

ADDRESS: 5700-04 GERMANTOWN AVE

Name of Resource: Langstroth Hall; Vernon Hall

Proposed Action: Designation

Property Owner: Robert A Canter

Nominator: Adrian Trevisan

Staff Contact: Meredith Keller, meredith.keller@phila.gov, 215-686-7660

OVERVIEW: This nomination proposes to designate the property at 5700-04 Germantown Avenue and list it on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The nomination contends that the building satisfies Criteria for Designation A, E, H, and J. Under Criteria A, H, and J, the nomination contends that the prominent intersection of Germantown and Cheltenham Avenues has been at the commercial center of Germantown since its creation, and the building was constructed at the intersection to take advantage of the location's commercial and social potential. The use of the building was adapted over time to satisfy changing commercial needs. As Langstroth Hall (1859-1872), it was a type of general store catering to many small merchants on the ground floor, and various social activities above. Visions of operatic grandeur fueled by questionable financial transactions transformed it into Vernon Hall (1872-1899), followed by a period as mainstay of the Germantown commercial district under the name of The Vernon Building (1899-1925). Under Criterion E, the nomination contends that the 1920's economic boom provided new owners with the means to commission prominent Philadelphia architect Frank E. Hahn, who is responsible for the current Art Deco façade.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the property at 5700-04 Germantown Avenue satisfies Criteria for Designation E and J, but not A and H. The staff suggests that arguments made in the nomination for satisfaction of Criterion A better satisfy Criterion J, and that a corner commercial building does not automatically rise to the level of required significance as an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community, or City.



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: 5700-04 GERMANTOWN AVE

Postal code: 19144

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Langstroth Hall, Vernon Hall, The Vernon Building

Current/Common Name: Villa Shoe Store

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 (shoe store)

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and site/plot plan of the resource's boundaries.

6. DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and photographs of the resource's physical appearance, site, setting, and surroundings.

7. SIGNIFICANCE

Please attach a narrative Statement of Significance citing the Criteria for Designation the resource satisfies.

Period of Significance (from year to year): from 1859 to 1949

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: const. 1859, alt. 1899, 1925

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: Frank E. Hahn (current facade)

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: constructed by Benjamin Langstroth

Original owner: Benjamin Langstroth

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 a bibliography.

9. NOMINATOR

Organization _____ Date July 17, 2017

Name with Title Mr. Adrian Trevisan Email a.trevisan@verizon.net

Street Address 2 Hamilton Ave Telephone 609-334-6143

City, State, and Postal Code Princeton, NJ 08542-3808

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: 17 July 2019

☒ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete Date: 2 October 2019

Date of Notice Issuance: 10 October 2019

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: Robert A. Canter

Address: 232 Kirk Drive

City: Huntingdon Valley State: PA Postal Code: 19000

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

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

☐ Designated ☐ Rejected



Figure 1: 5700-04 Germantown Avenue (Photograph by author, 2018)

5. Boundary description

Beginning at the corner formed by the intersection of the northwesterly side of Cheltenham Avenue (of the width of eighty feet) with the southwesterly side of Germantown Avenue (of the width of sixty-five feet nine inches) in the formerly 59th Ward of the City of Philadelphia and extending then south forty-one (41) degrees twelve (12) minutes forty (40) seconds west along the northwesterly side of Cheltenham Avenue eighty-seven (87) feet two (2) inches to a point; thence extending north forty-eight (48) degrees forty-seven (47) minutes twenty (20) seconds west seventy-eight (78) feet, three and five-eighths ($3 \frac{5}{8}$) inches to a point; thence extending north forty (40) degrees fifty-one (51) minutes six (6) seconds east one hundred (100) feet four and five-eighths ($4 \frac{5}{8}$) inches to the southwesterly side of Germantown Avenue (of the width of sixty five feet nine inches as aforesaid); and thence extending along the same south thirty-seven (37) degrees forty (40) minutes east twenty-nine (29) feet three and five-eighths ($3 \frac{5}{8}$) inches to an angle or bend on Germantown Avenue; and thence further along the southwesterly side of Germantown Avenue on a course south forty (40) degrees fourteen (14) minutes east fifty (50) feet eight and seven-eighths ($8 \frac{7}{8}$) inches to the northwesterly side of Cheltenham Avenue, the place of Beginning.

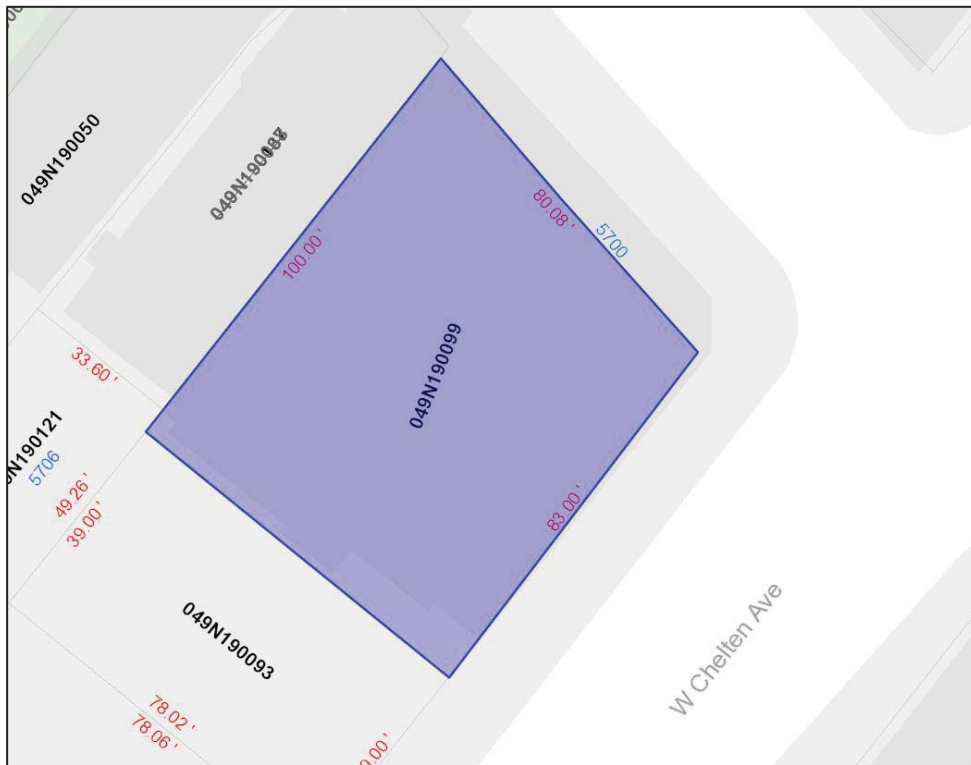


Figure 2: 5700-04 Germantown Avenue (parcel 049N190099). Cropped map courtesy of Parcel Explorer, Department of Records, City of Philadelphia (<https://atlas.phila.gov/#/5700%20GERMANTOWN%20AVE/property>, accessed December 8, 2018)

6. Description

The building at 5700-04 Germantown Avenue is a three-story, limestone-faced, Art Deco/stripped classicism commercial block at the northwestern corner of Germantown and Cheltenham Avenues, in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. (Figure 1)

