

PHILADELPHIA NEIGHBORHOOD RECOVERY TOUR

TOUR STOP #5: WEST POPLAR

CENTRAL LOCATION: 13th and Poplar Streets

BOUNDARIES: Brown Street to Harper Street and Watts Street to 12th Street

Introduction

Recent construction, developed to encourage new homeownership in a former rowhouse neighborhood, using amenities found in Philadelphia's lower-density "streetcar communities," such as, larger lots, more-generous yards, and the addition of porches.

Neighborhood Background

"From roughly 1880 through the 1920s, Philadelphia's industrial districts supported an array of mills and plants whose diversity has scarcely been matched anywhere in the history of manufacturing" (*Workshop of the World* published by the Society for Industrial Archeology). The city hosted both small firms and huge enterprises. Many of them were in North Philadelphia--a vast area of the city that included, for example, the Baldwin Locomotive Works. Baldwin occupied 20 acres in the vicinity of Broad and Spring Garden Streets, south of today's West Poplar neighborhood. In its heyday before World War I, Baldwin employed as many as 20,000 people and made as many as 3,000 steam engines a year. (In 1928, the company moved its operations entirely to Eddystone, outside the city; nine years later, Baldwin's old red-brick structures in North Philadelphia were demolished.)

Mingled with the manufacturing facilities were acres of two- and three-story row homes owned by factory workers. As Philadelphia's industrial base gradually weakened, deterioration and abandonment of housing began to emerge as serious problems, and demolition of structurally dangerous buildings continued unabated. The City's redevelopment plans of the 1970s included an area newly named West Poplar, positioned about a mile north of City Hall and west of the Reading Company railroad alignment (see Tour Stop 1).

By the early 1990s, through attrition and incremental demolition, West Poplar comprised mostly empty land and vacant residential, commercial, and industrial buildings. The Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia began assembling parcels for development, including the relocation (to nearby places) of remaining residents and businesses.

Development of the Venture

In 1978, the Friends Rehabilitation Program (a citywide organization of the Society of Friends, better known as Quakers) completed 100 units of subsidized rental housing for senior citizens in the southeast quadrant of West Poplar. In the early 1980s, Interstate Property Management (a private company) built 140 apartments in a townhouse configuration. About the same time, local community organizations began planning for the redevelopment of West Poplar's substantial vacant acreage and established a working relationship with the Enterprise Foundation, a national organization that supports the planning and implementation of community-development ventures across the United States. By the late 1980s, community leaders and Enterprise Foundation representatives had jointly organized the Poplar Enterprise Development Corporation to take responsibility for developing housing that would be built on some of West Poplar's vacant parcels.

The resultant housing was the first implementation of a municipal policy established in Philadelphia during the early 1990s. Called "Home in North Philadelphia," the policy was published by John Kromer during his first term as director of housing for the Office of Housing and Community Development. The new approach included lower-density development on cleared land, rather than replication of the traditional high-density rowhouse plan. (The City was, in effect, falling in line with federal policy that recommended reduced density of land use and increased diversity in housing type.) Homeownership subsidies were directed toward reducing each buyer's initial cash outlay and monthly payment.

Philadelphia's population had declined dramatically during the preceding half-century, and neighborhood-based factories and their supporting businesses—formerly the key employers of community residents—had disappeared. High-density housing development was no longer essential in areas such as North Philadelphia. Instead, neighborhoods with substantial vacant land could be rebuilt as lower-density housing with larger lots, bigger homes, generous side and rear yards, and off-street parking.

In the 1980s, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provided Philadelphia with part of the funding that was later used for a development on 12 square blocks in West Poplar—from Brown Street to Harper Street and Watts Street to 12th Street. This "Nehemiah" funding program unofficially lent its name to the development, still commonly referred to as the "Nehemiah homes."

Community residents reviewed a variety of housing types from other neighborhoods in the region. They favored a new design similar to an old one found in Mt. Airy—a Northwest Philadelphia neighborhood built up during the late-19th-century "streetcar era": a semi-detached (twin) house with a porch, a small back yard, and a side yard that had room for a driveway.

