

## SOCIETY HILL HISTORIC DISTRICT

**O**ur community of Society Hill is one of the most historic residential neighborhoods in the United States. Its extraordinary rebirth in recent decades was accomplished in the framework of overall redevelopment controls, which from 1958 to 1988, helped to create and protect the unique community we all love. Those controls, however, expired in 1988.

Being on the National Register of Historic Places, as we have been since 1971, is an honor that provides no protection or enforcement mechanisms. There is now *nothing* on a community-wide basis to prevent inappropriate exterior alterations or unnecessary demolitions that could destroy the visual delight of our neighborhood.

For these reasons the majority of our community has advocated "historic district designation" under Philadelphia's Historic Preservation Ordinance, with its reasonable enforcement provisions (Section 14-2007 of the Philadel-

phia Code). Such designation must be made by the Philadelphia Historical Commission (PHC).

Our Civic Association, under the leadership of its Historic Preservation Committee (Bernice Hamel, chair), has long advocated such designation. The Association's leadership effort has recently been joined by two other forceful groups:

(1) The Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia has provided policy and advocacy support, principally through the work of Patricia Wilson Aden, its senior vice president.

(2) An ad hoc committee was organized to collect individual and institutional endorsements of this important effort. This committee is called

*Continued on page 2*



We thank Elizabeth Armour and Philip Rakita, our Delancey Street neighbors, who in cooperation with the Society Hill Civic Association, have underwritten this Special Edition of the *Society Hill Reporter*.

### **SW Corner of 2nd & Spruce Streets**

*The 1957 photo at the left captures the corner building when it was a waterfront bar called the "Time Bar" and 302 S. 2nd Street when it was a luncheonette.*

*In the contemporary photo on the right, you can see how these early American properties have been rehabilitated and given a new life as single-family dwellings.*

# SOCIETY HILL HISTORIC DISTRICT

Continued

“Historic District Designation Now!” Co-chaired by Mary Doran and Stanhope Browne, the committee has enlisted the support of residents and property owners representing a broad spectrum of community leadership. It has also obtained the endorsement of the District’s houses of worship — epitomizing Philadelphia’s historical tradition of diversity and religious freedom.

## **Please take the time to read this special edition of our newsletter.**

We hope it will address many of your concerns and answer any questions you may have concerning historic designation.

Learn how you can protect and preserve our neighborhood — for now and for future generations. Find out what the immediate designation process entails, such as its legal framework and preservation guidelines.

To ensure authenticity and compatibility, historic designation does entail some regulation. But we think you’ll agree with us, and all the organizations listed, that becoming a city-certified historic district can be of direct benefit to you as a property owner and a resident by encouraging neighborhood maintenance and fostering community pride. Remember, Society Hill thrived for 30 years under similar redevelopment controls.

You can play a very important part in the process by voicing your opinion at public hearings. Plan to attend at least one of the meetings scheduled for February or March. (See Calendar, Page 8.) Also, please fill out, sign and mail the self-addressed, enclosed postcard to the office of the Philadelphia Historical Commission. Let your opinion be heard!

## **Endorsing Institutions of Historic Designation Now!**

(in alphabetic order)

B’nai Abraham Synagogue  
Central Philadelphia Development Corporation  
Foundation for Architecture  
Friends of Independence National Historical Park  
Head House Conservancy  
Historic Philadelphia, Inc.  
Keshet Israel Synagogue  
Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church  
National Trust for Historic Preservation  
Old St. Joseph’s Roman Catholic Church  
Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks  
Philadelphia’s Historic Neighborhood Consortium  
Society Hill Synagogue  
South Street/Headhouse District  
St. Peter’s Church (Episcopal)  
Third, Scots and Mariners (Old Pine Street)  
Presbyterian Church  
Vilna Synagogue

## ***The Society Hill Civic Association***

### **A Caring Neighborhood, A Vigilant Organization**

The Society Hill Civic Association (SHCA) is a pro-active volunteer organization serving more than 5,000 families, individuals and businesses. Its officers and board of directors, elected annually, are open to all.

To enhance the quality of life enjoyed in Society Hill, SHCA supports positive initiatives and responds to new challenges facing our community. Continuing efforts include providing cleaner, safer and greener streets; monitoring zoning and development concerns and the issuance of liquor licenses; cooperating with other neighborhood associations and lobbying elected officials; and keeping neighbors regularly informed through public forums and publishing *The Society Hill Reporter*.

