

ADDRESS: 714 CHESTNUT ST

Name of Resource: Henry A. Dreer Seed Company

Proposed Action: Designation

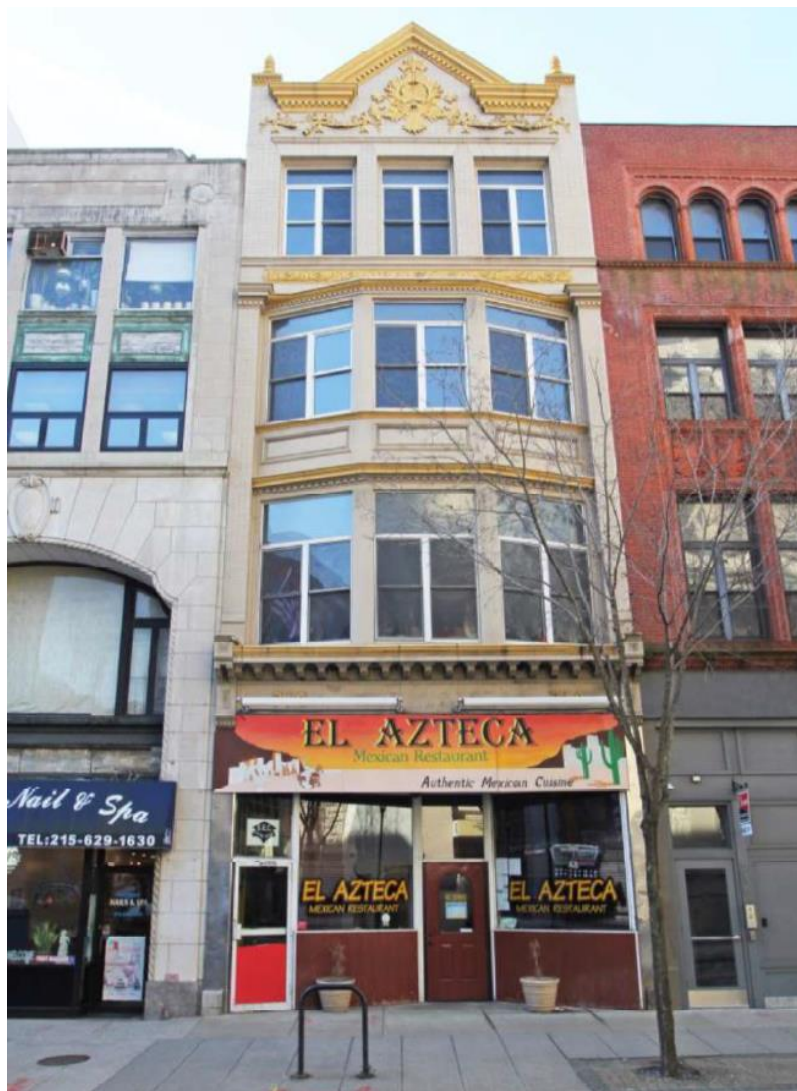
Property Owner: Herbert Richman

Nominator: Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia

Staff Contact: Allyson Mehley, allyson.mehley@phila.gov

OVERVIEW: This nomination proposes to designate the property at 714 Chestnut Street 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 property has significant character, interest, or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth of Nation, being the headquarters for the Henry A. Dreer Seed Company between 1863 and 1924, a leader in the development of horticulture in Philadelphia, the surrounding region, and nationally during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Under Criterion J, the nomination contends that the property exemplifies the cultural, economic, social, or historical heritage of the community, with Philadelphia being recognized as “the oldest and perhaps the foremost seed market in America.”

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the property at 714 Chestnut Street 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: 714 Chestnut Street

Postal code: 19106

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Henry A. Dreer Seed Company

Current/Common Name: _____

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: Restaurant on first floor. Upper floor uses currently unknown.

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and site/plot plan of the resource's boundaries.

6. DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and photographs of the resource's physical appearance, site, setting, and surroundings.

7. SIGNIFICANCE

Please attach a narrative Statement of Significance citing the Criteria for Designation the resource satisfies.

Period of Significance (from year to year): from 1863 to 1924

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: c. 1850, 1892

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: Charles Balderston (1892 facade)

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: Unknown

Original owner: Unknown

Other significant persons: N/A

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 Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia Date April 6, 2021

Name with Title Kevin McMahon, volunteer Email patrick@preservationalliance.com

Street Address 1608 Walnut Street, Suite 1702 Telephone 215-546-1146

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA 19103

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: 6 April 2021

☒ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete Date: 14 May 2021

Date of Notice Issuance: 14 May 2021

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: Herbert Richman

Address: 116 Tall Trees Dr.

City: Bala Cynwyd State: PA Postal Code: 19004

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

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

☐ Designated ☐ Rejected

12/7/18

5. Boundary Description

BEGINNING at a point on the Southerly side of Chestnut Street (sixty feet wide) at the distance of one hundred and sixty-four feet two and three quarter inches Westwardly from the Westerly side of Seventh Street; thence extending Southwardly, on a line parallel with the said Seventh Street, one hundred and thirty-nine feet ten inches to a point on the Northeast side of Ionic Street (nineteen feet wide); thence extending Northwestward, along the said Northeast side of Ionic Street, twenty-two feet nine inches to a point; thence extending Northeastward one hundred and thirty-nine feet nine and three quarters inches to the said Southerly side of Chestnut Street; thence extending Eastwardly along the said Southerly side of Chestnut Street, twenty-two feet five inches to the first mentioned point and place of beginning.

