

THE RESTRICTED SUBURB: NASHVILLE AND ITS NATIONAL PEERS

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 COMPANION TO "VENEERS OF HISTORY IN GREEN HILLS EAST", *NASHVILLE SCENE*

FINDING

Green Hills was the automotive heir of a syndicate-built national model sold on its deed restrictions, with the racial bar as the selling point; Nashville ran that model neighborhood by neighborhood for fifty years, and when the racial clause expired, acre-lot minimums did the sorting.

SUPPORTS IN THE ARTICLE

- *Green Hills capped a Nashville generation of restricted suburbs*
- *Murphy Addition, Belle Meade, Belmont/Hillsboro used one model*

ABSTRACT

Green Hills was the automotive version of a replicable national model — the restricted residential park — that Nashville developers had run, neighborhood by neighborhood, for four decades before the Green Hills plats were recorded. Baltimore and Kansas City developments of the 1890s and 1900s built the model and the instruments that made exclusion permanent: automatically self-renewing covenants, mandatory homeowners' associations, and racial deed restrictions a 1928 national survey of subdivision practice treated as the standard worth copying. Nashville imported the template in 1902 with its first fully syndicated streetcar suburb, marketed explicitly on its racial and class restrictions, and subsequent developers carried it west across the favored quarter. When the private covenants were set to expire, one municipality incorporated for the sole stated purpose of converting exclusivity into permanent zoning. Green Hills carried the explicit racial restriction to the end of its legal life in 1960, by which time a 1946 county rule mandating large minimum lot sizes — sold as septic-drainage policy — was already doing the sorting without a word about race.

SOURCES

Scholarship

- Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford University Press, 1985). The standard account of the American suburb as a cultural and economic type — the “romantic suburb,” the “residential park,” and the federal underwriting that nationalized exclusivity after 1934.
- Robert M. Fogelson, *Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870–1930* (Yale University Press, 2005). Reads the deed restriction as the central artifact of the upper-middle-class suburb and the index of the fears that built it; Palos Verdes Estates is its extended case.

- Paige Glotzer, *How the Suburbs Were Segregated: Developers and the Business of Exclusionary Housing, 1890–1960* (Columbia University Press, 2020). On Roland Park, Edward Bouton, and the Roland Park Company as an exporter of the restricted-suburb business model; corroborated by the Roland Park Company archive at Johns Hopkins.
- William S. Worley, *J. C. Nichols and the Shaping of Kansas City* (University of Missouri Press, 1990); Sara Stevens, *Developing Expertise: Architecture and Real Estate in Metropolitan America* (Yale University Press, 2016); and the Pendergast Years project (Kansas City Public Library). On the Country Club District’s self-renewing covenant and mandatory homeowners’ association.
- Virginia P. Dawson, “Protection from Undesirable Neighbors: The Use of Deed Restrictions in Shaker Heights, Ohio.” *Journal of Planning History* 18, no. 2 (2019): 116–36; and LeeAnn Lands, *The Culture of Property: Race, Class, and Housing Landscapes in Atlanta, 1880–1950* (University of Georgia Press, 2009). Two peer suburbs — one Northern, one Southern.
- Michael Jones-Correa, “The Origins and Diffusion of Racial Restrictive Covenants.” *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 4 (2000–01): 541–68; Richard R. W. Brooks and Carol M. Rose, *Saving the Neighborhood: Racially Restrictive Covenants, Law, and Social Norms* (Harvard University Press, 2013); and Helen C. Monchow, *The Use of Deed Restrictions in Subdivision Development* (Institute for Research in Land Economics, 1928). On how the covenant spread nationally and became standard practice.
- Elizabeth A. Herbin-Triant, *Threatening Property: Race, Class, and Campaigns to Legislate Jim Crow Neighborhoods* (Columbia University Press, 2019). The legislative counterpart to the private covenant.

Published reporting (Alex Pemberton, *Nashville Scene* “City Limits”)

- “The Last Single-Family House in the Murphy Addition” (July 31, 2024); “The Only Apartment Building in Belle Meade” (Aug. 29, 2024); “Affluence and Effluence in the Favored Quarter” (Feb. 25, 2025).

