

**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: 5627-33 Germantown Avenue

Postal code: 19144

**2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Historic Name: The Rowell Department Store

Current/Common Name: Walgreens

**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: Pharmacy, office building

**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 1949 to 1976

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1923, 1929, 1949, 2011

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: Herbert B. Beidler, Arthur H. Brockie

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: N/A

Original owner: Pennsylvania Company for Banking and Trusts

Other significant persons: Curtis Sisco

**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 N/A Date December 26, 2017

Name with Title Noah Yoder Email nkyoder@gmail.com

Street Address 164 N. 3rd Street Apt. 3F Telephone 740-506-4227

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA 19106

Nominator  is  is not the property owner.

**PHC USE ONLY**

Date of Receipt: November 18, 2019

Correct-Complete  Incorrect-Incomplete Date: December 12, 2019

Date of Notice Issuance: December 12, 2019

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: Philadelphia Suburban Development Corp.

Address: 100 Ross Road

City: King of Prussia State: PA Postal Code: 19406

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

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

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

Designated  Rejected

## 5. Boundary Description

All that certain lot or piece of ground with the buildings and improvements thereon erected, Situate in Germantown in the Twelfth Ward of the City of Philadelphia, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Beginning at a point at the intersection of the Northeasterly side of

Germantown Avenue with the

Southeasterly side of Chelten Avenue;

thence extending along said side of Chelten Avenue, North forty two degrees, thirty nine minutes, forty seconds East, one hundred and sixty feet to a corner; thence extending South forty seven degrees, twenty one minutes East, and at right angles to Chelten Avenue eighty four feet, five and one quarter inches to a corner; thence South forty nine degrees, sixteen minutes West, one hundred and seventy two feet, seven and three quarter inches to the said Northeasterly side of Germantown Avenue; and thence along the said side of Germantown Avenue North thirty eight degrees, forty seven minutes West eighty two feet, ten inches to the said side of Chelten Avenue and place of beginning.<sup>1</sup> (fig 1.)<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1. 5627 Germantown Avenue. Boundaries are outlined in red.

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<sup>1</sup> Deed: Elma O. Dunning and Provident National Bank (surviving trustees under the will of C.A. Rowell) to 5627 Germantown Avenue Corporation, 1 June 1977, Philadelphia Deed Book DCC. No. 1441, p. 551, City of Philadelphia Department of Records.

<sup>2</sup> For ease of reading, citations for figures are recorded in the *Bibliography of Figures*, at the end of this nomination.



*Figure 2. 5627 Germantown Avenue.*

## **6. Building Description**

5627 Germantown Avenue is prominently located on the eastern corner of Germantown and Cheltenham Avenues in the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia. The building is an eight-story, stone faced rectangular commercial block which combines retail and office functions in Georgian Revival, Modern, and Stripped Classical styles. The largest component stands four stories tall with a canted corner, and fronts eighty-three feet along Germantown Avenue and one hundred and sixty feet along Cheltenham Avenue (For simplicity's sake this section will be referred to as the department store). Fronting Cheltenham Avenue and set back from Germantown Avenue, the other section is a four-story mass (henceforth referred to as the office tower,) which extends above the department store. The façade of these masses is divided by horizontal zones; red granite facing on the first floor, limestone ashlar with varied surface treatments on the second and third floors, and gray painted, smooth-faced, limestone ashlar above. A limestone belt course above the first floor and cyma-recta cornice above the third extend across the department store. However, a transition from the Georgian Revival style of the department store to the Stripped classical style of the office tower above creates vertical variety with pilasters that extend from the fifth through eighth stories. (fig 2.)

The ground floor of the building is clad in large, purple-red granite tiles and panels of beige stucco, some of which contain a horizontal band of square, single-pane windows which feature aluminum, roll-down security shutters. Contemporary "Walgreens" signage hangs just under the cornice that extends across the top of the ground floor. (Fig 3.)

