

PHILADELPHIA NEIGHBORHOOD RECOVERY TOUR

TOUR STOP #3: WASHINGTON SQUARE WEST

Central Location:

11th and Spruce Streets

Boundaries:

Roughly, 7th Street to Broad Street; Walnut Street to South Street

Introduction

A Center City neighborhood founded in the 17th century; revitalized through limited urban renewal in the 1970s.

Neighborhood Background

The name Washington Square "West" was probably coined in 1959 by a group (started in 1935 as the South Central Civic Association), because part of its eastern boundary touches the western edge of Washington Square. That park is one of the five original public squares (eight acres each) laid out by William Penn's surveyor in the late 17th century. Known then as "the southeast square," it was at first a pasture and later served as a burial ground for many American and British soldiers of the Revolution, along with victims of the yellow fever epidemics that raged during the 1790s. In 1833, the year following the centennial of George Washington's birthday, the square was officially named to honor the country's first president, who—most likely—once walked these grounds.

Covering approximately 35 blocks—from 7th Street to Broad Street and Walnut Street to South Street—Washington Square West developed in the early 19th century, as the city expanded west from the Delaware River. Although this downtown neighborhood has a strong residential core with many historic houses, institutions such as Pennsylvania Hospital (the nation's first hospital), Thomas Jefferson University, and Wills Eye Hospital are also located here. Some small-scale industrial properties developed during the period in which this part of the city was originally settled. However, most of these properties were eventually converted to residential use (for example, the Macar Building on 11th Street below Locust Street, now an apartment building) or demolished (for example, the former site of the Clinton Envelope factory at the northwest corner of 10th and Lombard streets, now the site of a townhouse development).

During the early decades of the 20th century, many of the area's large single-family houses were converted into apartments and rooming units, and several mid-rise hotels were constructed on small sites. By mid-century, Locust Street, a "transition" area where downtown retail uses to the north converged with the predominantly residential community to the south, had gained a reputation as a seedy entertainment zone. Bars and night spots such as the ominously-named Bucket of Blood (once located near the intersection of 13th and Locust streets) attracted pleasure-

seekers, including many sailors from the Philadelphia port and the naval base. The proliferation of poorly-maintained rooming units, which housed a large transient population, undermined the stability of once-elegant blocks on Spruce Street and elsewhere in Washington Square West.

Despite these problems, many well cared for, appealing residential blocks remained stable, and some were upgraded through private investment in the years following World War II. Renowned architect Louis I. Kahn lived on historic Clinton Street (a nearby park at 11th and Pine streets bears his name). Philadelphia Orchestra conductor Eugene Ormandy lived on Addison Walkway—a very narrow, brick-paved street, a portion of which has been removed from the city grid and reserved for pedestrians only. The houses on Addison are essentially new construction in traditional styles.

Most vacant and badly deteriorated property in the area was developed or upgraded as the result of government redevelopment programs and private investment during the 1970s and 1980s. Although the neighborhood possesses fewer amenities and a less elegant overall appearance than Society Hill, Washington Square West's downtown location, attractive residential blocks, and diverse mix of housing types make it one of the region's most interesting communities.

Development of the Venture

The urban renewal plan drafted for Washington Square West during the 1960s proposed a comprehensive property-by-property improvement comparable to that which had begun in Society Hill in the previous decade. However, by the time the plan was ready for implementation in the early 1970s, federal funding for neighborhood reinvestment had declined significantly, and a more limited improvement approach had to be pursued.

Four buildings at the intersection of 11th and Spruce Streets illustrate the results of this approach. Two of the four corner properties were restored for new uses as a result of action by the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia (RDA), based on the area's urban renewal plan; the other two corner properties at this intersection, like many others in the area, were not targeted for Redevelopment Authority action.

