LOWER GERMANTOWN AVENUE MINI TOUR - PART 2
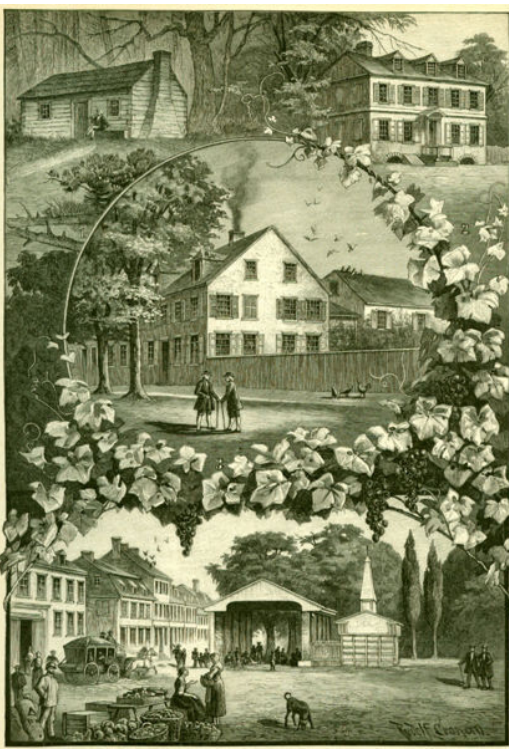
A brief history of Germantown

Founded by German Quaker and Mennonite families in 1683 as an independent borough, it was absorbed into Philadelphia in 1854. Germantown has played a significant role in American history; it was the birthplace of the American antislavery movement, the site of a Revolutionary War battle, the temporary residence of George Washington, and the residence of many notable politicians, scholars, artists, and social activists. Today the area remains rich in historic sites and buildings from the colonial era. There are two National Historic Landmark districts--Colonial Germantown Historic District and Historic Rittenhousetown--and several National Historic Landmark sites; Cliveden, the Germantown Cricket Club, John Johnson House, Charles Willson Peale House, and Wyck House.

Francis Daniel Pastorius founded the first German-American settlement in the colonies, negotiating a land purchase of 15,000 acres from the Penn family. In 1688, five years after its founding, Germantown became the birthplace of the anti-slavery movement in America. Pastorius, Gerret Hendericks, Derick Updegraeff and Abraham Updengraef gathered at Thones Kunders's house and wrote a two-page condemnation of slavery and sent it to the governing bodies of their Quaker church, the Society of Friends. The petition was mainly based upon the Bible's Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Though the Quaker establishment took no immediate action, the 1688 Germantown Quaker Petition Against Slavery was a clear and forceful argument against slavery and initiated the process of banning slavery in the Society of Friends (1776) and Pennsylvania (1780).

When Philadelphia was occupied by the British during the American Revolutionary War, British units were housed in Germantown. In the Battle of Germantown, on October 4, 1777, the Continental Army attacked this garrison with Benjamin Chew's house Cliveden at the center of action. During the battle, a party of citizens fired on the British troops, as they marched up the avenue, and mortally wounded British Brigadier General Agnew. Agnew died in the parlor of Grumblethorpe.

During his presidency, George Washington and his family lodged at the Deshler-Morris House in Germantown to escape the city and the yellow fever epidemic of 1793. Germantown was incorporated into the City of Philadelphia in 1854 by the Act of Consolidation.

Pictures from Old Germantown: the Pastorius family residences are shown on the upper left (c. 1683) and upper right (c. 1715), the center structure is the house and printing business of the Caurs family (ca. 1735), and the bottom structure is the market place (c. 1820). Original source unknown.

LOWER GERMANTOWN AVENUE MINI TOUR - PART 2

This mini tour features a collection of historic buildings along Germantown Avenue, continuing the walk up the Avenue from where we left off at Part 1 last week.

Photo @allysonatrandom via Instagram

ST. LUKE'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
5421 Germantown Avenue
1875

St. Luke's Episcopal Church was designed by ecclesiastical architect Henry Congdon. The congregation was founded in 1811, when Thomas Armat gathered eleven families at his home with the intention of starting the first Episcopalian church in Germantown.

The church is now also the home of the Urban Center at St. Luke's, which hosts the parish's food pantry, health awareness classes, yoga and exercise classes, an after school tutoring program, and countless parish activities and guilds who use the building for fellowship and outreach.

