

**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 ON CD (MS WORD FORMAT)**

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

Street address: Church/School: **801-15 N. 4<sup>th</sup> Street**  
Rectory: **319 Brown Street**  
Postal code: **19123** Councilmanic District: **5**

**2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Historic Name: **St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church**  
Other Name: **St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene Roman Catholic Church**

**3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Buildings  Structure  Site  Object

**4. PROPERTY INFORMATION**

Condition:  excellent  good  fair  poor  ruins  
Occupancy:  occupied  vacant  under construction  unknown  
Current use: **The original use prevails in each building, excluding convent within the school.**

**5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

Please attach a plot plan and written description of the boundary. **SEE ATTACHED SHEET.**

**6. DESCRIPTION**

**SEE ATTACHED SHEET.**

Please attach a description of the historic resource and supplement with current photographs.

**7. SIGNIFICANCE**

Please attach the Statement of Significance. [See Attached Sheet]  
Period of Significance (from year to year): **1910-82**  
Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: **Church: 1910-11; Rectory: c. 1875-95; School: 1926.**  
Architect, engineer, and/or designer: **Unknown**  
Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: Church: **John McShane**  
Original owner: **Rev. Patrick John Ryan and Rev. Edmond F. Prendergast.**

**CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:**

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

- X **(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;
  - (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
- X **(j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.**

**8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Please attach a bibliography.

**SEE ATTACHED SHEET.**

**9. NOMINATOR:**

**THE NORTHERN LIBERTIES NEIGHBORS ASSOCIATION WITH  
THE KEEPING SOCIETY OF PHILADELPHIA**

Name with Title  
Author

**Matt Ruben, President, NLNA (mruben@gmail.com)  
Oscar Beisert, Architectural Historian and Historic Preservationist**

Email

[keeper@keepingphiladelphia.org](mailto:keeper@keepingphiladelphia.org)

Date

**20 October 2017**

Street Address

**1315 Walnut Street, Suite 320**

Telephone

**(717) 602-5002**

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

Nominators are not the property owners.

**PHC USE ONLY**

Date of Receipt: 10/20/2017

Correct-Complete  Incorrect-Incomplete

Date: 1/10/2018

Date of Notice Issuance: 1/11/2018

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: Rev. Dennis J. Dougherty In Trust & St. Agnes-St. John Nepomucene

Address: 1723 Race Street, 19103 319 Brown St, 19123

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19103/19123

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

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

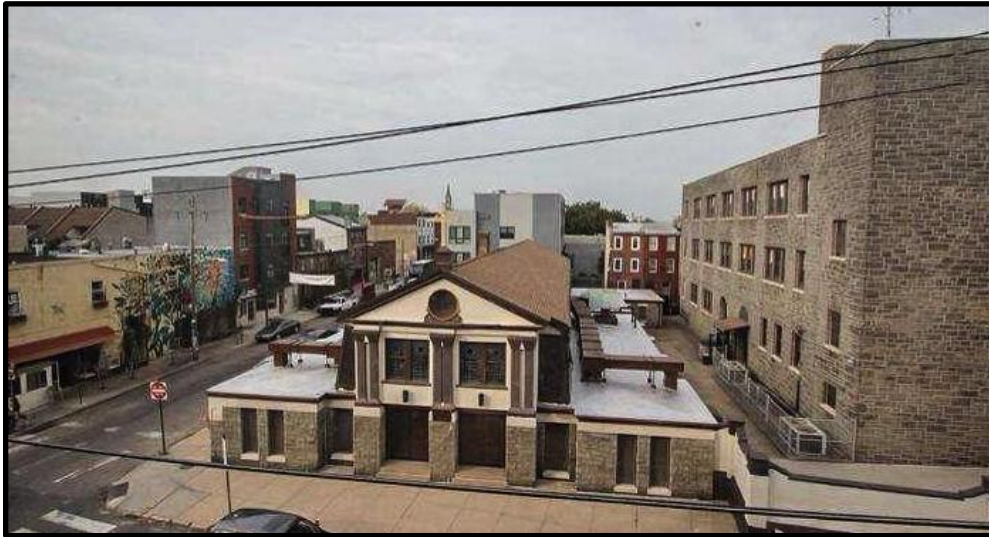
Date of Final Action: \_\_\_\_\_

Designated

Rejected

4/11/13

**Nomination**  
**for the**  
**Philadelphia Register of Historic Places**

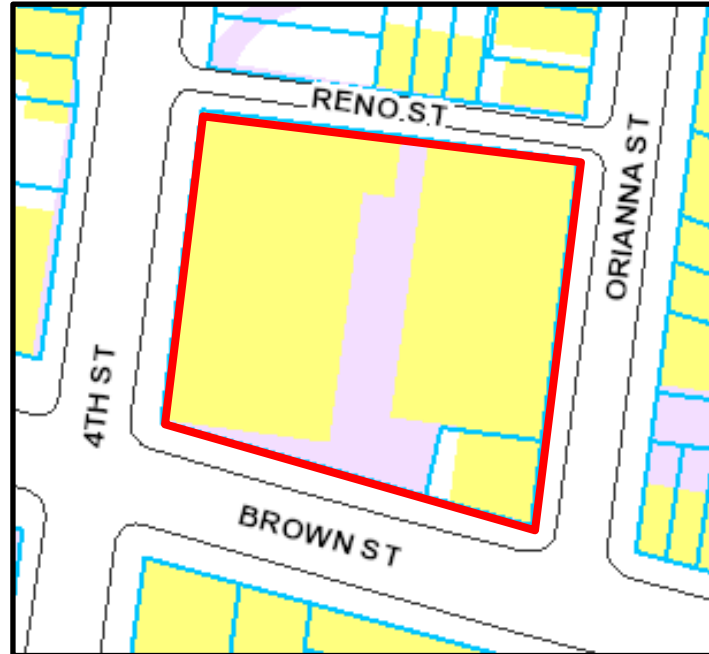


Looking north at St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church and School.  
Source: Long and Foster Realty via Facebook.

**St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church, Rectory, & School**  
**801-15 N. 4<sup>th</sup> Street & 319 Brown Street**  
**Northern Liberties,**  
**Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

## 5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The boundary of the subject designation includes the property bound by Brown Street at the south (roughly 144'-5"); N. 4<sup>th</sup> Street at the west (roughly 119'-5"); Reno Street at the north; and N. Orianna Street at the east (roughly 137'-9-3/4"). The subject boundary is delineated on the map below in red, and consists of two tax parcels, OPA Account Numbers 771200000 and 056153100.