The second and third floors of the building are visually



**Figure 3.** The first floor of the building, clad in purple-red granite and beige stucco.



**Figure 4.** The second and third floors of the building. Note the quoining and quarry-faced limestone.



*Figure 5. One of two large, two-story windows with classical details.*



*Figure 6. The fourth floor of the building, clad in dressed limestone ashlar.*

combined by a field of quarry-faced, random ashlar masonry edged by wide quoins of dressed stone. A band of molding, frieze and cornice top the third story. (Fig 4.) Both the Germantown and Cheltenham Avenue elevations feature a central, six-light, aluminum replacement window set in an architrave which spans both floors and is itself set on a field of smooth-faced limestone ashlar. The architrave consists of a paneled frieze, dentil molding and a cornice surmounted by a broken pediment containing a scrolled bracket and festooned urn. The dates “1903” and

“1950” flank the urn and the name “C.A Rowell” is incised in a frieze above the window. The window is situated above a mock balconette

with symmetrical balusters. (Fig 5.) Aside from its large central window, the second and third floors of the Cheltenham Avenue elevation contain thirteen bays of six-over-one windows. (Fig 2.) Aside from its large central window, the Germantown Avenue elevation contains five bays of

six-over-one windows, though the second story is missing two bays to the right of the central window. An additional bay of fire-stair openings is aligned to the far left. (Fig 2.)

The fourth floor is composed of smooth-faced gray painted limestone and is capped with a cornice and parapet. The Cheltenham Avenue elevation contains 15 bays of six-over-one windows divided into groups of six, four, and five, respectively positioned to the left, center, and right.

The Germantown Avenue elevation contains eight, evenly spaced bays, the leftmost two being fire stair openings. (Fig 6.)

The canted corner of the department store is made entirely of dressed limestone and has one bay with a square spandrel visually connecting a four-over-four window on the third floor with a six-over-



*Figure 7. The canted corner of the building.*



*Figure 8. The building's Stripped Classical office tower.*

one window on the fourth. The bay is surrounded by trim and topped with a keystone. On the first floor, the building's main, corner entry is inset with sliding, glazed double doors. (Fig 7.)

The office tower is made of smooth-faced ashlar limestone painted gray. Four pilasters break the continuity of, and extend from the cornice of the fourth floor, each edged by painted iron corner bracing and topped by a flattened shield motif. The



*Figure 9. The rear elevation opposite Cheltenham Avenue.*

of one over one windows on the fifth floor, and seven bays of one over one windows on the sixth through eighth floors. Above the fourth floor extends an unadorned, tan running bond brick box for utilities. The first three floors share a party wall with the neighboring building. (Fig 9.)

The elevation facing opposite Germantown Avenue is also made of tan running bond brick and features three vertical rectangles of banding extending to the seventh floor. Above those is a banded rectangle painted white with the name “C.

pilasters intercept an eighth-floor cornice and terminate midway through a parapet which is adorned with niches centered between pilasters. In each of the three zones between pilasters are three bays of windows, excepting the center zone of the Germantown avenue elevation which contains five bays instead of three. (Fig 8.)

The elevation facing opposite Cheltenham Avenue is made of tan running bond brick, with no ornamentation, and has a steel smokestack extending up the entire elevation. An inset on the fifth through eighth floors accommodates four bays



*Figure 10. The rear elevation opposite Germantown Avenue.*



A. Rowell” inscribed in black. Above the eighth floor extends an unadorned, tan running bond brick box for utilities. The first floor shares a party wall with the neighboring building. (Fig10.)

## **7. Significance**

5627 Germantown Avenue on the corner of Germantown and Cheltenham Avenues meets the following criteria for designation as set forth in Section 14-2007(5) of the Philadelphia Code.

The building:

- (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;**
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social, or historical heritage of the community.**

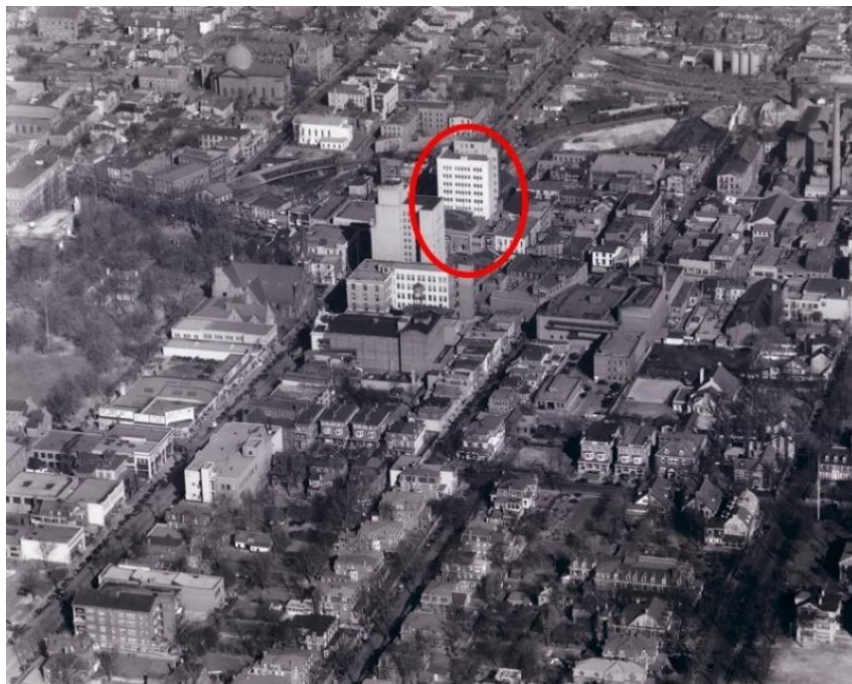
For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century 5627 Germantown Avenue was considered the anchor of Germantown's commercial center at the corner of Germantown and Cheltenham Avenues. From 1898 to 1947 the lot housed the Germantown Trust Company bank building, an institution regarded as the herald of the corner as a commercial hub. In 1949 the building was altered to accommodate the Rowell Department Store, a retail establishment that epitomized the neighborhood's status as Philadelphia's second largest commercial district as well as the gradual decline of department stores over the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rowell's was the first Black owned department store in America and in the early 1970's was the county's largest Black owned business. The Georgian Revival façade of the building stands testament to style's prevalence in Germantown, and its Modern form exemplifies trends in mid-century retail architecture of the era. (In order to distinguish it from the Rowell Department Store business the building itself will be referred to as "the Rowell Building" for the remainder of this nomination.)

