

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: 3414-16 W. WESTMORELAND ST.

Postal code: 19129

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Dobson Back-to-Back Houses

Current/Common Name: 3414-16 W. Westmoreland St.

3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

☒ Building

☐ Structure

☐ Site

☐ Object

4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

Condition: ☐ excellent ☐ good ☒ fair ☐ poor ☐ ruins

Occupancy: ☒ occupied ☐ vacant ☐ under construction ☐ unknown

Current use: Residential

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and site/plot plan of the resource's boundaries.

6. DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and photographs of the resource's physical appearance, site, setting, and surroundings.

7. SIGNIFICANCE

Please attach a narrative Statement of Significance citing the Criteria for Designation the resource satisfies.

Period of Significance (from year to year): from 1890 to 1891

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1891; interior alterations 1935

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: _____

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: John Dobson (builder, owner)

Original owner: John Dobson

Other significant persons: _____

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 a bibliography.

9. NOMINATOR

Organization East Falls Historical Society Date _____

Name with Title Steven J. Peitzman Email peitzmansj@gmail.com

Street Address 2911 Wood Pipe Ln Apt D Telephone 215 840 5637

City, State, and Postal Code 19129

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: April 14, 2023

☒ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete Date: April 19, 2023

Date of Notice Issuance: April 21, 2023

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: Michael A Bergen

Address: 2834 W Clearfield St.

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19132

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

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

☐ Designated ☐ Rejected

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Postal code: 19129

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Dobson Back-to-Back Houses

Current/Common Name: 3418-20 W. Westmoreland St.

3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

☒ Building

☐ Structure

☐ Site

☐ Object

4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

Condition: ☐ excellent ☐ good ☒ fair ☐ poor ☐ ruins

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

Street address: 3422-24 W. WESTMORELAND ST.

Postal code: 19129

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Dobson Back-to-Back Houses

Current/Common Name: 3422-24 W. Westmoreland St.

3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

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4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

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- ☐ (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
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NOMINATION

To the

PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Three Buildings, Formerly Back-to-Back Houses, Built by John Dobson

3414-16, 3418-20, and 3422-24 W. Westmoreland Street



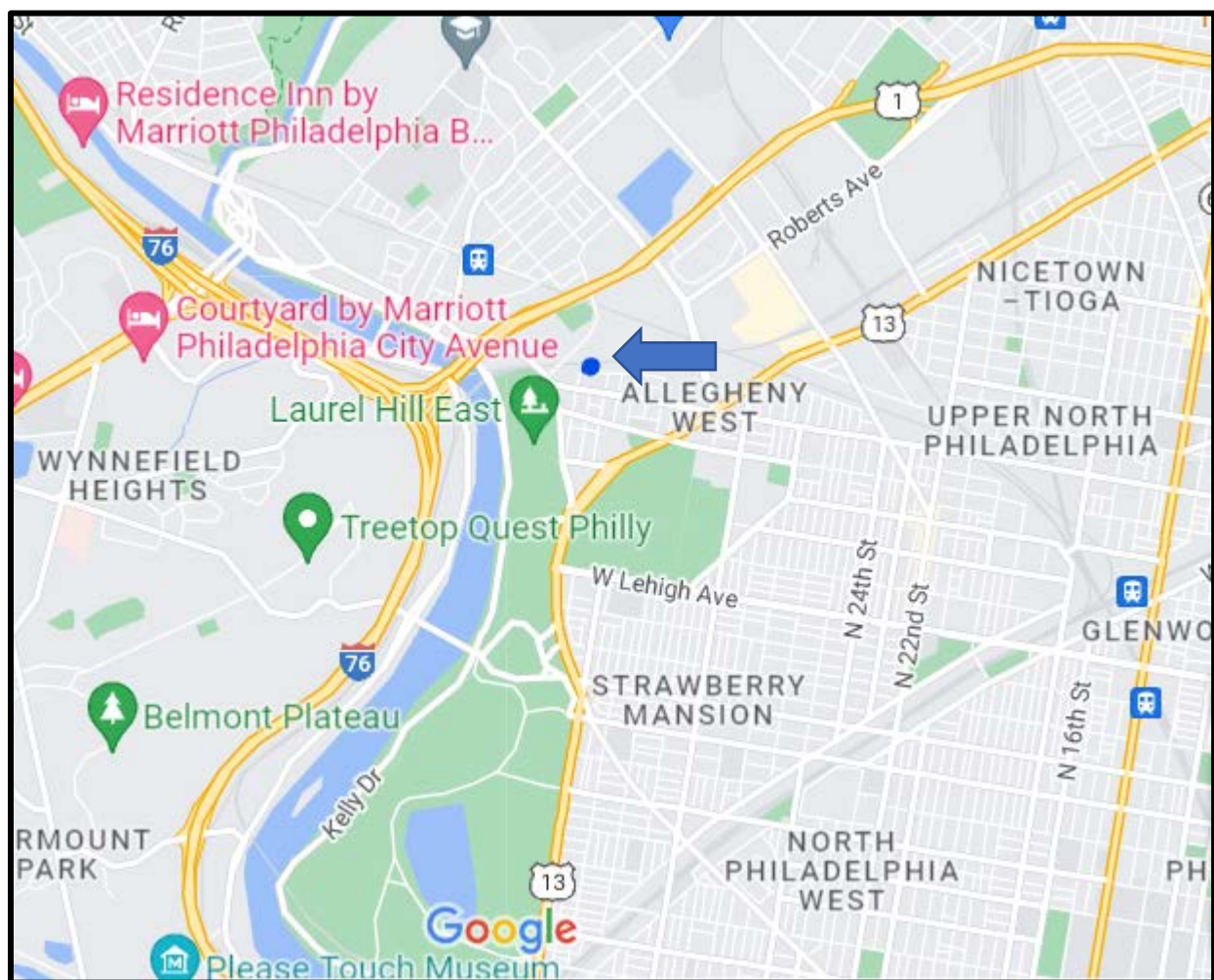
Introduction

This nomination proposes to add to the Philadelphia Register of History Places three stone structures built by textile manufacturer John Dobson in 1890-91 on a disconnected segment of W. Westmoreland Street in the East Falls/West Allegheny neighborhood, also known as “Paradise.” John Dobson was founder and co-owner of what was considered the largest single textile manufacturing complex in Philadelphia (possibly in the nation), known for its variety of fine products, including blankets for the Union Army, and its nationally-known carpets. He became as well a major property owner in Philadelphia and one of the city’s wealthiest men. The resources here nominated were build as “back-to-back” houses (though later modified) and display a distinctive appearance: “blocky” and solid, with varying application of a heavy stone cladding.

