

ABBOTTSFORD HOMES

Bounded by Abbottsford Avenue, Henry Avenue,
Robert Avenue, and Fox Street
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-6165

HABS
PA
51-PHILA,
732-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

National Park Service
Northeast Region
Philadelphia Support Office
U.S. Custom House
200 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, P.A. 19106

HABS
PA
51-PHILA,
732-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
ABBOTTSFORD HOMES

HABS No. PA-6165

- Location: Bounded by Abbottsford Avenue, Henry Avenue, Robert Avenue, and Fox Street, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania
USGS: Germantown, Pa. (See enclosed map)
UTM Coordinates (Easting, Northing): 18. 484740.4429140, 18.484920.4428880, 18.484570.4428620, 18.484410.4428840
- Present Owner: Philadelphia Housing Authority
4325 Merrick Road
Philadelphia, Pa. 19129
- Present Occupant: Abbottsford Homes Tenant Association
3226 McMichael Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Present Use: Residential housing
- Significance: Built in 1942-43, the Abbottsford Homes Defense Housing Project exemplifies World War II urban workers' housing. The 700-unit development, in 71 buildings, was designed by the architect W. Pope Barney, and his associate Victor Abel. The buildings are simple in their design, combining the tradition of the urban rowhouse with a more suburban setting of winding, tree-lined streets. Abbottsford Homes was considered the most successful of the city's seven public housing projects of the 1940's, especially notable for its landscaping, designed by James Bush-Brown. Four different housing types and a community center were built within the residential complex. Although the individual units lack architectural distinction, as a group Abbottsford Homes represents a recognizable design type, reflecting the needs of housing the most people at the least cost.

Historical Information

Abbottsford Homes was opened in the East Falls section of Philadelphia on May 20, 1942, as one of the city's permanent war housing projects. The development, financed with funds appropriated by Congress through the Lanham Act of 1940, was owned by the Federal Government and built and operated by the Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA) under the supervision of the United States Housing Authority. The \$3-million, 700-unit project consisting of a planned community of residential, social, and recreational facilities, was constructed to house employees in nearby defense industries. The Federal Government owned Abbottsford Homes until 1953, when title was transferred to the PHA.

Most of the site occupied by Abbottsford Homes had belonged to the Dobson family in the 19th century, and was the setting for their estate known as "Bella Vista". Bessie Dobson Altemus lived on the property in the first decades of the 20th century, in the 50-room stone house, overlooking the Falls of Schuylkill. The approximately 32-acre property was acquired by the Federal Government through condemnation proceedings, and Mrs. Altemus was evicted in August 1941, just prior to ground-breaking ceremonies.

The site was ideally situated for low-income housing, which had been proposed for this location since the 1930s. Nearby stood the Women's Medical Hospital for medical services; public schools for education needs; Fernhill Park for recreational facilities, and the trolley, bus and high-speed electric trains of the Chestnut Hill Branch Line for direct transportation to Center City. In addition, in 1939, there were roughly 50,000 jobs within a short walk of the site. The neighboring industrial area included Atwater Kent Manufacturing Company, Rayburn Tag Company, Tasty Baking Company, Budd Manufacturing Company, and Midvale Steel Company. While many of the companies produced for the war effort, the main defense-related employers of the first tenants of Abbottsford Homes were the Budd Company, Midvale Steel, Bendix Aviation Corporation, Empire Ordnance Corporation, and the U.S. Army Signal Depot, all located within a half mile of the project.

Abbottsford Homes was designed to house 2,563 persons. Rents ranged from \$27.05 per month for three rooms to \$35.00 per month for five rooms, plus \$10.00 for utilities. The PHA recognized that the project attracted a collection of strangers - to each other, and to the area - as many relocated for defense industry jobs. The PHA assigned Resident Aides to help guide community activities, and they appear to have been successful, as witnessed by the creation of hobby clubs, boy scout troops, and a local newspaper, all headquartered at the central community center building.

Historical Information (continued)

Architecturally, Abbottsford Homes was considered the best of the city's permanent war housing projects. Contemporaries noted its "distinctive architecture and carefully landscaped setting." The architect was William Pope Barney, assisted by Victor D. Abel. The landscape architect was James Bush-Brown. Barney had worked since the 1930s on public housing in Philadelphia, including the Juniata Park Housing Project and the James W. Johnson Homes. Through these commissions, Barney was exposed to the International Style, the "new" architecture of the period, and one distinctly suited to public housing in both philosophical bent and lack of ornamentation. Abbottsford Homes borrows a few elements from the International Style, such as the cantilevered entry canopies and flat roofs, but for the most part, the buildings are stripped-down versions of the traditional row house.

The site planning for Abbottsford Homes is more interesting, incorporating stone walls from the earlier Dobson estate which had stood on the site, and adding new walls to terrace the hillside site. Mature trees from the estate were also preserved, and new ones added to the site, further enhancing the "suburban" feeling of the project. Small yards in front or behind the grouped houses encouraged gardening, and the placement of clotheslines in the rear yards certainly signaled "suburbia" to housewives who were used to hanging wash from lines strung between the upper floors of tenements.

