

**REPORT OF THE HISTORIC DESIGNATION COMMITTEE  
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

10 September 2003

Room 578 City Hall  
Thomas Sugrue, Chair

Present

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Thomas Sugrue, Ph.D., Chair  
Warren Huff  
Janet Klein  
Bruce Laverty  
Hyman Myers  
Harris Steinberg

Randal Baron, Assistant Historic Preservation Officer  
Jonathan Farnham, Acting Historic Preservation Officer  
Laura Spina, Historic Preservation Planner

Also Present

Dan Griffith, Wachovia Bank  
C.M. Shea  
Beth Richards  
Emily L. Bittenbender  
Emily B. Bittenbender  
Charles Jefferson, Brownhill I LP  
John Gallery, Preservation Alliance  
Idell Rosner  
Ted Watson  
Pat Hitzges  
Norman Greene  
Jeffrey Glassberg  
Ted Newbold  
Walt Pieczynski  
Chip Donahugh  
James Quilligan  
Joseph Barber  
Michael Tilghman  
Veronica Yetzi

Mr. Sugrue called the meeting to order at 9:08. After introductions, Mr. Sugrue explained that there would be several Committee meetings as well as several Commission meetings to discuss the proposed Old City District. This first meeting would cover the Statement of Significance as well as boundary issues.

Ms. Spina and Mr. Farnham gave a slide show detailing the significance of the proposed district

One of the most historically significant neighborhoods in the City of Philadelphia, the Old City Historic District is roughly bounded by Walnut and Chestnut Streets to the south, Wood and

Callowhill Streets to the north, the Delaware River to the east, and Randolph and N. 5<sup>th</sup> Streets to the west. It contains approximately 800 buildings and structures as well as numerous historical cemeteries, parks, piers, plots, streets, and other sites. The District's period of significance extends from 1676, the earliest documented date of European settlement in Old City, five years before King Charles II granted William Penn his charter for Pennsylvania, to 1929, the start of the Great Depression, when new development largely ceased in Old City.

The area designated as the Old City Historic District is historically significant for many reasons. Since the founding of the City of Philadelphia in the late seventeenth century, the area has served as the stage upon which many of the city's noteworthy events and protracted developments have transpired. The District meets Designation Criteria a, c, d, e, and j of Section 14-2007 of the Philadelphia code. The built environment including edifices, structures, sites, and streetscapes of the Old City Historic District has significant character, interest, and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth, and Nation (Criterion a); and it exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social, and historical heritage of the community (Criterion j). The District's structures, streets, and other sites provide remarkable opportunities for the reading and rereading of the neighborhood's, city's, and nation's political, social, cultural, and economic histories. Of special significance are the noteworthy churches and other religious buildings, which chronicle the development of the nation's religious practices. The built environment is associated with the lives of persons significant in the past (Criterion a). The Historic District has been the home to numerous important individuals, for example Benjamin Franklin and Stephen Girard. The built environment reflects the environment of eras characterized by distinctive architectural styles (Criterion c); including significant examples of Georgian, Greek Revival, Italianate through streamlined Moderne. It embodies distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles and engineering specimens (Criterion d) in particular it forms one of the Nation's largest concentrations of cast iron front architecture; and it is the work of designers, architects, landscape architects and designers, and engineers whose designs have significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, and cultural development of the City, Commonwealth, and Nation (Criterion e) from William Strickland through Paul Cret.

Janet Klein explained how the Committee members walked the area and found much had survived from even the earliest periods of the area's history and significance.

The Committee members commented on the document being well researched and written.

Bruce Lavery said that if this district doesn't qualify as historic he doesn't know what would. Harris Steinberg questioned the 1929 cut off date and asked if it needed to have an end date since history is still being made there. He mentioned the Trenton Pottery building which seemed later than 1929. Laura defended the need for a cut off date to help define the district but explained that there are buildings which come after the date that qualify as individual landmarks and therefore significant in the district inventory. Other Committee members thought 1929 was about right based on the Depression, the bridge construction and WWI.

Mr. Sugrue opened the floor to comments from the audience.

James Quilligan from the Rivers Edge community presented a letter asking for inclusion in the district and explained how that area contains the story of the topography of the area and the history predating the Revolution.

Joseph Barber questioned the wisdom of creating an historic district given the fact that many of the buildings are already listed on the Philadelphia Register. He asked if the same thing couldn't

be accomplished with more individual designations. He thought that not all the buildings in the district were worthy of protection. He also asked if the Commission had the staff to handle the applications in a timely manner.

