

**ADDRESS: 5706 GERMANTOWN AVE**

Name of Resource: The John S. Trower Building

Proposed Action: Designation

Property Owner: Sung Choel Kim

Nominator: Keeping Society of Philadelphia and Germantown United CDC

Staff Contact: Kim Chantry, kim.chantry@phila.gov

**OVERVIEW:** This nomination proposes to designate the property at 5706 Germantown Avenue as historic and list it on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The nomination contends that the property satisfies Criteria for Designation A and J. Under Criterion A, the nomination argues that the building is associated with the life of a person significant in the past, successful caterer, businessman, philanthropist, real estate investor, and restaurateur John S. Trower, a Black man who achieved local, statewide, and national significance in American history. Under Criterion J, the nomination argues that the building stands as an important monument to the cultural, economic, social, and historical heritage of Trower's significant catering and restaurant business that predominated in the Black community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Germantown and Philadelphia. The period of significance begins when the property was acquired by John S. Trower in 1887 and ends with his passing in 1911.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:** The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the property at 5706 Germantown Avenue satisfies Criteria for Designation A 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: **5706 Germantown Avenue**

Postal code: **19144**

#### 2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: **The John S. Trower Building**

**The Restaurant, Catering Business House & Residence of John S. Trower**

Current Name: **Crab House**

#### 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: **Commercial**

#### 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): **1887 - 1911**

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: **1859 (Built), 1887 (Altered), ca.1887-91 (Addition)**

Architects/Builders: **Unknown**

Original owner: **The Savings Fund Society of Germantown & Its Vicinity**

Significant person: **John S. Trower**

**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: **The Keeping Society of Philadelphia and Germantown United CDC**

Author: **Oscar Beisert, Architectural Historian**  
**Keeping Society of Philadelphia**

Date: **25 February 2021**

Address: **1315 Walnut Street, Suite 320**  
**Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19107**

Telephone: **717.602.5002**

Email: **keeper@keepingphiladelphia.org**

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner.

**PHC USE ONLY**

Date of Receipt: 25 February 2021

☒ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete

Date: 5/4/2021

Date of Notice Issuance: 6/21/2021

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: Sung Choel Kim

Address: 5706 Germantown Ave

City: Philadelphia

State: PA

Postal Code: 19144

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

# NOMINATION

FOR THE

## PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES



Figures 1. and 2. The primary (northeast) elevation of the John S. Trower Building in 2017 and 2020, showing the restoration has taken place during the past few years. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2017 and 2020.

### THE JOHN S. TROWER BUILDING THE RESTAURANT, CATERING BUSINESS HOUSE, & RESIDENCE OF JOHN S. TROWER

—  
FORMERLY KNOWN AS *THE SAVINGS FUND SOCIETY OF  
GERMANTOWN & ITS VICINITY*  
BUILT 1869

—  
5706 GERMANTOWN AVENUE  
GERMANTOWN  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

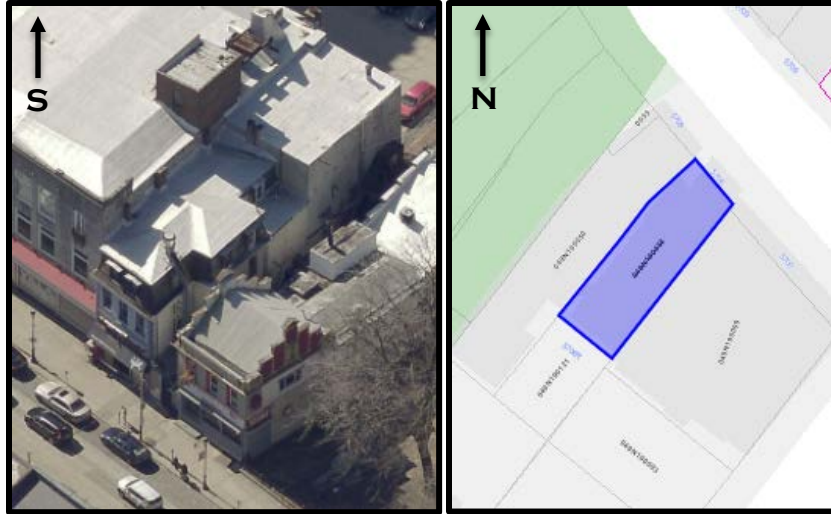


Figure 3. Left: Looking south at the subject property. Source: Pictometry, Atlas, City of Philadelphia, 2020. Figure 4. Right: The boundary for the proposed designation is delineated in blue. Source: Atlas, City of Philadelphia.

## 5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The boundary for the designation of the subject property is as follows:

ALL THAT CERTAIN lot or piece of ground with the two-story stone message or tenement with Mansard Roof thereon erected. SITUATE in the City of Philadelphia aforesaid and described as follows, to wit:

BEGINNING at a point on the Southwestwardly side of Germantown Avenue at the distance of 80 feet, 4-1/2 inches Northwestward from the Northwest side of Cheltenham Avenue thence extending along the said Germantown Avenue North 37 degrees 17 minutes West 26 feet 11-1/2 inches to a point thence by ground now or late of the Estate of Joseph Channon, deceased, South 50 degrees 45 minutes West 34 feet and 1/2 of an inch more or less to a point and South 42 degrees 20 minutes West 69 feet, 9-5/16 inches to a point in the line of ground now or late of the First Presbyterian Church of Germantown thence by the same South 49 degrees 08 minutes 54 seconds East 33 feet 7-1/4 inches more or less to ground now or late of the Estate of George Nugent, deceased, and thence by the same North 41 degrees 30 minutes East 93 feet 2 7/16 inches more or less to the said Germantown Avenue and place of beginning.

BEING No. 5706 Germantown Avenue.





Figure 5. The primary (northeast) elevation of the John S. Trower Building. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2020.

## 6. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The John S. Trower Building is a semi-detached, three-story Second Empire style masonry building situated on a typical row lot at 5706 Germantown Avenue in the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia. Designed to serve as a banking house, the building was originally commissioned by the Savings Fund Society of Germantown & Its Vicinity in 1869.<sup>1</sup> Purchased by John S. Trower, the prominent Black caterer and restauranter, in 1887, the building was renovated to serve his business purposes, replacing the banking rooms with a saloon and dining rooms. Trower constructed a one- and two-stories tall rear addition was completed between 1887 and 1891, which is reflected in an 1891 fire insurance policy. This addition was enlarged to three stories over the years. These and other additions and improvements appear to have been made by Trower and his heirs during their ownership through 1976. For the purpose of this document, the nomination will refer to the subject building as the John S. Trower Building and for clarification the components of the subject building shall be called the Main Building 1869 and the Back Building 1887-91, as delineated in Figure 6.

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Samuel Fitch Hotchkin, M.A. *Ancient and Modern Germantown, Mount Airy, and Chestnut Hill*. (Philadelphia: P.W. Ziegler & Co., 1889), 339.

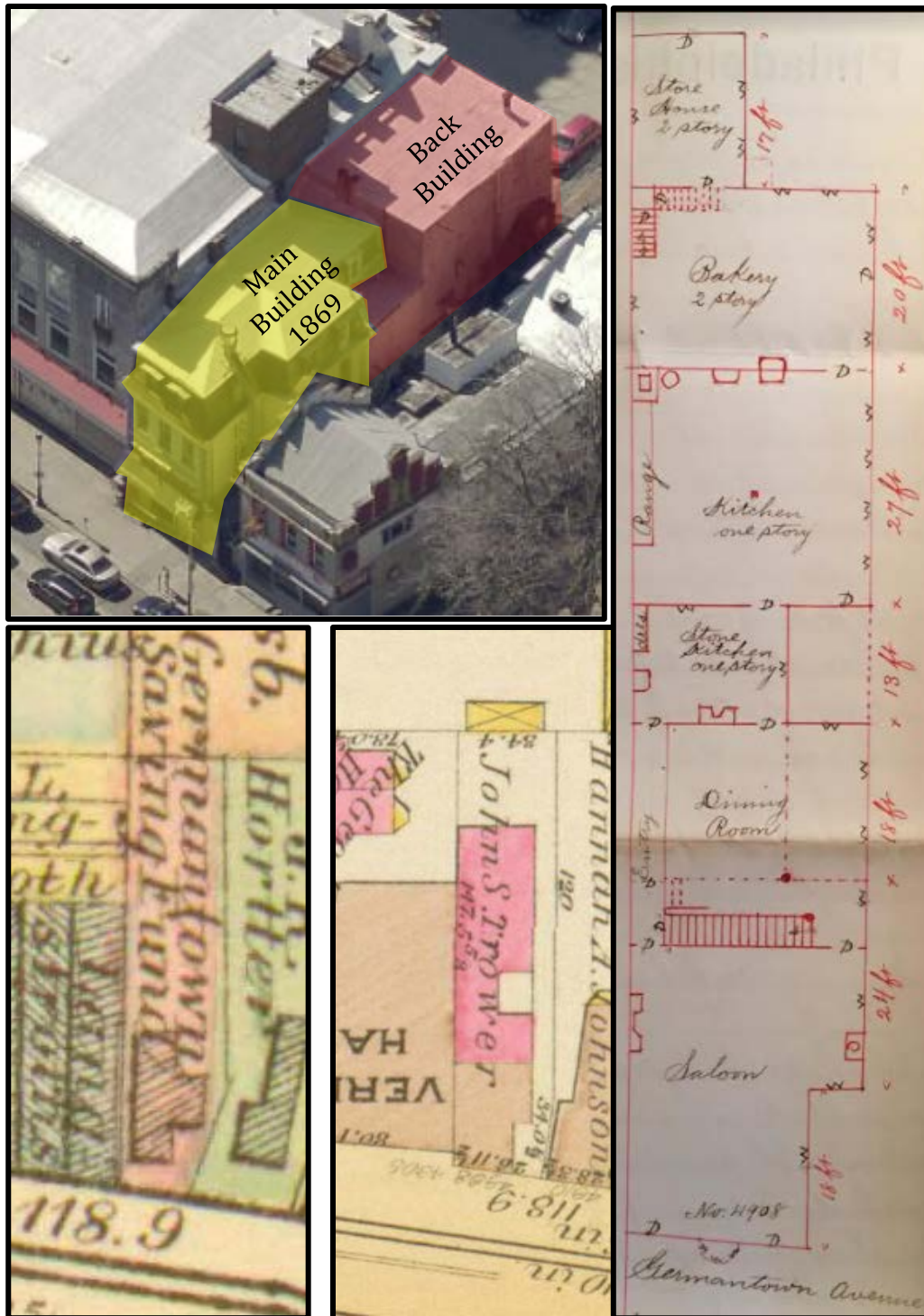


Figure 6. Top left: The John S. Trower Building with the 1869 Building and the 1891-95 Addition delineated. Source: Pictometry, Atlas, City of Philadelphia. Figure 7. Bottom left: 1871 Germantown Atlas, G.M. Hopkins. Bottom right: 1888 Philadelphia Atlas, 22nd Ward. Source: Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network. Figure 8. Right: 1891 Layout of the John S. Trower Building. Source: Franklin Fire Insurance Co. of Philadelphia, Perpetual Survey No. 70565, John S. Trower, 31 July 1891, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.



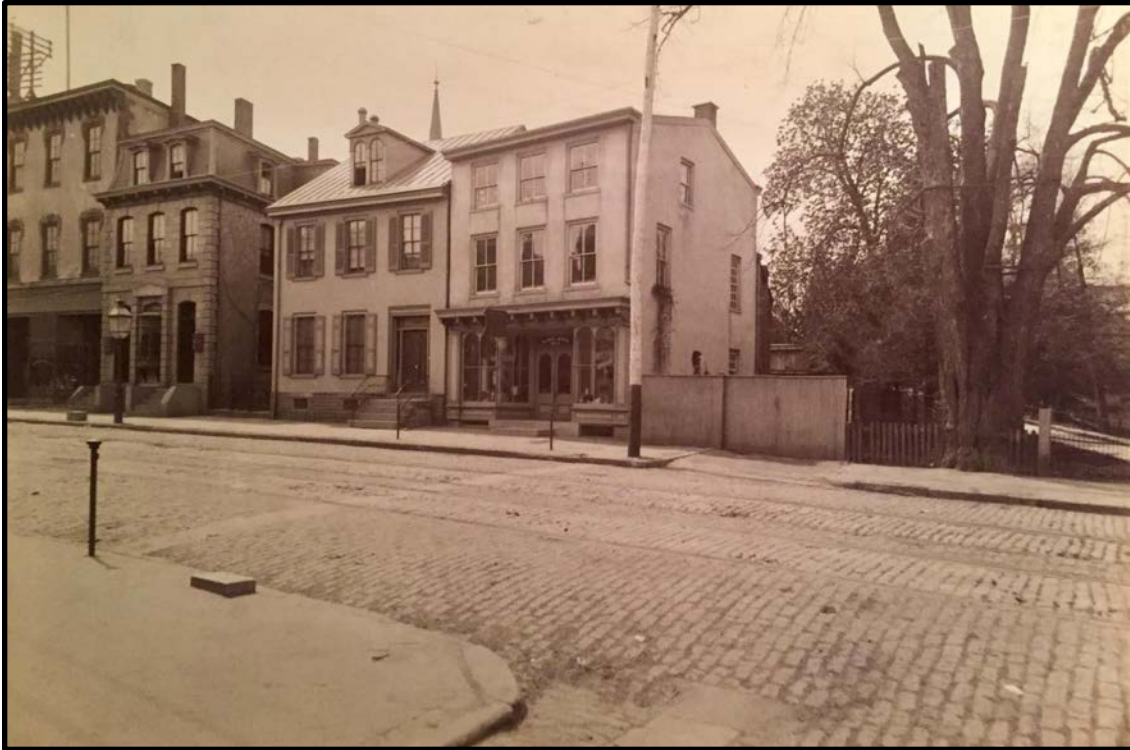


Figure 9. Top: The 5700 Block of Germantown Avenue, below Vernon Park. Source: Thomas Shoemaker Collection, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Figure 10. Bottom: The 5700 Block of Germantown Avenue, below Vernon Park in Germantown. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2020.





Figure 11. Left: The primary (northeast) elevation of the John S. Trower Building. Figure 12. Right: The primary (northeast) and side (northwest) elevations of the John S. Trower Building. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2020.

The Main Building 1869 is T-shaped in form and includes a two-story masonry structure at the first and second floors with a one-story frame third floor in the form of a Mansard roof clad in asphalt shingles. The primary (northeast) elevation is three bays in width with a façade comprised of cut granite at the first and second floors, which is painted two shades of blue. This elevation is delineated by rusticated quoins at each corner. Originally, the quoins at the first floors enframed a formal, three-bay fenestration, which included a central, elevated doorway, accessed by a short staircase. The pedestrian entrance was flanked by single windows (Figure 15). This fenestration survived until at least 1887, when the building was purchased by John S. Trower and renovated to serve his catering and restaurant business, as well as an abode for his own family. Between 1887 and 1891, Trower removed the central exterior stair and entrance in the central bay and inserted a projecting display window (Figures 9, 16, 30, and 43). The windows that flanked the original entrance were removed and separate pedestrian entrances were installed, each of which were accessible by granite steps. This fenestration was again reconfigured in the early twentieth century to create a more open storefront, though posts of the granite pillars that once separated the façade in to three parts remained in place (Figure 8). Extending from the quoins at each corner, the original header for the first-floor fenestration remains, acting as horizontal band of granite coursing interrupted at center with a primitive arch or pediment over what was originally the entrance.

The second floor retains its original fenestration, featuring three symmetrically placed apertures with granite sills and lintels with keystones. Each opening is served by one-over-one replacement windows. A cornice of thirteen ornamental brackets and dentils delineates the second and third floors. The third floor is a concave Mansard roof with two dormers that are both articulated in a manner commonly known in the Second Empire style.

The northwest side of the building features five separate elevations, all of which are largely clad in stucco. The fenestrations of each of the five side elevations are largely original, but unsympathetically maintained and most of the windows are boarded or concealed. The cornice is also hidden beneath aluminum cladding. The basic form of the side elevation, along with the Mansard appear to be original in form.