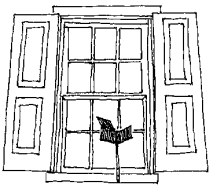
Long-time and current initiatives include working to establish a public library nearby and advocating protection of our streetscape through the historic designation process — described in this Special Edition of the newsletter.

# SOCIETY HILL: Where America's Past Meets The Future

Society Hill exhibits 300 years of the evolution of domestic architecture in Philadelphia and brings into play a present that is historic yet recognizably modern. Its streets contain not only the largest concentration of 18th- and early 19th-century buildings in the country, but also illustrate the course of mid-20th century urban design. Society Hill's blocks follow the grid pattern of the 1682 plan for Philadelphia designed by Thomas Holme (William Penn's surveyor-general) which ordained that they "shall for Ever continue as they are now layd out and regulated."

As the nation's first urban renewal project based on preserving the past, Society Hill exemplifies the earliest restoration standards of American preservation theory.

## Busybody Mirrors



Look up at some Society Hill homes and you'll see an ingenious early-American device protruding from second-story windows. These "busybody" mirrors allow household members to conveniently see from inside anyone standing at their doorstep or on the street below.

## "The Society's Hill"

The district derives its name from the Free Society of Traders in Pennsylvania, a company chartered by Penn in 1682 to foster commercial development of the colony. Penn granted the Free Society a parcel of land overlooking Dock Creek at Front Street, known as "the Society's Hill." This name prevailed even after the demise of the Society itself in 1723 and it continued to identify the community throughout the 18th century. When the neighborhood was revitalized under the covenants of the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority beginning in 1958, the name "Society Hill" was chosen to honor its colonial roots.

## Preserving the Past

Society Hill retains the harmony, scale, materials and rhythm of rowhouse construction and the original pattern of streets from the City Charter of 1701, altered only by the area's major redevelopment plan of the late 1950s and 1960s—which, *in itself*, has historical significance. As the nation's first urban renewal project based on preserving the past, Society Hill exemplifies the earliest restoration standards of American preservation theory. Most likely, some decisions made by the City's Redevelopment Authority in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., to demolish many 19th-century buildings) would not occur today.

## Spectrum of Architectural Styles

A broad spectrum of architectural styles — ranging from modest colonial dwellings, elegant Georgian, Federal and Greek Revival houses and also modern high-rise buildings—reflect the history of diverse ethnic groups, religions and institutions in the churches and synagogues, hospitals, and workplaces of the neighborhood. Scattered throughout this collection stand several important buildings designed by renowned architects, such as Thomas U. Walter, John Notman, Addison Hutton, Frank Furness, Ralph Bencker and I. M. Pei.

## Mid-20th Century Changes

Several blocks or large portions of blocks were cleared during the redevelopment period of the mid-20th century and were rebuilt as residential developments with shared courtyards — containing either parking, plantings or recreational areas. (Examples include Bingham Court, Blackwell Court, and Penn's Landing Condominiums, while high-rise buildings built during this period are Hopkinson House, Independence Place, and Society Hill Towers.)

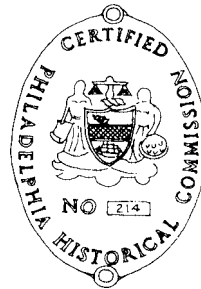
In addition, selected lots were razed to create mid-block passageways and landscaped areas — called "greenways." These "greenways" provide a measure of open space that link the neighborhood's historic churches to Washington Square and to Independence National Historical Park, which when established in 1948, helped spearhead the urban renewal plan.

## Notable "Street Furniture"

Notable "street furniture" and features that were replicated during the re-development of fifty years ago include electrified 18th-century streetlights. These "Franklin Lamps" reproduce the horizontal braces used to support the lamplighter's ladder when refilling the lamp oil.

Other typical architectural accoutrements in this district include "busy bodies" (mirror viewing sets) attached to second-story windows and original or reproduction fire markers, as well as Philadelphia Historical Commission (PHC) designation markers.

*Note:* Not all historical homes are adorned with PHC plaques, as this is an option chosen by home owners. If your house is listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places and you wish to display this plaque, please call the PHC office. You'll learn how to obtain one.



## Society Hill As We Know It Today

Changes in physical development, reliance on the Delaware River for commerce and trade, ethnic and cultural diversity, and economic health shaped Society Hill as we know it today. In this, we see evidence of a neighborhood that exemplifies William Penn's tolerance for religious freedom; the remnants of a thriving commercial entity; a community of diverse peoples and an integrated building fabric of old and new, academic and vernacular. The relationship between these elements allows us to understand the vibrant neighborhood we enjoy today.

