

# ON THE WEST SIDE

THE UNIVERSITY CITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



July/August 2021

<http://www.uchs.net>

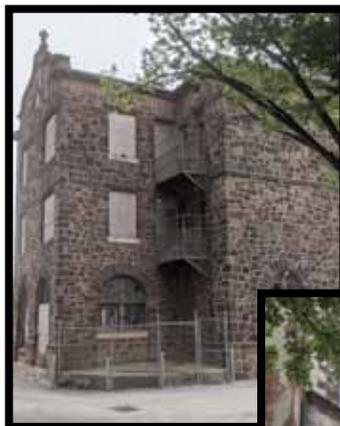
Joseph Minardi, Editor

## UCHS Tours Site of Stephen Smith Home and former Olive Cemetery

On May 16th, UCHS Board Members were treated to a special tour of the small neighborhood in West Philadelphia bounded by Lancaster Girard and Belmont Avenues that occupies the site of the former Olive Cemetery.

Neighborhood resident and expert tour guide Joseph Becton, expounded on the history of one of Philadelphia's most renowned abolitionists and early Black philanthropists, Stephen Smith (1795-1873). In 1865 Stephen Smith contributed a large sum for the establishment of the institution that would eventually become the Stephen Smith Home for Aged. Smith served as a board member and vice president of the institution, which relocated to its current campus at the intersection of Girard and Belmont Avenues shortly after his death.

The Stephen Smith Home for Aged still occupies the site, albeit in a more modern (and less architecturally distinct) building. A small portion of the original complex, the infirmary building, with its brownstone façade and Flemish gable end, remains vacant and susceptible to demolition by neglect. UCHS seeks to preserve this important piece of United States history by listing the building on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.



When the African American burial ground known as Olive Cemetery closed in 1923, graves were relocated to Eden Cemetery in Collingdale. The neighborhood we see today, including the Blankenburg Elementary school, was constructed in its place. UCHS was given an inside look of the neighborhood's rich history, replete with stories of famous jazz musicians, the now defunct Shanahan Catholic Club, Clara Muhammad Square, Our Mother of Sorrows Catholic Church, and the handsome Fire House of Engine No. 16, which closed in 1968 but was recently partially restored. UCHS thanks Joe Becton for his insight and passion for this incredible place. UCHS looks forward to offering UCHS members a tour of this unique neighborhood in the coming year.



*Photos by George Poulin.*

## UCHS Garden Tour Wrap Up

On Saturday, May 22nd, we held a Spring Garden Tour of Powelton Village. It was a lovely day and we had 155 people who purchased tickets for the event. Proceeds of the Garden Tour help support preservation initiatives in West Philadelphia. A special thanks to all of the garden hosts who shared their home and community gardens. We had a total of 20 gardens included in the tour. We also thank Cornerstone Bed & Breakfast who offered a wonderful rest point and array of refreshments for our guests. In addition we'd like to extend a hearty thanks to our volunteers for their help in making the day a success. We hope everyone who participated enjoyed the day.



*Just a few highlights from the UCHS Garden Tour of May 22nd. Photos by Joseph Minardi.*



# West Philadelphia Interiors Project

We have collected 153 images for the West Philadelphia Interiors Project. Thank you to everyone who has contributed! We are extending the submission period through the summer so there is still time to send in your images. We are asking residents of West Philadelphia to photograph interesting interior architectural features in your home so that we may better promote historic awareness within our community, create buzz around preservation, and to catalogue interior details specific to certain builders, architects, and time periods. We are seeking details of all types and styles. No detail is too modest.

We will be sending out a member email reminding folks how you can submit the photos. We have a Drexel graduate student of the Library and Information Science program who is working on cataloguing the images and creating a searchable database on our website through this summer as her capstone project.