After World War II, when defense housing was no longer needed, Abbottsford Homes was transferred to the Philadelphia Housing Authority for low-income housing. Some families that had lived in the defense housing project did not qualify for low-income housing, and moved away, while others who had been long-term residents of the project were allowed to remain. Before the transfer of Abbottsford homes from the Federal government to the PHA, a movement for tenant ownership arose. Tenants formed the Abbottsford Home Owners Community Council in 1952 to negotiate a purchase of the property. However, the Philadelphia City Council did not approve a bill that would have permitted them to buy the homes, because it conflicted with a previous agreement among the City, the Board of Education, and the Philadelphia Housing Authority. Currently, the residents of Abbottsford Homes are working with the PHA toward ownership of their own homes.

Architectural Information

Abbotsford Homes is a housing project of 700 housing units, arrayed in 71 buildings, in addition to a community center. The buildings are arranged on the sloping site around a roughly circular internal roadway, called McMichael Street on its northern and eastern sections, and Berkeley Drive on the western and southern sections. This ring road is bisected by two short streets, Defense Terrace and Authority Terrace. The internal roadways connect to the city streets on two locations along Abbotsford Avenue to the north of the site and on Roberts Avenue to the south.

W. Pope Barney and Victor Abel, architects, assisted by James Bush-Brown, landscape architect, planned the development to be laid out with buildings parallel to the contours of the sloping site, creating a terraced effect. Most of the buildings front onto internal streets or face each other, creating semi-private yards. The buildings along Abbotsford Avenue face the city street in a more traditional urban setting. Multi-car parking lots and street parking contribute to the urban nature of the site, as do shared entrances, concrete stoops and walkways, and connecting sidewalks. The suburban, garden apartment nature of the complex is reinforced by the detached buildings of eight to twelve units, the two- and three-story height of the buildings, the grassy terraces and mature trees of the public spaces and the small private gardens found outside many front and rear doors.

All the residential buildings are box-like, brick-faced structures, with flat roofs and minimal ornament. There are four residential types - one- and two-bedroom units on single floor, and two- and three-bedroom duplexes. Originally, the Abbotsford Homes project consisted of 88 one-bedroom units, 433 two-bedroom units, and 179 three-bedroom units in the four building types. The exteriors are laid up in common bond brickwork with corbelling accenting wall surfaces in various places. Cornices are wood, clad in aluminum flashing. The original black slate window sills have also been wrapped in aluminum. The flat roof slopes slightly toward the rear of the building, and dryer vents, gutters, downspouts, and exposed cable line the rear elevations. Brick and concrete stoops stand at the entrance doors, both front and rear. Window openings are arranged regularly across the front and rear facades, with no ornament or projecting molding. The original wooden windows have been replaced by metal sash and storms; the original doors to all units in the complex have also been replaced with metal doors containing small windows.

Inside, all units are characterized by a utilitarian aspect. Ductwork is exposed and hung from the ceiling, closet doorways still retain rod holders for curtain rods, rather than doors, and there is no decorative woodwork on any feature. The hardwood floors, the rear kitchen entries (on first floor units), and the incorporation of shelves and storage closets add a note of suburban living beyond the usual urban apartment. In all the units, the main entry is made directly into the living room, which connects directly with the kitchen. On the duplex units, access to bedrooms is from enclosed, straight-run stairways.

Architectural Description (continued)

Portions of several residential buildings are now employed for other purposes. The basement of Buildings #4 houses the maintenance facility, and this was designed into the structure from the beginning. The basement of Building #56 on the corner of McMichael Street and Berkeley Drive has been converted to a laundry. A Health Center has been added to the ground floor of Building #32. Two original residential buildings are now abandoned due to severe structural problems, evident in the cracked brick walls. The openings to these buildings have been boarded up.

The Community Center and Rental Office were originally two wings of the Community Building. The center section of the building, an auditorium, was destroyed by fire in approximately 1965. The concrete floor of the auditorium has been retained as an open patio between the two wings. Both surviving portions of the original community center have been largely remodelled in the years 1985-1995. Behind the Community Center and Rental office is a large open area which includes a playground, basketball court, paved play area, and open lawn.

Several minor utility/service structures exist on the site. Near the northwest corner, a small, painted concrete block structure with flat roof houses a fuel tank. Nearby is a one-bay, flat-roofed garage structure of concrete block. None of these are from the period of original construction, but appear to have been added sometime later in the 1940s or early '50s.

Most of the original vellum architectural / engineering drawings are on file at The Philadelphia Housing Authority.

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Plans and Drawings

The original pencil-on-vellum drawings of the Abbottsford Homes project, measuring approximately 31-1/2 x 43-1/4 inches, are on file with the Philadelphia Housing Authority. The faded pencil is legible but very difficult to reproduce photographically, so newly-drawn copies of the original plans were created for documenting the plans and elevations in this recordation project.

Atlases, Maps (FL=Free Library, HSP=Historical Society of Pennsylvania)

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PROJECT INFORMATION

This documentation was prepared prior to planned renovations of Abbottsford Homes, to record existing conditions and surviving original fabric and plans.

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