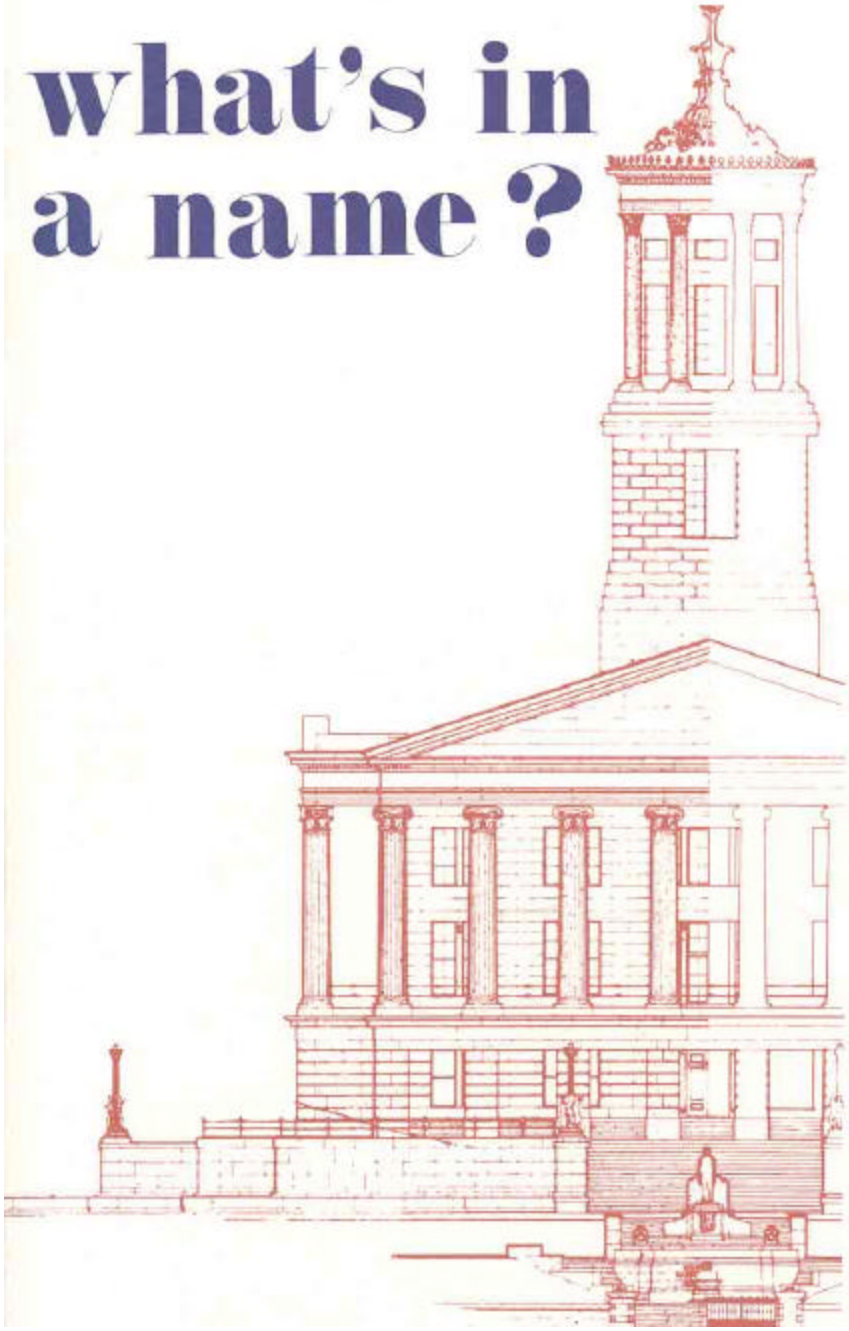
a brief history

NASHVILLE

what's in a name?

