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Germantown: A Cultural Convergence of Past and Present

Bound by Hume Street to the north, Jefferson Street to the south, Third Avenue to the east, and Eighth Avenue to the west, the colorful Germantown neighborhood lies just north of downtown Nashville, nearly bordering the Cumberland River. Named for the German immigrants who primarily populated the area after relocating to the nearly eighteen-square-block area in the mid- to late-1800s, the area has faced several setbacks over the years that have destroyed its historic value. However, over the last thirty years, the area has experienced significant renovation and garnered citywide attention for the strides made in restoring its architectural features and public domain, as well as in inviting new businesses and residents to the area. Modern Germantown has risen after nearly a century of decline and is now similarly inspired by the diversity and strong work ethic brought by those who first gave meaning to the neighborhood.

The area demarcated today as Germantown first attracted wild animals to the naturally occurring salt licks and sulfur springs in its vicinity¹ and then eventually became the dwelling place and hunting ground for the Shawnee, Chickasaw, and Cherokee tribes who migrated into the area.² The expansion of these roots began in 1786 after David McGavock, the son of James McGavock, Sr., came from Virginia to purchase 2,240 acres of land near the Cumberland River,

1. Gary Gaston, "The Historic Germantown Neighborhood, Nashville, TN," *Nashville Civic Design Center*, accessed April 14, 2015, http://www.sitemason.com/files/lw9B9C/NCDC_HistoricGermantown.pdf.

2. Jane Duke, "Nashville's Historic Germantown," *About Travel*, accessed April 14, 2015, <http://nashville.about.com/od/nashvillehistory/qt/germantown.htm>.

part of which encapsulated what would later become known as North Nashville.³ They then began to sell the parcels of land intended for agricultural purposes, marking the initial transition of the area being used primarily for residential purposes, mirroring the trend of urbanization other cities would experience in the ensuing decades.⁴ This decision prepared Germantown for its assumption of a fully immersed role in Nashville's economy.

In 1865, the Ninth Ward, otherwise known as Germantown, was created as Nashville's first residential subdivision.⁵ Over time, German immigrants were increasingly drawn to this expanding community (hence its fittingly eponymous name), blending their cultural heritage with the Irish, Italian, Swiss, and Jewish people who also lived there.⁶ The Germans absolutely flourished in "trades that were...practical and necessary to good living. There were groceries, bakers, bootmakers, cigar makers, salon keepers, beer garden proprietors, candy manufacturers, furniture craftsmen, and so on."⁷ A relatively recent excavation in 1992 led by Dr. William Fowler of Vanderbilt University unearthed "a large cache of artifacts...[that are] 'all sorts of things you would think to find associated with a store,'" further evidencing the role Germantown held in early Nashville commerce.⁸ Butchery also emerged at the forefront of the cottage industries prevalent in this area as a continuation of the Germans' traditional practices in Europe,

3. John Lawrence Connelly, *North Nashville and Germantown: Yesterday and Today* (Nashville: Ambrose Printing Co., 1982), 3.

4. Gary Gaston, "The Historic Germantown Neighborhood, Nashville, TN," *Nashville Civic Design Center*, accessed April 14, 2015, http://www.sitemason.com/files/lw9B9C/NCDC_HistoricGermantown.pdf.

5. "History of Germantown," *Historic Germantown*, accessed April 14, 2015, <http://historicgermantown.org/history/>

6. John Lawrence Connelly, "The Rebirth of Germantown," *CivicScope*, last modified January 13, 2010, <http://www.civicscope.org/nashville-tn/RebirthofGermantown>.

7. John Lawrence Connelly (presentation at the Sixteenth Tennessee Conference on Local History, Nashville, TN, December 5, 1980).

8. Gray Sasser, "What Can Empty Lot Tell About the 19th Century? Plenty," *Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), June 17, 1992.

which lead to the demand for building meatpacking houses and gave Germantown its “Butchertown” moniker.⁹ Continuing to employ the skills they used in their home country gave the Germans a distinct advantage in securing their position in Nashville’s burgeoning industrial scene.

