

Philadelphia Historical Commission  
1515 Arch Street, 13<sup>th</sup> floor  
Philadelphia, PA 19102

July 19, 2021

Dear Historical Commission Members:

In late May 2021, I received notification from The Philadelphia Historical Commission (HC), the City of Philadelphia's historic preservation agency, stating that my property at 714 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106 is being nominated for designation as an historical landmark and inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. Furthermore, the letter states that the City's historical preservation ordinance, Section 14-1000 of the Philadelphia Code, the Historical Commission is authorized to promote the preservation of buildings, structure, sites, objects, interiors, and districts that are representative of and important to Philadelphia's heritage, traditions and values.

The purpose of this letter is to urge the City of Philadelphia HC to deny this designation, and vote the 714 Chestnut Street building as a "non-contributing" property because of the hardship and additional burdens imposed on me should my building be designated.

I have been a partial owner of 714 Chestnut Street for around 35 years and then became the sole owner of the building for about the last 10 years. Before I retired I worked for 40 years on the 700 block of Chestnut Street and I have learned many stories over the years about the culture, history and the community of that block.

During that time, I have not once seen a historic or architectural tour going by the 714 property that explained anything about the history, the architecture, or frankly about anything significant that occurred in that location. As the owner, I have not been contacted once by anyone about the historical significant of the building until this nomination application that took me by surprise. Just because the building is old, doesn't mean the building is historic.

The Nomination application notes that the Henry A. Dreer Seed Company used to have one of its many locations in this building and claims it was a nice retail store. I am sure all his locations were nice retail stores, but I have not heard of any of his other stores getting this designation even though they would have been equally as insignificant.

Before seeing your nomination application I have never heard of Henry A. Dreer and I would make a bet that if you asked 1,000 people who walk by the building none of them would have heard of Henry or his Seed Company, a company that apparently did most of its business out of a catalogue that may have had nothing to do with our location.

If my building had anything "Exemplified the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community" then wouldn't someone have reached out to me over the last 45 years to tell me about

the history of the property? Wouldn't it permeate the culture to the extent that the people on the streets would be discussing what happened on this block? That is what happens at other historic sites such as Independence Hall and even Jeweler's Row on Sansom Street. But that does not happen on our block, and it does not happen at this building.

I respectfully believe that this nomination is an overreach by this committee to claim that our building meets criteria A or J from the application.

My wife (age 76) and I (age 75) are relying on income from the sale of this property for our retirement and to help support one of our sons who has special needs. After we are gone, the value of this property will be available to help support him. As a result of the Covid 19 crisis, my only tenant broke his lease in March 2020, and no new tenant has been obtained. Furthermore, the value of commercial real estate for this and most buildings in Center City has been negatively impacted by the Covid shutdown and the flight of residents to the suburbs. Despite these hurdles, I will continue to be a good steward of the building and pay the City's high real estate taxes from my personal savings since I have not received rental payments for 18 months and counting.

Having a historical designation will significantly reduce the resale price of my building since fewer buyers will be interested in ownership because of the HC restrictions, thus driving down the price. When discussing my building with real estate agents, they state that developers who have previously invested in neighboring properties prefer and will continue to seek out "non-contributing" properties to avoid the HC restrictions. The reduction in value to the property would hurt the city since it will take longer to re-develop this property on the inside that city's property tax website says in in "Below Average" condition.

The fact that HC must review all building permit applications for exterior alterations will require much more of the owner's time and especially additional expenses should the façade require upkeep.

Over the past few decades, the historical value of the building has also been reduced in two ways:

- First, changes have been made to the façade of 714 Chestnut Street, for example an addition of front door ways, circa 1970 aluminum-framed doorways and the metal-clad bay windows on the second and third floors. The previous restaurant owner attached signage with the restaurant's name on building's façade, and should I obtain a new tenant, this individual will wish to do the same.
- Second, 714 Chestnut building is no longer surrounded by mostly historical-looking buildings (e.g., Philadelphia's Eifely's Alley Street). Most adjacent properties have been repurposed and updated as upscale apartments and condominiums. As a whole, this modernization to the 700 block of Chestnut Street has been positive since it transformed old warehouse spaces and deteriorating buildings into beautiful residencies for Philadelphians. It also added much needed transfer and real-estate taxes to the City of Philadelphia Revenue Department and the high end residents all would pay income taxes to the city as well.

For cities to remain vibrant, owners and investors must be permitted to make changes to their property without undue constraints by those who oversee and make demands, albeit deemed justified and legitimized by Section 14-1000 of the Philadelphia Code, but do not share in the cost side of the equation.

While it is obvious that your committee is enthusiastic about historical buildings preservation, I urge you to vote no on 714 Chestnut Street on July 21, 2021 because of the major negative impact this designation will have on my personal livelihood and that of my family since I rely on social security, do not work, and am not receiving an income from the building to cover expenses.

Thank you for your attention to this appeal for rejection of the designation.

Sincerely,

Herbert Richman