

**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)

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

Street address: **1501-05 Fairmount Avenue**

Postal code: **19130** Councilmanic District: **5th**

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: **1501-05 Fairmount Avenue**

Common Name: **Overseas Motor Works**

3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Building

Structure

Site

Object

4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

Condition: excellent good fair poor ruins

Occupancy: occupied vacant under construction unknown

Current use: **Automotive repair**

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

SEE ATTACHED

6. DESCRIPTION

SEE ATTACHED

7. SIGNIFICANCE

SEE ATTACHED

Period of Significance (from year to year): **1930**

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: **1929-1930**

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: **Samuel Brian Baylinson**

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: **Frank G. Stewart**

Original owner: **Benjamin Barron, Edgar Wilson**

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, Director of Advocacy**

Email: **ben@preservationalliance.com**

Organization: **Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia**

Date: **September 22, 2014**

Street Address: **1608 Walnut Street, Suite 1300**

Telephone: **215-546-1146 x5**

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

Nominator is is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: _____

Correct-Complete Incorrect-Incomplete

Date: _____

Date of Notice Issuance: _____

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Postal Code: _____

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: _____

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

Designated Rejected

Acknowledgments

The nominator would like to acknowledge Preservation Alliance interns Allee Berger (2012) and Jennifer Robinson (2014) for their contributions to this nomination.

5. Boundary Description

Beginning at a point on the northwest corner of 15th Street and Fairmount Avenue; thence extending northwardly along the westerly side of 15th Street, 88 feet, 4 ¼ inches to a point; thence extending westwardly parallel with Swain Street, 72 feet 5 7/8 inches; thence extending southwardly at right angles to the said Fairmount Avenue, 97 feet three and 3/8 inches to a point on the northerly side of Fairmount Avenue; thence extending eastwardly along the same, 59 feet 4 inches to the westerly side of said 15th Street, the first mentioned point and place of beginning.



6. Description

The property at 1501-5 Fairmount Avenue is a one-story steel-framed commercial structure clad in cast stone. The building occupies the full width and depth of a trapezoidal corner lot on the northwest corner of Fairmount Avenue and 15th Street in the Fairmount neighborhood of Philadelphia. It has primary elevations fronting both 15th Street (east) and Fairmount Avenue (south), a secondary, utilitarian north elevation facing a surface parking lot, and a west party wall shared with an adjoining three-story brick rowhouse. A prominent two-story tower anchors the southeast corner of the building. The building is flat-roofed.

The building's primary elevations are composed of a series of repeating single-story bays that flank the two-story corner tower: three along Fairmount Avenue and five along 15th Street. Each bay features a large window opening with chamfered upper corners set between dividing pilasters. Each of the bays facing Fairmount Avenue was originally designed as an independent storefront, with a central doorway surrounded by flanking sidelights and a square glass transom. The same entrance configuration was also located at the southernmost 15th Street bay. Visible in historic photos of the site, traces of this original configuration can still be seen in the stone water tables at the base of each bay, which are interrupted where doorways were originally located. Historic photos and physical evidence also suggest that some of the 15th Street bays originally accommodated garage doors. With the exception of the contemporary glass and steel storefront entrance in the westernmost bay along Fairmount Avenue, all of these bays are currently infilled with painted wood panels set beneath shallow glass block transom bands.

Each bay is separated by a flat pilaster rising the full height of building to break the roofline in a coupled scroll profile. Beneath these scroll caps are Art Deco bas-relief panels featuring stacked shield-like medallions flanked by swooping drapery. The flat roofline between pilasters is accentuated by a thin band of bas-relief molding in a faceted chevron-like pattern. The space between the tops of the display windows and the top of the wall is filled by three courses of flat, ashlar-faced cast stone panels matching the tone and texture of the adjacent pilasters and bas-relief ornament. Centered within each wall

panel is a single bas-relief female face featuring a floral headdress and encircled by laurels.

