

A History of Rittenhouse Square: From Penn's Plan to the Millennium

The following highlights in the history of Center City's beloved "town common," the singular Rittenhouse Square, have been summarized by Bonnie Eisenfeld mainly from the book The Perfect Square, by Rittenhouse Square denizen Nancy Heinzen. Published in 2009 by Temple University Press, The Perfect Square is available on Amazon and at the Free Library's Philadelphia City Institute branch on Rittenhouse Square. Its 170 pages, plus Notes and Index, bound in the shape of—what else?—a perfect square, are packed with illustrations and fascinating historical facts. Heinzen was a teacher and counselor in the Philadelphia School District and has been active as a volunteer and board member with Friends of Rittenhouse Square, CCRA, Rittenhouse Flower Market and Friends of Curtis Institute.

17th century to 19th century: From plan to residential neighborhood

William Penn's 1681 plan for Philadelphia included five squares, one in the center of town and one in each of the four corners. The Southwest Square was in a forest known as Governor's Woods, the Penn family's private property. In the late 1820s, brickmakers and other workers—the first residents of the neighborhood—called it Goosetown because geese roamed there. In 1825, four of the squares were renamed for prominent Americans—the Southwest Square in honor of David Rittenhouse, an

astronomer, clockmaker, and first director of the U.S. Mint. In 1834 streets and churches were added around the square. Philip Physick, who built a Greek revival mansion, was the first gentleman to purchase properties in this neighborhood. Other prominent men followed, including John Hare Powel, James Harper, Henry Cohen and Francis Drexel.

Turn of the 20th century: Rittenhouse Square becomes a fashionable neighborhood

In 1853 Rittenhouse Square was enclosed by an iron fence; fountains and gas lamps appeared. Grass was trimmed and walks were cleaned. Over the next few years, upper class families built mansions and the Church of the Holy Trinity. Rittenhouse Square developed a prestigious reputation. Soon after the end of the 19th century the Rittenhouse Square Improvement Association was formed, and Paul Philippe Cret was selected to create the landscape design. In 1914, the ladies of the Square established the Rittenhouse Flower Market for Children's Charities, which continues annually to this day.

Early 20th century: Rittenhouse Square grows vertically

Developers demolished some of the old mansions and constructed apartment buildings around Rittenhouse Square. The first two high-rise buildings were 1830 South Rittenhouse Square (1916) and The Wellington (originally

a hotel). The most fashionable and expensive residential hotel, The Barclay, built in 1929, had a ballroom popular with debutantes. During the 1920s, five more tall apartment buildings rose around the Square. Residents included both established families and the newly affluent.

Mansions preserved and repurposed: Some of the remaining mansions were preserved and put to other uses, such as private clubs, institutions and offices. Still in existence are the Philopatrian Society (the Stotesbury mansion), the Ethical Society, the Curtis Institute (the Drexel mansion) and the Art Alliance (the Wetherill mansion). The Fell-Van Rensselaer mansion (now Anthropologie) became the home of the Pennsylvania Athletic Club; the Alison Building (now residences and Barnes and Noble) became the offices of the Presbyterian Ministers' Fund for Life Insurance; and James Harper's mansion (now Barney's at 10 Rittenhouse Square) became the Rittenhouse Club. The McIlhenny mansion, and 1804 S. Rittenhouse Square (designed by Frank Furness and now a dental office), remained private residences.

Rittenhouse Square becomes a cultural center: The new apartment residents were interested in educational, artistic and cultural activities—museums, libraries, concerts, theater and lectures. Heinzen writes, "As mansion dwellers moved to the country, the millionaire in the top hat was increasingly replaced as the icon of Rittenhouse Square



1830 S. Rittenhouse Square: Built in 1913, this Beaux Arts-style apartment building was the first high-rise on Rittenhouse Square. All photos by Bonnie Eisenfeld.



Barney's at 10 Rittenhouse: Built in 1901 in the Beaux Arts style, James Harper's mansion—whose facade has been preserved—later became the Rittenhouse Club.



