

The Little Loomhouse

A Brief History



by

Alice S Davidson, 1997

Revised 2021

The Lou Tate Foundation, Inc.
Louisville, Kentucky

THE LITTLE LOOMHOUSE

A Historic Perspective

By Alice S. Davidson, January 1997

The Little Loomhouse, a complex of three cabins and a center for handweaving since 1939, has an interesting history. The site, located on the north ridge of Kenwood Hill, has gone through four distinct periods of development: first, known as an Indigenous hunting ground; then, briefly, as an office and caretaker's establishment; next as a turn-of-the-century artists' colony; and, finally, during Lou Tate's residence, as a weaving center.

When Lou Tate died in 1979, she left the Little Loomhouse and all its property to a foundation devoted to historic preservation, and educational and arts participation. The Lou Tate Foundation, Inc. now carries on the unique work she started and promoted during a lifetime of artistic endeavor.

This booklet is dedicated to the memory of all those past artists whose activities comprise the history of the Little Loomhouse and to those current artists and volunteers whose contributions keep it alive.

Foreword

Many requests for the history of the Little Loomhouse have been received. Although much historical information has been printed in various publications and in slide and video presentations, it was felt that a short booklet would be an appropriate resource. The material is based on research of the Lou Tate Archives and the Landmark Commission Report of 1976.

This is a brief summary of landmark events in the Little Loomhouse life to date rather than a definitive history. A more detailed history is being developed which, hopefully, will be published in the future.

I wish to acknowledge Lee Ebner's drawings of the individual cabins and the important contribution of Jane Bottorff who edited and did the page layout of this publication.

Update

By Michelle K. Amos, September 2021

History is made every day. We are doing it right now. Which stories we choose to tell, preserve, and how we choose to tell them has interested me since I began my work at the Loomhouse in 2015. Additionally, there has been a national shift toward a deeper introspection into who and how we attribute historical events since the original publication of this booklet. When we sold the last copy of "The Little Loomhouse: A Brief History" it was a good time to revise it.

The section on Lou Tate Bousman has been updated to include more dates, such as her Master's Degree, the Speed Exhibition, and some events concerning Eleanor Roosevelt. There are also corrections to the timeline of events in her life.

These dates and timeline of events were all taken from documents and articles found in the Lou Tate Foundation Archives. The information about Tate's *Country Fair* publication is added for anyone wanting to further research her work adapting looms for rehabilitation and physical therapy. Not much is changed from the original publication in the sections about the cabins, just a few updates on the years of service to bring it up to date.

The most significant changes to this publication are made concerning the "Happy Birthday" song. Much research, and some litigious arguments have taken place since this section was originally composed. There is now definitive research that the most popular song in the English Language has deep roots in Black Louisville music. Louisville Author, and Historian, Michael L. Jones has written a comprehensive piece summarizing the research and recent litigation around the Happy Birthday song. In his article he details how Mildred Hill, composer of the "Happy Birthday" song, did all she could to preserve Black Louisville music. She, like our founder, Lou Tate with her coverlet drafts, saw the urgency in documenting this art and its important influence in music history before the elders, who alone knew it, died off.

We would like to acknowledge and thank Michael L. Jones for allowing us to use portions of his work in the Happy Birthday song section, Heidi Stoll for page layout and Judith Jennings for Editing.

Copyright 1997, revised 2021
The Lou Tate Foundation, Inc.
Louisville, Kentucky



Lou Tate Bousman with her dog Skipper, and a student, in Top House Weaving Studio. Photo taken from the Lou Tate Foundation Archives collection.

Lou Tate Bousman
1906 – 1979

Lou Tate Bousman, known professionally as Lou Tate, was born in Bowling Green, Kentucky, on October 19, 1906. Her ancestors were settlers in Virginia as early as 1790. Her father, J. H. Bousman, migrated as a young man to Kentucky where he became a conductor on the old L&N Railroad. In 1920, he was transferred to Louisville and the family bought a house at 1725 South Third Street.