# Questions & Answers About

## Franklin Lamps



The first street lights in Philadelphia were installed in 1751, using glass globes imported from London.

Benjamin Franklin criticized these lamps in his autobiography because they were smoky, fragile and draftless. He suggested composing them of "four flat panes, with a long funnel above to draw up the smoke and crevices admitting air below...."

These electrified versions of Franklin's improved street lamps are unique to Society Hill, installed during the area's redevelopment period.

### **Who serves on the Philadelphia Historical Commission?**

The PHC has 14 members appointed by the Mayor — which by requirement of the ordinance must include an architect, an architectural historian, a real estate developer, an historian and six City officials. See the current list of Commission members on page 7.

The PHC meets monthly, and has three functioning committees that consider issues prior to recommending their findings before the full Commission: the Architectural, Historic Designation, and Financial Hardship Committees.

Committee members volunteer their professional expertise and time to make very valuable contributions in the interest of our City. The Architectural Committee meets regularly year-round. The Historic Designation and Financial Hardship Committees meet as needed. The PHC has a paid staff of seven professionals, all of whom are educated in various aspects of preservation. Members of the Commission, except ex-officio City officials, receive a nominal stipend for their service.

### **What does the Designation Process entail?**

The Historic Designation Committee will meet two times to determine the merit of Society Hill's nomination. Following these two Designation Committee meetings, there will be three meetings of the full Commission, after which the Commission will vote yes or no for Society Hill's designation. (Official letters of notice were mailed in October to all owners of property within the district indicating the scheduled public meetings. See Calendar, page 8.)

**Note:** Approximately half of the buildings in Society Hill are already listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places and have been bound by the jurisdiction of the City's preservation ordinance for many years. From October 1998 when the letters of notice were sent to all owners in the proposed district, PHC's jurisdiction of 100% of Society Hill properties began. This jurisdiction provides interim protection against historically inaccurate repairs or demolition and will remain in place until the Commission votes on the nomination.

### **What are PHC's design guidelines and its legal framework?**

The legal framework for the administration of the district consists of:

- (1) the 1984 Historic Preservation Ordinance of the City of Philadelphia;
- (2) the administrative Rules and Regulations adopted by the PHC in 1990, as amended in December 1997; and
- (3) the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* (the *Secretary's Standards*), which PHC uses as design guidelines. All of these are available from the PHC office.

The *Secretary's Standards* are the guidelines most widely used in the United States for historic preservation and for federal tax incentives. PHC does not regulate the use of a building. It does not require restoration to be undertaken, nor does it extend the scope of work beyond what an owner chooses to do. Taking into consideration the economic and technical feasibility of a project, PHC provides that the *Secretary's Standards* be applied in a reasonable manner.

The *Secretary's Standards* are **not** a "How-To Manual" that specifies only one approach to a repair or renovation. PHC's well-trained staff provides technical assistance based on these standards to all property owners on such topics as repointing, cleaning, roofing, window and door replacement, as well



# Historic District Designation

as how to repair or replace deteriorated wood trim, brick and other historic building materials. Prior to beginning a repair or renovation to the exterior of your property, we recommend that you call and consult with PHC staff members who are there to assist you.

## **What is the scope of a PHC Consultation or Review?**

The process of review, and the standards followed, will vary—depending on the nature of the proposed project. Work on interiors is not reviewed, but building plans for interior work will be examined to ascertain that the project will not have an effect on the exterior — e.g. breaching exterior walls for heating, ventilating or air conditioning equipment. Alterations that affect the exterior appearance of a designated property — back and sides, as well as the street facade — require PHC approval, even if a building permit is not otherwise required. Such alterations include, but are not limited to, re-roofing, cleaning or pointing masonry, and painting facades.

If the work requires a building permit, review by PHC staff will occur automatically as part of the process of the Department of Licenses and Inspections for the issuance of the permit. The PHC does not charge for its review nor does it require drawings to be “stamped” by registered professionals. In any event, if you plan a project that in any way affects the exterior appearance of a building, check first with PHC for a free consultation. *Important Note:* The PHC does *not* exercise jurisdiction over the painting of trim. This means that you can choose any color paint you prefer for the wood trim of your building (shutters, doors, cornices).

