NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT
PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM ON CD (MS WORD FORMAT)

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1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE (must comply with a Board of Revision of Taxes address)

Street address: **5129-5135 Frankford Avenue**

Postal code: **19124** Councilmanic District: **7th District**

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2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: **Penn Fruit Supermarket**

Common Name: **Holiday Thriftway Supermarket**

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3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

☒ Building ☐ Structure ☐ Site ☐ Object

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4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

Condition: ☐ excellent ☒ good ☐ fair ☐ poor ☐ ruins

Occupancy: ☒ occupied ☐ vacant ☐ under construction ☐ unknown

Current use: Retail

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5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

SEE ATTACHED

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6. DESCRIPTION

SEE ATTACHED

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7. SIGNIFICANCE

Period of Significance (from year to year): **1955-c.1975**

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: **1955**

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: **George Neff**

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan:

Original owner: **Penn Fruit Company**

Other significant persons:

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

☒ (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,

☐ (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,

☒ (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,

☒ (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,

☐ (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,

☐ (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,

☐ (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,

☐ (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,

☐ (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or

☒ (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

SEE ATTACHED

9. NOMINATOR

Name with Title: **Benjamin Leech, consultant**

Email: **bentleech@gmail.com**

Organization: **Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia**

Date: **March 23, 2016**

Street Address: **1608 Walnut Street, Suite 804**

Telephone: **(215) 546-1146**

City, State, and Postal Code: **Philadelphia, PA 19103**

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: 28 March 2016

☑ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete Date: 28 April 2016

Date of Notice Issuance: 29 April 2016

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: Rite Aid of Pennsylvania

Address: PO Box 3165

City: Harrisburg State: PA Postal Code: 17105

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: 15 June 2016

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

☐ Designated ☐ Rejected

5. Boundary Description

Situate on the southeast side of Frankford Avenue (sixty-five feet wide) and the southwest side of Pratt Avenue (fifty feet wide); thence extending along the said side of Pratt Street South forty-four degrees ten minutes eight seconds East three hundred forty-seven feet seven-eighths of an inch to the Northwest side of Darrah Street (fifty feet wide); thence extending along the said side of Darrah Street South forty-five degrees six minutes twelve seconds West one hundred and forty-three feet one eighth of an inch to a point, a bend in said Darrah Street; and thence extending along the said side of Darrah Street South thirty-seven degrees eight minutes eleven seconds West thirty-two feet six and one-quarter inches to a point (which point is two hundred five feet Northeast from the Northeast side of Dyre Street (fifty feet wide); thence extending North fifty-two degrees fifty-one minutes forty-nine seconds West, partly through the center of a party wall eight-seven feet three eighths of an inch to a point; thence extending South forty-one degrees fifty-six minutes fifty-six seconds West thirty-four feet seven and seven-eighths inches to a point; thence extending North thirty-nine degrees twenty-eight minutes four seconds West two-hundred eighty-seven feet five and three-fourths inches to a point on the Southeast side of said Frankford Avenue (sixth-five feet wide); thence extending along the same North fifty degrees thirty-one minutes fifty-six seconds East two hundred feet to the first mentioned point and place of beginning.

6. Description

The former Penn Fruit Company supermarket at 5129-35 Frankford Avenue is an arch-roofed, masonry, steel and glass structure designed by architect George Neff and completed in 1955. It occupies a large lot on the southeastern corner of Frankford Avenue and Pratt Street, directly opposite the Frankford Transportation Center (the northern terminus of SEPTA's Market-Frankford El) in the Frankford neighborhood of Northeast Philadelphia. The building is sited diagonally on its lot. Its main arch-roofed volume is oriented north-south, surrounded on three sides by attached one- and two-story, flat-roofed wings. Four attached retail storefronts face Frankford Avenue along the building's northwest elevation; these occupy the same lot and were designed and constructed in conjunction with the supermarket. The parcel also includes a surface parking lot to the rear (southeast) of the building. Currently operating as a Holiday Thriftway supermarket, the building has been minimally altered from its original design and retains a high degree of architectural integrity. Its distinctive arch-roofed form and glass front were characteristic features of Penn Fruit supermarkets constructed in the 1950s and 1960s, an era in which the company embraced modern architecture and the barrel roof as core elements of its corporate identity.

The building's primary facade is a glass curtain wall that exposes the full interior volume of the supermarket to view from the street [Fig. 1]. This glass wall sits on a low stone-faced foundation and rises the full 33-foot height and 100-foot width of the main arch span, divided by steel muntins into three rows and eleven bays of fixed glass panes. The majority of these window units are further divided with narrower muntins into an irregular pattern of half- and quarter-pane units, but these are later modifications. The arched roofline is capped by a narrow cement cornice. To the east of the arch span, a one-story, flat-roofed vestibule houses the supermarket's main entrance, which is accessed from the east. This vestibule's north facade is in plane with the adjacent arched window span, but features a projecting stone-faced planter at its base and a projecting cornice that extends across one bay of arch [Fig. 2]. The planter wall follows a wavy serpentine path and is capped in grey stone. Behind the planter, six square piers

support the vestibule roof and divide its north facade into five window bays. These piers are painted in a repeating sequence of green, orange and yellow—a color scheme continued throughout the supermarket interior and possibly original to the building's design.[1] A contemporary plastic box sign stands on the roof above the vestibule in the approximate location of the building's original Penn Fruit signage.

At the building's northeast corner, the vestibule roof projects outward in a wedge-shaped prow to form a flat canopy over the main entrance, which features two automatic single-leaf glass swing doors (one entrance, one exit) on the vestibule's east side [Figs. 3-4]. The canopy area continues along the east elevation for half the depth of the building, and is partially enclosed by a non-original metal security fence. Due south of the glass entry vestibule is a decorative one-story panel of rough-faced multi-hued stone; the remainder of the building's east side is utilitarian in character and clad in brown and tan brick. The building's rear half rises two stories, with an offset second-story band of ribbon windows constituting the only fenestration [Fig. 5]. A one-story loading dock continues southward behind the two-story block, wrapping the southeast corner of the building and extending the full width of the rear (southeast) elevation [Fig. 6].

