

**ADDRESS: 5301-15 N FRONT ST**

Proposed Action: Designation

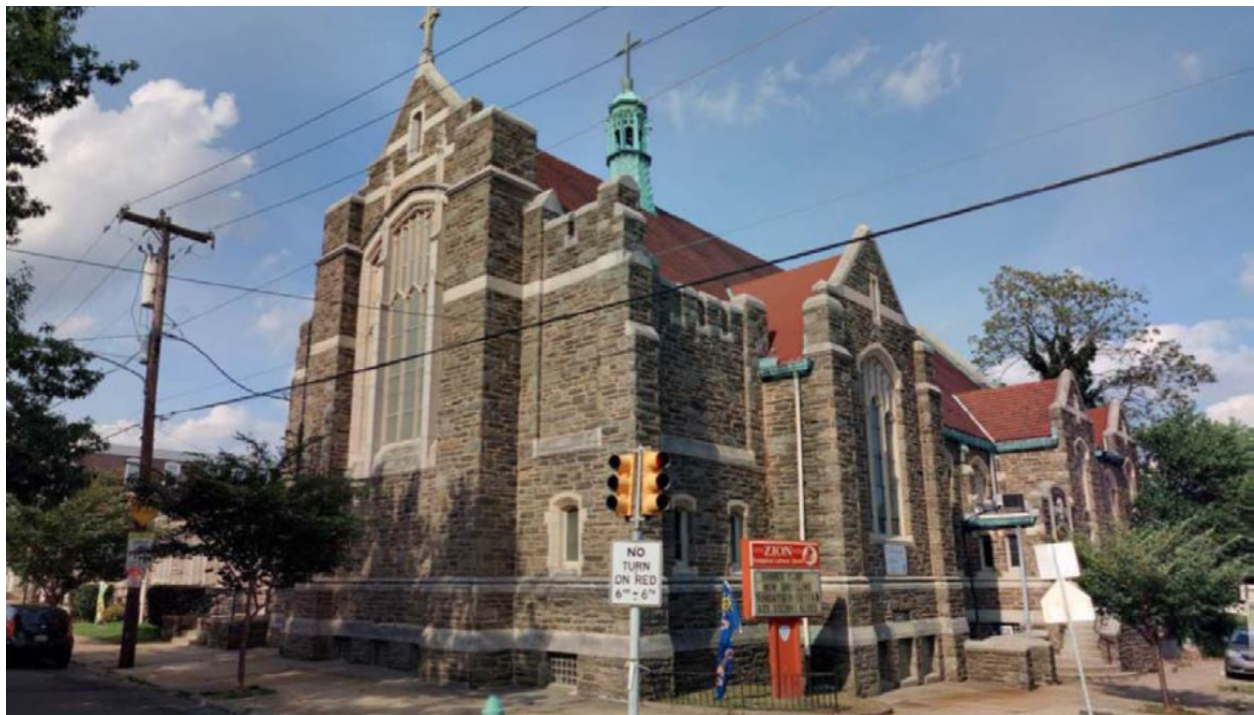
Property Owner: Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church of Olney

Nominator: Philadelphia Historical Commission staff for Karen Williams, Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

Staff Contact: Megan Cross Schmitt, [megan.schmitt@phila.gov](mailto:megan.schmitt@phila.gov), 215-686-7660

**OVERVIEW:** This nomination proposes to designate the property at 5301-15 N. Front Street and list it on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. Constructed in 1928 by German-American architects Ritcher & Eiler for a German-American congregation, Zion Lutheran Church exemplifies the cultural, social and historical heritage of the Olney neighborhood of Philadelphia, which developed as a German-American suburb in the first half of the twentieth century and has since become one of the most diverse communities in the city, satisfying Criterion J. The remarkably intact building is also reflective of the simple and precise late-Gothic Revival style popular for ecclesiastical architecture in the early decades of the twentieth century, satisfying Criterion C.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:** The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the property at 5301-15 N. Front Street satisfies Criteria for Designation 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: 5301-15 N Front Street (common address: 5307 N Front Street)

Postal code: 19120

**2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Historic Name: Zion Lutheran Church

Current/Common Name: Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church of Olney, Philadelphia

**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: Church; childcare center; day school

**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 1928 to present

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1928 (church); 1966-67 (addition)

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: Richter & Eiler (church); Mansell, McGettigan & Fugate (addition)

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: \_\_\_\_\_

Original owner: Zion Lutheran Church

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 Staff of the Philadelphia Historical Commission Date 9/25/2018

on behalf of Karen Williams (Manager),

Name with Title Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church Email Laura.dipasquale@phila.gov

Street Address 1515 Arch St Telephone 215-686-7660

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA 19102

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner.