Based on community input, the West Poplar development plan included the following elements:

- Reduced density, 13 units per acre (in contrast to the previous 45 units per acre)
- Lot sizes averaging 1,200 to 1,800 square feet (in contrast to the previous 800 to 1,200 square feet)

- Houses averaging 1,260 to 1,320 square feet (in contrast to traditional two-story row houses that customarily average 950 to 1,150 square feet)
- Attractive exterior design, with distinctive elevations and front entrances
- More secure and attractive streetscapes, accomplished by closing alley-like streets and creating two cul-de-sacs (which open onto 13th Street)

A total of 176 twin units were built in three phases between 1994 and 2001. These new homes were so popular that the second and third phases, at increased prices, sold out before the start of construction. Resale value now matches that of market-rate housing in other stabilized neighborhoods. Lower density has become the typical approach for cleared-site construction; higher-density row housing is built only for infill projects, to maintain the architectural integrity of an existing block.

- In the book *Neighborhood Recovery*, John Kromer describes how the development of West Poplar was positioned in Philadelphia's overall homeownership policy. (Chapter 4, "The New Homeownership.")
www.neighborhoodrecovery.com
- West Poplar is discussed in *21st-Century Neighborhoods: Assets & Advantages of the Older American City*, a 38-page illustrated booklet available from the Community Design Collaborative (\$8).

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A Personal Perspective

Comments by Rojer Kern

Former Executive Director

West Poplar Community Development Corporation

West Poplar is in one of the oldest residential sections of Philadelphia. Formerly this area relied exclusively on manufacturing for jobs and economic activity. However, as time went on, industry went away and homeowners quickly followed. We were left with a desert of vacant land, where buildings once stood, and public-housing projects, such as the Richard Allen Homes, which failed in terms of providing safe, affordable housing. (In 2000, the Philadelphia Housing Authority demolished most of the Richard Allen Homes-low-rise apartment buildings from 1953-which will be replaced by a new community of less densely developed twin homes and social-service facilities.)

Today, I see hope everywhere I look. In 1995, we identified one of the largest needs for the community: affordable housing. We applied for a Nehemiah grant (competitively awarded, special funding from the federal government), and soon we were building the Nehemiah townhouses. There are now 187 completed homes. All of them are twin houses with three bedrooms, purchased by first-time home buyers. Many of these buyers were returning to the neighborhood after moving away. Everyone who buys a house must agree to pay \$100 per year dues to our homeowners' association. A covenant protects the uniformity, appearance, and cleanliness of the neighborhood and restricts the type of activities that can occur. The residents feel extremely satisfied, especially because they have seen the market value of their homes rise in the last few years.

Our next project is the Alfonso Deal Housing Development. (The late Mr. Deal was a retired police officer and the state representative from this neighborhood.) We plan to start construction of 129 townhouses similar to those of the Nehemiah project. In addition, the Philadelphia Housing Authority has demolished two high-rise apartment structures from the 1960s that will be replaced with townhouse-like developments. Considered together, these projects are key to the growing success of this neighborhood.

Other wonderful things are happening. The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority is modernizing and reactivating the streetcar line on Girard Avenue, our principal commercial corridor, which itself is showing positive signs of development. One of the city's prestigious "magnet" schools (the Franklin Learning Center) has decided to relocate to this neighborhood. Goldman Properties, nationally known for neighborhood revival, has bought properties along Broad Street for redevelopment. On all sides, public and private money is flowing into this neighborhood, and there is an overall optimistic feeling about our future. Thinking ahead five or ten years, I can imagine the successes that will surround us on all sides. In the end, they can be attributed to the initial community-driven plan to revitalize and save the West Poplar neighborhood.

Nearby Points of Interest

FOUNDERS HALL AT GIRARD COLLEGE

www.girardcollege.com

215/787-2600

2101 South College Avenue (Girard and Corinthian Avenues)

America's first multimillionaire, Stephen Girard, provided in his will for a school (not a college in today's terms) for white, fatherless boys. The extremely expensive, initial building, Founder's Hall (completed in 1847), was designed in Greek Revival style by Thomas Ustick Walter. The layout was never effective, and Founder's Hall—although it remains part of the campus—ceased functioning as classroom space. In 1968, the school was integrated by race (and later by gender), following years of Civil Rights litigation. It is a full-scholarship boarding school for students from families of limited financial resources.

