

Copper History Panels: Grand Reading Room

(Detailed Guide)

A Story of Nashville

Gregory Ridley

Hammered Copper (Repoussé)

The 80 hammered copper relief panels installed above the book stacks of the Library's Grand Reading Room were designed especially for this space at the new Main Library, which opened in 2001. These marvelous works of art are a creative retelling of the history of Nashville. They were composed and executed in their entirety by one man, artist Gregory Ridley, who was seventy-five years old when they were completed.

Ridley, an African-American artist born in Smyrna, Tennessee, was fascinated by history. Throughout his long career, he made paintings, sculptures and metal repoussé pieces of historical, mythological, and religious subjects. He was particularly interested in filling out the visual record by casting people of color in historical settings whenever possible. Over a two-year period Ridley produced what was to be his greatest accomplishment as an artisan enduring legacy to the people of Nashville and the world.

Gregory Ridley's hand-hammered copper panels trace the history of Tennessee, and of Nashville, by providing a chronology divided into sixteen chapters that can be read like a visual book. Civilizations throughout history have recounted their heroes, events, and beliefs in pictorial form. One has only to look to Mesopotamian carved stone reliefs, Egyptian hieroglyphic picture writing, Aboriginal sand-painting and earthworks, Mayan carved reliefs, American Indian petroglyphs and pictographs, the pediment sculpture on Greek temples, Roman mosaics, medieval Christian stained glass windows, Buddhist sculpture and sand painting, Hindu wall murals and miniatures, and Chinese and Japanese scroll painting to understand the timeless value of visual art for commemorating history.

Beginning to the right of main entrance, the panels are grouped into alcoves, each covering one period or subject of Nashville's history. Within each alcove, the panels read from right to left.

Alcove 1: Prehistory and the native Indians

Spear marks on the excavated bones of mastodons provide evidence that the first people were in Middle Tennessee soon after the end of the Ice Age-over 15,000 years ago.

1. Panel 1 illustrates the earliest known period of human activity by showing only the animals: the native black bear, elk and bison freely roamed this area.
2. Panel 2 shows the first settled people, the Woodland hunter-gatherers (about 450-900 A.D.). At right: bringing down a mastodon. At left: preparing a feast.
3. Panel 3 depicts the Mississippian people (about 900-1600 A.D.) who built pyramidal burial and ceremonial mounds along the Harpeth River and throughout much of middle and west Tennessee.
4. Panel 4 depicts the Cherokee and Chickasaw tribes who inhabited some of the same sites after the demise of the Mississippian civilization.
5. Panel 5 portrays Tennessee's primordial dense forests, limestone bluffs, and flowing rivers undisturbed by settler homesteads.

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Alcove 2: Early Settlement of Tennessee

Traveling overland and down the Cumberland River, traders, trappers, and hunters began to arrive in the area by the early 1700s, staying in temporary fortified camps for parts of the year.

1. Panel 1 shows "long hunter" Kasper Mansker and New Orleans fur trader
2. Jean du Charleville and Illinois trader Timothé deMontbrun (Timothy Demonbreun) outfitted with long-barreled shotguns, powder horns and buckskin clothing at the salt lick in north Nashville that attracted animals to the area where the Bicentennial Mall stands today.
3. Panels 2 and 3 record the journey of the first permanent settlers led by James Robertson (in oval) on an arduous overland trek from the Watauga settlement in upper East Tennessee, through the Cumberland Gap, and down to the banks of the Cumberland River, which they found frozen solid on Christmas Day 1779.
4. Panel 4 depicts the rest of the East Tennessee settler party, organized by Colonel John Donelson, which traveled on flatboats down the Tennessee River to the Cumberland River, arriving in May of 1780.
5. Panel 5 shows the attack on Fort Nashborough, which enclosed the Cumberland settlement. Although Shawnee and Cherokee Indians had used the area as hunting grounds for hundreds of years, a council of East Tennessee Cherokees had sold the middle Tennessee lands to Richard Henderson, under whose auspices Robertson and Donelson had come to stake their claim. But the Chickasaw also considered it their territory. A group called the Chickamaugas, which included both Cherokee and Creek Indians who opposed the presence of permanent settlers in Tennessee, had encountered Donelson's party on the river the previous spring and had destroyed Mansker's Station in the fall of 1780. Left in charge of the women and children in April 1781, Charlotte Robertson (wife of the settlement's founder) unleashed dogs to prevent the Chickamaugas from securing the fort in the Battle of the Bluffs.

Alcove 3: Becoming a Town

The Cumberland settlement reached a peace agreement with Chickasaw leader Piomingo in 1783. That same year, Davidson County, officially a part of the North Carolina territory, was established.