These structures, built for mill workers, have visually helped define a little-known enclave within the city since 1890, and merit recognition.

Location of nominated resources:

The buildings at 3414-16, 3418-20, and 3422-24 W. Westmoreland Street are located on the south side of the 3400 block of W. Westmoreland Street, a stub of that street discontinuous with the rest of it. The area is somewhat isolated, just south of the Richmond Branch of the former Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, now a CSX line. This neighborhood goes by the name Paradise, and is part of West Allegheny, but is also considered the southernmost section of East Falls. See map below; the location is indicated by the blue dot and arrow.



5. Boundary descriptions

3414-16 W. Westmoreland Street boundary description, taken from 1978 deed:

PREMISES "A"

ALL THAT CERTAIN lot or piece of ground with the messuage or tenement thereon erected, described according to a survey thereof made by W.F. Wingate, Esq. Surveyor and Regulator of the Thirteenth Survey District of the City of Philadelphia, on the Twenty-seventh day of October, A.D. 1924 as follows to wit:

SITUATE on the Southerly side of Westmoreland Street (not on the City Plan but as that line is proposed under revision of the Southerly line of Westmoreland Street) at the distance of Two Hundred Thirty feet. One inch (measured at right angles with Thirty-fifth Street) Eastwardly from the Easterly side of Thirty-fifth Street (Fifty feet wide) in the Thirty-eighth Ward of the City of Philadelphia.

CONTAINING in front or breadth on the said Westmoreland Street (as proposed under revision) Twenty feet Eleven inches and extending of that width in length or depth Southwardly between parallel lines at right angles with said line of Westmoreland Street and parallel with said Thirty-fifth Street Seventy five feet Six inches.

BEING known as premises No. 3414 West Westmoreland Street.

PREMISES "B"

AND ALSO ALL THAT CERTAIN lot or piece of ground with the messuage or tenement thereon erected, described according to a survey thereof made by W. F. Wingate Esquire, Surveyor and Regulator of the Thirteenth Survey District of the City of Philadelphia, on the Twenty-seventh day of October, A.D. 1924 as follows to wit:

SITUATE on the Southerly side of Westmoreland Street (not on the City plan but as that line is proposed under revision of the Southerly line of Westmoreland Street) at the distance of two hundred Ten feet (measured at right angles with Thirty-fifth Street) Eastwardly from the Easterly side of the said Thirty-fifth Street (Fifty feet wide) in the Thirty-eighth Ward of the City of Philadelphia.

CONTAINING in front or breadth on the said Westmoreland Street (as proposed under revision) Twenty feet, One inch and extending of that width in length or depth Southwardly between parallel lines at right angles with said line of Westmoreland Street (proposed under revision) and parallel with the said Thirty-fifth Street, seventy five feet six inches.

BEING Known as premises No. 3416 West Westmoreland Street.

3418-20 W. Westmoreland Street boundary description, taken from 1978 deed:

PREMISES "C"

AND ALSO ALL THAT CERTAIN lot or piece of ground with the messuage or tenement thereon erected described according to a survey thereof made by W. F. Wingate, Esq., Surveyor and Regulator of the Thirteenth Survey District of the City of Philadelphia on the Twenty Seventh day of October, A.D. 1924, as follows to wit:

SITUATE on the Southerly side of Westmoreland Street (not on City plan but as that line is proposed under revision of the Southerly line of Westmoreland Street) at the distance of One hundred Ninety feet, One inch (measured at right angles with Thirty-fifth Street) Eastwardly from the Easterly side of Thirty-fifth Street in the Thirty-eighth Ward of the City of Philadelphia; thence extending Southwardly on a line at right angles to the said Westmoreland Street and parallel with the said Thirty-fifth Street and passing through the middle of a wall Eighty-six feet Two inches to a point; thence extending Eastwardly on a line parallel with Allegheny Avenue and Ninety Four feet Ten inches Northwardly therefrom and along the North face of a stone wall, Nineteen feet Five inches to a point; thence extending Northwardly on a line parallel with the said Thirty-fifth Street and two hundred Nine feet, Six inches Eastwardly therefrom and along the Westerly face of another stone wall, Ten feet, eight inches to a point; thence extending Eastwardly on a line parallel with the said Allegheny Avenue, One hundred Five feet Six inches Northwardly therefrom and along the North face of the last mentioned stone wall, Six inches to a point; thence extending Northwardly on a line parallel with the said Thirty-fifth Street and passing through the middle of a stone wall and on a line at right angles to the said Southerly side of Westmoreland Street (as proposed under revision) Seventy-five feet Six inches to the said Southerly side of Westmoreland Street; thence extending Westwardly along the said Southerly side of Westmoreland Street (as proposed under revision) Nineteen feet, Eleven inches to the first mentioned point and place of beginning.

BEING KNOWN AS premises No. 3418 West Westmoreland Street.

PREMISES "D"

AND ALSO ALL THAT CERTAIN lot or piece of ground with the messuage or tenement thereon erected, described according to a survey thereof made by W. F. Wingate, Esq., Surveyor and Regulator of the Thirteenth Survey District of the City of Philadelphia, on the Twenty-seventh day of October A.D. 1924 as follows to wit:

SITUATE on the Southerly side of Westmoreland Street (fifty feet wide) as now on the City Plan, at the distance of One hundred Sixty-nine feet Ten inches Eastwardly from the Easterly side of Thirty-fifth Street (Fifty feet wide) in the Thirty-eighth Ward of the City of Philadelphia.

CONTAINING in front or breadth on the said side of Westmoreland Street (measured always at right angles with the said Thirty-fifth Street) Twenty feet, Three inches and extending of that width in length or depth Southwardly between parallel lines at right angles with said Westmoreland Street and parallel with said Thirty-fifth Street (the Easternmost line thereof passing through the middle of a wall, and the Westernmost line thereof passing partly through the middle of a wall) Eighty-six feet, Two inches.

BEING KNOWN as premises No. 3420 West Westmoreland Street.

3422-24 W. Westmoreland Street boundary description, taken from 1978 deed:

PREMISES "E"

AND ALSO ALL THAT CERTAIN lot or piece of ground with the messuage or tenement thereon erected, described according to a Survey thereof made by W. F. Wingate, Esquire, Surveyor and Regulator of the Thirteenth Survey District of the City of Philadelphia on the Twenty-Seventh day of October A.D. 1924, as follows, to wit:

SITUATE on the Southerly side of Westmoreland Street (Fifty feet wide) as now on the City Plan at the distance of One hundred fifty feet one inch Eastwardly from the Easterly side of Thirty-fifth Street (Fifty feet wide) in the Thirty-eighth Ward of the City of Philadelphia.

