

**ADDRESS: 20-24 N 40TH ST**

Name of Resource: Hotel Powelton; Powelton Cafe

Proposed Action: Designation

Property Owner: Bridge Venture LLC

Nominator: Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia

Staff Contact: Kim Chantry, kim.chantry@phila.gov, 215-686-7660

**OVERVIEW:** This nomination proposes to designate the property at 20-24 N. 40<sup>th</sup> Street and list it on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The nomination contends that the former Hotel Powelton, constructed in 1893, satisfies Criteria for Designation A, C, and J. Under Criterion A, the nomination outlines the building's association with Albert C. Barnes, who operated his laboratory out of the building from the 1900s to the 1920s. Under Criterion C, the nomination argues that the building survives as one of relatively few intact Queen Anne structures in its immediate West Powelton neighborhood. Under Criterion J, the nomination contends that the Powelton Café chapter of the building's history exemplifies the cultural, economic, social and historical heritage of the community, as a leading venue for African American musicians and audiences to gather in the 1940s and 1950s.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:** The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the property at 20-24 N. 40<sup>th</sup> Street satisfies Criteria for Designation A, C, and J.



**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: 20-24 N. 40<sup>th</sup> Street

Postal code: 19104 Councilmanic District: 3rd

**2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Historic Name: Hotel Powelton; Powelton Cafe

Current/Common Name: My Pharmacy

**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: Retail and apartments

**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 1893 to c.1965

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1893

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: \_\_\_\_\_

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: Thomas. C. Sloan, builder

Original owner: Charles Sauers

Other significant persons: Albert C. Barnes

**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 for Greater Philadelphia Date Sept. 24, 2019

bentleech@gmail.com;

Name with Title Benjamin Leech, consultant Email patrick@preservationalliance.com

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: 9/24/2019

☒ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete Date: 10/9/2019

Date of Notice Issuance: 10/10/2019

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: Bridge Ventures LLC

Address: 509 Conshohocken Road

City: Penn Valley State: PA Postal Code: 19072

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

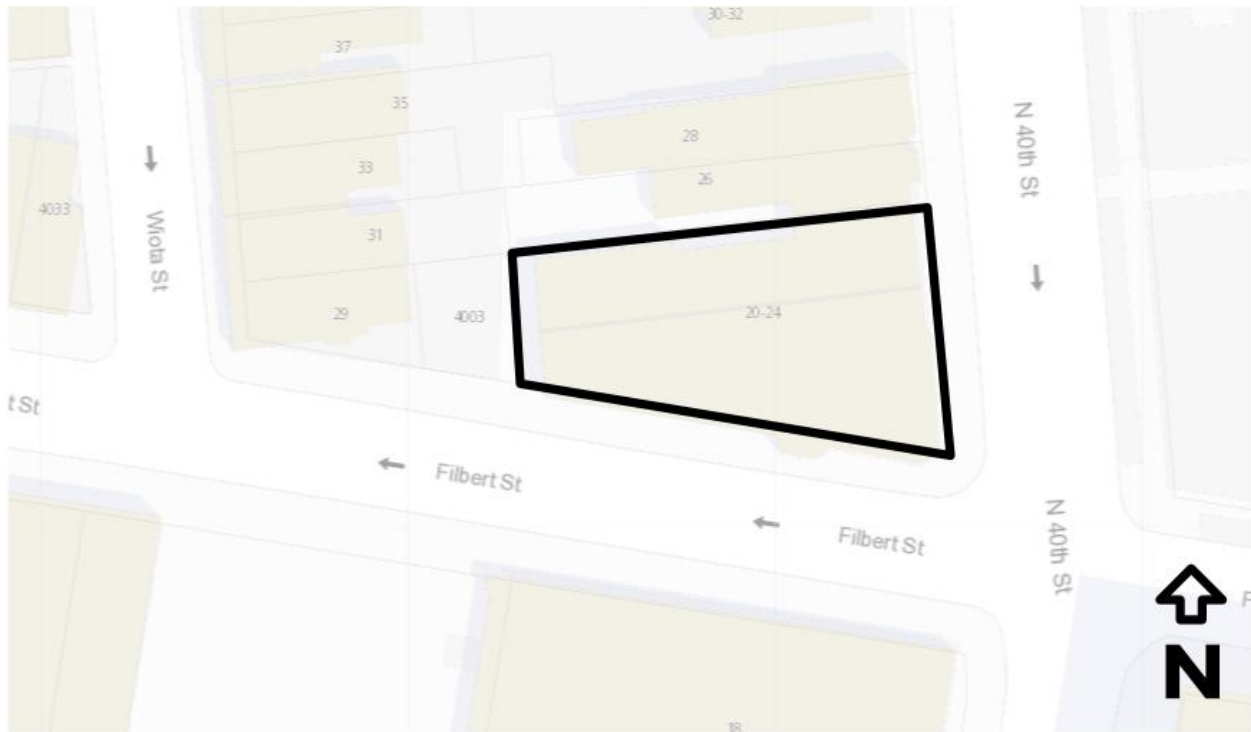
Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Final Action: \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Designated ☐ Rejected

12/3/18

## 5. Boundary Description



Beginning at the corner formed by the intersection of the Northerly side of Filbert Street with the Westerly side of 40th Street; thence running North 78 degrees, 59 minutes, West along the North side of Filbert Street, 114 feet 2 inches to a point; thence North 1 degrees, 1 minute, 30 seconds West 34 feet, 7- $\frac{7}{8}$  inches to a point; thence North 85 degrees, 4 minutes, 57 seconds East 109 feet, 10 inches to the West side of the said 40th Street and thence along the said 40th Street, South 2 degrees, 50 minutes, 8.2 seconds East 65\* feet, 11- $\frac{1}{2}$  inches to the point and place of beginning.

