



THE SOCIETY HILL INTERPRETIVE EXHIBITION

The first survey of the architectural, social, political and cultural issues that led to the creation of Society Hill.
Stop here to learn about the neighborhood BEFORE you stroll the streets.

PHILADELPHIA SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF LANDMARKS

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THE SOCIETY HILL INTERPRETIVE EXHIBITION

Society Hill: 1760-1960

*"This was a has-been neighborhood...It was kept alive by ships anchored in the port.
There were a number of noisy bars. It was a place to get away from"*

-Charles Peterson, Architectural Historian and Preservationist,
who documented historical structures for the National Park Service in the 1950s.

Background Image: Rooming house in Society Hill

DO YOU HAVE ANY PICTURES OF SOCIETY HILL THAT YOU WANT TO SHARE?

THE SOCIETY HILL INTERPRETIVE EXHIBITION

Immigration, Religious Institutions and Jewish Life 1880-1930



In the early years of Jewish mass immigration, a fairly sizeable Jewish quarter was established in a well-defined area of old Philadelphia, today known as Society Hill. It was here the Jews settled in number beginning in 1881. By the turn of the last century, they covered every block and the local residents - in a panic - ran to sell their properties.

*-Harry D. Boonin, *The Jewish Quarter of Philadelphia A History and Guide 1881 - 1930**

Left Image: Founded to care for the Jewish elderly and newly arrived immigrants, the Sheltering Homes (Moyshev Zkeynim and Hakhnosses Orkhim) moved to 315-17 S. 3rd St. in 1908 with the financial support of Wolf Klebansky, a manufacturer and noted philanthropist who lived nearby and owned Powel House from 1904 to 1931.

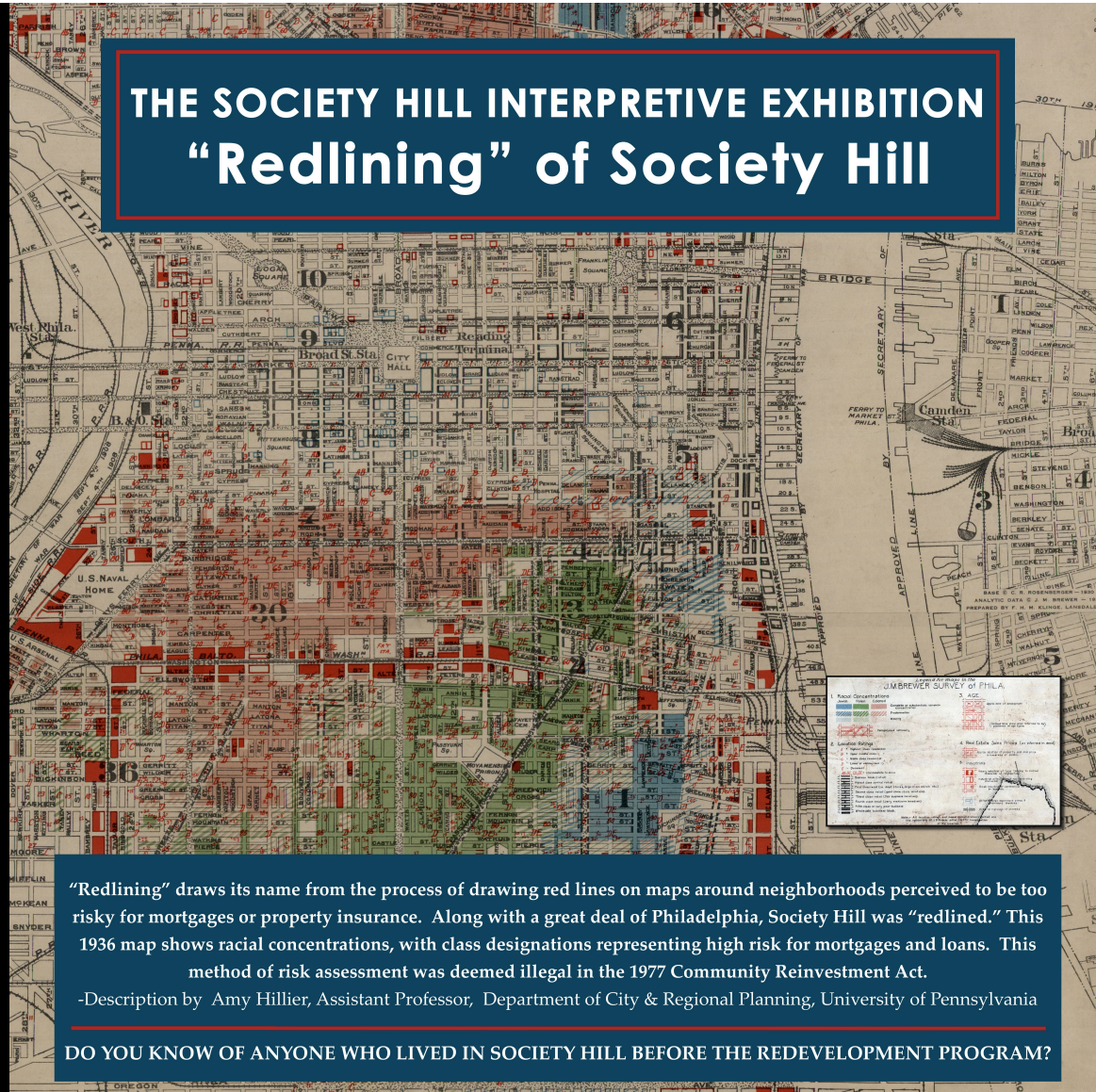
Center Image: Congregation B'nai Abraham, 521-27 Lombard St., as seen on the day of dedication, April 3, 1910. Founded in 1882 by Lithuanian immigrants, B'nai Abraham was for decades the soul of the Jewish community and built this magnificent new synagogue to house its growing congregation.