Mixing with other ethnicities of European descent in the environment of Nashville seemed to also intensify the achievement of the Germans’ pursuit of a livelihood, reflecting the similar, shared experiences these immigrants once had their native countries. The microcosm of Germantown fostered such diversity that contributed to the Germans’ overall success in the interwoven nature of working and living in the same space. By this century’s close, “Germantown was remarkably diverse ethnically, economically, and architecturally...[reaching] its peak in the years immediately before World War I, with meatpacking (Neuhoff) and textile production (Werthan Bag Co.) becoming the area’s largest employers.”¹⁰ Overall, the craftsman mentality of German culture was exemplified through their rich contributions to early Nashville’s development.

The growth of Germantown continued largely unencumbered for several decades, but change was certainly inevitable as the turn-of-the-century approached. One of the first major factors that influenced Germantown’s gradual downturn was the wide-scale development in transportation that Nashville experienced. As local historian John Lawrence Connelly explains, “Streetcar lines expanded and advancement was made in motor transportation...there was a

9. Gary Gaston, “The Historic Germantown Neighborhood, Nashville, TN,” *Nashville Civic Design Center*, accessed April 14, 2015, http://www.sitemason.com/files/1w9B9C/NCDC_HistoricGermantown.pdf.

10. Ibid.

definite trend for many to move away from the ‘walk-to-town areas.’”¹¹ In the early 1900s at its factory just a few miles from Germantown, Marathon Motor Works also peaked in its manufacturing of cars, which generated even more access to and ease of transportation for the ever-increasing population of Nashvillians.¹² While increased mobility is generally a sign of overall social and technological progress, this phenomenon of urban sprawl posed a threat to Germantown, ultimately fragmenting the close-knit community as its residents looked elsewhere to expand their living and working opportunities.

Additionally, the refinement of refrigeration considerably decreased the necessity of the backyard slaughterhouses and small butchery stores, which then consolidated to form more efficient packing houses and ironically eliminated the very business core that helped Germantown thrive.¹³ The weight of the economic benefits Marathon Motor Works and local butcheries provided for the city had to draw from more densely populated areas with more business activity in order to have such expansive, progressive results at all. The conflicting interests between continuing the idyllic coexistence of residential and business life with providing an atmosphere for industry growth led to a great number of Germantown citizens to seek up-and-coming neighborhoods elsewhere in which to live rather than remaining in this area that adapted to a distinctly different, unpredicted purpose.¹⁴ These instances of modern advancement proved to be only part of Germantown’s waning popularity.

Despite the influence of these socioeconomic issues imposing a significant

11. John Lawrence Connelly, *North Nashville and Germantown: Yesterday and Today* (Nashville: Ambrose Printing Co., 1982), 144.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid, 144-145.

transformation on the composition and density of Germantown's population, the most notable imposition on the neighborhood was the pervasive, anti-German sentiment sweeping across America at the time of World War I. This attitude "did much to destroy the pride they had had in a common background, the customs they had loved, and the feelings of unity in Germantown."¹⁵ The residents' compulsion to shed their previously prideful sense of heritage in order to assimilate undetectably into other parts of the city evidences how the international conflict disparaged the American mentality at home. In other words, the Germans attempted to seem like typical Americans as to avoid harsh, intolerant treatment from the non-Germans in Nashville. This situation exemplified the disbanding of an entire tightly-knit community due to this xenophobic attitude, which was also being perpetuated in other immigrant-dominated areas throughout the country. Unfortunately, the former homes of those compelled to leave either fell into great disrepair, were subdivided and leased, or became boardinghouses, signifying the end of Germantown's pleasant residential atmosphere.¹⁶ Within the next twenty years, Germantown's fate was sealed as an industrial hub because of a lack of occupants in the neighborhood, leading to the destruction of many stately, historic buildings for the sake of erecting complexes to further this alternative use of the area.¹⁷ This action precipitated even larger changes to come that would eventually halt and then alleviate some of its consequences regarding the appearance and function of the neighborhood.

Germantown's descent in losing its cultural identity while upholding American society's modern ideals of progress eventually reached a definitive turning point. A hundred years after

15. John Lawrence Connelly, "Old North Nashville and Germantown," *Tennessee Historic Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1980): 144.

16. Gary Gaston, "The Historic Germantown Neighborhood, Nashville, TN," *Nashville Civic Design Center*, accessed April 14, 2015, http://www.sitemason.com/files/lw9B9C/NCDC_HistoricGermantown.pdf.