The corner tower is framed in engaged fluted columns that rise the full height of the tower and are crowned by ornate sculptural finials. Each finial is composed of a globe-like urn capped by a bouquet of stylized bas-relief leaf and flower forms, partially shrouded by cascading drape-like posts. Fascia panels between each corner column feature ornate repeating leaf and flower patterns in bas relief. Each tower face is composed of a single large masonry opening that was originally filled by a single one-story picture window and a single-light glazed transom. The current window configuration has been altered into shorter ground-floor picture windows below an upper a twelve-light fixed casement window with thin metal muntins. A bas relief series of bird figures stretches across the tops of the window opening; each bird sits within a dove-cote-like half-round alcove, alternating between forward-facing and rear-facing views. Centered above this band and the fascia panels is a high-relief ram's-head medallion.

The north elevation is a utilitarian rear wall of common-bond red brick. It features a single large garage entrance flanked by two infilled masonry openings. The opening to the east has been completely infilled with stucco; the opening to the west has been reduced in size to a single-leaf steel door surrounded by concrete block and glass block infill. A short, one-story brick structure and a simple exterior chimney are attached to the northwest corner of the building. The majority of the surface parking area to the north of the building sits on a separate legal parcel.

7. Significance

Introduction

The Art Deco commercial block at 1501-1505 Fairmount Avenue was designed by architect Samuel Brian Baylinson and completed in 1930.¹ The building is listed as a contributing resource in the National Register-listed Fairmount Avenue Historic District, though it is misidentified as an automobile service center designed in 1919 by Leroy Rothschild, an earlier building replaced by the current structure a decade later.² Also specifically designed for the automobile trade, 1501-05 Fairmount Avenue is an architecturally distinctive example of the Art Deco style as applied to low-rise commercial construction. By virtue of its distinctive architectural characteristics, 1501-05 Fairmount Avenue merits listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places by satisfying the following criteria for historic designation as established in Philadelphia's Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 14-1004 (1):

- c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style;
- and*
- d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen;

Art Deco in America, 1925-1940

In the United States in general and Philadelphia in particular, Art Deco was an architectural style popular primarily for commercial, institutional, and multiunit residential/hotel buildings roughly between the years 1925 and 1940. The style's adoption in America is generally traced back to the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, the 1925 Parisian design fair that historian Bevis Hillier cited in coining the term "Art Deco" in 1968.³ While French inspiration was indeed prevalent in the American incarnation of the style, so too was the influence of Viennese Secessionism, German Expressionism, Italian Futurism, Beaux-Arts Classicism, and the domestic Arts and Crafts and Prairie School movements of the late nineteenth

¹ *Building Permit 8361*, October 21, 1929. Philadelphia City Archives.

² Domenic Vitiello, "Fairmount Avenue Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, Sept. 8, 2001.

³ Bevis Hillier, *Art Deco of the 20s and 30s*. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1968, 13.

century. The style's exotic undercurrents were further fuelled by the discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922 and a corresponding interest in ancient Aztec and Mayan architecture.⁴

Evident in the diversity of sources cited above, the Art Deco movement in American architecture was a pluralistic, inventive and loosely defined strain of modernism that represented an alternative to both the historicist traditionalism of academic revival styles as well as the emerging austerity of Bauhaus functionalism. According to Richard Striner, "Art deco designs were in a middle range between polarized tendencies" and characterized by an "impulse to synthesize, to bridge antagonistic realms-- past and future, conservative and radical."⁵ Art Deco developed into a widely disseminated commercial vernacular style that, alongside jazz and Hollywood in interwar America, represented a fertile union of imagination and imitation.