- (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.**

and

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

## The Corner of Germantown and Cheltenham Avenue



*Figure 11. An aerial view of the corner of Germantown and Cheltenham Avenue in 1931. The Germantown Trust Company building and tower is circled in red.*

The corner of Germantown and Cheltenham Avenue on which the Rowell Building sits has long been a commercial hub of the neighborhood. Beginning in the 1890s a confluence of rail and trolley lines within four blocks of the corner allowed easy access between Germantown and Center

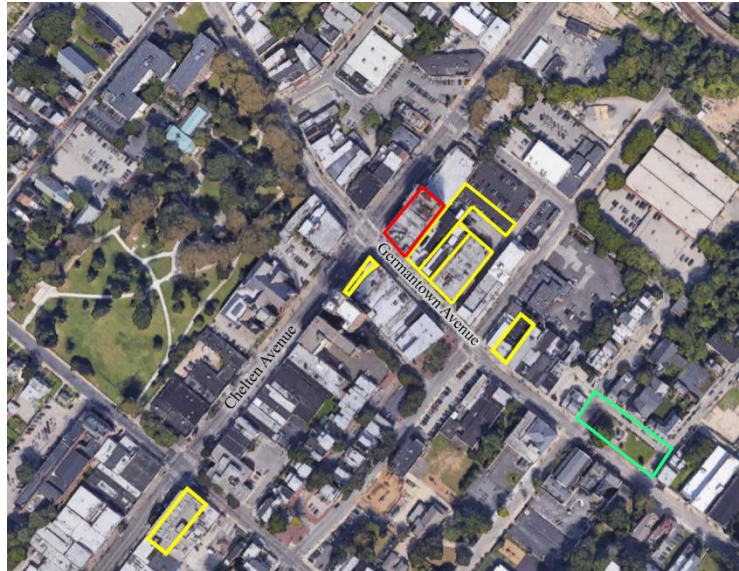
City Philadelphia, spurring rapid development.<sup>3</sup> In 1889 the fledgling Germantown Trust Company built their banking establishment on 5627 Germantown Avenue, and was considered a herald of the corner as a “100%” location (parlance for a district through which nearly all foot and vehicle traffic passes.) Over the course of forty years the company expanded several times, culminating in 1929 with an eight-story office tower that now comprises the top four stories of the Rowell Building.<sup>4</sup> (Fig 11.)

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<sup>3</sup> Philadelphia Historical Commission, *Historic Preservation Recommendations for the Upper Northwest Planning District*, p. 13, (Philadelphia Historical Commission, 2017), <https://www.phila.gov/historical/Documents/Upper%20NW%20hist%20pres%20recs%20draft.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> “Germantown Trust Company to Erect Eight-Story Office Building”, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 21 June 1929 p. 64, Newspapers.com.

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century the commercial significance of the district was so great that it was regularly referred to as a “city within a city,” and until the mid-1960s was the second largest commercial district in Philadelphia, exceeded only by



*Figure 12. Some of the major department stores of Germantown's commercial district outlined in yellow. The Rowell Building is outlined in red. Germantown's Market Square is outlined in green.*

Center City. The district was home to a number of department stores,

including Woolworth's, Cherry's, Allen's and S.S. Kresge's.<sup>5</sup> (Fig 12.)

