

germantown CRIER

A Publication of the Germantown Historical Society

\$10.00



Between the Wars

A House on Church Lane

Charles Cauthorn

Charles Cauthorn was interviewed on June 22, 1992 by Gregory Woods. He lived his whole life in Germantown apart from his military service. He died on April 6, 2005.

My name is Charles Cauthorn and I live at 116 W. Hortter Street. I was born in 1916 and raised at 178 Stafford Street in Germantown.¹ I went to the Hill School, Roosevelt Junior High School, and Gratz High School.

My parents came here from Virginia. They came looking for work. My mother's maiden name was Jenny Myers. She had 10 children. We lived on a multiracial

block—we had Italians, Irish, colored people (they were known as colored people then) and some Jewish people. Plain working people.

My father did landscape gardening. He took care of people's lawns and gardens and stuff like that. He worked for people in classy neighborhoods. They lived on places like W. Tulpehocken Street and W. Cheltenham Ave. He only worked for about eight people. The strangest thing was that my father was a landscape gardener and he did not have enough money to get a truck. I wonder about how he managed to carry all his tools on a wheelbarrow, including his lawn mower and other material. He walked all the way

¹ Social Security records list his birth date as November 6, 1915.

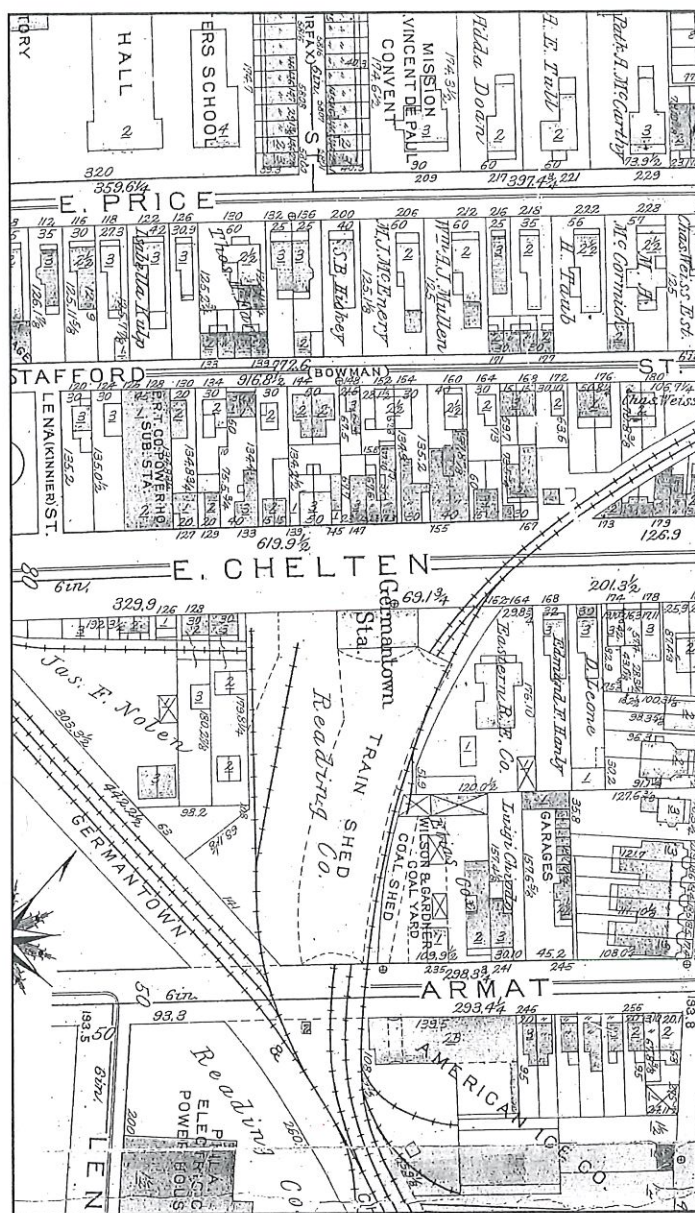
from Stafford Street back and forth. He kept his tools in our basement.² There were five boys in our family. When we got larger he would have the older boys help him cut the grass and do the heavy stuff. He would make me mad by having me pull grass out between bricks. Bricks were very prominent then. They were used for pavements and they were very artistic.

There was a saloon on the corner of our street. When I was seven or eight I used to get money by selling bottles. I used to get two or three cents a bottle depending on if the bottle was a pint or quart. I would get these empty bottles when the guys threw them away. I spent the money on candy, ice cream, cake and any other thing kids love. I used to love bananas. I also used to haul ice for people in my wagon with wheels. The ice house was three blocks away at Armat Street and Baynton Street—a man named Mr. Hill ran it.

