

**NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT**  
**PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
**PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

**SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM (CD, EMAIL, FLASH DRIVE)**  
**ELECTRONIC FILES MUST BE WORD OR WORD COMPATIBLE**

**1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE** (must comply with an Office of Property Assessment address)

Street address: **204 South 12th Street**

Postal code: **19107**

Councilmanic District: **1**

**2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Historic Name: **The Camac Baths (T-Square Club, Stragglers' Club, etc.)**

Current/Common Name: **The 12<sup>th</sup> Street Gym**

**3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Building

Structure

Site

Object

**4. PROPERTY INFORMATION**

Occupancy:  occupied  vacant  under construction  unknown

Current use: **Unknown**

**5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

Attached

**6. DESCRIPTION**

Attached

**7. SIGNIFICANCE**

Please attach the Statement of Significance.

Period of Significance (from year to year): from **1834** to **1984**

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: **1. c. 1907; 2. 1832-47; 3. c. 1834**

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: **1. Jacob Ethan Fieldstein (1891-1954)**

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: **Unknown**

Original owner: **1. Alexander P. Luker, 2. & 3. James Hutchinson, House Carpenter**

Other significant persons: **NA**

**CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:**

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

- (a) 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; or,
- (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,
- (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,
- (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,
- (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,
- (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,
- (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

**8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Please attach

**9. NOMINATOR: KEEPING SOCIETY OF PHILADELPHIA**

Author: **Oscar Beisert, Architectural Historian**

Date: **30 August 2018**

Author: **J.M. Duffin, Archivist & Historian**

Email: **keeper@keepingphiladelphia.org**

Street Address: **1315 Walnut Street, Suite 320**

Telephone: **717.602.5002**

City, State, and Postal Code: **Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19107**

Nominator  is  is not the property owner.

**PHC USE ONLY**

Date of Receipt: 4 September 2018

Correct-Complete  Incorrect-Incomplete

Date: 7 November 2018

Date of Notice Issuance: 8 November 2018

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: South 12<sup>th</sup> Street Owner LLC

Address: 430 Park Avenue, Suite 505

City: New York State: NY Postal Code: 10022

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: \_\_\_\_\_

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Final Action: \_\_\_\_\_

Designated  Rejected

# NOMINATION

FOR THE

**PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**



Looking southeast at the upper stories of the Camac Baths. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2018.

## **THE CAMAC BATHS**

**ESTABLISHED 1929**

**204 SOUTH TWELFTH STREET**

**PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA**



The boundary for this designation delineated by the red line. Source: Philadelphia Water.

## 5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The boundary for the designation of the subject property is as follows:

ALL THAT Certain lot or piece of ground SITUATE on the West side of South 12th Street between Walnut and Locust Streets in the City of Philadelphia, BEGINNING at a point at the distance of 19 feet south of Chancellor Street, then southwardly along the west side of S. 12th Street 92 feet to the northeast corner of S. 12th Street and St. James Street, then westwardly along the north side of St. James Street 124.83 feet, then northwardly 37 feet, then westwardly roughly 63 feet to the west side of S. Camac Street to a point 36.99 feet north of the northeast corner of S. Camac Street and St. James Street, then northwardly along the east side of S. Camac Street 75 feet to the southeast corner of S. Camac Street and Chancellor Street, then eastwardly along the south side of Chancellor Street 110 feet, then southwardly 19 feet, then eastwardly 78 feet to the east side of S. 12th Street being the place of beginning.

OPA No. 882568700; Philadelphia Deed Registry Nos. 002S150115, 002S150050, 002S150217, 002S150116, 002S150247, 002S150248, 002S15035.



Looking southeast at the upper stories of the Camac Baths. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2018.

## 6. Physical Description

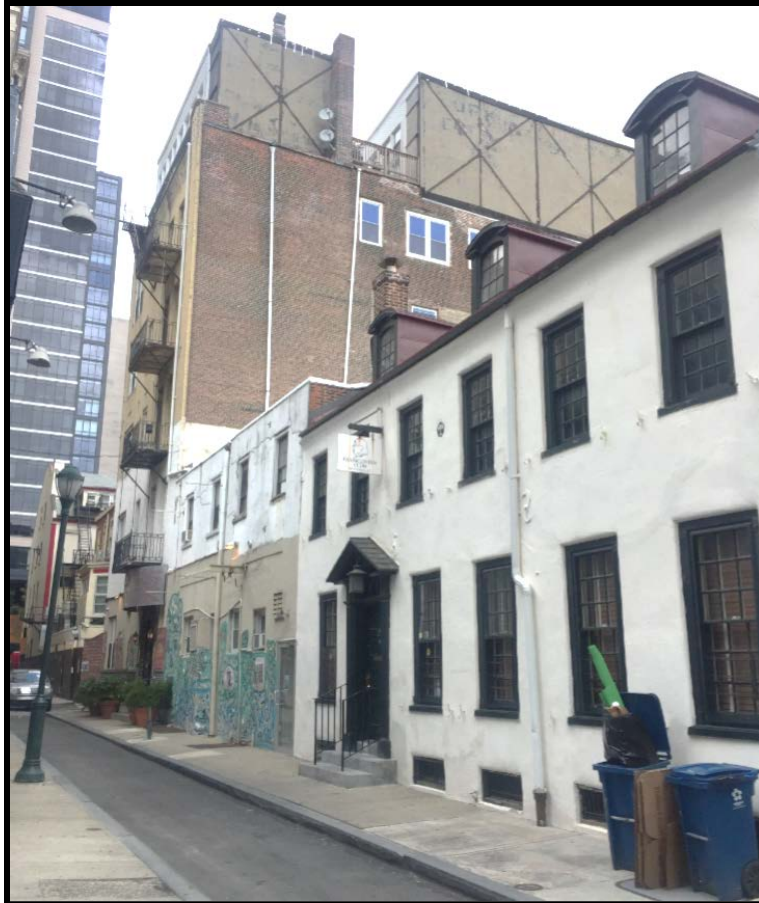
The Camac Baths subject to the proposed designation is essentially a three part building: 1. The 1907 Building; 2. 1204–06 Chancellor, c. 1832–1847; and 3. 201–203 S. Camac Street, c. 1830s.

Central to the Camac Baths, the 1907 Building is a five-story building, constructed almost entirely of load-bearing, red brick masonry construction with twelve inch bearing walls, concrete floors and roof, and plastered walls. At the top of the fifth floor is a one and two story overbuild that appears to be of frame construction. The building's original brick front underwent a stucco treatment at the north and west elevations likely between 1928 and 1929 when it was converted to the Camac Baths. The stucco façade was part of a renovation that incorporated features of the Mission style, including the stucco facing, wrought iron balconies, a dark brick skirting at the north and west elevations, decorative tile around the primary entrance on S. Camac Street, and touches of tile and iron work at various points within the façade. The primary entrance, located within the west, S. Camac Street elevation, is delineated by a surround dark red brick and Spanish tile that is built up from a base course that spans both the north and west elevations. The flat roof of the fifth floor is surrounded by a Mission style parapet that is partly comprised of the same decorative dark red brick. The fenestration of the west, S. Camac Street elevation features large, arched openings with mullion windows near the corner at each level, followed by a full size, arched single window opening, and a pair of two doors per floor that open onto the balconies. The fenestration of the north, Chancellor Street Elevation, right to left, contains seven openings on each level of the upper floors, six of which are large arched window openings containing two-part mullion windows.





Looking north at Camac Street with the south wall of the Camac Baths rising above the lower buildings on right.  
Source: Oscar Beisert, 2018.



Top: Looking north on S. Camac Street, the Camac Baths located on right. Bottom: Looking northeast on S. Camac Street, the Camac Baths on left, 201–203 S. Camac Street, also on left, and the Franklin Inn Club on right. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2018.



Top: Looking southeast at the upper floors of the Camac Baths. Bottom: Looking northeast at the Camac Baths.  
Source: Oscar Beisert, 2018.





Top: Looking east at the upper floors of the S. Camac Street elevation, featuring wrought iron, Mission or Spanish-inspired balconies, and other discreet tile details. Bottom: A wrought iron balcony on the S. Camac Street elevation of the Camac Baths. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2018.



A tile on the entrance surround of the Camac Baths at Camac Street entrance.  
Source: Oscar Beisert, 2018.



Top: The upper portion of the brick and tile surround at the primary, S. Camac Street entrance to the Camac Baths. Bottom: the lower portion of the brick and tile surround at the primary, S. Camac Street entrance to the Camac Bath. Note the original granite steps from 1907. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2018.





Left: Looking east at the façade of the Camac Baths at the southeast corner of S. Camac and Chancellor Streets. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2018. Right: Looking east at the façade of the Camac Baths at the southeast corner of S. Camac and Chancellor Streets. Taken on December 27, 1973. Source: PHC Files.





Top: the St. James and S. Twelfth Street facades of the Camac Baths. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2018. Bottom left: Looking south at the 200 block of South Twelfth Street below Walnut. The subject building at 200 South Twelfth Street is on the right. This photograph was taken in 1959. Source: DOR Archives. Bottom right: looking southwest at the S. Twelfth Street elevation of the Camac Baths in the 1970s. Source: PHC files.

By 1959, it appears that an entrance to the Camac Baths existed on S. Twelfth Street, and while that section of the building may have significance, it no longer has sufficient integrity to convey that significance as shown in the photographs from 1959, the 1970s, and 2018.



Top left: looking southwest at the façade of 1204–1206 Chancellor Street, Building 2, of the Camac Baths, and the former T-Square Club. Top: Looking east in the 1200 block of Chancellor Street, the Camac Baths on right and 1204–1206 Chancellor on left. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2018. Bottom: the same view taken December 27, 1973. Note: the narrow doorway is the former doorway to the T-Square Club, shown later in the nomination. Source PHC Files.

