This book is about Germantown, a Philadelphia neighborhood established in 1683. It is also about public history, history that takes place outside a classroom and actively involves people from varied backgrounds and with varied points of view. Germantown is a perfect place to explore public history in America—its strengths and possibilities, its limits and the ways in which it can be truly effective.

Germantown is rife with contradictions. Old enough for many to find themselves in its compelling history, whose physical evidence is apparent in well-preserved artifacts and buildings, Germantown is also riddled with abandoned structures, racial politics, and crime, despite more than a century of efforts to use its connections to important events in American history for the benefit of the community.

From 1683 to 1854 Germantown stood on its own, legally separate from the city of Philadelphia. As the name implies, it was founded by people from what is now Germany. Anabaptists, mainly Mennonites and Quakers, came from the German and Dutch areas of the Rhine seeking religious toleration and freedom from persecution in William Penn’s Pennsylvania. Five years after the first settlers arrived, four members of the town’s Quaker meeting drafted the “Germantown Protest against Slavery.” At the beginning of the twentieth century, “Germantown” referred to the entire pre-1854 German Township, which comprised Germantown,
Mount Airy, and Chestnut Hill. Economic efforts to promote the township centered on the Germantown and Chestnut Hill Improvement Association, which spanned all three neighborhoods but focused on the commercial district that is the main artery of the community, Germantown Avenue. Shortly after World War II, as the population of the region changed from white upper and middle class to predominantly black and working class, first Chestnut Hill (today an upper-middle-class neighborhood) and then Mount Airy (today largely middle class) separated their economic fates from that of Germantown and its increasingly African American population. In this book “Germantown” refers to the neighborhood rather than the township designation that became obsolete after 1854. Bounded by Windrim Avenue in the Logan section of North Philadelphia north to and including Upsal Street in Mount Airy and bounded on the east roughly from Stenton Avenue west to the Wissahickon Creek, Germantown, for this book, refers to an area that encompasses the historic sites of Northwest Philadelphia that have been or are now open to the public.²

Germantown developed as a rustic strip village of small-shop manufacturers, farms, and mills where raw materials from outlying counties were turned into products that could be sold in Philadelphia. It had lost its “Germanness” by the early 1800s and was incorporated into Philadelphia under the Consolidation Act of 1854. After the Civil War, Germantown’s population grew rapidly, from seventeen thousand people in 1860 to sixty-five thousand in 1900, largely because of influxes of Irish and Italian immigrants and African American migrants from the South. Since consolidation, Germantown and other Philadelphia neighborhoods have cultivated community identities separate from the city, with distinct founding narratives and histories and their own historical societies to celebrate them. Losing political independence prompted Germantown to use history to establish its own sense of place. Well into the middle of the twentieth century, for instance, people identified themselves as coming from “Germantown, Pennsylvania” rather than Philadelphia.³

For well over a hundred years, markers, monuments, and house museums identified attempts to document and preserve Germantown’s history. Germantown Avenue, the spine of the neighborhood, was once known as the “Great Road.” Today, a two-mile stretch of Germantown Avenue starting in North Philadelphia and ending near Cliveden is the longest National Colonial Historic Landmark District in the country. Along with Annapolis, Maryland, it was also one of the first districts so designated. The pathbreaking Historic American Buildings Survey began in German-
town in 1935, and the neighborhood’s many house museums are owned or operated by prominent local and national preservation stewards, such as the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, the National Society of Colonial Dames, the National Park Service, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. History has been crucial to the neighborhood’s identity, as seen in its many (and often competing) history festivals, and vital to its economic well-being, as demonstrated by successive heritage tourism and urban planning initiatives. Yet Germantown’s preservation goals have fallen short of making its place in American history lastingly useful for the neighborhood’s overall benefit. In many ways, Germantown’s public history offers a parable for what happens when insular practices of public history and preservation fail to overcome entrenched interests or are unable to involve broad sections of the population, such as immigrants and people of color.

The most recent generation of people working to preserve and make known Germantown’s history, motivated by an urgent sense that the way history has been practiced is not financially or socially sustainable, recognizes that change needs to be made. With dedicated leadership, ongoing research, and the willingness to use new methods to reckon with the results of selective historical memory, Germantown’s citizen historians, amateur and professional, have pushed boundaries and changed inert patterns. They recognized and took responsibility for the limitations of previous generations of stewards, which had almost doomed its public history to irrelevance. A narrow public history leaves a legacy of division. These new public historians began to overcome tendencies to insular, self-serving narratives with openness to innovative ways of looking at the colonial period that have encompassed the difficult histories of slavery, racism, and class distinctions. Recent efforts to reckon with Germantown’s history-making have embraced the history of the twentieth century to show how politics, economic forces, and population shifts shaped how the neighborhood looks today, adding new chapters to well-chronicled colonial and Victorian narratives. The resulting collaborations among historic sites and with community institutions have not been easy, nor have they solved all the problems, but they have generated powerful responses from a wider public that finds itself involved in honest, inventive, and good faith efforts to preserve and remember all the stories that Germantown’s history contains.

