
UNDERGROUND RAILROAD STATION PROTECTED

The home of William Still, leader in the Abolitionist and Vigilance Movement, has been added to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

By Laura Burtner

In many parts of Philadelphia it is easy to sense American history and the people who walked here before—colonists along Elfreth’s Alley, patriots at City Tavern, our nation’s forefathers in Independence Hall, industrialists when you stroll along the new Rail Park. The influence of waves of immigrants can be found throughout Philadelphia’s neighborhoods. Take for example South 9th Street, the commercial core of Bella Vista. With its sidewalk awnings and open air produce stalls, it is still known as “The Italian Market” harkening the not so distant past. Today however, Bella Vista’s place in the history of the Underground Railroad is undetectable.

On March 9 this year a major landmark of the Underground Railroad was added to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, and it is located in Bella Vista. From 1850-1855, 625 South Delhi Street (known as Ronaldson Street before 1897) was the home of William and Letitia Still. William Still was a prominent abolitionist and leader in the vigilance movement who has become known as the Father of the Underground Railroad. His wife, Letitia worked as a seamstress. At this time there is no sign to be found along the 600 block of South Delhi marking this important history. It has taken historians years to uncover specific details about the Underground Railroad; indeed, given its covert operation, many stations in the network and the stories of those who traveled it in their quest for freedom have been lost.



The subject home as depicted on the Philadelphia Historic Resource Nomination form by The Keeping Society of Philadelphia 2017, photographed in 1935; source: Phillyhistory.org. The adjacent building is a condominium, formerly the Samuel J. Randall Public School, originally the Institute for Colored Youth.

The William and Letitia Still House and Underground Railroad Way Station does not stand out as a landmark; it sits at the end of a row of homes, most of which date back to the early- to mid-1800s. Most have been altered over time and no longer reflect their original appearance, including 625 South Delhi. It seems fair to say that the home’s physical appearance doesn’t justify historic preservation. In this case it is the person who lived there and what took place inside its walls while he lived there that warrant our reverence today.

Antebellum Philadelphia had a considerable African American population. Our neighborhood, now known as Bella Vista, was a thriving African American community. The Anti-Slavery movement gained momentum here and among the region’s Quakers. Starting around 1804, the Underground Railroad developed as loosely knit networks of escape routes, safe shelters known as “way stations,” and “conductors” or “pilots” who would guide freedom-seekers from station to station northward to free states. When the Fugitive Slave Act became law in 1850, free states became dangerous territory for escapees and all U. S. citizens were mandated to aid in the capture and return of run-aways or face arrest and steep penalties. That same year, William Still took up residency on Ronaldson Street, became the Chairman of the Vigilance Committee of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, and stepped up efforts to aid fugitives, becoming a chief operative of the Underground Railroad. He and his wife sheltered and aided hundreds of people fleeing slavery during their five years on Ronaldson Street. Next time you walk along South Delhi, imagine how it would feel to be free for the first time in your life.

The Fugitive Slave Law instilled fear among Underground Railroad operatives who destroyed their records of the escapees to whom they had given aid. William Still instead continued to keep detailed accounts of the people who passed through Philadelphia on their way to Canada. He did so even though it implicated him in unlawful activities, putting his own safety and freedom in jeopardy. He hoped that the records would one day help families reunite. In his journals there are accounts of Harriet Tubman transferring

“The heroism and desperate struggle that many of our people had to endure should be kept green in the memory of this and coming generations.”

—William Still



Portrait of William Still, ca. 1870, engraving by John Sartain. Source: William Still’s The Underground Rail Road (1872). (as depicted on the Philadelphia Historic Resources Nomination Form for 625 S. Delhi St. by The Keeping Society of Philadelphia).



625 South Delhi Street as it appears today

Underground Railroad passengers to safety on Ronaldson Street. He hid the journals, then in 1867 he wrote a book to chronicle the details contained in them. Published first in 1872, the 800-page volume titled, *The Underground Railroad* is the single most authoritative “passenger manifest” and first-hand account of what took place during that tumultuous era in American history.

