HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT FOR LOWER NORTHEAST PLANNING DISTRICT

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Geographical Summary

The Lower Northeast Planning District (figure 1) lies inland (northwest) of the Delaware River waterfront at the point where the northeast and northwest sections of the city branch off from north Philadelphia. The Lower Northeast Planning District is characterized by relatively flat topography that rises gradually from the southeast to the northwest, moving away from the river. The Planning District is bounded on the southwest by the Frankford and Tacony creeks, and abuts Montgomery County on the northwest just south of the Tacony Creek as it turns to the northeast. The Tacony Creek becomes the Frankford Creek at the point where it historically met the Wingohocking Creek, which flowed east from Germantown and is now culverted, near the intersection of Tabor Road and Garland Street. Historically, the Little Tacony Creek flowed in several branches through the heart of the Planning District, meeting the Frankford Creek below where Erie Avenue is now located.

Figure 1. Lower Northeast Planning District, outlined in black, with the area previously studied shown in gray
Introduction

The Lower Northeast Planning District can be divided into three general zones that developed at different rates. The settlement and industrial village of Frankford, which was studied in the Historic Context Statement for Neighborhood Cluster 1 (2008-2009), was the historic town center of the Planning District and was one of several such urban concentrations that developed in Philadelphia’s former county before the 1854 Consolidation. Frankford arose because of the water power available from the Frankford Creek where the major road from Philadelphia north (now Frankford Avenue) into what is now Bucks County crossed that Creek at a convenient fording place. Its growth is relatively easily charted by the fact that it became the only borough in Oxford Township (which encompassed the Lower Northeast Planning District and parts of adjacent districts on the north and east) in 1800, and was expanded in 1831. In addition to this zone of historic concentration of development, the area to the east of Frankford, the communities of Tacony and Wissinoming, developed as Philadelphia’s industry grew rapidly in the second quarter of the nineteenth century along the Delaware River. Whitehall Borough, to the east of Frankford, was established in 1849 not long before the Consolidation. The remainder of the area of the Lower Northeast Planning District, north and northwest of Frankford and the riverfront industrial communities, developed considerably later, remaining essentially rural into the early twentieth century, when access by automobile and the growing population of the city led to primarily residential construction, with some notable industrial sectors, in this portion of the city.

First Period of Development: Initial European Settlement, late Seventeenth through mid-Eighteenth centuries

The portion of the city of Philadelphia that is now identified as the Lower Northeast Planning District lay in Oxford Township from the founding of the Pennsylvania colony until the 1854 Consolidation of the city and its surrounding county. Oxford Township (figure 2) stretched from Tacony and Frankford Creeks on the southwest to what is now Cottman Avenue on the northeast, and from Montgomery County on the northwest to the Delaware River. Because the inland portion of Oxford Township, although relatively well supplied with water, was remote from the river and from the major road (Frankford Avenue) that connected the city to areas further to the north and east, this portion of the township was slow to develop, and the growth consisted of relatively sparsely located farms and mills along the waterways.

As for Frankford itself and areas along the river, Oxford Township was the location of European settlement prior to the establishment of the Pennsylvania Colony. As in other areas of what is now the city, this settlement was sparse and generally consisted of subsistence farmers, although within the first few generations of settlement, a number of relatively widely spaced mills had developed along both the Tacony and little Tacony creeks in the township upstream from Frankford, as well as nearby in Cheltenham Township and Bristol Township. The earliest mill developed in the township was probably built by Richard Dungworth on the Tacony Creek not far from where Frankford was to develop. 1 Typical of the early landowners was Matthias Keen, grandson of the founder of the Swedish settlement at Upland (later Chester), who owned a
substantial amount of Oxford Township in the latter portion of the seventeenth century, but lived along the Delaware rather than in the inland portion of the township. ²

Figure 2. Detail, John Hills, *Plan of the City of Philadelphia and Environs*, 1808, showing Oxford Township.

