Burnet Corwin Tuthill brought his musical background, creative inspiration and ceaseless determination to Memphis at a crucial point in the city’s history, adding to the cultural strengths and leadership already present, and inspiring the success of the first permanent Memphis Symphony Orchestra. By 1939 in Memphis Tennessee, five attempts had been made to create a symphony orchestra. All had failed. Since the first attempt in 1860, war, politics, disease, death, lack of community support and financial troubles had plagued every effort to provide Memphis with a symphony. The fine arts and classical music were a sophisticated luxury that the people of this river town had failed to cultivate and claim as their own, even at this late date. But something about the
handful of Southwestern faculty and students that began practicing together around Christmas of 1938 was different. Their conductor had arrived in Memphis just three years before to become director of music at Southwestern, but was already a prominent and respected local figure. He had already established a national reputation as a conductor, composer and leader in many fine arts organizations and musical societies. He founded his first orchestra in high school. He founded a choral society within months of his arrival at Southwestern. This was someone with the creativity and drive to change the way Memphis thought about music.

Burnet Corwin Tuthill gave musically minded Memphians hope. Tuthill, a clarinetist, conductor, composer, civic leader and teacher, possessed the reputation, talent and magnetism that inspired the entire community to ensure that Memphis would have a Symphony orchestra. He dedicated the majority of his life to bringing music to the city he loved. Tuthill surpassed everyone’s hopes as a leader and pioneer for the fine arts. Without the perseverance and creative initiative of Tuthill, the current Memphis Symphony Orchestra would not be the civic institution it is today.

The story of classical music in Memphis goes back to the founding of the city. When Memphis developed in 1819 as a stopover on the route down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, its strategic location made it ideal as a natural distribution point and center of commerce. Memphis quickly grew into a rough and rowdy river town. Her economy was based on agriculture and trade, mainly in cotton grown with slave labor in the Delta. “As the gateway to the lower south and trans Mississippi west, Memphis became the
largest inland cotton market in the world.” ¹ Memphis’s central location also meant that folk songs and spirituals from farmers, slaves and river workers stopping in Memphis from all up and down the Mississippi combined to form a rich medley of musical expression. From the very beginning Memphis was a place where musical cultures converged. The growth of commerce and trade brought wealth into Memphis. Soon, a society of affluent planters and merchants developed who had been exposed to the refinements of cities in the East. They began to take the initiative in bringing the arts to Memphis.²

In Memphis before the Civil War, church choirs were the main source of classical music.³ Theatrical performances were recorded as early as 1831. By 1837, the newspaper announced a regular season of plays. Touring companies brought their own orchestras, or at least a couple of musicians to enhance their theatrical exhibitions.⁴

The first attempt to create an orchestra was in 1860 by Carlo Patti, and Italian immigrant. This handsome violinist had been an orchestra leader at a theatre in New Orleans before he came to Memphis around 1860. He started the first musical societies by recruiting local talent for a Mozart Club and Philharmonic Society. Patti was said to

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² Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
have been the first orchestra leader to popularize the song *Dixie*, which soon became a cry for Southern independence.\(^5\) With the onset of the Civil War, Memphis’s first symphony orchestra was destined to come to an end because the majority of the members, including Carlo Patti, were called to fight for the Confederacy.\(^6\)

After the Civil War in Memphis, musical activity increased, but according to the 1865 Bledsoe Census, there were only two music professors and ten music teachers residing in the city at that time.\(^7\) The devastation the war caused in the South and the turmoil of reconstruction hindered the development of cultural institutions. “Groups such as the German Casino and the Memphis Mannerchor continued to encourage musicales and concerts as well as balls and ‘sociables.’”\(^8\) Also active in promoting classical music in the nineteenth century was the Mendelssohn Society. This vocal club was founded in 1865 and attracted the best trained musicians in the city.\(^9\) There have always been cultured citizens interested in bringing classical music and a symphony orchestra to Memphis. However, the majority of citizens in the late nineteenth century were content with more popular forms of entertainment and were not yet ready to commit to funding a permanent orchestra.

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6 “His departure may have been hastened by the over-ardent attentions of Bella Edmondson, who was soon to make a name for herself as a courier for the confederacy.” As quoted in; Magness, “Arts Soon Tamed,” 1993.

7 Anglin, “The ‘Dean of Musicians,’” 15.


9 Anglin, “The ‘Dean of Musicians,’” 15-16.
The next attempt to form an orchestra was in 1870. A German concert was held at the Greenlaw Opera House to raise money to support Prussian soldiers wounded in the Civil War. This concert led to the formation of the Memphis Philharmonic Orchestra. Tragically, plague struck Memphis, decimating the population. In the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1878 and 1879 some of the best musicians died and many fled to St. Louis. “Their departure caused great disruption to culture and music in Memphis.” Memphis was forced to forfeit its charter in 1879 because of bankruptcy caused by Reconstruction era debt of five million dollars. Survival of the city took precedence over cultural institutions. As a result, the Memphis Philharmonic was forced to fold in 1881.

The Beethoven Club, still active in Memphis today, began on October 27, 1888. A Ms. Martha Trudeau invited some friends to tea to discuss the lack of musical opportunities in Memphis. After debating about what to do for over a year, they finally put on a musical concert on December 17, 1889. They called themselves Miss Trudeau’s Quartet. On January 20, 1890, ten ladies stemming from this original group presented a concert and included a guest artist. “The profit from the evening was $10, but that was enough to get them started. In 1892, the group, incorporated as the Beethoven club, began bringing artists of international repute to Memphis.” Musical societies remained the only solid source bringing classical music into Memphis for many years.