*\* Note: The three most recent recorded deeds for this property contain a transcription error recording this measurement as 6 feet, 11/1-2 inches. The correct measurement is taken from Deed Book CAB 524, page 63 (March 28, 1957).*





Figure 1: 20-24 N. 40<sup>th</sup> Street, south and east elevations

## 6. Description

The former Hotel Powelton is a three-story, flat-roofed, brick and stone building occupying an irregular quadrilateral parcel located at the northwest corner of North 40th and Filbert Streets in the West Powelton neighborhood of Philadelphia. The building faces south onto Filbert Street and east onto 40th Street, with a prominent domed oriel crowning the building's angled southeast corner. The building contains a ground-floor retail space (currently a pharmacy) with an entrance along 40th Street, with ground-floor and upper-story apartment units with multiple entrances along both 40th and Filbert Streets [Fig. 1]. The building was constructed in 1893 by the builder Thomas C. Sloan for hotel owner Charles Sauers.



*Figure 2: East (40<sup>th</sup> Street) elevation*

The building's primary east elevation [Fig. 2] is nine bays wide and extends approximately 66 feet along 40th Street. Clad primarily in buff-colored brick with limestone trim, the building's corner oriel and a projecting second-story bay window are clad in pressed metal. A bracketed cornice spans the roofline, interrupted over its third and fourth bays by a gabled parapet. A bracketed pressed metal pent eave marks the retail entrance at the building's south end, and rock-faced limestone arches cap the building's remaining ground-floor windows and doorways. A limestone arch also spans the area above the projecting bay and below the gabled parapet. Limestone belt courses form the lintels and sills of the second and third floor windows, which currently feature replacement double-hung sashes. Other modern alterations include modified and infilled window and door openings across the ground floor, contemporary doors and retail windows, a painted brick and mosaic tile storefront area, and contemporary retail signage. The building shares a northern party wall with an adjacent three-story rowhouse. The rear of the north elevation behind the rowhouse is not visible from the public right-of-way.





Figure 3: South (Filbert Street) elevation detail



Figure 4: South (Filbert Street) and west (rear) elevations

The building's south elevation [Figs. 3-4] is ten bays wide and extends approximately 110 feet along Filbert Street. Also clad in buff brick and limestone, the Filbert Street elevation features a stucco-clad (originally shingled) second-story projecting octagonal bay topped by a third-story cylindrical bay window and tower (originally domed, currently flat-roofed). Between the tower and the corner oriel is a chimney-like corbelled brick pier with oval oculi rising above the cornice-capped roofline. The windows across all three floors are topped by flat limestone lintels with oversized keystones; all windows feature replacement sashes, and many window openings have been partially infilled. A three-story brick and stucco addition at the building's far west end [Fig. 4] was constructed in 2010, replacing a short one-story rear porch. The addition is unfenestrated along Filbert Street and features paired double-hung windows and stucco cladding across its rear west facade.



## 7. Significance

Constructed in 1893 as the Hotel Powelton, the distinctive turret-crowned corner property at 20-24 N. 40th Street has played a significant and multifaceted role in the economic, cultural, and social heritage of the surrounding West Powelton neighborhood and the City of Philadelphia at large, and stands today as a relatively intact architectural specimen with an unlikely and exceptional cultural history. Commissioned by German immigrant Charles Sauers and constructed by the builder Thomas C. Sloan, the building first served as a handsome yet middling hotel and tavern located near the busy commercial hub at 40th and Market Streets. While Hotel Powelton remained in operation through the First World War, in 1902 a portion of the building was converted into a small chemical laboratory and factory by Alfred C. Barnes and Herman Hille, who patented and manufactured the highly successful antiseptic drug Argyrol at this location. The short-lived Barnes & Hille partnership dissolved in 1907, but the subsequent A.C. Barnes Company continued to manufacture Argyrol and other pharmaceuticals here for another two decades. The enterprise was so successful that Barnes acquired the entire building in 1919, converting the remainder of the former hotel into a factory notable for its progressive working conditions and its integrated workforce. After Barnes sold his company and its Argyrol formula to the New York-based Zonite Products Corporation in 1929, the building was sold and converted to apartments. A third significant chapter in the history of the site followed in 1939, when the Powelton Café opened in the hotel's former ground-floor corner tavern. As the surrounding neighborhood evolved into the "Black Bottom," a predominantly African American working-class district driven by the Great Migration of Southern rural African Americans to the industrialized North, the Powelton Café emerged as a leading venue for African American musicians and audiences. Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Dinah Washington, Lionel Hampton, and Screamin' Jay Hawkins were among the many seminal performers hosted by the club at the height of its popularity in the 1940s and 1950s.