The origins of and earliest religious practice patterns associated with Trinity Church, Oxford (figure 3; located at Oxford Avenue at Longshore Avenue), the most important early institution in Oxford Township outside of Frankford, give a sense of the character of the earliest period of European settlement in Oxford Township north of Frankford. According to a nineteenth-century
parish history, before the turn of the eighteenth century, the church served “Dutch Anabaptists and Swedish Lutherans of the neighborhood, as well as . . . English Quakers.” These early settlers worshiped in a log building which thus served as a communal house of Protestant worship in an area too remote for other options to be available for the small population in the vicinity. Matthias Keen himself primarily worshipped at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes’), where he is buried.4

Figure 3: Trinity Church, Oxford. Historic American Buildings Survey, Library of Congress.

The 1700 deed conveying the property to Trinity Church trustees established it as a congregation of the “Holy mother” Church of England. Many of the worshipers were converts who had already been using the building: Quakers and Anabaptists. Further, a Swedish Lutheran minister conducted services there regularly in the early eighteenth century, and several Swedish clergymen attended the consecration of the brick building that replaced the original log structure in 1713.5 Thus, although Trinity was an Anglican congregation, it served a group of settlers of mixed national origin, some of who retained strong ties to Swedish Lutheranism.

Evidence related to some of Trinity’s parishioners indicates that connections across the Philadelphia county line were strong in the early eighteenth century between upper Oxford Township and Cheltenham Township. For example, Susannah Keen, granddaughter of Matthias Keen, was born in Oxford Township, and married John Martin, who was from Cheltenham Township and who inherited significant real estate in the inland portion of Oxford Township as well
as Cheltenham, and who was associated with the family of millers for whom Martin’s Mill Road, which led to facilities along the Tacony Creek on the other side of the Philadelphia boundary, is named. After John Martin died and was buried at Trinity Church, Susannah married Edward Milner, and continued in the milling business, in which the Milners amassed considerable wealth. Susannah and Edward Milner relocated from the Trinity Church vicinity to Whitemarsh, in Montgomery County, worshipping at St. Thomas’s Church. In fact, Reverend Aeneas Ross, who became rector of Trinity Church in 1742, was in charge of both Trinity and St. Thomas’s for sixteen years, suggesting connections across the eight miles to Whitemarsh on what is now Church Road from inland Oxford Township.

The 1755 Scull and Heap map (figure 4) gives a sense of the continued sparseness of the settlement of the inland portion of Oxford Township at the mid-eighteenth century, as well as the patterns of distribution and roads that had taken place by this point. In the inland portion of Oxford Township (east of the Tacony Creek), roads had been established connecting the village of Frankford and the main road (now Frankford Avenue) to the north. One, now essentially Adams Avenue, ran near the creek and connected to several crossing points. A lane led from this road to Buzby’s Mill (essentially Fisher’s Lane and Romona Avenue today), another (now Tabor Road) cross further to the north, and the main road itself crossed the creek leading into the Northern Liberties east of Germantown. The other main road from Frankford, which would become Oxford Avenue and its branch, Martin’s Mill Road, led to Trinity Church and beyond into Cheltenham Township, passing only three estates on the way to its crossing of the creek, one of which may have belonged to the prominent silversmith Philip Syng, and another to Quaker physician Samuel Preston Moore. The Scull and Heap map strongly suggests that inland Oxford Township was not a popular area of elite estates, in contrast to portions of the township closer to the river, and despite the presence of an Anglican church.

Figure 4: Detail, *A Map of Philadelphia and Parts Adjacent*, 1753, by Nicolas Scull and George Heap, showing inland Oxford Township. Frankford/Tacony Creek is at left and Oxford Avenue at middle right. Library of Congress.
Proprietary tax records for 1769 show several large landholdings in Oxford Township, although not the location of those holdings. The names of those with the largest acreage indicate a mixture of ethnicity among the landowners, indicating that the patterns established by immigration by the end of seventeenth century persisted into the pre-Revolutionary period. Those of English background include three members of the Buzby family – William, Abraham, and Isaac, who together held over 300 acres – and Leonard Shallcross, who served as the Proprietary Tax Assessor for the township, and whose 400 acres constitute the largest estate in Oxford Township at that date. James Duffin’s mapping of land ownership in Philadelphia in 1777 reveals that members of the Buzby family’s holdings were adjacent, and lay to the east of the Buzby Mill on the Tacony Creek at that date.9 Shallcross’s land lay along Frankford Avenue and what would become Bustleton Avenue. The other notably large landholding was in possession of Benjamin Cottman and Jonathan Bavington (200 acres).10 Bavington’s land lay on the Delaware River side of Bustleton Avenue to the east of Shallcross’s property. Cottman’s estate straddled the township line near the intersection of Oxford Avenue and what is now, not surprisingly, Cottman Avenue. Cottman, a member of the Trinity Church congregation, stands out from other residents in Oxford Township as the owner of the largest number of enslaved workers in Oxford Township (6) in 1790. No other resident owned more than two; all of the slave owners were also members of the Trinity congregation.11 By 1810, no resident of Oxford Township held enslaved workers.12