11 Ibid.
12 Bond and Sherman, Memphis, 64.
These societies also united all the musical efforts in Memphis. “Before 1890, all of the city’s musicians worked together through the Mozart Society.” Members of the Mozart Society decided that Memphis needed a conservatory of music. This society eventually became the Memphis School of Music and later, under the leadership of Tuthill, the Music Department of Southwestern at Memphis (now Rhodes College). Tuthill became the director of the Memphis School of Music in 1937 only two years after moving to the city. With his assistance, it was able to develop into a full musical college accredited by the National Association of Music Schools.

It was fourteen years after The Memphis Philharmonic folded before another attempt at forming a permanent symphony in Memphis was organized. Professor W. W. Saxby Jr. recruited talented musicians in the Memphis area in 1895 to form the Memphis Philharmonic Orchestra Association. There were 29 charter members and the orchestra lasted almost 15 years. The organization was forced to disband in 1909 when Professor Saxby’s health failed. Without other driven and capable community leaders supporting the symphony, this orchestra could not survive.

A year later, under Jacob Bloom, the third symphony orchestra was organized. The Beethoven Club was the sponsor of this orchestra. They gave their opening concert

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15 The name of The Memphis School of Music was changed to the Memphis College of Music after they were accredited by the NAMS.
January 13, 1910 at the old Lyceum Theatre. The orchestra had forty five musicians, and all but eight musicians were native Memphians. This time, the involved Memphians were determined “to make symphonic orchestral music a part of the cultural influence of this city.” They obtained a charter approved by the governor and the secretary of state. A symphony society was organized and permanent memberships were sold to attempt to acquire the necessary funds. Starting in 1912 this orchestra was conducted by Arthur Wallenstein, then Carl Metz and Arthur Nevin, and finally in 1922 by Joseph Henkel. Unfortunately even this valiant and well organized attempt did not last. In 1925 the group disbanded because of financial difficulties.

The next serious orchestra was formed after a lapse of eight years, with Joseph Henkel again serving as conductor. Henkel, a native Memphian, started studying music at the age of six. At 14 he went to Germany and studied violin for three years at the Boehmert Conservatory at Ponkow near Berlin. Next he studied with Bernhard Gehwald, pupil of the renowned Joseph Joachim. He took up the study of piano and orchestration with Ferdinand von Hummel, director of the Royal Opera and Dramatic House in Berlin. He returned to New York to study under Maximalian Pilser and studied harmony under A.W. Lienthal. Albert Stoessal, celebrated violin virtuoso and director of orchestral work at the Julliard foundation, provided intensive training in orchestral conducting. At this time Henkel returned to Memphis.

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18 Author and article unknown, [Archives of the Memphis Room at the Memphis Public Library, Memphis TN], found 15 June, 2005.
20 Houston, “Music Lifts the Soul,” 1941.
The orchestra, called the Memphis Philharmonic, was composed of fifty professional musicians. They were sponsored by the Memphis Federation of Musicians and the ladies auxiliary of the Auditorium. They performed their first concert on February 15, 1934. They played the Egyptian Ballet by Luigini, March and Procession of Bachus by Delibes, The Mississippi Suite, Massenet’s Overture to Phredre and Liebestraum. The concerts were free and open to the public. While Memphis was ready for a symphony orchestra, without a steady source of public funding, the orchestra quickly went bankrupt and was disbanded in 1936.

This left the stage open for the arrival of Burnet Tuthill. He was called to Southwestern in 1935 by President Charles Diehl and the staff of Southwestern to form a music department, band, chorus and orchestra. From the moment Tuthill came into the world, November 16, 1888, his whole life was filled with music. His father, William Burnet Tuthill, was an amateur cellist, who enthusiastically took part in New York City’s musical culture as the secretary of the New York Oratorio society. His father also happened to be the architect for Carnegie Hall. When it was completed in May, 1891, Tuthill was 2 1/2 years old. Dr. Tuthill claims to have been “brought up on the backstairs of Carnegie Hall, more or less.” At the time it was built, Carnegie Hall, “New York’s Great Shrine of Music,” had the best acoustics of any music hall in the world.

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Tuthill also inherited his passion for music from his mother. Henrietta Corwin Tuthill was an accomplished pianist and organ teacher. In 1895, at their home at 785 Park Avenue in New York City, his parents formed the Wiederholen String Quartet and held regular rehearsals and concerts. This musical ensemble created a pleasant tradition in Tuthill’s family life that continued for thirty five years. The group performed weekly from 1895-1929. Tuthill stated “I started to learn chamber music when I was seven years old. I sat there every week listening to them and learning.”

Even though Tuthill was surrounded by music from such an early age he never imagined the impact music would have on the rest of his life.

Tuthill attended high school at Horace Mann, an adjunct of The Teachers College of Columbia. While there, he started his first orchestra with the help of Morris Ernst, cellist, later a famous New York attorney. Tuthill also became the clerk to the librarian of the New York Oratorio Society, and as soon as his voice changed began singing in their tenor section. Throughout his formal education Tuthill and his father attended performances and recitals all over New York. These included the New York String quartet, which he first heard at the home of its sponsor, Joseph Pulitzer. Tuthill was fortunate to grow up in the center of the American classical music world. Tuthill and his father attended many concerts. He was privileged to be surrounded by the genius of men such as Andrew Carnegie and Joseph Pulitzer. This background would provide him with inspiration and confidence for his musical endeavors later in life.