Right Image: The Jewish World (Di Yidishe Velt, 233 S. 5th St.), founded in 1914 "to serve the interests of the Jewish population generally and the . . . inhabitants of the local Jewish population in particular," was the most popular Yiddish newspaper printed in Philadelphia.

CREDIT FOR ALL PHOTOGRAPHS: Harry D. Boonin, *The Jewish Quarter of Philadelphia, A History and Guide 1881-1930*, Philadelphia, 1999.

THE SOCIETY HILL INTERPRETIVE EXHIBITION

“Redlining” of Society Hill





THE SOCIETY HILL INTERPRETIVE EXHIBITION

Society Hill as a Commercial District 1890 - 1960

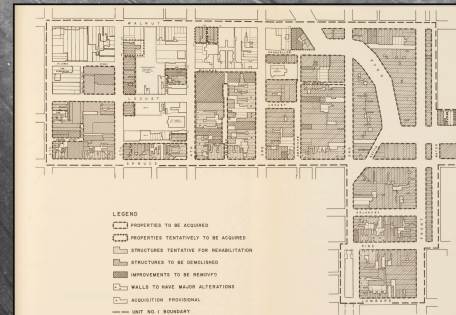
"Mr. Koss was born on Society Hill and married 'the girl around the corner.' Two years after the 1929 Crash, Mr. Koss and his bride opened a barber shop on Spruce Street...He cannot start over again. The present plans will be his economic death."

-1959 Testimony opposing Washington Square East Re-zoning to eliminate all commerce from Society Hill.

DO YOU HAVE ANY PICTURES OR MEMENTOS RELATING TO BUSINESSES THAT WERE OPERATED IN SOCIETY HILL BEFORE THE REDEVELOPMENT?

THE SOCIETY HILL INTERPRETIVE EXHIBITION

Washington Square East Redevelopment Project 1960



*"Philadelphia has come into a new era of city planning.
Instead of zoning and building codes, she is using the power of eminent domain."*

John Stuart Carnes, Esq., January 28, 1959.

Transcripts of City Council Public Hearing on Society Hill Redevelopment.

Background Image: Typical Washington Square scene prior to redevelopment

Map: Proposed redevelopment land use map, including demolition plans.

DO YOU HAVE ANY STORIES OR MOMENTOS RELATED TO SOCIETY HILL'S REDEVELOPMENT?

THE SOCIETY HILL INTERPRETIVE EXHIBITION

Residential Before and After



In 1950, one quarter (24.1%) of all of the homes in Society Hill were without running water or indoor plumbing. (Survey Source: Cybriwsky 1986, p. 29). "Buildings were being torn down as part of urban renewal," David Stevens, a retired executive, said. "Part of the Food Distribution Center across the street had been torn down, and it was completely empty. At the corner, the vacant Mariners Church was ready to collapse. Behind us, there was one apartment house that was occupied." "It was a wasteland," he said. "Rats were running through the streets."