The west side of the building incorporates an attached row of one-story, flat-roofed retail spaces that face northwest along Frankford Avenue [Fig. 7]. A continuous projecting slab cornice runs the length of the four-unit row and makes a short return around the northwest corner, extending into a canopy across one bay of the supermarket's north facade. This northwest corner is also marked by a stone-clad end wall and a projecting planter at the base of the building [Fig. 8]. The retail storefronts, which originally housed a men's shop, a ladies apparel salon, a "five-and-dime" variety store, and a dry-cleaner, are currently leased to a tax preparation agency, a fast-food restaurant, a beauty supply store, and a cell-phone store.[2] The

[1] No original color photographs or color descriptions of the building have been located, but historic black-and-white photos appear to depict a three-tone color scheme [see Fig. 11]. Descriptions of other contemporary Penn Fruit locations include references to "rainbow-colored" interiors, and the same green, orange and yellow tones exist in what appear to be original fixtures and finishes inside the supermarket.
[2] "Penn Fruit Store Opens Tomorrow," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, April 12, 1955.

northernmost storefront was originally a second supermarket entrance, but has since been subdivided into a separate unit. The storefronts all feature contemporary signage and replacement glazing, though original stone-clad foundation walls survive beneath three of the four units' storefront windows. Stone-clad end walls bracket the row. Except for a short stone return around its western corner, the building's southwest elevation is a blank one-story brick wall [Figs. 9-10].

Figure 1: Primary (north) elevation, looking south from the intersection of Frankford Avenue and Pratt Street.

Figure 2: North elevation detail.

Figure 3: Northeast vestibule entrance

Figure 4: Northeast vestibule entrance detail

Figure 5: East elevation

Figure 6: Rear (southeast elevation) loading docks.

Figure 7: Attached storefronts along Frankford Avenue (northwest) elevation.

Figure 8: Altered northwest corner detail (originally a second supermarket entrance).

Figure 9: West corner detail and southwest elevation

Figure 10: Rear southwest elevation.

Figure 11: Original Penn Fruit signage at northeast vestibule, c. 1959.
http://www.phillyhistory.org/PhotoArchive/Detail.aspx?assetId=115538

Figure 12: North elevation detail, c. 1959. http://www.phillyhistory.org/PhotoArchive/Detail.aspx?assetId=115535

7. Significance

The glass-fronted, arch-roofed former Penn Fruit Company supermarket at 5129-35 Frankford Avenue is a rare surviving example of an architectural style and building type that spread rapidly across the American landscape in the decades following World War II. As both an architectural and socioeconomic phenomenon, the mid-twentieth-century modern supermarket was a ubiquitous and conspicuous symbol of an ascendant consumer culture fueled by mass production, mass consumption, suburbanization, and the proliferation of the automobile. Penn Fruit was one of the first companies in Philadelphia to adopt the supermarket business model in the 1930s, and was one of the earliest supermarket chains in America to embrace modernist architecture as a core element of its corporate identity. Though approximately four dozen former Penn Fruit supermarket structures still stand across the greater Philadelphia region, including at least nineteen in Philadelphia proper, the vast majority have been heavily altered and no longer retain significant architectural character.[3] In contrast, the Frankford Penn Fruit supermarket survives today in remarkably intact condition. Its barrel-roof form, "open-front" glass facade, expressive color scheme, and other period-characteristic features are reflective of an architectural style, now commonly described as "roadside modern" or "exaggerated modern," that emerged in tandem with new development patterns and new automobile-oriented building types like shopping centers, diners, gas stations, and motels in the 1950s and 1960s.[4] As an architectural manifestation of production and consumption patterns that transformed daily life in the postwar era, this intact midcentury modern supermarket structure merits recognition and listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places by meeting the following criteria established in Philadelphia's Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 14-1004 (1):

(a) Has significant character, interest, or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth, or nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past;

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[3] http://joshaustin610.blogspot.com/2014/03/penn-fruit-pa-nj-de.html

[4] Liebs, Chester. *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture.* Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1985, pp. 59-64.

(c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style;

(d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen;

and

(j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social, or historical heritage of the community.

A brief history of supermarket architecture

Just as eighteenth-century market shambles and nineteenth-century market houses were fixtures of daily life and the urban built environment in their respective eras, the supermarket in postwar American society was (and largely remains) the primary architectural symbol of a basic socio-economic prerequisite: public access to food. Broadly defined, supermarkets are large, self-service retail stores that sell a wide variety of foods and household goods (produce, groceries, meats, frozen foods, etc.) under one roof, with a single range of checkout lines and usually with dedicated on-site parking.[5] In both form and function, the supermarket evolved in fits and starts from a number of antecedents: the public market house, the specialty grocer, the department store, the "self-service" combination store, the "drive-in" shopping center, etc. Though some early examples date to the 1920s, supermarkets first appeared in most American cities in the 1930s, when the disruptive effects of the Great Depression upended established consumer patterns and led to new strategies in food retailing. At that time, the vast majority of existing grocery stores occupied small (500-600 square-foot) shopfronts located along traditional commercial corridors or within dense mixed-use neighborhoods. By expanding the range of products offered, by purchasing merchandise in bulk, and by relying more on sales volume than price margin to stay profitable, upstart supermarkets offered significantly lower

[5] Zimmerman, M.M. *The Super Market: A Revolution in Distribution.* New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1955, p. 18; Mayo, James. *The American Grocery Store: The Business Evolution of an Architectural Space*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993, p. 140.

prices than an average grocery store and were typically ten or even twenty times their size.[6] Initially dismissed by skeptics as a fleeting and unsustainable gimmick, supermarkets instead emerged from the Great Depression as an established industry whose exponential growth--measured both in raw volume and market share—continued unabated for the next three decades. Less than 100 supermarkets existed nationwide in 1934; just two years later, there were more than 1,000, and by 1946 more than 10,000. By 1955, supermarkets were responsible for more than 60% of the national food trade.[7] Over the same quarter-century, the supermarket also evolved from a symbol of novelty and thrift into a sophisticated icon of technological and social progress, consumer choice, and capitalist abundance. This transformation was accompanied by a corresponding evolution in supermarket architecture; not only in the size of supermarket buildings, but in their location, site orientation, structural characteristics, and style.