**PHC USE ONLY**

Date of Receipt: 9/25/2018

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

Date of Notice Issuance: 10/10/2019

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church of Olney

Address: 5301 N Front St

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19120

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

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

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

☐ Designated ☐ Rejected

12/7/18

## **5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

Located at the northeast corner of E. Fisher Avenue and N. Front Street, 5301-15 N Front Street is a rectangular parcel that contains in front or breadth on E. Fisher Avenue 118 feet and extends of that width in length or depth 165 northward along N. Front Street and between parallel lines.



Figure 1: Parcel boundary for 5301-15 N Front Street in orange. Source: Philadelphia Water Department Stormwater Map Viewer.

## 6. BUILDING DESCRIPTION

The property at 5301-15 N Front Street features two building campaigns: a late-Gothic Revival church constructed in 1928; and a low, modern, two-story addition constructed to the north between 1966-1967. The two-story church sits on an elevated basement and is clad in light grey random ashlar stonework set in beige mortar. Light-colored, smooth cut stone is used to form the window and door surrounds, water table, belt-courses, strapwork, and buttress and parapet caps. Wide, Gothic arch tracery windows with diamond-paned leaded glass are found throughout. A steeply-gabled, red tile roof with copper gutters and the copper base of a formerly-taller spire tops the building.



Figure 2: Looking west at the 1928 church (right) and the 1966 parish building/community center addition (left). Source: Pictometry, 2019.



Figure 3: View of the west and south elevations from the intersection of E. Fisher Avenue and N. Front Street. Source: Cyclomedia, July 2019.

### South Elevation (E. Fisher Avenue)

The primary, south elevation of the church is eight bays wide with asymmetrical planes and detailing. The gabled roof of the church is broken by the lower cross gables of three projecting pavilions, two of which feature red asphalt shingles in place of the original tile. A broad two-sided stairway fronted by a stone wall capped with smooth stone provides access to the main entrance along E. Fisher Avenue. The entry features wood double doors with what appears to be an infilled arched transom. On the western portion of the building, the double-height Gothic tracery windows indicate the interior configuration and presence of the sanctuary, while smaller windows separated by stone spandrels on the east, or rear, portion of the building suggest two separate stories used for auxiliary purposes. Two means of access are provided to the basement along this elevation. The tall basement window openings are filled with glass block.



Figure 4: South elevation along E. Fisher Avenue. Source: Cyclomedia, July 2019.

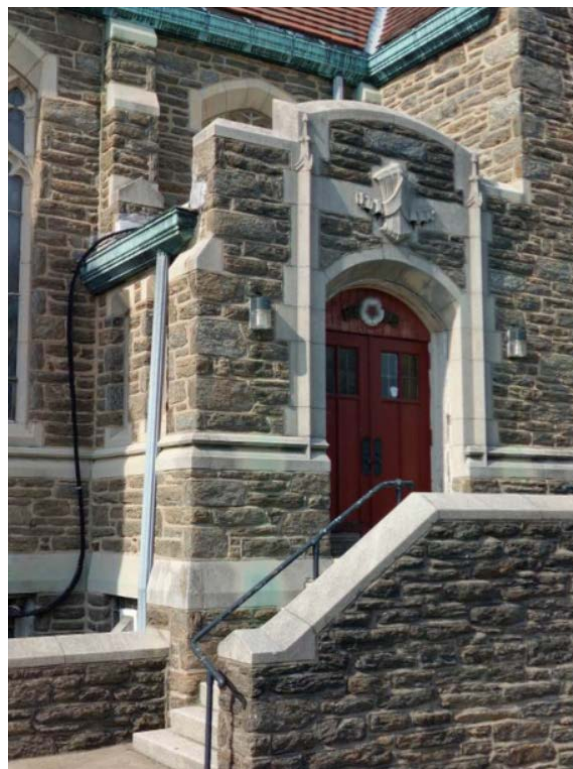


Figure 5: South elevation details, including the crenelated parapet, buttress detailing, and cornerstone (left), and the entrance bay details (right). Source: Cyclomedia, July 2019.

**West Elevation (church)**

The symmetrical, three-bay wide west elevation along N Front Street is dominated by a broad Gothic arch window surround located below the gable end and set between two buttresses. A tripartite tracery window flanked by stone niches with tracery details and punctuated by stone finials fills the surround. The gabled roof is obscured from this vantage by a crenellated parapet. Small arched windows with stone voussoir surrounds punctuate the first-floor level in the first and third bays.



Figure 6: West elevation of the church along N. Front Street. Source: Cyclomedia, July 2019.

### North Elevation (church)

The north elevation of the church building is obscured from view at the first floor by the 1960's addition, but the red tile roof, crenelated parapet, a tall stone chimney, and cross gable with a large tracery window are visible from N. Front Street.