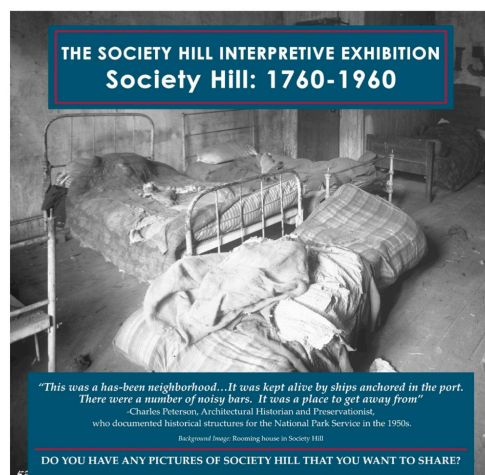
-Alan J. Heavens, Real Estate Writer, Source: Philadelphia Inquirer, Published: 2006-01-15

DO YOU HAVE ANY PICTURES, STORIES OR MEMENTOS RELATED TO LIVING IN AND RESTORING A SOCIETY HILL HOME?



Society Hill Interpretive Project

With this modest exhibit, the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks inaugurates a new project. Our aim is to present to a broad public, including Society Hill residents and visitors from everywhere, the full spectrum of the history of this district, especially beyond the colonial period. In this project, we ask for your help and contributions. If you or your family have connections, memories, photographs, experiences of Society Hill, we hope you will share them with us. We hope to tell the story not only of the buildings that remain as tangible evidence of the past, but of the individuals who made this a living community.



INTRODUCTION

To stroll along the streets of the Society Hill neighborhood is to imagine oneself stepping back through time into the 18th century. The stately churches, handsome townhouses and charming if modest "trinities" along with the street lamps designed by Benjamin Franklin powerfully evoke the city of the Founding Fathers. One almost expects to encounter Thomas Jefferson or John Adams, en route to Samuel Powel's house on 3rd St to enjoy one of his famous "sinful feasts" or to discuss the latest political developments.

At the same time, among the meticulously restored colonial buildings are many clearly of our own time. On almost every block, newer houses, respectful of the scale and material of their historic neighbors, partake of a frankly modern aesthetic, and at the northeast corner of the neighborhood, the three Society Hill Towers preside like watchful sentinels. Here and there too, are a few reminders of the area's complex evolution. In particular, three synagogues, the survivors of several dozen in the 19th century, recall the time when parts of Society Hill were a haven for Jewish immigrants.

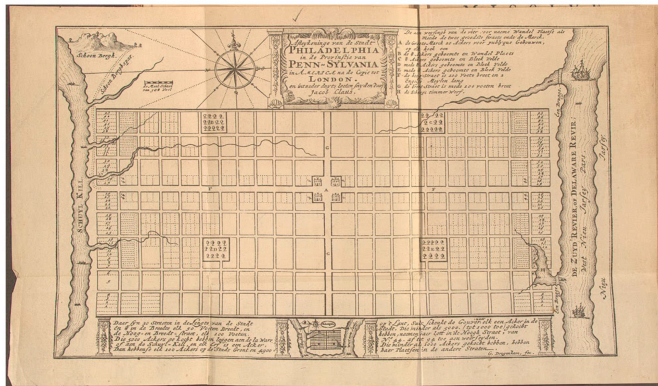
The name Society Hill originated in the 17th century, not as a description of an elite "society" neighborhood, but from the headquarters of the Free Society of Traders, located on Front St above Dock Creek (Dock St) overlooking the Delaware. The name was revived in 1947 by National Park Service architect Charles E. Peterson. In 1967, the National Register of Historic Places defined the Society Hill Historic District as extending from Walnut St south to Lombard and from Front St west to 8th



Photograph with assistance of Dr. David Browne

ORIGINS

Society Hill lies in the southeast quadrant of the original grid plan of streets designed by William Penn's surveyor Thomas Holme in 1682 and includes one of the four original neighborhood squares, now Washington Square (picture of Penn's plan). The hub of early Philadelphia, however, lay to the north, along the Delaware River front and extending a few blocks west along Market (originally High) St. For many years, houses in Society Hill were few and scattered. What today appear to be row houses were for the most part built one by one, and often stood by themselves, surrounded by empty land. Perhaps because a large plot was available, in 1732 the city built its public alms house or workhouse for the poor and infirm on the entire block between 3rd and 4th, Spruce and Pine. As late as 1776 according to one map Society Hill was still sparsely settled, most dense near the Delaware, and with a few institutional buildings.