Sunday morning was a big day for selling ice. I used to go there and work at the icehouse and I would give taffy out to the kids and I would get my share. The kids would come with their parents.

Most of my companions were Italians. We interrelated what ever and we had lots of fun. At that time I don't think people paid as much attention to race as they do today. Today it's a big thing. It was like we were in a big box and everybody knew each other. I knew everybody and everybody knew me. Streets were small—the backs of houses on Price Street ran into the street that we were on. There was one family on that street called McEnery.³ He was an attorney. He was Irish and his son did not have anyone to play with. There weren't many Irish people to play with. He would come get us to play with him. He had a high wooden seven-foot fence. We would go back there and play ball. Hit balls and play tennis. He was allowed to bring us in to play ball at certain times of the day because he had no companions to play with. His father had a colored chauffeur and a colored maid. They also had a car. They had this driveway and garage and entered on Stafford Street. They entered the front door of the house on Price Street.

St. Vincent's Church is on the corner of Price and Lena Streets. At that time we were not Catholics. My parents were Baptists. We went to Mt. Zion Baptist Church, which is still there on Rittenhouse Street. You got up on Sunday morning and took your one pair of shoes and shined them up and got the little clothes you had and you went to Sunday school. Your parents would give you a nickel or a dime to put in Sunday school and when you would think your parents weren't aware of it you would take part of it and buy some penny candy from a store near the church.



Section of 1923 Ward Atlas showing site of Charles Cauthorn's house at 178 E. Stafford Street (not numbered here). The McEnery house can be seen at 206 East Price. The American Ice Company where Charles sold ice is seen at Armat and Baynton Streets. GHS archives.

Q. How was your house set up?

CC. We had a three-story house with four bedrooms. I often wonder how we managed that with so many people in it. The house is now torn down. At that time the railroad ran across the street. They had gates across the street and a man would wind it down when a train would come. They would stop traffic and let the train go by. When I was about fourteen years old [i.e. c.1930] we had to move because the railroad bought the property and put a bridge there, which is there now. We moved to Duval Street.

² Charles's father is listed in the 1927 City Directory as a gardener living at 178 Stafford Street, but his name is spelled Cawthorn not Cauthorn.

³ John J. and Michael J. McEnery are listed in the 1927 City Directory as being lawyers living at 206 E. Price Street.

On Stafford Street I shared a room with two brothers. Three of us were in one bedroom. I was number six of ten children. There were three older boys and two older girls that is why I came in number six.

Q. Were things different when you moved to Duval Street? Different setting, were the neighbors different?

CC. Yes, they were different because at that time only certain blocks had colored people living in them, only some blocks were integrated. For example, when we lived on Duval Street, from McCallum Street to Greene Street was where colored people lived. On the other side of Greene Street there were no Black people. There was an unwritten line but it was still there. I don't think they had a name for our area—Price Street, Baynton Street, Strafford Street, Rittenhouse Street, Haines Street, High Street, and Lena Street. The colored people and Italian people were very prominent in this area. The Italian people, when some one died, they would have a parade and have someone carry a large statue of the Lord or the Virgin Mary. Some people would fasten money to it as they passed through the streets. We did not think of it in terms of someone who had passed away. We would go out and watch it. Most of the time it happened on weekends—on Saturday. It was a big day for the kids.

They would always have big parades too—4th of July, Memorial Day, and Flag Day. They always had parades in Germantown, oh yes. Different organizations marched, different Posts, American Legions, V.F.W. Mostly it was your people [Whites]. At that time I don't think we had any bands. Except the Elks and Masonic organization.

The first time I got married we eloped to Elton, Maryland. If you got anywhere near that town people on the roadside would lead you to a minister. The fellow who helped you would be your witness. You paid the fee and the fellow who helped you would share in the money. I was about nineteen years old or twenty—what did I know about anything? I did not have any money, but I got married. I married a girl five years younger than me. I was in love and did not care.

Q. How did you get down there?

CC. I had an old piece of car—a little Ford Roadster and I thought I was the cat's meow. White wire wheels, had a rumble seat too. I had a little piece of job at a tailor's shop at Wayne Avenue and Walnut Lane. Then I got another job making a little more money.