CONTAINING in front or breadth on the said side of Westmoreland Street (measured always at right angles with said Thirty-fifth Street) Nineteen feet, nine inches and extending of that width in length or depth Southwardly between parallel lines at right angles with the said Westmoreland Street and parallel with said Thirty-fifth Street, Eighty-six feet, two inches.

BEING known as Premises No. 3422 West Westmoreland Street.

PREMISES "F"

AND ALSO ALL THAT CERTAIN lot or piece of ground with the messuage or tenement thereon erected, described according to a Survey thereof made by W.F. Wingate, Esq. Surveyor and Regulator of the Thirteenth Survey District of the City of Philadelphia on the Twenty-seventh day of October A.D. 1924, as follows, to wit:

SITUATE on the Southerly side of Westmoreland Street (Fifty feet wide) as now on the City Plan) at the distance of One hundred Thirty feet Eastwardly from the Easterly side of Thirty-fifth Street (Fifty feet wide) in the Thirty-eighth Ward of the City of Philadelphia.

CONTAINING in front or breadth on the said side of Westmoreland Street (measured always at right angles with said Thirty-fifth Street) Twenty feet, one inch and extending of that width in length or depth Southwardly between parallel lines at right angles with the said Westmoreland Street and parallel with said Thirty-fifth Street, Eighty six feet, two inches.

BEING known as Premises No. 3424 West Westmoreland Street

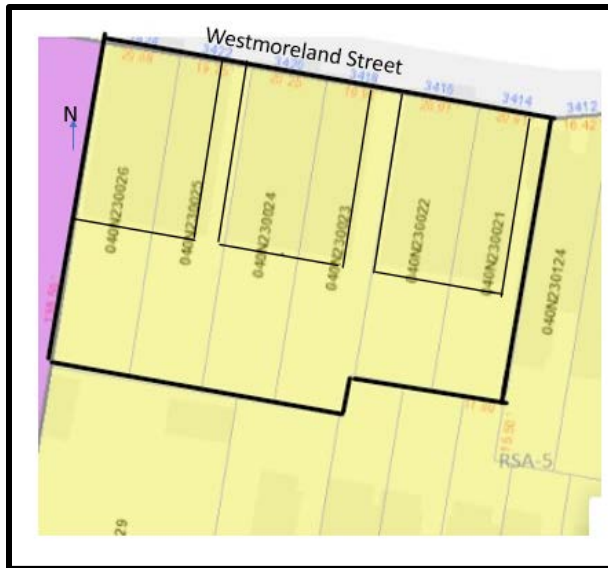


Figure 1: Boundaries of nominated resources, parcels and the buildings. From Atlas.Phila.Gov.



Figure 2: The three nominated buildings (arrow) seen from above, showing dense old row housing in area, and new development to the west (right) of these buildings. Blue arrow points to north. Google maps.

Each of the three buildings sits astride two parcels, as seen in figure 1. In configuration and use (see building history below), each building is similar to a pair of semi-detached houses. (When referring to one of the two sections forming a pair, the term “half” will be used.) Buildings will be denoted by their W. Westmoreland Street addresses. Building 3414-3416 partly occupies parcels 040N230021 and 040N230022; 3418-3420 partly occupies 040N230023 and 040N230024; and 3422-3424 partly occupies 040N230025 and 040N230026. Each half of each building sits on one parcel, as seen in figure 1. For the purposes of this nomination, Westmoreland Street is considered as running east – west, and 35th Street north – south.

6. Description

In dimension, massing, and fenestration, the three building are of one design. They have very gently pitched roofs (3414-16 W. Westmoreland Street differs in part; see below), with the ridge parallel to the fronts, which face Westmoreland Street. They differ in some aspects of cladding, façade detail, and in the extent of deterioration. The buildings are of stone, with stone cladding or stucco over the structural rubble walls. This is documented in a building permit and can be seen in several places where surface deterioration has revealed the structural stone.

Building 3422-24 W. Westmoreland Street, the most westward

Front façade (front, north elevation): As with all three structures, the façade is symmetric, with a central entrance raised above street level (there are basements) and symmetrically placed windows. On three sides, the building is faced in stonework that seems somewhere between ashlar and coursed squared rubble, with considerable variation in height of the courses and length of the stones, especially seen in the lower range of the front surface. The irregularity provides some added visual interest. Two small windows give light to the basement, and a definable stone belt course demarcates the foundation from upper wall. **First story:** The central entrance is classical, showing a single door glazed with six lights, sidelights (five panes) adjoining. Small square pilasters between the sidelights and door, and at the ends, support a crown comprising a frieze (or fascia), a course of dentils (or small modillions), and a cornice.



Figure 3: Building 3422-24 W. Westmoreland Street, looking south and east. All photos are by S. Peitzman except where noted.



Immediately above the cornice, one sees a pair of segmental arches in stone separated by a trapezoidal stone, suggesting two doors originally.¹ If in better repair, the entrance would offer a pleasing appearance.

Flanking the central entrance, two double sash modern replacement windows are capped by segmental arches and sit on stone sills below.

Second story: Four symmetrically placed modern sash windows also enjoy the protection of segmental arches. The voussoirs are smaller than those of the first floor.

Figure 4: Entrance of Building 3422-24 W. Westmoreland Street.

Third story: The window arrangement of the second story is replicated.

Cornice: Closely-spaced small brackets support—or at least embellish—an overhanging cornice. Slightly larger brackets add some rhythmic variation to the pattern. These represent a hint of the Italianate, still a popular streetscape style in Philadelphia in 1890.

West façade:



Figure 5: West façade, looking east at 3422-24.



Figure 6: Detail of stone facing, west façade, 3422-24.

¹ This is confirmed by inspecting 3401 – 3411 W. Westmoreland Street, across from the subject houses. These are similar and clearly derive from the same design, though they are arrayed in a row, and cosmetic alterations make them less striking in the streetscape. Their door settings, however, have not been altered, and show that originally each half had its own door.

The same stone cladding is seen, looking in some areas even more variable than on the front (north façade). At each of the three levels, four windows provide light and air into the building. These are modern windows. They are not centered within the naked: the course of windows begins about 10 feet from the front. Then two windows separated by perhaps four feet, then towards the rear, another set of windows, separated by about 6 feet. This pattern no doubt reflects the internal layout of rooms as built. The replacement windows are crudely set in the masonry openings, with stone sills below, but no discernible lintel above.

East façade: (not shown; partly viewed by nominator but it is not possible to obtain a useful photograph owing to the small gap between buildings) The east façade duplicates that described for the west, but of course in reverse.

