

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 (CD, EMAIL, FLASH DRIVE)
ELECTRONIC FILES MUST BE WORD OR WORD COMPATIBLE

1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE (must comply with an Office of Property Assessment address)

Street address: 701-65 E. Westmoreland Street

Postal code: 19134 Councilmanic District: 7

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Ascension of Our Lord Roman Catholic Church

Current/Common Name: _____

3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Building Structure Site Object

4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

Occupancy: occupied vacant under construction unknown

Current use: _____

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Please attach

6. DESCRIPTION

Please attach

7. SIGNIFICANCE

Please attach the Statement of Significance.

Period of Significance (from year to year): from 1914 to present

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1914-1928

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: Henon & Boyle

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: Paula Himmelsbach Balano

Original owner: Archdiocese of Philadelphia

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

Please attach

9. NOMINATOR

Organization Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia Date July 31, 2018

Name with Title Amy Lambert, RA Email _____

Street Address 1608 Walnut Street, Suite 1702 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: 1 August 2018; 10 September 2018 (revised)

Correct-Complete Incorrect-Incomplete Date: 13 September 2018

Date of Notice Issuance: 14 September 2018

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: New Phila Investment LLC

Address: 1222 Spruce Street, Apt.5

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19107

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: 10/17/2018

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: 11/9/2018

Date of Final Action: 11/9/2018

Designated Rejected

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

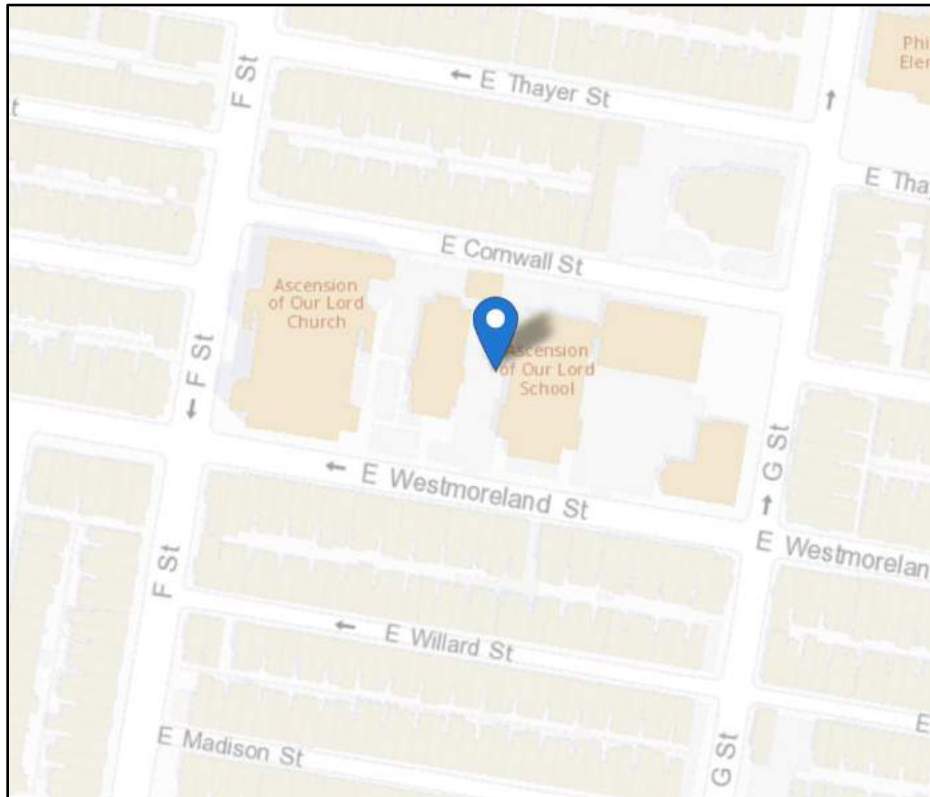


Fig. 1. Location of the subject property in relation to its Kensington neighborhood and the block of once associated parish buildings.

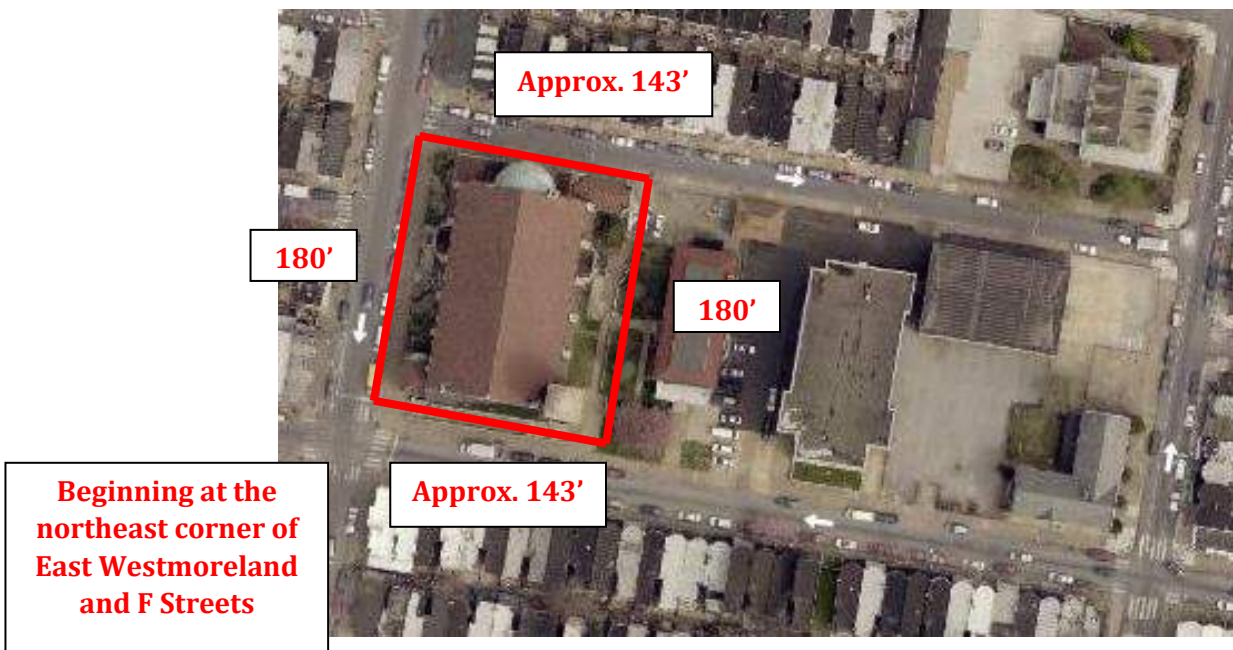
The church at 701-65 East Westmoreland Street is located in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia. The church building is located along with formerly associated ecclesiastical buildings on an entire city block bound by East Westmoreland, F, East Cornwall, and G Streets. Situate at the Northwest corner of G and Westmoreland Streets in the 33rd Ward of the City of Philadelphia, thence extending Westward along Westmoreland Street 500 feet to the East side of F Street (50 feet wide); thence Northward along the same 180 feet to the South side of Cornwall Street (to be laid out and opened 40 feet in width); thence Eastward along the same 500 feet to the West side of G Street and thence Southward along the same 180 feet to the North side of Westmoreland Street, the place of beginning. Being commonly known as 701-65 E. Westmoreland Street.

The property is known as Parcel No. 041N040004, Office of Property Assessment Account No. 777344005.

