NORRISTOWN: A BLOCK THROUGH TIME

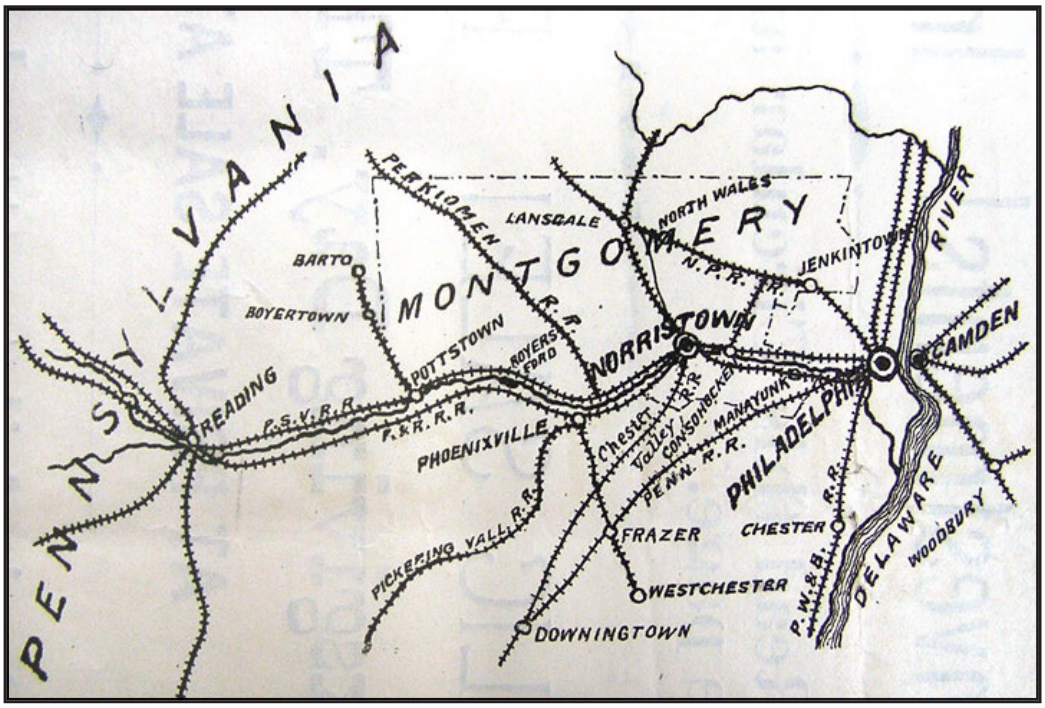
This project was initiated for a class in the University of Pennsylvania's Historic Preservation Program. The research began with library books about the history of Norristown and with a long browse through the image file folders at the Montgomery County Historical Society. I read about the founding of the Town of Norris in 1784, with the establishment of the courthouse and the jail, and how the town grew around these two key civic structures. I wanted to trace the evolution of a single block -- to watch its development, how ownership and use changed, what architecture survived from what period. I selected a block central to the downtown historic district, just down the hill from the courthouse, bounded by two main access roads. Main Street's origins predate the arrival of Europeans; it was a native american trail.

This particular section of Main Street (also known as Egypt Street, the Ridge Pike, Reading Road, and the Perkiomen & Reading Road) has Swede Street on one edge and DeKalb on the other (Swede was home to the lawyers and politicians during Norristown's heydays; DeKalb home to the wealthy industrialists.)

As it turns out, the block was a busy commercial center for decades, until "urban renewal" in the 1960s and early 70s tore most everything down. Surviving from the earliest period of time is an open park space on Swede, deeded to the town by the University of Pennsylvania with the understanding that it remain open in perpetuity. (One wonders if Norristown is still paying the annual "fee" of one acorn a year.) Aside from a brick structure in the center (a bank for many decades) and three single story structures on the corner of DeKalb, the rest of the block has been razed for courthouse parking. The center of town has been gutted. While only slightly more built up, the opposite side of Main Street has suffered the same fate: almost nothing of the original architecture remains. It was a sad thing to see after viewing the vitality of the town in historic images. And strange, since Norristown's State Register Nomination form cites the integrity of the town's architectural legacy as a remarkable achievement. Indeed, throughout the rest of Norristown one finds Greek Revival shoulder to shoulder with Federal. Just a block away one can find a block that boasts Beaux Arts, Art Deco, Gothic, Second Empire and Half-timbered Tudor.

This [not actually a] website shows the block as seen in historic maps with period photographs to show an example of the streetscape at the time. (Photographs are not available for each period) In the late 1880s, you'll see the opera house and newspaper offices that once graced the center of the block draped in flags for a town parade. I pulled numerous Franklin Fire Insurance surveys from the collection of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. These give remarkably detailed descriptions of the residences and offices of lawyers, dentists and others who once resided on this block (I have included only a portion of what is available, choosing to focus here on only the north side of Main Street.)

I hope visitors to this site will appreciate the essence of what was -- and by visiting what is there now will gain an appreciation and understanding for the importance of "streetscape" and how our buildings and their histories affect our concept of place.

