

# THE SOURCES OF THE SHORT HISTORY: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CRITIQUE

VERSION 1.0 · 2026-06-11 · ALEX PEMBERTON

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

## FINDING

Eleven of the Short History's fifteen footnotes are Tennessean clippings from the model home's own sponsor; it cites no deed and no scholarship — the gap that puts the model home at the wrong address and hides the racial covenant printed on the same deed page as the cost clause it does cite.

## SUPPORTS IN THE ARTICLE

- twelve of the Short History's fifteen footnotes are newspaper clippings, eleven of them from the *Tennessean*
- the district's national-significance claim rests on a single mail-order house-plan catalog, cited three times
- the Short History cites no scholarship and no recorded deed, and the missing deed work is the source of its central error

## ABSTRACT

The MHZC's *Short History of Green Hills East* builds the district's significance almost entirely from the promotional record of the people who built and sold the neighborhood. Twelve of its fifteen footnotes are contemporaneous newspaper clippings, eleven from the *Tennessean*, the model home's own sponsor, and the claim to national significance rests on a single mail-order house-plan catalog. The history cites no scholarship and no recorded deed. The missing deed work is the source of its central error — the model home at the wrong address — and it is why the history never sees the racial covenant printed on the same deed page as the cost minimum it does cite. The document reproduces the 1927 sales vocabulary as its own narrative voice and reads the neighborhood as a roster of notable men, in a mode of preservation history that the field spent the last half-century correcting.

## METHODOLOGY

The text was read from the MHZC document filed in the December 17, 2025 hearing record (*A Short History of Historic Green Hills East*). Every numbered footnote and every figure-source credit was tabulated and classified by publication and by source type: contemporaneous newspaper, promotional or movement literature, secondary scholarship, recorded deed or plat, map, oral testimony, or government record. The two image-dependent claims — the content of the advertisement the commission clipped as its Figure 1, and the form of the *Tennessean* sketch map at its Figure 9 — were verified by direct inspection of the document's own page images against the underlying public-domain 1927 *Tennessean* originals. Each factual claim of consequence was checked against the corresponding primary instrument established in the companion briefs: the recorded deeds, the plats, and the federal census. Direct quotations are cited in the notes.

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## SOURCES

### The document under review

- Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission, *A Short History of Historic Green Hills East*. Submitted in support of the proposed Green Hills East Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay; in the December 17, 2025 MHZC hearing record. Fifteen numbered footnotes; figure credits as cited.

### Primary instruments the history does not cite

- Davidson County Register of Deeds, [Book 919, page 110](#) — T. J. Haile Jr. to Holt and Salome Bean (Lot 6, 1612 North Observatory). Recites the recorded purchase consideration of \$12,250.
- Davidson County Register of Deeds, [Book 770, pages 41–42](#) — Plan of Green Hills, Plat 1 covenants. Covenant 3 sets the construction-cost minimum (“no residence will be erected on said property which costs less than \$5000.00”); Covenant 4 is the racial restriction.
- Davidson County [Deed Book 716, page 312](#) — American Trust Company, Trustee, to Mizella Burton Grant (Lots 12 and 13, 1637 South Observatory), recorded January 12, 1927.

### The history’s national-significance source, and the program it describes

- Henry Atterbury Smith, ed., [The Books of a Thousand Homes, Vol. I](#) (New York: Home Owners’ Service Institute, 1923). A mail-order house-plan catalog offering several hundred small-house plans with working drawings and specifications for sale; the document’s sole authority for the home-demonstration movement (cited at notes 3, 4, 5).
- Janet Hutchison, “The Cure for Domestic Neglect: Better Homes in America, 1922–1935,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture II* (1986). Scholarship on the Better Homes movement the history does not consult.

### Advertisements (for the coded marketing lexicon)

- *Nashville Tennessean*, April 10, 1927, p. 68 — the Green Hills “OPPORTUNITY” ad; the source of the commission’s Figure 1.
- *Nashville Tennessean*, April 6, 1927, p. 3 — the four-point pitch including “RESTRICTIONS — For Your Protection.” ProQuest doc. 1898671154.
- *Nashville Tennessean*, January 23, 1927, p. 9 — Benz Realty, “A HOME FOR THE DISCRIMINATING ... protection from inferior and poorly built homes.” ProQuest doc. 1898671700.