Many of the first experiments in supermarket retailing were makeshift in nature; King Kullen, generally credited as the first supermarket chain on the East Coast, operated mainly out of converted warehouses, garages, and factories.[8] But early on, other supermarket pioneers commissioned architect-designed, purpose-built new structures, even during the depths of the Depression. The first appearance of a supermarket in an architectural journal occurred as early as 1931 (an A&P in Westwood, California by architect Allen G. Siple was featured in *Architectural Concrete*), and in 1934 *Architectural Record* featured a four-page spread on architect B. Sumner Gruzen's groundbreaking Big Bear supermarket and shopping center in Jersey City, New Jersey.[9] Other notable architects who designed early supermarkets included Albert Kahn (Jack Cinnamon's Market, Highland Park, Michigan, 1935) and Stiles Clements, who

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[6] Zimmerman, p. 17

[7] Zimmerman, p. 54; Liebs, Chester H. *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1985, p. 131.

[8] Longstreth, Richard. *The Drive-In, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999, p. 121; Zimmerman, p. 35ff.

[9] "Supermarket for Atlantic & Pacific in Westwood, Calif.," *Architectural Concrete,* Vol. 3, Issue 4, 1931, pp. 6-8; Gruzen, B. Sumner. "Automobile Shopping Centers," *Architectural Record,* July 1934, pp. 43-46.

oversaw two major buildings campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s for California-based Ralph's Grocery Company.[10]

Though a variety of architectural styles embellished early supermarket buildings, one design trend came to epitomize the industry by the late 1930s. Streamline Moderne, a style characterized by smooth surfaces, rounded corners, exaggerated horizontal and vertical lines, architecturally-integrated signage, and modern materials like structural glass, porcelain enameled, glass blocks, chrome, and neon, dominated commercial architecture in general during the Great Depression. New Deal initiatives like the Federal Housing Administration's "Modernize Main Street" program incentivized business owners to remodel struggling commercial corridors in an effort to both stimulate the manufacturing and construction fields and to create the appearance of prosperity. Streamline Moderne stood for technological progress, efficiency, and optimism, and from one perspective, the moderne supermarket was simply a logical adaptation of design tropes being applied opportunistically to businesses of all sizes and types—clothing stores, restaurants, movie theaters, pharmacies, etc. An influential 1935 design competition sponsored by glassmaker Libbey-Owens-Ford collected over three thousand entries, the vast majority in a streamlined style, for the conceptual redesign of four "everyday" Main Street business types—a drug store, a clothing store, a gas station, and a grocery store (itself evidence that, while the supermarket was gaining in popularity, it had not yet supplanted the ubiquity of the traditional grocer).

But from another perspective, the industry's embrace of streamlining presaged a more significant shift in the maturation of the supermarket as a cultural phenomenon. Led especially by West Coast architects like Stiles Clement, streamline moderne supermarkets of the late 1930s and early 1940s began to take more sculptural form, with exaggerated sign towers, elaborate entrances and canopies, and more unified treatment of multiple facades. Shedding the image of a makeshift clearinghouse catering solely to bargain-hunters, the modern

[10] Liebs, p. 129; Longstreth, pp. 87, 116-120.

supermarket began to emerge as an iconic, progressive new building type tailored to changing consumer habits and expectations [Figs. 13-14].

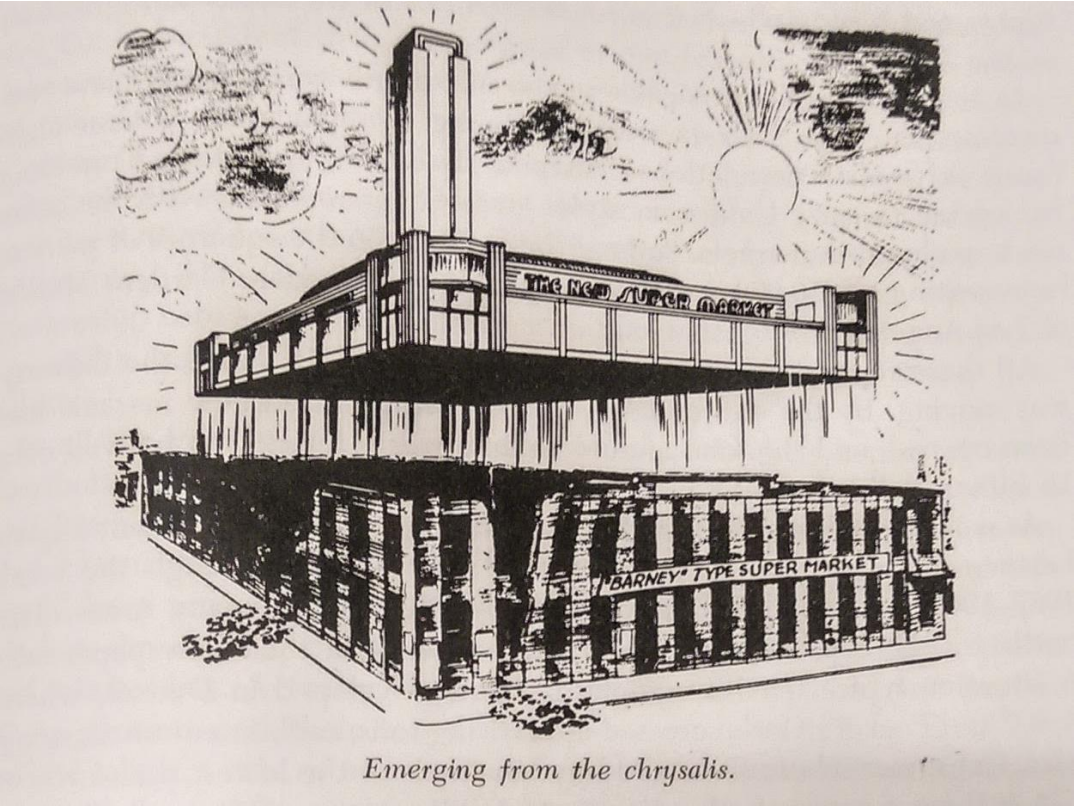

Figure 13: A prototypical Art Moderne supermarket illustrates the emergence of a purpose-built building type in the 1930s. (M.M. Zimmerman, The Super Market: A Revolution in Distribution*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1955, p. 121.*

Figure 14: Ralph's Grocery Company, Crenshaw Boulevard, Los Angeles, 1939-1940, Stiles Clement, architect. Note the arched roof partially concealed behind the streamline moderne façade. (Richard Longstreth, The Drive-In, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999, p. 111.*

