

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: 1461-65 N. 52nd Street

Postal code: 19131

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: The George Institute Library

Current/Common Name: The George Institute Branch, Free Library of Philadelphia

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: none

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 1914 to 2001

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1914

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: E. Allen Wilson

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: J. Wolff

Original owner: George Institute and Library

Other significant persons: Jesse George, Rebecca George, Edward Heston

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 none Date 3/13/25

Name with Title Joseph E. DeStefano, Contr. R. Austin Huber Email jedhmc2@gmail.com

Street Address 1301 N 53rd St Telephone 267-317-6147

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA 19131

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: 3/13/2025

☒ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete Date: 4/17/2025

Date of Notice Issuance: 4/17/2025

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: City of Philadelphia

Address: Municipal Services Building

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19107

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

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

☐ Designated ☐ Rejected

12/7/18

NOMINATION OF
The George Institute Library, 1461-65 North 52nd Street
to the
Philadelphia Register of Historic Places

Presented by Joseph Edward DeStefano, March 2025
with editing and contributions from Robert Austin Huber



5. Boundary Description

BEGINNING at a point on the northwesterly side of Bible Way (formerly Media Street, formerly Old-Fifty Second Street) (sixty feet wide) at the distance of one hundred feet southwestwardly from the southwestery side of Lancaster Avenue (eighty feet wide); thence extending northwestwardly along a line at right angles to the said Bible Way (formerly Media Street) and through the center of a nine inch party wall between this and the premises adjoining on the northeast seventy-seven feet nine and five eighths inches to a point in the easterly side of Fifty-Second Street (eighty feet wide); thence extending south three degrees, twenty-one minutes, eighteen seconds east along said side of Fifty-Second Street nineteen feet, four and three quarter inches to a point; thence extending southeastwardly on a line at right angles to said Bible Way (formerly Media Street) and through the center of a nine inch party wall between this and the premises adjoining to the southwest sixty-six feet, three and one half inches to a point in the northwesterly side of said Bible Way (formerly Media Street); thence extending 6 north thirty-three degrees, five minutes, two seconds east along the said side of Bible Way (formerly Media Street) fifteen feet, seven and one-quarter inches to the first mentioned point and place of beginning.

Please note, this lot was consolidated at the end of 2024 from three parcels (1641, 1643, and 1645 N. 52nd). This creates an irregular triangular shape at the “flatiron” 5-way intersection.

The historic boundary description above is listed on the property deed. I propose designating the historic boundaries of the property, based on extant walls, easements, and intersecting public rights of way, regardless of the 2024 consolidation’s impact.



Boundary of 1461-65 N 52nd Street, which comprises the George Institute.

6. Description

The George Institute Library at 1461-65 N 52nd Street in Hestonville is a now-freestanding, two-story, five bay, flat roofed, snub-nosed triangular “flatiron” structure in the Federal Revival (or Georgian Revival) architectural style. It compliments nearby buildings of comparable age and street frontage to the direct west and east along the intersection of 52nd and Lancaster. The street-facing facades are constructed of red brick in a running bond and wrapped with soldier course bands aligned with the first and second level sill heights. The building’s windows are accented with glazed terracotta sills, splayed lintels, and keystones. A simple, partially intact classical copper cornice with wide modillions protects street-facing walls from the elements and embellishes the roof grade. A short parapet, also of running bond brick and capped with glazed coping tiles, tops off the building to provide architectural balance and roof safety. The Federal inspired façade is a unique play on imperfect symmetry, inspiring the eye to look up and all around at features of the building. **Figures 1-10**

This Federal Revival building employs subtle stylization, using portals and bays as the main attraction. Renaissance/Palladian inspiration of the “piano nobile” (noble floor) or a more beautiful, prominent level above the ground/first floor is employed via the taller, more detailed second floor and its arched windows. (Cole, pp. 274-275) The six-bay 52nd Street front is dominated by three central second floor arched windows inset into concentric relieving arches, not dissimilar to those seen at the Neo-Palladian Chiswick House (1729). **Figure 11** These are flanked by shorter rectangular, splayed-lintel windows in a set of two on the north side (left hand) and another matching one on the south (right hand) side. Above each of the shorter windows is a recessed decorative niche with contrasting corner blocks. The Bible Way (aka 5100 Block of Media Street) façade features a nearly mirror-image second floor, apart from the north-end having one singular periphery window rather than a pair. The first level and basement windows are aligned with the dominating second floor windows on each street-facing facade. The 52nd Street facade has three centrally placed splayed lintel windows, with two narrower windows on the northern periphery that match the two second floor windows above, creating a pleasing “four corner” set. The first level of the Bible Way elevation features the same rhythm, in that there is only one far-end (north) periphery window to align with that on the second floor. The southernmost first level windows on both street-facing elevations are elliptical rather than rectangular. Though these matching windows seemingly undermine symmetry on each isolated elevation, they in fact contribute to the overall, more complex, symmetry of both elevations combined. These “twin” windows are outlined in brick with four cut keystones

on each. As of January 2025, all but two original windows are extant and intact. They appear to be in very poor, but potentially restorable condition, lending excellent templates for repair. **Figures 2-9**

Reached by a set of six concrete steps, the library's main entrance sits at the aforementioned snub-nosed "tip" of the building off of the 52nd and Bible intersection, emphasizing the "flatiron" form. Though the original wooden double doors were replaced with ahistorical metal ones, the original entry portico remains in fairly good condition beyond significant paint loss. Two hefty, round Tuscan columns flank the entrance, backed by two square Tuscan pilasters. They support a simple classical entablature and triangular pediment of profiled wood trim that matches the copper cornice, turning this entry into a "miniature temple." A non-contributing, ahistorical light is attached to the entablature at this time. The roof of said pediment is of square-cut slate. The left/west side of the entablature retains its early 20th century porcelain enamel sign for "N 52nd ST". **Figures 3, 3.1** Though the wood elements of the portico are in a state of decay, they are serviceable. Their plinths are missing two three-inch bluestone capping elements, but retain their structural components. Above the temple-like entry is another simple, rectangular splayed-lintel window, which inspires the eye to focus on the point of entry rather than the otherwise more aggrandized second level on either side. **Figure 2**

At the foundation/exposed basement level, the 52nd Street façade has six egress windows aligned with the above bays. The flat rectangular lintels are of bluestone. The Bible Way side only has three egress windows, similarly aligned with the central windows above. There is a basement hatch in the sidewalk towards the north end. **Figures 4, 7, 9**

The north wall of the building does not face any street and was originally a party wall. "Ghost lines" of the former buildings are apparent on the non-stuccoed red-salmon brick elevation. A brick chimney or shaft sits almost exactly in the middle. **Figure 10**

There is no extant landscaping, or compelling evidence that there ever was any, aside from street trees. The earliest photographs show a paved sidewalk. **Figure 1** Three trees were planted along the Bible Way elevation at the end of 2024, consistent with current green stormwater infrastructure planning initiatives. (Philadelphia Water Department, Stormwater Management Project Footprints)



Figure 1: The George Institute Library at 52nd and Media, now Bible Way, C. 1940. See previous, now demolished, adjacent buildings, including a very old gabled roof structure facing Lancaster Avenue, which might date back to the Federal era. Functional 52nd St/Hestonville train station to the left in this photo. From the Free Library Digital collection.