Constructed in 1859 to exploit the commercial possibilities of the intersection between Germantown Avenue and the recently created Cheltenham Avenue, it occupied prime street frontage during the Victorian Era and the early automobile era, and still retains its commercial function today. Its two facades (added in 1925, see below), each seven bays wide, meet in a chamfered corner that contains a single bay (on the first floor, the principal entrance). Examination of the rear (southwest) elevation of the building shows the cornice of the older façade running along the roofline from the rear of the building to a point approximately six feet from the front of the building where it turns into the building and the parapeted roofline of the current façade begins. (Figure 3)



Figure 3: 5700-04 Germantown Ave, southwest elevation, showing original cornice behind 1925 façade. (Photograph by author, 2018)

The ground floor of the façade facing Germantown Avenue, which is configured as retail space, has five plate glass display windows. The two windows closer to the corner are smaller than the remaining three. A canvas-like awning runs the length of the building, hiding bas-relief arabesques above each window. The second floor is configured as offices with seven single-pane fixed-light rectangular windows, each with a fixed transom light above. The five center windows are grouped, while those on each end are set slightly apart. The third floor mirrors this window arrangement with a slight difference. The five center windows duplicate those on the second floor, while the two end windows are replaced by smaller, inward opening casement windows with cast-iron balconettes. Each vertical pair of the five center windows is enclosed in a shallow indentation, and has a bas-relief arabesque spandrel centered between the windows. (Figure 4) There is a row of eight small gargoyle masks above the windows, six centered on the five center windows and one at each end of the wall. (Figure 5) The roofline has a slight parapet above each of the two balconette windows. The center of the roof is flat, surrounded by a low pitch down to the roofline; the façade prevents this from being seen from the street. (Figure 6)



Figure 4: Bas-relief spandrel panel. (Photograph by author, 2018)



Figure 5: Gargoyle mask (Photograph by author, 2018)

The Cheltenham Avenue façade is a duplicate of that on Germantown Avenue, except that the two smaller display windows are on the right, closer to the corner. The corner of the building at the intersection is chamfered, with a double glass door at the ground level, a

window on the second floor, and balconette window on the third. These windows are of the same design as those on Germantown Avenue. The small parapet at the roofline is repeated.



Figure 6: Roof and facade of 5700-04 Germantown Ave, 1969. (Courtesy of Temple University Digital Collection, <https://digital.library.temple.edu/digital/collection/p15037coll3/id/23486/rec/2>)

The combination of the separation of the balconette windows from the central ones, the slight inset surrounding the adjoining vertical pair of central windows, and the parapet at the roofline provides the illusion of vertical massing pushed forward in piers—both at the corner of the building and at the ends of the elevations—when they are actually flush with the façade. This, combined with the indentation surrounding each vertical pair of central windows, provides verticality to the façade which is in keeping with the fashion of time.¹

7. Statement of Significance

The intersection of Germantown and Cheltenham Avenues in Germantown sits at the historic center of commercial activity in Germantown. 5700-04 Germantown Avenue was built

¹ Richard Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street – A Guide to American Commercial Architecture*, Washington, DC, The Preservation Press, 1987. pp. 24-29.

shortly after the creation of the intersection to take advantage of the location's commercial and social potential. The ninety-one years in the period of significance can be divided into four phases, as owners adapted the building to the commercial realities of the times. As Langstroth Hall (1859-1872) it was a type of general store catering to many small merchants on the ground floor and various social activities above. Visions of operatic grandeur fueled by questionable financial transactions transformed it into Vernon Hall (1872-1899), followed by a period as mainstay of the Germantown commercial district under the more sober name of The Vernon Building (1899-1925). Finally, the 1920's economic boom updated the exterior of the building from dowdy Italian Renaissance to thoroughly modern Art Deco (1925-1950) by prominent Philadelphia architect Frank E. Hahn. Although it has undergone several phases of renovation, the core of the building remains, as does its prominent location. Consequently, 5700-04 Germantown Avenue merits listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, satisfying the following criteria established in Philadelphia's Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 14-1004 (1):

- (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past;
- (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;
- (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristics, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; and
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

CRITERIA A, H, J

Langstroth Hall (1859-1872)

The intersection of Germantown Avenue and Cheltenham Avenue has been at the commercial center of Germantown since its creation. One historian has described eighteenth century Germantown as "a strip village, with houses and shops fronting along Germantown Road (later Germantown Avenue)...Most of the early residents were craftsmen and shopkeepers."² As Philadelphia's population grew, the Avenue evolved to accommodate it. Cross streets which were introduced to allow more access to the Avenue provided more locations for commercial activity. A railroad, The Philadelphia, Germantown and Norristown Railroad, connected Germantown to Philadelphia in 1832 and had its Germantown terminus on Germantown Avenue slightly north of what later became Cheltenham Avenue.³ (Figure 7) In 1859 a horse-drawn trolley company, the Germantown Passenger Railway Company, began offering

² David Contosta. "Philadelphia's 'Miniature Williamsburg': The Colonial Revival and Germantown's Market Square," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*: 120 (October 1996): 285-286.

³ Allen Meyers and Joel Spivak, *Philadelphia's Railroads*, Charleston, Arcadia Publishing, 2010. p. 12. Charles Ellet, Jr. *A Map of the County of Philadelphia from Actual Survey, 1843*. Accessed July 16, 2019 at <https://www.philageohistory.org/tiles/viewer/>

service along Germantown Avenue from Center City to northern Germantown; daily usage soon reached 2,500.⁴ And in about 1854 Cheltenham Avenue was created.



Figure 7: Germantown Avenue 1843. The Railroad can be seen entering from the right side and ending at the Avenue. Cheltenham Avenue would be added in 1854 parallel to Poorhouse Lane at roughly the middle of the “M” of Germantown. Note that most buildings are on Germantown Avenue, rather than the new perpendiculars. (Charles Ellet, Jr. *A Map of the County of Philadelphia from Actual Survey*, 1843. Courtesy of Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network)

⁴ Edward W Hocker. *Germantown 1683-1933*, Germantown, published by the author, 1933, p. 224. Judith Callard. *Images of America: Germantown, Mount Airy, and Chestnut Hill*, Arcadia Publishing, Charleston, 2000. p. 74.



Figure 8: Germantown Avenue 1855. Cheltenham Avenue (then called "Market Street") has been added, as has the Railroad extension to Chestnut Hill. (R. L. Barnes, New Map of the Consolidated City of Philadelphia, 1855. Courtesy of Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network)