The boundary for the subject property is in red.  
Courtesy Philadelphia Water Department.



Looking northwest at the church (on left), the rectory (at center), and the school (on right) of St. Agnes.  
Source: Oscar Beisert.

## 6. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Bound by Brown Street at the south, N. 4<sup>th</sup> Street at the west, Reno Street at the north, and Orianna Street at the east, St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church is comprised of three buildings: 1. The Church at 801 N. 4<sup>th</sup> Street; 2. The Rectory at 319 Brown Street; and 3. The School also at 801 N. 4<sup>th</sup> Street. Set in the dense urban environment of Northern Liberties, the complex is situated on a combined parcel, occupying an entire block with the Church at the northeast corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and Brown Streets; the Rectory at the northwest corner of Brown and Orianna Streets; and the School at the southwest corner of Orianna and Reno Streets. The buildings share a common court of paved space at the center of the parcel.



Looking northeast at the church and the rear of the school of St. Agnes.  
Source: Oscar Beisert.





Looking northeast at the primary, central elevation of the church of St. Agnes.  
Source: Oscar Beisert.

### **The Church**

Built in 1910, the church building that was constructed as St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church is an unusual house of worship that consists of a large stone foundation with rusticated stone walls and a narrow, frame overbuild. The building is essentially a basement church with a frame clerestory over the center to create a vaulted sanctuary. Stylistically, the church is a hybrid of Greek Revival and Egyptian Revival elements – specifically, a Greek Revival clerestory supported by a stone foundation that achieves an Egyptian Revival effect.

The largely rectangular building is defined by its battered single-story façade with flat roof and full-height windows, details that are typical of Egyptian tomb architecture. The rough stone base gives the appearance of a sturdy stone foundation or a stylobate supporting the classical clerestory above. All the windows along the base rest on granite sills and are topped with a granite belt course running along the perimeter of the building. At the southwest corner, a granite date-stone is inserted below the belt course, and within it is carved a cross and the text “A.D. 1910,” corresponding to the year the church was constructed. Two single recessed stained glass windows divide the south elevation into three large partitions – the central entry, topped by the clerestory, flanked by two aisles within which are a pair of rectangular stained-glass windows. The central entry is two bays wide, each bay containing a pair of brown wooden doors with carved floral motifs. These projecting and recessing bays resemble Egyptian pylons.

The clerestory, clad in asphalt shingles, runs through the length of the church. Tapering to a gable roof, it provides a vaulted sanctuary within the church. Seven stained glass dormer windows penetrate the east and west elevations of the clerestory. On the south elevation, at the main entrance of the church, the clerestory's resembles a Greek temple, with three pairs of pilasters, dividing the façade into two bays. Pairs of stained glass windows between the pilasters let southern light into the sanctuary. A pediment tops an understated architrave and frieze. Within the pediment's tympanum is a cartouche filled with a stained glass window. The pediment is topped with a gold cross. Abutting the north end of the clerestory at the back of the church is a stone chimney. The east, west and north elevations of the clerestory are entirely clad in asphalt shingles.

Within the west elevation, a pair of recessed wood doors serves as a secondary entrance on the south end, and as one moves north from the door, toward the back of the church, to the north there are eight recessed bays containing six paired stained glass windows and two single stained glass windows. Within the bays, each single window or pair of windows is surrounded by stone, and the bays are divided by projecting stone pilasters.

The east elevation was not accessible, but appears to be in keeping with the west.<sup>1</sup>



Looking northwest at the church of St. Agnes, showing the gambrel roof that is obscured by the central façade. Source: Oscar Beisert.

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<sup>1</sup> This description was informed by Arielle Harris, Architectural Historian.



Corner stone of the church of St. Agnes, dated 1910. Source: Oscar Beisert.



The side, 4<sup>th</sup> Street elevation of the church. Source: Oscar Beisert.





The rear, Bodine Street elevation of the church, showing the roof form and chimney stack.

Note: The following interior images are for documentary and contextual purposes. The interior is not subject to this nomination.



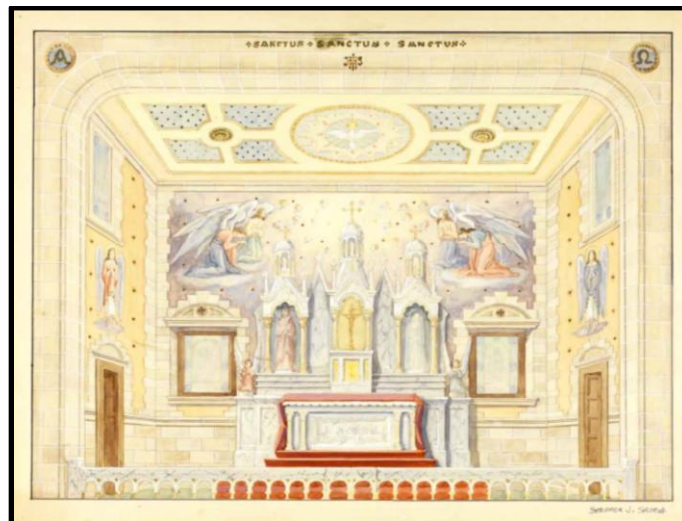
Looking north within the sanctuary of St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church.  
Source: Facebook Group: St. Agnes, Northern Liberties 1957-1977.



Looking north within the sanctuary of St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church.  
Source: Facebook Group: St. Agnes, Northern Liberties 1957-1977.



Interior view of St. Agnes, c. 2017. Source: Mary Wombacher Dankanis.



Watercolor of a Slovak church interior, appearing to be an early rendering of St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church. Signed by Stephen J. Sroba (1919-1995), who was a commercial artist and known for painting church murals. Source: Collection No. 3517: M. Mark Stolarik Papers, HSP.





Looking northwest, the Rectory. Source: Oscar Beisert.