FREEDOM THEATER

215/978-8497, box office

1346 North Broad Street (at Master Street)

Since 1968, the region's oldest and most active African American theater has been located in this expanded 1852 mansion, built by a wealthy brewer. Theater founder John Allen gained fame for his involvement in community activities; besides a full season of annual performances, Freedom Theater provides instruction through the Performing Arts Training Program. The original part of the house was (coincidentally) once occupied by famous 19th-century actor Edwin Forrest. For much of its history, this location was home to the Moore College of Art and Design (originally the Philadelphia School of Design for Women), now on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. For a tour of the theater, call 215/765-2793, ext. 2264.

RODEPH SHALOM SYNAGOGUE

615 North Broad Street (at Green Street)

215/627-6747

Rodeph Shalom—the oldest Ashkenazic congregation in continuous existence in the United States—was founded in 1802 by a group of German Jews. Built on the site of its 1866 predecessor, this 1927 synagogue was designed in Byzantine style by Simon and Simon. Both the exterior and interior walls are covered with painted and carved geometric designs, executed by the D'Ascenzo Studios, which was also responsible for the stained glass of the main sanctuary and the mosaic tile floor of the vestibule. Call ahead for a tour.

EASTERN STATE PENITENTIARY

www.easternstate.org

215/236-3300

Fairmount Avenue between 21st and 22nd Streets

Completed in 1836, this National Historic Landmark was designed in Greek Revival style by John Haviland. Its interior was based on Sir Samuel Bentham's 1787 plan used for jails and insane asylums in England—seven long cell blocks radiating from a surveillance rotunda. Each prisoner

was put in solitary confinement and given a chance to study the Bible and reflect on his life of crime. The last inmate left Eastern State Penitentiary in 1972. A decade later, preservationists rallied to save the structure. Tours, exhibits, and special events vary by season. Call ahead or check the penitentiary's Website.

**MURAL ARTS PROGRAM
PHILADELPHIA DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION**

www.muralarts.org

www.gophila.com/murals

215/685-0750

Established in 1984 (initially as an anti-graffiti initiative), the Mural Arts Program has created more than 2,000 painted walls. This extraordinary, nationally recognized program emphasizes collaboration between the artist and the community—resulting in bold, colorful compositions that have altered the architectural landscape of the city and fostered civic pride. In the words of director Jane Golden, the murals "serve to provoke thought, to inspire dreams, to bear witness, and to remind people that they are part of a larger world." In 1996, the program became part of the Philadelphia Department of Recreation. Mural locations near Tour Stop 6 include:

Ridge Avenue at Green Street

JULIUS ERVING (DR. J)

Artist: Kent Twitchell. 1990.

Notes: This "portrait" mural honors Julius Erving (Dr. J), one of Philadelphia's preeminent sports figures. Artist Kent Twitchell pioneered the photo transfer method (which uses silk or polyester parachute fabric as an interface material) to create this mural. The more conventional method is the grid system, in which proportioned, enlarged squares help the artist transfer the mural design from paper to wall.

Sponsor: Pennsylvania Council on the Arts

11th and Wallace Streets

AUTUMN CASCADE (1108 Wallace Street)

FOREST BROOK (1110 Wallace Street)

Artist: Ken Millington. 2001.

Sponsor: City of Philadelphia

Directions

TO WEST POPLAR

13th and Poplar 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 Poplar Street (which is about four blocks beyond Fairmount Avenue) to 13th 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 Poplar Streets. Cross 11th Street and walk one block West along Poplar Street to 13th and Poplar Streets.

Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

www.septa.org

Information line: 215/580-7800

FROM TOUR STOP 4

Yorktown
12th and Jefferson Streets

By Car: Turn Right onto 12th Street. Turn Right onto Parrish Street. Turn Right onto 13th Street to Poplar Street.