Clearly meriting listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, the property meets the following criteria for historic designation as set forth in the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Ordinance §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;

C: Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style;

and

J: Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

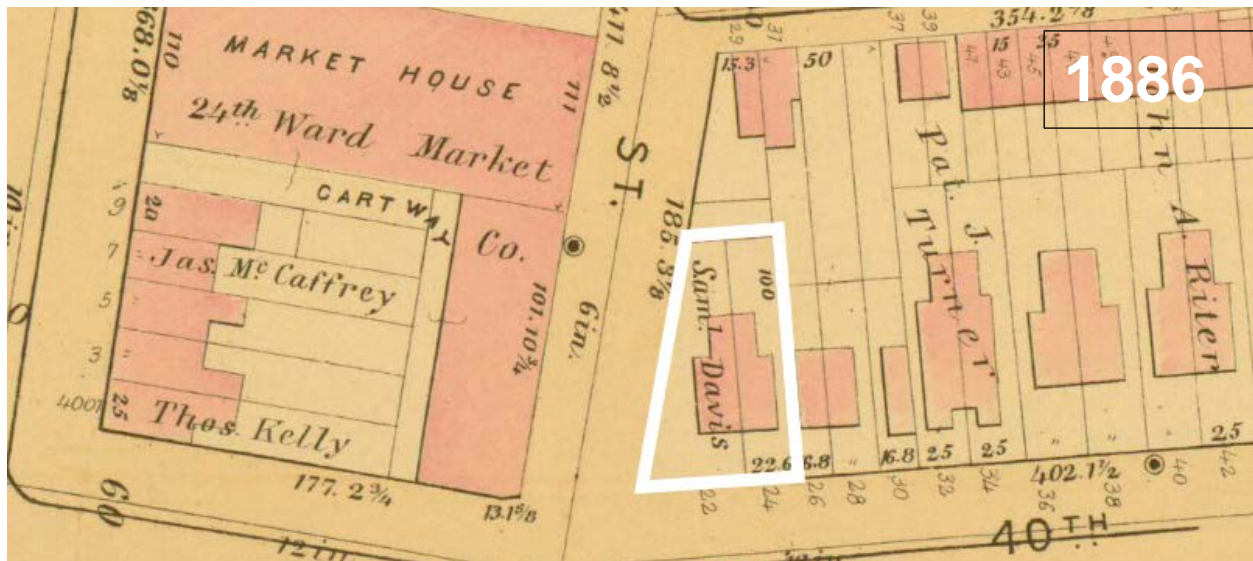


Figure 5: Atlas of West Philadelphia, 24<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> Wards, William G. Baist. 1886, Plate 5

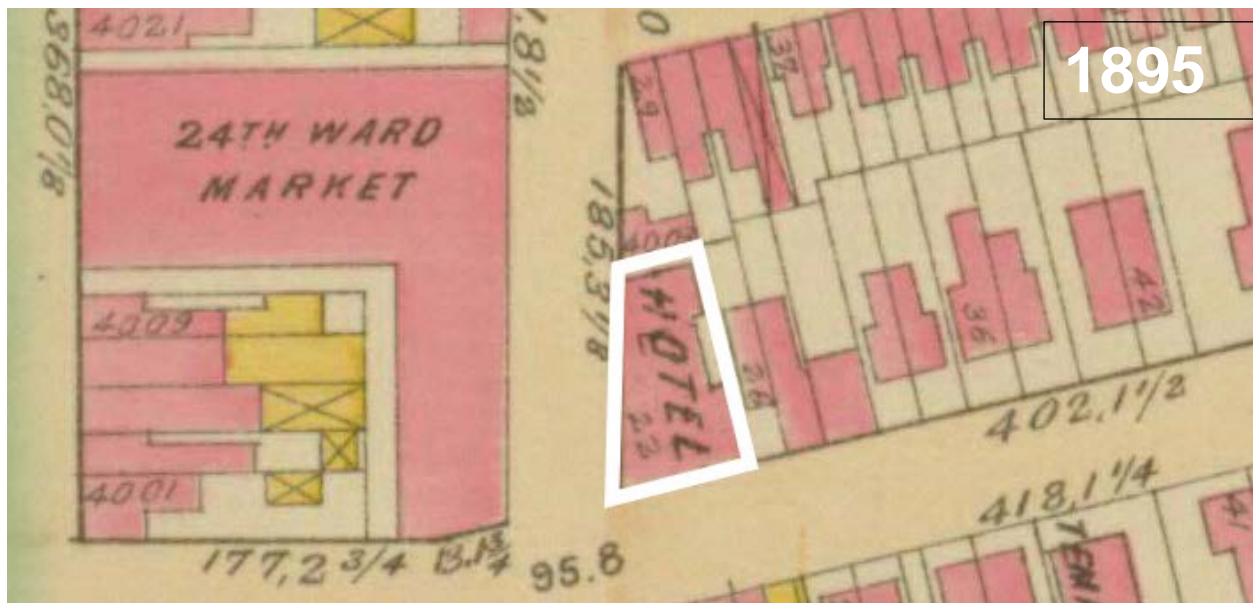


Figure 6: Atlas of the City of Philadelphia, W.G. Bromley and Co., 1895, Plate 10.