### **The Rectory**

Built prior to the formation of the parish, the Rectory is a typical, but handsome corner row building that stands three stories in height with a two-story addition at the north. The building is of load-bearing masonry construction with a redbrick façade. Both the Brown and Orianna Street facades serve as primary elevations. The entrance is within both elevations at the corner, being recessed within the volume of the building, which is supported by a fluted iron column. Above the single doorway is a stained glass transom that features signage: “Saint Agnes Rectory.” All of the windows on the primary elevations feature smooth-faced brownstone lintels and sills, the lintels being hooded, but flush with the façade. The Brown Street elevation features a cantilevered

bay window, which is in very good repair. Both primary elevations feature a continuous Italianate cornice. The addition to the north includes the continuous redbrick façade at the first floor with a frame overbuild. At the rear of the Brown Street elevation is a high masonry wall that is roughcast, which faces the property line and is connected to the church.



Looking northwest, the cast iron column and corner entrance of the Rectory.  
Source: Oscar Beisert.



The stained glass transom within the corner doorway of the Rectory.  
Source: Oscar Beisert.





Looking northwest, the ground floor of the rectory, a high brick wall, and the church in the distance. Source: Oscar Beisert.



Looking northwest, a bay window of the Rectory. Source: Oscar Beisert.





Looking northwest, the primary elevation of the School. Note, aside from some minor improvements the School retains its original fenestration, and the rusticated stone façade appears to be in good condition. Source: Oscar Beisert.

### **The School (and Convent)**

Built in 1926, the School (and Convent) is a handsome three-story institutional building that stands at the southwest corner of Orianna and Reno Streets. While any stylistic overtones are overpowered by the rusticated stone façade, the distinct details suggest a Mission stylistic influence. Most notable stylistically are the arcaded entrances on Orianna and Reno Streets, and, of course, the Mission-shaped roof parapet within which is a simple stone cross, consisting of two intersecting bars of equal length that are perpendicular to one another. Rectangular in form, the building is of load-bearing masonry construction with a rusticated stone façade laid in a random pattern.

Facing east onto Orianna Street, the primary elevation contains four distinct sections and a symmetrical fenestration. Comprising a vast portion of the façade, three of the said sections appear to be generally equal in width, containing two three-part mullion windows per floor. All of the window openings are defined by simple granite lintels and sills. The central of the three sections contains the primary entrance at the ground floor, which consists of two arched-openings that are defined by granite molding laid in sections. Within each arched-opening are double replacement doors, which are shaded by blue canopies within the arches. Centered above the primary entrances at the line between the first and second floors is a granite tablet inscribed: "Saint Agnes." The entire building features stone coping atop the roofline parapet, which culminates into the Mission-shaped parapet at the center of the three like-sections. The aforementioned cross motif is featured within this parapet. A traditional gold cross is atop the parapet at center. The four section is a narrow expanse with one window per floor at the southwest corner of Orianna and Reno Streets.



Looking west, the central section and primary entrances of the School. Note the plaque with Saint Agnes inscribed. Source: Oscar Beisert.



Left: Looking southeast at the Reno Street entrances. Right: Looking southwest at the Reno Street façade. Note the cornerstone on left. Source: Oscar Beisert.

Facing onto Reno Street, the north elevation is similar to the primary elevation, but is divided into just three distinct sections with symmetrical fenestrations. The central section contains one three-part mullion windows on the second and third floors, while the flanking sections feature one two-part mullion window per floor. All of the window openings are defined by simple granite lintels and sills. The central of the three sections contains the primary entrance at the ground floor, which consists of two attached arched-openings that are defined by limestone moldings laid in sections. Within each arched-opening are double replacement doors. Also within this elevation, the continuous stone coping culminates into a Mission-shaped parapet atop the central section of the facade. Within the parapet is the aforementioned cross motif. Atop the parapet at center is a traditional gold cross.



Looking south at the interior court of the buildings of St. Agnes. Source: Oscar Beisert.

Facing onto a paved court shared by all three buildings that comprise the St. Agnes complex, west elevation is an understand version of the primary elevation without the parapet at the top of the central section. The southwest corner of the building features a tower which is likely for a



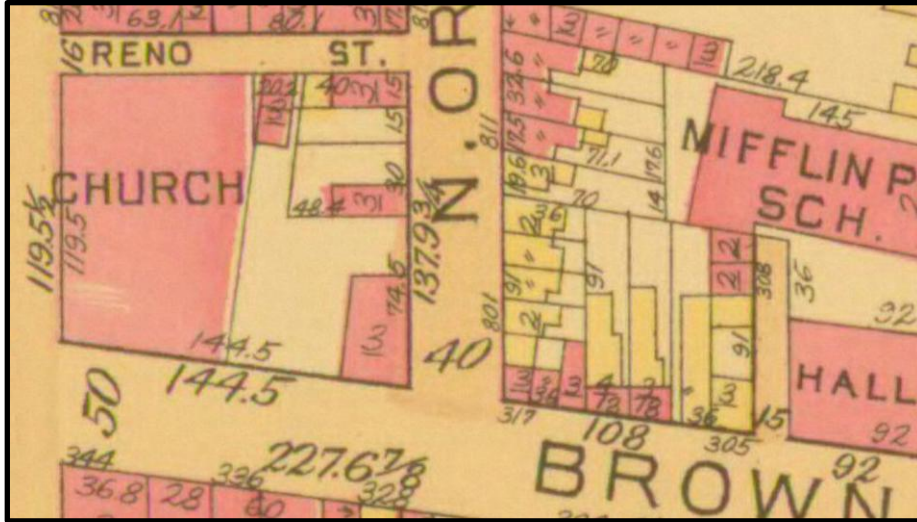
staircase and/or elevator fire egress. The south elevation was inaccessible, but partly attached to the north wall of the two-story addition to the Rectory.



Looking southwest, the primary elevation of the School at the corner of Reno Street.  
Source: Oscar Beisert.



Looking west, the cornerstone, inscribed "1926," is at the southwest corner of Orianna and Reno Streets.  
Source: Oscar Beisert.



An atlas showing the site of St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church.  
 Source: Atlas of the City of Philadelphia (Central), 1922.  
 Provided by the Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network.

