

3100 BLOCK WEST BERKS STREET (HOUSES)
South side
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS PA-6680
PA,51-PHILA,752-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

3100 BLOCK, W. BERKS STREET

HABS No. PA-6680

LOCATION: 3100 block, W. Berks Street, south side between Thirty-first and Thirty-second Streets, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

SIGNIFICANCE:

The 3100 block of W. Berks Street is representative of the type of row constructed in the final stages of North Philadelphia development south of Diamond Street. While not as large or well-articulated as the rows lining the premier east-west and north-south avenues, this block retains a street presence and care in appointment that indicates a solidly middle-class intention for the residences. The exterior articulation exhibits material and detail contrasts indicative of late-Victorian design, but also includes overt classical references denoting the Colonial Revival's rise in popularity throughout the 1890s.

DESCRIPTION:

This row of twenty-three, three-story attached residences (Nos. 3102-3146) fully fills the south-side interior of W. Berks Street's 3100 block. All of the dwellings are front facing with no lateral articulation or openings, and although the contiguous east (razed) and west (extant) corner units were not constructed at the same time, they were clearly anticipated.

Each of the twenty-three units is identical or a mirror image—save for an alternating pattern of pediments and simple parapets above the corbelled brick cornices. Further differentiation between units was achieved through extruded vertical bands rising from the middle of the second story which terminate in spikey pinnacles above the parapet line. The row's most dominant visual form—the incessant chain of three-centered arches springing from squat Composite order columns—simultaneously links the dwellings as well as delineates individual residences with one per semielliptical arch.

In keeping with eclectic Victorian aesthetic sensibility, the row is constructed of contrasting materials and employs forms drawn from a variety of sources. Each façade is organized in two bays; the second and third stories break out over the first, providing cover for the front porch. The irregularly-coursed gray stone on the first-floor exterior wall and the gently drooping profile of the rusticated stone balustrades emit a picturesque quality that is fully at odds with the more rigid articulation of the upper stories. A sheer brick wall extends upward from the cleanly delineated brick arch, relieved only by the rusticated stone voussoirs of the segmental arch window lintels. The carved stone columns flanking the porches and additional classical forms employed in the parapets, provide an added measure of eclectic articulation.

As all of the units are attached, rear ells provide light and ventilation for the interior rooms. The northern portion of the ell is three stories and the rear (southern) portion is two stories.

The mirror image units contain back-to-back bays—probably at the second story and originally containing bathing facilities—that span the open space between. Given the odd number of residences in the row (23), No. 3112 does not have a mirror image partner and thus enjoys less light and air than its neighbors—its open well faces the blank eastern wall of No. 3114. A narrow alley extends across the block between the row and the properties to the south.

The 3100 block of W. Berks Street remains in excellent exterior condition. Small changes to fenestration and doors have been made over time. Recently, the interiors were fully rehabilitated and the dwellings are now at one-hundred percent occupancy.

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.

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.

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.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:

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).

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.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,

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.

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 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, 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.¹⁵

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.

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.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

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.

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.

3100 BLOCK, W. BERKS STREET

As development in North Philadelphia west of Broad Street largely progressed east to west towards Thirty-third Street and Fairmount Park, it is not surprising that the 3100 block of W. Berks Street was not constructed until the mid-1890s. Berks Street lay in an area bounded on the east and west by the Pennsylvania Railroad tracks and Fairmount Park, respectively. None of the east-west streets between Diamond and Montgomery included bridges over the railroad tracks, and their comparatively out-of-the-way location probably curtailed earlier development. Only in 1886, did important Diamond Street extend fully from Broad Street to Fairmount Park.¹⁸

In 1884, the rectilinear streets in the vicinity of the 3100 block were platted, however no construction was started in the area. Mifflin Lane, a vestigial road left from North Philadelphia's more bucolic days, still cut diagonally across the block. By 1892 most of the surrounding area had been fully developed, however Berks and Thirty-second Streets were not graded in the immediate area of their intersection; a carpenter's shop stood only a half block away indicating continued construction. Mifflin Lane still cut through the block at this time. Records show that No. 3110 was the object of a deed transfer on 15 Aug. 1895, indicating its probable completion or near completion—and by extension the entire attached block—by that time.¹⁹ In 1901, the eastern corner lot (at Thirty-first) remained empty and the western lot contained two small buildings facing Thirty-second Street. It was not until 1911 that records showed two buildings with identical footprints framing the interior row, notations indicate that these larger edifices were used for both residential and retail purposes.

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¹⁸*Record*, 1:24 (21 Jun. 1886): 279.

¹⁹Deed and transfer file 16N9, plot number 224 (subdivision of 154), Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

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HISTORIAN: James A. Jacobs, Summer 2000.

PROJECT INFORMATION:

The documentation of 3100 Block, W. Berks 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.