Public history played a big role in this shift over the past one hundred years, providing a source of community pride and a context that allows people to address present-day issues by considering the history of the com-
munity, good and bad. Because Germantown has always been a cauldron for understanding preservation and public history in America, the resulting signs have implications for the wider field, especially at a time when people in the preservation movement are considering its future.

Publications abound about public history and preservation, the demise of house museums, and the need to change how we think about preserving the past. Few, however, are written by someone leading the work, building coalitions of stakeholders, overcoming institutional resistance, or raising money and allocating resources to make the necessary changes. Those that are tend to be alarmist rather than instructive. Yet in my case a practitioner’s perspective clarifies how hard, political, socially engaged, and ultimately satisfying it is to forge a common experience of making history meaningful to the public. Writing about making history public as a participant observer seems especially appropriate in Germantown, with its tradition of citizen historians who made a difference. John Fanning Watson, J. Gordon Baugh Jr., Edwin Jellet, David Richardson, Edward Robinson, Margaret Tinkcom, Shirley Farham, and many others whose work is described here, wrote, collected, or advocated for a sense of place based on the belief that putting the past and present into a broader context might improve current and future conditions.

I believe my practitioner’s perspective offers needed context and real world examples showing a record of community engagement that stretches back a century and helps explain current circumstances. And Germantown offers lessons that can be applied in other communities.

As a neighbor, a historian, and a leader of a historic site, I have based my analysis on my own research, observations, and experiences, which need to be taken as informed yet personal and limited. The book is not a complete chronology of Germantown but an exploration of its struggles and contested discussions about how to apply its history in publicly accessible ways. This account of making Germantown history truly public is more than a collection of impressions, though. It shows how heritage practitioners like me are finding their place in the United States and in the community life of places like Germantown.

My experience suggests that when public history is used to address equity, fairness, and agreed-on community needs, it can help a place like Germantown not only survive but also thrive. Examples appear throughout this book. At certain points in the past century, public history came to Germantown’s aid through documentation, preservation, and creative forms of stewardship—but with the limitations inherent in the practices of the
times and the interests of people with the political or economic influence to dictate what was preserved and remembered. As the field has evolved to embrace new ways of knowing history and involve more perspectives, public history has also helped Germantown evolve. The examples in this book show that it would be wrong to cast Germantown in either/or terms; instead, we must embrace a both/and approach in order to make local history beneficial in sustainable ways. Germantown stands as a parable about the limits of public history and a laboratory for understanding what makes it effective.

Effective public history is an active group endeavor that transcends any one view of the past. “Effective,” like many words associated with public history, carries multiple meanings. “Effective public history” means history done accurately and with scholarly rigor in ways that make it come alive for a variety of people; it also actually builds on a German concept (Wirkungsgeschichte) of ways of knowing history that address personal perspectives that affect one’s view of the past. In this book I argue that Germantown has begun to practice effective public history by addressing the limitations and biases it has inherited from earlier stewards in ways that transform individuals and their understanding of the past, so that public history can help address the social ills plaguing the neighborhood today. Public history will not solve income inequality or racism or housing problems or the shortcomings of the education system. But all of these things intersect in public history, and that is where Germantown’s public history practitioners have begun to do more to reveal context and stimulate discussion. Public history can democratize which stories matter, contextualize new information openly and with critical awareness, and boldly embrace the personal passions that make encounters with history meaningful, even if the subjects are less than celebratory, even if they are tragic.

Interpretation of historic sites can raise people’s consciousness, inspire them, and lift them to an unanticipated level of understanding. But, like weightlessness, it can be scary in practice. Effective public history provides a kind of “antigravity.” Encounters with artifacts and places often evoke visceral responses, powerful emotions, even cognitive changes in the brain. The result is an opportunity to change people. But such fraught encounters have to be managed and led carefully. Effective public history, therefore, requires time and resources to overcome resistance, as well as intentional communication, facilitation of difficult conversations, and leadership of organizational change. In the end, these encounters are
rewarding because they can take people beyond one story to understand that there are many more ways to see the past and ourselves in it.

We lay the foundations for effective public history by broadening the level of input, lowering barriers to participation for expert and nonexpert historians, and deepening our sense of the past by plumbing the sources more expansively and examining all stories accurately and fairly. The result is an active, adaptable process that can elevate public discourse by providing context, expanding our point of view to consider new ways of understanding, and transcending parochial limitations to raise our shared sense of the past. By uncovering history, working toward partnerships, and openly striving for dialogue, effective public history in Germantown builds a platform for preserving stories in as full a context as possible in ways that usefully inform the neighborhood’s often competing needs.

