The Alton Park Connector

Creating A Pathway to Alton Park’s History, People and Culture

Written by Maria Noel
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Photos by Brooke Bragger Photography brookebragger.com

Design by Caroline Jewell carolinejewell.com

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For more than 25 years, The Trust for Public Land has worked to connect Chattanooga neighborhoods and residents through greenways and park spaces. Alongside the City, and with the generous support of our philanthropic partners, we protect places of ecological value while connecting people to parks - and to each other.

I am honored to introduce Maria Noel, who has written a history of her neighborhood as she and her neighbors have lived it. Through stories and struggles spanning several generations, she brings to life the rich culture of this particular place.

We commissioned this document as a means of better understanding the challenges and opportunities of one particular greenway: a planned trail connection between the historic African American community of Alton Park and the Tennessee River’s expansive trail system.

The lens through which we view both our purpose and possibility evolves as we learn more from the communities in which we work. We are proud to be completing one more link in our ever-improving web of trails and greenways that ensure Chattanoogans of all backgrounds, from all corners of our city, can connect.

Jenny Park, Tennessee State Director
The Trust for Public Land
Prologue: A Labor of Love

When is a pathway more than a simple trail through a community? For residents of Alton Park, the answer lies in where it starts, what it connects to, and how it ends.

The Alton Park Connector begins with the telling of a community’s story. It connects to the people who paved its path. Its ending will be yours to tell.

For me, writing The Alton Park Story is a love letter to sidewalk games and bicycle rides, to June bugs on a string and lightning bugs in a jar, to playing softball in an open field and sharing banana-flavored Popsicles. It’s wearing funny hats at political rallies or eating free hot dogs and barbecue at the annual Fourth of July celebration; a day when everyone in Alton Park eats. It’s reading books about famous African Americans and later finding out what it really means to be Black.

It’s a testimony about riding a raft across a polluted pond or walking by smoke-filled chimneys. It’s wondering what Lookout Mountain looks like on the other side of a brown haze or why no other community smells like ours. It’s an early Saturday morning, when we cover our faces and evacuate; the science teacher, whose rose bushes warn us of chemical leaks; and the jobs lost, when companies close their doors because it costs too much to clean up. It’s watching families move out, businesses relocate, and schools and playgrounds close.

It’s also recognizing the hearts of community members – whether they leave or stay – who fight another day for Alton Park’s possibilities. It is an awakening, an embrace, a thank you to my parents, our neighbors, and so many committed African Americans, who knew how special Alton Park was and still is. It’s the people, the places, the memories, and the battle to make ours a community of choice, not chance for a whole new generation of residents.

My name is Maria Noel, and this is how my Alton Park Story begins …
The Alton Park Story

Every community has a story; its sense of place and what that means to the people who call it home. In Alton Park, we have our challenges and victories, our history and history makers that distinguish us from any other community in Chattanooga. Our boundaries identify where we are. Our residents make up who we are. Our shared experiences tell the story of what we once were, how we see ourselves today, and what we hope to become.

There’s the beauty that exists and the beauty we, as residents, remember. Our memories paint a picture of the people, places and events that have made a difference in our lives, good and bad.

Today, a low-to-moderate income, predominantly African American community, Alton Park’s population was once all White, with some of Chattanooga’s most prominent political and business leaders living here. A victim of white flight, we later became home to this city’s most distinguished and highly regarded African American leaders. Sadly, we were a victim of black flight as well, due to integration, limited investment, and environmental obstacles that pushed many residents to other communities.

However, beyond Alton Park’s physical, socio-economic and environmental characteristics is our collective belief that this community has much more to contribute.

*And so our story begins....*
More Than a Traditional Trail

The Alton Park Connector is the first neighborhood connection in The Trust for Public Land’s 25-mile Greenway System in Chattanooga. The Trust for Public Land is converting a former rail line into a 1.3-mile walking and bike pathway. When completed, it will connect the Tennessee Riverwalk and Broad Street to Alton Park’s Southside Community Park. More important, it will link our often overlooked community to a major tourism, commercial and residential corridor – opening the door to our own redevelopment opportunities.

