

1315-1317 SPRUCE STREET



———— a brief history ————

by Bob Skiba

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INTRODUCTION

This brief history of the building at 1315 Spruce Street that is now home to the William Way Community Center grew out of a presentation that was given at the Building Bash at the Center on June 5, 2010. The response to that slideshow and lecture was so overwhelmingly positive, and there were so many requests to put the information into a book, that this is the result.

Since the construction of this block of Spruce Street over 160 years ago, this building has housed many prominent private Philadelphia citizens, the prestigious Engineers' Club and the city's GLBT Community Center. The people whose lives and spirits resonated in this building, and the events that occurred here connect the site inextricably with the broader, complex and vibrant history of Philadelphia. Their stories help make the Center a part of what makes Center City the great place it is today for both straight and GLBT people to live and work in and to visit.

The information and the photos here came from many historical sources, among them :

- The amazing collection at the John J. Wilcox Jr. GLBT Archives here at the Center
- Historic issues of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* at the Free Library
- The Engineers' Club papers and journals at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania
- City Directories and Atlases
- Boyd's *Philadelphia Blue Books*, 1880-1920
- Ray Fuller's *Through the Years*, a history of the Engineers' Club published in 1970

I sincerely hope those of you who take the time to look through the history, stories and photos presented here enjoy reading and seeing them as much as I enjoyed researching them.

Bob Skiba, WWCC Archivist
July 2010

CHRONOLOGY

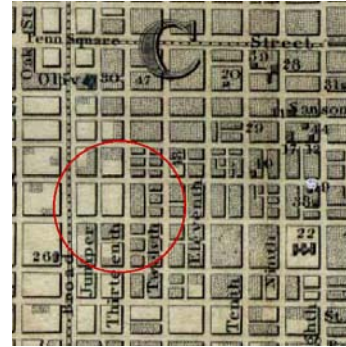
- 1844-48** The 10 rowhouses, N side of 1300 Spruce St. are built
- 1850** Benjamin Etting is living at 421 (now 1315) Spruce
- 1851** John B. Budd is living at 423 (now 1317) Spruce
- 1868** John Budd dies, his widow Anna stays at 1317
- 1875** Benjamin Etting dies
- 1889** B. Maurice Gaskill is living at 1315 Spruce
- 1891** Anna Budd dies and 1317 is vacant for 3 years
- 1894** Mr. & Mrs. Ch. W. Potts are living at a remodelled 1317
- 1904** Charles Potts dies
- 1907** The Engineers' Club buys 1317 Spruce for \$55,000
- 1909** The restaurant opens in the Philadelphia Room
- 1917** They buy 1315 Spruce for \$35,000 and expand
- 1919** The fire tower is built
- 1929** The façade is rebuilt with a central entrance
- 1930s** 1319 Spruce St. is torn down for parking
- 1939** The nw bar is installed downstairs
- 1945** The kitchen is renovated,the exposed west wall is reinforced
- 1950** The lobby is renovated using Wanamaker's designers
- 1960s** New decor is added by designer Dorothy Draper
A second front entrance is added
- 1989** The Engineers' Club moves out
- 1996** GCCP purchases the building

1. A PRIVATE RESIDENCE: 1844–1907

William Penn laid out his famous grid plan for Philadelphia in 1682. The city flourished remarkably quickly, expanding in a triangle with its base along the Delaware River and its apex centered on Market Street. By the 1840s, the apex had pushed a few blocks west of Broad Street, but as seen in the maps below, the north side of Spruce between 13th Street and Juniper was still undeveloped. A few years later, ten Philadelphia rowhouses were built on the block. The term “Philadelphia rowhouses”



Philadelphia in 1842



1300 block of Spruce St. in 1842

referred to a row of identical townhouses built on a block by one developer. Throughout the 19th century the name “Philadelphia rowhouses” was given to similar constructions in most American cities. An ad from the December, 1849 *North American* describes these buildings on Spruce:

New—**ELEGANT NEW RESIDENCE SPRUCE ST**—All that elegant new four story brick message, with extensive back buildings, and lot of ground, north side of Spruce St, between 13th and Broad, 25 feet front, 170 feet deep to Howard street. The house finished in very handsome modern style, and replete with all the modern improvements and conveniences. It is one of the handsomest situations in Spruce street. The elegant garden of General Patterson is immediately in the rear.