## Hotel Powelton (1893-1919)

In 1893, Charles Sauers purchased a pair of existing residences at the northwest corner of 40th and Filbert Streets, just north of the 24th Ward Market House and the bustling streetcar hub at 40th and Market Streets in West Philadelphia [Fig. 5], with plans to erect a “stylish hotel and restaurant” for \$15,000.<sup>1</sup> Sauers, a forty-one-year old German immigrant, was one of many new hoteliers active in West Philadelphia in the 1890s, an era when surging populations and increased commercial activities were reshaping the area’s original suburban character.

Demolishing the existing structures, Sauers engaged the builder Thomas C. Sloan to erect the three-story Hotel Powelton on two adjacent parcels at 20-22 and 24 North 40th Streets. Sloan’s plans were highly characteristic of the eclectic Queen Anne style popular at the time, featuring a prominent onion-domed corner turret, a picturesque roofline ornamented with a gabled parapet, bracketed cornice, and cornice-head finials, projecting bay windows clad in pressed metal and wooden shingles, leaded glass windows, and Romanesque limestone arches spanning the ground floor and third-floor balcony.

Perhaps related to the Panic of 1893, however, Sauers’ project was hampered by financial difficulties from the outset. The *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide* recorded a long series of mechanics’ liens filed during the building’s construction, which was nevertheless completed by 1894.<sup>2</sup> In February of the same year, the property was seized and eventually sold at sheriff’s sale as two parcels, 20-22 N. 40th Street and 24 N. 40th Street.<sup>3</sup> While Sauers lost control of the real estate, he continued to reside at and operate the Hotel Powelton through the First World War, and eventually repurchased half of the building (the southern parcel at 20-22 N. 40th Street) in 1907.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Over in West Philadelphia,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 12, 1893, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> At least forty such liens were filed by dozens of subcontractors and suppliers between November 1893 and May 1894. While indicating Sauers’ unstable finances during the project’s construction, the liens also provide a helpful record of the building’s original materials, fixtures and finishes, including products from the Eastern Hydraulic Press Brick Company, Quaker City Mortar Company, Howard Foundry Works, Sharpless & Watts, Philadelphia Iron Cornice Company, and the Horn, Brannen & Forsyth Company. *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide*, Vols 8-9, <http://www.philageohistory.org/BuildersGuide/>

<sup>3</sup> “Sheriff Sales,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Feb. 19, 1894, p. 5; “Sheriff Sales,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 23, 1894, p. 6; “Sheriff Sales,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 13, 1895, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Deed Abstracts, 056N10-003 and 056N10-012, Philadelphia City Archives.





Figure 7: Official Office Building Directory and Architectural Handbook of Philadelphia. *Philadelphia: Commercial Publishing and Directory Co., 1899, p. 436.*



Figure 8: "Hotel Powelton in Philadelphia, PA." Warren-Ehret Company Photograph Collection, n.d. (1890-1910), Hagley Digital Archives. [https://digital.hagley.org/2002251\\_2\\_011](https://digital.hagley.org/2002251_2_011)



Figure 9: Detail of Figure 8, Hagley Digital Archives.

Assorted newspaper citations, directory listings, and archival documents help paint an evocative picture of the hotel's operations under Sauers' proprietorship. Surviving early photographs [Figs. 7-9] depict a structure with prominent "Hotel Powelton" signage incorporated into the corner turret, a leaded glass corner transom reading "Sauers," and an ornate freestanding signpost advertising beers and whiskies available at the "Hotel Powelton, Chas. Sauers, Prop." A side entrance on Filbert Street led to a "Ladies Cafe." Fresh oysters were sold on the sidewalk near another entrance to a basement rathskeller that originally featured "shuffleboards which attracted boys," and was converted to a banquet hall in 1896.<sup>5</sup> Classified listings advertised "handsomely finished rooms" on the "European plan," and society pages noted the occasional club meeting of

<sup>5</sup> "Want to Give Banquets," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 28, 1896, p. 4.

the West Philadelphia Business Men's Association, the Belmont Cycling Club, the Homing Pigeon Club, and others.<sup>6</sup>

An interesting description of the hotel and its proprietor survives courtesy of the FBI, whose predecessor Bureau of Investigation monitored suspected pro-German activities during the First World War. In January 1918, Agent Todd Daniel filed the following report:

*A Mr. Kearney called at the office and stated that Charles Sauers, Proprietor of the Hotel Powelton, was pro-German. He exhibited an advertisement which Sauers had inserted in the papers in which Sauers had advertised his hotel as a place where German cooking could be obtained. Kearney stated that a great many Germans could be found around the Powelton Hotel for this reason. The matter will be investigated.<sup>7</sup>*

Another report followed in June 1918:

*A Mr. Joseph Evans of 226 South 40th Street, this city, reported that a Charles Sauers, proprietor of the Powelton Hotel, 40th & Filbert Streets, this city, advised a Mrs. Conners of 224 South 40th Street, not to buy [war] Bonds, thrift stamps, etc., as the Germans will take this country and she will never get her money back.*

...