The design of this safe and walkable linear park, located at the community’s gateway, will feature Alton Park residents’ contributions to local history, art and African American culture.

To accomplish this, The Trust for Public Land participated in public forums and implemented outreach activities to gain input on the connector’s importance, design vision, and community benefit. The organization also recruited an Alton Park resident, yours truly, to conduct interviews with stakeholders. The result is a collection of memories and historical data highlighting our community’s strengths, challenges, and the people who call this place home.

More than a traditional trail, The Alton Park Connector is a bridge to our past and a pathway to our future. We hope our personal reflections and creative storytelling inspire you to support the people, places and events that serve as its motivation.

Southside Community Park, located in Alton Park at the site of the former Charles A. Bell Elementary School.
From Suburbs to Industrial Hub

Alton Park is located south of downtown’s Market Street, near the foot of Lookout Mountain. It lies between the communities of St. Elmo (South Broad Street) and Clifton Hills (Rossville Boulevard).

The area is comprised of several neighborhoods, including: Richmond, Oak Hills, The Villages at Alton Park, Piney Woods and Emma Wheeler Homes. Its borders are: (north) 33rd Street, near the proposed connector; (south) State Line Road on the Tennessee-Georgia line; (east) Chattanooga Creek; and (west) Hawkins Ridge and Forest Hills Cemetery, established in 1874 as a racially integrated cemetery.

However, in the late 19th century, the community consisted of self-governing suburbs and incorporated towns, according to local historians. Its northern end was part of a larger, planned development called Rustville. The suburb of Oak Hills, which changed its name to Alton Park in 1895, had an all-white population of 635 residents in 1901. A centrally located Doty or Doty’s Junction was a rail station connecting two railways. Black Bottom (now Piney Woods) got its name from coal sludge dumped into Chattanooga Creek by factories lining its path. Poeville (also called South Alton Park, East St. Elmo and Arlington) was along both sides of Central Avenue and ended near the crossing of Tennessee Avenue, West 55th Street and Lee Avenue.

In addition to the Town of Alton Park, which was incorporated as part of Chattanooga in 1917, the remaining suburbs and towns were annexed in 1930. This entire area became an important economic hub, due to its close proximity to rail lines, manufacturers, and available workers, who lived in housing adjacent to the companies.
Former Bunge Oils in Alton Park, adjacent to Milliken Park at the corner of 45th Street and Central Avenue.

Mural by Charity Hamidullah. Street Art Project Burnin Bridges Chattanooga, curated/directed by The Artist Seven. Located at 4300 Oakland Ave
In the late 1930s and early ’40s, Tennessee Products was among the factories in Alton Park whose workers lived in company housing, including African Americans, who lived in a small community called Coke Quarters. A large manufacturer, the company produced coke for use in foundry ovens to melt steel and iron. Made by burning coal, coke held hotter temperatures than coal, gas and oil. However, one of its by-products was coal tar, a hazardous substance that caused cancer.

“Only Blacks lived in the Coke Quarters, which they rented,” said Milton Jackson, whose father worked at Tennessee Products. His mother, a volunteer nurse, trained under the Civil Defense program during World War II. At age 85, Mr. Jackson says he’s the oldest original resident, born and raised, in Alton Park. He lives blocks away from where his father purchased a home in 1935.

“Black workers lived in Alton Park as early as the 1920s. My dad used to paste the doors up at the coke ovens, so fire wouldn’t escape the units. One day, the wind was blowing and set him on fire. He was burned pretty badly with third-degree burns, which put him in the hospital. It was a blessing he lived but he went back to work.”