In 1903 Clarence A. Rowell opened a dry goods store on Susquehanna Avenue in North Philadelphia. By 1918 the profitability of Rowell's store allowed him to expand to Germantown's already bustling commercial district only a few doors down from where the Rowell Building stands today.<sup>6</sup> From its arrival in the area until its closing, Rowell's was considered the anchoring department store of the district for its considerable size, quality service and merchandise.<sup>7</sup> Following C.A. Rowell's death in 1930, the department store began operating as charity, with all proceeds going to the Germantown boy's club, churches, and various civic charities in the neighborhood.<sup>8</sup> The store's philanthropic efforts were praised in local newspapers well into the 1960's.

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<sup>5</sup> Philadelphia Historical Commission, *Historic Preservation Recommendations*, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> “Charity Store Located in New Building”, *The Indiana Gazette*, 2 June 1950 p. 10, Newspapers.com

<sup>7</sup> Len Lear “Owned Northwest's Finest Department Store – A Forgotten Pioneer: ‘The Jackie Robinson of Retail’”, *Chestnut Hill Local*, 30 August 2013. <https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2013/08/30/owned-northwests-finest-department-store-a-forgotten-pioneer-the-jackie-robinson-of-retail/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Charity Store Located in New Building”.

Despite a gradual decline in business through the 1950's and 60's due to rapid suburbanization, both Rowell's and the corner remained a commercial stalwart in Philadelphia until its closure in the 1970s.<sup>9</sup>

### **Department stores in Philadelphia**

From the late 1880s through the 1920s department stores across the nation enjoyed high profits and popularity, offering luxury goods to a middle-class population with increasing disposable income. Though sales dropped during the Great Depression most department stores managed to survive and even profit by reducing staff, catering to cash strapped consumers, and abandoning emphasis on luxury and name brand goods. Departments stores like Wannamaker's in Center City Philadelphia continued to draw large crowds with organ concerts, choirs and performances.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Len Lear "Owned Northwest's Finest Department Store".

<sup>10</sup> Vicki Howard, *From Main Street to Mall: The Rise and Fall of the American Department Store*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), P. 121-123.

The advent of WWII saw a return to prosperity for department stores as families had more money to spend following the depression. Increased profit margins resulted from dramatic changes in retail structure as well. The depression era cutbacks in services, staff, and luxury goods continued to save department stores money, while

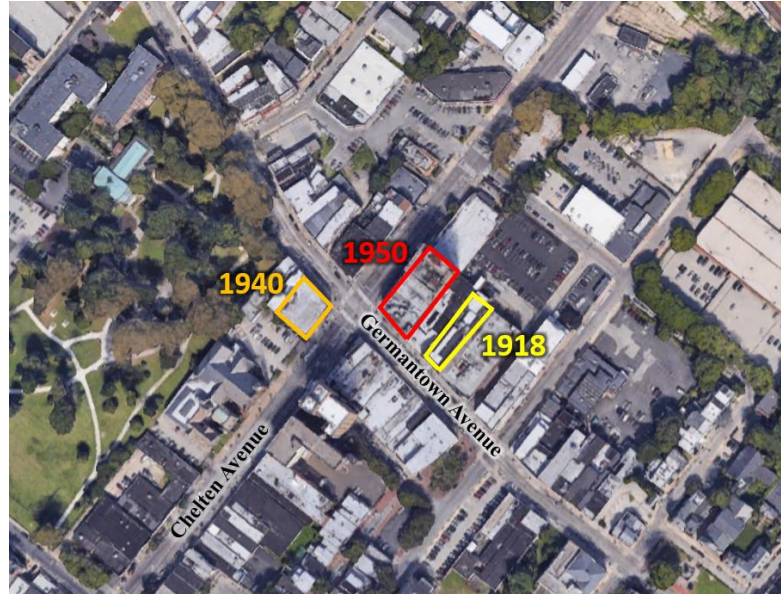


Figure 13. The Rowell Department Store's three locations in Germantown's commercial district and corresponding dates of expansion.

wartime rationing and price controls boosted savings further still. Rationing on gasoline and tires reduced the number of cars in urban centers and the convenient proximity of commercial districts to public transportation caused department stores' consumer base to expand.<sup>11</sup> By the middle of the 1940s retail profits were at an all-time high, and department stores like Rowell's began to expand and modernize their stores to meet growing demand.<sup>12</sup>

The Rowell Department Store was indicative of the optimistic expansion of department stores in the 1940s. Though Rowell's had been near the corner of Germantown and Cheltenham Avenue since 1918, the store expanded twice over ten years. First to the corner lot at 5700 Germantown Avenue in 1940, and then across the street to its ultimate location at 5627 Germantown Avenue in 1950.<sup>13</sup> (Fig 13.) By that time, department stores had already passed

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<sup>11</sup> Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 163-167.