Figure 7: The north elevation of the church, as visible from N. Front Street, with the 1966 addition in the foreground. Source: Cyclomedia, 2019.

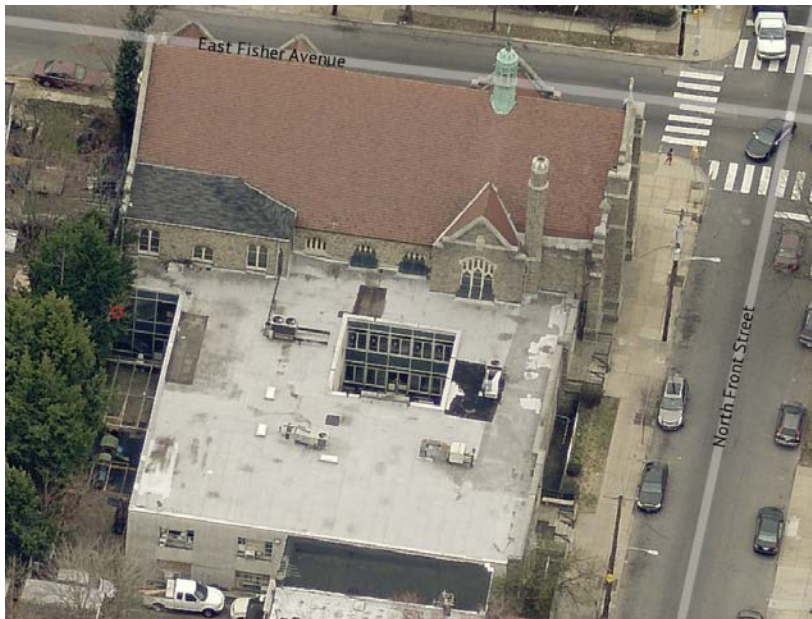


Figure 8: Birdseye view, looking south at the church and the addition. Source: Cyclomedia, 2019.

**West Elevation (addition):**

Connected to the north elevation of the church is a low, technically two-story addition (one story is primarily below grade along this elevation), opened in 1967, which extends six bays in width along N Front Street. Clad in similar ashlar stone with light stone detailing, the west elevation of the addition is sensitive to the character of the historic church building, but is differentiated from it with more modern details, including slightly-projecting window and door surrounds and metal windows. The details of the addition become more modern as it moves away from the church, until it ultimately transitions to fully modern detailing its north elevation.



Figure 9: Detail of the connection between the addition (left) and the church. The addition is set back slightly from the plane of the church. Source: Cyclomedia, 2019.



Figure 10: The west elevation of the addition is six bays wide and pays homage to the historic church building in materials and detailing such as the crenelated parapet, and yet is decidedly modern and of its time. Source: Cyclomedia, 2019.



Figure 11: Detail of the northernmost bays of the addition. Source: Cyclomedia, 2019.

At its northwest corner, the addition transitions from stone cladding to stucco. A series of tall, narrow, modern windows with projecting barrel awnings are visible from N Front Street.



Figure 12: The northwest corner of the addition. Source: Cyclomedia, 2019.

### **East Elevation (church and addition)**

The east elevation of the church is visible from E Fisher Avenue, but is partially obscured by large trees. Three bays in width, the east elevation is less detailed than the other elevations, with a simple gable end and smooth façade, but is still accented by stone tracery windows. The east elevation of the addition, which is set back from the church, is not visible from the public right-of-way. As the aerial below shows, the addition features an interior lightcourt.

