

## Description

The Overbrook Farms neighborhood in West Philadelphia is an example of a planned suburb, principally constructed between 1893 and 1929, within the city's limits. The development illustrates trends in suburban community planning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries including street layout, landscaping, setbacks, amenities, and architectural lexicon.

The plan of Overbrook Farms is roughly rectangular, encompassing approximately 171 acres at the city's western edge. The former Pennsylvania Railroad, now used by Amtrak and Septa's Regional Rail Division, bisects the community as does Lancaster Avenue, which was a turnpike road until 1917 and remains a major automobile thoroughfare through the area. City Avenue (U.S. Route 1), another major arterial, forms the northwestern boundary of the district as well as the Philadelphia city boundary. Morris Park, part of the Fairmount Park system, bounds the district to the southwest adjacent to 66<sup>th</sup> Street. Rowhouse dwellings and the grounds of the Overbrook School for the Blind mark the southeastern boundary of the district. The northeastern boundary is 58<sup>th</sup> Street and the property of the Sisters of the Visitation of Holy Mary in the 2400 block of North 58<sup>th</sup> Street at City Avenue.

Streets in the district are laid out with respect to the railroad. The only railroad crossings within Overbrook Farms are the bridge carrying City Avenue over the tracks and Woodbine Avenue running under the railroad tracks. East of the tracks, Drexel Road and Overbrook Avenue curve to meet City Avenue rather than traverse the tracks. Upland Way, 58<sup>th</sup> Street, and 59<sup>th</sup> Street provide cross streets. To the west of the tracks, most streets form a rectilinear grid except for 63<sup>rd</sup> Street, Lancaster Avenue (former turnpike), and Church Road, the latter of which was the last road to be constructed in Overbrook Farms around 1912. The paved roads are generally 35-50 feet wide, with granite curbs and cement sidewalks. Roads follow the terrain of the landscape. The concrete sidewalks are separated from the curb by a grass strip except along 63<sup>rd</sup> Street where the sidewalk meets the curb. Traffic is regulated by stop signs, except along the main thoroughfares where traffic lights prevail.

Although building usage within the district is diverse, single-family detached and semi-detached dwellings are the dominant building types in the district. Religious institutions dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are located at the corners of several of the blocks in both sections of the district. In the twentieth century, several Jewish organizations were established on the east side of the district. The train station, built c. 1858, is located on N. 63<sup>rd</sup> Street at its intersection with City Avenue. The steam plant, which was built in the 1890s and demolished in 1976, was also located on the east side of the railroad tracks along Woodbine Avenue. Modern buildings now replace this structure.

Many of the various architectural styles that were popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are represented in the district. Although there are over twenty styles represented in the district, the majority of houses are Colonial Revival or Tudor Revival. Other styles from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the district include Arts & Crafts, Dutch Colonial Revival, Gothic Revival, Queen Anne, Prairie, Romanesque, and Shingle.

Consistent with suburban developments, approximately 90% of the buildings in Overbrook Farms are residential in nature. These include detached and semi-detached dwellings and apartment buildings. Massing and materials are consistent throughout the district, with two-and-a-half to three-story buildings being most common. Primary materials are stone (mostly Wissahickon schist), brick, and stucco. All historic houses have large front porches, many of them covered. Ornate chimneys, classical columns, projecting bays, leaded glass windows,

dormers, and decorative masonry features such as cartouches, quoins, and gargoyles are found on many residential buildings in the district.

Utilitarian structures were also built in the district to provide amenities to its residents. Commercial, religious, and educational buildings dominate the non-residential uses. Two-story commercial buildings are located on 63<sup>rd</sup> Street between the railroad and Lancaster Avenue. Originally, these commercial buildings, specifically those located along the east side of 63<sup>rd</sup> Street, included uses such as a general store, pharmacy, doctor's office, and a livery. Currently, these buildings contain restaurants, medical offices, day care centers, delicatessens, dry cleaners, and other small retail and service providers. Apartment buildings dating from the early part of the twentieth century also permeate this area and occupy the corner lots of several blocks. One and two-story intrusions, primarily modest houses constructed on the subdivided lots of lost mansions, are mostly located in the northeastern side of the district. There are also two bridges in the district. The stone bridge carrying the former Pennsylvania Railroad over Woodbine Avenue and the Art Deco concrete bridge that carries City Avenue over the railroad tracks.

Landscaping and vegetation were important features of suburban developments during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and remain important to the district today. The deed restrictions requiring set backs from streets have been respected. The front and side yards, mature trees, and plantings such as hedges define the suburban environment. While hedges often define front and side property lines, other plants including rhododendrons, mountain laurel, japonica, holly, and azaleas dot the properties. Property owners have also planted flowerbeds and other gardens to enhance their outdoor spaces. Although front yards generally remain open, the fencing of rear yards has become fairly common in the district. Fence types include wood picket, wood plank, chain link, and iron fences with stone piers. Walkways are mainly concrete, although brick and slate are present. Driveways are largely concrete; however there are some asphalt driveways present.

Many driveways in the district lead to outbuildings, which are set back significant distances from the streets, as required by the deed restrictions. Most outbuildings in the district are garages or former carriage houses. Some have been converted to other uses, such as studios and residences. There are scattered sheds, most of which are modern. Historic outbuildings tend to match their parent dwellings in material and style.

The majority of the buildings in the district, particularly the dwellings, maintain their original form and materials. In many cases, additions and alterations were made within the period of significance. More recent alterations include replacement windows, glazed porches, and wing additions. Although modern alterations and materials are present, original or otherwise historic exterior materials dominate this district. This is likely due to the predominance of masonry construction. The majority of buildings are in good to excellent condition.