

1900 BLOCK NORTH THIRTY-SECOND STREET (HOUSES)

HABS No. PA-6679

East side of North Thirty-second Street

Philadelphia

Philadelphia County

Pennsylvania

HABS
PA
51-PHILA,
746-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL & DESCRIPTIVE DATA
PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior
1845 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

1900 BLOCK, N. THIRTY-SECOND STREET

HABS No. PA-6679

HABS
PA
51-PHILA,
746-

LOCATION: 1900 block, N. Thirty-second Street, east side between Berks and Norris Streets, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

SIGNIFICANCE:

The 1900 block, N. Thirty-second Street stands among the most impressive in North Philadelphia. The buff-colored roman brick and spacious integral porches makes these twins stand out among the other—generally red-brick and porchless—urban residences in the area. Additionally, emphatic bracketed cornices and alternating units with projecting two-story window bays offer a bold street presentation for these higher-end dwellings located one block from Fairmount Park. The innovative facades stand before dwellings that largely adhere to the standard urban plans with a full-width front portion and a set back rear ell. The block of twins are a notable survival of well-known local architect Angus S. Wade's work in Philadelphia.

DESCRIPTION:

These twenty-two dwellings, originally part of a row of twenty-six arranged in thirteen pairs, encompass a form rarely seen in the late-nineteenth-century North Philadelphia landscape. The southernmost twin (Nos. 1901-1903) has disappeared as have one-half of two others (Nos. 1905 and 1943). The northernmost corner unit (No. 1951) fills the entire width of the lot and included—from its inception—space for a store in addition to its residential function.

This block of twins departs from conventional North Philadelphia residential construction in two significant ways: the use of buff-colored roman brick on the facades and the integral front porches contained within the dwellings' masses. The façade brickwork extends upward from a narrow band of stone trim along the ground; it is neatly keyed into well-laid conventionally-sized red brick walls which are found on the sides and at the rear. The "heavy" appearance of the second and third stories extending out over the void of the graciously-sized porches is countered by visual "support" offered by the battered brick bases for the porch piers. Two basement windows topped by brick jack arches are contained between the pier bases on either side of the stairs.

Beyond a powerful street presence when compared with the surrounding rows, these twins are also notable for their extensive use of decorative metal elements. The cornices, window bays, coffered porch ceilings, and bracketing are all mass-produced pressed metal ornamentation. Ornate bracketed cornices in each pair show a holdover of Italianate detailing from earlier decades, however, classical swags and thinned-out composite pilaster strips on the alternating front-facing bays belie the row's 1894 construction date and reflect

the growing popularity of the Colonial Revival at that time.¹ In addition to the pressed metal, stone detailing is used for the porch balustrades, stringcourses, keystones, and at the top of the porch piers. As constructed, the solid stone porch balustrades had a regular line of round-cornered rectangles punched through the mass.

There are two façade variations. One employs a trabeated system for the porch openings and contains two double-height, three-sided window bays at the second and third stories, one each for the conjoined units. The slightly larger center opening frames two sets of double doors reached by a single run of divided stairs. It is flanked by two roughly square openings which are fronted by stone balustrades. The lintels over these openings are composed of vertically laid roman brick set on an iron plate which is let into the piers and visually “supported” on the front by pressed metal brackets resting on the stone “capitals” of the piers. The porches’ side openings also have brick lintels, but the metal brackets are replaced with brick corbels extending from the corner piers and engaged pilasters. The pressed metal window bays contain three double hung sash at each level with unadorned panels below them; a stone stringcourse runs across the façade at the second story’s sill line. These protruding bays are further set off from the façade by shallow brick quoins. The robust roof cornice breaks out around the top of the bay and is divided between the units by a large console set on a brick corbel, originally topped by an ornamental pinnacle.

The other façade type uses an arcuated system for the porch openings; the fenestration is neatly aligned and does not extend beyond the wall plane. The three front-facing and two side porch openings are all spanned by three-centered brick arches. The central opening, framing the doors, is slightly larger than the others. Stone keystones and trim underscore the graceful spring of the arcade across the façade. On the second and third stories two pairs of windows on each level are aligned vertically within an unbroken line of quoins. Brick jack arches with identical keystones to those in the porch arcade top the windows. A thin stone stringcourse extends across the second floor at the sill line. The bracketed cornice is broken at the center by a console set on a brick corbel, also originally topped by an ornamental pinnacle.

