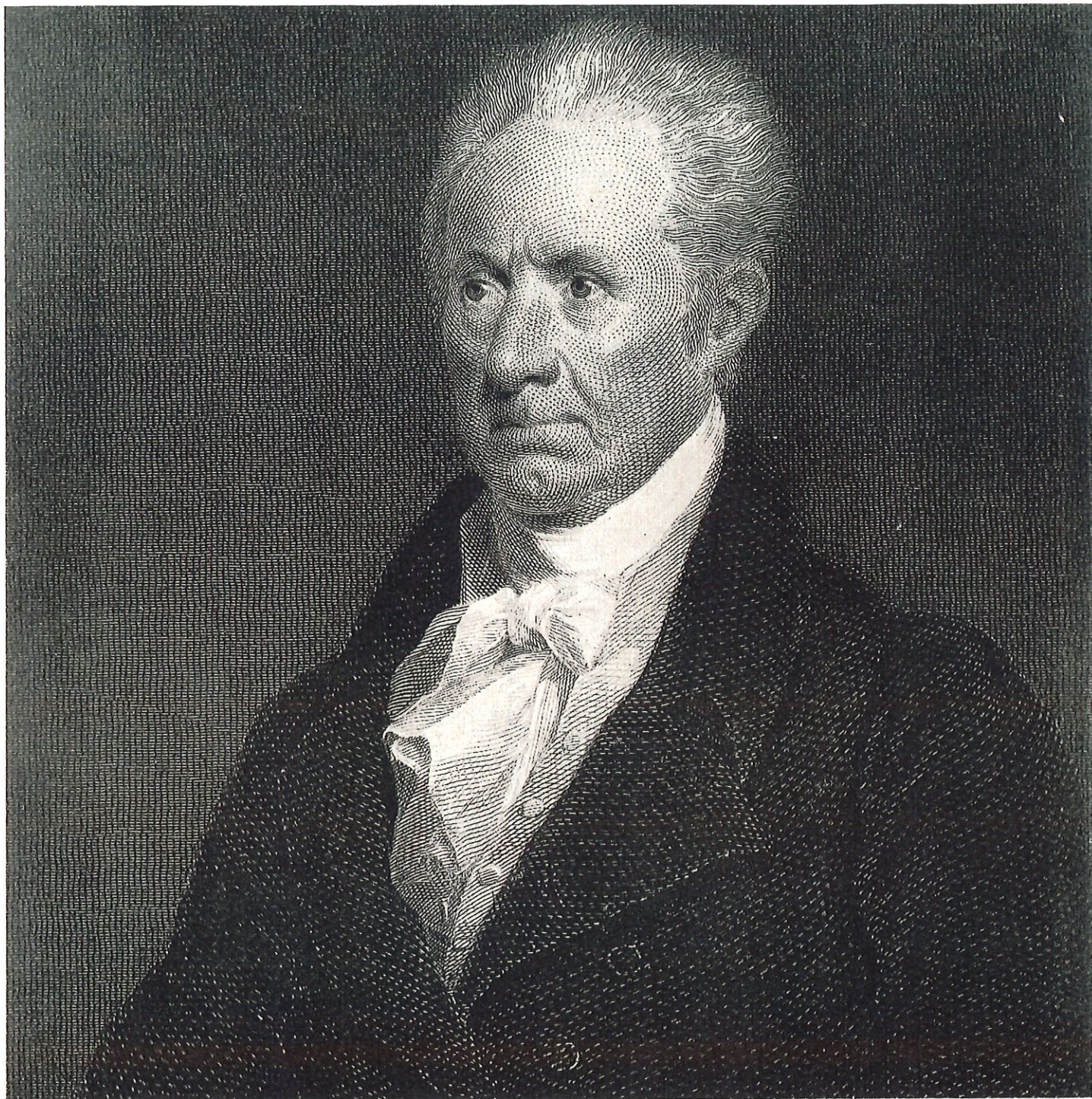


GERMANTOWNE *CRIER*

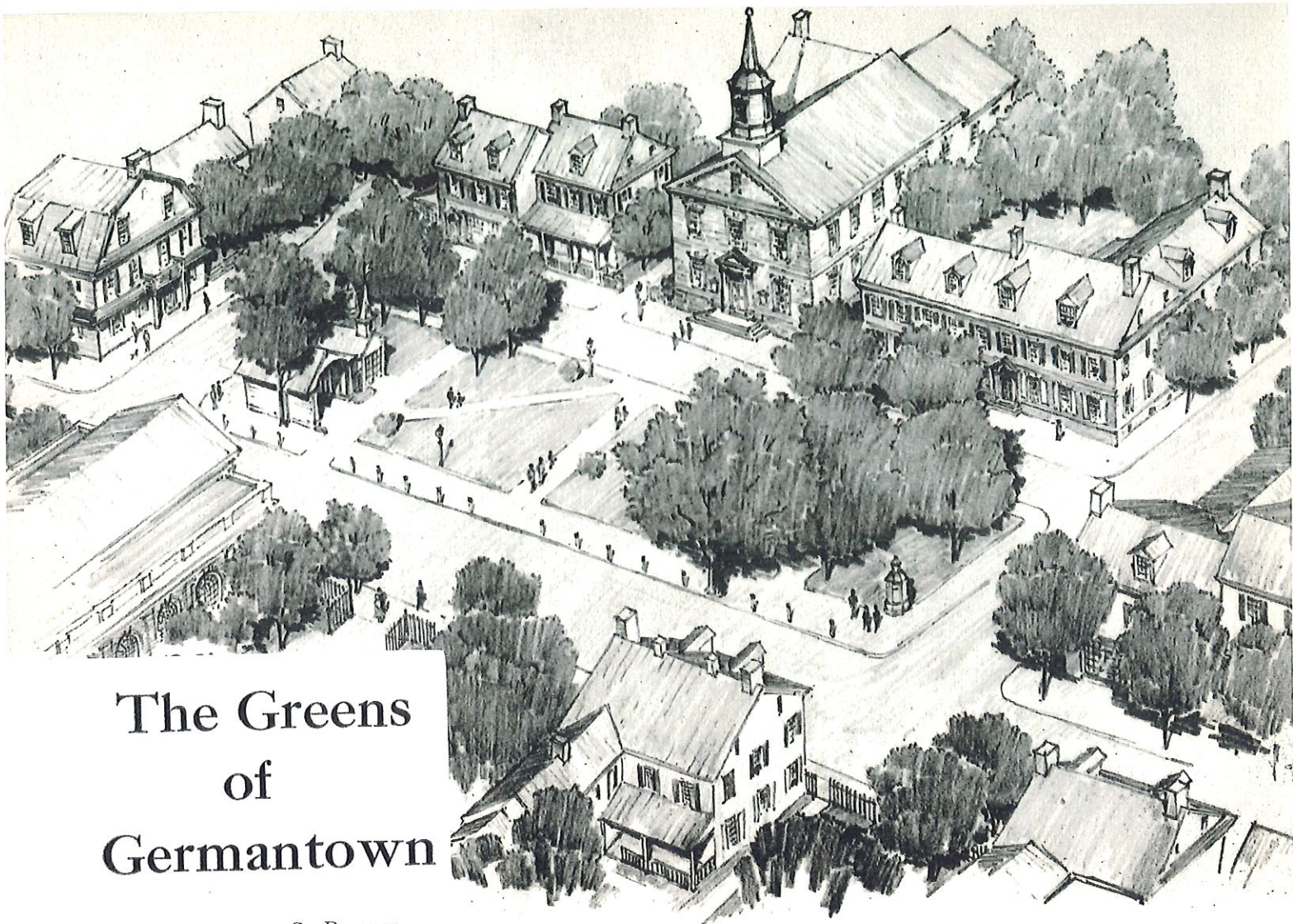


GILBERT STUART, engraved by A. B. Durand (See page 9)

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The Greens of Germantown

By DRAYTON S. BRYANT

A TREASURE lies in the open in Germantown—its greens, trees, and open spaces, large and small. John Greenleaf Whittier, poet of nature, quietness and the friendly way, wrote in "The Pennsylvania Pilgrim,"

..... through the deep,
Hush of the woods a murmur seemed to creep,
The Schuylkill whispering in a voice of sleep.

