

# WHITEWASHING THE HISTORY: THE SHORT HISTORY CRITIQUE

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

## FINDING

The MHZC's Short Histories name race densely for historically Black overlays and never for white ones whose founding deeds barred Black ownership; where covenants are transcribed, they list setbacks, cost floors, and livestock bans while stopping at the racial clause on the same deed page.

## SUPPORTS IN THE ARTICLE

- *the Short Histories mention deed restrictions in only two overlays and omit the racial clause on the same page*
- *race is the dominant frame in Black overlays and absent in white ones*

"Because the descriptions completely dance around the importance of these developments — the motivation for their existence in the first place, who was developing them and why... And it reminded me a little bit of a plantation tour — that's talking about, 'here's the architecture and it was built this year, and here's the china' — and doesn't mention slavery at all, or what the plantation was there for, or the cause-and-effect relationships in all of these other things."

— Dr. Karen Benjamin, on reading the MHZC Short Histories (interview, May 18, 2026)

## ABSTRACT

Two independent measurements of the Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission's twenty-seven Short Histories run exactly opposite. A race-language count across the corpus finds nearly all verified mentions concentrated in the histories for historically Black neighborhoods; the nineteen white-overlay histories carry none. A parcel-level chain-of-title audit finds confirmed racial covenants in the founding deeds of every covenant-era white overlay. In the two white-overlay histories that discuss founding covenants at all, the commission transcribes setbacks, cost minimums, and livestock bans while stopping at the racial clause on the same deed page. The asymmetry tracks authorship: the dense Black-neighborhood sections were produced under a National Park Service grant to surface African American heritage; the white-overlay sections were drafted in-house to carry applications through Council, where naming the founding racial covenant would have complicated the case. The two measurements test what the histories choose to tell, not whether what they tell is true — the factual errors of the Green Hills East history are documented separately — and what they find is the selection.

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## SOURCES

Companion briefs (the two measurements synthesized here).

- [Counting the Silence: Race-Language Asymmetry in the Short Histories](#) — Research Brief M3. The verified per-section race-language counts across all twenty-seven Short Histories, with the blind dual-coder verification protocol behind them.
- [Auditing the Overlays: Racial Clauses Citywide](#) — Research Brief M5. The parcel-level chain-of-title audit and the confirmed racial-covenant rates per overlay district.

Primary documents.

- MHZC, *Turn of the Century Part II NCZO Design Guidelines* (December 2025); *Mid-Century 2025 Revision NCZO Design Guidelines* (December 2025); *Belmont-Hillsboro NCZO Design Guidelines* (2017, rev. April 2026); *Hillsboro-West End NCZO Design Guidelines* (2024). The four documents containing the twenty-seven Short Histories.
- Davidson County Register of Deeds instruments, as cited by book and page in the chain-of-title audit.
- National Park Service, *Documenting Nashville's Mid-20th Century African American Neighborhoods*, Underrepresented Communities Grant Program.

Derived analysis, interview, and scholarship.

- The author's analysis — the multi-pass detection record and the side-by-side covenant-rate-versus-race-language table, established in the two companion briefs.
- Karen Benjamin, interview by the author, May 18, 2026. Dr. Karen Benjamin (Elmhurst University), author of *Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools*, on the Short Histories.
- Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002) — the survey of plantation-museum interpretation behind the "symbolic annihilation" framing invoked in the closing note.

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## FINDINGS

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### READ TOGETHER, THE TWO MEASUREMENTS RUN EXACTLY OPPOSITE

The race-language count and the deed audit are independent instruments: one reads MHZC's narrative, the other reads the deeds the narrative describes. Every overlay with a confirmed racial-covenant rate above zero — Cherokee Park, Richland-West End, Belle Meade Links Triangle, Eastdale, and Blakemore at every parcel, on down to Waverly-Belmont at 5 percent — sits in the zero-race-language column.<sup>1</sup> Every Short History with substantial race-language is for a

neighborhood whose founding deeds, per the audit, carry no racial covenant. The narrative pattern is the exact inverse of the documentary pattern: the neighborhoods whose deeds structured the racial landscape are written as race-blind architecture, and the neighborhoods those deeds penned in are written as racial history.<sup>2</sup>