This nomination proposes to designate the Ascension of Our Lord Roman Catholic Church, one building on a larger parcel of 701-65 E. Westmoreland that currently includes several. The overall parcel is bounded by East Cornwall Street to the north, G Street to the east, East Westmoreland Street to the south, and F Street to the west.



The boundary of the church building begins at the northeast corner of East Westmoreland and F Streets. The proposed boundary includes the footprint of the church, with a perimeter buffer. The other buildings on the parcel are not under consideration at this time.



6. PROPERTY DESCRIPTION



Fig. 2. Southwest corner of Ascension of Our Lord Church.

The church located at 701-65 East Westmoreland, designed in 1914 by architects Henon & Boyle and completed in 1928, is a Romanesque Revival structure clad in quarry-faced Port Deposit granite with Indiana limestone trim and a red tile roof. As is typical of the Romanesque style, the building projects a heaviness through rustication, round arched openings, and a side campanile. The full expression of the building, however, is not exclusively Romanesque as an elegant colonnade along the primary elevation projects an early Renaissance spirit. The entire composition, with integral campanile and baptistry, set upon a high base, has a particularly grand presence at the southwest corner of East Westmoreland and F Streets where it appears as if a grand Italian village church in the midst of an ordinary working-class neighborhood.

South Elevation

While the buildings of the church complex take up the entire city block, the church itself is sited at the western end of the block on a site 160 feet deep and 120 feet wide¹. The primary elevation faces East Westmoreland Street and stretches back along F Street to the apse at Cornwall Street. The elevation expresses the south end gable containing the main volume of the interior space with a small baptistry to the west and a tall, square-plan campanile to the east.

The main volume is elevated on what was a rather grand base accessed by two side staircases; the staircases have somewhat recently been boxed up with concrete, preventing access to the elevated entrances. The most distinctive component of this elevation is the rather tall colonnade of smooth granite with a shallow loggia that contains three entry doors to the church. The round arches of the colonnade are rather shallow compared to the tall columns they sit upon with floriate capitals. The loggia is capped with a blind arcade cornice in limestone. The end gable of the main volume rises above the loggia with a tripartite, rounded windows centered above a shallow projection capped with a bracketed cornice and containing a small rose window. Within the loggia are three evenly spaced, oak double-entry doors each set into an arched opening; the center door and arch are taller than the two flanking doors. Within the tympanum of each arch is a smaller arch; that arch contains a cross only within the tympanum of the center door. On either side of the two flanking doors is a small, arched niche; both niches have boards covering their openings. Above each flanking door, within the flat wall of the main volume and under the barrel vaults created by the colonnade, is a small round window. Each of the seven bays of the colonnade has a barrel vault constructed of segmented limestone. There is a lamp hanging from the three barrel vaults above each entry.

The side projection to the west is a baptistry, two stories tall with a red tile hipped roof that meets the side of the main volume at a point lower than the top of the loggia. From the south, the upper floor reads as a one-story volume sitting atop the large stair base, yet the lower floor of the baptistry is accessible from the ground level at the west side. There is a "Florentine" window in the center of this volume, or a round arched window containing two smaller round arched windows divided by a slender stone column and with a circular motif in the tympanum. There is a copper gutter at the base of the red tile roof.

To the east of the main volume is an integrated campanile that rises to almost twice the height of the main volume. The campanile is arranged in four levels. At the loggia entry level, there is a "Florentine" window that matches the one to the west of the entry, sitting on a heavy limestone belt course. As with the baptistry, the campanile extends down to the ground level where there is a single window centered in the tower. At a point that matches the eave of the west entry, the third level of the tower springs from another belt course of limestone above which is a single round arched window opening flanked by slender columns; the height of this window is just below the blind arcade cornice of the loggia. The third level of the tower has

¹ *Ascension of Our Lord 1899-1999: 100th Anniversary Souvenir*, September 12, 1999. Source: Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

chamfered, corner pilasters in granite. The walls and corner pilasters of the third level of the campanile rise until they extend past the peak of the gable of the main volume where another arched window opening is located. Above this opening is the bell tower which from its base of a blind arcade extends into walls of double-arched openings and corner columns, all expressed in limestone. The campanile is capped by a limestone dome atop of which sits a slender cross.

West Elevation

The west elevation primarily expresses the main volume of the sanctuary space in five bays. To the south is the baptistry projecting out from the walls of the main volume. There are two sets of doors set into the ground level above which is an arch containing a polychromatic tile tympanum that is divided from the doors below by a heavy belt course. This belt course is at the height of the stair landing to the south that has now been boxed up and made inaccessible. Above the arched tympanum is a rectangular window opening with three windows divided by two slender columns. Above this opening are the remains of a copper gutter and the red tiles of the hip roof. The north side of the baptistry contains a rounded wall that curves back toward the recessed main volume. Each bay of the main sanctuary volume is divided by corbeled, integrated buttresses in granite. Within the wall plane of each bay, tripartite arched windows at the upper level sit on top of a pent eave of red roof tiles. The walls below the pent eaves are flat planes with small limestone openings except at the second to last bay to the north where there is a pedimented arched entry door projection reached by a balustrade of stairs. This balustrade resembles the once at the south entry façade that has since been removed and made inaccessible. At the ground level of each bay is a larger squared opening each with infilled panels. At the northernmost end of this elevation is the side of the rear apse with copper roof above a double-level base of granite with the side of a red tile roof extending to a gable. There are three boarded up window openings in this wall that is in the same plane as the wall below the pent eaves to the south.

North Elevation

The north elevation contains the granite apse of the church, rounded in true Romanesque form, centered within the granite end gable of the main volume and sitting upon a double level, granite base that itself has a flat parapet with two gable peaks at either end. To the east, there is an extension of the flat wall that is capped by a red tile roof and contains three window openings. Each gable has a red tile hip roof extending to the wall of the main volume of the church. Below each of these gables are two rectangular window openings. The char from a past fire is still visible at the eastern windows. Below these windows is a simple but thick limestone belt course. Below this belt course at the ground level are several window openings that have since been boarded up. The apse itself has a faceted, copper roof and contains three tall, arched window openings, each with two windows divided by a course of granite. To the east of the gabled roof of the main volume, a granite chimney rises from the wall past the roofline; there is a stub of a chimney in the same location on the west side of the gable.

East Elevation

The east elevation is identical to the west elevation except that the entry projection at the south end is here replaced by a campanile and the north elevation's base extension ends in a gable with a flat wall with no openings, as opposed to the side gable with three windows at the west elevation. At the entry projection in the second to last bay to the north, the balustrade is missing from the stairs leading to the doors. Graffiti is found throughout and many of the window panes at the upper level tripartite windows are missing. These windows historically contained the stained glass of artisan Paula Himmelsbach Balano. The campanile has two door openings at ground level divided from a polychromatic tile tympanum within a limestone arch by a limestone belt course; this belt course is punctuated by a limestone shield centered above the doors. These two lower levels of the tower have narrow limestone quoins at the corners. As with the south elevation, the tall, third level of the campanile contains two window openings above which is the limestone bell tower level, identical at each elevation.

All photos included below by Amy Lambert.



Fig. 3. South elevation with colonnade and entry loggia.



Fig. 4. West elevation along F Street.



Fig. 5. The baptistry at the south end of the west elevation.



Fig. 6. West elevation with sanctuary entry projection.