In addition to the Keen family of Swedish background, the owners of larger properties include George Castor. The southeastern edge of Castor’s 200-acre, rectangular estate would become the location of Castor Avenue. Castor, born Hans Georg Gerster in Basel, Switzerland, came to Oxford Township from Germantown, where he had settled after emigrating in 1736, and where he was involved in the Moravian Church. After purchasing 200 acres in Oxford Township in 1762, Castor became one of the founders of the Presbyterian Church of Frankford, as well as one of its largest contributors. In addition to farming, Castor earned income from a sawmill located on his property on the Little Tacony Creek.13

Accounts of both the Castor and Shallcross families and map evidence indicate that these eighteenth-century estates remained the basis for generations of farmers in the nineteenth century. For example, Samuel Hotchkin relates that the Shallcross family settlement in Oxford Township began with three brothers immigrating from Derbyshire in 1704 to establish a homestead stone house that was still in the hands of descendants in 1893.14 Equally, the Castors retained George Castor’s estate through the nineteenth century, living in a house near the saw mill, which was located near the intersection of Castor and Unruh avenues.15

Second Period of Development: Slow Growth in the Nineteenth Century

In the period after the initial settlement of Oxford Township, as Frankford developed as an industrial village, the inland area of the township remained mostly in relatively large farms, with mills sparsely located along the waterways. In 1820, the population of Oxford Township was 1,315 outside of Frankford Borough, which, by contrast, had 1,405 residents in that year.16 Before the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century however, additional roads had been laid out in the
township, including a portion of what would later become Rising Sun Avenue and a connector between the western road (Adams Avenue) and the road to Trinity Church (Oxford Avenue). The John Hills 1808 Map of Philadelphia (see figure 2) indicates that the farm buildings and mills were located near the township roads, or at the end of access lanes leading from them.

By the 1840s, the second connector had been extended to the northeast and had become identified as Castor’s Road: it led to the Castor Saw Mill and beyond into Upper Dublin Township. A major intersection dubbed “Five Points” had developed at about the location that would later become the Oxford Circle on the Roosevelt Boulevard. In the 1840s and 1850s, important “internal improvements” came to inland Oxford Township in the form of larger (if not better) roads: the artery already known as “Adam’s Road” was developed as a plank road leading from Frankford to the growing industrial area of Crescentville on the western side of the Tacony Creek. More significantly for later improvement, the Kensington-Oxford Turnpike, which later became Rising Sun Avenue, linked the northwesternmost portion of the township with other areas of the city to the south and west.

By the mid-nineteenth century, a number of mill complexes had developed along the Tacony and upper portion of the Frankford creeks above Frankford itself at the point where roads crossed this waterway. At the point where a road that has no current equivalent in the city’s plan, but which lay to the southwest of Friends Hospital (see below), “Rowlandville” had developed around the William and Harvey Rowland Rolling Mill, which may have dated back to as early as 1732. The company operated another rolling mill in Cheltenham Township on the Tacony just over the city line. At the point where Tabor Road crosses the creek, a dam provided power for Whitaker’s Cotton Factory, and the small settlement of Cedar Grove lay on the north side of Tabor Road, with a school house close to the creek. The Crescentville Woollen Factory lay in Bristol Township on the creek at the crossing of Adams Avenue.