The automobile drove much of this transformation: not only did supermarkets locate in areas where customers could conveniently drive, but the buildings themselves, usually freestanding and surrounded on one or more sides by parking, were designed to be conspicuous and attractive to passing motorists. Other technologies were also transforming American shopping habits: between 1926 and 1936, refrigerator ownership increased tenfold to almost two million home units. Shopping daily for perishables was no longer a necessity, and consumers began buying more groceries per visit. Finally, supermarkets could stock a far wider variety of goods at a time when competing food brands were flooding the market with new products and packaging methods.[11] By the 1940s, new supermarkets routinely topped 12,000 square feet, with stores adding frozen foods, bakeries, pharmacies, and other new departments, expanding aisle widths to accommodate grocery carts, and providing more space for elaborate product displays.[12]

As one of the few commercial institutions to survive the Great Depression unscathed, the supermarket industry's exceptional growth in the 1930s and 1940s continued unabated in the decade following World War II. America's rapid postwar suburbanization, fueled by increased car ownership, aggressive highway construction, and federal housing policies that incentivized low-density, proscriptive zoning, further tipped the economic scales in favor of supermarkets. The neighborhood shopping center became a standard feature in new suburban developments, and the supermarket became a standard feature of the suburban shopping center.[13] At the same time, supermarket owners and architects redoubled their efforts to attract shoppers with stores designed to symbolize progress, efficiency, convenience, and excitement. With streamline moderne now considered out-of-date, a new mode of modern architecture emerged. The "open front" or "visual front," whereby large expanses of glass replaced solid exterior walls, dominated commercial architecture of all types in the 1950s, supermarkets

[11] Mayo, pp. 130-133.
[12] Zimmerman, p. 126.
[13] Gruen, Victor. "What the Supermarket Means to the Center...and Vice Versa," *Chain Store Age*, May 1955, p. 39.

included.[14] Unconventional massing, structural expressionism, and integrated graphics were other hallmarks of contemporary design that found particular expression in the postwar supermarket. In a suburban landscape increasingly filled with competing supermarket chains, "brand identity" was of paramount concern, and architecture was a powerful means by which companies sought to differentiate themselves and outshine their competitors.

In this context, the Penn Fruit Company was one of the first supermarket chains to embrace a particular form of structural expressionism that would come to characterize much postwar supermarket design: the clear-span arch. Along with other "exaggerated modern" tropes like the folded roof, the canted roof, and the scalloped roof, variations on the arched-roof form proliferated across the country in the 1950s and 1960s.[15] Constructed variously in steel, concrete, and laminated wood, the clear-span arch provided flexible, column-free interior space and a visually striking exterior profile that added a pronounced verticality to an otherwise low-slung, horizontal program. Arched roofs had long been a staple in the design of train sheds, market houses, warehouses, and other utilitarian structures of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and many 1930s-era streamline moderne supermarkets even featured arched roofs concealed behind flat-topped exterior shells [Fig. 14]. But the full architectural expression of the arch-roofed form, especially when paired with a full-height open front, was an innovation uniquely characteristic of the postwar era.

No single architect, company, or geographic region can lay sole claim to the arch-roofed supermarket, which appears to have evolved along parallel tracks in various regions of the country in the early-to-mid 1950s. On a national scale, the type is perhaps most closely associated with the Safeway Company, which constructed hundreds of its arch-roofed, glass-fronted "Marina-style" stores (named after a 1959 prototype designed by Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons for the Marina district in San Francisco) across the country in the 1960s [Fig 26].[16] But

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[14] Treu, Martin. *Signs, Streets, and Storefronts: A History of Architecture and Graphics Along America's Commercial Corridors.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, p. 162ff.
[15] Calak, Thomas. "The Big Change in Store Fronts," *Progressive Grocer*, December 1960, p. 78.
[16] Allen, Peter. *A Space for Living: Region and Nature in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1939-1969* (doctoral thesis), University of California, Berkeley, 2009, p. 187.

Safeway's association with this iconic roofline was preceded by more than a decade of similar experiments by other architects and other supermarket chains, including the Penn Fruit Company in Philadelphia.

Penn Fruit and the rise of the modern supermarket in Philadelphia

Penn Fruit was founded by Russian-born brothers Morris and Isaac Kaplan and their friend Samuel Cooke, who opened their first produce stand at 52nd and Market Streets in 1927.[17] By 1933 the partners were running six markets specializing in fresh produce and seafood, including one extra-large store that also featured a bakery, delicatessen, poultry counter, and an assortment of dry goods. Penn Fruit was one of the first companies in Philadelphia to experiment with supermarket-style retailing, and by 1937 were operating six full-blown supermarkets across the city.[18] Though significantly fewer in number than established grocery giants like A&P and Acme, who were slow to abandon their hundreds of small neighborhood grocery stores, Penn Fruit's early embrace of the supermarket model drew national attention. At the height of its success in the 1950s, Penn Fruit averaged the highest per-store sales figures of any supermarket chain in the country.[19]

Early on, the company recognized the importance of attractive, contemporary stores for attracting a large and loyal client base. In 1941 the company hired architect Stiles Clement, well-known for his Ralph's supermarket designs across Southern California, to construct a new 40,000-square-foot store at 69th and Chestnut Streets in suburban Upper Darby. Compared to a typical A&P, Acme, or Food Fair supermarket of the day, Penn Fruit's new design (which was billed with questionable accuracy as "America's Largest Food Market") was unlike anything else in Philadelphia. Though not as ornate or streamlined as some of Clement's earlier California designs, the store featured an expansive open front, a soaring sign tower, and in a first for Penn

[17] Cooke, James. "How Penn Fruit Checked Out," *Philadelphia Magazine*, July 1977.
[18] Zimmerman, p. 56.
[19] Zimmerman, p. 165.

Figure 15: Rendering of architect Stiles Clement's Upper Darby Penn Fruit supermarket. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, *Nov. 9, 1941.*

Figure 16: Lucky Supermarket, San Leandro, Calif., 1947, Raymond Loewy with Francis Constable. Architectural Forum, May 1948, p. 134.