Fig. 7. View of the northwest corner of the church.

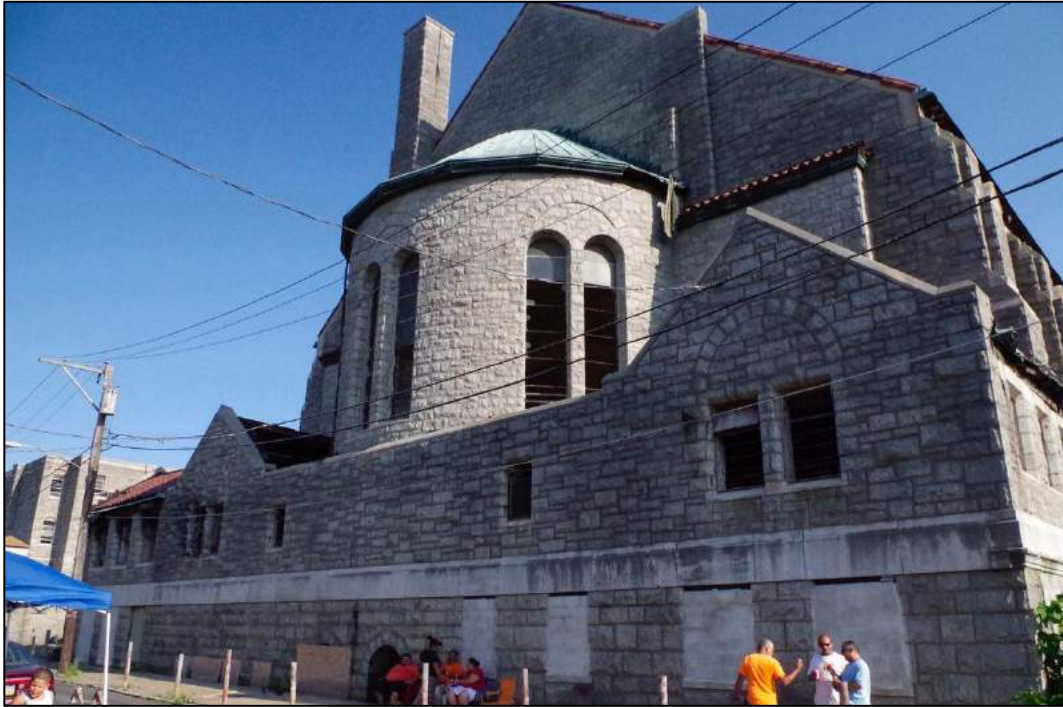


Fig. 8. North elevation of the church showing the apse of the sanctuary.



Fig. 9. North elevation of the church showing fire damage.



Fig. 10. View of the church from the northeast.



Fig. 11. East elevation of the church showing missing window panes and a staircase without its balustrade.

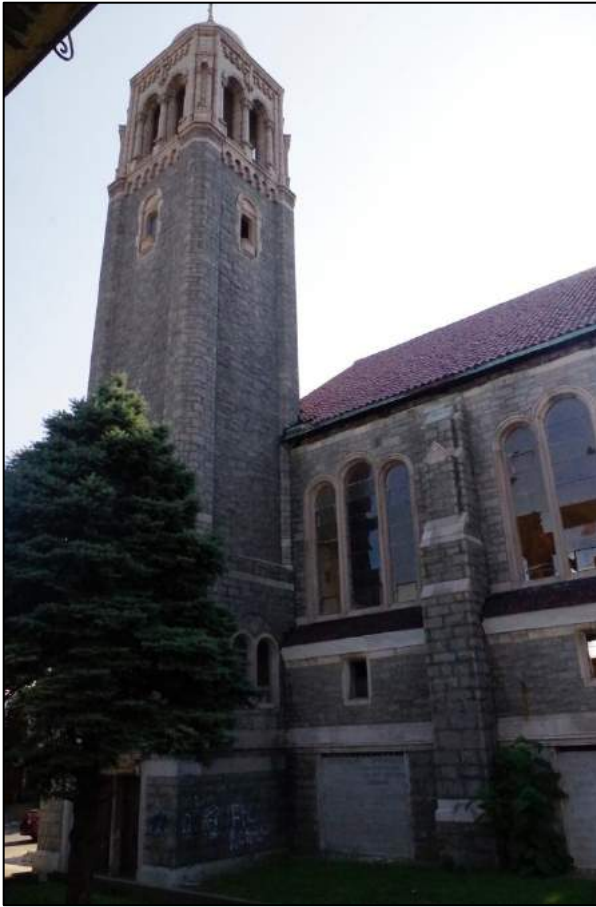


Fig. 12. Northeast corner of the campanile.



Fig. 13. East stairs leading to the Sanctuary.

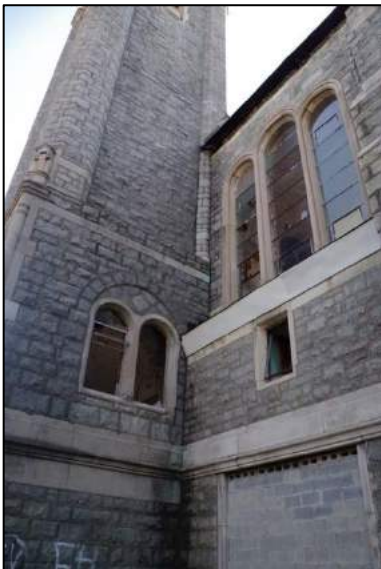


Fig. 14. North face of campanile.



Fig. 15. 1914 cornerstone.

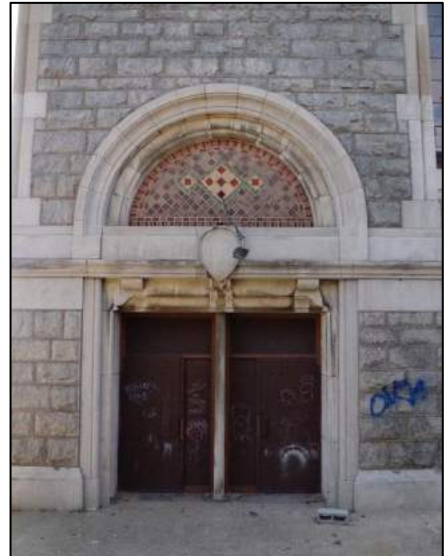


Fig. 16. East tower entrance.



Fig. 17. View of church and campanile from the southeast.



Fig. 18. Detail of south entry loggia.

7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Ascension of Our Lord Church at 701-65 East Westmoreland Street is a significant historic resource in Philadelphia and meets Criteria D, E, H, and J for designation on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, as enumerated in Section 14-1004 of the Philadelphia zoning code. The church meets Criterion D as an example of ecclesiastical Romanesque Revival with emergent Renaissance components. It meets Criterion E because of its design by successful architects Henon & Boyle who, prior to becoming Hoffman & Henon, created a deep portfolio of ecclesiastical and theatrical commissions. Ascension of Our Lord meets Criterion H owing to its impressive siting on an entire city block with other parish buildings in a dense neighborhood of low rowhouses within a regular street grid. The church meets Criterion J due to the parish's deep & historical connections in the neighborhood and city with regards to community and charitable outreach towards a diversity of constituents. The church is within the boundaries of the (determined eligible) Kensington-Allegheny National Register Historic District and would likely be determined to be a contributing resource.