Rear: Will be described in conjunction with the other two buildings.

Building 3418-20 W. Westmoreland Street, the middle building



Figure 7: 3418-20 W. Westmoreland Street.

It is identical in massing, dimensions, and pattern of fenestrations. The quasi-ashlar cladding, however, extends only over the (front) façade, the quoins, and up to the first window level on the sides. Several basement windows are visible at the base of the building on west, downslope, side. (These are likely present on the 3422-24 W. Westmoreland Street building as well, but not visible owing to weeds and construction debris.) Two flat arches of stone (somewhat crudely done) separated by a small square block, surmount the entrance door, suggesting, as with building 3422-24 W. Westmoreland Street, that once separate doors for the two sections existed. The design of the current, single, entry frontispiece is the same as in 3422-24 W. Westmoreland Street. The two first floor front windows are boarded up, and the cornice has been covered with siding.

Building 3414-3416 W. Westmoreland Street, the easternmost of the three buildings.

This building, constructed in 1891, probably about six months after the other two, shows some structural differences, best seen from above, though the overall dimensions match the other two. It actually comprises two masses, a gabled segment about 30 feet deep, and a flat roofed segment about 15 feet deep. See the building history section of this nomination for some explanation.

The façade is similar to those of the neighboring buildings, but yet again with some variation.



Figure 8: North (front) façade of 3414-16 W. Westmoreland Street.

We see the stone cladding up to the base of the first-floor windows on the front and both sides, and forming a pattern of quoins at the the front corners, extending up to the cornice. Otherwise, stucco covers the underlying rubble stone walls on four sides. The layout of windows on the front (north façade) is identical to that of the other buildings, as is the doorway, which also shows flanking quoining. In yet another small variation of design, however, the windows are sandwiched between simple but heavy stone sills and lintels.



Figure 9: 3414-16 W. Westmoreland Street east elevation.

Rear (south) elevations:

These have been very much altered, former windows filled in, and fire escapes added. Access to the rear of 3414-16 W. Westmoreland Street (figure 10) provided further evidence that these structures were built as back-to-back double houses. The doors at either end at ground level are likely original in location, based on the stone surround work, and these would have been the individual entrances to the two rear dwellings.



Figure 10: Rear of 3414-16 W. Westmoreland Street.

History of the Properties

John and James Dobson by the early 1870s had built the Falls of Schuylkill Woolen Mills and Falls of Schuylkill Carpet Mills into one of the largest such works in America (see below under criterion A for details about the mills and John Dobson). John Dobson in particular bought up land in the southwest area of Falls of Schuylkill, mostly adjoining the mills to the south and west, also to the north and east, and along Ridge Avenue south (or east) of Indian Queen Lane. The 1875 G.M. Hopkins *City Atlas of Philadelphia* shows some of his holdings and houses Dobson built by the date of this publication in the area of interest, north of Allegheny Avenue and below the Richmond Branch of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad. The upper (northern) row comprises sixteen three-story rowhouses.



Figure 11: Excerpt from the 1875 Hopkins *City Atlas of Philadelphia*. The arrows indicate some row housing John Dobson built prior to 1875. The blue rectangle is the future site of the subject properties of this nomination. The star shows the location of Dobson's home near present-day 34th Street and Allegheny Avenue. To the west (left) one sees part of the Dobsons' Falls of Schuylkill Carpet Mills. The Richmond branch of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad is seen running from lower left (southwest) to northeast. The thin arrow indicates north.

Dobson does not seem to have built further on his Westmoreland Street lots until 1890. A building permit request dated 24 June of that year signed by John Dobson as "Owner and Builder" looks to "4, 3 Story Stone Dwelling houses built in two Pairs," on the south side of Westmoreland Street "130 [feet] east of 35th Street," these being 3416-18 and 3420-22, two of the subject buildings.² These were built as three-story back-to-back houses, as described to me by East Falls Historical Society board member and property owner William Ross, III, who owns several similar structures in the immediate area, though not the subject properties. A back-to-back house is a double or semi-detached house in which the individual dwelling units adjoin at their rears, rather than along one or both sides. The dwellings are laid out as mirror images of each other, back-to-back. The walls dividing the two dwelling units are not necessarily structural

² Philadelphia building permit application, 24 June 1890, City Archives. No permit number was found on the document.

or “fire walls.” Each dwelling unit is entered by a front door, or sometimes a side door for the rear “house.” One house will face a conventional street, whereas the one to its back might face a small and close-by parallel street, or some sort of alley or courtyard, the latter common in industrial towns of England. (See appendix for the history of back-to-back houses.) Since each half of a pair in the subject buildings was a back-to-back, in effect these buildings were



Figure 12: Overhead view of nominated structures
(Atlas.phila.gov, Pictometry)

quadruple houses! The building permit indicates that each half (referred to in the permit as dwelling houses) contained 9 rooms. Two “trinity” houses set up back-to-back, a plausible plan for Philadelphia, would contain *six* rooms, excluding possible inside water closet and kitchen. *Nine* rooms suggests that these structures comprised asymmetric homes – likely two rooms on each floor for the front house, and one room per floor for the less desirable and less costly to rent rear house.

Such an arrangement, with the front house showing about twice the depth of the rear house, is highly suggested by pair 3414-3416, built in 1891 as two masses, easily discerned from an overhead view (Figure 12).³

Census sheets provide evidence that these three buildings were double back-back-houses (in effect, quadruples). The sheet for 1900 covering the stretch of Westmoreland Street indicates that there were yet no street numbers, but for a series of numbered “dwelling house[s]” two families are listed for each. (Occupations shown for residents included: blanket weaver; carpet weaver; plush weaver; finisher, dye house; plush beater; velvet finisher; twister, woolen mill--giving within these few homes a quick survey of the range of Dobson’s products.) By 1910, addresses were in place for 3414 through 3424 and families are listed at “front” and “rear” of each.⁴

No building permits turn up in the card index (on micro-film at Philadelphia City Archives, extant only from 1905) until 1935, when the three buildings underwent major internal alterations. Each half of a building was transformed from two, three-story back-to-back dwellings, to three apartments, one on each floor – or in the words of the permits, from “two family dwelling” to “three family tenement.” The architect for the alterations was Richard Neely. At this time, the owner was given as “John Dobson Estate.”⁵ Dobson had died in 1911. Eventually, and after a

³ The building permit for this structure is not available at Philadelphia City Archives.

⁴ United States Census for 1900, Philadelphia, ward 38, e.d. 970, sheet 6; for 1910, ward 38, e.d. 945, sheets 14 and 15.