Humble as it may appear today, 625 South Delhi Street remains as a historical landmark commemorating the Abolition, Anti-Slavery and Vigilance movement, just as Independence Hall represents the Birth of a Nation. The Underground Railroad and the work of William Still have shaped American culture and society, moving us closer to the ideal the fore-fathers held in the founding of our nation, E Pluribus Unum, out of many one.



William Still's entry in Journal C of Station No. 2 noting Harriet Tubman's arrival in Philadelphia on December 29, 1854
(as found on the Keeping Society of Philadelphia's Philadelphia Historic Resource Nomination form, 2017).

ADDING THE WILLIAM & LETITIA STILL HOUSE TO THE PHILADELPHIA REGISTER

By Laura Burtner

Finding the exact home of the Father of the Underground Railroad and protecting it underscores the importance and justification for undertaking the effort to maintain a historic register. It gives us today and future generations the opportunity to piece together our whole history.

625 South Delhi Street does not stand out as a monument to freedom. As Lonnie G. Bunch, III, Director of the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of African American History and Culture, points out in one of the eight letters of support the nomination garnered from scholars and historians:

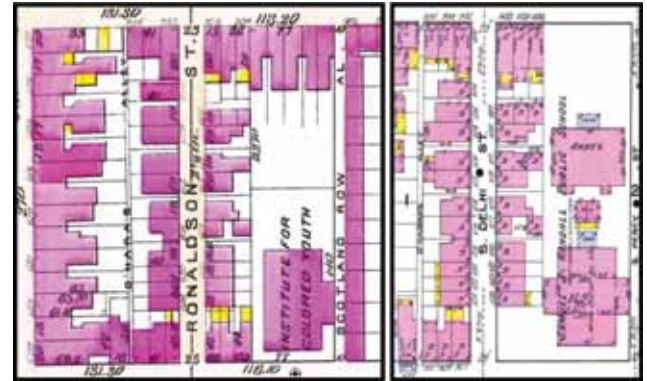
“The powerful sense of connection with the past that comes from a specific historic site such as this is of vital importance. I am aware that the facade of the building was changed in the 1920s. However, the house’s significance has never depended on precisely how it appeared to the street. Indeed, its facade always covered the work taking place inside: meetings, discussions, and the harboring of fugitives striking out for freedom.”

THE DISCOVERY

An advertisement in the *Pennsylvania Freeman* on April 24, 1851 that read: “Fashionable Dressmaking Done in the best manner by Letitia Still, Ronaldson street, first house above Shippen street, East side, between Ninth and Tenth streets,” provided historic archivist James Duffin, member of The Keeping Society of Philadelphia, with the description needed to pinpoint 625 South Delhi Street (known as Ronaldson Street before 1897) as the home of William and Letitia Still from 1850 until 1855. Before finding the archived newspaper ad, Duffin and fellow historians relied on old city maps—the Bromley Atlas and the Sanborn Atlas—and *McElroy’s 1854 Philadelphia City Directory* (a precursor to the phone book) as well as other archived documents and scholarly research to determine that the 600 block of South Delhi Street was where the couple had once lived and sheltered freedom seekers.

THE STEPS

Discovery of the precise location was the final detail The Keeping Society needed to complete a Philadelphia Historic Resource Nomination form. The form and supporting documentation was submitted to the Philadelphia Historic Commission on December 11, 2017, then officially accepted by commission staff on December 29. On March 9, 2018, The William Still House and Underground Railroad Way Station was added to the Philadelphia Register of Historic



Left: 1887 Bromley Atlas of Philadelphia, plate B. Right: 1917 Sanborn Insurance Map of Philadelphia, vol. 5 sheet 404 (both as shown in the Philadelphia Historic Resource Nomination form for 625 S. Delhi Street by The Keeping Society of Philadelphia.