Two exceptions to the general pattern of mills along waterways and farms on the diagonal roads in inland Oxford Township should be noted. The first of these is the development of “Volunteertown”: a small village cluster that developed in the early nineteenth century at the intersection of Martin’s Mill Road and Oxford Avenue (figure 5), named for the Volunteer Tavern established before 1808 at this intersection. The other significant exception to the general pattern was largest single change in the vicinity in the early nineteenth century: the creation, in 1813, of the Friends Hospital to the northwest of Frankford village along the Frankford Creek. The hospital first served the mentally ill only from the Society of Friends’ membership, but by the 1830s accepted members of all denominations. This institution, which remains in its original location, corresponds to a pattern that had existed in Philadelphia since the mid-eighteenth century of placing the city’s large institutions at its periphery (Pennsylvania Hospital is the earliest surviving example of this trend), although Friends Hospital was by far the most remote from the original city.

By the mid-nineteenth century, a number of the estates north and west of Frankford, particularly those along Adams Avenue and Oxford Road (where the Syng and Moore estates had been located in the eighteenth century) had acquired names such as “Oxford Lodge” “Fairview Farm,” and “Pendle Hall,” and presumably belonged to “gentlemen” farmers or to those at least
with gentlemanly pretensions. These individuals were likely associated with the wealth of industrializing Frankford and their properties were suburban estates outside of this village center. The properties of the descendants of the earliest settlers, including the Buzbys and the Castors, generally remained unnamed.

Figure 5: Detail, Jones D. Scott, *Scott’s Map of the Consolidated City of Philadelphia*, 1855.
With the 1854 Consolidation of the city and county, Oxford Township became part of the 23rd Ward, the largest in Philadelphia (figure 6). Oxford Township was sufficiently distant from the core of the city that farmers in the area resented becoming part of Philadelphia. In 1861, the 25th Ward was subdivided from the 23rd, indicating the relative density of the riverfront industrial areas at that point, and leaving all of the land northeast of Frankford and Tacony creeks as the 23rd (figure 7). The relative lack of development in the inland portion of the former Oxford Township persisted beyond the end of the Civil War (figure 8). With the continued growth of Frankford, however, the area along the Frankford Creek below Friends Hospital became the location of two cemeteries serving the industrial center. Greenwood Cemetery, built by and for the use of the fraternal organization the Knights of Pythias, was chartered in 1869.21 Mount Auburn Cemetery, later renamed Oakland Cemetery, filled in the land between Greenwood and Friends Hospital by 1887.22

By the time of the Centennial, the growth of the city into this relatively rural section had begun to be anticipated by the planned extension of the city’s “gridiron” street pattern (figure 9). These streets were not opened at this time, however, and the grid ultimately was not carried out along this anticipated orientation, which would have followed that of Center City and North Philadelphia. Another anticipation of further development was the Wentz Farm city reservoir, completed in the block now bounded by Rising Sun and Hasbrook avenues, and E. Comly and Lardner streets, where the Lawncrest Playground is now located.

Figure 6. Detail, Ward Map, City of Philadelphia, 1855, from Daly and Weinberg, Genealogy of Philadelphia County Subdivisions.
Along with the reservoir (which was created primarily to supply Frankford’s needs), the most crucial infrastructure change in the aftermath of the Civil War in the inland portion of the former Oxford Township was the arrival of a nearby rail line. Although the waterfront areas of the township had been reached by railroad by 1849 (see Historic Context Statement for Neighborhood Cluster 1), the first rail line to come near the upper portion of the township was the Philadelphia and Newtown Railroad. This line, chartered in 1860, took its first passengers from the city to Fox Chase in 1876, and had three stops in or near Oxford Township: Crescentville, Lawndale, and Cheltenham (see figure 10). The Crescentville station served the industrial village that had developed on the western side of the Tacony Creek (just outside of the former Oxford Township), and by 1895, a spur line connected Frankford to the Crescentville station (figure 11). Two stations, Lawndale and Cheltenham, are now located on the city line, but at the time of their construction, lay in Montgomery County before the city boundary was adjusted to take in this land. Thus, the upper portion of Oxford Township remained relatively remote from transportation systems in the immediate post-Civil War period. Nonetheless, the arrival of the railroad in inland former Oxford Township began the change in the course of development that brought the scale of Philadelphia’s urban development into this area.
Figure 8. Detail, R. L. Barnes, *Map of the Whole Incorporated City of Philadelphia*, 1865.
Figure 9. Detail, C. M. Hopkins, *Map of Philadelphia from Official Records...* 1876.
Figure 10: Detail, G. W. Baist, *Baist's Map of Philadelphia and Environs*, 1889.
Third Period of Development: 1876 to World War II – the effect of the arrival of the railroad and the car