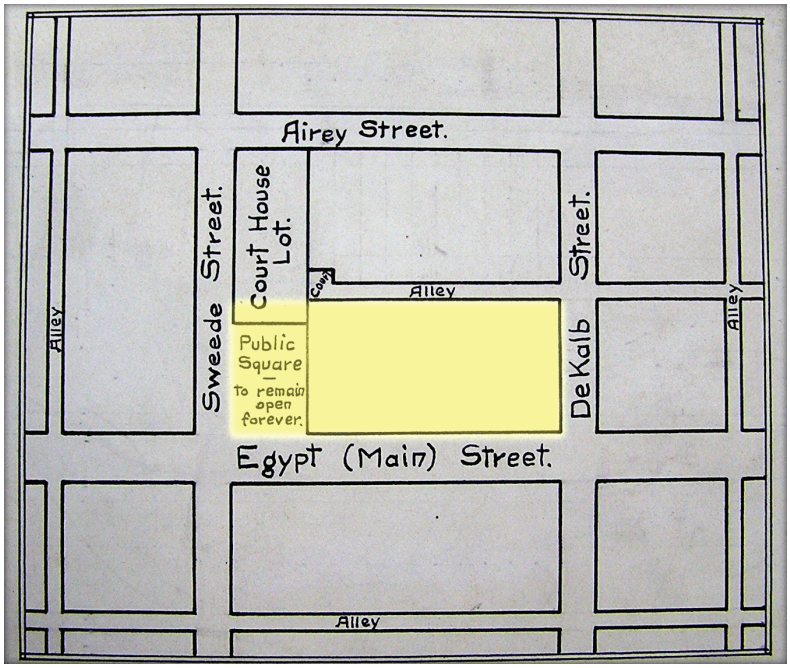


Norristown, the county seat of Montgomery County, is located on the edge of the Schuylkill River sixteen miles northwest of Philadelphia. In 1704, William Penn Jr. was given a large land grant which he named "Williamstadt". Penn sold 7,482 acres (for a price of 850 puonds) to Isaac Norris and William Trent later in that same year. Trent soon sold his interest to Norris, and the area gradually became known as Norriton or Norritingham.

In 1784 the boundaries of Montgomery County were formally drawn and the town of "Norris" was formally surveyed and laid out. Norris became the seat of the county government.

In 1812, the town was incorporated as a borough and officially renamed Norristown. Transportation systems fueled the town's growth:

- 1812 The opening of the 24 mile roadway to Philadelphia
- 1826 the opening of the Schuykill Canal and the beginning of an industrial base in Norristown
- 1835 the opening of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad allowed locally milled iron and marble to be transported more quickly and inexpensively than ever before
- 1850 Norristown experienced rapid growth as immigrants arrived to work in local mills. The building boom included portions of today's courthouse, churches, mansions, West End housing.
- 1880-90s Victorian Norristown develops
- 1911 The Philadelphia & West End High Speed trolley line establishes Norristown as a suburb of Philadelphia. This results in another housing boom in the north and west end for Philadelphia-bound commuters.



On this reproduction of the original 1784 plot plan of the town of Norris, I've highlighted the block that is the focus of this study. The court house has been located on the hill at the corner of Swede and Airey Streets since this date. The public square below it has always remained open space.

While the study block has been blighted over time and now shows nothing of its venerable past, all of the surrounding blocks have fascinating architectural examples, ranging from Federal and Greek Revival to Second Empire and Italianate. The examples below are just half a block from our blank square.



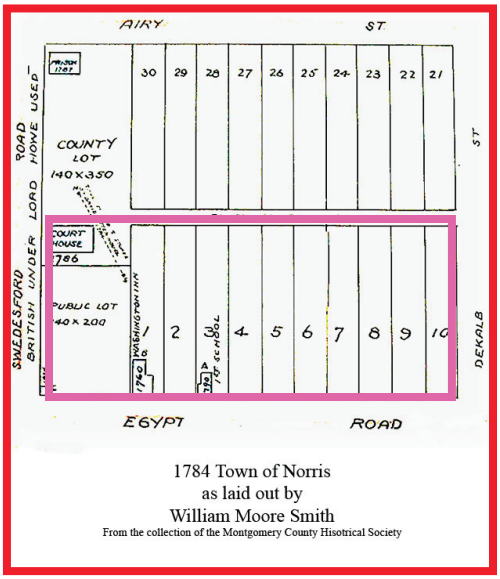
The Old Jail on Airey Street -- Gothic flavor at its best....





Odd Fellows Hall on DeKalb; the mansard roof was a stylistic update in the 1890s. The hall hosted such period luminaries as Mark Twain, Tom Thumb and Horace Greeley.

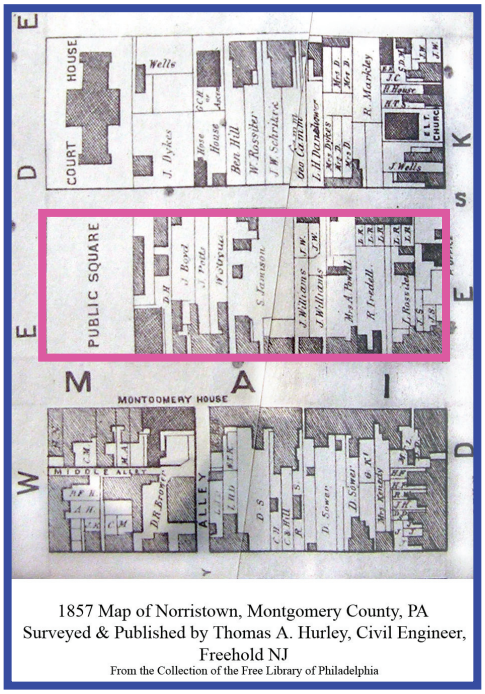
1784



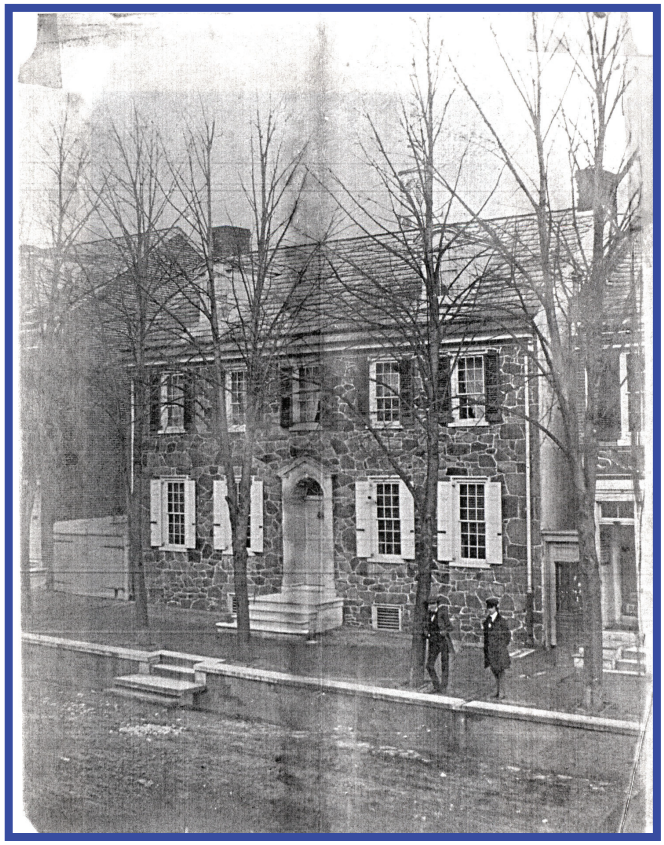
1784 Town of Norris
as laid out by
William Moore Smith
From the collection of the Montgomery County Hisotrical Society