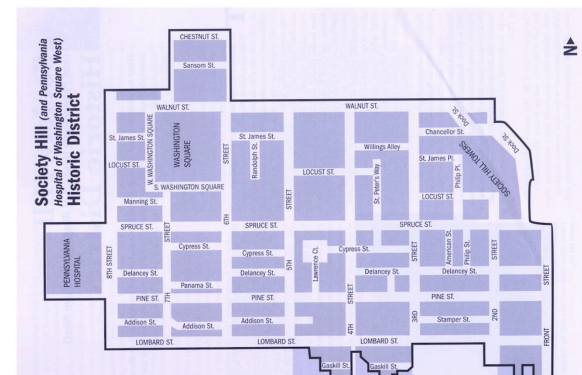


An important sign of the neighborhood's growing residential population, St. Peter's Anglican (now Episcopal) Church was constructed at 3rd and Pine (1758-61) for those parishioners of Christ Church, near Market and 2nd, who found the trek along muddy streets too arduous on Sunday mornings. By the later 18th century, clearly, wealthier Philadelphians were finding Society Hill an attractive place to build grand new houses, removed from the commercial bustle of Market St.

The William Bingham and the Henry Hills built imposing freestanding mansions surrounded by gardens, and Samuel Powel, twice mayor of Philadelphia, occupied a gracious townhouse. At the same time, this was not an exclusive upper class enclave. Some of the oldest surviving houses (1740s) are the most modest: narrow rowhouses of only two and a half stories - "trinities" in Philadelphia parlance - occupied by artisans and others of limited means. The demand for such modest housing was apparently so great that property owners colonized the interiors of blocks by creating small courtyards of tiny houses grouped around a common area. Drinker Court, 200 block Delancey St., constructed in 1765 by John Drinker behind his large house on Pine St, is perhaps the best surviving example.



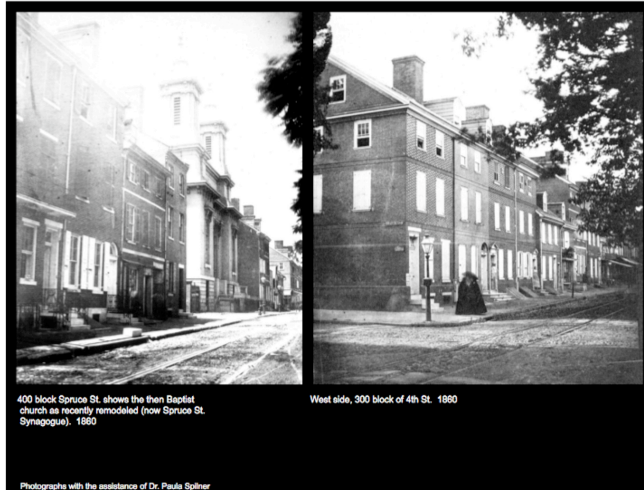
A City Directory of 1791 offers a glimpse of the inhabitants of some streets and is an important reminder that in this "walking, mercantile" society, working and living spaces typically overlapped. Among those living on Delancey (then Union) St., for example, were 5 bakers, 5 carpenters, 9 gentlewomen, 3 laborers, 8 sea captains and 3 tailors as well as a minister, a lawyer, a blacksmith, a printer, a porter, a writer, and one schoolmistress, the only woman to specify a profession.



CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Society Hill continued to develop well into the 19th century. In the late 1840s elegant Italianate townhouses in the fashionable new material of brownstone were constructed along 3rd St. And as late as 1888 the prominent architect Wilson Eyre updated a Federal period house on S. 3rd St with an English medieval revival facade more in keeping with contemporary taste.

