

1400 BLOCK WEST GIRARD AVENUE (HOUSES)
South side
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS PA-6674
PA,51-PHILA,753-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

1400 BLOCK, W. GIRARD AVENUE

HABS No. PA-6674

LOCATION: 1400 block, W. Girard Avenue, south side between Carlisle and N. Fifteenth Streets, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

SIGNIFICANCE:

The 1400 block of W. Girard Avenue (Nos. 1416–1432) is representative of upper-middle-class attached urban housing that became available in North Philadelphia in the 1880s. Located a half block off N. Broad Street on one of the area's premier east-west avenues and important transportation connector, the row's cohesive street presence in three groupings of residences, and elegant and intricate detailing all underscore their high-profile siting and social prominence.

DESCRIPTION:

This row of expansive urban dwellings is composed of nine three- and four-story units arranged in three physically separate, but programmatically conjoined groupings. Two pairs of three-story houses stand at the corners of the block with an attached group of five houses in the middle. The two corner residences entirely fill their lots and the three middle units have street frontage that fills the lot entirely as well; these three dwellings are three-stories with full height attics comprising a fourth. The attics provide a visual center for the row; No. 1424 has a front facing gable and is flanked by two mansard roofs with dormer windows at Nos. 1422 and 1426. Despite the overall emphasis on symmetry, the center unit is not bilaterally symmetrical, rather its entrance bay is justified to the east. The areaways dividing the ensemble into three groupings are composed of space taken away from the interior units at Nos. 1418, 1420, 1428, and 1430. As a result, these residences are the smallest in the row. All of the units have three-story ells.

With the exception of the attic stories at Nos. 1422, 1424, and 1426 and slight variations in the units' widths, the Girard Avenue facades are identical or mirror image arrangements. Eight of the nine units are formally conceived of as pairs, with the center unit "standing alone." The westernmost pair, Nos. 1430 and 1432, is representative of the others in the row. The dwellings are of brick with double courses of glazed bricks extending across the façade and corresponding with the lintels and sills of the windows. The exterior is further embellished with extensive stone trim—including all of the sills and lintels, the two-story bays, and the foundation up to the water table. Much of this stone is decorated with delicate incising, employing both geometric and foliate designs. Below the attic level, the pairs are arranged in essentially two bays. On the first floor are two sets of double doors with rectangular transoms above, sharing a single large stone lintel. One second-story window is aligned with each of the doors. The dominant feature of the dwellings are two-story, three-sided bays with curved windows flanking the central one. The crispness of the stereotomy contrasts well with the expanse of brick wall. At the third-story there are two windows

aligned with each of the two bays. All of the windows are one-over-one double hung sash. A multi-stage corbelled brick and stone cornice extends across the pair with a thin corbelled “pinnacle” breaking through the roofline and providing a minimal degree of differentiation between the two units.

The 1400 block of W. Girard Avenue remains in good condition. Some of the units are not inhabited, but grave physical deterioration has not set in; for example, No. 1418 has boarded-over first floor windows and doors. Other alterations to the row include paint applied to some of the stone and brickwork and varied window replacement, for example in No. 1428 with glass block.

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.”¹ 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

¹“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.

east of Broad in the Spring Garden District.² 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.

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 1829.³ 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 1847.⁴ Concurrent with this building campaign, Girard Avenue became an important transportation corridor and fashionable thoroughfare, centered on an increasingly German-dominated population.⁵ 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.⁶ 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, 1849.⁷ The hospital added a number of more substantial buildings over fifteen years beginning in 1852.⁸

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.⁹ 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

²Richard Webster, *Philadelphia Preserved: Catalog of the Historic American Buildings Survey* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976) 287.

³J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609–1884*, vol. III (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Co., 1884) 1835.

⁴The 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.

⁵George E. Thomas, “National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Girard Avenue Historic District,” Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 13 May 1985, item 8.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Scharf, vol. II, 1679.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Plan of the District and Township of Penn, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Fox & Haines, 1847).

was crippled by the multiplicity and jealousy of the many existing governing bodies acting independently of one each other.¹⁰

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 employed in Penn's city in 1853 and extended throughout the consolidated city in 1858.¹¹ 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.¹²

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

¹⁰Edward P. Allinson, *Philadelphia 1681-1887: A History of Municipal Development* (Philadelphia: Allen, Lane & Scott, Publishers, 1887) 140-141.

¹¹Russell 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.

¹²E. 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.

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 up on Fifteenth, Sixteenth, Seventeenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth streets, and on Montgomery avenue, Berks, Diamond, Norris and other streets.¹³

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.¹⁴

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, signalized 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.¹⁵

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

¹³“Improvements...,” 18 Aug. 1883.

¹⁴G. 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).

¹⁵*Philadelphia Real Estate Record & Builders' Guide* (hereafter *Record*) 1:24 (21 Jun. 1886): 279.

wedged housing in the small streets between the main thoroughfares dedicated to manufacturing and service buildings.¹⁶ 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, cooper, bartenders, butchers, grocers, and boardinghouse keepers had wended their way as far as Thirty-second 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.¹⁷ 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.

¹⁶George E. Thomas, "National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Brewerytown Historic District," Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 17 May 1990, revised 4 Sep. 1990.

¹⁷U.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.

1400 BLOCK, W. GIRARD AVENUE

While much of W. Girard Avenue rapidly developed after the opening of Girard College late in the 1840s, the 1400 block was not developed until the mid 1880s. This comparatively late row development for blocks that far south was due to the presence of one house on the block until the 1880s. In 1882 a large brick single family house, greenhouses, and a large garden occupied the property bounded by W. Girard, Carlisle, N. Fifteenth, and Cambridge. The *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* noted in its April 12, 1886 issue that real estate developer William Weightman was responsible for the construction of six three-story brick dwellings on Girard Avenue one block west of the 1400 block.¹⁸ As Weightman was a major developer along Girard Avenue, it is entirely possible that he was responsible for the construction of the 1400 block and that it was constructed around 1886. Regardless, by 1888, the nine spacious attached residences on lot Nos. 1416–1432 were completed. These structures occupied deep lots that accounted for nearly two-thirds of the block; more modest dwellings facing Cambridge and N. Fifteenth Streets filled the remainder of the area. Alleyways did not fully bisect the block, and oddly, while all of the smaller residences opened onto back alleys, Nos. 1428–1432 W. Girard Avenue had no rear access.

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¹⁸*Record*, 1:13 (12 Apr. 1886).

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HISTORIAN: James A. Jacobs, Summer 2000.

PROJECT INFORMATION:

The documentation of 1400 Block, W. Girard Avenue 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.