In a style inclusive of such diversity of forms and applications, the character-defining features of Art Deco elude easy definition. Broadly speaking, however, characteristic examples of the style typically exhibit sculpturally expressive massing, stepped or otherwise conspicuous rooflines, geometric and/or schematized figurative bas-relief ornament, and richly decorative fixtures and surfaces at the human scale (door pulls, window grilles, lighting fixtures, etc). A broad range of building types are characteristic of the Art Deco era, from high-rise office towers and monumental motion picture palaces to diminutive retail shopfronts. Past scholarship on the style has explored the "so-called zigzag/streamline dichotomy" of the Art Deco spectrum, contrasting the vertically-oriented, ziggurat-like forms epitomized by the Chrysler Building with the more horizontal, "moderne" expressions of Miami Beach hotels and their kin.⁶ Other sources add a third pole to this taxonomy, citing the stripped classical or "Greco Deco" style as a major strain in Art Deco design.⁷

⁴ Mark Gelertner, *A History of American Architecture: Buildings in their Cultural and Technological Context*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999, p. 241.

⁵ Richard Striner, "Art Deco: Polemics and Synthesis," *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Spring 1990), pp. 21, 24.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 21.

⁷ Robert D. Leighninger Jr., "Cultural Infrastructure: The Legacy of New Deal Public Space." *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 49, n. 4 (May 1996), p. 228.

Art Deco in Philadelphia

An overview of Art Deco buildings currently represented on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places presents a useful survey of the diversity of building types and stylistic variants that flourished in the city during this era. Office towers present perhaps the most conspicuous manifestations of Art Deco design in the city: Market Street National Bank (1930, Ritter & Shay, 1319-25 Market Street), the Sun Oil Building (1928-30, Tilden, Register & Pepper, 1608 Walnut Street), 1616 Walnut Street (1929, Tilden, Register & Pepper), the Ayer Building (1927-29, Ralph Bencker, 204-14 West Washington Square), Suburban Station (1930, Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, 1601-29 John F. Kennedy Blvd.), and the Beury Building (1926, William H. Lee, 3901 N. Broad Street) all embody Art Deco characteristics in both the stepped massing of their overall forms and in the details of their ornamental programs. Though not an office tower, the mid-rise but imposing Fidelity Mutual Life Insurance Building (1926-27, Zantzinger, Borie & Medary, 2501 Pennsylvania Avenue) is likewise one of the most significant Art Deco office buildings in the city by virtue of its distinctive terra cotta ornament.⁸

Closely related to office towers in form, high-rise Art Deco apartment and hotel structures are also represented on the Philadelphia Register. Perhaps the first “pure” Art Deco building in the city in terms of both massing and ornament was French architect Louis Jallade’s YMCA Armed Services tower of 1926 (111-23 N. 15th Street); McLanahan & Bencker’s Rittenhouse Plaza Apartments (1901 Walnut Street) of 1925-26 and Ritter & Shay’s Drake Hotel (512-14 Spruce Street) of 1928 both applied historical revival details to Deco-inspired massing.

Government and institutional buildings also occupy a major share of the Art Deco landscape in Philadelphia, though often tempered by Classical or Colonial Revival leanings. The U.S. Custom House (1932-34, Ritter & Shay, 200 Chestnut Street) and Board of Education Building (1932, Irwin T. Catherine, 230-38 N. 21st Street) are both listed on the Philadelphia Register, though the equally notable 30th Street Post Office (1931, Rankin & Kellogg with Tilden, Register & Pepper, 2970 Market Street), Robert

⁸ Significant office towers that are *not* listed on the Philadelphia Register include Paul Cret’s Integrity Trust Company Building (1929, 1530 Walnut Street) and the Architects Building (1930, 121 S. 17th Street).

Nix Federal Building (1937, Ballinger Company and Harry Sternfeld, 900 Market Street), and a number of Catherine's Art Deco public schools are not currently designated.

Less common in Philadelphia were Art Deco factories and warehouses, though both the Lasher Printing Company (1927, Philip S. Tyre, 1309 Noble Street) and the Terminal Commerce Building (1929, William Steele & Sons, 401 N. Broad Street) are both excellent examples of the style. Ecclesiastical commissions were even more rare, but Our Lady of Loreto Church (1938, Petrillo & Neely, 6208 Grays Avenue) is a wonderfully idiosyncratic exception. Though later used as a church, the Levin Funeral Home (1933, Edwin Rothschild, 1512-16 N. Broad Street) is characteristic of the more common use of the style in funerary and memorial contexts.