We'll be tracking lots numbered 1 - 10

1857



1857 Map of Norristown, Montgomery County, PA
Surveyed & Published by Thomas A. Hurley, Civil Engineer,
Freehold NJ
From the Collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia



This is one of the earliest views of Samuel Jamison's residence on the North side of Main Street, between Swede & Dekalb Streets. (The lot is located just above the "A" in "Main" in the 1857 map above.)

Note the wooden shingle roof and the low level of the street, with steps leading down.

Photo c. 1850?

Image from the collection of The Montgomery County Historical Society

Franklin Fire Insurance Company of Philadelphia, Survey No. 1996

Located in the collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. This transcription has been reformatted and some punctuation has been added to make it easier to read. However, the original spelling has been maintained throughout. Illegible words have been indicated. To see location within block, see 1857 Norristown map.

Samuel Jamieson's [sic] house and barn. Egypt Street, Norristown
On Building, $ house $2700.00 Barn $300.00
Policy and incidental expenses $75.00 plus $1. Total dollars: $76
27 day of December 1837

Franklin Fire Insurance Company of Philadelphia of Samuel Jamieson's two story stone dwelling house fronting Egypt Street Norristown, between Swede and DeKalb Streets and Barn on same lot –

House front part 40 by 23
Back part 35 by 22
Workhouse 10 by 22

1st story So. Room. : 4 windows 18 lights 8 by 10 casing pannel [sic] Grecian moulding one door – Marble mantel supported by round pillars – large doors separating this room from North room, pannel casing

N. Room, 2 windows 12 lights 10 by 12. One chimney marble mantle [sic] fluted pilasters, iron back and jambs – 2 cupboards 2 double doors each – one door. Facings 4 in -- Subbase. The Ceiling of each of these rooms has ornamental Centerpieces. [word?ing] cornice

Entry front door semicircular head ornamental sash 10 in. facing. Casing pannel. One door 8 in. facing. Star or rose moulding.

South room. 4 windows, 18 lights 8 by 10 pannel casing 5 in. facing. One door
2 [word?] Closets. Double doors. Chimney wooden mantle. Fluted pilasters marble head & jambs. Grate with iron jamb

Back part of entry. One out door lined [?] 4 in facing back door ditto. One window 12 lights. Straight open stairs turned posts and handrail –

Kitchen. One window 12 lights 10 by 12. One ditto 12 lights 8 by 10 5 in. facing. One out door lined – Chimney plain mantle. 2 large Cupboards pannel doors – subbase

2nd story 6 rooms and entry – South Room 3 windows 15 lights 8 by 10, plain casing [word?] One door. One chimney wooden mantle fluted pilasters. Marble head jambs. Cupboard one large door. Subbase

Middle front Room One door and one window as last. Subbase
West ditto two windows & one door as last fireplace small wooden mantle, [word?] closet subbase

Entry Two windows 12 lights 8 by 10 handrail & turned rounds around stairhead – stair door.

Middle [word?] Room. 2 windows 12 lights 10 by 12. One door 4 in. One Chimney wooden Mantle fluted pilasters 2 Closets large doors each – subbase

Next room back 2 windows 12 lights 8 by 10. One door. Facing 5 in. One cupboard with large door. One [word?] -- One Chimney, wooden mantle, fluted pilasters subbase –

Close winding Stairs out of entry, into garret
S. End. 2 windows, 4 lights One dormer window Circular head 12 lights 9 by 11, [word] door
Middle room, one window 6 lights. One door [ledge?]
West Room one window 6 lights one dormer winwo as in S. Room
One door [on last?]

Back garrett one 4 light window not plastered or Cieled [sic].

All plastered ceiled and painted except those noted. [?] Rooms & Entry in front lower story papered – fastening various – iron box lock with brass knob. Knob latches, thumb latches & bolts.
Washboards – doors pannel except noted. Floors pine yellow in first and in most if not all 2nd story. White pine in garret front of kitchen part, framed. Built-in with brick – plasted wash house adjoining end of kitchen 3 windows 18 lights 8 by 10 1 pannel door 5 in. floor part pine part [paved?]. Cieled & plastered piazza in front of kitchen 7 ½ feet wide 4 post. Cieled. Pine floor. --- Windows in first story have panneled shutters in the second story pannel shutters or Venetian blinds. Spouts & conductors front and back – Roofing 9 courses on piazza and wash house – 44 courses on front part and 30 on back part. Cornice & [word?] moulding

Alley about 3 feet wide between this and Jamieson brick building, containing lawyers offices and about 10 feet from the brick houses on the other side – Lot extending from Egypt to Penn Street.