### Interview and scholarship

- Karen Benjamin, [Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools: Selling Segregation Before the New Deal](#) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2025); and interview by the author, May 18, 2026.

- Paige Glotzer, *How the Suburbs Were Segregated: Developers and the Business of Exclusionary Housing, 1890–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).
- Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg: The Restoration of Virginia’s Eighteenth-Century Capital* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002).
- Ned Kaufman, *Place, Race, and Story: Essays on the Past and Future of Historic Preservation* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
- Max Page and Randall Mason, eds., *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
- Andrew Hurley, *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

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## FINDINGS

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### THE HISTORY’S EVIDENTIARY BASE IS THE SELLERS’ OWN PROMOTIONAL RECORD

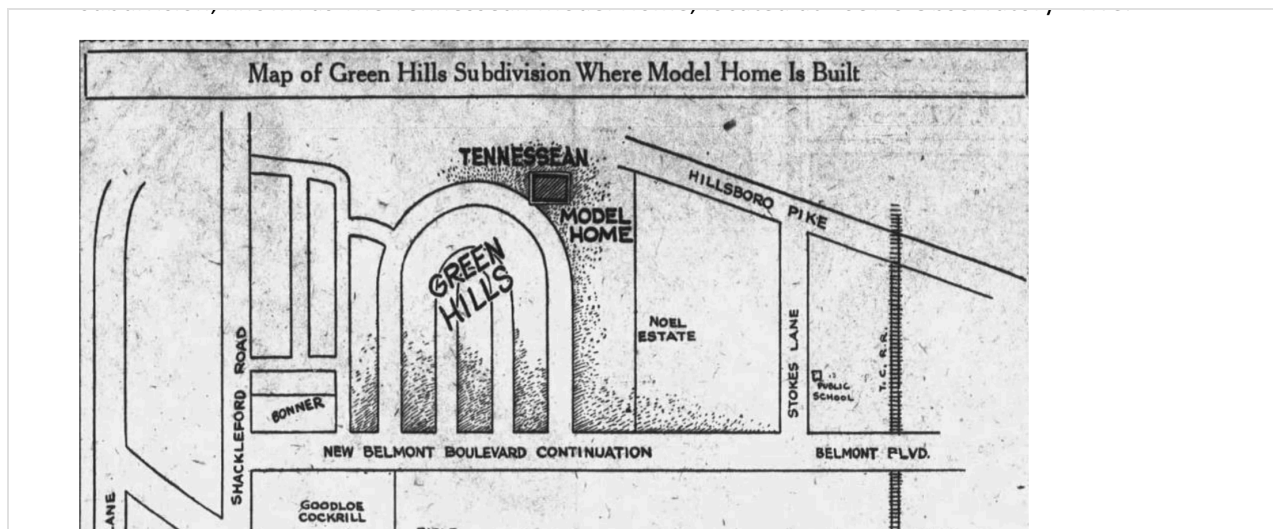
The Short History carries fifteen numbered footnotes. Eleven cite *The Tennessean* (notes 1 and 6 through 15). One cites the *Nashville Banner* (note 2). The remaining three (notes 3, 4, 5) cite one book — Henry Atterbury Smith’s *The Books of a Thousand Homes*, a mail-order catalog that sold several hundred small-house plans with working drawings by post. The case for the district’s national significance — the claim the whole nomination turns on — rests on a sales catalog produced by the movement it credits. The figure credits run the same way. Of the sixteen figures, the *Tennessean* supplies six, the *Banner* two, recorded plat books three, and old maps three; the rest come from the Metro Historical Commission’s own files. No footnote and no figure cites a work of scholarship. The document also reproduces three recorded plats (Figures 3, 5, 6) and not one recorded deed. It went to the courthouse for the drawings that show lot lines and skipped the instruments that show owners and restrictions. Of the eleven *Tennessean* footnotes, ten point to the paper’s promotion of its own model home and subdivision — “The Model Roof for The Model Home,” “Men to Be on Ground Every Day for 5 Weeks to Receive Visitors,” “Tennessean’s Model Home Thrown Open to Throng of 15,000,” “Green Hills Subdivision a Proven Success!”<sup>2</sup> The lone gesture toward a secondary source folds back into the paper: “Archivist, Debbie Cox, in her Nashville Blog Post, noted that the *Tennessean* wrote ...”<sup>1</sup> The chain of authority collapses to a single interested publisher and a house-plan catalog.

