

PHILADELPHIA NEIGHBORHOOD RECOVERY TOUR

TOUR STOP #6: JOHNNIE TILLMON TOWNHOUSES

CENTRAL LOCATION: Germantown Avenue and Master Street

Introduction

Twenty-three new rental units, built at the edge of a former industrial zone, and developed by a nonprofit advocacy group for families headed by low-income women.

Neighborhood Background

Johnnie Tillmon Townhouses are located in a quiet, well-preserved rowhouse community—sometimes called Old Kensington—of eastern North Philadelphia. Swiping through Kensington is American Street, a wide industrial corridor that once included a very busy railroad right-of-way along with the bustle of wagons and trucks. American Street intersects with Germantown Avenue, a diagonal artery that extends across the city to the northwestern neighborhoods and into the suburbs. During the 19th century, the American Street-Germantown Avenue area was one of the region's busiest job centers.

A major employer was the John B. Stetson Hat Manufactory, a company started in 1865, eventually becoming the largest hat maker in the world. Twenty-five buildings occupied nine acres in the vicinity of Germantown and Montgomery Avenues. In the 1920s, the plant employed more than 5,000 men and women and produced more than three million hats a year. Paternalistic John Stetson established employee institutions that included a school, a hospital, and a building-and-loan society that encouraged homeownership. The Great Depression of the 1930s and changing fashions ultimately crippled the company, and the plant closed in 1960. Today, the site is vacant land.

As Philadelphia's manufacturing sector declined during the late 20th century, many other companies in the vicinity of American Street and Germantown Avenue went out of business, leaving behind deteriorated, multistory, masonry structures that could not be readily adapted to modern industrial needs. In the 1970s, the City of Philadelphia began demolishing buildings and assembling parcels of land. The area became an attractive location for firms that valued the central location and reasonably good access to both city and suburban destinations. For example, two major food distribution companies, Honor Foods and Asia Foods, developed large facilities on cleared sites.

Urban renewal funding helped finance repairs to many Kensington homes and supported the development and operation of community facilities such as playgrounds and senior centers. Under the Local Public Agency rehabilitation programs of the 1970s, vacant houses were acquired and

renovated by the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia and then sold to individual owners. These improvements helped limit late-20th-century abandonment of housing, which occurred in many nearby parts of Philadelphia. As a result, the area contains a number of stable, well-maintained residential blocks that have remained intact while the industrial zone has changed dramatically.

Development of the Venture

The Johnnie Tillmon Townhouses venture comprises apartments (some wheelchair accessible) and two-, three-, and four-bedroom rental units—all in a townhouse configuration with on-site community facilities. The parcel of land on which it was built had been cleared by the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia (RDA) in the 1960s. Because fully funded, federal housing programs were subsequently phased out (with a policy shift to block grants awarded to city governments), the RDA never developed the land. It remained unoccupied for about three decades, until the Women's Community Revitalization Project (WCRP) identified the site as the prospective location for a venture in rental housing.

Founded in 1987, WCRP is a multiracial, community-based development organization that supports the social and economic empowerment of low-income women and their families. It provides affordable housing linked to education, training, and support services (such as child care) with economic self-sufficiency as a goal. During the 1990s, WCRP was one of several nonprofit developers that helped a substantial number of their tenants complete a transition from welfare dependency into full- and part-time, unsubsidized jobs.

WCRP has developed 123 units of affordable rental housing at sites in several eastern North Philadelphia neighborhoods, with each venture named after a righteous woman. For example, Johnnie Tillmon (a Californian) was the founder of a national welfare-rights organization. In another example, the late Lillia E. ("Mom") Crippen was beloved in her Philadelphia neighborhood as a one-woman social services agency, organizing educational and charitable programs for more than 55 years. Two locations named for Crippen, one at 6th and Berks Streets and one at 6th Street and Montgomery Avenue, provide housing for very low-income families with special needs. In addition to developing rental units, WCRP has rehabilitated and sold off scattered properties that have provided eight families with homeownership opportunities.

Members of WCRP's housing committee—tenants, former tenants, community members, technical specialists, urban planners, and architects—generate concepts for an ideal home for the neighborhood. Then the designers do their best to approach that ideal, for example making sure the kitchen window always faces an individual yard or general courtyard. Colors and types of materials are chosen with community input. WCRP places a portion of its "developer's fee" into an "internal subsidy" fund; the interest or dividend income helps reduce rents for those families who are in greatest need of financial assistance.