“Message” was derived from the French “menage,” and meant a main building and all outbuildings on a piece of property. The “elegant garden of General Patterson” reached from Locust to the back of this block of Spruce. The mansion itself stood at the NW corner of 13th and Locust Sts., as can be seen in the view at right looking south, and the gardens filled the entire remainder of the block. The site of the house is now occupied by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.



The atlas page to the left shows the 5 pairs of twin houses on the block, all with “L” shaped rear additions, which housed the kitchens. This was usual in mid-19th century dwellings, when

cooking over a wood burning stove was still a smoky affair. Some of the residents had already extended the additions, but there was still some open land on each plot. All the fronts were a spacious 25 feet wide, and all the buildings were four stories with basements. Numbers 1315 and 1317 Spruce St. are what now house the William Way Community Center.

John B. Budd and Benjamin Etting

By 1851 the 1300 block of Spruce was a decidedly upper-middle class, professional neighborhood. At 1315 lived Benjamin Etting, a merchant from a prominent Jewish family and a relation of Rebecca Gratz. His business was involved with the exotic China trade; his ships brought tea, silks and firecrackers to Philadelphia. At 1317 was John B. Budd, a prosperous importer and exporter of goods with the Caribbean and the southern states, and at 1319 was the residence of Moncure Robinson, a renowned engineer who had surveyed the Pennsylvania Railroad line from Pottsville to Pittsburgh. All of them were prominent citizens involved in the artistic, literary and scientific organizations of the fast growing city, and all of them appeared in the Philadelphia Blue Book of "prominent householders" published later in the century.

Charles W. Potts

Benjamin Etting died in 1875 at age 80, and by the 1880s 1315 Spruce was home to B. Maurice Gaskill, a publisher, merchant and graduate of the University of Pennsylvania. John Budd died in 1868 at age 71. His wife Anna remained at 1317 Spruce until her death in 1891. The property was then bought by Charles W Potts. Charles had carried on the steel and iron business that his father, W.F. Potts had built up (*see business ad below*). Apparently, he razed the original building and constructed a new,



Ad for WF Potts, Son & Co.

grander, more "modern" residence on the location. This explains the elaborate staircase and woodwork on the west side of the building, which was known as the "Potts Mansion."

ART TREASURES SOLD
Potts Estate Sale Began Auspiciously, Bringing Good Prices
The sale of the art treasures from the estate of Charles W. Potts opened auspiciously yesterday afternoon in the galleries of Davis & Harvey, 1112 Walnut street, and will continue until Tuesday, December 13.
The collection contains many rare and valuable paintings, real bronzes, carrara marble statuary, rare porcelains, cut glass, Oriental rugs and furniture, comprising the contents of Mr. Potts' residence, 1317 Spruce street.

Mrs and Mrs Potts and their social doings and events appeared regularly in the Inquirer's Society pages for the next 10 years. Potts and his wife resided there until his death in 1904. The estate sale (*left*), that followed his death attested to his wealth and social position. The building would remain empty for the next three years.

The Inquirer, September 1904

2. THE ENGINEERS' CLUB: 1907-1989

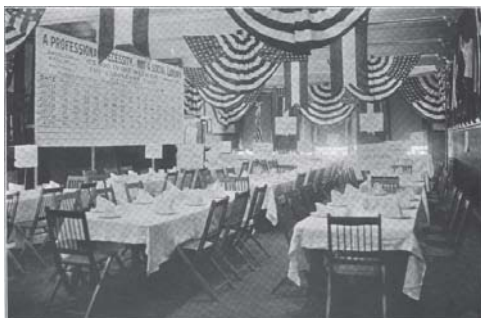
During the Centennial Exhibition in 1876, engineers from all over the world gathered in Philadelphia to see the latest scientific marvels. That gathering sparked the organization of the Engineers' Club of Philadelphia in 1877. The organization grew steadily in membership and prestige. In 1906, with 330 members, they had outgrown their rented space on Girard Street and were looking for a new clubhouse building to buy. After deliberation, in November of 1907 they bought the former Potts residence. They paid \$55,000 for it, planning on spending another \$20,000 on renovations. On the first floor would be a smoking and reading room with a large dining room at the rear. The second floor would contain an assembly room and a library and the third and fourth floors would house residential apartments for members. The basement would be used as a rathskeller and billiards and card room.



The Club held its first meeting at 1317 Spruce in December of 1907, which also marked its 30th anniversary. The photo at left shows the building with its second floor bay window. To the left is 1319, which is a parking lot now, and to the right is 1315. These two buildings show us what the original row of 1848 houses looked like. Of those original rowhouses only 1305, 1309 and 1311 still remain today.