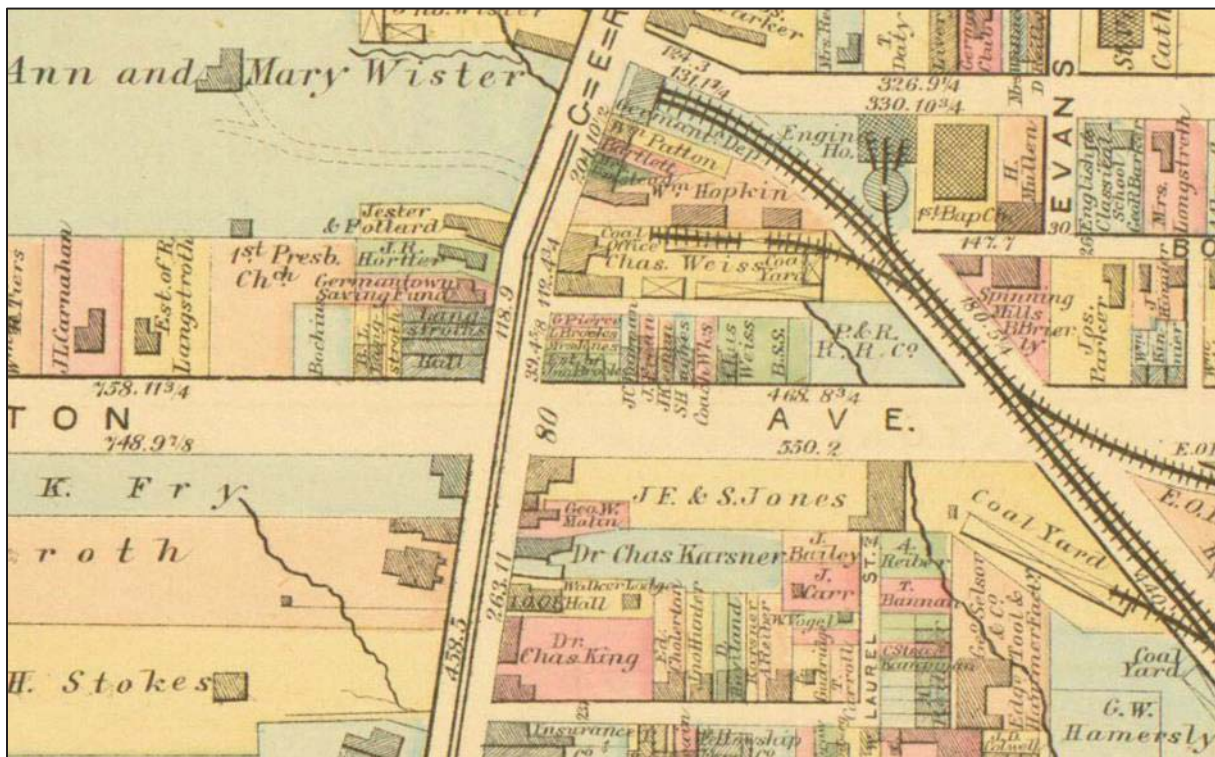


Figure 9: Germantown and Cheltenham Avenues in 1871. Note that Langstroth Hall is the largest building in the area. (Atlas of the Late Borough of Germantown, 22nd Ward, City of Philadelphia, 1871 Courtesy of Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network)

Shortly after the opening of Cheltenham Avenue, Benjamin Langstroth bought the property that is now 5700-04 Germantown Avenue as part of larger lot.⁵ In 1859 he pulled down an existing building and constructed a three-story commercial and social building made of brick which he called Langstroth Hall. Clearly intending to take advantage of its location, the Hall consisted of “several stores and a market room” with 42 stalls on the first floor, “a billiard room with six tables and other games” on the second, and a large room serving as “a ball room and concert and lecture hall seating 600” on the third.⁶ In his book *The Buildings of Main Street*, historian Richard Longstreth notes that before the American Revolution commercial activity had been conducted in taverns and small utilitarian buildings, and then had moved gradually to structures with stores below and housing above. Langstroth Hall is a clear example of Longstreth’s third phase: the purely commercial building which emerged in mid-nineteenth century in response to “the ever increasing demand for trade and professional services along with a corresponding increase in land values.”⁷



Figure 10: 5700-04 Germantown Avenue as it appeared from construction to 1925; taken around 1913. The vertical sign reads “Real Estate,” advertising the Schaeffer Conveyancer office on the first floor. Courtesy of The Library Company of Philadelphia (<https://digital.librarycompany.org/islandora/object/digitoool%3A4103>, accessed December 8, 2018.)

⁵ S. F. Hotchkin. *Ancient and Modern Germantown, Mount Airy and Chestnut Hill*. Philadelphia: P.W. Zeigler & Co., 1889. p. 106. Deed: John Hockler and wife Althea to Benjamin Langstroth, September 2, 1855. Philadelphia Book R.D.W. 41, p. 186 and following.

⁶ “To Rebuild Interior of Vernon Building” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 26, 1925.

⁷ Longstreth, p. 24-29.

Vernon Hall (1872-1899)

In 1872 a visionary purchased the building determined to use it to bring culture to Germantown. George Wharton Hamersly, a 34 year old Civil War veteran, who the year before had purchased *The Germantown Chronicle*, purchased the building ostensibly as the office for the paper.⁸ An opera enthusiast, Hamersly clearly also recognized the value of the intersection as a location for entertainment and engaged Philadelphia architect, Edwin Forrest Durang to draw up plans for a new interior of the Hall. Changes must have been substantial because the new Germantown Opera House contained a balcony, in addition to a parquet and parquet circle, and seated 800.⁹ Presumably the additional height required for the balcony came at the expense of the billiard room on the second floor.

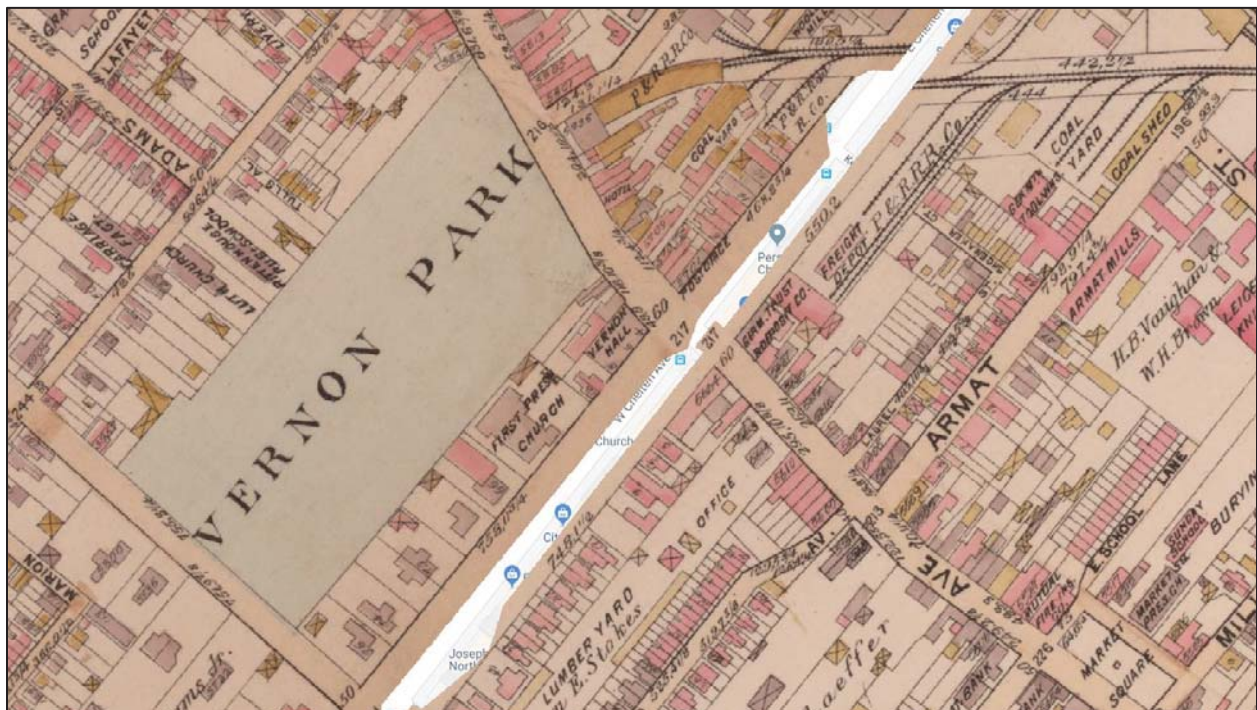


Figure 11: Germantown Avenue 1895. 5700-04 is called Vernon Hall. (G. W. Bromely Atlas of the City of Philadelphia, 1895. Courtesy of Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network)

The financial details of Hamersly's ownership of the building and his actions afterwards imply that the project was not a complete success, however. After buying the building in 1872 for \$30,000, Hamersly sold it to the *Chronicle* for the same amount in 1873. The next year he bought it back—paying \$26,000, before finally selling it once and for all to G. B. Wilson in 1875

⁸ "About The Germantown daily chronicle. (Germantown [i.e. Philadelphia, Pa.]) 1869-1873," *Chronicling America – Historic American Newspapers*, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86072133/>, accessed December 8, 2018. Deed: Benjamin Langstroth and wife Margaretta to George Wharton Hamersly, July 18, 1872. Philadelphia Book J.A.H. 262, p. 355 and following.