From the 1920s to late ’60s, Alton Park experienced steady industrial, residential, and population growth. Though a majority of workers at Tennessee Products and other manufacturers were White, African Americans found employment at: Reilley Tar and Chemical Corp., Southern Wood Piedmont, Crane Enamel, Velsicol Chemical, Chattanooga Glass, Key-James Brick, Morningside Chemical, Southern Chemical Cotton, Swift Packing (Bunge Oils), and Wilson Packing companies.

However, what Black workers and residents didn’t know was that the same companies supporting them financially also impacted them through birth defects, cancer, and other debilitating illnesses and diseases. The absence of environmental regulations led to contamination from the dumping of coal tar, creosote, pesticides, glass and other industrial waste into Chattanooga Creek and on nearby land. Residents complained about the emission of fumes, odors and airborne particulates that caused respiratory illnesses, skin
irritations, and damaged the vegetation around their homes.

One Saturday morning in 1967, a leak from a chemical tank at Velsicol Chemical Company caused the entire community to evacuate. Several Black residents had previously filed a class action lawsuit against the company for its contamination of their properties. A decade later, a settlement was reached with less than $1,000 awarded to each family. In 1999, there was a second evacuation, in which numerous African American children and teachers at Frank H. Trotter Elementary School, directly across the street from Velsicol, became ill with some rushed to area hospitals. The building was demolished at the end of the school year.

“I left Chattanooga in 1967 to work in Kansas City,” Mr. Jackson said. “When I came back in 1992, my wife asked me to go to a Stop Toxic Pollution (STOP) meeting in Alton Park. People were talking about Chattanooga Creek and how bad it smelled. I told them it wasn’t the creek, though it did have coal tar and sludge dumped in it since the 1940s. It was the benzene and benzoyl produced by Velsicol. It also was the cooking oil that Bunge produced.”

“My wife had asthma really bad. I wanted to find out what caused her asthma and made other residents ill. I studied the chemicals produced in Alton Park but found pollution in other communities, especially where Blacks lived. Companies had been built before people moved in.
They didn’t know what they moved into or what companies were making during those years. Each company carried its own secret that was poisonous to human bodies.”

Elected president of STOP, Mr. Jackson’s advocacy and professional work brought national attention to the environmental injustices in Alton Park. He succeeded in getting governmental agencies and manufacturers to remediate hazardous sites throughout the community.

“They didn’t tell the people what was hurting them. Instead, they told them to stay in the house and close everything up so the chlorine, benzene, benzoate and chloroform wouldn’t take their breaths away, cause a rash bad enough to make sores, or kill them. They didn’t tell them the lead swelling their children’s brains was enough to cause permanent damage. They didn’t, so I told the truth. That’s why Chattanooga Creek became a Superfund site, one of the most hazardous places in the country, and why the city has concentrated most of its environmental cleanup efforts in Alton Park.”

The absence of environmental regulations led to contamination from the dumping of coal tar, creosote, pesticides, glass and other industrial waste into Chattanooga Creek and on nearby land.

Mr. Jackson holds an award for his environmental activism.
More African Americans Migrate to Alton Park

“Alton Park had everything,” said William Cotton Jr. “Our migration was an opportunity for African Americans to get jobs because there weren’t many jobs for us in Chattanooga.”

In 1949, William Cotton Sr. (his father) moved the family from public housing in the Westside community to a home in Alton Park. Like other African Americans in Chattanooga, the Cottons were impacted by Urban Renewal. This 1950s federal program was designed to eliminate blight, increase property values, leverage private investment, and revitalize urban cities. However, instead of renewing the Westside’s Cameron Hill community, the city bulldozed it to make room for a Golden Gateway Business District (west of Downtown).

“At the same time Blacks were moving into Alton Park, Whites were relocating to East Lake.” Mr. Cotton, who still lives in the family home, said few Blacks lived in Alton Park, when his family moved to the Oak Hills neighborhood. His father got a nearby job at Chattanooga Glass Company.

