

CURTIS HALL
8230 Old York Road
Elkins Park
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6057

HABS
PA
46-ELKPA,
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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Location: Bounded by Washington Lane, Church Avenue and Greenwood Avenue, Wyncote, Montgomery Co., Pennsylvania.

Significance: Curtis Hall, built in 1903 as a music room addition, is the surviving portion of Lyndon, a French Renaissance style mansion built for publishing magnate, Cyrus H.K. Curtis, at the turn of the century.

Description: Curtis Hall is a one-and-a-half story, French Renaissance style structure built of Indiana limestone with a slate roof. The building faces east overlooking a large park that is currently an arboretum. The three-bay front facade consists of a central entrance with wood, ten-paneled double doors and flanking eight-light casement windows with decorative iron grates below. The rear facade has no openings. The central three bays of the side facades contain divided-light French doors with divided-light transoms. The dominant feature of Curtis hall is the tall, steeply pitched hipped roof with a metal roof cap and finials at the ridge. The ridge runs east to west and is perpendicular to the front facade. The north and south planes of the roof contain two circular limestone dormers with round leaded-glass windows. A limestone balustrade with modillions below extends around the entire cornice line.

The interior consists of a small rectangular front vestibule with stairs to the south leading to the basement and an enclosed staircase to the north leading to a projection room. Beyond the vestibule is the main block of the building; a large, square hall featuring a elaborate Rococo-style coffered ceiling and molded cornice, a parquet floor (currently covered with a oak floor) and a stage at the rear. The ceiling is constructed of plaster mixed with sawdust and horsehair while the vaulted section is formed of concrete. The walls are wood, as are the ornate screens on the stage. In the 1920s, holes were cut through the ceiling above the room's main entrance door for movie projectors, providing a private screening room. A raised wooden stage used for musical performances fills the rear portion of the room and is framed by fluted pilasters with Corinthian capitals. In the corner of the stage there is a spiral staircase leading to the basement which originally housed dressing rooms for the musicians. Currently the basement contains an office, two lounges and a cloak room.

The attic is open to the stage and contains a room with an extremely heavy wood door. It is not clear what this room was used for, especially since there is no staircase or direct access to this space.

Curtis Hall is located on forty-three acres. The building is approached by a long driveway and has a circular drive at the entry and a flagstone patio to the south. Beyond the patio there

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is a beautiful arbor. To the west there is an eclectic brick potting shed with a red tile roof. It is likely that the potting shed was contemporary with the main house, Lyndon, for it contains a cast-iron staircase leading to the basement, which originally housed the heating system for the mansion. Two tunnels leading from this structure to Curtis Hall still exist. Currently, the building is used for storage.

A memorial grove has been established on the park grounds of Curtis Hall to honor Cheltenham's war dead. The area contains a tree for each veteran from World War I and World War II, and one for the United Nations symbolizing "spreading and lasting peace." There is also a memorial monument with the names of all the men in Cheltenham who served in the two world wars.

History: Curtis Hall was built in 1903 as a music room addition to Cyrus Hermann Kotzschmar Curtis's mansion, Lyndon, which was built in 1895-96. Both structures were designed by Philadelphia architects William Lloyd Baily and Arthur Truscott. Jacob Myers & Sons were the builders of the music room addition. The room was initially furnished with many period pieces, including an elaborate organ. Curtis died in 1933 and Lyndon was demolished in 1937, presumably because Curtis's daughter, Mary Louise Curtis Bok, was living on the Philadelphia Main Line and did not want to pay property taxes on the mansion. The music room was retained and Mrs. Bok donated the estate, known as Curtis Arboretum, to Cheltenham Township.

Because Curtis Hall had originally been a music room attached to the main house, a front facade had to be added. In 1937, Ehrling H. Pederson was hired to design this addition. He retained the French Renaissance style of the original Baily and Truscott design and added the balustrade. He also designed a new mechanical systems for the structure.

Also in 1937, the Olmstead Brothers landscape architectural firm was hired to landscape the site that the main house had previously occupied. They designed a planting plan and various other landscape features for the parking space, music room and east and west courts. This included the circular drive at the entrance of Curtis Hall and much of the surrounding lawn.

Cyrus H.K. Curtis founded Curtis Publishing Company, the corporation which published such well-known periodicals as The Saturday Evening Post, The Ladies' Home Journal, The Country Gentleman, and Jack and Jill Magazine. During his lifetime, he was very interested in yachting and music, and was the director of a number of organizations. Curtis was very philanthropic and bequeathed large sums to the Franklin Institute as well as several schools and hospitals. His daughter, Mary Louise Curtis

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Bok (later Mrs. Efrem Zimbalist), lead the way in establishing the renowned Curtis Institute of Music.

William Lloyd Baily and Arthur Truscott formed the firm Baily & Truscott in July of 1890. Both men had worked for several Philadelphia architects and firms, including Theophilus P. Chandler, Wilson Bros. & Co., and Cope & Stewardson. Baily also worked for Addison Hutton, Frank Miles Day and Wilson Eyre. Although most of their commissions were residential, they designed a number of churches and several academic buildings at Haverford College. The majority of their projects were Colonial Revival designs, however, Baily was also known for designing buildings with French-influenced detailing and massing, which is evident in Curtis Hall.

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18-23 and 807-08.

Temple University Urban Archives. Various photos of Lyndon
including Curtis Hall.

Historian: Janet Blutstein, HABS Historian, 1994.