Barn near to Penn Street. Stone 28 by 18 feet 2 stories. Lower Story one etnry with Stable on each side, separated by partitions on studs in [sills and caps.?] -- 3 door iron strap hinges. Large frames – horse stable two stalls, trough, & rack [8 joists?] whole length, Cow stable 2 stalls [word?] troughs and Racks – mow above with threshing floor alongside. Large doors broad frame. Front door [word?] iron strap hinges. One [word?] 2 wall plates. Ladder posts & studs partitions 4 feet. 15 rafters 30 courses shingles

Survey No. 1995

Perpetual Samuel Jamison Brick Building, offices in Egypt St Norristown, On building, $3000
Policy and incidental expenses $75 $1 Dolls. 76, 27 day of December 1837

"Survey, made ---- and reported to the Franklin Fire Insurance Company of Philadelphia. Of Samuel Jameson's brick building fronting Egypt Street between DeKalb & Swede St. Norristown.
Front on Egypt Street 47 feet back 32 feet, 2 stories high with Cellars and garrets.
Cellars divided into three parts by stone walls. First story divided into three parts beside a stairway into second story by brick walls. The cellars are similar to each other and the 3 parts of the first story are alike. The first story is now occupied as offices. The second story is rented as a lodge room for the Society of Odd Fellows.

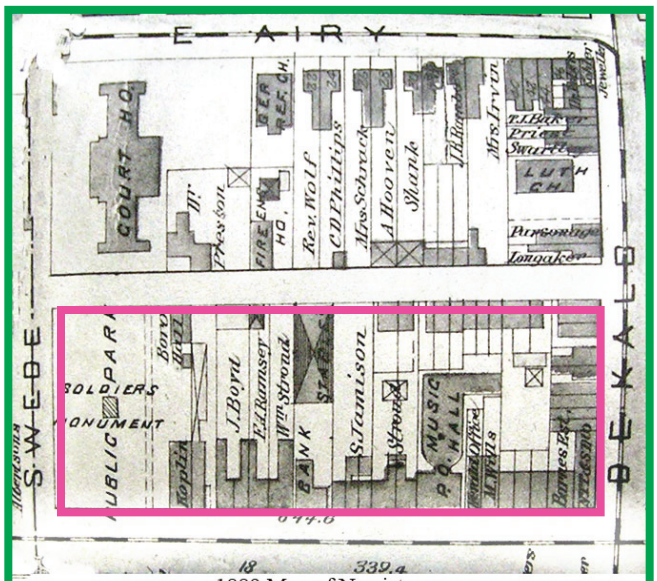
Cellar.. Out door next to street iron hinges. One window wooden bay. Not Cieled Earthen floor. One girder 12 joists ---
One office first story 2 rooms. Back Room One out door Square head 3 lights above framed 4 in facing One closet pannel [sic] door One door do . One window 18 lights 8.10 One Chimney with grate. Wooden mantle imitation marble. Washboard subbase –
Front Room One door Circular head ornamental sash. Pannel [six large box lock One window 12 lights 12@16. Wash boards Subbase – Floors yellow pine, paneled window shutters

Close Strait Stairs from door on alley next Jamieson house to 2 story panel door knob lock at bottom & top of stairs

Lodge room has 6 windows in front and 3 back with venetian shutters. Front windows 12 lights ab. 12 by 16. back windows 18 lights 8 by 10. Grecian mouldings washboards, 3 chimneys, each having wooden mantle, imitation black marble with Iron lambs? – and coal gate – this room occupies the whole of 2 story. But the Society have partitioned off an entry at one end having 6 doors in it – Straight Close stairs into garret

Garret one room. 3 dormer windows 12 lights arched head. 27 pair Rafters Hollarbeams ? 60course? Roofing – wooden arch for the purpose of sustaining the Ceiling below, lathed at the sides but not plastered or Cieled. Juni? Floor.
First & 2 story. Painted plastered Ceiled well furnished.
Gutters in roof & tin conductors. Cornice and undermoulding – Separated from S. Jamieson's store house by an alley about 3 feet wide – and from Joseph Williams brick house by an alley of 3 feet wide.
10 November 1837 Alan W. Corson