## **Will a PHC Review delay my project?**

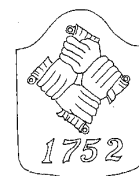
Although the 1984 Preservation Ordinance allows up to 60 days for the review of most applications, approximately 85% of all applications are reviewed and approved within 5 days or less by the PHC staff. Only a small fraction of applications are *not* approved by the PHC staff. These cases are submitted to the Architectural Committee for design and technical consideration before going to the Commission for vote. The Architectural Committee is appointed by and is advisory to the full Commission. Decisions of the Commission, like any other decision on a “code” issue, can be appealed within 15 days to the Board of License and Inspection Review.

The PHC’s “Rules and Regulations” require staff reviews within 5 days if work is not visible from a right-of-way or if the review is to confirm that the work has no effect on an exterior. PHC also has jurisdiction over demolition permits. Except for properties that the Department of Licenses and Inspections has determined to be “imminently dangerous,” the Commission itself, and not the staff, must review demolition permits. The Commission also reviews—for comment only, not for approval or disapproval—new construction on vacant sites.

A Committee on Financial Hardship evaluates applications that claim exemption from historic preservation requirements because the use, or adaptation for use, of a property would be impractical and uneconomical. Property owners may also claim exemption based on unnecessary hardship owing to low-to-moderate incomes, medical expenses and the like.

## **Decorative Firemarks**

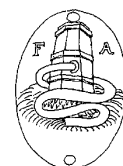
*During colonial times, firemark plaques on the facades of buildings signified to Philadelphia’s volunteer firefighters that they would be rewarded if they extinguished the fires of these insured buildings.*



*The “Hand-in-Hand” marker signifies the 1752 Philadelphia Contributionship Company — founded by Benjamin Franklin, and is still in existence today, at 212 S. 4th Street.*



*The “Green Tree” or Mutual Assurance Company was founded in 1784 because the Contributionship at that time would not insure houses with trees on their property.*



*The “F.A.” marker belonged to the Fire Association of Philadelphia. These colonial-era firemarks are essentially decorative today.*

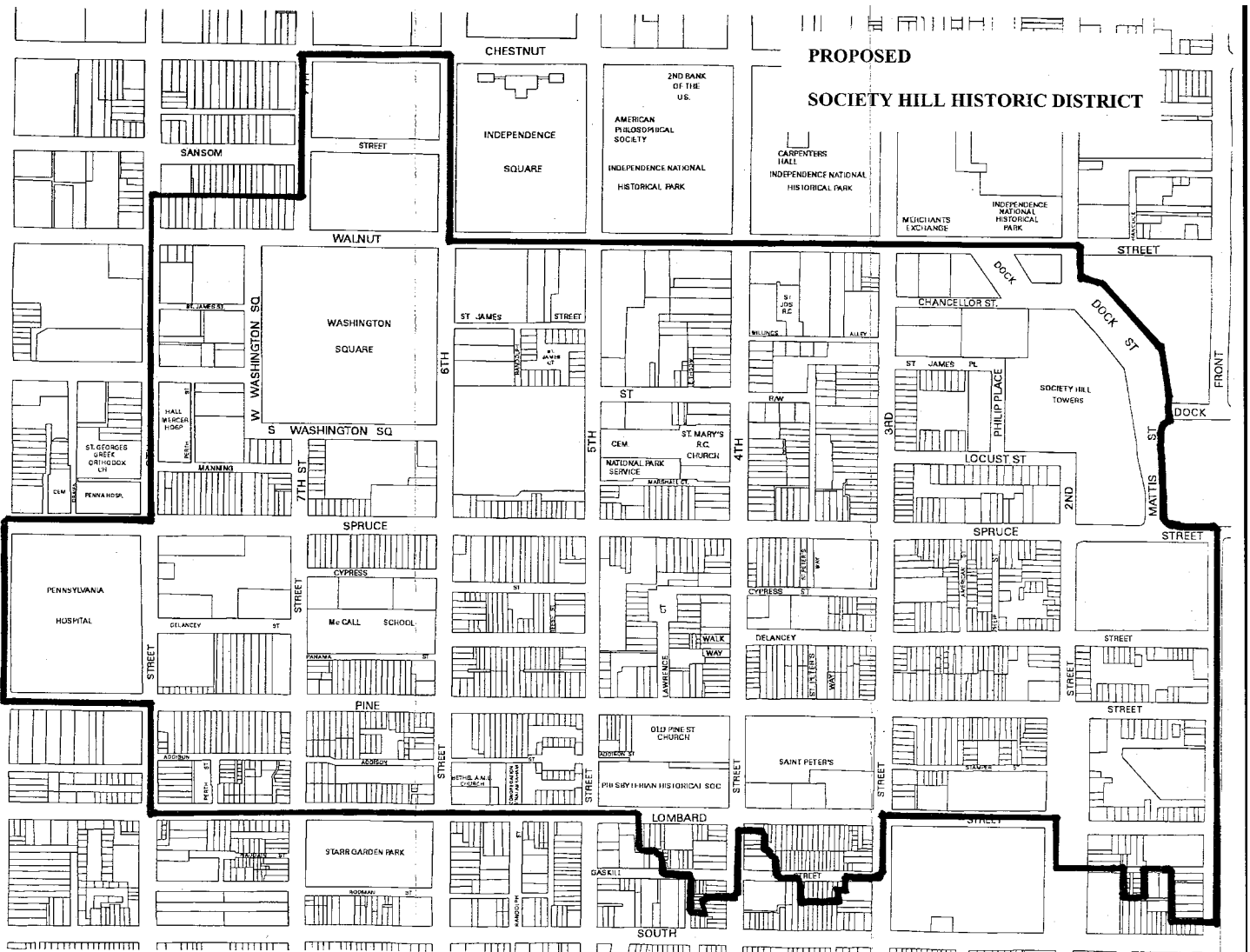
# What are the boundaries of Society Hill?