Places. It may seem like it was a quick process, however the documentation took a few years to compile.

Anyone can file a nomination with the Historic Commission, but the supporting documentation must include citations from accepted sources. Depending on the type of resource under consideration, there are four to five stages involved in the commission’s review and decision:

- Submittal of a complete Historic Resource Nomination form;
- Review for completeness and accuracy by Historic Commission staff;
- Review by the Committee on Historic Designation who determines if the nominated resource meets one or more of the ten criteria for designation;
- The Committee on Historic Designation and Commission Staff will work with local communities on a Preliminary Assessment to define boundaries for nominations of historic districts;
- Several public meetings are held to gather input on historic district nominations;
- Nomination and recommendation at a Historic Commission meeting where public testimony is heard, and a vote is taken by the Commission.

Of the Historic Commission’s ten criteria, The William and Letitia Still House and Underground Railroad Way Station qualified under two: 1) the property 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; and 2) the property exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

Support from historical and cultural advocacy organizations, scholars, historians, and community groups can bolster a nomination. The Smithsonian Institution National Museum of African American History and Culture, The National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the National Center for History in Schools—powerhouse advocates for American history and culture, provided letters of support for the William and Letitia Still House, as did a number of scholars in African American history.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR A PROPERTY TO BE LISTED ON THE REGISTER

Inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places is a significant status supporting the thesis that the history of certain properties is extraordinarily invaluable to the community at-large. Once a property is listed, it cannot be demolished or unsympathetically altered without approval from the Philadelphia Historic Commission, a design review process that must be completed before permits can be considered.

Anyone interested in pursuing the nomination of a property they feel has

merit may want to begin with one of the several organizations that exist to help guide such an endeavor. (See the list on the right.)

For a city that has been developing for nearly 340 years, there are relatively few historic-designated properties in Philadelphia. According to The Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, there are nearly 11,000 listed on the local register, 2.5% of buildings in the city. These numbers pale when compared with 4.3% on average for other U.S. cities. But there are efforts underway to address this. In May 2017, Mayor Jim Kenney established the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Task Force which is charged with making recommendations to strengthen the city’s historic preservation practices. Their final public meeting has taken place and their recommendations are due to be made public in the near future. ♦

The writer wishes to thank historic archivist James Duffin for taking time to be interviewed for this story, and The Keeping Society of Philadelphia for their diligence in completing the research needed to complete the nomination.

Organizations and Resources That Support Historic Preservation in Philadelphia

- The Philadelphia Historical Commission
phila.gov/historical
- The Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia
preservationalliance.com
- The Keeping Society of Philadelphia
keepingphiladelphia.org
- City of Philadelphia Storefront Improvement Program
business.phila.gov/storefront-improvement-program
- Philadelphia City Archives
<https://www.phila.gov/phils/carchive.htm>
- Historical Society of Pennsylvania
hsp.org
- The Library Company of Philadelphia
librarycompany.org
- The Athenaeum of Philadelphia
philaathenaeum.org
- The Free Library of Philadelphia
freelibrary.org
- Preservation Pennsylvania
preservationpa.org
- Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Bureau for Historic Preservation
www.phmc.pa.gov/Preservation
- National Trust for Historic Preservation
savingplaces.org

HARRIET TUBMAN CROSSED THIS THRESHOLD WITH FREEDOM SEEKERS



The marble stoop of The William and Letitia Still House and Underground Railroad Way Station, 625 South Delhi Street, as it appears today.

Philadelphia Register of Historic Places Listings in Bella Vista

- 729 S 9th St.
- 740-42 S 10th St.
- 744-46 S 10th St.
- 611 -21 Catharine St.
- 613 Catharine St.
- 619 Catharine St.
- 711-19 Catharine St.
- 923 Christian St.
- 710-720 Montrose St.
- 609 S. Clifton St.
- 814 South St.
- 625 S. Delhi St.

Source: The Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia