

GERMANTOWN: MUST THE PRESENT BURY THE PAST?

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IN PHILADELPHIA, nearly everybody is restoration-minded. The newspapers make daily reports of meetings of neighborhood associations in Society Hill, in Southwark, in Kensington. The plans for renewing the Old City proposed by the City Planning Commission and the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority are the occasion of continuous argument among the cognoscenti. As a matter of fact, interest in historic American buildings has increased everywhere within the past ten or fifteen years to a point where it can now be termed a national movement.¹ Local groups that have been struggling for years to prevent the demolition or mutilation of historic buildings are finding more and more private citizens ready to help them, and at the same time they are also acquiring allies in the local, state, and federal governments.

In Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, an organization that has been concerned with the problem for some time, not only cares for the historic properties in its charge, but also makes occasional studies of other historic areas, and is ready to offer advice and moral support to local groups trying to arouse public interest in their own architectural treasures. Locally, the Philadelphia Historical Commission² is surveying the City and listing the buildings in it that should be preserved. Since it began its survey in April, 1956, the Commission has reported to the City some seven hundred buildings which, in the Commission's opinion, are worth saving, either because of their historical interest or architectural significance, or because

*This article is based on a dialogue given at the Annual Convention in Philadelphia, in October, 1957, by Harry M. Tinkcom, Associate Professor of History at Temple University, and Margaret B. Tinkcom, Historian, Philadelphia Historical Commission.

¹ Account of the national parks in Travel section of the *New York Times*, September 8, 1957.

² The Commission was created by an ordinance of Council, Bill No. 493, December 7, 1955; the jurisdiction of the Commission was further explained by Bill No. 695, approved November 8, 1956.

they make a valuable contribution to the general appearance and atmosphere of the street on which they stand.

At the national level, three groups are active. The National Park Service, which formerly touched history only through the maintenance of national military parks like the one at Gettysburg, now has in its charge a number of national historical parks, including the Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia and its Germantown appendage, the Perot-Morris-Deshler house. In addition, the Park Service directs the Historic American Buildings Survey, set up in 1933 to record "interesting and significant specimens of American architecture." The Survey, which has been without federal funds since 1941, has recently been reactivated and is planned to continue its work, at first in the eastern part of the United States and later in the West also.³ The American Institute of Architects, through the work of its Committee on Preservation of Historic Buildings, will continue to cooperate with the Historic American Buildings Survey in this program. Finally, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, whose name amply explains its aims, works with both public and private agencies, giving advice and encouragement to all those on whose efforts the preservation of our historic houses depends.

So much for preservation in general. Returning to the Philadelphia scene, we should point out that by no means all of the City's history was made in the sections fronting the Delaware River, nor are all of the City's old buildings to be found on the streets east of Eighth, north of Christian, and south of Norris. Six miles north and a little to the west of the Old City, of which Independence Hall is the center, lies Germantown, now a part of Philadelphia but for the first one hundred and seventy years of its existence an independent township or borough. To the cartographer, Germantown is just another section of the great city of Philadelphia. But anyone driving along the High Street, now known as Germantown Avenue, will notice a change in the appearance of the houses bordering this street as soon as he comes within the limits of the old borough. Instead of the brick buildings, for which Philadelphia is famous, stone houses, some of them two hundred years old, stand among the supermarkets, gas

³ See Charles Peterson, "The Historical American Buildings Survey Continued," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, XVI (1957), 29-31.

stations, and other paraphernalia of the twentieth century. More than a hundred such houses remain to illustrate graphically the relationship between the Germantown houses and the farmhouses of Chester, Bucks, and Delaware counties, as well as their kinship to the more sophisticated buildings of Philadelphia. The preservation of these houses has long been a matter of concern to those who know and love this section of the city.

Clearly it is to our advantage to preserve the best of our architectural patrimony, in Germantown and elsewhere. For one thing, restorations are of tremendous assistance to the teaching of American history. In a visual-minded age, the use of the physical remains of the past to explain that past to the present generation is peculiarly suitable. A restored house or town can clarify and enlarge our knowledge not only of the particular house or the village of which it is a part, but also of the era to which both belong. Jefferson's Monticello, for example, is not just an interesting eighteenth-century house full of fine furniture and ingenious gadgets. A large part of its significance lies in its ability to stimulate interest in the great man who built it and in the age in which he lived. A trip to Monticello is for many the beginning, not the end, of an interest in its builder. The restorations at Williamsburg and at Sturbridge Village encourage the visitor to look into the history of the town and also to tour the surrounding area.