In 1963, the RDA acquired 1035-37 Spruce Street (northeast corner of the intersection)—home from 1879-1881 to Republican state senator and political boss Matthew S. Quay. A real-estate company had been on the verge of demolishing this four-story brownstone mansion with its ornate ballroom. (The earliest portion was built in the Italianate style prior to 1840 for druggist Edward Roberts.) The authority planned to convey it to nearby Thomas Jefferson University. The medical school's initial proposal was for use as a student residence and activity center, but that concept devolved into destruction for a parking lot. The RDA instead approved a proposal submitted by the privately owned Performing Arts School. The school restored the Quay House in keeping with standards for historical properties (established by the City as part of the urban renewal plan) and moved into the building. Not long after, a serious fire caused extensive damage, forcing the school to move out and relinquish ownership. In the 1980s, a private Philadelphia developer, Historic Landmarks for Living, acquired the Quay House and converted it to 20 flats and bi-level apartments. The building is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Diagonally opposite, on the southwest corner of 11th and Spruce Streets (1100-1102 Spruce), stands a mid-19th-century building that was once the Hotel Colonial, advertised as "Conveniently

located for all visitors to Philadelphia...Every room with bath or running water." A corner turret (now gone) and the ornate 11th-Street entrance (shifted from Spruce Street) were added about 1900, when the hotel was converted to apartments. By the 1960s, the Colonial, damaged by fire and neglect, had been downgraded to rooming-house status. During the 1970s, in keeping with "deinstitutionalization" policies of the time, the property became a single-room-occupancy residence for chronically ill people released from mental hospitals. The RDA acquired the Colonial, and maintained the property during the 1970s, eventually relocating all the residents. The vacant building was advertised for development proposals in 1983 and converted into 24 apartments. The private developer upgraded the exterior of the structure, using standards set by the Philadelphia Historical Commission, which had recently implemented policies more stringent than those of preceding decades (see Tour Stop 2, Society Hill).

Although detailed rehabilitation specifications were drawn up for buildings on the other two corners (northwest and southeast) of the 11th-and-Spruce intersection (as well as for many other Washington Square West properties), reductions in federal funding made it impossible for the RDA to acquire buildings such as these, or to compel the owners to rehabilitate them based on government-mandated specifications. Because of these circumstances, Washington Square West today does not have the uniform, finished look of adjacent Society Hill, where every address in the neighborhood was redeveloped or upgraded as part of the area plan. On the other hand, Washington Square West has a more varied, diverse character than Society Hill, which has a more limited range of property uses and architectural styles. For example, a Society Hill type of renewal plan would have called for removing the ground-floor commercial establishments from the northwest and southeast corners of 11th and Spruce streets. These restaurants are regarded by many community members today as neighborhood assets, not as problems which should have been removed through public intervention.

Another example is the treatment of the streetscape. When the RDA conveyed properties in Washington Square West to developers, it required them to install brick sidewalks—a demand that was not made of purchasers of individual homes. Unlike Society Hill (see Tour Stop 2), federal funding was not available to pave entire blocks in brick; thus the sidewalks in Washington Square West are mostly stretches of concrete paving, interspersed with stretches of brick.

William J. Way, manager of the RDA in the 1970s, played the central role in organizing and coordinating the development of Washington Square West. (The William J. Way Community Center at 1315 Spruce Street is named in his memory.) He used innovative strategies for collaboration between the government and the community and took a creative approach to implementing neighborhood reinvestment plans in an environment of limited resources. In subsequent decades, his outlook and methods had a strong, reverberating influence on John Kromer, Director of Housing for the Philadelphia Office of Housing and Community Development, as well as other practitioners of neighborhood reinvestment policies.

- In the book *Neighborhood Recovery*, John Kromer contrasts the development of Washington Square West with the earlier implementation of urban renewal plans for the adjacent Society Hill area. (Chapter 1, "A Strategic Problem.")
www.neighborhoodrecovery.com

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A Personal Perspective

Comments by Jeffrey A. Cohen, Ph.D.

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Excerpted from the introduction to "The Changing Heart of the City: Building and Rebuilding Western 'Wash West,'" a 2000 exhibition mounted by the Library Company of Philadelphia. www.brynmawr.edu/iconog

Washington Square West is a neighborhood remarkable for its scale, its diversity, and its surviving historic fabric.