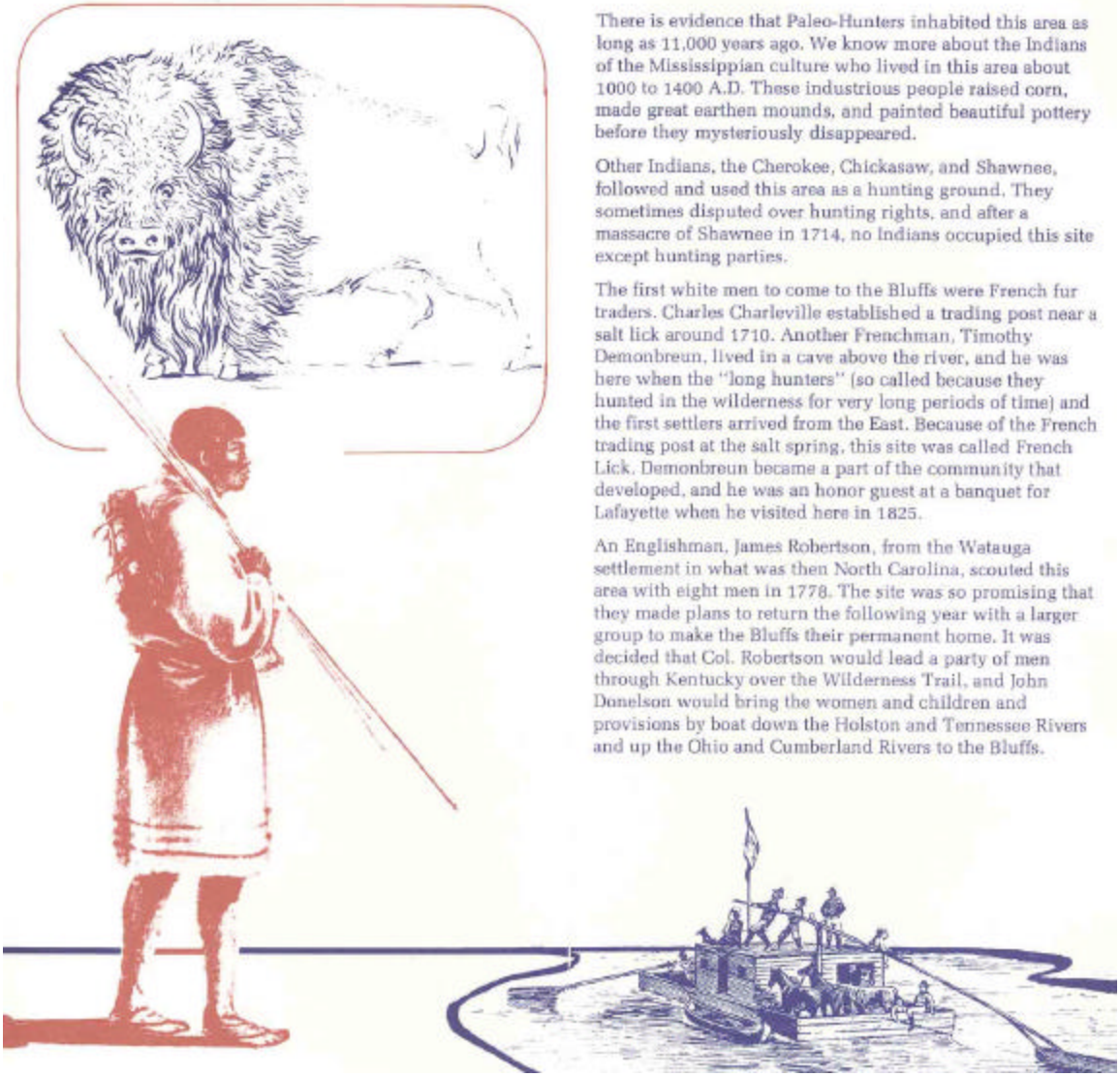


what's in a name?

This particular place has had many names: the Hunting Grounds, French Lick, the Bluffs, Fort Nashborough, Athens of the South, Music City. These names tell a part of the story of Nashville and help explain what makes this city the special place it is.