⁹ "Clipper Theatrical Notices: 1874," *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*, Stephen Railton and the University of Virginia, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/revus/osar15gt.html>, accessed October 28, 2018.

for \$35,000. Hamersly went on to have a long career managing theatrical companies—first in Wilkes-Barre and then in California—but while both an 1885 interview and his 1921 obituary describe his work with the *Chronicle*, neither mentions the Germantown Opera House, despite listing a chain of subsequent theatrical successes.¹⁰ Interestingly, during the Germantown period he went by the name G. Wharton Hamersly, but afterwards called himself George W. Hamersly. While the initial name change might have been an effort to distinguish himself from his father—also named George W. Hamersly—who lived in Germantown and was well known as the clerk of the Pennsylvania State Senate, the reversion to George W. and the lack of mention in the articles suggest a desire to distance himself from the Germantown Opera House project.

After Hamersly sold the building it continued to be a locale for entertainment for Germantowners for many years, both under the names Germantown Opera House and Vernon Hall (no doubt an allusion to the nearby Wister family estate, Vernon). The opera house hosted performances such as the play *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the operatic travesty *Romeo and Juliet* by Charles C. Soule, as well as attractions such as wrestling matches, political meetings, and debates.¹¹ Writing reflectively of musical performances in the Germantown twenty-five years later, a local journalist noted, “Nowadays Germantown’s people go to Philadelphia to hear talent of this caliber.”¹²

In 1882 wealthy Germantown industrialist and philanthropist George Nugent bought the building and added it to a portfolio of buildings that he owned in the neighborhood. After his death his estate sold the portfolio to the George Nugent Home for Baptists for \$1.00 so that the proceeds from their rent could be used to finance the construction and then operations of the Home, built in 1895 on West Johnson Street. In the words of the Deed, the Home (listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places), was “an institution where ministers and other members of that [Baptist] church disabled by age or infirmity might find a home and enjoy some of the comforts of social life.” The Home sold the building in 1907.¹³

¹⁰ “A Most Active Career,” *The Dollar Weekly News*, Wilkes-Barre, PA, 15 May 1885, p. 1. Accessed on July 2, 2019 at: https://www.newspapers.com/clip/6689630/dollar_weekly_news/. “Maj. Hamersly Dead at 83,” *The Evening News*, Wilkes-Barre, PA, 12 September 1921, p. 8. Accessed on July 2, 2019 at:

https://www.newspapers.com/clip/6689800/evening_news_9121921_wilkes_barre_pa/

¹¹ David Bispham. *A Quaker Singer's Recollections*, New York, The MacMillan Company, 1920, p. 45. “To Wrestle for Gold Medals,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 2, 1892, page 3. “Democrats Annoyed - Democrats in Germantown,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 31, 1889, p. 3. “Out in Germantown,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 3, 1891, p. 7.

¹² No title, Jane Campbell Newspaper Clippings, Germantown Historical Society, X 108, December 24, 1907.

¹³ Deeds: 1) John T. Maull, Emma M. Maull, John Bronen and wife Anna J, David M. Castle and wife Sallie C., Margaretta A. Langstroth widow, William C. Pritchett and wife Mary, Ambrose Lehman and wife Virginia, Heidel London and wife Regina, Thomas P. Wentz and wife Mary, Anna B. Meylin, and Luisa S. Maull, guardian of the estate of James Lehman Maull to George Nugent; 2) Horatio Gates Jones, trustee of the late George Nugent to The George Nugent Home for Baptists; 3) The George Nugent Home for Baptists to George W. B. Fletcher (see appendix).

As travel to Philadelphia became easier interest in the opera house waned and, in a shift reflecting Germantown's urban character, a branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia opened in the Hall in 1895. Containing 4,000 volumes, it boasted "sixteen large windows to furnish light in the day time and in the evening the hall will receive its illumination from an 80-jet chandelier and numerous side gas jets."¹⁴ The library remained in this location until 1898, when it moved to the nearby Wister Mansion, possibly because a larger space was needed to satisfy demand by the urban, book-reading public.¹⁵ Activities such as public meetings and basketball games resumed in the Hall.¹⁶

The Vernon Building (1899-1925)

A crosstown trolley along Cheltenham Avenue was added in 1892, adding to the number of northwest Philadelphia residents coming to the intersection to shop.¹⁷ Department stores such as Allen's, S. S. Kresge, Cherry's, Woolworth's and C. A. Rowell's, and numerous specialty stores opened within a short walk of the intersection, making the area the second largest commercial district in Philadelphia.¹⁸ As automobile usage grew, shoppers from more distant neighborhoods joined those arriving by trolley, requiring a "No Left Turn" sign to be added to the intersection in 1920.¹⁹ In the words of a local journalist, "The greatest advance in real estate values in recent years has been in the vicinity of Main St. [Germantown Avenue] and Cheltenham Avenue."²⁰

In 1899, responding to this increase in commercial activity and recognizing the decline in use of the opera house, the owners hired a Philadelphia architect, Adin B. Lacey, and contractor, John W. Fritzinger, to make "extensive alterations" to the interior of the building.²¹ The opera house was removed and the building—renamed The Vernon Building—became a more standard type two-part commercial block of the type common in Main Street America, with retail on the ground floor and offices above.²² In the new design, three stores occupied the first floor, one at the corner numbered 5700 Germantown Avenue, two others on that

Dara Zitzmann, "Nugent Home for Baptists" National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Accessed July 17, 2019.

http://www.dot7.state.pa.us/CRGIS_Attachments/SiteResource/H054140_01H.pdf

¹⁴ "Germantown's New Library, Branch No. 6 Opened and Inspected by a Large Gathering," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 15, 1895, p. 4.

¹⁵ "Joseph E. Coleman Northwest Regional Library," Free Library of Philadelphia, accessed October 27, 2018, <https://libwww.freelibrary.org/locations/index.cfm>.

¹⁶ "New Hospital for Germantown," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 12, 1898, p. 5. "Basket Ball Games Millville Defeats Clover Wheelmen in the Play-off of a Tie Game Hanover," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 29, 1898, p. 4.

¹⁷ Callard. p. 54.

¹⁸ *Upper Northwest District Plan 2018*, Philadelphia City Planning Commission, p. 61.

¹⁹ *National Register for Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form - Colonial Germantown Historic District*, p. 18.

