

**ADDRESS: 1131 S BROAD ST**

Name of Resource: Boot N Saddle Bar Sign

Proposed Action: Designation

Property Owner: Frank Del Borrello

Nominator: Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia

Staff Contact: Alex Till, [alexander.till@phila.gov](mailto:alexander.till@phila.gov)

**OVERVIEW:** This nomination proposes to designate an object, the Boot N Saddle Bar neon sign, attached to the property at 1131 S. Broad Street, and list it on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. An eight-foot wide and twenty-foot tall stainless steel and porcelain sign with neon lighting elements is attached to the front of the three-story masonry commercial building that stands on the property.

The nomination contends that the Boot N Saddle Bar sign satisfies Criteria for Designation D, H, and J as a historic object. It argues that the sign embodies many of the distinguishing characteristics of the Neon Spectacular design style as seen on neon signs in the twentieth century, satisfying Criterion D.

The nomination also argues that the sign, owing to its rare and complex design and position situated along the commercial corridor of South Broad Street, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, satisfying Criterion H.

The nomination further argues that the sign, through its connection to midcentury mom and pop commerce, neon sign design, and the area's Italian American community history, exemplifies the cultural, economic, social, and historical heritage of the community, satisfying Criterion J.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:** The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the object on the property at 1131 S. Broad Street satisfies Criteria for Designation D, H, and J and should be designated as historic and listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.



# 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: 1131 S. Broad Street

Postal code: 19147-4434

#### 2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Boot N Saddle Neon Spectacular Sign

Current/Common Name: Boot N Saddle Sign

#### 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: \_\_\_\_\_

#### 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 c. 1955 to Present

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1960, built; 2015-16, restored

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: N/a

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: Angelo Colavita, Colonial Signs

Original owner: Pete Del Borrello

Other significant persons: \_\_\_\_\_

**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 Phila. Date October 18, 2022

Name with Title Derek Duquette Email patrick@preservationalliance.com

Street Address 1608 Walnut St, Suite 1702 Telephone 215-546-1146 x5

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA 19103

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner.

**PHC USE ONLY**

Date of Receipt: October 18, 2022

☒ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete Date: December 14, 2022

Date of Notice Issuance: December 15, 2022

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: Frank Del Borrello

Address: 1147 S Sydenham Street

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19148

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: January 18, 2023

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: February 10, 2023

Date of Final Action: \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Designated ☐ Rejected

## **5. Boundary Description**



*Figure 1: Location of the Boot & Saddle sign (in red), on the west façade of the property at 1131 S. Broad Street (outlined in blue). Map courtesy of Pictometry, 2022.*

The Boot N Saddle sign protrudes west from the front of a brick and wood three-story structure, formerly the Boot N Saddle restaurant and music venue. The neon sign is anchored to the façade between the first and second of three bays of windows at the second and third floor levels, suspending the sign eight feet out above the sidewalk and public right-of-way. The base of the roughly 1.5-foot wide sign is located approximately 10 feet above grade, and extends approximately 20 feet in height.

The remainder of the property at 1131 S. Broad Street, which extends 21 feet in width by approximately 125 feet in length, is not proposed for designation.

Although the establishment to which the sign once belonged is no longer present to light it, the Boot N Saddle sign nevertheless satisfies the definition of an “object” established in the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Ordinance and the Philadelphia Zoning Code, § 14-203 (195): “A material thing of functional, aesthetic, cultural, historic, or scientific value that may be, by nature or design, movable yet related to a specific setting or environment.”<sup>[1]</sup>

<sup>[1]</sup> City of Philadelphia, “CITY OF PHILADELPHIA HISTORIC PRESERVATION ORDINANCE, CHAPTER 14-1000 WITH PERTINENT EXCERPTS FROM OTHER SECTIONS OF THE ZONING CODE,” July 1, 2021, <https://www.phila.gov/media/20210827135732/Historical-Comm-ordinance-2021.pdf>.