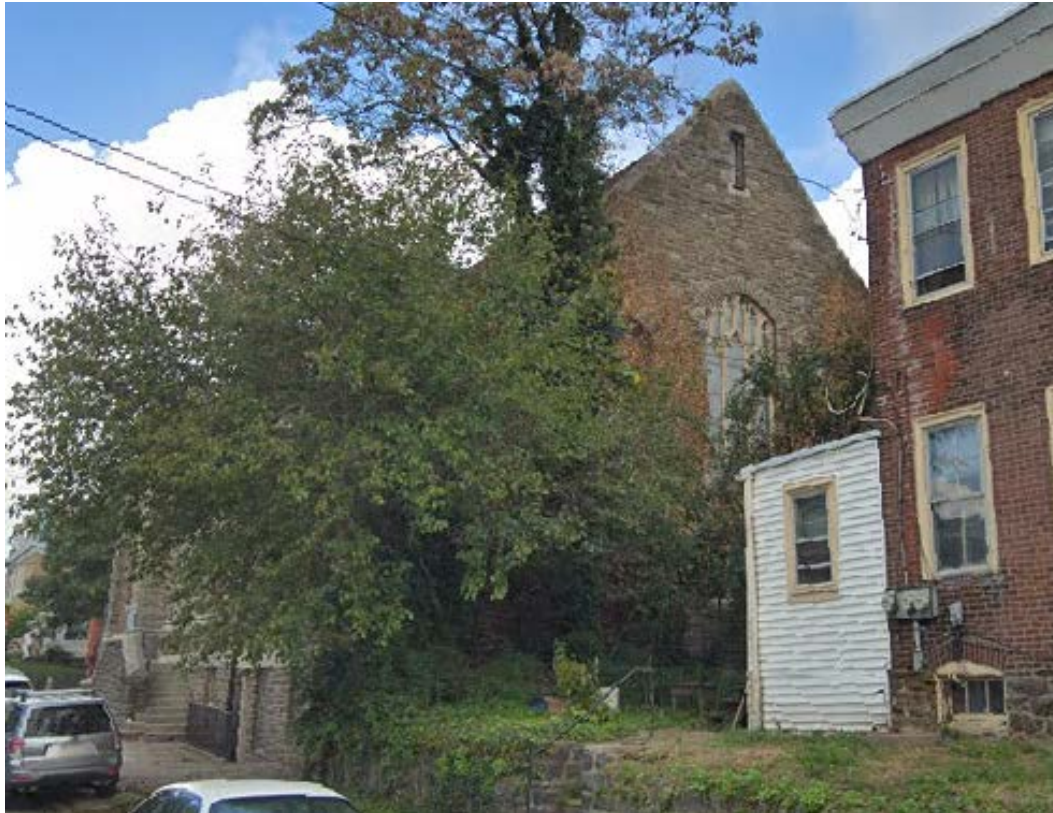


Figure 13: View of the west elevation from E Fisher Avenue. Source: Google Streetview, 2018.



Figure 14: Birdseye view of the west elevation of 5301-15 N Front Street. Source: Pictometry, 2019.

## **7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

The property at 5301-15 N Front Street is historically significant and should be listed individually on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. Pursuant to Section 14-1004(1) of the Philadelphia Code, the property satisfies Criteria for Designation C and J. The property:

- (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.

Constructed in 1928 by German-American architects Ritcher & Eiler for a German-American congregation, Zion Lutheran Church exemplifies the cultural, social, and historical heritage of the Olney neighborhood of Philadelphia, which developed as a German-American suburb in the first half of the twentieth century and has since become one of the most diverse communities in the city, satisfying Criterion J. The remarkably intact building is also reflective of the simple and precise late-Gothic Revival style popular for ecclesiastical architecture in the early decades of the twentieth century, satisfying Criterion C.

### ***Criterion J: Exemplifies the cultural, social, and historical heritage of the Olney community***

Through the late nineteenth century, the far north Philadelphia community of Olney remained largely undeveloped, its land composed mainly of farmland and the country estates, served by three main roads, Clinton Street, Olney Road, and the Kensington-Oxford Turnpike (now Mascher Street, Tabor Road, and Rising Sun Avenue, respectively). Historic maps bearing the names of Rorer, Wentz, Altemus and Snyder indicate an early presence of German families in the area (see Appendix 1, Maps), which by the 1910s would be recognized as a German suburb.

As Philadelphia's dense grid of streets crept northward, people seeking to escape the growing population density moved to Olney. With the availability of land and access to railroad lines, Olney also appealed to manufacturing companies such as Heintz, Proctor & Schwartz, and Brown Instrument, which in turn attracted more residents, many of German descent. During the period between World Wars I and II, large numbers of first, second, and third-generation German immigrants settled in the Olney neighborhood, its German-American population nearly matching that of the city's "most German" 29<sup>th</sup> Ward, which encompassed Brewerytown to the south.<sup>1</sup> As historian Russell A. Kazal notes, "Census tract data for 1930 show that two tracts in the [Olney] neighborhood had German-stock populations exceeding 20 percent, at a time when the Twenty-Ninth Ward's most German tract was 28 percent German-stock."<sup>2</sup>

German-American social and religious institutions followed, many relocating to Olney from other parts of the city. In 1895, the Philadelphia Rifle Club (Philadelphia Schützen-Verein), a prominent German club founded in 1846, relocated to Olney.<sup>3</sup> By 1898, enough German speakers lived in the area to justify the founding of a German Lutheran church, Tabor Lutheran.<sup>4</sup> Older congregations, like that of St. Paul's Independent Lutheran Church, which had been a fixture of the 16<sup>th</sup> Ward since 1871, moved to Olney in the 1920s, the church following the congregants, so many of whom had moved to the northern part of the city. Its congregation completed construction of a new church there in 1926.<sup>5</sup>

During the early twentieth century, Olney's German-American population grew to such an extent that it could support multiple German Lutheran congregations. One of those was Zion Lutheran Church, which held its first services in the home of Dr. Jesse Harpel at 202 E. Tabor Road in 1903. The following year, the congregation erected a frame chapel on a lot they purchased at the northeast corner of N. Front Street and E. Fisher Avenue. By the mid-1920s, Zion had expanded and was able to commission architects Ritcher & Eiler to design a large stone church on the site of their frame chapel (see Appendix

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Andrew Kazal, *Becoming Old Stock: the Paradox of German-American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press,

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 217.