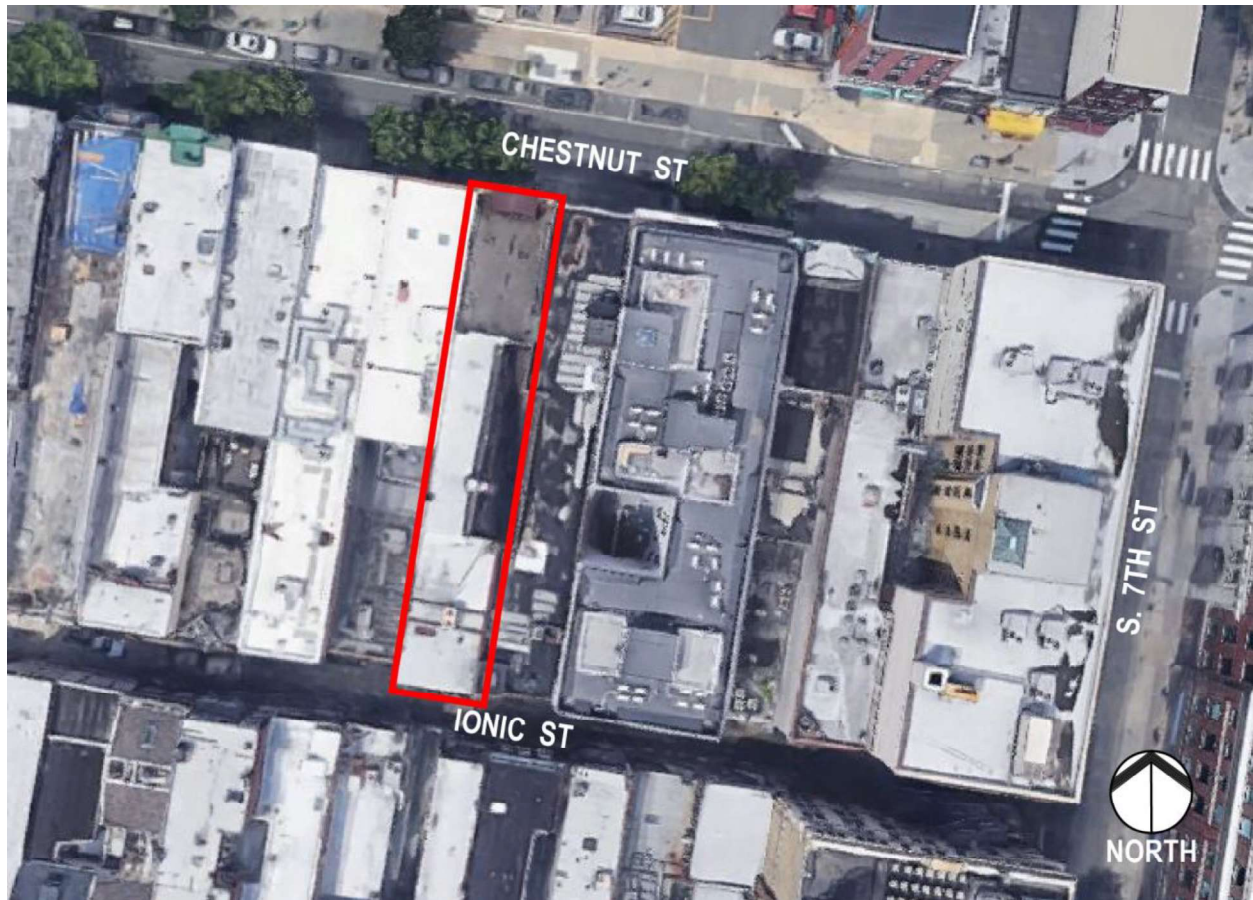


Figure 1 – Boundary Map showing 714 Chestnut Street (Google Maps imagery, 2021).

6. Description

The Henry A. Dreer Seed Company building is a four-story, Queen Anne style building on the south side of Chestnut Street roughly halfway between 7th and 8th Streets in Center City Philadelphia. Built in the mid-nineteenth century, the north elevation (facing Chestnut Street) was remodeled in 1892 when Chestnut Street was widened, resulting in the appearance that still largely exists today. The first floor of the north elevation contains a circa-1970 aluminum-framed storefront framed by stainless steel-clad pilasters on either side. The storefront contains two doors. The eastern door, which was likely installed with the storefront, is glazed and opens to a stair providing access to the upper floors. The center door, which appears to be less than twenty years old, is an aluminum-clad wood door with a glazed upper panel that opens into the first floor restaurant. Above the storefront, there is a flat painted sign panel as well as an original limestone cornice that spans the full width of the building. Above the cornice, the north elevation is faced in buff brick with limestone and painted terra cotta accents.



Photo 1 – The north elevation of 714 Chestnut Street.

The second and third floors both contain projecting, three-sided metal clad bays. Each opening in the projecting bays contains two one-over-one, double-hung aluminum replacement windows with a single-light transom. Each bay is capped by a denticulated metal cornice. There is also paneling between the second and third floor bays. Above the third floor bay, there is a painted limestone frieze as well as a limestone sill course directly below the fourth floor windows. Like the floors

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Henry A Dreer Seed Company, 714 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA

below, the fourth floor windows consist of paired one-over-one units with single-light transoms, except that they sit within the masonry exterior wall, not within a projecting bay. The fourth floor windows contain splayed limestone lintels. The west elevation is capped by a painted pressed metal pediment with painted pressed metal ornamentation, including the four leaf clover that was the logo of the Henry A. Dreer business. On either side of the pediment, there are painted pressed metal finials.



Photo 2 (left) – Detail of the limestone cornice above the first floor storefront.



Photo 3 (right) – Detail of the third floor bay window with limestone and terra cotta ornamentation.



Photo 4 – Detail of the fourth floor and pediment.