Before Nashville had a name, it was part of a general area known as the Middle Basin. This was a broad region of rolling hills, rich deep soil, limestone outcroppings, thick grasses, canebrakes, great trees and plentiful water. Because of this abundance of natural resources, animals came in great numbers, and in pursuit of the animals came man.

NASHBOROUGH



There is evidence that Paleo-Hunters inhabited this area as long as 11,000 years ago. We know more about the Indians of the Mississippian culture who lived in this area about 1000 to 1400 A.D. These industrious people raised corn, made great earthen mounds, and painted beautiful pottery before they mysteriously disappeared.

Other Indians, the Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Shawnee, followed and used this area as a hunting ground. They sometimes disputed over hunting rights, and after a massacre of Shawnee in 1714, no Indians occupied this site except hunting parties.

The first white men to come to the Bluffs were French fur traders. Charles Charleville established a trading post near a salt lick around 1710. Another Frenchman, Timothy Demonbreun, lived in a cave above the river, and he was here when the "long hunters" (so called because they hunted in the wilderness for very long periods of time) and the first settlers arrived from the East. Because of the French trading post at the salt spring, this site was called French Lick. Demonbreun became a part of the community that developed, and he was an honor guest at a banquet for Lafayette when he visited here in 1825.

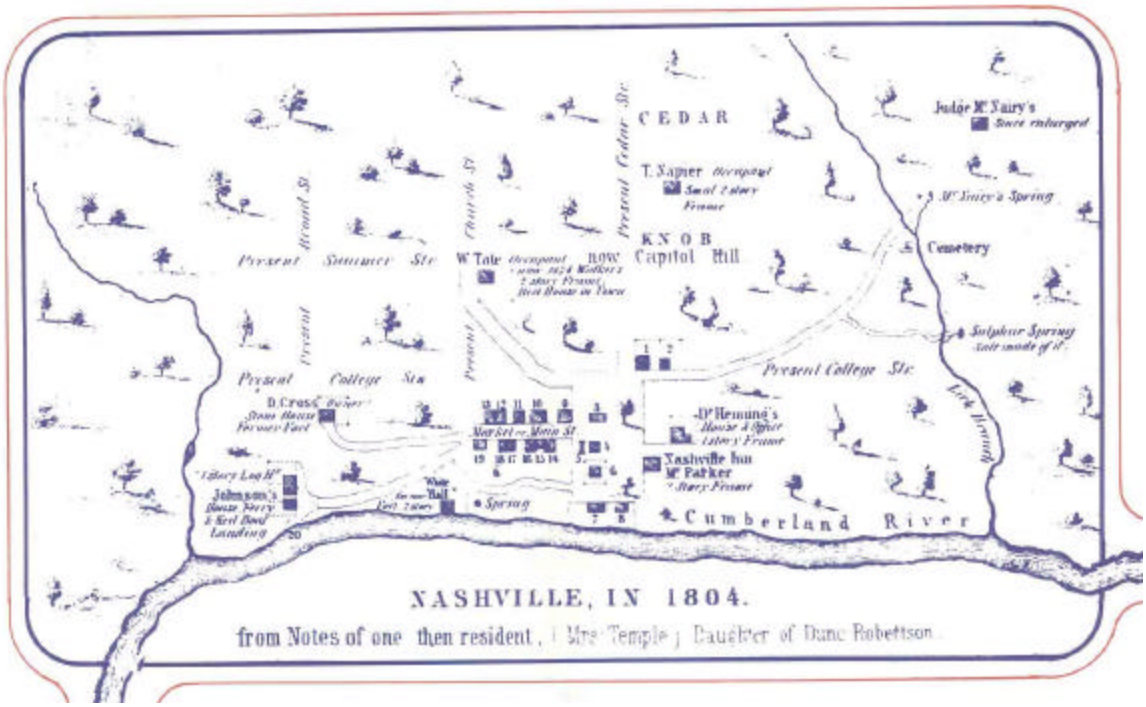
An Englishman, James Robertson, from the Watauga settlement in what was then North Carolina, scouted this area with eight men in 1778. The site was so promising that they made plans to return the following year with a larger group to make the Bluffs their permanent home. It was decided that Col. Robertson would lead a party of men through Kentucky over the Wilderness Trail, and John Donelson would bring the women and children and provisions by boat down the Holston and Tennessee Rivers and up the Ohio and Cumberland Rivers to the Bluffs.