FIGURE 1.1: View of the interior, looking towards the entrance (southeast). Note traditional Federal Revival millwork. From the Free Library Digital collection.



FIGURE 1.2: Earliest known view of the interior, looking north towards the original staircase. This split staircase would be removed and have parts reinterpreted for a more conventional, albeit design sensitive, staircase. Photo from the Free Library Digital collection.



FIGURE 1.3: Interior view from 1930, also looking north. The upper-level balcony, where the flag is mounted, is roughly the same location for the top landing of the original staircase. Note the new staircase to the left, where the lower-level glazed bookcases (or display cabinets) had been in the earlier photo. (**FIG 1.2**). This may be a photo to document said renovation. When the library was assumed by Philadelphia Free Libraries (1927), renovations were undertaken to conform to the Free Library's space standards. Photo from the Free Library Digital collection.



FIGURES 1.4 + 1.5: Interior views taken from the front door in January 2025. Note intact interior in serviceable condition. (Joseph E. DeStefano, R. Austin Huber)



FIGURE 2: South Elevation, showing the main entrance and portico entablature. (Joseph DeStefano)



FIGURE 3 + 3.1: Close-ups of the south elevation entrance, showing Tuscan columns, pilasters, modillions on classical entablature/pediment. The right-hand picture (3.1) displays the porcelain enamel street sign. (PC)



FIGURE 4: East elevation facing Bible Way (formerly Media St). Eight of ten original windows are still visible. (PC)



FIGURE 5: First level elliptical windows found towards the southern end of the building on the east and west elevations. Soldier course band in view beneath window. (PC)



FIGURE 6: East elevation, showing typical ground level rectangular “splayed lintel” windows, and second level (“piano nobile”/noble floor reminiscent) with arched windows inset into concentric relieving arches and decorative carved relief keystones. These are found on both east and west elevations in sets of three. (PC)



FIGURE 7: West elevation, viewed from south elevation entrance. (PC)



FIGURE 8: Top left corner of west elevation, featuring a portion of intact copper cornice, bracketed cornice end cap, and typical (periphery) rectangular window with splayed lintel, relief-carved keystone, and multi-part sill. (PC)



FIGURE 9: West elevation basement light well showing bluestone lintel and an original window. (PC)



FIGURE 10: Rear (north) elevation of the building, looking from Lancaster Avenue, showing “ghost lines” of former attached structures. (PC, typ. all pics)



FIGURE 11: Neo-Palladian Chiswick House designed by Richard Boyle (1729). The three Palladian windows feature relieving arches (building at right) similar to the central second floor windows on the George Institute. (English Heritage, PC)

In context of the greater area, the building is quite unique, but intentional in respecting the neighborhood's historical architectural language. Buildings along the west side of 52nd Street, from Lancaster to Media, employ small amounts of Federal Revival architectural elements. The building at the northwest corner of 52nd and Lancaster, while matching the rest of the row's Pompeian brick and likely being built around the same time, employs differing splayed lintels which provide a more "Federal" look. **Figure 12** The Verizon building, formerly Bell Telephone, at the southeast corner of 52nd and Bible is also Federal Revival in style. A handsome first level with equidistant rows of recessed bonds to emulate a rusticated foundation fades into similarly fashioned quoins at each corner. The original main entrances feature classical, temple-like entablatures. **Figure 13** The similar styles and materials of these prominent corner buildings "bookend" the intersection, providing a distinct and unique architectural language between other simpler, more eclectic 19th-century styles.



FIGURE 12: Similarly aged row on the southwest corner of 52nd and Lancaster. Note splayed lintels and keystones along with fanlight transom over the door. (Joseph E. DeStefano, January 2025)



FIGURE 13: Verizon building (formerly Bell Telephone), southwest corner of Lancaster and Bible. Note stylized Flemish bond, entablatures, and keystones. (Joseph E. DeStefano, January 2025)

This area’s architectural and built history dates to the mid-18th century, with founding member and namesake of the library, Jesse George (1785-1873). General Edward W. Heston (1745-1824), namesake of the community, also lived nearby. (See Statement of Significance, Criterion A for more information). By 1914, when the George Institute was built, many late 18th and early 19th century period-built Federal buildings were freshly demolished to make way for more Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) tracks, sub-developments, and urban growth. The Federal Revival style being implemented on prominent corners is a sympathetic nod to lost older structures and community heritage.

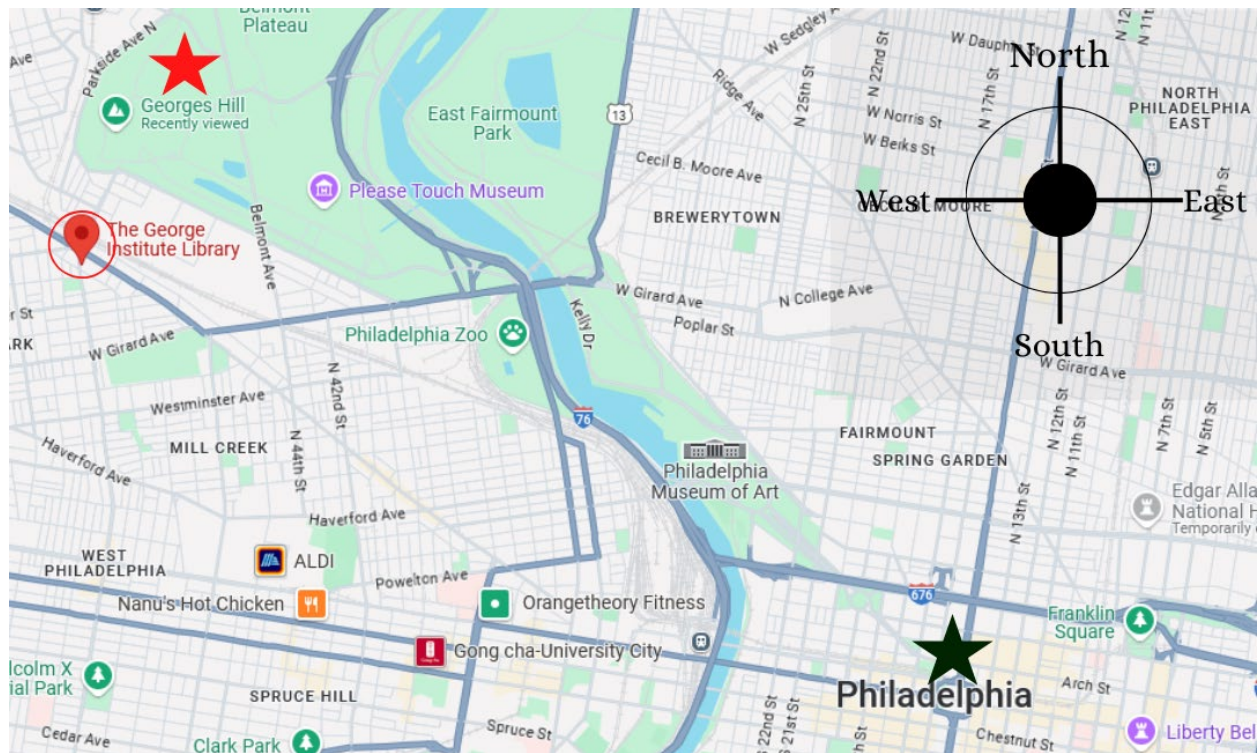


Figure 14: The George Institute (red tag) in context of West, North, and Central Philadelphia. Jesse George donated the land that comprises “George’s Hill” (red star), which is immediately north of the library in Fairmount Park. City Hall on Penn Square (black star) sits about 3.8 miles to the southeast.

