

# ON THE WEST SIDE

THE UNIVERSITY CITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



January/February, 2014

<http://www.uchs.net>

Joseph Minardi, Editor

## UCHS Valentine Tea & Awards Presentation 2014

Feb. 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 4:00 to 6:00, 48th & Springfield

The UCHS will be presenting another slate of awards on Sunday, **February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014** from **4:00 to 6:00** at the Castle, 930 South 48th (48th and Springfield). As with our past Awards Teas, there will be a wide array of tea, desserts, pastries, and petite sandwiches. And as per usual, the UCHS will be handing out a number of awards to worthy neighbors who have done their part to beautify and improve their homes and surroundings. The event is free to all UCHS members and is an opportunity to meet with members of the University City community and partake of some delicious homemade sweets and delectables. As with all UCHS events, items such as mugs, posters, and books will be available for purchase.

Please contact the UCHS to inform us of anyone you know who has performed a superior restoration or renovation job during the previous year for our Gift to the Streets Award, Outstanding Preservation Award, or Preservation Initiative Award. And feel free to nominate yourself at [info@UCHS.net](mailto:info@UCHS.net).

*Food, fun, and friends on tap for the 2014 UCHS Valentine Tea & Awards Presentation. Photos by Joseph Minardi.*



## NEW BOOK TELLS TALE OF WEST PHILLY SURVIVOR IN ALASKAN YUKON

Growing up on the streets of West Philadelphia prepares a person for many of life's challenges, but nothing Leon Crane experienced in his neighborhood of 54th and Baltimore Ave. could have prepared him for his harrowing tale of survival in the Alaskan Yukon. As author Brian Murphy tells it, "Crane didn't see himself as a hero. That's just how people were back then. After the War, they wanted to get back to everyday life."

Mr. Murphy is currently working on a book about Lt. Crane's 80 days of survival after his B-24 crashed in the remote area of Alaska on Christmas Day, 1943. Of the plane's five-man crew, Crane was the only survivor. Murphy, not really a World War II buff, got hooked on the story when he read a press release about a Pentagon cold case unit finding human remains of the missing crew members in 2007. The story mentioned Lt. Crane and told of his amazing tale of survival. That story sent Brian Murphy to research further into how Crane survived and his early years growing up in West Philadelphia.

Leon Crane was born in 1919 and lived at 5464 Baltimore Avenue. His parents, who worked for Quaker State Auctions, emigrated from the Ukraine around 1902 and eventually settled in West

Philadelphia. Leon graduated from Harrington School at 53rd and Baltimore in 1936, later attending Penn for one semester before transferring to M.I.T., then joining the United States Air Force in the World War II effort.

On December 25, 1943, Lt. Crane and crew mates went off from Fairbanks for a test flight when their B-24 went into a tail-spin from which it could not recover. The plane crashed about 120 miles east of the airfield in a largely uninhabited wilderness. Leon Crane was the only member of the crew to survive the crash. What followed next was truly the stuff of legend.

Fortunately for Lt. Crane, he was dressed for subzero weather. Temperatures on the ground were between minus 40 to minus 50 degrees Fahrenheit with snow up to his waist. He waited for a rescue plane that never came. To survive in this frigid environment, he followed the course of the Charley River where he came upon hunting cabins that were stocked with food. This was just enough to keep him going until his eventual rescue from his 80-day ordeal.

Brian Murphy's book is expected for an early 2015 release and will be published by De Capo Press, a division of Perseus Books Group.



## THE WOODLANDS IS REACHING OUT

The Woodlands has been part of West Philadelphia for over two centuries, but how many neighbors are aware of it and its amazing history? That's something of a concern to Jessica Baumert, who has served as its Executive Director for the past two years. "I live in Cedar Park and bike to work if the weather is agreeable," she explains. Jessica has been focusing on bringing the historic mansion and 54-acre cemetery to greater attention, stating, "I always thought the Woodlands was an amazing and under-appreciated asset, if only more people knew about it." One problem is visibility for the one-time Hamilton estate: in its verdant setting, surrounded by the many monuments and mausoleums of the past, the mansion can't be seen from Woodland Avenue.

But another problem may be that many in the community aren't yet aware that the Woodlands is welcoming them back! Long-time UCHS members will recall that in the not-so-distant past, the University City Historical Society had a close working relationship with the Woodlands. Historian Mike Hardy was both a UCHS Board member and the Woodlands' Executive Director. At the time, Mike raised money and found volunteers for desperately-needed restoration work at the mansion. Under his supervision, community parties, weddings and New Year's Eve celebrations brought neighbors to the Woodlands, and an Adopt-A-Grave program and picnic brought UCHS members to the grounds every spring. Unfortunately, all of this ended sadly for both the UCHS and Mike: the Society's 10-year lease at the Woodlands was not renewed upon its expiration. The condition of the building made public use unsafe, UCHS was told. On a hot and sultry June 22, 1997, the Society left the Woodlands and relocated a seemingly-endless collection (furniture, paintings, stained glass, tiles and more) to a temporary home above the Firehouse Market at 50th and Baltimore. With the help of 50 volunteers, including the son and husband of UCHS President-at-the-time Melani Lamond, the arduous task was accomplished. Most neighbors have not been back to the Woodlands since then - except, perhaps, for funerals. But there are many fond memories.