The Robertson party arrived on Christmas Eve 1779 and immediately began to build shelters. They named the site Fort Nashborough for General Francis Nash of North Carolina. Col. Donelson and his flatboat contingent had a hazardous journey on the rivers fighting the elements as well as Indians, hunger, and disease. Their arrival in April 1780 was a time of real thanksgiving. A replica of Fort Nashborough, located near its original site, is open daily and serves as a living museum of eighteenth century frontier custom and dress.

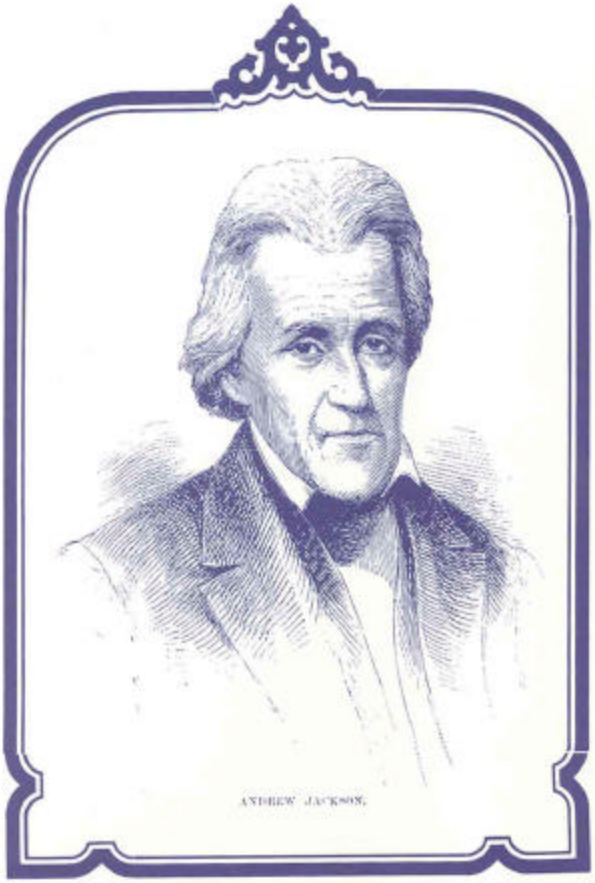
True to their Anglo-Saxon heritage, these literate settlers began to think of a method of self-government—the nearest seat of government being 600 wilderness miles away in North Carolina. Within a week of the arrival of the Donelson party, the Cumberland Compact, the first civil government in Middle Tennessee, was signed by 256 settlers.

While the Indians tolerated the long hunters, settlements were seen as a threat. Incited by British agents, a coalition of Cherokee, Chocktaw, and Chickasaw was formed to run the white settlers out of the hunting grounds.

The Battle of the Bluffs was fought in April 1781 between a large party of Cherokee and the settlers. In this battle some of the men, lured from the fort by a small number of Indians, were ambushed by the main party. Realizing the desperate plight of the men, Mrs. Robertson released the dogs and horses from the fort. In the confusion caused by the biting dogs and by the efforts of the Indians to catch the highly prized horses, the settlers were able to reach the safety of the fort.



NASHVILLE



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The settlers managed to survive those perilous first years, and the community began to grow. In 1784 the name was changed from Nashborough to Nashville. This name change may have been the result of anti-British sentiments in the area.