7. Statement of Significance

The George Institute Library at 1461-65 North 52nd Street in the Hestonville (aka Cathedral Park, aka Carroll Park) neighborhood of West Philadelphia is a significant historic landmark that warrants protection and designation by the Philadelphia Historical Commission and inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The library satisfies the following Criteria for Designation as expressed in Section 14-1004 of the Philadelphia Code:

- (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past;
- (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style;
- (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;
- (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City;

Criterion A:

- (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;*

The George Institute is of significant character, interest, and value based on its connection to the George Family, of which George's Hill is named, and due to its unique ties with the development of Hestonville, one of West Philadelphia's oldest communities.

The George Institute is one of the last remaining West Philadelphia buildings sponsored by the George Family, specifically Jesse George, who owned land north of Lancaster Avenue around 52nd Street. The George Family were early occupants of what would become the Hestonville area, purchasing 300 acres from Dr. Thomas Wynne in 1721. (D'Apéry, pp. 13) As one of Hestonville's founding families, their contributions to growth of community life helped establish a long-lasting town along Lancaster Avenue. This area, initially Blockley Township, would later be annexed into Philadelphia County during the 1854 city

consolidation. Though many areas of West Philadelphia were primarily used as farmland prior to the installation of public transit in the mid to late 19th century, the George family's involvement helped establish Hestonville as a village long before most other West Philadelphia neighborhoods. This gives the George Institute a unique link to one of the oldest families in one of the oldest West Philadelphia neighborhoods.

In 1868, quaker siblings Jesse and Rebecca George offered an excess of 83 acres of their family's land to the Fairmount Park Commission, for consideration of \$4000 each within their lifetimes. Rebecca would live until 1869, and Jesse until 1873. (Weigley, pp. 427) This tract of land would become known as "George's Hill," which it, along with its namesake George's Hill Drive, are still called today. Philadelphians can admire sweeping views of the city from George's Hill's remarkable vantage; views which inspired Jesse George to donate the land to Fairmount Park. In more recent history, the land has been used to house the Mann Center for the Performing Arts, and related cultural events/concerts hosted within the park. **Figure 15**

The residents of Hestonville responded very positively to this donation of land towards public use, documenting their honors in a unique, community signed, multi-page letter to Jesse and Rebecca George. This significant act of altruism by the George Family was compared to acts of heroic patriotism in the recently ended Civil War, but with the honor of being an action of peace rather than conflict. The latter distinction was extremely important to the generally pacifist quaker community of Hestonville, especially in the context of civic betterment and greater development of Philadelphia beyond Center City. (Fairmount Park Archives, "Letter to Jesse and Rebecca George.") **Figures 16** Though the George family was already well established at this point, this philanthropic act arguably solidified them as venerated actors both within their community and the city of Philadelphia, setting a great example for similar benefactors.

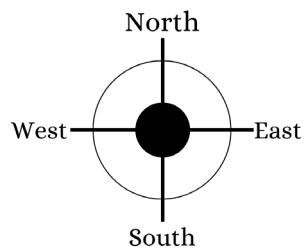


FIGURE 15: From the Fairmount Park Archives, this 1860s City of Philadelphia Map shows the “Jesse George Estate,” one city block bold outlined, near what would become 52nd Street. Note this map predates planning for West Fairmount Park, and shows the entire space platted and gridded, which never came to pass.