Revivals Colonial and Economic

Visitors to the neighborhood are often struck by what the novelist Mat Johnson calls the “urban depression that is Germantown,” a place “frozen in an architectural class war.” In 1983 German journalists visiting Philadelphia to celebrate the three hundredth anniversary of the first permanent German settlement in America were aghast at the neighborhood’s dilapidated condition. I have heard university students call it “ghetto Williamsburg.” Whites simplistically blame the last generation of black politicians, while blacks assign the problems to white flight and discriminatory business practices. In the 1990s, Germantown’s white state representative, Robert O’Donnell, the speaker of the state legislature, was often heard saying, “Places like Germantown will never die, but they will always be dying.” What makes “places like Germantown”?

You might say that public history—in particular, the way people apply history to make sense of change in the present—has made Germantown and places like it. Germantown is a very old neighborhood where many of the ills that beset U.S. cities in the twentieth century are easy to spot. Other old neighborhoods with unique architecture or significant historical resources have used them for economic revival. But not Germantown. Why not? Many remarkably creative approaches to contemporary problems in Germantown have had historic preservation at their core. Several times a year, news headlines proclaim some new project or initiative that will provide the spark and allow it to reach its elusive potential. A look at what has been tried, what has succeeded, and what has failed in Germantown helps
to illustrate how urban planning, heritage tourism, architectural preservation, and museum studies have evolved in the country overall. Each decade has offered examples of attempted solutions and success stories, frequently setting standards for historic preservation nationally. Why did history fail to provide the development spark that people expected?

Part of the answer lies in how public history has been practiced: occasionally, by people with insular, self-interested motives who are trying to justify their own power or place by establishing connections to the past. Germantown lost its status as an independent town when it was incorporated by the city of Philadelphia in 1854. At that point its leaders pushed for a distinctive identity for the neighborhood by rekindling ancestral associations with the colonial and Revolutionary War generations. Our record of this contested process begins with John Fanning Watson (1779–1860), who started the evolution of Germantown's public memory by establishing markers, collecting objects from the Revolutionary War, commissioning photographs of colonial buildings, and interviewing people who were alive when President George Washington lived in the neighborhood. Though Watson's work was error-prone, inaccurate, and highly bigoted, his influence lasted well into the twentieth century. Guidebooks used his *Annals of Philadelphia* as a source, and it shaped the papers read before meetings of descendant groups. In 1900 the Germantown Site and Relic Society was founded to maintain Watson's approach to local history by preserving “souvenirs and mementos of Washington.” Watson's model of progressive historic preservation, combined with his conservative politics, informed a century's worth of efforts in what amounted to one prolonged, localized Colonial Revival.

Though generations of antiquarians followed Watson's model, many groups claim Germantown, with pride, as a vessel for their own heritage. Because of William Penn's bold idea of toleration for all Christian sects in his colony, many people sought a religious home in Germantown. The influx of settlers resulted in the establishment of scores of congregations but also a tendency to fragment and exclude. Thus, the Germantown Friends meeting and school (built in 1845) stands across from the reform Quaker meeting and school, Greene Street Friends, founded ten years later. Rittenhouse Street, on what was once called “Poor House Lane,” has more than a dozen churches, mostly storefront congregations established by successive waves of African American migrants after the Civil War. They and other immigrants and migrants saw opportunity in Germantown's natural beauty and architecture. Even as its German identity gave way to
Irish, Italian, and African American, the neighborhood’s history helped to Americanize new groups. So strong was the impulse to connect to Germantown’s icons of colonial America that in February 1928 the black YWCA hosted a ladies’ tea where African American women celebrated Washington’s birthday by dressing as George and Martha.

A Day in Germantown

On a bright August day not long ago, the historic site where I worked, Cliveden, gathered a team of historians, architects, designers, museum conservators, and professional tour guides to study its two kitchens. The construction of Cliveden was completed in 1767. Today the property consists of a large stone mansion, two separate outbuildings, and a stone and wood carriage house, reconstructed after a 1970 fire, that today contains staff offices, interpretive exhibition space, and rooms for community use. Though built by local craftsmen out of locally quarried stone, the sixteen-room mansion stands apart from the German-style architecture on the avenue. Significantly, it reveals certain differences between spaces where the workers lived and worked, such as a hidden staircase that slaves, servants, and children used, and the 1767 kitchen, one of two “dependencies”—outbuildings on which the household depended for laundry, food, and other products of the service quarters. Workers lived in the service spaces but also on upper floors of the mansion. Thus, the spaces where the family lived and the ones where the workers lived and worked sometimes intersect. Enslaved and indentured workers served the large household, which included twelve children in the first generation that occupied Cliveden. The seven generations of Chew descendants who owned the house until 1972 modified and modernized the stone structure several times, particularly the service spaces (see Chapter 5), but, because of the house’s role in the Battle of Germantown during the Revolutionary War, they never altered the façade.