The Woodlands. Photo by Joseph Minardi.



The Woodlands, 1809 engraving.

The house itself was built in 1789 in a grand Adamesque-Federal style and is one of the earliest examples of a free-standing portico in an American residence. "It is possibly one of the most significant structures in the United States," added Jessica. The Hamilton Mansion is considered the first fully-realized example of Federal style architecture in the United States. The cemetery is also the final resting spot of some of Philadelphia's Victorian elite.

Now, more than 16 years later and after stabilization and restoration projects, Jessica is attempting to re-rescue the Federal-era dwelling from obscurity, so she wants locals to think of the Woodlands as a community space. "We are planning community events such as the Go West Craft Fest, which was held in September and attracted over 2,000 folks," said Jessica. Another area of interest is engaging the many recreational users of the Woodlands in its long and fascinating history.

Today, the University City Historical Society and the Woodlands are taking steps to renew a relationship. Melani, once again president of UCHS, and Mike, through his involvement with UC Green, encourage members of these organizations to attend events at the Woodlands, join the Woodlands Trust, and donate for the ongoing repairs which make the property safe for community visits once again. Jessica hopes that the Woodlands and UCHS can assist each other with cross-membership programs. "There could possibly be discounts for future events, or a membership swap, or short term dual-memberships" she said. Melani adds that UCHS will be glad to lend a hand whenever there's a need. Melani has known Jessica as a neighbor for some time now, and she thinks that Jessica's energy and dedication will serve the Woodlands and our community well. (For more information about the Woodlands Trust, see woodlandshilpa.org)

## Italianate Architecture in University City - Part One



Woodland Terrace in West Phila. Photo by Joseph Minardi.

"There is a strong and growing partiality among us for the Italian style," opined Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852) in his influential 1850 book *The Architecture of Country Houses*. Downing believed the Italianate style, with its broad overhanging eaves and ample porches, to be highly suitable to America's hot summer. He and other architects approved of the Italianate style as superior for suburban settings and for having a picturesque composition, with the characteristic campanile or "Italian tower" imparting an air of power and elevation, an important aspect for the socially conscience Victorians.

The earliest example of an Italian style building in Philadelphia was the Athenaeum of Philadelphia (1845-1847) by Scottish-born architect John Notman (1810-1865) in the Florentine Palazzo style. The outstanding Edward King House in Newport, R.I. (also 1845-1847) by Richard Upjohn (1802-1877) is an early residential representation of Italianate architecture in America. It wasn't long before artistic variations of this building overtook West Philadelphia as its favorite suburban style of residential architecture.

(Continued in next issue of *On The West Side*)

## URGENT UCHS MEMBERSHIP MEETING FEB. 19TH FOR NEW 40TH AND PINE PROPOSAL

A revised proposal for the long-abandoned historic villa at 40th and Pine Street (aka 400 S. 40th Street) was presented to a standing room only crowd at the Spruce Hill Community Center on November 25th. This latest concept for the "Azalea Gardens Apartments" was presented by Equinox Management and Construction, LLC and was met with general approval from the 50-plus people in attendance that evening, which included several UCHS Board members.

At the center of the debate was the fate of an circa 1853 Samuel Sloan-designed Italianate villa. Around 1942 the mansion was converted into the Thoroughgood Nursing Home. Extensive interior and exterior alterations were undertaken in 1964 and 1975, giving the historic house its current appearance. The property was added to the Philadelphia Register of Historic places on November 1, 1973. It was last occupied as a boarding home called Azalea Court and vacated in 2002. In 2003 it was purchased by O.A.P., Inc. (a wholly owned subsidiary of the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania) for a cost of \$1,749,000 with a view to redevelop the site. The building was not inhabitable due to water damage and other hazards, and has sat abandoned for the last decade.

Over the years several proposals for the site, some of which included demolition of the house, were presented but were ultimately scrapped, mainly due to persistent local opposition.

Penn and Azalea Gardens Partners, LP received zoning approval from the Zoning Board of Adjustment in November 2012 to construct a 5-story, 120 unit apartment building and the Board of License and Inspection review upheld the Historical Commission's approval of the demolition of the existing building in February 2013. Although these two decisions involved many months of hearings, they both were promptly appealed to the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas by appellants Woodland Terrace Homeowners Association (WTHA), Constellar Corp. (Guy Laren) and Maryanne Kurmlavage (an absentee landlord). In late July 2013 the WTHA filed its brief with Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas, which brings us to the November 25th meeting with the Spruce Hill Neighbors.

"Compromise" was the word of the day at the November 25th meeting. The apartment portion of the development was reduced from seven to five stories and is an L-plan surrounding a renovated mansion, and is to include public green space and improved street lighting. It was hoped that this lower density plan with the restored house would please enough neighbors to end the litigation and move the ball forward. After all, a blighted property on a unlit corner lot is very unsafe as well as an eyesore.