East of the 1907 Building, 1204–1206 Chancellor Street is a three story building of load bearing masonry construction that was originally constructed between 1832 and 1847 as a stable.<sup>1</sup> The primary elevation of the building is clad in a stucco finish. The fenestration of the building is generally four windows per floor, which have definitely been reconfigured over time. South of the 1907 Building, 201–203 S. Camac Street is a two story building of load bearing masonry construction that was constructed in phases. The northerly part of 201–203 S. Camac Street was constructed by January 1834 as a stable and coach house at S. Camac Street with three small dwellings extending from the rear of the main block that appear to be encapsulated in later

<sup>1</sup> Deed: James Burk, of the city, merchant, and Elizabeth, his wife, to Joseph B. McIlvaine, of the same, merchant, for \$1,660, 19 November 1832, 19 November 1832, Philadelphia Deed Book A.M., No. 27, p. 689; Deed: Joseph B. McIlvaine, of the city, merchant, to Thomas P. Remington, of the same, merchant, for \$2,900, 17 February 1842, Philadelphia Deed Book G.S., No. 36, p. 427, City Archives of Philadelphia (hereafter CAP). The first reference to a stable on this lot is in 1842.



additions.<sup>2</sup> These dwellings were once accessed by an alleyway that ran through the middle of two buildings at 201 and 203 S. Camac Street. The southerly part of 201–203 S. Camac Street was constructed as a single building that was divided into two tenements by 1837.<sup>3</sup> Both 201 and 203 were altered at the façade with large window openings on the second floor, which have since been infilled. The sills still exist despite the infill.



Top left: looking northeast at 201–203 S. Camac Street, c. 1910, before alterations. Top right: looking northeast at 201–203 S. Camac Street on May 6, 1923. Note: the townhouses have been altered to a more Bohemian appearance for the Stragglers Club. Source: HSP. Bottom left: looking northeast at the same view today. Bottom right: looking southeast at the same building today. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2018.

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<sup>2</sup> Survey for Policy No. 778 for James Hutchinson was finalized by the Franklin Fire Insurance Company of Philadelphia on 13 January 1834. This survey was updated on 1 December 1836. Source: Philadelphia Historical Commission Files.

<sup>3</sup> Survey for Policy No.1778 for James Hutchinson was finalized by the Perpetual on 15 June 1837. Source: HSP.



“The lower level of the 12<sup>th</sup> Street gym retains a good bit of detailing from the Camac Bath days, Photo: Peter Woodall.” Source: Source: Ron Avery. “12<sup>th</sup> Street Gym Is Great, But It Used To Be The *Shvitz*,” Hidden City Philadelphia. (19 November 2014). <<https://hiddencityphila.org/2014/11/12th-street-gym-is-great-but-it-used-to-be-the-shvitz/>>

## 7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The buildings at 204 South Twelfth Street comprise a significant historic resource that merits designation by the Philadelphia Historical Commission and inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The subject building satisfies the following Criteria for Designation, as enumerated in Section 14-1004 of the Philadelphia Code: Criteria A, G, & J.

### **Criterion J: Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social and historical heritage of the community.**

*Criterion J (1).* Serving as a familiar *shvitz* from the time of its opening in 1929 until it closed in 1984, the Camac Baths represents a significant aspect of cultural and social life for the Jewish immigrant population in Philadelphia within the context of the larger bathhouse movement in America (Pages 16-26).

*Criterion J (2).* Beyond its place in the Jewish community as a *shvitz*, the Camac Baths is significant under Criterion J for its associations with the history of the sexual and social underworld of homosexuality. A Queer subculture, which included openly and closeted gay and bisexual white men, existed in this space as early as the late 1930s in Philadelphia, at which time homosexuality was not only considered immoral, but was also illegal (Pages 27-35).

*Criterion J (3).* Within the complex that became known as the Camac Baths, the buildings 1204-1206 Chancellor Street and 201-203 S. Camac Street represent and relate to a significant segment of the city’s cultural and social heritage, when S. Camac Street and its adjacent alleys and streets were Revered as the “Biggest Little Street in the World,” the “Little Street of Clubs,”



“Club Lane,” and even “Club Row.” Built as a stable between 1832 and 1847, the building at 1204-1206 Chancellor was the first official clubhouse of the T-Square Club, which was one of the first clubs known to move within the square known as S. Camac Street. Built for various uses including residential as early 1834, the building at 201-203 S. Camac Street was later home to the Straggler’s Club, the Venture Gardens, etc. (Pages 35-39).

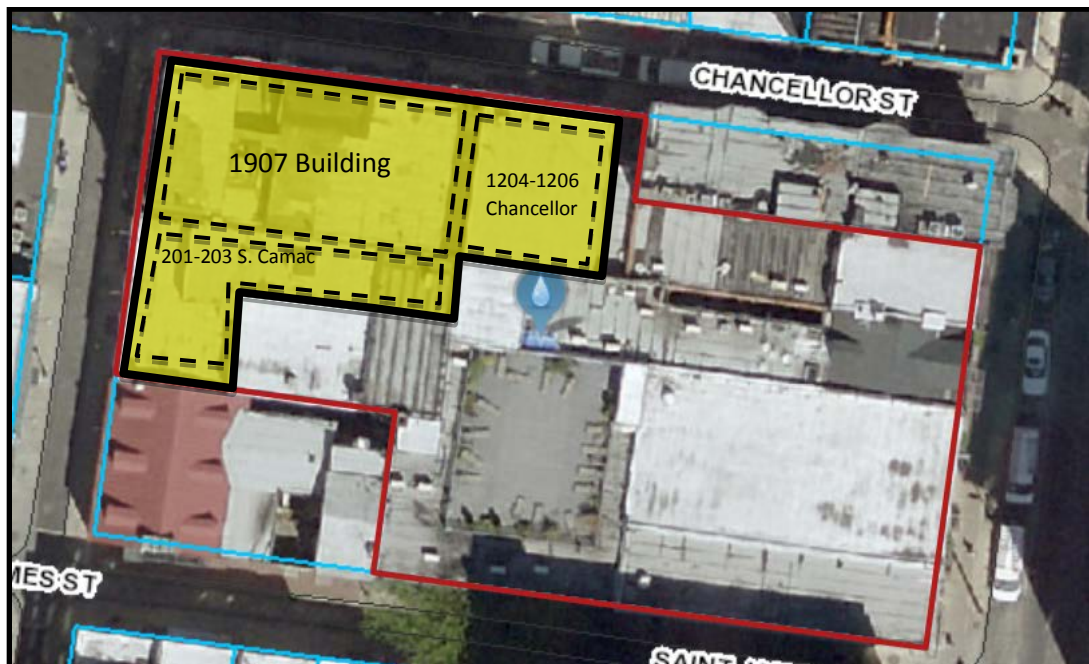
**Criterion A: Has significant character, interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth and Nation—and is associated with the lives of persons significant in the past.**

Within the complex that became known as the Camac Baths, the buildings 1204-1206 Chancellor Street and 201-203 S. Camac Street represent and relate to a significant segment development and redevelopment of S. Camac Street and its adjacent alleys and streets as the “Biggest Little Street in the World,” the “Little Street of Clubs,” “Club Lane,” and even “Club Row.” The redevelopment of this area in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century led to the formation of an important historic and cultural enclave of the city (Pages 35-39).

**Criterion G: Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif.**

The Camac Baths, including the 1907 Building, 1204-1206 Chancellor Street, and 201-203 S. Camac Street are part of a distinctive area that comprises S. Camac Street between Walnut and Spruce Streets, which should be preserved as part of an historic, cultural, and architectural motif (Pages 39-40).

The period of significance for the subject designation is from 1834 to 1984.



The Camac Baths is highlighted in yellow with the three significant building components delineated with dashed lines. The delineations are approximate and will require the oversight of the Philadelphia Historical Commission. Source: Philadelphia Water.



“South Side - Walnut Street – Camac to 13th Streets. Sign: Camac Baths Russian and Turkish Men and Women Turkish Bath and Health Course. Sign: Coiffeur Français Drug Store. Sign: Luncheonette. Sign: Hotel Saint James.” Taken on June 14, 1931 by Charles L. Howell. Note: the sign was displayed on Walnut Street, like the advertisements read, but with an arrow directing patrons to Chancellor Street. Source: DOR Archives, Phillyhistory.org.

**Criterion J.** Established in 1929, the Camac Baths at the southeast corner of S. Camac and Chancellor Streets were opened and operated as the “Camac Health Institute,” known officially as the Camac Baths, Inc. and, mostly commonly, as the Camac Baths. While operating as a general “health club” and a Russian and Turkish bath, the Camac Baths also served as a familiar *shvitz* for a Jewish immigrant clientele, representing a significant aspect of cultural and social life for the Jewish immigrant population in Philadelphia. While most popular during the second quarter of the twentieth century, the baths survived until 1984. According to Grey Pierce’s, masters’ thesis in historic preservation, “Throwing Open The Door: Preserving Philadelphia’s Gay Bathhouses” (2015), the establishment and operation of bathhouses in American can be divided into three distinct categories: “baths created for poor, immigrant communities in large cities; baths as places in urban areas for Jewish males to gather and take part in a ritual known as a *shvitz*; and the lastly story and development of the gay bathhouses in America.”<sup>4</sup> The Camac Baths fits into both the second and third categories discussed by Pierce, but this section is limited to a discussion of the second category. In addition, the Camac Baths also included Russian and Turkish bath facilities for both men and women, though this service seems to have ebbed and flowed in popularity over the years.