Figure 17: Wynnewood Penn Fruit (1951), Wallace & Warner, architects. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, *May 17, 1951.*

Figure 18: Baltimore Pike Penn Fruit (1951), architect unknown. Delaware County Daily Times, *Sept. 18, 1951..*

Fruit and for Philadelphia, a prominent arched roofline [Fig. 15]. Promotional literature celebrating the store's grand opening attributed the novel design to the impending war effort: "When the defense program created a shortage of steel the original plans were altered and the beautifully arched ceiling, perhaps more arresting than the original would have been, resulted."[20] While the veracity of this explanation is unknown—many of Clement's earlier Ralph's supermarkets also featured similar clear-span arched roofs, albeit largely obscured from exterior view by enframing parapet walls—the new Upper Darby store clearly established a pattern for subsequent Penn Fruit supermarkets to follow and embellish. For historical context, it is worth noting that the Upper Darby Penn Fruit preceded a widely-praised Raymond Loewy prototype for Lucky's Supermarket in San Leandro, California, which featured a similar barrel-vault roof and pylon tower sign, by more than five years [Fig. 16].[21]

Figure 19: Old York Road and Windrim Avenues, Philadelphia, 1951, architect unknown. Jacob Stelman Collection, Athenaeum of Philadelphia

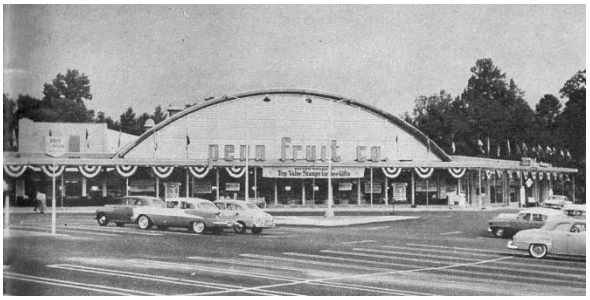

Figure 20: Wilmington, Delaware, c. 1955, architect unknown. https://www.flickr.com/photos/42444189@N04/8627720340

Figure 21: Glenolden, Pennsylvania, c. 1955, architect unknown. https://www.flickr.com/photos/42444189@N04/403189

[20] Penn Fruit Co. advertising supplement, *Philadelphia Record,* Nov. 9, 1941.
[21] "A Real Supermarket," *Architectural Forum,* May 1948, p. 134.

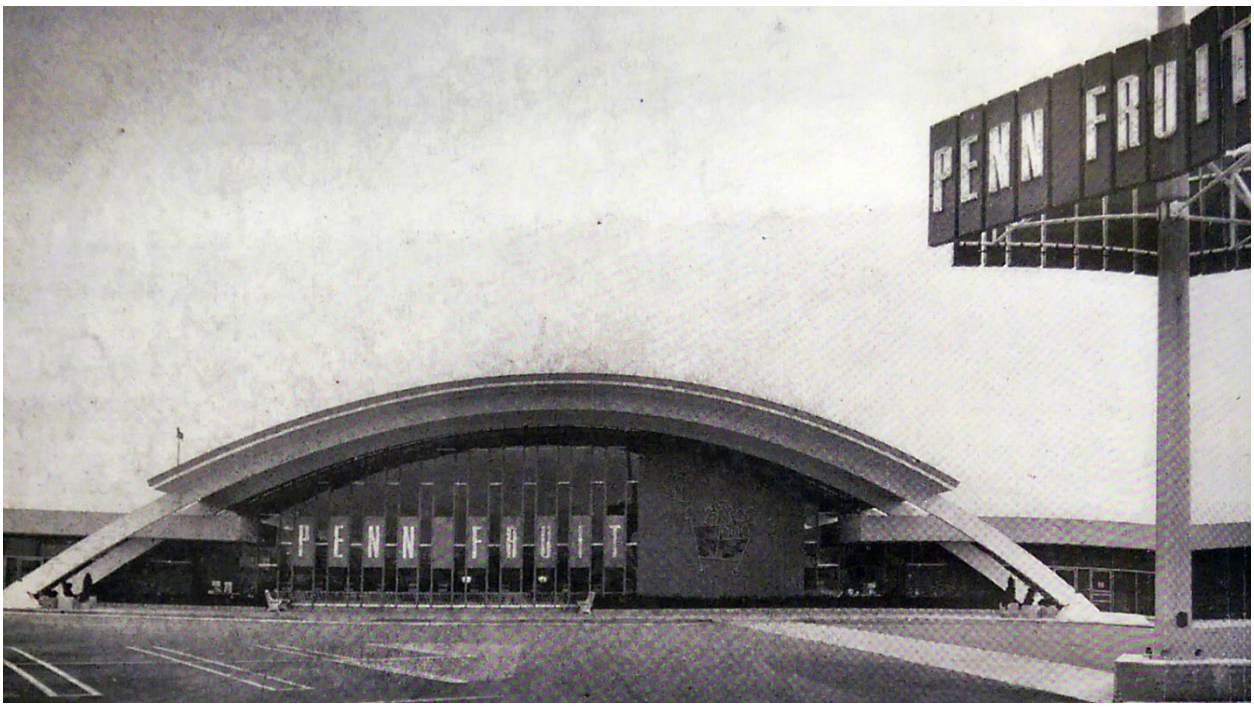

Figure 22: Victor Gruen's prototype suburban Penn Fruit design, Audubon, New Jersey, 1955. Progressive Architect, *July 1956, p. 100.*

Penn Fruit's transition to the arched roof was neither immediate nor uniform, but by the mid-1950s the majority of its new supermarkets featured various iterations of the distinctive roofline. The company tapped a wide range of locally prolific architects to design its Philadelphia and suburban stores, including George Neff, David Supowitz, Thalheimer & Weitz, Sabatino & Fishman, Wallace & Warner, and Kneedler, Mirick & Zantzinger, each of whom produced different variations on the basic arch-roofed form. Some oriented the barrel roof to face forward while others oriented it sideways; some stores featured tall pylon towers while others did not; some fronts were fully glazed while others were enclosed above the ground floor [Figs. 17-21]. But all shared an unmistakable family resemblance which eventually became a trademark of the company, and in 1954 Penn Fruit hired well-known commercial architect Victor Gruen to develop a codified prototype for a major expansion into suburban Pennsylvania, Delaware, New York, New Jersey, and Maryland.[22] Featuring exposed laminated wood trusses, a full-height open front, and elaborate signage and graphics, Gruen's design was

[22] "Commercial Buildings: Prototype Supermarket," *Progressive Architecture*, July 1956, pp. 100-105; Gruen, p. 35; "Huge Store Set for Audubon," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, Nov. 17, 1954.