Shown in Figures 13 and 14, the Back Building 1887-1891 began as a one-story kitchen that was enlarged over time. At present, the subject building is a three-story commercial addition that appears to be of red brick construction, which is largely clad in stucco. While most of the windows and doors on the side (northwest) elevation are concealed, several apertures at the rear are visible, including a loading bay.



Figure 13. Left: Looking northeast at the northwest and southwest elevations of the subject property. Source: Pictometry, Atlas, City of Philadelphia. Figure 14. Right: The rear (southwest) elevation of the subject property. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2019.



Figure 15. Left: A photograph of the subject building prior to 1887 when the Savings Fund Society of Germantown & Its Vicinity sold the property to John S. Trower. Source: Germantown Historical Society. Figure 16. Right: The primary (northeast) and side (northwest) elevations of the Tower Building. Source: The Shoemaker Collection, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

## 7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The John S. Trower Building at 5706 Germantown Avenue is a significant historic resource that merits designation by the Philadelphia Historical Commission and inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The subject property satisfies the following Criteria for Designation, as enumerated in Section 14–1004 of the Philadelphia Code:

- (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 period of significance dates from the time the subject property was acquired by John S. Trower in 1887 until his death in 1911.

**Early History.** On October 29, 1868, Martha Channon sold the subject property to Thomas C. Garret for \$7,000. Acting as an agent, Garret transferred the property to the Savings Fund Society of Germantown & Its Vicinity on November 7, 1868 for the same sum.<sup>2</sup> As previously stated, the subject building was constructed as banking house for the financial institution in 1869. The history of this important local financial institution was not explored as part of this nomination, but may be an additional area of historical significance.

<sup>2</sup> Deed: Martha Channon to Thomas C. Garrett, for \$7,000, 29 October 1868, PDBk J.T.O., No. 188, p. 252, CAP.; and Deed: Thomas C. Garrett to the Savings Fund Society of Germantown & Its Vicinity, for \$7,000, 7 November 1868, PDBk J.T.O., No. 188, p. 271.





Figure 17. Top: A portrait of a young John S. Trower. Source: James Lyons, a descendant of John S. Trower.  
 Figure 18. Bottom: The signature of John S. Trower, ca. 1910. Source: Ancestry.com. *Pennsylvania, Wills and Probate Records, 1683–1993* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015.

### **CRITERION A & J: JOHN S. TROWER, THE GREAT CITIZEN**

A successful caterer, businessman, philanthropist, real estate investor, and restaurateur, John S. Trower (Figures 17, 21, and 51) is a Black man of the past that achieved local, statewide, and national significance in American history. The subject building represents his career as a businessman—particularly a restaurateur and caterer—in the Philadelphia region and beyond. In the 1860s Trower left his home in rural Virginia with the nominal sum of \$52. By way of Baltimore, he eventually arrived at Philadelphia, where he settled in Germantown, opening a restaurant on Cheltenham Avenue opposite the Germantown Depot

of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Company.<sup>3</sup> Yielding good profits at his first venue, Trower purchased the subject property for \$12,500 from the Savings Fund Society of Germantown and Its Vicinity.<sup>4</sup> It was here that he became popularly known as one of the wealthiest Black men in the United States. Emanating from his financial success, Trower invested significantly in his community. Among the most important of his accomplishments and philanthropies, he co-founded the Downingtown Industrial and Agricultural School at Downingtown, Pennsylvania “for the Moral and Industrial Improvement of Colored Youth of Philadelphia...”<sup>5</sup> A generous patron of all manner of charitable causes, his financial contributions to the First African Baptist Church of Philadelphia led to the construction of that congregation’s surviving historic edifice at 1600–06 Christian Street.<sup>6</sup> This was just one of many Baptist charities and congregations that he regularly supported. Trower also founded and was an officer in one of the earliest associations enabling African Americans to purchase homes, including The Cherry Building and Loan Association.<sup>7</sup> In the same vein, he was a founding officer of the Reliable Mutual Aid and Industrial Society for African Americans; the National Negro Business League, and a number of other entities of the day.<sup>8</sup>

Trower’s immense success was well known in his lifetime. He embodied the ideal African American model, as prescribed by Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), an American educator, author, orator, and presidential adviser, as one who was successful in business and worked to raise the economic and material improvement of the African American. Washington devoted chapter five of his book, *The Negro in Business*, published in 1907, to a brief study on Trower’s successful career.<sup>9</sup> He was also recognized at the time of his death in *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—an organization founded, in part, by W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), the American sociologist, socialist, historian, author, editor, and civil rights leader.<sup>10</sup> Beyond that, Trower is discussed, honored, and noted in almost all of the significant publications on African Americans of the period.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Booker T. Washington, *The Negro In Business* (Hertel, Jenkins & Co, 1907), 48–53.

<sup>4</sup> Deed: The Saving Fund Society of Germantown and Its Vicinity to John S. Trower, of the City of Philadelphia, caterer, for \$12,500, 28 September 1887, PDBk G.G.P, No. 281, p. 506, CAP.

<sup>5</sup> Charles H. Brooks, *Official History of the First African Baptist Church, Philadelphia, Pa.* (Philadelphia: 1922), 52.

<sup>6</sup> Oscar Beisert, *Philadelphia Register of Historic Places Nomination: The First African Baptist Church 1600–06 Christian Street.* (Philadelphia: 7 April 2015), 35.

<sup>7</sup> Juliet E.K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (Macmillan Library Reference USA, 1998), 179.

<sup>8</sup> *The Philadelphia Colored Directory: A Handbook of the Religious, Social, Political, Professional, Business and Other Activities of the Negroes of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia Colored Directory Company, 1907), 106.

<sup>9</sup> Washington, *The Negro In Business*, 47–53.

<sup>10</sup> “John S. Trower,” *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, May 1911, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Specific references to John S. Trower include: *A Sketch of the History of Baptist Education in Pennsylvania* by Frank Grant Lewis; *Evidences of Progress Among Colored People* by G.F. Richings; *The Mulatto in the United States: Including a Study of the Rôle of Mixed-blood Races throughout the World* by Edward Byron Reuter; *Negro Education: A Study of the Private and Higher Schools for Colored People in the United States* by the United States Office of Education; *The Negro in Pennsylvania: A Study in Economic History* by Richard R. Wright, Jr; *Pennsylvania Negro Business Directory, 1910: Industrial and Material Growth of the*

G.F. Richings provides a fairly accurate account of Trower's success in his book, *Evidences of Progress Among Colored People* (1902):

John S. Trower, as a successful business man, ranks among the leading men of this country.

He was born in the State of Virginia. When a young man, in 1870, he moved to Philadelphia, Pa. He found employment in various lines of work, until ambition led him to commence an enterprise of his own. He started and conducted for fifteen years on Cheltenham Avenue [sic] a catering business. By much economy and a strict adherence to his work, he soon found his project assuming much larger proportions than he had ever hoped for, and in 1887 he purchased the old Germantown Savings Bank for \$25,000 [sic]. This building has been put in good shape, with all the modern improvements, with a telephone, and all that goes to make up a first-class business house. His business office is presided over by three competent clerks, all of whom are colored.

On the second floor he has a magnificent parlor with every evidence of culture and comfort. Mr. Trower has won high distinction in his business.<sup>12</sup>

It is critical to emphasize the public perception of Trower at the time of his death in 1911 as the "wealthiest Negro in the United States," one of many phrases that no doubt presented the fact that he was among the wealthiest Black men in America at the time of his demise.<sup>13</sup> His death was reported in major publications that remain prominent to-date, including the *Baltimore Sun*, the *New York Times*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the *Washington Post*. While contextually, Trower's wealth equated to that of an upper middle class white American, his career and successes must be examined through the lens of total and widespread racism that prevailed throughout the country. This is the society that Trower negotiated to achieve financial independence, respect, and success.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Trower is a person of great significance in the past at the local, state, and national level.

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*Negroes of Pennsylvania; The Philadelphia Colored directory: A Handbook of the Religious, Social, Political, Professional, Business and Other Activities of the Negroes of Philadelphia* by R. R. Wright; *The Philosophy of Booker T. Washington, the Apostle of Progress, the Pioneer of the New Deal*, by Theodore S. Boone; *Sermons, Addresses and Reminiscences and Important Correspondence, With a Picture Gallery of Eminent Ministers and Scholars* by E.C. Morris; *The Story of the Negro: the Rise of the Race from Slavery*, v. 2 by Booker T. Washington; *Who's Who in Philadelphia: A Collection of Thirty Biographical Sketches of Philadelphia Colored People ... Together with Cuts and Information of Some of Their Leading Institutions and Organizations* by Charles F. White.

<sup>12</sup> G.F. Richings. *Evidences of Progress among Colored People*. (Philadelphia: G.S. Ferguson, 1902), 306–07.

<sup>13</sup> "Wealthiest Negro Is Dead, John Trower Worth \$1,500,000 Dies At Philadelphia," *Harrisburg Daily Independent*, 4 April 1911, 1.

<sup>14</sup> While the sum total of John S. Trower's wealth may be comparable to upper middle-class white people within the larger context of American fortunes, one must examine Trower through the lens of a global social contract that thrived on racial inequality. This racist system was well-established and vast with fortifications





Figure 19. A catered, outdoor event purported to be by John S. Trower. Source: James Lyons, a descendant of John S. Trower.

#### **CRITERION J: JOHN S. TROWER, THE GREAT BUSINESSMAN**

Representative of the second generation of Black caterers and restaurateurs in Philadelphia, the John S. Trower Building is one of exceptional significance, being one of the few to survive, representing both Trower, as well as the larger legacy of an industry dominated by the African American community. While the building is not landmarked and stands without any marker or plaque, the personal legacy of John S. Trower remains associated with the subject building among the learned people of Germantown. It stands as an important monument to the cultural, economic, social, and historical heritage of this significant catering and restaurant business that predominated in the Black community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Germantown and Philadelphia at-large.

Discussed in greater detail in the historic context section of this nomination, Trower's business acumen and associated products and services attracted a clientele, which included commercial and industrial giants, as well as some of the most socially prominent white

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in the form of cultural, economic, legal, and societal barriers geared to keep Black people in an inferior position. This resulted in a commonly demoralized, dehumanized, and marginalized community of Black Americans throughout the nation's history.

people in Philadelphia. Contextually, this was an important mark of success for a Black-owned business in the catering and restaurant industry. While Trower was indeed a successful caterer and restaurateur for his said clientele, he, more importantly, prevailed in leveraging his income to continually advance his own, largely unrivaled business interests. The process was one achieved carefully and methodically, step by step. His early success on Cheltenham Avenue propelled him to raise the necessary funds to purchase the subject building from the Saving Fund Society of Germantown and Its Vicinity. While payment for the property was a key requirement, Trower had clearly achieved a high level of respect in the white-dominated culture that defined late-nineteenth century Germantown. This is the story of a Black man who purchased the bank building of a well-known, white-owned financial institution, which placed his business immediately upon the Germantown “Main Street,” which was one of the city’s oldest and most important arteries, the precise location being opposite a significant transit hub of the city’s premier suburb.



Figure 20. Right: Detail from the Receipt of John S. Trower, Caterer and Confectioner, to John Wister. Source: The Wister Family Papers, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

The acquisition of the subject building and its improvements over the years enabled Trower to enlarge his business capacities. Perhaps his most prominent client was the Cramp shipping empire, one of the largest ship builders in the world. While his most successful Black predecessors generated wealth through catering and paid service, he was able to leverage that position to a greater place of prominence in the city. With an advanced tactical acumen, he tapped into the emerging corporate culture of late-nineteenth-century Philadelphia.

Trower was an exceptional man by any measure. He was not just the most successful Black caterer and restaurateur in context, he went on to diversify his business holdings to include manufacturing for his purposes, as well as other investments such as real estate, owning numerous properties in Germantown and Ocean City, New Jersey by the time of his death at just sixty. Even more importantly, he invested substantially in his own community.

Booker T. Washington provides a succinct statement on Trower's significance in *The Negro in Business* (1907):

The position that Mr. Trower has obtained in the community in which he lives has made it possible for him to be of great service to other members of his race. He has established a business in which a number of them find employment and have an opportunity to obtain a business experience and training. His own success and, in many cases, his positive aid and support has given encouragement to a number of young men, and his influence in the community has enabled him to be in many ways a friend of the colored people and a leader of his race.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond the individual importance of such a successful Black caterer and restaurateur, the subject building and its relationship to the business of John S. Trower represents the cultural, economic, social, and historical heritage of the Black community in Germantown and Philadelphia at-large.

#### **HISTORIC CONTEXT: AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE PHILADELPHIA RESTAURANT AND CATERING BUSINESS<sup>16</sup>**

In a period where racial inequality and socioeconomic inequities limited entrees to success and wealth for all minority communities, especially people of color, the food service industry, which included catering and restaurant businesses, was one realm of opportunity that was open to Black people, representing a significant aspect of American cultural, economic, political, and social development and heritage. Trower, himself, described the context of his profession as it related to the African American community at-large:

Catering was once all ours. We were America's acknowledged cooks, butlers, waiters, and caterers. But a few years ago, white men were unknown in many of these kinds of work. Colored men once controlled this work in Baltimore, Washington, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Chicago and the great Northern cities. As a result of this control the wealthiest colored

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<sup>15</sup> Washington, *The Negro in Business*, 50–51.

<sup>16</sup> This historic context was written by the authors of this nomination and was adapted from the following document: Oscar Beisert and J.M. Duffin. *Philadelphia Register of Historic Places Nomination: The Residence & Restaurant of Henry S. Minton, 204 S. Twelfth Street*. (Philadelphia: The Keeping Society of Philadelphia, 2018).



citizens were caterers. Some of these men branched out and became managers and owners of hotels of more or less magnitude.<sup>17</sup>

W.E.B. Du Bois provides the best description of the significance of the profession in his groundbreaking sociological study, *The Philadelphia Negro*:

The question ... of obtaining a decent livelihood was a pressing one for the better class of Negroes. The masses of the race continued to depend upon domestic service, where they still had a practical monopoly, and upon common labor, where they had some competition from the Irish. To the more pushing and energetic Negroes only two courses were open: to enter into commercial life in some small way, or to develop certain lines of home service into a more independent and lucrative employment. In this latter way was the most striking advance made; the whole catering business, arising from an evolution shrewdly, persistently and tastefully directed, transformed the Negro cook and waiter into the public caterer and restaurateur, and raised a crowd of underpaid menials to become a set of self-reliant, original business men, who amassed fortunes for themselves and won general respect for their people.<sup>18</sup>

Philadelphia was the leading city of opportunity for Black caterers and restaurateurs in the United States for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Juliet E.K. Walker contextualizes Black caterers in her 2009 *History of Black Business in America*:

Philadelphia's black caterers succeeded because they stroked both the palates and the egos of their clients. Their culinary specialties were lobster salad, deviled crabs, chicken croquets, and their unsurpassed terrapin. While few of Philadelphia's first black caterers had any formal education, they were masterful politicians and diplomats, described as "gentlemanly," even "aristocratic," "possessing great wit and charm," "commanding great influence," "dictatorial," but always of "fine business attainments." The services provided were delivered with impeccable manners, taste, and elegance...<sup>19</sup>

Du Bois devotes an entire section in his chapter "The Negro in Philadelphia, 1820–1896" to what he calls the "The Guild of Caterers, 1840–1870." He describes the "Guild" as including "names which have been household words in the city for fifty years: Bogle,

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<sup>17</sup> "Extracts from Addresses.," *Report of the Second Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League at Chicago Illinois*. (Chicago: R.S. Abbott Publishing Company, 1901), 24.

<sup>18</sup> W.E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, Publications of the University of Pennsylvania Series in Political Economy and Public Law, no. 14 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1899), 33.

<sup>19</sup> Juliet E.K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship*, 1 (UNC Press Books, 2009): 133.

Augustin, Prosser, Dorsey, Jones, and Minton.”<sup>20</sup> These men embody the first generation of Black Philadelphia caterers.