## 6. Description

The Boot N Saddle Bar sign is a style of neon sign known as a “Neon Spectacular” or “Extravaganza.” The sign itself is 8’ wide and 20’ high and double sided. Each face of the sign is fit with painted porcelain.<sup>1</sup> The neon lights spelling out Boot N Saddle are routed across each face of the sign. Facing south along S. Broad Street, “Boot” is spelled out vertically down the boot with the letters painted red, “Saddle” is spelled out horizontally across the saddle section with the letters painted green, and “Bar” is spelled out diagonally down the tip of the boot with the letters painted yellow behind the neon lights. Facing north along S. Broad Street, “Saddle” is written vertically down the boot in green letters, “Boot” is written in red horizontally across the saddle section, and “Bar” is again written diagonally down the tip of the boot in yellow. The edges of the sign are all lined with polished stainless steel. Thanks to a restoration effort between 2015-16 led by Urban Neon, the sign’s paint, polish, and design retain integrity to its original design from the 1960s.



(2a)



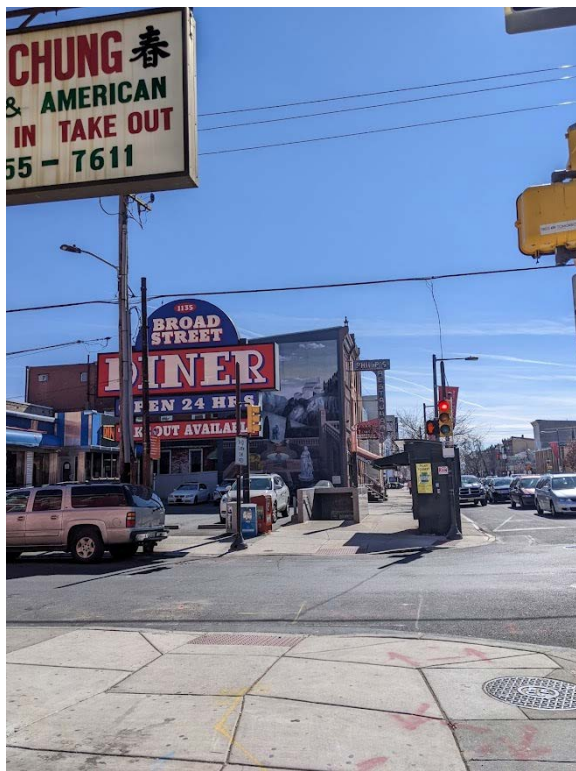
(2b)

Figures 2a and 2b) Photographs showing the southern face of the Boot N Saddle sign before (2a) and after (2b) the sign’s restoration c. 2015-2016. Figure 1a, c. 2012 courtesy of Len Davidson. Figure 1b, 2021 photo by author.

The area immediately surrounding the Boot N Saddle is a mix of modern construction (1970 and later) and structures from within the period of significance (c. 1955 onward). Despite the construction of a modern shopping and residential center on the northwest corner of Washington Avenue and S. Broad Street, structures like the Broad Street Diner and the Philips Restaurant maintain their mid-century character through a box neon

<sup>1</sup> Len Davidson, “Boot and Saddle Assessment,” April 5, 2012.

and dictorial neon sign respectively (see figures 3a and 3b). The Philips Restaurant sign, visible on the southeast corner of Ellsworth Street and S. Broad Street, best situates the Boot N Saddle sign within the area's mid-century neon history with its unrestored and deteriorated sign which still advertises air conditioning, a novelty in the mid-century. Although modern construction detracts from the surrounding area's integrity, the presence of these mid-century structures and neon signs in the Boot N Saddle sign's immediate vicinity sufficiently establish the integrity of the setting and atmosphere.



3a)



3b)

Figures 3a and 3b) Photographs of the viewshed facing south from the Boot N Saddle sign across Ellsworth Street. Images feature mid-century signs of box neon and dictorial neon design at the Broad Street Diner and Philip's Restaurant respectively.

