Owner response received by the Philadelphia Historical Commission regarding the nomination for the French Village Historic District
April 19, 2021

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.
June 14, 2021

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,

In advance of this evening’s Zoom meeting, I write to follow up my letter of April 19 regarding the metes and bounds of the proposed French Village Historical District. In his study, “Suburb in the City: Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, 1850-1990 (Ohio State 1992), David Contosta describes the French Village as consisting of the substantially Norman houses between Emlen and McCallum Streets. The only structures on Emlen Street described as part of the French Village by Contosta are the two stone gatehouses at the corner of Emlen and Allens Lane (see. P. 111). While perhaps not pertinent to the architecture of the area, but pertinent to the historical background, Contosta describes that the properties developed by Woodward, were tainted by his antisemitism. It quotes him as saying in a 1920s publication: “I have always inquired into antecedents, I have never taken a Jewish family or allowed one to be taken as a subtenent.” (at p. 112). We can only imagine his views of African Americans. Contosta reports that when the Nazi’s took to implementing these views, Woodward repented some though he does not discuss any changes in his rental practices.

Sincerely,

Howard Langer