The south elevation, which faces Ionic Street, is far more utilitarian in treatment than the north elevation. It contains stucco on the first floor, which has several hollow metal doors to access the rear of the first floor restaurant space. Several air conditioner condensing units are mounted to the wall above the doors. The second through fourth floors are faced in red brick and contain a metal fire escape. Nearly all of the window openings – there are three on each floor with stone sills and segmental arched headers – contain two-over-two, double-hung wood windows. The only exception is in the westernmost opening on the second floor, which contains a hollow metal door

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that provides access from the interior to the fire escape. The south elevation is topped by a simple, corbeled brick cornice.

Four-story buildings about 714 Chestnut Street on the east and west sides, therefore those sides are largely not visible. The only exception is the southern half of the west elevation, which is faced in red brick and stucco as seen in Photo 5.



Photo 5 – South elevation and partial view of the west elevation, as seen from Ionic Street.

7. Significance

The Henry A. Dreer Seed Company building is significant under Criteria A and J as a leader in the development of horticulture in Philadelphia, the surrounding region, and nationally during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Founded by Henry Augustus Dreer (1818-1873) and Henry Beck Hirst (1813-1874) in 1838, the business, originally known as Hirst & Dreer, became one of the principal suppliers of bulbs, seeds, and flowers to the Philadelphia and national market from their original location at 97 Chestnut Street (now in the 300 block of Chestnut Street), and later from 714 Chestnut Street, where the company operated between 1863 and 1924.

CRITERION 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.

CRITERION J

Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

As late as the early twentieth century, Philadelphia was recognized as “the oldest and perhaps the foremost seed market in America.”¹ The roots of the industry began in 1784, when David Landreth established the first seed importation business in the city. Landreth, who was also the first in the United States to grow his own seeds commercially, became known as a supplier to the likes of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Joseph Bonaparte, attesting to his significance at the time. Landreth created a model for a host of future businesses in Philadelphia that would dominate the national seed trade throughout the nineteenth century.

Several major seed firms followed Landreth, including that of Bernard McMahon (1775-1816), who published the first seed catalog in the United States. McMahon, who specialized principally in native American species of plants, flowers and vegetables, eventually became a gardening mentor to Thomas Jefferson, supplying seeds for plantings at Monticello and later becoming a steward of the plants collected during the Lewis and Clark expeditions. In 1830, Robert Buist (1805-1880), who briefly worked for Landreth, opened his own seed business, later publishing a variety of instructional books for the home gardener. Among other accomplishments, Buist is known for introducing the poinsettia to the United States.


Following in the footsteps of Landreth, McMahon and Buist, Henry A. Dreer (1818-1873) and Henry B. Hirst (1813-1874) opened their first store at 97 Chestnut Street (on what is now the 300 block of Chestnut Street) in Philadelphia in 1838. The son of a German immigrant, Dreer was trained in cabinet making by his father, but was from an early age more interested in flowers and plants. As soon as he was able, Dreer opened a small flower shop near Front and Chestnut Streets, which lasted only briefly as Dreer soon opened a more permanent shop with Hirst.² Hirst’s background was in poetry and the law, but he was something of an eccentric, with interests as varied as horticulture, ornithology, minerology, and taxidermy, among others. His poetry and other

¹ “The Seed Industry: Its History and Development,” *The Courier*, Bristol, PA, 1915. Accessed through ExplorePAhistory: <https://explorepahistory.com/odocument.php?docId=1-4-305> on March 12, 2021.

² “Henry A. Dreer,” *The Standard Cyclopedia of Horticulture* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1917), 1573.

writing appeared in prominent national magazines of the day, such as *Graham's Magazine* and *Godey's Lady's Book*. Perhaps to pursue his other interests – he was eventually admitted to the bar in 1843 – Hirst only lasted two years with Dreer, leaving the partnership in 1840. During his time with Dreer, Hirst was a close friend of Edgar Allen Poe, although the two had a falling out after Hirst parodied Poe's "The Haunted Palace" and claimed to be the author of "The Raven" (coincidentally, Hirst at one point operated an exotic bird store in Philadelphia and owned a pet raven). Hirst eventually went insane.³

HENRY A. DREER'S



**SEED AND HORTICULTURAL
WAREHOUSE,**
NO. 97 CHESNUT STREET, PHILADELPHIA,
Where is offered every variety of Kitchen, Garden, Herb, Flower,
Grass and Field Seeds,
WHOLESALE AND RETAIL,
Of the best quality, and at the lowest Cash Prices.
ALSO,
Green and Hot-house Plants,
Fruit and Ornamental Trees, Bulbous, Flower Roots, &c. &c.
Gardening Implements, Agricultural and Horticultural Books.
Canary Birds, Bird Seeds, Cages, &c. Seeds supplied to Store-
keepers, neatly put up in packages, with printed directions, ready
for retailing.
Catalogues may be had on application.
Bouquets of the choicest Flowers furnished at the shortest no-
tice.

Figure 1 - Henry A. Dreer advertisement in *O'Brien's Philadelphia Wholesale Business Directory*, 1844.

In opening their seed store, Hirst & Dreer were responding to a growing enthusiasm for horticulture that arose in the United States in the years before the Civil War. Both increasing economic prosperity, advancements in print technology and advertising, and expanding transportation networks — the railroad, in particular — made the cultivation of ornamental gardens affordable and accessible to a much wider segment of the population.⁴ The increasing availability of horticultural publications also actively encouraged Americans to garden. In one such publication, Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852), considered the founder of American landscape architecture, argued that gardening could "increase local attachments, and render domestic life more delightful; thus not only augmenting [the proprietor's] own enjoyment, but strengthening his patriotism and making him a better citizen."⁵

³ James D. Hart, with revisions by Phillip W. Leininger, *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 291.

