

THE MINUTES OF THE 290th STATED MEETING OF THE PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

29 May 1985

F. Otto Haas, Chairman

Present: F. Otto Haas, Chairman

Joan Ferreira

Grace Gary

David Hollenberg

Jason Nathan

William Thompson

Christine Washington

Barbara Kaplan, Executive Director, City Planning Commission

Charles Pizzi, First Deputy Director, Office of Director of Commerce

Dudley R. Sykes, Commissioner, Department of Public Property

James S. White, Commissioner, Department of Licenses & Inspections

Mark MacQueen, Deputy City Solicitor

Richard Tyler, Historian

Patricia Siemiontkowski, Architectural Historian

Terry Koob, Clerk-Steno II

Also: Grace Wheeler and John Kremer of William Penn Charter School

Janet McMill, Philadelphia Inquirer

Anita M. Mastroieni, Germantown Courier

Mary Lou McFarland, Preservation Coalition of Greater Philadelphia

Lenore Millhollen, Preservation Coalition of Greater Philadelphia

Gersil M. Kay, Restore Philadelphia

Gray Smith, Architect

and others

Unless otherwise noted, all actions taken herein are the results of motions correctly made, seconded and carried.

The Chairman directed that Old Business be discussed first.

OLD BUSINESS

Steel-Strawbridge House, 3001 School House Lane. Mr. Tyler reviewed the matter of the Steel-Strawbridge estate with the Commission and thanked Penn Charter School officials for allowing members of the Commission and staff to visit the estate on 18 May 1985. The visit proved to be very enlightening, showing the buildings to be well-preserved both inside and outside. Mr. Tyler explained that owing to the reorganization of the Commission under the new ordinance, a problem in the scheduling of meeting dates did not allow the Commission to respond to Penn Charter's demolition permit application for the Steel-Strawbridge estate within the statutory sixty days. As an expression of good faith and in a spirit of cooperation, the Penn Charter School officials agreed not to hold the Commission to the statutory sixty days. As a result, the Historian recommended that any delay placed on the proposed demolition of any of the Steel estate buildings be limited to five months

rather than six months allowed by ordinance. Mr. Tyler further stated that the staff had discussed this issue at length and agreed to recommend to the Commission a course of action which included a five month delay on the demolition of the main house and carriage house and the immediate approval of the demolition of the remaining three buildings. The compromise would allow the timely preparation of two playing fields at the rear of the property and give the Historical Commission and the Preservation Coalition of Greater Philadelphia an opportunity to continue to work with Penn Charter School and others to secure the preservation and reuse of the remaining buildings.

Commissioner White moved to accept the recommendation of the staff as outlined by Mr. Tyler. Before taking a vote on this motion, the Chairman opened the meeting for comment. Gersil Kay of Restore Philadelphia, Mary Lou McFarland of the Preservation Coalition of Greater Philadelphia and interested neighbors of Penn Charter School urged the Commission to delay the demolition. Some neighbors voiced their concern over the removal of the trees in an area which already suffers from flooding problems.

Mr. Kremer, representing Penn Charter School, reiterated the School's position that the imposition of any delay on demolition would cause a financial strain on the School. Mr. Kremer further assured those concerned that any and all ordinances relating to the Wissahickon Watershed will be strictly adhered to during the construction of the playing fields.

The Chairman expressed his particular concern for the preservation of the landscaping which includes many very old and beautiful trees and shrubs.

Following these comments, Mr. Hollenberg moved to amend Commissioner White's motion. He suggested that if the terrain permits, the proposed baseball field could be moved approximately thirty feet to the west thereby leaving the cowshed untouched. Commissioner White accepted Mr. Hollenberg's amendment to his motion and a vote was taken.

The Commission voted unanimously to delay for five months the demolition of the mansion, the carriage house/stable and the cowshed. The five-month delay on the cowshed, however, rests on the feasibility of an adjustment in the placement of the baseball field. The Commission further voted to allow the demolition of the log tool shed and the gardner's cottage to proceed immediately.

Continuation of Orientation

The Historian outlined the daily activities of the staff of the Historical Commission. He explained that duties vary widely and include such assignments as gathering information for the designation of buildings, structures, sites, objects and districts. The staff reviews numerous building permit applications for historic buildings and, with the help of two staff members from the Office of Housing, routinely performs environmental assessments. The staff also participates in considerable consultations and on-site inspections with owners, developers and architects to advise them concerning compliance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines.

