

Building Biography:  
Woodland Terrace

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HSPV 600  
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September 28, 2010

Mid-nineteenth century Philadelphia underwent unprecedented transformation as the Industrial Revolution altered the city and nearly all aspects of its inhabitants' lives. Along with increased noise and congestion on the city's streets came the grim side-effect of unprecedented civic violence resulting from a host of factors: an explosive increase in population; a complex and tense ethnic, racial, and religious mixture; a growing and ever-widening misdistribution of wealth; and a volatile class structure.<sup>1</sup> The eighteenth century populace, once made up of individual entrepreneurs with comparable economic status, had now been clearly divided by class distinctions that separated business owners from managers and employees.<sup>2</sup> For much of the nineteenth century, wealth and poverty rubbed elbows in a muddled environment. Domestic and menial workers gathered in the alleyways behind their employers' townhouses as neighborhoods degenerated into slums.<sup>3</sup> In the decade of the 1840s, the population of Philadelphia rose 58 percent and in the 1850s it rose another 38 percent.<sup>4</sup> This sharp increase created the need for more adequate housing, and prompted those with means to look outside of the city's center when considering where to migrate.

With both the completion of the Market Street Bridge over the Schuylkill River in 1805 and the creation of railroad lines and horse-drawn trolleys in the 1850s, relocating to West Philadelphia had become a convenient option. Speculative builders bragged that their ambitious enterprises had achieved great results in West Philadelphia, touting the wider streets, the high and healthy location, and the close proximity to the city in an effort to attract homebuyers.<sup>5</sup> In this early stage of the development of West Philadelphia as a suburb, investors regularly purchased large tracts for their private estates and built mansions as country retreats and summer homes, while still maintaining their townhouses in the city. The elegant houses built during this first wave of development portrayed West Philadelphia as a fashionable suburb and lent an aristocratic distinction to this young community, which would soon be used by commercial developers to capitalize on nearby building projects.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth M. Geffen, "Industrial Development and Social Crisis, 1841-1854," in *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*, edited by Russell F. Weigley (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), 307.

<sup>2</sup> John Andrew Gallery, *Philadelphia Architecture: A Guide to the City* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2009), 48.

<sup>3</sup> Russell F. Weigley, "The Border City in the Civil War: 1854-1865," in *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*, edited by Russell F. Weigley (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), 374.

<sup>4</sup> Geffen, *Philadelphia*, 309.

<sup>5</sup> Henry M. Boyd, "West Philadelphia," *The Architectural Review and American Builders' Journal* 1 (Aug. 1868): 148.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Miller and Joseph Siry, "The Emerging Suburb: West Philadelphia 1850-1880," *Pennsylvania History* 47, no. 2 (1980): 107.

In an effort to attract buyers and tenants from a homogeneous social class, the early developers of West Philadelphia planned subdivisions encompassing a uniform house style and price.<sup>7</sup> In 1857, real estate agent Charles M.S. Leslie petitioned to create a new public street on his recently purchased land between Darby Road (now Woodland Avenue) and Baltimore Avenue. He then divided the adjoining property into twenty-two house lots, named the street and the proposed development Woodland Terrace, and commissioned Samuel Sloan as its architect.<sup>8</sup> Sloan, a renowned designer of public schools and asylums, had recently completed a handful of ornate mansions in the area. These were all built in the Italian Villa style and included Bartram Hall (1851), the Judge Allison House (1853), Piper-Price House (1854), and Hamilton Terrace (1856), located one block away.<sup>9</sup> This style of building advanced the romantic idea of West Philadelphia as a place located far enough away from the city to be a retreat, but close enough for one to remain aligned with the cultural benefits of city living. Together, Sloan and Leslie worked to design a unified development of suburban villas, a building type described as “the country house of a person of competence or wealth sufficient to build and maintain it with some taste and elegance.”<sup>10</sup> Strict control went into the planning of the site and the appearance of the houses of Woodland Terrace, as Leslie desired that his development would attract a group of sophisticated residents of similar social standing and family size.<sup>11</sup>

Constructed at the start of the Civil War (from April 1861 through June 1862), Woodland Terrace was designed as a group of ten three-story, two-family houses, each meant to look like an individual mansion. This effect was achieved by placing the doorways not at the front of the buildings, but far back on the sides, at the rear of the wrap-around porch. The larger and more ornate buildings were placed at the ends of the block where they would be the most visible. These end-houses were asymmetrical, were built of stone and featured a curved Corinthian-columned porch and an off-center tower.<sup>12</sup> In comparison, the central houses were minimally adorned, symmetrically built in brownstone or stucco, each with a wrap-around porch and topped with a squared cupola.

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<sup>7</sup> Miller and Siry, *The Emerging Suburb*, 103.

<sup>8</sup> “West Philadelphia: The Basic History, Chapter 2: A Streetcar Suburb in the City: West Philadelphia, 1854-1907,” University Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, accessed September 26, 2010, <http://www.archives.upenn.edu/histy/features/wphila/history/history2.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Norman Cooledge, Jr., “*Samuel Sloan (1815-1884), Architect*,” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1963), 73-80.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses* (Mineola: Dover, 1969), 257.