²⁰ "Real Estate Values," Jane Campbell Newspaper Clippings, Germantown Historical Society, December 24, 1907

²¹ "Real Estate News - Plans Filed for Extensive Alterations at Vernon Hall, in Germantown," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 2, 1899, Page 13.

²² Longstreth, pp. 24-53.

street (numbered 5702 and 5704).²³ The second floor held offices, and the third floor classrooms and a lodge room. Publications of the time mention several of the tenants, and they reflect how Germantown had changed. The Schaefer Conveyancer real estate office (Figure 10) seems to have been the longest-term first floor tenant, joined for varying amounts of time by a “high-grade grocery store,” a branch of the Riker and Hegeman drug store chain, “an electric concern,” the Vernon Palace Theater movie house (from 1913 to 1914), and the Philadelphia Electric Company.²⁴ The second floor held offices of the Business Men’s Association of Germantown, the Germantown and Chestnut Hill Improvement Association, and the Germantown branches of two life insurance companies as full-time tenants, as well as serving as “the meeting place for most of the building and loan associations active in Germantown, [who] paid \$5 every three months for the privilege of using a room one night a month.”²⁵ The third floor was occupied by the Germantown Business College (another long-term tenant) and a lodge hall.

²³ Note: Two stores in an adjacent building on Cheltenham Avenue numbered 7 and 9, were included in the deed and in descriptions of the property. It is not clear when this building was constructed. This property was also at times merged into one store identified as 7 or 9 Cheltenham Avenue.

²⁴ “Sale of Vernon Hall,” Jane Campbell Newspaper Clippings, Germantown Historical Society, p. 61. Note: The Newspaper clipping states “The property was bought for a future home of Mitchell, Fletcher & Co.,” but advertisements for that company show 5708 Germantown Avenue as the company’s Germantown address; see *The National Rotarian*, Vol. 2, No. 7 (July 1912), p. 4. No title, 1921. Newspaper clipping, Germantown Historical Society, “Real Estate Pamphlet” box, “Germantown Ave” folder. Note: Riker and Hegeman was purchased by the Liggett Company drugstore chain and later articles use the Liggett name when speaking of the store. “Liggett Co. to Buy Riker & Hegeman,” *New York Times*, October 17, 1915. Accessed December 9, 2018. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1915/10/17/101569813.pdf>

²⁵ “Rent Increase of 350 Per Cent for Building Societies,” 1919. Newspaper clipping, Germantown Historical Society, “Real Estate Pamphlet” box, “Germantown Ave” folder.



Figure 12: 5700-04 Germantown Avenue around the turn of the century. The arched doorway to the right leads to 5702, or possibly stairs to the upper floors. Note the trolley tracks in the foreground. (Courtesy of the Germantown Historical Society.)

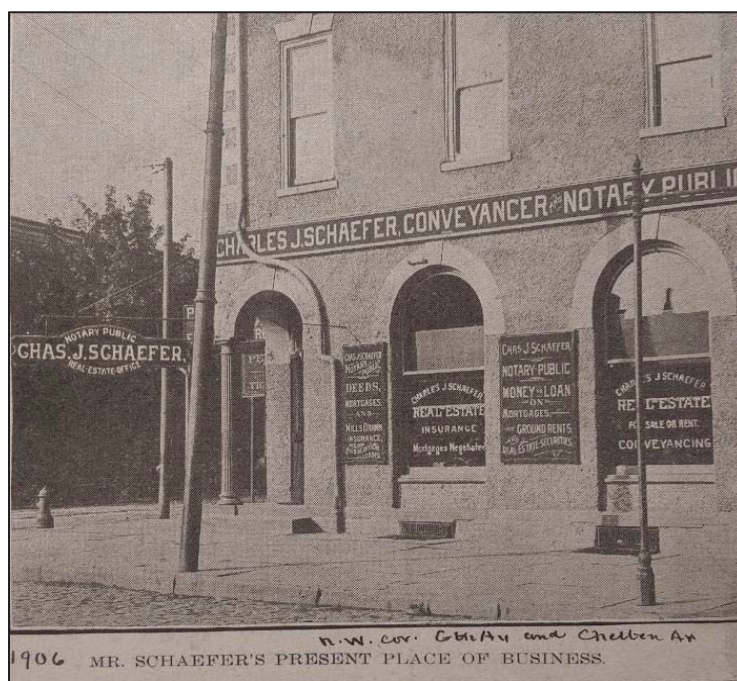


Figure 13: The Schaefer Conveyancer Office around 1906. (Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Jane Campbell Collection, Vol 33, p. 68)

The building's commercial success and location also led to its involvement in an alleged attempt at fraud. 1913 newspaper articles recount in breathless terms the amount of money that was to be spent "by an unnamed buyer" to purchase and renovate the building. Tenants, including a jewelry store, were waiting for the new stores and an elevator, and rents and incomes for the different stores in building were published. Unfortunately, the impresario, one J. F. Otterstetter of 65 West Queen Lane, did not own the building and had been recently released from jail on bail after serving time for embezzling funds from a building and loan association. He was acquitted after a trial, since he had actually conveyed to the owner of the building the \$2,000 check issued by the prospective buyer as an indication of interest, rather than cashing it as had been suspected. The paper reported, "Owners of real estate in that neighborhood will breathe easier now because they feared that the announcement of the price...would result in a general advance in real estate assessment in that locality."²⁶

Art Deco Modernization (1925-1950)

The Post-World War I economic boom led to significant changes in the form and function of the building. New owners purchased it in 1925, told tenants to vacate, and engaged Philadelphia architect Frank E. Hahn to update the building.²⁷ The resulting \$125,000 project consisted of "new limestone facing and steel framing as well as a general rearrangement of the interior"—the current façade, which resembles Hahn's later work at the Alexander Building in Center City.²⁸ Comparing this to the previous façade, one can see the architectural historian Longstreth's observation that in these years, "Retail storefronts may possess little more than a wall of plate glass at street level, a solution made possible by the development of steel and concrete frame construction and lightweight steel trusses."²⁹ Little information is available about changes made to the interior of the building in this round of alterations, but the lodge room was removed, leaving only offices on the second and third floors, thus bringing the final curtain down on the entertainment phase of the building and concentrating it solely on commercial activities.

²⁶ "Big Improvements at Vernon Hall," Newspaper clipping, Germantown Historical Society, "Real Estate Pamphlet" box, "Germantown Ave" folder, 1913. See also, "Changes at Vernon Building," Jane Campbell Newspaper Clippings, XXIII, 56, June 6, 1913, and "Tangle In Vernon Hall Sale," Jane Campbell Newspaper Clipping, XXIII 143, August 22, 1913.

²⁷ The adjacent building at 7/9 Cheltenham was removed from the deed at this time; compare the property description in the 14 April 1922 deed to that of the 12 November 1925 deed—see Appendix. *National Register for Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form - Colonial Germantown Historic District*, p. 16. Note that the form does not provide a source for this attribution. *Philadelphia Builder's Guide*, v40, 1925, p. 596 (9/23/1925) and p. 682 (10/28/1925). Accessed on July 11, 2019 at http://philageohistory.org/rdic-images/view-book-uv.cfm/PhilaBuildersGuide_v40_1925#?ft=&q=hahn&c=&m=&s=&cv=746&xywh=2808%2C-207%2C5415%2C1925, and http://philageohistory.org/rdic-images/view-book-uv.cfm/PhilaBuildersGuide_v40_1925#?ft=&q=hahn&c=&m=&s=&cv=852&xywh=3275%2C482%2C6432%2C2878

²⁸ "Vernon Building Again Transferred," *The Independent Gazette*, December 10, 1925. p. 1 (hard copy accessed at Germantown Historical Society)

²⁹ Longstreth, p. 45.