By the eve of the Civil War, however, change was already evident, only to accelerate dramatically as the century drew to a close. As early as 1806, the fashionable 300 block of S. 3rd St saw the conversion of Bingham's imposing mansion into a public hotel. On the northern edge of the neighborhood, Walnut St became a prime location for office buildings, particularly for insurance companies. In 1856, the Lehigh Valley Railroad Company moved to a 5 story office building on the corner of Willings Alley and S. 3rd St., a few steps north of Powel House. The thriving port along the Delaware meant that the eastern boundary of Society Hill was more and more devoted to commercial activity with the construction of warehouses and other large scale facilities. Before the turn of the century, the Dock St area below 2nd became the wholesale food distribution market, which remained until the 1950s. Also, the residential city was moving west, beyond Broad St and even across the Schuylkill River as the development of street car lines made it feasible to live farther from the center of town. Moreover, the housing stock of Society Hill was aging and often lacked the amenities, such as indoor plumbing, now considered essential. As those who could afford to moved away, the neighborhood became conspicuously poorer.



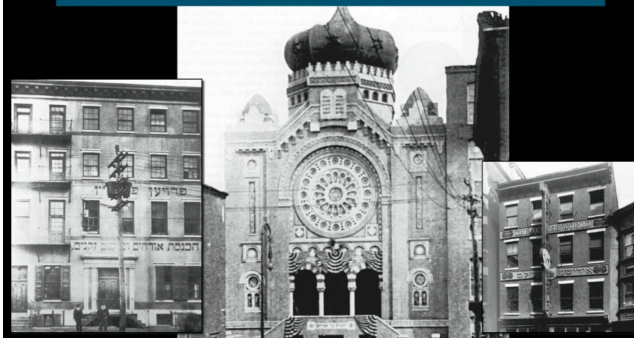
It was events far from Philadelphia, however, which quickened the rate of change in Society Hill. Philadelphia was by definition a city of immigrants, but the stream of newcomers became a flood after 1881, when the systematic persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe made escape imperative. Refugees from Russia and Poland, where the czar had carried out brutal "pogroms," took advantage of frequent steamship service from Liverpool to Philadelphia. Hundreds and eventually thousands, many of them essentially paupers, disembarked at the Emigrant Depot a few blocks south of Society Hill over the next several decades. Some stayed to settle in the immediate vicinity and created what came to be known as the Jewish quarter, centered on South St, but close to the center of the garment industry near Market St where many found work in the "sweatshops." Now Yiddish became the language of the colonial streets as the immigrants found homes in the old houses from South to Spruce Sts, started businesses, and established houses of worship. Although Society Hill had always accommodated craft and commerce as well as residences, this became more pronounced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The ground floors of many colonial brick facades were converted to commercial use with the installation of large storefront windows for the display of goods while the proprietor and his family lived upstairs. Other colonial structures were converted to rooming houses or used for small scale manufacturing or storage. For example, the house occupied by Congressman James Madison and his wife Dolley in the 1790's, became M. Feitelson and Sons, rag warehouse, with the installation of large double doors on the ground floor. Because Society Hill was a low-rent district, however, there was, as Richard Webster has pointed out, little demolition or rebuilding: "That left the material culture of an earlier era under galvanized iron shopfronts . . . to be uncovered



The Jewish Quarter

The Jewish quarter was in some respects a world unto itself, with many institutions serving the needs of the community. Anna Blitztein, for example, ran a private "immigrant bank" at 4th and Lombard from the 1890s to 1930. The Jewish World (Di Yidishe Velt, illustrated), published out of an office at 233 S. 5th St., was the most widely read Yiddish language newspaper in Philadelphia. Charitable organizations included The Sheltering Homes, as the home for the elderly and for recent immigrants were collectively known, located at 315-17 S. 3rd St. Several large synagogues served - and continue to serve - the residents of Society Hill and environs. Two are housed in former Christian churches, both historic structures left behind by congregations that had relocated. In 1889 a Jewish congregation, now Keshet Israel, acquired the Universalist Church, constructed in 1793. The Baptist church on Spruce St, designed in 1829 by T. U. Walter, architect of the United States Capitol Building and abandoned by its congregation in 1908, was purchased three years later by an Ashkenazic group and was known as the Great Romanian Synagogue from 1916 to 1967, when it became Society Hill Synagogue. B'nai Abraham, a primarily Russian congregation founded in 1882, constructed a magnificent Byzantine-Romanesque synagogue on Lombard St dedicated in 1910. Numerous other small synagogues are also documented, but have left no such impressive traces.