⁵ Building permits 2410-2412, 24 June 1935, City Archives. The changes are also described on Application for Zoning Permit and/or Use Application Permit, # 8704, 5 June 1935, available on-line via Atlas.Phila.gov.

confusing series of transactions including sheriff sales, the properties were sold by the estate on January 10, 1947 to a real estate broker named Milton Prusan. After some further conveyances,⁶ Prusan and several partners owned the houses, and did so for many years. The current (2022) owner purchased them in 1977. The middle structure is boarded up and unoccupied; the other two contain rental apartments.

7. Significance

The nominator believes that the subject properties described satisfy criteria for designation A and H. He believes that the three buildings, especially as a set, display a distinctive, idiosyncratic, external appearance, unlike anything else in the West Allegheny or East Falls areas. But the PHC criteria allow for only “style,” innovation, or influential architect when considering architectural merit.

Criterion 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.

The subject properties were built and owned until his death by John Dobson (1827 – 1911), who with his brother James built and managed the single largest complex in Philadelphia (or possibly the nation) centered on the manufacture of woolen goods, and especially carpets. The Dobsons are generally remembered and written about as a pair; and their significance derives largely from their joint development and management of what has come to be known as the Dobson Mills, an enterprise which at its peak counted either 6000 or 11,000 workers, depending upon the source (6000 seems more likely).⁷ But John founded the business, made an enormous amount of money (as did his brother), and became a major land-holder in its neighborhood (the Falls of Schuylkill, later East Falls) and well beyond. On many properties near the mills Dobson built dwellings to rent, including the subjects of this nomination. It does not seem that this function was carried on by the business, though before incorporation there might not be much distinction. But deeds, building permits, and atlases refer to “John Dobson.”

John Dobson was born on October 9, 1827, in Saddleworth, an area comprising several small towns northeast of Manchester, near the town of Oldham. The 1841 census of England shows that John was one of six children of Elizabeth and William Dobson, a farmer. Like many

⁶ The various sales are documented in Deed Registry Ledger 40-N-23. Oddly, the sale to Prusan merited a small article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “Apartments Conveyed” (10 March 1947).

⁷ Though this never seems to have been a name under which it did business. The *Manufacturies and Manufacturers of Pennsylvania in the Nineteenth Century* (Charles Robson, ed; 1875; hereafter *MMP*), enters the business as “Falls of Schuylkill Woolen Mills,” and later the name “Falls of Schuylkill Carpet Mills” gained usage – these were two divisions of the one company, on one large site. The firm incorporated on 1 January 1912 as Falls of Schuylkill Textile Mills, soon changed to John and James Dobson, Inc. The nominator has never seen substantiation of the claim to have been the largest single textile plant in the country. The first appearance of this assertion may have been in *MMP* p. 52 (“...the largest individual [textile] enterprise in the United States”), and it is repeated in Scharf and Westcott’s *History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884* (v. 3, p. 2309), published in 1884, when the Dobson’s mills were still growing.

children living at that time in Saddleworth or Oldham, John, then fourteen, and two siblings worked in the cotton mills, the dominant industry of the region.⁸ They were “piecers,” young workers who dashed about repairing broken threads in the mechanized spinning process. Probably in 1850, John Dobson emigrated to the United States (brother James, ten years younger, would follow).⁹

Already knowing textile manufacturing, John Dobson found work at the cotton mill of Joseph Schofield, another émigré from England, in the Mill Creek district of Lower Merion. Soon after, he married one of Schofield’s daughters (later, brother James wedded her sister!). Going out on his own, though he would maintain lifelong ties with the Schofield family, John, with two partners, James Lee and Hugh Shaw, established a textile mill (cotton or wool is not known) first in the Rockhill area, then across the Schuylkill to Manayunk. After a fire took the Manayunk building, in 1855 or 1856 the business moved to the Falls of Schuylkill (now East Falls). Dobson bought out the two partners in 1860.¹⁰ James Dobson became an associate soon after the Civil War, and from then, it was John and James Dobson conducting the business until John died in 1911. Exactly how they shared management and planning over the many years is not known.

Though relatively new in the textile arena of Philadelphia in the 1860s – already a very large playing field – John Dobson succeeded in obtaining one of the largest contracts to manufacture woolen blankets for the Union Army at the outbreak of the Civil War. Throughout the war, the demand for blankets ceaselessly grew, and the company enjoyed large profits. Twice during the war, John Dobson left the Falls of Schuylkill Mills to lead a unit of Pennsylvania Volunteers (the “Blue Reserves”) into battle.¹¹ According to the entry in *Encyclopedia of Biography, Pennsylvania*, while at war, he “ordered that, while he was away and the war continued, four dollars a week should be paid to the wife of each of his one hundred men.”¹² The same source recounts that “During this trying time it was Mrs. John Dobson who looked after the business

⁸ Census of England, 1841, Saddleworth, piece 1279, book 6, folio 44, p. 34. Oldham is both a town and a governmental district, Saddleworth bring part of it). The best sources for the life of John Dobson are: “Dobson, John, Manufacturer,” in Thomas Lynch Montgomery, ed., *Encyclopedia of Biography, Pennsylvania*, v. 15, pp. 255-258 (New York, 1924); “Injuries Fatal to John Dobson,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 29 June 1911. Reflecting the importance of the company, the Dobsons and their mills are referred to frequently in both of Philip Scranton’s books on the history of textile manufacturing in Philadelphia: *Proprietary Capitalism: The Textile Manufacture at Philadelphia, 1800 – 1885* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and *Figured Tapestry: Production, Markets, and Power in Philadelphia Textiles, 1885-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁹ This was the year of immigration listed in the 1900 census, but secondary sources give other years. In the 1900 census, Dobson is denoted as “N” – having been naturalized. Oddly, his English-born wife Sarah does not have this designation.

¹⁰ See Historic American Buildings Survey, “John & James Dobson Carpet Mill (West Parcel),” HABS No. PA-5383, 4041-4055 Ridge Avenue, Philadelphia, “Data” section (on-line via Library of Congress). This document contains an appendix listing relevant deed transfers. This parcel in 1860 comprised 13 acres and 68 perches, and on the property were some frame houses and a mill. A tributary of the Schuylkill, Falls Run (later Dobson Run) ran through the tract and powered at various times going back to the 18th century a paper mill, grist mill, marble sawmill, and others. The Dobson mill was also water powered at first, but by 1866-67 the *Hexamer General Survey* indicated a combination of water power and steam (volume 4, plate 279).

