The Community of Spruce Hill
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Proposed Spruce Hill Historic District

Boundaries shown are subject to change
The transformation of West Philadelphia into the area that we see today has been a long and extensive process. West Philadelphia which was once the scene of a vast industrial area has changed over the past 150 years into an urban area which mixes different ethnicities and classes of people in the hope for a better community. The Spruce Hill district (its borders being located 40th to 46th Streets, Woodland Avenue to Market Street) was one of the communities created during this process of urbanization. It is the development of communities such as these that shows us the transformation of a society from mainly an agricultural society into an urban and commercial setting which has been altered by the influx of commercial and institutional development. Spruce Hill is one of the most identifiable communities in West Philadelphia. Even today glimpses of the past are still represented in the houses that are present and the class of people that remain. The Spruce Hill community today still looks for chances to improve its society, while maintaining the historical integrity of West Philadelphia.

In 1626 Gustavus Adolphus sought to establish Swedish power in America in order to found a colony which would become a refuge for oppressed Protestants.\(^1\) Govenor John Printz took charge of this operation, and in 1653 the Swedish moved up the Delaware discovering Upland, which is currently modern Chester, Pennsylvania. The Swedish also settled colonies in Kingsessing as well as in Moyamessing on the present site of South Philadelphia.\(^2\) With the settlement of what is today South Philadelphia, different groups looked for areas in which they could expand. West Philadelphia at the time of the arrival of the Swedish in South Philadelphia was mainly a farming and agricultural land. In 1680, William Penn became the owner of Pennsylvania and divided West Philadelphia into two townships, Kingsessing and Blockley (which is present day
40th ward).³ Penn put vast amounts of land in the hands of the people which created the opportunity for people of Philadelphia to acquire land outside of the city. Blockley township played a huge role in the development of West Philadelphia.⁴ 5,000 acres of Blockley township were sold to some of the wealthiest landowners in the country at the time.⁵ These lands were turned into beautiful estates in what is now Belmont District, Fairmount Park and present day Wynnewfield.⁶ In the early 1800’s, two West Philadelphia landowners attempted to establish residential villages. William Hamilton, a botanist, owned 500 acres of land including the Woodlands.⁷ Hamilton recognized that the opening of the Market Street Bridge in 1804, offered the potential for new settlers to arrive in West Philadelphia, thus making land very marketable.⁸ Judge Richard Peters had the same thought when he laid out the village of Mantua, which was between the Lancaster Turnpike and the Upper Ferry Bridge.⁹ These places were still very much rural and were used initially as homes to escape the city life. However, by 1850 West Philadelphia had industry, commerce and rural farms, as well as picturesque and scenic destinations, large estates, and pleasant residential areas.¹⁰ The development of this land by 1850 led to the creation of an area that was growing and prospering into its own city. From this expansion different areas were being created and thus the city became divided into sections of its own.

The Spruce Hill District of West Philadelphia, during the years of 1850-1910, was the largest residential area in Philadelphia.¹¹ Most of the dwellers at the time, who owned property in Spruce Hill, were of the middle class. Since the land was close to “old city”, this gave residents the option of a suburban home which enabled them to get away from city life.¹² The area of Blockley, laid the foundations for what is now Spruce Hill. When
William Hamilton first developed Hamiltonville in the early 1800’s, he used speculative development. 

“This consisted of the purchase of large tracts of land by one person, and the subsequent division and construction of buildings and resale to individual owners.”

The earliest speculative development in Spruce Hill took place during 1851. Samuel Sloan, who would become a nationally known architect, was chosen to design the area. People such as Samuel Harrison and Nathaniel B. Browne, tow prominent owners of land in this area, wanted Sloan to evoke the image of a romantic picturesque house as a retreat for the cultivated and the successful. Sloan designed houses for the wealthy in the formation known as Gothic Revival and Italianate houses. These houses were semi-detached houses that were simple and elegant in their detailing, but they showed that separate residences existed. These houses created space between the residents while at the same time allowing for the increase in population in Spruce Hill.

When transportation as well as the construction of major houses was completed, the population of Spruce Hill increased. In 1857 the Chestnut Street bridge was constructed, which allowed people access to the area from the city. In 1866 a horse car depot opened on Chestnut Street between 41st and 42nd streets, which allowed movement from West Philadelphia down Chestnut Street to front Street and back. The development of transportation allowed people to explore vast amounts of land in the Philadelphia area as well as venture to places they had never seen. With transportation causing an influx of people into the Spruce Hill and West Philadelphia, living space need to be constructed. The building of important commercial sites such as the Pennsylvania Hospital at 44th and Market Street, home for the incurables at 47th and Woodland Avenue and the Satterlee Hospital which was constructed in the farmland of West Philadelphia
around 44th Street and Baltimore, increased the influx of people to this area. The development of these buildings shows the changing characteristic of the landscape of not only Spruce Hill, but of West Philadelphia. Since the influx of people into this area was happening so quickly, developers were forced to push past the 42nd street boundary. Developers extended the street grid by constructing houses beyond the established boundaries by provided more compact, less ornate houses on smaller plots of land. Row houses were developed, especially along the 4000 block of Locust Street. “These plainer, more repetitive houses were more clearly identifiable as speculative projects for the middle class. They introduced urban density and architectural uniformity which had been avoided in earlier speculative developments.” The residents of these houses were thus of the middle class and the people were more native born than the people who had bought the land initially. Between 1910-1927, all the remaining space west of Cobb’s Creek was developed using a variety of housing types and many of the large mansions that had been developed because of the Hamiltonville idea of life, succumbed to development pressures of the time. As the transportation developments became greater and more advanced, there was another push in Spruce Hill for housing. Apartment complexes were built to house people. There was a mixture of elaborate, highly decorated buildings reminiscent of palaces along with apartment buildings articulated to resemble individual row houses.

