

IDENTIFYING THE MODEL HOME: 1612 NORTH OBSERVATORY

VERSION 1.0 · 2026-06-11 · ALEX PEMBERTON
COMPANION TO "VENEERS OF HISTORY IN GREEN HILLS EAST", NASHVILLE SCENE

FINDING

The Metro Historic Zoning Commission built the Green Hills East district around the 1927 Tennessean Model Home. But deeds, census, architecture, and the 1938 Sanborn map all affirm the commission misidentified the house.

SUPPORTS IN THE ARTICLE

- the commission misidentified the model home
- the plan is also evident in the house constructed at 1612 N Observatory
- Smith was right about the address and right about the house

ABSTRACT

The Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission (MHZC) built the Green Hills East historic district around the 1927 *Tennessean* Model Home, the demonstration house that gives the neighborhood its claim to national significance. The commission's *Short History* places the Model Home at 1637 S Observatory; the documentary record places it at 1612 N Observatory. Four independent lines of evidence support the identification of 1612 N Observatory: the architecture the *Tennessean* photographed and described, the 1938 Sanborn fire-insurance map, the recorded chain of title, and the federal census. The commission's own narrative concedes the Tennessean Model Home's plan is evident at 1612 N Observatory, and a lone commissioner questioned the identification from the dais; his colleagues recommended the overlay over his dissent. Presented with this evidence, the Metro Planning Department affirmed 1612 N Observatory is the Tennessean Model Home.

METHODOLOGY

The identification rests on triangulation across four record types produced independently of one another.

1. The period architectural record: the *Tennessean's* own renderings, construction-progress photographs, and finished-house and interior photographs of the Tennessean Model Home, published December 1926 through May 1927, read against the building standing at 1612 N Observatory today. Diagnostic exterior and interior features are stated once and tested for presence at 1612 and absence at 1637. Every quotation reproduced here is taken from the archival newspaper page image, and architectural claims rest on the photographs, not the prose around them.
2. The 1938 Sanborn fire-insurance map, which records construction material, footprint, outbuildings, and other building features parcel by parcel for insurance underwriting.
3. The chain of title and the federal census. The Davidson County deeds were read from the recorded instruments; the originating 1927 conveyances for the surrounding lots were pulled to establish who held what, and when. The census sheets (1930, 1940, 1950) were read from the National Archives page images to fix the Beans' household on the ground and to confirm the lot-by-lot walk of the enumerator along the street.
4. The commission's own documentary output — the published *Short History* and the verbatim transcript of the December 17, 2025 MHZC hearing — read for what the commission conceded against its own conclusion. The Metro Planning Department, which oversees the MHZC, affirms the identification presented here.

SOURCES

Primary documents — period reporting (public domain; published before 1929)

- *The Nashville Tennessean*, December 12, 1926, p. 31 — Model Home groundbreaking; architect's rendering of the "Dream Home"; architects Tisdale, Stone and Pinson; owner John Calhoun.
- *The Nashville Tennessean*, January 30, 1927, p. 34 (subhead: "Contractor T. J. Haile, Jr., Rushing Structure to Open to Public in Late March") — construction-progress photograph by staff photographer C. J. Burnell, showing wood stud walls.
- *The Nashville Tennessean*, February 6, 1927, p. 32 — construction-progress photograph by staff photographer C. J. Burnell, showing sheathed walls and erected roof framing, before any masonry.
- *The Nashville Tennessean*, February 27, 1927, p. 24 — "Exterior of Model Home Nearing Completion — Brick Veneer Practically Completed."
- *The Nashville Tennessean*, March 20, 1927, p. 20 — "Tennessean Model Home Will Be Completed In Short Time." The boxed roster "Contractors and Firms Aiding In Tennessean Model Home Work" names the builder, "Thos. J. Haile, Jr.," with the owner (John C. Calhoun), Nashville Trust Co. (Frank Welsh), and the architects (Tisdale, Stone & Pinson), among the contributing firms' advertisements on the page.
- *The Nashville Tennessean*, May 1, 1927, p. 20, and May 2, 1927, p. 1 — opening-day coverage; interior description including "beamed ceilings"; the brick "painted to give it an antique" finish; basement garage, servants' quarters, and laundry.

