



DAGspace articles express the opinions of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Design Advocacy Group

October 19, 2020

Henry Minton House, Systemic Racism and Historic Preservation

by Faye Anderson

FAYE M. ANDERSON is director of All That Philly Jazz, a public history project that is documenting and contextualizing Philadelphia's golden age of jazz. In 2021, she will lead a walking tour to commemorate the bicentennial of the birth of the Father of the Underground Railroad, "William Still at 200: Walking in the Abolitionist's Footsteps."

Philadelphia is a city where history has happened. From the colonial era to the Civil War, Philadelphia was a center of organized resistance to slavery. The city was home to leading Black abolitionists including Henry Minton (1811-1883). But this history is largely absent from the properties listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. Last year the nomination to the register of Minton's home and place of business was rejected.

The decision by the Philadelphia Historical Commission reflects a systemic problem. In an essay published earlier this year in [The New Yorker](#), Casey Cep wrote: "To diversify historic preservation, you need to address not just what is preserved but who is preserving it—because, as it turns out, what counts as history has a lot to do with who is doing the counting." Similarly, in a blog post, "[Systemic Bias & Racism of Preservation](#)," Franklin Vagnone, founder of Twisted Preservation and recipient of the 2019 American Institute of Architects Winston-Salem Advocate Award, observed: "As Preservation has become more professionalized and can require a four-year degree, college has become more expensive and thus constricts the possibility of a racially, culturally, and economically equitable pool of professional practitioners. As a result, professional practices are sometimes biased.... The real control comes with the power to choose, and when membership into that profession is limited, so too is the resulting representation."

Although the nineteenth-century features of the Henry Minton House are visible, preservation is not just about what we can see. Indeed, the National Park Service recognizes that preservation is more than brick-and-mortar. Robert Venturi's "ghost house," the site of the vanished residence of Benjamin Franklin, is a contributing property in the Independence National Historical Park historic district. Legendary preservationist James Marston Fitch said Franklin Court marked "a new level of maturity in American preservation activities."



Franklin Court. Source: National Park Service

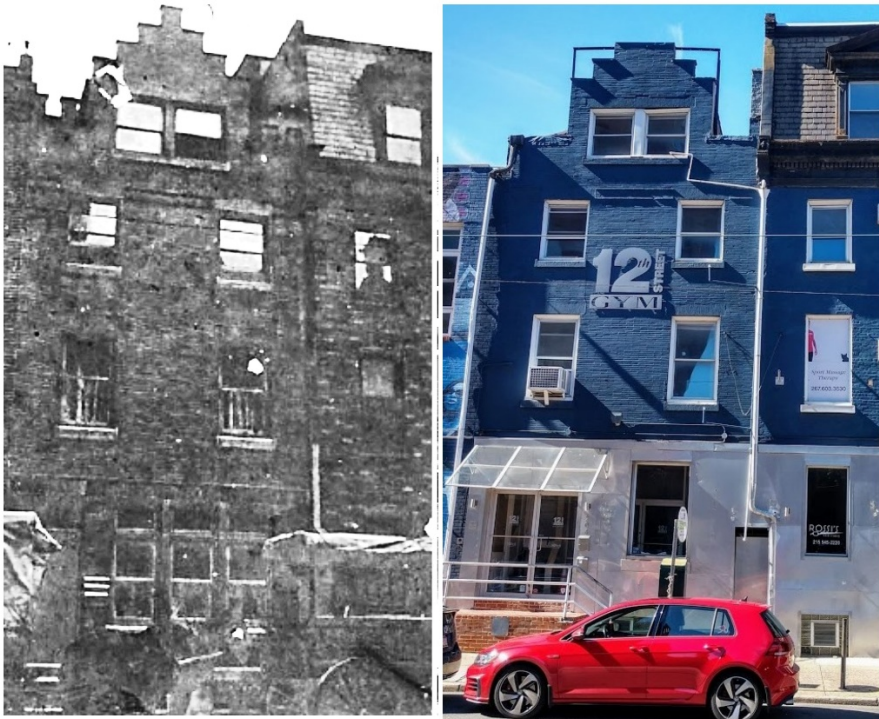
Such a level of maturity was missing on April 12, 2019 when the nomination of 204 South 12th Street came before the Philadelphia Historical Commission. The property comprises interconnected buildings, all of which are owned by Midwood Investment & Development. The [Keeping Society of Philadelphia](#) nominated the portion of the parcel that was the restaurant and home of Henry Minton for listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