<sup>3</sup> Marita Krivda Poxon and Rachel Hildebrandt, *Oak Lane, Olney, and Logan* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Kazal, *op.cit.*, 30.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 217.

2).<sup>6</sup> In 1928, Rev. Bela Shetlock, pastor of Zion Lutheran Church since 1920, laid the cornerstone for the new church, which was erected at the cost of more than \$115,000.

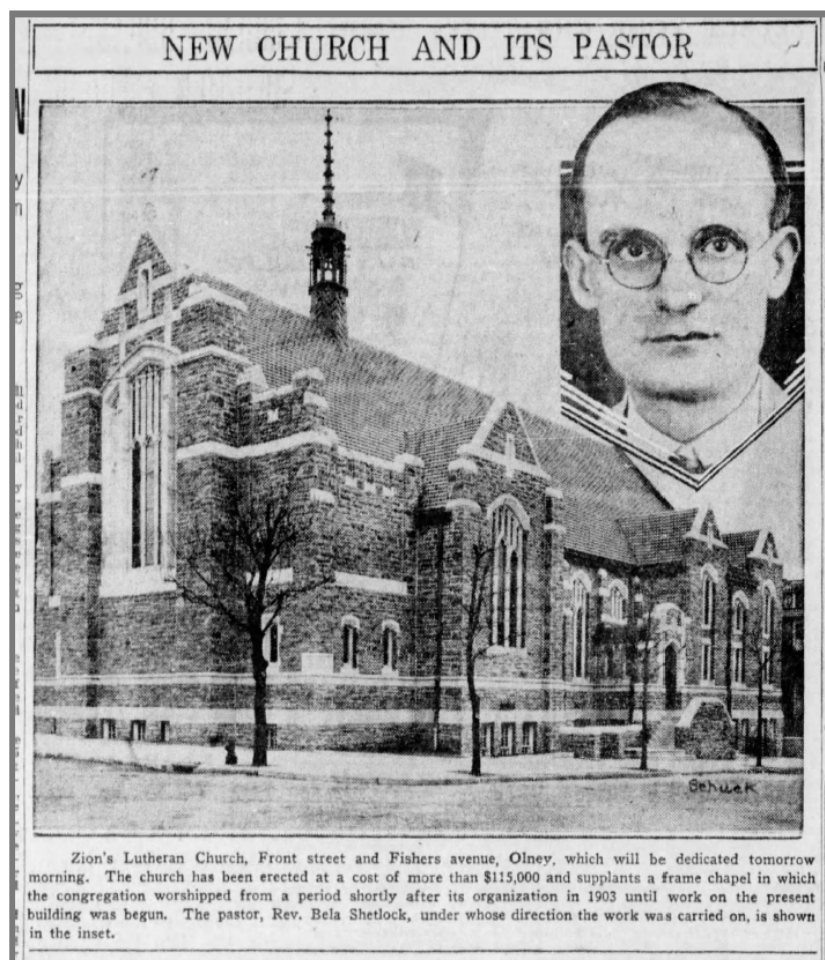


Figure 15: "New Church and its Pastor," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), 22 December 1928, p. 20.

That same year, the Broad Street subway station opened a terminal at Olney Avenue, providing quick and inexpensive access between Olney and Center City Philadelphia, and opening the area to potential further development. Despite the Great Depression and subsequent deindustrialization of Philadelphia during the middle of the twentieth century, Zion Lutheran Church persevered. The church was able to complete a renovation of the property for its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1953, and broke ground on a large new addition in 1966.<sup>7</sup> The addition, which was designed by the firm of Mansell, McGettigan & Fugate (fl. 1955-9; 1961-9) and dedicated in 1967, cost \$400,000 and included classrooms, a church parlor, youth lounge, library, recreation room, kitchen, outdoor chapel, and offices.<sup>8</sup> A day care and kindergarten opened in 1973, and a childcare center in 1984. Where it once catered primarily to a German-American congregation that was representative of the Olney neighborhood, the church has adapted to serve the shifting demographics of the community, which is now one of the most diverse middle-class neighborhoods in Philadelphia.

