In spring 2011, two walking tours were offered as part of the public history project PhilaPlace. For each, a booklet was created to summarize the tour guide’s information. They are presented here for those who wish to recreate the tour themselves.
The Northern Liberties: Building on “Ruins”

A walking tour guide created by Nathaniel Popkin for PhilaPlace, a project of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

– philaplace.org –
The Northern Liberties: Building on “Ruins”
Crafting the contemporary urban landscape

INTRODUCTION William Penn was a regionalist. In Philadelphia, he envisioned a “great city,” with its port and institutions of religion and governance, connected to large plantations and farm communities in the hinterlands, or liberties. The symbiotic relationship between city and liberties lasted well beyond Penn, as the Northern Liberties took on a more open, and in some ways more tolerant, character than the city itself. And by the early 1800s, with its huge Second Street market (3 miles long!) and numerous inns, mills, and workshops, it too became one of the largest cities in the nation.

The mills and workshops grew up around the streams and ponds of the Cohocksink Creek; this was marshland in the early days of Philadelphia, a haven for ice skating and swimming. Early on, it was also a place of freedom for African Americans who founded a pair of vanguard churches, African Zion and Mt. Tabor. By the mid-1800s, it was becoming an immigrant haven: German Jewish immigrants moved here to be near German Catholics and Protestants then later came a succession of Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Romanians, Russians and Jews from those same countries. A relative sense of openness and tolerance gave residents a sense that it could be a place to make one’s own. Meanwhile the Northern Liberties remained a place of technological innovation and invention and industry grew rapidly after 1850.

The mid-1900s brought deindustrialization, suburbanization, and racial flux. The neighborhood was depopulated even as Urban Renewal brought stable middle-class housing for African Americans and as the emergent Puerto Rican community moved into west Kensington, at the edge of greater Northern Liberties. By the 1970s, much of this section of the city was empty—it was a modern ruins. This tour is about living in, responding to, and ultimately crafting contemporary urban life from the ruins.

[[1]] “It was many and many a year ago, in this kingdom by the sea”
E.A. Poe and the enduring civilizations of Germans, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Quakers
Tour begins: Edgar Allan Poe House, Seventh above Spring Garden

[[2]] “That was our world”
Vision and veneration: Marshall Street, Mt. Tabor, urban renewal, and the end of time
Tour begins: 900 N. Marshall Street (at Poplar)

[[3]] “Toil and an act of faith”
Creating space: Liberty Lands and the promise of neighborhood life
Tour begins: 5th and Poplar Streets

[[4]] “We have to rethink everything”
Onion Flats and the Piazza: Space, sustainability, and the new city
Tour begins: Hancock and Germanatown Ave.

[[5]] “I fought new life to find”
The Crane Building and Al-Aqsa Mosque: mirrors on the emerging world
Tour begins: American Street and Girard Ave. (Quixote statue)

“[1]}
“It was many and many a year ago, in this kingdom by the sea”
E.A. Poe and the enduring civilizations of Germans, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Quakers

Stop A: Edgar Allan Poe House

We’re going to explore and observe and interpret the changing urban landscape in a place that has—by its name, definition, role in the larger city—enabled and allowed a sense of invention.

We stand here, of course, in front of the house of the great inventor of alternative reality: Edgar Allan Poe. He took from the Northern Liberties of the 1830s and 1840s—a quick changing place of industry—an ethos of terror, of wilderness.

When William Penn arrived in 1682, this was wild land, laced by creeks and bluffs and dotted with ponds. Penn, the rationalist, envisioned a hierarchy of places: city and towns, town and plantation. Investors in prime city lots at the heart of Penn’s famous grid were also given the opportunity to purchase large plots here in the Liberties. But the Liberties were never subjected to the kind of rules and governance of the city and so its character developed differently. Where the city was confining the Liberties would be freeing. The people come here and invent: machinery, machine pumps, steam engines, locomotives, pistols (this is the home of Derringer), and large mills grow up around the creeks. The Northern Liberties itself grew into one of America’s largest early cities and in 1854 was consolidated into the City of Philadelphia. And yet it was still physically separate; in the 1800s the Liberties were linked to the city by street car and then in 1922 by the Frankford elevated.

We’re going to start the tour by seeing and interpreting the signs and artifacts of the people who have come here, invented a world, and left us a mark. We can see those marks—be they buildings, ideas, or institutions as the “ruins” left by those who have come before. Each group adapts to the ruins of the previous group, not in a linear way but through a dynamic process—this how the city changes. We start the tour by getting a taste for some of these “ruins,” objects in the urban landscape.

If we look around, we see a kind of dull urban landscape, but interpretation requires us to look a little closer, for we have to learn to see and imagine not only what’s here today, but what was here in years past.

This is Poe’s house in 1843 and 1844. While in Philadelphia he wrote many of his most famous stories including “The
Black Cat,” “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” and “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Across the way is a late 1800s-early 1900s immigrant social club, the Latvian Society, which was founded in 1892. It is the oldest of its kind outside of Latvia, and you can still sit at the bar and chat in Latvian, if you like. There are three such clubs, founded by Eastern European immigrant groups of the late 19th century, still in operation in the neighborhood. The other two are Russian and Ukrainian.

At corner of Seventh Street and Spring Garden, turn left and cross Seventh Street, walk to German Society on Spring Garden.

Stop B: German Society of Pennsylvania

By 1892, the year of the founding of the Latvian Society, Philadelphia had more than 600 secular, non-political German organizations that ranged from singing societies to lodges and gymnastics clubs. This is the German Society of Pennsylvania, which was created in 1764. We can begin to form a picture of the movement of people across the landscape. Groups of people leave things behind; and we in the present decide what’s valuable enough to save—a very complicated process!

The German Society is the oldest German organization of its kind in the United States. It offered charitable and practical assistance to newly arriving immigrants. It later evolved into a cultural organization, with a research library focused on German American history, and settled here in this building in 1888.

The German Society established a variety of programs to aid newly arrived German immigrants adjust to life in the United States. An employment bureau, a legal aid committee, and English classes were among the organization’s offerings. The library was established in 1817 to serve the reading interest and needs of the GSP membership, and the German American Archive was founded in 1867 specifically to collect materials documenting German American history.

German Philadelphia encompassed many diverse subcultures, including Lutherans, Catholics, socialists, and the working and middle classes; a sense of common German identity was forged primarily through fraternal societies. The German Society aimed to provide a neutral ground for German Americans to meet, although in reality its membership was primarily middle-class. By the 20th century, the German Society’s mission had evolved from providing charitable assistance to immigrants into preserving German American history and culture. Today, the German Society offers its members German-language instruction, cultural programs, lectures, and a research and lending library dedicated to German American history. Housed in the recently restored original 1888 reading room, the Joseph P. Horner Memorial Library contains 70,000 volumes, including over 50,000 German-language books.

Continue to walk on Spring Garden to Sixth Street, left on Sixth Street, past former Synagogue on left.

What happens as groups and cultures move on? What do we do with their “ruins?” You’ll notice, especially in this first part of the tour, that much of the landscape feels empty. This is, in effect, one answer to the question. In the 1960s, a response to natural evolution and movement of people through the city, and often up and out to the suburbs, was to remove the “blight” left behind. That happened here in this western part of the neighborhood. But we have to see that as a legitimate response to the inherited reality of the time period, just as later in this tour we’ll see more contemporary responses to the same ongoing issue.

Continue two blocks to Fairmount, right on Fairmount one block to Fifth Street, turn left onto Fifth and walk half-block, stand on west side of street across from St. Andrew’s.

Stop C: St. Andrew’s Russian Orthodox Cathedral, NE corner Fifth and Fairmount

In this case, we have St. Andrew’s Russian Orthodox Cathedral. Founded as St. Andrew’s Orthodox Christian Brotherhood in 1897 and consecrated in 1902, St. Andrew’s is the oldest Orthodox church in Philadelphia and traces its roots to the Russian Imperial Navy. In 1898, a contingent of Russian sailors was staying in Philadelphia awaiting the completion of their two new battleships at Cramp’s Shipyard in Kensington. They became devoted congregants of the new parish and donated generously to the cathedral’s construction and maintenance. The religious icons that grace gate and altar were donated by the sailors. St. Andrew’s became a social and cultural center for the Russian Orthodox community, providing economic and spiritual aid to immigrants and new arrivals to the Orthodox faith.