- *The Nashville Tennessean*, May 6, 1927, p. 20 — paired photograph of the front door and the basement-level garage entrance (“As attractive from one angle as the other”).
- *The Nashville Tennessean*, May 16, 1927, p. 1 — “Home Purchased; Many Visit House,” reporting Holt Bean’s purchase, the “8-room cream-painted brick structure with servants quarter and two inbuilt garages in the basement,” and the “sits, regally, yet snugly, on its picturesque setting” line.

Primary documents — maps and property records (Davidson County Register of Deeds; Library of Congress)

- [Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee](#), Aug. 1929–Apr. 1938, Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress — sheet covering 1612 North Observatory Drive.
- Davidson County Plat Book 547, p. 128 — “Plat of Section 1, Green Hills Subdivision,” W. B. Southgate, surveyor, “As Subdivided for John Calhoun.” [Davidson County Register of Deeds, Plat Book 547, p. 128](#)
- Davidson County Deed Book 919, p. 110 — T. J. Haile Jr. and wife to Holt and Salome Bean, deed dated May 23, 1927, recorded November 13, 1933 (Lot 6). [Davidson County Register of Deeds, Deed Book 919, p. 110](#)
- Davidson County Deed Book 1427, p. 275 — Noel-estate trustees to Holt and Salome Bean, 1946, naming “Lot No. 6 ... owned by Holt Bean.” [Davidson County Register of Deeds, Deed Book 1427, p. 275](#)
- Davidson County Deed Book 716, p. 312 — American Trust Company, Trustee, to Mizella Burton Grant, deed dated December 15, 1926, recorded January 12, 1927 (Lots 12 and 13). [Davidson County Register of Deeds, Deed Book 716, p. 312](#)
- Davidson County Deed Book 700, p. 500 — American Trust Company, Trustee, to John S. and Mildred Moore Milam, recorded January 18, 1927 (Lot 4). [Davidson County Register of Deeds, Deed Book 700, p. 500](#)

Primary documents — census

- 1930 U.S. Census, Davidson County, ED 19-220, Sheet 7A (enumerated April 7, 1930) — Bean household, dwelling 129, on Observatory Drive.
- 1940 U.S. Census, Davidson County, ED 19-264, Sheets 3A–3B — Milam (Lot 4), Bean (Lot 6), Gore (Lot 7), Hunt (Lots 12–13), Creighton (Lot 14) in lot sequence.
- 1950 U.S. Census, Davidson County, ED 19-72 — Bean at “1612 N Obser[v]atory Drive”; Milam at 1608; Hunt at 1637.

Primary documents — the commission’s own

- [A Short History of Historic Green Hills East](#), Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission, posted to nashville.gov, January 10, 2025.
- MHZC public hearing, December 17, 2025, verbatim transcript (Green Hills East section).

FINDINGS



"Architect's drawing of the 'Dream Home,'" *The Nashville Tennessean*, December 12, 1926, p. 31 — the published rendering of the Tennessean Model Home. (Public domain.)

THE ARCHITECTURE: 1612 N OBSERVATORY IS THE HOUSE THE *TENNESSEAN* DREW AND PHOTOGRAPHED

The Tennessean Model Home the newspaper rendered on December 12, 1926 and documented through its May 1, 1927 opening day is a compact, picturesque English Cottage-style house with a steep hipped roof broken by a half-round dormer, two gabled wings carrying ridge chimneys, and a curved wing wall, set on a lot that falls away to the side so the basement opens at grade. Burnell's construction photographs of January 30 and February 6, 1927 show the structure going up as wood stud walls and wood roof framing, with no masonry; on February 27 the paper reported the "Brick Veneer Practically Completed." The brick was then painted, in the period phrasing, to give the house an "antique atmosphere" — the May 16, 1927 sale article calls it an "8-room cream-painted brick structure." These features are present at 1612 N Observatory and absent at 1637 S Observatory, the structure Commissioner Smith described from the dais as "a huge home that's over two lots with a swimming pool with white painted brick."