Despite being a row of semi-detached twins, the footprints of the dwellings reflect the conventional North Philadelphia plan with a main block at the front backed by a slightly narrower ell at the rear. The only embellishment in terms of plan are the side-facing polygonal window bays lighting the middle room of the first floor. For most of the units, those with front-facing window bays contain only two stories in the rear of the ells, while those without the bays are a full three stories. The first floor originally contained an entrance vestibule, entry/stair hall, formal parlor, dining room, and kitchen in the rear.² On the second floor, an informal, or family parlor is present in the ell with the principal bed chamber at the front; a bathroom was contained in the remaining space. The third floor contained a similar layout except the front room was divided into two separate ones and the ell at this level was originally truncated in some of the units.

¹*Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide* (hereafter *Record*) 9:3 (17 Jan. 1894), from George E. Thomas, “National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Mansion Court,” Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Mar. 1993, revised Sep. 1993, item 7, for construction year.

²Thomas, for sketch plans and description of interior arrangement of rooms.

Despite extensive interior alterations, the 1900 block of N. Thirty-second Street retains remarkable integrity on the exteriors. Four of the units—one twin and two halves of two twins have been demolished.

HISTORY:

NORTH PHILADELPHIA

For the first 150 years, the physical expansion of Philadelphia remained intricately tied to the Delaware River. The neatly gridded plan laid-out by William Penn late in 1682 was originally composed of twenty-two blocks extending between the Delaware and the Schuylkill rivers. Development in the colonial city occurred largely in the blocks east of the center square, organically spilling over north (Northern Liberties) and south (Southwark) of the grid along the Delaware long before driving west towards Schuylkill. By the first decades of the nineteenth century, commercial establishments continued their march further west along Market Street and the Center Square became home to the city's first pumping station—an impressive structure designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe. By the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century, well-heeled Philadelphians looked westward for the formation of their elite enclaves on and around Rittenhouse Square and even across the Schuylkill. If not fully developed—an action that would take many decades—the remainder of Penn's city was at least staked-out.

In the eighteenth century, the areas northwest of Northern Liberties and north along the Schuylkill evolved as the location of wealthy Philadelphians' country estates and a variety of more modest farmsteads. Nearly every prominent family in the city owned both a spacious townhouse, as well as an expansive, Georgian-plan rural retreat offering respite from the summer heat and the seasonal epidemics that plagued the dense city. These residences and the neighboring working farms were casually positioned in the landscape and tied together by a tangle of country roads. Their form and direction was based more on property divisions and topography than the rational linearity of the urban grid to the south. Reflections printed in 1883 nostalgically characterized this early landscape: "the whole neighborhood was then a pretty piece of country, upon which the country-seats of noted Philadelphians stood."³ While the dominant landscape for well over a century, this bucolic mix of farms, country houses, and rural lanes began to change in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

In 1843, the irregularly platted blocks of the crossroads village of Francisville—turned 45° to the city grid and aligned with the Ridge Road—existed as the northernmost developed blocks west of Broad Street. Most higher density development north of the city remained east of Broad in the Spring Garden District.⁴ West of Broad, the most significant expansion in the antebellum period was a variety of institutions that reflected the social reform and education fervor gripping the entire country, but particularly pronounced in Philadelphia.

³"Improvements in the Northwestern Part of the City—Professor Wagner's Recollections—The Progress of Time," *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript* 18 Aug. 1883, from Scrapbooks of the Wagner Free Institute of Science, 1847–1980, box 8, vol. 3.

⁴Richard Webster, *Philadelphia Preserved: Catalog of the Historic American Buildings Survey* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976) 287.

Within the northern reaches of the Spring Garden District, the groundbreaking and influential Eastern State Penitentiary fronted Coates Street (Fairmount Avenue) and had its perimeter wall and initial cells completed by 1829.⁵ A few blocks to the north, within Penn Township, the original Girard College orphans' school buildings, designed by Thomas U. Walter, rose on capacious grounds beginning 1833 with construction continuing through the end of 1847.⁶ Concurrent with this building campaign, Girard Avenue became an important transportation corridor and fashionable thoroughfare, centered on an increasingly German-dominated population.⁷ Certainly, the location of Girard College enhanced the development potential of the avenue. However, the fact that Girard was half-as-much-more broad than nearby parallel streets it could accommodate both the expanding horse car lines, as well as other traffic, running between Broad Street and the Schuylkill River.⁸ A few blocks east of Girard College on this premier avenue, the steeple of the Green Hill Presbyterian Church, constructed in 1847–1848 on plans by John Notman, pierced the skyline. Directly south across Girard Avenue, St. Joseph's Hospital was installed in a double house purchased by the Sisters of St. Joseph on June 18, 1849.⁹ The hospital added a number of more substantial buildings over fifteen years beginning in 1852.¹⁰