Nowadays there are few Russians left in the neighborhood and so a church like this—and there several in the neighborhood—struggles to draw congregants. In this case, the church has an energetic pastor who is not Russian, but instead was raised a Quaker, a descendent of the storied Lippincott family of Philadelphia. And the church’s congregants come from all over the region.
Return to Fairmount, turn right, walk three blocks to Eight Street and Fairmount Avenue, NE corner

Stop D: Friends Guild House

The ruins we find aren’t just buildings or cultures, but institutions and ideas. Philadelphia is a Quaker City, but after about 1700 Quakers are only small minority of the population. But their influence belies their small numbers. If you look at who, throughout the city’s history, starts the most progressive institutions, it is the Quakers. The Friends Neighborhood Guild was established in 1879 as Friends Mission #1 by the Hicksite Friends. Interestingly, this strand of Quakerism is started by a group of Quakers who were critical of the powerful Philadelphia Quaker elite for both their tolerance of slavery, and for their wealth that was often the product of enslaved labor. In its first building at Beach Street and Fairmount Avenue, the Friends Mission sought to provide religious and moral uplift to the poor European immigrants flooding into the waterfront neighborhoods of Northern Liberties, offering worship services and youth and temperance meetings. In the early 20th century, the Guild served mostly Central and Eastern Europeans immigrants and their children, organizing vocational training and English classes to help them adjust. Since 1950, the Friends Neighborhood Guild has carried its mission forward and adapted it to improve housing in the East Poplar neighborhood.

Turn around on Fairmount and walk half block back to Franklin Street, up Franklin, cross Brown Street to Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral

Stop E: Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral

Ukrainians have been coming to Philadelphia since the middle of the 1800s. They have come in waves that relate to political and economic changes in Eastern Europe. This was their first Philadelphia neighborhood—only a very few descendants of the original residents still live here, across the street from the Cathedral. There is the “Ukie” bar, a social club much like the Latvian Society, only larger. What’s interesting is that the Cathedral, which replaced a smaller building from 1907 and which is modeled on the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, was built in 1966, long after the center of Ukrainian life had moved north and west to other parts of the city and suburbs. Building it here was a conscious effort to resanctify this neighborhood as part of the Ukrainian landscape—at a time when immigration was again increasing (from the Soviet Union). In effect, it was an attempt to build on the ruins of their own history here in Philadelphia.

The church’s golden dome measures 106 feet in height and 100 feet in diameter and consists of 22-karat gold fused into hundreds of thousands of one-inch-square Venetian glass tiles. In 2006, workers cleaned away decades of automotive soot and industrial pollution to restore the dome’s golden gleam. However, like at St. Andrew’s, maintaining the institution with a full-time Metropolitan (church leader) and services for parishioners is difficult, and so this too is in real danger of becoming a kind of ruin.

{"2}"

“They were our world”
Vision and evisceration: Marshall Street, Mt. Tabor, urban renewal, and the end of time

Continue walking north on Franklin Street to Poplar Street, right on Poplar to Seventh, cross Seventh, and turn left, walk half block to Mt. Tabor African Methodist Church

Stop A: Mt. Tabor African Methodist Church

Like Mother Bethel near South Street, Mt. Tabor is African Methodist Episcopal (AME), an independent denomination formed from the 1792 African American break with the predominantly white St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Old City. When the white congregants of St. George’s tried to force black members into segregated galleries during service, the blacks walked out, prompting the birth of a new denomination. The new AME denomination proved especially appealing to both free blacks and recently freed or fugitive enslaved people.

The free black community began settling in Northern Liberties as early as the 1790s, when the newly formed state legislature opened up land in the then-outlying district to relieve overcrowding in the city of Philadelphia proper. By the 1830s, Northern Liberties had a growing free black population and played an integral role in Philadelphia’s Underground Railroad network. Mt. Tabor African Methodist Episcopal Church was founded in 1803, and the current house of worship was built in 1875.

Walk through parking lot next to Mt. Tabor to Marshall Street

Stop B: Marshall Street

So we begin to see the landscape in this part of the neighborhood, which appears somewhat empty and tired, as deeply imprinted by the lives and hopes of people. There may have been no place in the neighborhood more engraved with the life of a people than Marshall Street, here on this very block. So the lesson here is that the deep impression may not always survive in an obvious a form as we have seen elsewhere: an old church, a social service agency, a social club. So we have to look for clues—and the only one really is this, the pushcart mural (on the east side of the street, halfway up the block).
So what was this? Perhaps the most intensely lively Jewish neighborhood in Philadelphia. In the early days of the 20th century, Jewish merchants set up pushcarts and opened storefronts all along Marshall Street. Reminiscent of a European village market, live fish, poultry, fresh produce, baked goods, clothing, jewelry and hardware could all be bargained for in multiple languages. As one former resident recalled, “I loved to go to Marshall Street because Saturday on Marshall Street was an open-air, outdoor, festival. It seemed like a million people [were there].”

The pushcarts are particularly memorable for those who grew up in the area. As one former resident described it, “The pushcart [area] was basically a bazaar. It was akin to what you think of the mall today, but all outdoors. . . . Before World War II and growing up there . . . there were pushcarts on both sides of the street – one right next to each other . . . There were pushcarts for bananas, a pushcart for potatoes, one for produce.”

Another resident recalled how hard families worked in the storefronts. Women rose to the demands of working alongside their husbands and nurturing their children toward American success. Even the children were put to work. But, she says, “we sort of made friends across the street by waving, by coming back and forth when we had a few minutes. After the stores were closed, that was when we all got out into the street and played, whether it was tireball, whether it was kingball, or baseball, or just skating, or learning how to ride one of the two bicycles that people had on the street.”

Merchants served not only the Jewish population in Northern Liberties, but welcomed business from the non-Jewish Germans, Ukrainians, Poles, and Puerto Ricans who lived and worked nearby. “You know,” said a long time resident, “the place was a United Nations. So many people. So many cultures and languages. My dad himself came to Marshall Street by way of Argentina.”

But then, given deteriorating conditions and a growing Jewish exodus to the suburbs, another idea—a powerful idea—came along. To counter the growing exodus to the suburbs, the Redevelopment Authority had plans to eliminate the pushcarts and traditional storefronts and build a modern retail complex called the “Marshall Street Mall.” This “renewal” inevitably meant razing homes as well. In 1958, Mayor Richardson Dilworth’s urban-renewal plan signaled the beginning of the end of bustling commercial Marshall Street. The Marshall Street Mall plan languished and was never actually implemented, but the looming threat of demolition drained the life out of the neighborhood. Anticipating displacement, many Jewish residents moved out before the city could take their homes and businesses. Additionally, as families grew more affluent, they moved away from cramped Northern Liberties to greener, more spacious neighborhoods in the Northeast, West Philadelphia, and the suburbs. Some merchants commuted from their new homes in Oxford Circle and Overbrook to tend to their families’ Marshall Street businesses, but by 1960, the heyday was over. Puerto Rican shop owners moved in, but that community too, moved north in the 1970s.

Turn right to Poplar. Turn left and walk Poplar to Fifth Street, cross Fifth Street to east side.

[[3]]

“Toil and an act of faith”
Creating space: Liberty Lands and the promise of neighborhood life

Tour begins: Fifth and Poplar Streets; at Fifth, Poplar and St. John Neumann Way come together at a point. Follow St. John Neumann Way for half a block to the first alley, N. Orkney Street.

Stop A: N. Orkney and St. John Neumann Way

When we talk about Liberty Lands we talk a great deal about adaptive reuse—that is the turning a school into a condominium, a factory into marketplace, a train trolley into a park—but the fact is that this is simply the means by which cities change. As the built environment is passed down from generation to generation, we take what we’re given, and if we’re creative enough we do something interesting. Even if we’re not creative enough, and our only response is to knock down an old building then the newly vacant lot itself is a kind of measure of our own taste and values and of the economics of the present day. Here, we are in the middle of a once bustling, noisy (for all the machinery), time regulated (various work shifts throughout the day) little node in the vast city. Present day heirs to all of this have taken cues and built a world of their own. As we walk through these alleys for a few minutes you will take notice of the rather diverse set of architectural responses. It is a kind of urban free for all. Even the streets themselves reveal something about their history, and what emerges is a dialogue between past and present, always with an eye to the future.

On the corner here, stretching from Orkney to Lawrence street is an old diaper factory, now the home and studio of an artist. Half a block north on Lawrence is an old horse stable (the tallest building on this block of Lawrence), now the home of Duncan Buell, the architect who worked in the office of Louis Kahn.

Continue on St. John Neumann Way to Lawrence. Turn right on Lawrence and take to Poplar. Turn left and walk to Fourth Street.