Between 1887 and 1888 (figure 10), residential development along the lines of “gridiron” plan construction had begun near the Lawndale Station. In Philadelphia, Argyle, Palmetto, Shelburne, and a portion of Levick streets had been opened. By 1894, more streets had been opened (figure 12), lots had been laid out, and houses built on them. In contrast to the earlier farm and estate houses of the area, these early Lawndale houses, mostly of frame construction, were suburban in character. While they were on relatively small lots compared to the farms of the preceding periods in the area, most were single houses with yards, although a few were built as pairs (twins). In 1900, the Lawndale Land Improvement Company sold multiple lots in the area. Many of the initial purchasers of the area around Lawndale were German immigrants, and this area would remain one in which ethnic Germans were concentrated in succeeding generations. In 1898–1899 the German Protestant Home for the Aged (now the Philadelphia Protestant Home at 6500 Tabor Avenue) was built in an open area just to the southeast of Lawndale to serve this community.
architects were Stearns and Castor. In addition to the development going on in Lawndale, another area nearby to the southwest below Rising Sun Avenue had been laid out in smaller lots and houses were beginning to be built there in 1895.

Figure 12: Detail, Kaufmann, *Street Atlas of Philadelphia by Wards* 1895, showing streets opened in Lawndale area by that date.

Between 1895 and 1910, construction continued in Lawndale, and another former estate closer to the Crescentville station was laid out in small lots for development. Single houses were also being built along the spine of Rising Sun Avenue. Along Oxford Avenue above the Five Points crossroads, Har Nebo Cemetery was founded in 1900, adding this larger graveyard to the existing group of smaller Jewish burial grounds in the eastern portion of Frankford, which included Mt. Sinai, founded in 1854.

The period before World War I saw the most significant changes in the former Oxford Township. One of these was the establishment of the Summerdale Station on the spur railroad to Frankford and the adjacent construction of a large factory, the first to be built outside of Frankford in the inland portion of the former Oxford Township. The most important development, though, and one that would affect the twentieth-century growth of the inland portion of the area, was the creation of what was for the period a magisterial roadway, simply called the Northeast Boulevard at its inception and later renamed in memory of President Theodore Roosevelt. This project was allied with other progressive “City Beautiful” projects of the period such as the creation of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Clinton Rogers Woodruffe, writing in Gustav Stickley’s *Craftsman* magazine in 1906, linked the creation of the Boulevard to the rebirth of the city, noting that “few cities in America are making more steady progress toward the realization of ‘more beautiful public life.’”

Woodruffe describes the “Torresdale Boulevard” as being “admirably conceived,” noting the advantages of not having to go through “solid blocks of houses” as in the Parkway’s development, and suggests that the Boulevard ought to inspire a break with the city’s “checkerboard system of
construction,” which he characterizes as “not the best.” He does, however, admit the role of “private interests” in the development of the project that would lead to a real estate “boom” in this portion of the city. The project, begun in 1903, came under attack for corruption in the New York Times, in an account characteristic of the reform tenor of the period in Philadelphia. An anonymous reporter wrote that the Boulevard was the

main connection between Mayor [John] Weaver and the Republican city organization. This boulevard is the special pet of the political leaders, because most, if not all, of them and their pecuniary backers are interested heavily in the real estate that will be greatly enhanced in value by the construction of this driveway.

Two years ago the groundwork of this scheme was laid. Title was obtained to small farms by politicians or their agents along the proposed route. The route was laid out, so that it would bisect or parallel farms already owned by politicians or their friends.29

Regardless of who may have profited from the Boulevard, its creation was a significant and large undertaking in the period when automobiles were just beginning to come into use and remained largely the province of the very wealthy. Construction of the thoroughfare, referred to as either the Torresdale or Northeast Boulevard in its first decades, progressed from Broad Street at a steady pace. By 1910, construction had reached the area of Oxford Circle: in 1911, the state awarded damages of over $30,000 caused by “opening boulevard” to the Oxford farm facility of the “Pennsylvania Training School for Feeble Minded Children.” The farm was located just north of Five Points on the west side of Oxford Avenue, although the main campus of the organization, now simply known as the Elwyn Institute, has been in Elwyn, Pennsylvania since the 1850s.30 The Boulevard’s alignment did have a relationship to pre-existing roads: a portion of the existing Adams Road (Avenue) became part of the new road path, and Oxford Circle, where the Boulevard meets Oxford Avenue, was the former location of the Five Points intersection.