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28 “Tuthill Just Couldn’t Miss.”
Tuthill graduated from Columbia University with a degree in Chemistry. Upon graduation, he could not secure the job he wanted, so he entered into the business world. From 1910-1922 he worked at various jobs throughout New York City. Music remained a huge part of his life and took up all of his spare time. After graduation, Tuthill became the director of the Orchestra at Columbia from 1909 to 1913. When he turned 21 in 1909, he became the librarian of the Oratorio Society and thus a member of its board of directors.

From 1913-16 Tuthill trained the Bronx Branch of the People’s Choral Union. For six years, from 1911-18, Tuthill played first clarinet in the Young Man’s Symphony Orchestra under Arnold Volpe. While in this position he also served as a board member and assistant conductor from 1917-1918. In 1916 he was the assistant conductor of the Shakespeare Tercentenary celebration. In 1919 Tuthill founded the Society for the Publication of American Music of which he acted as treasurer for many years. It continued to function for nearly half a century and published about 85 works by American Composers. He was also the editor and chief of the National Solo and Ensemble Series for Wind Instruments. He would bring all of this valuable experience with him when he came to Memphis.

In early 1920 Tuthill took a job in real estate with one of the most prestigious firms in New York, Cross and Brown Company. He thought he might have found his niche, when a friend and fellow conductor, Chalmers Clifton, asked if he knew anyone with business

32 “Resume of Burnett C. Tuthill,” [Rhodes College Archives, Memphis, TN], 1935.
and musical experience who would consider becoming general manager of the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. Tuthill reminisced, “Having been struggling all these years to find time for all the musical activities that attracted me this seemed to be a call.”

In 1922, Tuthill traveled to Cincinnati as general manager of the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. This job was the perfect union of the commercial and artistic sides of his personality. His job consisted of directing the conservatory’s educational policy and also conducting glee clubs at the University of Cincinnati. Even though this was still a “business job,” he was gaining valuable experience in music and music education. He served in this position for eight years. In 1924, Tuthill shared in the organization of the National Association of Schools of Music. He was the secretary of this organization for 35 years until his retirement in 1959. He was also an examiner for the organization from 1930-59.

In the spring of 1930 he met Ruth Carroll Wood, a violinist from Muncie, Indiana. They were married on August 9, 1930. Later that month, Tuthill resigned as general manager of the conservatory for financial reasons. Realizing he just could not escape his musical fate, Tuthill left the conservatory post and went back to school at the College of Music at Cincinnati. To make ends meet while earning his degree, Tuthill went on tour, gave recitals and composed more works for the clarinet. He also worked as a concert

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37 “Resume of Burnett C. Tuthill,” [Rhodes College Archives, Memphis, TN], 1935.
manager for the Cincinnati wind ensemble, all the while still serving as a clarinetist in the Cincinnati Little Symphony.38

In 1935, after Tuthill received his degree, financial need led him to accept a job as Director of Music at Southwestern. This was a small liberal arts college of about 400 students in Memphis, Tennessee. He was to form a band to perform at football games, teach several introductory music classes and organize a glee club. He succeeded at all these tasks, and upon arrival also got together with some other professors and immediately started a string quartet.39

One of the main projects that motivated Tuthill to come to Southwestern and Memphis was the prospect of starting a new Symphony Orchestra. He was encouraged to believe Memphis was ready to embrace a permanent orchestra by the reception of the performances under Joseph Henkel. Also, with his business experience, Tuthill was confident that he could make the organization and finances work. He was eager to augment his salary of $2000 that he was receiving from his employment at Southwestern.40 So, only two years after his arrival in Memphis, Tuthill started rehearsing a chamber orchestra with string instruments composed of a student-faculty group at Southwestern College and the Memphis College of Music.41


39 One of Tuthill’s main contributions to Rhodes was the formation of the Southwestern Singers. The descendent of this choral group still travels the Mid South providing beautiful performances. Tuthill’s students quickly grew to love this stern, yet brilliant new addition to the faculty, and christened him “Papa Tut”, his daughter Anne’s nickname for him.


41 “City’s Symphony in Second Concert,”1940.
They performed so capably and with such talent, despite the mix of amateurs and professionals, that the public took an enthusiastic interest. Tuthill saw the potential for growth and opened the orchestra to members of the community. He realized that Memphis did not have the funds to support a professional orchestra, and so persuaded the professional musicians to agree to collaborate with amateurs.\textsuperscript{42} Civic support was overwhelming. The general desire for participation by members of the community was so great that the number of musicians almost doubled before the orchestra was ready for its first concert.\textsuperscript{43} Soon, there were twice as many outsiders as Southwesterner’s in the aggregation. However, the success which the orchestra attained reflected credit on the original group at Southwestern and afforded college supporters a certain amount of gratification. The college also took great pride in the fact that the man who prepared and directed the group as well as coming up with the original idea was a member of the Southwestern faculty.\textsuperscript{44}

Memphis believed that “Here was an orchestra that sprang up because men and women wanted to play together. Enthusiasm for good music of all kinds has been the keynote of its success. It [became] a permanent organization through conservative and careful management and by giving both the players and the audience’s real musical satisfaction at its performances.”\textsuperscript{45} By Christmas the organization of twenty four


\textsuperscript{43} “City’s Symphony in Second Concert of Season Jan. 23,” \textit{Press Scimitar}, 15 January 1940.