Stop B: Fourth and Poplar

Along the way, you will notice how people take great pains to personalize the landscape. At Lawrence and Poplar (across the intersection on Lawrence, east side of the street) is a log cabin, for example, and there are charming gardens and “wild” lots as well. At Fourth and Poplar, you will notice how the idea of the curved wall of the 19th-century building on the NW corner was adapted across the street on the contemporary house on the NE corner. Again, here is a kind of dialogue. On the SE corner is Madison Court, a circa-1988 development was built on the site of the old Dolly Madison ice cream plant. Philadelphia was home to
several ice cream factories, including Bassett’s (still based here) and Breyer’s. Local favorite Dolly Madison ice cream (Dolly had been a resident of Philadelphia) was named after the first lady, who glamorized ice cream by serving it at White House state dinners. The 32 row homes of Madison Court are an early example of converting a razed industrial site into new housing. The structures are composed of prefabricated modular parts that were later assembled into various configurations. You can see the conservative architectural design of the 1980s. What’s notable is that this development emerged from a now forgotten idea in urban development—“linkage,” which aspired to connect downtown skyscraper development with affordable residential construction in neighborhoods. Madison Court was built by Williard Rouse, in a linkage to the development of Liberty Place in Center City.

Follow Poplar across Fourth Street, past Orianna to Third Street, cross Third Street to NE corner.

Stop C: Ortlieb’s Brewery and Kaplan’s New Model Bakery

Founded by Civil War veteran Trubert Ortlieb in 1870, Ortlieb’s was one of the few Philadelphia breweries to survive Prohibition and, along with Schmidt’s Brewery, one of the last of the great industrial-era local breweries to close. Philadelphia has a long brewing history dating back to the colonial era, but the 1800s marked the heyday of Philadelphia brewmasters. Traditionally, Americans consumed English ales due to the availability of the yeast. In 1840, Bavarian brewmaster John Wagner brought lager yeast from Bavaria and brewed the first lager on St. John Street (now North American) near Poplar. Lager beer was very popular among German immigrants and fueled the growth of the brewing industry in Philadelphia. In 1850, the majority of the German immigrants in Philadelphia involved in the brewing trade lived in Northern Liberties. Most breweries started out as small family operations and expanded as demand for lager increased. By 1869, there were 60 breweries in Philadelphia, and many of them were located in Northern Liberties and Kensington. In those early days of lager brewing, there were at least 20 other breweries in the vicinity of Ortlieb’s.

The remains of the Ortlieb’s is a visible reminder of the importance of the brewing trade in Northern Liberties and adjacent Kensington. Ortlieb’s Brewery ceased operations in 1981. In 1987, the tavern here reopened as Ortlieb’s Jazzhaus, featuring live jazz every night of the week, ranging from local house players to the internationally renowned.

Founded by Leonard B. Lipkin, Kaplan’s New Model Bakery has been supplying the neighborhood with challah and rye breads for more than 60 years. Kaplan’s is the only remaining Jewish bakery in the area, a surviving link to the large Jewish enclave that thrived here until the 1950s.

Turning left on Third Street, walk past Kaplan’s and into Liberty Lands Park.

Stop D: Liberty Lands Park

Liberty Lands Park is the product of a grassroots neighborhood effort to transform an industrial brownfield into a vital community green space. Once the site of the Burk Brothers Tannery and later a long play record factory, the Environmental Protection Agency conducted waste-removal projects here in 1987 and soil sampling in 1990 to ensure the lot’s environmental safety. In 1995, a developer planned to convert the old leather tannery into loft apartments, but the deal fell through. The developer’s loss was the neighborhood’s gain when the company donated the land to the Northern Liberties Neighborhood Association (NLNA) in 1996. Since Northern Liberties was the only neighborhood in the city without a public green space, the neighbors envisioned a multi-use park for the site. The NLNA received a grant from the Philadelphia Urban Resources Partnership to get started and—after several years and a lot of sweat equity, hours and hours of pick axing, ameliorating the dead soil—the neighbors created Liberty Lands Park. The transformation of Liberty Lands rallied the neighborhood, forging a cohesive sense of community and providing a public meeting and recreation space. The park has played a major role in redefining the neighborhood and attracting new residents and developments in the past 15 years.

Liberty Lands features a community garden, a composting area, an herb garden, picnic tables and benches, a children’s playground, a butterfly garden, and more than 180 trees. Longtime resident, artist, and park cofounder Dennis Haugh created the “Cinema Verde” mural, a work in progress that depicts the evolution of the park from wilderness, to factory, to industrial wasteland and, finally, to community park. Bees are used as a metaphor for their sense of community and industry to tell a story of the transformation of a post-industrial site to a green park. A second mural, “Cohocksink,” was completed in 2006 and memorializes the (now filled-in) creek that was such a defining feature of the geography, industry, and history of Northern Liberties (this site was an early Tuscara rice mill). A tribute to its community character and aesthetic appeal, Liberty Lands Park has been named one of America’s “Great Public Spaces” by Projects for Public Spaces.

Leave the park from the eastern edge (past the playground), at the corner of N. Bodine and N. American Streets. Turn right and walk on Laurel Street, crossing Second Street, to #157.
“We have to rethink everything”
Onion Flats and the Piazza: Space, sustainability, and the new city

Tour begins: East of Second and Laurel Streets
Stop A: Thin Flats

In the 1990s the brothers Pat and Tim McDonald began to experiment. Not only were they interested in adaptive reuse of the streetscape, but in rethinking the built environment itself. Their firm, Onion Flats, resurrected an old slaughterhouse just down the street here to create a contemporary living space, “Capital Flats.” Then, a few years later, they began to rethink buildings—and the cityscape itself—from the perspective of sustainability and building systems. This project “Thin Flats,” was built in 2009. At Thin Flats, the builders are playing with the regular rhythms of the basic Philadelphia row house form. And in this way we see another aspect of “building on ruins.” The row house, certainly, is a kind of ruin in America, a traditional form that is rarely followed in its original context. The rowhouse form—the ruins of the idea of dense, urban living—has been applied to suburban townhouse developments and gated communities. In this case, the McDonalds are building on the idea of a horizontally organized—as compared to the vertical model of NYC—city, on a form developed in England, transported here, and played out across the grid of Philadelphia.

Of course, it is also full of contemporary ideas of green building and sustainability and therefore is the first LEED H Platinum multi-family residence in the state of Pennsylvania.

“Why wouldn’t you use power that doesn’t cost anything to generate?” asks Pat McDonald, “Why wouldn’t you use a green roof to overcome the heat island effect? Why wouldn’t you install a gray water system to save water? What makes you not think of these things?”

“It’s a blast,” says Tim McDonald, “because we have to rethink everything.”

Walk back up to Second Street, turn right, walk half a block and enter the Piazza at Schmidt’s

Stop B: The Piazza at Schmidt’s

This is the literal ruins of the massive Schmidt’s brewery site. Over at the other end of the piazza, you’ll see some architectural elements from that monumental building. One of the strengths of this project architecturally is the way it incorporates the old industrial landscape, opening up views of some of the old buildings and neighborhood sites, while presenting an altogether different approach to city-building.

Poised on the boundary between Northern Liberties and Kensington, this sprawling 15-acre site was home to Schmidt’s, Philadelphia’s largest and most famous brewery, established in 1860. Schmidt’s was the last survivor of Philadelphia’s 19th-century German brewing industry, closing down in 1987 after over 125 years and leaving Philadelphia without a brewery for the first time in 300 years. (Today, that is a changing as quite a number of breweries inhabit the city and region, making Philadelphia “Beer City USA.”) Schmidt’s Beer—and its tenacity—was a point of pride for all Philadelphians.

Schmidt’s Brewery was founded by German immigrant Christian Schmidt in 1860 and remained in the Schmidt family until 1976. Unlike workforces at some other large manufacturers, the Schmidt’s Brewery workers—primarily of German and Irish descent—were unionized. The union, and not the Schmidt family, took care of the recruitment, hiring, and promotion of production workers, and provided employee benefits including medical insurance, pensions, and recreational programs. This differed from companies like the nearby Stetson Hat Company, which provided cradle-to-grave services and benefits to employees and their families in the hope of instilling workforce loyalty. The Schmidt family was willing to work with the union, and Schmidt’s Brewery earned a reputation as a good place to work, often employing several generations of the same family.

What we have here now—for much of this section of the neighborhood—was developed by Bart Blatstein. This project, the Piazza, is apartment residences, offices, and retail outlets, and this broad public-like space (it is in fact private). Developed in phases, the central piazza here was completed in 2009. We have some things to consider in light of the theme of this tour. First, is the idea of a “piazza,” borrowed from Italy, a kind of ruin itself. The architects, Scott Erdy and Dave McHenry, went to Italy and took note of the scale, proportion, massing, and materials used in the traditional piazza, and also, of course, of its role as central public space in the life of a city or town. Like the McDonald brothers, they took the “ruins” of that traditional form and adapted it to a different place in a different time. The other thing you will see here is that Blatstein meant to create a “5-minute neighborhood,” where residents wouldn’t have to travel far or long for anything—it would all be right here. That idea, and the sense of this being a very social, 24-hour place, is comparable to Marshall Street, which we visited earlier. There, of course, residents lived and worked and socialized (if there was time) in place. That’s very much what goes on here.

