

ON THE WEST SIDE

THE UNIVERSITY CITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



March/April 2021

<http://www.uchs.net>

Joseph Minardi, Editor

UCHS Spring Garden Tour, Save the Date!

Featuring more than a dozen gardens in Powelton Village

The ongoing pandemic may preclude indoor house tours, but that won't stop us from showcasing the amazing architecture and private garden spaces of West Philadelphia.



Saturday May 22nd (Rain Date May 23rd) Time TBD

\$15 for Members/ \$25 for Non Members

RSVP at uchs.wildapricot.org/events

Stay tuned for additional updates

Save the date!



Powelton Village Moves Ahead with Historic District

At a special February virtual meeting attended by more than 100 residents, the Powelton Village Civic Association (PVCA) voted to authorize funds for the preparation of a nomination to create a local historic district. The vote comes after nearly a year of ongoing discussions to engage with neighbors, local stakeholders, and potential partners to weigh the pros and cons of historic designation. With 97% of eligible attendees voting in favor, the PVCA will engage a team led by Kathy Dowdell of Farragut Street Architects to proceed with the nomination with the goal of having it submitted to the City by the close of 2021.

In September of 2020, the PVCA released an RFP soliciting proposals from qualified consultants to prepare the nomination. The RFP was released prior to having neighborhood support for the designation with the intent of knowing the full cost prior to taking a vote on whether to proceed. Although the staff of the Historical Commission does have the ability to author district nominations, the limited staff resources and the current backlog of the Historical Commission led the PVCA to consider funding their own nomination. Having received proposals from five qualified consulting teams, Farragut Street Architects was selected based on team member qualifications, local knowledge of the neighborhood, and ability to engage with the community, among other factors.

Powelton Village is undoubtedly worthy of historic designation. Several dozen properties within the neighborhood are already individually listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, but many more remain unlisted. With dozens of homes of architectural significance built by the movers and shakers of Philadelphia in the late 19th century, Powelton Village remains remarkably intact despite the tremendous pressures of development caused by local real estate speculation, the growth of Drexel University, and massive redevelopment projects such as uCity Square and Schuylkill Yards. Like many Philadelphia neighborhoods, Powelton Village has seen both interest from homeowners looking to live in this vibrant neighborhood, but also many foreign investors

with little appreciation of the neighborhood's history. Beyond the 19th century architecture, the PVCA hopes that the nomination will also be able to capture the incredible social history of the neighborhood from the middle of the 20th century when Powelton Village was both known as the center of the counterculture movement in Philadelphia and one of the earliest integrated neighborhoods in the City.

In 2017, an ordinance was enacted to create the Powelton Village Neighborhood Conservation Overlay (PV NCO). This overlay created form controls for new construction and major renovations to require that features such as porches and cornices be included where the property it is attached to does as well. The overlay also regulates the size of windows and prohibits certain materials, such as vinyl siding or unpainted pressure treated lumber. Although the PV NCO has been helpful, like many things in the City of Philadelphia, it has proven to be an imperfect tool. L&I reviewers have frequently disregarded the provisions of the PV NCO and many renovations such as window replacements don't require a permit and therefore fly under the radar of the City. At the time of the enactment of the PV NCO in 2017, historic designation was not seen as being a politically viable option.

This step marks an important milestone for Powelton Village and West Philadelphia. The PVCA is cognizant that other West Philadelphia neighborhoods, such as Garden Court and Spruce Hill, are monitoring this process with interest. The Powelton Village Historic District will include approximately 900 properties, with boundaries largely consistent with the 1985 National Register District subject to relevancy with the selected criteria for designation.

UCHS would like to offer a special thanks to members Mark Brack, Debra McCarty, Helma Weeks, and George Poulin who participated in the Powelton Village Historic Preservation committee to lead the charge for this effort. Stay tuned for additional updates as the nomination progresses.

West Philadelphia Interiors Project

CALLING FOR PHOTO SUBMISSIONS! UCHS is excited to announce the launch of our West Philadelphia Interiors Project. 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 and a buzz around preservation interest.

CALL FOR PHOTO ENTRIES!



We will be announcing submission details on **April 1st**. Once all images are submitted, UCHS plans to partner with students enrolled in the Library and Information Science program at Drexel University to catalogue the images.



Ask the Experts

WAX WORRIES

Q: In our Victorian house the floors under the area rugs put down by the previous owner are lighter than the rest of the floor. Is there a safe way to remove the old wax from these floors without damaging the patina?

A: All floors which are waxed need to be periodically stripped of built-up old wax and dirt before rewaxing. Use any commercial wax remover, as long as it is specified for use on wood floors, not tile or linoleum.

