Powelton: From Estate to Village
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From its humble beginnings as a tiny settlement on the west bank of the Schuylkill River, Powelton Village has gone from an upper-class trolley suburb to a gang-filled, crime-ridden neighborhood to now become one Philadelphia’s most historic, politically active and vibrant areas.

Nestled between the magnificent 30th Street Station, Drexel University and the dense neighborhood of Mantua, Powelton shows hardly a semblance of its former bucolic self. Long before America’s founding fathers met during the hot summer of 1776, the area now known as Powelton Village was home to two competing services that ferried travelers across the Schuylkill River. William Powel, a Welsh colonist who operated the ferry that ran along what is now Spring Garden Street, soon built a house to host travelers. With the construction of the Lancaster Pike, which connected Lancaster, Pa. to Philadelphia, in 1750 the ferry and surrounding area began to grow.¹

With the development of the pike, there was a large demand for taverns. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, the intersection of 30th and Market streets, a place that would later became a grand locomotive hub of the northeast with 30th Street Station, was then a tavern that served a starting point for a great many Conestoga wagons — so many that Market Street west of the river was then

called Conestoga Road. Only taverns sprung up in the neighborhood, including one at 35th and Lancaster streets.

Hare Powel, an heir to the Powel estate, purchased 96 acres of land and constructed a large mansion at 32nd and Race streets in the second half of the 18th century.

He erected a fine mansion, with a very imposing front adorned with massive columns of gray stone. The lawn in front extended from the house down to the water, and many large forest trees dotted the grounds in all directions. The Powelton Mansion was in the old days a place of note. It was the great resort of fashion and the scene of not a few celebrations and grand festivities.

Growth in the community, however, progressed at meager pace until the opening of bridges on Market and Spring Garden streets in 1805 and 1813, respectively.

With much easier access to Center City—which made up all of Philadelphia at the time, between Vine and South streets—wealthier citizens who were tired of the grime, noise and traffic of the city and in search of more sylvan setting began to move to the growing suburb.

In 1854, West Philadelphia—along with a number of other communities around Philadelphia proper—was consolidated into the single municipal district of Philadelphia. Yet the more

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2 W. Wallace Weaver, West Philadelphia: A Study of Natural Social Areas (Philadelphia: 1930), 47.
3 Ibid., 45-48.
4 Ibid., 46.
significant changes came with the arrival of American rail systems — much of which were centered in Philadelphia.⁵

The changes began three years before Philadelphia stretched itself across the Schuylkill. In 1851 — while Lancaster Avenue was still the only street north of Market that was paved⁶ — the first horse-drawn trolleys appeared in Powelton Village, running from Center city along Market Street to 41st Street. ⁷ With this development and the addition of the Chestnut Street Bridge in 1866, settlements increased in earnest. With cheap, somewhat reliable transportation located nearby, upper-class residents moved the area. The larger estates that had once defined the area began to sell off their holdings.

Even the esteemed Powel mansion “became the property of Evert J. Wendell, of the firm of Wendell and Smith, builders, who developed much of that area. Summer and Winter Streets were cut through and rows of homes erected.”⁸ Development in the rest of what is now called University City followed much the same pattern, particularly in nearby neighborhoods such as Hamilton Village. Powelton, which had been mostly farmland only a generation before, was increasingly being carved up, developed and occupied by upper-class families.

⁸ Rosenthal, A History of Philadelphia’s University City, “Powelton Village.”
There is ... an area of pretentious homes with beautiful broad lawns, old trees and spacious gardens above Race Street as far west as 38th Street on Powelton Avenue and as far north as Spring Garden Street. This area was in many respects the equal of Hamilton Village in its day.\textsuperscript{9}

While both neighborhoods would see massive residential developments in the second half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the railroad would take a far more drastic toll on Powelton, particularly the area immediately adjacent to the Schuylkill waterfront.

In 1852, the Powel family sold the section of his estate running along the Schuylkill River to the Pennsylvania Railroad, and in 1864 a station was constructed at 30th and Market streets. The construction of the rail yards would alter the neighborhood’s makeup for at least the next 150 years and cut off eastward development at 32nd Street. However, the rail yards did spark a large number of commercial developments around 30th Street Station and the Lancaster Avenue commercial corridor and many slaughterhouses and some lumberyards sprung up in the area.\textsuperscript{10}

Development in the area quickened after the 1876 Centennial Exposition held in West Philadelphia. As one of the guidebooks describes,

West Philadelphia is “one of the most attractive sections of the city, blending as it does, the beauties of both country and town. It is a location much sought after for private residences and consequently is filled with handsome edifices and delightful villas ... the buildings break away into couples, relieved by bay windows, cozy porches, and mansard roofs, standing in the midst of pleasant lawns -- the section, which is above 32nd Street and north of Lancaster Avenue, will also be found covered with

\textsuperscript{9} Weaver, West Philadelphia, 48.