⁴ Cheryl Lyon-Jenness, "Planting a Seed: The Nineteenth-Century Horticultural Boom in America." *The Business History Review* 78, No. 3 (Autumn 2004), 381-421.

⁵ Andrew Jackson Downing, *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, Adapted to North America* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1841), iii.

To Downing and others, gardening was also to be viewed as a moral pursuit. Writing in *The Florist's Guide* in 1835, New York horticulturalist Thomas Bridgeman exclaims that garden was a means of maintaining man's "station in society as becomes a rational and intelligent being, instead of sinking himself, as too many do, below the meanest of the mean, by spending his time in dissipation and vice."⁶ Other prominent figures, including Philadelphian Thomas Meehan (1826-1901), considered "one of the most important horticulturalists in nineteenth-century America," echoed Bridgeman's words.⁷ According to Meehan, who is credited with saving Bartram's Gardens from development in the late nineteenth century, "Gardens and flowers are inseparably connected with virtue and morality, and happiness flows from them, as from a natural fountain and source," continuing that "the pursuit forms the most natural and most protective hedge against the intrusions of misery and vice that exists amongst men."⁸

Boosted by such vigorous appeals to patriotism and morality, a horticultural boom ensued in the United States, and it was within this environment that Hirst & Dreer thrived. Almost immediately after opening their shop in 1838, the pair earned renown as both seedsmen and florists. Supplying their shop with seeds cultivated at their greenhouses at the Woodlands in West Philadelphia, Hirst & Dreer quickly gained attention from the local press for their window displays and exhibitions at the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, which bestowed on the men numerous awards during their early years (Dreer became a lifelong, active member of PHS, serving as its treasurer from 1862-1873). One of Hirst & Dreer's most notable early accomplishments was their display of 8,000 dahlias at Parkinson's Restaurant in September of 1839, which generated effusive praise from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Coincidentally, Parkinson's was then located at what would later become 714 Chestnut Street (prior to 1857, the building had the address of 180 Chestnut Street).⁹

Not satisfied with merely local successes, Dreer had his sights set much farther afield. In fact, almost as soon as Hirst & Dreer opened, the company began marketing its seeds to a national audience, with the *National Gazette* reporting that their first catalog was intended for wide distribution "in perfect condition" to "any part of the Union."¹⁰ The catalog, which was only two pages and had no illustrations, nonetheless demonstrated Dreer's early adeptness at marketing and signaled the great significance that the printed catalog would have for the Dreer business for decades to come.

Catalogs in the form of printed broadsheets or small booklets have existed since the earliest days of the seed business in the United States. Rarely illustrated, most catalogs published before the Civil War, including Hirst & Dreer's, were merely lists of available seeds, often without descriptions. Bernard McMahon's "A Catalogue of garden, herb, flower, tree, shrub and grass seeds," published in Philadelphia in 1805, was the first and remains one of the best known examples from this early period. Although lacking the visual appeal that would characterize later

⁶ Thomas Bridgeman, *The Florist's Guide* (New York, 1835), 3.

⁷ Robin Veder, "How Gardening Pays: Leisure, Labor and Luxury in Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Culture," PhD Diss., College of William and Mary, 2000, p 145.

⁸ Thomas Meehan, *The Gardener's Monthly* (February 1, 1860), 51.

⁹ "A Splendid Display at Parkinson's," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 26, 1839.

¹⁰ *National Gazette* (March 23, 1839), 2.

publications, McMahon's catalog nonetheless points to an effort to develop American horticulture by diversifying the range of available seeds and widening access to them.¹¹

Although Dreer's catalogs (Hirst left the partnership in 1840) remained fairly simple through the 1840s and 1850s, the firm's national profile continued to grow. In his 1848 book *The Cottage Garden of America*, horticulturalist Walter Elder recommended only eight seedsmen to his readers, of which Henry A. Dreer was one (four were located in Philadelphia, with the others in New York City, Albany and Boston).¹² Dreer also earned regular mentions in popular horticultural and agricultural trade journals of the day, including *The Farmers' Cabinet* (Philadelphia, PA), *The Gardener's Magazine* (London, UK), *The Magazine of Horticulture* (Boston, MA), which reported on new varieties made available by Dreer, the exhibits he made at the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and other organizations, and the awards bestowed on him by those groups.¹³



Figure 2 - Dreer's store at 714 Chestnut Street as it appeared between 1863 and 1892. From the 1876 edition of *Dreer's Garden Calendar*.

Dreer's catalogs remained text heavy through the 1850s, although they grew in length, often with twenty or more pages describing hundreds of varieties of flower seeds and bulbs as well as seeds for vegetables, fruits, and other types of garden and house plants. By the early 1860s, Dreer's catalogs began to feature a limited number of simple black and white woodcut illustrations. They also became significantly more educational in an effort to attract amateur home gardeners, providing fuller descriptions of key varieties as well as planting and care instructions. In 1849, due to the company's expanding offerings, Dreer moved his nursery from the Woodlands to a larger property in Mantua, on the block now bounded by 35th and 36th Streets to the east and west and Wallace and Mount Vernon Streets to the north and south.¹⁴

By the early 1860s, Dreer also found that his shop, then at 327 Chestnut Street, was inadequate for his rapidly growing business. In 1863, Dreer moved four blocks to the west, acquiring the four-story building at 714 Chestnut Street from Charles Desilver, who had operated his publishing company and bookstore at this address for several years. This large commercial building, designed in the Italianate style by an unknown architect and built around 1850, replaced an earlier, four-story, Federal-style building that likely dated to the early nineteenth century. The

¹¹ An overview of the seed catalog in the nineteenth century is provided in an online exhibit through Oregon State University entitled "A Short History of The Seed & Nursery Catalogs in Europe and the U.S.," available at <http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/seed>. Accessed March 12, 2021.