On October 4, 1777, General George Washington attacked British forces at Germantown in a battle that extended over the entire neighborhood. Planned as an attack on the British army to liberate occupied Philadelphia, the Battle of Germantown engaged twenty-one thousand troops and could be heard sixty miles away. The most intense skirmishes took place at Cliveden as the Continental Army tried unsuccessfully to remove approximately a hundred British soldiers who were using its thick stone walls as a fortress. Though an American defeat, the Battle of Germantown...
town was a key event in the Philadelphia campaign, for it persuaded European allies to support the Continental cause. Cliveden was permanently linked to the 1777 battle, just as the neighborhood as a whole cherished its connections to America’s colonial and revolutionary history as a source of pride and identity.

Cliveden had received a major grant to involve consulting scholars and neighborhood residents in a project to uncover the history of its kitchens in order to preserve them appropriately and program the spaces for regular exhibitions and tours. Even simple spaces can yield historical insights that are accessible, relevant, and even provocative to visitors and neighbors. One kitchen is located in an original 1767 structure—a two-story outbuilding or dependency—former slave quarters that were remodeled into a twentieth-century apartment and later damaged by water and neglect. The second, located inside the Cliveden mansion itself, is a 1959 kitchen filled with bright green cabinets and what were modern appliances for the
time. As surprised as visitors are to enter a “modern” kitchen in a colonial house museum, they are consistently shocked to learn that the family that owned Cliveden until 1972, the Chews, were once among the largest slave owners in Pennsylvania. This history was a shock, too, to the experts visiting on that August day. Some members of the team were unaware that slavery existed in Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love in the Quaker State. Learning this history disorients visitors to this revolutionary shrine, challenging them to reconsider their understanding of the site’s past.

The kitchens project is the latest initiative to excavate this facet of the history of mid-Atlantic chattel slavery: the enslaved people associated with the Chews of Cliveden. If visitors are taken aback by the presence of slave quarters, then all of Germantown’s well-remembered history is worth reconsidering. Only within the past generation have its established museums, monuments, and historic markers—its “memory infrastructure”—acknowledged anything but a celebratory past. How the memory infrastructure of the neighborhood changed and expanded in response to residents’ experience and understanding is a central component of this book.11

As the team probed Cliveden’s kitchens, children from a neighborhood summer camp played on the six acres of grounds, careful to avoid the caution tape that marked off where heavy rains had felled a two-hundred-year-old tree the week before. One of Cliveden’s challenges is connecting local children with the sense of wonder the experts felt in their own encounter with the site. The children ran around and played on the grounds, while the experts coaxed a few of them down from the trees.

Leaving Cliveden, at the upper end of Germantown Avenue, the team took to the road to examine historic kitchens at several nearby sites built in the eighteenth century. Most of the twenty experts were seeing the neighborhood’s historic resources for the first time. Among these are sixteen historic sites, seven of which are National Historic Landmarks, the highest designation of historic significance conferred by the Secretary of the Interior. The 1777 Battle of Germantown sprawled over the neighborhood, and damage can still be seen on many houses from that period. Three schoolhouses from the time when Washington lived in Germantown remain standing; one of them was adapted for use as a coffee shop, which provided lunch for the team. More than ten thousand residential buildings here are at least a century old. Among the scores of churches in the neighborhood are the founding congregations in North America for Lutherans, Mennonites, and Moravians, who settled in Germantown.
because of the promise of religious freedom offered in Pennsylvania. The buildings, however, do not reveal all the stories. Burial grounds dating from the seventeenth century include group graves of Revolutionary War dead, buried by neighborhood boys on October 4, 1777, and a “potter’s field” with the remains of paupers and nameless African Americans. The presence of so much history in plain sight makes it practically invisible to most residents. The purpose of our trip was to get to the previously untold stories embedded in the architecture and social history of kitchens and service spaces where workers toiled to provide food and clothing for the wealthy owners of the properties. Even team members familiar with Germantown’s history saw it with new eyes. Going in and out of old kitchens, exploring physical evidence of the interplay of labor, wealth, and privilege, prompted us to make connections to today’s dynamics of class and power.

The first stop was the Johnson House, constructed in 1768 by the same man who built Cliveden, a Mennonite master carpenter named Jacob Knorr. The team looked through the kitchen, examined the well pump, and peered into the icehouse outbuilding. The site’s central air conditioning units had recently been stolen for scrap copper, and the board of directors was trying to raise funds to replace them. A private home until 1908, the Johnson House for most of the rest of the twentieth century was the meeting place for the Germantown Women’s Club. Research in the 1980s verified that the Johnson family included abolitionists who offered their house as a station on the Underground Railroad in the early 1850s. The house’s history was rewritten, and in 1997 the house was designated a National Historic Landmark. Today it is open as a public house museum whose mission is to tell the story of the slaves’ struggle for freedom. The same man who built Cliveden, the slave owner’s mansion just one block away, built this house that became a station on the Underground Railroad. Germantown history contains many such juxtapositions, showing how the revelation of events and connections from the past changes the public’s sense of a building’s importance.