One more thing to consider. Built on the ruins of a brewery is a new kind of city: a city for pleasure, fun, and desire. A city life that celebrates the city itself.

Exit at the top of the Piazza to Second Street, turn right walk up Second Street, cross Girard Avenue. Turn left, walk half block to N. American Street. Stop at statue to Don Quixote.
“I fought new life to find”
The Crane Building and Al-Aqsa Mosque: mirrors on the emerging world

Tour begins: American Street and Girard Avenue (Quixote statue)
Stop A: Statue of Don Quixote
Standing here with Don Quixote, we have to ask if it’s an impossible dream to reclaim and reinvent the post industrial city. This city’s industrial architecture endures—but much of it continues to deteriorate, either by neglect, lack of an economically feasible use, or by fire. Some of the best of it—including the original building of Schmidt's—has been lost. The Spanish city of Ciudad Real in the region of La Mancha gifted this 14-foot bronze sculpture to the Spanish-speaking people of South Kensington in 1997 as a token of friendship and cooperation between the two communities. Quixote overlooks the razed site of Schmidt’s Brewery — the quintessential reminder of Philadelphia's former industrial might — and embodies the hopes and aspirations of a “neighborhood on the rise.”

Continue on N. American Street two blocks, cross Master Street
Stop B: Crane Arts Building
This last part of our tour considers the urban future, how groups of people adapt the city to their needs and how what they do then spawns further urban evolution. This city was an industrial giant and like a lot of cities it produced things. And now what does it produce? Perhaps in addition to science and education, it produces experiences and culture. That’s what’s happening here.

Designed by Walter Ballinger and completed in 1905, the Crane Building was originally home to the Crane Plumbing Company. In 2004, artists Nick Kripal and Richard Hricko transformed this 117,000-square-foot former ice house and flash-freezing plant into space for emerging and established local artists. The five floors of artists’ studios and office suites house individual artists, design and architecture firms, and arts organizations including InLiquid, Claymobile, and Gallery 201. The Crane Arts complex also boasts a huge white exhibition space called the Ice Box Gallery. The growth of artists’ collectives and studio and exhibition spaces is nurturing Philadelphia's arts community, providing both the spaces and incentives to live and work in the city.

From the Crane Building, go up N. American Street to left on Jefferson, one and half blocks to Germantown Avenue
Stop C: Al-Aqsa Mosque
The contemporary city also tries to find ways to celebrate its diversity. This is yet another cultural product built upon a ruins—of a history of fragmentation and group competition and hatred. In this case, Al-Aqsa Mosque is also built upon another industrial remnant, this the former furniture warehouse of the Dubin Company.

Al-Aqsa's vibrant mosaic-and-mural exterior, “Doorways to Peace,” (along Jefferson Street) is the result of an interfaith, collaborative project between Al-Aqsa members, local artists, local Muslim and non-Muslim schoolchildren, neighbors, churches, and synagogues. Al-Aqsa encompasses a mosque and cultural center for the neighborhood’s close-knit Palestinian community and other Arab Muslims in the area. Since its founding in 1991, Al-Aqsa has grown beyond the mosque to include a grocery and a K-12 school that provides Islamic studies and Arabic language lessons. After September 11, 2001, the mosque’s leaders and members have sought to raise awareness and tolerance of Philadelphia's Arab Muslim community to counter the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment. By reaching out to their non-Arab neighbors, Al-Aqsa has become a welcome hub of community activity in this transitional neighborhood.

The “Doorways to Peace” project began in 2003 when Al-Aqsa undertook a community-wide effort to both beautify its facade and build bridges between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities of South Kensington. Al-Aqsa partnered with the Mural Arts Program, the Arts and Spirituality Center (located in West Philadelphia) and artists Joe Brennan, Cathleen Hughes, and Fadwa Kashkash, to enlist neighbors, two nearby public schools, Hancock St. John's United Methodist Church, and a variety of other individuals and community groups to work collectively to transform the Society's building and strengthen relationships along the way. The team of artists researched Islamic art and for almost a year, the groups met in Al-Aqsa's basement and collaborated on everything from the color scheme to making ceramic tiles, painting the mural on a large swath of fabric and mounting it the building’s façade. Joe Brennan asked the mixed-faith group of schoolchildren to design tiles that depicted their individual ideas of peace to adorn the exterior walls. Integrating her research with community input, artist Cathleen Hughes designed the overall mural for the building and led the team of community painters to create “Doorways to Peace.”

The disparate groups overcame their initial wariness to make the Al-Aqsa Islamic Society building into a living symbol of interfaith community and cooperation, humanizing the Muslim community and forging lasting relationships in the process. In this way we see the urban dynamic at work here in the Northern Liberties. People, free to shape their idea of the city, are also shaped by the city itself, and we all leave signs of who we are and what we are doing here.
Credits

These tours are sponsored by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and based on information gathered on PhilaPlace.org, the Historical Society’s interactive website where visitors can explore the history, cultures, and architecture of Philadelphia’s neighborhoods. To learn more about PhilaPlace, visit philaplac.org.

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About Nathaniel Popkin

Nathaniel Popkin is a writer of the American urban experience. According to Tom Sugrue of the University of Pennsylvania, Popkin is “a visionary with two feet on the ground, a poet who finds verse in the everyday.” Philadelphia Inquirer book critic Carlin Romano calls Popkin’s Song of the City (Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002) “exquisitely literary...electric.” In Metropolitan Philadelphia: Living in the Presence of the Past, historian Steve Conn writes that Song of the City is “the finest book about contemporary Philadelphia I have come across.” In response to The Possible City (Camino, 2008) the novelist Beth Kephart calls Popkin’s writing “profoundly beautiful, often surprising.”

Popkin is currently the senior writer for the documentary film series “Philadelphia: The Great Experiment,” editorial director for Hidden City Philadelphia, and the editor of Hidden City, Dreams Revealed, a prospective work to be published by Paul Dry Books about the experience and impact of the Hidden City festival. He is currently at work on I Will Flood You, a novel about the tragic death of the painter John Lewis Krimmel. In 2009, Popkin was named a fellow by the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.
South Philadelphia: Territory of Dreams

A walking tour guide created by Nathaniel Popkin for PhilaPlace, a project of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania
South Philadelphia: Territory of Dreams

Reading the layers and observing the collisions of urban life

INTRODUCTION: For four centuries, they have come and still they are coming. From Scandinavia, from Holland, from Africa, England and Scotland, from Ireland, from Russia and Poland, from Italy, China, Lebanon, Cambodia, Viet Nam, Laos, and Mexico, they have come to hoist their dreams on this place: South Philadelphia. It wasn’t ever virgin territory, of course, but for some 10,000 years, it was part of a vast and evolving world of Algonquin and pre-Algonquin people, and finally the Lenape, farmers and fishermen, who lived until late in the 18th century along the Lenapewhiittuck—the Delaware River.

From the perspective of history, we see South Philly—one of the most historically diverse places in urban America—for its layers of people and civilizations, ideas and ways of life. This tour will illuminate the layers, for we can see them in the present urban landscape. With such perspective we will provide a kind of panoramic view across time.

That’s the simple version. The more complex reality is that people have always been forced in South Philly to negotiate over the control of space. It hasn’t always gone so smoothly and sometimes differences among struggling working class people have been exploited by the powerful for political gain. There are stories of hatred and violence and also cross-cultural harmony and shared lives.

In this tour, we will encounter the places and people who have sought to make this the territory of their dreams. The tour will make five stops; each stop is an intersection of time and place. One after the other, the layers will gather and overlap, forming a single complicated narrative, the collision of dreams.

[1] April 8, 1638, Coquahanock

“We trust them still less”: New Sweden and the “Fast Flowing Water of the Lenape”

Tour begins: Christian Street and Delaware Avenue, in front of Shank’s

[2] Sometime in 1787 or 1792, Seventh Ward

“We were filled with fresh vigor”: Richard Allen and the largest free black community in America

Tour begins: NE corner 6th and Lombard, Mother Bethel Church

[3] October 10, 1871, Moyamensing

“A great deal of disorder and turbulence”: One corner, two men, and the fight for equality

Tour begins: SE corner of 7th and Bainbridge, Bean Exchange Coffeehouse


“The worthy prayers”: Peddler Louis Moscovitz defies the pious, exposing the soul of the immigrant

Tour begins: 322 Bainbridge

[5] January 1, 1900, South Philadelphia

“Now we must make them Italians”: Father Antonio Isoleri forges a new people in America

Tour begins: St. Mary Magdalen dePazzi Church/ Mario Lanza Museum, 700 block Montrose St.

