

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: 1621 Jefferson Street

Postal code: 19121

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: House of Dr. Oscar James Cooper

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: District Office of Senator Sharif Street (Representing the 3rd Senatorial District)

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 1930 to 1972

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1890

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: _____

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: _____

Original owner: John Roberts

Other significant persons: Dr. Oscar James Cooper

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 July 17, 2023

Name with Title Mesha A. Hester (Advocacy Intern) Email advocacy@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: July 21, 2023

Correct-Complete Incorrect-Incomplete Date: August 1, 2023

Date of Notice Issuance: August 3, 2023

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: Union Housing Development

Address: 1410 N 16th St

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19121

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: September 6, 2023

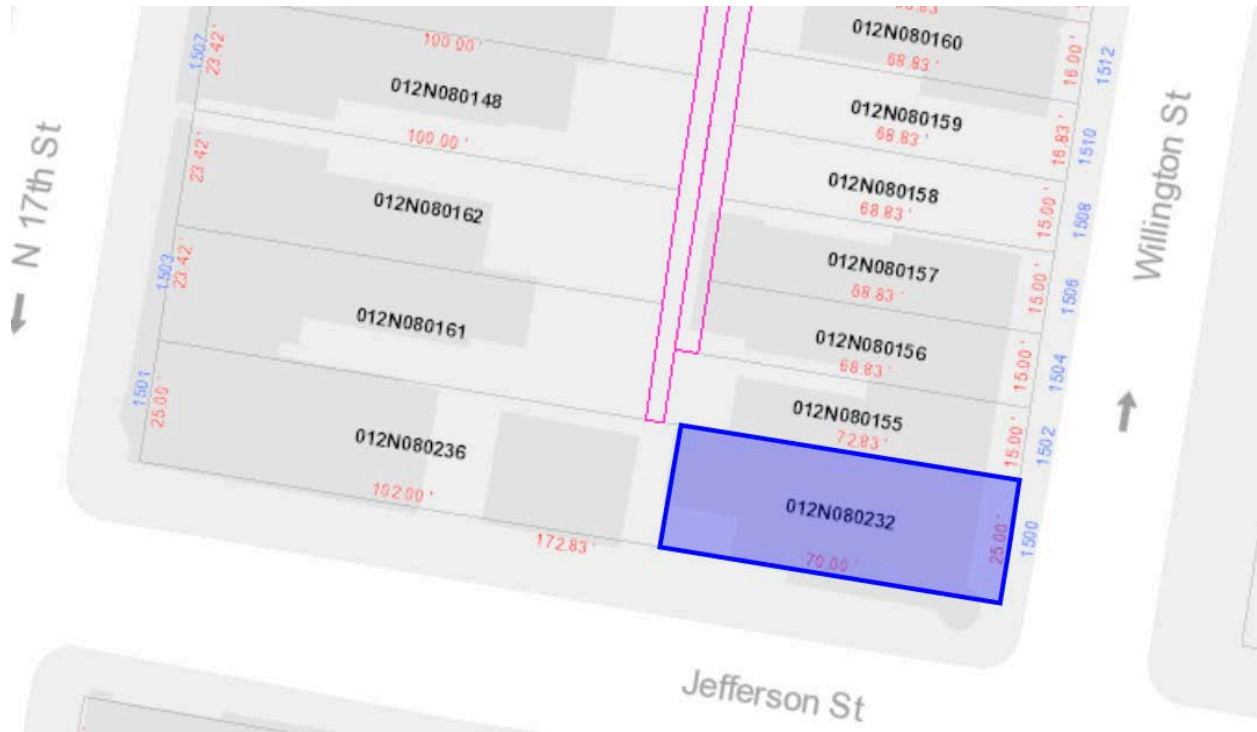
Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: October 13, 2023

Date of Final Action: October 13, 2023

Designated Rejected

5. Boundary Description

Beginning on the Northwest corner of Jefferson Street and Willington Street in the 47th Ward of the City of Philadelphia. Containing in front or breadth on said Jefferson Street seventy feet and extending in length or depth Northward along the West side of said Willington Street, twenty-five feet.