Lou Tate graduated from the Louisville Girls High School in 1924. She spent one year at the University of Louisville before enrolling at Berea College where she earned a B.A. degree, followed by a Master of Arts in History from the University of Michigan in June of 1929.

Her interest in weaving began when she received five generations of weaving patterns from an elderly weaver, Nan Owen. From then on, she began her unique contribution as an American handweaving historian. Collecting old patterns, called drafts, took her into the far reaches of Kentucky – often on horseback. Her first local exhibition of Kentucky handweavings were held at the J. B. Speed Museum in Louisville in 1937.

During the depression, she worked at President Hoover's Dark Hollow School for mountain children deep in the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia. Her contacts with First Lady, Lou Henry Hoover, led to the development of the Lou Tate Table Loom (the Little Loom), first constructed by Dr. S. W. Mather, a Louisville dentist. Lou Henry Hoover, a supporter of Girl Scouts, had approached Tate for a weaving project

suitable for them. Her Little Looms were sold for over 20 years, both in this country and abroad, and for over 80 years exclusively at the Little Loomhouse. Her looms are still in use today in the Top House Weaving Studio, off-site education programs, outside organizations, schools, and individual homes.

Later in 1941, Tate and her loom were given national exposure in Eleanor Roosevelt's syndicated column, *My Day*. In the mid 1930's, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had paid a visit to the Loomroom of Lou Tate and ordered a woven luncheon set for the White House in 1934.

In the 1940's, Tate started an experimental weaving group, The Kentucky Weavers Guild, and started publishing the *Kentucky Weaver* magazine. She also began collecting contemporary hand-woven textiles in addition to her collection of traditional woven coverlets which were exhibited both nationally and internationally.

Tate's custom weaving business soon gave way to her first love, teaching – particularly introducing young children to this ancient form of folk art. Her own methods of teaching very young children also stimulated interest in history.

During World War II, Tate extended her weaving skills to helping the hospitalized soldiers weave as a good form of physical therapy, as documented in her *Country Fair* publication from 1946. She published several booklets and magazine articles on Kentucky weaving history, early coverlet patterns, and weaving techniques.

Spinning was added in the 1970's. She used the cabins for many open houses, as well as formal classes and workshops.

She also taught college extension courses in the Greater Louisville area and surrounding states.

Unfortunately, illnesses and lack of resources to maintain the cabins plagued the last few years of her life. However, her contributions to the revival of handweaving in Kentucky, the preservation of old coverlets and their patterns, and encouragement of contemporary experimental weaving were a true legacy in this field of folk art.



Lou Tate showing Eleanor Roosevelt coverlets from her collection. Originally printed with permission of the Courier-Journal

The Cabins

The three cabins are located one above the other on a steep slope below the north ridge of Kenwood Hill under mighty oaks. During a visit in 1948, Architect Frank Lloyd Wright wrote of them as, “Three summer homes set in the dignity of nature.” Each has its own design and tradition, and each has acquired a personality of its own.

The earliest known inhabitants of Kenwood Hill were the Cherokee Indians who used it for their campgrounds during the buffalo hunting season. They called it Sunshine Hill because its bare top was an ideal place to tan hides and cure meat after the kill.

Members of the Phillips family were the earliest known owners of the area. Apparently successful and prosperous farmers, they had large tracts of land in Jefferson County. Philips Lane derives its name from this family, and an old family cemetery is located on the grounds of what is now the Louisville Zoo.

Treasury warrants issued about 1780 were entered in Jefferson County by Jenkin Phillips who came from Virginia. These included one warrant for 1000 acres of land located six miles southeast of the Falls of the Ohio “between a large beaver pond and the Knobs near two miles from the Salt River Road.” The land remained in the family for several generations.

The particular section of this land that became the Loomhouse site was acquired in the 1860’s by a man named Beoni Figg. It next passed to a son-in-law, Charles W. Gheens. Sam Stone Bush acquired the property in the 1890’s.