## **7. Statement of Significance**

The Boot N Saddle Bar neon sign is a piece of Philadelphia's rich material culture and retains integrity of setting, style, materials, design, and craftsmanship. The sign is a product of Philadelphia's mid-twentieth century neon industry, which contributed to the city's unique visual landscape through the creation of signs along Broad Street, particularly south of Washington Avenue where one can find the deteriorated Philip's Restaurant sign, the Meglio Furs sign, among a few others in similar states of degradation. South Broad Street remains a corridor influenced by Philadelphia's neon cultural history, with the Boot N Saddle remaining as the best preserved and restored neon sign in the city. The sign itself was created by Angelo Colavita, an Italian-American

immigrant who later, with his brothers, opened Colonial Signs which created many other local and regional neon signs. Angelo Colavita arrived in Philadelphia and trained under local neon artisans before creating the Boot N Saddle Sign which has come to typify South Philadelphia's visual landscape.<sup>2</sup> The sign itself exhibits elements of neon lighting which set it apart from others still present, including the use of porcelain enamel along the façade, of stainless steel for the structure of the sign, the sign's figural nature as opposed to being box-shaped, and it possesses a further dictorial element due to the incorporation of the name written in neon. These factors taken together situate the Boot N Saddle as the best operational neon sign in Philadelphia, strongly embodying distinguishing characteristics of neon lighting as an engineering specimen. As such, the Boot N Saddle is eligible for listing under criterion d. Philadelphia's local neon movement included small "mom and pop" neon shops like Colonial Signs which over decades curated a neon landscape throughout South Philadelphia, resulting in the vintage neon signs becoming unique, characteristic and familiar visual features of the neighborhood. For this connection to the neighborhood's uniquely local visual and cultural landscape, the Boot N Saddle sign is furthermore eligible for listing under criterion h. Finally, because this sign exemplifies the cultural, economic, social and historical heritage of the South Philly community through its connection to mid-century mom-and-pop commerce, neon advertising, and South Philly's growing Italian-American population beginning c. 1950, the Boot N Saddle Bar sign is eligible for listing under criterion j.

Criterion d. *Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen;*

Stylistically the Boot N Saddle Bar sign can be categorized as a "Neon Spectacular" or "Extravaganza," titles reserved for neon signs that sit atop the hierarchy of neon signs.<sup>3</sup> The various elements that determine the intricacy and exceptionalism of a neon sign include: larger anchored structures versus smaller window signs, porcelain enamel backgrounds versus painted backgrounds, animated versus static, figural versus nonfigural, metalwork versus a lack thereof, and dictorial (featuring a name) versus not.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, a large figural neon sign – that is, one which is a unique shape instead of a simple box or shape – that exhibits the illusion of movement (animated) and bears a name in neon against a porcelain enamel background framed by stainless steel metalwork would be an exceptional example of a Neon Spectacular.

Neon Spectaculars emerged during the early twentieth century and were stylistically inspired by the earlier electric light spectacular which debuted at the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893. These signs were large figural structures illuminated by innumerable fluorescent light bulbs and showed how electric light could be utilized in

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<sup>2</sup> Maria Colavita, Boot and Saddle Interview with Maria Colavita, interview by Derek Duquette, February 15, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Davidson, "Boot and Saddle Assessment."