THE RESTRICTED SUBURB WAS A TYPE, AND GREEN HILLS IS A LATE INSTANCE

The American “romantic suburb” dates to Llewellyn Park, New Jersey, in 1853, and the “residential park” of curving, landscaped streets to Olmsted and Vaux’s Riverside, Illinois, in 1869.¹ The defining features held constant across seventy years: a single developer assembled a whole tract, built the infrastructure ahead of sales, and bound the lots with restrictions that governed use, appearance, and occupancy. Green Hills’s acre lots and winding streets are that instrument in automotive form.¹³

THE MODEL WAS PERFECTED AT ROLAND PARK AND THE COUNTRY CLUB DISTRICT, AND THE RACIAL COVENANT WAS CENTRAL TO IT

Edward H. Bouton's Roland Park, founded in Baltimore in 1891 by a British-financed syndicate that became the Roland Park Company and laid out in part by the Olmsted Brothers, established the company-built residential park with comprehensive deed restrictions. The company weighed an explicit racial covenant as early as 1893; by 1912 its "Nuisances" deed language barred occupancy "by any negro or person of negro extraction," which it carried into its successor district, Guilford, in 1913.³ J. C. Nichols's Country Club District in Kansas City, named in 1908 once Nichols had assembled more than 1,000 acres, added the two devices that made exclusion permanent: covenants that renewed automatically unless a majority of owners voted to dissolve them, and a mandatory homeowners' association to enforce them in perpetuity.⁴ Nichols advertised the tract as "1,000 Acres Restricted," and a 1928 survey of subdivision practice treated his racial covenants as the national model, copied in more than fifty cities.⁵

The same instrument turned up wherever developers built for the carriage and then the automobile trade. At Palos Verdes Estates outside Los Angeles, laid out by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. in the 1920s, the deed forbade use or occupancy by "any person not of the white race," excepting servants and students — the same servant exception Nashville's Green Hills covenant would carry.⁶ In Shaker Heights, Ohio, the Van Sweringen Company's "Restriction No. 5" required its written consent for every sale, a facially neutral screen against Black and Jewish buyers that the company, and later the city, enforced past the Supreme Court's 1948 ruling against racial covenants.⁷ Once the Court closed off racial zoning in *Buchanan v. Warley* (1917), the private covenant became the favored substitute, spreading through the new high-end subdivisions and then the middle-class market on the advice of the developers, brokers, and lenders who profited from it.⁸ The restriction was the product, and the fear of "unwanted change" was what buyers were paying to escape.²

NASHVILLE'S FIRST FULL INSTANCE WAS THE MURPHY ADDITION, SOLD ON ITS RESTRICTIONS

The Murphy Land Company subdivided sixty-six acres between 1902 and 1905 as the first Nashville tract coordinated with a company-owned streetcar line and a complete municipal infrastructure package. A full-page 1905 *Nashville American* advertisement touted the "high class restrictions" and instructed buyers: "Don't forget that the value of real estate is determined by the *restrictions* placed on it." The deed barred use by "any person or persons of African blood or descent." Racially restrictive covenants and their relentless promotion were, in the reporting on the tract, "the great local innovation of the Murphy Land Company" — the restriction was the marketing.¹¹ White Southerners ran parallel campaigns in the same years to legislate Jim Crow neighborhoods outright, from the Winston-Salem residential-segregation ordinance to Clarence Poe's drive for statewide rural racial zoning; the suburb's covenant did the same work by private contract.¹⁰ In Atlanta, the elite park-

neighborhoods of Druid Hills and Ansley Park became the templates for racially homogeneous subdivision across that city — the nearest Southern parallel to Nashville’s sequence.⁹

THE MODEL WAS A CHILD-CENTERED REFUGE SOLD AGAINST THE DISEASED CITY

The Murphy Addition was advertised as a “suburban park” with “pure air,” free of the “disease and vice” of the city; its bar on Black residence sat among bans on the “charitable institution[s]” of slum reformers and on swine and other “uncleanly” animals.¹¹ The suburb sold familial privacy and moral order, an escape from an urban “congestion” understood in racial terms.¹ The advertising rhetoric is treated in [Selling the Restricted Suburb: How Green Hills Was Marketed](#).

ONE FIRM CARRIED THE MODEL WEST ACROSS THE FAVORED QUARTER

Bransford Realty copied the Murphy formula, subdividing or selling lots in Richland, Belle Meade, and Belle Meade Golf Links through the 1900s.¹¹ Belle Meade’s first subdivision out of the plantation carried the now-standard restrictions — large lots, hundred-foot setbacks, mandatory minimum construction costs, and a bar on “persons of African blood or descent.”¹² One model migrated outward: Murphy, Richland, Belle Meade, then the postwar highlands of Green Hills, Forest Hills, Oak Hill, and Hillwood, each iteration pulling elites farther from the city center.