Criterion (d): Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen.

The former Roman Catholic church at 701-655 East Westmoreland Street is a particularly spectacular example of the Romanesque Revival style of architecture and with its incorporation of early Renaissance components, gives the undeniable impression of a grand Italian church. The church was constructed using Port Deposit granite with Indiana limestone trim and oak for the entry doors.

While the church's manifest Romanesque Revival style is undeniable, the building achieves its distinctly Italian feel from the incorporation of early Renaissance features in the primary façade. The grand loggia that spans nearly the entire width of the church evokes the loggia and colonnade at the Hospital of the Innocents in Florence, a building that is credited as marking the birth of Renaissance architecture in that city. The tall colonnade, proportionally short semicircular arches, and dome vaults in the ceiling of the loggia in both buildings are strikingly similar. In addition, the dome of the campanile has a more refined Renaissance appearance than typical Romanesque tower with their pitched tile roofs.

In a 1949 souvenir book for the parish's 50th Anniversary, the architect, presumably Paul J. Henon, Jr., the surviving partner of Henon & Boyle, is quoted from his speech to the assembled crowd for the 1928 dedication of the church:

“The church is typically Romanesque in design with an appropriate campanile tower on the southeast corner. The walls are of Port Deposit granite, trimmed with Indiana limestone, carved and molded. Granite steps lead up to the main entrance doors. These doors are of carved oak. At the right side of the vestibule, two beautiful wrought iron gates led into the baptistry, with a wrought iron panel over them depicting the baptism

of Jesus by St. John. The baptistry is octagonal in shape with terrazzo floors and marble wainscoting. Two pairs of stained-glass windows showed the baptism of Jesus, Moses striking the rock, Elijah on Mt. Carmel, and Jesus sending forth the disciples into the world to preach the Gospel. A mural painting gives an appropriate addition to the decoration of this portion of the church. The baptismal font is of carved, polished marble with a cover of antique bronze, suspended from the ceiling. At the opposite end of the vestibule is the church office from which circular iron stairs lead up to the choir balcony. The nave of the church is eighty feet wide and one hundred and twenty-five feet long with a semi-elliptical vaulted ceiling. Five beautiful stained glass windows on each side of the church are divided into three panels each and depict thirty incidents in the Life of Christ. Three additional pairs of stained glass windows are found back of the main altar. Over the front entrance is a beautiful rose window... The Communion rail and the floor of the sanctuary are of Italian marble. The statues of Joseph and Mary on the two side altars were exquisitely carved in Italy of Botticino marble... The main altar, including the Tabernacle and the columns supporting the dome, are done in rare Italian marbles. The circular wall back of the sanctuary has a wainscoting of polished marble. All the radiators in the auditorium are concealed behind wrought iron grilles, tastefully decorated in gold and polychrome. The aisles of the church are floored with terrazzo with borders of pleasing design. The pews, confessionals and other woodwork are of oak, appropriately carved in ecclesiastical designs. All the wood is stained in subdued greenish gray tones.”¹

Ascension of Our Lord is a particularly majestic building incorporating the vocabulary of early Christian churches. Its elegance and accessibility to its neighbors make it a gorgeous character-defining feature of the area.

Criterion (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.

Ascension of Our Lord Church was designed in 1914 by the firm of Henon & Boyle, the precursor firm to the Hoffman-Henon Company, and completed by Hoffman-Henon Co. in 1928. Hoffman & Henon built their international reputation based on the deep foundation of church and theatre design as pioneered by Henon & Boyle. Paul Henon and James F. Boyle were the founding partners at Henon & Boyle.

James F. Boyle was the son of architect Rowland W. Boyle. The elder Boyle spent the period of approximately 1903-1918 “making drawings for churches for Mr. Durang,” according to a letter

¹ *Church of the Ascension of Our Lord 50th Anniversary Souvenir Book*, Ascension of Our Lord Church, 1949, 31-32. Source: Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

included with his entry for the competition to design the First Baptist Church in Philadelphia.² The referenced Edwin Forrest Durang (1829-1911), then as now, is considered one of the preeminent church architects in Philadelphia, with several grand Roman Catholic churches in his portfolio including Our Mother of Sorrows, Church of the Gesu, St. Charles Borromeo, and St. Laurentius. Rowland Boyle worked in Durang's office during the time of the Nativity Church and Our Lady of Mercy projects were on the boards. This training, in addition to what appears to be some formal training at the Franklin Institute, established Rowland Boyle as a Catholic church architect, and according to a posthumous article, "to whose work as a builder Philadelphia owes many of its most beautiful structures."³ He launched his own firm by 1898 and shared office space with family members who were all listed as plasterers, including C. Dixon Boyle and son James.

In 1907, Rowland Boyle was contracted by the Ascension of Our Lord Church to work on some interior alterations to the existing church buildings constructed seven years prior by another architect. Upon the passing in 1911 of Rowland W. Boyle, son James F. Boyle succeeded his father's practice.⁴ Presumably, the work performed by Rowland Boyle was satisfactory enough for his son James to be approached in 1914 for the sanctuary design.

Paul J. Henon, Jr., like James Boyle, grew up in the world of design and construction as the son of a contractor. He was listed as a draftsman in city directories until 1912. After 1911 and the passing of Rowland Boyle, Paul J. Henon, Jr. was recruited by James Boyle to be the junior partner in a new enterprise that allowed them to capitalize on their contacts from Catholic church projects.

Henon & Boyle was in practice at a time of great building projects for the Church as well as the moment when cinematic theatres begin to pop up around the country. In 1914, they were contracted to build a church for the Ascension of Our Lord parish in Kensington and in that same year were contracted to design the Arcadia Theatre on Chestnut Street as well as the Great Northern Theatre on N. Broad Street. Among Henon & Boyle's area Roman Catholic church commissions are Our Lady of Victory, St. Cecilia, and St. Anne in Philadelphia, and St. Jerome in Tamaqua.

In 1914, Henon & Boyle proposed a design for Ascension of Our Lord Church that would accommodate thirteen hundred people and would be patterned after two ancient cathedrals: those of the Abbey of St. Gilles and the Cathedral of Arles, each located in southern France.⁵ St.

² Sandra L. Tatman & Roger W. Moss, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects: 1700-1930*, (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985), 98.

³ Al Paul Lefton, "The Story of Paul and Dan Henon and of the Institution They Have Created," *The Romance of Bricks and Mortar*, December 1927. Source: Athenaeum of Philadelphia.

⁴ Sandra L. Tatman & Roger W. Moss, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects: 1700-1930*, (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985), 99.

⁵ *Ascension of Our Lord 1899-1999: 100th Anniversary Souvenir*, September 12, 1999. Source: Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

Gilles is a typical French Romanesque church dating from the 11th century that has a wide, tripartite set of entry doors within a shallow colonnade above which rises a simple gable end volume. The Cathedral of Arles dates from the 12th century and has a similar Romanesque design to the Abbey of St. Gilles with a centered entry flanked by a flat colonnade.