Photo: Oscar Beisert

Photo: Oscar Beisert

Photo: Marriott Morris, 1887. Library Company of Philadelphia.

FRIENDS FREE LIBRARY OF GERMANTOWN

5418-5420 Germantown Avenue
1874

"The historic stone structure standing at 5418 Germantown Avenue has been the home of the Friends Free Library since 1874.

One of the oldest public libraries in the country, its origin dates back almost three decades earlier during a time when the surrounding neighborhood of mill workers had no real free access to the written word. Begun by the Germantown Meeting's School Committee in 1845, the original Free Library collection of 41 titles was first housed in the School and later the women's cloakroom of the Meeting House. Included among the original books were such titles as Piety Promoted, The Journal of George Fox and Penn's Rise and Progress of the People Called Quakers.

At this time, the concept of a free and public library with books on science, travel and natural history was a new and untested one considered quite radical by some of our British peers as just "a typical piece of American 'tomfoolery and extravagance.'" In spite of critics' predictions that by the "end of the year" there would not "be a book on the shelves", these limited volumes coupled with a gift of $45, allowed the library to expand its collection to 5,634 books by the time it moved to its current location on Germantown Avenue.

Although much has changed over the years, the Friends Free Library remains committed to preserving and growing this valuable resource for both the school and the community of Germantown."
~~ Our History, Friends Free Library

Photo: Oscar Beisert

MASONIC HALL
5423-27 Germantown Avenue
1874

Constructed as the home of the Mitchell Lodge #296, the Gothic Revival style Masonic Hall served as meeting and event space for the fraternal organization, with ground level retail space occupied by a hardware store. It is thought that architect and builder John D. Caldwell was the designer of the building, as he was a member of Mitchell Lodge at the time.

In 1980, the Masons sold the building and joined the Jenkintown Masonic Hall. The building became the showroom for the Cunningham Piano Company, with their workshop and factory just around the corner.

Cunningham occupied the eye-catching building until 2016, when they opted to move to a Philadelphia suburb.

In 2016 the building was purchased by a local mission-driven developer whom is working on converting the building to a mixed-use retail and residential property.

Photo: The History of Mitchell Lodge #296 by Lincoln E. Leeds, 1905

Photo: Tom Bastin, via Flickr

Photo: Marriott Morris, circa 1890. Library Company of Philadelphia.

DESHLER-MORRIS HOUSE

5442 Germantown Avenue
1772

David Deshler built the original four-room summer cottage on this Germantown lot in 1752, adding the three-story front addition in 1772.

Colonel Isaac Franks purchased this elegant home from the Deshler heirs in 1792. Colonel Franks rented this home to President George Washington in the fall of 1793, while Philadelphia remained under quarantine for yellow fever. Washington met with his cabinet here, and together, they conducted the nation's business and addressed issues of foreign policy. The following summer, Washington returned with his family to enjoy the expansive gardens and orchards in this "fine airy place" and to escape the summer heat of the city.

The house was later sold to Elliston and John Perot. In 1834, Elliston's son-in-law, Samuel Morris, purchased the home. The house stayed in the possession of the Morris family for over a century, when Elliston P. Morris donated the house to the National Parks Service in 1948. The name was officially changed to the Germantown White House in 2009 and work has been undertaken to restore the house to its 18th century appearance.

Restored interior of Germantown White House.
Photo: National Park Service.