## 7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Known today as St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene Roman Catholic Church, the former St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church, Rectory and School (St. Agnes Church, Rectory, and School), located at 801-815 North 4th Street and 319 Brown Street, is a significant historic resource that merits designation by the Philadelphia Historical Commission and inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The property satisfies the following Criteria for Designation:

- (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; and
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

**Criterion J: St. Agnes Church, Rectory, and School is the oldest remaining purpose-built church associated with Philadelphia’s Slovak community, and in fact is only one of two such remaining structures in the city. It also contains the only school erected by a Slovak church in Philadelphia. The subject property represents the cultural, political, economic, social, and historical heritage of the Slovak community in Philadelphia. Criterion A: The establishment of ethnic or immigrant congregations and/or parishes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represents a subset of institutional and, specifically, religious growth in Philadelphia. Serving as a primary center for both local and trans-local ethnic or immigrant communities, single houses of worship in recycled and/or purpose-built buildings were enlarged, and single building sites became complexes of multiple buildings over time, representing a thread of the larger physical development of Philadelphia.**

### CRITERION J

In late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, immigrants from Middle and Eastern Europe came to Philadelphia in large numbers to pursue what is commonly known as “the American Dream.” As part of this process, immigrant populations formed their own communities through the establishment of cultural and religious institutions and organizations. The Slovak immigrants



were no different, being part of both geographic and trans-local communities throughout city. With limited resources, the Roman Catholic Church served as the nucleus of these immigrants with the founding of Holy Ghost Byzantine Catholic Church in 1891 and St. John Nepomucene Roman Catholic Church, South Philadelphia, in 1906. These congregations represented the trans-local Slovak community that defined their experience in Philadelphia in the last years of the nineteenth and the first years of the twentieth centuries. As time passed many Slovaks had found jobs in the various industries that were largely quartered in Northern Liberties, and a less trans-local community formed St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church in 1907, constructing the present church in 1910. The subject building served the St. Agnes parish from 1910 to 1980, when it then merged with St. John Nepomucene Roman Catholic Church, becoming what is now known as St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene Roman Catholic Church. While the former St. John Nepomucene Roman Catholic Church was an older congregation, its building was not built for the congregation, nor is it extant to-date. Being the oldest purpose-built Slovak church in the city, St. Agnes represents the cultural, economic, social and historical heritage of the Slovak-immigrant population in Philadelphia.

After the founding priest was reassigned almost immediately, the following eleven years were tumultuous for the congregation with as many as five priests. Fr. John Lawrence York came to St. Agnes in 1922 and it was he who unified the congregation. Part of this unification was getting the finances and facilities in order. Part of this was his aggressive planning for a parish school, which came to fruition in 1926. A three story stone school was constructed to the northeast of the church, and the third floor was a convent for the Sisters of Saint Cyril and Methodius from Danville, who came to Philadelphia and operated the school for forty-three years. According to Joseph P. Budd, the establishment of a school, and an associated convent meant both community and stability for the Slovaks parish:

Enrolling children in a Catholic school typically means registering and financially supporting the school's church. Parishioners drawn away from St. Agnes to other schools would be lost to the parish and so would their financial support. Building a school at St. Agnes meant keeping parishioners. Parish schools, although costly, have ancillary benefits. They generate community spirit and camaraderie through parent associations, fundraisers and student activities. St. Agnes School graduated 746 students between 1926 and 1969.<sup>2</sup>

The establishment of the church and later the school, its associated convent, and the rectory were part of a trajectory that fostered a long-lasting sense of cultural, economic, social and historical heritage of the Slovak-immigrant population in Philadelphia.



The Dramatic Society of St. Agnes Church, 1935. Photo: Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982, p. 12. Source: HSP.

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph P. Budd, "We Do Know English: Philadelphia's Czechoslovak Presbyterian Church of Jan Hus, 1926-1967." Master's Thesis (University of Delaware, 2009), p. 24-25.

### **Historic Context: Slovak Immigration to Philadelphia**

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, over twenty million people from Eastern Europe and Southern Europe immigrated to the United States in search of economic opportunity and freedom from religious persecution. Among them were the Slovaks of Upper Hungary, who came to the United States – mostly to Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois – seeking jobs in coal mines, steel mills, oil refineries, tanneries, etc.<sup>3</sup>

Slovak immigration to Philadelphia began in the early nineteenth century, but did not intensify until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Between 1880 and 1920, about ten thousand Slovak-speaking immigrants from Upper Hungary flooded into Philadelphia.<sup>4</sup> According to historian Robert Zecker, Slovak immigrants to Philadelphia lived in trans-local communities rather than geographic communities – as families chose to live in the vicinity of their workplaces instead of in the proximity of other Slovaks.

In Philadelphia, Slovak immigrants settled broadly across the face of the city so as to be close to the industries in which their family members labored. Those who found work in the tanneries, textile mills, and wireworks of Northern Liberties and adjacent neighborhoods lived miles from the dockworkers of Southwark, and even further from Trencinske living in Delaware County or across the river in New Jersey. Refinery workers settled in Point Breeze, even though it was ten miles away from fellow immigrants from Zemplin province working for Midvale Steel in Nicetown.<sup>5</sup>

Philadelphia's Slovak community was loosely clustered in the above-mentioned areas: Northern Liberties, between Girard Avenue and Vine Street to the north and south and the Delaware River and 7th Street to the east and west; Southwark, on Front Street, Bainbridge Street, Fitzwater Street, and Queen Street; Point Breeze, where 28th Street meets the Schuylkill River; and Nicetown, in the vicinity of Germantown and Hunting Park Avenues.<sup>6</sup>

Before establishing churches, the Slovak community established numerous beneficial associations, which created a safety net in case of illness or death. The first beneficial association established by the Slovaks, founded in 1887, was the Society of St. Peter. Several branches of the National Slovak Society followed. In addition, the Slovak community established fraternal organizations, which provided opportunities for fellowship. The first fraternal organization established by the Slovaks, which “blended gymnastics with Catholic fraternalism,” was Assembly 56 of the Slovak Gymnastic Union Sokol.<sup>7</sup>

Next, the mostly (70%) Roman Catholic Slovak community established churches.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Zecker, “All Our Own Kind Here’: The Creation of a Slovak-American Community in Philadelphia, 1890-1945.” Dissertation: (University of Pennsylvania, 1998). p. 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Zecker, “All Our Own Kind Here’: The Creation of a Slovak-American Community in Philadelphia, 1890-1945.” Dissertation: (University of Pennsylvania, 1998). p. 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Zecker, “ ‘Where Everyone Goes to Meet Everyone Else,’ The Translocal Creation of a Slovak Immigrant Community.” *Journal of Social History*, 38 (George Mason University Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Zecker, “ ‘Where Everyone Goes to Meet Everyone Else,’ The Translocal Creation of a Slovak Immigrant Community.” *Journal of Social History*, 38 (George Mason University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982, p. 10-11. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph P. Budd, “We Do Know English: Philadelphia’s Czechoslovak Presbyterian Church of Jan Hus, 1926-1967.” Master’s Thesis: (University of Delaware, 2009), p. 16.