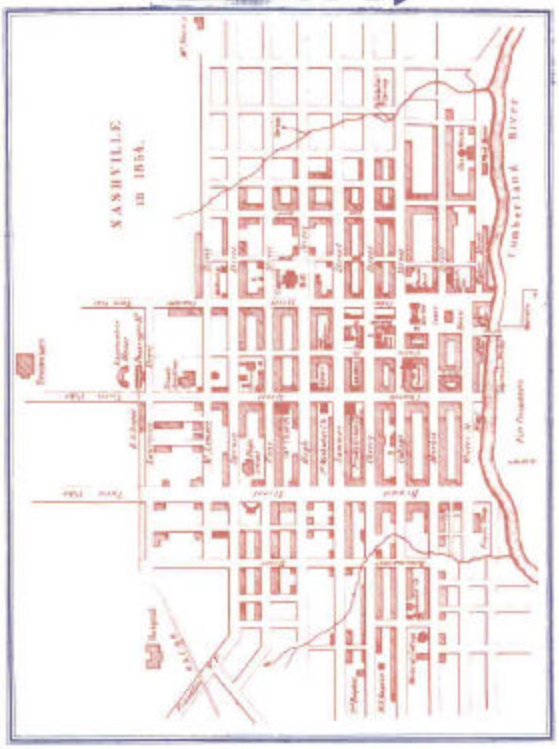
In 1796 Tennessee became the sixteenth state of the union. Several historians have quoted an English visitor who in 1797 commented on the settled state of the surrounding country and on the presence of coaches and carriages in the style of Philadelphia and New York. Considering the precarious perch these people had on the Bluffs in 1780, this is an amazing development.

This flourishing western area began to exert a strong political influence, and Andrew Jackson began to attract national attention. He was selected to lead a group of militia to defend New Orleans from British attack in 1812. The British were soundly defeated, and Jackson became a national hero. Andrew Jackson became the seventh president of the United States in 1829. He retired with honor to his home, the Hermitage, near Nashville in 1837; and he is buried there beside his beloved wife, Rachel, daughter of John Donelson.

John Overton, a great friend of Jackson's, came to Nashville before Tennessee became a state. He became a judge and served in the state Supreme Court. His friendship with Jackson was so close and their correspondence so personal that, before his death, Overton burned most of Jackson's letters to him. The Overton home, Travellers' Rest, built in 1797, has been carefully restored and is open to the public.

Another Nashvillian, William Walker, attracted international attention when he became the only American to become president of another country. Walker, the "grey-eyed man of destiny," tried to unite all of Central America into one country. He became president of Nicaragua in 1856 and was shot by a firing squad in Honduras while attempting to make himself president of that country.

Many early settlers, including James Robertson, are buried in the Old City Cemetery on Fourth Avenue South. This cemetery, one of the very few listed in the National Register of Historic Places, is the final resting place of eight Revolutionary War veterans. Other noted Nashvillians buried there are Captain William Driver, who named the American flag "Old Glory," fourteen mayors of Nashville, and several of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers.



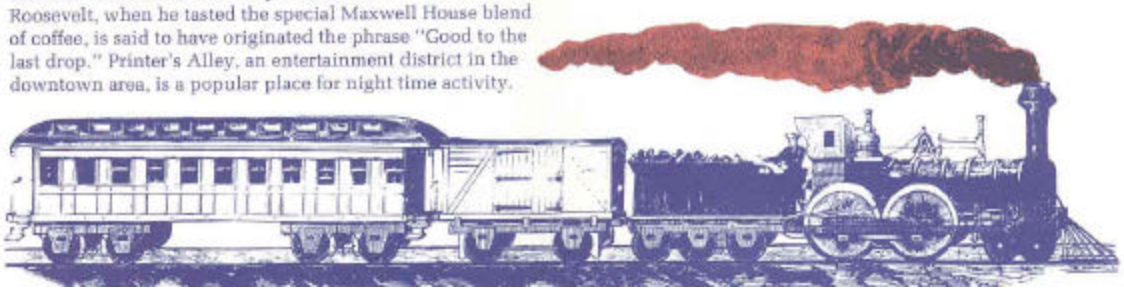
CAPITAL CITY

The state capital was moved from Knoxville to Nashville to Knoxville to Murfreesboro, but in 1843 Nashville became the permanent capital by an act of the legislature. The capitol building was designed by William Strickland, a renowned Philadelphia architect, who also designed the steeple on Independence Hall. Other buildings he designed in Nashville are the First Presbyterian Church (Downtown Presbyterian Church) and St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church. All these structures are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Strickland became so involved with the capitol building that he asked to be interred within its walls. His request was granted, and his crypt is in the northeast section of the Capitol.