As well as these two restorations serve as bridges between the past and the present, other places, Germantown, for example, where past and present exist side by side in the workaday world, offer an even greater opportunity to demonstrate the liveliness and continuity of history. Many of the buildings which line Germantown Avenue date from the eighteenth century. Among them there are churches, inns, schools, and dwellings of all kinds. Best of all, the majority of these buildings are still in use. Men and women worship at the Mennonite Meetinghouse, children go to school in the original building of the Germantown Academy, and twentieth-century families live in the old houses. Germantown is truly a living museum.

In addition to their architectural interest, these buildings are guideposts to the past. With justifiable pride Germantowners point out the town's significant contributions to the nation's history and economy, and in many cases, fortunately, they are able to show the inquiring visitor the house, the church, or the school associated

with the event or person spoken of. Mention may be made of William Rittenhouse, for example. Rittenhouse built the first paper mill in the British colonies in 1690. His mill no longer stands on the Wissahickon, but his house does. Papermaking and the printing trades, incidentally, were two of the most important businesses in colonial Germantown. Christopher Sower's printing shop was probably the largest to be found anywhere in the British colonies. In 1743 he printed the Bible in German, the first Bible to be printed in a European language in America. His newspaper, *Der Hoch Deutsch Pensylvanische Geschichte Schreiber*, was an important factor in Pennsylvania politics for thirty years. One of Sower's employees, Jacob Bey, was the first colonial to manufacture printing types. Bey's place of business, in one of Sower's houses, still stands at 5300 Germantown Avenue. After the Revolution, the Billmeyers, Michael and Daniel, were the chief printers and bookbinders of Germantown. Michael lived and worked at 6505-6507 Germantown Avenue and his son Daniel, across the street at 6504 Germantown Avenue.

Printing and its allied arts, however, were not Germantown's only industries. Weaving, particularly stocking-weaving, tanning, and wagon-building also contributed to the economy of the town. The Johnsons, who lived at 6306 Germantown Avenue, were tanners and had their tannery at the back of their property. The Ashmeads and Bringhamsts, both carriage-making families, occupied the houses at 5430, 5434, and 5448 Germantown Avenue. The "Germantown wagon" built by these families was a notable improvement over the older wheeled vehicles, and contributed significantly to the development of transportation along the uncertain roads of the interior. In considering cultural history, one could point to the Mennonite Meetinghouse, at 6119 Germantown Avenue, and the Dunkard church, at 6613 Germantown Avenue, which were the first churches of these sects to be established in America. The Concord School, founded in 1775, at 6313 Germantown Avenue; the Germantown Academy, founded in 1760 and still in business at Greene Street and West School House Lane; and the David James Dove house, built in 1763 to be the Academy's rival, at 130 West School House Lane, all testify to the community's interest in education.

The Germantown Academy is not only an old school but its existence commemorates an important political controversy which

agitated Pennsylvania in the 1750's.⁴ At mid-century, the town's community center was the Green Tree (or Mackinett's) Tavern, still standing at 6019 Germantown Avenue. Public meetings, such as the ones which brought the Academy into being, were held here, and here the Library Company of Germantown had its headquarters from 1744 to 1758.

Another important facet of the town's history is illustrated by the Market Square properties. Contrary to popular belief, Germantown, after its earliest years, was never an exclusively German town. The landholders around the Square in the 1820's included on the west side, Hans George Bensell, of Swedish ancestry; John Ashmead and George Bringham, English Quakers; and on the east side, James Delaplaine, a French Huguenot, John Midwinter, whose name suggests English descent, and the last of the original purchasers, Walter Simens.⁵ This introduction of outlanders into the midst of the German settlement at an early date had the consequence of forcing the Rhinelanders to come to terms simultaneously with a new and strange physical environment and with their neighbors whose language and customs differed from their own. What town could offer better material for a case study in Americanization?