Established in Alton Park in 1901, Chattanooga Glass produced bottles for beer, pharmaceuticals and a variety of products. However, during the 1920s Prohibition Era, the company began making bottles for Coca-Cola and other soft drinks. Former Mayor P.R. “Rudy” Olgiati, whose name is memorialized on downtown’s Olgiati Bridge, was a glass company employee and early resident of Alton Park.

“Chattanooga Glass was owned by Frank Harrison of the Coca-Cola family. He put Blacks to work as wheelbarrow carriers. When the trains came in, they unloaded sand that was melted down to make bottles. The wheelbarrows weighed 300 to 400 pounds. Dad started working there in 1950. It was the only job Blacks could get. Black men in Alton Park kept the glass company operating; wheeling sand off those trains. Whites didn’t get dirty. Blacks got dirty.”

According to Mr. Cotton, Frank Harrison also was a race car driver in the Indianapolis 500 and often raced his car through the community. He started a summer jobs program at the glass company for Black college students and advocated for a greenway from Alton Park to Howard School. The city’s
oldest public school, built in 1865 for African Americans (grades 1 - 12), Howard School had relocated in the 1950s from the Westside to its current location on Market Street.

“He was different from most business owners. He had a strong love for this community, for putting African Americans to work and giving us opportunities to move up. That’s how my father became a member of the Alton Park Chamber of Commerce, representing the glass company for Mr. Harrison.” Of the 15 Alton Park Chamber members, four were African American.

African American women also played a major role in improving Alton Park, Mr. Cotton said. They advocated for a community health center to reduce high incidences of cancer, respiratory illnesses, skin rashes, and other health problems caused by environmental pollutants. In the late 1960s, Spencer J. McCallie Homes’ residents and community leaders, Elizabeth Dixon and Erma Choice, took their protest of a rat infestation in public housing to the Mayor. They captured several rats and released them in City Hall. Their actions also caught the attention of State Representative Marilyn Lloyd, who was instrumental in solving the problem, which was caused by illegal dumping.

In addition, the first chairperson of Alton Park’s voting precinct (19th Ward, First Precinct) was Irma Parmes. With over 2,000 registered and active voters, she helped Alton Park become the swing vote in local elections.

“We built our voting power. Alton Park was the last precinct to be counted for mayor and police commissioner. That was the power of our votes.”
The construction of public housing (Spencer J. McCallie Homes in 1953 and Emma Wheeler Homes in 1964) opened the door for a more economically diverse population in Alton Park. Low-income residents, many of them female heads-of-household, secured these rental units. Blue collar workers continued to buy homes in Oak Hills, though their employment expanded to other areas. While, in the southern half of the community, a growing middle class was emerging.

In 1956, two weeks after the birth of their fourth child, Ruth and Jimmie Williams moved their family to Dorsey Street.

An auto mechanics instructor at Howard High and owner of an auto repair shop and taxicab service, Mr. Williams relocated to the same street his best friend, Roy Noel Sr. (my father), had moved. Mr. Noel, also an instructor at Howard, taught shoe repair and owned several shoe shops. Both men had previously taught at the all-Black Boone-Higgins Trade School on West Main Street.

“We went to see Ernestine and Roy, after Deborah (their third of four children) was born,” Ruth Williams said. “I saw a for sale sign across the street. There were only three houses on Dorsey Street, so I...
convinced Jimmie to buy the property. He bought five lots and later sold one. It took him two years to build our home. He had to sell his taxicab. Eventually, he got a loan, which was hard to do because banks didn’t want to give Black people loans.”

In the 1950s, only two local banks, First Federal and Pioneer Bank, offered loans to African Americans. In addition, the federal government and financial institutions limited the purchase of homes and property to designated “redlined” areas considered hazardous. Redlined communities included those occupied by African Americans or areas where the land or homes had little or no investment value.

“We moved from the Westside housing projects, after Jimmie finished building our home. To my knowledge, no one was building houses anywhere else, except those for veterans on Riverside Drive. There weren’t any houses for Black folks to buy and very few for Whites. People were living in their homes and nobody was going to give them up.”