1. Panel 1 depicts an elderly male Indian and a young female dressed in ceremonial attire.
2. Panel 2 is dedicated to the beginning businesses and industries around the Public Square of the young town. A gristmill, a Methodist church, and a whiskey distillery were soon established. Nashville's first hotel, the Nashville Inn, opened in the early 1780s. Robert Renfro (in oval), a free black, had a tavern and rooming house on the public square by 1794.
3. Panel 3 depicts the rise of religion and the early evangelical "camp meetings" where many were baptized by traveling preachers.
4. In Panels 4 and 5 we see portraits of Andrew Jackson, a frontier lawyer and politician who married the daughter of Colonel John Donelson and became one of the area's largest landholders. Jackson also invested in Nashville's growing horse racing industry. By 1812, he was a national military leader in the war against Great Britain. He was later hailed as the hero of the Battle of New Orleans. His

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fame was so widespread that Nashville's first steamboat, which arrived in 1819, was named the General Jackson.

5. Andrew Jackson panels continued.

Alcove 4: Andrew Jackson: Local Hero

This alcove is devoted to the life of General Jackson the war hero and eventual 7th President of the United States. Elected in 1828, he served two terms in the White House, returning to Nashville in 1837.

1. Panel 1 shows Jackson's heroic exploits against the British and their Creek allies during the War of 1812.
2. Panel 2 records the visit of American Revolutionary war hero Marquis de Lafayette in 1825. Andrew Jackson and the French general appeared together in the public square. One of the guests at a gala dinner and ball held in Lafayette's honor was 80-year-old Timothy Demonbreun.
3. Panel 3 features Jackson in full military regalia mounted upon a prancing stallion, not unlike the equestrian monument to Jackson erected by the citizens of Washington, D.C. One of the two additional casts of the monument can be seen on Nashville's Capitol Hill today; the other graces Jackson Square in New Orleans. Jackson's nickname "Old Hickory" was coined by one of his soldiers, who claimed he was tough as hickory wood.
4. Panel 4 depicts Jackson's home, The Hermitage, and commemorates the date of his election to the Presidency in 1828.
5. Panel 5 in this group pairs portraits of Andrew Jackson and Rachel Donelson Jackson, who, to Andrew's great sorrow, died the same year that he entered the White House. The gun below Rachel's image refers to the famous 1806 duel between Jackson and Charles Dickinson over a horseracing bet and a slanderous remark about Jackson's marriage to Rachel before her divorce was finalized.

Alcove 5: Agriculture, Industry, and Transportation

Nashville and its surroundings prospered in agriculture and industry due to its prime location near navigable rivers and abundant natural resources. Corn, wheat and cotton grew well in the flat river bottoms of middle Tennessee and livestock roamed its hilly pastures. Hardwood forests and stone quarries yielded ample building materials for permanent structures.

1. Panel 1 (based on the painting Southern Cornfield, Nashville, 1861, by artist Thomas Waterman Wood) depicts pre-Civil War plantation life in Middle Tennessee, which relied heavily on slave labor, although a number of free blacks owned homes and businesses in and around Nashville.
2. Panel 2 shows a horse-drawn carriage arriving at Nashville's Public Square, with the 1832 domed courthouse at center right.
3. Panel 3 is even sadder than Panel 1: it portrays Cherokee Indians expelled from the land during the 1837 and 1838 forced migrations from Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee to Oklahoma. Their "Trail of Tears" passed very near Nashville.

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4. In Panel 4, we see Tennessee's new State Capitol Building (completed in 1859) at left and just down the hill to the right, a teeming riverfront scene of steamboats lined up for unloading along the Cumberland river.
5. Panel 5 includes a carriage passing over a carefully laid Tennessee limestone bridge. By the end of the 1830s, Nashville had well-constructed turnpikes leading in and out of the city.