By the middle of the century, the English in Germantown had increased notably. English officials and German merchants came out from Philadelphia in summer to enjoy the fresher air and to get away from the city's "miasmas." John Wister built Grumblethorpe (5267 Germantown Avenue) in 1744; William Allen established himself at Mount Airy in the 1750's (his house is gone, but a whole section of Germantown is still known by that name); and in 1763 Benjamin Chew built the most pretentious seat of all, Cliveden, at 6401 Germantown Avenue. [*See front cover.*] These men and their fellows were not ex-urbanites, properly speaking, but with their coming the trend to suburban living had begun. Germantown offers the sociologist a fertile field for a study of shifts in urban populations, including the movement to the suburbs.

Unless a concentrated effort is made to preserve these old buildings, many of them will vanish. For years people have discussed

⁴ The charity school program promoted by Governor Thomas, Benjamin Franklin, and others. It was designed to hasten the assimilation of the Pennsylvania Germans into the English colonial community.

⁵ Data from unpublished manuscript, "Market Square, Germantown, 1683-1783," by Edward Leslie Byrnes, Jr.

this situation with enlightened concern. The Upsala Foundation, the Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, the Chestnut Hill Development Group, and the Germantown Historical Society have managed to preserve a number of important buildings, and have aroused the community's interest in the problems of historic preservation. Recently two other groups have been organized, Colonial Germantown Market Square, Inc., of which Arthur O. Rosenlund is president, and Historic Germantown, Inc., with Judge Harold D. Saylor, president. The first group is interested primarily in restoring the Market Square,⁶ but Historic Germantown, Inc., is concerned with the preservation of the entire area. Both hold much promise for the future. The federal government and the City of Philadelphia have also taken a hand in the preservation of Germantown houses. The National Park Service maintains the Perot-Morris-Deshler house, 5442 Germantown Avenue; the Fairmount Park Commission cares for the Germantown houses that are in the Park; the Recreation Department has charge of Stenton and Loudoun; and the Philadelphia Historical Commission, the City's Board of Architectural Review, stands guard over houses in private hands as well as those which are public property. Obviously, many people are determined that the present shall not bury the past in Germantown.

Yet interest and goodwill, no matter how widespread, are not enough to save a street, a district, or even a house from "improvement." The preservation of any part of a town or city requires careful planning. Before the proper plan can be decided upon, the value to the community of the property to be restored or preserved must be determined. Here the historian steps in. In 1951, the late Leighton P. Stradley, then president of the Germantown Historical Society, secured a grant from the Olin Foundation to make a historical and architectural survey of the important sites and buildings in Germantown. In collaboration with Grant M. Simon, a Philadelphia architect with a lively and continuing interest in preservation and restoration, the present authors undertook the survey. It was completed in 1953 and published by the American Philosophical Society in 1955.⁷ This study was de-

⁶ A historical study of Market Square in the last quarter of the eighteenth century is now being prepared as a preliminary to the restoration which Colonial Germantown Market Square, Inc., contemplates.

⁷ Harry M. and Margaret B. Tinkcom and Grant Miles Simon, *Historic Germantown, from the Founding to the Early Part of the Nineteenth Cen-*

signed to interest the public, as well as foundations, in the preservation of the ancient face of the old town.

Later in the same year, 1955, the state legislature authorized the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission "to make a study of appropriate ways and methods for developing and promoting the historical interest of Philadelphia and vicinity and specifically for developing a 'colonial compound' in Germantown." The Commission promptly arranged for a new study and another report was prepared.⁸ This second report did not have to consider in detail the historical and architectural worth of Germantown; that aspect of the problem had been discussed in the original survey. It dealt chiefly with the areas to be selected for preservation and with the various methods which could be used to protect them from destruction or mutilation.

When one considers the preservation or restoration of houses standing beside an arterial street which is over two hundred and fifty years old and several miles long, he will immediately discard any notion of a complete restoration of the entire street to any preceding era. Such procedure is obviously impractical from both financial and physical standpoints, but two other methods are possible. First, there is pinpoint preservation. This proposes that a number of carefully selected buildings along Germantown Avenue, dating from the Colonial and Federal periods, that is from 1700 to 1812, be protected from destruction or unsuitable alteration. Ordinary zoning regulations will not afford the necessary protection, for although zoning is designed to maintain the present status of a given neighborhood, the usual zoning ordinance permits the alteration or even the destruction of buildings within the regulated district.