¹² Walter Elder, *The Cottage Garden of America* (Philadelphia: Moss and Brother, 1848), 15.

¹³ These publications are available in full text online through the Biodiversity Heritage Library: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/>. Accessed March 12, 2021.

¹⁴ *The North American, Philadelphia and Popular Philadelphians* (Philadelphia: The North American, 1891), 213.

building served as the home of the Glenn & Company Perfumery until that business moved into new quarters at 726 Chestnut Street and was replaced by Desilver in the late 1850s.¹⁵ The commodious interior of 714 Chestnut Street allowed Dreer to significantly expand the size of his shop, as well as his seed warehouse and offices.

Although Dreer experienced steady growth from 1838 through the early 1860s, the business expanded dramatically once established in its new home at 714 Chestnut Street. One of the clearest indications of the increasing size and scope of Dreer's business was the company's ever-expanding catalog, which had grown to 70 or more pages by the early 1860s and had become almost encyclopedic in nature, providing extensive planting and care instructions for nearly every available variety. After 1861, when the U.S. Congress passed legislation that lowered postage rates for the mailing of seeds and plant cuttings, which were previously sent to customers using more expensive express services, catalogs became even more important to Henry A. Dreer and the seed business in general.¹⁶ Now able to reach more customers at a lower cost, Dreer began to expand his offerings. Flower seeds and bulbs remained a key part of the business, but Dreer also began to cultivate and grow seeds for thousands of varieties of vegetables, shrubs, fruit trees, herbs, grasses and tobacco. Through the catalog, which was distributed to customers in over dozen states as far west as Kansas and Nebraska, Dreer became a national authority on domestic horticulture. This position was reinforced by Dreer's frequent contributions on gardening to the most popular national magazines, including the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Godey's Lady's Book*.¹⁷

In 1865, taking advantage of developments in chromolithography, Dreer published one of the first color illustrations in a seed catalog in the United States. This appeared in the annually published *Dreer's Descriptive Catalog of Bulbs and Other Roots*, and consisted of a single, six-color plate depicting an elegant bouquet of lilies, hyacinths, crocuses, and tulips, among other varieties of flowers (**Fig. 3**). Such color plates would increase in number in subsequent years, although due to their expense they would continue to be limited to the bulb catalog until the early 1900s. Dreer's main catalog, the annually published *Dreer's Garden Calendar*, although not printed in color at this time, grew significantly in length and complexity, featuring dozens of black and white woodcut illustrations after 1870 (**Fig. 4**).¹⁸

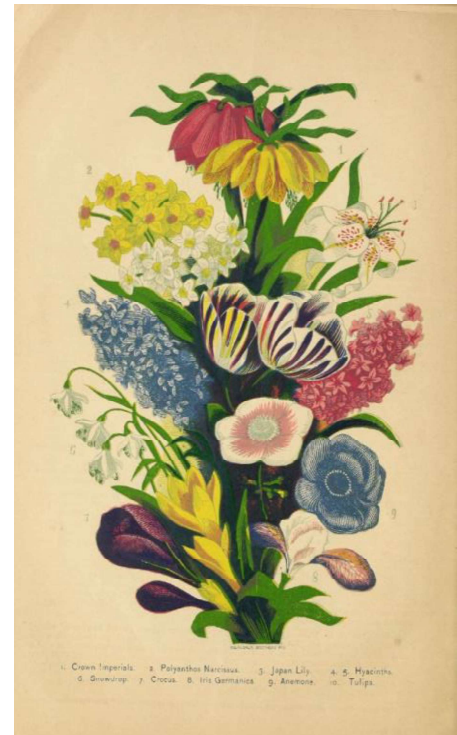


Figure 3 - The color plate that appeared in Dreer's *Descriptive Catalog of Bulbs* in 1865.

¹⁵ Oscar Beisert, with contributions by Kevin McMahon, "The Glenn & Co. Perfumery, 726 Chestnut Street," nomination to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places (designated May 10, 2019).

¹⁶ Cheryl Lyon-Jenness, "Petunias by Post: The Post Office and America's Nineteenth-Century Horticultural Boom," a paper presented at the Winton M. Blount Symposium on Postal History at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum, Washington, D.C., November 4, 2006.

¹⁷ L.H. Bailey, *Cyclopedia of American Horticulture, Vol. 1, A-D* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910), 506-507.

¹⁸ Many of the several hundred catalogs published by Dreer between the 1850s and 1950s are available in full text online through the Biodiversity Heritage Library: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/creator/11103#/titles>, accessed March 10, 2021.

Due to the relentless pace at which Dreer was adding new seed varieties to his offerings, the nursery in Mantua proved inadequate by the early 1870s. In 1873, Dreer moved the operation to a significantly larger site in nearby Riverton, New Jersey, where on 300 acres the company would be free to grow without concern for running out of space. Through Dreer's own experiments with cross-breeding at the Riverton nurseries, as well as the regular procurement of rare seeds from his many contacts abroad, the company introduced dozens of new varieties of flowers, vegetables, and other plants to the U.S. market throughout the nineteenth century. During this period, Dreer became particularly well known for "Hanson" heirloom lettuce, "Dreer's Lima," "Dreer's Standard Potato," "Eclipse Asparagus," the "Duhring Raspberry," as well as several types of roses, geraniums, and crotons, the latter a variety of green house plant.¹⁹

