I have chosen to study the Powelton Village neighborhood of University City District. I have been living in West Philadelphia for only a few weeks but I have already discovered that this neighborhood is particularly attractive. In addition to this, as an American Civilization student, I was interested in studying one of the oldest neighborhoods in West Philadelphia, especially one with such well-defined boundaries. The size and number of inhabitants of Powelton, as well as its Victorian houses and yards and its tree-lined streets make it deserving of its « Village » name. It has never been able to become a real village though, as Leon Rosenthal said, Powelton is "the town that never was". The very active community organization of Powelton provides much information and acts to preserve and promote its neighborhood, which makes it an even more compelling and interesting site to visit. My choice to research Powelton was strongly motivated by the overwhelming changes it has undergone during the past 50 years: from a decrepit, run-down neighborhood to an upper-middleclass residential one.

Location

Powelton Village is located in the northern area of University City District of Philadelphia, across the Schuylkill River, north of Drexel and Penn Universities. The area it covers goes from 32nd to 39th streets, and from Lancaster Avenue to Spring Garden Street, in West Philadelphia.

Construction and Development of Powelton Village

As I mentioned earlier, Powelton Village is one of the oldest neighborhoods, with Spruce Hill, of the now called University City District. They were built in the early 1800’s as “fashionable suburbs outside of the Old City. The predominant building type in these neighborhoods was the three-story Victorian semi-detached house.”

One of the first real estate assessments conducted in 1693 listed 15 landowners in West Philadelphia, among them was the Welshman William Powel, a carpenter who was one of

1 This paragraph was written with the help of the book by Leon S. Rosenthal, A HISTORY OF PHILADELPHIA’S UNIVERSITY CITY, http://www.uchs.net/Rosenthal/powvil.html
2 Philadelphia City Planning Commission, The Plan for West Philadelphia (Philadelphia: Published by the Commission, June 1994)
the early settlers of Blockley, South of Spring Garden. He gave his family's name to Powelton. In the 1690’s, William Powel opened a ferry company crossing the Schuylkill River where today’s Spring Garden Bridge is located. Then he built a house on the west bank offering accommodations to the travelers who used his company. At the end of the 18th century, the Powel family had become wealthy and influential in the city; Samuel Powel was the mayor of Philadelphia during the American Revolution. He extended the family’s lands by purchasing 96 acres northwest of the west end of the Market Street Bridge, and for the first time the name Powelton was used for this area.

The first important period of settlement in Powelton Village followed the opening of the first suspension bridge in 1842 over the Schuylkill River³. It gave the opportunity to many center city inhabitants to move westward and settle in the “suburb” of West Philadelphia. This new wave of settlement was both commercial and residential. In the 1850’s many wealthy and high figures of the City built their homes in Powelton, the new fashionable suburb. Many of them were brewers, business owners or institution members. In 1852 a great part of the Powel land passed into the hands of the Pennsylvanian Railroad. The block from Powelton Avenue to Race Street west of 32nd Street was sold. It was then purchased by Evert J. Wendell, of Wendell and Smith building company, who developed much of that area. The success of Wendell company inspired other builders to develop the area too. The District of West Philadelphia began negotiations to purchase the entire Powelton Estate along the Schuylkill River from Bridge Street to Market Street for $75,000. The original plan was to use this land as a public park but the plan was abandoned due to public outcry. Ironically, the Powelton Community Association today intends to reclaim some of this same land to turn it into a park for recreational use.

By 1872 all that remained in the name of the Powel family was a small part of land on 33rd Street between Howell (taken from the Welsh) and Race Streets. The Pennsylvania Working Home for Blind Men was established in 1874 on Lancaster Avenue below 36th Street and still occupies the site and adjoining buildings. The Industrial Home for Blind Women which had opened in 1869 on Locust Street below 45th in Hamilton Village moved to the corner of Saunders and Powelton Avenues in 1880.

In the 1880’s, thanks to the electrification of streetcar lines, many middle-class families established their homes in the neighborhoods in smaller lots of land. Thus, the inhabitants

³ [http://www.ucityphila.org/things_to_do/powelton_village.cfm](http://www.ucityphila.org/things_to_do/powelton_village.cfm)
who already owned land in Powelton began in this period to develop speculative housing to sell smaller portions of land to newcomers. The housing was very spacious and had been designed by some of the most famous architects. Powelton welcomed various churches and community institutions who decided to settle their buildings there because of the sylvan setting and the already diverse community. The whole neighborhood developed around Lancaster and Powelton Avenues, which were then and still are the main commercial strips of Powelton.