<sup>6</sup> Based out of Reading, Pennsylvania, architects Ritcher & Eiler (fl. 1921-1931) chiefly designed churches (see Appendix 2: Selected Works). Source: Sandra L. Tatman, *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*.

<sup>7</sup> "Brief History of Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church of Olney, Philadelphia," and "Zion Dedication on November 19, *The Call* (Schuylkill Haven, Pennsylvania), 19 Oct 1967, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Mansell, McGettigan, & Fugate (and in particular Norman Mansell) specialized in ecclesiastical design, largely for the Lutheran church. "Application for Zoning Permit and/or Registration Permit," City of Philadelphia Department of Licenses & Inspections, Application No. 50134H, 10/21/1965.

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

While the 1920s are seen as a time of social and cultural hedonism, flamboyance, and change in America, in comparison to the ornateness and eccentricity of the preceding Late Victorian years, the architecture of the period was relatively simple, careful, and precise. This dichotomy was particularly apparent in religious architecture, construction of which boomed during the early twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1927, the annual expenditure on church architecture rose from \$55 million to \$179 million, owing to growing church membership, and despite decreased church attendance.<sup>9</sup>

Ralph Adams Cram, the foremost ecclesiastic architect of the period, best expressed the mood that dominated church architecture during the first third of the twentieth century: “Build in stone or brick; plan with rigid simplicity; design both interior and exterior with reserve, formality and self-control; have the mass simple, the composition equally so; imitate no form or detail of larger structures, but work for the dignity and the reverence that are theirs; above all, let the spirit be that of the unchanging Church, the form alone that of the present day.”<sup>10</sup>

With a focus on simplicity and quality construction, many architects still chose to conscientiously search the past for inspiration without necessarily replicating form or content. As Carole Rifkind notes, “twentieth century church design is careful and correct in selecting historical details, and inventive in using them to fulfill modern requirements.”<sup>11</sup> Characteristics of the church architecture during the period included functional and clearly organized plans, the use of light colored masonry, and ornament selected from a single historical style, mostly Gothic through the 1920s.<sup>12</sup> Easily distinguishable from the picturesque and nostalgic Gothic Revival style of the mid-nineteenth century, the Gothic Revival designs of the twentieth century, such as Zion Lutheran Church, rework Gothic elements in original, respectful, and staid ways. For Zion Lutheran Church, the architects chose a simple and functional hall plan—also popular in German Lutheran architecture—into which they incorporated Gothic Revival characteristics including Gothic arch tracery windows (a wider version than found in the mid-nineteenth century Gothic Revival), abstracted buttresses, and the use of crenelated parapets.

***Conclusion***

Over its nearly century history, Zion Lutheran Church has continuously served the Olney community from its late-Gothic Revival church, expanding its services with a sensitive addition in the mid-twentieth century. The 1928 Zion Lutheran Church reflects the development of the Olney neighborhood in the early twentieth century as one of Philadelphia’s largest German-American communities. With its wide Gothic arch windows, abstracted buttresses and crenelated parapet, the late-Gothic Revival church reflects the simple and precise revivalist style popular for church design in the first decades of the twentieth century.

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<sup>9</sup> Carole Rifkind, *A Field Guide to American Architecture* (New York: Signet, 1980), 157.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Adams Cram, “Church Building,” *The Churchman* LXXX, no. 1 (July 8, 1899): p. 331.

<sup>11</sup> Rifkind, 158.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 157-58.

## APPENDIX 1: Maps



Figure 16: Detail of the small community of Olney is 1862. Source: Smedley Atlas, Greater PhilaGeoHistory Network.

