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## West Philadelphia, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Rough Road to Revival and Cooperation

For many reasons, the West Philadelphia/University of Pennsylvania case is one of the most notable examples of university-driven revitalization and university–community collaboration. In the mid-1960s, Penn began to develop strategies for improving campus life. This required expansion into previously residential and commercial strips, which led to a continuing need for negotiating a new relationship with surrounding communities. To that end, in the 1990s Penn developed both an infrastructure for community engagement and service learning and a parallel and somewhat complementary real estate development agenda. Together, these systems created one of the most celebrated examples of university-driven urban change and redevelopment. This chapter reviews the history of the university’s efforts of the 1990s and early 2000s in order to place them in their proper context.

On Halloween Night in 1996, a purse snatcher fatally stabbed a University of Pennsylvania researcher, Vladimir Sled, on a West Philadelphia sidewalk.<sup>1</sup> In the weeks before Sled’s murder, the university had been victimized by a rash of crimes, including the shooting of a student near campus.<sup>2</sup> Although crime was nothing new

to West Philadelphia by 1996, Sled's stabbing, in plain view of his girlfriend and twelve-year-old son, struck a painful chord with many West Philadelphia residents and Penn students, faculty, and staff. It exposed long-standing tensions and anxieties about the urban crime that many West Philadelphians had come to accept as their way of life.

At a meeting with concerned parents during the university's homecoming weekend a few weeks later, then Penn president Judith Rodin and then Philadelphia mayor Edward G. Rendell were booed off the stage as they tried to assuage the crowd's fears about crime in the area. Long before this meeting, Rodin and Rendell had known of West Philadelphia's problems and were developing a plan to improve public safety in the area. Nevertheless, they were given their marching orders to clean up the crime or lose students.

Several university staff and administrators interviewed for this study recalled how important that experience was for Rodin and the university. More than any other event, the stabbing served as a major turning point in Penn's resolve to seek solutions to the "West Philadelphia problem." A few days after the parent meeting, a group of area residents held a candlelight vigil in nearby Clark Park to commemorate the life of the slain researcher and to draw attention to the problem of neighborhood crime. The parent meeting and the vigil sparked the emergence of a new wave of activity collectively known now as the West Philadelphia Initiatives (WPI).

As a program for neighborhood revitalization, the WPI were not intended to be a comprehensive plan for the area. Their focus was on five main areas of activity: the fortification of public education, increased housing availability and quality, clean and safe streets, improved economic opportunity for residents, and increased and improved retail options.

According to study participants and other commentators on the Penn/West Philadelphia case, many of the improvements in University City and West Philadelphia were, in some manner, because of the university's efforts. What follows is a history of both Penn and its university-community relations. Placing the WPI in a longer trajectory of tensions and relations between university and community reveals how activity since 1996 represents the apex of work begun by

Penn president Gaylord Harnwell in the 1950s and how that work has been touched by every president of the university since.

Perhaps more than that of any other urban university, the work of the University of Pennsylvania has been well documented at both a local and a national level. However, much of this documentation has been initiated by the university itself.<sup>3</sup> Many in the Penn community would regard Rodin's tenure as president as one of the most successful and distinguished because of her leadership of the WPI and the growth of the institution's prestige and standing.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Penn's Netter Center for Community Partnerships is internationally known as a model of university–urban engagement and service-learning curricula. To date, much of the writing about Penn's urban engagement and revitalization efforts has been by those closest to the work itself, with other accounts by admirers.

This chapter describes components of the West Philadelphia Initiatives, the greatest impacts of which, according to informants, have been improved conditions in University City and West Philadelphia. There is agreement on a certain amount of improvement, but informants were mixed on the methods, the types of improvements, and the impacts those improvements have had on their lives. The final section of this chapter presents informants' views of the university and the West Philadelphia Initiatives.