the most contemporary, structurally expressive Penn Fruit yet, and it cemented the company's reputation for progressive modern architecture and design [Fig. 22]. Variation of Gruen's arched open-front design became standard for the company through the 1960s, clearly distinguishing Penn Fruit supermarkets from those of competing chains like A&P, Acme and Food Fair. Penn Fruit also invested heavily in contemporary interior design during this era, hiring the Philadelphia Museum of Art's design director Wanda Norstrom to develop eye-catching interior color schemes and commissioning custom-designed mosaics, sculptures, and store directories from prominent contemporary artists and designers.[23]

Penn Fruit was one of the first supermarket chains in the postwar period to fully embrace "exaggerated modern" architecture as a core element of its corporate identity, but it was by no means the only one exploring similar design trends. In 1953, for example, acclaimed California modernist A. Quincy Jones designed a King Cole supermarket in Whittier, California which featured a dramatic arched roof and a glazed open front very similar to Penn Fruit's nearly contemporaneous designs [Fig 23].[24] Two years later, a Foodland supermarket in Hawaii by Wimberly & Cook and a Purity supermarket in California by Chicago architect Harry Weese both also featured similar open fronts and arched roofs [Figs 24-25]. By the early 1960s, when the Safeway company was building hundreds of iterations of its 1959 Marina supermarket prototype across the country, the arched roof was a common and recognizable element of the modernist commercial vernacular [Figs. 26-27].[25]

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[23] "Penn Fruit Opens Market at Front and Cheltenham," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin,* Aug. 25, 1954.
[24] "Foodland Supermarket," *Architectural Record,* March 1955, pp. 170-172; "Prototype of Supermarket," *Progressive Architecture,* July 1955, p. 12.
[25] Calak, p. 78.

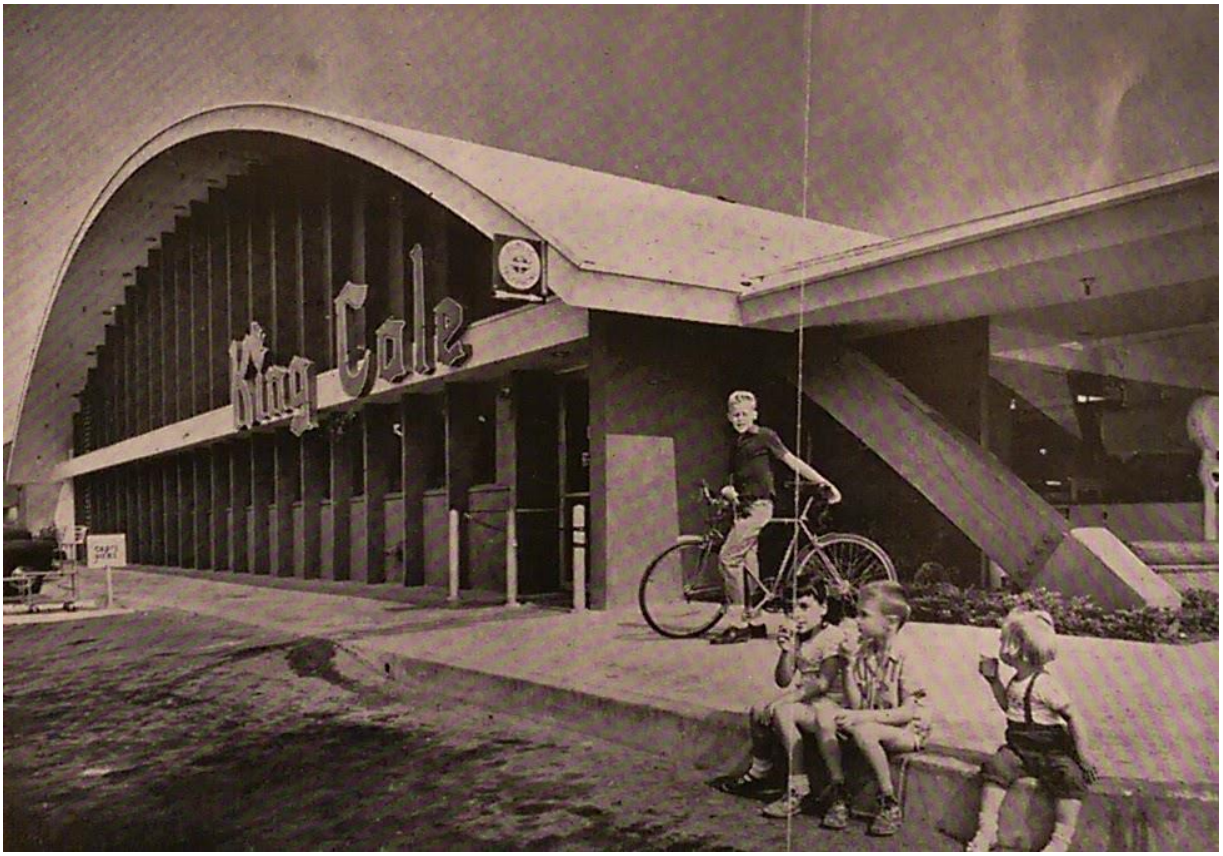

Figure 23: King Cole supermarket, Whittier, California, A. Quincy Jones, architect, 1953. Progressive Architecture, *August 1953, p. 99.*

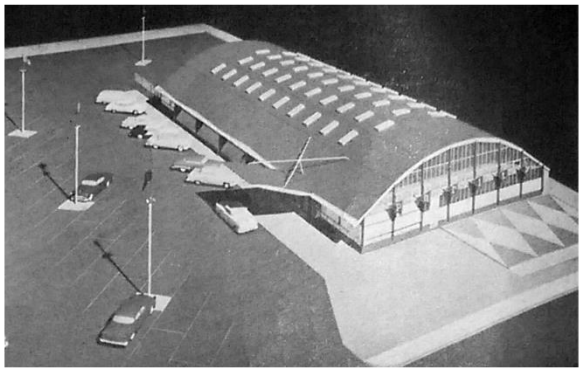

Figure 24 (L): Foodland Supermarket, Oahu, Hawaii, Wimberly & cook, architects, c.1954. Architectural Record, *March 1955, p. 171.*
Figure 25 (R): Purity Stores prototype supermarket, Harry Weese, architect, 1955. Progressive Architecture, *July 1955, p. 12.*

Figure 26: Marina Boulevard Safeway, San Francisco, California, Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons, architects, 1959. San Francisco Public Library, http://webbie1.sfpl.org/multimedia/sfphotos/AAC-7001.jpg