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### **WHERE EXCLUSION WAS WRITTEN INTO THE DEED, THE HISTORY GOES QUIET**

Cherokee Park is the cleanest case. The audit confirms a racial clause in all four founding subdivisions; the Short History names race zero times. It describes development by Wakefield-Davis Realty of Louisville, the curving streets, the absence of an alley system, the architectural styles. The streets are in the document; the deeds that barred Black owners are not.<sup>3</sup>

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### **THE COMMISSION WRITES RACIAL HISTORY ONLY FOR THE BLACK NEIGHBORHOODS**

Haynes Heights, the densest section, carries 55 verified mentions in 2,684 words and a 0 percent racial-covenant rate in its founding deeds, because a Black subdivision under Jim Crow did not need a covenant to be segregated; the segregation was the surrounding city. The document says so, and quotes the marketing verbatim: advertisements that “let Nashvillians know that the subdivision was exclusively for African Americans,” carrying phrases such as “Colored Exclusively” and “Colored Haynes Heights” “to ensure the neighborhood remained segregated.”<sup>4</sup> The commission plainly has the capacity to name racial history. It exercises that capacity in one direction only.

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### **THE OMISSION LANDS ON THE PAGE THAT TRANSCRIBES THE COVENANT**

In two white-overlay histories MHZC discusses the founding covenants and selects only their non-racial provisions. Richland-West End lists “protective covenants precluding uses such as stores, factories, saloons or asylums” and the cost minimum — “no residence or dwelling house costing less than \$2400” — while the chain audit shows the same numbered restriction sets carry the verbatim “African blood or descent” exclusion in four of five reachable founding instruments. Belle Meade Links Triangle notes covenants specifying “certain setbacks from the street, ‘no swine,’ and a prohibition on fencing,” while the governing 1916 Belle Meade Golf Links master covenant — the Bransford Realty Company agreement at [Book 472, p. 481](#), binding the subdivision platted at Book 421, pp. 94–95 — carries the Calhoun-template racial-exclusion clause.<sup>5</sup> These are the two white-overlay histories in the corpus that describe their founding deed restrictions in detail, and both stop at the same line. Setbacks and swine make the page; the bar on Black ownership, in the same instrument, does not.

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## THE ASYMMETRY TRACKS WHO WROTE EACH HISTORY, AND WHY

Three of the four dense Black-neighborhood sections — Haynes Heights, Haynes Manor, and Lathan-Youngs — were produced with a grant-funded consultant under the National Park Service’s “Documenting Nashville’s Mid-20th Century African American Neighborhoods” initiative, whose mandate was to surface racial history. The nineteen zero-hit white-overlay sections were drafted in-house by MHZC staff to carry overlay applications through Metro Council, with no equivalent mandate and a political incentive to leave the founding covenants unmentioned: surfacing them would force Council to ask whether the overlay continues or repudiates the original instrument.<sup>6</sup> The grant authorship is documented for those three Mid-Century sections; Edgehill, the fourth, was not part of that grant. That every white-overlay section was drafted in-house follows from the structure of the commission’s reactive-overlay process, not a per-document byline, and a section-by-section provenance check would settle the question. The histories are reactive zoning advocacy, drafted after homeowners petition for an overlay, written to pass it.

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## THE TWO MEASUREMENTS TEST SELECTION, NOT ACCURACY

Neither instrument here tests the histories’ accuracy — the Green Hills East history’s factual errors, from the misidentified model home to the misdescribed research behind it, are documented in [Identifying the Model Home](#), [The Sources of the Short History](#), and [Fact-Check: Zeigler’s Account](#). What the two instruments measure is what the histories choose to tell. Cherokee Park’s streets do curve, and Richland-West End’s covenants did bar saloons; the finding is selection — a consistent editorial choice, across nineteen sections and two decades of adoption files, to render the white overlays as architecture and the Black overlays as racial history, and to transcribe a racially restrictive deed as though its racial clause were not on the page.<sup>7</sup> A history that documents the china and omits what the plantation was for says nothing false about the china.<sup>9</sup>