<sup>4</sup> Len Davidson, Boot and Saddle Interview with Len Davidson, interview by Derek Duquette, February 15, 2022.

advertising and architecture.<sup>5</sup> Decades later, c. 1923, Georges Claude, the French inventor credited with inventing neon signs, brought neon lights to America and advertised them as the “latest and most artistic form of electrical advertising and illumination” due to neon’s capacity for creating startling shapes and letters in many colors.<sup>6</sup>

Despite its European origins, neon came to symbolize American progress and inventiveness as well as American energy. Neon Spectaculars were electric mosaics, information grids, and street theater, simultaneously advertising and entertaining passersby. This engaging medium became typified by the uniqueness of individual signs to their particular advertisers and designers. According to Rudi Stern, “In the days that preceded white plastic anonymity, neon was a highly refined folk art form with great individuality. As artistic feats of technical virtuosity, these electric sculptures were indelible features of our American landscape.”<sup>7</sup>

This is particularly true in Philadelphia. While few remaining neon signs in Philadelphia are of the same caliber as the Boot N Saddle, those that do remain hold indelible connections to Philadelphia’s economic and cultural heritage. Neon signs like that of the Termini Bakery at the Reading Terminal Market reminds visitors of the generations who have owned and operated the Termini Bakery. The Philips Restaurant neon sign, visible from the Boot N Saddle, is rusting and degraded, but the still legible “Air Conditioning” caveat on their sign reminds passersby that air conditioning was once a rarity and was popularized in the mid-to-late twentieth century.

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<sup>5</sup> Rudi Stern, *Let There Be Neon*, First Edition (Abrams, 1979), 19.

<sup>6</sup> Stern, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Stern, 34.





Figure 3. Photograph of the Philips Restaurant neon sign's southern face, at 1145 S. Broad Street, visible from the Boot N Saddle bar across Ellsworth Street. The sign has degraded over time, as clear from the rusting along the painted steel façade.

The Boot N Saddle itself is remarkable for its style and materials, and indeed the sign provides arguably the strongest example of a Neon Spectacular in Philadelphia, and along Philadelphia's South Broad Street neon corridor. The Boot N Saddle is a large structure anchored to the façade of the former bar and music venue. The sign is figural, in the shape of a boot, framed by stainless steel metalwork with a porcelain enamel background. Though the sign is not animated, it is asymmetrically dictorial with "Boot" and "Saddle" written in neon on either side and "Bar" at the toe of the boot on both sides.<sup>8</sup> The intricacy and creativity of the design determine the Boot N Saddle Bar sign an exceptional example of a Neon Spectacular. For this reason, the Boot N Saddle Bar sign embodies distinguishing characteristics of an engineering specimen, making it eligible for inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places under criterion d.

<sup>8</sup> Davidson, Boot and Saddle Interview with Len Davidson; Domenic Urbani, Boot and Saddle Interview with Domenic Urbani, interview by Derek Duquette, February 8, 2022; Davidson, "Boot and Saddle Assessment."



(4a)



(4b)

Figures 4a and 4b. Photographs showing the south- and north-facing facades of the Boot N Saddle sign, respectively, highlighting its asymmetry of design.

Criterion h. *Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community, or City.*

The Boot N Saddle sign has watched over South Broad Street since its installation in the 1950s. Since then, the sign has become a visual staple of the neighborhood owing to its increasingly rare design. Indeed, one remark upon news that the Boot N Saddle Bar would be closing permanently due to the COVID-19 pandemic asserted that “Even folks who never stepped foot in the place knew about it ... because of that instantly recognizable sign – one of several that dot the South Broad corridor.”<sup>9</sup>

South Broad Street, beginning around Washington Avenue, features a number of neon signs of comparable size and design the further south one travels. These include those signs of the Philip’s Restaurant, Meglios Furs, Dolphin Tavern, and Bambi Cleaners. Prior to the Boot N Saddle sign’s restoration in 2015 the sign’s deteriorated appearance blended into the rest of the building and the local landscape of deteriorated neon signs. Of the aforementioned signs along South Broad Street, only the Dolphin Tavern neon sign has been restored like the Boot N Saddle sign. Other neon signs, like those at Philip’s Restaurant and Bambi Cleaners have fallen into disrepair but remain in place, while exponentially more, like the animated Subway Bar sign formerly at S. Broad and

<sup>9</sup> Danya Henninger, “Boot & Saddle Is Closing, Long Live the Boot & Saddle Sign,” *Billy Penn* (blog), accessed January 31, 2022, <https://billypenn.com/2020/11/10/boot-saddle-philadelphia-closing-neon-sign-cowboy-south-broad-live-music-union-transfer/>.