Robert Bogle (1775–1837) was perhaps the first of the great African American caterers and restaurateurs, lived at 46 (present-day 110) South Eight Street (demolished).<sup>21</sup>

Bogle’s “importance went far beyond his craftsmanship as a cook: he introduced Philadelphians to the concept of the catering contract and personally trained many of the great black caterers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>22</sup> Peter Augustin (1768–1843) was from the West Indies and ran both a restaurant and catering business, which his wife, Mary Frances Augustin (1799–1890), took over upon his death. She went into business with her son James G. Augustin (1817–1878) in the 1850s, forming M.F. Augustin and Son. Starting out at 219 (present-day 421) South Fifth Street (demolished) in the 1820s, the family moved to 123 (present-day 277) South Third Street (demolished) in the 1840s and 1108 Sansom Street (demolished) by 1859 before purchasing their longtime location at 1105 Walnut Street (pending demolition) in 1864.<sup>23</sup> “After James G. Augustin’s death in 1878, Mary Antoinette’s in 1885, and Mary Frances’ in 1890, the responsibility of the business passed to Peter Jerome and his wife Elizabeth B. Augustin. Elizabeth then continued the company after Peter Jerome’s sudden death in 1892 with one of their sons, James K. Augustin (1872–1898). Sadly, both of Elizabeth and Peter Jerome’s sons died young. Elizabeth closed the business sometime between 1906 and 1907. She sent a letter to the St. Andrews Society, which was read aloud in their meeting on August 31, 1906. In that letter she stated her intention to go out of business “owing to ill health.” The final location of M. F. Augustin and Son was 2005 Arch Street from 1900 to 1907.<sup>24</sup>

Another Black caterer, James Prosser, Sr. (1782–1861), born in southern New Jersey, started his business in the 1810s and by 1828 was running a well-known oyster house at

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<sup>20</sup> W.E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, Publications of the University of Pennsylvania Series in Political Economy and Public Law, no. 14 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1899), 32. Du Bois’ use of the term “guild” is in the figurative not literal sense.

<sup>21</sup> Bogle first appears in the city directories in 1810 as a shopkeeper at this address (James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1810* [Philadelphia: James Robinson, 1810]). The directories from 1811 into the 1830s list his occupation as “waiter.” He moved to Pine Street above 11<sup>th</sup> around 1829.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Anne Hines, Gordon Marshall, and William Woys Weaver, *The Larder Invaded: Reflections of Three Centuries of Philadelphia Food and Drink* (The Library Company of Philadelphia and The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1987), 65.

<sup>23</sup> The locations noted here are all taken from the Philadelphia city directories for 1825, 1841, 1850–1866. Deed Tripartite: Elizabeth Hannah Freeman (late Powell, widow of J. Miller Freeman), and others, surviving executors of the will of John Powell, of the first part, Elizabeth Hannah and others, of the second part, to James G. Augustin, of the city of Philadelphia, French cook, for \$14,250, 30 April 1864, PDBk L.R.B, No. 22, p. 331, CAP.

<sup>24</sup> This information was provided by Dr. Danya Pilgrim, Assistant Professor of the Department of History at Temple University. Original sources include Ancestry.com and St. Andrew’s Society, “Extracts from the Minutes,” in *An Historical Catalogue of the St. Andrew’s Society of Philadelphia: with Biographical Sketches of Deceased Members* (Philadelphia: Loughhead & Co., 1907), 63–64.

274 (present-day 808) Market Street (demolished).<sup>25</sup> James Prosser, Jr. (1813–1866) eventually joined his father in the business.

Du Bois considered Thomas J. Dorsey (1810–1875), Henry Jones (1810–1875) and Henry Minton (1811–1883) as the leaders of Philadelphia’s golden age of African American caterers “who ruled the fashionable world from 1845–1875.”<sup>26</sup> The success of these businesses is also noted by Walker:

Philadelphia’s black caterers sold their dinners or banquets by the plate, with prices as high as fifty dollars per plate. Consequently, these businesses were regarded highly as lucrative enterprises, as shown by an entry in the Dun [credit and business] report regarding one of the sons of Henry Minton. The Dun entry emphasizes that the caterer had the financial capacity to back his son’s business, which is described as “Gents furnishing”: “Oct 2. [18]60 Colored—Aged abt 23. Single son of Henry Minton who keeps a restaurant at 204 South 12<sup>th</sup> St & who owns considerable city p[ro]p[er]ty, furnishes the capital...”<sup>27</sup>

Minton’s success did not limit that of his competitors. Thomas J. Dorsey, a freedom seeker, arriving at Philadelphia before 1840, was perhaps an equal if not superior to Minton. “Dorsey’s fine art is said to have outshined that of others of the time through sheer perfection and dominance of his personality. In later years, he served at his Locust Street establishment (demolished) such celebrated leaders as Charles Sumner, William Lloyd Garrison, John W. Forney, William D. Kelley, and Frederick Douglass.”<sup>28</sup> Dorsey first appears in the city directories in 1842 at 3 Osborn’s Court (demolished) and by 1847 was at 57 Currant Street (present-day 257 South Warnock Street).<sup>29</sup> His rise to success was swift as by 1849 he was able to purchase a property at 166 (present-day 1104) Locust Street (demolished).<sup>30</sup> Only four years later, Dorsey purchased another house, 217 (present-day 1231) Locust Street (demolished), which became the center of his operations for the remainder of his life.<sup>31</sup>

Henry Jones, a native-Virginian, was “a man of great care and faithfulness” and “he catered to families in Philadelphia, New Jersey, and New York.”<sup>32</sup> Jones first appears in the

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<sup>25</sup> Philadelphia city directories for 1828, 1841, 1843, 1847, 1850, 1859, 1860 and 1862; William C. Bolivar, “Oh, James Prosser, Jimmy Prosser,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 9 August 1913, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> Walker, *The History of Black Business in America*, 134.

<sup>28</sup> John A. Saunders, *100 Years After Emancipation (History Of The Philadelphia Negro), 1787 to 1963* (Philadelphia, 1964), 137.

<sup>29</sup> Philadelphia City Directories for 1841, 1842, 1843, 1847–1850.

<sup>30</sup> Deed: Gideon Scull, of the city of Philadelphia, merchant, and Lydia, his wife, and Newcomb B. Thompson, of the same, merchant, and Harriett, his wife, to Thomas Dorsey, of the city, waiter, for \$1,400, 3 May 1849, PDBk G.W.C, No. 12, p. 354, CAP.

<sup>31</sup> Deed: Thomas L. Ellis, trustee, to Thomas Dorsey, 2 November 1854, PDBk T.H, No. 169, p. 474, CAP.

<sup>32</sup> Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 32–36.



Philadelphia directories in 1839 as a waiter living at 39 (present-day 243) Quince Street.<sup>33</sup> Four years later he was 18 Currant Street (later 213 South Warnock Street; demolished) where he remained until he purchased a property on 76 (present-day 250) South Twelfth Street (demolished) in 1856, which became the base of operation for his business.<sup>34</sup> A year before Jones' death in 1875, he purchased the house next door to Minton, 206 South Twelfth Street (demolished).<sup>35</sup>

There were many other caterers in Philadelphia at the time, but these men were among the most successful. Later, other Black caterers and restaurateurs would arrive on the scene. The most notable among that second generation is the subject of this nomination, John S. Trower, the famously handsome caterer and restaurateur of Germantown, who captured the Philadelphia region with his talents in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> All of the buildings that served as restaurant and/or residence for these early Black business and entrepreneurial figures likely have historical significance and would be potentially eligible for historic designation; however, few survive and those that exist are largely forgotten to time or unknown.

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<sup>33</sup> Philadelphia City directories for 1838–1843.

<sup>34</sup> Philadelphia City Directories for 1847–1856; Deed: James A. Donath, of the city of Philadelphia, esquire, and Theresa, his wife, to Henry Jones, of the same place, waiter, for \$4,800, 18 January 1856, PDBk R.D.W, No. 52, p. 557, CAP.

<sup>35</sup> Deed: Edward Hutchinson and Paul Jones Fry, executors of the will of James Hutchinson, to Henry Jones, 24 April 1874, PDBk F.T.W, No. 128, p. 11, CAP. Jones' death had the unfortunate distinction of causing a law suit when Mount Moriah Cemetery refused the funeral procession entrance to burying his body. In the end Jones was buried at burial ground at St. James the Less.

<sup>36</sup> Washington, *The Negro In Business*, 47–52.

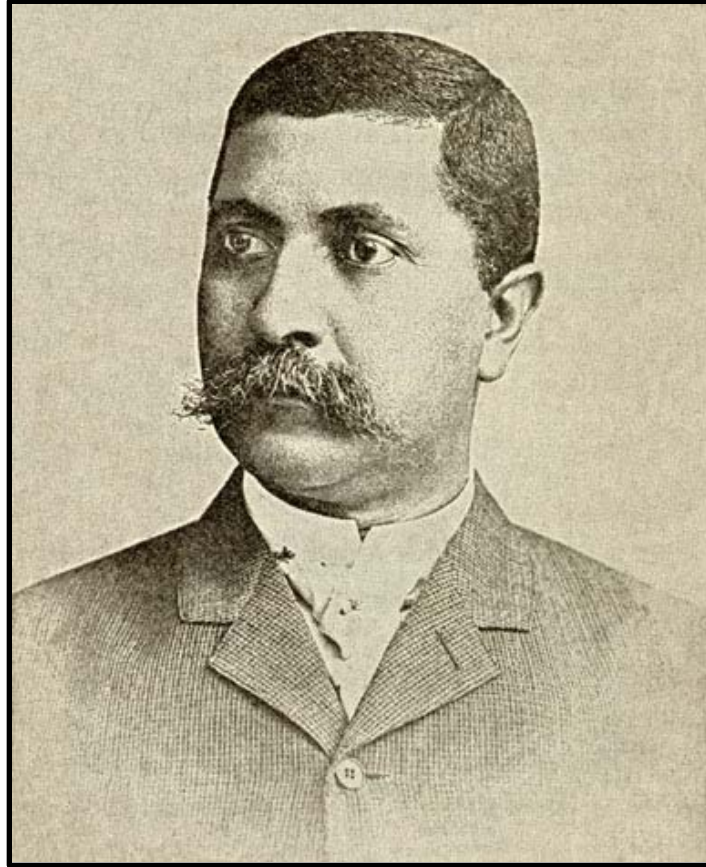


Figure 21. John S. Trower. Source: G.F. Richings. *Evidences of Progress among Colored People*. (Philadelphia: G.S. Ferguson, 1902), p. 307.

### **HISTORIC CONTEXT: A BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN S. TROWER (1849–1911)**

When John S. Trower purchased the former banking house of the Savings Fund Society of Germantown and Its Vicinity at 5706 Germantown Avenue in 1887 for \$12,500, the famously handsome, six-foot tall businessman was on his way to being one of the most successful Black men of the era.<sup>37</sup> He would later be popularly known as, the “Wealthiest Negro in the Country [United States].”<sup>38</sup>

Trower was born free or “free born” on October 3, 1849 to Luke Trower (1807–1871) and Ann Maria Reid Collins Trower (1822–1889) on the Eastern Shore in Northampton County, Virginia.<sup>39</sup> The son of Nelson Trower (b.1790) and Mary, Luke Trower was a sailor born in Northampton County, Virginia. Born to Adah Reid (b.1805), Ann M. Trower, also a native of Northampton County and twice married, was often listed as the head of

<sup>37</sup> Deed: The Saving Fund Society of Germantown and Its Vicinity to John S. Trower, of the City of Philadelphia, caterer, for \$12,500, 28 September 1887, PDBk G.G.P, No. 281, 506. Source: City Archives of Philadelphia.

<sup>38</sup> “Wealthiest Negro in Country Dead,” *Harrisburg Telegraph*, 4 April 1911, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Pennsylvania (State). Death certificates, 1906–1963. Series 11.90 (1,905 cartons). Records of the Pennsylvania Department of Health, RG 11. Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

household in census records.<sup>40</sup> It is said that Trower's ancestors "...purchased their freedom..." "...having earned it so dearly, were proud of it."<sup>41</sup> The Trowers lived "near Eastville" in Northampton County; although, according to Booker T. Washington, the community was known as Indiantown:

...[John S. Trower's] parents, Luke and Anna M. Trower, were among those Eastern Shore farmers who were known as the farmers of Indiantown. These people of Anglo-Saxon, Indian and Negro blood, were known the country over for their industry, thrift and frugality. No slaves were ever among them; they boasted of their manhood and independence. Nat Turner's insurrection brought to the people of this town many cruelties by the whites. Their independent spirit forced many of them to leave their homes and settle in the different sections of the North. A considerable number of these Indiantown farmers found refuge in Philadelphia. The names of the Stevens, Bivins, Press and Trower are among Philadelphia's most successful colored citizens. It was from this stock and out of such early traditions that John S. Trower came.<sup>42</sup>

It is likely that the family attended the Union Baptist Church in that locality.<sup>43</sup> Though Trower himself was freeborn, he and his family lived on the land of the multi-generational Collins family.

3	299	299	John Collins	38	m	M	Chamber	800	"	
4			Rosecca	60	f	M			"	
5			Jenny	1	80	f	B		"	
6			Eliza	40	f	B			"	
7			Meliana	11	m	M			"	
8			Luke Trower	46	m	m	Sailor		"	
9			Ann	27	f	B			"	
10			Margaret	3	f	B			"	
11			John	4 1/2	m	B			"	
12			Sarah Collins	10	f	M			"	
13			Charles Storkley	20	m	B	Labourer		"	

Figure 22. The 1850 U.S. Federal Census shows the multi-generational household of four-month-old John S. Trower. Source: Seventh Census of the United States, 1850; (National Archives Microfilm Publication M432); Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29; National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>40</sup> Much of this genealogical research was provided to the authors by James Lyons, a descendant of John S. Trower via an in-person meeting at Germantown in Philadelphia, emails, telephone interviews, and online via Ancestry.com.

<sup>41</sup> Washington, *The Negro in Business*, 47.

<sup>42</sup> Washington, *The Negro in Business*, 47.

<sup>43</sup> Washington, *The Negro in Business*, 48–49.

Listed as head of that household in the 1850 United States Federal Census, John Collins, then thirty-eight, was a farmer with property valued at \$800, though Rocilla Collins, then 60, and Jenny Collins, then 80, were the oldest members of the family in residence. The Trower family consisted of Luke Trower, then a 46-year-old sailor, his wife Ann M. Trower, then 27, and their daughter Margaret Trower, then three and four-month-old John S. Trower.<sup>44</sup> The racist analysis conducted in the 1850 U.S. Federal Census is apparent in the fact that the “mulatto” or mixed-race and Black citizens are individually enumerated by skin color, all of the Trowers, aside from Luke Trower, being listed as Black. The designation of “mulatto” family members in that household no doubt represents the racially mixed, “Anglo-Saxon, Indian, and Negro blood” background referenced by Booker T. Washington in his biographical sketch on Trower.

335	338	John Collins of Roxon	58	M	M	Farmer	1000	800
		Rocilla	70	F	M			
		Eliza	49	F	M			
		William	20	M	M			
339	339	Ann Trower	45	F	B			
		Sarah	15	F	B			
		Peggy	13	F	B			
		John Shepherd	10	M	B			
		George W.	4	M	B			
		Maria	2	F	B			
		William Carter	11	M	B			
340	340	Elizabeth Collins	35	F	B	Planets		30
		George R.	17	M	B			
		Pach.	13	M	B			
		Ally	13	M	B			
		William P.	10	M	B			

Figure 23. The 1860 U.S. Federal Census shows that the multi-generational household of a four-month-old John S. Trower had subdivided into three households during the decade-long interim. Source: 1860 U.S. census, population schedule. NARA microfilm publication M653, Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration.

