

**REPORT OF THE HISTORIC DESIGNATION COMMITTEE
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION
17 September 1999**

**One Parkway, 1515 Arch Street, 18th Floor
David Brownlee, Chair**

Present

David Brownlee, Ph.D., Chair
Ernest Leonardo, Deputy Director, City Planning Commission
Stephanie Wolf, Ph.D.

Elizabeth Harvey, Historic Preservation Planner
R. Scott Jacob, Executive Secretary
Laura M. Spina, Historic Preservation Planner
Richard Tyler, Historic Preservation Officer

Also Present

Augustino Lari
Dona Krall
Robert Krall
Bart Iaia
Alike Strakes, Preservation Alliance
Walter Elliott
Irene Elliott
Albert Gambone

Mr. Brownlee called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. After introductions, Mr. Brownlee explained that the Committee on Historic Designation acts as an advisory committee to the Commission, the body that actually votes on nominations. Mr. Tyler stated that the Historic Designation Committee must review the nomination for accuracy and completeness, and determine if the nomination meets one or more of the criteria for designation as set forth in the Historic Preservation Ordinance at § 14-2007(5) of the Philadelphia Code.

Mr. Brownlee introduced Elizabeth Harvey and Laura Spina of the Historical Commission staff. He stated that Ms. Harvey and Ms. Spina worked on the nomination and updated the inventory for the district together. Ms. Spina and Ms. Harvey presented slides of Girard Estate and read from the nomination regarding the historical and architectural significance of the development:

The Board of Directors of City Trusts, the trustees for the Estate of Stephen Girard, developed the farmland surrounding Girard's former country estate in Philadelphia to earn revenue for Girard College. The resulting district of 456 semi-detached houses, 25 rowhouses and one apartment house deviated greatly from the ubiquitous brick rowhouse development of South Philadelphia. The District meets eight criteria outlined in the Philadelphia Code, Section 14-2007(5)(a, c, d, e, f, g, h, i). Girard Estate has significant character, interest and value as a part of the development and heritage of the City and is associated with the life of Stephen Girard, a significant person

in the past. The District reflects the environment in an era characterized by distinctive architectural styles and embodies distinguishing characteristics of those styles. The houses are the work of two architects, James and John Windrim, whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural and cultural development of the City, Commonwealth and Nation. The District contains elements of design, materials and craftsmanship that represent a significant innovation. It relates to a square or park, Girard Park, which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural and architectural motif. Girard Estate, owing to its unique location and singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community and City. And finally, the area around *Gentilhommiere* may likely yield information important to pre-history or history.

Stephen Girard came to Philadelphia from his native France soon after the British left Philadelphia in 1778. A merchant by trade, Girard established himself in banking and insurance ventures and made himself the wealthiest man in America by the time of his death. Although he had property scattered around Pennsylvania and other states, Girard's residence was the farm and house in Passyunk Township, now South Philadelphia, known as *Gentilhommiere*. Upon his death in 1831, Girard left his estate, valued at approximately \$6 million to various philanthropic institutions; however, the bulk of it went to the City of Philadelphia. The bequest included several conditions. The City was obligated to establish a college for poor, orphaned, white boys, and the proceeds and profits of any business and investment ventures had to support the College. The City complied by establishing Girard College. Another stipulation in the will stated "that no part [of the Estate] shall ever be sold or alienated." Therefore, the City could not sell any property, including Girard's house and farm in South Philadelphia. This restriction led to the Board of Directors of City Trusts to establish Girard Estate as a community of rental properties.

Design elements such as low-density, cottage-like houses and landscaped parks became synonymous with Ebenezer Howard's Garden City movement at the turn of the twentieth century and many of these features are found in Girard Estate. The Architect for the Board, James H. Windrim, along with his son John, designed a community of semi-detached twins in various architectural styles rather than a more dense rowhouse development typically found in Philadelphia neighborhoods. Almost all of the streets within the District have trees lined at the curb, many houses still have a patch of grass at the front and almost all of the buildings have side as well as rear yards creating a park-like setting for the District. The architecture of the houses has a wide variety of styles, including Bungalow, Prairie, Mission, Craftsman, Jacobean Revival, Tudor and Colonial Revival. The Board wished to avoid the monotony of other developments citing that in its development "the exterior appearance is varied and ornamented, affording a pleasing view of the block." The Board aimed to provide a suburban-like atmosphere for those who needed to live within close proximity to the City.

The Board of Directors of City Trusts carved Girard Estate out of the farm of Stephen Girard, but the City of Philadelphia initiated and managed the road improvements of the area. Grading, paving, installing water and sewer lines and curbing became the responsibility of the City, not the Board. It was during these improvements that the Board realized the market potential of rental housing in this area. The Board owned, developed and maintained the Girard Estate development as rental housing. This relationship of publicly owned properties leased to private tenants formed the

backbone of Howard's ideal city. He believed that this economically structured community, in a park-like setting that promoted good health, would alleviate the problems that plagued existing cities, including overcrowding, disease, unemployment and class division.