April 8, 1638, Coquahanock

“We trust them still less”: New Sweden and the “Fast Flowing Water of the Lenape”

Tour begins: Christian Street, left to Front and Delaware Avenue, next to Shank’s

Stop A: Encounters on the Delaware

The Delaware River below Trenton is a tidal river and we can thus imagine the tides bringing layers of people and culture to its banks. An endless tide of people, language, religion, and ideas. Of course for much of the human history of this region, the people are Algonquin, who lived in small, seasonal settlements near the creeks and tributaries of two great rivers—one north (Hudson), the other south (Delaware)—that flow out to the sea. The inhabitants of the south river valley come to call themselves Lenni-Lenape—“The Real Original People.” They speak Unami, an Algonquin dialect. They give the river a name, Lenapewhiittuck—Fast Flowing River of the Lenape People.

In the early 17th century, the Dutch West Indies Company convinces the Swedish crown—looking for influence and glory during the Thirty Years’ War—to create a colony in North America—New Sweden. Two Swedish ships led by Dutchman Peter Minuit pull into the South River Bay in March, 1638; the smell of pitch pine fills the air. Minuit’s men quickly explore the area along the Minqua Kill. He wants to be sure there are no other Europeans in the area. When this is confirmed, Minuit fires a canon. He knows doing so will draw Lenape to the shore. He is right. Very soon, on March 29, five Sachem—or tribal leaders—Mattahorn, Miatsemint, Eru Packen, Mohomen, and Chiton come aboard the ship.

On April 8, 1638, the Sachem agree to share the land for the establishment of a Swedish colony. Minuit agrees to purchase the land—some 67 miles of land along the South River. The difference between sharing and purchasing—two opposite views of man’s relationship to the earth—is essentially irreconcilable. The tension it produces is unceasing.

The tension carries across the centuries as this shoreline a few blocks down becomes Philadelphia’s central immigrant port of entry, second only to Ellis Island in numbers of immigrants, many of whom board stage coaches and later trains heading west. But many—Africans (both slave and free), German, Scot, Irish, French, and later Jews and Italians, in the past 50 years, Vietnamese, Chinese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Mexican—stay, negotiating for space and identity.

“Picturesque patches populated by foreign groups give South Philadelphia an Old World flavor,” says the 1937 WPA Guide to Philadelphia, a description that is true even today. “Phalanxes of pushcarts, pins and pencils, and flypaper, others heaped with grapes and bananas and berries, clutter some of the streets. The aroma of strange viands permeates the air.”
This tour begins right here in New Sweden and travels through time and place—to the 18th century waterfront populated by a polyglot “lower sort,” to the 19th-century confrontations of African Americans, Irish, Jews, and Italians—ending a mile away in front of a mural on the wall of a Buddhist temple, a picture of refugees in the South China sea. On our journey we’ll meet heroes and bullies, radicals and priests, and we’ll experience a little of the Old World, ever being reinvented. We’ll learn to read and interpret all this history preserved in the tidal layers of South Philly.

Cross street to Old Swede’s, enter on Christian, walk through passage and stand in front of church entrance.

Stop B: Old Swede’s Church (1700)

The second voyage of the Swedish Kalmar Nyckel brings more colonists, some who practice specific, and needed, trades. Some hope for opportunity, among them Peter Gunnarsson Rambo, a farmhand on three-year indenture contract. He carries a box of seeds—apple, rye, barley, among them. He earns ten guilders a month, sends part of the wages home to his father, and keeps the rest. In 1642, when his contract is up, he makes an unusual decision. Rambo, who cannot write or sign his name, chooses to stay in New Sweden. Rambo—a name we’re all familiar with. Peter Gunnarsson is the ancestor of the man made famous by Sylvester Stallone.

Peter Minuit’s eventual replacement is Johan Printz, at 400 pounds an enormous figure in the colony, and the person New Sweden directors hope will build an empire. The imperious Printz hopes to face down the Lenape. He dreams of having enough soldiers so that “with the help of God not a single savage would be allowed to live on this River” Lenape outnumber the Swedes and Printz is wary. He wishes for confrontation but knows the risks. After organizing a peace treaty in 1644, Printz observes, they “trust us in no wise and we trust them still less,” and promises retaliation for even the slightest hostility.

Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus’ heir Christina, now 12, is a brilliant, curious student of science, philosophy, and language. She dresses as a boy, rides horseback, and sends for Descartes to be her tutor. She begins to take a role in government. Christina maneuvers to end the Thirty Year’s War, a conflict between Catholic and Protestant powers. She is tolerant, a free-thinker, and in 1645 blocks the official adoption of a strict Lutheranism. Christina’s tolerance holds Printz in check, as does her disinterest in the colony. Despite plans in 1649 and 1650 to invest in New Sweden, little aid arrives. Christina spends freely on feudal estates, further draining the treasury. In 1651, she declares to her court that she is Catholic and wishes to renounce the crown. Christian Street, right here, and Queen Street, one over, are named for her.

By then, Printz himself wants out. Lenape leaders Mattawiraka and Wassiminetto see an opportunity to push off the Swedes. The Lenape chiefs invite Peter Stuyvesant, the new Governor of the Dutch West Indies Company, to establish a camp in New Swedish territory near the Schuylkill River. They themselves plant the Dutch flag and encourage other Dutch settlers to venture south. The Dutch fort at Passyunk sets in motion the gradual loss of Swedish power. New Sweden is absorbed in 1657 by New Netherlands. Stuyvesant advises leniency; for at least a few years, Swedes, whose colony has grown to about 400 people, are left to govern themselves. Left alone, they seek peace with the Lenape.

Meanwhile, however, the growth of New Amsterdam threatens English interests. In 1664, Charles II annexes New Netherlands to unite his colonies along the Atlantic coast. On August 17, 1664, four English ships sail into New Amsterdam’s harbor to demand capitulation. Colonists, tired of petitioning for Dutch military protection and indeed more or less defenseless, put up no resistance. Though English and Dutch officials continue to contest ownership of the colony for a decade, the Treaty of Westminster, signed in November 1674 at conclusion of the Third Dutch-Anglo War (1672-1674), cedes New Netherlands—including the Lenape villages and New Sweden—to the English once and for all.

In 1682, William Penn arrives. He has to scramble to put together the land for his “great city.” The Swedish Svenson (or Swanson) brothers—for whom Swanson Street right here is named—agree to sell land to Penn. They also provide this site for Gloria Dei church, completed in 1700 and the oldest standing church in Pennsylvania. Penn’s tolerant charter makes freedom of religion a key American concept. Even in 1700, we can see this church as a layer of urban life in what will be South Philadelphia.

The church houses many historical artifacts related to Swedish American settlement. Replicas of the two ships that brought the first Swedes to Pennsylvania are suspended from the church ceiling. A wood carving of two cherubs with a Bible was brought from Sweden before 1646, and the Swedish baptismal font was imported in 1731. The church’s stained glass window is one of the earliest examples of American-made stained glass and dates to the mid-1800s.
Stop C: Beck Street, 18th century working polyglot

By the 1740s, this area is experiencing a building and population boom. The small cobblestone alleys, like Beck and Hancock Streets, are home to mid-level artisans drawn here by maritime trades, including shipwrights, carpenters, blacksmiths, mast makers, and boat builders. Many homes in this enclave are made of wood — cheaper to construct, but harder to maintain. In predominantly brick Philadelphia, wooden houses are associated with devastating fires. Several of the wooden framed houses survive on the 800 block of Hancock Street, and still bear the bronze “firemark” plaques of various local insurance companies. These plaques denote which homes were insured and should be saved in the (very likely) event of a fire.

Now let’s flash forward to the 1790s. Philadelphia, the nation’s capital, enjoys a wave of immigration, of Africans (slave and free), French and creole from Haiti, German, Irish, Scot, and Dutch. It is a port city—as many as 50 ships a day call here—with all the attendant work of ship building, sailmaking, rigging, longshoremen, etc., hard manual work. The historian Billy Smith recreates this world in his book The “Lower Sort.” Smith follows the dockworker Peter Carle, who comes to Philadelphia with his wife Hannah in 1795. They live here, paying $6/month for a two-story frame house just like one of these, rented from the wife of a brick layer Anthony Pearson. When Peter doesn’t have enough work, they share the house with renters. Carle works as a stevedore, moving goods on and off of ships—backbreaking work that involves transporting 200 pound barrels off ships and rolling them to warehouses and stores.