Although he operated one of the largest and most successful seed companies of his time, Henry A. Dreer faced stiff competition throughout his career. The Landreth Seed Company, founded in 1784, remained a major player in the national seed business. The Robert Buist Company, which started as a flower shop around 1830, later expanded into a seed business of a size and scope similar to that of Dreer's. Located at 922-924 Market Street, Buist was one of Dreer's chief competitors. Later, the W. Atlee Burpee Company, founded in 1876 and located at 485 N. 5th Street; the William Henry Maule Seed Company, founded in 1877 and located at 21st and Arch Street; and the Henry F. Michell Seed Company, founded in 1890 and located at 1018 Market Street, copied the mail-order model of Dreer and Buist, becoming extremely successful in the process. All five companies had between 100 and 200 employees in their Philadelphia shops, warehouses and nearby nurseries. Despite facing constant and growing competition from these companies, to many sources at the time the Henry A. Dreer Seed Company remained a leader in the seed business, exemplifying the position that Philadelphia maintained as "America's greatest seed market" into the 1920s.²⁰

In December 1873, only months after the opening of the new Riverton nurseries, Henry A. Dreer died, succumbing to a "nervous condition of the heart." Dreer was eulogized in numerous horticultural publications, including by Thomas Meehan in *The Gardener's Monthly*. Meehan wrote that the announcement of Dreer's death, "seemed as if it could scarcely be real," and that it "will carry regret to many a distant home in this country, where his efforts have contributed so much to beautify and adorn."²¹ Fittingly, Dreer was buried at the Woodlands Cemetery in West

¹⁹ A brief history of the company and its accomplishments is provided in the 1908 edition of *Dreer's Garden Book*.

²⁰ "Why You Should Buy in Philadelphia," *Horticulture* (August 14, 1909), 229-240. "Seedsmen of Philadelphia," *Seed World* (March 19, 1920), 28-37.

²¹ Thomas Meehan, Obituary for Henry A. Dreer, *The Gardener's Monthly*, Vol. VII, No. 1 (January 1874), 19.

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Philadelphia, where 35 years prior he had started up his first nursery. Dreer's son, William F. Dreer (1849-1918), who had worked closely with his father since 1868, inherited the business.

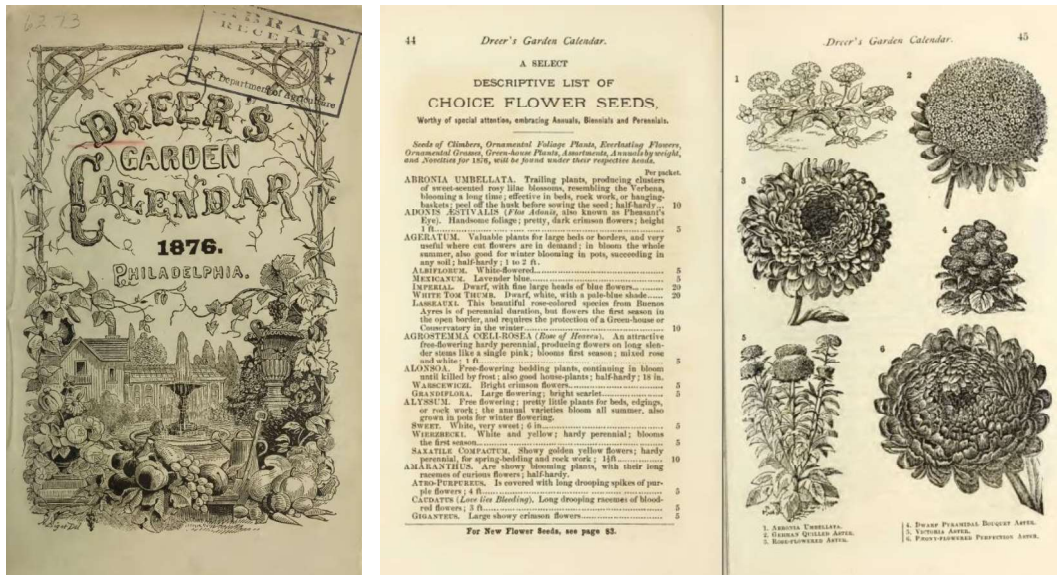


Figure 4 – The cover and sample pages from *Dreer's Garden Calendar*, 1876.

William F. Dreer continued to run the company largely as his father had, and it retained the name the Henry A. Dreer Seed Company. The introduction of new varieties continued on a regular basis, and the geographic reach of the company's ever growing, and ever more illustrated catalogs – with over 150 pages by the mid-1880s – continued to expand, with a circulation of 250,000 by 1898.²² Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century, horticulture continued to be critical part of domestic life, particularly in the developing streetcar suburbs where, in the words of Kenneth T. Jackson, lawns with lush gardens were “a barrier – a kind of verdant moat separating the household from the threats and temptations of the city” and served as an “Edenic retreat.”²³



Figure 5 - Part of Henry A. Dreer's display in Horticultural Hall at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, 1876 (Image courtesy Free Library of Philadelphia).

²² “60th Anniversary, Henry A Dreer, 1838-1898” (Philadelphia: Frank H. Taylor, 1898).

²³ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 58-59.

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One of the company's most significant accomplishments during the early years of William F. Dreer's tenure as president was the exposure it gained at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. Located in Horticultural Hall, Dreer's "handsome exhibit" included garden and flower seeds, garden tools and implements and flower stands (Fig. 5).²⁴ At the Exhibition, the Henry A. Dreer Seed Company was awarded with the grand prize medal for the best display of decorative and ornamental plants.²⁵



Figure 6 – The cover of Dreer's Garden Calendar, 1886 (from the Library Company of Philadelphia).