The tradition of steam and hot air bathhouses originated in the Mediterranean from the time of the Romans and Greeks. Though the practice largely died out in Western Europe with the fall of

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<sup>4</sup> Grey Pierce, “Throwing Open the Door: Preserving Philadelphia’s Gay Bathhouses” (Masters’ thesis: University of Pennsylvania, 2015), 11–12.

the Roman Empire, the movement had a revival in the mid-nineteenth century. Hot air baths were known as Turkish Baths and steam baths were known as Russian Baths. The revival started what was known as the Turkish Bath or Victorian Turkish Bath, or in continental Europe as the Roman-Irish Bath, and has its origins in the United Kingdom with David Urquhart, a Scottish diplomat, Member of Parliament, and authority on Turkish/Ottoman culture. Urquhart wrote about the benefits of Turkish baths and developed a form which employed a system of dry, hot-air baths.<sup>5</sup> In the 1850s and 1860s, Irish physician Richard Barter read Urquhart's book, and worked with him to construct a bath in 1856, which was the first Victorian Turkish bath in Europe, known as St. Ann's, near Blarney in County Cork, Ireland.<sup>6</sup> Two followed in 1860, one in Manchester and another at 5 Bell Street near Marble Gate in London. For more than one hundred years afterwards more than 600 Turkish baths opened all across England.<sup>7</sup> The movement spread to continental Europe in the 1860s with the Friedrichsbad in Baden-Baden, Germany from 1869–1877 being one of the most famous and early examples of this form. The Turkish Bath came to America in the 1860s. The first Turkish baths appear in New York with the Dr. Charles H. Shepard's Turkish Bath in Brooklyn Heights in 1863.<sup>8</sup> In the 1860s it was considered somewhat of a novelty frequently appearing in the reports about New York in the Philadelphia newspapers.<sup>9</sup>



Left: “Bath Night, circa 1945. (Weegee/International Center of Photography).” Source: <http://bedfordandbowery.com/2014/01/the-steamy-history-of-the-tenth-street-baths/>; and Right: Photograph of the “Russian & Turkish Baths Health Club,” established in 1892, was the oldest bathhouse of its kind in New York City. Source: <http://bedfordandbowery.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/BATHS11.jpg>

In Philadelphia the first public bathhouses were primarily facilities for simple bathing or washing. One of the earliest “bathing establishments” was founded in the 1820s at the northeast corner of Seventh and Sansom Streets by William Swaim, who was an early pharmaceutical magnate. Installed in townhouses, there were collectively between forty-four and fifty baths

<sup>5</sup> D. Urquhart, *The Spirit of the East* (London: Henry Colburn, 1838) and “The Turkish Bath,” *The Free Press*, 26 May 1858, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Shifrin. “Dr. Richard Barter (1802–1870) and St Ann's Hydropathic Establishment near Blarney, Co Cork, Ireland,” *Victorian Turkish Baths: Their Origin, Development, and Gradual Decline*, updated 19 May 2017, [http://www.victorianturkishbath.org/\\_4PERSONS/AtoZPerson/Barter/1BarterEng.htm](http://www.victorianturkishbath.org/_4PERSONS/AtoZPerson/Barter/1BarterEng.htm)

<sup>7</sup> J.J. Cosgrove. *Design of the Turkish Bath* (Books for Business, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Shilfin, “The Victorian Turkish bath arrives in the United States of America,” *Victorian Turkish Baths*, updated 19 August 2018, [http://www.victorianturkishbath.org/\\_2HISTORY/AtoZHist/NewYork/1ColumbiaEng.htm](http://www.victorianturkishbath.org/_2HISTORY/AtoZHist/NewYork/1ColumbiaEng.htm)

<sup>9</sup> Described as “the newest kink, in the way of foreign luxuries,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 25 January 1862, p. 4; *The Evening Telegraph* (Philadelphia), 29 September 1866, p. 6.



made of tin-plated copper and Italian marble in addition to “luxurious and sanative shower baths” for men and women, a swimming pool where swimming lessons were offered, and a bar room “with variety of choice liquors.”<sup>10</sup> There was not much general interest of the basic commercial bathhouse during this period. By the late 1850s and early 1860s there only four active establishments in the Philadelphia.<sup>11</sup>



“Philadelphia Bathing Establishment, erected 1827 by W. Swaim.”  
Source: the Library Company of Philadelphia.

The first reference to steam and hot air baths in Philadelphia comes in 1860 in the prospectus of The Natatorium and Institute for Scientific Instruction in the Improvement of the Physical Power. The Natatorium, located at 219 S. Broad Street, was an early physical fitness club formed by Dr. Charles Beck Goddard and a number of leading Philadelphians. Though the main feature of the club was an indoor swimming pool, it also included “Russian Baths.”<sup>12</sup> By 1861 it would appear that the Natatorium had both “Russian and Turkish Baths” – making it one of the first in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Though these types of baths were becoming popular in New York in the 1860s, Philadelphia appears to have been slow to adopt them. As one newspaper remarked: “These things may take well enough in New York and the eastern cities, but Philadelphia is too

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<sup>10</sup> The Library Company of Philadelphia Digital Collection, last accessed January 27, 2015, [http://lcpdams.librarycompany.org:8881/R/?func=dbin-jump-full&object\\_id=64797&local\\_base=GEN01](http://lcpdams.librarycompany.org:8881/R/?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=64797&local_base=GEN01). “The Philadelphia Baths,” *The National Gazette* (Philadelphia), 19 July 1828, 2.

<sup>11</sup> They were: J.C. Abel at 228 S. 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, Charles T. Matheys at 610 Sansom and William Winship at 616 Sansom (*Boyd’s Philadelphia Business Directory* [Philadelphia: William H. Boyd, 1858], 47); John K. Murphy at 218 S. 12<sup>th</sup> Street (*The Philadelphia Merchants’ and Manufacturers’ Business Directory for 1856–57* [Philadelphia: Griswold & Co., 1856], 15). These all appear in the business directory section of *McElroy’s Philadelphia City Directory for 1860*.

<sup>12</sup> *To Philadelphians On Behalf of The Natatorium & Physical Institute* (Philadelphia: J.B. Chandler, 1860). 11–12.

<sup>13</sup> Notices, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 22 June 1861, 3; the Natatorium “has just introduced the Russian or Turkish Baths into this city” (*The Press* [Philadelphia], 5 November 1861, 2).



slow a city for them...”<sup>14</sup> The next bath to appear was in 1868 when Robert Wilson opened the first standalone Turkish and Russian Bath at 1109 Girard (later Ludlow) Street.<sup>15</sup>

Russian and Turkish Baths appear more and more in Philadelphia newspaper ads towards the end of the 1870s and into the 1880s.<sup>16</sup> They were primarily located in Center City.<sup>17</sup> Dr. William A. Elvins who took over Wilson’s Turkish Bath moved it to 25 S. 10<sup>th</sup> Street by 1879.<sup>18</sup> In April 1872, a Mrs. Durand advertised “Improved Turkish Baths,” at 13 N. 11<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>19</sup> In the 1880s Rowland & Co was operating at 1013 Chestnut Street.<sup>20</sup>

**SPECIAL NOTICES.**

**MRS. DURAND**

Begs to state that she has leased and refurnished the Department of Dr. Landis' Patent

**IMPROVED TURKISH BATHS,**

(Also, The IMPROVED COOL BATH.)

No. 13 N. ELEVENTH STREET, above Market, Where she hopes, by polite attention to her patrons, she will receive a liberal patronage, as she is convinced from experience that this is by far the cheapest and most exhilarating and healthful bathing process extant. Only \$1 a bath, or four tickets for \$4.

Polite male and female servants. Separate bath for ladies and gentlemen. Open daily from 9 A. M. to 10 P. M., and Sundays, 6 to 10, morning.

RECOMMENDATIONS.

The Improved Turkish Bath is in every way preferable to the old Turkish Bath. It is worth more and costs less; I have taken both.

B. F. JOHNSON, M. D., U. S. Navy.

We agree with Dr. Johnson, and esteem it the only true cleansing operation, which is beneficial all the year round.

B. STONE, M. D.,  
A. R. COOPER, M. D.

Mrs. Durand merits a liberal patronage at her Improved Turkish Bath. It is the neatest, least exposed and most delightful of baths; each bather has a separate bath.

HORACE BINNEY.

Dr. Landis' Improved Turkish Bath is well worth letters patent, as it is positively an improved apparatus.

JOHN KANE.

What I claim in my Improved bath, as superior to all others, is that the heat is directly emitted upon that portion of the body where perspiration is needed, while the head is in pure air, which prevents arterial excitement and congestion of the membranes of the brain. The consequence is that no one can take cold after the proper use of it. Thousands of diseases would be prevented by taking one or two of these baths weekly. They cannot harm any one, but benefit all by removing waste matters from the inner layers of the skin.

S. M. LANDIS, M. D., Patentee.

P. S.—Cut this out, please, for future reference.

MRS. DURAND, Proprietress,  
No. 13 N. ELEVENTH Street.

Left: “Special Notices,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 August 1872, 5.

<sup>14</sup> “A Model Bathing Establishment,” *Daily Evening Bulletin*, 17 July 1869, 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Daily Evening Bulletin*, 15 May 1868, 8; “City Notices,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 28 May 1868, 4; “A Model Bathing Establishment,” *Daily Evening Bulletin*, 17 July 1869, 6.

<sup>16</sup> “City Notices,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11 August 1879, 5.

<sup>17</sup> The baths that could be identified in 1881 are: William A. Elvins, 25 S. 10<sup>th</sup> St.; Louis Heine, 216 Franklin St., Harry w. Kelsey, 1106 Walnut St.; Philadelphia Thermiac, 1013 Chestnut (*Boyd’s Philadelphia City Business Directory 1881* [Philadelphia: Central News Co., 1881])

<sup>18</sup> “Hydrophobia: Death of a Wilmington Fish Dealer in this City,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 13 October 1879, 8; *Boyd’s Philadelphia Business Directory 1874* (Philadelphia: Central News Co., 1874);

<sup>19</sup> “Mrs. Durand,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 August 1872, 5; *Boyd’s Philadelphia Business Directory*.

<sup>20</sup> “Fire in a Turkish Bath House,” *The Times* (Philadelphia), 13 February 1889, 2.



*The Times* (Philadelphia), 23 January 1886, 3.

These early bathhouses likely catered to a middle and professional class clientele. The “Philadelphia Shopping Guide and Elite Business Directory” in the Philadelphia *Blue Book* regularly had listings under the heading of “Baths” in 1880s and early 1890s.<sup>21</sup>

An important shift in the use and operation of Turkish and Russian Baths occurred in the 1890s when the clientele broadened with more working class people and immigrants making use of bathhouse facilities. This coincided with the large emigration of Jews from Eastern Europe who brought a bathing tradition with them to the New World.

