

Girard Estate

Girard Estate is located in South Philadelphia.



To get to the Girard Estate Historic District from Center City, take the Broad Street Line to Oregon Avenue and walk one block north to Shunk Street and west to Girard Park at 21st and Shunk streets to begin the tour (about one mile total). Or, take the #17 bus on 19th Street southbound to Shunk and walk two blocks west to Girard Park. To return to Center City, take the northbound #17 bus at 20th and Shunk. For more details, visit www.septa.org.

Please note that most of the properties on the tour are private residences and not open to the public, unless indicated with (OP).

Text by Paula Spilner. Photos by James B. Abbott.

In 1797, wealthy merchant, financier and philanthropist Stephen Girard (1750–1831) purchased 500 acres of land in a section of South Philadelphia then known as Passyunk Township. With the property came a modest farmhouse, which Girard modified in 1800 and again in 1825 to create *Gentilhommiere*, a country retreat and working farm where he could pursue his interest in scientific agriculture.

By the time of his death, Girard was considered the wealthiest man in America. He left his estate, mainly real estate holdings valued at \$6 million, to the City of Philadelphia with the stipulation that none of it could be sold and that the income be used to support Girard College, a school for orphan boys.

In accordance with their mandate to produce income for the school, the Trustees of the Girard Estate in 1906 hired architect James H. Windrim who, with his son, John Torrey Windrim, created a neighborhood of “ideal city homes,” which departed in many respects from the typical pattern of development in South Philadelphia.

Intended for rent to middle-class tenants, the semi-detached twin houses all offered porches, front and back yards, modern kitchens and bathrooms, ample windows for fresh air and sunlight and heat, hot water and electricity all provided by the Estate from a central plant on Oregon Avenue. The houses were designed in a variety of architectural styles including Colonial Revival, Tudor Revival, Prairie, Arts and Crafts and Spanish Colonial/Mission.

The Girard Estate project was an immediate success, with houses renting quickly to lawyers, bankers, managers and naval officers, among others. In 1913, a school and branch library (funded by philanthropist Andrew Carnegie) were completed. The Trustees originally planned an even larger development of some 1,500 homes, a self-contained neighborhood to be entered through a ceremonial gateway at 21st Street and Passyunk Avenue. For reasons that are not recorded, however, construction came to a halt in 1916 with 481 houses.

The Trustees continued to rent the homes until the early 1950s when, following a tenants’ revolt over rising rents, they successfully appealed to Orphans Court for permission to sell the properties. So popular were the houses that they were all sold within two years, earning over \$5 million for the Trust.

Girard Estate today survives as a rare planned community in Philadelphia, a community of homes that retains the character of a “village within the city proper.” Girard Estate was designated as a historic district on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places in 1999.

The tour begins at the statue of Stephen Girard, at the center of Girard Park, between 21st and 22nd Sts. at Shunk St.

Gentilhommiere

Girard Park, 21st & Shunk Sts.



Gentilhommiere was Stephen Girard's country retreat as well as a working farm of more than 500 acres where he pursued an interest in scientific agriculture. The eastern wing of the house predates Girard's acquisition of the property in 1797. To this modest farmhouse, he added the center (1800) and western (1825) sections, creating a more-or-less symmetrical composition of modest elegance. On both the north and south facades, the white stucco-coated wings contrast with the central pavilion of red brick, surmounted by a cross gable highlighted by a round window. On the north, presumably the principal facade, the central section is set back to allow for a shed-roofed porch supported by four classical columns. Gentilhommiere is administered by the Fairmount Park Commission, but is not currently open to the public.

Exit the park at the southeast corner, 21st and Shunk Sts. Cross 21st St. and turn left.

2525 21st St.
Spanish Colonial Revival/Mission



Houses in the style of the Spanish colonies of the Southwest, sometimes known as Mission Style, are the most numerous in Girard Estate. Typically, the walls are stuccoed to simulate the traditional finish of an adobe house. The front porch is sheltered by a large elliptical or "Spanish" arch. A second spacious porch opens from a second-floor bedroom. Large wooden brackets support the deep eaves of the hipped roof. Window boxes are inset with ceramic tiles.

2519 21st St.
Spanish Colonial Revival/Mission



This stuccoed house alludes in several ways to its Spanish ancestors. The massive supports of the front porch are battered (widened at the base), a technique required in adobe construction. Above the second-story windows are what appear to be the wooden rafters of the structure projecting through the surface, although they are purely ornamental here. The wooden window boxes, second-story porch railings and red-tiled roof also reflect Southwestern influence.

Continue to Porter St., turn right on Porter, and continue to 20th St. Turn right on 20th.

2523 20th St.
Colonial Revival



The houses on this block are the largest in the Estate, consisting of three full stories with attic. This house is a variation on the Colonial Revival harking back to 18th-century Philadelphia traditions. Like the farmhouses of colonial Pennsylvania, the walls are entirely sheathed in rough-hewn stone, the locally quarried Wissahickon schist characterized by sparkling flecks of mica. The gambrel roof, best seen from the side, is tiled in gray slate. Elements of Georgian sophistication are the full-height columns supporting the porch roof, the turned balusters of the porch railing and the modillions under the eaves.

5

2534 20th St.
Jacobean Revival



Jacobean, the term applied to 17th-century English architecture during the reign of King James I, is characterized by a mixture of English medieval traditions with Classical Revival elements. Here the porch features classically shaped balusters as well as full-height classical columns supporting an austere horizontal frieze. The principal material is brick, but the windows of the upper stories are set in stone surrounds featuring quoins. On both front and sides, a steeply pointed gable harks back to medieval sources.