At various times the area has accommodated, often simultaneously, major portions of the city's elite residential quarters, its African American population, its high-end retail corridor, its most visible centers of night life (high and low), bookish Philadelphia and clubbish Philadelphia, its gay and lesbian community, and a host of small households at the heart of the city. This diverse character has been shaped since the area's initial development in the 1820s and 30s by the carving of minor streets and alleys within William Penn's grid, which brought different classes and uses together within his outsized blocks. The district still bears marks of the westward migrations of the fashionable elite and of high-end commerce along its northern half, and of the redefinition of its northern and western edges with tall office and commercial buildings whose deeper invasion was forestalled by the Depression. Its history has made the neighborhood a rich array of different moments and uses that can shift every dozen footsteps, a rare survival at the heart of a great city.

Recent and pending reinvestment in this western part of "Washington Square West"—by the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, by residential and commercial development interests, and in civic and institutional initiatives on all four edges—

seems to signal a new, potentially transforming chapter in this neighborhood's history after decades of relative stasis.

Nearby Points of Interest

PENNSYLVANIA HOSPITAL

215/829-3971

8th and Pine Streets

With various sections constructed between 1755 and 1805, the historic portion of Pennsylvania Hospital (now part of a modern medical center) was the first hospital in the colonies. The proportions and materials are similar to those of domestic, rather than institutional, architecture. In the domed, skylit amphitheater at the top of the center building, doctors performed the first modern surgical procedure in the United States. An 18th-century herb garden is on the Pine Street grounds. For a 30-minute, self-guided tour, stop by the marketing office (weekdays only) on the second floor of the Pine Building. Enter from Spruce Street.

WALNUT STREET THEATER

www.wstonline.org

215/574-3550, box office

829-833 Walnut Street (at 9th Street)

By 1820—overcoming 18th-century Quaker opposition—Philadelphia was the theatrical center of the country. The Walnut Street Theater, designed in part by John Haviland, was built in 1809, with renovations in 1816 and 1828. The oldest English-speaking theater in continuous use in the United States, its stage has been graced by Sarah Bernhardt, the Barrymores, Lunt and Fontanne, the Marx Brothers, and Katherine Hepburn.

ATWATER KENT MUSEUM

www.philadelphiahistory.org

215/922-3031

15 South 7th Street (between Market and Chestnut Streets)

The Atwater Kent Museum occupies an 1825 Greek Revival-style building, designed by John Haviland and once home of the Franklin Institute for the Promotion of Mechanical Arts. In 1933, the Franklin Institute (by then an expanding science museum) moved to its present location on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, and the century-old structure was nearly demolished. Five years later, local inventor and radio manufacturer Mr. A. Atwater Kent bought the building and established a museum where objects of everyday life communicate more than 300 years of Philadelphia history. Open every day except Tuesday, 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

THE ATHENAEUM

www.philaathenaeum.org

215/925-2688

219 South 5th Street (between Washington Square South and Walnut Street)

In 1814, a group of young men formed a social and literary club and named it after Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and learning. Twenty-nine years later, the club built a subscription

library opposite Washington Square, on the site of the old Walnut Street Prison. Designed by John Notman, it was the first Italian Renaissance Revival-style building in America. The building was meant to be covered in marble, but an innovative building material—brownstone—was used to save money. Today, this member-supported research library contains significant materials on the French in America; early-American travel, exploration, and transportation; and, especially, architecture and design. The building also serves as headquarters for the Victorian Society in America. First-floor exhibits are open to the public, weekdays 9 a.m.–5 p.m. Tours, by appointment only.

Directions

TO WASHINGTON SQUARE WEST

11th and Spruce Streets

FROM TOUR STOP 1

Reading Terminal

By Car: (about 15 minutes by foot): Market Street to 10th Street. Right onto 10th Street (by foot, Right onto 11th Street) to Spruce Street. Right onto Spruce Street to 11th Street. Nearest parking facility: 11th and Locust Streets. On-street, metered parking also available.

By Mass Transit: SEPTA bus #23 southbound. Board at 12th and Market Streets, northwest corner (across from the Hard Rock Café). Get off at 12th and Spruce Streets. Turn left. Walk one block east to 11th Street.

Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

www.septa.org

Information line: 215/580-7800

FROM TOUR STOP 2

Society Hill

4th and Spruce Streets

By Car or By Foot: Spruce Street, proceed west to 11th and Spruce Streets.