One of the grand plantation houses of that time is Belle Meade Mansion. Built by John Harding in 1840, Belle Meade was developed into one of the great thoroughbred stud farms by his son, William Giles Harding, and his family. Five presidents have visited in this house; and the mansion and stables, owned by the state of Tennessee, are open to the public.

By 1860 Nashville was a prosperous city. During the Civil War Nashville was important to the Federal troops because of its location on the river and because of the railroad link from Louisville, to Nashville, to Chattanooga, to Atlanta. For three years the city was occupied by Federal troops, and houses were razed to fortify the city. The Battle of Nashville, fought in 1864, was the last aggressive action of the Confederate Army.

When the war ended, Nashville was in sad condition; but in the decades that followed, Nashville experienced a growth in population and renewed vigor in business and industry. Already a printing center, Nashville became an important distributing and wholesale center. An important new hotel, the Maxwell House, was completed. President Theodore Roosevelt, when he tasted the special Maxwell House blend of coffee, is said to have originated the phrase "Good to the last drop." Printer's Alley, an entertainment district in the downtown area, is a popular place for night time activity.



ATHENS of the SOUTH

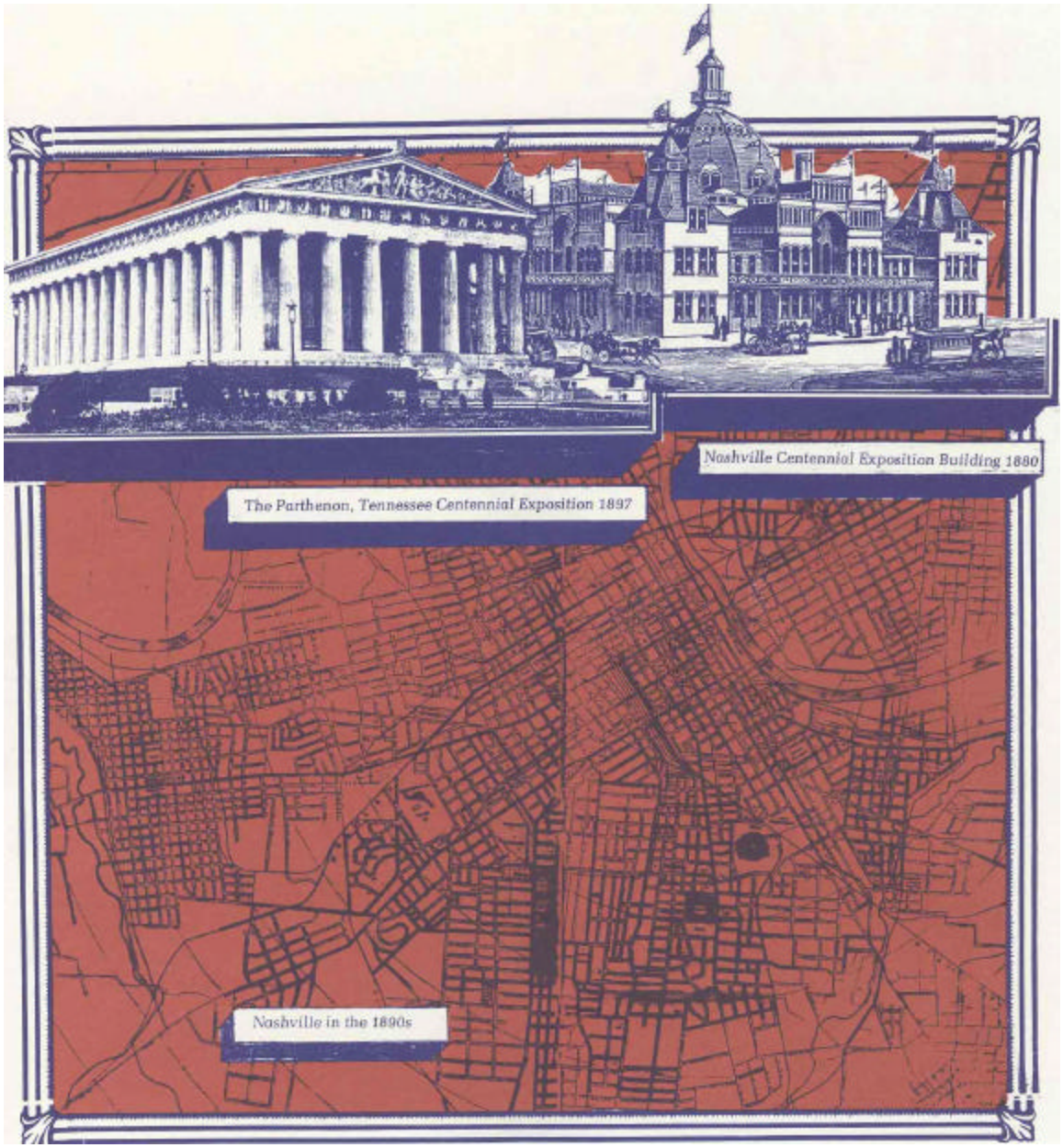
The most remarkable growth was in education. Vanderbilt University was founded in 1873—the roots of whose medical college extend to the old University of Nashville. Peabody College, another lineal descendant of the University of Nashville is a leading institution for teacher education. In 1866 Fisk University, one of the first private schools dedicated to the education of blacks, was founded; and Meharry Medical College, which has educated more black doctors than all other medical colleges in the world combined, was founded in 1876. There are now seventeen colleges and universities in Nashville.