¹¹ See Samuel P. Bates, *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-5* (Harrisburg, 1871; repub. Broadfoot Publishing Company, Wilmington, North Carolina, 1994), pp.

¹² *Encyclopedia of Biography, Pennsylvania*, v. 15, pp. 256.

and held it together.”¹³ Being of the Schofield textile-producing family probably aided her ability to run the firm. Assuming this is correct – and the nominator does not doubt it--it confirms that James Dobson was not yet a partner, though he may have been an employee of John’s mill. He became a partner, as noted above, likely just after the Civil War ended.¹⁴

The owners of the Schofield woolen mills, like John Dobson, also twice led a contingent of their workers when invasion of Pennsylvania was threatened or had occurred. These owners, and the Dobsons, were British born and still relatively new to the United States. Their patriotism can be commended, but also can be seen as an element of “fraternal paternalism” as described by the prominent historian of Philadelphia industry, Philip Scranton.¹⁵ The Dobson’s were notable for paying good wages. Both lived in Falls of Schuylkill, as did, of course, their numerous employees, and were very much hands-on proprietors, showing up for work at the mill or downtown offices well into their senior years. The generally good relations between the brothers and their workers crumbled toward the end of the nineteenth century, particularly into the economically disastrous 1890s, which brought discord and strikes.¹⁶

During the Civil War and into the 1870s, however, the Dobson story was one of rapid growth: additions to the plant, particularly to extend carpet-making, and the hiring of hundreds of skilled workers, many being immigrants from England and Ireland. New buildings, made from Wissahickon schist excavated on site, arose in 1862, 1864, 1867, 1869, 1870, 1871, 1872, 1873, and beyond. A set of “magnificent compound beam engines” powered the production of cloth, blankets, and carpets, which consumed 600,000 pounds of cotton warps annually, and 20,000 pounds of wool *daily*. The Dobsons sold their goods through agents in Philadelphia and New York, and likely elsewhere.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Though the *MMP* cites 1861 as the year the brothers associated (p.52).

¹⁵ Philip Scranton, “Varieties of paternalism: industrial structures and the social relations of production in American textiles,” *American Quarterly* 36(1984): 235-257.

¹⁶ Even before this period, workers organized and sought agency. The dominant issues in the textile industry in Philadelphia were refusing wage cuts, and the demand to reduce the work week from 60 to 55 hours.



Figure 13: The John and James Dobson mills in 1926 (FLP print collection but found in Library of Congress online images; from HABS?)

They even made “Saved List Cloths for the Indians.”¹⁷ For their carpets, the firm eventually set up showrooms in New York, Boston, and of course Philadelphia, at 809-811 Chestnut Street.

In January of 1891, the carpet mill (the section of the complex north of Scott’s

Lane) suffered a spectacular fire. It attracted thousands of hearty cold-tolerant Philadelphians to watch it from various points, including the nearby Baltimore and Ohio Railroad bridge. Accounts state that the brothers kept at least some of the newly jobless staff on salary, to help

with cleanup, and the plush and other divisions had escaped the flames. Rebuilding followed, and carpet production resumed in less than one year. The output of carpets (ingrain, Brussels, etc.), as well as blankets and many other products resumed, and grew. The proliferating middle class of the late nineteenth century wanted attractive carpets, not the thin and comfortless floor coverings of the past; also plush upholsteries, and other select textiles for their stuffed “Victorian” parlors. Surviving mill buildings have been deemed eligible for both the National and Philadelphia registries

¹⁷ *MMP*, p. 52. The article on the Dobson enterprises in this work, published in 1875, abounds in detail suggesting a high level of familiarity. “Saved list cloth” was a high-quality woolen fabric popular with some Indian groups for ceremonial blankets and garments.

The Dobson brothers became extremely wealthy. John's personal assets at the time of his death, the "goods and chattels, rights and credits" *not* including real estate, were valued at over 14 million dollars. With the excess accumulation of money, John had invested in railways and traction companies, and bought land, a great deal in the vicinity of the mills, but also in Center City Philadelphia, Atlantic City, and beyond. An inventory of the John Dobson estate made in 1943 following the death of his daughter, Elizabeth Dobson Riddle, showed real estate holdings throughout Philadelphia and its suburbs, and he held mortgages from as far away as Kentucky



Figure 14: Houses built by John Dobson c. 1900, 4200 block of Ridge Avenue. Built as three-stories, later shortened for unknown reason. Courtesy N. Pontone

and Texas. On some of the land in the Falls of Schuylkill, he built dwellings which would be rented mostly by his workers. Most were three-story houses, some (along Ridge Avenue) with retail on the first floor. Among the most unusual in plan and appearance were the back-to-back buildings, the subjects of this nomination.

The textile industry of Philadelphia entered a period of decline in the 1920s. John and James Dobson Carpet Mills went out of business in 1927, a victim of national, "brand name" products. John Dobson had died in 1911, and James in

1926. Neither had sons, and no family member had the interest or capability to confront the challenges. The sorry details of the decline of the Dobsons' mills, - and of overall manufacturing in Philadelphia—are not needed here.¹⁸ We return to John Dobson.



Figure 15: John Dobson (1827-1911), from C. Morris, ed., *Men of the Century* (Phila., 1896)

Little is known of John Dobson's personal life. The admiring article in the *Encyclopedia of Biography, Pennsylvania* tells us that Dobson was "a liberal giver to charities;" in politics "a staunch Republican" (and like his peers in textiles, a protectionist); a vestry member at the Episcopal Church of St. James the Less, near to his home and business; and "a man of domestic tastes."



Figure 16: John Dobson's home, which was near present-day 34th St. and Allegheny Avenue.

¹⁸ The story of the decline of the textile mills of Philadelphia, including the Dobsons', is best told in Philip Scranton's *Figured Tapestry* (n.8).

His “chief recreation was his daily drive through Fairmount Park to his office, behind “Morgan” and the famous trotter, “New York Central...”¹⁹ Regarding his domesticity, the nominator found no mention of European vacations, or country estates. Dobson built a very substantial Gothic revival home near what is now Allegheny Avenue east of 34th Street, but it was no mansion, and is not mentioned in the biographical narratives. It seems to not have been given a name.²⁰ It was a very short walk from the house to the mills. For a time, John could see the subject buildings from his home, and its tenants – those in the back houses - could view his house.

In sum, this nomination argues that John Dobson was a person “significant in the past,” within the context of Philadelphia:

--A childhood millworker in England, he eventually became one of the wealthiest men in Philadelphia, leaving a personal estate of about \$14 million (would be roughly \$420 million today; in 1914, his workers would have earnings of about \$12 weekly for men, \$9 weekly for women). While massive accumulation of wealth may not be everyone’s most admired attainment, it has always mattered, for better or worse, in American society. And the rise from young immigrant to this level of success is a mythic American story.