A small bus (a remade trolley car, recalling the Number 23 trolley that operated on the nine miles of Germantown Avenue until the 1990s) brought the group to Historic RittenhouseTown (built in 1688), site of America’s first paper mill. Its executive director showed us through two of its kitchens: the 1740 bakehouse and the cooking hearth in the recently renovated 1707 homestead, birthplace of the colonial-era astronomer David Rittenhouse. The restored bakehouse is larger than it appears from
Figure I.2 Publicly accessible sites of Historic Germantown, 2016. This map shows all sixteen members of the Historic Germantown consortium, most of them on or near Germantown Avenue; Cliveden is near the top. (Courtesy of Historic Germantown; design by Caspari-McCormick.)
outside; episodes of a cable television show, *Cooking with History*, have been filmed there, with cooks from Philadelphia’s City Tavern preparing meals over multiple fires in its hearth. The 1707 homestead building is now used as the visitor center. The director seemed upbeat about the challenges of maintaining seven historic buildings with a volunteer board of directors consisting of Rittenhouse descendents, local craftspeople, and professionals with varied skill sets and financial capacity, all of whom share a love for the site.

The next stop was the “Germantown White House,” as the Deshler-Morris House (built in 1752) is now known, operated by Independence National Historic Park (part of the National Park Service). Washington lived and held cabinet meetings during two summers of his presidency, in 1793 and 1794. The curator showed the team through the kitchen ten at a time because of the delicate state of its recent restoration. Owned by the federal government since 1948, the site has benefited over the past ten years from millions of dollars in investment for meticulous repairs and new exhibitions; the interior spaces and the exterior are exceptionally handsome. Budget cuts resulting from the 2012 federal sequester, however, keep the Deshler-Morris House closed to the public most days of the year.

The bus passed Vernon Park, which includes the 1803 Vernon-Wister House and serves as Germantown’s de facto public square. Monuments to the neighborhood’s colonial and revolutionary past are spread throughout Vernon Park’s spacious lawn. This central Germantown park was the scene of numerous public history festivals during the past century, and in 2008 presidential candidate Barack Obama spoke to twenty thousand people there. The kitchens team saw construction under way to improve the park’s landscaping and playground, with funding recently secured through the efforts of Germantown’s city councilwoman. The initiative to shift the perception of the park from a hangout for homeless drug addicts to a community gathering place was nearing completion. Banners promoted the project’s progress and announced upcoming movie nights and concerts featuring local musicians and poets.

Three prominent buildings not far from Vernon Park stand empty and abandoned: the Young Women’s Christian Association, the Germantown Town Hall, and, across the street from them, the old Germantown High School, which closed in 2013. The Y had been the scene of progressive interracial programming in the 1920s. Only a few months before our tour, plans for adapting and reactivating the Y building were scuttled by the councilwoman at a public meeting, and with it hopes for the redevelop-
ment of at least one of Germantown Avenue’s vacant, graffiti-tagged institutional ruins. It stands as a reminder that the public does not always get to decide the fate of historic buildings. The other buildings hold some promise. A private developer has purchased the 1914 high school building. As for the 1923 Town Hall, abandoned since 1996, a complicated ownership arrangement with the city of Philadelphia challenges efforts to make the massive marble structure viable. In 2013 public art projects drew attention to the building, currently the greatest test of the neighborhood’s ongoing efforts to use its historic architecture for the benefit of the public. Germantown regularly sees creative efforts to reuse existing structures to meet present community needs. (The coffee shop in the 1750 schoolhouse is one such example.) No museum has ever been built in Germantown: All its historic sites are adaptations, mostly former homes preserved and interpreted for the public.

The trolley drove past dollar stores housed in what had been Germantown’s grand department stores during the mid-twentieth century. I left the group for a moment to rush into a lawyer’s office located in the Clarkson-Watson House (built in 1750–1760), where Thomas Jefferson lived during the summer of 1793. Once a bank, later home to the nineteenth-century historian John Fanning Watson, the building’s historic features, including exposed wood panels and door hardware, had been expertly restored in 2010. I was delivering a letter needed to legally dissolve the Upsala Foundation—the nonprofit that had run the 1798 Upsala mansion as a house museum. Rarely visited and overburdened by maintenance costs, Upsala closed in 2003 and was (at the time of the tour) operated by Cliveden, located across the street. As I left to catch up to the trolley, I invited the attorneys to offer promotional fliers to their clients or even purchase a program ad for the history festival held each October to commemorate the 1777 Battle of Germantown on the grounds of Cliveden and Upsala.