## **An Abbreviated “Urban” History of the University of Pennsylvania**

The University of Pennsylvania holds a special place in the history of American higher education. Chartered in 1749 by Benjamin Franklin, it was the brainchild of Franklin along with civic, social, and commercial leaders who felt that Philadelphia needed a university in order to join the ranks of other world-class cities.<sup>5</sup> In the mid-eighteenth century, Franklin authored a treatise on the need to train the territory's youth for practical arts. His famous essay, “A Proposal for the Education of the Youth of Pennsylvania [*sic*]” laid the groundwork not just for the University of Pennsylvania but for secular higher education in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Franklin's essay led to

the founding of an academy that would later become the University of Pennsylvania in 1791. Unlike its colonial peers, Franklin's academy would focus on preparing men not for the clergy but for commerce and public service. Today, Penn's programs in business, medicine, nursing, dentistry, and law are considered some of the best in the nation and are among the oldest. While debate continues as to which U.S. college first made the move to a research orientation, Penn often claims this honor because of the age and prestige of its various professional schools. For most of its history, however, it remained a teaching college, graduating fewer than five hundred students in 1920.

Despite its long history, Penn has not always been regarded as a true rival to schools such as Harvard and Yale. Its admittance into the Ivy League athletic conference was a topic of great debate among the other universities in the league, based on its reputation as a "football school with lacking academics."<sup>7</sup> Penn differed from many universities in that its various parts, until very recently, operated virtually autonomously, with only a loose affiliation to the larger institution. Moreover, its administration lacked structure and recognizable leadership. Penn did not have a university president until the inauguration of Thomas Sovereign Gates in 1930.<sup>8</sup> Until then, for the most part, the board of trustees governed the affairs of the university and arguably failed to control the units that sought to assert their independence when necessary.<sup>9</sup> John Terino describes the process by which the University of Pennsylvania pursued the status of research powerhouse equivalent to that of its respected peers and thereby became a greater beneficiary of the federal government's Cold War spending on science and technology.<sup>10</sup> Its disorganized and divided engineering and science schools were in need not only of facilities and faculty but also of direction and mission. Finally, the institution found both with President Gaylord Harnwell, who led the university between 1953 and 1970. Under his leadership, Penn began working with city groups and leaders to construct the University City Science Center, an independent center of innovation that would provide Philadelphia and the universities located in West Philadelphia with a foothold in the new military-industrial complex. Harnwell is also credited with diversifying the university

and dramatically expanding its size, constructing ninety-three buildings during his tenure.

In the late nineteenth century, confronted with Philadelphia's dominance as an industrial power, Penn made the transition from a teaching college to a Humboldtian-model research institution. This identity was not an enormous leap given Penn's mission for and orientation toward its already prestigious professional schools. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, Penn was known as the "University of the State of Pennsylvania." Because it was regarded in the eighteenth century as a haven for Tory sympathizers, it was renamed and rechartered by the city fathers as a state affiliate, further indebting its graduates and faculty toward a mission that favored the city and the state.<sup>11</sup>

Since its founding, the University of Pennsylvania has operated at three distinct sites. The first location was at Fourth and Chestnut Streets, in what is now known as "Society Hill" and is the oldest part of the city. Franklin himself worked, lived, and was buried a few short blocks away. The university moved to its second location at Ninth and Chestnut in 1901.<sup>12</sup> Finding itself again surrounded by teeming urban life, the university moved for a third and last time to the Almshouse Farm on the western banks of the Schuylkill River, then suburban farmland. This move represented a major shift in university life. Penn was now somewhat divorced from the ills of the city, although in a few short decades, the city would come to surround the West Philadelphia campus as it had in central Philadelphia.

Until 1930, Penn's board of trustees was the primary decision-making body of the university, with the deans of the respective colleges and the provost acting as day-to-day managers and chiefs of their respective units. Because it was not until the 1940s that Penn had a strong senior administration, its academic structure did not become fully integrated until Judith Rodin's tenure in the late 1990s.

Although Penn's professional schools flourished during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, its undergraduate curriculum proved disconnected at best. For the better part of its history, Penn's academic reputation was largely regional. As previously mentioned, its admission into the Ivy League was highly contested by the already

admitted universities, whose argument was that Penn was more an athletic than an academic school. After agreeing to dismantle its nationally renowned athletic programs, Penn was admitted to the league.