Janet Klein and Hyman Myers explained that a district is more than a sum of the buildings. The significant parts include such elements as buildings, sidewalks, horse troughs and streetscapes. Jon Farnham explained the system of grading of resources within the district including Significant, Contributing and Non-contributing. Laura Spina explained that only about half of the buildings in the boundaries are presently designated. District designation is the most efficient way to address those resources. She said that the Commission had made a decision that this district could be accommodated with present staffing.

John Gallery of the Preservation Alliance spoke in support of the district saying that Old City is a microcosm of the City as a whole. He supports the idea of the 1929 cut off date.

Walter Piszynski spoke and presented information regarding Penn's Treaty with the Indians and other information relating to Fishtown. Mr. Sugrue thanked him for his information and informed him that these considerations would be most appropriate in a designation hearing regarding Fishtown.

Veronica Yetzi, owner of a building on Market Street asked about the benefits of designation to a building owner.

Mr. Baron explained using the example of Manayunk how design review was credited there with enhancing the economic viability of the area as well as improving the historical character of the neighborhood over time.

Ms. Spina talked about the confidence a district provides to property owners that new development will not destroy what makes an area special and attractive, the opportunity provided to the community to weigh in on matters significant to the neighborhood and the technical advice offered by the staff, committees and the commission.

Hyman Myers explained that a National Trust for Historic Preservation study found that historic districts tend to have higher property values and better quality of life both of which benefit the owner.

Laura Spina explained that the Board of Revision of Taxes does not base tax assessments on historic designation.

Mr. Barber objected to the possibility that the Commission can ask a property owner to make expensive changes to his proposed designs.

Mr. Sugrue explained that most changes are approved at staff level and that the Commission is sensitive to alterations needed for changes in use. He gave the dates for the next meetings of the Committee and Commission.

Committee members explained that sometimes the correct historical design can represent a financial savings and that there is a Hardship Committee to address the possibility of an owner's inability to afford expensive changes.

Emily Bittenbender owner of two houses on Lawrence Street registered her hope that the district would be designated.

Idel Romer asked if non-contributing buildings such as her own would be demolished by the Commission. She was assured that the Commission does not demolish non-contributing buildings.

Ms. Yetze asked if it affects insurance rates. Members did not think it did.

Ted Watson of Elfreth's Alley expressed his enthusiastic support of the district and said that the district has been under siege of late by development pressures.

Chip Donahue a long time resident said that the staff review of permits added only a small amount of time to the review process which he thought was modest and worthwhile.

Beth Richards of Elfreth's Alley also expressed her support for the district.

The Committee turned to the issue of boundaries.

Harris Steinberg expressed the opinion that the historic link of Old City to the waterfront trumps the physical division created by I 95. He thought that the piers should be included.

Hyman Myers thought that the piers could be addressed in a separate thematic district.

Janet Klein thought that the southern boundary should be cut at Ionic Street.

Warren Huff addressed the western boundary and thought it should cut out the non-contributing structures along the east side of 5<sup>th</sup> Street. Members insisted however that the boundary should take in the structures of Bank Row, the Lafayette building and the Bourse.

The conversation turned back to the east side of I 95.

Bruce Lavery thought that Rivers Edge should be included because it represents the survival of the early topography of Philadelphia.

Harris Steinberg thought that the Rivers Edge and the piers should be included, attaching to the main body of the district across Vine and Race Street where the highway is elevated, allowing for a ground connection. He thought that most of the highway and all of Penn's Landing could be cut out.

Janet Klein initially spoke in favor of including Rivers Edge without the piers, but eventually thought that the piers should be included and that a piers thematic district could be considered eventually in addition.

James Quilligan spoke about the importance of including the site of West's shipyard and six buried original wharves.

Jeff Glassberg and Beth Richards both spoke about the connection to the River and the importance of including the piers.

John Gallery favored including the piers but not Penn's Landing. He said that the 1929 date also supported the idea of the pier's inclusion. He spoke in favor of including the Pincus building at the northwest gateway of the district.

The question came up of how much of the bridge to include. Committee members thought that as much of the bridge entrance plaza and structure should be included as possible. Members asked about notification requirements to the owner of the bridge.

All Committee members came to the consensus that the piers and Rivers Edge should be included in the district.

Warren Huff thought that Penn's Landing should definitely be excluded. Although Committee members seemed to agree with him, they held off on any vote until the next meeting.

Laura Spina said she would mark up a map for the Committee's consideration at the next meeting of the Designation Committee on September 24<sup>th</sup>.

The Committee meeting came to a close at noon.

Respectfully submitted

Randal Baron  
Assistant Historic Preservation Officer