

# PHILADELPHIA NEIGHBORHOOD RECOVERY TOUR

## TOUR STOP #2: SOCIETY HILL

### Central Location:

4th and Spruce Streets

### Boundaries:

Roughly, Chestnut Street to Lombard Street; 7th Street to Front Street

### Introduction

Implementation of a preservation-oriented urban renewal plan to restore houses and create amenities in a neighborhood adjacent to Independence National Historical Park, within Philadelphia's downtown.

### Neighborhood Background

One of Philadelphia's oldest neighborhoods, Society Hill is near the downtown business district and adjacent to Independence National Historical Park, where Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell, and other colonial-era attractions are located. The name Society Hill reflects the community's history, not its current appearance or status. A hill once existed at the area's eastern border, on the bank of the Delaware River. As commerce grew and docks and warehouses multiplied, the hill was gradually flattened. The word "society" comes from the Free Society of Traders in Pennsylvania, a late-17th-century land-investment company founded by William Penn. Society Hill became home to many leaders of post-colonial America, particularly between 1790 and 1800, when Philadelphia was the nation's capital.

Society Hill today extends roughly from Front to 8th streets and from Walnut to Lombard streets. Society Hill contains the largest concentration of 18th-century architecture in the United States. As part of a post-World War II redevelopment plan, more than 800 houses in the area were restored during a two-decade period, beginning in the mid-1950s. Although most of these properties are private, single-family homes, two house museums are open to the public: the Hill-Physick-Keith House (1786) at 321 South Fourth Street and the Powel House (1765) at 244 South 3rd Street.

One of America's most walkable neighborhoods, Society Hill is laid out in a grid of tree-lined streets with brick pavements and a network of pedestrian alleys interspersed with small parks. Public transportation, tourist attractions, and downtown shopping are all readily accessible. The lively restaurants and night spots of the South Street area are one block from Society Hill's southern edge. The art galleries and cultural attractions of the Old City area lie a few blocks from the northern edge. Penn's Landing (a portion of the Delaware River waterfront) is just east of Society Hill. Its riverside walkway leads to restaurants, a Hyatt Hotel, and the River Link Ferry.

## Development of the Venture

By the 1940s, Society Hill had gained a reputation as one of the worst slums in Philadelphia. The historic, once-thriving neighborhood was overwhelmed by a chaotic mixture: poorly maintained rooming houses and other deteriorated or vacant residential properties; a massive, overcrowded food distribution center; and dilapidated commercial buildings, scattered throughout the area.

During the 1950s, when the federal government began to make a substantial commitment to altering the nearby Independence Hall area, the City of Philadelphia drafted a reinvestment plan for Society Hill. After a survey of the neighborhood's assets, the City decided that Society Hill property owners should be required to restore their historic-house facades to the original appearance. If they declined, the properties were condemned under urban renewal law and purchased by the Redevelopment Authority (RDA). While the RDA was purchasing and demolishing factories and commercial buildings, a new civic association worked on finding hundreds of individual buyers willing to restore historic houses according to City regulations. In some cases, valid mid- and late-19th-century elements were removed to recreate federal or colonial residential styles; and viable mixed-use or commercial buildings were turned into residential properties or razed. These practices were typical of the planning and zoning philosophy of the time and do not represent the more enlightened approach of preservationists today, including the current Philadelphia Historical Commission.

Across a two-decade span of time, with land acquisition and funding for development made available through the RDA, more than 800 historic houses were restored. After the City moved the food distribution center to South Philadelphia, the old site was redeveloped in 1964 as Society Hill Towers—a group of three 32-story apartment buildings designed by architect I. M. Pei, with extraordinary views of the Delaware River and the downtown area. The neighborhood surrounding the towers retained its traditional low-rise character. Developers of vacant parcels were subject to architectural controls, which required that new residential structures, even if modern in style, be built of brick and have cornices that lined up with those of the older buildings. Some of the very narrow streets were closed and turned into brick-paved and landscaped pedestrian walkways, extending into or through city blocks redefined as primarily residential in character. Spaces on the interior of blocks became small parks or play areas for young children. Many trees were planted throughout the community, concrete sidewalks were replaced with ones of brick, and period street lighting was installed.

In two decades of public intervention and publicly supported investment, Society Hill was transformed from a slum into an attractive residential community that offered desirable housing for a middle-class (today largely upper-class) market. Because of Society Hill's exceptional characteristics and advantages—stockpile of historic architecture, easy access to the downtown business district, and proximity to entertainment and cultural attractions—the area would have likely been upgraded during the 1950s and 1960s through private market activity, without the expenditure of a single public dollar. However, the total improvement of this community and the level of economic benefit to the neighborhood and to the entire city would never have been achieved without public intervention and government funding.

- In the book *Neighborhood Recovery*, John Kromer discusses the relationship between Society Hill and the City's current neighborhood reinvestment policy. (Chapter 1, "A Strategic Problem.")