17. Ibid.

the height of the influx of German immigrants to North Nashville, “a small group of socially charged... early urban pioneers” began to reassert control over properties throughout Germantown by renovating the homes and, thus, sparing them from demolition or by reselling empty lots to developers intending to build new construction.¹⁸ This proactive mindset of forward-thinking Nashvillians perfectly encapsulated the positive aspects of urban development of the 1970s detailed in the book *Downtown America*, in which Alison Isenberg explains, “Continued abandonment coexisted with hopeful experimentation, and tear-down approaches persisted while historically themed development and preservation gained credibility.”¹⁹ The initiative they exerted proved beneficial, ushering in an era of the realization that the remnants from Germantown’s height of influence on the city were meant to be preserved. Studies by the Metropolitan Historical Commission also from the 1970s discussed the promise of Germantown’s future viability since many of the structures, which were of sound quality and condition and among the most architecturally heterogeneous in Nashville, were still intact.²⁰ This linking of past to present became central to securing Germantown’s position on the National Historic Register in 1979.²¹ The result of this put Germantown back on the map metaphorically as it finally gained the recognition that had been repudiated of it over the years. The city also began to recognize the historic and cultural value of Germantown’s long neglected potential.

After experiencing this reawakened interest, Nashville collectively turned its attention to implementing ways in which to move Germantown forward while using its past as a guide in

18. Ibid.

19. Alison Isenberg, “Animated by Nostalgia: Preservation and Vacancy Since the 1960s,” in *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 254.

20. John Lawrence Connelly, “The Rebirth of Germantown,” *CivicScope*, last modified January 13, 2010, <http://www.civicscope.org/nashville-tn/RebirthofGermantown>.

21. “Germantown Named to National Register,” *Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), September 11, 1979.

how to proceed. First, the Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency (MDHA) invested in updated brick sidewalks and improved lighting to create a more desirable aesthetic. Low interest renovation loans and zero interest business loans were also allocated to help stimulate business activity.²² Government involvement to beautify this area of the city was crucial to incentivizing and drawing others back to Germantown in order to have a chance at restoring its greatness once again. The city of Nashville's vested interest most notably ensured the survival of Germantown by signaling to others that by following suit, a total transformation could indeed happen.

On October 11, 1980, the Germantown locals overwhelmingly responded to the influx of attention to their neighborhood by instituting the first annual Oktoberfest, a cultural festival embracing the merriment of the German traditions of food, drink, dance, and music.²³ Oktoberfest has become one of the main proponents in the success of Germantown's revitalization, attracting more festival-goers each year by offering a unique experience in a setting where the people it continues to celebrate once lived. Of course, Germantown was not without its own set of hurdles in this transitional time of reestablishment in the modern city. City planners and residents often found themselves at odds with each other regarding their views for what Germantown's future should entail. Some situations that have arisen in the past thirty years included finding a suitable voting precinct in the North Nashville area that allowed for handicapped accessibility²⁴ and whether a shelter for homeless women and children should be built in Germantown.²⁵ The growing metropolitan area needed to work in order to meet the civic and social needs of its

22. Gary Gaston, "The Historic Germantown Neighborhood, Nashville, TN," *Nashville Civic Design Center*, accessed April 14, 2015, http://www.sitemason.com/files/lw9B9C/NCDC_HistoricGermantown.pdf.

23. "Germantown Oktoberfest" (informational pamphlet, Nashville, TN, 1980), 1-3.

24. Gail McKniche, "Search for Germantown Voting Station Baffles Election Workers," *Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), April 9, 1988.

25. Beth Fortune, "Opponents Continue Fight to Halt Germantown Shelter," *Nashville Banner* (Nashville, TN), September, 26, 1986.

rising population, but the newly adopted agenda of historic preservation posed some difficulty in preventing progressive movements from altering the urban landscape of Germantown.

Disagreement regarding mixed-use zoning has also been another issue Germantown has had to contend with. Some business owners resented the proposed idea that would allow for the introduction of “offices or limited industrial businesses to exist in the same area as a residence”²⁶ because it could hinder them in the future if they desired to expand or needed to reconstruct their buildings.²⁷ However, one of the most contentious issues in Germantown arose in 1990 when a proposal to build a vehicle emissions testing site was brought forth. Because of the residents’ input of time and money in retaining their neighborhood’s heritage, they justifiably feared “long lines and the accompanying exhaust fumes...[and that] the station would permanently change the face of the historic neighborhood.”²⁸ This incident was so significant because it revealed the fact that people were beginning to turn their attention toward Germantown after years of apathy.