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### THE TENNESSEAN WAS THE MODEL HOME’S SPONSOR, AND AN IMPRECISE ONE; THE HISTORY TREATS IT AS A RECORD OF FACT

The demonstration house was “The Tennessean Model Home.” The home-demonstration program reached the public through newspapers by design, and the Short History says as much: the Home

Owners' Service Institute led the movement "by publishing home plans and information first in the New York Tribune and then through syndication."<sup>1</sup> The Nashville instance carried the sponsoring paper's name across its front, and the paper ran "Regular full-page articles" on the construction that, in the history's own words, were "used not only to sell ideas but also materials and home goods."<sup>1</sup> The coverage was a sales vehicle, by the document's own admission. The history reads it as testimony. It lifts the paper's copy into its own narrative voice — "perfection in every detail," "a thing to be admired," "near perfect as possible for small homes," "an exclusive neighborhood in which to erect substantial homes"<sup>3</sup> — and it carries the paper's carelessness with the copy. The Beans' purchase price appears as "\$12,000,"<sup>1</sup> the *Tennessean's* rounded number; the recorded deed states \$12,250.<sup>4</sup> The paper's promotional sketch map (below) marks the home at the bend of the horseshoe with no lot numbers, no distinction between North and South Observatory, and only stylized streets. The document adds errors of its own. It misspells the paper as "Tenneassean," gives the lead institution two different names ("Home Owners Service Institute" and "Homeowners Service Institute, Inc."), and drops a word ("the first house was enlarge").<sup>1</sup> It also assigns the movement's founding to a 1923 women's-club model home, when the campaign had launched in 1922.<sup>7</sup> No single slip is fatal. Together they describe a document that reproduced a promotional source without checking it, down to the typography.



"Map of Green Hills Subdivision Where Model Home is Built," *The Nashville Tennessean*, April 3, 1927 — the schematic promotional map the commission relied on for the model home's location. It marks the house at the bend of the horseshoe but carries no lot numbers, no North/South Observatory distinction, and stylized streets. (Public domain.)

## THE HISTORY DID NO DEED RESEARCH, AND THE MISSING DEED WORK IS THE SOURCE OF ITS ERRORS

Not one recorded instrument is cited by book and page anywhere in the document. The staff did consult the courthouse: three recorded plats appear as figures. They read the class of land record that shows lots and skipped the class that names owners and carries covenants, and the deeds were a public search away. Four consequences follow.

*The central artifact is misidentified.* The history places the Tennessean Model Home at “1637 S Observatory Drive (lots 12 and 13).”<sup>1</sup> The deeds and the census fix it at 1612 North Observatory, Lot 6, and show that the 1637 lots were privately held by Mizella Burton Grant in January 1927, four months before the model home was sold. The error most likely traces to the promotional sketch map above: a drawing made to sell lots, read onto a parcel on the wrong arm of the horseshoe. The document is internally consistent about it. It always locates the home at 1637 and refers to 1612 only as a place where “the original design can be seen,”<sup>1</sup> a surviving copy of the plan. The error is the product of method: significance assigned without reading the chain of title. The proof is laid out in [Identifying the Model Home: 1612 North Observatory, Not 1637 South and The Misidentified Lot: 1637 South Observatory and the Burton Cluster](#).

*An oral claim goes uncorroborated.* “Longtime resident Lee Maddux says that 3810 Belmont, at the corner of Burton Ave and Belmont, was owned by Burton.”<sup>1</sup> The ownership of 3810 Belmont is a matter of recorded deeds. The history reports the recollection and never checks it against them.