Due to complications during construction including World War I, the time consuming engineering that was required once the crew hit a creek while digging for foundations, and economic crises, completion of construction and church dedication was delayed until 1928. During this time, Henon & Boyle were able to incorporate several new features into the design and according to a history of the construction project, “chief among these, and particularly noteworthy even today because it shows something of the humanity of the pastor who wished his church to be reached as easily by the handicapped as by the non-afflicted, were the gradients leading to the basement. This feature eliminated steps, and, it was believed, was the first instance in which gradients were incorporated into the plans for churches in the city.”⁶

James F. Boyle died in 1918 during the prolonged construction of the Ascension of Our Lord Church after which time Paul Henon assumed control of the business until 1921 when he partnered with William Hoffman to become president of Hoffman-Henon Co. Despite William Hoffman’s death in 1925, the company carried on until 1930 and during this time Paul’s brother Daniel ran the engineering department. Therefore, the firm of Hoffman-Henon Co. is ultimately credited with the commission for Ascension of Our Lord.

Paul Henon saw the church project through to its 1928 completion. In a 1927 article on Hoffman-Henon Co., the early partnership of Paul Henon to James Boyle was noted for having given Henon the “practical knowledge to which he gratefully attributes much of his success,” Mr. Boyle being noted as a specialist in the building of churches.⁷ Further, Paul Henon is described therein as essentially American rather than a copyist in terms of his approach to design. Noting that his interest in and love for buildings spurred him to spend months at a time studying European precedents, Paul Henon “never returns from such trips without renewed inspiration and determination to build for his own land churches and schools that shall rival in intrinsic beauty those of the old world if they cannot for a time, at least, equal them in historic association.”⁸ The praise of Paul Henon is extended with a note that “he is one of the many American artists who are demonstrating that we are not bound by traditions, but are ready to meet new conditions with new ideas.”

This description of Henon’s dedication to taking inspiration from the past and making a new iteration for modern use is certainly evident in the Ascension of Our Lord Church in Kensington.

⁶ *Ascension of Our Lord 1899-1999: 100th Anniversary Souvenir*, September 12, 1999. Source: Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

⁷ Al Paul Lefton, “The Story of Paul and Dan Henon and of the Institution They Have Created,” *The Romance of Bricks and Mortar*, December 1927. Source: Athenaeum of Philadelphia.

⁸ *Ibid.*

The building clearly evolved from initial Romanesque inspiration in the south of France to a Romanesque Revival building with early Renaissance design elements that were iterated with the parish's needs for accessibility to the worship hall.

In addition, the stained glass windows of the new church building were the creation of Philadelphia-based artist Paula Himmelsbach Balano. As the first woman in the United States to have her own stained glass studio that handled operations from design to installation, Balano is a notable figure in Philadelphia. A prominent member of the Plastic Club and the Philadelphia Water Color Club, Mrs. Balano's studio was located at 22nd Street and Spring Garden until the Great Depression when she moved it to Germantown.

Paula Himmelsbach Balano was born in Germany in 1877 and moved with her family to Philadelphia two years later. She apprenticed with Nicola D'Ascenzo in stained glass and created her own studio in 1925, preferring to work in the Gothic Revival style, but producing other works as commissioned.⁹ Her projects included windows for the Unitarian Church of Germantown, St. Stephen's Roman Catholic Church on North Broad Street, and St. Peter Episcopal Church & Rectory in Germantown. A 1916 review of her show for the Plastic Club raved that "her work is striking and individual" describing the watercolor works from trips to Greece, that "she exercises a clever handling of her medium in the expression of subject.. with much of the attitude of mind of an architect in rendering an old building for purposes of practical study."¹⁰

The artistic work of Paula Himmelsbach Balano at the windows was praised by the architect in his dedicatory speech in November 1928. "All the designs of these windows as well as the painting of all the figure medallions represents the work of one artist, P. H. Balano and has consumed the greater part of one year to produce. To her insight and genius must be accorded a large share of the praise given this magnificent church for the windows constitute a large part of the wall. They control the light of the entire church and in addition they decorate and beautify the whole."¹¹

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

The church at 725 East Westmoreland Street is a grand scaled building sited within an entire city block in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia, surrounded on all sides by dense rowhouse development. Upon immediate approach to the church, its impressive size and scale dwarf the neighboring working class rowhouses. The streets on either side of the church are quite narrow, making it difficult to impossible to take photographs of any flat elevation. The

⁹ Sandra L. Tatman, Philadelphia Architects and Buildings website, Athenaeum of Philadelphia.

¹⁰ "Art and Artists Pass in Review," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 23, 1916, 24.

¹¹ *Church of the Ascension of Our Lord 50th Anniversary Souvenir Book*, Ascension of Our Lord Church, 31-34. Source: Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

building itself extends out to the public right of way at both the north and south elevations, making the experience of the church, especially along Westmoreland and Cornwall Streets, a rather intimate one. On the author's visit to the site on a hot July day, neighbors were resting in the shade of the church against the north wall at Cornwall Street.

The church is a character-defining feature of this eastern portion of Kensington, rising as if an Italian village church surrounded by ordinary houses. The church, "with its towering columns and bell tower and interior that brought to mind the churches of Europe, was proudly nicknamed by parishioners the Cathedral of Kensington."¹² The density of low rowhouses surrounding the church block on several small streets, carved early in the twentieth century, contributes to the feel of a European village the center of which is a venerable cathedral. The regularity of the rowhouse development is broken unexpectedly by the grand basilica, providing a deviation to the repetition of the workingman's rowhouse archetype. The entire church complex provides an impressive backdrop to this residential neighborhood north of Allegheny Avenue.

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

Ascension of Our Lord Roman Catholic Church was founded in 1899 by Father Dennis Broughal in an unused barber shop at 3018 Kensington Avenue.¹³ The store became a chapel which became one of the most important Roman Catholic parishes in Philadelphia for the next century. Over the course of those one hundred years, the parish of Ascension of Our Lord has been involved with direct and active charitable outreach within and outside of its immediate community. While the parish seems to have been founded mostly by working-class Irish-Americans, the congregation's mission has been deep and wide, reaching all races, ethnicities, and income levels. Looking outward beyond ethnic ties and associations, the Ascension of Our Lord Church has from its inception been a source of "spiritual nourishment, a beacon of hope, and a wellspring of educational enrichment to its neighborhood."¹⁴

The number of congregants of this growing faith community soon exceeded the confines of the store. In early 1900, led by Father Broughal, a plot of land was purchased at the northeast corner of Westmoreland and F Streets taking up the entire block. Here, plans were initially made to erect a school building and a chapel and one year later, on May 27, 1900, the chapel

¹² Mike Newall, "Once the Cathedral of Kensington, now a heroin shooting gallery," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 8, 2017.

¹³ *Church of the Ascension of Our Lord 75th Anniversary Souvenir Book*, (Hackensack, NJ: Custombook, Inc., 1974), 9. Source: Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

¹⁴ Citation, City of Philadelphia City Council, September 12, 1999. Source: Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

was dedicated by the Archbishop.¹⁵ Plans for a rectory were made one year later and on March 11, 1901, groundbreaking was held for the excavation of the basement which was completed in February 1902. In 1906, two houses were purchased for a convent and one year later was expanded upward due to the large number of pupils enrolling in the growing community.¹⁶

In 1914, ground was broken for a permanent church structure, although completion would be impeded by the early discovery of a creek under the property, and by war and economic crises. Additionally, there was turnover amongst the design team in that fourteen year time span between groundbreaking and dedication. Architects Henon & Boyle received the commission after Boyle's father Rowland W. Boyle had designed earlier structures for the parish. James Boyle himself died in 1918 during the design and construction phases after which time Paul Henon's successor firm Henon-Hoffman Co. took over. Despite partner William Hoffman's death in 1925, Henon was present for the dedication in November 1928 alongside the visionary Father Broughal.