\textsuperscript{44} “Comment by the Editor,” \textit{The Sou’Wester}, [Memphis Symphony Office Archives, Memphis, TN], 1939, 2.

musicians had grown to fifty five, a short time later the number increased to 72. Rehearsal quarters had to be moved to the band house on Southwestern’s campus because quarters at the College of Music quickly became too small.\textsuperscript{46} The group included amateurs and professionals, teachers, businessmen, housewives, doctors, lawyers, students and people from the city who wanted to play purely for musical pleasure.\textsuperscript{47} By the time of its first concert, the old Memphis Symphony had truly turned into a civic orchestra which the city and Tuthill could be proud.

Tuthill’s credentials and the success of the Southwestern students inspired musicians in Memphis to give a symphony orchestra one more attempt. Tuthill declared, “Our Dream of a Symphony Orchestra is coming true sooner than anticipated. It is due to the co-operation of the musicians, both professional and non-professional, and of the musician’s union. The orchestra has become predominantly a city, not just a school, orchestra.”\textsuperscript{48} Several of the musicians were from outside Memphis, and some drove more than one hundred miles to participate.\textsuperscript{49} A number of dedicated members had played in the previous orchestra under Joseph Henkel.\textsuperscript{50}

Civic patriotism and support at that time was unprecedented in the history of Memphis because of the onset of World War II. Nationwide, all things American were

\textsuperscript{46} The band house was a temporary structure that the music department was located in before Tuthill hall was dedicated in 1962.

\textsuperscript{47} “City’s Symphony in Second Concert of Season Jan. 23,” \textit{Press Scimitar}, 15 January 1940.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{49} According to Ryan Fleurs, Executive Director of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, this fact is still true today. e-mail to the author, Memphis TN, 24 July 2005.

\textsuperscript{50} “City’s Symphony in Second Concert,” 1940.
promoted, and an effort was made, spearheaded by the American Association of Lovers of Music, to promote American artists. Previously, foreign artist and musicians had been the top choices. “Memphis was beginning to grow at that time, and there was a population of people who finally had the passion and disposable income to finance a symphony.”

Civic organizations promoting city pride and music education received momentous support. In Memphis organizations interested in “building up a symphony orchestra such as other cities boast,” included the Beethoven Club, Civic Music League and the Music Committee of the Educational Division of the Chamber of Commerce.

On Saturday February 25th, 1939, Tuthill established a board of directors and later that same year a charter was obtained. It was decided to call the organization Memphis Symphony Society Inc. maintaining and operating the Memphis Symphony Orchestra. The purpose of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra Inc., was “to organize and maintain a symphony orchestra and present concerts of symphonic and other music; to foster an interest and appreciation of music generally; to give performances of a musical nature; to train musicians in correct musical principles in connection with the above purposes or otherwise; to do any or all acts and things necessary or convenient in promoting music generally.” Fifty board members were elected to take care of the public aspect of the Orchestra. Officers were established, and a membership drive was held early in the

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51 Martha Ellen Maxwell, former board director, interview with the author, Memphis TN, 20 July, 2005.
53 Ibid.
54 Memphis Symphony Orchestra Membership Campaign Program April 29-May 11th 1940.
second season selling two types of subscriptions, one at $5 for one concert and another at $25 dollars for all four concerts.\textsuperscript{55,56}

The first concert was performed May 13, 1939 at Goodwyn Institute.\textsuperscript{57} Tickets were sold for one dollar, and student tickets were discounted to fifty cents.\textsuperscript{58} It received such wonderful reviews and enthusiastic support that another concert was given a week later at the Orpheum Theatre on May 20, 1939.\textsuperscript{59} The first season of the new Memphis Symphony Orchestra had been a success. Emma Pitt, a contralto from Nashville, was featured as guest artist in the final concert. She was accompanied by the Mississippi State Glee Club, with Edmund L. King as conductor. Memphis’s talented concert pianist Herbert Summerfield played “Spoon River,” an Illinois Folk tune.\textsuperscript{60}

Tuthill quickly made plans for a second season, recruiting prominent local soloists as guest artists. The orchestra presented Eugenia Buxton, Memphis’s internationally recognized concert pianist, and Joseph Knitzer, concert violinist. The number of performances grew due to popular demand. For the third concert, two well known Memphis pianists, Mrs. Ben Walker and Mrs. Louis Leroy were featured in Saint-Saëns’s suite \textit{The Carnival of the Animals}.\textsuperscript{61}

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\textsuperscript{56}Grant M’Gee “City’s Symphony In Second Concert of Season Jan. 23,” \textit{Press Scimitar}, 15 January 1940.
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\textsuperscript{57} “Four Concerts On Program, With the Opening Performance Slated Nov. 17: All Who Are Interested Welcome to Play,” 1942.
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\textsuperscript{58} Houston, “Music Lifts the Soul,” 1941.
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\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{60} “Four Concerts On Program,” 1942.
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\textsuperscript{61} “Four Concerts On Program,” 1942.
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The 1940-41 seasons saw the addition of a hundred voice symphony chorus. The opening performance was *Ballad for Americans*, sung by Baritone Hubert Kockritz of Cincinnati. This was so popular it was repeated the next year by request. Evelyn Swarthout, young American concert pianist, was the guest artist for the January concert, and Francis Greer from the Metropolitan Opera Company was the guest artist for the final concert in May. Guest artists for the 1942-3 seasons included Buxton and Ethel Taylor-first prima donna of the open air theatre and last season with the Municipal Opera. Robert Gay, on leave from the army, and a baritone formerly of the Philadelphia Opera, was featured with a chorus of 140 voices in Hanson’s *Songs from Drum Taps*. The closing concert of the season on May 5th featured Emil Heermen and his brother Walter Heermen, solo cellist. The symphony made it’s radio debut when the last 30 minutes of this performance was aired on WMC.62

The Orchestra completed its third season with a positive financial balance and all the bills paid. To have a symphony orchestra that operated in the black the first three seasons was a nationwide phenomenon. The budget was increased in 1941 from $4,000 to $5,000. The income that made this unique record possible came only from ticket sales, program advertising and less then $400 received from the Music Appreciation Committee as the orchestra’s share of the sale of phonograph records.63

By 1941 the orchestra consisted of forty three strings, twelve woodwinds, thirteen brass, four percussion and two harps, for a total of 74 musicians. Of these, 24 were

62 Ibid.

members of the union, twenty eight were amateurs or teachers, fifteen were college students and seven were still in high school.