# Our Lady of the Rosary Church Facing Demolition

Our Lady of the Rosary Church (1887), located at 63rd and Callowhill Streets, has been a landmark in the West Philadelphia community for over 132 years. The venerable Romanesque church was designed by noted architect Frank R. Watson (1859-1940) who is credited with many church designs. But now Our Lady of the Rosary is facing demolition. A demolition permit was issued by the Department of L&I on April 28, 2021. Without warning, a notice of demolition was posted on the front doors to the church. As this story reached the news, the demolition notice disappeared instantly. Residents in the West Philadelphia community have no knowledge that this church is being demolished. Community and Local Civic Associations were not aware of this planned demolition. Neighbors around the church never knew that demolition was coming to their neighborhoods.

In 2019, the church was nominated for inclusion to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, which was supported by UCHS. The church met all criteria for historical designation, yet was denied, because the owners of the church, Boys' Latin of Philadelphia, fought against the church and argued that the church would be renovated as a gym, serving both the school community and local community. The UCHS also encouraged adaptive reuse when the nomination failed. Community members from the Haddington, Morris Park and Cathedral Park neighborhood have filed an appeal of the demolition permit. UCHS supports these community efforts. A vacant lot is planned for this site. We are sad to learn of the impending demolition of this historic asset by Boys' Latin.

UCHS is acutely aware of the threat to West Philadelphia's sacred places, often the most monumental structures within the community. To date UCHS has been successful in adding Metropolitan Baptist Church (3500 Baring), Mt. Pleasant Primitive Baptist (435 N. 8th), Christ Community Church of Philadelphia (4017 Chestnut), and the West Philadelphia Friends Meetinghouse (3500 Lancaster) to the Philadelphia Register of Historical Places.

We would like to share the following information regarding a petition created by concerned neighbors in solidarity with those who were blind sided by its demolition. You can help by signing the petition against the demolition of this historic church. Go to [Change.org](http://Change.org) and enter Our Lady of Rosary in the search engine. You can also contribute money for the cause if you please.

*Church of Our Lady of the Rosary, 339 North 63rd Street, seen here in September of 1931 with its belfry still intact. Courtesy of the City of Philadelphia Department of Records.*



# Member News

Welcome to 2021's  
New and Restored Members:

Deirdre Aaron  
Fred Allen Barfoot  
Murray & Libby Dubin & Rosof  
Jacob Gantz  
Jeanette Gillison  
Ivy Gray-Klein  
Ann Kell  
Elaine Lander  
Anita McKelvey  
Julie Orts  
Martin Seligman  
Charles A. Thrall & Sally A. Simmons  
Carrie Waterman  
Jeffrey Young  
Randy Zauhar & Jenny Yu

## 2021 Donations to UCHS – Thank You!

Eric Cohen & Anne Pomerantz  
Robert Glorioso  
Michael D. Hardy & Barry L. Grossbach  
Maureen Tate  
Marianna Thomas

### Questions? Ideas?

Interested in working with the Membership Committee?

Contact us at [info@UCHS.net](mailto:info@UCHS.net)

## “Old” versus “Antique”

A basic question confronting you, the owner of an elderly house, is how to best rehabilitate or restore it within the limits of our time and budget. An analogy with furniture can be useful: some pieces of furniture are “old” while others are “antiques.” These two words, “old” and “antique,” denote two opposite ways of regarding and dealing with the same object, and can apply to houses as well as to furniture.

“Old” is a pejorative. “Old” is outmoded, dilapidated, unfashionable, and shabby. “Old” is an affliction to be cured by repair, modernization, and renewal.

“Antique,” on the other hand, carries more positive connotations. “Antique” objects have patina; they are heirlooms, charming, precious, rare, beautiful, unique, and full of character. They are appreciated, cherished, conserved, invested in, and, occasionally, restored.

A curious but significant result of dealing with our chest as though it were merely old is that doing so will severely compromise its chances of ever being seen as an antique: When an object receives new hardware or a new finish, to say nothing of when it is rendered into firewood, its antique value is drastically reduced, and it is frequently left useless as well.

