

The Ruth L. Bennett Fence Finds a Home at the Queen's House by Regina Robinson

Can a fence be a bridge? Yes, if that fence is from the historic Ruth L. Bennett House in Chester, Pennsylvania! The ornate but damaged wrought iron fence was rescued from its original location several years ago when a PennDot project replaced it. The fence — after restoration — is slated for installation at the Queen's House in our neighborhood. This is significant for the Tulpehocken Station Historic District because it will replace the existing wood picket fence to reflect the home's original 1851 exterior design. In addition, the piece will enhance our street since it's consistent with similar fencing in the District.

The acquisition of the fence is also notable because it connects our neighborhood to a significant era in Philadelphia-area industrial history: The Great Migration. This period spans the decades roughly between 1916 and 1970. During this time more than 6 million African Americans fled racial discrimination and economic oppression for opportunities in the booming North. Philly attracted many of those migrants with an abundance of jobs offered by local steel mills, factories, ship yards, munitions plants, hotels, railroads, restaurants, private homes, and more. Most of the African Americans settling in our area came from Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Maryland. Once here, they established vibrant neighborhoods in Germantown, South, West, and Southwest Philly as well as the surrounding towns and cities of Darby, Sharon Hill, and Chester.

Ruth L. Bennett and her minister husband left Alabama in 1914 for Chester. As the Great Migration progressed, increasing numbers of young women flooded the area to find work. Lacking family ties and barred from white-only accommodations, they were welcomed into the Ruth Bennett Community House for Colored Women and Girls. There, they found a safe and nurturing environment until securing employment and more permanent housing. From 1918 to 1940, the Bennett House sheltered more than 2,000 girls and women.

The Bennett fence will also link our District to Philadelphia's Industrial Age through a collaboration with the Ebenezer Maxwell Mansion. Maxwell is planning a project to explore that era. The fence was produced locally by the Manly & Cooper Manufacturing Company on Elm Avenue and Fortyc Second Street. It will serve as an artifact to bridge Philadelphia's period iron works industry with African American history.

Of course we'll have a community party to celebrate once the fence is installed! The entire effort wouldn't be possible without Team Bennett Fence: Jeff Smith and Luke Russell of WGCN, Diane Richardson of the Ebenezer Maxwell House, and John Lewis and Regina Robinson of the Queen's House. Finally, many thanks go to Monica Harrower, District 6c 0 Architectural Historian at PennDot and Russ Stevenson, Senior Architectural Historian at A.D. Marble for their support and guidance.