The restaurant (where today's Philadelphia Room is), opened in 1909. Soon after, 15 additional bedrooms were added on the upper floors for out of town visitors and resident locals. At this time membership was all male, and only male wait staff was used in the dining room. A sign in the rathskeller indicated "Wines and liquors will not be served to ladies unless accompanied by members."

Membership continued to increase over the next 10 years. The club rented out some of the space to other affiliated organizations, like The American Society for Testing Materials. By 1916 it became obvious that they needed more space. 1319 was now the residence of well known ophthalmologist Dr. Thomas Fenton, but his asking price was too high. The Engineers were able to negotiate successfully for 1315, however. They purchased the building from B. Maurice Gaskill, who was 73 at the time, and who moved to Pine Street near 15th Street soon after.



The photo at left from the September 1917 *Proceedings of the Engineers' Club* shows us the second floor Assembly Room set up for a campaign to raise money to purchase 1315 Spruce. It is the western half of what is today's ballroom, spanning only 3 windows instead of 6. It was, also, in fact, the need for a larger Assembly Room that had caused the Club to look into expanding in the first place.

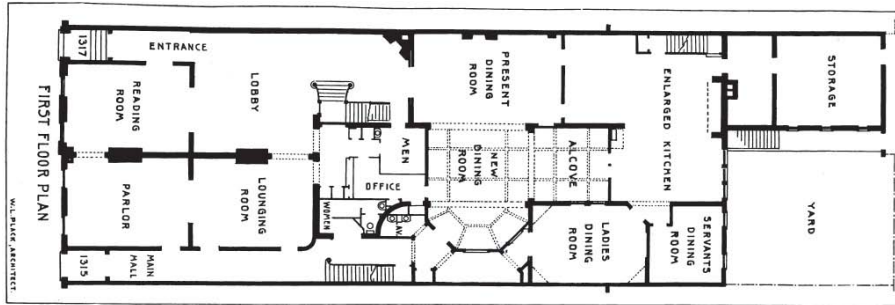
In late 1917, the Engineers' Club purchased 1315 Spruce for \$35,000, much less than they had paid for 1317. The plan was to carry out much of the initial work in a few weeks, to make the first and

NEW HEADQUARTERS FOR ENGINEERS' CLUB

Famous Organization Purchases
Old Potts Mansion on Spruce
Street

The Engineers' Club, including among its members representatives of the largest firms in this city and many outside of the city, have completed negotiations for the purchase of one of the old mansions on Spruce street and after extensive alterations, for which plans are now being prepared, will occupy the building as a club house.

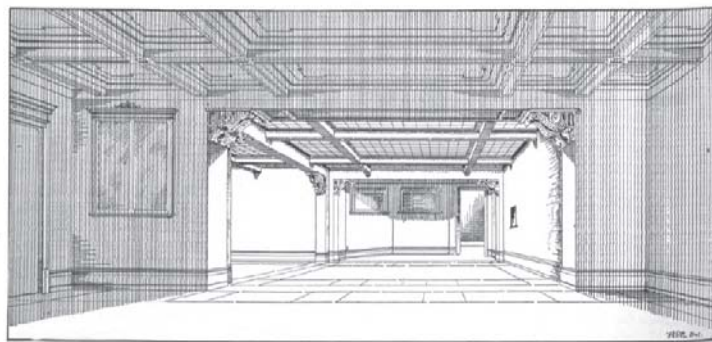
second floors useful as soon as possible. One of the problems was that the floor levels between 1315 and 1317 were no longer even since 1317 had been entirely rebuilt by Mr. Potts. Below is the architect's plan for combining the first floor spaces in the two buildings:



Architect's renovation plan, October 1917

The expansion would provide for a ladies' dining room, (this was at the time an all male club), an expanded main dining room, two additional rooms at the front, many more offices and sleeping quarters that could be rented, and a second entrance on the east end at 1315.

Below is the architect's drawing of the expanded dining room (the Philadelphia Room):



484 INTERIOR PERSPECTIVE OF THE NEW DINING-ROOM
OCTOBER, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND SEVENTEEN

The second floor renovation would double the size of the assembly room, allowing for a projection booth – very high tech for 1917. The engineers' *Proceedings* mentioned the difficulty in finding a steel beam that would span the third floor floor, allowing for an assembly room without support columns. (This is the same beam everyone needs to climb over today to get from the elevator to the third floor offices).