While this institutional expansion was significant, it did not greatly change the area's rural atmosphere. However, the massive population explosion in antebellum Philadelphia, with over half a million residents by 1860, pushed the necessity for rational planning of the city's inevitable and imminent physical expansion. In the 1840s, the grid of Penn's city was, on paper, extended northward over the houses, farms, institutions, and irregular lanes up to the borders of Roxborough and Germantown.¹¹ The 1854 Act of Consolidation brought a number of adjacent, but municipally independent, townships under the jurisdiction of the City of Philadelphia. The rationale for this move was simple:

the city and contiguous territory had practically become one city, with a common future and common wants, and their adequate development was crippled by the multiplicity and jealousy of the many existing governing bodies acting independently of one each other.¹²

With political uniformity completed, the consolidated government worked to standardize the organization of street names and numbering, utilizing a highly logical system that was first

⁵J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609–1884*, vol. III (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Co., 1884) 1835.

⁶The Penn District was “erected out of Penn Township” by an Act of Assembly on February 26, 1844. The district was enlarged by Act of Assembly on February 17, 1847 and became the 20th Ward under the Act of Consolidation on February 2, 1854.

⁷George E. Thomas, “National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Girard Avenue Historic District,” Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 13 May 1985, item 8.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Scharf, vol. II, 1679.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Plan of the District and Township of Penn, Philadelphia (Philadelphia: Fox & Haines, 1847).

¹²Edward P. Allinson, *Philadelphia 1681–1887: A History of Municipal Development* (Philadelphia: Allen, Lane & Scott, Publishers, 1887) 140–141.

employed in Penn's city in 1853 and extended throughout the consolidated city in 1858.¹³ The restructuring of the city politic and street grid established, expansion northward could commence unabated, however it did not come to fruition until the decades after the Civil War, at a pace that few could have imagined in 1860.

Historically, wealthy and many middling Philadelphians largely remained quartered in center city. Some higher density row-type housing did go up north of Penn's city. Until early in the 1870s, however, most of this construction west of Broad terminated with Girard Avenue. In the 1870s, horsecar ("streetcar") extensions and road surface improvements made blocks north of Girard Avenue attractive to upper-class Philadelphians. From that location, the city's political and economic powerbrokers resided within easy reach, by horsecar or private coach, of the center city commercial district.

Commodious row and single-family houses intended for upper-class owners and tenants rapidly lined the streets of North Philadelphia, particularly along Broad Street. The men who made ostentatious statements of their wealth through the houses they constructed failed to penetrate the social and power circles of Philadelphia's old and established blue-blood families. The wealthy of the North Broad Street area were the *nouveaux riches* who made their fortunes in ways that differed from the practices of Philadelphia's staid gentry. In the 1870s and 1880s, Philadelphia's patrician families maintained their residences in Rittenhouse Square or in suburban Chestnut Hill.¹⁴

After 1880, the pace of expansion became frantic. Row housing for all tiers of the social hierarchy were going up on first-rate, second-rate, and tertiary streets. The move from horsecars to cable and electric streetcar lines made the journey to the central district an option affordable to middle-class professionals; a variety of lower-status work possibilities in the area, including some industry, brought an influx of solidly working-class residents as well. An 1883 article highlighting a prominent North Philadelphia educational institution, the Wagner Free Institute of Science constructed between 1859 and 1865, noted the changes in the area.

Gradually the old landmarks began to disappear as the population and enterprise of Philadelphia increased... There are thousands of... houses now being built by persons in this neighborhood. The convenience offered by the street cars, the healthy atmosphere and the general neatness of the new houses combine to make the neighborhood agreeable and pleasant. Buildings are going

¹³Russell F. Weigley, "The Border City in Civil War, 1854-1865," *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*, ed. Russell F. Weigley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982) 375.