In 1942 the annual symphony drive had a goal of $7,500. The orchestra was growing slowly. Even with the shadow of World War II looming over Americans and forcing everyone to cut costs, Memphians still loved their symphony. The Orchestra flourished during the war, a tribute to the high level of civic patriotism and support in Memphis. Despite having 95 members serving in the armed forces, the quality of music and enthusiastic response from the audience only improved with each performance. Newspaper articles with titles such as “Symphony Win’s Music Lover’s Warm Praises,” and “Worth Risk of Ice and Snow to Hear Symphony,” show how positive the reception of this new orchestra was. Many shared the feelings of Mrs. George Clark Houston who believed that “music helps build and sustain our morale. Supporting the symphony is investing in community welfare.” She and Tuthill were pictured in the Commercial Appeal working in their Victory Gardens. The Symphony Board eagerly met the challenges of raising money during wartime to support their orchestra.

The Board also worked hard to meet the challenges of filling vacancies left by members who were called to military service. They ended the 1942 season with

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64 “How the Memphis Symphony Started,” 1945.

65 Press Scimitar, 13 January, 1940.

66 Press Scimitar, 27 January 1943.

67 “Symphony Drive off to Good Start,” Commercial Appeal, 6 August 1942.

68 Newspaper photograph, [Rhodes College Archives, Memphis Tennessee], 1945.


70 “Finds Among Newcomers Fill War Gaps in Orchestra,” Commercial Appeal, 12 November 1942.
another radio broadcast. This was a sign of symphonic music’s growing popularity and civic support in Memphis.\footnote{“Symphony Ends Season by Going on Air,” \em Commercial Appeal, \textit{3 May 1942}.} The last concert of the 1942-43 seasons focused on music of the United Nations. Members supporting the orchestra believed that “music is a vital factor in building and sustaining a state of mind and heart essential to American morale. The Memphis Symphony Society and the Memphis Symphony Orchestra stand for just that, and are truly fighting the war on both fronts . . . keeping the morale on the home front and sending their members into active military service.”\footnote{Mrs. George Clark Houston, “Music of the United Nations will Feature Final Symphony Concert of the Season,” \em Press Scimitar, \textit{30 April 1943}.}

In 1943, the orchestra held weekly Monday night rehearsals and performed four concerts per season. True to Memphis’s racial climate, performances in the Auditorium were strictly segregated, with the gallery reserved “for negroes only.”\footnote{“How the Memphis Symphony Started.”} Their ticket price was 30 cents, half the cost of the cheapest ticket available to white Memphians, whose tickets were available from 60 cents to $2.40.\footnote{There was no mention of the old Symphony Orchestra or the Sinfonietta in the \em Memphis World, the main African American newspaper in Memphis, for the years 1939 and 1952, when they opened, respectively. From this, one might deduce that the African American community was not interested in the Orchestra. While no record of specific numbers of the ethnic makeup of the audience exists, the author surmises that the seats in the balcony were mostly filled by home or work employees of symphony goers who attended while working.}

The next year the budget goal was raised to $10,500.\footnote{“Record Budget for the Memphis Symphony,” \textit{16 September 1944}.} The extent of civic involvement can be deduced by the fact that at the Memphis Symphony Society’s annual
luncheon at the Peabody to open the membership drive, Mayor Chandler chided the Symphony Board for not being sufficiently ambitious. He declared, “Instead of a budget of $10,500, you should be seeking the money for a budget of $25,000 or more. Your Orchestra has reached the point where it must go forward and the best way for it to go forward is to give the people a great amount. You must obtain more money; you must hire more professional musicians and must make your symphony as good as any. That is a matter of civic responsibility and duty.” The board followed their mayor’s call, and in the succeeding years became more and more ambitious.

Mayor Chandler continued his admonitions, representing a firm belief in the necessity of the symphony for the cultural life of Memphis and a misconception of the abilities of the still fledgling orchestra. “Every progressive city in America,” Chandler added, “has a symphony orchestra. It is one of the hallmarks of a real city and Memphis could not do without our symphony. . . I want to see the Symphony Orchestra here develop into a full professional orchestra within our lives, an orchestra that is great and famous.” The slogan for the ticket sales of this pivotal season was “Industry is a city’s brawn, business is its brain. Culture is its spirit and soul.” This “spirit and soul” of Memphis was still composed of any one who could play a musical instrument, many still amateurs. Despite this challenge, every season the orchestra expanded their repertoire and tackled more and more difficult pieces.

