

PRESERVATION MATTERS

The Newsletter of The Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia

SPECIAL ISSUE
ENDANGERED
PROPERTIES



Ninth Annual Endangered Properties List

JOHN COLTRANE HOUSE ♦ CHINESE CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY CENTER ♦ JOE FRAZIER'S GYM ♦ KENSINGTON SOUP SOCIETY
NEW FRANKFORD Y ♦ ROYAL THEATER ♦ SPRING GARDEN POST OFFICE MURAL ♦ STIFFEL SENIOR CENTER ♦ DOX THRASH HOUSE

Each year, the Preservation Alliance highlights important historic places in and around Philadelphia that are threatened by development pressures, disuse, or neglect. Often these places are selected for their architectural significance, but historic preservation is about much more than just saving important architecture. Preservation is also about cultural conservation and saving the “everyday” buildings that tell extraordinary stories about Philadelphia and its people. Philadelphia’s preservation ordinance recognizes this; buildings can be designated historic solely because they exemplify the cultural or social heritage of the community.

For this, our ninth annual Endangered Properties List, we have identified nine places that languish today in relative obscurity and are in danger of being lost, but whose histories reflect the richness and diversity of our shared cultural legacy. By highlighting these places and the challenges they face, we also hope to help inspire a renewed vision for their future and a broader understanding of the purposes of historic preservation. To learn more about these properties and those from past years’ lists, and what you can do to help protect their future, visit our website at www.PreservationAlliance.com/Endangered.

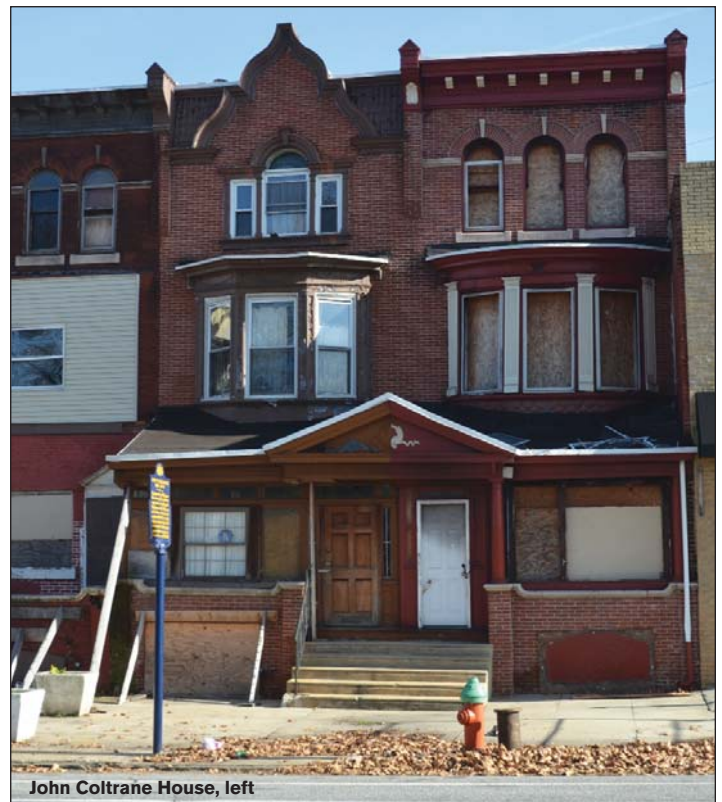
John Coltrane House

1511 N. 33rd Street, Philadelphia

SIGNIFICANCE One of the most influential musicians in American history, saxophonist John Coltrane called Philadelphia home during the most formative and transformational period of his career. He purchased this modest Strawberry Mansion rowhouse as an unknown twenty-six-year-old musician and factory worker in 1952. He lived here full-time until 1958, refining his musical style, overcoming drug addiction, and experiencing a profound spiritual awakening that inspired his most significant musical innovations. As his fame grew in the 1960s, Coltrane’s ties to Philadelphia remained strong—he owned the house until his death in 1967 and made frequent visits here between tours. The building was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1999.