1889

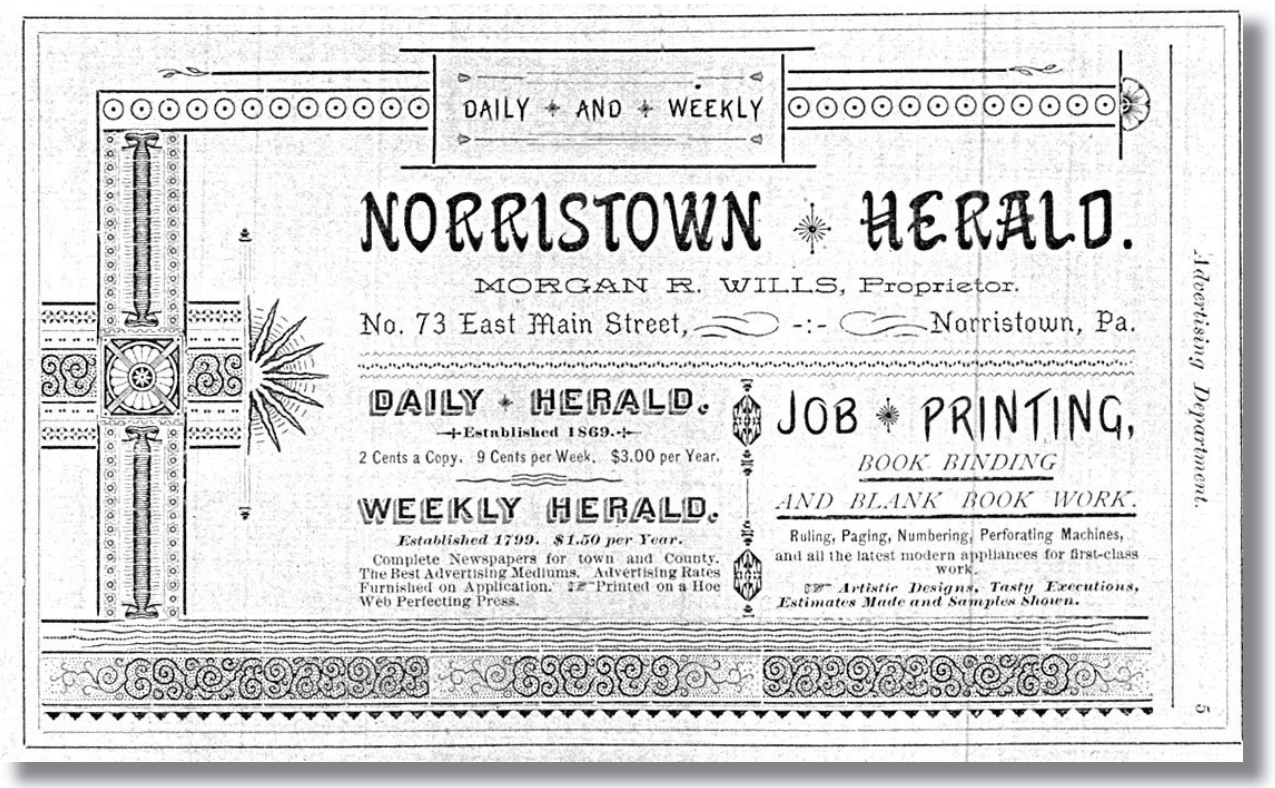


1889 Map of Norristown
Alan W. Corson, C.E. Surveyor
Published by J.D. Scott, 30 1/2 N. 5th Street, Phila.
From the collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia

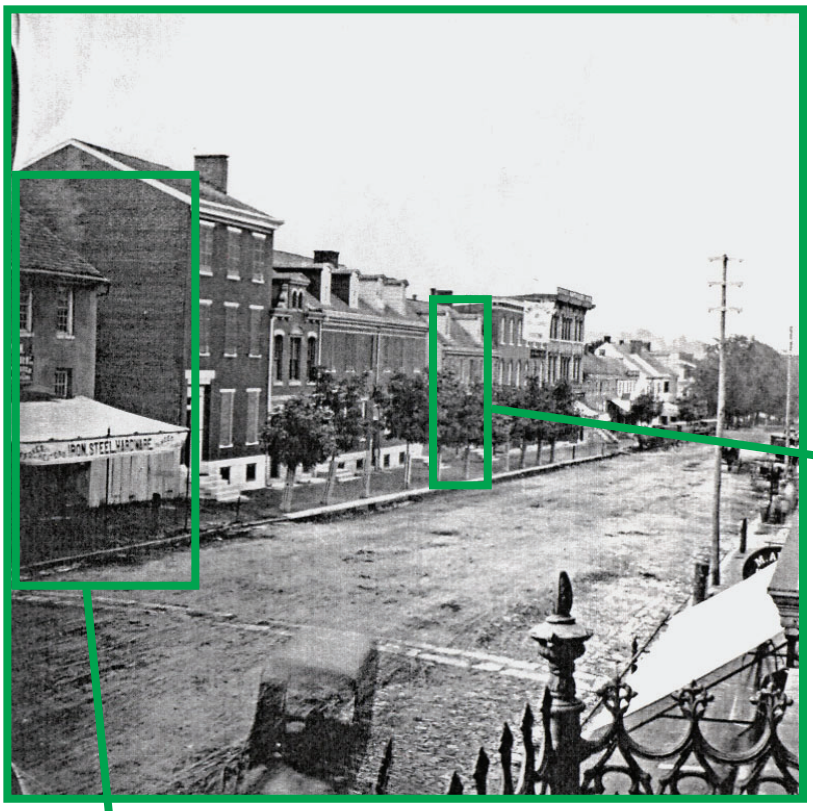
Correlation of the property owners from the 1889 map above with listings in the 1889-1890 Boyd's Norristown Directory

Map	**Boyd's Directory**
Public Park at Swede Street	-------
Koplin	Koplin, Wm. H. iron, steel, hardware and stoves 25 East Main Street h[ome] 117 E. Penn Street
J. Boyd	Boyd, J. lawyer, 33 E. Main, h[ome] ditto
F.A. Ramsey	Ramsay, Francis A., dentist, 35 E. Main, h[ome] ditto
Wm. Stroud	1889 directory lists Jane Stroud, widow of Wm. @ h[ome] 928 W Main. At 37 E. Main the directory lists Stroud, Herbert, Stationer, h[ome] 501 Stanbridge *However, the 1886-88 directory lists Wm. Stroud h. 37 E. Main, bookkeeper; Herbert Stroud is listed as a bookkeeper at Main at the corner of Swede h[ome] 503 Stanbridge. Furthermore, the 1886-88 directory has one Stroud, Ella, cashier at 80 E. Main, h[ome] 37 Main*
Bank (Jamison property)	Jamison not found in directory
S. Jamison	Fire Insurance Survey states there are lawyer offices.
Stroud	(see above)

Map (cont'd.)	**Boyd's Directory** (cont'd.)
Music Hall	[note: this is a distinct change from the 1857 map -- the entire rest of the block has changed]
Herald Office	See ad below
M. Wills	Wills, Morgan R., editor & proprietor Daily & Weekly Herald, 73 E Main, h[ome] 901 DeKalb
Barnes Estate	no listing found
NTT & SD Co.	no listing found



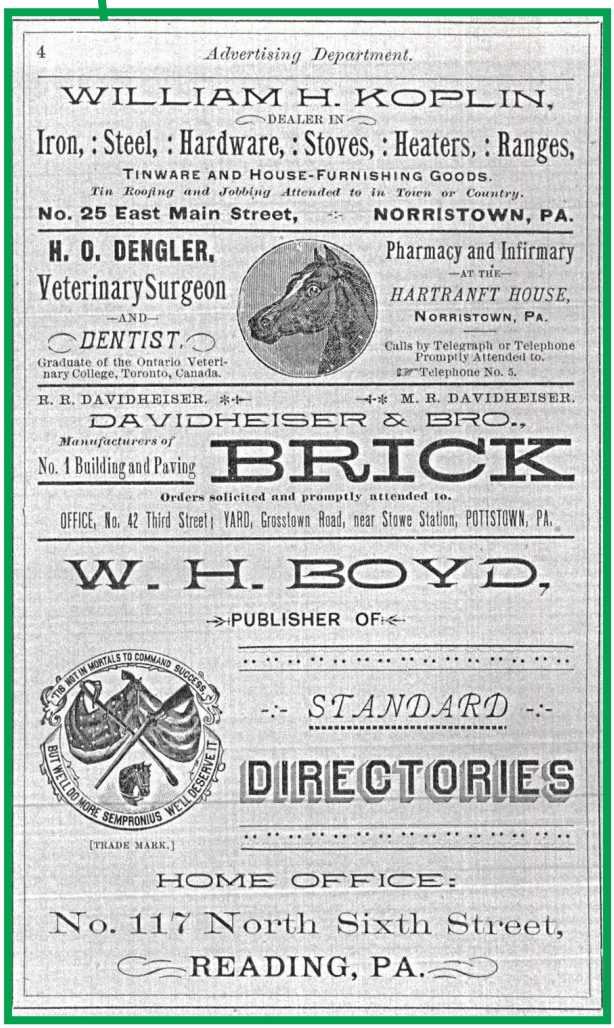
Advertisement from Blyd's Norristown Directory, 1889-1890, from the collection of the Montgomery County Historical Society