WHEN THE PRIVATE COVENANT LAPSED, EXCLUSIVITY WAS RE-SECURED PUBLICLY

The streetcar-era model had a flaw: deed restrictions expired. Belle Meade’s covenants were set to lapse at the end of 1938, and on October 25 of that year 397 poll-tax-paying residents incorporated a city “for the purpose of protecting property values by zoning and planning, and for no other purpose,” whose first act banned apartments and all commercial use.¹² The device differed from Nichols’s self-renewing covenant, but the aim was identical: make the restriction permanent. Oak Hill and Forest Hills incorporated in turn on the same model, banning apartments and commerce and imposing large minimum lots to preempt absorption into the city and its land-use regime.¹³ The wider covenant-to-zoning migration is traced in [From Covenant to Code: Nashville’s 1933 Zoning Map](#).

GREEN HILLS IS THE MODEL’S AUTOMOTIVE TERMINUS

Green Hills carried the explicit form of the restriction to the end of its legal life. Plat 1’s fourth covenant barred ownership or occupancy by “persons of African blood or descent ... except in the capacity of servants,” recorded at Book 770 and running until January 1, 1960 (see [Plat 1, Covenant 4](#)). It also carried a second instrument that named no race. The postwar favored quarter — Oak Hill, Forest Hills, Green Hills, Hillwood — was governed by the car and by county subdivision rules that, after 1946, set half-acre and, in poor-soil areas, one-acre minimum lots, ostensibly for septic drain fields. The lot-size minimum set a price floor that did the work of exclusion without a word about race,

and it outlasted the covenant: by the time the racial clause expired in 1960, long after the Supreme Court had made it unenforceable, the acre lot was doing the sorting on its own.¹³ Septic geology supplied the sanitary alibi where a racial rationale could no longer be written down.

No single firm links Baltimore to Davidson County; the instrument is what traveled: the syndicated tract, the residential-park atmosphere, the child-centered pitch, and the restriction written first. How far the explicit covenant reached across Nashville's peer suburbs is taken up in [Auditing the Overlays: Racial Clauses Citywide](#).

NOTES

1. Kenneth T. Jackson, [Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), on the "romantic suburb," the "residential park," and the suburb as an escape from urban "congestion." ↩ ↩
2. Robert M. Fogelson, [Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870–1930](#) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), reading the deed restriction as the central artifact of the upper-middle-class suburb and the index of the fears that built it. ↩
3. Paige Glotzer, [How the Suburbs Were Segregated: Developers and the Business of Exclusionary Housing, 1890–1960](#) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), on Bouton, the Roland Park Park and Guilford, and its racial-covenant practice across Roland Park and Guilford; corroborated by the Roland Park Company archive at Johns Hopkins. ↩
4. William S. Worley, [J. C. Nichols and the Shaping of Kansas City: Innovation in Planned Residential Communities](#) (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990); Sara Stevens, [Developing Expertise: Architecture and Real Estate in Metropolitan America](#) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); and the [Pendergast Years project](#) (Kansas City Public Library), on the automatically self-renewing covenant and the mandatory homeowners' association. ↩
5. Helen C. Monchow, [The Use of Deed Restrictions in Subdivision Development](#) (Chicago: Institute for Research in Land Economics, 1928), which surveyed eighty-four subdivisions, forty of them carrying racial restrictions, and treated Nichols's covenants as the model. ↩
6. Fogelson, [Bourgeois Nightmares](#), on Palos Verdes Estates, whose deed barred use or occupancy by "any person not of the white race," with an exception for servants and students. ↩
7. Virginia P. Dawson, "[Protection from Undesirable Neighbors: The Use of Deed Restrictions in Shaker Heights, Ohio](#)," *Journal of Planning History* 18, no. 2 (2019): 116–36. ↩
8. Michael Jones-Correa, "[The Origins and Diffusion of Racial Restrictive Covenants](#)," *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 4 (2000–01): 541–68; and Richard R. W. Brooks and Carol M. Rose, [Saving the Neighborhood: Racially Restrictive Covenants, Law, and Social Norms](#) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). ↩
9. LeeAnn Lands, [The Culture of Property: Race, Class, and Housing Landscapes in Atlanta, 1880–1950](#) (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009). ↩
10. Elizabeth A. Herbin-Triant, [Threatening Property: Race, Class, and Campaigns to Legislate Jim Crow Neighborhoods](#) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). ↩
11. Alex Pemberton, "The Last Single-Family House in the Murphy Addition," *Nashville Scene*, July 31, 2024. ↩ ↩ ↩
12. Alex Pemberton, "The Only Apartment Building in Belle Meade," *Nashville Scene*, August 29, 2024. ↩ ↩
13. Alex Pemberton, "Affluence and Effluence in the Favored Quarter," *Nashville Scene*, February 25, 2025. ↩ ↩ ↩

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Fogelson, Robert M. [Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870–1930](#). New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

- Glotzer, Paige. *How the Suburbs Were Segregated: Developers and the Business of Exclusionary Housing, 1890–1960*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.
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