ON A RAINY DAY IN 1968, a reporter named Peter Binzen walked into a tavern in Kensington, a working-class neighborhood of Philadelphia. As Binzen entered, he heard "the barkeep and his lone customer . . . exchanging views on a favorite subject: niggers." The customer, "a white-trash nigger hater," was making little headway with the bartender, a man "who looked to be of German extraction." "There’s good whites and good niggers," Binzen recalled the bartender as saying. "’Bad whites and bad niggers.’"  

The reporter saw the barkeep as someone who “wasn’t going to put up with a lot of nonsense,” including the customer’s rantings. Clearly, however, that German-looking man behind the bar had accepted color categories—however expressed—as fundamental to life in working-class Kensington. He was part of a world that Binzen described as “Whitetown,” inhabited by “’ethnics’” who resisted the territorial encroachments of black residents living just to the west. The “white workingman” of neighborhoods like Kensington was, more than likely, “the son or grandson of immigrants. . . . Whether of Irish, Italian, German, Polish, Russian, or Ukrainian extraction, he was a hundred per cent American and proud of it,” Binzen wrote. He was also “usually Roman Catholic.”

Binzen’s portrayal verged on caricature, but it did describe a type widely recognized, in and outside of Kensington, as the “white ethnic.” The term was popularized in the late 1960s and early 1970s through the “white ethnic revival,” which saw many second- and third-generation European immigrants rediscover their ethnic roots. The revival had different facets, from intellectual declarations of the persistence of European ethnicities to popular assertions of “ethnic pride.” To a certain extent, it overlapped with—and indeed, according to some scholars, was fueled by—a cultural and political mobilization among residents of Northern working-class neighborhoods who felt threatened by black militancy and civil rights gains. This dimension of “white ethnicity” surfaced, for example, when one such New York activist in 1976 pointed to the slogan “’black power,’” then demanded “’that our politicians represent white ethnic rights.’”

While scholars have divided sharply over the sources, the strength, and even the reality of the white ethnic revival, they have recognized white ethnics themselves and white ethnicity as significant social and political phenomena. White ethnicity, in David Roediger’s formulation, refers to “the consciousness of a distinct identity
among usually second- or third-generation immigrants who both see themselves and are seen as racially white and as belonging to definable ethnic groups.” The term “white ethnics” describes the bearers of this kind of identity, but carries more specific connotations, in line with Binzen’s description: white ethnics are working-class or lower-middle-class; self-consciously patriotic; often, though not exclusively, Catholic, while encompassing a range of European backgrounds; and often at odds, at some level, with African Americans. Certainly, the 1970s white ethnics portrayed in the scholarly literature fit this description, whether they were opponents of busing in Boston, defenders of a “white” neighborhood in Brooklyn, or Philadelphians electing a “backlash” mayoral candidate.

**But how, exactly, did white ethnics come to be?** That question has been central to the last decade’s outpouring of work on the historical construction of “whiteness” in the United States, much of which asked how European immigrants “became white.” In this formulation, groups like the Irish, whose status as whites was questioned, had to win acceptance and learn to identify as white. White ethnicity, of the kind that became so evident by the 1970s, could then be conceived as a particular and historically recent construction of whiteness that bundled together the Irish and descendants of later immigrant arrivals from southern and eastern Europe.

**MIXING WITH NON-GERMANS: NEIGHBORHOOD, PARISH, VEREIN**

By the 1920s, working-class and Catholic Germans increasingly were mixing with non-Germans on their neighborhood streets, in their Catholic parishes, and, most surprisingly, in their own ethnic associations. These encounters with the Irish, Slavs, and, to some extent, Italians and Russian Jews, stemmed in part from larger population shifts. The beginning of the twentieth century had seen an influx of southern and eastern European immigrants; by 1920, they formed a majority among Philadelphians born abroad.

The Great Migration brought roughly 40,000 black Southerners to Philadelphia during the war years and additional tens of thousands in the early 1920s, bolstering the city’s longstanding black community. These immigrations in turn made for greater diversity in and around some neighborhoods traditionally considered “German.” As “new immigrants” and some African Americans moved into neighborhoods near the city center, many residents of German, Irish, and Anglo-American background moved out. Germans who stayed behind found themselves encountering a greater range of peoples. The city’s 16th and 17th wards provide a good illustration of such ethnic succession. **The wards—which together I have labeled the Girard Avenue district, after the thoroughfare that divided them—lay northeast of the city’s downtown (see Map 1) and encompassed the heart of late-nineteenth-century Philadelphia’s largest cluster of first- and second-generation German immigrants.** They also straddled the two larger, industrial neighborhoods of Northern Liberties and Kensington. In 1900, the Girard Avenue district was predominantly
working-class and heavily German, as shown by an analysis of census households in a random sample of block fronts—a front being one side of a city block—taken in the two wards (see Map 2).41 ... (Continued)