Walk back to Queen Street, left on Queen (1/2 block)

Stop D: Weccacoe Firehouse

This is Weccacoe Engine House. We’re going to stop here for a minute because the engine house gives us a preview of mounting 19th-century tensions among Protestant and Catholic immigrants, tensions transported here from Ireland. We’re going to learn more about these fire companies a little bit later in the tour, as the 19th century wears on. What’s significant from this stop and the one that follows—St. Philip Neri Church—is that poverty and famine in Ireland are pushing huge numbers of Irish Catholics, among the poorest people in Europe, to emigrate to Philadelphia, Boston, and New York starting in the 1820s. The influx of Irish into Philadelphia and Pennsylvania coincides with a period of Protestant revivalism, temperance (clean living, anti-alcohol) movements and rapid industrialization, creating uneasiness and resentment on the part of the native-born population and fomenting fear and defensiveness among the Irish Catholics. Nativists are primarily American-born, Protestant whites, but are also Protestants of Irish descent. The Nativist working classes especially feel threatened by Irish competition for jobs and housing, their anger stoked by the perception that the Irish drive down wages by working for next to nothing.

We can see some of the tensions here, and their political ramifications. In the early 1800s, the engine house is the center of social life for working-class men in the area. Membership in a fire company grants men social status, authority, and legitimacy within their own neighborhoods and ethnic groups. Around this time there are seven volunteer fire companies in Southwark, their members drawn from and aligned with competing ethnic and political groups: Irish Democrats and Nativist Republicans. The companies often operate like street gangs competing for turf — and in this case, the “turf” is burning buildings. The clubhouse atmosphere and ethnic and political antipathies often led to rival companies fighting at the scene of the blaze, causing more harm than good as the structures burned down.

This house, Weccacoe Engine, spawns a splinter “Weccacoe Hose” in 1842 after an ethnically tinged rift occurs within Weccacoe Engine over temperance. The Irish Catholics feel targeted and alienated by the temperance movement, which they perceive as thinly veiled anti-Catholic sentiment. Weccacoe Hose is aligned with the Democratic Party and anti-temperance, while the Engine Company remained Republican and pro-temperance.

Cross Second Street to St. Philip Neri Church and Mario Lanza Park on the next block of Queen St.

Stop E: Mario Lanza Park

By the early 1830s, there is a sufficient concentration of Irish Catholics in Southwark to warrant a new Catholic Church for the neighborhood. St. Philip Neri Church is built and opened in 1840, with Bishop Francis Kendrick dedicating it on May 9, 1841. In Northern Liberties and Kensington, St. Michael’s and St. Augustine’s burn to the ground. The chaos travels south, and in summer a mob surrounds St. Philip, intent on its destruction. A militia is called in to restore order. After four days of violence (July 5-8), with 20 dead and scores more wounded, St. Philip Neri survives—today it has a congregation of 650 families.

Flash forward another century for a minute, a just note the name of this park, Mario Lanza—named for the celebrity tenor from Christian Street (born Alfredo Cocozza to Italian immigrant parents in 1921). More about Lanza later, but again, the present day streetscape reveals the layers.

Walk through park to Catherine Street, turn left on Catherine and walk to Sixth St., right on Sixth to Lombard, cross to NE corner of Sixth and Lombard

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Sometime in 1787 or 1792, Seventh Ward “We were filled with fresh vigor”: Richard Allen and the largest free black community in America

Stop A: Mother Bethel Church

So let’s jump back into the 1700s for a moment, putting aside the story of the Irish and the Italians. Post-Revolution, Philadelphia flourishes as a center of free black life in America. The Pennsylvania gradual abolition act of 1780 is the first in the nation; enslaved people live here—those who didn’t qualify for abolition, those owned by the President and members of Congress, etc.—but they are in the minority.

The late 1780s then is a time where free blacks, some of them formerly enslaved, take the first steps in the ongoing fight for civil rights. This is a time of hope; leaders emerge, among them James Forten, a sailmaker, who runs a mixed race shop. Forten becomes one of the wealthiest African Americans in Philadelphia. Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, formerly enslaved, emerge as both ecumenical and civic leaders. Under their leadership, for the first time African Americans hold organized protest, purchase property, and establish their own organizations.

On a Sunday morning in 1792 (or 1787, it isn’t clear), Reverend Absalom Jones, one of two black preachers ordained by St. George’s Methodist Church—the other is Richard Allen—kneels as the church elder says, “Let us pray.” Allen’s eyes are closed; he opens them when he hears commotion. White church leaders have Jones in their arms. “You must get up—you must not kneel here.” They are trying to send him, and the rest of the numerous and growing group of African American congregants, upstairs. From now on the church will be segregated.

“Wait until the prayer is over,” lectures Jones.

“No. You must get up now or I will call aid and force you away.” Allen sees an opening. He’s long imagined a black church; a walkout would be the first step. He and Jones lead the exodus.

“I have the charge given to me by the [Methodist] conference,” pursues the white elder, “and unless you submit, I will read you publicly out of the meeting.”

>Show us where we have violated and law,” Allen responds, “then we will submit.”

“We had no place of worship,” Allen writes later, “and we did not mean to go to St. George’s Church anymore. But the elder of the Methodist church still pursued us. We told him we were determined to seek for ourselves. Here was the beginning and rise of the first African church in America.”

Jones goes on to found St. Thomas Episcopal Church; Allen, a Methodist, finds this piece of ground and purchases it. This today is the fourth version of the Bethel Church on this site. In the first two decades of the 1800s, as the community grows substantially, political and economic opportunity lags; the Methodist establishment refuses to grant full control to Allen and his congregation. An attempt by white bishops to take back the church fails when the congregation resorts to a sit-in and then in 1817 wins a Supreme Court case protecting their right to control their own church.

Cross Sixth Street and then cross Lombard and continue on Sixth to Rodman

Stop B: St. Mary’s Street (Rodman Street)

So this neighborhood becomes the heart of the African American community, with the first schools, literary societies and dance halls. The people here compete with their Irish neighbors for the jobs at the lowest rung of the economic ladder. They work as carters, laborers, domestics, prostitutes. But a professional elite begins to form, among them Sarah Louisa Forten, James Forten’s daughter, and Sarah Douglass, both literary minded campaigners for black rights. Racism, the young Forten writes, betraying her relatively upper-class upbringing, “has often engendered feelings of discontent and mortification in my breast when I saw that many were preferred before me, who by education—birth—or worldly circumstances were no better than myself—their sole claim to notice depending on the superior advantage of being white...” But, “[God] is just and his anger will not always slumber. He will wipe the tear from Ethiopia’s eye; He will shake the tree of liberty, and its blossoms shall spread all over the earth.”

In 1834 a series of riots begins in and around South Street. In 1838, Pennsylvania takes away the right to vote from black men, the abolitionist Pennsylvania Hall is burned, and life begins to get harder. In 1849 there is a bi-racial tavern called the California House here on this corner. It is owned by a black man, who, it is rumored, has married a white woman. A gang of Irish men attack the tavern; in a brutal battle, in which blacks fight back, Allen’s church across the street survives the riot.

Continue on Sixth to South Street (mural of W.E.B. Du Bois on NW corner)

This significant mural on Engine Company 11 celebrates the Seventh Ward—the center of black life—in the last part of the 1800s. Hose companies in the 1800s were entirely composed of white men. In 1819, a group of black Philadelphians led by James Forten propose an African Fire Service. But the AFS movement quickly collapsed in the face of virulent attacks in the white press, public threats from white firefighters, and rising anger from the white public.

The original Engine Company 11—the building is still there at Eleventh and South—is one of the original 22 fire companies established by Philadelphia’s first paid, municipal Fire Department in 1871. That year is critical to our story, so we’re going to keep it in mind. Philadelphia did not hire its first black firefighter, Isaac Jacobs, until 1886. Jacobs was stationed at Engine 11, and although designated a hoseman, in reality he was relegated to caring for the company’s horses. He served until 1891. In 1905, Philadelphia hired its second African American firefighter, Stephen E. Presco. Unlike Jacobs, Presco actually fought fires, and died
in the line of duty in a shirtdress factory blaze. Engine 11 became the firehouse where all African American firefighters were stationed, often working under white supervisors and chiefs. Until the Philadelphia Fire Department officially desegregated in 1952, Engine 11 is Philadelphia's de facto African American firehouse.

Dedicated in 2008, the mural depicts W.E.B. Du Bois, unrolling his survey of the Seventh Ward. From 1896 through 1897, Du Bois lived at 617 Carver Street (now Rodman Street), just where we had stopped before, while researching his monumental sociological and demographic study, The Philadelphia Negro. In the late 1800s, this neighborhood in the heart of the Seventh Ward is a notorious “slum,” populated by a mix of Jewish and Italian immigrants and blacks. It is known for taverns, brothels, loud music, and crime. Du Bois, with a Harvard PhD, is given a post at the University of Pennsylvania and asked to do a comprehensive survey of black life in Philadelphia. Looking somewhat out of place dressed in his top hat and coat-tails, Du Bois goes door-to-door in the neighborhood, interviewing black residents about their education, employment, health, family life, and household arrangements, collecting information that white census takers could or would not. He categorizes the households and creates color-coded maps to display his various classifications, which include “poor,” “working people,” “middle class,” and the “vicious and criminal class.”