Bathing as a form of ritual purification, known as the *mikveh*, is an ancient practice in Judaism. The Talmud even contains an instruction that “a scholar” must live in a city with baths. Over time the specific ritual practice expanded to become a more general one in everyday life. Because of the severe restrictions on Jews throughout Europe, they were forced to develop their own *mikveh* and general baths.<sup>22</sup> The *shvitz*, the popular Yiddish word for steam baths, became popular in the Jewish immigrant community in America in the early twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> In Poland and Russia most Jews did not have baths in their homes and the Russian and Turkish bath tradition became part and parcel basic sanitary measures. A New York resident, Abraham Richman, for example, “...came to America in 1905 from rural Russia and continued the tradition of attending Russian baths in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.”<sup>24</sup> Professor Irwin Richman in his memoir *Borscht Belt Bungalows, Memories of Catskill Summers*, remembers that only in the Catskills did his grandfather, Abraham Richman, attend shul (synagogue) regularly and, when in the city, he was at the baths:

In the winter, he [Abraham Richman] spent his Saturdays with his cronies, eating, drinking, and playing cards at the Turkish bath, or as he would say, “ein bord” [meaning “a bath” in Yiddish].<sup>25</sup>

In his memoir of life in Philadelphia at the turn of the century, William B. Richter described the importance of the baths as follows:

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<sup>21</sup> *Boyd's Blue Book: The Fashionable Private Address Directory and Ladies' Visiting and Shopping Guide of Philadelphia and Surroundings, Season of 1887–88* (Philadelphia: C.E. Howe, 1887), 501; *Boyd's Blue Book ... 1891–92*.

<sup>22</sup> “Bath, Bathing,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 210–211.

<sup>23</sup> *Shvitz* comes from the Yiddish *shvitsn* which means “to sweat” – a derivative of the German verb *schwitzen* (Grey Pierce, “Throwing Open the Door: Preserving Philadelphia’s Gay Bathhouses” [Masters’ thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2015], 11–12). Celia J. Bergoffen, “The Lower East Side’s Synagogue, Tenement, and Russian Bathhouse: Mikva’ot and the Excavation of a Mikvah at 5 Allen Street,” *American Jewish History* 101 (2017): 165–196.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Irwin Richman. 27 August 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Irwin Richman, *Borscht Belt Bungalows, Memories of Catskill Summers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 144.

Philadelphians, especially those of European ancestry, loved the old Russian Baths. Two were located at the turn of the century at Second and Vine streets. One was “Goodmans” on the north side of Vine ... and the other “Silvers” on the south side of Vine near Third. ... The sweat baths were very popular. An attendant would massage the customer with a “broom,” made up of tied “oak leaves,” in the hot Russian room. “Git a Guetch!” “Git a Guetch, Berchick!” the customer would yell as they were being massaged by the attendant who wore an old soft hat to protect him from the horrible heat which was generated when the water was poured on the hot stones over the charcoal or wood heated furnaces. ... After the massage, followed a cold rub; then a place of “Mislinnas” (black olives), herring and onion, and plenty of buttered Jewish rye or pumpernickel bread. Such were the days when life was simple and people lived plainly in Old Philadelphia. Later came the more luxurious bath houses and hotel and apartment “Turkish Bath” and health institutes.<sup>26</sup>

The emergence of the important role Jewish residents played in the bathhouse expansion at the beginning of the twentieth century can be seen in newspapers and city directories. *The Jewish Exponent* had its first advertisement in 1889 for “The Grand Turkish Bath” run by Dr. Carl Lindell at 21 N. Tenth Street.<sup>27</sup> Numerous other ads followed, the largest number being in the period from around 1915 to 1940. The city directories chart this shift well. The 1910 business directory lists the following baths:<sup>28</sup>

Hugo Bach,	1712 N. Broad
Samuel Bershadsky,	436 Lombard
Abraham Bronstein	240 Monroe
Carrodus Baths	1709 Chestnut
Nathan Cooperman	935 S. 4 <sup>th</sup>
Girard Turkish & Russian Baths	960 N. 8 <sup>th</sup>
Solomon Goodman <sup>29</sup>	211 Vine
Kratchman Bros.	315 Monroe
Katharine Lipscomb	1603 Thompson
Hiram Lucker	1522 S. 7 <sup>th</sup>
Manhattan Bathing Establishment	1614 Market
The Oriental Bath Co	1104 Walnut
Penna Orthopedic Institute & School of Mechano-Therapy (Medical and electric light baths)	1711 Green
Jacob Petchon	819 Wood
Silas H. Rowland <sup>30</sup>	23 S. 11 <sup>th</sup>

<sup>26</sup> William B. Richter, *North of Society Hill and Other Stories* (North Quincy, MA: The Christopher Publishing House, 1970), 50–51.

<sup>27</sup> *The Jewish Exponent*, 15 March 1889, 9.

<sup>28</sup> *Boyd's Co-Partnership and Residence Business Directory of Philadelphia City 1910* (Philadelphia: C.E. Howe Co., 1910), 1399.

<sup>29</sup> “Conspiracy Charged,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1 December 1904, 2.



Isaac Silber	230 Vine
Solomon Widreritz	913 New Market

Other baths from this period include one operating at Third and Montrose in 1920.<sup>31</sup> Saratag Garbenhden was operating a Turkish bath at Ninth and Race Streets in 1922.<sup>32</sup> In 1926 Max Loomis was operating a Turkish bath at 954 N. Eighth Street, which was damaged by fire in December of that year.<sup>33</sup> Jacob Fillers' owned a Turkish bath at 511 S. Third Street in 1929.<sup>34</sup> Prior of the opening of the Camac Baths, there were at least thirteen bathhouses operating in Philadelphia by 1927.<sup>35</sup>

Many of the baths that persisted remained in the hands of the same family. Abe's Baths at 317–21 Monroe Street (no longer extant) is one example. Its origins date to 1896 when Kanevsky and Bershadsky opened a bathhouse dubbed "Paradise on Earth" at this location. The following year Hyman Kretchman purchased it, and, eventually, the bathhouse ended up in the hands of his son Abe who expanded and modernized the facility in the 1920s. The bathhouse had white tile throughout and offered much of the traditional Russian Bath amenities – such as the rub down with the *pleytse*. There was also a dormitory for the male customers which could accommodate up to 150 men.<sup>36</sup>

The Camac Baths was established by Alexander Putter Lucker (1889–1962). Lucker, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants, Hyman Lucker (ca. 1862–1923) and Sarah Putter (ca. 1862–1931). Hyman came to Philadelphia around 1884 and eventually became a real estate broker by the 1910s, owning several properties in the city. Around 1906, he opened a bathhouse on his property at 1522–24 S. Sixth Street, across the street from his home at 1533 S. Sixth Street.<sup>37</sup> According to his grandson, Hyman charged 15 cents for a steam bath and shower and had "as many as 6,000 customers come in on a weekend."<sup>38</sup> Alexander started his career as a builder but in 1928 decided to go into the Turkish and Russian Bath business. Plans for a "seven-story bath house" were first announced in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* on March 18, 1928.<sup>39</sup> According to National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form: East Center City Commercial Historic District, listed in 1984 and amended in 2018, the renovations were designed by Jacob Ethan

<sup>30</sup> "Fire in Turkish Baths," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 6 March 1919, 2.

<sup>31</sup> "Dies in Turkish Bath," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 13 December 1920 4.

<sup>32</sup> "Runs Naked To Police," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 28 January 1922, 5.

<sup>33</sup> "Fire Damages Turkish Bath," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 21 March 1926, 7.

<sup>34</sup> "7 Men Scalded In Turkish Bath," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 10 May 1929, 2.

<sup>35</sup> They were: Abe's New Bath at 319 Monroe Street; Adelpia Bath House at 211 Vine Street; Bershad's New Turkish & Russian Baths at 975 N. 7th Street; Central Turkish & Russian Bath at 44 N. 10th Street; Collins Baths, Women, Bellevue Ct. Bldg.; Collins Physical Culture for Men at 219 N. Broad Street; the Hydratic Institute in the Sylvania Hotel; Kelsey Oriental Bath Co. at 1104 Walnut Street; Phillips Model Baths at 728 Snyder Avenue; the Sulphur Vapor Baths at 1514 Pine Street; and the Sylvania Baths at the Sylvania Hotel (*Philadelphia and Surrounding Territory, Classified Business Directory* [Philadelphia: The Buyer's Clue Book, Inc., 1927], 53.)

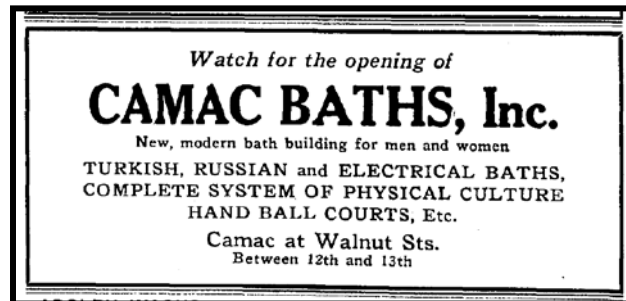
<sup>36</sup> Harry D. Boonin, *The Jewish Quarter of Philadelphia: A History and Guide, 1881–1930* (Philadelphia: Jewish Walking Tours of Philadelphia, Inc., 1998), 103–104. This building was demolished in 1981.

<sup>37</sup> The first reference to his bathhouse is in the 1906 city directory. Lucker purchased the property in 1903 (Philadelphia Deed Registry Plan 11S12, Plots 271 and 272, CAP).

<sup>38</sup> Ron Avery, "The Shvitz: A 'Mechayeh' on Camac Street," *The Jewish Exponent*, 22 January 1982, 29.

<sup>39</sup> "Real Estate Deals of Week List Few Central Transfers," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 18 March 1928, 70.