North side of Main Street, c. 1897, looking from Swede toward DeKalb.

Awning at left is William H. Koplin hardware store. (See ad below from the 1889-1890 edition of Boyd's Directory -- from the collection of the Montgomery County Historical Society)

The Jamison properties can be seen in the middle of the block. Jamison has added a large stable structure at the rear since the 1857 map.



4 *Advertising Department.*

WILLIAM H. KOPLIN,
DEALER IN
Iron, : Steel, : Hardware, : Stoves, : Heaters, : Ranges,
TINWARE AND HOUSE-FURNISHING GOODS.
Tin Roofing and Jobbing Attended to in Town or Country.
No. 25 East Main Street, -:- NORRISTOWN, PA.

H. O. DENGLER,
Veterinary Surgeon
—AND—
DENTIST.
Graduate of the Ontario Veterinary College, Toronto, Canada.

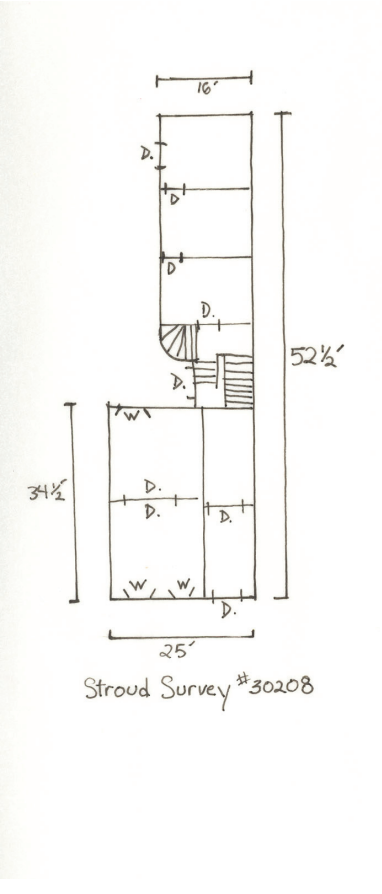
Pharmacy and Infirmary
—AT THE—
HARTRANFT HOUSE,
NORRISTOWN, PA.
Calls by Telegraph or Telephone Promptly Attended to.
Telephone No. 5.

R. R. DAVIDHEISER. M. R. DAVIDHEISER.
DAVIDHEISER & BRO.,
Manufacturers of
No. 1 Building and Paving BRICK
Orders solicited and promptly attended to.
OFFICE, No. 42 Third Street; YARD, Grosstown Road, near Stowe Station, POTTSTOWN, PA.

W. H. BOYD,
PUBLISHER OF
-:- STANDARD -:-
DIRECTORIES
[TRADE MARK.]
HOME OFFICE:
No. 117 North Sixth Street,
READING, PA.



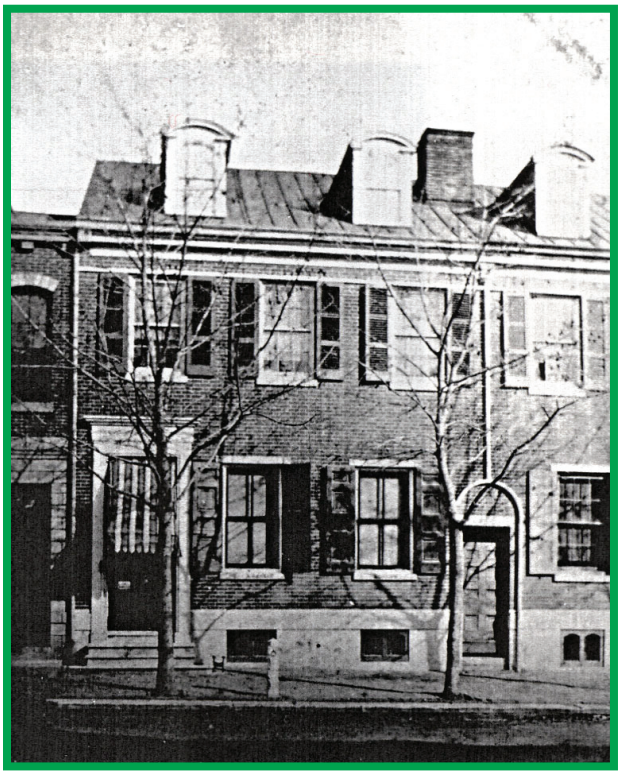
Norristown, looking south from the court house over the public square in the foreground, c. 1897
Note the covered bridge in the upper left of the image, connecting Bridgeport with Norristown
Image from the collection of The Montgomery County Historical Society



Floor plan of Stroud residence at 37 E Main Street redrawn based on image from the Franklin Fire Insurance survey, No. 30208, in the collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

The survey was made for Jane Stroud, but signed by her husband, William, for "her two story Brick dwelling House with two story Brick back buildings on the North East side of Egypt Street, 265 feet south easterly from Swede Street."

The survey notes the walls of the structure are made of "good brick, 9" thick" and, further, that "a similar house to this adjoins this on NW side. Door & windows front have marble sills and heads. Marble steps & platform to front door." The marble was probably taken from local quarries.