All else was still. The oxen from their ploughs
Rested at last, and from their long day's browse
Came the dun files of Krisheim's home-bound cows.

And the young city

Lay in the distance, lovely even then
With its fair women and its stately men
Gracing the forest court of William Penn,

Urban yet sylvan; in its rough hewn frames
Of oak and pine the dryads held their claims,
And lent its streets their pleasant woodland names.

"Urban yet sylvan" is the combination that struck the eye and heart of the poet. This is a special charm, that of urbanity along with a rhythm of open spaces and green vistas, closed spaces and structures and

long ways before the eye. This quality of living which is found in much of Germantown is different from either the once solidly filled brick blocks of a walk-to-work industrial era, or the present often confused scatteration of the suburbs.

In its first century, Germantown was a settlement along a road. Yet it was more than a road. It was a known focal point with a felt character. Below, the road led to the great city, second largest in the British Empire before 1775. To the west, the road led on to other towns and the great interior. It existed in itself with its own character from first settlers with strong and special motivations. One face was toward the greater urban area and the other toward farms, villages and the wilderness.

It was a pleasant road and people lived close to it. In a time when travellers were welcomed, new people were of high interest for their infrequent tidings of the larger world.

The Great Road, as it was once called, followed an Indian trail. In the year of the Battle, 1777, there were reportedly six cross-roads. It was once called the worst road in the United States. "The soil was of such nature that in summer time it was ground to fine choking dust, while in winter and spring, it was almost impassable for wheeled vehicles on account of

the mud." The story is told of a gentleman who is building a house on the other side of the road from his home and saddled his horse to ride across in safety."¹

THE RHYTHM OF OPEN SPACES

The Great Road has a special wealth of open spaces, parks, cemeteries, open spaces around churches, institutions, large and small houses. At many points, the green lands are paired across from each other giving a refreshing break to the eye and re-enforcing each other. None of the other famous old roads of Philadelphia have any comparable quality at this time, except at infrequent points. Think of the condition of the Baltimore Pike, Ridge Avenue, Frankford Avenue, Passyunk Avenue, Lancaster and Bethlehem Pikes and York Road. In spite of the creeping disorder, destruction, signs and other jarring notes, there still is more character on about three miles of Germantown Avenue than any other stretch within or near the City limits of Philadelphia.

A FINE MORNING WALK

If you would know Germantown, you are urged to walk from Wayne Junction to Sedgwick Street. Observe the churches, institutions, schools, big and small houses of character, from the 18th and 19th centuries—and at the same time, observe open spaces, green areas and trees. What would the street be without the latter? What can be added to space and green to further strengthen the character that still remains? Controlling, rehabilitating, or eliminating the negative elements along the Avenue is another subject, that of an historic district and its methods for saving and re-establishing one of the great heritages of the United States. 19th century houses add to its meaning as well as those of the 18th. In 1850, a visitor with a keen eye wrote:

"On the morning of the 29th of November, (1848), I left Philadelphia for Germantown. It was a delightful morning, the air a little frosty. The road from the city to its ancient suburban village passes through a pleasant, undulating country, and was swarming with vehicles of every kind a greater portion of the way (sounds familiar)!

The village of Germantown extends along a fine macadamized road for nearly three miles, having no lateral streets, and, though so near a great commercial city, few places in the United States present more striking appearances of antiquity. Twenty or thirty of the low, steep-roofed, substantial stone houses, with quaint pent eaves and ponderous cornices, built by the early inhabitants, yet remain and produce a picturesque feature in the midst of the more elegant modern mansions of a later generation."²

LARGE GREEN AREAS AROUND GERMANTOWN

A primary asset of Germantown as a fine residential district, next to its people, its home and institutions,

is its large green areas. From the Schuylkill River to the west with the green portico of the Wissahickon, there joins the natural north line of Cresheim Valley with its creek and especially attractive roads. To the south, there is the railroad and industrial districts and now the expressway. There is Fern Hill Park, still substantial. In addition to the many trees of the southernmost streets, there is the opportunity for significant planting along the expressway, a kind of green strip which has been better planned and maintained in many other states.

