ON THE WEST SIDE

THE UNIVERSITY CITY HISTORICAL



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http://www.uchs.net

Mike Hardy, Editor

SAVE

THE



DATE

for the Fall UCHS "Restoration/Renewal IN PROGRESS" House Tour, Sunday, November 6, 1-4 p.m. This self-guided walking tour will be followed by an after-tour, 4-5 pm get-together of home owners/tour goers/contractors to continue the on-going discussion of "how-to-do it" and a free drink at Abrraccio, 820 S. 47th Street.

Tickets, UCHS members, \$15, non-members, \$20, will be available that day, at Calvary Center for Culture and Community, 48th and Baltimore Avenue entrance, beginning at 12:30 p.m. More details in the next "On the West Side."

RECALLING

By Alvin ("Bill") W. **Thomas**, (who with his wife, Carolyn, has lived and raised two children at 232 S. 44th Street in Spruce Hill since 1958. As a child, he lived in the neighborhood now called "West Shore," south of Woodland Avenue surrounding the Alexander



Wilson School, which he remembers here, ed.)

Do you remember or know the "old" Wilson School (The Alexander Wilson School, named for Alexander Wilson [1766-1813] the "father of American ornithology" whose house once stood nearby, ed.) on the S.E. corner of 46th Street and Woodland Avenue? The following are a few of my notes on people and topics which I recall that some will remember, others will have forgotten and some

will never have heard of.

If you remember the Wilson School as I knew it, you will recall that its interior was primarily wood. There were no elevators but there were three floors (levels) as far as I can remember. The interior stairs were wooden and often squeaked under the feet of the many groups of children going up and down them. Of course there were cement and brick fire towers (fire escapes) that, fortunately, were used only for fire drills.

The main room in the entire school was the office of the principal, Miss Ella P. Webb. She was firm and fair. During my entire time at the Wilson School (Kindergarten plus six grades), I cannot recall even hearing of a pupil talking back to Miss Webb. That phenomenon derived from respect and affection—not fear. Of course, many or even most of the teachers were accorded a similar level of respect and caring by the majority of the pupils.

A point of interest not to be over-looked is the iconlike/quality impact exerted upon the pupils as a whole by the only male staff member at the Wilson School, Mr. Mays, whose paid role was as the maintenance man/building superintendent. Those titles may not have been his official designations, but were nonetheless functionally descriptive. However, they were only partially descriptive, since, at that time, Mr. Mays was the sole male employee in the school and served several roles. He maintained the school's heating system, provided its cleanliness, made general repairs, opened and closed the building, removed snow from the school steps, and above all, maintained peace in and around the school grounds among the pupils while keeping non-pupils off the school grounds. Mr. Mays was a firm but friendly adjunct staff member, relied upon by faculty and students alike. His influence on students and the school's existence extended beyond the gates and out into the neighborhood.

As a neighborhood school, the Alexander Wilson School served many families and functions. Teachers often remained after school hours to meet with parents or elder siblings or pupils who were having problems in school or were introducing home-probPage 2

lems into the school. Here again, of course, it involved Mr. Mays, the building superintendent, who had to secure the building and who often saw the teachers to their automobiles or trolley cars (routes #11 & #37), which stopped at the corner of 46th and Woodland Avenue.

And while I am at recalling, do you remember (or know) that the trolley system in those days was known as the "PRT" (Philadelphia Rapid Transit), "PTC" (Philadelphia Transit Corporation) and finally "SEPTA"?

- —And that at the Wilson School we were provided with some services which some might call "ancillary" but which might be called "necessary"? For instance, we were occasionally given dental examinations, on site, at school, with recommendations for needed follow-up care (and referrals to city dentists).
- —And that an artist (a black male) visited our school periodically, along with others, to discuss art and give instructions and encouragement in "drawing."
- —And that, at Wilson School, there was a teacher who was then thought of as what would now be thought of or categorized as a "disciplinary" teacher. I cannot recall her name, but did thereafter learn that she was a brilliant academician whose personality allowed her to teach/work with students who were behaviorally disruptive.
- —And that some of the other teacher "greats" were **Miss Congo**, **Miss McCants**, **Miss Davis**, **Miss King** and others I have forgotten.