¹⁴E. Digby Baltzell, *Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958); George E. Thomas, "Architectural Patronage and Social Stratification in Philadelphia between 1840 and 1920," *The Divided Metropolis: Social and Spatial Dimensions of Philadelphia, 1800-1975*, eds. William W. Cutler and Howard Gillette (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980) 85-123.

up on Fifteenth, Sixteenth, Seventeenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth streets, and on Montgomery avenue, Berks, Diamond, Norris and other streets.¹⁵

By late in the 1880s, the frontage along another premier east-west thoroughfare—Diamond Street—in the blocks immediately west of Broad became lined with both staid and eclectically-styled rows. By 1892, when the first stones of the George W. South Memorial Church of the Advocate—an unparalleled landmark of French gothic ecclesiastical design—were being laid, its Diamond Street site was surrounded in all directions by blocks upon blocks of attached urban dwellings.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, the blocks furthest west from Broad Street along the final approach to Fairmount Park were among the last to be developed. This generally slow westward development along east-west thoroughfares stemmed from two major obstacles—topography and industry. Diamond Street did not extend all the way to the park until 1886, after a massive cemetery relocation and grading project undertaken by developer William M. Singerly.

The actual opening of Diamond Street thru (sic) Odd Fellows Cemetery, and the removal of fences that crossed this line, signaled the completion of the most extensive improvement ever projected in this city. Thus far...he has raised the grade of nearly two miles of streets...Persons who are unfamiliar with the locality as it was prior to the completion of these improvements can only have a faint conception of the transformation that has occurred there.¹⁷

In addition to the need for filling and grading, a degree of industry, though much more modest when compared to that elsewhere in the city, stymied development—particularly upper-end housing—furthest west. A great deal of North Philadelphia real estate west of Broad bordered on Brewerytown, a neighborhood of industrial operations and noxious smells and processes connected to the beer-making business. Brewerytown stretched from Thirtieth to Thirty-second Streets between Girard and Glenwood Avenues; factory owners wedged housing in the small streets between the main thoroughfares dedicated to manufacturing and service buildings.¹⁸ In the end, however, the amenities offered by Fairmount Park ultimately negated the detrimental effects of living in proximity to industry. Solidly blue-collar and small proprietor families headed by firemen, coopers, bartenders, butchers, grocers, and boardinghouse keepers had wended their way as far as Thirty-second

¹⁵“Improvements...,” 18 Aug. 1883.

¹⁶G. M. Hopkins, *City Atlas of Philadelphia by Wards* (Philadelphia, 1875); George W. and Walter S. Bromley, *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia*, volume 6 (Philadelphia, 1888); Ernest Hexamer, *Insurance Maps of the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1892; revised 1893–1895).

¹⁷*Record*, 1:24 (21 Jun. 1886): 279.

¹⁸George E. Thomas, “National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Brewerytown Historic District,” Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 17 May 1990, revised 4 Sep. 1990.

and Thompson Streets by 1900. Streetcar lines provided the means for downtown pleasure seekers to reach the park, and for residents in areas bordering the park to commute to center city.¹⁹ By 1910, Thirty-third Street along the park was completely developed and the area between Broad Street and Fairmount Park was completely filled with houses, churches, schools, and businesses for scores of blocks northward from the city center.

As the final stages of development fully filled North Philadelphia blocks, the area was already going through pronounced demographic shifts. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the "graying" of many blocks proved key to their wholesale turnover to other groups. As elite Protestant homeowners of the first generation died, their descendants sold the properties and established residences in the Main Line suburbs. In the first major demographic shift in the 1920s, the two principal sorts of purchasers were organizations and upper-class Jewish families. The organizations largely took over the expansive and impractical Victorian mansions, while Jewish families and their associated social groups and congregations purchased both private residences and former churches.

Close on the heels of Protestant white middle and upper class migration out of the area was the flight of the white working class. Prohibition and the Great Depression devastated the Brewerytown economy in the 1920s and 1930s and the de-industrialization of Philadelphia in the 1940s and 1950s further constricted the local employment base. The Brewerytown neighborhood, historically teetering between industrial and residential uses, became fully undesirable to white residents at this time and they moved to other areas of the city or to the expanding suburbs. Additionally, large houses were increasingly divided into multiple units and drew a slightly less affluent clientele to the streets.

By the still-segregated 1950s, the social composition of the vicinity had shifted once again; the majority of Christian and Jewish white residents had left and North Philadelphia became the one of the centers of the city's African-American population. Beginning in the mid-1920s, African Americans, in search of employment and drawn to the urban north from the rural south in the wake of agricultural depression, migrated to Philadelphia in large numbers—a great many ultimately settling in North Philadelphia. Not long after, desegregation and the expansion of the black middle class in the 1960s and 1970s led to a progressive emptying out of the area by those who could afford to leave. North Philadelphia remains an African-American enclave, and recent redevelopment efforts are aimed at reducing continued flight of residents out of the area, offsetting high vacancy rates, and shoring-up continued deterioration of the housing stock.