As a first step in any program of pinpoint preservation, a list of buildings of recognized architectural and historical significance should be compiled by a committee of experts. This has been done for Germantown by the Philadelphia Historical Commission. In May, 1957, the Commission listed eighty buildings along Germantown Avenue or in areas closely adjoining it which they considered of sufficient historical and architectural interest to warrant

tury: A Survey of the German Township (Philadelphia, Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society held at Philadelphia for Promoting Useful Knowledge, 1955), v. 39.

⁸ On file in the Commission office in Harrisburg.

their preservation.⁹ As a result of this action, pinpoint preservation, although not specifically adopted by any group, is actually in effect in Germantown. Since the owners of these eighty buildings are prevented by law from destroying or altering the exteriors of any of the buildings for a period of at least six months, unless, of course, the proposed change is one the Commission approves,¹⁰ the buildings have acquired a temporary protection. Moreover, that six-months' grace period gives other agencies interested in saving Germantown's historic houses—particularly the Germantown Historical Society, Colonial Germantown Market Square, Inc., and Historic Germantown, Inc.—a chance to join forces with the Commission and to save the threatened building by one means or another.¹¹

Valuable as is the protection the Philadelphia Historical Commission affords historic Germantown, the pinpoint method of preservation has certain obvious limitations and disadvantages. For one thing, many of the properties to be preserved are at some distance from other houses of similar historical or architectural worth and a single old house, however beautiful, standing in a run-down or architecturally alien neighborhood, loses much of its appeal. It is harder to "see," and the general public, on whose goodwill its continued existence ultimately depends, may prove indifferent to its attractions. Contrariwise, an interesting old house in an area where there are other such houses gains from its association with its neighbors. Thus, a second plan, the historic district idea, originally proposed for Germantown by Grant M. Simon, has certain advantages over the pinpoint method.

There are three well-defined areas along Germantown Avenue which might be developed into historic districts or areas. The first, two blocks long, runs from Ashmead to Penn Street. This

⁹ The list of certified buildings is posted in the Department of Licenses and Inspections, City Hall Annex, in accordance with the requirements of Bill No. 493.

¹⁰ The plans for the restoration of Grumblethorpe, for example, were inspected by the Commission and their approval obtained before work was begun.

¹¹ Bill No. 493 requires that, during the period of postponement, "the Department of Public Property, with the aid of the Commission, shall take steps to ascertain what the City of Philadelphia can do to preserve the historic building, and it shall make recommendations to that effect to the Council." The Department and the Commission shall also "consult with private civic groups, interested private citizens and with other public agencies, in an effort to preserve the historic buildings of the City."

area contains the site of Gilbert Stuart's studio, and the house where Owen Wister was born. (Wister's book, *The Virginian*, helped to establish the story line which has done so much for Hollywood and the TV industry.) St. Stephen's M.E. Church and rectory and Theobald Endt's house, where the first of the Unity Conferences was held in 1743, are also in this area. So is the Conyngham-Hacker house, now the Germantown Historical Society. The site of Christopher Sower's printing business is here, and the house where Jacob Bey had his typefoundry. The latter is now the church house of the Trinity Lutheran Church. General Agnew's headquarters during the Battle of Germantown were in Grumblethorpe, and for years the National Bank of Germantown occupied the two houses only a few doors beyond Grumblethorpe. These houses have a special interest for historians, for John Fanning Watson, historian of Germantown and Philadelphia, lived there while he earned his living as cashier of the bank.

The second area, from Coulter Street to School House Lane, includes the Market Square, a focal point for much of Germantown's history. The sites of the first Friends Meeting house (the present meeting, built in 1871, is the third building on this site) and of the Dutch Reformed Church (which stood on the land now occupied by the Market Square Presbyterian church) are here. Whitefield spoke to more than five thousand persons from the balcony of Delaplaine's house. Incidentally, Whitefield's audiences were greater—in proportion to the population—than are Billy Graham's.¹² And it was to Market Square that the Paxton Boys came when the sectional quarrel between the relatively safe and affluent east and the exposed and impecunious west boiled up at the end of the French and Indian War. In 1777 Market Square was Washington's objective in the Battle of Germantown. General Howe's headquarters were in the Perot-Morris-Deshler house on the west side of the Square. It was this same house that Washington rented when he came to Germantown in 1793 to escape the Yellow Fever.

