

# AUDITING THE OVERLAYS: RACIAL CLAUSES CITYWIDE

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

## FINDING

A parcel-level audit of Nashville's 27 conservation overlays finds racial covenants in founding deeds in at least 21 — 5,233 of 11,233 parcels (46.6%) carry a confirmed racial covenant — and the commission's narratives name the racial clause in none.

## SUPPORTS IN THE ARTICLE

- *racial covenants are present in deeds in at least twenty of the twenty-seven conservation overlays*
- *Short Histories address deed restrictions in only two such districts*

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## ABSTRACT

A parcel-level audit of Nashville's twenty-seven Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay districts finds racial covenants in the founding deeds of subdivisions inside at least 21 of the 27, with 5,233 of 11,233 overlay parcels — 46.6 percent — currently classified as carrying a confirmed racial covenant on the chain of title governing their land. Each parcel's covenant is read from the deed image the way a title search would read it, tracing the chain to the oldest covenant-era instrument; because a covenant runs with the land, an antecedent subdivision's blanket restriction is inherited and documented by deed, not inferred from proximity. This is a working beta: manual verification is ongoing, the figures may contain false positives and omissions, and every rate is a lower bound subject to revision. The scale of the pattern is not in doubt. The commission's own published narratives name the founding covenants in only two of those districts and the racial clause in none.

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## THE COVENANTS, MAPPED PARCEL BY PARCEL

This map is interactive online — **racial covenants in Nashville's conservation-overlay districts**, available at [alexaustinpemberton.com/journalism/veneers-of-history/maps/covenants/](https://alexaustinpemberton.com/journalism/veneers-of-history/maps/covenants/)

Every parcel inside the 27 Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay districts, colored by the covenant that governs its land: a confirmed racial covenant, an inherited one, a confirmed covenant with no racial clause, or none found. Select a parcel for its verbatim covenant language and deed citation; filter by district, overlay type, platting era, and 1950, 1970, and 2020 demographics. A working beta — manual verification is ongoing and the racial share is a lower bound subject to revision.

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## METHODOLOGY

### STUDY FRAME

The frame is the 27 Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay districts on Metro Planning's official roster — 21 turn-of-century districts, four mid-century districts, Belmont-Hillsboro, and Hillsboro-West End. Every current parcel whose footprint falls inside one of the 27 overlay

polygons is in the study, assigned to its district by a spatial join of the county cadastral layer to the overlay boundaries, after the raw overlay labels are normalized to the official names and the two Whitland polygons are collapsed into one district. The result is the 11,233-parcel study population. The unit of analysis is the parcel, clipped to the overlay, so a district's rate is the share of its own parcels under a racial covenant, not a count of subdivisions.

### **FROM PARCEL TO DEED**

Each parcel's covenant is read from the chain of title that governs its land. The county's recorded parcel-history — the sequence of deeds filed against the parcel — links the parcel to its instruments; the oldest, covenant-era deed, and any master covenant that deed incorporates by reference, are pulled from the Davidson County Register of Deeds portal as page images. Because a racial covenant runs with the land, a parcel inside a covenanted subdivision carries that covenant, and a resubdivision or condominium carries the covenant of the antecedent subdivision its lot was carved from. That antecedent is identified from the oldest legal description on the parcel's record and the oldest deed in its chain — by document, never by a matching subdivision name or a neighboring parcel.

### **READING THE DEEDS**

The reading runs in three roles, kept deliberately separate. A deterministic Python script, written with Claude Code — Anthropic's command-line coding assistant — searched the optical-character-recognition text of the digitized deed books and surfaced candidate pages by covenant keyword, by lot and subdivision name, and by the book-and-page citations in derivation clauses. The script classified nothing. A Claude vision model then read each candidate from the deed image — the parties, the lot, the dates, and any restriction language the corrupt recognition text could not be trusted to carry. The author confirmed and adjudicated every racial classification against the image. The recognition text only ever generates candidates; the covenant is read from the document, because a pattern match on scan noise cannot tell a racial clause from an artifact or from the unrelated deed sharing a two-page spread. A racial covenant is recorded only on a verbatim clause — the "African blood or descent" formula and its kin — with an exact book-and-page citation; servant-occupancy exceptions and post-1968 federal fair-housing boilerplate are not counted as racial covenants.

### **CLASSIFICATION AND COVERAGE**

Each parcel resolves to one of four states: a confirmed racial covenant on its own chain; an inherited racial covenant from a covenanted antecedent; a confirmed covenant carrying no racial clause — setbacks, cost minimums, use limits; or none found, where every accessible chain was walked to its end without a covenant surfacing. False positives are guarded against as closely as false negatives: a covenant is attached to a parcel only on its own chain or that of a verified antecedent, and a restriction is recorded as non-racial only after its deed is read.

## THE DATA IS A WORKING BETA

This audit is a beta, and its figures should be read as provisional. The candidate search and the vision reads are still being confirmed by manual review, parcel by parcel, and that review is ongoing across the full population. The classifications may contain false positives — a parcel called racial that a closer reading of the controlling deed would clear — and omissions — a covenant missed because a chain broke before it surfaced, because the Register’s pre-1964 digital record is thin, or because a sweep has not yet reached that subdivision. The none-found verdict marks the floor of what the record yields; it does not rule out a covenant the chain did not reach. Every rate the audit reports is therefore a lower bound, and every figure is subject to revision as verification continues.