The design of the houses in Girard Estate resulted from a father-son architectural team. After graduating from Girard College, James H. Windrim apprenticed with John Notman and his firm in Philadelphia. In 1867, he opened his own firm and won the competition for the Masonic Temple in Philadelphia, establishing his career. Windrim became a Director for the City Trusts in 1871 for a term that lasted four years. The Board then appointed him as the official Architect for Girard Estate, which encompassed all of its properties in the region, in 1885. Windrim's son, John Torrey Windrim began working for his father in 1882 and soon established himself as an accomplished architect. By 1892, few of the firm's projects could be attributed solely to either father or son. The work in the Girard Estate Historic District probably results from a collaboration between both architects, but the development of the area may reflect the individual styles of James and John. The houses built in 1906 and 1907, along the north side of Porter Street, reflect a late nineteenth century view of architecture. The stepped parapets and the attachment of the bays show an attempt to create something new, but demonstrate the lack of a modern vocabulary. Later styles within the District represent a twentieth century approach to house design. The influence of the Arts and Crafts and Prairie styles are evident in later houses. This division of architectural styles may illustrate the difference between the work of the father and that of the son.

The era at the turn of the century fostered an atmosphere of reform, and the housing industry did not escape from reforming changes. Advocates of the new Garden City planning philosophy also stressed the importance of clean, open-planned houses with a full array of amenities. The Board agreed, saying in the brochure for the new houses that, "the almost alarmed awakening of public opinion upon the subject of sanitation has led to widespread distrust of the old-fashioned ideas concerning the disposal of waste and the toleration of dust and ashes within the home." As an answer to reformers' demands, the houses in Girard Estate had fully appointed kitchens and baths. A central heating plant provided heat to all of the buildings within the development, eliminating the need for individual furnaces. Reformers emphasized the need for a healthy environment and the elimination of the ashes from individual furnaces helped keep each house clean. Numerous windows for light and air, yards on two or more sides and front porches were included in the design of each house for the comfort and health of the tenants. The Board took pride in the workmanship and use of innovative mechanical systems in the houses. In the belief that well-constructed houses would fare better and create fewer expensive repairs, the Board chose the best materials possible and employed its own builders.

As a part of the self-contained community, the development's design also included a school and library within its boundaries. In 1913, the Board of Education built the Jacobean Revival school on the southeast corner of 22nd and Ritner Streets. The school, designed by Henry deCoursey Richards, is identical to five other schools in the City. Also in 1913, construction finished on a library on the northeast corner of 20th and Shunk Streets. The Passyunk Branch of the Philadelphia Free Library was one of twenty-five libraries built by the City of Philadelphia using a grant from Andrew Carnegie. Along with his generous gift for funding these libraries, Carnegie suggested their

design. He advocated a design that included a large well-lit reading space, open book stacks, public meeting spaces, and a central librarian's desk all within a classically designed rectangular building.

The Board also added a series of garages at the south side of the development to accommodate the automobile. Rather than disturb the design of the area, the Board built four long rows of single-car garages. The single-story, brick garages reflect the design of the support buildings found at *Gentilhommiere*. Area residents can rent these garages still owned by the Board, continuing the tradition of the City's role as landlord.

By 1916, Girard Estate reached its full development and the Board did not add to the site. Despite the development's grand success, the ideal public landlord-private tenant relationship espoused by Howard suffered its own problems. Rent increases caused friction between tenants and the Board throughout the subsequent decades and Girard Estate did not escape the financial troubles of the Depression. By July 1950, the Board sought court permission to sell the first of the 481 houses and the apartment house within the development. Like their rentals, these houses sold in record numbers, with the entire development sold in just over two years.

Boundaries

The boundaries for the district match the borders of the original development. Any property built after 1916, even if on the same block, has been cut out. The district resembles an "L" with one shaft northward between 21st and 22nd Streets from Passyunk to Shunk and a lateral piece running from 22nd Street to 17th Street between Porter and Shunk Streets.

Classifications

While the Description and the Statement of Significance recognize the district as a whole, the inventory addresses each property within the district individually. Besides brief architectural and historical descriptions, each property has a classification of "significant," "contributing" or "non-contributing." A building, structure or site can be listed as "significant" if it would qualify for the Philadelphia Register in its own right. Only Stephen Girard's *Gentilhommiere* qualifies as a "significant" property within the Girard Estate District. Buildings listed as "contributing" conform to the overall significance of the district, and contribute to the character of the district in at least two of three criteria. The criteria are scale and rhythm, materials and massing. The three-dimensional, sculptural aspect of these houses proves extremely important. Many of the changes in the district include new windows, aluminum siding, and new porch railings; however, these changes do not negate the overall sculptural effect. All, but six houses fall into the "contributing" category. "Non-contributing" buildings, structures or sites do not satisfy at least two of the three criteria. The six "non-contributing" houses have changes that radically alter the scale, rhythm or massing of the houses.

Conclusion

Girard Estate possesses significance as a clear departure from the two-story, brick rowhouse development typically found in South Philadelphia. The garden-like setting and architecturally mixed, semi-detached houses create a neighborhood unique in character and development. The influence of the Garden City movement and the vision of James Windrim, and his son John, provided a rare opportunity for the creation of a suburban-type of development in an urban area. It also allowed the City of Philadelphia, through the Board of City Trusts, to enter the real estate market as developer and landlord. For these reasons, the staff recommends the designation of the Girard Estate Historic District.

Albert Gambone, who lives in the proposed historic district, thanked the staff of the Commission for its hard work. Alik Strakes of the Preservation Alliance read a statement in support of the proposed district.

Ms. Wolf made a motion to recommend approval of the nomination and inventory of the proposed Girard Estate Historic District. Mr. Baldinger seconded the motion which carried unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

R. Scott Jacob
Executive Secretary