In the 25th Anniversary Souvenir Book for the church, published in 1924, it was stated that "today, Ascension ranks among the foremost parishes of the diocese. Its brief history has been a magnificent one. Its growth has been magic. From a modest beginning it has risen to lofty heights. From a handful of people it has spread out into a mighty congregation. From a tiny mustard seed it has, through the zeal of its pastor, the energy of his assistants, the fidelity of its people, evolved into a bulwark of Christianity."¹⁷

The completion of the church brought on a huge indebtedness that was supplemented by the stock market crash one year later in 1929. In 1934, Father Broughal, in declining health, resigned as pastor of Ascension of Our Lord which was struggling under crushing debt of nearly \$850,000.¹⁸ Far from heralding the dissipation of the parish, a new rector, William J. Casey, was recruited to Ascension of Our Lord and proceeded to execute plans to relieve the debt "that hung like a millstone around the collective parish neck."¹⁹ Solvency eventually came to the church and by 1954, capital improvements projects could newly be undertaken. The parish seemed to thrive well into the 1980s after which time changing neighborhood demographics and the loyalty of the descendants of early families could no longer be reliable indicators of church health.

Ascension of Our Lord Church celebrated its 100th Anniversary in 1999. As proof of the parish's importance in the life of the neighborhood and the city, the proclamations issued by municipal

¹⁵ *Ascension of Our Lord 1899-1999: 100th Anniversary Souvenir*, September 12, 1999. Source: Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Church of the Ascension of Our Lord 25th Anniversary Souvenir Book*, September 1924. Source: Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

¹⁸ *Church of the Ascension of Our Lord 75th Anniversary Souvenir Book*, (Hackensack, NJ: Custombook, Inc., 1974), 23. Source: Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

and Commonwealth authorities testified to the impact of the church over the course of the past century. Then-governor Tom Ridge indicated that the congregation of Ascension of Our Lord Parish has “worked hard to preserve a spiritual legacy in the Kensington community...to unify Philadelphia’s unique and spiritual community under the guiding principles of faith, hope, and love.”²⁰ According to a Citation from the City Council of the City of Philadelphia, Ascension of Our Lord is “an integral part of the bustling community of Irish-American families, commerce and industry” that “English as a Second Language, literacy, Catholic Social Services, a food bank, and a resume and job placement service are only a few of the community outreach programs housed and administered at Ascension of Our Lord.”²¹ The diversity of both the church’s parishioners and charitable partners is particularly noteworthy. Then-mayor Ed Rendell in a Proclamation called the church “one of the outstanding houses of worship in the City, instrumental in providing the strengths needed to build a diverse parish community” and “it has responded to a diverse congregation of Hispanic, Asian, African American, Caucasian, and Philippino [sic] parishioners” and the “Church also considers all ages, races, and income of parishioners in networking” with several area social service groups.²² In a personal letter to then-pastor Rev. Michael McCleane, Rendell spoke of the history of outreach saying, “founded in 1899, under the pastorship of Reverend Dennis Broughal and Archbishop Patrick Ryan, Ascension’s many outreach programs have touched the lives of Philadelphians of all ages and backgrounds. Located in a community consisting of neighbors of all ages, races and income, Ascension has had a strong commitment to those in need.”²³

Unfortunately, the church was unable to extend its mission much into the twenty-first century. Dwindling numbers of families sent their children to the parish school or showed up on Sundays. The Archdiocese closed the church in 2012 and sold it to New Philadelphia Investments in 2014. The glorious Balano stained glass windows were sold to The Diocese of Raleigh in North Carolina for installation at the Cathedral of the Holy Name of Jesus, and the window openings in the upper church were subsequently infilled with clear glass.²⁴ The latest chapter in the church’s history is particularly gruesome and speaks to the ills that unite its fate with that of its immediate neighborhood. McPherson Square is today a few streets south of Ascension of Our Lord down F Street, and is considered ground zero of the current opioid epidemic that is festering in Philadelphia. Proximity to McPherson Square and to Kensington Avenue under the elevated tracks of SEPTA’s Market-Frankford line has meant that Ascension of Our Lord has been an attractive shelter for area addicts. At some point after the church’s closing in 2012 through 2017 when a Philadelphia Inquirer column exposed the presence of a

²⁰ Letter of congratulations, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, September 12, 1999. Source: Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

²¹ Citation, City of Philadelphia City Council, September 12, 1999. Source: Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

²² Proclamation, City of Philadelphia, Ascension of Our Lord Church Day, September 12, 1999. Source: Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

²³ Letter to Ascension of Our Lord Church, Mayor Edward G. Rendell, City of Philadelphia, September 12, 1999. Source: Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

²⁴ Christopher Mote, “Philly’s Pain, Raleigh’s Gain,” *Hidden City Philadelphia*, January 29, 2014.

large number of addicted squatters, the church has been in the crosshairs of an epidemic that has been plaguing the city and country for several years, with no easy solutions in sight. Fires have broken out in the rear of the building twice. After that 2017 exposé in which the church building was erroneously blamed for the problems and its demolition proposed, the squatters were cleared out and the building was made even more inaccessible by boxing up the front stairwells leading from the street on Westmoreland to the south entry doors.²⁵

Conclusion

The former Roman Catholic Church of the Ascension of Our Lord in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia is a shining example of Italian Romanesque Revival architecture by one of the city and country's preeminent ecclesiastical architecture firms, Henon & Boyle. Its siting as a glorious basilica towering over a dense rowhouse neighborhood within the city's street grid makes it a particularly noteworthy area landmark. The parish's over one hundred year old history in Philadelphia contributed to the social, religious and charitable strength of the city without regard to the race, ethnicity, or income of its parishioners or care recipients. The church's demise in 2012 coincided with a rise in the opioid epidemic making it a target of squatters and accelerating the descent of the building itself. However, the history and surviving architectural glory of the building make it a noteworthy and historically important witness to the religious and social heritage of Philadelphia.

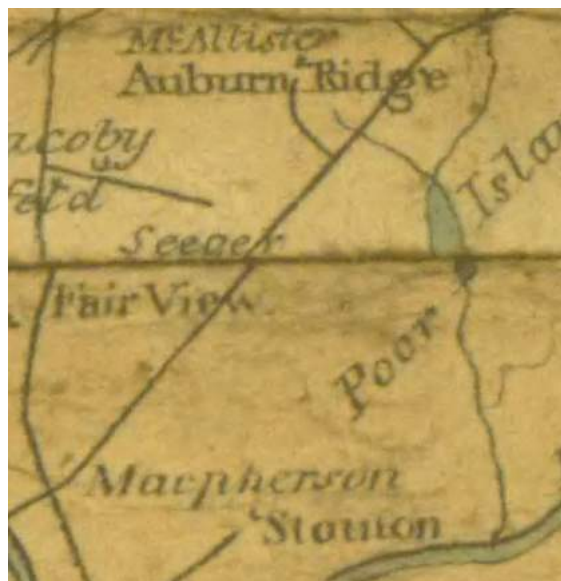


Fig. 19. John Hills, *A Plan of the City of Philadelphia and Environs*, 1808. The rectangular area indicates the approximate future location of Ascension of Our Lord north of William McPherson's house in the northern liberties of Philadelphia.