For the next few years, records show work on the building almost every year; to modernize the heating system, to add more rentable bedrooms, and to expand the kitchen.

The picture at left was taken in August of 1929. The Engineers' Club space occupied the two very different looking buildings with awnings. To the left, 1319 is visible, and to the far right the Lenox Apartments, which had been constructed in 1917



BEATRICE FENTON



Through the 1920s, 1319 Spruce was home to the Fenton family. Daughter Beatrice Fenton, pictured left, studied at the Philadelphia School of Industrial Art under Alexander Stirling Calder. Family friend Thomas Eakins advised her to take up sculpture, and she went on to continue her studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. For a while she was part of “The Philadelphia Ten,” the first group of women artists in the country who joined together to promote themselves and women in the arts. Many of Fenton’s works adorn parks in the Fairmount system

– Beatrice never married, but maintained life-long friendships with two fellow female students.

1929: A Beauty Makeover

In the late 20s the Engineers’ Club discussed the feasibility of moving to a new location. Instead they decided to go ahead with major renovations to the existing facility. The first step was to modernize and unify the façade. A mortgage was taken to fund the project. Since the window levels on both buildings were different, they also chose to entirely rebuild the front, rather than to just reface the old façades with brick. The work was begun in late 1929, not long after the photo above was taken, and completed by the end of the year. In the photo (*left*) of the current left side of the main entrance, we can see the date of the renovation commemorated. The architectural style they chose was Colonial Revival, which had become very popular after the sesqui-centennial of 1926.

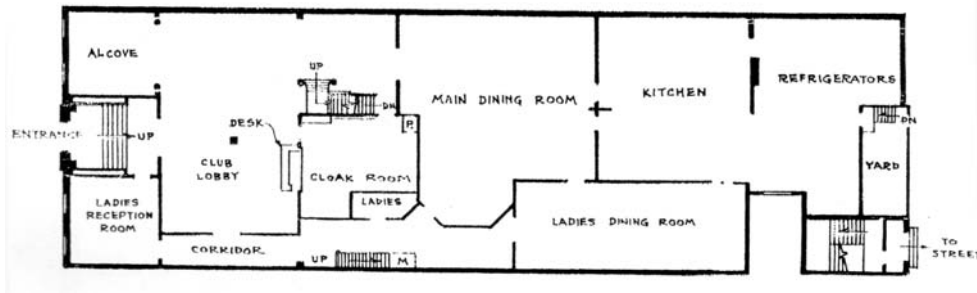


The completed result is shown at the right. Moving the entrance to the center gave a pleasing, symmetrical dignity to the façade. The matching pair of buildings on each side adds to the effect. (1313 would not be rebuilt until the 1940s). Compared with the previous picture taken only a few months before, the transformation was incredible. New windows were installed, and both old entrances were sealed off. The eastern, 1315 entrance was not to reappear until the 1960s. The front lobby space was entirely opened up, with only one supporting column where the diving wall had been between the two buildings. Notice the trolley tracks down the center of Spruce Street.



The 1930s: Dark Wood, Leather & Cigar Smoke

The following blueprint and group of pictures were created for insurance purposes a few years later. The plans show the fire tower which had been constructed in 1919.



Main Dining Room



Ladies' Reception Room

Above left: the Dining Room looks very much like the architect's drawing from 1917, and the mosaic floor is visible on the right. *Above right:* in the spartan Ladies' Reception Room can be seen one of the two scale models that Alexander Stirling Calder created of his statue of William Penn atop City Hall. It is still in possession of the Engineers' Club.

Lower left: the auditorium looks much the same as it does today. *Lower right:* the large mirror seen on the lobby wall remained there right up until the engineers left in 1989.



Auditorium



Lobby



Lobby Alcove



Main Stairway

Above left: the Alcove with the incredible moose head is, of course, the present exhibition space. *Above right:* the photo of the Main Stairway shows the fireplace that had graced the corner just to the left of the dining room entrance.

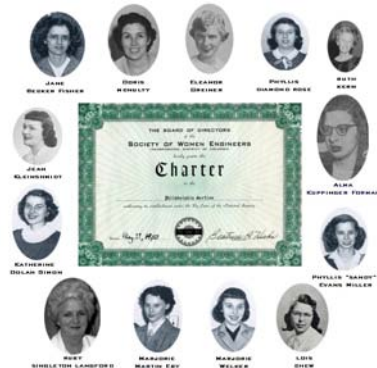
Sources say that after Prohibition ended, it was liquor sales that helped put the organization in the black. In 1939 a new bar was installed in the old basement card room, with modern fluorescent lighting which was changed when ladies complained that it “was unflattering and spoiled their make-up.”