6. Description

The former residence and medical office of Dr. Oscar James Cooper is located at 1621 West Jefferson Street (occasionally incorrectly identified as 1500 Willington Street), on the northwest corner of Jefferson and Willington Street in the Lower North neighborhood of Philadelphia (Fig. 1). It is a stately three-story semi-detached rowhouse with a side ell and flat roof. The ell portion has been heavily modified, with a one-room addition added to the recess (Fig. 2). The plan takes advantage of its corner lot orientation and places the building's entrances on Jefferson Street rather than the narrow Willington Street elevation as would be expected in a typical rowhome.



Figure 1: Perspective looking northwest from the corner of Willington and Jefferson Streets. Source: Google Earth

The building features a running bond brick pattern with stone details. Most notably, a prominent corner turret straddles the south and east elevations on the second and third floors. The building was built in 1890 and underwent a major rehabilitation in 2017 after falling into deep disrepair (Fig. 3). Many modern elements were installed, including windows (many ill-fitting in the historic openings), doors, railings, and a limestone water table with rusticated drip molding (originally it consisted of three stone bands, the top matching the rusticated stone in the arches [Fig. 4]).



Figure 2: Aerial view with the ell addition shown in red. Source: Google Earth



Figure 3: The property in 2009. Source: Google Earth



Figure 4: The property in 1998. Source: Lower North Philadelphia Speculative Housing Historic District, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form.

South Elevation

The south elevation facing Jefferson Street is the primary façade, with an essentially symmetric design. The main building block is on the property's eastern edge, while the side ell and its addition are to the west (Fig. 5). The key entrance is centered on the main building block. A modern stoop with five steps and railing leads to a modern front double door with wrought-iron elements. The entrance is topped by decorative elements of floral wreaths and leaves and a rusticated stone segmented arch with rounded tops. Two windows flank the door with a similar stone arch crowning the window heads. They sit directly on the water table, which serves as a sill. The modern one-over-one window inserts feature a transom to cover the extended height of the window. Two windows are set into the limestone water table at the ground level directly under the first-floor windows. A modern sign on the easternmost portion of the elevation identifies the building as Senator Sharif Street's District Office.

The second floor repeats much of the same elements as the first floor, except in place of the entrance is a large double window. Originally this was an oriel window, and the brickwork

surrounding the modern window opening shows evidence of the former. The side windows on this floor have the same detailing as the first floor but are shorter and have a stone sill.

Between the second- and third-floor center windows, spanning the entire height and width, is a large modern sign that advertises the property owner UHDC (Universal Housing Development Corporation). Above the sign on the third floor is an arched double window. Its stone lintel is unique to the building in that the voussoirs are not round topped, and it is a round arch rather than segmental like the others. The side windows replicate those on the second floor. Detailed brick corbeling tops the elevation, capped by an ornate wooden cornice. The cornice contains a paneled frieze board topped with egg and dart bed molding and convex brackets supporting an overhanging flat roof.



Figure 5: South Elevation of the main black and ell addition. Source: Google Earth

An elaborate modern ramp and double-stair system and railing were added in front of the ell on the western portion of the south elevation, providing access to a second set of entry doors. The ell addition features two windows atop the water table with plain rectangular limestone lintels flush with the plane of the wall. This detailing repeats for all the windows on the ell. The eastern window is square, while the western window is narrow and tall, requiring the modern window

insert to include a transom. This window configuration is repeated on the second and third floors. The ell features the same brick corbelling as the main block, without the wooden cornice. A buttress element breaks up the plane between the second and third floors of the ell addition and the main block.

The historic ell portion has a modern metal door abutting the corner with the addition. It is topped with a stone lintel. To the west of the door is a window with a poorly fitting modern insert. The same-sized opening is repeated on the second and third floors. On the eastern portion of the upper floor are two narrow windows of the exact proportions of those on the ell addition. The brick corbelling is continued onto this elevation. The western corner also features the same buttress element found between the addition and the main block.



Figure 6: West and south elevations of the ell portions. Credit: Mesha Hester

West Elevation

The ramp that starts on the southern elevation winds its way across the western elevation as well, connecting both portions of the ell (Fig. 6). A modern metal door is centered on the first floor of the ell addition. It has the same stone lintel as all the other openings on the ell. A line of header bricks marks the change in floors, evidence of this section's growth over time. The ell addition historically contained window openings on its third and second floors, but they have been bricked in and are not visible. Despite the third story being added in 2016, it has brick corbelling to match the other elevations.