As more houses were built or vacated by Whites, Black professionals and skilled laborers moved into South Alton Park. A Black physician purchased the home once owned by former City Commissioner Frank H. Trotter. Other homeowners included: educators, business owners, physicians and nurses, a trained architect, former NASA mathematician, police officers, the Tennessee Valley Authority’s first African American lineman, factory workers, religious leaders, artists and musicians.

In the nearby Piney Woods community, homes were being built for African American veterans. Schools – some built, others converted – were now occupied by Black students. A Bi-Rite grocery store opened at the corner of 38th Street and Alton Park Boulevard and, in 1960, the United Methodist Church constructed the Bethlehem Community Center, to provide recreation, daycare and other services to Black residents.

We were so glad to have a place to live, a friendly place to raise our children, we didn’t think about the pollution. We didn’t know how bad it was. Sometimes, I would wake up at night and smell it. When my children came home from school, I had to shut the windows.
In the 1960’s, Alton Park was a thriving community with five schools, including Piney Woods Elementary.

“We were so glad to have a place to live, a friendly place to raise our children, we didn’t think about the pollution,” Mrs. Williams said. “We didn’t know how bad it was. Sometimes, I would wake up at night and smell it. When my children came home from school, I had to shut the windows. A lot of Black families went elsewhere to live because of the odor. Black people, who could afford it, started building houses in the Highway 58 area. It wasn’t easy back then. Even though you could buy a house for $20,000 or $30,000, most people couldn’t afford it. You only made $400 a month teaching school.”

At age 91, Mrs. Williams still lives in the home her husband and a friend built 64 years ago. A former educator, who taught at Normal Park Elementary for 27 years, she dropped out of school after finishing seventh grade in her hometown in Georgia. After moving to Chattanooga, she completed her Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED). At age 36, she started college; graduating in three years and getting her bachelor’s degree the same year her youngest of six children entered first grade. She also completed her master’s degree.

“I've enjoyed living here and have had no problems. I’ve been here all these years and plan to stay.”
Growing Up With A Sense of Pride

Larry “Bear” High, owner of Bear’s Barbershop on Alton Park Boulevard, has been a cornerstone of the community since his business opened in March 1970. His best friend, Herman Prater, is a freelance photographer, who has chronicled Alton Park’s history in photos and film.

“Some of the people in this community, I gave their first haircuts. Now, they’re granddaddies. I’ve been a licensed barber for 54 years but started cutting hair 60 years ago, when I was 12 years old. Herman and I started cutting hair together. Then, he picked up a camera.”

“I have videotapes of Howard High and Alton Park Junior High bands, when they performed in the Armed Forces Day Parade downtown in 1963 and ’64. The film is old and doesn’t have sound but you would enjoy it,” Mr. Prater said.

On most days, the two can be found at the barbershop conversing with other barbers, patrons, elected officials, parents and their children. They met decades ago as neighbors in the Spencer J. McCallie Homes public housing. Mr. Prater moved to Alton Park, when he was 5 years old. Mr. High, known by most people as “Bear”, moved there at age 10. Both attended Calvin Donaldson Elementary, were among the first to graduate from Alton Park Junior High, and were Howard High School graduates. They currently reside in Alton Park, blocks away from the McCallie Homes site, which is now The Villages at

Mr. High, known by most people as “Bear”, smiles inside his barbershop.
Alton Park, a mixed-income home owner and rental housing development.

“We also used to walk the railroad tracks on 33rd Street to get to the bakery on Broad Street,” Mr. Prater said.

“My father was in the Negro Baseball League, playing for the Chattanooga Choo Choo’s at Engel Stadium,” Mr. High said. “(Hall of Famer) Willie Mays was the youngest member of the team at age 16. We would go to their practices and, if any of the players broke a bat or knocked a ball out of the field, we would get it and keep it. One day, players for the Nashville Elite Giants gave our Little League team some old uniforms. We still have them.”