Snyder, the Venus DeMilo sign, and the animated Twist Bar neon sign have outright disappeared from the landscape. Following the Boot N Saddle restoration, the illuminated sign once again drew the attention and appreciation of passersby and locals alike, reasserting its place as a neon landmark despite the deterioration of its numerous sister signs.<sup>10</sup>

Originally intended to welcome folks to South Philly, this sign has now become emblematic of South Philly, particularly along S. Broad which historically featured more neon signs going south, few of which remain. As one music critic put it, “That whole strip of the Boot N Saddle, and the Dolphin, and also Philip’s ... had that kind of old, seedy, gritty, grimy South Philly feel.” South Philly retains this neon landscape, imperiled though it is.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, according to Philadelphia design and culture writer Sarah Archer, during the 1960s neon began to be phased out in favor of new cheaper and less labor-intensive alternatives. She asserts that within the context of the global economic downturn of the 1970s a landscape emerged of older and deteriorating neon signs which conveyed a seediness instead of the intended sophistication.<sup>12</sup>

Philosopher Luis de Miranda examines this dramatic shift in the atmosphere the built neon landscape endured during the latter half of the twentieth century in his 2012 book *L’etre et le Neon*, a material history of neon lighting. De Miranda draws a parallel between the physical form of neon lights – hollow glass tubes full of electrified gases – and that of a glass capsule.<sup>13</sup> This paints classic neon signs like the Boot N Saddle Bar sign in a new light; one in which the sign itself is a time capsule, harkening back to South Philadelphia’s dominant Navy Yard and Italian American influences.

Again, according to Sarah Archer, neon in the twenty-first century is experiencing a kind of craft revival owed largely to the fact that neon signs cannot be mass-produced, turning the techniques for creating neon signs into a kind of artisanal craft. This is celebrated in neon museums around the country, including the Philadelphia Neon Museum where visitors can appreciate classic works of neon alongside modern interpretations of the style.

Regardless of the deterioration many of South Philadelphia’s neon landmarks have endured, the Boot N Saddle Bar sign remains and, due to the restoration carried out by

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<sup>10</sup> Inga Saffron, “Boot & Saddle Sign Back with All Lights Blazin’,” <https://www.inquirer.com>, accessed February 7, 2022, [https://www.inquirer.com/philly/columnists/inga\\_saffron/20160113\\_Boot\\_\\_\\_Saddle\\_sign\\_back\\_with\\_all\\_lights\\_b\\_lazin\\_.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/columnists/inga_saffron/20160113_Boot___Saddle_sign_back_with_all_lights_b_lazin_.html).

<sup>11</sup> Kate Bracaglia, “Exploring the Legacy of South Philly’s Boot & Saddle,” *The Key*, September 6, 2013, <https://thekey.xpn.org/2013/09/06/exploring-the-legacy-of-south-phillys-boot-saddle/>.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Archer, “Neon Is the Ultimate Symbol of the 20th Century,” *The Atlantic*, April 27, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/04/being-and-neonness-neon-lights-symbol-20th-century/588184/>.

<sup>13</sup> Archer.

Urban Neon, retains the highest possible integrity from its original creation. With its characteristic asymmetric design, with one side emphasizing the “Boot” and the other the “Saddle,” its painted porcelain façade, and polished stainless-steel framework the Boot N Saddle sign at 1131 S. Broad Street reminds longtime residents of an institution tied to their history with the Navy Yard and of a time when South Broad Street was illuminated not only by streetlights, but by that warm, humming neon glow.<sup>14</sup> For its situation along South Broad Street, one of Philadelphia’s main routes of transportation and a corridor historically associated with the city’s neon landscape, and unique physical design and familiarity within the neighborhood, and indeed the city’s built landscape, the Boot N Saddle sign is eligible for inclusion in the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places under Criterion h.