*I next called on Charles Sauers, the proprietor of the Powelton Hotel, 40th & Filbert Streets. Confronting Mr. Sauers with the statement made by Mrs. Conners, he stated that although he was born in Germany in 1852, he became a citizen of the United States 43 yrs. Ago. At present, he is 64 yrs. old. He stated "I am a better citizen of the United States than many Americans." He has nine brothers, born in Germany, who came to this country and all became naturalized citizens. His parents likewise came to this country. His father died in Philadelphia some years ago. All members of his family became American citizens.*

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<sup>6</sup> Miscellaneous classifieds, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan. 23, 1895; April 8, 1895; May 10, 1896.

<sup>7</sup> Investigative Reports of the Bureau of Investigation, Old German Files, 1909-21, <https://www.fold3.com/document/1283622/>



After learning that Sauers sold nearly \$30,000 in Third Liberty Loan Bonds from the Hotel Powelton, the Bureau apparently dropped their investigation.<sup>8</sup>

### **Barnes & Hille, Chemists (1902-1908)**

While the Hotel Powelton occupied the southern half of the building (20-22 N. 40th Street) through 1919, the northern half (24 N. 40th Street) was rented separately to a variety of commercial tenants following its sheriff's sale in 1894. By far the most notable of these early occupants were two young chemists who rented the property beginning in 1902: Philadelphia native Albert C. Barnes and recent German immigrant Herman Hille. The two men met in Heidelberg, Germany in 1899, where Barnes studied pharmacology while on leave from an advertising and marketing job with local drug manufacturer H.K. Mulford and Company. Barnes first recruited Hille for a position at Mulford, but once resettled in Philadelphia by 1900, the pair began moonlighting in their own makeshift laboratory, experimenting with new drug compounds in the hopes of launching their own company. After perfecting the formula for Argyrol, a silver nitrate compound used to treat gonorrhea and other infectious diseases, the pair left Mulford in 1902 to found Barnes & Hille, Chemists. The company's new headquarters at 24 N. 40th Street included laboratories for the manufacture of Argyrol and other drugs, shipping facilities to distribute their products to pharmacies nationwide and abroad, and living quarters for Hille. Though later biographers of Barnes would invariably describe the location as "eight rooms in a hotel or what used to be a hotel [in] a poor Negro neighborhood," "a rundown three-story building... in the midst of a poor, predominantly black neighborhood," and "a rundown building which used to be a hotel," in fact the building was then still relatively new, adjacent to the still-operating Hotel Powelton, and located in a still-predominantly white, middle-class

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

neighborhood.<sup>9</sup> After initially renting the property, Barnes and Hille purchased 24 N. 40th Street outright in January 1904.<sup>10</sup>

With Hille managing production and Barnes directing sales and promotion, Argyrol was an immediate and highly lucrative success, netting over \$100,000 in the firm's first year of business alone.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, prosperity did not translate into mutual trust, as the partnership between Barnes and Hille grew increasingly acrimonious over time. In 1908 the company formally dissolved, with each partner accusing the other of mismanagement and self-dealing. In a court-supervised liquidation, Barnes bought out Hille's share of the company for \$350,000 and immediately reorganized as the A.C. Barnes Company, retaining the 40th Street factory and the exclusive rights to Argyrol.<sup>12</sup>

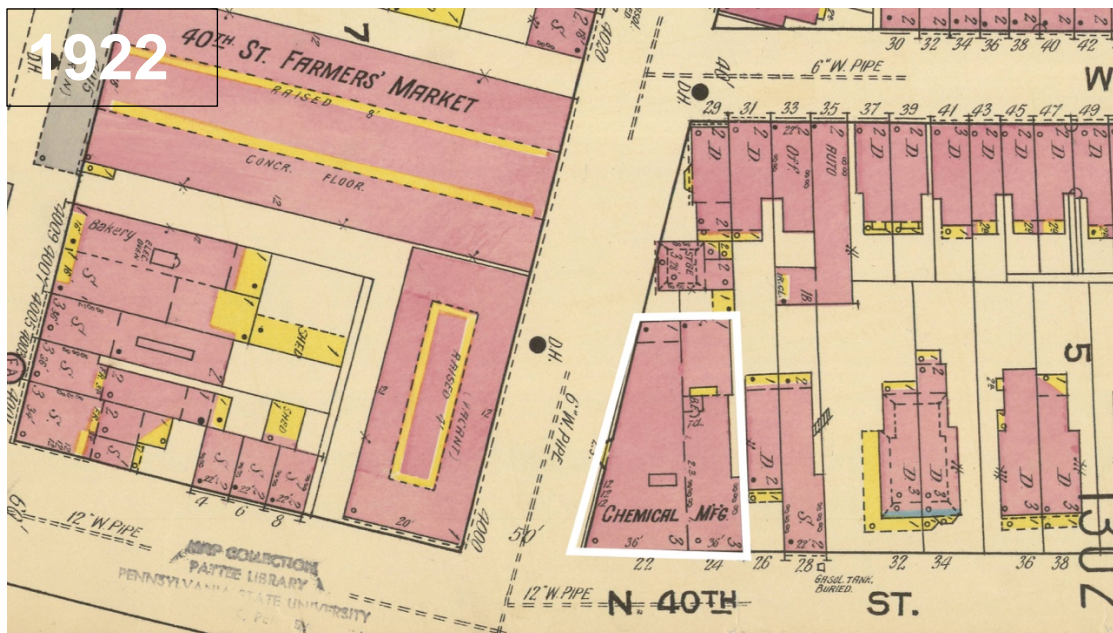


Figure 10: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Philadelphia Vol. 14, Plate 665, 1922.

