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Urbs 227
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Kingsessing: Swedish Settlement to Urban Blight

Kingsessing, like the rest of its surrounding West Philadelphia neighbors, was first inhabited by the Leni Lenape Indians back in the Pre-Colonial period. The name Kingsessing or “Chinnessing,” stems from the Delaware Indian settlers’ term for “bog meadow” or “place of the big shells.” (Free Library of Philadelphia Branch History 2) Swedish settlers “founded” the area in 1646, extending the boundaries to include the land between the Schuylkill River and Darby Creek above Mingo Creek. Kingsessing is first mentioned in the deed Queen Christina gave the Swanson family in 1653. (The Sesqui-Centennial City, 26). It was the first village within the territory of Philadelphia. The modern neighborhood of Kingsessing has its origins on what was once known as Kingsessing Township, a massive area of 8,923 square miles that comprised the whole section of what today is referred to as Southwest Philadelphia.

In 1790, Kingsessing Township had a population of 542, out of the 54,388 for the total Philadelphia County. This number grew to around 1,778 by 1850. As opposed to the more aristocratic Blockley, Kingsessing’s agricultural population grew slowly. Kingsessing was mainly composed of farms and landed estates at the turn of the 19th century. As one of the four main political units of West Philadelphia during the Consolidation Act of 1854, Kingsessing Township became an integral component of the city. However, it was without an authentic urban area, having only the scrawny village of Paschallville. This tradition continued, as Kingsessing Township’s population increased from 19,438 in 1900 to 78,900 in 1920, almost one-fifth of West Philadelphia’s population. While Kingsessing and the southern areas of West

Philadelphia still remained sparsely populated compared to the denser area of Blockley, there was still respectable growth during this period.

Kingsessing became a land entity separate from Kingsessing Township as a whole of Southwest Philadelphia. The neighborhood started at Cobbs Creek and Cemetery Lane, stretching to Florence Avenue and 50th Street to 50th and Baltimore, on Baltimore to 45th, on 45th to Kingsessing, to the Schuylkill River and Grays Ferry Avenue, along the Schuylkill to 60th street, and from 60th to Brill's car factory back to Cobb's Creek and Cemetery Lane. This vast tract of land contained notable landmarks like Mount Moriah Cemetery and John Bartram's estate. The first real neighborhood in Kingsessing was Pascallville, also known as Mondal. This area mainly constituted by farms. Industry other than farming did exist and contribute to the landscape of Kingsessing. Both Grays Ferry Road and Darby Road, now known as Woodland Avenue, were used for transportation from the southwest and the northeast. Commercial activity has existed on Grays Ferry Avenue since 1695.

A shift from the original agrarian fields and economy began to take hold at the turn of the 20th century. By 1920 and 1930, workingmen, clerks, and lower middle class people populated Kingsessing, with larger numbers of housing taking root there. The working class inhabitants of Kingsessing relied on industrial establishments such as the gypsum plant on the Schuylkill and the GW Smith Woodworking Company. (Weaver 65) There was also a city incinerator and machinery sheds to keep the population of Kingsessing employed in industry. In addition to these employment hubs, extensive tracts of rail and railroad yards were laid along Grays Ferry Avenue, insuring transportation both of people and materials to Kingsessing. Many of these old industrial institutions are now merely skeletons of their old employment powerhouses, decimating the workforce when the industrial economy shifted and work disappears. According

to the Census Business Zip Code Pattern in 1998, Kingsessing's zip code of 19143 had 53 business establishments on its soil, constituting about 12% of the West Philadelphia total. (WestPhillyData, October 2005) Kingsessing still has myriad shops along Woodland Avenue, mainly catering to the "Cash Paychecks Early," discount dollar stores, and ethnic bar/cafes crowd. An April 2004 study by the Philadelphia City Planning Commission and the Urban Land Initiative entitled "Philadelphia Shops" ruled that Kingsessing had the lowest "occupied convenience oriented GLA square feet per 1,000 residents" in all of Philadelphia. This calculation determines the investment and depth of goods and services aimed at consumers. This study exemplifies the depressed economic situation of modern Kingsessing, both in commercial jobs and employment and in consumer revenues and entrepreneurial proliferation. The Septa area on 49th and Kingsessing used to be a hopping hub for transportation, now that has been laid waste to blight. In October 2002, the PCPC certified a 40-block area blighted, spanning from 52nd and Chester to 61st and Kingsessing to 62nd and the Amtrak rail line. 16.6% of the 4,289 separately titled properties and dwelling units are vacant (Capital Program Office of the City of Philadelphia, September 17 2002). Due to a lack of concrete literature on the status of Kingsessing as a whole, studies by planning commissions on the blight of the Amtrak rail area can illustrate the diagnosis and outlook of the larger townscape. The industrial and manufacturing institutions' exodus from Kingsessing severely depressed the economy and employment of the area, contributing to flight and lowering real estate prices.