By 1860, Ann Trower reigned a household with five dependents that appear as her children, including “John Shepherd,” who we know as John S. Trower. Despite being listed in Johnsontown rather than Eastville, it is likely that the family was in the same rural location. Luke Trower is no longer listed as residing with his family; in fact, a 55-year-old so-named sailor, is domiciled roughly twenty-five miles away in Capeville and living with one other

<sup>44</sup> Seventh Census of the United States, 1850; (National Archives Microfilm Publication M432); Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29; National Archives, Washington, D.C.



man, Levere Moses, perhaps for employment purposes.<sup>45</sup> Much reduced in size over the decade between 1860 and 1870, Ann M. Trower's family was again under the roof of John Collins, at which time John S. Trower is listed as John S. Collins, despite the fact that he is known to have embarked upon a life in the north by this time.<sup>46</sup>

392	344	Collins John	57	M	Married	bro	100
		Trower Ann	47	F	Married		
		Collins John	30	M	Married		100
		Sarah	27	F	Married		
		Maggie	22	F	Married		
		George	14	M	Married		
		John S.	20	M	Married		

Figure 24. The 1870 U.S. Federal Census shows that the Collins and Trower households have again united under one roof. Source: 1870 U.S. census, population schedules. NARA microfilm publication M593. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.

According to various sources, it appears that Trower worked hard to save money during his teenage years by “gathering sumac which he sold to the tanneries for use in tanning hides.”<sup>47</sup> With his savings, he is said to have eventually presented the deed to their family farm, free of debt, to his mother though the precise date of this accomplishment seems unclear. At about twenty-one, he left Eastville for Baltimore, Maryland with \$52.<sup>48</sup> In Baltimore, “he began opening oysters,” residing with Mr. and Mrs. Mack, who are said to have provided him with much personal advice and assistance.<sup>49</sup> Here he entered into “a small partnership”, which “did not prove successful financially, and was, therefore abandoned.”<sup>50</sup>

Booker T. Washington also described Trower's formative years:

Although the farmers of Indiantown were proud of the fact that they had never been slaves they do not seem to have escaped the serfdom of debtors.

<sup>45</sup> 1860 U.S. census, population schedule. NARA microfilm publication M653. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.; “Virginia Deaths and Burials, 1853–1912.” Index. FamilySearch, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2010. Index entries derived from digital copies of original and compiled records.

<sup>46</sup> 1870 U.S. census, population schedules. NARA microfilm publication M593. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.

<sup>47</sup> *The Life of John S. Trower*, an unpublished manuscript, which was provided by James Lyons, a descendant of John S. Trower.

<sup>48</sup> “NEGRO LEAVES \$1,500,000. One of the Wealthiest Colored Men in America is Dead,” *The Burlington Free Press*, 6 April 1911, 2.

<sup>49</sup> “John Trower Dead. Wealthy Philadelphia Business Man and Church Leader Passes Away: Left a Great Fortune.” *The New York Age*, 6 April 1911, 3; and *The Evening News*, 10 April 1911, 6.

<sup>50</sup> *The Life of John S. Trower*, an unpublished manuscript, which was provided by James Lyons, a descendant of John S. Trower.

All through his early life young Trower was hobbled with the necessity of raising the debt on the farm. By the time he was twenty-one he had saved enough to lift this burden from his family and he felt free to go in search of a fortune.<sup>51</sup>



Figure 25. A mansion that was for many years the home of the Roberts family, which stood at the northwest corner of Walnut and Nineteenth Streets on the north side of Rittenhouse Square. Source: Frank H. Taylor, Artist, Digital Collections of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

At some point between 1870 and 1873, Trower migrated farther north to Philadelphia, where he found work as a waiter in a very wealthy, private house, which stood in the most fashionable part of the Quaker City at the corner of Nineteenth and Walnut Streets on Rittenhouse Square.<sup>52</sup> At the time Trower arrived at Philadelphia, he either worked for Alexander Brown at the northeast corner of Nineteenth and Walnut Streets or Elizabeth Cuthbert Roberts (1802–1891), the widow of Algernon Sidney Roberts, and her three spinster daughters at the northwest corner (Figure 25) of that venerable juncture. A financier, philanthropist, and direct descendant of the founders of Brown Brothers Harriman, Alexander Brown (1815–1893) lived in the “fine brown-stone dwelling” at 1829 Walnut Street, which, in 1860, he is said to have purchased from the Powel family. Algernon Sidney Roberts (1797–1865) purchased the mansion at 1901 Walnut Street in 1864, which his widow and spinster daughters occupied for many years afterwards.<sup>53</sup> Either family might have employed Trower as a waiter, a connection he no doubt did not waste. During this period, he would also work in Atlantic City, New Jersey during the summertime, when his employers were away in cooler climates.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *The Life of John S. Trower*, an unpublished manuscript, which was provided by James Lyons, a descendant of John S. Trower.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Joseph Cohen, *Rittenhouse Square, Past and Present* (Philadelphia: 1922).

<sup>54</sup> *The Life of John S. Trower*, an unpublished manuscript, which was provided by James Lyons, a descendant of John S. Trower.



Figure 26. Top: Trower's Restaurant, 138 (present-day 147) E. Cheltenham Avenue (demolished), Germantown. Source: Patricia Irwin, a descendant of John S. Trower. Figure 27. Bottom: The same building in the context of E. Cheltenham Avenue in 1929. Source: Dallin Aerial Survey Company Photographs, Hagley Digital Archives.

Following his arrival, Trower joined the Cherry Street Baptist Church—later known as First African Baptist Church.<sup>55</sup> Though he would continue to worship in Philadelphia proper, he eventually settled at Germantown. By 1874 he had entered into partnership with George W. Brown to form Trower & Brown, caterers, at 134 (present-day 145) E. Cheltenham Avenue. Both men were also listed as residing at that address.<sup>56</sup> This building was located directly across E. Cheltenham Avenue from the Germantown Depot, which had recently been built to serve the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Company. When Trower came to Germantown, the neighborhood was Philadelphia's premier suburb. Trower's partnership

<sup>55</sup> Charles H. Brooks *Official history of the First African Baptist Church* (Philadelphia: 1922), 87.

<sup>56</sup> *Boyd's Philadelphia Directory* (Philadelphia: Central News Company, 1874).

with Brown was short-lived, seeming to have terminated after just one year. According to “The Man on the Corner,” published in the *Germantown Independent Gazette*, the termination of the partnership required Trower to either buy out his partner or sell his own interest in the business. Though no primary source materials have surfaced to corroborate this story, the article states that another Germantown businessman, Henry B. Bruner, “wrou[t sic.] out a check for the money Trower needed and told him to close the deal at once.” Bruner operated a hotel, bar and livery stable at the Fountain Inn—a building owned by the Wister Estate—which stood on Germantown Avenue opposite East Price Street. Due to the proximity Bruner’s business and residence to that of John S. Trower, the contention regarding their relationship is not improbable.<sup>57</sup>

While Trower would ultimately be associated with the building for much of his life in Philadelphia, the property on E. Cheltenham Avenue represents Trower’s business through 1880.<sup>58</sup> Possibly a change of address or relocation to a building located two doors down, 138 (present-day 157) E. Cheltenham Avenue (Figures 26 and 27) is listed as the location of Trower’s “restaurant” in 1881, 1882, 1883, 1886, and 1887.<sup>59</sup> For a time a building at 4838 (present-day 5604) Germantown Avenue also appears to have been employed by Trower in some capacity.<sup>60</sup>

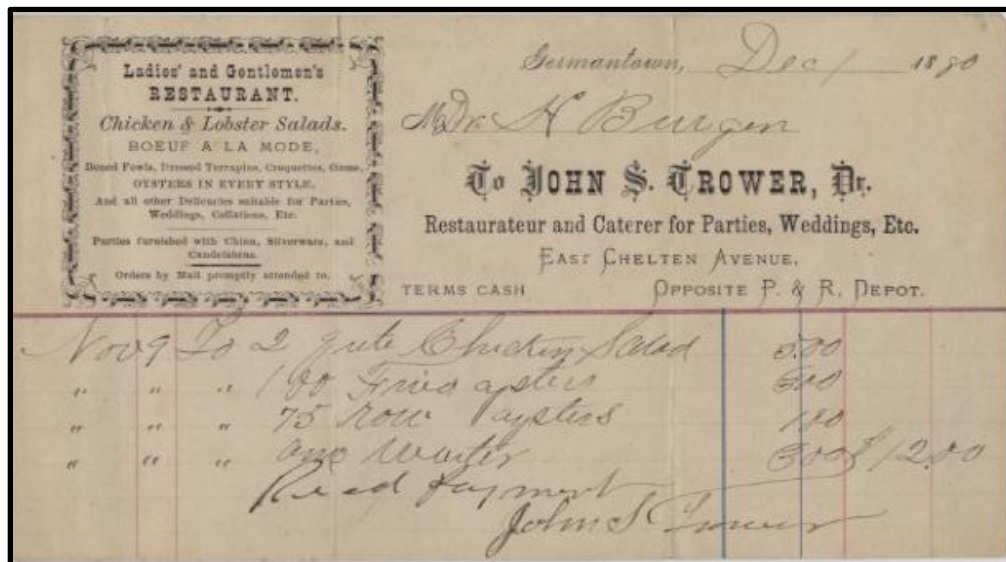


Figure 28. Receipt for the Restaurant of John S. Trower, Restaurateur and Caterer for Parties, Weddings, Etc. Source: The Germantown Historical Society.

Trower became well-known for his cultured menu and elegant service, as well as fine cuisine. Shown in Figure 28, an 1880 receipt provides insight to his menu, as well as his

<sup>57</sup> “The Man on the Corner,” *Germantown Independent Gazette*, n.d. Source: Germantown Historical Society.

<sup>58</sup> Trower is listed in Philadelphia City Directories at 134 E. Cheltenham Avenue in 1875, 1877, 1878, and 1880. (*Boyd’s Philadelphia Directory*).

<sup>59</sup> Trower is listed in Philadelphia City Directories at 138 E. Cheltenham Avenue in 1881, 1882, 1883, 1886, and 1887 (*Boyd’s Philadelphia Directory*).

<sup>60</sup> *Boyd’s Philadelphia Directory*.



entrepreneurial progress. In fact, it was early on that Trower began “the art of manufacturing fine confectionary,” which he described as having “a good degree of success” in an address on “Catering” that he delivered in August 1901 before the Second Annual Convention at Chicago, Illinois of the newly-established National Negro Business League. Trower briefly, but eloquently, outlined his road to success as a caterer, stating that “with a good degree of success, I added a large stock of Fine China, glass, silver and linen ware and candelabra” to refine the delivery of his products and services. He illustrated additional detail on his company, “...my upholstery department; to have linens for parlors and canopies for church weddings; also a full line of decorations and draperies for halls and churches.”<sup>61</sup>

In January 1885, Trower catered the wedding of “a New York Gentleman and a Well Known Chester Lady” Charles E. Schuyler and Sara E. Roach. The *Delaware County Daily Times* said the following about Trower’s service:

Everything about the menu was of recherché order, and was in the charge of the distinguished caterer, John S. Trower, of Germantown.<sup>62</sup>

Trower’s growing reputation can be found in a reference later that same year in *The [Philadelphia] Times*, reporting on “A West Philadelphia Marriage” of William H. Black and Emma L. Frazier:

John S. Trower, Germantown’s crack [i.e. excellent] colored caterer, who was made a happy husband a few hours before, had charge of the supper.<sup>63</sup>

In November 1885, Trower catered the Hoff-Ferguson wedding in Reading, which was described on the front page of the *Reading Times*:

Mr. John S. Trower of Germantown was the caterer and the dining hall was beautifully decorated with flowers and vines. The table was a marvel of the caterer’s art, having as a center piece a large and beautiful floral arch and banquet, on either side of which were a large fish and elephant carved from huge blocks of ice. On each end of the table were silver candelabra, while fruits and candies filled the space between. Oysters in every style, terrapin, lobster outlets, assorted cakes and a half a dozen kinds of ice cream made up the bill of fare.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> “Extracts from Addresses,” *Report of the Second Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League at Chicago Illinois*. (Chicago: R.S. Abbott Publishing Company, 1901), 23. This extract was kindly provided to the authors by Dr. Danya Pilgrim, Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Temple University.

<sup>62</sup> “The Schuyler-Roach Nuptials, Marriage of a New York Gentleman and a Well Known Chester Lady,” *The Delaware County Daily Times*, 22 January 1885, 3.

<sup>63</sup> “A West Philadelphia Marriage,” *The Times*, 1 May 1885, 1.

<sup>64</sup> “Hoff-Ferguson Wedding,” *Reading Times*, 28 November 1885, 1.

Beyond the complexities of operating a restaurant and catering in general, Trower outgrew his quarters on E. Cheltenham Avenue, as the manufacture of fine confectionary and the need for a proper bakery was required to take his business to the next level.



Figure 29. Grace Trower Cherry, the daughter of John S. Trower and Jane “Janie” E. Johns. Source: James Lyons, a descendant of John S. Trower.

**FIRST MARRIAGE.** John S. Trower was married twice. His first marriage was to Janie E. Johns of Bristol, Bucks County in May of 1885 at First African Baptist. The fact that *The Times*, a predominately white newspaper, reported on the occasion alludes to Trower’s prominence in greater Philadelphia area:

### **Trower – Johns**

The First Colored Baptist Church, on Cherry street, below Eleventh, was well filled yesterday afternoon [April 30] at the marriage of John S. Trower and Miss Jannie [sic] Johns, of this city. Rev. T. D. Miller performed the ceremony. Mr. Trower is a well-known restaurant-keeper of Germantown, where he has carried on business for more than ten years.<sup>65</sup>

Jane “Janie” E. Johns was born in 1849 to Charles B. and Grace A. Johns of Bristol, Pennsylvania. In the U.S. Census of 1870, Janie and her five siblings were enumerated as a mixed-race family. With Janie, Trower appears to have had at least one child: Grace Ann Trower Cherry (Figure 29) born on February 22, 1886 in Philadelphia. After just a few years of marriage, Janie died on April 3, 1889 at Germantown. The well-known white Germantown funeral home of Kirk & Nice handled the funeral and Janie was buried in Olive Cemetery.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> “Trower-Johns,” *The Times*, 1 May 1885, 3.

<sup>66</sup> “Pennsylvania, Philadelphia City Death Certificates, 1803–1915.” Index. FamilySearch, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2008, 2010. From originals housed at the Philadelphia City Archives. “Death Records;” and



Figure 30. Taken ca. 1890s, the primary (northeast) and side (northwest) elevations of the John S. Trower Building. Source: The Germantown Historical Society.

**JOHN S. TROWER, CO., RESTAURATEUR AND CATERER FOR PARTIES, WEDDINGS, ETC., GERMANTOWN AVENUE.** In 1887, John S. Trower purchased the subject building, the former banking house of the Savings Fund Society of Germantown and Its Vicinity. The building was a fully-detached, elegant stone edifice, which Trower enlarged, improved, and refined to serve the needs of a caterer and restaurateur.<sup>67</sup> He prided himself on the delivery of all aspects his catering and restaurant service and the subject property allowed him to enlarge his capacities.

All done by my own men, with a head or foreman over each department; in the bakery, candy factory, and in the ice-cream factory, a foreman; in the culinary department a chef, and a stable boss to look after the horses and wagons, and a director in the shipping department.<sup>68</sup>

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Ancestry.com. *Pennsylvania and New Jersey, Church and Town Records, 1708–1985* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc, 2011.

<sup>67</sup> Deed: The Saving Fund Society of Germantown and Its Vicinity to John S. Trower, of the City of Philadelphia, caterer, for \$12,500, 28 September 1887, PDBk G.G.P, No. 281, p. 506, CAP. In October 1887 Trower obtained a building permit to add a one-story kitchen to this building (*Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* 2 [1887]: 484 [October 17, 1887]).

<sup>68</sup> “Extracts from Addresses.,” *Report of the Second Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League at Chicago Illinois*. (Chicago: R.S. Abbott Publishing Company, 1901), 23.