MARKET SQUARE

Germantown Avenue between School House and Church Lanes

Surrounded by a number of historic buildings, the parcel of land that is Market Square has been in the public domain since 1703, when Germantown - then an independent municipality - acquired the property for "the common good." A William Britten painting from 1820 shows a wooden shambles, or open-air market hall, in the center of the block.
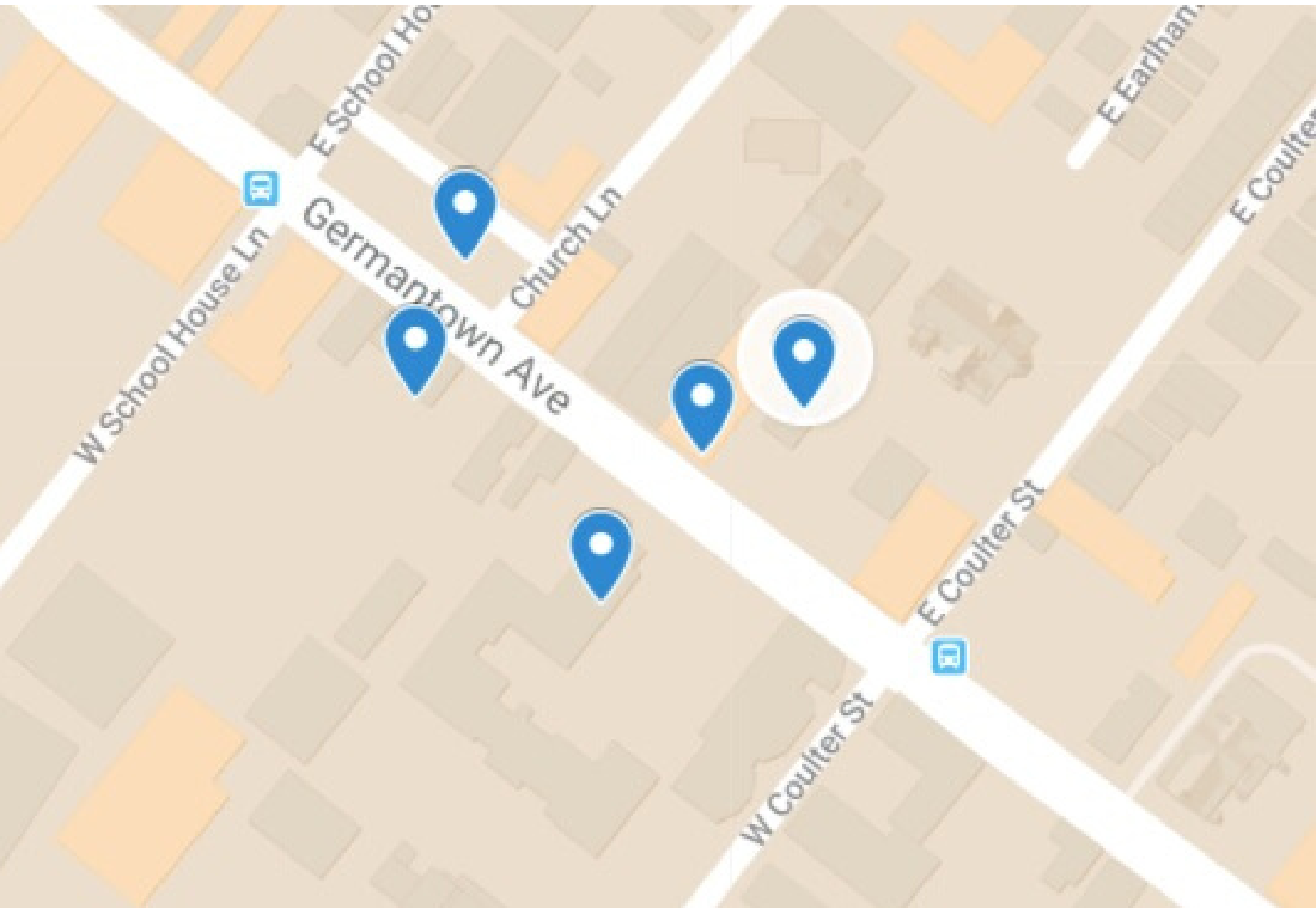
Inga Saffron summarizes the shift in Market Square's function, "By the 1830s, Germantown's center of commerce had shifted north to Chelten Avenue, near the train station, and the area around the common began to develop into a posh residential neighborhood. In 1883, the square was given a more formal look when a handsome Civil War monument was installed at its center. Five years later, Germantown Presbyterians hired George T. Pearson, noted for his ornate Victorian house designs, to construct an impressive new church: an asymmetrical stone building with a large circular stained-glass window and oversize arched entry. By the 20th century, whatever traces of the square's colonial past had existed were long gone."

In the 1950s, with a strong desire to connect to America's revolutionary history, locals began to re-colonialize Market Square. Victorian houses were replaced with Colonial-style buildings and those not replaced were redecorated to appear more Colonial.

All photos this page by Oscar Beisert

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MAP OF SITES ON THIS MINI TOUR

Germantown features many more historic sites and cultural resources than we included here.
A great tour of Germantown is available in *Philadelphia Architecture, A Guide to the City*
by John Andrew Gallery (available at your local bookstore).

The Germantown Historical Society is located at Market Square, and offers a wealth of information and resources for the further study of Germantown's rich history.

Follow us on Instagram to see more photos of these buildings @presalliancephl
and tag us in your photos when you visit them!