On weekends, the Alton Park Bears Little League team played other African American teams from Piney Woods, Emma Wheeler Homes, Dorris Street, St. Elmo, East Chattanooga, the Westside, and Dalton and Calhoun, Georgia.

“We also used to walk the railroad tracks on 33rd Street to get to the bakery on Broad Street. We couldn’t walk on the street because White people driving by would spray you with stuff or throw bricks at you.

Some of our neighborhood ballfields were so rocky, workers had to drag a mattress across to clean them before games. If it rained, the dugouts flooded; however, on Sundays, our African American youth baseball leagues got a chance to play tournaments at Engel Stadium,” Mr. High said.

“‘It was good back in those days, so much for everybody to do,’ Mr. Prater said. “There were banquets each year and, since Blacks weren’t allowed in Warner Park, we would go to Lincoln Park to participate in baseball toss, kite flying tournaments, and Junior Olympics.”
“We couldn’t walk on the street because White people driving by would spray you with stuff or throw bricks at you,” he continued. “We would go to the stockyards to see the horses and cows; go fishing on the Tennessee River; or to a drive-in theater. We weren’t allowed in, so we watched the movie from St. Elmo Courts (another Black neighborhood). We couldn’t hear the movie unless someone went across the street, turned on a speaker, and jumped across the fence so they wouldn’t catch you.

“One of my fondest memories was Christmas mornings,” Mr. High said. “Everybody in the housing projects did one thing; they could skate. If you had one toy, a bag of fruit, some candy and skates, you were happy. People would come from East Chattanooga and the Westside to skate; about a thousand folks out there, all day skating until 1:00 in the morning. When you took your skates off, your feet would be numb and it took a while to walk again. Once you tore your skates up, you created a scooter, nailing them to 2 x 4s. We had a good time.”

Bear’s Barbershop is housed in a building constructed in 1947 as Imperial Drive-In, a Black-owned restaurant patronized by Chattanooga’s Black elite and adjacent to a Black-owned golf driving range. The two friends said they became business owners after growing up surrounded by Martin’s Service Station, Frozen Joy, Hamp’s Place, Ruby’s Drive-in & Ranch House, dry cleaners, grocery stores, beauty shops, restaurants, a hardware store, shoe repair shop, night clubs, and other Black-owned businesses.

“We no longer have that in our community, Black businesses everywhere,” Mr. High said. “Back then, we had pride, a different kind of pride. I want to see our community grow and do better.”

Back then, we had pride, a different kind of pride. I want to see our community grow and do better.
Others Take Notice of the Community’s Health

In 1969, CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite shocked residents by announcing on national television that Chattanooga was the Dirtiest City in America, due to our high concentrations of pollution.

At the time, there were no governmental standards and limited enforcement of environmental regulations. Signs posted along the Tennessee River and Chattanooga Creek warned residents not to drink, fish or swim. Redevelopment areas had few land uses because of unchecked dumping of hazardous waste. The stories Chattanoogans told about downtown smoke emissions and poor air quality were as permeating as the odor Alton Park residents smelled daily. There was no getting around this environmental disaster and the world was beginning to notice.

As the city enacted tough air pollution standards in 1972 and the national economy slid into a recession, Alton Park manufacturers faced layoffs, cut backs and closings. Some African

The former Piney Woods Family Resource Center is across the street from Chattanooga Creek.
American homeowners lacked the means to maintain their homes and those that could leave the community, did leave. Our environmental challenges continued into the 1990s and, as a result, Alton Park’s standing as a sought-after, middle-class community deteriorated, along with its population base, housing stock, economic stability, residents’ health, and plans for redevelopment.

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In 2000, two Social Work professors at The University of Tennessee at Knoxville began conducting an Environmental Justice Study on the hazardous contamination in Chattanooga Creek and its impact on plants, animals and residents. They partnered with a community-based nonprofit, the Alton Park Development Corporation, and its executive director, Deborah Noel Maddox, who was a former Alton Park resident with family ties (my sister) and a commitment to the community.

