Powelton Village: From Rural Estates, to Suburban Community to Urban Artisans

From the inception of West Philadelphia, the neighborhood of Powelton Village – nestled in the northeast corner of University City and bounded by, Spring Garden Street on the North, 31st on the East, Lancaster Avenue on the South and 38th street on the West – has held the reputation of a small but attractive, upscale and opulent area. The guidebook to the 1876 Centennial Celebration explained that “the section, which is above 32nd Street and north of Lancaster Avenue, will also be found covered with exceedingly attractive homes…”¹ From the opulent early nineteenth century estates described in the Centennial guidebook grew a suburban like community in the early twentieth century spurred by transportation and infrastructure improvements in Philadelphia. Development in the area continued into the twentieth century as Powelton Village transformed from a rural community to a bustling urban district. Even as the area urbanized, its historical roots as an opulent and attractive area allowed it to retain its appeal as a desirable neighborhood in which to live.

Powelton and the West Philadelphia area emerged in the early nineteenth century as a collection of country estates. Powelton became a rural excursion from the urban, Philadelphia City Center. Powelton’s location, distant from Center City Philadelphia, dictated the nature of the people that lived in Powelton; the wealthy and the upper class inhabited Powelton as West Philadelphia then resembled farm country, not an urban area like it does today.² Powelton residents needed to have the necessary resources to travel to, and live in, a rural area. At its

inception, separated from Philadelphia City Center by the Schuylkill, people living in, working or visiting West Philadelphia had to take a ferry from Market Street over the river. In fact, the first house in Powelton resulted from a demand for additional transportation between West Philadelphia and the city. Dating all the way back to 1693, in true entrepreneurial spirit, William Powel, one of the first settlers of Philadelphia, started a rival ferry service on what is now Spring Garden to challenge the Market Street ferry monopoly. After a drawn out legal battle in the British courts, Powel was granted permission to operate his competing ferry. In order to offer a hospitable venue for travelers on the west side of the Schuylkill, Powel built a house. This house appears to have been the first house built in what would later become known as Powelton Village.³

Samuel Powel, another member of the Powel family and the second historical Powel associated with Powelton, appeared to further solidify the family name in the area by purchasing 106 acres of land to the northwest of Market Street and building a large home there. In 1883, however, a real estate development firm bulldozed the Powel mansion and built several smaller estates on the property along Thirty-First and Thirty Second Streets.⁴ This appeared to end the connection of the Powel family name to the neighborhood. But some seventy five years later, landlord Max Pfeiffer named a housing development on Thirty-Second Street after the Powel family.⁵ As a result of this seemingly random act, the neighborhood gradually became known as Powelton Village, a name which has stuck now for over a half century.

Even though the real estate firm razed the original Powel mansion, the architecture of the area in the first part of the twentieth century continued to reflect that the residents of Powelton

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³ Rosenthal.
⁵ Rosenthal.
came from wealthy backgrounds. According to the 1930 Ph.D. thesis of Penn student William Weaver Wallace, “Powelton village was unique among the settlements north of Market Street for the class of residences and settlers.”⁶ Up until at least the 1930s, the neighborhood, Wallace explains, was still characterized by “beautiful broad lawns, old trees and spacious gardens…”⁷

Politically speaking it seems the community, dating back to 1834, aligned with the aristocratic class as well. In 1834, Powelton hosted a victory party for the Whig party, which arose in opposition to the agrarian and egalitarian ideals of Jeffersonian Democracy. Accounts of the party confirm that it was rather opulent, as they served “boiled ham, beef tongue, crackers and cheese, [and] bread… - with a large stock of ale, beer, porter and cider…”⁸ In terms of politics, the Powelton of the nineteenth century consisted of Philadelphia’s conservative elite.

Beginning in the mid nineteenth century, however transportation improved accessibility of the neighborhood and gradually transformed Powelton from a rural area attracting the wealthy, conservative aristocratic to an upper middle class, suburban community. In 1842, the first suspension bridge across the Schuylkill River, at Spring Garden Street, provided residents direct access to Philadelphia.⁹ Supplying further accessibility, in 1850, the early stages of a horse drawn street car service began to be constructed along Market street, providing the first alternative form of public transportation to the area since the ferry service that had started a century earlier.¹⁰

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⁶ Wallace, 48.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Rosenthal.
The Spring Garden Bridge and the foundations of a rail service led to an influx of middle and upper class families who could now more easily commute between the area and Center City. According to the current Powelton Village Civic Association (PVCA) Archivist, Michael Jones, these transportation improvements directly led to the construction of more modest Victorian and twin row houses, standing aside the large estates built in the previous period. Nearing the turn of the century, Powelton Village functioned as a flourishing middle class suburb. An 1873 Lippincott & Co. guidebook for Philadelphia described the Powelton neighborhood as “a multitude of pretty residences of moderate cost [and] some of the handsomest and most expensive mansions in the city.” By the end of the nineteenth century, the impressive architecture and social and economic diversity of the area made Powelton one of the more popular neighborhoods in the entire city of Philadelphia.

As industry came to American cities at the turn of the century, middle class job opportunities became available in the areas surrounding Powelton Village. The working upper-middle class of Powelton represented a middle ground between the “old money elite” of Rittenhouse and the “nouveau riche” of North Philadelphia. Community organizations, such as a “Catholic complex with an Episcopal church, and a Baptist church with Hicksite and Orthodox Quaker meetings” typified the diversity of the community.