The historic ell has one window centered on each of the three floors. All have stone lintels and sills. The second and third floors have typical rectangular portions, but the second floor is square. There is a simple brick chimney on the northern corner. The detailed brick corbelling on the cornice line from the other elevations is continued.

North Elevation

Originally the building shared its north party wall with a neighboring building on Willington Street, but it was demolished in 2016, exposing the building's northern elevation. The elevation is blank and features a rough stucco finish.



Figure 7: North Elevation. Source: Google Earth

East Elevation

Historically there was a door on the northern portion of this elevation, but the 2016 rehabilitation changed that opening to a window, which now mirrors the one on the southern portion of the wall. The treatment of the windows is the same as the southern elevation, except that these windows have limestone sills that sit above the water table. Originally there was no water table on this elevation, reinforcing that Jefferson Street is the primary façade. A similar tenant's sign to the one on the southern elevation is also placed on the southern corner, adjacent to the window.



Figure 8: East Elevation. Source: Google Earth

Also added in the 2016 rehabilitation was exterior access to the basement through the northern ground-level window with modern steps and railing. The ground-level window on the southern portion of the wall remains unchanged directly under its first-floor counterpart.

The eastern elevation is dominated by a centrally situated raised ornate brick corbeled chimney, which runs from the top of the first floor through the cornice. The second and third floors feature windows on the northern portion, directly above their first-floor counterpart. The northern corner features raised brick corbeling as a buttress-like feature that visually separates the elevation from the former neighboring rowhome. The elaborate cornice detailing found on the southern elevation is also extended on this elevation.

Turret

A projecting turret between the south and east elevation starts on the second floor and continues to the third. It is supported by a conical base which is topped by three bands. Similar leaf and wreath decorative elements found over the front entrance are repeated three times under each second-floor window. The second and third floors consist of three windows, connected by a continuous sill and each topped with an oversized drip molding. Three decorative swag elements are under each window between the second and third floors. A band of floral motifs separates the third-floor windows and the cornice detailing, which connects the south and east elevations.