76 Mayor Chandler was working under the political machine established in Memphis by “Boss” Crump.
77 “Mayor Urges Greater Budget As Symphony Launches Drive,” 16 September 1944.
78 Ibid.
True to the mayor’s wishes, Tuthill initiated programs that would appeal to the entire city in an effort to expand community support and ensure the growth of the symphony. In 1944 they attempted their first pops concert in the Shell in Overton Park. The event was a huge success, and the “lighter” music appealed to a broader audience. In March of 1945, continuing their attempts to appeal to the broader community, the Symphony reached out to children. Working in conjunction with Goldsmith’s, they sponsored a contest to find a young piano soloist. Eleven year old Helen Walker won the contest and played with the Memphis Symphony in one of its Sunday concerts.\(^{80}\)

In June of that same year, Tuthill was granted a leave of absence by the Memphis College of Music, the Music Department of Southwestern, and by the Memphis Symphony Orchestra to work for several months on an educational project for the United States Army. Tuthill was sworn to silence by the War Department in Washington on the exact nature of this top secret project.\(^{81}\) He was gone from June 6\(^{th}\) 1945, to January 6 1946. He ended up going to England to work with the army educational services at Shriveham American Army University, heading the department on music education.\(^{82}\) While Tuthill was in England, the first two concerts of that season were conducted by his assistant, Vincent de Frank, principle cellist in the orchestra.

When Tuthill returned, the board had increased the five concerts a season to ten. The board had become too ambitious for the abilities of the inexperienced orchestra. This arrangement only gave Tuthill four rehearsals to prepare the orchestra for the last two

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\(^{80}\) “Helen Walker, 11 to play with Symphony on Sunday,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 1945.

\(^{81}\) “Dr. Tuthill to Leave for Work with Army. June, 1945.”

\(^{82}\) “Tuthill has Taken a Job With the Army That Will Keep him out of Memphis,” *Commercial Appeal* 13 June 1945.
concerts of the season. He sent a letter to Louis Levy, President of the Symphony Society, requesting that the board of directors postpone one of the concerts. Knowing that he, as conductor, would be held responsible for the quality of music performed, he declared, “I must ask that my resignation as conductor be accepted as of April 15, unless such action is taken.”

The board of directors felt they had no other choice but to let Tuthill go. Dr. Levy responded by assuring Memphians that the remaining concerts would be held as scheduled. They could not forfeit the contracts made with guest artists, and season tickets had already been sold to the public.

Tuthill explained that “From the first I have argued against an excessively long season. I knew it just couldn’t be done properly. Last season there were five concerts, and this season we have ten scheduled. It has become an impossible situation.” He made it clear that “there was no sudden difference with the policy of the orchestra’s management.” He ended on a positive note and some useful advice.

I hope the orchestra will go on to greater and greater accomplishments. As I see it, it will have to retreat to a smaller season as in the past, or go ahead and become professional so that adequate rehearsals can be held. The professional members of the orchestra have to do their regular work, as the situation is now. They can not rehearse in the mornings as Professional orchestras are able to do. The amateurs have worked hard and long. The season simply developed into impossibility.

The orchestra failed in part because the board was too eager to push the amateur musicians beyond their limits. The symphony tried to grow too fast. Without Tuthill

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83 “Dr. Tuthill Quits as Symphony Conductor in Sudden Move: De Frank To Take Baton,” *Press Scimitar* 1 April, 1946.


85 Ibid., 1946.

86 “Dr. Tuthill Quits,” 1946.
holding them in check, they doubled the number of concerts and did not take into account
that the musician’s day jobs would make it impossible to hold the number of rehearsals
necessary to perform up to a high standard. Without that standard, the public was not
satisfied and did not come out to support the symphony. The next season ended in a
$25,000 deficit that crippled further hopes for an orchestra at that time.  

Tuthill also disagreed with the board about the type of music to be played. He
wanted to tackle more advanced modern pieces, and conservative symphony going
Memphians were not willing to pay unless they were assured of hearing their traditional

It was not until 1952 that Vincent de Frank reorganized musicians into the Memphis Sinfonietta,
which grew into the present Memphis Symphony Orchestra.

Another suggestion for the failure of the orchestra came from The President of the
Memphis Musicians Union, Orville Bond. He sat in on the two hour meeting of the
Memphis Symphony Society that debated about a solution to the problem, and blamed
the lack of music education in Memphis for the city’s failure to finance the Symphony.
He stated, “even if we build a symphony for Memphis we haven’t got a potential
audience for it. We’ve got to develop Memphis for a symphony and develop a symphony
for Memphis.”  

He criticized the Memphis city school’s music program as “far below
par.”

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88 Charles and Ruth Cobb, Memphis TN, interview by the author, 6 July 2005.
90 Ibid., 1948.
Tuthill held himself to the same standards he held the musicians he conducted. He remained a perfectionist for the rest of his life. When asked in an interview by Amanda McGee in 1979 why he didn’t play the clarinet anymore when at one time he had owned five, he responded “I played in 1973 and didn’t play up to standard so I sent them away – got rid of them, sold them. When my wife couldn’t play anymore, I didn’t want to play when I couldn’t so as well.”91 He would either perform to the best of his ability, or not at all. He has been described as “a stern taskmaster, whipping us up to temp with batons like willow switches, which he broke repeatedly on the flanks of our frequent ineptitude.”92 At his retirement speech John H. Davis remembered, “woe betide a clarinetist who blew an ill wind, for Tut would blow his top and the clarinetist’s too, and it took all of Ruthie’s diplomatic tact to put Humpty Dumpty together again.”93

In 1946, after his return, Dr. Tuthill founded the Southwestern Chamber music society. Tuthill loved getting groups together in his home to play music. Joy Wiener remembers many enjoyable evenings spent collaborating on different chamber music compositions. Sometimes they would play one of Tuthill’s own works. It helped encourage rapport between musicians, strengthening the performances of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra.94