Saint Agnes School, c. 1930s. Source: HSP.

### **Historic Context: St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church**

The church at the northeast corner of 4th and Brown Streets was erected by the parish of St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church (St. Agnes) in 1910. Founded in 1907, St. Agnes was established by a group of Slovaks that found it inconvenient to commute from Northern Liberties to South Philadelphia to attend St. John Nepomucene Roman Catholic Church – Philadelphia’s first Roman Catholic Slovak parish.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia had intended to establish its first Slovak parish in Northern Liberties. However, despite the fact that the majority of Slovaks lived in Northern Liberties, pressure was applied to Slovak Missionary William Heinen, which led to the establishment of the first congregation in South Philadelphia. In 1906, the Archdiocese purchased the Presbyterian-built church located at the northeast corner of 9th and Wharton Streets in South Philadelphia for \$28,000. On June 9, 1907, it was rededicated as St. John Nepomucene Roman Catholic Church.<sup>10</sup>

Agitated yet undeterred, the Slovaks of Northern Liberties lobbied the Archdiocese for permission to establish a parish north of Market Street. These efforts proved successful; and, in 1907, Father Francis Cyril Vlossak moved from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania to Philadelphia to pastor the congregation. Vlossak, a Hungarian priest, would go on to establish a total of fourteen Slovak congregations throughout the United States<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982, p. 11-12. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>10</sup> Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982, p. 11. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>11</sup> Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982, p. 11-12. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.



The former Wharton Presbyterian Church, which was sold to St. John Nepomucene Roman Catholic Church in 1906. It has since been demolished. Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

While the commute from Northern Liberties to South Philadelphia played a role in the decision to establish a parish in Northern Liberties, tension between eastern and western Slovaks appears to have played an even greater role:

The split had more to do with *stara krajina* ('the old country') than Philadelphia, as Liberties immigrants were primarily from western Slovakia, especially Dolny Hricov and vicinity in Trencin County, where many had practiced the wireworking craft they continued to pursue in Philly. Point Breeze and Nicetown Slovaks, though, were mostly from rural western Slovakia, many from Hutka and nearby towns.<sup>12</sup>

By 1926, there were five Slovak churches within Philadelphia's boundaries:

Name	Founding Date
Holy Ghost Byzantine Catholic Church	1891
Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity (founded in Camden, NJ)	1900
St. John Nepomucene Roman Catholic Church	1906
St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church	1907
Jan Hus Presbyterian Church	1926

<sup>12</sup> Robert Zecker, " 'Where Everyone Goes to Meet Everyone Else,' The Translocal Creation of a Slovak Immigrant Community." *Journal of Social History*, 38 (George Mason University Press, 2004).

Of these five Slovak churches, two are closely associated with the present property – as Jan Hus Presbyterian Church was founded by a group of parishioners who split from St. Agnes in 1926.<sup>13</sup> St. John Nepomucene Roman Catholic Church merged into St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church in 1980.<sup>14</sup> St. Agnes, in particular, was an integral part of Philadelphia’s Slovak community. It was the only Slovak parish to open a school, and it was the first Slovak parish to establish a business and loan association.

In 1919, John D. Heljenek founded the St. Agnes Building and Loan Association. This organization utilized its members’ deposits and subscriptions to make low interest loans to the Slovak community. These loans were used to purchase homes – thus, to increase homeownership among Slovaks – throughout the city. St. John Nepomucene established a similar building and loan association in 1920. Interestingly, St. Agnes’ was not limited to serving only the Northern Liberties section of the city, but rather Slovaks from different regional origins.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, members of the parish remained invested in affairs at home as its members advocated for the creation of an independent Czech-Slovak state during WWI. According to the St. Agnes’ parish historian:

The highlight of these activities came on October 26, 1918, in Philadelphia. Standing in front of Independence Hall, T.G. Masaryk, flanked by members of the local Slovak Sokols, denounced Austria-Hungary and proclaimed that Slavic nations would soon shake of the fetters of slavery. And so it happened – on October 28, 1918, the Czecho-Slovak National Council in Europe declared independence of Austria-Hungary and the creation of a Czecho-Slovak state. Czechs and Slovaks in America, including those in Philadelphia, were elated.<sup>16</sup>

T. G. Masaryk, who led the above-described demonstration, was the principal organizer of such activities throughout the United States.<sup>17</sup>

### **Present Site**

While raising the funds to build the present church at 4th and Brown Streets, the congregation of St. Agnes worshipped at nearby Odd Fellows Hall, located at the northwest corner of 3rd and Brown Streets.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982, p. 30. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph P. Budd, “We Do Know English: Philadelphia’s Czechoslovak Presbyterian Church of Jan Hus, 1926-1967.” Master’s Thesis: (University of Delaware, 2009), p. 21-22.

<sup>15</sup> Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982, p. 13. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>16</sup> Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982, p. 12. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>17</sup> Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982, p. 12. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>18</sup> “Lay Corner Stone for Slavic Church,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Philadelphia: 12 September 1910.





Odd Fellows Hall, 1959. Photo: City of Philadelphia, Department of Records.

The present site, which is bounded by Reno and Brown Streets to the north and south, and Orianna and 4th Streets to the east and west, includes a purpose-built church (b. 1910), a purpose-built school (b. 1926), and a rectory that was built between 1875 and 1895.