²⁵ Mike Newall, "Once the Cathedral of Kensington, now a heroin shooting gallery," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 8, 2017.



Fig. 20. Smedley's 1862 *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia* shows the city's street grid overlaid onto what was still farmland and woods in the Kensington neighborhood.



Fig. 21. G.W. Bromley's *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia* from 1910 shows the block where the entire Ascension of Our Lord would eventually be built amidst dense rowhouse development. In 1910, only the school building and a rectory had been constructed.

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Fig. 22. US Works Progress Administration's *Land Use Map of Philadelphia*, 1942, shows the completed infill of the surrounding neighborhood with the Ascension church, school and convent.



Fig. 23. An "as-built" photograph of Ascension of Our Lord Church in 1928. William Rittase, photographer. Source: Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Hoffman-Henon Collection.



Fig. 24. West elevation, 1928. William Rittase, photographer. Source: Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Hoffman-Henon Collection.



Fig. 25. Interior of the sanctuary from the altar looking back to the south entrance, 1928. William Rittase, photographer. Source: Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Hoffman-Henon Collection.



Fig. 26. View of the altar, 1928. William Rittase, photographer. Source: Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Hoffman-Henon Collection.

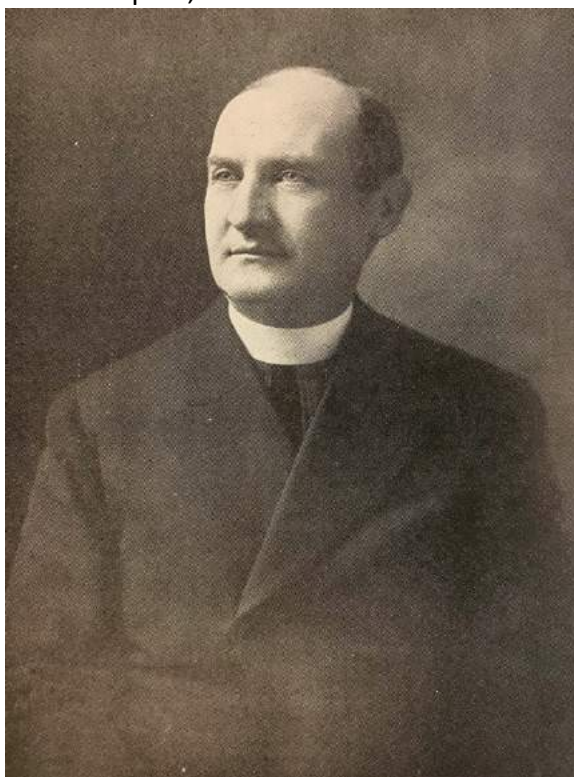


Fig. 27. Father Dennis Broughal, founder of Ascension of Our Lord Roman Catholic Church, Kensington, Philadelphia. From the 1924 25th Anniversary Souvenir Book.

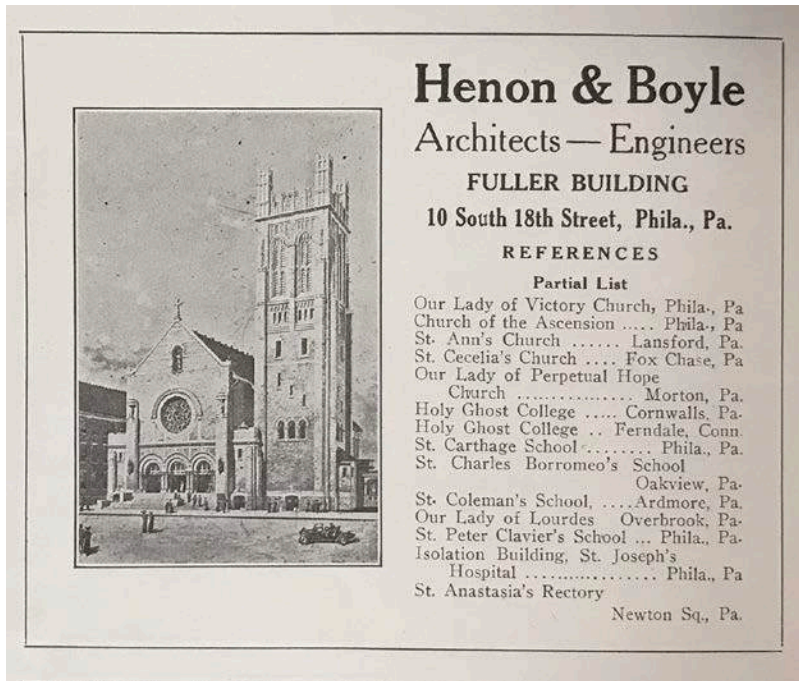


Fig. 28. Advertisement for Henon & Boyle from 1910. Source: Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Hoffman-Henon Collection.



Fig. 29. An undated photograph of Paul J. Henon, Jr., and his architectural practice, presumably after the 1918 death of James Boyle and the 1921 partnership with William Hoffman. Source: Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Hoffman-Henon Collection.

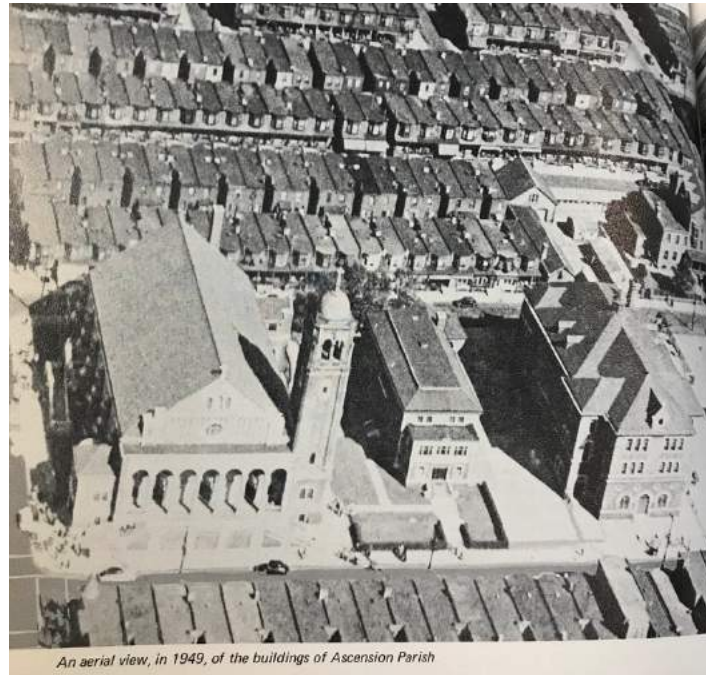


Fig. 30. 1949 view of the parish of Ascension of Our Lord from the 1974 75th Anniversary Souvenir Book. Source: Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