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

The Boot N Saddle Bar was founded as a country-music bar in 1950 by Pete Del Borrello, an Italian American of South Philly who previously worked for the city’s Navy Yard. The restaurant itself catered primarily to workers from the Philadelphia Naval Yard.<sup>15</sup> During the 1950s, Del Borrello hired Colonial Signs, a local South Philadelphia neon shop, to design and install a neon sign for the Boot N Saddle bar.<sup>16</sup> The sign was anchored to the bar’s exterior at 1131 S. Broad Street and remained there until its restoration by Urban Neon between 2015 and 2016.

The sign’s designer, Colonial Signs, was opened by Italian immigrants to South Philly in the mid-twentieth century. Angelo Colavita (1927-2021) came to America circa 1950 with his father who opened a pizza parlor in South Philly. Although there were some specifically Italian American enclaves in South Philadelphia at this time, particularly in the areas around Oregon Avenue and around the Navy Yard, the majority of the population in the area the Colavitas moved into closer to Washington Avenue was African American, Irish, or Jewish. Yet in the decades that followed, the Italian American community in Philadelphia’s South Philly neighborhood around Washington Avenue exploded. Early in his life in America, Colavita worked for Cutler Signs in New Jersey. There, he learned about sheet metal work and metal sign designing before picking up the intricacies of blowing glass and processing neon.

After working there for approximately four years, Colavita was laid off in 1954. This coincided with his wedding, ironically, and when he returned from his honeymoon he began doing independent commissions for box and neon signs around South Philadelphia. As opposed to the figural and dictorial elements the Boot N Saddle sign exhibits, these box and neon signs were metal box frames backlit with neon, with a

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<sup>14</sup> Davidson, “Boot and Saddle Assessment.”

<sup>15</sup> Saffron, “Boot & Saddle Sign Back with All Lights Blazin’.”

<sup>16</sup> Colavita, Boot and Saddle Interview with Maria Colavita.

corrugated plastic façade exhibiting a client's business's name. From there he began creating more signs around and beyond the city, including signs made for the Pennsauken Diner in Pennsauken, New Jersey. Following the opening of a franchise called Two Guys Hardware off Route N. 30 in New Jersey, Angelo was hired to make the sign for their east coast headquarters. This proved to be a breakthrough job which gave rise to Colonial Signs c. 1960; the business Colavita opened with his brothers Domenic and Tony. Together they bought a warehouse building adjacent to the train station at Broad Street and Washington. The building at 1522 Alter Street was equipped with space and infrastructure from loading and unloading trains and made an excellent site for Colonial Signs' first workshop.<sup>17</sup>

Colavita also created the Boot N Saddle sign prior to the formal organization of Colonial Signs. The sign itself emerged in an era marked by an increase in neon signage in Philadelphia. According to Len Davidson, the foremost expert on mid-century Philadelphia neon and executive director of the Philadelphia Neon Museum, neon became a popular investment for advertising purposes as many families at the time anticipated handing down their establishments to the next generation who too would benefit from a neon sign's advertising. The scale of an investment in a neon sign is discernible through the materials chosen for a given sign. The Boot N Saddle, for example, is a figural and dictorial sign – both the shape of a boot and with the name of the bar spelled out in neon – made by cutting, bending, and shaping stainless steel to frame the sign around a sheet metal core which was then elevated with a porcelain enamel façade for the boot. Both the porcelain enamel façade and stainless steel frame were among the most difficult materials to work with, but which produced the greatest visual effect and longevity.<sup>18</sup>

