

Beat: Local

Local Historic District Determined to Survive

Shelbyville Historic Belmont District

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USPA NEWS - On a busy street just two blocks off the Public Square, the residents are coming together as never before to protect their neighborhood, their investments, and the history which drew them there to begin with.

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On a busy street just two blocks off the Public Square, the residents are coming together as never before to protect their neighborhood, their investments, and the history which drew them there to begin with. The Historic Belmont District is uniting under the organization of the Historic Belmont District Preservation Society to ensure the stabilization and improvement of one of the oldest surviving neighborhoods in the City of Shelbyville.

About 20 or so years ago, a local resident of the Belmont Avenue neighborhood, Gary Ashley, who has long had a passion for Historic Structures and Historic Preservation, organized a handful of the then neighbors, and successfully created the Historic Belmont District which was passed by the Shelbyville City council soon after. He continued to fight to keep the historic integrity of the neighborhood, which at that time was on the verge of vanishing with the demolition of numerous historic structures. He and his partner, owned and restored the Historic Gore Home, and ran a successful Tea Room for a number of years until they had to relocate to Nashville due to a career change.

Before leaving Shelbyville, they had fought with the City to prevent the construction of an apartment complex on Landers Street which ran behind the Belmont Historic District, and while they were still here, kept that project from happening. But, as soon as they were out, the complex went up, and with it, the crime rate as well.

After a few years, they decided to return to Shelbyville, a city which they both felt at home and welcomed in, and purchased one of the homes that was in need of much attention and care, the Historic E. C. Shoffner Home at 517 Belmont Avenue. After years of restoration and improvements, their home is now one of the showpieces of the Historic Belmont District. Gary, being determined as he is, continued in organizing and improving the neighborhood, and in the early 2000's had acquired acceptance from numerous additional homeowners to be added to the District's listing.

Time passed, and many of the homes have sold and have gotten new owners who have taken the same interest in the Historic Preservation of a neighborhood which dates back to the founding of Shelbyville. Belmont Avenue, originally named High Street, was one of the original ten streets that were constructed and paved when the city was founded. High Street was later changed, after a prominent resident, Mr. J. H. Thompson, stated that High Street was "too common" a name for a street where numerous prominent families in varying positions, the majority of whom were Doctors, Lawyers, Pharmacists, and Store owners on the Public Square.

Mr. Thompson began calling High Street Belmont Avenue until it was officially recognized and changed by the City of Shelbyville and the United States Postal Service. The original home that Mr. Thompson built, in 1854, still stands at the corner of Dunaway Street and Belmont Avenue, now known as the Woods Apartments.

Now back to the current fight, the neighborhood is preparing for. A few weeks ago, a Graduate Student with Middle Tennessee State University spoke with Mr. Ashley and told him that she was conducting a survey and inventory of the Historic Belmont District, in order to determine if it still "was worthy" of its Historic Overlay.

Apparently the poor woman had no idea with whom she was speaking, and as well she was not given very much information by the City on the Historical Residences and history of this street. Mr. Ashley spent close to two hours answering her questions and correcting the misinformation that she was provided with by the City Officials in charge of coordinating this survey. Once this conversation was over, the alarm bells were sounded throughout the Historic District. Neighbors were called, doors were knocked on and the conversation was repeated to many of the property owners who care deeply about not only their investments in their property, but also the historical integrity of the District.

Once the word got out, Mr. Ashley contacted the City Officials and was told that a letter would be mailed to him explaining the process. The letter was sent, stating that the survey was being conducted on all three of the Historic Districts of Shelbyville, and that he hope to discuss it further once the survey was completed. This letter was what was expected as a response to the concerns that were raised, however, the letter contained little to none of the information that was relayed to Mr. Ashley to begin with. He was told enough to panic, and sound the alarms.

Coincidentally, the day following the date of the letter and article was published in the printed local newspaper, this article pretty much towed the line on the City's response, but then included closing comments such as: "Might there be further action at some point? Yes," "I. "What those are, we don't know" as well as "It's going to be a long process, if it moves forward". Again, the city of Shelbyville Officials apparently do not know the residents and property owners of the Historic Belmont District very well, nor, as far as we have seen in past experiences, do they care.

The flag has been raised, a complete inventory of the Historic Belmont District was completed in two days, as opposed to the months, that the graduate students and City Officials seem to be taking. The residents also have already begun their own process in getting the District nominated by the Tennessee State Historical Society for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Districts, and in doing so will be able to ensure that the information is more accurate than if the city did the same. For an example, take a look at the Historic Frierson-Eakin District, which was named on the National Register as the "Historic East Shelbyville District". Our District is rich in the history of the city, county, as well as the nation.

Numerous Nationally Important as well as people of State and local importance are tied to the street, its homes, as well as a few of its empty lots.

For now it is a "wait and see" situation to see what these City Officials, who one of which, would not know Historic Preservation if it "walked through her soup". Also, it has been confirmed that this same City Official has an apparent conflict of interest dealing with a personal relationship, which has been confirmed by multiple confidential sources, with a disgruntled property owner who in the past lost a fight to add a building that was not suitable for the neighborhood, and has actually purchased an adjacent lot in the past six months.

This seems to the residents that this individual may be planning to attempt to build the inappropriate structure again, but the District is ready, and better prepared should that fight occur.

The residents of the Historic Belmont District as well as the newly formed Historic Belmont District Preservation Society, along with its State, National, and International Supporters will not wait, we have already begun the process and the residents of this important neighborhood will settle for nothing less than victory!

or More Information on the Historic Belmont District, visit their website at www.HistoricBelmont.org or the Facebook page for the Historic Belmont District Preservation Society at [www.Facebook.com/BelmontHistoric](https://www.facebook.com/BelmontHistoric).

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