

Charlie and Alina Elison
423-425 Vine Street
Philadelphia, PA 19146

Philadelphia Historical Commission
1515 Arch Street 13th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19102

Members of the Commission,

Please find this letter in support of our application to obtain building permits for the renovation of our home on 423-425 Vine street.

We have always wanted to own a historic home in Old City. We were immediately drawn to the history and character of this house and the surrounding neighborhood. We love that this house provides room to grow for our expanding family.

It was immediately obvious that the stairs would not work given accessibility and functional needs for our family and we bought this property with the immediate intent to modify the staircase. To accomplish this, we retained an architect and structural engineer to plan for modifications to address our family's needs. Demolishing (and rebuilding) this ell wall was not our first choice. Our architect, with consultations from our structural engineer, proposed several designs alternatives. As much as we tried, none of these alternatives allowed us to keep the functional utility of our dining room, while allowing us the space to modernize both our stairs to the basement and stairs to the second story. Additionally, the second floor of the property is mis-aligned on three different levels, involving two different sets of steps. A key requirement of this renovation project is leveling the second floor to a greater extent to improve accessibility.

The modernization of our stairs is an absolute necessity for our home, given mobility considerations for both an older adult family member with accessibility needs, a 1 year old, our growing family, and myself (a combat veteran with minor but overlapping combat-related injuries that will progressively limit my mobility in the future). This is our forever home – but it can only be so if we can navigate these stairs in 20 years. Any other design alternative forced us to lose the functional utility of the middle section of the house.

Important to your consideration, is the fact that this ell is not currently (and if re-built) will NOT be in public viewshed. Please see several sets of photos, including photos taken December 23, 2025 by a preservation focused property photographer that prove this fact (PHOTOS).

Originally constructed to be an alley-way ell, this wall's character and fenestrations have been significantly altered over time. In order to help date this ell and lend perspective to our design options, we consulted two key subject matter experts. Dr. Lori Arnold, a local historic preservationist and neighbor, as well as Mr. Mike Gavlick, a master mason with historic

preservation certifications and 24 years of experience. Dr. Arnold's assessments are included, including her summary of Mr. Gavlick's findings. The most critical elements of those assessments and findings note that the brick on this ell is in poor condition (owing to its original construction, as well as the many layers of stucco cladding added over the years), out of viewshed, and that the marble step may not be original. We also consulted with local realtor and near neighbor Scott Neifeld as a subject matter expert on navigating the unique architectural constraints of Old City properties, whose expert opinion on the nature of the functional obsolescence of these staircases and their impacts are included.

423-425 Vine is the last single-family home on this block of Vine street. This is our forever home. In order to make it our forever home, we must modernize the stairs. If we cannot accomplish this, we would be forced to put the house back on the market, at significant financial hardship. We are already very invested in the neighborhood and community, including volunteering extensively with the Franklin Bridge Neighbors North Registered Community Organization. As such, we've sought great counsel from neighbors, including previous owners of this home who are still very active in the neighborhood and local preservation efforts.

This wall, although original, does not characterize the historic character of the house. It was built to be an alley wall. It was not well-maintained overtime and even in the 20th century maintenance has long been deferred because it continues to be an alley wall not in public view. The true historic character of this house is seen in the front façade and the rear most ell, which will not be altered and which we look forward to investing in preserving.

Sincerely,

Charlie and Alina Elison

Lori Arnold, PhD LEED

woodconservator@gmail.com

215-667-4734

RE: 423-425 Vine Street

Honorable Commissioners of the Historic Commission:

I write to express support for the small addition the homeowners would like to add to their historic home. This house and adjacent courtyard (425 Vine Street) sat on the market for a significant amount of time before the Elisons purchased it. It is currently designated and in a historic district. Prior to this designation, it was restored and heavily altered. I disagree with the denial recommended by the Architecture Committee since there have been significant alterations with this property. To claim that this addition will compromise the integrity of the structure is simply false. Originally, this was a workman's home, a barbershop with German inhabitants for decades. This house was not considered historic until the 80s. As an architectural conservator and historic preservationist, with 30 years of experience, I submit my reasoning for the approval of this addition:

With the aid of a mason, an investigation was conducted to determine the thickness of the stucco on the wall to be demolished for the addition. There were several layers of stucco resulting in a thickness of more than 2 inches. This indicates that the wall – original or not – cannot be returned to or acknowledged as original. The bricks were of lower quality than the original on the front of the house. The mortar originally used was black. There is a large marble step at the door that originally was used as a doorstep but has been reseated during earlier restorations. We have no way of knowing its original location.

View-shed parameters, used in the past to allow alterations is *VERY* applicable in this situation. The portion of the house the homeowners wish to build an addition onto cannot be seen from the street – at all. The homeowners' architect is open to recommendations for fenestration and appropriate materials – including black mortar. No one will be able to see the construction of the addition, nor will it be visible from the street. The demolition to the wall with the addition will add space, light and value to the home.

The Architecture Committee's recommendation to deny the addition will put this house back on the market. Federal houses are beautiful but do not leave a lot of room for a growing family in the 21st century. Considering these factors, I would recommend approval of the proposed addition for this family.

Thank you,
Lori Arnold



Charles Elison <cmlison@gmail.com>

423-425 Vine Street

Scott Neifeld <scott.neifeld@compass.com>
To: "cmlison@gmail.com" <cmlison@gmail.com>

Fri, Dec 26, 2025 at 1:23 PM

To whom it may concern:

The following observations are based upon my 33 years as a licensed PA Real Estate Agent and Realtor in Philadelphia and the surrounding communities. Over this time, navigating the unique architecture of Center City, I have identified characteristics that directly impact marketing residential properties.

It is my professional opinion that homes with functionally obsolete staircases generally take longer to sell and seem to sell for less than homes with contemporary and standard width staircases. Many of these staircases were built at a time when occupants were smaller in stature, had simpler household needs and shorter lifespans. Today these narrow, tightly turned staircase proportions present significant challenges. In my experience these staircases are often perceived as:

A Safety Concern: They can be difficult to safely traverse, particularly for aging populations or families with young children.

A logistical Barrier: They frequently make moving modern furniture- which is significantly larger than 19th century pieces--difficult or impossible without professional hoisting.

A Lifestyle Constraint: Contemporary buyers prioritize flow and accessibility and a restrictive staircase is often viewed as a primary functional defect.

Best regards.

Scott

Scott Neifeld
Realtor
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