He was Secretary of the Kenwood Residential Company that developed large tracts of land in the southern part of the city. Advertisements in the 1890's described the company as having "practically a monopoly of the Grand Boulevard section lying between the city and the city's grandest attraction, Jacob Park." They advertised lots for \$300, with \$5.00 down and the rest in installments of \$1.00 per week, no interest and no taxes.

Bush was also a prime mover on the extension of the trolley lines out Third Street, allowing accessibility to the city. Mayor Jacob's foresight in buying the land as a park for the city led to the development of what is now Southern Parkway and Iroquois Park (first known as Jacob Park), designed by Frederick Law Olmsted's nationally known firm.

During the late 1890's when Bush built both Tophouse and Wisteria as summer rentals, he built three houses in the Kenwood area for himself and two other family members. These were designed by the well-known Louisville architects, William J. Dodd and Mason Maury. All three of these houses are now on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1976, The Little Loomhouse cabins were the first property on Kenwood Hill to be put on the National Register of Historic Places. The following year the property was designated both a Louisville and a Kentucky state landmark, deeming it worthy of preservation.



In 1898, Etta Hest, an artist, purchased the cabin and originated its tradition as a center for cultural life in southern Jefferson County, establishing an annual Strawberry Festival for artists, writers, and teachers. Mildred and Patty Smith Hill, noted kindergarten and music teachers, had a summer cabin farther up Kenwood Hill. The sisters co-created the “Happy Birthday” song which, according to local legend, was first sung in Esta.

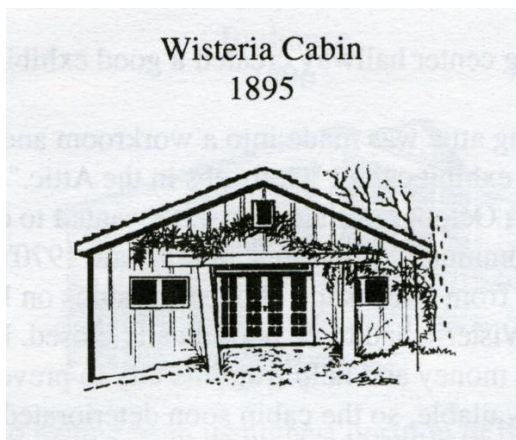
The next owner, Mary Wulff, a writer and artist, bought the cabin in 1907 and continued using it for community-oriented events. An early Sunday School class held in this cabin led to the founding of St. Mark Lutheran Church on Southside Drive. Mary Wulff held special gatherings to which she invited Kentucky artists, poets, and writers, as well as neighboring residents who had built summer log cabins on the hillside. She always included children in these parties. Tate said her first acquaintance with the cabin was during such a visit. It was during Mary Wulff’s time that the cabin was named *Esta*, which is said to be an old Norse saying meaning “May God’s presence be in this dwelling.”

In 1939, Tate's mother purchased the property from Mary Wulff's estate as a retirement home and space for Tate's weaving business. Sadly, her mother died shortly thereafter. Tate inherited the property and lived and worked there for the rest of her life.

The cabin soon became a gathering place for weavers and those interested in learning to weave. Through the years, Esta has had many distinguished visitors. In the 1940's, local legend says Eleanor Roosevelt paid a visit. As she entered the cabin, her foot went through a loose board. After noticing initials painted on a number of other boards, she asked for paint and brush and added her name. This bit of history has long ago disappeared.

More recently, Esta had undergone restoration in the early 1980's thanks to a challenge grant from the James Graham Brown Foundation, the support of the City of Louisville through its Board of Aldermen, and many individuals and businesses in the community. The late Margaret Wilson, with able assistance of attorney William Burbank, laid the initial groundwork. Jane Bottorff completed the actual reconstruction period.