Not everyone in attendance was completely on board with the latest proposal. Opponents still expressed the usual concerns about parking and density. As the presenters explained, Penn would agree to allow tenants to park in Penn parking lots located a few blocks away for a fee. Skeptics at the meeting didn't think that renters would pay for parking and would simply park on the street for free. Developers Jonathan Weiss and Peter Staz assuaged this fear by stating another of their projects, the Hub at 40th and Chestnut, had only but a small percentage of renters who owned cars. Also, the proximity to the 40th Street trolley hub and Penn's campus would make the apartments ideal for tenants without cars, such as international students. Permit parking was also forwarded as an idea for alleviating any future parking issues. The Equinox team also assured everyone that ample bicycle spaces would be provided.

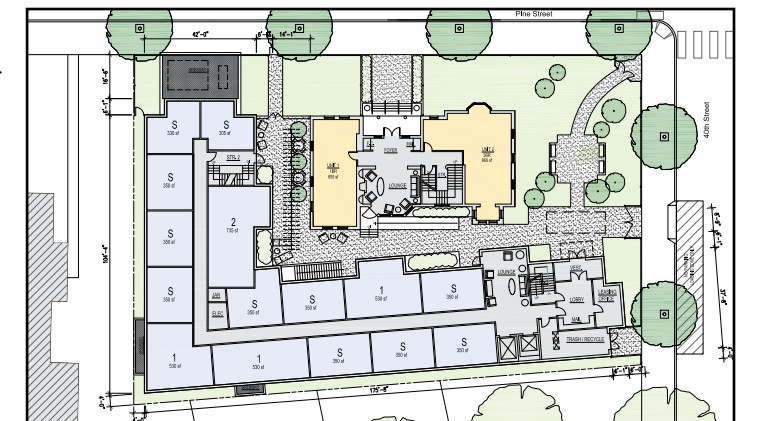
Regarding density, in the latest proposal, the number of units has been decreased from the earlier 122 to 99 before. The current



Spruce Hill zoning chair, Barry Grossbach (top, right) and other Board members, contemplating latest developments. Photo by Joseph Minardi.



Latest rendering for 40th and Pine (400 South 40th St.) Courtesy of Peter Staz.



Site and first floor plan of Azalea Gardens Apartments. Schematic design courtesy of Atkin Olshin Schade Architects and Azalea Gardens Apartments, LP.

plan calls for mostly studio apartments (350-400 s.f.), some one bedrooms (550 s.f.) and a handful of two bedrooms (750 s.f.).

The property's current zoning doesn't allow for a more dense use than seven twin buildings - that is, seven buildings, each containing two housing units, for a total of 14 housing units, with parking. The city's zoning process approved the 122 unit use Equinox Management previously proposed, and the opponents sued, so this is awaiting its turn in court. However, even if the developers were to offer to build the seven twins with parking, the opponents still wouldn't agree, because the city agreed that restoring the mansion is a hardship, and allowed it to be de-listed from the Philadelphia register and torn down, and the opponents are suing on that ruling also.

**UCHS must take a position on this proposal which preserves the mansion! Equinox Management has agreed to meet with UCHS members at the Calvary Center (48th & Baltimore, enter on 48th St. side) on Wednesday, February 19th at 7:30 p.m. WE URGE ALL UCHS MEMBERS TO ATTEND so that we can make a decision.**





## Did you know?

In the year 1900 the City of Philadelphia had...

- 1,293,000 residents
- 258,685 dwellings
- 20,500 gas lamps
- 8,556 electric arc street lamps
- 3,549 public school teachers
- 2,592 policemen
- 2,467 factories and mills
- 1,480 miles of street
- 817 firemen
- 773 churches
- 390 office buildings
- 339 school buildings
- 310 bridges
- 239 hospitals and asylums
- 63 freight stations and rail yards
- 40 small parks
- 18 libraries
- 16 daily newspapers
- 12 colleges
- nine public bathhouses
- and one nearly-finished City Hall

## PROFILES IN ARCHITECTURE

### *Joseph Miller Wilson*

Joseph M. Wilson (1838–1902) began his professional career as a civil engineer for the Pennsylvania Railroad before being tapped for an important assignment for the 1876 Centennial Exposition. Wilson was put in charge of oversight, from concept to finish, for Memorial Hall and the main exposition building. Encouraged by this high-profile commission, he formed, along with his older brother John A. Wilson and Frederick G. Thorn, Wilson Brothers & Co. Eventually another Wilson brother, Henry W., would join up. The firm would go on to do much work in Philadelphia, from railroads to residences. But their most lasting contribution to University City is the terra-cotta encrusted Drexel Institute on Thirty-second and Chestnut Streets.



*Joseph M. Wilson*  
(1838-1902)

Joseph Wilson belonged to numerous architecturally related organizations, and otherwise, as well as being a prolific writer on engineering

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The University City Historical Society is happy to announce our new Facebook page and we would like you to send us articles, photos, etc. for us to share with our fan base. We can't wait to hear from you!



**Ask the Experts, Featured Historic House and University City: Then & Now** will return in the next issue of *On The West Side*.



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