THE SOCIETY HILL INTERPRETIVE EXHIBITION Immigration, Religious Institutions and Jewish Life 1880-1930



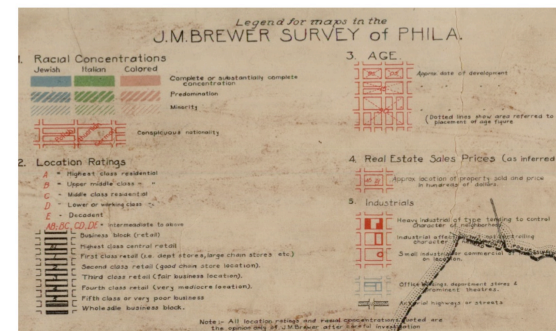
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-Harry D. Boonin, *The Jewish Quarter of Philadelphia A History and Guide 1881 - 1930*

Left image: Provided to us for the Jewish identity and newly arrived immigrants, the Sheltering Homes (Mischew, Zeytoun and Haddoussan Children) moved to 315-17 S. 3rd St. in 1908 with the financial support of Wolf Mischew, a manufacturer and noted philanthropist who lived nearby and owned Pennell House from 1908 to 1931.
Center image: Congregation B'nai Abraham, 521-27 Lombard St., as seen on the day of dedication, April 3, 1910. Founded in 1882 by Lithuanian immigrants, B'nai Abraham was for decades the soul of the Jewish community and built the magnificent new synagogue to house its growing congregation.
Right image: The Jewish World (Di Yidishe Velt), 233 S. 5th St., founded in 1914 "to serve the interests of the Jewish population generally and the inhabitants of the local Jewish population in particular," was the most popular Yiddish newspaper printed in Philadelphia.
CREDITS FOR ALL PHOTOGRAPHS: Harry D. Boonin, *The Jewish Quarter of Philadelphia, A History and Guide 1881-1930*, Philadelphia, 1995.

DEPRESSION AND DECAY

The spectacular stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression hit Society Hill hard. Real estate values plummeted and jobs disappeared. An unusual window into the Society Hill of the 1930s is provided by a map created by J. M. Brewer in 1934 that provided information about real estate conditions, presumably to local lenders, realtors, and appraisers. Brewer also served as a map consultant to Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), part of a Federal program established to stem the tide of mortgage defaults during the Depression. Of about 51,000 loans in Pennsylvania, HOLC made 15,000 of which were made in Philadelphia. Probably reflecting the population most vulnerable to foreclosure, HOLC made a disproportionate number of loans on its residential security maps and to African Americans, Jews, and immigrants, at least in Philadelphia. These were made in areas colored red in the later city surveys such as Brewers. Red was the color code for areas considered blighted. Brewer's map also provided information about the ethnic composition of the neighborhood



REDEVELOPMENT

This then was the dismal situation facing Society Hill residents immediately after WW II. Substandard, often dilapidated housing in a neighborhood that was sparsely populated compared to other areas of the city, even as middle class residents were abandoning downtown for the suburbs. Several converging movements and projects coalesced, however, into the creation of a new vision of Philadelphia, including the Society Hill area.

The first of these was a growing interest in protecting and preserving the “shrines” of American independence, especially the old Pennsylvania Statehouse now known as Independence Hall. The long gestation of this idea culminated in the authorization by act of Congress on January 20, 1948 of Independence National Historical park, including the eastern extension from 5th to 2nd Its, which abuts Society Hill at Walnut St. Recruited early on as an advisor to the project was National Park Service architect Charles E. Peterson (d. 2004) ,whose impressive credentials included launching the Historic American Buildings Survey, which documented thousands of historic structures during the 1930s. He was also probably the first to revive the long forgotten name “Society Hill,” in a 1947 speech calling attention to the historic importance of the neighborhood and calling for Park Service support of civic plans for the area.

The second important development was the reinvention of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission, which for years had been essentially moribund. In 1947-8, the CPC certified a number of areas for redevelopment, including the “Old City,” 350 acres from Vine to Lombard, and east of 7th. Numbers tell a tale: with only 940 dwelling units, the population of this area was only 3680, with a density of only slightly more than 10 per acre. Clearly much of Society Hill had been turned to other than residential uses.