Fieldstein (1891-1954), a fairly prosperous Jewish architect in Philadelphia. Officially, the Camac Baths, Inc., represented by Alexander P. Lucker, purchased the existing building (former power plant to the St. James Hotel) at the southeast corner of Chancellor and S. Camac Streets in April 1928 for \$100,000.<sup>40</sup> The building was renovated to include a barbershop, a gym, pools and steam rooms. To help create cultivate a clientele, Lucker ran a series of ads in the *Jewish Exponent* from September to December 1928 alerting potential patrons that the baths were going to open soon.<sup>41</sup> The Camac Baths appears to have been one of the largest of more than twenty-five baths in Philadelphia that existed from the 1920s to the present day.



Advertisement that appeared in *The Jewish Exponent* beginning on 14 September 1928.

Lucker would enlarge the Camac Baths with the purchase and eventual incorporation of 1206 Chancellor Street in March 1938 for \$10,000.<sup>42</sup> A few years later, Lucker purchased 201–203 S. Camac Street, formerly two residential properties. The building at 201 S. Camac Street was built by 1834 as a stable and three houses in a rear court, and 203 S. Camac Street was built by 1837 as a house. When the Camac Street became a center for club life, the Stragglers' Club would take over the building and, later, the Venture Gardens. Described as a "three-story building, lot 30 by 72 feet," 201–203 S. Camac Street was bought by the "Camac Baths & Health Corp." from the Stonewall Building & Loan Association for \$32,000.<sup>43</sup> The Camac Baths would again be enlarged in the 1950s with a mid-century building being added at 1206 and 1208 S. Twelfth Street. A photograph from 1959 shows this addition, which was later expanded to the corner, subsuming the property at 1210 S. Twelfth Street. However, as stated in the physical description, only the earlier portions of this complex are subject to the proposed designation due to the physical changes of the façade of the building at the northwest corner of S. Twelfth and St. James Streets.

After Alexander P. Lucker died the baths passed to his children and his sons Arnold B. and Edward continued to run the business until 1984. It remained one of the last baths to offer the full range of services in the city. As Edward Lucker described in 1982 "Tradition, tradition, tradition and service, service, service is what makes us different. Our attendants will dry a man off, wrap him in a sheet, bring him a glass of ice water. No one else gives that service."<sup>44</sup>

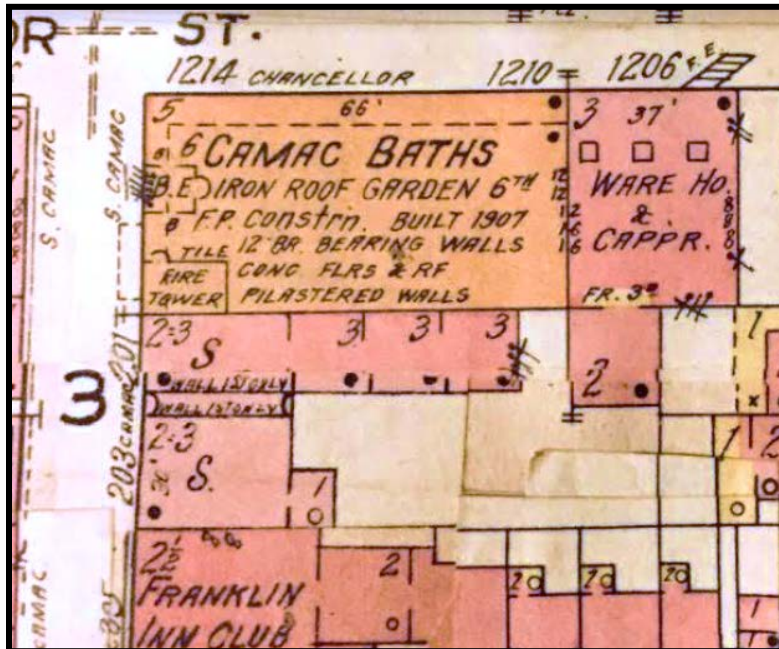
<sup>40</sup> "Activities of Day in Real Estate," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 5 April 1928, 15.

<sup>41</sup> *The Jewish Exponent*, 14 September 1928, 17 to 21 December 1928, 13.

<sup>42</sup> *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 5 March 1938), 23.

<sup>43</sup> "201–03 S. Camac St.," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 18 August 1942, 26.

<sup>44</sup> Ron Avery, "The Shvitz," 29.



1916 Philadelphia Sanborn Atlas with updates through 1931. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2018..



A banner from the earliest days of the Camac Baths.

Source: <http://myauctionfinds.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/bath1.jpg>



**CAMAC**  
**Health Institute**  
*and Baths*  
**PHYSICAL CULTURE**

*under supervision of*  
 P. E. DESMOND and H. W. FURLONG

**Weight Reduction Body Building Modern Facilities**

HYDRO THERAPY ULTRA VIOLET SUN RAY BATHS  
 ELECTRIC CABINET RUSSIAN & TURKISH BATHS  
 COLONIC IRRIGATIONS ELECTRO THERAPY

*Men's Baths Open All Night*  
*Women's Hours, 9 A. M. to 10 P. M.*  
*Hotel Accommodations*

**CAMAC AT WALNUT ST. For Men**  
**BETWEEN 12th & 13th ST. and Women**

*Phone, Pennypacker 0771*

**A HEALTHY PLEASURE.**  
**ALL FOR**  
**\$1**

GYM. COURSE  
 TURKISH BATH  
 SUNRAY  
 ALCOHOL RUB  
 OVERNIGHT SLEEP

**CAMAC BATHS**  
*For Men and Women*  
**CAMAC at WALNUT STS.**

Left: *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 27 January 1929), 44. Right: *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 22 November 1932), 20.  
 Source: Newspapers.com.

**Acquire Your Vacation Sun-Tan Now**

. . . On the newly decorated sun-decks atop the Camac . . . Nature may also be aided by the indoor Sun-Ray treatments. Separate decks for men and women, included with

TURKISH BATH, All for  
 GYM COURSE, **50c**  
 ALCOHOL RUB, ETC.

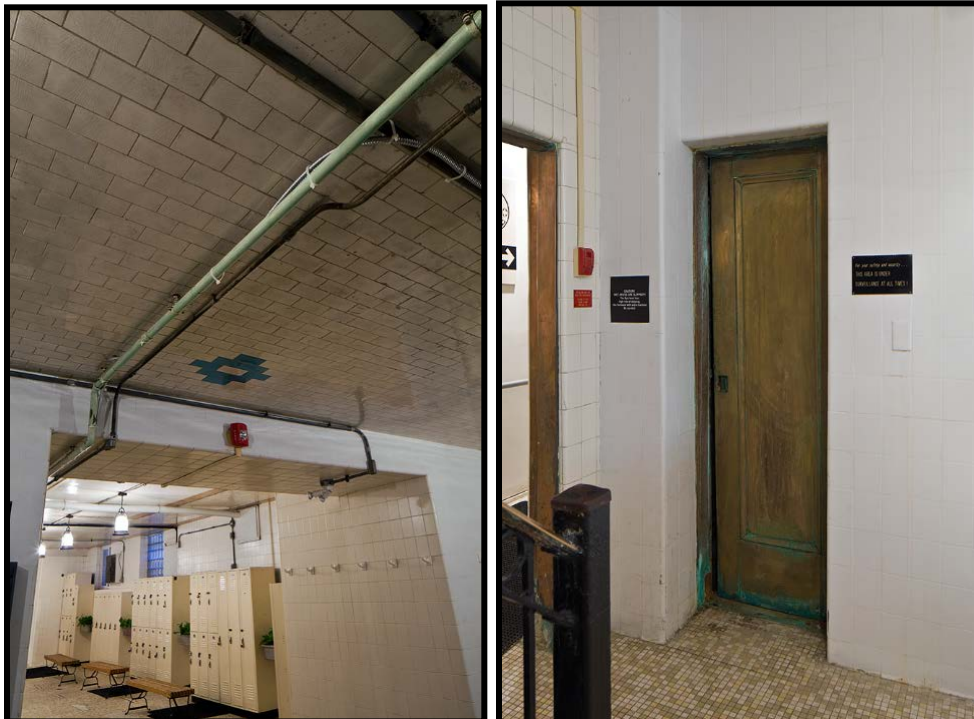
*Phone PENNypacker 0772 Men's Treatment—75c Open Day & Night*

**CAMAC HEALTH INSTITUTE**  
 Walnut at Camac bet. 12th and 13th Sts.  
**WE WILL ALSO BE OPEN DECORATION DAY**

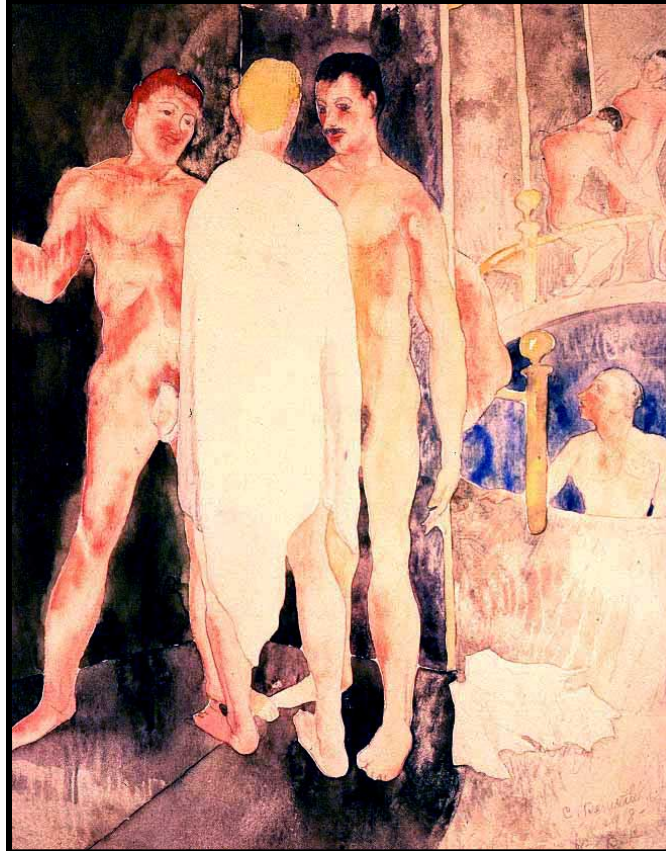
*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 26 May 1935), 56. Source: Newspapers.com.