THREAT Today, the Coltrane House is vacant and deteriorating, with immediate repairs needed to stabilize the house and its neighboring unit, which suffered a recent fire and remains in perilous condition.

RECOMMENDATION The home’s current owners are committed to its rebirth as a museum and educational center and have taken steps to establish a new non-profit organization to guide its rehabilitation. Even in its current condition, the site is a destination for jazz aficionados; a sound reuse program incorporating the adjacent property could return the site to sustainability if adequate funds can be raised in the near future to prevent its irrevocable loss.



John Coltrane House, left

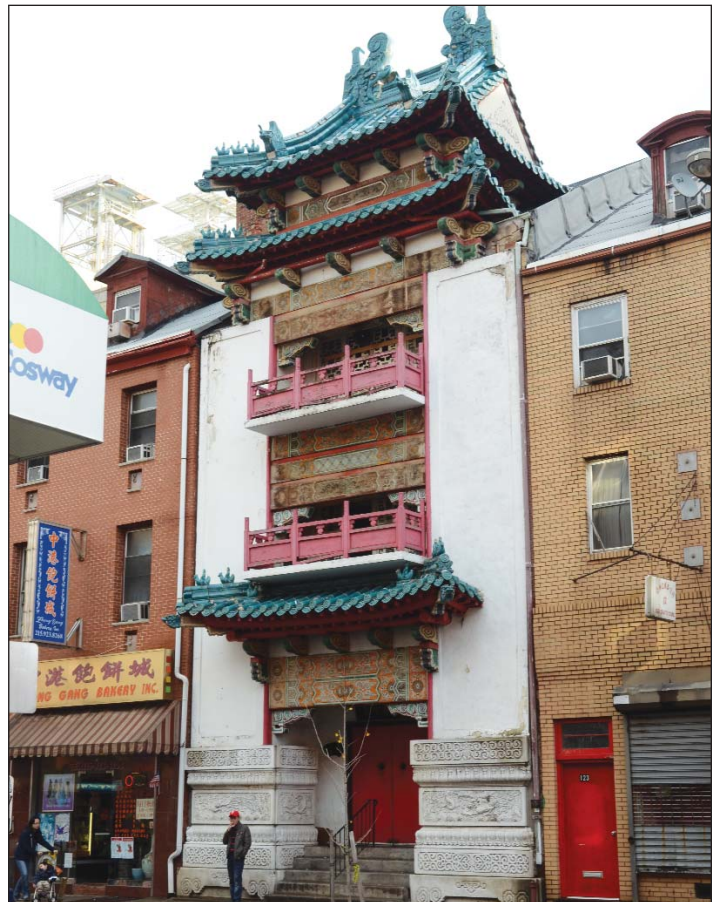
Chinese Cultural and Community Center

125 N. 10th Street, Philadelphia

SIGNIFICANCE Before the Friendship Gate was erected in 1984, the Chinese Cultural and Community Center stood as the single most iconic symbol of Philadelphia's Chinatown. Behind an elaborate façade assembled from pieces of the Chinese Pavilion from the 1967 Montreal Expo, the center was an anchor for generations of Chinatown residents and the public face of the community for the rest of the city. The center evolved from a YMCA chapter established in 1955 by T.T. Chang, considered the unofficial "mayor" of Chinatown for his lifelong efforts in promoting Chinese culture in Philadelphia. Known for its collection of Chinese cultural artifacts, classes in language, cooking, and the arts, and for traditional New Year banquets, the Center suffered a period of slow decline after Chang's death in 1996.

THREAT The center closed permanently in 2007, and the building has stood vacant ever since. Its current owner, a nonprofit foundation which grew out of the defunct community center, has limited resources to maintain the structure, portions of which date to the early nineteenth century. Despite its iconic street presence and cultural history, it is not locally designated.