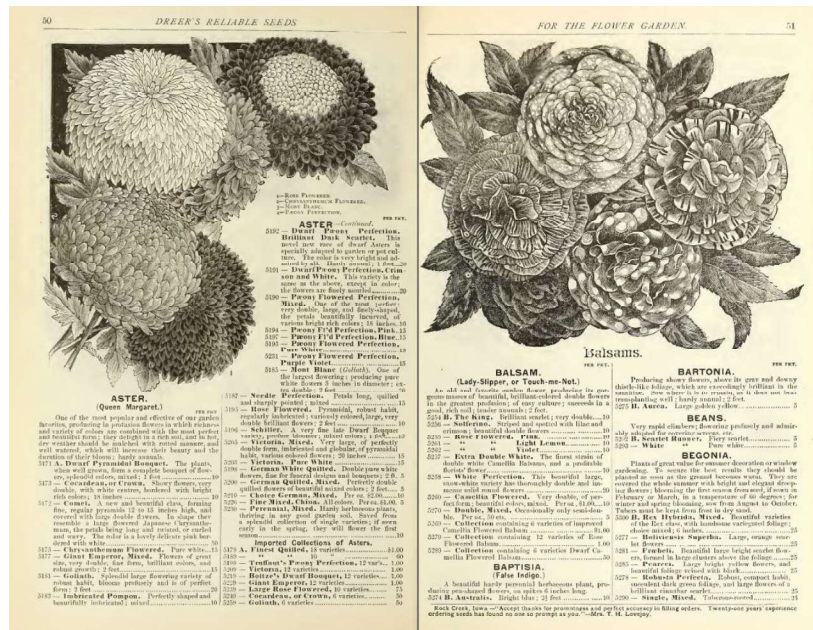


Figure 7 – Sample pages from Dreer's Garden Calendar, 1886.

²⁴ James D. McCabe, *The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1876), 189.

²⁵ Dreer's Garden Calendar for 1877 (Philadelphia, 1877), 3-4.

Several significant changes to the business occurred under William F. Dreer's leadership. In 1892, for example, the company was formally incorporated, allowing senior managers to become stockholders. The same year, the City of Philadelphia announced plans to widen Chestnut Street between 7th and 8th Streets, requiring owners to rebuild the fronts of their buildings.²⁶ It was at this time that Dreer hired architect Charles Balderston to redesign the north elevation, building what still largely exists today (**Fig. 8**).²⁷ The pressed metal ornamentation that was incorporated into the pediment of the building, and still remains, included a four-leaf clover that was used by Dreer as a logo for decades.



During the 1890s, Henry A Dreer, Inc., increased the circulation of its catalog, added seasonal catalogs (**Fig. 9**) and began to advertise more heavily in magazines and newspapers across the country. The company's national reputation grew, bolstered by its participation in the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, where Henry A Dreer, Inc., became involved both in the landscaping of the exposition grounds and in the extensive horticultural exhibits. Not only was Henry A. Dreer, Inc., one of only seven companies to participate in the general seed exhibit (and the only from Philadelphia), but they were also "some of the principal exhibitors of bedding plants" and made "extensive contributions" to a "wonderful collection of palms and decorative trees," as well as to an exhibit of cannas, including examples that were "perfectly new."²⁸ The company also became heavily involved in the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis in 1904, where they were allotted four acres – the largest of all the horticultural exhibits – to plant and display bedding plants, "Dreer" lawn grass, as well as water lilies and other aquatic plants in a large pond.²⁹

Figure 8 - The store at 714 Chestnut Street as it appeared after the front was rebuilt in 1892. From the 1908 edition of *Dreer's Garden Book*.

Whether due to the company's exposure at national fairs, or to the accumulated reputation built up over the previous 60-plus years, Henry A. Dreer, Inc. attracted numerous prominent customers around the turn of the twentieth century. In 1902, Dreer supplied various types of flower seeds to the White House, and correspondence between the company and the superintendent of grounds at the time, Colonel Theodore Bingham, remains in the collection of the National Archives.³⁰ Between about 1903 and 1915, the company also regularly supplied numerous varieties of seeds –

²⁶ "Big Changes Coming: How a Chestnut Street Block Will Be Improved," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 15, 1892.

²⁷ *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, Vol. 7 (July 6, 1892), 1285.

²⁸ Rossiter Johnson, *A History of the World's Columbian Exposition Held in Chicago in 1893*, Vol. III (New York: D. Appleton, 1898), 133, 137-138, 144.

²⁹ *Dreer's Garden Book for 1904* (Philadelphia: Henry A. Dreer, Inc., 1904), 4.

³⁰ Frederick L. Kramer, "A General Survey," in *The White House Gardens: A History and Pictorial Record* (New York: Great American Editions, 1973), 66-71.

for ferns, flowers, and other plants – to the gardens at the Vanderbilt Mansion in Hyde Park, New York.³¹



Figure 9 – The cover and sample pages from *Dreer's Autumn Catalogue*, 1899.

Customers as diverse as the White House, the Vanderbilts, and the ordinary home gardener all ordered seeds from the same catalogs, the largest of which – renamed *Dreer's Garden Book* around 1905 – had over 200 pages by this time. Among the thousands of seeds and bulbs available in each catalog, which now had illustrations on virtually every page (mainly black and white, but with a limited number of color plates), were new flower, vegetable, and fruit varieties developed, rigorously tested and selected for quality by the company's specialists at Riverton. Perhaps even more than his father, William F. Dreer invested heavily in the cultivation of new varieties for visual appeal, hardiness, and in some cases for disease resistance. The vast amount of nursery acreage devoted to peonies (10 acres), phloxes (10 acres), and dahlias (40 acres), not to mention ferns and palms (grown in greenhouses covering five acres) after 1900, suggests that these varieties were among the company's priorities at the time.³² In several advertisements during the 1910s, Dreer claimed to be the largest grower of perennial phlox in the world.³³

Even as it faced growing competition during the early twentieth century, Henry A. Dreer, Inc. continued to prosper. Despite the significant investment made in reconstructing the façade of 714 Chestnut Street in 1892, the building quickly proved to be too small for the company's warehousing operation. Around 1905, Dreer built a new six-story warehouse at 710 South Washington Square, adjacent to where the Farm Journal Building would be erected several years later (the Dreer warehouse remains standing and is largely intact, now used as offices). Now a property owner on Washington Square, Dreer became heavily involved in improving this historic public space and planning for its future. In 1913, Dreer was one of several property owners to

³¹ Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, National Park Service, "Cultural Landscape Report for the Vanderbilt Mansion Formal Gardens" (Boston, 2011), 279-282.

