

Owner response received by the
Philadelphia Historical Commission regarding
the nomination for the French Village Historic District

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Philadelphia Historical Commission

1615 Arch Street, 13th Floor

Philadelphia, PA 19102

Re: French Village Historical District

Dear Members of the Commission and Members of the Advisory Committee,

I write regarding the metes and bounds of the proposed district. The description of the district in the nomination report omits a crucial historical change: the transformation of Emlen Street into a major thoroughfare. The report stresses the careful design of the district to preserve the enclave from certain urban encroachments and to preserve its suburban bucolic setting. This setting is maintained within the area from the entrance to Gate Lane on Emlen Street along Gate Lane across to Elbow Lane, down Elbow Lane and even across McCallum Street along St. George's Lane. This area remains relatively untouched by through automobile traffic. Residents purposely have allowed the asphalt on the private streets to deteriorate to discourage through traffic. For purposes of this letter, I will call that area "the pristine French Village." There is much foot traffic there because of the quiet that has been maintained. But history took a different course along Emlen Street, which is now a busy thoroughfare that cannot be crossed on weekdays because of the heavy traffic. It is the main conduit into Center City from Chestnut Hill and the Northwest suburbs and along route 309, up as far as Bucks County. It hasn't even a traffic light between Germantown Avenue and Allens Lane. There is almost no foot traffic along Emlen Street because of the traffic. There is no maintained sidewalk along most of Emlen Street and such sidewalk as there is leads to nowhere (the remnants of sidewalk ending at the turn at Cresheim Road). Such foot traffic as there is ends just a few yards below Gate Lane where the Friends of the Wissahickon maintain a staircase into a relatively remote part of the park. In short, Emlen Street cuts the area from Huron/Emlen Street side from the Gate Lane side and the pristine French Village. The present character of the two areas is very different.

As a result of the increased traffic on Emlen Street over the years, the houses on Emlen Street have had to adapt to avoid the noise and maintain privacy. They are now different from the houses within the pristine French Village, preserved by its private streets. In contrast to the houses within the Elbow/Gate Lane area which the report characterizes as having stone fences, several of the houses along Emlen Street and Allens Lane have wood fences or stone fences that have been augmented. One has a berm blocking it from Emlen Street traffic. After the fences were built—all

decades ago—other changes occurred: landscaping changes were undertaken, swimming pools were installed, orientation of the houses changed so that some main entrances now face Huron rather than Emlen Street. The Emlen Street entrances to the two “gate houses” are rarely used and the landscaping of all the houses along Emlen Street itself is not well maintained. It would be inappropriate to hold the houses along Emlen Street to the same standards of preservation as those within the essentially private enclave of the pristine French Village.

None of the above is taken into account in establishing the metes and bounds of the proposed French Village district even though the report acknowledges that from the outset there was a fundamental historical distinction between the core project, which resulted in the pristine French Village and the properties along Emlen and Huron Streets which were neither part of the original plan, nor subject to the same restrictions.

For the above reasons, I would ask the Commission to reconsider the actual metes and bounds of the proposed district to end it at the entrance to Gate Lane at Emlen Street and exclude the area across Emlen Street.

Sincerely,

Howard Langer

P.S. The report describes 7303 Emlen Street as having a “slate hipped roof.” 7303 Emlen has had an asphalt shingle roof for at least forty years. Below two asphalt roofs is the remains of a cedar shake roof, so it apparently never had a slate roof, in contrast to the houses in the more pristine French Village.