Alcove 6: Antebellum Tennessee

1. Panel 1 portrays James K. Polk, born in North Carolina, who served as Governor of Tennessee and a seven term U.S. Congressman before being elected the 11th President of the United States. During his four-year term (1845-49) Polk established an independent Treasury, settled the Oregon boundary dispute with Great Britain, and oversaw the purchase of California. He carried out the annexation of Texas from Mexico, which resulted in war and the conquest of the Southwest. Having promised at the outset not to run for a second term, Polk returned to his Vine Street home in Nashville. He died of cholera soon thereafter and is buried on Capitol Hill in Nashville in a tomb designed by Philadelphia architect William Strickland, who had been chosen to build Tennessee's state house.
2. Panel 2 shows Strickland with two of his best-known buildings: The First (now Downtown) Presbyterian Church (1849-1851) and the Tennessee State Capitol (1845-1859). Strickland had apprenticed under America's first professional architect, Benjamin Latrobe. Like his mentor, Strickland was a proponent of the classical revival in architecture, as can be seen in the pediments, columns and cupola of the Capitol. The Egyptian-revival style of the church building was a departure from the Greek Revival designs for which he is best-known. He died in 1854, shortly before the Capitol's completion, and is buried in a niche in the north portico.
3. Panel 3 presents Philip Lindsley, a Presbyterian minister and classical scholar from Princeton University who was the founding President of the University of Nashville.
4. Panel 4 is a gathering of notable Nashville homes dating from early to mid-1800s. From left, they are: Travellers Rest (1799) Belmont Mansion (ca. 1850) Belle Meade Plantation (1845) Two Rivers (1859) and Clover Bottom (1858).
5. Panel 5 records the introduction of railroads to middle Tennessee. In 1850, the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad's first locomotive engine arrived by steamboat. This image depicts engine # 8, The Davidson, an 1855 wood-burning locomotive that would be one of the first trains to travel from to Louisville from Nashville when the L&N line was opened in 1859.

Alcove 7: The Civil War

One of artist Gregory Ridley's favorite subjects was the Civil War and he portrayed it with passion.

1. Panel 1 is a bold close-up of a Confederate soldier facing right with pistol drawn. Wearing the fashionable facial whiskers of a southern gentleman, he stands below an unfurled Confederate battle flag in front of the rolling Tennessee landscape he aims to defend.
2. Panel 2 shows the Tennessee State Capitol under siege by Union troops who secured its strategic hilltop site when they occupied the city of Nashville in February 1862. The State Capitol building was used as a Union barracks.

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3. Panel 3 depicts Fort Negley, a stone fortification just south of the city that was built by Union troops and free and slave blacks.
4. In Panel 4, Confederate and Union soldiers clash in the Battle of Nashville, a last-ditch effort in December 1864 by General John B. Hood to retake Nashville for the Confederacy. The two-day battle, a resounding defeat for Hood, was the last major battle of the Civil War.
5. In Panel 5, the profile of a Union soldier looks left, proudly hoisting the Stars and Stripes over his head.

Alcove 8: Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction

During the Union occupation of Nashville, President Abraham Lincoln appointed United States Senator and former Tennessee Governor Andrew Johnson as Military Governor of the state.

1. Panel 1 combines portraits of President Lincoln and Andrew Johnson with the Presidential Seal. Lincoln is shown in front of the United States Capitol dome and portrayed with a gun to signify his death by assassination, just six weeks after the inauguration in 1865. Upon Lincoln's death, Johnson became the 17th President of the United States. In the aftermath of the Civil War, Union General Clinton B. Fisk was the senior officer in charge of Federal assistance to Kentucky and Tennessee. Working through the Freedmen's Bureau and the American Missionary Society, Fisk helped establish the first free schools in the South for African Americans. Fisk University, to which he left a large endowment, bears his name today.
2. Panel 2 shows the Fisk Jubilee Singers (first director, George White, is in circle) a coeducational vocal ensemble that raised money for the university by performing Negro spirituals in the United States and abroad during the 1870s. Jubilee Hall (1876) was erected entirely with funds raised by the singers.
3. Panel 3 displays early houses of worship. Left to right: Christ Church Episcopal, the Vine Street Temple, Saint Mary's Catholic Church, and McKendree Methodist. A portrait of Rabbi Isadore Lewinthal and an image of a dove signifying the Holy Spirit are included in the composition.
4. Panel 4 is dedicated to Vanderbilt University, with an image of administration building Kirkland Hall at left and the Old Gymnasium, now the fine arts building, at right. Originally chartered as Central University in 1872 by the Methodist Church, the school was named after its major donor, the shipping and railroad magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt (pictured in center roundel) a northerner who recognized the importance of high quality educational institutions for rebuilding the South.
5. Panel 5 illustrates a cattle sale on the Belle Meade Plantation, signaling the resumption of Nashville's agricultural economy.

Alcove 9: The Rise of Nashville

After the Civil War, the resumption of river and railroad shipping made Nashville a transportation and commercial hub for the upper South.

1. Panel 1 shows three and four-story brick warehouses along Front Street (now 1st Avenue) where goods could be conveniently off-loaded and stored. Customers then made retail purchases on Market Street (now 2nd Avenue).