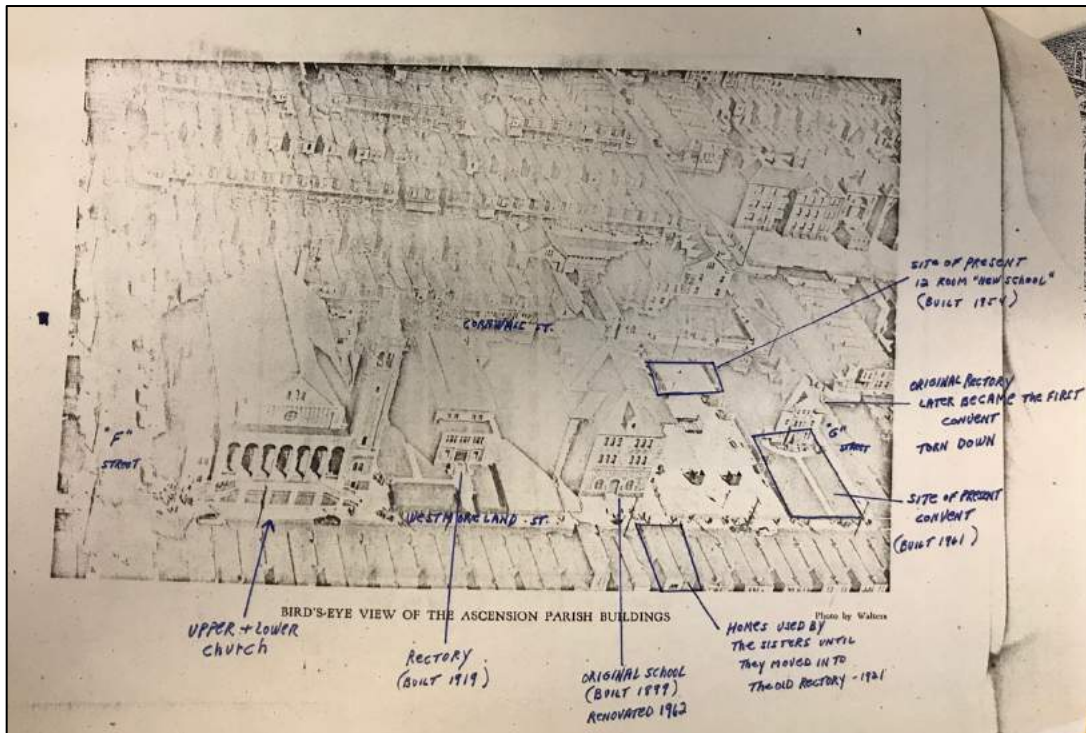


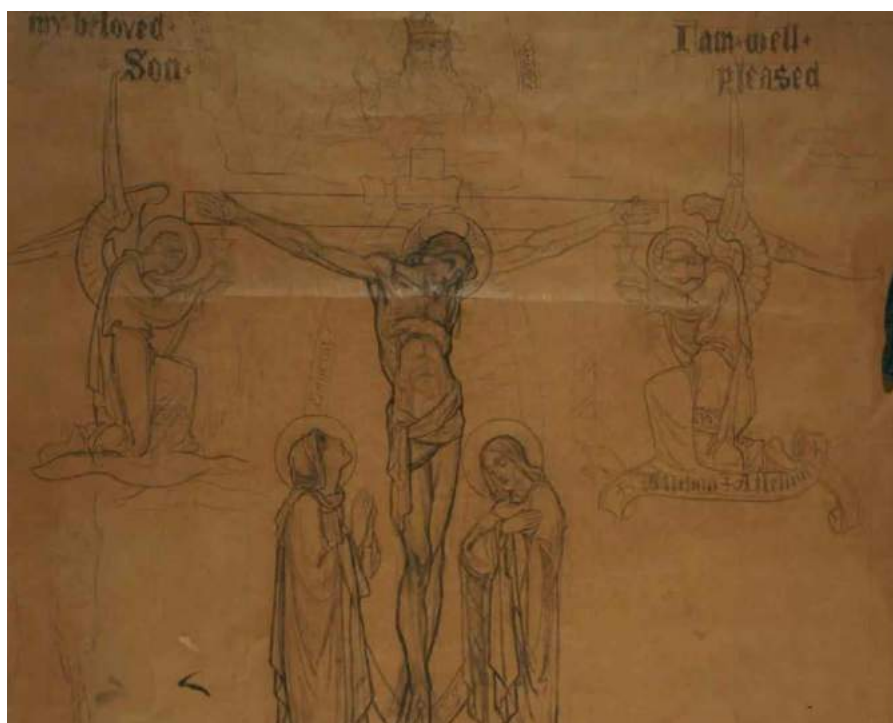
Fig. 31. Map of the Ascension of Our Lord complex from "A History of the Ascension of Our Lord Parish," by William Coneghen for Systematic Theology 606, unnamed school, May 22, 1971.



Fig. 32. An undated photo of stained glass artist Paula Himmelsbach Balano of Germantown, Philadelphia. Source: Beyer Studio website.



Fig. 33. An undated portrait of Ms. Balano from the 1999 Ascension of Our Lord Souvenir Book. Source: Catholic Archives, Philadelphia.



Detail of a sketch for a stained glass window by Paula Himmelsbach Balano. Source: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, The Plastic Club Collection.



Fig. 33. Squatters in the sanctuary with Catholic church representatives. Photographer David Maialetti, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 2017.

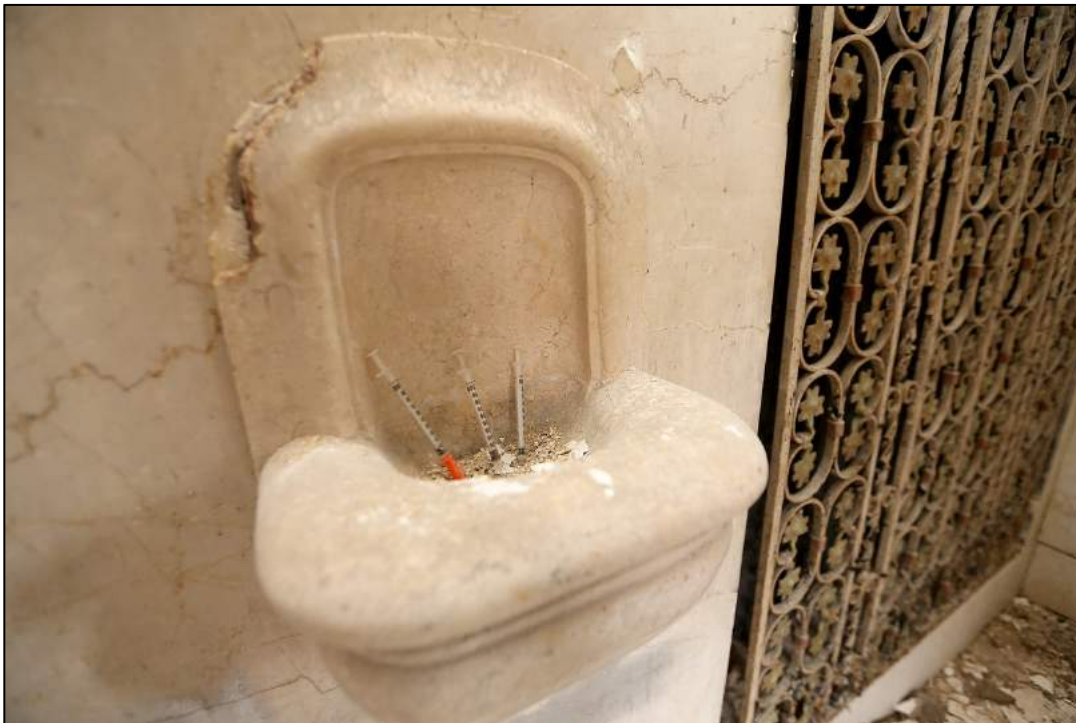


Fig. 34. Marble benetier, chipped and littered with used needles. Photographer David Maialetti, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 2017.

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