Cross 20th St and continue on Shunk St.

6

1935 Shunk St (OP)
Free Library, Thomas F. Donatucci Sr. Branch
Neo-Classical



The Trustees of the Girard Estate donated land for the construction of a Free Library branch, which they considered an important amenity for the community. Designed by John Torrey Windrim, the one-story brick building strives for monumentality through classical symmetry and detailing. Up a broad flight of steps, the centralized entrance is flanked by a pair of fluted Doric columns supporting a Doric frieze of tryglyphs and metopes. Originally the Passyunk Branch, this is one of 25 Carnegie libraries in Philadelphia built with a grant from the industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. In 2004, the Passyunk Branch was renamed in honor of Thomas F. Donatucci, Sr., a lifelong resident of South Philadelphia who served the community from the 1930s until his death in 1970.

Continue to Garnet St., cross Garnet and turn left.

7

2521 Garnet St.
Spanish Colonial Revival/Mission



Building lots on Garnet St. are shallower, but wider than elsewhere in the Estate, so the house plans were adjusted accordingly. Most notably, the open porch is set into the body of the house. Unlike the numbered streets through the Estate, which were laid out by the city, Garnet and several other streets were plotted by the planners of Girard Estate to create more frontages for houses. Because it is so much narrower than city streets, Garnet creates a feeling of intimacy. Typical of the Mission style, this house is stuccoed and includes other characteristic features including the segmental arch over the first-floor window, the brick window surrounds and the window boxes on robust brackets.

Continue to Porter St. Turn right on Porter. Cross 19th St. to 1800 block.

8

1811 Porter St.
Colonial Revival



The houses on the north side of Porter between 17th and 19th streets represent the first phase of construction in Girard Estate. All are variations on Colonial Revival themes, although many have been altered by additions or replacement of original materials. Colonial Revival elements on this well-preserved brick house are the full-height columns with simple bases and capitals supporting a simple lintel. The second story has the original bay window surmounted by a deep cornice with brackets.

Continue on Porter St., cross 18th St. to 1700 block.

9

1725 Porter St.

Colonial Revival



This house is distinguished by simple square-brick piers with wooden swag capitals that support the porch roof. A segmented conical roof crowns the bay window on the second floor. The roof parapet is stepped in a “Flemish gable” and flanked by projecting piers formed by angled bricks. The Porter Street twins are more modest in scale than the later homes to the south and were originally less technologically advanced. They were heated by coal furnaces and lighted by gas while the later houses were supplied with steam heat and electricity from a central plant.

Continue to Colorado St. and turn right.

10

2502 Colorado St.

Prairie



Frank Lloyd Wright created the Prairie House in the early 20th century as a reflection of the characteristic landscape of his native Midwest. In this house, some Prairie features are adapted to the urban twin. The material is traditional red brick, but on the second story the brick is used in untraditional ways to create ornamental patterns within frames of contrasting color. Particular Prairie features are the deep eaves of the roofs, supported by carved brackets, and the grouping of the three second-story windows into a unified band. Rather than classical columns, the porch supports are severe brick piers, terminated by wooden swag capitals.

11

2506 Colorado St.

Tudor Vernacular Revival



Tudor, the name given to the architectural style of England in the late Middle Ages, was a popular choice for American houses in the later 19th century. This Tudor Revival uses a variety of materials. Rough-hewn stone is laid in uneven courses on the ground floor. On the second floor, white stucco walls contrasting with the dark wooden porch supports and window surrounds suggest the half-timbered houses of 15th-century England. Another feature of this style is the steeply pointed front gable with attached “bargeboard,” meant in medieval houses to disguise projecting rafters.

12

2511 Colorado St

Arts and Crafts Bungalow



The Arts and Crafts Movement in the U.S., promoted by Gustav Stickley and others, rejected most historical styles and emphasized the simpler life. This version of the Craftsman bungalow is characterized primarily by the roof which covers the entire second floor and from which a shed dormer gives access to a second-story porch. The base of the house is brick, with white stuccoed walls and columns, contrasted by the dark painted wood of door and window surrounds. The muscular tapered columns at each corner are planted firmly on the ground and sprout large wooden brackets to support the roof.

At Shunk St., cross to south side, turn right and continue to 18th St. Cross 18th St.

13**1800–06 Shunk St.***Prairie Apartment Building*

This is the only apartment building in Girard Estate. The administrative offices of the Estate were located in one of the four storefronts on the ground floor of this brick building. A central section steps forward, framing the main building entrance at the center. Four rental apartments were located on the two upper stories. The apartments received fresh air from their large porches. Ornament is minimal, consisting of brick laid in geometric patterns.

14**1822 Shunk St.***Colonial Revival*

This house exhibits a number of features found on authentic 18th-century structures in the older neighborhoods of Philadelphia. Like its Georgian ancestors, it employs classical elements. Fluted porch columns support a classical entablature. The most striking feature is the central pavilion projecting from the slate gambrel roof on the second story. This house has a version of the Palladian window, named for the Italian Renaissance architect. Consisting of a large central opening flanked by narrow sidelights and surmounted by an arch, this element is familiar to all who have visited Christ Church or Independence Hall in the historic area of Philadelphia.

15**1924 Shunk St.***Tudor Vernacular Revival*

The cross-gable roof of this house emphasizes the vertical dimension, a medieval feature. The large gable across the entire facade has a plain bargeboard with decorative cornice divider separating it from the adjacent house. The shed roof of the porch is supported on narrow wooden posts with splayed capitals. The large three-part window on the second floor is highlighted by the brick surround.

Continue on Shunk Street to the starting point, Girard Park.