The Model Home going up in wood frame, before any masonry, *The Nashville Tennessean*, early 1927 (photographs by C. J. Burnell, January 30 and February 6, 1927). (Public domain.)



The same house with its brick veneer in place but not yet painted — the paper reported the “Brick Veneer Practically Completed,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, February 27, 1927. (Public domain.)



The finished house — the “8-room cream-painted brick structure,” its veneer painted to an “antique” finish, *The Nashville Tennessean*, May 1927.

Front Door and Garage Entrance of Model Homea



(Public domain.)

An oblique view of the completed Model Home on its side-sloping lot, the basement garage opening at grade, *The Nashville Tennessean*, 1927.

(Public domain.) The basement is the most physically distinctive of the diagnostic features, and the *Tennessean* described it in detail. On April 17, 1927 the paper reported that “[r]oom for [four] automobiles is left in the basement, although actual provision has been made for only two,” reached by “[t]he concrete drive, leading from Observatory drive into the basement” — a drive-in garage cut into the slope, visible from the street and photographed by Burnell on May 6, 1927 as the “Garage Entrance of Model Home.” The same below-grade level held the laundry, the furnace, and a servant’s room with its own shower, furnished for the opening by Sterchi Bros. That service level is the built form of Plat 1’s fourth covenant, which barred occupancy by any “person of African blood or descent ... except in the capacity of servants.” The 1930 census records the Beans’ maid, Sally Carpenter, twenty-eight, living in the house in the one capacity the deed permitted. The basement room materialized the household arrangement the covenant clause codified.

The match runs deeper than the exterior. The May 1927 photographs show a beamed ceiling and an inset shelving niche, both still visible in the 2014 listing video of 1612 (Pilkerton Realtors; Showcase Photographers). The house retains the customizations of its 1927 interior, documented photograph by photograph in [The Model Home’s Interior: A Century of Photographic Evidence](#).

THE 1938 SANBORN MAP RECORDS 1612 N OBSERVATORY AS FRAME WITH BRICK VENEER OVER A BASEMENT GARAGE

Sanborn fire-insurance maps were drawn for underwriters, who priced risk on the facts in dispute here: whether a wall was masonry or frame, whether a garage was attached and below grade, the footprint of the dwelling, and its position on the lot. The 1938 Nashville sheet for 1612 N Observatory marks the dwelling — with yellow fill and a pink border, the standard Sanborn notation for a wood-framed house with a masonry skin — over a basement garage, on a footprint similar to the floor plan printed in *The Nashville Tennessean*. That is the construction sequence Burnell photographed in 1927 (frame, then veneer) and the basement-garage-on-a-slope the paper photographed on May 6, 1927. The 1938 sheet confirms it independently: the standing house at 1612 is wood-frame, brick-veneered, with a drive-in basement garage, exactly as the *Tennessean* Model Home was built.

DEEDS AND CENSUS RECORDS FIX HOLT BEAN TO 1612 N OBSERVATORY DRIVE

Deed Book 919, page 110 records the conveyance of Lot 6 from T. J. Haile Jr. and his wife to Holt and Salome Bean, the deed dated May 23, 1927 — days after the Model Home opened and was reported sold to Bean. Haile was the Model Home's own builder, and the *Tennessean* documented it from the December 1926 groundbreaking through opening day: the January 30, 1927 construction report ran under the subhead "Contractor T. J. Haile, Jr., Rushing Structure to Open to Public in Late March," and the March 20, 1927 feature carried a boxed roster, "Contractors and Firms Aiding In Tennessean Model Home Work," that named "Thos. J. Haile, Jr." as the builder among the firms furnishing the house, set on the page among those firms' own advertisements. The builder the newspaper named is the grantor who, weeks after the house opened for public viewing, deeded Lot 6 to the Beans. The chain runs from the David Lipscomb College trust through American Trust Company to Haile, who held the lot through construction and then conveyed it to the Beans, and onward through Salome Bean's 1962 sale to Edith Lynch, the Lynches, and the Chapmans to the present owners. A later instrument affirms ownership: in 1946 the Noel-estate trustees, conveying adjoining Glen-Echo land to the Beans, described their starting point as "the southwest corner of Lot No. 6 ... and being the [land] owned by Holt Bean" ([Book 1427, p. 275](#)).