The University of Pennsylvania moved to West Philadelphia from old city in 1872. West Philadelphia was only spottily settled at this time and the University thought that it could use the space to create a more elaborate campus. Most of the neighborhoods closest to the Penn campus were developed as “streetcar suburbs” for the
working class families in the late 19th century. After several decades of growth there were visible problems that affected the community. In every neighborhood around the campus of Penn, deteriorated houses were clearly apparent. “West Philadelphia’s formerly thriving neighborhood commercial corridors experience increasing storefront vacancies, the abandonment of most upstairs occupancy, and the replacement of community-based businesses by convenience stores or “stop and go” fast-food establishments that sold beer and malt liquor and generated complaints about loitering and criminal activity on adjacent sidewalks.” There was also a shift in the type of people moving around Penn’s campus. What had been a middle class to upper class area when Spruce Hill and West Philadelphia was first being developed saw the entrance of a more racially diverse community. In 1990 the census tracts that University City hosted a population of 25,692, with 41.2% of those people being white, 46.2% African American and 11.2% Asian residents. The median family income was $27,657 with 15.7% percent of the families below the poverty level. The area around Penn’s campus was deteriorating and Penn’s faculty felt a need to resurrect the area for the future of the school. Spruce Hill, however remained largely intact and mostly remained a middle class dwelling. Before the creation of the high rises as well as other Penn housing facilities, many students decided to purchase houses in the Spruce Hill community. Today many students live from 40th to 42nd from Chestnut Street to Baltimore Street. These houses are not only occupied by the students of Penn but as well as by professors and people of the Spruce Hill community.

Today the Spruce Hill community encompasses over 16,000 residents of West Philadelphia’s University City, so called because of its proximity to the University of
Pennsylvania, Drexel University and the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia. “It overflows with the greatest American architecture and urban design of the late nineteenth century. Its abundance of trees, shrubs, and flowers evokes lush cities of the West Coast.”  

Spruce Hill has divided into three distinct sections. The area to the north of Locust Street is a mixed use zone that contains many commercial properties, very heavily traveled streets, and affordable apartments and row homes. The central section represents the late 19th century Hamiltonville in that it contains the largest and most expensive homes. These homes are between Locust Street and Baltimore Avenue. The third section is represented by Clark Park, which is located below Baltimore Avenue. Clark Park symbolizes the only park in Spruce Hill. 

The Spruce Hill Community Association which is a non-profit organization that exists to promote the betterment of the Spruce Hill community has come up with plans to promote the area. The first goal of the community is to increase the rate of owner-occupancy while respecting and addressing the need for a diversity of housing types that respond to a range of income levels. Second, increase the strength of the Spruce Hill Community Association and other community-based organizations while improving the connection among all neighborhood organizations and institutions. Third, radically improve the public and private education in and around Spruce Hill. Fourth, strengthen the "social capital" of Spruce Hill, such as the linkages among neighbors, streetlife, and neighborhood pride and respect. Fifth, significantly improve the retail areas in and around Spruce Hill. Sixth, develop formal relationships with the University of Pennsylvania and engage Penn in Spruce Hill's long-term strategy. Seventh, reduce crime and the perception of crime in Spruce Hill. Finally, to increase the cleanliness of Spruce Hill. These plans overall with help to create the
type of society that represents a suburban life in a city dwelling. The community of Spruce Hill is presently working together to achieve these goals and with the further connection with the University of Pennsylvania the area can only improve.

Spruce Hill is one of the most well known areas of West Philadelphia. “It evolved as a planned small neighborhood for the new population of middle-class managers working in industrialized Philadelphia in the last half of the 19th century.” The houses built in this community are often more spacious than other areas in West Philadelphia and they represent several styles that were popular in the period when this area was being developed. The integrity of this area has survived with the continuous change that has happened in West Philadelphia over the past 150 years. This community while keeping its historical appearance and interests keeps looking for new ways to better its community in the future.

11 Rebecca Trumball, “History of Spruce Hill,” http://www.uchs.net/
12 Rebecca Trumball, “History of Spruce Hill,” http://www.uchs.net/
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18 Rebecca Trumball, “History of Spruce Hill,” http://www.uchs.net/
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Margaret Pugh O’Mara, Cities of Knowledge: Cold War Seizure and the search for the next Silicon Valley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 144.


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