The kitchens team moved on to Grumblethorpe to see the kitchen and service cellar at this 1744 site. Located on 2.5 acres, Grumblethorpe remains Germantown’s best example of German architecture from the colonial era. Volunteers run an award-winning education program for local students, who tend an urban farm; Grumblethorpe is not open to the public except by appointment. Like many historic sites in Germantown and elsewhere, its financial sustainability is in jeopardy because of declining resources and dwindling visitation. Economics may well force more of Germantown’s sixteen historic sites to go the way of Upsala and
either close or become something other than a house museum. (These sixteen sites belong to the Historic Germantown consortium, described in Chapter 1.)

The team ate lunch at the 1730 Stenton mansion at the lower end of Germantown. Stenton’s prominence in the Historic Germantown consortium of sites stems, in part, from its status as the first house museum in Philadelphia (opened in 1899). More recently, Stenton has managed an exemplary program aimed at promoting history education and literacy through collaboration among five sites in Germantown, no small feat in a community with ninety churches and thirty-nine neighborhood associations, as well as those sixteen historic sites. Stenton’s grounds are open to the public, and thousands from the surrounding community take part in an annual Easter egg hunt and other seasonal events. The city of Philadelphia owns Stenton, but the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania operates the property. Though a traditional and descendant-based organization, the Dames have implemented a strategic vision that transcends mere preservation of the building.

Reviewing our day in Germantown, the scholars, architects, and consultants of the kitchens team saw potential beyond the study of kitchen spaces and the social history of the people who worked in them. Though we were charged with examining and comparing elements of kitchen design and architecture, the give and take of the day allowed us to see the whole neighborhood as a sort of test kitchen for public engagement with history. Many remarked that despite all the issues Germantown faced, they had never experienced such a well-preserved place. They saw the neighborhood as curators would, examining the kitchens for evidence, interpreting archaeological and architectural details, but they also saw Germantown in its larger urban context and wondered how preserving the kitchens could help identify the needs of the surrounding neighborhood. Could the research be made relevant to more than just a small group of experts? What was the symbolic importance of recovering known slave quarters? Can colonial cooking demonstrations show the evolution of traditional foodways, and perhaps connect that knowledge with local restaurants and businesses on the commercial corridor? Finally, the kitchens team noted the strong reactions to the contrast between a modern kitchen and one from colonial times. A relatively simple space architecturally, a kitchen can be the setting for complex social dynamics. Exploring how those played out over time offers opportunities to connect with individual
visitors. Making the kitchens more prominent on the tour could lead to more sensory experiences: tastes, sounds, and aromas, triggering reactions to the historic kitchens or sparking memories of their own homes. A kitchen can raise issues of, race, class, status, servitude, and gender roles in a realm that is identifiable for most people. Showing the kitchens as private and public spaces raises key questions of public history. Who owns the history of such spaces? The people who worked in them? The employers and owners? The current stewards? An encounter with the past through a common space like a kitchen can create a powerful historical experience.

The team saw a great opportunity but also the current state of Germantown. Gated shops and abandoned buildings stand alongside beautiful historic architecture. Even the many well-preserved historic sites interconnected through the Historic Germantown consortium stand apart from people walking by on the street, literally fenced off from the everyday life of the neighborhood. The history practitioners who work at the sites, largely white and well educated, are separated from the neighbors they are trying to reach. If Germantown is indeed a test kitchen for public history, and if Germantown’s historic places are to provide a common space for all kinds of audiences, its practitioners need to emerge from behind the gates to engage with the community so that the sites can offer inclusive experiences that make the neighborhood’s compelling history matter to its residents.

Citizens and Historians

Public history depends on citizens trying to see themselves in larger cultural narratives. The passions that motivate campaigns to save a place typically stem from a drive to preserve something that illustrates a story of “our people.” Whether those impulses are curatorial (saving the buildings and artifacts), urbanist and contextual (saving the place or location), or experiential (saving the feeling and association the place inspires), they derive from groups pushing a specific version of history. National Park Service historians informally call this energy “Criterion P”—referring to the passion and political influence that frequently determine which historic places are designated as nationally significant. Both elements of Criterion P are vital to Germantown. Tension is generated when people delve deep into their ethnic or local roots to make a case for national importance. With personal passions motivating the striving for more general affiliation, people often make their claim to national importance by
highlighting culturally specific roots in a larger narrative. Germantown’s historical memory comes from its many citizen historians, passionately raising the profile of their own special interest.

Public history and historic preservation have always been political. The national embrace of historic preservation began in the nineteenth century as a reaction to industrialization and the Civil War. Colonial customs and revolutionary heroes recalled the nation’s origins: Mount Vernon was saved and New England kitchens were reconstructed for local fairs and national exhibitions to suggest that the sacrifices and sentiments that had built the nation could still be drawn upon. In Germantown, Watson preserved strands of George Washington’s hair in a box fashioned from a fragment of the William Penn Treaty Oak. Moments became mementos used to inspire as well as preserve the past against change in the present.