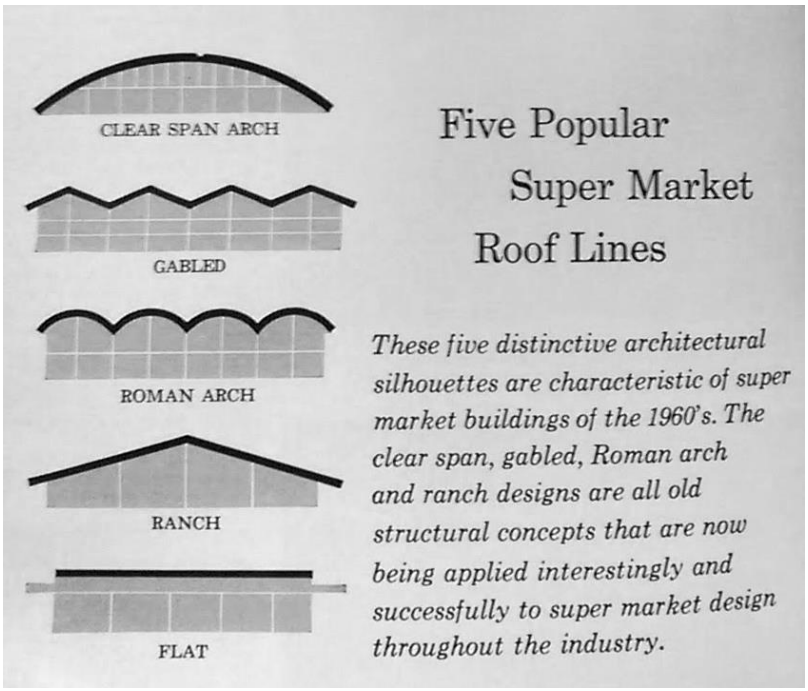

Figure 27: Progressive Grocer, *December 1960, p. 78.*

Figure 28: Frankford Penn Fruit, 2013. Photo courtesy of Peter Woodall.

Frankford's Penn Fruit in context

The Frankford Penn Fruit is a highly intact, highly representative example of the company's arch-roofed, open-front supermarkets of the mid-1950s [Fig. 28]. The store replaced a smaller, 25-year-old Penn Fruit market located two blocks away at Frankford Avenue and Bridge Street, evidence of the company's continued investment in older Philadelphia neighborhoods even as it expanded rapidly into the area's newer postwar suburbs. The new site, previously a gas station and large surface lot used for car rentals and seasonal Christmas tree sales, was large enough to accommodate the new 24,000-square-foot supermarket, four attached storefronts along Frankford Street, and parking for 200 cars. While not a true shopping center in the emerging suburban mold, the development emphasized the importance of on-site parking and complementary adjacent businesses in attracting supermarket patrons, even in an urban

context adjacent to public transportation. Second only to Penn Fruit's 69th Street location in its volume of passing traffic, the store was designed to attract 20,000 shoppers a week.[26]

The new supermarket—the company's 30th store—opened to local fanfare on April 13, 1955 [Figs 29-30]. Typical for the era, the grand opening was a promotional spectacle, with a ribbon-cutting ceremony presided over by Ethel Cooke, the 78-year-old mother of Penn Fruit president Samuel Cooke, and seventeen neighborhood housewives who were regulars at the older Penn Fruit store nearby. Prominent newspaper advertisements touted the new supermarket's features: "16 Moving Belt Checkouts! 200 Car Parking Lots! Parcel Pick-up Service! More Than 5,000 Fine Foods to Choose From! See the Modern Murals! See Pancho the Burro!"[27] Newspaper reports noted the store's "self-opening doors" and modern steel and glass construction.[28] With 15,000 square feet of selling area, the store was larger than average for the chain to date, slightly exceeding the industry-standard "ideal" supermarket size of the era.[29]

The store was designed by local architect George Neff (1907-1990), a Philadelphia native and Central High School graduate who studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania (B.Arch, 1929) and Harvard (M.Arch, 1932). After brief stints in the offices of Harry Sternfeld, Solomon Kaplan, and David Supowitz, Neff established his own practice in 1936, which remained active until his retirement in 1975.[30] His prolific and varied career included commissions for single-family homes, apartment buildings, public housing projects, public schools, recreation centers, fire stations, commercial storefronts, and larger retail and industrial buildings across the Philadelphia region.[31] Among his more notable surviving designs are the Swartz Furniture Building (1108 Chestnut Street, 1946), Stein's Flowers (7059 Frankford

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[26] Application for Zoning Permit #77242B, May 26, 1954; "Penn Fruit Starts Store in Frankford," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, July 3, 1954.
[27] Penn Fruit advertisement, *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, April 12, 1955.
[28] "New Penn Fruit Store Opens Tomorrow," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, April 12, 1955.
[29] *The Supermarket Industry Speaks: 8th Annual Report by the Members of the Super Market Institute.* Chicago: Super Market Institute, Inc., 1956, p. 16.
[30] Tatman, Sandra L. and Cooperman, Emily T. "Neff, George Warren (1907-1990)," *American Architects and Buildings Database*, http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org
[31] "Neff, George Warren (1907-1990)," *American Architects and Buildings Database*, http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org

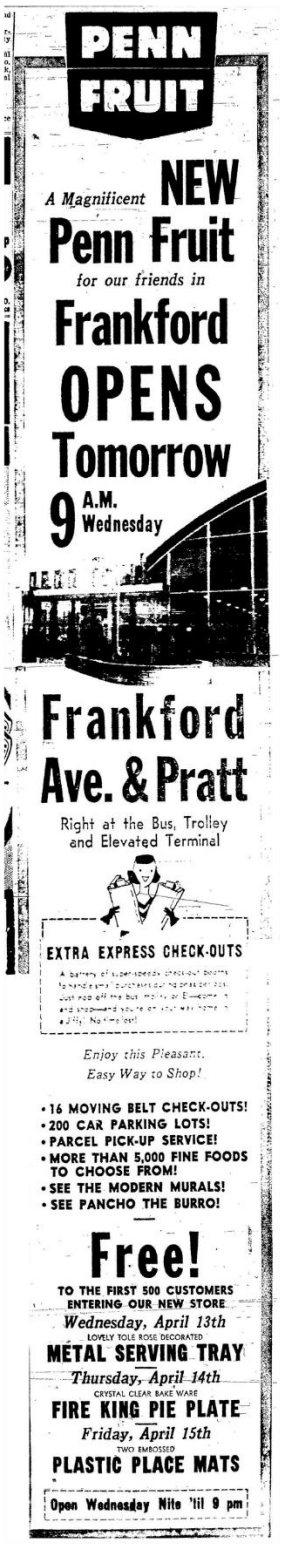

Figure 29 (L): Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, *April 12, 1955.*
Figure 30 (R): Frankford Gazette and Dispatch, *April 15, 1955.*