Q. You went to the Hill School?

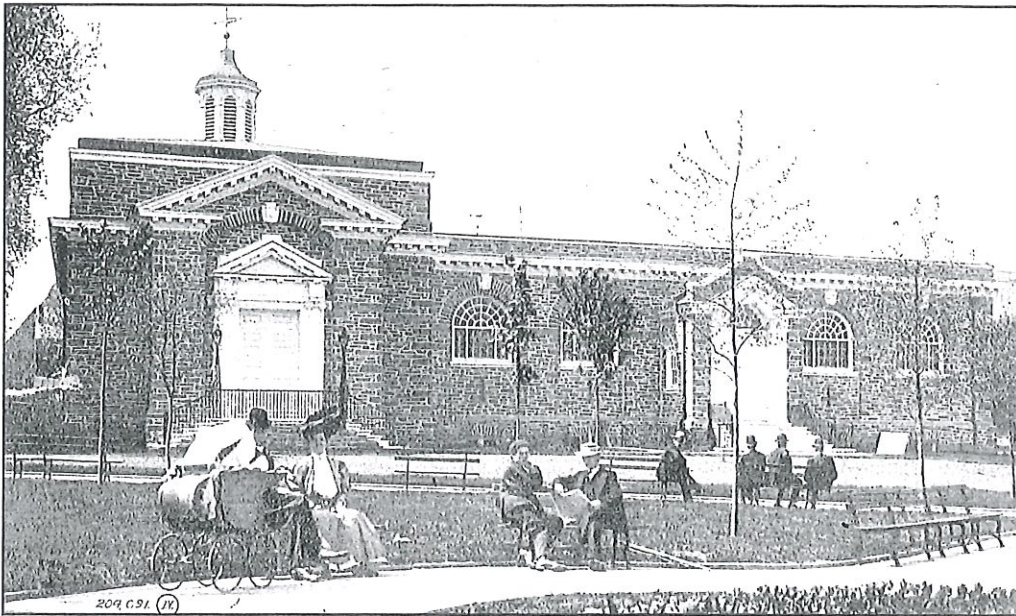
CC. Yes, Elementary School went there to the 6th grade. I left there and went to Roosevelt Junior High School. At the Hill school they wanted you to learn. I was a pretty good student for a while. I even skipped a grade or two when I was in elementary school. My problem was when I got to the 6th grade. I guess I thought I knew everything and I stopped studying in a sense, I could had gone a lot further if I had continued studying. I had no incentive. My parents were not educated. To them at that time education was not that important as it is today. There were a minimum of jobs for people of my race. My parents and I did not realize that up the road there would be a better chance to get a better job if you had an education. We were looking for jobs such as a street sweeper, chauffeur, taking care of someone's lawn, working in some house, or things of that sort, never stopping to think we could be a doctor or lawyer or someone like that.

We didn't have many toys. The only ones who might have toys would be kids who parents worked for the Postal Service. At that time a postal clerk was considered a big job. They were not making big money, but it was considered a big job. There were a few policemen and the guys that were chauffeurs. Chauffeurs would come by in their uniform, caps and they had the people's cars that they were driving. They were sharp, but we did not use such words as sharp then!

Vernon Park was different then. The place now called Center in the Park was a library. That is were we went to get our books. The Hill School that we went to was just around the corner on Rittenhouse Street. I was a very avid reader. I read books like [*The Three*] *Musketeers*, *The Knights of the Round Table* and *Sir Galahad* and those other great knights. I would fantasize about being a knight. I



Charles Cauthorn enjoyed Germantown parades. This is a Memorial Day parade in 1929 on Germantown Avenue near Chelton. GHS archives.



Young Charles was an avid reader and borrowed books at the Carnegie-built library in Vernon Park, now the home of Center in the Park.

remember going to the library many times and getting two or three books and reading them that same day and taking them back the same day. The librarian said, "You just can't bring back the books the same day." I said, "I read the books." She said, "You must keep it out a least one day even if you did read it." I felt she didn't think I read the books. She was a real nice woman. I was just a great dreamer. When I wasn't playing I guess I would be reading books.

Q. Did you go out and see movies?

CC. At that time there were only five movie theaters in Germantown. The colored people could only sit in certain parts of the theater. At the Upsal Theatre

[Germantown and Upsal] colored people sat in the right hand corner with a brass pole separating the people. The pole was moved when more people showed up. At the Germantown Theatre you had to sit in the balcony, at the Colonial Theatre you had to sit in the balcony, Orpheum Theatre you had to sit in the balcony, and at the Manheim Theatre it did not matter because it was located where a lot of colored people were. The Manheim was located at Manheim and Germantown. My brothers and I were very lucky. We were light complexioned. When we went to

the theatre with the Italian boys we did not go upstairs but we would sit with the Italian boys downstairs. The dark-colored kids had to sit upstairs in the balcony or they didn't go.

