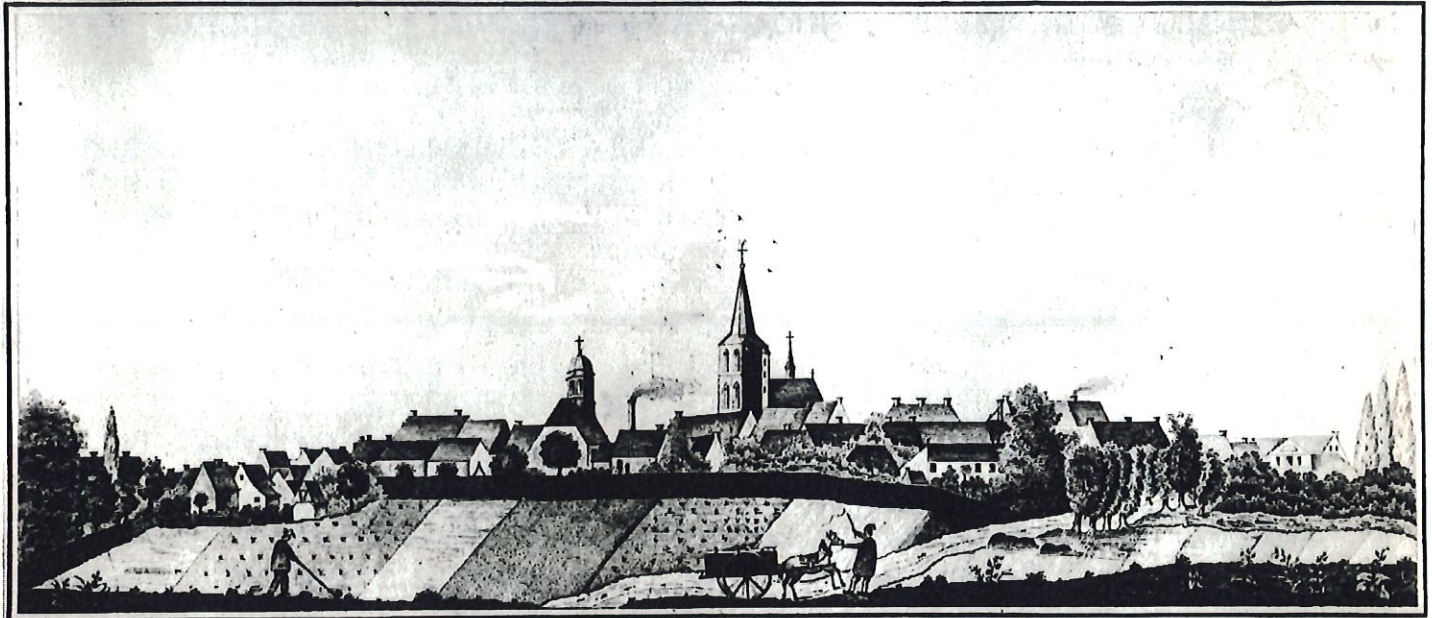


GERMANTOWN CRIER



KALDENKIRCHEN.

(von der Südseite.)

When thirteen families travelled from Krefeld, Germany to Philadelphia to "found" Germantown in 1683, among them were the Kaldenkircheners Wilhelm Streper and Reinert Tisen, as well as Peter Keurlis from Waldneil with his Kaldenkirchen wife, Elizabeth Doors.

NEIGHBORHOODS: Somerville

By LeRoy Council

Editor's Note: This column inaugurates what we hope will be a regular feature describing life in Germantown's varied neighborhoods. If you are a lifelong resident of Germantown, grew up here, or just want to reminisce about your own neighborhood, we'd like to hear from you.

In this issue we will be looking at the neighborhood known as Somerville. Somerville is located in what was East Germantown at the intersection of Church Lane and Limekiln Pike. Early references indicate that, at the turn of the century, it was a village of 38 houses. The following was submitted by LeRoy Council, at age 52 a lifelong African-American resident of this section of Germantown. Mr. Council obtained much of his information by talking to some of the older residents of his neighborhood. He tells us about life in Somerville during the early part of this century as he writes:

I am proud of my roots. I wish to give you an insight into the community where I was born.

Although primarily inhabited by Irish, German, Italian, and Polish immigrants, the Somerville section of East Germantown was likened to other small communities in Philadelphia where Colored family members had headed North for a more prosperous life and livelihood. As they came together in small pockets from Southern states such as Georgia, Virginia, Maryland, the Carolinas, etc., the Southerners joined themselves into a new family nucleus. Very much like our African forefathers, these families bonded into one, like a Tribe or Clan. The men fathered and the women nurtured all of the children of this newly formed nucleus, as well as their own. *Respect* was uppermost in the upbringing of the Colored youngsters in the community.



Harry and Reba Phillips, on their 50th wedding anniversary, 1962.