Curtis Institute of Music: 1726 Locust St. Originally the Drexel Mansion, built in 1894, notable for its Romanesque and Renaissance architectural details.

by the earnest young music student with the violin case.” Statues were added to the Square, including “Billy” the goat, which was not universally appreciated at the time but became very popular with children. In 1932 the first Clothesline Art Exhibit was held in Rittenhouse Square. The Center City Residents’ Association (CCRA) was formed in 1946. In 1950 a development firm sought to build a parking garage underneath Rittenhouse Square, which CCRA opposed. At a meeting



Rittenhouse Plaza: A 1920s high-rise, Art Deco-style, 19th & Walnut. Garden entrance faces Walnut St.

called by CCRA on June 19, 1950, 500 neighbors gathered at the YWCA to express their opposition; two days later the City announced that the garage proposal was dead.

Mid-20th century: Rittenhouse Square modernized

In the 1950s, developers built the first modern apartments on the Square—the Savoy, the Claridge and 220 West

Rittenhouse Square. In 1961 the Dorchester was built. To prepare for America’s Bicentennial, Friends of Rittenhouse Square was founded in 1976, providing funds for plantings, new lighting, and other improvements, and getting Rittenhouse Square listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Late 20th century: Rittenhouse Square celebrated and maintained

In 1984, Friends of Rittenhouse Square raised \$50,000 with the first Ball on the Square. Tickets ranged from \$150 to \$1,000 per couple. New park benches were installed with plaques commemorating the donors. The Millennium was celebrated by Luminaire in the Square on December 31, 1999. In 2010, the American Planning Association named Rittenhouse Square one of the top 10 Great Public Spaces in the U.S., citing its beautiful and inviting public space; vibrant neighborhood; use for ceremonies and festivals, walking dogs and eating lunch; variety of people and buildings; accessibility by public transportation or walking; and long-standing community preservation efforts.

CCStreetwise

A Tale of Three Alleys

By Bill West

Go to Fittler Square. Look west. You’ll see three alleys leading down to the park by the Schuylkill River. The 2400 blocks of Panama, Delancey, and Cypress. They can talk to us about what it’s like to be an alley in Philadelphia.

Let’s start with Panama Street. This is an old street that has seen hard use and survived in very good shape. Its scars (have a look at the tree behind the dog walker) should be seen as badges of honor. I don’t want to turn Philadelphia into Disneyland.

I think this is one of the most beautiful streets in Philadelphia. On my rating scale (see *Center City Quarterly*, Fall 2015, p. 1), I give it an A. I choose not to see its flaws, and it sparks joy. Make that an A+.

Next is Delancey. A very different block from Panama, with a lovely mix of brick and Mediterranean houses. Don’t know how to improve it. It’s been on my basic running route for many years, and I’ve watched the

work that got it to where it is. Another A.

Ah, Cypress. There are some very good elements here, but the block hasn’t gelled. The other two alleys hold you, but this one lets the space bleed away on the north side, over the garage gates.

I think part of the problem is that the alley is so wide. The gates simply aren’t tall enough to provide closure.

And there are no sidewalks. Well, there are some remnants, but mainly this alley is wall-to-wall asphalt. I feel adrift, and it’s not a wine-dark sea. We need a little poetry here.

What to do? Sidewalks would be nice; they would help define the space. But they would be expensive. Strings of LED lights over the parking spaces on the north side would provide an attractive visual closure, at least at night.

On the south side, have a look at the building with the red-painted brick. Call Isaiah Zagar



The 2400 block of Panama Street.

and get a mural. One with lots of mirror shards. The light at this end is dead.

Also, the buildings on the south side might want to consider some Mediterranean pastels for their facades, which are actually quite nice in their current shades of off-white. But the block needs something. (The house facing the park, on the south side of the alley, has already made a nice start in this regard.)

Bury the utility wires. Maybe some trees? There are a few, but not enough to pull the block together.

2400 Cypress is a clean utilitarian alley. There are no derelict structures. I’ll give it a B.