- In the book *Neighborhood Recovery*, John Kromer discusses the accomplishments that community development corporations have made in creating rental housing for low-income families. (Chapter 1, "A Strategic Problem.")
www.neighborhoodrecovery.com

- For information about WCRP, contact:

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A Personal Perspective

Comments by Sharonel Monroe

Tenant and Board Member
Women's Community Revitalization Project

It is an overwhelming feeling to be able to call someplace your home. When I think of a home, I think of a place where joy is abundant and laughter is contagious. The neighborhood I came from was not a home. No matter how hard we tried to create that loving atmosphere inside, it was always interrupted by the sound of gunshots, breaking glass, or the thumps of bodies being beaten, over and over again. We became prisoners of our own house.

I did not feel like I wanted to get a job, because I was worried that my children would not be safe. We got our new home through the Women's Community Revitalization Project (WCRP) in 1999. In 2000, I started working. WCRP did not give me a job; the job was always there. But being in this housing has given me the confidence and assurance that my children are safe, so I could go back to work. Your home is where you grow, and if you feel afraid, you cannot do that. Once you feel safe, you want to expand your horizons.

WCRP has gone from being just a name to me. I became a member of the advocacy committee, and then a member of the board. We wanted to start an after-school program on one of the sites. At a tenant meeting, everyone had the same kind of need for their kids. Two other parents and I thought we would start it. We planned it and then children started signing up. The whole thing started with just three women.

WCRP is not involved simply in housing; it takes more to better a person than being able to live in a house. WCRP has resources to help a person be stronger and self-reliant—like a caring family that has your needs and your desires in mind. The environment is warm, and it makes me feel good now to invite someone into my home.

Nearby Points of Interest

ST. PETER THE APOSTLE CHURCH NATIONAL SHRINE OF ST. JOHN NEUMANN

www.stjohnneumann.org

215/627-3080

1019 North 5th Street (at Girard Avenue)

John Nepomucene Neumann was born in Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic). In 1836, he emigrated to the United States. Six years later, Pope Pius IX consecrated him the fourth Bishop of Philadelphia, then the largest Catholic diocese in the United States. Bishop Neumann is laid to rest in St. Peter the Apostle Church, site of his last public mass, held in 1859. The earliest part of the church (1843) was designed by Napoleon LeBrun. The 1901 expansion, an eclectic blend of Romanesque and Gothic Revival styles, was designed by Edwin Forrest Durang, architect for many of the Catholic churches in Philadelphia (and godson of actor Edwin Forrest). Shrine open Monday-Saturday, 7:30 a.m.-6 p.m.; Sunday, 7:30 a.m.-5 p.m.

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:

Sixth and Master Streets:

Cruz Recreation Center

CHILDREN AND SPORTS

Artist: Shira Walinski. 2000.

RHYTHM OF IMAGINATION

Artist: Cathleen Hughes. 1999.

Notes: All four sides of the Cruz Recreation Center are covered with murals. *Children and Sports* (two walls) depicts recreation-center sports. *Rhythm of Imagination* (two walls) is an abstract. The four murals were done using the grid method, in which proportioned, enlarged squares help the artist transfer the mural design from paper to wall.

Sponsor: The William Penn Foundation.

Sixth and Master Streets:
Ludlow Elementary School

BUGS

Artist: Ana Uribe. 2002.

Notes: Tiles created by children from three neighborhood schools make the frame for *Bugs*.

Sponsor: The William Penn Foundation.

1417 North Howard Street (between Master and Jefferson Streets)

SEASONS

Artist: Ras Malik. 2000.

Notes: Located in a garden near Hancock Park, *Seasons* depicts the changing image of plants that grow in the actual garden.

Sponsor: Philadelphia Empowerment Zone.

Directions

TO JOHNNIE TILLMON TOWNHOUSES

Germantown Avenue and Master Street

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 West Girard Avenue. Left onto North 3rd Street. Soft Left onto Germantown Avenue. Left onto West Master Street.

By Mass Transit: SEPTA bus #17 eastbound. Board on 12th and Market Street (in front of Loews Philadelphia Hotel). Get off at 3rd and Market Streets. Transfer to SEPTA bus #57 northbound. Get off at Germantown Avenue and Master Street.

Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

www.septa.org

Information line: 215/580-7800

FROM TOUR STOP 5

West Poplar
13th and Poplar Streets

By Car: North on North 13th Street toward Cambridge Street. Right onto West Girard Avenue. Left onto North 3rd Street. Soft Left onto Germantown Avenue. Left onto Master Street.