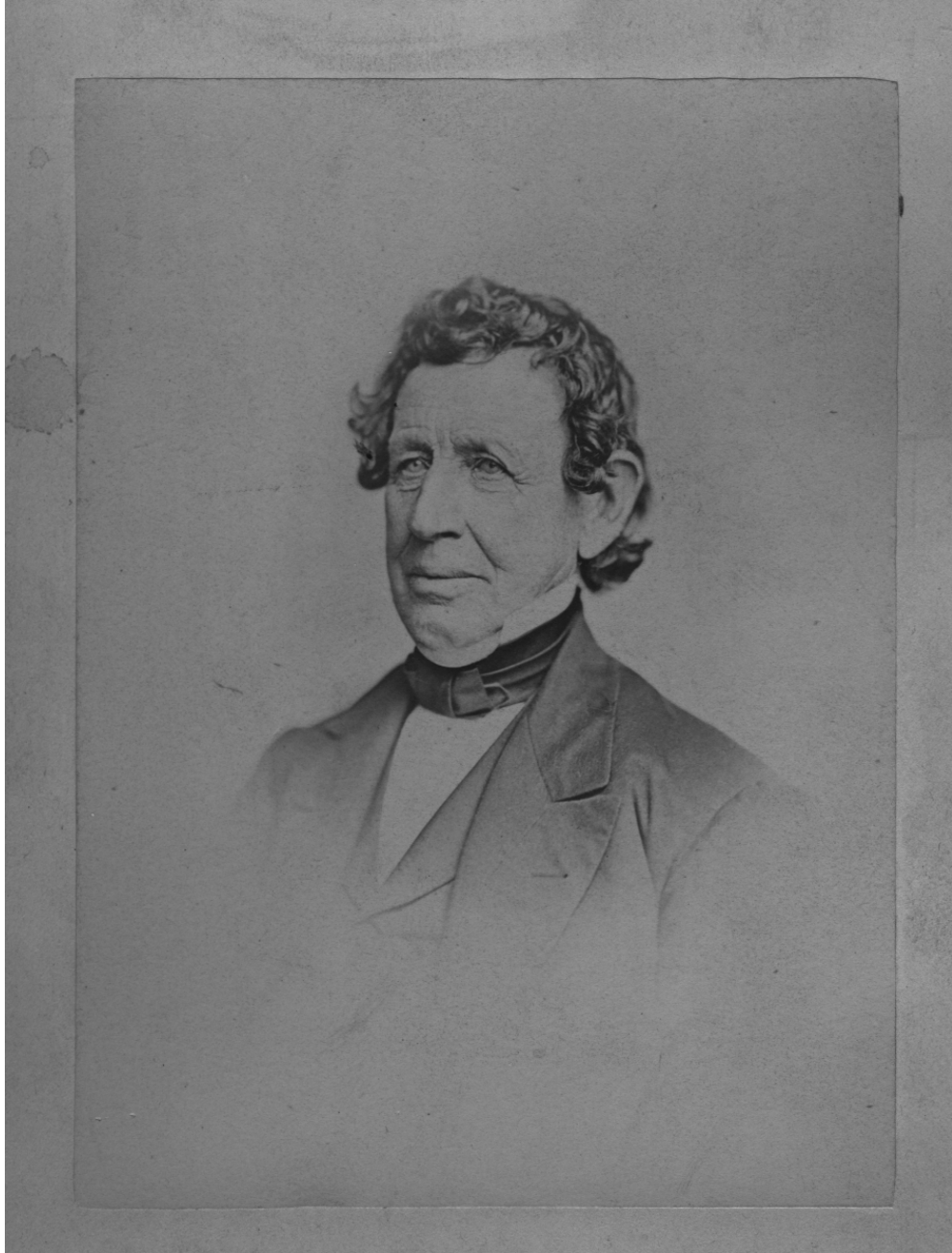


FIGURE 15.1: Jesse George; namesake, main donor, and founding sponsor of the George Institute Library. Taken 1865-1868. Fairmount Park Commission Archives.

To
Jesse and Rebecca George

We, your neighbors, the residents of
Hestonville, feel that we can not let the
occasion of your magnificent gift of land
to the City for Park purposes, pass by
without expressing our gratification and
appreciation of your generosity.

The value of such an open space of
ground as the Fair Mount Park is
destined to be, has been so often set forth
that we need not dwell upon it; but we
feel glad however, that you have thus not
only evinced your interest in the future
welfare of our City, but have connected
the name of your respected family indissolubly
with a source of enjoyment to all
coming generations.

FIGURE 16: Page one of a ribbon-bound four-page letter to Jesse and Rebecca George, written and signed in 1868 by Isacc Heston, descendent of town founder Edward W. Heston. The letter, held by Fairmount Park Archives, contains an impressive amount of additional community member signatures.



FIGURE 16.1: A testament to the city's appreciation for the generosity of Jesse George, many articles were published regarding his donation of land for intended uses of beauty, pleasure, and enjoyment of nature. Note paragraph 4, which chronicles his lasting donation of the George Institute Library. This highlights Jesse George's contributions to education and recreation.

Upon Jesse George's death in 1873, \$119,650 was dedicated to the establishment of various institutions, including the local George Institute Library. (D'Apéry, pp. 14) The George Institute aimed to serve as a beacon for education, archival, and community space. The library's original location, unfortunately demolished in 2024, was situated along Lancaster Avenue at the northwest corner of 51st Street. **Figures 17-17.2**



FIGURE 17: Above, an 1895 map showing the original location of the George Institute at 5100 Lancaster Avenue, circled in blue. The red circle shows the lot where the George would be relocated in 1914. The 2025 map below shows the same locations, similarly circled. The 5100 Lancaster/original building was demolished during March of 2024.



FIGURE 17.1: The first location of the George Institute at 5100 Lancaster Avenue being demolished on March 5th, 2024. The central portion dates to the library’s 1872 opening and retained its basic historic form. This vernacular, almost Greek Revival, structure featured a front gable, square pilasters at each corner, and a dropped cornice that blends into an exaggerated front-spanning lintel. This hefty, front-spanning element gives the upper windows a “hooded” look. (Joseph E. DeStefano)

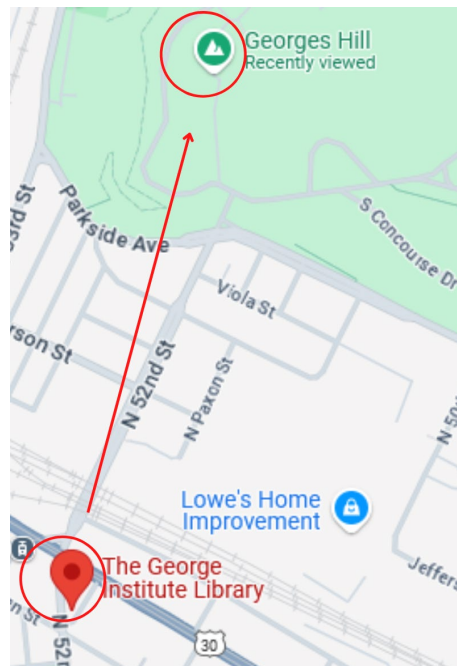


FIGURE 17.2: Proximity of “George’s Hill” to the George Institute; 0.6 miles north on 52nd Street.

The organization, under the same founding grant, relocated to the current E. Allen Wilson-designed 52nd Street building in 1914. (Philadelphia Builders Guide, Volume 29 pp. 221)

Figure 18 The Institution continued to function as a standalone library until 1927, when it was dissolved and the assets awarded to the Free Library of Philadelphia. It re-opened on May 1st, 1928, still bearing the George name as the “George Institute Branch.” (Free Library of Philadelphia Archives.)

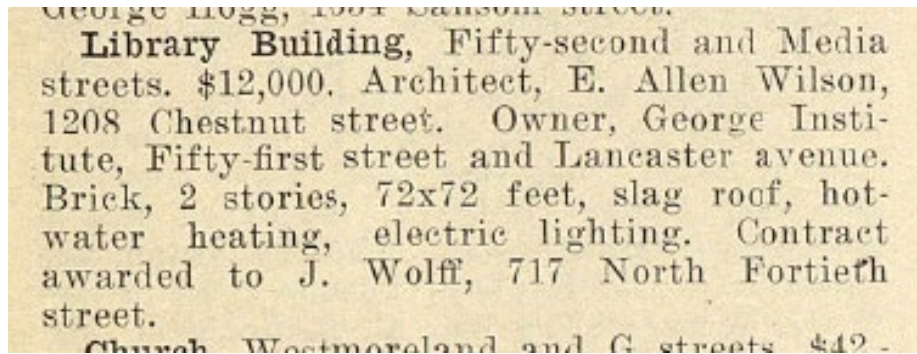


FIGURE 18: From Page 221 of Philadelphia Builder's Guide, Volume 29, Page 221, mentioning the construction of the second George Institute Location in 1914.

The George Institute is a unique link between one of West Philadelphia's founding families and a commitment towards civic improvement. Had it not been for the George family's donation of land, Fairmount Park would not have its spectacular views of the city, or land for its current Mann Center for the Performing Arts. In the same vein, the act of establishing the George Institute created a lasting precedent for access to public education, community resources, and “third spaces” in Philadelphia.

Criterion C:

(c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style;

The George Institute is designed in the Federal Revival style, which is not only distinctively characteristic of Philadelphia architectural history, but of Hestonville's historical architectural language.

Federal architecture and revival movements thereafter have a long-standing tradition in this section of West Philadelphia. The greater Hestonville area dates to the early to mid-1700s, with residents such as the George family and Lieutenant General, Judge and Senator Edward Heston settling along Lancaster Avenue. (Senate Library, Member Biography Edward Warner Heston) **Figures 19, 20** As this mostly Quaker community continued to grow and thrive towards the end of the 18th century, the height of the Federal period, prominent homesteads and buildings sprang up reflecting the Federal tradition.