You will notice, after the floor, that there will be spots and some discoloration. These are probably water stains, or the result of some other agent having penetrated so deeply into the wood that no amount of cleaning will remove them. You will also find that there are some floorboards which have deteriorated or have been so abused that they are no longer serviceable. You will undoubtedly have to deal with conditions such as splintering, nail holes, holes from pipes, termites, or excessive wear. If you feel you cannot accept certain of these stains and signs of age as marks or character, or if they are hazardous, the affected boards will have to be removed.

From *The Old-House Journal*, February/November 1981.

Book Talk Recap

We at UCHS would like to thank everyone who participated in our recent book talk series featuring the new books by Dr. Whitney Martinko (*Historic Real Estate*) and Joseph Minardi (*City of Neighborhoods*). Both talks were fun and informative and were followed by a question and answer session. Due to the continuing pandemic, the book talks were virtual events via Zoom. We really appreciate the authors sharing their books and insights with our membership and hope to do more book talks in the near future.

Member News

Welcome to 2021's
New and Restored Members:

Fred Allen Barfoot
Jeanette Gillison
Ivy Gray-Klein
Anita McKelvey
Charles A. Thrall & Sally A. Simmons

2021 Donations to UCHS – Thank You!

UCHS extends our sincere gratitude to Mike Hardy and Barry Grossbach for their recent generous donation of \$5,000. This unrestricted donation will support our organization's mission to advocate for the preservation of the history, architecture and cultural heritage of West Philadelphia. This donation provides resources for UCHS to continue funding efforts to protect vulnerable properties through listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, uncover stories of important cultural figures, and to highlight the incredible history of our neighborhood. Many will recognize Mike Hardy as the long-time President of UCHS. We would not be where we are today without the generosity of Mike and Barry, and we are incredibly grateful for their trust and support.

In Remembrance - Joe Moloznik

Joe Moloznik passed away on January 8, 2021. Joe, along with his wife Betty, was an early member and long-time supporter of UCHS. The entire UCHS family offers our sincere condolences to the Moloznik family and friends in West Philadelphia and beyond.



Questions? Ideas?
Interested to work with the Membership Committee?
Contact us at info@UCHS.net

West Philly Through the Lens WALNUT STREET EAST OF 36TH STREET, 1907



Joseph Minardi photo collection.

UCHS Recommended Reading: Historic Real Estate: Market Morality and the Politics of Preservation in the Early United States

We know that UCHS members love to read about our neighborhood's rich history, and when a good book comes along, we'll make a recommendation for an addition to your library.

Dr. Whitney Martinko, an associate professor of History at Villanova University, recently gave a virtual talk for the University City Historical Society about her new book *Historic Real Estate: Market Morality and the Politics of Preservation in the United States* (Penn Press, 2020). She was nice enough to grant us an interview about this wonderful book and about herself.

UCHS: How long have you been living in University City?

Whitney Martinko: I have lived in the Cedar Park neighborhood of University City since 2016.

UCHS: What made you choose University City as a place to live?

WM: When I got hired as a professor at Villanova in 2013, I moved to Center City because I had loved living there for a year when I was a visiting fellow at Penn. It was also convenient to take public transit to work. I quickly made several good friends who lived in West Philly. When I wanted to put down more permanent roots in 2016, I looked to University City as a place where I could live near friends, enjoy porch life and nearby green space, and enjoy a historic yet vibrant neighborhood.

UCHS: What was your inspiration for writing the book?

WM: My inspiration for writing the book came in graduate school when I kept finding historical documents that contradicted histories of preservation. Most studies that I read said that Americans did not really care to save old buildings until the 1850s, when Americans started to appreciate the past more in the face of rapid economic change and political turmoil that would lead to Civil War. However, in doing research about various topics in graduate school, I kept finding evidence that residents of many localities cared deeply about keeping historic sites standing in their communities—even if they weren't always successful. I decided to write a book that took a comprehensive look at these efforts between the American Revolution and the U.S. Civil War.

UCHS: What was the most surprising fact you found in researching the book?

WM: I think that I was surprised by just how common debates about the fate of historic structures were in the early United States. My book is full of a surprising array of characters, such as Abraham Touro, a Jewish philanthropist; Stephen Gould, a Quaker artisan and antiquarian; Payton Stewart, an African American salesman of secondhand clothes; John Doyle, an Irish tavernkeeper; Mary and Catherine Byles, spinster sisters who proclaimed loyalty to the British crown decades after the Revolution; Thomas Commuck, a member of the Brothertown Indian Nation; and Eliza Leslie, a writer best known for her cookbooks.

UCHS: What is the biggest take-away you want your readers to have?

WM: Historic preservation is—and always has been—so much richer than listing a building on a local or national historic register. Ameri-

cans did not invent historic preservation, and they constantly defined their projects in conversation and comparison with European projects. But early Americans did debate the fate of buildings to work out how they wanted to bring into being some conception of “public good” at a moment when a capitalist economy was expanding. This founding narrative is important because it shows that the United States is not some fundamentally “forward-looking” nation where people who preserved evidence of the past were somehow outside of the mainstream or trying to stop economic development or operate out of nostalgia.