J. L. Smith’s 1910 Atlas of the 23rd, 35th, & 41st Wards of the City of Philadelphia shows a dual carriageway separated by a green median, but slightly later accounts suggest that this was not intended to be the finished configuration if it was in fact accurate as a depiction. In 1914, the Good Roads Association met in Philadelphia for its annual convention and as part of its meeting conducted an inspection trip of Philadelphia’s new and newly paved roads. In addition to the Parkway, the group inspected a number of streets in Chestnut Hill, and travelled through Oak Lane and a portion of Montgomery County to the former Oxford Township. There, the group noted a number of newly paved streets in a period when such surfaces were both new and the subject of great study. The newly paved streets included parts of Cottman, Castor, and Cheltenham avenues. A great deal of detail was furnished on the configuration of the new Boulevard, which had been completed to Pennypack Circle the year before. The contractor, McNichol Paving & Construction Co., working on a project whose budget was some $1,000,000, created a roadway of “300 ft. in width between building lines, with a central driveway of 60 ft. and two side driveways 34 ft. each.”31
This configuration was in essence the parkway model invented by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux for the boulevards extending from Brooklyn’s Prospect Park of the 1860s, with a central driveway intended for through-travel and the picturesque experience of the suburban construction around the roadway, and side lanes for local deliveries and access separated from the central lanes. This was, of course, also the configuration of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. The green park areas that divided the main driveway from the side roads were created at a grand scale in the Boulevard, thanks to the open land available in the Northeast. Although the Boulevard has received considerably less attention than the Parkway, its significance beyond Philadelphia was greater, as is clear in contemporary publications. A 1916 account of the completion of the project published in *Engineering and Contracting* noted that the new roadway would “connect Philadelphia and New York, and carry a great volume of motor traffic.” Two years later, *Good Roads* noted that this “important thoroughfare” would connect not only the two cities, but also “the great industrial area between.” Thus, in the era before the modern interstate system, the Boulevard was seen as a main means of connecting New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia.

The 1916 article also reported that the newly completed Boulevard would become part of the Lincoln Highway, an endeavor that stitched together existing and new roads to create the first transcontinental highway beginning in 1913. The Boulevard was thus a major highway of the period of early automobile use before World War I, connecting not just Philadelphia to New York but also these cities to the west. Even before the roadway’s completion, the effect of the automobile could be felt in the former Oxford Township: the large new factory built by 1910 and located on the railroad spur near the new Summerdale Station was the Carlston Motor Vehicle Company. Construction began to rise in the vicinity.

In the period between the end of World War I and the Depression, patterns of development established before the war continued in the planning district. The area near the Crescentville and Summerdale stations along the spur line into Frankford became increasingly industrialized. The combination of the rail line, the Boulevard, and the opening of the Bustleton Branch of the Pennsylvania Railroad by 1910 (parallel to the later Whitaker Avenue to its southeast) combined to facilitate industrial growth. Rowhouses were constructed on streets opened up near these areas, on either side of the spine of Rising Sun Avenue, and in some areas adjacent to Oxford Avenue. Rowhouses and semi-detached houses also appeared around Lawndale, reaching from the Fox Chase rail line to Tabor Road by 1927, but large areas of the former township still remained open and undeveloped and would continue to be undeveloped until after World War II.