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2. Panel 2 depicts Nashville's first baseball park, Sulphur Dell, located near the old salt lick in north Nashville. Legend has it that baseball was introduced in Nashville by Union soldiers in 1862. By the 1870s the city was home to both white and African-American teams. Nashville entered the minor leagues in 1886 with the Nashville Americans, succeeded by the Nashville Vols from 1901-1961. Tom Wilson started the Nashville Elite Giants for the Negro Southern League in 1926 and transferred them to the Negro National League in 1930. They played at his Wilson Park, near the Fairgrounds, and later at Sulphur Dell. Also pictured is Dick Sisler, who managed the Nashville Vols in the 1950s.
3. Panel 3 chronicles the 1888 arrival of electronic streetcars and extension of the line out into the Nashville suburbs as far as Glendale Park, a popular family outing destination. By 1910 the lines stretched to Greenwood Park, an African-American recreational park opened by Preston Taylor in 1905.
4. Panel 4 introduces the ballroom of the fashionable Maxwell House hotel, completed in 1869, an important social meeting place in the downtown Nashville "Men's Quarter" business district.
5. Panel 5 portrays the Ryman Auditorium, built in 1892 as the Union Gospel Tabernacle by riverboat captain Thomas Ryman. The great hall that Ryman created for "tent meeting" gospel revivals was converted to the home of the Grand Ole Opry in 1943. Ridley has placed a fiddle and bow at left and included Opry announcer Judge George D. Hay, speaking into his WSM radio microphone, at right.

Alcove 10: Tennessee Centennial

The 1897 Centennial, which took place in Nashville's West Side (now Centennial) Park, was organized to celebrate Tennessee's 100 years of statehood. It was a grand exposition, with electric lights strung across temporary buildings housing exhibitions on industrial, social, agricultural and cultural achievements.

1. Panel 1 pans around the "white city" of temporary structures positioned around the artificial Lake Watauga.
2. Panels 2 and 3 show fireworks and the statue of Athena in front of the replica of the Parthenon, which served as the art exhibition hall.
3. Panel 4 captures the statue of Daniel Boone that stood on the Exposition site. It was borrowed from sculptor Enid Yandell, who also created the large-scale Athena in her Paris studio.
4. In Panel 5 we see a carriage parade, one of many, during the six-month long exposition that drew 1.8 million visitors.

Alcove 11: Turn of the Century Nashville

The year 1900 began an age of progress for Nashville.

1. Panel 1 depicts the massive limestone Union Station railway terminal that opened that year. It was designed by L&N engineer Richard Montfort in the Romanesque Revival style first made popular in the 1880s by Boston architect Henry Hobson Richardson.
2. Panel 2 shows the two-level interior of the 1903 Arcade, one of the country's first enclosed shopping centers, which still links 4th and 5th Avenues.

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3. Panel 3 portrays an entrepreneurial newsboy and two pioneering African-American businessmen: Richard H. Boyd, who founded the National Baptist Publishing Board in 1896, and James C. Napier, who started the One Cent Savings Bank in 1904.
4. Panel 4 is a lively account of early automobile traffic in Nashville, in which bicyclists nearly collide with the latest model Marathon motor cars, produced in Nashville from 1910 to 1914.
5. Panel 5 includes the 1890 brick brewery once operated by William Gerst and Company and the still-standing Nashville Stockyard, built in 1919.

Alcove 12: Nashville in the 1910s

In the years leading up to the First World War, Nashville's increasing urbanization called for a more active citizenry whose energy would soon be redirected into the build-up to war.

1. Panel 1 commemorates the founding of such social service agencies as the Bethlehem Center, the Fannie Battle Day Home and the Martha O'Bryan Center, all designed to assist with childcare and community social improvement.
2. Panel 2 records the leaping flames of a devastating fire that swept through East Nashville in 1916.
3. Panels 3 and 4 show Tennessee's volunteer spirit as Red Cross women march down Broadway and battle-ready soldiers assemble for transport.
4. In Panel 5 we see the DuPont Powder Plant ammunition factory in Old Hickory, which opened in 1918 in order to supply the war effort.

Alcove 13: Nashville in the 1920s and 1930s

Post-war optimism and prosperity carried Nashville along on its wave of progress. In August 1920, the Tennessee State Legislature voted to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which granted women the right to vote.