Education was always a major concern of the community. Classes were held on the flatboats for the children of the Robertson and Donelson expedition, and Davidson Academy was established shortly after the settlement on a land grant Robertson acquired from North Carolina for that purpose. Davidson Academy became Cumberland University and later the University of Nashville. Education for women was not neglected, and the Nashville Female Academy was in existence until the Civil War.

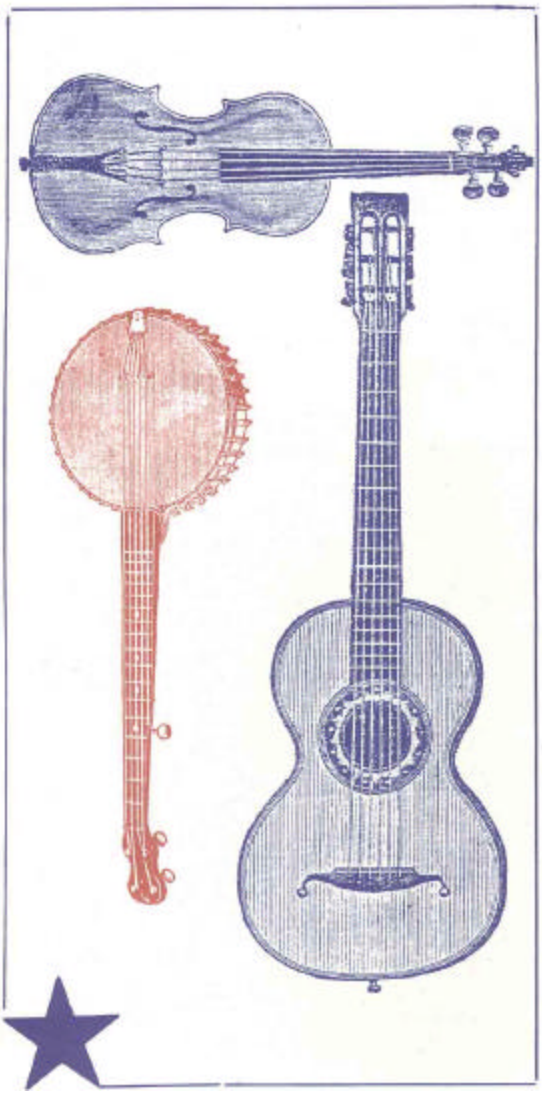
On the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of Nashville, the city celebrated the event with the usual parades and speeches and a spectacular fireworks display. The Centennial Building, located at the corner of Eighth and Broad, was a handsome structure (no longer standing) in which art, historical mementos and industrial exhibits were displayed. The culminating event of the Centennial was the unveiling of the equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson presented to the state by the Tennessee Historical Society. The other two castings of this statue stand in Jackson Square in New Orleans and in Washington, D.C.