The proposed Society Hill Historic District includes all properties bounded roughly by Front Street on the east, Naudain, Gaskill and Lombard Streets on the south, 8th on the west, and Walnut Street on the north. An official inventory compiled by the PHC contains a brief history and architectural description of every property within the proposed district. (SHCA's Historic Preservation Committee has a copy of this inventory.)

Based on a building's history or architecture—but *not* related to its market value—each is characterized as either “significant,” “contributing,” or “non-contributing” to the overall significance of the neighborhood. Most Society Hill buildings are listed as “contributing,” with few as “non-contributing.”

PHC assigns these characterizations using three criteria—scale, rhythm and materials—as well as how a building relates to other structures in the District.

If a building meets two of these criteria, it is likely to be identified as “contributing.” If less than two, then “non-contributing.” An example of a “significant” building is the Abercrombie House at 270 S. 2nd Street, a 4 1/2 story Georgian built in 1759. However, buildings need not be 100 years old or older to be characterized as “significant.” The “significant” three high-rise apartment buildings that constitute the Society Hill Towers, at 2nd Street, were designed by the world-renowned architect I. M. Pei during the District's rebirth in the second half of the 20th century.



## Resources

The designation of the Society Hill Historic District is a new phase in the community's efforts to preserve this remarkable neighborhood. In the years ahead, SHCA's Historic Preservation Committee along with the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, an independent, nonprofit organization, will continue to monitor the guidelines and the process of review by PHC.

For further information or copies of documents regarding the district, please contact either SHCA or PHC. Also, we suggest you retain the following list.

### Society Hill Civic Association (SHCA)

P. O. Box 3  
Philadelphia, PA 19105  
Contact: Norman Tissian, President, 923-7399 FAX: 923-2741  
Bernice T. Hamel, Chair, Historic Preservation Committee,  
925-4363 FAX: 925-0877 E-mail: hamelbt@aol.com

### Preservation Alliance For Greater Philadelphia

1616 Walnut Street, Suite 2310  
Philadelphia, PA 19103  
546-1146 FAX: 546-1180  
Contact: Aliko K. Strakes, Advocacy Associate

### Philadelphia Historical Commission (PHC)

1515 Arch Street, 13th Floor  
Philadelphia, PA 19102  
683-4590 FAX: 683-4594  
Contacts: Designations: Laura Spina & Elizabeth Harvey  
Architectural Review: Randal Baron

#### Appointed Members

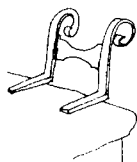
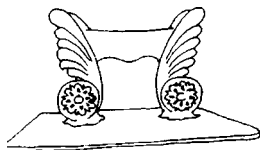
Wayne Spilove, Chair, Rittenhouse Management Corporation  
David Brownlee, Ph.D., History of Art, University of PA  
Robert Thomas, Campbell, Thomas & Co. (architect)  
Michael Sklaroff, Esq., Ballard Spahr Andrews & Ingersoll  
Carol Lawrence, Director of Public Art, City of Philadelphia  
Dennis P. Ward, III, Dennis Ward & Associates (Insurance)  
Caroline Wischmann, Wischmann Design (interior designer)  
Stephanie G. Wolf, Ph.D., History, University of PA