Q. Did the people treat you differently because you were of lighter skin?

CC. Yes, of course they did. At that time lighter skinned people were considered better off as a person or better than the darker ones. It was not true. It was very stupid but that is way we looked at things in those days. I don't know what else to say. There were no Whites on my

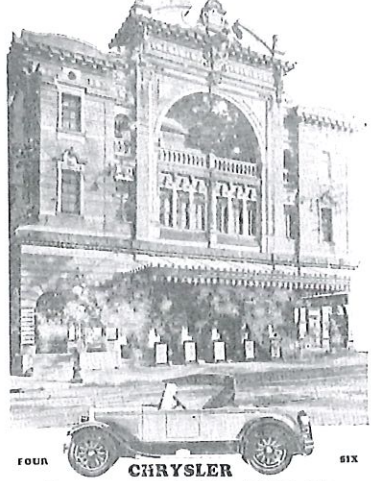
block of Duval. This was strictly a colored neighborhood. Duval Street, Pomona, and Ambrose were strictly colored. There were a few Whites in the unit block of Duval Street. I don't think there were any in the one hundred or two hundred blocks. If they were, they were down close to Greene Street. There was another street called Burbridge St which is between Greene Street and McCallum Street, which was all White and had very few kids on it. McCallum Street was mixed. Between Johnson and Washington Lane down to Harvey Street I think was all White. Harvey Street to Rittenhouse Street on McCallum Street was practically all colored. That was right to the school.



Cauthorn went to movies at the Colonial Theater (top right) on Germantown Avenue. GHS archives.

ORPHEUM THEATRE
 GERMANTOWN & CHELTEN AVENUES
 DIRECTION STANLEY COMPANY OF AMERICA
 Program for Week Beginning December 14, 1925

KEY
TH
VAU
DEV
ILE



FOUR **CHRYSLER** SIX
 TULPEHOCKEN MOTOR SALES CO.
 SALES: GERMANTOWN 9305 SERVICE: GERMANTOWN 0286

Parts and Repair
for All Makes

**Sewing Machines SINGERS
 A SPECIALTY
 Hemstitching & Pleating**

P. KRONER
 4429 GERMANTOWN AVENUE
 Phone, Wyoming 0303

Renting by the
Week or Month

STANLEY
PHOTOPLAYS

Built in 1912, the Orpheum Theater was a richly decorated Vaudeville and movie palace. It was located at 42 W. Cheltenham Avenue. GHS archives

Harvey Street was all White except Dr. Warrick. Dr. Warrick was the only colored on Harvey Street.⁴ They did not mind him moving there because he was a doctor. They did not want a painter or laborer there.

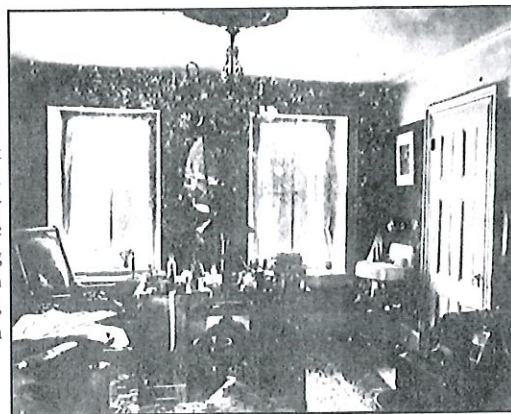
Q. When did you get your first job?

CC. My first job I worked for a shop while I was still in high school. Jewish fellow had a tailor's shop at Walnut Lane and Wayne Avenue. I worked there on week-ends and after school. I think my salary was eight dollars a week. Of course I got tips. All that I did was to carry clothes and clean out pants beforehand to make sure they didn't leave marks or dents when pressed. That was my biggest job at that time. Eight dollars a week wasn't bad at that time. Some grownups were only getting twenty-five dollars a week.

Q. Did you have a choice about where you could attend high school?

CC. Yes, I should have gone to Germantown High School. I did not want to go to Germantown High School because they would have made me study. Germantown High School was considered one of the best high schools in the city. Only the good students went there. That is why I went to Simon Gratz.

Dr. William H. Warrick, Sr.'s office was at 31 W. Harvey Street, seen here in 1913. Dr. Warrick (1867-1940) was the second Black person to take a medical degree at the University of Pennsylvania. He segregated his waiting rooms, unlike his son (of the same name), whose office was on Rittenhouse Street.



I went to Simon Gratz because they had what you called industrial courses like carpentry, auto mechanics, and sheet metal work. My major was auto mechanics. Today the only thing I could do would be to pull a spark plug or change a tire. That's about all of my auto mechanic ability but later I went to plumbing school and became a plumber. That is way up the road.