FIGURE 19: The original George family home displays architectural styles and traditions suggestive of Federal form, albeit much simpler than its early 20th century revival counterparts. The home employs some level of symmetry, handsome double-chimneys, gabled roof, Tuscan columns, and 12-light windows.



FIGURE 20: Original homestead of Edward W. Heston, founder of Hestonville. A three bay, two and a half floor home in a paired down, Federal influenced style. Aside from the right-aligned front door, the house reads as symmetrical and has a classically inspired entablature around the front door. The house was razed in 1901 for expansion of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

The Federal Style takes its roots in England with the Adam brothers, who popularized their eponymous style. This would soon transition into the Georgian style, a very similar and overlapping design narrative. (Pennsylvania and Historical Museum Commission, Federal Style 1780-1820) In the American colonies, the term “Federal” came into use to respect the new nation’s sovereignty. This architectural movement blended traditional northern European construction methods with classical ideas and motifs, such as a symmetrical exterior/layout and rooms “en filad,” or centered around a main hall. Ornamentation relies on classical motifs when present - prominent arches, dentil moldings, columns, large window bays, quoins, etc. (Lester, pp. 94-99)

Like any architectural style, Federalism was paired down and adapted for many different uses in the late 18th and early 19th century, establishing itself as the preeminent form in American colonial cities such as Philadelphia. Reduced stylization and ornament in Federal era architecture appealed to and harmonized with Quaker sensibilities of simplicity and integrity of construction. Various fine examples were built, such as

Independence Hall and related memorial buildings, the Hill-Physick House, Colonnade Row, to name a few. **Figures 21, 22**

Federal era architecture, with earlier Georgian influence, flourished in the small settlement of Hestonville to the best of its ability, defining the Edward W. Heston homestead, the George House, and other simple buildings of that time. **Figures 23 and 23.1**



FIGURE 21: Federal Style Colonnade Row, 1500 block of Chestnut St, circa 1830



FIGURE 22: Hill-Physick House at 321 S 4th Street, a 1786 Federal Era Philadelphia Townhome.

The term Federal Revival would be coined with the style's second wave of popularity around the turn of the 20th century, after the Centennial and various world's fairs breathed new interest into the United States's style in its dawning days. Federal Revivalism was marked by incorporating symmetry and classical motifs onto the facades and interiors of contemporary builds. In Philadelphia, the Federal form started to appear on rowhouses that employed classically embellished metal cornices, classical order columns, windows with splayed lintels, etc. In larger civic buildings, the luxury of space and budget allowed for more complex brickwork, employment of quoins, larger cornices, and elaborate multi-lighted windows. This aimed to honor both the classical design narrative and more local 18th century traditions that were similarly inspired.

Hestonville was no stranger to revivalism. As the 19th century neared its end, many of these old homesteads found themselves in jeopardy. What was once a sleepy suburb was first impacted by the Main Line railroad in the middle of the century. In 1895, electrification of streetcar lines led to denser, more rapid development. Any open farmland was gridded subdivided into plots for rowhouses and the Pennsylvania Railroad yard (52nd and Lancaster) assumed more land, including the tract where Edward Heston lived. **Figure 24** His house was demolished around this period. **Figure 23**

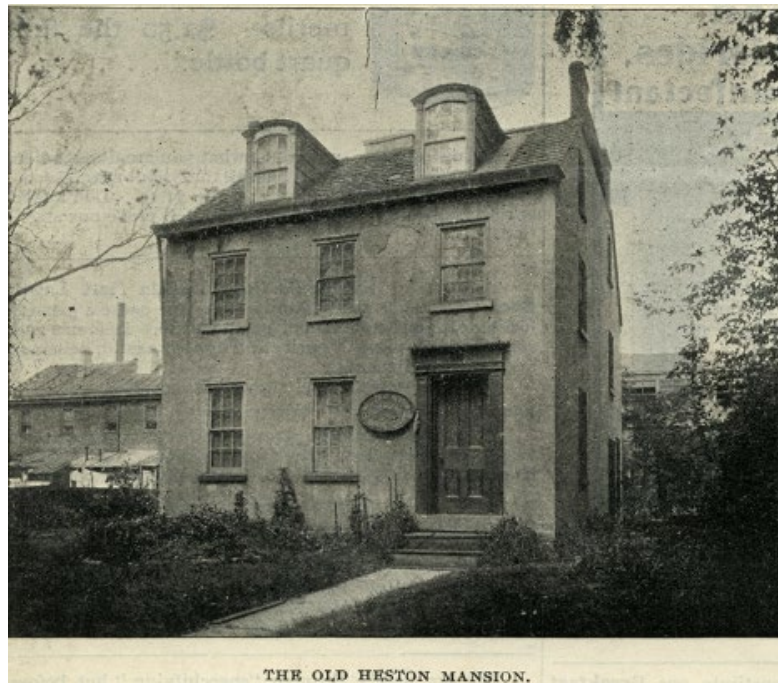


FIGURE 23: Restated for reference. The homestead of Edward W. Heston, founder of Hestonville. A three bay, two and a half floor home in a paired down, Federal influenced style. Aside from the right-aligned front door, the house reads as symmetrical and has a classically inspired entablature around the front door.



FIGURE 23.1: Restated for reference. The George family home displays architectural styles and traditions suggestive of Federal forms, albeit much simpler than its early 20th century revival counterparts. The home employs some level of symmetry, handsome double-chimneys, gabled roof, Tuscan columns, and 12-light windows.