Figure 9: Detail of turret. Credit: Mesha Hester

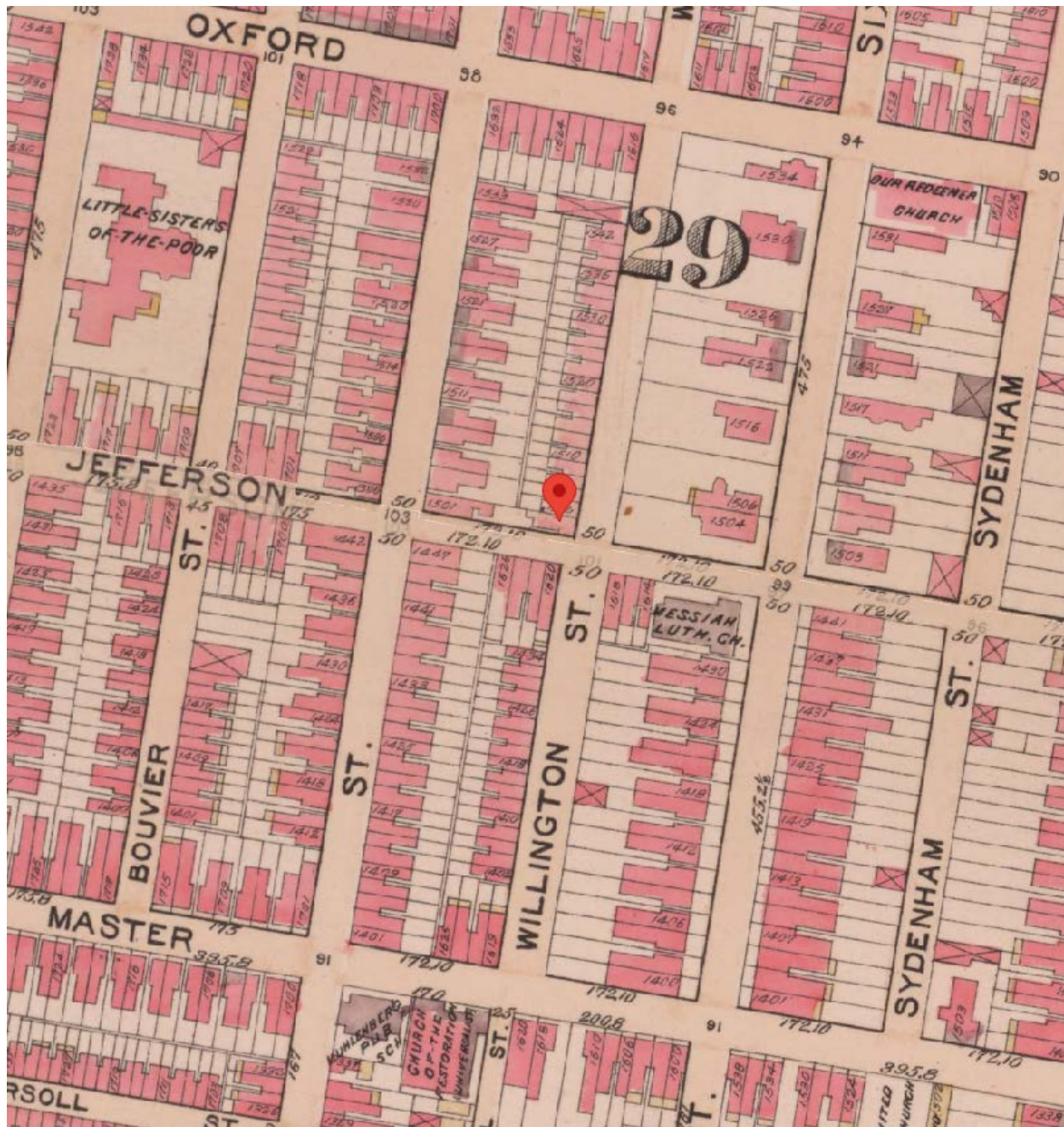


Figure 10: 1895 G.W. Bromley Atlas

7. Significance

Dr. Oscar James Cooper was a prominent African American medical doctor with long ties to the North Philadelphia community. He was born in Washington, D.C., in 1888. He received a Bachelor of Science in Biology from Howard University in 1913. He earned a Doctor of Medicine from Howard University three years later. As an undergraduate student, he co-founded Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Incorporated. Dr. Cooper subsequently served as Omega Psi Phi's first Grand Keeper of Records and Seal in 1911, the second Grand Basileus (National President) from 1912 to 1913, and the second Keeper of Finance in 1913¹. After medical school, Dr. Cooper moved to Philadelphia to begin his medical career. During this time, he was a charter member of the Pyramid Club. He practiced medicine out of 1621 West Jefferson Street for fifty years until he died in 1972.

The mixed-use building located at 1621 West Jefferson Street should be individually listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places because it meets the following criteria for historic designation as stated in the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 14-2007 (5) of the Philadelphia Code:

- (a) Has significant character or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City; and is associated with the life of a person significant in the past. The building at 1621 West Jefferson Street has significant value for its association with African American physician Dr. Oscar James Cooper, who resided here from 1930-1972.

and

- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community. 1621 West Jefferson Street exemplifies the North Philadelphia community's cultural, economic, social, and historical heritage as Dr. Oscar James Cooper practiced medicine out of his residence to provide neighboring African Americans adequate healthcare.

Founding of Omega Psi Phi

During his undergraduate studies at Howard University, Dr. Cooper co-founded Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Incorporated on November 17, 1911. It was the first fraternity to be established on the campus of a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) and remains one of the largest fraternal organizations in the country. The three other founders were Bishop Edgar A. Love, Frank Coleman, and Dr. Ernest E. Just as their faculty advisor.² They endeavored to create

¹ Chapter History, Mu Omega Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc, <https://www.muomegaques.com/index.cfm?e=inner4&itemcategory=73386>

² "About Omega – Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc." <https://oppf.org/about-omega/>

a fraternity based on the motto “friendship is essential to the soul” and the cardinal principles of “manhood, scholarship, perseverance and uplift.”³ This set the path for Dr. Cooper to leverage a vast network of academics and professionals.

Subsequently, Dr. Cooper established two new Omega Psi Phi chapters in Pennsylvania. The first was the Beta Chapter at Lincoln University in Oxford, PA, on February 6, 1914. This was the second chapter established for the organization, indicated by the beta identifier. Expansion was important for Omega Psi Phi to reach more potential members and to implement local programs under their principles.