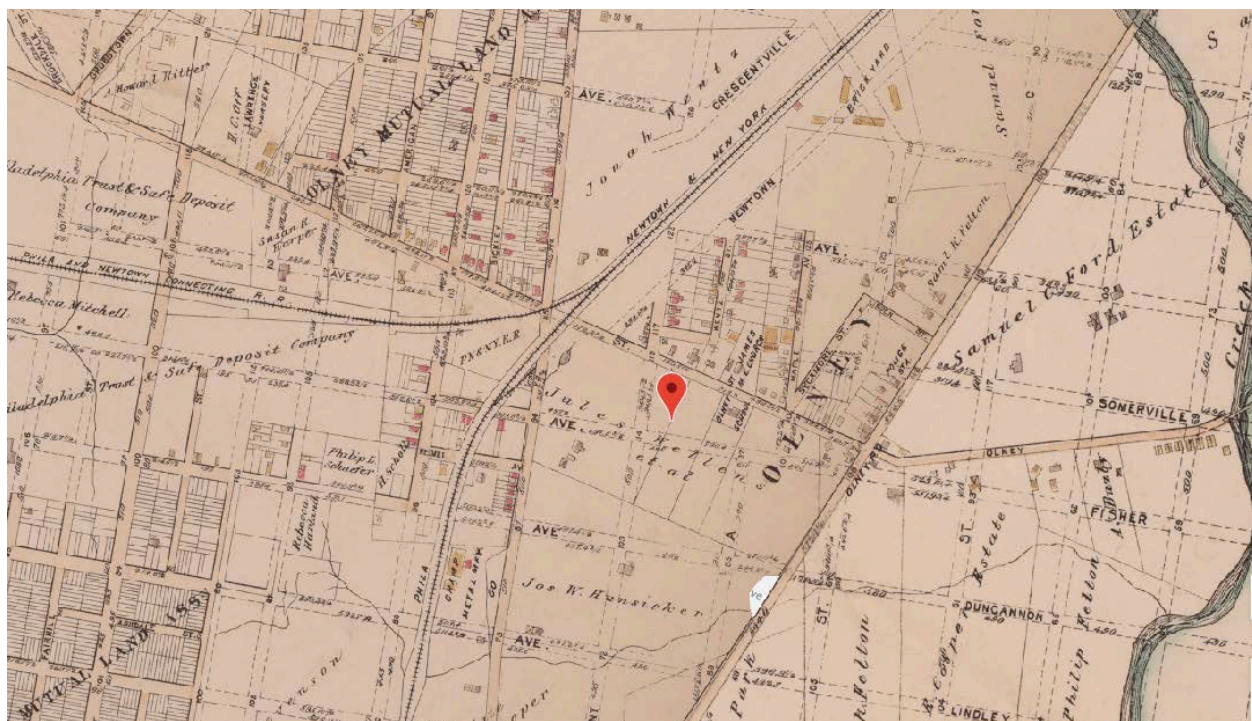


Figure 17: Detail of Olney is 1895 showing many plotted streets and speculative developments, but relatively little development. Source: G.W. Bromley Atlas, Greater PhilaGeoHistory Network.

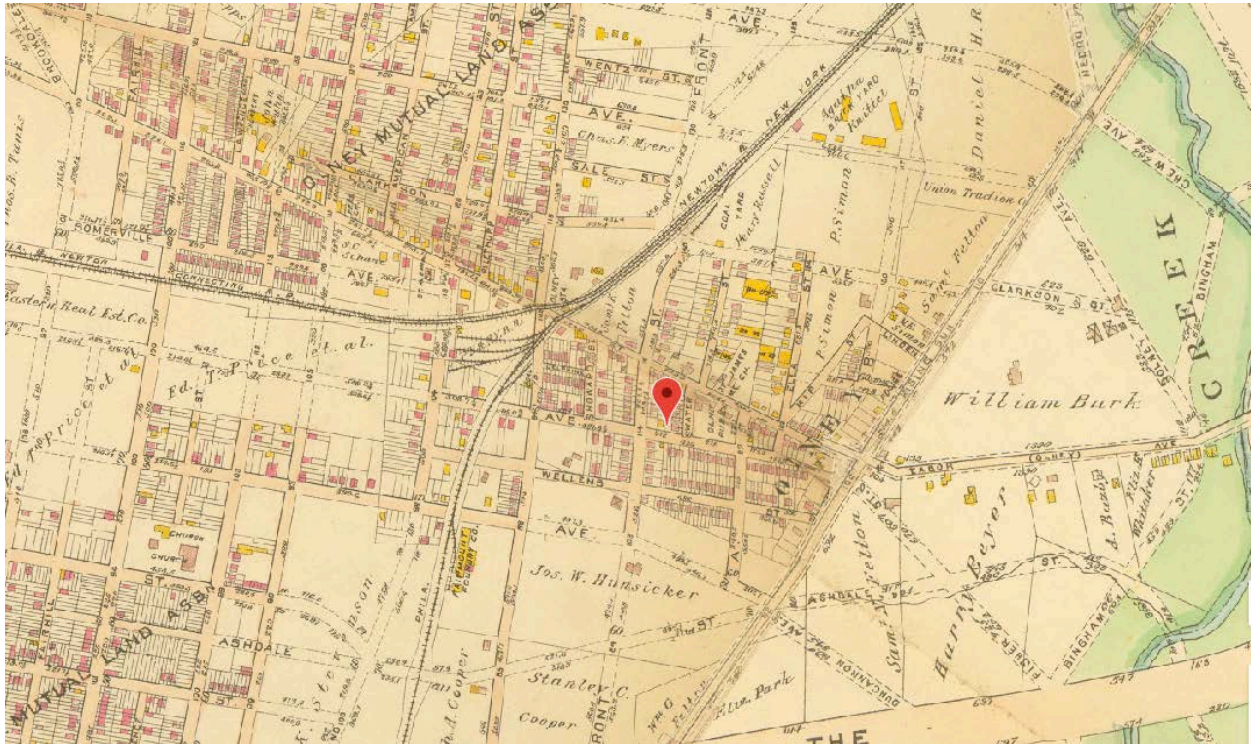


Figure 18: Detail of Olney is 1910 showing increased development. Source: G.W. Bromley Atlas, Greater PhilaGeoHistory Network.