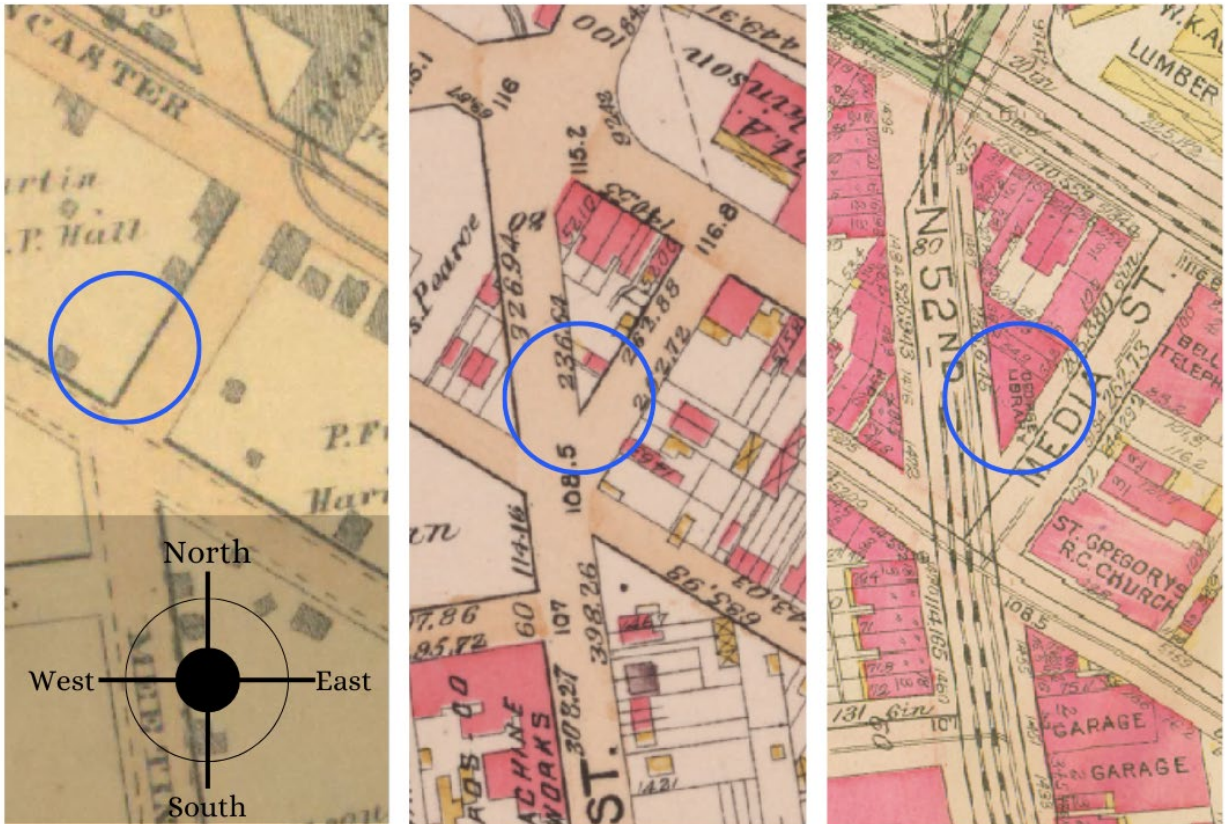


FIGURE 24: From left to right, Philadelphia Atlas sections from 1862, 1895, and 1927 showing rapid development of land adjacent to the Pennsylvania Railroad yard and trolley routes (along 52nd Street and Lancaster Avenue). Note the triangular lot where the George Institute sits (circled in blue) was created sometime between 1862 and 1895, when Meeting House Lane became 52nd Street, and the 1400 block was laid.

The George Institute being in the Federal Revival style not only honors the Philadelphia tradition of this simple, classically inspired, brick forward form; moreover, it recognizes the true Federal era buildings that were readily razed at the turn of the 20th century. For the George Institute, architect E. Allen Wilson follows contemporary stylistic trends, but blends them with architectural motifs that had existed in the area for over a century prior. Bending the facades' symmetry around the irregular acute angled frontage is not unlike adaptations builders employed in the late 18th century to utilize Federal style under compromised conditions of budget and material choices. The unique library building is a subtle nod to the area's greater history. Other buildings at the prominent intersection of 52nd and Lancaster also follow this Federal Revival trend in the same period. Bookending the intersection are the equally Federal-inspired Bell Telephone Building (now Verizon) and the northwest corner block along 52nd and Lancaster before Lansdowne. **Figures 25, 25.1**



FIGURE 25: Restated for reference. Early 20th century Federal Revival style commercial row on the southwest corner of 52nd and Lancaster. (Joseph E. DeStefano, January 2025)



FIGURE 25.1: Restated for reference. Verizon building (formerly Bell Telephone), southwest corner of Lancaster and Bible. Note classical features tied to Federal Revivalism, including stylized Flemish bond, entablatures, and keystones. (Joseph E. DeStefano, January 2025)

Criterion E:

*(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;*

The George Institute Library was designed by E. Allen Wilson, an architect whose work significantly influenced the form and functional development of Philadelphia buildings during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Design of the George Institute Library at 1461-65 North 52nd Street was awarded to prolific Philadelphia architect E. Allen Wilson (1874-1940). Wilson appeared in the Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide and city directories between roughly 1895 and 1929. He is attributed to a considerable number of housing sub-developments, apartment buildings, and commercial structures mostly throughout West and North Philadelphia. (Tatman, Philadelphia Architects and Buildings) Today, his buildings are better known for their iconic Philadelphia form rather than his name.

Wilson achieved notable national recognition at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where a model "Workingman's Rowhouse" was constructed after his designs.

Figure 26 (Converse et al., pp. 165-166) While Wilson certainly did not invent the modern (early 20th century) rowhouse, his significant contributions to its iconic design helped to standardize its form and function within a burgeoning Philadelphia, allowing builders to readily interpret his plans as the "model" of an ideal urban home. He was commissioned to design large tracts of land, usually entire blocks, during Philadelphia's turn-of-the-century development boom. This provided Wilson the unique opportunity to create unique, uniform, and complete looking architectural works.

Some of his notable developments, in a style similar to the Federal-inspired George Institute include the "painted ladies" at 10-18 S 52nd Street and the Satterlee Apartments at 4500-4506 Chestnut Street. Attractive sub-developments demonstrating more composite, vernacular early 20th century styles include the John Coltrane Residence at 1511 N 33rd Street, the Paul Robeson House at 4951 Walnut Street, and the Regent-Rennoc Court Apartments at 1311-1327 S 52nd Street thru 5100 Regent Streets. Less notable, but architecturally significant and comparable developments such as 5810-5861 Washington Avenue also demonstrate his ability to blend classic styles indicative of Philadelphia architectural dialogue with then-contemporary housing demands. (Tatman, Philadelphia Architects and Buildings) **Figure 27**

