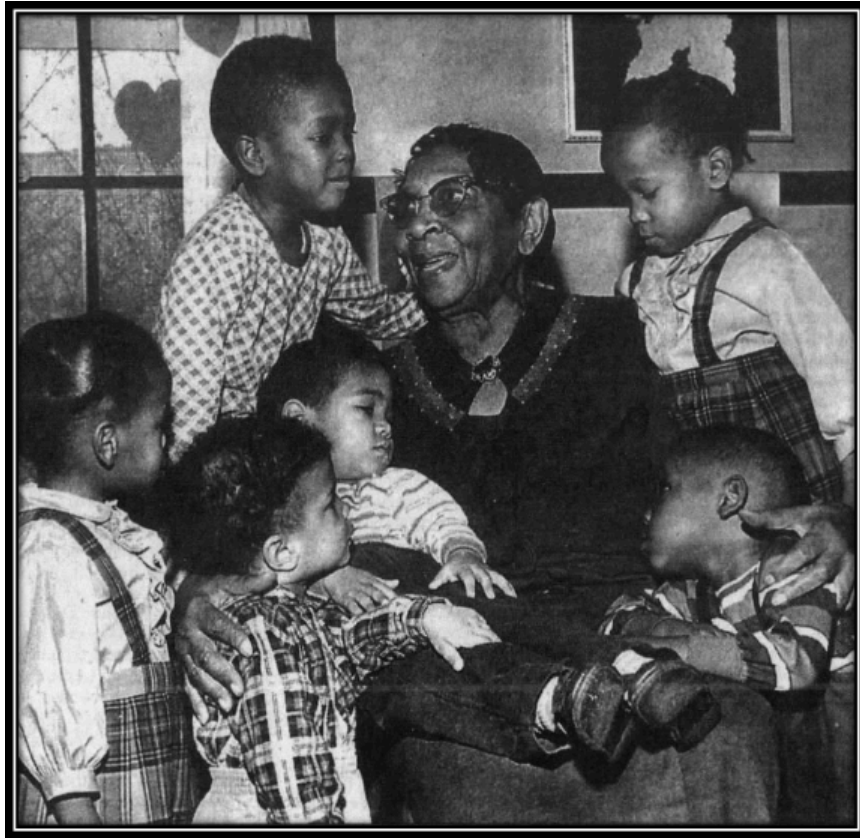




SINCE 1841

# WOODLAND

HISTORIC CEMETERY & ARBORETUM



*Above:* Photo published by the *Dayton Daily News*, 3/18/2004

Caring for the Community



**Above:** Photo published by the *Dayton Daily News*, 11/30/1965

Born in Paris, Kentucky in 1886, as a young woman Melissa and her mother, Esther Washington, came to Dayton, Ohio. The exact reasons for their move are lost to time, but a strong possibility is that Melissa and her mother came to Dayton to find work.

By 1910, Melissa Washington found work as a private family cook for one of Dayton's wealthiest bankers—Jonathan Harshman Winters. When Mr. Winters died in 1915, many “old family retainers” were remembered in his will with bequests of cash, including Melissa[1]. This inheritance from a former employer may have helped Melissa to enroll at Wilberforce University. While there, she studied nursing, child care and child psychiatry.

Around the same time, residents of Dayton's West Side (led by Moses Moore and his wife, Marian) were working to address a very familiar problem—suitable childcare for working families. According to census research by the University of Dayton, in 1920 there were 2,837 Black women & girls over the age of 16 living in the city. Of this number, more than half were employed outside the home, many of whom were mothers of children too young to begin school.

The solution was the establishment of the West Side Day Nursery at 114 Fitch Street—right next door to the house Melissa shared with her mother. Like many grassroots organizations, the West Side Day Nursery was kept alive by the community it served.

Volunteers were the key to the West Side Day Nursery's success and survival. Clothing was donated by the Needlework guild; the Delphinium Garden Club placed flower boxes in the windows, and in 1919, Melissa became a volunteer. 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[2].



**Above:** Children gather around Mrs. Bess. Published by the *Dayton Journal Herald*, 7/26/1942

[1] *Dayton Daily News*, 7/13/1915 p.1

[2] *The Journal Herald*, 11/30/1965 p.1



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

**Above:** Photo published by the  
*Dayton Daily News*, 12/21/1962

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. “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 fellah came to us when he was only three months old,” she chuckled, “and today he’s a Methodist district superintendent living in Cincinnati.”

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

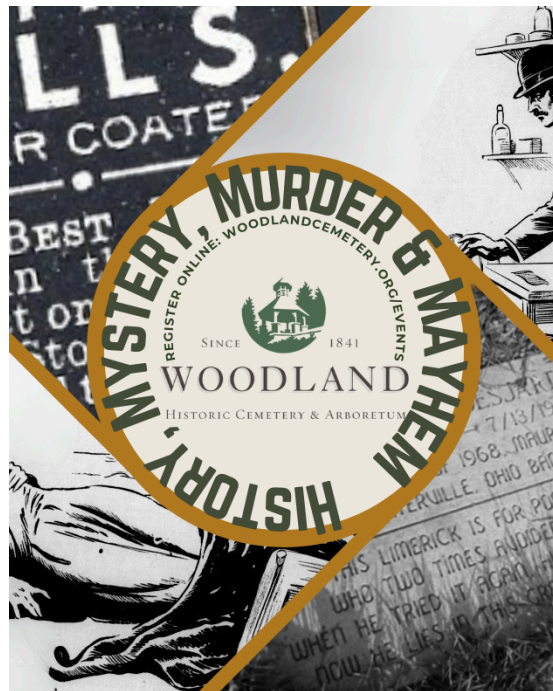
Melissa Bess died in 1965 at the age of 78. She is laid to rest with her cousin, Pricilla Middleton, in section 123 lot 273 at Woodland Cemetery.



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