\textsuperscript{10} West Philadelphia and Powelton Historic District Development Timeline,” 9 Oct. 2005, <Swarthmore.edu>
exceedingly attractive homes.”\textsuperscript{11}

Attendees at the exposition who were visiting the suburb for the first time “found interest and beauty in the West Philadelphia streets.”\textsuperscript{12} Two major institutions also found themselves interested in West Philadelphia, as the University of Pennsylvania and the Presbyterian Hospital — located adjacent to Powelton at 39\textsuperscript{th} and Market streets — both opened in the 1870s. Increasingly urban development continued through the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. By the first decade of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the Market-Frankford Elevated line was completed, and trolley lines 10, 38 and 43\textsuperscript{13} and ran directly through Powelton Village. With the increasingly easy commuter access to downtown Philadelphia and denser development, Powelton had gone from a bucolic, unpaved hamlet in the middle of the 19th century to a suburb whose “population came to be dominated by white middle-class families.”\textsuperscript{14} Yet, new transportation technologies would soon alter the makeup of the neighborhood once again.

With the invention of the automobile, commuters were able to live much farther away from their workplace than ever before. Combined with the loss of green space in West Philadelphia, whites that had lived in the neighborhood began to move to the suburbs.

\textsuperscript{11} Rosenthal, A History of Philadelphia’s University City, “West Philadelphia.”
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Mike Szilagyi, “1923 Transit Map,” Philadelphia Trolley Tracks, 1996, Oct. 9 2005 <phillytrolley.org>
According to History professor Walter Licht, “Owners of single-family homes left the area, but retained ownership, dividing the houses into apartments. An era of absentee landlordism and the deterioration of housing stock continued well into the 1940s and 1950s.”¹⁵

And, increasingly, blacks were filling the vacancies left by middle-class whites. As middle-class whites fled for the suburbs, West Philadelphia went from 17.2 percent black in 1940 to 34.3 percent black in 1960. “North of Market Street, except in a few isolated spots, slum or near-slum conditions developed.”¹⁶ Lillian G. Burns, Penn’s former secretary, described the situation to a conference:

Homeowners, dismayed by the encroachment of business and traffic on their residential communities, looked to the quieter, greener suburbs … Our neighborhood declined. Business declined. The new homeowner or businessman looked elsewhere to establish himself … In turn many of these houses deteriorated until only the desperate tenant would live in them. The blight of dilapidation began its infectious spread through our area. Homeowners who chose to stay found themselves surrounded by and powerless before the gradual decay. Population density increased, crime increased, all the city problems increased.¹⁷

These issues finally came to a head in 1958 with the murder of Penn graduate student In-Ho Oh. Walking near his Powelton Village apartment, he was stabbed and beat to death by a gang of at least seven young men — dubbed “hoodlums” by Philadelphia newspapers. The brutal assault enraged the community and forced the area

¹⁵ Ibid.
¹⁷ Ibid.
universities to realize that the quality of life in their surrounding neighborhoods directly affected the quality of the life at the universities.18

The result of the new approach was the West Philadelphia Corporation, a non-profit development corporation spearheaded by Penn. Over the next decade, Penn, Drexel and other universities would reshape the communities — including Powelton — under the banner of “urban renewal.”

"The University claimed 37th to 40th streets and Spruce to Walnut streets for its own purposes." ... As Penn's population tripled in the 1960s, dormitories sprouted up from what was once a neighborhood. Additionally, Penn essentially "mowed down a community" to build a science corridor down Market Street.19

Using federal money earmarked for blight reduction, the University of Pennsylvania constructed the University City Science Center and University City High — both just south of Powelton Village — that "created a massive physical barrier between black neighborhoods to the north and the Penn campus to the south."20 While some of these renewal projects were successful, the demolishing of large sections of previously inhabited communities led to resentment from the surrounding neighborhoods. By the end of the 1960s, backlash had caused the University and many cities nationwide to give up on large-scale urban renewal projects. The creation of University City High and

19 Elizabeth Rossi, “Civic House lecture explores history of local community.”
crime prevention measures after the In-Ho Oh murder had improved the neighborhood. According to resident Suzanne Minnis, in the 1960s, “You would see families with children; this felt like a very close-knit community.”²¹ In the 1960s and 1970s, the neighborhood was a home for black political activities, most namely the organization MOVE, which was eventually evicted from Powelton.

By the 1980s, urban renewal projects had been long since abandoned, and with better partnerships between schools and the communities, as well as Powelton Village being placed on the National Register of Historic Districts in 1984, Powelton’s fortunes began to improve. “Investors purchased architecturally magnificent homes that were in disrepair, restored the houses and caused property values to increase tremendously.”²² With Drexel’s expansion into Powelton Village, its inclusion in the creation of the University City District in 1997²³, the surge in housing prices in the 1980s and 1990s and increasing numbers of students living off campus in the neighborhood, Powelton has enjoyed a strong revitalization in recent years. Yet, with improving fortunes, came more changes to the makeup of the community.