NOTICE TO THOSE WHO ARE FOND OF GOOD LIVING.—Reed Birds and Oysters are now in season. The well known **HENRY MINTON**, who removed his Restaurant from Fourth and Chestnut to No. 204 SOUTH TWELFTH street, is serving up the above mentioned luxuries that have been so highly approved of for the last seventeen years. All kinds of Game in season. Also, Rooms for Supper or Dinner Parties. Orders sent to any part of the city. Call and see for yourselves.

Newspaper Advertisement, 1860. Source: Newspapers.com

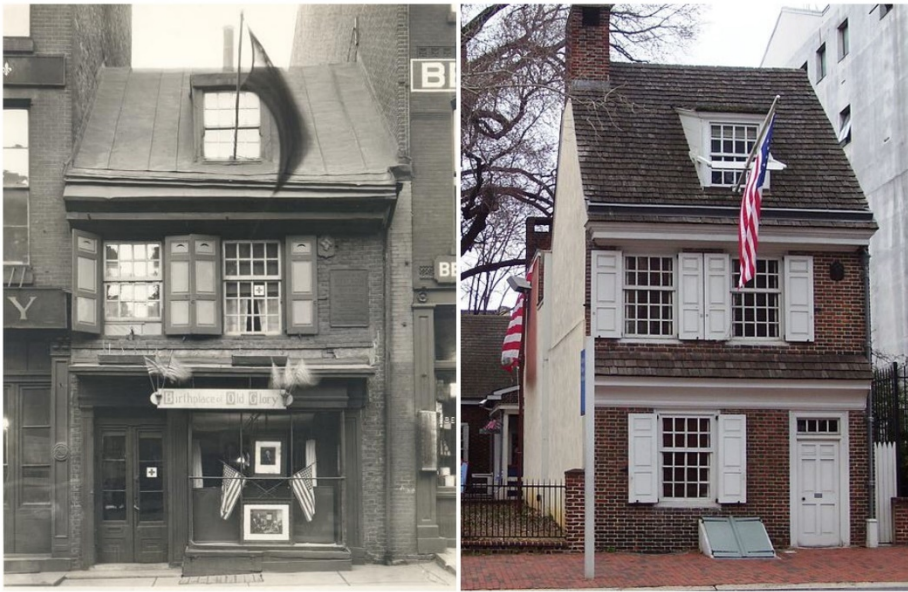
Minton was a celebrated restaurateur and caterer whose guests included John Brown, Frederick Douglass and William Still, the “Father of the Underground Railroad.” He was a co-signer of an iconic Civil War recruitment broadside. In *The Philadelphia Negro*, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that Minton “wielded great personal influence, aided the Abolition cause to no little degree, and made Philadelphia noted for its cultivated and well-to-do Negro citizens.”

The Commission ignored the unanimous recommendation of its Committee on Historic Designation and voted against adding the Henry Minton House to the local register. The Commission agreed with the property owner’s lawyer, Matthew McClure, who said, “If these bricks and sticks do not tell the cultural story, they should not be designated.” The Commission’s decision seemingly rested on uncertainty about the authenticity of the “bricks and sticks.” This myopic focus lost sight of the fact that the building’s distinctive profile and fenestration pattern remain visible. Moreover, the location is associated with events of great historic importance. In addition to Minton’s presence, William Still lived just 400 feet away. Although his house is demolished, the site is identified by a state historical marker, dedicated in 1991.



Minton House, 204 South 12th Street. Left ca. 1907. Source: Archives of the Philadelphia Contributorship. Right: October 2019. Source: Faye Anderson

If preserving Black history mattered at the Historical Commission, the Henry Minton House would have been protected. The façade could be fully restored to its period of significance. As with the Betsy Ross House, the later alterations are reversible.