[www.neighborhoodrecovery.com](http://www.neighborhoodrecovery.com)

- For information on the Philadelphia Historical Commission, contact:

Director  
Philadelphia Historical Commission  
576 City Hall  
Philadelphia, PA 19107  
215/686-7660 voice  
215/686-7674 fax  
[www.phila.gov/historical](http://www.phila.gov/historical)

- For information about the current development of sites on Penn's Landing, contact:

Public Relations Director  
Penn's Landing Corporation  
121 North Columbus Boulevard  
Philadelphia, PA 19106  
215/629-3200 voice  
215/923-2801 fax  
[www.pennslandingcorp.com](http://www.pennslandingcorp.com)

- For information on summer events at Penn's Landing, call:

215/922-2-FUN (215/922-2386)

## **A Personal Perspective**

### **Comments by Robert Butera**

Former Executive Director  
Pennsylvania Convention Center

Condensed from "Urban Convert: How 'Mr. Suburbia' Learned to Love Center City."  
Philadelphia Forum, July 11, 1996.

"You left the suburbs to move to the city?" someone asked me the other day. "You, of all people! That's like Charles de Gaulle moving to Spain!"

At a time when Philadelphia (except Center City, where population is increasing) continues to lose population to the suburbs, I guess it's noteworthy when any suburbanite swims against the tide by moving into town. And I concede that it might be mind-boggling when the suburbanite making the switch is me—that is someone who represented Montgomery County in the state legislature for 15 years and who ran for governor supported largely by a suburban constituency.

Personally, I never thought of myself as a symbol. But for whatever it's worth, the deep dark secret of my life is this: After growing up in Norristown and spending most of my life in the suburbs, I now live quite happily in Society Hill. When suburbanites ask me why I moved to the city, I offer a one-sentence reply: "We can walk everywhere!" In the suburbs, walking *anywhere* is inconceivable. But in Center City, walking is so ingrained that most people don't realize what a blessing it is.

I love to walk. I love to explore. I love to meet people. I especially love to explore Philadelphia. Where else can you walk through America's architectural history in a stroll from the Schuylkill to the Delaware? And now I can engage in these stimulating activities every day in my own neighborhood. Imagine spending your whole life in the suburbs and then waking up one day to discover that you live within walking distance of the Academy of Music, the Walnut Street Theatre, the Arden Theatre, Independence Hall, a dozen museums, and two-dozen movie screens. That's my happy situation, and I want to savor every bite of this cultural feast.

My neighborhood consists of people who have lived in all parts of the Philadelphia region, of the United States, and, indeed, in all parts of the world. It's this wide variety of people and the interaction among them that distinguishes the city from the suburbs. To me, life's daily routine is more fascinating in the city; a casual walk to the local bakery might result in three or four conversations with people who have vastly different backgrounds and interests but a commonality of neighborhood.

I am an early riser. An early morning walk to work watching the city wake up is a joy. The street cleaners are fast at work, and so are the shopkeepers opening their businesses. We're a comfortable walk to a hundred restaurants that literally cover the cuisine globe. I enjoy cooking. In town I can't even count the number of specialty food shops within walking distance of our house. The bakeries, of which I frequent six, rival those of any city in the world. I haven't even mentioned the "special spaces": a jog or bike ride along the River Drives; a Saturday morning breakfast at the Reading Terminal Market; walking in Rittenhouse and Washington Squares, Independence Hall Park, Logan Circle, and Fourth Street below South; the Delaware waterfront; the Italian Market. They are the icing on my cake. This is where we city dwellers rub shoulders and share our lives. It is in these "special spaces" where people from all backgrounds become one. And now I'm one of them.

## Nearby Points of Interest

### **POWEL HOUSE**

215/627-0364

244 South Third Street (between Walnut and Spruce Streets)

Completed in 1765, the Powel House is one of seven residences collectively known as Mansion Row. Samuel Powel (the last mayor of Philadelphia under the Crown and the first mayor after the Revolution) lived here with his wife, Elizabeth Willing Powel. The sophisticated interior plan (compared to a typical town house) included a generous hallway and a ballroom, where legendary figures such as generals Washington and Lafayette were entertained. Hours are usually Thursday–Saturday noon–5 p.m., Sunday 1 p.m.–5 p.m. Call ahead.

**MOTHER BETHEL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

215/925-0616

6th Street between Pine and Lombard Streets

This place of worship is the "mother" church of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, which separated from white Methodists in 1816. Bethel had been founded several years earlier by Richard Allen—a freed slave who started his own congregation, because black leadership was not wanted at St. George's Methodist Church (4th Street, between Race and Vine Streets). The current late-19th-century building is the fourth on the site. (The first church was in an old blacksmith shop that Allen moved to this lot in 1794.) A small museum in the basement contains the tomb of Allen and artifacts from the Underground Railroad. Designed by Hazelhurst and Huckel in the Romanesque Revival style, the church is open for tours Tuesday–Saturday, 10 a.m.–4 p.m. (last tour at 2 p.m.).