Similar things happen to houses. Few old houses can safely lay claim to being antiques in the same exact sense as a fine old chest of drawers which has been used and cared for lovingly over generations. Most houses have all too often been subjected to the questionable values of modernization: the deliberate destruction of one character in favor of another, more recent one. Yet some buildings have survived almost unmodified or with the modifications made long ago and with great care, and so can justifiably claim to be real antiques.

# Ask the Experts

## LATH QUESTIONS

**Q:** I need to replace interior plaster in my old house. When I had the plastering contractor in to estimate the job, he said I would have to replace the sawn wood lath with rock or wire lath. I would like to retain the old lath if possible, feeling it is part of the original fabric of my house.

**Is it really necessary to replace it?**

**A:** Most plasterers, not without reason, are wary of replastering directly on old wood lath. The dry lath will absorb water out of the plaster before it has cured, causing a weak set, and the resultant expansion of the wood can cause cracking of the plaster. (In the original application this problem was avoided by soaking the lath before it was used.) As a result, most contractors opt for wire lath, which is either fastened directly to the joist or studs or simply tacked over the wood lath.

Still, if your original lath is sound and attached firmly, there's no reason for not reusing it. Just make sure that it's thoroughly damp before the plaster goes on. This can be done with a simple pump-spray bottle. Start a day or two ahead of the first plaster coat; this gives the wood time to absorb the water and expand a little. The lath shouldn't be dripping, just not drinking up the water anymore.

The other alternative is to coat the lath with a masonry bonding agent, available from most supply houses. This is fast-drying latex which brushes on easily. It forms a firm bond with the plaster and seals the wood from absorbing water.

From *The Old-House Journal*, May 1981.



## West Philly Through the Lens 4600 BLOCK OF LOCUST STREET, 1914



Joseph Minardi photo collection.



## VICTORIAN PAINTED WOODWORK THE 1890 TO 1900 PERIOD

In the previous issue of On The West Side we looked at Victorian-era painted woodwork from the 1870 to 1890 period. Now we will take a look at the late-Victorian period of the 1890s.

The treatment of woodwork during this period reflected the reform philosophy of simplification. Until the 1870s, grained woodwork had been the preferred finish, followed by woodwork painted a hue generally the same as the walls but darker. Eastlake and the reformers of the Arts and Crafts Movement disapproved of “dishonest” grained finishes and advocated staining and varnishing hardwoods or painting softwoods in tertiary colors that contrasted with the walls. By the 1890s, the reform philosophy wholly condemned the fakery of grained woodwork. Critics favoring the Craftsman interior recommended stained and varnished woodwork, particularly for rooms on the first floor of the house. Critics favoring revival styles urged painted woodwork, particularly for French and Colonial interiors. Natural wood might be suitable for dining rooms or halls, often furnished in different styles, but never in the drawing rooms or bedrooms; “white woodwork with a highly-polished surface is gaining in public favors,” *House Painting and Decorating* assured its audience. The same magazine, favoring the revival styles, alerted readers that the time was past “When varnish alone was considered to convey a title of respectability and when painted interior woodwork was supposed to be a sure indication of poverty and social inferiority, for now even the richest and most favored socially dare to paint their woodwork, if it suits them best to do so.” Exponents of both Craftsman and revival styles accepted painted woodwork in bedrooms, kitchens, and bathrooms for its sanitary qualities.

Picture rails could be placed next to the ceiling molding or below the frieze, if the room had one. While larger pictures still hung from exposed cords, smaller ones often hung from screws hidden behind them on the wall, the latter marking the beginning of modern picture-hanging technique.

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From *Victorian Interior Decoration, American Interiors 1830-1900*. Gail Caskey Winkler and Roger W. Moss, 1986.



Woodwork from house on 45th St. Photos by Joseph Minardi

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