Avenue, 1950), the Jardel Recreation Center (1400 Cottman Avenue, 1953), and the Penn-Wynn Apartments (2201 Bryn Mawr Avenue, 1960).[32] Neff's association with Penn Fruit lasted for most of the 1950s and produced at least six known supermarket commissions.[33] His Frankford Avenue design was among the earliest Penn Fruits to combine the arched roof with a fully-glazed open front, perhaps influencing Victor Gruen's prototype design completed the following year. It is also interesting to note that the store was Penn Fruit's newest supermarket when a group of Safeway executives traveled from California to Philadelphia to tour Penn Fruit's operations, as recounted by former Penn Fruit executive James Cooke in a company history.[34] Though the Frankford location was not mentioned by name, it was more than likely included on their itinerary and may have helped to inspire Safeway's development of their own well-known "Marina-style" stores, which debuted four years later.

Penn Fruit continued to expand through the 1950s and 1960s, and at its height operated eighty stores across five Mid-Atlantic states. Much of its success was directly attributable to its early adoption of both the supermarket model and its cultivation of a progressive, fashionable image in an era when its main competitors were slow to modernize their operations. Unfortunately for Penn Fruit, the relative novelty of the supermarket began to erode in the 1960s and 1970s, as larger rivals A&P, Acme, and Food Fair successfully adopted and co-opted many of Penn Fruit's business practices and instigated a series of price wars that the smaller company struggled to endure.[35] At the same time, the exaggerated modern style in commercial architecture also began to fall from favor as more and more supermarkets and shopping centers began to crowd the built landscape. By the 1970s, the "environmental look," a more

[32] Midcentury Modern Architectural Resources Inventory, Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, http://www.preservationalliance.com/directory/mcmar/index.php
[33] No comprehensive inventory of Penn Fruit stores and their architects has yet been compiled, and the vast majority of known locations are currently unattributed. It is likely that these six represent just a fraction of Neff's work for Penn Fruit, which included suburban supermarkets in Springfield, Camp Hill, and Pennsauken, and Philadelphia supermarkets at Cottman/Bustleton and Erie/Castor, per various sources.
[34] Cooke, n.p.
[35] Ibid.

Figure 31 (top left): Roosevelt Mall, Cottman and Bustleton Avenues, Philadelphia. George Neff, architect, 1959, altered. Photo via Google Streetview.
Figure 32 (top right): South Philadelphia Shopping Center, 2419 S.24th Street, architect and date unknown, altered. Photo via https://www.flickr.com/photos/62355920@N00/3725329025
Figure 33 (middle left): City Line Shopping Center, 7630 City Ave., Philadelphia, architect and date unknown, altered. Photo via Google Streetview.
Figure 34 (middle right): Wynnewood Shopping Center, Wynnewood. Wallace & Warner, architects, 1951, altered (compare with Figure 17). Photo via https://www.flickr.com/photos/62355920@N00/285739983
Figure 35 (botton left): Glenolden, architect and date unknown, altered (compare with Figure 21). Photo via https://www.flickr.com/photos/62355920@N00/2977302478
Figure 36 (bottom right): Audubon, New Jersey, Victor Gruen, architect, 1955, altered (compare with Figure 22). Photo via https://www.flickr.com/photos/62355920@N00/6194104388

conservative, restrained style that emphasized traditional materials like stone, brick, and cedar shingles, had replaced exaggerated modernism as the industry's standard design mode.[36]

Penn Fruit's eventual bankruptcy in 1975, coupled with constantly changing trends in commercial architecture, have both taken a heavy toll on what was once a remarkable collection of modernist buildings. Today, the vast majority of former Penn Fruit locations have either been demolished or heavily modified, and this is especially true of the company's most characteristically modern designs—those that combined the clear-span arch with the full-height open front. Typical alterations have included the removal of canopies and cornices, the enclosing of open fronts, the installation of dropped ceilings, and the complete reconstruction of front facades, usually in a postmodern or neo-traditional style [Figs 31-36]. In contrast, the Frankford Penn Fruit has retained nearly all of its character-defining exterior features save its original Penn Fruit signage and has operated continuously as a supermarket since its construction, having converted to a Holiday Thriftway with minimal alterations following Penn Fruit's closure in the 1970s.[37]

Conclusion

The former Penn Fruit supermarket at 5129-35 Frankford Avenue is a significant local example of a both a building type and architectural style emblematic of profound changes in American society and consumer culture in the aftermath of the Great Depression and World War II. The ascendency of the supermarket as the normative mode of food distribution in America was both rapid and transformative: by the early 1960s, around 70% of all grocery shopping took place in a highly specialized retail setting that was essentially nonexistent a mere thirty years prior.[38] Where Americans went to shop, how they traveled there, what products they

[36] Liebs, p. 134.
[37] The exact date Penn Fruit vacated the property is currently unknown, as the company phased out its store closures over the span of a few years. Holiday/Thriftway installed the current signage in 1979, per Application for Zoning Permit #09491, Sept. 5, 1979.
[38] Liebs, p. 133.

purchased, and how much they spent: all were radically transformed by the supermarket. This paradigm shift coincided with the emergence of a new architectural style—exaggerated modernism—that reoriented the scale and character of commercial architecture to suit a new autocentric, suburbanized lifestyle. At the height of their architectural expression in the 1950s, supermarkets—as exemplified by the arch-roofed, open-front designs embraced by Penn Fruit—combined dramatic structural forms, modern materials, and eye-catching signage and graphics to create iconic new anchors of daily life. In its original design characteristics and in its current state of preservation, the Frankford Penn Fruit possesses significant character, interest, and value as part of the development of Philadelphia in the postwar era, exemplifies the legacy of the Penn Fruit Company as a major innovator in the supermarket industry, reflects the environment of the postwar era characterized by the popularity of exaggerated modernism, and embodies the distinguishing characteristics of the supermarket as building type uniquely emblematic of this era and style. The building therefore merits listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

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