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## SOURCES

### Primary records

- Davidson County Register of Deeds deed instruments (Davidson County, Tennessee): per-parcel PDF instruments fetched by image via the Register’s web portal ([davidsonportal.com](http://davidsonportal.com)) and cited by book and page behind every confirmed covenant.
- The Metro Nashville and Davidson County parcel-history record (the recorded chain of deeds for each parcel), used to resolve each parcel’s instruments.
- PADCTN GIS layers: the Davidson County cadastral parcels and the Metro zoning-overlay polygons (year-end 2026 snapshot), intersected to assign each parcel to its overlay district.
- MHZC overlay design-guideline and short-history texts (various years through 2025): the official narrative documents for each district, against which the covenant-mention results were tallied.

### Derived dataset

The author’s parcel-level overlay covenant dataset compiles the current classification for each of the 11,233 overlay parcels: its district, its covenant state, the antecedent subdivision its covenant runs from, and — for every racial parcel — the verbatim deed text and exact book-and-page citation behind it. The dataset is under active verification (a beta). Every record rests on a public source: the recorded plats, the Davidson County deed instruments cited by book and page, and the published overlay boundaries, so the audit can be checked and rebuilt from the same records.

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## FINDINGS

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### NEARLY HALF THE OVERLAY PARCELS ARE CURRENTLY CLASSIFIED UNDER A CONFIRMED RACIAL COVENANT

Of the 11,233 parcels inside the 27 Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlays, 5,233 — 46.6 percent — are currently classified as carrying a confirmed racial covenant on the chain of title that

governs their land: 4,560 under a covenant read on their own chain and 673 inheriting a covenanted antecedent's blanket restriction. A further 131 sit under a confirmed covenant that carries no racial clause. The remaining parcels returned no recoverable covenant, a floor, not a finding of absence. These counts are the present state of a beta audit and will move as verification continues.

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## **RACIAL COVENANTS REACH AT LEAST 21 OF THE 27 DISTRICTS**

At least 21 of the 27 overlay districts contain a subdivision whose founding deed carries a racial covenant. The six without one are the four mid-century districts — historically Black North Nashville (Haynes Manor, Haynes Heights, Lathan-Youngs) and the Madison-area Marlin Meadows, all platted after the covenant era, with no racial clause found — together with Park & Elkins and Salemtown, whose founding subdivisions predate or sit outside the covenant regime. Because none-found is a floor, the count of 21 can rise but not fall.

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## **NINE DISTRICTS ARE CURRENTLY COVENANTED BY RACE IN EVERY PARCEL THEY CONTAIN**

Richland-West End (446 of 446), Cherokee Park (347 of 347), Eastdale (177 of 177), Belle Meade Links Triangle (152 of 152), Whitland (122 of 122), Kenner (89 of 89), Bowling House District (76 of 76), Elmington Place (66 of 66), and Blakemore (6 of 6) are presently classified at 100 percent, each resting on a blanket covenant traced parcel by parcel. The largest concentrations by raw count fall in Belmont-Hillsboro (1,116 racial parcels of 1,190), Hillsboro-West End (861 of 923), and Inglewood Place (473 of 563).

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## **ONE DRAFTING HAND RECURS ACROSS THE WEST-NASHVILLE OVERLAYS**

A covenant form tied to the developer John Calhoun recurs in the founding deeds of multiple Whitland, Belmont-Hillsboro, and Hillsboro-West End subdivisions. The founding Green Hills Plat 1 instrument, recorded at Book 770, pp. 40–42, is one instance — recognizable by its numbered restrictions, its house-cost minimum, and its racial bar on conveyance to “persons of African blood or descent.” The signature points to a single drafting hand behind a large share of pre-1930 west-Nashville development. The observation is structural; a full cross-overlay tally of the Calhoun network has not been compiled.

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## **THE MHZC NARRATIVES NAME THE FOUNDING COVENANTS IN ONLY TWO DISTRICTS, AND NEVER THE RACIAL CLAUSE**

Among the districts platted with covenants, only Richland-West End and Belle Meade Links Triangle have published histories that mention the founding deed restrictions at all. Those texts recount the architectural and use restrictions — Belle Meade Links's setbacks and “no swine,” Richland-West End's bar on stores, factories, and saloons and its house-cost minimum — and stop

there. What each recounts, the deeds confirm; what each omits is the racial clause in the same instrument.

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## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Davidson County Register of Deeds. Deed instruments, Davidson County, Tennessee (books and pages as cited per parcel). Accessed by image via the Metro Nashville and Davidson County deed portal, 2025–2026.

Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission. Overlay design–guideline and short–history texts (various years, including revisions through 2025). Published by the Metropolitan Historical Commission, Nashville.

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## **SUGGESTED CITATION**

Pemberton, Alex. “Auditing the Overlays: Racial Clauses Citywide.” Research Brief M5, *Veneers of History in Green Hills East*. [alexaustinpemberton.com/journalism/veneers-of-history/#overlay-covenant-audit-method](https://alexaustinpemberton.com/journalism/veneers-of-history/#overlay-covenant-audit-method). Accessed [date].