<sup>12</sup> Vicki Howard, *From Main Street to Mall*, p. 124, 191, 193.

<sup>13</sup> "Charity Store Located in New Building".

their peak profit margins and were experiencing a marked decline.<sup>14</sup> However, decades of economic success in inner city commercial hubs like Germantown Avenue gave the Rowell board of trustees little reason to believe the corner wouldn't quickly bounce back. The reality was that the future of department stores was unclear by 1950 as chain stores and retail branches began opening in the suburbs, undermining metropolitan retail centers.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the 1950s and 60s the ready availability of the automobile along with affordable housing through the G.I. bill caused suburban populations to grow seven times as fast as those of inner cities. Throughout this time department stores were in flux, unable to adapt to the unprecedented changes in the market caused by this demographic transformation. Chain stores and suburban shopping centers drew consumers to the outer edge of cities and drained the commercial viability of the inner city. In order to remain relevant, many department stores branched out, believing satellite stores would strengthen the metropolitan commercial core. Others were unable to build enough capital to build in the suburbs and instead were bought out by more profitable chains.<sup>16</sup>

In 1963 Rowell's was purchased by a conglomerate of department stores based out of Chicago. Though Rowell's maintained its identity, the store's affiliation with the



*Figure 14. The Rowell Department Store Board of Trustees at the 1966 ribbon cutting ceremony opening the store's branch in Moorestown, New Jersey.*

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<sup>14</sup> Vicki Howard, *From Main Street to Mall*, p. 124.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Longstreth, *The American Department Store Transformed, 1920-1960*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010), p. 220-221.

<sup>16</sup> Vicki Howard, *From Main Street to Mall*, p. 134-137, 191, 193.

conglomerate helped it purchase goods in bulk, maintain lower prices, and stay economically viable on the corner into the next decade.<sup>17</sup> In 1966 Rowell's also opened a branch in the new Moorestown Mall in New Jersey, a venture which lasted until 1971.<sup>18,19</sup> (Fig 14.)

By the 1970's suburban shopping malls and department store chains had all but wiped out urban retail centers. Competition from two new malls built to the northwest of Germantown proved too great for the Rowell Department Store which went bankrupt in 1976.<sup>20</sup> Rowell's was the last independent department store to close in the Germantown and Cheltenham Avenue commercial district, marking the end of a retail era which had lasted over eighty years.<sup>21</sup>

### **Curtis W. Sisco**

The final years of the Rowell Department Store were overseen by Curtis W. Sisco, who purchased the business in 1974. When he bought the department store Germantown was experiencing severe economic decline, but Sisco was determined to raise the profile of the corner and bring Rowell's back to its former reputation as a rival to suburban malls and department stores in Center City. (Fig15.)

Sisco was the son of a Virginia sharecropper



*Figure 15. Curtis W. Sisco, owner of the Rowell Department Store from 1974-79, and the first Black owner of a department store in America.*

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<sup>17</sup> "3 Buy Share of Rowell Store", *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 17 November 1963, p.74, Newspapers.com.

<sup>18</sup> "New C. A. Rowell", *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1 September 1966, p. 4, Newspapers.com.

<sup>19</sup> "C. A. Rowell Moorestown Mall Going Out of Business", *Courier-Post*, 3 August 1971, p.4, Newspapers.com.

<sup>20</sup> David R. Contosta, "Philadelphia's 'Miniature Williamsburg': The Colonial Revival and Germantown's Market Square", *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol 120, No. 4, October 1996, p. 319, <https://journals.psu.edu/pmh/article/view/45106>.