But in my "recalling" I have remembered many of them again and given you the chance to **know** something of what it was like at the Wilson School I knew.

PRESERVING LOW INCOME NEIGHBORHOODS

by Gregory Heller, Parkside Historic Preservation Corporation (excerpted from <u>City Paper</u>, May 19-25, 2005)

In many cities, historic districts are sources of pride — valuable tools protecting local residents from forces that would demolish irreplaceable buildings and destroy the character of cherished neighborhoods. In Philadelphia, many believe historic districts have negative impacts on low-income communities. But this is not the case. In fact, low-income communities may have more to gain than wealthier ones.

Some wrongly believe that communities with

limited resources do not care about their history. The truth is, rich or poor, Philadelphians love their history and the look and feel of their neighborhoods. The issue for most residents is the perceived added cost of home repairs and tax burdens that come with living in a historic district. Fortunately, the city offers a tool to relieve this burden in the form of a tax abatement. When homeowners make building repairs, they do not have to pay taxes on the resulting increase in property value for 10 years, and there is no minimum level of repair required to qualify. Still, home repair is often more expensive in historic districts. The city recently requested proposals for the establishment of an agency to oversee a \$1 million historic-property repair program, subsidizing costs for those whose incomes qualify. This will allow homeowners to afford historic repair, in addition to keeping taxes from going up substantially once the repair is made. Previously viewed as a liability, historic home repair could be a great asset for low-income homeowners.

While most of Philadelphia's historic districts are in well-off areas, it is our poorest areas that need protection the most. Philadelphia is seeing a major building boom as developers invest in up-and-coming neighborhoods, rehabbing historic buildings when it would be cheaper to tear them down and start anew. People move to areas like Northern Liberties, Mt. Airy, Bella Vista, Manayunk, University City, East Falls or Fishtown for their distinctive historic and vibrant urban character. New buildings in these neighborhoods are built to fit in — not to stick out.

In poorer areas, there aren't new residents with money demanding that developers maintain the character of a neighborhood. Developers — or the city for that matter—don't hesitate to tear down dilapidated houses in **North or West Philly** that would be rehabbed and renovated in a wealthier community. They develop modern, ugly or out-of-character buildings in a beloved but poor area. Historic buildings are our neighborhoods' greatest assets for revitalization. By destroying them, we deprive our poorest neighborhoods of valuable opportunities for current residents and business owners.

Some financial incentives now exist to make historic designation a positive tool for low-income communities, but we can and should do better. Since so few areas qualify for historic designation, the city should use every tool possible to ensure that residents can afford to stay there. There ought to be real incentives that come only with historic designation. The tax abatement program is citywide and has

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limited impact. How about a freeze in market increase on taxes for low-income residents in historic districts? How about a local counterpart to the federal historic tax incentive program, which utilizes tax credits to make historic rehabilitation more affordable? Such incentives could help residents stay in, protect, and rebuild their neighborhoods.

The **Historical Commission** will soon be getting a new executive director. He or she must put a more progressive face on the commission, marketing the advantages of designation and dispelling the notion that preservation is just for those who can afford it. Everyone must come away understanding that historic designation is a desirable tool, a source of pride and an asset to our communities. In that way, we will protect our poorest areas, celebrate all of our historic neighborhoods and renew the essence of what it means to live in Philadelphia.

STREET

SMART





Amidst instances of continuing mangling of historic facades in University City, including disfiguring porch tear-downs and inappropriate enclosures, the enlightened recent treatment of **415 S. 44th Street** stands out as a best case example of "curb appeal" that will certainly merit a **UCHS "Gift to the Street"** commendation for 2005. When the owner of this multi-family twin put it up for sale, he elected to remove the vinyl skin of siding that had long covered the façade to reveal and highlight its original detailing, adding a multi-colored paint scheme matching that of the attached twin. Self-interest paralleled the public's street sense to restore both twins' historic place in the block.