In Philadelphia and elsewhere, the entertainment industry fuelled the spread of Art Deco in the form of motion picture palaces, radio station buildings, and the like. Both the Boyd Theatre (1928, Hoffman-Henon Company, 1908-1910 Chestnut Street) and the Uptown Theater (1927-29, Magaziner, Eberhard & Harris, 2240-48 N. Broad Street) are major Art Deco landmarks in the city, as is the undesignated Sedgwick Theater (1928, William H. Lee, 7137 Germantown Avenue). Arguably the most exuberant Art Deco composition in Philadelphia, the WCAU Building (1931, Harry Sternfeld and Gabriel Roth) was the nation's first purpose-built radio headquarters at 1618-22 Chestnut Street. Ralph Bencker's WPEN Studio (1928, 2212-14 Walnut Street) is also a showcase of Art Deco design, albeit on a much smaller scale.

Many other small-scale Art Deco shopfronts and commercial blocks punctuate retail corridors across the city, a handful of which have been individually listed on the Philadelphia Register. Ralph Bencker's collaboration with the Horn & Hardart Company helped promulgate the Art Deco aesthetic throughout Philadelphia's neighborhoods via their popular chain of "Automat" cafeterias; Bencker's shopfront at 818 Chestnut Street (1930) is representative of this iconic partnership, and unfortunately one of the only examples in the city which survives with any degree of integrity. Frank E. Hahn's 1935 store and office for Raymond Pace Alexander at 1900 Chestnut is a characteristic example of a small-scale Art Deco corner building in a dense commercial setting. Another Art Deco storefront gem at 1106 Chestnut Street (1935, Markham

Ashberry) has recently (and illegally) been disassembled in spite of its Philadelphia Register status.

Polychrome and Monochrome

This brief survey demonstrates the popularity of the style in Philadelphia, with the zig-zag/streamline/greco modes all represented to varying degrees (though pre-WWII streamline moderne buildings here are markedly less common than the other two modes). This survey also highlights another apparent dichotomy in the range of buildings represented, one that has been given less scholarly attention but is nevertheless germane to a discussion of Philadelphia's Art Deco commercial vernacular in general and 1501 Fairmount in particular: that of polychrome versus monochrome expressions of the style.

Much of Art Deco architecture is marked by bold material contrasts and the prominent use of colorful ornament, often glazed polychrome terra cotta or metal highlights that stand out against a surrounding brick, stone, or stucco skin. Great local examples of polychromism can be seen in the terra cotta ornamentation of Market Street National Bank and Fidelity Mutual Life Insurance Building, the metal panels and blue skin of the WCAU Studio, and the black Vitrolite glass and metal facade of 1106 Chestnut Street, among others.

However, these buildings stand in contrast to an alternative mode perhaps even more common as an expression of the Art Deco style in Philadelphia: a monochromism sometimes characterized as "chaste deco." In buildings of this type, ornamentation is rendered in the same surface material as the rest of the building, creating an often sculptural but uniform facade typically of limestone, cast stone or concrete. This style of deco was particularly popular with smaller-scale retail shopfronts and low-rise commercial buildings both in and beyond Center City; 1900 Chestnut, the headhouse facade of the Boyd Theatre, and the Levin Funeral Home are all Philadelphia Register-listed representatives of the monochromatic mode, as are the Horace Potts Company offices at 1702 Walnut (Addison Savery, 1930) and the parking garage and store at 1523-25 Spruce Street, both listed as contributing structures in the Rittenhouse-Fitler Historic District. However, far more examples of the style can be found in neighborhoods across

the city, and despite their clear reflection of the prevalent architectural and cultural inclinations of the era, are largely underrecognized and underrepresented on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. An incomplete but representative list of such buildings would include the City National Bank at 1505 Walnut (c.1930, Arthur W. Hall), 2006 Chestnut Street (1928-29, Silverman & Levy), the Oak Lane Trust Bank at 6701 N. Broad Street (1924, McLanahan & Bencker), 7200 Germantown Avenue (1928, Norman Hulme), 27, 29 and 35 Maplewood Avenue in Germantown (architect and date unknown), and Mulligan's Funeral Home at 1119 W. Lehigh Avenue (c.1933, architect unknown).