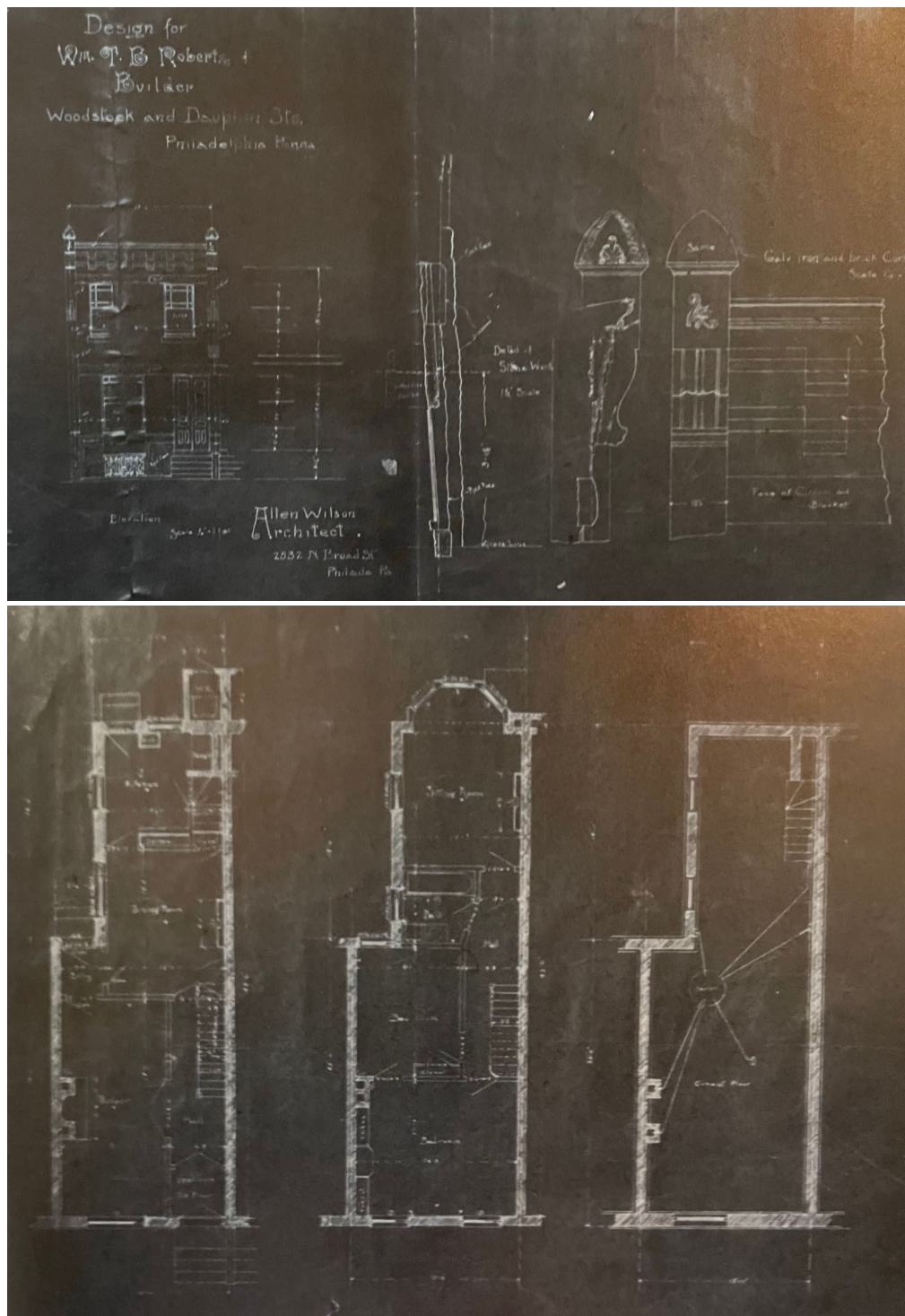


FIGURE 26: Designs of a “Workingman’s Rowhouse” by E. Allen Wilson, for William Roberts, similar to Wilson’s work for the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Wilson aided in standardizing rowhouse design plans, allowing builders to readily interpret specifications for consistent, high-quality homes. This housing model would permeate Philadelphia’s residential real-estate stock in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This home, more or less, is visible in all parts of the city. (Converse et al., “Drawing Toward Building”)



FIGURE 27: Several E. Allen Wilson commissions of similar age in typical Philadelphia Federal Revival style. In order, 10-18 S 52nd Street, 4500-4506 Walnut Street, and 5810-5861 Washington Avenue. Note classical features such as large quoins, cornices with dentil detailing, splayed lintels, temple-like entrances, and broken pediments. (Google Maps)

The 1910 federal census shows E. Allen Wilson living at 5244 West Jefferson Street, at the corner of Wilton, only a few blocks from the George Institute. **Figures 28, 29** Given the architect's choice to design the building in the Federal Revival style, referencing earlier buildings in the town of Hestonville, and his established residence within the community, it can be considered a truly thoughtful design.

Criterion H:

(h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City;

The unique location and flat-iron shape of the George building is deeply tied to the visual identity of 52nd and Lancaster.

This nomination would be remiss to leave out how this building's unique form and critical location define this neighborhood's section of the 52nd Street corridor. Not many areas, especially west of the Schuylkill and within an area where development boomed during the late 19th century, maintain the irregular streetscapes that permit flatiron buildings to exist. That being said, of the few flatiron buildings that exist, even fewer were purpose-built for public use. This special, captivating building sits front and center on West Philadelphia's "main street," acting as a familiar face, welcoming pedestrians to the Lancaster Avenue corridor, West Parkside beyond, and hopefully a world of literary wonder.

Since Hestonville predates the consolidation of Philadelphia (1854) by more than a century, the area was first traversed by irregular streetscape consisting of ancient travel routes and corresponding paths. (1862 Philadelphia Atlas, Hestonville Section) **Figures 30, 31** By the time streetcar lines were electrified in 1895, such as the major Lancaster Avenue Line, most of the adjacent land was gridded and platted for development. Though many pre-consolidation streets were "corrected" or obliterated entirely to match the Philadelphia grid, some of the less uniform paths prevailed, such as the 5100 Block of Media/Bible Way.

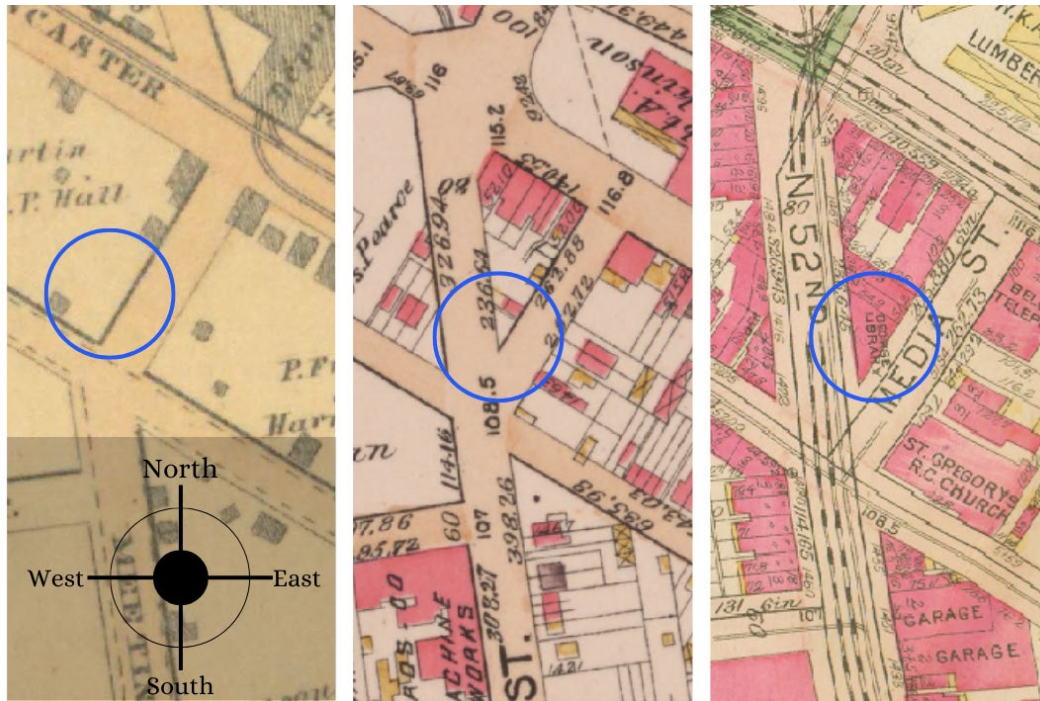


FIGURE 30: Restated for reference. From left to right, Philadelphia Atlas sections from 1862, 1895, and 1927 showing rapid development of land adjacent to the Pennsylvania Railroad yard and trolley routes (along 52nd Street and Lancaster Avenue). Note the triangular lot where the George Institute sits (circled in blue) was created sometime between 1862 and 1895, when Meeting House Lane became 52nd Street, and the 1400 block was laid.