If you know of other owners who are contemplating what should guide their exterior remodeling decisions, with the interests of both the community and their own property values in mind, suggest they take a look at 44th Street before remuddling that which contributes to the neighborhood's sense of place and favorably catches the eyes of visitors to University City. And if you know of other instances of new historically sensitive façade improvements and multi-colored paint schemes that highlight their details,

send UCHS the addresses for this year's "Gift to the Streets" recognitions along with "Green Gift" citations for public greening and gardening enhancements. Among these will be the nominees for UCHS Outstanding Preservation Awards for 2005 given at the February Valentine's Award Tea.

But don't wait to recommend those who deserve our thanks for their Gifts and Green Gifts to our Streets in common. Contact us by mail, email or phone.

FURTHER WEST OcTrolleyFest 2005

In addition to regular runs on the "new" Route 15 Ridge Avenue line, a vintage streamline PCC trolley will be running this fall west of us on Saturday, October 15 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.in a loop between Colwyn, Darby, Eastwick, Elmwood and Yeadon with events (pumpkin contests; music; decorations and displays; book signings (including Joel Spivak's Philadelphia Trolleys); food; historic tours; reenactments, etc) sponsored by participating organizations Tickets to ride are free and will be available at Darby Library, 1001 Main St.

The loop is accessible from University City via regular trolley **Routes 11 and 13** with details available from the organizer, **John Haigis**, (610) 583-0788 (h), (215) 241-7218 (w), **johnghd@yahoo.com**.

ELECTIONS, OFFICERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

UCHS members will find a ballot for eight of UCHS' Board Members, including new nominees Belynda Steward, Matt Sauer and Helma Weeks. Belynda is a **North Carolina** native, **Wharton** grad, former banker/investment advisor, now a realtor with **Coldwell Banker**. She has lived in University City since 2003, restoring her house at 4812 Springfield **Avenue** and pursuing her preservation and gardening interests. Matt Sauer is an architect with Scan-Design, a small Center City firm. He and his wife, Meridith, live at 4522 Locust, where they are in the final stages of a four year renovation. Helma Weeks, of 3623 Pearl Street in Powelton Village, was, until recently, the director of communications at Penn's School of Veterinary Medicine. She now has additional time to devote to her art, photography and advocacy/activities on behalf of historic preserva-

These board members will join others led by new officers, Arlene Matzkin, President, 3501 Baring

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Street; Stephen Wagner, Vice President, 4506 Chester Avenue; Treasurer, Joanne Kellerman, 208 St. Marks Square and Gregory Oliveri, 506 Woodland Terrace. Former President, Mark Stuart, is thanked for his exemplary services and wished well as he departs for San Diego as a development officer for their great zoo.

You will also find a self mailer to volunteer for the **Standing Committees of UCHS**. Please consider joining board members and fellow UCHS members in developing and implementing the agendas of these hands-on committees as they pursue new UCHS initiatives to make UCHS more effective.

AND THANKS

to those who recently renewed their annual dues and especially to those who made generous additional contributions as Sustainers of UCHS: Steven Wagner & Jason Bell; Nicholas & Eleanor Cernansky; Margaret Kasschau & Donald Gillis; Nancy Roth & Sigrid Larson; Tom McCarron & Richard Keiser; Susan O. & Edward A. Montgomery; and Brenda & Arnold Palley

and those who make equally special contributions as Friends of UCHS: Fran Aulston, West Phila-

delphia Cultural Alliance; Ellen Bentsen; David & Linda Blythe; Margaret Campbell; Christine Fronczak & Sean Dorn, MiaLou; Kevin Fisher & Kathy Dowdell; Sylvia L. Egnal; William F. Hooper; Marja & Jan B. Hoek; E. David Horwitz; Michael Jones; Nadine Landis; Dan Liberatoscioli, The Restaurant School; Judy Zagozen & Tim Long; Michael M. Lynch; LaChrista Jean Mitchell; Martha Dooley & Kathleen Murray; Laurie & Victoria Olin; Brenda Ringel; John Puckett & Karin Schaller; David Ade & Paul Steinke; Belynda Stewart; Rodman B. Stewart; Carol Thomson; Robert & Rheta Weidenbacker; and Joan Weiner

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