In 1920, Dr. Cooper also established a graduate chapter, Mu Omega, in Philadelphia for local alumni of undergraduate chapters. The graduate members were involved in nearby undergraduate chapters and guided those brothers.⁴ He served as the chapter’s first Basileus (President) from 1920-1922. As the Basileus of the Mu Omega chapter, Dr. Cooper presided over the organization’s 1936 conclave (convention) in Philadelphia, celebrating their 25th anniversary. It was noted as the “greatest conclave in the history of Omega.”⁵

As president of this service-based organization in Philadelphia, Dr. Cooper helped make a difference and helped those in need. The Mu Omega chapter “engaged in community outreach-annual competitive scholarships for high school students, continuing support for the needy, voter education and registration, and career education.”⁶ Nationally, the fraternity championed civil rights by supporting legislation to ban the practice of lynching and imposing criminal penalties.⁷

In April 1953, Dr. Cooper was a key proponent of creating a collaboration among the Philadelphia area Omega chapters, known as the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity of Philadelphia.⁸ The group’s purpose was to promote fraternal and civic interest among its members and to encourage and propagate principles of good citizenship. Dr. Cooper’s lifelong commitment to the fraternity and its mission speaks to his dedication to community service.

Private Medical Practice

Dr. Cooper was a successful physician with a private practice for nearly fifty years. He was a very popular physician, seeing thousands of patients.⁹ He was the first intern at Misericordia Hospital (later Mercy- Douglass Hospital and now Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania –

³ “Omega Psi Phi Founded by Local Physician; First Fraternity on Negro College Campus,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 1, 1963

⁴ M.W. Wilson, “Omega Psi Phi extends activities into Community,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 28, 1985

⁵ “Omega Fraternity Endorses Fight on Lynching, Peonage,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 31, 1936.

⁶ M.W. Wilson, “Omega Psi Phi extends activities into Community,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 28, 1985

⁷ “Omega Fraternity Endorses Fight on Lynching, Peonage,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 31, 1936.

⁸ Chapter History, Mu Omega Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc,

<https://www.muomegaques.com/index.cfm?e=inner4&itemcategory=73386>

⁹ “Addict threatens Dr. Oscar Cooper,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 7, 1956

Cedar Avenue) in West Philadelphia shortly after graduating from medical school in 1917.¹⁰ After his internship, Dr. Cooper became a resident of North Philadelphia.

In January 1930, he purchased 1621 West Jefferson Street from Joseph S. Potsdamer to be his residence and medical office.¹¹ One month after the purchase, he applied for a building permit to modify the property to house his office. According to the permit, the rear stairs (no longer extant) were widened to accommodate the patients' entrance, and new windows were inserted for the office.¹² His "swank, private offices" allowed him to become "one of Philadelphia's wealthiest and most prominent physicians."¹³ Dr. Cooper saw patients in the western ell of the building while residing with his wife Louise (divorced in 1951) and later Willa Mae (married in 1955) in the remainder of the house.¹⁴ A 1956 article described the home as "expensively appointed ... decorated with golden draperies, golden panel walls throughout and air conditioning in every room. Expensive mosaics are liberally scattered throughout the house and every floor is covered with rich, Asiatic and Persian wall-to-wall carpeting."¹⁵

During his medical practice, it was challenging for African Americans to obtain quality healthcare. Dr. Cooper provided his community with quality healthcare and medical resources "whether they had insurance or could pay for it themselves."¹⁶ His bedside manner was described as "suave" and "excellent," which won him the trust of many female patients.¹⁷ He established and maintained an onsite medical library and general library.¹⁸ Dr. Cooper was a recognized leader in the medical field. He was a member of the American Medical Society, the National Medical Association, the Dental and Pharmaceutical Association, the Philadelphia County Medical Society, and the Medical Society of Eastern Pennsylvania.¹⁹



DR. OSCAR COOPER
Credit: *Philadelphia Inquirer*,
October 12, 1972

¹⁰ "Last Rites for Dr. Cooper Saturday," *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 14, 1972

¹¹ Philadelphia Deed Book T, 12, pg. 8

¹² Application for Permit for Additions, Alterations, Repairs, etc., 1621 Jefferson St, pg. 595

¹³ "Addict threatens Dr. Oscar Cooper," *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 7, 1956.