This restoration of Esta typifies a summer home serving residents of Louisville during the early years of the twentieth century. The home contains the Foundation's weaving research archives and library and is a showplace for antique cloth-making tools. The main room is still being used as a gathering place for weavers, textiles artists, field trips, and community events. Esta is a historic building with a historic collection of artifacts in a unique setting.



Wisteria Cabin, the middle cabin of the Little Loomhouse complex, celebrated its 126th birthday in 2021. Its name comes from the Wisteria vines climbing on a trellis over the front entrance. These vines show off their lovely lavender blooms in early spring.

The cabin was built of native oak cut at a saw mill located on Kenwood Hill. The exterior is board-and-batten-style siding stained dark brown. It is built in dogtrot design creating a corridor down the center with French doors on each end for ventilation. The front right-side room has a stone fireplace and the left side originally contained two bedrooms, now combined into one large room.

For many years, all three cabins were used for summer homes. When Tate acquired the property in 1939, she used Wisteria mainly for storage. As her weaving business and teaching expanded, she began to utilize it for exhibitions.

After the Kentucky Weavers Junior program was organized in the 1960's, she rented the cabin to them for \$1.00 a year. This gave the children a club house and center for their

weaving and spinning activities. The long center hallway created a good exhibition space.

In 1965, the sloping attic was made into a workroom and opened with a celebration exhibit called “Cobwebs in the Attic.” This ran from April through October of that year. Tate wanted to continue to use Wisteria for community programs, but the late 1970’s water and mud slide damage from bulldozing above the cabins on Possum Path brought disaster. Wisteria had to be periodically closed. Repairs were sorely needed, but money and help from the city to prevent further damage was not available, so the cabin soon deteriorated.

It was not until 1985, six years after Tate’s death, that a complete restoration of Wisteria was begun. Tony Belak, President of the Foundation at the time, put together grants from the city, county and the Carpenters’ Union for renovation. A furnace, bathroom, kitchen cabinets and shelves were all included.

Upon completion, a rededication ceremony was held on June 25, 1986. Jefferson County Judge Executive Harvey Sloane, and others who had helped in the restoration, participated.

Wisteria now serves as the Foundation office, Lou Tate Gallery, and gift shop. It remains a charming and useful cabin, still alive and kicking after over a century of hard living.

Tophouse
1896



Tophouse, so named from its highest position of the three Little Loomhouse cabins, was built in 1896 by Sam Stone Bush, then owner of the property. It, like Wisteria, was constructed from the native oak trees grown on Kenwood Hill with wood cut at a local sawmill.

Tophouse, like Wisteria, was built for use as a summer home for well-to-do Louisville families who wanted to escape the heat of the city. Until 1939, when Tate acquired the property for her home and weaving activities, it was probably rented out for the summer months.

The cabin's exterior is constructed of board-and-batten-style siding with a second story gable. Describing the property's appearance when Tate first started using it for her experimental weaving group she wrote, "the road was bumpy, the roof leaked, and the porch was built so that we can weave and enjoy the woods at the same time."

An open porch on two sides of the cabin was enclosed in glass in the late 1950's to allow more space for looms. This enabled weavers to work throughout most of the year. A wood stove provided the only heat.

From that time on, Tophouse has always been used for loom weaving. Both the Little Loom and larger floor looms were housed there.

Weaving classes, individual weavers, and visiting weavers were all headquartered there. Almost from the beginning of Tate's forty-year residency, Tophouse was also used for displays. Both in-house and visiting displays emphasized new patterns and innovative ideas. The surrounding grounds adjacent to Tophouse were also the scene of many open house events throughout the years.

During the World War II years when most of Tate's weaving activities had to be curtailed, she rented Tophouse to a defense worker and his family. This brought in much needed revenue. Also, she felt it was the patriotic thing to do during this period of housing shortages.