To the east where Germantown merges directly into the larger Northwest district, there are the large grounds of the Awbury Arboretum, Wister Woods, the grounds of large institutions and many smaller green areas.

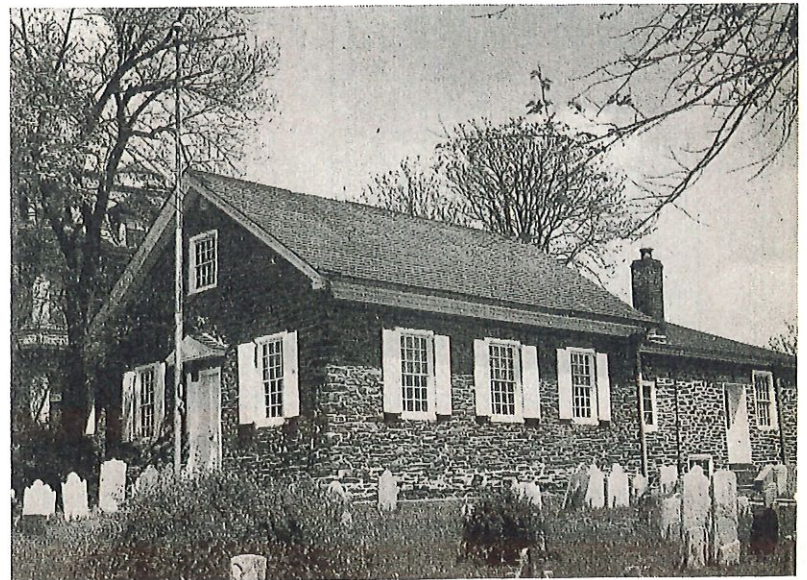
In 1844, Edgar Allan Poe in "Morning on the Wissahickon" wrote of the high quality of this most beautiful of urban large green spaces that "the Wissahickon is of so remarkable a loveliness that, were it flowing in England, it would be the theme of every bard."

A FULL SPECTRUM OF OPEN SPACES

A varied source of uses, purposes, sizes and designs applies to the value of open space. A full catalogue is beyond this article but from the great areas of Fairmount Park and the Wissahickon, the Carpenters Woods and Cresheim Valley, there are the sizeable open, free greens such as McMichael and Cliveden Parks.

There are green fingers reaching from the large park areas into the residential blocks as that fine one on Lincoln Drive from above Wissahickon Avenue to Wayne Avenue.

Less considered are the small spaces. Some of these may be only for the eye while others may be places for informal gathering, a few benches, a piece of wood, metal or stone on which children may climb, where friends and strangers may meet, mothers bring baby carriages, elderly or young couples find a peaceful



moment. Our hurried culture scarcely recognizes the kind of quiet point for contemplation within nature, sought and designed in the Orient, for instance, within large or small planted areas.

Today's writers on planning have begun to reemphasize the spirit of the gathering place particularly—its casual aspects as a vital part of social process, whose function has been too often crushed in the sterility of new massive planning. A sense of community must be based upon the arterial function of communication. Face-to-face contacts, groups and meeting places, organized or casual, are a vital part of the process of growth and renewal.

WASTED OPPORTUNITIES

Open spaces are being wiped out or jammed by the rush of builders and enterprisers to launch their ventures. The vacant lot where children could dig and create the world of their fancy is steadily disappearing. Increasing national attention has been given to the saving of open space. Greenbelts are still lacking in metropolitan planning but within each neighborhood are still many opportunities for small open spaces, useful and beautiful.

There are some spaces in Germantown unused and still available for public or civic ownership and design. A handsome small sitting and tot area similar to Fidler Square in Center City could be designed in the large, weed filled, fenced and useless yard of the old school at Horter and Musgrave Streets. A sizeable piece of land is unused on Belfield Avenue near Church Lane. Stations and much of the right of way along railroads could be vastly improved for the eye of the commuter and could often be put to informal use along the banks. At Mt. Pleasant Avenue just southwest of the Pennsylvania Railroad is an unused piece. Green spaces might be developed currently in the Morton area, such as at Haines and Morton Streets. The Germantown Settlement is engaged in guiding a group of neighbors toward a better use of their yards.