³² "Why You Should Buy in Philadelphia," *Horticulture* (August 14, 1909), 238.

³³ Advertisement for Henry A. Dreer, Inc., *Horticulture* (September 10, 1910), 379.

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convene the first meeting of the Washington Square Improvement Association, later becoming part of a committee that consulted with the Olmsted Brothers on the redesign of the square.³⁴

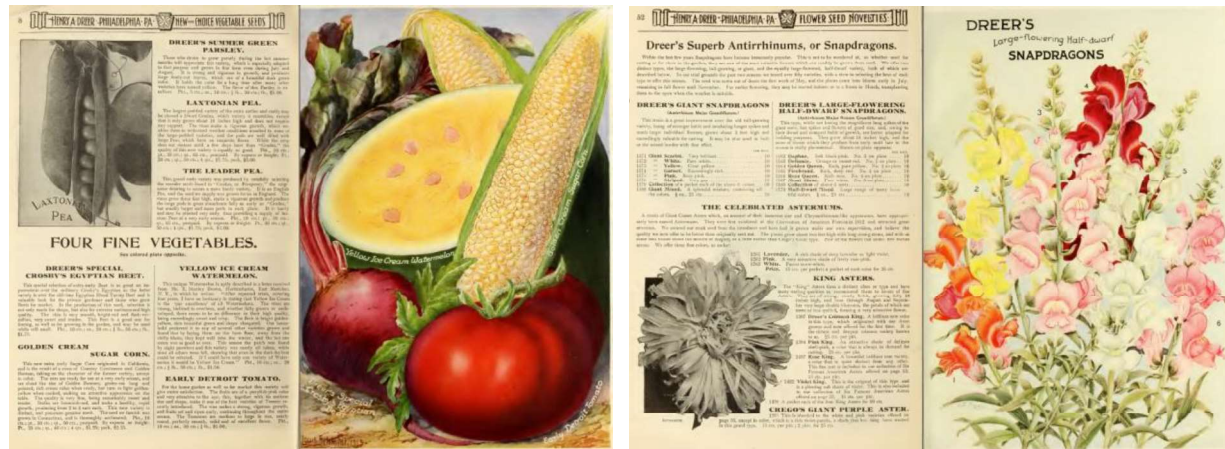


Figure 10 – Sample pages and color plates from *Dreer's Garden Book*, 1914.

William F. Dreer died in 1918. His obituary in the *Florists' Review* exclaimed that “The name of Dreer has earned a worldwide reputation for integrity and fair dealing. Its representatives are known in every state of the Union and in the principal horticultural centers abroad. From a small beginning, the business has grown to large proportions and embraces many branches of the seed, bulb and plant trade.”³⁵ After Dreer’s death, the business was carried on by J.D. Eisele, who had served under Dreer as vice president for many years.

Despite the loss of Dreer, Henry A. Dreer, Inc., remained a profitable enterprise into the 1920s and beyond, retaining its position as one of the most prominent seed companies in Philadelphia and the United States. The company continued to send hundreds of thousands of catalogs to almost every state, and to exhibit flowers, vegetables and plants grown from its seeds at horticultural events across the country, winning numerous awards in the process. In 1924, the company finally outgrew its headquarters at 714 Chestnut Street and moved into a new eight-story building at 1306 Spring Garden Street, where it consolidated its retail and warehousing operations (this building remains standing and is currently used as offices).³⁶

Henry A. Dreer, Inc., passed into new ownership in 1951. Within a short period of time, however, the “inept” and “inexperienced” new owners (in the words of a group of creditors) had amassed large debts, leading to a declaration of bankruptcy in 1953. After 115 years in business, Henry A. Dreer, Inc. finally closed, having published its catalogs up to the very end.³⁷

Although Philadelphia gradually lost its position as the leading seed market in the United States as the country’s population moved westward, many of the city’s seed companies continued to thrive through the twentieth century. Remarkably, the David Landreth Seed Company, founded in 1784, still operates, although it is now located in Vermont. In addition, both W. Atlee Burpee &

³⁴ National Park Service, “Cultural Landscape Report for Washington Square,” (Philadelphia, 2010), 81-82. This report incorrectly states that Dreer moved his business to the square in 1914. In fact, the building served only as Dreer’s warehouse. The store on 714 Chestnut Street remained in operation until 1924.

³⁵ Obituary for William F. Dreer, *Florists' Review* (September 12, 1918), 19.

³⁶ *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* (July 11, 1923), 442.

³⁷ “Dreer Firm Bankrupt after 115-Yr. History,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 9, 1953.

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Company, now known simply as Burpee Seeds and Plants, and the Henry F. Michell Seed Company, remain in business and have been located in the Philadelphia suburbs for many years. Burpee and Michell continue to print and mail catalogs, although both maintain extensive online stores.

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Note: Except where noted, all references to and images from Henry A. Dreer catalogs were sourced from the Biodiversity Heritage Library, which maintains an extensive online archive of horticultural publications, including hundreds of Henry A Dreer catalogs from the 1850s through the 1950s: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/creator/11103/year#/titles>

Preparer's Statement: This nomination was prepared by Kevin McMahon as an individual volunteer for the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia. It is solely the work of Mr. McMahon and was not initiated or sponsored by his employer, Powers & Company, Inc.