As Philadelphia continued its industrialization into the twentieth century, a growing population of African Americans from the American South found their way into West Philadelphia. The deindustrialization that followed World War II set the city on a path toward population loss and urban poverty for the next sixty years. During that time, urban blight and decline found its way to the gates of the Penn campus. Immigration forever transformed the character of West Philadelphia's neighborhoods, which changed so fast and so dramatically that a plan, never carried out, was developed by the university trustees to relocate the campus to university-owned property in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. At virtually the same time, Penn saw itself develop into a true research university comparable to some of the nation's most elite and wealthy institutions. The philanthropy of the city's Protestant industrial elite proved to be one of its best assets as it sought to compete in a marketplace for university research.

Immediately following the decision to remain in West Philadelphia (rather than move to Valley Forge), the end of World War II, and the onset of the Cold War, a race began among the nation's elite research universities to garner a significant share of the federal government's largesse.<sup>13</sup> Largely, Penn succeeded in leveraging its medical school and strengths in information technology and life sciences to spawn the University City Science Center and what has become the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania complex—consistently one of the nation's leading receivers of funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

### **A Brief History of University–Community Relations in West Philadelphia**

The University of Pennsylvania's history is laced with tensions between its continual attempt to personify a romantic ideal of classical university education and the harsh realities of its industrial and later postindustrial surroundings. This history is marked with a few

moments of increased tension between Penn and certain demographic groups based on the notorious displacement of hundreds of African Americans during the period of Urban Renewal in the 1950s and 1960s and several high-profile incidents involving Penn students, faculty, and staff. In the establishment of the University City Science Center, approximately six hundred low-income and African American families were displaced. Unlike other institutions that used the Section 112 amendment of the Urban Renewal legislation of 1949 (which allowed colleges and universities to employ Urban Renewal policy for campus expansion), Penn leveraged that legislation to construct the nation's first inner-city urban research park. The legacy of this event is still experienced by many West Philadelphia residents. Two former residents of "Black Bottom," the area razed in the construction of the center, were interviewed for this study.

Many universities faced with similar challenges have taken different approaches. In her introduction to John Kromer and Lucy Kerman's report on the West Philadelphia Initiatives, former Penn president Judith Rodin outlined Penn's choices in the wake of the new urban crisis in West Philadelphia during the 1990s. Those choices included (1) engaging in community-oriented academic and service-oriented activities, (2) physically sequestering the campus with walls and gates, (3) relocating the campus, and (4) leveraging the university's resources to improve area conditions. These choices represented a higher-education version of Albert Hirschman's theory of exit, voice, and loyalty, where the first choice represents voice, the second and third represent exit, and the fourth represents loyalty.<sup>14</sup>

For many years, the best lens through which to view the university's contentious relations with West Philadelphia was Penn students. Through their often uncivic behavior, students revealed a naiveté regarding urban living and a contempt for and fear of their neighbors. For many years, they received maps of West Philadelphia as a part of their orientation. Those maps contained a black line that explicitly warned students not to travel beyond Fortieth Street (going west) because crime was much higher on the other side. This rationale was a subtext for the reality that the areas west of Fortieth Street were predominately African American. As one participant in this

study mentioned, one of the supermarkets located three blocks from the Penn campus, an Acme store, was nicknamed by Penn students “Black-Me” and avoided by students because of its clientele and overall quality.

Some West Philadelphia residents feel that because of Penn’s development of high-end retail amenities on and near its campus in the past fifteen years, retail amenities for residents of more limited means have diminished. One of the only remaining retail outlets near the campus that is still patronized by more African Americans than Penn students is a McDonald’s directly across the street from the Penn-developed supermarket and movie theater/bistro/nightclub on Fortieth Street. In 2008, the university completed a mixed-use development near this intersection, replacing an aging strip mall with the Radian, a 14-story building with 179 market-rate apartments and 40,000 square feet of retail.<sup>15</sup> Original plans for this development called for the relocation of a long-standing McDonald’s restaurant at the corner of Fortieth and Walnut. Attempts to relocate the restaurant to nearby Market Street inspired the Neighbors against McPenetration group to file a suit to halt the construction of the new building. The group succeeded, and the McDonald’s remains in its original location. University representatives have stated that they still wish to help the restaurant to relocate and deny the implication that there are racist or nefarious intentions behind their assistance. In the university’s view, the intersection has changed dramatically, and at least in an architectural sense, a one-story, detached, fast food restaurant is no longer needed and does not maximize the utility of its current site. This was understood as the university’s blatant and overt racism toward the community. While students no longer receive maps as a part of orientation, the suggestion that West Philadelphia should be transformed to better service Penn students and faculty remains the dominant theme of the area’s revitalization efforts.<sup>16</sup>