The residential patterns mirrored the healthy economic environment of Kingsessing in the first half of the 20th century. In 1920, there were 16,553 dwellings in Kingsessing's Ward 40 for 17,790 families. (Weaver 128) Home ownership rates hovered around 48.1%, and the average family consisted of 4.4 people. Multiple family housing and efficiency apartments were the

trend in housing, with apartment houses also speckling the residential market. The upper middle class generally inhabited these apartment houses, but lower income people with little to no financial obligations or children also lived side by side with Kingsessing's upper echelon. These families resembled the more modern young urban economic couple, with two workers and no kids. This again presents a stark contrast to residential patterns of Kingsessing today. The average persons per family dropped to 3.31 in 2000, from the 1920 census' 4.4. (WestPhillyData, October 2005) The median home sale price in 1999 was \$14,550, a substantial decrease from the roughly \$23,000 in 1975 and the citywide median of \$59,700. (Philadelphia City Planning Commission A-16) Housing in Kingsessing ranges from petite houses with mini-gardens, duplexes and bilevels, and rowhouses. Buildings and homes tend to be dilapidated or abandoned, with a lack of reinvestment in crumbling real estate. Streets lined with housing fall prey to the decay pocket, or gap-tooth, syndrome, in which one home crumbles, and the value of all fall as well. According to 2000 census, the vacancy rate in 2000 was about 13.4%, and the low overcrowding rate of 1.4% parallels the sparsely populated Kingsessing of the Colonial period. (WestPhillyData Site, October 2005) Low homeownership rates, illegal squatting, and condemned housing characterize the Kingsessing which once boasted of ritzier apartment houses and multiple family homes.

Kingsessing's population has always been relatively small. In 1920, a city census revealed Kingsessing's Ward 40 had a little over 78,900 people on its 5,197 acres. (Weaver 128) Around 10,817 of its inhabitants were foreign born, and 3,946 were "Negroes." Ethnic groups such as Jews and Italians were prevalent in Kingsessing in the first half of the 20th century. The Jewish population rose from 1,060 in 1910 to about 1,711 in 1920, and the Italian population jumped from 482 to 1,044 in the same time frame for Ward 40. (Weaver 147) Kingsessing is

now 95.1% African American, with a little over a thousand White, Asian, and Hispanic people combined. The total population for Kingsessing from 1960 to 2000 has decreased, from 42,822 to the last census number of 28,843, resembling other depressed West Philadelphia neighborhoods like Mantua. (Philadelphia City Planning Commission A-16) The decreasing population can be attributed to many causes, but all probably stem from the depressed economic sector of Kingsessing. The poverty rate in 2000 was 26.1%, with a median household income of \$25,826. (WestPhillyData, October 2005) Around 70.5% of residents has a high school degree today. The male to female ration in 1920 Kingsessing was about even, with 98,6 men for every 100 women. (Weaver 133) In 2005, the married couple rate hovers under 9%. (www.gaydemographics.org September 2005) Kingsessing predominantly consists of Moynihan' s single female-headed families, with 334 of the 409 live births in 2000 being born to unwed mothers. (Philadelphia Department of Health Data, October 2005) The educational options in Kingsessing today are predictably bleak. A search of public schools in Kingsessing school district revealed 11 options, with reading proficiencies ranging from a high of 43% to a low of 15.7%. Math proficiencies ranged from 37.9% to 6.3%, with economically disadvantaged enrollment averaging on 80%. (School Information Partnerships)

Bartram' s Garden is a beautiful draw to the Kingsessing neighborhood. John Bartram developed the land near 54th and Lindbergh Boulevard in September 1728. (West Philadelphia Illustrated 113) A quaint house rested on 37 acres by the Schuylkill River, lush with myriad species of exotic arbors and plants. Legend says that John horse-backed a giant Cyprus with a width of more than 25 feet from Georgia. (116) John Bartram enjoyed various accolades during his life as a renowned botanist, being elected Professor of Botany at the University of Pennsylvania, co-founding the American Philosophical Society, appointed "Botanist to His

Majesty George the Third,” and being pronounced the greatest botanist in the world by Linnaeus. After John’s death, the estate and garden was bequeathed to his son, William, and was placed on the city plan on July 2, 1888. It has remained a Philadelphia landmark, a verdant garden on which Benjamin Franklin flew his kite and David Rittenhouse planned a better observatory, and is now run by the non-profit John Bartram Association in cooperation with the Fairmount Park Commission. Bartram’s Garden now lies on 45 acres, complete with a wetland, parkland, meadow, botanical garden, and the refurbished Bartram House, and is the oldest botanical garden in the country. (Bartram’s Garden, October 2005)