Mrs. Maddox, who oversaw the organization from 1999 to 2005, had surveyed residents to find out their needs, wants, and skills. Originally housed in a public housing unit, the organization relocated to the Piney Woods Family Resource Center, a former elementary school that offered access to classroom, meeting, and library space.

“We created a construction training program, a clothing closet, soft skills training for job prep, a tailoring class, and Resource Directory. We partnered with other nonprofits to establish a reading center, daycare for parents attending classes, a computer lab, summer jobs program for area youth, and several community wide clean-ups.”

The nonprofit’s goal was to educate and empower Alton Park residents, improve conditions for redevelopment, and provide a vehicle for funding that allowed change to happen.

“Our Neighborhood Environmental College worked with the university to identify toxins in our community. We wanted to see why people were getting sick, had respiratory problems, or died from cancer and other diseases.”
We wanted to see why children couldn’t play in certain areas and why some residents were born with developmental or physical disabilities. We also wanted to know what made the community shift from a large population and economic base to a small one.”

The Alton Park Development Corporation also partnered with Alton Park’s Southside Community Health Center and Meharry Medical College in Nashville. The Neighborhood Environmental College sought answers about environmental justice from advocacy groups and brought in speakers from regulatory agencies, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation. Most important, they invited residents to learn about the effects of toxins, when mixing household chemicals, and the long-term damages resulting from the community’s manufacturing history.

“Green Peace determined there were 47 hazardous waste sites, along with one federal and two state Superfund sites in Alton Park. That’s why we got piles of colorful broken glass, abandoned by Chattanooga Glass Company, removed. It was leaching toxins into the soil. That’s why signs, warning residents not to eat fish from Chattanooga Creek, were posted. The coal tar dumped there by Tennessee Products (Chattanooga Coke & Chemical) was causing cancer. That’s also why we informed residents about Velsicol Chemical Company’s production of Agent Orange and how water run-off from its adjacent, toxic Residue Hill was flowing into the Piney Woods Ballfield.”

“Though the Alton Park community remains strong and resilient, it still needs our support. After all, who wants to live in a community that others define as poor, toxic and distressed?”

After all, who wants to live in a community that others define as poor, toxic and distressed?

Mrs. Maddox stands at the entry of Milliken Park.
Giving Back to the Community

“I wanted to make a difference in Alton Park, in my own community,” Steve Talley said. “That’s what motivated me to open my landscaping and property restoration business and the auto detail shop. It reminds me of a speech Booker T. Washington gave in Atlanta (in 1895). He said, ‘Cast down your bucket where you are.’ I’ve made it my business to cast down my bucket right here; to reach back and help those that are willing to learn and dedicate themselves.”

Mr. Talley was raised by a single mother in the McCallie Homes housing projects. His father worked at DuPont and, when he could, spent quality time with his son.

“I got with the wrong crowd and started stealing cars and carrying guns. I was in and out of juvenile detention centers from age 16 until I became an adult. While there, I attended vocational programs and picked up skills in carpentry and brick masonry. At age 19, I was released from juvenile, only to be transported to prison to serve an attempted murder charge. I did 10 years of a 12-year sentence.”

While in prison, he received his GED and enrolled in commercial cleaning, drafting and blueprint reading. He also became a teacher’s aide, helping other inmates prepare for the GED.

Mr. Talley in front of one of his businesses, located at the former Martin Service Station.
“I was tired of doing time, being around negative people, doing the same negative stuff. My desire to change was because of the time my family was spending; supporting me through visits and phone calls. They were in jail with me.”

Upon his release, Mr. Talley became a flea market vendor, selling art and novelty items. There, he got his first taste of being a business owner and dealing with the public.

“I met all kinds of people, who became my angels in my mess; people who embraced my ideas and supported me in my small business ventures. A lot of those people, who did business with me in 2002, still do business with me today. One customer became a real estate partner and taught me how to buy a house with zero down. That’s how I bought my first home in Alton Park.”