Advertisement, *The Jewish Exponent*, 3 May 1950, 3.



Interior views of the former Camac Baths, taken by Peter Woodall. Source: Ron Avery. "12<sup>th</sup> Street Gym Is Great, But It Used To Be The *Shvitz*," Hidden City Philadelphia. (19 November 2014). <<https://hiddencityphila.org/2014/11/12th-street-gym-is-great-but-it-used-to-be-the-shvitz/>>



“Turkish Bath with Self Portrait” (1918) by Charles Demuth.  
Source: <https://www.theartstory.org/artist-demuth-charles-artworks.htm>.

**Criterion J.** Despite being established and operated as a “health club,” a Russian and Turkish bathhouse, and a *shvitz* for a Jewish clientele, the Camac Baths is significant under Criterion J for its historic associations with the sexual and social underworld of homosexuality in Philadelphia. A Queer subculture, which included openly and closeted gay and bisexual white men, existed in this space as early as the late 1930s, at which time homosexuality was not only considered immoral, but was illegal. To put the significance of this place into context, one must imagine a world where the natural, carnal, and romantic desires and interests of gay men, and any outward indication of those feelings, are not allowed to exist in general society. This place was among the few establishments of the period where one could discreetly, and, occasionally, openly, know and experience a glimpse of what heterosexuals have known and enjoyed as natural rights since the beginning of time. The Camac Baths was one of these places—a significant building that represents the homosexual underworld of the past, being one of the earliest known examples in the City of Brotherly Love.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> It is important to note that this building’s significance is limited to the context of white gay men, which is due to the fact that the Camac Baths was a segregated bathhouse. As a result, the authors have limited the discussion to that category of the larger Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer (LGBTQ) community.

*Historic Context and Documentation.* Bathhouses have been the scene of homosexual behavior since the dawn of the age, being one of the only enclosed places of refuge for those we now known as gay, bisexual, and queer men.<sup>46</sup> In David D. Doyle, Jr.'s "Rediscovering Ogden Codman" for the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, he opens a section on bathhouses by stating: "Another important site of the [homo]sexual underworld was the Turkish bath."<sup>47</sup> George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940*, describes bathhouses as a safe place for the social and sexual life of the underground world of homosexuality:

Forthrightly sexual in character, the baths were also important social centers, where gay men could meet openly, discuss their lives, and build a circle of friends. Their distinctive character fostered a sense of community among their patrons.<sup>48</sup>

The history of homosexuality in America can only be gleaned from a very small category of records that are confined to police records and media reports and minimal correspondence, oral histories. New York City certainly was one of the places where one could find establishments dedicated to serving a "specialized clientele" of any kind, where men with same-sex erotic interests could find a meeting place. As early as the 1890s, there were "notorious sites," such as the Slide in Manhattan, "a saloon where men of different classes with same-sex desires met," and, more importantly, "numerous Turkish baths, the Boston Athletic Association [being] most prominent among them."<sup>49</sup> Two of the baths located in Manhattan at that time were on Lafayette Place and at 28 West 28<sup>th</sup> Street. Ogden Codman, Jr. (1863–1951), co-author with Edith Wharton of the *Decoration of Houses*, as well as a noted architect and decorator, left substantial documentation of his secret life in the homosexual underworld.<sup>50</sup> In letters between Codman and his friend Arthur Little (1852–1925), the common sexual activities practiced in Turkish baths is documented in surprising detail. Naturally, the correspondence between Codman and Little is just one source, but the claims made are corroborated by "frequent police raids," as well as other sources of the period.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Allan Bérubé, "The History of Gay Bathhouses," *Journal of Homosexuality* 44 (2003): 34.

<sup>47</sup> David D. Doyle, Jr., "'A Very Proper Bostonian:' Rediscovering Ogden Codman and His Late-Nineteenth-Century Queer World," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 13 (2004): 461.

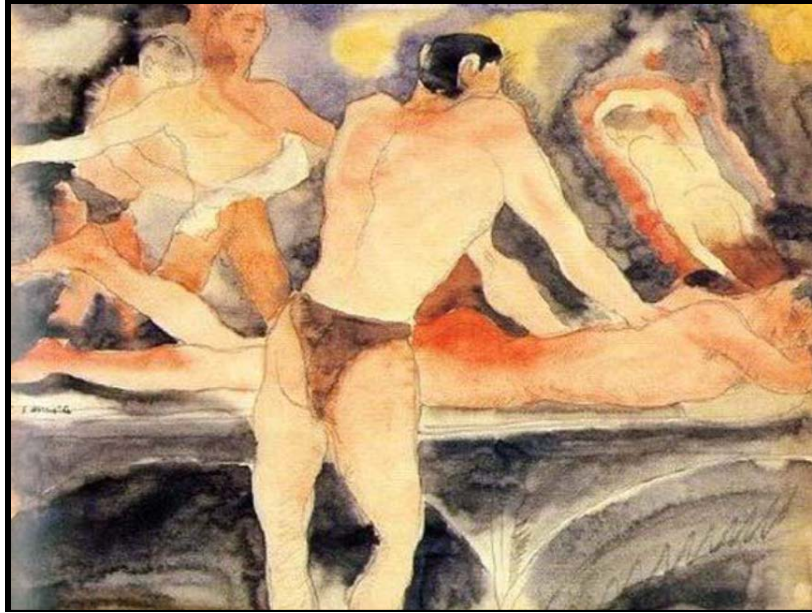
<sup>48</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 224.

<sup>49</sup> Doyle, "A Very Proper Bostonian," 450.

<sup>50</sup> Doyle, "A Very Proper Bostonian," 446.

<sup>51</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 220–23.





Another bathhouse work by Charles Demuth.

Source: <https://boverijuancarlos pintores.blogspot.com/2012/02/charles-demuth.html>

Due to the discreet nature of this underworld, it is most difficult to find and prove associations with buildings or establishments that served these purposes; however, over time, it is known that bathhouses were also popular among men with same sex desires in Philadelphia. In his study of history of Philadelphia's gay community, Marc Stein found that "the bathhouses, most of which were located near the Locust Strip, included the Bellevue Health Club, Camac Baths, and Jack Drucker's Baths."<sup>52</sup> Whether or not Philadelphia had earlier bathhouses or not, where gay men socialized and had sex with men, is not known, but, by the late 1930s, it is clear that the Camac Baths had become, in addition to its general purpose and use, a place that attracted "homosexual patrons."

Among the thousands of advertisements published in Philadelphia papers for the Camac Baths over the years, perhaps the most unusual was one published in 1936, which portrayed a shirtless man in fit physical condition. The advertisement stated the following:

#### CAMAC TURKISH BATHS

Camac at Walnut St.

Men—Keep Fit!

This time of the Year when a TURKISH BATH is most advantageous.

Turkish Bath, 75c

Come In Today!<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves, Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945–1972* (The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 81.

<sup>53</sup> *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 5 April 1936, 47.

The purpose of this advertisement was to draw a certain clientele. Who exactly this advertisement was meant to attract to the Turkish bathhouse is not known, but this is clearly an example of the type of advertisement that sent mixed signals into the marketplace of the 1930s.



*The Philadelphia Inquirer, 5 April 1936), 47.*

The earliest known documentation of the Camac Baths as a meeting place for homosexual encounters dates to about 1938, when George Axler, born George Fisher, (1928–2005), a Philadelphia-born American actor of Jewish origin, was taken to the Camac Bathes by his father for the typical Russian and Turkish bath experience that was enjoyed by many immigrant Jews of his class and background. His father, “being from Europe, loved to go to the Turkish baths.” In a 1994 interview, George Axler recalled his experience at about ten years old, while at the Camac Baths with his father and brother:

And if you'll recall, there was a basement where the steam rooms and the massage tables were. On the first floor, the street level floor, there were other massage tables where they gave you alcohol rubs and wintergreen rubs and they had a sunray room. You had to put goggles in there. And you would lie on your stomach for one minute and lie on your back for one minute and get the hell out of there or else you get burned. Then the entire upper floor was like a dormitory. And it was very dark, very, very dark with just a little red light at the door. And there were just rows and rows of beds. And people went up there to take naps. And my father used to like to do that. That was part of the routine when you go there. After you got your rub-down and everything, you just want to lie down for an hour. He took me up there with my brother once and I wasn't sleepy. And I heard sounds somewhere not far from us. But it was too dark to see anything. But

they were slurping sounds. And I shook my father. I poked my father and I said, "Daddy, what's that?" And he lifted his head and he listened for a while and he smiled in an embarrassed way and he said, "It's nothing. Just don't pay any attention to it." And that was it. I knew what it was. I figured out what it was.<sup>54</sup>

Axler went on to confirm that the sound he heard was two men having a sexual encounter, which he felt he understood at the time. This became a very distinctive memory for Axler likely because he, himself, was a gay man.

Between 1941 and 1942 it appears that the Camac Baths was still a meeting place for homosexual encounters. This is documented in the diaries of Christopher William Bradshaw Isherwood (1904–1986), the eminent English-American novelist, during his stay in the Philadelphia area between 1941 and 1942.<sup>55</sup>

As a result of his status as a pacifist during the Second World War, Isherwood was required to commit a substantial period of time to community service, particularly assisting refugees, which led to a stint with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). He served the AFSC in Haverford, Pennsylvania from October 15, 1941 through July 6, 1942, during which time he made observations about the Philadelphia region, the Main Line, specifically, and various Quakers.<sup>56</sup> While much of his time was spent in Haverford, Isherwood took day trips to Philadelphia, where on several occasions he visited the Camac Baths. He referred to the bathhouse as his "favorite haunt," no doubt within the localized context of Philadelphia.<sup>57</sup>

In his diary, Isherwood penned the following about the underworld of bathhouses:

It has always seemed to me that there is in fact only one Turkish bath—an enormous subterranean world, a delicious purgatory, a naked democracy in which the only class distinctions are anatomical. And that this underworld merely has a number of vestibules in all the cities of the earth. You could enter it in Sydney and emerge from it to find yourself in Jermyn Street.<sup>58</sup>

On March 1, 1942, Isherwood and his friend Pete Stefan, a Mexican ballet dancer known as Jose Martinez, spent the day in Philadelphia with Paul Cadmus (1904–1999), an American artist, and Lincoln Kirstein (1907–1996), an American writer, impresario, art connoisseur, philanthropist, and cultural figure in New York City, and his wife, Fidelma Cadmus Kirstein (1906–1991), an American artist. After their friends returned to New York City on a late train, Isherwood and Pete Stefan went to the Camac Baths late that night where they stayed until early the next morning, taking a train back to Haverford in a "dazed and wan" state with what Isherwood called

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<sup>54</sup> Marc Stein interview with George Axler, 10 June 1994. Transcribed by Marc Stein. Source: <http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/philadelphia-lgbt-interviews/interviews/george-axler>

<sup>55</sup> Katherine Bucknell, ed., *Christopher Isherwood Diaries, Volume One: 1939-1960* (Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), 212–216.