*Figures come from the paper, not the instrument.* The “\$5,000 minimum building restriction” is footnoted to “New Subdivision Sells Rapidly,” *Tennessean*, 6 Feb 1927.<sup>1</sup> The recorded covenant states the same figure — “no residence will be erected on said property which costs less than \$5000.00” ([Book 770, p. 42](#)) — so the number is correct, but the instrument, not the paper, is the authority.<sup>5</sup>


*The racial covenant goes unseen.* That cost minimum sits on the same deed page as Covenant 4, the bar on ownership or occupancy by “persons of African blood or descent ... except in the capacity of servants.”<sup>5</sup> Reading the deed to source the \$5,000 figure would have placed the racial covenant directly in front of the author. Sourcing the figure to a newspaper is how it stayed out of the history. The omission reads as a failure of basic historical research, not a proven editorial choice; the question of intent is taken up in [Whitewashing the History: The Short History Critique](#), and the covenant itself in [Plat 1, Covenant 4: The Racial Covenant in the Green Hills Deeds](#).

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## THE HISTORY REPRODUCES THE MARKETING’S CODED LANGUAGE WITHOUT EXAMINING IT

The document repeats the 1927 sales vocabulary as its own. The neighborhood sits on a “plateau that overlooks the knobs,” advertised “Where There is No Smoke or Dirt,”<sup>6</sup> sold as a “respite from urban living.”<sup>1</sup> In the suburban marketing of the period, elevation, clean air, and distance from the city carried a racial and class meaning: the healthy, ordered suburb set against a city imagined as crowded, dirty, and racially mixed. The historian Karen Benjamin shows how developers “assured buyers that deed restrictions were protective rather than restrictive,”<sup>14</sup> and, in an interview for this article, how a “healthier environment” was pitched to parents who would read it as protection for their children.<sup>15</sup> The commission’s own Figure 1 is the illustration from the ad — a suited man presiding over a grid of ordered lots beneath the word “OPPORTUNITY” — and the copy printed beside that

picture reads “Green Hills is attracting the sort of people you’d like as neighbors today as well as tomorrow,” “Values here will rise quickly. That’s certain,” and “The Plateau Overlooking The Knobs.”<sup>8</sup> The commission reproduced the image and engaged none of the words. The campaign’s other advertising was plainer still. Green Hills was sold to “those who want an exclusive neighborhood in which to erect substantial homes” (a line the Short History quotes),<sup>1</sup> as “A HOME FOR THE DISCRIMINATING ... in a restricted location, where you have protection from inferior and poorly built homes” (Benz Realty, Jan. 23, 1927),<sup>9</sup> and under the banner “RESTRICTIONS — For Your Protection” (Apr. 6, 1927).<sup>10</sup> In 1920s subdivision advertising “exclusive” and “restricted” were the marketing companions of the racial covenant and the cost floor, and buyers read them as such.<sup>11</sup> The developers had used the same words for a generation, from J. C. Nichols’s 1908 “Restricted for Those Who Want Protection” in Kansas City<sup>12</sup> to the Murphy Addition’s 1905 “the value of real estate is determined by the restrictions placed on it.”<sup>13</sup> The Short History quotes “exclusive ... substantial homes” as evidence of neighborhood character and lets the period meaning pass. The lexicon is examined in Selling the Restricted Suburb: How Green Hills Was Marketed and “For Your Protection”: A Protective Lexicon, 1908–2025.



**GREEN HILLS**

**Nashville's Fastest Selling Subdivision  
Offers Opportunity To The Investors**

**T**HE opportunity to make money is here now! The expertly planned Green Hills subdivision is now being offered to you at prices far below what you'll have to pay later on.

The location of Green Hills is ideal for investing, situated right in the path of the city's expansion. Values here will rise quickly. That's certain.

And it's environment is ideal for home-building. Advantages of living in the city and country are combined here. And Green Hills is attracting the sort of people you'd like as neighbors today as well as tomorrow.

Convenient terms of extended payments make it easy for you.

*A representative will be on the grounds at the field office every afternoon.*

**How to Get There**

Drive out Belmont Boulevard to the end of it's new extension and you're right at the property.

**GREEN HILLS, "The Plateau Overlooking The Knobs"**

CONSULT ANY OF THE FOLLOWING "REALTORS"

<b>BENZ REALTY CO.</b> 309 Church St. Phone 6-2671	<b>G. A. MADDUX &amp; CO.</b> 241 Fourth Ave., N. Phone 6-1007
<b>BOLLING &amp; HINRICHS</b> 520 Union St. Phone 6-6931	<b>A. P. MARTIN &amp; SON</b> 628-630 Stahlman Bldg. Phone 6-1048

Green Hills advertisement, *The Nashville Tennessean*, April 10, 1927. The commission reproduced this ad's illustration as its Figure 1. The copy beside it sold "the sort of people you'd like as neighbors today as well as tomorrow" and "The Plateau Overlooking The Knobs," and the history engages none of it. (Public domain.)