*The John S. Trower Building*  
*The Restaurant & Catering Business House of John S. Trower*  
 5706 Germantown Avenue, Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
 Philadelphia Register of Historic Places Nomination, February 2021 – Page 28

Notices in various newspapers provide laudatory reviews of Trower's service, and his reputation continued to flourish in the new quarters. In April 1887, Trower catered a "party given in Eshleman's hall" by "Mr. W.U. Hensel to his friends, which was described as follows:

The supper provided was a triumph of the art of Trower, the Germantown caterer, and it was served at innumerable small tables, a convenience that was highly appreciated by the guests.<sup>69</sup>

Numerous articles of the period characterize Trower's catering abilities, including the *Reading Times* in December 1887, depicting the "Silver Anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. W.R. McIlvain's Wedding":

Mr. John S. Trower, of Germantown, was the caterer, and the supper was one of the most elaborate affairs of the kind ever served in the city by this well-known caterer. The ice-sculpture was quite artistic and very much admired.<sup>70</sup>

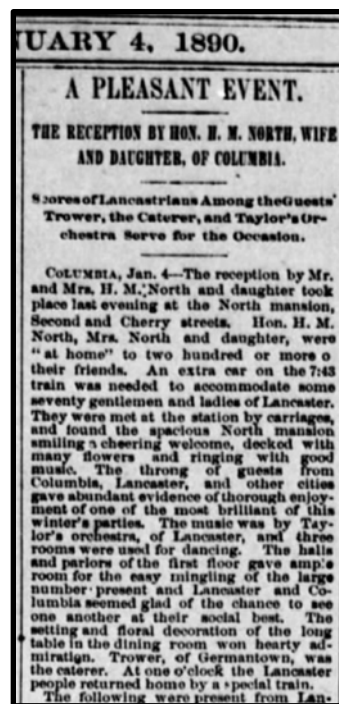


Figure 31. "A Pleasant Event" catered by Trower, January 4, 1890, published on the frontpage of the *Lancaster Daily Intelligencer*.

<sup>69</sup> "Mr. Hensel Entertains," *Lancaster Daily Intelligencer*, 14 April 1887, 1.

<sup>70</sup> "Notable Social Even. Silver Anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. W.R. McIlvain's Wedding. Elaborate Floral Decorations in a Palatial Residence Thronged with Guests from Home and Abroad to Tender Their Congratulations." *Reading Times*, 22 December 1887, 1.



The first-class attention to detail, excellence in service, and superior cuisine exhibited in Trower's private catering commissions and at his restaurant rendered him a consequential businessman and professional. Ultimately, these factors were paramount to enlarging his career, winning him significant contracts with William Cramp and Sons Ship and Engine Building Company. *The New York Age* described Trower's relationship with Cramp:

In 1889 he got the catering work at Cramps' shipyard. He supplied the food on the trial ships of all the warships built at the yard during the years he was connected there, including vessels for the United States, Russia and Japan.<sup>71</sup>

According to Booker T. Washington, those ships included: the *Yorktown*, the *Columbia*, the *Minneapolis*, the *Newark*, the *Brooklyn*, the *Variag* (Figure 32), the *Retvian*, the *Medjidia* (or *Medjidie*) (Figure 34), the *Colorado*, and the *Pennsylvania*. This led to additional contracts with the New York Shipbuilding Company in Camden, New Jersey and the Harlan and Hollingsworth Shipbuilding Company of Wilmington, Delaware. The work included catering "launchings" and "...trial trips of battleships from these yards lasting from 10 days to 2 weeks or more."

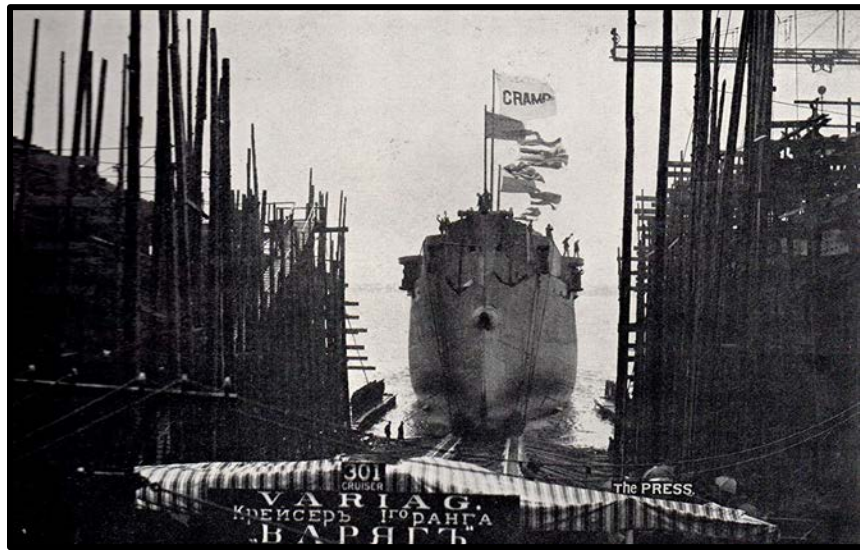


Figure 32. The launching of the *Variag* at the Cramp Shipyard in Philadelphia, for which John S. Trower provided catering services in November 1899. Source: "The Launch of the *Variag*," *Collier's Weekly*, 18 November 1899, 9.

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<sup>71</sup> "John Trower Dead. Wealthy Philadelphia Business Man and Church Leader Passes Away—Left a Great Fortune." *The New York Age*, 6 April 1911, 3.

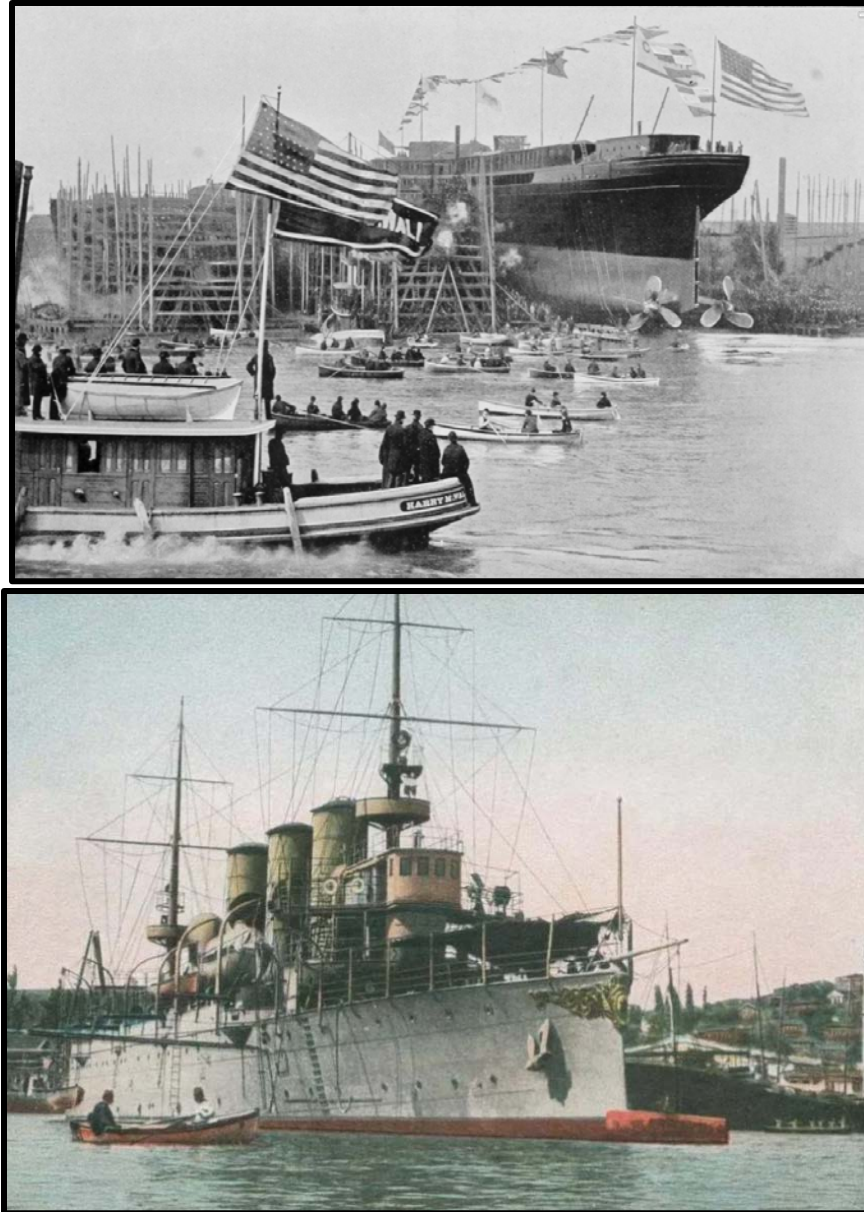


Figure 33. Top: The launching of a ship, ca. 1900, Cramp Shipyard at Beach and Palmer Streets. Source: William Cramp & Sons Ship and Engine Building Co. Philadelphia 1830-1927, Facebook. Figure 34. Bottom: The *Medjidia*/*Medjidie* arriving in Constantinople, Turkey in 1904 for which Trower's firm was contracted to provide catering services. Source: laststandonzombieisland.com.

One specific job for Cramp was providing food and service for the officers and crew of the *Medjidia* (or *Medjidie*), a protected cruiser commissioned by the Ottoman Empire in 1900. The official launch occurred on July 25, 1903, followed by sea trials between October and December. The Ottoman cruiser was ready for delivery to Constantinople in February 1904, requiring food service for the voyage, which was contracted to Trower.<sup>72</sup> Execution

<sup>72</sup> *The Life of John S. Trower*, an unpublished manuscript, which was provided by James Lyons, a descendant of John S. Trower.

of the catering job was supervised by a longtime employee of Trower's, George Douglas Press (1863-1939), a caterer and native Virginian, described as having a "dark" complexion. Another Trower employee, John Albert LaCombe (1866-1906), a cook, described as "dark mullato," also appears to have served that same job.<sup>73</sup> Both men applied for passports in 1904 (Figures 35 and 36), which were conveyed to Cramp's office by Herman Schoenfield, the Counsel General of Turkey that February.<sup>74</sup>

The image shows two side-by-side copies of a 1904 United States passport application form. The left form is for George D. Press, a caterer from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, born in 1863. The right form is for John A. LaCombe, a cook from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, born in 1866. Both forms include sections for personal information, a description of the applicant, and a certification by the applicant's knowledge of the facts. The forms are signed by the applicants and a notary public, and include a date of application of February 27, 1904.

Figures 35. and 36. Passports for George D. Press, caterer, and John A. LaCombe, cook, employees of Trower's, at the time of their pending voyage to Constantinople aboard the *Medjidia/Medjidie* in 1904. Source: Ancestry.com. U.S., *Passport Applications, 1795-1925* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2007.

Between 1889 and 1893, John Wanamaker served as the 35<sup>th</sup> United States Postmaster General under president Benjamin Harrison. During Wanamaker's tenure, Trower catered at least one incredibly elaborate dinner, which was noted and praised for its grandeur and finery.<sup>75</sup>

In 1890, the largest group of foreign engineers to ever visit Philadelphia, came to the region to participate in a program of events. Trower was commissioned to cater a dinner aboard the *Columbia*, which was described in *Jones Wister's Reminiscences*:

<sup>73</sup> Ancestry.com. U.S., *Passport Applications, 1795-1925* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2007.

<sup>74</sup> Ancestry.com. U.S., *Passport Applications, 1795-1925* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2007.

<sup>75</sup> Booker T. Washington. *The Negro in Business*. (Hertel, Jenkins & Company, 1907), 51.

For the dinner on board the boat I engaged the services of John Trower, caterer, of Germantown. He was six feet tall and the handsomest colored man in Philadelphia. He was a major general in managing a crowd. Everybody enjoyed themselves and events could not have been better. I received many thanks for my arrangements.<sup>76</sup>

*The Nashville Globe* reported the following in relationship to his catering business:

It is said that on one occasion he received \$10,000 for a luncheon served.<sup>77</sup>

Trower's catering business became locally famous, and was known beyond Philadelphia, as stated in the *Baltimore Sun*:

He was phenomenally successful, and has done the catering not only for the fashionable society of Germantown and Chestnut Hill, but also in this and adjoining states.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Jones Wister, *Jones Wister's Reminiscences* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1920), 234.

<sup>77</sup> "John S. Trower Dead," *The Nashville Globe*, 7 April 1911, 1.

<sup>78</sup> "Richest Negro In America, Trower Made His Money As A Caterer In Philadelphia," *The Baltimore Sun*, 6 April 1911, 6.





Figure 37. Top left: Matilda/Mathilda Daniels Trower as a young woman. Figure 38. Top middle: Matilda Daniels Trower. Figure 39. Top right: Matilda Daniels Trower and her granddaughter Gladys Cherry. Figure 40. Bottom left: Francis H. Trower Cherry. Figure 41. Bottom middle: Joseph Douglas Trower. Figure 42. Bottom right: Matilda/Mathilda “Tillie” C. Trower Pair. Source: James Lyons, a descendant of John S. Trower.

**SECOND MARRIAGE.** In 1891, just two years after Janie’s death, Trower married Matilda (or Mathilda) Daniels (1861-1923), who was twelve years his junior. Being from Haymarket, Virginia her parents were John Daniels and Lydia Hudley.<sup>79</sup> John and Matilda Trower had at least eight children, only six of whom survived to adulthood. In 1892, John S. Trower, Jr. was born; however, after just eight months, he died as an infant on April 24, 1893. The funeral was conducted two days later at 10:00AM on a Wednesday by Rev. Dr. Miller, and the baby was buried in Olive Cemetery.<sup>80</sup> Charles D. Trower was born in 1895

<sup>79</sup> Pennsylvania (State). Death certificates, 1906–1963. Series 11.90 (1,905 cartons). Records of the Pennsylvania Department of Health, Record Group 11. Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.; “Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Marriage Index, 1885–1951.” Index. FamilySearch, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2009. Philadelphia County Pennsylvania Clerk of the Orphans’ Court. “Pennsylvania, Philadelphia marriage license index, 1885–1951.” Clerk of the Orphans’ Court, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

<sup>80</sup> Ancestry.com. *Pennsylvania and New Jersey, Church and Town Records, 1708–1985* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc, 2011.

and died a child on August 12, 1900, just five years, five months old. The funeral took place on a Monday at noon and the burial occurred in Olive Cemetery.<sup>81</sup> William Trower was born on December 1, 1896 in Germantown. He died at just twelve days old and his burial was officiated by Rev. Urnston on December 14 at Olive Cemetery.<sup>82</sup>



Figure 43. The subject property ca. 1910. Source: J. Gordon Baugh Jr., *A Souvenir of Germantown Issued during the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation at Philadelphia, PA, September 1913* (Philadelphia, 1913).

By 1910, John Trower, then 60 years old, is enumerated in the census at the subject property, indicating that they family was living above their catering business and restaurant. The surviving children of his second marriage included: Frances Helen Trower Cherry (ca.1893-1976/Figure 40), Walter Sheppard Trower (1896-1954), Joseph Douglas Trower (1897-1980/Figure 41), John Morgan Trower (1899-1968), and Matilda/Mathilda “Tillie” C. Trower Young (1902-1984/Figure 42). His sister Margaret, who was one year older, and Matilda Trower’s much younger brother, Edward Pearlson Tyler, then 22, who worked as a salesman for the firm, were also listed as living at the subject property along with two servants: Lottie Morris from Maryland and Racheal Jackson, a native of Pennsylvania.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ancestry.com. *Pennsylvania and New Jersey, Church and Town Records, 1708–1985* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc, 2011.

<sup>82</sup> “Pennsylvania, Philadelphia City Death Certificates, 1803–1915.” Index. FamilySearch, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2008, 2010. From originals housed at the Philadelphia City Archives. “Death Records.”