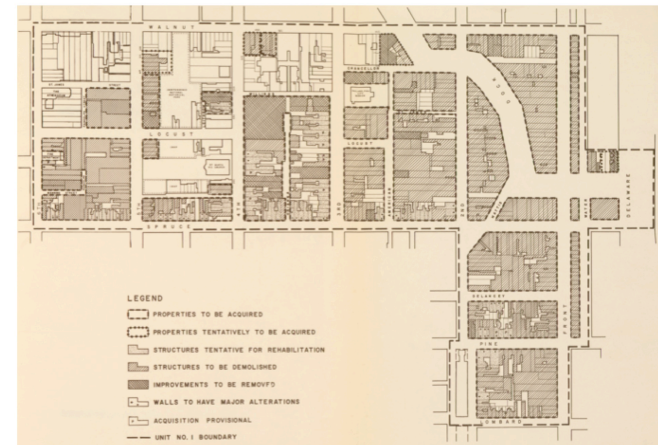
One of the most vocal champions of the reinvention of Society Hill was a member of the Planning Commission staff, Edmund Bacon (d. 2005). Even in the early stages of planning for the National Park, Bacon had lobbied for the inclusion of the blocks from Walnut to Lombard, with their concentration of 18th and early 19th c. structures. Though this was not to be, Bacon was not deterred. Working with the newly constituted Redevelopment Authority, whose powers included the ability to acquire private property through eminent domain, Bacon and the Planning Commission outlined a project to preserve the area south of Walnut and east of 5th as a “historic residence section.” This would entail

- 1) the repair and renovation of all architecturally significant houses for modern living, preserving their 18th c. character
- 2) the removal of heavy commercial and industrial activities, including the wholesale food market
- 3) the construction of new apartment houses “designed in harmony with the older buildings.”



In 1947, in other words, the entire program for the redevelopment of Society Hill had been laid out. In 1949, Bacon was appointed Executive Director of CPC, a position from which he would vigorously pursue these goals. And they were astonishingly radical goals for this period. As Bacon pointed out in a 1949 speech, Federal redevelopment legislation was “curiously negative in character. They provide only for the clear of areas for tearing buildings down.” Bacon on the other hand advocated rehabilitation and restoration of historic structures and their adaptation to the requirements of modern life, even as new construction should “relate strongly and clearly to the neighborhood of which they are a part.”

The final and crucial change that made Society Hill redevelopment feasible was the reform movement that transformed Philadelphia's politics in the early 1950s after decades of “corrupt and contented” Republican control. Among other reforms, the City Planning Commission became the agency in charge of setting priorities for the city's long term development and gained direct control of expenditures in this process. Finally, reform Mayor Richardson Dilworth, elected in 1955, formally endorsed the restoration of Society Hill as being “of critical importance” and formed the Old Philadelphia Redevelopment Corporation in 1956 to serve as the official developer of Society Hill according to plans approved by the City Planning Commission. Dilworth himself would soon move to a house on Washington Square, a personal endorsement of the viability of the neighborhood.



Selective “surgical” demolition also made way for one of the most innovative aspects of present day Society Hill, the system of “historic pathways” or “green ways” which Bacon regarded as an integral element of the neighborhood. These intimate pedestrian walkways thread through the centers of blocks from Walnut to Pine Sts, carved out of rights of way and private property to create a new system of movement. Key to their organization is their relationship to important individual historic structures, to give them, as Bacon put it, “a focus and to focus attention on them.” Thus, for example, the spire of St. Peter's Church is visible from Bingham Court several blocks to the north, and seems to beckon one onward along the walkway that connects them.

The final issue is what happened to the several hundred historic houses deemed significant and worthy of rehabilitation. Through its powers of condemnation through eminent domain, the Redevelopment Authority had the power to gain control of any property deemed worthy of restoration. The architectural firm of Wright, Andrade and Amenta undertook a house by house survey, identifying some buildings to be preserved and others to be removed. The architect Preston Andrade drew up rigorous guidelines and standards for the restoration of each house to its original appearance. Bacon's declared goal was to persuade and enable as many of the original owners as possible to retain their houses, on the condition that they undertake restoration in accordance with official guidelines. Perhaps surprisingly, many did, even though the cost of restoration was estimated at \$25,000 to \$30,000. In the area below Spruce St for example, about 230 houses were declared in need of restoration work; of these, 170 were claimed by their owners.