Betsy Ross House, 239 Arch Street. Left: ca. 1925. Source: PhillyHistory.org. Right: 2012. Source: Wikimedia Commons



204 South 12th Street, July 2020. Source: Venise Whitaker

While opposing the designation of the Minton House, Midwood has agreed to replicate a mural memorializing [Gloria Casarez](#), a civil rights leader and LGBTQ activist, which adorns several of the other interconnected buildings that are to be demolished. A spokesperson told [The Philadelphia Inquirer](#), “Midwood understands the significance of Gloria Casarez, her importance to the LGBTQ community and is dedicated to ensuring her legacy in the community.” The agreement begs the question: What is Midwood doing to preserve the legacy of Henry Minton in public memory?

Attention is beginning to focus on preserving the important sites of Black history. In the press release announcing the University of Pennsylvania Stuart Weitzman School of Design’s newly launched [Center for the Preservation of Civil Rights Sites \(CPCRS\)](#), preservationist and CPCRS senior advisor Brent Leggs said, “Civil rights sites that bring forward the Black American fight for racial and economic justice have served a crucial role in redefining our collective history.” Black abolitionists, like Minton, paved the way for the Civil Rights Movement, but by the time CPCRS is in full swing, the Henry Minton House, one of the few extant buildings in Philadelphia associated with the Underground Railroad, will be demolished.

The Historical Commission was created in 1955 to ensure that buildings, structures, sites and objects that possess historic value are preserved. A surprising number of the properties designated “historic” are restorations or reconstructions that date back to the 1950s and ‘60s. Two of the city’s core historic districts – Independence National Historical Park and Society Hill – are social constructs.

In 1948, Congress established Independence National Historical Park to preserve historic resources “of outstanding national significance associated with the American Revolution and the founding and growth of the United States.” In its 1988 nomination form for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, the National Park Service expressly stated that recreated and restored properties are historic resources that contribute to the national significance of the proposed historic district. Recreated properties include City Tavern; the Bishop White House and the Dolley Todd House on Walnut Street are restorations.

Before urban renewal, the area south of Walnut Street now known as Society Hill was a diverse neighborhood with a significant percentage of African Americans. In a recent opinion piece, preservationist [Starr Herr-Cardillo](#) wrote: “Like Independence Mall, Society Hill was selectively curated in the 1960s to clear blight — really, to displace lower-income residents living in tenement houses — and to highlight the city’s connection to the nation’s founders. That was done through a process of elimination: Federally funded bulldozers razed the visual clutter of more than a century of additions, subdivisions,

storefronts, and commercial buildings. Through selective and extensive condemnation, demolition, modern construction, and mandated restoration, Society Hill's real estate was processed through the mechanics of urban renewal and handed over to the 'adventurous,' mostly white, upper middleclass at bargain prices backed by low-interest federal loans. Society Hill as we know it today is much more a product of 1960s urban renewal policy than 18th century Philadelphia."

Disinvestment and poverty created the blight that was the pretext for city planner Edmund Bacon's development project. The historic district includes reconstructed 18th century facades, including 238 South 3rd Street. That property was designated "historic" in 1962.



238 South 3rd Street. Left: 1961. Right: 1964. Source: PhillyHistory.org

In September 2020, City Councilmember Cindy Bass introduced a resolution authorizing the Committee on Rules to hold hearings to examine the forthcoming citywide survey of historic and cultural assets. If the resolution passes, the hearings will shine a light on historic preservation and systemic racism. "The resolution is a transparent way to look at the good and bad of historic preservation. Many examples of where it makes sense, and many of it being a tool to disenfranchise. Let's talk about them all to get it right," Bass wrote on Twitter.

Bass' concern is shared by [Franklin Vagnone](#): "Historical regulations, district codes, and Preservation restrictions can be latently economically restrictive and culturally exclusionary, benefiting only those individuals who can afford the added costs, thus ensuring a form of aesthetically gated communities that reflect the dominant culture."

Society Hill was the nation's first development project to incorporate historic preservation. Sixty years later, the Black presence in the former low-income neighborhood has largely been reduced to the state historical markers. As the country undergoes a reckoning on race, we must examine the systemic bias embedded in historic preservation that leaves properties associated with Black history and culture unprotected.