<sup>21</sup> Dave Bittan, *Merchants: What's in Store?*, *Philadelphia Daily News*, 2 October 1980, p. 24, Newspapers.com



who moved to Philadelphia in the 1950s to earn an associate degree in tailoring and clothing design at the Borean Institute of Technology. He briefly owned a tailoring and cleaning shop before serving in the US Army in Korea.<sup>22</sup> Through the 1960s, Sisco was a Philadelphia Police officer under then police commissioner and later mayor Frank L. Rizzo, an unpopular figure in the Black community. Despite being a Black man himself, Sisco respected Rizzo as a “good and loyal man” and remained his friend and associate until Rizzo’s Death in 1991. Sisco’s career as a police officer was cut short after an injury from a motorcycle accident in 1968, after which he turned his attention back to the fashion industry. He went on to open a trio of men’s clothing stores and became well known as a purveyor of men’s fashion, creating the popular “Sisco look,” characterized by “clever use of color, fabric and design.”<sup>23</sup>

In five years, Sisco’s haberdasheries built him enough capital to buy the Rowell Department Store. His purchase of the business in 1974 garnered national attention. President



*Figure 16. Sisco in front of the Rowell Department Store in 1974. At the time, Rowell’s was the largest Black owned business in America.*

Richard Nixon declared him “minority businessman of the year” and Sisco was praised as America’s first Black owner of a department store in magazines and newspapers across the country.<sup>24</sup> Jet, a magazine marketed to Black audiences, noted the Rowell Department Store’s new status as

<sup>22</sup> Len Lear “Owned Northwest’s Finest Department Store”.

<sup>23</sup> “Curtis W. Sisco Sr., Black Business Pioneer”, *The Philadelphia Daily News*, 6 July 1994, p. 29, Newspapers.com

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

the largest Black owned business in the US, which employed over a hundred workers.<sup>25</sup> (Fig 16.)

Sisco was part of a dramatic demographic shift that took place in Germantown over the course of the twentieth century. Philadelphia's Black population increased significantly between 1916 and 1970 during the Great Migration, in which six million Black southerners like Sisco left the rural south for northern cities. Redlining, a discriminatory housing policy which encouraged segregation by denying loans to minorities while guaranteeing loans to white people, further shaped Germantown's identity as a primarily Black neighborhood. In 1950 the Black population of Germantown was 15%. Twenty-four years later, when Sisco purchased the Rowell Department Store, Germantown's population was 84% Black.<sup>26</sup> The late sixties and early seventies saw a marked increase in minority businesses in Germantown, many of which, including Rowell's, begun with the help of government loans from programs like the Pennsylvania Minority Business Development Authority.<sup>27</sup>

Despite his best efforts at reviving the Rowell Department Store, the business defaulted on its loans and went bankrupt in 1976, only two years after Sisco took ownership.<sup>28</sup> However, Sisco remained a champion of Black owned businesses in Philadelphia and served as a role model and mentor to a number of successful Black entrepreneurs. He also remained relevant in the world of retail as an adjunct professor of marketing and merchandizing at Drexel University, and occasional lecturer at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> "Philadelphia Black Owns Large Department Store", *Jet*, 7 March 1974, p. 29, <https://books.google.com/books?id=AqYDAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA29&lpg=PA29&dq=rowell+department+store&source=bl&ots=JQPNanxGpc&sig=CLCPdSIt0yoSnzz3jsdo8ZNW1ZI&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjR5qDzylaLeAhUxU98KHTiBBY84ChDoATAggQIBxAB#v=onepage&q=rowell%20department%20store&f=false>.

<sup>26</sup> Philadelphia Historical Commission, *Historic Preservation Recommendations*, p. 13-14.

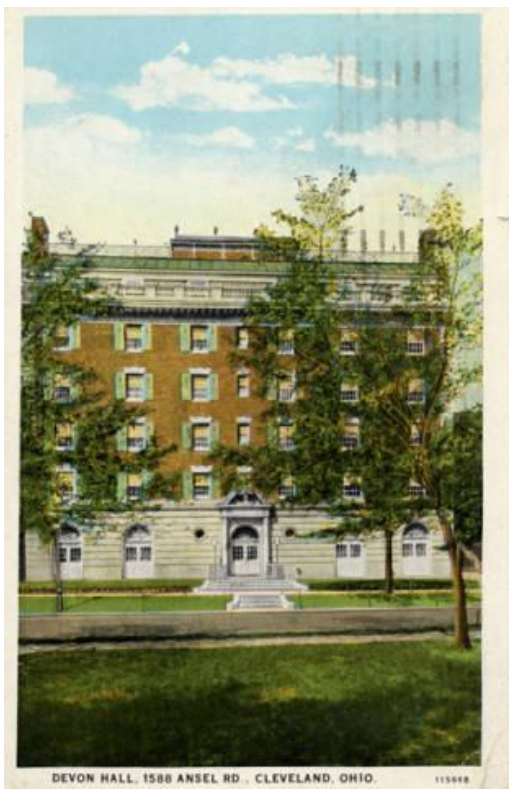
<sup>27</sup> "Minority Businessmen Feel Recession's Crunch", *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 16 March 1975, p. 36, Newspapers.com.