A wood and stucco replica of the Parthenon was such a popular exhibition building for the Tennessee State Centennial in 1897 that the city, already called the Athens of the South, decided to build a permanent reconstruction in concrete in Centennial Park. This magnificent structure is the only full-scale facsimile of the Parthenon in existence.

Vanderbilt University Campus 1880

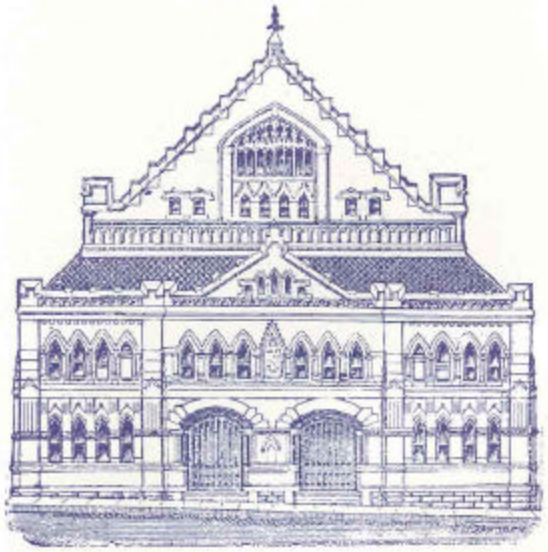

Nashville Centennial Exposition Building 1880
The Parthenon, Tennessee Centennial Exposition 1897
Nashville in the 1890s

MUSIC CITY



Two World Wars have come and gone. The Old Hickory Powder Plant was built in 1918 to make smokeless gunpowder for the Allied armies, and many soldiers of the Second World War will remember furloughs in Nashville when they prepared for the invasion of Europe by participating in the largest war games ever held in the world on the fertile fields of Middle Tennessee.

Nashville today is Music City. Long a center of education, business, and manufacturing, Nashville is also the home of country music. A rich heritage of Anglo-American folk music came to the Bluffs with the settlers, and it is recorded in John Donelson's *Journal* that religious services, music, and dancing were part of the two-day celebration when the flatboats arrived at the Bluffs. By the 1920s it became clear that country and blues recordings were increasing in popularity, and by mid-century every major record company had offices and studios in Nashville. Country music was big business.



UNION GOSPEL TABERNACLE.

The showcase for country music is WSM's Grand Ole Opry, which is America's longest running radio show. First broadcast in 1925 in a studio, the Opry moved to the Ryman Auditorium in 1941. The Ryman Auditorium was built as the Union Gospel Tabernacle by Tom Ryman, a Cumberland riverboat captain who was converted by the zeal of a tent meeting evangelist. This tabernacle, noted for its superior acoustics and "half-round" seating arrangement, was the scene of many spiritual and cultural events, including talks by Billy Sunday, Booker T. Washington, Carrie Nation and Helen Keller, and performances by Sarah Bernhardt, Caruso, Isadora Duncan, Helen Hayes, Katherine Cornell, Marion Anderson, and Arthur Rubinstein, as well as by the familiar Grand Old Opry stars and superstars. In 1974, the Grand Ole Opry moved to a permanent home specifically designed for live productions at Opryland, and the old Ryman Auditorium near 5th and Broadway is a historic landmark at rest.

Our historic houses, government buildings, parks, and museums are open to the public, and they have much more to tell about Nashville. We think you will find that, after 200 years, Nashville is a strong, vigorous city—one which looks to her past with pride and looks forward to her third century with enthusiasm.

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