Two qualifications bound the reading without unsettling it. The race-language count is a strictly lexical floor: it registers explicit race-marking only, not the implicit coding — “exclusive neighborhood,” “high-class development,” “neighborhood character” — that a reading attentive to the period’s racial-stewardship vocabulary would flag; the rhetorical asymmetry is almost certainly wider than the count shows.<sup>8</sup> And the covenant rates are lower bounds: the audit recovers covenants through the modern chain of title, a “none found” is not proof of absence, and the two sections added after the audit’s run date — Haynes Manor and Lathan-Youngs — are unmeasured, not confirmed zeros. Neither qualification reaches the inversion the brief rests on, which is carried by the white overlays whose rates are confirmed above zero and whose histories name race not once.

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## NOTES

1. The confirmed racial-covenant rates per overlay district come from the parcel-level chain-of-title audit in [Auditing the Overlays: Racial Clauses Citywide](#), Research Brief M5. ↩
2. The per-section race-language counts — 193 substantive mentions across the twenty-seven Short Histories, 178 of them in the four Black-overlay sections (Haynes Heights 55, Edgehill 68, Haynes Manor 20, Lathan-Youngs 35) against zero across the nineteen white-overlay sections — are established in [Counting the Silence: Race-Language Asymmetry in the Short Histories](#), Research Brief M3, with the blind dual-coder verification protocol behind them. ↩
3. Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission, *Turn of the Century Part II NCZO Design Guidelines* (December 2025), Cherokee Park section. The racial clause is confirmed in all four founding subdivisions by the chain-of-title audit, [Auditing the Overlays: Racial Clauses Citywide](#). ↩
4. Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission, *Mid-Century 2025 Revision NCZO Design Guidelines* (December 2025), Haynes Heights section. The verbatim advertising phrases are cataloged in [Counting the Silence: Race-Language Asymmetry in the Short Histories](#). ↩
5. Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission, *Turn of the Century Part II NCZO Design Guidelines* (December 2025), Richland–West End and Belle Meade Links Triangle sections. The governing racial clause for Belle Meade Links Triangle is recorded in the Bransford Realty Company’s Belle Meade Golf Links master covenant, Davidson County Register of Deeds, [Book 472, p. 481](#) (registered January 17, 1916), which binds the subdivision platted at Book 421, pp. 94–95, on the Bransford Realty / John C. Calhoun template; the “African blood or descent” language in the Richland–West End instruments is confirmed in four of five reachable founding deeds by the chain-of-title audit, [Auditing the Overlays: Racial Clauses Citywide](#). ↩
6. National Park Service, *Documenting Nashville’s Mid-20th Century African American Neighborhoods*, Underrepresented Communities Grant Program, administered by the Metropolitan Historical Commission. The grant funded the four Black-neighborhood sections; the in-house authorship of the white-overlay sections follows from the structure of the commission’s reactive-overlay process, set out in [Counting the Silence: Race-Language Asymmetry in the Short Histories](#). ↩
7. Karen Benjamin, interview by the author, May 18, 2026. Benjamin (Elmhurst University) is the author of [Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools: Selling Segregation Before the New Deal](#) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2025). ↩
8. Herman H. Long and Charles S. Johnson, *People vs. Property: Race Restrictive Covenants in Housing* (Nashville: Fisk University Press, 1947). The lexical-floor caveat — that an explicit-term count cannot register the period’s coded racial-stewardship vocabulary — is set out in [Counting the Silence: Race-Language Asymmetry in the Short Histories](#). ↩
9. Benjamin’s comparison names a pattern the heritage-studies literature has measured. Surveying 122 Southern plantation museums, Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small found that the dominant interpretive mode at most sites was what they call the “symbolic annihilation” of the enslaved: the owner’s architecture, furnishings, and status are centered while the people held in bondage go unnamed, and roughly a fifth of the sites mentioned them not at all. Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, [Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums](#) (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002). ↩

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## **SUGGESTED CITATION**

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