The 1940s & 1950s

Renovations and improvements were continually made on the now hundred year old structure. The kitchen was renovated and new refrigeration added in 1945, and in 1948 the booths were installed in the bar downstairs.

The building next door at 1319 had been torn down in the late 1930s and was already being used as a parking lot by the Burlington Apartments. In the mid-1940s the Club had to add reinforcements to the exposed west wall and paid to have the parking lot resurfaced to stop leaks into the basement of the club building.

In the late 1950s there were still dormitory rooms for rent, and the bar continued to be a money-maker. The club looked once more into purchasing the 1319 lot, but it was not available. They turned their energies into re-doing the lobby and hired interior designers from Wanamakers to repaint, slipcover the furniture and add new rugs. A few floral prints were even added to the Ladies' Reception Room to soften the “institutional effect.” The Society of Women Engineers, which was formed in 1950 affiliated in 1959, but the first woman did not join the Engineers' Club of Philadelphia until 1961. By 1969 there were 5 women members.



The 1960s: Decorating Is Fun!

Early in the '60s the east entrance, which had been the old entrance to 1315 was re-opened to meet Philadelphia fire codes. (Until they left in 1989, the Engineers' Club used 1317 Spruce Street as their official address).

When the Building Committee decided to refurbish the Club interior in the '60s, they made an unusual choice. They hired fashionable, flamboyant, New York designer Dorothy Draper.



Dorothy Draper

Dorothy Draper was the first woman in America to head her own interior design firm. Her style and use of color were big, brash and bold, using traditional elements in a grandiose, somewhat shocking manner. In 1939, she had published *Decorating is Fun!: How to be Your Own Decorator*, the first do-it-yourself interior design book.

Draper had been the darling of the wealthy Rittenhouse set in Philadelphia in the 1930s and '40s. When the engineers hired her she was in her 70s, but still writing a syndicated home design advice column called "Ask Dorothy Draper." The article below appeared in 1962. Little did she know!



The 1970s: A Center City Landmark

The last pictures we have of the clubhouse when it belonged to the engineers are from a brochure they published about 1979, just after the centennial of the Club. Below are some photos from that brochure.



The Basement Bar



The Philadelphia Room



Ballroom



Lobby



Library

Unfortunately, it's impossible to tell which elements, if any, were remaining from Dorothy Draper's 1960s decor. By now the gold lettering which we still see today had been painted on the door lintels. The Library had moved downstairs to the current exhibition space and the Ladies' Dining Room had become the private Members' Dining Room. The colonial style hutch seen in the Philadelphia is still used for storage in the building. Almost all the public floor space was covered in red wall-to-wall carpeting and the brown leather upholstery was replaced by red and tan vinyl.



By the 1980s the Engineers decided that the building was too large for them. They moved out in 1989, first to temporary quarters in the Public Ledger Building on 6th and Chestnut Streets, then to their present home at the Racquet Club on 16th Street. 1315 Spruce Street would remain vacant for 7 years.

3. THE WILLIAM WAY COMMUNITY CENTER: 1996 –

Since 1990, the Gay Community Center of Philadelphia, or Penguin Place, as it was then known, was housed in a building at 201 S Camac St. After years of renting less than ideal spaces around Center City, the center had begun the search for a permanent building. The photos below are from a 1993 appraisal of the old Engineers' Club as a suitable new home. The building had only been empty 4 years, but the neglect was showing.



Building Exterior



Lobby



Philadelphia Room



Kitchen

The eery shadow of the huge mirror is visible on the wall of the lobby. The worn and faded red carpeting remains, as well as all the equipment in the kitchen behind the Philadelphia Room.

In 1996 the board approved the purchase of the building, and named it in honor of board member William Way who died of AIDS in 1998. Bill Way had embodied the spirit that kept the Community Center alive through the '80s when it was "Penguin Place, the Community Center without Walls."





1998 Pridefest

Next year, 2011, not only marks the 15th anniversary of the William Way Community Center at 1315 Spruce Street, but the 35th anniversary of the original location of the Center, which opened at 325 Kater Street in April of 1976. Hurrah!