<sup>83</sup> Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910 (NARA microfilm publication T624). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

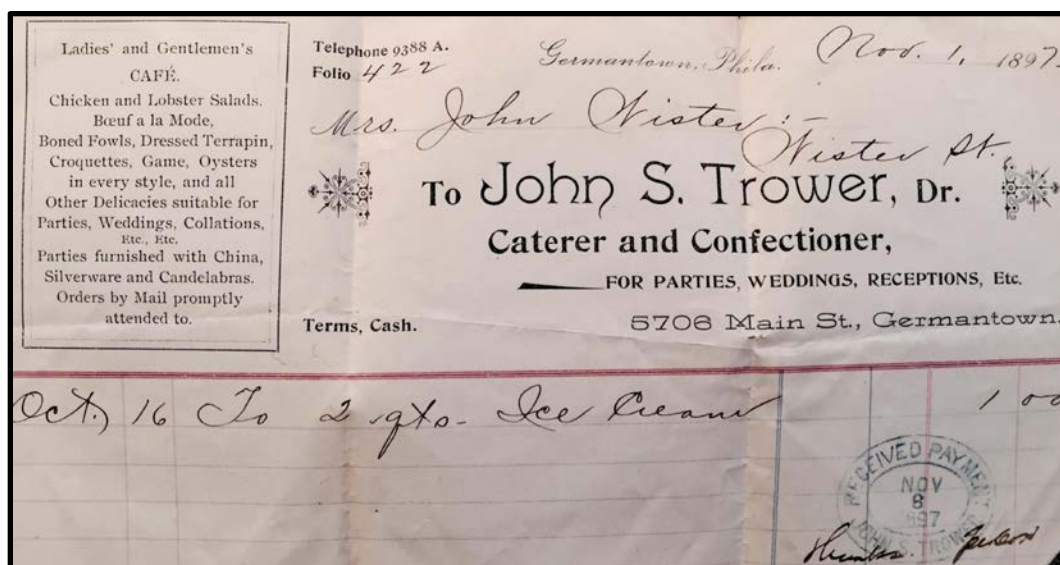


Figure 44. Receipt from John S. Trower, Caterer and Confectioner, at 5706 Main Street (Germantown Avenue). Source: The Wister Family Papers, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

#### **JOHN S. TROWER, BEYOND THE RESTAURANT AND CATERING BUSINESS—THE PROMINENT AFRICAN BAPTIST, PHILANTHROPIST, AND REAL ESTATE INVESTOR.**

Booker T. Washington immortalized Trower in his book, *The Negro in Business* as stating that “Among the men who have made fortunes in the catering business, John S. Trower, of Germantown, Philadelphia, is one of the best known to the members of his own race.”<sup>84</sup> Trower spent much of his earned fortunes on various philanthropic endeavors throughout his lifetime.

A longtime member of First African Baptist, Trower was a significant contributor to both that congregation and the larger African Baptist community in Philadelphia as well as Ocean City, New Jersey. He was a friend and confidant of William D. Credit, D.D., the eminent pastor of First African Baptist. Sources of the day suggest that he guaranteed the church’s mortgage, then \$75,000, along with that of other congregations, as described by the *Baltimore Sun*:

He also financed the building of Zion African Baptist Church, on West Rittenhouse street, Germantown, and the Colored Baptist Church, at Ocean City.<sup>85</sup>

Trower was a member of the Board of Deacons, the Board of Trustees, and Superintendent of the Sunday school at First African Baptist. Beyond his own congregation, the African American National Baptist Convention elected Trower “the National Baptist

<sup>84</sup> Booker T. Washington. *The Negro in Business*. (Hertel, Jenkins & Company, 1907), 47–48.

<sup>85</sup> “Richest Negro In America, Trower Made His Money As A Caterer In Philadelphia,” *The Baltimore Sun*, 6 April 1911, 6.

Superintendent of the World.” In addition, he served as president of the Sunday School Convention of Pennsylvania, a position he held for fifteen years.<sup>86</sup>

<p><b>Stop Paying Rent Save Your Money in</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Cherry Building and Loan Association</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">1440 Lombard St., Philadelphia</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ORGANIZED 1904 INCORPORATED</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Capital Stock, \$500,000</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Stock is One Dollar per month on each share, and matures when worth \$200 per share.</p> <hr style="width: 20%; margin: 10px auto;"/> <p style="text-align: center;">John S. Trower, <i>President</i>; Rev. William A. Credit and H. J. Drowery, <i>Vice-Presidents</i>; Robert S. Jackson, <i>Treasurer</i>; C. H. Brooks, <i>Secretary</i>; G. Edw. Dickerson, <i>Solicitor</i>.</p>	<p><b>Reliable Mutual Aid and Industrial Insurance Society</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Chartered under the Laws of Pennsylvania ORGANIZED 1902</p> <p>The society pays Sick Benefits from \$2.50 to \$10.00 per week, and Death Benefits from \$50.00 to \$250. Membership Fee, 50 cents, \$1 and \$2. Persons ad- mitted from 5 to 60 years of age. The society is located in its own building. Hours from 8.30 a. m. to 5.30 p. m. daily.</p> <hr style="width: 20%; margin: 10px auto;"/> <p>Main Office - 1440 Lombard St. Bell Phone - Spruce 2996d</p> <hr style="width: 20%; margin: 10px auto;"/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>PRINCIPAL OFFICERS:</b></p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%;">Walter P. Hall</td> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: right;">President</td> </tr> <tr> <td>John S. Trower</td> <td style="text-align: right;">Treasurer</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Chas. H. Brooks</td> <td style="text-align: right;">Sec'y and Manager</td> </tr> </table>	Walter P. Hall	President	John S. Trower	Treasurer	Chas. H. Brooks	Sec'y and Manager
Walter P. Hall	President						
John S. Trower	Treasurer						
Chas. H. Brooks	Sec'y and Manager						

Advertisements for Black organizations in which Trower had great influence and standing. Figure 45. Left: An Advertisement for The Cherry Building and Loan Association published in the *Philadelphia Colored Directory*. Figure 46. Right: An Advertisement for the Reliable Mutual Aid and Industrial Insurance Society published in the *Philadelphia Colored Directory*.

Combining community betterment with business, Trower financed and was president of the Cherry Building and Loan Association (Figure 45), which was incorporated in 1904 with a capital stock of \$500,000. This association provided loans for the erection of numerous homes for Black Philadelphians.<sup>87</sup> He was also Treasurer of the Reliable Mutual Aide and Improvement Company (Figure 46), as well as Treasurer of the Reliable Business Men’s Building and Loan Association. Trower also served on the Board of Trustees for the Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People, as well as in a leadership capacity for the Olive Cemetery.

Perhaps his grandest philanthropic contribution, Trower was a co-founder and financier of the Downingtown Industrial and Agricultural School in 1905 (Figure 47), a charitable institution for the education and vocational training of Black youth. The institution was in operation until 1993.

<sup>86</sup> Washington, *The Negro in Business*, 51.

<sup>87</sup> “Richest Negro In America, Trower Made His Money As A Caterer In Philadelphia,” *The Baltimore Sun*, 6 April 1911, 6.

The Downingtown Industrial and Agricultural School dates from 1905 which Mr. John S. Trower and Rev. William A. Creditt, D.D., of Philadelphia, called together other leading colored men and worked out plans which became a foundation for a very important school for Negro young people. They are trained in mind and also in technical lines for the various walks of life and, while the institution is non-sectarian, the very great interest of Dr. Creditt and other Baptists in its maintenance make it in some real sense a Baptist educational plant.<sup>88</sup>

The charter for the school was obtained at the time of its establishment and a farm of one hundred and ten acres with outbuildings was procured by Trower.<sup>89</sup>



Figure 47. An article published on April 28, 1907 in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on the establishment and progress of the Downingtown Industrial and Agricultural School, which recognizes the work of John S. Trower, a founder of the institution. Source: *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*.

Trower was also a prominent member of and participant in Washington's famous National Negro Business League. At the League's second annual meeting held at Chicago, Illinois in 1901, Trower gave a powerful talk on the catering business that has been referenced and quoted in this document.

<sup>88</sup> Frank Grant Lewis. *A Sketch of the History of Baptist Education in Pennsylvania*. (Chester: John Spencer, Inc, 1918), p. 38.

<sup>89</sup> *Pennsylvania Negro Business Directory* (Harrisburg: Jas. H.W. Howard & Son, 1910), 27–28.



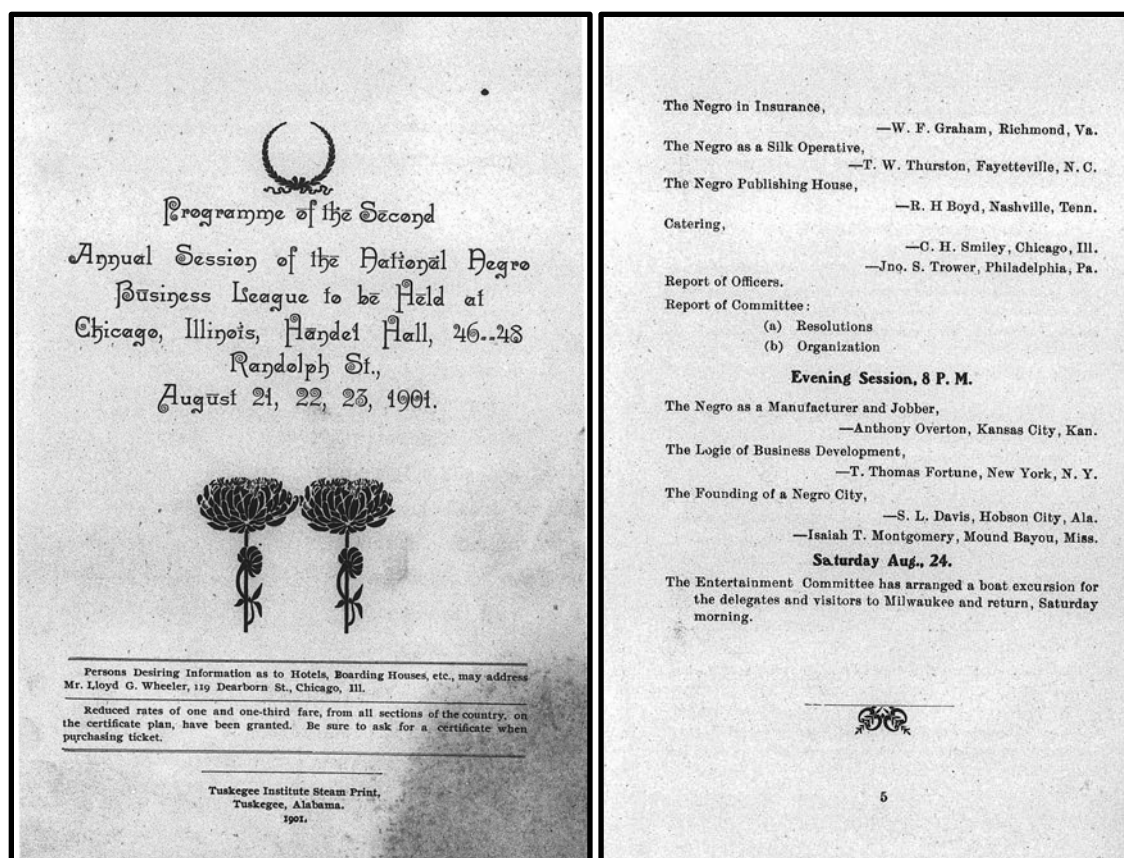
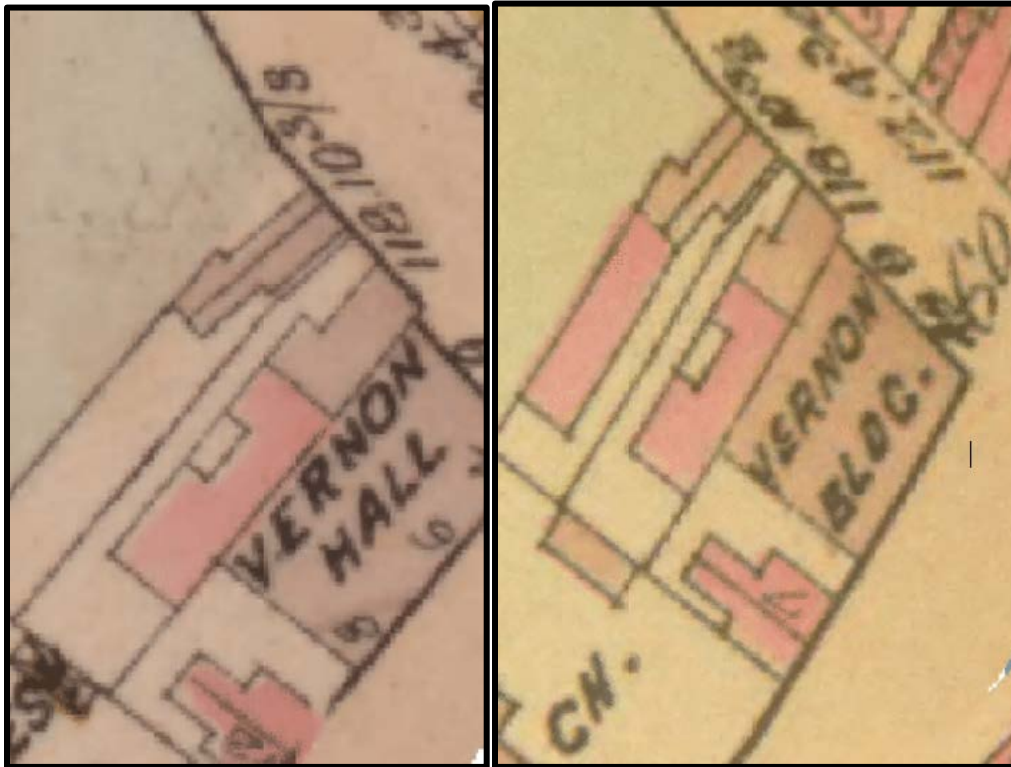


Figure 48. John S. Trower's participation at a session of the Second Annual Meeting of the National Negro Business League, Chicago, August 1901. Source: Black Economic Empowerment: The National Negro Business League, Programs, 1901–1914, Library of Congress.

Trower owned stock in several companies: two shares of preferred and one share of common stock in the International Education Publishing Company; four shares of the International Text Book Co.; 750 shares of the Black Diamond Development Co.; five shares of the Cheltenham Trust Co.; three shares of the First National Bank of Ocean City; two shares of the Enterprise Coal Co.; one share of the Commonwealth Publishing Co.; nineteen shares of the Philadelphia Caterer's Manufacturing & Supply Co.; thirty-one shares of the Unagitated Water Freezing Co.; 2,500 shares of the Westerfield Mining Investment Co.; and thirty-one shares of the Ice Manufacturing Co. of Germantown. Other interests included bonds of \$1,400 for the Reliable. Like many wealthy men of his day, Trower held mortgages, including several lots in Ocean City; two shares of the mortgage of George H. Quarels of 339 W. Penn Street; the mortgage of Howard Jones of 5911 Greene Street; the mortgage of Peter W. Deacon of 6116 Lensen Street; and mortgages on behalf of the Downingtown Industrial and Agricultural School.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Ancestry.com. *Pennsylvania, Wills and Probate Records, 1683–1993* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc, 2015.

East of Market Square in Germantown stands a row of Second Empire style houses that represent the small residential section of buildings that comprise E. School House Lane. While these houses were built in the 1870s, several eventually came into the ownership of John S. Trower, and represent a few of the houses that comprised his relatively small, but nonetheless impressive real estate holdings in Germantown. At the time of his death, Trower owned the following properties in Germantown: 5706 Germantown Avenue; 171 Manheim Street; 134 N. Cheltenham Avenue; 5636 Chew Street; 5913 McCallum Street; 143 Maplewood Avenue; 187 Greaves Street; 212–224 W. Duval Street; 6332–6342 Ambrose Street; 4948 Bayton Street; 21, 23, 31, 37, 39, 49, and 59 E. School House Lane; 5821–23 Bayton Street; and 43–45 W. Rittenhouse Street. Trower also owned property in Ocean City, where he had a summerhouse.<sup>91</sup>



Atlases showing the John S. Trower Building. Figure 49. Left: The 1895 Philadelphia Atlas. Figure 50. Right: The 1910 Philadelphia Atlas. Source: Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network.

<sup>91</sup> Washington, *The Negro in Business*, 47–50.



Figure 51. “Mr. Jno. S. Trower, Philadelphia, Pa., is one of the most prominent laymen in the denomination. He is an active Sunday school worker and a great friend and supporter of our National Baptist Publishing Board.” Source: “John S. Trower Dead.” *The Nashville Globe*. (Nashville, Tennessee: 7 April 1911), 1.

