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### **History of Spruce Hill**

The history of West Philadelphia's Spruce Hill neighborhood—roughly bordered by Walnut Street to the north, 41<sup>st</sup> Street to the east, Baltimore Avenue to the south and 46<sup>th</sup> Street to the west—begins, as might be expected, with the history of West Philadelphia itself. In 1677, a man named William Warner bought roughly 1500 acres west of the Schuylkill River from the local Lenni Lenape tribe of Native Americans. The area remained undeveloped until 1692 when a young carpenter, William Powell, built a ferry over the Schuylkill near where the present Spring Garden Bridge stands; in the early eighteenth century, several large mansions were built by wealthy Philadelphia families looking to escape the hot, crowded city during the summer months. The most prominent of these estates, “The Woodlands,” was completed in 1789 by William Hamilton, the man largely credited for beginning the development of West Philadelphia.

After the first permanent bridge over the Schuylkill River was built in 1805 at Market Street, Hamilton designed and built the first large residential development in the area, appropriately named “Hamiltonville,” and positioned just south of the new Market Street crossing, where the University of Pennsylvania now resides. Hamiltonville would become the inspiration for much of the development to come, especially influencing residential neighborhoods such as Spruce Hill with its archetypal wide, paved streets and open spaces between houses for landscaping. The future Spruce Hill neighborhood, ideally situated on farmland hills elevated above the city, would gradually be built

directly west of Hamiltonville, although its building boom wouldn't begin until sometime in the 1850s.

The earliest development of Spruce Hill took place in 1851, the year the District of West Philadelphia was created. Samuel A. Harrison and Nathaniel B. Brown bought undeveloped farmland west of 41<sup>st</sup> Street with the intent to develop not single homes, but entire blocks thought of as “streetscapes.” They hoped to build a series of houses that would attract professionals from Philadelphia looking for suburban housing with an estate feel. To this end, Harrison and Brown commissioned famed architect Samuel Sloan to design “Hamilton Terrace,” an entire block that gave the illusion of country life.



*Hamilton Terrace*

The streetscape, built on what is now 41<sup>st</sup> Street between Chester and Baltimore Avenue, was designed to include houses in a variety of architectural styles, all enjoying the country feel of front and back yards, and the elegant refinement of porches and sidewalks. At Hamilton Terrace Sloan advanced the remarkable “twin” houses that would become a familiar vestige in West Philadelphia architecture. The area was

protected from urbanization by covenants and clauses in the deeds, preserving Spruce Hill for residential purposes.

In 1857 the Spruce Hill neighborhood was greatly encouraged by the building of the Chestnut Street Bridge over the Schuylkill River. The new developments at Hamilton Terrace were now readily connected to the Philadelphia city center by easily traveled roads and public transportation; residential building began to boom westward. Inspired by Harrison's and Brown's success, Charles M.S. Leslie commissioned Woodland Terrace, a similar development to span the three blocks west of Hamilton Terrace in 1861. John D. Jones and John C. Mitchell continued in this vein to develop streetscapes on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street between Spruce and Locust Streets and on Pine Street between 40<sup>th</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> Streets, respectively. Most of these structures are around today, many of them well preserved.

Spruce Hill's expansion west coincided with the American Civil War, in which Philadelphia played a central role. In need of a site to provide medical attention to wounded Union soldiers, in 1862 the U.S. Army built the West Philadelphia Hospital—renamed Satterlee Hospital—to the south-west of the budding Spruce Hill neighborhood, around 44<sup>th</sup> Street and Baltimore Avenue. Although Satterlee Hospital was closed at the end of the war in 1865, the land it sat on was divided into smaller parcels and sold off individually for residential development. Movement as far west as Satterlee Heights, the former hospital land, was furthered in 1866 by the building of a horsecar depot on Chestnut Street between 41<sup>st</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup> Streets, just north of Spruce Hill. Transportation between Philadelphia and its suburbs to the west was quick, simple, and ubiquitous.

At this time Spruce Hill boasted the finest estates of some of Philadelphia's most prestigious citizens. Perhaps most famously, Clarence H. Clark, wealthy banker and developer, built his grand Chestnutwold estate on the block stretching from 42<sup>nd</sup> to 43<sup>rd</sup> Streets and between Locust and Spruce Streets.