RECOMMENDATIONS Always a popular destination for residents and visitors to Chinatown alike, the building has great potential to be repurposed in a way that would make its operation sustainable. If an appropriate commercial use for the building is identified, listing on the National Register of Historic Places could provide economic incentives for its rehabilitation.



Joe Frazier's Gym

2917 N. Broad Street, Philadelphia

SIGNIFICANCE Smokin' Joe Frazier was one of the greatest boxers of all time. In 1968, Frazier converted a North Philadelphia lumber warehouse-turned-dance hall into the Cloverlay Gym. He trained here for the duration of his legendary career, living in a modest apartment above the gym after amassing one of boxing's most celebrated career records of 32-4-1. His 1971 victory over Muhammad Ali in the "Fight of the Century" is still considered one of the sport's most epic bouts. After his retirement in 1976, Frazier devoted himself to the gym, which became an ad-hoc community center for its North Philadelphia neighborhood. Frazier passed away in November 2011.

THREAT Joe Frazier's Gym closed in 2008, and the building was sold. A furniture outlet recently opened in the former ground-floor gym, but the upper floors are boarded up and unoccupied. Though Frazier's name is still legible across the face of the building, little is left to commemorate the importance of the site. In a city more associated with a fictional boxer than a real champion, Joe Frazier's legacy is in danger of losing its most tangible link.

RECOMMENDATION Frazier's hopes of transforming the site into a boxing museum and community center were ultimately unrealized in his lifetime, but will remain a compelling vision as long as the building remains standing. Listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places would help protect the physical building while honoring one of the city's great citizens.



Royal Theater

1524 South Street, Philadelphia

SIGNIFICANCE South Street was once the heart of Philadelphia's African American community, and the Royal Theater was once the heart of South Street. Built in 1920 as the city's first and largest movie theater catering to African Americans, the 1,125-seat theater was billed as "America's Finest Colored Photoplay House." It specialized in "race films" by and for African Americans, an industry that showcased the talents of Paul Robeson and director Oscar Micheaux, among many others. The Royal also hosted the era's biggest names in black music, including Bessie Smith, Cab Calloway, Fats Waller and Pearl Bailey. The theater remained a neighborhood fixture through a period of slow decline along South Street, but it was eventually shuttered in 1970.

THREAT Now vacant for over three decades, the Royal continues to deteriorate while its South Street neighborhood enjoys a renaissance. Neighbors continue to hope for the theater's rebirth, but its current owners have yet to develop a viable reuse plan for the site. Despite listing on



both the Philadelphia and National Registers of Historic Places, recent proposals have suggested demolishing all but the iconic South Street façade, which is protected by an easement held by the Preservation Alliance."

RECOMMENDATIONS Any redevelopment of the site should honor the theater's legacy as a dynamic neighborhood anchor and cultural beacon. The building must be stabilized and sufficiently maintained now to allow for the best possible rehabilitation in the future.

Spring Garden Post Office Mural

1299 N. 7th Street, Philadelphia

SIGNIFICANCE Philadelphia artist Walter Gardner (1902-1996) painted "The Streets of Philadelphia" in 1937 for the Spring Garden Post Office, one of many across the country built as part of President Roosevelt's New Deal. The painting depicts a bustling street scene with workers unloading goods in front of the Merchant Exchange on Dock Street. Murals like this one represent an important chapter in American history, when federal policies encouraged the production of art "for the masses" to combat the economic and social challenges wrought by the Great Depression. Gardner was an English-born painter who emigrated to Philadelphia as a teenager and studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. He also created murals for post offices in Honesdale, Pennsylvania and Berne, Indiana, as well as a large panel for Philadelphia's Family Court, included in the building's recent interior designation to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.