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
Yet, the expansion of Philadelphia and the industrialization and urbanization of America produced a third period of development in Powelton Village. According to PVCA archivist Jones, “Powelton effectively functioned as a ‘suburb’ of Philadelphia, but as the city grew through the turn of the century, city limits expanded outwards, encompassing Powelton.” By the 1950s, the demographics of Powelton had shifted from an upper middle class white neighborhood to a majority working class African-American neighborhood.16

Despite the nationwide phenomenon of “white flight” from the urban center, Powelton remained a diverse and eclectic neighborhood. As redlining and restrictive covenants condemned much of post World War II urban America to extreme segregation and poverty, Powelton as a community actively sought to maintain its diversity. The efforts of twelve young adults who objected to World War II typified this commitment. These young people organized a housing cooperative in Powelton Village, the Friendship Victorian Housing Inc., which specifically embraced diversity of race, religion, class and ethnicity.17

With this commitment to diversity, Powelton transformed again, this time from a middle class, working neighborhood to an intimate, bohemian community. The intimacy of the neighborhood with its Victorian porches allowed citizens to begin to refer to Powelton as “Powelton Village.”18 Jones explains that the “changing ideologies” of the 1960s, in addition to its convenience to Center City, the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University, and, of course, the “beautiful low-cost Victorian housing stock” fused the working class demographic with an artisan class consisting of “[q]uaker groups, university professors, artist colonies, and

16 Jones.
other groups…”.”  

With this artisan bohemian community living alongside working African Americans, Powelton thrived as a progressive and sometimes aggressive and militant community that challenged social boundaries.

At times, the desire of Powelton residents to challenge social norms had tragic results for the community. In the 1970s, Powelton residents Vincent Leaphart, an African-American third grade drop out, (later known as John Africa) and Donald Glassy started the MOVE organization, “a radical, activist, counterculture organization.”  

All members of MOVE took the surname Africa and John Africa charged all of his followers to bring about an apocalyptic state to return the city to a “natural, forest like state.”  

MOVE moved into a house at 33rd Street and Powelton and the group got involved with a series of violent acts, killings and even bombings. MOVE officially dissolved by the early 80s, but not before establishing a blemish on the neighborhood’s reputation.  

MOVE continues today at Forty Seventh Street and Kingsessing. It is dramatically changed from earlier decades, but thrives nonetheless.

Despite the acts of MOVE in the 1970s, Powelton continued to grow as a boutique and eclectic neighborhood through the 1980s and 90s. According to Jones, the composition of the current neighborhood still consists of a diverse set of people – ranging from artists, professors and professionals.  

Demographically, the neighborhood is as ethnically diverse as it is

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19 Jones.
23 Jones.
professionally diverse. According to an analysis of the 2000 census data, the approximately
11,000 residents in Powelton village consist of about 47% African Americans, 40% Caucasians,
8% Asians and 5% Hispanics -- numbers that reflect on the whole the diversity of the city of
Philadelphia overall.24

Part of this diversity can certainly be attributed to the efforts of the Powelton Village
Civic Association. Ironically, the PVCA formed concurrently with MOVE. The PVCA
emanated from two organizations -- the Powelton Village Homeowners Association and the
Powelton Neighbors. The PVCA aimed to “preserve, protect and improve on the things that
make Powelton a great place to live.” 25 In the constitution, the PVCA lists the “preservation…of
the residential character of Powelton Village” and long term owner occupied property as two of
its main goals.26

Today, the PVCA’s main goals continue to be to maintain the diverse and residential
classacter of the neighborhood. The threat today to the residential character of the neighborhood
comes from an entirely different source than earlier in its history – Drexel University. Starting in
the 1960s, long time Powelton resident Suzanne Minni explained in an interview with the Drexel
student newspaper, The Triangle, “Drexel started to move their campus in the northern
direction… They would pay a huge amount of money to homeowners for their houses…and then
tear them down…. They destroyed …beautiful homes….”27 Jones fears that Drexel’s continued

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
expansion in this manner threatens the “neighborly Village atmosphere and the tolerant social values” of Powelton. Unlike the University of Pennsylvania, which offers incentives for faculty and staff to purchase homes in Powelton or, for that matter, anywhere in University City, Drexel University, according to Minnis, “has failed to see the importance of a viable neighborhood next to its campus.” Many Powelton residents contend that Drexel and Powelton Village must work collaboratively in the upcoming years in order to maintain the integrity and intimacy of Powelton Village, while at the same time finding a way to provide additional resources for the Drexel Community to expand and to continue to grow.

Despite the heightening conflict with Drexel, Powelton continues to thrive as a diverse community with a historical and intimate atmosphere. These attributes stem directly from its past. Its diversity emanates from its roots in urbanization. Its intimacy stems from its years as a suburban community for the wealthy and upper middle class in the early nineteenth century, when grand and ornate homes were built that remain and give the neighborhood a historical richness. Because of its historical roots, Powelton appears to retain the attributes that will allow it to overcome its struggles with the Drexel community and to maintain a thriving and intimate community attracting a diverse population to this unique neighborhood in West Philadelphia.

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28 Jones.
Works Cited