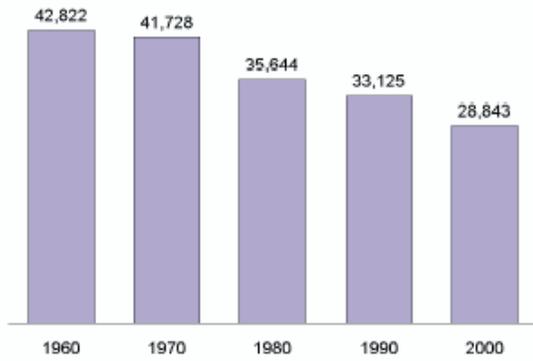
Even though it pales in comparison to the Woodlands and Laurel Hill, Mount Moriah Cemetery, located near 62nd and Kingsessing, is a notable Kingsessing sight. Founded in 1855, the Mount Moriah Cemetery Association proclaimed itself as having “great and decided superiority over any other cemetery in the vicinity of Philadelphia,” due to its isolation from future development and manufacturing. Partly because of these same conditions, Mount Moriah Cemetery today is in a sad state of disrepair. Community supporters organized a website, <http://mountmoriahcemetery.org>, devoted to bringing attention to the disrepair and abuse fallen upon one of Kingsessing’s old landmarks. Mount Moriah Cemetery has not remained ignored, with spooky legends lingering; In Jack Myer’s new book, “Row House Days,” about growing up in Southwest Philadelphia, he recalls the neighborhood rumors of haunted encounters in Mount Moriah.

Despite the bleak nature of Kingsessing’s modern environment, it was once home to other notable attractions, like the Belmont Cricket Club. The Kingsessing Branch of the Philadelphia Free Library now resides on the land where the Belmont Cricket Club once was. The Satterlee Military Hospital cornered Kingsessing at 45th and Baltimore. Once the largest

military hospital in the world, it is now gone and honored with a statue in Spruce Hill's Clark Park. Kingsessing is the home of many local Churches and Catholic schools, St. Francis de Sales, Good Shepherd and the still-standing Swedish founded St. James. The dearth of viable Kingsessing landmarks may help perpetuate the carelessness imbedded in many of its residents and the city's disinterest in tax money and issues.

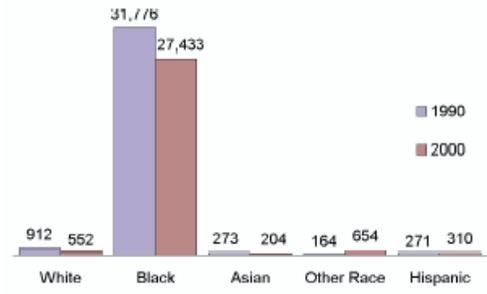
Kingsessing has transformed from the initial Swedish settlement to a depressed urban area. Business disinvestment led the path for unemployment, lower real estate prices, and eventually blight. I enjoyed researching this area, where my mother grew up and her family is from. Traveling around Kingsessing and seeing the modern reincarnations of my family's neighborhood were very fulfilling and interesting examples of urban evolution.

Total Population: 1960 - 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

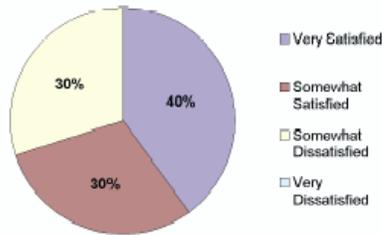
Racial/Ethnic Composition: 1990 - 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Neighborhood Satisfaction

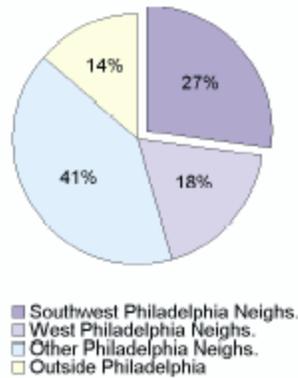
(Answers are for Southwest Philadelphia, of which Kingsessing is a part)



Source: Phila. City Planning Commission
1998 Homebuyers Survey

Location of Previous Residence

(Answers are for Southwest Philadelphia, of which Kingsessing is a part)



Source: Phila. City Planning Commission
1998 Homebuyers Survey

Most Frequently Cited Neighborhood Complaints

<i>Neighborhood Complaints (Reported by Current & Former Residents)</i>	<i>Percentage of Respondents</i>
Not Safe	32%
Appearance of Housing	32%
Too Much Noise	29%
Trash and Litter	29%
Condition of Streets and Sidewalks	29%

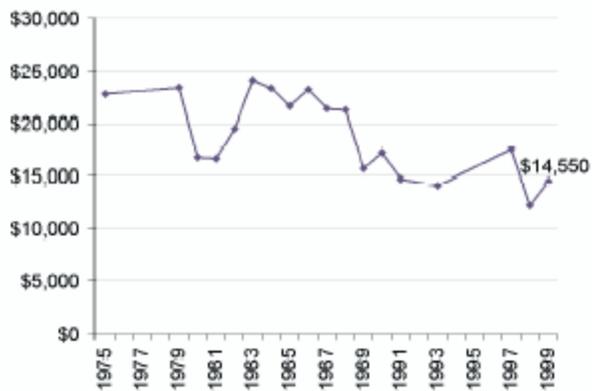
(Answers are for Southwest Philadelphia, of which Kingsessing is a part)

Top Reasons for Choosing Neighborhood

<i>(Answers are for Southwest Philadelphia, of which Kingsessing is a part)</i>	<i>Percentage of Respondents</i>
Safety of Neighborhood	75%
Quiet, Low Traffic Neighborhood	70%
Availability of Affordable Housing	65%

Source: Phila. City Planning Commission
1998 Homebuyers Survey

Median Home Sales Price: 1975 - 1999 (Constant 1999 \$)



Source: Philadelphia BRT

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Images