<sup>9</sup> Schack, William. *Art and Argyrol: The Life and Career of Dr. Albert C. Barnes*. New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960, p. 51; Greenfeld, Howard. *The Devil & Dr. Barnes*. New York: Viking, 1987, p. 18; Meyers, Mary Ann. *Art, Education, and African-American Culture: Albert Barnes and the Science of Philanthropy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004, p. 15; Barlow, Katherine, "Plays for the Local Audience," West Philadelphia Collaborative History, <https://collaborativehistory.gse.upenn.edu/stories/plays-local-audience>

<sup>10</sup> Deed Abstract, 056N10-003, Philadelphia City Archives.

<sup>11</sup> Meyers, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Meyers, p. 18.

### A.C. Barnes Company (1908-1929)

The A.C. Barnes Company continued to manufacture Argyrol and other drugs at the 40th Street factory until 1929, eventually acquiring the Hotel Powelton parcel next door from Charles Sauers in 1919 and expanding to fill the entire building [Fig. 10].<sup>13</sup> The continued success of Argyrol not only funded Barnes' increasingly ambitious art collecting habits, a passion that began in earnest around 1912, but the factory also proved a convenient laboratory for Barnes' progressive and idealistic social and educational philosophies. Writing in *The New Republic* in 1923, Barnes himself described the A.C. Barnes Company factory as a "community plan which is basically educational in the modern conception of that term. By that is meant education as a means of growth, of direction, of personal development cooperated in by a group of people who work for their livelihood in a corporation engaged in the manufacture of chemicals originated by themselves."<sup>14</sup> Barnes believed fervently that every individual, regardless of race, class, gender, age, or educational background, was capable of self-improvement through the study of philosophy and art, and structured his business as a demonstration project for the pragmatic, humanistic philosophies of William James, John Dewey, and George Santayana. Barnes established an integrated workforce (something of a rarity at the time) and a six-hour workday organized around a voluntary, two-hour paid midday seminar. "We found that no business day need be longer than six hours of actual work, but we had to concede to the tradition that eight hours at the place of business were necessary," explained Barnes, who initially designed the seminar as a William James reading group, which over the course of a decade grew to cover the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Leo Tolstoy, John Stuart Mill, Henrik Ibsen, Bertrand Russell, and others.<sup>15</sup> Barnes also established a lending library for his workers and a factory art gallery featuring "rarely less than one hundred pictures on view at all times," likely including paintings by Pablo Picasso, Giorgio di Chirico, Amedeo Modigliani, Charles Demuth, and William Glackens.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Deed Abstract, 056N10-012, Philadelphia City Archives.

<sup>14</sup> Barnes, Albert. "The Barnes Foundation," *The New Republic*, March 14, 1923, p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66; Tang, Vivienne, "In West Philly, Finding the Source of Barnes' Fortune," *Hidden City Daily*, March 6, 2013, <https://hiddencityphila.org/2013/03/in-west-philly-finding-the-source-of-barnes-fortune/>



At the height of its production the factory employed around twenty workers, primarily African American men and white women with limited formal education. “We do not mean to convey the impression that we have developed a crown of savants, or art connoisseurs,” wrote Barnes, “but we are sure that we have stirred an intelligent interest in spiritual things created by living people and in the writings of gifted thinkers, which has been the means of stimulating business life and affording a sensible use of leisure in a class of people to whom such doors are usually locked.”<sup>17</sup> In 1922 Barnes launched his eponymous Barnes Foundation as a direct continuation of the educational program first established at his 40th Street factory, and the continued success of Argyrol funded the construction of his Paul Philippe Cret-designed galleries and personal residence in Merion, PA, which opened in 1925. Four years later, Barnes sold his company and its Argyrol formula to the New York-based Zonite Products Corporation for \$6 million in stock options, which he liquidated only three months before the October 1929 stock market crash.<sup>18</sup> Barnes spent the remainder of his life and his fortune on the Barnes Foundation and its art collection, while Argyrol production was transferred to New York. The 40th Street factory, now consolidated into a single legal parcel, was sold and converted to apartments in 1931.<sup>19</sup>

### **Powelton Café (c.1939-1965)**

A third noteworthy chapter in the life of the former Hotel Powelton began around 1939, when proprietor Lew Gold opened the Powelton Café in the building’s former corner tavern (the use of the space during Barnes’ ownership of the property, which roughly coincided with the Prohibition era, is unknown). Boasting of “America’s Most Complete Bar” in newspaper advertisements, postcards, and on a neon sign hung prominently above the well-stocked bar shelves, the café served “2268 brands of liquor, 144 brands of beer, 455 different kinds of wine, ginger beer and ginger ale from Ireland, Schweppe’s ginger beer and quinine water from London, England, 27 varieties of cheese, [and] cigars from 6c to \$1.50.” Known in the colorful parlance of the hospitality industry as a “nabe nightery,” or neighborhood nightclub, the café also

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<sup>17</sup> Barnes, p. 66.