At the same time, it's important to see the motives and consequences of early advocates of preservation with clear eyes in the context of their times. Too often, we refer to these individuals as “saviors” of buildings or “ahead of their time,” but in fact the motives and actions that led them to preserve historic structures often served as a means of exclusion, erasure, removal, or personal profit at the expense of others.

UCHS: What preservation issues from the past are relevant for today's preservationists?

WM: I think this new history of preservation shows that how we define preservation is a way of defining what sort of economic and social values we subscribe to. When we think about “the public good” of preservation, we should be thinking about who we hire, how much we pay, who we invite to the table, and why exactly we think that a certain building should stand the test of time and how. In Philadelphia, we are facing a crisis of demolition in the built environment, but I think that we are also facing a crisis of inequality in the whiteness, wealth, and labor

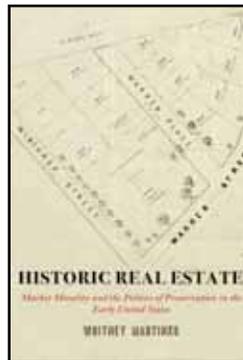
practices of preservation today. Looking to the past should remind us that we ourselves are historic actors, and we have the power to confront these challenges of preservation. To my mind, fields of sustainability, maintenance, environmental justice, and a feminist ethics of care offer historic preservation ways to address its problematic historical legacies and envision a more broadly inclusive vision of “the public” in preservation.

UCHS: Who do you feel is the book's target audience?

WM: The book is certainly an academic book in the sense that it engages with scholarship about architectural history as well as histories of capitalism and early American culture. But I wrote it with the hope that readers interested in historic sites or early American history would pick it up and find it interesting. There is a lot of Philadelphia content for readers interested in the history of sites such as Independence Hall, William Penn's supposed homes like Letitia House, and the Woodlands Cemetery. The book opens with an Onion article about Philadelphia too! It's not very good at writing books on spec, finishing something and then going into the market place, manuscript in hand, looking for a buyer.

We'd like to thank Dr. Martinko for contributing to our Recommend Reading article. For more information about the book and how to order a copy for yourself, click the link below:

<https://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/16099.html>



Cover of *Historic Real Estate* by Whitney Martinko



NOTES ON WOOD FINISH FROM 1882

The following article was written by William B. Tuthill (1855-1929), an American architect noted for designing Carnegie Hall in New York City as well as a number of other important buildings in New York and New Jersey. The article on wood finish was taken from his comprehensive guide on interior details. This book would have served as a practical guide for contemporary architects, carpenters, and builders and remains a fine resource for historians, preservationists, and Victorian home restorers.

“A great part of the effect of any piece of decorative woodwork depends upon the description and method of its ultimate finish.

Variety and differences of tone, contrasts between the natural color and that which can be legitimately given, enrichment of plainer and emphasis to the more naturally beautiful woods, effects which can be almost endlessly varied, may be obtained by simple mechanical treatment.

From the following memoranda, collected from various sources, many suggestions may be taken.

The woods in general use for the construction and finish (including furniture) of houses may be classed as follows:

For General Construction, -Pine, oak, whitewood, chestnut, ash, spruce, sycamore.

For Ordinary Finish, -Beech, birch, cedar, cherry, pine, whitewood.

For Best Finish, -Cherry, mahogany, maple, oak, rosewood, satinwood, sandal wood, chestnut, cedar, tulip wood, walnut, ebony, butternut, white mahogany.

The better known woods are classified according to the properties for which they are most valued, as follows:

Elasticity, -Ash, hazel, hickory, lance wood, chestnut, snake wood, yew.

Elasticity and Toughness, - Beech, elm, lignumvitae, oak, walnut, hornbeam.

Even Grain (for carving and engraving), - Pear, pine, box, lime tree.

Durability (in dry work), - Cedar, oak, poplar, yellow pine, (Exposed to weather)-Chestnut, larch, and locust.

Coloring Matters. *Red*-Brazil wood, camwood, logwood, red sanders, sapan wood. *Yellow*, -Fustic, Zante.

Scent, -Camphor wood, cedar, rosewood, sandal wood, satinwood, sassafras.

There are several imported woods which are used only decoratively, such as amaranth, amboyna, zebra wood.

The woods best adapted for ebonizing are given variously by different authorities; among them may be mentioned, pear, holly, beech, chestnut, cherry, sycamore, plane.

The woods most commonly used for inlaying are, ebony, box, palm, bird's eye maple, beech, satinwood, sandalwood, holly.

Veneers are cut from most hard woods, especially the more costly. The burs or gnarls of hardwood trees give beautiful veneers on account of the irregularity of the grain. The junction of large roots and large branches with the trunk of the tree also gives good veneers. Of this class is the French walnut, Hungarian ash, etc.”

William B. Tuthill,

Published by William T. Comstock, New York, 1882