**SOCIETY HILL SYNAGOGUE**

215/922-6590

Spruce Street between 4th and 6th Streets

Originally the Spruce Street Baptist Church, this Greek Revival-style building became a Roumanian synagogue in 1910, one of a dozen ethnic Jewish congregations then in the neighborhood. In 1967, when the area's revitalization began, a new congregation—Society Hill Synagogue—made substantial repairs and restored the facade to the initial 1851 design of architect Thomas Ustick Walter. Guided tours Monday–Friday, 10 a.m.–3 p.m.

**INDEPENDENCE SEAPORT MUSEUM**<http://seaport.philly.com>

215/925-5439

211 South Columbus Boulevard (foot of Walnut Street, at the Delaware River)

Once known as the Philadelphia Maritime Museum, the Independence Seaport Museum relocated in 1995 to a site built for the United States Bicentennial (Port of History Museum). The museum explores the role the Port of Philadelphia has played in immigration, commerce, defense, and recreation. It features more than 20 interactive exhibits and more than 10,000 maritime artifacts, including uniforms, navigational instruments, and model ships. Not far from the museum's door, at Columbus Boulevard and Spruce Street, visitors can tour the "real things": the 1892 cruiser *Olympia* and the World War II submarine *Becuna*. Museum hours: Daily 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

**THE BOURSE**[www.bourse-pa.com](http://www.bourse-pa.com)

215/625-0300, ext. 15

11 South 5th Street (between Chestnut &amp; Market Streets)

Located 50 yards from Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell, the Bourse was completed in 1895 to accommodate a variety of financial institutions, including the Maritime Exchange and the Stock Exchange. Brother architects G. W. and W. D. Hewitt of Philadelphia designed a block-long building of steel-frame construction, clad in red sandstone and Pompeian brick. In 1982, the building was extensively renovated (by the local architectural firm H2L2) to become a food court

and retail stores on multiple levels within a 10-story-high atrium. Commercial offices overlook the skylit Great Hall.

### **CHRIST CHURCH**

215/922-1695

20 North American Street (just off 2nd and Market Streets)

Between 1727 and 1744, the Anglicans of the Church England replaced their old 1697 wooden church with a brick, Georgian Colonial-style gem, now a National Historic Landmark. The 196-foot-high steeple (added in 1754) was largely financed through a lottery organized by Benjamin Franklin. Brass plaques mark the pews of George Washington and William Morris, among others. The graves of five signers of the Declaration of Independence are located in the Christ Church Burial Grounds at 5th and Arch Streets. Church open Monday–Saturday 9 a.m.–5 p.m., Sunday 1 p.m.–5 p.m. Sunday services at 9 a.m. and 11 a.m.

### **ELFRETH'S ALLEY**

215/574-0560, museum phone

Off North 2nd Street, between Arch and Race Streets

The oldest continuously occupied street in the country, tiny Elfreth's Alley dates to 1703. Number 124, built for a colonial-era craftsman (a dressmaker who lived on the second floor) and Number 126 (the Windsor Chair Maker's House) serve as a museum. During a few special days and/or evenings in June and December, many of these 30 Georgian Colonial and Federal-style houses (built between 1728 and 1836) are open for public tours. Museum hours vary by season.

### **FIREMAN'S HALL MUSEUM**

215-923-1438

147 North 2nd Street (near Race Street)

Housed in an 1876 former firehouse, the Fireman's Hall Museum is operated by the Philadelphia Fire Department. The collection, starting with the colonial era, includes hand- and horse-drawn firefighting equipment. Visitors can see period living quarters on the second floor. Open Tuesday–Saturday 9 a.m.–4:30 p.m.

### **PENN'S LANDING**

For information on summer events at Penn's Landing, call:

215/922-2-FUN (215/922-2386)

Extending from South Street to Vine Street, Penn's Landing is a mile-long, redeveloped portion of industrial waterfront along the Delaware River—where two municipal piers and a ferry terminal once stood. The name Penn's Landing is a modern-day misnomer (William Penn actually landed at Upland, now called Chester). After plans for a much-heralded family entertainment center fell through, public discussion has begun on how to better connect the waterfront to Center City (Interstate 95 is a barrier) and how to generate the most appropriate new uses.

## Directions

### TO SOCIETY HILL

4th and Spruce Streets

### FROM TOUR STOP 1

Reading Terminal

12th and Market Streets

**By Car:** (about 20 minutes by foot): Market Street to 4th Street. Right onto 4th Street to Spruce Street. Nearest parking facility: 2nd and Lombard Streets. On-street, metered parking also available.

**By Mass Transit:** SEPTA bus #38 eastbound. Board on Market Street between 11th and 12th Streets, opposite the Reading Terminal. Get off at 4th and Market Streets. Transfer to SEPTA bus #57. Get off at 4th and Spruce Streets.

Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

[www.septa.org](http://www.septa.org)

Information line: 215/580-7800