<sup>56</sup> Bucknell, *Christopher Isherwood Diaries*, 230.

<sup>57</sup> Bucknell, *Christopher Isherwood Diaries*, 212–216.

<sup>58</sup> Bucknell, *Christopher Isherwood Diaries*, 212.

“hangovers up to our ankles.”<sup>59</sup> His description of the evening makes it clear that he and Pete stayed at the baths all night, which was possible since the bathhouse included a large dormitory for men on its upper floors where customers could spend the night or relax. Another description, though brief, describes a regular visit to the bathhouse:

April 4 [1942]. In Philadelphia with Pete. The usual program: lobster, whisky sours, the Camac Baths. (There is always a psychological moment at which I remove the AFSC button from my coat, so as not to be seen wearing it drunk on the streets.)<sup>60</sup>

While there is not a large amount of documentation of the Camac Baths as a meeting place for gay socializing and sex, Grey Pierce’s Masters’ thesis, “Throwing Open the Door: Preserving Philadelphia’s Gay Bathhouses,” describes the subject property as one of the known venues for men seeking discreet encounters with other men:

The Camac Baths is an example of a favorite spot – a bath that did not specifically target homosexual patrons, yet nonetheless attracted men seeking sex with men. It was a place where many men went to socialize, but its design also allowed for private sexual encounters. Later, when the bath became known as a “homosexual trysting spot” in the middle of the twentieth century, the upstairs cots provided a place for private sexual activity. Camac Baths was frequented by straight men at first and then catered to a mixed crowd. It did not appear in the gay guides of later years like other Philadelphia baths, yet the bath had a variety of amenities including Russian and Turkish steam rooms. The building was never designed specifically for gay sex, but sex did occur in that space.<sup>61</sup>

Pierce also discusses the suitability of the Camac Baths as a discreet meeting place due to its location on narrow and relatively quiet Camac Street, which was also a Bohemian center of the city; the architectural treatment of the exterior, a relatively simple Mission style façade; and the intricate arrangement of the interior, which made it ideal for sexual encounters. All of these features made the Camac Baths the perfect place for men to meet other men for sex in a period when homosexuality was still very much considered immoral and unacceptable. These discreet respites were of critical importance and significance to this subculture of white men attracted to men in Philadelphia.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Benjamin Britten, *Letters from a Life Volume 3 (1946–1951): The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten*. (Faber & Faber, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> Bucknell, *Christopher Isherwood Diaries*, 216.

<sup>61</sup> Pierce, “Throwing Open the Door: Preserving Philadelphia’s Gay Bathhouses,” 100–101.

<sup>62</sup> Pierce, “Throwing Open the Door: Preserving Philadelphia’s Gay Bathhouses,” 102–103.





Looking south at the 200 block of South Twelfth Street below Walnut. The subject building at 200 South Twelfth Street is on the right. This photograph was taken in 1959. Source: DOR Archives.

### **Historic Context: S. Camac Street—An Early Social Center for Gay & Lesbian Philadelphia**

An integral period of S. Camac Street’s importance to the cultural and social heritage of Philadelphia is its early position as a center for the Gay and Lesbian community—additional research might find that it served the larger umbrella of the LGBTQ population, with venues that discretely catered to and/or tolerated “specialized clientele.”<sup>63</sup> By the 1940s, the heirs of Buck Devlin were leasing his former residence at 243 S. Camac Street to an establishment known as “Maxine’s Musical Bar,” hosting “The Cobra Room” upstairs and “Saturday afternoon cocktail sessions at 3.” Ironically, the haunt formerly known as Maxine’s is the current location of the well-known T.O.C. (Tavern On Camac), a LGBTQ bar that packs the house on weekends and where, on the first floor, a piano sing-along is always underway.<sup>64</sup> Being a piano bar, Maxine’s Bohemian crowd would eventually include gay men, but it is unclear just how early this hot spot evolved. The Venture Inn at 255 S. Camac Street was another discreet hangout for gay men in the 1940s.<sup>65</sup> As previously discussed, the facilities at the Camac Baths including its large dormitory served as a meeting place for white gay men by the late 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>66</sup>

By 1948, the Bohemian flavor of the street was perhaps at its height in terms of bridging social mores, as S. Camac Street was dominated by “musical bars,” among which included Maxine’s, then owned by Eddie King; the Tabu, owned Irv Perper, and the Venture Inn, owned by Dick

<sup>63</sup> “Mary the Hat; Popular Figure In Gay Community Is Found Dead,” *The Philadelphia Daily News*, 27 January 1984, 4.

<sup>64</sup> “Notes On Entertainment Offered At Bright Spots,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 21 May 1943, 22.

<sup>65</sup> Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves*, 69–70.

<sup>66</sup> Thom Nickels, “The Gay Philadelphia Story, Part 1.” *The Blog*. (4 January 2014). Accessed 6 August 2018. <[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/thom-nickels/the-gay-philadelphia-story-1\\_b\\_4531890.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/thom-nickels/the-gay-philadelphia-story-1_b_4531890.html)>

Nolan.<sup>67</sup> Marc Stein documents the context of gay and lesbian venues in Philadelphia in the 1940s forward. Both Maxine's, the more formal of the two, and Venture Inn, catering to white gay men, were both active in the 1940s and 1950s, when the "gayborhood" was in its earliest stages of development.<sup>68</sup>

### **Criteria A & J: The Renaissance of S. Camac Street, 1887–1959**

Revered as the "Biggest Little Street in the World," the "Little Street of Clubs," "Club Lane," and even "Club Row," the blocks of S. Camac Street between Walnut and Spruce Streets represent an important period of development in Philadelphia that led to a significant segment of the city's cultural, economic and social heritage. Between 1887 and 1959, S. Camac Street and its immediate environs underwent an incredible renaissance, during which time it came to be known as the "Bohemia in the Quaker City." *The American Magazine of Art* published an article and illustrations of "The Street of Little Clubs," by Eleanor Palmer Williams in December 1920, which included a justification for the preservation of S. Camac Street and recognition of its first clubs and the efforts made toward what we know today as historic preservation:

Great cities in their growth necessarily obliterate much of historic interest, but it is in such overlooked localities as these, that reclamation and restoration is still possible.

The pioneers in this enterprise, were The Franklin Inn Club, whose members were important in the literary life of the City, and the Sketch Club, equally influential in sister branches of art.

Thus was introduced into what was sometimes called "Hell's Half Acre," that lump of leaven, which is still at work, which resulted in the Victory Loan Drive in the name, "The Biggest Little Street in the World," and much consequent notoriety. The club members, however, prefer a more modest title, and affectionately refer to Camac, as the "Street of Little Clubs."<sup>69</sup>

This special, "Bohemian" section of the city was described in relationship to a fundraising accomplishment by the *New York Times* in 1917:

"...the unique series of clubs, shot through with the feeling for an atmosphere of art, along the twenty-foot alley called Camac Street, with its Sketch Club and Plastic Club, its Franklin Inn, Coin d'Or, Poor Richard Club, Meridian Club, and Stragglers Club; and that has resulted in raising the total sum of \$2,000,000 for the Philadelphia Museum of Art at three public elections..."<sup>70</sup>

S. Camac Street's renaissance would become an unprecedented development of a street of clubs that focused, almost entirely on the renovation, restoration and reuse of old buildings. This

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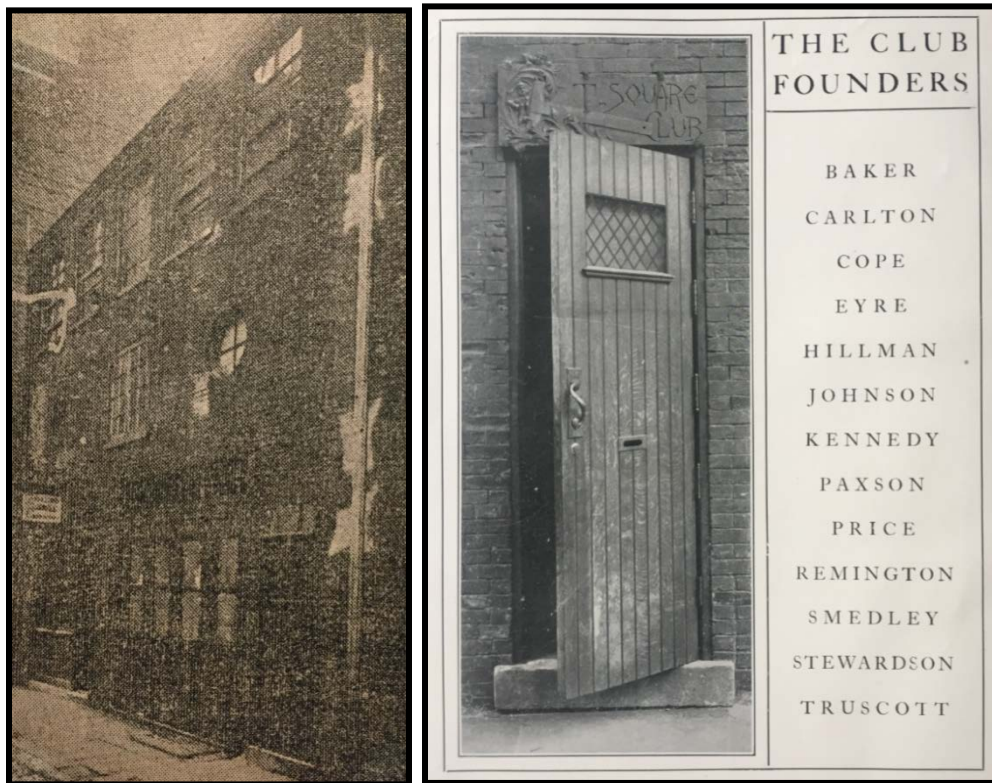
<sup>67</sup> "Philly Ops Start Street Sprucing," *The Billboard*, 24 April 1948, 40.