Figure 14: Germantown Avenue Elevation of the Vernon Building in 1958. Compare the ground floor retail window area to that of Figures 12 and 13. (Courtesy of PhillyHistory.org, detail from Photo C-8956, <https://www.phillyhistory.org/PhotoArchive/Search.aspx?type=area&minx>)

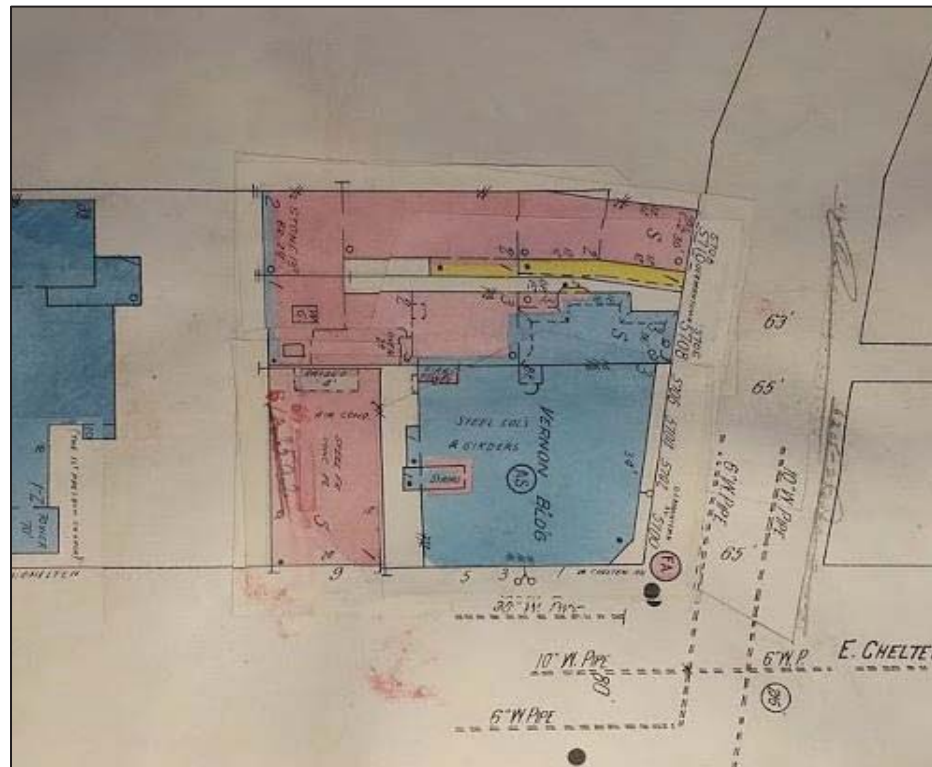


Figure 15: 1926 Sanborn Map showing The Vernon Building after the 1925 renovations. Note the chamfered corner. (Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania)

This was probably the height of commercial prosperity for the intersection. One history of Philadelphia neighborhoods reports that “many of the ten thousand resident of East Falls did their major shopping neither in their own neighborhood nor in downtown Philadelphia. Instead

they took a trolley up Midvale to the great regional shopping area at Germantown and Cheltenham Avenues.”³⁰ Reflecting this, a 1928 announcement of a change of ownership within the building’s controlling partnership stated that, “The building is well rented, being one of the best real estate investments in the Germantown retail section.”³¹ Crowning this, in 1940 a new tenant, the C.A. Rowell Department store, moved from a smaller store just south of the intersection and occupied the entire ground floor.³² (Figure 16)

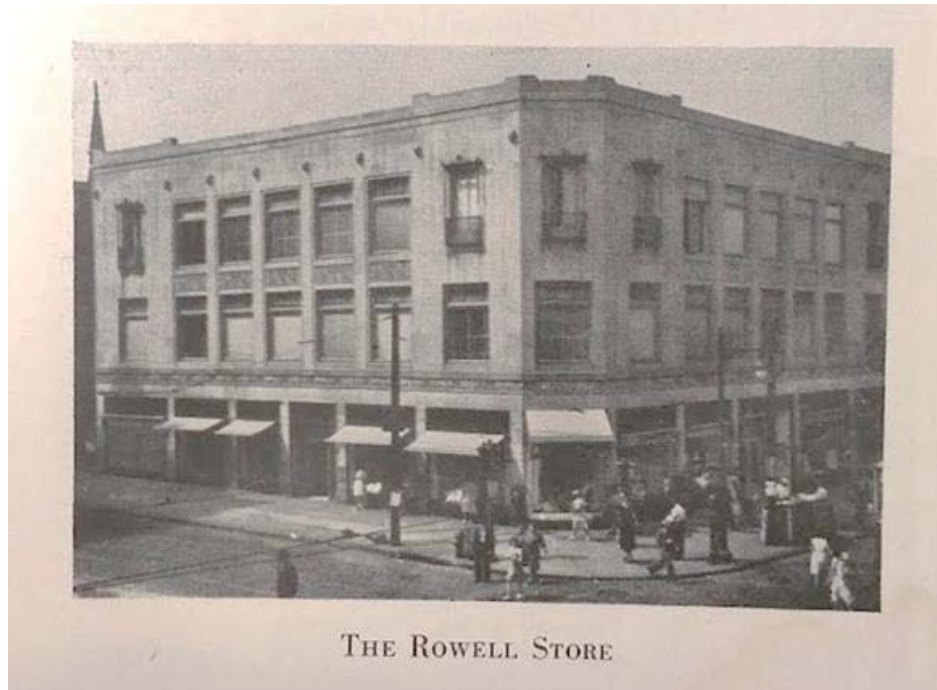


Figure 16: C. A. Rowell Department Store, “Realtors Magazine,” Philadelphia Real Estate Board, September 1943, p. 20. (Courtesy of the Germantown Historical Society.)

Decline in the Modern Era (1950-today)

In retrospect, however, 1949 marked the high point of the commercial life of the building. The building was purchased for \$660,000, and then resold in 1952 for \$640,000, both prices much higher than seen previously.³³ However, in 1950 Rowell’s moved to a newly constructed, much larger building on the southeast corner of the intersection to meet the demand of its customers, and in 1953 access to the second and third floors was closed, indicating that there was no longer a market for office space in the neighborhood —a stark change from the beginning of the century.

³⁰ Fredric M. Miller, Morris J. Vogel, Allen F. Davis, *Philadelphia Stories – A Photographic History, 1920-1960*. Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1988. p. 199.

³¹ Untitled, 1928. Newspaper clipping, Germantown Historical Society, “Real Estate Pamphlet” box, “Germantown Ave” folder.

³² *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 17 Nov 1963, Sunday, Main Edition, p. 74.

³³ Deed: Provident Trust Company of Philadelphia to Standard Properties, Inc., February 17, 1949. Philadelphia Deed Book C.J.P. 2274, p. 361 and following. Deed: Standard Properties, Inc. to The Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company, June 30, 1952. Philadelphia Deed Book M.L.S. 144, p. 575 and following.