Between 1947 and 1952 there was a lull in the fine arts scene in Memphis. Vincent de Frank went to play in the St. Louis Symphony. Tuthill stayed on at

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94 Joy Wiener, Concert Master Emeritus of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, interview with the author, Memphis TN, 10 July 2005.
Southwestern, and was instrumental in the formation of the Southeastern Composers league, an organization established to promote the performance of works by composers in that geographical area.\textsuperscript{95} Even though there was no performance season in 1948, in 1949 Memphians elected officers and directors of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra Society. They hoped to rejuvenate Memphians interest and support for a symphony. Ike Meyers, a prominent Memphis citizen, was elected president.\textsuperscript{96} He was so devoted to bringing classical music to Memphis that he personally paid to bring in the Metropolitan Opera. In a last effort to revive the bankrupt orchestra, the board found fifty business men who agreed to raise $40,000 to finance the symphony, which heretofore had been dependent on voluntary contributions and box office sales.\textsuperscript{97} They were so positive that the symphony would succeed that dates were announced for concerts for the 1947-48 season.\textsuperscript{98} Unfortunately only a little over $7,000 was raised, and the Orchestra could not survive.

Another person who played a central role in bringing the arts to Memphis at this time was Louise Mercer. Louise Mercer had been a pianist in New York, studied in Paris and was well trained as a musician. Unfortunately, she got arthritis in her fingers and had to retire. She moved back to Jackson, Tennessee, where she was from and taught music and elocution. She made enough money to become a real estate investor and ended up becoming quite wealthy. Mercer wanted to spend her money developing music, and so she came to Memphis from Jackson, determined to do something about the barren artistic

\textsuperscript{95} Raines, “Burnett C. Tuthill,” 56.


\textsuperscript{97} “50 Men Agree To Raise $40,000 For Symphony,” Press Scimitar, 20 March 1947.

situation. She was a very active, extremely dynamic person who was determined to build music in Memphis.

Mercer’s first action was to organize the Mid South Concert Bureau in which young musicians could perform. She had so much drive and determination that she went into the towns and cities around Memphis by herself, rare for a woman in those days. She managed to single handedly persuade bankers, store owners, ministers and other local influential citizens to organize a group to raise about three or four hundred dollars in order to have a concert. Some of these people in these tiny little towns had never heard classical music before. Many had never seen musical instruments such as a harp or cello. The closest thing they had encountered to a violin was a fiddler playing folk music. This program began to expand and attract interest from a lot of people who were very impressed. They began to request an orchestra instead of just the few musicians who were touring. This was one of the inspirations for reinstating a symphony in Memphis.\textsuperscript{99} Barbara Thompson remembers that “at this time there were a lot of classically trained musicians in Memphis, all of whom were eager to play.”\textsuperscript{100} So in 1952 when de Frank formed the Sinfonietta it was not hard to find musicians to participate. They began meeting one night a week and the first year they gave a concert in the spring and then the following fall. When Vincent de Frank formed the Sinfonietta, “Ms. Mercer provided publicity and assisted with business arrangements.”\textsuperscript{101}

\textsuperscript{99} Joy Brown Wiener, Concert Master Emeritus, interview with the author, Memphis TN, 10 July 2005.

\textsuperscript{100} Barbara Thompson, Cellist with the Sinfonietta, interview with the author, Memphis TN, 11 July 2005.

\textsuperscript{101} Shelley Sublett, “The Founding of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra.” [Memphis Symphony Archives, Memphis TN].
The two orchestras and two conductors were very different. Tuthill was a national authority on music and enjoyed the position. De Frank was just a lowly cello player when he started. He came to Memphis with the navy and started playing at the Naval base in Millington. Charles Cobb remembers, “He started playing side performances in Memphis and got to know people and started leading a little orchestra in Memphis. If someone had a party and wanted some musicians to come play, he would provide the music. That is where Mrs. Mercer discovered him and started collaborating with him on how to reinstate an orchestra in Memphis.”

Another difference between the orchestras was that Tuthill accepted anyone who was willing to play an instrument, but de Frank was determined only to accept the most competent players. He required auditions from the very beginning. In Memphis at that time only 21 qualified musicians could be assembled, so that is the number he started with. Also, there was not enough money to pay a big orchestra and always operate in the black. De Frank was also very passionate about starting a children’s education program, while Tuthill restricted his educational activities to Southwestern.

They were similar in the respect that they both thought it was crucial for the musical education of all Memphians to introduce them to modern classical music. Sometimes to do this de Frank had to sacrifice some old favorites. This was rarely a

102 Joy Wiener, Concert Master Emeritus of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, interview with the author, Memphis TN, 10 July 2005.

103 Charles Cobb, early board member of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, interview with the author, Memphis, TN, 10 July, 2005.

104 Charles Cobb, early board member of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, interview with the author, Memphis TN, 6 July 2005.
popular option. In fact, at one point the board became disturbed because de Frank was scheduling too many modern pieces and the audience was complaining. So the board appointed a music review group. The review group consisted of Louise Mercer, Edith Sprunt and Betty Bruce. These were the three women who really worked to back the orchestra at that time. They worked very hard negotiating with de Frank about the programs he would play. Some of those sessions were very tense. They called in Charles Cobb, a lawyer, to mediate. They came out of the meeting with the agreement that he could play one modern piece every second concert. Most of the people wanted symphonic music that was understandable, beautiful and most of the time familiar. Cobb remembers, “Memphis did not have any people who had been trained to be qualified critics or who really understood a lot about classical music. De Frank was a strong believer in education and supported the modern pieces because people could not decide if they liked music until they heard it.”