## THE HISTORY FILLS ITS GAPS WITH GUESSWORK

Much of what links its facts is speculation. The name Green Hills "may come from" the view of three hills; a marketing tool was "most likely" the origin; Eden Avenue was named "possibly" after the Garden of Eden; "Shriver may have known Bonner, as Mrs. Bonner is listed in 1897 as receiving a free gas cook stove from the Nashville Gas Co."<sup>1</sup> The name-origin passage — a poem of the 1800s, an 1829 song, a 1920s opera — is speculative etymology with no bearing on the district's

significance. Speculation has a place in historical writing, marked as such and bounded by what the records can and cannot show. The Short History supplies the hedges and skips the reckoning: it strings the guesses into a continuous story and never tests them against the record, and the result is folk history.

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## THE METHOD BELONGS TO AN OLDER, ELITE MODE OF PRESERVATION

The “Short Histories by Street” section is a register of first residents and their employers, and it foregrounds notable men: Judge Thomas Shriver, chancellor and appellate judge and gas-company founder; Andrew Mizell Burton, “the founder of Life and Casualty Insurance Company,”<sup>1</sup> with an avenue named for him. The section records who lived on each street and what each man did for a living. It does not ask who was kept out, who worked in the houses, or how the neighborhood was assembled. American preservation began the same way. Its first national body, the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, was founded in 1853 to save a founding father’s estate, and its formative restoration, Colonial Williamsburg, was rebuilt with Rockefeller money beginning in 1926 as an idealized eighteenth-century capital, and for decades it left the enslaved people who were about half the colonial town out of its public story.<sup>16</sup> The Short History performs the same operation a century later. It restores the judges and the insurance founders and leaves out the servants in the basements and the covenant on the deeds. The field has spent fifty years correcting that paradigm. Ned Kaufman faults a preservation that saved buildings for their form, their style, or the pedigree of their architects, and argues for protecting “storyscapes,” the places that carry a community’s history.<sup>17</sup> The same critical turn runs through the field’s recent historiography.<sup>18</sup> The correction is now institutional, and it reached Nashville. The National Park Service’s Underrepresented Communities program, begun in 2014, funds states and cities to document the histories the national register long left out, and the Metro Historical Commission — the body whose staff produced this history — won one of its grants. The commission used the grant to document Nashville’s mid-twentieth-century Black neighborhoods, and the Short Histories that resulted, for Haynes Heights, Haynes Manor, and Lathan-Youngs, name race openly and at length.<sup>19</sup> The commission has written inclusive history. It has kept the practice on one side of the color line. The grant paid for a full racial accounting of the neighborhoods built under Jim Crow for Black residents, while the white-neighborhood histories, Green Hills East among them, were drafted in-house with no such charge and the racial content of their own deeds left out. Across the commission’s overlay histories, the four Black-neighborhood accounts carry 178 of the 193 race-language mentions, and the historically white neighborhoods — including those whose founding deeds barred Black ownership — carry almost none, as Counting the Silence: Race-Language Asymmetry in the Short Histories sets out. The Short History was filed in 2025, by a commission that had done the inclusive work elsewhere and brought none of it here.

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## THE RICHER HISTORY WAS ALREADY IN THE DOCUMENT'S OWN MATERIALS

The method missed an account a sound one would have found, and the evidence for it sits in the staff's own pages. The resident lists name a cluster of Life and Casualty Insurance figures — A. M. Burton, the company's founder, with an avenue named for him; "Frank C. and Cloie Womack (Dist Mgr L&C Insurance Co.)" on Observatory Drive;<sup>1</sup> Otis P. Grant, Burton's son-in-law — and Holt Bean, who bought the model home, rose to executive at the same firm. The kinship-and-employment network that built the favored quarter of Green Hills is legible in the directory the staff transcribed, and the history never examines it. The companion briefs read it out: [Holt Bean: A Life and The Misidentified Lot: 1637 South Observatory and the Burton Cluster](#). The servant rooms named in the model home's own plan, and the racial covenant recorded on the deeds, are the other absences. Reading the advertisements and the deeds would have produced a fuller and more accurate history than the promotional digest the commission filed.