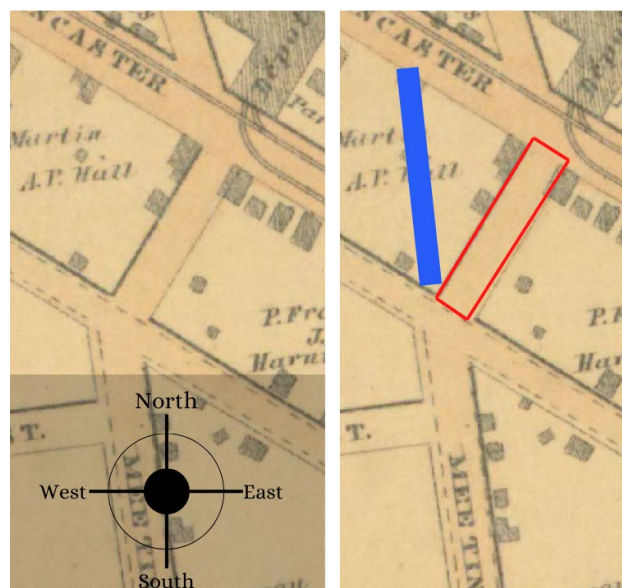


FIGURE 31: From the 1862 Philadelphia Atlas, see the unaltered (left) and annotated (right) maps of the same intersection. North 52nd Street is still called “Meeting House” here. The block outlined in red was originally “Meeting House Lane’s” connection to Lancaster Avenue. After the 1400 block of North 52nd was laid, colored in blue, the red outlined section of “Meeting House” would come to be known as “Media” and later “Bible Way.”

This little block has a rich history, as it was the original main connection of 52nd Street, formerly “Meeting House Lane”, to the Lancaster Avenue corridor. **Figures 31, 32** For reference, the section of 52nd Street between Girard Avenue and Pear Street, now Warren Street, was called “Meeting House Lane” until at least 1862. (Phillyhistory.org, Historic Street Name Index) The 1400 Block of North 52nd Street would later carve through Hestonville to provide a more uniform, in-line connection with Lancaster Avenue, making this section of old “Meeting House Lane” appear as no more than a one-off path from the replanned main boulevard. **Figures 30, 31**



FIGURE 32 From TriCollege Libraries/Haverford College archives, the original Hestonville Meeting House, for which the Lane was named. (1918) A very simple, though sturdy, stuccoed stone structure, reflecting Quaker values of integrity in construction with minimal frills. Even still, its symmetrical form and minimal window casements reflect classical sensibilities tied to the Federal era.

Meeting House Lane’s prime location and connectivity would serve its continued use and existence. Lancaster Avenue runs at a diagonal to the more traditional, post 1854 consolidation grid. Most of its immediate, irregular “offshoot” streets were more likely to survive by the very nature of their convenience.

As a result, this offshoot from 52nd Street (5100 Block of Media/Bible way) was solidified as part of the grid, creating a unique triangular lot. This allowed for architect E. Allen Wilson to play with traditional building forms. What arose was a marvelously efficient use of a unique space with exterior symmetry that reflects across said triangular corner to accommodate all street-facing sides. **Figures 33-35**



Figure 33: Restated for reference. George Institute at 52nd and Media, now Bible Way, C. 1940, Free Library Archives.



FIGURE 34: Restated for reference. Southern Elevation, showing the main entrance and portico entablature.



FIGURE 35: Restated for reference. Eastern elevation facing Bible Way (formerly Media St). Eight original windows are still visible. (PC)

Surviving irregular streets can also be seen at the former southern section of “Meeting House Lane,” where only one surviving block remains into the 21st century, between Poplar and Girard. Keeping this oddly shaped path in the face of uniform urbanization somewhat proves the ancient road’s communal significance and former prominence. The former Hill’s Pharmacy, currently the Girard Donut, on the southwest corner of 52nd and Girard’s rear elevation is angled to accommodate Meeting House Lane, with visible former shop windows lining that strip. **Figure 36** (The section between Wyalusing and Poplar was removed in 2024 for a new apartment development.) **Figure 37**



FIGURE 36: Above, two pictures of the building at 52nd and Girard, southwest corner. Top from Google Maps, July 2019, and bottom from early 20th century. Visible in both photos (close-up on top) is the irregularly shaped back end of the building facing the southern stretch of “Meeting House Lane.” Storefronts were included here to accommodate pedestrians on that thoroughfare; a relic of the past.



FIGURE 37: The demolition of the Horn Surgical Factory building (foreground). This is the southernmost end of “Meeting House Lane,” just south of 53rd and Poplar. This section was removed as of Fall 2024 to facilitate a new apartment complex. (Joseph E. DeStefano, October 3rd, 2024)

Hestonville does not stand alone in unique intersections; further adaptations to irregular grids can be found east on Lancaster Avenue at Hawthorne Hall and in other parts of the city with organic development prior to consolidation. **Figure 38**

The oddly shaped, triangular lot the George Institute sits is a result of organic urban development being adapted to gridded streets. In the path of the latter comprehensive planning, many older roads and travel routes were lost, making this intersection one of the few remaining examples. The development of this irregular block directly informed the shape of this flatiron building, which silently reveals centuries of urban planning in Hestonville. The George Institute has defined this prominent intersection since 1914, caringlly styled to reflect the neighborhood’s storied pre-revolutionary past, and look towards its future.



FIGURE 38: From Google Maps, July 2024. Hawthorne Hall under restoration. This trapezoidal building conforms to the unique grid layout between diagonal Lancaster Avenue, and gridded streets 39th (north/south) and Hamilton (east/west). This special building was intended to be multi-purpose with communal meeting space.

Closing Thoughts:

E. Allen Wilson’s “George Institute” is not only a remarkable and immediately recognizable face of early 20th century Federal Revival architecture in Philadelphia; but also, it is a direct tie to the formative years of Philadelphia’s founding and expansion, and an extremely necessary “third space” for the greater community. This vital city-provided resource for public education, study, and exploration has not been available to this area since being shuttered in 2000. The building itself, retaining many original features and contributing to the corridor’s sense of place, creates an inspiring space to learn and create. It is more than a building - it is a monument to the human spirit of altruism, knowledge, and community. I assert that this building has historical and contemporary significance in all aspects of the term.

- PHILADELPHIA MANETO -

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