Although an alternative site was finally selected, there were many more long-term issues and their effects to consider. The major result of MDHA’s eventual concession of the entire Fifth Avenue block to the newly formed Germantown Partners in 1997 was the creation of new residential spaces.²⁹ This was one of the main turning points in redefining Germantown for several reasons: These were the first single-family homes built in the neighborhood in several decades; they experimented with urban infill, which was not very prevalent in Nashville and revealed the demand for city living; and their success led the way in altering zoning codes for

26. “Foes Say Mixed Use Zoning Meant for Germantown,” *Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), November 16, 1984.

27. Kent Hoover, “Germantown Zoning Idea Is Deferred,” *Nashville Banner* (Nashville, TN), March, 1, 1984.

28. “Germantown Accord,” *Nashville Banner* (Nashville, TN), November 19, 1990.

29. Gary Gaston, “The Historic Germantown Neighborhood, Nashville, TN,” *Nashville Civic Design Center*, accessed April 14, 2015, http://www.sitemason.com/files/lw9B9C/NCDC_HistoricGermantown.pdf.

historic districts within the Metro's limits.³⁰ Additionally, the prior debate on the status of Germantown's zoning was resolved when it was officially designated as being a mixed-use neighborhood rather than an industrial one.³¹ These considerations would shape the role of Germantown and its modern assimilation into the greater part of Nashville. Compromising on what should constitute the future of Germantown entailed coming to terms with leaving its valuable history untouched yet devising a way in which to interact with the space in a modern context. Using the past to inspire and direct the future contributed to fulfilling the needs of rapidly evolving city while maintaining a reverence for Germantown's intrinsic value.

Following the tumultuous reconciliation between moving forward yet preserving its storied past, Germantown quickly transitioned to a period of recognition of the work being done to restore it to its former glory. As a younger generation moved into the area to begin the arduous but worthwhile repair process, the older locals lamented the amount of history that had been lost before people realized how valuable it was.³² In the early 1980s, activist groups sought funds from Metro Nashville's federal community development funds in order to encourage the progress of renovation in vacant houses and to supplement the private investment of over a million dollars in the prior three years that was not quite enough.³³ Soon after this discovery of "the last frontier in urban living," more began taking note of and following suit to create something out of the decaying buildings with a "future filled with potential and echoes of a

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Max York, "Germantown Revives Its Old Style," *Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), June 22, 1980.

33. Donald Caldwell, "Germantown Group Seeks U.S. Funds," *Nashville Banner* (Nashville, TN), April, 20, 1983.

thriving past.”³⁴ The activism of the small group of citizens who guided this movement was one of the major proponents in generating as much enthusiasm for the entire project. By stepping in as intermediaries between the neighborhood’s needs and city’s access to what was necessary to fulfill those, Germantown ultimately experienced success in this realm.

These changes have led to a new wave of people coming in as well. Professionals such as architects and lawyers have been drawn to the interspersing of the unusual yet entirely functional zoning, while artists find that they can have studios near their homes as well.³⁵ However, these new residents in Germantown can still enjoy the charming aspects of traditional Germantown homes; the homes that were built more recently are “sympathetic to the existing historic architecture...and slightly unique,” striking a happy medium between old and new without sacrificing one for the other.³⁶ The Lawrence Brothers Inc. developers in Germantown have also been building “100% EarthCraft and Energy Star certified homes” since 2005” which is helping to pioneer the way for Germantown to reach Gold Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Certification.³⁷ These inventive approaches have helped to make Germantown desirable once again and create a more economically viable area overall.

Germantown is currently in the midst of its own cultural renaissance after cementing its position in Nashville. Many local small businesses are at the forefront of innovation in Nashville, creating a self-sustaining district for Germantown that reflects its humble beginnings in the

34. Susan Quick, “The Word’s Out on Germantown,” *Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), January 31, 1986.