The Fairmount Park Commission, the City Recreation Department and the City Parks Association with reason, should consider the needs of large numbers of children and adults and stretch the service of their available funds. The maintenance costs are allegedly higher for small pieces. Yet in view of the values to a neighborhood, ways should be found to develop and maintain such small spots.

Garden clubs have well served to stimulate awareness and results within well placed homes. Mrs. James Bush-Brown and associated volunteers and clubs have brought much flowering to smaller homes and less experienced families. A new organization, the Neighborhood Conservation Corps has begun work in various locations throughout the city. Teenagers and adults have obtained local used materials, bricks, marble steps, railroad ties, beams from demolitions, and are building small places for outdoor informal use. Civic groups in some sections have

maintained greenways, flower plots, and memorials. Volunteer initiative should be able to play some role not only in clean-up and exhortation but in action and responsibility. And a visible physical result for the neighborhood association is a source of immediate pride and strength in service.



TOWN OF A HUNDRED PARKS

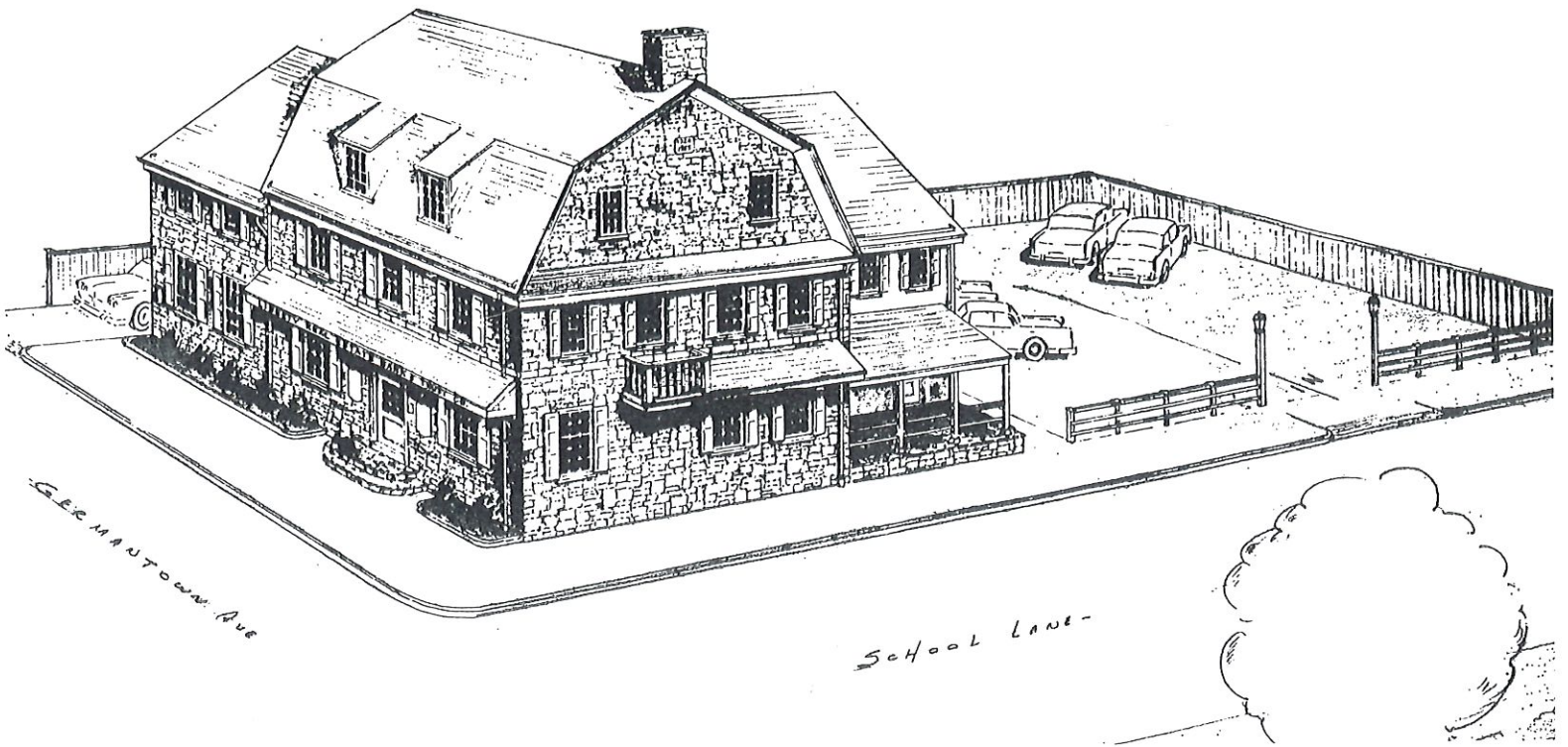
There are several dozen park and green areas of note in public or institutional ownership. In the new growth of Germantown over the coming decade, there could be found and developed more green anchors which would justify the title, "Town of a Hundred Parks." This would expand and strengthen the present character of spaces and homes, organization and quality of Germantown.

