

West Central Germantown Neighbors Guidelines for Development

Vision Statement: Matters of Zoning

West Central Germantown Neighbors is the Registered Community Organization (RCO) that represents some 500 households within approximately 23 city blocks of varying configuration. It fills an area bounded on the east by Germantown Avenue, on the west by the SEPTA Chestnut Hill West tracks, on the north by Washington Lane and on the south by Cheltenham Avenue. This area -- usually designated by the term "Northwest Germantown"-- includes sections of the three main thoroughfares, a city park, and some of the nation's best and most pristine stock of Victorian architecture in the Picturesque Movement, which was highly valued from before the Civil War through the 1890s.

WCGN consistently strives to preserve the historical integrity of its neighborhood and its irreplaceable housing stock, and to limit the incursion of developers unsympathetic to its goals, for example, the conversion of Victorian homes into apartment houses, halfway houses, shelters and parking lots.

In order to help guide debate and decisions concerning land use, parking, signage, and population density, especially with respect to the character and caliber of new development (be it new construction or alteration to existing structures), West Central Germantown Neighbors hereby publicly articulates its vision for the future of the community in a list of values and priorities that have historically guided its interpretation and enforcement of the Philadelphia Zoning Code. These priorities include:

- Single Family Dwellings
- Rental Properties Owner-Occupied or Owned/Managed by a Neighborhood Resident
- Low Population Density
- Limited Curb Cuts
- Sensible On- & Off-Street Parking
- Preservation of Open Space and Mature Trees
- Minimization of Negative Environmental Impact
- Respect for the Historic Integrity of its Buildings
- Avoidance of "Demolition by Neglect" of Structures of Historic Significance.
- Commerce Restricted to Sites Already Zoned for Commercial Use
- Development that Enhances the Commercial Corridors
- "By Right" Usage Respectful of Surrounding Structures

*** WCGN encourages inquiries; please refer to its website: www.wcgnonline.org ***

Historical Background

The rich history of Northwest Germantown must be seen in the context of the original Germantown settlement as a whole, including its early relationship to the city of Philadelphia. In 1683, Francis Daniel Pastorius purchased 15,000 acres of rich farmland from William Penn and laid out a settlement to serve as a haven for Quakers, Mennonites, and Dunkards fleeing religious persecution in Europe. "Germantown Township", as it was known, remained essentially a sleepy rural village of farmers and shopkeepers for nearly a century, slowly advancing west along the old coach road (now Germantown Avenue), until its significance as a retreat from urban life was made shockingly clear when, in 1793, George Washington and his cabinet removed the seat of government from Philadelphia (then the nation's capital) to Germantown in order to escape the devastating yellow fever epidemic which brought the city to its knees. Periodic outbreaks of this disease also brought Benjamin Chew to the area, where Cliveden was established as the family's summer retreat.

Meanwhile, in 1688, Pastorius and his fellow Quakers promulgated the Germantown Quaker Petition Against Slavery (the first such document produced by any religious group on American soil), starting a tradition of tolerance and compassion which later saw Germantown become an important stop along the Underground Railroad and which, undoubtedly, led to a strong African-American presence in the community ever since. A year later (1689), a young immigrant founded the dynasty that would plant its roots at the corner of Germantown Avenue and Walnut Lane. The structure there (*circa* 1700), now known as Wyck House, is one of the few truly Colonial properties within WCGN's purview. Slow and steady growth of Germantown, mainly in the unit and 100 blocks on either side of the Avenue, continued -- interrupted only by the Battle of Germantown and the British occupation -- well into the mid-19th century and the disastrous Civil War. During this time Colonial style architecture gradually gave way to what is known as the "Gothic Cottage", many fine examples of which are to be found in Northwest Germantown.

In the thirty-five years following the war, America was transformed from a rural to an urban society, and the population of Philadelphia more than doubled. Young Americans deserted the farms to take well-paying jobs in the cities, and wave after wave of immigrants flocked to our shores for the same opportunities. At the same time that the birth and expansion of the railroads made the suburbs more accessible, vast amounts of wealth were created by and for industrialists, manufacturers, and merchants, enabling them to establish ever-more impressive dwellings in the "Garden Suburbs" promulgated by the likes of George Woodward, his son-in-law Henry Houston, and Andrew Jackson Downing (it was Downing who popularized the "Gothic Cottage" style). Architectural designs, now harkening to European tastes, abounded. Among these are Gothic, Queen Anne, Italianate (including bracketed), Second Empire, and seemingly endless variations thereof. Meanwhile, middle and working class families took up residence in more modest dwellings, usually semi-detached and row houses nearby--many if not most of which emulated in structure and detail the prevailing architectural trends. All had the same

goal: to escape the congestion, the heat and humidity, and the detritus of horse-drawn transportation to be found in the city.

WCGN's Early Activism

Efforts to retain the residential qualities of the neighborhood and to save Victorian structures began in the 1950s, when neighbors pooled their resources and successfully blocked at the corner of Greene and Tulpehocken Streets a petroleum company from demolishing a sublime example of Gothic Revival architecture and replacing it with a gas station. That structure, the Ebenezer Maxwell Mansion, is now an authentically restored house museum and garden. It is visited regularly by tour buses and is considered a jewel in the city's crown of Victorian architecture.

In the mid '70s, the Association garnered even more impetus, as Victorian structures were being purchased and converted for institutional uses. Neighbors rallied and worked collectively; WCGN continued contesting zoning waivers before the Zoning Board of Adjustment. Over the years WCGN has addressed many zoning issues, usually successfully. An early effort prevented three large houses on West Walnut Lane from being used by Gaudenzia House. More recently, WCGN managed to block--at the Pennsylvania Supreme Court level--a local nursing home planning to build a mammoth four-story structure that would have surrounded and dwarfed the Maxwell Mansion.

Historic Certification and Beyond

In the mid '80s a group of dedicated neighbors undertook the daunting project--ultimately successful--of surveying and documenting the six blocks closest to the Tulpehocken Station for the purpose of adding the area to the National Register of Historic Places. Within these small boundaries, known today as the Tulpehocken Station Historic District, are to be found prime examples of Victorian picturesque eclecticism in handsome and imposing dwellings designed by such notable architects as Samuel Sloan, Joseph Hoxie, Phineas Hamm, the Hewitt brothers, Frank Miles Day, Hazelhurst and Huckel, Cope & Stewardson, George T. Pearson, and Mantle Fielding. Most of these are owner occupied, well maintained, and sited on sizable lots preserving the "open space" feeling of the neighborhood.

More recently-- using SEPTA funds for historically restoring the station building-- WCGN cleaned up and guided the restoration of the train station at Wayne Avenue and Tulpehocken Street. The efforts included the planting there of an orchard and a garden for community use. Also recently, two mansions on West Walnut Lane, a dilapidated Presbyterian manse and two three-story Victorian twins in the unit block of West Tulpehocken Street have been retained as or returned to single-family occupancy.

WCGN welcomes imaginative development in situations where it is truly not feasible for a structure to maintain its historical purpose. This was evidenced in its enthusiastic

support for the adaptive re-use of St. Peter's Episcopal Church at the corner of Wayne Avenue and Harvey Street. The church buildings have been beautifully restored and repurposed to serve as the new campus for the Waldorf School of Philadelphia.

WCGN is now working to have additional sections within its area similarly recognized by the National Registry, and is also researching certification from the Philadelphia Historical Commission for the area as a whole.