The Colored children of Somerville attended Spencer Roberts School, a Negroes only school. Although there are no known records of when the school was built, we can assume from the ages of those who attended, that it was erected in the 1890's. It was a one-story stone building having a center hallway that separated two classrooms on each side. The school stood on the high side of Norwood Street at Church Lane with its schoolyard sloping down towards Twenty-First Street. The Spencer Roberts School had no principal, so if discipline was required, students were sent to the principal at the Francis Daniel Pastorius School, at Sprague Street and Woodlawn Avenue. There were four teachers at the Spencer Roberts School and one full-time nurse. Mrs. Margaret Shelton, a 92 year-old resident of the 5500 block of Blakemore Street in Somerville, recalls that the sister of Walter and Handy Beckett, Ruth Beckett, had taught at the school. Besides Miss Beckett, Miss Hendricks and Mr. Able also taught at the school. Mr. Harry Phillips was the janitor and also had a small barber shop located at 5509 Sprague Street. Both Harry and Reba G. Phillips were students at Spencer Roberts School. At her death in 1981, they were married for over 69 years. Near the school, on the corner of Twenty-First Street and Church Lane there was a bakery shop. On the land bounded by Church Lane, Opal, and Norwood Avenues, and Nedro Avenue, there was a place known as Tapesey Farm. Mr. Romeo Briggs, still a Germantown resident today, fondly reflected on Tapesey Lot as the place he spent the day playing hookey from school.

Mrs. Shelton told me of relocating to Somerville after her marriage to the late Ellis Johnson, Sr. They moved to Cora Street in 1918, the first totally Colored block in Somerville. There were about ten small, two-story houses situated on one side between Beechwood and Norwood Streets. Some of these houses still stand today on a street renamed Laveer Street. Each rowhouse had two bedrooms, a living room, dining room, and a shed/kitchen. Each had its own outhouse with running water in the yard. Besides the Johnsons, there lived Robert Sr. and Caroline Grey, George Willie and Zalee Lee, and the Mundell, Burnam, and Marshall families. Mr. Robert H. Jones, also a life-long Germantown resident,

was born on Cora Street, along with half of his twelve Jones siblings.



Mrs. Margaret Shelton

Dominating the neighborhood was a huge knitting and manufacturing mill. The Dobbins (Dobson) Mill was bounded by Wister, Cora, and Twenty-First Streets, and Godfrey Avenue. The sounds of the machinery at work could be heard both day and night. The mill's redbrick smokestack towered high into the air and was visible throughout the neighborhood. The mill, a major industry in the area, employed whites only. Mr. Briggs recalled that when he was young, he and other children would skate up and down Godfrey Avenue. The area of the Dobbins (Dobson) Mill is now the Corinthian Square Senior Citizens Complex.



Rev. Minyard W. Newsome (1891-1988), Pastor of Corinthian Baptist Church.

In the direct vicinity of the mill was the Corinthian Baptist Church. It was a small, one-room, wooden church building purchased from the Elkins Estate circa 1900. Residents recall that it was moved on stilts from Elkins Park to the 6100 block of Twenty-First Street. This building was known as "The Little Blue Church on the Hill." The building was heated by a large potbellied stove in the center of its sanctuary. Seating was on wooden folding chairs. As the congregation grew, additional space was required. Used lumber was purchased from the Samaritan Hospital (now Temple University Hospital), and Brother Booth took charge of the committee of hammer and saw-wielding members. In September of 1931, the new church was finished and we moved into a modern stone structure. Ground was broken for the present enlarged building on October 5th, 1958.

Germantown Hospital was a major employer of the Colored workers of Sommersville. A handful of neighbors worked at the old Elwood Ivin Tube Company in Elkins Park and some at the Bolger Brothers Mill in the 1100 block of Chelton Avenue. Many of the women worked as domestics and the men as chauffeurs.



LeRoy Council, with his parents, Charles and Margaret Council.

In 1926, my father, Charles Freeman Council, came with his family from Virginia to Sommersville. A neighbor, Louise Cox, who lived in the 6000 block of Beechwood Street with Mrs. Queen, took my dad to school on his first day there, where he entered the fourth grade. After completing the sixth grade, students from the Spencer Roberts School went to the Kinsey School, located at Limekiln Pike and Sixty-Fifth Avenue. Charles F. Council was among the students that were the second class to enter the year-old Wagner Junior High School at Eighteenth Street and Chelton Avenue.

Sommersville was no utopia, for racial conflicts did exist in the North. Our ancestors had to deal on a daily basis with segregation, slurs, and outward racism. They endured, survived, and succeeded. We are deeply indebted to those who paved the way for us to have a better future. Settling and marrying in Sommersville before the turn of the century were Lillian Frye (Grandmom) Smith, (Aunt) Pearl Myrick, Samuel R. (Pop) Cosby, Charles (Pop) Kirby, Carroll B. (Pop) Fleming, Laura (Grandmom) Holliman, Rev. William Henry Hopkins, and others like the Friend, George, Adams, Banks, Mumford, Boone, McNatt, Quarles, Colen, and Morris families. At age 103, Mrs. Charmie (Mom) Kirby still lives on Beechwood Street.

It behooves us to follow the examples of those who passed this way before us. My father did just that, by purchasing a house in the 5500 block of Sprague Street to rear his large family. It is now our fiftieth year at this address. The Council family and its five generations remain deeply rooted in Sommersville today.

¹ *Dedicatory Celebration and Sixtieth Anniversary, Corinthian Baptist Church, Philadelphia 38, PA, 1960.*

Residents of Somersville



Pearl Myrick (1878-1988)



Junious B. Friend (1892-1972)



Lillian Frye Smith (1873-1971)