to enroll at Wilberforce University, where she originally intended to study nursing[5]. For more than three years she studied nursing, child care and child psychiatry.

At around this same time, a group of Black Daytonians led by Moses Moore and his wife Marian were working to address a very familiar problem—suitable childcare for working families.

The solution was the establishment of the West Side Day Nursery located at 114 Fitch Street—right next door to the house Melissa shared with her mother. As Mrs. Bess would later succinctly explain to the Dayton Daily News, their aims were "To train the children to be better men and women of tomorrow and to help the working parent[6]."

Originally only able to accommodate 15 to 20 children daily; the need for child care in the community quickly outgrew the Fitch Street cottage. Less than three years later (and with the continued financial help of Moses Moore), the nursery moved to Hawthorne St., which was large enough to care for 35 to 40 children a day. In 1948, the nursery moved for the last time to West Stewart St.



Above Photo: Dayton Daily News, 2/19/2004 circa 1960s

Created to serve pre-school age children of working families, the West Side Day Nursery was kept alive by the community it served. Like many organizations, volunteers were the key to its success and survival. Clothing was donated by the Needlework guild; the Delphinium Garden Club placed flower boxes in the nursery's windows; and a local club volunteered to paint the building.



Photo: The Journal Herald, 7/26/1942

In 1919, Melissa began as a volunteer at West Side Day Nursery. She officially joined the staff shortly thereafter as a cook and by 1932 had worked her way up to the position of executive director or superintendent[7].

“We take children whose mothers need to work,” Mrs. Bess told the Dayton Daily news in 1962, “Parents may leave the children at 7 a.m., must pick them up by 5:30. All get a big noon meal. None get spanked.”

In 1925, Melissa married Richard P. Bess. They were married only seven years; Richard passed away at the age of 54 in 1932, and Melissa never remarried.

Though not a mother in the biological sense of the word, Mrs. Bess was an irreplaceable part of the childhoods of many young Daytonians. The West Side Day Nursery would be renamed the Melissa Bess Day Care Center in 1958 in honor of its beloved, long-time superintendent.

Upon her retirement in 1962, Mrs. Bess had been caring for the children of Dayton for 43 years.

“We’ve turned out ministers, school teachers, a judge and just a lot of fine young men and women,” Mrs. Bess told the Journal Herald in 1963; “One little fellow came to us when he was only three months old,” she chuckled, “and today he’s a Methodist district superintendent living in Cincinnati.”



MRS. MELISSA BESS WITH URSULA AUBREY
Party Brings Smiles.—Photo by Tamaska

Photo: Dayton Daily News, 12/21/1962

Melissa Bess died in 1965 at the age of 78. She is laid to rest with her cousin, Pricilla Middleton, in section 123 lot 273 at Woodland Cemetery.



Above Photo: courtesy Jaylynn F. via FindAGrave.com

Sources:

1. The Journal Herald, 7/28/1940 p.33
2. Gauder, Heidi, "Moses Moore: Community Needs" (2022). University Libraries Blog Archive 432
3. "United States Census, 1910", FamilySearch
(<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MLFD-YPV> : Fri Oct 06 21:20:05 UTC 2023), Entry for Jonathan H Winters and Susan L Winters.
4. Dayton Daily News, 6/13/1915 p.1
5. The Journal Herald, 2/16/1963 p.1
6. The Journal Herald, 11/30/1965 p.1
7. The Journal Herald, 7/28/1940 p.33



Upcoming Events!



Woodland Cemetery's Lookout Point offers one of the best views in Dayton, making it a perfect location to view the total solar eclipse! Join us for an incredible celestial experience Monday, April 8, 2024 from 1pm-5pm.

Featuring Dayton Urban BBQ food truck and plenty of space to take in the eclipse, bring chairs and blankets to experience the eclipse with family and friends. Come early to claim a viewing spot (gates open at 8am) and spend the afternoon at Woodland Cemetery and Arboretum.

A limited number of tickets will be available, and we anticipate they will sell out quickly. For more information, please click the link below. Pre-registrations ends on April 1st.

Cost: Pre-registration is \$60 per person (plus \$5.87 Eventbrite Fee)

Pre-registration Packet Includes:

- Pair of solar eclipse glasses
- Woodland Cemetery and Arboretum Solar Eclipse T-shirt
- Two meal tickets (entrée and drink)
- Parking for one vehicle
- Information on Woodland Cemetery and Arboretum, while you wait for the eclipse!

To register for this event, please click [HERE](#).

Due to the nature of this type of event, tickets are non-refundable. All proceeds support the Woodland Arboretum Foundation which focuses on the restoration, preservation, horticultural and educational projects needed to keep Woodland a cultural resource for Dayton and Ohio

Share Your Story With Us:



Here at Woodland, we love to share stories of those who rest within our grounds.

It is most often thanks to family members or newspaper articles that those stories reach us, which allows us to include their loved ones in features like this.

Does your relative have a story we should be telling? Let us know by sending an email to ashimp@woodlandcemetery.org

Come Visit Us!



Volunteer opportunities

Woodland is seeking volunteers to give presentations to community groups on subjects such as local history, notable biographies, and trees.

Not into public speaking? Consider getting involved with our horticulture team, or assisting with special events & research projects.

*If there is something you'd like to see here at Woodland please reach out to us & suggest it!

Office Hours:

Monday-Friday
8am-5pm

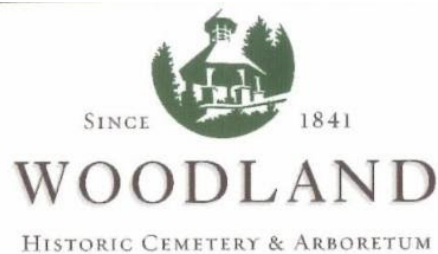
If you need help finding where someone is buried, need directions to a particular area, or have questions about pre-planning or funeral services, Woodland's Staff is here to assist you!

Tours & More:

We welcome walkers, runners, and wanderers -- leashed dogs & school groups.

Register for a guided tour: visit the Woodland Cemetery website! Learn about fascinating Daytonians resting peacefully in one of America's oldest rural garden cemeteries!
Or check out our [virtual tours!](#) (if you really don't want to go outside)

DONATE ONLINE!



Committed to providing dignified and caring funeral services and burial options to families of all faiths since 1841.

Woodland Cemetery and Arboretum
118 Woodland Ave.
Dayton, OH 45409
woodlandcemetery.org

Beautiful. Timeless. Still Available...



Discover the men and women who made it great in Dayton on a guided walking or bus tour. Self-guided tours are available on our mobile app.

For information call 937-228-3221 or e-mail info@woodlandcemetery.org

Woodland Cemetery & Arboretum | [Visit our website!](#)

Woodland Cemetery & Arboretum | 118 Woodland Ave., Dayton, OH 45409