The opening concert of the Sinfonietta was January 25, 1953, at the Goodwyn Institute Building, before an audience of 300. Works by Vivaldi, Schubert, and Strauss were on the program, and Alabama pianist David Gibson played a Mozart concerto.

The audience was enthusiastic and demanded encores. The next day, a review in the Commercial Appeal stated, “This fledgling organization should be around for a long time, and with a steadily growing place in the cultural life of the city.”

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105 Ibid., 2005.
106 Ibid., 2005.
Orchestral Society was formed as its sponsoring organization. By 1960 the Sinfonietta had grown into the Memphis Symphony Orchestra we know today.

Tuthill was glad to participate in the new symphony, and provided invaluable guidance to the younger de Frank. Tuthill was there at every rehearsal and concert. I don’t think the orchestra could have started again without the Tuthill family.”  

In 1952 Tuthill agreed to play second clarinet. His wife Ruth was the first violinist, his daughter Ann was the first flutist and her husband, Dick Reynolds played first clarinet.  He would be involved with the Memphis Symphony as clarinetist and librarian until he retired from the Memphis Symphony completely in 1971. He retired from Southwestern in 1959 at the age of 71 and Southwestern conferred upon him the title of Professor Emeritus of Music. They gave him the honors of ODK, Phi Beta Kappa and the dedication of the Lynx. The Rhodes Singers presented him with a key to Southwestern in an emotional ceremony. He was also given a silver tea set in gratitude from the college. Later, in 1962, the new music building was named Tuthill hall in his memory. Students fondly nicknamed it “Tut Hut.”

109 Charles and Ruth Cobb, early board member and harpist, interview with the author, Memphis TN, 6 July 2005.
110 Ruth Cobb, harpist with the early Memphis Symphony, interview with the author, Memphis TN, 6 July 2005.
111 Letter from Dr. Tuthill to Peyton Rhodes, March 8 1962.
112 Raines 22.
Always needing to stay busy, In 1959 Tuthill returned to the business world for a while as a representative for Wadell and Reed Inc.\textsuperscript{113} He also spent a good deal of time composing. He left over 96 compositions along with a legacy never to be forgotten.\textsuperscript{114} His pastoral symphonic work, *Bethlehem*, had been played by many of the leading Orchestra’s in the country. His other pieces span the repertoire of classical music, including, chamber music pieces, works for woodwinds and a choral work. Other outstanding examples of Tuthill’s compositions include, *Come Seven*, *Symphony in C Overture for Symphonic Bands* and *Big River*.\textsuperscript{115} After moving to Memphis he would make the leisure time to work on these pieces every summer when he and his family retired to the Michigan woods.\textsuperscript{116}

Approximately half of his works date from 1959. Tuthill attended as many performances of his works as possible, and made many guest appearances conducting them. In 1979 he moved from his home at 295 Buena Vista Place to Knoxville to live with his daughter. He died January 18, 1982 in Knoxville Tennessee at the age of ninety

\textsuperscript{113} “Tuthill, Burnett C(orwin),” *Who’s Who in the South and Southwest* (Chicago: Marquis-Who’s Who Inc. and Port City Press, 1950), 1029.

\textsuperscript{114} This is the Argument of Jean Lee Raines in her dissertation cited above.

\textsuperscript{115} “How Memphis Symphony Started.”

\textsuperscript{116} “Tuthill Just Couldn’t Miss.” In 1929 Tuthill went to Interlochen, Michigan for the first time to be an instructor at the National Music camp. He enjoyed the experience so much that he purchased a cottage and returned to Interlochen for the next 16 summers. The two summers between 1945 and 1947 were spent away, but after that he and his family came back every summer for the next twenty five years. (Raines, 15.)
three. Still devoted to Rhodes and the city he loved, he and his family requested that memorials be sent to the music building at Rhodes College 117

Tuthill’s entire life was spent trying to convey his love and knowledge of music to the world, and many would say he succeeded. The dedication and commitment Tuthill inspired in the musicians and the members of the community in Memphis, Tennessee created a symphony. No matter how daunting the challenge, he never gave up. Martha Ellen Maxwell admits, “Musicians are very lucky because they have a passion for what they’re doing. They are very fortunate to be able to spend their entire lives doing what they love.” 118 From his musical beginnings in New York City through his formal education and training in Cincinnati, to his remarkable achievements in Memphis, Tuthill brought his drive and creativity with him. Even though he was chemistry major and worked in the business world for many years he could not escape his passion for music. He brought that passion with him and shared it with many others, whom he introduced to their musical calling. Papa Tut thought of the old Memphis Symphony as a father thinks of his children. 119 Mrs. Cobb, who played second harp under Tuthill when she was only 16, recalls that “there was a family like atmosphere. Tuthill was highly respected. We were all there for the love of the music, so there was never any dissension between us.” 120

When his orchestra failed, Tuthill devoted himself to the Sinfonietta and the current Memphis Symphony. He saw his dream of having a permanent successful

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117 Tuthill Funeral program, Rhodes Archives, Memphis TN.


119 “Dr. Tuthill Quits,” 1946.

120 Ruth Marie Cobb, harpist with the Sinfonietta and Memphis Symphony Orchestra, interview with the author, Memphis, TN, 6 July 2005.
Symphony orchestra in Memphis become a reality. Tuthill arrived at Southwestern at a crucial time in Memphis, because the city’s population growth and the financial gains and civic interest of her citizens finally placed a premium on developing the arts and cultural institutions like never before in her history.\textsuperscript{121}

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