<sup>28</sup> Edgar Williams, "Rowell's Closes in Germantown", *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 December 1976, p. 27, Newspapers.com.

<sup>29</sup> "Curtis W. Sisco Sr., Black Business Pioneer".

**(c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style.**

The Rowell Building's varied architectural styles represent a marriage between standard mid-century retail architecture and Germantown's fascination with its 18<sup>th</sup> century past. The building was grown by accretion, beginning as a two-story bank building in 1923 and acquiring an eight-story, stripped classical office tower designed by Arthur H. Brockie in 1929.<sup>30</sup> The eight-story structure still stands over the Rowell Building as testament to the dramatic commercial growth and prosperity of the district in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. (Figs 8,11.)



*Figure 17. Devon Hall, Cleveland. A Georgian Revival apartment building designed by Herbert B. Beidler in 1926.*



*Figure 18. The Bond Department Store in downtown Cleveland Designed by Herbert B. Beidler with Walker & Weeks in 1946.*

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<sup>30</sup> "Activities of Day in Real Estate", *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 27 September 1929, p. 30.

The building's Georgian revival façade and Modern first floor, designed by Chicago based architect Herbert Bishop Beidler, was added to the building in 1949.<sup>31</sup> Having experience designing both Georgian Revival buildings and Modern department stores, Beidler was uniquely suited to Germantown's stylistic needs, creating a façade that reflected neighborhood history yet served the prevailing ethos of the era's commercial building design.<sup>32</sup> (Fig 17,18.)

### Georgian Revival Architecture in Germantown

Germantown was settled in 1683 and was thriving township until it was annexed by Philadelphia in 1854. Germantown has a rich 18<sup>th</sup> century history which includes the 1777 Battle of Germantown in the Revolutionary War, and distinction as the summer residence of George Washington and



*Figure 19. Cliveden, a Georgian house in Germantown built in 1763. An example of the historic architecture that influenced Germantown's Georgian Revival architecture.*

other notable figures during Philadelphia's yellow fever epidemic in 1793. Much of this historic fabric remains in Germantown and 18<sup>th</sup> century Georgian and Federal style residences like Cliveden, Loudon, Vernon and others are scattered throughout the neighborhood.<sup>33</sup> (Fig 19.)

Colonial era architecture enjoyed a resurgence in popularity in Philadelphia as early as the 1890s and by 1900 Georgian Revival could be seen across the city. Promoted as a national style, Georgian Revival stood in contrast to the more ornate and eclectic architectural fashions of

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<sup>31</sup> "Rowell's New Store Will Be Ready in 1950", *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 8 June 1949, p. 49, Newspapers.com.

<sup>32</sup> Cleveland City Planning Commission, "Cleveland Architects: Herbert Bishop Beidler", *Cleveland City Planning Commission*, <http://planning.city.cleveland.oh.us/landmark/arch/pdf/archdetailPrint.php?afil=&archID=379>, accessed 5 December 2018, accessed 5 December 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Philadelphia Historical Commission, *Historic Preservation Recommendations*, p. 3-6.

the Victorian era and appealed to a prevailing new interest in academic classicism.<sup>34</sup> Revival buildings in Germantown often followed the local vernacular model using undressed local stone, brick, flat keystone arches, broken pediments and other details found on surviving Georgian buildings in the



*Figure 20. The Germantown Historical Society, a Georgian Revival building on Market Square.*

area.<sup>35</sup> (Fig 20.) Though an eclectic, stylistically mixed building, the Georgian Revival second and third floors of the Rowell Building epitomize Germantown’s interpretation of the style, with quarry faced stone, bold quoining, and large, elaborate classical windows evoking a colonial entryway. (Fig 2.)

Georgian Revival architecture remained prevalent in Germantown for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was seen as both a celebration of the past and a tool for economic growth in the neighborhood. The success of the Colonial Williamsburg project in Virginia inspired Germantown city planners and community organizations to capitalize on Germantown’s historic past by developing a “miniature Williamsburg” of their own. The Creation of a “colonial atmosphere” was intended to bolster the local economy by drawing tourism to the neighborhood.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> David R. Contosta, “Philadelphia’s “Miniature Williamsburg””, p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> Betzy Dinesen, “Colonial revival”, *Grove Art Online*, 2003, <https://proxy.library.upenn.edu:2101/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T018773>, accessed 6 December 2018.

<sup>36</sup> David Young, “The Battles of Germantown: Public History and Preservation in America’s Most Historic Neighborhood During the Twentieth Century”, PhD diss, Ohio State University, 2009, ProQuest (3375736), p. 226.