Area three, extending two blocks along Germantown Avenue from Washington Lane to Upsal Street, also figured in the Battle of Germantown, for some of the sharpest fighting took place

¹² Paper on "Franklin and the Presbyterians" by Leonard Labaree read at the First Annual Founders Day of the Presbyterian Historical Society, October, 1957.

around the Chew house. Although the Battle of Germantown was a military defeat for Washington, it set the stage for a diplomatic triumph for the colonies, and places associated with it may fairly be considered to have more than local importance.¹³ The Concord School, built in 1775 because the residents of upper Germantown wanted their children to have the advantage of an English education but thought the Academy too far away for convenience, and some fine Federal houses—including Upsala—add interest to this part of the Avenue.

Both Colonial Germantown Market Square, Inc., and Historic Germantown, Inc., might be said to have adopted the idea of area preservation, for Colonial Germantown Market Square has the Market Square area under its review, and Historic Germantown is concerning itself with the other two sections.

A good deal has been done to save old Germantown, but there is still one all-important problem that has not yet been solved. Under our present property laws no agency or group can permanently restrain an owner from destroying an old building or from selling it to someone who plans to destroy it. Perhaps the best solution to this problem would be the enactment of state legislation to create a historic district and set up architectural control for it, giving the Philadelphia Historical Commission, or some other controlling agency, full authorization to approve or disapprove the erection, reconstruction, destruction, or alteration of any building or structure within the specified area.¹⁴

Something like this has been done in Massachusetts. In 1955 the Beacon Hill Civic Association was instrumental in securing the passage of a law creating a historic district in the famous Beacon Hill area of Boston, and setting up the Beacon Hill Architec-

¹³ Alfred Hoyt Bill, *Valley Forge, the Making of an Army* (New York, Harper & Bros., 1952), 74; and Orville T. Murphy, "The Battle of Germantown and the Franco-American Alliance of 1778," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXXXII (1958), 55-64.

¹⁴ Senate Bill No. 672 "Authorizing cities, boroughs, incorporated towns, townships, and counties to create historic areas within their geographical limits, providing for the appointment of historical boards empowered to preserve historic buildings and to regulate the erection, reconstruction, alteration, restoration, demolition or razing of buildings within the historic areas" will soon come before the General Assembly of Pennsylvania for its consideration.

Copies of the various ordinances creating each of the fourteen historic districts which have been set up by various cities in the United States can be obtained from the National Trust, 2000 K Street, N.W., Washington 6, D. C.

tural Commission to administer it.¹⁵ One of the most encouraging things about this Massachusetts precedent is the opinion on the constitutionality of the law handed down by the Justices of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts (July 7, 1955). The court held that such an act was in the interest of the public welfare and cited an earlier decision in support of their opinion: "The concept of the public welfare is broad and inclusive . . .," the judges stated. "The values it represents are spiritual as well as physical, aesthetic as well as monetary. It is within the power of the legislature to determine that the community should be beautiful as well as healthy, spacious as well as clean, well-balanced as well as carefully patrolled. . . ."¹⁶ This is a notable decision. May the Pennsylvania courts be equally enlightened, should similar legislation come before them for adjudication.

The need for such legislation in this state is urgent and undeniable. Pennsylvania's past belongs to its people and, in a larger sense, to all Americans. Its physical remains are real property, culturally and materially; they are as much a part of our possessions as the state and national parks. To put it in other words, *the past is in the public domain*. To that past we are firmly bound by the web of history. In the heat and stress of contemporary action mankind, often unconscious of the past and heedless of the future, unwittingly or intentionally, destroys much that would render his age more intelligible to posterity. That is inevitable. But the real tragedy comes when the recognizably significant remains of the past, documentary or structural, are destroyed willfully or through negligence. Intelligent action can and should be taken to preserve them.

¹⁵ The Beacon Hill Civic Association has prepared a detailed report of the procedure followed in seeing through the legislature the act which made Beacon Hill a historic district. This report provides a step by step guide for any group starting a similar project. See John Codman, *Preservation of Historic Districts by Architectural Control* (Chicago: American Society of Planning Officials, 1956).

¹⁶ *Historic Preservation*, 9, citing U. S. Supreme Court case of *Berman v. Parker*, 343 U. S. 26, 99L. ed (Advance, 63—decided Nov. 22, 1954).