The hedged or walled patio, a private garden for a room, or a family, can be a vital extension of the home. Attractive walls can also add emphasis to an opening beyond, a larger space, an important vista. Their vertical lines blend with or heighten horizontal attractiveness.

The hiding of inevitable nuisances in the urban scene is another function where solid screening should not only be encouraged but in the writer's opinion, required by city ordinance. Out of Germantown might come the demand for a city-wide ordinance to require partial screening up to perhaps 4 feet for parking lots of all types and solid screening of 5 feet or more for the worst eyesores, junk yards, garages, auto wrecking lots.

There may be places where the churches, major civic buildings, and selected location for high residential concentrations of good quality, or a handsome new vertical note would be appropriate and positive.

At the core of the village at Germantown Avenue and Cheltenham Avenue, there is no high point from which a tourist coming to this historical district can rise above the trees to get a feeling of the Great Road and its historic stretch. No one outlook enables him to see the new cultural, educational and civic institutions of the reconstituted Germantown core. Some slender tower, well set in green space near Germantown Avenue and Cheltenham, might be the important point for understanding the special quality of Germantown.



Partial Screening For Parking Lots

THE ANCHOR ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS

The fabric of Germantown from its first century has been richly woven with institutions, particularly of educational and moral quality. In addition to the early schools and churches, houses still stand where the first type was cast in America, the first school book printed and the first Bible. The first public protest against slavery was made in 1688 at another place on what was "Main Street."

The point here is the contribution by institutions to the life and appearance around them today by what their leaders do outside their walls, as well as the programs within. The list here of such schools, churches, and voluntary groups is particularly rich. Each by its work upon building exteriors and grounds can make a major contribution to the strength of the community about it. On Germantown Avenue alone, there can be listed at least thirty such institutions in public, religious or other voluntary ownership.³

The treasure in Germantown should not be only for archeologists digging for shards. It is here now for the citizens of this year and their children. Three centuries of settlement, heavy labor, the pains and joys of great numbers of residents and their hopes, exist about us. The challenge to every member of the community and its organizations are the manner in which it will be passed on.

Far-sighted citizens have aided the work of saving and improving historic houses; in the same way it is important for a bank to acquire land, both are making an investment in the community and a trust for those who follow.

THE FLOW OF HISTORY

An historical society, town rooted, state-wide or national is vital to the extent that it understands the moving line of history from the deep to the recent past, to the point of the present to the future road. The little bird flying backward because it only wanted to see where it had been may enjoy his travels until he runs into a cliff or finds himself in the middle of a desert. In the origins of Germantown with love for its woods and streams, its farm and garden spaces around homes of individuality and strength is a value which has meaning not only for the past but also the present. The question of its continuation will rest upon the insights and actions of the present and coming years.

¹"Guidebook to Historic Germantown," Charles F. Jenkins, 1904, p. 27.

²"Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution," B. J. Lossing, New York, 1855.

³"Byways and Boulevards in and about Historic Philadelphia," Brandt and Gummere, Corn Exchange National Bank, Philadelphia, 1925.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

Drayton S. Bryant is a consultant on housing and planning, developer of middle income housing and active in several rehabilitation programs. He is presently serving as Vice President of the Germantown Community Council and Chairman of the Physical Planning Division. He is an associate member of the American Institute of Planners and other professional societies.