When the owners were financially unable or unwilling to undertake the required improvements, new owners were sought. Bacon personally “tried to entice, for example, the descendants of colonial families to reestablish connections with the neighborhood of the ancestors.” As he recalled in a 1988 interview:

“I took women down there on trips. . . to get them to change their attitude and become interested. . . . In order to make the whole thing work you had to create conditions which would attract the rich. Because economically it could only be done by. . . individuals being motivated to buy the properties themselves and put their own labor, love and money into fixing them up.”

Similarly, Charles Peterson, who had moved to the neighborhood in 1954, also promoted Society Hill, showing off the area to friends, some of whom bought houses.

New owners who accepted the challenge of rehabilitation, had first to pass muster with the Old Philadelphia Development Corporation, which acted as realtor. Sales included a legally binding covenant spelling out the new owner's responsibility for restoration. The selection process was rigorous: prospective buyers had to demonstrate financial means and a commitment to live in the neighborhood. Single family use was highly preferred and speculators were not welcome. Gaining ownership of a historic house was only the first step, of course. Maureen Murdoch, first president of the Society Hill Area Residents Association, bought a 1792 house on Delancey St in 1956. In 1988 she recalled doing “much of the work myself. . . . The biggest problem was the brown paint that covered the entire interior to what seemed to be a thickness of an inch or two. It took a lot of elbow grease to get down to the wood and proceed from there.” The wood, however, proved to be the original work of Robert Welford, whose work is now collected by museums.



As the redevelopment project progressed, it became eminently clear that preserving the historic fabric of the neighborhood entailed changing fundamentally its social and economic character. And there lies the crux of a problem. Many owners whose properties were slated for rehabilitation simply could not afford to undertake the required work and thus were in effect forced out of their homes. Especially vulnerable were renters, whose landlords had no stake in keeping them in place. Even the Octavia Hill Association, whose mission was to provide housing to the urban poor, agreed to evict tenants from its property near Lombard St. The tenants, however, stood their ground. A lawsuit filed on behalf of seven Octavia Hill tenants succeeded in requiring the inclusion of low-income housing within the redevelopment area. As one of the original parties to the suit, Dorothy Miller, an African American who grew up in Society Hill, reflected on her experiences in a 2004 interview: "They were pushing people out and we didn't understand till they got to Lombard Street and tried to push us out, too. I had never dreamed such a thing - that I would have to stand up before a group of people and defend ourselves because we wanted decent places to live in."

Similarly, because commercial and retail uses were restricted to only a few designated sites many residents who had served the community for years were effectively forced to relocate or abandon their businesses. Mr and Mrs Koss, life-long residents and proprietors of a barbershop on Spruce St., were among those who pleaded to be allowed to continue their business, to no avail. At least the Koss family was able to stay and rehabilitate their house, marked to this very day by a diminutive barber pole.

Society Hill's growing pains pitted affluent against poor

GENTRIFIED from G13 who was respectable actually living in this area was totally unknown," Bacon said. "I commenced a campaign with the rich and the powerful that it had to be revived and could be revived."

He remembers bringing those rich and powerful to stroll through the neighborhood.

"We'd walk past the dead cats, step over the garbage and trash," Bacon said. "Amidst all this trash and moldering piles we had about five rehabbed houses. The effort was all to communicate the idea that you guys could live down here."



PETER TOBIA / Inquirer Staff Photographer
Dorothy Miller, who grew up in the area and still lives there, fought the eviction of poor residents during Society Hill's gentrification. Her lawsuit led to the creation of low-income

Walnut and Lombard Streets became developed, older residents began to gather their wits about them.

In the early 1970s, they finally took a stand and sued to block evictions and force the building of low-income subsidized housing.

It turned into a nasty fight, rife with racial overtones. Many of the poor were black, although most of those evicted in the two decades had been working-class Polish, German, Irish and Jewish residents.

Dorothy Miller, who grew up at 615 Lombard St., led the last-ditch effort for poorer residents.