<sup>18</sup> Greenfeld, p. 149.

<sup>19</sup> Deed Abstracts, 056N10-003, 056N10-012, and 056N10-127, Philadelphia City Archives.

featured “dancing and entertainment nightly, featuring seven all-star acts.”<sup>20</sup> These vaudeville-style shows were seemingly geared towards a white middle-class audience and featured a motley assortment of performers, including “Barney Long, emcee; Mattes and Therese, ballroom team; tap dancer Marion Adams, Matteo and his accordion, exotic Dixie Fenton, songstress Nan O’Rourke, sepia songster Charlie Ray, and New Barker and his Swingsters.”<sup>21</sup> Classified advertisements also sought “waitresses, must have experience and know how to sing.”<sup>22</sup>



Figure 11: Powelton Café, n.d, Paul J. Gutman Digital Library Collections, <http://digitalcollections.philau.edu/cdm/ref/collection/postcards/id/4105>

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<sup>20</sup> Advertisement, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 5, 1939, p. 18; “Powelton Cafe,” Paul J. Gutman Digital Library Collections, <http://digitalcollections.philau.edu/cdm/ref/collection/postcards/id/4105>; “Powelton Cafe, interior,” University of Pennsylvania Archives Digital Image Collection, [http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/archives/detail.html?id=ARCHIVES\\_20090126127](http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/archives/detail.html?id=ARCHIVES_20090126127)

<sup>21</sup> “Night Clubs Presenting Best in Entertainment,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 28, 1943, p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> Classified advertisement, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Feb. 13, 1941, p. 36.

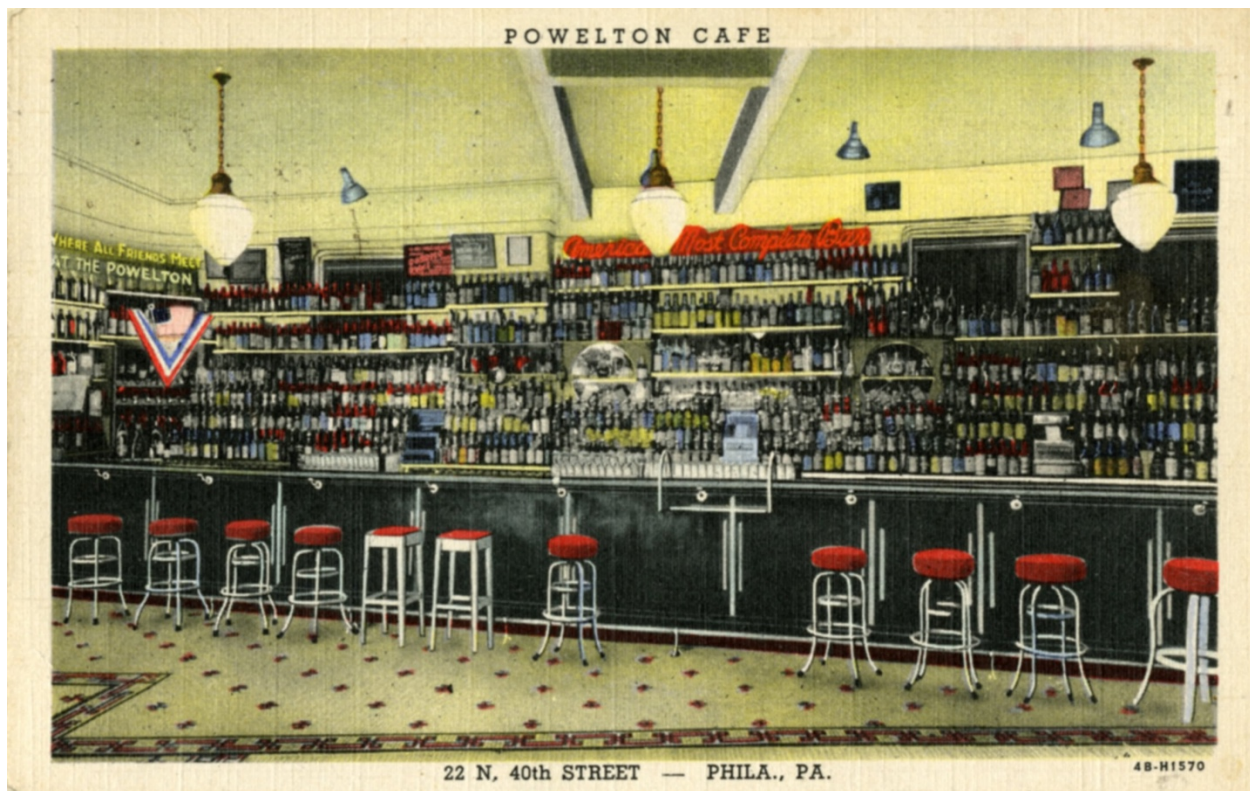


Figure 12: Powelton Café, n.d, University of Pennsylvania Archives Digital Image Collection, [http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/archives/image.html?id=ARCHIVES\\_20090126127](http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/archives/image.html?id=ARCHIVES_20090126127)