<sup>11</sup> Miller and Siry, *The Emerging Suburb*, 117.

<sup>12</sup> Gallery, *Philadelphia Architecture*, 67.

All of the houses of Woodland Terrace were designed with low-pitched roofs and widely overhanging eaves supported by decorative bracketed cornices. The windows were uniform on all buildings, with tall, narrow windows on the ground floor, pedimented windows on the second floor, and arched grouped windows in both double and triple groupings on the third floor. The interior and grounds were described in an 1868 advertisement announcing the sale of #504 Woodland Terrace: “A genteel residence, with verandah and side yard, saloon parlor, library and dining-room connecting with folding doors...marble mantels, butlers closet, with hot and cold water...The yard is laid out with a variety of shrubbery, grape vines &c.”<sup>13</sup>

Speculative development in nineteenth-century Philadelphia was risky; made even more precarious when the intention was to attract a very specific group of ideal buyers. The 1870 Census documented that nearly ten years after completion, fourteen families resided on Woodland Terrace, all fitting the developer’s desired mold. Of the fourteen households, all but one had servants; all heads of households were white, between the ages of thirty and fifty, married with an average of three children, and born in the United States.<sup>14</sup> Prosperous merchants headed nine of the households, all with stores or wholesale offices located downtown.<sup>15</sup> These middle-class pioneers were undoubtedly reassured of their decision to leave the city by the similitude of the first wave of residents at Woodland Terrace.

Woodland Terrace has been continuously maintained and occupied since it was completed (with the exception of #522, now demolished). It is a staple of Philadelphia guidebooks and was listed as a National Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972. A Pennsylvania state historical marker was placed at #516, where celebrated architect Paul Philippe Cret, designer of the Ben Franklin Bridge and the Rodin Museum, resided after 1911. Although the survival of this meticulously planned development is noteworthy in its own right, the true significance of Woodland Terrace is as a physical document of a period of history when the city encountered population growth so tremendous that its boundaries were extended and the Philadelphia suburbs were born.

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<sup>13</sup> “Peremptory Sale- James A. Freeman,” *Daily Evening Bulletin* (Philadelphia, PA), August 27, 1868, 2, <http://digitalnewspapers.libraries.psu.edu>.

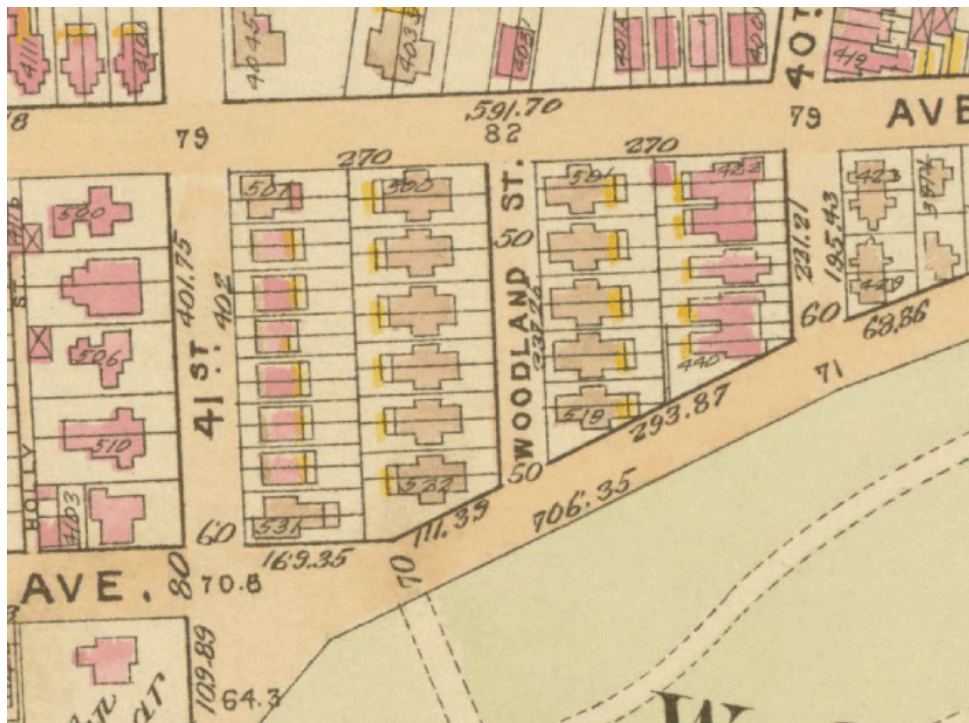
<sup>14</sup> Miller and Siry, *The Emerging Suburb*, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 280.

APPENDIX



Figure 1: Photograph of Woodland Terrace.  
Courtesy of: Lewis Tanner and George E. Thomas, *University of Pennsylvania: An Architectural Tour* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 176.



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