Twentieth-century public history and preservation saw a venerated past vulnerable to urbanization and threatened by more alien newcomers. John D. Rockefeller Jr.’s Colonial Williamsburg, like Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village collections and Henry du Pont’s Winterthur period rooms, saved and honored structures that were reminders of earlier eras, when, it could be believed, ingenuity, shared values, political virtue, sacrifices for common goals, and even high style distinguished a traditional America. The preservation movement of the 1920s went hand in hand with race-based immigration restriction: The same sources created and funded a vision of a presumably superior homogeneous America and promoted parallel legislative strategies to protect that vision.

Germantown’s preservation-based responses to change were built on the Watson model. As immigrants and migrants made their way into Germantown after the Civil War, citizens trumpeted their connections to the colonial generations, using curatorial research or symbols from the historical records. In the 1890s Governor Samuel Pennypacker celebrated the Germanness of early Germantown as it faded from view. The Germantown Site and Relic Society drew attention to buildings, artifacts, and documents that showed how different white Protestant groups each had their roots in the township’s colonial heritage.

As its population changed, Germantown’s citizens responded by crafting their own sense of place. We have already noted the tradition of antiquarians like John Fanning Watson, carried on by the preservationist Frances Anne Wister (1874–1956) and the founders of the Site and Relic Society (renamed the Germantown Historical Society in 1925). The society operated on Watson’s model, treating anything colonial as a sacred
relic and pairing a nostalgia narrative that emphasized the authority of the past with the melancholic realization that, amid so much change, Germantown’s best days were behind it.

The work of preservation gave rise to a professionalizing preservation community, which shifted the movement beyond its culturally specific origins. The 1906 Antiquities Act and 1935 legislation authorizing the Historic American Buildings Survey prompted architects and historians to draw on disciplinary expertise; since the 1960s, the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties and the National Historic Register nominations process have reinforced the importance of expert knowledge. Professional preservationists extended the movement’s purview from battlefields and landscapes into cities; they also came to valorize buildings and specific details of the built environment. These curatorial and urbanist impulses passed from a traditional antiquarian elite to a class of professional experts with similar biases and no less exclusive. At its best, the process upheld rigorous standards for a designation conferring elite status on a site or structure. At its worst, it produced an expert-led “tyranny of best practices,” a term frequently cited by critics who feel that house museums have become so boring as to be unsustainable. The result is that only 5 percent of the buildings listed on the National Register have anything to do with women, African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, or LGBTQ people, suggesting that, if a building did not tell the story of a famous white person, it did not deserve designation. In 2012 Cliveden applied to update its National Historic Landmark nomination to include the new findings on its history of slavery, based on the Chew plantation records. The effort ran up against the limits of the current rules and guidelines. Cliveden’s team had to make the case in terms of the buildings’ architecture rather than the experiences of the people who toiled in them.

There was, however, another way to look at Germantown. J. Gordon Baugh Jr. (d. 1946) documented the growing African American population in a remarkable 1913 photograph album that commemorates what blacks in Germantown did in the fifty years after emancipation. Rather than depicting a neighborhood in decline, he captured images of how African Americans had established their own sense of place, contributing jobs, taxes, and associations for what he labeled “our people.” Baugh placed the growing African American population in Germantown’s history, with a chronology beginning in 1863 rather than 1683. Rather than glorifying what used to be, Baugh depicted the experience of African Americans with a sense of progress and hope. He showed people active in the pres-
ent, trumpeting their contributions and proclaiming their existence in the community as citizens. Baugh’s goals would be extended in 1928, when leaders of the Harlem Renaissance brought an exceptional collaboration to Germantown for one of the first-ever Negro Achievement Week celebrations.

Tension between national connections and ethnic identification played out in many ways. Until the early 1940s, there were separate Young Women’s Christian Associations and Young Men’s Christian Associations for whites and blacks. The Ys and Germantown Settlement, rooted in organizations founded in 1884 by Quakers to Americanize immigrants, promoted ethnic clubs and associations to advance patriotic American ideals. Such groups found their own ways to connect to the past, invoking the example of Penn’s religious toleration or establishing a sense of place in a specific section of the neighborhood. Ethnic heritage festivals were frequent and competing. The ethnically English and the descendants of revolutionary patriots celebrated October 4 with parades and gatherings in Vernon Park to recall the Battle of Germantown. Two days later German groups celebrated German-American Day. It was easier to start a new variation on a theme than to work together. In the early 1970s, when Germantown’s emergent African American political leaders gained control over Germantown Settlement, they used that organization to control public investments for the benefit of black political causes, empowering a single group rather than joining with others to address larger neighborhood issues. Efforts to embrace a broader view of American history tended to break down because of entrenched agendas serving narrowly defined interest groups. This endemic parochialism remains enshrined in the neighborhood’s constellation of house museums, each celebrating a discrete connection to the past while struggling to establish a niche in a crowded field.