#### Ex-Officio Members and Their Designees

John F. Street, Esq., President of City Council  
Shelly Merhige, Office of City Council President  
Richard Reuda, Chair, City Planning Commission  
Barbara Kaplan, Executive Director  
Steve Mullin, Director & City Representative, Dept. of Commerce  
Duane Bumb, Deputy Director  
John Kromer, Director, Office of Housing & Community Development  
Scott Wilds, Deputy Director  
Frances Egan, Commissioner, Dept. of Licenses & Inspections  
David Perri, Deputy Commissioner  
Andres Perez, Commissioner, Dept. of Public Property  
Joseph James, Deputy Commissioner

#### Bootscrapers

As some streets were unpaved, bootscrapers were essential for removing mud. Found near the front steps or incorporated in the stair railings, they were made of wrought iron through the early 19th century. Later they were cast in molds.



### Words of Support

by Patricia Wilson Aden, Senior Vice President,  
Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia:

*The designation of Society Hill as a local historic district is an essential step towards preserving and protecting this unique neighborhood—for its residents and businesses, fellow Philadelphians, and visitors to our city. We applaud the leadership of the Society Hill Civic Association, and urge all Society Hill property owners to voice their support of historic district designation at the upcoming Philadelphia Historical Commission hearings.*

## Society Hill REPORTER

#### Special Edition

published by  
The Society Hill Civic Association  
P.O. Box 3, Philadelphia, PA 19105  
Phone (215) 629-1288  
Fax (215) 592-4239

PREPARED AND EDITED BY  
BERNICE T. HAMEL

ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
PENELOPE H. BATCHELER

WE THANK THE FOLLOWING  
CONTRIBUTORS FOR THEIR EDITORIAL &  
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

LAURA SPINA AND ELIZABETH HARVEY  
Philadelphia Historical Commission

NORMAN TISSIAN, SHCA president  
and

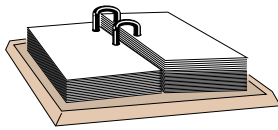
ELIZABETH ARMOUR, MATTHEW DE JULIO  
SHCA Historic Preservation  
Committee Members

and  
STANHOPE S. BROWNE  
Historic District Designation Now!

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# PHC Hearings: All Property Owners Encouraged to Attend

The first of two hearings before PHC's Historic Designation Committee was conducted on December 18th. SHCA President Norman Tissian and Stanhope S. Browne, co-chair of Historic Designation Now! were among about 35 Society Hill property owners who attended the first of two such committee hearings. Although most spoke in favor of Society Hill becoming a historic district under the auspices of the PHC, Leon Chudzinski, president of Washington Square West Civic Association, objected to the inclusion of Pennsylvania Hospital within Society Hill's borders because he said it is located in Washington Square West. Since the hospital straddles the border of both communities, a compromise under consideration would include Pennsylvania Hospital and Washington West in the official name of the historic district. At press time, the proposed new name for the District could be: Society Hill (and Pennsylvania Hospital of Washington Square West) Historic District.



## CALENDAR

The next and final meeting of PHC's Historic Designation Committee will consider individual buildings within the District. If you can attend, please note the day, time and place:

Friday, January 22 at 1515 Arch Street,  
Conference Room, 18th floor, at 9 am.

**Wednesday, February 10, 1999, 10:00 am**  
**Historical Commission Conference Room**  
**1515 Arch Street, 18th floor**

**Tuesday, February 23, 1999, 7:00 pm**  
**in our neighborhood at a convenient, evening hour:**  
**Auditorium of Pennsylvania Hospital**  
**8th & Spruce Streets**

**Wednesday, March 10, 1999, 10:00 am**  
**Historical Commission Conference Room**  
**1515 Arch Street, 18th floor**

## WHY YOU SHOULD ATTEND HEARINGS

All Society Hill property owners are encouraged to attend at least one of the public hearings in February or March, after which the full Commission will vote on our nomination. You will be invited to speak in support of, or in opposition to, the proposed designation at any of these three public hearings. Come prepared with a statement or feel free to speak extemporaneously (but briefly). Note that one meeting will be held in our community, in early evening: Feb. 23, 7 pm, at Pennsylvania Hospital.

- Learn why our community has sought this designation since 1986.
- See a slide presentation and hear the complete proposal given to the Philadelphia Historical Commission.
- Find out what historic designation means to our community and to you.

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## Special Edition: Historic Designation

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The Society Hill Civic Association  
P.O. Box 3, Philadelphia, PA 19105

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