The present property contains one of two remaining purpose-built churches associated with Philadelphia’s Slovak community (it is the older of the two). And further, it contains the only school erected by a Slovak church in Philadelphia. Operated by the Sisters of St. Cyril and Methodius of Danville, Pennsylvania, the school graduated over seven hundred students between the years of 1927 and 1969.<sup>19</sup>

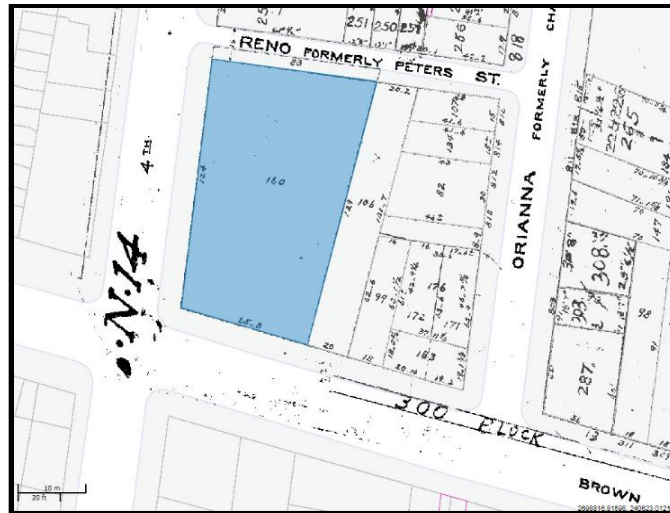
The parish, which owns the entire block bounded by the above-mentioned thoroughfares (Reno and Brown Streets to the north and south, and Orianna and 4th Streets to the east and west), acquired it in six transactions:

Property	Grantor	Grantee	Date	Cost
Western half of the block, beginning with 327 Brown St.	Samuel W. Passmore for Estate of A. Walker	Rev. Patrick John Ryan	11-Apr-1910	\$2,500
319-321 Brown St.	John Klein	Rev. Edmond F. Prendergast	4-Jun-1917	\$6,000
323 Brown St.	Merchants Union Trust Co.	Rev. Edmond F. Prendergast	30-Jun-1917	\$2,000
325 Brown St. and 814-816 Orianna St.	Greene R. Hulsiger	Rev. Edmond F. Prendergast	4-Jun-1917	\$9,500
802-806 Orianna St.	Otto G. Kuehne	Rev. Edmond F. Prendergast	15-Jun-1917	\$4,500

<sup>19</sup> “St. Agnes Parish Marks Golden Jubilee of Service to Slovaks in North Philadelphia,” *Philadelphia Bulletin*. Philadelphia: 1 November 1957.

810-812 Orianna St.	Franklin P. Albright	Rev. Edmond F. Prendergast	15-Jun-1917	\$3,000
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The first transaction took place on April 11, 1910, and enabled the parish to erect the present church building. In this transaction, Samuel W. Passmore, administrator of the estate of A. Walker, deeded much of the western half of the above described lot to then Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia, Rev. Patrick John Ryan. This property included a rag warehouse and several brick structures. The total cost of this parcel, which was cleared to make way for the construction of a house of worship, was \$2,500.<sup>20</sup>



The Walker property, which was deeded to Archbishop Jack Patrick Ryan in 1910, is highlighted.  
Photo: Parcel Explorer.

The cornerstone of the present church was laid on Sunday, September 11, 1910 before an “immense throng” of attendees. The ceremony, led by Archbishop Edmond F. Prendergast, was held in the unfinished building (on temporary flooring laid atop the foundation). About ten thousand people, including parishioners of St. Agnes as well as parishioners of other churches, participated.<sup>21</sup>

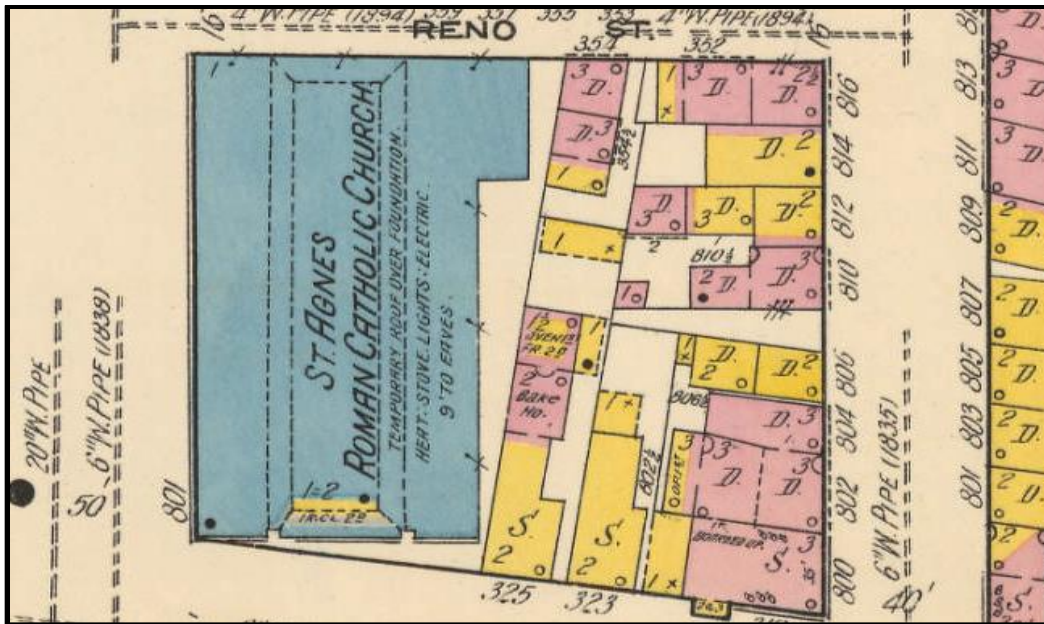
The building, described by the parish in 1982 as a “handsome basement church,” was erected by Irish contractor John McShane at a cost of about \$30,000.<sup>22</sup> It is likely that the congregation planned to enlarge the church at a later date, as funds became available. This was not uncommon among congregations that depended entirely on the generosity of their parishioners. However, at present, there are few examples of a house of worship that has not been completed or enlarged. Most were eventually completed or enlarged.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Recorded on 11 April 1910 in Philadelphia Deed Book W. S. V. No. 1285, p. 469.

<sup>21</sup> “Lay Corner Stone for Slavic Church,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Philadelphia: 12 September 1910.

<sup>22</sup> Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982, p. 12. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>23</sup> Sanborn Map Company, *Insurance Maps of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*, Volume 3, Plate 234 (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1916).