Approximately 75 percent of residents are college-age students. Yet, even long-term residents are highly educated: 95.1 percent of Powelton residents 18 years or older have at least a high school diploma, while the rate for all of West Philadelphia

²³ “About UCD,” University City District, 2004, 8 Oct. 2005 <Ucityphila.org/about>
is less than 70 percent. The median house value in Powelton is $79,200, more than $47,000 above West Philadelphia’s median price. Also, a section of the neighborhood between 36th and 39th streets and Spring Garden and Baring streets was graded “high value” real estate by the Philadelphia Office of Housing and Neighborhood Preservation — the only area to receive that designation in 2003 in all of University City. Possibly most indicative of the neighborhood’s changing fortunes in the last decade, the number of vacant units in Powelton between 1990 and 2000 dropped 77 percent, from 285 to 65 — and the percent of all units that were vacant dropped from 16 to 4 percent over the same period. Because of the high student population, only 12.1 percent of community residents are homeowners — less than one-fourth the overall rate in West Philadelphia.

Residents also have a much different racial makeup than the rest of West Philadelphia. According to 1990 estimates, 72 percent of Powelton residents are white and 17 percent are black, compared to 23 white and 72 percent black for West Philadelphia as a whole.

This situation has created a love-hate relationship with Drexel University, as housing prices have greatly increased "homeowners became increasingly concerned about the growth of

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<http://www.phila.gov/ohnp/westphila.htm>
<westphillydata.library.upenn.edu>
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
Drexel University’s campus and about the fraternities, sororities and student apartment buildings that are often located next to single family homes.” 28 Fights have ensued between Drexel and the Powelton Village Civic Association, which remains a vocal voice for development, zoning and historic preservation issues relating to the community. As Michael Jones, head of the PVCA told the Drexel Triangle, "Powelton Village has been around for over two hundred years. Students and members of Drexel University do not realize that our community has been around much longer than the university." 29

A number of well-known landmarks still continue to bring the older community residents together.

The Community Education Center, located at 3500 Lancaster, was founded in 1973 to “serve the culturally and economically diverse neighborhoods of West Philadelphia” and “since the mid-1980's, the CEC has served as a center for community arts.” 30 According to their executive director, “We have been serving our community with quality arts programming for nearly 30 years, believing in the power of the arts to help build well-rounded, creative, positive individuals, and stronger communities.” 31

The Spiral Q Puppet Theater similarly seeks to unite the community at its 3114 Spring Garden Street headquarters - except using puppets. As its Web site declares, “In a short time we have

29 Jason Gomes, “What Powelton Village Has to Offer: Past to Present.”
31 Ibid.
been here, we have doubled staff, created a living museum for the hundreds of giant puppets and parade items and vastly expanded our programs to meet the growing demands of our partners.\textsuperscript{32}

The grand art deco 30\textsuperscript{th} Street Station and adjacent Post Office are likely the most visible community landmarks. While a small percentage of travelers in and out of the station venture into Powelton, the buildings create a large amount of foot traffic that benefits local business and allow residents to claim their own major tourist attraction. Yet, “a major issue looming in Powelton Village’s future is the possible development of the 30\textsuperscript{th} Street rail yards,”\textsuperscript{33} with construction such as the recent Cira Centre. The development could greatly expand the neighborhood, and better connect residents with the Schuylkill River.

For many younger residents, the most important community landmark is Drexel University. As the center of life for most of Powelton’s residents below of the age 25, Drexel has played very big role in community development. Their recent announcement of the construction of a new dormitory at 33\textsuperscript{rd} and Race streets has angered some residents, especially those that used the basketball court the dorm will sit. Because of this and previous projects, as well as the influx of students, the “community is still dealing with ‘town and gown’ concerns, such as zoning, traffic and parking, recreation and open space, crime and public

\textsuperscript{32} Spiral Q Puppet Theater. “About Spiral Q.” 9 Oct. 2005 <spiralq.org/abouthome.html>

\textsuperscript{33} Philadelphia City Planning Commission, The Plan for West Philadelphia, 62.
Yet, those problems pale in comparison to those faced by the neighborhood in the crime wave of the 1950s— and while its bucolic origins hardly show today, the community is still being held up as one of the best examples of the successes of historic preservation and revitalization. Unlike many parts of West Philadelphia, the neighborhood is grappling not with abandoned buildings, but with a lack of vacant space and rising, not falling housing prices. Though it has its problems, for now, Powelton is one of the most vibrant and resurgent neighborhoods in University City and Philadelphia.

34 Ibid, 62.