<sup>68</sup> Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves*, 69–70.

<sup>69</sup> Eleanor Palmer Williams. "The Street of Little Clubs," *The American Magazine of Art*, 11 (1920): 398.

<sup>70</sup> "Philadelphia as an Art Centre," *The New York Times*, 17 June 1917, 66.

revival was part of a larger redevelopment and gentrification of a poor neighborhood that consisted largely of renters.



Left: “The T Square in Loft,” is the caption for this newspaper photograph of the organization’s clubhouse at 1204 Chancellor Street, appearing to still be extant on the site though obscured by years of stucco. Source: Jane Campbell Scrapbook Collection, HSP. Right: The doorway of the T-Square Club at 1204 Chancellor Street, and a list of “The Club Founders.” Source: The T-Square Club, Twentieth Anniversary Catalogue of the Tenth Annual Exhibition.

### **The T-Square Club, 1204 Chancellor Street**

The first club to move in the vicinity of S. Camac Street was the T-Square Club, which established its first clubhouse in a three-story, red brick stable at 1204 Chancellor Street (formerly Lyndall’s Alley) in 1897. For the purposes of this nomination, 1204 Chancellor is known as Building 2 of the Camac Baths. This building was repurposed to serve as their clubhouse until roughly 1914. All descriptions of the period and later years referred to the building and its environs as “Bohemian.”<sup>71</sup>

In later years, Edwin Bateman Morris would describe the T-Square Club as part of the S. Camac Street group in his book *Pen and Ink, Inc.*, which was comprised of features on prominent American cities:

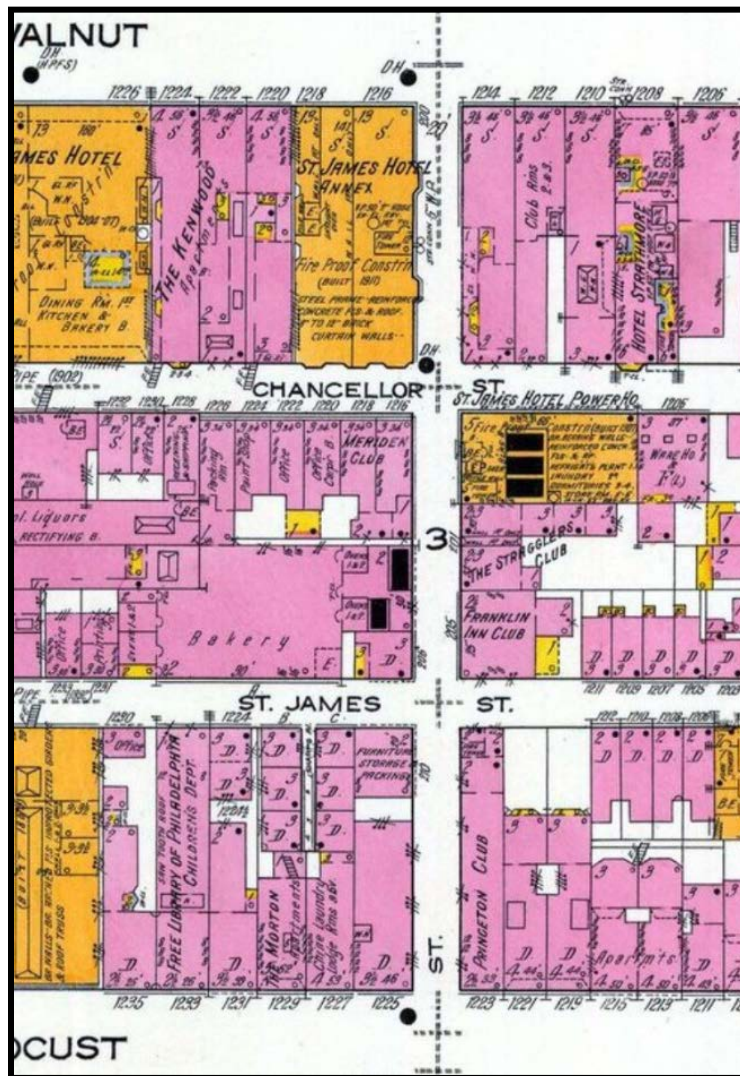
The right angle alley to Camac Street is Chancellor Street. On this in the old days was the T-Square Club, with its quaint assembly room. The room had a stage, lighted then with gas footlights which could be dimmed and flared bright without danger of their going out and asphyxiating the company. Here was produced Herbert Wise’s *De Bumps and Buoneratti*, an

<sup>71</sup> “T-Square Club’s New Quarters,” *The Times* (Philadelphia), 21 October 1897, 7.



architectural extravaganza, in which was perfected a device unfortunately lost to the architectural world. It consisted of a stamp in large letters which the architect imprinted on all bills. It read “Forget it.”<sup>72</sup>

At the southwest corner of Walnut and S. Camac Streets is a large is a thirteenth-story, steel-frame, reinforced concrete building with a brick façade and oriel windows that was constructed as the St. James Hotel Annex in 1911. By the time this annex was completed, the area had become an even more attractive place for tourists and hotel tenants.



1916 Philadelphia Sanborn Atlas. Source: Pennsylvania State University Libraries.

### The Stragglers’ Club, 201–203 S. Camac Street

The Stragglers’ Club, a gentlemen’s supper club, began occupying the paired three-story, brick houses at 201–203 S. Camac Street in 1912, which had likely been renovated at their own expense.<sup>73</sup> Le Coin d’Or, Inc. took ownership of and renovated 251–253 S. Camac Street

<sup>72</sup> Edwin Bateman Morris, *Pen and Ink, Inc.* (Ward and Paul, 1959), 163.

<sup>73</sup> “Social and Personal,” *Evening Public Ledger*, 7 December 1914, 9.



between May and December 1914. The club combined the two-and-one-half story house at 251 S. Camac Street and a three story house at 253 S. Camac Street.<sup>74</sup>

In a description of one club's decision to move to S. Camac Street was an interesting tidbit on the subject, published in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in May 1914:

In addition, a prominent social organization procured a site for permanent quarters on Camac Street, justly famed in recent years as the home of many small clubs.<sup>75</sup>



"The Venture Gardens," at 201–203 S. Camac Street, published in the *Town Crier* (19 May 1930). Source: <https://philadelphiaasadvertised.com/time-machine-wish-list/#jp-carousel-620>

After the Stragglers' Club removed from their clubhouse at 201–203 S. Camac Street, the Venture Book Shop operated briefly in the building in 1924.<sup>76</sup> This was followed by the Venture Gardens, which was established by Blanche LaVoie James Page in 1925. It appears that the Venture Gardens not only used the dining facilities of the former club, but also the open space of Jones' Court in the rear.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> "Social and Personal," *Evening Public Ledger*, 7 December 1914, 9.

<sup>75</sup> "Review of Week in Real Estate." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 31 May 1914, 9.

<sup>76</sup> "A New Book Shop Here—Mrs. Angelo Myers and Miss Rose Kessler Open Venture Book Shop," *The Jewish Exponent*, 24 October 1924, 5.

<sup>77</sup> "MIKVE ISRAEL ASSOCIATION—Dance at Venture Gardens," *The Jewish Exponent*, 8 May 1925, 23.



Left: Looking north on S. Camac Street from just below St. James Street. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2018. Right: A drawing Looking north on S. Camac Street from just below St. James Street by Joseph Pennell. Source: the Franklin Inn Club.

### **Criterion G**

The Camac Baths, including the 1907 Building, 1204-1206 Chancellor Street, and 201-203 S. Camac Street are part of a distinctive area known as S. Camac Street between Walnut and Spruce Streets. The buildings are component parts of an unusual, surviving ensemble of historically, culturally, and architecturally significant buildings facing onto small, narrow streets that form distinctive urban area that should be preserved and carefully integrated into future development. The small streets that define this distinctive area are among those historic vignettes that form an essential aspect of the physical character and distinctiveness of Philadelphia. The streets that form this area are centered on S. Camac Street, running north-south, which is intersected by Chancellor, Latimer, Manning, and St. James Streets running east-west. The buildings set upon these small streets contribute in various ways, façade types ranging from primary, side, and rear elevations. The character of this distinctive area is very much defined by primary, side, and rear elevations, providing the brick, stone, and stucco walls surfaces that create and enclose this urban space. These resources include early two-and-one-half and three-and-one-half-story houses; later and more impressive nineteenth and early twentieth century dwellings; institutional

buildings; and larger, multi-story buildings that served as apartment houses, club space, and hotels, casting shadows into these quaint byways for more than 100 years.



A drawing of S. Camac Street looking north from St. James Streets by an unknown artist.  
Source: the Franklin Inn Club.

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 Historical Society of Pennsylvania  
 Newspapers.com  
 Proquest Historical Newspapers

This nomination was prepared by Oscar Beisert, Architectural Historian and Historic Preservationist and J.M. Duffin, Archivist and Historian. The nomination is sponsored by the Keeping Society of Philadelphia. Information for this nomination was provided by Thom Nickels, Author and Writer, and John Robert Pettit, Archivist of the Urban Archives at the Paley Library, Temple University. This nomination was edited, in part, by Kelly E. Wiles, Architectural Historian. Several photographs were provided by Michael Bixler, Editor, Photographer, and Writer.