He joined Toastmasters International and read books and other publications related to business, like *Black Enterprise* magazine and *The Wall Street Journal*.

“My Muslim brothers are responsible for my character today. They taught me to be considerate of others, to respect women, and set goals for myself and my family. I learned to bring balance to my life, eat healthy, think positively, believe in myself, and practice self-sufficiency. I was seeing strong brothers being responsible, and it got me on track to want to do constructive things.”
He also did speaking engagements on conflict resolution and the need for prison re-entry programs. He added a third-shift job at Komatsu and created a Male Rescue Program to serve as a peer group for men recently released from prison. When The Trust for Public Land’s newly constructed Alton Park Safewalk was opened, Mr. Talley and his peer group monitored the route, so elementary students walking to school would feel safe.

“I wanted to help guys, like myself, who were having a difficult time re-entering society and getting adjusted. For some of us, it takes two or three chances.”

A serial entrepreneur, Mr. Talley bought his first home in 2004, paid it off in seven years, and re-invested in the community. Today, he owns several rental properties, an auto detail shop, and a property restoration, ground maintenance & landscaping business. He has earned business degrees from Chattanooga State Community College and The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He also received one of the City of Chattanooga’s largest contracts awarded to a minority owned business.

He said, ‘Cast down your bucket where you are.’ I’ve made it my business to cast down my bucket right here; to reach back and help those that are willing to learn and dedicate themselves.
A New Generation Advocates for Change

East Chattanooga native Raquetta Dotley has spent the last 13 years getting to know Alton Park. Her ability to connect with residents comes from lessons learned from family members. Her mother, a single parent, grew up here. Her late grandmother, an avid churchgoer, lived in The Villages at Alton Park. Her late grandfather operated a good-time house.

“I used to visit my granny all the time and attended Westside Missionary Baptist Church with her. I joined the church in 2007. Our pastor was about members getting involved with the community, so I started going out and meeting people. I fell in love with the people of Alton Park and had a good feeling about this community, the culture of it. It felt like this was where God wanted me to go.”

Ms. Dotley smiles in front of Westside Missionary Baptist Church, where The Net Resource Foundation is housed.
Ms. Dotley moved to the newly constructed Alton Place Apartments six years ago. She is executive director of The Net Resource Foundation, a mentorship and community-building nonprofit housed at Westside Missionary Baptist Church. She oversees programs that: support youth leadership; provide hot meals to seniors; assist residents with rental payments; and promote healthy initiatives, like gardening and physical fitness. An officer in one of Alton Park’s neighborhood associations and board member at the Bethlehem Community Center, she also advocates for healthy foods access, community improvements, financial management, job training, and voter education.

“I liked the Alton Park community so much, I tried to buy my first home here but couldn’t find anything for sale. We’ve got a lot of empty houses but few investors. This is one of the reasons why I’m running for City Council, District 7 representative. Equity is important to me. You can see development in some areas of the district but not in others. All residents want good schools, decent housing, a safe community, and great parks – regardless of their income or circumstances.”
Epilogue: On Our Way

The Alton Park Story begins as a love letter, a testimony to the resilience of our community and its residents.

It continues as a thank you to my parents, Roy and Ernestine Noel, both educators, who helped strengthen Alton Park and encouraged others to take action. They organized youth baseball leagues; created community gardens and parks; supported small businesses and job training and placement programs; and fought for equal opportunities for families throughout our community.

It ends with the hope that The Alton Park Story remains a living document; breathing new life into an historic community and prompting others to share what we once were, how we see ourselves today, and what we hope to become.

Thank you to The Trust for Public Land for entrusting this important task with me and for your continued support of our community. The Alton Park Connector is one of several projects the organization is implementing. Plans are underway to build a playground in Southside Community Park and, in 2019, The Trust for Public Land funded a series of outdoor festivals, educational events, and beautification activities in Alton Park.
For more information about The Trust for Public Land: tpl.org/tennessee