The “Colonial Germantown” project was centered around Germantown’s Market Square, extending northwest to the commercial district at the corner of Germantown and Cheltenham Avenues. The endeavor began in earnest in 1948 and continued with varying degrees of success through the 1960s. (Fig 12.) This attempt to “colonialize” Germantown coincided with the neighborhood’s economic decline over the same period. The movement was ultimately considered an urban renewal plan that stood in contrast to the demolition and modernization-based urban renewal taking place in other areas of Philadelphia. Like Rowell’s, stores and other institutions along Germantown Avenue participated in the fervor for Georgian Revival, but significant pushback from residents in the neighborhood prevented a complete Colonial Germantown district from forming.<sup>37</sup> The Rowell Building was and remains one of Germantown’s largest Georgian Revival buildings of the era.

### Modernism in Department Store Architecture



*Figure 21. Interior display rooms designed by Herbert Beidler For the Rowell Department Store. 1950.*

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 215, 224-226.



*Figure 22. The Rowell Department Store as it appeared in 1950. The building's windowless massing is typical of department stores of the era.*

The Georgian Revival historicity of the Rowell Building stands in marked contrast to the Modern aesthetic common to commercial architecture of the era. Beginning in the late 1930s, Modernism offered an optimistic hope for the machine age and a utilitarian philosophy well suited to shopping centers.<sup>38</sup> The style also offered a vision of newness and stability that supplanted the luxury emphasized by earlier retail architecture, which had become irrelevant amid Depression era cutbacks of services and luxury goods. By the mid-1940s glass and steel Modernism had become the norm, and clear patterns in retail architecture emerged.<sup>39</sup>

Described as “monuments on the outside, machines on the inside,” Department stores of the era were often characterized by a large, windowless massing on the upper floors, intended to aggrandize size on the outside and facilitate display “rooms” and distraction free shopping on the inside. Horizontality characterized the first floor, with long runs of curtain windows, deep

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<sup>38</sup> David J. Smiley, *Pedestrian Modern: Shopping and American Architecture, 1925-1956*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Longstreth, *The American Department Store Transformed*, p. 34.

entries, and overhangs, meant to meld indoor with outdoor space and entice pedestrians inward.<sup>40</sup> (Fig 21, 22.)

Though not immediately recognized as Modern, the Rowell Building bears several core characteristics of Modern commercial architecture, adding to the building's eclectic appearance. Before bays of windows were added to the building in 2011, the Second and third stories were characterized by a large windowless mass of limestone. (Fig 22.) Pictures of Rowell's interior architecture at the time show the advantageous nature of this Modern form, with store displays and tableaus of merchandise arranged uninhibited by windows. (Fig 21.) Though it may appear to be a contemporary remodel to the Rowell Building storefront, the red granite cladding that characterizes the first floor of the building is original Modern fabric.<sup>41</sup> What are now panels of beige stucco were once deep entries and open store windows advertising Rowell's varied merchandise to passing pedestrians, a hallmark of mid-century retail architecture. (Fig 23.)



*Figure 23. The Rowell Department Store's Modern first floor in 1950.*

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<sup>40</sup> David J. Smiley, *Pedestrian Modern*, p. 6, 80.

<sup>41</sup> "Rowell's New Store Will Be Ready in 1950".



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# Rowell's New Store Will Be Ready in 1950

C. A. Rowell department store officials announced yesterday that their new four-story building at the southeast corner of Germantown and Chelton aves., diagonally opposite

from the present location, will be opened "early in 1950."

Demolition of the former home of the Penna. Co. for Banking and Trusts, and before that the Germantown Trust Co., already is under way and the eight-story office building at the rear of the site will remain and be linked to the new store, the officials said.


They added that the new structure, designed by Herbert B. Beidler, Chicago architect, "will reflect the latest in store design." It will be air-conditioned throughout and will have no exterior windows, except for display windows on the street level. It will be finished in Briar Hill stone and limestone, and will be a light buff in color.

The department store officials noted that Rowell's has had to expand its facilities three times within the last 31 years. In 1918 the late Clarence A. Rowell, the founder, moved his business from 16th st. and Susquehanna ave. to 5615-17 Germantown ave. In 1940 Rowell's moved to its present location.

The Turner Construction Co., 1500 Walnut st., is the general contractor for the new building, which will have 55,000 square feet of selling space or twice that of the present store.

**There will be music for everybody at Municipal Stadium Friday night. Don't miss the Music Festival. Good seats are still available.**

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