1. Panel 1 depicts a local rally of Tennessee women from Nashville and Chattanooga who led the fight for voting rights and helped Tennessee become the swing-vote state.
2. Panel 2 is a panoramic view of the handsome War Memorial building erected in 1925. The statue of Victory in its open courtyard is by Tennessee's most famous woman sculptor, Belle Kinney Scholz.
3. Panel 3 shows the Nashville to Franklin inter-urban railroad, Tennessee's first commuter train.
4. Panel 4 is a panoply of stars from the Grand Ole Opry. From left: Hank Williams, Deford Bailey (the first African-American performer), Minnie Pearl, Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys. The Opry originated in 1925 as a live show on WSM, a radio station owned by the National Life and Accident Insurance Company, with call letters representing their slogan "We Shield Millions." In 1943, the Opry took the stage at the old Ryman Auditorium, where the variety of performers once had ranged from Opera stars to the Ziegfield Follies.
5. Panel 5 portrays the Great Depression in simple graphic images: a wornout car mired in mud and a WPA laborer trying to shovel it out. With the collapse of banks and financial markets and the state and local governments nearly bankrupt, Tennesseans were grateful for assistance from government programs like the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).

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Alcove 14: Building the Modern City

Federal funds were allotted for important public buildings in Nashville as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal for Americans.

1. Panel 1 portrays Nashville's Main Post Office (1934) and the Davidson County Courthouse (1936-38), handsome additions designed to set Nashville on its way to becoming a modern city. Ridley has included an American eagle, used as a symbolic ornament on many Federal Architecture Project and Works Progress Administration buildings. Federal funds also went into building schools including Pearl, Howard, Cameron, Eakin, Bailey and Stokes, as well as providing campus facilities for Fisk and Tennessee State Universities.
2. Panel 2 combines images of schools across the city.
3. Panel 3 focuses on Fisk University and its flowering of the arts in the 1930s. The Great Depression that effectively ended New York's Harlem Renaissance brought notable artists and writers, such as Aaron Douglas, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps and Zora Neale Hurston to Fisk. Ridley has also included eminent sociologist Charles S. Johnson, Fisk University's first African-American president, and William Edmondson, a self-taught sculptor from Nashville and the first African-American artist to have a one-man show at New York's Museum of Modern Art (1937).
4. Panel 4 shows Nashville's first airport, Berry Field (1937), constructed by the WPA and named for Colonel Harry S. Berry.
5. Panel 5 pictures the Cumberland River frozen solid in 1940.

Alcove 15: Nashville in the 1940s and 1950s

By the time of the Second World War and for about fifteen years afterwards, Nashville was a mixture of progressive and traditional ways.

1. Panel 1 portrays Captain Jack Barnes and his long-running west Nashville ferry service across the Cumberland River.
2. Panel 2 depicts Army recruits and the Union Station train shed where thousands of Tennesseans departed for duty overseas.
3. Panel 3 is a portrait of Nashville heroine Cornelia Fort, a pioneer in women's military aviation and the first woman in uniform to be killed serving her country (19443).
4. Panel 4 shows the post-war return to prosperous times in Nashville's premier shopping district: Church Street.
5. Panel 5 turns to the problem of racial segregation in Nashville. Featured portraits are of three leaders of the Civil Rights movement (Attorney and State Senator Avon Williams, the Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, and Attorney and City Councilman Z. Alexander Looby) above a vignette of the lunch counter sit-ins led by one-time Vanderbilt Divinity student, the Reverend James Lawson, and others. Shown here are Matthew Walker, Peggy Alexander, Diane Nash and Stanley Hemphill. The results of their courageous efforts made Nashville the first major city in the South to begin desegregation.

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Alcove 16: Nashville Today

Metropolitan Nashville has expanded out past its suburbs into what was once farmland, and has migrated back again to revitalize its old neighborhoods. It is a place of opportunity for all, with fine universities, a variety of cultural amenities and several major sports teams.

1. Panel 1 turns an affectionate eye on a favorite landmark: the Edgehill neighborhood's concrete polar bears, originally created to advertise frozen custard.
 2. Panel 2 shows Tennessee State University track star Wilma Rudolph, an African American and first American woman Olympian to win three gold medals in a single Olympiad. She is flanked by famed TSU track coach Ed Temple and Ed "Too Tall" Jones, a TSU football hero later drafted by the Dallas Cowboys.
 3. Panel 3 memorializes two of Nashville's most important mayors of the modern era, Ben West, whose meeting with Civil Rights marchers on the steps of the courthouse served as a public acknowledgement of the rightness of their cause, and Beverly Briley, who combined city and county into Metro Government.
 4. Panel 4 provides a glimpse of Nashville today through its architecture old and new, from the Capitol to historic church steeples to the Titans stadium, the spire of the Arena, the "Batman" building and the Church Street façade of the Main Library.
 5. The final panel shows Riverfront Park on the banks of the Cumberland, where Nashville gathers every 4th of July for a gala celebration featuring the Nashville Symphony.
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For Further Reading:

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