¹⁴ "In honor of Philly's Dr. Oscar James Cooper, a street was renamed and a historical marker erected," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 2, 2021

¹⁵ "Addict threatens Dr. Oscar Cooper," *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 7, 1956.

¹⁶ "In honor of Philly's Dr. Oscar James Cooper" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 2, 2021

¹⁷ "Addict threatens Dr. Oscar Cooper," *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 7, 1956.

¹⁸ "Omega's Founders," Iota Chapter Ques,

https://iotachapterques.org/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=66506&module_id=282323

¹⁹ "Last Rites for Dr. Cooper Saturday," *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 14, 1972. "Dr. Oscar J. Cooper Appoints Committee," *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 26, 1936.

Founding of the Pyramid Club

Dr. Cooper continued to support causes that promoted equality and good citizenship. He was a charter member of the Pyramid Club of Philadelphia at 1517 Girard Avenue. In 1937 Dr. Walter F. Jerrick, Dr. Cooper, and other prominent African American professionals formed the club. The purpose was to foster, encourage, and give expression to civic, social, and cultural opportunities for African Americans denied to them by other organizations in the area.²⁰ The Club welcomed the likes of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Marian Anderson, Josephine Baker, and A. Phillip Randolph through the arts or social action events. Dr. Cooper served as the club's treasurer for over a dozen years.²¹

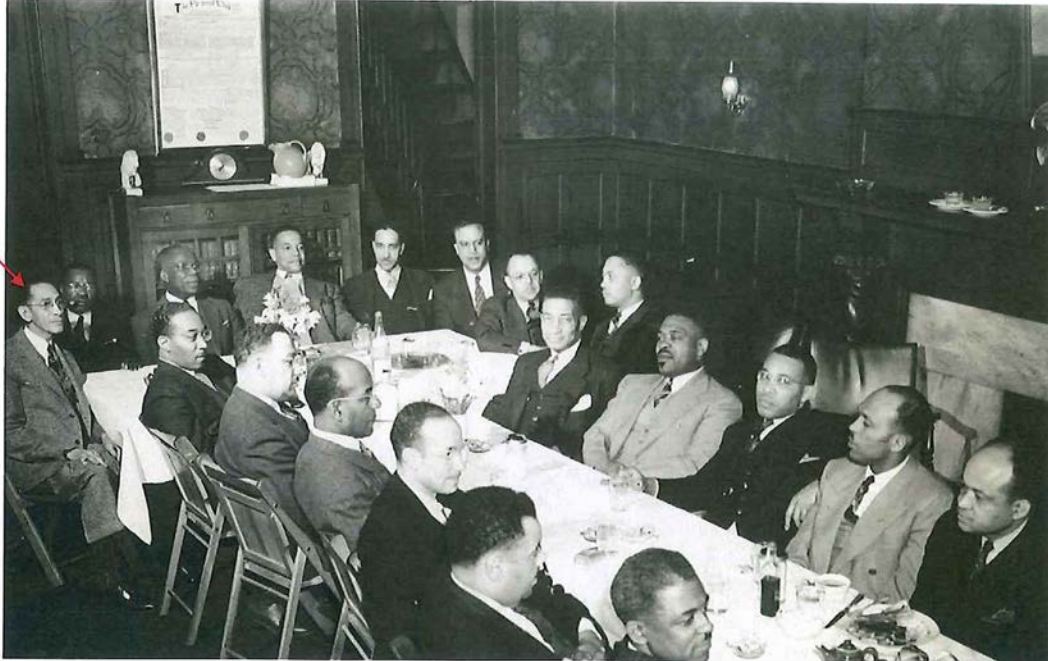


Event at the Pyramid Club featuring, left to right, Clarence Monroe, John Logan, Handy Beckett, Magistrate Joseph Rainey, Marian Anderson, Walter Jerrick, and Oscar Cooper. Credit: John W. Mosley

The establishment of the club was pivotal in sustaining community upliftment, as racial segregation was prevalent and greater African American community development was needed. Not only did the Club provide employment opportunities and direct financial contributions, but it provided the community a platform for exposure to the arts, empowerment, and social action. It hosted art exhibits, award ceremonies, concerts, scholarship drives, and other events. It could be considered Philadelphia's version of the Harlem Renaissance movement.

²⁰ Bernice Shelton, "Pyramid Club Dedicated at Solemn Service Sunday by Rev. R. Bagnall," *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 17, 1940

²¹ "Addict threatens Dr. Oscar Cooper," *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 7, 1956.