1900 BLOCK, N. THIRTY-SECOND STREET

An 1892 insurance map depicts the west side of the 1900 block as entirely developed with attached rows as well as the row of more modest two-story residences on 31 ¼ Street (N. Patton Street). The blocks to the south are not developed, nor was the rectilinear platted grid of streets realized; a carpenter's shop stands halfway up the eastside of the 1900 block of N. Thirty-second Street. Early in 1894, the *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* announced that developer Isaac Bleim would be constructing twelve semi-detached houses

¹⁹U.S. Census of Population, 1900, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Enumeration District 738; Nathaniel Burt and Wallace E. Davies, "The Iron Age, 1876-1905," *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*, ed. Russell F. Weigley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982) 483-485.

on N. Thirty-second Street as part of a larger program of 130 residences.²⁰ Well-known and eccentric architect Angus S. Wade, one of the favorites for modish *nouveau riche* commissions in Northwest Philadelphia, was selected by Bleim to design the large twins on the east side of N. Thirty-second Street. Given that the area contained evidence of heavy development around that time, it is probable that the residences were started and probably completed in 1894.

SOURCES:

GENERAL

Allinson, Edward P. Philadelphia 1681–1887: A History of Municipal Development. Philadelphia: Allen, Lane & Scott, Publishers, 1887.

Baltzell, E. Digby. Philadelphia Gentleman: The Making of a National Upper Class. Glencoe, IL, Free Press, 1958.

Burt, Nathaniel, and Davies, Wallace E. “The Iron Age, 1876–1905.” Philadelphia: A 300-Year History. Ed. Russell F. Weigley. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982.

“Improvements in the Northwestern Part of the City—Professor Wagner’s Recollections—The Progress of Time.” Public Ledger and Daily Transcript 18 Aug. 1883. From the *Scrapbooks of the Wagner Free Institute of Science, 1847–1980*.

Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builder’s Guide.

Scharf, J. Thomas, and Westcott, Thompson. History of Philadelphia, 1609–1884, 3 Vols. Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Co., 1884.

Thomas, George E. “Architectural Patronage and Social Stratification in Philadelphia between 1840 and 1920.” The Divided Metropolis: Social and Spatial Dimensions of Philadelphia, 1800–1975. Eds. William W. Cutler and Howard Gillette. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980.

Thomas, George E. “National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Brewerytown Historic District.” Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. 17 May 1990, revised 4 Sep. 1990.

Thomas, George E. “National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Girard Avenue Historic District.” Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. 13 May 1985.

U. S. Census of Population. 1900. Enumeration District 738.

Webster, Richard. Philadelphia Preserved: Catalog of the Historic American Buildings Survey. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976.

²⁰*Record*, 9:3 (17 Jan. 1894), from George E. Thomas, “National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Mansion Court,” Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Mar. 1993, revised Sep. 1993, item 7, for Bleim development.

Weigley, Russell F. "The Border City in Civil War, 1854-1865." Philadelphia: A 300-Year History. Ed. Russell F. Weigley. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982.

MAPS AND VISUALS

Baist, G. William. Atlas of the City of Philadelphia, Penna, Complete in One Volume. Philadelphia, 1888.

Bromley, George W., and Bromley, Walter S. Atlas of the City of Philadelphia, Vol. 2 & 6. Philadelphia, 1888, 1901.

Hexamer, Ernest. Insurance Maps of the City of Philadelphia. Philadelphia, 1892, revised 1893-1895.

Hopkins, G. M. City Atlas of Philadelphia by Wards. Philadelphia, 1875 (Volumes 2 & 6), 1882 (29th Ward), 1884 (28th Ward), 1892.

Plan of the District and Township of Penn, Philadelphia. Philadelphia: Fox & Haines, 1847.

HISTORIAN: James A. Jacobs, Summer 2000.

PROJECT INFORMATION:

The documentation of 1900 Block, N. Thirty-second Street was undertaken during the summer of 2000 as part of a larger program to record historic landmarks and historically significant structures in North Philadelphia. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), E. Blaine Cliver, Chief of HABS/HAER, and Paul D. Dolinsky, Chief of HABS; funding was made possible through a congressional appropriation for documentation in Southeastern Pennsylvania and supplemented by a William Penn Foundation grant to the Foundation for Architecture for educational purposes. The project was planned and administered by HABS historian Catherine C. Lavoie and HABS architect Robert R. Arzola. The project historian was James A. Jacobs (George Washington University). Large format photography was undertaken by Joseph Elliott.