The whimsical style associated with the Boot N Saddle Bar sign is attributable to the core inspirations for neon signs in the mid-century; newspaper comics and advertisements. At that time, printed news was the primary media for most Americans and the styles and designs seen there inspired the kind of creativity that went into Philadelphia's neon landscape. These stylistic inspirations are best captured in Tyler Bilk and Erik Baker's book, *Trademarks of the '20s & '30s*, which exhibits the vernacular artistic references evoked in neon signs.<sup>19</sup> The creativity of the sign speaks to both its printed inspirations and the necessity for creativity in the bidding process. There were dozens of sign shops in mid-century Philadelphia, including a number of local Cutler Signs shops which could have been connected to the Cutler Signs Colavita trained and worked for in New Jersey. Other notable neon shops included Hopkins Neon at 2829-31 N. Mutter Street, Ajax Signs at 2327 N. 11<sup>th</sup> Street, Spencer Industries at 117 S. 13<sup>th</sup> Street, and Almar Neon at 1003 Spruce Street.<sup>20</sup> In order for a shop like

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<sup>17</sup> Colavita.

<sup>18</sup> Davidson, Boot and Saddle Interview with Len Davidson.

<sup>19</sup> Tyler Bilk and Erik Baker, *Trademarks of the '20s & '30s*, 1st edition (Chronicle Books, 1985).

<sup>20</sup> Bell Telephone Company, "Philadelphia Phonebook, Yellow Pages," in *Philadelphia Phonebook* (Bell Telephone Company, 1956).



Colonial Signs to set themselves apart their signs had to be complex, appealing, and enticing. In response to the question of what makes vintage neon signs so compelling, Len Davidson asserts it is their pictorial design.<sup>21</sup>

The Boot N Saddle design and craftsmanship are further supported by its location along Philadelphia's South Broad Street; historically the city's main thoroughfare going north and south. As the city's primary north-south corridor, it remains the corridor which retains the best remnants of the city's neon landscape. At the north end of Broad Street the Oak Lane Diner erected a large neon sign, and at the south end so too did the Melrose Diner. Between the two, historically, one found neon signs from the Divine Lorraine, to Meglio Furs, Sunright Pharmacy, and the Venus DeMilo catering hall.<sup>22</sup> This historic neon corridor within which the Boot N Saddle is situated further contributes to this sign's significance as a remnant of Philadelphia's mid-century neon character, culture and landscape. Each of these varied, locally owned shops and restaurants invested in neon advertisement. Yet in 2022, the Boot N Saddle Bar sign is the only truly spectacular neon sign of its caliber to remain.

The Boot N Saddle Bar itself became a popular spot in South Philadelphia, identified by its Navy Yard clientele and signature neon sign. Although the neon sign out front characterized the building's exterior, the interior was as much characterized by the Navy Yard memorabilia which attracted its local regulars who worked there themselves.<sup>23</sup>

The prominence of the sign speaks to the commercial culture of mid-century America in Philadelphia. Prior to the emergence of franchises and mega-corporations, commerce was a more personal affair. Neighborhood merchants, like Pete Del Borrello, often lived either above their shops or in the immediate vicinity, and likewise, employees were often either relatives or locals. It was socially expected that ownership of family businesses would transfer to successive generations. This piece of social context is essential to understanding the significance of the investment in neon spectacles like the Boot N Saddle. As Davidson states in his book, *Vintage Neon*, "the store was the owner's showpiece, an extension of himself. It was designed with an eye toward eternity. If the store would be in the family for 50 years or more, why not wrap it in long-lasting, albeit expensive, materials like stainless steel and porcelain-enamel... Of course the package was incomplete until tied in the most colorful of bows: a dazzling neon sign."<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, the Boot N Saddle Bar remained open for decades, and its clientele only began to dwindle with the Philadelphia Naval Yard's closure during the 1990s. Shortly thereafter the bar itself closed down and remained vacant for thirteen years.<sup>25</sup> In 1995 Del Borrello was quoted attributing the bar's difficulties to the city's ripping up and rebranding of South Broad Street. "My receipts fell from \$450 a day to \$100, \$150 a

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<sup>21</sup> Len Davidson, *Vintage Neon*, Illustrated Edition (Schiffer Pub Ltd, 1999), 5; 8.

