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CITYSPACE

Broad Way of Life



The history -- and future -- of the city's pre-eminent street.

by Robert Skaler

The Way We were: Long before Broad Street was a pedestrian's nightmare, horses ruled the road, as shown in this 1898 view from Broad and Girard.

Much of early 20th-century Philadelphia was still standing when I was an architectural student at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1950s. Because of the economy in the Great Depression and restrictions of World War II, much of 19th- and early 20th-century Philadelphia buildings were still standing, although often covered with years of soot and in bad need of restoration.

After graduation, I went to work for architect Vincent Kling. I would drive to Kling's offices in the UGI building at Broad and Arch streets and park in the underground garage under Kennedy Plaza for a mere \$30 per month. As I drove back and forth on North Broad, the street's unique architecture always intrigued me. As a young architect interested in Victorian Philadelphia I began collecting turn-of-the-century postcards of Philadelphia street scenes. Although a lot had been demolished, by the 1960s one could still see remnants of North Broad's "Gilded Age." Standing in the late '60s were the grand Widener mansion and Majestic Hotel at Broad and Girard, and the Foerderer and Disston mansions as you approached Jefferson Street. Further north in the area of Temple University's campus was the imposing Keneseth Israel Synagogue and Our Lady of Mercy Church at Broad and Susquehanna, to name a few of the many grand houses of worship that were on North Broad. Some of the landmarks standing today are City Hall, the Masonic Temple, Arch Street United Methodist Church, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the Blue Horizon, Freedom Theater and the Baptist Temple.

However as I drive down North Broad Street today I find only a very few historical landmarks are still standing. Many have been torn down for failed urban planning projects or are in danger of being demolished. My postcard collection, which now numbers more than 4,000, offered a great visual documentation of the history of Broad Street as it looked in 1910 and so I decided to write a book titled *Philadelphia's Broad Street: South and North* illustrated with circa 1910 postcard images of the street. The section of Broad Street from Washington to Lehigh avenues is now called the Avenue of the Arts. Although South Broad Street has numerous architecture treasures that have been recently restored, I found the history and lost exuberant architecture of North Broad Street more fascinating.

Religious institutions were well represented on Broad Street where almost every Christian denomination had an imposing structure. Churches once stood on almost every other block of North Broad Street north of Spring Garden, their steeples punctuating the skyline.

North Broad Street was also the center of social life for upper-class German Jews who, by 1910, had built four major synagogues on North Broad Street, and the impressive and extravagantly decorated Mercantile Club at Broad above Masters. I discovered in my research that every North Broad synagogue was built on the east side of the street, so the seated congregation would face east, toward Jerusalem, as they looked toward the Holy Ark.

At the turn of the century, North Broad Street was also the home to La Salle College and Temple University. The Philadelphia School Board built three new elaborate schools on or near Broad Street, including the school system's crown jewel -- Central High at Broad and Green streets, which opened in 1900 and cost \$1.13 million to build. The lot alone cost \$400,000, such an unusually high amount -- equal to many millions in today's dollars -- that it caused a scandal that received national attention. Built of granite with Tiffany stained-glass windows and a tall tower topped with an observatory dome, the school was dedicated in 1902 by President Teddy Roosevelt. Speaking from the school's Broad Street balcony, Roosevelt gave his famous "Don't flinch, don't foul" speech to 1,500 Central High students.

North Broad Street hit its summit with the construction of the Hammerstein's Metropolitan Opera House at Broad and Poplar. The Met was built to rival the Academy of Music, and opened on Nov. 17, 1908 with the opera *Carmen* and a cast of 700. The Met unfortunately never was a success, and ended up a ruined backdrop for a scene in the 1995 sci-fi



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nise was hastened with the 1924 construction of the Broad Street
al address as the large mansions became funeral parlors, clubs,
. Eventually most were demolished for fast food establishments, gas
s history and architectural fabric apart.

However, there is hope for North Broad Street with the impending renovation of the Divine Lorraine Hotel at Broad and Fairmont, saved from certain demolition when it was purchased by Father Divine in 1948. The 1894 hotel's renovation into upscale apartments may encourage developers to restore other remaining structures from North Broad Street's "Gilded Age." Hopefully, the once elegant Met may soon become a candidate for restoration.

Robert M. Skaler is a forensic architect and architectural historian. He has written two books about Philadelphia's architectural heritage: West Philadelphia: University City to 52nd Street, and his latest, Philadelphia's Broad Street: South and North, both published by Arcadia.



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