**TROWER’S LEGACY.** On June 3, 1910, John S. Trower executed his last will and testament, devising \$300 to James Henry Hill, a “faithful employe[e]”; his “old homestead” near Eastville, Virginia to Union Baptist Church, Eastville for use as a baptismal ground; his “gold watch and chain” to his son; his bedroom furniture to his daughter, Grace A. Trower; and \$500 to First African Baptist Church, Philadelphia. He also provided a lifetime estate Margaret Trower, his sister, and Lula H. Trower, his brother’s widow, at 5821 Bayton Street in Germantown. Both of these women and his nieces and nephews were given modest trusts for living expenses. One niece, Annie M. Smith, was also provided for specifically. Naturally, his wife, Matilda Trower received the largest trust at \$50 per month with lifetime interest and tenancy in their home at 134 W. Cheltenham Avenue or another house at 143 Maplewood Avenue. Trusts of \$600 per annum were also provided for each of his children, as well as a \$500 allowance for furniture upon marriage. Grace A. Trower received “free use” of the building at 5636 Chew Street in Germantown with a permanent allowance of \$600 per annum regardless of marital status.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Ancestry.com. *Pennsylvania, Wills and Probate Records, 1683–1993* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc, 2015.

Trower died of “Pulmonary Abscess” on April 8, 1911 at the subject property. Upon his last illness, he was attended by Dr. Karpeles of Cheltenham Avenue, Germantown.<sup>93</sup> His death was reported on across the state and country. The *Harrisburg Daily Independent* reported the following headline on its front page: “Wealthiest Negro Is Dead, John Trower Worth \$1,500,000 Dies At Philadelphia”.<sup>94</sup> Also in Harrisburg, front-page headlines of the *Harrisburg Telegraph* read: “Wealthiest Negro in Country Dead.”<sup>95</sup> In Wilkes-Barre it was “Richest Negro Dead” on page two of *The Evening News*.<sup>96</sup> *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* declared: “Negro Magnate Dies. John Trower Leaves Fortune Estimated at \$1,500,000.”<sup>97</sup> The day after his death, *The Pittsburgh Press* reported: “Born A Slave, Left \$1,500,000 Estate,” which was provided by the *United Press*.<sup>98</sup> Other papers in Pennsylvania published similar announcements, including the *Mount Carmel Item*; the *Altoona Times*; the *Pittsburgh Press*; the *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, the *Evening News*; the *Montrose Democrat*; and the *Republican News Item* in Laport.<sup>99</sup>

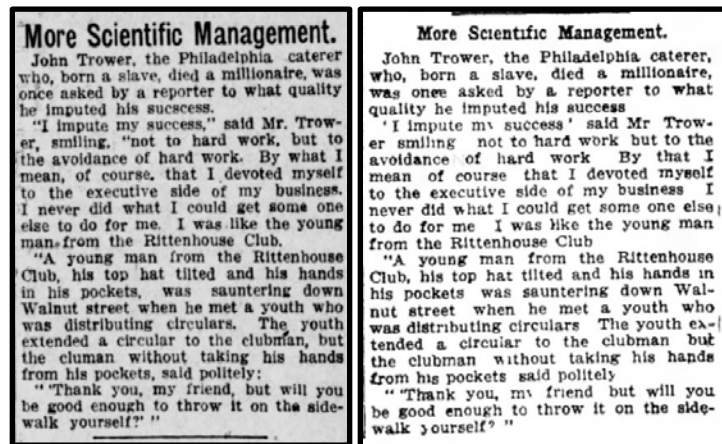


Figure 52. Left: “More Scientific Management,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, 26 May 1911, 18. Figure 53. Right: “More Scientific Management,” *The Washington Post*, 28 May 1911, 47.

Outside of the Commonwealth, numerous papers announced his death. *The Times-Democrat* of New Orleans stated, “Negro Millionaire Dies.”<sup>100</sup> Under the title, “NOT SO

<sup>93</sup> Ancestry.com. *Pennsylvania and New Jersey, Church and Town Records, 1708–1985* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc, 2011.

<sup>94</sup> “Wealthiest Negro Is Dead, John Trower Worth \$1,500,000 Dies At Philadelphia,” *Harrisburg Daily Independent*, 4 April 1911, 1.

<sup>95</sup> “Wealthiest Negro in Country Dead,” *Harrisburg Telegraph*, 4 April 1911, 1.

<sup>96</sup> “Richest Negro Dead,” *The Evening News*, 4 April 1911, 2.

<sup>97</sup> “Negro Magnate Dies. John Trower Leaves Fortune Estimated at \$1,500,000,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 5 April 1911, 11.

<sup>98</sup> “Born A Slave, Left \$1,500,000 Estate,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, 5 April 1911, 1.

<sup>99</sup> “Wealthiest Negro Dead,” *Mount Carmel Item*, 5 April 1911, 3; “Wealthiest Negro Dead,” *Altoona Tribune*, 5 April 1911, 1; *The Montrose Democrat*, 13 April 1911, 7; “Wealthiest Negro Dead,” *Republican News Item*, 14 April 1911, 1.

<sup>100</sup> “Negro Millionaire Dies,” *The Times-Democrat*, 5 April 1911, 15.

MUCH,” the *Nevada State Journal* in Reno reported Trower’s death.<sup>101</sup> The day after his death, the *New York Times* reported, “Negro Left Fortune of \$1,500,000,” on page nine, noting that he was “reputed to have been the wealthiest negro in the United States.”<sup>102</sup> Other newspapers, nationwide, published short reports of his death, including the *Lansing State Journal* of Lansing, Michigan; *The Courier-Journal* of Louisville, Kentucky; *The Marion Star* of Marion, Ohio; *The Town Talk* of Alexandria, Louisiana; the *Democrat and Chronicle* of Rochester, New York; and *The Washington Bee* of Washington, D.C.<sup>103</sup>

Like many white Germantowners of his day, his funeral and burial were handled by Kirk & Nice. On April 8, 1911, a service took place at twelve noon at First African Baptist, and his internment occurred afterward in the Merion Cemetery.<sup>104</sup>

At the time of his death, Trower had \$2,727.42 cash in his business and \$8,795.02 in a special account on deposit at the National Bank of Germantown; \$1,962.52 on deposit with the Germantown Trust Company; and \$692.52 on deposit with the Cheltenham Trust Company. He recorded \$25,000 as related to his business in Germantown. His estate inventory was valued at \$105,836.56.<sup>105</sup>

Matilda Trower lived for more than a decade after her husband’s death. She resided at 134 W. Cheltenham Avenue, where she died of liver cancer on February 17, 1923. Her funeral was handled by Walter C. Beckett of Germantown and she was buried in Merion Cemetery on February 20<sup>th</sup>.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> “NOT SO MUCH,” *Nevada State Journal*, 5 April 1911, 3.

<sup>102</sup> “Negro Left Fortune of \$1,500,000,” *The New York Times*, 5 April 1911, 9.

<sup>103</sup> “PHILADELPHIA,” *Lansing State Journal*, 5 April 1911, 10; “Negro Millionaire Dies In Philadelphia Suburb,” *The Courier-Journal*, 5 April 1911, 11; “Newslets,” *The Marion Star*, 5 April 1911, 3; “Wealthy Negro Is Dead In The East,” *The Town Talk*, 5 April 1911, 2; “Wealthiest Negro Dead,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 5 April 1911, 3; “John S. Trower,” *The Washington Bee*, 29 April 1911, 6; “America’s Richest Negro, Trower Made His Money as a Caterer in Philadelphia,” *Detroit Free Press*, 7 May 1911, 69.

<sup>104</sup> “John S. Trower,” *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, May 1911, 10.; and *Historic Pennsylvania Church and Town Records*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>105</sup> Ancestry.com. *Pennsylvania, Wills and Probate Records, 1683–1993* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc, 2015.

<sup>106</sup> Pennsylvania (State). Death certificates, 1906–1963. Series 11.90 (1,905 cartons). Records of the Pennsylvania Department of Health, Record Group 11. Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.



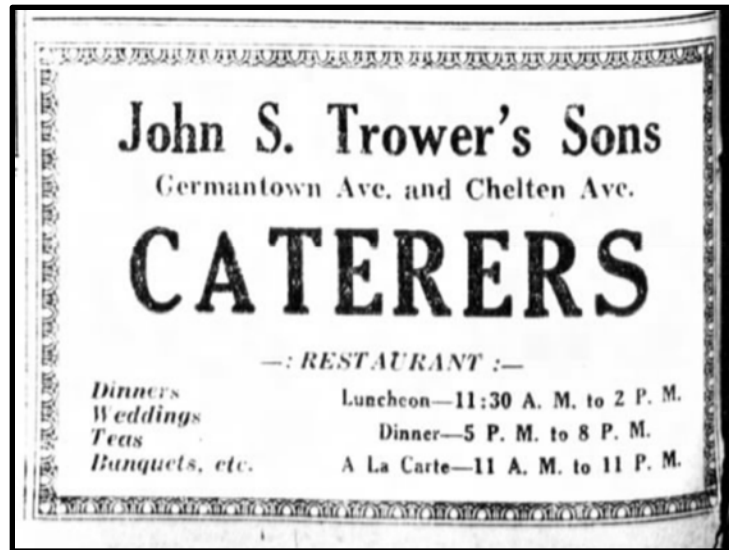


Figure 54. Advertisement for John S. Trower's Sons, November 5, 1921 in Philadelphia. Source: *Evening Public Ledger*, Philadelphia. Source: Newspapers.com.

**THE JOHN S. TROWER CO.—POST 1911.** It appears that the business was carried on for several years after Trower's death in 1911, first under his name and later under the name John S. Trower's Sons. The Trowers commissioned Frank R. Watson, the well-known Philadelphia architect, to design alterations in the form of "brick work, carpentry, steel and iron work, plastering, painting, and glazing, electric work, composition floors, hardware, hot water heating," etc., to the subject building on January 1, 1920.<sup>107</sup> Additional alterations also took place in April 1921, which were also under the design oversight of Watson.<sup>108</sup> John S. Trower's Sons operated at the subject property until the close of 1925, when many of the fixtures in the subject property were sold at auction.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>107</sup> *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, 21 January 1920, 48.

<sup>108</sup> *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, 27 April 1921, 271; Advertisement: "John S. Trower's Sons," *Evening Public Ledger*. (Philadelphia: 5 November 1921), p. 6.

<sup>109</sup> "Trower Firm Closes Career of 55 Years, Widely Known Business Was Founded by a Negro Who Became Wealthy, Sons Decide To Quit," *The Independent Gazette*, December 1925.

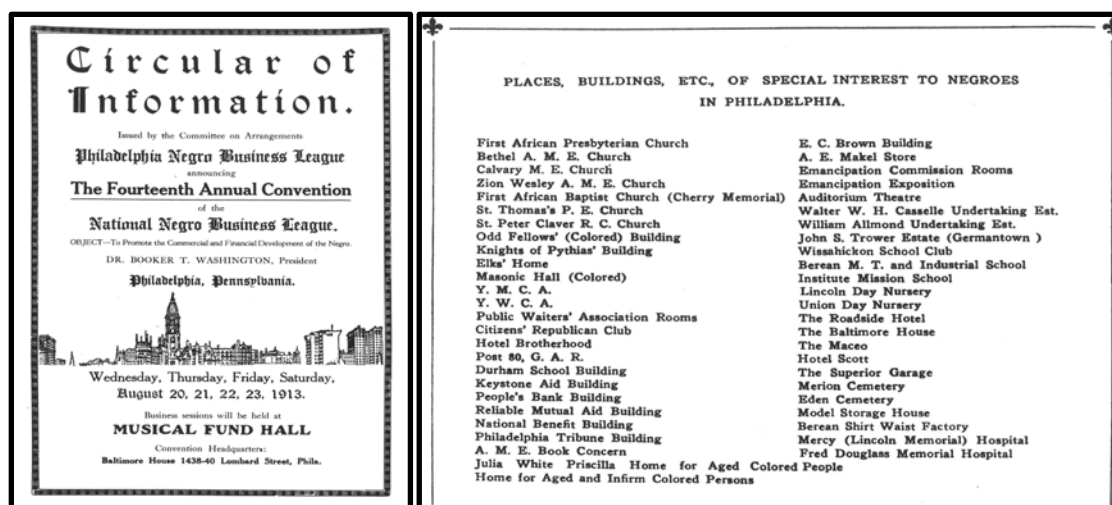


Figure 55. John S. Trower's business in Germantown listed as a place for special interest for attendees of the Fourteenth Annual Meeting of the National Negro Business League, Philadelphia, August 1913. Source: Black Economic Empowerment: The National Negro Business League, Programs, 1901–1914, Library of Congress.

When the National Negro Business League had their annual meeting in Philadelphia in 1913, Trower's business was listed as one of the important African American sites to visit in Philadelphia (Figure 55).

In 1937, the catering companies of John S. Trower and Thomas L. James, then fifty years old, joined to form the James-Trower Company, a concern then valued at \$50,000. The company occupied the James property in central Philadelphia and the subject property in Germantown.<sup>110</sup> The James-Trower Company continued to operate through 1944.<sup>111</sup> Trower's son, John M. "Jack" Trower, continued in the Philadelphia catering business into the 1960s under the name of Holland-Trower Caterers.<sup>112</sup>

The Estate of John S. Trower continued to own the subject building until the death of Matilda Trower Pair of Baltimore, Maryland in 1974.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>110</sup> "Philadelphia Merger Forms New \$50,000 Catering Company," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 19 March 1937, 2.

<sup>111</sup> *The News Journal*, 27 January 1944, 31.

<sup>112</sup> "Holland's is Bought by Trower," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 29 January 1957, 1; "Heads of State Among Guests At Epps-Alexander Reception," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 12 September 1961, 6.

<sup>113</sup> Deed: The First Pennsylvania Banking and Trust Company, successors by merger to the Germantown Trust Company, Substituted Surviving Trustee, and Matilda T. Young, Surviving Trustee Under The Will of John S. Trower, Deceased, to Bernard Spiegel and Marilyn W. Spiegel, 29 January 1974, PDBk D.C.C, No. 559, p. 315, CAP.

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The Keeping Society of Philadelphia (Keeping Society) and its principal volunteers have been engaged in researching and writing on the life of John S. Trower and his association with the subject building for several years, believing him to be among the most important Black Philadelphians of his day. In 2017, the Keeping Society nominated the subject building for a Pennsylvania Historic Marker with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, which was approved. Funds for the marker were raised in 2020 by Historic Germantown and Germantown United CDC, a process in which the Black Writer's Museum and the Keeping Society participated. This nomination was authored Oscar Beisert, Architectural Historian and Historic Preservationist, with assistance from J.M. Duffin, Archivist and Historian, and Kelly E. Wiles, Architectural Historian. While this nomination was completed pro bono, Germantown United CDC made a small contribution to the Keeping Society to offset organizational costs and expenses, signing on as a co-sponsor. The nomination was also reviewed by Dr. Danya Pilgrim, Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Temple University, who also provided additional research materials. James Lyons, a descendant John S. Trower, provided family photographs and research materials, as did Patricia Irwin. Mark Frazier Lloyd, the former Director of the Germantown Historical Society and the University Archives and Records Center of the University of Pennsylvania, also provided research materials and moral support. The nomination was filed on February 24, 2021 as a tribute to Black History Month.

The following sites were used to create the nomination: Ancestry.com, Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Germantown Historical Society, Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Newspapers.com, etc.

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**INTERESTING PEOPLE**

**FROM FARM BOY  
TO CATERER -  
JOHN S. TROWER**

ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL  
BLACK BUSINESS MEN. HE MADE  
A FORTUNE IN THE CATERING  
FIELD IN GERMANTOWN, PA. BEFORE  
THE TURN OF THE CENTURY.

1. BORN IN NORTHAMPTON  
COUNTY, VA. IN 1849. HIS PARENTS  
WERE EASTERN SHORE FARMERS  
WHO WERE KNOWN AS THE  
FARMERS OF INDIANTOWN. THEY  
WERE A MIXTURE OF BLACK,

2. INDIAN AND ANGLO-SAXON. ALTHO THEY  
WERE NEVER SLAVES THEY COULD NOT  
ESCAPE THE SERFDOM OF DEBTORS. AFTER  
MANY YEARS OF HARDWORK HE SAVED  
ENOUGH TO LIFT THE BURDEN OF DEBT  
FROM HIS FAMILY. WITH \$52 SURPLUS  
HE LEFT THE FARM AND WENT TO

3. BALTIMORE. HE WORKED IN A RESTAUR-  
ANT AS A OYSTER-OPENER. ALWAYS THRIFTY  
HE DECIDED TO GO NORTH TO GERMANTOWN  
IN 1870. SOON HE HAD ENOUGH MONEY TO  
OPEN A SMALL RESTAURANT. HE PROSPERED  
AND ADDED CATERING. A BIG SUCCESS. BY 1887  
HE WAS ABLE TO PURCHASE AN OLD BANK BLDG  
FOR \$25,000. HIS EXCELLENT SERVICE WAS SOUGHT  
AFTER BY THE VERY WEALTHY.