“We lived there a year,” he writes later, “in the midst of an atmosphere of dirt, drunkenness, poverty and crime. Murder sat at our doorsteps, police were our government and philanthropy dropped in with periodic advice.” But he adds, “On its face this slum is noisy and dissipated, but not brutal . . . the stranger can usually walk about here day and night with little fear of being molested, if he be not too inquisitive.”

Continue down Sixth Street half block to Kater, turn right, go one block to Seventh St., left half block to Bainbridge, SE corner

Walking up Kater Street, we get a sense of the scale of the neighborhood. On a block like this, stepping back to the mid-1800s, African Americans and poor immigrant Irish Catholics shared space, shared resources, they even shared stoops.

| 3 |

October 10, 1871, Moyamensing
“A great deal of disorder and turbulence”: One corner, two men, and the fight for equality

Tour begins: SE corner of 7th and Bainbridge, Bean Exchange Coffeehouse, walk south down Seventh Street and stop in front of vacant lot.

Stop A: Birthplace of William McMullen and church of William Catto

So we step back from Du Bois’ time to the middle of 1800s, in effect to get at the seeds of contention and group conflict. And also to give you a sense of the intimacy and the boundaries of life in a diverse and contested place. It is 1848. We must consider notions of whiteness and access to opportunity and jobs. Blacks, at the lowest rung of the ladder, confront continued disempowerment. Their access to even slight advancement is blocked by Irish immigrants, who are also not considered white, and who are willing to work for cheap. However, Irish men are allowed to vote, serve in hose companies, and ride the streetcars (women too!). Blacks have none of these rights.

But then let us consider the reality. On the left here, on this vacant lot, which incidentally later becomes the Second Ward Republican Club, is the colored First Presbyterian Church. Its pastor is a 36-year-old black man from South Carolina named William Catto. Catto’s church is noticeably elite: “I assume that no church of color in Philadelphia, and I omit not one, could compare with the church at this time for the number of young intellectuals that were members of it.” Directly across the street is the birthplace of a young man—he is 24 in 1848—named William McMullen. Downstairs is his father’s grocery store.

Born to an enslaved woman, Catto’s life is utterly heroic. He rises out of Charleston, South Carolina, an ordained minister. William McMullen at 24 is already a neighborhood hero, as a teen he helps build St. Philip Neri, and during the riots of 1844 he protects the church and the other Catholic churches in Kensington from violent mobs. He is a member of the Moyamensing Hose Company, virulently Democratic, anti-elitist, a protector of “his people.” McMullen always feels threatened. And now, with men like William Catto around, snobbish people who teach their children Greek and Latin, there is yet another threat.

Walk up Bainbridge and turn left. Walk to Eighth Street, left on Eighth to Fitzwater, cross Eighth to west side, cross Fitzwater to SW corner

Stop B: Moyamensing Hose Company

Here, on this corner, is McMullen’s hangout, the Moyamensing Hose Company. The Moyas, as the hose company members were known, and much like the Weccacoe Hose Company,
are Irish, Democrats, anti-temperance. Here too is the headquarters of a street gang related to the Hose Company, likely the perpetrators of the California House riots we learned about before, called the Killers. McMullen is becoming their king.

**Walk back up Eighth Street, cross Fitzwater, stop at SW corner Eighth and Bainbridge.**

**Stop C: The McMullen Empire: House, polling station, and Church of the Crucifixion (Episcopal black church)**

Flash forward into the 1860s. Post Civil War. Here (Express Market) is McMullen’s home and his office as neighborhood alderman. NE corner is his polling station. Across the street (west side of Eighth, between Bainbridge and Kater) another elite black church. Past that, across Kater, is McMullen’s own saloon.

By 1871, William Catto’s son Octavius is a rising star of the racial equality movement. He’s helped to regain the right to vote, ordained by the 15th Amendment. In Pennsylvania, he’s at the forefront of a battle to grant blacks legal access to streetcars. He is a teacher at the elite black school, the Institute for Colored Youth, where we will walk in a moment. Remember 1871: the year the city pulls the plug on its volunteer hose companies, a product of consolidation and professionalization—concepts favored by the bureaucratic elite. It’s also a mayoral election and the more reform minded Republican Party is ascendant. The party of Lincoln. Now with suffrage, blacks are likely to be a swing vote in the election. Consider McMullen’s position: his turf threatened, his power at stake. His people helpless.

The night before, at this intersection, Eighth and Bainbridge, Jacob Gordon, a black man, went out to buy shoes. He was shot twice and killed.

**Walk back to corner of Bainbridge, turn left and follow Bainbridge to Ninth and to the Institute for Colored Youth**

**Stop D: Institute for Colored Youth**

Here is the center of educated black activism in Philadelphia, perhaps the leading place of its kind in the United States: the Institute for Colored Youth, a school opened by Quakers and run by African Americans. Octavius Catto is assistant principal. Fanny Coppin—for whom Coppin State is named—is principal. If the world was going to change and the dream of full citizenship realized, it would start here, with these young people, most of whom will become teachers. Education is the key.

Catto lets his students out early on Election Day. There is violence. Gordon’s murder is the first but not the last. Catto leaves, walks to the Mayor’s office to ask for police assistance in protecting voters. He purchases a gun. His national guard unit will go on duty at 6 p.m. He tries a safe route home from Chestnut Street. Up Lombard to Ninth, to his boarding house at 814 South Street. McMullen’s bartender Frank Kelly shoots him dead before he can get all the way home.

But McMullen fails to stop the Republican upswing. Republican William Stokely wins the election—and GOP rules the city until 1947. Critical to understanding the staying power of what becomes the Republican Machine: blacks, who remain loyal to the party of Lincoln even during the depression, and Italian immigrants, who we’ll meet in just a short time.

We think about the state of the Seventh Ward 25 year later, when W.E.B. Du Bois studies it. It hasn’t improved. Only 100 or so of 6,600 workers are professionals. No one has led the movement since Catto.

**Turn around and walk back down Bainbridge, cross Fourth to #318, on the southside.**

{{4}}

**October 5, 1889, Yom Kippur, Washington Market**

“The worthy prayers”: Peddler Louis Moskovitz defies the pious, exposing the soul of the immigrant

**Tour begins: 318 Bainbridge**

**Stop A: Old Washington Market, facing old Ahavas Chessed-Anshe Shavel (the brownstone at 318 Bainbridge)**

We learn to look closely and interpret the urban landscape. Some things to point out: this street for two blocks is extra wide. Why is that? It was a food market—the Washington Market. The market closed in the 20th century and it was replaced by this meager landscaping. Local people complained about it then, as they do today. But we can figure these tall trees are about 80 years old.

We are only about 17 years on from the moment of Catto’s shooting. And we can think about the pervasive sadness that must have followed it right here; the only close comparison is to the assassination of Martin Luther King. Catto is on the cover of Harper’s Magazine in the week that follows his murder. Now there are new people here, and they must seem pretty strange: Jews, most of them from the Pale of Settlement—which extends through parts of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Hungary, and Romania. Unlike the Jews of Germany, who migrated here in the 1860s and took up residence in the Northern Liberties, and who were urban, fairly assimilated, and somewhat wealthy, these Jews are poor peasants, and in their homelands they had possessed few rights. Many of them are quite traditional in their religious and cultural outlook, and they follow old, peasant customs. This becomes their turf, from here up to Sixth Street, over to Lombard and Pine, south to Catharine. The same turf of the Irish and of the African American. William McMullen is now a city councilman: and the Jewish immigrants are now his constituents, too. South Street is now their shopping street too and like the Irish and the blacks, most of the Jews work with their hands, in factories.
So it is October 5, 1889. Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar and inside this schul, men and women will pray all day; it is the day to absolve oneself of sin, a day to atone. Washington Market isn’t a Jewish market per se, that exists around the corner on Fourth Street south from Bainbridge to Washington Avenue, what is now, still, a Jewish fabric district.

But this is Louis Moscovitz’s stand. What is the life of the immigrant? It is a balance of maintaining identity and becoming something else, something new, in relation to a new land and a new people. Moscovitz considered himself part of an international community—of thinkers, political activists, modernists, anarchists, communists—seeking to recreate the world. Here there are likeminded men and women, who see America as a place to put ideas in practice; they bring mostly European ideas. They are Jews and also another set of people from a strange place, Italians. We’ll see how this neighborhood gives them a way to meet, foster ideas, and try to create a new world and how the neighborhood itself presents the immigrant’s tension.