Francis A. Ramsey office and residence at 35 East Main Street

Ramsey was a dentist, according to his listing in the 1889-1890 Boyd's Norristown Directory. Close examination of this image reveals "F.A. Ramsey" carved into the marble sill of the window to the right of the entrance door.

Image from the collection of the Montgomery County Historical Society.

Later view of Samuel Jamison property. Compare to c.1850 image and note different roofing material, change to entrance and raised street level.

Image from the collection of the Montgomery County Historical Soceity

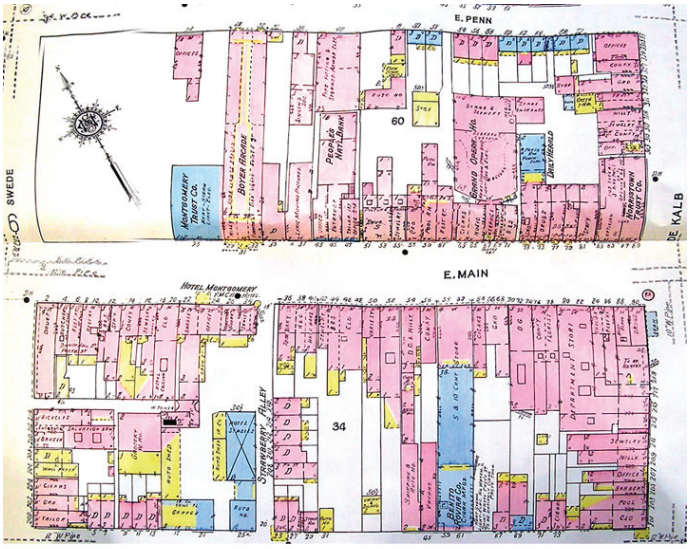




View circa 1897, of north side of Main Street, Norristown, between Swede (in far distance) and DeKalb. From left to right, Jamison building, Stroud property, Music Hall Building (with ornate tower), Daily Herald offices and then unidentified building at far right of image.

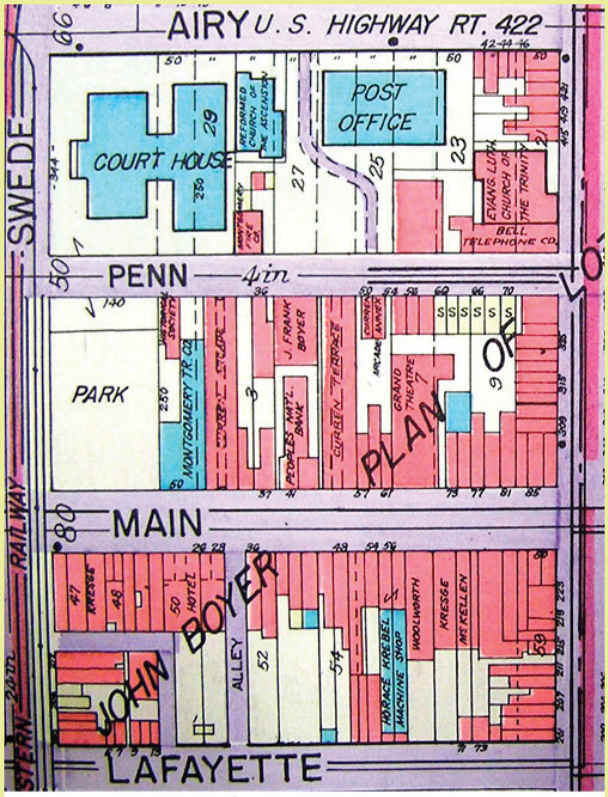
Image from the collection of the Montgomery County Historical Society

1920



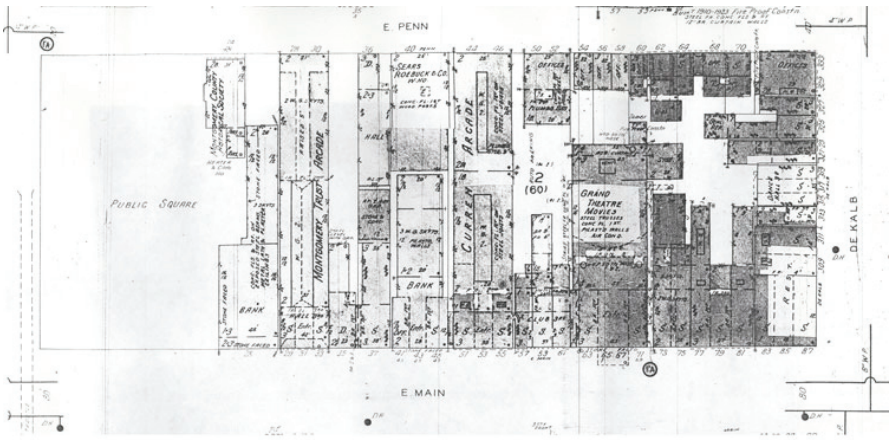
May 1920 Insurance Map of Norristown, Pennsylvania
Published by Sanborn Map Co. 11 Broadway, New York
from the collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia

1935



1935 Norristown, Montgomery County
by Franklin Survey Co., Philadelphia, PA
from the collection of the Montgomery County Historical Society

