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CITYSPACE

## Philly Royalty



**RECOGNIZED: Old Swedes' Church is among the structures that helped Queen Village earn Neighborhood Conservation District status.** Photo By: Michael T. Regan

### Queen Village ushers in the city's first Neighborhood Conservation District.

*by Joe Matje*

Queen Christina would be proud. The 17th-century Swedish ruler's Philadelphia namesake, Queen Village (which bears Queen Street and Christian Street in her honor), is under consideration to become the city's first Neighborhood Conservation District.

It is within this quaint neighborhood that Swedish history mixes with Italian, war icons with loft condos, South Street with Fabric Row, and an opera singer's park with high-density living. What better place to protect from future damage than Philadelphia's first neighborhood? It is the definition of history itself.

Immigrants from Sweden were already established on the land that would become Philadelphia by the time William Penn first set foot here. The Indians called the Swedish settlement Wicaco, but Penn renamed the neighborhood Southwark after the popular neighborhood in London. (The move allowed him to better market Philadelphia to would-be British immigrants.) Southwark officially became part of Philadelphia by vote during the year 1762, and the name Queen Village was formally applied to the neighborhood in the 1970s.

After Penn laid out his city plans, excluding the Swedes' neighborhood, the area became a commercial port with a large shipbuilding operation. Ship workers were the dominant force of the neighborhood, drawing their living from the Delaware River. Early U.S. Navy ships were built in the two Queen Village shipyards; one was the first U.S. Navy Yard before it moved out of the neighborhood in 1880.

So, what makes the structures of Queen Village deserving of the pending historic designation? Take the Gloria Dei Church, also known as Old Swedes', which was the focal point of Queen Village during Pennsylvania's early colonial days. The congregation met in a log-cabin church built in 1677; it replaced the log cabin with the current brick structure in 1700. The brick church is still standing and can be seen on Christian Street at Columbus Boulevard, along with the more current additions that were built around 1840. This building was the first church in the state of Pennsylvania, and enjoys the status of a U.S. National Historic Site.

Another historically significant structure is the Sparks Shot Tower, located on Carpenter Street near Front. The tower was owned in part by John Bishop, a prominent Philadelphia Quaker, and Thomas Sparks, who built their rifle shot business in 1808. The purpose of the business venture — also a national first — was to supply the newly formed United States with sport hunting shot. The pacifist Bishop decided to sell the business in protest as the Shot Tower was forced to produce ammunition for the War of 1812. This site is also currently protected for future generations by the City of Philadelphia itself; it uses the site as a recreation center and playground.

But what of the remaining structures of Queen Village and, better yet, the quaint feel of a neighborhood itself, which mixes a vast array of architectural styles? During the 18th and 19th centuries, Queen Village was divided into small parcels by profit-conscious landowners who built trinity-style homes for immigrant workers. This created the current style of resident architecture mixing luxury with affordability on every block.

The resulting diversity of the neighborhood is striking, as is the aesthetics of a leisurely stroll.

Important historical residential structures should not fall victim to the same circumstances as the Southwark Theatre, the first theater in Philadelphia, which opened in 1766 but is gone to the city forever. This structure was partially consumed by fire in 1821, and it was not thought important enough to be restored despite the fact George Washington enjoyed multiple performances from the presidential box.



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ically significant structures, but today that type of watchfulness will be  
Village most likely will be protected as a Neighborhood Conservation  
s, which was written with help by the Preservation Alliance and passed  
demolish buildings as well as provides a unique set of guidelines for  
me a Neighborhood Conservation District, the local community group  
must go through an application process and be approved by Council.

Queen Village is well on its way to becoming one, and the Preservation Alliance hopes to make the guidelines for Queen  
Village a template for future neighborhoods seeking the designation. In the meantime, Council has passed a  
moratorium on demolition in the neighborhood, with the understanding it will become the first Neighborhood  
Conservation District. With movements like this taking hold both within the neighborhoods and inside council chambers,  
the history of Philadelphia should be in good hands for some time to come.

*Joe Matje is a professional engineer living in Queen Village. He is a member of the Design Advocacy Group.*



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