The site in 1916 includes the church on the west half of the subject property; however, it is clear that the east half of the subject property retains an earlier period of dense residential development. Note, however, that the Rectory appears to be present at the lower corner of the block. Source: Sanborn Map Company, *Insurance Maps of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*, Volume 3, Plate 234 (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1916).

The parish grew throughout the 1910s and 1920s, enabling it to erect a parish school – the only school erected by a Slovak church in Philadelphia. In anticipation of doing so, the parish acquired property to the immediate east of the church. Between June 4, 1917 and June 30, 1917, the parish purchased the five parcels comprising the remainder of the block (bounded by Reno and Brown Streets to the north and south, and Orianna and 4th Streets to the east and west) at a total cost of \$25,000. These parcels – with the exception of the building located at the northwest corner of 3rd and Brown Streets (319-321 Brown Street), which was retained for use as a rectory – were cleared to make way for the school.<sup>24</sup>

Completed in 1926 under the pastorate of Fr. John L. York (Jurak), the school contained “a convent on the third floor, an auditorium on the first floor, and a club in the basement.”<sup>25</sup> It was the first and only school to be erected by a Slovak congregation in Philadelphia; and at a cost of about \$125,000, it is a tangible expression of the congregation’s commitment to its people and investment in its city.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Deed: Recorded on 4 June 1917 in Philadelphia Deed Book J. M. H. No. 212, p. 118. (319-321 Brown St.); Deed: Recorded on 30 June 1917 in Philadelphia Deed Book J. M. H. No. 217, p. 167. (323 Brown St.); Deed: Recorded on 4 June 1917 in Philadelphia Deed Book J. M. H. No. 182, p. 531. (325 Brown St. and 814-816 Orianna St.); Deed: Recorded on 15 June 1917 in Philadelphia Deed Book J. M. H. No. 191, p. 424. (802-806 Orianna St.); and Deed: Recorded on 15 June 1917 in Philadelphia Deed Book J. M. H. No. 263, p. 82. (810-812 Orianna St.)

<sup>25</sup> Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982, p. 13. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>26</sup> Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982, p. 13. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

In the 1930s, the City of Philadelphia attempted to tax the parish for showing films in the school's auditorium. Like the neighborhood movie houses surrounding it, the parish charged admission and sold refreshments such as candy and tobacco to its moviegoers, earning \$2,000 to \$2,500 a year. Fr. York resisted, and ultimately prevailed when the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled in the parish's favor after a prolonged, public battle with the City of Philadelphia.<sup>27</sup>



Interior classroom of St. Agnes Roman Catholic School.  
Source: Facebook Group: St. Agnes, Northern Liberties 1957-77.

St. Agnes School graduated over seven hundred students between 1927 and 1969, and played an important role in fostering cohesion among Slovak youth: “Graduates of the school not only received a first class Catholic education, but while there they also developed a deep-seated loyalty to their parish and to their heritage. This loyalty would carry them through some turbulent times in the 1970s. Meanwhile, in the 1920’s six nuns taught an average of 239 children a year (enrollment peaked in 1927-28 at 260); in the 1930’s the average enrollment was 212; in the 1940’s it was 207; in the 1950’s it was 162; and in the 1960’s it became 70.”<sup>28</sup>

In 1969, it was closed due to declining enrollment. However, the building was reopened in 1975, when the Board of Education (now the Philadelphia School District) opened a “School for All Ages” at St. Agnes.<sup>29</sup> Through the experimental program, which was funded by a \$150,000 federal grant, twenty adults were admitted to the school – and completed high school or prepared for a change of career while mentoring younger students navigating the standard curriculum.<sup>30</sup>

In 1980, the parishes of St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church and John Nepomucene Roman Catholic Church were consolidated into one. Both parishes had anticipated this, as both had been declining in numbers for decades: “If one looks at the annual spiritual reports of the two parishes, however, one will immediately notice a disturbing trend. Whereas both churches had almost 1,000 ‘souls’ in 1910, and St. Agnes peaked at 2,000 in 1930, while St. John’s had 1,200, by 1941, St. Agnes had only 1,500 and St. John’s 1000. By 1960, St. Agnes had dropped to 1,200

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<sup>27</sup> “Sue to Stop Tax Levy on Catholic Church Rectory,” *Philadelphia Bulletin*. Philadelphia: 8 December 1932.; and “Auditorium Tax Upheld,” *Philadelphia Bulletin*. Philadelphia: 15 September 1933.

<sup>28</sup> Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982, p. 16. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>29</sup> “School for Ages 5 to 70 Open,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Philadelphia: 1 February 1975.

<sup>30</sup> “Mother, Kids in Same Class, School for All Ages Opens in Logan,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Philadelphia: 4 February 1975.

and St. John's to 826. The parishes had slowly begun to decline. To make matters worse, veterans returning home from the second World War began to marry and settle in new sections of the city – Fox Chase, Olney, and the Northeast. They were following the general trend of Americans to move away from the central city to more fashionable neighborhoods and suburbs. Only very strong and imaginative leadership could possibly have slowed or halted this process.”<sup>31</sup>

In anticipation of the consolidation (which could have resulted in the closure of either parish), groups from and associated with St. Agnes organized to advocate for the survival of the congregation. A tremendous show of support coupled with numbers that indicated that St. Agnes was more viable than St. John's resulted in the decision to close St. John's as well as Chapel of the Little Flower in Drexel Hill (founded as a mission of St. Agnes in 1933), and to invite parishioners of the closed churches to join St. Agnes. By 1982, a revitalized St. Agnes numbered three hundred nineteen members.<sup>32</sup> St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene Roman Catholic Church celebrated its one hundredth anniversary (after adopting 1902 as the founding date) in 1982.<sup>33</sup> This year, it will observe its one hundred fifteenth anniversary.