Even as Germantown became more heterogeneous, passions and politics worked together to simplify complex historical narratives, resulting in a public history that was divided and not entirely public. The influence of Colonial Williamsburg proved long lasting. Between 1946 and 1976, Germantown business leaders tried to create their own version of a reconstructed colonial village, and despite that project’s failure, one still hears today the myth that the Rockefellers considered reconstructing Germantown before settling on the former Virginia capital.

For decades, the Germantown section of Philadelphia has been a poor, high-crime neighborhood with a declining population. In 1950, there were
more than 68,000 residents, of whom fewer than 10,000 were black. By 1980, there were fewer than 49,000 residents, slightly more than 10,000 of whom were white. The 2010 census saw 29 percent of the 46,690 residents living below the poverty line (compared with 14 percent statewide). The large minority population (73 percent as of 2010) has until recently been disconnected from the neighborhood’s established public history. No marker related to Germantown’s African American history existed until 1987, when a plaque marking the site of the Joseph Hill Elementary School was placed in the parking lot where it had once stood. The absence of museums and monuments reflecting the history of the neighborhood’s black residents was not an indication that these residents were uninterested in history—quite the contrary. Though black residents were not allowed to be members of the Germantown Historical Society (founded in 1900) until the early 1970s, they found ways to put themselves into the history of Germantown.

Applying “Criterion P,” black residents took matters into their own hands. In 1967 the recent high school graduate David Richardson Jr. led a walkout of two hundred students from Germantown High School to protest the absence of African American history in the curriculum. Recently, Vashti Dubois opened the Colored Girls Museum in her own home in southern Germantown, and Supreme D. Dow started the Black Writers Museum, which now occupies the 1803 Wister House in Vernon Park. The founders adopted the name “museum” for these institutions that were designed to fill a perceived gap in the public memory: a built environment and memory infrastructure that did not represent the black experience. Some museums have had to close because there are not enough visitors; several more have opened to share the history of “our people” when the memory infrastructure does not reflect them.

This book shows that the issues that divide Germantown go well beyond simplistic oppositions such as white and black, rich and poor, and descendant and newcomer. There have always been many Germantowns. The interplay of class, education, ethnic background, and one’s sense of the past helped determine which Germantown one belonged to and which clubs, heritage groups, and neighborhood associations one joined. Separatism was encouraged, rather than mitigated, by religious groups. If public history were solely about white history, there would be one colonial museum rather than a dozen. And if ethnic groups were perfectly cohesive, there probably would not be so many churches, often of the same denomination, in such close proximity. In Germantown, the “sense of place” and
identification with “our people” has proved as much a source of division as of unity. It has even been a source of embarrassment at key moments.

In 1983 the German Sunday newsweekly Zeit Magazin published a ten-page cover story about Germantown, marking the three hundredth anniversary of its founding. The magazine profiled descendants of the thirteen families who came from the Crefeld area of Germany in the 1680s. One of the highlights of the story was a history parade. Here was the epitome of the wave of Colonial Revivalism that shaped public history after World War II and continued into the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations. Planning for the tercentenary, historic sites formed a loose collaboration, Historic Germantown Preserved, to facilitate the efforts of volunteers and a small group of museum professionals to draw tourists to Germantown. Combined tours, exhibitions of founding documents, and a variety of programs and events celebrated the connection to Germany. The group even succeeded in bringing West German Bundespräsident Karl Carstens to the Germantown Historical Society.

The magazine coverage, however, could not have been more alarming. The front page featured an honor guard of five men dressed in Prussian military uniforms (helmeted in the traditional Pickelhübe, two of them carrying rifles), marching past gray buildings with boarded windows splattered with graffiti, on the broken cobblestones of Germantown Avenue, its sidewalks curiously devoid of onlookers. Intended to update colonial connections, the article ignored the fact that Germantown had lost its “Germanness” by the late 1800s. Nor did the northwestern German and Dutch founders who settled that Pennsylvania village have any link with Prussia. Those out-of-context re-enactors, in nostalgic costumes completely at odds with their surroundings, showed the limitations of the Watson approach to public history. Zeit used the word “decline” a dozen times to describe the neighborhood, giving special attention to race, crime (crack had arrived in Germantown earlier that year), and the diminishing interest in preservation. “The German Township is a black ghetto. I pass through decaying streets, the spray-paint-soiled façades, and whole city blocks vacant, doors and windows strewn with trash and debris. Is this Philadelphia’s future Bronx? The neglected historic dregs of the City of Brotherly Love?”