Automobile Deco

Purpose-built automobile showrooms and service centers were relatively new building types in 1920s and 1930s Philadelphia, often one story corner structures with large display windows and/or garage door bays designed for easy automobile access. Like movie theaters, Automats, and other distinctive cultural phenomena that proliferated in the interwar years, such buildings were commonly designed in the Art Deco style. Samuel Baylinson's 1501-05 Fairmount Avenue is perhaps the most distinguished, but not the only, surviving example of an architect-designed, automobile-related commercial building in Philadelphia. For example, Karl Otto's 1930 automobile showroom at 5822-28 Old York Road (1930) featured eclectic bas relief ornamentation and large, chamfered display windows very similar to 1501-05 Fairmount Avenue. Though badly altered, traces of its ziggurat-inspired design are still recognizable. More intact is I.W. Levin's auto sales and service building at 1172 S. Broad Street (1937-8), with its distinctive roofline studded with deco-inspired piers. Less refined in materials and ornamentation but similar in basic style and massing is a masonry auto service center at 6300 Oxford Avenue (date and architect unknown) featuring a prominent finial-capped two-story square tower flanked by rows of one-story vehicle bays. As a group, these buildings all reflect the environment in an era characterized by both the popularity of the Art Deco style and the proliferation of the automobile.

1501-5 Fairmount Avenue

In 1929, real estate developers Benjamin Barron and Edgar Wilson commissioned architect Samuel Brian Baylinson to design a one-story commercial block for the prominent intersection of 15th Street and Fairmount Avenue, a block away from the established “automobile row” of North Broad Street.⁹ Although the building replaced a ten-year-old auto parts store and service station on the site, it too was erected specifically with automobile industry in mind; a leasing brochure for the new building touted its “excellent location for tires, auto accessories or auto display and office.”¹⁰

Baylinson (1895-1969) was a 1920 University of Pennsylvania graduate who continued his architectural studies at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in France. After returning to his native Philadelphia Baylinson found employment with architect Frank E. Hahn, eventually advancing to the status of chief designer and partner in the firm of Hahn & Baylinson between 1923 and 1928. This partnership’s major commissions included the Warwick Hotel, the Glenside/Nixon Theater, and the Jewish Education Center at Porter and Marshall Streets.¹¹ The Fairmount Avenue commission was one of his first in private practice following the firm’s dissolution in 1928.

Not surprising given his Beaux Arts background, Baylinson’s design for 1501-05 Fairmount Avenue epitomized what David Gebhard characterized as Art Deco’s “middle course between ‘High Art Modernists’ and ‘Traditionalists.’”¹² On the one hand, the building’s form was boldly inventive, representing an early incarnation of the single-story retail strip that abandoned the multi-story “store-and-office” model of earlier commercial development in favor of a more horizontal repetition of structurally-expressive ground-floor retail bays. The building was clad in a materially innovative skin of tinted cast stone and featured an ostentatious, purely decorative corner tower with generous expanses of glass that flaunted the skeletal potential of modern construction (the tower was most likely designed as a display area for automobiles). But on the other hand, the building’s fluted columns, decorative swags, ram-headed and nymph-like medallions, and

⁹ *Building Permit 8361* (October 21, 1929) lists Benjamin Barron as owner of the property. However, the deed to the property at that time was held by Edgar Wilson (Deed book xxxxx). On the North Broad Street Automobile Row, see especially Kevin McMahan, “North Broad Street Historic District,” Pennsylvania Historic Resource Survey Form, Aug. 8, 2011.

¹⁰ “Offered for Lease,” J.R. Massey & Son advertisement, Philadelphia Historical Commission files.