One of the most important developments in the period between the completion of the Roosevelt Boulevard, renamed in honor of the late president in October, 1920 in a ceremony attended by his widow and son, was the construction of the Eastern Store of the Sears, Roebuck & Company on the Boulevard across from Friends Hospital. This facility was noted in national architectural profession at the time: the AIA awarded it a gold medal for industrial design in 1920 and served as the eastern distribution point for the company at the time of its completion. This remarkable facility, demolished in 1994, was one of a number of projects designed by Chicago architect George C. Nimmons for the company, and was the reason that Lessing Rosenwald, son of Sears owner Julius Rosenwald, relocated to Philadelphia. The Eastern Store’s location took
advantage both of the rail line from the Crescentville Station (and the Bustleton line that crossed it) and the Boulevard. By 1927, a significant number of rowhouses had been built in the area north and west of Oxford Circle near the Sears complex.36 The construction of the large and imposing Saint Martin of Tours Church and school was for a period one of the few structures near Oxford Circle itself, and served the growing Catholic community in the area. The 1920 census for the area northwest of Oxford Circle shows a heterogeneous mix of Pennsylvania-born and Irish and Eastern European immigrants.

In the 1920s, a trend began that would substantially influence the shape of the Northeast in general in the coming decades. Hyman Korman, who had been one of the few Jews living in the area before the construction of the Boulevard, began working, along with Marvin Orleans (both together and separately) to develop houses in the former Oxford Township. Korman first built residential projects in Lawndale around 1922.37 During the Depression, Korman continued to work, acquiring land at reduced prices and “miles of sewer and water lines were installed as make-work for the unemployed.”38 Ironically, Korman and Orleans found that, due to the conventional red-lining and steering practices that prevailed before the passage of the Civil Rights Act of the 1960s and which severely constrained the housing choices of minorities, that they were able to build houses in the former Oxford Township but not purchase or live in them, since the area was not open to Jews, Italians, or African Americans in the period.

The ethnic make-up and class status of the residents of the former Oxford Township at the end of the Depression are graphically represented in two sets of documents: J. M. Brewer’s map of 1934, which located Jews, African-Americans, and those of Italian background in the city for the real estate industry, and the 1936 and 1937 report of the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation.39 According to Brewer’s map, the inland former Oxford Township in 1934 was almost exclusively non-Jewish and non-Italian white, although one area south of Roosevelt Boulevard adjacent to Friends Hospital on the northwest had become a Jewish neighborhood. Brewer graded most of the housing in Lawndale and its surroundings as “C” or middle class, with occasional pockets of “B,” or upper class homes.

The Home Owner’s Loan Corporation of 1936 evaluated the entire northeast section of the city (including areas beyond the Lower Northeast Planning District) as a combination of “best” and “still desirable,” and noted that the region was “witnessing the greatest activity in new residential construction.” Further, the report recorded that in the 35th Ward, the area of the former inland Oxford Township, was one in which “two story row, semi-detached and detached are being erected in substantial numbers.” The area “following Roosevelt Boulevard and including most of Lawndale” was characterized as “practically an entirely new area within the past twenty years and the present site of substantial new construction.” The types of houses ranged from “modest row houses to fairly substantial detached dwellings.” Finally, the report stated that “a large part of this area is still undeveloped, but the portion lying south of Cottman Avenue in particular is equally desirable ground and is in the process of steady development of similar desirable character. Inhabitants are predominantly native whites of good middle class including small business men, clerks and skilled laborers.”40
Between 1934 and 1942, as the nation emerged from the Depression, construction continued in the Lower Northeast Planning District. Counter to both Brewer’s map and the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation reports, the area of Oxford Circle, particularly northwest of the Boulevard, was increasingly becoming a Jewish neighborhood. The founding of Temple Sholom Conservative Jewish congregation in 1939, and the construction of a synagogue on Large Street just north of the Boulevard serves as a touchstone for this demographic development. As Peter Binzen has noted, “as house-hunting families motored out the Boulevard their eyes were inevitably drawn to this impressive synagogue.”41 Eventually, the Boulevard would become an ethnic dividing line, with a Jewish community on the northwest and a Catholic one on the southeast within the Planning District.42

Despite continued development, several large tracts still remained open at the beginning of World War II in the area. These were particularly concentrated at the eastern portion of the district, which was furthest away from Center City, as well as in a swath approximately three blocks wide parallel to Whitaker Avenue across the district and in land on both sides of Roosevelt Boulevard east of Everett Street.