At the end of the 19th century, Powelton community was not only very diverse but also unified; we can notice this diversity from the church denominations and the range of architectural patterns, from elite architects as well as nouveau riche and industrial designs. There has been actually three main steps in the construction of today’s Powelton; in the early 19th century, great estates were built, in the middle of that century, street and rail lines enabled the development of an upper-middle class suburb, and at the end of the 19th and until the late 20th century there has been an urban building « boom » period. These three steps explain partly why we cannot really talk about a « Powelton Village » neighborhood prior to 1955; because it could not be commonly recognized or defined by the members of its community as a definite neighborhood. In the early 1940’s, workers from the Health and Welfare Council and other social organizations began calling the area north of Powelton Avenue as the "Powelton area". "It was a neighborhood where many so-called "hard-core" problem families lived. The section had degenerated to a social and economic low and its concerns were not helped by the presence of the vicious "Bottoms" gangs that infested the area. It was among these gangs that the Crime Prevention Association, was working. About 1955 Gerard H. Bye and same of his neighbors, created a company which had for its main purpose the preservation and restoration of this fine neighborhood of Victorian structures in the area from 34th Street to 38th, between Lancaster Avenue and Spring Garden Street. In order to dramatize their community and garb it with the cloak of historical dignity they called it Powelton Village, terming their company The Powelton Village Development Associates." 

In the 1960s many lower middle class families resided in this community and the development of Drexel University northward made Powelton land very attractive. The neighborhood drew an even greater interest in the 1980’s when other areas of Philadelphia became overcrowded, Powelton was “rediscovered” as a very nice place to live and the real estate prices started to increase sharply. This led to an even upper-class settlement in the residential areas of the neighborhood.

Powelton has always been an avant-garde and socially active community, where inhabitants give a great importance to the arts and use it as a means of community development. The way Powelton overcame its crisis in the mid 20th century moved the communities closer and unified them toward awareness for their neighborhood concerns so that no crisis would come again.

**Today’s Powelton**

Powelton was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on May 9, 1985, regulated by the Philadelphia’s Historical Commission in order to preserve the unique character of the neighborhood. Furthermore, some distinctive sites of Powelton have been declared Historic Sites, like the Frederic A. Poth Houses, The Powelton Apartments, John Shedwick Development Houses, etc.

Today’s main issue in the community is the debate over eastern land. Drexel has attempted to force a development on an open land on 32nd and Powelton Avenue to build new dorms for Drexel students. The neighborhood is strongly opposed to this and Drexel wants to negotiate. The Powelton Village Community Association argues that it is the only neighborhood in West Philadelphia that does not have a park, and urges Drexel to use this lot of land as a recreational facility for both Drexel’s students and the Powelton community, as was originally established between both parties in 1996.

Powelton community is very committed to the empowerment of all West Philadelphian communities; they originated the Spiral Q Puppet parade, from the Spiral Q Puppet Theater on 31st and Spring Garden that performs in the streets of West Philadelphia every year. The most recent was on October 1, 2005. This parade and the theater “not only aim at entertaining children in all of the University City District, but also to mobilize communities,
promote social actions and unite West Philadelphia. The community Education Center founded in 1973 on 35th and Lancaster provides the community with an arts center and « low-cost cultural and family activities, public areas for civic meetings and social events and space and technical support for organizations and individual artists [...] It also offers instruction in dancing, theater and martial arts, as well as after school programs, performance productions, and workshops »6. The Gwendolyn Bye Dance Center just next to the CEC also provides community with classes, lessons and training programs. The Ellen Powel Tiberino Memorial Museum on 38th and Hamilton « is dedicated to preserving and promoting work of contemporary African-American artists [...] It includes a collection of Tiberino’s work and a communal courtyard featuring words by local artists, family and friends »7.

Powelton is very concerned about public safety, traffic, recreation and parking, and its residents meet every month to discuss these issues and enhance their community living.

- Community Landmarks

The Philadelphia City Planning Commission describes landmarks as following: « Landmarks are physical structures that, by their significance, identify a particular precinct or lend identity [...] including churches, synagogues, schools, rail stations, museum and historical sites. Most have architectural and historical significance [...] »8.

Powelton is thus recognizable from many landmarks; Drexel University on its southeast boundary is one of them. The rail yards of the Pennsylvania Railroad, converging at 30th Street Station, marks its eastern boundaries. The red brick rows of the Mantua neighborhood on the north above Spring Garden Street and the institutional and commercial buildings on the West define the visual boundaries of Powelton. Its tree-lined streets and row houses with mansions and commercial support buildings dating from the second half of the 19th century are its main architectural characteristics. From the 900 buildings, 25 are significant and 809 contribute to the district9.

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5 The Daily Pennsylvanian, September 30, 2005
6 http://www.ucityphila.org/pdfs/univcity.supplement/arts_culture3.pdf
7 http://www.ucityphila.org/pdfs/univcity.supplement/arts_culture3.pdf
8 Philadelphia City Planning Commission, The Plan for West Philadelphia (Philadelphia: Published by the Commission, June 1994)
The Southern part of the district remains commercial and institutional, the residential character of this neighborhood attracting both of these types of settings.