--He was the founder and co-proprietor and manager of what grew to become the largest woolen textile manufacturing complex in the city (and by many early accounts, in the country), known particularly for blankets for the Union Army, chinchilla and plush fabrics, and for fine carpets marketed nationally. Union soldiers stayed warm with Dobson blankets, and countless Americans walked on Dobson carpets. At peak, the firm employed 6000 workers. It endured for almost seventy years. Its significance can be gauged by the attention given to the “Dobson Mills” in Philip Scranton’s definitive histories of the Philadelphia textile industry (cited in note 8).

--As a major landowner in the (now) East Falls – West Allegheny areas, in the late nineteenth century he built numerous row houses and some “twins,” including some on Ridge Avenue with first-floor retail. Many of these houses survive, constituting a major part of the current fabric of East Falls and West Allegheny. Though we do not claim he was a designer, his background as a youth and young man in the industrial midlands of England (Oldham, east of Manchester), where back-to-back houses for workers prevailed (see appendix), makes it plausible that he chose this plan for some of his projects, such as the subject buildings. The back-to-back is otherwise not known to have been common in Philadelphia. Dobson also owned a large amount of real estate in Center City Philadelphia, Olney, North Philadelphia, West Philadelphia, the western suburbs, Atlantic City, and Lexington Kentucky.

¹⁹ Dobson entry, *Encyclopedia of Biography, Pennsylvania* (n.8), pp. 257-58.

²⁰ James’ home, also near the plant, he called “Bella Vista.” The range of country estates nearby on School House Lane – but a world apart - had mostly arboreal names, such as Woodside, The Oaks, etc.)

Criterion H: Owing to its unique position or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar feature of the neighborhood, community, or City.

As described above, these three structures, built as quadruple houses, though not exemplars of architectural elegance, can claim a highly “singular” appearance (the somewhat irregular stone cladding, the classical entrances, the variations in details among the three structures). The blockish buildings convey solidity and robust presence. I have shown photographs of these buildings to several architects and historians of Philadelphia architecture, and none can recall seeing anything quite like them in the city.²¹ There are several similar but altered buildings across the street from these, but they form parts of a row and do not “stand out” and demand visual attention as do the subject buildings. In addition, these three buildings climb a slope, making for a dramatic appearance.

They have been where they are since 1890-91, as an “established” and weighty feature of the neighborhood—really of a sequestered enclave, still perceptible as such today, though threatened with unmoderated development. Figure 18 (below) shows the western stretch of the 3400 block of West Westmoreland Street. The three nominated buildings are to the left (south). To the right (north) one sees part of a row of buildings with facades with similarities to the nominated structures, then the row of 16 row houses built by John Dobson in the 1870s; and looking directly down the hill, the backs of houses from pre-1875 built by Dobson on a tiny lane first known as Dobson’s Row, later (and presently), as Sugden’s Row. It is tempting to see this view as revealing a small and inviting urban village, with the three nominated buildings prominent, and essential to this milieu.

(That these were erected as back-to-back houses makes them unusual: purpose built back-to-back’s seem not to have been widely built in Philadelphia, though they are found in this West Allegheny/lower East Falls vicinity. As noted above, however, the subject buildings were converted to conventional apartments in 1935. The internal configurations would not, of course, directly contribute to any of the PHC criteria, other than the suggested association with John Dobson’s English origin, as proposed above for criterion A).

²¹ Architect and author David S. Traub tells me that he has never seen buildings with this appearance during his extensive explorations of Philadelphia neighborhoods. He made a visit to view the nominated buildings directly. He also suggested the notion of a small “urban village.”



Figure 17: Looking west down the 3400 block of W. Westmoreland Street, the nominated buildings to the left (south).

Appendix

Back-to-back Houses

Early history

A pair of back-to-back houses comprises two dwellings sharing a back wall, though not necessarily a very sturdy one in their earliest examples. The two dwellings are laid out as mirror images, and in their most minimal early form in England stood two stories high with one room

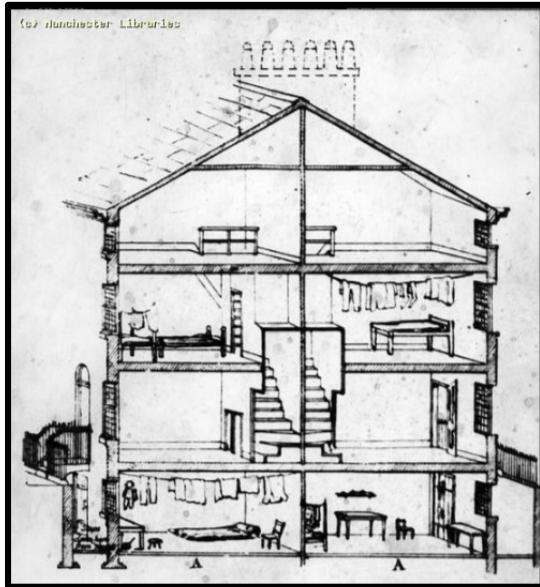


Figure app-1: Typical layout of a 19-century English back-to-back. City of Manchester Libraries.

per floor, sometimes an attic, and a basement (fig. app-1). All might be plentifully occupied. Though their exact origin remains unclear, they are known to have been built in England by the late 18th century. Into the 19th century, back-to-backs became a popular, and likely dominant, form of worker houses in the midland manufacturing cities such as Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Leeds and others. For example, they formed 71% of the housing stock in Leeds in 1886.²² In rows (or “terraces”), they might be arrayed along one prominent street (the front houses), and a parallel small street or alley (the rear houses, earning smaller rents). The basement rooms were often rented out as well. This plan gained more revenue than would a single dwelling of similar size on a given small lot. At their most wretched, back-to-backs could be clustered around a communal yard, or “court,” in which were found the privies and water pump, sometimes a wash house.