The very existence of Tophouse was endangered in the 1960's and again in the late 1970's. By this time developers had acquired much of the land on the hill above the cabins and had begun to bulldoze trees and land in order to build houses. Though one developer cast envious eyes on her property, Tate was successful in holding on to her land. Unfortunately, damage done by the builders changed the natural drainage of the hillside, uprooted trees on Possum Path, and caused massive mudslides as well as excess water to seep down to Tophouse and on down to Wisteria. The cabins had to be closed for a time. The situation was finally alleviated when the city spent over \$100,000 to build a retaining wall on Possum Path, but not during Tate's lifetime.

When the Lou Tate Foundation took over the property in 1979, shortly after Tate's death, Tophouse was in very bad condition. Officers of the newly formed Foundation decided to make the renovation of the cabin its top priority so that weaving activities could be continued.

A grant from the City of Louisville in 1983 enabled this restoration to go forward. Sally Moss and Bob Douglas were the two persons most directly involved in carrying out the project.

Today, Tophouse remains the headquarters for most of the weaving activities. Its years of service to the cause of keeping handweaving alive are a reason for pride.

The Happy Birthday Song

These century-old cabins have witnessed many “firsts” during their long years of service. Among them is the story of the Happy Birthday song, the most popular song of the twentieth century according to the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), and the most popular song in the English language according to the Guinness Book of World Records, 1998.

In the 1890’s, when Etta Hest was in residence at Esta cabin, she created annual art festivals for local artists, writers, educators and others who had summer cabins in the area. Sisters Mildred J. and Patty S. Hill, who frequently attended the art festivals, came from a prominent Louisville family. The family had a summer log home, Beaumont Cabin, also known as the Hill House, on Possum Path, located just above Top House Cabin on Kenwood Hill.

Patty Hill is now a nationally recognized pioneer in early childhood education. Mildred Hill collected and composed music as an early ethnomusicologist, documenting the African-American music that permeated the streets, riverboats, and churches of Louisville in the late 1800s. Patty became principal of a demonstration kindergarten at the Louisville Free Kindergarten Association. She found the songs being used in class to be of poor quality and too hard for the children to sing. Between 1889 and 1893, she and Mildred collaborated on a number of songs more appropriate for the classroom. The Hill sisters used the street cries of black vendors for inspiration. One of the first tunes the Hill sisters wrote was called “Good Morning to All,” included in their book called *Song Stories for the Kindergarten*, published

by Clayton F. Summy Co. of Chicago. Local legend says that during a birthday party given for Etta's sister, Lysette Hest, Patty Hill changed the words to their song "Good Morning to All" to "Happy Birthday to You."

A series of lawsuits have revolved around the Hill sisters' stake in the ownership of the lyrics and the melody of the song. In the Harris case, 2016, U.S. District Judge George King ruled that "Happy Birthday to You" is now in the public domain based on the 1893 copyright for "Good Morning to All." The decision reminded the public that "Happy Birthday," one of the few songs that is still orally transmitted, is not in fact a folksong. It was written by two women from Kentucky, and now we also know that it was influenced by Black culture.

The recent discovery of Mildred Hill's notebooks and compositions in the Dwight Anderson Memorial Music Library at the University of Louisville confirms the influence of African-American music on the development of the famous song. In 1892, Mildred wrote an article titled "Negro Music" for *Music*, a Chicago journal. She used the pseudonym Johann Tonsor because she was worried that her ideas wouldn't be taken seriously if readers knew she was a woman. Two decades before the appearance of jazz, she claimed that the African-American sound would be the basis of American music in the next century.

In a 2015 lecture on Mildred Hill, New York University professor Michael Beckerman said, "There is some sense that people probably have that 'Happy Birthday' is a white song or a product of white America...I believe certainly now that the world's most popular song has deep Black roots, deep

Louisville roots reflecting Mildred Hill’s lifetime commitment to African-American sound, which she believed...should be the future.”

Some of the information for this article was taken from “A Peculiar Composition” by Michael L. Jones, first published in *Oxford American* Southern Music Issue: Kentucky, Winter 2017.