35. Renee Elder, “Germantown: Artsy, Nice,” *Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), April 7, 1993.

36. David Hefner, “New Homes Historic, Too,” *Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), May 26, 1998.

37. Gary Gaston, “The Historic Germantown Neighborhood, Nashville, TN,” *Nashville Civic Design Center*, accessed April 14, 2015, http://www.sitemason.com/files/lw9B9C/NCDC_HistoricGermantown.pdf.

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Leather goods makers Nisolo and Peter Nappi have concentrated their efforts toward creating quality products in the same spirit as the meticulous master craftsmen who made a living with their skills in Germantown after immigrating to America.³⁸ Wilder also offers unique home goods inspired by global themes that resonate with the European influences the Germans brought when they settled in Nashville.³⁹ These storefronts offer a tangible sense of the timeless simplicity of German cultural values, which also reflects what these material goods symbolize for our culture in Nashville today.

Other types of businesses in Germantown are also more reflective of the area's cultural heritage. The 100 Taylor StreetArts Collective houses several local artisans' workshops, reviving the communal aspect of creating work in a shared space and drawing in others to experience it, just as the Germans did in attracting outsiders to their neighborhood to partake in what they offered. Because home and business often existed in the same plot of land, the bonds of the German community were increasingly strengthened at the turn of the twentieth century.⁴⁰ 100 Taylor Street hearkens back to this ideal with the handmade goods available to see here, evidencing the level of artistry involved in good workmanship that is still valued today. This guild-like organization of creators' studios often hosts impromptu concerts and gallery viewings to the public, keeping the collective essence of Nashville alive and well. One of the most recent additions to the Germantown scene is Butchertown Hall, a fusion of a smokehouse and a "visceral, modern take" on a traditional beer garden, which "pays homage to the neighborhood's

38. "Germantown," *Visit Music City*, accessed April 14, 2015, <http://www.visitmusiccity.com/visitors/neighborhoods/Germantown>.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Mike Antoniak, "Germantown's Forgotten Avenues," *Nashville Magazine*, April 1986.

historical significance as a German immigrant neighborhood lined with butcher shops.”⁴¹ Photos of influential people and places in Germantown throughout the years line the walls, truly evoking a united sense of past and present. Together, these local businesses have generated a renewed interest in the Germantown area by rooting themselves there and employing a similar philosophy to those who first made the area their workspace.

Today, Germantown is looking ahead to a promisingly bright future empowered by its vibrant past and projected exponential growth.⁴² As the centrality of downtown Nashville begins to refocus its perspective on the expanding, prospering pockets of its surrounding neighborhoods, all eyes are on Germantown. The eclectic neighborhood continues to redefine itself yet remain true to its roots in the city that helped it prosper hundreds of years ago. Its inclusion on the National Historic Register served as a catalyst for its reemergence and reassertion of influence on Nashville, molding itself into a more self-sufficient, slower-paced entity lest Nashville forget how it helped contribute to the city itself in its early days. Germantown’s proximity to the Bicentennial Mall State Park and Farmers’ Market⁴³ and First Tennessee Park, the brand new home of the Nashville Sounds Minor League Baseball Team, is steadily bringing in a new influx of people to North Nashville that bodes well for Germantown’s local economy.⁴⁴ By focusing on the legacy the Germans had left on their beloved place in Nashville, Germantown has been completely revitalized and is prepared for the direction it will take in the next two hundred years.

41. “Butchertown Hall,” *Butchertown Hall*, accessed April 14, 2015, <http://www.butchertownhall.com>.

42. Rose French, “Living in the City,” *Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), June 17, 2003.

43. Carrie Ferguson, “Germantown Looks to Past for Future,” *Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), January 23, 1997.

44. Abby White, “Neighborhood Businesses and Residents Welcome the Sounds with Open Arms—and Plenty of Barbeque,” *Nashville Scene* (Nashville, TN), April 23, 2015, <http://www.nashvillescene.com/nashville/neighborhood-businesses-and-residents-welcome-the-sounds-with-open-arms-andmdash-and-plenty-of-barbecue/Content?oid=5026273>.

In order to preserve the unique qualities of this neighborhood, city planners and citizens alike should be aware of how history could repeat itself if unimpeded growth between businesses and residencies rivaling for space occurs, which could adversely impact Germantown just as it did a century ago.

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