The racial omission reads as a byproduct of method, not proof of intent; the question of deliberate intent is taken up in [Whitewashing the History: The Short History Critique](#). The footnote and figure tallies describe the version of the *Short History* in the December 17, 2025 hearing record.

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## NOTES

1. Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission, *A Short History of Historic Green Hills East* (Nashville: Metro Nashville, in the December 17, 2025 MHZC hearing record). All quotations attributed to the Short History are from this document. ↩ ↩ ↩ ↩ ↩ ↩ ↩ ↩ ↩ ↩ ↩ ↩
2. The four headlines are the Short History's own footnotes 10, 11, 12, and 9, citing *The Nashville Tennessean* of February 13, April 3, May 2, and March 9, 1927. ↩
3. These descriptive phrases are quoted by the Short History from the paper at its notes 7–9, citing *The Nashville Tennessean* of December 9, 1926 ("perfection in every detail ... a thing to be admired"), January 8, 1927 ("near perfect as possible for small homes"), and March 9, 1927 ("an exclusive neighborhood in which to erect substantial homes"). ↩
4. Davidson County Register of Deeds, Book 919, page 110 (T. J. Haile Jr. to Holt and Salome Bean), reciting a consideration of \$12,250. ↩
5. Davidson County Register of Deeds, Book 770, pages 41–42, Plan of Green Hills, Plat 1 covenants: Covenant 3, "no residence will be erected on said property which costs less than \$5000.00"; Covenant 4, the bar on "persons of African blood or descent ... except in the capacity of servants." See [Plat 1, Covenant 4: The Racial Covenant in the Green Hills Deeds](#). ↩ ↩
6. *Nashville Banner*, May 6, 1928 (Short History, note 2). ↩
7. The Short History dates the movement to a 1923 model home for the General Federation of Women's Clubs; Better Homes in America was organized in 1922. See [The Better Homes in America Movement](#). ↩
8. *The Nashville Tennessean*, April 10, 1927, p. 68 — the Green Hills "OPPORTUNITY" advertisement, the source of the commission's Figure 1. ↩
9. *The Nashville Tennessean*, January 23, 1927, p. 9, Benz Realty Co. classified. ProQuest doc. 1898671700. ↩
10. *The Nashville Tennessean*, April 6, 1927, p. 3. ProQuest doc. 1898671154. ↩
11. Paige Glotzer, *How the Suburbs Were Segregated: Developers and the Business of Exclusionary Housing, 1890–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), on developers' deliberate use of racial exclusion to structure suburban real-estate markets. ↩
12. J. C. Nichols Company advertisement, *Kansas City Sun*, c. 1908 ("1,000 Acres Restricted for Those Who Want Protection"). See [Selling the Restricted Suburb: How Green Hills Was Marketed](#). ↩
13. Murphy Land Company advertisement, *Nashville American*, June 4, 1905. See [The Restricted Suburb: Nashville and Its National Peers](#). ↩
14. Karen Benjamin, *Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools: Selling Segregation Before the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2025), p. 234. ↩
15. Karen Benjamin, interview by the author, May 18, 2026. ↩
16. Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg: The Restoration of Virginia's Eighteenth-Century Capital* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002). Greenspan documents that the restoration long omitted the enslaved population — about half the colonial town, per Thad Tate's 1957 study — from its public interpretation. ↩

17. Ned Kaufman, *Place, Race, and Story: Essays on the Past and Future of Historic Preservation* (New York: Routledge, 2009). The characterization of the older paradigm follows Dianne Harris, review of *Place, Race, and Story*, *Journal of American History* 97, no. 2 (2010): 482–83; “storyscapes” is Kaufman’s term. ↩
18. See Max Page and Randall Mason, eds., *Giving Preservation a History* (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Andrew Hurley, *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010). ↩
19. The National Park Service’s Underrepresented Communities Grant Program was established in 2014. The Metropolitan Historical Commission’s award funded *Documenting Nashville’s Mid-20th Century African American Neighborhoods*; see [Metro Historic Preservation, Grants and Special Projects](#). The race-language counts across the commission’s overlay histories are set out in [Counting the Silence: Race-Language Asymmetry in the Short Histories](#). ↩

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