During World War II, there was, not surprisingly, relatively little construction in the Northeast. A large open area bounded by Tabor Avenue on the northwest and Oxford Avenue on the northeast was taken over in 1943 as the Naval Aviation Supply Depot.43 This property remains in the hands of the federal government today. In association with the opening of the Supply Depot, the government built the “Oxford Village” Defense Housing, designed by Philadelphia architect George Lovatt. Both the Supply Depot and Oxford Village have been determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Fourth Period of Development: Post-World War II Build-Out and Decline

Peter Binzen has noted that although Hyman Korman and Marvin Orleans “built hundreds of houses in Northeast Philadelphia before World War II it was not really after the war that the section’s major development took place,” although Binzen referred to the whole of the Northeast, not just the Lower Northeast Planning District.44 As noted, the district had already seen a good deal of construction before the war, but there remained significant amounts of open land.

In the period in which Americans settled in new suburban tracts in record numbers, the inland portion of the former Oxford Township was completely built out. In a report issued in 1954, Philadelphia’s City Planning Commission studied land use throughout the city in the decade following the war.45 The commission found that in 1944 on about 65% of the total of about 11,500 acres located in the northeast between the Frankford and Pennypack creeks had been developed, and that new construction was concentrated above north of Devereaux Avenue. While the vast majority of this development was residential, two new factories were built in the industrial area along the rail line to Frankford, near the Sears Eastern Store and the Naval Supply Depot.46 The map included in the report (figure 13) shows that the area of the Lower Northeast Planning District was virtually completely developed by 1954. In continuity with the houses built before the war, most of
this post-war construction was of rowhouses on the city’s “gridiron” plan that had been extended up from areas further south in the city as it developed.

In contrast to this, the city’s plan for the Far Northeast, developed in the 1950s, led to a street pattern that eliminated the grid plan, substituting curvilinear streets that separated through-traffic from as much residential properties as possible by introducing loop and cul-de-sac streets. New construction continued in the Far Northeast into the early 1970s. In order to facilitate access between the city’s center and these areas continuing to grow, the Roosevelt Boulevard was altered to become a 12-lane road rather than a scenic parkway in the mid-1960s.

While houses continued to be built beyond the Lower Northeast Planning District, the loss of the city’s industrial economy had a relatively rapid effect in what was once Oxford Township. The aging population did not replace itself in the decades after the area was built out, so that between 1970 and 1980, there was a loss of more than 41,000 people in the Lower Northeast. The area also was the portion of the city that gained the largest percentage of non-white residents in this decade. Between 1990 and 2000, the Lower Northeast Planning District continued to lose population in some of its parts, but also gained residents in others. The district also continued to be one of increasingly non-white residence.
Notes


2 Gregory B. Keen, “The Descendants of Jöran Kyn, the Founder of Upland (Continued),” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 3, no. 3 (1879): 450.


4 Keen, “Descendants.”


6 Gregory B. Keen, “The Descendants of Jöran Kyn, the Founder of Upland (Continued),” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 4, no. 3 (1880): 343-44.


11 These were John Finney and John Lardner (2 slaves each), and Alexander Martin (1 slave).

12 1810 U. S. Census for Oxford Township.


24 Philadelphia City Deed Records.


31 *Good Roads* New Series 7, no. 1 (3 January 1914): 63-64.


34 The renaming of the Boulevard was noted with approval by Philadelphia novelist Owen Wister, who asserted that “the new name hoards some of the strength of our past as a tonic for generations to come.” Wister, “Don’t Squander the Past,” *American Magazine* 92 (1921): 42.


37 Binzen, “A Place to Live,” pp. 185-186.

38 Binzen, “A Place to Live,” p. 186

39 Brewer’s map is in the collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia. The reports of the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation are available at the University of Pennsylvania’s Cartographic Modeling Laboratory thanks to the research of Amy Hillier, see http://cml.upenn.edu.

40 Ibid.


42 Binzen, “A Place to Live,” p. 188.

44 Binzen, “A Place to Live,” p. 188.


47 See Philadelphia City Planning Commission *Annual Reports for 1949, and 1957*.


49 Ibid.

50 Census abstract mapping information from the Neighborhood Information System, Cartographic Modeling Laboratory, University of Pennsylvania, http://cml.upenn.edu/.
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