THREAT The Spring Garden Post Office is one of seven Philadelphia facilities slated for closure as part of a nationwide downsizing proposed by the beleaguered U.S. Postal Service. While the similarly-threatened Benjamin Franklin post office on Market Street was recently granted a stay, prospects for the Spring Garden branch remain dim.

RECOMMENDATION If the post office does close as proposed, the mural should be preserved and remain publicly accessible at an appropriate new location. Its listing as an object on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places would help ensure that this work of art is not forgotten.

Stiffel Senior Center

604 W. Porter Street, Philadelphia

SIGNIFICANCE Constructed in 1928 as the Jewish Education Center #2, this neighborhood landmark has been a fixture of Jewish culture in South Philadelphia for over eighty years. Designed by Frank E. Hahn, whose many other works include the Royal Theater, the building served a dynamic immigrant community which developed along Porter Street in the early twentieth century. The center hosted Hebrew classes, provided recreational facilities, and offered space for neighbors to congregate and entertain—teen idol Eddie Fisher first performed as a student cantor at the center. Between 1966 and 1976, the center evolved to serve the neighborhood’s aging Jewish population with programs tailored specifically for senior citizens. A devastating arson fire in 1985 nearly destroyed the building, but an outpouring of community support led to a complete restoration the following year. The Stiffel Senior Center evolved with the changing demographics of the neighborhood, reaching out to new generations of immigrants to remain a vital part of South Philadelphia life.



THREAT In May of 2011, the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia voted to close the Stiffel Center, citing rising building maintenance costs. In November the building was listed for sale, and now stands vacant with no local designation preventing its demolition.

RECOMMENDATIONS Listing on the Philadelphia Register would help ensure that the building is not lost before a suitable new use can be found. A charter school, senior housing, or community center are all potential new uses which would honor the building’s rich past while contributing to the future of the neighborhood.



Dox Thrash House

2340 Cecil B. Moore Avenue, Philadelphia

SIGNIFICANCE Dox Thrash (1893-1965) was an innovative printmaker and key figure in Philadelphia’s vibrant African American art scene in the early and middle twentieth century. A native of Georgia and a veteran of World War I, he lived and worked in North Philadelphia for most of his career, regularly documenting the bustling street life in the city’s burgeoning African American working-class neighborhoods. He lived at 2340 Cecil B. Moore (then Columbia Avenue) from 1945 until his death in 1965. In 2001, his work was featured in a Philadelphia Museum of Art retrospective, *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered*.

THREAT The Thrash House is now vacant and prone to the elements and vandalism. The artist’s long-time studio at 2409 Cecil B. Moore has already been lost, and a nearby mural is the only visible evidence of Thrash’s legacy as a champion of the arts in Philadelphia.

RECOMMENDATION Standing next door to the Cecil B. Moore Branch of the Free Library, the Thrash House could be rehabilitated as an arts facility or community center to help rekindle the artist’s vision of a dynamic creative community in North Philadelphia, where he spent the last decades of his life mentoring young artists. The site is also an excellent candidate for a Pennsylvania Historical Marker and local register designation.

Kensington Soup Society

1036 Crease Street, Philadelphia

SIGNIFICANCE In an era before government assistance programs were commonplace, private philanthropic organizations were fundamental to the social and physical fabric of America's early industrial cities. In Philadelphia, neighborhood "Soup Societies" were community anchors, providing food and other assistance to the indigent and working poor. The Kensington Soup Society building, erected in 1870, was the city's longest-running soup house until its closure in 2008. It is one of only three purpose-built soup kitchen buildings still standing, and the only one not listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

THREAT In 2008 the building was sold to a private developer who has yet to redevelop the property, which has now sat vacant for over three years. The building still retains a high degree of architectural integrity, but remains vulnerable to demolition or adverse alteration.

RECOMMENDATIONS Concerned neighbors have nominated the building to the Philadelphia Register; their application is currently pending before the Philadelphia Historical Commission. If future plans for the property involve apartment units or other income-generating uses, listing on the National Register could also help finance an historically sensitive rehabilitation.