1950



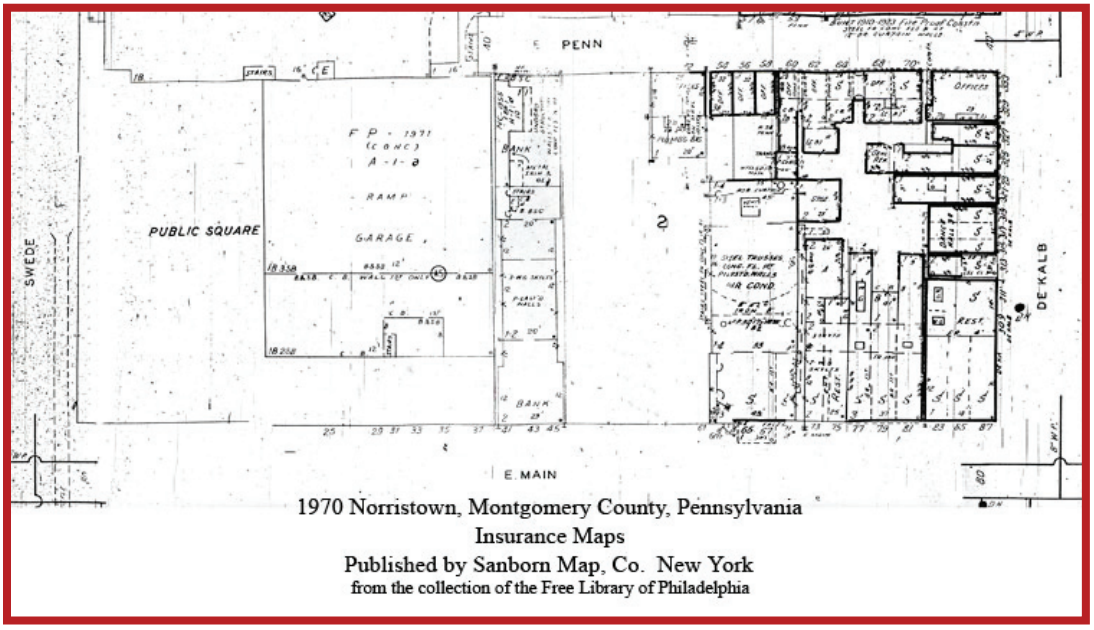
1950 Norristown, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania
Published by Sanborn Map Co., New York
from the collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia

Here is a view of the Montgomery Trust Company, demolished by the county to make room for more court house parking. This building was adjacent to the public park on the corner of Swede and Main.

The image dates from October 1954. From the collection of the Montgomery County Historical Society



1970



1970 Norristown, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania
Insurance Maps
Published by Sanborn Map, Co. New York
from the collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia



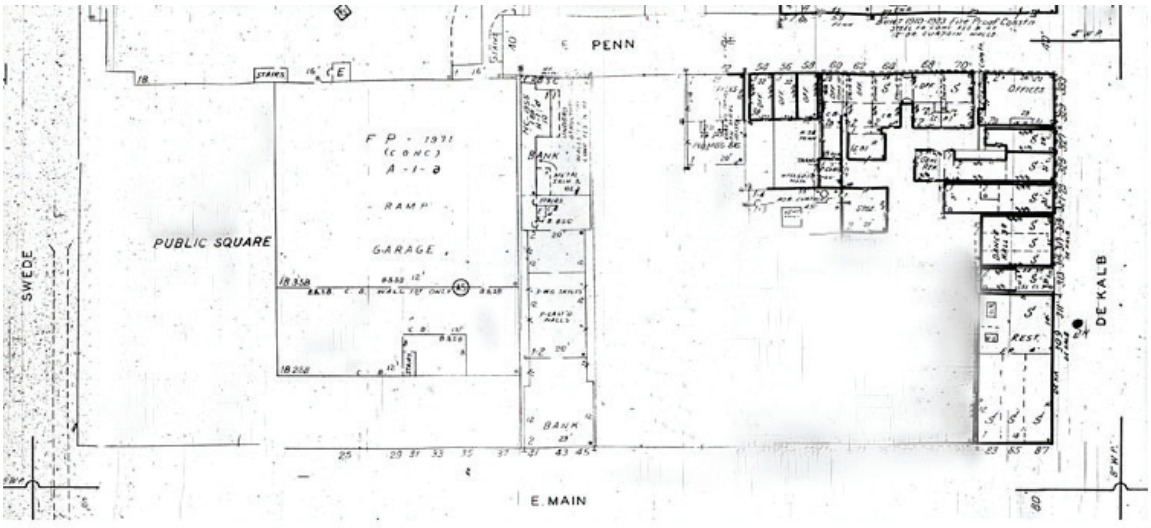
Schnably's was "the place to go", but a careful examination of the sign in their window shows that they are moving location. Probably prior to the razing of their building to make way for more parking for the court house. Oddly, the only building surviving from this picture is the brick bank building at the right. Located in the center of the block, it is possible this is a renovated, much-altered edition of Jamison's original structure (which would explain why it was spared the wrecker's ball).

Image dates from 1962. From the collection of the Montgomery County Historical Society



The building seen here may be a new theatre that was built sometime between 1920 (when the map shows a large apron shaped “Grand Opera” -- seen in previous images with the large ornate tower) and 1935 (when the footprint has changed completely and shows a new “Grand Theatre”.) In this photo, probably taken in the 1960s, the former theatre is now “John’s Shoes” It was also torn down to make way for parking.

Image from the collection of the Montgomery County Historical Society.



2004 Norristown
1970 Sanborn Map altered by Sabra Smith to reflect current structures



Main Street Today

Corner of Main and DeKalb, with view of court house in the distance behind the stop light

Photo credit: Sabra Smith

For additional information about Norristown, I'd like to suggest the following resources:

Montgomery County Historical Society
They are located just outside the center of Norristown, 1654 DeKalb, 610/272-0297.
www.hsmcpa.org

Norristown Preservation Society
This group has preserved Selma, the 1787 country estate of General Andrew Porter, located one mile west of central Norristown. They also actively promote the appreciation and preservation of Norristown's history and architectural inventory.
www.norristownpreservationsociety.org

Norristown Walking TourCompiled by the Norristown Preservation Society (though there is much, much more to see in Norristown than just what is listed here)
www.montcopa.org/montco/walkingtour/court_house.htm

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania www.hsp.org
Located in downtown Philadelphia, they have an extensive collection of fire insurance surveys for the Norristown area These documents are remarkable inventories of building material, layout and decorative detailing.

National Register Historic District Nomination forms and inventories, If you'd like to tour Norristown's architecture, I'd recommend you locate a copy of both the Central District and the West End District nominations and use them as your guide (until someone else creates a comprehensive printed guide).



Main Street, Norristown (two blocks from our study block)