Over the last forty years, Penn’s presidents devoted a great deal of attention to the issue of West Philadelphia. Informants with any opinion on this longer history all agree that the trend has been toward a gradual improvement in the university’s position on, and commitment to being an integral part of, West Philadelphia’s life



and economy. Each president since Gaylord Harnwell, who oversaw the university's expansion under Urban Renewal, spent some part of his or her tenure engaging the question and problem of West Philadelphia.

The university's stance on neighborhood change in West Philadelphia can at best be summarized as driven mostly by self-interest. That interest revolved around the desire to create a "connected and walkable" academic village embedded in an urban community.<sup>17</sup> So far in the twenty-first century, the inter-institutional competition for top faculty, students, research funding and support, and alumni donations has led the University of Pennsylvania to reinvent itself through transformation of its campus and surrounding environs. The impetus for much of this activity began with a focus on on-campus public safety and increased neighborhood desirability. As later chapters discuss, many factions within the university were very interested in social justice and beneficial outreach. However, it is the "emergency" of enhancing the university's context that has dominated its efforts in the most recent era and perhaps well before.

In the words of a Penn administrator, the intention was to "stabilize the area for private investment." The framework for the university's efforts came directly from Ira Harkavy's research and community engagement and directives from the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, which has existed in some form since the 1980s. According to historical records, the university's commitment to West Philadelphia crystallized after proposals to relocate the university campus to its bucolic Valley Forge holdings failed in the 1940s.

In significant ways, the West Philadelphia Initiatives were organized to respond to calls by parents and students for a safer urban environment for this prestigious university community. One of the critics of the WPI offered the following:

It's as if we now have students who are the children of the scared suburbanites who think they can come to school here and be as safe at three in the morning as they are in the afternoon. This is not [a] completely enclosed community where they are free to do what they want.

Note that Penn is not the only institution of higher education in West Philadelphia. To its north sits Drexel University, previously the Drexel Institute of Technology, an institution that has grown in size and stature since its beginnings over one hundred and twenty years ago. Because of its relatively smaller endowment, Drexel has had its own issues with community tensions, but it has consistently refused and failed to respond in any meaningful way. To the west of Penn's campus sits the Restaurant School, now known as the Restaurant School at Walnut Hill College. And to the south sits the University of the Sciences of Philadelphia (USP), which was formerly known as the Philadelphia College for Pharmaceutical Sciences. Penn students receive the brunt of the criticism for West Philadelphia's town-gown tensions in large part because of their numbers and the extent to which West Philadelphia revolves around Penn's nearly 300 acres.<sup>18</sup>

Besides in physical size, these other schools are smaller than the juggernaut Penn in their employment bases and endowments, which collectively represent only a fraction of Penn's total. Despite this, the physical expansion of the University of Pennsylvania following World War II would provide the context for the often contentious relationship between the university and the West Philadelphia neighborhoods that surround its campus. At several points in that relationship, the university attempted to inspire neighborhood change and revitalization, or leveraged its political and economic influence to see that change happened. Those changes sometimes inspired mutually beneficial transformations but often did not.

The successes of the university's effort have been heralded by its own public relations infrastructure and a series of scholarly works citing the turnaround of West Philadelphia. These successes were not the first for the university; nor were they the beginning of the process. Every Penn president since the end of World War II in some way dealt with the challenges of administrating a major research university in a struggling inner city. The momentum was increased by succeeding presidents, culminating in the 2004 creation of the Penn Compact, a new institutional philosophy that extends Penn's mantra of engagement well beyond West Philadelphia.<sup>19</sup>