Event at the Pyramid Club featuring, left to right facing camera, Oscar Cooper, Thomas Powell, Walter Jerrick, Handy Beckett, Alton Berry, Theodore Spaulding, Dr. Charles Dorsey, Ulysses Wiggins, John Francis Williams, unidentified man, George Thomas, Percy White, William Wingate, Dr. Percy Bowser, Daniel Wilson, Clarence Monroe. Credit: John W. Mosley



Founders Day event at the Pyramid Club, with Judge Harry S. McDevitt speaking. Featured left to right John Logan, Handy Beckett, Lewis Tanner Moore, Walter Jerrick, Oscar Cooper, and Alton Berry. Credit: John W. Mosley

Conclusion

Dr. Cooper passed away on October 9, 1972. He was remembered as “diminutive, highly intelligent,” smiling often, and with an “excellent reputation.”²² 1621 West Jefferson Street was inherited by his wife, Willa Mae, who passed in 2008. Since 2014, Jeffrey Smith, president of the Union Housing Development Corp., has owned the property. Following a renovation in 2017, it now houses the Philadelphia offices of State Senator Sharif Street.²³



DR. OSCAR J. COOPER, one of the founders of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, died Monday in Lankenau Hospital. He is shown in a recent photo with his widow, Mrs. Willa Cooper, when they attended a social function.

Credit: Jones, Ralph “Dr. Oscar J. Cooper, Omega Founder, Dead” *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 10, 1972



DR. COOPER AND WIFE: The above photo was taken of wealthy Dr. Oscar J. Cooper and his beautiful wife as they strolled on Walnut St. during this year's Easter parade. Last week, Dr. Cooper was threatened by a knife-wielding, dope-crazed addict, who invaded the prominent physician's swank private offices seeking drugs.

Credit: “Addict threatens Dr. Oscar Cooper,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 7, 1956

The former residence and medical office of Dr. Oscar James Cooper at 1621 Jefferson West Street merits listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and J. The property is associated with the life of Dr. Oscar James Cooper, a notable African American figure who significantly impacted the North Philadelphia community from the 1930s into the 1970s. Dr. Cooper's commitment to service began during his education at Howard University, where he co-founded Omega Psi Phi. After medical school, he moved to Philadelphia and opened a private

²² “Jack Saunders Says,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 17, 1972

²³ “In honor of Philly's Dr. Oscar James Cooper, a street was renamed and a historical marker erected,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 2, 2021

medical practice in this property and, from there, served his community. Dr. Cooper continued his work with Omega Psi Phi throughout his lifetime and was also a charter member of the Pyramid Club that sought to foster, encourage, and give expression to civic, social, and cultural opportunities for African Americans. His impressive work and leadership in the North Philadelphian African American community had a significant impact.

Dr. Cooper’s legacy on West Jefferson Street has been commemorated in various ways. On February 13, 2020, the Philadelphia City Council adopted Resolution 200121, naming the 1600 - 1700 block of West Jefferson Street as “Dr. Oscar J. Cooper Way.”²⁴ Subsequently, Dr. Cooper was honored by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission on October 2, 2021, with a historical marker that reads, “Dr. Oscar James Cooper - Cofounded Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc. at Howard Univ., the first fraternity established at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU); Beta Chapter at Lincoln Univ.; and Mu Omega Chapter in Philadelphia. He also cofounded the influential Pyramid Club. A physician for fifty years, his home and office were here.”²⁵



PHMC Marker on Jefferson St. Credit: Mesha Hester

²⁴ Resolution 200121, <https://phila.legistar.com/Legislation.aspx>

²⁵ PHMC Marker Text, <https://share.phmc.pa.gov/markers/> (2023)

8. Major Bibliographic Reference

“Addict threatens Dr. Oscar Cooper,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 7, 1956.

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Russ, Valerie. (2021, October 3). *In honor of Philly's Dr. Oscar James Cooper, a street was renamed and a historical marker erected.* <https://www.inquirer.com/news/oscar-cooper-omega-psi-phi-historical-marker-philadelphia-20211002.html#loaded>

“Last Rites for Dr. Cooper Saturday,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 14, 1972

Philadelphia Deed Book T, 12, pg. 8