1904 May 10. The John S. Trower Building

Figure 56. “Interesting People,” *Twin Cities Courier*, 9 August 1984, 4.

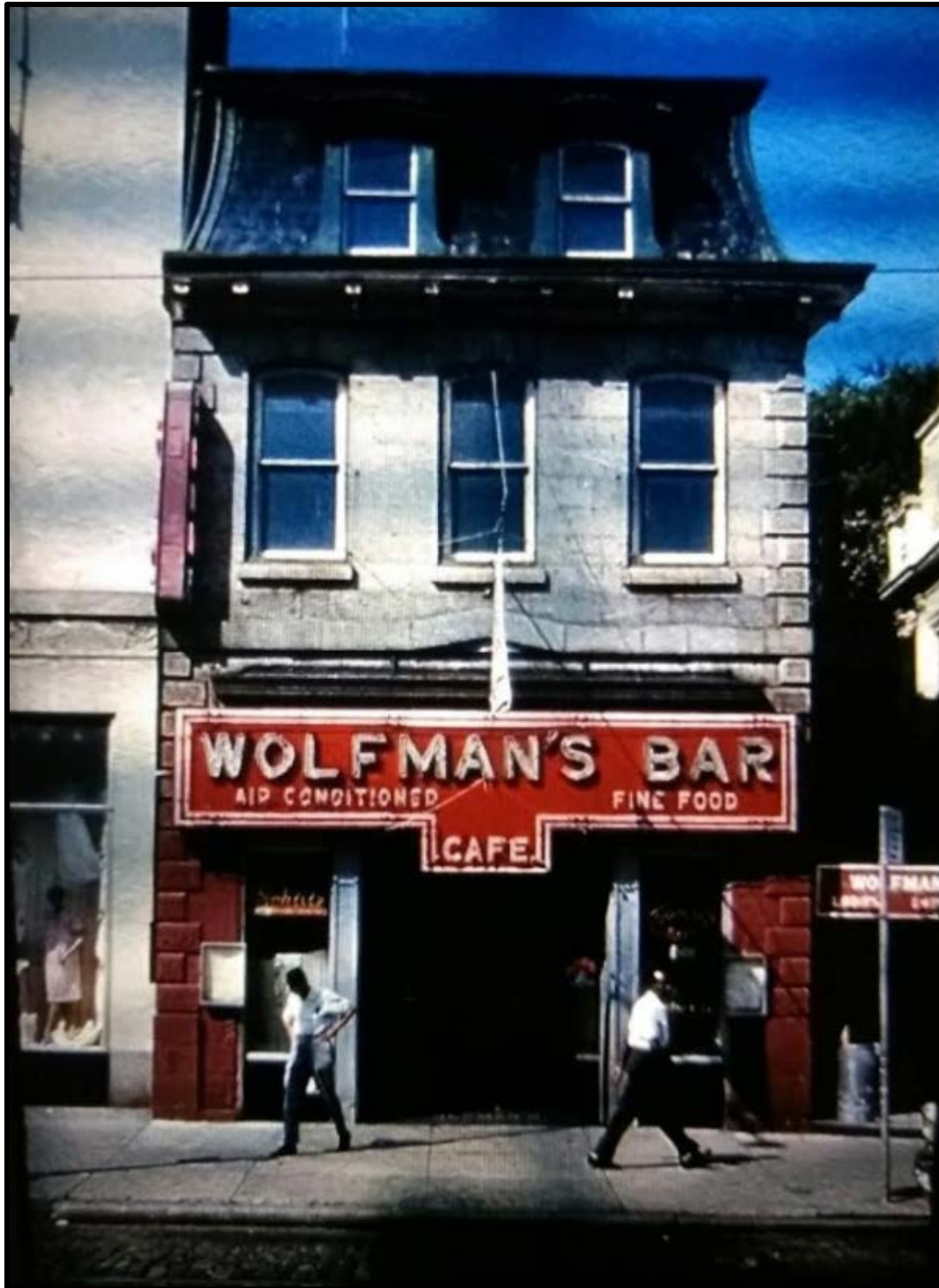


Figure 57. The John S. Trower Building in the 1960s, when it was still owned by the John S. Trower Estate, but occupied by Wolfman's Bar. Source: The Germantown Historical Society.



PERPETUAL SURVEY No. 70565

Made July 31<sup>st</sup> 1891

for John S. Trower,  
AND REPORTED TO THE

Franklin Fire Insurance Co. of Philadelphia.

A two story and mansard roof stone building, the front being granite pointed, a two story and mansard roof stone back building and a one story stone kitchen, the back building, kitchen and northwest side of main building being rough cast. Also a one story brick kitchen, a two story brick bakery and a two story brick store house adjoining and communicating with the above and occupied as a Restaurant and dwelling, situate on the Southwest side of Germantown No. 4908 beginning about 80 feet northwest from Chelten Avenue Germantown 2<sup>nd</sup> ward City of Philadelphia, \$5000 Insured.

Dimensions of main building 27 ft front by 112 ft deep back building 18 by 18 ft deep and stone kitchen 13 ft deep. Granite steps to front. Reveal window frames to front at first and second stories with segment tops, stone pills and stone arched heads and inside blinds to them frames sash and blinds being walnut. Cased frames back including back building and stone kitchen only having segment tops, outside panel shutters to first and blinds to second story, sash double hung. Hemlock joist yellow pine flooring, buildings plastered gas pipes throughout and a brick heater in the cellar.

The main building first story is the Saloon except 8 ft in depth at the rear including the stairway which is in the Dining room. 2 segment head door frames front in the saloon with paneled jacks transoms in 1 light of sash each and sash doors having each 1 light of 26 x 58 sash in it, a small circular show window front having 1 light of 24 x 51 sash in front and 1 light 12 x 51 sash in either end and a 1 light transom over each light, 2 - 4 light 15 x 40 and a 4 light 18 x 40 windows, 6 in finish, 10 in put and molded washboards, a 7/8 double faced passage door to dining room a sash door to entry having 2 lights of 9 x 32 sash in it, an open fireplace and grate and neat plate mantel over it and stucco cornice and centre, continued rail stairs, 3<sup>rd</sup> story with open string plastered below and cellar steps under Has a walnut newel and rail and turned ash balusters, 3<sup>rd</sup> story 12 ft.

The second story of main building is in two rooms entry and stairway off the back a store room off the north end of entry and an entry off the side of back room 3 - 4 light 18 x 36 windows

Figure 58. Page 1 of 1891 Franklin Fire Insurance Co. Survey of the John S. Trower Building. Source: Franklin Fire Insurance Co. of Philadelphia, Perpetual Survey No. 70565, John S. Trower, 31 July 1891, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

front and 1 in the side of front room a 4 light 13+36 do front in back room and a 4 light 15+36 do in the side a closet in back room with a 5/4 single faced door and stucco cornice and centre in front room. Work all trimmed with 6 in finish. 4/4 double faced passage doors except door to store room in the entry which is a pass door having 4 lights of 12+22 pass in it a doorway back in store room and panel door. Story 10 ft.

The mansard roof story of main building is in two rooms, entry and stairway off the back and entry off the side of back room and a bath room off the north end of rear entry 2 4 light 13+24 pediment top dormers with segment top pass front and 3 in northwest side a closet in the back room and a copper bath tub and a water closet in the bath room hot and cold water introduced. Work all trimmed with 4 in finish. 6 in molded washboard. 4/4 double faced passage doors to front rooms with a slight transom pass over entry door. a 5/4 single faced closet door and a pass door to bath room having 4 lights of 12+22 pass in it. Story 8 ft 6 in. The front and northwest side of roof is concave, covered with slate and tin on top wood eave plancier frieze cornice dentals and brackets tin gutters in the eave and tin conductor, wood molding cornice around at the top of roof and to dormers.

The back building first story extends 8 ft into rear of main building, and one story high of brick out to a line of main building the walls above being supported by an iron column, and the dining room having 4 4 light 15+40 windows walnut inside shutters to rear window. 6 in finish. 10 in molded washboard. a 5/4 single faced cellar door a doorway and panel door back. and story 12 ft. a flat tin roof on the one story brick part on the side.

The second story of back building is in one room and has 2 4 light 15+36 windows in the side and 1 back a large closet 6 in finish. 8 in molded washboard. a 4/4 double faced passage 4/4 single do closet door and story 10 ft.

The mansard roof story of back building is in one room and has 2 4 light dormer windows the same as main building. a closet 4 in finish 7 in molded washboard. a 4/4 double faced closet and passage door and story 8 ft 6 in. the side and rear of roof is covered with slate continued from front roof tin on top continued from front roof and cornice also continued from main building cornice except there is no dentals.

The one story stone kitchen has a door pane and panel door back. 2 4 light 13+30 windows. 3 in finish. 7 in molded washboard a

Figure 59. Page 2 of 1891 Franklin Fire Insurance Co. Survey of the John S. Trower Building. Source: Franklin Fire Insurance Co. of Philadelphia, Perpetual Survey No. 70565, John S. Trower, 31 July 1891, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.



# NASHVILLE GLOBE.

NASHVILLE, TENN., FRIDAY, <sup>April 7</sup> ~~March 7~~, 1911

**JOHN S. TROWER DEAD.**  
 Germantown, Philadelphia, Pa.—  
 After an illness which covered a period of about two years, during which time he was not altogether disabled, but complaining mostly, John S. Trower, the wealthiest Negro in Pennsylvania and probably one of the wealthiest in the United States, passed away at his home, 5487 Main street this morning.

The most notable thing in his life was his great devotion to his church and Sunday-school. He was regarded as the backbone of the Cherry Street Memorial Baptist Church, which is said to be the oldest free Baptist congregation in the United States.

As a caterer he has served more notable dinners and parties than any other man in the United States. He prepared and served luncheons for more than fifty United States war vessels. It is said that one occasion he received \$10,000 for a luncheon served.

It is reported that he is worth over \$1,500,000. He leaves a wife and five children. It was not known today just what arrangements would be made for his funeral, or when it would take place.

**JOHN S. TROWER.**

**BISHOP TYREE PRESENTED A**



Figure 60. An obituary for John S. Trower in the Nashville Globe. Source: "John S. Trower Dead," *Nashville Globe*, 7 April 1911.

*The John S. Trower Building  
 The Restaurant & Catering Business House of John S. Trower  
 5706 Germantown Avenue, Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
 Philadelphia Register of Historic Places Nomination, February 2021 – Page 54*

## JOHN S. TROWER,

**Best Known and Probably the Wealthiest Negro in the Country.**  
From the Philadelphia Record.

John S. Trower, aged 61 years, the well-known caterer, said to be the wealthiest Negro in Pennsylvania and perhaps in the country, who was reputed to be worth one million dollars and more, died yesterday morning at his home, No. 5706 Germantown avenue, of pneumonia. He is survived by his widow and six children, one of whom is the wife of Dr. R. K. Cherry.

Trower for a great number of years was interested in every movement in the uplifting of the people of his race, and gave liberally of his means, in the building of churches, Sunday schools, industrial homes and beneficial organizations. He was born in Eastville, Northampton county, Va., October 3, 1849. As a young man he learned the catering business in Maryland and 40 years ago he embarked in the same enterprise for himself. He was phenomenally successful, and had done the catering not only for the fashionable society of Germantown and Chesnut Hill, but also in this and adjoining States.

He was, according to Rev. W. A. Creditt, pastor of the Cherry Street Baptist Church, the most prominent colored layman in America. He attended all the national church conventions and became a powerful public speaker. He was chairman of the trustees of the Cherry Street Church; 16 years superintendent of its Sunday school and at the last meeting was elected superintendent for life.

He personally guaranteed all the mortgages and loans of the church, amounting to \$75,000, until a few years ago, when the church became financially strong, and he was relieved of this responsibility. He also financed the building of Zion African

Baptist Church, on West Rittenhouse street, Germantown, and the colored Baptist church at Ocean City.

He was president of the State Baptist Sunday School Association for 15 years, and was much respected by the white Baptist ministers. He was a self-made man, receiving but little education in his youth, and in order to help the young founded the Downingtown Industrial School, of which Dr. Creditt is president.

Trower organized a building and loan association for the colored people of the city and erected 20 houses for their use in the vicinity of the Cherry Street Church.

Booker Washington considered him the greatest man of his race in this country, and in his published book devotes an entire chapter to his life and work. The funeral will take place Saturday at noon. Booker Washington has been invited to be present.

### INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE NEGRO.

Wednesday, Thursday and Friday,  
April 17, 18 and 19, 1912.

For some years past I have had in mind to invite here from different parts of the world—from Europe, Africa, the West Indies and North and South America—persons who are actively interested or directly engaged as missionaries, or otherwise, in the work that is going on in Africa and elsewhere for the education and up-building of Negro peoples.

For this purpose it has been determined to hold at Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, April 17, 18 and 19, 1912, a little more than a year from this time, an international conference on the Negro. Such a conference as this will offer the opportunity for those engaged in any kind of service in Af-

Figure 61. An obituary for John S. Trower from a Germantown newspaper in 1911. Source: The Germantown Historical Society.

The Inventory of Trower's Restaurant and Offices, the subject building:

1½	Doz.	star tumblers	.54
1½	"	star sherbet glasses	.54
3	"	grape fruit glasses	1.08
8	"	champagne glasses	2.88
4	"	wine glasses	1.44
2	"	plain goblets	.72
1	"	champagne glasses	.36
16	"	cocktail glasses	.48
8	"	pony brandy glasses	.24
1	"	sherry glasses	.36
10	"	pouffe glasses	.30
6	"	vinegar glasses	.18
6	"	water bottles	.18
8	"	vegetable dishes, medium,	2.88
10	"	" " small,	3.60
8	"	white platters	2.88
450	"	soup plates, white,	13.50
10	"	wash bowls	.30
6	"	butter dishes	.18
1000	"	water tumblers	30.00
6	"	bentwood chairs	15.00
12	"	folding chairs	20.00
2	"	round tables	25.00
30	"	square tables	10.00

1	40	- seat table	5.00
3	20	- seat tables	7.50
2	12	- seat tables	3.00
1		gas stove	3.00
7		wagons	500.00
9		horses	700.00
3	sets	single harness, wagon,	10.00
2	"	double " "	10.00
2	"	" " " carriage,	10.00
1	"	single " "	5.00
2		carriages	100.00
16		card tables	8.00
895		forks	44.75
355		table spoons	17.75
326		forks	16.30
663		"	33.15
254		"	12.70
45		oyster forks	1.50
1385		"	5.00
132		dessert spoons	6.60
334		teaspoons	16.70
111		teaspoons	5.55
170		spoons	8.50
160		coffee spoons	8.00
8		sugar bowls	.50
7		cream pitchers	.50
16		ladles	1.25
30		silver dishes	1.50
23		water pitchers	.75
8		hot water dishes	.50
6		silver cake dishes	1.50
16		candelabras	20.00
15		silver candlesticks	10.00
5		glass candlesticks	.25
6		coffee urns	30.00
36		dinner knives	1.80

442		plain silver knives	1.80
23		cake pans, round,	22.10
12		cake pans, square,	.50
3	doz.	cake pans	.25
3		coffee kettles	.75
6		large bowls	.50
1		almond machine	.50
3	"	cake stands	2.50
7		dipping greens	1.00
1	"	white tin pans	.25
1		gas stove	.10
1	set	scales	3.00
200		small moulds	1.00
2		macaroon machines	2.00
			2.50

Figure 62. Source: Ancestry.com. *Pennsylvania, Wills and Probate Records, 1683–1993* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015. Courtesy Ancestry.com.