By the 1960's, decline was obvious. Germantown's economic vitality flagged as neighboring factories and mills closed. In 1965 the building was sold for \$200,000, one-third of the price ten years earlier, to Hess Kline, owner of Allen's Department Store at the nearby corner of Cheltenham Avenue and Greene Street. After Germantown merchants, led by Kline, defeated a proposal to put the new Northwest Regional Library on the corner, Kline opened a budget annex to Allen's in the main retail space on the ground floor—a clear sign of sagging sales at the main store.³⁴ In 1972 Allen's Budget Corner departed to be replaced by the Smart Size ladies' apparel store and Chuck's Beer Barrel Tavern.³⁵ In 1978-79, following the closure of Rowell's two years earlier, seven major Germantown retailers including Smart Size, Allen's, Sears & Roebuck, the Ford dealership, a toy store, and two supermarkets closed.³⁶ The outgoing president of Germantown Businessman's Association noted that 17 of the 84 members had closed or moved away during that time period. The stores that stayed adjusted their merchandise mix to appeal to a lower-income clientele, and some, like the J. C. Penny, also boarded up their front windows in response to repeated vandalism.³⁷

In 1983 in a further price decline the building was sold for \$165,000.³⁸ The 1990's and 2000's were a revolving door of businesses as a furniture rental business, a dollar store, a plus-size women's clothing store, and another dollar store all occupied the building in turn.³⁹ Finally, in 2007, a shoe store called Sneaker Villa moved in, and continues to operate there today. Interestingly, Villa's lease stipulates price increases every five years, (starting at \$100,000/year in 2007 and rising to \$132,000/year in 2017).⁴⁰ The fact that Villa still occupies the Vernon Building after 11 years (including the 2008 Recession) implies positive things both for the store and the Germantown Avenue economy.

Throughout its history, 5700-04 Germantown Avenue has been an essential part of Germantown's commercial life, occupying a prominent position at the intersection of Germantown and Cheltenham Avenues. Much as the history of the climate of a region can be read in the rings of a tree, the commercial health and history of Germantown can be read in the

³⁴ "Library Site Raises Protest in Germantown," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 04 Nov 1965, Thursday, p. 25. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/179877351/>. In addition to 5700-04 Germantown Ave, building the library would have required razing 7-9 Cheltenham Ave (Linton's restaurant), 5706 Germantown Ave (Wolfman's Café, and 5708 Germantown (Supper Club).

³⁵ Philadelphia Zoning Permit Document 219-172057. <https://atlas.phila.gov/#/5700%20GERMANTOWN%20AVE/li> accessed October 27, 2018. September 8, 1967. pp. 134-140. Philadelphia Zoning Permit Document 219-172057. November 24, 1972 p. 93-104, September 28, 1978 pp. 115-122.

³⁶ Mark Frazier Lloyd, "Germantown in Review, October 1978 through October 1979" *The Germantown Crier*, Vol 31, 1979. pp. 89-91.

³⁷ "Changing Clientele, Unchanging Stores," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 21 Jan 1979, Sunday, p. K-1. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/174585334>

³⁸ Deed: Hess Kline to Irving Canter and wife Min, January 10, 1983. Philadelphia Deed Book E.F.P. 647, p. 161 and following.

³⁹ Philadelphia Zoning Permit Document 219-172057, March 9, 1994. pp. 52-66; July 2, 1998 pp. 70-92; October 1, 2003. pp. 26-37; May 31, 2003. pp. 38-39.

⁴⁰ Philadelphia Zoning Permit Document 219-172057. April 4, 2007. pp. 7-25.

changes in form and occupancy of this building. From a mixture of retail and entertainment, through a gradual shift from entertainment to offices, and the current focus solely on retail with upper floors abandoned, The Vernon Building has tracked Germantown's rise from farming village to prosperous suburb to commercial hub to economically struggling neighborhood with potential.

CRITERION E: Frank E. Hahn

Frank Eugene Hahn (1879-1962) was born and raised in Philadelphia and studied at the University of Pennsylvania, graduating in 1900 with a degree in Civil Engineering. After graduation he worked in the engineering departments of two railroads and the Trussed Concrete Steel Company while studying architecture in evening classes at the T-Square Club's atelier. In 1905 he formed a partnership with Andrew Sauer where he was responsible for business, engineering and construction. The partnership with Sauer ended in 1916, and after practicing independently for a number of years, Hahn entered into a partnership with S. Bryan Baylinson which lasted from the early 1920s to 1928. He then practiced independently until his death in 1962, occasionally working with Aaron Colish. Hahn's studies at the T-Square Club's atelier were heavily influenced by Paul Davis and Paul Cret, giving much of Hahn's early work a strong Beaux-Arts flavor. He remained friends with Cret, collaborating with him on several projects and corresponding with him while on vacation in Italy.⁴¹

Hahn's work focused on commercial buildings and, reflecting his faith, buildings for Philadelphia's Jewish community. Among these were the Young Men's Hebrew Association Building (1616-20 Master Street) and Beth Israel Synagogues (32nd Street and Montgomery Avenue, Philadelphia and Coatesville, PA). He also designed The Alexander Building at 19th and Chestnut Streets in 1934-35, which was placed on Philadelphia's historic register in 2015. It and 5700-04 are strikingly similar in design. (Figure 17)

⁴¹ "Hahn, Frank Eugene (1879-1962) Biography." Philadelphia Architects and Builders, https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/22009.

Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer, Philadelphia, *A History of the City and Its People, a record of 225 years*, Vol. IV, Philadelphia, The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1912. Pp. 363-364.



Figure 17: The Alexander Building. (Courtesy of Hidden City Philadelphia. (<https://hiddencityphila.org/2014/05/paced-for-growth-at-1900-chestnut/>))

Notable Commissions:⁴²

- Alexander Building
- Alpha Epsilon Pi Fraternity House
- Beth Israel Synagogue
- Burroughs Research Center
- Federation of Jewish Charities
- Fleisher Industrial Center
- Marks Store
- Morris E. Leeds Middle School
- Royal Theatre
- The Schmidt Building
- Young Men's Hebrew Association Building

⁴² "Hahn, Frank Eugene (1879-1962) Projects." Philadelphia Architects and Builders, https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display_projects.cfm/22009

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The Philadelphia Inquirer

Appendix

Chain of Title: 5700 Germantown Avenue

31 July 1771, Christopher Meng and wife Catherine to Henry Kurtz

Property: Contains two contiguous lots, one 13.28 acres and the other 2.06 acres, with two two-story stone buildings adjoining each other.

Price: £625

Source: Deed Book I 11, p. 67 and following

10 March 1828, William Kurtz to James Ogible

Property: same as above Price: \$3,364

Source: Deed Book G.W.R. 19, p. 533 and following

Note: Henry Kurtz died and left the property to his nephew William.

2 September 1828, James Ogible and wife Mary to Christopher Mason

Property: same as above Price: \$4,360

Source: Deed Book S.H.F. 10, p. 443 and following

11 April 1832, Christopher Mason to John Hockler

Property: same as above Price: \$0

Source: Book of Wills 10, p. 307

Note: Christopher Mason died and left the property to his nephew, John Hockler.

2 September 1855, John Hockler and wife Althea to Benjamin Langstroth

Property: same as above Price: \$45,500

Source: Deed Book R.D.W. 41, p. 186 and following

Note: Cheltenham Avenue was created between 1854,⁵⁰ dividing this lot. The increased price is presumably due to the vastly increased amount of street frontage.

