

PHILADELPHIA NEIGHBORHOOD RECOVERY TOUR

TOUR STOP #4: YORKTOWN

CENTRAL LOCATION: 12th and Jefferson Streets

BOUNDARIES: Girard Avenue to Cecil B. Moore Avenue (formerly Columbia Avenue) and 10th Street to 13th Street

Introduction

Construction of a residential community of more than 600 homes during the 1960s, as the result of planning and organizing by a coalition of African-American churches and civic groups.

Neighborhood Background

Created during the 1960s era of urban renewal, Yorktown is located 10 blocks north of City Hall, below the southern edge of Temple University's main campus. The developer chose the Battle of Yorktown as his geographic "image," and gave the streets Revolutionary-era names—whether Philadelphia related or not—such as Saratoga Place, Betsy Ross Place, King's Place, Patrick Henry Place, and Valley Forge Place.

Not an organized community before the 1960s, the nine-block area was an anonymous part of North Philadelphia. First developed during Philadelphia's industrial-expansion period, the predominant 19th- and 20th-century land use was row housing for workers in factories along Broad Street or beside the nearby Reading Company railroad tracks. Smaller industries included the Philadelphia Home Made Bread Company, which once occupied a portion of the east side of 12th Street, south of Jefferson Street.

During the 20th century much of the area's housing stock deteriorated, and many structures were subdivided into overcrowded apartments with inadequate plumbing and substandard electrical service. In 1950, a City-commissioned study identified this neighborhood as one of the most distressed sections of North Philadelphia, making it a prime candidate for urban renewal.

Unlike many other urban neighborhoods that experienced economic disinvestment during the late 20th century, this area's proximity to Temple University and to Center City provided excellent access to education, jobs, shopping, and entertainment. The geographic value was recognized in a 1963 marketing study by the Jackson-Cross Company, which described the area as "one of the most accessible sites in the city of Philadelphia."

Development of the Venture

Yorktown was one of several Philadelphia areas considered for large-scale redevelopment during the years after World War II. In 1950, the City adopted an urban renewal plan which called for demolishing all structures and rebuilding new housing. Eight years later, nine city blocks had been acquired and cleared by the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia and sold to Norman Denny, a developer with a successful record in production of for-sale housing at many sites in Northeast Philadelphia and the suburbs.

Many African-American religious and civic leaders played key roles in the planning, development, marketing, and organization of the Yorktown community. One of these leaders, the Reverend Dr. William H. Gray, Jr., pastor of Bright Hope Baptist Church, was quoted in the January 3, 1963, *Evening Bulletin*: "This is the first time and place in the United States that Negroes have been named as developers for urban renewal. We think we can make a significant contribution to the city here."

The Yorktown venture was designed as one element of a larger community plan that included "affordable" rental housing, the Progress Plaza shopping center at Broad and Oxford Streets, and the Bright Hope Baptist Church and Youth Center at 12th Street and Columbia Avenue (now Cecil B. Moore Avenue). In Yorktown, the developer constructed two- and three-story attached single-family houses on 1,600-square-foot lots. Housing density was reduced to about half the level which had previously existed. The new houses had three or four bedrooms, with garages and car pads as standard features. Edmund Bacon, then executive director of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission, designed a new street layout with a contiguous series of cul-de-sacs, limiting through traffic and creating a quiet residential environment without separating Yorktown from the rest of the cityscape. Today, Yorktown remains an attractive, appealing neighborhood, with a substantial number of middle-class families and retired people, many of whom are the original buyers.

- In the book *Neighborhood Recovery*, John Kromer compares Yorktown's development with that of with present-day neighborhood reinvestment (Chapter 1, "A Strategic Problem"). www.neighborhoodrecovery.com
- For information about Yorktown, contact:

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- For a copy of the 1996 publication Learning from Yorktown, contact:

Public Information Department
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A Personal Perspective

Comments by Priscilla Woods

Executive Director
Yorktown Community Development Corporation

Yorktown comprises 635 privately owned homes. Started in the late 1950s, Yorktown has been a strong presence in North Philadelphia, especially as the rest of the area declined through the years. Today, as progress is being made in North Philadelphia, Yorktown continues to lend itself to neighborhood stabilization, and to promoting the long-term attractiveness of the area.