<sup>22</sup> Davidson, Boot and Saddle Interview with Len Davidson.

<sup>23</sup> Bracaglia, "Exploring the Legacy of South Philly's Boot & Saddle."

<sup>24</sup> Davidson, *Vintage Neon*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Saffron, "Boot & Saddle Sign Back with All Lights Blazin'."

day,” he remarked. With the bar closed, the Boot N Saddle sign itself went dark, a silent witness to the city’s changes around the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>26</sup>

When the Boot N Saddle Bar reopened as a music venue in 2013, there came with it a renewed interest in preserving and restoring the venue’s signature sign. Indeed, when Avram Hornik decided to reopen the Boot N Saddle Bar as a live indie music venue he readily adopted the venue’s name and associated neon sign.<sup>27</sup> By 2013, the Boot N Saddle Bar sign became a cultural touchstone in Philadelphia’s South Philly neighborhood, and for its well-preserved exemplification of mid-century neon design and culture, its connection to South Philly’s Italian-American heritage, and to the history of mid-century “Mom and Pop” commerce, the Boot N Saddle Bar sign is eligible for inclusion in the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places under criterion j.

## **Conclusion:**

The Boot N Saddle Bar neon sign is a rare example of Philadelphia’s rich material culture and retains integrity of setting, style, materials, design, and craftsmanship. The sign is a product of Philadelphia’s mid-twentieth century neon industry which contributed to the city’s unique visual landscape through the creation of signs along Broad Street, particularly south of Washington Avenue where one can find the deteriorated Philip’s Restaurant sign, among a few others in similar states of degradation. South Broad Street remains a corridor influenced by Philadelphia’s neon cultural history, with the Boot N Saddle remaining as the best preserved and restored neon sign in the city. The sign itself was designed by Angelo Colavita, an Italian-American immigrant who later, with his brothers, opened Colonial Signs which created many other local and regional neon signs. Angelo Colavita arrived in Philadelphia and trained under local neon artisans before creating the Boot N Saddle Sign which has come to exemplify South Philadelphia’s visible cultural landscape.<sup>28</sup> The sign itself exhibits elements of neon lighting which set it apart from others that remain, including the use of porcelain enamel for the façade, of stainless steel for the structure of the sign, the sign’s being boot-shaped as opposed to box-shaped, and it possesses a further didactic element via the presentation of the name in neon. These factors taken together situate the Boot N Saddle as the best operational mid-century neon sign in Philadelphia, strongly embodying distinguishing characteristics of neon design as an engineering specimen. As such, the Boot N Saddle is eligible for listing under criterion d. Philadelphia’s local neon movement was made up of various “mom and pop” neon shops, like Colonial Signs, which over decades curated a city-wide neon landscape best identified in South Philadelphia, resulting in the vintage neon signs becoming unique, characteristic and familiar visual features of the neighborhood. For this connection to the neighborhood’s uniquely local visual and cultural landscape, the Boot N Saddle sign

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<sup>26</sup> Bracaglia, “Exploring the Legacy of South Philly’s Boot & Saddle.”

<sup>27</sup> Inga Saffron, “Good Eye: Saddle Up,” <https://www.inquirer.com>, accessed February 17, 2022, [https://www.inquirer.com/philly/home/20150208\\_Good\\_Eye\\_\\_Saddle\\_up.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/home/20150208_Good_Eye__Saddle_up.html).

<sup>28</sup> Colavita, Boot and Saddle Interview with Maria Colavita.

is furthermore eligible for listing under criterion h. Finally, because this sign exemplifies the cultural, economic, social and historical heritage of the South Philly community through its connection to mid-century mom-and-pop commerce, neon advertising, and South Philly's growing Italian-American population beginning c. 1950, the Boot N Saddle Bar sign is eligible for listing under criterion j.

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**Appendix – Additional Photographs:**