So Moscovitz, an anarchist, opens his stall on Yom Kippur. He sells beans and grains. Then facing the synagogue across the way, he covers his head, puts on the linen robe and the prayer shawl. This is incendiary, mocking. He says not a word. His business that day is to antagonize the pious. He takes from his pocket not prayers to be read but pamphlets, incantations of the revolution. The religious men inside, taking a break during the day-long prayer of repentance, fill the stoop of the shul. Moscovitz reads an anarchist version of the traditional prayer; he davens. He expects neither customers nor confrontation. Yet the men on the steps have begun to admonish the blasphemer. They can’t ignore him.

Moscovitz goes on with his act. But the shouts, in Yiddish, grow louder. “All around the world we are hated!” they are screaming. “And here they accept us. Now that’s not good enough for you...” With their condemning eyes they refuse to leave him alone. Now they surround his stand; now they appear capable of violence and terror. “Why do you belittle us on this day?”

A policeman of Irish descent is on his beat. It appears to him that the peddler is in danger. He calls for backup. After much wrangling and desperate cries of the lynch-mob, the religious, terrified and indignant, many of them ignorant of English, are put into the police wagon and taken to jail.

Cross Fourth Street to SW corner Fourth and Bainbridge

Stop B: Famous Deli and Fourth Street market

Along with the eastern end of South Street, South Fourth Street becomes the commercial center of Jewish life in this neighborhood. “Der Fester” (the fourth) in Yiddish, and later “Fabric Row” because of the predominance of fabric and garment-related merchandise along the corridor.

This is Famous 4th Street, classic Jewish deli, which opens much after Moscovitz’s confrontation, in 1923. Owned by three generations of the same family until 2005, it has long been the preferred lunch spot for Philadelphia’s politicians, power brokers and dealmakers.

Many of the stores along Fabric Row begin in the late 1800s as pushcarts selling fabric, produce, or other small items. Early 1900s Fourth Street includes kosher butcher shops, fish stores and dairy stores, plus fruit and vegetable carts and stands stretching from Lombard to Carpenter.

In the 1920s, City Hall issues pushcart or curb market licenses for five dollars. Usually, three or four of the more prosperous businessmen purchase all the licenses and then re-sell them to push cart owners for 25 cents per day. During the heyday of the Fourth Street pushcart peddlers (1910s and 1920s) approximately 500 Jewish men in the city made their living this way. Pushcarts may have appeared haphazard and unprofessional, but many merchants make a living sufficient to eventually acquire storefronts (with their residences on the second story) and send their children to college. In fact, by the 1920s, many Fourth Street peddlers and stand keepers move into dry goods and fabric stores; tailors and dressmakers came from all over the city to buy fabrics on Fourth Street. Philadelphia labor played a role in every stage of the garment industry, from production to retail. Scores of Jewish immigrant women work as seamstresses (alongside Italian immigrant women) in the numerous sweatshops throughout the city.

Today, many of the original shops on Fabric Row remain, and are entering their third and fourth generation of family ownership.

Walk up Bainbridge to Fifth, turn right on Fifth cross South Street

Stop C: 500 block of South Fifth Street

Back to Moscovitz’s time in the 1880s, this across the street, the Adidas Store, is Snellenburg’s Department Store, a leading clothier in Philadelphia for generations. Joseph Snellenburg—a German Jew, and you can see in this another tension in an immigrant community, the perceptions that the German old line Jews are rich, the Jews who live here, poor, backwards—opens his shop in the 1850s on South Street. The company eventually employs 1,600 people here, at another retail store on Market Street and a manufacturing operation on North 3rd Street, where other German Jewish clothing houses of the time are located.

Walking down the block toward Lombard, we find the center of Jewish radical intellectualism. Here, Rich City Chinese is the Colonial Cafe, where weddings are held but also political meetings, which often include like minded Italians. At 508, you can see by the name on the stoop, is the office of the Yiddish Jewish Daily Forward. Across the street, no longer there, Uhr’s Romanin Restaurant and the Hungarian Synagogue, which has onion domes until 1920, and down this block of Gaskill Street, both the men’s and women’s bathhouses. (You can walk across Fifth, down to 413-15 Gaskill, which was the woman’s bath house.)
Walk to end of 500 block of S. Fifth Street, cross Lombard and walk half block west to B’Nai Abraham Synagogue

Stop D: B’Nai Abraham Synagogue

The original building on this site is the church for a group of African American worshippers who have broken away from Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, right here at the end of the block. You can see we have made a great circle! The Wesley Church, an AMEZion congregation, is completed and dedicated in 1820. By 1885, Wesley Church’s congregation has outgrown the building and moves west of Broad Street, selling the building to Congregation B’nai Abraham, founded by Lithuanian Jews. This building is the oldest synagogue in continuous use in Philadelphia. During the height of Eastern European Jewish immigration to Philadelphia (1880-1920), B’nai Abraham serves as a cornerstone of daily Jewish life, feeding the hungry and housing the homeless, and is often the first stop for Jewish immigrants disembarking at Washington Avenue. They head here to recite prayers of thanks and receive food and shelter.

Bernard Levinthal, a Lithuanian who is rabbi from 1891 to 1952, helps found New York’s Yeshiva University and countless other Jewish organizations in Philadelphia, including Mt. Sinai Hospital and the Hebrew Free School. Though the congregation dates to the 1800s, the Byzantine structure that stands today is built exclusively by Jewish workmen in 1910.

Continue on Lombard to Seventh, left on Seventh to Pemberton, turn right and walk through Cianfrani Park to Eighth and Fitzwater, SW corner, in front of Columbus Hall.

[Text forthcoming]

Continue to the left down Eighth Street, cross Christian Street to Montrose, turn left to St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi Church/Mario Lanza Museum, 700 block Montrose St.

Heading to the turn of the 20th century, we’re also heading into the heart of the Italian community of Philadelphia. At 814 S. Eighth is the office of L’Opinione and Il Progresso, two of the many Italian language newspapers published right here.

Stop B: St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi

[Text forthcoming]

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January 1, 1900, South Philadelphia

“Now we must make them Italians”:
Father Antonio Isolero forges a new people in America

Tour begins: Columbus Hall, west side Eighth Street below Fitzwater

Stop A: Columbus Hall

[Text forthcoming]
Return to Eighth Street and turn right. Walk to Christian and turn left, stop part way up block at Café Little

**Stop C: Café Little, with Fiorella’s Sausage in view**

Now with a sense of the layering of cultures, we advance into contemporary city, thinking about the ways immigrants continue to adapt and therefore remake the city. A wonderful example of this is the ‘Vietnamese Hoagie’ or Bahn Mi. In the Vietnamese cafes around here, Bahn Mi is served on local bread from Italian bakeries, with similar ingredients—pork meat, onion, peppers—as the famous Italian Hoagie. Here is one of the best purveyors, using local bread and ingredients. Across the street, the fourth generation of Fiorellas still make their sausage in their vintage 1892 store.

Continue west on Christian to Ninth Street and into the “Italian Market.”

**Stop D: In the Italian Market**

Morley on the Italian Market: vintage 1916. The 9th Street Market is one of the nation’s oldest open-air markets, dating to the turn of the 20th century when Italian immigrants sold fruit, vegetables, and meats from carts and stands. Although commonly referred as the “Italian Market,” for much of the 20th century Jewish vendors sell fabrics and household items, and eggs and poultry from Jewish farm communities in Southern New Jersey. Though a handful of long-time Italian American-owned family businesses still dominate, the market boasts a growing number of Southeast Asian and Mexican shops.
Credits

These tours are sponsored by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and based on information gathered on PhilaPlace.org, the Historical Society’s interactive website where visitors can explore the history, cultures, and architecture of Philadelphia’s neighborhoods. To learn more about PhilaPlace, visit philaplace.org.

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About Nathaniel Popkin

Nathaniel Popkin is a writer of the American urban experience. According to Tom Sugrue of the University of Pennsylvania, Popkin is “a visionary with two feet on the ground, a poet who finds verse in the everyday.” Philadelphia Inquirer book critic Carlin Romano calls Popkin’s Song of the City (Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002) “exquisitely literary...electric.” In Metropolitan Philadelphia: Living in the Presence of the Past, historian Steve Conn writes that Song of the City is “the finest book about contemporary Philadelphia I have come across.” In response to The Possible City (Camino, 2008) the novelist Beth Kephart calls Popkin’s writing “profoundly beautiful, often surprising.”

Popkin is currently the senior writer for the documentary film series “Philadelphia: The Great Experiment,” editorial director for Hidden City Philadelphia, and the editor of Hidden City, Dreams Revealed, a prospective work to be published by Paul Dry Books about the experience and impact of the Hidden City festival. He is currently at work on I Will Flood You, a novel about the tragic death of the painter John Lewis Krimmel. In 2009, Popkin was named a fellow by the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.