

## Francis Wright and Nashoba & Virginia Hill and Free Hill

*Essential Question: How did Francis Wright and Virginia Hill contribute to abolition in Tennessee?*

Francis “Fanny” Wright was a well-educated and wealthy young Englishwoman who came to America in 1818. She and her sister traveled about the country and Wright later wrote a book, *Views on Society and Manners in America*, based on their travels. A number of important people including Thomas Jefferson, Henry Clay, and the Marquis Lafayette were admirers of her work. She and Lafayette developed a deep, personal relationship. When Lafayette visited in 1824, Wright returned as well. On this visit, Wright noticed that a number of the men she met seemed to genuinely dislike the slave system, but were unable to see an alternative to it.

Wright proposed setting up a utopian colony as a social experiment. She wanted to bring together freed slaves and white settlers so that the former slaves could learn to be self-supporting. Lafayette introduced her to Andrew Jackson who helped her locate a 2,000 acre plot of land near Memphis. Because the site was on the Wolf River, Wright decided to name it Nashoba, the Chickasaw word for wolf.

In 1826, members of the colony began clearing land and building cabins. The work was difficult and made worse by sickness and disagreements within the community. The community also faced attacks from outside critics. Religious leaders were particularly critical of Wright’s liberal views on sex. Wright returned to Europe in 1827 to raise money for the colony. When she returned, the colony had strayed from its idealistic roots. The white residents soon left. Wright also left for New Harmony, Indiana. However, Wright could not forget about the people she left behind. In 1827, she returned to Nashoba and offered to take the thirty-one African American residents to Haiti. In Haiti, a nation founded by former slaves, they could live as free people. The residents eagerly took her up on her offer. Nashoba was abandoned and the experiment in equality ended.

Like Wright, Virginia Hill was a wealthy woman. Hill was the daughter of a planter from North Carolina. In 1830, she purchased 2,000 acres of land in what is now Clay County. She then freed her slaves, gave the land to them and moved away. It is unclear exactly what caused her to take this action, but oral tradition in the community holds that four of the freed slaves were her mulatto children. The freed slaves took the surname Free Hill to show that they were free and to show respect to the woman who freed them. The land she gave them also happened to be very hilly and remote therefore the community was also known as Free Hill.

People in Free Hill made a living by farming, and logging. The community at Free Hill served as a refuge for runaway slaves and post-Civil War freedmen. While the isolation of the

community did give the people a degree of protection, they were not completely safe. Nightriders sometimes attacked the community and drove off mules and injured residents.

In the 1960's Free Hill was a thriving small town with two churches, two grocery stores and about 300 residents. Today, only about 100 residents remain. The community continues take pride in its unique history.

Sources: Finger, John. *Tennessee Frontiers: Three Regions in Transition*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. Print.

“Free Hill .” Tennessee *Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. 1998. Print.

“History of Free Hill.” *Free Hill Community*, n.d. Web. 2 July 2014.  
<<http://www.freehillcommunity.org/History.htm>>

“Nashoba.” Tennessee *Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. 1998. Print.

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Use information from the text to complete the Venn diagram below.

**Frances Wright**

**Virginia Hill**