Q. When did you go into the service?

CC. I went in in 1942 and got out in 1946. I was drafted. I went first to work for the Frankford Arsenal, which was a government agency that made weapons. When they called you up you had to go. I worked for the Frankford Arsenal from 1942 to 1944. Then I was called into the service. I came out in December of 1946. I was in there for 33 months. I went into the artillery. My job was to bring down low-flying aircraft. At that time blacks were only in certain areas. I became a gunner. A gunner's job was to direct the person—the weapons were controlled by a person called a range finder. Guns were under automatic control—all you had to do was put the right figures in them. At first I became a gunner then I became a range setter. That is to set range for how far and how high the weapons would go. [For more on Mr. Cauthorn's war service see the transcript of this interview at GHS].

Q. What happened when you came back from the war?

CC. I went back to the Frankford Arsenal, But first I tried to get a job as dispatcher at United Parcels, and other places like that, but they were not accepting us in those jobs. So I went back to the Arsenal. First I drove trucks with supplies to the different buildings. There were forty-eight buildings in this vast complex. They lifted boxes with loaded and empty shells on those trucks and you had to take them to the different buildings. This was dangerous work and you had to be careful when driving these trucks. You tried not to make sparks when you were in this area. After that I became a clerk. It was a job taking care of time cards and other duties. I got tired of that because I wasn't

⁴ Dr. William Henry Warrick Sr., had his office at 31 W. Harvey Street.

getting anywhere. I saw on the bulletin board that they were offering school for people interested in becoming proficient in trades jobs. I chose plumbing school. You had to go eight hours a day for four years. It was just like going to school outside, eight thousand hours. The government paid for it. I graduated in 1959 and I been doing plumbing ever since.

Q. Do you remember any of the politics in Germantown when you were growing up and later on?

CC. I remember one thing for sure. If you were not a Republican you were in trouble.

Q. Was it machine politics?

CC. Yes, absolutely. The Democrats now have been in power for over forty years. The Republicans were in power for over sixty years. I became a Republican—I said those people are the ones you had to see to get something done. But I don't vote Republican. I vote for whoever I like. I don't care what party they belong to. If I think you are a good person, you can get my vote.

Q. Were there any political leaders living in your neighborhood?

CC. Yes, we were living on Duval Street and there was a man named Murphy. He was an Irish gentleman and he was a ward leader. He had two men working under him who were colored. They got handouts doing election time. We called these men flunkies. One was named Reed. That was around 1931. I was fourteen years old and he and another lady were the only two colored people with cars on the block.

Q. Would your parents take money to vote?

CC. My father and mother were very religious people, church people. I don't think my father would do any thing wrong if he could help it. He was a simple man, hon-

est, nothing fancy, straightforward. The biggest thing he did when he came home at night was to have a big rocking chair brought out to near the curb. He would get his chewing tobacco (Brown Mule) and apple. We had to go to the store and get it. He would spit his chewing tobacco into the street or into the spittoon. That was it until he went to bed. He did not have any other recreation that I can think of. But with all those kids I guess he was just tired.

Q. Did everyone in your neighborhood feel that way about politicians and politics?

CC. Everyone thought politicians were crooks. I have seen enough to know. If you want things done you had to see certain people. If you didn't see them you did not get it. You take like when some kids would get in trouble. Committee people would be awakened all times of night, because someone's son got into trouble. The police would arrest them for some silly thing, like breaking a window. The parents were worried and wanted them out of jail, so they would go see a committee person, who would call a ward leader, who would call a judge who would call a sheriff or person in charge of the jail and say let that person out. That's the way it worked. You'd better remember I did you a favor.

Q. What do you think about Germantown now as you walk through the streets?

CC. No way the same as when I was a kid. When I was a kid you could walk around, leave your front and back doors open. No one would bother anything. Hardly any crime was going on. The biggest thing we did as kids was to run past a fruit stand and grab a banana or apple. But today with drugs, people don't react normal. No one ever thought of killing anyone. Guns, what was that, something foreign. We didn't buy guns when we were kids.



LOST AND FOUND

The remarkable 1688 protest against slavery by four Germantown Quakers, was signed at Thones Kunders's house or at an early Germantown Meeting house, and presented to Monthly, Quarterly, and Yearly Meetings, but not acted on at that time. The protest is commemorated near the site of Kunders's house by this marker at Germantown Avenue and Wister Street. The original document, however, has been missing for half a century—until early 2006, when it was rediscovered in the vault at the Arch Street Meeting House. The document has been held temporarily by Haverford College, and is now being repaired and conserved. Its future has not yet been decided.

THANKS

We appreciate Dr. Sybil B. Beckett for her years of volunteer service in the Germantown Historical Society library. Thanks, Sybil!