18 July 1872, Benjamin Langstroth and wife Margaretta to George Wharton Hamersly

Property: a 0.27 acre lot on the corner of Germantown Avenue and Cheltenham Avenue Price: \$30,000

Source: Deed Book J.A.H. 262, p. 355 and following

Note: Langstroth divided the property he had bought from Hockler, and created this lot which he sold to Hamersly. The deed mentions buildings in general terms, but does not contain any specific information about them.

19 April 1873, George Wharton Hamersly and wife Rosalie Oldmixon to the Chronicle Publishing Company of Philadelphia

Property: same as above Price: \$30,000

Source: Deed Book F.T.W. 71, p. 35 and following

Note: Hamersly was the owner of *The Germantown Chronicle*⁵¹

3 March 1874, Chronicle Publishing Company of Philadelphia to George Wharton Hamersly

Property: same as above Price: \$26,000

Source: Deed Book F.T.W. 112, p. 275 and following

Note: Hamersly was owner of *The Germantown Chronicle* (see above)

31 May 1875, George Wharton Hamersly to George Banks Wilson

Property: same as above Price: \$35,000

Source: Deed Book F.T.W. 259, p. 251 and following

1 March 1876, George Banks Wilson to John M. Hildeburn

Property: The lot is the same as above; the deed mentions a store and building three stories in height. Price: \$40,400

Source: Deed Book D.H.L. 29, p. 40 and following

8 March 1879, William Wright, High Sheriff of Philadelphia to George A Cotton

Property: same as above Price: \$150

Source: Court of Common Pleas No. 3, December 7, 1878, No. 823, p. 36

16 August 1879, George A Cotton and wife Emma to Raymond T. Maull

Property: same as above Price: \$14,000

Source: Deed Book L.W. 21, p. 399 and following

28 December 1882, John T. Maull, Emma M. Maull, John Bronen and wife Anna J, David M. Castle and wife Sallie C., Margaretta A. Langstroth widow, William C. Pritchett and wife Mary, Ambrose Lehman and wife Virginia, Heidel London and wife Regina, Thomas P. Wentz and wife Mary, Anna B. Meylin, and Luisa S. Maull, guardian of the estate of James Lehman Maull to George Nugent

Property: same as above Price: \$30,000

Source: Deed Book J.O.D. 63, p. 548 and following

Note: Raymond T. Maull died on October 23, 1881, intestate and without issue, leaving behind one brother, four sisters, and issue of one deceased brother and two deceased sisters one of whom (James L. Maull) was a minor

5 December 1887, Horatio Gates Jones, trustee of the late George Nugent to The George Nugent Home for Baptists

Property: same as above Price: \$1

Source: Deed Book G.G.P. 316, p. 440 and following

Note: The deed quotes George Nugent's will directing that his estate be used to establish "an institution where ministers and other members of that [Baptist] church disabled by age or infirmity might find a home and enjoy some of the comforts of social life." The deed includes the sale of this and several other properties to the George Nugent Home for Baptists in order that they might be rented out and the proceeds be used to fund operations of the home which was built on 221 W. Johnson Street in Germantown.

13 January 1907, The George Nugent Home for Baptists to George W. B. Fletcher

Property: same as above Price: \$80,500

Source: Deed Book W.S.V. 818, p. 95 and following

2 November 1912, George W. B. Fletcher and wife Joy D. to George A. Ansley

Property: same as above Price: \$1

Source: Deed Book E.L.T. 134, p. 348 and following

2 November 1912, George A. Ansley to George W. B. Fletcher

Property: same as above

Price: \$1, "also subject to the payment of the proportionate part of a Blanket Mortgage Debt of principal sum of Forty Thousand Dollars given by the said George A. Ansley to Wesley R. Heyman dated the second day of November AD 1912"

Source: Deed Book E.L.T. 140, p. 518 and following

11 September 1919, George W. B. Fletcher and wife Joy D. to Morton E. Hecht Property: a 0.25 acre lot on the corner of Germantown Avenue and Cheltenham Avenue Price: \$1, also two mortgages, of \$120,000 and \$40,000

Source: Deed Book J.M.H. 626, p. 395 and following

Note: A strip of land with a frontage on Cheltenham Avenue of 5 feet 9-1/2 inches was removed from the property in the deed compared to the 1912 deed, reducing the lot size to 0.25 acres.

20 January 1920, Morton E. Hecht and wife Mabel S. to Joseph B. Hecht

Property: same as above

Price: \$1, also two mortgages, of \$150,000 and \$40,000 Source: Deed Book J.M.H. 1266, p. 119 and following

14 April 1922, Joseph B. Hecht and wife Florence M. to The Land Title and Trust Company

Property: same as above

Price: \$1, also two mortgages, of \$150,000 and \$40,000 Source: Deed Book J.M.H. 1254, p. 377 and following

12 November 1925, The Land Title and Trust Company to Benjamin Canter

Property: a 0.18 acre lot on the corner of Germantown Avenue and Cheltenham Avenue

Price: \$1, also one mortgage of \$50,000 and a lease by The Land Title Trust Company to the Louis K. Liggett Company for unspecified terms.

Source: Deed Book J.M.H. 2250, p. 87 and following

Note: A strip of land with a frontage on Cheltenham Avenue of 39 feet was removed from the property in the deed compared to the 1922 deed reducing the lot to 0.18 acres. This was 7/9 Cheltenham Avenue, and is now a parking lot. This edge of the property is described on p. 89 of the deed book as bordering on a "six feet wide private passage which leads Southeastward into said Cheltenham Ave."

19 February 1940, David E. Watson, Sheriff of the County of Philadelphia to The Pennsylvania Company for Insurances on Lives and Granting Annuities, Trustee

Property: a 0.17 acre lot on the corner of Germantown Avenue and Cheltenham Avenue Price: \$8,400

Source: Deed Book D.W.H. 859, p. 418 and following

Note: A strip of land with a frontage on Cheltenham Avenue of 6 feet was removed from the property in the deed compared to the 1925 deed, reducing the lot to 0.17 acres. Presumably it was added to the neighboring 7/9 Cheltenham Avenue.

2 March 1940, The Pennsylvania Company for Insurances on Lives and Granting Annuities to Provident Trust Company of Philadelphia

Property: same as above. Price: \$201,000

Source: Deed Book D.W.H. 924, p. 277 and following

17 February 1949, Provident Trust Company of Philadelphia to Standard Properties, Inc.

Property: same as above Price: \$660,000

Source: Deed Book C.J.P. 2274, p. 361 and following

30 June 1952, Standard Properties, Inc. to The Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company

Property: same as above Price: \$640,000

Source: Deed Book M.L.S. 144, p. 575 and following

24 September 1965, The Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company to Lillian Cohen

Property: same as above Price: \$200,000

Source: Deed Book C.A.D. 558, p. 111 and following

29 September 1965, Lillian Cohen to Hess Kline

Property: same as above

Price: \$1, "also subject to the lien of a certain mortgage securing the principal sum of \$160,000"

Source: Deed Book C.A.D. 558, p. 117 and following

10 January 1983, Hess Kline to Irving Canter and wife Min

Property: same as above Price: \$166,545.79

Source: Deed Book E.F.P. 647, p. 161 and following

16 May 1991, Irving Canter and wife Min to Robert A. Canter and Ellen R. Greenberg

Property: same as above Price: \$1

Source: Deed Book F.H.S. 1878, p. 432 and following

Note: Robert A. Canter and Ellen Greenberg are the children of Irving and Min Canter