The eastern boundary and Spring Garden Street, however, are poorly perceived by the community and the whole region and are thus less developed or have received fewer investments. In general Powelton has always been well considered like in the late 19th century it was seen as “containing a multitude of pretty residences of moderate cost and some of the handsomest and most expensive mansions in the city”. It is very impressive because of its architecture and of its economic and social diversity, and its good location. Furthermore, its wide range of institutions, including Catholic, Baptist, Orthodox and Episcopal churches, give shelter to many other diverse institutions.

• Demographic Data10

I have analyzed demographic data of the censuses of 1990 and 2000 for Powelton Village (Census Tract #90), and for the University City District and compared them.

In one decade the population of Powelton increased from 4,832 inhabitants to 5,335, following the global trend of UCD. The composition of this population was mainly Whites (73.7%) in 1990 followed by Blacks (16.7%), and by Asians (8.35%). Other communities were underrepresented. This composition underwent a radical change during this decade, the proportion of Whites having decreased by 11.6%, giving space to minorities. Principally the Black population rose by 2.4% but the most spectacular increase was among the Asian community, whose proportion in the Powelton population rose by 5.15%, representing 13.5% of the population in 2000. This data focuses on the opening and diversification of Powelton communities, mostly due to the expansion of Universities and a large number of students settling in the neighborhood.

The household pattern confirms this thesis, in 1990 77.7% were « nonfamily households », representing people living alone, and only 10.9% of the households were married couple without children. Ten years later, the household pattern totally changed; with only 31.3% of « nonfamily households » and 54.3% of « other households », this data representing

9 http://www.uchs.net
students’ dormitory or room sharing. Only 8.24% of households were married couples without children in 2000, less than the average of 12.1% for UCD for the same data.

The age pattern of the neighborhood also gives some indication about the influence of Universities on population, people between 18-24 years represented 43.8% of the population in 1990, doubling to 91.1% in 2000, the second largest group being the 15-19 one, it clearly states that the population of Powelton is a « student » population in 2000. This age-specific data is far above the average data for UCD population.

In 1990, 38.8% of Powelton population had a Graduate Degree, which was above UCD data and about 6 times more than the average data for all Philadelphian population. But this data decreased in 2000 to 20.0%, obviously because the student population living there now has not obtained its graduate degrees yet and because the graduate degree holding inhabitants living there in 1990 have mostly moved and not remained in the place they lived during their studies.

The level of employment of Powelton inhabitants over 16 is quite high compared to UCD data: 45.3% were employed in 2000, whereas only 40.4% were employed in UCD at the same date. It can be noticed though that the unemployment rate has doubled in the decade, rising from 6.33% to 12.4%, higher than the average unemployment rate for UCD of 11.5% and much higher than the average for Philadelphia of 6.09%. This increase in unemployment is quite worrisome for the neighborhood and might be linked to the lesser graduated population pattern.

Housing data also reveals the global trend to a young student population. In fact, the housing units number declined by 143 units, A figure that can be explained by the demolition of vacant units and construction of commercial structures. The number of vacant units were dramatically decreased because of the obvious need for more and more student housing, declining from 15.9% to 3.85%, it is the lowest rate compared both to UCD and Philadelphia data, meaning that this neighborhood is where most of the land is used and divided to settle habitations and commercial areas, leaving nearly no free space. Owner-occupied units represented 12.4% of the total housing units in 1990 and 11.7% in 2000, remaining quite stable and far below UCD data of 23.2% owner-occupied housing and Philadelphia data of 52.7%. This means that there is a traditional land leasing pattern in the Powelton neighborhood, land owners dividing their properties and leasing them to
temporary inhabitants (who are usually students).

The median house value in Powelton was $79,200 in 1990 and $91,500 in 2000. We can note a considerable increase in ten years, remaining above the median house value of the rest of Philadelphia by 25%. What can be understood by this huge increase is that there has been a considerable demand for housing in this neighborhood, and in all neighborhoods next to Universities, in the last 15 years. The leasing of properties to students proved to be a very lucrative investment which explains the increase in house value; there is little housing available and it can generate great income.

To conclude, Powelton Village Neighborhood is primarily residential and hosts many diverse institutions. It has been designed to be self-sufficient with its two commercial strips on Lancaster and Powelton Avenues. But unlike a real village, Powelton does not provide enough work for its community, and thus cannot be a “true closed living system”¹¹. The many facilities and connections to center city and to the rest of West Philadelphia enabled inhabitants to commute easily to work in industries and commerce, highlighting the very suburban setting of Powelton. “Its complex suburban form of housing, shopping street and institutional buildings remains fortunately largely intact, describing the origins and the first fruition of the suburban movement which has so changed the nature of urbanism in the US in the past century”¹². The current issues that Powelton community must face are the increasing demands for housing because of the development of Drexel University, and thus the crisis over the eastern land. The community remains very active and concerned about social, zoning and landing issues and is committed to many actions both for Powelton and the University City District communities, aiming to unify them to create a real community spirit.

¹¹ http://www.uchs.net
¹² http://www.uchs.net
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