In 1945 Gold sold the Powelton Café to brothers Herman and Alexander Comroe, who soon made significant changes to the bar's entertainment program. By the end of World War Two, the African American population of West Philadelphia had grown exponentially since the start of the Great Migration three decades earlier. The surrounding neighborhood was now, or was soon to become known as, the "Black Bottom" (i.e. the predominantly African American district of West Philadelphia closest to the Schuylkill River). One block south of the bar, the 2,500-seat Fay's Theater (formerly the Knickerbocker) at 40th and Market Streets announced a "Negro only" policy in 1931, hoping to attract an African American audience generally excluded from or relegated to the upper balconies of most other theaters in the city. The short-lived policy drew immediate ire from the all-white 40th Street Business Association and led to a series of protests and counter-protests known as the "Fay's Theater Fiasco," but the theater nevertheless retained a primarily African American clientele into the 1950s, and other neighborhood businesses began to follow suit in adapting to the neighborhood's changing demographics.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Barlow, Katherine. "Jazz at Fay's," West Philadelphia Collaborative History, <https://collaborativehistory.gse.upenn.edu/stories/jazz-fays>



The newly-minted Powelton Café and Musical Bar began advertising in the *Philadelphia Tribune*, the city's primary African American newspaper, in October 1945 with a house band led by Philadelphia saxophonist Jimmy Preston, now considered a pioneer of early rhythm and blues and rock and roll.<sup>24</sup> The club's new "Harlem-style" format also included weekly Monday and Saturday jam sessions, staples of the city's jazz club circuit. By 1948 the Powelton Café was hosting exclusively African American performers, many of whom were nationally renowned (or "names," in *Billboard Magazine* lingo) at the time.<sup>25</sup> Billie Holliday, Ella Fitzgerald, Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughan, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, and Lionel Hampton all headlined multi-night stands, and WHAT disc jockey Ramon Bruce, Philadelphia's first African American dee-jay, hosted weekly live broadcasts from the club.<sup>26</sup>



Figure 13: Souvenir photo with Ella Fitzgerald at far right. Alma Fay Horn, photographer, c. 1949.  
<https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/souvenir-photo-powelton-musical-bar-1040221876>

While the Powelton Café remained in business through the 1960s, changing tastes in popular music and the growing popularity of television both took a heavy toll on the city's once-vibrant

<sup>24</sup> Advertisement, *Philadelphia Tribune*, Oct. 27, 1945, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> "Powelton, W. Philly, Goes to Negro Names," *Billboard*, Feb. 14, 1948, p. 39.

<sup>26</sup> "Vox Jox," *Billboard*, Dec. 25, 1948, p. 37; "Powelton Starts Big Name Policy," *Billboard*, July 8, 1950, p. 41; "Books Billie Holliday," *Billboard*, Dec. 9, 1950, p. 35; "Rhythm and Blues Notes," *Billboard*, Jan. 13, 1951, p. 36; "Rhythm and Blues Notes," *Billboard*, May 23, 1953, p. 166



nightclub culture, especially in African American neighborhoods beset by disinvestment, redlining, and urban renewal.<sup>27</sup> The building stood just beyond the boundaries of the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority's "University Redevelopment Unit 3" district, which leveled most of the Black Bottom neighborhood between 34th and 40th Streets, displacing more than 2,000 primarily African American residents by 1967 for the creation of the University City Science Center.<sup>28</sup> The last known advertisement for the Powelton Café appeared in the *Philadelphia Tribune* in May 1965, touting a "grand opening party" celebrating a "newly decorated restaurant."<sup>29</sup> The business presumably closed shortly thereafter.

## Conclusion

Following the redevelopment-era closure of the Powelton Café, the building was later occupied by a dry-cleaner, various short-lived nightclubs (Muscles Showplace Lounge in the 1970s, CC's Nightclub in the 1990s) and, since 2009, current tenant My Pharmacy. Its upper floors have remained occupied apartments since the 1930s. Architecturally, the building retains a high degree of integrity despite modifications to the ground-floor storefront area, various window alterations, the removal of some original cladding materials, and a small rear addition. It survives as one of relatively few intact Queen Anne structures in its immediate West Powelton neighborhood, and one with a cultural legacy of citywide and even national significance. Given the building's architectural character, its close association with Albert C. Barnes in the 1900s-1920s, and its distinguished place in African American social and musical culture of the 1940s and 1950s, the former Hotel Powelton at 20-24 North 40th Streets clearly merits listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, satisfying Criteria A, C, and J of the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Ordinance.

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<sup>27</sup> "Bar Sales Soar in Philly----And We Do Mean Sale OF Bars," *Billboard*, Feb. 19, 1949, p. 41.

<sup>28</sup> Puckett, John L. "Collateral Damage in Unit 3," West Philadelphia Collaborative History, <https://collaborativehistory.gse.upenn.edu/stories/collateral-damage-unit-3>

<sup>29</sup> Advertisement, *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 22, 1965, p. 13.

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