## **CRITERION A**

**The establishment of ethnic or immigrant congregations and/or parishes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represents a subset of institutional and, specifically, religious growth in Philadelphia. Serving as a primary center for both local and trans-local ethnic populations, churches—the Roman Catholic Church being one of the largest—were established, some in recycled buildings, others in purpose-built houses of worship. Many were contained in simple buildings, while others responded to a growth in the local and/or trans-local community and its needs both religious and educational. This is reflected in the built environment through the construction of small facilities in areas that were largely developed by the late nineteenth century. In time, the continued growth within the community required expansion and additional construction and/or redevelopment. Facilities that included one or two buildings grew to three or four, representing the development of educational facilities and other services, and what was one church edifice became a complex of buildings. A simple review of Philadelphia's atlases will prove this trend in the physical development of the city during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, being particularly common within the Roman Catholic Church.**

Some examples of this type of development that occurred to accommodate institutional and religious facilities include the following:

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<sup>31</sup> Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982, p. 29. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

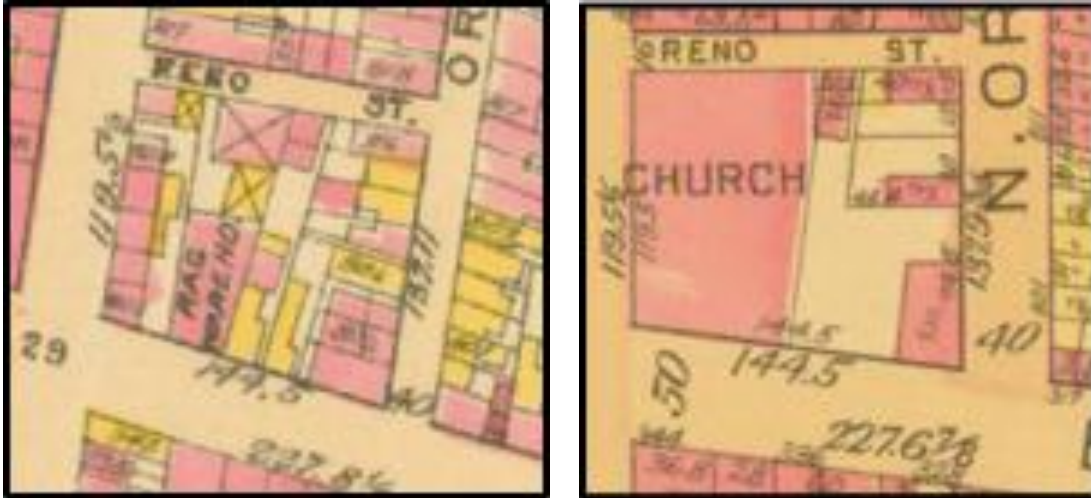
<sup>32</sup> Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982, p. 30. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>33</sup> Church of St. Agnes – St. John Nepomucene, Diamond Jubilee, 1902-1982. Northvale: Custombook, Inc., 1982. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.



### **St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church, Northern Liberties**

The subject site was entirely developed when it was purchased by the Archdiocese for the construction of St. Agnes' and over time the entire block would be the site of that parish and its operations.



Left: 1895 Philadelphia Atlas by G.W. Bromley. Right: 1922 Philadelphia Atlas. Source: Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network.

### **St. Anne's Roman Catholic Church, Kensington**

This parish's campus grew over time, original occupying a single block and later replacing row houses with St. Anne's School at the south corner of Memphis and Tucker Streets.



Left: 1910 Philadelphia Atlas by G.W. Bromley. Right: 1942 Land Use Maps by the Works Progress Administration. Source: Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network.

### St. Bonaventure Roman Catholic Church, North Philadelphia

Originally just two buildings, St. Bonaventure's complex nearly doubled in size during the first decades of the twentieth century, adding a school building across the street from its church to the west.



Left: 1910 Philadelphia Atlas by G.W. Bromley. Right: 1942 Land Use Maps by the Works Progress Administration. Source: Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network.

### St. Boniface Roman Catholic Church, Kensington

Originally just two buildings on Norris Square, the parish developed more than half of the block filling in most of the open space to the west and south of the original church and school. These later developments represented the growth in members and the requirement for additional educational services and related staff housing.



Left: 1875 Philadelphia Atlas by G.M. Hopkins. Middle: 1895 Philadelphia Atlas by G.W. Bromley. Right: 1910 Philadelphia Atlas by G.W. Bromley. Source: Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network.

### **St. Laurentius Roman Catholic Church, Fishtown**

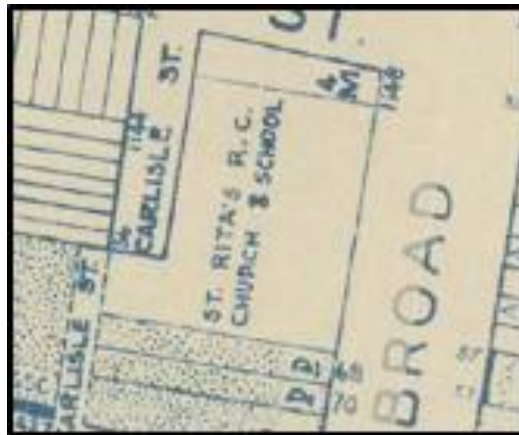
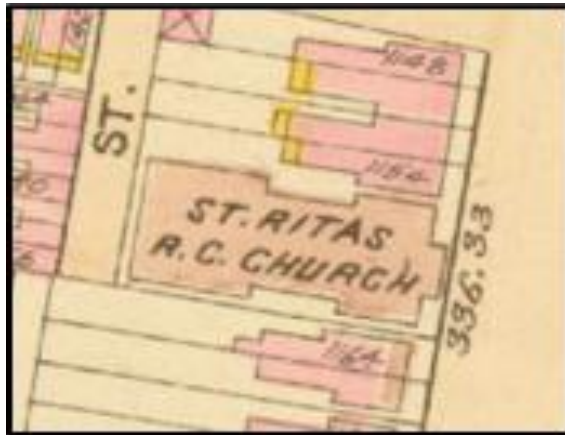
This church campus grew to the west along E. Berks Street from the time of its construction of the single house of worship to a complex of four large buildings used for educational and staff housing purposes.



Left: 1910 Philadelphia Atlas by G.W. Bromley. Right: 1942 Land Use Maps by the Works Progress Administration. Source: Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network.

### **St. Rita's Roman Catholic Church, South Philadelphia**

In 1895, St. Rita's did not exist on S. Broad Street. By 1910, the church was constructed and in the decades to follow it would double its footprint building a school to the north.



Left: 1910 Philadelphia Atlas by G.W. Bromley. Right: 1942 Land Use Maps by the Works Progress Administration. Source: Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network.

## 8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

This nomination was prepared by contractors and volunteers of the Keeping Society of Philadelphia, including the following individuals:

Oscar Beisert, Architectural Historian and Historic Preservationist

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