When built in rows, which was common, the small rooms of these homes enjoyed light and ventilation from only one side of four – which is to say, they enjoyed very little. And, the number of occupants per house was often high. As the nineteenth century saw countless back-to-backs packed into the mill towns of England, they were increasingly decried by British housing reformers and physicians concerned with public health. Following medical theory of the nineteenth century, they assigned blame for high rates of illness, especially cholera and what we now call typhoid fever, mainly to the lack of ventilation: the spread of such diseases was held to be through foul air, or “miasms.” More likely, the real blame laid with contaminated water,

²² Much literature exists concerning back-to-back houses, comprising both 19th-century censure and more recent historical exploration. Some examples include: Arnold Evans, “Back-to-back houses,” *Trans. Epidemiological Soc. London* 15(1896)87-99; J.R. Ashton, “Back to back housing, courts, and privies: the slums of 19th century England,” *J. Epidemiology Community Health* 60(2006)654; Richard Russell-Lawrence, “Back to backs” in *Period House* showing posts with label “Book of the Edwardian and Interwar House,” [periodhouse.blogspot.com/search/label/Book of the Edwardian and Interwar House](http://periodhouse.blogspot.com/search/label/Book+of+the+Edwardian+and+Interwar+House) [this author’s print book from 2009 is *Book of the Edwardian and Interwar House*]; Joanne Harrison, “The origins, development and decline of back-to-back houses in Leeds, 1787-1937,” *Industrial Archaeology Review* 39(2017)101-116.

privies having been close to the water source. It has to be added that although living in crowded back-to-back houses would seem likely to foster sickness – and some statistical analyses of the 19th century seemed to support this assertion—given that the occupants were poor, overworked, likely managing only borderline nutrition, and were possibly too given to use of alcohol, it is difficult in retrospect to determine the role of the back-to-back layout as compared to the “through” house in the health of workers in midland England. In any case, by the late 19th century the back-to-back design increasingly was banned as part of efforts at housing reform and disease prevention. They were finally outlawed in England in 1909. Most were eventually demolished as part of what later would be known, in large-scale form, as “urban renewal.”

The back-to-backs of Leeds

And so, by the early decades of the twentieth century, most back-to-backs were gone – except a small cluster preserved as a National Trust museum in Birmingham, other occasional survivors here and there—and rows of them in the city of Leeds. There, a “superior” version became popular with the working and middle classes: these were built soundly of brick, at first in chunks of eight pairs, later long rows enhanced with window hoods, bracketed cornices, and (for some) gardens. Of course, indoor plumbing became a norm. Thousands survive in the Harehills section of Leeds today (2023), many modified and individualized, as owners will do (figures app-2, 3).

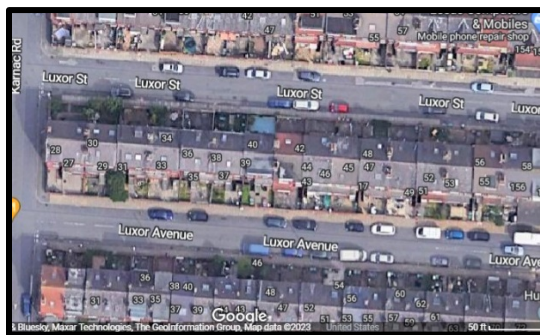


Figure app-2: Aerial view of Luxor Avenue and Luxor Street in Leeds, showing back-to-backs facing both (Google maps)



Figure app-3: Back-to-back houses along Luxor Avenue in Leeds.

Back-to-backs in the Philadelphia area

Searches of relevant data bases, such as the Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals, yielded no literature on back-to-back houses in nineteenth-century United States, much less in Philadelphia. Somehow, they did not make the Atlantic crossing, at least as a prevalent housing type for working class residents. American cities begot their characteristic (vernacular) forms: the tenements of New York, the now endangered “Workers Cottages” of Chicago, the trinities and other row houses of Philadelphia.²³ This writer has not investigated why Philadelphia, of course

²³ The Chicago workers cottage is at core a simple framed gable-front house with its longest dimension set perpendicular to the street to fit on small lots. The Chicago Workers Cottage Initiative seeks to preserve these once prolific homes, now subject to demolition and replacement by far more costly residences.

a major city for textile making (or other cities, for that matter) did not spawn back-to-backs: did the unfavorable reputation and eventual banning of them in England lead to preventive proscription in cities of the United States? Historian Jeffrey Cohen has pointed out to me that in densely sections of nineteenth-century Philadelphia, the crowding of structures within alleys and

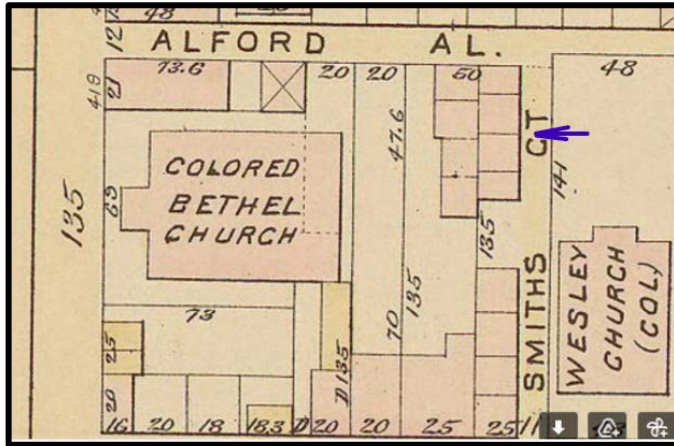


Fig. app-4. See text.

courts seems to have led to houses placed, or even attached, back-to-back, but this would not seem to have been an intentional housing strategy (Figure app-4, arrow). As noted in the body of this nomination, back-to-backs including the subject buildings clearly were built as such in the nineteenth century in the area now known as Paradise (part of West Allegheny), overlapping the southern-most extent of East Falls. Through the courtesy of Mr. William Ross and several of his tenants, I had the opportunity to visit a pair of back-to-backs still in their original configuration, on Scott's Lane.

In the period 1916-1922, the well-known housing developer John McClatchy created within his Stonehurst development in Upper Darby (near what became the “69th Street” shopping area) a number of dwellings situated back-to-back. These, however, are substantial residences, clearly



Fig. app-5: Streets of large back-to-back residences in Upper Darby. The 69th and Market Street commercial district is to the top (north). Note the yards and how each unit faces a similar street.

erected for middle-class buyers, built as individual pairs, not in rows, and would seem equivalent to the far more common “side-to-side” double house (Figure app-5). These attractive colonial revival homes remain occupied in 2023, likely the largest group of such “upscale” back-to-back houses in the Delaware Valley.²⁴ Why McClatchy adopted this unusual design is unknown. Perhaps they fit with the rather short distances between the parallel streets, and allowed for a modest sized front yard.

Of course, these houses bear little resemblance or connection to the textile workers’ homes of midland England or those built by John Dobson (and possible others) in lower northwest Philadelphia in the nineteenth century for textile workers and their families.

²⁴ I am grateful to Kate J. Clifford, Senior Planner with the Delaware County Planning Department, for pointing out these buildings during a tour she led for the Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia and later providing further information.

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Various building permits, insurance atlases, census sheets, etc. as cited in notes, customary to this sort of research.