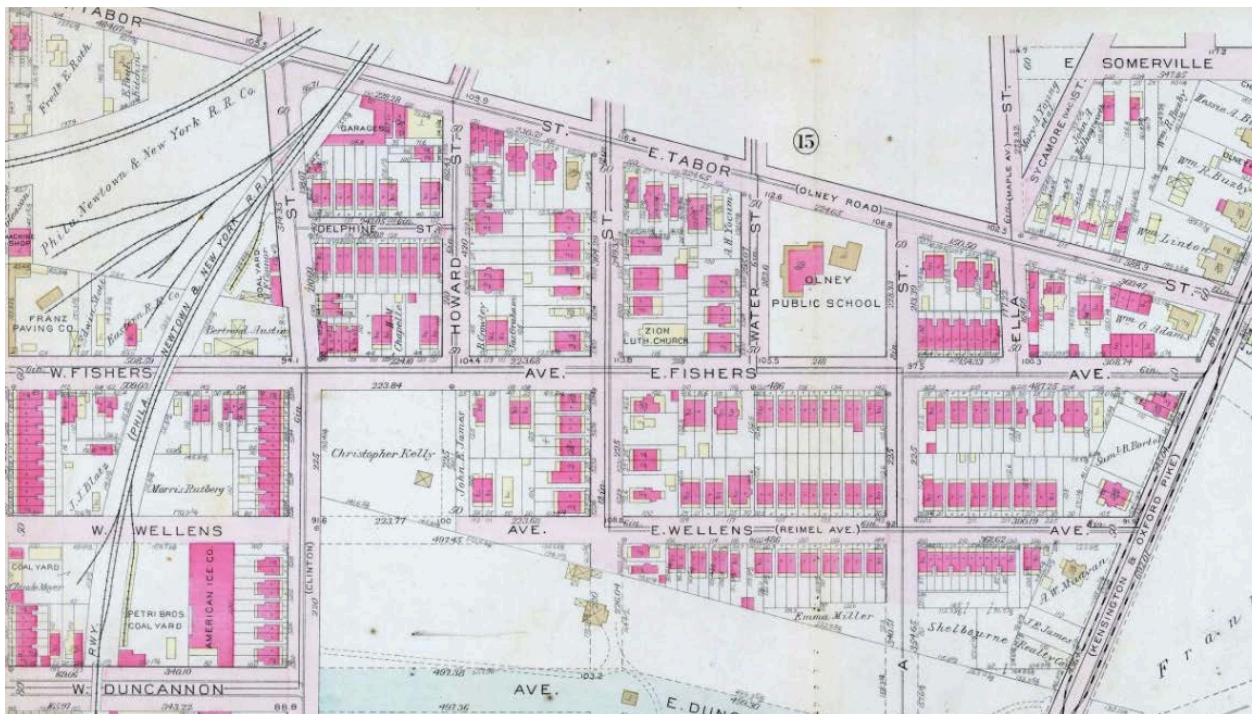


Figure 19: Detail of the residential neighborhood around Zion Lutheran Church (at the time of this map, still a frame structure) in 1923. Source: G.W. Bromley 42<sup>nd</sup> Ward map, HistoricMapWorks.com.

## APPENDIX 2: Selected works of Ritcher & Eiler



Left: East Stroudsburg Methodist Episcopal Church, 1922. Right: Muhlenberg Memorial Lutheran Church, N 13<sup>th</sup> and Ruscomb Streets. 1924.



Left: First United Brethren Church, Hershey, PA. 1928. Right: St. John's Lutheran Church, Nazareth, PA. 1929.

## 8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Cram, Ralph Adams. "Church Building." *The Churchman* LXXX, no. 1 (July 8, 1899): 331.

Kazal, Russell Andrew. *Becoming Old Stock: the Paradox of German-American Identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004.

Poxon, Marita Krivda, and Rachel Hildebrandt. *Oak Lane, Olney, and Logan*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2011.

Rifkind, Carole. *A Field Guide to American Architecture*. New York: Signet, 1980

Tatman, Sandra L. "Ritcher & Eiler (fl. 1921-1931)," *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*.