In order to qualify for the 25% Investment Tax Credit for an historic rehabilitation project, strict compliance with these Standards and Guidelines is required. In addition, the staff meets with community groups to discuss preservation as a planning tool. Occasionally research and writing tasks are performed by the staff on the history of Philadelphia. In short, the staff performs as architects, archeologists, lawyers, tax consultants, historians, bureaucrats and planners.

In concluding the orientation for the new Commission members, Mr. Tyler reiterated the importance of the Historical Commission as an advocate of preservation.

THE MINUTES of the 289th Stated Meeting of the Philadelphia Historical Commission held on 9 April 1985 were reviewed and unanimously approved.

THE REPORT of the Architectural Committee for 17 April 1985 and for 15 May 1985, David Hollenberg, Chairman, were reviewed and approved for filing.

THE MINUTES of the Orientation Meeting of the Philadelphia Historical Commission on 26 March 1985 were reviewed and approved for filing.

THE HISTORIAN'S REPORTS on the Staff Activities for March 1985 and for 1 April - 15 May 1985 were reviewed and approved for filing.

Considerable discussion followed regarding the budget submission for Fiscal Year 1986 which Mr. Tyler explained was originally submitted for \$231,180 and reduced by the Administration to \$97,984. City Council subsequently approved a \$250,000 budget which will cover the requirements of the present staff as well as an archeologist, an architect, a clerk typist I and a preservation planner.

Several Commission members asked about President Reagan's proposed federal income tax changes and their detrimental effect upon the preservation community. Mr. Tyler pointed out that elimination of the rehabilitation tax credit for historic buildings would significantly reduce the number of historic buildings undergoing rehabilitation and seriously impact the renaissance of older cities such as Philadelphia. Mr. Pizzi requested the preparation of a position paper in favor of retention of the 25% investment tax credit for historic rehabilitation. This paper should be in the hands of the Commerce Department no later than 18 June 1985.

NEW BUSINESS

Restoration of Roof Sign Atop Benjamin Franklin Hotel, Gerald F. Schwam Associates. Mr. Tyler advised the Commission of a proposal to re-energize the existing landmark sign atop the former Benjamin Franklin Hotel. This hotel, built in 1923-25, was the last and most lavish of the pre-depression hotels constructed in Philadelphia. Designed by Horace Trumbauer, one of

the city's most fashionable early twentieth century architects, the hotel soon became a major urban landmark. Its identity was enhanced in 1928 when a 49 feet by 68 feet neon-lit roof sign structure was erected atop the building by R. C. Maxwell Company. As part of the planned rehabilitation of the former Benjamin Franklin Hotel and its conversion to an apartment house, this proposal entails the fabrication of two new letters with neon tubes identical in size, location, style and color to the original letter to change the sign to read "Benjamin Franklin House."

After considerable deliberation, the Commission voted to support the restoration of the Benjamin Franklin sign. This proposal must be presented to and approved by the Art Commission before restoration can begin.

Computerization Grant Application

Mr. Tyler informed the Commission that preliminary estimates were received by the staff for the implementation of a computer operation for use by the Historical Commission staff. Estimates received totaled \$34,000 which include \$17,000 for equipment and \$17,000 to cover the salary for one year for an employee to enter our data into the system. Mr. Tyler explained that the money for this venture could be obtained through grants funded by the Pennsylvania Bureau for Historic Preservation.

The Commission unanimously approved the endorsement of the Computerization Grant Application.

Mr. Gray Smith, Architect, took the floor and questioned the Commission on its failure to certify the Bulletin Building which is scheduled for demolition to make way for the erection of a new criminal justice center. Mr. Tyler explained that certification of the Bulletin Building would not insure its preservation since the City had already obtained a valid demolition permit from the Department of Licenses & Inspections. Commissioner Sykes added that even if the Historical Commission could delay demolition, the City is under a judicial order to build a detention center within a specified time. Any delay would result in the imposition of fines upon the City and lead to financial disaster.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 3:55 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Terry Koob
Clerk Steno II