When a lot of displacement occurred all around us, Yorktown's special design gave us immunity from these problems. The result was a strong neighborhood. In this community, residents interacted with each other and formed bonds. In 1963, this commitment led to the formation of the Yorktown Community Organization. Nearly 30 years later, the covenant to maintain a beautiful and vibrant neighborhood has been true to its promise. When Yorktown formed, some called it urban homesteading. Whatever the term, it has been a success. Blue collar workers have invested in the area and have stayed here for most of their lives.

Although we take great pride in Yorktown, our work is far from done. In 1997, we completed Yorktown Arms, which is a retirement community for older residents. The land was originally blighted. After failed attempts (by several outside developers and by the redevelopments authority) to build conventional housing, the community came together and decided on a project that would serve the whole neighborhood. Many of the residents were getting older, and they wanted a place to go if their health started to fail. Although conceived to serve Yorktown residents, Yorktown Arms now also serves people who once lived in other sections of the city.

Besides this type of project, the Yorktown Community Development Corporation is engaged in other methods of strengthening the area, including setting up home-maintenance and job-training programs. We will continue to search for the right services to provide for the people of our community. Yorktown is doing very well, considering that we have an aging population. But

Yorktown is going to be here. With our present work, we are ensuring that the area will remain strong for the next 30 to 40 years.

Nearby Points of Interest

LIACOURAS CENTER

www.liacourascenter.com

215/204-2400

1776 North Broad Street at Montgomery Street

Opened in 1997 as The Apollo of Temple, this sports and entertainment facility was renamed in 2000 to honor the outgoing president of Temple University, Peter J. Liacouras. Designed by the Vitteta Group of Philadelphia and Thompson Ventulett Stainback & Associates of Atlanta, it is the largest indoor, public assembly venue ever built north of City Hall. It was the first step a multi-pronged redevelopment that includes the Draught Horse Restaurant (at the Liacouras Center), an inn and retail development (along the 1900-block of Liacouras Walk), and a 1,000-bed dormitory (at 13th Street and Cecil B. Moore Avenue) for what has been largely a commuter college.

BAPTIST TEMPLE

www.geocities.com/CollegePark/Field/5657/baptist.html

North Broad Street at Berks Street

In 1888, Russell H. Conwell, established a night school for students of limited means in the basement of Grace Baptist Church. That school would later grow into the renowned city-based Temple University. Conwell was one of the greatest orators of his time; his enormous following necessitated construction of a new facility, the Baptist Temple completed in 1891. Designed in a Romanesque Revival style by Thomas P. Lonsdale, the interior includes a 4,200-seat auditorium. In the late-20th century, the Baptist Temple was threatened by Temple University's expansion plans, but the school has agreed to maintain the vacant building and consider a future use. Closed.

CHARLES L. BLOCKSON AFRO-AMERICAN COLLECTION

www.library.temple.edu/blockson

215/204-6632

Sullivan Hall, First Floor

Broad Street and Montgomery Avenue

The Blockson Collection contains over 40,000 items, including books, letters, slave narratives, photographs, sheet music, and original recordings. Mr. Blockson is a noted historian and author of *Philadelphia's Guide: African-American State Historical Markers*. Open Monday–Friday, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.

Directions

TO YORKTOWN

12th and Jefferson Streets

FROM TOUR STOP 1

Reading Terminal
12th and Market Streets

By Car: West on Market Street (toward City Hall). Right onto 13th Street. Left onto Arch Street. Right onto Broad Street (Route 611). Right onto Jefferson Street (which is three blocks beyond Girard Avenue) to 12th Street.

By Mass Transit: Walk one block east (away from City Hall) to 11th and Market Streets. Board SEPTA bus #23 northbound. Get off at 11th and Jefferson Streets. Cross 11th Street and walk one block west along Jefferson Street to 12th and Jefferson Streets.

Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

www.septa.org

Information line: 215/580-7800

FROM TOUR STOP 3

Washington Square West
4th and Spruce Streets

By Car: Spruce Street to 13th Street. Right onto 13th Street. Left onto Arch Street. Right onto Broad Street (Route 611). Right onto Jefferson Street (which is three blocks beyond Girard Avenue) to 12th Street