*Chestnutwold*

Chestnutwold was eventually demolished to make room for the Episcopal Divinity School, built in 1926. Clark's son, Clarence Jr., eventually built a grand house at the corner of 42<sup>nd</sup> and Spruce Streets, which still stands. Newspaper editor and prominent Philadelphian Charles M. Swain built his estate later, in 1875, at 45<sup>th</sup> and Spruce Streets.

Starting in the 1870s, and largely due to the improved speed and availability of transportation into Center City, residential development of Spruce Hill increased rapidly, especially west of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. William S. Kimball designed a series of rowhousing, maintaining Sloan's original intent of suburbanized streetscapes but with smaller, more

compact, and often totally connected housing meant for a lower income household. A prime example of Kimball's architecture, fairly well preserved, can still be seen on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street between Spruce and Pine.



***Kimball Block***

Clarence H. Clark, wealthy banker and developer and famous Spruce Hill resident, also adopted the rowhouse as his design of choice. Although developing at roughly the same time, Clark's streetscapes were more luxurious and suburban than Kimball's. Clark set his rowhouses about twenty feet back from the street, leaving ample room for wooden porches and front gardens. Although intended to keep the bustling neighborhood attractive, spacious, and desirable, the increase of rowhouses resulted in a greater population of less wealthy, urban commuters that were looked down upon by the

middle and upper classes of suburban Spruce Hill residents. The University of Pennsylvania moved its campus to West Philadelphia in 1872, but the development was well east of Spruce Hill and would take decades to approach its eastern border.

A great influence upon the rapid urbanization of Spruce Hill came with the advent of electricity, and more specifically, with the electric streetcar. The first electric streetcar came to West Philadelphia in 1894, spurring a torrent of development and housing construction, especially of the rowhouses made popular by Kimball and Clark. Many of Spruce Hill's more gentrified residents followed the streetcars west, leaving the new rowhousing to be filled by lower income families or people who couldn't afford to be too far from the commercial center of the city.



*Clark-style Rowhouses*

New bridges built across the Schuylkill River at Walnut Street, South Street, and Gray's Ferry made West Philadelphia even more easily accessible from Center City, and vice versa. Clark himself, concerned at the rapid development of his beloved suburban community, deeded a portion of his property—which extended well beyond his enormous

estate at Chestnutwold—to be used as a park dedicated to the children of the neighborhood; Clark Park stands today along Baltimore Avenue between 43<sup>rd</sup> and 45<sup>th</sup> Streets.

Clark's foresight proved correct; in the first three decades of the twentieth century almost all of the land west of the Schuylkill River had been claimed and built upon. Old buildings were torn down to make room for new, but through it all Spruce Hill maintained its principally residential function. Apartment buildings, havens for the middle to lower class commuter, began to dot Spruce Hill's increasingly urban landscape, especially after construction of the Subway-Elevated Railway along Market Street was completed in 1907. Any lots still undeveloped after this point were almost unconditionally filled with apartment complexes, such as the Fairfax Apartments still in use at 43<sup>rd</sup> and Locust Streets.

After the close of World War II, the landscape and population of West Philadelphia—and of Spruce Hill specifically—changed somewhat dramatically. The neighborhoods of West Philadelphia had suffered, and were somewhat dilapidated, neglected, or abandoned outright during a period of “white flight” before and during the war's industrialization period. As the University of Pennsylvania grew to accommodate G.I.s returning from battle, they began an intense process of urban renewal, especially to the west. As the University's campus neared the eastern edge of Spruce Hill, overflow from student housing began to move into the rowhouses and apartments that had been recently vacated. Spruce Hill began to be identified as a neighborhood comprised of working class families, families of color, university students, or employees of the

numerous hospitals located in other areas of West Philadelphia. In the next fifty years, this process of diversification—racial, economic, and social—continued.

The most recent national census of Spruce Hill classifies the neighborhood as about 54% non-Hispanic White and about 21% non-Hispanic Black, a rate 9% higher than the national average, constituting Spruce Hill as a minority-influenced community. The total population of Spruce Hill reaches just over 7300, with only 10% ownership and 12% vacancy rates, and a poverty rate of a staggering 37%. More than 30% of residents are between the ages of twenty and twenty-five, identifying Spruce Hill as popular student housing for universities in the area. Still mainly residential, many of Spruce Hill's grand architectural accomplishments still stand, representing the efforts of pioneering developers to create a suburban community with easy access to the city of Philadelphia but the gentrified feel of a country estate. Spruce Hill has proven to be a neighborhood of dramatic changes, grand advancements, and a powerful ability to survive.

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