2 Battles in Germantown: One Re-Enacted, One Waged Every Day
By JAMES F. CLARITY Special to The New York Times
New York Times (1923-Current file); Oct 2, 1977;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009)
pg. 24

2 Battles in Germantown: One Re-Enacted, One Waged Every Day

By JAMES F. CLARITY
Special to The New York Times

PHILADELPHIA, Oct. 1—Cannon and rifle fire boomed and cracked, leaving blue smoke over Germantown Avenue today as men in uniforms, red for the British, motley for the Continentals, re-enacted the Battle of Germantown.

The rebels lost again, as they did 200 years ago. Among the spectators on the lawn at Cliveden House, where both battles were fought, was Joan Shoemaker, who lives in Germantown and who says her husband traces his ancestry to Samuel Shoemaker, Mayor of Philadelphia in the Revolution.

As Continental troops fell on the grass, victims of bulletless redcoat shots, Mrs. Shoemaker discussed the real battle knowledgeably and offered a 20th century afterthought. "In the 1920's," she said, "John D. Rockefeller wanted to buy all of Germantown Avenue and preserve the historic buildings. They wouldn't let him, so he went to Williamsburg, Va. Now, when you look at what happened around here, at all the deterioration, maybe we should have let him do it.

In the original battle of Germantown, fought here on Oct. 4, 1777, the American soldiers spent some of their musketry firing on one another in confusion abetted by fog. Today, in the middle of officially proclaimed Germantown Week, the ceremonial fight seemed to reflect not only the early history of the area but also its contemporary conflicts.

Spreading along Germantown Avenue through Northwest Philadelphia, the area was first settled nearly 300 years ago by 13 families from the Rhineland, whose names survive in Germantown mostly on tombstones: Kulp, Pastorius, Rittenhouse. The first language was German; the first non-English Bible printed in America, as well as the first American-made movable type, were produced in Germantown before the Revolution.

By the time the rebellion started, English colonists had begun to move in, their swarm increasing (Louisa May Alcott was born here in 1832) as yellow fever epidemics drove the well-to-do English-speaking up from low-lying Philadelphia along the Delaware. Today, there are still pockets of German-speaking people in Germantown, but the area has a large black population, mixed in some sections with white Roman Catholics, Jews and Protestants.

"There are still not many WASPs like me," said William Ewing, a 38-year-old lawyer of Scottish ancestry. Mr. Ewing is one of the many activists, black and white, who are trying to keep a racial and economic equilibrium in Germantown. This is why Mr. Ewing recalls that the first anniversary of the Skirmish of East Mount Airy, a part of loosely defined Germantown, will be next month.

Still a Battle

On Nov. 6, 1976, Mr. Ewing recalls, he and a group of neighborhood activists were finishing a community effort to clean trash out of a long-abandoned public school. City sanitation men, he said, lent the group six pushbrooms, but were reluctant to carry away the trash. When the volunteer cleaners were missing two city-owned brooms at the end of the day, the sanitation department called the Police Department, and Mr. Ewing and a friend were handcuffed and arrested. The city later apologized, and for Mr. Ewing, the victory meant that City Hall, like the Redcoats, can be beaten.

The current struggle for Germantown, Mr. Ewing and other community leaders and residents say, is bringing progress but is far from won. The view from trolley cars of Line 23, running up cobblestoned Germantown Avenue, is mostly of shabby storefronts and abandoned buildings. Many of the buildings are rat-infested and vandalized, and some parks are rarely tended.

Residents charge that local banks still red-line many parts of Germantown, refusing to provide mortgage money or insurance for the rehabilitation of older buildings.

The dilapidation stretches up along the avenue from lower Germantown, near the Wayne Junction overpass of the Reading Railroad, and dissolves against the tidy respectability of Chestnut Hill, a predominantly white area where many residents like to feel that they do not live in Philadelphia at all, much as some residents of Riverdale in New York City do not like to admit that they live in the Bronx.

Things Are Improving

But in East Mount Airy, and other parts of old Germantown, things seem to be improving. "Five years ago," Mr. Ewing said, "people were worried. Now, neither white people nor black people are fleeing the neighborhood and some of those who left, Catholics and Jews, are coming back."

In East Mount Airy, the population ratio seems to be stabilizing at about 60 percent black, 40 percent white. This, Mr. Ewing said, is partly due to Philadelphias growing need for good, moderate-priced housing. In Germantown, there are still many solid stone and frame houses selling for as much as $50,000 and a few even higher. The housing improves with distance from Germantown Avenue.

Neighborhood improvement, Mr. Ewing said, is also increasing as residents learn the art of grantsmanship, how to get public funds from the conglomeration of agencies and programs of the city, state and Federal Governments. In East Mount Airy, a $40,000 grant given by the Justice Department for a neighborhood block-security program was expanded to include the distribution of paint to homeowners agreeing to re-paint their houses, which 1,500 of them did.

'Despite City Hall'

Other Germantown residents agree with Mr. Ewing that there is progress. Edward Schwartz, a southwest Germantown activist and president of a research organization called the Institute for the Study of Civic Values, said the improvement had been largely accomplished "despite City Hall," although he conceded that the city was spending millions in different parts of Philadelphia to stem urban decay.

Mr. Schwartz, who says of his family with obvious pride that "we never left Germantown" at a time when many other whites did, said at a recent public hearing that his view on the concept of a community agreed with that of St. Augustine: "A community is a group of people united by the common objects of their love."

Rosemary Houston, a middle-aged black woman who has lived in Germantown all her life and is now working for a college degree, seems an Augustinian optimist. "People are just becoming more aware of each other's needs," she said. "Economically, blacks are doing a little better, and whites are becoming a bit more accepting."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.