The census corroborates. In 1930 the enumerator — Leo L. Boles, a Lipscomb College science professor and son of the college's president — recorded the Bean household at dwelling 129 on Observatory Drive, between the Milams at 128 and the Suttons at 130, the house owned and valued at \$16,000. By 1950 the address is written out as "1612 N Obser[v]atory Drive," with the same Milam family next door at 1608 — the lot sequence the 1940 enumerator walked as Milam (Lot 4), Bean (Lot 6), Gore (Lot 7). The plat fixes Lot 6 at the bend of the horseshoe, which is precisely where the *Short History* itself says the Model Home stood: "the center plot or 'bend in the largest horseshoe.'" Lots 12 and 13 sit on the far toe of the horseshoe, not at the bend.

Meanwhile the deeds show 1637 S Observatory was never available to build the model home. Lots 12 and 13 were conveyed to Mizella Burton Grant by a deed dated December 15, 1926 and recorded January 12, 1927 ([Book 716, p. 312](#)) — four months before Bean's purchase, and before the Tennessean Model Home was even finished. From Grant the title runs to the Hunts, the Schwartzes, the Hamiltons, and the Beverstein trust, the current owner. Holt Bean appears nowhere in it. The 1940 census marks the separation: the enumerator walked the Bean household at Lot 6 and the Hunt household at Lots 12–13 on the same route the same day, two distinct families on two distinct lots at distinct points along the street. (Grant's own story — a daughter of Life and Casualty Insurance founder A. M. Burton — is told in [The Misidentified Lot: 1637 South Observatory and the Burton Cluster](#).)

THE MHZC SAW THE MODEL HOME PLAN AT 1612 N OBSERVATORY, SAW A DIFFERENT HOUSE AT 1637 S OBSERVATORY, AND NEVER RECONCILED THE TWO

The strongest witness against the commission's address is the commission. Its *Short History* states that "[s]ignificant additions [to 1637 S Observatory] have been constructed over the years but the house plan is also evident in the house constructed at 1612 N Observatory," MHZC staff offered no evidence or confirmation that the house at 1637 S Observatory had been expanded, while conceding that the original Model Home plan is legible at 1612 N Observatory. At the December 17, 2025 hearing the contradiction surfaced in real time. Commissioner Matthew Smith opened deliberation by asking the staff:

"What's the status of 1637 South Observatory? Is it contributing still?"

The staff lead, Robin Zeigler, would not answer:

"I don't have the list with me right now, so I can't answer specific questions like that."

Smith pressed, then voiced the doubt directly:

"Okay. Um, interesting. ... I don't see how one model home that does not appear to be contributing today... It looks like a huge home that's over two lots with a swimming pool with white painted brick. Maybe I've got the addresses wrong."

He had not. Smith cast the lone dissenting vote, and the rest of the commission voted to recommend the overlay over his objection without resolving the issue he had raised. The *Short History* offers the mechanism of its misidentification: Zeigler located the Model Home by eyeballing an inaccurate April 1927 *Tennessean* sketch map of the subdivision, with no confirmation from the recorded plat and deeds. The two households now at the toe of the horseshoe — the Beverstein trust at 1637 (Lots 12–13) and Dylan Reeves at 1635 (Lot 14) — both opposed the overlay, and both own lots whose chains of title, running back to Mizella Burton Grant in 1927 and the Creighton family in 1935, touch no Bean conveyance and no model home transaction. The architecture, the Sanborn map, the deeds, and the census all point to Lot 6, to 1612 N Observatory.

Presented with this evidence and with review of Zeigler's research, Planning Department chief of staff Richel Albright, with approval from Executive Director Lucy Kempf, affirmed via email dated June 3, 2026 that 1612 N Observatory is the Tennessean Model Home.

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