New Frankford Y

4704 Leiper Street, Philadelphia

SIGNIFICANCE This rare Frankford brownstone mansion was built in 1866 as a mill owner's house. Also known as the Garsed-Bromley Mansion, it was acquired in 1941 by the Young Women's Christian Association for use as a neighborhood center. During World War II, hundreds of USO hostesses were trained at the mansion, which also provided recreational and educational facilities for a growing working-class neighborhood. By the late 1960s, with demographic changes and racial tensions on the rise, the mansion was also a center for integration efforts, publishing a community paper called the *Northeast Liberator*.

THREAT In 2009, budget shortfalls forced the center to close, ending 68 years of community service and threatening the future of one of the neighborhood's most distinctive buildings. Neighbors fear that continued vacancy will invite vandalism and other crime to the site, with some openly calling for the building's demolition. Since the building is not listed on the Philadel-



phia Register of Historic Places, this remains an unfortunate possibility, despite its sound physical condition.

RECOMMENDATION The property is currently scheduled for sheriff's sale by the end of 2011. Supporters of the building hope a clear title

and a new owner will allow for its successful rehabilitation, since earlier redevelopment proposals were hampered by ownership complications. If a new nonprofit steward cannot be identified, private redevelopment which preserves the mansion and restores its grounds should be encouraged.

Sidney Hillman Medical Center

(listed 2009)

The long-threatened demolition of this iconic mid-century modern medical center became a reality in late 2011 as site preparation began for a new highrise apartment tower at 22nd and Chestnut Streets. The efforts to save the building, though ultimately unsuccessful, contributed to a growing appreciation for architecture of the recent past in Philadelphia. The Preservation Alliance has assembled an inventory of midcentury modern architectural resources across the city for use as an educational and planning tool in future efforts to preserve and promote buildings built between 1945 and 1980. It is available online at www.PreservationAlliance.com/modern.

Vacant Religious Properties

(listed 2009)

Vacant and underutilized houses of worship continue to pose enormous challenges for preservation. Demolition is proceeding at the massive Saint Boniface Church on Norris Square, and a number of smaller neighborhood churches have been demolished in the past year alone. Neighbors of Callowhill's Church of the Assumption continue to defend that building's designation protection in a legal battle which awaits a decision from Commonwealth Court. North Philadelphia's Saint Bonaventure Church continues to languish, with an owner unable to afford critical maintenance. Not all news is bad, however. Queen Village's Emanuel Lutheran Church, once seen as a likely demolition candi-

date, has found a committed new steward in the Phat Quang Temple, a Buddhist congregation which moved into the building in late 2010.

The Preservation Alliance is partnering with the Philadelphia Historical Commission and Partners for Sacred Places to develop preservation strategies to address this growing problem of vacant religious structures. An important first step was the compilation of a comprehensive inventory of all historic religious properties in the city, including known historical information and current conditions. It can be viewed on our website at www.PreservationAlliance.com/churches.

Cruiser Olympia

(listed 2009, 2010)

Efforts continue to find a new steward for the *Olympia*, the world's oldest steel warship still afloat. Philadelphia-based Friends of the Cruiser Olympia is one of four groups selected for further consideration by a committee tasked with finding a viable new home for the ship, which needs at least \$10 million in repairs or faces the prospect of an off-shore sinking. In addition to the Philadelphia proposal, plans for the ship's relocation to South Carolina, California, and Washington D.C. are all being reviewed by representatives of the Independence Seaport Museum, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, the National Parks Service, and the U.S. Navy. A final decision is expected in 2012.

For current status on other endangered properties from past years' lists, visit our website at www.PreservationAlliance.com/Endangered.



Sidney Hillman Medical Center

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The Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia actively promotes the appreciation, protection, and revitalization of the Philadelphia region's historic buildings, communities and landscapes.