¹¹ Sandra L. Tatman, “Baylinson, Samuel Brian (1895-1969),” *American Architects and Buildings Database*, http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/22259.

¹² As quoted in Striner, p. 21.

draped urn finials evoked an unmistakable air of Classicism that tempered the building's more radical qualities while simultaneously projecting a feeling of playful exoticism unique to the Art Deco style. The building's intricate, verdant floral friezes crowning its tower are exceptional examples of a common Art Deco design trope, while its idiosyncratic decorative string-courses of wire-perched doves spanning its tower windows add a humorous twist to the building's refined ornamental vocabulary.

Conclusion

The building retains a high degree of architectural integrity and is used today for a purpose very sympathetic to its original design: that of an automobile-oriented commercial structure. With its refined ornament and prominent two-story tower anchoring an otherwise single-story program, the building was designed to be—and still remains—a conspicuous presence at a high-traffic intersection. In both its form and its details, the building embodies character-defining features of the Art Deco style and reflects the environment in an era when Art Deco design was embraced by architects and developers for small-scale but visually distinctive commercial buildings in neighborhoods across the city in the late 1920s and 1930s. By satisfying Criteria C and D as outlined in Philadelphia's Historic Preservation Ordinance, 1501-05 Fairmount Avenue therefore merits listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

8. Major Bibliographical Sources

Building Permit 8361, October 21, 1929. Philadelphia City Archives.

Gelertner, Mark. *A History of American Architecture: Buildings in their Cultural and Technological Context*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999.

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Tatman, Sandra L. "Baylinson, Samuel Brian (1895-1969)," *American Architects and Buildings Database*,
http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/22259.

Vitiello, Domenic. "Fairmount Avenue Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, Sept. 8, 2001.



Figure 1: South (Fairmount Avenue) and east (15th Street) elevations.



Figure 2: South (Fairmount Avenue) elevation.



Figure 3: East (15th Street) elevation.



Figure 4: Pilaster detail.



Figure 5: Bas relief medallion detail.



Figure 6:Corner tower viewed from the east.



Figure 7:Corner tower detail.



Figure 8: North elevation.

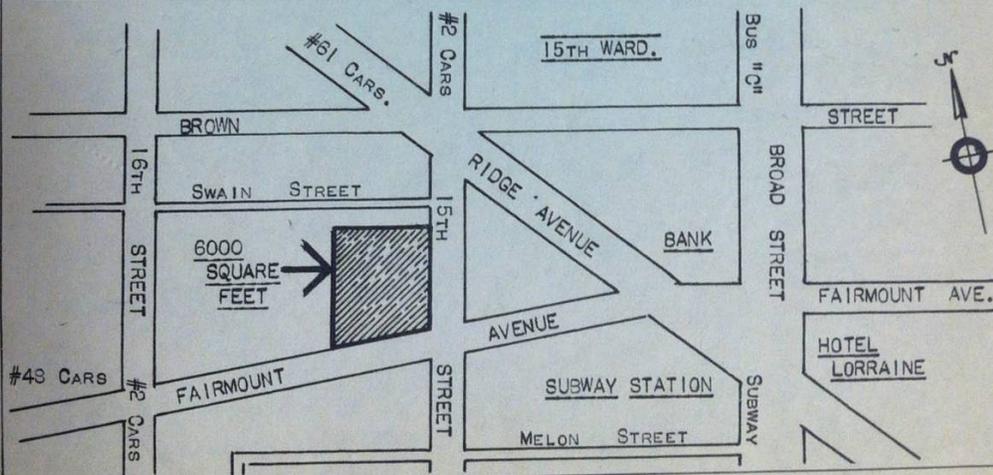
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THIRTEENTH AND GREEN STREETS

PHILADELPHIA

Figure 9: Undated leasing advertisement with c.1930 photograph of building. Philadelphia Historical Commission files.



Figure 10: 1939 *Evening Bulletin* photograph. Temple University Urban Archives.